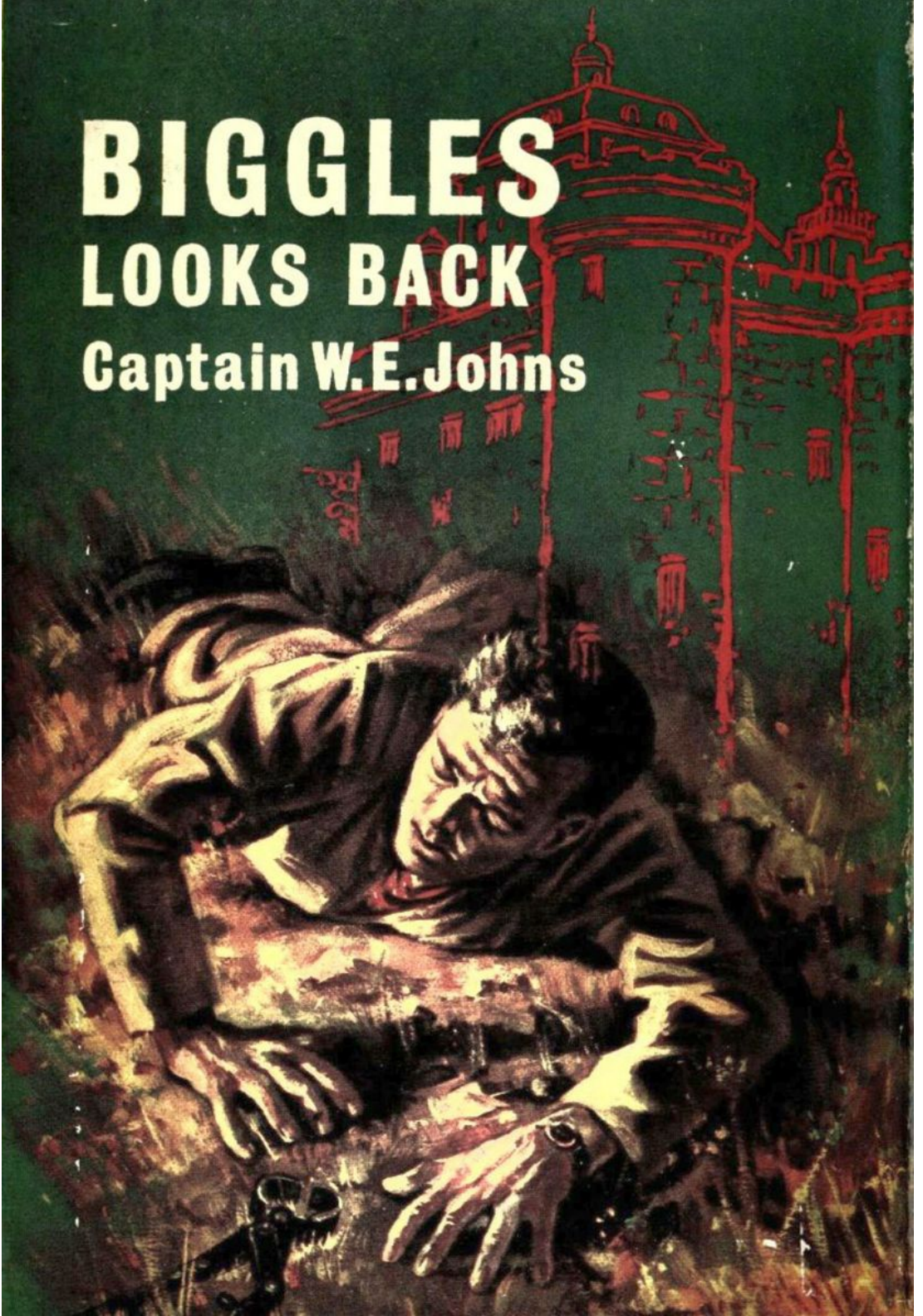
BIGGLES LOOKS BACK

Captain W.E. Johns



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BIGGLES LOOKS BACK

A Story of Biggles and the Air Police.

Biggles and Erich Von Stalhein combine
to frustrate the evil plans of Reinhardt, ex-Gestapo
official, who is keeping a helpless
woman prisoner in a mysterious Bohemian
castle.

By the same author:

BIGGLES GOES TO SCHOOL
BIGGLES LEARNS TO FLY
BIGGLES FLIES EAST
THE RESCUE FLIGHT
BIGGLES HITS THE TRAIL
BIGGLES AND CO.
BIGGLES IN AFRICA
BIGGLES, AIR COMMODORE
BIGGLES FLIES WEST
BIGGLES FLIES SOUTH
BIGGLES GOES TO WAR
BIGGLES IN SPAIN
BIGGLES FLIES NORTH
BIGGLES, SECRET AGENT
BIGGLES IN THE SOUTH SEAS
BIGGLES IN THE BALTIC
BIGGLES DEFIES THE SWASTIKA
BIGGLES SEES IT THROUGH
SPITFIRE PARADE
BIGGLES IN THE JUNGLE
BIGGLES SWEEPS THE DESERT
BIGGLES, CHARTER PILOT
BIGGLES IN BORNEO
BIGGLES "FAILS TO RETURN"
BIGGLES IN THE ORIENT
BIGGLES DELIVERS THE GOODS
SERGEANT BIGGLESWORTH, C.I.D.
BIGGLES' SECOND CASE
BIGGLES HUNTS BIG GAME
BIGGLES TAKES A HOLIDAY
BIGGLES BREAKS THE SILENCE
BIGGLES GETS HIS MEN
ANOTHER JOB FOR BIGGLES
BIGGLES WORKS IT OUT
BIGGLES TAKES THE CASE
BIGGLES FOLLOWS ON
BIGGLES AND THE BLACK RAIDER
BIGGLES IN THE BLUE
BIGGLES IN THE GOBI
BIGGLES CUTS IT FINE
BIGGLES AND THE PIRATE TREASURE
BIGGLES, FOREIGN LEGIONNAIRE
BIGGLES' CHINESE PUZZLE
BIGGLES IN AUSTRALIA
NO REST FOR BIGGLES
BIGGLES TAKES CHARGE
BIGGLES MAKES ENDS MEET
BIGGLES OF THE INTERPOL
BIGGLES ON THE HOME FRONT
BIGGLES PRESSES ON
BIGGLES ON MYSTERY ISLAND
BIGGLES BURIES A HATCHET
BIGGLES IN MEXICO
BIGGLES' COMBINED OPERATION
BIGGLES AT WORLD'S END
BIGGLES AND THE LEOPARDS OF ZINN
BIGGLES GOES HOME
BIGGLES AND THE POOR RICH BOY
BIGGLES FORMS A SYNDICATE
BIGGLES AND THE MISSING MILLIONAIRE
BIGGLES GOES ALONE
ORCHIDS FOR BIGGLES
BIGGLES TAKES A HAND
BIGGLES AND THE PLANE THAT DISAPPEARED
BIGGLES AND THE BLACK MASK

also

COMRADES IN ARMS

and

THE FIRST BIGGLES OMNIBUS

BIGGLES AIR DETECTIVE OMNIBUS

Biggles

LOOKS BACK

A Story of Biggles and the Air Police

By

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated by Studio Stead

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE tragic incident (call it love affair if you like) of Biggles and Marie Janis was told as a short story in the first book of the series, published under the title of *The Camels are Coming*, the Sopwith "Camel" aircraft being the type Biggles was flying at that time. To those who have not read the story (and perhaps those who have) the further details now revealed may throw a light on certain aspects of Biggles's character, notably his indifference to the opposite sex.

When the affair began he was young and carefree.

Shock left him bitter and disillusioned. He never really got over it. He couldn't forget it. Or perhaps he wouldn't allow himself to forget it. Algy knew about it. So did Air Commodore Raymond, now his Chief. But it was never mentioned.

W.E.J.

CHAPTER I

OUT OF THE PAST

BIGGLES and Erich Von Stalhein, one time of German Military Intelligence, lit their cigarettes as coffee was served after an excellent dinner in the little Thamesside restaurant where, with the thawing of the Cold War, they met once in a while for a meal and to indulge in reminiscences; thus fulfilling a sarcastic prophesy, made years earlier by Ginger, before the hatchet had been buried, that they would end up by dining together.

They were alone. For some minutes neither had spoken. Then, picking up his liqueur glass and gazing into the amber liquid it contained, Von Stalhein said quietly: "There's a question I have long been tempted to ask you."

"This seems a good opportunity," invited Biggles nonchalantly.

"Did you ever wonder what became of Marie Janis?"

Biggles, who had lifted his coffee cup, replaced it, slowly, in its saucer. His smile faded. His eyes met those of his old enemy. "I've been wondering all my life," he said simply. "I've never stopped wondering. War threw us together. War tore us apart."

Von Stalhein shrugged. "That's war."

"You're going back a long way."

"But you haven't forgotten."

"Am I ever likely to forget a woman who nearly got me shot as a traitor?"

The German shook his head. "That isn't the real reason why you remember her. A man doesn't easily forget his first love—particularly when it is born within the sound of cannon fire."

There was a long pause. Then Biggles said: "There has never been another woman in my life."

"As far as I know there was never another man in hers."

Biggles frowned. "How much do you know about that miserable affair?"

"As much as anyone knows, I suppose. I was a senior Intelligence officer at the time. You, fighting on the other side, were a junior captain. I knew Marie before I knew you. We did our training together at the

Wilhelmstrasse School of Espionage. You fell in love with her. But you know that. What you don't know is, I, too, was in love with her. Had she not met you I think she would have married me." A ghost of a smile crossed Von Stalhein's face. "But I never held that against you."

"Very generous of you," answered Biggles with a gentle hint of sarcasm. "No, I never knew you had an interest, heart or in any other way, in Marie. To me, as I learned too late, she was a German spy."

"And a very efficient one. Don't say the word spy as if it had a nasty taste. After all, the first time we came into collision, at Zabala, in the Middle East, what were you but a spy?"

"So were you, operating under the name of El Shereef. My assignment was to trap you."[1]

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[1] See *Biggles Flies East*.

"Good. So we were all spies. Let us congratulate ourselves on being members of an honourable profession."

"Honourable? Who said it was honourable?"

"Your own King, George V. He said: 'In my opinion the spy is the greatest of soldiers. If he is detested it is because he is the most feared.' And Napoleon once remarked that one spy in the right place was worth 20,000 men in the field. Armies can't do without spies."

"I wasn't a spy from choice. I was under orders."

"So was Marie. Unfortunately, as you should know by now, spies are human. They all have a weakness that can never entirely be eradicated. They have hearts. The perfect spy shouldn't have a heart. Alas, Marie had one."

"She tricked me into doing something that could have put me in front of a firing squad."

"Why not? If she was your enemy you were hers. If she was able to trick you it was because you were young, inexperienced and irresponsible."

"All in the name of eternal love."

"In war love can be a useful weapon."

Biggles's voice dropped to a soliloquy. "Those summer evenings. How close to heaven can mortal man get? I was nineteen and life was wonderful. Tearing up the sky all day, and then, when the searchlights were waving their silly arms—Marie. She'd be waiting in the orchard. Her face would

light up when she saw me coming, still alive after the day's dogfights. Or so, in my vanity, I imagined."

"This is a new Bigglesworth to me," murmured Von Stalhein, dryly.

"You said we all have hearts. Mine has been in cold store since the night a dream exploded in a cloud of lies. You've just opened the refrigerator door. Memories trickle out. Shut it. We've been talking of another world."

Von Stalhein fitted a cigarette into the long holder he used. "My dear Bigglesworth, don't you realize it was the shock of that affair that made you what you became—a deadly combat pilot and a reliable espionage agent? The best spies have been known to slip up over a woman: after the lesson Marie gave you no woman would ever again fool you. You owe her something for that."

"Did she get back to Germany? That's the canker that has been gnawing at me since the night my little world fell to pieces."

"Did you hope she'd get back? An enemy spy!"

Biggles hesitated. "Yes, may God forgive me, I did. My love for her should have died; but it wouldn't. I knew the entire counter-espionage corps, English and French, were after her, and I went through hell picturing her being caught and shot."

Von Stalhein held out his hands, palms upward. "You see what I mean about having a heart? You knew Marie was a German spy; she had betrayed you; yet you still hoped she'd get away."

"Did she?"

"Yes. She made her way across France to Spain where we picked her up and brought her home."

"Then what happened to her?"

"She continued her work till the war ended and then took up nursing."

"Well, right or wrong I'm glad she came through," declared Biggles. "Is she still alive?"

"Oh yes." Von Stalhein ordered more coffee and went on: "She would be happy to know you felt like that about her. It may seem strange to you but at the time we at German Intelligence Headquarters knew more about what was going on at 266 Squadron, your squadron, than you did. We knew, for instance, that a certain officer, one Captain Bigglesworth, then known to us by name only, was under the close surveillance of British Intelligence."

"What the devil for? I had done nothing wrong."

"You were associating with an attractive young woman suspected of being a German spy. It was obvious you were under her influence."

"If Marie was suspect why didn't they pick her up?"

"They were all ready to do so but were anxious to know why she had been sent there. You provided the information."

"How?"

"It was in the letter Marie gave you to drop at the Château Boreau, near Lille, where her supposed poor old father was said to live. The château was in fact our Intelligence Headquarters on that Front."

"How were you to know the letter I dropped was from her?"

"She gave you her black and white silk scarf for a streamer. She knew we'd recognize it."

"So she even thought of that," murmured Biggles sadly.

"But for a most unfortunate accident our plan for wiping out your entire squadron would probably have succeeded, in which case your career would have ended that night."

"I'm still not altogether clear about it."

"Your squadron was doing us a lot of harm, wherefore as we couldn't stop you in the air we decided to liquidate you on the ground. We wanted to catch all the pilots together at dinner in the officers' mess; but being well camouflaged we didn't know exactly where it was. To get that information we landed an agent behind your lines. Marie was chosen for the mission."

"How was she to get the information back to you?"

"Nothing original. She took with her a homing pigeon. By one of those curious twists that can alter the course of a war she lost it. We had arranged for her to stay at a farm. The couple who lived there were in our pay. The first night Marie was there the pigeon was killed by a cat. That left her without any means of communicating with us. Had the bird lived you would never have come into the picture. As it was, like a gift from the gods you made a forced landing at the farm. Marie was a resourceful girl. She decided you should take her information to us. She turned on the charm and soon had you eating out of her hand. But now a snag had cropped up. She had carried the game a little too far and had fallen for you. She knew our plan: to kill all the officers of 266 Squadron in one devastating raid. She had to choose between love and duty."

"And she chose duty."

"As you or I would have done she put her country first. She gave you a letter to drop to an imaginary old father. Actually, her father was a general in the German Army. But you were being watched. That letter, which pinpointed your officers' mess in invisible ink, was secretly removed from

your pocket, after you had returned to the aerodrome, and another substituted. On the substitute the objective marked was the farm where Marie was staying."

"That was a damnable thing to do."

"Why? War is war, nothing barred. You delivered the letter, with the result that your mess escaped and the farm was blasted off the map."

"You needn't tell me. I saw it happen. I shall never forget it."

"You thought she was in the middle of it."

"Naturally."

"But she wasn't there. For some reason she had gone out."

"Do you know where, and why?"

Von Stalhein looked surprised. "No. Do you?"

"Yes. Now I can tell *you* something you don't know because apparently she didn't tell you. Knowing what was going to happen that night—or what she thought was going to happen—she went to the aerodrome and handed in a note for me asking me to meet her outside, the intention being to get me out of the mess before the blitz started. It so happened that I wasn't there. I had busted a tyre landing on 287 Squadron aerodrome and was on my way home in a car. She waited for me."

"What time was this?"

"About eight o'clock."

"She knew the raid was timed for eight. She waited by the aerodrome knowing that hell might break loose at any moment. My God! She *must* have been in love with you."

"I never saw her again. I was on my way home when I saw the farm go up in flames. I think I must have gone mad for a while. I can remember as a sort of nightmare fighting the Security Police and troops who stopped me trying to get to her. I was put under arrest. Later I knew she had escaped the holocaust because when I got back to my quarters I found a note from her. She had scribbled it on the road and given it to an airman to deliver. Of course, there was no question of my getting out. I was under close arrest with a Flight Commander named Mahoney as my escort. I was demented with shock, anyway."

"Have you still got that note?"

"No. There was no need for me to keep it. Every word was burnt into my brain for life. I put a match to it so that it could never be used as evidence against her. By that time she knew I knew what she was—an enemy spy. All she said was: 'Our destinies are not always in our own hands. Tonight I

came to take you away or die with you, but you were not here. Remember always that if there is one thing true in this world of war and lies it is my love for you. That may help you as it helps me. My last thought will be of you.' "

"She expected to be caught and executed."

"I suppose so."

"What a woman! She went to your aerodrome to get you out at the very moment she knew it was due to be blasted out of existence by two squadrons of lowflying heavy bombers. I'm not surprised you've been faithful to her memory."

“That was why she wasn’t at the farm when the bombers struck. She was where she thought they were going to unload.”

“What a situation!” breathed Von Stalhein. “Can you imagine anything more ironical? Hell let loose. Marie ready to die for an enemy soldier. You prepared to die for an enemy spy. Me at German Headquarters hoping she’d marry me. The gods of war played strange antics that night.”

Biggles nodded sombrely. “For me the nightmare didn’t end that night. I could never find out what became of her. I had visions of her standing against a wall to be shot. For weeks I tore about the air like a madman, looking for trouble. I couldn’t eat. I tried to live on a diet of milk and brandy. My C.O. thought I was drunk. I wasn’t. I was cold sober. Just all burnt up with grief and rage. He said I was finished and posted me back to England. That was the last straw. I took off for one last show and, not surprisingly, was shot down over your side of the lines. Fate had one last trick to play. It happened to be the day the armistice was signed.”

Von Stalhein smiled sympathetically. “Thus are men, if they survive, tempered in the furnace of bitter experience to become what you became—efficient, calculating, with a single-track mind. Had you married, your loyalties would have been divided between your wife and aviation; and a man can’t serve two mistresses honestly.”

Biggles shrugged. “Why talk of something that didn’t happen?” A look came into his eyes as if a thought had struck him. “Has anything happened that you should raise this subject tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t tell me Marie is dead.”

“Would it grieve you if—”

“Yes, it most certainly would. If she died it would close a door which, foolishly perhaps, I have tried to keep open. She closed her last letter to me with the words, ‘We shall meet again, if not in this world then the next.’ I’ve clung to that hoping it was a prophesy that might come true, although in those days the odds against a combat pilot coming through the war were hundreds to one against.”

“There is a remote chance it might still come true. I’ve always tried to keep in touch with her but it became increasingly difficult. Now I have news. A few days ago I had a letter.”

Biggles’s eyes brightened. “From Marie?”

“Yes.” Von Stalhein put a letter on the table. “You might care to read it.”

“Is she in England?”

“No, I’m sorry to say.”

“But that’s an English stamp on the envelope.”

“Even if she knew my address, which seems most unlikely, she would hardly be so foolish as to write to me by name from where she lives.”

“Ah! So she’s behind the Iron Curtain.”

“Yes.”

"Where?"

"Czechoslovakia."

"What's she doing there?"

"Her people originally came from Bohemia, near the south-east German border. You will no doubt remember the fuss when before the last war Hitler took over Sudetenland, as it was called, on the excuse there was a big German population there—as indeed there was. Nearly 4,000,000."

"Have you got her address?"

"Unfortunately no. She doesn't put one. She simply says I am writing from the old home, presumably under the impression I would know where she meant."

"Don't you?"

"No. If she ever told me I've forgotten. I never went there. All I know is it is somewhere near Rodnitz, in Bohemia, now part of Czechoslovakia."

"I've never heard of the place. When she says her old home does that mean merely the region or the actual house?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"But you must have a clue. What sort of home had she? I mean, was it a big house, one that would be easy to find, or a cottage?"

"I have an idea it was a big place. From what little she said about it I gathered her people were important landowners who had lived there for centuries. In fact, I believe her father was a baron. What conditions are like in Bohemia today I don't know, because after the last war more than 3,000,000 Germans were evicted from the country."

"Yet Marie is still there."

"Apparently."

"How could that happen?"

"I can only suppose she wished to return to the family home and was given permission to do so. I imagine it would be her property. Her father was killed in the war and I knew her mother died young."

"If her family was as well known as that she shouldn't be too difficult to find."

"The name might not be so well known now, after all that has happened."

"How did the letter get here?"

"I wish I could answer that question. She must have heard through someone, perhaps an old friend of mine, that I am in England. I can only

suppose the letter was brought out of the country unaddressed, in the pocket of someone she could trust. When the carrier got here he put an English stamp on the envelope and posted it."

"But how could he know your address? You've always been so careful to keep it secret."

"He didn't know it. He sent it to the Aliens Department at the Home Office and asked them to forward it, which they did. As I am still officially an alien here on a permit, they would know it."

Biggles shook his head sadly. "What a complicated world we live in."

"The old aristocracy of central Europe still hangs together regardless of which side of the Iron Curtain they happen to live. They help each other whenever possible."

"Are you sure this letter isn't a trap to catch you? Are you sure it was written by Marie?"

"One can never be quite sure, of course, but I'm confident it's genuine. Marie mentions one or two incidents no one but she could have known."

"Why did she write?"

"The letter is mostly personal but I suspect the real purpose was to ask for news of you. She doesn't mention you by name but I know to whom she refers. She says had it been possible she would have liked more than anything on earth to see you just once more. Which I take to mean she can't get a permit to leave the country; or, possibly, she can't afford the journey."

Biggles spoke bitterly. "First it was trenches and barbed wire that kept us apart. Now it's power politics and iron curtains. Damn all dictators. Why can't they leave people alone?"

"Because they like being dictators. It flatters their vanity. But we were speaking of Marie."

"Yes. On second thoughts, would it be wise for us to meet again? A lot of water has rolled under the bridges and we're not as young as we were. I think I'd prefer to remember her as I knew her—young, charming, gay, beautiful."

"You couldn't get to her, anyway. To try would be asking for trouble. You might get past the Iron Curtain, but after that Roth affair[2] not long ago they'd see you never got back."

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[2] See *Biggles Takes a Hand*.

"Would they know about my part in that?"

"Without a doubt. Don't forget you gave evidence in court against two of their top agents, Molsk and Rallensky. That would be reported by the Communist embassies in London. They never forget, or forgive."

"There would be no need to go through East Germany. It should be possible to get to Czechoslovakia via Switzerland and Austria."

"You might find a chink in the Curtain that way but you'd still have to risk being spotted in enemy controlled territory."

"Yes, it would come to that eventually."

"It seems a pity. Apart from seeing you Marie says she'd love to live here again. She went to school in England, you know."

"So she told me, to account for the way she spoke English. I assumed that was another lie."

"Not everything she told you was a lie. Her command of English was one of the reasons why she was selected for the job of spying on a British squadron. If she could be got out I'd be happy to fix her up in a little apartment near mine. She'd be one of my own people, an old colleague, for company. I get a bit lonely sometimes. But read her letter and tell me what you make of it."

Conscious of a sense of unreality Biggles unfolded the letter and looked down on lines of neat handwriting. He did not speak until he had finished reading. In deep thought he refolded it.

"Well?" queried his companion.

Biggles looked up. "When was the last time you saw Marie, or heard from her, before you received this letter?"

"I had a letter shortly before I was sent to prison on Sakhalin Island."

"Would she know about that?"

"Naturally. I was tried by a Peoples' Court, which is public, and she'd read about it in the newspapers."

"Now she writes to you here. That can only mean she must know you escaped. How could she know that?"

"Obviously somebody told her."

"That would be dangerous talk. Who would take such a chance?"

"Don't forget Marie was a long time in the Secret Service. She knew many people, apart from me, doing the same work. Someone knowing we were friendly may have tipped her off. After the war quite a few turned to Russia for employment, as I did. Of course, she wouldn't dare to mention in a letter who told her, or that she knew I was now free."

"The fact that she writes to you now suggests to me that she's in trouble."

"How so?"

"When people are in trouble they look for a friend, someone to confide in. She had no one; so she wrote to you."

"For help?"

"Not necessarily. She'd derive some comfort just from making contact with you. Apart from what she actually says, reading between the lines one or two other aspects can be deduced."

"Such as?"

"She's living in poor, if not impoverished, circumstances. This is cheap paper. She wrote with an old pen and ink that had nearly dried up. You can see the breaks in the words. She had no blotting paper. She had to let it dry."

"She doesn't mention money."

"She wouldn't be likely to. Had she been comfortably off she'd have said so, to save you worrying about her on that score."

"That could be true. I can't imagine any source from which she could get money. She must have lost everything when the war ended. Most of us did. Anything else?"

"She isn't well. I'd say another reason why she wrote this letter was because she was in poor health and thought she might die. To me this has an underlying tone of being a farewell letter. Notice the way she says she'd have liked to see me *just once more*. Why only once more? There's a hint of finality there. I may be wrong but I read that to mean she feels she's near the end of her tether."

"She doesn't say she's ill."

"Of course not. She knew that would have upset you. It might have caused you to drop everything and rush out to her, probably losing your life in so doing. To my way of thinking, had she been fit and well she would have said so. The fact that she doesn't even mention her health is significant. Usually, when old friends write to each other after a long break health is a major subject. As people get older it becomes more and more important. She says nothing."

"I'm afraid you're right. Now you've said it I must admit I've been thinking on the same lines." Von Stalhein looked at his watch. "Great heavens! How time flies when I am with you. Everyone else has gone. The waiters are getting impatient. It's time we were going." He got up, putting the letter in his pocket. "Well," he concluded. "Even though digging up old

history might be painful to you I thought you'd be pleased to know Marie is still alive and still thinks of you."

"I'm glad you told me," returned Biggles. "There's no pain any more. If one can survive a wound time will heal it—or at any rate one can get used to it. We'll meet again soon and talk more about it. Meanwhile we can do some serious thinking." He paid the bill.

"I'll get in touch with you," were Von Stalhein's last words as they parted on the pavement outside the restaurant.

CHAPTER II

ACCUSATIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

THE effect on Biggles of his conversation with Von Stalhein was at once apparent to those at Air Police Headquarters at Scotland Yard, although they were left in ignorance of the cause. Biggles remained silent on the subject. His manner was preoccupied and he seldom spoke unless spoken to. He spent a lot of time studying maps which, it was observed, were of countries in central Europe.

Algy, Bertie and Ginger looked at each other, shrugged shoulders but asked no questions. They had on a few rare occasions seen their leader in this mood; but then they knew the reason. Now they did not, and Biggles gave no hint of an explanation.

So an uncomfortable week passed. Fortunately nothing occurred to break the normal routine of the office; or perhaps it should be said unfortunately, for this would have given everyone something else to think about.

Towards the end of the second week, which brought no change in Biggles's behaviour, Algy could endure the tension no longer. As the senior of the three police pilots he spoke up. "Look Biggles; we've had about enough of this. What's the matter with you?" he demanded bluntly.

Biggles looked up from his desk where for an hour or more he had sat apparently lost in thought. "Why should there be anything the matter with me?" he asked evenly.

"You know. I don't. That's why I'm asking you."

"Forget it. It would be of no interest to you."

Bertie chipped in. "But look here old boy. We can't go on like this. If you don't give yourself a nervous breakdown you'll give us one. We might as well work in a bally mortuary."

"It's purely a personal matter."

"Fiddlesticks! What upsets you upsets all of us, and you jolly well know it."

"I'm sorry."

Algy was not to be put off. "This moribund atmosphere started following the night you had dinner with Von Stalhein," he challenged. "Am I right?"

"Quite right."

“It was something he told you.”

“Right again.”

“Then out with it and get it off your chest.”

“It isn’t as easy as that.”

“You behave as if you were waiting for something to happen.”

“I am.”

“What is it?”

“Erich said he would be getting in touch with me to discuss a certain matter. I haven’t heard a word.”

“What’s the certain matter,” pursued Algy.

“Something that happened long ago.”

“How long ago?”

“Back in the old days of 266 Squadron.”

“In France?”

“Yes.”

“In my time?”

“You were there.”

Algy thought for a minute. “Would it be something to do with that beautiful Boche spy you got tangled up with? What was her name—Marie something or other.”

Biggles nodded.

“A beautiful spy?” queried Bertie. “I don’t know anything about this.”

“It was before your time,” Algy told him. “Biggles fell for a girl in a big way. She turned out to be a German spy.”

Bertie looked shocked. “A girl. Oh no! I can’t believe it.”

“It’s true. We never discuss it.”

“Well, stew me in hogwash! This *is* an eye-opener.”

“Oh pipe down,” requested Biggles curtly. “It might strike you fledglings as funny but at the time it was anything but that.”

Algy went on, quietly, seriously. “Would I be right in guessing Von Stalhein gave you news of her?”

“You would.”

“Is she dead?”

“No.”

“Then why bring up something that’s best forgotten?”

"Who says it's best forgotten?"

"Well—er—I would have thought so."

"That's where you'd be wrong. I've never forgotten."

"Tell me about it," pleaded Bertie.

Algy looked at Biggles. "Mind if I tell him?"

Biggles sighed. "Please yourself. But make it short."

Algy gave a brief account of the affair.

"Now you all know I hope you're satisfied," said Biggles coldly, when he had finished.

"There's no need to get narky about it, old boy," protested Bertie. "You know we're all on your side, absolutely."

Algy came in again. "What's this latest development that seems to have knocked you cold?"

"She'd like to come here to live."

"Okay. Let her come so we can all be pals together and get back to normal."

"There's reason to think she can't get here."

"Why not?"

"She happens to be living on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain."

"Oh spare my days! So that's it. Where is she exactly—East Germany?"

"No. Czechoslovakia. Bohemia, to be more specific."

"Strewth! You're not thinking of going out to fetch her?"

"Not seriously."

"I should say not. We've barked our shins on the Iron Curtain often enough as it is. There's such a thing as playing that sort of game once too often. Let it rest till someone pulls up the Curtain."

"That may not be for a long time yet. Meanwhile we believe Marie is in a bad way."

Bertie came back. "But I say, look here, why get all steamed up about an enemy spy who twiddled you round her little finger and then let you down with a wallop—if you see what I mean?"

"Marie Janis was doing the best she could for her side, the same as we were—and still are if it comes to that," retorted Biggles. "Von Stalhein was doing the same thing. We've nothing to shout about on that score, anyway."

"Ah well. All's fair in love and war, as they say."

"The war's over."

"But not love, eh?"

Biggles did not answer.

"Is Von Stalhein doing anything about getting Marie here?" inquired Algy.

"Not as far as I know. He said he'd get in touch with me to discuss the possibilities. That was a fortnight ago. I haven't heard a word."

"If you feel like that about it why not call on him and put an end to this tearing your nerves to pieces—and ours."

"I've considered that; but I thought it better to leave things to him. Marie wrote to him, not me. I don't want to butt in where I'm not wanted."

"Could he have got into trouble of some sort?"

"If so I don't know what it could be. Things have quietened down lately."

"Then for all our sakes go to his flat and find out what he's doing."

"Yes, I think the time has come to do that." Biggles got up. "I'll slip along right away. I've had enough of this suspense."

"Want anyone to go with you?"

"No thanks. I'll go alone. I shouldn't be long." Biggles put on his hat and went out.

As the door closed behind him Ginger said to Algy: "Was he really in love with this girl?"

"From what I can see of it he still is," returned Algy grimly.

Biggles wasted no time on his errand. He took a taxi to the block of flats in Kensington where Von Stalhein had an apartment and was soon knocking on his door.

There was no answer.

He knocked again, loudly.

Still no answer.

"It's me, Bigglesworth," he called, knowing Von Stalhein was cautious about opening his door to strangers, as he had reason to be.

No sound came from behind the door. He tried it. It was locked.

Thoughtfully he turned away and returned to the ground floor. There he found the caretaker doing some cleaning. "I'm a friend of the gentleman who lives in Number 21," he stated. "I can't make anyone hear. Do you happen to know if he's away?"

"You mean the foreign gentleman?"

"That's right."

“I think he must have gone away.”

“Has he given up the flat?”

“No, I don’t think he’s done that or I’d have been told about it. But he’s cancelled his morning papers and the milk so perhaps he’s gone on holiday.”

“Do you know if he’s had any visitors?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“No one been asking for him?”

“I ain’t seen no one and no one’s asked me about him.”

“He didn’t say anything to you about going away or when he’d be back?”

“No. I didn’t see much of him. Nice gentleman. Quiet. Kept himself to himself.”

“I see. Thanks.” Biggles went out.

For a minute he stood on the pavement considering what he had just learned. He was puzzled. There was no reason why Von Stalhein should tell him he was going away; but he was still a registered alien and as such would have to report to the authorities any change of address. That could easily be checked.

He took a taxi to the Home Office where, at the appropriate department, having shown his police credentials, he put some questions about Von Stalhein. He was kept waiting a little while, but when the inquiry officer returned he had the answers. Von Stalhein was still domiciled at the same address; but ten days earlier he had applied for permission to go abroad and this had been granted.

“Did he give any reason for wanting to go?”

“To see a relative who was ill.”

“Where?”

“In Austria.”

“Did he have a passport?”

“Yes. German, of course. It was issued by the German Office in London. We provided him with a document should he be questioned by the Immigration officers on re-entering the country.”

“So he intended coming back?”

“Yes.”

“Did he say how long he’d be away?”

The official consulted the file. “Two to three weeks.”

“Thanks. That’s what I wanted to know.”

Biggles went out and took a cab back to Scotland Yard.

"Well?" queried Algy. "Did you see him?"

"No. He wasn't at home."

"You didn't wait?"

Biggles dropped into his chair. "It wouldn't have been any use. He's gone away."

"Gone where?"

"Abroad. I've been to the Home Office. He got permission to visit a sick relative in Austria."

"Do you believe that?"

"No. He may have gone to Austria, but if so it was because he didn't want to go through East Germany on his way to Czechoslovakia."

"So that's where you think he's gone?"

"Where else?"

"Hoping to get in touch with Marie Janis."

"I can't imagine any other reason why he should dash off abroad at this particular moment."

"Without warning you!" put in Bertie. "I call that a bit thick."

"I can't believe it was because he didn't want me with him. He knew it would be a risky business so he decided to tackle it on his own."

"You mean, to keep you out of trouble?"

"That's how I see it. He must have thought that if he did nothing about Marie, I would."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

"For the time being, nothing. I might do more harm than good by barging in. Besides, it may not be necessary for me to do anything. Erich may find Marie and bring her here. Don't ask me how. The thing bristles with difficulties—money, papers . . . but as an experienced espionage agent he'd take all that into account. There is this about it: he won't stay abroad longer than is absolutely necessary. He must have been gone a week already. If he isn't back in a fortnight I shall begin to wonder if he's coming back at all."

"If he's spotted they'll see he doesn't come back, you can bet your life on that," declared Ginger. "It won't be Sakhalin this time. It'll be a firing squad."

"And that will be the end of poor old Erich," put in Bertie. "Well, at least we know how things stand, and that should clear the air a bit—if you see

what I mean."

"Just a minute," objected Algy, looking at Biggles suspiciously. "Let's get this tidied up while we're at it, before we talk of knowing how things stand. From what I can see of it, assuming Von Stalhein has gone to Czechoslovakia, one of two things will happen. Either he will not come back at all or he will return bringing the lady with him. If he doesn't come back—well, that's his funeral. If he gets home bringing Marie Janis with him what are you going to do about it?"

Biggles frowned. "Why should I do anything about it?"

"That's what I'm wondering."

"Suppose we leave that till it happens."

"You're not by any chance thinking of carrying on from where you left off in France? We have a right to know."

"At my age? Don't be ridiculous."

"All right. Now the alternative. What are *you* going to do if Von Stalhein doesn't come back?"

"He's an experienced secret agent. He'll get back if it's humanly possible."

"You needn't tell me that. Don't boggle the question. Are you contemplating going to Czechoslovakia to look for him?"

"No."

"I'm relieved to hear it."

"It's possible I might try to do what he failed to do."

"Does that mean *you'd* try to find Miss Janis?"

"Of course."

Algy groaned, throwing up his hands in a gesture of despair. "That's what I was afraid of. Now I know you're round the bend."

"There's no need for you to get steamed up about it," retorted Biggles coldly. "I haven't invited you to come with me."

"How in the name of lunacy do you reckon to get into Czechoslovakia—and out again? Is that what you've been brooding over for the past fortnight?"

"I have considered the possibilities," admitted Biggles.

"The Air Commodore will refuse to let you go."

"I shan't ask his permission. I could apply for leave of absence. On leave I'm free to do what I like."

“If you’re contemplating using government aircraft for a private venture __”

“I’m not quite as daft as that. If I wanted an aircraft for any purpose there’s no reason why I shouldn’t buy one.”

“And end up in the queue for national assistance.”

“I shan’t come begging to you.”

Bertie cut in. “Here, I say, chaps, easy on the oars. There’s no need to get a rush of blood to the brain over something that may never happen.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to make Algy understand,” protested Biggles.

“Fair enough. Just as a matter of interest let’s have a look at the atlas and get an idea of where Erich has gone to put his neck in a noose.”

“By now he should be somewhere in Bohemia.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s a province of Czechoslovakia.”

“Jolly good. I’ve heard of people in this country leading a Bohemian life. I gather they wear dirty shirts, grow beards and sit around in wine shops singing and playing things called zithers.”

“I doubt if Von Stalhein is taking an active part in any such frolics at the moment,” returned Biggles lugubriously.

“I suppose you’ve already swotted up all the gen on the country,” suggested Algy.

“I have—just in case.”

“What sort of country is it?”

“Mostly mountains with valleys between. It’s surrounded by mountains.”

“Sounds a charming place to land an aircraft outside an airport after dark.”

“About a third of the country is covered with forest.”

“Ha! Better still.” Algy was frankly sarcastic.

“I haven’t said anything about landing a plane after dark.”

“How else would you jump the frontier? The Iron Curtain may be getting a bit rusty but it’s still there.”

“Rather than do any jumping I might decide to put on my best suit, buy myself a nice railway ticket and travel like the traditional English tourist. Possibly a commercial traveller.”

“Selling what?”

“Not selling. Buying. It’s time you knew buyers are always more welcome than sellers.”

“All right. Buying what?”

“Samples of glass might do, if I could wangle an import licence. Bohemia has been manufacturing quality glass-ware, coloured ornaments and such like for 700 years. I have made it my business to ascertain there’s a factory at Rodnitz, the town near which the Janis family have resided—according to Von Stalhein—for centuries. This is the place. Take a look and get your bearings.” Biggles opened the atlas.

CHAPTER III

THE CLUE

DAYS passed. A week. Ten days. Biggles sorted the mail impatiently but no word had come from Von Stalhein. He made frequent visits to his flat only to learn from the caretaker that he had not returned. However, now that the subject had become one for open conversation, with the air cleared Biggles was more his usual self.

"If Erich was coming back he'd be home by now; or, anyway, you'd have heard from him," remarked Ginger one morning. This was as they were sitting down to breakfast. As usual the talk had turned to Von Stalhein's prolonged absence.

"And if he, German born, a trained agent, able to speak half a dozen languages fluently, couldn't get away with it, what a hope any of us here would have," put in Algy. He went on. "I'll tell you something else. He has another advantage. Having lived on the other side of the barbed wire for so long he must know quite a few people there. Surely he could rely on one of them to help him, lend him money if he ran short or even provide him with a hide-out if he got into trouble. We don't know a soul."

Ginger resumed. "For all we know he may have relations. Maybe he has no intention of coming back to England."

"In that case there was no reason why he should slink off without telling me he was going," answered Biggles, shortly.

"He may have changed his mind since he got there. He may have found Marie, married her and settled down for good."

"In which case, if I know the man, he would have found means of letting me know," retorted Biggles. "How you do carry on. Are you trying to put me off going to look for Marie by arguing that if he couldn't find her I wouldn't have a chance?"

Algy replied. "Frankly, yes. After all, a man with a name like Von Stalhein on his passport should have no difficulty in moving about in Eastern Europe; whereas any official would look twice at a name like Bigglesworth."

"I'm not so sure that you're right there."

“How do you work that out? How much do you know about Czechoslovakia?”

“Very little,” confessed Biggles. “When I had dinner with Erich I knew practically nothing. As a matter of fact he didn’t say much about the country. There may have been a reason for that. Since then I’ve been making a few inquiries.”

“And what did you learn?”

“It seems that Czechoslovakia, now officially a republic, is one of those artificial states created by politicians after a war—with the best intentions, of course, but more often than not with unfortunate results. The country, formerly part of Austria-Hungary, now takes in Bohemia, Moravia, part of Silesia and Slovakia.”

“Bohemia,” put in Ginger. “I’ve just remembered something. Isn’t that where Good King Wenceslaus looked out, on the feast of Stephen, when the snow lay round about . . .”

“Correct.”

“Sounds as if it might be a cold country in winter.”

“Probably is.”

“Then if you’re going you’d better get cracking before it starts to snow. It’s September now.”

“All in good time.” Biggles went on. “Naturally, this tie-up of countries produced a mixture of people with different languages, although they now have a common one. I don’t know for sure but I imagine most of them can speak some German, anyway in Bohemia, which before the war was chiefly occupied by Germans and now has a German frontier. The point I’m trying to make is, Germans can hardly be popular after the frightful things the Nazis did to the country in Hitler’s war. Von Stalhein must be aware of it, and that may be why he kept off the subject. If I’m right, being a German won’t make things any easier for him unless there are still some Germans living there.”

“Isn’t Marie a German?” asked Algy.

“Yes. That’s what Erich couldn’t understand. He could only conclude that she’d gone back there because her family had lived in Bohemia for centuries. It was probably on account of the Nazi atrocities that the Czechs, when it came to the showdown, voted to row in with the Russians, who are still in control. I imagine the biggest risk Von Stalhein has to face is being recognized by a Soviet secret agent, he having worked for Russia himself. Well, there it is.”

"What do the Czechs use for money?" asked Bertie. "Have you found that out?"

"Of course. The basic unit is the koruna, or as we call it, the crown. About two hundred go to our pound. It's divided into taler, a hundred to the crown. To get hold of some Czech money here may be a problem; but it shouldn't be too difficult in Switzerland or Austria. Incidentally, Czechoslovakia now has frontiers with Germany, Austria, Poland, Hungary and Rumania. But I'm in no great hurry to go there. I'll give Erich a few more days."

"And then, if he doesn't come back, or you hear nothing of him?"

"I shall start thinking seriously about looking for Marie."

"Okay. Have it your way," sighed Algy.

"I've got an idea," announced Bertie, brightly.

"Let's have it," requested Biggles.

"If anyone's going to have a stab at Rodnitz it should be me."

"Why you? Marie means nothing to you. You don't even know her."

"Neither will you, old boy, after all these years, if I know anything. Too many people know you by sight. They're not so familiar with my mug. As Algy says, the name Bigglesworth might ring a bell. Mine wouldn't."

"I don't get it."

"Well, without flattering myself, my civilian passport should command a little respectful attention. I mean, my title's on it. Had to be. The Lord Lissie, Chedcombe Manor. Occupation, gentleman—and all that rot, if you see what I mean."

Ginger grinned. "I think he's got something there."

"What would you do?" Biggles asked Bertie.

"Take my car over and do a spot of touring in Bohemia."

"Looking for Marie?"

"First of all a nice big field near Rodnitz, if there is one, where a plane could be put on the carpet."

"Whose plane?"

"Yours, of course."

"Why a plane, necessarily?"

"I'm thinking there would probably be snags in trying to get Marie out of the country by ordinary surface transport. She may not have a passport; or if she has, it may have expired. Had her papers been in order, if she's so anxious to come here she might have got here without any help from us.

Having found a field I then locate Marie, tell her where the field is and make a date for her to meet you there. I then come home and pinpoint the field on your map. Then all you have to do is slip over and fly her out. How's that?"

"Very ingenious and, as you put it, nice and simple. It might work. But why should you stick your neck out doing something that is really no concern of yours?"

"Nothing to it, old boy. We can't have you fretting about Marie for the rest of your life. You'll be going into a decline, or something. The sooner we get her here the better for everyone. That's what I say. Am I right, chaps?" Bertie looked at the others for confirmation.

They nodded assent, but without enthusiasm.

"I wish you'd get it out of your heads that I'm fretting," said Biggles, critically. "All that ended long ago."

"Then what's the fuss about?" inquired Algy.

"It's simply that I'm not happy while I have reason to think a friend may be sick, dying perhaps, alone, in miserable circumstances."

"You call Marie Janis a friend?"

"Put it like this. Over the years I've met a great many people. The majority have meant nothing to me. Others have played a vital part in my life. Marie was one. Von Stalhein is another. I may be flattering myself but I like to think they have some regard for me. In this cock-eyed world such people should stand by each other when life looks grim. Kindly remember there was a time when Marie, enemy though she was, risked her life to save mine, both by entering a zone due to be bombed flat, and afterwards in front of a firing squad. If you can't understand how I feel about that—well, never mind. That's all I have to say about it, except that I don't expect any of you to participate in what is a purely personal affair of mine."

"I can't remember Von Stalhein ever saving your life," argued Algy.

"There were occasions when he could have killed me. There were occasions when I could have killed him. Neither of us pulled the trigger. Don't ask me why. I'm not a psychologist."

Bertie came back. "But look here, old boy, your personal affairs are our affairs, as you know jolly well. I'm all for taking a close look at Bohemia."

"You may, but you're not going alone," stated Biggles firmly. "We'll talk about it later. We'd better be getting to the office. Ginger, you might slip down and see if the post has been."

Ginger went out and returned holding two or three letters. "Nothing of interest," he said casually. "Postcard for Algy." He handed it over.

Algy glanced at it. Then he looked hard. He turned it over. “Just a minute,” he said to Biggles, who was putting on his hat. “You’d better have a look at this.”

Biggles came back, holding out a hand for the card. “Who’s it from?”

“Unless it’s the top coincidence of all time it’s from Von Stalhein.”

Biggles’s expression changed. “Addressed to you!”

Algy smiled. “ ‘A. Lacey Esq.’ Never mind that. Look at the picture on the front.”

Biggles took one quick look at it. He threw his hat aside and returning to the table laid the postcard on it. “Rodnitz,” he breathed. He turned the card over. *The wine here is excellent*, he read, slowly. “What the devil does that mean? There’s no address.”

“It wasn’t necessary to put one,” Algy said. “I fancy it’s in the picture.”

Again Biggles turned the card while the others came up to look over his shoulder.

It was an ordinary cheap picture postcard, such as is made in quantities for tourists. The picture was of a typical Central European street. The title, in small letters, simply read: *Ludwigstrasse, Rodnitz*. Conspicuous in the foreground, on a corner, was a large black and white building, apparently old, carrying across the front in large letters the sign: CAFÉ WAGNER. No mark had been made by the sender. Nor was there an indication of anything in particular to invite attention.

“It *must* be from Von Stalhein,” breathed Biggles. “It couldn’t be from anyone else. That would be too fantastic.”

“Why couldn’t he have been a little more explicit,” complained Ginger. “The wine here is excellent! What are we to take that to mean?”

“Obviously he daren’t risk saying more. But hold your horses. This calls for serious thought. He says the wine is excellent. That could mean several things. First of all the card tells us he is, or has been, in Rodnitz. He is, or was, alive and well, or he couldn’t have written this. Also, I am at, or sometimes go to, the Café Wagner.”

“Why send the card to me?” queried Algy.

“To avoid using my name which, as Bertie has already pointed out, might be known to someone seeing the card. You would be certain to show the card to me. Remember, this comes from a Communist-controlled country. The mail may be censored. Probably is. It may have been for that reason the card was not posted in Rodnitz; nor, for that matter,

Czechoslovakia. The stamp is Swiss. The card, as we see from the postmark, was posted in Geneva."

"Could he have posted it from there himself?"

"I don't think so. Had he written from Switzerland he could have sent a letter and said anything he wanted us to know, instead of leaving us to guess. No. When he wrote this card he was in Rodnitz. I'd say he got someone leaving the country to post it. Possibly a tourist—a Swiss returning home. It's likely that the Café Wagner is used by tourists. I'm assuming the object of this particular card was to call attention to the café. This business about the wine is non-committal, but it suggests the place is worth a visit."

"Why did he write at all?" asked Ginger. "After pushing off without telling you he was going . . ."

"He knew I'd guess where he'd gone," broke in Biggles. "He also knew that after the lapse of time I'd be getting worried about him. This may simply have been his way of putting my mind at rest, telling me he got to Rodnitz and all was well."

"On the other hand," said Algy, a trifle cynically, "he may have written this to hint that he was in difficulties, and would welcome your assistance."

"Possibly. Again, it may merely have been a way to account for the delay in making contact with me."

Bertie gave his opinion. "I'd bet he's run into trouble and this card is as good as saying he's stuck in jolly Bohemia. Now he's waiting for you to do something about it."

Biggles shrugged. "You could be right. If he's on a spot it must be serious. He's no fool. With his experience he should be able to handle a difficult situation. As far as this postcard is concerned we may be sure he has done as much, and said as much, as he dare."

Algy came back. "Very well. The big question is, what are you going to do about it?"

"I shall see the Air Commodore and ask for two or three weeks' leave."

"To go to Czechoslovakia."

"I shan't tell him that. But don't worry. I've no intention of rushing bull-headed into this. I shall wait a few days to see if anything else turns up. He may come home. In any case it would take a little while to make the necessary preparations for a trip to Rodnitz."

"You mean—by train?"

"There's no other way."

Ginger spoke. “This seems a slow and roundabout way of getting to an objective. What’s wrong with a snappy airborne job, cutting out all these frontiers?”

“What exactly are you thinking of?”

“A parachute drop. One of us could fly you over.”

Biggles shook his head. “Forget it. Brollies are out. To start with, Bohemia is beyond the range—on a straight flight from here—of a standard light plane. Apart from that, no one but a lunatic would make a blind drop in the dark not knowing what was underneath. I’ve told you the country is mostly high land, mountains divided by valleys and much of the lower slopes heavily forested. In war-time one might risk landing on top of a mountain; but we’re not at war, so there’s no reason why one should take unnecessary risks. It would be a different matter if we knew an open area and had someone on it to show a light signal. Anyway, it’s time you knew that aircraft can’t fly about Europe just as they like, ignoring frontiers. If we hear no more from Erich I shall buy myself a nice railway ticket to Rodnitz to see just how good the wine is in the Café Wagner.”

“What about me?” asked Bertie, looking disappointed.

“I’ll think about it. You’d better polish up your German in case I decide to take you. It was a bit rusty the last time I heard you use it. English won’t get you far, and you’re not likely to learn Czech, which, I am told, has forty-two letters in the alphabet.”

Bertie saluted, clicking his heels. “*Jawohl, Befehlshaber.*” (Certainly, commandant).

Everyone laughed.

Biggles looked at the dock and got up. “That’s enough for now. It’s time we were at the office.”

CHAPTER IV

FIRST NIGHT IN BOHEMIA

"WELL, we're here, old boy, whatever else happens," said Bertie cheerfully as he unpacked his light travelling case in a front bedroom of the Steinhof Hotel, overlooking the Ludwigstrasse, in Rodnitz. "No bother at all. A slice of cake, in fact."

"That's how I rather hoped it would be," answered Biggles. "Why not? We're good sensible tourists prepared to spend money." He went close to Bertie and whispered. "Careful what you say. Remember where we are. There could be a dictaphone hidden somewhere."

As Bertie had remarked, the trip out had presented no difficulties. In fact it had been enjoyable, for the train by which they had travelled passed through some magnificent scenery, notably after they had crossed the border into Bohemia. For once they were seeing a new country from ground level.

The regular air service had taken them as far as Switzerland where they had cashed some travellers' cheques for the currency they needed. Then, Biggles still convinced it was their best way, had taken a train via Austria to Czechoslovakia and finally to Rodnitz. No one had tried to stop them, or asked the awkward questions for which they were prepared. The officer of the guard, when they had crossed the last frontier, had, it is true, made a close inspection of their passports and checked their visas before stamping them and handing them back with a penetrating stare at their faces. However, no matter what he may have thought, he said nothing.

As Biggles had remarked afterwards, why shouldn't they be treated as ordinary tourists? They had broken no law, contravened no regulation, done nothing improper. Their intentions were not criminal; nor were they directed against the government of a country towards whom they felt no enmity. They had behaved as genuine tourists were expected to behave, and they would continue to do so unless pressure by the authorities forced them into irregularities in sheer self-protection.

Of course, it could not be denied that they had an undisclosed purpose in coming to the country; but as this was simply to call on, and perhaps help, an old friend, it could hardly be called a threat to the security of the state or its people. Anyhow, as he was unable to see into the future that was how Biggles regarded the situation at the time of their arrival. He expected no

trouble from the Czech people, but of the power that governed them he was not so sure, bearing in mind that they had good reasons to treat him with suspicion—certainly if they associated him with the escape of Von Stalhein from the political prison on the island of Sakhalin.[3]

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[3] See *Biggles Buries a Hatchet*.

As they were travelling on their genuine civilian passports Biggles' name gave him the greatest cause for anxiety, in case (for this was something he had no means of knowing) the names of all foreigners entering the country were sent to a central office for checking. In that event someone seeing the name Bigglesworth might recall it in connexion with some of his activities.

For the rest, they had provided themselves with an excuse for their visit in the form of a letter naming them as representatives of a London business house specializing in high quality glass-ware. So far it had not been necessary to produce this. As a matter of detail, a recently concluded trade agreement between Britain and Czechoslovakia had enabled Biggles to obtain from the Board of Trade a permit to buy up to £100 worth of samples. He carried this in his pocket.

That was all, and he thought it should be enough. They would remain good honest tourists for as long as this was possible. He thought it not unlikely that they would be watched, at any rate until the authorities were satisfied that they were what they claimed to be.

A taxi-driver at the station had provided the name of the hotel. Biggles had asked him if there was a good hotel in the Ludwigstrasse and he had recommended the Steinhof, which turned out to be the largest. He had driven them to it. Their reception had been cordial. The service and the food were excellent. Biggles called Bertie's attention to a notice on the wall stating that the hotel doors were locked at one a.m. After that, entrance could be gained by ringing for the night porter.

They had arrived at six o'clock in the evening, and as this seemed rather early to investigate the Café Wagner it was decided they should have a bath, which was needed after the long journey, and a meal, before going out. Naturally, their first object would be to discover, if possible, the real purpose of Von Stalhein's cryptic message. There was no point in doing anything else until that had been settled. They would, of course, have to visit the local

glass factory sooner or later, to conform to what they were supposed to be doing.

It was ten o'clock, and a dark, moonless night, when they went out and without difficulty found their immediate objective, the Café Wagner. In was within a hundred yards of the hotel, and looked, as Bertie observed—unnecessarily—exactly like the picture postcard.

They entered to find themselves in the sort of establishment they had visualized; typical of the older drinking houses of Central Europe. A large room, hazy with tobacco smoke, well patronized by men mostly drinking beer in large tankards but a few drinking wine, at numerous tables, some large some small. There was a babble of conversation as if everyone was in good spirits. The drinks were being served by women of various ages dressed in old-fashioned clothes, presumably some sort of local or national costume.

In a corner a four-man band comprising a piano, a violin, a zither and an accordion, made merry music. These, too, wore what was evidently the male part of the dress; a blue blouse with loose sleeves, tight round the neck but belted at the waist, over baggy trousers and light black boots that came halfway up the calf. There were snatches of song from some of the customers when the orchestra played a popular number. In short, it was a busy, cheerful place.

Biggles led the way to a small, unoccupied table. To Bertie he said dryly, in a low voice, as a waitress came up: "Now we'll see just how good the wine is." He ordered wine, the best they had. The woman returned with a long-necked bottle and two glasses, which she filled. She lingered while they tasted it, and turned away, laughing, when Bertie winked, making a sign that it was perfect.

Biggles agreed that Von Stalhein had told the truth about the quality of the wine served in the Café Wagner. "I can't see him," he added, looking round.

For a while they sat talking, sipping their wine, taking note of everything that went on, particularly new arrivals. More people came than went, with the result that the room became crowded and the noise considerable. Occasionally the accordion player would get up and moving from table to table give a short solo performance. For this he was given a tip, and sometimes a drink.

Presently it became the turn of the violinist to do this. Playing his instrument he moved slowly through the throng, always drawing nearer to the table where Biggles and Bertie sat smoking and slowly drinking their

wine. He was a tall lean man with long hair, turning grey, ending in "sideboards" which ran down into a stubble of beard.

"I think he's going to give us a turn," observed Bertie. "I may be wrong but I fancy he wants to have a close look at us. I have several times noticed him staring in this direction."

He was right. The violinist, a picturesque figure, still playing, slowly edged his way through the crowd, and stopping at their table gave them a tune. This sort of thing being commonplace no one took any notice.

Nor, for that matter, did Biggles, until, having taken from his pocket some small change for the customary tip, he looked directly into the musician's face, to meet a pair of hard, steely blue eyes. For a moment he forgot to breathe, such was the shock he received. He would not have recognized the man, dressed as he was, but there was no mistaking the eyes. The man was Von Stalhein.

The musician finished his piece and bowed as he accepted his tip. With his lips hardly moving he spoke softly but distinctly. What he said was: "In the back courtyard at a quarter past twelve. By the gent's toilet. Be careful. Someone may be watching." Then, still playing his fiddle, he moved on, and presently made his way back to his place in the orchestra.

"*What* did he say?" asked Bertie. "I couldn't hear for the noise. Did he speak English or did I imagine it?"

"He spoke English. Didn't you realize who he was?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Von Stalhein."

Bertie's eyes opened wide. "It isn't true!"

"It is."

"Well stiffen me rigid! Now I know I'm in fairyland. What did he say?"

Biggles repeated the message, word for word. "We can take that to be an appointment."

"But why the secrecy?"

"We may be sure he had a reason. We should know more about it in an hour's time. I'd say he knocks off work at midnight. Then he'll be free to join us. All we can do now is wait."

"How can we be careful? I mean to say, we can't get to the yard without being seen, if someone is watching."

"As apparently there's a gent's outside lav. in the yard we have a good excuse. Maybe that's why he chose the place. We shall soon know if anyone is following us. It's more likely someone is shadowing him."

“I thought we might see him here but I wasn’t prepared for a fancy dress outfit.”

“There’ll be a reason for that, too, no doubt. Erich doesn’t play games for the fun of it. Keep your eyes open for anyone taking an interest in us.”

Nothing more was said.

The time passed slowly, but the waiting came to an end on the stroke of midnight when, as Biggles had anticipated, the musicians played what was obviously their final number. They then got up, made their bow and retired.

“This is it,” said Biggles, finishing his wine. “Don’t hurry. Behave casually.”

They strolled out.

There was no difficulty in finding the entrance to the courtyard. The tavern was apparently an ancient coaching stop, for within a few yards of the main door yawned a great arched entrance of massive timber with cobblestones underfoot and an extension of the building above. They went through what was in effect a vaulted tunnel to find themselves in a wide open yard, in which were parked a few cars. It was enclosed within long, two-storey outbuildings, once stables but now probably garages or store rooms. A single electric light bulb at the end of the tunnel gave just enough light for this to be seen. One or two other men who had entered the yard with them revealed the position of the convenience Von Stalhein had mentioned. Very soon they drifted out again.

As soon as they had gone, after a quick survey of the situation Biggles took up a position in the darkness of a doorway from which it would be possible to see without being seen. A strong smell of leather suggested a harness room behind them.

Minutes passed. Then from the archway appeared a tall figure of a man who walked with a slight limp. There was no mistaking it. Von Stalhein. Still in his band costume he advanced slowly, looking about him.

A soft hiss from Biggles brought him to them.

Von Stalhein spoke swiftly. “It wouldn’t be safe to talk here. Come to my room. Second door on the right. Up the stairs then first on the left. Wait for my light to come on. You’ll see it from here. Don’t come while anyone is in the yard.”

With that Von Stalhein moved on into the gloom. A key scraped in a lock and he disappeared from sight.

Biggles had made no answer. Asked no questions. None was necessary. With a hand resting lightly on Bertie’s arm to restrain him from movement

he stood still, watching the archway.

Seconds ticked by. Then, with no more noise than a cloud passing across the face of the moon, a thickset figure emerged close against the wall. It stopped. Looking. Listening. Another long minute passed before it moved on again to make a slow, silent tour of the yard before returning to the archway.

A broad beam of light cut a slice out of the darkness from an upstairs room. This may have been what the man was waiting for, as it showed that Von Stalhein was in his room, for presently he turned away and echoing footsteps told of his return to the street. Or so it seemed. Not entirely satisfied Biggles did not move for a full five minutes, his eyes always on the archway.

Then: "I think he's gone," he whispered. "Erich was right. He's being watched. It's as well we know that. I think it's safe to join him now. Quietly. Keep close to the wall. Stop if you see or hear a movement."

"If that chap saw us come into the yard he must know we're still here somewhere," breathed Bertie.

"I doubt if he saw us come in. He was watching Erich, in which case he'd have to wait for him to come out. We were then already here. Let's go."

Hugging the wall, moving with extreme caution, Biggles advanced, Bertie close on his heels. They passed the first door Von Stalhein had mentioned and a few paces later came to the second. It was shut. Biggles felt for a handle, found one, turned it. The door opened. He waited until Bertie was inside and closed it gently. All was utter darkness. The click of his petrol lighter to see where they were broke a silence as profound as a tomb. In front of them was a flight of steep, uncarpeted, wooden stairs.

Having seen all he needed to see Biggles closed the lighter and mounted the stairs, one by one, Bertie following. They creaked alarmingly, but this could not be prevented. They ended on a small landing. A slim line of light showed under a door on the left. Biggles went to it and tapped softly with the tips of his fingers.

It opened. Von Stalhein, in shirt sleeves, stood before them, framed against the background of a small, sparsely furnished bedroom. “Wait,” he said. “I’ll put the light out. It would be better so.” This he did. “Come in,” he invited on returning, and closed the door behind them. “You’ll have to sit

on the bed," he went on. "I have only one chair and it's ready to fall to pieces. We should be safe here, but speak quietly."

"Anyone else near us?"

"No. I'm alone in this loft."

"Good. Now what's it all about? I can tell you this; you were followed."

"So. I'm not surprised. A man?"

"Yes."

"Short, burly type?"

"Yes."

"Ah! I thought so. Did he see you?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. He left when you switched on your light, apparently assuming you'd gone to bed. What has happened here? You can imagine how anxious we are to know the position. Make the story as concise as possible because we're staying at the Steinhof and they lock the doors at one o'clock. To get in then means ringing for the night porter and I'd rather not call attention to ourselves by doing that. Some busybody might wonder why we stayed out so late on our first night here."

"So you've only just arrived?"

"On the six o'clock train."

"You must feel lost without an aeroplane."

"I still have legs."

Von Stalhein went to the window and for some seconds stared down into the courtyard before drawing a flimsy curtain.

Returning, he lit a stump of candle in a cheap ornamental candlestick which he placed on a stool between them.

"Smoke if you wish," he said. "I often smoke here at night when I can't sleep. You must be wondering why I am in these clothes working in what in England might be called a glorified pub."

"I certainly am," returned Biggles.

"We'll come to that presently," promised Von Stalhein. "To make things clear it would be better if I started at the beginning. Now, if you're comfortable, I'll tell you my tale of woe, then you'll be up to date with the situation."

CHAPTER V

VON STALHEIN EXPLAINS

"First of all I owe you an apology for dashing off without warning you or telling you where I was going," began Von Stalhein, contritely. "No doubt you guessed where I'd gone."

"Of course."

"I acted as I did for two reasons. Firstly, I did not want to see you involved in a dangerous undertaking as a result of what I had told you. Secondly, I thought I could handle the business on my own and give you a pleasant surprise by calling at your flat with Marie. And so I might have done had it not been for the most atrocious luck." Von Stalhein smiled lugubriously.

"I know it is a common fault in human nature to blame misfortune for what is really one's own fault," he went on, "but I think you will agree, when I tell you what has happened, that I was out of luck almost from the time of my arrival in Rodnitz. I had no difficulty in getting here. I travelled the cheapest possible way, by train via Switzerland and Austria, and finally by a tourist charabanc, but even that nearly exhausted my slender capital. Actually, I arrived here with the equivalent of less than twenty pounds in my pocket. It therefore became necessary for me to find the cheapest possible accommodation."

Biggles shook his head. "That was a mistake. Why handicap yourself by lack of funds? You should have come to me. You knew I'd have let you have some money."

"You would have demanded to come with me, and that would have defeated my object in working alone—for reasons I have already told you."

"Don't let's waste time on what we might have done. Carry on."

"Near the station I found a small *gasthaus*, called the *Pension Schmon* which seemed to suit my purpose admirably," resumed Von Stalhein. "Having established myself I went out to make discreet inquiries about the residence of the Janis family."

"Couldn't you have found it in a telephone directory?"

"That was the first thing I tried, but I could find no such name in it. Now I know the reason—but I'll come to that presently. Returning to my room,

having had no success, I was about to enter the *gasthaus* when someone touched me on the arm. I turned to find myself face to face with a man I had known in the Gestapo, and later in the service of the Soviet Union; a man by the name of Hans Reinhardt. Nothing could have been more unfortunate. In Germany I would expect to run into someone who knew me, but not here, and at that moment I wished him to the devil. I didn't like him and I knew he didn't like me, the reason being that he was once my junior and on more than one occasion I had to reprimand him for slackness and inefficiency."

"For whom is this fellow working now?" interposed Biggles.

"I don't know. I have no means of finding out. He might be a local police officer although I think that's hardly likely. It wouldn't suit his ambitious nature. It's more likely he's a local agent for the State Secret Police. As you know, in a Communist republic spies are everywhere."

"What does he look like, in case I should bump into him?"

"He's a little weasel of a man with a pale complexion and thin sandy hair. He has sandy eyebrows and eye lashes. His chin recedes so that he looks a weak type; but don't let that mislead you; his brain is as sharp as a needle. A bit too sharp. That's why we fell out. As you can imagine the last thing I wanted was to be recognized by anyone—least of all by him."

"What did he say?"

"He asked me, quite naturally, what I was doing in Rodnitz. I had to find a reason, so on the spur of the moment I told him I was nearly broke and looking for work. This had a curious consequence. I don't think he was serious, but he said he had just been to the Café Wagner, in the Ludwigstrasse. There was a notice announcing a vacancy in the orchestra for a violinist. I might apply for the job."

"Can you play the violin?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know that."

Von Stalhein smiled wanly. "You have never given me an opportunity to demonstrate my private accomplishments. Your interest in my affairs made it difficult for me to carry a fiddle around with me. But Reinhardt knew. This put me on a spot. I had hinted that I was broke. If I didn't apply for the job Reinhardt might wonder why. I decided that the only thing to do was live up to what I had said. I applied for the job, and, as you know, got it. You see, my trouble was, I didn't know if Reinhardt was now a civilian or still employed in an official capacity. I asked him what he was doing and he merely said he was still working."

"But he didn't say for whom?"

"No."

"Did he know about you having been sentenced to life imprisonment on Sakhalin Island?"

"That was of course the first thought that flashed into my mind. If he knew he didn't mention it. He may have had a reason for that."

"Meaning what?"

"Well, if I knew he knew, I might take fright and bolt. If he is still employed on Soviet Intelligence he would need time to check up on me. I still don't know what he is doing in Rodnitz, so that is the Sword of Damocles that still hangs over me. It may fall at any moment. And if we are seen together it will fall on you at the same time."

"What nationality is this man Reinhardt?"

"I think he's a Bavarian."

"Would he, as another German, rat on you?"

"He might, taking the opportunity to settle an old grudge. After we had parted, having given the matter a lot of thought I came to the conclusion that he was suspicious of me, but knew nothing definite. I'm pretty sure that if he knew I had escaped from Sakhalin I would have been arrested within the hour. Of course, he may be waiting for a report on me."

"But surely the fact that you haven't been arrested is a good sign?"

"Up to a point. There is a possibility that the truth about me is known, and the Security people are now trying to find out what brings me here—for whom I am working, my mission, and so on. That could be why I am being shadowed. They know that if they arrest me I would tell them nothing."

"How long have you been here?"

"Three weeks."

"And nothing else has happened?"

"Quite a lot of things have happened. Unfortunately, as things are I dare not pursue my quests for Marie, because if I did that would tell them what they want to know. And, I may say, from what I have learned, that could only end in disaster."

"In the position you are, more or less helpless, haven't you thought of returning to England?"

"With my mission unaccomplished? No. In any case, I couldn't get home even if I wanted to."

"Why not?"

“I haven’t the money for the journey. I lost what I had. That, if you must know the truth, is why I sent you the postcard. I thought you might guess I was in trouble and devise some way of getting money to me at the Café Wagner.”

“What happened to your money? You seem to have got through what you had rather quickly.”

“I didn’t spend it. It was stolen, and that was my second stroke of abominable luck. This was how it happened. I went out to continue my inquiries about Marie. Afraid I might be arrested at any moment, or taken to police headquarters for questioning, I thought it unwise to have all my money on me, because that would at once give the lie to what I had said about being broke. Keeping only a small amount of money on me I put the rest between the handkerchiefs in my case. When I returned it had gone. As soon as I opened my suitcase I knew it had been searched.”

“Reinhardt? Did he know you were living in the pension?”

“I don’t know. He saw me about to go in so he may have assumed it. But it may have been a common hotel thief. There was nothing I could do about it. To report the theft would have brought me to the notice of the police, and that was the last thing I wanted. Without money I was on another spot. How was I to live? Then I remembered what Reinhardt had said about a vacancy for a violinist at the Café Wagner. In that way he may have done me a good turn. As I have told you, I applied for the job and got it. My wages are low, but at least I am also provided with food and, as you see, a roof over my head. Having to wear a uniform in the café is another advantage, in that I am unlikely to be recognized by anyone who might know me by sight.”

“I certainly didn’t spot you, and I was looking for you,” stated Biggles.

Von Stalhein continued. “The morning of the day I started my new job I had the only piece of good luck I have had since I came here. I was talking to one of the customers, a Swiss tourist, who happened to say he was returning home that afternoon. This seemed an opportunity to get a message to you. I asked him if he would post a card for me when he got back to Switzerland, making the excuse that it would be delivered earlier than if I posted it in Rodnitz. He agreed, and apparently he was as good as his word.”

“That, of course, was what brought us here. Do I take it you have learned nothing about Marie?”

“I am now coming to that. I have learned a certain amount, but far from being helpful it threatens to make our task impossible. I never stopped looking and also listening for news of Marie, or her family, and I was nearly in despair when I struck lucky in a most extraordinary way. It’s strange how

things work out. I was talking one day to the old man who plays the zither in the orchestra. He's a nice, simple old boy, who was ruined by war. He happened to say he had been born in Bohemia, so I asked him, quite casually, if he had ever heard of a family named Janis. His manner changed at once. He looked a bit scared and wanted to know why I asked such a question. I answered, as if the matter was of no importance, that in the war I had served under an officer named Janis who I thought came from Bohemia."

Biggles nodded approvingly. "Nice work."

"Well, it was soon clear that I had started something. I can only imagine the reason why the old man opened up was because he was a Bohemian at heart, and so was the Janis family. In this part of the world, where wars, racial prejudice and persecution have been going on for centuries, families cling closer to each other than they do in England."

Biggles was now looking more interested. "Go on. What did he tell you?"

"He said the Janis home was named Schonschloss."

Bertie broke in. "*Schloss!* That means castle, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Are we given to understand that Marie lives in a *castle*?"

"I don't know quite what to make of it. I don't think there can be any doubt about the castle being owned by the Janis family, and in her letter to me Marie states she is writing from the old home. That can hardly mean anywhere else but Schonschloss. She may have been there on a visit, without actually living there. Even if she was there when she wrote it doesn't mean she is there now."

"We can soon settle that," declared Biggles. "Tomorrow we'll go there and inquire."

"That's just what you can't do," asserted Von Stalhein.

"Why not?"

"The castle stands in a prohibited area. No one is allowed to go near it. There is a permanent guard on duty."

"What's the reason for that?"

"I have no idea. My informant, the old zither player, didn't know. All he knew was the order had been made. He was nervous even of talking about it, and I had to go warily with my questions. I'm sure that if he had suspected I had a definite purpose in asking them he would have closed up as tight as a

limpet on a rock. I'm satisfied now that I know as much as he knows, but it took me days to get it out of him."

"Did you find out where the place is? That's the important thing."

"Yes. Well, roughly. The old man had seen the castle once, many years ago."

"Then it is, literally, a castle."

"Oh, yes. There's nothing remarkable about that. There must be thousands of castles scattered all over Central Europe, the strongholds of the princes and barons who held the different territories by force of arms, not only through the Middle Ages but up to the beginning of the last century. Of course, the castles vary in size and importance."

"How big is Schonschloss?"

"I think it must be fairly formidable. It has been held by a long line of barons. Marie's father was the last. He had no sons so I can only suppose the title died with him. I'm not sure, but I don't think that would prevent Marie from inheriting the property."

Bertie stepped in. "Castles—bold bad barons—maidens in distress, this gets more and more like a fairy-tale."

"Why not?" returned Von Stalhein. "It was in this sort of country that fairy-tales started."

"Never mind about that," broke in Biggles impatiently. "Where is this castle and how much do you know about it?"

"At the far end of the Ludwigstrasse there is a bridge over the River Voltana. On the far side a road branches off to the left, following the river bank. After four miles, on the right hand side a track climbs up steeply through the forest to end at the castle. It leads to nowhere else. This track was once the main approach to the castle, but as for years it has been little used I gather it has become much overgrown. So the old man told me. He passed it about a year ago when he was cycling along the riverside road."

"Can the castle be seen from the road?"

"He didn't say so. I didn't ask him."

"But if he once saw the castle he must remember how it stands, and its general appearance."

"I daren't press him too closely, but he told me it was a fine place, standing high overlooking the river. On one side the hill falls steeply, almost a precipice, to the flat ground at river level. I can imagine it. Such a site was a favourite place for a castle, defence being the most important factor."

"You haven't seen it?"

"I haven't dared to go near. If I am being watched all the time, and I'm pretty sure I am, to try to reach the castle would explain my presence here. As far as I'm concerned the position is a stalemate."

"What I don't understand is this," said Biggles, looking puzzled. "If the castle has been closed, and put under guard as you say, there must be a reason for it. Someone must know what the reason is. A whisper, or rumour, must have leaked out among the local people."

"If so, I don't think the old man had heard it. He had a suspicion, but he assured me it was only his personal opinion."

"And what was that? We might as well hear it. Did he know anything about Marie?"

"I don't think so. One day I went so far as to say that I understood *Generaloberst* Janis had a daughter. Searching his memory he said he thought that was true, but he knew nothing about her."

"Why did he think the castle had been closed to the public?"

"For political reasons. This, briefly, was his explanation. The seizure of Czechoslovakia by Hitler naturally turned the Czechs against Germany. When the war came they fought on the side of the Allies. When you won the war most of the German colonists living in Czechoslovakia were turned out and their property confiscated. Baron Janis was of German origin—"

"Then why was he allowed to remain?"

"That's the point. The family was allowed to retain its home and land because to have evicted them would have upset the local people. The Janis's may have been of German blood but they had lived in Bohemia for so long that for all practical purposes they had become Bohemians. They had fought for Bohemia. Successive barons had been good to the people and had gained their affection. When they looked like being turned out there were protests. So, Russia, then trying to get the country under control, allowed them to remain—with a stipulation that they had to remain in the castle."

"In plain English they were put under house arrest."

"Exactly, and to see that the order was kept a guard was put on the place. That was how the old man had worked it out."

"Do you believe that?"

Von Stalhein shrugged. "I suppose it could happen. As you know, the Communists take no chances with possible subversive activities. Do you believe it?"

Biggles looked dubious. "I'd say there's more to it than that. Had the government seriously wanted the Janis family out of the way they would

soon have fixed it. If Baron Janis and Marie were sympathetic towards Bohemia why did they fight on the side of Germany?"

"They couldn't do otherwise. To have refused would have meant death. They served only on the Western Front, not in the East, so they never found themselves in conflict with old friends in Czechoslovakia."

Biggles shook his head. "What a complicated business. I have a feeling there's another reason why the castle is under guard. We shall have to find out what it is."

"How will you do that?"

"By going to the castle."

Von Stalhein stared. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Possibly; but we shan't find Marie by walking about the streets. You say her father is dead. Do you know of any other relations who might be living in the castle?"

"No. Nobody talks about it. No doubt in time the whole thing will be forgotten. How do you propose getting to the castle?"

"Hire a car to take me somewhere near it, then walk. But before I do that I shall have to support my purpose in being here. I'm supposed to be on a glass buying project for a London store. I shall probably call at the factory tomorrow." Biggles looked at his watch and sprang up. "By gosh! Look at the time. We must go, or we shall be locked out. We must meet again. When would suit you?"

"Tomorrow night. Same place, same time. I shall be doing my job."

"Right. Come on, Bertie, let's get along."

"Be careful how you leave here."

"We will. Don't come out. We can find our way. Or do you have to lock the lower door?"

"No. I only lock the door into the yard when I'm out."

"Right. See you tomorrow."

Biggles opened the door quietly and stood for a few seconds listening. Hearing no sound he went on down the stairs and waited for Bertie before opening the door at the bottom. "Don't speak," he said, before opening it. Having done so he stood for a full minute listening, eyes probing the darkness, before stepping out. The courtyard, as far as could be judged, was deserted.

He closed the door behind them, went on to the archway and through it into the street, seeing no one on the way. There were a few pedestrians

about, none near, so they hurried on to the hotel, reaching the entrance just as the porter was about to lock the doors.

CHAPTER VI

A PARTY AND A RECONNAISSANCE

THE following morning found everything apparently normal. On going out after breakfast to look for a taxi Biggles was soon fairly confident they were not being followed. As he said, not that it would matter if they were, for they were now engaged on legitimate business: the visit to the glass works in the town.

As this played no vital part in their true mission no time need be wasted describing this in detail. They were received with the greatest cordiality by the Italian proprietors,[4] and in different circumstances would have enjoyed their tour of the works. In the showroom Biggles bought a few examples of coloured glass and made notes of more. Later, in the office, he paid a deposit, and arrangements were made for forwarding the consignment to England.

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[4] The important glass industry of Bohemia was introduced by colonists from that home of beautiful glass, Venice, as long ago as the thirteenth century.

Then, being anxious to waste no more time—for to him this was really a waste of valuable time—he would have left. But their hosts would not hear of it, and insisted on taking them out to lunch. As such hospitality could not be declined without discourtesy, and as they had no reasonable excuse to refuse they had to accept.

This turned out to be a pleasant party although a lengthy one; but in the long run it served a useful purpose, for on Biggles happening to say they would like to see something of the country before returning home, one of the directors at once offered to put a car, with his chauffeur, at their disposal. “You must certainly see some of our superb scenery,” he declared.

Biggles accepted the offer without hesitation, for not only did it save hiring a car but would give the outing something of an official status should anyone be taking note of their movements.

"I'm told there is one very fine scenic road; it follows the river from the bridge at the end of the town," he prompted.

"The valley is magnificent," he was assured. "On a fine autumn day like this the colours of the forest trees are at their best."

"I always feel that in a car one misses much by travelling too fast," said Biggles casually. "That's why I really prefer to walk, when one can stop to admire a good view. But against that, of course, one covers a shorter distance and therefore sees less. May I make a suggestion?"

"Anything you wish."

"If your car would run us a few miles down the valley it could drop us there, leaving us to walk back in our own time, enjoying the scenery in the reverse direction."

"But certainly."

And so it was arranged; but as a result of all this it was after three o'clock, later than had been intended, when they finally got away. Biggles's last words, as they shook hands with their hosts, really to provide an excuse for remaining in Rodnitz, was that they would call again for a second look round the showroom before returning home.

"Jolly good show," approved Bertie, as they set off in a big limousine with a uniformed chauffeur in front. "Your idea was a brainwave."

Biggles smiled. "Always grab your opportunities. It helps to make life easier."

The beauty of the landscape after they had crossed the bridge and turned down the river valley had not been exaggerated.

Beside them, forty or fifty feet below, flowed the river. The road, cut into the shoulder of a steep hill, and protected on the open side by a low wall, followed its winding course. The water, now low after a dry summer, ran fast over a shallow bed of shingle with an occasional rock projecting. Only at the bends did the river run black through apparently deep pools.

At a distance, beyond it, to form a spectacular valley, towered mountains, with peaks rugged and broken, the lower slopes covered with dense forest. For the most part the trees were deciduous, but there were stands of fir and pine, their dark evergreen foliage creating an atmosphere of mystery.

Like most rivers that have had to cut a passage through mountain passes, probably in prehistoric times when the snows of the Ice Age were melting, this one, the Voltana, must at one time have carried a much greater volume of water, for the original bed could be seen, considerably wider than the

present one. Floods had in fact cut what in Scotland would be called a strath, leaving flat areas more than a quarter of a mile wide and of various lengths. These had been brought under cultivation, and farmers were now harvesting their crops, mostly, it seemed, of sugar-beet, the production of sugar being an important industry in the country.

There was not much traffic on the road. An odd car, one or two trucks loaded with sugar-beet, and once a motor coach.

Bertie touched Biggles and looked at one of the wide areas of the old river bed. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked in a low voice.

"Probably," answered Biggles. "I've noticed one or two places where a machine could be put down after the crop has been cleared. It would be a tricky business in the dark unless there was a full moon, or you had someone on the ground to show a light."

The subject was not pursued.

The driver had obviously been given instructions, for he travelled slowly. Once in a while, passing through an unusually attractive piece of scenery, he would point. He did not speak.

After they had covered something over three miles Biggles began to pay more attention to the right hand side of the road than to the river. The ground rose steeply, always covered with forest. At last he saw what he was looking for, and nudged Bertie to call attention to it. It was a break in the trees, with a stone pillar erect on one side, and another, fallen, on the other. They may once have supported iron gates, but these had gone. Just inside were the ruins of a house, an entrance lodge, now a mere shell across which a tree had fallen. There was no one there. At any rate no one could be seen.

"That must be it," murmured Biggles.

Bertie nodded.

Biggles allowed the car to go on another half mile or so and then, at a sweeping bend that brought an inspiring piece of scenery into view, he rapped on the glass panel between them and the chauffeur to attract his attention.

The man knew what to do. He brought the car slowly to a stop, and getting out opened the rear doors.

"We'll stay here for a little while and then walk back," Biggles told him.

The man said he understood. Biggles gave him a good tip. He got back into his seat, reversed the car and drove off in the direction from which they had come.

“Good,” said Biggles, seating himself on the low wall overlooking the river and lighting a cigarette. “Now we’re on our own we can do as we like. Things have worked out very nicely.”

“I must say the scenery is the tops, old boy.”

Biggles agreed, but added he was not in the mood to admire landscapes.

“There’s a lad fishing over there,” observed Bertie.

“I’m watching him.”

“Don’t trouble. He won’t catch anything.”

“There must be fish in the river.”

“No doubt. And if I know anything they’ll stay there. I’ve spent hours watching people fish in the hope that one day I’d see someone pull one out. I never have.”

Biggles grinned. “The fish must have known you were watching. But never mind that. I have a notion that lad may tell us something. Just watch.”

Actually, the boy, rod in hand was walking along the far bank beside a long, broad, and from the way the water rippled, shallow stretch of river, where there were not likely to be any fish, or a fish of any size. It was in fact the broadest part of the river in sight, the reason being that for some distance it split into two parts, to pass each side of an island of sand or gravel thrown up in the middle presumably by storm water.

“Why are we waiting?” Bertie wanted to know. “What do you expect the boy to do?”

“If as I imagine, he intends to fish the deep pool where the river narrows at the next bend he’ll have to come over to this side—that is, if he can get across.”

And so it happened. Before reaching the pool the boy turned sharply and walked across the river, first to the island and then on to the road side. At no point did the water come up to his knees. Reaching the pool he began to fish.

“Capital,” said Biggles. “So it’s possible to wade the river in places, here for instance.”

Bertie looked surprised. “Are we going to paddle?”

“Not now. But we’d have to if we wanted to get to the fields, which happen to be on the other side. It’s as well to know it can be done. There’s no other possible landing ground near here that I can see.”

“Ah! I get it.”

Biggles got off the wall. “Let’s start walking back.”

“Are you going up that drive we passed?”

“Of course. That’s why we’re here.”

“Isn’t it a bit risky?”

“This is where we have to start taking risks.”

“If what Erich told us is correct we shall be stopped.”

“In which case we shall at least have confirmed that the castle is under guard. It will be something to know that definitely.”

“By getting ourselves arrested.”

“A couple of stupid tourists merely wandering off the road? We may be ticked off, but I can’t see them going to the trouble of arresting us. If they do we may find ourselves in the castle, and that would suit me. That’s where I’m hoping ultimately to get.”

“I’ve been thinking. Wouldn’t it be a good idea to report to the nearest British Consul, to let him know we’re in the country?”

“What good would that do?”

“Well, if we disappeared, or anything like that, he’d want to know what had become of us—if you see what I mean.”

“I imagine the nearest British office is in Prague, and we haven’t time to go there. If you’re feeling nervous—”

“Here, dash it all old boy, you know me better than that,” protested Bertie. “It just seemed to me plain common sense to let someone know we’re here.”

“You’re probably right, but as we came here with our eyes open I’d prefer we stood on our own feet rather than give other people a lot of trouble.”

“Fair enough, if that’s how you feel.”

“Let’s press on.”

At an easy pace they set off back along the road, remarking on places where the flat bottom of the valley offered possibilities for landing an

aircraft. Rounding the first bend, happening to look up on the side they were on Biggles stopped dead, letting out a low whistle. “By gosh! Take a look at that. What a picture,” he said in a voice full of admiration.

Bertie, too, stopped to look. His eyes saucered. “It isn’t true,” he breathed in an awe-stricken whisper.

Some hundreds of feet above them, standing on an eminence, frowning as it seemed from the edge of a cliff, a huge grey castle stood in a commanding position overlooking the valley.

“So that’s it,” went on Bertie. “What a smasher. It’s got everything—battlements, turrets, loopholes, the lot. I suppose it is *the* schloss?”

“It’s unlikely there would be two castles of that size near each other.”

“Do you seriously suppose Marie is inside it?”

“That’s all I want to know. If she isn’t we needn’t waste time on it.”

“Then all I can say is, anyone locked up in that little pile of stone blocks is going to take a bit of winkling out.”

“I must admit I didn’t come here prepared for anything quite like *that*,” confessed Biggles frankly. “I was thinking more on the lines of a flat in the town or maybe a country cottage. Let’s see if we can get a closer look.”

Bertie spoke moodily. “It strikes me that even if we got inside that lot it might take a week to locate the Sleeping Beauty—even if she’s there.”

“We might come back here at night. A light showing from a window would tell us of a room being used.”

“No wonder the Grimm brothers could write fairy-tales about dreadful castles, spooky forests, maidens in distress, and what have you.”

Biggles smiled. “Actually, I believe the Grimms were Germans, but no doubt they saw plenty of this sort of scenery. We’d better remember that apart from Prince Charmings and Sleeping Princesses they also had the low-down on witches, wizards, ogres, giants, dwarfs, and similar undesirable people.”

“How did they get the gen?”

“By travelling all over Central Europe collecting the old folk-lore legends mothers used to tell their kids to keep them out of mischief.”

“Did they really believe these tales?”

“Of course.”

“Why of course? Anyone would think you enjoyed them.”

“I do.”

“Oh stop kidding.”

“I’m all for ’em. Give me a cracking good fairy-tale every time. Open page one and you take off like a rocket. ‘Once upon a time . . .’ No messing about warming up the engine. No matter what happens you know it’ll all come right at the end. The dirty old witch gets a kick in the teeth and the handsome prince and his girl friend live happily ever after. What more do you want?”

“That’s hardly true to life.”

“Spare my days! Who wants to be true to life? Why read about what you can see going on around you any day of the week? You’ve been blinking too much at T.V. Thank heavens life isn’t anything like as ugly as some of these morbid script writers would have us believe.”

“All the same, if, trying to wriggle into that bally castle, we don’t bump into a dragon, I shall be surprised.”

“Then all we have to do is whistle up our fairy godmother. Don’t be so glum. Go buy yourself a magic wand.”

Bertie laughed. “Oh come off it.”

Biggles sighed. “The trouble with the world today is nobody believes in anything any more. Ah well . . .”

While this conversation, half humorous half serious, had been going on, they had walked back to the ruins at the once noble entrance to the castle drive. There was no one in sight. No vehicles on the road. They turned in, but waited a few minutes, watching and listening, to make sure they had not been observed, before proceeding up the overgrown track. It could hardly be called a road. The half-expected challenge did not come so they walked on, up steeply sloping ground.

Almost at once they found themselves in the eerie green twilight that is the atmosphere of the great forests that still cover large areas of Central Europe, notably the Black Forests of Bohemia and adjacent Bavaria. The silence is uncanny. No bird sings. One sees neither fur nor feather; which does not mean there is no wild life. Far from it. The original wild animals of Europe: various deer, wild boar, fox and sometimes the bear and the wolf, find sanctuary in the solitudes of what is natural forest of mixed timber, not an artificial plantation. The birds live near cultivated land where food is more plentiful.

Where no axe has touched these ancient trees they stand as nature intended, with branches intertwined, sometimes leaning one against another for support, some, already fallen, crumbling into the rich black mould of the forest floor, or a carpet of fir needles as the case might be. Roots, gnarled

and knotted, writhe out of the ground like snakes in torment. Grey lichen clings to the bark of trunks and branches.

From the dead and rotten leaves of ages spring monstrous toadstools, scarlet with yellow spots, orange with upturned caps, or slender and white with curling skins. Walking through these dim aisles it becomes easy to see how they gave rise to fantastic stories of unnatural inhabitants, now called fairy-tales.

Bertie must have noticed this, for speaking in the hushed voice one uses in a church he said: "I must say, old boy, this is just the job for elves, gnomes and hobgoblins."

Biggles did not answer. His eyes were on the track ahead, still climbing steeply.

In this way they went on for some distance before they encountered any opposition. Then it happened suddenly. From behind a tree stepped a grotesque figure of a man, short, wide-shouldered, with legs so bowed that he might have been born riding a horse. A pronounced limp suggested one was shorter than the other. He had a broad flat face, half covered with a tangle of beard, from which projected a nose like the beak of an eagle. He wore a shabby green suit, with brass buttons, that looked as if it might have been some sort of uniform. From the side of a felt hat sprouted a tuft of bright feathers. Black boots reached up to his knees. He carried a carbine and, to complete the picture, at his heels walked a great black hound, making no sound but showing its teeth.

"Oh I say," breathed Bertie. "The Wizard of Oz himself."

"*Wohin gehen sie?*" (where are you going?), inquired the man sternly.

"We are taking a walk," answered Biggles, affecting an air of innocence.

"You might have been shot. If my dog had been loose he would have savaged you. What are you hoping to find?"

“The castle we could see from the road.”
The man held out a hand. “*Der ausweis.*”
Biggles, having no identity card, offered his passport.

The man studied the photograph in it, comparing it with Biggles's face. "*So. Englander.*"

"*Ja.*"

The man returned the passport and pointed down the track. "Go back. This land is private."

"I am sorry," returned Biggles. "Being strangers we were not to know. Is there any way we can see the castle?"

"*Nein.*"

"Does someone live there?"

"*Nicht mehr.*" (No more). Again the man pointed.

Biggles and Bertie turned back like two schoolboys caught in an orchard.

They did not stop until they reached the main road, where Biggles sat on the fallen pillar and lit a cigarette. "We'll rest here for a minute or two to check if we're being watched," he decided.

"So the castle *is* guarded," said Bertie, sitting beside him.

"Apparently, although not by the sort of men I had imagined. The fellow who stopped us was neither a soldier nor a policeman. He looked more like a forester or a gamekeeper. Maybe they're using civil guards, drawn from people who know the ground. Anyway, he seemed a decent type. After all, we were trespassing, so he was only doing his job. All the same, I don't think he was telling the truth when he said there was no one living in the castle."

"What gives you that idea?"

"Why should they put a guard on a place that's unoccupied? When I asked him about it what he actually said was *nicht mehr*, which strikes me as odd, because it implies that no one is ever likely to live there again. Yet if you look at the track you'll see where the ground is soft there are wheel marks."

"Could be a vehicle taking rations to the guards."

"Why guards, in the plural, if there's no one there to guard? A truck load of food would hardly be necessary for one person—the man who stopped us." Biggles shook his head. "No, he isn't here alone. Well, we know what we came to find out so let's move on."

"You're going the wrong way," Bertie pointed out.

"I'm going back along the road for a bit to have another look at the castle."

"Why?"

“It’s unlikely we’d get to it by going up the drive. We’d be stopped every time we tried. It might be possible to reach it straight up through the forest from the road.”

“Up that cliff.”

“I wouldn’t call it a cliff. It would be a steep climb, I admit, but if trees can find a foothold so should we. I doubt if guards would be posted on this side.”

They walked back to the bend from which the castle could be seen. Biggles studied it, and the intervening bank, for some minutes. Then, turning away he said: “That’s all I wanted to see. Let’s get back home. At least we shall have something to tell Erich when we see him tonight.”

They set off on the return journey and reached their hotel without interference.

CHAPTER VII

TROUBLE AT THE CAFÉ WAGNER

It was a little before eleven p.m. when Biggles and Bertie sauntered into the Café Wagner, to pass the time until midnight, and threaded their way through the general bustle to a table for two.

The first thing they noticed was that Von Stalhein was not in his usual place in the small orchestra. In fact, although the band was playing there was no violinist. They saw nothing remarkable in this. Biggles was certainly not alarmed, or even perturbed.

"He's had to go out for something," he said inconsequentially, as they sat down. "No doubt he'll be back in a minute or two."

Von Stalhein was not back in a minute or two, or even several minutes. It was only when at the end of half an hour he had not put in an appearance that Biggles began to look concerned. "What can he be doing?" he muttered.

"Maybe it's his day off," suggested Bertie.

"No. That isn't it. He would have told us."

"Could he have been taken ill—eaten something that disagreed with him?"

"I hope it's nothing more serious that's keeping him away."

"How about asking the head waiter why he isn't here?"

"I'd rather not do anything that would associate us with him. That might start something."

Another quarter of an hour passed. "He isn't coming," declared Biggles, now looking really worried. "Something's happened. I don't like it."

"There's a chance he may be in his room."

"We can soon settle that. Stroll round to the yard and check if his light is on. If he's in it should be. Take your time. Don't go near his quarters if you have reason to suspect someone is watching the place, or you."

"Okay. That shouldn't take long." Bertie went out.

He was away about five minutes. "Nothing doing," he reported as he resumed his seat. "There's no light at the window. The downstairs door is locked."

“That means he isn’t there. He told us he only locked the door when he went out. It looks bad. Did you see anybody in the yard?”

“Not a soul. There’s a chap selling papers near the archway. I saw no one else.”

Biggles shook his head. “He’s in trouble. We might as well face it.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

Biggles thought for a few moments. “There’s only one thing we can do and that’s keep our appointment with him in the hope that he’ll show up. If he doesn’t—but let’s not jump our fences until we come to them. It’s nearly time.”

They waited, finishing their wine, until the stroke of midnight when the orchestra played its final piece and withdrew.

“That’s it. Let’s go round,” said Biggles, getting up.

Without haste they went out and made their way to the yard. The paper seller was still standing near the entrance arch. “He keeps late hours,” observed Biggles suspiciously, after they had passed him. Inside the yard he stopped to look back. “He doesn’t appear to be following us,” he said, and went on.

There was no light at Von Stalhein’s window. The door at the foot of the stairs was still locked.

“We’re still a minute or two on the early side,” he went on. “We’ll give him time. Let’s wait over here.”

They moved quietly to the position they had occupied the previous night.

Except for the one inadequate electric light bulb under the arch the courtyard was in darkness. Headlights flashed as a man came in to fetch a parked car. The blaze of light disappeared with the car leaving a darkness even more profound. One or two other men came in and went out again after using the convenience. The paper man came in and did the same thing, but took some time over it, staring into the yard before going out.

“I have a feeling that fellow is watching for somebody,” said Biggles softly. “I wonder if it’s us or Von Stalhein.”

Minutes passed.

“Bad show,” breathed Bertie. “He isn’t coming.”

Hardly had he said the words than a shadowy figure loomed furtively beside them. It was Von Stalhein. “Follow me,” he whispered. “No noise.” Keeping close against the wall he moved off towards the inner end of the courtyard, the direction from which he must have come, because had he entered through the archway they must have seen him.

The yard ended at a high wall, but Von Stalhein opened a small wooden door the purpose of which was revealed when they joined him on the other side. A short footpath led to a church. They were in the churchyard, as crowding tombstones made evident.

"What's happened?" asked Biggles crisply, as Von Stalhein closed the door.

"Sorry about this, but it was the only way I could get into the yard without being seen. I've no longer any reason for using the yard."

"Why not? What's the trouble?"

"I've been sacked. I no longer have the room."

"Sacked! What the devil for?"

"No reason—that I can believe—was given. This morning when I turned up for work the manager gave me my wages up to date and said he was sorry."

"Did he give no reason?"

"When I asked him why he simply said I wasn't suitable. He had found another violinist."

"That was a lie," asserted Biggles. "There was no violin in the orchestra tonight."

"I didn't believe him. I realized he was acting under orders. I was tempted to go into the café as a customer, to tip you off, but decided it would be better not to go near you."

"Quite right. So somebody's turning the heat on you."

"That, I'm afraid, is what it looks like. Let's get over here out of the way in case someone comes through the door." Von Stalhein led the way into the inky background of an ancient yew that spread its funereal branches over an equally ancient tomb. They sat on the ivy-covered stone.

"Where are you living now?" asked Biggles.

"I've gone back to the Schmon *gasthaus*."

"Wouldn't it have been better to go somewhere else?"

"There would have been no point in it. For the moment I think I've given them the slip; but no matter where I lived it wouldn't take them long to find me. Did anyone see you enter the yard?"

"The only person there was a fellow selling papers."

"Ah! I've seen him so often that I think he's one of them. I imagined he'd be about, which is why I got into the yard this way."

"What beats me is, if they're so suspicious of you why don't they arrest you and have done with it?"

"As I believe I said once before, I can think of only one reason. They're anxious to know what I'm doing in Rodnitz. By leaving me free to move about they hope to find out. Or it could be the local security chief may be waiting for a report on me from Moscow or East Berlin."

"Could they possibly associate you with Marie Janis?"

"Reinhardt might. He knew I was very friendly with Marie when we were all working together in the Intelligence Service."

"Why do you think you were sacked?"

"To limit my activities."

"How?"

"I've no money and no doubt they know that. I shall have to find another job, although I'm afraid if I did it wouldn't last long."

"You needn't worry about that," said Biggles. "I can let you have some money."

"If they see me spending it they'll get busy finding out how I'm getting it. That's the danger of us being seen together. They'd put two and two together and you'd find yourselves on the same spot as I am."

"Has your room in the guest house been searched again?"

"Not to my knowledge. Of course, it may be, any day. Has anyone been to your room in the Steinhof?"

"I don't think so."

"Be careful. I wouldn't leave money there. If they take yours you'll find yourself stuck here as I am."

"How far do you think Reinhardt is in this, if at all?"

"I still don't know. But it's pretty obvious now that someone has spotted me. How about you?"

"I think we're in the clear so far. This morning we went to the glass factory and bought some samples. We found the people there most friendly."

"They would be. But they may change their tune if inquiries are made about you. Never forget the sort of country you're in. The secret police run everything. They're everywhere, and everyone lives in fear of them. If people disappear, and they do, no one would dare to ask questions. What else have you done today?"

"We've seen the castle."

"That's more than I dare do. How did you manage it?"

"We've only seen it from the road, but it was enough to give us an idea of the size of the place. One of the directors of the glass factory was kind enough to put his car and chauffeur at our disposal for the afternoon so that we could see something of the country. Naturally, we chose the river road. We saw quite a lot. We dismissed the car and walked home, hoping to do some exploring on the way. That wasn't very successful."

"What happened?"

"We tried walking up the drive to the castle like a couple of stray tourists. We didn't get far. We were stopped by a man with a rifle and turned back." Biggles described their venture into the prohibited forest.

"And what are you going to do next?"

"Get into the castle."

Von Stalhein clicked his tongue. "I know to my cost you always carry your nerve with you, but isn't this going rather far?"

"What else can I do? Until we know whether or not Marie is in the castle we shall simply be blundering about to no purpose. We can't just sit here. We might as well go home."

"Have you any sort of a plan?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it a plan, but I have a notion to climb up to the castle from the road. That way I'm hoping to slip through the guards. What I do then will depend on what I find when I get there. I haven't thought further than that. If nothing more I shall have had a close look at what we're up against."

"And if this curious genius of yours for getting in and out of tight places succeeds, and you make contact with Marie, then what?"

"I shall find out from her the position; why she is there, if she wants to leave, and so on."

"I don't see how you can hope to get her out of the country."

"First things first. We'll deal with that problem if and when it arises. I have ideas about that, too. But we won't waste time talking about it now."

Von Stalhein still seemed doubtful. "You are really serious about breaking into the castle?"

"Unless you can suggest any other method of finding out if she is inside it."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No thanks. At this stage you'd do better to keep out of the way. You might arrive with a pack of watchdogs on your heels."

"How will you get there?"

“Walk.”

“When?”

“Not tonight, obviously. It’s too late. Probably tomorrow.”

“Well, I wish you luck. Where and when shall we meet again?”

“Why not here, same time, two days from now. If we don’t turn up come again the next night, and the next, until we do—unless of course you hear we’ve been nabbed. But we shall have to be going.” Biggles took out his wallet and handed over some notes. “This should see you all right for a little while. Now, can we get out of this dismal place without going back through the courtyard?”

“Easily. There are two ways, the main entrance to the church and a narrow alley that runs into the Ludwigstrasse.”

“That sounds the one for us.”

“I’ll show it to you. We’d better part there. I can only hope that the next time I see you it won’t be on a train bound for Siberia.”

“The next time you see me,” returned Biggles cheerfully, “with any luck I shall have news of Marie. Let’s go.”

They parted at the top end of the alley.

There was no interference.

CHAPTER VIII

HEAVY GOING

It was three o'clock in fair but sultry weather when Biggles and Bertie left their hotel and set out on foot for the castle, or to be more precise, the road that ran round the foot of the towering bluff on which it stood. Biggles, by the way, had taken the precaution of telling the hall porter at the hotel that they were going to call on a friend. He had (and this was true) no idea when they would be back. They might stay the night, so there would be no need for anxiety if they did not return until the following day.

They had reasons for starting early. One was, by walking slowly and stopping sometimes to admire the scenery, anyone watching them would get an impression that they were not going anywhere in particular. Again, Biggles was anxious to study in daylight the steep face of the hill they intended to climb. In a few places it was particularly sheer, and these would have to be noted if they were to be avoided.

The actual climb would not begin until twilight, and only then if they were satisfied they had not been shadowed. They had, of course, some distance to go, but not more than they could have covered in an hour had they been in a hurry.

All went well. They strolled rather than walked, stopping frequently to look down on the river below them on the left-hand side. The purpose of this was not so much to rest, or enjoy the view, as look back to check if anyone was keeping pace with them. They saw no one on foot, but as was to be expected, a few cars and cyclists passed them going in one direction or the other. They were also overtaken by a motor coach of the omnibus type, apparently public transport.

In this way, deliberately loitering for reasons explained, it was six o'clock and still broad daylight when they reached their first objective, the bend in the road below the castle. For a while they sat on the low stone wall that flanked the road on the river side to prevent careless car drivers from going over the bank and down into the river. More than once Biggles had cast a critical eye at the sky. "I hope I'm wrong, but I have a feeling there's thunder not far away," he remarked.

When there was nothing in sight either way they moved to the opposite side of the road and squatted under a tree far enough back to prevent them

from being seen from any traffic that might come along. There was no fence, no obstacle: the forest came right down to end flush with the highway. Again they waited, watching and listening.

Biggles lit a cigarette. “I think we’re all right,” he said. “This is where anyone laid on to watch us would have to show up, to check where we’d gone and see what we were doing.”

No one appeared. A few cars went past at high speed. None stopped. The sun dropped below the peaks of the distant mountains beyond the river and at once the light began to fail. Shadows lengthened. A huge black cloud, edged with golden light where the sun caught it, was advancing up the valley.

“I don’t like the look of that,” said Biggles. “If it decides to unload the water in it we’re going to get our shirts wet.” He got up. “I think we might make a start. The farther we can get before it is really dark the better.”

“I’m all for it,” returned Bertie. “Press on, Macduff.”

The climb started, Biggles zig-zagging to reduce the gradient and choose the easiest route. It was difficult, and therefore slow, but they made fair time and did not stop until it was judged they were about a third of the way up. The atmosphere in the forest was dank and stuffy, and they were glad to have a breather. They also had a drink at a ferny spring from which a trickle of water ran to the parent stream far below.

“So far so good,” said Biggles quietly. “I can’t believe guards would patrol such a slope as this. If they did we could hardly fail to hear them.”

“We’d better not crow too soon,” returned Bertie. “We may find them waiting at the top.”

“I think that’s more than likely,” agreed Biggles. “We shall see.”

Dusk now had filled the valley. Through a leafy screen it was just possible to see the pale outline of the road. Nothing moved on it.

The forest was now a gloomy labyrinth. In the absence of colour it had lost its elfin atmosphere as a home for gnomes and goblins. Movement was by feel rather than by sight. To climb meant a scramble from tree to tree sliding on loose leaf mould, clutching at protruding roots or a low-hanging branch. As Bertie remarked sadly, they were no longer in fairyland.

They had not gone far when Biggles stopped and half turned to look below when to their ears came the sound of a car travelling at high speed.

“Someone’s in a hurry,” said Bertie casually.

“He’ll be in the river if he tries to take the bend at that rate,” predicted Biggles.

"He's coming this way from Rodnitz."

"Sounds to me like two cars having a race."

They stood still to watch, as far as this was possible.

The light of distant headlights flickered on the road, on the wall and the trees overhanging from the forest. Then, as the cars raced nearer, the watchers were startled by the sound of a shot, another and another.

"What the devil's going on?" muttered Biggles. He did not sound in the least alarmed.

"It can't be anything to do with us," asserted Bertie.

"I don't see how it could be. They're not shooting at us, anyway," answered Biggles. "I hope you're right," he went on grimly, as a sub-machine gun started pumping out bullets in short bursts.

This was followed by a screech of brakes and a vicious skid that ended with a crash as if a car had struck the wall, or grazed it and overturned. Then came another squeal of brakes and skidding tyres. There were no more engine noises making it evident that both cars had stopped. Men shouted. Lights appeared on the road with the sound of running footsteps; but apart from the moving lights nothing could be seen. This continued for some time, as if several men were searching for something.

"What do you make of it?" queried Bertie, a tinge of anxiety creeping into his voice.

"I haven't a clue. Your guess is as good as mine. It's no ordinary accident. The leading car must have been shot at by the one following it. That stopped it. I can't imagine how it could be anything to do with us. Only the two cars on the road were involved."

"I can hear people crashing about as if they were in the forest."

"They must be looking for something—or somebody. We'd better not move till it's all over."

They sat down again, staring in the direction of the road, listening for a sound that might provide a clue as to what was happening. There was a good deal of talking, and calling, but as the actual words could not be heard it conveyed nothing.

"If they're looking for somebody in the forest they haven't much hope of finding him," remarked Bertie.

"This hold-up is a nuisance," answered Biggles. "It's putting us behind schedule."

It was half an hour before a car was started and the sound of it had receded in the direction of Rodnitz.

"They've gone," said Bertie, thankfully.

"Not all of them perhaps. They may have left someone to watch. We'd better keep still for a little while. We can't move in this murk without making a certain amount of noise. A branch snapping or a rock rolling down the hill could bring someone up here. We're not in such a desperate hurry that it's worth taking a chance."

They sat still. Time passed. Half an hour, possibly more. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Lightning flickered over the mountains.

"That storm's coming—" began Bertie, but broke off when Biggles laid a hand on his arm.

"Listen," breathed Biggles. "I can hear someone moving . . . below us . . . coming up the hill."

A twig cracked.

"Don't move," whispered Biggles.

"Let's go."

"No. Keep still."

Sounds drew nearer; slipping feet; breaking twigs; and then the heavy breathing of a man on the point of exhaustion.

Biggles and Bertie stood like statues on a pedestal.

Came a low whistle.

They did not answer it.

More panting. Then a voice said, in a husky whisper but quite distinctly: "Bigglesworth. Are you there?"

"My God!" gasped Biggles. "It's Erich." He whistled softly.

Blundering footsteps approached. "Where are you?" asked Von Stalhein.

"Here. Up a bit and a little to your right."

A final effort and Von Stalhein sank down beside them.

"What the devil's going on?" demanded Biggles, in anything but a friendly tone.

"Give me a minute to get my breath and I'll tell you. Do you happen to have a spare handkerchief?"

Biggles produced his own. "Are you hurt?"

"Not badly. You must have heard me crash. A bit shaken. A few cuts and bruises. Nothing serious."

"Take your time. Was that shooting at you?"

"It was."

"Then as soon as you can you'd better tell us all about it, because this looks like knocking our scheme on the head."

"I'm afraid it's all over as far as I'm concerned," confessed Von Stalhein bitterly. "What has happened won't take long to explain. When you've heard it I don't think you'll blame me. It was one of those things."

"Tell us," requested Biggles. "You're sure you're all right."

"Right enough to talk. I wouldn't have gone out today but I had to, to get something to eat. I waited until it was nearly dark. When I returned I took the precaution of looking down the street before going on to my lodging. It was a good thing I did. A number of men were standing outside the *gasthaus*. Reinhardt, who must have gone in to see if I was there, came out, and at once started posting men in positions to intercept anyone going in. Obviously the trap was being set for me. It could be for no one else. It was clear that as far as I was concerned the game was up. I can only suppose that Reinhardt had got the information for which he had been waiting, and with it orders to pick me up. As I backed away my first thought was of you."

"Why me?"

"Should I be arrested you would never know what had become of me, and in trying to find out, you, too, might well have been trapped."

Biggles nodded. "Yes, that could have happened. Carry on."

"There was a car parked against the curb in the next street; just an ordinary small car. I didn't wait to ask who it belonged to. For me it was now a matter of life or death. Finding the doors unlocked I took it and headed for the river. I hoped to catch you before you started to climb to the castle, to let you know what had happened, and then make a dash for the frontier—or get within walking distance of it. I reckoned on getting a good start, but they were soon after me. How that happened I don't know—"

"The owner of the car missed it and rang the police."

"Probably. Anyhow, by the time I was on the river road I realized they were after me. They hooted at me to stop but I took no notice. I wouldn't have stopped, certainly not here, but having a faster car they overtook me. Seeing I had no intention of stopping, as soon as they were in range they opened fire on me. A bullet burst a rear tyre and my car became uncontrollable. I struck the parapet, spun across the road, and hitting a tree on the edge of the forest, overturned. By sheer good luck I wasn't badly hurt. I managed to get out and did the only thing I could do. I dived into the forest. I thought that would give me a respite, for it seemed unlikely they'd be able to find me in the dark. It wouldn't be easy in daylight. Knowing you couldn't be far away I still hoped to make contact with you."

“We heard the fuss on the road and waited for it to end before we moved on,” said Biggles.

“Well, that’s all,” concluded Von Stalhein. “I’m finished. I can’t go back to Rodnitz. I can only say I’m sorry I brought trouble this way; but I had to act fast and there was little time for thought. You carry on. Forget about me. I’ll try to reach the frontier on foot.”

“If they know you’re the man who escaped from Sakhalin I wouldn’t give much for your chances,” replied Biggles frankly. “As soon as it’s daylight, if not before, they’ll comb the district for you, perhaps with dogs.”

“The alternative is to give myself up. Perhaps I’d better do that.”

“Why?”

“It would put an end to the hue and cry and so leave you free to manoeuvre.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” said Biggles bluntly. “We don’t abandon our friends when they’re on a spot, as you should have noticed by now.”

“You say I shall never make the frontier. What else can I do?”

“Stay with us. Obviously it would be suicide for you to go back to the road at this moment. You’re safe for the time being, at any rate.”

“By staying with you I could ruin your chances of getting in touch with Marie, wherever she may be.”

“I’ll not pretend you’re likely to make the job any easier; but let’s not look at it like that. In my opinion the nearer you are to the castle the safer you’ll be. Look at it this way. It will be assumed you’ll make for the frontier. Reinhardt, or whoever is after you, can’t possibly know that your purpose in coming to Rodnitz was to find Marie. I can’t see any possible reason why they should connect your crash on the road with her, or, if it comes to that, the castle. For the fact that the chase ended at the bend they were responsible, not you. I’d wager they thought you were making for the frontier, which is what any refugee would do, and what, given time, you would have done. The last place they’ll look for you is near the castle. It’s hardly the place for a man on the run. Wherefore I suggest you come on up the hill with us—that is, if you feel like it. We’ll see how that works out. If it fails we’ll try something else. How about it?”

“Physically I’m all right. A few sore spots, that’s all.”

“Good. Then that’s settled. Let’s see what conditions are like at the top.”

“Oh confound it; here comes the rain,” growled Bertie, as a few big drops pattered down.

“Don’t complain at that,” remonstrated Biggles. “It suits me fine.”

"How do you make that out?"

"I'm thinking of dogs. We've seen one of them. Dogs work by nose, not sight. They could get Erich's scent from the seat of the car he pinched. A heavy shower should wash it out. Let's get on with the job."

The climb, now a three man operation, was resumed. To describe it in detail would be needless repetition. Underfoot a tangle of roots alternated with rocky outcrops. Falls and slides, none serious, were common. As the ascent became steadily steeper rests became more frequent. Biggles got his wish about the rain. It continued and became torrential as the storm broke with thunder and lightning. This did nothing to make progress easier. The ground became more slippery and handholds treacherous; but the noise they made, and this at times was considerable as a branch broke or a loose rock went adrift, was drowned. However, they stuck to their task, and finally, after being baulked for a while by a low cliff, they reached level ground which they took to be—correctly as it turned out—the top of the bluff on which the castle had been built.

They could not see it. In pitch darkness they could not see anything; but they could feel they were in waist high grass or weeds. In this they sank down, panting, to recover from their exertions. The rain was still heavy and gave no sign of ending. They had no idea of how far they were from the walls of the castle. They looked in vain for a lighted window to give them their position, although as Biggles remarked, it would have to be a bright one to show through the rain. They were of course saturated, but fortunately it was not cold.

"We'll stay here for a bit to give the rain a chance to stop," decided Biggles.

Bertie wiped mud and water from his hands and face with a rain-soaked rag handkerchief. "I call this a disgusting business," he complained.

Von Stalhein, in answer to a question from Biggles, said he felt no after effects of his crash.

After a little while the rain settled down to the drizzle that so often follows the trail of a thunderstorm; but it was still too dark to see anything clearly.

"We shall have to make the best we can of it," declared Biggles eventually. "We can't sit here till daylight." He got up. "Take time from me and don't lose touch."

"Mind how you go," pleaded Bertie. "Don't forget some castles have moats and things."

“I’ll watch it,” promised Biggles. “I’m not so much afraid of a moat as trip-wires setting off an alarm.”

Taking a step at a time he forced a passage through the soaking wet herbage.

CHAPTER IX

THE SECRET OF THE CASTLE

BIGGLES had taken only a few paces, feeling his way carefully for wire, when a flicker of sheet lightning low over the horizon provided a momentary illumination of the scene. It lasted less than a second, but that was sufficient time to reveal the great mass of the castle rising like a cliff within a dozen yards of them. It had looked huge from below, but now, at close range, it loomed a colossal silhouette, formidable and almost frightening.

Brief as the picture had been one feature remained photographed on Biggles's brain. It was a curious black stain that started at ground level and ended in a ragged line at what appeared to be a wall with a castellated top. He saw no windows, no door.

Again feeling his way forward the stain was explained when his hands encountered cold wet leaves. The stain was ivy, or some similar growth, thick and unrestrained. He groped about in it, bringing a deluge of water on his head, until his fingers closed on a rough stem, as thick as a man's arm. He turned to the others.

"It's ivy," he whispered. "I think I could climb up it if there was something to reach. It doesn't go right to the top. I couldn't see a window. It looks like a blank wall. I didn't expect to find a door on this side but I thought there would be windows."

"Wait for another flash of lightning," suggested Von Stalhein.

"While we're fiddling about a guard may come along," protested Bertie. "Let's get on with it."

Biggles resumed. "If I know anything about guards they'll stay under cover while the rain persists."

"I may be wrong, but I got the impression this was an outside wall in front of us, not the actual castle," volunteered Von Stalhein.

"I thought the same thing," answered Biggles. "Of course, if it is only a wall surrounding this part of the castle it would prevent us from seeing what's on the other side of it. To settle the argument I'll climb up and have a look. It shouldn't be too difficult. There's no need for us all to go. You two stay here till I come down or make a signal. Keep under cover in case

anyone should come along. We may get a blink of moonlight presently. Don't go far away."

With that, having found a strong stem well rooted in the stone wall Biggles began to climb.

It turned out to be easier than he expected. That is not to say it was comfortable. Water poured over him from the disturbed leaves, but as he was already wet to the skin it didn't matter. After pulling himself up for what he judged to be about thirty feet he found himself clutching the parapet of a crenellated wall. He dragged himself on to it. At the same time a thin patch of cloud allowed enough starlight through for him to get an idea of his immediate surroundings.

He saw he had arrived on a stone-flagged balcony, or terrace, some five to six yards wide, which may have been part of the castle's defences; possibly a patrol point for a sentry, a look-out, since it must have commanded a view of the valley below. He could not see the extremities of the balcony. They merged into the gloom; but it was at least thirty yards long. It was backed by the massive bulk of the castle itself, broken at intervals by recessed slits of windows.

What caught his eye instantly was a misty slant of light that fell across the balcony not far from where he crouched. It was the only light he could see and obviously marked the position of a window. He could have asked for nothing more. It promised a glimpse of the inside of the castle, provided there was no curtain. From his position there was of course no indication of what was behind the window, but he assumed it would be a room of some sort. To confirm it promised to be a simple operation; and in fact it was.

Keeping close against the inner wall—that is, the castle itself—he made his way along, presently to perceive that the light came through a window which, reaching to foot level, was also a door. Sometimes called a french window. Taking care not to expose himself in the light he moved an eye forward until he could see round the outer stone frame.

What he actually saw through the glass window was, as he had anticipated, the interior of a room, a large room with a high vaulted ceiling. It was well furnished with chairs, a couch, a writing desk, carpets and rugs. Trophies of the chase decorated the walls. There was even a grand piano. All this Biggles took in at a glance before his gaze settled on the one occupant of the room, to him the only object of importance.

It was a woman. She sat, relaxed, on a couch, one knee drawn up, an arm resting on a cushion, reading by the light of a standard lamp.

He looked at her. Stared would perhaps be the right word. Could this be Marie Janis? Could he detect a slight resemblance to the girl he had once known or was imagination misleading him? When for a short while their paths had crossed in the turmoil of war she had been young, attractive and vivacious. Here was a slightly built woman getting on in years. She looked frail. She wore glasses, although this may have been only for reading. Her hair was streaked with grey. A sad, thoughtful expression, was that of someone who has known trouble.

Biggles was now in a quandary. Even if the woman was Marie would she behave as a friend or an enemy? It was evident he would learn nothing more unless he revealed himself; yet to do this would be a dangerous gamble . . . staking everything on a single throw . . . risking complete disaster should he lose.

After giving the matter some thought a possible solution to his problem occurred to him. Von Stalhein had seen Marie long after he had known her. Would he recognize her? He decided it would be worth a trial before taking a plunge that might prove fatal. Backing away he returned to the place where he had gained the parapet and there listened for a minute for sounds that would indicate trouble. It was now dim starlight but he could see nothing below. Leaning over he whistled softly. The signal was answered instantly by two dark figures that broke out of the deep ivy.

"Erich," whispered Biggles.

"Yes."

"Everything all right?"

"Yes."

"Come up. I want you up here."

Presently, reaching down, Biggles gave Von Stalhein a hand over the final obstacle.

"What is it?" asked Von Stalhein quickly, urgently, anxiously.

Biggles pointed to the light. "There's a woman in that room, reading. It could be Marie, but if it is I can't recognize her. You may. Go and look. I think it's reasonably safe here. I haven't heard anyone moving about."

Von Stalhein crept along to the light. He looked into the room. He returned. "It *could* be Marie but I wouldn't swear to it. She's aged since I last saw her."

"What shall we do about it? If I can't recognize her it's unlikely she'd recognize me; so if she saw a strange face at the window she might set off a general alarm. She might recognize you. You haven't changed so much."

"Are you suggesting that I show myself?"

"Yes. What else can we do? Be ready to bolt if she screams."

"If it is Marie she won't do any screaming," declared Von Stalhein confidently. "She's had plenty of shocks in her time. If it isn't her anything could happen; but as you say, the only way we shall find out is by putting it to the test. Wait a minute, though. I have an idea. We once had a secret signal for identification. She might remember it. By watching her I should know."

"Okay. Try it. Meanwhile I'll slip back and warn Bertie to be ready for trouble." Biggles hastened to do this. By the time he returned Von Stalhein was at the window.

He crept close to him. Saw him take a coin from his pocket. Heard a *rat-tat-tat* of metal on glass in what was obviously a sort of password.

The woman started. Her eyes went to the window. In a moment she was on her feet. She crossed the room swiftly. One of the panes of glass was opened. "Who is it?" she asked tersely.

"Erich."

In a second the french window had been opened a little way. "Erich! Are you mad? What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you. I got your letter. Bigglesworth is with me."

There was a little gasp. "Not *my* Biggles!"

"The same man."

"Where is he?"

"Here beside me." In a swift aside Von Stalhein said. "It's Marie."

Biggles moved forward into the light.

The window was opened wide. "Come in, both of you."

"Is it safe?" asked Von Stalhein, dubiously.

"Quite safe. The only other person in the castle is my old maid Greta; she won't disturb me at this hour unless I ring for her. She is to be trusted."

Von Stalhein went through the window into the room. Biggles followed; and so, after many years he and Marie stood face to face.

Smiling wistfully she held out a hand. "I knew we'd meet again one day," she said softly. "It had to be."

Biggles raised the hand and touched it lightly with his lips. "This is a dream come true," he murmured.

"Am I forgiven?"

"Forgiven? Between you and me there was never anything to forgive. But let us be sure it is safe to talk. Hadn't you better lock the door?"

"I can't. The key has been taken away."

"Do you really mean that you and your maid are the only people who actually live in this colossal pile of stone?"

"Yes. You would not have seen a light in any other window. Greta's room is on the other side of the corridor, overlooking the yard."

"What about the guards?"

"Their sleeping quarters are over the stables, which cover all the far side of the central courtyard round which the castle is built. They are forbidden to enter without the *unteroffizier* in charge. They only go to the kitchen for regular meals. Greta has to cook for them. I think that is the main reason why she and her husband, Max, were left here."

"Extraordinary."

"I'll tell you presently why I think such an arrangement was made."

"How many guards are there?"

"Max says six, with one *unteroffizier*."

"Do they patrol all round the castle?"

"No. They only watch the approaches, the old carriageways through the forest. Apparently it is supposed that anyone coming here would use one of them."

"Don't they go round to the front, the way we came?"

"I've never seen one under my window."

"There's a strip of level ground. We crossed it."

"Yes, but it's all overgrown, the weeds and bushes so high in places that a man couldn't see over them. They must suppose that no one in his right mind would try to reach the castle by climbing up through the forest from the road. After all, who would come here? I think the guards are more to keep me in than keep other people out. Sometimes a car brings one of the head Security Police to question me, otherwise I am left alone. It suits me."

Biggles looked at Von Stalhein. "This is fantastic." He turned back to Marie. "We shall have to talk fast. Erich is in trouble."

"How is that?"

"He has been recognized by the secret police and is now being hunted. He'll have to get out of the country. What is the position with you?"

"I am not allowed to leave the castle."

"You mean you are really a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You'd never guess the reason. Sit down. They'll hardly look for Erich here. My position is simple. I hold a secret I refuse to divulge. They say if I will tell them what they want to know I shall be free to go where I like. I don't believe that. Once I have answered their question I shall be of no further use to them—and I needn't tell you what that would mean."

"A labour camp in Siberia."

"More likely a convenient sudden death to prevent me ever from talking. So far I have held out; but they are getting impatient. I don't think this can go on much longer. They are beginning to drop hints of threats."

"May we know the secret?"

"Of course. It was an ancestor of mine who built this castle seven hundred years ago. My family has lived here ever since, fighting endless wars from the Middle Ages to the end of the last century. It would be strange if during this long period we did not acquire some objects of value, both intrinsic and historical. Some were given to my ancestors for services rendered. Some were bought. Some came to us as the spoils of war."

"In other words you accumulated a treasure," put in Biggles.

Marie smiled. "You may call it that. As years went on many of these objects so increased in value that steps had to be taken to protect them. At first they were merely arranged about the castle as decorations, curiosities, for which reason the collection became known to many people."

"Have you ever seen these things?"

"Yes. The first time was when I was a child. My grandfather took me to the strong room he had built to contain them. I have a clear recollection of holding the ancient jewelled crown of Bohemia. My grandfather said it had caused many wars. He explained that even though a royal family had become extinct through natural death or assassination, while the crown is in existence the country remains a kingdom. The crown, not a person, is the symbol of nationalism. It is around the crown that the people may one day rally. You will understand why this crown is of such importance to certain people."[5]

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[5] In the turbulent Early and Middle Ages of Europe for a kingdom to lose its crown was not as uncommon as one might suppose. Kings led their armies. They took their crowns with them and often wore them in battle; for the crown was a talisman, a sacred emblem, apart from its

national significance. It will be remembered that King John lost his crown in the Wash, and Richard III was wearing his crown when he fell in the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1489. Many crowns were so lost. Some were recovered, some were not; wherefore certain countries have had several crowns.

One crown of Bohemia, that of King Karl IV, made in 1347, is (or was until recently) in the Treasury at Prague, capital of Czechoslovakia. Was the crown held by the Janis family that of the blind King John of Bohemia who fell at the Battle of Crécy in 1346, fighting for the King of France against the English? One of his knights was a Janis. Did he pick up the crown and take it home? Possibly. Or was the Janis crown a much older one; that of King Wenceslaus, the Patron Saint of Bohemia (the Good King Wenceslaus of the Carol) who was assassinated in the year 935 for trying to convert his people to Christianity?

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Biggles nodded. "You know where it is?"

"Yes, although I have never admitted it."

"Is it still in the strong room where you saw it?"

"No. That would not have been a difficult place to find. Before my father went to the last war, not knowing how it would end or what would follow it, he put our treasure in a place that would be impossible to find without taking the castle to pieces. Even then it might be overlooked. My mother being dead, the only person he took into his confidence was me. It was as well this course was taken, because hardly had the war ended than people were here demanding that the Janis objects of art be handed over. My father did not survive the war. It happened that I did, so naturally, as the last of the family, I came home to claim the property. There was no difficulty about that. The trouble was I had no money in cash; that had been swept away in the war; and I had actually considered selling some of our treasures when men arrived ordering me to hand them over. I realized that if I complied, not only would I never see them again but I would not receive a *taler* for them."

"What did you do?"

"I pleaded ignorance."

"Did they accept that?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. Of course, they cannot be sure. They are certainly suspicious. They were here for a long time, searching. They took away the good old furniture, some books from the library, the best pictures

and some rare antique suits of armour, no doubt for their museums. This, they said, was to pay arrears of taxes. But so far they haven't found our real treasures and I don't think they will. The castle now is really no more than an empty shell."

"Why do they allow you to go on living here?"

"I think because they hope I will get tired of living like this and tell them what they are so anxious to know. It is almost solitary confinement. The only man who is allowed to enter the house is Greta's old husband, Max. He brings in the food. Much as I would hate giving away our precious things I would do that if I could be assured of my future."

"Why aren't the guards allowed in?"

"After all the searching they must know there is something of exceptional value hidden in the house. It may be thought they might do some searching on their own account, and if they found anything make off with it. I can think of no other reason. At first the worry of all this, the constant questioning, made me ill, but now I am used to it I don't mind so much. That is the situation now. I am not allowed to write letters."

"How did you get the letter to Erich?"

"You call him Erich. I don't understand this. Is it possible that you are now friends?"

Biggles smiled. "Very good friends. It took some time, but after a spell in prison on Sakhalin Island it dawned on him that he was fighting on the wrong side. There is an old saying, war makes strange bedfellows. He showed me your letter—and here we are."

"The letter was smuggled out by Max, Greta's husband, who, like his father before him, was a forester on the estate. His family are as much a part of the castle as we are. I was allowed to have one woman servant and I chose Greta for that reason. I think Max was left because, knowing everything about the place, it was thought he might be useful to my guardians. He gave the letter to a friend who was leaving the country."

"That brings me to the point of our coming here. What can we do for you? Do you want to stay here or leave the country?"

"I would leave if I could. I have considered trying to escape, but I am not very strong and I doubt if I could manage the hard journey overland which would be inevitable."

"You would leave even if it meant abandoning everything here? You could never come back."

"I wouldn't mind that. I don't want the treasure, but I would do anything rather than see it fall into the hands of people I detest."

"Then I can take it as definite that you don't want to spend the rest of your life here?"

"I do not."

"In that case I will try to arrange something. Erich is no longer in a position to do much." Biggles looked at his watch. "Now we must go. I have a friend outside and already he will be worried by our long absence."

"Where will you go?"

"Back to our hotel in Rodnitz."

"And then?"

"Make plans for your escape."

"What of Erich?"

"He's now the big problem. As soon as it is daylight the hunt for him will begin. We shall have to find him somewhere to hide."

"Why not here?"

"Here?" Biggles looked as if he did not understand. "Do you mean in the castle?"

"Not exactly, although that would be safe. You came to my room along the balcony?"

"Yes."

"How did you get up?"

"By the ivy."

"At each end of the balcony, not overlooked by any window, there is a small stone guard-room, where the sentries used to stand in bad weather. They are not very comfortable but I can give Erich a rug. No one comes here except my woman, Greta. She can bring extra food." Marie smiled. "While he is waiting for the hunt to end, so that he can escape, he can relieve my boredom by telling me the latest news and of your association with him."

Biggles looked at Von Stalhein. "How does that sound to you?"

"Perfect. What about you?"

"We'll go back to our hotel, make a plan and come back some time. I can't say when. It might be advisable to let things settle down on the road before we attempt to come back here. If we're seen on the road too often it may look suspicious. You'll have to leave it to us. Now we'll get along."

"Mind how you go," said Von Stalhein anxiously. "There are almost certain to be police on the road. If so you will be stopped."

"I shall have a tale ready for them." Biggles held out a hand to Marie. "I won't say good-bye. I shall be back. *Au revoir.*"

Biggles went to the window and through to the balcony. Above the place where he had left Bertie he waited for a minute, listening. The rain had stopped, but the air was clammy with mist. A luminous spot in the sky showed where the moonlight was trying to pierce it. A low whistle and Bertie appeared.

"I'm coming down," said Biggles.

"All okay."

Biggles clambered down the ivy, taking care as far as possible not to leave marks that would betray the purpose for which it had been used.

"I say, old boy, you've been a heck of a long time," complained Bertie. "What have you been doing—exploring the whole bally fortress?"

"We found Marie."

"You did! Jolly good."

"I've been talking to her. It took her some time to explain the situation here. However, I now have all the gen. Erich is staying. Marie can let him have food. I don't think he could do better. I'll tell you all about it later. The next thing is to get down to the road and home. Let's go."

The descent through the forest was as difficult, although not as exhausting, as the ascent. The difficulty was to get down without making a noise which might be heard by police left to watch the road. It occupied nearly half an hour, much of this time being lost in the last few yards, which called for extreme caution. Stepping out of the forest on to the road was the most dangerous moment, but in the event nothing happened. They could see no one; but the mist reduced visibility to a few yards.

They set off for Rodnitz at a brisk pace, talking naturally and talking no precautions against being seen, Biggles considering these to be unnecessary now they were on the public highway. In this way they had covered perhaps half a mile when they were stopped by a torch being flashed in their faces.

"*Halte*," ordered a voice sharply.

They stopped.

Two men loomed up. "Where have you been?" asked one.

"For a walk."

"Why at this hour of night?"

"We went farther than we intended, got caught in the storm and had to take shelter under the trees until the rain stopped."

"Why did you choose this road?"

"For the scenery."

"Where are you going now?"

"To our hotel in Rodnitz."

"Which hotel?"

"Steinhof, in the Ludwigstrasse."

"Have you seen a man on the road?"

"No, but there has been an accident. We passed a car on its side. There was no one in it."

"We know about that. Your identity cards, please."

They were handed over.

"*So. Englanders.*"

"*Ja.*"

"Tourists?"

"No. Business. I can show you letters . . ."

The man copied their names in his notebook and handed back the passports. "You may pass."

"*Danke. Gute Nacht.*"

"*Gute Nacht.*"

Biggles and Bertie walked on.

"I was prepared for that," said Biggles, after they had gone a little way.

They were not stopped again.

It was after two o'clock when they reached their hotel so they had to ring for the night porter to let them in. However, he was a jovial fellow and made a joke of their wet clothes. What was more to the point he offered to dry their suits in his boiler room, an offer that was accepted with gratitude since they only had a change of underclothes. The man went with them to their room and took the saturated garments saying he would return them in the morning before he went off duty—which, it may be said, he did, getting a good tip for his trouble.

Biggles laid a finger on his lips. "Don't talk now," he breathed. "I don't trust walls." Then, in a loud voice he said: "Gosh! I'm tired. I shan't need rocking to sleep."

CHAPTER X

THE PROBLEM

THE following day started with an incident which, while disturbing, looked for a few minutes as if it was going to be worse.

Biggles and Bertie had dressed and were just going down to breakfast when there came a knock on the door. Biggles called "Come in," whereupon it was opened by the manager of the hotel looking anything but happy.

"Some gentlemen wish to see you," he said, and withdrew quickly, closing the door behind him.

Two men had entered with him, and Biggles did not need to be told who, or what, they were. Officials have a look about them, a certain manner, even when they wear plain clothes. One conformed precisely to Von Stalhein's description of Reinhardt.

He bowed stiffly from the waist. "*Guten Morgen*, *meine herren*," he said.

"*Guten Morgen*," returned Biggles politely. "What can I do for you?"

The answer did not surprise Biggles. "We are police officers. I would like to ask you some questions."

"I shall do my best to answer them. I hope we have not inadvertently broken some regulation."

"*Nein—nein.* I believe you were on the river road late last night?"

Biggles agreed. "We were stopped and our passports checked. Our names were taken so I assume you know them."

"*So.* What were you doing on the road so late?"

"We went to admire the scenery at sunset. We should have returned earlier but we were caught in the thunderstorm and forced to take shelter under the trees. Even so, we got very wet. The rain lasted for some time."

"Did you see anything unusual on the road?"

"Yes."

"*So.* What was it?"

"A motor car that had overturned."

"Did you see it happen?"

"No. It was very dark and we must have been some distance away."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Earlier we thought we heard shooting, but that also was a rather long way from where we were taking shelter. There was thunder, too, about that time."

"Did you by any chance see a man on the road? He might have been running."

"We saw no one on the road except the two men who asked us the same question."

"I see. May I ask what are your plans for today?"

"Certainly, as far as we know them. After breakfast we shall pay another visit to the glass factory. The last time we went the management took us out to lunch. They may do so again. If not we shall probably have something to eat at the Café Wagner. We have no arrangements beyond that. I should like to see the church, which I am told is very old. Before we leave Rodnitz we may take another walk beside the river—that is, if there is no objection."

"You seem to like that road."

"That should not surprise you. The scenery is superb. I wish I had brought my camera. Would it be in order for me to buy one, to take pictures to show my friends at home?"

The question appeared to cause surprise. Reinhardt hesitated. "I will inquire," he said. "Well, I think that is all. By the way, if you should go down the river road again don't go into the forest. It is a dangerous place."

Biggles raised his eyebrows. "Dangerous? In what way?"

"There may be a boar hunt. You might be shot. Our rules with firearms are strict but accidents do happen."[6]

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[6] This is true. Before a firearm licence is issued the applicant must produce a certificate of proficiency.

"I'm glad you mentioned it."

"That is all. *Danke schön. Guten Morgen.*"

"*Guten Morgen.*"

The officials bowed and departed.

Biggles looked at Bertie. He grimaced, but all he said was: "Let's go down to breakfast."

In the room where coffee was being served he chose a table where there was no risk of their conversation being overheard. "Pity about that," he said.

"You realize who that was?"

"Of course. What do you make of it?"

"I don't really know. They may be suspicious of us, or merely curious. It may be they only wanted to know how much we saw and heard on the road last night. Perhaps they are not convinced that our walk down that particular road was as casual as I tried to make it appear. As you may have noticed, I paved the way for another walk down the road because we shall have to go back to the castle. But we shall have to be extra careful from now on."

"You think they'll watch us?"

"I think it's more than likely. They have reason. After all, commercial travellers, or buyers' representatives as we pretend to be, don't normally take long walks into the country for no other reason than to look at the scenery. Still, I doubt if they would have questioned it had it not been for that business over Erich last night. They're bound to take an interest in anyone who was on the road at that hour; and as far as we know there was no one else there except us."

"What was the idea of saying we'd be going to see the church?"

"That was simply to provide an excuse for going where we can be sure we shan't be overheard. That means in the open air. The churchyard is handy and we have a lot to talk about. I don't trust walls. As I said before, in a Communist country they can have ears."

"Are you really going to the glassworks?"

"Having said so we shall have to, or our friends may wonder why we changed our minds. We'll walk there. It's no great distance and we can talk as we go. I have another reason for going there."

"What is it?"

"To give us an excuse for parting company. It may be necessary for you to go home. What better reason than to apply for an extension of our permit to buy more glass? But we'll talk more about that when we see how things go. We're now faced with the problem of getting two people out of the country, Erich and Marie, and we can't stay in Rodnitz much longer without a good reason. Erich, being an old hand at this sort of game, might get away under his own steam. But not Marie. She hasn't been well and I doubt if she has the physical strength to tackle a rough passage on foot. It means transport of some sort."

"I'm waiting for you to tell me why she's being held prisoner in the castle."

"Let's start walking to the glassworks. I'll tell you as we go. We've been here long enough, with our heads together, to look like a couple of conspirators. Behave naturally. We don't want to give anyone watching us the impression that we know we're being watched."

They went out into the street, and during the next half-hour, as they walked to their objective, Biggles related in detail the story Marie had told him.

At the end Bertie looked serious. "It's close on a hundred miles to the nearest frontier, and all rough country."

"Too far for Marie. When we're finished at the glassworks we shall have the rest of the day to discuss the possibilities and perhaps work out a plan. Then, unfortunately, we shall have to make another trip to the castle to explain it. There's no way out of that. But by that time we should know if we're being shadowed. We're in no great hurry."

They had now reached the glass factory. They went in, to be received with the same hospitality as before. In the showrooms Biggles made some more provisional purchases, having explained that these were subject to permission of the British Board of Trade. They were taken out to lunch, so that as before it was well into the afternoon before the business was finished and they were free to discuss their own affairs. For this purpose, holding to Biggles's precaution of keeping in the open where there was no risk of being overheard, they turned up the alley in the Ludwigstrasse to the churchyard.

They may or may not have been followed. They didn't know, and went to no great pains to find out; for, as Biggles said, it didn't matter if they were, as they were doing nothing to which exception could be taken. They had said they were going to see the church, and they did—or pretended to—take an interest in it. Actually, their conversation had nothing whatever to do with that or any other church.

Said Biggles: "Naturally, in this sort of situation we're bound to think in terms of flying. In fact, I can't think of any other way to get them out." Meaning, of course, Marie and Von Stalhein. "It isn't going to be easy. But still, we have tackled more difficult jobs. As you've often heard me say, there's usually a way to handle a sticky proposition if one can hit on it."

"I can't see anything all that difficult about it," put in Bertie.

"That's because you haven't given it enough thought. To start with we need a machine with the right endurance range, or, alternatively, it means making an intermediate landing for fuel. That means Switzerland or Austria. East Germany is out. Next, whatever we do, to get here means flying over a frontier which has unpleasant ways of discouraging visitors by air except

along the authorized corridors. Ignore those and you're asking for trouble, as you know perfectly well." Biggles broke off to light a cigarette.

"As I said, Marie and Erich would have to be informed of the plan and that means another visit to the castle," he resumed. "If we're under suspicion and being watched that won't be easy. They will have to be told where to be, the date and the time. Lastly, we have the tricky business of putting the machine on the ground in the dark, without breaking anything."

"Why do you always have to think of the snags?" protested Bertie.

"Because I've learnt that it's no use trying to kid yourself they aren't there when you know thundering well they are. Do you feel like trying to make a night landing on any ground we've seen so far?"

"Does it *have* to be a night job?"

"Have a heart! You wouldn't have a hope in daylight. We don't want to start another war. A British machine on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain *would* start something. What possible excuse could we find for bringing an aircraft here?"

"Pilots have been known to lose their way, old boy."

"You wouldn't get away with that."

"All right. I'd tell the truth and say I aimed to rescue a lady in distress."

"Don't make me laugh. Knight-errantry went out of fashion with suits of armour and battle-axes."

"I wish you wouldn't be so depressing. I'm willing to have a bash at landing in one of the fields in the valley."

"Good. I was hoping you'd say that because I may have to ask you to do it. We can't both go home. Someone will have to stay here to keep in touch with the castle, where, as things are, anything might happen."

"You're not thinking of going to the castle tonight?"

"Not on your life. We've no reason to go. We may not be watched, but it would be stupid to take that for granted. Having got so far let's go back to the café and have a cup of tea. Talking always did make me thirsty. We can come back here later and try to fix something definite. There's no need to rush things and risk going off at half cock."

Keeping a watchful eye open for possible enemies they walked slowly back under a darkening sky to the Ludwigstrasse and the Café Wagner.

They saw nothing to cause them concern.

They lingered over their tea, saying little, Biggles mostly deep in thought. When, having paid the bill, they went out, it was dark. They stood for a moment by the door.

“Where are we going?” asked Bertie.

“It’s too early to go back to the hotel. I don’t think we can do better than the churchyard. We can at least talk there.”

They strolled along the street and turned into the alley.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Biggles. “This question of the choice of an aircraft worries me. Obviously it would be crazy to use one of our own machines. If things went wrong we should deserve to be shot. I’ve checked up on the moon in my notebook. It should be all right for the next ten days. You’re serious when you say you’re willing to go home and bring out a machine?”

“Absolutely, old boy. Absolutely.”

“It’s a bit weak, but the only excuse I can think of, if you should be forced down, would be to blame engine trouble. You were out on a test flight and didn’t realize you’d wandered over the frontier into Czechoslovakia. Something of that sort.”

They had walked, by mutual consent it seemed, anyhow without any prior arrangement, along a footpath that took them, as they now discovered, to the door in the wall of the courtyard of the Café Wagner. Biggles went on to the old yew tree and, as before, sat on the mossy tombstone. But he sprang to his feet, and Bertie took a sharp pace backward, as a tall figure suddenly took shape, moving furtively towards them.

CHAPTER XI

THE PLAN

THE figure came close.

"It's all right. It's only me," said a voice they recognized instantly.

It was Von Stalhein. He wore a shabby old mackintosh and a felt hat of the local type with a tassel dangling on the side.

"Erich! What in the name of heaven are you doing here? Are you out of your mind?" Biggles's voice was brittle with consternation.

"I had to come. It was vital that I saw you at once."

"How did you know we'd be here?"

"I didn't know, but I thought you might go to the café so I watched. I saw you come out and followed you. I daren't speak to you in the street."

"Well?"

"Something's happened; something you had to know."

"Tell us. Make it short."

"You now have a time limit to get Marie away. You can forget me. This morning two senior officials from Prague arrived at the castle and told Marie in no uncertain terms that their patience was exhausted. They issued what in effect is an ultimatum. Marie has one week to hand over the Janis valuables. If she persists in refusing she will be taken away and the castle demolished."

"Demolished! That place!"

"Stone by stone."

"They're bluffing."

"Marie doesn't think so. There's more to it than money, she says. The ancient Crown of the Kingdom might spark off a revolution, and if they can't get it they'll see that no one else does. They'd destroy it first."

"But this is fantastic."

"This is a fantastic country. Marie is sure it's that infernal crown they're really after. While it exists the people could revolt and muster round it."

"Where are they going to take Marie?"

"They haven't told her."

"How has she taken it?"

"Naturally, she's upset."

"I lost her once and I'm damned if I'll lose her again," grated Biggles. "We still have a week."

"It's that or—good-bye for ever."

"Well, I'm glad you've told me this. As you say, it was vital we should know. But you took one hell of a risk in coming here."

"Not as much as you would think. I didn't come down the road."

"How else could you get here?"

"By what you might call a back way. When Marie told me about the ultimatum I said I would have to let you know at once; and she agreed. She called in Greta, her maid, who by this time knew about me being there—as she had to on account of the extra food—and Greta had a word with her husband, Max. He was told the position. It was he, by the way, who lent me this coat and hat. To make the story short it seems that Schonschloss, like most medieval castles, is not without its underground passages and an emergency exit. He took me out through what I imagine was an old sally-port. It ran from the castle to the ruins of a disused hunting lodge in the forest, behind the ridge and therefore well away from the road. From there he took a deer path that brought us nearly to the bridge. It was dark, and I felt sure they wouldn't expect me to double back into the town. I had no trouble. My worry was to find you. I gambled on you going to the café, which you did. That's all."

"Are you going to be able to find your way back?"

"Max is waiting for me. The road would be impossible. There has been a lot of activity on it all day, the hunt I imagine for me; but as you thought, no one came to the castle. I've learned one interesting thing from Max. A public coach service operates between Rodnitz and a place called Brozno on the Upper Austrian frontier. It doesn't cross, but it links up with an Austrian coach service on the other side."

"That's a useful thing to know," agreed Biggles.

"I don't think it would be any use to me, because if I know anything the buses will be stopped and the passengers checked."

"For a few days, anyhow," agreed Biggles.

"Have you made a plan yet?"

"We were discussing one when you arrived. We weren't hurrying, but now we shall have to speed things up."

"I shall have to go now. Max will begin to think something has happened to me."

"Just a minute. I'm thinking of coming with you."

"To the castle?"

"No. Only as far as the deer track you mentioned. If we know where it began, at the bridge end, we should be independent of the road, which just now is one of our problems."

"Yes. I see that. We'd better not all go together, but there's no reason why you shouldn't follow me."

"There's one thing about what you've told us that puzzles me. If Marie wanted to escape from the castle why didn't she use the underground exit. Presumably the guards don't know about it."

"I put the question to her. She said it was one thing to get out of the castle, but a different matter to get out of the country. Remember, she's only now recovering from an illness. She's not very strong."

"Yes. I'd forgotten that," admitted Biggles. "All right. Let's get along. I think the best way would be for us to go first, the way we came in. You go through the café courtyard. Wait inside. If you see us standing under the light you'll know it's okay. You go through and we'll follow you at a fair distance."

"I agree. When you get to the bridge, in case you lose sight of me don't turn left by the river. Keep straight on. On your left will be a steep bank covered with forest. Stop after fifty yards. I'll see you there and show you the path. I had better tell you now, in case I forget later, the path isn't easy to follow. There are several forks. The right way is to take the left fork every time. That will bring you to the old hunting lodge. It's some distance from the castle. The track passes below the ruins. If I knew when you were next coming to the castle I'd arrange for Max to meet you there. He could show you the best way to Marie's balcony."

"Let's make a provisional arrangement for ten o'clock tomorrow night. By that time I hope to have made final arrangements with Bertie and he'll be on his way home. I'll tell you what has been arranged. That's as far as we can go for the moment. The path should make it easy for me to keep in touch with you without using the road. I shall have to stay on at the hotel or they'll wonder what I'm doing."

"I understand," said Von Stalhein.

"Good. Let's go. You wait here, Erich. Give us ten minutes."

The plan worked without a moment's anxiety. Half an hour later, under a high, forest-covered bank, Biggles and Bertie were joined by Von Stalhein who, after a short but stiff climb, introduced them to the forester, Max. To their surprise he turned out to be none other than the bow-legged guard who

had ordered them out of the forest on the occasion of their first attempt to reach the castle. Recognition was mutual and acknowledged with smiles.

Von Stalhein pointed out a narrow track, faintly visible, made by generations of animals moving from one part of the forest to another. “It runs well back behind the hill some distance from the road,” he said. “It doesn’t go straight, so from here to the ruins of the old lodge must be about five miles. Don’t forget, always go left where the track forks.”

“I get it,” returned Biggles. “I shall aim to be at the ruins tomorrow night at ten o’clock. Now we’ll leave you to it.”

That was all. They parted there and then, Biggles and Bertie arriving back at the hotel rather late for the evening meal.

They received a jolt when they walked in. Standing by the reception desk, apparently waiting, were the two men who had interrogated them earlier in their bedroom. Reinhardt carried a portfolio.

“Ah, there you are,” he said in a friendly voice. “I was beginning to think you must have gone off on one of your long walks.”

“Not tonight. Just a stroll as far as the bridge and back,” replied Biggles smoothly.

“You remember you spoke to me about a camera.”

“That’s right,” agreed Biggles, wondering what was coming next.

“It won’t be necessary for you to go to that expense,” was the surprising rejoinder. “I have managed to get together a nice collection of pictures of the views you wanted, taken by a professional. Here they are, with our compliments.” He handed over a large envelope.

“I must say that’s uncommonly kind of you,” acknowledged Biggles, with the gratitude for which the occasion called. “That will save us a lot of trouble.”

“We always try to be of service to foreign visitors. Have you decided yet when you will be leaving us?”

“Not exactly. I shall be here for a few more days but my friend leaves for England tomorrow.”

“Indeed? Why the hurry?”

“No hurry, but I have reached the limit of my currency permit to buy specimens of your beautiful glass. There are still some pieces I would like so my friend is dashing home to apply for an increased allowance. A personal application is more likely to be successful than a written one.”

“Excellent. I wish you luck. Well, I won’t detain you. *Guten Abend, meine herren.*”

"*Guten Abend. Danke.*"

As Biggles and Bertie walked up the stairs to their room to wash before going into the dining-room Bertie asked softly: "What's the idea of that? They seem to be getting pally all of a sudden."

"Don't you believe it," answered Biggles cynically. "The purpose of those photos sticks out like a sore finger. We no longer have an excuse for using the river road."

"The artful blighters."

"Two can play at that game. They can now call at the glass factory—as I have no doubt they will—to check that we really have bought some more stuff, subject to official approval. They're puzzled. They still don't know quite what to make of us. They'll watch tomorrow to see if you depart. When you do, that should get them guessing even harder."

On the landing Biggles paused. He looked up and down the corridor. "Mind you," he went on. "I can understand them being puzzled. After all, why on earth should they think we could have any possible interest in an ex-German female spy who lives in the castle? Of course," he added with a shrug, "if they should learn, as they might, that we were in the party that rescued a political prisoner named Von Stalhein from Sakhalin, there won't be just squalls; it'll be a hurricane."

"How right you are, old boy, how right you are," murmured Bertie.

As they walked on Biggles continued: "What Erich has told us puts a new complexion on the whole business. We've been acting as if time was of no importance. Now we've got to work fast. At least, you have, for the next few days. As soon as we've had something to eat we'll waffle into the Café Wagner and put the final touches to the big operation. With all the clatter there it should be safe enough to talk. First, though, I want to have another look at the map."

As soon as they were in the bedroom he took out the photographs that had so surprisingly been presented to them and threw the envelope on the bed. He was flipping through them casually, without any real interest, when he stopped at one and chuckled.

"What's the joke?" whispered Bertie.

"Take a look at this," breathed Biggles, offering the photograph. "I've been wondering how we could work in another survey of the possible landing grounds, either that long sand-bank island or one of the fields under cultivation in the valley, having in mind particularly the one where they were loading sugar-beet. They may not have finished it, in which case it would be no use. Believe it or not, our friends have been obliging enough to

present us with the very information we needed. This photo shows the crop has been cleared. Some of the other pictures are interesting, too. You can take them with you when you go and study the skylines in your own time. But we'll talk more about this later. Let's get a move on. We've no time to waste."

An hour later, having had a quick meal, they were in the café, in the quietest corner they could find—for there was the usual busy buzz of conversation—working out the details of the air operation.

Neither of them had remarked on it but they must both have been aware that it was as tricky an undertaking as they had ever seriously contemplated. Luck, as well as the most skilful air pilotage, would be essential to success. Biggles in particular had an exceptional war-time experience in what are called "special missions"; but in peace-time the calculated risks, considered in cold blood, had a more sinister appearance. In war there is always a headquarters to back up a dangerous operation; to share the blame in the event of failure, if not the actual risks. Here, acting entirely on their own account, they could expect no consolation from friends, and no mercy from foe, should things go wrong.

To narrate the discussion, the many pros and cons, in detail, would become tedious. A final plan emerged. It would depend more than anything on perfect timing; but that that would apply, whatever they did, was obvious from the outset. Luck would play its part in factors over which they had no control, such as, for instance, the weather, or anything that might happen at the castle from the hour of Bertie's departure for England and the night of his return. Nothing could be changed. There could be no more contact between Bertie and those waiting for the aircraft. In a word, one change in the existing conditions would throw the entire plan out of gear, with results that could only be fatal to the enterprise. No alternative scheme could be devised to cover last moment hazards of which they could have no knowledge.

The final plan, in the simplest terms, was this. And in fact the operation had been kept as simple as possible, Biggles knowing only too well that the more complicated a plan the more likelihood was there of something going amiss.

Bertie would start for England the following morning, leaving Rodnitz by train or by motor coach according to the most suitable time-table. This would have to be ascertained. Once across the frontier he would proceed by the first regular air service available. On arrival, having informed Ginger and Algy of the situation, he would look for an aircraft most suitable for the job. There had been much discussion about this. They had decided on a

Dove, if one could be found. Biggles knew one had recently been offered for sale by an air charter company that had gone into liquidation.

Bertie would return with Ginger acting as second pilot. The machine would glide across the frontier at maximum altitude in the hope of avoiding observation.

Five days had been allowed for all this. That would leave a margin of two days before the expiration of the ultimatum imposed on Marie. Bertie would return on the fifth night, touching down at midnight when the moon would be well up. Biggles and the others would be waiting. When they heard the plane a light would be shown at each end of the runway. If for any reason the plane did not arrive the same programme would be repeated the next night, same place same time.

In the matter of the actual days, Bertie would leave Rodnitz on Tuesday (one day of the ultimatum having already expired) and return on Saturday; failing that, on Sunday. The officials would return on the Monday for Marie's decision. If all went well she would not be at the castle to give it.

"I hate these rush jobs," said Biggles at the finish. "It's so easy to overlook something. However, let's leave it at that. There's nothing more we can do."

CHAPTER XII

A SHOCK AND A JOURNEY

THE next morning saw Bertie on his way to England. He went by coach. Particulars of the service had been obtained from the hotel reception desk and the clerk had booked the seat. The coach service had been decided upon not only because it was the most convenient way of getting to Austria from where they were, but it had the added advantage of following the river, thus enabling Bertie to have a last look at the terrain over which he would fly on his return. The river, reflecting the moonlight provided the weather was fair, would be an unmistakable landmark to bring him to the rendezvous.

Biggles saw him off. He was slightly amused to see Reinhardt standing by the door of a car, at a distance, watching. This did not worry him. Bertie was really going, as he had said, and there was nothing illegal about it. He could only suppose that Reinhardt's suspicions were founded on the fact that the car would take the river road. The police car followed the coach when it moved off, presumably to make sure that Bertie did not leave it on the way to the frontier.

Biggles now found himself in the unusual position of having nothing to do for the rest of the day, wherefore he decided to behave in a manner consistent with his announced purpose of awaiting official approval to make payment for his last purchases at the glass factory. He did not go near the river, but wandered about looking at the shops in the Ludwigstrasse. As the weather threatened rain, with drizzle from time to time, he bought himself a mackintosh. He also took the opportunity of buying three small electric torches to mark the best landing run for the plane. He chose three different patterns so that should he be searched he could account for them by saying they were samples. He had lunch at the Café Wagner.

He spent the afternoon in much the same way, but after a cup of tea at the café he returned to his hotel room to rest in preparation for his long walk to the castle, as arranged, to explain the escape plan. After that he would have nothing to do but wait for the night of Bertie's return. Or so he thought, moodily, for after one day of inaction he already found time hanging heavily. He had no reason to suspect that events were soon to relieve any question of boredom.

These started as dusk was closing in and the lights were coming on in the street below. He had gone to the window to see what the weather was like and observed with disgust that the rain appeared to have settled in, not heavily, but steadily, sufficient to make his proposed long walk an uncomfortable one. His intention was to have his evening meal in the dining-room of the hotel and then go on to the castle by the deer track. He threw his mackintosh over his arm, put the three torches in one of the pockets thinking he might as well take them along right away, and picked up his hat. Having checked that he had with him everything he was likely to want he was having a last look round to make sure he had not overlooked anything when a sharp squeal of brakes in the street below took him back to the window.

This was instinctive. Or perhaps it was force of habit. He did not expect to see anything that might concern him, but he was always alert for trouble.

Looking down into the street he saw three men getting out of a small black van that had pulled up at the hotel entrance. It was the way they did this that made him stare. There was an urgency of purpose about it. Without hesitation they entered the hotel.

Biggles frowned. Was one of them Reinhardt? Looking down from above it had not been possible to see faces, but one figure had been very much like his. The black van had an official look about it. A police van? Living dangerously can beget a sensitive intuition, and it may have been this as much as anything that took Biggles to his door in three quick strides. He opened it. He could see nobody. All he could hear was muffled voices, coming, he thought, from the reception desk. A few swift steps took him to the top of the main staircase. He heard his name mentioned. The voice that spoke it was Reinhardt's. He heard the reception clerk say he was in. Purposeful footsteps approached the bottom of the stairs.

Biggles waited no longer. He could not imagine what had happened but it was evident from the way Reinhardt moved and spoke that something had. The suave official had become what he was. A secret police agent. Biggles decided not to wait to hear what he had to say.

He did not return to his room. There was no time for that. Instead, he walked smartly straight along the corridor to where, opposite a bathroom, he had noted an emergency fire exit. Over the door the notice appeared in illuminated red letters.

Where the exit emerged he did not know, but it was reasonable to suppose it would be in the open air outside the hotel. Anyway, there was no

question of using the main stairs. There might be others, a staff staircase, but he had never seen it and dare not lose time looking for it.

He opened the fire exit doors. Iron steps spiralled down. He followed them to the bottom. Another door. It was bolted on the inside, as is usual, to prevent outsiders from getting in. He drew the bolt, opened the door, and after a quick peep went out to find himself in what obviously was the hotel car park. A car was just leaving. He followed it out into the street, the Ludwigstrasse, and with the black van in mind, which probably had a driver in the front seat, taking care not to appear to hurry he turned away from it and strolled along the pavement mingling with other pedestrians.

The rain still fell in a quiet drizzle.

The castle was now his objective. He knew of nowhere else to go. He had to get to the castle anyhow, and if he did not get to the bridge before the hue and cry for him started, as he was now sure it would, he might never reach the forest. Once clear of the hotel he put his best foot forward; but he knew better than to run.

The Ludwigstrasse is a long street, and to Biggles it seemed to have added a mile to its length before he came in sight of the bridge. Thinking fast as he walked he decided there were two things he needed to make him independent of the town, to which, he realized, he could never return. Wherefore he took a chance and stopped twice. The first time was at a tobacconist, where he bought as many packets of cigarettes as he could conveniently carry. The second was a *delikatessen*, where he purchased two bread rolls and a large German sausage—these really for emergency in case he should fail to reach his objective that night. He was by no means sure from where his next meal might come.

There was a fair amount of traffic using the bridge at that hour, which was to his advantage in that nobody was likely to pay any attention to him, and it was with heartfelt relief that he crossed it, for this, he surmised, would be the first place where Reinhardt would station guards. He walked on until he was below the deer track, and then, under the pretence of lighting a cigarette, he edged back under the trees. A quick glance up and down and he was in the forest, just as the black van came over the bridge, and turning left raced on down the river road.

Satisfied that he was for the moment safe he scrambled up to the deer track and there sat on a fallen tree to consider the situation. It had changed so suddenly and so swiftly that there had been little time for reflection. What had happened? Why had the police come for him? That they had he was sure. Had he blundered somewhere, somehow? He didn’t think so.

After giving the matter a lot of thought he could arrive at only one conclusion, and he was fairly confident it was the right one. Reinhardt had at last received a report from his headquarters, wherever that might be, associating him with Von Stalhein. That would be all he needed to know. It would explain what must have been a mystery: why they were in Rodnitz at the same time. It seemed probable that Reinhardt had received orders to arrest him. There was sufficient reason. The affair of Von Stalhein's escape from Sakhalin.

All Biggles could hope for now was that neither he nor Von Stalhein had been linked with what was going on in the castle. If inquiries had got as far as that the immediate future would look black indeed. He was surprised that Reinhardt was so soon on his track. The police agent had gone to his room at the hotel expecting to find him there. The fact that he was not in did not necessarily mean that he was not coming back. Why hadn't they waited for him? Perhaps the van driver had seen him leave the hotel car park. Investigation would reveal that the door at the bottom of the fire escape was open. It could not be bolted from the outside. No matter how they knew he had gone, he pondered. They knew, and now he, like Von Stalhein, was on the run.

Getting up he started his long walk to the castle—or rather, first to the ruined hunting lodge—groping his way through the dripping trees. One of his torches would have made progress a lot easier, but he daren't risk using a light. The rain had made the muddy track greasy and as it wandered about, up and down, he often slipped. He had to be careful, too, not to miss the forks; to overlook one and take the wrong track would almost certainly find him lost in the great forest.

He often stopped to listen, although being on the reverse side of the slope from the road he did not expect to hear any activity on it. Actually he was more concerned with what was in front of him. The rain pattering constantly on the leaves overhead, and dripping through them, worried him because he was afraid this would drown all other sounds unless they were close.

He had one fright when a large animal which must have been on the path crashed away into the forest. He didn't see it so he never knew what it was. Not that he wanted to know. He sat on the bank to rest and recover from the shock, glad that he was not pushed for time. He risked lighting a cigarette, shielding the flame with his hands. He felt he needed one.

All the time his brain was racing, trying to see any new difficulties that had arisen as a result of Reinhardt's latest action. One was clear, and he considered it with acute concern because he could see no way out of it. It

was the business of getting to the rendezvous to meet Bertie when the time came. It meant not only getting to the road but crossing it; and he had an uneasy feeling that after this new development it would more than ever be closely watched. He saw, too, that when he got to the castle he would have to stay there. There could be no going back to the hotel, or, for that matter, to Rodnitz.

He put his foot on his cigarette, got up and went on.

Five miles, as Von Stalhein had estimated the distance from the bridge to the ruins of the old lodge, is a fair walk in the best conditions. To Biggles the track seemed endless. The rain continued to drop and his pauses for rest became more frequent. By no means sure of what he would have to face at the finish he did not want to arrive in a state of exhaustion. The ruins, Von Stalhein had said, were not actually on the track, but some little distance above. Afraid of passing them he now began to make sorties into the forest in search of them, finding it easy to understand how in fairy-tales children so easily became lost. Once, having left the track, it took him some anxious minutes to find it again.

The ordeal came to an end when on one of these excursions he stumbled over a large solid object. His hands told him it was a block of stone. Groping about he found more, and presently the walls of a roofless building much bigger than he had expected. He had supposed the hunting lodge to be something in the nature of a cottage; instead, he found it had been a building the size of a small church, or chapel.

However, he felt sure this could only be the ruin of which Von Stalhein had spoken, so, as there was nothing more he could do for the time being he found a seat on a broken wall, and muffled up in his mac prepared to wait for Max, who was to be his guide for the remainder of his journey. The appointment was for ten o'clock. A cautious look at his watch, inside the mackintosh, showed that he was still early by nearly half an hour—the result, of course, of starting earlier than he had intended. There were only a few small trees on the site of the old building so visibility was somewhat better than it had been in the deep forest. That is not to say it was moonlight; but he could see a few yards.

It was a dismal, depressing place. The only sound was the monotonous patter of rain. All he could see was the stark silhouette of broken walls against the sky. Fairy-tales? If ever there was a setting for witchcraft and dark deeds this was it, he reflected, as he ate a portion of his bread and sausage.

He had just finished his simple but satisfying meal when a curious sound caused his nerves to stiffen. He could not imagine what had produced it. It was not wind in the trees for the air was still. It was not the soft spatter of raindrops. It was more of a scrape, as if stones had rubbed together. He held his breath, the better to hear a repetition of the sound, should it come. With every muscle alert for action his eyes strove to probe the gloom in the direction from which he thought the noise had come. Suddenly they stopped, concentrated on one spot.

Within a dozen yards of him the ground was moving . . . slowly rising. Or was it? Yes. Something *was* moving. Something that breathed . . . long, deep breaths.

Biggles was not a man easily frightened; but now for a few seconds he experienced the chilling shock of supernatural fear, which is a very different sensation from physical fear. For this no doubt the circumstances—night, the ruins, the forest, the proximity of the castle—were largely responsible; but it called for all his self-control not to give way to a panic rush from the spot.

There was a grunt. Something fell, with a curious hollow boom. A vague form materialized, rising out of the earth. Then, as Biggles stood rigid, staring, a match flared, revealing a face, and at the sight of it his straining nerves relaxed. It was a man. Max, the forester. He was lighting one of those long German tobacco pipes which end in a porcelain bowl.

"Here I am, Max," said Biggles.

Max nearly dropped his pipe. "*Ach. Mein Gott.* You startled me."

"Not as much as you frightened me."

"You are early."

"Yes. But they came to arrest me and I had nowhere else to go."

"*So. Sind Sie fertig?*" (Are you ready?)

"*Ja.*"

"*Folgen Sie mir.*" (Follow me.)

Everything was explained when Max stooped and lifted a stone slab. Biggles recoiled in horror, for in the light of a small pocket torch which the forester now produced it could be seen that an inscription proclaimed it to be a tomb. Max chuckled and made a sign for him to enter. The light showed stone steps descending. Biggles went down into a pit of utter darkness. Max followed, adjusted the stone above his head and took the lead.

It came as no surprise to Biggles to find himself in a tunnel; nor was he surprised that such a crafty bolt hole existed, for such emergency entrances and exits were a necessary feature of medieval castles liable to siege. Even

taking into account the improbability of it having been used for perhaps hundreds of years it was in a foul condition, damp, cold and stinking of decay; all the worse for its small dimensions.

It was not more than five feet high, which meant it was impossible to stand erect, and only wide enough for one person to pass at a time. This of course was a simple measure of defence. The walls were some sort of brick, but they were now coated with a veneer of slime over which water from above trickled to form pools of mud on the ground. Water dripped from the roof. However, Biggles was in no case to be particular. He thought it fortunate the hole was there, and that one man knew of it, the secret no doubt having been handed down father to son for generations.

They splashed on, Max showing the way, for some distance, when the hole came to a dead end at another short flight of stone steps. Max knew what to do. He mounted the steps. At the top he turned and raised a finger in a warning signal.

"*Sei still*," (be quiet) he whispered.

Biggles nodded.

Max pushed, and a door must have opened, for there came a current of clean cool air. He disappeared. Biggles followed and found himself standing by an enormous fireplace through the back of which he must have entered a room so huge that in olden times it could only have been the banqueting hall of the castle. Max beckoned and they went on.

The journey that followed, while not very long, was for Biggles as strange as he had ever undertaken. Rooms and corridors with grey, grim walls, practically devoid of furniture and as chilly as the stone of which the place was built. It was unreal. Glazed eyes in the heads of deer and wild boar long dead, the boar with curling tusks springing from red-painted gums. The only other decorations on the walls were ancient weapons, crossbows, a mace, a battle-axe, metal gauntlets, rusty spurs and the like.

Huge doors, black with age, were opened and closed behind them. It was impossible not to feel the atmosphere of the place; and hear it, for their footsteps, however quietly they tried to walk, had the hollow ring of an empty vault. A great flight of stone stairs swept up to the next floor. At the top a rusting suit of armour standing stiffly to attention, hands resting on the hilt of mighty sword, regarded them with sightless eyes as they passed by.

At last Max stopped at a door and again raised a warning finger. "*Warten Sie hier*," (wait here) he ordered, and went on alone.

He was soon back, inviting Biggles to enter. He himself withdrew.

Biggles walked in and found himself in Marie's sitting-room. She, and Von Stalhein, stood before him, expressions apprehensive.

"Max says something has happened," said Marie.

Biggles nodded. "I'm afraid it has. Most unfortunate but not entirely unexpected." He looked at Von Stalhein. "Reinhardt, I think, has at last been informed of our association. He came to the hotel in a police car with two other men. It could have been for no other purpose than to arrest me. I got away, but, like you, I am now on the run. Naturally, I made for here. I was coming here anyway, as you know, to tell you what had been arranged. Is everything all right here?"

Marie answered. "Yes. So far. Erich told you what the position is now. Sit down and we'll talk about it. You must be tired. Give me that wet mackintosh and I'll put it away to dry."

CHAPTER XIII

REINHARDT MAKES A CALL

BIGGLES described exactly what had happened in Rodnitz.

Von Stalhein listened with grave attention, Marie with dismay.

"I don't think this will affect the plan I have made with Bertie except that once we leave the castle, with the police on their toes, getting to the river and across it is bound to be dangerous," went on Biggles. "I'd better tell you what has been arranged then you'll understand the position. I was coming here tonight to do that, anyway. As things have turned out that was lucky, because Max was at the lodge to meet me and that simplified matters. Bertie has gone home to fetch an aircraft. If all goes well he should be back on Saturday night." Biggles went on to unfold the scheme in detail.

"I have some doubts about the operation that are worrying me," he confessed. "They concern you, Marie. Will you be able to get to the landing ground? First there's the problem of getting you down from the balcony. Erich and I can manage with the ivy, but can you? We haven't a rope."

"I'll ask Greta to speak to Max about that. He may be able to suggest something. But don't worry. If there's no other way I'll use the ivy."

"Then there's the matter of wading the river. I see no way out of that. We daren't use the bridge. Moreover it would double the distance. Unfortunately any possible landing grounds we've seen happen to be on the other bank."

"I shall get there, never fear," declared Marie confidently. "The thought of outwitting my persecutors will keep me going."

"Very well. We'll say no more about it, but I thought you'd better understand clearly what has to be done. The tunnel wouldn't be any use to us. It comes out on the wrong side of the hill and we mustn't forget the guards."

"What are you going to do in the meantime?" asked Von Stalhein.

"Nothing. There is nothing more for me to do. It's just a matter now of waiting for zero hour. The question is, where shall I wait? Had it not been for this upset tonight I would have stayed on at the hotel. That was my intention. But for obvious reasons I can't go back to Rodnitz. I shall have to find somewhere close, from where I shall be in contact with you. If we lost touch—well, anything could happen."

"You'll have to stay here," said Marie, firmly.

"I was sure you'd say that, and while it presents difficulties I must admit I can see no alternative," returned Biggles. "It would be foolish for me to go far from the castle."

"What are the difficulties? If you're thinking about food—"

"Naturally, I was thinking about that; but I'm more worried about the situation it would create."

"In what way?" asked Von Stalhein. "Provided Max can get the extra food one more person in the party won't make any difference."

Biggles shook his head. "I'm not so sure you're right about that. You disappeared, apparently into thin air. Now, I hope, I've done the same thing. The people we're up against aren't fools or they'd soon lose their jobs. If my guess is right Reinhardt has just learned that you and I have been on good terms for some time; that it was my party that lifted you out of Sakhalin prison camp. For some time they must have been asking themselves what are we doing here."

"You and Bertie have been buying glass."

Biggles looked dubious. "Now, as I suspect, our association is known, how long is it going to take them to realize the glass business was simply a cover story? Not long. I fancy it was suspect from the day we arrived; otherwise, why should Reinhardt be interested in me? It didn't take him long to spot we had a particular interest in the river road. How long is it going to be before he hooks up our visit to Bohemia with this castle?" Biggles looked hard at Von Stalhein. "And if he knew, or learns, that you and Marie are old friends, that will be the pay-off. He'll know all the answers. Did Reinhardt, when he was working with you on Intelligence, know that you were sometimes given an assignment together?"

Von Stalhein thought for a moment. "I don't know. I can't remember."

"Would he be in a position to know that Marie had got hold of a foolish young flying officer named Bigglesworth, and induced him to play her cards for her?"

"I don't know. Not to my knowledge. Of course, he may have seen the official reports on the case. It went on for some time while we were making arrangements to get Marie out of France."

"Pity. That's a vital question." Biggles looked at Marie. "Did you know Reinhardt in those days?"

"Only by sight. I never worked with him. I didn't like the man."

Biggles shrugged. “Well, there it is. However much is known about us there’s nothing we can do about it now.”

Marie changed the subject. “Did you have a meal before you left Rodnitz?”

Biggles smiled. “No. I left in some haste. But I’ve had one since. As an old campaigner I took care not to start on a journey without rations. On my way out of town I bought bread and a sausage. Also, not knowing where the next were coming from, a good supply of cigarettes. So I have all I want at the moment. Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Of course not.”

“What is more important, can you suggest a place where I can lie low for a few days? Not here, but somewhere not too far away. From what I’ve seen of it the castle isn’t exactly overcrowded.”

“I’ll speak to Greta about it and she can ask Max. Until then you’ll have to share the guard-room on the balcony with Erich. I’ll ring for Greta now.”

As it happened this was not necessary. A sharp knock on the door turned every head in that direction. There was no time to move. Without waiting for an invitation to enter the door was thrust open and in burst a little grey-haired woman in a state of agitation.

“What is it, Greta?” asked Marie quickly.

From Greta’s lips poured a stream of words, in low German, too fast for Biggles to follow, although he sensed trouble.

Marie looked at the two men. “You heard that?”

Von Stalhein nodded grimly.

Biggles said: “Not all of it. My German isn’t up to that speed.”

“She says the courtyard is full of soldiers. I think she must mean Special Police. Soldiers and police do not often work together.”

“What are they doing?”

“Max is there with the *oberfeldwebel* (sergeant-major) in charge. He has been asked to find quarters for the new men.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” returned Biggles.

“Could it be worse?”

“Easily. If they demand quarters they are obviously going to stay. If they are going to stay this can’t be a raid. A search party would have come straight into the castle. Still, Erich and I had better be ready to move fast. Let’s wait for a further report from Max.”

Marie told Greta to return to the yard and bring any news her husband may have gathered.

Said Biggles: “In such times as these what a wonderful thing it is to have a loyal servant.”

“It seems we’ve arrived at the castle just as things are boiling up,” remarked Von Stalhein, gloomily.

“It was because I thought matters were approaching a climax that I wrote to you,” said Marie.

They waited for some twenty minutes, the window open ready for the men to make a swift exit should it be necessary.

“Do you suppose this is a new move on the part of the Russians?” Biggles asked Marie.

She answered: “Not the Russians, I think. The country is of course controlled from Moscow, but they don’t worry us much now as long as the country remains quiet. The people who cause the trouble are the government, Czech Communists, traitors who, having been given power, intend to keep it. Everything they do is for themselves. They have agents and spies everywhere. There are many in Rodnitz, so even the ordinary people dare trust no one. The *Ortskommandant* himself is in their pay, I am told. These are the people I fear most. They are determined to have what they know is here. I don’t think the Russians on their own account would take much notice of me.”

Greta came back. She brought news. The guard over the castle was to be doubled. Among the new arrivals were some engineers. Finally, she herself had been ordered to tell her mistress that the *Kommandant* would be coming to see her.

“When?”

“Tonight.”

Marie half rose to her feet. “At this hour!”

“He says it is important that he sees you. He will not keep you long.”

“Very well, Greta. I can’t prevent him from coming here.”

Greta went out.

“We’d better get out, too,” Biggles told Von Stalhein. “I wonder what the devil he has to say at this time of night. Ah well, we shall soon know.”

They retired to the balcony, leaving the window open just enough to enable them to hear what went on in the room. They had to wait some time, taking it in turns to keep an eye to the window, before their curiosity was

satisfied. It happened to be Von Stalhein's turn to watch when a man's voice told Biggles that someone had entered.

"*Guten Abend, gnädige Fräulein.*"

Biggles frowned. He knew the voice.

"*Guten Abend, Herr Kommandant*," answered Marie.

In a flash Von Stalhein had turned and hissed in Biggles's ear: "It's Reinhardt! Look at him."

Biggles peeped. Reinhardt was now in uniform. High black boots, belted, a revolver holster on his hip.

The conversation that followed, after Greta had left the room, lasted some time. It began on a dangerous note, one that made Biggles furious at his carelessness.

Reinhardt sniffed. "I didn't know you smoked, Fräulein."

"Just occasionally."

"Where do you get the cigarettes?"

"My woman brings them. I think she sometimes gets one of the guards to bring her a packet."

"I see."

To Biggles's infinite relief this subject was not followed up. Reinhardt switched to the purpose of his visit. Two dangerous men, he stated, were at large in the district, and he thought it his duty, purely for her protection of course, to strengthen the guard at the castle. This would not affect her in any way. And if she saw men taking measurements she need take no notice.

"Who are these men taking measurements?" inquired Marie.

"They are engineers. They have to make a survey."

"Not demolition experts by any chance?"

"Well—er—yes. You may as well know. You would have to be told eventually. But don't get upset. These are only advance preparations."

"I understand."

"If you should be troubled in any way, or have a complaint to make, send your servant to me in Rodnitz, and I will attend to it."

"*Danke schön, Herr Kommandant.*" (Thank you.)

"Is there anything you want?"

"*Nein. Danke.*"

A pause. "If you see any strange men about I trust you will tell the guard."

“I never go out.”

“I understand you have a good view from your balcony.”

“Yes. What of it?”

“Would you mind if I posted a sentry on it, to keep watch for these two criminals?”

Marie’s voice rose in indignation. “I would most certainly object. Haven’t you intruded enough as it is, with your men about the place prying into everything. I understand I shall not be here much longer. Please allow me to keep what privacy I have.”

"I didn't know you smoked, Fräulein."

"Whose fault is that but your own, *gnädiges Fräulein*."
"Oh don't let us go over all that again," answered Marie impatiently.
"Very well. As you wish. That is all, then. *Gute Nacht.*"
"*Gute Nacht.*"
A door closed.

For a minute nobody moved. Then Marie walked slowly to the window. "You heard that?"

"We heard," confirmed Biggles. "You did very well. So they're tightening the net. That's what it amounts to. I found that encouraging. The *Kommandant* told us quite a lot."

"In what way? Are you coming back in?"

"As things are I think we had better stay outside. Reinhardt may come back, or start something. He as good as told us he has not the slightest suspicion that we are here, or with the men at his command he could have the place searched thoroughly. He gave us a few other interesting pieces of information that I'm glad to have. For instance, it's obvious he doesn't know of your early association with Erich; consequently it hasn't dawned on him that he came here to find you. Had he known he would not have said what he did. Again, he has no suspicion that you and I are old friends, or putting two and two together he would have questioned you about it. These factors are of vital importance. I'm pretty sure he knows now that Erich and I have worked together, but that doesn't matter as long as he doesn't link us with you."

"How you work things out. Suppose he puts a man on the balcony?"

"That would be a serious matter," Biggles had to admit.

"What shall we do now?"

"Wait until we have more news from Max. He's wide awake. I imagine he will keep his eyes and ears open and let us know what is happening."

"We can rely on him to do that."

"Good. Then Erich and I will go along to the sentry room and wait there. Should Greta have further news from Max you come to the window and cough. That'll bring us along to hear it."

"As you say."

Biggles and Von Stalhein walked along to the sentry room and sat on a wooden form, a fixture, presumably provided to enable a sentry to rest from time to time.

"What do you make of this talk of engineers?" questioned Von Stalhein. "Do you believe they seriously contemplate blowing up the castle?"

"Frankly, no. To blow the place up would surely defeat their object, if the purpose is to expose the Janis valuables. The stuff would either be buried under tons of rubble, or scattered far and wide by the explosions. It would be a major undertaking, anyway. This pile would take some shifting. Still, it would be an even more fantastic task to take the place to pieces stone by

stone, as they have threatened. I think it's more likely men have been brought here to take measurements and check them for vaults or secret chambers. Heaven alone knows what may be under the castle. Fortresses of this period usually had dungeons for prisoners."

"I'm inclined to agree with you."

Biggles was looking beyond his companion. "Is that a doorway in the wall behind you?"

"Yes."

"Where does it lead?"

"Nowhere. That is, only to one of the turrets. A circular place. An extra high look-out I imagine."

"Then you've been up?"

"Of course. Greta fixed me up with some old blankets. I keep them up there out of the way. There's nothing of interest. Slits for shooting arrows, a spout for pouring out boiling oil on anyone trying to climb up—and all that nonsense."

Biggles smiled broadly. "I wouldn't call a quart of boiling oil down the back of my neck nonsense."

"I think it must have been used for that purpose at some time. There are marks of burning on the floor as if a fire had been lighted. But never mind about that. The position here is getting serious."

"It might be worse. Nothing has happened yet to upset our plan for getting away."

"You take things very calmly."

"There's no point in getting in a flap."

"So Reinhardt has come out into the open, dolling himself up in the uniform of the Security Police. What's the idea of that?"

"To create an impression, I'd say. As you must have noticed, it's the regular thing for men who seize power to flatter their vanity by strutting about in a uniform, usually with a sprinkling of home-made decorations to make them look more important than they are."

"Listen. I thought I heard a cough. It must be Marie, with further news."

"Then let's go and hear it."

They returned to the window.

The news was comforting. The reinforcements had been quartered in dormitories over the stables, once used by outside staff. They had retired for the night. Marie produced a rug and a blanket provided by Greta.

“You’ll need them,” she told Biggles. “Erich tells me his room is rather draughty.”

Biggles took the coverings thankfully. “Having been there I can believe it,” he said dryly. “Now if there’s nothing more, I’ll go and try it.”

Their return to the sentry box was greeted with a fluttering noise that caused Biggles to recoil in alarm.

“It’s all right,” Von Stalhein was quick to reassure him.

“What the devil was it?”

“Only the owl.”

“What owl?”

“The one that normally occupies the place, I imagine. Naturally, he resents our intrusion. From time to time during the night he sits on a window ledge and hoots.”

“I’m glad you warned me,” replied Biggles grimly.

CHAPTER XIV

MORE PROBLEMS

THE following morning, after an uncomfortable night, Biggles was awakened by the sound of voices. Men's voices. They sounded dangerously close. In fact, perceiving where he was, for a few dreadful seconds as he sprang to his feet he thought the speakers were on the balcony. A swift glance showed they were not. The voices were coming from below.

Von Stalhein was still asleep. Biggles shook him, his expression a warning for silence. "*Shh*," he breathed, and went out to investigate.

He hadn't far to go. Three steps and a peep over the embattled parapet told him all he needed to know. Two men in uniform were making their way slowly through the tall herbage that flourished on the level strip of ground at the base of the castle wall. They appeared to be unarmed. Nothing in their manner suggested they were searching for something in particular. Sometimes they stopped, one pointing, giving the impression that they were strangers exploring ground unknown to them. Their chief interest was the castle.

Biggles waited, listening, until receding voices told him that the men had reached the extremity of the wall and turned the corner. He returned to the shelter.

"What's going on?" asked Von Stalhein anxiously.

"Two men having a look round."

"Doing what, exactly?"

"Nothing in particular. If you asked me to guess I'd say either they were a couple of engineers examining the structure or simply two of the new guards looking over ground they may have to cover. One had a stripe on his shoulder-strap so he may have been an N.C.O. They've gone now."

"If it's decided to take in the front of the castle as part of a regular patrol it'll be another hazard when the time comes to leave."

"Too true. I had reckoned on that way being clear."

"We shall have to watch and see what they do. If they patrol at regular hours we can time our departure accordingly. Alternatively we shall have to waylay them and put them out of action."

"With what? They'll be armed. Two men. What do we tackle them with, our bare hands?" Biggles was sarcastic.

"There are weapons inside."

"The weapons I saw are not my line. I'm not cracking some poor devil's skull with a battle-axe."

"Why not?"

"Have a heart! No wonder you Prussians have a reputation for being ruthless."

"Not ruthless. Practical. Whether you knock a man on the head with an axe or put a bullet through him it comes to the same thing. A dead man. I'll admit the axe method is a bit old-fashioned but the effect is the same."

"Okay. Let's not argue about it. This is no time to debate the efficiency of lethal instruments. All I can say is if I have to use a weapon I trust it will be something less savage than a battle-axe. Do we get any breakfast? What's left of my sausage is getting a bit shabby."

"Marie will put something out of the window and let us know when it's there. It's still a trifle early."

"What about a wash?"

"Rain water. There are some nice puddles. Marie let me have a piece of soap and a towel."

"Shaving?"

"Nothing doing. Marie doesn't use a razor."

"Pity. We shall look a couple of pretty specimens by the end of the week. While we're waiting I'll have a look round. I have yet to see in daylight just where we are."

Biggles stepped out on to the balcony, keeping well back from the parapet, and for the first time was able to see their position clearly. Behind him the grim grey walls of the castle rose sheer forty feet to frowning battlements. From the corners sprang circular turrets, like the one over the sentry box they were using. At the other end of the stone-flagged balcony was another. He formed the opinion that the balcony, really a terrace, was an addition to the original building, added to the front aspect only for the view it offered.

This, with the autumn-tinted tops of the forest trees rolling down into the valley, was magnificent. Between them it was possible to catch glimpses of the river.

Having seen all there was to see from the balcony Biggles went up into the turret built over the sentry shelter, disturbing some jackdaws whose nests

of twigs covered much of the floor. He found the place as Von Stalhein had described it. From their dizzy height two slit windows offered a wonderful panorama in different directions. He could see not only the proposed landing field but follow the course of the river.

As he surveyed it suddenly his expression changed. He pursed his lips. Something was different. The several small sandy islands were no longer there. All that was left of the large one was a narrow strip. What had happened was all too clear. He went down to the shelter where he found Von Stalhein squatting beside a jug of tea, half a loaf of bread and a pot of jam.

"Help yourself," invited Von Stalhein cheerfully. "Did you see anything interesting?"

Biggles sat down on his rolled-up rugs. "Too perishing true I did," he stated bitterly. "Mind you don't choke when I tell you the bad news."

Von Stalhein looked up sharply, a piece of jammy bread poised. "What is it?"

"After all the rain we've had the river is in spate. Well, if not in spate, I reckon it has risen at least a foot. When I last saw it there was a rock at the end of an island. It stuck up quite ten or twelve inches. I marked it as an obstruction in case Bertie tried to get down on the island."

"What about it?"

"It's gone. Or if it's still there it's under water."

"Does that affect us?"

"I'd say it does. Have you forgotten that we've got to cross the river to get to the landing ground? It was because I knew it was possible to wade the river that Bertie and I decided on the field."

"If it doesn't rise any more we should be able to get across."

"That's a hell of a big if," retorted Biggles. "If it rises another foot the field will be inundated. Think what that would mean. Bertie wouldn't recognize the place; and if he did, and tried to get down, he'd find himself in the middle of a lake. I don't have to tell you what happens to a land machine that tries to get down on water."

"Now it's stopped raining the river may start to go back."

"If it doesn't we're sunk. You seem to think we should be able to cross as it is. I'm not so sure about that. The river runs at a rate of knots. I'm thinking of Marie. If she fell she'd never get up. That goes for us, too. For all we know the water may still be rising. It was raining most of yesterday. Of course, it isn't what the weather is doing here that matters. It's what it's

doing higher up. The hell of it is, we shan't know what the river is doing until we get to it, and that won't be till zero night."

"We can watch it from up here. That should give us a rough idea of whether it's rising or falling."

"A *rough* idea isn't enough. We've got to know for certain. We can't afford to gamble. Imagine the position if we went to the river only to find we couldn't get across. Don't forget we've got to be over the other side when the plane touches down. There can be no waiting. You can bet that once the machine is on the ground it'll only be a matter of minutes before the police arrive."

"If we couldn't cross we'd have to come back here."

"That's likely to be easier said than done. We'd have to get Marie back to her room. Getting her down from the balcony won't be easy. To get her back up would be a lot harder."

"How about using the bridge?"

"Unless Reinhardt is a fool, and I wouldn't care to count on that, he'll have put a guard on it. Anyway, it's too far. Five miles along the deer track in the dark, then five miles back following the river on the other bank—she'd never do it. It would be complete lunacy to start."

"Could there be a boat anywhere near?"

"I haven't seen a boat of any sort. This is no river for boating."

"Max might suggest something."

"Well, he might ascertain the height of the water."

"When?"

"Any time."

"No use. It might go down now, but one good storm could put it up again. We've got to know the position on *the day*."

"Yes. I see that. Besides, we can't keep asking Max to do things for us. He's taking chances as it is. Marie has already asked him for a rope to get her down from the balcony."

"If we can't see what we want to know from here I'll go to the river myself," declared Biggles. "An hour on the bank should tell me whether the water's rising or falling."

"Just a minute," said Von Stalhein. "Can I hear something?" He went out. He was back within a minute, his expression serious. "Now I can give *you* some bad news," he reported.

Biggles looked resigned. "Go ahead. I can take it."

"Two men with billhooks are cutting a path through the weeds and stuff right across the front."

"Ah! So they are going to patrol it."

"I haven't finished yet. There's worse to come."

"How much worse can it be?"

"Judge for yourself. Along at the end someone has dumped coils of barbed wire."

Biggles stared, aghast. "You're right. If they're going to put up a barbed wire fence it'll be a lot worse. The man in charge of this new party obviously knows his job. He's not taking any chances of losing his prisoner. Just a minute, though. There's something queer about this. Why after all this time should they suddenly decide to build a fence if Marie is to be taken away at the end of the week? That doesn't make sense to me."

"Marie has only just been told she's going. Knowing this she may make a desperate attempt to get away. They're seeing to it that she can't."

Biggles shook his head. "That may be the answer but I'm not convinced. I can think of another reason. They're not doing this to keep Marie in. It could be to keep us out."

"I don't understand."

"Suppose someone with a brain has just worked out why we came here. Or new information may have come in associating us with Marie. We've always been afraid of that. I'd say that's what has happened. They haven't caught us. They don't know where we are, but they may reckon we're not far away. So far it can't have occurred to them that we might already be inside the castle so they're building a fence to keep us out. That's funny when you think about it."

"I can't see anything funny in it. What can we do with barbed wire?"

"Cut it."

"With what—our teeth?" Von Stalhein's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "Or are you hoping to find wire cutters among the antiques decorating the walls inside?"

"When men built castles that damnable stuff called barbed wire hadn't been invented. I've hated it since I was a kid, when I saw a pup rip its belly open trying to gallop through a fence. How could the poor little beast be expected to know what barbed wire could do? The man who thought of putting barbs on wire should have been flogged to death with a length of it."

"Never mind what you think of it. That isn't going to help us to get through it."

"We'll find a way, if it means burrowing under it. Max may be able to help us. Don't worry. After what we've been doing most of our lives we shouldn't let a little job like this beat us."

Von Stalhein looked at Biggles curiously. "Why is it that you English get more optimistic as the outlook gets blacker?"

Biggles smiled. "Nobody knows. Maybe we're too dumb to realize when we're beaten. Just to comfort you it's my guess that things will get blacker before we get to the plane."

"It looks as if we shall have plenty of time to think about it," returned Von Stalhein lugubriously. "With that work going on outside we're going to be stuck in here for the rest of the day."

"Not me," said Biggles. "I'm moving up one storey. There's a pile of old jackdaws' nests on the next floor. They should make a more comfortable bed than this stone floor. Aside from that I shall be able to watch the river."

"Has nobody told you that old nests are usually crawling with fleas?"

"I'd rather be flea-bitten than die of pneumonia. By the way, did Marie bring the tea out?"

"No. Greta."

"So you haven't seen Marie yet?"

"No. But she sent word that if she has anything to tell us she'll make the usual signal."

"I hope the news will be that Max has found the rope we asked for."

"We don't need it yet."

"I'd like it now. I'd sleep more comfortably with a rope under my head."

"Why?"

"To get to the ground in a hurry should it be necessary to evacuate this doghouse." Biggles became serious. "You realize we've no back door? At a pinch, not having wings, we couldn't retreat. In other words, my dear Erich, as things are we could find ourselves in a trap. Rather than do a high jump I'd prefer to slide down a rope."

From some way off came the crisp *snick* of an axe biting into wood.

"Now what are they up to?" muttered Von Stalhein, looking anxious.

"I'd make a small wager I could tell you."

"I'd like to know."

"Someone is busy cutting posts to carry the barbed wire. But don't let it worry you," added Biggles cheerfully. "He's wasting his time."

"I'm glad you think so," retorted Von Stalhein dourly.

The day wore on. A certain amount of activity continued below the balcony; voices, the clatter of posts being thrown down and the hammering of them into the ground.

Biggles took his bedding up to the turret and watched the river, hoping to see the rock emerge to show that the level of the water was falling. In this he was disappointed. The island appeared to be the same size, neither larger nor smaller. To his disgust more clouds were piling up.

A little before noon what he feared happened. It started to rain, quietly, in the way that promises a wet day. There was, however, some slight compensation for this. It stopped work on the fence, the men, presumably, having retired to shelter. At all events, nothing more was heard, and presently a cautious investigation showed that only a few posts, in a double row, had been put in place—a fraction of what would have to be done. The wire had not been touched.

"They'll just about finish the job by the time we're ready to leave," said Von Stalhein, morosely. "Of course, rain may hold them up."

"If it doesn't soon stop, by Saturday the river will be in flood," Biggles pointed out.

An hour later it was still drizzling when Greta arrived with more food, bread, butter, cold meat, some apples and a jug of coffee. She would, she said, bring something hot after dark.

"I hope we're not depriving you," said Von Stalhein.

Greta said there was no shortage of food. Nobody saw what was delivered to her kitchen, either by her husband or the truck that brought the rations for the guards. She knew about the fence. There was only one other message. Max had not been able to get a strong rope but he had brought up something which he thought would serve the same purpose. She would fetch it.

This she did. The substitute turned out to be a pair of leather reins, each about twenty feet long, part of the harness for a carriage, or a horse-drawn vehicle of some sort. At the ends were the usual buckles for attaching the reins to the bit. These would also enable the reins to be joined together if so desired.

Biggles was delighted. "This," he told Von Stalhein after Greta had gone, "is better than a rope. I shall feel a lot more comfortable now."

CHAPTER XV

A CHANGE OF PLAN

THE next day brought no change in the situation. The morning dawned fair. Work on the fence was resumed; but the weather continued unsettled and by noon more rain sent the men to shelter. The posts now covered two-thirds of the front but only a short length of wire had been attached.

Biggles spent most of the day in the turret where, by lying flat and looking down through the chute—which in the days of primitive warfare enabled defenders to discourage attackers by dropping on them such things as quicklime and boiling oil—he could watch the progress of the work. He had another interest. The river. As far as he could judge there was little, if any, change. He thought it had dropped a trifle. At all events, unless his memory was at fault, rather more of the island was exposed.

When the rain started he was looking down at the men working on the fence, trying to estimate how long it would take them to finish the job. This, he realized would depend on the weather—that is, if they stopped work every time it rained. Would they knock off or would they continue? There was a curious irony in the situation. If it rained the work would be held up; but any advantage so gained would be offset by an almost inevitable rise in the water level.

The rain became heavier and he watched with interest to see what would happen. The men got together apparently to discuss the matter. It took them only a minute to reach a decision. A sudden squall and they dropped their tools, hurrying for shelter. One tool in particular engaged Biggles's attention. It was a pair of heavy army type wire cutters being used by the man fixing the wire to the posts. They lay where he had tossed them, on the edge of the rough clearing that had been cut through the coarse herbage. Biggles regarded them covetously. Nothing could be done about them at the moment but he resolved to keep them in mind.

At lunch-time they saw Greta put out some food. Von Stalhein fetched it and they had a plain but satisfying meal.

All the afternoon the rain continued in a persistent drizzle. The men did not return to work.

After dark Biggles had a few words with Marie at the window. She had nothing to report so he did not go in. No one had been near her.

Later, back in the shelter, he buckled the reins together and made a loop at one end. Von Stalhein watched with interest. “Are you going to do something with that?” he inquired.

Biggles said he was going to make a quick trip to the ground. He explained: “The men chucked down their tools when they packed up, intending no doubt to come back if the rain stopped. Lying nice and handy is the thing we most need. Wire cutters. They could answer a big question for us.”

“Do you mean you’re going to fetch them?”

“Of course.”

“That’s a bit risky.”

“Not too risky, considering what they could be worth to us.”

“Someone may be sent to collect the tools.”

“That’s quite likely. A British working party wouldn’t have been allowed to leave their tools lying about like that. There’s plenty of cover for me if I’m disturbed.”

“The cutters will be missed.”

“Of course they will. I’m reckoning that the careless fellow who was using them will forget where he dropped them. There should be a spare pair. If so he won’t spend much time looking for the old ones. You know how casual people are with someone else’s property, particularly anything belonging to the government. If there isn’t a spare pair of cutters that’ll be all to the good, because the work will be held up. I could get down by the ivy, but I don’t want to disturb it too much in case someone spots the damage and jumps to the right conclusion. As we have a line we might as well use it. You can give me a haul up when I’m ready.”

Putting the loop he had made over one of the battlements and pulling it tight he concluded: “Stand by. I’ll be right back.”

In a minute he was on the ground walking briskly to the spot where the tool he wanted had been dropped. The sky was overcast, but the moon must have been up behind the cloud to give enough light for him to see what he was doing. The cutters were still there. He picked them up, put them in his pocket, and was on his way back to the rope when the sound of voices brought him to a halt. He listened. The voices came nearer. In a moment he was lying flat against the base of the castle wall where the weeds had not been cut.

The men talking approached slowly, as if they were inspecting the work. The voice of one identified him. It was Reinhardt. The other he did not

know, but from his tone of authority he suspected it was the *oberfeldwebel* in charge of the latest arrivals.

"They haven't got very far," complained Reinhardt, obviously referring to the fence.

"I couldn't see any sense in letting the men get wet through," was the explanation. "Given a fine day they'll finish it."

"I hope so," muttered Reinhardt.

"What's the idea of no one being allowed inside the place?"

"I don't know. I didn't make the order and it was not for me to question it. Why, do you want to go in?"

"Not particularly; but my engineers have finished outside, and their figures will have to be checked with inside measurements to locate a secret room if there is one. Moreover, there are some places that can't be reached from outside. This balcony, or whatever it is, above us, for instance. As there's nothing more my men can do outside they're wasting their time."

A pause, and Reinhardt went on: "I see no reason why you shouldn't go in if you see the men don't get into mischief. No collecting souvenirs, or anything like that. The head office has an inventory of the contents. I'd have to get the lady's permission for you to enter her rooms."

"Why?"

"Those are the orders. I imagine she still has powerful friends. I'll speak to her. If she has no objection I'll try to arrange for your men to go in tomorrow."

"Thanks. They shouldn't be in there long."

The voices faded as the two men moved on. Biggles gave them time to get clear and then returned hurriedly to his leather rope. A tug, and with Von Stalhein pulling on the other end he was soon up.

"Who were those men?" asked Von Stalhein tersely. "They gave me a fright."

"Reinhardt was one. The other I think was the *oberfeldwebel*. There was no danger. I heard them coming."

"You got the cutters?"

Biggles produced them and laid them on a window ledge. "Yes, and that's not all. From their conversation I also collected some information that gives us plenty to think about. It was a lucky break that I happened to be down there."

“So. What’s the latest bad news?”

“Tomorrow, with Marie’s permission, the engineers are going to continue their work inside the castle. That’s not going to make things any easier for us.”

“Will they go to Marie’s quarters?”

“They’ll have to go through them to get to this balcony, which is one of the things they want to check. There’s no other way.”

“That means we can’t stay here.”

“Obviously.”

“What can we do about it?”

“The first thing is to warn Marie of what’s likely to happen and hear what she has to say about it. Nothing is likely to happen until tomorrow so we shall be able to sleep here tonight. Then, if the worst comes to the worst we shall have to evacuate the balcony, taking everything with us, and hide up in the forest. We mustn’t leave even a crumb lying about to show someone has been living here. I’ll speak to Marie.”

“When?”

“Now. The sooner she knows the better. She can’t know about it yet because Reinhardt has only just said he’ll speak to her. I imagine that will be tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t like this at all.”

“Neither do I, but we’ve no choice. We’ve only one way out. We’ll clean up here, drop our stuff and take it into the forest. We’ve only two more days. We shall have to be away by daybreak, before the men come to work on the wire. We’ll use the rope. That means either Marie or Greta will have to come along to unhook it and throw it down after us. We shall need it to get back on Saturday to help Marie down. No doubt they’ll be able to let us have enough food to last us until then. I’ll go and tell her we shall be gone in the morning.”

Biggles walked along and after a precautionary peep through the window tapped on the glass.

Marie came at once and opened it. “Is something wrong?” she asked anxiously.

“Not exactly wrong but there is something you should know.”

“Come in and tell me.”

“Would that be wise?”

“No one is likely to be in the castle at this hour. Come in and I’ll close the window. It’s draughty standing here. The nights are getting chilly.”

Biggles went in. “You can tell Max he needn’t bother about wire cutters,” he began. “I have some.”

“Where did you get them?”

“From below. Those the men were working with.”

“Have you been down there?” Marie looked shocked.

“I couldn’t get them any other way. But that isn’t what I came to tell you.” Biggles went on to narrate the conversation he had overheard. “So you see,” he continued, “it’s possible the engineers may come tomorrow to measure the balcony.”

“I shall refuse permission.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“It might make Reinhardt suspicious. He might think you had something to hide. In any case it would be too dangerous for us to stay here any longer.” Biggles explained what he and Von Stalhein intended to do.

“Yes, I see you must go,” agreed Marie, looking worried. “But why not leave by the tunnel and hide at the old hunting lodge? With the work going on below the balcony you’d be safer there. Max would take you through, and knowing where you are he could keep you informed of any new development. If you hid in the forest as you propose he might not be able to find you.”

“We would have to come back on Saturday night.”

“There should be no difficulty about that. Max would fetch you. That could be arranged.”

“I think you’re right. Yours would be a better plan. It’s vitally important that we shouldn’t lose touch with each other now. We can spend tonight where we are. Nothing is likely to happen between now and daylight. Ask Max to come for us tomorrow morning at the first streak of dawn. We’ll—” Biggles broke off, listening.

Heavy footsteps could be heard coming along the stone corridor outside the door. There was a deliberation about them that brought Biggles to his feet.

At the same time the door was thrown open and Greta burst in. “*Schnell*,” (quick) she gasped. “The *Kommandant* is coming.”

Biggles instinctively made a dash for the window, but Marie moved as swiftly and opened an inner door. “In there, my bedroom.”

Biggles darted in. There was no time to do more for the footsteps halted and Reinhardt spoke.

“*Guten Abend, gnädiges Fräulein*,” he greeted suavely.

“Good evening,” acknowledged Marie. “What is it you want now?”

"Here with me is *Oberfeldwebel* Schultz, who is in charge of the engineers. Tomorrow some work must start inside the castle, and as the only way to your balcony can be reached is through this room he hopes you will have no objection to the men coming in. They will be only a few minutes."

"How can I object," returned Marie coldly. "I am in your hands."

"*Nein—nein*," protested Reinhardt. "The matter is in your hands. You have only to—"

"I know, I know," broke in Marie impatiently. "You have had my answer. I have not changed my mind."

"You could save so much trouble. What do you hope to gain by holding out?"

"I shall keep my self-respect. Let us say no more about it. At what time may I expect this intrusion?"

"Would ten o'clock suit you?"

"I shall be ready."

"Very well, then. *Gute Nacht.*"

"*Gute Nacht.*"

The door was closed. Footsteps retreated down the corridor. A minute passed. Then Marie appeared at the door of her bedroom.

"They've gone," she said. "They are not likely to come back, but in case they should, I think you had better go, too. You heard what was said?"

"I heard. They're coming at ten o'clock. We should be well clear by then."

"I'm glad you warned me what was likely to happen. I was prepared, but I did not expect them to come tonight."

"Neither did I, or you may be sure I wouldn't have come here," declared Biggles. "If they are going to walk in and out of your rooms at all hours we shall have to be more careful. However, it won't be for much longer."

"My obstinacy infuriates them. They must be getting desperate."

"So it seems. Can I leave you to make the necessary arrangements with Max?"

"I will ask Greta to do that at once. Max will be with you as dawn breaks."

"Good. Now I'll get back to Erich. He must be wondering what has happened." Biggles opened the window. "If all goes well we shan't meet again until the time comes for us to leave. That will be on Saturday. Be

ready by nine o'clock. Put together anything you wish to take with you but keep to bare necessities. Heavy luggage would be in the way."

"I understand."

"Then I'll say good night, dear lady."

Marie put a hand on Biggles's shoulder. "One moment. In case things should go wrong there is one thing I would like you to know. I am truly sorry for what I did to you in France."

Biggles smiled and took her hand. "We were at war then. I'm not sorry. You gave me something wonderful to remember."

"While it lasted."

"For as long as I live."

Marie smiled through sudden tears. "It would give any woman strength to hear a man say that."

"I must go," said Biggles abruptly.

"Good night, dear friend."

Biggles returned to the shelter.

"You've been a long time," grumbled Von Stalhein.

"Sorry. I was held up."

"By what?"

"Reinhardt and the *Oberfeldwebel* arrived while I was there."

"My God!"

"It's all right. We heard them coming and Marie hid me in her bedroom."

"What did they want?"

"Permission to survey the balcony tomorrow morning. Ten o'clock. Marie suggested it would be a better plan for us to use the tunnel and hide in the lodge. I agreed so she's going to arrange it with Max. He'll be here at daybreak to take us through. There's nothing more we can do tonight but we shall have to be on the move early to tidy up here. Now let's get some sleep while we can."

CHAPTER XVI

THE RIVER CROSSING

At the first glimmer of daylight, the weather fair, Max appeared.

He found Biggles and Von Stalhein ready and waiting, their beds bundled and strapped together with the reins and Biggles's mackintosh thrown on them. After a last look round to make doubly sure that no sign of their occupation remained they set off, and it may be said at once that the removal operation was completed without a hitch. As had been anticipated there was no one in the castle at such an early hour. In the gloomy half-light that crept in through the narrow windows the atmosphere of the place was even more unreal, something not of the present-day world but out of the past.

By the time the party had reached its objective, the ruins, the light had improved sufficiently for Biggles to see them in all their melancholy decay. Weeds flourished. Saplings and even small trees had found a root-hold, thrusting aside the stone paving slabs. Ivy, which seems to thrive on such conditions had taken possession.

Max led the way to a clump of evergreen shrubs, mostly holly, that had established themselves at what had been the rear of the building. In the middle was an open space large enough to accommodate half a dozen people, and here Max said they should be safe. It was well away from the tracks patrolled regularly by the guards. He would bring them food from time to time, enough to last them for their brief stay. He understood the position, Marie having explained it, so he knew when he had to come to fetch them.

With that this strange friend, with his grotesque legs, departed, leaving his charges to settle down in their new quarters. The weather remained fair, to the great satisfaction of Biggles, who still had the river crossing on his mind.

To make the story of their long and anxious wait as short as possible it can be said right away that no one came near them, although they sometimes heard voices in the distance. But they saw no one, for which they were thankful; but the day was a period of intense anxiety, and with nerves on edge they were relieved when darkness fell and they were able to relax.

They unrolled their bedding and settled down for the night, Max did not come back, but as they had brought food with them he was not expected.

He came, bringing bread, sausages and a large can of tea, soon after daylight. He had little to report and no bad news. The engineers had been in the castle. They had surveyed the balcony, but as no questions had been asked it could be assumed that nothing had aroused their suspicions. Police cars were still patrolling the river road. The river had gone down a little but the level of the water was still above normal.

The barbed wire fence was almost complete. There had been an argument over the lost wire cutters. After a search had failed to find them another pair had been produced. That was all. Max departed, saying he would be back at nine o'clock to take them through the castle to the balcony. The engineers, he said, had not finished their work inside; that would take days; but it was unlikely there would be anyone in the castle after dark.

"Well, this is it," said Biggles after Max had gone. "By this time tomorrow it should all be over, one way or the other."

"Suppose Bertie doesn't turn up?" suggested Von Stalhein. "Will you come back here?"

"Probably not. It all depends."

"On what?"

"On how long it takes Reinhardt to discover Marie has disappeared. Unless he goes to see her again there's no reason that I can see why he should know for twenty-four hours or more. In the normal course of events I'd stay on the other side of the river, in the forest on the far side of the turnip field, to give Bertie a chance to get in tomorrow night. That was the arrangement and I shall stick to it. Should Marie be missed the place would soon be swarming with Security Police, and I doubt if it would be possible to get back to the castle. I'm gambling that her disappearance won't be known for some time."

"And if Bertie doesn't turn up the next night?"

Biggles shrugged. "We can't really make any provision for that. Presumably Marie would go back to the castle. She'd be no worse off than she was before we came here. As for us, let's face it, the game would be up, and all we could do would be to try to reach the frontier on foot. There would be no point in staying here. They'd see to it we never got near Marie again. They'd take her away and we wouldn't have a hope of finding her. I doubt if they'd harm her while she still holds her trump card—the secret of the Janis treasure."

"Unless they pull the castle to pieces and find it."

“I can’t believe they’ll do that. I believe this talk of tearing down the castle is a big bluff. The cost would be enormous. Besides, the place must have an historical importance, and if people saw it being demolished, as they would, they’d want to know why. That could start something. The affair would become an international newspaper story, and they wouldn’t want that. But things haven’t reached that stage yet so let’s not worry about what may never happen.”

The occupation known as killing time is always a tedious one, but on this occasion there was no alternative. The day was spent mostly in silence, counting the passing of the hours; but it had to end, and as by the time night fell Max had not put in an appearance there was reason to hope that nothing had occurred to upset the plan. The weather was fair, clear and starlight, the moon not yet having risen.

Their hopes were confirmed when Max arrived, appearing out of the ground like a corpse from a grave, shortly before nine o’clock. He said nothing had happened. Marie was ready, waiting in her room. The fence had been finished and the men had gone. The last time he had seen the river the water was about the same.

“Then we may as well start,” said Biggles, picking up his mackintosh and checking that the torches, and the wire cutters, were in the pockets. “We’ll leave this stuff here,” he went on, nodding towards the bedding. “If Max wants it he can collect it in his own time. We shall want this, though.” He looped the reins over his arm.

The trip through the tunnel, and afterwards through the castle, was made without difficulty or alarm, which, as Biggles remarked, was a good start. “One can’t expect things *always* to go right, but they can’t go wrong all the time,” he added.

They found Greta standing guard at the door. Marie, in serviceable outdoor clothes, was inside. She said she had been on the balcony, watching. There was no one there.

“Have you any luggage?” asked Biggles.

“Only this.” Marie picked up a small bundle, actually a knotted headscarf.

Biggles offered to carry it, but she demurred, arguing that he would need his hands free.

“As you wish,” agreed Biggles. “Let’s start.”

Marie went and embraced her loyal servants. She spoke to them for a few moments. What she said the others did not hear. They were looking the other way, for the parting would obviously be a painful one.

"This is the order," said Biggles when she returned to them. "Erich will go first down the rope taking the wire cutters." He handed them over. "While he's cutting the wire I'll let you down, Marie. I shall follow, and Greta can release the rope from the top. We may need it for crossing the river." He asked Max to look over the balcony to make sure there was no one there.

He went. He came straight back to report that two guards were there.

"Are they walking or standing still as if they intend to stay there?"

"They are standing still."

Biggles swore softly under his breath.

"Wait," said Max. "I will get them away."

"How?"

"The stables are old and built of wood. There is much straw. Their things are there. If it goes on fire everyone will run to save his things." Max looked at Marie, apparently for her approval.

"Do that," said Marie. "The stables will never again be used."

"*Auf Weidersehen*," said Max, and departed.

The others waited, Biggles standing on the balcony listening to the voices of the men below.

A quarter of an hour passed. Then from a distance came a shout, followed by cries of "*Feuer! Feuer!*"

Biggles, looking over the balcony, saw the guards go off at a run. "He's done it," he said crisply. "Now's our chance. Down you go, Erich."

The leather rope was lowered and made fast to the parapet. Von Stalhein slid down. Biggles pulled it up and fastened the loose end securely round Marie's waist. She climbed over the parapet and Biggles let her down. Von Stalhein was waiting. He removed the rope. Greta was standing by Biggles. "When I'm down release the rope," he told her, and went down hand over hand. The rope followed him. He coiled it swiftly.

"This way," said Von Stalhein, dragging aside some severed ends of wire. They went through the gap he had made, and the descent through the forest to the road began.

The journey was taken without haste, for time had been allowed for this. Biggles went first, torch in hand, ready for an emergency. Von Stalhein gave Marie as much support as possible and lifted her over the most difficult places. In this way the road was reached without accident.

This, everyone knew, was the danger area. The others waited under the trees while Biggles made a cautious reconnaissance. The road lay clear in

the light of the moon, now rising. He could see no one, but he could hear a car coming and waited for it to pass. Then he said "*Now*," and they ran across to the low wall on the other side.

The bank beyond it, down to the gravel of the old river bed, was steep, and again the rope was brought into use, more as a precautionary measure against a fall than because it was essential. All went well, however, and at the bottom they paused both to rest and listen for sounds that might indicate trouble. Behind them, at the top of the hill beyond the castle, an orange glow was spreading across the sky.

"Max has made a job of the fire," observed Von Stalhein.

"It looks to me as if he's done more than was necessary," answered Biggles. "That fire will be seen from Rodnitz. It'll bring along Reinhardt and his whole perishing gang to see what has happened. If he finds Marie has gone the entire district will be crawling with police within an hour. We'd better press on."

"It's only just after ten so we have plenty of time."

"No matter. The sooner we're in position the better. We still have to cross the river. I can hear it from here, which must mean there's more water in it than I reckoned on."

They went on to where the bank faced the island, no great distance; but there was no cover and, as Biggles pointed out, while the moonlight was helpful there was a danger they might be seen from the road. "If a patrol car comes along and spots us we shall have Reinhardt breathing down our necks, so we'd better get across."

"Don't worry about me," said Marie. "I can swim."

"It won't be a matter of swimming," Biggles told her. "I don't think the river can be deep enough for that. But if you fall you may not be able to get on your feet again. We'll rope ourselves together. That should help."

The reins were adjusted, Biggles in front, Marie in the middle with Von Stalhein behind taking the slack of the lifeline.

"I shall make for the island," explained Biggles. "Take it slowly. Always make sure you have a secure foothold before you take a step."

He walked out into the water. Before it was up to his knees, the water building up the side of his legs, he could feel the drag. He realized that Marie, being lighter, would feel it even more. He daren't hurry, although he was worried by the reflection of the moon on the water. Anyone looking at the river from the road could hardly fail to see them. He was relieved that nowhere did the water come above his knees and he reached the island

without any great difficulty. He held the line taut until the others were across.

"Good work," he said. "Let's go on."

They crossed the narrow strip of shingle and the last part of the crossing began. As he had feared this became more difficult as he advanced, particularly the last few yards, where the current, swinging round a bend, had scoured a narrow groove in the river bed. It had, moreover, swept away the silt so that the bottom was rough rock. By leaning against the stream he got across safely although the water in the deep places came up to his thighs.

Turning, he warned the others what was ahead of them and braced himself to take the strain. He told Von Stalhein to stand still, playing out the line, until Marie was within reach of him. This was done. He took Marie by the hand, helped her up the bank and released her from the rope. Then just as all seemed well, came disaster.

A car rounding the bend of the road may have been responsible. Its blazing headlights swept across the water dazzling everyone. Von Stalhein, who had just started to cross, put a hand to shield his eyes. He slipped, lost his balance and fell.

Biggles pushed Marie on one side and hung on to the rope. Von Stalhein was already being swept downstream. As his full weight fell on the rope Biggles nearly went in head first. He dug his heels into the bank. The bank began to slip under his feet. Marie, who of course could see what was happening, added her weight by clutching him round the waist. For a few seconds it looked as if they would all end up in the river; but the extra weight told. The rope held, and the current swung Von Stalhein round to the bank. He got his hands on it and dragged himself up. The others ran to help him.

"Pity you had to get wet," consoled Biggles.

"My own silly fault," growled Von Stalhein, wringing water out of his jacket. "It was that cursed car. I thought someone had turned a searchlight on us. Bad luck it had to come along at that moment."

"Luck usually cuts both ways," said Biggles tritely. "Ours could have been worse. A lot worse. A wind might have got up, and I wouldn't fancy my chance making a crosswind landing here. We're all pretty wet, anyway; but we're across, and that's what really matters."

"It isn't the first time I've been wet through," put in Marie, cheerfully. "The water isn't as cold as I thought it might be."

"Let's get to the field," said Biggles. "We can talk there."

They went on to a low stone wall that was the boundary of the landing field and made themselves as comfortable as the circumstances allowed. Biggles looked at his watch. “We didn’t have too much time to spare after all,” he observed. “Half an hour. Not that we should expect Bertie to be punctual considering what he has to do. He might be late; or he might be early, so let’s get organized.”

“I’m wondering if the driver of that car spotted us,” put in Von Stalhein. “His lights were full on us.”

“He’d only see us if he happened to be looking this way, which doesn’t seem very likely. Surely he’d be looking at the road. There’s nothing we can do about it, anyway, so we might as well forget it. Now, this is the drill. I shall fall back on the old-fashioned way of marking out a ground for a night landing. That is, by putting out three lights in the shape of a letter L. Here are your torches. Marie, you stay here. I shall go forward two hundred yards. That will be my station. Erich, you’ll come with me. From my position you’ll turn at right angles and walk out, say, fifty yards. That will be a letter L, so to speak. Bertie will land into it. When we hear the plane coming we switch on the lights and wave them pointing straight up. The ground’s a bit soft, but not soggy enough I think to grip the wheels. All we can do now is wait.”

“And if Bertie doesn’t come?” queried Von Stalhein.

“If you don’t mind we’ll leave that fence till we come to it,” replied Biggles, shortly.

The next half-hour was a strain on the nerves for everyone. Little more was said. There was nothing to be said. The glow in the sky from the burning stables had died down, the fire having burnt itself out or been brought under control. Biggles was standing up, gazing to the south, the direction from which Bertie would come.

“He’s late,” said Von Stalhein.

“I fancy he’s coming now,” returned Biggles, quietly.

“I can’t hear anything.”

“Nor I. But I can see something.”

The others sprang up, staring in the direction of Biggles’s pointing finger. In the far distance, high in the sky, was a cluster of sparks that might have been a party of fireflies.

“What is it?” asked Marie.

“Anti-aircraft gunfire,” answered Biggles.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FINAL HOURS

"So they've spotted him," said Von Stalhein, heavily.

"I suppose it was too much to hope that an aircraft could slip across the defences without being observed," returned Biggles evenly. "As Bertie couldn't identify himself the guns have opened up on him. That doesn't mean they'll get him. He's done this sort of thing before and knows all the tricks. Be ready to take your place as soon as we hear him. Let him get down and then run flat out to the plane."

They waited, silent, staring into the sky. The sparks dwindled away.

"That means either he's down or is clear of the frontier," said Biggles. "We shall soon know. If he's through we shall have to move fast. He'll be tracked, either by radio or telephone, and all stations on his line of flight will be alerted."

Von Stalhein spoke. "That means Rodnitz. And Rodnitz means Reinhardt."

"No doubt. Listen! I can hear him. He's through. Action stations, quickly. Marie, stay here. Don't switch on until you see our lights."

Biggles and Von Stalhein ran off.

For a little while the drone of aero engines increased in volume. Then it died away completely. Biggles knew what that meant. Bertie was now losing height. A minute passed. The engines came on again, closer, Bertie apparently having undershot the field and was having to use power again to reach it. Biggles held his torch high, waving it slowly to and fro. Again the engines were cut, and a few seconds later the black silhouette of the plane, no lights showing, took shape.

It still had some height to lose. Would Bertie get in? There was not much runway to spare. It was an agonizing moment. Then, with heartfelt relief, Biggles heard the wheels rumbling. Switching off his torch he ran to the machine. It had stopped, but the engines were still ticking over.

Speed, now, was everything, for other ears must have heard the aircraft land. The castle was not too far away. He reached the plane to find Ginger getting out. The others ran up. At the same time two cars with headlights blazing came bearing down the road from the direction of Rodnitz.

"Everyone aboard," snapped Biggles. "Quick!"

Ginger held the door open. Von Stalhein helped Marie in and was getting in himself when either a mobile searchlight, or the car's headlights, found them. A sub-machine gun opened up. A hail of bullets struck the machine and tore up the earth around it, although the range being long the pattern was wide.

Biggles felt a blow on the shoulder as if struck by a hammer. He stumbled and fell. Ginger jumped to him. "Get away—get away," rasped Biggles, trying to get up. But Marie and Von Stalhein had jumped out again. As they reached him he slumped. With bullets flying they dragged him into the cabin.

There, on the floor, Biggles managed to say to Ginger: "Tell Bertie not to take the same track home. They'll be waiting for him." Then he collapsed.

The next thing of which he was conscious was brandy stinging his throat, making him gasp. He opened his eyes and looked into Ginger's face. He saw that the upper half of his body was naked except that his left shoulder was swathed in bloodstained strips of his shirt. Marie was holding her bundle under his head.

"All right, old boy," said Ginger. "Take it easy."

"Where are we?" asked Biggles, fighting for consciousness.

"Over France."

"*France!* How long have we been airborne?"

"A bit over two hours."

"Anyone else hurt?"

"No one."

"Machine all right?"

"No serious damage."

"How did we get to France?"

Ginger grinned. "Bertie worked out that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. He cut across Southern Germany. Nancy is coming up ahead. We arranged for Marcel Brissac to meet us there and see us through if questions are asked."

"Great work," breathed Biggles. For a moment his eyes met Marie's. Then he lapsed again into unconsciousness.

. . .

When he next opened his eyes he was in a bed, from the reek of anaesthetic a hospital bed, with Ginger sitting beside him. “What goes on?” he asked weakly as full consciousness returned.

“You’re in dock.”

“So I see. Where?”

“Nancy. Marcel fixed it. You’ll be all right, the doctor says, but you’re likely to be here for some time. He took the bullet out this morning.”

“How bad was it?”

“Nasty, but it could have been worse. The bullet missed your lung by an inch, the doctor told me.”

“Where are the others?”

“Bertie has gone on home in the Dove, taking Erich with him, to fix things up with the Chief. Marie is in the waiting room. She refuses to go without you. We’ve got rooms in a hotel. Bertie phoned the Air Commodore to tell him what had happened. Marie, having no passport, would need a permit to enter the country. It was lucky Bertie thought of asking Marcel to meet us here or we should all have been in gaol by now. He managed to patch things up here, but the Chief is meeting Bertie at the airport with the Head Customs officer.”

“I don’t get it. What have Customs got to do with it?”

“To see about Marie’s luggage. Bertie had to tell the Chief about it.”

“Luggage! What luggage? She hadn’t any luggage.”

Ginger stared. “Don’t you know what she had tied up in that scarf?”

“I haven’t a clue. I imagined a nightdress, or her small kit.”

“For Pete’s sake! How wrong can you be?”

“What was it?”

“Only a crown belonging to some dead king. It wasn’t gold. It was iron, but rubies, emeralds, and what have you, were stuck all over it like plums in a pudding.”

Biggles looked horrified. “Spare my days!” he breathed. “No wonder she wouldn’t let me carry it.”

“And that wasn’t all,” went on Ginger. “With it she had as pretty a collection of jewels since those Ali Baba had in his cave: you never saw such rings, bangles, necklaces—even loose stones. She told me she wasn’t going to leave them behind for the gang of thieves you seem to have been mixed up with. Do you mean to say she didn’t tell you?”

“She told me, more or less, but I didn’t realize what she meant,” answered Biggles slowly. “And Bertie told the Chief about this?”

“He had to. He daren’t risk being nabbed with that parcel on board.”

“Now I understand why Customs have an interest,” said Biggles. “You say Marie is in the waiting room?”

“Yes.”

“Then go and send her to me,” requested Biggles. “I have something to say to her. Once she nearly got me shot. Now she might have landed me with a ten year sentence for smuggling. Well, I don’t know.”

Ginger grinned. “I’ll go and send her up.”

CHAPTER XVIII

HOW IT ALL ENDED

BIGGLES was in hospital for a fortnight. Marie and Ginger stayed for a week, then Biggles sent them on to England where Marie was awaited to explain her extraordinary luggage.

Biggles arrived home, with his arm still in a sling, to find himself unpopular with his Chief, who made no secret of it.

The Air Commodore, having said what he thought about the business, concluded: "And all this, I understand, was for a girl, who if I hadn't put an oar in, might have caused you to be shot as a traitor."

"It only happens once in a lifetime, sir," pleaded Biggles.

"I sincerely hope you're right. You know, Bigglesworth, you're a dangerous fellow to have about." The Air Commodore sighed. "But then, you always were. See that it doesn't happen again."

"I will, sir," promised Biggles.

The end of the affair was probably satisfactory to all parties. The British Government, realizing that the crown was a relic that might cause trouble, took charge of it, although it remained Marie's property and she was given a receipt for it. The other jewels were sold. They made a considerable sum, on which of course duty had to be paid; but this still left sufficient money for Marie to buy a cottage in the Hampshire village where she now lives, Biggles and Von Stalhein often running down for the weekend to talk of their many adventures.

The great castle of Schonschloss still stands. As Biggles had predicted it was not pulled down. That may have been the intention at one time, but apparently someone had second thoughts about it. It may be that it became known that the most important part of the Janis treasure was no longer there, in which case the demolition would be a waste of time and money. It is now open to the public as a tourist attraction with Max and Greta acting as caretakers.

This came about in a curious way. When after some months no word of complaint came from the Continent about what had happened at Rodnitz, Marie, through an international lawyer, made an official application for an exit permit for her two faithful servants. In return she was prepared to give

an undertaking that the ancient crown would not in her lifetime be allowed to return to Bohemia.

This offer was accepted, but, understandably perhaps, Max and his wife declined to leave the home they had known all their lives, saying they were too old to start afresh in a new land. However, Marie sent them enough money to ensure that they would never want for anything.

In due course, somewhat surprisingly, the glass that had been bought and paid for in Rodnitz, was delivered, and today, on a shelf in Biggles's flat, there stands a handsome red goblet, a souvenir of what Bertie still called fairy-tale land. So, as Biggles remarked, in accordance with that tradition it could be hoped they would all "live happily ever after".

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.

[The end of *Biggles Looks Back* by W. E. (William Earl) Johns]