Ask For King Billy

HENRY TREECE

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DON’T EXPECT ANY MERCY
HUNTER HUNTED

Ask For King Billy

HENRY TREECE

illustrated by
RICHARD KENNEDY

FABER AND FABER
24 Russell Square
London

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The characters in this book are fictional and no reference is intended to any place or Institution.

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Ask For King Billy

CHAPTER 1

The Brass Plate

I stood in a little street that led to Soho Square. Behind me, the traffic still rumbled on its way towards Oxford Circus, for the day's work was not yet done. Back there, everything was noisy, busy, full of purpose. I looked in front of me; the afternoon sun seemed a little tired already, and the leaves that somehow clung to the grey trees were dusty, as though they had outworn their strength and their welcome; as though they were ready to drop off at any time now and have done with this tiresome business of trying to appear gay.

Let's face it, I was feeling depressed. When I had set up my office in that little backwater of a street only two months before it had all seemed very different—hearty, bright and full of adventure. But two months of nothing can knock the fun out of anything. With which profound thought, I turned towards the paint-blistered door.

Just then a small group of children came rushing round the corner from the Square, tousle-headed, ragged and indomitable, as London children so often seem to be to a provincial like myself—more like cheeky sparrows than any other children on earth.

These children were holding hands and swinging each other along at a furious pace:

Sally go round the sun,
Sally go round the moon,
Sally go round the chimney-pots
On a Sunday afternoon!

they yelled, each one in a different key!

They stopped within a few yards of me and stared. A tow-haired lad, whose shirt had unaccountably forced its way out from the seat of his

trousers, grinned, then pointed me out to his smaller companions as though I was a local curiosity which they must not be allowed to miss. “Hey,” he said, “look who’s here! That’s a ’tective! Yus, a real live ’tective! Aint yer a ’tective, mister, hey? Aint yer?”

The children drew back a pace and gazed at me, their eyes reflecting mingled suspicion and admiration.

“Garn,” said a little girl with small pigtails over each ear and a rag-doll that dangled down on to the pavement. “Garn,” she repeated, her hoarse little voice vibrating with the natural scepticism of womankind the world over. “ ’E aint no ’tective. ’E’s got no gun, ’ave yer, mister?”

The little boy pushed her on the side of the head, to show his authority. “I betcher,” he said. “He’s a sort of Sherlock ’Olmes, aint yer, mister?”

I could stand it no longer. I either had to chase the teasing gang back round the Square, or buy them off with an ice-cream apiece, or beat a retreat myself. I felt too disheartened to chase them; I had only a shilling in my pocket; and so I chose retreat, to their mocking laughter and high-voiced catcalls.

“Hi, Sherlock! Where’s yer bloodhound, hey?”

As I turned away from them, the brass plate caught my eye. I had polished it so feverishly when I first came, but now it was tarnished, already a mockery.

Gordon Stewart. Private Investigator. Second Floor.

“I’ll take that plate down to-night,” I thought to myself, as I rushed in and shut the door on the swarming children. “Enough’s as good as a feast, and I’ve had enough! More than enough!”

Their piercing voices fell away, like voices in a dream, and I was alone, in the empty silence of the narrow hallway, all London shut out for the moment, even the roaring traffic along Oxford Street. Now, all that remained was a dull rumbling, the curious noise that wraps a great city round like cotton-wool, and the staccato ticking of a tinny typewriter from some floors above me, up the bare wooden stairs.

I crossed the grimy tiles, that had been set in a sort of mosaic pattern to form a picture of Gog or Magog, or somebody like that—a fat character wearing a too tight suit of armour and a Roman-style helmet that looked none too secure. Someone had crayoned a black moustache on him, and all

the efforts of the caretaker, Mrs. Maggs, had been unable to remove the appendage, even after bucket upon bucket of soda-water, laid on with a new scrubbing brush. I knew—I had bought that scrubbing brush, so I could vouch for its newness.

"But it must be you, Mr. Stewart, and no offence meant," she had said. "None of the other gentlemen would do a thing like that. Bin 'ere ten years, the oldest of 'em. They wouldn't go rahnd drorin' whiskers on our beeyootiful floor, nah, would they!"

I paid up for the brush, knowing that suspicion had alighted on me, and wishing to create a good impression! They would see how wrongfully they had accused me when I became "the notable investigator" of the Daily Press and when Scotland Yard came round as a matter of course, every afternoon, to ask my advice.

I thought of all this sadly as I trudged up the bare wooden stairs.

The dingy white door creaked open with a protest—as though it didn't care for any extra work—when I pushed it viciously. I was met by the strong smell of cough sweets.

"Oh, lord, Connie," I said, "have you got a cold again? It was only three weeks ago when you had your last!"

My "secretary", a rather plump girl of eighteen, addicted to thick pullovers and glossy photographs of whatever film star happened to be current at the time, looked up from her knitting. Her eyes were red and her nose looked as though it was protesting like the office door against the extra work it was called upon to do.

"Yes, Mr. Stewart," she said, with a sniff and a brave smile, as the writers say. "Another cold. I seem to thrive on them, don't I!"

"The only thriving that's done in this place," I said, shortly, turning away and looking round the room, as though I was taking my last inventory of it before going on a journey, a long journey, the longer the better, I thought grimly.

The girl got up from the creaking chair and put her knitting down. It was another pullover. I tried to picture her home full of pullovers in Balham or Streatham, or wherever it was she had answered my advertisement from, when I asked for a smart shorthand typist, used to long hours and rapid work under dangerous conditions. I remember, I had offered little pay at the start, but hoped that the suitable applicant would be willing to accept a life of thrilling exploits in lieu of salary until the firm was well established! Thrills!

Why, the biggest thrill we'd been able to rake up was when the manageress of the tavern next door but one had come rushing in to say that her valuable Peke dog had been stolen. I had accepted the "case" and we had found the little brute no farther away than the Square. He had got himself enticed away by a particularly gruesome type of tom-cat, a real bruiser with half an ear missing, and claws like a grizzly bear. We found the Peke cowering by the railings, his eyes popping out of his fat head in terror, while this gangster of a cat advanced on him, back arched, tail stiff upright, like the mast of an especially deadly pirate ship as it closed in for the kill.

Yes, that had been the only thrill. Connie had got her wrist scratched, and I had had a chunk taken out of my trousers' leg in rescuing the Chinese hound. And to make matters worse, he had dealt both wounds! The very creature we had risked our lives to save!

And for that exploit, the manageress offered me a glass of beer, but I don't drink; and Connie a packet of cigarettes, but she doesn't smoke! Our solitary case; our immense rewards!

"Connie," I said, surveying the naked light bulb and the area near the ceiling where the faded paper was peeling away from the wall. "Connie, I'm afraid I have bad news."

I didn't know how to break it, quite. I leaned on the plain deal table, looking down at the office blotting-pad, at the scribbled aircraft over which I had passed those long hours, waiting for the phone to ring and call us out into the wild unknown, to glory and detection.

"What is it, Mr. Stewart?" she said, sniffing and popping another pungent cough sweet into her mouth.

I looked across the room at the gas-meter, which I had so carefully painted red to give a bright look to the little office. Now it seemed intolerably garish and cheap in the fading afternoon light.

"Look, my dear," I said, "things aren't going as I hoped. When I set up here, I thought a Private Detective's life must be full of immediate wealth and glory. But it didn't work out, you know."

She displayed what was meant to be a consoling smile and took up her knitting again. Even her metal needles made a brave keep-your-chin-up sort of clicking. I couldn't stand it. I went over to her and as gently as I could, took the wretched things away and put them in the empty "In" tray, a chipped black japanned job that we had bought at the junk shop on the corner. There had never been anything in that "In" tray except bills and a

cinema notice. The local cinema manager had promised us two seats each week if we would display his wares in our window. At first I was indignant, believing that a detective should be above such common practices; but Connie had taught me better. We had displayed the bill, and had got our cinema free at least for the last two months!

"Look, Connie," I said, "it's no good you trying to look brave and philosophical. We've had no jobs, and we shan't have any!"

"Time alone will tell, Mr. Stewart," she said, looking wise. "We can wait!"

I was a little impatient then. "Maybe you can," I said, "but I can't. Believe it or not, I have a shilling in my pocket right now. I have five pounds in the Bank on the corner. And after that, I am broke. Sheer broke! Not a blinking stiver, as they say. Now what about it?"

I expected that she would fly into a tantrum about the wages I owed her for this week. But she didn't. She ate three more cough sweets, wiped her nose on a handkerchief which a married sister had sent her from Dublin, and which was printed all over with scenes from Ireland. She said, "Why worry, Mr. Stewart? I don't mind not being paid. Once that big adventure crops up, we shall forget all our hardships."

I did my best to be calm. I even smiled down at her, though with great effort, as I paced those creaking wooden boards of my sumptuous office!

"Look, my dear young woman," I said at last, when I felt that I could control my voice once more, "I want you to get it into your head without delay—there just isn't going to be a big adventure. No adventure; no thrills; no chasing crooks on a bright moonlit night in a high-powered sports car; no swinging over dizzy cliffs on a fraying rope; no treasure caves; no ghosts. In fact—nothing! We're finished, through, napoo, gone!"

She looked up at me from her hand-painted handkerchief. Her eyes were suddenly full of tears, and it was not her cold that had brought them on.

"Oh, Mr. Stewart," she said, "finished? I can't believe it! And after all the tales I've told my girl friend about the bad-hats we were on the trail of! Ooooh!"

I am afraid that my education did not contain any information on the art of consoling distraught secretaries. In fact, this was the first secretary I had ever had. I felt helpless. Now if it had been my sister, I should just have pushed her gently but firmly on the side of the jaw and have told her to pipe down and I'd take her to the theatre. But I couldn't very well do that to

Connie—Miss Connie Hazledean, of the Peckham Secretarial College, first-class diploma and knowledge of French.

I stood irresolute, then said the only thing that came into my mind.

"Look, Connie, it can't be helped. I know you'd do what you could, but from my point of view, it is just a waste of our time. I shall look out for a nice quiet job as a schoolmaster, and you must sign on at the secretarial college again and hope for a better appointment next time."

She was still sobbing. I opened the table drawer and took out a screw-driver. She looked up with a sudden start, as though I had grasped a dagger in my hand.

"What are you going to do?" she said, hurriedly.

"I shall unscrew our fine brass plate from the door downstairs and hand it over to you as our last token of partnership," I said. "Thirty shillings' worth of brass, engraving extra! You can hang it on your bedroom wall to remind you of your struggling days as a maid-of-all-work to a make-believe Sherlock Holmes."

She rose and ran after me. "Oh dear," she said. "Please don't. I couldn't bear it! Don't take the plate down till I've gone, please."

Her face was so serious, so intense, that I could almost have laughed out loud at the ridiculousness of the situation.

"Right," I said, "if it means as much as that to you, I will at least wait till you have gone. But I can't send you away like that. Put your coat on and we'll go out and drink a farewell cup of coffee together. That's all my shilling will buy, dear lady, but I assure you that it will mean as much to me as the most sparkling glass of champagne, being drunk in your company."

I made an extravagant gesture as I said the words and it brought a wry wintry smile to her eyes.

"Oh, and take the cinema tickets too. They will keep you in films for a month."

In the little café at the other side of the Square, we sat long over our cup of coffee, listening to the radio playing dance music from Luxembourg, and telling each other how glad we were to have worked together. Though in all honesty, the only thing she had ever done was to fill up my Pools for me each week in her neat hand; and the only thing I had ever done was to watch her doing it, apart from the times when I had prowled about with my chin in

my hand, practising the elusive art of looking engaged intelligently on a problem.

Outside, in front of the net-draped window, couples were strolling on their way to the theatre. They all looked happy and prosperous. I envied them. I turned to say something to Connie and I saw that her eyes were full of tears again. I did not speak.

Then, when it seemed as though we had worn out our welcome at the café and the Italian-looking waitress was hovering about, wondering when we would order something else, I got up and said, "Well, one day perhaps we'll meet again, Connie. Good luck, and I'll post your wages to you the moment I make a lucky break."

That almost had her in tears again, but she controlled them and gave herself a dab with a round scrap of lambs'-wool. It didn't improve her appearance, but it seemed to strengthen her morale for a moment.

She shook hands with me: "Don't forget to send the typewriter back to the hire company," she said. Then she gave another sniff and before I knew what had happened, she kissed me lightly on the cheek and went through the swing-door as though I might attack her violently.

I watched her hurrying past the office door, towards the busy street where the buses ran. "Poor Connie," I thought. "I hope you get the chance you deserve."

Then I crossed the Square and felt in my pocket for the screw-driver. As I reached up to loosen that brass plate, I experienced a little of what Connie had felt. It seemed such a pity to take it down, to destroy the dream, so to speak. But there was no point in being sentimental.

"Come on, you," I said to myself, as I dug the screw-driver in and began to give a twist. "Down you come, Mr. Blooming Gordon Stewart, Private Investigator, Second Floor."

I was so intent on getting a good leverage on the screw that I gave quite a jump of surprise when a quiet voice spoke at my back.

"Do you have to do that?" the voice said.

I swung round, expecting some taunting remark from a passer-by with an ingrown sense of humour. The man who had spoken was not smiling, however. He had the serio-comic peering expression of a scholar, as he

gazed at me innocently through round, gold-rimmed spectacles. His sparse fair hair hung over one side of his weather-beaten face, untended. It seemed appropriate for this man to wear a rather grubby gaberdine raincoat and to carry an unbrushed black felt hat in his hand. He was lean and stooping, otherwise he would have been a much taller man than I was, and I run into the heavyweight class.

He spoke again, his voice gentle and cultured. “Are you packing up business, then?” he said. And before I could reply, he went on, “I am glad I came in time.”

I looked him over; this would be another case of tracking down a lost dog. I could sense it. I shook my head, as politely as I could, and turned back to unscrew the plate.

“Sorry,” I said, “but this is definitely the farewell performance. It’s finished, this flourishing rival to Scotland Yard.”

I felt a light touch on my shoulder.

The man’s voice was urgent this time. “Oh no, it hasn’t,” he said. “Not when you hear what I have to say.”

I did my best to be calm. “Please excuse me,” I said, “but I’ve no time to go chasing after dogs all over the Square. I’ve got to get this plate off and then find myself a job loading vegetables in Covent Garden, or selling ice-cream in Welwyn Garden City—anything to keep the old woof-woof from the door.”

The man’s voice was close to my ear now. It had lost its gentleness and had taken on something of a snarl.

“Don’t be a darned idiot,” he said. “Get inside there. Do you want to get me shot on your doorstep?”

His grip on my arm made me wince. Almost before I knew what had happened, I was inside the vestibule and the door was shut behind us.

“That’s better,” he said, wiping his brow with a rather off-white handkerchief. “But you almost left it too late with your nonsense. Which is your office?”

Puzzled, I began to lead the way. Three steps up he stopped and listened. All I could hear was the luxurious purr of a high-powered car that passed the door and went on into the Square. He seemed to smile, an Arctic smile, as the sound died away.

“The boys in that car would have moved your plate for you if we had stood there any longer,” he said. “Only you wouldn’t have been alive to see it go.”

As I led the way up the stairs, I found that my legs were trembling, much to my surprise.

“Oh, Connie,” I thought, “if only you were with me now, to share the adventure we had dreamed about!”

Then we went into the little room that had seemed so dingy an hour ago; but which was now the very hub of the world of detection—or at least, so it seemed to me then.

CHAPTER 2

A Fishy Story

He moved with a lightness of foot which I had not expected, but I noticed that he kept well away from the window as he walked across the room. He seemed to be looking for a place to sit down. I pushed forward the best chair, the one with the padded seat, intended for visitors, if we ever had any. But he waved it away and looked towards the inner door of the office.

"What's in there?" he said.

I flung open the little door, to disclose my bed-sitting room. I had wanted to live right on the job when I rented this office. He saw the narrow iron bedstead and the grey army blanket, the green tin filing-cabinet, the rickety wooden bedside table and the Peter Scott reproduction of geese over a marshy pool.

"My sole possessions, apart from five pounds in the bank," I said. "And they are mortgaged!"

He walked into the room without any comment. Then he strode over to the door which led to the bathroom, and flung it open, standing well to the side as he did so.

Only then did he speak. "Had to make sure," he said. "You must excuse me. Right, now, I've come to offer you a job. Are you prepared to take it?"

He sat on the edge of my bed while I drew up the bedside table. It groaned as I sat down. It was never meant to carry thirteen stone. I scratched my head and said, "Well, when you first spoke, I thought you wanted me to find a lost parrot or something. But since that scare you gave me on the stairs, I fancy that I might get a kick out of finding a parrot, even, for you! But I must say at the start, I am broke. Just that—broke."

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled, a thin wry smile.

"Yes, I know. I shouldn't have come here if you had not been broke, my boy!"

I stared at him in surprise. "What!" I said, annoyed.

He nodded calmly. "A hungry man makes the best worker," he said, his lips curling ever so slightly in a smile. "You see, we have kept a pretty close watch on you for the last six weeks, and we know just how much business you have done."

I gave an involuntary gasp of amazement. He nodded and went on, "You see, we have to be quite sure before we use anyone, and we knew that you needed money and would therefore be willing to take bigger risks than, say, the average well-established private investigator."

I eyed him severely. "Hm, very Christian, I must say," I muttered.

He turned on me a grimace so acidic that I said no more.

"My dear young chap," he said, "we are not discussing religion now. I am a practical man and am looking for a practical instrument. I want a sharp, keen-edged instrument, that's all. Are you that instrument?"

I somehow didn't care to be spoken of as though I was a pair of garden shears or a razor-blade. "It all depends," I said, wondering, even as I spoke, what I meant, but playing for time.

He glanced at me as though he knew what I was hinting at. He put his hand into his inside pocket with a sudden movement and flung a tightly packed roll on to the table by my side.

"Fifty there," he said. "Another three hundred when the job is done satisfactorily. Are you on?"

The temptation was immense, but I controlled myself and put the roll of notes back on the bed beside him. I stood up and tried to look incorruptible. It took a bit of effort, but I think I made a fair show of it, for after all, I did not know who he was and I was not anxious to get involved in anything crooked.

"My dear sir," I found myself saying, "I have no reason to trust you. You come into my rooms uninvited, with some strange yarn about being shot at. You offer me money, after telling me that you knew I had needed work for six weeks. And now you give me fifty pounds, just like that, without mentioning the sort of work you want me to do. No, I'm afraid the whole thing is just that little bit too fantastic. I'm sorry, but the answer is no, whatever it is that you want. I will see you downstairs."

I had moved to the door and stood, the handle in my hand. He leaned back on the bed and rolled himself a cigarette. I noticed the deft movements of his long fingers, and the fact that the tobacco he used was almost black, and, I imagined, very strong.

He licked the cigarette paper, taking immeasurable pains to create a neat and regularly rolled tube of tobacco. Then, as he lit it and blew the first stream of blue smoke towards the ceiling, he felt in his pocket again and took out another roll, identical with the first. He placed them both on the bedside table.

"I must say, you drive a hard bargain, young man. But I think none the worse of you for that. Right, a hundred in advance and three hundred to follow—with the strong chance, I might say, of further commissions, if you pull this one off successfully. How's that, now?"

He smiled at me from the bed, confidently. Now I don't know what stupid bee flew into my bonnet then, but I became very angry. I think my pride was touched, that he should have suspected my earlier words to have been put on, not sincere, a means of raising the hiring price. Anyway, I was definitely angry. I went towards him and said, "Look, whoever you are, I think this is funny business and I want no part of it. Get out before I throw you out!"

He lay back and smiled at me, nodding, as though he thought I was playing my rôle quite well. Infuriated, I leant towards him, intending to take hold of his arm and drag him from the bed. But even as I bent down, I found myself staring straight into the black muzzle of a small automatic pistol. It looked unbelievably vicious in the harsh electric light, and the more so since he had not moved from his recumbent posture on my bed.

He smiled at my surprise. "Sit down, my boy," he said. "I'm sorry to have to do this, but there was no other way, I'm afraid. I do not fancy being thrown down those stairs by a young ruffian of your size."

I sat down. He still smiled, but it was not the smile of a man who was feeling jovial.

I noticed that the hand which held the pistol was as firm and motionless as a rock. It showed not a single tremor as he smiled at me over it, like a moderately benevolent eagle with something unpleasant held in reserve. I had to admire his coolness. I had not expected this when I had first seen this scholarly looking person in the street outside. "Gordon, my lad," I thought, "you're not so bright after all! Perhaps it's as well you didn't become a private investigator!"

The man spoke then. “I’ve had a few curious experiences,” he said, in a quiet sort of way, “but I must confess, never before have I had to take out a pistol to persuade a young man to accept a hundred pounds!” He shrugged his stooped shoulders then, as though to say that there was no accounting for young men these days. Then, as suddenly as he had produced it, he thrust the pistol back into his pocket. His face was serious.

“Look,” he said, “we are both acting like crazy idiots in a rather poor gangster film.” He leaned forward and waved a long and stained finger at me. “Look here,” he went on, “stop playing the fool and listen to me.”

Such was his manner, his abounding confidence and authority, that I did listen. I lost all thought of taking him by the scruff of the neck and of flinging him out of my room.

He looked at his watch. “I am short of time,” he said, “and I want as few interruptions as possible. Now, sit still and listen. First, I want to offer you a job, a difficult and even a dangerous job, working for a certain off-shoot of one of the Government Ministries. Is that clear?”

I goggled at him, open-mouthed. He was not at all like a Civil Servant, as I had always pictured them.

“But,” I said, “why don’t you employ a, well, a reputable man? Why not Scotland Yard, or one of the old-established private investigators? There’s something a bit off-key in your coming to me.”

He nodded, as though he had expected this remark.

“Right,” he said. “If you want the cards on the table, you shall have them. I owe you that at least. Well, to answer your questions: first, we couldn’t employ Scotland Yard, because that would require official sanction for what we want to do, and what we want to do is as yet secret, and quite unofficial. Besides, too many people would get to know, and we don’t want anyone to know about this but the man employed by us, no, not even Scotland Yard.”

I stared at him, hardly believing my ears. Suddenly everything had started to become very difficult. I felt as though I was already wearing a cloak and carrying a dagger!

“Secondly,” he said, glancing behind him towards the bathroom door as he spoke, “I don’t imagine that any of the old-established private investigators would take on the job. They have wives and children, but you haven’t! They wouldn’t take the risk!”

He stopped then and surveyed me, as though he was waiting for the remark which I inevitably made.

“What makes you so sure that I will take the job on?” I asked.

“Well, you’re broke, aren’t you?” he answered. “And you have few prospects at the moment. That’s right, isn’t it? Besides, if this job goes well, you’re made, as far as we are concerned. We should pay a retaining fee for your valuable services, and offer you any other commissions that seemed to us to be in your line, as time went on. That is why we come to you, my young friend.”

He leaned back and smiled slightly, as though his arguments were unassailable. I couldn’t help giving a snort of incredulity.

“But it’s quite ridiculous,” I said, “you don’t know me from Adam. I’ve never done a job for anyone yet. You know nothing about me.”

He began to roll another cigarette. His eyes were lowered when he spoke.

“We know that you are twenty-five, that you have held a commission in the Royal Air Force, and that you recently took an Arts Degree at King’s College, London. That is enough, isn’t it?”

I reached over to the side table and took from it a folded copy of the *Telegraph*. I held it towards him, pointing to the column which I had already marked in red.

“You’ve just seen my advertisement,” I said. “ ‘Adventure wanted; single young man, 25, will go anywhere, do anything; B.A. King’s College, London; ex-Flight Lieutenant. No references worth having.’ You know no more about me than anyone else who read last week’s issue. And that just isn’t enough if you want a man who will compete with the best in the business.”

He smiled back at me through the blue smoke that curled up from his rank cigarette. Then, with the tips of his fingers together, he said quietly, “Date of birth, November 14th; place of birth, Wolverhampton; father’s profession, solicitor; school, Royal Grammar School, Wolverhampton, where you were head prefect for a term because the real one broke his leg hurdling. . . .”

I stared at him aghast. I think I said something, but he waved my words aside.

"Your dossier goes on," he said, with a wicked twinkle, "that you held a short service commission in the Air Force, passing out second in your intake as a navigator, and that when your term of service was completed, you read English at King's and had the good luck to get a third-class degree! I say the good luck, my dear young friend, because one cannot play football and read the immortal works of Wordsworth satisfactorily, can one?"

I stood up, speechless, not knowing what to do. But he waved his hand at me, in an amiable manner.

"Don't get worried, Stewart," he said. "We followed up your career the moment you set up here, for we wanted to be sure that you were a reliable type. Your record proves that, and although you don't come out of the top intellectual drawer, you must at least have some intelligence to have been a navigator and to have got yourself up to a University. The football record informs us that you are fairly fit. Your poverty assures the rest. All right?"

I sat down again, wiping my brow with my handkerchief. I nodded. "All right," I said, "go ahead. What do you want?"

He was the one to rise and walk round the room now, his chin in his hand, a man searching for the right words. At last he stopped and came over to me again.

"Look," he said, "will you give your word of honour that you will take on this job, first?"

Somehow I trusted him now, in a manner I would not have thought possible only a few minutes before. There was a strong force in the man, an integrity and an efficiency that I admired and even envied. I put out my hand to shake his. "Yes, I'll take on the job," I said. Then, as an afterthought, "Can I call back my secretary, to give a hand in it? She has stood by me for two months and I'd like her to get a cut at whatever turns up."

He smiled as he patted me on the shoulder. "Sorry, old boy," he said, "but this is a lone wolf affair. No one must know but you, ever. That is, until the whole thing breaks. I'm very sorry, but there it is."

I'm afraid I did not try to hide my disappointment. But there was nothing for it. "All right," I said, "shoot; I'm listening."

He leaned forward towards me, like a moulting vulture, or a comic-strip conspirator in some anarchist's cellar. Even his voice took on a conspiratorial tone, and he looked over his shoulder from time to time as though he was afraid that someone might have broken in silently behind him, to listen to his whispered words.

"You have heard of myxomatosis, the disease which has killed off all the rabbits?" he said. I nodded and he went on, almost without a break. "Well, I belong to a small group of marine scientists who have discovered that something of the sort could affect fish."

I could not restrain myself then, but let out a great guffaw and leaned back on the table, slapping my thighs. He took it well, however, and even smiled a little himself.

"I know it sounds faintly ridiculous," he said, "but I beg you to listen a little further before you laugh again. Consider the food situation in this country. We cannot support ourselves, by any means. In time of war, we would starve, if supplies could not get through to us."

I saw a little light then. "You mean that fish would become very important to us, if only as a means of keeping alive until supplies of meat and cereals, say, got through?"

He nodded. "Precisely," he said. "The vast harvests of the sea were of great importance during the last war, and could be so again. They might mean the difference between victory and defeat, between life and death. I do not say they would, but they might, you see. We scientists never claim too much, you know. We are cautious folk; we have to be. But you see the importance of the situation? Should a fish disease develop in the grounds available to us, that source of supply would be cut off."

I smiled. "But fish haven't had such a disease, have they? And what they haven't had, they are not likely to have at this stage in evolution, I should have thought."

As I spoke, I felt rather pleased with myself for my clever retort. The glow of self-satisfaction faded when he spoke, however.

"My dear and innocent young man," he said, almost in pity. "There are other scientists in the world, you know, besides us. And they have decreed that, should the occasion arise, the fish in our seas would most definitely contract a mysterious plague which would kill them off, and those of us who might be stupid enough to eat them."

I gazed at him in astonishment. "Has it gone as far as that?" I said, hardly believing my ears.

He nodded, and then smiled. "It has gone a stage further than that, my boy," he said. "We both discovered the fish virus at the same time; there was a leakage of some sort or other, I fancy. I've forgotten which side leaked; it does not matter, really. But we both know. Now, here's the great point—*we*

have found an effective antidote, we believe. We are in possession of a crystalline substance which would be exploded on the sea floor in depth charges, dropped from our aircraft. A substance of such a great concentration that it would immunize an area of many square miles at one operation. Of course, it would mean regular visits by Coastal Command aircraft, but that would be arranged in conjunction with the Admiralty."

All I could think of to say was that I had once heard that snake serum the size of an ordinary green pea could produce traces in an area of water the size of the English Channel. He listened to me politely and then said, "Oh, could it indeed?" Though his voice carried in it no interest. Instead, he leaned forward and placed his hand upon my thigh.

"Now," he said, "perhaps I've been over-enthusiastic. I'm afraid my scientific training was swamped by my patriotism, for the moment. But the fact is that we have been working on this in dead secret, without the knowledge of the Government. To make our findings known to anyone would be to risk a possible leakage. So, until we are quite ready to go ahead, we must work anonymously, even illegally. That has its own thrills, of course, but it also has its disadvantages. You see, we have no finances to back our experiments, no special laboratories or apparatus. Most of our work has been done in broad daylight, in jam-jars, so to speak! But now the time has come for us to use the more efficient resources of a fully equipped laboratory, and here we have been fortunate in gaining the assistance of a certain professor of Marine Zoology at a northern University. He was in Intelligence during the war, and is quite inured to the dark-alley attitude we have had to adopt. Apart from you, he is the only man in this country to know of this experiment."

My mystification began to return. "But where do I fit in?" I asked, scratching my head.

The other said softly, "Your job is merely to carry to him a phial, a very small phial, of the antidote. Indeed, all the antidote there is at the moment, for the process is a long and costly one and only a minute amount of the stuff has been realized so far. But we must get it to him, so that he may now treat the fish in his tanks with the cure, having already given them the disease."

For a moment I began to think that I had a maniac in my room, sitting on my bed, his head bent towards mine, his light eyes gleaming wildly behind the lenses of his gold-rimmed spectacles.

“Look, sir,” I said, “I can just about swallow what you said so far, it sounds feasible. But I cannot see why you should pay me this fantastic amount of money to take a phial of stuff from London to the north. You could take it yourself, send it by registered post, or by car, or you could get Professor whats-his-name to come down here and collect it. That seems the simplest part of the whole crazy affair, to me.”

He nodded at me, smiling ironically, his eyes piercing through me to the wall beyond.

“It is always the apparently simple things which are difficult, my boy,” he said. Such was his authority of manner now that I was even prepared to accept this paradoxical statement.

He began to brush his black felt hat with his right hand, stroking the pile backwards and forwards, almost contemplatively. Then at last he stopped and clapped it on his head, as though he had reached a decision. He rose from the bed suddenly and walked towards the window that gave on to the roofs and outhouses which lay behind the street frontage. But I noticed that he did not go right up to the window. He halted a couple of paces from it and then moved to the side before he spoke.

“You see,” he said, “the various means of communication, which you suggest, presuppose that no one but ourselves is interested in the affair, whereas, in actual fact, a small but quite lethally efficient team of workers is very hot on the trail already. They are not bound to any one country, as far as I can gather. They are stateless men, men like the old mercenaries who sold their swords to the highest bidder. They are never very far away, yet I cannot lay a finger on them without bringing my own secret out into the undesirable open. It would be the easiest thing in the world for me to arrange for them to be picked up by a good solid British policeman. But what happens then? Why I have to charge them with an offence against myself. That is the good old law we must all obey. We are not a Police State; and every man has a right to a hearing in this country. So, I should have to state my case in the open court. Alas, what case would I have? They did not steal money from my house; they did not steal money from my person. What then did they steal? The phial, the antidote, the secret! And once those words were spoken in open court, then the balloon would go up!”

He stared across the room, unseeing. I suddenly felt that I was in the presence of a fine man, one who thought little of his own safety, but much of the safety of his fellow citizens, the many millions in these islands who

would never know his name, would never even guess at the immense debt they owed him. . . . This was indeed a man, I thought.

He passed his gaunt long hand across his furrowed forehead.

“You see,” he said, suddenly, “if I tried to take that phial up north, I should be found at Peterborough, dead in the washroom of the train, when some irate old gentleman called the guard to find out why the door wouldn’t open. If I went by car, I should get no farther than the Barnet by-pass. And very possibly my driver would be dead too. And he might possibly have a family dependent on him, as I haven’t, and you haven’t.”

He looked across at me with a comic little smile that made me almost feel light-headed with anxiety to start moving out on this adventure. Then a solemn cloud passed over his face.

“If Professor Maguire came down from Hull,” he said, pausing as he mentioned the name and place, as though he had committed a great indiscretion, “then it would be worse still.”

I rose to the bait, knowing as I did so that he was a superb actor, that he had disclosed another piece of information merely to involve me further in the situation. “What then?” I said.

“That would be the biggest tragedy of the lot,” he said. “We can be replaced, you and I; we are expendable, whatever our own opinions of our worth. But he is a man that England could ill afford. He is a Drake, a Howard, a Frobisher, to use the outworn terminology of history.”

He shook his head gravely as he spoke. “If that man moved south, you can have no doubts, he would get no further than Nottingham, and what’s more, he knows it, my dear lad. No, please don’t think I am exaggerating. He might drink a cup of coffee in a train; he might stop at a garage to buy a drop of petrol; he might call at a café for an iced cake. What, say you, is so dramatic about that? Well, I will tell you that it is not the occasion or the thing that is important; it is what a man does with that occasion and that thing. Caesar merely leaned forward to hear a plea—but the dagger struck. Abraham Lincoln sat in a comfortable and safe box at the theatre—but he died, just the same.”

I went to meet him. “All right,” I said, “I’ll go to Hull and take the phial. Where is it?”

He looked up from the floor into my face. He was smiling, almost laughing.

"But my dear Mr. Stewart," he said, "do you think I would carry it out here into Soho on the off-chance that you would undertake this commission? Oh no, my boy, that is too absurd. First I had to find out whether you were the right man, and then whether you were willing. I have covered both of those questions. Very good. Now we must wait."

"Wait!" I exclaimed, already impatient to share the great adventure. "But surely time is precious?"

"Not as precious as all that," he said wryly. "We are not at war—yet! Oh no, my good friend, we can wait another day! After all, this antidote has been known to us for a month now, but we were content to wait for you, don't forget!"

I stared at him in complete astonishment. He nodded. "Yes, you were our man from the moment you screwed that brass plate up—though of course you didn't know it!"

I lay back on the little bed and laughed. The tears began to roll down my face.

"Good lord!" I gasped. "And we did not know it, poor old Connie and me! We thought we were failures! Oh, for all the saints!"

He looked down at me gravely. "And so you may be yet," he said.

I stopped laughing.

"I shall come here again, to-morrow evening," he said. "I shall be here before seven. If I am not, don't wait in, I might be otherwise detained. Indeed, I might be quite disinterested in this matter."

"What," I said, "with so much at stake?" His calmness dumbfounded me.

He smiled and touched me lightly on the shoulder.

"I mean, dead, my dear young innocent," he said. Then, as I gasped at his stoic acceptance, he went on, "Any way, the money on your table is yours. Just a gentleman's agreement. If I die, it is still yours. That is the bargain. If I don't die, then I shall give you the phial and your instructions to-morrow evening. Come on now, I shall be late home and my housekeeper is a regular tartar!"

As I left him at the street door, dusk was already falling over Soho Square. I watched him walk away, up to Oxford Street, his soiled gaberdine raincoat and black hat giving him the anonymous appearance of any one of a

million others. I shook my head, thinking that all at once life had become very exciting. Then suddenly I noticed a newsboy standing on the other side of the narrow street, a thin, undersized fellow with a narrow black moustache and a slouched check cap.

“Hey,” I called, “let’s have a paper.”

He didn’t seem to hear me but began to lope towards the Square. “Hey you!” I shouted now, “I want a paper.”

He did not stop, yet he had a thick pile of papers under his arm. I felt a sudden shiver go through my body, up my back, and lift my hair at the base of my head. That newsboy had been waiting by my door, not to sell papers, I now felt sure.

Once again, that evening, I felt the muscles behind my knees begin to shudder and turn weak. It was with an effort that I trod the creaking wooden stairway up to my office.

Somehow, I was not at all surprised when I found the light on in that dingy little room, although I clearly recalled switching it off.

I was not even surprised to see a man sitting in the chair, at the deal table, waiting for me to come in; waiting and smiling.

CHAPTER 3

The Man in Black

"Do come in," said the thick unctuous voice. "It is far too dangerous to hang about on draughty stairs—even on a summer night like this. Come in, come in, come in."

I stood stock still for a moment or two and surveyed my visitor, my heart thumping like a donkey-engine in my chest. He was an immense man, dressed in black. He wore his hat at a rakish angle as the writers say, and had on a massive coat with a black velvet collar. He *loomed* at the eyes, rather than appeared. I did not recall ever seeing such a man. His presence was hypnotic. I sat down at the other side of the table, thinking ironically that he was the first man to sit in the comfortable, visitors' chair. But, as I looked across the deal table at that bland, ivory, flat Buddha's face, with its heavy and half-closed eyes, I wished it might have been almost any other visitor. A cigar was pursed, unlit, between the thick, nearly colourless lips. He seemed to talk without moving his lips, from his throat. The cigar hardly trembled as he spoke.

"Did you get your business settled satisfactorily?" he asked. Then he waited for my reply. At first I almost answered him, such was his hypnotic power. But I came to my senses and stood up, angry. I'm afraid I even shouted a little.

"What the deuce has that to do with you?" I said.

He did not even look up at me. His thick lids fell as though he was examining a spot on the table directly beneath him. His plump white hands came together in the attitude of prayer. I noticed that he wore a ring on each little finger; of heavy red gold, set with garnet.

"Come, come," the thick voice said. "This is no way to be going on, my friend."

And as he spoke the last words, he raised his head slowly, like a cobra about to transfix his prey. I started away from him, almost with violence, and he smiled to see my movement.

“There, there,” he said, “you mustn’t mind me, young man. I am a little overpowering, I agree, but I mean well. Yes, I mean well.”

He smiled at me through those half-shut eyes. His lips moved a little but did not expose his teeth. The cigar hardly moved. He put out a plump white dead hand and beckoned me to the creaking chair.

“Sit down, my friend,” he said. “I have important business to discuss with you.”

Like a rabbit, ensnared by the magic of a stoat’s eyes, I moved back to the chair, though I would willingly have run from the room.

“What do you want?” I heard myself saying, and my voice sounded very flat, as though my throat was dry, very dry indeed.

He said, “I perhaps ought to say, my dear boy, that if you happen to try any funny business, I shall shoot you from under the table.”

He stopped then and smiled again. I observed that the plump dead hands were no longer visible.

“That’s it,” he said. “Now we understand each other. Put your hands on the table. I shall keep mine where they are, if I may.”

I did as he said. It would have needed the will of a Caesar not to. Suddenly all my resolution had drained from me, though I still had enough common sense to know that I must not give in to this man.

“What do you want?” I heard myself saying, though I must admit I felt amazed at my audacity in speaking at all.

The other voice was oily in the extreme. I loathed its every tone, its every cadence, as it sounded in that silly little room.

“A certain person, a so-called scientist, has just left you,” it said. “I want to know what he asked you to do for him, that’s all.”

I stared back at the fat white man in black, amazed at his cold effrontery. I tried to stand, but my legs felt rather weak yet. However, my voice still worked.

“Go to the devil!” I said, a little cracked, but sincere.

The bland white Buddha face came up and seemed to loom over me again. The lips did not move. “Oh, dear,” the voice oozed. “He is going to be awkward, I can see.”

Now I don’t know whether it was because I was genuinely attached to that scientist with the gold-rimmed glasses, or whether I was simply light-headed from lack of food, but I became foolishly chivalrous. I actually found the strength from somewhere to stand up and strike out at the fat white face.

Even as my fist was forcing its way through the heavy atmosphere of earth, I saw his black sleeve rising over the white deal horizon of the table. It moved so much quicker than my fist.

I heard myself saying “Oooh!” though I hadn’t meant to. I was on the floor, on the creaking bare boards of my office. He was not even bending over me. I thought that that was a bit uncouth. He was walking towards the door. No, not walking, gliding, like a great black Buddhist galleon—if such were possible—as though I did not exist.

At the door he stopped. His white face even smiled.

“I shall be round again, little friend,” he said. “Don’t go away, you have such a pleasant smile.”

Then he had gone through the door and I heard his slow, heavy elephant’s steps press onwards down the stairs. I heard the noise of the traffic in distant Oxford Street for a moment, and knew that the street door had opened. Then he had gone.

I don’t know what he had hit me with, but I was a long time getting up from the floor. When I could manage it, I tottered into my little bedroom. The window was open. He had come over the roofs at the back of the houses, had perhaps even been waiting, while my scientist was standing there, his back to the window, talking of fish. . . .

I shut the window and rolled into bed. The tumbled banknotes were still on the bedside table, but I had lost all interest in them. I just wondered what to do, what to do, what to do. . . . And while I was still wondering, I must have fallen asleep.

CHAPTER 4

The Nightmare Begins

I woke very early. In fact, I beat the milkman to it. The window was still open and the curtains blowing half across the little room. The hundred notes lay scattered about the floor.

It was the notes that brought me back to reality, harsh reality, I thought, as I staggered into the bathroom to see if I had a swollen jaw. I had. The man in black was no joke. He knew where to hit, it seemed. As I bathed my face with cold water, the sudden wish came to me to meet that man again. In a morning flush of glory, I imagined that I knew what to do to turn the tables on the great black slug. . . .

"Right," I said to myself as I shaved. "We shall see, we shall see."

All I did was to cut myself. It took almost fifteen minutes before I was presentable again.

Then I put on my best suit, a bit of cavalry twill, cut hacking jacket style, and went over to the café in the Square. The young waiter on duty said, "Well, and what do you know! All dressed up first thing in the morning! Come in, Monsieur Stooart!"

That foreign accent didn't deceive me. I knew he was from Birmingham. He had told me in a burst of confidence one day when trade was slack and he thought he might lose his job. He didn't like Birmingham.

"Cut every syllable of that," I said, trying to remember what Humphrey Bogart would have done. "I want coffee, and lots of it; bacon and eggs, and two helpings."

He gave me a slanted smirk, for he knew how my business was going. "Robbed the Bank of England?" he said.

"Sure," I said, "and the Exchequer at the same time."

Then, as he hurried away, I felt in my pocket to make certain that the hundred pounds were still there. They were. I never enjoyed a breakfast more in my life than I did that one—in spite of the dirty table cloth and the radio, still churning out that music from Luxembourg. . . .

I gave the waiter five shillings for a tip, just to see what he would say. But he did not say anything. He just went into the room behind the café and I heard him bouncing the coins on the floor. At least, there was a dull metallic ting. At length he came back, his off-white napkin over his arm. He was smiling.

"Roast duck to-night," he said. "The chef just told me."

I smiled too. I knew that chef; he'd make a stewed cat taste like partridge.

"I may not be back in time; lots of business," I said.

The young waiter put his right forefinger into his ear.

"My aunt's a film star," he said, giving his finger a twist.

I went out in high dudgeon, boarded a bus in Oxford Street and then changed my mind. I got off and strolled up Baker Street, as though to get inspiration from Sherlock Holmes, poor soul!

The upshot was that, just outside Baker Street Station, I decided that the safest place for me was the Zoo. And so I went there.

It's a pleasant place, the Zoo. Especially if you have a relaxed frame of mind. But I was thinking of one or two other things as I strolled in and out of the lion's house, past the bears and along Mappin Terrace. Indeed, I ate my lunch at the Zoo restaurant with that man in the black suit ever before my eyes, and so, when I stood gazing at two greyish-white hippoes, sunning their fat bulk in the late afternoon glow, it was hardly any surprise to me at all to hear a sly voice at my elbow saying, "Don't jump or do anything silly, dream boy, but there's a knife in your back."

I tore myself away from the immense creatures that snored beneath a denuded plane tree by the luke-warm water, and half-turned. Two men stood close to me, so close that if one of them had pushed that knife into me, the passers-by would have been surprised to see me fall without a blow being struck. They would have thought I had fainted in the Indian Summer's heat, and would have passed on about their comfortable lawful business and have left me dying. I knew that.

"What do you want?" I said.

A very thin man with an equally thin moustache said, “Start moving, chum. We aim to get to the exit gates without any trouble.”

I looked at him again. Then I saw the picture of a man selling newspapers outside my door, and I realized who he was.

The other man was tall and red-haired. He wore a tight blue serge suit, much too old-fashioned and shiny for a top-notch gangster to own, according to my recent spell of film-going. Moreover, he had red moustaches, flaming red, and long, curling up under his eyes. He looked more like a parody of some out-of-work bomber pilot than a really dangerous man.

I thought I would appeal to him. He was at least more in my known territory.

“I say,” I remarked, recalling Air Force days, “a driver like you should know better. This is a bit off the beam, isn’t it?”

But he stared me straight in the eye. His own eyes were light blue, and almost without a pupil. They were uncannily blank. His voice was harsh and metallic, echoing and inhuman, as though he spoke through a high tin dome, “I dunno what you mean, china, but keep goin’ like ’e says.”

Then I knew I had made a mistake. The man with the red moustache grew one merely because he liked it that way, not because he had flown an aircraft. I swallowed my pride and began to move, just the way the knife pressure took me.

Behind me the many varied sounds of the Zoo floated like a backcloth of crazy tapestry—the chattering and squealing of gibbons, the distant roar of the lions, the slipslop of the elephant’s feet as he slithered along, the howdah on his back full of excited children. All that belonged to another world now. I was in it, yet not of it. To me it seemed that I was being carried along by two seedy agents of doom, out of the daytime life of warm reality into a no less real nightmare. I remembered as I walked slowly along how someone had once told me that on Fifth Avenue in New York, hold-ups were carried out in broad daylight, with the passers-by none the wiser, and that in Harlem at night the police patrol cars always suspected that the bunch of men apparently joking together under the neon lights of some store or cinema were in truth a street gang surrounding one of the luckless enemy who had had the misfortune to stroll out at the wrong moment. . . . And now, I felt just like that—the victim of an ambush in broad bright daylight. It would have been laughable if it hadn’t been so serious.

“Keep moving, chum,” the hoarse voice whispered behind me. I felt another rather painful dig in the back and went towards the turnstiles of the exit. Tired parents were dragging their still-enthusiastic offspring away from the delights of bear-pit and lion-den, towards some peaceful home in Ealing or Uxbridge or Elstree, no doubt. I looked at them with longing, safe and comfortable men and women, good citizens, without a care in the world other than the problem of cutting the front lawn or paying off the instalments on the television set. . . . If I could only attract their attention to my plight, I thought. But the man in the blue serge suit was clairvoyant, it seemed.

“Slow march, china,” he honked. “Don’t get tangled up with the crowds whatever you do.”

I held back a bit; there was nothing else I could do. I said, “What do you want with me? Where are you taking me?”

I half-turned my head as I spoke and saw that the one with the little moustache, the newsboy of the previous evening, had his knife wrapped up in a handkerchief so that its deadly nature was hidden from anyone who might glance in our direction.

“Turn around,” he growled. “And don’t ask questions, then you’ll hear no lies. All you need to know is that we want something from you, and you’re going to see the man who will make you give it up.”

I said, “I have nothing that you would want, old boy.”

All I got was another dig in the small of the back. And then the miracle happened. Two policemen suddenly appeared even as we were passing through the turnstiles. They had been in the little kiosk at the entrance, no doubt chatting with a Zoo attendant about the sort of things that policemen talk about to Zoo attendants. And they were very keen-faced, eagle-eyed young constables, on the look-out for quick promotion, I guessed, observing their sharp expressions and crisp movements.

I heard the man behind me catch his breath and for a moment the pressure of the covered knife was relaxed. But I was in a dilemma, since I knew that if I appealed to the policeman for help, I should have to say that my two thugs were threatening me, and furthermore I should have to say why they were threatening me—and then the cat would be out of the bag. The secret of the fish antidote would be exposed and the very situation that the scientist had feared and worked against would be created.

I did the only other thing that came into my mind at the moment. I snatched off my hat and flung it at the policeman nearest to me. It struck

him in the face and I turned as though speaking to the little man behind me, putting on a laugh which was in reality the farthest thing from my thoughts or feelings.

"Got 'im, chum!" I said loudly. "Got the copper first time!"

I heard a scuffle behind me and realized that the knife-man had slipped back through the turnstile, into the crowds. The one in the blue serge suit was already half-way across the street, walking fast so as not to be associated with me. Then I saw the young policeman stretch out a very authoritative hand. His face was set but half-smiling as though he was secretly rather pleased that he had a case to book on this otherwise unprofitable afternoon at the Zoo.

"Right, little man," I heard him say. "And what's your name then?"

I couldn't resist it. "Danny Kaye," I said, and slipped under his arm. I saw his companion move forward to intercept me, but I swerved, selling him the dummy as I'd learned to do on the football field, and then I was away, pounding the asphalt as hard as I could go. I didn't want to be locked up for the night when my friend in the dirty gaberdine coat called. So I could not wait, not even to collect my one and only hat.

I heard a whistle blow behind me, but I did not look round. Gosh, I thought, if only Connie could see me now!

Then I turned a corner and my heart leapt with joy; a taxi was just pulling off, empty, having deposited an old lady and gentleman outside the other Zoo entrance. I ran alongside and got into the cab.

"Hey you," said the driver, "where's the fire?"

"Get a move on," I said, "I'm due at the B.B.C. at any moment now. Eye-witness account of a day at the Zoo for Children's Hour."

I don't know what put the words into my head, but they worked. If I'd said Third Programme, no doubt the cab-driver would have handed me over to the nearest policeman as a maniac, but the word "children" did the trick.

"Right, guv," he said, and swung round as though our lives depended on his speed. Actually, only mine did.

I realized that when I saw the man who had held the knife running down the path towards the side gates to cut us off. He was waving his arms to stop the cab. I glanced through the back window to see the one in the blue serge suit already getting into another taxi, two hundred yards up the road.

“Don’t stop for anything, driver,” I said. “If you do, I’ll get the sack!” As I spoke I flung two of the pound notes over to him through the half-open glass partition.

He nodded appreciatively. “Right, guv,” he said, “we can’t disappoint them kids, can we now!”

I held on to the silk cord beside my seat and shut my eyes, half-dazed now. As far as I know, there are no traffic lights between the Zoo and Broadcasting House.

At least, we did not stop.

CHAPTER 5

Sanctuary

There was no time to change my plans now. I left the taxi and almost ran into Broadcasting House. The taxi-driver called after me, "Give the kids a good programme!" I waved back to him and then heard him pull away as I went through the swing-door.

The commissionaire on duty gave me a wry look. I felt for my tie to find that it was almost under my ear. I put it straight and walked across that cold floor towards the reception desk, playing for time. As I walked, I saw the type of person who frequents that austere hub of radio; they were sitting round the walls on the cold seats, trying to look as though they weren't hopeful, interested, anxious or excited. Perhaps there was a Bach or a Shakespeare among them, waiting for recognition. I could not help feeling that it must be tough to be an artist and to wait there for a chance to show it. In fact, I should have got quite sentimental about it if I hadn't had other more pressing things on my mind.

There were three people before me, at the reception desk, talking to the girl who sat there, a telephone receiver strapped to her ears. While she was talking to some distant mogul and flicking about with her switchboard, I glanced over the shoulder of the little man in the astrakhan collar in front of me, and saw that on the desk before her she had a long sheet of paper ruled down in columns. One column gave times, the next studio numbers and the third, producers' names. I did not have time to read anything else, for the thing was upside down and she was getting ready to answer my requests, whatever they might turn out to be.

Such was my state of mental unbalance at that moment, I came near to blurting out, "Look, Miss, I shouldn't be here at all, but I've come in to dodge two men who seem bent on taking my life! Can you help me?"

In cold blood, it seems fantastic, all this, but at the time, it was the only thing I could do, to seek sanctuary somewhere where there were lots of

people, law-abiding folk whose very presence would be a sort of protection. The girl looked up at me, a little tired, bored, nonchalant.

“Yes?” she said. And then I knew that I could not ask her to help me. Her voice was too official and cool.

I said, “Mr. Brooks, please. I believe he’s rehearsing in Number Six.”

She checked on the list. I knew she would find that I was right. I had only just finished deciphering the name and the studio number from the same list!

“Have you an appointment?” she said, without looking at me.

I leaned over the counter and said, “Well, not exactly. But I’ve done so much work for him, we don’t bother about appointments.”

I racked my brains to think what this Mr. Brooks did—I seemed to recall his name somewhere, somehow. . . . Was it Woman’s Hour, Sports’ Report, Music Magazine, or what?

If I had been left to work myself up into any more of a frenzy, I fancy I should have broken down and confessed forthwith. But, once again that day, the gong saved me! Two men came out of the lift. A tall ascetic-looking man with pince-nez glasses and a bow-tie, and a chubby little man with fair hair and green corduroy trousers.

“There’s Mr. Brooks now,” said the girl, waving vaguely towards the lift and immediately forgetting all about me.

I almost ran towards those two gentlemen. “Mr. Brooks?” I said, looking between them and addressing the air. As I spoke I laid a bet with myself that it would be the tall gentleman, but it wasn’t. He swept by, looking straight ahead, his lips tightly compressed, in another world, a world no doubt of semantics, etymology or Euripides. The plump little man stopped and stared up at me with bulbous grey eyes. “What do you want?” he said, trying to remember my face.

I had to make the plunge. “Look,” I said, “I don’t know you. I am here under false pretences. But I’m in trouble with crooks. They are waiting for me outside and yours was the first name I could find in the book on the desk there.”

The plump little man stopped smiling and stepped back half a pace. “Are you speaking the truth?” he said, surprisingly.

"I was never more serious in my life," I said. "I have been chased from the Zoo as far as Broadcasting House."

He gave a light laugh. "Not much difference," he said, "but don't say I said so! Well, I don't make a practice of this sort of thing, but come with me."

He turned round and went through a door at the side of the lift-shaft and then along a corridor. "We'll have a cup of coffee or something in the canteen," he said.

I followed him, having to walk hard to keep up with him. He was a very dynamic little man, in spite of his corduroy trousers and the leather patches on his elbows.

We sat down at a chromium table and he got two cups of coffee from the service counter. The place was crowded and thick with the voices of actors and producers, engineers and writers. I looked round to see if there was anybody I might recognize, but it must have been the wrong time or the wrong place. They were just faces and voices and leather patches on the elbows.

Mr. Brooks said, "I've just finished a job in Studio Six. We were tying up an outside broadcast, on records, you know. London Life they call it in the *Radio Times*, you know, actualities taken here and there to produce as sort of patchwork-quilt effect—a sewerman, then a Covent Garden porter, followed by a bus-driver, or a shoe-shine boy. A sort of hotch-potch about other people's views on London. Now I think we could work you in, if you've got anything interesting, and if we can use your stuff without upsetting the police. We've got to be very careful, you know. I had an anonymous dope-peddler on one of these programmes a few months ago. Oh boy, you should have heard the squawks Scotland Yard put up! They sent chaps to interview me, to find out the speaker's name and what not. Of course, I couldn't say a thing. Luckily I'd paid him in cash, out of my own pocket and his name had never gone into our books, otherwise they'd have checked with Contracts and found him."

I let him talk on. He was a charming little man, tied up with his work, I could see. He lived, ate, drank and breathed radio, that much was obvious from the moment he started.

At last I said, "My story is of no interest to anybody but me. Your listening figures would drop with a dull thud if you put me on. I've just got in wrong with a bunch of thugs and they are after my blood, that's all. We

can't make a story out of that, and if we could I wouldn't want to be telling it, for personal reasons."

I saw the look of disappointment come into his eye. He was about to get up and leave me. I stopped him. "Look," I said, "I'm just at the beginning of something that could be exciting. I promise you that if things really do happen to me and if everything turns out right, I'll come here and offer the story to you. Is it a bargain?"

He tried not to look too interested. "Perhaps," he said. "We shall see. I always think it's best to get these things on to a disc right away. If you wait and cool down you'll tell the story as though you're reading some adventure yarn to the kids. But have it your own way."

I took my chance then. "Look," I said, "I've got to get out of here without being seen by the knife boys. Can you fix that for me?"

The plump little producer looked at his watch. "Very irregular," he said, "but you are, as it were, a future scriptwriter for my programme, so perhaps I can take a chance. Look, I've got a recording car outside in New Cavendish Street. I'll get it driven round here and will drop you off wherever you want to be. All right?"

I nodded. I couldn't speak, I was so overcome by gratitude to this little man. He brought me another cup of coffee and then left me. In five minutes he was back again.

"Put this coat on and these glasses, and carry this briefcase," he said. The coat was a thick Harris tweed affair that came only down to my knees. It must have been his own. But I turned up the collar and was pretty sure that it disguised my suit sufficiently to deceive any but the most hawklike eyes. Then we went back through the vestibule again. There were the same Bachs and Shakespeares sitting round the walls, waiting for fame. But no crooks. They had been afraid to penetrate into this home of respectability.

A great Humber stood outside, the engine ticking over. I got into the back seat, among the recording apparatus. Mr. Brooks climbed in beside me.

"Soho Square, Jimmy," he said to the driver.

"Okeydoke, sir," said the man, and almost imperceptibly the immense car moved off.

"Can you see your friends?" the producer asked.

I shook my head. "I can't see anything with these glasses on," I said.

He chuckled. “Nor can I,” he said, “though it was quite a craze here for a while. Gave the impression of eyestrain and hard work and all that.”

But I was not listening to him now; there were other things to think about.

CHAPTER 6

"Ask for King Billy"

As we slid smoothly along Oxford Street the realization came to me suddenly that I was perhaps doing the most stupid thing in the world. Suppose, I argued with myself, that I had shaken off the two men who had followed me from the Zoo; what would they do next? They would obviously cut their immediate losses and go on to await my return to the office. At least, I told myself, that's what I would have done in their place. It seemed so elementary a move that I wondered why I had not thought of it before.

Yet what could I do about it? I had to go back; there was no doubt about that. I had to meet the man in the soiled gaberdine before seven that night, and that was final.

As we passed along the busy street, I caught sight of a gilt clock outside a pawnbroker's shop. It was not yet six. There might be a long time to wait before he came, and every minute there would be a dangerous one. I wondered whether I dared ask the active little man by my side to come in with me, or to drive me around until seven. But I felt that this would be imposing too much on his generosity, even if he had the time to spare, which was pretty doubtful.

And while I was turning all this over in my head, we nosed into my own little street and I saw the tired trees in the Square down at the end of it. There seemed to be no one about as we drew up in front of that street door and the tarnished brass plate that had brought so much trouble to me in the last twenty-four hours.

"Here we are," I said, without much enthusiasm. Then, without warning, the thought occurred to me that there might be someone waiting for me upstairs. I had locked my office door, but a strong man, say a big man in black for instance, would find little difficulty in pushing my flimsy door in, Yale lock and all.

I looked back into the big black Humber. “Do you mind waiting for me a minute or two?” I said. “I’ll give a whistle if all is clear.”

Mr. Brooks looked a little taken aback. He glanced at his watch and made a wry face. “All right,” he said, “but please make it snappy. They might want the car, back at B. H.”

I smiled my gratitude to him and pushed open the front door. There was no one waiting on the stairs for me, at least!

I started across the narrow hallway, past the ridiculous mosaic of Gog or Magog, whichever it was, with the crayoned moustache that Mrs. Maggs couldn’t scrub off, when something made me turn round. It was a curious feeling of not being alone, although I had heard nothing. Yet to my over-excited senses, keyed up by the day’s events, it was as though there was some strange vibration, some thickening of the atmosphere, some distant but distinct emanation, I knew not what. I stopped, my foot on the first stair, and turned round.

In the dim shadows, just behind the street door, a man was sitting in the old chair that usually stood under the telephone, by the side of the peeling wall. His head was sunk on to his chest and his hands were hanging down, almost to the mosaic floor. He wore a black hat and a soiled gaberdine raincoat.

My first impulse was to run out to the car and ask Brooks to come in with me; but even as I thought of doing that, the counter-idea came to me that he might well suspect this of being an elaborate alibi that I had worked out for myself, for I had no doubt at all the man was dead. Everything about his posture indicated that state. And as far as Brooks was concerned, I might have lulled the scientist and then have gone to Broadcasting House to establish an alibi, with my tale of being chased by gangsters and what not.

Besides, I thought, even if he did not suspect me, I should be putting him in an ambiguous position, for he had no right to bring me out there, and I was sure that he had no wish to become tangled up in this situation anyway.

I went to the body and looked down at it. The man’s heart was not beating, though he could not have been dead long for there was a faint warmth about his gaunt hand as I held it in mine. Each of his pockets, even his waistcoat pockets, had been turned out. They had searched him thoroughly, it seemed. I raised his head gently. He had been shot in the forehead, very neatly, by a small calibre pistol. There were no burn marks so they must have stood a few yards away from him. Then as I struggled to prevent him from falling from my grasp on to the floor, my foot kicked

something metallic. It was his own pistol, the one which he had pointed at me such a short time before, when I had threatened him in my ignorance.

The story seemed clearer to me now. No doubt he had come to see me, bringing the phial and my instructions, and had met someone on the stairs, someone who was waiting for him or for me. He had drawn his pistol but had been too late. I suddenly recalled the panther-like speed of that massive fat man in black. I could almost picture him standing there, half-way up the creaking stairs, waiting for one of us to come in. And then he had quietly searched the body and had presumably taken the phial and whatever papers were with it.

Well, that was that! I thought grimly. A murdered man in the hallway and only my story to account for his being there. But could I tell my story? And if I did, would anyone believe me? I suddenly realized that I was in a very tough spot. All I had was a hundred pounds, less what I had spent that day, to prove anything. And what could they prove? I might even have stolen them from my visitor; who was to say? I gave a groan and let the body rest limply against the wall.

And then I noticed a very strange thing. The dead scientist had a cigarette still hanging from his lower lip, as cigarettes sometimes do when the rice paper of which they are made sticks to the lip. That in itself was not amazing; nor was the fact that it was unlit. He might have been about to light it when the shot was fired at him. No, what *was* strange was the sort of cigarette it was. A thick and perfectly cylindrical one, shorter than the average length, and quite unlike those rather rough affairs which I had watched him rolling the night before. That cigarette fascinated me. Almost without thinking what I was doing, I took it gently from his lips. It was hard to the touch, not like tobacco. Then, in a sudden revealing flash, I knew what it was. And I knew that whoever had killed him had searched in vain through his pockets.

Now I wanted time in which to think, but not there, not in the hallway and not in my office, for I did not know when my next visitor might appear, even whether he was not upstairs, waiting for me at that moment.

I laid the body down gently and covered the face with that pathetic black hat. Then I ran out again to the car.

Brooks was leaning out, impatiently. “I was just about to come in for you,” he said. Then he looked at me quizzically.

Even as I looked back at him, I saw, through the far window of the black Humber, a man gazing into a shop window across the road. His back was

towards us and I could not see his face. But this was the one man in the world whose face was of no importance when it came to identifying him. That great bulk, those oxlike shoulders, the black coat and the black hat, set at a rakish angle on the immense head, could belong only to one man. And that man was watching me through a shop window. Watching and waiting, no doubt, for the car to go away.

I dragged open the car door. "For Pete's sake, give me a lift," I said. "I can't explain now. But I beg you to take me with you."

The driver looked at me and then at Brooks, as though he expected the order to require him to stop at the nearest police station. But Brooks rose to the occasion once again.

"Drive round the Square, Jimmy," he said. Then to me, "I don't know why I am doing this, but I reckon you need somebody's help."

I put my hand on his arm. "I'm in a mess," I said. "I just can't explain anything right now; I can only ask you to help me. I assure you I am not a criminal of any sort, and I will never divulge that you have stood by me. But please get me away from this spot as fast as you can."

The chubby face had suddenly become a grim one. Brooks smoothed his fair hair away from his forehead.

"Don't I remember playing football against you at King's, once?" he said. I nodded, my heart giving a great thump, although I did not remember him. Suddenly I felt that I had not wasted my youthful years as fully as I had thought.

He smiled then. "Jimmy," he said, "go like the clappers, old boy. I'll see that you are all right if anything happens."

The driver looked rather doubtful, and then said stoically, "Well, I expect you know what you are doing, Mr. Brooks. Anything you say. Where shall I go?"

On a sudden impulse I said, "Out along the Edgware Road, please."

Jimmy nodded and swung the car round again.

Then, almost under some distant compulsion, I took that strange cigarette from my pocket and gently, very gently, eased the rice paper from it. Inside a thin covering of black tobacco was tucked a small phial. It contained a fine greyish powder. I slipped it into my waistcoat pocket without delay. And then I looked at that rice paper.

On the inside were some pencilled words and figures. I held it to the light and there was no mistaking the message:

“*Ask for King Billy, 10 a.m. 26th.*”

My head reeled and at first I could make nothing of the thing. Then it suddenly became clear. I must go to Hull, wasn’t it? And be there on August 26th at 10 a.m. That was, in five days’ time. But where must I take the phial? Obviously not to the University; that would be too dangerous, too public. And what did the rest mean? King Billy! Who was he? And where was I to ask for him, and of whom?

All I knew then was that I must set course for the north without delay. And there was no question of going by train. I recalled what the dead man had said about that and now the very thought of Peterborough gave me a shiver down the back.

“Yes,” I repeated, “the Edgware Road, please, and as quick as you can.”

CHAPTER 7

The Veteran

When we had gone far enough along the Edgware Road to let me get something of my assurance back, I said to Brooks, “How would you go to Hull by road?”

He stared at me in great concern. “Hey,” he said, “we can’t go as far as that, old boy!”

I gave him what I tried to make a reassuring smile. “Don’t get upset,” I said, “I want to make the trip solo.”

Jimmy the driver gave me a dirty look. “Not in this car you don’t, mate,” he said. “This is my baby and I have to take all responsibility for her.”

I saw there was nothing to be done but to send them back right away; I had asked enough of them already.

“That’s all right, Jimmy,” I said, “I shall go in one of those cars.”

We were drawing level with a big glass-fronted and concrete garage, in the yard of which a fleet of second-hand cars stood waiting for their new owners, rather like sad-faced and elderly slaves in some fly-blown market-place.

Jimmy put his brakes on and breathed a sigh of relief, glad to be rid of me at last. Brooks touched me confidentially on the arm, “Sure you’re all right for money?” he said. It was the nicest thing he could have done. My heart warmed to the plump little man. I said, “Yes, thanks, old boy. But I’m grateful all the same. When I get back we’ll have a dinner together, on me, to square things up a bit.”

He waved to me from the car window. “Don’t mention it! I shall look forward to that script. Don’t forget!” Then the big Humber swept round and was gone. I had no time to waste, but hurried into the little office at the front of the garage and rang the bell. A young fellow, in blue overalls, came

shambling in, wiping oil from his hands on a piece of cotton-waste. His dark hair hung about his face in curls, and he had a black smudge across his forehead where he had wiped his hand.

"Whatcher, guvnor," he said, "want to buy a car? We've got a smashing Bentley round the corner. Best value in town. Only one owner. Let you have it for nine hundred, and it'll be robbing the firm at that!"

I said, "Not to-day, old boy! I want something in the fifty-pound bracket and not a penny more."

He gave me a look that was meant to knock several inches off my height —but I was beyond that sort of treatment now.

"Come on, son," I said, "I'm in a hurry."

He gave a snigger. "You don't need to be if that's what you intend to pay for a car," he said.

I said, "Come on now. Let's see what you've got. Perhaps I'll call back next week and take the Bentley off your hands, just as a favour."

He walked ahead of me, round to the back of the show-yard where the oldest models were kept. "Pigs might fly," he said.

I looked at the car he pointed to. It was certainly a veteran, though not in the vintage class, quite. Its previous owners had had varying ideas about what colour it was to be and now it seemed that I was looking at the sum total of their idiosyncrasies. The bodywork was mainly a faded cerise, the wings a chipped blue, the wheel rims post-box red. I had never seen a more hideous combination of colours.

I leaned hard on the bonnet and pressed down; something groaned. I turned round, "Are you in pain?" I asked.

"Who, me mate?" said the garage-hand. "No, that was the car. She's getting on a bit; older than you are, I reckon. She don't care for rough usage."

"Will she go?" I said.

He scratched his head and then looked up at me with a smile.

"Like the perishin' wind, mate," he said.

I got into the car and started her up with two pulls on the starter. "There you are," he said, "a sheer bloomin' marvel, like I said. You want to drive

with your brake on through towns or they'll have you for speeding. That car does forty in bottom gear, mate, and I don't mean maybe!"

He took the card off the bonnet and showed it to me. "Today's Bargain," it read, "£45 only."

I said, "That card was written during Queen Victoria's last illness, I should say. I'll give you thirty-five." I began to count the notes out.

The young man's face assumed an expression of pained disgust. "Why, that'd be like selling my grandmother for a fiver," he said. "Oh, guvnor, have a heart. You get sensitive to that sort of thing, working amongst these old veterans."

"Right," I said, "I'm in a hurry. I'll give you forty if you'll fill me up with petrol into the bargain."

"Done," he said, his face creasing now at the hard bargain he had driven without my knowing it. "And if you'll wait a minute I'll give you a cover note for the insurance. We can fiddle it out finally when you're calling this way again. She's taxed to the end of the year."

"You'll never regret it, mate," he said, with a nasty grin as I trundled out of the garage yard into the road. "That model don't date, you know. It'll be just as good in a hundred years time as it is now!"

I set course northwards, and had the strange feeling that the young man was bent double with mirth as he watched me start out on the great journey. It was not until I had pulled up at Alconbury Hill, to find out what was rattling at the back, that I discovered I was still carrying a tin-plate on the back bumper.

"This model £45," it read.

Then I understood both why he was laughing and why the children along the road had suddenly grown so interested in my passage. I ripped the notice off and got back into the car. Then I laughed too, for I was on my way, and what was more, I was in such a contraption that no crook would ever think to find me travelling north so vehicled. This car was the best disguise I could have chosen. What was more, she went at such a gentle speed that everything, including children on bicycles, passed me with relative ease. Therefore, any car hanging about behind me must instantly arouse my suspicion! I felt strangely secure in that crazily painted tin box on wheels.

When the sun was sinking lower towards the west, I had a snack meal of sausages on toast at a wayside café, and having taken more petrol on board,

started off again.

To my great amazement that gallant little jalopy plugged on northwards without giving a spot of trouble. It was as though she had developed a personality of her own in our short time together. I began to sing in my elation. “Look, old girl,” I said at last, for I always talk to myself when I am driving alone; “look, my beauty, it is only right that you should have a name. I hereby christen you ‘Isabel’. What do you think of that, old girl?”

She gave a splutter or two, as though she thought it was all a joke as well, then she settled down once more to nibble her way up the concrete towards Grantham.

The dusk had turned to darkness when we ran through the great stone gates of old Lincoln, and when we saw the hill that lay before us, I was frankly afraid that I might be asking too much of my brave Isabel. But she tackled it like a lioness, a wheezy lioness, it must be admitted; a lioness nevertheless. Yet it was with relief that at last I saw the lights of the suburb that straggled along the summit of that ancient hill on which the Romans had once had their citadel and on which the floating grandeur of the great medieval cathedral still loomed out through the darkness. We had made it!

Outside the city, I stopped by the roadside. Isabel was almost boiling. It was inhuman to punish her any further. I lay back in the driving seat and dozed. I was desperately tired. I had gone through too much that day, and now the whole thing seemed a fantastic nightmare to me. Why, only this afternoon I was at the Zoo, watching the hippoes basking in the sunshine. . . . Only this afternoon I had smacked a policeman in the face with my one and only hat. . . . I had found a friend at the B.B.C. . . . and, my mind boggled at the thought, but I forced myself to think it, I had discovered a murdered man.

I lay back and speculated on what might happen. The body would inevitably be found, perhaps had been found, even before I had got clear of London. And no doubt my absence would be associated with it. Yet, I consoled myself, no one had seen me visit the office that afternoon; that is, except the B.B.C. producer and his driver, and the man in black. The first two had sworn they would know nothing about me, and the second was not likely to stand up in a court and accuse me!

So, if I were arrested on the charge of knowing something about the murder, I had no witness to state that I had been near the scene of the crime; whereas, I had a watertight alibi of a special sort in that I had struck the

young policeman outside the Zoo about the time when the murder must have been committed. And he would surely remember me!

As I sat there, I felt fairly sure of myself. Of course, I should have to come forward soon and see the police about the whole thing, but not until after August 26th. That much was certain. And then, I hoped Professor Maguire might be able to provide some support for my story.

I was thinking all these things, and wishing I might tumble into a comfortable bed at some secluded village inn, when a light flashed into my face. A policeman was standing outside, leaning on his bicycle. My heart gave a great thump and then sank. My dreams faded as suddenly as though they had been brushed away by a tornado.

Bad news travels fast, I thought, as I wound the window down and looked up into the young man's face.

"Do you know your rear light's out, sir?" he said.

I could have kissed him. "What!" I exclaimed. "It can't be! I've never had any trouble with it before."

"Well, you've got some now," he said sardonically. And at first I thought he was going to reach for his book. But he didn't.

"Try giving it a kick," he said to me as I got out. "It often works."

I did as he said. The red light blazed forth like a homing beacon. "Well," I said, "it's never done that before."

He regarded me with the slow irony of most country policemen.

"Fancy that," he said.

Then, as an afterthought, he almost murmured, "I should get a new one, if I was you."

I said, "But it's a good light, look at it."

"I meant a car," he said. "Good night, sir."

I watched his solid bulk disappearing into the darkness and then I started the engine again and turned on to the long straight Roman road that leads towards the River Humber, well over thirty miles away. At least I would be somewhere relatively near to Hull before I tumbled into bed that night.

As I strolled on along the road, between overhanging trees, a distant church clock sounded midnight. I decided that I would call it a day, and stop at the first village I saw.

And then Isabel let me down. After her gallant journey, comparable almost with that of Black Bess herself, she gave way to age and hard usage. I heard a sudden clang that sounded as though I had run over an oil drum in the road. I got out and looked, to see what I had hit. There was nothing. I lifted the ramshackle bonnet and flashed my torch over the engine. The fan-belt had broken.

Now, had she been a bit younger, and cold, I should not have let a little thing like that bother me, but she was already very hot, and I was in the depths of an unknown countryside, late at night. I had to press on, and that was going to do her no good at all.

I waited for a while, with some fantastic idea that she might cool down a little, and then I started off once more, nursing her along that straight and undulating Ermine Street.

“Don’t boil too soon, Isabel!” I begged her. “Don’t boil till we get to a village, old girl.”

But, with the perverseness of her sex the world over, she did. I heard the steam hissing somewhere and I almost gave up the ghost. And then . . . I saw lights! Ahead of me, not more than half a mile, a long string of bright lights. I even forgot myself so far as to put my foot right down on the accelerator, and so we chugged and hissed onwards, until we came to a stop outside the wrought-iron gates of an Air Force Station.

I did not need to be told what sort of place it was. I had spent too long in one not to recognize barrack blocks, guardroom, and all the other conveniences of a station.

I felt like shouting “Thalassa! Thalassa!” But it would not have been appropriate. I don’t think the Greeks had a word for the sort of place I had come to.

“Well, Isabel, old girl,” I said, “maybe we’ll get a bit of first aid for you here, if I know anything about anything at all.”

I got out and walked towards the light that burned above the guardroom. As I passed the window, I saw a corporal bent over a table, his tongue stuck out, writing something down with the stub of a pencil. “Perfect!” I thought. “God bless the unchangeable R.A.F.!”

CHAPTER 8

R.A.F. Brampton

There's something rather frightening, other-worldly, about an Air Force Station, especially a bomber station. If you have to work on one, there are times when you think those flat and rolling wide expanses, with the squat hangars dotted here and there, and the white control tower poking up its warning finger into the empty sky, form a sort of purgatory. You develop something akin to agoraphobia, the fear of open spaces. And you wish to creep into any enclosed and sheltered place away from the big sky that comes right down to the smooth ground, away from the slim and inhuman pylons and masts and flagpoles, the looming hangars and the lonely birds that swoop and settle in the dusk far out on that great plain which is your home, their melancholy cries coming back to you mingled with the whirring and whining and whistling of aircraft whose soulless voices echo within their metal prisons as their blue-overalled slaves scurry here and there to tend them. . . .

But there is something wonderful too, something you never forget, any more than the sailor forgets the sea when he has retired. He may have hated the sea when he was out on a long and hazardous voyage. He may have sworn never to come within fifty miles of the coast again, once he could set his feet on dry land. But one day he will see a shell, perhaps, a natural toy in a child's hand. He will take the shell into his own hand and may put it casually to his nose. And then, though the scent of salt be as distant as the antipodes, he will feel unsettled again, will want to know the lash of spray upon his face once more, the rocking of the floor beneath his feet. He will want the sea.

It is not simply that an airfield may exert a magical influence on a man's mind. After all, it is only a *place*, like any other place, rock and soil and wood and metal and grass. The inescapable magic is produced not by the place alone, but by the association between the place and the men who have

moved in the place, have used the tools and the weapons of that place, have laughed and cursed in that place, have lived and even died in that place.

Each airfield is a battlefield too. We often forget that as we walk or ride past these lonely and perhaps derelict stretches of wire-enclosed purgatory. Men respect such great fields as Waterloo or Flodden; they speak of them with awe, for here masses of men toiled against each other to decide the fate of a nation. They call up pictures of smoke and explosion, of waving banners and gallant generals riding here and there among the press, their pointing swords indicating the direction that the charge must take. . . .

Yet, here and there over England, over quiet England, tucked away among the green woods and hills and alongside grey-towered parish churches, are many battlefields—the airfields, whether they were fighter or bomber airfields. The silver aircraft screaming across the blue skies of summer, not a mile from home, perhaps, were once in the very thick of battle—just as much as Sir John Moore's good British riflemen were, or the brave lancers who rode into the Russian lines at Balaclava.

And the great unwieldy looking bombers, the Hampdens, and Wellingtons, the Halifaxes and Stirlings and Manchesters and Lancasters—they were all part of the immense and frightening battle, and their undulating lonely homes were battlefields. Only those who have seen a black war-painted bomber limp late across the night sky, the wind screaming through its ruined fuselage, will fully understand that. Only those who know what sad cargo of death such an aircraft could carry back can fully understand the curious, mixed feelings I experienced as I passed through the wrought-iron gateway of that bomber station, just after midnight, on the long road towards Hull.

And it all came back to me as I looked through the bare lighted window, to see the puzzled corporal sucking his stub of pencil, wondering, no doubt, how to spell the next word in his letter home. It was almost as though I had never left the Air Force to pit my few brains against the guile of King's College examiners in English literature. I smiled inwardly at this thought; I wondered why I had ever contemplated going out into the wide and cruel world again, of leaving this life of almost monastic simplicity to earn my living in the difficult modern chaos of business or industry.

I recalled the words my Group Captain had spoken to me, at our last interview. He was a tall scholarly looking man who had never worn anything but pale blue and had never looked on any other landscape but an airfield. He said, "Well, Stewart, old boy, you want to consider this thing very

carefully. Things aren't so easy *outside*." He always spoke of civilian life as *outside*, in the same way as some men might speak of *the jungle*, the place where wild beasts roam! "You have a nice comfortable home here and as much pay as you need, really. But what waits for you *outside*? Oh yes, I know we have a few parades and that sort of nonsense, but all in all they add up to nothing when you compare the things you'll have to do *outside*."

I think I was feeling in a sprightly mood that morning. I said, as innocently as I could, "What things, sir?"

He passed his hand across his forehead, as though he was trying to remember what things; but of course, he knew, and I knew, that he had never been *outside*, had never earned his living in any other way than the way he was following then.

"Well, just things in general," he said lamely. "Anyway, think it over."

He smiled at me as though he felt sure he had convinced me. But I stood up and said, "I think I'll have a shot at life *outside*, all the same, sir." I saluted and left his office. He stared after me as though he had lost another soul that might have been gained with more careful tending.

So I had gone *outside*, to earn my glorious living in the jungle of civilian life. And what had I done? Gained a degree that was hardly worth mentioning, played a few games of football that were fun to remember, and set up business as, of all things, a private investigator!

It did not bear thinking about; I recalled Connie, the man in black, poor old Gaberdine, and broken-down Isabel. My milestones of success! I could have groaned with the sad irony of it all.

I pushed open the guardroom door and walked inside. The corporal was caught off-balance, his pencil in his mouth. Then he saw that I was a stranger and jumped up, clapping on his side-cap and trying to buckle his webbing belt.

"Hey, you," he said, "wait a minute. You can't come in 'ere."

I was on known territory. I smiled as sweetly as I could and said, "I'm in here."

"Well, you can blinkin' well get out again," said the corporal, coming round the table very officially.

"Now, now, Corp," I said, "you know you mustn't hurt a nice little civilian like me. You would get into very serious trouble, you understand, in

the civilian court, not at some comfortable little court-martial of your own, with your own section commander trying you."

He goggled at me. I said, "Now pipe down, Corp, or the janker wallahs in there," I indicated the cell door with my thumb, "will be laughing at you!"

I walked over to the notice board. "I see you still have D.R.O's, Corp. They're a bind, aren't they!" I flicked over the pages of the roughly stencilled notices.

"All right," he said, "come clean, what do you want? I can see you've done a stretch in the R.A.F., but I must say you've got a blinkin' cheek, coming busting in 'ere like that. Quite gave me a turn, you did."

I said, "Look, chum, I'm in a bit of a fix. My fan-belt's broken and I want to get a bit further up the road. Is your motor transport officer about? I was wondering if I could buy a belt from him. I know he'll have lashings of them in stores."

The corporal gave a mirthless laugh. "What, 'im!" he said. "He's up at the mess enjoyin' 'isself. *They've* got a bit of a thrash on up there, celebratin' the Old Man's birthday, or some such. 'E won't come down 'ere to sell you a fan-belt, I'll lay five to one on that!" Then from behind us a thin voice piped out, "Hey, Corp, if you'll let me out o' here, I'll get 'im a fan-belt. I know where the M.T. bloke keeps 'em. Used to work in stores meself. There's a back way in. It's never locked."

I turned to see a shock-headed young fellow peering through the little window in the cell door. He smiled at me and nodded, as though we were old friends.

The corporal said sternly, "You get back into bed, Watkins. If I let you out you'd be off up that road and we'd have to fetch you back from Leeds again, like we always have to do."

The prisoner shrugged his thin shoulders and said confidentially, as though only to me, " 'Ard-'earted shocker is that there Corp! And to think I always write 'is letters to 'is best girl for 'im. Base ingratitude, I call it, don't you, sir?"

The corporal stepped forward and rapped on the door.

"I'm warnin' you, Watkins, if you don't beat it I'll 'ave you in the cookhouse for the rest of the week. They've just got three ton of potatoes in that'll keep you busy."

"Sorry, Corp," said the voice, and the head disappeared.

I wondered how I could play on this martinet's feelings. Then I thought the better of it. He was in the right, and I was trying in a way to break the law I should have upheld. Although, I consoled myself, the urgency of my situation forced me to do it, not my own inclination. Somehow, too, a mere fan-belt seemed so unimportant, compared with that dead man in the office in Soho Square, or the crook with the knife wrapped up in a handkerchief—or, and I shuddered as I thought of him, the black Buddha with the ivory face. . . .

I was almost about to walk out of the guardroom and try my luck up at the Officers' Mess, when the door opened and a Flight Lieutenant came in, a short, broad-shouldered man, wearing his greatcoat, for the night had turned out to be a chilly one. He wore a black armband, on which were painted the letters in red, "S.D.O." He was the Station Duty Officer, whose job it was to keep a watch on the general affairs of the station once every so often, when his turn came round.

I saw the armband first, and felt that I might have some luck there. Then I looked up and saw the man's face, and knew that I would!

"Why, Shorty, you old reprobate!" I said. "Have you smashed up any good aircraft lately?"

He stared at me in wide-eyed surprise for a moment; then he took my hand in his and almost broke every bone in it.

"Well, what do you know!" he said. "So they've loosed you out of Wormwood Scrubs at last! Hey, Corp, what's this bad type doing here, trying to set fire to the station?"

The corporal breathed a sigh of relief. He had thought he would get his next leave stopped for letting me into the holy of holies.

"He just wants a fan-belt, sir," he said, very primly.

Flight Lieutenant Shorthouse, hook-nosed and crop-haired, hard-faced and grim, but with the heart of a battered teddy-bear, gave me a punch in the chest that almost bowled me over.

"Fan-belt! Fan-belt!" he roared. "Well, what do you know! I trained with this shocking type, Corp, and he used to go round collecting bike-chains then. Got the best collection in Bomber Command, he used to boast. And now it's fan-belts, is it! Well, what do you know!"

I did my best to look as solemn as possible and I said to the corporal, "Corporal, I am very sad to think that the Air Force must depend on prunes

like this. I had hopes that such enemies of peace would have been swept away long ago, so that the great service to which you belong might gain itself still further glory without any blots on its scutcheon!”

The corporal tried to look wise. He even nodded his head, as though my words meant something to him.

But I heard a chuckle from behind me, and Shorty had got my arm in a terrible grip and was twisting it.

“I’ll have you shot,” he said, “for inciting a good Corp to mutiny! Come on, we’ll go up to the mess. They’ve got a bit of a meeting there. This is my last call to-night, so I’m handing over to the Corp. Hey, Corp,” he went on, “look after things. I’ll be in the mess if you want me. And don’t let me hear that you’ve been beating those prisoners with iron chains or anything, or I’ll have your blood!”

We left the guardroom to the sound of hollow laughter that came from the cell where Aircraftman Watkins was rejoicing that the corporal had been taken down a peg.

Outside, Shorty said, “Fancy you getting lost out on this horrible deserted road. Why, there are so many wolves round here, they’d gobble you up, a little man like you! How did you come?”

I pointed to Isabel, as she stood, forlorn under the bright lamp at the gates.

Shorty gazed at her and then pushed his cap to the back of his head.

“Jeepers!” he said. “What’s that go on, lighter fuel?”

“Take care,” I answered. “You speak of the girl I love.”

“Well, let’s push her into the yard here,” said Shorty. “Otherwise some wandering tinker might put a patch on her, thinking you’ve left the kitchen kettle out for his attention.”

We bundled Isabel into the shelter of the station yard. She was still warm.

As we left her, I said, “Shan’t be long, old girl. Soon have you fitted up as good as new.”

Shorty gave a snort. “Come on,” he said, “or the party will be over.”

But the party was not over.

In the centre of the long low anteroom, a group of red-faced young airmen were singing, their black ties made up into bows, their hair tousled, and the expressions on their faces simulating extremities of grief. They sang an old song, which expressed, as well as any I knew, the curious nonchalance of the Air Force:

A handsome young airman lay dying,
And as on the airfield he lay,
To the od-bods who round him came sighing,
These last dying words he did say:

Take the cylinders out of my kidneys,
The connecting-rod out of my brain,
Take the cam-shaft from out of my backbone—
And assemble the engine again!

In one corner another group of chaps were clustered round a very worn grand piano, their faces blacked up with soot. They were imitating negro Blues singers, in a melancholy ditty, the main words of which were:

See that spider, crawlin, up de wall!
Yeh, see dat spider, crawlin, up de wall!
Oh, see dat spider, a-crawlin, up de wall,
He haint got, haint got no home at all!

The large open fireplace was red with a comfortable glow, despite the fact that according to rules and regulations no coal might yet be burned in billets, the weather not being considered as sufficiently inclement, as the phrase goes, by Air Ministry, until September.

I was once more interested in a round game that was taking place in a far corner of the anteroom, a game as old as drinking mugs, and they must be fairly ancient! In it, some poor unfortunate is chosen to stand in the circling ring of his fellows, and they prance round, each one with a pint pot on his head. These young aircrew looked like wicked cherubs, or cherubic devils as they went round, wagging their fingers and balancing their beer or ginger-ale.

Do you know the muffin man,
Do you know the muffin man,
Do you know the muffin man,
Who lives in Drury Lane?

The man in the middle was doing his best to sing the required answer:

Yes, I know the muffin man,
Yes, I know the muffin man,
Yes, I know the muffin man,
Who lives in Drury Lane.

But as the ring closed in about him, he wavered, for the precariously balanced pint-pots were now almost over him. He wavered and stopped for an instant and then came the deluge! The wretch tried to duck, but his fate was sealed. He came out of the circle; drenched and laughing, the tormentors chose another victim, and the weary barman filled up the tankards once more.

I turned away from the scene. Some critics might consider such behaviour as being nothing less than hooliganism, I thought. But that would be to ignore the true reason for such games. A sedentary clerk might presumably gain relaxation from a quiet game of chess or a chair by the fire with a good book. But a young fellow who lived more dangerously had to play more roughly. There was a reason for it all.

Then Shorty grabbed my arm. “Come over here; the G.C. would like a word with you.”

The Group Captain was a youngish man, and had obviously been operational, since he wore the ribbons both of D.S.O. and D.F.C., with bars.

He grinned at me from under the wide brim of a Mexican sombrero. “I bet you were an awful navigator,” he said, holding out his hand. “Here, sit down and have a drink. You look dog-tired.”

Then he proceeded to forget all about me and began to strum on a broken-down banjo that someone had suddenly found under a settee. A young man, with his tunic on inside out and his trousers-legs rolled up to the knee, bent down and flung a Verey cartridge into the fire and the room was suddenly filled with red and green smoke.

“Slaughter him, you goons!” shouted the Group Captain, fanning himself with his sombrero. The singers banded together to chase the culprit round the room. They held their beer mugs threateningly over his head. There was suddenly a flailing scrum of arms and legs in the middle of the room, and everyone was coughing and laughing and shouting.

“Come on,” said Shorty, “the party’s getting to the rough stage. They’ll grow stupid now. You are best out of it, unless you don’t mind losing your

trousers!"

He led the way from the room. No one noticed us go. I said, "Can you get a fan-belt for me, old boy?"

"Not a hope," he grinned. "That was the M.T. officer who threw the cartridge in the fire. He won't be in any state to fit a fan-belt to-night. Look, you can stay here. I'll fix it. You can share my billet; there are two beds. You don't want to go out into the night now. It's nearly one o'clock."

Then the phone-bell rang. Somehow, I got a sudden prickling down the back of my neck at the sound. In a silly sort of way, I thought of John Donne's menacing words:

Send not to ask for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.

And as I heard that phone-bell tolling, I knew it meant me.

Shorty answered the call.

"Yes, Corp," he said, "what is it? What, three detectives? Hey, go easy! Have you been drinking? What do three detectives want here at this time in the morning? What's that? They are chasing a murderer? Blimey! What, they say he came here in that coloured car? Impossible, I know the man who. . . . Oh! No, don't send them up, I'll come down to the guardroom myself. Roger!"

He turned to me and his face was serious. "You heard that?" he asked calmly.

I nodded. "I could explain everything, Shorty," I said. "But I mustn't. I swore I'd keep the whole thing secret until I got through with a job I'm on. Honest, I wouldn't drop you in for anything crooked."

He stared me straight in the eye. It was like looking into the eyes of a falcon for a moment. Then he said, "Do you give me your word you have done nothing wrong?"

I said, "I swear it, Shorty."

He stared at me again. "I'll take a chance," he said. He put out his hand and grasped mine. Then he took up the phone again.

"Exchange," he said, "look, Duty Officer here. Tell M.T. to send the station wagon round to the mess immediately. Ask for Sergeant Baines to drive. He's on duty anyway, that's all right. Yes, straightway."

He turned to me. “Baines has to make a run to-night anyway, to Kirton. That’s further north from here. He’s got to take some equipment they need for an early morning flight so he had to go soon. I was giving him a bit longer in bed; he only came off duty at teatime.”

I said, “Thanks, Shorty, I won’t forget this.”

He gave me a playful punch. “Of course you will,” he said. “But I advise you to lie on the floor as the car goes through the gates, then if those narks are looking out for you, you might get clear, see?”

He had hardly finished speaking when we heard the big estate car pull up outside the mess door.

Shorty said a word or two to the driver and then slapped me on the back. “Good luck,” he said. “I’ve told Baines here that you’re a V.I.P. from Air Ministry and he has promised to take care of you, haven’t you, Bainsey?”

The driver growled something inaudible and we swung round and then down the wide drive towards the lights that burned outside the guardroom.

I wanted to say, “No rest for the wicked,” but I felt sure the saturnine sergeant wouldn’t appreciate any attempt at humour. In any case, I can’t say that I felt any too humorous as we came nearer the spot where three men were waiting to interview me.

CHAPTER 9

Bed at Last

As we drew nearer the guardroom, the driver began to slow down. A horrible realization dawned on me.

"Got to call in there," he said. "Shan't be long. Only going to sign out."

I had looked ahead, beyond the station gates. Parked where I had first left Isabel was a long black car, a Jaguar, I thought. I had no doubts about who would be in that car. Call it intuition, if you like, I only know that somehow I was certain that the three detectives, so called, were none other than the three thugs with whom I had already made a too violent acquaintance. That was no police car.

I said to the driver, "Don't stop. I will fix it with the duty officer. You won't get into trouble."

He gave a snort. "It's regulations, sir," he said.

I put on the V.I.P. attitude now. There was nothing else for it. "Look, Sergeant," I said, "you heard the duty officer say who I was? I can assure you that if you don't drive straight out of these gates, you will find yourself back in the ranks to-morrow. Understood?"

His face was grim and set. I could see that much by the light of the instrument panel. He did not speak, but nodded in such a way as to leave me with no doubts about his feelings towards me. I was sorry I had said it, but I knew that my only hope now lay in getting as fast a start as I could out of those gates. What happened after that, I could not hope to know. But every primitive instinct in my make-up told me to move, and move fast!

We passed the guardroom. The corporal looked out of the window and called something, but my sergeant's lips were tightly pursed. He was too angry even to reply to the corporal's query.

And as we slid by the guardroom door, I saw two figures I knew only too well. One wore a thin black moustache; the other a long red one. Now they both had on heavy white mackintoshes and felt hats. They certainly looked the part—either detectives or crooks! But out of some third-rate drama of dark alleyways and sewers.

They turned as we passed. I was bent in my seat and hoped they had not seen me. Where was the man in black? I thought as we slewed round and took the road north. In that big black Jaguar, I answered myself. Where else? That car seemed made for him. . . .

On the open road I spoke again, as briefly as possible for I could not trust my voice now, I was so scared.

"Step on it," I said. "This is top priority."

The sergeant grunted once more, and more out of anger than from a desire to obey me, he pressed his foot down and the station wagon leapt forward, roaring like a stung leopard with the acceleration.

Then I sat back and breathed freely at last. We were out of immediate danger, with a clear road before us and a fast engine to shoot us along. I felt in my waistcoat pocket. That dangerous little phial was still there. I had forgotten it for the greater part of the day, but now the realization came over me again that this, this little glass cylinder and its greyish contents, was the sole reason for my making a poor overworked airman turn out at one o'clock in the morning and roar along the Ermine Street. Only this—oh, yes, and the fear of death, that somehow or other had been in my bones all day, even without my thinking of it consciously. I was racing for my life, I knew, nothing more, and nothing less. And that was enough!

Now I felt tired, desperately tired, impossibly tired. I had done too much, been too far, seen too many people. As our bonnet clove its way through the darkness, I could almost have slumped back into that comfortable, well-upholstered seat and have resigned myself to sleep, even though there might be no awakening. Yet something, perhaps it was the set face of the sergeant beside me, kept me just awake. I felt that if he could stay awake, then I must. I tried to keep my mind on the journey before us.

Far, far ahead of the car, the twin beams of the headlights traced their long golden tunnels of discovery. The overhanging trees that lined the straight road stood out, with their black shadows behind them, like cardboard models, their colours toned down by the night. And the many clustered wires that guided us from one telegraph post to the other shone like thin strands of silver. A small rabbit limped out ahead of us, full in the

glare in the middle of the shining leaden road, then stopped and seemed undecided. When we were almost upon it, the creature turned and whisked away, back to where it had come from. Once, as we roared between the trees, I heard an owl shriek, its note rising madly as it rushed over our heads into the smothering wind we set up. The moon, now almost at the full, hung before us in the middle sky, gently mad and silver, patron of lovers and poets. . . . The mad and silver moon. . . .

"Take a grip on yourself," I thought. "You'll be the next one for the madhouse!"

I turned in my seat, to look through the back window. I think I knew what I would see even before I turned. Far off, back along that straight road, a car was sweeping through the night towards us. Its headlamps shone like the amber eyes of a pursuing monster, a monster, no doubt driven by another black monster, with the face of an ivory Buddha. . . .

I made myself wait a while, to see how things went, before I spoke to the sergeant who was driving me. Then, when I had checked once more through the back window, I said, "That car behind us; it's coming up fast, isn't it, Sergeant?"

Now he broke the silence he had imposed on himself. He nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. "It has been gaining on us for some time. It should pass us within half a mile at the speed it's doing. We have held fifty-five for the last two miles and it's quite some faster than that—seventy, I'd say."

Now I knew that I must take him into my confidence, at least, as far as was necessary for his co-operation.

"Look," I said, my voice hoarse with urgency, "the men in that car want me badly. They are crooks, I assure you of that. They are after something I've got and they'll stop at nothing to get it."

For a split second he took his eyes off the road and stared at me. Then he regained his composure. "Air Ministry secrets, sir?" he said.

"Something like that, Sergeant," I said. "Now look, I want you to slow down sufficiently for me to jump on to the grass at the edge of the road, but don't slacken off too much or they'll see it. Got that?"

The dark figure at my side nodded. "Wish you luck, sir," he said. "What am I to do then?"

"Go like a bat out of hell," I said. "It'll be up to you when I'm clear. All right, give me the word when to jump."

He let his foot back on the accelerator, and then said, "Right!"

Our speed slackened off quite perceptibly and we skimmed the edge of the grass verge. The sergeant leaned over and held the door handle.

"Okay," I said, "if I don't do it now I never shall! Thanks a lot, Sergeant. See you in paradise!"

It was meant to be a joke, of a sort, but I regretted it as soon as I said it. Even at thirty miles an hour, you never know! But I did not have any time to worry then. I dived sideways into the night. The almost purple darkness slid round me and I fell out of the orbit of the big car like a meteorite slipping away from its parent body, sideways and down, down, and then the bump.

I hit the ground with a terrific shock and rolled over helpless with the impact like a shot rabbit. I had time to notice a number of things; the red rear-lights of the R.A.F. car almost spurting away like tracer bullets into the night; then a gap of deep, deep blackness as the night enveloped me; then the sudden crescendo of approaching engine and tyre noises, preceded by the almost painful glare of powerful headlights; a screaming roar and the second car, the pursuing car, was past me, and I was in the dark again.

I did not see its retreating rear-lights because all at once my world of consciousness seemed to close in, like the smallest shutter of a camera, leaving me aware only of the most immediate thing—which happened to be a hawthorn twig, well-armed with spikes, that had wrapped itself lovingly into my hair. I realised then that fate had been very kind to me and had rolled me into the hedge, out of the line of vision of those great searching headlamps. Yes, I was conscious of that, and then of the shrill pain in my left shoulder. It came over me so suddenly and so violently that I wanted to howl out. But I don't think I did; at least, I didn't hear myself, if I did howl.

Instead, I just passed out, under the hedge. I had found my bed for the night it seemed.

CHAPTER 10

The Cottage by the Wood

I do not think I lay there very long, however, for I was suddenly aware of someone looking over the low hedge, down at me. It was a man with a gun. I lay quite still, staring up into the whitish blur of his face, knowing he had seen me, but now no longer anxious to make any move, one way or the other. If he was going to shoot me, then he would do it, I knew, and nothing I was capable of could prevent him. There was a sort of grim consolation in that situation. I had run as far and as fast as I could, and now I was cornered. No one could change that. I even found myself thinking of the words from *Macbeth*:

> *things without all remedy*
> *Should be without regard. What's done is done.*

There was a curious sort of consolation in that thought.

Then the man hoisted himself over the hedge and laid his gun down in the grass. He bent over me and I could see at that range he was a countryman.

"You're a rum 'un," he said, "a-jumpin' out o' cars, like that. I seed yer, down the road, but I was just getting a dog o' mine out of a trap, poor beggar. I come as soon as I could. Are you hurt?"

I should have said "No," but just then my shoulder called out again in purple language, and I said "Yes, I think so," instead.

"H'm, it's yer shoulder, I see," he said, with a gentle roughness. "No wonder, jumpin' out o' one o' them mad things. Well, it's done now. Come on, I'll see what I can do for you, me young jockey. Try to put yer other arm round my neck."

He held me strongly in his great rustic grip. Even in the moonlight, I could see that he was quite elderly, sixty I should have said, from his lined

face and white hair, yet there was nothing senile about his movements or his strength.

"Hold on a minute," he said, half-apologetically. Then he stooped and picked up the single-barrelled shotgun which he had laid on the grass. As he did so, he gave me a shrewd smile.

"Mustn't leave 'er be'ind," he said. "If Johnny, the Keeper, found 'er, 'e'd know I'd been about and 'e'd be up at t' cottage fust thing in the mornin' wi' a summons!"

I sniffed how the wind blew and said nothing. This must be one of the famous Lincolnshire poachers we'd all sung about and never met, I thought. But I was in no state to be overcritical of any man's way of earning the comforts of life at that moment.

As we went slowly along he said, "You c'n tell me t'mind me own business if yer like, but between you and me, what did you jump out o' that there car for?"

I was at a loss for a moment. There was a certain rough comradeship and honesty about this old poacher that made me feel ashamed to deceive him. But there was nothing I could do about that. He would not have believed me anyway, if I had told him I was being chased by gangsters who wanted to put me out of the way. I decided that I must lie to him, whatever my conscience said.

I said, "I'm a schoolmaster on holiday, trying to get up to the Lake District as cheaply as I can; you know how things are. I've been hitch-hiking, you know. Well, I got a lift outside Lincoln to-night in that car. The driver seemed all right, but when we got well on to this road, he started swerving about all over the place. I could see then that he was drunk, too drunk to be driving a car of that power. I asked him to let me get out and walk, but that seemed to send him crazy. We zigzagged all over the road, nearly knocked a policeman down way back, where the side road comes in at the finger-post. . . ."

The old man nodded, wisely. "Aye, that'll be the Dunholme turn," he said. "Many's the tom-fool driver I've seed rushin' along past there. Ought to have a man on point duty there, they did, or summat."

I felt I had convinced him then. "Well," I said, "I'd no wish to end up on a mortuary slab, so I waited till he slowed down a bit, and jumped out. That's all."

He looked at me with something like admiration. “It takes a good man to do that,” he said. “I’d not have dared do it, nor would many folk.”

My shoulder began to hurt me again and I had no breath left for desultory conversation; though the old poacher continued to nod his head, with a curious sort of rural respect, and mutter, “Nay, lad, there’s not many’d dare to jump out o’ them things. Nay, not many; and on a darkish night too. Not many.”

This solo went on until it was driven out of his mind by our arrival at his cottage. He stopped and pointed: “That’s where we’re bound for, me lad,” he said. “Light’s on, so missus’ll have put the kettle on waiting. Always gets up about this time to see I have a warm drink inside me afore I go back to bed. She’ll be surprised with what I’ve brought back to-night, though! A bit out o’ the ordinary! Aye, a bit out o’ the ordinary, that’s what her’ll say!”

The low white-washed cottage nestled at the very edge of a thick dark wood. It seemed to glow in the moonlight like the ghost of a house and not a real thing of bricks, and plaster, and thatch. The blue woodsmoke rose straight up into the moonlight and was clearly discernible a field away. In one of the downstairs windows an old oil lamp burned, painting the rectangle of window-space a deep amber with its light.

It seemed a wonderful place to me, after the jig-saw experiences of the daytime. There was an air of solid safety and normality about it, that made me wish I lived in such a place, in the depths of the countryside, as this man did. His mind was not overburdened by the anxieties of ambition and success, one could tell that. It was this simple rustic life that had kept him young and strong and compassionate.

Then we had passed through the little wicket gate that shut his small garden off from the field, and he was feeling for the door-catch.

The sounds and smells of the cottage rushed gently out to greet us as the oak door swung open—the crackling of a wood fire, the warm scent of baked cake, the faint cheeping of a bird beneath the baize cover on his cage, the grave tolerance of a kitchen clock that had been present at so many occasions, births and deaths, meetings and partings, good luck and ill luck, until time meant nothing to it, only clucking; and life meant nothing to it, nothing from which a good or an ill might be separated; only continued knocking of wheel against stay, the wooden bearings that had outlasted five families of birth and death, and meeting and parting. . . .

When I heard that clock, I knew that I could find peace here, in the old poacher’s cottage at the edge of the dark wood. He helped me over the

threshold carefully and a little plump woman, in a faded pink bedjacket and her grey hair in curlers, rose from the red-varnished rocking chair at one side of the fireplace and shaded her eyes with her hand.

"Brought a visitor, Martha," said the old man. " 'E fell out of a car, he did! Lucky to be alive."

The old lady smiled, peering into my face, and nodded her head with some attempt at understanding.

"I thought it might be our Tom coming back wi' you, Jack," she said. "Sit down, young man, and I'll pour you out a cup o' tea. You'll be wanting a cup o' tea after coming all that way."

She hobbled out of the warm room into the pantry. The old poacher leaned towards me.

"Tom was our lad," he said, "but he never come back from one o' them places abroad, when our boys were puttin' finishin' touches to that there 'Itler, you knows. But Martha never will 'ave it he's gone. Her always thinks Tom'll come back one o' these days. Don't let it worry yer, mister. I've got used to it now. You 'ave to, when you live with it."

He sat me down in an easy chair near the fire-grate and began to run an oily rag the length of his gun-barrel.

"You got to look after them things as looks after you," he said. "Old Meg 'ere fills the pot most days!" He patted the gun lovingly.

Then the old lady came in, smiling and nodding to me from time to time. "Excuse the curlers, mester," she said. "I got to look my best, in case our lad walks in, sudden like."

I sat and drank the warm sweet tea this kind old lady poured for me, and as I thought of their tragedy, my own troubles began to seem ridiculously small. Faced with this old lady's quiet faith and her husband's gentleness and even balance, I felt myself to be almost an impostor, and for a moment I almost blurted out the true story of my presence on the roadside that night.

Indeed, I think it may have been with the vague intention of showing it to them and of explaining its purpose that I felt in my waistcoat pocket for that little phial of grey powder which had brought me scurrying half-way the length of England. It was not there. I thrust my fingers deeper into my pocket, groping anxiously, imagining that the small tube might have lodged somewhere, in a loose lining. And then I drew my hand out again with a small cry. My finger-tips were bleeding.

So I realized the truth of the affair. The violence of my fall from the speeding car had smashed the phial to the tiniest pieces. And now, all that remained in my waistcoat pocket was a thimbleful of glass splinters and a few grains of dust. . . . And for this, the man in the gaberdine raincoat had met his death.

I felt ashamed of myself, to the very core. Yet at the same time I experienced that curious mixed feeling of wanting to laugh, quite apart from the terrible seriousness of the matter. There is a point beyond which gravity turns to mirth—the point of no return, in flying language, and I had now reached that point. Nor did I wish to return, or to go forward now. In fact, the whole purpose of my going anywhere had finished. I had nothing to take to anyone any more, and no message to give. And suddenly I began to laugh. The two old folk stared at me in grave concern.

"Lad's not feelin' very well, Martha," the old man said. Then he came over to me, supporting me in case I fell from the chair. I tried to tell him that I was all right; indeed, I honestly thought that I was. But he was wiser than I gave him credit for, after all. My last memory of that night, in the comfortable and warm little room, with the bird cheeping in its cage and the old clock ticking all time away, was of the old man pulling off my jacket, ever so gently, and his wife hobbling in with an enamel bowl of steaming water and a clean white towel.

"We'll have a look at that shoulder, lad," she was saying. "I'd like anybody to do the same for our Tom if he came to grief."

Then the clock and the bird faded away from me and I sank back into that chair, and into the depths of an exhausted sleep. That was the longest day in my life.

CHAPTER 11

A Troubled Night

My night in the little white cottage at the edge of the dark wood was not a restful one. I had done too much, seen too much, for my brain to lie quiet, even though my limbs were still. My dreams were chaotic and disturbing. I seemed to be conscious of their silliness even as they were being dreamt. But I could not break away from the state of exhausted nightmare in which I was a victim to the ridiculous procession of images.

For instance, in one sequence, the scientist in the dirty gaberdine was pouring masses of that scarce greyish powder into the radiator of Isabel, while the massive man in black—more massive than ever in my dream—was trying to push two tigers into the car. They were growling menacingly at him, but he only smiled in that impassive ivory-image way of his, and smacked them on the rump, saying, “That’s all the gratitude I get for bringing you out for the day, is it? Well, you shall go back to the Zoo directly we get home to Hull, and serve you right.” One of the tigers sat up, like a dog begging, then, and began to speak. I recognized that he was speaking with the voice of the Group Captain at Brampton. And as I watched, he even felt in the car and put on a Mexican sombrero. “Oh, please, Uncle, don’t take us back,” he said. “We’ll be good tigers and eat our fish. We promise, don’t we, Connie?” The other tiger had suddenly put on a cardigan and thick black spectacles. She giggled and said, “I don’t mind going back to the Zoo if I can take my knitting. I have a cold coming on and I’d rather be there than at the B.B.C., it’s always so draughty at the B.B.C., I always think.”

The scientist stopped pouring the greyish powder into the tank and turned round. I noticed that he still had that little hole drilled neatly in the middle of his forehead. He was smiling at the big man in black. “Let them

have their own way, Tom," he said. "I always say that a contented tiger is a contented tiger, and you can't say no fairer than that."

The tigers gave a laugh and jumped into Isabel and began to rock from side to side. The old car swayed and swayed until she began to creak and then pieces fell off her; first the mudguards, then the yellowing windscreen, then the bonnet, and then the wheel-hubs. They became dust as soon as they touched the ground. And suddenly there was nothing of the car but a rusty iron chassis.

The tigers gave a high yell and bounded away over the fields. The scientist said, "I'm glad they saw reason at last. They will be home before us, Tom."

The man in black began to fold the iron chassis up, like a telescope. When he had got it very small, he threw it over a hedge. "What concerns me," he said, "is that nameplate off Soho Square. I think Stewart ought to be made to clean it, don't you?"

The scientist said, "*Dolce far niente*, my friend. After all, you've just thrown it over the hedge. You can't expect him to go scrambling over hedges with a sprained shoulder. If you want him to clean it, you must get him a bucket of soda-water! Fair do's for everyone, I say."

Then the man in black looked over the hedge and said, "I do declare you're right. And I can see just the place where I shall be able to get a bucket of soda-water for him. Can you see it—that little white cottage at the edge of the wood?"

When I heard him say that in my dream, I felt trapped and began to shout out, "Get away from here. I'm not here. Go away and leave me alone."

I yelled so loudly that I woke myself up. I could still hear the echo of my own voice as I sat up in bed, and I wondered then whether I had called out in actuality.

It was still night. The moonlight shone across the window. I could see the tops of the nearest trees, touched with silver light. I was in a narrow little bedroom. They must have carried me there. The bed I slept in was a small iron affair, like the one I had in my office-bedroom in London. I lay back in it and was about to pull the blanket over my face when something seemed to move outside the little window. At first I wondered whether it was the shadow of a branch in the moonlight, thrown across the pane, and then the moon went behind a cloud, and my heart gave a great leap for it seemed to

me that someone *was* looking through the window, across the room, towards me.

I could not trace a distinct outline, for the moon had momentarily withdrawn most of her light; yet my tingling senses tried to persuade me that a man's head and shoulders were discernible. I stared at it, fascinated, and the shadowy blob did not move. I imagined that whoever it was was uncertain, himself, in the darkness, that I was in the little bed, and was waiting either for me to make a revealing movement or for the moon to come again from behind the cloud and light up the narrow room. I was as petrified as a rabbit, in the presence of a stoat. My limbs were sweating beneath my light coverings and my teeth were chattering uncontrollably.

I do not know how long that blurred shape remained in the pose of gazing at me, or how long the moon was hidden by the cloud-bank. I must have gone off to sleep again, my teeth still chattering and my hands wet with the sweat of extreme fear.

Then I knew no more until the sun was streaming in the little room and lighting up the gay flowered pattern on the bedroom walls. I sat up and saw that there was a white-painted chair and locker beside the bed and a length of red carpet on the wooden floor. As I explored the neat comfort of the place, I remembered my aching shoulder again, and the something that had looked at me in the night. Now I was no longer afraid and decided that at the worst it might have been some stray cat that had sat on the window-ledge outside.

My shoulder was much better, though very stiff and aching. They had bound it up for me with broad strips of linen. I guessed that they had torn up a sheet to do this for me. I was feeling very grateful towards the kindly old couple when the door opened and the man came into the room with a big cup of tea for me. He stood by me while I drank it but looked out of the window across the field towards the wood. I said, "What time is it? I seem to have been sleeping an age."

He took an old gun-metal watch from his worn waistcoat pocket and then said, "After midday. You were done in."

I started to thank him for what he had done, but his face as he turned to hear my words was grave. He looked as though he did not want to be thanked any further and at last broke in, "The boy from the village has just brought the day's paper. There's no use trying to kid me any more. The game's up, mister."

I said, "I don't know what you mean."

He looked down at me with something like contempt. “You know well enough what I mean, mister,” he said. “You are a murderer.”

That word did not seem right, in his mouth. He had been so kind before. Now he sounded almost brutal, as he said the word. I felt hurt that he did not understand me. I had lost some of my toughness since I had experienced the generosity of these two old folks, and now I wanted only to prove to them that I was not what they thought. I was about to tell him the story when I remembered that now there was no phial to show, as a proof that my words were genuine ones. Had it still existed, I would have displayed it to them without any qualms, for suddenly I felt a great loyalty towards them, a loyalty even greater than that which I felt to the dead scientist and to the Professor of Marine Zoology in the north, whom I had never met and whose very existence seemed to me a myth, set up against the rustic reality and homeliness of that little cottage.

I tried to put my hand on the old man’s arm.

“Wait a minute,” I said, “I can . . .”

He moved back a pace. “Keep your hands off me, mister,” he said. “I shall strike you down if you come near me, sick man or not. And don’t forget it.”

I tried to shrug my shoulder—but it hurt too much. I swung my legs out of bed and began to dress, rather painfully.

Almost as an afterthought, I felt gingerly in the pocket of my waistcoat. At least there would be the remains of the phial to show them, I thought. But nothing met my exploring fingers—though I rummaged in each of the pockets. Even the glass and the powder dust had gone. I looked up at him in bewilderment.

“Has anyone been searching my clothes?” I said, as gently as I could frame the words.

“Don’t worry, mister,” the old poacher said. “My missus put the money back when it fell out. We’re honest. She was only shaking your things to get the dust out of them.”

I smiled as well as I could. The good soul had shaken my jacket and waistcoat, and in that shaking had got rid of my last chance of proving my story to anyone, including the police and the misty Professor of Marine Zoology.

“I have put your wife to a lot of trouble, I must thank her,” I said.

The old man turned on me almost savagely. "You'll keep right away from her," he said. "I'll not have her upset, that's flat. Her thinks you are a friend of our Tom, come to tell us about him. I'll not have her troubled. All I say to you is, get out while the going's good. She's busy in the back, washing. Get out while she's away out of sight. I'll not tell the police you've been here. I'll not put them men on your track, I promise you. But get out."

I shrugged my shoulders now with a vengeance, and in spite of the sharp pain I knew I would get for my trouble.

"Why are you doing this?" I said, more for the sake of covering my embarrassment than for that of getting information.

The old man said, "My lad was a wild one. It was only by God's grace he never got himself into the sort of trouble you have found. If he had, I would not have had him here, but I would not have taken any part in putting the rope round his neck. And I would have wished all men to have seen it like that. I would not have thanked any man to have given my son up. That's all."

There was something fine, ancient, noble, about the old man's primitive reasoning. He was untouched by civilization as we knew it, I could see. He was patriarchal, almost an old stoic. I would have shaken his gnarled hand if he had let me. But I knew that if I moved towards him, he would strike me down, as he had threatened, and I was not yet in a position to defend myself.

When I had dressed, we walked into the little kitchen. A rumpled newspaper lay on the table. I picked it up and saw that the front page carried headlines which referred most unmistakably to me:

"*Private Investigator Suspected of Murder: Nation-wide Search!*"

With the print blurring before my eyes, I read a pretty thorough description of myself, my appearance, my habits, clothes, and career. How the police had got hold of the last in so short a time was beyond me, unless somehow they had access to the same dossier that the scientist had read from, that first night in my room. I found, on reading further down the page, that they had combed Soho Square for information and had interviewed the waiter who had served me the day before. He had told them I was in a state of unaccustomed affluence and that I was wearing a suit of cavalry twill. He had given a painstaking description of my general appearance.

No doubt the little garage man would recall that I had bought an old car from him and would come forward with what he knew about me. And no

doubt Brooks, the B.B.C. producer, would feel bound at last to lay his cards on the table too. A big recording car was too obvious a thing—it must have been seen at the office door by somebody, some hawk-sighted casual, peering from behind net curtains at the wrong moment!

Standing in that little kitchen, with the canary still cheeping and the walnut clock still annihilating time, I cast my mind over this crazy situation. . . . What if I cut adrift from the whole silly business of diseased fish, and went direct to the police? I really had no proof that a scientist had visited me with a business proposition. And the whole story sounded so improbable. One could imagine the fun which the daily papers would have with such a story. Even I could see now that it was funny! Yet supposing the police took my word for it, they would surely require proof that I had a phial of fish antidote—and now I hadn't even the last vestige of one. . . . And how would Professor Maguire fit in to this fantasy? I did not even know whether he was aware of my errand to him; I did not know whether he would admit to any connection with the scheme, even if he did not know of me; I did not know how much he would be prepared to make public; and whether, if he made the whole thing public, he would be believed any more than I would.

But the thing which stood out a mile as I considered the nebulous Professor was that he did not know me from Adam, and would be unwilling therefore to testify that I was innocent. He did not know that I had not shot the scientist and taken his money, without any intention of delivering any phial or any message at all.

The bird's cheeping and the clock's ticking whirled about me as I stood in the kitchen. I was in a spot, and no mistake.

The old man touched me on the shoulder. "Drink this," he said, holding out a small tumbler of an amber fluid.

I must have looked suspiciously at it. He said, "Have no fear. It's a drop of my wife's parsnip wine. It'll warm you up for your journey. Drink it."

I did as he said, and felt the golden stuff warming my throat and chest as it went down. It was just the right sort of thing to give me a bit of new courage when I most needed it.

He opened the door and let me go first. I noticed that he was carrying his shotgun. He walked behind me.

At the roadside he said solemnly, "May you make your peace with God, mister. I won't wish you more than that. But don't come back here, or I'll have to defend my own."

I nodded to him, trying to smile. “Give my thanks to your wife,” I said. “She is a good lady and was kind to me when I needed it. You can stop worrying about my coming back. I wouldn’t want to get you two into trouble.”

His face did not relax. “See that you don’t,” he said. “We have enough troubles without piling yours on to our backs. Good day.”

He stood at the other side of the hedge, watching me as I walked away up the long road. I turned once and waved to him, but he did not reply. He was as motionless as a statue; though I fancied that he drew his hand slowly over his cheeks.

I could have wept, myself, feeling shut out from the quiet stability of the little white cottage; but now there was no time for weeping—I had all the police in England after me, if that daily paper was to be believed.

CHAPTER 12

Black Car

I continued to walk along that straight and undulating road because I felt that the poacher would be watching me, and somehow I could not have retraced my steps to pass him again as he stood by the hedgeside. Yet I realized that there was nothing much on either side of this lonely road for twenty miles or so. I was in one of the most sparsely populated areas of that big county of Lincolnshire, which in size is only second to Yorkshire.

As I stepped out, with rolling fields on one side of me and the misty blue Wolds on the other, I wondered if I had done right. I wondered whether I should have made my way back to R.A.F. Brampton, and have thrown myself on the mercies of Shorty, asking him to hide me on the airfield for a while. Yet almost as soon as I thought of such a thing, I realized that it would be unfair to him. As an officer, holding a responsible position in the service, he could not be expected to shelter a man believed to be a murderer and wanted by the police. No, it was not possible to go back. Yet if I went forward, what was there waiting for me?

I was speculating on this problem when I heard the heavy sound of an engine. I half-turned to see a green bus trundling along towards me and my first thought was to board it and make my way north towards the Humber and so to Hull. It was an automatic impulse, which I corrected immediately, for I was described in the morning's paper and there would be many on board that bus who would have read the description; and perhaps one of them, one would be enough in an affair like this, would recognize me as the man described. No, the bus was impossible.

As it drew near me, I bent down and tied up my shoelace, half-turning away from the windows and kneeling on the grass verge. It was a perfectly ordinary action and would not draw attention to me, I thought. The bus passed by me and gathered speed down a slight incline, and at last swung over a rise in the road and so out of sight.

Walking alone along that bare road was an unnerving experience. In a wood, or even a field, one has always a chance of taking cover; but on that road, deliberately designed and positioned by its Roman builders for that purpose, it was possible to see and to be seen for miles. Yet there was something worse than that; the sky seemed to come down almost to one's knee level, since there were few obstructions in the shape of hills or plantations. And this was a clear blue summer sky, a pitiless sky, I thought at that moment, which made one feel as though one walked unprotected, one's spirit naked to God. I have heard men who had been lost in the desert say that one of the worst things they had to contend with was the emptiness, the incomprehensible vastness of the sky, which seemed to produce in the sufferer's mind a corresponding emptiness, a lack of focus, until all sense left him and he blathered on mindlessly about nothing at all, the wits gone from him.

I'll not say that Lincolnshire can match Libya in this respect, but I will say that when a black car pulled up alongside me, I hardly noticed it until the driver leaned out and looked back at me.

He was a slightly built man, rather hawklike and dark-haired. His bald head and short beard gave him something of a naval look, which his horn-rimmed spectacles immediately belied. His voice was deep but pleasant-sounding, a cultivated voice.

"Can I give you a lift?" he said, smiling.

My mind worked furiously. "Yes, thank you," I said, "I am making my way to Hull for a start."

He opened the door of the Triumph for me. "That's fine," he said, "I'm going part of the way there. At least, I'm going to Merton, and that's on the Humberside. From there you get a train to New Holland, and then a ferry across the river—that is, if the ferry is running. It's been very unreliable during the last year or two—terrific sandbanks have built up, here and there, and the boats can only cross at high tide."

I settled down as comfortably as I could. "Is it a big river?" I asked, more for the sake of saying something than of gaining information.

He stroked his beard, smiling. "Oh, yes," he said, "it's pretty big. You see, it's an estuary really, the result of the rivers Trent and Ouse, that come together to form the Humber. I'd say it's about two miles across, at the point

where we live. Well, you can work it out for yourself, the ferry-boat, which is quite a big effort, takes twenty minutes to make the trip."

I speculated for a moment. "And Hull lies on the other side of that stretch?" I said, almost to myself.

We purred along for a mile or so, when the bearded man said, "Are you on a walking tour, or something?"

I took the chance he offered. "Yes," I said, drawing a bow at the proverbial venture, "I've never been as far north as this before, and I thought I'd like to make my way round to Haworth, or somewhere like that."

He nodded, but a slightly sardonic look came into his face. "There is no other place like that," he said, "unless it is Hardy's Wessex. Are you an admirer of the Brontës then?"

I told him that I had read English at King's, and tried to give him the impression that I was a potential schoolmaster, only waiting for the right job to turn up.

As it happened, I had struck exactly the right note. His manner became less restrained and he settled back to his driving as though he was on comfortable, known territory. "Think twice, old boy," he said, familiarly. "I'm in that line of business. W.E.A. lecturer and organiser—you know, talks at village institutes every Wednesday, on Chekov and Ibsen and what have you, to eager farmers' wives out for a bit of culture. They are dears, really, but very wearing. So intensely anxious to read the right things, you feel quite a fraud, if you have any literary conscience, at advising them."

I said, "Well, it seems to me a fine thing if your aged pupils want to read at all! I always imagined no one wanted to read anything since television came to stay."

He chuckled. "Perhaps you're right," he said. "Though there are times when I wished I'd stayed on in the Navy after the war. But I have a family to keep. . . . I don't suppose you are married?"

I was the one to chuckle this time. "No," I said, "at the moment I'm fancy-free, as they say! How big is your family?"

He said, "Oh, just my wife and my boy, Mike—but I can tell you, they keep me on the run, especially Mike: he's quite a boy."

After that he was silent for a while, and then, as we passed through a narrow, winding village, with a half-timbered inn and a water-splash, he said, "Why not stay overnight with us? Mike would like a visitor, I'm sure,

and Peggie would jump at the chance of nattering with someone who is Brontë-struck."

At first, I almost leapt at the idea, and then I saw difficulties. What if I did stay with this inoffensive and kindly lecturer and his little family and then the police caught up with me? That would put them in an awkward position and might ruin their confidence in all strangers for ever. While I was pondering, he said, "Yes, it's the perfect set-up. I've got to go to Hull to-morrow, to discuss a new Extra-mural course, at the University. You could come with me. We could take Mike. He'd show you round the Art Gallery, or something, while I was in conference. He's on holiday from school and would love the trip over the river. He's fascinated with boats and that sort of thing. I expect it's because I've talked about them. We parents have a great deal to answer for, you know! Or at least you will know when you are one!"

And now, as he talked and as we passed through another, less interesting village, and then over a bumpy railway crossing, it struck me that this was indeed, as he said, the perfect set-up. I had covered my tracks so well, and without thinking, buying a car, staying at a poacher's cottage, and so on, that no one would be able to follow me. Then to stop overnight with a respectable lecturer and to cross the river with him . . . and, what was more, right to the doorstep of the University in which Professor Maguire was working!

It was too good to be true, almost—except that it *was* true!

I said, "Well, thank you, if you are sure I won't be putting you out."

"Think no more of it, old boy," he said. "Now take a look at the place we're coming to, Brigg. It's a quiet little market town, just a square and a bridge and a clock tower; nothing exciting, in itself. You could find a thousand prettier places in England—but it has something the others haven't got."

To my now-Metropolitan eye, it had nothing that any place hadn't got! I wasn't even perturbed by the young policeman who stopped us to let another stream of cars and buses go through a narrow street, across our bows. Yet policemen now seemed to me rather frightening, as they had done when I was a lad. . . .

"Well," I said, "I'm waiting!"

"Oh," replied the man with the beard, "I'd forgotten, watching that tractor! Yes, 'Brigg Fair' belongs to this little town. You know, that lovely

folk melody which Cecil Sharpe collected here. Delius and Frank Bridges both used it. It's rather important, in a way."

I had heard the plaintive strains of that tune, but had never visualized a place called Brigg, and especially a place like this, with its quite ordinary workaday pawkiness. I was perhaps disappointed.

"How interesting," I said.

We passed out of the town and then along an avenue of trees. "All right," said the lecturer, "you don't have to pretend to me. I'm used to Nature in the Raw—I lecture in the villages about here."

And now we left Brigg and were rolling along a pretty road, with a steep slope before us, enshrouded with trees which leaned over us as we set our bonnet northwards.

"Pretty steep," I said. "You've got a good car."

He grinned. "I wouldn't come this way in winter, if there was any ice about, at least," he said. "It can be a shocker. No, I'd go the long way round, Saxby, Bonby, Worlaby, Horkstow, all Danish in origin, like most of this part. That's why they're so close and clannish, they are still tribal."

But I was hardly listening. We had reached the top of the steep rise, and were running along a lonely highland road, with nothing but rolling fields on either side of us, and as we went I saw, far ahead and below us, the Humber. It was breath-taking for a moment. I almost asked what it was, that broad, gleaming stretch, with the smoke rising on its farther side, and the hills rising on its farther side too, green and golden in the bright sunlight.

The bearded lecturer seemed to foresee my question. "I think we've got to hand it to the Humber," he said, quietly. "I see it quite often, but it never palls. Indeed, it grows on you. And I've lived alongside the Severn and the Forth. I've only visited the Solway, so I can't claim to be infallible—but I will say this, it would take a big estuary to beat this. Especially with the Yorkshire Wolds as a background to it all."

I said, "Yes, it is pretty terrific."

Alas, for human vanity! I hardly guessed just how terrific this broad stretch of water was going to be, before I had run my course! And so we went on, a thousand miles, it seemed, from the dingy little office, just off Soho Square, where I had last seen a man slumped in a chair with a small hole in his forehead. A thousand miles from the waiter with the soup-stained jacket and the small kids who sang "Sally go round the chimney-pots". . . .

A thousand miles from dear Connie and her perpetual sniff. . . . In two days, I had passed from one life to another, and was not yet acclimatized to the change. Perhaps I might never become so. Perhaps at the next cross-roads a perfectly ordinary-looking policeman, the mud still on his boots, from some farmhouse quest, would hold up his hand and ask who I was. . . .

But no policeman stopped us. We careered on and on, and at length ran down a hill through a pleasantly straggling line of old trees, with a vista of lawns and a Georgian house, behind them.

My host said, "That's Maysgarth House. Part of the local grammar school now. Mike goes there."

We were in Merton, and after a few turns down narrow high-walled lanes, and past wide, open gates that gave a transitory glimpse of smooth lawns and clustered foxgloves, we were there. The car stopped outside a modern red-brick semi-detached house. My hiding-place, my haven, my salvation, perhaps!

We mounted the crazy path and went into a narrow hallway, where the square barometer said "Fine", and the dark walnut grandfather clock ticked consolingly.

"Peggie!" shouted my host. "Oh, Peggie! We've got a visitor!"

A door opened and a plumpish dark-haired woman came smiling towards us. She gave the bearded man a quick kiss and then said, "Oh, you wretch, and I've got nothing to give him for lunch!"

My host smiled back at me. "She always says that," he said. "It's an occupational disease with her. You will find that women are strange creatures; they always say there's nothing, and they produce the most wonderful spreads!"

His wife shook my hand but gave him a look which needs lifted eyebrows and pursed lips to imitate. "Well, this time it's true," she said. Then she winked at me. The sudden contrast of expression was almost more than I could stand. I came near to laughing outright, though laughter was the last thing in my thoughts at the time.

No, I was remembering a big, very big, man in a black hat. I was seeing his plump white hands coming over a table and doing something to me, before I could do something to him. And I was recalling what it was like to wake up with a very sore jaw and to wonder what had hit me. For that man must be somewhere about. And where was he? Not in London, you could lay any odds on that.

I came out of this reverie to observe the woman’s face. She was looking at me, smiling; but behind that smile I sensed a sharp observation. She was weighing me up. She was looking right through me and into the wallpaper behind me. There was something about that look which made me feel uncomfortable.

And when her husband said to me, “Come on up, I’ll show you your room,” I was not in the least surprised for her to touch my arm. “Let me have your jacket,” she said. “I will mend the tear. You can wear one of Arthur’s.”

I started to look for the tear in what I thought to be an intact article of clothing. But she already had it half off my back.

“Do you read the daily papers, Mr. MacDonald?” she said smoothly. “I find them awfully enlightening.”

I had almost begun to tell her that my name was Stewart, when I saw the point of it all. My host had not known my name and had made no attempt to introduce me. He had just gone upstairs, casually, as one might expect a lecturer immersed in Chekov and Ibsen to do. But not his wife. She knew who I was, and that accounted for her searching look. But what was more, she had obviously weighed me up and had decided that she would help me, would stand out on my side. And so she was relieving me of the tell-tale cavalry twill jacket. . . .

I smiled back at her, unsurely, but sincerely. “Thank you,” I said. “I caught it on a barbed-wire fence, I think.”

She said gravely, “Yes, they have to use them in Lincolnshire. So many sheep, of one sort and another.”

Then she went into the kitchen, I think. And I walked upstairs to see the room I was to have.

CHAPTER 13

Mike and an Evening Out

That afternoon was spent in a curious half-world, of peace and subdued fear. I stretched my legs and pretended to talk to my host with interest, about literature and politics and the Government's attitude to Russia. But though I wore one of his heather-mixture tweed coats and his lambskin slippers, I was not in the world of such comforts. I was driving back and forth along the Ermine Street, the old Roman road north . . . and wondering just where that black Jaguar had got to.

Let us not be deluded about the whole affair. The occupants of that car, the man in black, the little one who had held the covered knife to my back in the Zoo, and the one in the shiny serge, would kill me to get the phial. The phial which no longer existed. . . . And if I did not fall into their hands, the police would sooner or later get me and pass me over to judges who would hang me for killing a man who had, in fact, given me my one chance to make good in a profession which now seemed like a schoolboy's dream to me. . . .

Then the door opened and a boy came in.

I should not say came in as much as was catapulted in, for he almost fell at his father's feet, in a perfect parody of a Twickenham tackle.

"Hiya, Pop," he said. Then sensing his father's coolness in the presence of a guest, turned round and saw me. "Sorry, sir," he mumbled. "I've just been playing cops and robbers and it gets into the old bloodstream, don't you find?"

His mother, who was knitting by the bookcase, coughed quietly. It was a cough meant for me, not for Mike. I got the sense of that cough. I even looked across at her to find her smiling strangely.

"This is Mike," she said. "Mike, Mr. MacDonald."

Mike shook hands with me. “Gosh,” he said, “not another Scotchman!”

“Scot,” said his father, disapprovingly. “And Mr.—er—MacDonald doesn’t sound like a Scot, anyway, to me.”

He raised a questioning eyebrow.

“No,” I said. “It’s a long way back, anyway. I wouldn’t care to trade on it.”

Mike was a pleasant lad of about thirteen; not too clean, but then, not too dirty; with fair hair, surprisingly, and a lanky long-legged look, that went well with the bush of flax that fell over his forehead.

And now, as I looked at him, he became amazingly subdued. “Excuse me, sir,” he said, “but you look like a school master! Please don’t take that to heart, they’re not a bad lot, really. I mean, you *could* be one of the nicer sort. I mean——”

Mrs. Wadham said coolly, “Mike, go and see if I turned the heater off in the bathroom.”

The boy looked at her a little abashed. “Yes, Mother,” he said. “I’ll wash my knees while I’m up there. It’ll save time later on!”

He rushed out of the room. He seemed relieved, somehow. I did not wonder at it, for his mother’s eyes saw most things. If she saw through me, it could not be too hard for her to slice through the subterfuges of this lanky scrap of boyhood.

“Poor old Mike,” I thought, but did not dare to speak.

When the boy had gone from the room, the bearded lecturer said, “Look, MacDonald, what you were saying about Fry’s plays—you’re quite wrong, you know. I agree with you, they are full of sparks, like a sort of infernal champagne, with sparks for bubbles, but no plot. . . .”

I felt called on to defend my position, though I was only talking for time. “Well,” I said, “if you will tell me what a plot is, I may begin to agree with you! After all, what is the plot of *Lear*? A king misjudges his three daughters, that’s all. The genius of Shakespeare lies in the way he manipulates that plot. And that is where Fry’s genius lies, for I am convinced he has genius.”

At that moment a knock came at the front door.

I don’t know why, of course, but I shuddered at the very moment the knocker fell for the first time. I sat in a corduroy study chair, with a Swedish

table on one side, and a Dali reproduction on the other, and a hand-made rug before me—and I shuddered.

In that little room the air was suddenly still, as though breezes or speech had not yet been created. Arthur Wadham was still in the vacuum created by his speculations on Christopher Fry. Mrs. Wadham was most carefully counting stitches which I knew would count themselves on any other occasion. I was thinking of that little bullet hole in a man's head, just off Soho Square, and a B.B.C. recording car waiting outside, a day ago.

The bearded lecturer broke the silence. "Too late for the post," he said. "Perhaps it's a telegram."

"It won't be," said his wife. Then she laid her knitting down. Now, one day, if I live, I will write a play. And in that play I will put Mrs. Peggie Wadham, laying her knitting down and looking slowly across the room. And I will make the actress who plays that part put on a specially thick layer of white greasepaint. . . .

Yes, I will also put another person in that room who watches her face, and whose own face takes on two layers of white greasepaint, without the help of anyone! For I was that person.

Do you remember the knocking on the gate, in *Macbeth*?

The half-crazed Thane of Cawdor, having murdered his king, is pacing by night through the palace court when someone knocks on the door from outside. Outside . . . not seen. In that moment, the knocking represents retribution, fate coming to claim its victim, the Furies arrived to drag down the man who had thought to run from them and hide. Just then, I think I understood *Macbeth* for the first time! That abrupt knocking on the front door of this little semi-detached house did more for my understanding than an army of English lecturers had achieved in three years!

The bearded man began to get up from his chair to answer the front door. But Mike was already half-way there.

"All right," he called, "I'll go."

My own first impulse, and that of his mother, I knew, was to stop him. She thought that a policeman would be standing there; I thought that the visitor would be wearing a black, and not a blue coat. . . . But we both restrained ourselves and sat down again.

Then, from along the passage-way, I heard a thin silky voice say, "Is your mother in, my boy? I have some very nice things she would like to see,

carpets and bed-linen and things."

The boy's voice came back to me, undecided and a little afraid, I sensed. He said, "She, well, I don't know. I don't think she wants anything, thank you."

The man's voice said, "I will come in and see her, if I may." There was a slight pause then and it seemed that the boy was trying not to let the man in. Mrs. Wadham got to her feet suddenly and went quickly from the room. I heard her voice in the hallway, "No, not to-day, thank you. I don't need anything at all. Good afternoon."

The man's voice changed a little. He said, "Would you like me to tell your fortune, lady?"

She answered, "No, thank you. We don't believe in that sort of thing. Good afternoon."

The bearded lecturer said quietly, "He's come to the wrong house. Peggie is a thorough-going materialist. Most women are, don't you think?"

But my throat was too tight to let me answer, for that voice from the hall was not entirely new to me. I had heard it before, or something rather like it, not quite the same, but like it. . . .

Then it came again. "Look, just for the sake of proving to you. . . . You have a visitor, haven't you? Someone you have never seen before, come to you to-day from nowhere?"

My blood froze and my heart stood still! It was just one inflection in that high-pitched nasal voice which produced this terror in me, and I knew then where I had heard that note before. It was in the sunlit Zoo, and then the voice had said, "Slow march, china; don't get tangled up with the crowds, whatever you do!"

The image of a tall man in a shiny blue serge suit came before my eyes, an impersonal creature with red handlebar moustaches, like a rather gone-to-seed bomber pilot. . . . For a moment, I almost jumped from the chair to run through the french windows and into the long garden that stretched up from the house. . . . But as I heard Mrs. Wadham's cool voice, I restrained my panic.

"I'm sorry, but I can't stand here all day listening to your nonsense. Please take your foot away from the door or I shall have to call my husband."

My eyes met those of the bearded lecturer and I caught the momentary wry glimpse of apprehension that flitted across his face. Then he smiled outright and shrugged his shoulders, moving gently from his chair towards the drawing-room door, so as to be near at hand if wanted. In that action I admired this sparely built man who had once been a sailor and who now talked to farmers' wives about Ibsen and Chekov, for I knew that the task of throwing a doorstep salesman into the street was distasteful to him.

And knowing as I did the true identity of that particular salesman, I realized that such an attempt might be very dangerous, even fatal.

But his movement to the door, and my fears for him, were both unnecessary as it turned out. We heard Mrs. Wadham's still cool voice say, "Thank you very much," and then the front door closed with a crisp and decisive click. We heard a man's footsteps going down the path to the road, away from the house.

Then Peggie Wadham came back into the room. She was smiling but a little pale. "A most insistent man," she said, looking at no one in particular. "He was not quite *right*, somehow. . . ."

Her husband grinned widely and said, "What, my dear? You don't mean that he was a bit queer in the head, do you? He sounded quite sane, too sane, to me!"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I don't quite know how to explain it. It was as though he was . . . well, a man acting a part. As though he was something unpleasant, hiding beneath something else almost as nasty!"

I said, "I think I know what you mean, Mrs. Wadham. I got the same impression merely from hearing his voice. Was he wearing a shiny blue serge suit?"

Now she looked at me sharply as she nodded. "Yes," she said, "and very expensive looking brown shoes, too. Light tan shoes. They were the first thing I noticed, I think. He had his foot firmly planted in the door so that Mike could not shut it."

"A man with long ginger moustaches," I said.

But this time she did not nod. Instead, she smiled. "Oh no," she said, "that would have made him too ridiculous! They were quite black, as one expects these Indian pedlars to have. He wore a blue turban and carried a big valise. Really I would have liked to see what he had to sell, but I'm afraid those tan shoes quite put me off!"

I sat back in my chair with a whistle of surprise.

“An Indian pedlar!” I said.

Mike came into the room. “Yes,” he said, “and come into the hall. There’s something peculiar on the door.”

Standing before the door, we followed the boy’s pointing finger. On the cream paintwork were four marks, dark grey marks, the prints of fingers. I bent towards them and touched one of them lightly; the dark greasepaint smeared across the wood with the movement of my finger.

“He grabbed at the door when I tried to close it first,” said Mrs. Wadham. “So, he wasn’t a real one after all! I thought there was something peculiar about him.”

I could not reply. I was feeling too faint now. So they *had* followed me in spite of all my luck? Then I cursed my own stupidity in thinking that I could shake off such a gang so easily. Of course, what had happened was simple; when I had given them the slip, falling from the R.A.F. car, they had merely kept right on, knowing that I must cross the river in order to hand over the phial to the waiting professor. And that meant I must pass through Merton.

Obviously they had planted a man at the entrance to the town, hidden perhaps behind a hedge, and that man had noted all cars entering by the tree-bordered road. They had seen me in the Triumph, talking my head off, no doubt, about the Brontës, or something that now seemed equally foolish.

That black Triumph still stood outside in the road, as clear an indication of my whereabouts as anything could have been. I was wondering what I should do, when the bearded lecturer spoke. “Well, that’s pretty queer,” he said. “I’m going to phone the police about it right away. They will probably catch the man before he gets out of the street. I’d say he was up to no good.”

I saw a look of alarm come into Peggie Wadham’s eyes. She was trying to think of something to say, but I felt that I could not impose on her curious loyalty to me any longer. I placed my hand on Wadham’s arm. It was now or never; I felt it had better be now, whatever the consequences.

“Please don’t phone,” I said. “That man who came to the door was looking for me. You must believe that.”

He turned to look at me in amazement. His eyes were almost popping out of his head.

“For you!” he echoed. “What does he want with you?”

I knew now that I would have to take a chance.

"I am in some sort of trouble," I said, "and that pedlar is a member of the gang who are after my blood. That's all. But if you bring in the police, the whole thing will become very complicated. That pedlar will say something which will put me in a nasty spot too. I'd rather not say anything else just now, but I must ask you to believe me. Will you take a chance on it, please?"

He sat down on the oak hall settle and stared up at me, his eyebrows raised in bewilderment. Then he turned to his wife, "What do you say, Peggie?" he asked, almost plaintively.

She said, "We are all in this now, whatever it is. And personally I would let the thing work itself out in its own way. I would not ring the police. I don't know why, but I trust this man."

Mike was there during all this. His face was very serious. When he spoke, no one told him to be quiet. His voice contained a faith and a courage far beyond its years, and I think his parents heard those qualities in it and respected them.

"Look, Dad," he said, "Mr. MacDonald just isn't the gangster type, is he? Besides, he reads Shakespeare, like you. That should be enough for anybody, shouldn't it?"

Peggie Wadham put her arm round the boy's shoulders suddenly, in a warm gesture of motherly affection. The bearded lecturer stood up and scratched his nose. He smiled wryly. "Well, I suppose so, Mike. I was already thinking that, in a way—although," he said, turning to me half gravely, "I don't see that blank verse is any antidote to blackguardism, when all comes to all. But I'll trust you, MacDonald."

He began to turn away to go back into the drawing-room. Then he turned, his face more puzzled than ever. "Hey," he said, "how did you both come to know his name? He didn't even tell me."

Peggie Wadham said gently, "Mike heard me say it, that's all. And I learned it in my own peculiar way! All right?"

Her husband scratched his head and went into the drawing-room again.

Peggie Wadham said with a sad little smile, "He never reads anything but the *New Statesman*, I'm afraid. Quite out of touch with the cruder realities!"

I dared to say, "But that is not my name, you know."

She turned on me a look of delicate scorn. "I realise that," she said. "The *Daily Express* called you another name, but after all, one Scots name is very much like another, don't you think? And if my husband wants to introduce you to anyone, he has to have a harmless sort of name to make you public by."

I followed her into the drawing-room. Mike lagged behind. Just before we went through the door he said, "We won't let you down. You'll be all right."

I'm afraid I don't know much about small boys, but I knew that this was a good one! I'd have given him a ten-bob note if I'd dared. As it was, all I could think of was to slap him on the back. That seemed to be all right. He grinned at me and gave me the sort of nudge that told me plainly enough that, from then on, we were conspirators together. It is strange how moving even the most ordinary of gestures may be, if only the circumstances are right. I suddenly took a very great liking to this quite commonplace young boy.

Some time after tea the bearded lecturer said, "We've got to think about things rather carefully, MacDonald. You see, to put the matter in a nutshell, you are a potential danger to us."

His wife made a tiny clucking sound of disapproval, but I said, "I couldn't agree with you more. It seems to me that the only thing for me to do is to move on. I could perhaps slip out and get a room at the local inn and you could pick me up in the morning when you start out for Hull."

He thought about that plan for a while, then shook his head. "If these thugs are after you, *really* after you, what is to stop them from getting a room at the inn too, and visiting you in the night, for instance? No, that won't do."

Once more Mike spoke up. "Look, Dad," he said. "Why not take Mr. MacDonald along to Doctor Thomas's house to-night, when you go to the play reading. If you can get him there without being seen, I'm sure they will let him stay overnight. They have lots of room there. Then perhaps you can persuade Doctor Thomas to run you to New Holland in his Rover to-morrow to catch the boat. They wouldn't expect a Rover, would they?"

The bearded lecturer was about to put up some objection, but Peggie Wadham said, with her characteristic definiteness, "Why, Mike, that's just the very thing! Don't you think he has the makings of a detective, or a crook, Mr. MacDonald?"

There was a cruel little twinkle in her eye as she spoke. I said, “Yes, Mrs. Wadham. He certainly shouldn’t waste that talent for deception by indulging for too long in the higher education!”

The lecturer looked at me as though I had gone mad. Perhaps he wasn’t far wrong, I did indeed feel a little light-headed with the prospect of this almost watertight scheme.

“Right,” said Peggie, “then that’s settled. Now the next thing is, how to get you from here down to Targate without anyone seeing you. Any ideas, Mike?”

The boy sat on the hearth-rug, his long chin in his hand. He was thinking furiously, it was apparent. One could almost hear the wheels whirring. Then at last he slapped his knee and almost shouted, “I know just the way! I had most of it worked out before, but it was just the last bit, that stretch between Mob Hall summerhouse and the church. But I think I’ve got that fixed now. Yes, I can get him there!”

His father looked at him with concern, over his spectacles. “I hope it isn’t a very messy way, Mike,” he said. “I don’t want to spoil this new pair of trousers.”

The boy gazed back at him, almost absently. “Oh, don’t worry, Dad,” he said. “You won’t be coming with us. You will go by road, in the ordinary way. Then if they’re watching they’ll think Mr. MacDonald is still here. But there’ll only be Mums here! That’ll fox them!”

Now we all looked at each other in concern. The plan seemed to be breaking down at last. But Mrs. Wadham was the first to smile.

“Good for you, Mike,” she said. “That should be fine. I can always phone the police if anything suspicious happens, and in any case Mrs. Darlington and her daughter are coming in at seven to talk about the church bazaar. I’ll give them lots of coffee and keep them here as late as I can. You can’t picture even the most villainous of crooks attacking three women, can you! Especially if the women are just in the middle of a nice heart-to-heart talk! No, I’m sure any self-respecting thug would back out of the room and touch his forelock, or whatever crooks do, and say, ‘Awful sorry you’ve bin troubled, Ma’am’, or something!”

But the bearded lecturer was adamant this time.

“No, my dear,” he said, “we can’t trust to their sense of chivalry, or whatever it is you mean. You must phone Mrs. Darlington and put her off, and then you must come with me to the Thomas’s. Mike will see Mr.

MacDonald there and stay with us too. Then we will come back together and leave Mr. MacDonald there."

His wife gave a theatrical little shudder. "Very well, if that's what the head of the house decides; but I must tell you I don't like the idea of coming back into a house at night with no one to welcome me, or perhaps the wrong ones to welcome me!"

Once more Mike had a bright idea. "I've got it," he said. "I'll stretch a piece of cotton over each window and each door. If it is broken when we come back, we shall know that there's someone inside waiting for us and we won't go in and get caught."

And though each of us felt that we were behaving rather childishly that is what Mike did. But first he hid me in the garden, behind the potting shed, and saw his parents off in their car.

After a while he joined me, crouching behind the raspberry canes.

"No one can see us from the road," he said. "The only people who could possibly spot us are the occupants of that house over there. And they are two rather cracked maiden ladies and they would just think we were playing hide and seek. They often do it in their garden. It's a long one with a very high wall round it. One of the boys at school said he climbed over it once, to get his ball, and they chased him round and round till they caught him; then they made him dress up with a tea cosy on his head and pretend to be the Rajah of Zanzibar, in a play they had made up."

I could not help smiling. "That sounds crazy enough," I said. He merely nodded. "Oh yes," he answered, "everybody's crazy here. It's something to do with being so isolated, father says. You see, the river lies to the north, and that's a bit of a barrier to things in general. Then, the railway line stops here, you know. And the nearest towns are Brigg, ten miles away south; Grimsby, about twenty miles to the east; and Scunthorpe, fourteen miles to the west. . . ."

As the lad rattled on, explaining the set-up of the little town I'd landed myself in, I was overcome by a feeling of loneliness. I might have been in the depths of Wales or the heart of distant Shropshire! It seemed incredible to me that a place could appear so accessible on a map, and yet in reality be so cut off; yet that seemed to be the case. However, I had little time to ruminate on this idea, for Mike suddenly grabbed my arm. "Come on, follow me," he said.

That little journey, from one house to another, in a small market town in the obscure countryside, could not have been more than four hundred yards in length—yet in my fevered state it seemed like a day trip through Lilliput! It would do any man a power of good to test himself, in a place which he prides himself on knowing inside out, by trying to make his way from one street to another, over tangled gardens and through allotments, and across minute back lanes, without being seen and without losing himself.

We crawled through privet hedges and lurked beneath tumbling stone walls until the voices on their far side moved away to let us clamber over unseen and run past summerhouses and alongside hurdle fences.

Once, for a brief stretch, we ran bent double between leaning moss-grown gravestones, and then again we wormed our breathless ways between rows of beans on tall sticks.

Once an old gentleman with a pearl pin in his cravat almost looked me straight in the eye as he bent over the flowering shrub where I lay hidden for the moment; and once a little girl ran into the toolshed where Mike pressed himself against the wall, trying to look like a garden rake.

"Mummy," she yelled, making our hearts stand still for a minute, "my ball's gone under the bench. Can you get it?"

Luckily the mother in question was busy with some household chore and the small girl paddled away to other pursuits, leaving us to mop our brows and start again on that mad game of hide and seek.

Yet this small journey was no ordinary game; it had a sinister reason for being. And, with the clarity of a nightmare, from time to time as I sweated along after the agile Mike, I pictured that elephantine man in black suddenly appearing over a neatly clipped box-hedge, or the Pakistani pedlar materializing by my side, without warning, as I crouched in the dry mustiness of a dim potting shed. And I knew, as I frightened myself with their imagined presences, that had they done so I would soon have been lying, goggling up into the late evening sunshine, dead, in a perfectly ordinary Lincolnshire back-garden. Yet dead just the same, as dead as if I had met my end in some windswept crevasses, or in the fever-ridden swamps of Africa. And the whole bitter-sweet situation gave the journey a strange fillip, so that, while I was glad when it was all over, I would not have missed the strange experience for anything.

So, at length, I stood in Mrs. Thomas's drawing-room, my hair rumpled and my trousers in need of a needle and thread here and there, enjoying a glass of sherry before the play reading. Mike had been led off somewhere to

wash his hands and face, and then to spend a quiet hour or two in another room, watching television with a small niece who had been given permission to sit up late since the boy was to be present.

The long room was full of the indiscriminate chatter and laughter that attends the preliminaries of such gatherings, I imagine. Normally, I would have hated it all, being naturally antipathetic to play readings and what not. But that evening, the sound of every guffaw, every down-to-earth witticism, was music in my ears. This was solid, real, safe life; what awaited me somewhere outside was its opposite, in every word of the sentence *solid, real, safe—and life*!

The play they were reading was a Victorian melodrama, *Sweeney Todd*, in which a devilish barber of old Fleet Street cuts his victims' throats and then pitches them into a cellar, by means of a carefully contrived barber's chair. At first this theme seemed a little too close to reality as I knew it, for the barber was discovered as a murderer and was pursued by the police, being forced to hide in a cellar. . . . I translated the flowery language of the play into terms of my own existence . . . myself accused of murder, chased by the police, hiding in a cellar. . . .

Then suddenly I saw the funny side of it all. The man who played Sweeney Todd in that sedate drawing-room was a plump dark-jowled curate, with wide-open baby eyes and his waistcoat buttons undone. . . . About as frightening as a koala bear! And the heroine, Arabella, I think, was no more convincing. She was a strong-thewed gym-mistress who wore paper flowers in her straight hair to give the impression of delicate femininity. When she made to flutter gracefully across the room, it was more like a lolloping Saint Bernard than a wispy, poke-bonneted wench of the last century.

My good spirits began to return. I looked round the room, now enjoying myself. Near to me, in chairs sheltered from the rest of the gathering by the walnut grand piano, a grey-haired and redoubtable lady with the hard look of a piece of ancient Aztec sculpture discussed the drama resolutely with a moth-faced little body in a flat straw hat, who giggled whenever there was the slightest pause, as though suffering from a restrained form of hysteria which abhorred any hiatus in the stone-faced lady's monologue:

"Ridiculous, my dear! Pos-it-ively *ridiculous*! They should be set to work by Government order, on the roads! Long-haired impostors, I call them! Nothing else! How dare they call themselves actors!"

"Oh, yes, Miss Peach! hee-hee-how I agree!"

"I tell you, Nancy, if I had 'em in front of me when I'm on the Bench, I'd give 'em 'Drama!' That I would, and no mistake!"

"How I do agree, Miss Peach! Hee-hee! But——"

"No, Nancy, there's no 'but' about it! They're as bad as . . . as bad as these modern poets! Yes, that's what they are, as bad as modern poets!"

"Hee-hee, Miss Peach! Oh hee-hee, I agree!"

Just then Doctor Thomas came over to me, tall and grizzled and smiling. His long, lined face had a natural seriousness belied by his quick grey eyes, which now darted in the direction of the drama critics on my right hand, as though indicating to me his feelings about them. He touched me on the shoulder.

"They'll be at it for hours yet," he said. "Come over here, by the fireplace, where we can talk."

He gave a short high laugh which halted Miss Peach in the middle of a new tirade, this time against novelists. She stared at her host in shocked surprise. He bowed slightly to her, very solemnly but with an irony which she did not observe. She rewarded him with a smile which had all the appearance of having fallen out of a punctured bag of acid drops.

"An old shocker," Doctor Thomas whispered to me as he led me across the room. "She'd have Shakespeare banned and Lawrence consigned to the flames in the market square, if she could carry the other old dodderers of magistrates with her. Anyway, let me pour you another sherry and then we'll talk."

At last he said, "Now look, Wadham tells me you are in a bit of a jam. A good fellow, Wadham, and you're lucky to have fallen in with him. I've told him I'll do what I can for you, as long as you can assure me that you have not broken the law. I must be sure of that, you know, otherwise it could be a very serious thing for me to give assistance to a criminal."

I said, with all the honesty I could command, "I do assure you, Doctor Thomas, that I have not broken the law—at any rate, to my knowledge. . . ."

He patted my arm. "Yes, yes," he said, smiling, "I know what you mean. We are all law-breakers without knowing it, in some pettifogging sense, I suppose. I imagine that, if we could but turn it up in the Statute Book, there's a law against doctors forgetting their stethoscopes—but bless my soul!"

He began to laugh again. The perspiring actors looked in his direction and Miss Peach half-turned away from him, so as not to interrupt the flow of her latest invective, this time against ballet. I almost sympathized with them; the doctor's laugh was certainly penetrating. But he was a good man, there could be no doubt at all about that.

Later, I wished Mr. and Mrs. Wadham and Mike good night, for they had planned for me to stay with the Thomas's overnight.

Peggie Wadham stayed behind a moment and whispered, "Good night and good-bye. May it turn out right. You have our best wishes."

It was like losing a lifelong friend. "Shan't I see you in the morning?" I asked.

She shook her head, smiling quietly. "We have discussed it with the doctor. He agrees that we are all known to the men who are pursuing you, and that we couldn't be of any more use to you. Those men would watch every car and its occupants at the ferry slipway. My husband's beard would draw attention to him anyway and you'd be sunk."

I tried to say something, but she cut me short. "Good luck," she said. "I must catch my husband up. To be quite frank, I don't want to walk alone, even ten yards, up the street. It's getting dark now."

Doctor Thomas was standing by my side as I waved good night to the three of them, my good friends. He shut the door and said, "They will phone when they get home safely. I shall give them ten minutes to phone, that is the arrangement, and then I shall go to their house with a couple of policemen if they do not phone. It's all buttoned up, don't worry."

I had supper with the Doctor and Mrs. Thomas. She was tall too and had a mobile humorous face that made her seem just as young as anyone she was talking to.

The phone rang and the doctor came back from it smiling.

"All serene," he said. "Mike says the cotton wasn't broken, whatever that means. A great lad, Mike."

I had to agree. Mike was my favourite small boy, I decided—although until this last day I had not admired the genus overmuch.

Over a cup of coffee before we went to bed, Doctor Thomas said, "Wadham is going to put off his visit to Hull to-morrow and I'm going to take you instead, in my car. They won't recognize that one."

I said, “But you are a doctor! What about your patients?”

He laughed again and replied, “Oh, that’s fixed too. I’m due for a holiday and we have a locum already in. He will take over to-morrow and I shall make a necessary trip to the shipping agents in Hull to fix the final arrangements of our Mediterranean cruise. So don’t think you will be putting me out; I should have had to go in any case, before the week was out. Right, you can go to bed with a quiet mind, and we’ll give you a knock about eight. I’ve rung the station to confirm the ferry-boat; they don’t always run nowadays, you may have heard.”

I told him that I had heard, and so I went up to bed, in a room with a sloping oak floor and heavily shuttered windows. That oak floor and those solid cream shutters did much to restore my morale. In fact, I almost felt normal again! And that sensation of normalcy must have lasted me all night. Indeed, until eight the next morning, for I slept like the proverbial top.

But it didn’t last any longer than that. For as I sat down to breakfast, the phone-bell rang again.

“For you,” said Mrs. Thomas, handing me the receiver.

Mike was speaking, rather urgently, I thought, though he was doing his best to hide it. “I say, Mr. MacDonald,” he said, “what a lark! *They* came to visit us in the night!”

“What!” I shouted.

He went on in a rather more subdued manner then. “Well,” he said, “we don’t really know, for certain, but my window was wide open this morning and I had bolted it before I turned in; Mums told me to. But it was open this morning and my door, as well. And someone had knocked over a sort of green vase that stands on the landing, with flowers in it.”

Trying to appear calm, I said, “Could it have been the cat?”

Mike gave a guffaw. “We haven’t got one,” he said, “but if we had, I’d like to see the sort of cat who could pick a window catch to get in!”

“Gosh, I wouldn’t,” I said, involuntarily.

Then the lad said something which shook me to my very foundations.

“I’ve been doing quite a bit of detective work since last night, Mr. MacDonald. I was out prowling first thing this morning, and I saw something strange. A big black Jaguar came into the High Street and a monstrous man in a black coat and hat called at the police station. He was

there a long time and then drove off out of town. I thought I'd tell you, because I've never seen him or his car before—and he had such a funny face!"

"Like an ivory Buddha?" I said, almost without thinking.

"That's it!" yelled Mike. "Just that! Fancy you saying that! I thought of it, but I felt you might think I was crazy if I said that!"

"Who was with that man?" I asked the lad.

He sounded surprised. "No one," he said. "He was the only one in the car."

I could not help asking the next question. "Didn't you see a little man with a thin moustache, and that—er—Indian who called yesterday?"

"No," repeated the boy. "This one was quite alone. Why, is he connected with the others then?"

This was no time to spread ourselves on a long social chat.

"Well, thanks for the information, Mike," I said. "I'll do the same for you one day, perhaps. I'm off to New Holland now, with Doctor Thomas. I'll certainly keep an eye open for that big gorilla and his black Jaguar! Good-bye!"

I was just about to ring off when Mike's farewell words came over, softly and almost pleadingly. "I wish I could come, Mr. MacDonald. I wouldn't get in the way, I promise. . . ."

He waited, expectantly. Then I forced myself to be brutal. There was nothing else for it. I couldn't let the lad run into my brand of trouble.

"Sorry, Mike," I said, "I just can't risk it. No!"

I made that last word as definite as I could and slapped the receiver down before I relented. He was such a grand kid. . . .

At that moment Mrs. Thomas stuck her head round the door and said, "The car's waiting for you. Jimmy says you've got time for the boat—but only just!"

CHAPTER 14

New Holland

No one saw me get into that car, I swear to that, for it was still in the garage, warming up, when I got out into the high-walled yard. Moreover, as my hand moved towards the front door of the Rover, Doctor Thomas shook his head. “Sorry, old boy,” he said, “but if we are going to do this thing, we must do it properly. Get in the back; lie down on the floor, and keep this car rug over you! You’ll probably suffocate—but I’ll get you over to Hull.”

The car reversed, swung round over a bumpy grating, and then went forward round a bend or two on to the road. I heard the Doctor call out cheerily to someone in the street, and then we seemed to set a fairly straight course.

“Police Inspector,” he said. “He was hanging out of the station window, waving at me. Never knew I was so popular!” He giggled for a moment and then drove on. I heard him change up into top and we began to purr along what I took to be a straightish road.

All at once, he said, “I say, I wonder if the inspector wanted me! I never thought of that! Ah, well, perhaps he only wanted a lift to the ferry. He’ll have to use his own petrol this morning, we can’t go back now.”

His words set my heart thumping. Obviously he didn’t realize how anxious I was not to come within catching distance of a policeman of any sort! I tried to imagine how I would have felt had he stopped to talk to that Inspector—and then our car brakes gave a little subdued squeal and I felt myself being thrown forward slightly, to press on the front seat.

“There’s a bobby, at the cross-roads, waiting to get a lift, I think,” said the doctor. “I must pull up. I know the chap. An old patient of mine.”

I gasped out, “Don’t tell him I’m here, for God’s sake!”

"Don't be an ass," said the doctor. "I'm not as mad as that!"

Then his voice became a hearty one once more. "Hello, Sergeant! You out for a constitutional, then? I thought you'd be over at Belsham, playing golf, a nice morning like this. Jump in."

The policeman's voice was deep and rich, the voice of the countryside, wherever it may be.

"Sorry to stop you, Doctor, but I've just got the order to be at New Holland. I *should* have been out at Belsham, if this hadn't happened. Either that, or cutting that front lawn of mine. This weather makes the grass fair shoot up! Can't keep it back."

Then something happened which made my blood run cold. The sergeant had let his hand dangle down behind the seat and he had rested it on my prostrate back. I almost felt the fingers tighten as they touched me and I wondered what the next move would be.

It was the doctor's voice I heard then, above the thudding of my heart. "What's on at New Holland?" he said.

The policeman's voice was slow and non-committal.

"Nay, Doctor, I don't know," he said. "They've got some sort of stunt on, I reckon, but they didn't say what! That's the trouble, you know, they ring up from Scunthorpe, at Divisional H.Q., you know, and tell you nothing. 'Oh, just send a man down to the pier,' they say, just like that. Nothing more. That's the trouble about living out here; you're in the dark most of the time."

"But you wouldn't change it, Gledmore, would you!" said the doctor.

The Sergeant laughed aloud: "No, Doctor, I wouldn't," he said. "I like the small-town kind of work. In these big places you're at it from night till morning—always crime, as you might say. No time for gardening, or golf! But out here, well, we can keep ourselves as busy as we need—there's always somebody riding a bike without a light in the winter, and somebody forgetting where the Halt signs are in the summer. Then, there's lost dogs and suchlike. No, give me Merton any time. You can grow old gracefully here!"

The car engine mumbled on, much like an immense sewing-machine. The doctor was strangely silent. Then we passed over a level-crossing. "Nearly there," said the policeman. "Look, Doctor, you can drop me off here. I'll pop into the refreshment room first for a cup of tea. I came out

without one in my hurry. I've got time for a drink since you were good enough to give me a lift. Should've missed it otherwise." The car stopped and the door opened and shut. But in the brief instant it was open, I heard a cheery voice call out to the alighting sergeant, from across the road, "Hello there! Caught the murderer yet, Sergeant? They say he's hiding in Merton, somewhere!"

The sergeant laughed and said, "Don't you believe it, Nobby. He's more like in this dump! This is a real place for cut-throats! Look what happened at your Christmas Goose club last year!"

And then the car swung right round and we were bumping over the level-crossings again. I dared to look out for an instant and say, "Are we going back again, Doctor? I thought we crossed those lines a minute ago."

His voice was as grey as his hair now. It was rather cold, too.

"Yes, we're going back, my friend," he said. "The trip's off, I am afraid. There's a barrier across the platform down to the slipway and more policemen round it than I thought they had in Lincolnshire. And they're stopping every car—every car—and looking inside them, boot and all. I can't take that risk. I'm a doctor."

I said, "I understand, Doctor Thomas. Well, it was good of you to try to help me anyway. Shall I get out here?"

The car went on along the level road. At last he said, "No, I don't think you need. They said you were in Merton, those loungers at the station just now. So I suppose the safest thing for you is to go back there. Perhaps they won't look in the obvious place, eh?"

I felt slightly sick when he spoke those words. I recalled what the man, "Nobby", had said—"*The murderer's in Merton*."

I felt forced to say, "I'm not what you think, Doctor Thomas."

But he did not answer. He just drove on, and after an eternity the car swung round and round again and then over a bumpy grating, and stopped. We were in the garage.

I began to move from under the car rug. But his firm hand restrained me. "Stay there," he said. "I don't want anyone to know that I have brought you back. As far as the people you know here are concerned, you have left Merton for good. I want time to think what I must do. I shall lock you in, so please don't try to escape. Sorry, old chap, but I can't do anything else."

I nodded, weakly, feeling now as though the bottom had dropped out of everything. Perhaps I had been too lucky in the fine people I had met while I was on the run. They had all accepted me and had done everything they could for me. Now, at last, I had come unstuck, and was trapped in a car, in a garage, in a doctor's yard. I could not have been shut up more safely even if I'd been in the cell of the local police station. Doctor Thomas had caught the "murderer"! And so simply, too! What a hero he would be to the avid reporters of the *Lincolnshire Times* and the *Grimsby Advertiser*!

I sat on the back seat of the car; there was no point in remaining hidden any longer. The journey was over, it seemed. *Much Ado About Nothing*, I found myself saying—a corny sentiment, but how true! Well, now, at last, I must make up my mind what I would tell the judge and jury, for that's what my future held, without much doubt.

So, on the back seat of the Rover, in that white-washed garage, I went over the points of my recent dilemma, and tried to think of supporting proof for the story I must tell.

And the more I thought, the blacker seemed the picture. For indeed, when all came to all, I was the only man alive to know that the scientist had called on me—that is, apart from the crooks, and I could not picture them coming to my aid in court! Nor could my acquaintance from the B.B.C. help me. He only knew that he waited outside my office door, that I went inside, and shortly came out again and asked him to drive me away. He would testify to the fact that I seemed agitated when I came out again. He would also testify, no doubt, that I had been inside long enough to shoot a man and to go through his pockets. It would be left for the curly-haired garage man on the Edgware Road to tell the court that I had lots of money, and for Connie to state that when she left me, I had nothing. . . .

I was in a spot—a tough spot. I had seen this sort of thing happen to husky young men on the screen—but to me, never! And then a sudden tapping on the rear window shook me right out of my day-dream and set me trembling violently.

CHAPTER 15
Hay-Cart and Boy

In the sunlit yard, by the open garage door, a boy stood grinning back at my scared face. I said a boy—it might be more proper if I say the most ghastly travesty of youthful human malekind known to man since the worst days of Huckleberry Finn!

He stood, gangling and grinning and scratching, his carroty red hair cropped close to his bullet head, a pair of twisted steel spectacles on his stubbed and freckled nose, a spotted red handkerchief about his undoubtedly grubby neck. I saw the long wrists and hands protruding from a tattered blue woollen jersey, the long legs seeming to creep visibly out of the short and much-patched grey jeans, the toes poking out of the soiled canvas shoes—and I groaned.

When Fate might have sent me Mike, beloved Mike, it had sent me instead this awful specimen of primitive man! I tried to smile back at him, but it was as much as I could do. If my life depended on him, I was surely lost! I settled back to await my doom, thinking that at least I could be comfortable.

But when the side door of the car clicked open and the crop-haired creature poked his head inside, I almost fell off that comfortable seat with amazement.

"S'easy," he said. "The key was just hung on a nail inside the door. Doctor Thomas always keeps it there. I often unlock for him. He even let me drive the car out of the garage, once. Quite legal, you know, if you don't go on to the public road."

I stared at him. "Why, Mike!" I said, "how the blue Peter did you get into that rig-out! You had me properly foxed!"

"That's all I wanted to find out, Mr. MacDonald," he said. "If this disguise fools you, well, it'll fool *them* all right!"

"But how?" I said again, gazing at him in admiration now.

He looked over the top of the twisted steel spectacles. "Mother's the make-up expert at the Drama Club; you know, that gang you met last night. She let me get a close crop first thing this morning, as soon as the barber opened, after I phoned you. I had a sort of hunch that I might need it, and anyway, it'll grow again before we go back to school. Then she grease-painted what hair I'd got left. Comic, isn't it! This carroty stuff all rubs off, if you care to try."

"No, thanks, Mike," I said. "I'll take your word for it."

He went to the garage door and looked both ways. Then he darted back.

"Come on," he whispered, "there's no time to spare. Follow me."

Half a minute later, at the far end of the Thomas's long and high-walled garden, we stopped in a little summer house. There he pointed to a pile of clothing. "Put that on," he said, "over your other things. And take this stick with the bundle on it. It contains your food for the rest of the day. I've got the rest in this haversack."

While Mike stood at the doorway, I pulled on a worn and none-too-clean pair of corduroys, a check shirt and a dirty leather jacket, such as lumberjacks are supposed to wear. I had to leave the heather-mixture one behind.

"This is your father's," I said. "Please see that he gets it back."

"Not me," the boy answered. "Mother has tried to make him give that up for years. Now he'll have forgotten all about it, and I'll be able to dress my Guy Fawkes decently for once in a millennium, next November! That is, if I'm here to do it!"

Caught off-balance, for a moment, I almost asked him what he meant by that. Then I realised that the boy was referring to the great adventure which, he was convinced, lay before us both. I would have been mean if I had deprived him of that, in any way . . . and I did need him, there was no denying that.

I said, "When do we start, Mike?"

He went to the wall and listened. "Any time now," he said. "The hay-cart's just coming round the corner."

It was useless to question this coiled spring of action. I goggled as he dragged a short ladder out from behind the summer house and set it against

the wall.

"I'll go up first," he said. "Come right up behind me. I'll step off and then see that you don't delay or you'll miss the boat—or rather the hay-cart." His feeble joke amused him. I let it go; indeed, I even screwed out a laugh myself, to keep him company. I was in such a state I could have rolled in the aisle at the Christy Minstrels just then!

Mike stood above me for an instant, then, almost as sedately as though he had been entering a state coach, he stepped forward and disappeared. I put my best foot forward and followed suit, almost blindly. It was only a short drop and then we were in the hay together, on top of a big hay-cart, shaking hands with each other. It was the perfect getaway.

And then a gruff voice from below said, "That you, Mike? Are you well settled up there, then?"

The boy called down, "Yes, thank you, Mr. Johnson. Carry on! Full steam ahead as planned!"

"Right, Captain," said the voice, and we heard his tongue clicking, and felt the big wheels turning just a fraction faster. . . .

"I fixed it on the way from the barber's, this morning," he whispered. "Mr. Johnson's an old friend of father's. He'll take us where we want to be, almost. He always comes this way, so it didn't put him out. I just had to tell him to slow down a bit under the wall there, or we'd have bounced on the cobbles a bit!"

I gave up wondering at the boy then. He was a natural detective, or criminal, I decided. I lay back and enjoyed the morning sunshine, feeling suddenly as safe as the proverbial houses.

It is a very curious sensation, that of feeling secure. One might have it in a wattle hut, and lack it in a castle. It can be present when one's comrade is a scatter-brained young fighter-pilot, and utterly absent when one is in the company of the choicest gang of rugger-thugs a university can turn out. There is no accounting for it. I only know Mike gave me that inexplicable sense of safety, much in the same way as a tin mascot might do to some men more superstitious than myself.

As we trundled along a quiet road out of the town, I turned to Mike and whispered, "You've done a lot for me. I wish I could tell you my side of the story. Perhaps I shall, one day."

He gave a comic little twitch of the shoulders and then reached down into his trousers pocket. He drew out a rather grubby and folded newspaper; this morning's paper, northern edition. I unfolded it.

"I know quite a bit already," he said, looking away from me.

I read that newspaper avidly. There I was, on the front page all right, though, luckily, without a photograph. No doubt, before long, the reporters would get one from my father, some relic of school, or Air Force days. And then all the comfortable middle-aged readers would say: "Ah, look at this! What a come-down. I often wonder what comes over these young fellows—they start off so well, and then this happens to them!"

And that is precisely what my own father had said in a brief interview—he knew that I was a little reckless, but had no notion what could have made me commit murder, always supposing I had done so. I was glad to read his cautious reply. He wasn't a solicitor for nothing, I thought.

I wished I dared phone him to assure him that his faith in me, though so tenuously expressed, was justified. But I knew him too well; he would have asked where I was and would have regarded it his duty to inform the police. I could even hear his austere voice, as we rattled along the road. . . . "If you are innocent, my boy, then you should have no fear of the police. English law is intended to protect such men as you, not destroy them. I insist that you give yourself up."

No, I decided, there and then, I must not get in touch with my father until things had reached a more serious climax. . . .

The paper had other details; that I had won the small-arms prize at my Air Force Initial Training School. I could picture the clucking readers nodding their wise heads over this, putting two and two together—and making six!

Dear Connie had also told the reporters that I was impulsive. She had meant no harm, I was sure, and was probably thinking of the time when I had pushed a rather offensive salesman down the stairs of that seedy little office off Soho Square. He had tried to sell us a dictating machine and when I had told him that business didn't warrant such expenditure had made a remark, in Connie's hearing, to which I had taken a strong exception. I didn't hurt him, though. In fact he fell quite lightly. I flung his dictating machine after him. He saw it coming and caught it. So, one way and another, there was no harm done, save to his pride. . . . But I could see that impulsiveness, in newspaper terms, was damning in the present situation.

Moreover, the policeman who had saved my life at the Zoo, by acting as the target for my best hat, had put in a report, stating that I had been in the presence of two men who were most obviously of that class known as "wide boys".

"Ah," careful readers would say, "it is easy to see how the land lies now. . . . A young man, full of promise, who, through lack of money, gets into the hands of a gang. It makes sense, my dear; you see, he is impulsive, and a good pistol shot. Poor young chap!" I could hear their pity and their indignation mingling and coming towards me from all over the north.

I said to Mike, "If your parents have read this, why do they let you come out with me?"

He shrugged his thin shoulders once more and said, "Only Mother and I have read it, and she doesn't believe a word of it. She says she has an intuition that it is all a ghastly mistake."

I had never been much of a believer in it before, but as the boy said those words, I could have stood up and whooped for feminine intuition.

"And what do you think, Mike?" I said.

He scratched his cropped head, and then looked at the reddish greasepaint that clung to his finger-nails.

His voice was undecided, but he made a brave show. "Well," he said at last, "I don't believe you killed anybody, not really. There's just a little bit of doubt in my mind, that's all."

He turned then and saw the look on my face. Then, hurriedly, he said, "But even if you did, either he must have deserved it, or you couldn't help it."

Then he was tongue-tied and I shook his hand, because I could not think of any other answer. Mike belonged to the type of youngster who, once they have chosen their hero, will not budge. Britain seems to have a talent for breeding them—they stood among the arrow hail at Agincourt, and on the sombre field of Culloden cheering their golden-haired Prince; they leapt into Spitfires and Hurricanes and soared off into the blue skies of summer.

The wagon slowed down a little and the old man's voice growled out, "This is the lane you want, ain't it, Mike?"

"That's it," said Mike. "Many thanks!"

He grabbed my arm and we slithered down from the heaped hay. Almost immediately we were in a narrow lane, overgrown with thick hawthorn, and lush with cow-parsley. The wagon rolled on past the opening and Mike set off down the winding path, his bulging haversack on his back. “Come on,” he said, “the sooner we’re there, the better.”

“Where are you taking me?” I gasped, trying to keep pace with the hurrying lad.

“Ask no questions, hear no lies,” he said roguishly. “We’re heading towards the river. It is at the end of this lane—just after the next bend.”

Then, for the second time in my life, I saw the great Humber. It stretched out before us, a leaden blue in the sunlight, broad and strongly flowing. To my right hand, somewhere, lay the sea, the North Sea; to my left, beyond a long sweeping curve, the two rivers, Trent and Ouse, that made up this big estuary.

And away over the Humber, on the far far side, rose the green wooded slopes that would become the Yorkshire Wolds. A lark rose from near by and seemed to mount almost vertically into the clear air. From over on the other side of the Humber came a distant train whistle, and then a tiny toy train and carriages appeared, as from a tunnel under the hill, and made its silent way along the remote shore. Two chimney stacks in the far haze sent up their long cotton-wool columns of smoke. It was all so peaceful that I could not convince myself for a moment that I was a hunted man, wanted for murder. . . .

“Don’t stand mooning about, Mr. MacDon . . . Stewart,” said Mike. “We must get under cover as quickly as we can now.”

I said, “But I thought you might be bringing me down here to cross the river?”

He stopped and looked at me in amazement. Then he laughed, “What!” he said. “I don’t know anybody who would try to cross here! You’d have to be mad to try it!” He paused for a moment, then said, “No, I’m taking you to your new home, for a while. You’ll see it when we turn this bend.”

We went on, across the white chalk beach for a hundred yards, past the stone wall covered with thick bitumen to keep the river from rising and flooding the fields, and then we rounded the bend.

Mike stopped and pointed. “There,” he said, “the old brick kilns. You’ll be as safe as, well, houses, there!”

I looked, and for some strange reason, shuddered.

CHAPTER 16

The Old Kilns

Almost at the water's edge, their brickwork blackened and crumbling, tumbled and overgrown by weeds and mosses, lay the squat and foreboding shapes of the two old kilns. Roughly rectangular in shape, and in places rising to the height of fifteen feet or so, they looked to me more like the sacrificial temples of some forgotten Indian people, rather than the outworn relics of the last century.

In the contrasting sunshine, with the lark still singing above them and the train whistle from the other side of the river growing ever more indistinct, the kilns seemed to brood, rather than merely to exist.

I said to Mike, trying to cover my sudden apprehensions, "You could persuade yourself that these kilns are the shrines of some rather repulsive sea god, who comes up out of the Humber at nightfall!"

The boy turned on me a devastating look from his light eyes. "Are you feeling all right?" he said. "These kilns are smashing places! Why, I've spent days in them, with a pal of mine from further up the river."

"Days!" I said, in surprise.

"Well, hours, then," replied Mike, unabashed.

He raced on, his haversack bobbing against his back, and disappeared round the first corner of the nearest kiln. I followed him, but when I turned the corner, could not see him anywhere. He had disappeared, just as though he had plunged into the Humber without causing a ripple, and had stayed there.

"Hey, Mike!" I called in alarm. "Where are you? Don't act the fool!"

The boy's head appeared above a small clump of cow-parsley at my side.

"What's the matter?" he said, peering owlishly through the steel-rimmed glasses. "Are you scared, Mr. Stewart?"

I stared past him, into a low tunnel, which had been entirely enshrouded by the weeds until the movement of his body had exposed the hole.

"Is that the way in?" I said.

He nodded. "Come on now," he said, "and watch those nettles, they're brutes. But we can't uproot them; they make too good a screen, and people avoid nettles when they can, so they are not suspected as being front doors!"

He disappeared, backwards like a badger, then, and I got on to my knees to follow him.

"Keep your head well down," he whispered. "The roof's a bit low here. It once began to fall in and then changed its mind."

And so I followed the boy into that dim labyrinth, which got darker and darker as we left the small improvised entrance-way. The kiln we were in must have been the best part of a hundred years old and was constructed of small and very weathered bricks, reinforced here and there with great jagged masses of concrete, so that one had the impression of penetrating into an ancient burial place of the Egyptian Pharaohs, rather than an outworn riverside manufactory of common bricks.

The passage-way curved a number of times, and from it other narrow openings led off. It seemed that the thing might contain a number of separate ovens, each one of which reached down to the rough floor level and was now more like a room than a baking-place for the shaped clay that was once stacked inside them. Some of these ovens had been left full of bricks when the place was abandoned, and some had been filled to roof level by tiles and soil which had fallen in when the roof collapsed with the passage of time.

It was a grim place and not one which I would have visited if left to my own devices. It was cold and dank and full of tiny rustling noises, which might well have been the voice of the seeping water, but which at that moment brought to my mind the idea of rats, or snakes, or some unnamed slimy things, that probably existed only in my fevered imagination.

Then the boy stopped crawling. "You can stand up here," he said. "We've arrived."

He fumbled about for a moment and struck a match. Before us stood, or rather sagged, a rough door, made, it appeared, from a number of assorted pieces of driftwood, lashed together roughly with strips of tin. Mike pushed

the door open and I followed him into a recess of some sort. He bent down and soon struck another match, to light the damp and fizzing candle which he held in his hand.

"We keep a store of these in here. You never know when you might want them," he said. "Roger Graham and me. This is our hide-out. We found it last year and tidied it up a bit. No one knows about it."

He set the candle in a green bottle that stood on the roughly bricked floor. It flung strange and grotesque shadows over the tottering, crazy walls. I saw that water-moss had turned the upper part of the room green and a great chill came over me. It was like being in a tomb. Mike seemed to sense my shudder, for he said, "A bit unused, sort of, isn't it! But it's amazing how cosy it gets after you've had a fire or two burning here."

Then he pointed upwards towards a roundish aperture in the roof.

"Chimney-hole," he said. "Curls here and there, so you can't see the sky. But the smoke gets out all right, most of it. And what's more, it disperses through the brickwork; comes out in stray wisps. Nothing so obvious as a straight stream of smoke to give your hiding-place away. Oh no, this place isn't like that. It's quite safe to light a fire, especially if there's a wind blowing towards the river. Then the smoke-smell gets carried away too."

He lit three more candles and stuck them in bottles about the room. Then he opened his big haversack and took out of it a folded rubber thing. "Your bed," he said, smiling. He began to blow into a little tube, and after a while the collapsible object took shape as a Li-Lo. He plugged it up and placed it in the corner, away from the door.

Then he took from the haversack a tin of corned beef, three round milk loaves, a bag of scones and a thermos flask.

"Coffee in there," he said. "Mother made it specially for you, with plenty of sugar to give energy—in case you need it!"

"Give her a kiss for me, Mike," I said.

"Sure," he replied, grinning. "She seems to have taken to you all right."

I considered the provisions which the boy had brought. With care they should last me out for two days—apart from the liquid. I mentioned that to Mike who told me to look in my own haversack.

There I found two small bottles of lemonade, wrapped round with two pairs of kippers, in a cellophane bag. I stared in surprise at them.

“Try smoking them over a fire, on a stick,” said the lad. “They taste fine like that! I’ve often done it. Graham wouldn’t have them any other way, he says. But then, he’s such a frightful liar, you don’t know when to believe him. He once told me his father knew the whole of the Bible by heart and he often tells the master at school that his grandfather used to swim across the Firth of Forth as a boy, to save the ferry fare.”

I sat down on the rubber bed.

“Talking of ferries,” I said, “how do I get across the Humber, Mike? I notice from the paper you have given me that it is the 23rd of August. I have to be in Hull on the morning of August 26th.”

You see, the idea had returned to me in my confusion. I had at first doubted the good sense of proceeding with the first plan of finding Professor Maguire, when the phial had been broken and then lost; but now, with a gang of crooks somewhere about me, and the good honest police of Lincolnshire setting their traps for me, I could think of nothing else but going to Hull. True, there was nothing tangible to go for, nothing to give the learned zoologist, save my most profound apologies. But he had something to give me—if he was prepared to do so. He could give me life, if I could dodge the gang to get to him, and if, when I got to him, he would assure the police that I was innocent.

And there I came to a very abrupt standstill. All other things being equal, he would undoubtedly have vouched for me—but, and this thought came to me with all the horror of a protracted nightmare, *he did not even know me by sight, nor I him*. In a court of law, hearsay evidence is unacceptable. He could not swear on oath that he knew me, knew my character, my innocence.

I was like a rather pathetic mouse caught in a nasty great trap, with no one really to help me out of it but another, smaller, mouse. . . . And dear Mike was that smaller mouse.

This realization not only endeared the lad further to me; it also gave me a sort of light-headed feeling, as though I knew my boats were burnt, and so I must make the best of it all. I had studied English, as I said, at King’s; and now I recalled one of the literary works which had occupied me so much while I was there, an old Saxon poem called *The Battle of Maldon*. In this, the beleaguered Saxon warriors chant that, the harder they are pressed, the harder they will fight; and that as strength lessens, courage will increase.

In a way it is a pagan pæan of a crew of berserkers—but at that moment, in the deserted kiln, I felt rather pagan too, and even almost berserk!

Mike broke through my day-dreams and said, “I can probably get you across the Humber. That chap I was telling you about, Graham, lives further up the river, on an island. His father looks after a herd of cattle there; the grass is always green and lush. Roger could borrow his father’s boat, maybe, and get you across to the island. I don’t know how you’d manage the far stretch, but it’s worth thinking about.”

I smiled and said, “For the Lord’s sake, think about it, then, Mike. It’s quite important to me, old son.”

At last he looked at his big wrist watch and said, “It’s almost lunch time. I must go home or Mums’ll be worried. But I’ll try to get out to you again to-day. If not, I’ll come again to-morrow. I will give a warning signal, like an owl. I’d better not do it now in case anybody is about outside. An owl would sound a bit stupid in broad daylight, wouldn’t it!”

I followed him to the little entrance-way, behind the nettles and cow-parsley. He turned once and said, “Mind, don’t go out until nightfall. *They* might have got a whiff of something, and I’d just hate to find you stretched out in the nettles!”

He grinned once, his spectacles over his cheek on one side and over his forehead on the other. Then, very carefully, he went creeping on.

I waited a while, in case he cried out for help, for some reason or other. But all was silent, save for the river’s constant whispering, and so I retraced my steps and sat down again on the rubber bed, coughing already with the awful smell of the damp candle-wicks.

CHAPTER 17

First Day

August 23rd was the longest day in my life. Mike did not come back again, and I spent most of the day in a state of great anxiety. I began to imagine all sorts of dreadful things having happened to him. Suppose *they* had been waiting, somewhere, perhaps back on the road, undecided which way to take; and suppose they had tried to make him tell them where I was. . . . Then I would console myself and call to mind my own inability to recognize the boy, in that awful Huckleberry Finn disguise.

I drank some of my coffee and ate a thick slice of corned beef, pushed into one of the milk loaves, as a sort of gigantic round sandwich. After that, I read the paper he had left me, by the light of the now steadily burning candles.

And when I had read it through, I read it again, I even read the horoscopes. My own was Pisces, for I was born in February. It said:

"A happy and active day for the young, with financial rewards on the horizon. A relative will try to inflict unwelcome advice, but this may be avoided with tolerant humour. Do not speculate on uncertainties. Lucky colour, green."

I flung the paper from me—I would have given anything to see a relative just then, with unwelcome advice or not! I thought of the words "happy and active", and then smiled wryly to think of myself penned up in that musty dump of a disused brick kiln, with Mike's strict warning in my ears, not to venture out till dark. And that, I guessed, would not be for another seven hours, at least.

The only thing I could get out of the horoscope was the bit about green being my lucky colour. That, of course, meant the Humber, I told myself, sarcastically. And then I think I dozed off, for the rubber bed was comfortable and there was nothing else to do.

It was nine o'clock when I awoke. I felt very cold, and my clothes were damp from the atmosphere of the kiln. I began to shiver with the cold and groped about for more candles, the others having guttered away while I slept. I cursed myself for a careless fool, in not snuffing them before sleep overtook me. Then, by the side of the bed, I found a whole packet of them, and my spirits rose once more. I lit four of them and ate my supper, finishing off the corned beef and adding a scone or two as dessert. I kept most of the coffee, which was now luke-warm, against the possibility of my not seeing Mike the next day, even. I slaked my thirst with lemonade that night—a loathsome diet, but a veritable feast, in the circumstances.

And when I had finished, I crawled once more to the entrance. Outside, the many small waves of the Humber seemed to sing to each other, like ghastly conspiring enemies, threatening what they intended to do when the last light faded from the sky.

A covey of night birds got up from somewhere on the riverbank, and flew directly above the kilns, their shrill dry voices bringing a sudden spurt of fear into my heart.

And then, from not more than a hundred yards away, a bell began to clang, solemn, sonorous, deathly.

"Send not to ask for whom the bell tolls . . ." my mind said.

"Don't be a fool," my common sense replied, "that is a buoy-bell."

Nevertheless, its reiterated clanging emphasised my loneliness, my solitary state, my lack of hope. And I think I would have run from that awful kiln, but for the fact that, through the growing dusk, I suddenly heard a sound that set my pulses throbbing. It was the sound of feet, and, worse still, of a dog's excited snuffling.

As quickly and as silently as I could, I shuffled back into the little hide-out, shutting the cracked door behind me, and feeling about the floor for some weapon. In my sudden fear, I had pictured a bloodhound, which might have got my scent from that jacket of mine which I had left behind at the Wadham's. I found a piece of sharp flint, about two pounds in weight. I would sell my freedom dearly, I decided.

Outside, as through a thick wall of felt, I heard the footsteps crunching nearer, over the white chalk of the beach. And then I heard a dog's quiet whimpering, which grew and grew, until it stopped outside the wooden door that the boys had built of driftwood. I had blown out the candles and so sat in the darkness, waiting. The dog's claws began to scratch at the door, and

then, almost with relief, I realized that this was a small dog, a fox terrier, perhaps. In my joy, I almost spoke to the dog, some such words, as “Good boy, find the rats, then!” But I realised that if I tried to get him off the scent like that, he might well start to bark, and so attract their attention.

So, I did what is so often the best thing one can do—nothing. I sat and waited there, and then heard the footsteps drawing away from the kilns and on up the beach, I supposed. The little dog lingered, on the other side of the door, smelling the corned beef, perhaps. He began to whine and then to scratch violently again. I thought he must be hungry. My hand already crept to the bundle, to find a scone for him; and then I recollected the gravity of my position. I was in no state to give my food to stray dogs.

I crept to the door, and putting my head down to his level, growled, with all the menace of which I was capable, “Gerrout of my house, you tyke!”

The whimpering and scratching stopped, as though by magic. Then I heard the little dog’s claws scuttering against the bricks that paved the floor of the passage outside. He had gone, with the fear of the great unknown lending wings to his precipitate withdrawal.

I lit my candles again and waited on the bed.

And as I waited, with the sh-sh-sh of the big river in my ears and the cries of the night birds increasing over my head somewhere, I realized that I was still clasping a piece of sharp flint. I was, in all essentials, the first man who had ever crouched shuddering in a dark cave while the sabre-toothed tiger prowled outside snuffling—I was primitive man.

And with that realisation came another; I was alone now, completely alone, and in a completely deserted place. If *they* came for me, there was no one to help me, no one to phone the convenient police. What happened to me would depend on me—and them. And if I was quick enough, and strong enough, with that piece of sharp flint, I might take one of them with me, to wherever they were intent on sending me. . . .

These were not pleasant thoughts, to a fairly good-humoured and quiet-living type of chap, like myself! Indeed, I smiled a little, self-consciously, as I thought them. But what would you? If I found myself attacked by wolves in Siberia, I would try to kill a few before they sank their final fangs. . . . And if I were rubber planting in Malaya, that snake which dangled over my head would be asking for it, if I had a machete in my hand. . . . Now, I had a flint. I sat still.

And with that imaginary comparison, my state of mind seemed to improve. I became that Saxon, at the Maldon battle, whose courage rose higher as his strength failed. I felt that, at the worst, a man could only die. And I got up from the rubber bed and crawled outside, right through the nettles, not caring now who was there. But I still carried that piece of flint in my hand. That was my weapon and I must not lose it, I thought.

And so, as darkness came down, I stood on the banks of the Humber, looking across that wide stretch of treacherous water, to the vague shapes of the Yorkshire Wolds, and to the distant fairy lights of the Hull docks, that stretched like a string of tinsel balls, small and unattainable, away to my right, a million miles away. . . .

And a dark bird came swooping down over my head, crying out, as it seemed, for all the sins of humanity, and then it rose again, misty white in the growing moonlight, and set its course for the low grey shape, up river, which I guessed to be the island on which Roger Graham's father kept his cattle, on grass that was eternally green and unendingly lush. . . .

I stared and stared, until the leaden lights of the moon on that expanse of water seemed to hypnotize me. . . . I saw the distant banks of the Humber coming towards me, and then going away again. I walked down the beach, well away from the kilns, to where the waves rustled against the shingle. . . . I thought how easy it could be to swim across such a stretch, if only one were a strong swimmer. . . . I was bending down to try the temperature of the water with my fingers, when a voice spoke from behind me.

"A fascinating time of day, don't you think?" It was a well-modulated voice, the voice of an elderly man of some substance—but not a Lincolnshire voice. No, although I had been in the county for so short a time, I sensed that the vowels, the inflections, were those of a man who had spent his life much farther south than Lincoln.

I turned, looking first under my arm, even before I had fully straightened my body. Though the moon was behind him, I saw that the man was as I had thought, elderly. Though there was something about his hunched shoulders and long arms which gave me the instant impression of great strength, should the occasion arise which called for it.

He spoke again, "The Humber is so well worth one's time, I think. It has a thousand moods and hides so many wonders—which the casual eye never sees, or seeing, never fully understands."

He was dressed in a long, loose tarpaulin coat and wore a much-battered check cap. His feet and legs were clothed in strong boots and brown

leggings, such as farmers wear. He held a rough ashplant in his hand.

I said, “Yes, indeed, it is a wonderful river. Do you come down to the shore often?”

He poked a finger into his ear and began to move it round as though removing an irritation. Then he smiled at me. I saw his white teeth beneath the clipped grey moustache.

“If you are a regular visitor yourself, sir,” he said, “I had thought you would have noticed me, at some time or other. I live but a short distance from this point, at an old converted farmhouse beyond the trees yonder. A nice old place.”

There was something wrong about his gesture and the words he used, though I could not pin down my suspicions. But it seemed to me that the movement of his arm, as he swung it round, was altogether too vague, and that if indeed he had lived at a farmhouse, he would have given its name, for most farms in the more obscure countryside seem to get their own proper names attached to them—Glebe Farm, The Bottoms, and so on.

No, I sensed something wrong, but could not lay a finger on it. I tried to probe further.

“What is your house called, sir?” I asked, as politely as I could make my voice sound.

He gave a short low laugh in the moonlight and seemed to nod his head up and down a time or two. I did not know whether this was an affliction of age, or whether he was playing for time, in his characterisation of an old man, a little wanting in memory.

“Well, er, since you ask,” he said, “it is known by many names, hereabouts, but I think you would find it if you asked for Evans’s, simply that, Evans’s. The other names are purely local ones, you know, and some of them not even polite! But you surely are a stranger yourself, if you do not know Evans’s?”

I said, “I am writing a thesis on river formations, changes in structure, and so on. I heard that the Humber bed is shifting and thought I’d spend a few days up here to investigate.”

He surveyed me steadily for a moment, and a little smile seemed to flicker over his mouth-corners. “You are a geologist, then?” he said quietly. “In a way,” I replied, now wondering whether I had been wise in my impersonation.

He thrust his hand into his pocket and then held out something towards me. I had to take it. The object was of some sort of stone, I thought, a darkish brown in colour and about three inches long. It was exactly the shape of a very big bullet, though I could feel that it was hollow at the broad end.

"Very good specimen," said the old man. "You can pick 'em up by the hundred, especially when the tide has been up. Find 'em at the water-line, you know. 'Thunder stones' they call 'em round here. That's what I call 'em myself, most often. My memory isn't as good as it was once upon a time."

I looked down at the piece of stone and then at him. He was still staring into my face, waiting. I said at last, "Quite a good specimen, as you say, sir."

"Yes," he answered, smiling. "A good specimen. What do you geologists call them? I am always curious about the names folk give to these things. What is their name in the book, so to speak?"

I looked down at the thing in my hand, and then back at him; now I felt certain that he was testing me—or just playing with me, in some inexplicable cat-and-mouse game.

I said, "Funny thing, I don't recall ever seeing one of these before." He did not speak. "Amazing, one's blind spots," I went on, now feeling definitely uncomfortable.

"Yes," he said, "but you did say it was a good specimen, a few moments ago, didn't you?"

I slipped the thing into my pocket and said, "Look, if you are down here often, I'll find out all I can about these things, and we'll have a chat about them, next time we meet."

"Where are you staying?" he said, "in the town? Perhaps I could walk back part of the way with you. It would be a bit of exercise for me. I don't get much, stuck out here, you know. Used to think that when I retired I'd get plenty of golf, and so on. But this place is so isolated, it would cost a fortune in petrol to run the car out to the nearest golf course as often as I'd need to play to get fit again."

As he spoke he half-turned, as though we might walk on down the beach together. But I was not going to fall into that trap, if trap it was. Once we had reached the bend towards which he was turning his face, there was a heavily overgrown track we would have to pass along, and that would be the ideal place for an ambush, of any sort, by police or thugs.

Acting on a sudden impulse, crazy as it was, I turned about and began to run up river on the slippery shingle, making sure to keep well away from the kilns so as not to be associated with them.

The old man was taken by surprise. Then he ran a pace or two after me. “Stop!” he shouted, with a surprising force of voice for one so elderly. “Stop! I want to talk to you!”

But I ran on and on, until I was lost to him in the darkness. Then I headed away from the river and over the path above the shore, and so into a deepish ditch, covered by brambles and hawthorn boughs. And there I lay, trying not to breathe too audibly.

I heard his footsteps passing me, down below, on the beach, and when they had become faint with distance, I got out of the ditch and ran along the path, down river this time. As I did so, I heard him returning, but at a good pace now, his heavy boots sounding with frightening nearness on the path. I dropped again into the ditch, though it was less well-covered at this point.

He must have listened for my footfalls, for his own slowed down. And then I heard another sound, that of his stout ashplant swishing away at the green stuff that lined the sides of the ditch in which I crouched. He could not have been more than ten yards from me, and once, as he came nearer, I saw his dark shape lit up by the moon’s pale light. He was trying to peer down into the ditch and striking out whenever he became suspicious of any shadow.

But what scared me most was his muttering, which was kept up incessantly, as though he was talking to me and knowing that I could hear what he said.

“So, So, So!” he said. “You took me for a fool! An old fool, did you? Well, I know your sort, I know your sort, my lad, oh yes, I know. Come on out there, I can see you, yes, I can see you, it’s no use thinking you can hide from me, oh no, I have my eye on you, come on out or I shall brain you with this stick; come on, I tell you, it won’t be long now, not long now, come on, come on, with you, I have my eye on you. . . .”

I crouched down, my head deep in a clump of nettles. They stung my face frightfully, but I did not make a move. Indeed, I hardly breathed at all.

And then, after halting above me and seeming to stare right into my eyes, the old man passed on, still muttering and still striking at anything which seemed to resemble a human form in the darkness below him.

I waited for ten minutes, and then took a chance, cutting across the shore again, in the moonlight, to the squat kiln which was my only refuge. I did not stop to think that he might be waiting for me there. I ran on blindly now, more afraid than I thought was possible.

Once inside my little cell, I lay down on the rubber bed, not daring to light the candles for another half-hour.

Outside, the resonant bell-buoy kept up its grim tolling, and from time to time the night birds screamed as they began their weary flight across the broad and whispering Humber.

But the old man did not come to find me, and at last, tired by the day’s excitements, I must have fallen asleep.

Only once, that night, was there any occasion which caused me alarm. I awoke with a little start, at about two in the morning, for outside on the echoing beach I heard the sound of slow footsteps. They seemed to be dragging and unutterably weary. At first I almost crawled along that winding passage-way to see if I could find out who was taking so long to walk past my hiding-place. Might it not be Mike, I thought? Mike, perhaps wounded? And that notion brought me to my feet at once.

Then I sat down again. Mike knew his way here. If he were coming here, he would need no help from me to find his way inside.

No, it was someone else. I sat back against the chill, damp wall, and listened so hard that in the end my head was filled with a thousand indiscriminate noises that swirled and thickened in my ears, making neither rhyme nor reason—and when I knew anything more, it was broad daylight. I had fallen asleep listening, and those grim footsteps had passed by me in the night. I was safe, at least for the moment. And to-day was August 24th.

CHAPTER 18

August 24th

I ate a meagre breakfast of dry milk loaf, which had lost its pristine freshness in spite of the dampness of my larder, and a kipper, toasted on a stick over the best fire I could make in that now almost stifling cell.

Towards mid-morning I crept to the entrance of the kiln, to see if Mike was anywhere on the horizon. But I found no sign of him. I began to get so worried now that my caution and my fortitude oozed away from me at one and the same time, and left me in a state of extreme anxiety. However, I had just enough common sense left not to go running along the river bank in search of him, though it did cross my mind to make my way back to the road, to see if there was a phone box anywhere, from which I could make a call to his home to set my mind at rest that he had come to no harm.

But the futility of that course of action quickly became obvious to me; why should there be a phone box on such a lonely road? Who but the odd isolated farmer would wish to use the phone? And these days, all farmers had their own phones, however dilapidated their farms might look!

I sat back on the bed again, and to occupy my mind, began to translate the article about myself into French, for I had now read that torn and begrimed newspaper through and through a number of times, and with each reading it seemed more and more like the work of a crew of morons, rather than of responsible writers and reporters. It would be a most salutary exercise for any journalist, save one utterly blinded and deafened by his own ego, to read six times on the run that article of which he was so proud the night before! He would find such repetition, such crimes against euphony, such lack of rhythm, and such arrant nonsense in it, that it would take him days before he dared pick up a pen or tap away at a typewriter again!

Perhaps that's why they don't do it—life is too short, and editorial requirements so urgent. They couldn't afford those days of recuperation.

I had finished with my French and was just about to embark on a rough Latin version, to stop myself from banging my head on the damp wall in sheer despair, when I heard the cry of an owl. At first it seemed to come from the distance, and I must confess that I was so engrossed at that moment in tackling an Ablative Absolute, that I disregarded it.

And then, with the memory of that bird call echoing in my mind, I froze, sat upright, then began to crawl like mad along the twisting labyrinth, knocking my head on the wall and barking my shins, in my anxiety to see if Mike was indeed coming to visit me.

I peered through the barrage of cow-parsley. He was coming down the beach. I almost shouted out to him, but then he made a little gesture with one hand, a smoothing-out movement, which silenced me. His face was set, but as he marched on past me, he winked most obviously with one eye. He could see me, I was sure, and he was telling me to lie doggo. He went on past the kilns, and I retired, to wait whatever might befall.

But I heard nothing more, although I waited, cramped in the low passage-way, for at least half an hour. It was only when I had given up, in a state of extreme frustration and growing despair, that there was a sudden flurry from outside, and then a quick scrambling along the darkened tunnel. Then Mike stood upright in the doorway, his face blackened and his shoes and legs thick with mud.

He sat down beside me on the bed, flinging the bulging haversack on the floor.

"More supplies, pardner," he said, with a gasp for breath. "My, but I've been setting up a new record for the seashore mile, I should think! Haven't been so puffed since the school cross-country. I was sick after that. Hope I don't follow suit this time!"

I looked at the boy. He was smiling but his face was very white. There was a long cut across his cheekbone which gave him an even more undesirable appearance.

"What *have* you been up to?" I said at last. But he waved me aside. "Oh, nothing much," he said. "Try those hot dogs in the haversack. Mother made them for you this morning. But make this lot spin out. It'll be the last I shall be able to get out to you. Father and Doctor Thomas were talking last night and they have got so worried that they felt it their duty to report to the police that you had stayed the night in Merton. I have told Mums where you are and she has agreed for me to come out this once, but no more. I'm sorry, but

you know what these grown-ups are. Still, I think she's been quite a sport about it so far, don't you?"

I shook his hand. "Tell her I'm eternally grateful," I said. "If I don't shake this lot off, it won't be for lack of her support, hers and yours."

"Aw shucks," he said, putting on an American accent in his embarrassment. "Eat a hot dog!"

We both did. They were, as he had said, delicious.

Then I asked him about his cut. He grinned and was silent for a second or two, then he said, "I had made up my mind to tell you I had slipped against a bramble brier, but I might as well tell the truth. I'd better start at the beginning. . . ."

He paused a while, trying to make up his mind how to begin. I waited with a growing sense of apprehension. He flicked a pebble on his thumb for a moment or two, and then said, "I think the net is closing in."

We both sat silent then. I heard the Humber coming in from the outer world, with its soft-shoe whispering. The tick of my wrist watch began to sound like that of a great grandfather clock. I could not speak, not even to ask how long we had, or rather, I had got. Though I desperately wanted to know the answer to that question.

Then Mike spoke again. "I started to come out to you last night, just as dusk was falling. But when I got to the last cottages before the overgrown lane begins, I smelled a rat, sort of, and got into the ditch. A black car came by and an elderly man got out, dressed in an old tarpaulin coat and a bashed-about cap. A little man, with a thin moustache, in the car—he was driving, I think—gave the old man a stick and they agreed to pick him up at that spot at midnight. As he parted from them, he said, 'I'll go on through the night, if needs be.' Then the car backed into a gateway and went off in the direction of Merton again."

I recalled the old man and the strange stone with a shudder. He had been one of *them*, then. I had come to the conclusion that he might indeed be what he had said, a retired business man who had taken a converted farm on the hilltop. Either that, or a local madman, out for an evening airing.

Automatically, I felt in my pocket. The stone was still there. I drew it out and held it towards Mike, in the palm of my hand. It glinted, evilly in the candlelight, brown and bullet like—though it could not have been shot from anything but the heaviest elephant rifle.

“What’s this, Mike?” I said.

He looked at it without amazement. “Why,” he said, “it’s just a belemnite.”

“What!” I said, never having heard the word before.

“Yes,” he said, smiling, “there are millions of them along this bit of shore. You find them when the tide has gone down, at the water level. They are the fossilised remains of cuttle-fish sheathes. Nothing very remarkable. I used to collect them when I was young, but I don’t now.”

Then his face grew more serious. “Hey,” he said, “you haven’t been pottering about collecting these things, have you? That would be dangerous.”

I said, “Here, put this in your collection.”

He slipped it into his pocket automatically. His face bore the expression of extreme curiosity. “Where did you get it?” he asked.

I said, “An old man in a tarpaulin coat gave it to me, last night, just as I was about to swim across the Humber.”

He sank back on the rubber bed, passing his hand over his face and knocking off his steel-rimmed glasses, in an effect of complete bewilderment.

“Go on,” he said. “Here am I, trying to save your life, while you seem set on finding ways to destroy it. I hardly think it’s worth while going on, really, I don’t, Mr. Stewart.”

I smiled and said, “You’re perhaps right, Mike. The only thing I’ve ever been any good at is navigating aircraft—oh yes, and learning Shakespeare.”

He looked at me, pityingly. “That won’t keep the rope off your neck,” he said. Then ashamed at having spoken so unkindly, he smiled and said, “I’m really sorry, Mr. Stewart. I didn’t mean that. I got carried away, sort of.” He held out his thin hand and I shook it.

“What happened last night, Mike?” I said.

He went on, his embarrassment fading as he told his tale. “I waited till the old man had started off, and then I followed him,” he said. “He really is old, no kidding, and goes quite slow. So I had to slacken off so as not to run him too close.”

I said, “He can run when he likes, Mike.”

He gazed at me over his glasses. “Oh cripes,” he said, “you haven’t been playing chase-me with him, have you? That would be the end!”

“It nearly was,” I said, “but go on, please. I’m all ears.”

“I can see it,” he said, dodging the screwed-up newspaper which I flung at him. “Well, I kept out of his way until he began to get close to the kiln, then I had to drop into the ditch again because two men came by with a dog, a fox-terrier.” I shivered at the name.

Mike went on, “I knew the men, two notorious poachers, and I didn’t want them to see me, because they’d know me, disguise or not, and, well, I just waited and let them pass. But the dog came into the kiln—I’m surprised you didn’t hear him—and by the time they had gone, the old man had disappeared.”

I said, “I heard the dog all right. He came right to this door.”

Mike whistled. “You’re lucky then. That dog has a nose that would scent anything and anybody. It’s a wonder he didn’t wake the neighbourhood with his yapping.”

I felt weak again suddenly. “What happened then?” I said.

Mike gazed at me open-eyed. “I think there must be a sort of hoodoo on you,” he said. “You seem to attract trouble.”

“I’ve got out of it so far,” I answered.

He gave a queer smile. “You should never say things like that,” he said, “you never know who’s listening. Anyway, I didn’t dare risk it last night, so I went back home, keeping off the main streets, because the police know me and would wonder what I was up to, rigged out like this. This morning, I got permission from Mums to come here again and I started off after father had gone out, about nine-thirty.”

I looked at my watch. “It’s midday now,” I said.

He nodded wisely. I could have smacked his head for that wise nod. “I got as far as the lane,” he said, “when a man came out of the brambles, and asked me the way to Ferriby. Well, no one who wants to get there would make his way along the river, so I was suspicious. I directed him by the main road, but he said he was out for a ramble, and offered me ten shillings to take him there, by the river side. I said I would get into trouble if I stayed out so long, and he offered me a pound then. Well, I must admit, I was tempted. You see, there’s an electric motor in Blewitt’s, that toy shop off the market-place, and that pound would just have made all the difference. . . .”

I began to feel in my pocket, but the look on the lad's face made me take my hand out again, instantly.

"But I resisted the temptation," he said, putting out his tongue at me. "I told him I didn't want money. Then I began to run, just to see what he would do. I didn't bargain for what he did do, though. He suddenly let out with a cane thing he was carrying and caught me across the cheek. It bled a bit. But I knew he was a bad type then, and I *did* run—until I got near the kiln, then I walked on, till I was past you, and so I got to the sluice."

My head was whirling with the unfamiliar details.

"Steady on," I said, "where's the sluice?"

He smiled at my ignorance and said, "It's the continuation of Ferriby, down by the riverside. The River Ancholme flows into the Humber there. That's where my pal, Roger Graham lives. I met him in the post office. Dropped him a card yesterday asking him to meet me there. He lives on the island in the middle of the Humber, you see, so you have to make arrangements in good time."

"What arrangements have you made?" I asked, now thoroughly bewildered by this boy, and feeling utterly in his power.

"Oh, just to get you rowed over to the island, to-morrow night," he said.

I could not help groaning. "To-morrow night!" I echoed. "And have I got to stay in this smelly dump for another twenty-four hours?" I said, ungratefully, but with natural feeling, nevertheless.

"I'm afraid so," said the boy. "Longer, in fact. You can't set out for the sluice till nightfall to-morrow, after all. They are on to you, old boy!"

And I had to agree that this was so.

But I said, "What happened to the man who hit you with the cane?"

He said, "Oh, I don't know. All I saw was that he got into an awful mess when I took a short cut across the mud. He was floundering rather badly with the water round his waist. Even shouted out for help. The Humber is an awful river, you know, really. Not to be taken lightly; that's why I don't like to hear you saying you can swim across it."

He looked down at his trousers and shoes. "Look," he said, "and I know where I'm going."

I was weak and helpless now. This boy was more than a match for me, or for the men who were out to kill me, it seemed.

“Did you go back and help him?” I asked, already knowing the answer. Mike made a noise, of which I am certain his mother would not have approved. I said no more.

“Look,” he said, “old Roger Graham will be waiting for you at the sluice, to-morrow night, at ten o’clock. He will row you over to the island in his father’s boat. Then he will leave you to fend for yourself. His father will need the boat early in the morning, so Roger couldn’t risk letting you go right across with it. But he says he has another scheme for you, once you are there. He’s a good chap, if you can understand what he says, that is. He’s Scotch.”

Then Mike blushed, yes, positively blushed, for he had remembered my name. I patted him on the shoulder. “I’ve never been farther north than Wolverhampton,” I said.

He grinned. “Good football team there,” he said. “Look, Roger will see to you, if only you can get there. Don’t forget, ten o’clock, to-morrow night. Okay?”

I said, “How do I get to the sluice?”

He pointed, though his finger could not penetrate the mouldering black brick wall which enclosed us. “Just walk on up the river,” he said, “about a mile or so. You’ll pass an old jetty, formed from the hulk of a rotting barge, and then you’ll come to a very white beach, with a little cliff above it. Keep right on and on. The Hall grounds come down to the waterside; you can’t miss them. Always lots of dogs yapping. It’s a kennels now. And then, with the sound of yapping still in your ears, you’ll hear another sort of yapping. It will be old Roger. He has sworn to be there and to hail you as soon as you appear. Run for it then, because old Roger will get quite a pasting if his old man finds he’s got the boat out. Okay?”

I said, “Go home and tell your mother that she has a crook for a son.”

He said, “Sit still, or you will have a corpse for a friend.”

Then suddenly and silently he blew out the candle. I was about to speak when I too heard the footsteps coming towards the entrance of the kiln. And as in a ghastly nightmare, I heard someone crawling along our passage-way, crawling and muttering. I already knew who it was.

CHAPTER 19

No Holds Barred Now

Immediately outside the driftwood door, the shuffling stopped. There was silence for a few seconds, for long enough to let the hairs at the nape of my neck start upright, as though life were in them.

Then through the vertical cracks in the door, I saw the diffused beam of a powerful torch. As I tried to step back out of its range, there was a violent blow on the door and the ramshackle thing swung inwards with a jolt.

Standing in the doorway, behind that glaring white beam, was the elderly man in the tarpaulin jacket; but now his movements and his stance were those of an athlete rather than a man past his prime. His voice had taken on a new, virile and triumphant note. The sneer in his words penetrated even my dumb and bedevilled senses, shunting me back into a sudden awareness and fear.

"So, my geologist friend," he jibed, "and have you found out what a belemnite is yet?"

He chuckled and made a step forward. I saw the heavy ashplant poised before him, to deliver a numbing blow on my arm or shoulder, if I should spring out to attack him. He was a formidable opponent, I realized then. I pressed back against the damp wall, wondering what to do.

He came forward. "The game's up, Mr. Stewart," he said. "It was only a matter of time, my poor fellow! But there it is, life is like that, and we would be fools to protest when the die is once cast."

He stopped for an instant, savouring his victory over me.

I played for time then, my mind beginning to clear.

"For goodness sake," I said, "what do you want from me?"

His grim chuckle echoed through that awful labyrinth.

“There, there,” he said, “still the little innocent, my friend? Oh no, dear boy, that won’t do at all. No, not at all!”

His voice was now that of a tolerant old uncle, though I knew only too well how inaccurate such a description of him would be.

Then his intonation changed once more. He was now vicious, so vicious that I began to believe that my earlier ideas about him might well be true ones—that he was a madman, at the core, his apparent sanity being the merest outside covering, as thin as a paper veneer.

“Where is the phial?” he said. “That is all we want. Give me that, and I promise we shall let you go on with your game of cops and robbers. We shall not hand you over to the police, I will promise you.”

I said, “Phial? What phial? I have no phial!”

He stepped a yard towards me, his face distorted and full of anger. He almost shouted out, “You liar! You have it! Give it to me or I will. . . .”

But he did not finish that threat. I think that young Mike had slipped behind the door just before it was so rudely flung open, and that the man had walked straight past him without seeing him. Now the boy threw himself at the man’s back, in a brave attempt at a rugby tackle. He was very fast, but with the instinct of a crazed beast of prey, the man was faster. He whirled round with a grunt and brought his heavy stick down with all his force. My heart leapt into my throat, for the blow would have been a deadly one to the lad’s unprotected head. I saw Mike slide sideways a little, and then my own fury was so great at this murderous blow that I had shot forward without thinking and had punched out with every bit of force that was in me. My fist caught the man at the base of the skull. I felt the shock of that blow jar up my arm, numbing the limb from knuckle to shoulder.

And there he lay, at my feet, face downwards on the floor, his torch rolling away from him, sending a strange circle of light over the begrimed bumps and crevices of that place.

Mike said, “Phew! I never hope to see a worse clout than that, Mr. Stewart! I bet his neck is broken!”

I was shivering now. “Are you all right?” I said.

He nodded. “By the grace of somebody or other,” he said. “That club of his missed me by half an inch! Anyway, he asked for it and he got it! Thank you, Mr. Stewart.”

The lad didn't seem in the least put out, though, for my part I was now trembling from head to foot. I had to sit down on the bed for a minute. Mike took the torch and, rolling the man over, shone it down on to his face. He was quite still. Mike lifted his eyelid with a grubby thumb. His eyes were turned back.

"Oh cripes," I said, "I've done it at last! I *have* killed a man now."

I sank my head in my hands, my heroic fury drained away from me now. The very thing which I had run away from had caught up with me, almost as though I was the victim of the old furies in some ancient play of bloodshed and revenge.

Mike came over to me and put his arm round my shoulders.

"Well, you did it to save me, after all, Mr. Stewart," he said. "I would always swear to that in a law court."

I smiled sadly. "Thanks, Mike," I said, "but I don't know if a judge and jury would place much faith in the testimony of a thirteen-year-old. Sorry, old chap, but that's what I think."

He bent over the body again, and then rose suddenly with a smile. "His heart is beating," he almost shouted. "He's alive after all!"

I staggered across the room. Yes, his heart was beating, but very faintly. We weren't out of the wood yet, by any means.

Quickly I opened the fresh thermos flask of coffee which the lad had brought for me, and tried to force some of the liquid down the man's throat. I wasn't very good at it. The brown fluid trickled back out of his mouth, on either side of his chin. I laid him down again, too depressed for words.

Mike said, "I've got an idea. Look, I could say that this man attacked me—which would be quite true—and that I knocked him down."

"Which would not be quite true," I said, unable to restrain a smile at the lad's eagerness to save me from the law.

He shrugged his shoulders. "All right," he said, "if you will be pernicketty about it, let's put it this way; I'll take the blame until things get squared up a bit, and then we can both make a clean breast of it. How's that?"

As I was struggling, not too successfully, I must admit, with my conscience, the man on the floor stirred a little and the breath came from him in a small groan.

“He’s not going to die after all,” said Mike, almost disappointed, it seemed. I was overjoyed. I went to him and agreed then with the boy; he was not going to die, at least, not yet.

Mike’s mind now raced into action once more. “Look, Mr. Stewart,” he said, “we’ve got to change our plans. It’ll be chancy, no doubt, and perhaps quite a bit more risky than it would otherwise have been.”

“Say on, O sage,” I said, amused at the lad’s earnest expression, in spite of my anxiety for the unconscious man.

He made the gesture of punching me on the jaw and then said, “Look, if this man knows you are here, then you can bet the others do, too. All right, if you are to escape, you’ve got to get on the move right away. They *could* be on the way here now, even.”

I had to agree that this was a distinct possibility.

“Right,” he said, “then we’ll try to put to-morrow night’s plan into action. We’ll go to the sluice, by day instead of by night, unfortunately, and get Roger to row you over to the island. Then, when I’ve got you out of harm’s way for the moment, I’ll phone the police from Ferriby and get them to collect this man from the kiln.”

I said that I thought it was as good a plan as any other. The boy wanted no further encouragement. He grabbed the haversack.

“Come on,” he said, “the sooner the better. We’ll just have to take our chance now.”

Before I left the foul-smelling haven of rest, I rolled the man on to the rubber bed, making him as comfortable as I could even though one part of me said that he hardly deserved my anxiety on his behalf. He groaned again as we left, more strongly this time, and I felt then that he had more than an even chance of pulling through.

Outside, the fresh river breeze was like a tonic to me. My lungs must have been full to the brim with damp air and candle smoke. I even enjoyed racing up the long shore with Mike, who made a good turn of speed, despite the heavy haversack, which bounced on the small of his back, and which he would not let me carry.

Now the afternoon sun struck down on the white beach, turning it into a blinding track alongside the even more blinding waters, which reflected the sun in a blaze of amber and gold. The far green hills of Yorkshire were more than ever inviting now.

We ran under the little cliff that the boy had mentioned earlier and then, at a turn in the river, were right upon the old decaying barge that was used as a jetty once upon a time by the wagons which unloaded chalk from a nearby quarry, on to the old Humber sloops that now no longer existed.

The jetty consisted of a track, leading to the waterside, and supported on thick and heavy sleepers, which seemed to nod in slumber, half-heeling over drunkenly, blackened and mouldering. It was from behind one of these uprights that a man suddenly stepped as we approached.

Mike said, "Why, that's the man who cut my cheek with the cane. Look, he has one now. It is a light fishing rod."

But this man was no fisherman. He had shaved off the long red moustaches, certainly, but there was no mistaking the length of blue serge trouser leg which showed beneath his duffle coat and above the Wellington boots with which he had equipped himself to make the disguise the more convincing.

Now the plan became obvious to me; the old man had gone into the kiln to raise the quarry, and this one had stationed himself under the jetty to cut us off if we succeeded in escaping from the kiln. They knew I would come this way, and would not dare to retrace my tracks towards Merton, for fear of being picked up by the police.

Mike said, "Charge, Mr. Stewart, we can manage him!"

I shouted to him to come back, and then had to follow, since he disregarded my warning. "Mike, you young ass," I shouted, "fall flat! He's got a gun!"

The boy did as I said, though whether he had acted on his own initiative or not, I do not know. He must have seen what it was that the fisherman had pulled from his duffle coat-pocket and was pointing towards us.

I saw a small puff of smoke, but heard no report. I felt a hot searing sensation in my leg, and swung away sideways, trying to make him miss if he fired again. Then I fell on to one leg and sprawled among the white pebbles, and I saw the fisherman start his run forward, ignoring Mike for the moment. But even as his foot came down again, in that first pace, the man flung up his arms, the pistol glimmering in the sunlight as it swung out in a wide arc to the water's edge. Then he tumbled backwards, his hands clasped to his forehead, rolled over on to his face, and lay quite still.

Mike jumped up and ran to him and I saw the catapult swinging by its elastic in his hand. "He's out cold!" yelled the boy. "Thank the lord for

belemnites!"

Then I realized what had happened; the lad had fallen flat at the first report of the pistol, and before the man could take aim at me again had fished out his catapult and, using the bullet-shaped stone as ammunition, had hit him between the eyes, in what must have been one of the shots of the century.

I tried to get up, and then I remembered that searing pain in the leg. There was a neat hole through my right trousers' leg, and I could feel the warmth of my blood as it welled down into my sock. The score was almost even, I thought, grimly.

Mike came over to me and turned up my trousers' leg. I had got myself a flesh wound, just above the knee, through a muscle I imagined, for it was extremely painful when I tried to bend the limb.

I crept, trying to suppress my groans, over to where the man in the blue serge suit lay. That fossil had made quite a nasty wound in his head, but he was already stirring. I called to Mike anxiously, and together we tied his ankles and wrists with the man's tie and a length of rusty wire which was lying under the jetty. Mike rolled him painfully into the shelter of the old wagon track, high enough up not to be in any danger of drowning, when the river rose, and then we tried to make our way onwards.

Each step was an agony to me now, for the leg was already stiffening. A dozen times I almost yelled out with pain and tried to call the whole trip off. I even thought of giving myself up to the police when we got near Ferriby. But Mike gritted his teeth and said, "If I had come so far and done so much, I'd not give up just now. Mr. Stewart, you can't give up."

"Hold on a bit, Mike," I said. "Let me just have a rest by the cliff side and then I'll try to make it."

He actually slapped me on the back, as though we were schoolmates. "That's the stuff," he said. "I knew you wouldn't let me down!"

That slap did me a lot of good. For some obscure reason, Mike believed in me, and I knew that I mustn't let him down now. Just for the hell of it, I would go on as long as I could and see what happened. If I won through, I would have this scrubby-haired boy to thank for it; if I lost—well, the dice had been loaded against me from the start, it seemed.

While I was resting, Mike tore a strip off his shirt and went back to where a stream cascaded down on to the white beach. He made a cold compress and tied it firmly round my leg. From my own examination of the wound, it seemed clean enough and the bullet had passed across the muscle without lodging there. It could have been worse, much worse.

I made myself grin. "Right, Mike," I said, "let's go!"

My hobbling gait belied my jaunty words, but somehow or other we eventually passed the Hall grounds, where the dogs were yapping, as the lad had promised, and so on to Ferriby Sluice. I was forced to stop many times, and was deeply glad when at last we walked across the little swing-bridge over the Ancholme.

The island lay before us, well out into the Humber, like a vast green oval, bordered on all sides by thick estuary mud.

Mike shaded his eyes and then pointed. "Look, there's Fatty Graham, on the shore over there. He's seen us. He's waving!"

The lad cupped his hands about his mouth. "Hi, Fatty! Fatty!" he called. "Bring the boat across! Quickly, Fatty!"

I lay down in the tall lush grass by the riverside and watched the plump boy push the little dinghy out and then jump into it.

He seemed an incredibly long time getting across that strip of water. I thought I might pass out before he arrived, but I didn't. And I had never been so thrilled before to welcome an arriving vessel.

Roger Graham was a well-built dour-faced lad of Mike's age, brown-haired and grey-eyed. A Lowland Scot, with no nonsense about him. He rubbed his nose with his finger when Mike told him he must ferry me to the island and a shadow came over his face.

"Aye, it can be done," he said, with the characteristic caution of his race, "but when he's on the island, I canna be seen wi' him, ye know that, Michael?"

Mike looked sorrowful.

Roger Graham said, "He maun fend for hissel, thin."

I smiled and said, "That's all I ask, Roger. I won't get you into any trouble, if I can help it."

The Scots lad so far forgot his caution as to let his dour face slip into a little wintry smile. Then he corrected this show of feeling and said, "Right

then, sir, hop in and we'll be awa'."

I did my poor best to obey him, but I'm afraid my attempt at a hop would not have got a fourth prize, much less a first.

Mike stood on the river bank, smiling, his thin hand waving slowly in a little semi-circular motion, as though he regretted having to hand me over to his school friend.

I waved for as long as I thought it wise, and then settled down in the boat to make friends with Roger. But he was a different animal from Mike—a good chap, sound as a rock, but not so warm.

To make conversation, I said, "Way back in history, there's many a Scot has rowed fugitives over the sea to safety."

I thought I might stir some ardour in him, some memory of Bonnie Prince Charlie. But it was a sad blow in the eye for me, his cool reply. "Aye," he said, pulling at the oars as we approached the thick mudbank. "And many a Scot paid for it wi' his heid, na doot. We've learned better sense, since then."

I could not help laughing at the innocence of the answer, all the same. "I think you'd do it again," I said.

He shook his head. "Nay, nay," he replied. "Ye'll not catch us at that game any more."

I did not press the point. Nor did he pursue it. Then we had pushed as far as we could go and the lad jumped ashore and pulled the dinghy over the last stretch of mud with the tow-rope.

I was on the island.

CHAPTER 20

The Island

Now dusk was falling across the long island, and a flock of curlews swept in their crazy wobbling flight over the twilit meadowland, on which the cattle, humped in the growing darkness, still grazed.

I sat in a little shed on the northern shore of the island, staring through the one open side of the draughty structure, over the muddy waters that swirled in the rushes bordering the river's brink.

The sudden sharp crying of the curlews produced a sensation of utter loneliness in my mind. I knew that only a quarter of a mile away, at the other extremity of the northern shore, lay the long squat farmhouse where Roger Graham and his family lived. I could see the lights going on in the downstairs rooms, and as I watched another light blazed out from an upper storey. No doubt the dour Scots lad had just gone up to bed. . . . I felt lonely and rather sorry for myself. My leg was starting to throb badly and I wondered whether I might be feeling a little feverish. I tried to laugh this fear away, and ate as much as I could from the supplies which Mike had brought to the kiln that day. It was important to keep going now, I thought, and food was one way of retaining what strength I had left.

Looking back on that night, I think I *must* have been a little off-balance with fever, for I had but one thought in my mind: to get to Hull, find King Billy, whoever he was, at 10 a.m. on the 26th, and then see what happened. I did not know any more than that; my drive to achieve the goal was now almost as senseless as that which makes the lemmings swim out to their deaths in the raging sea. I had no phial to hand over; I had nothing, except a vague hope that Professor Maguire might somehow do something for me—though there was no reason why he should. But perhaps the fact that I arrived according to the agreed plan with the scientist might convince him that I meant well. . . .

In the rushes to my right, geese were gabbling, and the night was suddenly full of a thousand small rustling noises, the voices and movements of the many nocturnal creatures whose lives begin when that of mankind slows down towards sleep.

I got up painfully and walked to the front of the shed, to look about me in the moonlight. Before me the great river swept past, out to sea, to my right, for the tide was going down. Across the dark grey waters, I saw the dim shapes of the Wolds, now much nearer than they had been yesterday, but still a nightmare of a distance away. Before he had left me, Roger Graham had briefed me on the geography of the river at that point. I went over his instructions.

First, he said, there was a mudbank on which I might be able to walk for twenty yards or so, before it sloped steeply and suddenly to the slightly broader channel which shipping used. This was the route taken by such boats as needed deep water, the traffic that headed mainly to the port of Goole.

And beyond that channel, the mudbanks started again, sloping upwards gradually, until, thirty yards from the far shore, the Yorkshire bank of the Humber, it was possible at low tide to walk almost dry-shod back to land.

I had a rooted dislike of and fear for mud, especially such mud as this, glistening and shifting, almost as though life were in it, a sombre and sinister life. But I had almost as much distrust of that deep channel, which, Roger had assured me, I would not be able to swim since the current would be running too strong that night. So as to enable me to cross the channel, he had rolled an empty oil drum into the hut, one that he said his father would not miss. It was a yard and a half long and about a yard in diameter, and constructed of ribbed metal; altogether a strong affair, but too wide for me to clasp it, as he had informed me. Therefore he had encircled it a time or two with a length of tough towing-rope, to which I might cling if I lost my seat on the drum. I was to push this contraption out as far as I could, over the mud, and then get astride it and try to paddle over the channel. If I managed that safely, all I had to do was to wait a bit and then walk ashore in Yorkshire. But, and he gave a little granite laugh as he said it, this was no stream to go paddling in. It had turned over big trawlers, in from Iceland with a full catch, when they had under-estimated its massive strength and its uncertain violence. He had wished me luck, not as a matter of course, but as one who genuinely felt that I might need it, if I was to baffle this watchful monster.

My legs began to ache and my body to shudder. I turned away from the contemplation of the northern stretch of river, and looked towards the east, to my right.

First there was the green grazing, then the marshland and the high sedges that rustled in the late evening breezes; and beyond them, a long tongue of sandy mud, that seemed to lose itself in the distance, rising from the river like the first emergence of some monstrous whale, a whale that could almost have carried Britain on her back. . . . And beyond this, the troubled shallows of the Humber, which led at last to the long white beach up which we had run that afternoon in the sun.

I tried to peer through the curtain of darkness, to see the kilns in which I had spent so frightening a time. But I could not even sight the rotting jetty, much less the more distant squat ruins, in which the old man might still be lying on the rubber bed, for all I knew. . . . Dead, now, I thought. It might be possible. And where was the man in the blue serge suit, with the great wound in his temple from the thunder stone? And where was the man with the thin moustache, who had, a century ago, held a knife at my back in the Regent's Park Zoo? And where, I shuddered at the thought, was the master of them all—the immense creature in the black hat, that suave, bland Buddha, who could move as fast as a snake despite his elephantine bulk?

I went back into the hut and waited. Through the little back window, I saw the small lights of Ferriby, the village that lies under the Lincolnshire Wolds. From the distance, it looked charming, its blue woodsmoke rising peacefully in the moonlight, its roofs overshadowed by the wooded slopes of the chalk hills that rose gently above them. "Peace, peace, peace!" I found myself saying that word again and again; what wouldn't I give for peace—just that! In my stupid fever, I imagined myself writing a letter to Connie, dear Connie with the perpetual sniff. It ran something like this:

> My dear Connie,
>
> You will recall that once we craved for adventure—remember my silly advert, in the *Telegraph*? "Will go anywhere, do anything"? Well, I've tasted adventure since we last met, and, believe me, it is not what the story-writers say it is! No, Ma'am! I can tell you, it is not funny to lie in the dark, waiting for *someone* to find you, or to run, bent double, for half a mile in case *someone* sees you. It is not even funny to hit the crook you've been longing to hit for days! Oh yes, it seems all right, till you have done it; then the old civilized man comes back again and you start to get

> scared of the law. No, dear girl, forget it all, and see that your next job is with some quiet mouse-haired insurance man, who will never, while he has his senses, require you to crouch under hedges, lie in ditches, or otherwise demean a sex which has, or should have, as its finest quality, gentleness, hatred of violence, and grace. . . .

Somewhere down the river a ship's siren blared out into the darkness, its mournful vibrations echoing again and again, it seemed, almost to the sea, that vast mausoleum of all endeavour, the sea which swallows up all failure, and all success—the empires and the great ships, even Leviathan himself. . . .

I pulled myself together. This was no way to be going on. I was rambling. I got up from the wooden box on which I had been sitting. My leg was almost too stiff to bend now. I wondered how on earth I could get across that stretch of tempting, malicious water. Perhaps I wouldn't—and then my problems would be solved. Suddenly all my anxieties seemed so futile, against the great adventure of death. Now I almost envied the scientist with the bullet hole in his forehead, and despised the big man in the black coat. He did not know what the answer to life was—but the man in the dirty gaberdine did. And soon I should know too.

The many lights along the waterfront at Hull were blazing into the blackness, five miles away. I gazed at them like a child before a Christmas tree. "How pretty!" I heard myself say. "Oh, how pretty!"

And then I knew I was feeling off colour!

And it was with that realisation that I also knew I must shake my wits together and make that attempt now, before I grew more tired and defeatist. I rallied for a while and dragged the oil drum down to the mud. It was terribly difficult going, for the thick ooze came above my ankles and sucked at my feet as though it would drag me down before I had gone another yard. But somehow I stuck it, now rolling the drum before me, and pressing on it with all my weight for support. Sometimes I overbalanced and slipped, and once I rolled completely over it, to land on my hands and knees in the black slime, laughing and almost weeping, at one and the same time.

Then the water came about my feet and so up to my knees, and then my waist. And I knew that I was at the beginning of the deep channel. I recalled that Roger had warned me about its steep slope, and I told myself that I must be careful. Yet even while I was saying this, parrot fashion, again and again,

the drum slipped away from me into the stream, and I found myself sliding below the water.

I choked and gasped, and just had the sense to reach out in time. My hand grasped the rope that the Scots boy had strung round the metal drum, and by great good fortune I had strength enough to hold on tight.

That sudden shock did me a power of good. It drove my fever away for a time, and with it my mental maundering. Now I knew that I just didn't want to die, like the scientist, and know the secret of life! No, I darned well wanted to live—and with a vengeance!

So I struggled as hard as I had it in me to do, and after what seemed an eternity, managed to get up close to the drum. It was floating buoyantly now, and was quite steady in the strong waters. But what worried me was that it was floating away downstream, and not across the channel at all. That was no good. I would be carried away into the deepest part of the Humber, and the chances of anyone sighting me at night would be fairly remote. And, after that, the sea. . . . It did not bear thinking about.

I kicked and splashed then as frantically as I could, and felt the thing changing course, and pulling away from the channel, into the shallows that fringed the long tongue of mud which I had remarked on earlier.

That was just as deadly. I would be marooned in the middle of the river, on a high bank of slowly shifting mud, unable to reach solid land, in any direction. If I did not smother, I would be drowned with the rising of the tide.

Now I knew panic. I almost came close to screaming out for help. I would have accepted help from anyone, even the man in the black coat. . . . It was only by the greatest exercise of will that I compelled my weary legs to keep flailing out, and forced my voice to silence. If I was to die, I must do it decently, I thought. Though my heart beat loudly with unashamed fear now.

I had heard so much of the Humber's capricious nature that it had become almost a by-word with me; yet because I knew it so automatically, I was so much more surprised to experience proof of it, personally, that night. For the drum was suddenly caught in a minor whirlpool, off the long mudbank, swirled round twice or three times in the fastest of the vortex, and then as suddenly shot outwards, as it were, by some unexplained centrifugal

force, and so I was carried beyond the whirlpool and out into another new current that battled with the main channel stream.

And now I was in that stream once more, and moving obliquely towards the other side. I could have yelled out in my relief, until I heard a great thumping and a deep booming, all confused by a rhythmic lashing of water.

And then, out of the darkness, almost above me, a great shape loomed, cleaving the water powerfully, and the oil drum bobbed about like a mad thing, out of all control. I almost fell directly before the bows of the ship that swept along the deep channel. I shouted out in my fear, but no one seemed to hear me. No lights appeared and I saw no heads above the rail, that seemed to stand as high as a house above me. . . .

Then I was being buffeted in the wake, but that part of the wake which fed out towards the Yorkshire bank. I was afraid and exultant at the same time; it was impossible to explain, even to myself. It seemed that I had been through the gates of death and had triumphed, battered though I was.

Then my numbed hands let go of the rope and the drum bounced away from me again and downstream too rapidly to be caught. At the same moment, my feet encountered the mud slope of the farther side, and laughing and spluttering, my shoes sucked from me, my trousers' legs heavy with stinking ooze, I stumbled and fell, stumbled and fell, like a crazed thing, on and on towards the more solid sand of the shore.

I had crossed the Humber. Whatever happened to me, I could always say that to myself! It was at least a minor victory of the spirit, for my body had no strength left in it to fight.

As I dragged myself away from those leaden sucking waters, I remember how surprised I was that my stiff leg had lost both its rigidity and its throbbing fever. I thought that at least I had one thing to thank the Humber for. . . .

And then I fell forward, on to a patch of coarse grass, exhausted and sobbing. The moon came out, while I was fighting for breath, and I made out the dim shape of an upturned dinghy a few yards up the shore. It would be a roof over my head, a shelter until day broke, I thought. I made that little boat my next goal.

I think I lost consciousness twice in crawling those last few yards. But at last, with the dawn beginning to show far down the river, lightening the distant banks, making them seem even more chill, I drew my painful and

unutterably weary body under the boat, and without trying to find a comfortable spot, fell immediately into a deep and undisturbable sleep.

CHAPTER 21

Day on the Loose

When at last I awoke, it was with the uncomfortable sensation that I was no longer alone. It was broad daylight and the sun was streaming into my eyes. In a momentary flash, before my senses had completely returned to me, I glimpsed a white bird flashing past the upturned dinghy, and the air above me was filled with the greedy crying of gulls.

Then I was aware of a hand that attempted to undo the zip-fastener of my old leather lumber-jacket, a hand which drew away quickly as my eyes opened. I rolled over and looked up. A man was sitting by my side, smiling and nodding to me, a foxy smile that I did not trust, any more than I trusted its owner, at first sight.

He was little more than an indiscriminate bundle of rags, a tramp, I decided immediately. Under a floppy-brimmed felt hat, long green with age, his pale eyes winked and blinked down at me, red-rimmed and watery. His nose was long and red, and somehow reminded me of ferrets. Under a tobacco-stained grey scrub of a moustache, his twisted and swollen lips parted with a rhythmic muscular twitch to expose irregular and yellow teeth. This man had not shaved for a fortnight, I would have said, from the dust-coloured stubble that covered his face. It was not a prepossessing face!

His body was just as forbidding. Crouched under the little dinghy, he looked more like a nomadic Tartar than a western man of the twentieth century, bunched up into a round bundle with the many garments he wore, the top one of which was a very old grey tweed overcoat, which had once seen much better days, judging from the fine leather buttons that still hung on by precarious threads, here and there. Beneath that, I saw a soldier's tunic, its brass buttons tarnished and melancholy at their fall from glory.

My own haversack, which I had forgotten until this moment, but which I must have slung over my shoulder before setting out on the oil drum, hung

at his side.

Automatically, my hand went to my left breast, to that bulge which denoted to me the inner pocket in which I had placed my money, when Mike first gave me the leather jacket. The bulge was still there, though I had no doubt that it would not have been had the seagulls not awakened me when they did.

I said, “Who are you?”

The tramp patted me on the shoulder. His hands were callused and horny, his finger-nails long and black with neglect. I drew away from his touch. He noticed this movement and I saw his eyebrows give a little twitch of annoyance. But he did not move his hand.

“Billy,” he said, “they calls me Billy ’bout ’ere.”

My mind flashed back to the message which the scientist had hidden in the cigarette:

“*Ask for King Billy. 10 a.m. 26th.*”

Billy, Billy, could this be King Billy! I almost asked him that question, point-blank, but then the ridiculousness of the question came upon me and I laughed aloud at my credulity. The tramp watched me, nodding, and at last began to laugh in chorus with me. It was a fantastic situation, to see him laughing at something which he knew nothing about. I stopped laughing abruptly at the thought, and he stopped too, like a dog that senses his master’s displeasure.

I said, “Where have you come from?”

He shook his head and mumbled, “I lives ’ere mostly. You was in my place when I got back. This is my cottage, matey.” But his voice bore no resentment. And his crooked mouth still smiled.

“Been travellin’ long?” he said.

“Not long,” I answered, still weighing him up.

“Young chaps did ought to stay at a job o’ work,” he said. “Makes it harder for us old ’uns if young chaps leave their work and start travellin’. I’ll see to tea-can.”

He crawled from the dinghy and disappeared behind it, somewhere. I heard him moving about and mumbling to himself, and at last he reappeared, with a blue enamel mug which steamed in the morning air.

"Drink first," he said, "then I'll have the cup."

I looked down at the pale brown fluid. Tea-leaves and grease were floating on its surface. My stomach revolted and I shook my head.

"Thanks," I said, "never drink tea."

He stared through me, his lips tightening. "This is coffee," he said. He waited a moment, then he drank down the repulsive brew at a single draught.

"Coffee sets a man up," he said. "Change yer mind?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks," I answered. "I don't feel very well."

The tramp gazed at me, weighing up my chances of survival, it seemed. Cynically, I suddenly saw that this man was a vulture, not a homely ferret!

"You look pretty bad to me," he said, his mouth still smiling and his yellow teeth glimmering horribly, like those of some obscene ghost. "You need a father's care, matey. Let me look after you, eh?"

At any other time this idea would have been so unpleasantly fantastic that I should have laughed in his face; but just now I did not laugh, or even smile. My situation was too serious for either. And, what is more, I saw in a sudden flash of common sense that this man could even be useful to me.

I ran my hand over my face. Yes, I needed a shave almost as badly as he did, and my hair was shaggy and rumpled. My leather jacket was torn and soiled, my trousers stiff with Humber mud. I had lost my shoes in that terrible crossing at dawn-time. He and I must look of a similar breed to any but the most observant eye. So if I kept with him, I had a ready-made disguise, until to-morrow morning, at ten o'clock, when I was to be in Hull, and when my fate, whatever it was to be, would decide itself.

I said, "Right, we'll be together for a day or two, to see how it'll work. I expect you stay out here in the daytime?"

I had visions of being tucked comfortably away under that dinghy, out of sight of all prying eyes. But he shook his head.

"Too dangerous here," he said. "Policeman comes down here every day, on his rounds from the village back up the hill. He'd lock me up. I get right out till dark-time when policeman has gone to bed."

His crafty smile and the half-snarling, half-wheedling intonation of his hoarse voice, reminded me more than ever of some predatory animal that lives on its wits, pitting them against those of man.

I said, “Where do you go in the daytime, then?”

He jerked his horny thumb down river. “Hull,” he said. “Got friends there. We’ll go see my friends when you’re ready. Must keep out o’ that policeman’s way, though. He telled me he’d lock me up fer a thousand year when he see’d me next out here.”

He began to crawl from under the dinghy, and then stopped, looking back at me over his bunched shoulder.

“Got any money?” he asked, pleasantly, as though it was the most natural thing in the world to say.

I shook my head. “Only a bob or two,” I answered. “Oh, and some insurance papers.”

I patted my chest where the little bulge still lay. He looked very crestfallen suddenly.

“Insurance papers no good,” he said. “They make yer go to the police for the money and the police lock yer up and take the money fer themsel’s.”

This comment brought to my mind even more clearly the animal state of mind of this old tramp. To him, obviously, the police were the bigger beasts of prey in the jungle he existed in, the jungle of his own ignorance and fear.

Yet how far from that jungle was I, myself, at that moment? Wouldn’t these same police lock me up, if they knew where I was? And might they not put a noose round my neck too, and kill me, as the big beasts kill the smaller ones?

I said, “I’ll come to Hull with you. Lead on!”

But when I had crawled from the dinghy, I was not so sure that my leg would let me go with him. It was not very painful as yet, but rather stiff and weak. I had to swing it, not bend it, in order to get along. Yet, in a wry way, I thought that this too might create the right impression, of a disabled young tramp. . . .

We crossed a railway line, and walked for half a mile alongside a high rusty corrugated fence, meeting no one. Billy did not speak, but shambled on ahead of me, humming to himself, a strange crudely formed tune, like that of a primitive Australian, I would have said. He left me to make my own way, stopping now and again to pick up a tin can that lay in the hedgeside and to look into it intently, before casting it away, often on to the path behind him.

At last we came to a straight main road. Billy stationed himself at the roadside and stood quite still. Car after car passed us, but he made no sign of wanting a lift. I told him that he was going about it to the wrong tune, but he snarled back at me that you never got a lift from cars. Decent folk were too scared, he said. Besides, they didn't want their nice cars mucked up with your dirty clothes. He said he didn't blame them. I could not help admiring the brutal honesty of the man as he announced that.

And at the same time, I could not help feeling an immense pity for him. One-half of him was primitive animal, hunted and self-seeking; the other half, a man shut out from the daily comforts and decencies of ordinary life. The people about him, moving to and fro, on their day-to-day business, and to their day-to-day pleasures, were as creatures in a great dream to Billy the tramp. Their lives were to him insubstantial and unreal, almost as though they were the ghosts of a picture screen, leading impossibly gorgeous lives, bloodless and feelingless. . . .

Would I too become like that, I thought? Supposing I did run the gauntlet of the police and escape unscathed; supposing, when I found Professor Maguire, he did not wish to help me? What then was left to me, with a charge of murder over my head, but to take to the road and go on living such a life as Billy lived now? I was imagining myself, at his age, sleeping under upturned boats and examining empty tin cans, when a lorry drew up alongside us.

Billy said, "My usual transport into Hull." The driver did not even look at us as we shuffled round to the back and climbed up, under the tarpaulin that covered his load. Billy got annoyed with me when I made an effort or two to hoist my stiff leg on to the rung of the tailboard.

He even snarled down at me like an animal. "Don't keep the fellow waitin'," he said angrily. "He'll not stop fer me again if you keep 'im waitin'."

Then he grasped me by the shoulders and hauled me into the darkness of the lorry. His strength amazed me, and frightened me a little, I must admit. He was quite capable, I realised, of lifting me up bodily, hampered as he was by his many garments.

Then the vehicle started up again and roared off down that straight main road. It was a lorry belonging to a Hull pickles firm, and stank of vinegar and spices. It was difficult to get one's breath, under that heavy tarpaulin.

But I lay and tried to sleep again, for I had tired myself out with the effort of walking up from the river.

After perhaps half an hour we stopped. I sensed that the roadway under our wheels was no longer smooth. Billy jumped down first and without a word to the driver began to walk away. I had to scramble down as best I could, and only just made it before the heavy vehicle rumbled on towards some big warehouses.

We were on the dockside. Everywhere, along the quays, ships were tied up and cranes were busily loading or unloading them. Lorries passed to and fro incessantly and a small train chugged down the middle of the road, stopping first before one gangway and then another.

Men bustled here and there, with sacks on their backs, or crates on their shoulders, their iron-shod boots clattering on the rough cobblestones with which this long street was paved.

I looked past the ships that lay nearest to hand, and saw another such quay, facing us, across a strip of muddy water. And there the cranes were rising and falling, rising and falling, all the time.

Billy had stopped by an iron bollard and was waiting for me, his face drawn with annoyance once more.

"Hey," he called, "you don't want to miss dinner, do you?"

His whole life was a rush of anxiety, lest he should miss some crumb or scrap or cast-off fragment of decent living.

I hobbled towards him and sat down on a small pile of railway sleepers that had been used to lever some cargo on to the deck of the tramp ship that lay alongside.

After a while two coloured men in ragged blue sweaters came from behind a cabin with a paper-bagful of food, and a jug of hot tea. They almost flung the bag at Billy, who did not speak a word to them, and gave the jug to me. I was desperately thirsty by this time, and in spite of Billy's imperative look that I let him drink first, I shook my head and drank what I considered to be my fair half of the liquid. Then I handed him the jug. He set it by his side and went on eating from the greasy paper bag, without making any motion of letting me share the spoils. I should not have done so in any case, for from what I could see, the sailors had given us the remains of a fish-and-chip supper, purchased the night before, undoubtedly, and now stone cold and repulsive!

One of the men, who stood looking at us much as I had looked at the lions that day in the Zoo, at feeding-time, walked over to me and said, with difficulty, for his English was fragmentary, “Thees man bad fuh young fellah.” He said it openly, pointing at Billy with his long prehensile finger. Billy paid no attention to the words, but went on eating, as though he had starved for a week.

The other lascar now came up and said, “You can get work on this ship, man. Young fellah like you can get work. Good money and all found, yes. You think for the future, man, not go with that old fool. He’s finished, I tell you.”

For a grim instant, I almost went aboard and took them at their word. I almost signed on among these lascars, to sail on that tramp ship wherever she was going. What a perfect getaway, I thought! I could start life afresh somewhere else, anywhere, and who would be the wiser?

But something kept me back. I felt then that I must not take that easy way out of my problems. I must stay and fight my battle, here in Hull, even, or I would never have any self-respect for the rest of my days.

I shook my head and smiled. “No thanks, mate,” I said. “I like this life.” The lascars turned from me in disgust.

When Billy had finished the contents of the paper bag, he flung it on to the cobblestones behind him, not even bothering to screw it up. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stood up. He walked along the railway line for a while, then suddenly remembering me, stopped and turned back. He made an abrupt little gesture with his thumb, as though calling me on after him.

Well, I thought, if I am going to play this game to-day, I had better make it convincing. I got up and shambled after him. As I went, I turned up my sleeve to look at my watch. The glass was smashed and it had stopped at three o’clock. That would be when I was struggling with the bucking oil drum, no doubt. I walked over to a well-fed merchant who stood watching his cargo being unloaded. “Can you tell me the time?” I said.

He started back from me, his glasses quivering, the carnation in his button-hole quivering, his eyes almost starting from his head. I had never seen such a picture of indignation.

“Be off with you!” he said, his mouth pursing furiously.

I was about to tell him not to be an idiot; then I realized that I was a tramp, as far as this prosperous gentleman was concerned, and I realised too

the vast abyss which separates those who live regular and comfortable lives, and those who scratch their existence from among the husks and refuse of the world. I shrugged my shoulders and walked away from him, a little bitter that such a man begrudged even telling me the time. Yet, as I walked on, I became more reasonable about the incident. Perhaps he construed my request as being an introduction to some begging act; perhaps he had suffered much from beggars and vagrants along that waterside.

Billy was waiting for me, angry once again. “Do you want to get us locked up?” he asked. “Going about upsettin’ decent folk like that!”

“I only wanted to know the time,” I said.

He gave a snort of scorn. “Time! Time!” he said. “What’s that to the likes of us! Only decent folk are bothered with time!”

Just then we passed a barber’s shop, and I saw a big yellow-faced clock hanging from the inner wall. It was two o’clock in the afternoon. I was amazed at this, for I had thought it to be mid-morning, and no later. Then I saw how time flew by when one was an outlaw, without prescribed hours of work and eating.

Billy led the way and at last we left the dockside and came to a great open space, that had once been built on, it seemed, but was now laid out as a park. At its far end, a tall column rose, at the summit of which a begrimed statue stood in the heroic attitude of some Peninsular General.

I pointed to the thing. “Who’s that?” I asked.

Billy stared down the long flower-bordered path and said, “Victoria, that is.”

I said, “But Queen Victoria was a woman. That is a man.”

Billy turned from me. “That is Victoria,” he said. “I ought to know, I’ve seen him hundreds of times.”

Then he sat down at the corner of a bench and almost immediately went off to sleep in the sunshine. I sat down near him and wondered what my next move ought to be.

Children yelled about us, throwing coloured balls to each other, or playing chasing games. Sparrows settled on the bench to look at us, as though we were strange arrivals from another world. A small dog came sniffing at Billy’s stretched-out legs, only to be called away by the lady in the rabbit-fur coat who was airing the animal.

I began to feel very hungry, for I had eaten nothing since the night before, in that little shed on the north bank of the Island. Away at the other side of the park was a milk bar. I got up and started to walk slowly towards it, leaving Billy sleeping, as I thought. But before I had gone fifty yards, he was behind me, muttering about men who left their mates behind.

I had some difficulty in the milk bar, for the waitress had seen my mud-caked trousers and stockinged feet, and she was afraid I would scare the other customers away. But I turned on all the charm I was capable of, and spoke in my best tones. She began to suspect that my rig-out was a practical joke of some sort, and with a comment about students who go about frightening ordinary folk, she let me sit in the far corner, and served me with a glass of warm milk and a plate of ham sandwiches. I paid her with what small change I had, for I did not want Billy to see where I kept my paper money.

He would not come into the place, even though the waitress would have permitted him to do so, when she was convinced of my solvency. Instead, he drank his milk off at a gulp and, taking his sandwiches in his hand, walked to the other side of the road, waiting for me to emerge once again.

When I had eaten, I felt much stronger and in better spirits. I now conceived the idea of shaking Billy off. I would give him five shillings, I thought, and then go on my own way, for quite obviously I was taken for a tramp wherever I went, so my disguise would stand on its own feet, so to speak, without his help.

I went across to him and held out the money. He looked at me, suddenly afraid.

"You stolen that in there?" he asked. "I never touches stolen money. They'll lock yer up fer a thousand years for that. And beat yer with iron bars, no doubt. No, mister. You keep it. I don't want hot money."

I put the coins back in my pocket and we walked on, but when we had got well away from the milk bar and Billy saw no policeman coming after us, he said, "Hey, give me that money. What sort o' friendship is that, offerin' a man money then puttin' it back?"

I gave him a half-crown piece. But he still held his hand out. "Come on," he said, his face grim and threatening. "Hand that other one over or I'll tell the next copper we see."

I almost flung it on to the pavement, so that I should have the pleasure of kicking him in the rump when he bent for it; but I restrained my rather

schoolboyish plan for revenge and handed the half-crown to him with as good a grace as I could; he spat on it for luck before putting it into the inside of his army tunic.

"Got any more?" he asked. "Come on, hand it over. I've looked after yer, haven't I? Got you here safely, and got you your breakfast."

I pointed out to him that I had just bought his dinner for him. He shook his head. "Stole it, you mean," he said. "I saw you talkin' to that girl. She gave you that grub, I know."

Then I understood why he had drunk up quickly and had gone outside. He didn't want to be implicated if the police or the manager of the milk bar suddenly appeared and accused us of eating stolen food. Billy was nothing more than a jungle creature, I knew then.

And so the day passed. I gave up any idea I had had of shaking this creature off. Once I tried to evade him by going into an art gallery, but a smartly uniformed attendant at the swing doors shook his head and told me to get out. I almost asked him what he thought of the comparative merits of Dali and Chirico, but I thought he would give me in charge for insulting language.

I did give Billy the slip, however, for ten minutes, near a big a pair of Wellington boots, for by now my feet were becoming blistered.

When he caught up with me later, he saw the boots immediately and said, "I don't know why I am doing this for you. You are a common thief. I saw you pull those boots down from the doorway, where they was hanging up like. If you don't give me another dollar, I'll tell the next copper I see."

We were in a side street as he said this. I turned towards him and said through my teeth, trying to seem as vicious as I could, "You old vulture! I've stood as much of this as I am able. I'm going to break your ruddy neck, here and now!" I thought I would frighten some sense into him.

But he did not budge an inch. Nor did his watery eyes flicker as I came towards him. When I was a yard from him, I saw that he had drawn a sharp-pointed knife from among his many rags. He was holding it at a level with my stomach, and his hand did not even quiver.

"Keep off, mister," he said hoarsely. "It wouldn't be the first one I'd done."

I stopped in my tracks. It was too quiet a street for me to test his courage in; he might mean what he said, and I didn't fancy that knife. When I

stopped, he smiled and said, "You see, old Billy knows the trade, matey. Treat him fair, and he's your friend for life. Treat him rough, and he'll slit yer gizzard soon as look at yer."

He gave a savage little gesture with the knife, down the street. "We passed a grating along there I should have pushed you down, *after*."

He said the words with such nonchalance that I shuddered at the unassuming vice of the creature.

Then we went on together, back towards the park, until dusk-time. Once, when the lights came on outside the cinemas, I tried to persuade him to accompany me to a film, just to be inside a building and warm, for the evening breeze that blew across Hull just then chilled me to the bone, summer though it was. But Billy sneered at me.

"They'd never let you in, in them clothes," he said. And I knew he was right.

"A pal o' mine went into one o' them places to die in peace," he said. "They seen him at it and flung him out on to the street. I don't blame 'em, mark you. You can't have decent folk sittin' in seats where an old roady-man has pegged out, can yer?"

By now, I was so sickened with Billy the tramp, I almost gave him a wad of notes to buy him off, as it were. But I realized that if he saw what money I had, he would never leave me. The sight of the little roll of notes in my inside pocket might well spur him on to butcher me at the next dark corner, and, as he said, roll my body down a grating. No, I must put up with him, come what may. And so, as darkness came down like a cloak over the great port of Hull, I found myself still tagging along with my disreputable companion. The narrow streets in which we wandered seemed to lead one into the other, in some crazily geometric pattern, with just a thin ribbon of sky visible above as one walked.

"Where are we?" I asked the tramp at my side.

"Land o' Green Ginger," he said, his face twisted in a curious grin. "Oh, you're quite safe here—quite safe here. No one'll harm yer, if yer mind yer own business."

I had visions of some sort of provincial Chinatown at the mention of that curious name. Once perhaps when this port was a less disciplined place, stealthy pigtailed figures might have been glimpsed, shuffling down these very pavements, hands in sleeves, minds set on some pipe-dream to come in some cobwebbed basement near at hand. . . .

But we were bound for no opium den. Instead, we turned at last under an archway and along a narrow passage-way, at the far end of which a black door stood half-open, letting out a broad and smoke-filled beam of amber light.

From inside came the mingled sounds of singing, loud laughter and incessant talking, interspersed by loud shouts, directed no doubt to the busy barmaid or landlord, for, as the white-painted sign above the door proclaimed, this was the 'Golden Hind', licensed to sell ale and porter and spirits.

Billy pushed past me and on into the one long room of this dockside tavern. At the far end of the room an old piano tinkled and clashed away, thumped rhythmically by hands which knew better how to splice a rope than coax those yellowing notes to produce music. Round the pianist a group of sailormen sang, waving their beer mugs in time to the tune. Smoke filled the room and made me cough. Billy did not seem to notice it. He pushed through the thronged men and women, leaving me to follow him as best I could.

"Your friend's no gentleman, mister," said a woman in a leopard-skin coat, her face white with powder, her long gold-coloured ear-rings flashing as she moved her head indignantly.

I smiled at her and nodded. Then I passed on, for her escort was a bulky man with a shade over one eye, and the cropped hair of what I took to be a professional fighter.

I found Billy in a corner of the room, already seated against the dark varnished wood which came half-way up the wall. He had pushed his way among a group of men, as raggedly dressed as himself. They seemed like some ghastly brotherhood as I approached them and they looked up at me, enquiringly. Obviously Billy had told them about me before I had had time to get to their table.

The one who rose and held out his hand to me was a very tall and very bent man. He wore a long sandy bush of beard, which gave him a monkish look, for his clothing consisted of a knee-length sacking overcoat, round which he had bound a length of rope, to keep its edges together. It was with something of a shock that I noticed that this hand lacked three fingers; there was an empty feeling about shaking it.

"Most charmed to meet yer," said the bearded man.

Billy rapped on the table and pointed to me. "My friend, Mickey Callaghan," he said. Then he addressed me, "These are my schoolmates, Mickey. They'll teach yer the tricks o' the trade, won't yer, mates?"

That remark drew guffaws from the gang seated at the table.

The bearded man sat down, still holding my hand in his claw. "Mister Callaghan," he said, "I'm sure delighted to know you. I have known many men named Callaghan, and they've all been good scouts and fine fighters."

I said that, as far as I knew, I was neither. But he nodded knowingly and said, "Ha, ha, modest, that's what you are, my boyo! Well, as a sign that you mean us no ill will, at least, you will get us a drink, won't you, Mister Callaghan?"

Before I could answer, the men about the table had thrust their glasses towards me. Their eyes gleamed wickedly through the smoke at me.

"Get them rum, Mickey boy," said Billy the tramp, as though I was *his* slave, spending *his* money, at *his* behest.

My first impulse was to tell them what I thought of the whole business, but caution prevailed. I gathered up their glasses and pushed my way towards the bar. A perspiring barman slopped the dark brown fluid into the glasses and took my pound note with a sniff. That stuff smelled thick and nauseating. A true pirate's drink, I thought.

"What are ye waitin' for, mister?" said the barman, looking at me belligerently over the mahogany counter.

"Don't I get any change?" I asked.

He gave a great guffaw which made everybody turn and stare at me.

"Hark at this one," he bawled out, "comes in here for a half-dozen glasses o' rum and wants change out of a pound! Get out wi' ye, before I come over this counter and give ye the change with this!"

He bunched his fist at me. Everybody laughed. I looked at the man and his eyes shifted before my gaze. I had his measure then.

I said quietly, "You're a robber, old chap. Nothing less. Would you care to step outside and give me the change in the open?"

He had turned from me then, for the rest of the company appeared to have lost interest in the affair. The barman was washing glasses it seemed and did not hear me.

I went back to the table, where my nondescript set were waiting, like thirsty dogs.

Billy said, “You’ve been long enough about it, you young scallywag! Well, brothers, down the hatch!”

And as I watched they lifted their glasses and drained them at a gulp. Then, laughing, they pushed them back at me.

“Hurry, this time, Mickey,” said Billy. “We can’t wait all night.”

I went back to the bar, conscious of the tittering that sounded behind my back, from the various groups of drinkers who had witnessed what had happened. This time, I had to stand waiting for the barman, who was busy with a number of others.

And then something else happened, something I had not bargained for. A dark curly-haired fellow, of my own age, dressed in a sailorman’s blue woollen jersey and sea boots pushed his way from the group round the piano and standing beside me, slapped his hand on the bar loudly and said, for all to hear, “I can lick any man here over thirty!”

I ignored the challenge. In any case, it did not apply to me, I thought. The other men, at the bar, looked anxiously over their shoulders and then faded away, back to their groups, without getting the drinks they had ordered. I stood at the bar, waiting, still.

The sailor slapped the counter again. “I can lick any man here over twenty-five,” he said, looking me straight in the eye.

I was in no condition for fighting right then. Nor did I know how many of that rough gang might set upon me, if I as much as raised a finger at this young fighting-cock. I did the only possible thing and smiled at him.

“Have a drink,” I said.

His answer was to sweep his hand over the glasses I was clutching, sending them crashing on to the stone floor.

The barman looked up from his washing-bowl and snarled, “You’ll pay for that lot, you clumsy dog!”

I said, “You can take a run round the block, you crook!” Now I was really annoyed, in spite of my weakness and my painful leg. That remark of the barman’s had been the last straw which breaks the proverbial camel’s back.

The sailorman took me by the shoulder. “Jack’s my oldest friend,” he said, pointing at the smiling barman. “Now you’ve asked for it! Come on outside!”

And before I could do anything to prevent him, he had rushed me through the press of people, and into the narrow passage-way.

Once outside, in the fresh air, I put my fists up, on guard. He’d give me a beating, no doubt, but I’d leave my mark on him, I thought.

But instead of punching me on the jaw immediately, the curly sailorman suddenly said, in his hoarse whisper, “Come on, you crazy coot, that gang’ll have your last penny then leave you up some alley-way for the coppers to find in the morning.”

He began to run, clumsily, in his sea-boots, down the narrow passage-way. I followed him, without question.

In the street we had to slow down, lest a patrolling policeman should see us and suspect our haste. But as we hurried along, turning here and there, diving down alleys and then across well-lit main roads, the other said, “Jack behind the bar’s all right, but he tried to scare you away when he saw who you were with. Billy the tramp is a killer, make no mistake. Every time I get into port there’s a new tale about him. But so far he’s dodged the coppers. We tried to frighten you off, but you would come back for more. Must be a bit thick-skulled!”

I said, “Where are you taking me?”

Now the sounds of the river were coming closer and closer. The buildings we passed were old and decrepit, and had a sordid look about them. Men lurked in doorways, and even sat on the pavement, some of them playing dice. Coloured men and women strolled through the dusk, talking in foreign tones.

The young man beside me said, “I’m taking you to the safest place I can think of, apart from the police station: the Seamen’s Home. Mr. Wilkes’ll let you stay there if I say so. I stop there myself, when I’m short of money. A shilling a night, it’ll cost you. Have you got a shilling?” I told him I had.

He led me into a bare office up a few worn stone steps. A bald-headed man sat in his shirt-sleeves at a scrubbed deal desk. He was reading a paper and chewing a match-stick. He nodded to my companion, but hardly gave me a glance.

“Friend o’ mine,” said the sailorman. “Look after him. He’s down on his luck. Callaghan’s the name.”

The man in the shirt-sleeves smiled sourly. “You Irish sure stick together!” he said.

I shook the sailorman by the hand. “Have a drink on me,” I said, trying to give him a half-crown. He looked back at me in disgust. “If you want to start that fight now, you can,” he said.

Then he relaxed and smiled. “You meant well, mate,” he said. “But I’m not one of Billy’s gang, you know.”

As he went out I caught him by the arm and said, “What do they call him, what else, beside Billy?”

In the light of the lamp that hung above the stone steps he turned round. “Search me,” he said, “I only know he’s the sort of king of that gang! Well, sleep well, mate, and keep clear of the ‘Golden Hind’ for a day or two. I shall!”

Then he was gone, and my head was whirling with the strange possibility that Billy was indeed “King Billy”, for if he was, then my case was hopeless. I *had* met him, and apparently had only just got away with my life.

The man in the shirt-sleeves was regarding me with curiosity. “You’d better go upstairs right away,” he said, “or all the best beds’ll be gone. Hey, not so fast, a shilling, please, and we expect you to wash your feet before you get between our sheets. No offence meant, but it’s the rule. Sailor-men are not particular sometimes.”

He led me up a narrow flight of stone steps, lit by a low-powered electric bulb, and then into a little washroom, where he waited while I took off my rubber boots and washed the Humber mud from my feet and legs. I saw his look of scorn as he observed the condition of my socks and the dirty blood-stained bandage above my knee. I felt ashamed at that look, and wished to goodness I might have explained to him just how they got like that. But he wouldn’t have believed me, if I had.

So I had to grin and bear it. Then I followed him to a green-painted door, which he unlocked carefully to let me in.

“This is your bedroom for to-night,” he said. “We lock up at ten-thirty, and don’t open this door till seven in the morning. So it’s no use trying to slip out before then. We expect you to do a bit of cleaning up before you

leave. We can't do everything for you, you know, at this price." His voice was peevish.

As I was passing into the room he said, "If you want coffee brought in at seven, that's another bob."

I said, "No, thank you. All I want is to sleep."

He gave a meaningful sniff and locked the door behind me.

I made my way along that narrow room. It was lit by three dim bulbs, unshaded and spotted. The walls of the place were white-washed and the floor innocent of any covering. Along each wall narrow iron beds were set, four feet apart, with a wooden chair at the right side of each bed.

As I passed down the long room in search of an empty bed, I observed the differing attitudes of the sleepers who were already oblivious of the sad creation about them. Some lay flat on their backs, their arms hanging out of bed; some lay with their faces buried in the hard striped pillows; and some lay beneath the bedclothes, tucked up like little children, as though they could not bear to look any longer on a world which had treated them so badly.

I found a bed which looked as clean as any other, and soon undressed and lay down, keeping my roll of money in my hand until I could slip it, unobserved, beneath the pillow. My broken watch I left on the chair beside the bed, for I could not risk cutting myself on the jagged glass in the night.

Then I lay back and waited for sleep to claim me. But there was an electric light directly before my eyes and I could not get into that relaxed state which is necessary before sleep will come. I waited for that light to go out, an eternity, it seemed.

No one talked to his neighbour in that place. There were large notices up and down the room, scrawled out inexpertly in thick pencil, "No Talking. No Drinking. No Smoking."

However, those notices did not prevent men from talking to themselves as the long night wore on, many of them in their sleep; nor did they affect the man in the bed opposite to me who sat up all night, smoking cigarette after cigarette, his blue-jerseyed hands clasped behind his cropped head.

Not even when the electric light was turned off at the main did he stop smoking. I saw the small red tip of his cigarette glowing through the night, becoming brighter with each puff, and then dying down again to a dull pink spot.

I slept but little. And once I sat upright with a start, when, at two o'clock, I should say, I heard the sounds of a scuffle on the stone steps outside, and a drunken voice shouting out, "But I tell you, Mickey Callaghan's an old friend of mine. He has five pounds belonging to me. If you don't let me in to him, I'll fetch the police."

The man I knew as Mr. Wilkes spoke then, tired and brutal.

"You don't dare go near the police, Billy, and you know it. You'd better get out before I call Johnny. He'll break your neck, you know that."

Then that crazy voice started again, shrill and piercing, "Hey, Mickey! Mickey Callaghan! Are you in there? It's Billy! I'm waiting for you, Mickey!"

I suddenly found myself shuddering in every limb. I almost tried to climb from the window that lay at the end of the room—but I recalled that it was heavily barred and that the drop down would be as formidable as the act of meeting that old devil, Billy.

I pulled the bedclothes over my head, and fell asleep, still shuddering.

When I awoke in the morning, the man in the bed opposite me was still smoking; smoking and staring above my head, through the wall, through all eternity. He did not move when I nodded to him. His trance was too deep for me to break.

Then the green door opened and the man known as Mr. Wilkes looked inside. His face was white and drawn, and his eyes tired. It looked as though he had not slept much either.

"Seven o'clock," he said. "Broom's in the corner. Sweep up before you leave."

The man who lay smoking stubbed out another cigarette on the iron bedstead and flung it to the floor. The space about his bed was littered with tobacco refuse. I thought that he would have a pretty busy time with the broom.

And so, at last, I got up and dressed. This was the morning of August 26th. My great day, one way or the other. I swept round my bed and then put the broom and dustpan back into the corner. No one else seemed anxious to obey the rule and some of them smiled at each other as I walked towards the door.

"He'll learn," said a man with a crutch propped beside his bed.

I went down to the little office. Mr. Wilkes was sitting with a cup of tea before him on the desk, spelling out something with his finger in the paper.

I was about to pass by him when he said, “They think that the murderer’s got across the river. It’s all here in the paper. Like to read it before you go off?”

I said, “No, thanks. I’m not one for reading.” Then I turned and said on the impulse, “You must know a bit about Hull. Can you tell me if there’s anybody called King Billy here?”

He looked at me in surprise for a moment, then scratched one of his great red ears.

“Not *somebody*, mate,” he said. “But *something*! The only King Billy I know of is that golden statue, up that street on your left, as you turn out of here. They call that King Billy, though lord knows why.”

I thanked him and went down the steps.

CHAPTER 22

Golden King

It was eight o'clock that morning when I stood before the golden statue which Wilkes had described. It was a representation of King William III, as the plaque beneath it announced, and showed that monarch seated on a noble charger, dressed in all the finery of a Roman emperor. The whole thing was heavily gilded and looked splendid in the morning sunshine. King Billy!

Almost unable to believe my luck, I stopped a workman who was carrying a heavy sack.

"What do you call that statue?" I asked him.

He gave me a comic look. "All sorts of things, when I'm trying to get the lorry up the street with a full load on. But at other times, I call him what everybody else does, King Billy."

"Thank you," I said, "good morning."

He stared after me, shaking his head, as I went down the street, towards the riverside, to wait.

There I found a seat overlooking the broad Humber, right alongside the ferry jetty. I crouched in the seat, trying to keep warm until the sun had gained its full power, and there I dozed, too weak and worn out even to walk across the road to the van which had opened its shutters and was selling snacks to workmen waiting for the boat.

Somewhere up the long street I had left, past that golden king, a great bell tolled the hour . . . Eight thirty—eight forty-five—nine. . . . Then nine-fifteen—nine-thirty—nine forty-five. . . . I came to with a start, the seagulls crying mournfully above my head. A policeman was watching me. As I started he walked over towards me. My heart began to beat painfully—to think that I had got so far, and then was going to be taken up for loitering, or something equally disastrous, at the last minute.

He was a tall young policeman, and he stopped a yard or two away from me, smiling down.

"You don't look well, chum," he said, grinning. "You want to get some breakfast inside of you and then you'll feel a lot better."

He turned quickly to see if anyone was looking, then he bent over me and dropped a half-crown on to my lap and walked on, whistling.

I smiled after him, but he did not look round. I picked that coin up and rubbed it for luck. Silently, I swore to have it punched and hung on a watch-chain for an eternal keepsake! I prayed that one day I might meet that policeman again. . . . And then I realized that it must be almost ten o'clock—the fateful hour.

As quickly as I could hobble, I rose from the seat and made my way across the street. The young policeman saw me going and smiled that I was so fast off the mark to spend my half-crown.

"Hey," he called after me, "don't spend it on beer!"

I waved to him and went at my top speed towards the golden statue, which stood in the middle of the street, fifty yards away.

Yet, as I approached, my heart sank, for there was no one about, apart from workmen and the odd housewife, out shopping early. But I kept on, feeling like some old traveller entering the cavern of the monster to gain the promised treasure. I had stepped on to the base of the great plinth on which the golden king stood poised, when there was a movement behind me. I turned as quickly as my leg would let me. But the big man with the black coat and the face of an ivory Buddha had my arms by my side. He was smiling, smiling and saying something which I could not hear.

I struggled and gasped out, "Let go, you murderer!" And then I heard his whispered words, "Take it easy, Mr. Stewart, it's all right! You'll hurt yourself. Take it easy now."

And as he spoke a van drew alongside us. I can see it vividly even as I write. It was a small one, eight-horse, I'd say, green, with a picture of a fishing smack on it, and big red letters painted obliquely across it, "Eat Foster's Fish!"

And almost before it had stopped, the driver jumped out and in two paces was beside us. I did not look at his white overalls. I only saw the thin moustache, and then the small automatic pistol that he held close to his body. It was not pointing at me.

He said, “Come on, hand it over. He’s given it you by now, I know.”

The man in black smiled, as blandly as ever, and then, with the speed of a viper, swung over and at the same time cracked the other so hard on the jaw that he shot backwards and hit the stationary van with a thump that sickened me.

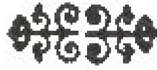
I had not heard the pistol go off, but it had. I felt myself slumping against that golden statue, King Billy. But before I lost consciousness, I saw the man in black pull a whistle from his waistcoat pocket and blow it. Policemen came from all the doorways, it seemed. Then they bent over the fallen man.

The big Buddha was bending over me, his ivory face strangely concerned.

“Great work, lad,” he said. “I’m damned proud to work with you.”

I can just remember trying to hit him on the jaw. And then I fainted off from the pain of the bullet wound in my shoulder. I was just conscious when the little white ambulance that had been waiting round the corner pulled up before the statue of King Billy to take me away.

Epilogue



The pretty nurse whom I had come to know quite well during my week in the hospital leaned round the tall screen about my bed, smiling.

I said, “Good morning, O Breaker of Men’s Hearts! What torment have you in store for your slave this bright day?”

She said, “That settles it! Now I *do* know that you are on the mend. I’ll get Doctor Brown to turn you loose on the world again. You are only occupying a bed that someone else needs.”

I said, “Oh, cruel maid, cruel, croo-el maid!” Then I pretended to weep with distress.

She came round the screen and said, “Be sensible, do, Mr. Stewart, there’s that big man come to see you again. Him in the black hat. He’s been four times and we’ve had to send him away.”

I said, “Well, as far as I am concerned, you can send him away again.”

The nurse automatically felt my pulse. “Hm,” she said, “you’ll have to be quiet, really you will. This is not the way to be going on. All the same, you’ll have to see him. He’s got the police inspector, or whatever they call him, and another gentleman with white hair.”

“Father Christmas,” I said. “Send them away, I’m too old to ask for any presents, my dear.”

“Oh, you’re im-possible,” the girl said as she swept out of sight behind the screen. “I’ll send them in anyway, and see that you mind your manners, or there’ll be no blancmange for you to-night.”

I heard the heavy tread of a number of feet along the big ward, and then the nurse appeared, winking slyly at me, and leading three men to my bedside.

The policeman appeared, evidently, to be a high-ranking one, but was nevertheless a pleasant red-faced person, who seemed only too happy to

settle himself comfortably in the easy chair at my bedside. The man with white hair was short and square-built. He wore his grey clothes carelessly and his tie was under one ear. I noticed that his fingers were stained, as with chemicals. He peered at me through thick glasses, and then went off into a reverie, having, no doubt, forgotten completely about me.

The big man in the black coat smiled, until I thought that his bland ivory mask would crack down the middle and spoil the illusion of poker-face for ever more.

I did my best to be sociable, for the young nurse was still there, watching to see that I did not get too excited. I waved her away. “I’ll ring if I want you, nurse,” I said.

She grinned and tripped off down the ward.

“Do you mind if I sit on your bed?” said the big man.

“There’s nothing I can do about it,” I answered, as coldly as I could make my voice sound.

He smiled and said, “I’m not surprised that you are a little annoyed, but we are all in the power of something bigger than we are ourselves, and must sometimes act strangely in order to achieve our ends.”

I said, “Right. Please start at the beginning and let me know just what our ends are supposed to be.”

The big man smiled and said, “Well, first, by way of clearing the ground, let me tell you that I have brought the policeman and the professor here merely to give support to what I have to say. Neither of them is here in, shall we say, an official capacity.”

I looked at the policeman, who grinned back at me. “Thank goodness for that!” I said, feelingly.

The big man went on, “The policeman will assure you, if you now need such assurance, that you are not wanted for murder, nor have you ever been suspected of it. The professor is here merely to assure you that he does indeed exist, and, if you require his statement to that effect, that the chemical concerned in this strange affair was really of great importance. All right?”

I leaned back in my bed and wiped my brow. “If you say so,” I said. “After this I could believe anything. Please go on.”

He sat down again and bowed his great head solemnly, in acknowledgement of my invitation. He was a man of commanding presence and courtesy, I had to admit.

"I belong to the same section of experimental Marine Zoology as the man who visited you in London. He was a dear colleague of many years standing. Though I worked more on the, shall we say, security side."

"Stop a moment," I said, "the afternoon he was killed you were in the street just off Soho Square. Why did you not save him?"

He smiled a little sadly. "I am noted for speed in some respects," he said, "but on that occasion, I came just two minutes too late. He was lying in your hallway when I found him. I walked outside and waited for you to come back. Indeed, that's what my job consisted of, waiting, all along the route, to see that you got through."

I said, "Do you mean that you would have stepped in if I had been in urgent need of you?"

"Hardly that," he said, scratching his heavy jowl for a moment in something approaching embarrassment. "But I wanted to keep an eye on you and to see, let us say, how you reacted."

I glared at him, "You make it sound like a chemical experiment," I said.

He smiled, unabashed. "It was, dear boy, in a way. Just that—an experiment. But an important one. I lost track of you once, though, I have to admit. I wasn't at all sure where you'd got to after you left the Air Force Station. I spent half the night peering through cottage windows, and what not!"

"I saw you," I said, shuddering with the recollection.

"Oh," he answered, smiling now. "Well, I'm glad I was at least on the right lines. But to continue: we let the newspapers splash their story about, so that the real murderers would feel safe."

"You didn't consider my feelings," I said wryly.

He waved me aside, "On an operation of this scale, the feelings of one individual are scarcely important. The main thing was to make them feel secure. You were, if I dare say it, a most useful bait. They followed you to the exclusion of anyone else, and so let a perfectly innocuous little clerk, called Bembridge, get through to Professor Maguire with the real stuff."

I felt my pulse quickening dangerously. “What!” I said. “Do you mean that the phial I carried wasn’t the real stuff?”

The big man smiled and shook his head rather sheepishly. “As a matter of fact, old boy,” he said, “it was an ordinary dye, the sort any housewife can buy by the dozen at any grocer’s shop. But there’s no need to get angry—as far as *they* were concerned, it was the real thing; and as far as you were concerned too. And that was important, because you would not have lured them on like that if you’d thought you were merely carrying enough stuff to dye little Willie’s cricket pants a nice serviceable colour for the winter, would you now!”

I said, “This is beyond me, quite beyond me. I give up.”

The man in black said quietly, “That’s just where you are wrong, my dear chap; you don’t give up—you *start* now. We weren’t sure of you before, but now we’d trust you with anything and feel sure that *you* couldn’t do the job, *no one* could. As a private whatever-you-like-to-call-it, your future is made. We intend to put you on the secret list and give you a solid retaining fee. You are an unofficial member of the Government, almost!”

My head whirled: “I don’t know what to say,” I gasped.

The big policeman grinned and whispered *sotto voce*, “Say ‘No, thank you,’ like a good boy! Why should you not live to draw the old age pension, like anyone else!”

The big man pretended to be annoyed with him. “Anyway, we’ll not press you for an answer,” he said. “Take your time, we’ve got to get that gang behind bars for a lifetime first. Then we can talk more seriously, and without policemen about!”

I said, “Tell me about the gang. I know you knocked the little one out, when he shot me, but what about the others?”

“All under lock and key at the moment,” he said. “Your little friend, Mike, saw to that. He phoned the police at Merton and presented them with one tied up with wire, with a hole in his head you could put a walnut in—and the other nicely incoherent in an old brick kiln. Mike was sitting by his bedside, bathing the back of his neck for him, when the police arrived. They are both charged with attempted murder, just like the one who shot you the other day. They won’t bother us any more.”

I struggled against the growing sensation of bewilderment that was sweeping over me like an insidious drug. “But why, oh why,” I said, “if they

are so dangerous, could they not have been taken in by the police earlier, before they had time to do any damage?"

The policeman spoke now. "I know it's crazy, old man," he said, "but the police can't just arrest a man because they know he is likely to do something illegal. He has to do it first, and then we come into operation. That's one of the penalties we pay for being a democracy and not a police state. We had nothing to accuse those gents of until they shot a man and then tried to kill others. Now they are for it, and no mistake."

I said, "All right, I'll take your word for that. But who on earth were they? They seemed just common or garden wide boys, to my untutored eye."

The big man said softly, "Your eyes deceived you, son. There were none better in the business—until you came into the picture, that is! What made them worse was their complete lack of morals and of patriotism. They are mercenaries, in the pay of, well, does it matter whose pay they are in? They are off the pay list now, and that is all that matters. And we have them on a non-political charge, that's most important, for it will not rouse suspicion *over there*."

The white-haired old professor came out of his trance just then and said to me, "Er, Mr. Stewart, there's one thing I would like to say, if it's appropriate at this juncture. That stuff you thought you carried, I mean, the real stuff; I don't know just what you were told about it, but whatever it was, it was probably a lie. Only a man has to be told some sort of credible story before he will co-operate, and dear old Frank was always something of a yarn-spinner, even in his student days. We were at King's together, by the way. I think that was why you were given the job, as much as anything else. . . ."

Then he wandered outside the screen to look into a goldfish bowl that one of the nurses had put in the window. He had forgotten all about us once more.

I was feeling very tired now. The two men got up to go. Then the big man lingered a while, when the nurse had taken charge of the policeman and the professor.

"Don't forget, old boy," he said, "you are definitely on the strength now, so get well as soon as you can and be off down to London with you. You'll get a bonus for this bit of work, and I have permission to say that you can fit yourself out with a real office now, and a secretary; that will go down on Initial Expenses and won't cost you a penny. We'll get in touch with you at

the old address off Soho Square until you blossom out properly. Good-bye, and all our thanks. You have done something to be proud of, my boy."

He left and I sank down on to my pillow, my head whirling. I had thought I was a failure, and yet the cards had turned out right for me in the end. But at the moment I felt too weak to take up that fine offer. I must think about it. . . .

The nurse poked her head round the screen once more. "Another visitor, Mr. Stewart," she said, with an attempt at severity, "and I must ask you to make this the last one to-day. It's a good job the ward is empty."

Mike came round the screen. He was wearing a new blue suit, which seemed to cause him some embarrassment, especially as his hair had not grown very much since he had had it cropped. The total effect was of some juvenile delinquent, freshly out of jail in a stiff new prison suit, but still with his prison crop. He shuffled from foot to foot, speechless.

"Glad you're better, Mr. Stewart," he said. "Mums has rung the hospital every day to see how you were making out. Dad sends his love too. And Roger Graham. He says he's sorry he was rude about Bonnie Prince Charlie. He says he thought you were pulling his leg because he's a Lowlander."

Then I realised just how sensitive boys can be, even tough-souled boys, like Mike and Roger.

I said, "Thanks a lot, Mike. You got me through. You did things for me that a grown-up would not have been able to do, or would have been too scared to do."

He shuffled his feet and looked down at the carpet. "Dad bought me a new air rifle yesterday," he said.

"Which side will you be on, the cops' or the robbers'?" I asked him.

"I reckon I'll play at being a Game Warden, or something," he said. "Cops and Robbers is a kid's game, after all."

He looked up at me and I saw the smile in his eyes.

"You're right, Mike," I said. "And who should know better than you and me?"

Then the nurse came to turn him out. He made no protest, but as he went round the screen he said, "Oh, Mr. Stewart, Mum told me that she expects you to come and spend a week or two with us before you go back to wherever it is. Doctor Thomas says he wants to give you the best dinner of

your life, for locking you in the car that day, and Miss Peach wants to ask you to address the Women's Guild, or something!"

I pretended to groan. The boy grinned again, "But you can always say a swear word, and not get asked again, can't you!"

The little nurse hovered about him, anxious to see him out of the ward. But still he did not go.

Then at last, very shyly, he said, "Dad says there's a job going at the grammar school next term. English master. He thought you might be interested as you studied English, or something. . . . He says if you want the job, he knows the headmaster and will put in a good word."

"That's the school you go to, Mike, isn't it?" I said, teasing.

He nodded, his eyes lighting up.

I looked as stern as I could. "And do you seriously think I could ever give you a hundred lines after that adventure in the brick kilns together?" I asked.

He said, "Business is business and pleasure is pleasure. I'd do them if you gave them."

I felt a lump rising in my throat. It was time he went. But I said, "Let's talk about it another time, old son. But I do promise to take you down the Ermine Street to see an old friend of mine, and to pick up the choicest bit of derelict car that ever missed running from London to Brighton."

He grinned and went behind the screen. I heard his light footsteps dying away down the ward.

I felt very tired, yet strangely exhilarated. The little nurse said, "I've just brought you a cup of tea. I'd made it just when the boy came, but I had to let him in."

I said, "You bet you did. That boy is worth a sight more than that old golden statue of yours down the road."

She looked at me wide-eyed. "What!" she said. "Worth more than King Billy! Oh, you heathen! Nothing *could* be! He saw us through the Blitz!"

I said, "Yes, and the boy you've just shown out would see you through the next, if it ever came to that."

Then I lay down and drew the clothes up to my eyes. I did not want her to see that they were a bit moist.

THE END

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Illustrations have not been included due to copyright considerations.

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Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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