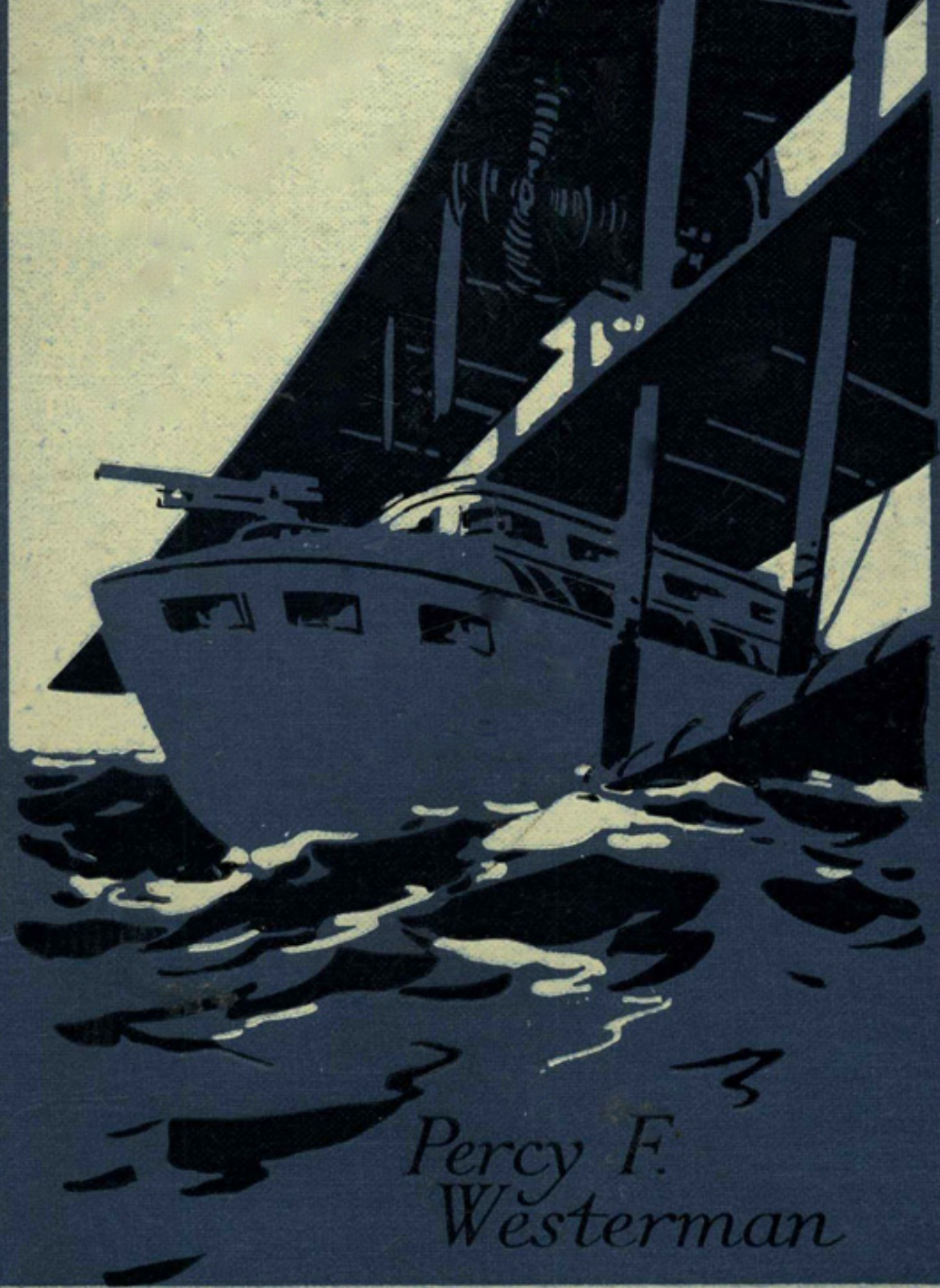


# CLIPPED WINGS



*Percy F.  
Westerman*

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# BY PERCY F. WESTERMAN

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“No boy alive will be able to peruse Mr. Westerman’s pages without a quickening of his pulses.”—  
Outlook.

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MAKING UP THE RIVER

# CLIPPED WINGS

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Author of "The Wireless Officer"

"Sea Scouts up-Channel," &c.

*Illustrated by E. S. Hodgson*

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# CLIPPED WINGS

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## CHAPTER I

### Paid Off

H.M.S. *Baffin*, light cruiser, of 9900 tons displacement, 30 knots speed, and armed with seven 7.5-inch and twelve 3-inch guns, was approaching Portsmouth. Already the Nab Tower bore broad on her port beam. Ahead lay the low-lying Portsea Island, upon which Portsmouth is built, backed by the grassy Portsdown Hills with their white chalk-pits standing out clearly in the rays of the midday sun.

The *Baffin* was a typical unit of the post-War fleet—long, lean, with two funnels of unequal size; a tripod mast with a decidedly ugly raking topmast, and an aftermast that, by reason of its position, should be termed a mainmast, but, on account of its stumpiness, could not reasonably be expected to be so termed. As if to make amends for its insignificance, the aftermast flew a white pennant, streaming yards and yards astern and terminating in a gilded bladder that bobbed and curtsied in the frothy wake of the swiftly-moving vessel.

That streamer—the paying-off pennant—indicated the cruiser's immediate programme. She was on the eve of completing her two years' commission.

To the lower-deck ratings that pennant meant home, and with it long "leaf" and freedom from strict discipline, watch on and watch off, divisions, subdivisions, "tricks", and other items of routine that combine to make up Jack's working day and night afloat.

The town-bred bluejacket or stoker would probably make for his old haunts and, with a seaman's typical philosophy, note the fact that many of his former acquaintances were vainly looking for work. Then, at the expiration of his "leaf", he would shoulder his bundle and return to the depot, thankful that he would have to take no thought for the morrow as to how he was to obtain his next meal.

Then, too, the seaman recruited from the country would make tracks for his native village, there to spend the next few weeks contemplating the dull-witted son of the soil—his companion of boyhood days—plodding at the tail-end of a plough. Quite possibly the labourer was being paid far more than he—the highly-trained product of a mechanical age in which electricity and oil-fed turbine engines have supplanted masts and yards. But, on the other hand, the bluejacket will thank his lucky stars that fate—usually in the guise of a naval recruiting officer—drew him from the unimaginative land and set his course upon the boundless ocean. At all events his outlook on life was not bordered by the hedges that surrounded the fields which the boon companions of his youth tilled from one year's end to another.

To the officers, "paying off" presented a somewhat different aspect. Working, eating, drinking, and playing together for the space of two years, inevitably thrown into each other's society owing to the limits of the ward- and gun-rooms, they cannot but form deep attachments for each other. Only those men who have served a commission afloat can thoroughly realize the meaning of the term "band of brothers".

And now, with the paying off of the ship, they would be scattered. True, they were going home, but the fact remained that some would "go on the beach" for the last time. Officers still in their prime would have to be compulsorily retired to rot ashore, because a conference in America has agreed that there is no longer any necessity for Britannia to rule the waves. For similar reasons junior officers, on the threshold of what had promised to be a long and honourable career, were being politely invited to resign their commissions, the invitation being backed by a hint that if they did not they would be ultimately "fired" as being surplus to the revised establishment.

Amongst the latter was Acting Sub-lieutenant Peter Corbold, a tall, broad-shouldered youth of nineteen or twenty. The only son of a country clergyman, Peter had been maintained at Dartmouth at a sacrifice that had played havoc with his father's meagre stipend; but, by dint of the strictest economy, the latter had seen his son through the earlier stages of his naval career, until Peter was in a measure self-supporting.

Studious by nature and conscientious in carrying out his duties, Peter Corbold not only passed the successive examinations required by the Admiralty during his midshipman days, but gained high praise in his captain's reports. In due course, he obtained acting rank of sub-lieutenant and was expecting to be confirmed as such when there came a bombshell in the form of an official memorandum on the reduction of *personnel*.

It was not a pleasing prospect. Its nearness became painfully apparent as the *Baffin* approached her home port. In other circumstances, Peter might have looked ahead and fancied himself in command of a destroyer, a light cruiser, or even a battleship, gliding between those chequered circular forts that rise like gigantic inverted buckets from the floor of the anchorage of Spithead. Now that dream was shattered. There remained but the prospect of “the beach”, with a meagre gratuity as a sorry solace for his compulsory abandonment of a naval career.

A deeply-laden Thames barge, beating up on a weather-going tide against a stiff sou’westerly breeze, attracted his attention. Sailing-craft of all sorts and sizes had a fascination for him, and this bluff-browed craft, with her dull-red sprit-mainsail and topsail straining in the wind, made a striking picture as the foam-flecked waves swept completely over her battened-down hatches. The only visible member of her crew was a tubby, blue-jerseyed man, wearing a billycock hat, who stood with legs planted firmly apart at the wheel, happy in the knowledge that the “brass-bound blighters” on the cruiser would have to alter helm—not he.

“Hello, old son!” exclaimed a voice, as a hand descended heavily on Peter’s shoulder. “How would that job suit? . . . Hang it all, man; sorry, I didn’t mean that. I forgot.”

The speaker was Sub-lieutenant Havelock de Vere Cavendish, a high-spirited youth, who answered readily enough to such affectionate names as “Weeds”, “Tawny”, “Straight-cut”, “Woodbine”, or any other term that bore any resemblance to the various brands of tobacco.

Cavendish was nearly twelve months senior to Peter Corbold. In height he was a full two inches shorter, and lacked the breadth of shoulder and massive limbs of his chum. Peter’s features were dark, and might be described as ruffled; Cavendish’s were fair and rounded. Peter was essentially a thinker; the other was a man of action, with an impulsive temperament. In short, they had little or nothing in common, as far as build, appearance, and characteristics went, but they were close chums.

“Nothing to apologize for, old son,” rejoined Peter. “There’s no such luck for me—even to the extent of becoming the master of a barge. There’s nothin’ doin’ afloat for a has-been naval bloke nowadays. There are far too many Mercantile Marine fellows on the beach looking for jobs as it is.”

“That’s a fact,” admitted his chum soberly.

Cavendish was one of the lucky ones, although, with his characteristic honesty, he could form no idea why his name should have been “ear-marked” for retention in the Service. He had not shone in his exams. More than once he had got into scrapes, harmless enough, during his career at Dartmouth. Perhaps it was the fearless, almost foolhardy feat he had performed in mid-Atlantic, when he took the *Baffin’s* second cutter alongside a burning tanker—a German—and rescued seven survivors from a raging inferno, that had been a deciding factor in his retention.

Probably he alone of all the officers knew the precarious state of Peter Corbold’s finances and the gloomy outlook that confronted him. So much he gathered by “putting two and two together”. Peter was not a fellow to moan and whine, but was inclined to reticence on the matter.

“What are you going to do, old thing?” he demanded abruptly.

“Haven’t any plans,” replied Peter. “At least, nothing definite to work upon. Probably I’ll go abroad.”

“Canada or Australia?”

Corbold shook his head.

“No; I’ve been thinking of going to Rioguary,” he replied. “I’ve an uncle out there. Mining engineer—nitrates, I believe, but I’m not sure.”

“Rioguary? Where’s that?” inquired Cavendish. “Somewhere in South America, isn’t it?”

“Quite a flourishing little republic,” declared Peter. “It has been going steadily ahead ever since that little scrap with Brazil. People are mostly of Spanish and Indian descent, of course, but there’s a fair sprinkling of pure Europeans, I’ve been told.”

The shrill notes of a bugle interrupted Corbold’s words. Instantly, every officer and man upon the *Baffin’s* deck stiffened to attention, the white-helmeted marine detachment drawn up aft presenting arms with the regularity and precision of a well-oiled machine.

The light cruiser had entered Portsmouth Harbour and was now abreast the blackened ruins of what was once the semaphore tower. Ahead and on the starboard bow appeared three tapering masts above a block of yellow-bricked offices. At the mizzen-truck fluttered a white flag with a St. George’s Cross. Quickly the rest of the vessel came into view—a comparatively small black-hulled ship with triple bands of white—lying, not

riding to the tide, but in a dry dock, in which she is fated to remain as long as her planks and timbers hold together.

A few seconds later and again the bugle blares out—this time to “carry on”. The *Baffin*, as does every vessel belonging to His Majesty’s navy that passes that way, has paid her homage to the renowned *Victory*.

Past the huge building slip—from which, until the Washington Conference left it untenanted and derelict, a ceaseless procession of noble battleships sped to make their first acquaintance with the ocean—the *Baffin* glided. Then, under port helm, she turned her lean bows towards the gigantic lock through which she must pass to gain her allotted berth. Ahead were warships of every size and condition; battle-scarred capital ships that had borne the brunt of Jutland, gigantic seaplane-carriers, battle cruisers, light cruisers, P-boats, destroyers, and submarines—forlorn, neglected, and condemned to the scrap-heap. No longer did the once-busy dockyard resound to the ceaseless rattle of pneumatic hammers as the “maties” toiled to contribute their not inconsiderable share to the supremacy of the Empire.

“You mark my words, old son,” exclaimed Cavendish, “some day we’ll be sorry we’ve scrapped these ships. We’ll want them pretty badly. People talk of air power being the predominant factor, and that the battleship is a back number! It’s sea power that counts, has counted from the beginning of history, and will do so till the end.”

## CHAPTER II

# A Day of Surprises

Three months later, Peter Corbold saw Rioguyan territory for the first time. Acting upon a laconic cablegram from his uncle, Brian Strong, he had taken a passage in a Royal Mail steamer as far as Barbadoes, transferring at that point to one of the fleet of small vessels plying between the West Indies and the numerous ports on the Rio Guaya.

After a voyage lasting nearly a week, the steamer entered the wide estuary of the Rio Guaya, which, for more than a hundred miles, averages forty miles in width, and is tidal for a distance of nearly four hundred and fifty miles. On the right bank is the Republic of San Valodar; on the left that of San Benito. Rioguyan territory does not begin until Sambrombon Island, where the river is divided into two deep-water channels barely five miles in width.

Sambrombon Island made the position of the Republic of Rioguy unique. It was in the territory of San Valodar, consequently San Valodar claimed control of the Corda Channel on the north-east side, and one-half of El Porto Channel on the south-west side, sharing the jurisdiction of that waterway with the Republic of San Benito. Thus, whatever shipping Rioguy possessed could not pass to the open sea without entering the territorial waters of either San Benito or San Valodar; but, by mutual arrangement among the three republics, Rioguyan ships were allowed the right of using El Porto Channel, without payment of dues.

This much Peter learnt from a fellow-countryman, the only British subject on the ship, and Mackenzie by name.

“The Rioguayans are frightfully proud of this concession,” continued Mackenzie. “They are top-dog out here and pretty go-ahead, I can assure you. Too go-ahead for my liking.”

“How’s that?” asked Peter.

His companion smiled enigmatically.



“You’ll find out quick enough,” he replied. “The country used to be all right, but of recent years there’s been a growing anti-British feeling. Why, I don’t know, but the fact remains. So much so, that I’m selling out. I’ve taken up a piece of land at Barbuda, and I’m returning to Rioguary only to arrange for the disposal of a small mine that I’ve been working here. Where are you bound for?”

“El Toro; that’s about five miles from Tepecicoa,” announced Peter. “An uncle of mine is an engineer there.”

“Not Strong—Brian Strong—by any chance?”

“Yes,” replied Peter. “Do you know him?”

“Do you?” asked Mackenzie.

“I was only five or six when I last saw him,” said Peter.

“You’ll find him a weird old bird, chock-a-block with comic notions and strange gadgets,” declared Mackenzie, with a burst of British candour. “Not a bad sort, though,” he added.

Just then Peter heard the distinctive drone of an aeroplane engine. It was some time before even his trained eye could detect the on-coming machine, but presently he could see the misty outlines of a huge flying-boat travelling at high speed at a great altitude. Even as he looked, the flying-boat shut off her engine and dived at such a steep angle that it appeared to be out of control.

At less than two hundred feet above the water the headlong plunge was arrested. The flying-boat seemed to hang irresolute, her momentum neutralized by the action of gravity.

She was a craft of nearly a hundred feet in length, propelled by four powerful engines. For her length, her wing-span was ridiculously small, the planes, three *en échelon* on either side, being short and with a decided horizontal camber. The absence of struts and tension wires gave Corbold the impression that the planes were of steel.

This much he took in before the flying-boat restarted her motors and was quickly lost to sight in the dazzling sunlight.

“Those chaps are pretty smart,” commented Mackenzie. “It’s only since 1918 that they took up flying seriously, and for Dagoes they’ve done wonders. But I wouldn’t say too much about it to any Rioguyan, if I were you; it isn’t exactly healthy. There’s San Antonio just showing up. It’s the port nearest to the Atlantic that Rioguary possesses, and like a good many

South American towns, it is going ahead like steam. Keep your eyes open and don't say too much, or we may both find ourselves in gaol."

Viewed from the broad estuary, San Antonio looked like a huge marble town, standing out against the lofty, tree-clad hills that enclosed it on three sides. But it was not the appearance of the place that attracted Peter's attention so much as the shipping.

To his surprise, he saw three large battleships lying at moorings off the town—leviathans that, in spite of the Rioguary ensign, looked unmistakably British.

"Ay, two of them hailed from the Clyde and the third from Barrow," declared Mackenzie. "They were originally built for the Brazilian and Chilian Governments, but for some reason those republics agreed to sell them to Rioguary. I expect they had been studying the 'Is the Capital Ship Doomed?' controversy and come to the conclusion that they'd best sell while they had the chance."

"But what good are they to Rioguary?" asked Peter.

"Ask me another, my boy," rejoined his companion. "They gave out that they were for maintaining friendly relations with the Republics of San Benito and San Valodar; or, in other words, those battleships are guarantees for a free passage between Rioguary and the open sea. They're building others like them over there. A couple of thousand skilled Japanese artisans were brought over eighteen months ago. I did hear that they can turn out a fully equipped battleship for three million dollars. . . . There's the submarine base."

Peter looked in the direction indicated. All he could detect was a solitary submarine, bearing a strong resemblance to the late unlamented *Unterseebooten* that played such an important part in the downfall of the German Empire.

"There are others," continued his mentor. "About twenty, I believe; but where their base is actually, I don't know. It's somewhere about here, but where exactly I've never been able to find out."

Slowing down, the little steamer entered one of the creeks comprising San Antonio harbour. It was not the largest, but its shores were occupied by at least half a dozen building slips on which were craft in all stages of construction.

"For passenger and cargo traffic between Rioguary and the West Indies and Brazil," explained Mackenzie. "A sort of national enterprise. The capital

was issued in five-dollar shares, giving each holder the chance of winning a big prize. That sort of thing, anything of the nature of a lottery, appeals to the Rioguyans. The required capital was over-subscribed in less than a week.”

As soon as the steamer berthed alongside the wharf, Mackenzie bade Peter “au revoir” and went ashore together with half a dozen other passengers, mostly Brazilians.

Five hours later Peter Corbold set foot on Rioguyan soil at the busy little port of Tepecicoa, being in the awkward position of knowing no word of Spanish and having no one to act as an interpreter.

But that troubled him very little. His previous experience of foreign ports stood him in good stead; while having previously provided himself with a large-scale map of the district on which El Toro, his uncle’s abode, was plainly marked, he had no great difficulty in finding himself upon the right road. He travelled light, his baggage having been detained at the Custom House for examination.

Peter had cabled out to his uncle from England, stating that he was sailing in the Royal Mail steamer *Tagus*, but the date of his arrival at El Toro was a matter for speculation. Nor was the ex-naval officer aware that there was direct telephonic communication between Tepecicoa and his destination, and that electric cars passed within two hundred yards of the place.

It was undoubtedly a day of surprises. Peter had expected to find a tenth-rate South American republic, peopled, for the most part, by swarthy ruffians, with long knives conspicuously carried in bright-coloured sashes. He had imagined the town of Tepecicoa to be dirty, squalid, swarming with beggars. Instead, he found broad, tree-planted streets and spacious *plazas*, lighted by electricity and provided with broad, shady, and remarkably clean pavements. There were Indians and half-castes in profusion, looking certainly far from being poverty-stricken. In fact, he did not see a single beggar. There were plenty of people on horseback, and quite a number of motor-cars that obviously had been imported from the United States.

Being afoot and dressed in clothes of English cut, Peter was the object of a great deal of attention, especially as he was walking. Almost everyone, even the poorest, rode either in a car or carriage, or on horseback.

Presently, Peter arrived at a long and open space, out of which seven broad thoroughfares radiated. Here he stood irresolute, unable to decide as to

which of these roads he should take.

“Wish I had Mackenzie with me,” he soliloquized.

Suddenly a hand slapped him heavily upon the shoulder. Surprised, Peter wheeled, to find a tall, lean-faced man, whose gold-filled teeth proclaimed him to be a citizen of the United States.

“Say, stranger,” exclaimed the man, “you’s the guy Boss Strong’s expectin’?”

“I am,” admitted Peter.

“Sure thing,” continued the other. “I’m right dead on it every time. What are you hoofing it for? Didn’t Old Man Strong send along his automobile?”

“He didn’t know when to expect me,” replied Peter. “I suppose I ought to have telegraphed.”

“There’s a cable-car at twenty centavos or an automobile at a dollar,” announced the man.

Peter expressed his preference for the latter.

“Come along right now, and I’ll get you up,” said his benefactor, and grasping Peter by the arm, he led him to a kiosk-like structure similar to those he had noticed at almost every street corner.

The rest was a simple matter. Young Corbold’s companion said something in Spanish to the polite uniformed person in charge of the Kiosk. Peter put down a dollar and was given a ticket, which he was informed he was to place in his hatband. An electrically-operated syren on the roof of the Kiosk gave a clear but not aggressive note, and almost before Peter could be escorted to the edge of the pavement, a motor-car had arrived and was awaiting him.

The mulatto driver gave a glance at the words on the ticket in Peter’s hat. That was all that was necessary. That piece of pasteboard was an order given by the Republic of Rioguary that, in consideration of the sum of one dollar having been paid, the driver of the state-licensed vehicle was to take his fare to El Toro by the shortest possible route.

Without that ticket, Peter might have sought and sought in vain for a conveyance.

He had expected, somewhat naturally, that his Yankee benefactor was going to El Toro with him. But he was mistaken. The man raised his hat and disappeared.

“Might have asked him his name, any old way,” thought Peter. “P’r’aps Uncle Brian will know who he is. My word! Rioguary is quite a go-ahead show!”

It did not take the motor long to get clear of the town. Soon the tree-lined streets gave place to a broad, dusty road that ran almost in a straight line for miles between fields of maize and open expanses of sun-baked grass, dotted here and there with *adobe* huts. Nearer and nearer drew the rugged, saw-like mountains, until Peter began to wonder whether El Toro lay on the far side of the formidable sierras.

But at length the car turned abruptly to the right, plunging into a defile through a far-flung spur of the main chain of mountains. For the next mile nothing of the work of man’s hands was visible, except the well-kept road and the inevitable telephone wires supported by substantial poles of ferro-concrete, until, swinging round a sharp corner, the car emerged into more open country, and gave Peter his first sight of El Toro.

Had Peter found his relative living in a shack, or even a timbered house, he would not have been surprised, for according to what he had previously heard, Brian Strong was not in affluent circumstances.

Again the lad had a surprise. El Toro was quite a substantial affair of white stone, standing amidst picturesque surroundings in extensive grounds, surrounded by a high stone wall much after the style of an English country seat. The house itself was neither high nor impressive, being of only one story on account of the danger from earthquakes; but it was well built and the grounds were in splendid order. There was a lodge by the entrance gate, whence a sweeping drive, bordered with dwarf palm trees, led up to the porticoed house. At one side of the main building was a range of stables, while farther away, and with their rounded roofs only just visible over a slight ridge, were numerous sheds that looked as if they might be workshops.

The motor drew up. Peter alighted and offered the driver a half-dollar piece, which the mulatto refused with a superb gesture worthy of a real Spanish grandee.

Before Peter had recovered from his rebuff, the double doors of the house were flung open by a pair of negro servants. Even as he was ascending the steps of the portico, Peter heard the clatter of heavy boots upon the tiled floor of the hall.

The next instant, his hand was grasped by his Uncle Brian.

“Glad you’ve got here, Peter!” he exclaimed. “Say, ever been up in an aeroplane? Ever flown at all?”

“No,” replied his nephew, too taken aback with the unusual and eccentric greeting to reply except in a monosyllable.

“That’s a pity,” rejoined Uncle Brian, “a great pity. I wanted a chance to bring you down.”

## CHAPTER III

# Uncle Brian

Brian Strong gave a deprecatory gesture.

“Explanations can wait,” he replied. “You must be hungry. Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. Meanwhile, I’ll show you the bathroom. Where’s your kit?”

Peter had to admit that he was hungry. The fact that he needed a bath required no verbal confirmation. He was covered with dust. The absence of his baggage was explained.

“If you had only let me know,” commented Uncle Brian, “I’d have met you at the landing-stage and saved a lot of bother. What did they rush you for custom dues?”

His nephew told him, at the same time thinking ruefully that his ready capital had already shrunk to three hundred dollars.

“H’m. I think I’d have got you passed through for less than that,” commented Mr. Strong. “We’ll go into the matter later.”

Peter made his way to the bathroom, puzzling his brains over Uncle Brian and his sayings.

He had not seen his uncle for about fifteen years, and impressions at the age of five are apt to be somewhat distorted. Then he remembered Uncle Brian as a tall, gruff-voiced man of great age. Now his uncle looked quite small—hardly up to Peter’s shoulder. His voice was still gruff. He usually spoke in short, crisp sentences, until he warmed up to any topic that interested him. His actual age was forty-eight, but his fresh complexion and athletic build made him look much younger.

A mining engineer by profession, Brian Strong had wandered far from the beaten track in the critical years from 1914 onwards. He was in Australia when war was declared, and promptly came home at his own expense to offer his services to his country. They were accepted—after a tedious delay—and his first war-job was that of inspecting hay and straw, notwithstanding his frank assurance that he knew little about hay and straw, beyond being

able to distinguish one from another. After twelve months or more of this totally uncongenial and monotonous work, Strong found a slightly better post in the Ministry of Munitions. Here his professional knowledge of mining might have been utilized, but no! He was attached to a section dealing with the extraction of explosives from wood pulp. There was some consolation. He was helping to fight the Huns, albeit still a square peg in a round hole. His last venture during the Great War was more to his liking. He was appointed to the experimental works of a Government aeroplane factory. Here he could show initiative, and before long several of his ideas were embodied in the latest types of bombing machines.

The War over, Brian Strong found himself out of a job. This, of course, he expected; but for various reasons he decided not to return to Australia, but to try his luck in South America. The old roving spirit, rigorously controlled for four years, now reasserted itself. Within ten months he had visited Brazil, Uruguay, the Argentine, Chile, Peru, and Bolivia, and was on the point of making his way to Mexico, when, quite on the spur of the moment, he decided to take up a Government post in the Republic of Rioguary. On the face of it, the appointment was that of consulting mining engineer to the Republic, and was for one year. Already Brian Strong had held the post for three years, but the nature of his duties had nothing to do with mining, but with something entirely different.

That evening, Peter and his uncle dined alone. Usually there were other members of the establishment present—Rioguaryans assisting Brian Strong in his work, and very frequently officials from the capital. On this occasion there were no guests, and Brian had dispensed with his usual table companions, since they spoke no English and Peter knew nothing of the dialect of the country.

The meal passed off quite cheerfully, the chief topic of conversation being family affairs. Uncle Brian made no further reference to his bewildering question when Peter first arrived, and his nephew did not seek enlightenment.

Judging by appearances, Brian Strong was in well-to-do circumstances. He had quite a large house with extensive grounds. There were plenty of men-servants. The establishment was run on well-ordered lines. To Peter, who had imagined his relative to be roughing it, the display of luxury took him by surprise and in a way damped his spirits. Somehow, he found himself convinced that there was something mysterious behind it all, although he could not offer any suggestion as to why it should be so.



When coffee was served and the two men lighted their cigarettes, Uncle Brian's conversation took a different turn.

"You'll have to learn the language, Peter," he began abruptly.

"Of course," agreed his nephew. "I did think of investing in a Spanish manual before I left England."

"It's as well you didn't," rejoined his uncle, with a grim smile. "You'd have a lot to unlearn if you did. A Spaniard would hardly be able to understand the Rioguyan dialect, although the bulk of the white inhabitants are of Spanish descent. Indian words, which largely make up the language, tend to render the Latin elements unintelligible. But you'll be able to pick up a decent smattering in three months. . . . I understand you gave up your commission in the navy. Why?"

"Had to—reduction of *personnel*," replied Peter laconically. "Feel as if I've been on the beach for centuries," he added feelingly.

"Keen on your work, of course?"

"Rather."

"What did you specialize in?"

"Gunnery."

"H'm," commented Uncle Brian, as if the announcement did not interest him very much.

For nearly half a minute he lay back in a lounge-chair, regarding his nephew through half-closed eyes.

"What's your opinion about the big-ship controversy?" he asked at length. "Do you think that the battleship is a back number?"

"No, I do not," replied Peter, for this was a topic that always aroused his professional enthusiasm. "It's the capital ship all the time that will count. History proved that. In the 'eighties the French thought that a horde of torpedo-boats would replace battleships. Destroyers formed the antidote. In the last war the Huns were going to wipe out the British capital ships with their submarines—a sort of attrition process. Did they? They never sunk a single dreadnought or super-dreadnought by means of a submarine attack. The nearest they did was to torpedo the *Marlborough* at Jutland, and she got home under her own steam. Then there's the aerial menace——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Uncle Brian.

“Wash out,” declared Peter. “There’s no instance of a warship being destroyed in action by aerial attack.”

“But that form of warfare has developed tremendously since the Armistice,” remarked his uncle.

“Under peace conditions,” Peter reminded him. “Take the *Agamemnon* tests. That vessel was directed by wireless. There was no crew on board. The airmen could hover over the ship and drop their bombs without hindrance. If her anti-aircraft guns had been manned the conditions would have been very different. As a matter of fact, the navy will find an effective safeguard against aerial attack——”

“Has it?” inquired Uncle Brian eagerly.

“No; but it will,” Peter hastened to assure him. “And the big-gun ship will still carry on.”

“In limited numbers,” corrected Uncle Brian. “In my opinion, this reduction of armaments is, as far as the British Empire is concerned, the greatest possible mistake. No doubt the League of Nations is an admirable theory, but it won’t—it can’t work. The only way to be at peace is to prepare for war—and to prepare for it so thoroughly that a possible enemy won’t have the ghost of a chance. Just fancy! Only a few years before the war there was an outcry against the voting of six millions a year for the increase of the British navy. Six millions a year, and the daily bill, during the war, was a little over that amount! Had we done so, the British fleet would have been maintained at the Three Power standard. Germany wouldn’t have tried to wrest the trident from Britannia’s grasp, and Kaiser Bill would still be on his throne, amusing himself with military manœuvres with his army that would be utterly useless for aggressive purposes against either France or Russia. And because we allowed the standard of naval superiority to be dangerously reduced Germany took the risk. Result, four years of desperate fighting, a million of British lives lost, and the Empire victorious yet reduced to the verge of commercial ruin.



PETER MEETS SEÑOR DIAZ

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“Mind you, Peter, I’m not a pessimist,” continued his uncle. “I’m only stating facts. The onlooker sees the most of the game. Out here I can only judge by what I hear from home—stories of unemployment, industrial strife,

class warfare, and all that. In due course we'll get over that. The British Empire isn't done yet—not by a long chalk. Do you know why I wrote and suggested that you should come out to Rioguary?"

Peter shook his head.

"You'll be very much surprised when I tell you, Peter," said Uncle Brian. "It's this."

At that moment there was a knock on the door. A servant entered and said something to his master.

"We'll have to defer explanations," remarked Brian Strong. "I've a visitor—Don Ramon Diaz. He'll interest you, I'm sure."

## CHAPTER IV

# Don Ramon Diaz

Uncle and nephew rose to receive the belated caller.

Don Ramon Diaz was a tall, swarthy individual, with rather plump features, loose lipped, and with a nose that bore a resemblance to a parrot's beak. His dark hair was long and plastered down with pomade. When he smiled, which was very frequently, the effort was "like the grin of a sea-sick monkey", as Peter afterwards described it.

He wore evening dress, with a broad crimson sash over his shoulder and the Order of the Sun of Rioguary on his breast. His tobacco-stained fingers were glittering with diamond rings.

"Here is my nephew, Peter Corbold, Señor Diaz," announced Brian.

Both men bowed—Ramon Diaz with the grace and dignity of an hidalgo of Old Spain, Peter with as much display of cordiality as he could muster.

"S'pose he's a natural product of the country," thought Peter. "Dashed if I like the cut of his jib; but since he's my uncle's friend, I must take him at his own valuation—not mine."

"So you have arrived in Rioguary, young man," exclaimed Don Ramon Diaz, speaking in tolerable English.

"Yes, I blew in quite unexpectedly this evening," replied Peter, unconsciously using a general naval term.

"Blew in, ah!" exclaimed Don Ramon. "You are an aviator then?"

"No," corrected Peter. "I was a naval officer. 'Blew in' means 'dropped in'."

"Dropped in what?" inquired Diaz.

Peter went into explanations.

The Rioguyan listened intently, and, pulling a notebook from his pocket, made a note of the term Peter had used.

"I know most of the English slang words," he declared. "For seven years I lived in London. I do not like it. What is your opinion of Rioguary?"

"I haven't seen very much of it," said Peter. "It's rather too early for me to give an opinion."

Don Ramon smiled superciliously.

"Your nephew, Mr. Strong, is more discreet than the majority of your countrymen," he remarked. "I believe he is here to assist you in your work?"

"I hope so," replied Uncle Brian. "Up to the present, we have had little time to discuss matters."

For some moments there was an awkward pause. Apparently Don Ramon wanted to ask a question, but hesitated to do so. Peter, having taken a dislike to the man—although he refrained as much as possible from showing it—was quite in the dark as to who and what Don Ramon Diaz was, and whether his uncle regarded the Rioguyan merely as an acquaintance, or a person with whom he had business relations.

"Don Ramon is the Minister for Aviation in the Republic of Rioguary," explained Uncle Brian. "I suppose you didn't know that out here there is a well-organized commercial air-service?"

"I saw a flying-boat when we were entering San Antonio harbour," replied Peter.

"It interested you, then," remarked Don Ramon.

"Naturally," agreed young Corbold.

By degrees, Diaz steered the conversation into a channel that Peter wished particularly to avoid in present circumstances, and soon the latter found himself engaged in a controversy about the respective merits of the navies of the Great Powers.

Presently Peter heard the Rioguyan refer to the "German victory at Jutland".

"I beg your pardon, Don Ramon," he said quietly, "but did you say 'German victory'?"

"Was it not so?" asked Diaz, with his irritating leer.

"Rather not," declared Peter, with some heat.

He fully expected his uncle to support him, but Uncle Brian gave no sign.

“Listen: I tell you a fairy tale,” began Diaz.

“You’ve told it already, Don Ramon.”

“A fable, I mean,” continued the Rioguyan. “A bull-dog and a fierce cat lived in a farmyard. They were very great friends. On the other side of the yard a hound-wolf—no, I mean a wolf-hound—lived in a stone kennel. The wolf-hound did not love the bull-dog and the cat. In fact, they quarrelled, but the wolf-hound was not strong enough to fight the bull-dog. One day, the cat walked in front of the wolf-dog’s kennel, and the wolf-dog pounced on him. Oh yes, the cat fought strongly, but the wolf-dog bit him hard. Then the cat called for help to his friend the bull-dog. Up came the bull-dog and placed himself between the wolf-hound and his kennel, before the wolf-hound could break away from the cat. ‘Now,’ said the bull-dog, ‘I’ve got you.’ Then the wolf-hound was frightened, because the bull-dog had got him in the open away from his kennel. But the bull-dog was in no hurry. He sat down to scratch himself. As he did that the wolf-hound slipped past the bull-dog and regained his kennel, having hurt the cat far more than he had hurt himself. Therefore the wolf-hound won. Do you see my point?”

Peter shook his head.

“You are very dense, young man,” said Don Ramon reprovingly. “For the bull-dog substitute your Admiral Jellicoe, the cat represents Beatty, and the wolf-hound von Scheer. Can you deny that the Germans won?”

“Certainly,” replied Peter. “A victory is decided by its results. Did the Hun fleet come out again before the Armistice? Only once, and then it never meant to fight. It tried to lure Beatty into a nest of submarines. Failing in that, it promptly legged it back for all it was worth. At Jutland, Don Ramon, the German fleet was beaten and totally demoralized. Its surrender and internment at Scapa prove that.”

Don Ramon threw out his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

“Mr. Strong,” he said, turning to Uncle Brian, “I cannot convince this headstrong nephew of yours. But we will make good use of him, will we not? I must now wish you good-night, gentlemen.”

Brian Strong escorted his visitor to the *patio* where his car was waiting.

“Insufferable sweep,” soliloquized Peter, when he found himself alone. “Wonder what he was driving at when he said ‘we will make good use of him’? He isn’t jonnick, that’s a dead cert. And hanged if I can fathom Uncle Brian’s attitude towards him.”

It was quite five minutes before Brian Strong rejoined his nephew. Peter fancied that his face looked drawn and haggard.

Without a word, Brian closed the big French windows and drew thick curtains over them and the door, which was rather remarkable, considering the night was hot and sultry. Then he switched on an electric fan, produced a tantalus and glasses and poured himself out a stiff peg of whisky.

“Peter, my boy,” he said at length, “do you know what I’m doing here? Mining engineering? Not a bit of it. You said you saw a flying-boat to-day. That was built from my designs in its entirety. I am the chief constructor of the Rioguyan aviation service. But I’ve got myself into a very nasty mess, Peter. That’s why I sent for you. I’m in the rottenest hole that a fellow could possibly find himself. I’m relying on your help, Peter. If you fail me——!”



## CHAPTER V

# The Menace

Peter Corbold regarded his uncle with feelings of amazement and pity. Up to the present, he had looked upon his relative as a man of means, and, although somewhat erratic in his methods, of action.

He had been under the impression that he had come out to Rioguary to get assistance from Uncle Brian. Now he found that Uncle Brian required his help. That put things on a totally different footing.

Naturally, he concluded, Uncle Brian's difficulties were not of a pecuniary nature, since he would not appeal to a nephew financially "on the rocks" for aid. Brian Strong was not that sort. The fact remained that he was, as he had confessed, in a hole and wanted to confide in his stalwart nephew.

"What's the trouble, Uncle?" he inquired. "Has anyone been threatening you out here? Are you in danger of your life?"

"I am," replied Brian Strong. "But that I consider a mere detail. It's not my life that counts, Peter; it's my work. I've made a terrible blunder—unconsciously, perhaps, but—well, I may as well commence at the beginning."

"Fire away," exclaimed Peter encouragingly.

"My story starts with my arrival in Rioguary," began Uncle Brian. "I'm lowering my voice purposely, Peter. Although no one in my employ speaks English—at least, I think so—there are other Rioguayans who do, and out here walls have longer ears than you and I are accustomed to. Well, I hadn't been more than a week in the place, when I discovered that Rioguary was a much more go-ahead republic than any I had previously seen during my wanderings in South America. There certainly seemed a jolly good opening in the mining-engineering line, and on making inquiries I found that I had to obtain a licence and register myself at the Department of the Minister of the Interior. That presented little difficulty. I gave all particulars of my career in accordance with the official requirements, paid the necessary fees, and came on to Tepecicoa.

“About a week later, I had a visit from a Don José Cordova, who introduced himself as the Minister of Transport. He was a long time beating about the bush. You’ll find, Peter, that that is a characteristic of the Rioguyans. They’ll use a hundred words to say what an Englishman would in half a dozen. He was courteous—very. He wanted me to take up an appointment under the Rioguyan Government, to design and supervise the construction of aircraft for commercial purposes. He mentioned the salary and stated that the estancia of El Toro would be provided as official quarters. Then, after a while, he asked whether I would embody the stabilizing device that I had offered to the British Air Ministry in the new type of machine.”

“The one the Air Ministry turned down?” asked Peter.

“Yes, unfortunately,” was the reply. “I tried to find out how Don José Cordova came to know about it, but he was as tight as an oyster over that. However, I considered the proposition. It was a tempting one. The British Government had had the chance of taking it up. Cordova took pains to point out to me that the Rioguyan Government would claim sole rights for the space of one year only. After that, I would be at liberty to sell the patent rights to anyone who cared to take the invention up. A week later, I accepted the appointment and signed the agreement. I took possession of El Toro, engaged my staff and a swarm of mechanics and labourers, and set to work. But it was not long before I made the discovery that I was virtually a prisoner and that my work was primarily intended as a menace to the country of my birth and to which I still belong.

“For the last two and a half years, there has been a growing anti-British feeling in Rioguy. The president, Jaime Samuda, is at the head of it, although I have been unable to find out the exact cause. Samuda is ambitious. There’s no denying he’s a strong man. The fact that there hasn’t been a revolution in Rioguy since he was elected in 1917 proves that. At any rate, he’s worked up a strong feeling against the British.”

“So Mackenzie gave me to understand,” observed Peter.

“Mackenzie!” exclaimed Uncle Brian. “Is Mackenzie back? I understood he’d cleared off for good. He was lucky enough to get out of the country. He won’t have such an easy task next time. When and where did you meet him?”

Peter explained.

“He told me he was returning to Rioguy only to square up his affairs,” he added.

“I hope he’ll be able to carry out his programme,” remarked Uncle Brian grimly. “It’s easy enough to come into the country, but a jolly hard job to get away from it, if they don’t want to let you. I can tell you this, Peter; there are a hundred chances to one against your leaving Rioguary for the next twelve months.”

“Sounds interesting,” rejoined his nephew coolly. “So interesting, that I might be tempted to try, just to see what happens. On the other hand, I rather fancy I’d like to hang on and see a bit more of this anti-British republic. After all’s said and done, what’s sentiment without action? All their anti-British feeling can’t possibly do any harm to the British Empire. It’s a case of a mouse trying conclusions with a lion. Well, what is the reason for this attitude?”

“I can’t say. As you know, the Rioguyans sent a contingent to the Western Front in 1917.”

“Yes, and the Boche made a point of capturing every section of trenches they held,” added his nephew. “They couldn’t put up a fight; they simply bolted, leaving either the French or the British to straighten out the line.”

“That, I believe, is a fact,” agreed Uncle Brian. “But, having taken part in the Great War as an ally, Rioguary wanted a share in the profits, so to speak. All she got was a couple of U-boats for breaking up, four destroyers, and a small light cruiser. She wanted far more, didn’t get it, but got disgruntled instead. That may be the cause of the present agitation, but I’m not sure. What’s more important is that the agitation has developed into a serious menace.”

“How?”

“Consider the natural position of Rioguary. She has access to the sea, but a hostile fleet couldn’t operate against her without violating the territorial waters of the Republics of San Valodar and San Benito. If any attempt were made to do so, those Republics would appeal to the United States for protection under the Monroe Doctrine. You know what that means. Rioguary has three or four modern battleships, and plenty of trained seamen under Russian and German naval officers. She has an understanding with two other South American republics that in the event of hostilities, she may take over their modern fleets *en bloc*. At San Antonio, at the present moment, there are building twenty or thirty light commerce-destroyers, under the guise of merchantmen.”

“Saw ’em,” corroborated Peter. “Thought they looked a bit fine in the hull design for merchant hookers. Well, fire away, Uncle.”

“Undoubtedly Rioguary’s waiting her time to have a slap at England,” continued Uncle Brian. “What with the drastic reduction of the British navy and the ever-present difficulty over the Near Eastern question and, perhaps, trouble in India and Egypt, it looks as if that opportunity were imminent. Apparently, Rioguary’s plan is to harry British commerce in the South Atlantic, use her fleet to tackle any flying squadron of British light cruisers, and to occupy certain of the West Indian Islands and Guiana. If the British navy put in an appearance in considerable force, they would certainly drive the Rioguyan fleet off the sea, but could they do anything against Rioguary itself? Then there is the Rioguyan air fleet to be taken into consideration. That’s where you and I come in, Peter.”

“By Jove! I’d like to have the chance,” exclaimed Peter. “But if we are virtually prisoners, what can we do in the matter? Supposing you struck—refused point-blank to do another stroke, could the Rioguyans carry on building aircraft?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” admitted Brian Strong. “As matters stand, they have a numerous fleet of fast flying-boats, capable of operating in a radius of two thousand miles. They can rise almost vertically in a twenty miles an hour breeze and hover without the aid of helicopters—never did think much of helicopters, Peter; that’s power wrongly applied and consequently wasteful. With four engines, each of 850 horse-power, they are unsurpassed for speed by any other aircraft in existence. Their all-steel planes and armour-plated hull are practically invulnerable to shrapnel, and only a direct hit could put them out of action. And their means of offence is highly formidable: liquid-air torpedoes. They aren’t my invention, thank heaven. Now, you ask, what can we do? I’ll tell you. Do you remember that almost my first question to you on your arrival was, ‘can you fly?’ or words to that effect.”

“And you also said, ‘That’s a pity, because I wanted to bring you down’,” said Peter.

“You thought it a strange thing for me to say?”

“I thought it was a joke on your part, Uncle.”

“It wasn’t,” declared Brian Strong. “I was in sober earnest. Having perfected the Rioguyan air fleet, I now want to undo the results of my handiwork. And I think I’ve solved the problem. I have constructed a secret

anti-aircraft device. The Rioguyan mechanics think it is a searchlight apparatus, and I let them go on thinking. Now, I want to put it to a practical test. Since I can't fly and be on the ground at the same time, I had to look out for an assistant. Obviously, a Rioguyan pilot wouldn't do. To-morrow I'll show you the device, but what I want you to do is to learn to fly. It's simple and quite safe with my design. You'll pick it up in a couple of weeks. Then I want you to go up. I'll manipulate the ground apparatus and see if I can compel you to make a forced landing. There'll be little or no risk, as far as you are concerned. Are you game?"

## CHAPTER VI

# The Super Flying-boat

Peter Corbold was usually a sound sleeper with an easy conscience, but his first night ashore in Rioguary was a restless one. He had had a tiring day, followed by the disturbing influence of finding himself in utterly strange surroundings; while as a climax came Uncle Brian's lengthy and amazing disclosures.

His bedroom was in the east wing of the building—a spacious apartment, with stone walls and floor, the latter covered with native rush-mats. In one corner was a porcelain bath with shower attachment, in another a wardrobe, with the legs standing in shallow bowls filled with kerosene—a necessary precaution against the destructive insects of that region. The bed was of the folding cot variety, its legs also standing in oil-filled saucers, while in addition, it was fitted with a double mosquito curtain. The two windows were jalousied, while on the outside were iron bars that gave the spacious room a prison-like aspect.

There were electric bells, hot- and cold-water taps, and a ventilating fan, indicating that El Toro was not behind the times as far as the interior fittings went.

Peter lost no time in undressing and turning in. Having made sure that no rest-destroying mosquito lurked within the gauzy network, he switched out the light and closed his eyes.

But sleep he could not. He reviewed the conversation with his uncle. Several things required explanation. What prevented Uncle Brian, even if he remained in Rioguary, from communicating his discoveries to the British Government? Why hadn't the Foreign Office got to know of this seemingly obscure republic's preparations and the creation of a formidable navy and a still more formidable air-fleet? Then, again, what was Ramon Diaz's object in trying to ram down Peter's throat his version of Jutland? These and a score of other questions had for the present to remain unanswered.

Nor could he account for President Jaime Samuda's temerity in contemplating a trial of strength with the British Empire, unless the

Riaguayans, taking the case of Ireland as a guide, had utterly underrated the mental and physical fibre of the British nation.

The dawn of another day found Peter opened-eyed and restless on his bed.

With the first blast of the syren summoning the employees of the El Toro works to their labours, Peter rose, completed his toilet, and strolled out of the house.

Somewhat to his surprise, he encountered his uncle looking brisk and spruce, as if the strain of the previous evening's conversation had had no effect upon him.

"Hello, Peter!" he exclaimed. "No need for you to turn out so early on your first morning here. Slept well?"

His nephew had to admit that he had not.

"You can make up for that during the heat of the day," rejoined Uncle Brian. "Here, we work from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m., knock off till four in the afternoon, and then carry on till six. It's a short working day compared with that at home, but I find that it's useless to expect to keep these fellows at high pressure for more than six hours a day. That they've jolly well got to do, or the Government would have something to say. Well, now you're up and about, we may as well make a tour of the works."

They made a tour of the rolling shop, the pressing shop, the foundry, and other departments. Although in every case the plant was up-to-date, there was nothing to cause Peter to show any surprise. He had seen similar machines at Dartmouth Engineering College and at the various Royal dockyards.

Presently they arrived at a large galvanized-iron building, enclosed by a massive wall of earth.

"This is part of the oil-fuel distillery," announced Uncle Brian. "Here we have stored about 50,000 gallons of kerosene, conveyed by pipe-line from the wells at Tajeco, about fifty miles from here. From this tank it passes into an apparatus in yonder building to have the flash-point raised to something like 200° F."

"Then what good is it?" asked Peter.

"Better than before for aeroplane engine work," replied his uncle. "All our motors are kerosene fired. We don't use petrol. And kerosene with a high flash-point is practically non-inflammable."

“And consequently non-explosive,” added Peter.

“Precisely. That’s where safety comes in. Roughly, eighty per cent of fatal accidents to flying men at one time were attributable to fire. This kerosene we are using is an explosive only when under high pressure. In the petrol tank it’s safe; even in the carburetter it is non-explosive; but directly it enters the cylinders and is affected by the compression-stroke it is not only more volatile, but far more powerful than the best aviation spirit.”

“But I take it that the fuel in the ’bus is under pressure,” remarked Peter, who was beginning to take a lively interest. “It must be, in order to maintain an even feed to the motor.”

“You’re wrong there,” replied his relative. “I’ll explain that when I show you a flying-boat ready for service.”

An inspection of the assembling sheds where aircraft were in various states of completion followed, Uncle Brian pointing out various “gadgets” embodied in the design to render the machine practically “fool-proof”.

“Now, here’s a flying-boat in an advanced stage,” he said. “All that is required to complete her is painting and varnishing. That’s done in another building. What do you think of this little fellow?”

The “little fellow” was actually one hundred and twenty feet in length, with a wing-span of a little over sixty feet. With the exception of the patent glass scuttles and screens it was constructed entirely of metal.

“There you are,” continued the inventor. “A child could fly it once it has ‘taken off’. The planes, you see, are on a horizontal axis, and automatically arranged so that should the diving angle become too acute they will adjust themselves and bring the ’bus into a position of safety. The horizontal rudders, too, can either be controlled by hand or set to act automatically. Thus a pilot can set a course and the machine will just carry on, even to the extent of allowing for ‘drift’ and unequal wind pressure. Get aboard, Peter; I want to show you the motors.”

His nephew swung himself up by the open entry-port and found himself in the “cargo hold”, or what would be in war-time the bombing compartment. From here a door through an armoured bulkhead led to the pilot’s “office” immediately above the for’ard pair of engines.

“Now, Peter, here they are,” announced Brian Strong. “See anything remarkable about these contraptions?”

“Sleeveless valves,” replied Peter.



“Good. Anything else?”

“Why, if that’s the full tank, it’s right over the engine,” exclaimed Peter. “And quite a small one at that.”

“If you’ll look, you’ll find that there are three tanks to each engine,” said his uncle, “and one larger one between each pair of motors. They are gravity tanks fitted with automatic valves, so that whatever position the boat assumes there’s always one tank supplying fuel to each motor. Now you see the system of not having the kerosene under pressure until it enters the cylinders. Carburetter—usual type; ignition—magneto.”

Brian Strong took hold of his nephew’s arm, and in a lower voice continued:

“That’s the heel of Achilles, my boy—the magneto. I’ve a little gadget I’m perfecting that will knock all existing anti-aircraft devices silly. It will make these flying-boats as harmless as a non-bacteric fly—as a bee without its sting. There’ll be no aerial menace, Peter. The blighters who declare that the big battleship is a back number will be utterly confounded. And as for Rioguary——!”

He broke off to give a cheerful chuckle.

“Let’s get back and have breakfast,” he said.

## CHAPTER VII

### Peter's First Ascent

"There is no knowing what tricks these Rioguyans will be up to," observed Uncle Brian, as they gained the open expanse between the workshops and the house. "For instance, I should not be at all surprised if I knew there was a secret dictaphone concealed in each of my private rooms. They are undoubtedly bluffing me—or at least they think they are—and I'm bluffing them in return. So I just carry on, do the work I contracted to do in a thorough and conscientious manner. What I do beyond that is my affair."

"I was thinking, Uncle——"

"Thinking what?"

"Can't you send in a report about what is going on here to the British Government?"

"How?"

"By letter, or cablegram in code?"

"Not an atom of use, Peter. That letter I wrote asking you to join me here was opened by the Rioguyan Government officials. Every scrap of paper that leaves here through the post is carefully examined. They wouldn't accept a code message. It would only serve to increase their suspicions, and that I want to avoid as much as possible. You and I, Peter, are marked men. If, for instance, you went into Tepecicoa, you'd be shadowed from the moment you left till the time you returned."

"You said I was to take up flying," persisted his nephew. "What's to prevent me taking you up and making a dash for the West Indies or the Southern States?"

"In the first place," objected Uncle Brian, "you won't be allowed up alone. There will be always six or eight of the crew. They won't prevent us from carrying out our proposed experiments, but they'd very soon stick a knife between your ribs if you attempted to fly across the frontier. In the second place, if you attempted to start at night without a crew there's always

a strong guard posted over the hangars. No doubt we'll find a way out when the time comes, but until then keep your eyes open and don't look too wise!"

"There's another point, Uncle."

"And that is——?"

"That greaser Ramon Diaz: what was his object in trying to prove that Jutland was a Hun victory?"

"I think simply because he wanted to see how you'd take it. Out here they think it is a great stunt to be able to rile an Englishman. According to their ideas Great Britain is fast crumbling. They'll never make a bigger mistake. Perhaps some of the newspapers are responsible for that. The Rioguayans cannot understand our form of government. To them it is an absurdity to appoint a Prime Minister and then begin to howl him down. Out here there is no Opposition, or if there is, it does not advertise. People in Rioguary who ostentatiously differ from the President and the Senate are forcibly and finally removed."

"Well, Uncle, I thought Diaz was a pal of yours, and naturally I didn't want to start scrapping with him in your house, but I should have liked to give him a straight left."

"It's as well you didn't," remarked Brian Strong drily, "although I quite sympathize with you in your desire to alter the features of Ramon's figurehead. Keeping your temper under control puzzles these Rioguayans far more than if you had hit out. You'll have plenty of provocation, Peter, especially later on when they think I've guessed the secret of the flying-boat's true colours. Our policy just at present is to carry on, eat humble-pie if needs be, and to prepare a line of retreat as soon as my anti-aircraft device is tested and perfected."

Breakfast over, Brian suggested to his nephew that he should take a stroll round the flying ground until *siesta*.

"I'll have to be fairly busy," he added. "But this evening we'll have a 'private view' of this little invention of mine."

Accordingly, Peter made his way to the "taking-off ground", which consisted of a sloping floor of wood, bordered on one side by a belt of sand and on the other by a track of earth covered with coarse grass—the three differently constructed in order to give the pilots experience in rising from various kinds of ground. At the end of the expansive slipway was a lake nearly a mile in length, artificially constructed in order to give the flying-

boats practice in taking off from and alighting on water before being dispatched to their tidal river base at San Antonio.

There were at least half a dozen craft undergoing flying tests, or else being employed as instruction machines for budding aviators. The pilots were young men, alert and keen on their work. Peter had to admit that. There was little or nothing of the supposed South American languor about *them*.

Peter Corbold's arrival on the flying ground had attracted a certain amount of attention, the airmen looking at him curiously and passing remarks that, owing to his ignorance of the language, left him quite "at sea". Every Rioguyan on the works and on the estate of El Toro seemed to know who he was.

For some while he stood watching the huge amphibians "take off". This they did after only a very short run down the inclined plane, rising steeply in the air with very little effort. The training at El Toro was confined to rising and alighting both on land and water, and being able to fly a straight course. Fancy flights and stunts were left severely alone until the flying-boats left for their war-base.

Presently, one of the pilots standing by came up and made signs to Peter that he might go as a passenger. Although he had come out without any intention of "going up", Peter accepted the offer with alacrity.

"The blighter would think I had cold feet if I refused," he soliloquized, as he followed the pilot into the interior of the flying-boat, where he found five other Rioguyans already there—lads undergoing instruction. The two mechanics—one for each pair of motors—were not visible, their "stations" being in the alley-way between the engines and below the space ostensibly to be used for the storage of merchandise.

It was Peter's first time of "going up", and he had to confess that he did not find the experience very exhilarating. The enclosed fuselage practically eliminated all sensation of speed, and once the initial movement was over—somewhat like the starting of a lift—there was little beyond the noise of the motors to convey the suggestion of speed.

Going to one of the side scuttles, Peter looked earthwards. By this time the flying-boat had attained an altitude of between 2500 and 3000 feet. At that height the land looked flat and uninteresting as it apparently moved slowly below the ninety miles an hour aircraft. It was only by observing the shadow of the flying-boat upon the sun-dried plain that Peter could realize

that he was being carried through the air at a rate that he had never previously attained.

Looking through the glass door between the main saloon and the pilot's office, Peter saw that the man had abandoned the joy-stick and was leaning back in his seat and rolling a cigarette.

"He's bored stiff," was the young Englishman's unspoken remark.

The pilots under instruction had also lost interest, but owing to a very different reason. It was their first flight, and already every one of them was in the throes of air-sickness.

It was evidently the intention of their instructor to prolong their agony, for the flying-boat was still climbing steadily and heading for the Sierra Colima, a range of jagged mountains forming the north-eastern frontier of the republic.

Here, there is to be found a perpetual turmoil of air currents, the torrid atmosphere of the plains rising on either side of the mountains and engaging in conflict with the cold blasts of air in the higher regions. Not only were there fierce, eddying winds to be met with, but highly dangerous air-pockets—veritable pitfalls taxing to the uttermost the resources of the pilot.

For a good twenty minutes the flying-boat tore madly over the tops of the jagged peaks. Lurching, side-slipping, flung almost vertically through a distance of two hundred feet, twisted like a withered leaf in an autumn gale, the machine provided a series of thrills to the now far from bored Peter. Gripping a metal rod, he divided his attention between the view below, the cool daring of the pilot, and his own efforts to prevent himself being hurled violently against the sides of the fuselage.

"That chap is some airman, although he's a Dago," declared Peter. "Those other fellows look like having a very rough time of it."

They were. The five were lying utterly helpless upon the floor, sliding in a confused mass every time the machine gave a violent lurch.

Greatly to his surprise, Peter felt no sign of air-sickness. Why he was immune he knew not. It was possibly owing to the fact that he was a sailor, but he remembered instances of his late brother officers going up for joy-rides and quickly falling victims to air-sickness.

"If I could manage this 'bus," he soliloquized, "and I wanted to clear out of the country, who's there to prevent me? Deal effectively with the pilot

and the trick's done. But there's no hurry; there'll be plenty of excitement down there before the time comes to do a bunk with Uncle Brian."

Half an hour later, the flying-boat swooped down towards the landing ground. This was a far more exciting bit of work than the comparatively tame ascent.

The ground appeared to leap upwards to meet the descending machine. Peter held his breath, fully expecting a terrific bump. The thought flashed through his mind that perhaps the pilot had lost control.

Peter watched the custodian of his fate. The pilot was sitting well back in his seat, his right hand grasping the lever controlling the planes. With a slow deliberate movement, he pulled the lever towards him. The flying-boat's speed was instantly checked. Her fore-and-aft axis came to a horizontal position. Then the bows appeared to rise ever so slightly, while at the same moment the four propellers ceased revolving.

There was a bump, but it was far less violent than Peter had expected. Another and yet another of less magnitude and the flying-boat was at rest once more on *terra firma*.

The pilot scrambled out, followed by the two mechanics. Peter dropped lightly to earth, with a sensation of elation at having successfully passed through the ordeal of his first flight.

He was half-way to the house when he glanced back to see the first of the five miserable looking "quirks" crawling painfully out of the fuselage.

"So you've been up," observed Uncle Brian. "How did you like it?"

"Not so dusty," replied Peter. "Those poor blighters under instruction didn't seem to revel in it, though."

"They wouldn't," rejoined Uncle Brian. "That flying-boat is of an old type, and is used only for instructional purposes. She's known to the instructors here as *El Boyeta*—the Emetic. So you weren't ill? Capital; you'll make a good airman, I can see."

"And the sooner the better," added his nephew.

## CHAPTER VIII

### Uncle Brian's Secret

Brian Strong did not carry out his promise to show Peter his anti-aircraft invention that evening. Nor did he for several days. Circumstances prevented it. There was a steady stream of callers—Rioguayan officials to discuss matters concerning the development of the Mercantile Air Service. They were delightfully polite, because they had not the slightest suspicion that Brian Strong knew they were trying to bluff him, and the Englishman was equally cautious to convey the impression that he was working merely for the industrial good of the republic.

All things considered, Peter was enjoying himself. He entered wholeheartedly into his part of the contract: to aid his relative to the utmost to circumvent the Rioguayan authorities in the scheme to twist the British lion's tail. In his spare time he devoted himself to learning the language of the country, his instructor being a Rioguayan employee who had lived in New York for nearly twenty years. Much of his time was spent in the engineering shops, while opportunities were given him to take practical instruction in managing the controls of a planeless flying-boat, in which all would-be pilots had to qualify before entering into the actual conditions of flight.

Thus a week went by and still the building that held Uncle Brian's secret device remained a sealed book to him. In fact, Brian Strong was so busy with work that demanded the almost constant presence of Don Ramon Diaz and his colleagues, that he himself had to steer clear of the experimental room.

"And how progresses the new type of searchlight, Señor Strong?" inquired Don Ramon. "I should like to see what you are doing in that direction."

"It is not progressing to the extent I should like," was the reply. "In fact, there are one or two important details that have completely baffled me. Of course, if you would like to see how far I've got with the design——"

“No, no,” said Don Ramon. “It is not really necessary. When you have overcome the difficulties, then it will be a different matter.”

“Quite so,” agreed Uncle Brian with well-feigned disinterestedness. “After all, there’s nothing much to be seen. If and when the apparatus is perfected—when I’ve tested it thoroughly and am satisfied that it fulfils all that is required of it—then, no doubt, you will be willing to negotiate for the exclusive rights say for one year.”

This conversation had the desired result. It put Don Ramon off the scent. He was not keenly interested in an improved searchlight. Those the republic already possessed were of a particularly powerful type and sufficient for defence purposes. He begrudged the time the Englishman spent in the work, but, he reasoned, a refusal on the part of the Rioguyan authorities to allow Brian Strong to experiment in that line might probably result in the foreigner “cutting up rough” and refusing to proceed with his aerial work. That, for the present, would never do. Until the El Toro works could be run independently—without the aid and supervision of Brian Strong—it was policy to humour the unsuspecting Englishman.

One evening at dinner, Uncle Brian suddenly inquired of his nephew:

“Are you under any obligation to the Admiralty, Peter? Have they any call upon you?”

“I signed a paper stating my willingness to serve in the event of hostilities,” replied Peter. “I fancy we all did—those who were pushed out under the so-called economy stunt.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Uncle Brian. “It seems to me that signing the document is unnecessary. If it came to a scrap, or even the suggestion of a scrap, you young fellows would clamour to be in it—and the older men too. I remember after the Boer War there were hundreds of men ‘fed up’ with their treatment at the hands of the War Office. They had good cause for complaint, too. ‘Wait till the next war,’ they said, ‘and we’ll take precious good care to be out of it.’ But did they? The majority were amongst the first to volunteer. That’s the Briton all over. He’ll grouse, but if danger threatens from without, he’ll be there! And the greater the danger the greater the enthusiasm to meet it. . . . Peter, my boy, you’ll be more useful to your country out here than at home—or even in the navy. Come along; let’s take a stroll as far as my experimental shed.”

Nothing loth, Peter fell in with the suggestion. He was curious to know the secret that the experimental shed held. His uncle had hinted at something



very mysterious, but beyond that he was dumb.

It was moonlight. Away down the valley came sounds of revelry from the employees' quarters—men singing to the accompaniment of guitars. The works and aviation sheds appeared deserted, but Peter knew by this time that each place was strictly guarded. And during the walk he fancied he heard movements behind the cacti that bordered the road.

Brian Strong's private experimental shed stood well apart from the rest of the works. It was by no means a large or a pretentious building, measuring forty feet by twenty and constructed of corrugated iron.

Although Uncle Brian was perfectly aware that the Rioguan authorities could inspect the building at any time, his careless assurances, coupled with the warning that any interference might destroy the fruit of months of research, had resulted in a state of immunity. He was allowed to carry on undisturbed.

But on the other hand, he guarded himself against a possible visit from his State employers. There were drawings in the office, but they referred to commonplace machinery and appliances. Of his invention, his *magnum opus*, no plans were in existence, save those that lived in his brain. He took extreme caution lest the future enemies of his country should score on that point.

Producing a bunch of keys, Uncle Brian unlocked the comparatively frail door and switched on a light.

Peter was about to cross the threshold when his uncle stopped him.

"Half a minute," exclaimed Uncle Brian. "Wait till I've put little Timothy to bed."

His nephew looked in astonishment. Right in the middle of the concrete floor was a coiled-up snake. Hearing footsteps, the reptile raised its head, revealing a pair of deep-set eyes that glittered in the artificial light.

Without hesitation, Uncle Brian grasped the snake at a point about four inches behind the head. The reptile immediately coiled itself round his arm.

"Timothy is quite harmless," explained Uncle Brian. "I got him from an old Indian up-country. I need hardly say the poison sac has been removed. He makes an excellent guard."

"So I should imagine," remarked Peter. "Dashed if I could handle the brute, poisonous or otherwise."

The snake was placed in a box. Uncle Brian poured out some milk from a bottle, placed the saucer beside the reptile, and closed the lid.

“Now we can get to work,” he said briskly.

Peter glanced around him. There was little or nothing to suggest anything mysterious about the place. On one side of the building was a long bench, absolutely littered with tools, scraps of metal, old bottles, and other débris, together with a lathe and an engineer’s vice. Underneath the bench was a similar assortment of rubbish.

“Bit of a lash up, eh?” commented Uncle Brian. “’Fraid I am a bit untidy, but I can generally clear a space when I want to get to work. Bear a hand and shift some of this stuff.”

He pointed to a confused heap at one end of the bench. When the pile of stuff was removed there stood revealed a small contraption that looked as if it were a box camera with an acetylene motor-lamp attached.

“There’s my patent searchlight,” he announced, with boyish enthusiasm. “Don Ramon Diaz and all his precious pals can fool about with that to their hearts’ content. They won’t be a penny the wiser. Look at it. See if you can make anything of it.”

Peter did as he was requested.

“Can’t make head or tail of it, Uncle,” he confessed frankly.

Uncle Brian proceeded to connect up a couple of terminals with a wall switch.

“Now then,” he resumed, “out with the light.”

The next instant the place was in total darkness, the painted glass windows effectually shutting out the brilliant moonlight.

There was a slight *click*. Peter, looking in the direction where he imagined the apparatus was, could discern nothing, but on the opposite wall was a small circular patch of greenish-hued light.

“Seen anything like that before?” inquired his Uncle.

“Rather,” replied Peter. “Anti-aircraft searchlights during the war. Couldn’t see the beam in its passage through air; when it hit a solid substance it lit it up.”

“This is somewhat similar, but very different,” said Uncle Brian. “Sounds a rummy thing to say, but there you are. I’ll demonstrate. On with

the light, Peter.”

Again the room was flooded with electric light. Uncle Brian pointed to a four-cylindereed motor standing in one corner.

“Get to work on that,” he continued. “Turn the engine over as fast as you can and see that the plugs are firing. They are already loose in the cylinders. You may as well remove the magneto dust-cap while you are about it.”

Peter did as requested, placing the plugs on the tops of the cylinders, so that he could observe the sparks jumping the gaps between the points and the central rods. There was no mistaking the efficient state of that magneto. It was giving a miniature Brocks’ firework display.

“Now!” exclaimed Uncle Brian.

His nephew continued to turn the geared starting-handle for another dozen revolutions.

Then he stood up and wiped the perspiration from his face.

“By jove!” he almost shouted. “It’s it—absolutely *it!*”

## CHAPTER IX

# The Proving of the Rays

"I hope so," rejoined Uncle Brian. "Of course, the distance is a mere nothing, but there is no reason why the gadget shouldn't work up to say 20,000 yards."

"It's scuppered that magneto, any old way," declared Peter. "However did you manage it by a ray of light?"

"I didn't," his uncle hastened to explain. "It's not light; it's electro-magnetism. I argued upon these lines. It's possible to send a wireless message through thousands of miles. Cannot a charge of electricity of infinitely greater strength be released through a relatively shorter distance and at the same time be confined to a definite path instead of radiating? For example: suppose Nauen wishes to communicate with, say, Moscow. Provided the receiving instrument is properly attuned, Barcelona, Clifden, and possibly New York can pick up the message. It's similar to throwing a stone in the middle of a circular pool. The ripples will eventually reach the side practically simultaneously at every point. Now, my idea was to concentrate high potential electric current and confine it to a straight and narrow path with the object of polarizing any magneto in its way."

"And you've done it," declared Peter. "An aircraft wouldn't stand an earthly—I mean an aerial chance. It's bound to come down."

"That's what I'm aiming for," said Uncle Brian. "If this apparatus can be perfected and conveyed to England, then the greatest weapon Riogauy possesses—one that I have forged, although at the time ignorant of the fact—will be broken. Not only that; the aerial menace with which the anti-battleship experts support their theories—poison gas and incendiary bombs raining from the blue sky—will be simply eliminated. Wars of the future—and I am convinced that while the world exists wars are simply bound to take place—will be conducted on more or less straight lines, without involving a holocaust of the helpless non-combatant inhabitants of the belligerent countries. Tanks, armoured cars, and in fact all modern inventions for war relying upon the magneto—the heart of the petrol engine

—will be rendered useless, and fighting will once more resume its former status—a contest of manpower.”

“Then you don’t believe in the theory that war will be so terrible, so scientifically brutal, that nations will be afraid to wage battle?”

“No, I don’t,” replied Uncle Brian. “It will only be an additional inducement for small nations to defy their greater neighbours. The primal instinct can never be destroyed, but the means of waging war ought to be controlled. According to the prophets, wars of the future will resemble a prize fight with poisoned rings hidden in the pugilists’ gloves.”

“Supposing, as is quite possible,” objected Peter, “this invention of yours is perfected? What if there’s an antidote—what then?”

Uncle Brian shrugged his shoulders—a habit he had acquired from his Rioguyan neighbours.

“That’s what I am dreading,” he replied. “Meanwhile, I’m going ahead with this gadget. Now you see why I’m keen on your flying. Obviously, I couldn’t experiment upon a machine in charge of a Rioguyan pilot. He’d smell a rat. But I can try it in a flying-boat piloted by you, even if there is a crew on board. There would be no danger, since I can control the rays before you are obliged to make a forced landing. I’ll see Jaurez in the morning and ask him when you will be sufficiently trained to take charge. We’ll give you a week’s practice from then and by that time I’ll be ready for the big test. Are you game?”

“Rather!” replied Peter.

They spent another hour overhauling the apparatus, Uncle Brian carefully explaining the nature and use of the various component parts until his nephew had a clear and comprehensive insight into the mysteries of the new anti-aircraft device.

Then little Timothy was released from his box to resume his duties of guardian of the experimental room, and Brian Strong and his nephew, having locked the door, returned to the house.

Peter had another restless night. He was not altogether satisfied that Uncle Brian’s secret would be all that it claimed to be. Unconsciously, he placed himself in the position of Uncle Brian’s rival and thought out schemes to counteract the blighting influence of the mysterious rays. Must an aeroplane engine always be fired electrically? he asked himself. Is a magneto or a battery and trembler-coil a *sine qua non* for the work? It was quite within the bounds of possibility that a dynamo-driven engine might be

produced, receiving its current by means of a wireless current. Or there was the hot-bulb engine—far too heavy in its present form for aerial work, but was it too much to expect that in the near future it could be reduced in weight and bulk without any sacrifice of horse-power?

“I hope Uncle Brian isn’t putting all his eggs into one basket,” he soliloquized. “By Jove! I’ll try a little experiment on my own account. It will be rough luck on Uncle Brian if it comes off; but better now than later.”

And with the new-born plan maturing in his active mind, Peter lay awake until pink hues in the eastern sky heralded the dawn of yet another strenuous day.

According to his resolve, Brian Strong tackled Jaurez, the chief aviator instructor, on the subject of his nephew’s progress.

“He is a born bird-man, señor,” replied Jaurez, with an admiration that even his secret contempt for Englishmen failed to suppress. “Reckless, *nombre de Dios!* yes; but he can keep his head. In three days, perhaps, then he will be sufficiently expert to go up in control.”

“That is good news,” said Brian Strong.

Suddenly the instructor’s mood changed.

“For why, Señor Strong, does your nephew wish to fly?” he demanded. “Surely Rioguary can produce sufficient pilots without having to make use of Englishmen?”

“I won’t dispute that, Señor Jaurez,” rejoined Peter’s uncle. “But it so happens that there are certain modifications in the design which I wish to test. My knowledge of the Rioguaryan tongue is fair, as you know, but there are several technical terms of which I am ignorant. You can readily see that there would be difficulties innumerable if I had to discuss the improvements with a Rioguaryan pilot.”

Señor Jaurez grinned amicably. Previous experience had taught him that Brian Strong’s assertion was a correct one. In the earlier stages of the El Toro experimental and constructive works the language difficulty had been a serious obstacle. He was a disciple of the doctrine “follow the line of least resistance”.

Eight days later, Peter went up for the first time as sole pilot of that notorious flying-boat *El Boyeta*, but on this occasion he was accompanied by three Rioguaryan airmen who were sufficiently “salted” to be immune from that distressing malady, air-sickness.

Uncle Brian was nowhere to be seen. He had retired to his private experimental shed, having previously given Peter certain instructions.

According to the usual custom, Peter went on board to test the controls. He was rather a long time—not that the testing was a lengthy affair.

As soon as he gained the for'ard motor-room, he proceeded to enclose the magneto of each of the two for'ard motors with sheets of pure Para rubber, making a tight joint to each of the high tension and “earth” wires.

The mechanic watched him curiously, but, having been given to understand that certain experiments were to be carried out, he took the unusual procedure with equanimity.

“Now,” thought Peter, “won’t Uncle be surprised if he succeeds in only cutting out the after-engines. We’ll see if his secret ray will penetrate this insulated screen. I don’t fancy it will.”

He made his way back to the pilot’s seat and gave the recognized signal that everything was O.K. The rest of the crew swung themselves into the observation saloon, while the ground attendants removed the chocks from the massive, tired landing-wheels.

Peter depressed the switch controlling the four electric starters. Instantly the propellers revolved and the flying-boat quivered as if eager to soar into her natural element.

A very short run—barely thirty yards—was enough for the machine to acquire momentum sufficient to part company with Mother Earth. With the planes tilted to their maximum angle, the flying-boat almost leapt upwards.

The British pilot let her climb steadily, until the altimeter registered 1800 metres. Then he flew steadily eastwards until the flying-boat was immediately over the spacious lake of Sta Estralloda. If the electric current were cut off and a hitch occurred whereby Peter would be unable to restart the motors, the flying-boat could descend and take the surface with little risk. A forced landing on unsuitable and unyielding land might end disastrously.

With frequent glances at the clock on the dashboard, Peter kept the flying-boat soaring above the sheet of water. Although he did not turn his head, he knew that curious eyes were watching him through the window between the saloon and his “office”. Ostensibly, the experiments were to prove the efficacy of a loud-speaking wireless telephone that claimed to be proof against atmospherics and “cutting in”. It was sheer bluff on Brian

Strong's part, but it sufficed to allay suspicion as to the real nature of the test.

The hands of the clock simply crawled round until they indicated 10.15—the pre-arranged time for the liberation of the secret ray.

Nothing happened! The motors continued to purr with their usual rhythm. It made no difference that the magnetos of the for'ard pair were insulated and those of the after engines were not.

On the face of things, Uncle Brian's experiment was a failure.

Another minute elapsed. Peter continued to keep the flying-boat circling, at the same time descending to 1500 metres.

Suddenly the whole fabric trembled violently. The engines ceased firing, the propellers turning on a free axis under wind pressure only. Then, in less than five seconds, the motors "picked up" again and resumed their normal revolutions.

Glancing downwards, Peter could see the mechanic had been aroused from his usual state of lethargy; for, in ordinary circumstances, he had little or nothing to do while the machine was in actual flight. Whether the engineer in charge of the after motors had been similarly startled Peter had no immediate means of finding out.

But what puzzled the pilot was the brief duration of the "short". Uncle Brian had arranged for a sixty-seconds liberation of the polarizing rays. Without the shadow of a doubt, the momentary cutting out of the "juice" was owing to Uncle Brian's "gadget". Had one motor only faltered, Peter might have attributed that to known engine trouble; since all four were affected simultaneously, the phenomenon could only be put down to the mysterious rays.

Peter Corbold was a fellow who always liked to get down to rock bottom, when dealing with a knotty proposition. He was still puzzling over the affair and trying to find a possible solution, when once again the motors ceased functioning.

This time, the "cutting out" was definitely prolonged. Peter prepared for a volplane, elevating the wings to their maximum resistance in order to check the downward glide, the while circling to keep the flying-boat immediately over the expanse of lake.

For all practicable purposes the machine was now a motorless glider without the power, owing to her weight and the limited area of the planes, to



rise to a favourable air current. The best she could do was to fly horizontally for a few seconds and then glide earthwards. Sooner or later, unless the engines regained their power, the machine must come to rest on the surface of the water.

The Rioguyan crew were now in a state bordering on panic. It was fortunate that Peter had taken the precaution to bolt the door between him and them, or his office would have been invaded, with disastrous results.

Foiled in that direction, the Rioguyans could only stare helplessly, until the sight of the hare-brained Englishman coolly manipulating the planes and rudders helped to restore them to a state of passivity.

All this occurred in the space of forty-five seconds. Peter was beginning to doubt whether he could keep up for the remainder of the stipulated minute when at a height of one hundred metres the motors fired again.

“Well, that’s proved the device, any old way,” decided Peter, as he began to ascend again. “My insulation stunt is a dud, but I’m jolly glad it is.”

Another twenty minutes elapsed before the flying-boat landed at El Toro, for Peter was in no hurry, as he wished to restore confidence in his somewhat tremulous fellow-airmen.

Uncle Brian was there to greet him.

“It’s no good, Uncle,” Peter lied loudly. “The telephone was an absolute wash-out. I even switched off to try and pick up what you were saying.”

If there were any Rioguyans amongst those present who understood English, Peter’s mendacious assertion would serve to offer a solution to the failure of the flying-boat’s ignition system. In fact, Brian Strong hastened to translate the gist of his nephew’s explanation. At the same time, Uncle Brian knew that his secret device had been proved and had passed the test. Peter’s declaration that he “switched off” was sufficient for that. Mutual and authentic exchanges of their observations would come at the next convenient opportunity.

For the present, all was well.

## CHAPTER X

# Plans for Escape

“Well?” inquired Uncle Brian laconically, when, the trial of the rays duly carried out, he and Peter were free to discuss the situation in all its bearings.

The two men were seated in the billiard room of El Toro. It was the time for siesta, but on this occasion neither Uncle Brian nor Peter sought repose. In the darkened room, for the double windows and the jalousied shutters were closed, they felt more like conspirators than loyal citizens of that great Empire upon which the sun never sets.

Four large electric fans were purring gently, not only to circulate the air, but to render conversation inaudible to anyone without. This, in Brian Strong’s opinion, was a necessary precaution. Although work was entirely suspended during siesta, it was quite possible that there were persons about keenly anxious to overhear any conversation between the two Englishmen.

“It worked,” replied Peter.

“So I gathered,” rejoined his relative.

“But——”

“But what?”

“You weren’t dead on time, Uncle,” said Peter. “Then, when you released the rays the action was only momentary at first. The second attempt was prolonged, but not to anything like a minute.”

“I’ll explain,” said Brian Strong. “I kept the day telescopic sights on you the whole time and released the electric charge sharp on time. As far as I could observe, there were no results. I was beginning to feel a bit disappointed, I’ll admit, until after some considerable time I noticed that you were gliding down. I had previously given the vernier screw regulating the telescopic sights a few turns. Then I realized what had happened. Either the line of sight was not exactly parallel with the centre of the beam of electricity, or else there was some discrepancy due possibly to parallax. Once your flying-boat was correctly registered, so to speak, you were under

the influence of the rays. So I decided to give a full minute for the experiment.”

“But you didn’t,” objected Peter. “The old ’bus picked up again in forty-five seconds. You can be pretty sure I had my eye on the clock all right!”

“That’s what I wanted to know,” continued his uncle. “You see, I gave a full minute’s liberation. You say your magnetos were cut out for three-quarters of a minute only. That was because I couldn’t see you during the last fifteen seconds. You were hidden from direct observation by an intervening ridge.”

“I see,” observed Peter, nodding his head.

“So do I now,” added Strong. “I had hoped that the rays would be active beyond an obstruction of that sort. Had they been so, it would be possible to keep a whole fleet of aeroplanes pinned to the ground, unable to rise. It is a curious point as to what does happen: whether the electric fluid is deflected by intervening ground or whether it stands dead up against it—like a beam of light, for instance, playing upon a dead black substance. Then, again, we’ve proved that the metal fuselage affords no insulation to protect the magnetos from the rays.”

“Nor does a sheet of rubber,” announced Peter. “I tried that little stunt on my own.”

“Did you?” remarked his uncle. “Evidently you hadn’t much faith in my invention.”

“Not that,” Peter hastened to assure him. “It was simply to see if there were an easy means to render the ignition system immune from the rays. I was jolly glad I wasn’t able to baulk you, Uncle.”

“Well, that’s a good thing,” said Brian Strong. “The next step is to dismantle the projector, pack up the vital portions of the apparatus, and make a hurried exodus from Rioguary. It’s easier said than done, Peter, and unless I’m very much out in my calculations, we’ll have our hands full when we do come to tackle the problem.”

“What’s to prevent our going down to Tepecicoa and taking passage to Bahia? There’s a steamer running once a week.”

“Nothing to prevent us making a start,” replied his uncle, “but the chances of our getting clear of Rioguary by that means are very remote. There would be a regrettable accident—according to the Rioguyan official version for foreign consumption—and there you are, or, rather, are not.”

“But isn’t there a British consul in Tepecicoa?” persisted Peter, who found it hard to believe that a British subject is not always, and in all circumstances, free to indulge his propensity for foreign travel.

“There is no British consul,” was the reply. “Riaguay in the opinion of the Foreign Office isn’t a state of sufficient importance to justify that expensive luxury. There is a British Consular Agent, who happens to be a Portuguese of doubtful antecedents. I don’t suppose he has a British subject in his office once in a twelve-month. You see, there’s no direct trade with Great Britain. Time was, before the Great War, when vessels flying the Red Ensign came up the Riaguay to San Antonio, Calador, and even as far up as Tepecicoa. Nowadays, owing to the slump in British shipping and the relatively high prices charged for British goods, there is never a vessel of our nationality to be seen in Riaguayan waters. If the Riaguayans require hardware they go to the United States for it. In fact, it seems to me that there’s a boycott of British goods out here, and all indications point to a growing hostility to Britain and everything connected with her. Personally, I’m inclined to think that we’re going to have trouble with Riaguay one of these days, and big trouble, too.”

For some minutes, there was silence. Both men were thinking hard. Presently, Uncle Brian walked across the room to a cabinet, which, when opened, disclosed a tantalus, glasses, and several siphons of soda.

“No, I’m not going to ask you to have a drink, Peter,” he laughed. “This stuff is for the use of my Riaguayan friends—if friends I may call them. But it happens that this cabinet has a secret drawer, which I find most useful.”

He pressed a concealed spring. A long, narrow section of the side swung back. From the recess, Uncle Brian drew a roll of stiff paper.

“Here’s a map of Upper Riaguay,” he announced. “Of course, it’s far from perfect, but in the main it is fairly reliable. I got it from a fellow in Venezuela before I came here. In fact, having acquired it, I was rather curious to make personal acquaintance with the country. It was made when there was a dispute between Riaguay and Venezuela over the fixing of the frontier. Evidently the Venezuelans contemplated an invasion of Riaguay, but either the difference was amicably settled or they thought that sending a force through that difficult country was too stiff a proposition. Now, if you had to decide upon a plan to get out of the country, what would you decide upon?”

“I’d make for either San Benito or San Valodar,” said Peter promptly. “Both have a coast-line. Once across the frontier, there’s a thundering good

chance of picking up a ship.”

“Exactly,” rejoined Uncle Brian drily. “When you are clear of Rioguary. But what chance would you stand to get even as far as Valodar without being arrested? My boy, you underrate the secret service of the republic. You might—I say might with great emphasis—you might gain possession of one of the flying-boats. But to what purpose? They’d fix your position with their magneto detectors. There would be half a dozen aircraft waiting for you before you as much as caught a glimpse of the sea. Even supposing you got as far as the supposedly neutral republics of San Benito or San Valodar, you’d find both places swarming with Rioguyan agents who wouldn’t hesitate to stick a knife into your back, or pump half a dozen shots out of an automatic into you. Assassination under the guise of robbery. That’s what would happen. No, Peter, it can’t be done. We’ll have to think of another way.”

“Have you thought of anything?” asked Peter, who for the first time fully appreciated the intricacies of the problem by which Uncle Brian was confronted.

“I have,” replied Uncle Brian. “I’ve been thinking it out for months—almost as soon as I discovered what I was engaged for. There’s one line of retreat.”

He pointed to the chart, indicating a vast extent of mountainous country, through which several rivers wended their way. The whole district, judging from the map, was devoid of towns and villages. Occasionally an outpost was indicated, where detachments of armed police were stationed for no other apparent purpose than to keep watch over an uninhabited district.

“Of course, we may not find these police posts,” continued Uncle Brian. “Since the settlement of the boundary dispute they may have been withdrawn. Tajeco, whence our pipe line runs, is the only place of any consequence. Apart from that, the whole country is mountainous, with the valleys stiff with tropical forests. Now, this is my plan: see these two rivers—the Rio Tinto and the Rio del Morte? They both join the Rio Guaya at about thirty miles above Tepecicoa. As you know, ordinary navigation is impossible ten miles above the town, owing to shallows, but canoes and light draft craft can ascend both the Rio Tinto and the Rio del Morte for a considerable distance. In fact, the Rio del Morte has never been explored to its source, so the map is merely guesswork as far as that river is concerned. That’s our way to freedom, Peter. It will be a difficult, a hazardous way, but with luck we’ll win through.”

“We’ll have a jolly good shot at it,” declared Peter with grim determination. “But how can we get away from here without arousing suspicion? For anything we know, your friend Diaz may be keeping an eye on us already.”

“Bluff,” replied his uncle. “I’ll tackle Don Ramon Diaz, tell him I’m badly in need of a holiday. Fact!” he continued; “haven’t been ten miles from El Toro for months. We’ll get his permission for a ten-days shooting trip up the Rio Guaya. He’ll probably take good care that we do go up, not down, because he’d never imagine that we were fools enough to attempt to penetrate that wild and mountainous country. We’ll give out that we are exploring the Rio Tinto, but in reality we’ll make a dash up the Rio del Morte as far as we can by water and foot it the rest of the way. It won’t be a picnic, Peter, I can assure you. We’ll have to travel light, depend upon our rifles for food, probably be half frozen before those mountains are crossed—but it’s worth it.”

“Rather!” agreed Peter Corbold enthusiastically.

## CHAPTER XI

# Up the Rio Guaya

“How does your marvellous searchlight progress, Señor Strong?” inquired Don Ramon Diaz.

Brian shook his head.

“Not at all well, Señor,” he replied. “In fact, I’m beginning to think I’ve worked myself to a standstill.”

“Is that so?” said the Rioguyan, giving the Englishman a sharp glance. “But, as a rule, one does not test searchlights by day.”

“In this case one does,” replied Brian. “If the combined telephone and searchlight apparatus can be perfected—as no doubt some day it will—you will reap the benefit. Or at least, the Republic of Rioguy will. Regarding daylight experiments, you will agree that it is easier to make delicate adjustments by natural light. The testing under actual working conditions at night will be made later. But that brings me to another point, Señor. I’m badly in want of a holiday.”

“Not a long one, I beg?”

“Oh no,” replied Brian jauntily. “A week or ten days. My nephew and I would like to have a shooting trip up the Rio Tinto.”

“It is dangerous—very dangerous,” declared Ramon Diaz. “And, Señor, we do not want to lose your valuable services just yet.”

“Perhaps not,” rejoined the Englishman. “But there are other ways of doing that without running risks on the Rio Tinto.”

“What do you mean?” demanded the Rioguyan suspiciously.

“For instance, I might have brain fever through overwork,” replied Brian. “I feel pretty confident that on my return I can tackle the present perplexing problem with a far better chance of success.”

Ramon Diaz considered the matter. He realized that he was in a position to refuse to grant permission. But at the same time, it was too early to show himself in his true colours. He had to make more use of the Englishman’s

undoubted skill before Rioguary was in a position to throw down the gauntlet to the British Empire. And Señor Strong's request was not unreasonable. He was supposed to be a free agent in the employ of the Rioguyan Government. To thwart him might cause trouble. He had not asked to go for a holiday to San Benito or anywhere in that direction. He wished to go up-country into the wilds beyond which was an impassable mountain chain, or at least impassable except with a train of mules to carry provisions and stores for a prolonged and perilous trek. No, there was no risk as far as Don Ramon was concerned. The Englishman would still be a prisoner in Rioguyan territory.

"Very good, Señor Strong," he said. "We can spare you for ten days. I hope you have good sport. Of course, if you like, we will send along a flying-boat to see how you fare in case your boat meets with a mishap and you are stranded."

"I should be delighted, Señor Diaz," replied Brian, without as much as a flicker of his eyelids. "Say in a week's time. She would be quite able to spot us up the Rio Tinto. I do not suppose we'll ascend for more than thirty kilometres."

The two parted, Ramon Diaz shaking hands with himself at the prospect of being able to verify his suspicions as to what Señor Strong's secret invention actually was; Brian chuckling with satisfaction at the thought that he had bluffed the Rioguyan so neatly.

Early next morning, the two Englishmen started on their dash for freedom. The final preparations took but little time, compared with the many hours spent in stealth to collect the essential portions of the secret ray apparatus.

The latter, wrapped in oiled silk, were hidden in bags containing provisions, the smaller and intricate pieces being concealed in empty cartridge-cases and placed in Brian's ammunition belt.

They took complete camp equipment, not that they had any idea of travelling on foot with it, but chiefly to lend colour to the deception that they were on a shooting expedition. Heavily-soled boots, leggings, change of socks and underclothing, sleeping-bags, and small mosquito nets, formed their travelling luggage. For defence and as a means of procuring food Brian carried a twelve-bore double-barrelled shot-gun, Peter an Express magazine rifle. In addition, they each had a .230 automatic pistol.



Brian Strong had already handed over the keys and given final instructions to the acting manager, an intelligent Rioguyan, who had more black blood in his veins than white.

The peons carried the gear down to the little landing-stage of the estate, where a small half-tide backwater communicated with the wide estuary of the Rio Guaya.

“There’s our boat,” announced Brian.

His nephew regarded the craft critically. He was not at all favourably impressed. As a deep-sea sailor he had an instinctive eye for boats. He could judge a small craft’s capabilities without going on board and rarely was his judgment at fault.

What he saw was obviously a roughly-built boat of soft wood, about twenty feet over-all and four feet in beam. She drew about four or five inches of water when at rest, while her freeboard seemed decidedly excessive. Her bow and stern were straight; she had little or no sheer, and with the exception of three feet from the bows was entirely open. In fact, viewed broadside-on she resembled what the Americans term a dory, but was without the characteristic sheer that these able little boats possess.

But it was the stern with which Peter found fault. So far the builder, whoever he might be, had made a creditable job, but for some inexplicable reason the after part tapered off, terminating in a transom only nine inches in width. Thus, not only was the boat deprived of useful bearing surface aft, to lift to a following sea, but she was additionally hampered by a heavy outboard motor clamped to the narrow transom.

“What do you think of her?” inquired Uncle Brian.

“Not much,” replied Peter bluntly. “Looks to me like a cross between a pauper’s coffin and an orange box. She’ll fill in the first bit of sea we meet.”

“Not likely to do that,” replied his relative. “It’s all sheltered water. We’ll pile the gear for’ard. Beggars can’t be choosers, and this is the best I could pick up for the job. There’s a mast and sail; shall we take them?”

Peter shook his head emphatically.

“Unless you want to make Kingdom Come straight away, Uncle,” he said. “She’s no keel, so there’s no grip on the water. That idiotic rudder on the engine’s all right for what it is intended, but you wouldn’t be able to keep the boat on a wind with it. She’d broach-to and dive right under at the first hard puff. No, scrap it.”

Uncle Brian did so. He was no sailorman, and he had the common sense not to pretend that he was. The mast and sail were handed to one of the peons with instructions to take them back to the store, and the work of loading up was resumed.

Ten two-gallon tins of petrol, mixed with the necessary quantity of lubricating oil, were stowed amidships, to add to the pile of gear already flush with the coamings.

“All aboard, Peter!” exclaimed his uncle, signing to the peons to cast off.

The motor, like the majority of two-strokes, started only after considerable persuasion, and the little craft was headed for the broad waters of the Rio Guaya.

“I hope we’ve seen the last of El Toro, Peter,” said his uncle, who seemed utterly indifferent to the fact that his whole personal estate had had to be abandoned. Compared with the service he hoped to do to his country, the loss was negligible.

All day the pauper’s-coffin-*cum*-orange-box was kept hard at it. Even during the terrific midday heat, with nothing save their broad-brimmed straw hats to shield them from the almost vertical rays, they stuck it gamely. Their freak craft was taking them steadily at four knots “over the ground”, in spite of an adverse current which they encountered as soon as the influence of the tide ceased.

Well before nightfall, the boat was alone on the river. Rarely were craft of any description to be encountered fifty miles above Tepecicoa. Occasionally, an Indian canoe, rough-hewn from a tree-trunk, was seen keeping discreetly close to the well-wooded banks, but civilized Riaguay seemed to have halted sharply at a spot where a range of low hills dipped to allow the now shallow stream to pass on its way to the ocean.

So far, the craft that had aroused Peter’s resentment had done remarkably well. He was beginning to feel a certain amount of confidence in her; but, he reminded himself, there had been no wind and the water was as smooth as a mill pond.

As a matter of fact, a tornado might be blowing and the surface of the river would be hardly ruffled, provided the wind was at right angles to the course of the stream, for the banks were high and deeply wooded. In places the giant vegetation almost formed a complete archway over the river. Caymans floated idly on the water, looking more like half-sunken logs, until the approach of the motor-driven boat aroused them from their lethargy.

Enormous eels, some of them of the deadly electric variety, could be seen beneath the placid surface, giving promise of a horrible death to any human being who, by accident or design, had to take to swimming in those cool and tranquil waters. Through the foliage came the unmistakable signs of the presence of jaguars and panthers, while more than once Peter caught sight of an enormous anaconda gliding over the branches.

With death lurking in the water and in the forests on either side, the prospect did not seem particularly alluring.

Well before sunset, the boat was run ashore on a small island, almost destitute of trees and covered with high grass. On one side there was a narrow sandy beach. The other sides were composed of rock rising sheer out of the water to a height of about ten feet.

“This looks like a comfortable camping-ground,” observed Uncle Brian, as he leapt ashore and stretched his cramped legs. “According to the map, we’re only five miles below the junction of the Rio Tinto and the Rio Guaya. I’d like to push on and get clear of the forests for a while, but it’s too risky in the dark.”

“’Spose it’s all right,” responded his nephew, “but how about the grass? I’ve no particular desire to get chawed up by a jaguar or pipped by a snake. And if we sleep on the sand, or even in the boat, there’s a chance of a hungry alligator butting in.”

“We must get sleep,” declared Uncle Brian. “It is absolutely essential at this stage of our journey. Later on we may not have the opportunity. We’ll keep watch-and-watch. As an extra precaution, I think we’ll fire this grass.”

“Don’t forget we’ve gallons and gallons of petrol on the boat,” Peter reminded him.

“By jove, yes,” agreed his uncle. “All right, Peter, you push off in the boat until the grass has burned itself out. It won’t be very long.”

Peter took to the oars and rowed the “orange-box” well out into the stream. Brian Strong struck a match and applied it to the sun-dried grass. The result exceeded his expectations. The flames literally ran, throwing orange-coloured tongues of fire fifty feet in the air.

The heat was terrific. Although he retreated to the water’s edge, with twenty yards of sand between him and the edge of the conflagration, Brian could barely stand his ground.

It was a nasty predicament. To shout to Peter to bring the boat in would probably result in the petrol exploding, since the sparks were flying to wind'ard, which was what Brian Strong had thought he had guarded against. To attempt to swim off was equally hazardous, owing to the presence of the deadly electric eels.

The flames died down almost as quickly as they had shot up, although on the furthestmost side of the island the fire was burning even more fiercely than before.

In a quarter of an hour the place was thoroughly cleared of animal and vegetable life, the bare rock showing through the diminishing wreaths of smoke from the smouldering timber.

"We've cleared out the mosquitoes at all events," declared Peter, as he rejoined his uncle and once more made the boat secure. "S'pose this packet will be all right in case of a shift of wind?"

"We're sheltered," declared Uncle Brian. "The only wind that can hurt us is a southerly one. That's very rare in this district; it's the Norther that plays up Old Harry. . . . Right-o, you turn in. I'll keep watch till midnight; that's another five hours. We'll make a start at dawn."

Clearing away a space amidships, Peter lay down in the boat and was soon sound asleep, his strange surroundings notwithstanding. In fact, it seemed to him that he had only just dropped off when his uncle roused him.

"Half-past twelve, Peter," he announced.

Peter had been used to keeping Middle Watch, but, if the truth be told, he would have infinitely preferred the bridge of a British cruiser at 1 a.m. to the stretch of sand on the edge of the fire-devastated island.

It was not pitch-dark. A dank mist hung over the river, blotting out the tree-clad banks on either hand. Overhead, the stars shone dimly through the drifting pall of vapour. The air reeked with noxious odours of decaying vegetation mingled with the sickly smell from the burnt grass.

From the depths of the forests came unmistakable sounds to indicate that the never-ceasing war between the various denizens was being briskly prosecuted. The shrill cries of a colony of monkeys, their rest suddenly disturbed by a hungry puma, the death-cry of a deer, crushed to the ground by the irresistible weight of a leaping jaguar; the squeal of agony of some luckless animal seized in the act of drinking on the riverbank, by the powerful jaws of a cayman—these were but a few of the noises that disturbed the silence of the tropical night.

The river flowed silently past the rocky islet on which the Englishmen were camping, but even the river contributed to the disturbing factors. Ever and again there was a sullen splash, as a semi-torpid alligator collided with another of his kind.

A little later on—it must have been about two in the morning—Peter noticed several dark objects drifting downstream. At first he thought that they were caymans, until one of them, hitching upon a submerged rock, revealed itself as a huge tree trunk. Swinging round, the massive log fouled another projection. Quickly a second trunk drifted against the first, then another, and yet another, until the “jam” assumed gigantic proportions, extending from midstream to within ten or twelve yards from the sandy beach of the little island.

Suddenly, from the rapidly increasing raft, a lithe shape leapt shorewards. Its leap was insufficient to clear the intervening space. It fell into the water and commenced swimming for the island.

Before Peter could grasp the situation and level his rifle, the animal rushed past him at a distance less than fifty paces, and with a cat-like bound gained the high rocky ground and disappeared from view.

It was a jaguar, one of the most formidable and cunning animals of the South American forests. And now the brute, possibly ravenous from its prolonged stay on the floating log, was marooned on a barren islet. In such circumstances it would not hesitate to attack man.

It was no exaggeration to say that Peter “had the wind up”—badly. The bare rock eight feet high and less than twenty feet from the boat, offered an excellent “take off” for a hungry jaguar. Yet Peter hesitated to rouse his relative. Although he was in a blue funk, it struck him that it was a far greater admission of fear to have to acknowledge the fact.

Very cautiously, he laid down his rifle and took up the double-barrelled shot-gun, reasoning that with a heavy charge of buck-shot he stood a better chance of dealing with the huge feline than with a rifle.

Then, with his face to the menacing wall of rock, and with the gun held at the “ready”, Peter prepared for the coming attack, since he felt certain that the jaguar would take the offensive.

From that moment he had no knowledge of the passing of time. It seemed an hour, perhaps more, before the tension was relaxed.

Somewhere on his right he felt certain that there was something moving. In the misty starlight he could discern, as he turned his head, a long,

writhing object moving over the sand. At first he took the creature to be a large eel, but soon he was certain that the thing was a huge serpent.

It was only ten paces off when Peter brought the gun to his shoulder and pressed the left trigger. The weapon clicked harmlessly. He pressed the right trigger. The result was the same.

Dropping the useless weapon, Peter grasped the previously discarded rifle. A vivid flash stabbed the night air, followed by a sharp report that sent myriads of birds fluttering in terror from the trees on the river banks.

Whether the bullet took effect or not Peter could not tell, but the reptile slewed round and with almost incredible rapidity made for the rocky wall of the island.

“Hello! What’s wrong?” inquired Uncle Brian, awake in a moment.

Peter briefly outlined the situation.

“H’m!” ejaculated his uncle. “Seems to me that we’ve chosen a sort of animal casual ward for our camp. Two misfires? Where’s my torch?”

The electric torch was soon forthcoming. Brian Strong picked up the gun and ejected both cartridges. On examination the caps in their bases showed no sign of a blow.

Brian said nothing, but thought the more.

He placed the double-barrelled weapon in the boat and unfastened the flap of his automatic holster.

“Almost wish we’d carried on,” he remarked at length. “At all events \_\_\_\_\_”

A crumbling, swirling sound interrupted his remarks. The “jam” that had been steadily and almost silently mounting up for the last hour or more had suddenly given way. The pent-up waters had forced the barrier of logs from the rocks that had impeded their progress, and now in a smother of foam the accumulated floating timber was speeding on its way.

“No,” continued Uncle Brian. “I think we’d better hang on where we are. We’ll make a fire to cheer us up, though.”

## CHAPTER XII

### “Caught Out”

It was easier said than done. The overnight conflagration had destroyed every vestige of brushwood. With the prospect of being leapt upon by a highly formidable jaguar or seized by a boa-constrictor already incensed by the proximity of a high-velocity bullet, it was not advisable to attempt to gather driftwood under the base of the low cliff. To attempt to fish pieces of floating brushwood from the river, when in the dim light it was a matter of impossibility to distinguish between a waterlogged tendril and a water-snake—and at the same time to present their backs to the lurking foe on the rocks—was also too risky a proposition.

“We’ll have to sacrifice some of our petrol,” decided Uncle Brian. “There’s some cotton waste in the locker under the fore-deck.”

The waste soaked in petrol was placed on the ground at a safe distance from the boat. A match was applied and the flames shot high in the air, accompanied by a hissing sound that could not be attributed to the combustion of the highly volatile spirit.

At intervals Peter replenished the fuel by the simple expedient of squirting petrol from a syringe. The flames were brilliant enough, but still the spluttering noise continued.

Thus the two men spent the weary and anxious hours until the time should come when there would be enough light to enable them to continue their voyage, the while keeping eyes strained and ears alert for indications of danger.

Suddenly the air was rent by a terrific shriek ending in a long-drawn-out howl. Somewhere beyond the edge of the low cliff a heavy body was thudding violently against the hard ground.

Then for a few seconds, exposed to the full glare of the petrol flare, appeared the head and fore-quarters of the jaguar. The animal’s eyes were almost starting from its head; its mouth was wide open, displaying a double row of glistening teeth and a red, lolling tongue.

Peter raised his rifle, but before he could press the trigger, the head and shoulders disappeared. A brief interval ensued, then the jaguar's hind-quarters appeared, the clawed feet pawing aimlessly in the air.

"Don't fire!" shouted Uncle Brian. "He's got more than he bargained for. The anaconda's seized him."

The rest of the tragedy was hidden from human view, although the sounds from the scene of anguish gave a pretty clear indication of what was taking place.

Held in the remorseless tension of several coils, the jaguar was being slowly crushed to death. Nevertheless, it was putting up a strenuous resistance, rolling over and over in a vain attempt to crush the anaconda by the weight of its body. Gasps and howls of agony rent the night air which, already heavy with pestilential odours, now reeked of blood and the nauseating smell from the huge reptile.

The cracking of the jaguar's ribs under the irresistible pressure was now distinctly audible. The groans ceased. The anaconda was preparing for its gargantuan meal.

"Can't we make a move?" asked Peter. "This stench is simply unbearable."

He would have willingly risked the hidden dangers of that uncharted, cayman-infested river in the darkness to get away from the noxious camping-place, but Uncle Brian was obdurate.

"We must stick it till dawn," he declared firmly, but without giving any reason.

At length the day broke with the rapidity common in the Tropics. The roaring of the beasts of the forest died away and a strange stillness brooded over the now languid river.

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Peter fervently. "Now for a fresh start."

"We'll have a look at our friend the anaconda," suggested Uncle Brian. "The reptile did us a good turn, I fancy, for the jaguar was on the point of springing at us when he was seized."

There was little need for caution. On climbing up the rocky ledge they found the anaconda still engaged in swallowing its prodigious meal. The reptile was about twenty-five feet in length and normally as big round as a man's thigh, but now it was tremendously distended in spite of the fact that



the head and half of the body of the jaguar, crushed almost to a pulp, had yet to be consumed.

It was not a sight to watch for long. The men returned to the boat. Then Uncle Brian unburdened himself.

“Don Ramon and his pals evidently don’t want us to return to El Toro,” he said abruptly.

“I’m not altogether surprised at that,” rejoined Peter. “But where are your proofs, Uncle?”

“Here,” replied Brian, indicating his double-barrelled gun and the petrol tins. “This gun has been tampered with. The striking mechanism has been thrown out of action. That’s why you had two missfires. And the petrol has been liberally watered; I guessed as much when it spluttered. Before we get under way, we must pass every drop of petrol through a strainer.”

The gun was beyond repair with the limited tools at their disposal. For all useful purposes the weapon and a hundred shot-cartridges were so much lumber.

They had better luck with the “doctored” petrol. By means of a strainer and a piece of fine muslin, the spirit was practically freed from water. In the process the fuel supply was appreciably diminished, for every tin had been tampered with, except the one which had supplied the petrol for the previous day’s run.

The double discovery was a disconcerting one. Nevertheless, it left Brian Strong a tolerably free hand. The mask was off. Either Don Ramon Diaz had his suspicions, or else he had no longer any need for the Englishman’s services, and in that case had no scruples about descending to a trick by which Brian and Peter might meet with disaster and death in the wilds of the Upper Rio Guaya, or its tributary the Rio Tinto.

It was half-past eight in the morning before the voyage was resumed. Before long, the confluence of the Rio Tinto and the Rio del Morte was sighted. Brian, who was steering, ported helm and shaped a course towards the left bank, where the latter tributary joined its coffee-coloured waters with those of the Rio Guaya.

Presently Peter, who was engaged in cleaning out the barrel of his Express rifle, happened to glance skywards. Following the boat at a height of about two thousand feet was one of the units of the Rioguyan air fleet.

How long the flying-boat had had them under observation, neither Peter nor his uncle could say. The rapid throb of the outboard motor had prevented them hearing the deeper roar of the flying-boat's quadruple engines.

Knowing to an almost absolute certainty that the aircraft's crew had them under clear observation by means of powerful binoculars, Uncle Brian carefully avoided looking up. A sudden alteration of helm would be a false move. He kept steadily in his course for a few minutes before putting the helm to starboard and making for the Rio Tinto.

"That's awkward," remarked Uncle Brian. "They won't leave us alone. We'll have to make a feint of ascending the Rio Tinto. It will mean a day's delay and a night dash for the Rio del Morte."

"Perhaps when they see we're well on our way up the Rio Tinto they'll clear off," hazarded Peter.

Apparently his surmise was correct, for after circling overhead for three hours, the flying-boat disappeared in the direction of Tepecicoa, without having made any attempt to molest or even communicate with the Englishmen.

During the heat of the day the fugitives rested, anchoring their little craft by means of a big stone and a rope in the shade of an overhanging tree. Here they were screened from aerial observation, but no buzz of propellers disturbed their rest. The flying-boat had, in fact, returned to the base with the news that the mad Englishmen had really taken the Rio Tinto course.

It was not until four in the afternoon that the outboard motor was restarted and the course retraced to the Rio Guaya. Not without considerable trepidation, Brian steered across the broad river and made the narrow entrance to the sinister Rio del Morte.

Here the banks were lofty and precipitous, the stream flowing at the rate of four miles an hour through a bottle-necked gorge of less than a hundred yards in width and nearly a mile in length.

Progress was in consequence tediously slow, an hour elapsing before the boat joined the wider expanse above the defile. Ahead the river broadened still more into a fairly large lake which the map had entirely ignored. At the farthest end the flat shores were broken by a number of rocky pinnacles, but whether they were small islands or merely parts of the mainland, it was as yet impossible to determine. The forests had now been left behind, the shores of the lake being treeless and bare, save for occasional patches of pampas grass and cacti.

“Think we’ll fetch the other end before dark, Uncle?” asked Peter. “It’s quite five miles off.”

“Might,” replied Brian unconcernedly. “It doesn’t matter much if we don’t. We’re carrying on at night. I think we decided upon that?”

“Yes,” agreed his nephew, “we did. But we didn’t reckon on having to navigate a lake. We don’t know where the inlet is. It might be between any of those projections we can see ahead; and it will be no joke bargaining about on a dark night trying to find a way out.”

“We’ll do it, never you fear,” rejoined his uncle, with one of those bursts of sublime optimism that characterized his mercurial spirits.

Soon it became evident that Peter had miscalculated the length of the lake. Darkness was drawing nigh and still the range of rocky pinnacles was far enough away to baffle any attempt to fix the channel with any degree of reliability.

The wind, too, hitherto light, was piping up dead astern and against the slight but distinctly perceptible current.

Peter was steering. More than once he glanced astern at the curling waves. In a craft possessing any degree of seaworthiness he would not have troubled to look behind him, knowing the short-crested waves would pass harmlessly under the boat’s keel. But the keelless type of freak construction was already giving signs of trouble. The metal rudder, of absurdly insignificant proportions, had little or no grip, except when at short intervals the narrow stern, weighted by the heavy outboard engine, dipped dangerously in the hollow water. At one moment the engine was almost stopped by the increased resistance of the deeply immersed blades; at another, the motor was racing furiously as the “orange-box” buried her bows and threatened to broach-to.

Both men realized the danger. Wave-crests were flicking over the sides of the little craft. Brian Strong was busily engaged in baling. Peter was endeavouring to keep the boat on her course, the while striving to discern an outlet between the still distant rocks.

Presently darkness fell upon the scene. The wind was increasing and now blew with the force of a “fresh breeze”. Peter would have laughed at it in a seaworthy centre-board dinghy, but in present conditions, he knew it was far from being a laughing matter.

Somewhere, and not very far distant by this time, was a lee shore. The “rebound” from the land at this end of the lake was already becoming

apparent, for the waves were now becoming irregular and confused.

Uncle Brian's task was a difficult one, for of all sorts of craft those with flat bottoms are the most awkward to bale out. In spite of his strenuous efforts the water was gaining. He communicated the news to his nephew.

"All right!" shouted Peter encouragingly. "I'll round to. Pass an oar through one of the sleeping-bags and weight the lower end of the bag. It will make a sea-anchor and we can ride to that. Call out when you're ready."

Uncle Brian understood. Although not a seaman, he was used to small boat work. He began to prepare the sea-anchor, which when hove overboard would keep the boat's head to wind, act as a floating breakwater, and reduce her drift to a little less than a mile an hour.

Suddenly the boat's stern dipped more than before. A wave broke inboard, sweeping completely over the outboard motor. The engine stopped. Either the water had short-circuited the high-tension wire, or else had found its way into the carburettor.

Immediately, the "orange-box" swung round broadside on to the wind, with the water already up to her crew's knees.

"Be sharp!" cautioned Peter, at the same time grasping a can of lubricating oil, unscrewing the cap, and throwing a quantity of the heavy liquid to wind'ard.

The action of the oil immediately quelled the waves, the boat drifting to lee'ard of a wide and steadily increasing patch of smooth water. But so rapid was her drift that she quickly drove beyond the oil-quelled area, and once more the waves swept over her side. Again Peter attempted to pour oil upon the troubled waters, but the can slipped from his grasp and disappeared overboard.

A moment later, the flat-bottomed craft heeled, recovered herself sluggishly, and slid beneath the waves.

## CHAPTER XIII

# Wrecked

The shock of being immersed feet foremost in the water, coupled with the fact that the night was pitch-black, was quickly followed by a quite unexpected discovery.

The boat had foundered, but a heavy jar proclaimed the fact that she had “struck soundings” in about three feet of water. Her crew found themselves standing waist-deep upon the quivering boat as the bottom boards writhed under their feet in an attempt to float to the surface—a feat that had been successfully performed by most of the buoyant gear in the boat.

For some moments neither Peter nor his uncle could grasp the situation, until Brian Strong shouted: “We’re close to shore; come on, Peter.”

“Don’t move!” bawled Peter, for conversation at an ordinary pitch would be inaudible owing to the shriek of the wind. “Don’t move. We may be on a sandbank with deep water all around.”

Uncle Brian saw the force of this assertion. It would be a fool’s trick to attempt to swim, since all sense of direction was lost, and they were still ignorant of how far it was to the nearest land. Visions of caymans, deadly eels, and other undesirable denizens of these waters also served as a deterrent, although, standing waist-deep, the two men were not less liable to attack than had they been striking out for the shore.

“I’m not at all keen on standing here till daybreak,” remarked Uncle Brian at length. “It’s too jolly moist,” he added, with a brave attempt at making light of the situation.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” decided Peter. “There’s a coil of rope under the fore-deck. Pass it aft and I’ll secure one end round my waist. Then I’ll go on a voyage of exploration. If the water gets deeper I’ll come back. If it shelves, we’ll move along till we find a better ’ole.”

“Better hump, you mean,” corrected Brian Strong. “All right, here’s the line. I’ll pay out as you go. There ought to be thirty fathoms of it at least.”

Having made his preparations, Peter stepped off. The ground was quite hard under his feet and clear of weeds. Nevertheless, he proceeded cautiously, having in mind the possibility of encountering a cayman or other ferocious inhabitant of the lake.

He had his automatic, but he was doubtful whether it would be serviceable. The cartridge in the barrel might be effective, since the ammunition was guaranteed damp-proof; but there was the chance of the delicate mechanism of the weapon being deranged by its submersion. Nor was an automatic of much use against a cayman. The bullet was not powerful enough to penetrate the creature's armour-plated body; and unless a lucky hit were made in the cayman's eye or throat, the odds would be against Peter. All the same, the possession of the automatic gave him a certain degree of confidence that would have been lacking had he been weaponless.

He had traversed about twenty yards when he encountered a dark object that well-nigh capsized him. Visions of an electric eel flashed across his mind. For a moment he floundered panic-stricken, striving to break away from the object that was clinging tenaciously to one foot.

Then the real nature of the thing became apparent. It was the sleeping-bag that Uncle Brian was preparing as a sea-anchor when the boat sank.

Disengaging the short oar from the bag and using it as a sounding-pole, Peter resumed his semi-aquatic walk.

If anything, the water was shoaling. Once or twice it was almost up to his shoulders, but mostly it was only knee-deep and the bottom level. For another thirty yards he progressed, and then looming through the darkness he could discern the irregular outlines of a rocky coast at a distance of about fifty yards.

That was good enough. Retracing his steps, a feat only rendered possible by the aid of the rope, Peter communicated the result of his discoveries to Uncle Brian.

During the last half-hour the wind had veered, with the result that the waves had died down completely—another indication that the lee shore had obligingly become a weather one.

“How about our gear?” inquired Uncle Brian.

“What has floated is most likely ashore by this time,” replied Peter. “The heavy stuff can stop in the boat till daybreak. We'll make fast the rope and take the other end with us. That will help us to find the boat later on.”

This suggestion was acted upon, but when Uncle Brian stepped out of the boat to join Peter in their walk to the land, the bows, relieved of his weight, appeared above the surface.

“I say!” exclaimed Peter. “She’s almost water-borne. It’s only the weight of the engine that’s keeping her stern down. We can drag her with us.”

Each man grasped one gunwale. The “orange-box”—that, but for the shallowness of the water, might have been a coffin—was moved shorewards with comparative ease, until the gunwales were awash and the bottom aground. Exerting all their strength, the two men found it impossible to move her another foot.

“We’re here, anyway,” declared Uncle Brian, regarding the rocky shore with feelings of thankfulness.

“We are,” agreed Peter grimly.

“And marooned on an island most likely,” added his relative. “S’pose there’s nothing for it but to wait till day.”

“To work,” corrected Peter. “We must get the gear out of the boat. The rifle will want drying pretty quickly if it’s to be of any use. And the engine too.”

They set to with a will. The outboard motor was unclamped and carried ashore, together with the precious parts of the secret-rays apparatus, the bedding, and provisions. Several articles that had drifted ashore were also found and placed in a position of comparative security.

“Now we can get the boat up a bit higher,” declared Peter. “If we can’t find the baler we may be able to cant her over and get rid of the water.”

With a lusty “heave-ho!” the waterlogged boat was dragged her own length nearer the shore, but all attempts to turn her on her side were unavailing. So they contented themselves by making the boat fast and leaving her till dawn.

It was a long, dreary vigil. They were without means of making fire, since their stock of matches was spoilt by the water. Bully beef and sodden biscuits provided a sorry meal, and the rest of the night was spent in constantly keeping on the move in order to mitigate the discomfort of wearing saturated clothing.

By way of contrast to their previous night’s camping-ground, the place was strangely quiet. No roaring of wild animals or splashing of caymans disturbed the solitude. The wind had died entirely away and not even a rustle

came from the scanty clump of trees, showing dimly above the brink of the precipitous rock.

At last, to the tired eyes of the weary men appeared a pale pink glow in the eastern sky. Five minutes later it was quite light, and the comforting beams of the rising sun were glinting over a distant range of hills.

Peter and his uncle were now able to take stock of their surroundings. The gravel beach was piled with their waterlogged belongings. A little distance away was the boat with her nose and one gunwale showing; beyond, the now tranquil lake with the furthestmost shore hidden in a fleecy mist.

They had come ashore in a sort of shallow bay bounded by bluffs of iron-grey rocks and connected by an irregular wall of granite-like stone, averaging fifty feet in height.

“The sun will soon dry our gear,” said Peter. “We can make a fire by means of one of the lenses of our binoculars. Suppose we climb up to the top of the cliff and see where we are?”

“You can,” replied Uncle Brian. “I’m as stiff as anything. I’ll stop here and start a fire. Don’t forget to take your rifle.”

The rifle had already been cleaned as far as Peter was able to do so; and for lack of suitable oil he had washed out the barrel, magazine, and mechanism with petrol.

It was a fairly easy ascent, for the cliff face was covered with horizontal clefts that afforded a secure hold. Nor was the cliff so steep as it had looked to be in the darkness.

Peter was but little wiser than before when he reached the summit. The higher ground farther inland prevented any extensive outlook in that direction; but beyond the projecting bluffs that bounded the bay the lake was visible on either side. The land upon which they had been cast was either a wide peninsula or else an island.

Anxious to settle the question, Peter made his way towards the highest peak, which was about three-quarters of a mile away. It was easy going, for, with the exception of a few clumps of trees and patches of thorns, the ground was bare and sun-baked. For the most part it consisted of lava-like rock mingled with veins of granite, but here and there were patches of hard mud intersected by fissures of considerable depth.



The only signs of animal life that Peter saw were a few vividly-coloured lizards and an animal strongly resembling a hare; and although he kept a sharp look-out for snakes basking in the now powerful rays of the sun, none appeared, much to his satisfaction.

When Peter returned to the beach, he found his uncle busily engaged in making tea. A fire was blazing strongly, and from a tripod composed of the oars and boat-hook a “billy” hung over the flames.

“It’s a jolly good thing we’ve still got the boat, Uncle,” said his nephew. “I’ve been to the highest ground about here and we’re on an island.”

“Just our luck,” rejoined Uncle Brian. “The boat’s got a hole in her as big as my head. But we can discuss that later. Breakfast first.”

Without the shadow of a doubt, Uncle Brian had risen to the occasion. The biscuits were little the worse for their immersion and, when flavoured with tinned pilchards and bottled tomato soup, were eaten with gusto. The tea, having been stored in an air-tight case, was in splendid condition, although Peter deplored the fact that there was no sugar available, and that the condensed milk was of the unsweetened brand.

The meal over, the two men settled down to serious business. An examination of the boat confirmed Uncle Brian’s statement. Right amidships was a fairly clean hole about fifteen inches in diameter. A blanket had, by some means, got underneath the bottom boards and had become wedged in the hole, with the result that when the two men had attempted to drag the boat clear of the water, the fabric prevented a free outlet. Now that the obstruction was removed, it was a comparatively simple matter to drag the damaged craft well up on the beach.

“That’s one advantage of not having a keel,” said Uncle Brian. “We can patch the hole from the outside.”

“We can,” replied Peter, “but——”

“But what?”

“Now that there is a gap amidships why not use it to take the propeller?” suggested Peter. “It would make the old coffin a jolly sight more seaworthy with that weight transferred from over the stern to the ’midship section.”

Brian Strong regarded his nephew suspiciously. He was wondering whether Peter was wandering in his mind, or trying to “pull his leg”.

“I mean it,” continued Peter.

“Well, what’s to keep the water out?”

“This,” replied his nephew, indicating a zinc-lined wooden box in which the provisions had been stored. “Knock out the bottom and secure the four sides to the bottom of the boat like a square centre-board case. We’ll have to caulk the joints and stiffen the box with cross bearers to take the strain of the engine.”

“Good idea, that,” agreed Uncle Brian. “I shouldn’t wonder if we get another one and a half knots out of her. She won’t drag her stern down so much.”

“That’ll be something to be thankful for,” declared Peter. “That stern of hers is a positive danger. Let’s set to work.”

On taking stock of the tools at their disposal, they found they possessed a hatchet, screw-driver, hammer, mallet, and gimlet. There were also copper nails and a few brass screws.

By about eleven (judging by the sun, for their watches had been stopped by water penetrating the cases) the box was in position, being secured by two-inch screws through the bottom of the boat. For caulking they used unlaid rope soaked in oil, and clay thinned down with grease. Strips of wood from one of the bottom-boards screwed together formed strengthening cross-pieces. Altogether they had made a sound job in a comparatively short time.

“We’ll knock off for a bit,” said Uncle Brian, wiping the perspiration from his eyes. “It’s too risky to swot in the midday heat. We’ll make another start when it’s a bit cooler.”

“Right-o,” agreed Peter, throwing down his tools with alacrity. “If——”

He broke off suddenly and pointed.

Brian Strong looked in the direction indicated by his nephew’s outstretched hand. Then he muttered under his breath, for a couple of miles away was the misty outline of a Rioguyan flying-boat.

## CHAPTER XIV

# A Change of Locomotion

“Take cover!” exclaimed Peter warningly, at the same time making for his automatic and ammunition, which were lying on one of the blankets spread out on the beach.

“Too late, I fancy,” replied Brian. “They’ve spotted us for a dead cert. We were fools to leave the boat and all this gear strewn over the sand.”

Nevertheless, Uncle Brian grasped the rifle and automatic pistol and a haversack containing parts of the secret ray invention. Come what may he was not going to let *that* fall into the hands of the Rioguyans.

“Which way?” he inquired.

“Up the cliff,” replied Peter. “We may be able to stow ourselves away before they are sufficiently above us. There’s not very much cover, worse luck.”

It was fortunate that Peter Corbold had previously found a way to the top. Profiting by the experience, uncle and nephew quickly gained the summit of the cliff.

The flying-boat was now about a mile away, but was shaping a course that would bring her to the west of the island.

“Don’t believe they’ve spotted us yet,” declared Peter. “But they are bound to see our boat if they start cruising over the island. Look! What’s wrong with that?”

He pointed to a cleft in the face of the cliff about twenty yards to the left of the spot where they had made the ascent. A closer acquaintance showed that the hollow was deep and narrow, descending steeply until it terminated in a natural breastwork about eight feet above the beach. Although open to the air, the enclosing walls of rock were sufficiently irregular to cut off direct observation; and as neither Peter nor his uncle had noticed the cleft from the beach, it being similar to a dozen others, they were fairly safe in assuming that they stood a chance of outwitting their pursuers.

They could hear the drone of the motors, but were unable to see the inquisitive flying-boat. For some minutes the noise continued almost constant in volume, as if the machine were hovering in the vicinity. Then the sound grew louder and louder until it ceased abruptly.

Peter knew what that meant. The Rioguyan airmen had discovered traces of the two Englishmen and were volplaning down to investigate.

Suddenly the descending aircraft appeared within Peter's limited field of vision, since by cautiously peering over the breastwork he could command a view of the beach in the vicinity of the spot where the two Englishmen had landed.

There was nothing to criticize adversely in the manner in which the flying-boat alighted on the surface. With hardly a splash the lightly-built hull took the water. A few revolutions of the for'ard pair of propellers and the flying-boat "taxied" until she touched the edge of the sandy beach.

If there had been any doubts in the minds of Peter and his uncle as to the intentions of the Rioguyan airmen, there was now no uncertainty on that score.

A couple of men jumped out and secured the gently swaying flying-boat by means of a grapnel and rope. Then several more leapt ashore, all fully armed with rifles, revolvers, and *machetes*. Almost their first act was to smash the little craft which the Englishmen had only just succeeded in repairing.

The Rioguyans seemed to take a childish delight in their work of destruction, laughing, yelling, and gesticulating at the thought that they had run their quarry to its lair and had cut off the fugitives' means of escape.

Not content with smashing the boat to firewood, they examined every article that was strewn on the beach, destroying some and passing the rest into the hull of the flying-boat.

Peter glanced at his uncle and tapped his automatic significantly. At all events, he thought, since the Rioguyans had deprived them of a means to leave the barren island, there was no reason why the two Englishmen shouldn't open a destructive fire upon their now declared foes. At that short range there was a good chance of killing or wounding every man in the group on the beach.

Uncle Brian shook his head.

"Wait," he whispered.

Peter felt positively mutinous. To remain inactive was to throw away their only chance of scoring heavily off their pursuers.

“Why?” he demanded in a low voice.

“They’re going to search for us,” was the reply.

Brian Strong had the Rioguyan airmen’s own words to support his statement, for amid the babel he managed to overhear one of the men declare that the Englishmen must be found, and taken prisoners. These were the Comandante’s explicit instructions.

There were now eight of the crew on the beach, all of them arguing with each other and paying scant heed to the excited shouts of an officer in the pilot’s seat of the flying-boat.

At length two of the crew went on board, reappearing with a long, scraggy dog, whose chief points were his long drooping ears and lolling tongue. Brian Strong recognized the breed as a cross between a Cuban bloodhound and a Brazilian whippet.

The dog was carried ashore in spite of its weight, the apparent reason being that for the purpose for which it was intended it must not walk through water.

At the sight of the hound Brian felt more ill at ease than he had since the appearance of the flying-boat. He knew the ferociousness of the breed and their skill in following the trail of a fugitive. He almost wished he had fallen in with his nephew’s unspoken suggestion and had tried the moral and physical effect of a sudden and unexpected burst of automatic pistol firing.

It was too late for that now. The opportunity had passed, for already some of the men were screened by the intervening wall of rock.

So Brian watched the movements of the two men with the dog, noting with considerable apprehension that both fellows, in addition to their firearms, carried a supply of hand-grenades, which might or might not be smoke bombs.

Presently they, too, passed out of the Englishmen’s arc of vision; but from auricular evidence, it was plain that they were experiencing considerable difficulty in persuading the animal to scale the cliff. But one point was distressingly in evidence; the hound was already on the trail, since he had indicated the way by which Uncle Brian and Peter had gained the summit.

It seemed quite a long interval before the baying of the hound announced that the feat of the ascent was accomplished. Momentarily the two fugitives expected to hear their pursuers descending the narrow gorge in which they were concealed, but minutes passed without their unpleasant expectation being realized.

Gradually the deep notes of the dog, accompanied by the encouraging shouts of the searchers and the occasional report of firearms, died away.

“Good business,” whispered Peter. “The brute’s picked up the wrong scent. He’s following my track where I went this morning.”

Which was exactly what the hound was doing, accompanied by the airmen who were firing at haphazard into every bush they passed, on the chance of compelling their quarry to abandon a possible place of concealment.

Peter took another look at the flying-boat. He could see the officer in charge sitting up in the for’ard cockpit with a rifle laid upon the decking by his side. There was no one else visible, but in front of the Rioguyan was an automatic gun somewhat resembling a Colt, with its muzzle pointing ominously in the direction of the way down the cliff.

“We’ll have to rush the ’bus, Uncle,” said Peter in a low voice. “It’s our only chance.”

Uncle Brian nodded, and raising the haversack from the ground, slung it over his shoulder.

“Right,” he whispered. “Lead on, but keep a sharp look-out in case there’s a man on guard on the cliff. If there is, no firing if it can be avoided, mind.”

His nephew gave a sign of assent and replaced his automatic, taking the precaution of leaving the flap of the holster unfastened. Then, with his uncle close at his heels, he crept cautiously along the gully, till he arrived at the slightly rugged ground adjoining the brink of the cliff.

As Peter had expected, there was a sentry posted within ten paces of him. The fellow had discarded his flying kit, which was not to be wondered at, seeing that the temperature was somewhere in the region of 120° F. Evidently taking it for granted that, as his comrades and the bloodhound had swept the ground in the neighbourhood of his post, he could “stand easy”, he even went so far as to commit the grave military crime of parting with his rifle, for the weapon was resting against a rock. His back was turned to the

two Englishmen and—a fact that Peter noted with intense satisfaction—he was rolling a cigarette.

Like almost every person of Latin descent, the fellow was an adept at that task, the cigarette when made being almost semicircular as regards its shape. Then, producing a large box of sulphur matches, he proceeded to set light to the “smoke”.

That was the opportunity which Peter was waiting for. He reckoned on the sulphurous fumes causing a little discomfort to the smoker, or at least his attention would be concentrated upon lighting the cigarette, to his own undoing.

Peter had already counted the men engaged in following the useless trail. There were seven, strung out in an irregular line, and by this time quite a quarter of a mile away.

As stealthily as a cat, Peter approached the careless sentry until he was within a couple of yards of him. Then he sprang.

His love of Rugby football had taught him how to “tackle his man low”. Before the Rioguan could utter a sound or realize what had happened, he was lying half dazed upon the ground, with Peter pinning his arms and Brian Strong pressing the muzzle of an automatic gently against the fellow’s temple.

“Ask him,” said Peter, “how many men are on board the flying-boat.”

Uncle Brian obliged, backing up his request with a slightly stronger pressure of the cold ring of the automatic’s muzzle.

“The captain and two mechanics,” was the tremulous reply.

“That’s what I wanted to know,” remarked Peter gratuitously. “Now, Uncle Brian, we’ll gag and bind this gentleman, to be left till called for.”

Peter proceeded with the operation so rapidly and deftly that it left Uncle Brian wondering where his nephew had acquired that knowledge.

In a very few moments the Rioguan was trussed like a fowl, his sash and belt coming in very useful for the purpose.

“Now a cartridge, Uncle Brian,” continued his relative. Uncle Brian handed him one of the rifle cartridges. This Peter wrapped in a handkerchief.

“Open your mouth, old son,” he said.

The “old son”, although ignorant of English, obliged instantly. It was patent that he, too, had had experience in the gentle art of gagging.

“And that’s that,” concluded Peter. “Now for the next act of the matinee. We’ll kick off from our hiding-place. It’s only an eight-foot drop to the beach, and a jolly sight quicker than scrambling down the cliff. I’ll take the rifle, please.”

Silently and cautiously the two men descended the gully until they reached the breastwork separating the rift from the beach.

Peter peered cautiously in the direction of the flying-boat.

The Rioguyan captain was still at his post in the pilot’s seat. He was wearing his leather flying-coat but had thrown back the flaps. He was a swarthy, thick-lipped man with hulking shoulders and a head set well forward—altogether a brutal type of humanity.

“It’s like potting a sitting rabbit,” thought Peter, as he slipped a cartridge into the breech of his rifle. “It’s not giving the fellow a ghost of a chance.”

Yet, his compunction notwithstanding, Peter’s hands were as steady and his eye as clear as an experienced hunter’s. It was the first time in his life that he had had a human being covered with a rifle—but it was the only way.

Deliberately he pressed the trigger. The Rioguyan captain did not appear to move. Peter was beginning to think that he had missed, when the man leant forward until his head rested on his arms on the deck of the fuselage—to all appearances as if he were asleep.

Without hesitation, the Englishmen vaulted over the ledge of rocks on to the beach and ran towards the flying-boat. They fully expected to find their way barred by the two mechanics; but the latter had either not heard the shot, or, if they had, had taken it as one of the many fired by the searchers on the island.





PETER TACKLES THE SENTRY

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Gaining the pilot's cabin, Peter peered down the hatchway into the engine-room. The place was empty. Hurrying aft, he found the two

mechanics in the motor-room, where the twin engines driving the after pair of propellers were situated.

At the sight of a couple of automatics thrust down the hatchway both men raised their arms with commendable celerity.

“Up—you!” ordered Uncle Brian, indicating one of the engineers.

The fellow complied, his olivine features grey with terror.

At Brian Strong’s orders, backed up by an indisputable argument in the shape of a pistol, the man was marched along the alley-way to the gangway and told to go ashore and bring back the grapnel and mooring rope. This he did.

“Now,” continued Brian sternly, “you can go and stand over there,” indicating a spot close to the mangled remains of the “orange-box”. “If you shift from there while you are within range of a rifle, you won’t stir more than half a dozen steps. I’m a crack shot. . . . All right, Peter. Away as soon as you like.”

The remaining mechanic was ordered for’ard to start the motors. For the present the flying-boat was to be actuated only by the bow propellers, those aft being required only when proceeding at top speed.

Then Peter, having lowered the body of his victim to the water, took his place in the “office”. By this time the flying-boat, no longer tethered by the rope and grapnel, had drifted from the island before the light offshore wind.

The motors were throbbing tunefully. A forward thrust of one lever was sufficient to bring both propellers in gear. Like a gigantic water-fowl, the aerial craft leapt forward, leaving a feathery wake on the surface of the lake.

When the speed gauge indicated thirty-eight kilometres, Peter manipulated another lever, and, obedient to the alteration of trim of her short, cambered planes, the flying-boat soared into her proper element.

“A ’bus for an orange-box,” soliloquized the light-hearted pilot. “Not a bad exchange, eh what?”

## CHAPTER XV

# Over the Sierras

Presently Uncle Brian rejoined his nephew. The flying-boat was now at an altitude of 4000 metres and following the course of the Rio del Morte.

From the island from which they had made their escape rifle bullets were singing harmlessly, for the searchers, upon hearing the hum of the flying-boat's engines, had jumped to the conclusion—a correct one in this case—that the “English dogs” had scored rather heavily.

“She's well stocked in the food department,” reported Uncle Brian, “and there's plenty of fuel in the tanks. With reasonable luck we'll cross the Sierras before sunset.”

“And then——?”

“Make for Trinidad or Barbadoes,” replied Peter's uncle, as he carefully stowed the haversack containing the secret-rays parts into a locker. “She'll do that easily. But I've a notion that I'd like to stop and have a look at the pipe-line between El Toro and Tajeco. We might be able to cut off the fuel supply to the Rioguyan Air Fleet.”

“Right-o,” agreed Peter. “And what about Antonio?”

“Who?” asked his uncle.

“Antonio, our mechanic,” explained Peter, indicating the closed hatchway, underneath which the Rioguyan engineer was quaking and trembling. “He'll be a bit of a nuisance on board, although he hasn't the pluck of a mouse. Can't we land him somewhere? Between us we can manage quite all right.”

There was no difficulty in conversation. With the plate glass window in front of the pilot's seat and the hatch to the motor-room closed, the compartment was practically cut off, both from external and internal noises. Except for the muffled pulsations of the motors and the subdued roar from the propellers, there was little to indicate that the flying-boat was cutting through the air at eighty-five miles an hour.

“It’s a jolly lucky thing we didn’t carry on in the motor-boat,” remarked Peter. “Look down there.”

He pointed to the sinuous course of the river. Even at that height it was quite easy to see that the Rio del Morte above the lake was not easily navigable. There were rapids at about every half-mile, the foaming water showing up distinctly in the strong sunlight. It was doubtful whether a small boat, or any boat, could force her way against that furious torrent, rendered even more formidable by the numerous rocks that split the swiftly-running water into dangerous cascades.

“Yes,” agreed Uncle Brian gravely, “we did the right thing. But don’t forget—more than likely the air station at San Antonio is in touch with us by means of the magnetic detectors. We’ve got to bear in mind the possibility of being pursued.”

“But they won’t know what has happened,” said Peter. “All they know is that the ’bus is proceeding up-country, following the course of the river. They would naturally conclude that the original crew are in pursuit of our late and unlamented ‘egg-box’. Until the air station people get to hear from the fellows we left on the island—by the by, what will happen to them?”

“That’s not our affair now,” replied Uncle Brian. “In a few days another flying-boat will be dispatched to look for them. They’ve plenty of water, so they won’t be thirsty; and, if they’re hungry—well, there’s the hound. In a way, he is responsible for their present plight.”

“Talking of hunger,” observed Peter, “isn’t it about time we piped to dinner? I think I heard a suggestion about grub a couple of hours ago.”

His uncle agreed, and went aft to the store and provision room. A few minutes later, thanks to the stabilizing device that enabled the flying-boat to hold on her course both as regards altitude and direction, Peter and Uncle Brian were enjoying a plain but satisfying meal of the food originally intended for the ill-fated Rioguanay captain.

Nor was the motor-mechanic neglected, although, when Peter opened the trap-hatch to pass the food down to him, he cowered and trembled in a state of utter funk.

“Now,” remarked Uncle Brian, after consulting a map, “we ought to be approaching the scene of preliminary operations. The pipe-line should be about here, running in a north-west to south-east direction. It may be overgrown with tropical growth, but I know for a fact that it was laid on the surface and not buried.”

“Bad system, that,” observed Peter.

“Yes; but it was for economical reasons,” continued his uncle. “Apparently the Rioguyan authorities never contemplated an attempt to cut it. We’ll do our utmost to prove the fallacy of their belief in its immunity.”

By the aid of binoculars, the track of the huge oil-pipe was located. So far so good; but there still remained the task of finding a suitable landing-ground. The flying-boat, although provided with means for alighting both on the water and on land, could not reasonably be expected to come to rest on tree-tops without the almost certain risk of being completely destroyed.

At two hundred metres the aircraft followed the line—until Peter discovered a possible landing in a clearing about fifty yards from the Englishman’s objective. Here, for the first time since leaving the island, they saw signs of human habitation—small *adobe* huts.

“All right, I suppose?” asked Peter.

“Yes, they’re Indians in the pay of the Rioguyan Government,” replied Uncle Brian. “They are paid, I understand, not for the work they do, but for the damage they don’t do—sort of retaining fee, providing they are good and don’t start carving pieces out of the iron pipe.”

“I see,” remarked Peter. “Then, as far as we are concerned, they need not be taken into account. S’pose they won’t carve up our engineer bird when we set him ashore?”

“They will more likely take him down to El Toro and get paid for the job,” said Uncle Brian.

His nephew nodded. He was now engaged upon the task of bringing the flying-boat to earth, no easy task in a strange ’bus and on a landing-ground of doubtful quality and very limited extent.

With a succession of slight jolts, the flying-boat was brought to rest with her nose within ten feet of one of the huts. No Indians came out to gaze curiously at the wonderful sight, or to beg tobacco from the crew. They had promptly taken to the bush at the first distant view of the strange, enormous mechanical bird.

Bolting the hatch over the for’ard motor-room and at the same time telling the craven Rioguyan that there was nothing to be afraid of, provided he behaved himself, Peter and Brian Strong removed one of the fifty-pound bombs from the dropping gear and carried it ashore. Then, armed with rifles, they transported their bulky load to the enormous rust-red pipe-line that was

raised eight feet above the ground, stretching miles in either direction, upon which depended the main kerosene supply to the Rioguyan arsenals and aerodromes.

It was the work of a few minutes to place the bomb close to the pipe and “tamp” it with earth. In the absence of a time fuse, it was necessary to detonate the explosive by rifle-fire.

At a safe distance, Peter put bullet after bullet at the target. The pipe was holed in several places, the oil gushing forth at high pressure, but it was not until the tenth shot that the desired result was attained.

There was a deafening crash. To quote Brian Strong’s words: “It was as if the entire contents of an ironmonger’s store had been dropped from the top of a skyscraper”. A cloud of dust and smoke rose high in the air, mingled with fragments of jagged iron. Flames fifty feet in height shot up from the pipe, spreading far and wide as the inexhaustible supply of highly inflammable oil poured out in torrents to add to the work of destruction.

“That’s kipped the show,” remarked Peter gleefully, as the two Englishmen retraced their steps to the flying-boat.

The next business was to “pay off” the Rioguyan engineer. He was given a supply of provisions and a liberal quantity of tobacco and told to clear out and not to hurry back to San Antonio; while, for self-protection, he was provided with a rifle and twenty rounds of ammunition.

“You might have made him start up the motors, Peter,” remarked his uncle, as the mechanic disappeared in the undergrowth.

“Thought I’d try my hand at the job,” replied his nephew.

The for’ard pair of motors fired without hesitation, but the after ones gave a certain amount of trouble. At length, with the four engines throbbing and out of gear, Peter made his way to the pilot’s seat.

At a steep angle, the flying-boat rose skywards. As she did so, a rifle bullet “pinged” harmlessly against the light steel armour plating of the fuselage.

“Ungrateful brute, that mechanic,” was Peter’s only remark.

Ten minutes later the fiercely burning oil pipe was a mere speck in the distance. The flying-boat, at an altitude of three thousand metres, was heading for the distant Sierras, that rose in a far-flung barrier of irregular projection to a height averaging nine thousand feet above the sea-level.

The aircraft was flying “all out”, her speed, on account of the rarefaction of the atmosphere, being a little less than 140 miles an hour.

Peter was in a hurry. It was most desirable that the mountains should be crossed well before dark. Apart from the risk of crashing blindly against one of the many almost vertical peaks, there were the dangerous air-pockets and eddies to be taken into consideration, and with the setting of the sun, and the consequent rapid cooling of the earth’s surface, the higher altitudes were certain to be disturbed by raging winds that attain the velocity of a hurricane.

For miles the ground rose steadily. Viewed from a height, the rise appeared to be gradual, since the smaller irregularities were apparently flattened out. It was only by judging by the shadows cast by the sun, which was now well down in the west, that the numerous valleys and ridges could be noticed.

For the first hundred miles, the country was well wooded. Then came a wide belt of grass land, gradually merging into an arid waste absolutely destitute of vegetation. The desert marked the beginning of the Sierras, which were now plainly visible at a distance of thirty or forty miles.

“Think she’ll do it before dark?” inquired Uncle Brian, glancing at the sun, now only about thirty degrees above the horizon.

“Rather,” replied Peter. “It will be quite light up here after the low-lying ground is in darkness. Once we’re above the peaks I don’t mind. It will be plain sailing after that.”

“If you’re sure of it, well and good,” rejoined Brian. “If not, we’d better make a landing while it is light.”

The youthful pilot shook his head.

“Twelve hours saved is twelve hours gained,” he said sagely. “I don’t want to spend another night in Rioguyan territory if it can be avoided. She’ll do it.”

Fifteen minutes later, a violent bump announced that the flying-boat had struck an air-pocket, a clear indication of the adverse conditions that awaited her above the snowy peaks of the Sierras. She dropped vertically for nearly a thousand feet in spite of the pilot’s efforts to counteract the sudden loss of “lift”. Then staggering blindly into the furthestmost wall of the invisible air chasm, the flying-boat “stalled” and almost stood on her tail, until she picked up and Peter was able to bring her back to her normal trim.

The next five minutes was a perfect nightmare. Above the snowy crags, now pink in the diffused rays of the setting sun, she sped, side-slipping, banking, and plunging, as if scorning the desperate efforts of the pilot to keep her up.

Once she nose-dived, flattened out, and made straight for a sheer wall of rock that a few seconds previously she ought to have cleared with a thousand feet to spare. Vainly Peter put the vertical rudders hard over. It seemed as if a collision was inevitable and that the shattered débris of the flying-boat would fall headlong into the fathomless chasm, when a side gust of terrific force hurled her, like a leaf, crab-fashion, so that she just scraped clear with a few feet between her port wing-tips and the pitiless face of the peak.

Then, propelled upwards by a freak air-current of irresistible strength, the flying-boat was hurled, like a sheet of paper up a tall chimney, between the perpendicular walls of a deep defile. So near did she scrape the summit of one of the twin peaks, that the rush of air dislodged a mass of snow, sending it thundering into the abyss, with a roar plainly audible within the supposedly sound-proof pilot's cabin.

Suddenly the roseate snow peaks gave place to a void of intense darkness. The crossing of the Sierras was accomplished. Ahead lay miles of country, sloping towards the Caribbean Sea, with nothing higher than three thousand feet to be encountered—at least, so the map read.

“We’re over!” exclaimed Peter thankfully, as the flying-boat settled down to her normal even style of flight.

“More by luck than by anything else,” thought Uncle Brian, who felt bruised and shaken all over.

“I’ll take her down to eight thousand feet,” continued Peter briskly. “Then I’ll get you to stand by, Uncle. There’s nothing to be done except to watch the altimeter and the compass. There’s no need to bust along now. We’ve ten hours of darkness in front of us and we don’t want to find ourselves miles out over the Atlantic when day breaks. I’ll cut out the after motors.”

In spite of the fact that the interior of the fuselage was heated by pipes connected with the exhausts, the air within the cabins was bitterly cold, and the temperature fell yet lower after the rear pair of motors was shut down.

Peter was now feeling very sleepy. Lack of proper rest, the excitement of the last two days, and the effect of the rarefied atmosphere all combined to



reduce him to a state of resistless drowsiness.

“You turn in,” said his uncle peremptorily. “I’m good for another ten hours, if needs must. If there’s anything requiring your attention, I’ll wake you.”

The elder man “took on”. Since the flying-boat was built largely after his designs, he was well acquainted with the technical part of the mechanism and construction, but he was quite a novice in the art of actual flight. As long as things went right, there was little for him to do.

Peter, wrapped in half a dozen blankets in addition to a leather flying-coat, was soon sound asleep in spite of the low temperature.

He had not slept for more than ten minutes when his uncle roused him.

“She’s faltering—both engines,” announced Uncle Brian laconically.

Peter rose stiffly to his feet. He had not the trained ear for mechanism that his uncle possessed, and as far as he could hear, the motors were still keeping up their rhythmic purr.

“Look at the gauge of the main fuel tank,” suggested Uncle Brian.

His nephew picked up an electric torch and made his way to the ‘midship compartment. He went sceptically enough, but on consulting the indicator, the state of the gauge fairly startled him. It stood at zero.

That meant that only one of the auxiliary tanks contained any kerosene, and owing to its position was useless unless the flying-boat was diving steeply or in an inverted position while “looping”.

The tanks were three-quarters full when the flying-boat had passed out of Rioguyan control; and since only a few hours had elapsed, it was a matter of impossibility for the four motors even running all out to “mop up” anything like the quantity that had gone somewhere.

A hasty examination revealed the cause of the leakage. A drain-cock was half open, allowing a steady stream of kerosene to flow into space. At first thoughts, Peter attributed the leakage to the Rioguyan mechanic, until he remembered that the fellow had been locked up when left alone on board.

But there was little time for speculation.

Hastening back to the control compartment, Peter found that the for’ard motors were now firing spasmodically. In a few moments they would cease functioning for lack of fuel, and then there was nothing to keep the flying-

boat from descending with fair rapidity. Her weight and relatively small plane-area were against her for prolonged gliding.

He touched his uncle on the shoulder and motioned him away from the controls.

“Luck’s out this time,” he said grimly. “It’s a thundering big drop in the dark.”

## CHAPTER XVI

### “Crashed”

Peter had barely resumed charge, when the motors coughed and stopped. A deadly silence succeeded the purr of the engines, since the rush of air past the metal planes was inaudible within the sound-proof compartment.

It was the pilot's chief concern to keep the flying-boat up as long as possible. It was entirely beyond reason to suppose that the gliding would be prolonged till dawn, but the longer the aircraft kept up the better, since there would be more time to make preparations for the forced landing.

Planing as nearly in a horizontal direction as possible for two minutes, was followed by a short steep rise until the flying-boat seemed in danger of “stalling”. This manœuvre Peter repeated, knowing that for every hundred feet of vertical drop he could knock off twenty or more by the sudden leap against gravity.

For quite twenty minutes he held on, his hand dexterously manipulating the controls, while his eyes never left the altimeter and speed-indicator.

Meanwhile, Brian Strong was busy. Realizing that perhaps the flying-boat might be able to land on fairly even ground, he set about to prepare the electric head-lamp which could be trained in a vertical arc of fifteen degrees—enough to illuminate a sufficient length of ground before the machine came in contact with terra firma.

The searchlight was of the accumulator type. According to instructions issued to the Rioguyan airmen the batteries were to be kept fully charged; but when Brian tested the circuits he found that the accumulators had completely run down.

There remained the secondary head-lamp—a three-hundred candle-power acetylene-generated light.

Hoping against hope that this apparatus was in working order, Brian unfastened the lid of the generator. The acetylene chamber was full of perfectly dry carbide, but the water compartment was empty.

“How long can you give me?” asked Uncle Brian.

“Five minutes—ten, with luck,” was the reply.

Hurrying to the water-tank, Brian turned the tap. There was no flow.

“Has every tank in this confounded contraption run dry?” demanded Brian. Then the solution of the mystery dawned upon him. The water in the tank was frozen into a solid block.

Had the motors been water-cooled a way out of the difficulty would have been simple; but being air-cooled no help was forthcoming from them.

Seizing a spanner, Uncle Brian vigorously attacked the six nuts securing the circular plate on the top of the water-tank. The cover removed, he hacked at the ice until he was able to gather a double handful of chips of frozen water. These he placed in a can and held them over the still warm cylinders of one of the motors until the vessel contained about a pint of fluid.

“Look sharp!” shouted Peter. “We can’t be much more than a thousand feet up.”

Working feverishly, Brian poured the water into the generator, turned on the needle-valve to its fullest extent, and applied a match to the triple fish-tail burners. With a mild explosion the gas ignited, and the powerful beam flashed out into the night.

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Peter, aghast, for the bright white light was playing on a solid substance less than four hundred yards away—the steeply rising face of a formidable mountain peak. Only a few seconds separated the flying-boat from an end-on crash.

Putting the vertical rudders hard over, Peter literally jerked the machine round, tilting her to an angle of nearly sixty degrees as he did so.

Unprepared, Uncle Brian lost his balance and fell violently against the lee-side of the compartment. Before he could regain his feet, the flying-boat pancaked and crashed.

Peter had a brief vision of the nose crumpling up and the under-carriage being forced through the steel floor of the fuselage. Then the long slender body rose until the tail was almost vertical. The pilot, hurled against the instrument-board, lost all interest in the immediately subsequent proceedings.

Brian Strong came off fairly lightly.

Owing to the circumstance that he was lying inertly upon the floor—for after his first attempt to rise he had philosophically abandoned further effort—he had escaped being flung headlong against the bulkhead. As it was, he found himself lying on the ground with wreckage on either side of him—while within two yards of his feet were the remains of the acetylene headlight, with a flare of vivid white light leaping twenty feet into the air.

“Never did think much of those acetylene lamps,” he remarked to himself, and tried to puzzle out by what means he found himself where he was.

It was indeed fortunate that the fuel supply of the flying-boat—there were about twenty gallons in the lowermost tank—was non-inflammable when released from pressure; had it been ordinary petrol the wreckage would have been a mass of molten metal and the two airmen would have been burnt to ashes.

Still muttering incoherently, Uncle Brian sat up and rubbed his head vigorously.

“Where am I?” he demanded.

He dug his hands into the ground. It was fine sand. He sniffed at it, half expecting to find it salt like the sand of the seashore.

Still puzzled, he watched the strongly-burning acetylene until the glare was too much for his eyes. He turned his head, but was unable to discern a single object.

Then he crawled, like a stricken animal, away from the light, until a mass of twisted steel plating impeded his progress.

“There’s been a most unholy smash,” he declared solemnly.

Gradually coherent reasoning returned to him. Strangely enough he completely forgot that Peter had been with him in the crash. His chief thoughts were for the safety of the essential parts of the secret-ray apparatus. Those placed in a locker in the flying-boat were probably smashed, but there remained the most important object of all—the delicate valve which he had hidden in an empty cartridge case.

Almost feverishly he tore open his leather greatcoat and felt for the cartridge-belt that had been his constant companion from the time he left El Toro. With trembling fingers he extracted the small glass phial and held it up to the light. Then he gave a gulp of relief and satisfaction. The delicate filament and the minute and complex mechanism were intact.

“Hello, Uncle! Taking a blood test?”

Brian Strong turned at the sound of the well-known voice. Walking unsteadily towards him was Peter Corbold.

His nephew was still wearing his flying-coat and helmet, which he had put on merely for the sake of warmth. The coat was rent in half a dozen places, while the left side of his face was red with blood welling from a cut on the forehead.

Peter’s period of insensibility had been of short duration. Thrown clear of the wreckage after his impact with the instrument-board, he had got off with a nasty bruise on the forehead. The padded helmet had saved his skull from being fractured, but the blow had been sufficient to cause the blood to flow freely. His head was whirling, he felt horribly sick and as weak as a kitten, yet he could not repress a facetious remark upon seeing his relative so absorbed in his precious invention.

“We’re here,” continued Peter. “But where, goodness only knows. What’s your damage, Uncle Brian? Wasn’t it a jolly old crash? It reminds me of a song we used to yell in the gun-room of the old *Baffin*: ‘She bumped as she’d never bumped before.’ ”

“And never will again,” added Uncle Brian with emphasis. “What’s to be done now?”

“Sleep till the morning,” replied the practical Peter. “My head’s buzzing like a top. There’s a chunk of the old ’bus that will make quite a decent bunk. I vote we turn in.”

Eight hours later Peter awoke to find the sun shining brightly. His headache had vanished and—good sign—he felt ravenously and healthily hungry.

Uncle Brian was still sleeping soundly. Peter let him sleep. It would give him an opportunity to take stock of the locality.

Throwing off his blankets and greatcoat, for the heat of the sun was oppressive, Peter emerged from his retreat and stood blinking in amazement in the dazzling light—sheer amazement at their marvellous escape.

The wrecked flying-boat was practically in the centre of a circular patch of sand and gravel about three-quarters of a mile in diameter. On all sides rose rugged mountains with precipitous faces in places rising sheer to a height of at least two thousand feet.

The plain was almost dead level and absolutely destitute of verdure. No sign of life was visible. The flying-boat had struck a snag in the form of a mass of rock about four feet in height and less than a couple of yards in circumference. Otherwise, the sandy waste was free from irregularities. It would have been an ideal landing-ground, for the sand was fairly hard; and it was certainly a case of sheer hard luck that the machine should have wrecked herself on the only dangerous bit of ground in the extensive circle.

On the other hand, it was a rare slice of good fortune that had accompanied the flying-boat on her downward glide. She must have skimmed the summit of the encircling mountains with but a few feet to spare. In the darkness Peter had been in entire ignorance of the danger. Equally fortunate was the fact that the timely lighting of the acetylene head-lamp had enabled the pilot to escape crashing nose-on against the opposite wall of the huge basin of natural stone.

"We're here," decided Peter grimly. "We're here; but goodness only knows how we are going to get out. It's been a fine old smash-up. However, there's some consolation: the Rioguyan air fleet has lost one unit."

So severe had been the impact that both of the for'ard motors had broken away and lay quite fifteen yards from the crumpled bows. The after portion of the fuselage had broken off short, forming with the buckled 'midship part an irregular, inverted "V". Four of the subsidiary fuel tanks had completely parted company with the hull, while the steel water-tank had burst from its securing bonds and now rested bottom upwards upon the sand. The tank was practically intact, but, since Uncle Brian had not had time to replace the cover after chipping the ice, the precious contents had drained into the parched ground. The outstanding feature was the sight of the two rear propellers, both intact, standing up like flaming crosses as the sunlight glinted upon the polished metal blades.

"And we're a long way from the sea," exclaimed Peter aloud.

"Did I hear anyone say 'tea'?" inquired Uncle Brian, from the depths of his temporary sleeping compartment. "If so, many thanks."

"You didn't," replied his nephew. "There's nothing doin' in that line, I'm afraid. No water to be had."

"That's a rotten look-out," said Uncle Brian, as he emerged from his retreat. With his bruised features, torn clothing, and staggering gait, he looked more like a dissipated tramp than an engineering expert.

He glanced at the débris, then at the mountain barrier.

“The old horse jibbed at that fence, Peter,” he added. “It’ll mean padding the hoof for us, I fancy. Any grub going?”

Scrambling over a litter of steel sheets, Peter dived into the débris that remained of the ’midship part of the flying-boat. After hunting about for some time, he discovered the oddly assorted contents of the provision-room. He managed to rescue a couple of tins of pressed beef, a loaf made of maize, and a bottle of soda water—the sole survivor of nearly four dozen.

“Enough here for the present,” he announced, as he crawled out. “We shan’t starve if we can carry enough away with us.”

The frugal meal was eaten in silence. Uncle Brian produced a spirit flask, half filled with brandy. Pouring about a couple of tablespoonfuls of soda water into the metal cup, he handed it to his companion.

“Your liquid ration, Peter,” he said solemnly. “We’ll have to make it last out till we find water.”



## CHAPTER XVII

### The Passage Perilous

No time was lost in making preparations for the long trek. Each man had to carry as much as he possibly could without impeding his movements. Uncle Brian took the remaining parts of the secret-ray apparatus, which he discovered lying in the sand undamaged and still in the haversack. The rest of his load consisted of a rifle and ammunition, a blanket and waterproof sheet, and about ten pounds of foodstuffs. Peter loaded himself up with his sleeping-bag, twenty pounds of provisions, the liquid compass from the flying-boat, a coil of light line, his automatic, matches, and—in anticipation of finding water—an empty water-bottle with slings attached.

“We shan’t have to do very much climbing to get out of this,” declared Uncle Brian. “And I shall be very disappointed if we don’t find water within an hour or two. At one time this place was a mountain lake. The water has drained away—where? Not through the sand, because it’s a certainty that the bed of the lake was hard rock similar to the surrounding mountains. It flowed away through a canyon. If we find the canyon we find our way of escape.”

Peter agreed, but up to the present there was not the slightest visible sign of a gorge. The enclosing wall of rock seemed continuous, without a rift lower than five hundred feet above the plain.

Progress was slow. The sand, although tolerably firm, was hard going. The heat of the sun, coupled with the weight of their burdens, distressed both men severely.

Presently they came to a shallow depression resembling a North American gulch or a South African drift, only bone-dry. At one time it had been a watercourse. The bed was littered with small stones.

Uncle Brian stooped, picked up one of the rough pebbles, and examined it.

“Would you like to be rich beyond the dreams of avarice, Peter?” he asked. “If so, load up. These are rough diamonds.”

His nephew looked incredulous. He half suspected that the sun, following the concussion of the crash, had affected his uncle's brain.

"Fact," continued Brian Strong. "The quantity of diamonds here would make the De Beer's reserve look silly in comparison. We'll take a few—just a few—to support our statement, should we be lucky enough to come through. Personally, I'd rather have a pint of pure water at the present time. . . . Enough, Peter! Don't sacrifice mobility to cupidity. Later on, perhaps."

In his present state of mind, Peter, once he was convinced of the sincerity of his uncle's announcement, was not greatly impressed by the magnitude of the discovery. The mere fact that untold wealth lay at his feet was as nothing compared with his anxiety to get clear of the mountain-enclosed arena. He hardly doubted his ability to find a way out; but it was the long and tedious tramp that rather appalled him. The change from speedy flying to a trudge afoot at two and a half miles an hour, when time was of the utmost importance, was a disconcerting prospect.

"There's an outlet," declared Uncle Brian, pointing to a bluff that even at a short distance merged into the sombre greyness of the mountainous wall. "We'll find a gorge close to it."

"Let's hope so," added Peter.

"There must be some egress," continued Uncle Brian. "At some time—centuries ago—when this place was a lake—the overflow escaped in a northerly direction. Why? Because to the south'ard are the Sierras, which form a watershed between Rioguary and Venezuelan territory. For some reason—an earthquake, most likely—the feeders dried up or were diverted. Consequently, the lake ran dry. Yes, here we are."

The cleft was so narrow that there was barely room for the two men to walk abreast. The walls, up to a height of thirty feet, were quite smooth, bearing evidence of the friction of sand and water for countless ages. Above that height they were rugged and irregular, so that in many places the sky was completely shut out from view.

For nearly a hundred yards they progressed with tolerable ease. Then the gorge contracted to such an extent that Peter's broad shoulders were rubbing against either wall. Once or twice he had to turn sideways and drag his pack after him.

"Hope it isn't going to be a blind alley!" he exclaimed.

“Never fear,” declared Uncle Brian encouragingly. “The floor is on the down-grade all the time. That’s a sure indication that——”

“We’re done this trip!” interrupted his nephew. “There’s been a fall of rock.”

In the subdued light the defile appeared to terminate abruptly in a barrier of enormous stones, some of which must have weighed at least a thousand tons, rising to quite seventy feet.

“Fallen recently,” commented Peter. “By jove! If there’s another smash-up, we’ll either be flattened out, or trapped. Let’s go back!”

Uncle Brian deliberately unburdened himself of his load.

“Let me get past you,” he said. “Before we talk of going back, I’ll make a brief examination. H’m, yes! Recent fall, eh? You’re wrong, Peter. That mass of rock probably subsided a thousand years ago. The dryness of the atmosphere accounts for the fresh-looking stone.”

“Possibly,” rejoined Peter, “but that isn’t of much consequence to us, is it? It doesn’t make our job any easier. I might be able to scramble up and lower the rope for you.”

“No climbing for me, thank you,” replied his uncle. “I’m going to crawl under.”

He pointed to a small cavity, barely two feet in height and triangular in section, between two masses of stone inclined one to the other.

“You can’t possibly,” began Peter.

“Can’t I?” retorted his uncle. “Wait till we shift some of the sand. It may be ten feet deep, but it has accumulated since this rock fell. The stone is quite smooth. . . . Just come here a minute and kneel down. I fancied I saw daylight; do you?”

Peter looked through the narrow tunnel. Sure enough, at about fifty feet away, he could discern the farther end of the horizontal shaft.

“No need to dig,” he declared. “Stand by. I’ll crawl through and pay out the rope.”

It was a nerve-racking experience. Notwithstanding Uncle Brian’s assurance as to the well-established nature of the barrier, Peter was haunted by the dread that the wall of the tunnel might subside; and when about half-way through, he had grave doubts whether he could wriggle past a

particularly narrow section. At any rate, there he was. He could not turn to crawl back. He simply had to go on, or get stuck.

With his heart figuratively in his mouth, the perspiration pouring down his face, his hands and knees raw with the friction of the sand, Peter continued his way, turning on his side in order to negotiate a couple of narrow places where the rocks protruded.

“Worse than the double bottoms of a battleship, any old time,” he soliloquized. “Now, if I butt into a particularly venomous snake at the far end—that will be the limit!”

At length Peter emerged from the tunnel, rose to his feet, and drew in a copious draught of fresh air.

“Through!” he shouted.

“Right-o!” sang out his uncle. “Steady on while I finish with the gear. . . . Now then, haul away!”

Peter began to haul in the line. It was heavy work, for at the other end was attached the baggage belonging to both men, Brian Strong’s haversack with its precious contents being secured for safety within the folds of the blankets and sleeping-bag.

“Good thing the rope’s new,” thought Peter, carefully coiling away the line as he hauled it in. “If it did part half-way through there’d be a fine old lash-up!”

Presently an increased tension of the rope announced that the load was passing the narrowest part of the tunnel, which was about fifteen feet from the end. Then there was a sudden jam. Something had fouled, and the whole of the gear was wedged tightly, forming a formidable barrier between Peter and his relative.

In vain the former heaved and hauled. He could hear Uncle Brian plaintively inquiring when he would be able to crawl through.

“There’s no help for it,” decided Peter. “I’ll have to go in again and clear the lash-up.”

He did not relish the task, but it had to be done. The journey through had been bad enough, but now, although the distance was much shorter, he was additionally hampered by the fact that he was working in utter darkness and that the baggage, filling the height and breadth of the tunnel, considerably interfered with the air supply.

Peter realized the possibility of having to cast off the rope and remove each bundle separately—a task entailing at least half a dozen trips into the shaft.

Fortunately this was spared him; for on feeling cautiously, he discovered the cause of the “block”. The rifle had come unhitched and, swinging round until the muzzle caught the projecting rock, had jammed the whole contraption. It was a fairly simple matter to release the rifle and drag it into the open. Then the rest of the gear was hauled out with comparative ease.

“All clear,” shouted Peter again.

Brian Strong made the passage quickly and easily. As a mining engineer, he was used to crawling through narrow passages. Had it been a case of making their way aloft to the fire-control platform of a battleship in a heavy sea-way, Peter would have won easily; but as a tunnel crawler, he admitted unhesitatingly that he did not shine.

For the next mile, it was fairly easy going. The floor of the ravine was wider, but the height of the walls correspondingly higher. Here and there were pieces of rock that had become dislodged and had fallen, half buried in the sand. Once a stone as big as a man’s head came hurtling down within twenty paces of them.

The end of the chasm was now in sight, but they were not yet out of danger or difficulty. At about four hundred yards from the end their progress was arrested by a single slab of rock about ten feet in height that completely obstructed the passage.

This time there was no tunnel. The only way was to climb over.

“I’ll give you a leg up, Uncle,” suggested Peter. “Then I’ll send up the gear and swarm up by the rope.”

He took up his stand close to the rock and was about to bend down to enable Uncle Brian to clamber on his back, when his boot came in contact with something hard, buried a few inches under the sand. As he trod on it, it gave with a rasping sound.

“Hello!” he exclaimed. “What’s this?”

With the toe of his boot, he pushed aside the covering layer of sand, revealing a rusty breast-plate. Grasping the metal, he pulled it up. It came quite easily, disclosing a number of human bones lying on the backpiece of a suit of mail. A short distance away was a steel morion, together with fragments of a skull.

The discovery roused Peter's interest far more than had the sight of the diamond-studded sand.

"We're not the first people to find the gorge," he remarked. "How old is this, do you think, Uncle?"

"Seventeenth century or late sixteenth," replied Brian Strong. "The lace-holes in the breast-plate prove that. A Spaniard, I should imagine. He was crushed by the rock. I don't suppose he was alone. We may have walked over the bodies of his comrades buried underneath the sand."

"It would be interesting to know——" began Peter, then he broke off suddenly, adding, "Come on, let's get clear of this rotten hole as fast as we can."

Half an hour later, they emerged from the canyon. Ahead stretched a seemingly endless expanse of trackless forest; behind them, the mountains.

"There's bound to be water down there," said Brian. "And if there's water, there's a stream. The stream becomes a river, and the river flows into the sea—in our case, the Caribbean. We'll have to skirt the fringe of the forest until we strike a stream."

This reasoning proved to be sound. It was not long before they came across a small rivulet gushing from the hillside.

This they followed, noting with satisfaction that it grew steadily in volume. For four days they kept to one of its banks, sometimes cutting a way through dense undergrowth, at others wading in the clear shallow stream. Wild animals they neither heard nor saw. Several times they had narrow escapes from poisonous reptiles. At night they were tormented by mosquitoes; by day they were almost knocked out by the moist, enervating heat. Their clothing was in rags, their boots cut almost to ribbons.

Yet they held doggedly on their way, living on short rations and sustained by the hope that every step brought them nearer to the sea, though there were no signs of approaching the outskirts of the forest.

On the fifth day, both men felt utterly done up. Too exhausted even to speak, they plodded on, until their progress was arrested by the stream flowing into a wide river, literally alive with caymans.

"Voices!" exclaimed Peter.

Both men listened intently.

Brian Strong shook his head.

“Imagination!” he replied briefly.

“ ’Fraid you’re right,” rejoined his companion disconsolately, but seized with an inspiration, he drew his automatic and fired two shots into the air.

A few minutes later, a dug-out canoe, manned by a dozen Indians, appeared round the bend of the river.

## CHAPTER XVIII

# Orders for Cavendish

“Commander wishes to see you, sir!”

Sub-lieutenant Havelock de Vere Cavendish—affectionately known to his brother-officers as “Weeds” and known to have answered readily to the sobriquet “Plug”—acknowledged the marine orderly’s announcement.

Cavendish was in a shore-billet—the Royal Naval Barracks at Portsmouth—having just completed a gunnery course at Whale Island. He was speculating upon what manner of craft his next ship would be. He rather fancied a destroyer, but would have been in no way surprised or disappointed if he were appointed to a light cruiser. He was not particularly keen on a battleship. That meant a two-years commission either in home waters or in the Mediterranean—and already, in his comparatively brief career, he had seen enough of Malta and Gib. to express a wish never to see either place again.

Life on a battleship in peace-time, he reflected, was apt to savour of boredom; on a destroyer there were discomforts, but on the whole there were compensations. It gave a fellow a chance to do something that would be impossible on a capital ship. A sub on a destroyer was a responsible person; on a battleship, he was one of a crowd.

For another reason, he was not altogether certain that he had done well in the gunnery course; but he *did* know that he had obtained a “first” in the torpedo course.

Cavendish unshipped his legs from the mess-room fender, threw the morning’s paper on the settee, and, after exchanging a jest with some of the other occupants, made his way to the commander’s office.

The marine orderly had given no indication of the reason for the interview. It was more than likely that he did not know. That left Cavendish speculating as to the possible reason for the “Bloke’s” wish to see him. As far as he knew, there was nothing “up against” him.

Discreetly he knocked at the door of the commander’s private room.



Commander Broadstairs was a typical officer of the present-day navy—clean-shaven, alert both physically and mentally, and with a certain brusqueness of manner that at times might be mistaken for churlishness. On the quarter-deck, he would reduce a truculent defaulter to a state of panic by a mere look. On duty he was a living example of discipline and order, both spelt with a capital letter. He knew by heart the whole of the “Sailors’ Bible”—the Admiralty Instructions. It was said that the men feared him more than they did the Commodore.

But when off duty, Commander Broadstairs’ mantle of routine was shed. He was just an ordinary, jovial fellow—a gentleman in the truest sense of the word. His popularity was not of his own seeking; it was acquired simply by his personality.

“Come in!” he shouted breezily. “Ah, there you are, Mr. Cavendish. Take a seat.”

He waved his hand in the direction of an arm-chair by the side of his large knee-hole desk.

The Sub sat down promptly enough. The fact that he, a very junior officer, had not been kept standing at attention, indicated the nature of the forthcoming interview. Probably it concerned the garrison sports, or the united services boxing tournament.

But Cavendish was well out of his reckoning.

“The Commodore has asked me to select a certain number of officers for a particular service,” began the Commander. “It occurred to me that for various reasons you would be a suitable candidate. It is, of course, optional whether you accept or otherwise, since it is a matter requiring great discretion and involving a certain amount of risk, not to say danger.”

The “Bloke” paused and fixed his eyes upon the young officer.

“Near East, for a dead cert,” thought Cavendish, then aloud he said, “I’m quite ready, sir.”

“You’d better wait until you’ve learnt more of the nature of the operations,” resumed the Commander, with a wry smile. “Let me see; you served a commission in the South American station, I believe?”

“Yes, sir; midshipman on the *Cyclax* in 1921-2.”

“You know the approaches to Bahia? And San Luiz? And Macapa? Good. Now, describe the anchorage off Port of Spain.”

“Weeds” did so, evidently to the Commander’s satisfaction.

“Do you know anything of the Rio Guaya?” continued his inquirer.

“No, sir,” replied Cavendish promptly. “We never put in there during the whole of the commission. But——”

He paused, thinking that what he was about to say was irrelevant.

“But what?”

“I know a fellow living out in Rioguary, sir. An old shipmate of mine. He went on the beach from the *Baffin*.”

“Name?”

“Peter Corbold, sir.”

“H’m; name’s familiar. Do you ever hear from him?”

“I had one letter, sir. I answered it—but I haven’t heard since.”

“What’s he doing out there?”

“Mining engineering, I think, sir. He mentioned an uncle in the same profession who had been in Rioguary for some time.”

The Commander started on another tack.

“The Admiralty have issued orders for the *Cynesephon* to be brought forward for commissioning,” he announced.

Cavendish sat bolt upright in the chair. Now he was beginning to grasp the drift of things. Hitherto, he had been groping blindly, trying to piece together the baffling questions which the Commander had put to him, in a vain endeavour to discover the nature of the hazardous duty hinted at.

He knew the *Cynesephon*. She was one of the “P” boats that in 1918 had been converted into a “Q” ship and altered to resemble a South American freighter. She was supposed to be the last word in mystery ships, but an opportunity to use her never arrived, owing to the Armistice.

For certain reasons she had not been scrapped. She was now lying in one of the basins at Portsmouth Dockyard, snugly moored between two battleships of the *Thunderer* class, which were permanently out of commission.

And now the *Cynesephon* was to be rescued from the scrap heap and reconditioned—why?

Putting two and two together—the commissioning of the *Cynesephon* and the Commander’s inquiries about Cavendish’s service on the South American station—the Sub made a shrewd guess.

For several days there had been reports of British ships bound to and from Brazilian and Argentine ports being overdue. Several of them had been posted at Lloyd’s as missing. At first, the general public hardly noticed the information, and until the Press gave prominence to the matter, few people outside the shipping circles had any idea of the persistent increase of the list of vessels overdue.

Then sprang up the usual crop of rumours—a pirate in the South Atlantic providing the favourite topic. Vessels of all nationalities had cleared South American ports and had made their various destinations. None of the masters had reported falling in with a suspicious craft; but it was an ominous fact that, without exception, the overdue vessels had sailed under the Red Ensign.

A question was raised in the House concerning the mysterious disappearance of so many ships, to which the First Lord made a reply that the Admiralty were considering the matter, but did not feel justified in sending H.M. ships, which were urgently required elsewhere, to investigate.

That reply was a “blind”. Already orders had been issued for the secret commissioning of the *Cynesephon* and the dispatch of the light cruiser *Basilikon* and the 35-knot destroyers *Messines* and *Armentières* to the West Indies.

“It is in connection with the missing merchantmen, sir?” asked Cavendish.

“You are right on the target, Mr. Cavendish,” said the Commander. “It is. The *Cynesephon* is to be fully manned by naval ratings, but the crew have to be disguised as merchant seamen. I need not emphasize the fact that this information is absolutely confidential. She will be detailed to cruise between Rio and Port of Spain in the hope that she will be mistaken for a cargo-boat. That is acting upon the supposition that there is a piratical vessel out. Personally, I think that some obscure South American republic has run *amok*. A light cruiser and a couple of destroyers will be within a hundred miles of the decoy ship, but you will understand that they will only be called to the *Cynesephon*’s assistance if she is in immediate danger of foundering. There is a great chance of her being sunk with all hands before the supporting vessels can arrive on the spot. Now, I think I’ve hinted enough for you to realize the nature of the operations. Are you a volunteer?”

“I am, sir,” was the ready response.

“I thought so,” rejoined the Commander. “Here are the names of your new skipper and the officers who have already volunteered. You know most of them, I believe. Well, that’s that. Use the greatest discretion. Remember, a chance word may wreck the whole business. And I don’t think I’d write to Corbold again if I were you—at least, until you return.”

The Commander held out his hand. Fifteen seconds later Sub-lieutenant Cavendish stood in the corridor, hardly able to realize his good fortune.

## CHAPTER XIX

# The Decoy Ship

That same afternoon, Sub-lieutenant Cavendish went on leave. That was the official version given out to his messmates. They saw him depart in a taxi, rigged out in mufti and with a prodigious amount of “kit” that suggested a “tidy drop o’ leaf”.

Cavendish’s home was in the Midlands, within a few miles of Grantham—but that was not his objective. Two hours later, he put up at a modest hotel in Southampton, patronized almost exclusively by Master Mariners of the Mercantile Marine.

The next day he joined the S.S. *Complex* at Southampton Docks as Third Officer.

The *Complex* was a tramp of 570 tons displacement, belonging to the port of Grimsby, if the information painted on her stern were correct. She was 230 feet in length. She had the usual raised fo’c’sle and poop, with deckhouses and bridge amidships just for’ard of her solitary funnel. Her fore- and mainmasts were of the “pole” type, with the customary appendages in the shape of derricks.

She was under orders for Buenos Ayres with a cargo consisting principally of cork.

The tramp resembled her kind in the matter of paint. Her sides were supposed to be black, but there were several irregular patches of red-lead, and broad streaks of iron rust. Her crew, rigged out in nondescript garments, were still stowing cargo. She had raised steam and the Blue Peter fluttered from the foremast head.

But, although her topsides were disreputable, the same could not be said of her hull below the water-line. The bottom had recently been coated with dull-grey anti-fouling composition, her owners being evidently of the opinion that it was false economy to pay for extra fuel simply to drive a barnacle-encrusted hull through the water.

Checking an almost irresistible impulse to salute the quarter-deck as he came over the gangway, Cavendish went aft to report to the “Old Man”, who was standing at the head of the poop-ladder, rigged out in blue cloth trousers, waistcoat with tarnished brass buttons, and a cap bearing a salt-stained badge of a well-known shipping firm, perched awry on his close-cropped head. He was in his shirt sleeves. A very seasoned black briar pipe was between his strong, even teeth.

“Hello, Weeds!” exclaimed the Old Man; “so you fetched here all right? You’ll find Seton and Carr down below. They’ll tell you where your cabin is. ’Fraid you won’t find it very ship-shape, old thing.”

A sailor came slouching aft.

“Beg pardon, sir!” he announced with a *pukka* naval salute. “There’s a Board of Trade chap come to see you.”

Captain Meredith gave a gesture of annoyance. It was decidedly unhealthy to have too many officious shore-people on board.

“All right,” he replied. “And look here, Johnson, can’t you remember not to give salutes? Or must I send you back to the Depot?”

The man grinned and went off.

“That’s one of my hardest jobs,” commented the Old Man. “Trying to make an A.B. forget what has been drilled into him from the first day he joined at Shotley. And look here, Weeds, you’re not a credit to the ship. Your rig-out is just a trifle too smart and too new. Try toning it down with a little tar.”

Captain Meredith hurried off to interview the Board of Trade Inspector, leaving Cavendish to his own resources on the deck of the S.S. *Complex*.

Only the previous day the *Complex* had come out of Portsmouth Harbour as the *Cynesephon*. She had been hurriedly docked, her bottom cleaned and coated in less than six hours. Her armament, consisting of one 4.7, four 12-pounders, and a couple of 3-pounder high-angle guns, had in the dead of night been placed in their elaborately concealed mountings. Her holds and double-bottoms were packed tightly with cork; ammunition, stores, and oil fuel were placed on board, and with a naval crew, she was taken out of Portsmouth to the Motherbank, off Ryde.

Here the uniformed crew were taken off by a Government tug—leaving only twenty “hands” under a couple of officers to take the ship round to Southampton.

Almost their first act was to paint out the name *Cynesephon* and substitute that of *Complex*.

Cavendish went below. In the alley-way he encountered Robin Seton, whom, until that moment, Cavendish had imagined to be undergoing a course at “Whaley”—a “two and a half striper”, now posing as the first officer of the tramp.

“Cheerio, George!” was Seton’s greetings. “Now our little band of merry wreckers is complete. Seen Carr and Warrender? They’re sculling around somewhere. My word!”

He stepped back and critically looked Cavendish up and down.

“My word!” he continued. “I’ve never seen such a smart-looking Third Mate before.”

“So the Old Man remarked—or words to that effect,” rejoined Cavendish, with a laugh. “No matter. Live and learn. Where did you pick up your rig-out?”

Seton held open his coat for inspection.

“Got kitted out in the Ditches for something like half a dozen Bradburys,” he replied proudly. “Sent the gunner’s mate along to make a deal. And he did. He knows the ropes.”

Cavendish wished that he had known of the gunner’s mate’s capabilities in the wardrobe department. He had laid out over twenty-five pounds in an outfit that had already been twice remarked upon as being out of place. He quite agreed that the hardest part of the job was not to be smart, and to forget that he was an officer of the Royal Navy.

The Sub was shown his cabin. He reappeared twenty minutes later looking more his part.

The *Complex* was under way. She had just parted company with a fussy little tug that had coaxed, cajoled, pulled, and pushed her out of the Empress Dock. Southampton lay astern, the Weston Shelf buoy was broad on the port-beam, while ahead lay the wide stretch of Southampton Water, until it merged into the Solent beyond the airship sheds at Calshot Castle.

There was plenty of traffic, from gigantic ocean liners to steam-lighters and “spreeties”—low-lying barges with a generous spread of tanned canvas. Tramp steamers, topsail schooners, steam, motor, and sailing yachts, tugs, “hoppers”, and fishing-smacks passed in endless procession, little knowing

the venomous nature of the little *Complex* as she ploughed her way through the calm water at a modest nine knots.

It was Alec Carr, the navigator, who showed Cavendish round the ship. Carr, a burly, six feet two inch giant, hailing from North Berwick, was the man for that job. He, like the Captain, knew the ship from end to end, since both had served in a similar craft during the later stages of the Great War.

The transformation had been an astounding one. From a long, low-lying “P” boat, she had been altered into a very presentable tramp, looking at least of 1500 tons, although her actual displacement was little more than one-third of that tonnage. Yet she retained the speed and high manœuvring qualities of her original rôle. She could work up to 23 knots when required, could turn almost in her own length and with the minimum of “tactical advance”. She could go astern at 18 knots, while her nominal fuel capacity of 93 tons could be augmented sufficiently to give her a cruising distance of 4000 miles without replenishing her oil tanks.

For armament, she was adequately provided with weapons calculated to deal with anything short of a cruiser. The 4.7-inch gun was housed in the fore-hold, the gun and its mounting being raised when required by hydraulic pressure. On either side of the deck-house under the bridge was a 12-pounder, each concealed by a section of the dummy bulwarks, while by lowering two of the wings of the deck-house an arc of fire of 160° could be obtained. Two more were as skilfully concealed aft, while the 6-pounders were mounted in boats stowed on top of the deck-house abaft the mainmast. The boats were dummies, constructed to fall apart by means of hinges and quick-release gear.

In addition she carried four 14-inch torpedo tubes of the “submerged” type, and a couple of mortars for discharging depth charges at a range of two hundred yards.

The “P-boat’s” original conning-tower was still in existence, although, owing to the new superstructure, its sphere of usefulness was considerably curtailed. Another had been built for’ard.

Cavendish walked right round the latter and never spotted it. Outwardly, nothing was to be seen but a big reel of wire hawser. The reel was a dummy, being actually the hood of the armoured conning-tower.

“See the idea?” inquired Carr. “If, by a bit of luck, we do fall in with a pirate, he’ll start shelling the bridge. We found that with Fritz. Let him shell. There’ll be no one there, and from this little box of tricks our skipper can



keep an eye on him until he decides it's time to put him in his place—to wit, Davy Jones his locker.”

“What’s your opinion about the loss of these merchant vessels?” asked Cavendish.

Carr shook his head.

“Ask me another,” he replied. “That’s what we’re sent to find out.”

The *Complex* was now well down the Solent. Yarmouth<sup>[1]</sup> was on the port bow, Lymington to starboard, and the high light of Hurst right ahead, rising like a needle out of the sun-flecked water.

A light cruiser, with her distinguishing signals displayed and a commodore’s broad pennant flying from the masthead, came pelting along, passing the decoy ship a cable’s length to port. The *Complex* dipped her ragged, smoke-begrimed Red Ensign.

Carr and Cavendish exchanged glances.

[1] In the Isle of Wight.

“I was expecting the ‘Still’ to sound,” declared the former. “Wonder what Old Man Meredith thought of it all?”

As a matter of fact, Captain Meredith, D.S.O. (with bar), had almost given himself away, and his vessel as well, by ordering the strangely-garbed crew to attention. To deliberately ignore a commodore’s broad pennant was the most trying experience he had had that day, which was saying a lot.

“Think we’ll have any luck?” asked Cavendish, reverting to the burning topic of the hour—the hoped-for meeting with an as yet mythical pirate.

“Goodness knows,” replied Carr. “I trust so. ’Tany rate, whether we’re up against a submarine or a commerce destroyer, we’ll give ’em a thundering good run for their money.”

For the next few days, all hands were busily engaged in rehearsing for the forthcoming show. Every member of the crew took up his cue with zest, confident that should occasion arise they would play their part to the utmost satisfaction of the navy generally, and themselves in particular, and to the complete discomfiture of the enemy—whoever or whatever he might be.

The drills took two distinct forms. The first was that of countering an attack by a surface ship. In this case, with the exception of a few hands leaning idly over the bulwarks and a couple of officers on the bridge, the

crew were at action stations and carefully hidden from external observation. Right aft, crouching in a steel shelter made to resemble a skylight, was a seaman holding the uncleated halliards of the ensign staff. It was his duty, on hearing the “action” gong, to strike the Red Ensign and substitute the White. Simultaneously, all gun-screens were to be lowered and every gun that could be trained on the target was to open fire, while below the water-line the L.T.O.’s stood by the torpedo tubes ready to launch the deadly missiles on an invisible objective; the direction of the “run” being governed by controls from the conning-tower.

Should the piratical craft turn out to be a submarine, the procedure was of an entirely different nature. The enemy might approach submerged and torpedo her prey. In that event, the “panic-party” would make a wild rush for the boats. One of the boats would be purposely lowered by one of the falls only, so that it would tumble bows on into the water. The “abandon ship” stunt would then be carried out, the men in the boats rowing desperately from the sinking ship.

“’Ere you—bow an’ number three,” bellowed the coxswain. “Stop grinnin’. You ain’t a bloomin’ picnic party. Look as if you was scared stiff. No! Don’t for goodness’ sake pull together. You ain’t pullin’ for the Squadron Cup. You’re supposed to be goin’ for dear life. Pull any’ow, as if Old Nick were in the perishin’ boat.”

The rest of the decoy ship’s crew were at action stations, supposedly on a foundering vessel, although ’twas to be expected that even if torpedoed the *Complex* would keep afloat by reason of the “cargo” of cork. There, prone in their places of concealment, unable to see what was going on, they had to wait until the submarine appeared awash and on a suitable bearing for the guns to be brought into action.

If the submarine declined to investigate and the *Complex* was really sinking, there was nothing for the crew of the latter to do but to abandon ship in earnest and trust that a wireless message to the destroyers perhaps a hundred miles away would bring succour and perhaps retribution, should the lurking enemy be located by aerial observation from co-operating seaplanes.

Then, again, there was the chance of the submarine coming to the surface and shelling the *Complex* at long range. That was the most trying situation of all. The supposed tramp had to withhold her fire and take her gruelling without replying. The only thing to be done was to stop engines, start a fire on board, and, by flooding the for’ard water-tight compartments, give the impression that she was sinking by the bows. Then arose the

question: would the submarine close sufficiently for the decoy ship's guns to bear and fire with fatal consequence to her foe? For the *Complex* to reveal herself as a formidably armed warship and at the same time to allow the submarine to get away, was the worst thing that could happen. To destroy was the *Complex's* mission; anything short of that meant failure—glorious failure, perhaps, but none the less futile.

Sub-lieutenant Cavendish's action station was by the two after 12-pounders, his duty being to keep the enemy under observation through a periscope. The latter was cleverly disguised as a galley-funnel. The post was a hazardous one—rather more than the rest. Since the *Complex*, if shelled by a submarine, had to simulate flight, the after part of the ship would bear the brunt of things. Then it was quite possible that the depth-charges might be exploded by shell-fire and blow the poop and everyone near it to smithereens.

Cavendish had to admit, with a shivering sensation in the region of his spine, that Commander Broadstairs' hint of the dangerous nature of the mission for which the Sub had volunteered was by no means an exaggeration.

## CHAPTER XX

# Two Against One

Once clear of the “chops of the Channel” the *Complex* had increased her pace to a good eighteen knots. In due course, she arrived at the Bermudas and replenished her fuel tanks at the Admiralty yard—taking advantage of a privilege accorded to merchant vessels seeking assistance from Government resources.

The light cruiser *Basilikon* and her attendant destroyers *Messines* and *Armentières* had preceded her, and were lying off the town of Hamilton. They knew what she was, she knew what they were there for, but no sign of recognition passed between the rusty-sided tramp and her spick-and-span consorts.

Continuing her voyage, the *Complex* sighted nothing conspicuous. Without incident, she arrived at Bahia, where she received telegraphic orders from her imaginary owners to proceed to Savannah to unload.

Accordingly, she turned her head to the nor’ard, and, at a modest eight knots, proceeded to invite the as yet mythical pirate to “tread on the tail of her coat”.

Several days passed. No calls from distressed vessels were received. Ships of all nations were passing on their lawful occasions without let or hindrance. Cape St. Roque, the north-easternmost point of Brazil, had been passed on the port hand, and a course shaped north-west by west to enable the decoy ship to keep within a hundred miles of the coast.

At one bell in the first Dog-watch on the day following, Cavendish, who was on duty as officer of the watch, heard the look-out report “vessel on the port bow, sir.”

The Sub brought his binoculars to bear upon the vessel in question. She was quite five miles off and apparently on a course practically the same as that of the *Complex*.

In spite of the purposely slow speed of the latter, the *Complex* gained rapidly on the stranger, and presently Cavendish saw that she was not

making way and that she was flying the N.C.—the international signal requesting immediate assistance. The glasses also revealed the information that the vessel was a tramp, flying the Red Ensign and bearing the name *Holton Heath*—*London* on her counter.

In response to a message from the officer of the watch, Captain Meredith was quickly on the bridge.

“No wireless from her?” inquired the owner.

“No, sir.”

“H’m, that’s remarkable, very. Action stations. We can’t afford to take risks of this description. . . . Signalman?”

“Sir?”

“Stand by with the International Code flags,” continued the Skipper. “Don’t be too smart in making the hoists. Ask ’em what’s wrong.”

Stealthily the crew went to action stations, allowing no chance of their presence being visible to anyone on board the *Holton Heath*. Leaving Carr and Cavendish on the bridge, Meredith went below, made his way for’ard by means of the specially provided armoured alley-way, and gained the fo’c’sle conning-tower.

Meanwhile, the *Holton Heath* had made her number correctly and had given the information that her mainshaft had been broken. Could she be taken in tow?

Carr reported the request from voice tube to Captain Meredith.

“Round-to under her stern,” ordered the Captain. “Don’t hurry, I want to have a good look at her. Reply, ‘I will take you in tow’.”

The *Complex* was manœuvred according to orders. Half a dozen hands went aft, ready to receive and secure the hawser to the towing-bitts. The Captain of the *Holton Heath* stepped to the starboard side of the bridge and waved an acknowledgment.

Presently Captain Meredith’s voice-pipe whistle sounded.

“Ay, ay, sir,” replied Cavendish.

“She seems jonnick,” said the Skipper, in a somewhat disappointed tone. “We’ll take her hawser. Pass the word for a hand to stand by the Senhouse slip, in case we want to cast off in a hurry.”

The Sub leant over the bridge-rail to give the order to one of the deck-hands, when his eye caught sight of the wake of a torpedo rapidly approaching the now almost stationary *Complex*. It was coming, not from the *Holton Heath*, but from a submerged source broad on the *Complex's* beam.

Cavendish watched it like one in a trance. His parched throat refused to utter a warning. For days he had expected this to happen. He had hoped it would, and now, this being the first time that he had experienced the sight of a live torpedo approaching, he found that it was a totally different experience from watching a “tinfoil” being discharged *from* the ship, and he was dumbfounded.

Too late he recalled the special orders given in anticipation of such an occurrence—orders which he and every other executive officer in the ship had countersigned—that in the event of a torpedo being sighted as fired from a submerged submarine, no effort was to be made to *avoid* the impact. On the other hand, the ship must be brought to meet it, so that the torpedo would strike anywhere except in the vicinity of the engine-room. In brief, the decoy ship was to sacrifice herself in the almost certain hope that, before she sank, the enemy would reveal himself and fall a victim to her guns.

Tardily, Cavendish jumped to the engine-room telegraph and rang for “easy astern”. Before the order could be acted upon, the torpedo hit the *Complex* twenty feet abaft the bridge, against the starboard engine-room. There was a terrific report. A column of water was thrown violently into the air to a height of nearly two hundred feet, mingled with smoke, oil, and pieces of cork and shattered timber. The *Complex* heeled rapidly to port, then, recovering slightly, lay well over on her starboard side, and the engine- and boiler-rooms were flooded by the irresistible inrush of water.

In view of the suddenness of the attack, coming from a totally unexpected quarter, it would not have been surprising had the *Complex* unmasked her guns and thus revealed her identity.

But nothing of the sort happened. Not a man of the concealed crew started to his feet. Discipline—perfect order—prevailed; all on board, with the exception of three victims of the explosion who had already “slipped their cables”, remaining alert, awaiting their Captain’s orders.

Undoubtedly, it was a complex situation, and one for which no adequate provision had been made.

Cavendish, now that the explosion had taken place, was wondering what he ought to do. Should he order away the panic-party? If he did, they would be obliged, for appearance's sake, to make for the *Holton Heath*. But was she what she purported to be? Or was she acting in consort with the still unseen submarine?

“If,” reasoned the Sub, “if she’s a British merchantman, why did the submarine waste a torpedo on us when she had an easy victim of about three times our tonnage?”



THE "PANIC PARTY"

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Similar thoughts were flashing across the mind of the imperturbable Captain Meredith.



“Order away the panic party, officer of the watch,” he shouted per voice-tube. For the present he would ignore the submarine and keep the *Holton Heath* under observation, he decided.

The latter vessel had swung round slightly, so that her starboard beam was exposed to the sinking *Complex*. On the bridge of the former, her captain was bellowing incoherent cries. A few hands were preparing to lower the quarter-boats.

Cavendish gave the order verbally. It would not do to trust to the pre-arranged system of gongs.

Instantly, there was a well-simulated panic-stricken rush for the *Complex's* boats, men falling over each other in their efforts to swing clear and lower away. Carrying out the lesson learnt at their rehearsals, they let one of the boats down by the head, staving in her gunwale against the listing side of the ship.

Suddenly, the supposed disabled *Holton Heath* underwent a transformation. Portions of her bulwarks dropped, revealing the muzzles of half a dozen quick-firers. Simultaneously, swarms of men appeared on deck to gloat over the anticipated spectacle, while several machine-guns were being placed in position with a view to mowing down the survivors of the helpless and foundering British ship.

There was now no doubt in the minds of the officers and men of the *Complex* who were in a position to see what was going on, of the manner in which so many craft flying the Red Ensign had vanished without a trace.

The Rioguyan crew were in no hurry. They prepared to prolong the business, before commencing a general and cold-blooded massacre. But on this occasion, the already sinking victim was to prove a very unpleasant surprise-packet.

Captain Meredith was quick to act. Alarm gongs rang out in all parts of the stricken ship. The panic-party, abandoning their rôle, threw themselves prone and began to wriggle their way to their appointed battle stations. The Red Ensign was hurriedly lowered, to be replaced by the emblem of British naval power.

Down clattered the gun-screens. Before the astonished and terrified Rioguyans could realize their mistake, the vengeful quick-firers took a heavy toll, receiving but one shell in reply—a 4-inch missile that whizzed harmlessly between the rigging.

The British gun-layers made one mistake. In their anxiety to settle with their treacherous foes, they aimed, not at the enemy's water-line, but at the dense mob on deck. There the havoc was beyond description.

Before the error could be corrected, the *soi-disant* S.S. *Holton Heath* had forged ahead, until she was end on to the bows of the *Complex*. The latter, stopped dead and unable to gather way, was sorely handicapped, for her 4.7-inch was masked by the rise of the fo'c'sle and the explosion of the torpedo had disarranged the training gear of the for'ard 12-pounder—the only gun that in ordinary circumstances could be brought to bear upon the fleeing vessel.

A triple-screwed cruiser disguised as a tramp, the *Cerro Algarrobo*—*alias Holton Heath*—was “legging it” at twenty-two knots, yet it was evident that, apart from the raking she had received, she had been hulled aft, since she was yawing badly. A 12-pounder shell had penetrated the submerged steering flat and had put the rudder out of action.

All need for concealment now at an end, Captain Meredith emerged from the fo'c'sle conning-tower and climbed the bridge-ladder.

By this time, the *Complex* had settled well down aft. Fumes and steam were still issuing from her engine-rooms. The acrid smell of burnt cordite still wafted from the unsecured guns.

The skipper had to make up his mind quickly—whether it were worth while pretending to abandon ship again and thus lure the submarine into rising to the surface, or to wireless for assistance.

He decided on the latter course. It might not be too late for the *Messines* and *Armentières* to stand in pursuit of the somewhat damaged *Cerro Algarrobo*. The seaplanes from the *Basilikon* might be able to spot the lurking submarine, if, as was likely, she continued to remain in the vicinity to make sure of the sinking of the *Complex*.

Accordingly, the wireless telegraphist began sending out an urgent signal to the *Basilikon*. The reply was prompt and to the point. The cruiser and her attendant destroyers were roughly seventy miles off. The *Messines* and *Armentières* were detached to proceed at full speed to the foundering decoy ship.

The *Complex* was in no immediate hurry to make her acquaintance with the bed of the Atlantic. Her cargo of cork and her elaborate system of water-tight bulkheads were playing their parts well. Those of the crew who were not at the guns were busily engaged in shoring up the bulkheads and

endeavouring to pass a collision-mat over the gaping rent caused by the torpedo. The flooding of the boiler-rooms had automatically put out of action the mechanical bilge-pumps, but the hand-pumps, manned by the stokers of both watches, helped to delay the inevitable.

Meanwhile, the boats were lowered, each armed with a Lewis gun in the likely event of the submarine attempting to massacre the survivors. The wounded were transferred to one of the boats, the medical officer and sick-berth staff being in attendance.

Having taken all precautions, Captain Meredith and his crew could but await the end, whatever way it might turn out.

“Periscope right astern, sir,” reported the Gunner.

Hardly able to credit the good news, the skipper crossed to the port side of the bridge and looked. To his surprise and satisfaction, the submarine was within eighty yards of her victim. Her commander, judging that, as the stern of the *Complex* was almost awash, it was safe to make a periscopic view of the foundering vessel at short range, was in complete ignorance of the fact that the decoy ship still carried a most formidable sting in her tail. It might be that through inexperience he had misjudged his distance and had brought the submarine closer to the *Complex* than he thought.

Dead astern of the decoy-ship, he imagined himself to be safe. A Rioguyan invariably plays for “safety first”. The two after 12-pounders could not be brought to bear astern. Even if they could, they could achieve nothing beyond demolishing one of the three periscopes with which the submarine was equipped. Twenty feet of water between the surface of the sea and the armoured back of the submarine would deflect any shell striking the water obliquely.

“Mr. Jones!” sang out Captain Meredith, “let her have it in the neck.”

The warrant-officer signed to a couple of hands. Deftly and cautiously, the howitzers were loaded with their deadly depth-charges and trained to extreme elevations.

Both weapons were discharged simultaneously. The missiles rose with apparent slowness. Viewed from the bridge, they looked like enormous cricket-balls being lobbed by a titanic hand. Describing parabolic curves, they struck the water almost vertically—one on either side and about ten yards from the periscope.

There was a double splash. The tip of the periscope was hidden in spray, but still there was no explosion. The depth-charges had to sink to a distance

of thirty feet before they were automatically detonated.

Right aft, the Gunner was standing knee-deep in water, with a hand over his eyes as he watched. In vain the Skipper shouted to him to take cover. His interest in what was about to take place had rendered him deaf to every other sound.

Suddenly there was a stupendous upheaval. Almost the entire length of the submarine was lifted clear of the agitated sea, but only for a few brief moments. Completely torn asunder, the doomed craft disappeared from view, amidst a pall of smoke and under a rapidly increasing circle of oil and charred débris.

A wave of foaming water swept over the now submerged stern of the decoy-ship, hurling the zealous Gunner Jones against the dummy steering wheel.

The *Complex's* stem rose sullenly, until the whole of her forefoot showed clear. She was making her last plunge. The concussion of the exploding depth-charges, while they had sent her foe to her doom, had also hastened her parting.

“Abandon ship—all hands!” shouted the Old Man.

## CHAPTER XXI

### A Stern Chase

It was the work of a few moments for the rest of the highly-disciplined crew to take to the boats that, regardless of the danger, had closed to rescue their comrades.

Captain Meredith was the last to leave. True to the traditions of the British navy, he stood on the bridge until not another soul remained on board. Then, with the confidential code-book under his arm, he leapt nimbly into the stern-sheets of the cutter.

A couple of cables' lengths from the doomed vessel, the crews of the various boats lay on their oars and awaited the end. There was almost dead silence. Although the men were elated at having scored heavily off their treacherous foes, the sight of their erstwhile floating home disappearing for ever from mortal eyes was a sad one. Now and then some of the wounded groaned involuntarily. Those whose hurts were light insisted upon sitting up and watching the awe-inspiring sight.

The *Complex* went quietly. There was very little commotion in the water, no rush of compressed air. With the White Ensign streaming proudly in the light breeze, she slipped slowly beneath the surface and disappeared from view.

"The seaplanes, my hearties!" shouted a bull voice, and a horny hand was raised with the finger pointed at an angle of about forty-five.

"Smart work, by Jove," commented Cavendish, glancing at his wristlet watch.

Barely fifty minutes had elapsed from the time of sending out the first wireless call, and already the two seaplanes attached to the *Basilikon* were in sight.

They were manned by officers and petty-officers of the newly reconstituted Royal Naval Air Service. The Royal Air Force, although admirable in its conception, had failed in actual practice. The fusion of the Naval and Military branches had left much to be desired. Apart from mutual

jealousy—a very different thing from healthy rivalry—the two branches were not readily interchangeable. It was soon realized that an airman working with a fleet must not only be an aviator—he must have had a naval training. It could not reasonably be expected that a man with little knowledge of ships and the sea could be of much use in an air squadron operating under the orders of an admiral. He might be, and possibly was, an excellent airman, but something more was required. Hence, after prolonged and heated arguments, the Admiralty got their way, and the purely naval airman again came into his own, unhampered by well-meaning but blundering Air Ministry officials.

The two seaplanes, flying at two thousand feet, passed almost immediately above the bunch of motionless boats. From each a hand waved over the coaming of the cockpit a distant tribute to the cheers of the late crew of the *Complex*.

A few minutes later, the seaplanes were lost to view. Already they had received a report of the course taken by the fleeing *Cerro Algarrobo*, for that information had been embodied in the *Complex's* wireless for aid. Like vengeful wraiths they were hard in pursuit, with the object of bombing the pirate vessel and crippling her sufficiently to allow the destroyers either to capture or destroy the mysterious cause of the disappearance of so many British merchantmen.

Alone on the deep, the boats' crews became boisterous. They sang, cheered, and yelled, confident in the assurance that they would shortly find themselves on board a British warship. Their Old Man allowed them to "work off steam". It was a natural outlet for their pent-up feelings, after days and nights of ceaseless watch and ward, followed by a glorious climax of self-sacrifice.

It was not long before two trailing clouds of smoke appeared over the eastern horizon.

"Hurrah! here come the destroyers, lads," exclaimed Captain Meredith. "Give them a cheer as they pass and then sit tight for the old *Basilikon* to roll up. You'll be sleeping in hammocks to-night all right."

Quickly the approaching vessels materialized into two very business-looking destroyers, each armed with five guns—four 4.7-inch, one 3-inch—and six 21-inch torpedo tubes, and credited with a speed of 35 knots. At the present moment they were doing a good 5 knots more than their designed speed, flinging showers of spray on both sides of their pronounced flare and emitting flame-tinged smoke from their glowing funnels.

Then an unexpected manœuvre took place. The men in the boats, fully prepared to have a terrific dusting from the swell of the swiftly-moving destroyers, had resumed their oars and were heading so as to meet the curling bow waves end on.

Instead of holding on their course, which would have taken them not less than half a mile from the nearest boat, the destroyers altered helm, one passing on either side of the little flotilla. Losing way under the reverse action of their quadruple propellers, the destroyers came to a standstill.

“On board, every mother’s son of you!” shouted an officer from the bridge of the *Messines*.

The survivors of the *Complex* could hardly realize their good fortune. They were to be in at the death after all. They were to witness, and perhaps take an active part in, the smashing up of the so-called *Holton Heath*, otherwise the Rioguyan light cruiser *Cerro Algarrobo*.

Quickly the work of taking off the boats’ crews was accomplished, the majority finding a temporary home on board the *Armentières*, the rest on the *Messines*.

Sub-lieutenant Cavendish was amongst the latter. He had barely time to exchange greetings with a short, bull-necked brother-officer—one Slade, who was on the same term with him at Dartmouth—when the *Messines* forged ahead again, leaving three deserted boats bobbing forlornly in her foaming wake.

“How goes it, old thing?” inquired Cavendish.

“Not so dusty,” admitted Sub-lieutenant Slade. “We’re hoping to finish the job before dark. We’ve a couple of hours yet. . . . You’ve been having a bit of a jamboree, eh what? See anything of the submarine?”

“I did,” replied Cavendish grimly. “Both ends with nothing between ’em.”

“Are you trying to pull my leg, Weeds?” inquired Slade earnestly.

“No—fact,” was the reply. “We did her in with an ash-can—a couple, in point of fact. Couldn’t let you know before. Dynamos were flooded and emergency wireless was out of action.”

“You must tell our owner that,” continued Slade. “He’s on the bridge.”

Lieutenant-Commander Trehallow received the information with marked enthusiasm and not a little relief. Hitherto, he was hampered by the

knowledge that there was a mysterious submarine acting as consort to the pirate surface-craft. The submarine accounted for, left him and his “opposite number” on the *Armentières* with relatively free hands. They could concentrate all their energies upon the pursuit of the *soi-disant Holton Heath* without the chance of becoming targets to an invisible foe—unless there were other submarines out.

“It puzzles me,” remarked Trehallow to Cavendish as they stood under the lee of the chart-room, the only possible spot on the otherwise exposed bridge where they could converse without having to shout in a howling wind, “it puzzles me to know where these blighters hail from. You can’t hide even a disguised cruiser and a submarine in your coat pocket. They must have a base somewhere—but where? There’s no port on this part of the coast that isn’t under the control and jurisdiction of one or other of the South American republics. It’s fishy—very. There’s something pretty big behind this. Only the other day——”

The appearance of the yeoman of signals, with a signed pad in his hand, interrupted the Lieutenant-Commander’s words.

“By smoke!” he ejaculated. “Here, Carfax!”

The officer thus addressed laid down his telescope and joined his chief behind the chart-house.

“Look here, Carfax,” continued the Lieutenant-Commander, “what do you make of this?”

“This” was a crudely pencilled report, almost obliterated in places where the flying spray had played havoc with indelible pencil.

It was to the effect that both seaplanes had been compelled to alight on the surface for the second time in half an hour. On each occasion they had got well to the west’ard of their quarry, hoping to keep in the eyes of the setting sun and thus approach without being observed. They had succeeded in getting within three miles of the fugitive, when unaccountably their engines “konked”.

“Alighted and made examination,” proceeded the report. “Everything O.K. Restarted; came down again. Are now up again. Will——”

Here the message ended.

“Why didn’t the silly owl finish?” inquired Trehallow testily.

“’Cause, sir, he’s probably had to come down again,” hazarded Carfax. “Can’t wireless with the aerial trailing in the water and all hands trying to



find out what's wrong with the old 'bus. 'Tany rate, we're only fifteen miles astern."

"And a stern chase is a long one," commented the Lieutenant-Commander, glancing at a western sky.

"Where is the pirate making for, I wonder?" inquired Cavendish, turning to Carfax, when the skipper had gone into the chart-room.

"According to what I've heard, he's making for the estuary of the Rio Guaya," replied the Sub of the *Messines*. "Goodness only knows what for. There are three potty little republics somewhere there, and they wouldn't dare to give shelter to a filibustering blighter like that. But what is puzzling me is, why do our seaplanes keep failing? We've had 'em up for eight hours on a stretch many a time and they've never had any trouble up to now. And when they're most wanted they're broken reeds. Give me something that floats, any old time," he added, with sublime youthful confidence in the omnipotence of sea power.

Twenty minutes later, another wireless report came through from the seaplanes. It was to the effect that neither was able to approach the fugitive pirate. If they attempted to do so their engines failed, but as soon as the pirate craft drew away there was no further trouble until they again overhauled their quarry.

Lieutenant-Commander Trehallow was obviously perplexed. At first inclined to imagine that the series of forced descents was due to accident, he had at last to admit that on the face of things the seaplanes were under some unknown adverse influence.

He therefore gave the airmen instructions to keep the pirate craft within sight, but not to close, until the destroyers came within visual distance of their foe. Then, rather than risk having to stop and pick up a couple of disabled aircraft, he would order them to return to their parent ship, the light cruiser *Basilikon*.

At length the masts and funnel of the fugitive ship appeared over the horizon. The destroyers, hard on her track, were now rapidly overhauling her. It was a question whether they would get within striking distance before dark. The odds were against that, for the sun was now only a few degrees above the horizon.

Meanwhile, all preparations were being made for a night encounter. Battle lanterns were provided in the event of the electric lamps being put out

of action; night sights were attached to the guns; the parachute star-shells were taken from the magazine and the searchlights prepared for use.

The sun dipped. The short tropical twilight gave place to intense darkness. The moon was not due to appear for another couple of hours, and in that time the pirate vessel might have found an opportunity to evade pursuit.

There was no doubt that she was attempting to do so; but she had overlooked one important circumstance—her phosphorescent wake. Miles astern, clearly defined on the surface of the dark water, was a faint luminous trail and to this the avenging destroyers kept, like bloodhounds to a strong scent.

Suddenly a vivid flash of reddish light sprang out of the darkness ahead. A shell whined through the air, throwing up a column of spray two hundred yards on the *Messines*' port quarter.

"Six-inch, by the sound of it," commented Lieutenant-Commander Trehallow. "We've found her this time. On searchlights!"

## CHAPTER XXII

### Flying-boats v. Destroyers

Two dazzling beams from the *Messines*' bridge leapt across the waste of dark water. The *Armentières*' searchlights were almost immediately switched on, and the four powerful rays swept inquiringly in the direction from which the flash of the hostile quick-firer emanated.

Had there been two enemy vessels, Trehallow, as senior officer present, would not have ordered the searchlights to be run. In those circumstances it would have been bad tactics. Whilst you are "picking up" one opponent, the other will, to a certainty, pour in a withering fire. But when, as in the present case, it is possible to concentrate the dazzling beams upon a solitary hostile craft, the latter is practically blinded. She cannot fire with any degree of accuracy right into a bewildering glare, while her gun-layers, in the knowledge that they are literally "in the limelight" and in momentary anticipation of the arrival of a death-dealing salvo, become "jumpy" and possibly panic-stricken.

It was a matter of a few seconds before the beams picked up their objective. The *Cerro Algarrobo* was eight thousand yards away, and had just turned eight points to port, or at right angles to her previous course.

With the discharge of her quick-firer she had resorted to a very old trick—one that stood a fair chance of success before the era of searchlights. She had dropped overboard a balsa-raft with a lighted lantern, in the hope that her pursuers would concentrate on *that* and give her an opportunity to escape in the darkness.

But now she lay revealed, with two powerfully-armed destroyers, both capable of giving her six or seven knots, well within effective range.

The *Cerro Algarrobo* was heavily armed and was protected on the water-line. She had a very numerous crew, well trained in modern naval warfare. Had the cruiser been manned by Britons and the destroyers by the pirates, the former would have been more than a match for her opponents. But the dominant factors—the man behind the gun and the cool, calculating brain in the conning-tower—were absent. The hot-blooded South American strain—

partly Spanish, partly negro, with a touch of Indian and a flavour of a dozen other races—was no match for the British seaman.

Already, in her brief encounter with the *Complex*, the Rioguyan cruiser had “bitten off more than she could chew”. She had lain in wait for the decoy ship in the belief that the latter was unarmed and unsuspecting, and that she could, with impunity, fire upon the already sinking British ship. Instead, she had been sent in headlong flight, with gaping holes in her upper works and fifty of her crew *hors de combat*. And worse was to come.

The 4.7’s were getting to work. Splashes of lurid light marked the explosion of the deadly missiles right on their target. The Rioguyan vessel replied, but feebly, most of her projectiles falling short and wide of the zigzagging destroyers.

In five minutes the *Cerro Algarrobo* was on fire fore and aft. Her masts and funnel had disappeared, her topsides were torn by ragged gashes through which lurid flames poured fiercely.

She was still making way, but at a very reduced speed, and showed a pronounced list to starboard.

“Cease fire!”

The pandemonium died down. A tense silence brooded over the destroyers, save for the hiss of escaping steam and the *swish* of water from their knife-like bows.

Satisfied that the pirate craft had received her quietus, the British destroyers were about to close and lower boats. There were lives to be saved, even if they were those of blood-thirsty pirates. Apart from humanitarian instincts, it was desirable to find out from the survivors the exact particulars of the mysterious buccaneering vessel.

A gun was discharged from the burning Rioguyan cruiser. Whether it was a note of defiance, or merely caused by the flames exploding the charge in a loaded quick-firer was a matter for speculation.

The masthead flashing lamp of the *Messines* sent out a demand for surrender, with the assurance that quarter would be given to the survivors.

“X G E” (surrender), read out the Chief Yeoman to the signalman, at the key of the flashing lamp, referring to the International Code Manual, “O A H (I will give you) . . .”

Then he paused and turned inquiringly to the Lieutenant-Commander.

“Beg pardon, sir,” he exclaimed, “but there ain’t no right letters for ‘quarter’. Will this ’ere ‘U E V’ do?”

Trehallow glanced at the signal book.

“Use that and risk it,” he replied, adding in an undertone, “ ’spose the Tower of Babel is responsible for this.”

“Beg pardon, sir?” reiterated the Yeoman of Signals interrogatively.

“Carry on,” said the Lieutenant-Commander curtly.

So the signal had flashed forth as follows:

“Surrender—I will give you one-fourth!”

The answer was in the negative. The *Cerro Algarrobo* replied with five or six rounds, one of the projectiles penetrating the *Messines’* quarter and completely wrecking the Skipper’s cabin.

There was no hope for it. Both destroyers reopened fire. In less than thirty seconds an explosion was observed on board the hostile craft. Then, in a pall of smoke, she disappeared beneath the waves.

The crews of both destroyers broke into a round of stentorian cheers. With searchlights still playing on the débris-strewn water, the *Messines* hastened to search for possible survivors.

Slowing down, she lowered a couple of boats. The *Armentières*, lying-to a couple of cables away, assisted in the search.

Two half-naked and badly burnt men were rescued from the keel of an upturned boat. Others were observed to be clinging to a large float, somewhat resembling a “Carley” raft, at a considerable distance from the scene of the *Cerro Algarrobo’s* disappearance.

The *Messines’* whaler was hurrying to their succour when there was a tremendous detonation within fifty yards of the *Armentières*. The destroyers heeled under the upheaval of the water. Men on deck were thrown about like skittles, some narrowly escaping being washed overboard by the torrent of water that swept completely over her. At the same moment her searchlights went out, probably owing to the dislocation of the circuits under the terrific concussion.

“What are those seaplane fellows doing?” exclaimed Trehallow. “They’re bombing us, by Jove! Switch on our recognition lights. Be sharp there!”

But before the order could be carried out, bombs were descending close to both destroyers. Against the faint luminosity of the starless sky could be discerned the outlines of half a dozen aircraft, wheeling in squadron formation, preparatory to returning to the attack.

“Hostile aircraft!” ejaculated the Lieutenant-Commander, hardly able to credit his senses. “The sky’s stiff with ’em.”

The position of the destroyers was now an unusual one. With their boats still away picking up survivors, they could not manœuvre at high speed. Their only means of offence was a solitary “A A” gun each. They were taken by surprise and had no means of finding out the actual nature of the aerial attack.

Ordering the searchlights to be screened and all lights visible from without to be masked, Trehallow next telegraphed for “easy ahead”, at the same time warning the engine-room staff against the danger of allowing flames to issue from the funnels.

Then he steamed slowly in the direction of the destroyer’s boats, the crews of which were still busy with the work of rescue, despite the danger to which the latest development of enemy activity so cruelly subjected them.

Doubtless the *Armentières* was similarly engaged. There was no sign of her in the darkness; added to the complicated business was the possibility of the two destroyers colliding.

Whether the *Armentières* was successful in her quest those on board the *Messines* were in ignorance. On her part, the *Messines* was fortunate to pick up her boats in quick time, including two survivors of the *Cerro Algarrobo*. The others sighted clinging to the raft had perforce to be abandoned to their fate; the coxswain of the *Messines*’ whaler afterwards reported that a bomb had fallen close to the raft and had probably sent the luckless pirates to share the fate of the bulk of their comrades.

The boats had only just been hastily hoisted in and secured, when the loud drone of a dozen aeroplane engines announced the return of the aerial attackers.

It would be no exaggeration to state frankly that the crews of the two destroyers had—to use a pithy expression—“cold feet”. On board a lightly-built craft, with little or no protection—for the decks were only of three-sixteenths steel—the crews were practically helpless. All they could do was to “stick it”; for, with the exception of the three hands manning the anti-

aircraft gun, they had no means of offence against the almost invisible menace from the darkened sky.

In the heat of battle, even against odds, when each man had his active part to perform, there was little or no time for thoughts of personal danger. These were men who had willingly undertaken to remain motionless for hours upon the deck of a Q-boat when shelled by a submarine; they did so in the hope that an opportunity of hitting back with interest was imminent. They had weapons wherewith to strike and strike hard, and they were eager to take up the offensive at the very earliest opportune moment.

But now the position was different. They were defenceless—or practically so—against the hostile airmen. They were ignorant of the nationality of their foes, of the strength and manœuvring power of the attacking aircraft. Yet not a man failed to do his duty, although his greatest concern was to conceal from his “raggie” any indication of the fear that gripped him.

Both destroyers were now without way. They realized that zigzagging tactics were too risky. The tell-tale phosphorescent wake that had betrayed the fugitive *Cerro Algarrobo* would also reveal their presence to the men controlling those swift-moving machines high above the surface of the sea.

It was now so dark that the *Messines* had entirely lost touch with her opposite number. Not the faintest suspicion of a light was displayed. The anti-aircraft gun of each destroyer was silent, although the respective gunlayers were itching to let rip at the reapproaching aerial squadron.

Suddenly a star-shell fired from the leading flying-boat threw the two destroyers into a pool of light. All attempt at concealment was, for the present, futile. Engine-room telegraph gongs clanged. The long, lean boats darted forward, heeling to the action of their helms put hard over. The “antis” spat viciously, the crash of the exploding shells punctuating the roar of the aerial propellers.

One of the attacking aircraft, caught by a six-pounder, was literally pulverized. Apparently the detonation of the projectile had exploded her cargo of powerful bombs.

In the flash of the explosion, the rest of the attackers could be seen staggering under the effect of the air-blast; but, admirably handled, they recovered and resumed formation, closing up the gap where the luckless flying-boat had been.

The British crews cheered ironically at the destruction of one of their foes, but their triumph was short-lived. Almost before the shouting had subsided, a bomb struck the *Armentières* between the stern and the after torpedo tubes. So terrific was the force of the resulting explosion that the after part of the destroyer was completely shattered. Deprived of her propellers and rudder, she still carried way, though her deck as far forward as the aftermast funnel was awash. Knee-deep in water, her shell-shocked anti-aircraft gun's crew were still firing blindly.

"She's gone!" ejaculated Carfax, who with Cavendish and another officer, was on the *Messines*' bridge.

"No fear," replied Cavendish, catching a glimpse of the *Armentières*' outlines in the flash of the gun. "Watertight bulkheads are holding."

Cavendish was now almost unconscious of the peril that threatened the *Messines*. The plight of the *Armentières* had displaced all other thoughts. He felt himself speculating as to what ought to be done and what he would do had he been commanding-officer of the *Messines*.

Lieutenant-Commander Trehallow was grappling with a similar problem, but in his case he was quick to act. To attempt to seek safety in flight and leave the crippled destroyer to fall an easy prey to her attackers never entered into his calculations. He was debating whether to run alongside the *Armentières* and remove her crew, or whether to attempt to take the sorely damaged craft in tow.

The while bombs were dropping rapidly, but the enemy airmen were either novices at the game or were too excited to act with deliberation. The nearest of the terrible missiles fell not less than eighty yards away, turning the otherwise calm sea into a maelstrom of smoke-laden spray.

The second phase of the attack passed. The airmen had overshot their quarry and were turning to approach in the eye of the wind once more.

Trehallow rang for easy ahead, shouting to the quarter-master to lay the *Messines* alongside her consort. It was a difficult operation in the darkness, but with admirable skill and judgment the Lieutenant-Commander succeeded in his manœuvre.

"Prepare to be taken in tow," he roared through a megaphone.

A greatcoated figure on the *Armentières*' deck raised his hand in acknowledgment. Men dashed on to her forecabin to receive the heaving-lines. The wire hawsers were hauled aboard and shackled to the towing strops with the utmost dispatch, but without confusion. Here again discipline told.



Gently the *Messines* forged ahead until the strain on the hawsers was taken up. Then, in obedience to an order, dense clouds of smoke issued from both vessels, enveloping them like a pall.

Under cover of the smoke-screen—one of the recognized appliances of modern naval warfare—the two destroyers made a bid for safety. The odds were now in their favour. A single aeroplane might venture to attack through that lofty, dense, suffocating bank of artificial fog. More would stand a serious risk of collision. And, apart from having no visible target, an attacking aircraft would quickly lose all sense of direction while within the limits of the smoke-cloud.

Trehallow's next move was to send a wireless message to the *Basilikon*, requesting the light cruiser to keep away. It would be useless devotion on the part of the latter to run the risk of being destroyed by aerial bombs under cover of night.

Still zigzagging and consequently throwing a heavy strain upon the towing hawsers, the *Messines* carried on. There were limits to the duration of the action of the smoke apparatus. Sooner or later the two destroyers would have to emerge, but it remained to be seen whether they had eluded the five flying-boats. Perhaps the hostile aircraft were hovering, three thousand feet up and out of sight and hearing, waiting for their prey to disclose their presence. A period of suspense followed, but still the waiting planes—if they were indeed waiting—gave no indication of their presence.

Presently Cavendish touched his companion on the shoulder.

"Listen!" he exclaimed. "Machine-gun fire!"

"Not the faintest doubt about it, Weeds," rejoined Carfax, as the staccato reports were borne to their ears. "What's the move?"

At length the destroyers crawled slowly from the fringes of the smoke-cloud. The moon had risen and the sky and sea were bathed in brilliant yellow light. Not a sign of the hostile aircraft was to be seen.

Twenty minutes later came the solution of the affair in the form of a wireless from one of the *Basilikon's* seaplanes.

"Report engaged unknown hostile aircraft. Two shot down. Rest in flight. Pursued, but unable to overhaul."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### At the Admiralty

The news came as a mild surprise to the average British citizen when, on opening his morning paper, he found that there was actually another war on—no rumour of impending hostilities, no preliminary exchange of “Notes”, nor even a declaration of war. Hostilities had taken place between Great Britain and the Republic of Rioguary.

Very few people had as much as heard of that South American state. Those who did were almost without exception quite in ignorance of its resources. Even the Cabinet Ministers had to admit that their information concerning the supposedly obscure republic was vague. The Foreign Office could supply but little information.

It was War. The Admiralty communiqués reported an engagement off the north-east coast of South America, but without any details. Already part of the Atlantic Fleet was on its way to the West Indies to reinforce the three light cruisers and half a dozen destroyers in those waters.

Undoubtedly, the Rioguyan Republic had chosen a favourable opportunity to challenge the British Empire. The Near Eastern question had cropped up again when the optimists had come to the conclusion that at last the Balkans were no longer a firebrand. Consequently, two-thirds of the British navy’s capital ships were tied down to the Mediterranean.

Internal troubles in India and external troubles on her North-West Frontier were brewing, while both Egypt and the Sudan were in a state of grave unrest.

Señor Jaime Samuda, President of the Republic of Rioguary, had laid his plans well. He knew that he had little to fear from United States intervention. Uncle Sam was at present kept on tenterhooks by a revival of the Japanese peril, and practically every available warship flying the Stars and Stripes had concentrated on the Pacific coast.

He counted on French neutrality, gauging the Gallic attitude by the events of 1922. Italy did not come into his calculations; but he reckoned

upon German support as far as the curtailed resources of Germany's armaments permitted.

Altogether the Rioguyan Government had at its disposal nine capital ships—all of recent construction and heavily armed.

Against these the British Government could show but four or five. Of the numbers allowed by the Washington Conference, the bulk were “up the Straits”. Of the remainder, two had recently received serious damage through mutual collision. Their repairs would take at least six months, provided the workmen employed in the private yards to which the damaged vessels had been sent would refrain from striking during that period.

In light cruisers the rival countries were about equal, but as regards the numbers of destroyers available, Great Britain had a decided superiority apart from the numerous vessels of that type required elsewhere. On the other hand, Rioguy was a long distance from England. The West India station had been neglected and its resources cut down. The nearest base of any importance was Bermuda, and even then the dockyard at Somers Island was incapable of dealing with repairs of much magnitude. For oil fuel, on which the destroyers depended, there were no British ports in the West Indies where any large quantities were stored. It meant that the fleet had to be “fueled” either at neutral ports or by oil-tankers. The latter required escort as a protection from commerce-destroyers, which entailed a heavy drain upon the numbers of light cruisers available.

But it was on aircraft that President Jaime Samuda pinned his faith. He hoped that by means of the efficient machines in the possession of the Rioguyan Government, the task of extending the scene of hostilities far beyond the frontiers of Rioguy would be successfully carried out.

The ultimate hope of Rioguy was the consolidation of several republics into a United States of South America with resources rivalling those of the hitherto greatest Powers in the world. For some undefined reason, Samuda had become obsessed with the idea that a decisive blow at the British Empire would be an important preliminary stroke.

Originally, his scheme was to start a campaign against British mercantile ships, destroying them without leaving a trace. By so doing he hoped to deal a paralysing blow at a section of seaborne resources of the British Empire, which the interruption of the Argentine and Brazilian trade would embrace. There was also a large proportion of British shipping still making the Horn passage, and already a number of vessels bound to and from the Pacific had been sunk.

In following the policy of secret destructive action Samuda also hoped that suspicion would fall upon certain South American republics other than Rioguary. His hopes might have been realized but for the series of engagements following the attack upon the decoy-ship *Complex*.

The few survivors from the *Cerro Algarrobo* had “given the show away”. Separately cross-examined, they had admitted their nationality readily enough. The mere hint that if they could claim no governmental covering authority for their acts they would be classed as pirates and treated accordingly, was sufficient to compel them to hasten to give a full account of the cruise of the ill-fated *Cerro Algarrobo*.

These facts were communicated by wireless to Bermuda and thence cabled to the Admiralty.

A Declaration of War—declaring a war that was already in progress—followed.

That same day, Brian Strong and Peter Corbold landed at Southampton.

Seven weeks had elapsed from the time they crossed the Rioguyan frontier. The Indians, with whom they had fallen in, had proved very hospitable and had nursed them both through a bout of fever. On their recovery, Brian Strong and his nephew were conveyed down the river in canoes of their Indian benefactors, and eventually reached La Guayra, the port of Caracas, the Venezuelan capital.

From La Guayra they took steamer to Barbadoes, thence to Southampton.

The news of the outbreak of war with Rioguary did not surprise either uncle or nephew, but what did was the bald information that two British seaplanes had routed six hostile flying-boats. They rejoiced after the manner of their kind—without demonstrations.

Nevertheless, Brian Strong was puzzled. Although as a patriot he was elated at the news of the aerial combat, it puzzled him to think that the Rioguyans had failed to take advantage of the wonderful machines that owed their existence to his brains.

“It’s the human element that counts, all the time, Peter,” he remarked. “If the Rioguyan air fleet doesn’t put up a better show in the future, I needn’t have gone to the trouble of bringing this gadget home.”

He tapped his breast coat pocket, wherein lay one of the essentials of his invention. The others he had also succeeded in bringing to England in spite

of difficulties—the latest being a wordy encounter with a self-important Customs official at Southampton Docks.

Had the Admiralty permitted a full, uncensored account of the engagement to become public, Brian Strong would not have been quite so cheerful. No mention had been made of the disconcerting fact that the British seaplanes were unaccountably unable to attack the fugitive *Cerro Algarrobo*. Perhaps the circumstances were deemed too insignificant to merit notice at Whitehall, but that was not the view taken by the flying-officers of the seaplanes in question.

Hurrying by taxi to Southampton West Station, Brian and Peter were just in time to catch a Waterloo express. They dined on board the train, took another taxi at Waterloo, and gave the driver instructions to drive to the Admiralty.

They found the buildings besieged by a crowd of applicants of all sorts and conditions. There were young ex-Royal Naval and R.N.R. officers offering themselves for active service afloat. Retired officers, who had been on the Pension List for years were clamouring for jobs afloat, a few “after soft billets ashore”. There were highly patriotic individuals of the profiteer type ready to prove their indispensibility and secretly hoping that the petty little war would develop into something big and last for years and years. Inventors with ideas that were good, and inventors whose suggestions were of not the slightest use, were in evidence to leaven the lump that threatened to clog the Admiralty machine.

At length, after an hour and a half of tedious waiting, Brian and Peter found themselves within the vestibule of the Admiralty. Without a word, a harassed petty-officer attendant handed Brian Strong a slip of paper to be filled in.

“Name?”—that was easy enough. “Address?” Brian hadn’t one. He was a wanderer on the face of the earth. He wrote the name of an hotel in the Strand where he hoped to put up, but up to the present he had made no attempt to book a room. “Officer required to be seen?” Here was another poser. At Peter’s suggestion, he wrote, “Deputy Chief of Naval Staff”. The last question, “Nature of Business?” was the pitfall. If he stated too much and claimed too great an importance of his errand, he would more than likely be “turned down” as an importunate time-waster. If he merely requested a private interview without credentials to support his application, he would not stand the ghost of a chance of stating his case.

He turned appealingly to his nephew. The petty-officer sighed impatiently. He was not a man to “suffer fools gladly”. That sort of thing becomes boring after years in the Admiralty inquiry bureau.

“Put down ‘Applicant late Consulting Engineer to the Rioguyan Air Board’,” suggested Peter. “That will do the trick.”

Uncle Brian thought not; it looked too audacious on paper. But it suggested a line of action.

In a firm, scholarly hand, he wrote:

“Confidential. Applicant for interview landed at Southampton this morning from Rioguy.”

A messenger took the paper slip and departed. Uncle Brian resigned himself to another spell of tedious waiting. He had vivid recollections of Government offices in the days of the Great War, when a caller, no matter how important his business, was handed over to the tender mercies of a flapper in brown holland, and might, with luck, arrive at his destination with the last ounce of strength left in his tottering legs, only to find that after tramping through hundreds of yards of corridors the person he sought had gone to lunch.

It came as an agreeable surprise when, in about five minutes, Brian Strong and his nephew were told that the Deputy Chief would see them.

Their passes stamped, the two men were escorted by a messenger to a room overlooking the Mall. Here the naval officer was waiting to receive them.

Sir John Pilrig was by no means the Sherlock Holmes sleuth-hound type of man that the nature of his office seemed to warrant. He was burly, full-faced, with a fresh complexion. His mild blue eyes and smooth white hair gave him a benevolent aspect. He reminded Peter more of a Harley Street specialist than a naval officer upon whose shoulders rested the weight of a responsibility hardly less than that of the First Sea Lord.

There was no brusqueness in his demeanour. His manner seemed almost apologetic, but it was evident that he had the art of being able to obtain information from a person without “rubbing him up the wrong way”.

Sir John showed no surprise at the appearance of his callers, although their clothes, suitable to the climate of the West Indies, were hardly *comme il faut* in Whitehall.

“So you have just arrived from Rioguary, Mr. Strong?” he began. “I am pleased to meet you. I must confess that my knowledge of the internal conditions of Rioguary is elementary—I might say vague—and no doubt you may be able to give me valuable information on several points. And your friend—was he with you out there?”

“My nephew—yes,” replied Brian. “We left Rioguary in somewhat unusual circumstances by air.”

The Deputy Chief did not conceal his surprise; but he merely nodded an encouragement for Brian Strong to “carry on”.

Uncle Brian maintained a full head of steam for quite fifteen minutes, describing the details of the flying-boat with technical and convincing accuracy.

“You know a lot of very important information about the Rioguyan air fleet,” observed Sir John.

“Because I designed them,” was the astonishing rejoinder.

“H’m,” commented the Deputy Chief, without attempting to charge his visitor with unpatriotic motives. “Then with your technical knowledge, perhaps you could enlighten me on one point. Apart from the armour protection of the Rioguyan flying-boats, do they possess any special means of defence against opposing aircraft?”

“Speed and manœuvring powers,” replied Brian.

“Anything else?”

Brian shook his head.

“Why I ask,” continued Sir John Pilrig, “is this: here is a portion of the report of the officer commanding H.M.S. *Basilikon*. He lays particular stress upon the fact that when two of our seaplanes were about to attack one of the Rioguyan cruisers, they were unable to approach within two miles of her. They simply had to descend through ignition troubles, but on the hostile vessel increasing her distance the defect—if defect it could be termed—was no longer in evidence. That phenomenon occurred on three occasions during that operation.”

Peter threw a sidelong glance at his uncle. Brian’s face was pale beneath its tan.

“By jove, Peter!” he exclaimed. “Ramon Diaz has got to wind’ard of us. He’s stolen the plans of the rays.”

“Explain, please,” said the Deputy Chief of Staff.

In answer, Brian Strong stopped and undid the fastenings of a leather portmanteau which, like the haversack, he had so carefully guarded in his flight from El Toro. From it he drew a complicated “valve set” and placed it upon the table.

“This, sir,” he replied, “is the secret. I had hoped that it was a secret still, but your information unfortunately leads me to think otherwise. With an apparatus embodying this invention, I can truthfully claim to bring down any aircraft in existence. It was my intention to give my secret to the British Government, and it is for that purpose that I am here. Unfortunately, it is a secret no longer. By some means, the Rioguyan Government has acquired the knowledge and has already put it to practical use.”

Briefly, Brian Strong explained the device, giving particulars of the experimental flight in which Peter had taken a practical part.

“It is, of course, unfortunate,” admitted Sir John. “But tell me, in the event of two opposing forces using a similar device, would the rays of one affect the other?”

“Undoubtedly,” affirmed Brian decidedly.

“Well, then,” continued the Deputy Chief of Staff, “the position, I take it, would be this: the aircraft of both opponents would be rendered ineffectual. That’s something. It leaves the conduct of operations in the hands of other branches of warfare. In the present instance—warships.”

“Precisely,” agreed Brian.

Sir John went to the window and gazed across the Mall, apparently deep in thought. Suddenly he turned to his visitor.

“If you had an up-to-date workshop and a staff of highly-trained mechanics at your disposal, Mr. Strong, how long would it take you to produce a complete apparatus for testing purposes?”

“Two days,” replied Brian, without hesitation.

“Excellent,” exclaimed Sir John, touching an electric bell. “I will make arrangements for you to proceed to the naval gunnery establishment at Whale Island, where all facilities will be provided. There is one other matter. I trust you will not mind my mentioning it—the question of funds.”

“That’s all right, Sir John,” said Brian. “I can carry on without—er—financial assistance for a bit. When the gadget’s proved——”



Sir John let it go at that. He realized that Brian Strong was a man with high motives, and that discussing money matters was distasteful.

“I don’t care what I get out of the business,” declared Brian when uncle and nephew found themselves crossing Trafalgar Square. “They can give me what they like, as long as it’s not the Order of the Bad Egg.”

## CHAPTER XXIV

# War in Home Waters

Brian Strong's surmise was a correct one. He had underrated the craftiness of Don Ramon Diaz, Air Minister to the Government of Riaguay. Strong mistrusted Diaz. Diaz mistrusted Strong. Each hoped that the other was unsuspecting. Brian's hasty and daring departure had removed all shadow of doubt on the Riaguayan's part, but that did not give him any great concern. What was more to the point, Ramon Diaz had acquired the secret of Strong's ray apparatus, and had wasted no time in turning it to good account.

Sir John Pilrig decided that it was a fortunate circumstance, this interview with a scientist unknown and lacking credentials. Not only had Brian Strong afforded valuable information, but he had unreservedly placed his invention at the Government's disposal. Should the invention come up to expectations—and there was no reason why it should not, judging by the results obtained by the Riaguayan flying-boats on the *Cerro Algarrobo* engagement—it would reduce the rival aerial forces to a state of stalemate. It was, of course, unfortunate that the secret was in hostile hands, he mused, but there was some satisfaction to be derived from the knowledge that the Riaguayan air forces were not the sole possessors of the mysterious rays.

And—a remarkable fact, decided the Deputy Chief of Staff—the inventor had asked nothing, either for himself or his nephew—a rarity in these days of mercenary offers in the name of patriotism.

By eleven o'clock on the morning following the momentous interview, Brian Strong, with Peter Corbold as his chief assistant, reported for duty at Whale Island Naval Gunnery Establishment—an artificially-constructed island in the upper reaches of Portsmouth Harbour.

Already a large building had been allocated to them as an experimental workshop, complete with lathes, benches, moulds, and drawing-office, with electric light and power, and with a small staff of armourers and electricians—the pick of the highly-skilled naval artificers of the Gunnery School.

There, behind closed doors—for no one save the Commodore was allowed entrance—Brian Strong set to work to reconstruct the device that,

for all time, it was hoped, was to draw the sting from the terror of the skies.

At 4.45 of the same afternoon, a look-out of the R.N. signal station at Culver Cliff in the Isle of Wight heard the rumble of distant gunfire. There was nothing extraordinary in that. Men-of-war carrying out gunnery practice in the Channel, he decided.

But when, almost simultaneously, he heard the shriek of a projectile, his interest became aroused. It was part of his duty to warn ships, when, as sometimes happened, the ricochetting shells pitched against the chalk cliff, of the possible danger to life and property of His Majesty's liege subjects.

"Bill!" he shouted to his opposite number, who was industriously engaged in mending frayed signal flags in the room under the look-out place. "Stand by to 'oist 'height nought nine'. The *Spanker*—'er wot went out this mornin'—is a-lobbin' 4.7's ashore."

Having shared the responsibility of taking action, the signalman applied his eye to a large telescope mounted on a tripod.

From his elevated post, the look-out hut being 350 feet above sea-level, the horizon line was roughly twenty-five miles away. The sea was calm, the atmosphere clear, except for a few patches of mist that threatened to develop into a sea-fog.

There was but one vessel in sight. She proved to be a tramp bound up-channel. There were no signs of the light cruiser *Spanker*.

Even as he looked, came another faint report.

The man, by reason of long experience, knew that it was not a quick-firer. The interval was too great for that. The unusual pitch of the whine of the projectile puzzled him.

Suddenly a long, low-lying dark object appeared in the field of the high-powered telescope.

"Gosh!" ejaculated the bluejacket, "s'elp me if she ain't a perishin' submarine."

Even as he looked, he saw a long, slender object rise from the for'ard deck of the distant vessel. Slowly but unhesitatingly it moved until the watcher found himself gazing down the muzzle of a gun. Instinctively he shut his eyes, forgetting that a distance of about fifteen miles separated him from that menacing ring of metal.

When he looked again, the gun had been trained to an elevation of nearly forty-five degrees. There was a flash . . . thirty seconds later he heard the report.

Twice more the gun was discharged; then the mysterious vessel submerged.

The spell was broken as far as the signalman was concerned. Clamping the telescope, so that it remained trained upon the spot where he had seen the submarine disappear, he shouted to his mate, who was leisurely bending the hoist of flags to the signal halliards.

“Belay there,” he exclaimed excitedly. “Get on the telephone to the C.-in-C. There’s a bloomin’ submarine been shellin’ Pompey.”

His opposite number looked up languidly and solemnly winked his eye.

“’Tain’t the fust of April, mate,” he remarked in mild reproof. “D’ye want ter get me ’ung, or what not?”

Ten minutes later, the Commander-in-Chief at Portsmouth was informed by wireless telephony from Culver Cliff of something that he was already well aware of—that five shells had been fired at the principal naval port of the British Empire. In addition, he learnt that the shells came from a submarine, nationality unknown, operating 16 miles S. ½ E. magnetic from Culver Cliff Signal Station.

In a very short time, the Admiral was in possession of material facts concerning the damage. One projectile had fallen in the Dockyard, completely demolishing the caisson at the entrance to No. 15 Dock, and severely damaging the light cruiser *Volobus*, which was undergoing repairs in that particular dock.

Another had hit the seaplane carrier *Furious*, which had recently returned from the Mediterranean. The shell had descended obliquely, just in the wake of the conning-tower. Fitted with a delayed-action fuse, the missile penetrated three decks before exploding in the port engine-room. The greatest effect of the explosive was downwards, indicating that it was composed of a substance allied to dynamite. The double-bottoms and “blister” on the port side were shattered to a length of fifty feet, pieces of the three-inch side-armour being torn bodily away. The *Furious* sank in eight minutes in seven fathoms.

Shell No. 3 descended on the railway close to Fratton Bridge, blowing a hole eighty feet in diameter in the railway cutting and bringing down the bridge. Here, the loss of life was great, for the bridge carried one of the

principal arteries of the town. In addition, the sole means of railroad communication into and out of Portsmouth was cut. The most sanguine estimate placed the completion of the repairs at eight weeks.

The remaining two projectiles luckily failed to do serious damage, one falling in the sea two hundred yards from the South Parade Pier, the other making a huge crater in the Fratton Park football ground twenty minutes after a huge crowd had departed.

The British nation had abandoned its old-established ideas of insular immunity. The lesson of the Great War, particularly the German “tip-and-run” raids on Scarborough, Whitby, Hartlepool, Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth, Dover, and elsewhere, had destroyed the fetish-like faith in the navy to render our shores inviolate. With a length of coast-line greater than that of any other country, taken in proportion to its area, Great Britain offers a decided chance of success to a daring sea-raider, and even when her fleet was at the zenith of power and size, the numbers were insufficient to protect the coast from minor hostile operations without seriously affecting the striking power of the Grand Fleet.

Thus the news of the bombardment of Portsmouth occasioned comparatively little surprise, except for the mystery of the affair. What was the nationality of the enemy craft? From what port did she come? Was she the emissary of a treacherous European Power, hoping to take advantage of the external and internal difficulties of the British Empire to deal a coward blow?

The idea of linking the submarine with the distant and insignificant Republic of Rioguary, with whom Britain was at war, seemed out of the question. Yet it was a submersible cruiser seventeen days out of San Antonio that had thrown out a challenge to the principal naval port of Great Britain.

Even as a professor of anatomy can reconstruct the skeleton of a prehistoric mammoth from a few scraps of bone, so can a gunnery expert decide upon the calibre and power of an unseen and unknown weapon from a few fragments of its projectile—and with a greater degree of certainty than in the case of the constructive anatomist.

From available data, combined with information picked up from examination of such remains of the shells as were recovered, the experts decided that the projectile was seven feet in length with an external diameter of four inches; that the weapon was a 120-calibre gun, with a muzzle velocity of from 3000 to 3500 feet per second and with an extreme range of fifty-five miles.

It was also established that at a range of twenty-five miles—the distance between the position of the submarine and the town of Portsmouth—the projectiles must have attained the extreme vertical height of eight and a half miles.

In the midst of his labours, Brian Strong was called to the telephone in the Commodore's office to answer an urgent inquiry from the Admiralty.

Sir John Pilrig was at the instrument, anxiously inquiring whether Mr. Strong could give him any information about the Rioguyan submarines.

"I cannot," replied Brian bluntly. He was not the sort of man to beat about the bush and try to give the impression that he was in the position to supply the information. "Aircraft was my line. But my nephew here can give you particulars."

Peter took his uncle's place at the telephone and described the submarines he had seen manœuvring off San Antonio.

"They were possibly instructional craft," he added. "Somewhat resembling our obsolete C class."

He proceeded to describe the craft in clear technical language, which compelled Sir John to inquire in what circumstances he had gained the knowledge.

"I was a sub-lieutenant, R.N., sir," he replied. "Retired under the regulations for the reduction of personnel."

"Ah," commented the Deputy Chief of Staff. "Very good. I'll ring off now."

Peter went back to his work.

## CHAPTER XXV

# Seaplane and Submarine

Two hours after the shelling of Portsmouth by a Rioguyan submersible cruiser, Southampton was heavily bombarded, presumably by the same craft. Here, the firing was of a more concentrated nature, practically all the projectiles falling in the docks, although an obvious but unsuccessful attempt was made to destroy the Naval Ordnance Magazines at Marchwood. Southampton, however, escaped comparatively lightly—few of its prominent buildings were even damaged, and the toll of human life in the town itself was small. At the docks, too, the loss of life was not great, owing to most of the workers quickly finding cover which proved useful against anything but a direct hit.

Within thirty minutes of this bombardment came telegraphic reports that Plymouth and Devonport were under hostile fire.

The news had barely reached the Admiralty, when telegrams were pouring in from Manchester and Liverpool, reporting that both places had been shelled from an unknown type of craft that had appeared sixteen miles west by north of the Bar Lightship. In this case, the firing lasted only a couple of minutes or so, for on the appearance of an Isle of Man packet-boat the submarine hastily dived. That pointed to the fact that the crew of the submarine were evidently “jumpy”, otherwise they would not have dived simply because of a small and unarmed steamer.

True to his promise, Brian Strong had a complete apparatus ready in the specified time. In the presence of a number of naval experts, the device was submitted for trials.

For the sake of secrecy, the apparatus was placed on the light cruiser *Cariad*, the vessel with the experts on board being ordered to proceed to a position twenty miles south-east of the Nab tower.

Four modern-type seaplanes from Calshot were detailed to play the part of hostile aircraft. At the time specified, two of them were observed approaching from the nor'-east at an altitude of 2000 feet.

The inventor, feeling far from cool and collected, peered through the telescopic sights. In spite of the fact that the rays had been proved, he was assailed by doubts. Supposing something—a minute adjustment—was in error and the device failed? Or if the current should prove too strong or too weak for the sensitive instrument? He feared failure, not because the apparatus might be defective, but by reason of the ridicule that would be hurled at him.

Slowly, Uncle Brian trained the projector, still hesitating. The nearest seaplane was now a bare two miles away, flying serenely, almost defiantly, in the cloudless sky.

“Three thousand yards,” chaunted the range-finding officer.

Some of the experts shrugged their shoulders. The rays were to be released at nine thousand yards. For all they knew, the inventor had done so, but without effect.

At last, with a nervous jerk, Brian Strong depressed the lever actuating the mysterious current. The leading seaplane held on for perhaps five seconds, then like a wounded partridge, it began to dive towards the water. The pilot, retaining his presence of mind, righted his 'bus and allowed her to volplane, until the inventor trained the projector upon the second seaplane.

At the first sign of the ignition being cut out, the pilot banked steeply. The sudden swerve brought the seaplane outside the invisible beam. The twin motors picked up again.

By this time Brian had recovered his composure. He was again an inventor, sure of himself, and tasting in full measure the joy of achievement, when not a moment before his sensations had been much like those of a nervous schoolboy faced by a tough “paper”, and by no means confident of the result. The slightest deflection made it possible for the ray to hold the machine as surely as the spider’s web does the enmeshed fly.

Vainly did the accomplished airman attempt to extricate his machine from the numbing influence. Looping, banking, attempting a spinning nose dive, he tried ineffectually to dodge the invisible but none the less paralysing beam, employing all the artifices of a flying man who had won experience in that perilous school—the Great War.

It was a gallant struggle. The seaplane—a mere glider encumbered by the dead weight of a useless pair of engines—was beaten.

The third and fourth shared the same fate, and whilst the four were resting on the water, the inventor demonstrated the effect of playing the ray



fanwise. The moment one seaplane “started up” she was rendered powerless by the swift swing of the electric beam. Another and yet another attempted to rise, but hardly had the engines fired when they were reduced to a state of silent impotency.

“That gadget will clip the wings of the Rioguyan air fleet,” exclaimed Sir John Pilrig enthusiastically.

“And the Rioguyans will clip ours,” added another Admiralty official.

“Precisely,” agreed the Deputy Chief of Staff. “That wipes the air menace off the board. Now there are the submarines to be taken into account. Conditions somewhat different from those during the last war. S’pose your rays aren’t applicable to underwater craft, Mr. Strong, or have you managed to solve still another problem of modern warfare?”

Brian shook his head.

“’Fraid not, sir,” he replied. “But there’s no insurmountable difficulty, I take it. A submarine’s electrical engines ought to be ‘shorted’ by the rays. The difficulty appears to me to be the non-adaptability of water to the conditions of a concentrated current.”

“Meanwhile, we just carry on,” rejoined Sir John. “After all, we didn’t do so badly with depth-charges and hydrophones. . . . That will do, Captain Parr,” he continued, addressing the Commanding-Officer of the cruiser. “There is no need for further trials. Will you please have a signal sent to the seaplanes to that effect? They can part company and return to Calshot.”

The four aircraft began “taxi-ing” into the wind, prior to “taking off”. To do so, they had to pass to wind’ard of the *Cariad*, and, when at a sufficient altitude, turn and retrace their course.

“Wireless telephone message, sir!” reported the Yeoman of Signals to the Captain of the *Cariad*. “Seaplane reports submarine approaching within one thousand yards of ship. Request instructions.”

“Port eight,” ordered the owner, with the idea of turning the cruiser so that her stern, instead of her broadside, should present itself to a possible foe. “Any of our submarines out?” he demanded of the Officer of the Watch.

“None, sir,” was the prompt reply. “All submarines of the Portsmouth Division were to use the Needles Channel.”

“Then heaven help me if she’s one of ours,” exclaimed the Captain grimly. “By jove, won’t it make ’em jump!”

He indicated a group of Admiralty experts, both naval and civilian, gathered round Brian Strong's gadget on the quarter-deck.

Sir John smiled.

"They'd jump still more if a tinfish got us," he added.

The seaplane had already been given orders to attack. It was indeed a lucky chance that she had left Calshot under active service conditions. In addition to two torpedoes designed for use against surface craft, she was equipped with four delayed-action bombs, each capable of being set to explode at any depth between four and twenty-four fathoms.

It was with weapons of the latter type that the seaplane was about to deal drastically with her submerged foe.

The latter was the submersible cruiser that had recently bombed Portsmouth and Southampton. She was now proceeding up-channel intent upon causing a little annoyance at Dover.

Unfortunately for her, she was unaware of the presence of the seaplanes; but she had spotted the slowly moving *Cariad* and had marked her down for an easy prey.

The light cruiser had swung gently through eight points of the compass. Captain Parr had purposely refrained from ordering increased speed lest the submarine might "smell a rat". On her part, the Rioguyan craft was not able to gain on the cruiser, but was hanging on in the hope that the *Cariad* would again alter helm and thus present a target that was almost impossible to be missed by the deadly torpedo.

During the conversation between Sir John Pilrig and the Captain of the *Cariad*, Brian Strong had rejoined Peter, who had been closely questioned by the experts concerning the anti-aircraft device.

In complete ignorance of the presence of the Rioguyan submarine, the group of experts transferred their attention to the seaplane that had detached herself from her consorts and was now hovering in wide circles over the clearly-defined hull of her lawful prey.

A dark object dropped from the fuselage, quickly followed by another, their impact with the water throwing up a tall column of spray.

"What is that fellow doing?" began Uncle Brian, but before he could complete the sentence a muffled roar shook the air. A thick cloud of greasy black smoke shot up, mushroom-shaped . . . the rush of subsiding water hurled high above the normal surface deadened the long-drawn-out

reverberations of the explosion. . . . The *Cariad* rolled lazily to the wash caused by the violent displacement of hundreds of tons of water.

It seemed an interminable time before the straight snout and the net-cutting device of the Rioguyan submersible rose for a brief interval above the pool of oil—sufficient for the *Cariad* to establish the certainty that the craft was not a British one.

The submarine had been hit right aft, the explosion completely shattering the hull abaft the Diesel-engine room. The for'ard portion was, however, still practically intact.

The *Cariad's* engines were stopped. Captain Parr was seemingly in no hurry to take his ship from that forbidding spot. Nor did he close in order to drop a mark-buoy over the wreckage.

A quarter of an hour had passed. The seaplanes, their work accomplished, were out of sight. The light cruiser still lingered. At the microphone apparatus a grave-faced watch-keeping lieutenant was listening, and not listening in vain, for auricular evidences of what was taking place within the as yet water-tight sections of the submersible.

Suddenly the muffled roar of a second explosion, of lesser magnitude than that of the first, was borne to the ears of the watchers on the cruiser's deck and superstructure. A thin cloud of vile-smelling smoke filtered through the agitated waves and drifted athwart the *Cariad*.

The Deputy Chief of Staff turned inquiringly to Captain Parr. His hands were trembling perceptibly and his tanned features had assumed a greyish hue.

"Well?" he inquired laconically.

"Done themselves in, poor wretches," replied the owner. "They've detonated the warhead of one of their torpedoes. . . . Either that or a lingering death."

The Captain turned to order speed for fifteen knots. Sir John left the bridge and made his way to the quarter-deck to rejoin his colleagues.

"That apparatus of yours, Mr. Strong," he observed in level tones, "is perfectly satisfactory. How many can you guarantee within a fortnight?"

He paused and laid his hand upon Brian's masterpiece.

"If only you could adapt it for submarine work," he continued, "you would become the greatest humanitarian of the decade—of the century.

There would be none of that brutal business we've just witnessed. . . . Fifty in a fortnight, Mr. Strong? Excellent! Carry on, and let's have the goods."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### Orders to Proceed

During the next fortnight, Brian Strong kept his augmented staff hard at work. Ninety men were employed in turning out numbers of the apparatus that was to knock the Rioguyan air fleet out of the running. In three shifts the enthusiastic men toiled, Brian personally superintending two shifts a day, while Peter was in charge of the third.

Meanwhile the personnel of the Royal Navy was being strongly increased. Ex-officers and men volunteered and were gladly accepted. The fleet reserve was called up, the R.N.R. and R.N.V.R. veterans of the Great War offering their services in shoals.

The existing ships, even including those hastily brought forward for commission, were in danger of being over-manned. Owing to the wholesale scrapping of serviceable warships, there were available roughly three times the number of trained men actually required to put every existing ship into commission.

Amongst the ex-officers regranted a commission was Peter Corbold. Without identifying himself as a relative of the inventor of the mysterious ray, he had made an application through the usual channel for service afloat. Now that the apparatus was tested and adopted by the British Government, he felt that he was no longer bound to remain an assistant experimenter. But he rather dreaded breaking the news to Uncle Brian. Peter had a lurking suspicion that it was hardly fair to his relative.

During a brief spell in the workshops, Peter found an opportunity of broaching the news.

Uncle Brian listened quietly. Hardly a muscle of his face moved during the announcement.

“That’s all right, Peter,” he said, when his nephew had unburdened himself. “Quite all right, my boy. As a matter of fact, I knew how keen you were to volunteer for sea service, so I approached Sir John Pilrig on the subject. You’ll find that you’ll be appointed to the *Rebound* as lieutenant borne for wireless duties.”

“Wireless duties!” exclaimed Peter. “Precious little I know about that.”

Uncle Brian winked.

“Camouflage,” he rejoined. “You’re in charge of the anti-aircraft apparatus to be installed on board the flagship. It wouldn’t do to let everybody know. In war-time, one must not call a spade a spade. It must be described by some other name and be disguised to resemble something that it is not.”

Two days later, Peter Corbold’s appointment to H.M.S. *Rebound* was announced.

The *Rebound* was a post-war battleship, of 40,000 tons, armed with eight 15-inch guns, and embodying many details of construction that bitter experience at Jutland had taught the naval constructor. At present, she was at Bermuda with the rest of the small, but efficient, squadron that represented the total available force at the Empire’s disposal without seriously impairing her naval resources elsewhere.

Diplomacy backed up by the guns of the British Navy had all but settled the Near Eastern question. British warships on the East Indian station were an invaluable asset in keeping a vast section of a fanatical India under control, even though the seat of incipient disorder was eight hundred miles from the Arabian Sea. A squadron lying off Suakin and Port Sudan had a salutary effect upon the fractious dervishes of Darfur and Kordofan; while by the same token the Egyptian Nationalists were gently but firmly called to order.

The withdrawal of any of these vessels would inevitably result in widespread trouble that would with certainty lead to a world-wide war. Almost too late came the realization that the drastic curtailment of the British Navy left the Empire in desperate straits, with no margin for emergencies.

Meanwhile, the squadron detailed for South American waters had been held up at Bermuda, pending the arrival of the anti-aircraft apparatus, which was now being turned out in sufficient numbers to render the ships invulnerable to the attacks of the Rioguyan flying-boats.

At length, the initial supply of Brian Strong’s device was ready. The destroyer *Greyhound* was ordered to proceed with the sets of apparatus to Bermuda and to take supernumeraries to the fleet.

Amongst the latter was Peter Corbold, with the rank of full lieutenant.

The voyage out was uneventful. At Bermuda, Peter reported on board the flagship, which, with the *Repulse*, *Royal Oak*, and *Retrench*, comprised the capital ships of the small but efficient fleet that was to try conclusions with the numerically superior battleships of Rioguary.

Having reported himself to the officer of the watch and been introduced to the Captain, Peter was escorted to the ward-room. Here he looked for familiar faces, and he did not look in vain. Amongst the officers were several who had been in his term at Dartmouth.

According to the custom of the service, newly-joined officers are given twenty-four hours to “shake down”. During that period they are excused duty in order to allow them to become acquainted with the internal arrangements of the ship.

Peter, with his usual keenness, was making a tour round, under the guidance of the “gunnery jack”, when he was “barged into” by a burly “two striper”, who dealt him a hearty whack on the shoulders.

In the dim light, for the meeting took place in the electrically-lighted passage between the engine-rooms, Peter was at a loss to establish the identity of the officer with the boisterous greeting.

“Mouldy blighter,” exclaimed the lieutenant. Then Peter knew.

“Weeds, old son,” he ejaculated. “I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“But I did,” replied Cavendish; “heard you were appointed. Saw you coming up over the side, in point of fact, only I couldn’t hail you. My watch—still on it,” he added hurriedly. “See you later, old thing.”

Cavendish, with several of the other survivors of the *Complex*, had been “turned over” to the flagship on her arrival at Bermuda a week previously, so that her normal complement was now exceeded. It was the same with the rest of the fleet. Trained officers and men were plentiful. The deficiency lay in the number of ships available.

After “seven-bell” tea the chums met again.

“So you’re the new gadget expert, I hear,” said Cavendish. “Something that’s going to make the Rioguyans feel the breeze, eh? What sort of ‘ujah’ is it?”

Peter explained.

“That sounds all right,” remarked the sceptical Cavendish. “It’s been tested and all that; but will it stand concussion when we’re in action?”

“It will stand up to it as well as any searchlight,” declared Peter. “While we were testing the gadget an enemy submarine was depth-charged about three hundred yards off. That was some concussion! and I examined the apparatus afterwards. It was O.K.”

“Nothing like our principal armament firing salvoes,” said Cavendish. “My action station is B turret. Where’s yours?”

“Fore-top, I believe,” replied Peter. “Not sure, though. It depends, so the Commander informs me, upon the disposition of the little stunt I’m supposed to be in charge of. When are we going south, do you know?”

Cavendish shook his head.

“Waiting for the oil-tankers, I believe. And there’s trouble with the *Repulse’s* underwater fittings. We can’t go without her. Dockyard divers might fix up the damage. Wonder if the Rioguyan navy will come out, or will it act like the Hun High Seas Fleet? Hello, what’s that? General signal.”

The two officers were pacing that side of the quarter-deck which was theirs by custom. The other side was by the same tradition the owner’s.

From the signal yard and almost immediately above their heads a hoist of gaily-coloured bunting fluttered in the breeze.

It was the signal to “weigh and proceed”.

Cavendish gave a low whistle.

“What’s up now?” he asked.

A messenger from the decoding officer came hurrying aft. The lieutenant stopped him, and repeated his question.

“They’re out, sir,” replied the man, saluting. “Enemy have appeared in force off Barbadoes and Barbuda.”

“Good business, Peter,” ejaculated Cavendish. “They’re raiding. Will try to bust up Jamaica before they’ve done. We’ll give it to ’em in the neck.”

For the next half-hour a scene of bustling activity took place. Steam pinnaces were scurrying between the ships and the dockyard, picking up liberty men, who had been hastily recalled to duty. The final consignments of urgent stores were being hurriedly unloaded from lighters alongside the warships. Cruisers and destroyers not lying at moorings were already shortening cable. Derricks were swinging in and out as they hoisted the heavy boom-boats. The signal halliard blocks were *cheeping* as hoist after hoist of bunting rose and fell from the ship’s upper-bridges; the semaphores



waved their arms with bewildering rapidity as if mutually bewailing their inability to join in the din. Above all other sounds came the hiss of escaping steam.

It was a chance—a chance at long odds—but the Admiral was throwing away no opportunity.

The Rioguyan fleet was out. Possibly in ignorance of the presence of the British warships concentrated at Bermuda, the Republicans thought it a propitious moment to carry out a “sweep” amongst the Windward Islands. At a moderate estimate, they might reach a point some eight hundred miles from their base at San Antonio. Bermuda was approximately 1200 miles away from the estuary of the Rio Guaya. The proposition that confronted the British admiral was the chance of being able to intercept the enemy before the latter gained the shelter afforded by the neutral waters of the Republics of San Valodar and San Benito.

“Do you think they’ll fight, sir?” inquired a midshipman, as he passed Cavendish on his way to the fire-bridge. Cavendish, by virtue of his having been in action with the *Cerro Algarrobo*, was regarded by the members of the gun-room as an unimpeachable authority on Rioguyan matters.

“They probably will,” was the non-committal reply.

“Hurrah!” exclaimed the “snottie”. “Won’t it be something to write home about!”

Poldene, the Paymaster-Commander, who happened to overhear the conversation, stopped to speak to the two lieutenants.

“That youngster,” he remarked, nodding in the direction of the receding midshipman, “that youngster is a bit too optimistic. I wonder whether he’ll sing the same tune after the show’s over?”

“It’ll be a pretty stiff business,” declared Cavendish. “Those fellows fight when they’re cornered—fight like a cargo of mad devils—specially if they think they’re going to win. Spanish blood, you know.”

“They want teaching a lesson,” continued Poldene, “and we’ll do it. But, by jove, I don’t mind admitting that I funk going into action.”

The Paymaster-Commander wore the ribbon of the D.S.O., awarded him for a particularly gallant deed at Jutland. He had seen the real thing, shorn of all the ornamental trappings of glory. A vision of a shell-shattered battery, tenanted only by mangled human beings and illuminated by the vivid white glare from a pile of burning cordite cartridges only three yards distant from

the open ammunition hoist—that was his sole clear recollection of the greatest naval battle that the world had seen.

No, Poldene did not hanker after another similar experience. One was enough, more than enough, for a lifetime. Almost without exception, the older officers and men who had been under fire during the Great War held similar views. But as the present job *had* to be done, they jolly well meant to do it thoroughly.

The British ships had a stupendous task in front of them. Apart from the disadvantage of numerical inferiority, they were fighting thousands of miles from home waters. There was no docking accommodation for the battleships within a few hours' steaming. The smaller "lame ducks" might be patched up in the neglected dockyard at Kingston, Jamaica, and also at Bermuda. In either case, it was a long distance for a shell-torn vessel to go. The wavering neutrality of San Valodar and San Benito had also to be taken into account. A slight success of the Rioguyan arms might turn the scale and induce those two Republics to declare war.

But one thing the Rioguayans had grossly under-estimated—the character of the man behind the gun.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### In Action—Fore-top

Eight bells had just sounded off. Cavendish, the officer of the forenoon watch, had been relieved and was descending the bridge-ladder, when he ran against Peter Corbold, who, having completed the daily examination of the anti-aircraft gadgets on board the flagship, was about to report to the Commander.

“Hello, Weeds,” exclaimed Peter. “Nothing through, I suppose?”

Cavendish shook his head.

“Absolutely nothing,” he replied. “Patrolling destroyers twenty-five miles ahead of us haven’t reported even a single sail. It’s my belief the blighters have given us the slip and are back in the Rio Guaya. As for——”

The sentence remained unfinished. A shrill bugle-call rent the air, its meaning as clear as its note.

“Action stations at the double,” exclaimed Peter. “That’s business. S’long, old bird.”

The two chums parted company, Cavendish making for B turret, while Peter, having paid a hurried visit to his cabin for his gas mask, binoculars, life-saving waistcoat, and emergency ration, began the ascent to the fore-top.

Here he found two other officers and three ratings; a midshipman followed, so that seven people were occupying rather cramped quarters in a steel, roofed-in box, 120 feet above the water-line.

Peter’s duties were chiefly confined to taking notes of the impending action. He was also to keep a look-out for hostile aircraft. Should any Rioguyan flying-boat appear in sight, he was to immediately warn the party told off to man the new anti-aircraft devices. The apparatus, until actually required, was kept below the armoured deck, whence it could be whipped up into position and connected with the dynamos supplying the necessary electric current.

It was a weird experience. Viewed from aloft, the fore-deck and superimposed turrets of the *Rebound* looked like a model. Even the

enormous beam of the ship—slightly over a hundred feet—was dwarfed to such an extent that it seemed possible to jump clear of the sides.

The guns of A and B turrets were being turned with a view to testing the training gear. Smoothly and easily the enormous weapons, looking no bigger than twin pairs of lead pencils projecting from an oval-shaped inverted dish, swung first on one beam and then on the other; at one moment trained to full elevation, at another depressed until the line of fire hardly cleared the slightly up-curved fore'sle.

Ten feet above Peter's head the huge range-finder was being adjusted by a gunnery lieutenant, his assistant standing by with telephones and voice-tubes ready to communicate with the transmitting station for "direction" firing.

The wind shrieked through the wire stays and shrouds and whistled past the now unemployed signal halliards, for the battleships had worked up to a speed of twenty-two knots. Each ship had hoisted two battle-ensigns, the wind-stretched bunting presenting the only dash of colour amidst a general tone of grey.

The four battleships were still in line ahead, the following craft being almost hidden in the dense cloud of smoke from the flagship's funnels.

Three miles to port and starboard were the light cruisers, standing out clearly in the tropical sunshine. Farther away, ahead, astern, and on both beams, were the destroyers detailed for anti-submarine work, while two separate flotillas, held in reserve for a torpedo attack upon the Rioguyan fleet, were almost invisible in the waste of sun-flecked water.

Broad on the port beam could be discerned the land, San Valodaran territory. Farther astern the coast-line dipped. The gap was the broad estuary of the Rio Guaya. The British admiral had got between the enemy and their sole means of regaining port. Provided he could head the Rioguyan fleet away from neutral territorial waters, he knew that there was nothing to prevent his bringing them to an engagement.

Again and again Peter swept the horizon ahead with his binoculars. Nothing—not even a blur of smoke—obscured the clearly defined line which cut sea and sky. But far away out yonder wireless messages were being sent by the scouting destroyers, announcing with ever increasing certainty that the enemy was still coming south.

Two bells of the afternoon watch sounded off. Peter could hardly realize that fifty minutes had elapsed since he ascended to his eyrie. Surely it was

about time, with the rival fleets approaching at an aggregate rate of from forty to fifty-five knots, that something was seen of the enemy?

A few seconds later and a triple hoist of bunting crept past the fore-top. Fifty answering pennants were almost immediately hoisted on fifty different ships, large and small. Then a burst of cheering—a huge volume of sound—came from the invisible crews of the battleships, to be taken up by their comrades in the cruisers and on until the furthestmost destroyer within signalling distance joined in the roar of appreciation.

It was the Admiral's battle signal:

“Strike hard, strike straight for England.”

“There they are, by smoke!” exclaimed one of Peter's companions in the fore-top.

Peter raised his glasses. With uncanny suddenness, the hitherto unbroken skyline was dotted with the masts, funnels, and superstructures of a host of vessels, their hulls still below the horizon. Approaching each other at the rate of an express train, the rival fleets were now within visual distance or, roughly, fifteen miles.

The destroyers that had been on ahead of the battleships, their mission for the time being accomplished, had turned tail and were taking station astern. The chance of getting to work with the deadly torpedo was not yet. Until gunfire had demoralized the half-trained gunners of the Rioguanan battleships, it was a purposeless, futile business to dispatch thinly-plated destroyers against armoured ships bristling with quick-firers.

Suddenly Peter caught a glimpse of a couple of flying-boats hovering well in advance of the British ships. Apparently they were engaged upon reconnoitring duties—for they made no attempt to take up a position favourable for bomb-dropping.

As a matter for precaution, Peter turned out one of the anti-aircraft apparatus with its crew, but it was neither the time nor the occasion to make use of the rays. Had the hostile aircraft been bombing machines intent upon scoring a hit, the case would have been different; but they were spotting machines, up to record the results of salvos and to acquaint the Rioguanan admiral of the disposition of the British ships. The light cruisers would deal with them.

It was the *Cadogan* that brought her rays into action. Both flying-boats dropped like shot partridges, recovering in time to enable them to volplane to the water. Here they drifted helplessly until a destroyer ranged alongside

each in succession, removed the crews, who did not offer the slightest resistance, and sent the abandoned aircraft to the bottom.

“Neat work that,” thought Peter. “It proves that friend Ramon Diaz hasn’t found an antidote for the rays. Apparently he’s satisfied with stealing Uncle Brian’s secret.”

Meanwhile the four battleships had deployed into single line abreast, each with the object of getting its four 15-inch guns of A and B turrets to bear upon the enemy.

So engrossed was Peter with the little episode of the flying-boats, that the distant rumble of heavy gunfire—sounding like a subdued thudding upon a bass drum—failed to attract his attention.

A few seconds later a veritable cauldron of foam, a dozen separate pillars of spray, announced to him and to a favoured few who could see what was going on outside the ship, that the action had commenced by the enemy opening fire. As a gratifying corollary was the knowledge that the salvo had fallen short.

“Sixteen thousand five hundred,” chaunted the range-finding lieutenant, the moment the battleship had emerged from the slowly dispersing wall of spray.

“Train fifteen red,” sang out another voice in a lower key.

The two for’ard turrets swung a few degrees to the left. The long lean guns rose slowly, as if roused from slumber.

Again the distant rumble. This time Peter could see the massive hostile projectiles approaching. The air seemed stiff with them, . . . and they were coming *his* way. Instinctively he ducked behind the thin steel plating of the fore-top—a protection hardly more serviceable than brown paper. The beastly shells seemed in no great hurry. . . . He could see the bright copper rifling bands on the dark grey bodies of the projectiles.

“Train twenty-five green,” came the clear level tones again.

The *Rebound* had starboarded helm, and the enemy, instead of being on her port, were now well on her starboard bow.

With an infernal screech, the salvo trundled past the flagship’s foremast, falling within a radius of fifty yards, a good three cables’ lengths astern.

“Straddled, by jove!” ejaculated a midshipman with Peter in the fore-top. “Why the——?”

His question was interrupted by a deafening crash that shook the tripod mast like a bamboo in a hurricane. The steel platform seemed to jump bodily. A whiff of acrid-smelling cordite flicked over the edge of the steel breastwork.

Peter gave a sidelong glance at the midshipman. It was the youngster who, but a short while before, was gloating over the prospect of being in action. The boy's face was pale underneath the tan. He laughed—it was a forced laugh without any ring of sincerity about it. His heart was doubtless in his boots, but he was making a gallant effort to get it back into its right place.

Retrieving his binoculars, Corbold brought them to bear upon the distant target. The terrific concussion was the simultaneous discharge of the four 15-inch guns of A and B turrets. Already the salvo was on its way towards a target unseen by the fifty odd men cooped up within the two turrets. Eight miles away those shells, by the latest workings of the science of gunnery, were calculated to fall—and they did.

Through his glasses, Peter watched the receding flight of the huge missiles, each weighing more than a ton. The impact came. At first there was little to indicate to the observer's eye that they had done their work—just a few dark splashes on the light grey hull of a Rioguyan battleship—no more. But the next instant the scene had changed considerably. The projectiles had burst, not on impact, but after they had eaten into the vitals of the enemy ship. Lurid flashes leapt from her superstructure and from different parts of her lofty hull. One of her funnels sagged, hung irresolute, and then crashed across her port battery. Then flame-tinged smoke poured through a dozen unauthorized outlets. Reeling like a drunken man, the Rioguyan battleship hauled out of line and disappeared behind the ship next astern.

By this time the firing had become general. The four British battleships were letting rip as fast as the loading-trays could deliver shells and ammunition into the rapacious breeches of the enormous weapons. The din was terrific, while the vibration was so intense that the fore-top was shaking and rattling like a high-pressure engine on a faulty bed.

“Goodness only knows what we're here for,” thought Peter, wiping the cordite dust from his eyes and shaking the beads of salt spray from the peak of his cap. “Can't see a blessed thing.”

He continued to peer out automatically. There was little to be seen, save when an occasional lifting of the pall of spray and smoke enabled him to see

the flashes of the guns of the *Royal Oak* and her consorts. His senses were benumbed by the continuous crashes. He was no longer afraid. A sort of stolid indifference seemed to take possession of the fragments of thought left in his brain. The whole business seemed a ghastly, bewildering nightmare.

A terrific crash, outvoicing every other noise in the pandemonium, shook the fore-top like a rattle. The occupants, hurled violently, subsided in a confused struggling heap upon the steel floor. For some moments they remained prostrate, making no effort to sort themselves out.

Peter opened his eyes, to close them quickly again. Someone's heel was beating a tattoo within an inch or so of his nose.

He wriggled clear and sat up. One of the bluejackets, wedged in an angle of the walls, was mopping the claret that welled from his nose. The two officers and the midshipman were sorting themselves out, looking too dazed to understand how they got there and what they were doing. The second bluejacket was muttering to himself as he fumbled in his jumper for some article that he had prized and lost.

"Anyone hit?" bawled Peter.

His words were inaudible, but no one showed any signs of serious injury. The fore-top was shaking badly—not only through the continuous concussion, but as if it were no longer firmly secured to the head of the tripod mast. The small oval aperture that opened into the principal leg of the tripod, and formed an alternative means of gaining the deck, was open. Wisps of smoke issued from it.

A man with a bandaged head appeared, squeezing with an obvious effort through the door. Peter recognized him as a petty-officer belonging to the range-finding party.

"Fair kippered that way, sir," he shouted. "A perishin' eel couldn't wriggle through. No, mast ain't carried away quite. 'S got a bulge in 'er. Lootenant, 'e told me to report verbally that our range-finder's knocked out, an' all controls smashed up."

Having explained his presence, the P.O. spat on his hands, hitched up his trousers, and lowered himself over the edge of the fore-top.

Peter, leaning over, watched him grip the rungs on the outside of the tripod and commence his eighty-odd feet descent. Then something else attracted the young officer's attention.



All was not well with A and B turrets. They had ceased firing. The smoke had cleared considerably, but from the riven roof of A turret a column of white flame was leaping almost as high as the platform on which Peter stood. He was unpleasantly aware of the heat. The updraught was like that of a blast-furnace.

Someone touched him on the shoulder. Turning, he saw Ambrose, one of the officers with him on the top.

“Looks like the *Queen Mary* stunt,” said Ambrose grimly. “We’ll be blown sky high in half a shake.”

Peter replied that that possibility was by no means remote. That white flame came from burning cordite. Once the fire got to the magazine the *Rebound* would be blown to smithereens.

“We shan’t have to go as far as some of those poor blighters,” continued Ambrose, with a wry smile. He came of a stock of fighting men, many of whom had met death with a jest on their lips.

It was indeed a desperate situation. The occupants of the fore-top were craning their necks over the sizzling flame. Projectiles were still hurtling through the air. Although the for’ard guns of the flagship had ceased fire, Q and X turrets were still hard at it, trained abeam to starboard. Smoke was pouring from the funnels and enveloping the fore-top. Either the wind had changed, or else the ship had swung round sixteen points and was retracing her course. At least, Peter imagined so, until a partial clearing of the smoke showed that the *Rebound* was going astern, but still towards the enemy line. Battered and bruised for’ard, and with her bows well down, she was still holding her place in the line.

Even as he watched, Peter fancied that the column of white flame was diminishing. Men, looking no larger than flies, were swarming round the turret with hoses directing powerful jets of water into the raging inferno. Steam mingled with the flame. The pillar of fire wavered, died down, flared up again, and finally went out like a guttered candle.

Losing all account of time, Peter “carried on”—doing absolutely nothing. His range of vision was limited, owing to dense clouds of smoke, steam, and spray. The turret sighters and men at the range-finders on the “Argo” towers, could see much better than he, since the atmosphere was less obscured closer to the water-line and the opposing fleets had drawn to within torpedo range. As far as Corbold was concerned, existence seemed to be composed of a continual roar and vibration, punctuated by deeper

concussions that indicated direct hits from Rioguyan guns. How the battle was progressing, he knew not. That it was being fiercely contested, he had no doubt, nor had he that ultimate victory would be with the ships flying the glorious White Ensign. He was beginning to feel horribly sick, for in addition to the distracting vibration, a whiff of poison gas-shell had wafted over the fore-top.

A flash of orange-coloured flame rent the billowing clouds of acrid-smelling smoke. The light seemed to spring from a source within a few feet of the tripod masthead. Actually a 5.9-inch had glanced obliquely from the hood of B turret and had burst outside the massive steel walls of the conning-tower.

Again Peter was hurled against the side of the fore-top. How long he remained there, he had not the faintest recollection. At length he raised his head. His companions were strangely quiet, except the midshipman, who was vainly attempting to stifle his groans. There were jagged rents in the floor and in the sides of the fore-top; there were also holes punched as neatly as if done by a pneumatic drill. There were pools, too, of dark sticky liquid. . . .

Peter struggled to his feet, somewhat surprised that he was able to do so. As far as he knew, he had not been hit. He turned his attention to his companions. Ambrose was lying on his side, his face pillowed on his left arm. There was the same grim smile on his face. He looked to be sleeping peacefully, but it was the sleep that knows no wakening on this earth. The other lieutenant and the two bluejackets were simply shattered lumps of clay. Only Peter and the midshipman were left alive out of the seven, since there was no trace of the third able seaman.

The snottie looked Peter in the face with eyes that resembled those of a sheep on the slaughter-block.

"I've stopped one," he exclaimed feebly. "'Fraid it's the last fielding I'll ever do."

His left leg was completely severed just below the knee, yet Peter noticed the stump was only bleeding very slightly. The shock had evidently contracted the torn arteries, but there was every possibility of a rush of life-blood before very long.

Fumbling with unsteady fingers at his first-aid outfit, Peter contrived to rig up a rough-and-ready tourniquet. His next step was to get the wounded lad down to the dressing-station. As far as he, personally, was concerned,

there was not the slightest reason why he should remain in the wreck of the fore-top. The question was, how was he to get the midshipman down?

Even had the passage down and within the centre leg of the tripod been available (which it was not), the small diameter of the shaft would not have permitted the descent of one man with another clinging to his back. To lower the snottie was also out of the question, since the signal halliard nearest the mast had been shot away and no other rope was available. The only likely way was to descend on the outside of the mast by means of the rungs provided for that purpose.

“Can you hang on, do you think?” inquired Peter anxiously.

“I’ll have a good shot at it, anyway,” was the reply.

As a matter of precaution, the young lieutenant knotted his scarf round the midshipman’s body and his own. Then, heavily burdened, he let himself down through the jagged gap in the floor of the fore-top that had once been a trap-door.

Rung by rung he made his way, never once looking down and religiously adhering to the old sea maxim: “Never let go with more than one hand or foot at a time.”

The eighty-odd feet descent seemed interminable. Momentarily, Peter’s burden grew heavier. The lad’s grip, at first so strong as to threaten to choke him, was becoming feebler. His own leg-muscles were giving indications of cramp, or else, perhaps, he had received an injury of which at the time he was unaware.

Presently his left foot, groping for the next rung, failed to find a temporary resting-place. For the first time in the descent, Peter looked down. Where a series of rungs should have been, was a gaping void, encompassed by a saw-like edge of riven steel. In ordinary circumstances, he could have dropped without risk, since he was only about eight feet above the boat-deck. But where the leg of the tripod passed through the boat- and flying-decks was an abyss, out of which acrid fumes were wafting. A shell that had penetrated the side had burst on the upper-deck and had blown upwards, completely isolating the stricken leg of the tripod from the other two decks by a gap at least fifteen feet across.

“If I cast you adrift, can you hang on for a couple of minutes?” asked Peter, shouting at the top of his voice above the discordant din.

There was no response.

The midshipman had lost consciousness.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### In Action—'Tween Decks

On parting with Peter Corbold, Cavendish made his way for'ard, through the battery and out by the armoured door of the screen. Throughout his progress, he could not help remarking upon the enthusiasm of the crews of the quick-firers as they cleared away and triced up the mess-tables and closed up round their guns.

They were the pick of Britain's manhood, for the most part men under twenty-five, tall, deep-chested, clean-shaven fellows, looking in their singlets and trousers like zealously-trained athletes.

The battery was in semi-darkness, save for the yellow gleam of the candles in the battle-lanterns. Oil lamps, for obvious reasons, were not lighted, while the electric lamps were disconnected from their holders and stowed away. The lesson of Jutland had shown how dangerous an electric-light globe can be. The concussion of gunfire alone will shatter it into a thousand jagged little fragments with disastrous results as far as the bare feet of the guns' crews are concerned.

Fire-hoses, sending their jets of water from their unions, lay along the deck like healthy serpents, ready to trip the unwary. "Present use" ammunition was stacked in the rear of the guns, ready to feed their rapacious maws when the order to open fire with the secondary armament was received. Above the chatter of men's voices came the rattle of the ammunition cages and the steady purr of the engines far below the water-line.

"Close up round your guns, my lads," the bronzed and bearded gunner kept on shouting, "close up and give the greasy swine socks when the time comes."

Arriving at his action station, Cavendish climbed the short iron ladder and passed through the narrow doorway in the rear of the turret. Blades, the officer in charge, gave him a delighted grin.

"No blessed mist this time, Weeds," he observed. "It'll be an almighty hammering . . . what's that, Petty-officer?"

“Crew numbered off, sir; all present and correct, sir.”

“Very good—test loading-gear. Then stand by.”

Blades turned away to watch operations. Cavendish, his work not yet begun, stood behind the turret-trainer under the sighting-hood.

“Anything in sight yet?” inquired Cavendish.

“Nothing yet, sir,” was the reply, as the P.O. stepped aside to allow his officer to peep out.

Cavendish placed his eyes to the rubber-rimmed periscope. As he did so, he heard the order given, “load all cages!” The show was about to open.

He could see nothing but an expanse of sunlit sea and sky. Out there lay the hostile fleet, but still below the horizon, although no doubt visible from the fore-top and fire-control platform.

“We’ll be firing by direction, sir,” supplemented the turret-trainer.

Even as he looked, Cavendish’s range of vision was obscured by a white wall of spray. The enemy’s opening salvo had fallen short.

“Train fifteen red!”

The turret turned smoothly—so smoothly that Cavendish was hardly conscious of the pivotal movement. The breeches of both weapons sank gently as the muzzles reared themselves almost to extreme elevation.

The lieutenant moved away from the sighting-hood and watched the massive steel monsters for the recoil that would announce that the master-hand well outside the turret had completed the circuit that would send the mighty projectiles on their pre-ordained flight.

There was a breathless silence, broken only by subdued noises down in the working-chamber and the crash of a salvo that had passed handsomely over the ship.

“Train twenty-five green!”

Back rolled the turret until the still silent weapons were trained on the bearing ordered.

A suspense of a few long-drawn seconds, then with a roar the guns of A and B turrets spoke simultaneously and with no uncertain voice.

The period of inaction was over.

Recoiling to the full extent of their hydraulic buffers, the huge weapons jumped forward again into loading-position. Men sprang to the breech-blocks; a strong whiff of burnt cordite wafted back into the confined space of the turret. The huge 15-inch projectiles were rammed home by the mechanically operated rammer; followed the bag containing the propelling charge; and again the breech-blocks closed with a deep metallic clang.

A brief pause, and again the pair of guns recoiled.

Apart from watching the turret crew “carrying on” as rapidly and as smoothly as a well-ordered machine, Cavendish began to feel decidedly bored. There was a most terrific clamour going on without—probably the “five-point-fives” of the starboard battery were getting to work. In that case, he decided, there might be something to be seen.

He touched the turret-trainer on the shoulder. The man stepped aside. Cavendish applied his eyes to the periscope. He could see nothing. Even if the enemy ships had closed to within a few thousand yards, they were still invisible, for the front glass of the periscope was blackened and smudged with smoke, oil, and water. The continuous concussion was positively painful. The noise and rattle of a dozen pneumatic hammers in a double bottom was nothing to it.

Cavendish had lost all idea of time. He glanced at his wristlet watch. It told him that he had been in the turret only five minutes. A second look showed that the watch had stopped.

Just then, Blades, the lieutenant of the turret, caught sight of him.

“Hello, old thing!” he exclaimed. “You haven’t been sent for yet?”

“No,” shouted Cavendish in reply. “And don’t want to be sent for. Shows everything’s going on all right. I’ll——”

A jet of greasy oil forced through a broken gland struck Cavendish in the face and interrupted his words.

“Faugh!” he ejaculated. “Your beastly turret again.”

“Sorry, old man!” replied Blades, apologizing for the misbehaviour of his beloved “box o’ tricks”. “’Tany rate, if that’s all you get, you’re lucky.”

One of the turret guns’ crew appeared and put his face close to Cavendish’s ear.

“Message through from Captain, sir,” he reported. “’E wants you to go aft and report, seein’ as ’ow the ship’s been badly ’it.”

The two officers exchanged glances.

“Good old Weeds!” exclaimed Blades. “‘England expects’, and all that sort of thing, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” agreed Cavendish, with a wry grimace.

Turning up his coat-collar, although it was not until afterwards that he recognized the futility of the action, Cavendish scrambled out of the turret. Wriggling like an eel and feeling very forlorn and unhappy out in the open, he slid over and gained the port superstructure ladder. Cordite-laden clouds were sweeping past him as the guns of B turret fired simultaneously. He could feel the blast and the back-draught much too close to be pleasant. A murderer making for one of the Jewish cities of refuge couldn’t have sprinted in quicker time or in greater funk than he did in his mad rush for the door of the superstructure—only to find that aperture barred and bolted.

Hardly knowing how he did it, Cavendish found himself clambering over the remains of the cutter, his progress hastened by a shell that burst against the horizontal leg of the tripod mast, fortunately without carrying it away or bowling the lieutenant over by the shower of splinters.

Right along the deserted mess deck Cavendish hurried. Here and there were fairly round holes where projectiles had passed through the thin steel plating. Soon he located the serious damage; a 14-inch shell had completely penetrated the armour at the water-line and had exploded between decks.

The shell had played havoc. The compartment was so full of smoke that it was impossible to enter without a respirator. A fire had broken out, the corticine and shattered teak planking allowing it to get a good hold until the water, pouring in through the shell-hole every time the ship rolled to starboard, put most of it out. Right beneath was the after dressing station, already occupied by twenty or thirty cases, most of them suffering from burns. Through a hole in the deck, water was liberally flowing in upon the medical staff and their patients.

Shouting for a fire-party, Cavendish soon had the rest of the flames under control, the badly damaged hoses notwithstanding. Then came the task of plugging the shell-hole in the armour plate. This was accomplished by means of a number of rolled hammocks shored up with timber.

The lieutenant, finding that nothing more could be done, dismissed the party and went below the armoured deck to reassure the Surgeon Commander.

“How goes it?” demanded the Medical Officer.



“Dashed if I *do* know,” replied Cavendish. “I was in too tearing a hurry. Couldn’t see anything if I wanted to. But I know we’re keeping our end up.”

“And the enemy?”

“No use asking me,” persisted the lieutenant. “I’ve heard nothing, seen nothing. You’ve had a busy time, Doc.”

The Surgeon Commander gave a quick glance round the crowded dressing-station.

“Twenty-eight,” he replied, “and every man-jack a perfect brick. Not a whine amongst the crowd. And some of them are—well—thank God for morphia!”

He picked up an instrument from the sterilizing bowl and turned away. Already he had performed five amputations by the light of a few candle lamps, with the place shaking like a house during an earthquake, and stuffy with fumes from the shell that had burst on the deck immediately overhead.

At the head of the ladder, Cavendish was intercepted by one of the carpenter’s crew.

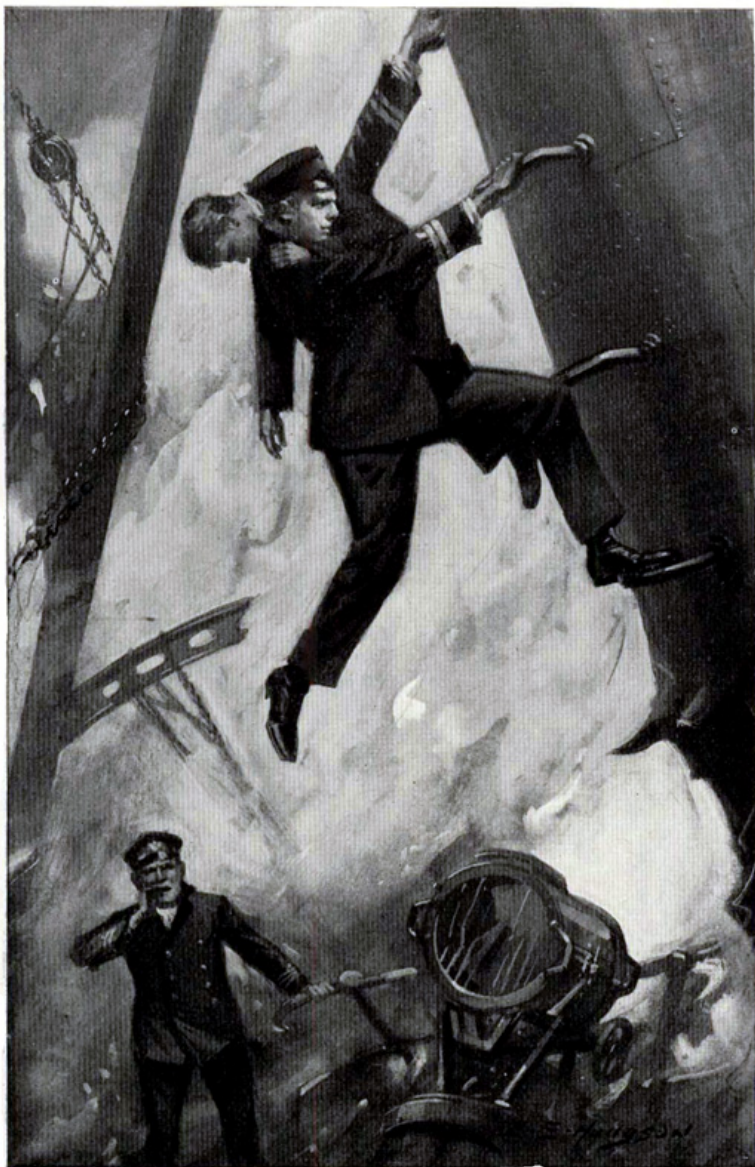
“I’ve been sent to fetch you, sir,” explained the man. “There’s a nasty mess up for’ard.”

The lieutenant hurried along the mess-deck, negotiating various obstacles and passing groups of men “standing easy”. Many inquiries they made of how things were going, but Cavendish, beyond reassuring them, could give no definite news.

When at length he arrived upon the scene of the damage for’ard, he looked grave.

A 15-inch shell had penetrated the unarmoured end, twenty feet abaft the stem, blowing jagged rents in the plating and in places starting whole sheets of metal from their frames. The cable stowed in the manger had been flung about like string. A fire had been started, but had been already got under control by the fire-party, who, under the orders of the chief carpenter, were endeavouring to plug the rents with canvas and bedding.

It was a useless task. The sea was pouring in like a mill race, washing men and gear away like corks. The sunlight was streaming through the gaps into the smoke-laden compartment, giving Cavendish the impression that he was in a train about to emerge from a tunnel—only that the din was a hundred times greater.



**"WEEDS! BEAR A HAND!"**

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The only thing to be done was to abandon this compartment. The water-tight doors and bulkhead were shored up with kit-bags, hammocks, and bunks of timber. Cavendish stood by and watched as the bow compartment

filled. The barricade bulged slightly. Streams of water oozed through the started rivet holes in the bulkhead. The steelwork groaned—but it stood the strain. So far so good.

Telling off a hand to keep watch over the bulkhead and dismissing the rest of the party, Cavendish made his way to the trunk of the conning-tower, whence by means of a ladder and a manhole he could gain the conning-tower itself.

Here he found the Captain and reported the damage.

“All right; carry on,” was the response.

The *Rebound* had stopped and was already losing way. She was so deep down by the bows that it would have been imprudent to continue to steam ahead. A destroyer, in obedience to a signal, was alongside for the purpose of transferring the admiral and his staff to another ship.

From one of the officers in the conning-tower, Cavendish learnt something definite. The enemy were in flight. Three, possibly four, of their capital ships had been sunk. The rest had been badly mauled. The *Numancia*, which under a different name was at one time a crack ship of the Brazilian navy, and had recently been acquired by Rioguary, had been so severely punished that she had surrendered to the British destroyer *Audax*. The *Audax* herself was in a sinking condition, so her commander promptly turned over his crew to the prize, secured the survivors of the Rioguyan under hatches, and compelled the republican engine-room ratings to carry on. The *Numancia* was thus able to render considerable service to her new masters by finishing off a pair of hostile cruisers that, although disabled, were still capable of discharging their torpedoes.

“And you’re deucedly lucky, old top,” continued Cavendish’s informant.

“I don’t see how,” rejoined the lieutenant.

“Then have a look at B turret,” suggested the other. “That was your action station, I believe.”

By this time the admiral’s flag had been transferred.

The Captain and the rest of the conning-tower staff were making their way to the after citadel, for the ship was gathering sternway. Although unable to keep her place in the line, she could still render good service with the guns of Q and X turrets.

As far as the *Rebound* was concerned, there was a decided lull in the action. In turning through sixteen points, she had of necessity lost a

considerable distance and was a good five miles astern of the *Royal Oak* and the three other battleships.

Cavendish went to the front of the badly damaged fire-bridge in order to see the damage to B turret. Clouds of smoke, pouring from both funnels and from a huge rent in the base of the foremost funnel, were sweeping for'ard. It was impossible to see with any distinctness.

Descending to the boat deck, the lieutenant noticed that the inclined leg of the tripod mast was wreathed in smoke, and that the boat deck all around it had been torn away. A party of marines and stokers were playing hoses on the smouldering débris, and in answer to Cavendish's inquiries, replied that the fire was almost out.

"Weeds! Bear a hand, there's a good sort!"

Hearing his nickname shouted, Cavendish glanced aloft. Clinging to the lowermost intact rungs of the badly damaged tripod was Peter Corbold, with something looking like a scarecrow lashed across his shoulders.

"Right-o!" bawled Cavendish. "Hang on a bit. I'll get you down."

"I can hang on for two minutes," rejoined Peter.

Realizing that there was no time to be lost, Cavendish turned out a party of bluejackets. A block was not to be had, but a length of two-inch rope was soon forthcoming. A hurried test proved it to be serviceable. One of the men swarmed up the jagged leg of the tripod like a cat, regardless of lacerated fingers and ankles. In a few seconds the rope with a "bowline on the bight" at one end was rove through one of the rungs above Peter's head. His burden was transferred to the bowline and lowered away until the unconscious midshipman was level with the shell-torn boat-deck and dangling in the centre of the jagged hole.

By the aid of a short length of rope, the snottie was drawn within arm's reach of three or four bluejackets, and before Peter gained the deck the lad he had rescued was well on his way to the dressing station.

"Hit, Peter?" inquired Cavendish laconically, as he noticed the smoke, begrimed, blood-stained face of his chum.

"Don't think so," replied Peter, stretching his arms to relieve the cramped muscles. "How are things going?"

Except for the funnel smoke and wisps of steam and smoke from a dozen different sources, the air for some miles around was comparatively clear. In the distance could be discerned the four battleships still firing

heavily. The hostile fleet, or, rather, those still flying the Rioguyan ensign, were invisible in the haze of gunfire.

Away on the port hand was a British light cruiser with a heavy list. Flames and smoke were pouring between her funnels. A destroyer was standing by to rescue her crew. Astern were a couple of enemy destroyers, badly damaged, but displaying the White Ensign over the Republican colours. Close to them were the bows of another destroyer sticking up vertically to a height of about thirty feet above the surface. Everywhere were large patches of black oil and débris of all descriptions.

“We’ve whacked ’em,” replied Cavendish. “Come along, old thing, if you’re fit. I’ve got to look at B turret.”

The ship was now making about twelve knots, going astern the whole time. Most of the crew were on deck to get a well-earned breather and to watch the progress of the running fight.

Cavendish stood stock still when he caught sight of what had been his action station. B turret was completely out of action. Only a few minutes after he had been sent aft, a 15-inch projectile had landed squarely on the face of the turret below the sighting-hood. Penetrating the 11-inch armour, it had burst with devastating effect in the confined space of the turret. Several massive steel plates had been dislodged from the roof of the hood; the two 15-inch guns had been displaced from their mountings, with their muzzles resting on the deck. Those of the crew who had escaped from the direct explosion of the shell were killed by the ignition of a couple of cordite charges. The resulting fire was the one Corbold had seen from the top. Fortunately the men filling the trays at the foot of the ammunition trunk realized the danger of the down-blast and, acting on their own initiative, flooded the magazine.

When Peter and Cavendish arrived upon the scene, smoke was still issuing from the roof of the turret. Fire parties were at work with hoses, pouring volumes of water into the shell-wrecked charnel-house that had not long since been tenanted by thirty officers and men.

For the present nothing more could be done.

Suddenly Peter gave a glance to the west’ard. The sun was on the point of setting.

“By jove,” he exclaimed, “I thought it was nearly time for seven-bell tea, and it’s close on four bells in the first dog. Let’s get some grub.”

“Right-o!” agreed Cavendish soberly, for he was still thinking of his late comrades of B turret. “Let’s. We mayn’t have another chance, ’specially if we go into action during the night.”

## CHAPTER XXIX

### After the Battle

A buzz of voices greeted the ears of the two chums as they “blew into” the ward-room. The first lieutenant, the engineer-commander, three or four watch-keeping officers, the padre, and the surgeon had foregathered to partake of a “stand-up” meal. The commander, having swallowed a cup of cocoa, was making for the bridge, with the remains of a half-consumed bully-beef sandwich in his bandaged hand.

“Hardly knew we were in action,” declared the engineer-commander. “Once or twice, perhaps, when we were hit by shells; otherwise, we might have been on steam trials for all we knew.”

“Gave the blighters a bellyful, anyway,” observed one of the junior lieutenants. “My gun was out of action five minutes after the battery opened fire. Not half a mess. Looked out and saw an enemy battleship blow up. Seemed slow work, but it really didn’t last fifteen seconds.”

“I saw her, too,” added another. “The wreck of her standard compass landed on our quarter-deck. Hanged if some marines didn’t clear out of the battery and start picking up the bits for souvenirs. Hello, Weeds, back to your little grey home again, I see. What were your impressions, old lad?”

“Noise,” replied Cavendish. “Had enough to last me a lifetime, so I came down here for quietude and find none.”

Which went to show that Cavendish, usually a jovial soul, was decidedly “mouldy”. Now that this phase of the action was over, his nerves were very much on edge.

As for Peter Corbold, he was as yet hardly able to realize his surroundings. He could hear people talking, but their voices seemed far away. His head was buzzing like a top. His throat was dry and parched. He was hungry. Yet, somehow, now that food and drink were available, he made no immediate effort to satisfy the inner man.

The ward-room had come off lightly. There was one hole in the side, apparently made by a 6-inch. The missile had glanced off the fore transverse

bulkhead and had brought up against the fore-and-aft bulkhead separating the ward-room from the half-deck lobby. In its course the shell, which luckily did not explode, had completely gutted the piano, although the front of the already sorely-tried instrument showed no signs of internal disarrangement.

There were no settees or chairs. Down the centre of the room was a trestle table hastily rigged up by the mess-room servants. On it were enamel cups and plates, open tins of bully beef, bread and butter, and two iron kettles filled with hot cocoa. The ward-room crockery was no more.

"You'll have to buck up, Soldier, and replenish our mess traps," remarked the doctor to the captain of the marines, who held the honorary yet responsible position of Mess President.

"We'll have to wait till we go home for that, M.O.," replied the marine officer, "unless we loot the official residence of the President of Rioguary."

"When are we going home, anyway?" inquired the Chaplain. "We can't barge about here, drawing thirty-eight feet of water for'ard, and there are no docks available out here."

"If you don't know, Padre, who does?" rejoined the First Lieutenant grimly. In other circumstances, the jest would have raised a general laugh, but no one even smiled.

The Senior Medical Officer pushed aside his plate. As he moved, the smell of iodine followed him.

"Must see the Owner," he announced. "He wants a list of casualties."

"What is the butcher's bill, M.O.?" asked the Engineer-commander.

The surgeon shrugged his shoulders. Of all the ship's company he was perhaps the best able to estimate war at its true value. Without providing the excitement of combat his work brought clearly before him just those nerve-racking details which the fighting man himself is too busy to realize until such time as they cannot influence his conduct.

"Heavy," he replied. "Very heavy. Some people are fond of telling you that war is one remedy for over-population. It is: only it starts at the wrong end. The weakling and the man who has enjoyed life go scot-free, or nearly always, while youth and strength pay the toll."

"S'pose it's the same with t'other side," observed "Jimmy the One", after the M.O. had gone. "That pot-bellied bald-headed president of theirs tells 'em to go and get killed, and they do. Dash the Washington Conference,



say I. If we'd a navy—an incontestably strong navy—President Jaime Samuda wouldn't have dared to declare war. We're winning, but look at the price we've paid—our ship alone."

"Sooner we get back to a Two or even a Three Power standard, the better for everybody," added the Chaplain. "'Defence, not defiance', you know. A big navy is synonymous with security; a small navy—well—a big casualty list, and I've seen enough of a dressing-station to-day to make me plump for an Umpteen Power Standard."

"And what's your opinion, Padre, about disarmament?" inquired the Engineer-commander. "Only the other day, when we were lying at Bermuda—after ye with the butter, Weeds, old son—at Bermuda, you remarked—hello! there's action stations!"

The shrill notes of a bugle had the effect of clearing the ward-room almost as quickly as if a hostile shell had made a sudden and unexpected entry. In double quick time the already battle-worn officers raced off to their respective posts.

"It's 'hands to night defence'," corrected Cavendish, as the two chums gained the quarter-deck. "Well, thank goodness we're in the same watch-bill. It's going to be a sticky night."

Their station was on the fore-bridge, which, since the ship was going astern, corresponded to the after-bridge. Here, Cavendish was in charge of the searchlight party and the light quick-firers. Corbold's task was to take charge of the hands told off to work the anti-aircraft ray apparatus, since it was quite possible that the Rioguyan air fleet would attempt to make good the disaster to their surface ships.

But nothing of the kind happened. No hostile flying-boat was reported. Neither were the enemy submarines in evidence, although several of the crippled British light cruisers and destroyers offered an easy target in the bright starlight of the tropical night.

Away to the north-west flashes of gunfire were still visible, while now and again far-flung bursts of flame indicated the business-like activities of the British torpedo craft in the same quarter.

Nevertheless, it was not all watch on board the *Rebound*. Work was the principal order of the night. Certain repairs had to be put in hand forthwith; others less urgent had to wait, while much of the damage was beyond the resources of the ship and would have to be deferred until she was in dockyard hands. But before dawn, the débris had been dumped overboard. A

turret, which had been jammed at the same time that B turret was knocked out, was again in fighting trim. The rents in the two funnels were patched, thereby freeing the ship from the danger and inconvenience of spark-laden smoke sweeping for'ard along the boat deck. The damaged tripod mast was strengthened by means of steel rods and booms "woolled" with fathoms of flexible steel wire and light chain. Electric-light circuits and pipes belonging to the Downton pump system had been repaired and the wireless aerials renewed.

The *Rebound* was no longer cut off from the rest of the world and the fleet in particular. It was now possible to receive a fairly accurate account of the battle. The remnants of the Rioguyan fleet had gained Venezuelan territorial waters, and were creeping within the three-mile limit towards their base. Every vessel flying the Republican colours was carefully watched over by the British light cruisers and destroyers, ready, should the enemy vessels incautiously go outside the limit of neutral waters, to "slap in a mouldy" (torpedo) or to open fire. Throughout the night, the course of the demoralized Rioguyan ships was carefully checked by scores of British sextants, while gun-layers stood by with fingers itching to press firing trigger, and leading torpedo-men lingered longingly over the "bar" by which the deadly Whitehead was dispatched on its errand of death and destruction.

The Rioguyan battleships had put up a good fight at the commencement of the action. Confident in their superior numbers, they fired salvo after salvo with commendable accuracy; but when the British shells began to find their target with a skill and rapidity that was an eye-opener to the Republican crews, the *moral* of the Rioguyans simply vanished.

Of their capital ships, two were blown up by gunfire, three were torpedoed and sunk, two were captured, although of these one was in a sinking state and had to be abandoned by her prize crew during the night.

Their light cruisers had come off lightly, for directly the Rioguyan battleships turned sixteen points and fell back, they played for safety, steaming off at full speed to the nor'ard. Nevertheless, three had been overhauled and sunk by five light cruisers of the D class.

Amongst the hostile destroyers the losses were also slight, for they, too, were broken reeds. One flotilla did, however, attempt a night attack upon the severely-punished British battleships, but was driven off by the supporting light cruisers and destroyers with a loss of six out of the fourteen craft originally comprising the flotilla. It was already perfectly clear that President Samuda's plans for the future greatness of Rioguya—and

incidentally of himself—stood a particularly poor chance of ever being realized if they depended for success on naval supremacy.

On the British side the losses were heavy, but confined chiefly, as far as ships were concerned, to the light cruisers and destroyers, which pushed home the attack with a dash and daring worthy of the traditions of the senior service. All the battleships had survived the action and were still capable of dealing hard knocks. The *Rebound* had been seriously damaged; the *Royal Oak* had received three big shells just above the water-line, but, although listing to starboard, was able to maintain her station. The *Retrench* had practically all the guns in her battery on the port side put out of action, but her turret guns were undamaged. The *Repulse*, on which the dockyard staff at Bermuda had set right her defects in time for her to take her place in the line, had both her bows and stern blown away as far as the 4-inch armoured belt. Her mainmast had gone by the board. Altogether, she looked a wreck, but the damage hardly impaired her fighting qualities, the ship being quite tight below the water-line and her armament intact.

The losses in personnel were great: 1015 killed and 622 wounded. Of these, the casualties on board the *Rebound* accounted for 125 killed and 82 wounded. The excess of fatalities was a clear indication of the destructive power of guns. Wherever a heavy shell burst it killed everyone within the battery or turret. The wounded were mostly hit by fragments of flying metal at a considerable distance from the point of impact, or were severely burnt by fires that broke out simultaneously in different parts of the ship. Only a very small percentage received slight wounds. Except on board the destroyers and light cruisers, there were no casualties from the enemy quick-firers, the missiles failing to penetrate the armoured parts of the ship.

It was a stiff price to pay, and the task of subduing the Republic of Rioguary was not yet accomplished. There were still the Rioguyan flying-boats and submarines to be taken into consideration. Britain's capital ships, though few in number, had vindicated themselves against superior numbers of hostile surface ships. Would they be able to confound the enemy and the critics who so loudly declared that the day of the big battleship was over, and that air-power would overwhelm the long-standing might of Britannia's trident?

## CHAPTER 299

# The End of the Rioguyan Air Fleet

Grey dawn revealed the battered *Rebound*, still steaming stern-foremost, within the wide estuary of the Rio Guaya. Four miles to the west'ard lay her three sister-battleships, with their attendant light cruisers and destroyers, awaiting daybreak before pushing on up the broad river as far as they could without violating the territorial waters of San Valodar and San Benito.

There was a widely expressed hope amongst the officers and crew of the British fleet, that one of these republics would throw in her lot with the enemy. That would leave the admiral a comparatively free hand, since he would no longer be obliged to respect the zone over which either San Valodar or San Benito claimed jurisdiction. As things stood, there was a curious anomaly. The Rioguyan fleet had the right to the free use of the river below Sambrombon Island, although both passages were controlled by neutral states. Until the British fleet could contrive to obtain sanction, they were unable to proceed much farther without causing an international affair which might call for protests from the Powers.

The British air squadron attached to the fleet was also unable to approach Rioguyan territory, owing to the republic's possession of Brian Strong's anti-aircraft rays. On their part the Rioguyan flying-boats were useless against the British fleet, armed as it was with the ray-projecting apparatus.

The only course open, apparently, was to blockade Rioguy by sea, but this promised to be a most unsatisfactory operation. The republic was practically self-supporting; it could still maintain trade with the neighbouring republics despite any active interference on the part of the British navy.

The defeat at sea hardly troubled President Jaime Samuda. It was a regrettable occurrence, from a national point of view, but he still hoped for great things from the powerful aerial armada of the republic. Even if air-power failed, he could still hope that the ineffectual blockade would be maintained until either the British got tired of "watching the mouse-hole", or else became involved in embarrassing complications elsewhere. His own

position seemed so secure that never for one moment did President Jaime Samuda think seriously upon the possibility of a revolution.

Corbold and Cavendish had completed their “trick”. Their reliefs had taken over and they were on their way below to enjoy a well-earned sleep.

Just as they were about to enter the battery door, there was a shout of “periscope one point off the starboard bow!” For the present, the stern of the ship was considered to be the bows for manœuvring purposes, consequently the starboard side became the port and vice versa.

The two chums ran to the rail and, leaning out, could discern the object in question at a distance of about two hundred yards from the ship.

There was no time to be lost. The Captain on the bridge had to decide quickly. Checking his first impulse to ram the submarine—he remembered the possibility of having the propeller blades smashed and the rudder buckled—he bore away a couple of points, at the same time ordering the Q.F. guns to open fire.

A moment later he countermanded the order, for a destroyer, observing the pole-like object in the slanting rays of the early morning sun, starboarded helm and charged straight for the periscope.

Her youthful lieutenant-commander, in his zeal, had but one thought—to smash the submarine’s hull with the destroyer’s knife-like stem before the former could fire her torpedo at the increasingly favourable target that the *Rebound* was momentarily presenting.

In vain the battleship signalled to her to stand clear and destroy the periscope by means of gunfire and then finish off the blinded submarine with depth-charges. All on the destroyer’s bridge had eyes for nothing but the hostile periscope.

The *Rebound* could do nothing. Already the destroyer was masking her quick-firers. A warning blast from the syren did attract attention, but only when it was too late.

The destroyer’s bows hit the periscope fairly and squarely. There was no rending of steel, no release of air and oil from the submarine, for the simple reason that there was no submarine there. The periscope was a dummy, but to it were attached two mines by means of long spans of wire.

Five seconds later, the mines, swung inwards by the strain upon the spans, exploded simultaneously on either side of the destroyer. Before the upheaval of smoke and spray had dispersed, the luckless destroyer had

vanished, leaving half a dozen men swimming aimlessly in an ever increasing pool of oil.

Up dashed another destroyer, the survivors were picked up, and the little craft hurried on ahead of the battleship, with paravanes towing in order to detonate any other mines that might be in the vicinity.

The lesson, obtained at a price, was not thrown away. It proved that the Rioguyans had not resolved to defend the river by means of submarines, otherwise they would not have indiscriminately sown mines which would prove a menace not only to the British surface craft but to their own submarines.

“Ain’t ours a nappy ’ome?” inquired Cavendish, as the two lieutenants surveyed the remains of their cabins, which before the action had adjoined each other. Now they were knocked into one. That saved the trouble of Cavendish having to open two doors when he wanted to “kag” with his chum; but the removal of the bulkhead did not end the damage. Both cabins had been completely gutted. Although the blackened débris had been cleared away, the nauseating smell of burnt corticene hung about persistently. Scuttles and dead-lights had disappeared, and although the ragged apertures where they had been were covered with iron plates bolted to the side, there was a distressing lack of light and fresh air. Neither officer possessed any clothes other than those he stood up in, and they were showing considerable evidence of the ordeal through which their wearers had passed. Until the *Rebound* put into port, the chums would have to depend upon the generosity of their brother-officers for the replacement of deficiencies in their wardrobe; and as almost every officer on board had suffered loss of personal gear, there looked like being a stupendous famine in the clothing line before very long.

A visit to the bathroom revealed an equally unsatisfactory state of affairs, no other washing arrangements being available than a metal hand-basin and a meagre supply of cold water.

But in less than ten minutes, Corbold and Cavendish, with most of the dirt and grime removed, were sound asleep on strips of canvas laid upon the floor of their respective cabins.

They were awakened at eight bells (noon) by tremendous rounds of cheering. Officers and crew had fallen in by divisions on the quarter-deck, where a wireless message from the Admiralty was read out, congratulating the fleet on its brilliant achievement.

My Lords had lost no time in broadcasting the news of the victory. There was no halting, beating-about-the-bush wording. The victory was claimed, our losses and those of the enemy given, together with the information that the remnants of the Rioguyan ships were in full flight.

The moral effect of this *communiqué* was tremendous. It helped materially to settle certain Eastern problems, and that so quickly that the Admiralty were able to order five capital ships with light cruisers and destroyers to leave the Mediterranean for South American waters.

Peter and his chum were too late to hear the Admiralty order read out, but on the cheering dying away the Captain raised his hand for silence.

It was indeed momentous news that followed.

Hondo, a powerful Asiatic State, had suddenly made war on the Associated Republic of America. The navy of the latter had been concentrated on the Pacific coast, but the points raised in the dispute seemed to have been satisfactorily settled. Then the wily Asiatics struck suddenly and struck hard. The Associated Republic's combined squadrons ran full tilt into a mine-field laid off the Mexican coast. Eight of their battleships, four battle-cruisers, and numerous smaller craft were destroyed, and in the confusion that ensued the Hondese submarines followed up the blow by torpedoing another half-dozen big ships. The remainder scattered, some running for the Panama Canal, others making for San Paulo. The latter place was bombarded by Hondese battleships and aircraft, while other aircraft had played havoc with the Pacific ports of the Republic.

Already the Associated Republican Government had applied to Great Britain for aid.

The latest report stated that Great Britain was unable to render assistance, owing to the pressing claims upon her limited navy; but she suggested a conference—a conference, when the Hondese were actively hammering upon the Pacific gate of the Associated Republic!

Having communicated this startling information, the Captain ordered “Pipe down” and the crew dispersed to their various stations to discuss and argue further about the matter.

The general opinion amongst the officers was that the Associated Republic's predicament was Britain's opportunity, as far as Rioguy was concerned. The Monroe Doctrine would become a “wash out”. There was nothing to prevent the British admiral sending an ultimatum to the Republic

of San Benito demanding right of way through her territorial waters to precisely the same extent as the Rioguyan Republic enjoyed it.

This demand was sent. San Benito acquiesced in a very chastened mood. She had read and accepted the lesson of the Writing on the Wall.

Meanwhile, oil-tankers had replenished the fuel supply of the British warships. The *Egmont* and *Edgcumbe*, battle-cruisers, had arrived hot-foot from Malta, and the fleet was now ready to bring President Jaime Samuda to heel.

On the evening before the day fixed for the fleet to ascend the river and attack the batteries and naval port of San Antonio, Peter was keeping middle watch.

All around, in steadily increasing numbers, lay the fleet, silent and vigilant. Not a light was visible, save when a masthead signal lamp winked its message either to or from the “flag”. Even the searchlights were screened, since the navigable channel well above the anchorage had been heavily mined against the chance of a surprise attack by hostile submarines. As for the Rioguyan destroyers, these were ruled out of count. Their experience during the battle had so shaken the *moral* of both officers and men, that they absolutely refused to come out, and had in consequence been ordered by President Jaime Samuda to form a shore-defence corps.

Pacing alertly up and down the bridge, Peter was approached by a yeoman of signals.

“Message from Flag, sir,” he reported.

The lieutenant took the signal pad into the chart-room. Then he gave a low whistle.

The sensitive microphones on board the *Royal Oak* had detected the approach of a large number of aircraft, bearing north-west by north. That meant that, assuming the aircraft were the Rioguyan flying-boats, the hostile forces had made a wide detour and were approaching over San Valodarian territory.

“Now we’re going to see something,” commented Peter, as he passed the message to a side-boy to convey it to the Skipper.

The rest of the fleet had been simultaneously warned by General Signal. Every searchlight was “running”, although carefully screened; and in conjunction with each searchlight was a “Strong” anti-aircraft projector.



As a precautionary measure, the crews of the quick-firers were called to action stations, but already there was sufficient confidence in the rays to warrant the assumption that the forthcoming task would not require the aid of gunnery.

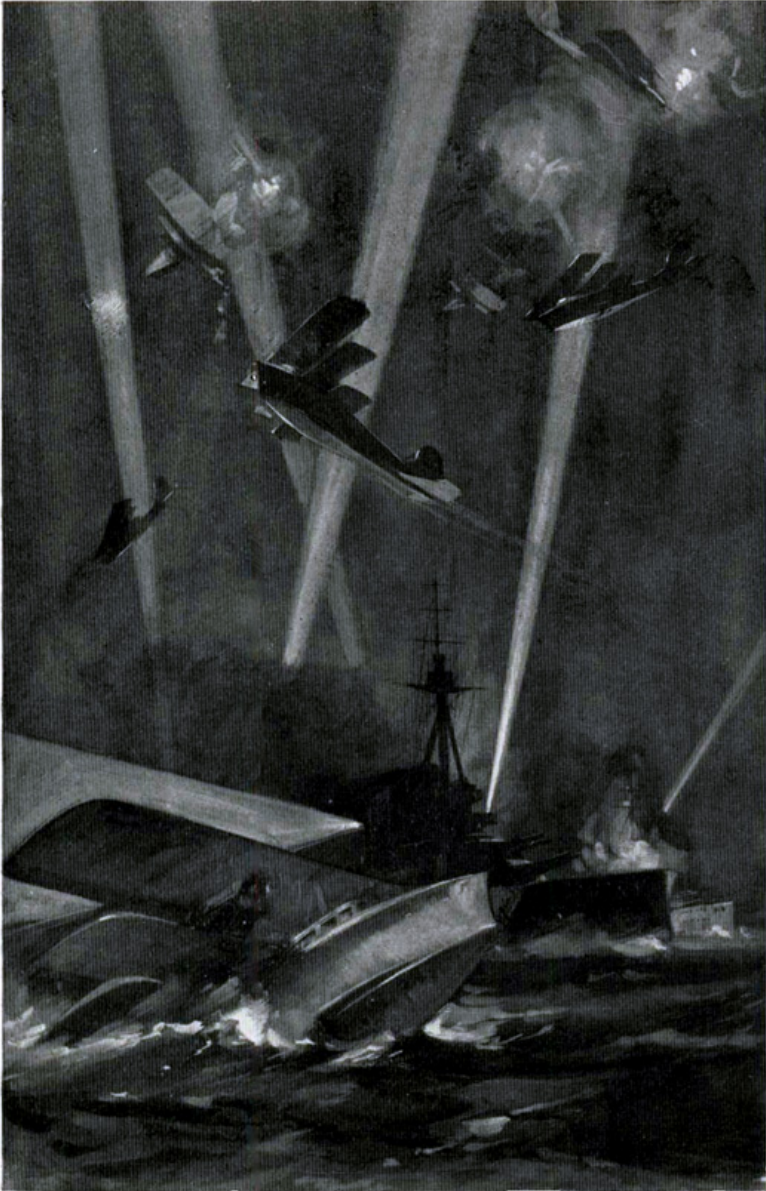
Throughout the darkened fleet an uncanny silence prevailed. The night was starless. There was a flat calm. The conditions for microphone detector work were excellent.

Nearer and nearer came the hostile flying-boats, their direction and distance being so accurately recorded that they derived no advantage by delivering a night attack.

At length the dull rumble of their propellers became faintly audible. In spite of devices calculated to muffle the noise, it was impossible to smother the beats of fifty or sixty aerial propellers working in unison.

“Bearing 55 degrees; elevation 22 degrees,” announced the range-finding officer at the searchlight director station.

Then, fifteen seconds later: “bearing 60 degrees; elevation 25 degrees.”



**A BLAZE OF DAZZLING BEAMS**

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Not until the elevation increased to 30 degrees were the searchlights to unmask. The period of suspense seemed interminable, although the flying-boats were known to be approaching at well over a hundred miles an hour.

“Bearing 90 degrees,” came the level, even tones of the range-finding officer; then in a louder voice that seemed to indicate that a slow job had at last been completed: “Elevation 30 degrees.”

Within the space of five seconds, every searchlight of the fleet was flashed obliquely into the darkness. The air was one blaze of dazzling beams, spread fanwise lest any daring and cunning airman should attempt to approach from an independent direction.

Eight miles off could be discerned the almost mathematical formation of the hostile air squadrons. They wavered when the beams fell athwart their path, which was probably owing to the pilots being temporarily blinded by the sudden glare. Then they recovered formation and came on.

A red rocket soared skywards from the flagship. It was the signal to let loose the rays.

To the onlookers it seemed as if a flight of plover had been raked by the heavy charge from a punt-gun. The massed flight broke its ranks. A few of the flying-boats held on, the majority simply nose-dived. A few were crashed into by those following. Others recovered sufficiently to plane down, remorselessly followed by the beam of a searchlight until they dropped helplessly upon the surface of the river.

One by one, those who at first had evaded the blighting rays were “picked up” by the searchlights and compelled to volplane. In less than thirty seconds silence brooded over the now crippled aircraft where a short while before the roar of two hundred powerful engines had rent the air. And within the space of another three minutes fifty flying-boats were either resting upon the water or were lying ten fathoms beneath it, all within a radius of a mile and a half.

Another signal issued from the *Royal Oak*. A flotilla of fifteen destroyers in double column line ahead swung round under the lee of the battleships and darted towards the paralysed flying-boats.

Not a shot was fired. The Rioguyan airmen refrained because they feared the consequences—the British gunners, because their foes offered no resistance.

With typical imperturbability, the skippers of the various destroyers manœuvred alongside their prey. The Rioguyans were peremptorily ordered on board and sent below. Then a few blows with a hatchet were sufficient to start the steel plating of the all-metal aircraft and send them to the bed of the river. Out of the fifty flying-boats, five were reserved as prizes. The rest

were scuttled, since the British admiral had no means of sending the whole of the captured air fleet into harbour.

It was a glorious triumph for Brian Strong's inventive genius.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### Peter Goes Ashore

At dawn the British fleet began to ascend the river to carry hostilities into Rioguyan territory. The van of the fleet consisted of a number of West Indian motor fishing-boats, provided with paravanes and other countermining devices. These boats, belonging to patriotic owners in Jamaica, Trinidad, St. Vincent, Barbadoes, and Barbuda, had been offered to the British admiral, who, realizing their value, had gratefully accepted them.

They were manned entirely by volunteers from the fleet—men who knew the danger but did not hesitate to risk their lives for their comrades.

Following the sweepers came the battleships, cleared for action. Hard on their heels were three flotillas of destroyers, ready should occasion arise to dart past the lowering hulls of the battleships, and deal effectively with any hostile craft that might pluck up sufficient courage to attack. The light cruisers came next, escorting a huge airplane carrier, although no attempt had been made to use any of her brood for reconnaissance or bombing work. She was like a “back-number” veteran amongst a crowd of athletes.

Astern of the light cruisers were the fleet store-ship and oil-tankers, while in the rearguard were more destroyers and half a dozen “coastal motor-boats” that had come south from Halifax on the decks of two fleet auxiliaries.

The passage between the Island of Sambrombon and San Benito was accomplished without any sign of resistance. It had been expected that the enemy would train their anti-aircraft rays upon the motorcraft, since their magnetoës would be affected in a similar manner, but unaccountably the Rioguyans made no attempt to do so.

At length the fleet came in sight of San Antonio, and consequently well within range of their 15-inch guns. From the yard-arm of the *Royal Oak* a hoist of bunting fluttered.

“Flag making our number, sir,” reported the chief yeoman to the officer of the watch of the *Rebound*.

The “answering pennant” was hardly up before the *Royal Oak* semaphored:

“Flag to *Rebound*. Lieutenant Peter Corbold to report on board as soon as convenient.”

Peter was given the message. He guessed what was “in the wind” and hastened to obey. “As soon as convenient” meant, he knew, in naval parlance “as sharp as you jolly well can, and the quicker the better”. Rigged out in a white drill tropical uniform lent by a brother officer who luckily had lost only a small amount of kit during the action, Peter went over the side into the waiting picket-boat and was soon on his way to the Flagship.

“I have selected you, Mr. Corbold,” said the Admiral in his usual style of coming straight to the point, “to be the bearer of this letter to the President of Rioguary, since, I believe, you speak the language and have been a resident in Rioguary. You will wait till noon for a reply. The ultimatum is unsealed. Read it, and make yourself acquainted with the terms.”

Peter did so. The British ultimatum was brief and emphatic. It demanded the unconditional surrender of San Antonio, with all warships, forts, military, naval, and aircraft stores and equipment. No hostages were demanded, and a promise was given that private and civil property would be strictly respected. The question of indemnities with respect to the wanton destruction of British mercantile shipping would be impartially dealt with at a later date. Failing an acceptance of the terms by noon, the port and fortified positions of San Antonio would be bombarded at 3 p.m.

The ultimatum was then sealed and again handed to Peter for delivery.

Five minutes later, the envoy was in the stern-sheets of the picket-boat on his way to San Antonio. He was unarmed, as were the crew. From the jack-staff in the bows was displayed a large white flag.

It was a good half-hour’s run to the naval port landing-steps. The picket-boat was not fired upon, although Peter would not have been surprised if the Rioguyan forts and ships had done so. As he passed the shell-shattered warships lying at anchor off the town, their crews regarded the British boat with unfeigned interest, but without any demonstration of anger. The wharves, too, were crowded with spectators, civilians, seamen, and soldiers mingling indiscriminately.

It was a risky business. At any moment an exasperated Rioguyan might “let rip” with rifle or revolver, since there were no signs of anyone in authority to hold the throng in check. Yet unhesitatingly the unarmed picket-

boat held on her course until at length she ran alongside the broad stone steps facing the Rioguyan Port Admiral's residence.

"Hey, laddie!" exclaimed a voice that sounded strangely familiar.

"Hello, Mackenzie!" replied Peter. "Didn't expect to see you in this galley."

"I hardly did myself," admitted Mackenzie. "I've only been released from prison this morning. They nabbed me when you cleared out. Our mutual friend Don Ramon wasn't particularly gentlemanly about it. Snarled like a dog. He was a bit hipped because you took French leave. But I hardly expected to see you here again and in that rig. So you got away all right? I had no means of finding out. And how is Mr. Strong?"

"Steady, Mac," protested Peter laughingly. "It's a long yarn and can wait. I've got to interview the port officials. We're going to put it about them this time."

"Never doubted but what we would," rejoined the Scot. "I gathered that Rioguy is feeling a bit sorry for itself. For one thing, my release. They wouldn't have been so courteous if things had been going their way. I'll wait on board your wee boat if you have no objection, and perhaps you will give me a passage?"

"Do so," agreed Peter. "I hope I shan't be very long."

All this while, a party of Rioguyan officers had been kept waiting. The lieutenant was in no hurry. He meant to let them cool their heels.

Then, with a great amount of saluting and heel clicking, the Rioguyan officers introduced themselves and offered to escort the envoy to the Admiralty buildings. There was no hauteur in their demeanour. They seemed genuinely anxious as to what was going to happen and were almost clamouring to pay attention to the representative of the British admiral.

In one of the rooms of the Admiralty House, Peter was introduced to the Port Admiral and Governor of San Antonio. With them were numerous officials—military, naval, and civilian.

Declining the offer of a glass of wine, Peter delivered his dispatch. Keenly observing the faces of the Rioguyan officials as one of the number translated the terms of the ultimatum, Corbold knew that there would be no bombardment. In fact, the mildness of the terms was a complete surprise. They expected nothing less than a demand for the surrender of the principal

officers of the port and the instant payment of a vast sum of money to save the town from destruction.

Then they explained the situation to the British envoy. As far as San Antonio was concerned, the terms were accepted, and probably the rest of the Republic of Rioguary would surrender on the same conditions. For, unknown to the British admiral, a revolution had broken out. President Jaime Samuda had been shot during the fighting in the streets of the capital, Don Ramon Diaz and Don José Cordova, his principal lieutenants, were in the hands of the insurgents, and the last of the troops fighting for President Samuda had laid down their arms.

Eight bells, noon, was being sounded off when Peter went on board the *Royal Oak* bearing a written acceptance of the British admiral's ultimatum.

At 2 p.m. the fleet stood towards San Antonio. An hour later, the Rioguyan colours on board the various warships were replaced by the White Ensign. The forts were taken over by British marines and the town patrolled by armed bluejackets.

That evening, Corbold and Cavendish, accompanied by Mackenzie, went ashore. The shops were open, electric tramcars were running, and the town was brilliantly lighted as usual. Everywhere the British seamen and marines were received not as conquerors, but as deliverers from the drastic rule of the dictator, President Samuda. Perhaps most of the demonstrations of friendship were simulated, but the inhabitants of San Antonio were certainly favourably impressed by the demeanour of the victors and by their generous terms.

"By jove! I had no idea that this was such an up-to-date place," remarked Cavendish. "Everyone seems chock-a-block with prosperity. Why weren't the silly asses content? What possessed them to twist the tail of the British lion?"

"They were made to," explained Mackenzie. "It was the late President's idea."

"But surely they could have declined to risk their lives and property?" rejoined Cavendish.

"There were inducements," continued Mackenzie. "Samuda gave them to understand that Great Britain was a pigeon to be plucked. But apart from that, the President's will was law. The Czar of all the Russias in his day was not more autocratic. But they've learned a lesson."

"Are you remaining here?" asked Peter.



Mackenzie nodded.

“Yes,” he replied slowly. “I am. I’m away home for a bit, though, but I’ll be back before very long. There’s money to be made in Rioguary after this trouble’s over. And that mystery man—your Uncle Brian—I suppose he’ll be out this way again? Or perhaps he’s made enough out of his invention to retire into private life?”

“I don’t think he’ll come out to Rioguary,” replied Peter. “He’s had enough, I fancy. As for making money out of the rays, that won’t worry him very much. From what I know of him, he’ll have a tip-top laboratory, wear any old clothes, and give away all his superfluous cash.”

Cavendish was unusually quiet that evening. The unrestrained gaiety of the streets fascinated him. He could not understand why a people, only just beaten in war, should take so light-heartedly to amusements and rejoicing. The Rioguyans had discovered that there was far more liberty under the British flag than there had been under the late republic.

Suddenly there came the sound of men shouting in execration.

“What’s that?” exclaimed Cavendish, his hand gripping the flap of his revolver holster. “Some of our men being knocked about?”

“No fear,” replied Mackenzie reassuringly. “The Dagoes wouldn’t risk doing that—even if they wanted to. Come on, let’s see what the row’s about.”

A crowd taking up the whole width of the spacious Calle Almeira swept along, brandishing sticks and waving *sombreros* and yelling threats.

Standing on the steps of a café, the three chums could see a strong body of civil police forcing their way through the press. In the centre of the guards were three or four men looking horribly scared. They were bleeding from wounds in the head, caused by missiles hurled by the mob, who threatened to rush the none too determined police.

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Peter. “There’s Don Ramon Diaz.”

It was. Ramon and the other principal officials of the late Government had been brought in from the capital to be tried at San Antonio. Even if they had a fair trial, which was doubtful, they were practically certain to be condemned and shot. That was one of the penalties of holding office in an unstable South American republic—autocratic power one day, degradation and a firing party the next. In the present case, it looked doubtful whether

the prisoners could be taken through the mob, some of whom had just thrown noosed ropes over the electric lamp standards in the Plaza.

Gone was Ramon's sickly smile. It was the first time Peter had seen him without that sneering, fatuous grin. He was trembling violently and clinging desperately to the civil guard on his left.

"Poor blighter!" ejaculated Peter.

He was almost on the point of forcing his way through the mob to attempt to save Ramon from lynch law. But moderate counsel prevailed. He realized that in their present burst of frenzy, the crowd might murder him. He was willing to risk that possibility, but the result would destroy the amicable relations existing between the inhabitants of San Antonio and the British seamen and marines. The bloodshed that would ensue would be enormous, and perhaps the Rioguyans would make a desperate and prolonged resistance.

Yet, somehow, Peter couldn't stand by and watch his enemy being done to death.

Mackenzie was watching him covertly.

"Keep cool, laddie," he exclaimed. "There's an armed party coming up."

A British naval patrol and a picquet of marines, wearing shrapnel helmets, doubled up the street. A sharp word of command and the armed men formed two deep right across the Calle Almeira, motionless as statues.

"Order arms . . . fix bayonets!"

The click of steel and the clatter of rifle butts on the asphalt acted like a cold douche upon the hot-headed citizens of San Antonio. The forefront of the crowd retreated. Those in the rear, unable to see what was going on, pressed forward. Yet a strange silence fell upon the crowd.

The civil police, seizing their opportunity, hurried their prisoners forward right up to the steel-tipped line of British bluejackets and marines.

The officer in charge of the armed party was in a bit of a dilemma. Unable to understand a word, he tried to silence the now vociferous clamour of both prisoners and civil guards. He couldn't grasp the situation, being under the impression that the affair was an anti-British demonstration, while Don Ramon was in such a state of collapse that his fluent command of English failed him utterly.

Peter and Cavendish, followed by Mackenzie, went up to the officer, who happened to know the two former. Briefly Corbold explained the situation.

“Well, what can I do?” asked the officer in charge of the party. “These fellows aren’t our prisoners. I can’t take them away from the civil authority.”

Peter turned to the non-commissioned officer of the Rioguyan police. The man stated that his orders were to take the prisoners to the town gaol for the night. They would be tried and shot before noon to-morrow, he added inconsequently.

“It’s murder,” declared Peter, conferring with the lieutenant of the landing-party. “Look here, can you detail half a dozen men? I’ll take all responsibility and get the prisoners on board. After all’s said and done, they aren’t criminals, merely political prisoners.”

“Get on with it then,” was the reply, “and jolly good luck. Only, remember, I can’t make these *opera bouffe* policemen give up their prisoners.”

“I’ll try, anyway,” rejoined Peter.

Producing a buff-coloured paper with the Admiralty crest, Peter held it in front of the Rioguyan *caporal*.

“Here is your new President’s authority that all political suspects under arrest are to be placed in British custody,” he said brazenly.

The Rioguyan couldn’t read. If he did and was able to understand English, he would have seen that the document was a receipted mess account. But it served its purpose.

“Sí, señor capitán,” he replied, with a salute.

Ten minutes later, Don Ramon and his companions in misfortune were seated in the stern-sheets of the *Rebound*’s picket-boat. He was only too glad to enjoy the security afforded by the British navy that he had oft-times derided.

Standing beside the midshipman at the wheel of the picket-boat was Peter Corbold, ruminating with satisfaction upon the results of his jaunt ashore.

As the cool air of the river fanned his face, he rubbed his cheek vigorously.

“Wish the greasy blighter hadn’t kissed me,” he soliloquized, as he gave a backward glance at the smug features of Don Ramon Diaz.

## CHAPTER XXXII

# The Fence Impregnable

During the next fortnight, events moved rapidly.

The new Government of Rioguary expressed its willingness to submit at discretion to the British arms and craved the clemency of the victors.

The terms were similar to those offered to San Antonio. All fortified posts in the republic were to be dismantled, together with armed ships-of-war and those of the flying-boats that had previously escaped capture. An indemnity of £6,000,000, payable either in negotiable bonds or in natural products of the republic, was demanded, to be delivered in instalments extending over five years. Until the indemnity was paid, a naval force was to remain at San Antonio, its upkeep being guaranteed by the Rioguyan Government.

Almost at the same time that the treaty was signed, Great Britain was able to mediate between the Associated Republic and the Empire of Hondo. It was a ticklish business—calming down the fierce little Asiatics without ruffling their *amour-propre*. They had beaten the Associated Republic. The latter's navy was practically wiped out, and the teeming millions of the Union were absolutely helpless. They could raise a huge army, but to what purpose? Possessing sea-power, Hondo, separated from her foe by the width of the Pacific, could and did defy the armed might of her antagonist.

Vainly the Associated Republic proposed arbitration, but arbitration is no good when an enemy is hammering, and hammering very forcibly, at one's gate. And the Asiatics still remembered with bitterness that the fruits of victory in times past had been taken from them by certain European Powers whom they could now ignore with impunity.

Even had she wished, Great Britain could not have intervened with armed force against Hondo on behalf of the Associated Republic. For one thing, she had not a sufficient fleet to operate with any likelihood of success in the distant Pacific. For another, Great Britain had no desire to make war, either on Hondo or any other nation, without good and just cause; and in the present instance there was none.

Now that the war clouds had dispersed, Lieutenant Peter Corbold began to ponder over his position. Taken back into the Royal Navy owing to the Rioguyan war, he was now faced with the possibility of having to “go on the beach” once more. It was not for pecuniary reasons that the prospect worried him. Apart from his share in the award by the Government for the “Strong anti-aircraft ray apparatus”, he knew that, if necessity arose, he could exploit the Rioguyan diamond mine that Uncle Brian and he had discovered.

He was a sailor by inclination and instinct. The call of the Five Oceans was irresistible. The sea with its changing moods was an attraction that would never pall. And under the White Ensign, a life afloat was at its very best. It was bad enough, Peter reflected, to have been chucked out of the navy once. To have to repeat the experience was almost unbearable.

Following the signing of peace between Great Britain and Rioguy, the *Rebound*, *Repulse*, and *Retrench*, together with a number of light cruisers and destroyers, were ordered home. The *Royal Oak* was to remain for the present as Flagship to the South American squadron with its base at San Antonio.

On the afternoon prior to the day fixed for the departure of the homeward-bound warships, Peter was again ordered by signal to report on board the *Royal Oak*.

“That means a telling off,” he remarked to Cavendish. “I’m going to get it hot over that Don Ramon business.”

“’Fraid so,” agreed Cavendish. “To tell the truth, old thing, I wonder you weren’t on the carpet long before this. Don’t suppose I can do much, but if you want me to back you up, I’m only too willing.”

Peter shook his head.

“Best keep out of it,” he replied. “The Admiral can’t do much, considering I’m due to get slung out any old way.”

But Peter Corbold was woefully adrift. The Admiral received him quite cordially.

“My flag-lieutenant has received his promotion,” he announced. “I’m looking out for someone I can recommend for the billet, someone with a good knowledge of the Rioguyan language. You, I think, Mr. Corbold, will suit me.”

“But I’m holding a temporary commission, sir,” explained Peter.

“Rubbish!” declared the Admiral breezily. “There’ll be no officer sacked on reduction. You can take my word for that. The Admiralty will want every trained officer they can lay their hands on with this expansion of the navy stunt coming on. Now, then, what do you say? Shall I send your name forward for appointment? Matter of form only, of course.”

“Thanks awfully, sir,” mumbled Peter. He was too taken aback to answer coherently. Usually cool and self-possessed, his sudden stroke of good luck had metaphorically taken the wind out of his sails.

“Very good, then,” continued the Admiral. “We’ll leave it at that for the present. Maynebrace, my flag-lieutenant, won’t be turning over for a bit, so carry on on board the *Rebound*. When you get home, take a month’s leave. The *Stylex* is ordered to this station on the 25th of next month: you’d better come out in her. . . . Oh, by the by, you brought off some refugees, I understand?”

“Yes, sir,” admitted Peter.

“Glad you did,” resumed the Commander-in-Chief. “The President wrote me requesting that I should give them up. I told him pretty plainly that it’s not wise for the under-dog to kick, and that the refugees were political prisoners who had found a shelter under the British flag. The President can whistle for them. They’re on their way to Jamaica by now. All right, Mr. Corbold, carry on.”

Peter “carried on”. With a light heart and feeling that he was treading on air (in his joy he very nearly did as he went over the side), he returned on board the *Rebound*, was told that he was a lucky dog, and on the strength of it had to stand champagne all round the ward-room.

At nine next morning, the three battleships, with the signal requesting permission to proceed, shortened in their cables. The answering flags fluttered from the yard-arm of the *Royal Oak*.

With bands playing and men lining the sides, the battle-scarred ships steamed slowly past the Flagship. Then, to the strain of ringing cheers, the *Rebound* and her consorts stood down the river, on their homeward voyage across the Atlantic.

Ten days later, the *Rebound*, her gaping wounds temporarily patched, steamed between the Round Tower and Blockhouse Fort, guarding the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour. Gosport Beach, Portsmouth Point, and Portsea Hard were black with people, who cheered to the echo the home-

coming ship that had won credit and renown in the battle with the Rioguyan navy.

Then, with a powerful tug straining at her bow hawsers and another following discreetly astern, the *Rebound* glided slowly past the South Railway Jetty, and “opened out” the tapering masts of the veteran *Victory*.

Peter remembered the last occasion when he entered Portsmouth Harbour, and the comparison was a pleasant one. Then he was, as he imagined, going on the beach once and for all. Now he was safely re-embarked upon a career after his own heart. Then the huge slipway was bare. Now it was taken up with the keel-plates of a mammoth battleship—the first of Britain’s new navy. The dockyard was teeming with life and activity. The ceaseless rattle of pneumatic tools once more filled the air. The huge electric cranes were again endowed with movement. Thousands of busy workmen swarmed everywhere.

Trade was already “following the Flag”, as it had done in times past. Mercantile shipping was reviving steadily, without the deplorable prospect of a “boom” and its disastrous consequences. Iron and steel workers were getting into their stride; the coal industry was looking up. There was every indication of an era of peace and prosperity.

And the reason was not far to seek. Britain had at last a definite policy. No longer was she content to “toe the line” at the behest of a party of international politicians assembled at Washington. She was determined to regain her rightful position as Mistress of the Seas. Without acting harshly towards her weaker neighbours, anxious to keep peace on the principle of the “strong man armed”, Britain was much in the position of a big and tolerant brother keeping his brothers and sisters in order.

As soon as the *Rebound* paid off, Peter Corbold journeyed up to town after a hurried but comprehensive visit to a Portsmouth firm of naval outfitters. At the Admiralty he obtained official confirmation of his appointment as Flag-lieutenant, and also obtained the information that Sir Brian Strong (with K.C.B. and a dozen other titles tacked on to his name), was living in retirement near Bournemouth.

That same evening, Peter went down to his uncle’s house, a small, unassuming villa overlooking Poole Harbour. Although the hour was late, he found Uncle Brian in overalls, working in a laboratory that for area completely eclipsed the dwelling-house.



“You’re wrong in your surmise, Peter,” observed Sir Brian, during the course of conversation. “I’m paying a flying visit to Rioguary. I’ll probably be out there before you. Yes, it’s concerning the diamond valley. I’ve obtained a concession from the new President, and I’ve formed a Limited Company. You’re one of the principal shareholders, Peter—but we’ll go into that matter presently. So I’m just off to introduce the Works Manager to the place, although in point of fact I’m rather keen to see the scene of our exploit again.”

Peter nodded.

“Wish you luck, Uncle,” he said, “but thank goodness I’m not flying. Had quite enough of that; blue water’s much safer. But it was a great stroke of yours—the rays invention.”

“It was,” agreed Sir Brian gravely. “But come this way.”

He took his nephew to a corner of the laboratory where stood a simple yet ingenious device.

“That was my emergency gadget,” he announced, after explaining the mechanism.

Peter looked at it long and anxiously. Then he turned to his uncle.

“Better sling it in the ditch before there’s any harm done,” he said seriously.

Sir Brian chuckled.

“That’s exactly what I mean to do,” he replied. “Give me a hand with the thing.”

Together they carried the latest creation of Sir Brian’s brain out of the laboratory down the sloping lawn to a small pier.

In the bright moonlight, Peter saw a small dinghy made fast to the steps. Into the stern-sheet of the boat the gadget was placed. Uncle Brian sat aft, while Peter cast off and took the oars.

It was now slack tide and first high water.

With steady stroke, Peter urged the dinghy along, while Sir Brian steered for the High Light at Sandbanks.

“This will do,” he observed, when the white section changed to red. “Right in the middle of the channel. It’s a good fifty feet down. Steady, Peter, mind the gunwale; it was varnished only yesterday. . . . Let go!”

With a sullen splash, the “box of tricks” disappeared from sight. Sir Brian sat gazing at the ever-increasing circles in the moonlit water.

He sat up with the air of a man who has taken a critical step and is well satisfied with the result. Then, in a barely audible voice, he quoted:

“Let us be back’d with God, and with the seas  
Which He hath given for fence impregnable,  
And with their helps only defend ourselves;  
In them and in ourselves our safety lies.”

## THE END

### TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Clipped Wings* by Percy F. Westerman]