

A STORY OF COMBINED OPERATIONS

KING OF THE COMMANDOS



Captain
W.E. JOHNS

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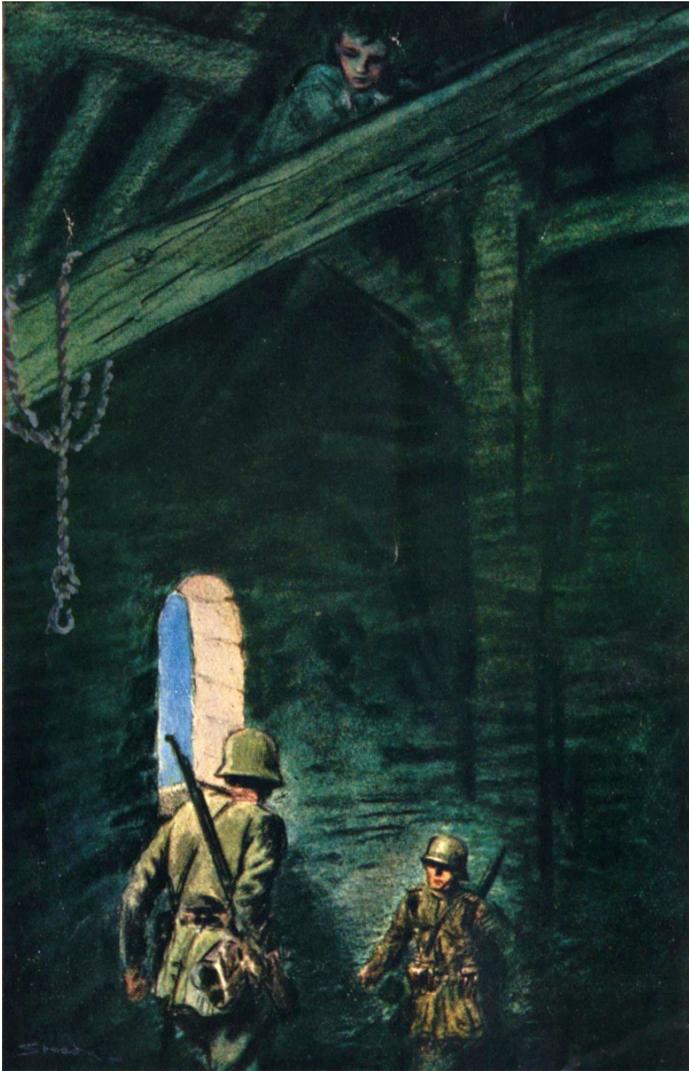
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[Frontispiece

CUB HAD NOT LONG TO WAIT. THERE CAME A SCRAPING OF NAIL-STUDDERED BOOTS, THEN INTO THE CHAMBER CAME TWO GERMAN SOLDIERS. "HE ISN'T HERE," SAID ONE.

KING OF THE COMMANDOS

A Story of Combined Operations
by
Captain
W. E. JOHNS

Author of
The “Biggles” & “Worrals” books



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A STRANGE ENCOUNTER

NIGHT had drawn its black-out curtain across the coast of Northern France; but like most black-out curtains it was not perfect; from time to time a crescent moon peered mistily through lowering clouds which, as sullen and menacing as the Nazi invaders who had set their heel upon the land, marched in endless procession across the dome of heaven. The dim light fell on a bleak, deserted foreshore, and close at hand, the uneasy waters of the English Channel.

From the summit of a low dune, lying deep in the coarse grass that softened its outline, Corporal Collson regarded the scene without emotion—Corporal Albert Edward Collson, to give him his full name. Not that anyone called him Albert—at any rate, not in the Special Service Troop of the Combined Operations unit, No. 9 Commando, of which he was a member. In that small band of hard-hitting warriors, sometimes known as King's "Kittens," he was invariably known as "Copper," due to the fact that he had once been a member of the Metropolitan Police. He bore no resemblance whatever to a kitten. It happened that the shoulder cypher chosen for No. 9 Commando was a wildcat. This, with that whimsical humour which is never far distant from British fighting men, had been interpreted by other commando units as a kitten. Captain Lorrington King happened to be the commanding officer—whence the title, King's Kittens.

As we have remarked, Copper Collson had nothing in common with a kitten. His six feet two inches of bone and muscle, which had twice enabled him to win the City Heavyweight Championship, would, he had decided, be better employed in smiting the enemy who had bombed his Wapping home, than in directing London's traffic. In this he was undoubtedly correct, for apart from his sometimes startling strength, he had other qualifications for the work on which he was now engaged.

He made no secret of the fact that he had been brought up, to use his own expression, "rough." He did not mention, however, that his father had died when he was a boy, leaving him with the responsibility of supporting an invalid mother. That he had got on sufficiently well to gain admittance to the River Police was due more to shrewd Cockney alertness than education. Another detail he did not mention was that, prior to joining the police, an uncle had given him an intensive course of instruction in petty crime, with the result that he could pick anything, from locks to pockets. But when this

same uncle had made a slip that resulted in his being sent to prison for five years, young Albert had the wit to perceive that as a means of gaining a livelihood, crime had such definite disadvantages that he abandoned it forthwith—not that he had started on it seriously. From errand boy he had worked his way up the ladder until at last he found himself in a blue uniform, this being the immediate limit of his ambition. In this capacity, his early training in crooks and their methods stood him in good stead. As a commando, combined with his waterfront experience and knowledge of small craft, it was even more useful.

For the rest, his methods were direct and simple. Like all true Londoners he loved his London, and his transference to one of the first commando units followed swiftly upon the blitzing of the City, when his home, like many others, had disappeared in a cloud of dust and rubble. His mother had survived, but true to type had refused to leave London, and now occupied a room in the house of a friendly neighbour.

“I want to get my hands on the blokes who done this to London,” he had told his superintendent grimly, when he had applied for transfer.

The superintendent had smiled, and let him go. And in due course Copper had got his huge hands on “some of the blokes who had knocked his house about,” not once, but several times. On these occasions there was definitely nothing kittenish about him.

At the moment he was lying among the dunes that fringed the coast of Northern France with a Sten gun snuggled against his side. He had been lying there for an hour, which, in his opinion, was too long, and he made a remark to this effect to his one companion.

“*Ma foi!* You’ve said it,” was the impatient reply, in a curious foreign accent tinged with American drawl. “I tink something goes wrong with Gimlet this time.”

And in case it should be thought strange that a British commando should speak with a foreign accent it must be explained that Private “Trapper” Troublay was not, from the point of view of breeding, entirely English. He was, in fact, a French Canadian, a lean, dapper product of the great backwoods, wherein he had spent ten of his early years of life as a trapper and prospector. Hence his nickname, Trapper. Having spent most of his time hunting in the wilds, often in the company of Indians, it followed naturally that he should have exceptional sight and hearing; that he should be a deadly shot; and when it came to stalking, he could move with no more noise than the moon passing across the heavens. All these were very useful accomplishments for a commando.

Copper and Trapper were more than ordinary comrades. They had first met at the training centre, but it was not until the raid on Glamfjord Power Station, in Norway, that they had hooked up in the arrangement known in the Commandos as “me and my pal”; wherein two men make a pact to stand by each other through thick and thin. They had been through the carnage at Dieppe together, as well as in several smaller raids, when Trapper’s knowledge of French had come in useful.

Trapper’s French accent, which became more pronounced under the stress of excitement, had at first worried Copper somewhat, because, as he often declared, he hadn’t much time for foreigners. Copper had also looked with sceptical amusement at a small piece of private equipment which Trapper carried on his forays in enemy country—but only until he perceived how useful it could be. This was a weapon, a weapon one would hardly expect to find in a war of high-velocity firearms. It was, in fact, a bow and arrow—quite a small one. Its advantage, a great advantage on commando work, was that it made no noise beyond a faint *phung* when an arrow was released. Trapper’s skill with this deadly toy was uncanny. Yet this again was not remarkable, as he had explained, for on more than one occasion when his stores and ammunition had run out in the back of beyond, he had sometimes had to live on this simple weapon for weeks at a stretch.

At first, the C.O. too had smiled tolerantly at this unorthodox addition to standard equipment, but neither he, nor Copper, smiled any longer. When it became necessary to dispose of a Nazi sentry in silence, a sentry who could not be approached without risk of starting an alarm because he was standing in the open, the whisper would go along the line for Trapper. Trapper would take a little arrow from the slim quiver that hung over his right hip. *Phung!* Usually the sentry died without knowing what had struck him.

For ordinary operations Trapper relied on two heavy service revolvers strapped low on his thighs, and, for close work, an Indian, horn-handled, skinning knife, which he could wield, and throw, with fearful dexterity—again the result of long practice. He had once killed a bear that had got him in its clutches with that same knife: and if, as he said with simple logic, it would kill a grisly, it would almost certainly kill a Nazi. Before it had died, the bear had slashed open his face, leaving a scar that he would carry for the rest of his days as a reminder of that grim encounter. The scar could not now be seen, for Trapper’s face, like that of his companion, was blackened for night work, commando fashion. White faces are apt to show up even on a dark night.

Copper picked his teeth reflectively with a stalk of grass. “Gimlet’s a long while,” he muttered for the tenth time. “I hope he ain’t bit off more

than he can chew single-handed. It must be getting near dawn.”

Trapper grunted—another habit he had acquired from his Indian friends. Then he stiffened, crouching even lower in the grass. “*Enfin!* Someone comes,” he breathed.

Copper had heard nothing, but after hitching the Sten gun forward to cover a deserted road that wound a serpentine course through the dunes, he, too, sank lower into the grass. Silence settled over the scene, a melancholy silence broken only by the gentle sighing of the breeze through the harsh herbage, and the fretting of little wavelets on the beach.

But presently there came another sound; a swift patter of running footsteps; soft, furtive footsteps, as if the runner ran on bare feet.

“That ain’t the Skipper,” whispered Copper.

Trapper did not answer. All that could be seen of him, even of his face, were the whites of his eyes and the flash of white teeth under a wisp of black moustache. His right hand moved slowly to the butt of the revolver that lay flat against his thigh.

The runner soon came into view. A slim figure topped a slight rise in the ground about twenty paces distant, and then stopped, looking to right and left with the jerky movements of a startled fawn.

Copper relaxed with a hiss of disappointment. His finger slackened on the trigger of his gun. “It’s only a kid,” he muttered. “What the devil’s he doing here at this time o’ night?”

The boy, for that much was obvious, spoke, in a tense, urgent voice—strangely enough, in English. “Commandos! Where are you?” he said in a hoarse whisper. “They’ve got one of your men. Where are you?”

Trapper slithered away through the grass like a snake, and with no more noise than one. Copper waited for a few seconds and then rose up, huge in the uncertain light.

The boy sprang back with a strangled cry of alarm, which was hardly to be wondered at, for the sudden appearance of the black-faced apparition so near at hand, out of the very ground, as it seemed, would have frightened anyone. Another shadow rose, silently, this time behind the boy, who only stopped when his back came into contact with the hard muzzle of Trapper’s revolver.

“Don’t shoot, I’m a friend,” said the boy hastily. “I’ve brought information.”

Copper advanced. “All right. You won’t be hurt as long as you behave yourself,” he said coldly. “Who are you and where have you come from?”

“I’m English,” was the quick reply. “What does it matter where I’ve come from? You’d better listen to me if you want to save your friend.”

“What’s your name?” snapped Copper.

“Peters.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Scouting.”

“And you swam the Channel to get here, I suppose?” suggested Copper sarcastically.

“Listen,” said the boy crisply. “Half a mile down the road there is a hut.”

“What of it?” demanded Copper suspiciously. His manner was still uncompromising.

“After you came ashore, the three of you——”

“Half a mo,” interrupted Copper. “Who said there was three of us?”

“I did,” was the curt reply. “I watched you land.”

Copper frowned. “So you did, did you? Go on.”

“Two stayed here, and the other went on to the hut,” resumed the boy. “The hut looks like a radiolocation station, but it isn’t. It’s a fake. It’s a trap to catch raiding commandos. There were Nazis inside, waiting. The man who went along has been captured. The Germans have telephoned for a car to take him away, and for reinforcements to round you up.”

“Zut!” growled Trapper.

Copper drew a deep breath. “You know a lot for a youngster. How did you get hold of all this?”

“I make it my business to know,” answered the boy shortly. “Having been here for over two years I know a lot more about what goes on than you do.”

“Two years!” gasped Copper. “Doing what?”

“Sabotaging the enemy,” was the astonishing reply.

“*What!*” Copper’s voice was pitched high with incredulity.

“If you stand here talking much longer you’ll find yourself in shackles,” declared the boy impatiently. “If you want to rescue your pal, you’d better be quick about it. If you don’t, I’ll push off, and leave you to work it out for yourselves.”

“Strike me purple!” choked Copper. “Who do you think you’re bossing about?”

“I reckon you’re a couple of loose kittens,” was the casual reply.

Copper sucked in his breath. “You know a sight too much, my young cockalorum. How many Jerries are there in that hut?”

“Ten, with two sentries outside.”

Trapper chuckled. “*Psst! De l’audace!*”

The boy shrugged his shoulders, and answered coolly in the same language. “*Que faire?*”

“Talk English,” snarled Copper.

“All right,” agreed the boy. “I’ll give it to you straight. I’m not going to stand here talking any longer—it’s too dangerous. There’s ten thousand francs waiting for the man who turns me in to the Germans. That’s how badly they want me.”

“For doing what?” asked Copper in a dazed voice.

“Pulling up railway lines, cutting telephone wires, fusing electric circuits, setting fire to dumps—and that sort of thing,” was the calm rejoinder. “It’s my guess that you’re Gimlet King’s outfit. Oh yes, we know all about Gimlet—so do the Nazis. They’ve got you all taped through their spies, even to your names. You’ve led ’em a fine old dance up and down the coast, but if ever they get hold of you they’ll skin you alive. With my own ears I heard *Generaloberst* Gunther—he’s in charge of this area—promise to drown every Kitten that fell into his hands. That was after you bumped off his garrison in the Luvelle lighthouse. If daylight finds you here you won’t have a hope.”

Now, all that the boy had said about the Kittens, the hut, and the Luvelle raid was true, for which reason Copper was not a little shaken. Security training warned him to beware, but common sense told him that this astonishing youngster knew what he was talking about. His leader, Gimlet King, had gone forward to reconnoitre the hut, a supposed radiolocation station, with a view to blowing it up. He had been gone for so long that the boy’s story concerning his capture sounded feasible.

“The man who has been captured was Gimlet himself,” he said slowly. “Do you know how it happened?”

“Yes, I saw the whole thing,” was the frank reply. “I was watching the hut with *Le Renard*——”

“With what?” broke in Copper.

“*Le Renard*. Renard is French for fox. He’s one of the gang. We never use our own names, but call ourselves after animals, so that we can’t give each other away. I’m The Cub.”

“I see,” said Copper.

“I was watching the hut from a safe distance with The Fox, when *Le Faucon*—that’s Falcon, in French—ran up to say that three commandos were landing from a motor canoe. Two remained to guard the road and the other was walking through the dunes. I should have warned him, but I was too late. The Nazis weren’t inside the hut. They were lying in a ring outside. They let the commando go through. When he went into the hut they closed in from all sides. He hadn’t a chance. The Rat had got the telephone tapped further back, and he reported to me that a message had gone through saying that a British commando, who wouldn’t give his name, had been taken prisoner. I thought I’d better let you know what has happened.”

“Okay, Cub, you did quite right,” replied Copper. “That was smart work.”

“Are you going to try a rescue?”

“Sure. Sure we are,” put in Trapper. “Either we all go home together or none of us go. That’s our rule.”

“That’s what I thought,” remarked The Cub.

“Will you show us the best way to the hut?” asked Copper.

“Of course.”

“Just one thing, though,” went on Copper. “If this is a trick, you’ll be the first to get what comes out of the muzzle of this gun. I’ll fill you so full of holes you’ll drop apart.”

“Save your bullets for the Nazis,” advised Cub calmly.

“If we run into a bunch of Jerries, you keep out o’ trouble,” warned Copper.

The Cub laughed softly. “This way, and go quietly,” he said.

Followed by the two commandos he struck off through the sombre dunes.

CHAPTER II

HOW CUB PETERS WENT TO WAR

THE CUB’S amusement at Copper’s well-meant advice to keep out of trouble was natural, for in more than two years there had scarcely been a moment when he was not in peril. Trouble and danger had long ago ceased to mean anything to him, for, strange though it may seem, one soon becomes

accustomed to having Old Man Death for a companion. And this is how it had all come about.

When France had collapsed before the overwhelming surge of Nazi Panzers, and the abandoned British troops had fallen back upon Dunkirk, Nigel Norman Peters—to give The Cub his proper name—then in his fifteenth year, had been engaged in the tiresome occupation of writing lines in the fourth-form classroom of Brendall's School, this being the punishment awarded for a bird's-nesting expedition on the Essex marshes, on which occasion he had broken bounds by a considerable margin. To tell the truth, at that fateful moment of history, when the news reached him he was not so much concerned with the British army, which he confidently assumed would be able to take care of itself, as a particular member of it—his father, Colonel Lionel Peters, D.S.O., of the Buffs, and, incidentally, his only living relation. Nigel thought the world of his father.

When report reached the school that every craft, large and small, moored along the Essex coast, had put to sea in the desperate hope of bringing home the outnumbered troops, excitement ran high. This soared to a new high level when it became known that two masters with sailing experience had gone out in a leaky wherry to join in the stupendous task. But excitement came near to hysteria when the word flashed round that three prefects had slipped off in a dinghy.

This was all hands to the pump with a vengeance, and more than any normal healthy boy could be expected to watch from a distance. At least, so Nigel decided, and with his lines unfinished he had joined in the throng surging towards the creek where, so rumour asserted, battle-stained troops were being disembarked from the miscellaneous craft that had brought them home. Naturally, he was actuated chiefly by the hope of seeing his father. In this he was disappointed, but he did find a soldier of his father's regiment, who declared that the colonel, when last seen, was lying wounded on the bomb-torn beach of Dunkirk.

Something like panic swept over Nigel at this disagreeable news, and he decided there and then that something would have to be done about it. If nobody else could find a means of bringing his father home, then it was up to him to do it. He formed the opinion, somewhat hastily—and quite wrongly, of course—that his father would be pleased to see him on the bloodstained battlefield.

This line of thought was perhaps natural, but as a serious proposition rescue was hardly practicable. Unfortunately, as it transpired, at that juncture Nigel was not in the least concerned as to whether his scheme was practical or not. He was concerned only with one thing, and that was how to get to

Dunkirk. The means was at hand. A small pleasure launch, with several significant holes in its funnel, manned by three unshaven longshoremen, was just casting off for its third trip, and almost before he had realised what he was doing Nigel had jumped aboard and stowed himself beneath the splintered superstructure. Dusk was closing in and nobody saw him go.

That was the end of his career at the famous public school, although at the time he was blissfully unaware of it. Not only did his spectacular plan fail, but never for a moment did it look like succeeding; for as the launch backed in towards the now thinning lines of waiting troops, a bomb fell alongside and threw it clean out of the water. Just what happened after that not even Nigel could say for certain. After swimming for a while he somehow found himself on the beach, very wet, very cold, and more than a little scared. In particular he was scared about what would happen when he got back to school, for so far it had not dawned upon him that he might not get back. This thought came later, when, after a fruitless search for his father, the beach was suddenly swept by bullets and a number of German soldiers appeared. Real German soldiers they were, in coal-scuttle helmets just like he had seen on the films. He could hardly believe it. He decided that he was dreaming. But when the hideous truth was no longer in doubt, that he was alone on a stricken battlefield with a mob of victorious Nazis, terror took him by the throat and he ran as he had never run before, not even on last sports day, when Smith minor had beaten him by a yard in the junior sprint.

Where he had gone, what he had done, and how he had survived those first few dreadful days he himself hardly knew. It was all a nightmare. Without shoes, for he had kicked them off while swimming in the sea, his clothes in rags, hungry, tired and miserable, he had wandered about like a lost dog, living on such scraps of discarded food as he was able to find. Quite often he ran into parties of Germans, but they took no notice of him, and he soon became accustomed to the grey uniforms. All he thought about at this period was, of course, how to get home. But no more ships came, and as he could not swim the Channel, he at length perceived that he was marooned upon a hostile shore as effectively as if he had been cast away on an atoll in the middle of the Pacific.

It was about a month later that he had met Louis Morelle, a French boy who had once lived in Dunkirk, now in ruins. They had discovered each other in a bomb-blasted church in which they had passed the night. It turned out later that Louis was nearly seventeen, but at the time he affected juvenile garments to avoid being made to work by the Nazis. A curious comradeship had developed, and together they had made their way down the coast,

without any particular object in view, collecting other waifs and strays like themselves, until at length there were a dozen of them hiding in the woods behind Le Havre.

At first they had lived like animals, content to keep out of sight, but as time went on some sort of order had emerged. Louis, who had the instinct of a town rat for danger, by reason of his age became the leader; and food forays, from being haphazard affairs, became cunningly organized pillaging expeditions on the Nazi storehouses. From this, growing bolder, they came to inflicting damage on enemy property whenever and wherever it could be found. Louis had been an apprentice motor mechanic, and it was but a short step from making military vehicles unserviceable to jamming the breechblocks of cannon.

By the end of a year the gang had become a small, well-organized, highly mobile force, intensely loyal, with its spies in every town and village, and its headquarters deep in the Forest of Caen. Lacking imagination, apparently it never occurred to the Nazis that the dirty little ragamuffins who hung about their camps under the pretence of looking for scraps, but really to listen to their conversations, could be the thorns in their sides. Incidentally, it was in this way, from the Germans themselves, that the gang first learned about the commandos, and their astute leader, known to his men as "Gimlet." No German could move without it being known at the gang's headquarters. An intricate system of signals had been arranged—a broken branch, a feather, a sprig of broom, the cry of a sea-bird . . . all these had meanings. The enemy soon knew that an organization of some sort was at work, but although they stormed and blustered, and occasionally shot hostages, they could never discover what it was. The local French people knew what was afoot, of course, but the Nazis learned nothing from them.

As time went on more ambitious projects were planned by the gang, which now styled itself, somewhat ingloriously Nigel thought, *Les Poux Gris du Nord*, which being translated means, The Grey Fleas of the North. Louis thought of the name, because, as he explained, they were like fleas, always irritating the Nazis without being caught. Trains unaccountably ran off their rails; oil and petrol dumps caught fire; bridges collapsed; trees fell across the roads, blocking them and tearing down telegraph wires, interrupting communications. German troops fell sick as a result of poisonous herbs finding their way into the canteen soup. Nazis officers walking home at night fell into man-holes from which the covers had been removed. In short, sabotage was rife, and all this was the work of a score of urchins, so dirty and so ragged that they would have disgraced a city slum. Names, being dangerous, were forgotten, and each member of the gang was

identified by the name of an animal, a bird, reptile or insect—The Fox, The Wolf, The Snake, The Owl, The Grasshopper, for example.

Nigel, now sixteen, was The Cub. He had learned a lot in the two years he had been adrift in France. He spoke French and German as well as he spoke English, and he knew every hole and corner, every coppice, every back street, from Calais to Cherbourg. He had travelled far, exploring prison and internment camps in the hope of learning something about his father, but in vain. He had even planned a raid into Germany itself, for not to know whether his father was dead or alive was a pain from which he was never free. Aware that there was just a chance that his father had been carried to England, he often looked long and thoughtfully across the grey-green waters of the Channel towards his homeland, but so far no reasonable chance of getting across had presented itself. Apart from which he was loath to leave his comrades.

Needless to say, two years of hard living and desperate enterprises had left their stamp upon his face, which was thin, and set in rather hard lines; but his nerves were like steel, and he moved with a self-assurance beyond his years. He had looked upon death too often to have any fear of it; which was why he had laughed when Copper had suggested that he should keep out of trouble—he, who under his threadbare breeches carried a small arsenal of lethal weapons filched from the Germans. He smiled again as he strode on through the dunes, wondering what the two commandos would think if they knew the truth about him.

Sometimes stopping to listen, keeping always below the skyline, he walked on for some ten minutes, and then, dropping to his knees, wormed his way to the top of a low dune. The hut was at once in plain view, appearing as a black oblong shadow about forty paces distant. It might have been an empty cowshed. Not a crack of light showed. All was silent. Far away a sea-bird uttered its mournful cry, thrice repeated.

Cub indicated the building with a jerk of his thumb. “There it is,” he breathed. “You’ve no time to lose. The Nazi car has already crossed the bridge of St. Jean.”

“How do you know that?” demanded Copper.

“A little bird told me,” answered Cub. “You can take my word for it. What’s your plan?”

“We’ll rush the place,” decided Copper, who was always in favour of straightforward methods.

“If bullets start flying, your officer will probably stop one,” Cub pointed out evenly. “Why not get the sentries first? There’s one of them now, just

come round the corner.”

Copper threw a puzzled glance at this astonishing boy who, in circumstances calculated to strain the nerves of a war-toughened veteran, could think and behave with such nonchalance. Then he looked back at the hut, and, a few paces from it, the dark silhouette of the German sentry who, with a rifle in the crook of his arm, had halted, and now stood gazing out to sea. He nudged Trapper. “Knock him off, chum,” he ordered.

“*Bon ça. Tout simplement.*”

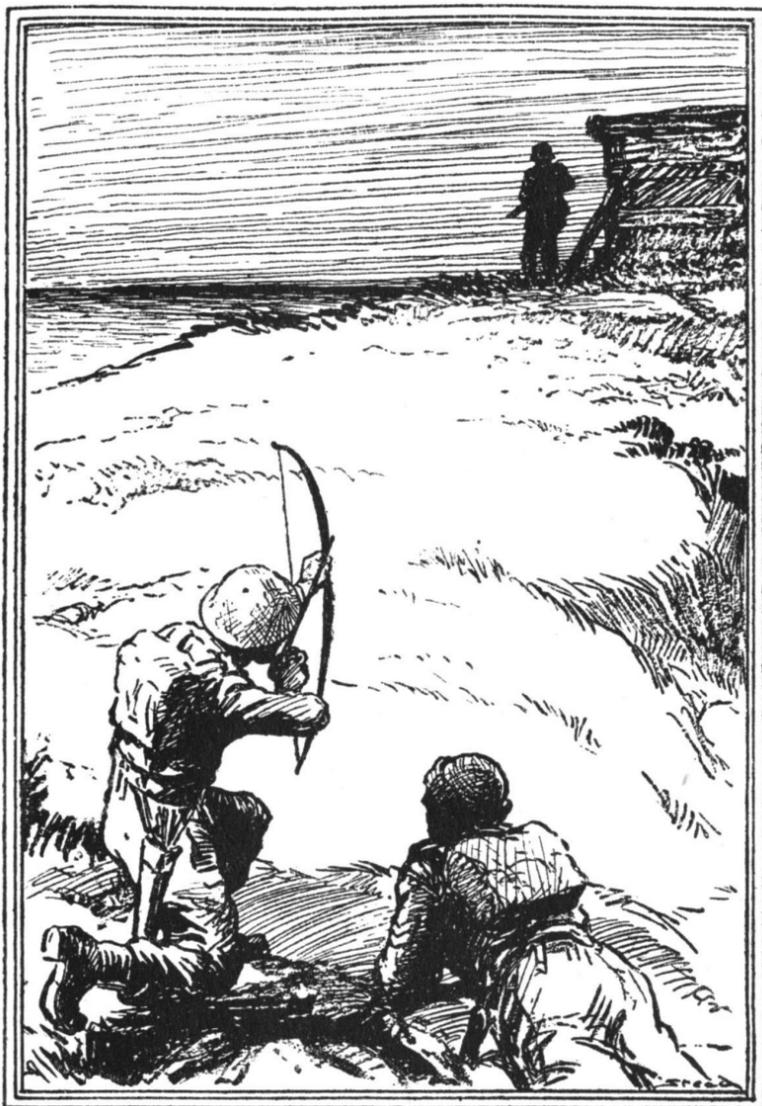
It was now Cub’s turn to be surprised. He watched in amazement as Trapper rose to a kneeling position and fitted an arrow to his bow. *Phung!* sang the cord.

The German gasped, staggered a few paces, and then fell with a heavy thud.

A voice spoke, in German. It said: “What’s the matter, Karl? Did you see something?” With the voice, the second sentry appeared in the open, from the end of the hut where evidently he had been standing.

Cub had been watching Trapper, fascinated by the spectacle of a modern warrior using a bow and arrow, so he had not seen Copper disappear. When he looked round he had gone. “Where is he?” he whispered to Trapper.

“Wait, my chicken,” was the soft reply. “*Voilà!*”



TRAPPER ROSE TO A KNEELING POSITION AND FITTED AN ARROW TO HIS BOW.

The German sentry had by this time seen his companion on the ground. Foolishly, or perhaps unthinkingly, he ran to him, and stooped to see what was the matter. As he did so another figure appeared. For a few seconds the two merged, like a piece of statuary. Then they broke apart. One sagged to the ground.

"Beaucoup bon," murmured Trapper. "Copper break his neck, I tink. He does not know his own strength, that one. You stay here, my infant. *Sacré*

nom! Here comes the car.”

The dimmed headlights of a car had appeared on the road. Trapper ran forward to the hut, drawing his guns, and Cub, forgetting or ignoring the injunction to remain where he was, followed him.

“Here’s the car—let’s clean this place up,” greeted Copper, in a natural voice. “Out of the way, youngster.”

Hitching his Sten gun forward Copper walked up to the door, and putting his foot against it sent it crashing inwards with one tremendous shove. “Flat, Skipper!” he roared, as light blazed through the open doorway.

Cub caught a fleeting glimpse of a group of German soldiers, and a slim figure in commando battledress dropping to the floor like a coat slipping from a peg. Then several things happened at once, with a good deal of noise. The Sten gun streamed flame. The light went out. There were shots, shouts and groans. Unseen things smashed and crashed. Splinters flew in clouds. A German blundered out through the open door. Trapper’s revolver blazed from his hip and the German appeared to dive into the sand. Another figure emerged on all-fours.

“Steady with that gun,” said a calm voice, as the figure rose erect. “Give them the fruit and we’ll be going.”

Trapper took an egg-shaped object from his pocket, raised it to his teeth, flung it into the hut and backed quickly away. An instant later there came an explosion that nearly shattered Cub’s eardrums. As the sound died away he heard Copper’s voice say, “You okay, sir?”

“Yes, I’m okay,” came the reply. “We’ll make straight for the beach.”

As the party began to retire, the same voice asked, “Who’s this boy?”

“English, sir. Wandering without fixed abode,” answered Copper. “He told us the Jerries had grabbed you.”

“Good. Bring him along.”

“But——” protested Cub, for whom things were moving rather fast.

“You ’eard what the Skipper said,” snarled Copper. “Keep going.”

Contrary to Cub’s expectations the retreat was quite orderly. He noted that the leader walked with a slight limp. A good deal of noise was coming from the direction of the hut, but the commandos appeared to take no notice. They went on along the beach until they came to a low cliff, from the shadow of which a small craft was lifted and carried to the water. An engine came to life, and a propeller thrashed the sea into foam.

“Get aboard, boy,” ordered the officer.

“But——” began Cub.

Copper cut him short. "You 'eard what he said," he snarled. "Get aboard."

Cub got aboard. Having been up all night he was really too tired to argue. Besides, searchlights were sweeping the dunes, and voices were calling on all sides. The little craft moved out across the dark water.

"Same course as usual," said the officer.

"Aye-aye, sir," answered Copper.

Thus did Cub come home. Not that he was aware of it, for he was fast asleep in the bottom of the boat when its keel grated on a south-coast beach.

CHAPTER III

CUB MAKES HIS CHOICE

WHEN CUB awoke it was broad daylight. Observing that he was in a room—an unusual event—he was up in a flash, gazing wonderingly at his surroundings. Then he saw two men in commando uniform and remembered all that had happened. They looked quite different now. One, whom he judged to be Copper, was a tall, fresh-complexioned, loose-limbed giant in the early twenties; the other, who looked a trifle older, was a swarthy, dark-eyed, black-haired man with a mere wisp of moustache, equally black. A scar, stretching from the left ear to the chin, disfigured what otherwise would have been a handsome face. Both were smiling at him.

"What-ho, chum," greeted Copper. "How goes it?"

"Hello," answered Cub. "Have I been asleep long? What's the time?"

"Half-past three, as near as makes no difference," replied Copper.

Cub was aghast. "Good Lord! Have I been asleep all that time?"

"Dead to the world, *mon petit*," declared Trapper, who was feathering an arrow with meticulous care.

"I must be going," asserted Cub.

"What's the hurry?" inquired Copper.

Cub hesitated, trying to grasp the fact that he was in England.

"How about a cup o' Rosy Lee?" suggested Copper.

"Cup of what?"

“Rosy Lee—that’s a cup o’ tea down our way. There’s some grub going too, but that’ll have to wait. Gimlet’s waiting to see you. Got a couple o’ brass-hats with him, an’ all.”

Cub looked interested. “I’ve heard about this Gimlet,” he said slowly. “The Jerries talk about him. Why do you call him that?”

“Well, some say one thing and some say another,” answered Copper. “Some say it’s because he goes straight through anything he meets; others say it’s on account of his eyes. They sort o’ bore right into you. You’ll get what I mean when you see ’im. But don’t worry; his bark’s worse than his bite—unless he happens to be barking at a Jerry.”

“Has he got a wooden leg, or something?” asked Cub. “I noticed that he walks with a limp.”

Copper looked horrified. “Strike me pink! Don’t ever let him ’ear you say that, chum. He’s sort o’ touchy about that leg. He got it smashed when he was in the Air Force—collided with a Jerry, they say, during the Battle of Britain. But he kids himself that no one notices it. All the same, he’s a pukker sarb—as they say in India. Owns a castle, he does, down in Devon. Used to be a regular Guards officer, but ’e couldn’t get enough action out o’ that, so he gets himself seconded to an Air Force squadron for a bit. He used ter fly before the war, they say. Playing tennis, he was, one day, when the alert goes. Up he went just as he was, in white flannels, and bags a brace with a left and right. I tell you, chum, he’s hot stuff, is our Gimlet. He can ride anything that moves on legs, wheels or wings. His father was a V.C. in the last war; so was ’is grandad, in the Boer War. Like them, he’s got red hair—maybe that has something to do with it. When you see his hair begin ter curl on top—that’s the time ter watch yer step. Am I right, Trapper?”

“Are you right? *I’ll* say you’re right,” confirmed Trapper.

“He talks a bit la-de-da, but don’t let that kid you,” went on Copper. “Bit of a dandy, too, in ’is way. I’ll bet he wouldn’t come down if his house was on fire till his slacks had a crease in ’em. One day, in a sortie, he gets a spot o’ blood on his shoulder. Disgusting, he sez ter me. How perfectly disgusting. Made me wipe it off with me ’ankerchief, ’e did. Never gets excited, ’e doesn’t. On a sticky job he’s as cold-blooded as a fish, and the worse things are the chillier ’e gets; but in action—blimy! He’s like a panther what’s been fed on quicksilver. They must ’ave mended that game leg of his with a steel spring. He’d walk the wandering Jew himself off his pins. Am I right, Trapper?”

“Are you right? *I’ll* say you’re right,” agreed Trapper.

“We reckon they put pistons in ’is arms at the same time they mended ’is leg,” continued Copper. “When ’e goes all quiet is the time to look out. I see him talk to a runaway horse once, and I’ll take my oath that horse stopped like it was paralysed. Oh, he’s a one all right. Not that any other sort would be much good at the head of the Kittens, mind you. These Kittens ’ave claws, and some of ’em ain’t particular who they scratch—but they don’t scratch Gimlet. No blooming fear. Not on your sweet life. I only ever see one man give ’im lip. I won’t tell you what happened—no names no pack drill. For weeks afterwards that Kitten went white ter the gills every time Gimlet’s eyes dropped on ’im. Take my tip, don’t you ever answer back; and when he says Tally-ho, start runnin’. Am I right, Trapper?”

Trapper clicked his tongue. “*I’ll* say you’re right,” he agreed. “He’s half-way between a bull moose and the Wizard of Oz. They say he was born in a pink suit, spitting bullets, with a gun in one hand and a grenade in the other. He threw the grenade at his nurse because she wouldn’t give him a stick of dynamite to chew. *Tiens!* That’s what they say, and it may be true.”

“No, you’ve got it wrong,” argued Copper. “It was a detonator ’e asked for, and when the nurse wouldn’t give it to ’im he reached up for an ancestral battle-axe and swiped ’er over the boko with it.”

Trapper shrugged. “What does it matter? You will both be swiped with a battle-axe if you keep him waiting.”

“That’s right,” agreed Copper. “We’d better put a jerk in it.”

“I heard you call him Skipper—does that mean he’s a captain?” inquired Cub.

“He’s acting major now, but his substantive rank is still captain, so we still call ’im Skipper,” Copper explained. “Between ourselves, me and Trapper usually call ’im Lorry, since we heard the Duke of Marlingham call ’im that. On the mole at St. Nazaire it was, with everything blazing and bangin’ like somebody had taken the lid off hell. The duke—’e was in the Navy—climbs up out o’ the sea with burning oil runnin’ down his pants. ‘Why, hello, Lorry old man,’ he says, all casual, like we was at a blinkin’ garden party. ‘How’s the huntin’?’ sez ’e. S’welp me, that’s what ’e said, as true as I stand ’ere, without a word of a lie. Am I right, Trapper?”

Trapper showed his white teeth. “*I’ll* say you’re right.”

“We didn’t know then that Gimlet’s first name was Lorrington—Captain Lorrington King, D.S.O., M.C. and Bar, of Lorrington Castle, Devon. That’s ’is name and address. But I reckon it wouldn’t do fer ’im ter hear *us* calling ’im Lorry. Let’s go and see ’im.”

First impressions are often misleading, and Cub was conscious of a feeling of disappointment when he was marched into the orderly room, and, really for the first time, set eyes on the man whose reputation he had learned from the enemy. For here was no elderly ferocious-looking martinet such as he had visualized, but a slim, good-looking young man of medium height, with a quiet, unassuming, almost gentle manner. He might have been twenty-five—certainly not more. His hair, close cropped, was a fair auburn rather than red; but it was his eyes, when they were turned on him, that held Cub's attention. In fact, they almost gave him a shock. They were blue, the brightest, most startling blue that he had ever seen. It was not a soft blue, but rather had the hard gleam of burnished steel in sunlight. And that was not all. They seemed, in a disconcerting manner, to bore right through Cub's eyes into his brain, as if they would read what he was thinking; and Cub realised there and then that it would be futile to try to deceive him, let alone lie to him. With him, one on either side, sat two elderly officers of senior rank, one in naval uniform.

When King spoke, Cub was again aware of a feeling of disappointment. The voice did not line up with Gimlet's reputation. It was soft, well-modulated, with a pronounced what is known as Oxford accent—in fact, the sort of voice that is sometimes ridiculed on the screen.

“Pull up a chair, laddie,” said King quietly. Then, glancing at Copper, he added, “All right, Corporal, you had better stay.”

A chair was placed in front of the desk and Cub sat on it.

“Tell me,” began King in an easy manner, “what were you doing in France?”

“Secret-service work and sabotage mostly, sir,” answered Cub.

King smiled faintly. It was clear that he did not take Cub's assertion seriously. “Did you have any success?” he inquired.

“Well, I haven't done badly sir, I think,” replied Cub. “I've helped to derail five trains, including the one that fell into the river at Dinan. That was when Dorsmann of the Gestapo was drowned. We knew he was on it. I blew up the big dump at Trouville, and with some friends set fire to the oil storage depot at St. Brioux. Of course, these things are fairly easy when you know the location of the German camps, the position of the guards, and their orders.”

King's smile faded. “Good God!” he said in a startled voice. “Did *you* do that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How did you come to start in this business?” asked King curiously.

“In the first place I went to France to try to find my father, Colonel Peters of the Buffs, who I heard was lying wounded on the beach at Dunkirk. I couldn’t find him, though. A bomb sank my boat, and I was left behind after the evacuation.”

King glanced at his companions, and then leaned forward. “Go on,” he said softly. “Tell us the whole story.”

In dead silence Cub recounted the full tale of his adventures. All eyes were on his face. No one spoke until he had finished, and even then silence persisted for a full minute.

King took a cigarette from a gold case and tapped it on the back of his hand. “That,” he remarked, “beats anything I ever heard. You’ve actually been in France over two years?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell me, Nigel——”

“Cub, if you don’t mind, sir,” interrupted Cub. “It’s better to avoid proper names from the start, in case of accidents.”

“You’re right, by thunder. I only wish everyone over here was as careful,” said King, deadly serious. “You’ve learned absolutely nothing about your father?”

“Nothing, sir, although I hung around a good many prison and internment camps, including a secret one I found in a castle down on the Loire, at Chateaudun. The War Office may like to know that there are several senior officers and diplomats down there, some of whom, I believe, have been reported dead.” Cub named some of them. “I was unable to ascertain the actual purpose of this camp,” he added.

“Are you telling me that these officers you have named are alive?” cried King, moved for once from his easy manner.

“They were a month ago—I saw them through the wire,” asserted Cub.

King drew a deep breath. “This is interesting—very interesting indeed. We’ll have another talk about it when I’ve reported the matter to the Higher Authority. Meanwhile, I’ll ask the War Office if they have any information about your father. What are your plans now?”

“I’d like to be put back in France the next time you go across, sir,” requested Cub.

King raised his eyebrows. “Do you mean that—seriously? Haven’t you been in danger long enough?”

“You wouldn’t suggest that I abandon my comrades?” said Cub reproachfully. “They’ll wonder what’s happened to me. They’re probably

hunting high and low for me at this very minute. Besides, Tyke would miss me. He's our dog. He's only a mongrel, but what he doesn't know isn't worth knowing. A Nazi booted him once, and he's never forgotten it. Moreover, I'm carrying information in my head which the gang may need. We never put anything on paper—it's safer not to. Of course," went on Cub quickly, as an idea struck him, "if I went back, if you like I could meet you somewhere, any time, and tell you what Jerry is up to—act as a guide perhaps? I know my way about."

"By gad!" breathed King. "That certainly is an idea. But why stay in France? I take it you could make contact with the—er—Fleas, whenever you wanted to?"

"Of course."

"Then surely they could collect the information and you could act as a link between us—that is, between the Commandos and the gang?"

"He's a bit young for that sort of thing, isn't he?" put in the naval officer.

"I don't see that age has much to do with it, sir," returned Cub sharply. "After all, I've been at this game, right under the noses of the Nazis, without getting caught, for more than two years, so I think I can claim to know something about it. I've friends everywhere, loyal French people of all ages, ready to help me, and that's an organization even the Commandos haven't got. I'd say my age was an advantage, and that goes for all the Grey Fleas. Had we been older we could never have got away with the things we've done. Why, I've even cleaned a German general's boots—and nearly cut through the laces at the same time, so that they broke when he was on parade. What full-grown man could do that?"

"Marvellous. Absolutely marvellous," chuckled King. "I think we'd better put you in the Commandos as a special enlistment."

Cub shook his head. "That's very kind of you, but I'd rather stay with the gang. But there's no reason why I shouldn't be attached to your Commando, to the Kittens, as a sort of liaison scout. I should be safer in these rags than in a uniform. That wouldn't prevent me from putting on decent clothes, and having a bath occasionally, if I was over here, as no doubt I should be, sometimes."

King considered Cub thoughtfully. "We shall have to think about this," he decided. "You run off now and get some food. The corporal will fix you up. For the moment, at any rate, you can regard yourself as on our strength. That's all for the present."

Cub rose. "Thank you, sir. How long will it be before I can get back to France, do you think? You see, if the gang thinks the Nazis have bumped me

off, they're liable to do something desperate."

"You'll be back pretty soon, I fancy," answered King drily. "In fact, I'll see to it that you are."

There was a new respect in Copper's voice when they got outside, and walked across the parade ground to the old house that was used as a mess.

"You're a coughdrop," he remarked. "That tale o' yours fair took the blinkin' biscuit, particularly the bit about cuttin' the general's bootlaces. It'll tickle Trapper to death when I tell 'im."

"You and Trapper aren't the only Kittens left alive, by any chance?" queried Cub.

"No bloomin' fear," declared Copper warmly. "Only it happens—keep this ter yourself—that me and Trapper are Gimlet's right-hand men. We act as sort of pathfinders fer the others, for which reason we go our own sweet way, if you get what I mean? Once in a while we do a little sortie on our own, like last night, fer instance. Me and Trapper share quarters where we can talk things over; there's bags of room for another bunk, so you can muck in with us if you like, till you know what you're goin' ter do."

"Thanks, that'll suit me fine," agreed Cub, who was already attracted to these two genuine if unusual men.

"Then let's go and swipe some grub before the hogs get their feet in the trough," suggested Copper. He glanced at the Cub's bare feet. "Would you like me ter scrounge a pair of shoes for you?"

"After two years without them I reckon leather would rub my feet, thanks all the same," declined Cub. He grinned. "Besides, the soles of my feet don't wear out—shoes do."

Copper laughed, so loudly that for a moment Cub was startled. "Blimy! you certainly are a one for knowing all the answers," he averred. Then, becoming serious, "Remind me of a kid I used ter know down the Old Kent Road, you do. Smart kid 'e was, too—poor little blighter."

Cub looked up. "Why poor? Did something happen to him?"

"Yeah," returned Copper grimly. "Something happened to 'im. Volunteer fire messenger, 'e was, in the blitz. One night 'e never came back. I helped dig 'im out. The same night, it was, my Ma had our roof on top of 'er."

Cub noticed that the big Cockney's hands were opening and shutting, and he understood, then, why the Nazi sentry outside the hut had died so quickly.

During the next twenty-four hours he came to know more about the Commandos, particularly his new-found friends. They showed him the

armoury, and the gun pits, and demonstrated some of the weapons.

“I reckon they’d be a bit too heavy for me,” said Cub regretfully. “But I get on pretty well with this,” he went on, putting his hand inside his ragged shorts and displaying a small Mauser automatic. “It’s only a thirty-eight,” he continued, putting three shots in quick succession through the bull’s-eye, “but it hits pretty hard.”

Copper stared. “Strike a light!” he gasped. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“In France—there’s plenty to practise on.”

Copper glanced at Trapper, who was smiling approval. “He don’t need no one ter take care of him,” he asserted. “Next thing we know he’ll be taking care of us.”

Trapper clicked his tongue. “*Mot de Cambronne!* I guess you’re right.”

Late that afternoon Cub’s presence was again requested at the orderly room. After one glance at King’s face his heart sank.

“Yes, I’m afraid it’s bad news,” said Gimlet. “The War Office has no information about your father beyond the fact that it is known he was seriously wounded in the rearguard action. What happened to him after that no one knows. The beach was bombed incessantly, and a lot of our fellows are simply on the missing list. Occasionally one turns up, but not often. It’s always better to face facts, Cub, and although it may hurt, I wouldn’t set too much hope on seeing your father again. If he died—well, he died like a soldier, and that being so he’d expect you to take it on the chin. I’m sorry.” Gimlet held out his hand.



"I'M AFRAID IT'S BAD NEWS," SAID GIMLET.

Cub took it. "That's all right, sir," he said in a steady voice. "It's just one more grudge I have against the Nazis."

"Good," replied King briskly. "Now let's get down to business. The Higher Command has decided to exploit to the full the information you possess, but as you are British, and under age, they don't like the idea of your wandering about loose in France. They suggest that you return to school and resume your studies where you left off."

Cub's jaw sagged. "To *school!*" he cried incredulously. "To go back to prep—Euclid, Latin verbs, and all that sort of rot, after what I've been doing!"

Gimlet's blue eyes twinkled. "There's an alternative," he admitted. "If you prefer, you may stay on the strength of this unit for such duties as I may decide—purely as a volunteer, of course. You would come under me for discipline, and draw pay and rations like any other commando."

Cub drew a deep breath. "That's better," he agreed vehemently.

Gimlet looked stern. "Don't get the idea that you're going to run wild with a Tommy gun. You're still a bit young for that sort of thing. But as a guide, your knowledge of the country should be invaluable."

"I understand, sir," said Cub. "When do we start?"

The corners of Gimlet's mouth twitched. "Don't be in such a devil of a hurry. I haven't decided yet just what we're going to do. Headquarters are anxious to know just what dirty work is going on at Chateaudun, so we may run down there and have a look round."

"I could think of a dozen things we could do right away," exclaimed Cub eagerly. "In the Grey Fleas we were always rather stumped for equipment _____"

"One thing at a time," broke in King. "You must realise that as we commandos work, the great difficulty is getting to and from the objective—that is, the enemy coast—without being spotted. U-boats are always on the prowl and enemy reconnaissance aircraft are always on the look-out for small craft in the Channel. It isn't so much the danger of being caught on the open sea in daylight, although it would probably be a bad business if we were; but should that happen, the element of surprise, which is vital to the success of a sortie, has gone. It is useless to go on after being spotted. Sometimes, of course, we bale out of aircraft over the objective, and arrange to be picked up somewhere on the coast by the Navy after the job's done. But that isn't always possible; in nine cases out of ten it means a sea voyage at the finish. In short, getting to and fro is the most tricky part of a raid."

"I didn't think of that," confessed Cub. His face brightened, "Why keep going to and fro? We could cut out a lot of that by mucking in with the Fleas in the Forest of Caen, and operating from there. In that way we might do several jobs at one crossing, so to speak. In my experience the Nazis haven't much imagination. Because, after a raid, you have always departed by sea, that's where they'd look for us. It wouldn't occur to them that we might have dodged inland. In any case, sir, you really ought to meet The Fleas, so that if anything happened to me you would still have scouts on the other side."

Gimlet stared. "There's something in that, by gad! That *is* a new idea. But wouldn't that be throwing a load of danger on The Fleas?"

"They'd love it," declared Cub. "But without me you'd never find them. We don't fight the Nazi search parties because that would put the whole forest under suspicion. We just fade away—unless, as has happened once or twice, we show the Nazis the way through the forest, taking care to keep away from those parts we don't want them to see."

Gimlet nodded approval. "Nice work."

"There's one thing you ought to know, sir," remarked Cub. "*Generaloberst* Gunther, who is in charge of the coast defences, is a proper Nazi. He's shot scores of French hostages, and he's sworn to drown any

Kittens who fall into his hands. But his adjutant, *Hauptmann* von Roth, is even worse. He's the devil himself in uniform. Old men, women and children—it makes no difference to von Roth when he gets his hands on them.”

King's eyes looked frosty. “I'll remember it,” he said softly. “That's all for the moment. I'll put a scheme forward. Report at my quarters at seven o'clock this evening and we'll go into it. Copper and Trapper will be there.”

Cub raised his eyebrows. “Do you always call them that, sir?”

Gimlet smiled. “Not always—certainly not on the parade ground. But in the sort of work we do, when we're on the other side of the Channel—well, badges of rank, social position, rates of pay, and that sort of thing don't matter very much. We're comrades then, and that's all that matters.”

Cub nodded. “I understand, sir. I'll try to live up to that standard.”

“That's the spirit,” murmured Gimlet.

Cub departed to find his comrades.

CHAPTER IV

UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE

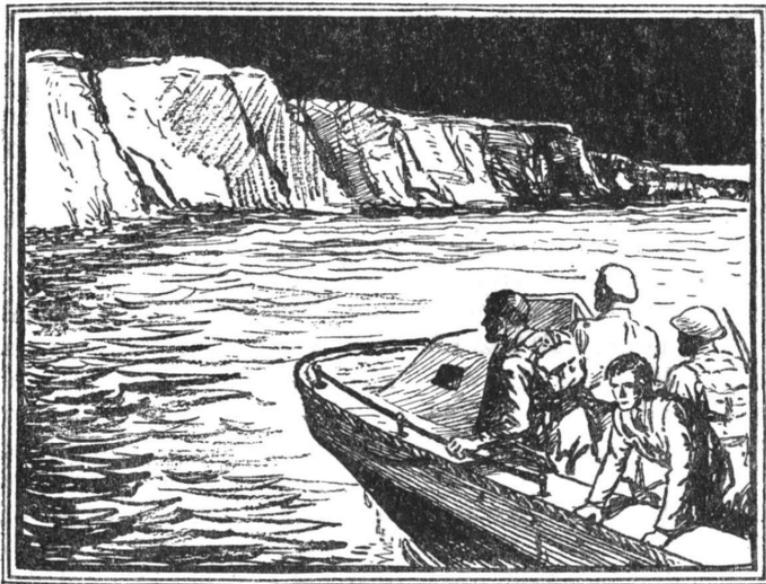
IF CUB thought that twenty-four hours would see him back in France, he was mistaken. He learned that commandos do not rush to and fro across the Channel at a moment's notice. He was informed that a plan, a plan embracing the most minute details and covering every possible contingency, is prepared before the first move is made, and this takes time. Four days and nights were to elapse before he again set foot on the coast of Normandy.

The hour was midnight, and the moon not yet risen, when he guided a small, flat-bottomed, blunt-nosed landing craft into a tiny cove of his own recommendation. In the boat were Gimlet King, and his two new friends, Copper and Trapper, for the expedition was in the nature of a private enterprise, no more than a scouting sortie with the primary object of making contact with The Grey Fleas and establishing a dump of useful equipment at their forest hide-out. This equipment, comprising guns, grenades, demolition charges, ammunition and tinned food had presented a problem, for it made a heavy load. To avoid the danger and difficulty of carrying it across nine miles of hostile country to the forest retreat—for the forest stretches away to the south of the town of Caen, which is only a matter of five or six miles

from the coast—the services of the R.A.F. branch of Combined Operations had been called in. At 3.0 a.m.^[1] a low-flying Hurricane fighter-bomber was to drop by parachute two containers, with the equipment packed inside, in a stretch of uncultivated country fringing the forest, a spot selected by Cub, and marked by him on an aerial photograph of the district taken expressly for this purpose. Nothing was left to chance.

[1] Actually, the Commandos use the 24-hour clock, but for the purposes of this narrative normal times will be more readily understood.

There had been a suggestion that they themselves might land by parachute, but after careful consideration Gimlet had opposed this for a number of reasons. Firstly, they would be left without any means of getting back unless an assignation was made with another aircraft, or a marine craft sent in by the naval branch. This would necessitate a definite appointment which might be difficult to keep. At all events, such an appointment would set a time limit on their raid, and in view of the indefinite nature of the sortie, which might last for some days, Gimlet was loath to tie his hands, so to speak. Another reason was, Gimlet was anxious to have sight of the country between the coast and the rendezvous, particularly the cove, which Cub had asserted was ideal for their purpose. It was, in fact, the cove used by The Fleas when they wished to have access to the sea, for which reason, although the Nazis were unaware of it, a passage had been made through the barbed wire; and land mines—the bugbear of a raiding force—had been removed. As a matter of detail The Fleas had watched these mines being laid, so as they knew just where they were their removal had presented no great difficulty. The mines had been transported to the forest for use against the Nazis at some future date should a suitable opportunity present itself.



FOUR DAYS LATER CUB AGAIN SET FOOT ON THE COAST OF
NORMANDY.

Having arrived in the cove, the boat, which obviously could not be left on the beach through the hours of daylight, was disposed of by the simple expedient of filling it with rocks until it sank—this in shallow water close to a low cliff. When the boat was again required it would only be necessary to remove the rocks, when air-filled floatation chambers would bring it to the surface.

The immediate objective was the spot where the Hurricane was to jettison the equipment. If nothing unforeseen occurred to hold them up they would be there when it arrived—for thus it had been planned—in which case, to remove the last possibility of error, they were to flash a signal from a torch showing a green light. This rendezvous was two miles from the old hunting lodge used by The Fleas as their headquarters, where the equipment was to be hidden.

This lodge, Cub had told them, was rather worse than a ruin. In places the walls, all overgrown with ivy, were still standing, but for the most part it was no more than an area strewn with blocks of stone, in a tangle of briars, nettles, and similar wild vegetation. But—this was the point—beneath the ruin there was a range of cellars, the entrance to which, hard to find at the best of times, had been made doubly secure from discovery by blocks of weed-covered masonry. As the ruin was far away from any beaten track it was well suited to their purpose.

Legend attributed the original building to William the Conqueror who, prior to the conquest of Britain, resided in his palace at Caen. As his great passion was hunting—witness the New Forest which he established in Britain—it seems likely enough that he hunted regularly in the Forest of Caen, and that being so, it is reasonable to suppose that the legend of the hunting lodge rested on a foundation of fact. At any rate, it was at Caen that William mustered his knights for the invasion of England, and to Cub it seemed right and proper that the process should now be reversed. Should the spirit of William linger in the vicinity, he must, Cub thought, regard the matter with approval, for William, while a gallant warrior, was not above a spot of trickery when it suited his purpose.

With the boat disposed of, Cub took the lead, and moving forward with confidence guided the party through the wire to the coastal road where a cautious reconnaissance was made. This precaution was an obvious one, and it was as well that it was taken, for a minute later a German cyclist patrol appeared. The Nazi troops passed the commandos all unaware that within ten yards two Sten guns were trained on them. They were allowed to pass on this occasion because the business of the commandos was not with them.

As soon as the Nazis had disappeared into the night the advance was resumed, with Cub, still acting as guide, avoiding roads and habitations. His intimate knowledge of the country was at once revealed. Without such a guide progress must have been slow; as it was, they marched with such assurance that the party arrived at the objective with a quarter of an hour to spare, which enabled them to rest and refresh themselves from their haversacks. It was a bleak, lonely spot, undulating, occupied chiefly by gorse and bracken, with an occasional birch or holly, with the forest looming dark in the background. Several times during the march Cub had halted to listen, and uttered the harsh, honking cry of a wild goose. He did so again now, and on this occasion the cry was answered from a distance by the screech of a nighthawk, a double screech, twice repeated.

“Good,” said Cub approvingly. “That’s Falcon. He’ll pass word on to the others that I’m back. They’ll be here in no time. We ought to hear Fox yapping pretty soon.” But although they listened, and although the forest seemed suddenly to have developed a wealth of wild life, there was no yap of a fox.

At two minutes to three, searchlights in the direction of the coast, and a sparkle of distant flak, heralded the approach of the Hurricane. Very soon it announced its own arrival with a drone that quickly became a roar. Gimlet flashed the signal, whereupon the aircraft bellowed overhead, unseen, and passed on into the darkness. In the silence that followed, two thuds, at no

great distance, could be plainly heard. The party ran towards the spot and found the two containers, with their dark-coloured parachutes spread over the ground near them.

While the parachutes were being folded, a dog of the lurcher type dashed up and greeted Cub with those unrestrained manifestations of joy with which a dog displays its affection. Cub fondled it while it kept a watchful, suspicious eye on the others.

The screech of a nighthawk came again, close now. Cub honked, and a moment later a small figure in ragged overalls, capped with a beret dragged down over one ear, loomed up. It stopped abruptly, and then disappeared in a flash, presumably when it caught sight of men in the party. Cub called, whereupon the lad reappeared, and running up to Cub kissed him on both cheeks.

“They—er—the French, do that sort of thing,” explained Cub uncomfortably. To Falcon he said, “It’s all right. These are friends, British commandos.”

Upon this, addressing Cub, using his hands as well as his lips, Falcon broke into a veritable torrent of speech, words pouring from his lips so fast that Gimlet, who spoke French well, and Trapper, whose accent was somewhat different, found it hard to keep pace. By the time Falcon had finished speaking six more Fleas had arrived on the scene.

“What’s the trouble?” asked Copper shrewdly.

Cub raised his hands for silence and then turned to the commandos. “I don’t know how much of that you were able to follow, so I had better explain. There has been a tragedy. The Nazis have captured The Fox, our leader. Apparently it happened the night I left France. The Fox, in his anxiety to find me, made the mistake of getting too near the hut. He was caught in the cordon the Nazis threw round the place, and *Hauptmann* von Roth, who is no fool, guessed he had some hand in the matter. To make matters worse, Fox was caught with his weapons on him. He was put in the *gendarmierie*, which of course has been taken over by the Nazis, and in the morning was hauled up before *Generaloberst* Gunther. The Fox refused to speak, but the French people are in a state about it, naturally, because it’s on occasions like this that Von Roth goes mad and shoots people—perfectly innocent people. Some of the French people want The Fox to speak, to save a massacre; some, regardless of consequences, want him to remain dumb. At times like this, when the citizens get at loggerheads with each other, it’s hard to know what to do for the best. But the ghastly thing is, at eight o’clock

tomorrow morning The Fox is to be publicly flogged, in Caen, to make him open his mouth. If he refuses he will be shot.”

For a moment silence reigned.

“And where is this nauseating spectacle to take place?” asked Gimlet quietly.

“In the Place de la République, which is in front of the Hôtel de Ville, where Gunther has his headquarters. The *gendarmérie* is close by, in the next square—the Place de la Préfecture. But excuse me while I tell the others who you are. They don’t understand.”

In a profound hush Cub made the necessary explanations. It was evident that The Fleas were not a little impressed by the new arrivals, but their satisfaction, and their joy at seeing Cub again, whom they had given up for lost, was largely offset by the impending fate of their leader.

“It looks as if we shall have to take a hand in this affair in the Place de la République,” said Gimlet. “But for a start, let us get this stuff stowed away in a safe place. Good thing we’ve got it. Looks as if we shall need it. Lead on, Cub.”

There were now plenty of willing hands to carry the containers, which were picked up. The party then entered the timber, following what Cub stated was an old boar path, for these animals still lingered on in the most inaccessible parts of the forest.

Half an hour’s walk through a jungle of undergrowth, above which rose the spreading arms of ancient oaks, brought the party to its objective—the ivy-clad walls and fallen stones that were all that remained of the Conqueror’s hunting lodge. In a cellar beneath, a candle stuck in a bottle threw a flickering yellow light on a scene that was a mixture of fantasy and drama. The actors were now able to see each other, and The Fleas looked at the commandos with the same curiosity as the British troops looked at the strange tribe that swarmed about them. The Grey Fleas of the North, while often unlike each other in appearance, varying in type from blonde Celts to swarthy Latins, had one characteristic in common. On every face was an expression of earnest, almost fierce determination. Each was so deadly serious in his purpose that humour found no place in the assembly. Gimlet sat on a container. Copper and Trapper sat on the other. Cub stood up, giving orders curtly, in charge of the gathering. On his instructions The Fleas formed themselves in a half circle and waited expectantly. All eyes were on Gimlet’s face, for the word had gone round that this was the famous British commando leader.

Gimlet made a brief speech, congratulating The Fleas on their work. He then took a guide-book from his pocket and opened it at a plan of the town of Caen. He glanced at his watch. "If The Fox is to be saved," he said, speaking in French, "we have no time to waste in idle chatter. Let us make a plan. I take it you all know your way about the town?"

There was a chorus of affirmation, which was only to be expected, for most of the boys had been born there, or close by.

"I shall need assistants," said Gimlet. "The work will be dangerous, but every Flea who volunteers to take part must be prepared to go through with it, come what may, for in an enterprise of this sort perfect timing is everything, and the success of the whole depends upon strict adherence to orders on the part of each member. Who will volunteer for the rescue?"

Every hand shot up.

Gimlet's blue eyes flashed round the semicircle of eager faces. "*Bon*," said he. "Now let us work out the plan." He glanced at Cub. "I take it that sentries have been posted?"

Cub looked pained. "Sentries are *always* on duty, sir," he said. "No one, neither French nor German, can approach within two miles of this place without my being informed of it."

"I beg your pardon," said Gimlet. "Let us start by making a rough model of the square, the Place de la République, which will be the scene of action."

CHAPTER V

GIMLET SIGNS HIS NAME

WHEN day dawned in the time-mellowed town of Caen, it dawned much as any other day since the Nazi occupation. Black-out blinds were drawn, and slatted shutters fell open, carelessly, reluctantly almost, as if the houses themselves saw little purpose in opening misery-dulled eyes to gaze once more upon their own dilapidations.

In the Place de la République a few starved-looking sparrows took up their customary positions on the eaves of the dingy shops that lined three sides of the square, and preened themselves without enthusiasm; for even they scarce knew where to look for their next meal in hungry France. An occasional cart, drawn by a horse too skinny to eat, passed through, and one or two fishermen plodded heavily homeward from the direction of the Canal

Maritime. Few of the shops had anything to sell, so for the most part they remained unopened. There was no bustling activity outside the Café Normandie, as there was in the almost-forgotten days of peace. The brisk aroma of fresh roasted coffee and baking bread was but a memory. The newspaper kiosk stood silent, abandoned, a little awry, as forlorn as a moorland milestone. Occasionally a heavy-booted Nazi patrol marched through the square, or a motor cyclist, with a clatter that seemed almost sacrilege, like shouting in a church, delivered despatches to General Gunther's headquarters in the Hôtel de Ville—which in France is what in England is called the town hall. In the intervals, an atmosphere of hopeless lethargy hung over all. The only permanent visitor to the square appeared to be a boy who took up a position, a somewhat precarious one, on a flat roof commanding a view of the Rue Auber, the little street that connects the Place de la République and the Place de la Préfecture with its adjacent *gendarmerie*. Only a close observer would have noticed that this boy (if he noticed him at all) from time to time made seemingly meaningless gestures with his hands, as though he were an idiot.

At a quarter to eight, however, there came a sudden note of busy movement. Four Nazi soldiers, under an *Unteroffizier*, appeared from the direction of the *gendarmerie*, carrying between them three short scaffold poles. They marched to a position in the middle of the square, halted, and then, in a businesslike manner, arranged the three poles in the form of a tripod; that is to say, with the feet wide apart and the three tops forming an apex. In this position the poles were fastened with ropes. The soldiers then fell into line a short distance away and stood at ease. There were still no curious spectators to see what all this was about, as might have been expected, but here and there the blind of a bedroom overlooking the square moved slightly, and a face peered furtively at the scene.

At five minutes to eight the boy on the roof made another of his imbecile signs, and a moment later, with a steady tramp—tramp—tramp, three squads of Nazi soldiers, twelve to a squad, rifles at the slope, marched into the Place and with admirable military precision formed up in line on three sides of the scaffolding, but some little distance from it, leaving the fourth side, facing the Hôtel de Ville, open. Rifles were “ordered,” and the troops stood “at ease.”

On the stroke of eight came another sound of marching, followed by the appearance of another body of troops, six this time, in open order. By their side, a little apart, marched a sergeant, carrying at the slope a short-handled whip, the several tails of which hung far down his back. In the centre of this imposing procession, looking singularly out of place, a slim youth, his hands

in his pockets, walked with jaunty step and defiant air. As the party marched across the square towards the scaffolding the youth began to sing, and the song he sang was the Marseillaise.

“*Stillschweigen!*” roared the sergeant.

The boy continued to sing. Indeed, he sang with greater enthusiasm, whereupon the sergeant broke into the ranks and struck him across the mouth. With blood running down his chin the boy continued to sing. He sang while his shirt was ripped off, and he was tied, spreadeagled, to the tripod. The sergeant took off his tunic, folded it carefully, laid it on the ground and rolled up his sleeves.

At this juncture there appeared on the steps of the Hôtel de Ville an officer, immaculate in a dove-grey uniform, a smart figure indeed, but somewhat spoilt by the fact that his field boots seemed to have been made for a larger man, for they sagged round the ankles. For a moment he paused to survey the scene. At a shout of command the assembled troops sprang to attention. The officer advanced towards the tripod, followed by a rather fat bespectacled soldier, carrying an open notebook. The youth continued to sing with fervour.

Apart from those described, the square was deserted. Even the boy on the roof had disappeared. But that is not to say that there were no spectators. As a matter of fact there were several, although none was visible.

From the front ground-floor room of old Marcel Boudrier’s abandoned paint and wallpaper establishment, which had lately been partly gutted by fire, with his face just above the charred windowsill, Copper Collson regarded the scene with cold, hostile eyes.

“If I hadn’t seen this with my own eyes, on my oath I wouldn’t have believed it,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “Forty perishing Nazis to whip one boy, s’welp me.” Apparently he spoke to Trapper Troublay, who crouched near him, also watching the scene; close at hand were Gimlet King and Cub.

“Don’t talk!” snapped Gimlet, whose face was pale. “Prepare for action. Trapper, take the fellow with the whip. Copper, you take the officer. Then get busy with the Sten gun. Wait for it!”

With a little sigh that held in it a note of affection Trapper snuggled a rifle to his shoulder. The sergeant’s arm, whip in hand, was raised for the first stroke.

“Fire!” said Gimlet.

There came a crack more vicious than the whip could have made. Simultaneously Trapper’s rifle gave a little jerk. The sergeant’s whole body twitched spasmodically. And there he stood for a split second, his arm

raised, while sparrows whirled upwards in alarm at the unexpected interruption; then he crashed headlong, the whip flying from his hand. Came another crack. This time the officer spun round in a manner scarcely human, and with his fall some sort of understanding of the situation seemed to dawn upon the troops. With a rising murmur of voices, looking wildly about them they broke ranks; but before the movement was properly begun the air was rent by the tearing snarl of a machine-gun, and the shrill whine of bullets ricocheting from hard earth and cobble-stones. In the confined space of the square, with echoes crashing to and fro between the walls, the noise was considerable. Nazis fell. Some stumbled about, firing their rifles indiscriminately; some sank to their knees; others ran first one way and then another, not knowing what they were running from, or where they were running to, as it seemed. The line of men immediately in front of old Marcel Boudrier's shop, enfiladed, went down like a row of ninepins.

Gimlet raised a whistle to his lips, and its piercing blast cut across the pandemonium which had so devastatingly descended on the sleepy square. In response, as though the whistle were a piece of mechanism that had released them, a number of small round objects, that might have been miniature Rugby balls, appeared, bouncing across the gravel. They came from several places, from doorways, from alleys, and empty shops. At least one came spinning down from a roof, to strike a cobbled area with a crash, and bouncing high, explode in mid-air in a manner that can only be described as spectacular. Then came a swift succession of explosions, and on the instant the *Place* became filled with dense white smoke that rolled and surged as if it might have been a liquid. The scene was blotted out.

"Your innings, Cub," said Gimlet, in a thin dry voice. "Copper, plaster the door of the Hôtel de Ville. Trapper, put a squirt across the entrance to the Rue Auber to prevent fresh troops from coming up from the *gendarmérie*. You can use grenades, but be careful of the boys."

Before Gimlet had finished speaking Cub was streaking across the square in the direction of the tripod, a knife in his hand. He disappeared into the smoke made by the smoke bombs. Within a minute he reappeared, running like a hare, with The Fox at his side.

As the two boys emerged from the smoke Gimlet again put the whistle to his lips and blew a number of short blasts—the prearranged dispersal signal. "All right," he said calmly. "Let's go." Then, seeing that tears were running down The Fox's face, he asked sharply, "What's the matter—are you hurt?"

"*Non, m'sieur,*" answered The Fox. "I was thinking of the people here, who will be blamed for this."

“Ah,” breathed Gimlet. “I see what you mean. In that case we’ll let Gunther know who is responsible.”

Several pots of paint stood on a shelf, one with the lid off, and a brush in it. Gimlet took the brush, dripping with green paint, and walking out quickly to the derelict newspaper kiosk, in three swift sweeping strokes made a mark, in the rough shape of a gimlet, thus: **T** He tossed the brush aside and returned to the shop. “Let’s be going. Lead on, Cub.”

“It’s all right, sir, The Grasshopper’s there, I’ve seen him,” said Cub, as he led the way to the rear of the building where a back door opened into the Rue Jacques. There, a tired-looking horse was standing between the shafts of a ramshackle cart, in which lay a heap of old potato sacks. A small boy, with a pinched, freckled face, sat on the driver’s seat.

“*Montez, messieurs,*” said he.

“*Du courage,*” muttered Trapper.

“*En avant,*” called Cub as the party got aboard and pulled the sacks over them.

The boy clicked his tongue. Iron-shod hooves clattered on the road; the horse moved forward, and on objurgations from the driver broke into a trot. The noise of shooting and shouting in the Place de la République died away.

The ride that followed, as rides go, was not a pleasant one. For one thing the cart stank of stale vegetables, if nothing worse, and was entirely destitute of such modern appliances as springs. Fortunately there was some improvement when the vehicle left the cobbled area of the town and ran on into the country over a gravel-surfaced road.

Presently a motor cycle came tearing along behind, and stopped with a screech of brakes.

“*Halte-là!*” shouted a voice.

The cart stopped. A question was asked, and The Grasshopper replied, in a level voice, that he had seen some men running across the Pont de la Courtonne towards the Canal Maritime, as if making for the sea. The motor cycle roared off and the cart continued on its way. After about twenty minutes it made a sharp turn, and shortly afterwards came to a stop.

“*Descendez, messieurs,* if you please,” chirped The Grasshopper.

The occupants of the cart jumped down and found themselves in a farmyard enclosed by barns. The farmer, who Cub said was The Grasshopper’s father, looking rather anxious, received them. His anxiety was pardonable, for in occupied France there is only one punishment for harbouring refugees.

“At your service, *messieurs*. This way, if you please,” said the farmer, leading the way into a barn that was, or appeared to be, entirely filled with trusses of hay. But he pulled one aside, disclosing a cavity large enough to accommodate the party in comfort.

“It would be advisable to remain quiet,” said the farmer. “I shall replace the truss of hay, so you should be secure. Presently I will bring you soup. Then you can sleep. Tonight, I should be glad if you would depart, because my nerves are not as good as they were, and should the Boches come searching, my fears might betray all of us.”

“We are deeply in your debt, *monsieur*,” said Gimlet. “It shall not be forgotten.”

“I could do no less,” said the Frenchman simply, as he replaced the truss of hay in the hole and departed.

There were now in the party five persons, Gimlet, Copper, Trapper, Cub and The Fox, The Grasshopper having gone, as Cub averred, to put the horse away and watch the road for danger. “It all went like clockwork,” he added.

“No reason why it shouldn’t,” replied Gimlet. “I hope the boys got clear after rolling in those smoke bombs.”

“By this time they will have vanished like mice in a cornfield,” declared Cub. “It is not the first time they have had to do it. In their own time, from different directions, they will return to the forest. In uniforms, that would not have been possible for you, but after dark it should be fairly easy. I’m afraid The Fox will no longer be able to appear in public, though.”

The Fox, who, although no worse for his imprisonment, seemed to be slightly stunned by his dramatic rescue, now recovered and stepped into the conversation. He expressed his joy at Cub’s reappearance, and addressed the commandos in a manner not far short of reverence. When he learned that they had brought equipment with them, and intended staying in the country for a time, he broke down from sheer emotion and wept unrestrainedly.

Copper sniffed. “Okay—okay,” he muttered impatiently. “Cut it out.”

“Leave him alone, you big stiff,” interposed Cub. “He’ll be better when he’s got his feelings off his chest. Don’t worry, when it comes to action The Fox may be able to show you a thing or two.”

“Blimy, ’ark at ’im,” growled Copper, grinning.

The farmer’s wife brought in a great pot of soup, and some cups. When the soup was finished the party stretched themselves out on the hay.

“Let’s get some sleep while we can,” said Gimlet. “After this morning’s diversion we’ll see about getting down to the work that brought us here. By

the way, Cub, you might ask The Grasshopper to swab his cart out, in case we have to use it again. It's filthy, positively filthy."

Cub smiled. "Very good, sir," he said.

Copper chuckled. "But it was better than no cart at all," he murmured softly. "Am I right, Trapper?"

"Are you right?" grunted Trapper. "*I'll* say you're right."

CHAPTER VI

SABOTAGE DE LUXE

TWILIGHT was creeping in through the grimy barn window when Cub was awakened by the low murmur of voices, to find Gimlet, with a map on his knees, engaged in quiet but earnest conversation with Copper and Trapper. Missing the Fox, Cub asked where he was.

"No use asking us, chum," said Copper. "He was gone when we woke up."

"Probably gone on the prowl to find out what's happening," opined Cub. "We needn't worry; the Fox lives up to his name—but unlike an ordinary fox he doesn't leave a scent."

"Come over here, Cub," ordered Gimlet. "We were just having a look at the lie of the land between here and Chateaudun. The Government would like to know what's happening there, and why it is necessary to keep an internment camp under the hat, so to speak."

"It's a fair step—about a hundred miles south of Dieppe and fifty miles west of Paris," returned Cub. "That means it's a good eighty miles from here. It took me about a week to get there, although, of course, I was in no hurry, and did a spot of scouting on the way." Cub looked dubious. "In uniforms, you'll only be able to travel after dark—the country isn't as lonely as all that, not even if we kept to the fields."

"Yes, I realise that," answered Gimlet, resuming his study of the map.

"We might ride down," suggested Copper.

"Ride? In what?" demanded Cub.

"Borrow some bikes, or get a lift on a goods train, maybe."

"We might get a bit nearer that way," agreed Cub.

At this point of the conversation there was a rustle in the hay, and The Fox, after the manner of his namesake, appeared. He carried a parcel. He stated—as Cub had predicted—that he had been to make contact with The Fleas, to find out what was happening. As he spoke, and Cub translated, the Fox's hands lent eloquent support to his words.

"The whole place is in an uproar," he reported. "Gunther is raging like a maniac, they say, since the gimlet sign was found on the kiosk." The Fox chuckled. "That was a touch, *mon commandant*." Then he became serious. "But this is no matter for laughing. When Gunther is in this mood he is capable of any devilment, and I am afraid for the people. They, too, are afraid. Into such a fury as this he flew when it was learned that Jacques Voudrier had escaped in his fishing smack to England, to join the Fighting French. That was an affair most unfortunate."

"It sounds all right ter me," said Copper.

"It was bad for the people Jacques left behind," explained The Fox. "Von Roth, as an example to others, as he said, shot Jacques' wife, his mother, and his two children, Jeanette and Paul. Had there been other relations, doubtless he would have shot them, too."

Gimlet's eyes were on the Fox's face. There was a frosty gleam in them. "One day I hope to have the pleasure of meeting this fellow von Roth," he said softly.

"Pleasure?" greeted Cub.

"The pleasure on that occasion will, I trust, be entirely mine," answered Gimlet, in a voice that was like cracking ice. "Go on, Fox."

"There are Boches everywhere, even in the forest," resumed The Fox. "The Fleas have gone into hiding, and it would be well for you to do so, *monsieur*, until things settle down. On the dunes there are many patrols, with Messerschmitts flying low, and the sea swarms with E-boats to make sure that this time the commandos do not get back. To approach the sea while things are like this would be madness, so I have brought some food from the store in case it is needed."

"We were just talking of going the other way, towards Chateaudun," said Cub. "I am rather out of touch with things, but perhaps you know if a goods train goes south tonight?"

The Fox shrugged. "I doubt it. I have just spoken with the Frog, whose father, as you know, works on the railway. Already an ammunition train, a goods train, and a loose engine are held up at Falaise junction, waiting for a troop train to go through."

"What's that you say?" asked Gimlet sharply.

“A troop train is taking new U-boat crews to Cherbourg,” replied The Fox. “Since the British bombing broke the bridge only one line operates, so much traffic is held up at Falaise, in a siding which the Germans have built there.”

“And an ammunition train is now waiting at Falaise?”

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

“How very interesting,” murmured Gimlet.

“Falaise is on our way to Chateaudun,” prompted Cub.

“So I see.” Gimlet was looking at his map. “I seem to know this name, Falaise. Didn’t something once happen there?”

“It was in a dungeon of the castle that King John had his nephew, Prince Arthur, murdered,” replied Cub. “The *concierge* is a friend of ours, by the way, if ever you are in trouble.”

Gimlet nodded. “If someone started this ammunition train, would it run down the line and meet the troop train?”

“Not exactly, but it could be done,” returned The Fox. “*Voilà!* This is the situation.” Using stalks of hay to demonstrate his meaning, he continued. “We are a mile outside the town, you comprehend? Here is the main line, so. The troop train comes from the east, from Paris, although just where it is now I do not know. Here is the siding, with the ammunition train facing west, also the goods train. The loose engine waits between them. Here is the junction. This line that runs south to Argentan. It would only be necessary to switch the points at the western end of the siding to put the ammunition train on the main track—*comme ça.*” The Fox juggled with his pieces of hay.

“That, I suppose, would have to be done from the signal box?”

“Not necessarily,” put in Cub. “The control cables run above ground. It is possible to pull on the cable at any place between the signal box and the points, to work the switch. We have wrecked several trains that way, in other places, haven’t we, Fox?”

“But certainly. If it is desired that the points be switched, the Fleas will do it. I had such a plan in mind, until this affair in Caen. Now it is known that there are commandos in Normandy there may be guards—I do not know.”

“What about the drivers of these trains—are they French?” questioned Gimlet.

“*Non, monsieur.* The Boches no longer trust French drivers—at least, not with important war trains.”

“I see,” said Gimlet. “We shall have to pay a call on this place, Falaise, I think. It’s nearly dark, so we can soon be on the move. I take it, Cub, that you know the best way?”

“I know every inch of the ground,” declared Cub.

Gimlet turned to The Fox. “And if we seize the engines, you, with The Fleas, will attend to the points?”

“With pleasure, *mon commandant*,” agreed The Fox readily. “And afterwards?”

“Afterwards, you had better return to the forest, where we can find you should we need you again.”

“*Oui, mon commandant.*”

The final details of the plan were soon settled. The commandos were to give The Fox half an hour’s start in order to get The Fleas together. The gang would then spread out in the manner of a protective screen, and travelling cross-country move ahead of the commandos, to ascertain the position of enemy patrols, should there be any. On arrival at the Falaise siding the commandos would first dispose of the driver and fireman of the ammunition train. A whistle would announce that this had been done, upon which the train, driven by Gimlet, would move on to the main track. When the train stopped, The Fleas were to switch the points. The train would then be started in reverse, so that it would run backwards up the main line, and meet the troop train coming down. Naturally, the commandos would jump off as soon as the train was started on its last trip. If possible, the goods train would also be switched to the main line, and sent along, driverless, to pile into the wreck. The Fleas would then return to the forest, and the commandos proceed on their way towards Chateaudun. This was the broad plan, but in the event it did not work out that way.

The Fox departed on his mission, and when half an hour had elapsed, the commandos rose.

Leaving the hay barn, they found The Grasshopper keeping watch outside. He reported that German patrols were constantly on the move; all roads were guarded, and travellers were being questioned. He was told to let his father know that the commandos were leaving, and to thank him for his hospitality. Then, under Cub’s guidance, the party set off in single file across the sullen countryside. There was nothing to indicate that The Fleas were somewhere ahead, but about twenty minutes later The Fox, with Tyke at his heels, loomed up in the darkness and had a whispered conversation with Cub, after which he vanished as silently as he had appeared.

“There’s a searchlight battery in the field ahead,” Cub told Gimlet. “We shall have to make a detour, that’s all.” Striking off at a tangent he strode on.

Time passed, and at length The Fox again appeared, to report that all was quiet at the siding, which was only a short distance ahead, but that an armed guard, comprising an *Unteroffizier* and three men, had been posted at the signal box.

“What are these troops doing?” asked Gimlet.

“One stands at the foot of the steps,” answered The Fox. “The others are trying to make the telephone work.”

“Is it out of order, then?”

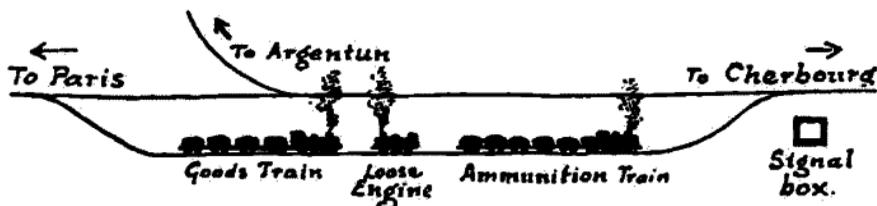
“*Oui, monsieur.* It is out of order because we have cut the wires on both sides of the box,” answered The Fox calmly. “That is always a good precaution.”

Gimlet turned to the commandos. “I think we had better deal with these fellows first, otherwise, they’ll try to interfere when we start shunting the trains. Cub, tell The Fox to lead us to a position from which we can see the signal box.”

Cub passed the order, and the party again moved forward.

The signal box soon came into sight—a small frame building, as usual built high, and entered by a flight of wooden steps. It stood at the western end of the siding. From the top of the low embankment that occurred at this spot it was possible to see the sentry, and hear him, for he strolled up and down in the careless attitude of a man who feels that he is doing an unnecessary job. Within the building above him, dark shadows moved from time to time against a background of dim light.

The siding was also in plain view, with the trains standing in the positions The Fox had described, thus:



Smoke curled idly from the engines. From the locomotive of the ammunition train came a low hiss of escaping steam. The Fox reported that The Fleas were in position to work the switch. Gimlet ordered him to rejoin

them, and stand by for the whistle, which might be some minutes, as they had first to deal with the Nazi guard. Obediently, The Fox faded away.

Gimlet touched Trapper on the arm. "The light is tricky," he whispered. "Do you think you can get that sentry or shall we go down after him?"

Trapper unslung his bow. "*Ma foi!* When I can't hit a man at thirty metres I will use my arrows for firewood."

There were a few moments of tense, almost painful silence, while he fitted an arrow to his bow, and the sentry, all unconscious of his impending doom, began to sing a ribald song.

"Why, the silly swipe has been on the booze," grunted Copper in a disgusted voice. "A sentry who gets a skinful before going on duty deserves all 'e gets. Am I right, Trapper?"

"Name of a dog! *I'll* say you're right," agreed Trapper. "*Regardez.*" He rose slowly to one knee. *Phung!* sang the bowstring.

The singing stopped abruptly. Almost before the sound had died away, Gimlet, gun in hand, was sliding down the bank. The others followed, although Cub observed that there was no need for haste. With an arrow projecting from his heart the sentry lay still and silent beside the line he had so unwisely guarded.

Gimlet threw a glance at the smoking engines, and then switched his eyes to the signal box. As he did so the door above opened and a voice shouted, in German, "The wires must have been cut. There may be commandos about, so watch what you're doing, Rudolf."

"*Ja,*" grunted Gimlet.

"I don't like it," continued the voice above. "I'm sending number fifty-six down to the siding in the town, to be on the safe side."

"*Ja, ja,*" grunted Gimlet again.

The man above, presumably the *Unteroffizier*, re-entered the signal box, leaving the door open. A moment later there came the crash of a lever, and the harsh swish of a cable. Somewhere down the line a signal clanged.

For a second or two the commandos stood staring, uncertain as to what was happening, for to them the *Unteroffizier's* statement was vague; but when the engine of the ammunition train suddenly spurted steam and began to move, it became all too clear. The ammunition train was leaving, which at once threw the whole scheme out of gear.

Gimlet rapped out new orders to meet the situation. "Trapper, don't let anybody out of that signal box," he said tersely. To Copper he snapped,

“Come on,” and began running towards the ammunition train which by this time was rumbling slowly past them.

Not from the start was there any question of reaching the engine, which had already gone past and was now gathering speed. Indeed, Cub was convinced that it was too late to do anything, although he followed as a matter of course, not knowing what else to do.

From then on there was little time for thought, and his actions were prompted by those of his comrades. He saw Gimlet race for a moment beside the train and then make a flying leap at a truck. Copper did the same, dropping his Sten gun in the effort. The clatter of its fall was drowned in the noise made by the train. In sheer desperation Cub grabbed at a passing buffer. Instantly he was dragged off his feet, and all but fell under the wheels, but he managed to hang on and drag himself up. Somehow he clambered to the top of a tarpaulin-covered truck, and there he lay, panting from exertion and excitement. He could see the others, dimly, just ahead, and wondered what they would do. His brain was in a whirl. To tell the truth, he was already repenting his haste. It seemed that they had all bitten off more than they could handle, for the train was now travelling so fast that dismounting would be a perilous undertaking. Then he saw Gimlet's slim figure rise up, and begin jumping from truck to truck towards the engine, swaying, and sometimes falling. Copper, looming huge in the darkness, did the same. Cub, realising that they did not know he was aboard, followed.

CHAPTER VII

A RIDE TO REMEMBER

CUB followed, not so much because he had any hope of taking part in what the others were going to do, as because he did not relish the idea of being left alone. He felt that anything might happen at any moment.

The trip down the train, necessitating as it did a jump from one truck to the next, together with the noise, the rush of wind, and the smoke and soot that swirled aft, was a nightmare. This was bad enough, but worse was to come, for while he was staggering on, to add to the horror, from out of the darkness overhead suddenly came a stream of living sparks of fire. Even above the noise of the train came the roar of a low-flying aircraft, and he realised that the train was being shot up by a British intruder intent on

making a sieve of the engine. Remembering that he was on a train loaded with ammunition, had there been the slightest hope of surviving the fall he would have jumped for his life; but the engine driver, apparently aware of his danger, had increased speed to something in the order of fifty miles an hour. Then, to cap all, from somewhere ahead of him, on the train, a pom-pom began spitting back at the aircraft. He recalled, vaguely, that French trains were being equipped with guns, with German crews, to answer the menace of British intruding aircraft. It was in something like panic that he began to move forward again, in the hope, now a desperate hope, of getting in touch with the others, to let them know he was there. Tracer shells and bullets were still flying in a most terrifying manner.



SOMEHOW CUB CLAMBERED TO THE TOP OF A TARPULIN-COVERED TRUCK.

Then, suddenly, the engine driver had had enough; or so it must be assumed, for the brakes, screaming in protest, were clapped on with such force that the train jolted violently, nearly throwing Cub overboard. As it was, he fell, and to save himself clung to the rope lashing the tarpaulin. The train, bumping and jolting, but fast slowing down, plunged into a deep cutting, and at the same time the shooting stopped. At any rate, the aircraft

disappeared. What happened to it Cub did not know. He never knew. At the time he was quite content that it should go.

Rising, he ran forward, and nearly trod on Gimlet and Copper before he saw them, for they were lying flat, firing their revolvers at point-blank range into the gun crew, of which only two members remained. They jumped off—or fell off, he was not sure which—leaving the pom-pom, which was mounted on an iron trolley.

“Strike me pink!” cried Copper when he saw Cub. “Where did you spring from?”

“Same place as you,” answered Cub grimly, dropping beside him.

“You watch your step,” warned Gimlet, and then ran on towards the engine.

“He’s crazy,” averred Cub.

“Don’t you believe it, chum. He’s having the time of his little life,” declared Copper. “The fun hasn’t started yet.”

“Fun!” snorted Cub, as he followed Copper in the wake of their leader.

They were just in time to see the end of the first chapter of the night’s work. It was not without its humorous aspect. The engine driver, a very fat man, had already abandoned the footplate, and was sprinting down the line—a ludicrous spectacle. The fireman was made of sterner stuff. He made a terrific swipe at Gimlet with his long-handled shovel. Gimlet ducked, and the tool passed over his head with such force that its weight carried the man off his perch, so that he fell flat on his back beside the track. He was up in a flash, running for dear life.

“All right. Let him go,” said Gimlet, as he dropped lightly to the footplate. Then he laughed. “By gad! We shall need a bath after this,” he remarked. Which was true enough, for they were all as black as chimney sweeps with the grime flung back from the funnel. “Quite a trip, wasn’t it?” he added cheerfully.

“Er—yes,” agreed Cub.

“We’d better get back to see what’s happened to Trapper,” went on Gimlet, and putting the engine in reverse he sent the train back up the track.

They had not gone far when sparks, and a reek of burning, sent Cub to the top of the tender. He let out a yell. “The train’s on fire! That plane must have set it alight. Let’s get off.”

“Get off? Why?” demanded Gimlet.

“Well—er—the ammunition,” stammered Cub.

“Oh, that,” rejoined Gimlet carelessly. “No jolly fear. I’ve been to too much trouble to get this train to throw it away. Besides, I don’t feel like walking all the way back to the siding.”

“But the ammunition may go up,” argued Cub.

“It has to get hot, quite hot, you know, before it explodes,” said Gimlet evenly.

“We shall get quite hot, too, if it does go up,” growled Copper.

“What was that?” demanded Gimlet curtly.

“Nothin’, sir.”

“Don’t get in the habit of thinking aloud,” snapped Gimlet.

“No, sir,” assented Copper, nudging Cub.

The fire, fanned by the wind, grew quickly worse, so that the train appeared to thrust before it a miniature volcano. Cub, who by this time was really scared, fearing that the whole train would blow up at any moment, was more than a little relieved when the signal box came into sight. As Gimlet applied the brakes and slowed down, Trapper appeared, running beside the engine. He seemed to be excited about something.

“You’re on fire!” he shouted.

“Did you suppose I hadn’t noticed it?” inquired Gimlet sarcastically.

“But the train, the troop train, she comes!” yelled Trapper. “*Voilà!*” He pointed up the track.

“By gad! That’s lucky; just in time,” said Gimlet. “Off you get, you fellows,” he ordered.

Cub and Copper needed no second invitation. They jumped to the ground. Gimlet started the engine, and standing on the step, called brightly, “Two to Waterloo!” Then he, too, jumped off.

The train, with swiftly increasing speed, puffed on, tail first, towards the oncoming locomotive, the headlight of which could now be seen.

“We’d better get under cover, sir,” urged Copper, backing away.

“I think you’re right,” agreed Gimlet. “There’s going to be a bang, quite a bang, in a minute. If there isn’t, I shall be disappointed.” They hurried to the embankment. “What happened at the signal box, Trapper?” he asked.

Trapper clicked his tongue. “Those Nazis would try to come out,” he answered plaintively. “So I tossed a grenade through the window to keep them amused.”

“And The Fleas?”

“*Les Poux?* They say they return to the forest, but I think they lie somewhere to watch.”

A minute later, about four hundred yards from the siding, the two trains came into collision. To Cub it sounded like the end of the world. First came the crash of the impact. It was followed instantly by a single explosion, and then a roar that rocked the earth. It lasted for nearly a minute, like a tremendous roll of thunder, and with it came a blast of air that flattened trees as though they had been tissue paper, and flung the signal box on its side. The heavens blazed with a lurid glare that made the landscape as light as noon. As the roar ended, and the glare began to fade, there came the clash and clatter of falling debris. These sinister sounds lasted for some time, and at the end were followed by an ominous silence. Above the scene of the explosion a mighty pillar of smoke coiled high against the starlit sky.

“That’ll learn ’em,” remarked Copper approvingly.

“Quite a bang, wasn’t it?” said Gimlet quietly. “Spoilt the trains, I should say. Bit tough on the fellows in the trooper.”

“Not ’alf tough enough,” growled Copper. “I don’t forget what they done ter London, and, from all accounts, a lot of other places. They asked for it. Now they’re getting a bellyful of it themselves I’ll bet it ain’t so funny, not by a long shot. Am I right, Trapper?”

Trapper hissed through his teeth, stroking his little moustache. “Are you right, pal? *I’ll* say you’re right.”

Gimlet picked up a lump of chalk that had fallen from the embankment, and crossing to the signal box, made his mark, the gimlet. “What about the goods train?” said he, and walked on down the line. “We may as well finish the job.”

They found it abandoned, which in the circumstances was hardly surprising. What had become of the driver and his mate is open to conjecture, but it seems likely that they bolted when they saw that a collision was inevitable. The goods train stood as they had left it, with steam up.

“The line that runs to the east, you say, has its terminus at Cherbourg?” queried Gimlet.

“That’s right, sir,” confirmed Cub.

“In that case, as the Nazis will be waiting for it, we may as well send it through,” decided Gimlet. “It would be a shame to disappoint them. Pity we can’t be there to see it arrive.” He made his mark on the side of the engine. Then, climbing into the cab, he took the train slowly to the main line. Then he opened the throttle and jumped down. The train, beyond all human control, rolled ponderously into the night.

“That should bend the old buffers a bit, when it gets to Cherbourg,” opined Copper. “The funny thing is, when I was a kid, I hated playin’ with trains.” He walked over and retrieved his Sten gun, returning as Gimlet rejoined the party.

Gimlet stopped suddenly. “Hark!” he said. “It sounds as though we’ve stirred things up a bit.” This was obviously true, for from several directions came the sound of motor traffic travelling at high speed.

The Fox dashed up. “*Départ, messieurs, tout suite!*” he cried. “*Les Boches*—they come.”

“Which way?” asked Gimlet calmly.

“From all directions,” answered The Fox urgently. “They will come to the siding.”

“Yes, I quite think they will,” agreed Gimlet.

“*Regardez!* Here are some, coming down the line from Argentan.” The Fox pointed with a quivering finger.

“I think it’s time we were moving off, if I may say so, sir,” suggested Copper tentatively.

“You’re right—definitely right,” answered Gimlet. “Did someone say that the line to Argentan is on the way to Chateaudun?”

“Yes, but you can’t walk that way,” said Cub. “There are troops coming up the line—I can see them.”

“Who said anything about walking?” inquired Gimlet. “I always did hate walking, and I see no reason to walk when we can ride. We’ll borrow the loose engine—it seems to be doing nothing. Fox, switch us to the main line, then over to the junction. Afterwards, make yourself scarce. *Au revoir.*”

“*Au revoir, mon commandant.*” The Fox dashed off.

“Take care of Tyke,” called Cub.

“*Oui.*”

The commandos boarded the loose engine which, like the goods train, had been abandoned. The first shunt took them to the main line, and the second, to the branch line, which curved away to the south.

“Tally-ho! Here we go,” said Gimlet, and sent the train puffing down the line. “Give the boys a squirt as we go through them, Copper, just to show there are no hard feelings,” he suggested.

The Nazi troops, who were coming up the line at the double, flung themselves aside as the engine thundered towards them. Copper, leaning out of one side, sprayed the crouching figures with bullets from his Sten gun, while Trapper, from the other side, blazed away with two revolvers. It was

all over in a moment. The engine, bathed in the lurid glow of its furnace, roared on into the night.

“This is a lot better than walking; yes, by gad!” asserted Gimlet.

“As long as we don’t meet something coming the other way,” muttered Copper.

“Never thought of that,” admitted Gimlet. “Still, if we do, we shan’t know anything about it,” he added brightly. “We *are* having fun.”

“Some of us are,” grunted Copper.

“What was that?” inquired Gimlet crisply.

“Nothin’, sir.”

“I thought you spoke. By the way,” went on Gimlet, “does anyone know exactly where this line ends?”

“For my part, I tink we go to Kingdom Come,” said Trapper anxiously. “When we stop the loco, if we do not hit a station on the way, the Boches will know where we are.”

“Ha! That’s where you’re wrong, my comrade from the wide open spaces,” disputed Gimlet. “When we leave the engine we shall send it on without us. Then the beastly Nazis will have to guess where we got off. Hello! Here’s a station, by gad! No stopping for refreshments, I’m afraid.”

They roared through the station, catching a fleeting glimpse of figures running for their lives.

“What station was that, Cub?” asked Gimlet.

“That,” answered Cub, “was Argentan. Aren’t we going rather fast, sir?” he added anxiously.

“As fast as this old barrow will go,” answered Gimlet cheerfully.

Cub moistened his lips. Remembering the conversation in Copper’s quarters, for the first time he began to wonder if Gimlet was really sane.

“What’s the next station, Cub?” inquired Gimlet.

“Alençon. At this rate we shall be there in five or six minutes.”

“Do you know of a good hiding-place there?”

“Yes—the one I always use when I go south.”

“Splendid! What is it, exactly?”

“It’s a barge, moored on the river Sarthe, an old one, but still serviceable when I last saw it,” explained Cub. “It belonged to an old man named Jules Rochet, who ran it with his son and daughter. The old man was shot for some small offence, and the son was sent as a forced labourer to Germany. Marcelle, the daughter, still lives in the boat, which used to come up as far

as Caen, where I first met her—but I don't think she works it any longer. There isn't anything for it to do. You can guess how much *she* loves the Nazis. She knows about The Fleas. In fact, she once hid some of us. She would have joined us, I think, but she stays on the river in case her brother should escape and get back."

"Will she put us up, do you think?"

"Without a doubt—if the barge is there."

"And does the river run on to the south?"

"Yes, more or less. It passes a fair distance west of Chateaudun, though."

"That should suit us fine."

"Yes, sir," agreed Cub. "But we're nearly there. If you're going to make for the barge you'd better start stopping."

"In that case I'll turn off the juice," answered Gimlet, suiting the action to the word. "Tell me just where to stop."

Cub leaned out and surveyed as much of the countryside as could be seen. "Steady," he called.

The brakes went on, and the engine thumped over an iron bridge.

"Stop her!" called Cub sharply.

Slowly, with many wheezes, the engine came to a stop.

"That's fine," declared Cub. "We're only about five minutes' walk from the river."

"I'm sorry to part with this old barrel," said Gimlet regretfully. "Still, we shan't want her again, so we'll make her last trip something to remember. Off you get." He waited until they were on the track before opening the throttle and joining them. The engine, gathering speed, puffed off into the night. As they watched it disappear Cub wondered where it would end its life. He never knew.

"This way," he said.

They struck off across a field, and as Cub had promised, a walk of five minutes brought them to a broad stream. Another two minutes, at a bend, Cub stopped and pointed. "There's the barge," said he. "Let's go and find if Marcelle is at home."

At that moment the sound of a woman's voice, muffled, though pitched high in anger, came from the rivercraft.

"I should say she is at home," murmured Gimlet drily. "And I don't think she's alone."

Walking forward, Cub's voice was tense when he answered, "Just a minute. I'll see what goes on." He crossed to the barge by a short plank, and rapped sharply on the cabin door.

There was a moment's pause. Then the door was thrown open and a figure appeared, framed in yellow candle-light. It was a German soldier, a burly man of about forty-five, with a truculent expression on a heavy, bloated face.

CHAPTER VIII

DEATH COMES ABOARD

WHATEVER it may have been that Cub expected, it was not a Nazi trooper. He stared, and continued staring, for once at a loss for words.

"What do you want, *gamin*?", demanded the German harshly, in villainous French.

"I—er—want to see Mademoiselle Rochet," answered Cub, recovering himself.

"You can't," snarled the Nazi, and slammed the door in his face.

Cub looked over his shoulder at the others, who had dropped flat on the river bank. "Did you—hear that?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "I think Marcelle is in trouble."

"If there are Nazis there you can bet on it," said Gimlet. "Something tells me that we have arrived at an opportune moment, a most opportune moment, by gad! Stand aside, Cub. I'll deal with this."

As Gimlet advanced to the companion-way that gave access to the cabin, Cub stepped back. The two commandos took up positions on either side of the door.

Gimlet took out his revolver and with the butt knocked gently.

"*Donnerblitz!*" rasped a voice inside, and again the door was flung open. The same German appeared, his face flushed with anger. "I said——" he began, and then stopped, his jaw sagging, and the flush fading from his face as his eyes fell on the slim figure in battledress: they stood out like those of a frog, with shock, fright, or astonishment, or maybe a combination of all three.



“YOU SAID—WHAT?” INQUIRED GIMLET, IN A VOICE THAT HAD IRON IN IT.

“You said—what?” inquired Gimlet, in a voice that had iron in it.

The Nazi began to back away, and Cub caught sight of another, sitting at a table with a bottle of wine and some playing cards in front of him.

“Where is Mademoiselle Rochet?” asked Gimlet, in a tone ominously quiet.

The German began to bluster, and the one inside, having had time to recover, or perhaps thinking he was unobserved, made a grab for a rifle that leaned against a bulkhead. His hand never reached it. Gimlet's revolver roared. The German stiffened convulsively, turned in his seat, and then, quite slowly, slid to the floor, where he lay still.

The original German made an equally fatal mistake. He seemed to lose his head. With a leap of surprising agility for one of his size, knocking Gimlet's arm aside he sprang past him to the companion steps and made a dash for the plank. He had no idea, of course, that anyone else was there. When Copper's gun crashed down on his head his legs collapsed under him and he fell into the water with a mighty splash. As the splash subsided a few bubbles came floating up, nothing else.

"Any more in there, Skipper?" asked Copper calmly.

"I don't think so," answered Gimlet.

By this time Cub was in the cabin. "Marcelle, where are you?" he cried.

"Here," answered a voice beyond the cabin.

Cub crossed the floor and unlocked a door.

A girl, a pretty girl of about eighteen, looking dishevelled and bewildered, almost fell into the cabin. Her eyes went round with fear when she saw the soot-grimed commandos—which was not surprising.

"It's all right, Marcelle," said Cub quickly. "These are friends. What has happened? What were those Boches doing here?"

Marcelle steadied herself with a hand on the table. She gasped when she saw the dead man on the floor.

"Mother of God!" she breathed. "You've killed him. You know what that means. We shall all be shot."

"What were these men doing here?" insisted Cub.

Marcelle passed a hand wearily over her face. "They came with orders to seize the barge," she replied. "The Nazis are taking all the barges, so I was not surprised. They came at eight o'clock, but they did not go. They searched the barge, and found a little wine which my father had hidden. They stayed to drink it. When they began to get drunk I tried to run away, but they caught me and locked me in the galley."

"You're not hurt?" questioned Gimlet.

"*Non, monsieur*—only this." The girl turned her face so that a red bruise could be seen. "This one did it." She pointed to the man on the floor. "He would try to kiss me, so I smacked his face. Then he struck me."

“*Le diable!* I wish he was not dead, so that I could kill him again—slowly,” grated Trapper.

“You’d better get him out of the way,” commanded Gimlet. “He isn’t pretty to look at. I think the river is the best place.”

“*Psst!*” hissed Marcelle. “Someone comes.” She ran to the top of the companion and looked out. She was back in a flash. “*Les Boches,*” she said breathlessly. “A patrol is coming up the path. They can only be coming here.”

“How many?” asked Gimlet dispassionately.

“Ten—twelve—I do not know. Quickly—in here. I will talk to them.” She sped across the room and opened the galley door.

Gimlet inclined his head. “Inside, everyone,” he said. “Bring that stiff with you, Copper.”

“I shall stay and see Marcelle through with this,” declared Cub. “She may need support.”

The commandos disappeared into the galley, taking the dead German with them. As the door closed, footsteps could be heard on the plank, and a moment later the head and shoulders of a German officer, a *Leutnant*, appeared at the top of the companion. For a second he stood, or rather, crouched, peering into the cabin. Then he came down. After a perfunctory glance at Cub he addressed Marcelle, speaking in French.

“There was a noise that sounded like a shot not long ago. It came from this direction. Did you hear it?”

“Yes, *Leutnant,*” answered Marcelle, with ingenuous frankness.

“Where was it?”

“It was not far away,” asserted Marcelle. “My friend, here, heard it too.”

“You have seen nobody, then?”

“We stayed inside. Those are the orders, when there is shooting, as you know, *Leutnant*. It was not our business, and we have no desire to get into trouble.”

The officer picked up one of the playing cards. It was a German pack, quite unlike the French. “What are these things doing here?”

“They belong to the soldiers, *Leutnant.*”

“What soldiers?”

“The two soldiers who were sent to inform me that the boat is required by the authorities.”

“Where are they?”

Marcelle shrugged. “German soldiers do not tell people like me where they are going. Perhaps they were responsible for the shooting?”

The German raised his eyebrows. “Whom would they shoot?”

Marcelle’s native wit was now well into its stride. She made a little grimace. “They might shoot each other.”

The officer frowned. “Shoot each other! Why?”

Marcelle’s eyes went to the wine bottle. “They drank, and played cards. One tried to kiss me, and then they quarrelled. I was struck in the brawl—look.” She pointed to her bruised cheek.

“How long since you saw them?”

“Only a few minutes, *Leutnant*.”

“*Zo!* If they come back, you will tell them that *Leutnant Zimmermann* has been here, and orders them to return to camp.”

“*Oui, Herr Leutnant*.”

The officer’s brow knitted. His eyes were on the floor. He bent and touched something. When he stood up, his fingers were red. “This is blood,” he said in a hard voice.

“I told you, there was fighting here,” said Marcelle simply.

The officer threw a curious glance at Cub. “Did you see this?”

“But no, *Herr Leutnant*. I only arrived a minute ago.”

“What are you doing out at this time of night?”

“I have no home. I sleep where I can.”

The German considered the scene for a moment and then turned to the steps. “*Bonsoir*,” he said abruptly.

“*Bonsoir, Herr Leutnant*,” said Marcelle and Cub together.

Footsteps thumped on the plank. An order was rapped out. Feet marched, retreating.

Cub glanced at Marcelle. “You were magnificent,” he breathed.

“Pah!” sneered Marcelle. “They are dolts, these Germans—animals.” She went to the head of the companion, looked out and returned. “They have gone,” she announced, and crossing to the galley door threw it open. “The swine have departed, *mon capitain*,” she told Gimlet. “May I offer you a glass of wine?”

“Not at the moment, *mademoiselle*, thanks,” answered Gimlet. “We have things to do.”

Acting on his instructions, Copper and Trapper between them carried the dead German to the deck. There was a splash, and they returned.

To Cub, Marcelle said: “Now tell me. Why have you come here?”

“We needed a hiding-place.”

“And now what? The barge has been commandeered. In the morning the Germans will come, seeking the two soldiers. They may search the barge. It is not a place the most safe, *mon ami*.”

“Don’t worry about us, *mademoiselle*,” put in Gimlet. “We’ll be on our way long before then.” He looked at his watch. “It’s just midnight,” he announced. “It is unlikely that the Germans will come back before dawn—it may even be later. What are you going to do?”

“Me, I shall sink the barge so that the Boches can’t have it, and then go to an uncle in Le Mans, who will hide me.” Marcelle started. “*Hélas!* An idea. We can go to Le Mans, which is on the river, in the barge.”

“I know the town pretty well,” stated Gimlet. “I used to come over for the motor races, before the war. Jolly good fun.”

“It’s a long way,” Cub pointed out. “The river winds about.”

“By dawn, downstream, Charon, who is eating his head off in the field, will cover eighteen, perhaps twenty miles,” declared Marcelle.

“Charon is the horse,” explained Cub.

“You could all get some sleep then, as we travelled,” went on Marcelle, warming up to her idea. “I will lead Charon down the tow-path.”

“It takes two people to handle the boat,” Cub pointed out. “You know the river, so lead Charon, and I will take the tiller.”

“*Bon*. And when it gets light we will find a quiet spot to sink the barge,” said Marcelle.

Gimlet looked concerned. “But the barge is your home. Is it necessary to destroy it?”

“The Germans will take it, anyway,” Marcelle pointed out. “If I sink it the Germans may spend much time looking for it,” she argued, with shrewd logic. “They will not know where to look for me, so they will not be able to ask awkward questions.”

Gimlet smiled. “You have your wits, *mademoiselle*.”

“One needs wits, *mon brave*, to live in France, at such times as these.”

“You are sure your uncle in Le Mans will look after you?”

“After all of us, if you wish, *monsieur*. He was a soldier in the last war. Now he is a mechanician, although he keeps the shop of an ironmonger in the Place des Jacobins. Even so, I know he tries to think of a way to get to England, to carry on the fight.”

“Then we may be able to help him,” asserted Gimlet. “If we should be parted, make your way to the Forest of Caen, and wait there with The Grey Fleas for our return.”

“*Entendu, monsieur.* Now, the sooner we are on our way the better.”

The matter being settled, she fetched the horse from the field, harnessed it, adjusted the tow-rope, and cast off.

“*Allez, mon vieux,*” she ordered.

The horse strained on the rope and the barge began to move. Cub went aft to the tiller. The commandos went below and closed the door.

The clumsy vehicle moved ponderously down the stream.

CHAPTER IX

DOWN THE RIVER

DAWN found the barge still surging slowly down the river, through a typical, flat, pastoral landscape, which has so often been depicted by artists. Poplars, never far distant in northern France, broke the horizon at regular intervals. Bullrushes, and an occasional willow, lined the banks. Beyond, on either side, cows ruminated in fields of lush, dew-soaked grass. At one point an ancient windmill pointed a derelict arm to heaven. Crows sailed serenely across a sky of pale azure blue. It was a pleasant scene, a picture of peace. The war might have been a thousand miles away.

Breaking the placid water with its blunt bows the barge moved on with hardly a sound, leaving only a broad V of ripples to mark its passage. It was not one of those huge vessels common in the Thames Estuary. Compared with them it was small, as are most French barges, the size being governed by the speed at which some of the rivers flow—it would not be possible to tow a heavy craft against a fast-moving stream. Marcelle, bare-legged, a black beret hanging over her right ear, plodded steadily beside the horse. Cub leaned, half asleep, against the tiller.

A sudden splash brought him to his senses with a rush. It came from somewhere forward, and he darted to the side to ascertain the cause. His nerves relaxed when Gimlet’s face appeared beside the barge. His body, looking strangely white in the pale light, and rather absurd, Cub thought, in blue silk trunks, floated by.

“Just having my tub,” called Gimlet cheerfully, as the vessel slid by. “Get some of that disgusting soot off, by gad.” He allowed the barge to pass him, and then, overtaking it in a flashing crawl stroke, seized the rudder and climbed aboard. “That’s better,” he observed. “I’ll be with you in a minute.” Swinging the water off his arms he returned to the cabin.

Yawning, Cub returned to his leaning posture on the tiller.

Soon afterwards a whistle from Marcelle again brought him to the alert. Seeing nothing ahead, he looked back and observed a man overtaking them, a cyclist. He seemed to be one of the peasant class, dressed in his best clothes. A bulky parcel was tied on the back of the machine. With a casual “*Bonjour*” he overtook the barge and passed on.

Presently came two more men, of similar type, walking briskly. One carried a bundle and the other a suitcase. Not far behind marched yet a fourth man, again of similar type, with a bundle on his shoulder. As he drew level, moved to curiosity by this strange procession, Cub accosted him.

“*Bonjour, monsieur,*” he greeted. “As it is not Sunday, where do you go so early, dressed in your best clothes?”

“To Le Mans,” was the answer.

“Is there a fête, or something?”

“There is no fête, but there is a meeting,” answered the man, with bitterness in his voice. “Another hundred men have been called up from this district, and I, alas, am one of them.”

“Called up?” queried Cub, not understanding. “For what? By whom?”

“By the Germans—who else? We go to Germany to work.”

“Why do you go?”

“Because,” returned the man in a hard voice, “if I do not report this morning I shall be shot. The Nazis have promised, and this is one of the promises they *do* keep—may the devil seize their souls.”

“*Sacré nom!*” ejaculated Cub. “Where is this meeting, and at what hour?”

“In the Place des Jacobins, at noon.”

“A hundred men, eh?”

“So it is said.”

“Which way do you travel?”

“First to Paris, then Germany. That’s all I know. *Au revoir.*” The man strode on.

The cabin door opened and Gimlet's face appeared, his chin freshly shaven. "Did I hear talking?" he questioned.

Cub replied that he did, and gave him the gist of the conversation.

Gimlet nodded. "How far are we from Le Mans?"

"Seven miles, perhaps eight."

Marcelle dropped back until she could join in the talk. "I don't think it would be safe to go much farther," she averred. "There are people about."

"They will see us more plainly if we get out and walk," argued Gimlet.

"Not if we hide, *monsieur*."

"Hide where?"

"There is a marsh just ahead."

"I once caught cold lying in a marsh," asserted Gimlet. "For that reason I have detested marshes ever since. I would rather go to Le Mans."

Marcelle looked startled. "But your uniforms, *mon capitain*—they would be seen."

Gimlet admitted that this was a possibility.

"But wait!" cried Marcelle. "An idea! In the clothes of my brother it might be possible."

Gimlet's eyes brightened. "You have clothes? Men's clothes?"

"But certainly—the clothes of my father and my brother. They are not of the best quality, you understand——"

"So much the better," declared Gimlet. "Cub, you take over the horse, while Marcelle trots out the togs. Come aboard, *mademoiselle*."

Copper's face appeared at the head of the companion. "What's the idea, sir?" he asked suspiciously.

Gimlet looked sad. "An unfortunate thing has happened," said he. "We have been called up by the Jerries, to work for them in their beastly country. We are due to report in the Place des Jacobins at ten o'clock."

Copper shook his head. "I might 'ave known something like this would 'appen," he lamented.

"What's that?" asked Gimlet crisply.

"Nothing, sir."

"This should be fun, quite good fun," declared Gimlet, as he helped Marcelle aboard.

Marcelle was not long below. She went ashore laughing at some private joke. "Oh, la-la, what types," she remarked to Cub as she took over, and Cub

agreed that the three commandos were, as she called them, types. Types described them aptly, he reflected.

After that, the first to appear was Gimlet. He wore three articles of clothing. A striped singlet, much faded; a pair of rust-red sailcloth trousers, rather too large for him, and a pair of dilapidated rope-soled sandals. Copper followed, in a grey sweater with a monogram worked over the heart, and dark blue pantaloons, full at the waist and small at the ankles. Trapper looked entirely native in one of those fantastic outfits the French affect when they wish the world to know that they are sportsmen. The main features were skimpy knickerbockers, and a check jacket decorated with an unnecessary number of trappings, of the same material, sewn on to it.

In reply to a question Copper told Cub that their uniforms, and the Sten gun, were below, in sacks.

Seeing them, Marcelle halted the horse and came back. "We are three miles from Le Mans, *monsieur le capitain*," she told Gimlet. "I doubt if it is safe to proceed farther."

"Why not?"

"The boat, *monsieur*. If a search is made by the river, as doubtless it will be, she will be observed. You forget that the barge has a name."

"Ah! Of course. What is her name?"

"Jeanne d'Alençon."

Gimlet thought for a moment. "Have you any paint?"

"But yes, *monsieur*."

"Fetch it, please."

The barge was brought quietly to the bank, and in a few minutes, by the alteration of four letters, the Jeanne d'Alençon had become Jeanne d'Avignon. A handful of dust was sufficient to remove the impression of newness.

"Now," said Gimlet, "there is no need to sink the barge. Also, there will be no need for us to walk."

Marcelle considered the matter seriously. "It is a risk worth taking," she decided. "In the town, among the other barges, perhaps she will not be noticed."

"There are other barges?"

"Many."

"Where do you usually tie up?"

"At the Quai Louis Blanc."

“Then let us go there.”

“As you wish, *monsieur*.”

Marcelle returned to the horse, and Cub to the tiller. Gimlet lolled on the deck house, and the two commandos disposed themselves in comfortable positions near Cub. The barge proceeded.

Just outside the town two German soldiers, accompanied by a French *gendarme*, appeared, walking briskly up the towing path. Watching them closely, Cub saw their eyes go to the name on the bows, and he did not need to be told what they sought. The search for the Jeanne d’Alençon was on.

The *gendarme* raised his hand. “Hi, there!” he hailed. “Have you passed the Jeanne d’Alençon?”

“No, *monsieur*,” answered Cub respectfully—and truthfully.

“What are all those men doing on your boat?” questioned the *gendarme*.

“They are workmen, on their way to report at the Place des Jacobins, *monsieur*,” answered Cub readily. “They were walking, so I offered them a lift.”

The *gendarme* nodded approval. “Very well. Proceed.”

“Thank you, *monsieur*.”

The barge moved on, and the search party continued up the towing path.

“Easy,” muttered Copper scornfully. “What was that Frenchie doing with those Jerries, Cub?”

“I expect he is an agent of Vichy,” answered Cub.

“He ought ter ’ave his block knocked off,” growled Copper. “Am I right, Trapper?”

Trapper spat into the river. “*I’ll* say you’re right,” he agreed.

Signs of unusual activity became apparent as the barge entered the town. Many people could be seen, mostly men carrying parcels or suitcases. Some were talking in little groups, with an occasional German soldier moving among them, breaking up the groups when they exceeded five or six. An unusual number of motor vehicles, mostly old lorries, which the French call *camions*, or *camionettes*, were also converging on the town. Marcelle walked on and brought the horse to a stop at a stone quay where a number of other barges were already moored. Cub leaned on the tiller, and guided the slowly moving vessel to a vacant berth. Jumping ashore, he joined Marcelle in the short task of making fast. The commandos sat on the deck house watching the scene.

Marcelle called to a swarthy, flashily-dressed young man who stood talking to a small party of idlers. The man looked round, started visibly, and

then hurried towards the barge. The colour drained from his face, and he snatched nervous glances up and down the quay.

“Will you take Charon to your stable, as usual, Bertrand, and look after him?” requested Marcelle.

The man came up, obviously agitated. “*Mon Dieu!*” he almost hissed. “Are you mad? What folly made you fall out with the Germans? Don’t you know that the police are looking for your boat? Are you trying to get me into trouble? What about the money you owe me already?”

“I will pay you one day,” promised Marcelle.

“One day? If you can’t pay, why should I risk my life? Why come here at all?”

Marcelle shrugged. “Where would you have me go? A barge cannot fly, neither can it travel overland. Be calm. Take Charon and go, and forget what you have seen.”

Bertrand’s eyes swept nervously over the barge. “Who are these men?” he queried petulantly, his eyes narrowing with suspicion—or it may have been jealousy.

“Ah, I am glad you are at least able to recognise men when you see them, my worm,” answered Marcelle with bitter sarcasm. “Ask no questions, and answer none. *Adieu.*”

Bertrand threw a last startled glance at the party, shrugged his shoulders and departed, leading the horse.

“That girl has got guts,” observed Copper soberly, if vulgarly. “From what I can see of it, the women and kids in this country ought to wear the trousers.”

“She is magnificent,” agreed Trapper, his dark eyes glowing. “She has nerves, that one.”

Marcelle turned to them, “Let us go,” she said quietly. “Fortunately the house of my uncle, Gaston Boulanger, is in the Place des Jacobins, towards which everyone is walking. If we are questioned, you are of the party going to Germany—you comprehend?”

“Lead on, *mademoiselle,*” answered Gimlet.

At this juncture a civilian, a middle-aged man in dark clothes, came walking along the quay. He stopped in front of the barge. “What are you men doing?” he inquired curtly.

“Can’t you see they are of the party going to Germany?” inquired Marcelle.

“What is in those sacks?”

“Tools, my donkey,” answered Marcelle tartly. “What use is a mechanician without his tools?”

The man gave her a surly look and passed on.

Cub drew a deep breath of relief. He was wondering what would have happened had the man opened one of the sacks and found a Sten gun and a commando’s uniform.

Marcelle made her way unconcernedly through the streets to the Place des Jacobins, which lies only a short distance from the river. No one took any notice of the little party, which, after all, was typical of several. The French were too concerned with their own affairs, and the German troops were busy directing the traffic, both human and vehicular—the latter mostly ramshackle camionettes from the country.

The square reached, Marcelle threaded a course through the assembly to the far side, and after another short walk stopped at a narrow street, where the corner was occupied by an unpretentious little shop in which a miscellaneous assortment of dusty hardware was displayed for sale. Confidently, she turned the handle of the door, and then drew back, throwing a swift glance over her shoulder. For the first time her face betrayed anxiety.

“Locked,” she said laconically. “I don’t understand. Let us try the side door.”

She turned into the narrow street and tried a door from which most of the paint had peeled. “Locked,” she said again, and rapped urgently on a panel. There was no reply, so she knocked again, harder.

A woman put her head out of an upstairs window of the next house. “Whom do you seek?” she called.

“Gaston Boulanger.”

“He has departed,” stated the woman bluntly.

“Departed?” faltered Marcelle. “Where?”

“*A là bas!*” The woman pointed to the square. “All mechanics have been conscripted by the Nazis for work in German factories. Today he goes, *mademoiselle*. The shop is closed for the duration.”

“Thank you, *madame*,” answered Marcelle in a dull voice.

CHAPTER X

THE IRONMONGER OF LE MANS

MARCELLE quickly recovered her composure. "This is an affair the most unfortunate," she announced quietly.

"What about your aunt?" suggested Cub.

"She is dead."

"The party for Germany does not leave until noon," put in Gimlet. "If you can find your uncle, all may yet be well. We cannot help you so we will remain here." Gimlet sat on the doorstep.

"It is an idea," admitted Marcelle, and hurried off into the square, where she could be seen looking urgently to left and right.

An uncomfortable interval of about ten minutes followed. A soldier looked at the little party more than once, and at last he called: "What do you want there? Take your places in the square."

Fortunately, very soon afterwards Marcelle returned, bringing with her a tubby little man whose face, decorated with an enormous pair of black moustaches, was a picture of concern. Arrived at the side door he took a key from his pocket, inserted it in the lock with a trembling hand, and opened the door. The others followed him in, when he again closed the door and locked it.

"What happens, Marcelle?" he asked in a voice tremulous with alarm. "Name of a name! Is this a day to come visiting?"

"To be sure," answered Marcelle calmly. "We could not have chosen a better day. You do not wish to go to Germany, my uncle, do you?"

"Who are these?" Boulanger indicated the commandos with a sweep of his arm.

"Just friends," answered Marcelle airily. "But why do we stand here? Let us go up to the parlour, where we can talk in comfort." Without waiting for a reply she led the way upstairs into a sitting-room that overlooked the square.

Monsieur Boulanger now asserted his authority. "I asked you, who are these *apaches*? And what are you doing with them?" he demanded in no uncertain voice.

Marcelle shrugged. "Since you must know, my uncle, they are British commandos," she answered evenly.

Boulanger's face blanched. He stared stupidly, with beads of perspiration breaking out on his brow. "Ten thousand devils!" he got out at last. Then he threw up his hands. "This is the end," he went on heavily. "I might as well cut my throat. *Alors!* What is in those sacks?"

"Guns, my uncle. Only guns, and uniforms."

The little ironmonger clapped his hands to his head. “Guns,” he echoed. “Did I hear you say guns, or has madness come upon me?”

Gimlet stepped into the conversation. “Come, come, Monsieur Boulanger,” he said sadly. “There was a time when your nerves were not so delicate.”

Boulanger stared hard at Gimlet. “*Mon Dieu!* I know this face,” he gasped.

“You should, you old road-hog,” returned Gimlet, smiling. “Once, in the good old days, I chased you for forty miles in my Bentley. You were racing mechanic to Monsieur le Comte de Rozay, who had the big Lancia, if I remember?”

Boulanger’s fat face broke into a smile. “Monsieur King! But of course. Forgive me. It is these Germans—they deprive me of my wits.”

Gimlet frowned. “You won that race because I had a puncture. A puncture is not an unusual thing, my old one. But two punctures, both with brand-new nails, at the same moment—that *is* unusual. I have often wondered how it happened that you passed over those nails without injury, and I did not.”

Boulanger looked disconcerted. “You don’t think that I——”

“No. No, no. I know you wouldn’t do such a thing as to throw nails overboard,” said Gimlet slyly.

Marcelle joined in. “*Messieurs*, is this a time for the reminiscence, however pleasant?” she inquired plaintively. “Let us speak of what is urgent.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” agreed Boulanger, who seemed more than willing to change the subject. “Soon I must be going.”

“Do you want to go?” asked Gimlet.

“I would as soon visit the devil in hell,” declared Boulanger.

“Let us sit down,” suggested Gimlet.

They found seats, Gimlet drawing a chair forward so that he could see across the square. It presented an animated appearance. Conscripts, accompanied by their friends, or their women-folk, wandered about or stood in little groups, some talking, some weeping, in spite of the efforts of German troops, who did their utmost to muster them in some sort of order at the far side of the square. With the lorries they had more success, compelling the civilian drivers to form a line against the kerb immediately under the shop window. In some of these vehicles conscripts had already taken their places. At the head of the line stood a large open touring car, with

a swastika pennant on the radiator cap, and behind it, a large mobile petrol tank, also decorated with the Nazi insignia.

“Tell me, Gaston, my old warrior, precisely what happens here,” requested Gimlet.

Boulanger explained. “The camions are those that have been commandeered by the Nazis. They will go all the way to Germany and stay there, taking the conscripts with them—that is the usual thing. Each driver is provided with enough petrol to bring his lorry into the town, and no more. The Germans see to that, in case one should decide to make a bolt for it. Now, when there is no longer any risk of that, the tanks will be filled, ready for the journey across France. In the touring car will ride the escort, armed with rifles, to see that none escapes. Also, it sets the pace. Motor cyclists ride up and down the column.”

“But some of the lorries are already loaded with other things,” observed Gimlet.

“Ah yes. Those are of a convoy that has come up from the south. As you know, the Germans are taking everything. The barrels you see contain brandy, from Cognac. They say the Germans take it for the alcohol, to put in their aviation petrol. There is also, as you see, hay and straw that is needed by our own farmers. There is butter, too, and, in that green camion, candles from the big factory here. Now you will no longer wonder that France is being stripped bare.”

“It’s a shame,” opined Gimlet softly.

Boulanger shrugged. “We can do nothing about it.”

“That, my old grease-gun, is where you are wrong,” argued Gimlet. “It seems to me that it would be a simple thing to prevent this convoy from reaching Germany. Consider, for example, how well the hay and straw would burn. And the brandy, and the candles.”

Boulanger did not take Gimlet seriously. “It would be a fine thing to watch,” he admitted.

“It would be even better to depart while the diversion kept the Nazis busy,” declared Gimlet. “I want to go to Chateaudun, which is some distance from here—nearly fifty miles, if I remember. Rather than walk all that way I would prefer to ride in a touring car.”

Boulanger stared. “*Monsieur* is not serious?”

“You would not have me walk all the way to Chateaudun?”

Again the colour drained from the Frenchman’s face. “Pardon me, but *monsieur* talks like a man who has either drunk too much wine, or has a

beetle in his brain.”

“What purpose shall we serve by sitting here?” asked Gimlet. “Is this spectacle so pleasing? No, I shall go to Chateaudun, where the scenery is better. And I shall ride. You, Monsieur Boulanger, may go to Germany if you wish, but you would serve France better by going to England.”

The little ironmonger drew himself up and struck his chest. “I am ready to die for France, *monsieur*,” he said proudly. “Give the orders.”

“It would be much better to go on living,” responded Gimlet. “Pay attention, everyone. This is what we will do. The driver of the petrol lorry, fearing nothing, is eating his breakfast, I observe, on a table outside the café opposite. First, I shall throw the pipe-line in the gutter, and then turn on the petrol, which will run along under the line of camions. Cub, you will oblige me by finding a hammer in the shop below, and with it knock in the bungs of as many of those brandy casks as you can before you are discovered. This will happen when I give the signal by raising my hand. At the same time, Gaston, you will take your place beside the driving seat of the touring car, ready to mount when the fire starts. That should not be difficult, because all eyes will be on the fire. Marcelle will go with you. Copper and Trapper will stand by the rear seat to deal with any unforeseen emergency that may arise. When I have lighted the petrol we shall all enter the car and drive away.”

“It is not possible,” declared Boulanger vehemently.

“Why not?” inquired Gimlet.

“Because such things are not done.”

“Oh, but they are,” replied Gimlet lightly. “You don’t know the Kittens. As soon as we are all in the car you will take the road to Chateaudun, driving not too fast until we are clear of the town, and all the time taking care not to hit a telegraph pole in your excitement.”

“The Nazis will telephone along the road,” asserted Boulanger.

“They will not, because I shall stop to cut the wires,” answered Gimlet.

“We shall be followed by motor cyclists and shot.”

“That we shall be pursued is certain, I admit,” went on Gimlet. “A Bentley once pursued a Lancia. And what did the man in the Lancia do? Have you forgotten, my old cheat?”

Boulanger’s sense of humour overcame his natural fear. He smiled. “He sprinkled the road behind him with nice new nails.”

“At the time I was most displeased,” continued Gimlet. “But now I perceive that there is a reason for all things. On that day you taught me a

trick, one that we will now use to even better advantage against these unpleasant fellows in grey uniforms. Doubtless there are nails in the shop?"

"I have a very good stock of nails."

"Could we fill two small sacks?"

"With ease."

"Good. Copper and Trapper will carry the sacks to the back seat of the car, but the nails will not be used until they are required. Is there any food in the house, Gaston?"

"There is food here in my bag. The Germans have issued rations to last us to Germany."

"Excellent. As we are not going to Germany we will eat it now," declared Gimlet. "We shall all work better on full stomachs."

CHAPTER XI

ON THE ROAD TO CHATEAUDUN

THERE were moments during the next half hour when Cub had serious doubts as to whether what he saw was real or imaginary; when he asked himself, was this truly happening or was it all a dream? Here, in the heart of enemy-occupied country, within a few yards of a German convoy, practically surrounded by the hated grey uniforms, sitting by an open window were three British soldiers, eating black bread and sausage with no more concern than if they had been picnicking on Hampstead Heath. It took some believing. What added a final touch of fantasy was that none of the commandos made the slightest reference to the business, much less dwelt on the peril of their position. Gimlet took the occasion to discuss with Trapper the prospects of trout fishing in Canada after the war. Copper contributed a story of how, from a police launch, he had once seen a shark in the Thames Estuary, a tale that ended lamely when he admitted that on close inspection the shark turned out to be a log.

Every now and then the little ironmonger would look from one to the other, shrug his shoulders and shake his head as if the whole thing was beyond him—as it probably was. Once, Marcelle burst out laughing, and on Cub's look of inquiry stated that the affair was "droll." Cub was by no means convinced that this was the right word.

When the food had been consumed Gimlet carefully brushed some crumbs from his clothes and announced that they might as well be moving on. "I have a feeling," he remarked, "that this ought to be rather fun."

Cub had doubts, but did not express them. He surveyed the square and saw that the situation was unchanged, except that the lorries were now lined up, and the conscripts marshalled in some sort of order on the far side of the *Place*.

Gimlet got up. "Let's get the nails, Gaston, my old trench rat," he suggested.

The commandos picked up the sacks containing their equipment and the party returned to the ground floor where, in the shop, Gaston found two small sacks, about the size of sandbags, into which he emptied several drawers containing nails of various sizes. With a twinkle in his eyes he held up a horse nail.

"Did you ever see anything like that before, *monsieur*?" he inquired.

"Yes," answered Gimlet. "I once drew two out of a perfectly good tyre—you old twister."

"Monsieur le Comte had promised me a thousand francs if we won the race," explained Gaston. "And I am a poor man," he added with a sigh.

"Add some of those nails to the others," ordered Gimlet. "They seem to do the job well."

"That is what I thought," observed Gaston naïvely.

For Cub he found a hammer suitable for knocking in the bungs of the brandy casks.

Gimlet opened the side door and glanced up and down the narrow street. "All quiet," said he. Then, addressing Gaston and Marcelle in particular, he enjoined them to keep their heads, no matter what happened. "I mention this," he concluded, "because when the fun starts it should be fast and furious. You all know what you have to do."

Copper spat on his hands. "If my Ma could see me now she'd throw forty fits, s'welp me, she would."

"Don't talk so much," ordered Gimlet. "I want no shooting unless it becomes imperative—you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good—let's go."

Although he had been toughened by long association with danger, to Cub the events of the next few minutes were a whirl of excitement not far

short of madness, although for reasons which will become apparent they were somewhat hazy.

The business started quietly enough. Without interference or question they went into the square where each took up his allotted station. Gimlet looked up and down to make sure they were all in position and then raised his right hand—the signal for operations to begin.

Cub at once climbed on the brandy truck beside which he had halted, and for the next minute or so was too taken up with his task to see how the others were getting on. Two smart blows on the first bung were sufficient to drive it in, the noise being hardly noticeable among the other noises filling the square. The brandy gushed out, soaking his legs and feet, and although he was unaware of it, upsetting his equilibrium. He was conscious of a reek of brandy as the volatile spirit began to evaporate in the warm sunshine, but it did not occur to him that this might affect his actions, that by smell alone he might become intoxicated. This, evidently, is what happened, although, as we have said, he was unaware of it, and saw nothing strange in his behaviour. The exhilaration that came over him he assumed to be the natural outcome of the excitement of the moment.

With a mighty swing he drove in another bung to such purpose that the spirit squirted into his eyes, causing him some pain which, far from having a sobering effect, spurred him to more ambitious efforts. In quick succession he drove in three more bungs, and looked round for another, laughing joyously as he did so. Gimlet was right. This was fun. Bang! In went another bung. There was now a noticeable recklessness in his manner as, almost overcome by the fumes, he went from cask to cask. In great good humour he drove in two more bungs, and then looked round, rather unsteadily, to see how the others were getting on.

Observing that Gimlet had worked his will on the petrol lorry, for its contents were now gushing down the gutter, he hailed him merrily. “Nice work, Gimlet!” he shouted—in English.

Gimlet threw him a startled, penetrating stare, and dropping what he was doing made a dash for the brandy truck. Actually, his work was finished, and he was only waiting for Cub.

“Come off that,” he rasped.

Cub, taken aback by Gimlet’s manner, attempted to obey with such alacrity that he fell, and might well have broken his neck had not Gimlet caught him.

“What have I done wrong?” he demanded indignantly.

“You’re drunk, my pup,” snapped Gimlet, looking quickly up and down. “My fault—I should have thought of it. Come on.”

Cub wiped his brow. “Phew! It’s hot.”

Gimlet grabbed him by the hand. “It’ll be hotter in a minute if we don’t get out of this,” he said grimly. “Run.”

Cub was promptly sick, which was hardly surprising, for the combined fumes of brandy and petrol were overpowering. But he felt better. “Sorry,” he said apologetically.

“You disgusting brat,” grated Gimlet. “Come on.”

Now it is not to be supposed that all this had occurred without notice being taken. One or two passers-by, fortunately French citizens, had halted to gaze at the curious scene, and then bolted incontinently, presumably for fear of being implicated. Someone far down the line of lorries was shouting something about petrol, and this may have served the commandos a good turn, for the attention of the crowd was attracted to that direction. Quite a number of men, both French and Germans, were staring at the lorries, not with any particular alarm, but in the bovine manner of a crowd that suspects something is wrong, but does not know what. Only one German soldier, who turned out to be the driver of the touring car, apparently had a good idea of what was happening, for he began running towards his vehicle. The other Germans shouted orders, holding up their hands to control the conscripts, who were beginning to move uneasily. The Germans seemed to take the view that a riot was imminent. Gimlet, holding Cub by the hand, began to drag him towards the car, with Cub protesting that he could see no need for haste.

This was the situation when, with a terrific *swoosh*, the petrol took fire. In an instant the gutter, and the air above it, was filled with flame, a spectacle so terrifying that Cub was nearly sobered with shock. How the petrol caught fire, or who set fire to it, was never known for certain; but as far as the plan was concerned the explosion was premature. Copper afterwards asserted that the fire was started by a German officer who at the crucial moment arrived on the scene, and perhaps wishing to create an atmosphere of tranquillity, lit a cigarette, afterwards tossing the match in the gutter. If this were so, no man defeated his object more effectually. As the line of flame leapt up there was a murmur of voices that grew in volume like an oncoming tidal wave. It ended in a roar. Pandemonium followed; and only those who have seen a French crowd lose its collective head know the real meaning of the word. The parade broke up in disorder and the German troops were overwhelmed by the milling crowd.

Still dragging Cub, Gimlet ran on to the car. As they arrived, Cub had a brief but clear picture of Copper's huge fist catching the Nazi driver on the point of the jaw with such force that the German was lifted clean off the ground. Gaston and Marcelle, both looking rather pale, were already in their seats. Copper and Trapper tossed their sacks into the rear of the car and climbed on to the back seat. Cub was staring fascinated at a pillar of flame that was leaping skyward from a straw-laden lorry when Gimlet picked him up by the scruff of the neck and the seat of his pants, and threw him on to Copper's lap. By the time Cub had scrambled to his feet the car was on the move. Gaston took the first turning out of the square and the atmosphere at once was calm and orderly, although from behind there still came a great noise of shouting.

Copper sniffed, and then stared suspiciously into Cub's face. He caught him by the front of his shirt. "Why, you young swipe," he growled. "Who told you to swill the stuff?"

"It was the fumes." Gimlet threw the words back over his shoulder. He had squeezed himself in between Marcelle and her uncle. "He's not to blame; I should have guessed that would happen," he added.

Cub, grinning foolishly, flopped down between Copper and Trapper. "We're on our way—hic," he hiccupped.

Copper roared with laughter. "Bad luck, kid," he consoled.

The car glided on, unmolested, and after taking several turnings came out on a broad macadam highway.

"The road to Chateaudun," announced Gaston, putting his foot down on the accelerator.

"Got your cutters handy, Trapper?" called Gimlet.

"Aye-aye, sir."

"Stand by to cut the wires. Stop her, Gaston."

The car came to a skidding stop. Trapper was out in a flash, running to the nearest telegraph pole. To Cub's spellbound admiration he went up it like a monkey. A dozen snips and the wires flopped. Trapper slid down the pole and ran back to the car.

"Pour the sauce,^[2] my old periwinkle," he told Gaston, and the car shot forward.

[2] A French idiom, meaning, Open the throttle.

The little ironmonger, who by now had entered into the spirit of the adventure, broke into a torrent of words, but Gimlet told him curtly to watch what he was doing and look where he was going. This was necessary, because to lend emphasis to his words the old mechanic thought nothing of taking his hands off the wheel. The car tore on.

Some minutes passed without incident, and then, on one of those long stretches of road that make the Le Mans district an ideal race track, the first signs of pursuit appeared. Two motor cyclists, riding side by side at breakneck speed, swung into sight. They were followed by several other riders, strung out, and a powerful-looking car. It was soon evident that they would overtake the tourist.

“Let go the nails, Copper,” ordered Gimlet evenly. “Don’t waste them—use just enough to give the road a good sprinkling.”

Cub had now recovered sufficiently to take a normal interest in the proceedings. He thought they would be worth watching. He was right. They were. Copper hauled up a sack, no light weight; and resting the open end on the back of the car moved it from side to side to ensure that the whole road surface received an even share of nails.

There was no doubt as to when the leading motor cyclists reached the spot. Almost immediately one of them soared over his handlebars in the fashion of the young man on the flying trapeze, while the cycle, riderless, struck the verge, and after a high jump landed on its side in the middle of the road. The second motor cyclist, who had been slightly behind, managed to avoid it, but soon afterwards pulled in to the gutter, presumably with a normal flat tyre.



TRAPPER WENT UP THE TELEGRAPH POLE LIKE A MONKEY. A DOZEN SNIPS AND THE WIRES FLOPPED.

Most of those following suffered similar fates, but a few got through. However, the second bag of nails stopped everything with the exception of one motor cycle and the car, which by something like a miracle had escaped disaster.

“That guy must have solid tyres,” grunted Trapper. “For the chap on the motor cycle it is going to be too bad, I tink. He would have done better to pick up a nail.” He opened his sack and took out his bow and an arrow.



THE LEADING NAZI SOARED OVER HIS HANDLEBARS.

“Wait till you see the whites of his eyes,” advised Copper.

“Hold the car straight, Gaston, *mon vieux*,” requested Trapper, and resting a knee on the back seat, took aim.

The motor cyclist, a brown-shirt trooper, was now close enough to consider shooting. He drew a revolver and raised it to the level of his shoulder. That was as far as he got. *Phung!* sang Trapper’s bow. Where the arrow hit the man Cub could not see, but the motor cycle whirled to the side of the road where it struck a telegraph pole with a crash that made him wince.

“What-ho!” exclaimed Copper dispassionately. “That’ll learn ’im. My turn, chum. Leave the car to me.” He glanced at Gimlet, who was looking over his shoulder, for approval.

Gimlet nodded. “Go ahead.”

Copper reached for his bag, took out the Sten gun and prepared for action, addressing the weapon in affectionate tones, as if it might have been a pet canary, as he did so. “Come along, my little beauty. Never bin known ter miss, she ain’t, and that’s no lie,” he told Cub with deadly seriousness. “Am I right, Trapper?”

Tiens! I’ll say you’re right,” confirmed Trapper.

By this time the car was no more than sixty yards behind. It was loaded, overloaded in fact, with German soldiers. One, supported by others on either side of him, was standing up trying—not very successfully—to take aim with a rifle over the head of an officer who, with the driver, occupied the front seats.

“Look at ’im,” said Copper plaintively. “What a hope he’s got, tryin’ ter shoot in that position; s’welp me, all he’ll do if he ain’t careful is push that officer’s brains into his lap.”

The rifle blazed. The bullet went wide—at least, it did not come anywhere near the tourer.

“There you are,” sneered Copper. “What did I tell yer? Not a hope.”

“Get on with it,” ordered Gimlet curtly. “This is no time for fooling.”

Copper threw a shocked glance at Cub. “Hear that?” he asked in a hoarse whisper. “He thinks I’m fooling. Strike me pink! Them Jerries won’t think I’m fooling, not on my oath they won’t. I wish my old Ma could see this. You watch.” Getting into a comfortable position on the back seat he trained the machine-gun on the overtaking car. There was a brief pause. Then it spat—and kept on spitting.

The effect on the car was instantaneous, and, Cub thought, appalling. Steam and water spurted from the radiator. Stars appeared all over the windscreen. Glass flew. Splinters of wood and strips of metal leapt into the air. The troops fell into a confused heap, either to escape the hail of lead or because they had been hit. Then the car swerved sickeningly, tried to climb the bank, and overturned.

Copper lowered his gun. "That'll stop them laughing in church, I reckon," he observed calmly. "Did that look like fooling, Cub, to you?"

"No," answered Cub. "Definitely no."

Trapper put his bow away. "Now we can sit back and enjoy the drive," he remarked.

Gimlet turned to Cub. "Change places with Marcelle," he commanded. "I want to talk to you about what we're going to do when we get to Chateaudun."

"What we're going to do?" echoed Cub.

"I mean, where are we going to park the car?"

Cub shook his head. "I hadn't thought of that," he confessed.

CHAPTER XII

GUNTHER TAKES A HAND

IN the front seat of the car they discussed the matter.

"I thought you had friends everywhere; haven't you any in Chateaudun?" asked Gimlet.

"No."

"Where did you stay when you were there?"

"Father Edwinus—he's the *curé* of the Church of the Madeleine—let me sleep in the old chapel in the cemetery."

"Did he know what you were up to?"

"He didn't ask me, and I didn't tell him, but I fancy he had a pretty shrewd idea. He's a true Frenchman, and I think we could trust him."

"Thinking isn't enough at this game," said Gimlet. "One has to be sure. Is this chapel open?"

“Yes. It’s very old, and no longer used. You couldn’t park the car in it, though.”

“Can you think of any place where we can hide it? The point is, a car isn’t a thing you can just throw away. If we merely abandon it the Nazis will find it, and they’ll know we’re in the district. We’ve got to dispose of it so that it won’t be found, at least for some time.”

“There’s the aerodrome,” said Cub slowly.

“What use is that?”

“It was a French military aerodrome, about two miles from Chateaudun on the Orleans road. It isn’t used any longer. The buildings were only of the temporary sort, and they got knocked about pretty badly by German bombs before France fell. The planes were taken long ago. We could put the car in one of the empty sheds—it might be some time before it was found. Of course, things may have changed. It’s over a month since I was here.”

“It sounds hopeful, anyway,” returned Gimlet. “In the meantime, if we wanted a car urgently, we should know where to find one. It’s worth trying.” Turning to Gaston he told him to drive straight on towards Orleans.

Actually, when the position was explained to him, Gaston did better. Knowing the country, he took a turning that by-passed the town of Chateaudun, and struck the Orleans road not far from the aerodrome. Studying the road anxiously, he remarked that the sooner they were out of the car the better. After what had happened it was probably the most dangerous vehicle in France. Every German in the country would be on the look-out for it.

To Cub’s infinite relief, the aerodrome, when it came into sight, was as he had last seen it. Not a soul could be seen. The buildings stood derelict, forlorn, showing signs of the damage done by the German bombs. The grass was long, and had almost overgrown the short track that led to the hangars.

Gaston drove straight into a building that looked as though it might have been the station garage. The doors, if ever there had been any, had gone. Sparrows and starlings whirled out when the car drove in, confirming the impression that the place was deserted. Gaston ran on into a dim corner and stopped.

“I don’t think we could have found a better place,” declared Gimlet, looking round. “All the same, the sooner we ourselves are out of this the better. We’ve got to do some quick thinking. First of all, what about you, Gaston, and you, Marcelle? You can’t continue with us. We’re soldiers, but you’re civilians, and to be found with us would settle your fate. Will you

stay in France or would you like to go to England if it can be arranged? Either way, I can give you money.”

Without hesitation they voted for England.

“I think you’re wise,” said Gimlet, taking a wad of money from his pocket and peeling off several thousand-franc notes, which he handed to them. “As long as you keep clear of Le Mans there doesn’t seem to be any reason why you shouldn’t travel by train,” he remarked. “Make for Caen by a roundabout route, and then hang about the forest until you make contact with the Fleas. I understand Marcelle knows some of them. If you don’t actually stay with them, leave a message where we can get in touch with you. After that you’ll have to wait for our return. I think that’s about all.”

“Thank you, *monsieur*,” acknowledged Gaston, with tears of gratitude sparkling in his eyes. To Marcelle he said, “We can catch a train from Chateaudun to Paris, and go from there to Caen.”

Marcelle pointed out, and Gimlet agreed, that after what had happened, Chateaudun might not be a healthy spot, and while it would be a longer walk, Orleans would be better. Gaston agreed.

The parting was brief, and rather embarrassing, for neither Marcelle nor Gaston really wanted to leave their friends. Indeed, they said so, but Gimlet was adamant. So they went, and with sympathetic understanding, wondering if they would ever see them again, the commandos watched the two lonely figures disappear up the dusty road towards Orleans.

“She’s got pluck, that kid,” said Copper huskily.

“And brains,” added Trapper. “*Ma foi!* She would make a man a wife. I _____”

Gimlet interrupted. “This is hardly the moment to contemplate matrimony,” he said coldly. “You’ll have time to think about that when we get home. Let’s get down to business. This is the position. Point one. As much as I dislike these disguises it would be silly to try to walk about France in British uniforms. Therefore, for the time being, we shall have to remain as we are. Point two. We’ve got to get nearer the town, where we can keep in touch with things. What about this chapel you spoke of, Cub?”

“I can guide you to it.”

“How far is it from the internment camp?”

“No distance at all.”

“Where exactly is the camp, by the way?”

“It’s the castle.”

Gimlet raised his eyebrows. “You mean the chateau itself?”

“Yes. Of course, there’s barbed wire round it—it goes all round the grounds, which are not very large.”

“What sort of a place is this chateau?”

“It’s enormous. Part of it’s very old, and other parts not so old.”

“Have you ever been inside it?”

“Oh yes. I went all over it a long time ago, with the custodian, before it was an internment camp. I called to see him the last time I was down—that’s how I discovered that the place had been turned into an internment camp. Before then it was uninhabited, some of it being more or less in ruins.”

“Can you give us a description of the place?”

Cub thought for a moment. “It’s too big for that, I’m afraid. We shall see it on the way to the chapel. In fact, if I remember rightly, it’s possible to see the tower from the chapel. Chateaudun itself isn’t a very big place, and the castle stands high, overlooking the river Loire. There’s the usual open square in the middle of the town. A little street of old houses leads down a hill to what remains of the castle wall, where there is a gateway, and the cottage where the custodian used to live. It’s the guardhouse now. That’s all I can tell you—except that the castle was captured by the Germans in the war of 1870. They knocked the place about, using the chapel—I mean the chapel in the castle—as a stable for their horses.”

“Hm. That doesn’t help us much,” muttered Gimlet. “We’d better see what the guide-book has to say about it.” Taking the book from his pocket he flicked through the pages. “Here we are,” he added, and read aloud: “Chateaudun. The castle. An interesting edifice dating from several epochs. The original fortress was erected in the tenth century, on the pointed cliffs above the Loire. The donjon, a huge round tower a hundred and fifty feet high on the left of the courtyard, was rebuilt in the twelfth century. The chapel was added in the fifteenth century. The view is imposing. For permission to enter apply to the custodian.” That’s all.” Gimlet closed the book. “Let’s go and have a look at the place. We shall be less noticeable if we break up the party. I’ll go on ahead with Cub. Copper, you follow with Trapper. If anyone speaks to you, Trapper can answer.”

“Aye-aye, sir,” agreed Copper. “What about our uniforms and gear?”

“Ah yes. I don’t think we’d better try carrying sacks about with us—the Jerries are getting inquisitive. We’ll leave them here, taking only the things we’re likely to need—knives, pistols, wire cutters and our torches. We’ll dump the sacks in the overgrown ditch beside the track that leads to the road. If it’s reasonably possible we will return for them after dark.”

“Can I take my bow?” queried Trapper. “It may be useful. If I unstring it, it can ride in the leg of my trousers.”

“All right,” agreed Gimlet. “Any more questions?”

There were none, so the party set off, with Cub and Gimlet a hundred yards or so in advance of the others. There was nobody in sight. Even the country wore a hopeless, abandoned look, and Cub remarked that it appeared as if a blight had settled on the land.

“It has,” answered Gimlet grimly.

Occasionally they saw a man or woman working in the fields, but on the road itself traffic was negligible. This, of course, did not surprise any of them, for they knew that all transport had been seized by the Germans. The appearance of a motor-cyclist despatch rider gave them an uneasy moment, but he passed without a glance, as did the driver of a German military lorry. Just as they reached the town a formation of swastika-decorated bombers passed over, but the travellers paid little attention to them.

The chateau came into view in the near distance. “There it is,” said Cub, pointing.

Gimlet studied it for a moment with thoughtful eyes, and then walked on.

A few minutes later, avoiding the square, whence came sounds suggesting a certain amount of activity, they arrived at the cemetery, a dreary area made no less so by rows of the usual ornate French tombs, on which the hand of time had left its mark. Most of them were half buried under a mantle of moss, ivy and rank undergrowth. In a corner, in the shadow of some sad-looking cypresses of great age, was the chapel, a small, grey-stone building of Gothic design, and like the rest, fast falling into ruin. This they entered through an arched portal fitted with a heavy, iron-studded door, and found themselves in what can best be described as a stone cell, some thirty feet long by fifteen wide. There was no furniture, not even a chair. Plaques of various shapes and sizes, bearing the names of persons long since dead and forgotten, decorated the walls. That was all.

Soon afterwards Trapper and Copper came in, and the door was closed.

“What tale do you suggest we tell, if anyone finds us here?” Gimlet asked Cub.

“We can say we are making our way south,” answered Cub. “Many people from the north are doing that. Although a pass is really necessary, the Germans don’t stop them because they want the Channel ports evacuated, in case of a British invasion. Many houses have been bombed, too, so people

sleep where they can. No one thinks it odd to find people sleeping in any old building.”

As they settled themselves on the floor, for lack of seats, Gimlet remarked, “The next question to arise will be food.”

“That isn’t easy to find in France,” Cub pointed out.

“I know that,” replied Gimlet. “Unfortunately, we can’t do without it. We could always fall back on our iron rations, which will last us a couple of days, but I’d rather hang on to them for a real emergency—always bearing in mind that it may take us several days to get back to the stores at Caen.”

“Suppose I go and have a scrounge round the town?” suggested Cub. “After all, I’ve been on the scrounge for a couple of years, so I know the ropes. I might pick up some news by listening to the people talking. There may have been changes made in the garrison. When I was last here there was a platoon of a Bavarian regiment quartered in the Hôtel de Ville. They provided the guard for the chateau. The commandant of the camp, by the way, is a Vichyite French general.”

“I think it would be a good idea if you had a look round,” assented Gimlet. “Watch your step, though. The pursuit from Le Mans will probably have reached here by now. In fact, after this morning’s dust-up the whole countryside is likely to be buzzing. It would be useful to know what direction the hunt is taking, so see if you can find out—but be careful.”

“I’ll watch it,” promised Cub, and departed on his mission, thoroughly happy to be entrusted with work of such importance. If he was conscious of danger he paid no heed to it. Accustomed by long association to German military uniforms, he took little notice of them, but in the light of what was to follow, it is to be feared that this may have been a case of familiarity breeding contempt. Be that as it may, it was with more satisfaction than concern that he found the *Place* buzzing—to use Gimlet’s expression—with Nazi activity, for this provided a harvest of useful information. With his hands in the pockets of his threadbare shorts he strolled along with the utmost confidence. No one paid the slightest attention to him—he would have been surprised had it been otherwise.

A slow stroll round the groups of soldiers soon revealed that Gimlet’s surmise had been correct. The commandos had stirred things up. The talk was all of the affair at Le Mans, although reference was also made to the ammunition-train disaster at Falaise. He gathered it was thought that these were the work of the notorious Gimlet and a small party of his commandos, who were believed to be still in the country. The search for them was being pursued with energy, for the German Higher Command was extremely

angry, and *Generaloberst* Gunther, and his adjutant, von Roth, under the lash of reprimand, were turning the country upside-down. Throughout Normandy and Brittany patrols were on the move. Bridges were guarded. All leave had been stopped.

The Germans talked freely, for the most part grumbling about the extra work all this involved, regardless of a conspicuous notice on the wall of the Hôtel de Ville that conversation should be guarded. No one appeared to notice the untidy youth who wandered about apparently without any object in view—which shows how disregard of official warnings may upset the plans of those who issue them.

Cub got a mild shock when an officer, a captain, walked over to him and accosted him.

“Here, you,” said the German roughly, speaking in French, “how long have you been about?”

“Most of the morning, *Herr Hauptmann*,” answered Cub readily, and with respect.

“Have you seen a car go through here?”

“I have seen several cars, *Herr Hauptmann*.”

“Have you seen a grey car, open, with a flag on the bonnet?”

“A swastika flag?”

“Yes.”

“But yes, *Herr Hauptmann*,” Cub pretended to think. “It must have been nearly an hour ago. I noticed it because it travelled very fast. In it there were . . .” Cub puckered his forehead. “Four or five men . . . I’m not sure.”

“That’s right,” declared the officer with some excitement. “Which way did it go?”

“It took the road to Chartres, *Herr Hauptmann*.” Cub pointed to a road that led north-east. Orleans lay to the south-east.

“Are you sure?” cried the officer.

“I’m certain of it,” declared Cub.

The officer raised his hand and shouted to the driver of a car to join him. The car came over, and Cub got a real shock when the driver, after a good look at him, said in a curious voice, “Didn’t I see you in Le Mans this morning?”

“But no. That is not possible,” lied Cub fluently. He had long overcome any scruples about lying where Nazis were concerned, for they themselves, he had observed, were past-masters at it.

“That’s queer,” said the German, looking puzzled. “I could swear I saw you in Le Mans.”

Cub shrugged. “But how could I get from Le Mans to Chateaudun already?”

For this shrewd question the German had no immediate answer. The distance was nearly fifty miles. Few French people were permitted to use motor transport—certainly not a ragamuffin like Cub. The Nazi could hardly be expected to guess that he had ridden in the wanted car. Still looking puzzled, however, he considered the mystery.

How this incident would have ended had there not been an interruption it is impossible to say; but at this juncture a new factor appeared on the scene, one that set Cub’s brain racing, and, it must be admitted, turned his lips dry for the first time. A big car came roaring into the square, and there was an all-round stiffening to attention when it was observed that it carried no less a personage than *Generaloberst* Gunther, with his adjutant, *Hauptmann* von Roth. The officer responsible for Cub’s interrogation saluted stiffly, and the car came to a stop beside him. Slowly, with imperial dignity, as if aware of the import of their arrival, the occupants descended.

In appearance, *Generaloberst* Gunther was not that grotesque type of Nazi so often ridiculed by caricaturists. Nor was his stature imposing. On the contrary he was a smallish man, with a skin of a curious grey pallor. In civilian clothes, from a distance, he might have appeared harmless enough; the small, thin-lipped mouth might have appeared merely mean, and the pale eyes unusually large; but seen close there was something repellent, sinister, about him, an indefinable suggestion of evil, as there is about a snake, which even though it is not venomous makes the blood curdle.

His adjutant, von Roth, was a different type. He was heavily built, swarthy, and looked what he was—a typical Prussian bully. Power had simply made a savage of him. In his hand he carried a cane.

The general, ignoring Cub, addressed the officer. “Any news, yet?” he demanded in a thin voice, a voice as sour as vinegar.

“Yes, sir,” answered the officer eagerly. “This boy saw the car go through the town an hour ago. It took the Chartres road.”

“Then why the delay? Why have you done nothing about it?”

“We were considering if his evidence was reliable. There is a suggestion that the boy was in Le Mans this morning.”

The general glanced at Cub. “Nonsense,” he said curtly. “This boy lives at Caen.” His glance passed on.

Cub drew a deep breath of relief—but it was short lived. The general's glance switched back, his eyes clouding, as though he had only just grasped the significance of what he had said. "If he lives at Caen, what is he doing here?" he muttered. "I saw him in Caen quite recently." Addressing Cub, he demanded peremptorily, "How did you get here?"

"Except for an occasional lift, I walked, your highness," replied Cub humbly, but without hesitation.

"Zo! Why did you come here?"

"I am on my way to Orleans, highness."

"Why?"

"To visit relations there."

"Ah! Without a permit, I suppose?"

Cub dropped his eyes. "Yes, highness."

"You know the regulations about travelling without a pass? Why did you do it?"

"Because . . ." Cub faltered for the first time, groping blindly for an excuse.

Von Roth's cane swished with vicious force against the back of his hand. "Answer," he snarled.

Cub cried out under the pain of the blow. Then his wits, sharpened by experience, came to his rescue.

"I was driven out of the town, *Generaloberst*," he stammered.

"Driven out—by whom?"

"By a fellow——"

"What fellow? No lies, now."

"You would not know him, general. A fellow by the name of Louis Morelle." (This, it will be remembered, was the proper name of the Fox.)

The general stared. His jaw set. "That gutter-rat! I know him. Why did you leave Caen on his account?"

"He beat me," whimpered Cub.

"Why?"

"Because I would not do the things he wanted me to do."

"What things?"

Cub's voice dropped to a whisper. He seemed to choke over the word, "Sabotage." This was not betraying the Fox, who had already been convicted on this charge.

“Ah!” The general drew a deep breath. His pale eyes flashed to von Roth and came back to Cub. “So that was it? Morelle was arrested. Didn’t you know that?”

“Yes, highness, but he escaped. It was then that I fled for my life, fearing that he would lay the blame for his arrest on me, and kill me with his knife. He is a bad one, this Morelle.”

The general’s eyes narrowed. “Do you know where this young devil hides?”

“No, highness. He vanishes—I don’t know where.”

“But by returning to Caen, and pretending to work for him, you could find out, eh?”

“Perhaps,” answered Cub doubtfully, perceiving that he was getting into deep water.

“You could try.”

“Yes, highness,” admitted Cub. He could hardly say otherwise. Apart from which he was desperately anxious for this questioning to end before it occurred to the Nazis to search him. No story he could invent would avail him if he was found to be in possession of a German automatic. As it was he marvelled that the Germans should overlook a precaution so obvious, and he reasoned, probably correctly, that it was his age that saved him, as it had before. An adult suspect would certainly have been searched. Nazi imagination evidently did not go so far as to suppose a boy would be equipped with German firearms.

“We’ll talk about this later,” decided the general. He turned to the local officer. “Keep your eyes on this boy. Don’t let him go. After this Morelle business I wouldn’t trust any of these little French swine. For the present you’d better put him in the castle.”

“*Ja, Generaloberst.*” The officer beckoned to some soldiers who were standing near and pointed to Cub. “This boy is under arrest,” he said. “Take him to the castle.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAN OF GOD

BACK in the chapel, with nothing to do, time hung heavily on the hands of the commandos, who were in no mood to settle down. As their future movements would depend largely on Cub's report they awaited his return with impatience.

"He's a long time," remarked Gimlet, looking at his watch. And an hour later, "What the deuce can he be up to? I hope he hasn't run into trouble."

"If ever I saw a kid able ter take care of himself it's 'im," opined Copper.

"All the same, it's time he was back," said Gimlet, looking worried.

The afternoon wore on, and dragged slowly into evening. When twilight began to creep silently through the unglazed windows, and still Cub did not come, Trapper suggested that he made a reconnaissance in the hope of learning something, pointing out, with justification, that on account of his French extraction he was the most suitable one for the job.

"I'm afraid it's no use kidding ourselves any longer," answered Gimlet. "That boy's in trouble or he'd be back by now. All right, Trapper, see if you can find him."

Trapper was on his way to the heavy door when he stopped suddenly. "*Ecoutez!*" he whispered, clipping the word and at the same time moving like lightning as footsteps, heavy purposeful footsteps, echoed in the stone-flagged portal. With his hand in his pocket he took up a position against the wall behind the door.

A moment later the big iron handle was turned from the outside. The door swung open, and a man stood on the threshold, a man in the sombre habit of a priest. He was rather past middle age, stout, yet with the dignity that portliness gives to those who are getting on in years. His face was hairless, and his skin as smooth as that of a child. For perhaps ten seconds he surveyed the scene before him in silence. Then, without haste, he closed the door and advanced into the room.

"What are you doing here, *messieurs?*" he inquired in even tones, speaking of course in French.

Gimlet hesitated for a moment before he replied. "Are we compelled to answer that question, father?"

"No," returned the priest quietly. "You are not. To do so, however, would be a matter of courtesy. I was bound to ask."

"Are you by any chance Father Edwinus?" said Gimlet.

The priest's eyebrows lifted. "I am. Have we met before?"

Gimlet shook his head. "No."

"You are not French." This was a statement rather than a question.



THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN AND A MAN STOOD ON THE THRESHOLD.

“No,” responded Gimlet again. “In your own interest I suggest that you ask no more questions, but depart, forgetting what you have seen.”

The *curé's* eyes, soft and sad, rested on Gimlet's face. “It may be that I can be of service,” said he.

Gimlet considered the priest. How much did he know? It seemed likely, since he would hear the gossip in the town, that he had guessed who they were. Would it, he wondered, be advisable to take him into their confidence?

It would be a risk, but not, he thought, a very great one. Unless he were a traitor, which was unlikely—particularly so since he had once helped Cub—he would be against the Nazis.

“It may be that you wonder how we knew your name, father,” went on Gimlet. “I will tell you. Some time ago you befriended a boy, a boy of Caen, who was in these parts. It was he who told us of you, and this place.”

“You mean the English boy, he who calls himself Cub?” returned the priest imperturbably.

Gimlet stared. “You knew he was English?”

“I guessed. Men of my age and experience are not easy to deceive, my son. It was to see if he had been here that I came.”

“What led you to think that he might have come back?”

“Something that I have just learned in the town.” The *curé* looked from one to the other. “The boy’s a friend of yours?”

“He’s more even than that.”

“In that case, *messieurs*, you will be grieved to learn that he has been apprehended,” said the priest heavily. “He is a prisoner in the chateau.”

Silence fell. It was broken by Gimlet. “I was afraid something of the sort had happened. How did this come about?”

“I don’t know the details. Did he come here with you—or you with him?”

“We were together. He was acting as our guide.”

“From which I judge that you, too, are British?”

“We are,” admitted Gimlet quietly. “And if you are the man I judge you to be, we have nothing to fear on that account.”

“Thank you,” said the priest softly. “On the contrary, *messieurs*. Under my cloth there still beats a French heart, and for that reason any service I can perform for you will be undertaken willingly.”

“You know the risks of concealing British troops?”

“Too well. But what is risk of life at a time like this?”

“Do you know who we are?”

“You must be, I think, the officer who is called Gimlet, for whom the Germans are seeking. As I came through the town a notice was being posted on the wall of the Hôtel de Ville, offering a reward of fifty thousand francs for your body, dead or alive.”

Gimlet smiled. “Only fifty thousand? I trust they will have occasion to double that before very long. How did you guess?”

The priest shrugged. "There cannot be so many British soldiers in this part of France. But now that we understand each other, tell me how I can be of service?"

"We shall need food, father, if it is procurable," answered Gimlet. "But there is no hurry. First, can you give us any more information about Cub?"

"I only know that he was questioned by the Germans, and that it was under the orders of *Generaloberst* Gunther that he was detained and sent to the chateau for safe custody."

"Gunther! Is he here?"

"He was, but has, I think, gone on. Search is being made for you, for it is thought that you are still in France. You are far from safe here, but I know of no better place, so you may as well stay. Food is not easy to procure, but there is still a certain amount, in spite of the Nazis, for those who need it." The priest glanced at the window. "But the light fades. Soon it will be dark, and then it will be less dangerous to move about. I will endeavour to learn more about the fate of the boy."

"Thank you, father. We shall not leave France, of course, without making every effort to save him—and others who I understand are confined in the chateau."

"Was it on account of these others that you came to Chateaudun?" inquired the priest.

"Yes," admitted Gimlet. "The Allied Governments are anxious to know their names, and discover, if possible, why pretence was made by the Germans that these prisoners were dead—at least, that is what we were given to understand."

"I can answer these questions for you," said the priest. "There are in the chateau twelve men—mostly French, but not all. There were more, but some have died as a result of the brutal treatment they received. Some of these men are diplomats, or government officials; others, military leaders; but in every case it is their misfortune that they possess information which the Nazis are anxious to obtain. Here, within those grey-stone walls, they are subjected to torture, physical and mental, to make them speak. They are stubborn men, what you would call hard cases, men who have refused to yield even though they are in duress. Some, as I have told you, have died rather than betray their country. Since they were already presumed dead, their fate causes no concern."

Gimlet's face was grim. "In what part are the prisoners confined?"

"The Nazis, I regret to say, have turned the chapel into a dormitory, in which they are locked every night."

“Is this hell-hole—saving your presence, father—under the jurisdiction of *Generaloberst* Gunther?”

“Yes, aided by his able assistant, *Hauptmann* von Roth, and a man of Vichy, who has sunk so low that he has sold his honour to the enemy. His name is Colonel Frey, an Alsatian—probably a man of German descent.”

“I shall remember the name,” said Gimlet slowly.

“The latest victim in the chateau is General Romortin, who, before the war, in the opinion of many, was France’s military genius. For a long time he was a prisoner in Germany, and, doubtless to account for his disappearance, it was reported that he had died. This, like most Nazi stories, was untrue. He has been sent here for more drastic treatment. Unhappily for him, he knows where certain documents of great importance are hidden, including particulars of weapons that were being developed in France at the time of her collapse. If he does not know where the papers are the Germans believe he does, which as far as he is concerned comes to the same thing. The information, by any foul means they can think of, the Nazis will endeavour to wring from him. If you have a pencil I will give you the names of the others.”

Gimlet opened his notebook and jotted down the names as the priest dictated them.

“This information is of the greatest importance, father,” he said, as he closed the book. “If I get back, your co-operation shall be made known to the leaders of the liberation, when it comes.”

“I ask no thanks,” said the *curé* simply. “What I do is no more than any true Frenchman would do for our beloved France. Is it possible that your Government can help these unfortunates, *monsieur*? Retribution when the Nazis are driven out will be of no comfort to them if they are already dead, as it seems likely they will be.”

“Something shall be done,” replied Gimlet firmly. “How did you learn all this?”

“That is a question I prefer not to answer,” returned Father Edwinus. “I have sources of information. Does it matter where it comes from?”

“Not in the least,” answered Gimlet.

The priest, who had turned casually to the crumbling window, and the darkening scene beyond, suddenly stiffened in an attitude of intense interest. “I see something,” he said sharply. “Look! On the tower—a rag, it waves, as if in the hands of one who wishes to attract attention. A signal—yes. It must be. Alas! I cannot read military signals.”

By this time the others were at his side, staring at the top of the chateau's great cone-topped tower. What the priest had said was manifestly true. Someone was waving a piece of rag, jerking it to and fro in movements that were too regular to be accidental.

"It's Morse, s'welp me," muttered Copper; and as they were signalled he began reading the letters aloud. "Dash dot dash dot—C; dot dot dash—U; dash dot dot dot—B. It's him. It's Cub. Come ter think of it, he knows we can see the castle from here. He's trying to attract our attention. What's he saying?" He went on reading the signal. "C-U-B . . . H-E-R-E."

Gimlet jerked into action. "We've got to stop him before someone else sees that," he said tersely. "Stand fast, I'll do it." He dashed outside, and whipping out his handkerchief flagged the "message received" sign. He followed this with the "stop sending" signal, and added, "wait, but watch."

The distant rag obediently disappeared.

"That's something to work on, anyway," remarked Gimlet, when he rejoined the others. "How the deuce did he get to the top of that tower, I wonder?"

"He was in the upper compartment, waving through a loophole," said the priest, whose placid calm had broken down under the excitement of the moment. "That is a place most dangerous to approach, with great holes in the floor, through which the defenders once poured boiling oil on those below. I have seen it, and shudder even now to think of it."

"How's it reached, this chamber?" demanded Gimlet.

"By a spiral staircase that winds, it seems, for ever upwards. It is just wide enough for a man to use his sword arm."

"Is it possible to get close to that tower without actually entering the castle grounds, which I understand are surrounded by barbed wire?" asked Gimlet.

"It is possible to get within a reasonable distance," rejoined Father Edwinus, after a moment's reflection. "About four acres are enclosed, but there are places where the wire comes closer to the actual building than in others, because of the existence of some cottages on one side. It was decided that these cottages must be outside the wire, you understand. Nevertheless, they were evacuated, the reason given being their proximity to the chateau. No one is allowed to enter them under pain of death. The houses are locked, no doubt, but I have not been to see."

"Would it be possible to speak to anyone in the tower from one of these cottages?"

“The tower is a hundred and fifty feet high, *monsieur*. It must be well over a hundred feet to the loophole. It would be possible to shout a message, but that would be heard by the sentries.”

“Ah! The sentries. Can you tell me about them?” queried Gimlet.

“There are perhaps twelve soldiers always on duty at the chateau, not counting the regular staff—the cooks, the waiters, and so on,” rejoined the priest. “The gate-house at the *Porte d’Abas* is the guard post. Two sentries stand there, with those not on duty inside. Four sentries patrol the wire in regular beats, turning when they meet each other.”

“Inside or outside the wire?”

“Inside. And I must tell you that there are little bells on the top of the wire, so that if anyone tries to get over they would ring, and bring the sentries to the spot.”

“Is the wire very deep?”

“You could see it from the cottages because it passes the end of the gardens. There are, as it were, four fences, on which the wire is stretched taut, with loose wire between—perhaps five paces in all. Of course, in daylight none of the prisoners could approach the wire without being seen; at dusk they are locked within the chapel, as I told you.”

“I am not thinking about them getting out; I’m thinking about us getting in,” asserted Gimlet. “I think we’d better go and survey the objective before attempting to make a plan. Will you, Father Edwinus, guide us to the cottages you spoke of? You could walk a little ahead of us so that if we were challenged you would not be implicated.”

“But certainly, *monsieur*. Is it your intention to go at once?”

“Immediately, otherwise it will be dark and we shall be unable to see anything. The moon does not rise until the early hours of the morning. Having seen the place we shall be in a better position to make a plan, although it is unlikely that we shall be able to put it in motion before the moon comes up.”

“But what about food? I can promise only bread and cheese, and salads from my garden.”

“We are in no case to be particular, father,” stated Gimlet. “I would prefer to see the chateau while any light remains. For the moment, take us to the cottages. We will talk of food later, when a greater need for it arises.”

“As you wish, *monsieur*,” agreed Father Edwinus. “I will go by a roundabout way, taking a path that is little used, so that we should not be

seen. Monsieur will pardon me if I appear presumptuous, but you realise that if you are caught in those garments you will be shot as spies?”

“We should probably be shot anyway, if we were caught,” replied Gimlet. “If it comes to that, I admit I would prefer to be shot in my uniform—but that, too, is a matter that can wait.”

“You intend to attempt a rescue?”

“Yes.”

“At once?”

“That is unlikely,” answered Gimlet. “It may be better to wait until things are quiet, or we may need the light of the moon. We shall see.”

The priest gazed steadily at Gimlet. “I fear you are attempting the impossible,” he said with a sigh. “To enter the chateau gate without force of arms is not to be thought of, and even if you got in the grounds, you would need the wings of a bird to reach the chamber at the top of the tower. One shot will bring out the whole garrison.”

Gimlet smiled faintly. “There may not be shooting, and we may not attempt to force the gate. For the rest, the business of commandos, reverend sir, is the attempting of the impossible, otherwise there would be no need for them. Our soldiers can quite well handle ordinary military enterprises. But come, let us go and reconnoitre this Nazi torture house.”

CHAPTER XIV

“CARELESS TALK COSTS LIVES”

CUB’S ascent to the top of the donjon tower was mainly a matter of luck. At any rate, it was not premeditated at the outset, but was a development of a situation that arose.

On the way to the chateau, after his arrest in the *Place*, perceiving that his plight was desperate and likely to get worse rather than better, he considered seriously the chances of making a bolt for it. But the risks were too great; not only were his two guards armed with rifles which they would most certainly use, probably successfully, but there were a number of other Germans about who would stop him before he could get far. Such an attempt, if it failed, would be an admission of guilt that could only make matters much worse, for at present the attitude of his guards suggested that

he was not so much a dangerous prisoner as a foolish or disobedient child who needed restraint. In these circumstances he walked on, determined to wait for a more promising opportunity. His great fear was still that he might be searched, but try as he would he could think of no way of disposing of his incriminating equipment. This exercised his mind all the way to the guardhouse, because he felt that while he was regarded as a child he still had a chance. The discovery of a loaded pistol on his person would put an end to that.

They went on through the medieval gate in the wall, where his name was taken and entered in a book by the sergeant of the guard. Naturally, he did not give his proper name, which would have betrayed his nationality. Instead, he chose one at random—Henri Blanc. It was at this stage that his ascent of the tower really began, for so harmless did his escort consider him—or so it seemed—that one of them stayed behind talking to the sergeant. Cub, therefore, went on with only one guard, whose manner was that of a nurse taking a child to church.

Passing under the noble façade they found themselves in the stone-flagged hall, from a corner of which the majestic stone stairway, the admiration of tourists before the war, leads to the upper part of the building. Here the escort's casual regard for his prisoner was again revealed.

“Wait,” he said. “I report to the commandant. No doubt he will wish to see you.”

It may be that the Nazi, now that his prisoner was safely inside the barbed wire, ruled out of his mind any possibility of escape; if he did he is hardly to be blamed, for such an attempt appeared hopeless. At all events, leaving his charge standing in the hall, he walked on to a massive door at the far side of the vestibule.

Cub had no desire to see the commandant. Far from it. Not only would he ask automatically if the prisoner had been searched, but Cub's French, while almost perfect—certainly good enough to deceive a foreigner—might not get by a Frenchman. Wherefore Cub looked about him swiftly for some place where he could at least hide his equipment. There was no place. The stone walls were devoid of even a shelf. He looked at the stairway, then back at the Nazi, and saw that he was still facing the door, presumably waiting for permission to enter. In a flash, moving on tip-toe, Cub was on the bottom step. Then, hardly knowing what he was going to do, he was on his way up, glancing to right and left for a suitable place in which he could secrete the pistol. His knife, he thought, did not matter so much. Three steps were sufficient to take him out of sight of the hall. He heard the soldier call,

“Blanc!” which told him that he had been missed, but in the spirit of “in for a penny, in for a pound,” he held on his way.

To describe in detail his movements for the next few minutes, without making a long story, would necessitate some knowledge of the interior of the castle—which, as we know, Cub possessed. The great stairway, known as the *Escalier d’Honneur*, sweeps round to the front of the building, overlooking the courtyard. This is repeated twice, mounting to the second and third floors, where access is obtained to the twin turrets. From the third floor a narrow corridor of some length leads off at right angles, and after traversing some awkward—not to say dangerous—angles, where the timber has rotted to such an extent that a false step might precipitate the visitor into the courtyard far below, it ends at the donjon, which is the oldest part of the building. In times of peace most visitors are content to accept the rest for granted, and retrace their steps, for the ascent to the top of the tower is a grimy as well as an arduous performance, and, moreover, it requires a steady head.

Cub had passed several places where he could well have concealed his pistol, but by this time he was inspired by a more ambitious project. Up the narrow spiral staircase he went, sweeping aside cobwebs with his arms, and stepping over oblique holes, dropping sheer into space, left by the masons for the discharge of arrows, quicklime, boiling oil, and the like, as was customary in earlier forms of warfare. The staircase is so narrow as to permit the passage of only one person at a time, and it would be no exaggeration to say that it could be held by one determined man against an army—provided the defender did not have to eat or sleep. Cub was not thinking of anything so violent. He had just remembered that from the compartment in which the staircase ended it was possible to see the chapel. He arrived in it hot, dusty and dishevelled, and not a little out of breath; but it was with a feeling of triumph that he gazed out of one of the four square apertures that serve as windows, gulping clean, cool air into his overworked lungs. He had a good look at the chapel. The commandos were not in sight, and he did not expect that they would be. Then he turned his attention to the chamber.

He was quite sure that he would be followed; or perhaps, since no one knew which way he had gone, it would be more correct to say that he knew the chamber would be examined in the search that would soon be ordered. There could be no question of retreat. The only way down was the way he had come up—unless he took a flying leap on to the roof of the main building, some forty feet below. What he needed now was a hiding-place, and that was something the chamber did not possess; or so it appeared at

first glance, for the circular wall was as bare as the face of a cliff. On top of it was the massive wooden truss which supported the conical roof, and this was carried by two enormous beams, some eighteen inches square, fitted in the form of a cross with their ends built into the masonry. Had it been necessary for him to reach these beams quickly it is unlikely that he would have been able to do so, for they were not less than eight feet above the floor. But as it happened he had plenty of time, and by prizing out some mortar from the wall with the point of his knife, he was able to make toe and finger holes deep enough to support his weight and elevate him to the timber. He gave it a trial before he was satisfied, and finding that the climb now presented no difficulty, he returned to the floor, and resting his elbows in a turret gazed upon the scene spread out before him.

The view, as the guide-book states, is imposing. On one side, far below, the little town of Chateaudun lies spread out like a model. Looking southward across the grey pile of buildings one sees the river Loire, rolling majestically in great curves towards the distant sea. On the other two sides magnificent panoramas of green fields and woods, heath and plough land, recede unendingly to the horizon. Cub was not interested in views or landscapes. He returned to the window that overlooked the cemetery, and gazed longingly at the little building in which his friends reposed, unconscious of his fate. And as he watched he saw a man in a priest's habit walking swiftly through the tumbling tombs towards the chapel. Even at that distance the portly figure told him that it was Father Edwinus. What would happen when he found the commandos there? With eager eyes he watched, hoping to get some indication of what was passing. But he saw nothing. The priest did not emerge, from which he could only hope that those within were engaged in profitable conversation.

During this time, from the courtyard, had come sounds, shouts and the banging of doors, which indicated clearly enough that the search for him was proceeding with vigour; but he paid no attention. This was only to be expected. But now a new sound sent him to the head of the spiral staircase. From far below came a murmur, a curious whispering noise, such as a receding wave makes on a shingle beach. He was in no doubt as to what caused it. Men—at least two men, since they were talking—were coming up the stairs. Moving quietly, without undue haste, he mounted to one of the great beams, and gathering his rags round him to make sure that they did not overhang, stretched himself at full length and waited for what might befall. He had not long to wait. The murmur gave way to a scraping of nail-studded boots. Then, panting, into the chamber came two German soldiers. From the top of the steps they made a quick survey of the compartment.

“He isn’t here,” said one.

“I didn’t expect he would be,” replied the other. “How would he find his way up here? We’ve come up all those cursed steps for nothing. Let’s get back.”

“No hurry,” returned the first speaker. “The sergeant will only send us somewhere else. We might as well have a breather. I’ll have a draw at my pipe.”

“A lot of fuss about nothing, I reckon,” said his companion, “all over a brat.”

“From something I’ve just heard, the general may have got the right idea when he ordered his arrest,” observed speaker number one, mysteriously. “Fine view from up here.”

“Maybe that’s why Frey is in such a sweat, wondering what the general’s going to say when he learns that the boy has disappeared.”

“He can’t have got away. The sergeant swears he didn’t go through the gate, which means that he’s still inside the wire. There are plenty of places where he could hide, in a pile this size. Sooner or later he’ll have to give himself up for want of food, though, unless he falls off the roof—if that’s where he is—and breaks his neck.” The speaker crossed the room, passing under Cub, and leaning in the window turret looked down on the roof of the main building. “He doesn’t seem to be there,” he remarked, returning to his companion.

“I shouldn’t worry. The general is more taken up with this Englander they call Gimlet. I hear they’re offering fifty thousand francs for him, dead or alive. If it’s my luck to bring him in he’ll be dead—no sense in taking chances, with all that money at stake. I should like to see him, just once, for about three seconds.”

As it happened, this wish was to be fulfilled, but the speaker was unaware of it. So was Cub, who, flat on his beam, was listening to this conversation with no small interest—wishing fervently, nevertheless, that the men would go.

“Well, let’s be getting down,” ran on the man who had last spoken. “I’m on duty tonight. I’d as soon be at the front. Nothing happens in a hole like this. Even the French are too scared to squeak. Come on, before the sergeant starts yelling for us.”

The other tapped out his pipe with thoughtful deliberation. “You know, a thought has just struck me,” he remarked in a curious voice, “I was talking to Hans Schneider, the despatch rider, just now. It looks as if they’re going

to catch this fellow Gimlet. The general is no fool. The reward did the trick—it usually does.”

“What have you heard?” inquired the other, in a low voice.

“Keep this to yourself,” replied his comrade, in that off-hand manner which some men affect when they know something important—or think they do. “I shouldn’t talk about it at all, really, but nobody is likely to overhear us up here. But don’t repeat it.”

In spite of his predicament Cub could hardly repress a smile. Here, indeed, was a classic example of how, in almost impossible circumstances, information can reach the enemy. But his smile faded as the man continued.

“From what I can make out we’ve as good as got this fellow Gimlet. About an hour ago, after the reward notices were posted, a fellow turns up at headquarters, at Caen, and says he has information worth part of the reward. A gipsy horse dealer, of Le Mans, he said he was. He gave evidence that a barge belonging to a girl named Marcelle something or other came into the quay at Le Mans with some suspicious characters on board. The girl asked him to look after her horse. These men, he swears, were dressed in the clothes of the girl’s father. Now, that fitted in with what was already known, because, the night before, the barge was up at Argentan. It had been commandeered, but the two men who went to take it over didn’t come back. By dragging the river one of the bodies was found. The chap had been shot, and a forty-five British service bullet was found in him. So it looks as if Gimlet and his men went down the river in the barge. At any rate, this horse dealer, Bertrand Dacosta, says there were three men with the girl, and he gave a description of them. He thinks there was a boy with them, but he’s not sure—he didn’t pay much attention at the time. Anyway, if there was, he couldn’t remember what he looked like. We know Gimlet came this way, and it just struck me that this brat the general picked up might be the same one. He comes from Caen, and that’s where the trouble started.”

“*Donner!* That was pretty smart work. Our people must be wide awake.”

“More than you guess. What about this. They’ve spotted the girl already. Saw her, so Hans tells me, at Orleans station. Got a man with her, supposed to be her uncle, and it turns out that he’s an absconding conscript from Le Mans.”

“They were arrested, I suppose?”

“Ha! That’s what you’d do, no doubt. The general is smarter than that. Arrest them? No fear. Leave them alone, but watch them—that’s his plan.”

“He’d look silly if they gave him the slip after all.”

“Not much chance of that. They’ve taken tickets for Paris. They missed the morning train, so they’ve got a long wait. There isn’t another till the night train which comes up from Narbonne. Gets to Paris about four in the morning.”

“But what’s the idea of leaving them loose?”

“Fool! Don’t you see these two must know this man Gimlet. It’s ten to one they’ll meet him somewhere. When they do—*phut!* We’ve got them all in one net.”

“Sounds too good to be true.”

“Hans told me—and he should know. But keep this to yourself. You know how these things leak out?”

“Don’t worry about that. I can keep my mouth shut.”

“The joke is, it seems that this gipsy has been detained—to keep him from talking, so they say; but I expect the truth is, the general doesn’t trust him a yard. But we’d better be getting back.”

To Cub’s infinite relief the two men disappeared down the staircase. He waited until the footsteps had receded to a safe distance, and then sat up. His face was white, and his lips dry with shock. His hands, as he lowered himself to the floor, were trembling. Crossing to the window the Germans had just vacated he stared, at first with unseeing eyes, across the vista. His brain was reeling, and he found it difficult to think clearly. Snatches of the conversation he had overheard kept running through his mind like a scratched gramophone record repeating itself. It took him a little while to recover, but even then the position seemed so hopeless that he nearly gave way to despair. It was really anger, or rather, cold fury, that saved him. “That gipsy rat,” he grated. “The dirty traitor. The craven money-grubber.”

It was natural that he should look across to the chapel, now mellow in the glow of the setting sun. If only he could get in touch with Gimlet, he thought feverishly. If he could warn him, the position might yet be saved. But how? And then, as an obvious possibility occurred to him, he wondered why he had not thought of it before. His handkerchief was really too small for his purpose, so with a recklessness born of the gnawing anxiety that gripped his heart, he tore off the tail of his shirt and waved it through the loophole.

Nothing happened. He went on waving. Still nothing happened. For all he knew, he thought bitterly, the priest might have gone. They might all have gone, if it came to that. Still, he went on waving. There was nothing else he could do.

It was ten minutes that seemed like hours before his signal was answered, and when he saw Gimlet's handkerchief flutter he could have shouted with relief and joy. As he read Gimlet's curt order he realised at once the wisdom of it, and although he would have preferred to signal the terrible news he had just heard, regardless of consequences to himself, he withdrew to think the matter over, and wait, taking up a position from which he could keep an eye on the chapel.

Soon afterwards he saw the handkerchief flutter again, and made out the signal—not without difficulty, for dusk was closing in:

Leaving here. Watch cottages below you direction east. Message ends.

Cub moved to a new position, one that commanded a view of the cottages, and settled down to wait. Night came, and with it a melancholy silence that dragged like millstones on the feet of Time.

CHAPTER XV

GIMLET MAKES HIS PLAN

DURING this period of early darkness the commandos moved from the chapel to the cottages, an operation that was carried out quietly, and with complete success. Father Edwinus went first, taking the roundabout route he had advised. He walked slowly, with head bent as though in profound meditation, although in fact his eyes and ears and nerves were braced for the first sign of danger. The commandos followed, loafing rather than walking like men on a definite errand, with a fair interval between them. The arrangement was that they should keep within sight of each other. Should trouble develop, the others were to close up and take such action as the situation demanded. As it happened, nothing of the sort occurred, and the little party reached its objective without seeing a soul.

It turned out that the cottages referred to by the *padre* comprised a row of four tiny dilapidated dwellings, set on a slope, and terminating in an old tavern, also empty, in much the same condition. This inn, Gimlet found on close inspection, seemed to be larger than its position warranted, for it was built round a cobbled yard. That is to say, there was an opening in the middle large enough to permit the entrance of a vehicle into the yard, and the stables beyond—a not uncommon arrangement. The priest explained that

in times gone by the inn had been a posting house, where travellers could ride in and change their horses.

Still under the *curé's* guidance they returned to the top cottage, which was the one nearest to the chateau, and tried the door. Having ascertained that it was locked, access to the inside was quickly gained by the simple expedient of forcing a window—a task which Copper performed in silence. Passing to the rear of the building the back door was opened from the inside, so that it was possible to survey the imposing pile beyond, although in the failing light little detail could be seen. Against the darkening sky the building looked enormous, with the donjon rising up like a mighty monument. For the first time the immensity of the ancient bulwark, or keep, to give it its proper name, could be really appreciated. The windows, or the apertures left in the masonry which served as such, could just be made out, a little darker than the rest. Nearer, the course of the barbed-wire fence could be followed, passing, as the priest had described, the end of the garden. The distance from the wire to the base of the tower was about thirty paces, and consisted of a flat, open, gravelled area, the home of a few sun-parched weeds.

All this Gimlet regarded for some time without speaking, but at last he put a question to Trapper.

“Could you,” he asked, pointing to the top of the great round tower, “put an arrow through that window?”

Trapper looked dubious. “It’s a long shot, and the light is bad, but it might be done, although I would not swear to hit the mark first time. It would be easier after the moon comes up. It would be easier now if I could stand on the roof, there.” He pointed to the roof of the chateau proper, which ended in a high gable under the tower. “There is plenty of good old ivy, so an ascent should be possible,” he added.

“If you miss,” returned Gimlet thoughtfully, “the arrow will fall into the yard, perhaps with enough noise to attract a sentry.”

“And if he hits the mark the arrow might hit Cub in the face, if he happens to be looking out,” put in Copper shrewdly.

“I hadn’t overlooked that,” said Gimlet. “Before we begin operations I shall flash a message to Cub with the torch, telling him to stand clear. He will be waiting for a signal, no doubt. By standing well back in the house the light should not be seen by sentries. It will of course be necessary to cut a way through the wire.”

“Don’t forget the bells,” murmured Copper.

“By working on the bottom strands we ought to be able to do the job without disturbing them. That will take time.” Gimlet’s tone was still pensive.

“What’s the general idea, sir, if I may ask?” inquired Copper.

“Well, in view of what the *padre* tells us, it’s pretty obvious that we couldn’t hope to get into the building through the front door without colliding with the guard. That would result in a good deal of noise, and noise is something we must avoid. Anything in the way of an alarm would bring the whole garrison down on us, and that would knock any attempt at rescue right on the head. My idea, therefore, is to join Cub in the Tower. If I can do that, not only should I gain admission without disturbing anybody, but Cub, who knows his way about the inside of the place, could guide me to the chapel, where the prisoners sleep.”

“Are you thinking of evacuating everyone out of that window?” asked Copper incredulously, pointing to the tower.

“That’s it.”

“But how are you going to get up?”

“By means of a rope, I hope.” Gimlet turned to Father Edwinus, who stood listening to the conversation. “Can you procure for us a rope—it would have to be a long one—and a ball of string?”

“May I ask for what purpose, *monsieur*?”

“The string will be fastened to an arrow, and the arrow will be shot through that window. To the string will be fastened the rope. Cub, by hauling on the string, will draw up the rope and make it fast.”

“I have string, but no rope long enough for that purpose,” said the priest regretfully.

“What about the church ropes—those you use to ring the bells?”

“*Pst!* Dolt that I am! But, of course. I did not think of that. You think of everything, *monsieur*.”

“Not everything, father,” said Gimlet, smiling. “But we are trained to think of ways and means. If you will let us have the rope, I promise you shall have it back, so that you will not be incriminated in the affair—as you would be if the Germans found the rope and recognised it.”

“I will fetch it at once,” offered the priest. “It will take a little while.”

“It will be long enough for our purpose?”

“Ample, *monsieur*. There are three ropes, and they can be joined together.”

“Then fetch them, *mon père*. There is no need for haste. Don’t forget the string.”

“I will return as quickly as may be,” promised the priest, and departed forthwith.

Gimlet turned to the others. “That settles that. Now then, if we get those chaps out we are going to be quite a party. There are several of them, and some, after ill usage by the Nazis, will be in no state for a forced march. Yet, once the job is done, the sooner we are away from this place, the better. In the car which we left at the aerodrome we could travel faster, and farther. I see no great difficulty in getting it. We shall have to wait for the rope, anyway. Also, I think it’s time we got back into our uniforms. Not only would they make our attack a military operation, but they would convince the prisoners that we are genuine; otherwise they might not believe us, taking our intrusion as some sort of new trick by the Nazis. Copper, I want you to go to the aerodrome and fetch the car. Bring it here and park it in the courtyard of the inn, just below; no one will be likely to see it there. While you are away we’ll make a start on the wire—it will take time to cut a clean gap.”

“Aye-aye, sir!” assented Copper. “I shall feel more at home in khaki.”

“All right. Move off. Remember, I shall depend on the car.”

“You’ll get it,” promised Copper cheerfully, and vanished into the darkness.

Gimlet turned to Trapper. “Get the cutters out and let’s see about this wire,” he ordered. “You do the cutting, working only on the bottom strands. I’ll draw it out as you cut, and put it out of the way. You can ignore the sentries. I’ll watch for them. If I tap you on the foot, stop working and lie still. Two taps will mean you can carry on.”

“Okay, sir!” Trapper produced the powerful cutters, and making his way cautiously to the bottom of the garden, began work. Lying flat, he cut pieces out of the wire, methodically, with the dexterity of long practice. Gimlet knelt behind him in a position from which he could watch the fence in both directions, and taking the loose ends of wire as Trapper passed them to him, drew each piece clear, and disposed of it by tossing it into the next garden.

A few minutes later the first sentry made his appearance. He wore a greatcoat, for the air was chilly, and on his head a field service cap, not a steel helmet—a detail that was noted by Gimlet, who, seeing him coming, tapped Trapper’s foot. They both lay flat, motionless, while the sentry sauntered by, his rifle at the slope. A short distance below he met his half-section, had a few words with him, and then strolled back, passing within

ten feet of where the commandos lay. As soon as he was at a safe distance the work was resumed. This happened on and off for the next hour, by which time the gap was complete, and Father Edwinus had returned with the information that he had brought the rope, the string, and a small parcel of food.

Gimlet remarked that Copper was not yet back, but that there was no need to delay on that account. The stars were bright in the sky, and Trapper announced that these provided enough light to give him a reasonable chance of putting an arrow through the window at the top of the donjon.

“It would be easier from that roof,” he averred. “To reach it, though, I guess I should make some noise in the ivy—and there are sentries. In any case, I do not like these sentries about,” he declared. “They would be better out of the way.”

“I think you’re right,” agreed Gimlet. “We’d better dispose of them first. It will be safer that way. We’ll knock the first one on the head as he passes; when his half-section walks along looking for him, we’ll deal with him in the same way. According to Father Edwinus there are two more sentries on the far side. They may appear in due course, but we should be able to handle them. After that things should be nice and quiet—at any rate, until the new guard takes over. That should not be yet. I expect they’re doing the usual four hours on and four off. We’ll get the two sentries on this side for a start; then I’ll signal to Cub to get his head out of the way and you can try your luck with an arrow. If you can’t manage it from the ground, you’ll have to get on the roof.” Gimlet turned to Father Edwinus. “There is no need for you to stay any longer; to do so would be taking a needless risk. Things may go wrong. Thank you for all you have done. Maybe we’ll meet again some day. No doubt you will hear in due course of our success or failure. The rope, when we have finished with it, we will leave in the kitchen of this cottage. You can collect it after we have gone.”

“If it is all the same to you, my son, I would prefer to see this business through,” answered the priest. “At last I feel that I am doing something for France. It would be better, too, I think, if I waited for the rope, and took it away with me.”

“As you wish,” concurred Gimlet. “But,” he added grimly, “for the next few minutes the work will be better suited for soldiers than for priests—you understand?”

“I comprehend perfectly, *monsieur*,” said Father Edwinus quietly. “I understand also that this is total war, and that the Nazis started it. Someone said long ago that those who sought to live by the sword should perish by

the sword. There was a time in the history of this castle that priests took an active part in the defence of their homeland. They did so in the war of 1870, when here at Chateaudun was fought a bitter battle by the people against the invading Prussians. In better times you can see a tablet in the *Place* commemorating the deeds of those brave souls. What those who were here before me could do, so I, under God's blessing, can also do. Proceed, my son, and take no account of me."

Gimlet smiled faintly in the gloom. "That's the spirit, father!" He glanced at Trapper. "It's time Copper was back," he said anxiously. "I wonder what he's up to?"

It was, perhaps, a good thing for his peace of mind that he did not know what Copper was up to.

CHAPTER XVI

COPPER GETS A SHOCK

IT had been in no spirit of apprehension that Copper had set out for his objective. He did not expect there would be any trouble in fetching the car, for he was the fortunate possessor of one of those minds that never does expect trouble, and is both surprised and indignant when it is encountered. It was no use, he often stated, trying to jump a fence before you came to it. There were some among his comrades who put this attitude down to lack of imagination; and there may have been something in their contention. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that Copper's sanguine outlook was a useful attribute on such work as now occupied his attention. Such plans as he made were primitive in their simplicity. If he were challenged, he decided, it was going to be too bad for the man who challenged him; and if anyone tried to stop the car after he was in it, it was going to be too bad for him, too. Such was the extent of Copper's practical philosophy, as he walked boldly down the road, intent on reaching his objective in the shortest possible time.

Being alone, he disdained such undignified manœuvres as crawling, or dodging from cover to cover, which always irritated him. After all, he had been a policeman, and London bobbies did not do that sort of thing. It went against the grain to do it now. Still, he was not wantonly reckless, and he did on one occasion, after a short tussle with his pride, stand behind a tree while some army lorries went by. He encountered one or two men on the road;

they passed him with a nervous *bonsoir*, to which he grunted a reply that was not in any known language. Fortunately—fortunately for them, that is—they were Frenchies, as Copper called them, so it did not matter.

As he approached the short drive that led from the Orleans road to the aerodrome, certain sounds, and one or two dim lights, caused him to suspect that something had happened on the landing-ground during the short time he had been away. Perceiving clearly that he would not discover just what this was by standing still, he walked on, his stride not shortening by an inch. His predominant reaction was curiosity. What *could* have happened? he asked himself—without guessing the answer. It was dark, much too dark to see anything from a distance, so with a slight frown of annoyance lining his forehead he advanced for a closer inspection.

He nearly walked into a German sentry who was standing at the gateway. Luckily this sentry, being a hundred miles away—as he supposed—from any possible trouble, was in much the same frame of mind as Copper. It is reasonable to assume that he took the belated pedestrian for a stray Frenchman making his way home. At any rate, his “*Wer da?*” was spoken quite casually.

“*Wer da?*” is the German equivalent of the British “Who goes there?” but Copper did not know that. He only knew that the speaker was a German, because he had learned to tell the difference between French and German. He was sure that the words spoken in the darkness were not French; therefore the man must be a German. As a matter of fact, by this simple logic he arrived at the truth. To be precise, the man was a member of the Luftwaffe, on gate duty.

With his hands rolling themselves into fists, Copper walked straight up to him. He could just see the rifle raised threateningly, but he guessed that the man would not shoot, because he had often been a sentry himself, and he knew that a man, any man, hesitates to fire his weapon until he is quite sure that such action is justified. One can get into serious trouble, for example, for shooting one’s own officer, who might be returning home late after a night out. What the sentry thought we do not know, for if he made a decision at all it came too late to serve any useful purpose. His rifle was brushed aside, and Copper’s great fist crashed like a battering ram into the middle of his face. Under such a blow the proverbial ox would have staggered, at least. The sentry, who happened to be a little man, did more than that. His cap flew off as he was lifted from his feet and hurled with considerable force against the gate which he was supposed to be guarding. He slumped to the ground and lay still. Copper leaned over him for a moment, gazing into the unconscious face; then he dragged the inert body to one side, tied the hands

and feet with the man's own lanyard, and placed him carefully in the bottom of the hedge.

"Sorry, chum," he said apologetically, "but you asked fer it!"

It is not to be supposed from the foregoing that Copper was a fool. Far from it. He would not have been in the commandos if he were. He had already realised that if a sentry had been posted there must be an enemy unit of some sort in the vicinity; and what place could be more likely than the aerodrome? That this was so he soon verified by advancing a short distance, and then lying down to get a clear view of the skyline. What he saw brought his favourite expletive to his lips. "Well, strike me pink!" he muttered, as he made out the silhouettes of a number of aircraft, so big that they were obviously bombers, lined up in front of the dilapidated hangars. "Strike me pink!" he breathed again. "That's awkward!" But on further consideration he did not see that the presence of these machines should necessarily interfere with the carrying out of his orders, which were to get the car, and the sacks containing the uniforms. The sentry was disposed of—that was the main thing, he reasoned. If there were any more—well, they would have to be disposed of, too. This, he appreciated, would have to be done without noise, if possible; nevertheless before advancing towards the shed in which the car had been parked, he made sure that his revolver was handy.

The sight that confronted him when he reached the shed threw him for a moment into confusion. The garage was full of vehicles; not merely were a few cars parked in it; the building was literally packed with lorries of all shapes and sizes, to the number, he judged, of not less than thirty. And somewhere behind all these, presumably, was the car he had come to fetch. He had a good look round to make sure that no Germans were about, and then, scratching his head in perplexity, considered his problem. One thing was at once clear. It was going to be a long time, a very long time, even if he were not interrupted, to move all these vehicles, one by one, in order to get to the car at the back. It would, he perceived, take more time than he could afford; apart from which, the Germans might come and ask him what he was doing. They might even object. What was the answer?

Copper could think of only one answer; and it was, in fact, the only practicable one. If he could not get to his own car, then he would have to take one of the lorries. As far as he knew, it would serve Gimlet's purpose equally well, except that a lorry was not as fast as a car. Yes, he decided, it would have to be a lorry. Nothing else for it.

Having reached this decision he returned to the sentry to make sure that the man was in no condition to cause trouble at an inconvenient moment. The German was still unconscious, so, acting on the spur of the moment, he

picked up his cap and put it on his head, remarking: “You don’t mind if I borrow your titfer,^[3] chum?” This was no mere fooling. He knew that seated in a lorry little more than a man’s head and shoulders can be seen by a person standing on the ground; the hat, while far from being a disguise, might serve a useful purpose if he were questioned—might, in fact, save him from being questioned, a contingency which, since he could speak neither French nor German, he preferred to avoid.

[3] Army rhyming slang, derives from tit-for-tat = hat.

Leaving the sentry, he walked back down the track to the place where the sacks containing the uniforms and equipment had been dumped. It took only a moment to recover them, and pile them in a heap on the grass verge. This done, he returned to the garage and selecting a new-looking five-ton lorry, climbed into the seat and started the engine.

He frowned when a voice suddenly called something from the back of the building—the voice speaking, of course, in German. He had not known that anyone was there, nor even suspected it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” he growled in English, and drove out, stopping when he came to the heap of sacks. He had just pitched them into the back of the lorry and was moving round to the front seat, when a German officer appeared, walking briskly up the track towards the camp. He stared hard at Copper, and, although he was unaware of it, he was never nearer to death than at that moment. With inspired presence of mind Copper saluted. The officer returned the salute in the perfunctory way officers usually return salutes, and walked on without stopping.

Copper gazed after the retreating figure. “Strike me purple!” he muttered. “That takes the blinkin’ biscuit! Fancy me, saluting a perishing Jerry! Trapper won’t ’alf laugh when I tell ’im about it—not ’alf he won’t.” Climbing up into the seat, he continued on towards Chateaudun. Nothing happened—not that he supposed anything would happen. Why should it? he reasoned, naïvely.

He cruised quietly through the town, and without being challenged ran on down the hill past the cottages, and brought the lorry to a stop in the courtyard of the inn, in accordance with orders. Walking to the top cottage, he found Gimlet waiting for him.

“You’ve been a long time,” accused Gimlet.

“Had a spot o’ trouble,” answered Copper briefly.

“What happened?”

“There’s some flying blokes moved in,” explained Copper. “I couldn’t get ter the car fer lorries, so I brought a lorry instead.”

“That’ll do. Get the kit?”

“It’s all here.”

“Good!” murmured Gimlet. “We’re all set? Let’s get into our uniforms.”

“Aye-aye, sir,” agreed Copper.

CHAPTER XVII

DIZZY WORK IN THE DARK

CUB, in his lofty prison, was far from happy. It seemed a long while since he had received the signal from the chapel, and he could not imagine what his comrades were doing. He had lost all count of time. Naturally, having been warned to do so, he watched the cottages closely and unceasingly, but he saw nothing, except the vague shapes of the sentries patrolling the wire. Even these eventually failed to appear; at any rate, he saw them no more, although, curiously enough, he did not connect their disappearance with the commandos.

Then, at long last, he saw a light flash in what he took to be the kitchen of the nearest cottage. Actually, it was little more than a reflection on the window-panes, but it told him things were on the move, and he read the message eagerly, as letter by letter it was flashed in the Morse code.

Take cover. Stand by to receive arrow. Haul on string and make rope fast. Am coming up. Whistle if O.K.

Cub whistled softly, whereupon the light went out and was seen no more. With his heart beating fast he sat on the floor and waited. So taut were his nerves that he started when he heard a sharp *snick*, as if some object had struck near the window. It was followed almost at once by a faint clatter far below, and he guessed that Trapper had missed his mark. Twice more the same thing happened; then, with a whizz and a smack the arrow flew through the window to strike the wall on the far side, and fall with a thud. It took him only a moment to find it, with the string attached. Crossing to the window, he began to haul in, hand over hand. Extra weight told him when

the rope began its upward journey, and it needed all his strength to drag it in. Making it fast to one of the great beams that already had served him so well, he again whistled softly. Instantly the rope creaked as it took the strain, and he peered down into the gloomy depths below to see if he could discern the climber. What puzzled him was how Gimlet—assuming that it was Gimlet—hoped to climb the dizzy height, for as he knew well, climbing a rope is no easy matter. Then he saw a figure already so close, and in such a position, that he gasped with astonishment and the most acute anxiety. It was not hanging vertically; instead, it stood out at an angle from the wall, feet in the ivy, head and shoulders in space. He understood, then, how the climb was being made. Gimlet was not climbing the rope in the literal sense of the word; he was, so to speak, walking up the wall, leaning back on the rope, using the gnarled ivy as footholds. Even so, Cub shuddered as he looked down the fearful height and contemplated the consequences of a slip, of one false step.

In a surprisingly short time Gimlet's head and shoulders appeared in the aperture, and Cub had another shock when he observed that he was in uniform. A brief final struggle, and Gimlet was inside, on the floor, breathing heavily.

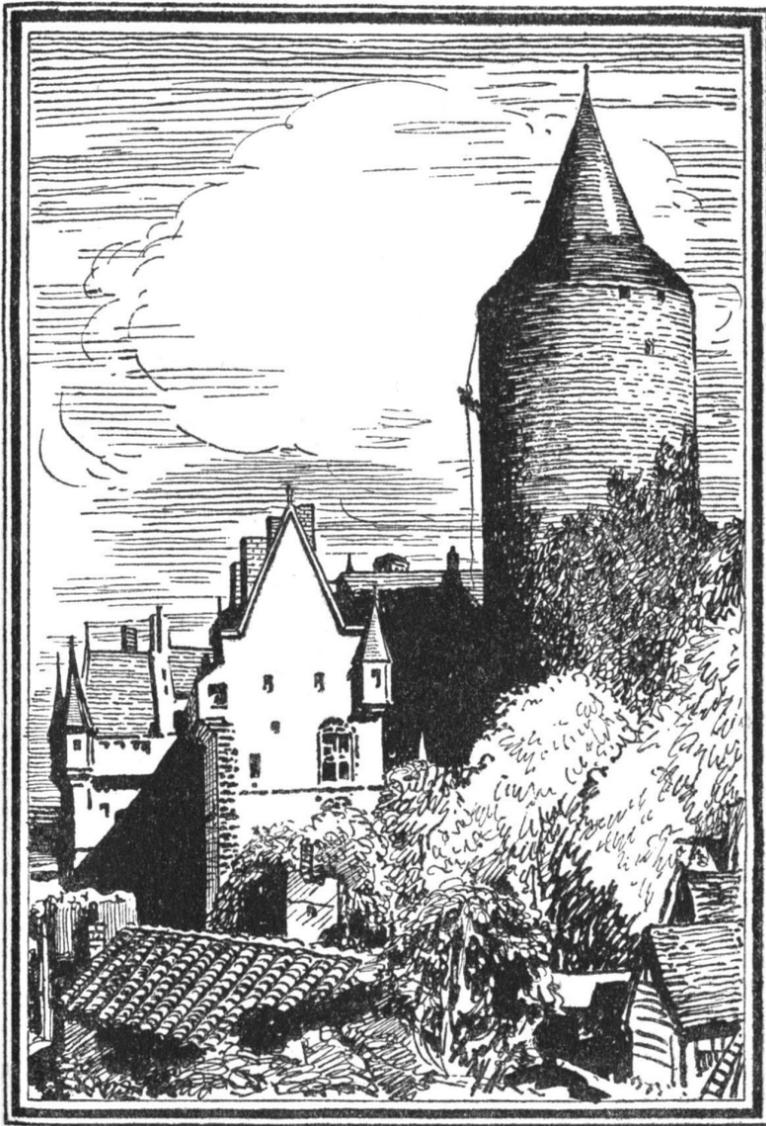
“By gad!” he panted. “That was a stiffish—climb. Are you—all right?”

“Right as rain, but I've some ghastly news,” answered Cub.

“Tell me while I'm getting my breath,” invited Gimlet.

“That rat of a fellow in Le Mans, Bertrand, whom Marcelle asked to mind her horse, was a Vichyite. He has betrayed us.” Cub repeated the gist of the conversation he had overheard between the two German soldiers.

“Not so good,” was all Gimlet had to say. “One fine day that fellow will get what's coming to him.”



GIMLET WAS NOT CLIMBING THE ROPE IN THE LITERAL SENSE OF THE WORD . . . HE WAS WALKING UP THE WALL.

“But don’t you realise, sir, that they’ll capture Marcelle and her uncle, to say nothing of The Fleas, if Marcelle tries to make contact with them?”

“Of course I do, but that mustn’t be allowed to happen,” returned Gimlet curtly.

“But Marcelle and Gaston will soon be on their way to Paris!” said Cub in a strained voice.

“So shall we, I hope,” replied Gimlet evenly.

“The Gestapo will meet the train.”

“Any reason why *we* shouldn’t?” queried Gimlet, as he got up. “But we’ve several things to do first.”

“You mean—you’re thinking of going to Paris—in that uniform?” Cub was incredulous.

“Suppose we talk about that when the time comes?” suggested Gimlet. “You know your way about this place, I understand?”

“Pretty well.”

“Good. I want you to show me the way to the chapel. That’s where the prisoners are confined—or should be. I propose to bring them up here—or at any rate, those who are prepared to take their chance with us. They can go down the rope to Trapper, who is waiting at the bottom.”

“They’ll have a job—getting down the rope.”

“Not such a job as I had to get up it, I’ll warrant,” said Gimlet warmly. “Lead on. By the way, have you still got your pistol?”

“Yes.”

“Then have it handy—you may need it. We’re going through with this, whatever happens—understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well. Let’s go. Don’t make a noise.”

“There are some pretty bad places,” warned Cub.

“Tell me when we come to them. Go ahead.”

The descent of the spiral staircase in the dark was to Cub something of a nightmare. The steps seemed interminable. What Gimlet thought about it all he did not know, for he made no comment; nor did he make any remark as they traversed the upper passage, stepping over the holes in the floor.

After descending two more flights of stairs, slowly, and with infinite caution, Cub stopped. “We’re on the ground floor,” he whispered. “You see the passage in front? If you turn to the left it takes you to the entrance hall. If you turn to the right it brings you to the chapel door. The door is on the left-hand side.”

“Good. I’ll take the lead now.”

Moving noiselessly in his rubber-soled shoes, Gimlet went on in front towards the glow of light that illuminated the passage which Cub had indicated. Reaching it, he lay flat, and peered round the corner, looking both ways. He was back in a moment, on his feet, a finger on his lips.

“Sentry—outside the chapel door.” His lips did little more than frame the words.

With what interest Cub now watched Gimlet prepare for action can be better imagined than described. His heart was palpitating with such excitement as he had never known, the more because it had to be restrained. Yet it all seemed so simple—afterwards.

Gimlet loosened his dagger in its sheath and took his revolver in his right hand. Then, quite calmly, without any attempt at concealment, he turned the corner and strode towards the sentry, who was, Cub now saw, about six paces distant.

Gimlet had covered the distance before the sentry became aware of him. “*Hande hoch!*” ordered Gimlet crisply.

The German did not move. He stood, gaping foolishly, his eyes round, at first with wonder, then fear. He behaved like a man stricken by a sort of mental paralysis, and made no protest as Gimlet, with his gun in the man’s stomach, took the rifle from his hands. Slowly the sentry obeyed Gimlet’s order to put his hands up.

Cub could almost feel sorry for him. The shock must have been terrific, and most men, he reflected, suddenly confronted in the dead of night by the devil himself, as it were, would probably have behaved in the same way.

“The key,” said Gimlet tersely, still speaking in German.

Dumbly, the wretched man pointed to a key that hung on a nail beside the door.

“Open the door, Cub,” ordered Gimlet, and as Cub complied he pushed the sentry inside. “Keep him covered,” went on Gimlet. “If he makes one false move, or let’s out one squeal, let him have it. We can’t afford to be squeamish. It’s unlikely that a shot in here would be heard outside, through these old walls. Always remember, what we are doing to him is nothing to what he’d do to us if he had the chance.”

By this time, from inside the room, which was of course in darkness, came exclamations of surprise and alarm. Gimlet closed the door.

“Is there a light in here?” he asked, speaking in French.

“Yes,” came a voice. “The switch is by the door.”

“Is the room blacked out?”

“Yes.”

Gimlet switched on the light, and all was plain to see. Beds lined the walls. In them, men, mostly elderly men, were sitting up, facing the intruders.

Gimlet spoke again. "Gentlemen," he said, "am I correct in supposing that you are all prisoners?"

There was a murmur of assent.

"Is General Romortin in here?"

"I am General Romortin," said a tall, fine-looking old man, getting out of bed. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I address myself to you, *monsieur le général*, as the senior officer present, although what I have to say applies to all," stated Gimlet. "My name is Captain King, commanding a unit of British Combined Operations. We have come here to effect your escape, and, if possible, take to England those who wish to go. Please make up your minds quickly, because the matter is somewhat urgent."

Dead silence greeted this pronouncement, which must have been startling to the hearers.

"Is there anyone here who does not wish to escape?" queried Gimlet.

There was a murmur of conversation. "I speak for all," said General Romortin. "We wish to escape."

"You will follow me?"

"With pleasure, *capitan*."

"Is anyone ill?" inquired Gimlet. "I ask because escape involves a descent by rope from the donjon to the courtyard, where my men are waiting. The sentries have been disposed of, but it is not a trip for a sick man."

"No man here is so ill that he would not seize this chance, even at the risk of his life," answered the general. There was a chorus of confirmation.

"In that case will you please dress quickly, gentlemen. Minutes are precious."

This request was not really necessary, because most of the prisoners were already dressing in feverish haste.

Gimlet turned to the German, who had now recovered sufficiently to grasp what was going on; but with Cub's pistol in the small of his back he made no attempt to move. Gimlet forced him to a bed, and having tied a blanket round his head lashed him to it—a task in which Cub took a hand. Gimlet then went to the door, where, as each one finished dressing, the prisoners assembled. When all were ready he spoke to them again.

"Gentlemen, I rely on your implicit obedience to my orders. He who fails in that will imperil the lives of all. Now follow the guide. No talking, please. You will be warned of the dangerous places." Gimlet turned to Cub.

“Show the way,” he ordered. “I shall guard the rear. The first to reach the top of the tower will begin the descent immediately. Lead on.”

“This way, *messieurs*,” said Cub, and started off, followed by the prisoners in single file. Gimlet locked the door behind him, leaving the sentry inside.

Then began the return journey to the donjon, with Cub still not quite sure whether he was asleep or awake. He could hardly believe that so much could be achieved so quickly, and with so little noise. Every instinct in him urged him to run, to escape before their intrusion was discovered; but copying Gimlet’s imperturbable manner, he held himself in hand. This, he thought vaguely, was discipline—or the result of it. How different, he reflected, were The Fleas’ frantic, haphazard methods!

In ten minutes the main party was mustered in the chamber in which he had spent such a long vigil. The first officer was on his way down the rope. Gimlet stood guard at the head of the staircase.

“Don’t forget, gentlemen; follow the instructions of the soldier whom you will find waiting at the bottom.”

The prisoners said nothing—or very little. They seemed to be stunned by the suddenness, the almost miraculous nature of the escape, savouring as it did more of medieval intrigue than modern military tactics. One by one they took the rope firmly in their hands, and disappeared from the window on the perilous descent, each one signalling by a tug on the rope when he reached the bottom. At last Gimlet and Cub remained.

“Down you go!” ordered Gimlet.

“What about you, sir?”

“I’m not coming this way.”

Cub started. “Why not?”

“Because the rope must go down. To leave it would incriminate Father Edwinus. Someone must stay to unfasten it. Copper and Trapper understand this. After giving those below time to get clear, I shall go down the staircase. I hope to be with you shortly. If I do not join you in fifteen minutes you will go without me. Copper knows what to do. By the way, stand clear when you get down or you may get the rope on your head.”

“But that means you’ll have to go through the front——”

“You’ve got your orders!” snapped Gimlet.

“Yes, sir,” acknowledged Cub heavily, and taking the rope, crawled through the window and started down hand over hand. When he reached the bottom he gave a tug and stepped quickly away. Trapper was waiting. The

rope came down with a swish. Trapper coiled it, and slung it over his shoulder.

“This way,” said he.

As they walked across the gravelled area, keeping sharp watch for danger, Trapper said, casually: “We thought we’d lost you. What’s the news?”

“The news is,” returned Cub, “that rascally horse dealer in Le Mans has, for a sum of money, told the Nazis about Marcelle bringing us down in her barge. Marcelle and Gaston have been spotted at Orleans, waiting for the Paris train. They are being watched by the Gestapo.”

Trapper stopped dead. His expression, usually cheerful, was suddenly grim. “Is zat so?” he said slowly. “*Enfin!* Now let me tell you something, kid,” he went on, in a voice that was brittle with passion. “If those swines lay a finger on that girl, one finger only, I’ll—I’ll——” Something seemed to stick in his throat. Then, recovering himself: “This is no time for talking,” he said coldly. “Keep going.”

Cub followed him to the wire, where Copper was waiting.

“Through the hole, kid,” said Trapper softly.

Cub crawled through the gap in the wire. It struck him that the cold-blooded efficiency of these men was almost past belief.

“I don’t like going without Gimlet!” he muttered.

“Neither do we,” returned Copper. “But when Gimlet gives orders, it’s as well to obey them without arguing the toss. Am I right, Trapper?”

“Sure. Sure you’re right,” answered Trapper in a dull voice, as though his thoughts were far away.

Copper glanced at him and nudged Cub. “What’s wrong with ’im?” he asked curiously.

“It’s bad news, about Marcelle. The Gestapo are watching her,” replied Cub.

“Oh, blimy!” murmured Copper. “If that’s right, chum, Gawd ’elp any Jerries who get in ’is way after this. But come on.”

Followed by Cub he strode on, leaving Trapper standing by the gap in the wire, the Sten gun in the crook of his arm.

CHAPTER XVIII

GIMLET GOES ALONE

FROM his elevated position, quietly smoking a cigarette, Gimlet watched those on the ground make a successful exit through the wire. Then, with the businesslike air of a man going to work, he dropped the cigarette on the floor, put his foot on it, and walking over to the staircase, began the descent. All was still quiet. The atmosphere within the thick old walls was that of a tomb.

Reaching the corridor on the ground floor, he glanced first in the direction of the chapel, and then turned to the left, towards the entrance hall, which he had never seen. Voices now came faintly to meet him, muffled, yet harsh, as though an argument was going on in some distant part of the building. But as he advanced, gun in hand, the voices reached him more clearly; and although he could make out that the language used was French, he was still unable to catch the actual words.

The hall, or one end of it, came into view, lighted—as he presently discovered—by a single electric bulb. Proceeding more slowly now, keeping close against the wall, he reached the end of the corridor, a position from which he was able to survey the entire vestibule. There was no one in it—he had fully expected a sentry. It was larger than he had imagined, but devoid of anything in the way of furniture. Floor, walls, and ceiling were of stone, bleak and grim, like a large prison cell. His eyes went to the massive double doors that opened on to the courtyard. They were shut. A huge iron key projected from the lock, as though the door had been closed for the night, and for some reason opened again. In a moment his hand was on the latch. Then he stopped, head half turned in a listening attitude, as from somewhere near at hand came a fresh outburst of voices, speaking in French. One was raised high as if in authority; another answered sullenly. The words reached him distinctly, and it was really on this account that he waited.

Said one, in guttural Teutonic French, stiff with anger: “Fool! Don’t you realise that I have made a special journey? The boy can’t be far away. It is important that this fellow should see him at once. If he turns out to be the boy who travelled in the barge with those cut-throat Englanders, we should soon tear some useful information out of him. Why did you not report immediately that the boy had disappeared?”

“I did not want to cause a scene unnecessarily,” came another voice—this in fluent French although in a cringing tone. “Naturally, I hoped the boy would turn up.”

“Imbecile!”

“It was not my fault!” went on the second voice. “I tell you, I did not even see him. It was while his escort was reporting to me that he vanished. The escort was one of your men. Blame him—not me!”

“*Ach zo!* Well, we shall hear what the *Generaloberst* has to say about this when I get through to him. Already he is in no sweet temper. He has given me twelve hours to find this cursed commando captain. *Gott!* What would I not give to clap my eyes on him! The boy was a heaven-sent chance, and you——”

At this juncture a telephone-bell jangled.

“This will be Gunther,” went on the voice, with a threat in it. The bell cut out abruptly as the instrument was picked up. “*Ya—ya, Generaloberst,* this is *Hauptmann* von Roth. I regret to report that Colonel Frey has allowed the boy to escape.”

Now, all this time Gimlet had been standing by the door with his hand on the latch, looking over his shoulder at another door that stood ajar on the inner side of the hall. It was from the room beyond that the voices came. And as he listened his expression hardened. Curiosity was replaced by understanding, for he now had a pretty good idea of who was in the room, and what was going on. A dozen swift paces took him to the door, and he pushed it open, gently, a trifle more, so that he had a clear picture of the inside.

The room was furnished as an office. Papers were strewn on a heavy desk behind which stood a man with a French officer’s tunic, unbuttoned, pulled on over pyjamas, as though he had been fetched from his bed. Standing in front of the desk, with the telephone in his hands, was a German officer who could only be von Roth. A little apart, looking ill at ease, was the man whom Gimlet had last seen on the quay at Le Mans, the man Marcelle had called Bertrand, the man who had betrayed her. Von Roth was talking volubly into the telephone, but Gimlet was no longer interested in the conversation even though his name was frequently mentioned. Besides, he had no time to waste.

He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

The movement must have been both seen and heard by those already there. All eyes switched to the door. After the first sharp intake of breath the only sound was *Generaloberst* Gunther’s voice, harsh and distorted, coming over the telephone receiver. Staring, very slowly, blindly, von Roth put the instrument on the desk. There was a crash as it overturned, but the voice at the other end went on speaking, or rather, shouting.

Gimlet's face was expressionless. His eyes were hard and cold, like glacier ice.

"You know who I am?" he said quietly.

No one answered.

"Come, *Hauptmann* von Roth, surely a moment or two ago I heard you express a desire to meet me?" went on Gimlet, a suspicion of banter creeping into his voice. "Well, here I am!"

Still no one spoke, or moved. Only the quisling colonel's tongue flicked nervously over his lips.

"Well, come on, what are you staring at?" Gimlet snapped the words. "You've all got weapons. Use them. Or would you, von Roth, rather that my hands were tied behind my back, as were those of the civilians you murdered in Caen, and other places?"

The German found his voice. It was pitched high with incredulity. "What are you doing here?" he asked. His eyes were still on Gimlet's face, as if it fascinated him.

"That is something you will soon learn," answered Gimlet.

"What are you going to do?" muttered von Roth.



STARING, VERY SLOWLY VON ROTH PUT THE INSTRUMENT ON THE
DESK.

“I’m going to kill you, unless you can kill me first,” rejoined Gimlet evenly. “None of you is fit to live—*stand still!*” Gimlet’s gun switched like the head of a striking snake to cover the gipsy who, pale as death, had started to back away. “I am going to count three,” went on Gimlet inexorably. “On the word three, whether you move or not, I shall shoot.”

“This is murder!” blustered the Nazi. “I demand to be treated as a prisoner, in accordance with the Rules of War.”

Gimlet’s voice was soft and low. “Murder,” he breathed. “You talk of murder. That, admittedly, is something you know much about. You prattle glibly of the Rules of War. What do you know of the Rules of War? You ask for mercy. What do you know of mercy—you thug, you hell-hound? What mercy did you show those innocent hostages in the market-place at Caen? when in your foul fury you vented your spite on them because you could not catch a man who had slipped through your fingers. You slew them in cold blood.” Gimlet’s voice quivered for a moment. “And now,” he went on, with steel in his voice, “you ask for honourable treatment. What do you know of honour? Get your gun, butcher, because I am going to count. One—two—”

The Nazi moved like lightning. His hand flew to his holster and he dived for cover behind the desk. He did not reach it. Gimlet's gun roared, flame streaking from the muzzle.

The German stopped as though he had collided with an invisible wall. His hands clawed at the desk, but the slipping fingers found no hold, and he crashed in a crumpled heap. For a second or two his heels beat a spasmodic tattoo on the floor. Then he lay still. Silence fell, a silence loaded with pale blue haze and the acrid reek of cordite.

Gimlet's eyes, frosty, relentless, found the gipsy.

"No!" gasped the man. "No! In God's name!" His terror was pathetic, but it made no impression on the man who confronted him.

"So you call on God?" sneered Gimlet. "Were you thinking of God when you betrayed a girl who has more courage in one finger than you have in the whole of your vile body? Yet you would have sent her to her death for a handful of Nazi-tarnished francs. You *Judas*. Now go and spend them in hell!"

The gipsy screamed, running like a hunted rat to the end of the room, seeking an exit where none existed. Again Gimlet's gun roared. The man sprawled across the floor, moaning. Presently he, too, lay still.

Gimlet turned to the Frenchman. "Take off that tunic," he ordered curtly.

"Take—off——?"

"Take it off, I said!" rasped Gimlet. "It's the only decent thing about you. Too many brave men have died in that uniform for you to share the honour—you traitor—you cheat—you wolf that would gorge himself on the bodies of his comrades. Take it off!"

With hands that shook, his eyes on Gimlet's face, Frey took off the tunic and put it on the desk. Then, suddenly, he raised his hands above his head. "You wouldn't shoot—you couldn't shoot a man with his hands up!" he faltered.

"Craven, too, like all traitors!" scoffed Gimlet. "You have made many mistakes, Colonel, but this, your last, is the greatest of all. You are an enemy of my country and your own, and of all true Frenchmen. Doubtless you have a pistol handy. If you prefer not to use it, that is your affair; but if you could not live like a man, at least try to die like one."

The quisling must have read his fate in the blue, scornful eyes, for with a speed born of despair he whipped open a drawer of the desk and snatched up an automatic.

Two shots came so close together that they sounded as one. Actually the colonel fired first, but he was in too great a hurry. The bullet struck the floor at Gimlet's feet and ricocheted with a shrill whine from floor to wall and from wall to ceiling. Gimlet did not move. The other staggered back a pace and fell into his chair, coughing. His eyes, glazed with horror, were still on Gimlet's face.

From the telephone came Gunther's voice, bellowing now, lending a macabre touch to the scene. Gimlet walked over, picked up the receiver, and spoke.

"Hello! *Generaloberst* Gunther? This is Captain King speaking. You know me better, I think, as Gimlet. Ah! You do know me? What am I doing here? Use your imagination, general. I can't stop to talk to you now. You heard shooting? Yes, there are some casualties. The chateau will need a new commandant, and you, *Generaloberst*, will need a new adjutant. Von Roth has left your service to take up duties in an even more sulphurous headquarters where, I hope, you will presently join him. *Gute nacht, Generaloberst!*"

With a swift jerk Gimlet tore the 'phone cable out of the wall, took a last glance round the room, and walked out. Closing the door behind him, he stood for a moment or two, listening. He did not think that the sounds of the shots would be heard outside, through two stone walls, the outer one several feet thick; and it seemed that he was right, for no one came. All was quiet.

Walking on to the main entrance doors he opened one of them a little way and looked out. A sentry who was on duty, his rifle at the slope, jumped to attention, as if expecting an officer to emerge, having, apparently, seen the door open.

Gimlet spoke to him sharply in German, taking care to keep out of sight. "Come here," he said. "There has been trouble in the office of the commandant."

"*Jawohl!* I thought I heard something," said the soldier, and marched into the hall. In the light he saw Gimlet at once. As his eyes took in the uniform from top to bottom it was evident that he knew what it was, for his mouth opened foolishly. But no sound came—probably because Gimlet's gun jabbed him in the stomach.

"Not a sound, if you wish to live," said Gimlet softly. "To the commandant's office—march."

The soldier, who may have heard of the reputation of the commandos, obeyed. Gimlet followed and opened the door.

“Inside,” he said shortly, “You will find something to interest you there,” he added. “If you are wise you will think a little while before calling for help. You will be sorry if I come back.”

The German went in. He was an oldish man, a member of a Bavarian regiment, and looked more like a farmer than a soldier. At any rate, he had no stomach for a fight with the lean, businesslike commando.

Gimlet locked the door behind him, and returning to the front entrance, looked out. The moon was just coming up, shedding a wan light over the courtyard. It was deserted, although voices of talking and laughing came from the guardhouse at the gate in the outer wall. Closing the door behind him, he locked it and put the key in his pocket; then, keeping close to the building, watching the guardhouse, he walked on until he was opposite the gap in the wire. Another glance to right and left and he crossed the open space swiftly.

“That you, Skipper?” came Trapper’s voice, in a hoarse whisper.

“Yes.” Gimlet crawled through the wire and stood up. “Everything all right?”

“Sure—but I’d just about given you up.”

“I had several things to do,” explained Gimlet.

“The party is in the lorry, only waiting for us to move off.”

“In that case we’ll get cracking,” returned Gimlet. “There’s going to be quite a rumpus here presently.”

As they walked down the road to the inn, Trapper remarked: “Cub tells me they’ve got the low-down on Marcelle. That double-crossing gipsy horse dealer squealed. *Ma foi!* I’ll have his scalp——”

“You’re too late,” interrupted Gimlet. “I’ve already had it. He was inside.”

Trapper stopped dead. “*Sacré nom!* How did he die?”

“I shot him.”

“Ah, that was too quick, sir!” muttered Trapper. “You should have called me. There is an Indian trick I know for making people die slowly——”

“We’re not Indians,” broke in Gimlet curtly.

“No,” agreed Trapper; “there are times, though, when I think it is a pity.”

The lorry was waiting in the yard of the inn, Copper at the wheel.

Said Gimlet, looking at his watch: “The time is one-thirty-five. I want to be in Paris, at the Quai d’Orsay Station, in time to meet the Orleans train. It’s due at four. The distance is about eighty miles. Can you do it?”

“Easy, sir,” answered Copper cheerfully.

General Romortin’s head appeared round the fabric cover of the lorry. “Did I hear you say you were going to Paris, *capitan*?”

“Yes,” replied Gimlet, “We have to pick up two friends there.”

“If you could stop at my house in the Bois de Boulogne I could pick up some papers that your Government would be glad to have—those the Germans were so anxious to obtain.”

“We will discuss it on the way, general,” returned Gimlet.

“Certainly, *monsieur*.”

“You cover the rear with the Sten gun,” Gimlet told Trapper, and climbed in beside Copper. “All right—let her go,” he ordered. “Good-bye, Father Edwinus, and a thousand thanks.”

The priest raised his hand. “Farewell! God go with you.”

The engine purred, and the lorry swung out on to the open road.

CHAPTER XIX

PARIS

CUB saw little of the journey to Paris. He slept most of the way, for now there was an opportunity to relax, weariness came upon him, and he succumbed to it, as he was bound to, for sleep is something before which even the strongest must sooner or later fall. His dreams were punctuated by occasional incidents, but only two of them really brought him back to full consciousness. Three times—or it may have been four—the lorry stopped, and Trapper got out to cut the telegraph wires that followed the road. He could see his silhouette against the sky, clinging to the top of the post, in a manner reminiscent of “a monkey on a stick,” and heard the soft snick of the cutters as they bit through the wires with no more effort than if they had been made of thread. Then, monotonously, the lorry resumed its journey.

There was an incident of a different sort when a helmeted motor cyclist came tearing along, passed them, and half-turning in his saddle, signalled to the driver to stop. Copper gave the wheel a vicious twist, causing the lorry to swerve sharply, so that it struck the motor-bike broadside-on and sent it crashing into the ditch. Without a backward glance Copper drove on.

“That’ll learn ’im!” said he, dispassionately.

Trapper spat out of the back of the car. “In future, I guess that guy will think twice before he tries to stop travellers on the road,” he remarked to Cub, without emotion.

“This is the maddest thing I have ever heard of,” declared Cub. “You’ll never get away with it. The whole country must be looking for us—and besides, how are we going to get all this bunch across the Channel?”

“I reckon Gimlet knows what he’s doing,” returned Trapper, with calm assurance. “You’ll be surprised.”

“Nothing,” said Cub distinctly, “would surprise me.” He dozed again.

The next incident was more serious—sufficiently alarming to awaken him thoroughly.

It happened between Maintenon and Rochefort where, at a bend, the road narrows as it swings under a railway arch. A red light appeared under the bridge. As the lorry approached other lights appeared, waving in what were obviously stop signals. Copper switched on the headlights, and their glare revealed a barrier comprising two planks, supported by what seemed to be a heap of sandbags on either side. A number of German soldiers stood in the road.

Cub heard Gimlet say to Copper: “Step on it. We’re not stopping.” Then, turning: “Trapper, let me have that gun.”

As Trapper put the Sten gun into his hands the lorry leapt forward.

Cub did not see what happened—he only heard. Knowing what was likely to happen, he ducked instinctively, and covered his face with his hands. The French officer sitting next to him muttered an urgent prayer. There were shouts. The Sten gun spat in one long burst that only ended when, with a frightful crash, the front of the lorry* struck the planks. The lorry jolted, swerved a trifle, and then went on.

Copper laughed. “That’ll learn ’em!” said he.

“Look what you’re doing,” ordered Gimlet tersely.

“Aye-aye, sir.”

The Frenchman next to Cub rubbed his shoulders, and crossed himself fervently. “Insane,” he murmured in a resigned voice.

“Sanity, *monsieur*, would not have brought us as far as this,” opined Cub.

“Better cut the wires again, Trapper,” said Gimlet.

The wires were cut and the lorry* went on. Cub dozed again, but shook himself into some sort of wakefulness when he saw that they were running through the dingy, dreary suburbs of Paris.

Gimlet, who had been having a quiet conversation with General Romortin, looked at his watch. "I think we can just do it," he said. "All right, Copper, I'll take over now. I know my way about."

He and Copper changed seats, and the lorry went on to stop, at a sharp word from the general, against the kerb in front of a stylish house of some size. The general was out in a moment, and disappeared up the short drive. Inside five minutes he was back, carrying a portfolio under his arm. He climbed into his seat, and the lorry went on through dark, silent streets, deserted except for an occasional *gendarme*, who took no notice of the German military vehicle.

"Listen, everyone," requested Gimlet. "This is the general set-up. We are now going to the Quai d'Orsay Station, terminus of the Paris-Orleans railway. I shall park the lorry in a side street which you will presently see. Cub, I am going to detail you for the most vital task because you are the least likely to attract attention. You will go into the station and meet the Orleans train. If it's on time it should arrive in about five minutes. Make contact with Marcelle, but—this is important—do it without allowing it to be known to others who will also be there to meet her. They will most likely be civilians, members of the Gestapo, although there may be soldiers as well. You'll have to use your discretion. What you have to do is to induce Marcelle and Gaston to follow you. They will, of course, be followed in turn. You will then simply return to the street, and enter an alley which I will show you when we get to it. Leave the rest to us. Is that quite clear?"

"Perfectly clear, sir."

"Here we are." Gimlet cruised quietly across the broad thoroughfare in front of the station, and turning into a narrow street with tall, imposing houses on either side, brought the lorry to a stop a few yards past a passage that separated two blocks of houses. "There's the alley," he went on. "When you come back walk into it—and keep walking. You saw the station as we turned in? Off you go—you haven't too much time."

One of the Frenchmen questioned the wisdom of sending a boy on what was obviously a man's errand.

Gimlet reproved him sharply. "You will oblige me by not questioning my decisions, *monsieur*."

"*Pardon!*" murmured the officer.

Cub dismounted and walked back to the station, which he found lighted by a few dimmed lamps. There were some belated travellers about, mostly German soldiers going on or coming back from leave, judging by their kit-bags, with a sprinkling of French civilians; but compared with the bustle of

normal times the station was strangely silent and empty. Somewhere an engine ejected steam with a hiss that sounded sinister in the gloom, and a regular clang of metal against metal proclaimed that a mechanic was testing the wheels of a train by striking them with a hammer.

Cub found a porter and asked at which platform the Orleans train came in.

“*Là-bas!*” The porter pointed.

Cub moved slowly towards the barrier, observing with satisfaction that few people were waiting there. There were five, to be precise. One was a ticket-collector, one was an elderly woman in widows’ weeds, one was a French *gendarme*. These stood alone. The remaining two were together, talking in low tones. One was a brown-shirted trooper adorned with a swastika armlet; the other was a civilian, also a German. Cub knew that from the shape of his head and the cut of his clothes, but he strolled past to make sure. As he expected, they were talking in German. These, he guessed, were the men detailed to meet Marcelle and her uncle. They took no notice of him—did not, in fact, appear to see him; so he sauntered on to a vacant seat not far away and prepared to wait.

The train was six minutes late. Cub was glad when sudden activity, and a rumble, announced its arrival. Waiting for a late train is always tedious; in the circumstances he found it a strain on his nerves. Rising, he took up a position in front of the barrier, some ten yards or so from it.

There were more passengers than he expected; indeed, there was quite a crowd strung out along the platform, moving in procession towards the barrier, which now stood open with the ticket-collector by it. Some of the travellers carried luggage, and this gave Cub an idea—an excuse for being there in case he was being watched by unseen eyes; for he was well aware that the eyes of the Gestapo agents were everywhere. As the travellers passed him he touched his forehead with a plaintive, “*Service, monsieur—service, madame*. Shall I carry your baggage?” At the same time he moved up and down quickly in case someone accepted his offer—which was, of course, the last thing he wanted.

His nerves tingled when the *gendarme* shouted: “Hey, there! What are you doing? Get off home. This is no place for you!”

“*Oui, monsieur,*” answered Cub respectfully, and backed away until the travellers were between him and the policeman.

Either by accident or design Marcelle and Gaston were among the last to appear. For a horrible moment Cub feared they were not on the train. Then his heart gave a bound when they came into view, walking arm in arm

among the stragglers. He watched them as they came through the barrier and gave up their tickets, to be followed at a fair distance by the Gestapo agents. He braced himself, for the moment had come, the moment on which all depended, the most dangerous moment of all, he thought. He was afraid that when they saw him they would stop and speak, perhaps exclaim—a natural thing to do. This would at once place him under suspicion as an accomplice, so it was a thing to be avoided, if possible. However, the risk had to be taken.

Approaching, he touched his forehead and said loudly, “Any luggage, *monsieur-dame*?” Adding in an urgent whisper: “Keep walking, don’t stop.”

Gaston faltered, with a half-strangled little exclamation of astonishment, but the quick-witted Marcelle grasped the situation instantly. Or, at least, she guessed, from Cub’s presence there, and method of approach, that something was amiss.

“No baggage,” she said loudly, and kept on walking, dragging the dumbfounded Gaston with her.

Cub slouched along behind them—an insignificant figure. “You are watched by the Gestapo,” he whispered. “But fear nothing. Friends are near. Follow me when you see me in front of you. Behave naturally.”

“Hey, there!” shouted the *gendarme*. “Get off home, you *gamin*. I’ve told you once!”

“Instantly, *monsieur*!” answered Cub, with alacrity, and pretended fright.

The command suited him very well, for it gave him an excuse to hurry. He even dared to run a little way, passing Marcelle. With a clear lead he walked on, hands in his pockets, whistling cheerfully. As he turned out of the station he glanced behind him and saw that Marcelle and Gaston were following, with the two Germans a little in the rear. He walked on, or rather, meandered, sometimes stopping to examine the contents of the wire baskets erected for the collection of waste-paper. Not only was this playing up to his character of a street-urchin, but it enabled him to see what was going on behind him. He could imagine how poor Gaston, hearing the footsteps behind, was feeling, but he himself was thoroughly enjoying the picture of two members of the hated Gestapo walking into a trap. He was only sorry that all France could not see it.

Reaching the main street he hesitated for a moment at the corner and then went on. Marcelle and Gaston had closed the distance somewhat, and he was a little alarmed to see that Gaston, in his nervousness, was hurrying. He walked on, past the lorry standing by the kerb, and halted again at the

alley. He stared into it, but could see nothing. Silence reigned. But he whispered, "They're coming!"

He waited until Marcelle and her uncle had almost reached him, and then went on down the alley. After a dozen paces he waited again, to make sure that they were following, and when he heard their footsteps turn in he said in a low voice, "Keep walking."

After that he was too far away to see exactly what happened. In any case, it was dark in the alley. But sounds told the story almost as well as sight. He heard the Germans turn in and heard them increase their pace. Then came a thud, gasps, a cry cut off short by a vicious smack, a groan, and the thump of a falling body. A brief silence. Then Copper's voice said, brightly: "Okay, Cub. All over."

Cub ran back to Marcelle and Gaston and clasped their hands. "Congratulations, dear friends," he said, smiling. "You were superb!"

Gaston mopped his forehead with a large handkerchief. "*Mon Dieu!*" he breathed. "The Gestapo—phew! What happens?"

"Bertrand betrayed you to the Nazis," explained Cub quickly. "You were seen at Orleans and put under Gestapo surveillance. But it's all right now."

Gimlet came up. "*Bonsoir, mademoiselle. Bonsoir, Gaston.* Come along. This is no time to stand talking. We have a journey to make."

Copper and Trapper were standing at the entrance to the alley. "Nice work, kid," said Trapper. "*Bonsoir, Marcelle.*"

"Where are the Boches?" said Cub, not seeing the bodies.

Copper inclined his head. "They're all right—just having a nap in that doorway. Strike me pink! They must have thought a house had fallen down on them. Well, that'll learn 'em not ter follow folks on a dark night. I remember once, down the Old Kent Road——"

"We're in Paris—don't talk so much!" snapped Gimlet. "Get aboard. I'll drive. Copper, you come in front with me. You'd better come too, Cub. I'm heading north-west, and you may help if I'm not sure of the road. Trapper, watch the rear and let me know at once if you see anything following us. Marcelle, Gaston, inside, please. We've a long way to go, and it's going to be a race against daylight."

Within a minute the lorry was once more on the move, cruising through the war-stricken streets of the once-gay capital. It was soon out of the fashionable quarter, purring through the dingy northern suburbs.

"All we have to do now is to get home," remarked Gimlet cheerfully.

“All?” queried Cub. “I should say that will take some doing. The country was buzzing when we left Caen; by this time it must be in an absolute uproar.”

“France is a big place, quite a big place, you know, to search for an odd lorry,” returned Gimlet evenly. “Besides,” he added meaningly, “we happen to have friends in France as well as you, although we’re not allowed to go near them except in case of dire emergency.”

Cub looked at Copper. “You didn’t tell me. Did you know about that?”

“Me? Well, I’ve heard rumours,” admitted Copper. “But there’s some things they don’t tell poor blinkin’ corporals!”

“Don’t get a bee in your bonnet on that account,” adjured Gimlet. “If the whole British Army knew Intelligence secrets, they wouldn’t be secrets any longer. Naturally, we have our agents in the occupied countries; the Nazis know it, and they go to some trouble to find them; that’s why, unless we are hard pressed, we keep clear of them. Were we alone I wouldn’t consider going near one of our chaps, but in view of the size of the party, and the documents General Romortin is carrying, I think we are justified in calling on the Intelligence Branch of Combined Ops. for assistance.”

“Then we’re not going back to Caen?” queried Cub.

“No.”

“What about the stuff we left in the forest?”

“That’ll come in handy later on, no doubt. We needed a dump like that, to save us bringing over a big load every time. I’m quite happy to leave it there—I imagine The Fleas will look after it?”

By this time the lorry* was running through open country at high speed.

Copper chuckled. “It’s a good thing my old Ma can’t see me,” he remarked.

As the telegraph poles flashed by the feeling again came over Cub that this was not really happening; that it was a dream, a dream that had been going on for so long that he must soon awaken, to laugh at the absurd improbability of it all. He yawned, for he was still tired, and presently fell into a state midway between consciousness and sleep.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE SIGN OF THE *CHEVAL NOIR*

CUB started and sat up. The lorry* was still speeding through the night, although above the eastern horizon the stars had lost their brilliance.

“I’ve been asleep,” he said. “What’s the time?”

“Half-past five,” answered Gimlet.

Cub looked about him, and saw that the lorry* was travelling on a second-class road over a vast undulating expanse of cultivated country, hedgeless fields forming a curious geometrical pattern that stretched away monotonously as far as he could see. Here and there a lonely poplar thrust its spire towards the sky. In the far distance, to the north-west, the direction in which the lorry was travelling, pale searchlight beams were scissoring the heavens into wedge-shaped sections.

“For a guess,” said Cub, “I should say we are in the Département of Seine Inférieure.”

“Quite right,” confirmed Gimlet.

“Where are those searchlights?”

“On the coast—we’re no great distance from the sea.”

“Dawn is on the way,” observed Cub anxiously. “Have we much farther to go.”

“We’re nearly there.”

“Thank goodness!” sighed Cub. “We seem to have been rushing about for years.”

“Don’t talk so much,” said Gimlet. “Keep your eyes skinned for trouble—we may run into it at any moment.”

The lorry topped a slight rise, and then dropped down into a wide depression where at frequent intervals willows drooped, and tall reeds stood stiffly beside stagnant pools of water. A solitary house appeared ahead, with straggling outbuildings, looking drear and lonely in the wan moonlight. Presently Cub made it out to be one of those rambling old taverns that dot the bleak face of northern France, relics of not-so-long-ago when visitors to the Continent from England travelled to Paris by private coach, or by the public horse omnibus. He read the name on the dilapidated sign, and saw that it was the *Cheval Noir*, otherwise the Black Horse. The inn stood, he observed, at a cross-roads, surrounded by the eternal hedgeless fields. A glimmer of light escaping from a ground-floor window revealed that the tavern-keeper was already astir.

He was surprised when the lorry swung into the yard, for Gimlet had given no indication that this was their destination. Even before he could get down a door had opened, and a man came out. He was, Cub noted, typical of

the district—untidy, unshaven, dirty shirt open at the throat, legs in faded blue, well-patched trousers. His feet were thrust into an old pair of carpet-slippers.

When this man spoke Cub had the shock of his life. So certain was he, so automatically had he assumed that the man was French, that he could hardly believe his ears when he addressed Gimlet in English that was not only faultless, but with an accent that said quite plainly, “public school.”

“Hello, Lorry, you old buccaneer!” he greeted with a smile.

Gimlet jumped down. “ ’Morning, Freddie. You’re up bright and early. Anyone would think you were expecting us.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I was,” was the surprising rejoinder. “I gather you’ve been having some fun? You’ve fairly set things alight this time.”

Gimlet’s eyebrows went up. “How did you know?”

The other’s smile broadened. “I should think the whole world knows by this time. I’ve just been listening to the radio—the Jerry private short-wave. It’s positively hysterical. The whole country is up, laddie, thirsting for your blood. I couldn’t think how you were going to get through the cordon along the coast, so it struck me you might roll up here.”

“I’ve got a big party to get over, and it’s important that it should get through,” said Gimlet seriously. “I’m sorry to inflict myself on you, Freddie old boy, but it seemed to me that our best chance was to come here and get you to put a signal over the air, asking for a ’plane. But the thing that has got me cheesed is what to do with this beastly lorry. It’s probably the most badly wanted vehicle in Europe.”

“Don’t worry about that,” answered Freddie calmly. “I’ll fix it.” He went to the tavern door and shouted, “Charles!”

Charles appeared. He was a short, fat little man of about fifty, a French peasant—or so he appeared. Cub, who was beginning to distrust his eyes, was quite sure that he was English.

“We’ve got to get rid of this thing,” announced Freddie, pointing to the lorry. “I think you’d better take it down to the swamp and turn it over in the lake. It should settle down nicely in the mud, and be out of sight in half an hour.”

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

So he *is* French! thought Cub helplessly.

“Better bring your party inside,” suggested Freddie. “They could probably do with a bite of breakfast while you’re waiting. Tell them not to leave anything lying about—in case we have visitors.”

Gimlet went to the back of the lorry. "Come along, Marcelle," he requested. "Descend, gentlemen, please. Into the house."

The party, a woebegone party after the long, anxious drive, got out and followed Freddie to the tavern. The man called Charles took charge of the vehicle. He backed it on to the road. Presently it disappeared over the brow of the hill and was seen no more.

The commandos followed the party into the tavern, and found everyone assembled in the huge old kitchen. Freddie closed the door.

"Better tell your boys to keep an eye on the roads," he said casually.

Copper and Trapper took up positions at the windows, which commanded views of the roads.

"I'd better see about getting you an aircraft before I do anything else," went on Freddie. "It'll be broad daylight in half an hour. Pity there's no cloud about—a covered sky would have made things easier."

"It'll have to be a big machine," Gimlet pointed out.

"We'll give the number of passengers and leave that to them," returned Freddie. "They'll probably send a Liberator—we had one over last week to pick up a batch of refugees. If you're lucky you'll get Bigglesworth for a pilot. Good bloke."

"You mean the chap they call Biggles?"

"That's right. His squadron is doing co-operation work with us at the moment. Crazy crowd, but tough as they make 'em."

While he was speaking, Freddie had crossed over to the big fireplace, and resting his hands against the chimney-beam put his weight on it. The beam, which looked as if it had been undisturbed for centuries, slid to one side, revealing a battery of dials and valves. He held up a hand for silence, put head-phones over his ears and manipulated the instrument. Lights glowed. A buzzer chattered.

Cub stared. He had guessed, vaguely, that this sort of thing must go on, but he never expected to see it. He glanced at Copper. Copper caught his eye and winked.

Freddie was a minute or two at the wireless transmitter. Cub could hear the buzzer zipping away, but he had no idea of the signals; not that he expected to understand them, aware that they would certainly be in code. At last the Intelligence Officer took the 'phones from his ears, switched off, and slid the beam back into place.

"Okay," he said with a nod. "A Liberator will be on its way in two minutes. It ought to be here in a quarter of an hour. The landing-field is only

a short step from here, so you've nice time for a cup of coffee and a biscuit."

"Top hole," answered Gimlet. "Personally, I could do with a bath, but a wash will have to suffice. The trouble about these jobs is, one gets so disgustingly filthy. Marcelle would probably like a wash and brush up, too."

Freddie grinned. "My accommodation isn't exactly *de luxe*," said he. "You'll find what there is at the end of the passage."

What amazed Cub about all this was the casual way it was done. The two leaders, Gimlet and his friend the Intelligence Officer, might have been in a regimental dining-room, in England, for all the concern they showed. The French officers evidently thought this, too, judging from the way they looked at each other, with shrugs and blank expressions.

Very soon an aroma of coffee filled the air with warm fragrance. A plate of buttered ham rolls and a tin of biscuits appeared on the table. No one asked where these things had come from. Freddie just produced them. Coffee was served in a miscellaneous collection of cups, but no one minded that. The hot beverage put everyone in good heart.

In the middle of all this a motor-cycle patrol swept past the tavern. A car followed. A minute later an aircraft roared overhead, and Cub, thinking it must be the rescue 'plane arriving, hastened to the window. He was mistaken.

"Messerschmitt!" he exclaimed, with something like dismay in his voice.

Freddie poured more coffee.

"It's a Messerschmitt," repeated Cub sharply, thinking that he could not have been understood.

"We heard you the first time," stated Freddie drily. "By the way, Lorry, old man, have you still got that grey mare with a rat tail and flea-bitten hocks—Seagull, I think her name was?"

"Yes, she's still in the paddock," answered Gimlet, sipping his coffee.

"I'm expecting to go across for a spot of leave shortly. Can I borrow her for a few days?"

"With pleasure," granted Gimlet. "She needs exercise."

"That mare jumps like a cat," declared Freddie, a note of enthusiasm creeping into his voice for the first time.

"What I like best about her," asserted Gimlet, lighting a cigarette, "is the way she keeps her eyes open for rabbit holes in the park. She's never stumbled over one in her life."

“Strike me perishin’ purple!” growled Copper in Cub’s ear. “They’re off. If they get set on horses, we’re liable to be here for hours.”

The Frenchman who had spoken to Cub in the lorry shrugged his shoulders with an air of hopeless resignation. “Insane!” he muttered fiercely.

Another motorised patrol raced down the road, an officer shouting orders.

“Things seem to be warming up a bit,” observed Freddie lightly. “I think, Lorry, old boy, we’d better see about making a move.”

Gimlet looked at his watch. “Another minute.”

Cub looked at the sky, now pallid with the near approach of day, and getting lighter every moment. He wondered if the rescue plane would get through. In his heart he doubted it.

“Finish up now, please,” said Gimlet. Then, turning to Freddie. “This is your show, old boy. What’s the programme?”

“It’s very simple,” replied Freddie. “I shall go out now and walk up to the top of the rise you can see on the right. From there I get a pretty good view all round. I shall take a hoe with me, for the look of the thing. While I hold it up it will mean that the road is clear. You will then come along. There’s a bit of a bank beside the road—keep behind it. If I lower the hoe, go flat and stay flat until I raise it again. It will mean that something is about. For the moment stay where you are. I shan’t raise the hoe till I see the Liberator coming. If Bigglesworth is at the stick its wheels will be about a foot from the ground—that’s his usual technique. When the sky is clear like this he usually brings an umbrella with him.”

“Umbrella?” echoed Cub, in a puzzled voice. The expression was new to him.

“Escort,” muttered Copper.

“I’ll move off now,” announced Freddie. “Stand fast till you get the signal.” He went out, and presently could be seen making his way up the gentle slope to which he had referred, stopping occasionally to cut down a weed with his hoe.

Cub’s heart came into his mouth when a motor cyclist, a storm trooper, appeared on the road, and pulling up as near to Freddie as he could get, shouted something.

Freddie strode over to him and touched his forehead. A brief conversation took place and the German roared on. Freddie resumed his walk, and was soon a conspicuous figure on the skyline, a distance of

perhaps two hundred yards from the tavern. Almost at once he raised his hoe.

“That’s it,” observed Gimlet. “Off we go. Don’t get in a bunch. I’ll lead. Copper, you take the rear with the Sten gun.” With his eyes on Freddie all the time he led the way to the road, and then took a course parallel with it, keeping on the field side of the low bank.

Freddie’s hoe came down.

“Flat!” ordered Gimlet crisply, and the party dropped prone.

A car roared by. They did not see it. Gimlet was watching Freddie. The hoe went up. “Forward,” he ordered.

The party proceeded. Cub’s heart was thumping with suppressed excitement. The thing was like a game—with death the penalty for the losers.

The party reached Freddie on the crest of the hill just as the plane arrived. There was nothing spectacular about its approach. It came gliding in with its wheels just clear of the ground, with no more fuss than if it had been landing on its base aerodrome. The wheels touched down, and the big machine rumbled on until it was in line with the spectators, when its brakes brought it to a stop.

“Clockwork,” said Copper. “That’s what it is—clockwork.” Whether he was referring to the aircraft, or to the whole episode, was not clear.

Freddie waved to the pilot, and got a wave back. “It’s Bigglesworth,” said he. “I’ll leave you to it now. I must get back to the pub in case I have customers. Cheerho!”

“Thanks, old boy,” said Gimlet without emotion.

“Don’t mention it—pleasure, and all that,” returned Freddie. “So-long. All the best.” He went off down the hill, hoe at the slope.

A second figure had appeared with the aircraft, standing at the open door. He was a youngish flying officer with a freckled face and ginger hair.

“Hi! Come on,” he called impatiently. “We haven’t got all day.”

Up to this time Cub had had eyes only for the aircraft. The clatter of its engines drowned all other sounds. But now, as the party moved forward, the air was suddenly filled with another noise, a shrill whine, rising swiftly to a fierce crescendo. With it appeared an aircraft, dropping like a meteor out of the blue. He recognised one of the latest Messerschmitts, and the muscles of his face went stiff with consternation. Even though the Messerschmitt was diving it seemed to be making an astonishing amount of noise, and Cub, lifting his eyes, saw the reason. The machine was not alone. Coming down

vertically to intercept it was another, and behind, covering a wide area of sky, there were others. They were Typhoons. Then multiple machine guns snarled, punctuated with the heavier reports of cannon. Tracer flashed.

The Messerschmitt swerved, staggered, half pulled out of its dive and then went on again, its motor wailing like a lost soul. It did not stop. The wail ended abruptly as the aircraft struck the ground with a splintering, tearing, rending crash, that was like nothing so much as the fall of a giant tree. Pieces bowled over the ground, leaving a trail of flame. Cub, his mouth dry with horror, could not take his eyes from it. He heard Copper say, with a short laugh, “That’ll learn ’im.”

Then a fist smote him between the shoulder blades. “Get in,” snarled a voice. “What do you think this is, a circus?”

Cub looked into an angry face topped by ginger hair, and fell into the Liberator. The others were already aboard. The ginger-headed flying officer slammed the door and made a signal to the pilot, who was looking back into the cabin. The machine began to move.

“Make yourselves at home,” called the flying officer. “We shan’t be long, but you’d better hang on to something in case we have to take evasive action. There’s a little opposition to our trip—as you may notice.” He went forward and joined the pilot. Gimlet did the same.

Cub sat on the floor. He began to understand dimly how it was that Britain had survived that dreadful year of the war when she stood alone, outnumbered in men, planes, tanks and guns. Men like these were responsible, men like Gimlet, Freddie, Bigglesworth, Copper . . . all of them. They did their jobs, and went on doing their jobs whatever happened, calmly—yes, that was the point—without losing their heads. It was not merely bravery, but downright thoroughness.

For the next ten minutes things were a trifle confused. The machine skimmed the ground, jumping over—or so it seemed—houses, trees, and other obstacles as they occurred in its path. Sometimes it swerved sickeningly. Two of the French officers were, in fact, sick. Once, with a vicious bang, a piece of something tore a hole in the side of the fuselage, and once another plane flashed past a cabin window so close that Cub flinched. There was no question of standing up to see what was going on outside.

Copper leaned over and shouted in Cub’s ear, “If my old Ma could see me now she’d throw a fit, s’welp me, she would, not ’alf she wouldn’t.”

Cub found no difficulty in believing this, but he grinned—or tried to.

Trapper was sitting beside Marcelle; they were smiling at each other, apparently quite oblivious to what was going on.

Then, suddenly, the machine was flying steadily on even keel. The ginger-haired flying officer came back into the cabin.

“Mademoiselle and gentlemen,” he said. “Welcome to England.” Then he added as an afterthought, with a smile, “I hope you enjoyed your trip.”

Some of the party looked doubtful.

Copper clapped his great hands together. “Now *that’s* what I call a snappy crossing,” he declared.

There were several officers waiting on the aerodrome when the Liberator landed—Navy, Army, Air Force and Fighting French were represented. The latter at once took charge of their own people. Gimlet ordered the commandos to stand fast while he went over to speak to what he called the “reception committee.”

Presently one of these officers, in army uniform, came across to Cub. “I imagine you are Nigel Peters?” he said pleasantly.

Cub, wondering what was coming, said that he was.

“I have some news that should cheer you,” went on the officer. “I’m from the War Office. We’ve just had word that your father, Colonel Peters of the Buffs, is in Spain. Apparently he was wounded and taken prisoner, but he escaped and made his way across the South of France to the Spanish frontier. It took him some time, which is why we lost track of him. Arrangements are being made to bring him home.”

Cub stood stiffly to attention. His expression did not change, although his eyes moistened suddenly with thankfulness.

“Thank you, sir,” he said.

The officer nodded with a smile and returned to where Gimlet was talking.

Copper nudged Cub in the ribs. “That’s the stuff,” he murmured. “Congratulations, chum.”

Trapper smiled. “*Bon ça, mon ami,*” said he quietly.

A Waaf appeared and told them that the canteen was being opened for them.

Gimlet came over. “All right, you fellows. You can fall out for half an hour. Then a car will take us back to the depot. I’m going off to have a tub. By the way, corporal, I notice you need a haircut. See to it.”

“Yes, sir.” Copper saluted as Gimlet went off with the officers.

“Did you hear that?” murmured Copper plaintively. “Did he say, Thank you, my dear brave corporal? No. Did he say we’ve had a sticky trip? No! Did he say he was lucky ter be ’ome? No! All ’e thinks about is ’is perishin’ tub. All he sez is, get yer ’air cut. Strike me all colours! But it’s a bit ’ard. What say you? Am I right, Trapper?”

Trapper’s white teeth flashed. “Are you right? *I’ll* say you’re right,” he agreed sadly.

“Well,” said Copper in a resigned voice, “we may as well go and get a bite of grub. Then I must drop a line to my old Ma.”

Arm in arm the comrades walked towards the canteen.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

* In Chapter XIX and XX, the original text has “car” instead of “lorry”. Given that the car has already been swapped for a lorry earlier in the story to accomodate over a dozen passengers, it would appear that the author/editor forgot to update all of the story to include the lorry.

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *King of the Commandos* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]