Pursuit of Passy

by David Moore Crook, 1914-1944

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Foreword

I never met my grandfather, David Moore Crook, he having died more than three decades before I was born. However, I have always felt I have known him through reading his autobiographical work, *Spitfire Pilot*, his first-hand account of the Battle of Britain. I knew that he had also written a novel, but I had never seen a copy. Around 10 years ago I managed to find an old copy from an online bookseller. I found the book a thrilling read, and it gave me further insight into my grandfather's life and mind. This year marks the 100th anniversary of his birth, and sadly, the 70th anniversary of his death. I felt it was fitting to convert the story, which was nearly lost, into a format which can be enjoyed by many more people.

S. J. Crook, 2014.

Author's Note

This story was written more as a mental exercise than anything else. It has no foundation in fact so far as I know and should be taken with a very liberal dose of salt.

All the French characters are imaginary, many of their names being taken from a map.

Original Publisher‘s Note

We deeply regret the death of Flight-Lieutenant D. M. Crook, D.F.C., before his book could be published. Those who read and enjoy what he modestly called “a mental exercise” will agree that it worthily reflects the spirit of this gallant officer and of the Service to which he belonged.

Prologue

ONE evening in July 1940, about three weeks after the French armistice, three men were sitting in a room at the back of a small hotel in Northern France.

They were of different nationality and type, these men, but probably if you could have seen them as they sat round the table you would have noticed that each of them in his own way betrayed signs of great anxiety and suspense, as though aware of the terrible scene that was to take place in a few moments.

Walking towards this room, through the dusty and tree-lined streets, a man and a girl were approaching rapidly. Though the man was quite unaware of it, he was in fact walking to his death, walking straight into the trap just as the unsuspecting fly draws nearer and nearer to the fatal web and the dark shape of the spider watches hungrily from the corner, waiting his moment to pounce.

Following the man and the girl, perhaps a hundred yards behind and now rapidly closing the distance were two men whose rather nondescript appearance was belied by their hard faces and purposeful stride. The Gestapo also had their part to play.

Above and beyond this little drama, much larger issues were at stake. The German armies which had halted for the time being on the French coast at Calais and Boulogne were gazing eagerly across the Channel to the sunlit cliffs of Dover that showed up white through the heat haze on the water. That was to be their next objective; invasion of the proud and almost helpless island which alone stood between them and final victory.

But England still possessed a few trump cards for the approaching struggle, and the safety of one of them depended to a great extent on what was to happen during the next few minutes in this little French hotel.

I was one of the three men who sat waiting round the table, and this is how it came about.

Chapter I

Above the Amiens Road.

BY the 22nd May, 1940, the German tanks were past Amiens and racing on for the Channel ports. Together with the Luftwaffe they seemed an irresistible combination and, as our C.O. remarked, “they went through France like a dose of salts.” Nobody ever looked like stopping them.

In the air it was much the same story. The day of the Luftwaffe had come with a vengeance and it ranged far and wide over France in tremendous strength, bombing, machine-gunning, causing alarm and confusion that had to be seen to be believed.

In short, the situation that day was grave and rapidly becoming desperate.

Early the same morning, in the first light of a perfect dawn, we emerged from the mess at Hawkinge, fortified by an ample breakfast of tea, bacon and eggs, and waited on the steps for transport to take us down to dispersal. Over in the east the sky showed light above the trees, and the fields around Hawkinge lay covered in patches of white mist. From the aerodrome I could hear the deep crackle and roar of our Spitfires being warmed up. It was very cold and we shivered and stamped our feet to get warm, despite our Irvin jackets, flying boots and unshaven chins which always seem much cosier than clean shaven ones.

A rumble in the lane announced the arrival of the lorry. “Here comes the bloody tumbril,” said somebody, and we laughed automatically though really it didn't seem very funny at that hour of the morning. We scrambled into the back and the lorry rattled and jolted its way round the aerodrome and stopped by the line of aircraft.

I jumped down and walked across to my Spitfire. The fitter was just getting out, having run up the engine.

“3,000 revs. sir,” he said. “She’s fine.” There had been a heavy dew and I wiped carefully all the moisture off the windscreen and perspex and then checked over everything in the cockpit. Oxygen, air pressure, petrol, reflector sight—it all seemed perfect. I closed the hood again and went across to join the others. There were no orders for us yet and apparently the C.O. didn't know any more than we did, so it was just a case of waiting as patiently as we could.

The sun was up now, and the sky was that deep hazy blue which foretold yet another brilliant day. Anderson looked at it appreciatively. “It’s going to be good,” he said, “but we'll have to keep our eyes skinned for those damned Me. 109s in the sun.” He turned to me. “You’ll be leading Green section, Peter. Keep in close, keep your eyes open, and tell your Number Three to weave like hell.”

“Fine,” I said. “Do you hear that about weaving, Johnny?”

He grinned. “Watch me,” he said, “I've developed a special eye in the back of my head.”

“You’ll need it,” said Hamilton amiably. “You’re at the back so there's not much future for you if we get jumped by any Huns.”

“Thanks awfully for reminding me,” retorted Johnny sarcastically. “I’d never thought of that you know. Gives me an added interest in my work.”

Backchat of this nature is rather difficult to maintain so early in the morning and we lapsed into silence and lit another cigarette apiece.

Now and then we could hear the distant mutter of the guns in France and I kept wondering how things were going over there. Pretty grim, probably.

Just after nine o'clock the field telephone rang and everybody stiffened suddenly. The C.O. picked up the receiver.

"C.O. 473 Squadron here," he said. "Yes." He listened intently and started to scribble on a message pad. "Yes, I understand, sir, thank you. Goodbye." He hung up and looked round at the group of expectant faces.

"We're on our way," he said. "A force of Blenheims is going over to attack a Hun tank column on the Amiens-Abbeville road and we're escorting them in. We take off at 09.50 and rendezvous at 10.00 over Folkestone. Group think we may run into a spot of trouble as the Hun is doing his damnedest to get these tanks through to the coast and they have a big fighter cover available for it. Our job is to see that the Blenheims get to the target at all costs"—he paused slightly—"and whatever the cost. Remember to keep in close if we're attacked and watch your tails, particularly in the sun. Absolute R.T. silence on the way out. Any questions?"

Nobody spoke. It all seemed quite clear—a bit too clear I thought. I didn't much like that bit "the Hun is doing his damnedest… they have a big fighter cover for it."

Oh hell, why worry anyway? We're obviously going to have a terrific fight over the target, we shall outnumber the Hun by at least one to ten (Fighter Command's stock joke in those days) and anyway, twelve Spitfires led by a good C.O. are capable of doing quite a bit of damage. The "trouble" won't be all on one side.

In any case, if you're going to be killed in this war you might just as well be killed today and forget about it, and if you're going to survive there's nothing to worry about anyway.

I've always found fatalism quite useful if taken in reasonable doses, and it worked now. I suddenly felt quite calm and confident, though I still had that horrible empty feeling in the tummy which no attitude of mind could shake off.

It was nearly time to go. I threw my cigarette on the ground, stubbed it down with my heel and moved across to my aircraft. It all seemed so unreal, so fantastic; around Hawkinge the green landscape of Kent lay bathed in brilliant sunlight, and a couple of miles away the Channel would be lapping gently on the beaches where last year the children played and ran about. And now, instead, we had to leave "this green and pleasant land" and fly across to fight in France, to shoot and be shot at, to kill or be killed. Oh God, why do we have wars?

I fastened on my Mae West, put a couple of lungful's of air into it and then settled down in the cockpit and glanced round at Hamilton and Johnny who were both flying in my section. Ham put his thumb up, meaning all O.K. and I looked round at Johnny who, irrepressible as ever, stuck two fingers up at me (this was before Mr. Churchill adopted it as the V sign) and shouted, "So long, Peter, don't shoot till you see the whites of their eyes."

"O.K.," I shouted, "and you weave like hell." One by one the line of Spitfires started up and began to taxi out to our take off point. I pressed my starter button and the prop. turned slowly with a groaning noise from the starter. She coughed once or twice and a long tongue of flame played round the exhaust and then she started with a roar. I opened the throttle and moved out into position. Johnny and Ham close behind like a couple of faithful terriers.

The C.O.'s section was taking off. I opened the throttle and we tore across the aerodrome after the rest of the squadron, gathering speed with a tremendous rush

and then we were in the air and sweeping across the far boundary of the aerodrome. Change hands on the stick, undercarriage up, arm cautiously back to draw the hood forward without getting your shoulder dislocated by the slipstream, and then pull the constant speed control gently back till the engine revs. drop to 2,350.

Ham and Johnny dropped out of sight behind me as they went into line astern and we swung hard left to catch up the C.O. who was circling the aerodrome. The whole squadron was now in position and we started to climb swiftly over Folkestone. At 5,000 feet we levelled out and continued to orbit the harbour in gentle turns waiting for the bombers to arrive.

The Channel seemed very busy and off Dover several destroyers and merchantmen were steaming out towards the French coast which was only just visible through the haze.

The Blenheims arrived almost exactly on time, five little dots away to the north that grew rapidly in size as they approached. Five Blenheims. God, I thought, things must be in a pretty bad way if we can spare only five bombers for this job! It's so vital to stop these tanks that fifty bombers would be insufficient and yet we can send precisely—five Blenheims.

We joined up with them, flying rather above and behind, and the whole formation set course for the French coast. We were throttled right back in order to keep our speed down to that of the Blenheims and at first it seemed strange to be moving so comparatively slowly in a Spit.

We altered course when a mile or two off Boulogne and I saw the harbour with its long funnel-like entrance pass behind on our left as we flew down the coast about a mile out to sea. We turned inland somewhere near Le Touquet and I pulled the mixture control back into “Rich.” The time for petrol economy was past now when at any moment we might need absolutely full power for a fight. I started to “rubberneck” energetically and searched the sky for enemy fighters, but none appeared.

A big forest (presumably Crecy) passed below and then a town with a railway and river running through. That must be Abbeville and the Somme.

The bombers turned slightly left and continued steadily on. Below us I could see a main road crammed with traffic which here and there was overflowing and making detours in the adjoining fields. That must be the Amiens road and a little further on was our target, but I couldn't see anything happening yet.

I glanced round at the squadron. All twelve Spitfires were still in position keeping very good station and the men in each section were busy weaving behind and guarding our backs. Below us the Blenheims were bunched together, apparently quite unperturbed. Perhaps they've done this sort of thing before, I thought. They certainly seem pretty cool customers because if we run into a pack of Huns they're going to be the main target and they know it. Thank God I'm not a bomber boy. We must be very close now. I switched on my reflector sight, turned the gun button on to “Fire,” slipped the constant speed control fully forward to increase the engine revs. to 3,000 r.p.m. and finally “pulled the plug” and operated the automatic boost control cut-out which allows the engine to develop emergency full power.

Suddenly a cluster of black smoke puffs appeared in front of the Blenheims. They materialised so suddenly that it took me an instant to realise that it was enemy flak. We must be over the target now. The Blenheims started to turn left—they must have spotted the German tanks and were turning before running up to bomb. We started to turn also and at that instant an urgent voice said on the R.T., "Hallo, Goblin Leader, look out, very many bandits above us on the right." I whipped round and saw, almost directly in the sun and about four thousand feet above us, a very big formation of Me. 110s. The front sections were just starting to dive on us. Above them and well beyond I saw a quick flash as yet more wings caught the sun. Those must be the Me. 109s. Now we're for it. These Huns have everything—height, numbers, position and sun.

The C.O.'s voice broke in on the R.T., clear and very cool. "Goblin Leader calling, turning left, turning left, look out behind," and at the same time we started to turn very steeply to the left. I caught a quick glimpse of the Blenheims below, moving swiftly across the green chequer board landscape as they ran up to the target and then glanced back again over my shoulder. I can never forget it—the sun, the deep blue sky, and then that great mass of enemy fighters diving down hard on us.

In an instant we were mixed up in a raging dog fight and the whole squadron was split up, every man for himself.

I kept turning left and at the same time pulled the nose up to try and get a bit of height. I saw two Me. 110s in line astern coming after me, obviously having picked me out as their victim. The leader came round after me in a steep turn and over my shoulder I saw him open fire. There was a red flicker from the muzzle of his cannon and a lot of wispy grey trails shot past behind me with here and there the red spark of incendiary bullets.

He hadn't allowed enough deflection and the whole lot passed just behind my tail. I breathed a frantic desperate exclamation and tightened up my turn to the limit. I knew I could out-turn him. The Spit shuddered violently but did not spin and I saw that I was starting to turn inside him and would soon be on his tail. He saw it too and suddenly broke away and dived down in the opposite direction. I turned to follow him. All round us a terrific fight was in progress and the sky seemed full of aircraft diving and turning madly after each other. I never dreamed that anything could be as hectic or as fast moving as this. In front of me a Spitfire was spinning down apparently out of control and with a lot of black smoke trailing out behind. An instant later it burst into flames. I didn't see anybody get out. The main fight seemed to be rather above me on the left and two Me. 110s fell away towards the ground burning furiously while above them there was a large puff of black smoke hanging in the air with bits of wreckage falling away where apparently two aircraft had collided. I didn't see the unfortunate Blenheims anywhere.

I dived after my Me. 110 on full throttle and started to overhaul him rapidly. The speed was now over 400 m.p.h. but he kept on diving and was evidently determined to get down to ground level and shake me off there. A Me. 110 is no match for a Spit in a dog fight and he knew it.

I think we were down to about 1,500 feet now and I was almost in range. I opened fire and immediately he turned violently to the right. I went round after him rapidly closing the range till I could see every detail of the aircraft, the black

cross on the fuselage and the dirty mottled grey effect of the camouflage paint. I had another burst, but didn't allow enough deflection and missed. Now for it! I pulled the stick back and tightened up the turn till the red dot of my sight was well in front of him. The strain was terrific and I nearly blacked out, but just managed to see him through a sort of grey mist. I pressed the trigger again. This time the whole terrific burst hit him fair and square. The cockpit cover shattered in and he turned over on to his back and went straight down with a long streamer of smoke trailing from his starboard engine.

I eased off the turn and watched him. He never pulled out of the dive and an instant later he crashed into a small wood and exploded in a sheet of flame.

That's my first Hun, I thought. Both dead, too. I watched the flames licking up through the trees with a sort of fierce satisfaction, and then turned round hastily to see what was happening. Now to re-join the others.

I began to climb up again, searching the sky which now seemed more or less deserted, though a few miles away to the north there were a few aircraft milling round, so I turned towards them.

I had reached perhaps 3,000 feet and was just about to look down at my petrol gauge when I saw the sudden flash of tracer going past my left wing and immediately afterwards there was a blinding orange flash and a terrific explosion somewhere in the bottom of the cockpit.

I sat there stupidly, half stunned and wondering what had happened, but just managed to collect my wits sufficiently to dive away. I never saw the Hun that got me. Perhaps he thought I was finished when he saw the Spitfire fall away in a dive.

The cockpit was full of smoke and I wrenched the hood open as I thought she was on fire, but there was no height in which to bale out as I was now almost at ground level. I pulled out of the dive and flew along at nought feet, all the while glancing fearfully over my shoulder to see if the Hun was still on my tail. To my great relief the smoke seemed to be decreasing, but I could see the cockpit was a shambles. A 20 mm. shell must have come up between my legs and burst in the instrument panel which was absolutely shattered. My left leg felt numb and there was blood on my trousers though I didn't feel any pain—just a sort of dull-feeling that I'd had enough for the moment and if anything else happened I couldn't cope with it. My first instinct was to land immediately in the nearest big field because the engine was getting very hot and I suspected the radiator had been hit. Well, that gave me perhaps a few more minutes before she packed up, and with luck that might be enough to get me back over friendly territory.

I hadn't the faintest idea of my position and the compass was smashed but I steered roughly north by the sun. Fortunately no Hun fighters appeared or they would have found a fairly easy victim especially as most of my ammunition had gone.

A moment later a river loomed up ahead. I reckoned this would be the Somme and I flew along parallel to it until I saw the roofs of a town ahead. This is probably Abbeville. I left the river and skirted north of the town and then to my intense relief saw the aerodrome ahead. There were a lot of bomb craters on the landing area and several burnt out aircraft but I put the undercarriage down and corkscrewed in between them, not giving a damn whether I landed up or down wind. All I wanted was to get two feet planted firmly on Mother Earth again.

I dropped heavily on to the grass and slowed down, swerved to avoid another ragged bomb hole, and switched off the engine. She stopped with an ominous grinding noise and a thin trail of black smoke drifted up from the engine cowling. She had just got me back and no more.

I climbed out painfully and looked round.

Chapter II

The Englishman.

MY first impression was that the aerodrome was deserted but on looking more carefully I could see a few figures moving away from the hangers, and on the far boundary of the aerodrome were several Hurricanes and a couple of Blenheims with some men standing round them. These appeared to offer the best chance of escape because I was suddenly aware of heavy gun fire not far away. The Hun must be getting pretty close now and there wouldn't be much time to spare. The thought of being taken prisoner after struggling so far in the Spit was too awful for words.

I started to walk across towards the Blenheims and suddenly remembered the blood on my trousers. I had quite forgotten about it in all the excitement of the last quarter of an hour, but now my leg started to hurt again, and I rolled up my trousers to examine the damage. It didn't seem very bad. A number of small splinters had penetrated the flesh and there was a nasty gash in the back of my leg which caused most of the bleeding but it had dried up now. The damage could keep for a bit, anyway. There were far more important things to worry about now and I started off again towards the Blenheims.

There were seven or eight men engaged in refuelling one of the Blenheims from tins. They worked with the mechanical haste of men who are absolutely tired out. A man still wearing his parachute harness lay on the ground by the tail of a Blenheim. His chest and arm were badly injured and I think he was dead. One of the aircraft had a lot of holes in it and he was probably the gunner.

A squadron leader called out to me as I approached.

“Do you want a lift back?”

“Yes please,” I replied. “My Spit has packed up. What about these Hurricanes?”

“They're all hopeless. This Blenheim is the only thing that will possibly fly. Now give us a hand with these bloody tins. If we don't get away soon we'll be caught.”

I picked up a tin, ran over to the aircraft and the work went on.

I was still rather shaken after that fight, my leg was throbbing painfully and my mouth seemed as dry as a piece of felt, but I was in far fresher condition than any of this lot. They looked as though they hadn't been to bed for a week and were only keeping going at all by a great effort. I wondered where they'd come from as I could see by the squadron letters on the aircraft that they were not the ones we had just escorted over from England. However there was no time for idle questions; all that

mattered was to get away as soon as possible. Those guns seemed to be getting nearer.

Suddenly I became aware of a deep though still distant throb. The others had heard it too and we all looked up. “Christ,” said somebody, “this is the end.” About five miles away to the north-east a large formation was making straight for the aerodrome. It was far too large to be anything of ours and as they got nearer I saw they were Ju. 87s escorted by perhaps twenty or thirty Me. 110s.

“Come on!” said one of the pilots quickly. “We can just make it,” and he started to climb into the Blenheim.

“Don’t be a damned fool,” shouted the squadron leader. “They’ll be here before we get the engines going. Get into cover.”

We ran hard for the aerodrome boundary. About 100 yards away there was a narrow slit trench and we tumbled into it and lay there watching the approaching bombers. They were flying in perfect formation, so obviously sure of themselves, so confident of their overwhelming strength, and there was no opposition at all—not even a gun fired at them. It might have been the final fly past at Hendon in the old days.

They were almost over our heads now at about five thousand and suddenly the Stukas started to peel off and dive. One, two, three, four, down they came like the clappers of hell. I could see very clearly the black crosses on the pale blue under surface of their wings.

“Down, everybody!” shouted the squadron leader. We cowered in the bottom of the trench.

The dive bombers came down with a long screaming roar, increasing rapidly in volume till it seemed absolutely on top of us. I lay with my face pressed into the earth and wondered if it were possible to be more frightened than this.

There was a shattering explosion followed by another and another till they all merged into one long roar which made the earth heave and shake underneath us. There was one tremendous one that seemed to fall just outside the trench and a shower of earth and stones rattled on top of us. This was followed by a burst of cannon and machine-gun fire and an aeroplane roared across just above our heads. Several more followed, each firing hard and then the bombing and ground strafing died away, the noise of engines receded in the distance and everything grew quiet again.

We crawled out of our trench and looked despairingly at the scene of devastation. A heavy bomb had landed practically on top of one Blenheim and it lay there, a crumpled mass of metal blazing furiously. The other Blenheim was also on fire and so were the Hurricanes. It was an absolute clean sweep. A number of bombs had also fallen on the hangars and buildings and they were on fire with great clouds of smoke drifting across the aerodrome.

We regarded the scene in silence.

The little group seemed stunned by this last and crowning misfortune. The Hun was within a few miles of us and now our last means of escape was destroyed.

“Well,” said the squadron leader, “that’s that.” He spoke very quietly now and there was a dull note of hopelessness in his voice. I don't think I've ever seen a man so near the end of his tether.

An idea struck me. “Look here,” I said, “I’ll go over to the hangars and see if there are any lorries or bicycles lying about. There might be something.”

“No,” he said, “I don't think it's any good, and there's no time anyway. We'd better get on to the road and try to get a lift.”

“Well, I'll just nip across,” I said. “If we can find a car or something we'll have a far better chance.”

I left them and walked rapidly across to the aerodrome buildings. Everything seemed quite deserted, but above the fierce crackle of the flames I could hear quite clearly the sound of machine-gun fire in the distance. There was very little time to spare and I made up my mind that if I didn't find any method of transport within a couple of minutes I'd follow the others and try to beg a lift on the road.

I walked round the corner of a hangar and saw an open car standing a few yards away. A man was sitting at the wheel with a tommy-gun across his knees and I was just about to call out to him when something curious about his helmet and uniform struck me and I jumped back round the corner. He was a German soldier! God, I thought, they're here already.

I ran down past a long hut in front of the hangars. My heart was thumping like a piston and I was scared stiff of being taken prisoner in such a silly way. Why the hell didn't I get away with the others when the going was good.

I was perhaps half-way down the length of the building when I heard a shot in front of me, followed by a cry and the sound of voices. I whipped into a doorway and found myself in a small bare room with concrete floor and a wooden table. It looked like somebody's office.

I ran to the window and peered out cautiously. A few yards further along two German officers appeared from another door followed by a tall man in civilian clothes. They stood talking on the path for a moment; I could hear the murmur of their voices without being able to distinguish any words, but the civilian was talking rapidly and kept spreading out his hands in a sort of negative gesture. He seemed to be making excuses for something.

The two officers then turned and walked quickly down the path past my window. As they turned I noticed the black collar patches and shoulder straps on their field grey tunics, and then I bent down hastily below the window ledge. I looked up again as their footsteps moved away and saw them vanish round the corner of a hangar. Probably going back to their car, I thought.

The tall man stood there for a moment and then turned back into the door again. There's obviously some dirty work going on, I thought, but I'm damned if I know what. I wasn't really surprised. We had heard so many stories in the last few days of unpleasant incidents that our people had experienced; how telephone lines had been cut at very awkward moments, how fake instructions had been issued in the most convincing manner by people who obviously knew a great deal about secret matters, and numerous other incidents which all showed that the enemy had many agents and supporters in France who were just waiting for the right moment to emerge from their obscurity.

I pulled my revolver out of my pocket, slipped the lanyard round my neck, and thanked my lucky stars that I'd decided to bring it along.

There was nobody to be seen and I walked quickly out of the office and turned in the opposite direction to that which the Germans had taken. I had gone only a

few steps when the tall man emerged again from the doorway and turned towards me.

Even now I can see his face as clearly as though it were photographed upon my mind. He was a big man, aged about thirty-five, I should think, and powerfully built but rather tending to run to fat. His face was definitely unpleasant at first sight, not so much by reason of the features as because of the general impression of dissolute character and cruelty that his expression produced. Despite this there was a certain hard air of purposefulness and determination about the man, and his glance was bold and intelligent.

The moment he saw me he put his hand towards his pocket and then, seeing the revolver in my hand, apparently thought better of it and walked rapidly past me and disappeared round the corner.

I stood watching him till he was out of sight—I had no intention of being shot in the back—and then I hurried on.

I was running past the door where they had been standing when I heard a cry from inside. I looked round—the coast was still clear and I went in and found myself in a passage with some doors on the right. They were probably flight offices and some doors still bore a card with the owner's name.

The first door was open and I went in. There were two or three chairs in the room and a bare wooden table with a lot of papers and files scattered on it. The owner had evidently quitted in considerable haste.

Lying on the floor near the table was a small middle-aged man, perhaps fifty years old, with a small military moustache and iron-grey hair. He was wearing an old brown tweed suit. He had been shot in the chest and his shirt was covered in blood which was forming in a little pool under his shoulder. His face looked as though something heavy had run over it; there is no other description for its condition. His nose was smashed, his cheeks and forehead so cut and swollen that you could scarcely see his eyes, and his mouth was a mass of blood. Even to my inexperienced eyes it was obvious that he was dying.

He turned his head slightly as I came in and tried to look at me.

“Who are you?” he said faintly. He was English apparently. “My name's Claydon,” I said. “I’m an officer in the Royal Air Force.”

“Thank God you're English,” he murmured. Every word was an effort for him and he kept stopping and gasping for breath in a way that was most distressing to see.

“Listen,” he said. “You must—do something for me—it's terribly important—” he repeated the last words with all the emphasis he could muster—“terribly important.”

“Of course I will,” I said gently. “What is it you want?”

“Get back to England—quickly,” he said, “and tell Air Ministry Intelligence that you've—seen me. Tell them that Passy came into my office—with some Germans—and they beat me up to get some information about Python—and when I still refused he—he shot me.”

“Yes,” I said, “I understand perfectly. But tell me your name.”

“Stephenson,” he whispered, and then added so feebly I could scarcely hear it, “Python too” or some word like that. His eyes were closed and he seemed to have lost consciousness or perhaps he was already dead. There was nothing more that I

could do though it seemed hateful to leave him. I grabbed a pile of papers, pillowed his head on them and walked out of the building.

It came very near to being the last damn fool action of my life. I'd taken perhaps a couple of steps when there was a crack like a whip from somewhere on my right and a bullet strummed viciously past my face, sounding for all the world like an angry bee. Hell, it was close! I gave an excellent imitation of a thoroughly startled person jumping about six feet in sheer terror, and then bolted down the path away from the direction of the shots, head well down, and jinking like a wing three-quarter. Two more shots banged out but they both missed and then I was round the corner of the hangar, reflecting rather breathlessly that you never realise how agile you are until you hear a few bullets flying about.

Somebody was very anxious to kill me and I reckoned I knew who it was. He must have hidden near the door and then fired, probably through a window, when I blundered out.

I was both frightened and angry, and felt very tempted to sneak back and have a pot at him but I could see that this was no time to indulge in a little private war of my own, and anyway my marksmanship with a revolver is hardly up to the Al Capone standard. As if to clinch the matter there came the sound of very heavy machine-gun and rifle fire from the direction of Abbeville where probably the French were holding the enemy in the streets of the town. I ran on through the aerodrome buildings picking my way past numerous fires and bomb craters. The air was thick with smoke and dust and I kept coughing.

I turned a corner and almost stumbled on a little group of bodies. They were French soldiers who had evidently been running for shelter when the raid started but they had been too late and about twenty yards away a very heavy bomb had fallen. They had been knocked in all directions and lay scattered limply, their bodies covered in white dust from the explosion. One of them had been riding a bicycle and it lay on the ground beside its late owner. The handlebars were badly twisted but oddly enough I found the tyres were still intact when I pressed them, and so I picked it up and pedalled away down a narrow path between two buildings. A moment later I found myself back on the aerodrome again and set off across the landing area in what I knew was roughly the direction of the main road. On reaching the aerodrome boundary I forced my way through a hedge, threw the bicycle over some barbed wire and clambered over myself, tearing my clothes badly in the process.

I found myself in a small lane and rode down it for perhaps a couple of miles, past a column of French infantry on the march, and then emerged in a main road.

This was packed with a slow moving crowd of horses and carts piled high with families and household goods, cars with mattresses on the roof presumably as a shield against machine gunning from the air, and pedestrians, military lorries and bicycles all struggling along painfully to the coast.

Coming up in the opposite direction were hundreds of French infantry with a few light Renault tanks and seventy-fives. They were trying to force their way through the mass of traffic and here and there where a car had broken down or run out of petrol the traffic piled up behind it, completely blocking the road in both directions. There followed much shouting, swearing, and gesticulating, the

block would be dragged away and the painful procession moved slowly forward again. It was complete chaos.

My bicycle seemed worse than useless in this so I left it in the ditch and walked along as quickly as I could. By this time I began to feel distinctly weary and looked at my watch expecting to see that it was nearly evening; I was astonished to find that it was barely three o'clock in the afternoon. We had left Hawkinge at ten o'clock—only five hours ago but a great deal seemed to have happened in that time. However, no food was available so I plodded on, becoming more depressed and angry as I saw the suffering and weariness of all these unfortunate people. Old men and women and children all struggling on despite their exhaustion, women grey with dust and fatigue carrying a baby in one arm and leading a weary child with the other, horses lame and tired, some people apparently wounded by bombs or bullets being jolted along on a farm cart, all fleeing from the dreaded invader towards some elusive refuge ahead of them.

This was a side of war I had never seen before and I began to understand something of the suffering and misery which invasion brings in its trail. These simple peasants had never wanted to fight; all they asked from life was to dwell on their farms and continue to make their frugal living in peace. They had never marched up and down in ridiculous goose-step or screamed their silly heads off in endless “Heil Hitlers”, or beaten and tortured anybody whose political views differed from their own. Perhaps their only fault was to have lived rather in the other way, to be too easy going and peace loving when all round them the world was crumbling. They were paying for it now.

After walking on for some distance I saw a lorry coming past packed with R.A.F. personnel. I hailed them and as the lorry slowed down I swung myself on to the back and was hauled in by several pairs of hands. They seemed to be mostly the airmen from a Battle squadron which had been based near Reims. The few surviving Battles had flown back to England the previous day and the ground crews were making for Boulogne. They seemed in very good spirits and were quite confident that there would be no difficulty in reaching England once they got to Boulogne. I wasn't half so confident about this myself, but said nothing.

Best of all, they had scrounged some loaves en route and I sat on top of the tightly packed lorry munching bread and cheese and feeling much better. It was grand to see the familiar blue uniform around me again.

I began to think hard about the curious scenes I had witnessed at Abbeville. What had happened to the squadron leader and the rest of that tired band of men? They were probably further ahead on the same road as they had nearly an hour's start on me.

And that small Englishman who lay battered and dying on the floor—who was he, and what was the significance behind that message he tried so hard to make me understand? He spoke as an intelligent and educated man and I was sure that he wasn't wandering in his mind when he spoke to me.

Presumably the tall man had helped to beat him up and then shot him. I tried to recall the actual words. Yes, that was it. “Passy came into my office with some Germans and they beat me up to get some information about Python and when I refused he shot me.” That must have happened just before I got there because I heard the shot.

Well, I knew who Passy was, anyway. He'd shot at me too, the swine, and I began to wish that I'd spent a few minutes playing hide and seek with him round the burning hangars. I had a gun too, and instead of using it I'd bolted like a scared rabbit. But on the other hand I might have run into those Germans... Those Germans. I hadn't thought about them before. There was something very odd about them. I suppose I must have assumed they were part of the enemy advance guard but on second thoughts that didn't seem at all likely. It looked as though they had gone to the aerodrome to carry out some specific job or keep a rendezvous that had already been arranged. They had certainly taken some risk in advancing as far ahead as that, though perhaps it hadn't been too difficult really in view of the confusion and apathy that seemed to prevail everywhere. Boldness will often get away with it under such circumstances, but still I thought a fairly important matter must have been at stake to bring them there.

And "Python too." He'd mentioned Python twice and they were his last coherent words. I couldn't see any meaning or significance in them at all.

A corporal touched me on the arm and pointed away in the direction of Abbeville. "Gawd, sir, look at that!" I looked carefully and saw in the distance a bombardment the like of which I had never seen before. High above the town circled layer upon layer of aircraft, fighters at the top and below them a mass of Stukas. I could just distinguish the latter as they plunged down towards the smoking town. They went down so steeply in such a determined dive that it seemed they must crash, but they pulled out near the ground and went rocketing up again, leaving behind another erupting column of smoke and dust.

Poor bloody French, I thought. They're probably holding the tanks in the streets, so the Hun has called in the Luftwaffe to flatten the whole place. And by God, they're doing it. I began to wonder how much longer we could stand up to such a battering.

* * * * *

Soon after midnight we reached Boulogne. An air raid was in progress and the deep drone of Hun bombers could be heard plainly though bombs were falling only at intervals. Probably it was a nuisance raid intended to hamper the evacuation.

We drove slowly through the streets to the harbour. A lot of soldiers were wandering about but the houses had all their shutters closed and looked empty and deserted. Several big fires were raging in the town.

After much searching I ran down a Naval Officer who told me that we should have to wait till the following morning before we embarked so I went back to the lorry to try and get some sleep.

About seven in the morning I walked along the harbour and went into a café to get some food. A number of people were already there, including some R.A.F. pilots who like me were evidently walking home. They all seemed very weary, very dirty and exceedingly cheerful. I managed to get some ham and bread and a large basin of steaming café-au-lait which cheered me up a lot.

A little later there were several big explosions outside. "Air raid," said somebody, and we went out to see what was happening, but there were no aircraft in sight and we decided it must be shelling. That meant the Hun was getting very close. We

walked back towards the quay. Shells were starting to fall fairly regularly in the harbour area and raising great clouds of dust among the buildings.

We came across a small group of soldiers outside a tall building gazing intently upwards. I spotted a British major. “What’s happening?”

“Hun spy,” he said, pointing to the roof. “He’s up there with a signalling lamp spotting for the guns.”

I looked but couldn't see anything. A moment later two French naval officers appeared on the roof and started to walk cautiously across. They disappeared from sight and then there was a lot of excited shouting and scuffling and they re-appeared over the corner of the building holding a man between them. He was bent forward and they had his arms twisted up behind his back.

Now what, I thought. They'll probably shoot him.

They dragged the spy to the edge of the roof and one of them shouted, “Anybody there below?”

“Non,” roared several Frenchmen. Everybody stood very still. They paused for a moment, there was one last brief struggle and then they pitched the spy head first off the roof.

He gave a terrified yelp as he fell and then he disappeared from our sight behind a wall and there was a heavy thud and silence.

“Serve the bastard right,” said the major. “I’ve seen enough of their dirty tricks in the last few days,” and there was a general murmur of agreement. We walked away. I agreed too, but felt slightly sick.

About ten o'clock two destroyers came slowly into the harbour and we struggled on board and wedged ourselves sardine fashion on deck.

I never admired the Navy so much as I did then. Cool, competent, authoritative, they seemed to take it all as a matter of course, and the sight of those destroyers and their officers and men restored my faith in England and made me feel that we would come through all right in the end.

We steamed quickly out of Boulogne, leaving a lot of people still standing on the quay and my last sight of the town showed the shells falling steadily, while a grey pall of dust and smoke hung in the air. Goodbye to France, I thought.

But I was wrong. For me it was only Au revoir.

We reached Dover in less than an hour and after a long delay were shepherded into a train for London. I secured a corner seat, fell asleep and when somebody roused me again we were in Victoria.

London seemed the same as ever and apparently quite regardless of the fact that the German Army was less than a hundred miles away. Only the newspaper placards announcing the fall of Boulogne dispelled the illusion that we were living in normal times.

I had a meal and a shave and then took a taxi round to the Air Ministry where my torn and filthy uniform was regarded somewhat curiously. I gave my name and after a long wait I was taken up to see a squadron leader. He was a large red-faced man wearing the M.C. and 1914-18 ribbons, and he seemed very busy and not too pleased to see me.

I told him the whole story of my forced landing at Abbeville after the fight, the shot I heard and the German officers coming out of the office followed by the

French civilian, the Englishman called Stephenson dying on the floor and the curious message he gave me.

The squadron leader seemed interested. “Stephenson, you say his name was,” he said reflectively, “I wonder what he was doing there. And there certainly seems to have been some reason to get those Huns there.” He paused a moment and then opened a drawer and pulled out some foolscap. “Look here, Claydon, I want you to write the whole story out just as you've told it to me. Make it as complete as possible and stick in every detail you can think of, however trifling it may seem.”

I wrote it down, signed it and handed it back. He took it out of the room, and I sat down wearily in a chair. I must have fallen asleep almost immediately because the next thing I knew was the squadron leader shaking me gently by the arm. I scrambled to my feet hastily.

“Don’t apologise,” he said. “You must need a bit of sleep after the last couple of days. Now, about this story of yours. It seems rather more important than I thought at first and I'm going to take you along to see Group Captain Leighton who deals with these Intelligence matters.”

He led me along a corridor, up a lift and along some more corridors, and stopped outside a door and knocked. I saw a card on the door bearing the name “Group Captain C. H. Leighton, D.S.O., A.F.C.” A voice said, “Come in,” and I followed the squadron leader into the office and saluted.

The Group Captain was a smallish man, perhaps forty years old, with pale aquiline features, dark hair getting rather thin on top, and very dark deep set eyes.

“Come in, Claydon,” he said. I noticed he had a quiet rather pleasant voice. “I’ve just been looking into this statement of yours and you seem to have been involved in a matter of some considerable importance. Now, about this man Passy. We are very interested in him. Can you tell me all you remember about his appearance?”

“Yes sir,” I said. “He was tall—quite six foot I should think and well built, though he looked rather fat and out of condition. He was dark and had very bushy black eyebrows and a rather bent nose which looked as though it had been broken.”

“Did you notice anything about his face or complexion?” I pondered. “I seem to remember that it was rather pock marked, sir.”

The Group Captain glanced significantly at the squadron leader. “It seems to be Passy all right,” he said. He turned back to me. “And you think it was this man who fired at you as you were leaving the office. Did he see you go into the room where Stephenson had been shot?”

“No, I don't think so, sir. I looked round and couldn't see anybody. But of course he might have been watching from somewhere.”

“I think that's most likely,” said Leighton. “I think the reason he tried to kill you was because he wanted to stop you getting away with any story about him or the German officers.”

There was a pause for a moment. Leighton kept tapping the desk with a little silver pencil while he read through my statement again. What on earth is all this about, I thought. I wish he'd tell me something instead of being so damned mysterious. It certainly seems rather important though I can't for the life of me see how it all works out.

Leighton looked up. “You probably think all this is very mysterious,” he said, “but I'm afraid I can't say anything more to enlighten you.” I was rather surprised that he should guess exactly what I was thinking. He went on—“You did quite right in telling us about this matter so promptly and your information may prove useful, but that's all I can say at the moment, except that you are not to mention this affair to anybody. If there's anything more we want I shall get hold of you later. And now, I suggest you go and get a good night's sleep and a new uniform. You look as though you need both. Good afternoon.”

I saluted and walked out. Blast it, I thought. This is a very nice little mystery and I don't know a thing more about it than when I started.

I walked out into the street and hailed a taxi for Piccadilly feeling very tired and rather bad tempered.

* * * * *

The squadron was now stationed at Northholt and I went out there next day to re-join them. The doctor took a rather poor view of my leg and bandaged it heavily and gave me strict orders not to fly again till further notice. This may or may not have saved my life because a week later the squadron was very heavily engaged over Dunkirk during the evacuation. This has no part in this story and it will be sufficient to say that we destroyed a number of Huns and suffered rather heavily ourselves, nearly a quarter of the squadron being lost in four days.

Meanwhile I sat on the ground at Northolt, watching the squadron take off and waiting anxiously for their return, and feeling very unhappy and useless.

The affair at Abbeville was buried in the back of my mind, and I did not even give it another thought.

Chapter III

The Photograph.

THE next link in this story occurred on June 16th, three weeks after my return from France. My leg was now quite fit again.

“B” Flight were at readiness that afternoon and we were basking in deck chairs down at dispersal, chatting peacefully over a cigarette when the telephone rang. We sat up, suddenly alert. A second later the telephone orderly shouted, “Scramble Green Section, patrol base, angels ten.”

“Come on, Peter!” said Johnny and we grabbed our Mae Wests off the chair and ran hard across to the aircraft. I jumped into the cockpit, started up and taxied out with Johnny and Hamilton just behind. We took off, and as soon as we were airborne I called up the controller in the operations room. “Hallo Ratter, Goblin Green One calling. Are you receiving? Over.”

Ops. answered immediately. “Ratter calling Goblin Green One, receiving you loud and clear. One bandit is approaching Croydon from the south, angels ten. Vector one-two-five.”

I swung on to course and started to climb rapidly south-east, all the time examining the sky ahead. The day was sunny but there was a fair amount of broken cloud and conditions seemed excellent for a reconnaissance aircraft to operate.

We continued to climb on the course given and about 8,000 feet passed through some cloud and dodged round some more.

It struck me that we'd be lucky to spot him in this.

Ops. came on the R.T. again. “Hallo Goblin Green One, bandit has now turned south, angels ten, vector one-seven-o.”

I turned on to 170° and acknowledged the message, peering eagerly among the towering clouds that surrounded us.

We flew on for about ten minutes and began to feel rather anxious lest he should get back to France before we overtook him. But unless he was a fighter he could not hope to shake us off at the speed we were now travelling. His only hope lay in concealment.

Ops. again, “Hullo Goblin Green One, you are very near him now.”

We were still flying through a lot of broken cloud about 10,000 feet and I couldn't see anything.

There was a sudden shout from Ham. “Hullo Green One, bandit on the left behind us.”

I swung round and saw about quarter of a mile away a twin-engined bomber in a break between the clouds. We had already overtaken him as he was rather behind us.

I turned hard left and went after him on absolutely full throttle. He disappeared in a cloud and then emerged again. We were closer now and I spotted the characteristic “bite” out of the rudder; it was a Heinkel 111. He saw us too, for there was a sudden burst of black smoke from both engines as the pilot opened up to full throttle and he dived away to the left towards a great bank of cloud.

There was a wisp of grey smoke from the fuselage as the rear gunner opened fire. I opened up and gave a quick burst just to encourage him though we were still out of range.

Damn, he's almost in the cloud! I fired a long burst hoping that it might do some good but the range was too great and he disappeared into the cloud. I went straight in after him but couldn't see him. Johnny's voice crackled suddenly on the R.T. I think he was talking to Ham.

“There he is on your left.” I was still in cloud and couldn't see a thing.

I emerged into clear sky again and looked round—not an aircraft in sight. I kept going south and noticed with relief that we were still over land. We must be getting fairly near to the coast.

There was still nothing in sight. I rolled the Spit over vertically and looked down. By God, there he is! The Heinkel was about 2,000 feet below, just visible through a gap in the clouds. One engine was pouring out white smoke and he seemed to be losing height rapidly. Johnny and Ham must have shot him up pretty thoroughly though there was no sign of them. He must have shaken them off in the cloud.

I dived down and as I came into range two black objects tumbled out of the fuselage and I saw a parachute drawing out as I flashed past. They must be

getting out. But nobody else baled out and the bomber kept flying on quite steadily though still losing height.

I came in very close and was just about to open fire when a flash of tracer went past my head. I immediately fired a terrific burst into the fuselage and starboard engine which was apparently still untouched. I fired all the rest of my ammunition and the return fire ceased; probably the gunner was killed. The starboard engine suddenly burst into flames and the Heinkel dived more steeply.

I pulled away to watch it. The pilot still had some control and seemed to try and pull out of the dive. I caught one last glimpse of him rushing across the fields, a long trail of flame and smoke behind him, and the dark shadow on the ground moving swiftly forward as though to intercept him.

He struck the ground with a tremendous explosion and seemed to disintegrate completely. Many pieces of burning wreckage were thrown forward along the ground, and a mass of black smoke arose from the fierce petrol fires. Well, that was that.

I circled round a few times and watched the usual crowd of people appear miraculously from an apparently deserted countryside and start running towards the crash. Where they appear from I can't think.

I turned back towards Northolt, and suddenly remembered how close those tracers had been. It had been a gallant but hopeless gesture on the part of that Hun rear gunner. He was dead now and he might have baled out with the others.

I was only a few miles from Lympne and decided to land there and see if the Spit had been hit at all, so I turned off to the east and a few minutes later circled the aerodrome and came in to land.

I was right about those tracers being close. A couple of armour piercing bullets had gone through my starboard wing but the engineer officer said it could be flown back to Northolt quite safely.

I was just getting ready to leave when a car drew up and a middle-aged and portly flight-lieutenant hailed me and asked if I was the pilot who had shot down that Hun near Appledore. I said I was.

“The police have just rung through,” he said. “I’m the station Intelligence bloke, you see. Do you want to come along and have a look at it?”

I jumped in and we set off along innumerable country lanes and byways. After much questioning of local policemen and villagers we arrived finally in a lane crowded with cars, bicycles and eager sightseers. We left the car and forced our way past the throng to a gate where a couple of self-conscious soldiers were holding back the crowd.

“Sorry, sir,” said the soldier. “We can't allow anybody through this gate.” My companion produced an Air Ministry pass which seemed to work wonders and we were allowed into the field.

We walked forward a few yards and came across the wreckage of the Heinkel lying on a slope. It wasn't a very pleasant sight; I'd never seen a crash as bad as this before and I didn't like it much. My elation at having shot him down diminished considerably.

The aircraft had been smashed completely and the wreckage lay scattered over a considerable area with the engines nearly a hundred yards from the first point of impact.

An Army lieutenant approached us. “We’ve found two bodies so far,” he said cheerfully. “They’re over there. I don't think there are any more.”

We walked with him across the field. The pilot was still lying where he had fallen, and as I looked at this broken tattered object which only an hour before had been a brave and intelligent man I realised as never before the utter waste and futility of killing people like this.

My companion bent down, turned the body over and removed the parachute harness and then started to go through the pockets. He pulled out some letters, a notebook, a wallet and a badly broken watch and laid them on the ground. The notebook seemed to interest him. “Gay sort of devil, this,” he said. “Seems to have been having a very hectic three days in Paris last week judging by his diary and the girls' addresses he put down.”

He picked up the wallet, opened it and took out some photographs. He glanced at them one by one and handed them over to me. There were several photographs of girls, one sitting in a car, another skiing and so on.

He handed me another photograph. “That’s possibly this crew,” he said.

It showed a Heinkel with several men posed in front of it. They wore flying kit and were evidently the crew. In the background was the corner of some aerodrome building with one or two men standing about.

I was looking at the group standing in front of the Heinkel, trying to recognise among them the man lying at my feet when I realised with a sudden shock that one of the faces in the background was strangely familiar. Now where had I seen that man—? Got it! The scene at Abbeville come flooding back into my mind and I realised that the man in the background was Passy.

I began to examine the photograph with the keenest attention. What had happened was fairly obvious. The little group had posed in front of the Heinkel and Passy, standing perhaps twenty yards behind with only the side of his face showing, was obviously quite unaware that he was being included or even that a photograph was being taken at all. He was standing with a Luftwaffe officer evidently engaged in a conversation. The photograph was very sharp and clear and I was quite certain that it was Passy.

I began to think furiously. Group Captain Leighton must hear about this as soon as possible. What else could we learn from the photograph? If we knew the date and place at which it was taken we should have some idea of Passy's whereabouts. We couldn't interrogate the pilot—oh, but of course two of the crew had baled out. They must be interrogated immediately.

I turned to the flight-lieutenant and led him a few paces away from the little group of soldiers. He looked rather mystified.

“Listen,” I said. “I’ve just spotted something in this photograph which may be very important. You see this man”—I indicated Passy with my finger—“Well, he was involved in a rather fishy business in France that I happened to see and I know Air Ministry Intelligence are very interested in him and his movements. We must find out when and where this photo was taken and tell Air Ministry immediately. Can you arrange for the fellows who baled out to be interrogated as soon as possible, and find out, without appearing to emphasise the point, all about this photo and what they know of this man, and then get on to Group Captain Leighton at Air Ministry and tell him all about it.”

“I see,” he said. “I’ll get cracking immediately and then get through to 11 Group. They'll see about Air Ministry being informed. Now, I wonder where those two Huns are? They've probably been picked up by now.”

We walked back towards the gate and met a rubicund and very hot police inspector, just coming in with his bicycle.

“Afternoon, inspector,” said my companion, “Do you know anything about two Hun airmen who baled out from this machine?”

“I was just coming to see you about that, sir. My fellows have picked up two Germans about four miles away and they're on their way now to the Police Station. I came along to see if there are any more to be accounted for.”

“There are a couple of dead ones here,” I said, “it looks as if we have got the lot.”

We walked back to the car, forced our way through the crowd in the lane and drove back to Lympne where the flight lieutenant dropped me and went off to see the prisoners. I returned to my Spit and flew back to Northolt.

* * * * *

The C.O., Johnny, Hamilton and several others were in the mess when I walked in. They seemed in very good form and were busy celebrating the latest Hun.

Johnny hailed me, tankard in hand. “Where the hell did you get to, Peter? We lost you in the cloud and then Ham and I had a terrific squirt at the Hun as he popped out of cloud but the bastard nipped back again before we could finish him off.”

“I heard you on the R.T.,” I said. “You were yelling like a couple of schoolgirls. I was just stooging about wondering where everybody had disappeared to, when I saw the Hun just below me. You two had certainly done your stuff because one engine had packed up and the crew were so paralytic that two of them baled out as soon as they saw me.”

“You’re a lucky devil Peter,” said Hamilton, “you arrived just in time to polish off the wounded, like Blücher and the Prussians after Waterloo.” Ham used to be a schoolmaster in the old days.

“Absolute balderdash,” I retorted. “He may have been wounded but the ruddy gunner put a couple, of bullets into my wing which is more than he did to you.”

“Stop arguing, children,” said the C.O. “It's another Hun on our scoreboard anyway and you're all getting one third apiece. Let's have another Pimm.”

Six more cool tankards arrived, each decorated with borrage, mint and cucumber. I felt a warming glow spread down my innards. A good party seemed to be getting under way; the recollection of the burnt out Heinkel and the dead pilot lying at my feet faded into the background and all I remembered was the glorious excitement of that hunt through the clouds after an elusive enemy and the fierce satisfaction as I saw him blow up in the field.

This is the life for me, I thought; plenty of flying, lots of excitement and the best companions in the world with whom to share it all.

A steward came down to the serving hatch where we were standing. “Flying Officer Claydon wanted on the telephone, please.”

“Hell,” I said. “Back in a minute anyway.” I went across to the telephone and picked up the receiver.

“Hallo Claydon,” said a voice, “Adjutant here. Air Ministry have just 'phoned through that you're to report there immediately. I don't know what it's all about but it sounds very urgent and I'm sending the Humber round to the mess now to pick you up.”

“Damn,” I said. “We’re just having a party in aid of that Hun today. I'll be off in a minute.”

“You’ll go now,” said the voice inexorably and he hung up.

I went back to the party by the hatch, finished my Pimm and took the C.O. aside.

“I’ve just heard from the Adj., sir, that I've got to report to Air Ministry.”

“What’s all this about, Peter?” said the C.O. “Have you been up to a spot of no good?”

“No, I think it's about something that occurred in France which I happened to see. And that Hun we shot down today had something to do with it too.”

“This all sounds very mysterious,” said the C.O. rather nettled, I think, by my refusal to give him any more details.

“I know, sir,” I said, “I'm sorry to be so hush-hush about it but I was told very definitely to keep my mouth shut. I'll probably be back tonight anyway and I may be able to say a bit more then.”

“O.K.,” said the C.O. “We’ll see you later then. So long.”

“Where are you off to now?” asked Johnny.

“I must go for a bit,” I said. “I’ll be back later.”

“A fine fellow,” said Ham. “You pinch our Hun and then sneak off from the party. From the gleam in your eye I suppose you've got designs on some popsy.”

“Rot,” I said. “Have a good party and don't do anything I wouldn't do. So long.” And I went out to find the car.

* * * * *

Less than an hour later I was shown into Group Captain Leighton's office.

“Come in Claydon,” he said. “Have a chair.” I settled myself down.

He went on, “I sent for you as soon as I heard from it Group about this new development. We've been looking into this business very carefully since you were here last and I'll tell you straight away that the information you gave us about Passy at Abbeville has brought to light a most serious matter.” He must have seen the look of mystification on my face for he smiled slightly and went on, “I know you're wondering what on earth it’s all about but you'll hear in due course. Now, before we go any further, are you absolutely certain that the man in this photograph is Passy?”

He handed me an enlargement of the photograph I saw in the field that afternoon and it struck me that things had been moving fairly quickly for him to have an enlargement already.

I looked at the photo again. “There’s absolutely no doubt at all, sir. Every feature of this man is the same. I'm quite positive about it.”

“Good,” he said. “Well, the prisoners were interrogated and the points you mentioned were put to them. Neither prisoner appeared to see any significance in the questions and they both stated independently that the photograph was taken at Laon Athies on June 12th—four days ago. It was done at the suggestion of the

pilot who was a keen photographer and possessed his own Leica. He wanted a photo of his crew so they posed in front of their own Heinkel. The crew got these prints from the squadron photographic section last night and both prisoners left theirs in their room. The pilot must have put his in his wallet."

"And Passy? Did they know anything about him, sir?"

"I'm coming to that," he said. "Again they seemed quite open about it and saw no significance behind the questions. Neither man knew who he was but the navigator said he had seen him once before in the last few days and also at a café in Laon called the Deux Frères.

I see no reason to suppose that these men were not telling the truth, so it seems that we have tracked down Passy to some extent—at any rate we know that four days ago he was at Laon."

"Why all this interest in Passy, sir? Is it because he shot this man Stephenson?"

"Oh no," said Leighton, "I'm afraid there's much more in it than that." He paused a moment, picked up the photograph and then went on—"I want you to come along now and see somebody else who is interested in this matter. I was told to bring you along as soon as possible."

He took his hat off a peg and we went out of the office, down the lift and into the street.

We turned along Whitehall—I can't say exactly where—and entered a large building. Two men were stationed at the door but apparently they knew Leighton for we went straight in. Leighton stopped for a moment and turned to me. "I must tell you," he said, "that the identity of the man you're going to see is absolutely secret. You won't even be told his name."

We walked on and stopped outside a door. Leighton knocked and the door opened and a girl looked out. She was perhaps thirty years old, with an intelligent, attractive face and she wore a pair of horn-rimmed glasses.

She also knew Leighton for she smiled at him and then turned back into the room and said to somebody within, "Group Captain Leighton is here, sir."

"Oh, good," said a deep voice. "Ask him to step in."

Leighton entered the room, paused on the threshold and did a most punctilious salute. He said, "I've brought Claydon along to see you, sir."

I noticed both the salute and the "sir" and decided that I was about to meet somebody pretty important. I walked in.

The room was large and pleasantly though simply furnished. The windows were thrown wide open and though it was now after seven in the evening the June sunlight still streamed in on the carpet.

In the centre of the room stood a large desk and a man was sitting behind it.

He was neatly dressed in a grey suit and if you saw him in the street you would probably have taken him for a Senior Civil Servant. But there was some compelling quality about the man that impressed you from the very beginning. He was small and slim, with a neat moustache and the tanned skin and creased eyes of one who has spent some years in the East. His forehead was broad and high and some rather thin sandy hair was brushed straight back. His eyes and glance were the most remarkable feature of his face, cool, shrewd, analytical. He gave the impression of quiet authority and competence, and made you feel all the time that you were being subjected to the closest scrutiny and weighing up.

He looked at me for perhaps five seconds before he spoke.

“Good evening, Claydon,” he said, “you seem to have got here fairly quickly. I gather you've had a busy day.”

“Yes fairly, sir,” I said. I began to feel a little more at ease.

The man picked up a photograph from his desk and turned to Leighton.

“I gather you've shown this enlargement to Claydon?”

“I have, sir, and he's quite certain that the man is Passy.”

“Good,” said the Unknown, “that makes matters rather more simple to start with.” He turned to me. “Now, Claydon, I suppose you're wondering exactly what all this mystery is about —aren't you?”

“I am, rather, sir.”

“Well, I'm going to tell you the whole story as far as I know it. You'll see the reason for doing so later. I think I've got all the facts right but Group Captain Leighton will correct me if I go wrong.”

He paused for a moment and then went on. “In the first place, I don't have to tell you as a fighter pilot about the functions of R.D.F.[3-1] You must have experienced it in action and have some idea of the part it plays in the general scheme of our air strategy.”

“I have sir,” I said. I thought of the fight only that afternoon when we had been directed with almost uncanny accuracy towards an unseen foe in the clouds by an officer sitting in an Operations Room over sixty miles away.

“Experiments were first started in this country some years ago,” he went on, “and gradually the many difficulties inherent in it were overcome and it has developed into the reasonably efficient instrument that you know today. Now, this country was the first to start these experiments and we have every reason to believe that we are still a long way ahead of any other country in its development and application to war.

The Germans don't seem to have had any inkling of this activity—it was a well-guarded secret as you can imagine—until just before the war started when they commenced experiments. But there is no doubt that they still have a long way to go and very many difficulties to overcome before they reach our level.”

He paused for a moment. I wondered what all this had to do with Passy.

“The French were also very deficient in this respect,” he went on, “and early this year, February I think, we started the construction of two R.D.F. stations in France. Others were scheduled to follow but the first two were being erected at Abbeville and Combles, north of Peronne. These covered both Amiens which was the principal rail centre for the B.E.F. and also the north-west approaches to Paris.

“Both these installations were given the code name Python. Combles was Python One and Abbeville Python Two. That's what Stephenson meant when he tried to convey that message to you. He was a signals expert from Farnborough and was in charge of the electrical installation at Abbeville. He knew that if the message was delivered we should recognise immediately who he was and realise the gravity of the position he had discovered.

“The French were quick to see the possibilities of R.D.F. and they were very interested in it and asked our permission to attach some of their own engineers to our people in order to gain experience in the erection and working of the

equipment. We agreed to this but also pointed out the very secret nature of the work and asked that only very reliable people should be sent. They agreed, and shortly afterwards four men were sent along, two for each station.

"The two men attached to Python Two were Passy and Bolbec, but we aren't concerned with the latter as he's now in this country and we have no reason to believe him anything but a loyal Frenchman.

"We have questioned Bolbec and also some of our engineers who returned from Abbeville and they say that Passy behaved quite normally during his time there. He worked hard, made himself quite useful and altogether fulfilled the purpose for which he had been sent, that is, to get a good knowledge of R.D.F. Probably he had been told by the Germans to lie low till the moment arrived to strike. Bolbec doesn't seem to have liked him much—he says he was rather surly and difficult to get on with, and extraordinarily avaricious in regard to money matters. Perhaps it was this trait which the Germans used to seduce him.

"Of course every preparation was made to remove or destroy the R.D.F. equipment to prevent the enemy capturing it. Three days after the German attack started we were so concerned about the general situation that we sent out an officer from England specially to supervise the destruction of equipment if it became necessary. The signal to commence demolition was sent on 18th May and it was carried out very thoroughly. The officer returned to England and made his report, and there is no doubt that the enemy have drawn a blank as far as the R.D.F. equipment is concerned.

"The rest of the engineers only just got away in time, and in the confusion they missed Stephenson. Evidently he had gone back to his office to collect some papers or files. We have established, by the way, from the description in your previous statement that the room where you found Stephenson was in fact the office he had been using.

"What happened then we can only guess, but it seems certain that these two German officers had been sent on ahead as far as possible to contact Passy and help him to prevent demolition of the equipment. It was certainly a pre-arranged rendezvous and not a chance meeting, and this is confirmed by the details you noticed about their uniform. The black collar patches and shoulder straps are the insignia of the Waffen S.S. who are a very special organisation originally formed as Hitler's bodyguard. They are often used now for tasks of this sort which are considered to be particularly dangerous or important. They comprise some of the toughest and most ruthless thugs in the Nazi Party and if there's any dirty work to be done you generally find them involved somewhere.

"As soon as they met Passy, he probably told them that the equipment had already been destroyed—he must have been aware of that—and so they went straight along to Stephenson's office to see if they could pick up anything there.

"They found poor old Stephenson and probably beat him up to get some information from him—the way his face was battered confirms that—and then shot him to stop any information getting back to this country. And that's the point at which you appeared on the scene."

The man sitting at the desk paused and turned to the Group Captain.

"I think I've got the facts right so far, Leighton?"

"As far as we know, absolutely right, sir."

The Unknown addressed me again. “Now Claydon, you're probably wondering what all the fuss is about. The R.D.F. was destroyed; no documents of any importance were left behind. It all seems quite satisfactory at first glance doesn't it?”

“It seems so, sir,” I said.

He went on, speaking very slowly and emphatically. “But don't you see that Passy has accumulated all this knowledge of R.D.F. and is now going to apply it for the benefit of the Hun?”

“But could he be of much use, sir, without plans of the equipment? Or is it possible that he has been able to make a copy or photograph them?”

“No,” said the Unknown. “He never had access to any plans. We're satisfied on that point. But he has considerable experience of R.D.F. under working conditions and he knows some of the snags in it at present. For instance, you may be aware that it's not at the moment very effective in locating low flying aircraft.[3-2]

He knows that and a lot more besides. What we're afraid of is that he will be used by the enemy to advise them in their R.D.F. research. They're now very interested in it and are making tremendous efforts to catch us up, though they are still several years behind.

“But suppose they have an expert to advise them who knows all our methods of working R.D.F., who will help them to short-circuit all their difficulties by telling them the remedy which perhaps took us months of experiment and modification to discover. They may in a few weeks make the same progress that took us a few years.”

He spoke to the Group Captain again. “I don't think that’s pitching it too high, Leighton, is it?”

“No, sir,” said Leighton. “It’s one of the most disturbing of all the problems that have cropped up as a result of the French crash. Both the War Cabinet and the Air Staff are very concerned about it.”

I could see myself from the gravity on both men's faces how serious was the position.

“It’s incredible, sir,” I said, “that the French should have allowed a man like Passy to wriggle himself into such a vital position.”

“I know,” said the Unknown. “I know. A month ago I wouldn't have believed it possible but in the last few weeks we have had so many cases come to light, and proved beyond any doubt, of slackness, inefficiency and corruption in France that now I'm prepared to believe almost anything. Passy knew what he wanted and he will have been provided with ample funds for the purpose, which is always a help in France.

“As an example of what's been going on there—you've probably heard of the Paris newspaper *Paris Soir?* You have. Well, for the past three years they have had a very smart and efficient Commissionaire. Three days ago when the Germans entered Paris he donned the uniform of a German officer, marched into the editor's office and is now running the paper for the enemy. That's just one instance for you. There are plenty more.”

Another point occurred to me. “If Passy has all this knowledge, sir, won't the damage already be done? Surely he will have made a report to the Germans by this time?”

“I think that's very probable, in which case the Hun will certainly possess some knowledge on the subject and some damage will have been done, as you say. But you must remember that this is a highly technical and complicated subject, and there is a limit to what you can sit down in a chair and write about it. What we're afraid of is what you might call his long term value to the Hun, his expert research and advice to the German scientists who are working on the matter, and to do that we reckon that he will have to go to Germany, probably either to the Luftwaffe Experimental Station at Rechlin or else to one of the big German electrical concerns whom we know are engaged on this work—Siemens Schuckert or Telefunken in Berlin for instance.

“We know at any rate, from your very lucky recognition of that photograph that he was still in France four days ago, though of course he may have moved in the meantime. However, affairs in France are very disorganised at the moment and the Germans have a tremendous job on their hands trying to get it straight again, and therefore we think it’s just possible that they haven't got Passy's role settled yet. The question may already have been referred to Berlin and now be waiting their decision. In any case they'll rope him in very soon—we're under no delusions about that—and once he's in Germany the damage is done.

“So that, very briefly, is the position. Walking about France at the moment is a man—a traitor if you like—with all this priceless knowledge in his head which is shortly going to be transferred to Berlin.”

I began now to understand many things that had been a mystery before; the urgency of Stephenson's last message as he lay lying on the floor; the reason that Passy had tried to kill me; and why there had been such a swift response by Air Ministry to my report that afternoon about the photograph.

The Unknown went on, “Let’s look at another aspect of this matter. You know as well as I do that in all our history this country has never been in such a grave position before. Nothing in the last war was comparable with the present situation—we have no allies now that France is gone, and virtually no army because all our equipment has been lost and the crisis is coming before we can replace it.”

He spoke very slowly and tapped the desk with his pencil. “Once the Hun gets some troops ashore at Dover and establishes a bridgehead—we're sunk. We simply can't stand up to him on dry land and therefore we've got to stop him landing.

“It is, I know, the agreed opinion of both the Prime Minister and the Chiefs of Staff that the main assault on this island may commence in a few weeks. When it does the Navy will put up a tremendous fight in the Channel but they'll be working in narrow waters under constant dive bombing from the French coast and they're bound to suffer tremendous losses.

“Our main—our only hope—is our small fighter force which will be outnumbered about five to one. On the other hand, we have one or two assets left, firstly some good aeroplanes and also the R.D.F. By this means we hope to compensate for our lack of numbers by giving our few squadrons ample notice of approaching raids, and enabling them to make a very high proportion of interceptions, whatever the height, whatever the cloud conditions. We hope this means that our fighters will play a part in the coming battles that is out of all proportion to their actual numbers.

“That’s our trump card. We're staking practically everything we've got on you fellows and the R.D.F., and so you can see why we've got to keep this secret to ourselves.

“We’ve got to maintain our lead over the Hun and we've got to stop him, hearing of any shortcomings in our present equipment which he would take advantage of. In other words, we have got to stop Passy going to Berlin, or anywhere else for that matter.”

He laid on the desk in front of him the pencil he had been playing with, and looked me very straight in the eyes. “And that is why we brought you here Claydon. We intend to kill him and we're offering you the job.”

Chapter IV

Into the Darkness.

I STOOD very still. The implications of this remark were so staggering that it took a little time for my mind to adjust itself to the shock. The room was very quiet and in the silence I was conscious both of the clock ticking gently on the mantelpiece and also the urgent throbbing of a pulse in my head.

The man at the table smiled slightly and went on: “It is rather unusual for an R.A.F. officer to be sent out to murder a man, but then we live in unusual times. After all, you take off in your aircraft to destroy the King's enemies whether they're German or anything else and generally they get killed in the process though I don't suppose that worries you very much.

“Yet this man Passy is far more dangerous to this country than any German pilot you will ever meet, and as we can't shoot him down from the air we've got to hunt him on the ground. I used the word murder just now but that's the wrong word. Remember this man is both a spy and a traitor and his life is forfeit. If he were to fall into the hands of the French—the true French that is—he'd be court-martialled and shot in no time. He's also a very callous murderer as you saw at Abbeville.

“In the position we're in today we've got to forget all our pleasant English ideas of fair play and not hitting below the belt. We've played the game too long when everybody else has been getting away with their dirty tricks and you see the result. Now we're going to be tough too, and we're going to beat them at their own game. D'you understand?”

“I do, sir,” I said slowly, “but I can't see why you should select me for the job. I've no experience of this sort of thing and no qualifications. I'm sure you could find somebody more suitable.”

“No,” he replied emphatically. “As soon as your report about the photograph came in this afternoon we saw immediately that this was our opportunity to strike because we know for the first time where Passy is. I discussed the matter with Group Captain Leighton and one or two other persons well-qualified to judge and we decided that you were the most suitable person for the task. I also obtained

permission from Air Ministry for you to be attached temporarily for special duties. You can speak French after a fashion, can't you? I believe you worked there for a time before the war."

"Yes I did, sir." I wondered how the devil he knew so much about me. I was beginning to have a very considerable respect for this man and the resources and information at his disposal.

I went on: "But my French is nowhere near good enough to pass as a Frenchman."

"No," he said, "but I think we can overcome that as you'll see in a minute." Evidently he realised my reluctance for he paused and reflected for a moment and then went on in quiet persuasive tones.

"Believe me, Claydon, if we had anybody else we should send him, but the matter is so urgent and our position is so desperate that we cannot risk delay while we hunt round for somebody else.

"You see, we have no intelligence organisation in France. It was the country of an ally whom we never expected to lose and this situation had never been foreseen. All security and intelligence matters were dealt with by the French Intelligence people—the Deuxième Bureau that you've probably heard of—and now all that has been swept away by the tide and we have to start building an efficient organisation of our own which will take a long time.

"Remember, you have one great advantage over anybody else—you know Passy and would recognise him. That is your main qualification.

"To give you an idea of the importance we attach to this—do you think that with the present acute shortage of fighter pilots we could pinch you from Fighter Command unless the matter were vital? There's so much at stake that you are going to be more useful in this job than you are in your Spitfire. It's risky, of course, and if the Germans catch you they'll certainly shoot you at the very least, but it's got to be done by somebody and we consider that you have as good a chance as anybody we can find at such short notice. Are you game?"

I stared out of the window thinking furiously. I was cornered and I knew it. There was no decent way out except to go forward. I hated the idea of saying yes; I hated the idea of being hunted down in a foreign country, and then perhaps tortured and shot in cold blood, far from England and home and one's friends. To be killed in action—well, I didn't mind that much; it was clean and quick and exciting and hot-blooded, and I had often faced the possibility in my mind, but to be led out one morning in front of a firing squad—ugh!

And yet I could not turn down this request, and I knew I should never be happy with myself again if I refused. Also I didn't see how I could continue to face the man in front of me; such cowardice and selfishness would be quite outside his comprehension, I was sure of that.

Suddenly, and without even realising that I was going to speak, I said, "Yes."

The man at the table smiled. "Good," he said simply and then added, "I thought I wasn't mistaken in you." In other circumstances such a compliment would have gratified me considerably but just now it left me quite cold.

"Now for details," he went on. "We realise that your French may be rather a handicap and also your lack of knowledge of French ways generally so we have found a companion for you."

He pressed a bell on his desk and the girl came in silently.

“Ask Captain Carnac to step in, will you.” She went out again.

He turned to me. “You’ll like Carnac,” he said. “He’s the very best type of Frenchman, brave, intelligent, resourceful. You should make an excellent team.”

Footsteps sounded in the passage followed by a knock on the door and I turned round with the keenest interest to see the newcomer as he entered.

I beheld a very striking looking soldier. He wore the peaked cap and khaki tunic of a French officer and his breeches were of the usual French cut, so perfect that you felt they must be on a dummy in a tailor's window. His riding boots gleamed a rich brown against the carpet; his linen was impeccable. Evidently he thought a great deal about his personal appearance.

He was small and slim yet very well proportioned and a certain breadth about his shoulders told of considerable strength in a lithe and supple way. His hands were small and beautifully kept.

His face impressed me from the outset. The skin was burnt by the sun and was a smooth brown under his dark hair. His eyes were quick and full of intelligence, he had a small moustache turned up at the ends and when he smiled he showed a row of pearly teeth. He possessed an extraordinary degree and air of good breeding, dignity, intelligence and a touch of fiery yet controlled recklessness that reminded me irresistibly of D'Artagnan in “The Three Musketeers.” It struck me that here was a companion well suited to the enterprise ahead of us.

The man at the table rose to his feet. “Come in, Carnac,” he said. “This is Flying Officer Claydon of the Royal Air Force who is going with you to France. Claydon, meet Captain Charles Carnac.”

We shook hands. “I am very happy to meet you,” said Carnac. He spoke English quite easily though with a pronounced accent.

The Unknown went on, “I’ve already told you, Carnac, about this business of Passy and I think now you both know as much about it as we do.

“Now for your actual instructions. All we can do is to give you ample money and the name of a man in Laon who will help as much as possible. He's a doctor, a Frenchman and a Jew. His name is Paul Mendel and his address 23 Avenue Neuilly, Laon. Remember that because you mustn't write it down: I think you'll find him a very good friend and he certainly has no love for the Boche, but you must be exceedingly careful in your approach to him as the enemy may already have him under supervision as a Jew, if nothing worse.

“One of our officers was in Laon just before the Germans arrived and he realised what a valuable agent Mendel would be, so they arranged a recognition signal in case anybody went to see the doctor on our behalf. You will go to him and complain of a pain in your back. Mendel will then ask how long this has been troubling you and you will reply, 'Since May 6th,' which was the day this signal was agreed on. It may sound a bit elementary, but it was all arranged very hurriedly.

“Once you have seen Mendel and fixed your hiding place, start your search for Passy immediately. I can't give you any advice about this at all, or how you will deal with him later when you've found him. It may be easy; more likely it will be very difficult. You'll just have to use your own brains and your own initiative but

remember always that your sole object is to kill Passy and return safely to this country.

“There’s a great deal of confusion in France at the moment, with thousands and thousands of refugees wandering all over the countryside. This should make it much easier for you to conceal yourselves and I think you'll be fairly safe so long as you can stay in cover, but of course the danger starts for a spy when he has to stick his head out to get information.

“Be very careful about the Germans. Their security and secret police are very vigilant, very clever and absolutely ruthless. If they catch you they'll stop at nothing—literally nothing—to get information from you about your mission, your means of entry into France and the identity of your companions. You've probably heard of their methods of interrogation and most men will break down under it sooner or later. If by any chance the worst should happen—” he looked at us very intently, “you'll just have to stick it as long as you can but in case it gets too bad we're giving you some little phials which you might get the opportunity to take. That will give you an easy way out, but you mustn't give anything away whatever they do to you.”

He paused a moment and then picked up a folder on the table.

“Lastly, here are all the details of Passy that we have been able to discover. He's about thirty-five, an electrical engineer by trade and evidently a clever one.

“Before the war he was employed for a time on research by the French branch of Siemens and he was mobilised for the Army in September 1939, but he was soon released again and shortly after he got this liaison job at Abbeville. He's inclined to be a heavy drinker and is very partial to women —in fact his morals would shame an alley cat. We can't trace that he's ever been in trouble with the police and there's no indication as to when the Germans may have got hold of him, but his political views are certainly Fascist for he was an active member of the Croix du Feu about the time of the Stavisky riots. Since then, however, he seems to have quietened down somewhat, though of course this may have been a blind. We have heard a story that at one time he had some connection with the Deuxième Bureau but we can't confirm this and personally I think it's most unlikely. And that's all I can tell you.”

He stopped and regarded us both. “Is there anything more you wish to know?” I shook my head. Carnac said, “No, nothing.”

“Good,” said the man at the table. “Well, I wish you the very best of luck and remember you have our authority for anything that you consider is necessary for your success, and we shall back you up whatever you do and whatever the result.”

We shook hands and the Unknown, turned to Leighton. “Group Captain Leighton will see that you're fixed up with everything that's necessary and settle all the other details.”

“When are we going, sir?” I asked.

“Tonight”, said Leighton. “We have a Whitley laid on to drop you near Laon.”

I grinned. “It all seems to have been arranged very quickly, sir.”

“It was,” said Leighton. He also seemed slightly amused. “We fixed it as soon as we got your report this afternoon. Come along.”

You are a B.F. I said to myself. You really thought you were being very noble in volunteering for this job, didn't you? And actually it was all arranged for you from the very beginning. You never had a hope of getting out of it.

* * * * *

Later that evening a large R.A.F. Humber was travelling fast up the Great North Road in the direction of Cambridge. The rear windows of the car were covered by small squares of black material and Group Captain Leighton sat in front beside the squadron leader who was driving.

Charles Carnac and I sat in the back concealed by the curtains. We bore little resemblance to the R.A.F. pilot and the immaculate French officer who had recently left a building in Whitehall.

Carnac was dressed in a very dirty French uniform and his dusty boots which were caked in mud and filth looked as though he had been marching for a week. His hair was untidy and matted, and his moustache had been shorn of its magnificent turned-up ends and now looked ragged and un-kempt. His carte d'identité and army pay book proclaimed him to be Jean Baptiste Prouvy, a corporal in the 177th Infantry Regiment. He looked as though he'd been a poilu since the day he was born.

My appearance had also altered considerably. I was a lieutenant in l'Armée de l'Air and my dusty blue uniform and filthy shoes spoke of many days tramping the roads. The metal identification disc on my wrist bore the name Pierre de Buissy and gave my number, class and place of mobilisation—in my case Paris. I was an observer in the 61st Bomber Squadron; we had been flying the Potez 63 and I had a fairly comprehensive knowledge of the Squadron's movements and operations during the past three months. I knew the names of the C.O. and several other officers and at any rate could have held my own in general conversation on the subject.

Altogether we had been very thoroughly briefed and I knew my present personality fairly well. My obvious English accent was explained by the story that I had lived in England for many years as my father had been in charge of the London office of a big firm of Lille cloth manufacturers; on the outbreak of war I returned to Paris for mobilisation and joined l'Armée de l'Air.

My carte d'identité bore my photograph and although the paper was overprinted like a cheque to avoid forgery, the official stamp had been impressed on both the photograph and the surrounding paper in the same way that a passport is stamped. There was no trace of the stamp for the original which must have been removed and the whole thing had been very skilfully faked. I don't know whether our papers were forged or not, but Leighton had assured us that there was no chance of our being confronted by the true owners of these identities from which I gathered that they were either in this country or dead. “Remember,” he said, “these papers will pass an ordinary scrutiny but they will not stand up to a thorough investigation. No false papers ever will and you must not rely on them if you are in trouble.”

I lifted a corner of the black curtain and peered out of the window. It was a perfect late June evening and the setting sun cast long shadows from the trees and hedges across the road. The tranquillity of centuries seemed to lie over the

English countryside. For a thousand years we had been immune from invasion: it was difficult to realise now that only a hundred miles away the most formidable army and air force in the world were gathering themselves for the final assault on these shores.

I glanced round at Carnac. He was smoking a cigarette and humming snatches of a little tune. He seems a pretty cool customer, I thought to myself. I began to feel a strong regard for this debonair Frenchman.

He grinned at me and pointed out of the window. “You see,” he said, “it's a beautiful evening. We shall have a nice flight.”

“I’m not thinking about the flight,” I retorted. “Our troubles start when we land.”

“Perhaps,” he replied, “or perhaps not. I think it may be quite easy till we have to deal with Monsieur Passy. It will be difficult to do that quietly and the Boches will not be very pleased to find they have lost this prize. We shall have to be very quick then and very careful.”

There was a pause. “What do you suggest we do after landing?” I said. “It may be rather difficult to join up again in the dark.”

“There will be a good moon,” he said thoughtfully. “I think before we leave the aeroplane we will choose some point on the ground—perhaps a wood or a road—and both walk there as soon as we land. We will meet there and start our journey into Laon.”

“Very well,” I said, “and if anything should happen and one of us fails to appear at the rendezvous the other one must go straight to Laon and not wait.”

“I agree,” said Carnac. “We mustn't fail in this. Whatever happens one of us must see this doctor and then look for Passy.”

We lapsed again into silence. The car hummed along through Letchworth and Royston and half-an-hour later we turned into the main gates of an aerodrome.

Evidently we were expected, for a Wing Commander emerged from the guard room, saluted Leighton and then got into a car and led us round the perimeter track till we stopped by a Whitley. The adventure was about to begin.

It was getting dusk and around us lay the flat rather featureless Cambridge countryside. A few yards away the glow of cigarettes showed the crew of the Whitley standing in a small group. They had evidently been briefed about their odd passengers for they glanced at us curiously but made no effort to talk to us.

The Wing Co. came over and spoke to me, asking if we had any special instructions for the pilot. He had no idea of my rank for he persisted in addressing me as “sir” which at any other time would have amused me more than somewhat.

He called the pilot over to join the discussion and as he approached I recognised John Millard who was on the same course at F.T.S. with me. Fancy meeting old John again! He ambled towards us with the same slow gait that had always acted like a red rag to every drill sergeant he ever encountered.

“Hallo, Millard,” said the Wing Commander. “We want a final word with you about dumping these gentlemen.”

“Very good, sir,” said John. He looked first at Carnac, then at me, but never batted an eyelid. My disguise must be fairly effective, I thought.

“Hallo John, you old scoundrel,” I said. “Mind you don't do any of your old style take-offs tonight with me on board.”

He jumped as if he'd been stung, and peered into my face.

“My God, Peter Claydon!” he exclaimed. “What the hell are you—” He realised suddenly that he was asking questions and checked himself abruptly in the middle of the sentence.

“Oh, just off on a little jaunt to France,” I said. “I’ve got to see a man about a dog, actually.”

The Wing Co. just hadn't a clue on this conversation. From the expression on his face we might have been talking basic English.

“Well, well,” said John. He was recovering from his surprise. “I suppose you must be up to some dirty work. Anyway, what do you want me to do? We've been told the place to dump you—two miles south of Vitry-le-Grand which is a few miles east of Laon.”

“That’s right,” said Carnac. “There is a big wood just south of the village and we want to drop as near to that as possible in case we have to hide.”

“What height do you want?” asked Millard.

“As little as possible,” I said. “The less time we have to spend dangling in the air the better, and it cuts down the risk of being spotted by any Huns on the ground. I'd say 1,500 feet would be about right.”

“I agree,” said Carnac, “and we must jump close together.”

There was a pause. Everything was settled, the aircraft was ready, and yet somehow I was reluctant to give the word to start and take my feet from the good English soil that seemed so solid and comforting beneath me.

Carnac evidently had no such feelings. “Eh bien,” he said briskly, “let us start.” He turned to Leighton and shook hands. I did likewise.

“Goodbye,” said the Group Captain. “Goodbye and the very best of luck to you both. You'll never have a bigger job than this. Far more depends on you at the moment than you probably realise. Au revoir.”

We walked across to the Whitley. Millard emerged from the aircraft with two sets of parachute harnesses which he handed to us. I put mine on and clambered on board with Carnac just behind me.

Millard came past and settled himself down in the pilot's seat. He started the engines and ran them up carefully and a few moments later we roared along the flare path and climbed steadily into the darkness.

* * * * *

The moon was rising and as I lay in the bomb-aimer's position in the nose of the Whitley I could see the English countryside slipping gently beneath us like a great silver pattern on which streams and fields and roads and villages were all clearly etched. Here and there the dim lights of a car moved along a country road and the red glow from the driver's cab of a railway engine was shown up by a shower of sparks as the fireman threw on more coal.

We climbed over Essex towards the south, crossed the Thames somewhere near Gravesend and quarter of an hour later the English coast fell away behind us. We were flying at about 7,000 feet and the Channel lay spread out below, calm, silver, and with a dappled surface rather like a pewter salver. It was all very lovely and very peaceful.

Ahead of us lay the dark line of the French coast and as we crossed it I could see the rocky, deeply indented cliffs near Dieppe. There was still no sign of the enemy. Perhaps he isn't troubling about single aircraft, I thought hopefully.

For another ten minutes we flew on steadily over the silent countryside and then suddenly a searchlight sprang out of the darkness ahead of us. The beam swayed erratically across the sky searching for us, and a moment later a number of other searchlights exposed and commenced to probe methodically through the darkness like great white fingers.

Millard evidently thought it was time for a little evasive action and he turned away to the left. We had just straightened out of the turn when one searchlight swung over towards us and there was a brilliant light inside the aircraft as the beam actually caught us. We were exposed only for a second and the beam continued its sweep but the spotters on the ground must have seen us for the light swung back quickly and as though controlled by some unseen hand all the other beams suddenly concentrated round the Whitley. They found us almost immediately and every detail of the aircraft was shown up by the blinding light.

I tried to look down but could see only numerous points of intensely white light and I looked away hastily to avoid being dazzled. Millard was taking violent evasive action now and the aircraft was turning and twisting so sharply that I was thrown against the side of the fuselage but still the lights held on to us.

It was a horrid naked sort of feeling being exposed like that and knowing that scores of enemy eyes were fixed on you but yet being quite powerless to evade them.

Finally Millard put the nose down and we dived hard. The trick seemed to work, or perhaps we were now beyond the group of lights for almost immediately the beams lost us and flickered aimlessly behind. John's voice came over the intercom. “Good show, chaps, we've got away.” He sounded relieved, I thought. So was I.

I was just making myself comfortable again when another very urgent voice broke in on the intercom. “Enemy fighter coming in, starboard quarter.” Millard replied quickly, “O.K., O.K.” and we turned to starboard and dived. A few seconds later I saw a stream of tracer and incendiary bullets flying past the wing and then felt a couple of thuds and dull explosions.

The aircraft lurched violently and went into a very steep dive. We recovered, turned to the right and then dived again and finally pulled out a few hundred feet from the ground. I tried to call Millard on the intercom but it must have been cut for it was absolutely dead so I struggled to my feet and crawled past Carnac to the pilot's seat. Carnac was sitting in the same place apparently quite calm and unperturbed. I said, “Are you O.K.?” and he smiled and nodded.

I went back to Millard. “Are we O.K.?” I shouted. He leaned over slightly, still keeping his eyes fixed on the sky ahead and said: “We’ve been hit but I don't know what the damage is. The port engine's getting bloody hot.”

I leaned across and looked at the radiator temperature. It was 110° and still rising. The oil pressure was normal and it looked as though the radiator must have been hit.

“What do you want to do?” I said. “We’ll never make Laon with that engine.”

“Not flaming likely. We'll have to turn back and try to get home. What do you want to do?”

“Can you make any height before the engine packs up? We can't bale out as low as this.”

“I’ll try,” he said. “I think we've shaken off that ruddy fighter now. Do you want to come back to England or bale out?”

“If you can get over a thousand feet we'll bale out. The sooner the better because if you've got to forced land we'll probably be caught and then Carnac and I will be shot.”

I felt a tap on the shoulder and turned round. The navigator was standing just behind me. He shouted to Millard, “Cocky’s been hit. I'm afraid he's pretty bad.”

“Damn,” said Millard calmly. “Go back and do what you can for him. We're climbing up to let these two bale out and then we're cracking straight home.”

The navigator grunted and went off again. I shouted to Millard, “I’ll go and see if I can help,” and followed him down the aircraft to the rear turret. The navigator was struggling to pull the wounded gunner out of the turret but there was so little room I couldn't help him. Over his shoulder I could see the splintered perspex of the turret shining against the moonlit sky. It looked as though several bullets had come through.

The navigator heaved backwards with his arms round the wounded man's chest and drew him out. We lay him on the floor and by the light of a torch took off his parachute harness and Irvin jacket. He'd been hit in the shoulder and his jacket was covered in blood. There was another wound in his leg. I thought he was pretty badly hurt. He was in considerable pain though only semi-conscious and he kept groaning and muttering to himself. The navigator ripped open a first aid packet and prepared to give him a shot of morphia.

I was still trying to take off the man's tunic when the wireless operator came down and told me to go forward. I went back to Millard.

“You’d better get ready,” he said. “We’re just over fifteen hundred feet now and the engine may blow up at any time.”

I seized my parachute pack and snapped it on to my harness and then went forward to Carnac.

“We’ll have to get out now,” I said. “One engine's been hit and we mustn't be found near the aircraft if they have to land.”

“Merde,” he said. “It is bad to commence like this. Where are we?”

“I don't know exactly but somewhere near Rouen. We'll try to pick up some landmark for a rendezvous after landing but if not we'll just have to make our own way to Dr. Mendel at Laon and meet there. O.K.? “

“Yes,” he said. He clipped on his parachute pack and stood ready.

I climbed back to Millard. Several searchlights were waving ahead of the aircraft. It struck me that our position was anything but healthy.

“All set?” said Millard.

“Yes absolutely,” I replied. “Well, bye-bye Johnny and thanks for the lift. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Have a drink with me when you get back.”

I was just turning to go when I saw over his shoulder a great sheet of orange flame burst from the port engine. It had packed up at last, good and proper. The flames leapt up from the cowling and streamed back over the wing.

Millard saw it too. “Bloody hell!” he shouted savagely. “Get out quickly—go on.”

I jumped down again and opened the escape hatch in the floor. Carnac was standing there waiting.

“Quick!” I said, “we’re on fire.” He sat down on the floor with his legs dangling through the hatch. “Laon,” he shouted. I nodded. He put his hands on the edge of the hatch, lowered himself down and then suddenly his hands disappeared. He had gone.

I sat down and put my legs through. A blinding light came up in my face and the Whitley started to dive. Hell, the searchlights have got us again. It's too easy for them with that great sheet of flame coming out of the engine; we must look like a great Roman Candle in the sky. There was a terrific blast of air as I swung down through the hatch and then I let go and dropped away from the aircraft into the darkness.

My first impression was that everything had grown strangely quiet now that the vibration and drumming of the aircraft had ceased. Also I must have started somersaulting almost immediately because the brilliant points of light from the ground were rotating crazily round my head.

There was very little height to spare and I pulled the rip cord quickly and felt the sudden check as the parachute drew out.

I was perhaps a thousand feet from the ground now, swinging gently to and fro like a pendulum and just about to try and examine the ground below when a searchlight beam swept across me in a blinding flash. It passed me and then swung back and held me, and several more lights joined it.

They'd seen the parachute all right. I was now thoroughly desperate. Scores of enemy eyes would be watching the great white canopy as I floated down and there was nothing I could do to avoid them, simply nothing. Already men would be moving across the ground below to intercept me.

I glanced round wildly but could see very little as I was completely dazzled by the glare of the lights. Suddenly the beams left me. For a second I couldn't understand this and then realised that it was because I was almost on the ground and they couldn't depress their beams any lower.

Now that the glare had vanished my eyes were able to pick up details of the ground below and I tried to fix a quick picture of it in my mind. The country seemed to be very open, with fields and hedges, a few trees and here and there a small copse. On one side a small river gleamed like a silver thread in the moonlight. The searchlights were rather further away than I had thought at first, and a vague, desperate hope rose in my mind that I might still have a chance of getting away if only I made a safe landing. To be caught in a tree or sprain an ankle would be fatal. Quite literally, fatal.

A moment later the dark mass of the ground came up to meet me with a sudden rush and I landed heavily in long grass and rolled over. I picked myself up in a flash, noted with quick relief that my legs were unhurt and took off my parachute harness. Even seconds were going to count now.

The searchlight beams were still visible above some trees and I decided that the first thing to do was to get as far as possible from the searchlight positions and their crews. There was no point in concealing the parachute as we had been warned to do. The Hun knew perfectly well that somebody had baled out from the aircraft and they also knew to within a few hundred yards the position to search.

I turned and started to run across the field. By great good fortune I had dropped into a corn field which had broken my fall, but the long corn now made progress rather difficult and to my anxious ears the swish of the grass past my legs seemed loud enough to rouse the whole countryside. I reached a wire fence at the end of the field, paused a moment to recover my breath and listened intently for any sounds of pursuit.

In the deep silence I could hear nothing but the agitated thumping of my heart, and somewhat reassured I scrambled over the fence and set off across another field as fast as I could.

I was beginning to realise with dismay that my physical condition, which is generally pretty hard, was not at the moment all it should have been; probably three weeks inactivity following the wound in my leg was the cause. I knew that any chances of evading capture in the next few hours would probably depend to a great extent on sheer physical endurance and I could see that I was going to have to push myself to the limit.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I was wondering what had happened to all the others but I can't say I was worrying very much. Millard at any rate had a sporting chance of getting back on one engine, and even if they had to land and were caught they were only prisoners of war which was a very different matter from being a spy. And Carnac should be all right. I knew he hadn't been spotted by the searchlights and probably he had managed to land unobserved. Not more than thirty seconds had elapsed before I followed him through the hatch and therefore he must be within a mile or so of my position, but it was hopeless to try and make contact with him in the dark. In any case he was well able to take care of himself.

I came to the end of another field and a gate which led into a rough cart track. I peered cautiously over the gate but everything was still quiet and I climbed over and walked quickly along the track. It was narrow with high hedges on either side and seemed to offer better cover than the open fields. The moon was nearly full and visibility was good—far too good for my liking. A really black night would have made escape much easier.

I had gone perhaps a hundred yards along the track when I stopped very suddenly and listened, every sense keyed up to an almost unbearable pitch. There was no mistaking the distant hum of several cars. They seemed to be getting nearer, but as I couldn't see any lights and had no idea where the road lay I couldn't be certain.

The noise was more distinct now. It was certainly approaching. I debated hastily what to do. The cars might be merely on a routine drive but it seemed more likely to me that a search party had been collected and sent down as quickly as possible to the approximate position where the parachute had been seen. It was no use trying to run away because I didn't know in which direction to go, and in any case

a man running is bound to make a certain amount of noise which not only gives away his own position but stops him hearing other movements.

I forced my way through the hedge, got back into a field and worked my way cautiously along a hedge till I came to a ditch in the corner which seemed fairly dry. It was as good a hiding place as any and I decided to lie up for a few minutes and see what happened. I eased myself in and lay down with my head just above ground level.

For a few minutes nothing happened. There was no noise from the cars and they had either stopped or else were out of earshot. I waited a little longer and was just beginning to think that the coast was clear enough for me to move when I heard the sound of voices, followed a moment later by footsteps quite near me. Very, very slowly I inched my head up and saw the light of torches moving up the track I had just left. It was impossible to tell how many men there were, but by the voices and footsteps I thought at least a dozen. I wondered quickly how they had managed to track me down so promptly. Most likely the track would be marked on their maps and they had left their transport on the road and taken the track as the easiest method of getting across the fields. I began to curse myself for not hiding my parachute in a ditch. It wasn't more than five hundred yards away and once they found it they would know they were getting warm.

The voices died away up the lane. I waited a few minutes longer and then decided I must move despite the risk. In two hours it would be dawn and if I were still in that open countryside in daylight I shouldn't last five minutes. There was no cover at all and not a hope in hell of evading a thorough search. And the search would be thorough; I was under no delusions about that.

Very gently I lifted myself out of the ditch and started to crawl along the line of the hedge until I came to the corner of the field. Here another problem rose. I wanted to get as far away as possible from the track and to do so I had to get out of this field, but there was no gate and to climb the hedge inevitably meant some noise and the possibility of being seen. The hedge was too thick to crawl under.

I was lying there wondering whether to take the risk when I heard somewhere behind me a man coughing and then the shuffle of feet. It sounded as though he was in the lane. I hadn't realised there was anybody so near. Probably the search party had left men posted at intervals all along the track to stop any escape in that direction. It was very lucky that I had just got across in time but I dare not move again while he was so close.

I lay there absolutely motionless for what seemed an age, all the time getting more and more desperate. Every moment I stayed here decreased the chance of escape and I was still within fifty yards of the enemy, absolutely pinned down by this confounded sentry who didn't even realise how close he was.

Suddenly I heard a whistle in the distance, followed by a lot of shouting. They've found the parachute, I thought. Now they must realise I'm not far away. Still the faithful sentry in the lane never moved. I couldn't see him but I heard him shuffling his feet occasionally.

An idea suddenly flashed across my mind, a memory of days when we were children playing hide and seek in the garden. It was a risky trick it might work with luck and distract his attention for ten vital seconds. Very cautiously I groped my hand along the hedge till I found what I wanted, a good sized stone. I raised

myself to a kneeling position and hurled the stone towards the lane, aiming well to the right of the sentry. A good thud broke the silence. The man said something very sharply and I heard his footsteps break into a run.

It was now or never. I jumped to my feet, ran a few paces at the hedge and hurled myself over. I scraped heavily through the top and landed on my arms and shoulders on the far side in fairly soft ground. I lay for a moment listening but heard nothing. The sentry was probably doing the same and wondering what the hell had caused that noise. I picked myself up and crouching almost double ran along the hedge and through a gate into another field.

I walked on rapidly for about half a mile and then emerged in a road and paused for a moment, weighing the extra risk of travelling along the road against the greater speed that it would allow, and finally decided that the risk must be accepted. I simply had to be several miles away by dawn and I reckoned that I could nip off the road quickly if I heard anything coming.

It was a mistake that very nearly finished me.

Chapter V

A German Dies.

THE road ran straight and was lined with poplars which cast deep shadows across its moonlit surface. There were still many evidences of the great retreat which had just finished. At intervals along the side of the road cars lay abandoned, wrecked or burnt out, sundry equipment was scattered in the ditch and once or twice I passed a ragged bomb crater which had not been filled in.

I walked along quickly, keeping in the shadow of the trees and ever on the alert for the sound of cars, but none appeared. I was now making good progress and feeling rather more hopeful, but time was getting short and I knew that in another hour it would be dawn and I should have to be in cover. I looked in vain for any likely place to hide. There were one or two small woods but I thought those would be the first places to be searched and decided to use them only as a last resort.

I was still worrying about this when I heard a car approaching from the direction I had come. Immediately I jumped off the road and crouched behind a tree. The car came on at high speed, blew its horn once and flashed past. When the sound died away I got up and stepped back on to the road. I had just emerged from the trees when a voice said loudly, “Halten, wer ist da?” I whipped round and saw a German soldier ten yards away. He was just jumping off a bicycle as he spoke and in an instant he unslung the rifle he was carrying and covered me.

I never had a chance. I was so startled and taken completely by surprise that I just stood there helplessly while he flashed his torch on me. I realised miserably that I'd been caught absolutely off my guard, thinking when the car had passed that the coast was clear, whereas actually the noise of the car had covered any slight noise made by the cycle and enabled him to approach unobserved. He was riding without lights and I realised now why the car had sounded its horn.

The soldier completed his scrutiny. “So,” he said. “Französich Vorwarts.” He pushed his bicycle into the side of the road, motioned me to turn round and then banged me on the arm with his rifle. I gathered what he meant and put my arms up, clasping my hands at the back of my head.

“Vorwarts,” he repeated roughly and emphasised the point by a sharp jab in my back with the muzzle of his rifle. I started to walk and he fell in behind me.

We were going back along the road we had come and I knew that probably in less than two miles we should meet another section of the search party.

Over and over again I muttered savagely to myself, “You bloody, fool, you bloody fool.” If only I had kept to the fields, if only I had been more careful emerging on to the road, if only—but what was the good? I ought to have expected patrols to be sent along the road and obviously they would not advertise their approach by using lights.

What a silly, rotten ending to this mad adventure, to be captured as soon as I set foot in France. A thousand mad thoughts surged through my brain and at the back of them all lay that black overwhelming certainty that this was the end. I felt almost resigned in a dull hopeless way and then my mind would react vigorously and I would realise that, short of a miracle, this was the end of my life. But I couldn't see the miracle.

Our venture had gone wrong from the very start, when that night-fighter attacked us and again when the searchlights caught my parachute. Perhaps Carnac would fare better and accomplish our mission alone. That was the thought that depressed me most of all, that I had failed so completely and that I was going to lose my life without accomplishing anything in return for it.

We walked on in silence. I began to wonder how far my captor was behind. I could hear his footsteps very close but it was difficult to estimate the distance and I dared not look round.

Another thought suddenly occurred to me. The soldier had never searched me and in a sheath under my tunic I was carrying a small fighting knife. I also had an automatic in my side pocket but there would be no time to pull this out, and anyway I had put on the safety catch for the jump from the aircraft.

I didn't see how I could possibly use the knife. The man behind had me covered and I knew he would fire without hesitation at the first wrong move I made. He just couldn't miss at such short range, though I didn't worry very much about that. I should certainly be killed if I remained a prisoner, and a bullet in the back now suited me better than ‘interrogation’ by the Gestapo followed by a firing squad.

And then another idea occurred to me. When he covered me in the first instance he was holding his rifle at the waist in the usual way, i.e. right hand on the butt holding the trigger, left hand on the barrel. That meant he would probably now have his rifle held across his body with the muzzle pointing up to the left. This would make it very easy to take a quick shot to the left but a shot low down on the right would be much more difficult, and would necessitate either swinging the body round and probably moving the feet or else changing hands on the rifle. Of course I couldn't be certain that was how he was carrying his rifle and I dare not glance round but it was a chance. And I remembered also that jab in the back—he hadn't got his bayonet fixed. A quick dive down to the right and at the same time

snatch out the knife from the sheath and come up under his guard—there was a ghost of a chance in it.

Now to get him closer. I slowed down my pace and started to limp slightly. Nothing happened and he seemed quite prepared to slow down too. I dare not say anything for fear of rousing his suspicion but I slowed down even more.

His footsteps sounded right behind now. The gap must have lessened. The moment was coming. I clenched my hands very tight and braced myself for a supreme effort.

An instant later he got impatient. There was an angry grunt and I felt a sharp blow from the rifle across my back.

I waited a split second for his rifle to be withdrawn slightly and then as my left foot came on to the ground I suddenly flung myself down to the right, at the same time dropping my left hand to my belt.

Immediately he gave a startled shout and fired. He was so close- that the explosion sounded right in my ear but he missed.

I fell with my shoulder on the ground, fumbling for the knife and missed it. I knew if I didn't catch it at the first grab it was no good and without pausing I somersaulted over, saw in a flash his legs beside me and dived hard for them.

I banged into him and at the same time a frightful blow crashed down on my back. He must have made a vicious downward jab with his rifle butt, fortunately missing my head by inches but nevertheless it nearly finished me. I felt quite sick and faint with the pain and it seemed to have affected the strength of my legs as though they were half paralyzed.

The next thing I knew he had fallen backwards on the ground under the weight of my tackle and I was lying on top of him with my arms round his waist.

I shot one arm out to seize the rifle and stop any more of those terrible jabs and at the same time brought my other hand up to try and get his throat, but he was a powerful man and very quick; he seized my wrist, twisted it outwards so sharply that I thought it had gone, and then brought his knees up violently underneath me so that I was thrown sideways on to the ground. He must have let go of the rifle because as I rolled over he tore his other hand from my grip and hit me a tremendous blow in the face.

I thought I was finished. I was half-stunned and though I'm fairly strong I was no match for the powerful brute.

My right arm was numb and useless after that vicious twist but as I fell back on the ground I fumbled again with my left hand for the knife in my belt, and this time I was lucky and seized it at the first grab.

He half rose to his feet and flung himself across towards me to finish me off. By a great effort I drew my legs up and with the last despairing strength that I could raise I jabbed out viciously as he approached and caught him in the body fair and square. He gave a sharp grunt of pain and went over backwards. I think he was hurt pretty badly too.

I had the knife in my hand now and staggered across to him but he was tougher than I thought and grabbed me by the legs and dragged me down. He was incredibly strong despite the awful knock he'd taken, and he got both hands on my throat with tremendous pressure and rolled over on top of me. I remember as clearly as though it were happening now the feel of his hot breath in my face and

his short tearing gasps as he made this tremendous final effort to kill me. He was just fighting mad with pain and fury.

Another few seconds of that iron pressure on my throat and I should have been finished but I made a wild stab with my left hand at the dark outline of the man above me. I heard a grunt and struck again and then, very slowly, his hands loosened their grip on my neck and he collapsed gently on the ground beside me and lay there absolutely motionless.

I struggled to a sitting position and remained on the ground for some little time, fighting against the nausea and faintness that seemed to come over me in great waves. I was so nearly done that I didn't really care any longer what happened; all I wanted was to crawl away and lie down and be sick.

I don't know how long I was there—perhaps five minutes —and then I began to realise that I was free again and must be moving quickly. I struggled slowly to my feet and looked at the German soldier. He was lying with his head in a dark pool of blood and his helmet which had rolled off, during the fight lay on the ground beside him. I had stabbed him in the neck. He was quite dead.

I got hold of him by the legs and dragged him off the road. He was a heavy man and in my weak condition I had considerable difficulty in moving him at all. I left him lying in the long grass, collected his rifle and helmet from the road and dropped them by his body. He was bound to be discovered soon but it might give me a few hours start.

I looked round. In the eastern sky a streak of light showed above the horizon. It was nearly dawn and I was still on the road without any hiding place. Worse still, any hideout I did discover now would be near at hand and once the body was discovered there would follow a most rigorous search of the whole neighbourhood. There was going to be absolute hell to pay, firstly because they knew a parachutist was still at large and also because a German soldier had been killed. That wouldn't please them at all.

The road was now too risky and I set off across the fields in the first light of dawn. For nearly a mile ahead of me the country was flat and open, covered here and there with patches of white mist and then the ground rose gently to a wooded ridge. I walked on through the fields, knee deep in standing corn, crossing ditches and hedges until I reached the slope and started to ascend it and was soon amongst the trees. It was now daylight and I had reached my hiding place in the nick of time.

I sat down to rest and think out my next move. For the first time I glanced down at my clothes and was amazed to see that my tunic was covered in blood. I took it off hastily but could find no wound, and it dawned on me suddenly that the Hun must have bled on to me when I stabbed him. For some reason this was the last straw to my worn nerves and aching body and I was miserably sick. I never felt so rotten before; my face and mouth were stiff and swollen from the blow he gave me, my right arm ached and my back felt as though it was broken after that jab with the rifle. It wasn't, of course, but it still hurt like hell.

I had a small packet of rations and Horlicks tablets and I ate some of these and felt a little better. The food refreshed my mind too and I was able to think clearly again and try to puzzle out my best course of action. I reckoned that if only I could stay in hiding for a couple of days the hunt might have died down, and it would be

possible to resume the journey to Laon. This wood wasn't much good as a hiding place, being neither large enough nor thick enough, and if the searchers used dogs they would soon run me to earth.

However, the first thing was to get shelter and food and rest, so I got up and walked along through the trees.

Chapter VI

Marckenface.

AFTER perhaps half-a-mile I came to the edge of the wood, and before emerging from the trees I examined carefully the ground ahead.

There were fields of corn and orchards with white farms dotted here and there, and over on the right above some trees I could see the tall spire of a village church standing upright in the golden morning light.

Apart from a few cattle grazing peacefully there were no signs of life and so I left the cover of the trees and walked on, keeping the village on my right. I decided that I should be much too conspicuous in the village at that early hour, particularly with my blood-stained tunic and battered face and I made up my mind to go to a farm and ask for help.

A little further on I saw a small cluster of farm buildings with a few trees on one side and I walked across an orchard and sat down under the trees to wait, intending to see if the occupants were likely looking people before approaching them; for all I knew German soldiers might be billeted there though it seemed unlikely.

I was tired out and dozed fitfully under the trees till about seven o'clock when a woman came out of the house with a bucket and walked across the yard. I waited a few minutes but saw nobody else so I rose stiffly to my feet and walked across into the farmyard. There was nobody in sight and I looked round to see where she had gone when a shrill voice called from a shed “Jacques, Jacques!” and a second later the woman herself appeared in the doorway and stood there looking at me in surprise, a typical sturdy French peasant dressed in an old black apron and clogs.

“Bonjour m'sieur,” she said questioningly and waited, glancing curiously at my blood-stained tunic and bruised face. She looked shrewd and kindly, and I made up my mind to tell her the truth and trust her to help me. After all she would be taking far more risk in sheltering me than an ordinary French soldier and therefore it seemed only fair to acquaint her with the fact.

“Bonjour, Madame” I said. “I am an English officer in the R.A.F. and I have just escaped from the Boches. Will you let me hide here for a day or two because they are searching for me?”

“Oui,” she said simply, and then added, “Come in and I will give you some food. But you have been wounded?”

“Not badly,” I said as we walked across the yard to the house. “I had to kill a Boche in order to escape and this is his blood. I must hide because they'll shoot me if they find me, and they might shoot you too for helping me.”

“N’importe,” she said decidedly. “I am a Frenchwoman and I have no love for them. But I think we can hide you so that you won't be found.”

That woman was magnificent. She took me into the kitchen where her three small children were sitting at the table having breakfast, bathed my face, massaged my back which was badly bruised and swollen and gave me a meal of ham, bread and cheese and a great bowl of steaming coffee.

I sat at the table surrounded by the children who regarded me with silent curiosity and ate greedily everything she put before me, all the time listening to innumerable details concerning the family. Their name was Cormier and her husband who owned the farm (Marckenface, I remember it was called) had been mobilised as a reservist in September, 1939, since when she had carried on the farm by herself. When she last heard from Cormier he had been in the Vosges but now she had no idea of his whereabouts and for all she knew he might be a prisoner or dead. She must have been very worried about him but she never showed it, and she moved briskly about the farmhouse, feeding me, alternately scolding and petting the children in her shrill voice, chasing out sundry dogs and hens who wandered in, and apparently regarding an escaped and hunted person as just another incident in a busy life. The Germans were her enemies and what could be more natural than to deceive them and conspire against them on every possible occasion? She seemed to me to embody all the traditional virtues and great qualities of the French race and I felt for the first time a new confidence which was to be strengthened by every Frenchman whom I met in the next few weeks that whatever discreditable action the present leaders of France might take, the heart of the ordinary people was as sound as ever.

I finished my breakfast at last.

“Now,” said Madame briskly, “we must hide you away. Come.”

We left the house, Madame leading the way carefully to see that all was clear, and crossed the farmyard into some stables where she pointed to a ladder slung along the wall. Somewhat mystified I lifted it down and carried it outside. She pointed upwards and I saw what appeared to be an old dovecote built in to one end of the roof.

“There,” she said, “I think that's the best place. There is no way up except by the ladder and I'll hide that, but you must move very carefully because it hasn't been used for many years and the floor may be rotten.”

I hoisted the ladder against the wall and climbed up. In the side of the dovecote was a small door probably to allow a man to crawl in and clean out the floor. The wood was rotten but I managed to prise it open and crept in gingerly.

The floor was filthy and covered in a thick layer of dust and droppings left behind by the previous occupants. French pigeons certainly possess the same dubious personal habits that characterise their famous cousins at St. Paul's, as far as I could see. The boards creaked badly as I crawled across and in one or two places I could see through cracks into the stable below.

There was just enough room for me to lie full length and I stretched myself out and peered down at Madame Cormier through one of the small circular holes in the front of the loft.

“Hallo,” I said, “I'm quite comfortable now, thank you.” “Eh bien,” she said. “Keep quiet and leave me to deal with the Boches if they should come. Au revoir.”

She took the ladder away from the wall and carried it out of the yard. I stretched my legs out into a more comfortable position, brought my head close to one of the holes and prepared to spend a very long day in my little cell.

* * * * *

From where I lay there was a good view over the small farm buildings to the countryside beyond. Over to the left and just in my line of vision I could see the wood through which I had travelled at dawn. Beyond the wood, perhaps two miles away, a German soldier was lying dead in a field near a road with a gaping wound in his neck. Had they found him yet? I reckoned it wouldn't be long; they were bound to discover the bicycle he had left by the side of the road and once they found that they were only about half-a-mile from his body, I tried to recollect how far we had marched together but couldn't make even a rough estimate because my mind had been in such a wild turmoil. At any rate I made up my mind to watch that wood carefully because probably any search party would approach from that direction.

Poor devil. Leaving his bicycle hadn't done him much good. If he had kept his distance behind and not fallen for that trick of slowing down he'd have still been alive and I should have been awaiting court martial and a firing squad.

I don't think I cared about having killed him, though using a knife against a man is hardly an English custom. But it had been him or me and he started off with all the advantages. I remembered that terrible downward jab with his rifle on my back—he'd nearly won in the first two seconds by smashing my head. Yet I'd never killed a man before except the crews of the two aircraft I'd shot down and somehow that seemed different. An aircraft going down in flames is quite an impersonal thing to me (and to most fighter pilots I think) and one never really faces the unpleasant fact that there are men perhaps still alive inside that blazing mass. Probably this mental evasion is the best attitude to adopt in order to preserve one's peace of mind, but it breaks down badly if you go to see the crash afterwards… I still wake up at nights and see that German pilot lying dead in the wreckage of the Heinkel.

My mind switched off in another direction. Sixteen hours ago I had been sitting in a Whitehall office listening to an almost incredible story, and this was the first chance I had to pause and reflect on what we had been told.

The main point about our task seemed to be its urgency. It was quite) literally a race with time, to reach Laon and kill Passy before he left for Germany. Once he had gone our task became impossible. We might still be able to strike him down under cover of all the confusion which existed in France at the moment, but to follow him across the frontiers of the Reich, and kill him in the heart of the enemy's country—that was a task quite beyond our powers and we possessed neither the necessary papers, authority or knowledge of any people in Germany who might help us. It had to be done in France now, without a moment's delay,

and here was I, lying cramped in a filthy dovecote about seventy miles from Laon, with the whole of the surrounding countryside being searched systematically by an exceedingly thorough enemy. It didn't seem a good prospect.

Hitherto my only concern had been to escape the immediate danger of capture, but I saw now that I could not afford to stay in hiding for longer than another day. Perhaps by then the enemy, having drawn blank, would assume that their quarry had escaped from the district and call off the search accordingly, but whatever the risk I must start on my journey as soon as possible or our whole enterprise might fail. The words of that unknown man in London came back to me, “We’re staking practically everything we've got on you people and the R.D.F… we must stop Passy going to Berlin.”

I started to think about this pleasant Frenchman, Carnac. In the few hours that I'd known him I had already been impressed by the man and his striking personality and I remembered his conduct during that very unpleasant few minutes in the Whitley, cool, apparently unconcerned and ready to do anything I told him without a moment's hesitation because we had agreed that my decisions would be final during the flight.

Perhaps he would be more fortunate. He had better luck in his escape from the aircraft and he possessed the great advantage of being in his own country but—it had not occurred to me before—he had never seen Passy and therefore he would be searching for a man whom probably he could not recognise. He'd seen the photograph in London, of course, but Passy had been well in the background and it would be a hopeless job trying to seek out a man on the likeness of that photograph.

I was the member of the team who possessed that vital knowledge and we must join forces again as soon as possible. Now to make plans.

I fumbled inside my shirt and brought out the silk map I was carrying. Madame had told me that the nearby village was La Hocquerte, about twenty-five kilometres from Amiens. Once in Amiens I was on the main railway running east through Laon and I thought the railway journey would be fairly easy.

The difficulty lay in those twenty-five kilometres to Amiens as I was pretty sure the roads would be watched and I debated whether to attempt it by night across country or walk openly along the road in daylight.

The danger about travelling by night was that I might stumble into some German patrol and then my furtive movements would lead inevitably to strict inquiries which I could not possibly face. Travelling by day, on the other hand, would mean bluffing one's way past the Hun, but they didn't know the identity of the parachutist and if my papers were in order they had no reason, as far as I could see, to connect me with the man they were seeking.

I made up my mind therefore to leave shortly after dawn the following day and then, much happier for having reached a clear decision, and overcome by the heat of the roof under the strong sun, I fell asleep.

* * * * *

I must have slept for nearly three hours because when I wakened it was past midday and the atmosphere inside the loft was stifling.

I peered out of my spyhole and examined the countryside but as yet there were no signs of the Hun. It almost began to look as though they had given up the search, or perhaps the body was still undiscovered.

Here and there a few men and women were working in the fields but apart from that nothing stirred. Overhead the sun blazed in a cloudless sky as it was to do all through that brilliant, fateful summer of 1940.

Somewhat reassured by the lack of activity I lay back and thought enviously of the squadron at Northolt, now sitting down to lunch and—tantalising thought—a cool pint of foaming beer. It would have suited me very well just then.

I dozed off again, but woke soon after with a start, sensing in some curious way that danger was near. I peered out of the hole. Instinct had not deceived me. Crossing the fields from the wood were a number of German soldiers spread out at intervals in a long line and working steadily across country. Further along I could see more men just emerging from the trees.

They had found the body and I had underestimated badly the speed and thoroughness of the Hun's reaction.

I lay quite still and watched the approaching men in painful suspense. They were still several hundred yards away, but they came on briskly and when they reached the orchard I saw a man beckon two or three others and then the little group approached the farm while the rest of the line continued its sweep. Probably they intended searching every building in the district.

The men were almost in the farm now and I could see clearly their grey green uniforms and leather boots. Their faces were hard and tanned. I thought they looked a tough lot. They passed out of my sight as they went up to the house, but I could hear the clump of their boots and a peremptory knock on the door. Then followed the sound of voices and then silence; probably they were looking through the house.

About five minutes later, I heard the door open and then Madame appeared round the corner of the farmyard accompanied by a soldier who seemed to be the N.C.O.

The remainder followed in a bunch behind, rifles slung across their shoulders.

The N.C.O. followed Madame into the cowshed and then came out again and entered the stable above which I was lying. Through the cracks in the floor I could see just below me the man's helmet as he talked in laborious French to Madame. He then moved out of my line of vision and I heard the scraping and banging of various farm implements being moved as he searched round the building. They weren't taking any chances.

I lay absolutely still, hardly daring even to breathe. One movement, one cough would be enough to give me away. Thank God, Madame had concealed the ladder; that might have given them an idea.

The N.C.O. crossed the floor again and walked out into the farmyard. I could see him now through the holes in front of the loft as he stood there glancing keenly round the buildings, Madame still by his side apparently unconcerned and rather bored by this interruption of her day's work. That woman certainly had a nerve.

The German looked up to the roof and his eyes rested suddenly on the dovecote. He seemed to be staring straight at me and for an instant I thought he had spotted me, but then I realised that he could not possibly see into the interior. He turned

to Madame, pointed up to my hiding place and then walked back into the stable. Probably he thought there were some steps inside.

Madame followed him talking rapidly. Their conversation was muffled but I gathered she was explaining that there was no ladder and no way up. For the first time I seemed to detect a trace of anxiety in her rapid speech. If that N.C.O. really was determined to search the loft he could get them up on the roof, ladder or no ladder, and that would be the end. No wonder Madame betrayed ever so slightly the anxiety she must have felt.

The German paused, looked up again and then with a shrug of his shoulders he turned back and said something to his men, saluted Madame stiffly and the little procession tramped out of the farmyard.

Once again my luck had just held; but my mouth was dry as a piece of felt and I was sweating profusely. It wasn't only the heat, either.

* * * * *

Towards nine o'clock that evening it grew cool again, and as dusk fell I saw Madame Cormier enter the farmyard carrying the ladder.

She stood directly below the dovecote and said in a low voice, “You can come down now. I think it is quite safe.”

I crept out of my little hole, thinking for the hundredth time that day that I'd rather be Peter Claydon than a French pigeon, thank you very much, and climbed down the ladder.

“You see,” said Madame calmly, “I told you they would never find you there.”

“You were marvellous,” I said. “I can never thank you enough. But I thought they were going to search the dovecote. You just managed to stop them in time.”

“Yes,” she said. “He was a difficult man, that one. I was frightened a little too, but they have gone now and I don't think they will come back.”

We walked into the house and she gave me a plateful of hot stew. Food was never more welcome.

The children were in bed and she sat opposite me drinking coffee and discussing the war. She must have been an attractive woman once, I thought, with her clear skin and white teeth, but worry, strain and over-work had left their mark and though I don't believe she was over thirty-five her face was lined and worn as though she were quite old. Nevertheless, her mind was young and she was a brave and intelligent woman, quite at a loss to understand the disasters that had befallen France. Only the previous day Petain had requested an armistice and she kept asking over and over again; what would England do now; could we hold out alone against the Boches? I think she held the view of most French people at that time that we could not possibly last out the summer and though I told her that we should fight on whatever happened I don't think she really believed me.

I told her of my intention to leave in the morning and asked if she could provide me with some clothes to replace my own filthy uniform. She produced a suit of her husband's which fitted moderately well—Cormier was evidently about my height though considerably broader in the beam—but the general effect when I tried it on was not too bad. The cut and pattern of the cloth would have caused a few raised eyebrows in Sackville Street, but it certainly changed me into a typical Frenchman which was all to the good.

We nearly had a row when I suggested payment for the suit. “No,” she said. “Don’t spoil everything. I am very happy that you should have it.”

However, I was determined to give her something for I knew their income must be meagre in any case and would soon get much worse, and I had been given a very large sum of money in London. It was only when I pointed out that it was the British Government's money and not mine that she showed signs of relenting and finally I managed to leave her a sum that would help them through a number of difficult days ahead. It seemed the least I could do.

Towards midnight she rose to show me to.my room, when I had a sudden idea and asked if she had a wireless. Having lost touch with the outer world for twenty-four hours I was very anxious to hear the midnight news from London.

She led me through into the next room where a wireless set was standing on a small table in the corner and she switched it on.

It was a lucky thought, because that afternoon Mr. Churchill had made his famous speech of defiance in a packed House of Commons; he had broadcast it again later and now we heard a recording of it.

The memory of that evening in the little French farm will remain clear in my memory till I die, Madame Cormier and I standing beside an old wireless and listening with feelings that I cannot describe to the one voice in Europe that still defied the German might. It was a deep voice and rather harsh, and it struck me that the speaker must be very tired because I noticed that he made a number of small slips and then corrected himself.

“What General Weygand called the Battle of France is now over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilisation. Upon it depends our own British life and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. He knows that he will have to break us on this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad sunlit uplands; but if we fail then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister and perhaps more protracted by the light of a perverted science.

“Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.' ”

I turned to Madame. She was crying very quietly. I think I felt rather the same way myself.

“You see,” I said, “England will fight on.”

* * * * *

I slept that night deep in a feather mattress in a little attic under the sloping roof of the farmhouse and when I woke up the following morning I could not think for a moment where I was or what had brought me to this bare little room, and then suddenly all the scenes of the previous day sprang back into my mind—Madame Cormier, the dovecote and the German soldiers. And today I must start my journey to Laon.

I jumped out of bed, put on Cormier's old suit and then went out into the yard and washed under the cold clear stream of water from the pump. This freshened me up a lot and I went into the kitchen to find Madame bustling round the room surrounded by children and sundry dogs and cats. She gave me an excellent breakfast and about nine o'clock I rose to my feet, feeling ready for anything, and prepared to depart.

She accompanied me to the door. Outside the sun was climbing slowly in a cloudless sky. I turned to her and we shook hands.

"Goodbye," I said. "You saved my life, and I can never thank you enough for all your help, but I promise you one thing and I want you to remember it. We are your friends and we shall go on fighting till we beat the Boche and one day—perhaps many years—we shall return to France and you will be free again. Au revoir."

"Au revoir," she said and then added "Bonne chance."

I walked down the path and turned at the end to wave. She was still standing in the sunlit doorway, a sturdy figure with her pleasant face and old black apron. She waved back and I strode off through the orchard.

Goodbye, brave Madame Cormier, and good luck. After the war I hope to return to Marckenface and find you still there, though I'm afraid Cormier will never get his suit back again.

Chapter VII

Giselle.

I CROSSED one or two fields and came out in the lane which Madame had told me led down to La Hocquerte. About a mile further on I entered the village and slouched along the street, past women with their baskets and old men smoking in the sun. I was just thinking how normal everything looked when a German army lorry came slowly through the village with several soldiers standing in the back eyeing the passers-by keenly. I showed not the slightest interest but kept straight on and to my intense relief they passed me and continued on their way through the village.

I know who you're looking for, my friends, I thought to myself. I could feel my heart thumping away like a piston and looking back now I realise that my nerves must have been in a pretty jumpy condition.

I reached the church and following Madame's directions turned left into the Amiens road and was soon out of the village striding along vigorously in open country. I felt a different man from the tired hunted fugitive who had crept painfully into Marckenface only twenty-four hours before; my back was still rather painful but did not hinder my movements any longer and though my wrist was sprained it felt much stronger.

A few farm carts laden with vegetables passed on their way towards the village and now and again German lorries and cars drove past at high speed sounding

their horns impatiently whenever a cart was rather slow in pulling into the side of the road.

After a good hour's walking without meeting any German patrols I sat down in the grass for a short rest and after a careful glance in both directions to see that the road was clear I pulled out my silk map to make sure I was on the right road. There was no mistake about it: straight on for another twenty kilometres or so and I should be in Amiens. I was just replacing the map inside my shirt when I heard a car approaching, so I hastily buttoned up my coat.

As the car came on I saw it was a German one driven by an officer. There were no other occupants. He saw me by the roadside and pulled up sharply just beyond and then leaned back over his seat. “Combien kilometres a Amiens?” he shouted.

“Vingt kilometres,” I replied and started to walk towards him, observing with some relief that his French was worse than mine. With luck he would never spot my accent.

I was now level with the car and had a good look at the driver. He wore the uniform of a Luftwaffe officer and was quite young, not more than twenty-two I think. He was good looking in a rather aggressive way with his fair hair, tanned skin and good teeth, but his face was spoiled by the arrogant expression; he was very much the German officer talking to an inferior. It struck me that there was something in common between this man and those soldiers who had searched the farm, an indefinable quality of toughness and arrogance and also, I must admit, of hard efficiency. I imagine he would have been a very good pilot.

He bent down and pulled a map out of the pocket. “Show me the way please,” he said. I placed a grimy forefinger on his map and indicated an approximate position, repeating “Vingt kilometres.” He studied the map carefully, then folded it up and replaced it in the pocket, said, “Danke schon,” and prepared to drive on.

I had a sudden inspiration. “Herr Hauptmann,” I said, “I know the way to Amiens and I am going there to my family. May I come with you and show you the way?”

He paused for a moment, looked at me, and then said curtly, “Very well. Get in.” I obeyed and we started off.

This suited me very well. With luck now I should be in Laon by night and also there was a better chance of getting through any patrols that might still be watching the road. I sat back in my seat and felt fine.

After a few minutes my companion turned to me. “You look a young man,” he said coldly. “Why aren't you in the army?”

“'Herr Hauptmann,” I said, “I was an observer in a bomber squadron, but we were shot down by one of your fighters near Rouen and my pilot was killed. I have walked for two days now to try and re-join my family in Amiens.”

He seemed interested and became a little more human. “So,” he said. “Where was your squadron?” This was getting on to dangerous ground and I thanked my lucky stars that I had been given such full details of the squadron's recent operations before leaving London.

“We were in Champagne till May 16th,” I replied without hesitation, “and then we were retreating all the time till the Armistice when we were south of Rouen.”

“South of Rouen?” he said. “What aerodrome were you at?”

This was difficult. I thought hard. The information I had been given covered the squadron's movements till just after Dunkirk and for the last fortnight I had no idea where they had been. I was very tempted to reply, “Rouen-Boos” which I knew was south-east of Rouen, but it was risky and it occurred to me in a flash that he was coming from that direction and might therefore have some accurate information on the subject. It seemed safest to be vague.

“We were not at any aerodrome,” I said slowly. “We had lost many aircraft in action and the remainder were destroyed on the ground by your bombing. What was left of the squadron was on the road driving south.”

“How did you come to be flying when you were shot down?” he said.

“My pilot and I were trying to get a damaged machine away from Pontoise, but just after we left the ground we were shot down by a Me. 109. Lieutenant Alliard was killed in the crash and I just managed to get out but my clothes were burnt and I had to buy this suit from a farmer.”

This seemed to satisfy him, for the sharp note of suspicion left his voice and he went on more amiably. “Well, I suppose you French did your best, but you never had a chance against our Luftwaffe. Now you may realise what it means to challenge the German might. In nine months we have crushed everybody who dared to threaten us just as the Fuehrer promised.”

This stung me into an unwise retort.

“What about the English?” I said. “You have not conquered them yet and Churchill says they will go on fighting.”

“The English,” he snapped. I cannot hope to convey the utter contempt and hatred in his tone. “What can they do? They ran away at Dunkirk and in a few weeks we shall go across there and break them for a thousand years. How can an old and decadent race like the English hope to resist the young German nation. They are going to learn a final lesson now and as for their precious Churchill—” he made a significant gesture with his hand across his throat—“we shall know what to do with him.”

“And the R.A.F.?” I said. “You will have to defeat them first and the British Navy too.”

“The R.A.F. will not last a week,” he said. “They have only a handful of fighters and their pilots are inexperienced. Did they save France?”

“No,” I said, “but I believe they stopped the Luftwaffe destroying the Tommies at Dunkirk.”

“Bah!” he retorted. I think the subject rankled slightly. “The British Navy got the Tommies away, not the R.A.F., and when our Stukas operate from the Pas de Calais the British Navy will not dare to show its nose in the Channel. The R.A.F. was at Dunkirk—I saw them there myself—but they lost so many fighters that they can have very few left now. And their tactics were ridiculous—they just attacked immediately even if there were only two or three of them and our fighters shot many down. Brave if you like, but ridiculous. They may have destroyed some of our aircraft, but we have so many that we can afford the losses and they cannot. No, the R.A.F. will be destroyed in a week when Marshal Goering gives the order.”

I knew it would be unwise to protest too much against his extravagant and ridiculous claims and therefore remained silent, but I had noticed one weakness

which sprang from his conceit and self-confidence, a complete inability to stand contradiction. This, of course, is an old method of obtaining information; to make an absurd statement which will sting the other man into making an unwise retort that reveals what you want, but it is amazing how people still fall for it. It struck me that I might pick up a few tit-bits which would interest Group Captain Leighton on my return.

I was just thinking what to say next when the car swung round a corner and I saw ahead a bridge across a small river. Two farm carts were drawn up on the far side of the bridge and several German soldiers stood round them evidently questioning the occupants. I had become so intrigued by this conversation with an enemy pilot and its revelation of the Luftwaffe outlook and mentality that I had almost forgotten the search which was still in progress for me, and the sight of those Huns brought me up with a jolt.

There was no possibility of turning back or trying to cross the stream at some other point. My companion was bound to notice any attempt at evasion on my part, and the only chance was to rely on bluff and my forged carte d'identité.

The car slowed down as we reached the bridge and two soldiers walked towards us waving their arms as a signal to halt. The officer muttered something I could not catch and pulled up. The soldiers came up, rifles slung across their shoulders. One of them was small, red-faced and bloated looking; he looked rather like an unintelligent pork butcher but nevertheless possessed that air of first-rate physical condition which characterised all the German soldiers I saw in France. The other man seemed to be the N.C.O. as I noticed he did the talking. He was tall with pleasant aquiline features, a quiet voice and a pair of shrewd intelligent eyes. Somehow I felt afraid of him. He looked too wide awake and competent to be deceived easily and I would far rather have dealt with the red-faced one.

He saluted the officer smartly as he came level with the car.

“What do you want?” said my companion brusquely.

“I beg your pardon Herr Hauptmann,” said the feldwebel, “but we have orders to examine the papers of all persons travelling along this road.” His tone was polite but there was a firm note in it; the man had authority behind him and he knew it.

“What is all the fuss about?” said the pilot. He produced his identity form from a pocket and handed it to the N.C.O., who glanced at it and handed it back.

“You are travelling on duty, Herr Hauptmann?” he asked.

“Yes, I am,” said the officer shortly. “I am on my way to Amiens Glisy. Why all this questioning, anyway? “

“I am sorry, Herr Hauptmann but these are our orders. A soldier was found stabbed to death on the road near Tapecul yesterday morning, and it is believed he was killed by a man who was dropped by an English aeroplane during the night. The district Kommandantur has ordered a general search of the whole area, and we are examining all persons travelling on this road.”

“So,” said the pilot. He nodded his head towards me. “Well, I picked this man up on the road about ten kilometres back. He asked for a ride into Amiens, but I don't know anything about him. He says he's in the French Air Force.”

The feldwebel looked at me hard, then held out his hand and said in a tone very different from that which he had used to the officer. “Your papers, please.”

It was his first remark in French and I noticed with quick anxiety that he spoke it easily and with only a slight accent.

I fished in my pocket and handed over my carte d'indentite.

The work of that skilful forger in Whitehall was about to be tested.

The N.C.O. looked at it carefully.

“Your name?” he said curtly. “Pierre de Buissy.”

“Unit?”

“61st Bomber Squadron, l'Armee de l'Air.”

“Where is your unit?”

“I don't know. A few days ago there were only a few of us left together. We were on the road near Rouen driving south.”

“What are you doing now?”

“I am trying to get to Amiens to find some relatives who may still be there.”

“Where do your relatives live?”

This might have been a poser, but fortunately I'd thought it out already and my reply came without hesitation.

“8 Place du Nord.” I hoped the feldwebel, didn't know Amiens very well.

“Why are you not in uniform?”

I told him the same story about being shot down that I had already told the captain. He still seemed suspicious, and kept looking at me and then back at the photograph.

He said suddenly, “'You are not a Frenchman.”

“Mais oui,” I said as stoutly as I could. “I lived in London for many years because my father was in business there. I returned to France at the beginning of the war.”

He looked at me again reflectively. God, I thought, will the man ever be satisfied.

He put his hand out and seized my wrist. For an instant I thought he was going to pull me out of the car, but he merely raised my arm and examined the metal identification disc on my wrist. This seemed to satisfy him and he stepped back, saluted the officer punctiliously and said, “This man's papers are quite in order, Herr Hauptmann, thank you.”

“Good,” said my companion. He started the car and we moved across the bridge and set off towards Amiens, while I lay back in my seat and felt that I couldn't stand much more of this terrifying questioning. There can be few things more unnerving than the constant feeling of being hunted and watched and interrogated, knowing all the time that one slip will give you away.

However, I must possess a fairly resilient nature because after a few minutes my spirits rose again and I felt much more cheerful, partly because I realised that in all probability I was safely through the cordon now and would be able to finish the journey in peace.

I began to think out a way of leading the conversation along the channels I wanted. It would have to be done very carefully or he would realise that he was being “pumped”.

“Herr Hauptmann,” I said humbly. “When do you think this dreadful war will be over and we soldiers will be able to go home? If the English are mad enough to go on fighting it may last for years, n'est-ce pas?”

He laughed contemptuously.

“Years? It will be over in a matter of weeks, I tell you. The English won't last more than a few days when we get the order to march. Why, the Fuehrer has promised that we shall be in London by September 15th.”

“The Fuehrer must know,” I said, “but do you think he can tell whether the English will give up or not?”

He turned on me angrily. “Are you questioning the word of the Fuehrer?” he snapped. “If so it will be the worse for you. You Frenchmen have got to learn that when Germany says she will do something then that thing is as good as done. The Fuehrer told the world that we should be in Paris by June 15th and you fools laughed but he was right, you see.”

“That’s quite true,” I said humbly. A bit too true, I thought to myself.

I went on after a moment. “But, Herr Hauptmann, I know the English because I have lived there and they are obstinate people. An English officer told me a week ago that you would not be ready to attack before the autumn, and by then the seas would be too rough for invasion so you would have to wait till next year and then the Americans would be fighting.”

“Nonsense!” he said. “You’re an airman too. You know that there is some work to be done on your aerodromes before we are established—repairs to do, bombs and petrol and equipment to bring in, but that will take a few weeks only. I know,”—he repeated the words—“I know that the Luftwaffe will be ready to attack England in six weeks. You can remember what I say when the time comes and you will see once again that the Fuehrer's words are not to be disregarded.”

I made no reply. I had got the bit of information I wanted and it seemed too risky to go on fishing for more. Six weeks. That meant the fun would start around the first week of August. There might just be time to replace the Dunkirk losses in the fighter squadrons and train the new pilots before the storm broke. (I did not know it at the time, but already in June one quarter of the pilots in Fighter Command had been killed and the main battle was still to come.) Every day was going to count now, but we might still make it. Six weeks…

This officer almost certainly did not know the operational plans for the attack on England, nor would he have hinted at them if he did know, but the estimate which he let slip in an unguarded moment would probably be nearly the correct one particularly as he was in a squadron himself and would therefore have a good idea of the serviceability state of both aircraft and crews. Perhaps for instance they had been told that all leave was to stop at the end of July; there are often a number of such indications which will point to impending operations.

There was something very impressive, I thought, about this man's superb confidence in his service and his cause—impressive and rather frightening, and I was bound to admit that the Germans had very solid cause for their conviction that it was all over bar the shouting. They had conquered the greater part of Europe in a few months and achieved victories infinitely more spectacular than any which the Kaiser's army managed in the last war. No wonder they were so cocksure.

When I was in the squadron, imbued with their infectious spirits and absolute conviction that we could knock the Luftwaffe for six any time they dared to take us on, I should have laughed at this conversation, but now, alone and in enemy country I realised that I wasn't half so brave or so confident as I used to think.

Courage is such a collective quality and many people who are capable of anything in the company of other men become so cautious and timid when alone. At that moment I would have given a great deal to see a vision of the C.O. and Johnny laughing heartily, tankard in hand, telling me exactly what Goering could do with his precious Luftwaffe after they'd finished with it, but alas, no such inspiration was forthcoming.

We drove into Amiens without saying another word and near the centre of the down the car pulled up.

"There you are," said the officer. "Get out please."

I obeyed, closed the door behind me and bowed slightly.

"Thank you, Herr Hauptmann," I said. "I am very grateful to you."

That's quite true, I said to myself as he drove off. I'm very grateful for two things, Herr Hauptmann, a lift in your car which helped me past a sentry and one or two chance remarks which you let slip.

I have often wondered since what happened to that arrogant young man; whether he survived the Battle of Britain to which he looked forward so ardently; whether we ever fought against each other later in the summer in the great battles over London or Portsmouth, and whether he still regards the R.A.F. as such easy meat. I think, if he is still alive, he may have learnt better by now.

* * * * *

I made my way to the station through some badly damaged streets. Amiens had certainly taken a good battering from the Hun.

German military police controlled the traffic and the place was crowded with German soldiers, lorries and cars all moving briskly through the streets in great contrast with the hundreds of weary and hungry French soldiers who roamed about aimlessly till somebody could get organised and take them prisoner.

Nobody paid the slightest attention to the French civilian in the ill-fitting suit as he made towards the station, and he was very thankful for this. I was only too ready to retire into obscurity. The main thing was to avoid doing anything that might make me conspicuous; all my troubles so far had risen from that blasted parachute. However I felt fairly safe amongst such a motley crowd.

The station was packed with soldiers and civilians and I edged my way through the crowd to the booking hall where I stood at the back of a long queue and shuffled slowly forward at intervals. After a long wait I got nearer the booking office and noticed with a sinking heart that standing by the window was a feldwebel of the German Field Security Police and a Garde Mobile watching the crowd as they moved past the booking clerk. There were still perhaps a dozen people ahead of me in the queue and as I watched I saw the French policeman stop a man in civilian clothes who had just bought a ticket and both he and the German started to question him.

I thought quickly. This check-up probably had no connection with the hunt for me—I reckoned I had got safely away from that—but it was still very dangerous, particularly with the Garde Mobile standing there as he was bound to spot my accent and that would lead to more awkward questions. I might have risked it with the German, but I couldn't possibly bluff the Frenchman as well and every interrogation was an added risk.

Looking back now, I think the most likely explanation for this check-up is that many hundreds of British soldiers were still at large in Northern France and the Germans were endeavouring to round them up. Amiens would be a very likely place to search as it is the focal point of the railway system in that part of the country and anybody endeavouring to escape by rail would probably pass through the town.

I could of course come back later for a ticket, but knowing the Hun I reckoned the watch would still be maintained.

The queue moved forward again. I was now very near the two guards and suddenly the German's eyes rested on me. To break away now would be almost as dangerous as going on. I glanced round anxiously. In a moment my turn would come.

Many people were moving past and among them I saw a girl in a brightly coloured frock. She was carrying a small suitcase and she was just approaching when I saw her.

Acting on a sudden impulse I left the queue, went up to her and touched her on the arm and said in a low voice, “Please smile at me quickly. I am an Englishman trying to escape and I need your help. Smile as though you recognise me. I am being watched.”

For an instant she looked at me in surprise and then I saw a quick look of comprehension in her eyes and she smiled as though recognising an old friend. She put her case on the ground and we shook hands and laughed at each other.

“That’s better,” I said. “Now let's get away from here and then I can talk to you.” I picked up her case, slipped my arm through hers, and we walked away. I looked back over my shoulder. The two guards were still standing by the ticket office paying no further attention to me. The little act had worked.

We emerged from the station and went across to a café. There were several Frenchmen standing by the zinc enjoying their morning glass of wine and over in the corner a small group of German soldiers sat round a table with Pernod arranged in front of them. Judging by their noisy laughter and the number of glasses on the table, I gathered that they were having a “lunchtime session” and therefore wouldn't pay much attention to us.

We sat down and a decrepit old waiter in a white apron shuffled across to us. I ordered the drinks, Dubonnet for her and a beer for me, and then managed for the first time to have a good look at my companion.

She was quite young, perhaps twenty-two, and fairly tall for a French girl with a slim boyish figure and long legs which were tanned a rich smooth brown by the sun. The tan didn't come out of a bottle either. Her hair was dark and in striking contrast to her skin which was pale and ivory clear. She had lovely eyes, dark and limpid, and the most perfect, even teeth I have ever seen, set in a delicate and mobile mouth. When she smiled, which she did frequently, her whole face lit up in the most enchanting way. Her printed creton frock, which was beautifully cut with a flared skirt, her shoes and handbag all possessed an air of expensive simplicity and around her there hung an elusive fragrance. The whole effect was quite bewitching with its air of youth and freshness and vitality. I began to think that I had fallen into my usual luck again.

The waiter placed the drinks on the marble-topped table in front of us and I raised my glass to her. She smiled and raised her's in acknowledgment. I noticed that she had scarcely said a word yet and I made up my mind to tell her my difficulties and ask for her help.

I leaned across the table and said in a low voice. “Mademoiselle, I'm an English officer in the R.A.F. and the Boches are trying to catch me. I want to get to Laon to see a friend who will help me, but there was a Garde Mobile standing with a Boche by the ticket office and I dare not ask for a ticket because my accent would give me away. Will you help me?”

She looked at me for a moment, sipping her drink reflectively.

“What do you wish me to do?” she asked.

“Will you get a ticket for me and I'll meet you at the barrier?”

“Yes,” she said, “I think that will be quite easy. Is there anything else you want?”

“There's a great deal,” I replied, “but I'm afraid you couldn't help much. It's very good of you to take this risk at all because there'd be serious trouble for you if they caught you helping me.”

She was silent for a moment and then asked suddenly, “What is your name?”

“Peter Claydon. I'm a Flying Officer in the R.A.F.”

“Were you shot down in France?”

I hesitated for a moment. I did not intend telling her my real purpose in coming to France, but equally it didn't seem playing the game to let her think I was an airman evading capture. She was aiding a spy and would probably be shot too if we were discovered together, so after a slight pause I replied, “No, I haven't been shot down at all. I was sent out from England to see somebody in France and the Boches would shoot me as a spy if they could, so you see I prefer not to be caught.”

Her dark eyes twinkled again.

“It would be too bad, as you say in England. Very well, I will get your ticket to Laon and meet you by the barrier.”

I slipped the money for the fare across the table to her and after a little argument and an assurance from me that I had ample funds she put it in her bag and we left the café. The Germans in the corner were now very-nicely-thank-you after their frequent applications of Pernod and were becoming rather noisy; they were also casting a number of glances at the girl beside me. It struck me that we might get involved in a row if we stayed much longer and that was the last thing I wanted.

We wandered back in the brilliant sunshine to the station. My companion was in light-hearted mood and kept humming snatches of that catchy tune “J’attendrai” which seemed to be the French favourite at that time judging by the amount one heard it.

At the station I walked straight through the crowd and made for the barrier on the platform where I was to wait for my girlfriend. To my dismay I saw two more German military police standing by the barrier watching the crowd pass through. There was no way of avoiding this, but I hoped that by keeping my mouth shut I could get through without question.

A few minutes later I saw a gay-coloured dress moving in the crowd and my French girl appeared and handed me the ticket.

"Thank you very much indeed," I said. "Now you go on the platform and I'll follow in a moment as there are some more Boches to pass. Please forget that you have ever seen me or it might mean trouble for you. Goodbye and thank you. Perhaps we may meet again after the war."

"I hope so," she said quietly. "Goodbye, and I shall think of you and pray for your safe journey."

"Please tell me your name," I said. "I can't leave you without knowing that."

She opened her bag, took out a card and scribbled on it.

"Here it is," she said. "If ever I can help you again, please tell me. My father was killed in the last war and my brother is missing in this, so I have a few scores to pay off against the Boche. Au revoir."

We shook hands and with another of her enchanting smiles she left me and walked towards the barrier. I watched her unhappily till she was lost in the crowd and then looked at the card in my hand. Her name was Giselle Saint Brie, and written in pencil was an address, 8a Rue Lord Byron, Paris. I memorised it carefully and then tore the card into fragments and dropped them furtively on the ground.

Now to get on to the platform. I approached the barrier and when my turn came I shuffled up to the ticket collector, paying not the slightest attention to the watching Germans, the man glanced at my ticket and I was through. No trouble at all, I said to myself, conscious of a heart that was beating pretty fast. I must be getting better at this escape business.

I walked along the badly damaged platform with "AMIENS" still visible in large red letters on the roof and struggled into a crowded carriage. Most of the passengers seemed to be French civilians trying to get home and in the crush nobody took the slightest notice of me. After a long wait the train started off with a jerk and I sat in the corner watching the green countryside of France passing the grimy window and thinking of a girl with a lovely smile and a lovely name. Giselle Saint Brie…

I was still thinking of her when I fell asleep.

Chapter VIII

Dr. Mendel.

SOME hours later we reached Laon and I left the train and walked out of the station without any further difficulty.

I had arrived at last, but as I stood outside the station watching a long column of German transport moving past there was no rejoicing or satisfaction in my heart for I knew that the real difficulties were only starting now.

Somewhere in this city or at the nearby aerodrome of Laon Athies was the man we had come to kill—that was, unless he had already left for Germany in which

case we had failed at the outset. I smiled grimly; the only hope of success that I could see lay in the damned impudence of our project and its seeming impossibility. Occasionally—just occasionally—enterprises of this nature do come off by very reason of their sheer impudence.

It is fortunate that we cannot read the future. Had I realised all that was to happen before we left this place I believe I would have given up there and then. I don't think I would have had the guts to go through with it.

I walked up the hill from the station into the old town and after one or two discreet enquiries came at length to Avenue Neuilly, which was a small road of residential houses leading from a quiet tree-lined square.

I reached Number 23 and walked past the house in order to have a good look. It wore a deserted air and the windows at the front were closed and shuttered. I wondered if the doctor had left the town before the Germans arrived. My position would be distinctly awkward then; no hiding place and no rendezvous with Carnac.

I walked back towards the house again and looked round carefully. There was nobody in sight, and I slipped quickly into the doorway and knocked vigorously.

For a minute there was no response and I thought the house was empty, but then footsteps approached the door, there was the rattle of a bolt being slid back and the door opened.

I saw in front of me a man perhaps fifty years old, tall and sparely built, with a pale face, grey hair and a straggling grey moustache. His eyes were evidently very short-sighted for he wore a pair of thick glasses which seemed to flash and reflect the light whenever he moved. At first you would have said he was rather a nondescript specimen with his round shoulders and untidy moustache until you examined his mouth and jaw which were hard, determined and in striking contrast to the rest of his somewhat fragile appearance. His dark suit was well cut and his linen was immaculate, particularly so by French provincial standards.

He peered at me closely through his glasses and said, “Yes? What do you want?”

“Dr. Mendel?” I asked.

He nodded. “I am Dr. Mendel. Do you wish to see me?”

“If you please.”

He opened the door and motioned me inside. The interior of the house was simply and tastefully furnished, and the soft pile of the blue Aubusson carpet beneath my feet seemed a veritable luxury after the hard pavements of the town. On a small table at the foot of the stairs stood a very beautiful alabaster bowl filled with flowers. The doctor must have had a good practice, I thought.

Mendel shut the door and turned to me.

“What can I do for you?” he said. “I should tell you that since the occupation of Laon by the Germans I have been confined to my house by order of the Town Kommendantur because of my Jewish blood, and I think perhaps it would be best for you to see another doctor if you need attention.”

“I have a pain in my back,” I said slowly. He gave no sign of recognising the signal, but glanced me up and down, stroking his moustache reflectively and then asked suddenly, “How long have you felt this pain?”

“Since May 18th,” I said promptly.

“I see, I see,” he said. “And what is your name?”

“Pierre de Buissy.”

The doctor looked at me again. “It is perhaps a coincidence,” he said, “but a soldier came to see me today with the same trouble as yourself.”

My heart leapt. Carnac must have arrived too. I could have shouted with relief and excitement.

“Was his name Prouvy?” I asked eagerly.

Mendel smiled for the first time since we met. “I think he is a friend of yours?” he said. “Come and see him. He was worried about you.”

He led the way upstairs, opened a door and I walked in. Sitting at a table having a meal was Carnac. He bounded up, seized my hand and shook it warmly.

“Hallo, mon ami!” he cried. “So you have arrived at last! I was getting rather worried about you. I thought the Boche had caught you when I saw those searchlights. You must have had a difficult time.”

“It wasn't very easy,” I said. “It’s a long story anyway. And you—how did you get on?”

“Oh, no trouble at all. I hid my parachute and lay in a ditch till dawn and then started to walk to Amiens. On the road I was stopped once by a Boche patrol, but I soon satisfied them I was a poor starving poilu and they let me past. It was really very easy.”

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders and then continued, “I arrived here this morning and came straight to see M. Mendel hoping that you would have arrived also, but you never came and all day I have been getting more worried. At any rate, we are together now which is a good thing.”

“And what do we do next?”

“We must find a safe place to hide. I don't think we are very safe in this house as M. Mendel is already under observation by the Boche.” He turned to the doctor. “Perhaps it would be better if we left you, monsieur, and tried to find somewhere else to hide.”

Mendel thought for a moment. “No,” he said at length, “I think you may be safe for the moment because they haven't searched the house or shown in any way that they suspect me. If they should come then you must hide in the place I showed you this morning, behind the water tank in the roof.” He paused and then went on, “Will your business here take you long, M. Prouvy?”

“That depends,” said Carnac slowly. “We don't know our plans yet. They may take a long time or they may be carried out very quickly. We shall see. At any rate, Monsieur, if you think it is safe here we shall be very grateful for your help.”

“Please remain,” said Mendel, “I think you will be safe for the present.”

I noticed the way in which Carnac had evaded the doctor's question and gathered that he was not prepared to reveal our plans. I followed his lead obediently. We had agreed before leaving London that I was in charge during the flight from England, but that once on French soil he would take charge of operations. This is the only sensible way of working when quick decisions are necessary and there is no chance to discuss the problems; somebody must give orders and obviously in France his knowledge and qualifications far exceed mine.

Carnac turned to me.

“You must be very hungry, Pierre,” he said. “We must get you something to eat.”

Mendel jumped up full of apologies. “I beg your pardon,” he said. “Please sit down and I'll get you a meal. It is very rude of me not to think of that—I am afraid that my mind has been a little vague recently with all this trouble. My servants have left but I can offer you an omelette and a bottle of Beaune.”

“That sounds marvellous,” I said. “I haven't eaten anything since breakfast.”

Mendel left the room and I heard his footsteps descending the stairs on the way to the kitchen.

Carnac waited till he had gone and then turned to me and said in a low, urgent voice, “Now we can talk. You notice that I didn't tell the doctor our reason for coming to Laon and I haven't even told him our real names because he is already being watched and I think they may arrest him soon. If they believe that he knows anything useful they'll beat him till he reveals it. I know their methods and they aren't pleasant. However loyal the doctor is he might break down under torture and then the Boche will be on his guard. Also, the doctor is too optimistic about this house being safe for us. We are in great danger here.”

“I quite agree, but can we find anywhere safer?”

“We must try,” said Carnac. He looked at his watch. “It’s after seven o'clock now. We shall have to stay here tonight and take the risk because the Boche has imposed a curfew at ten o'clock and we mustn't be in the streets then.”

“Very well,” I replied. “And now, what about this man Passy? How are we going to start looking for him? I feel that any day he may be sent off to Germany.”

“It is difficult,” said Carnac thoughtfully. “We have just one clue as a starting point—the remark of that Luftwaffe N.C.O. you shot down that he remembered seeing Passy one evening in the café des Deux Frères with some officers. Perhaps if he's still in Laon he may go there again. I think our only course is to watch that place.”

There was a long silence. I stared at the table and tried to puzzle out some way of finding this man but the more I thought about it, the stiffer it seemed. It was rather like the old problem of looking for a needle in a haystack, except that in this case there was a large man in German uniform patrolling ceaselessly round the haystack ready to shoot at sight, and we had to find the needle in the next few minutes or admit defeat.

Matters would have been so much easier had there been ample time at our disposal, but as it was we were up against an inexorable time factor. Already a precious week had elapsed since the crew of the Heinkel had seen Passy at the aerodrome and we had not even commenced the search yet. He might have left already or he might be going in the next day or so. Time, time, time—that was what we were up against.

“I can't see any other way,” I said at length. “Obviously we can't get into the aerodrome at Laon Athies and in any case I doubt very much if we'd find him there. Probably he is living somewhere in the town and all we can do is to watch the cafés or anywhere else he's likely to visit. I suppose we'd better go along and have a look at the Deux Frères.”

“Good,” said Carnac. “We’ll go as soon as you've had your meal. And now, suppose you tell me how you managed to get here. You must have had a difficult time.”

“Too true,” I replied with feeling. I started the story of my adventures but before I finished we heard Mendel's footsteps along the passage outside and Carnac seized my wrist. When the doctor entered the room with a tray of food, Carnac was giving me a graphic description of the great tank battle at Rethel during the German advance.

* * * * *

Half-an-hour later Carnac and I slipped out of the house on our way to the Deux Frères.

There were a lot of German soldiers in the streets, some sober, a lot tipsy and quite a number distinctly drunk: the Herrenvolk were busy celebrating yet another overwhelming victory for the Reich. The oldest profession was also enjoying the boom, and practically every other soldier who passed us had a very dubious looking fine de joie on his arm.

We paid no attention to these Teutonic revellers but walked on towards the centre of the town and after Carnac had asked the way once we found the Deux Frères tucked away in a side-street near the cathedral, a small café with a number of German officers outside sipping their drinks at tables under the striped awning.

“Well,” said Carnac cryptically, “we shall see.” And I followed him through the door.

Inside there were a lot more Germans, both officers and men, drinking the inevitable Pernod or champagne and generally inclined to be noisy and a little drunk. A few French civilians, silent, aloof, were playing cards in the corner.

The walls were painted cream and covered with mirrors, while on the shelves stood a whole range of aperitifs of all descriptions, their gaily coloured labels adding a dash of colour to the room. The atmosphere was thick with pipe and cigarette smoke and there was a steady hum of conversation broken by loud bursts of laughter from the Germans.

We walked up to the zinc, wedged ourselves in the corner and ordered “deuxdemis.” I waited till the beer was drawn, had a long drink and then glanced casually and yet thoroughly round the room, examining every face. We had drawn blank so far; there was no sign of Passy or anyone resembling him. I turned to Carnac and said quietly, “No good.”

He shrugged his shoulders and murmured calmly, “Well, we must wait.” We drank our beer, ordered two more, and settled down to desultory conversation about nothing in particular, all the time keeping a watchful eye on the door.

For some reason or other I was becoming extraordinarily jumpy and nervous. There was no cause for it as far as I could see; we were quite safe for the moment and nobody seemed to be paying the slightest attention to us, and yet the feeling grew on me that we were being watched. I think that sometimes I have a curious warning instinct of danger and it was too insistent now to be ignored.

I looked round again carefully. The Germans were still laughing and drinking and I couldn't see anybody there who was interested in us. The patron was leaning over the bar talking to the Germans, a heavy man with an enormous black moustache and massive paunch. The Frenchmen were still deep in their cards and the waiter moved briskly round the room with a tray of glasses.

Near the door a man was sitting at a table by himself, glass in front of him, evidently reading a paper. His face was partly hidden by the paper but I watched him in the mirror in front of me and noticed that he gave an occasional glance in our direction and then returned once more to his paper. He was a very ordinary looking man dressed in an ordinary suit and there was no obvious reason for thinking that he was any other than a French civilian, and yet I felt somehow that this man had not come to the Deux Frères either to have a drink or read the paper. Also, he had not been there when we arrived.

I kept watching him carefully in the mirror, noting his occasional lightning glances in our direction, and after a time was quite sure of it. I turned to Carnac, smiled as though amused by something and said softly, “There's a man by the door watching us.”

His reply surprised me. “I know,” he said, “reading a paper by himself. I saw him come in a moment after us. There is nothing we can do.” And he turned back to his glass.

I took another gulp of beer to moisten my dry mouth. It looked as though the hunters were becoming the hunted, though I couldn't for the life of me see how the enemy had picked up the scent again.

I turned to Carnac. “I don't like this at all.”

“Neither do I,” he said quietly. “Let's get out of here. It looks as though our friend won't be coming tonight.”

We said good night to the patron and made for the door. The watcher in the corner saw us move and stuck his head behind his paper again but made no attempt to move.

Outside it was still daylight and there was the same crowd of Germans and civilians in the streets. I glanced round once but there was no sign of the man and with so many people about it was quite impossible to tell whether we were being shadowed.

Carnac was walking beside me with his lithe, springy steps. His face was set and hard and his manner was curiously alert. He realised it too: something was wrong, very badly wrong.

“Do you think we're being followed now?” I muttered.

“I think so, but we can't be sure. It will be dangerous if we are followed back to Mendel, but we must be indoors by curfew. I think we'll have to go back and hope for the best.”

We walked on and reached the square which led into Avenue Neuilly. Carnac spoke again with the same low voice. “What do you think of it, Peter?”

“Lousy,” I said. “I just don't see how that man came to be watching us. It really did seem as if we were safe for the moment.”

“There’s only one way,” said Carnac after a pause. “We must take the risk and ask our friend the doctor for help. It is a risk but on the other hand he would be a useful ally. He must know many people in Laon who could help us. Do you agree?”

“Yes, I suppose so. We can't manage this business on our own while we are being watched like this.”

We reached Number 23 and looked round but nobody in the street seemed to pay any attention and Carnac knocked on the door, rat-tat—pause—rat-tat-tat.

He must have arranged the signal with Mendel because a moment later the doctor let us in. He was carrying a book in one hand and smoking an exceedingly strong cigar.

We followed him upstairs again into the room we had used earlier in the evening. It was a long room with a beautiful mahogany table at one end by the fireplace and a desk near the window. By Mendel's armchair a shaded lamp cast a round pool of light on the carpet. The doctor drew up two more chairs and we sat down.

"M. Mendel," said Carnac, "we want to talk to you about our plans. You must forgive us for not telling you before, but the whole success of this operation depends on secrecy and therefore we have told nobody of our intentions—yet. However, something happened this evening that worries me very much. We were followed when we went out and somehow it looks as though the Gestapo are on our trail, though I can't see how they picked us up unless by our visit to your house.

"We came here in order to find a man. It's going to be very difficult to carry out our search if we are being watched all the time so we decided to ask your help, because probably you know many people in Laon and among them might be a man who would be useful."

"I see," said Mendel. He sat with his elbows on the arm of his chair, slowly rubbing his fingertips together. His glasses flashed as they caught the light and this made his face appear quite inscrutable. "I know many of my patients in the town. They are good Frenchmen, most of them, and I'm sure I could find one who would help you in whatever way you wish."

He ended on a note of query, and Carnac went on. "Very good, monsieur, here is the story! Nobody in France knows it outside this room, and I need not tell you that it's absolutely secret."

Mendel nodded and Carnac then told him the main facts of our hunt for Passy, our difficulties in finding him and our one and only clue, the Deux Frères.

The doctor listened carefully and when Carnac had finished he sat there, deep in thought. It was some little time before he spoke.

"That is a very interesting story, M. Prouvy," he said. "I think it will be difficult to pick up this man Passy before he leaves for Germany and even more difficult if you cannot go out and look for him. Is he a native of Laon? Why should he come here from Abbeville?" I had been wondering the same thing myself but we had been given no explanation of this move.

"We don't know," I said. "He may know somebody here or the Germans may have sent him to the aerodrome at Laon Athies for some technical work. It's impossible to say definitely the reason."

There was another long silence, and then Mendel spoke again.

"I think I know a man who will be able to help you. He is a good patriot and will do anything he can. I'll ask him to come round, and then you can meet him for yourselves."

He walked across to his desk, lifted the telephone and dialled a number.

"Hallo, Jean," he said softly. "This is Paul Mendel. Could you come round to my house now? There is a small matter I would like to discuss with you. Yes, that's right. Knock three times—I'll let you in."

He replaced the receiver and turned to us. “M. Brouste is coming round now.”

“What about the curfew?” I said suddenly.

Mendel glanced at me sharply. “I hadn't thought of that,” he said. “However, Jean knows the city very well. He will be able to get here somehow, I think.”

Carnac seemed restless. He got up and walked round the room, running his finger along the bookshelf and picking a book out here and there to glance at it. I sat in my chair, depressed and badly worried. The more I thought of it the blacker it all seemed.

Perhaps five minutes later Mendel rose to his feet. “He should be here in a moment,” he said. “I’ll go down and be ready to let him in.”

He left the room and I heard his footsteps descending the stairs.

Carnac was still glancing idly through the books. His restlessness infected me too and I got up and walked over to the desk. Somewhere in the back of my mind a little red warning signal was beginning to flash again. All evening I had felt that something was wrong. I was quite convinced of it now, and yet could not for the life of me figure out what it was. There was just an impression, all the more sinister for being so vague and shadowy. My nerves must be getting lousy with this constant strain, I thought angrily.

I was just about to sit down again when Carnac exclaimed, “Jésu,” so violently that I jumped round in surprise.

He was holding a book in his hand and staring at it like a man transfixed. He turned towards me and bounded across the room like a tiger. “Regardez!” he said in a savage whisper. I grabbed the book out of his hand, wondering what on earth had happened.

In my mind I can still see every detail of it. It was the story of Verdun in 1916 written by some French general. Pasted in the front of the book was a photograph showing a group of officers standing in front of a ruined building, and underneath the photograph, written in brown faded ink, were the names. Evidently Mendel had fought at Verdun and stuck this old photograph in the book as a souvenir. His name was third along from the left, Lt. P. C. Mendel, *but the man in the corresponding position was short and stockily built—certainly not our Dr. Mendel with his tall spare frame*.

I glanced at the others; there were only six of them. Mendel was not there. Not by any stretch of imagination or passage of the years could the man we had been talking with be one of the group.

And then I saw it all in a flash, the whole black deception that instinct had warned me about.

“My God!” I exclaimed, “so this isn't Mendel at all. And we've told him—” I broke off suddenly. Footsteps were coming rapidly along the corridor outside.

“And that,” snapped Carnac, “will be our friend the Boche. Quick!”

He leapt across towards the door, perhaps with the intention of locking it, but he was too late. The door was thrown open violently and four or five men sprang into the room. For an instant I had an impression of a horde of grey-green uniforms advancing on me and then I was seized roughly and hurled backwards into a chair without time to draw my revolver or make any attempt to escape. It would have been hopeless anyway, these men all carried automatics.

Just as the door was opening I caught a glimpse of Carnac. He whipped behind the door in a flash as it was thrown open and the Germans poured straight into the room and made for me without seeing him. An instant later he jumped round from behind the door, cannoned into one man and knocked him over and then the door slammed and he was on the other side of it, the coolest and quickest bit of action I have ever seen.

The man by the door recovered from the surprise and was on his feet again immediately, opened the door and rushed out of the room after Carnac with a couple of the others on his heels. There were two loud reports in quick succession and a furious exclamation, and the two men jumped back hurriedly inside the door. Somewhere I heard a door slam and they ran out again. Lying with his feet across the threshold was the man whom Carnac had knocked over. They picked him up and carried him back into the room, his head lolling over in a ridiculous, helpless sort of way. They put him down on the floor and looked at him. He was dead; Carnac had hit him in the chest as he ran out into the passage.

There were peremptory orders given in German and two men left the room, probably to look for Carnac. The dead man remained on the floor by the door. Nobody paid any more attention to him.

That left three Germans in the room. Two of them were holding me down in the chair, and the third man who had given the orders now came over towards me. I saw in an instant that I was for it good and proper. If I had been able to get at the little capsules we had been given in London I would have taken one there and then without hesitation. It would have been an easy way out compared with the treatment that was coming. I only hoped I would pass out before it got too bad. Whatever happened I had to keep my mouth shut.

I looked at the man as he came across the room.

He wore the uniform of the Waffen S.S., with the same black collar patches that I had seen at Abbeville. Some words spoken in London came back to me—“the toughest thugs in the Nazi Party.”

Well this man certainly looked the part. I could well believe his prowess in torturing Jews or exterminating Polish villages to the last baby. He was a big powerfully built brute, a good six feet and sixteen stone of bulky strength, with long arms and great red fists the size of a ham.

But his face was more terrifying than his brute strength. The skin was pallid and smooth, tight drawn over the nose and cheek bones and rather blotchy as though he were a heavy drinker. The forehead and face were long and narrow with small eyes like little slits, and his mouth had hardly any lips at all—just a tight, thin, cruel line. When he opened his mouth the teeth enhanced the narrow impression of his head; they were long and peg-shaped and one eye tooth was broken and disfigured. Ever since then I have always thought of him as Hatchet Face. It seemed the best description.

He was in a raging temper. He rammed his revolver back in its holster, transferred his stick to the other hand and glared at me. Now for it, I thought. He's going to vent his rage at Carnac's escape on me.

“You swine of a Frenchman,” he said quietly. “When I've finished with you and your friend, I don't think you'll ever shoot another German.”

He swung his truncheon down with a vicious blow on my knee. God, it hurt. I bent forward sharply with the pain, but the two bastards who were holding me jerked me upright again and he gave me another swipe, this time across the face. I was half stunned and I felt the blood trickling down my chin in a warm stream.

Curiously enough, I felt half resigned now that the first shock was over. If only he gave me another couple of cracks like the last one I knew I'd pass out for a bit. But I wasn't so fortunate; he was an old hand at “interrogation” and knew when to stop and let the victim revive a bit before the next round.

He sat down in a chair opposite me and I became aware that the man who had impersonated Mendel was standing beside him. He must have slipped into the room quietly after the scrum had died down for I hadn't seen him since the Germans rushed in.

My brain was too shaken and confused to think clearly but I could see that we had been fooled from the very start. Worse still, we had told “Mendel” our purpose in coming to France. The Hun knew now that though Carnac had escaped for the moment he had no chance of success now that the alarm had been given. The other side had won, hands down, and all that remained was to face the music.

I became aware that Hatchet Face was talking to Mendel (I call him Mendel now because I have always thought of him by that name).

Hatchet Face said, “Now, Schörnich, let's hear exactly what these two told you.”

Mendel stood respectfully at attention. From his attitude it was evident that he stood in considerable awe of Hatchet Face. His glasses still flashed as they caught the light. Somehow, now that I knew he was an imposter he looked so German that I couldn't see how we had ever been bluffed by him.

“Herr Major Roessing,” he said, “according to your orders I rang you up as soon as I found out what these men were doing. Unfortunately the man Prouvy who appears to be the leader is the one who escaped. This one calls himself de Buissy but I don't think that's his real name, in fact I don't believe he is a Frenchman at all because he speaks with a marked accent.”

Hatchet Face interrupted. “Search him,” he said curtly to the two men standing by my chair. Those two were certainly practised in the gentle art of “frisking,” and in less than a minute my wrist-watch, every single article in my pockets, carte d'identité, revolver and money-belt were arrayed on the table beside Hatchet Face. He glanced through them rapidly, seemed interested in the very large amount of money I was carrying and looked at the carte d'identité carefully.

He then glanced back at me. I think he was weighing me up and deciding the best line to take because after a slight pause he started his questions again, this time in a quieter voice.

“What is your name?”

“Pierre de Buissy.”

“Your unit?”

“61st Bomber Squadron, l'Armee de l'Air.”

“Where is your unit?”

“I don't know. I left them at the Armistice when they were south of Rouen.”

“You are not a Frenchman, are you?”

“Yes.”

“How do you explain your English accent?”

“My father was in business in London for many years, and I lived over there till the war.”

“You’re an Englishman, aren't you?”

“No.”

“Where did you get all this money?”

I did not reply. He regarded me in baleful silence. I found this quiet interrogation almost worse than the shouting and threats. Obviously he didn't believe a word I said, and he would soon take drastic steps to find out the truth.

One of the thugs standing by me was evidently getting a little impatient for he said, “Excuse me, Herr Major, but are we not wasting valuable time? This man's companion has escaped and he may know where he is hiding. If we start now we can have it out of him in a few minutes.”

“Wait a little, Brühl,” said Hatchet Face evenly. “The other man can't get far. We'll give the prisoner a little time to get his breath and realise how stupid he is being and then—” He looked at me significantly and then turned to Mendel again.

“Now, Schörnich, get on with your story.”

“These men told me, Herr Major Roessing,” said Mendel, “that they had come from England and been dropped near Amiens by parachute from an English aeroplane. They had to find a Frenchman called Passy who they believe is in Laon, and they had instructions to kill this man.

“They didn't tell me the reason for this except to say that he possessed very valuable knowledge which he was about to communicate to Germany, and the English Secret Service wished to prevent this. They seemed to think that Passy might be at the Café des Deux Frères and as you know they went there this evening.”

“I know,” said Hatchet Face, “but they didn't communicate with anybody there.”

So that was the explanation of the man who had watched us in the café that evening. Mendel had given the warning immediately we left the house and we had been followed there. Thank God we'd spotted that man and been so careful. They couldn't learn much from that episode, anyway.

Hatchet Face stared at me again.

“What have you got to say now?”

It was useless to reply. I kept my mouth shut.

“How did you learn that this man Passy was in Laon?” No reply.

“What other persons do you know in Laon?”

Silence.

“Who were the people who helped you to get here?”

I looked down at the carpet. My face felt as though it was broken in half and my collar and shirt were warm with the blood dripping down my face.

I could see that Hatchet Face's patience, like his Fuehrer's, was nearly exhausted. His pallid skin was white with anger and his little eyes glared viciously at me.

“You may have heard of our methods of interrogation,” he said. “You will find that they have not been exaggerated and I advise you to tell the truth without any further unpleasantness. Silence won't help for we know most of the facts already.”

That's an old gag, I thought. Do you, hell.

“I may tell you that Doctor Mendel was arrested as soon as our Army entered Laon and he told us that some English spies might be coming to him for help, so we arranged a suitable reception for them. You see, we even knew the recognition signal to be given. Now, are you going to tell us why you came to France or do we have to beat you till you're half dead in order to get the truth?”

No reply.

There was a knock at the door and a German N.C.O. entered the room and saluted Hatchet Face. “Beg to report, Herr Major,” he said, “the other man is not in the house, so we have notified the Town Kommandantur and a general search is commencing.”

“Very well,” said Hatchet Face. “You will inform the Kommandantur that I shall be at his office shortly. I have an important interrogation of this prisoner to complete first.”

“Jawohl, Herr Major.” The feldwebel saluted and left the room.

“Very well,” said Hatchet Face. I had never heard such a cold, cruel voice. I think he was only too glad for the excuse to beat up a prisoner. “You refuse to speak voluntarily. You will now be made to talk and you will wish that you had taken my advice. Your friend the doctor was equally stubborn at first, but after a few hours of Lieutenant Brühl's treatment he was just a screaming wreck of a man and only too glad to give us all the details we required. I saw him yesterday and hardly recognised him at first. He has changed a lot since his arrest. He is quite mad now.”

His voice rose to a shout. “You miserable fool! I have broken hundreds of stubborn men, Poles, Norwegians, Belgians, they all resisted at first and after we had beaten them and lashed them they talked—if they were still alive. And you think you can defy me!” He nodded at Brühl and leaned back comfortably in his chair.

The moment had arrived that I had half expected and dreaded ever since leaving England. Death, wounds, firing squads—none of these are pleasant but they are easy to bear compared with calculated and deliberate torture.

I was frightened in a way I had never known before, scared stiff at the prospect of the physical pain and even more scared at the idea that I might not be able to stand it and be forced to divulge the information they wanted.

Brühl and the other man seized me by the arms, took off my coat and ripped my shirt up over my head, and then Brühl kicked me viciously on the ankle and knocked me down. I lay on the floor struggling to get up, but they never gave me a chance. A perfect rain of blows fell on my arms, shoulders and back with their heavy rubber truncheons. There was nothing you could do; no way of avoiding this murderous attack. I rolled about desperately on the floor and then gave it up and lay there groaning and gasping for breath, for help, for mercy, for anything that would stop this frightful punishment. God, it was awful.

I don't know how long it went on but gradually I became aware that I was lying on the floor quite still and that the beating had ceased for the time being.

They hauled me up and, slung me back into the chair. Through a mist of faintness and sweat and blood I saw Roessing sitting opposite me, cold, sneering, vicious.

“That may teach you that I mean what I say,” he remarked. “Are you going to talk now? How did you know that this man Passy was in Laon?”

Even had I been willing I could not at that moment have given the information he required. I just wasn't capable of mustering in my battered head the long chain of events that had led to our mission to France. I said nothing and remained slumped in the chair, conscious that the whole of my body was one mass of sickening pain and hoping that I would soon pass out.

There was another knock at the door. Hatchet Face looked round and said sharply, “Come in,” and I heard the door open.

The next instant several shots cracked out in quick succession and the German standing by my chair crashed to the floor, while Brühl gave a startled cry of pain and fell doubled up and writhing in a chair. I turned my head round wearily, hardly caring any longer what happened.

A German N.C.O. was standing by the door, revolver in hand. Suddenly I realised it was Carnac. He advanced into the room just as Roessing recovered from his surprise and tried to grab his revolver from its holster. Carnac fired again and Roessing grunted sharply and bent forward clutching his knee.

I raised myself in my chair and staggered a few paces over to him, forgetting everything else in a mad, surging desire to strangle and tear the life out of this brute and revenge myself for the pain and terror he had caused me.

It is but a short step from acute fright to blazing anger and I had been very frightened indeed.

I seized his wrist and with both hands and he looked up at me suddenly, his face quite inhuman with pain and terror.

I swung his arm up to the right and over my head as I turned round. This twisted him clean out of his chair and he somersaulted over backwards with a crash on to the floor and lay there groaning. I think his shoulder was dislocated.

I half fell on to his back, seized him by the ear and twisted his face down to the carpet and then, remembering a stranglehold that somebody once taught me, I slipped my right forearm underneath his chin, grasped my left elbow with my right hand and threw all my weight forward on his head.

His great body heaved and struggled underneath me but under this frightful leverage his head was forced down, down, till it seemed something must give.

I eased off the pressure slightly to bring my knees up and exert greater force. His head came up again and he gave one strangled long drawn “Ah.” I like to think that Mendel and all the other men whom this devil had tortured to death may somehow have heard that scream and realised in what terror and agony he met his own end.

I made one last effort and leaned forward again with all my remaining strength and weight behind it. His head was forced down again, right down, and then suddenly there was a jerk and a sound as though a carrot had been snapped between the hands and the desperate struggling underneath me ceased abruptly. His neck had gone.

I rose shakily to my feet and collapsed into a chair. I was very nearly all in, and only my blind fury had given me the strength to kill him.

The next thing I knew Carnac had seized me by the hand and was saying urgently, “Claydon, Claydon, ah, mon pauvre, can you walk now? We must get away quickly or we shall be caught.”

I made a tremendous effort and got up. I was trembling so much that I could hardly stand or talk and Carnac helped me on with my coat.

I looked round. We were the only persons left alive in the room. Brühl was still doubled up in the chair where he fell, but his writhing had ceased, and Mendel lay a few feet away near the door. Carnac must have dealt with him while I was struggling with Roessing.

I remembered suddenly the possessions taken from me during the search and turned to get them off the table, but Carnac was already doing this. He stuffed them into his pocket, patted me encouragingly on the arm and guided me quickly out of that terrible room.

Chapter IX

The Spider and the Fly.

WE descended the stairs in the dark and turned off into a room. Just inside the door a man was lying practically naked. I never troubled to think who he might be but stepped across the body after Carnac and walked across to the window. Carnac opened it very softly, listened carefully and then climbed out and helped me through after him. As far as I could see we were now in the garden at the back of the house and Carnac set off quickly across the grass till we came to a wall. This was quite beyond me to tackle in my weak condition, but Carnac lifted me up and I managed to struggle on top and drop over the other side.

My recollections of the next hour or two are extremely blurred and vague. I remember scrambling through an interminable succession of gardens and hedges, over walls and all the time avoiding the roads. Several times we had to cross a street and then Carnac would leave me in the shadow while he went forward cautiously to see that the way was clear and then appear silently and lead me quickly across the danger area. These precautions were very necessary for once or twice I remember he seized me suddenly and pulled me down, and we would lie motionless on the ground hardly daring to breathe while the steady tramp of footsteps went by.

I couldn't think what we were doing or what Carnac intended to do; I was just beyond caring. Looking back, I am amazed at the strength and determination of my companion. I am no lightweight, and he had to help me on many occasions, lifting and dragging me over walls, yet he seemed never to tire but kept on, coolly and carefully making our way through the darkness.

After what seemed an age we stopped in a small garden and Carnac made me sit down. I was very nearly at the end of my tether and I think he realised this, for he left me on the ground and disappeared in the direction of the house. I heard a gentle tapping and after a long pause a door creaked as it was opened. There

followed the soft murmur of voices and then he came back and lifted me up. I noticed that he had another man with him.

“Courage, mon ami,” he whispered, “we are nearly safe now. Can you make just one more effort?”

I nodded miserably and we walked on, Carnac and the other man supporting me.

After a short distance I saw the outline of a large building ahead and we came right up to it and stopped in the shadow. They set me down and vanished but were back again in a few minutes and took me round the corner. We scrambled in through a window and were taken in the darkness along a corridor and up some stairs. Here a, door was opened and they carried me into the room and lay me on a bed. It looked like a rough operating theatre and I remember a man in white overalls examining me while Carnac talked to him, and then they must have given me an injection for gradually everything went dark and I slipped away gently into oblivion.

* * * * *

The shaft was very deep but at the top a small pinpoint of light showed the surface. I clambered up out of the darkness towards this light, but it was a long way and sometimes I felt I would never make it.

As I neared the surface full consciousness began to flow back into my brain and I opened my eyes slowly and gazed round the room. It was small and bare but spotlessly clean and the whitewashed walls reflected the brilliant sunlight which streamed in through the window. Hanging over the mantelpiece was a small crucifix.

I shifted my position slightly but gave an involuntary grunt of pain and abandoned the idea rapidly. The whole of my back and shoulders were abominably tender and reminded me very forcibly of the beating I had undergone.

My mind switched back to the events of that nightmare evening at Mendel’s house and I started to think out all that had happened.

What fools we had been, Carnac and I! We had walked straight into the trap which the Hun had set for us. I could see it all now; they had forced from Mendel the information that British agents might be making contact with him and then, with typical thoroughness and patience, they had installed a man in the doctor's house, knowing the recognition signal to be given, and there he had remained waiting for us to appear. Probably they would have been prepared to keep the trap set for months providing there was a bare chance of success at the end of it all.

It was difficult to believe now that I had been so completely hoodwinked by this imposter but the recognition signal about the pain in the back had been acknowledged so quickly that it put me right off my guard and after that it never occurred to me that the doctor might not be genuine. And I could see now the reason for other little aspects of the doctor's behaviour; his story that he was under house arrest had been necessary to explain the fact that nobody came to see him; his anxiety to keep us in the house despite the apparent danger to himself was due to their anxiety to keep in touch with us and find out if possible our purpose in coming to Laon.

As soon as we gave him this vital bit of information he rang up the authorities at once. Hell, what a cheek the man had, to arrange for our arrest under our very nose while we listened!

We had been fooled all along and yet after all, I thought with a sudden grim satisfaction, we had won after a fashion because at any rate we were still alive and five of them were dead.

Footsteps sounded in the passage, the door opened and a tall middle-aged nurse walked softly into the room. She saw I was awake and her rather hard face relaxed into a smile.

“Well, how do you feel now?” she asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “My back's pretty sore, but apart from that I'm fine.”

“Good,” she said. “Capitaine d'Angelay will be coming to see you soon. You must keep quiet till then.” And she went out.

I started to puzzle again, about the problems that faced us now, but twist them and turn them as I would there seemed no way out of the impasse. Our task was to kill this man Passy, at all costs to prevent him going to Germany and I knew now that we had failed because the enemy knew our plans and Passy would be sent away immediately and also because we dare not venture out again to look for him. The Gestapo would be searching for two men whose descriptions they knew and that was much easier than searching in the dark.

There didn't seem much point in remaining in Laon any longer and I felt that I could be much more use in the squadron—always assuming that we could get back which seemed rather doubtful.

Through the window I watched the tall green branches of a tree rustling gently in the warm breeze. A spider let itself dexterously down a silver thread across the window and then climbed nimbly up to the top again. I lay back and watched it, completely fed up with brooding over our misfortune.

It was evidently doing a little repair and maintenance work on its web in the corner for it ran lightly to and fro, tying knots and linking up the whole complicated skein. It reminded me of the old story of Robert Bruce and the inspiration he gained from watching a spider struggling to climb up its thread, though this spider of mine seemed a much more competent fellow than the one in the fable.

I wondered drowsily if Robert Bruce would have derived much benefit if his spider had been as nimble as mine. Probably not, I decided and then dozed off to sleep.

I awakened to find Carnac and a French officer standing by my bed. Carnac had got rid of his stolen German uniform and was dressed in a shabby blue suit.

“Well, Peter,” he said, “you look much better now than you did before. Here is Captain d'Angelay. He is a doctor in the army and he saved our lives last night.”

I looked at d'Angelay. He was a small middle-aged man with a brisk manner, a pair of friendly twinkling eyes and a small clipped moustache. His skin was the burnt sandy colour which indicates many years spent in hot climates. I liked his pleasant and humorous face.

He smiled at me. “You've had a good sleep,” he remarked. “Is your back more comfortable now?”

“Yes, thank you,” I replied. “When do you think I shall be able to get up?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “In a few days perhaps. You have the advantage of a strong constitution, but you were badly knocked about by these Boches and it will take a few days to recover. Well, if you're feeling more comfortable now that's the main thing. I'll see you later—” and he left the room.

Carnac pulled up a chair and sat down by my bed. He looked worried and tired. I think he felt our failure as keenly as I did.

“Now, mon cher Peter,” he said, “we are fairly safe for the moment and we've got to think out carefully the best thing to do.”

“I quite agree. Tell me first, though, what is this place?”

“It used to be a large school, but it has been turned into an emergency hospital and it's still full of wounded men, mostly French. The staff are all army doctors and nurses.”

“How did we get here?”

“When I saw you couldn't carry on any longer last night I had to take the risk of going to a house and asking for help. Fortunately the man was willing to take the risk and he told me we were near a French hospital so he came along and helped and to carry you in. I spoke to Captain d'Angelay and told him that you were badly hurt and being hunted by the Boches and he insisted that you should be brought in. He is a good man, I think. This is a little room in the top of the building and only d'Angelay and the nurse realise who you are. They know the risk but they are quite willing to take it, though I don't know how long we are safe here because the Boche is furious about this affair. Not only did we escape from their little trap but we killed five of them as well, including your Major Roessing who seems to have been a fairly big man. That's a direct challenge to the German authorities and they don't like it. D'Angelay was in the town this morning and he said all cars were being stopped and they are searching whole blocks of buildings where they think we may be hiding. They are determined to get us now.”

“I bet they are,” I said. “They must be furious that their little trap failed. That reminds me—how the hell did you get away last night? If you hadn't rescued me then, I don't think I could have stood it much longer.”

Carnac laughed. “It was very simple,” he said, “so simple that it deceived the Boche, I ran out of the room, shot the man who came after me and ran into another room and opened the window. Then I jumped into a cupboard and the rest of them rushed into the room, saw the open window and assumed I had got away. That's typical of the Boche—anything unexpected like that will often deceive him. Then I came out of my cupboard and crept downstairs in the dark and a few minutes later a man entered the front door and went upstairs.”

“I know. A German N.C.O. came in and spoke to Roessing and then left again.”

“Exactly,” said Carnac. “He came downstairs again and I jumped on him out of the darkness and got my hands on his throat. He struggled for a moment and then was obliging enough to die quietly.”

He spread his brown supple hands on the sheet and laughed with obvious amusement.

“I have very strong hands, you see.”

“And then?”

“Then I pulled his body into the room, took off his tunic and trousers and walked straight into the room where you were.”

I remembered the half-naked body lying downstairs as we made our way from the house. So that was the explanation.

Carnac went on. “You see, it was so unexpected that it worked. I shot two of them before they realised anything was wrong and I hit your man in the leg. Mon Dieu, but you seemed to enjoy killing him!”

“I did. It's the only part of the whole business that gives me any satisfaction. He was an absolute devil. And Mendel—what happened to him?”

“He wasn't armed,” said Carnac calmly. “Also I was a little annoyed with him for the deception he practised on us. He will be no good to the Gestapo again.”

There was silence between us for a moment. I knew that behind this rather flippant account of his exploit there lay the fact that he had been in a position to escape and instead he had remained behind and deliberately walked back into the midst of the enemy in order to rescue me.

“Look here,” I said awkwardly, “I'm not awfully good at speeches of this sort, but I do want to thank you for last night. I'll never forget it and I only hope that someday—”

He interrupted me. “Nonsense, mon ami. You don't think I would leave you, do you? Particularly when it was my fault for not spotting Mendel sooner as I should have done.

“And now, let's get down to business, as you say in England. What are we going to do?”

“I've been puzzling it out for a couple of hours,” I said slowly. “I just can't see what we can do now that the Hun knows our plans. We haven't a chance to get at Passy now.”

Carnac looked at me oddly. “I thought the same at first; and then I began to consider the matter carefully. Does the Boche know why we came to France?”

“Of course they do,” I said quickly. “Mendel told them —”I stopped suddenly. “My God, I see what you mean. The only people who knew the facts were killed.”

“Exactly,” said Carnac. “Mendel telephoned them while we were in the room and we know he didn't tell them anything then. Afterwards they came along to the house, but the only men who left were the ones who chased me at the beginning.”

“They didn't know,” I said. “Mendel only started to tell the whole story after you had escaped. God, that's a lucky chance. I can hardly believe it—but it's true.”

“Yes,” said Carnac reflectively, “it is true but does it help much? Consider what the Boche does know. He knows that two British agents came to the rendezvous arranged with Doctor Mendel and he knows what these men look like and that their names are Prouvy and de Buissy. Mendel told them all that as soon as we arrived—that's why we were followed when we went out—and other men will know of this besides our friends who were killed. Obviously we can never use these identities again. Also they know we went to the Deux Frères for the evening and they'll suspect that we have some interest in the place. They will watch it carefully and therefore we can't go there again.”

“I'd go further than that,” I said. “I don't think we dare leave this hospital at all till the hunt dies down. So how the hell are we to carry on this search?”

Carnac did not reply. He sat staring out of the window, his dark eyes clouded with anxiety, and neither of us spoke for some little time.

I think we both realised that we had failed, that there was nothing more that we could do, and yet neither cared to be the first to admit it.

From the window came a frantic buzzing. I glanced up. The spider's labours had not been in vain and struggling wildly in the web was one of the large blue-bottles that swarmed round the room. The spider shot out of its corner in a flash and fastened on to the fly which continued to buzz furiously in its efforts to escape, but it was no use and after a moment its struggles ceased, the spider tied its body firmly to the web and then retired to its corner again leaving a small object swinging gently in the web.

This was a much more intelligent spider than Robert Bruce's, I thought sardonically. What was that old rhyme—"*Will you walk into my parlour?* said the spider to the fly." It described exactly the spider's tactics; to spin a web and leave the victim to trap himself.

At that moment I had a sudden inspiration. Of course we had never caught Passy! Our methods had been wrong from the very beginning. We had been groping blindly for him whereas—I sat up in bed. It hurt like hell but I was so excited that I scarcely felt it.

"Carnac," I said excitedly, "we've been doing this all wrong. We've been trying to find Passy by groping in the dark for him, and of course we failed. We must change our tactics."

He looked at me as though I'd left my senses.

"What do you mean?" he said shortly.

"Just this—we're not in a position now to go on looking for him. Therefore we must try and make him come to us."

"Quite," said Carnac sarcastically. "Very easy no doubt, but how? What bribe or bait do we possess that will attract him?"

And then I had another idea. I did not realise it at the time but it was to alter the whole of our adventures in France.

"I know the bait," I said. "I met her in Amiens. We'll write to her tonight."

* * * * *

I finished the letter and tossed it across to Carnac for his approval.

There had been a long discussion about the form it should take. At first Carnac had pooh-poohed the suggestion, maintaining that a girl could not do any better than we could and anyway it was unfair to drag her into such a hazardous business. I replied that she had already been willing to help me despite the risk and that anyway if we didn't adopt a new line of approach to this problem we might just as well go back to England—if we could. He fully agreed to this in the end.

There remained the problem of making the necessary rendezvous with Giselle (curiously enough, though I had met her for such a short time I always thought of her by her Christian name). At first I suggested the hospital but Carnac quite rightly pointed out that letters might be opened in which case we might give away not only our own hiding place but also d'Angelay and the nurse who were sheltering us. It would be difficult to venture outside the hospital to meet her, but at any rate one of us could make the attempt without compromising the other.

Eventually, therefore, I wrote out the following letter. It was purposefully vague and non-committal and I hoped that if it did get into wrong hands it would not arouse any interest.

> Dear Mademoiselle Saint Brie,
> The friend who met you in Amiens Station remembers your effort to help and would like to meet you again if possible. Could you meet him outside l'Epicerie Herve in Rue Mailly, Laon, on 24th June, at noon? He will be waiting for you.

Carnac read it thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I think that will do. There's only one problem to face now."

"What's that?"

"How either of us are to get out of this place to meet Mlle. Saint Brie."

"I think I'd better go. After all, I know the girl."

"But how will you get there with every Boche in the town looking for you?"

"There's three days to puzzle it out," I said hopefully. "We'll think of a way."

* * * * *

The following morning about eleven o'clock d'Angelay walked quickly into my room and shut the door. I saw immediately from his manner that something was wrong.

"Monsieur," he said, "we must be very quick now. The Boche are here and they are searching the whole hospital."

"Hellfire!" I exclaimed. "Where do you want me to hide?"

"Here," he said. "Remain in bed. Leave it to me."

The door opened quietly again and the tall nurse came in with a tray which she set down on the foot of the bed. She moved very quickly yet without any suggestion of haste.

d'Angelay took a hypodermic from the tray and seized my arm while the nurse dabbed a little spirit on the skin.

"Now," said the little doctor briskly, "I'm giving you an injection which will affect your heart and pulse. After this you must lie quite still and not make a single move whatever happens. Leave it all to me and we may be able to bluff them."

I nodded and he jabbed in the needle, replaced the hypodermic on the tray and he and the nurse seized gauze and bandages and started to bandage the whole of my head, arms and chest. My face was completely covered leaving only a small slit for my nose and mouth and I couldn't see at all. They worked rapidly and finally laid me down again and covered me up.

I felt d'Angelay bend over me. "Remember," he whispered. "Absolute silence."

I moved my head slightly in acknowledgment, and then the door closed behind them.

For what seemed an age I lay in darkness, straining my ears to catch the slightest sound that would announce the arrival of the enemy but all I heard was the normal sounds of the hospital, of people moving along the corridors and the chatter of birds outside the open window.

After perhaps half an hour I heard the sounds that I had been dreading. Footsteps approached in the corridor outside, one or two doors were opened and closed again, and then the tramp of feet paused outside my door and it was thrown open. Several people came in and moved round the room. Two of them stopped by my bed. I could hear their breathing.

A deep voice said in atrocious French. “Who is this?”

The other man standing over me was d'Angelay. He replied evenly. “We don't know. He is a badly burned French airman, but he had no papers that could identify him.” He dropped his voice. “The man's condition is very weak. I don't think—” he paused significantly.

There was a long silence. I sensed that I was the object of keen scrutiny. My heart was giving a dull thud-thud, and inside my bandages a cold trickle of sweat ran down my cheek.

The German spoke again. There was a curt note of suspicion in his voice.

“When was this man brought in?”

Another voice, a Frenchman apparently, answered from the direction of the door.

“I can't say, monsieur, but probably in the last day or two because I haven't seen him before.”

d'Angelay broke in quickly. “Pardon, mon colonel, but this man has been here for ten days now. He arrived from Rheims before the Armistice.”

“Did he?” said the other voice. “I don't remember seeing him before, but then things are in such chaos…”

The German interrupted. “Please remove these bandages.”

d'Angelay answered quietly. “I am afraid that is impossible monsieur. The man is only just recovering from the shock of his dressings yesterday. I dare not disturb him again now.”

“I am sorry, monsieur, but my orders are to examine all the patients in this hospital. Several Germans were killed the other night by two British agents who managed to escape. We think they may be wounded and being sheltered in the town and I must satisfy myself that they are not in this hospital.”

Silence. Then d'Angelay's voice, “I beg your pardon, monsieur, but this man cannot possibly be the person you want. He has been lying here for ten days now in such a weak condition that once or twice we have thought he couldn't last another day. I dare not disturb him just now.”

“Do you refuse my orders?” said the German coldly. “I am quite prepared to enforce them if necessary and I tell you for the last time, I wish to see this man whatever the result.”

“And I, monsieur, refuse to take a step that may kill him.”

There was a tense silence for a moment. I could picture the two men, French and German, glaring angrily at each other across my bed.

The voice by the door intervened in conciliatory tones. “Captain d'Angelay would be very pleased to do as you wish, monsieur, but you understand that it is a point of honour with him not to do anything which would cause this man further injury. Surely the matter is not so urgent—this man cannot possibly be the person you are seeking and if you come back in a few days we can let you see him without doing him injury—if he's still alive.”

d'Angelay broke in quickly. “That is quite right, mon colonel. In a few days it will be different. Look, monsieur, you can see for yourself how weak the man is. Feel his pulse.”

A hand grasped my wrist and held it for a minute. I understood now the reason for the injection.

The grip on my wrist relaxed again.

“Very well,” said the German. “Under the circumstances I am prepared to take your word for it, but as this man has no papers I must see him as soon as his condition allows.”

“Very good, monsieur,” said the doctor and the little procession filed out of my room again. I lay down, still listening intently as the footsteps receded down the passage.

I didn't like that German's final remark. He would be coming back again.

* * * * *

A little later d'Angelay slipped into the room and started to remove the bandages from my head. He grinned cheerfully as my face appeared.

“Well,” he said, “I thought for one moment that we had lost, but we just managed to stop him in time.”

“Just is the word,” I said. “I was almost paralytic with fright inside those blasted bandages. By the way, who was the man by the door?”

“That was Colonel Ravel, the Commandant.”

“Does he know who I am?”

“Only two people in the hospital know—Madame Berger and myself. It would be dangerous to tell anybody else.”

“And how did Carnac get on?”

“He slipped into the operating theatre when the Boche arrived and hung round as though he were an orderly. You'd never have recognised him yourself in overalls and mask.”

“And what happens next time the Hun comes round?” I asked. “How will you get over that one?”

“I've been thinking about that,” said the doctor. His eyes twinkled. “It looks as if you'll have to die before then and I shall show the Boche your body to satisfy him.”

“Excellent scheme,” I said. “Is there anything I could do to survive my death, so to speak? I'd rather do that if it's not too much trouble.”

“No trouble. I'm afraid we have a good supply of bodies here; some of these poor devils are badly wounded and they are dying like flies. We can easily produce a corpse for the Boche and if we don't even know its identity then he certainly won't either.”

“And the burns?”

“I'll arrange that too,” he replied calmly. “And now, please excuse me. I'm giving anaesthetics in the theatre all afternoon.”

After he had gone I sat up in bed and stared moodily out of the window, wondering how on earth I was to keep the rendezvous with Giselle. It wasn't going to be easy with the search for us still in progress and I was still trying to puzzle it out, thinking of one desperate scheme after another and rejecting them immediately as being completely impracticable, when I heard a noise about my

head. I looked up and saw a man's face peering down at me through the skylight in the roof.

He put his finger to his lips and then signalled me to open the skylight.

I listened carefully but all seemed quiet in the corridor outside and so I pushed my bed across the little room and by standing on it I just reached the skylight and unfastened it, though my bruised back and shoulders throbbed abominably in the process.

The man put his head down through the hole and whispered in French.

“Are you by yourself?”

“Yes, it's all right. Do you want to come down?”

“Yes, please.” He lowered himself awkwardly through the roof and I saw that his left arm was in a sling. I steadied him as best I could and he dropped lightly on to the bed.

We looked at each other. He was a sunburnt, hard-bitten looking man, tall, broad-shouldered and vigorous and, I should imagine, very quick tempered. His eyes were blue and steely and he spoke in a jerky yet decisive manner. His shirt and trousers were torn and filthy and with his unshaven chin and tousled black hair he looked as though he'd been roughing it for some time.

“Well?” he said brusquely, “and who are you?”

But I had spotted the accent. I held out my hand. “It's all right,” I said, “I'm English too.”

He stared at me for a moment, then laughed and shook my hand.

“Damn!” he said. “Am I as obvious as all that? Thought I made a pretty good Frenchman. Anyway, my name is Dalkeith, Major Dalkeith. I'm in the Gordons—or was.”

“My name's Claydon. I was in the R.A.F. once upon a time, about a week ago. Anyway, is there anything I can do for you? Presumably you're trying to get home.”

“Correct,” he said. “I was pinched with the 51st at St. Valery and they shipped us off to Germany, but I got away one night and now I'm making for the Swiss frontier. Worst of it is I hurt my bloody arm but I managed to get here and some French people hid me for a few days. Damn good people they were too, but unfortunately somebody killed a few Hun soldiers in Laon the other day and they've been going out again p.d.q. I came here and got my arm seen to by some French doctor. He kept me in his room, but today the Hun turned up again and I had to get out on the roof and hide in a water tank. Pretty close thing it was, too.”

“What made you come down this way?”

“Had to,” he replied. “I got up through a trap door but when it came to crawling back again the damned thing was fast so I crawled round till I found this skylight. Lucky chance I hit on you, eh? Anyway, has the Hun gone now?”

“I think so. They've been in here so probably they won't come back again for a bit.”

“Were they, by God.” He stared at me. “How did you shake 'em off?”

“I was bandaged up to the eyes. They were pretty suspicious, all the same.”

“No doubt,” he said. “It seems to me this place is getting too hot. How about joining forces with me and making for the frontier tonight? I've got a little money and two heads are better than one. Are you game?”

I hesitated a moment. It was difficult to refuse without giving something away. “I'm afraid I can't do much at the moment,” I said slowly. “I've got some sort of poisoning in my innards and I'd soon pack up if I did anything very active. You'd find it much better on your own.”

He stared at me without replying, probably thinking that I looked fit enough for anything and was just making excuses.

“In that case I'll leave it for a couple of days,” he said at length. “You'll be fit then and probably my arm will be less of a handicap and we—” he broke off abruptly as the door opened and Carnac slipped in quietly. He was still dressed in a white overall and he looked in surprise at Dalkeith who returned his glance with a stony glare.

“Hullo, Charles,” I said. “Let me introduce Major Dalkeith—Captain Carnac.” The two men shook hands.

“Dalkeith has just been playing hide and seek on the roof with the Huns, and he arrived through my skylight.”

Carnac laughed. “Bien,” he said. “The Boches might have made a good haul this morning if they'd looked more carefully. At any rate they've gone now, so we are safe again for a little while.”

Dalkeith smiled again. “So you're another one,” he remarked. “Excuse my being so suspicious but being continually on the run like this gets me down after a time. I don't even trust myself now.”

“I know,” said Carnac. “My friend Claydon and I have had our share of being hunted in the last few days and it's not at all pleasant.”

“Well,” said Dalkeith, “I'm starting for the Swiss frontier as soon as my arm is better and I've been trying to get Claydon to join me. Are you interested?”

Carnac glanced at me.

“I'm afraid, m'sieu, that Claydon and I must stay here a little longer. We have to see somebody before we can go.”

“Oh,” said Dalkeith slowly. “I don't really see that—” he checked himself and resumed after a slight pause. “Well, in that case, we'll leave it for a few days. I'll slip along occasionally when the coast is clear and keep in touch with you. Now, do you think it's safe for me to go back to my room?”

“I think so,” said Carnac, “but perhaps it would be better if I walk back with you. I can pass as a hospital orderly, you see.”

“Good,” said Dalkeith. He nodded coolly at me and they went out.

I was rather amused by the gallant major. He was obviously a keen type himself and didn't trouble to disguise his opinion that it was my duty to escape at the first possible opportunity and that I was shirking it at the moment. It had done me good to see him, though; the sound of an English voice was pleasant indeed after all this time. “All this time,” I said to myself and smiled. Four days ago I was at Northolt. But it seemed like four years.

Carnac came in again. He smiled at me, cheerfully, fished a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket, tossed one across to me, lit one himself, and then sat down on my bed.

He seemed in excellent spirits again and hummed a little tune to himself.

“Well, Peter,” he said, “I really begin to think that le bon Dieu looks after us personally.”

“It looks like it sometimes,” I said. “And yet in another way I feel that everything has gone wrong.”

Carnac blew two perfect smoke rings and gazed at them critically.

“No, I don't think so,” he replied slowly. “We have been here only two days and we had very bad luck over that canaille Mendel, but if we can meet Mlle. Saint Brie I think she may succeed where we failed. It's a new idea, anyway, and a new way of approaching the problem.”

“That reminds me. How am I going to get out of the hospital to meet her? It won't be very easy.”

“Au contraire,” said Carnac. “I've arranged it all with the doctor. You are going to fetch her in an ambulance.”

Chapter X

We Meet Again.

Two days later I was able to get up. My back and shoulders were still bruised and raw and movement was very painful but a good constitution had stood me in good stead and I wouldn't have believed that I was the person who only four days ago was so thoroughly beaten up by the S.S.

Carnac and the doctor were in my room helping me to dress. I had to meet Giselle at midday and we were making preparations for the sortie.

I put on an Army shirt and khaki trousers and the addition of a Red Cross armlet made me a very convincing French medical orderly.

d'Angelay handed me a pair of dark glasses.

“This will complete the disguise,” he said. “It’s a sunny day, too. Nobody would recognise you now.”

I looked in the mirror and agreed with him.

Carnac laughed. “That’s very good,” he said. “I only hope that Mademoiselle will recognise you.”

I followed the doctor down long corridors and a flight of stairs to the hospital entrance. An ambulance stood outside with a soldier at the wheel. We climbed in beside him and started off into Laon.

I was curiously excited at the prospect of seeing Giselle again.

She had been so much in my thoughts for the last few days that I had once to regard her almost as an old friend and not a French girl whom I had met for a brief hour in Amiens. I wondered if she would be there to keep the appointment. The postal service must be seriously disorganised at the moment; perhaps she had never got our letter, or she might decide that the risk was too great, that she had helped me once and that was enough. I continued this anxious speculation as we drove on through the busy streets of the old town, past the German traffic policemen, the German lorries and cars and the new black and white signs, “Nach Reims” and “Nach Amiens.”

Just before we reached the station two German traffic policemen signalled us to stop and our driver pulled up sharply. The Germans strolled across to us and one of them put his head through the windows and addressed the driver.

“Where are you going?”

“To the station to pick up some stretcher cases for the hospital.”

“Where is your authority?”

d'Angelay pulled a form out of his pocket and handed it across to the German who glanced at it and then handed it back. I sat very still, trying to appear unconcerned. I knew they were becoming very strict about French motor traffic. If he asked for our papers as well, we were finished. I hadn't got any.

The feldwebel looked at each of us in turn. His eyes rested on me for a second, and then he stepped back.

“Very well,” he said. “Carry on.”

I breathed again.

We drove up to the station, left the driver in the ambulance and d'Angelay and I walked in. The train was late and we went across to the bar and edged our way through a grey mass of Hun soldiers. They were all swilling beer by the gallon and nobody paid the slightest attention to us.

We had a glass of vin rosé and talked quietly. d'Angelay said, “I hope this girl of yours will be there. It may be difficult to do this ambulance journey another day.”

“I hope so too. A lot depends on it.”

We had another glass.

“Has Carnac told you our plans?”

“Yes, everything. Very difficult, I think.”

“That's why I've got to see this girl.”

I remembered another point.

“Has the Boche been making any more enquiries at the hospital? They didn't seem very satisfied with your story of the burned airman.”

“No, nothing. I hope they've dropped the matter.”

Eventually the train arrived. I summoned the driver, now fast asleep in the ambulance, and we walked up the train. At the back there were some cattle trucks. They had been hastily converted into an ambulance train and a lot of French wounded were lying on stretchers on the floor. The heat and the flies were beyond description.

Some Red Cross nurses and an army doctor were checking the patients against a list of names. d'Angelay walked up and conferred with the doctor. They picked out four stretchers and the driver and I carried them into the ambulance.

d'Angelay came out of the station after us. He glanced at his watch and said to me in an undertone. “Nearly time.”

It was ten minutes to twelve.

We climbed into the ambulance and set off up the hill.

Near the cathedral d'Angelay said something to the driver and we turned down a little side street. The doctor pointed ahead.

“L'Epicerie Herve,” he said.

I saw the sign above the door and an instant later I saw a girl standing in the doorway.

It was Giselle.

The ambulance slowed down and stopped. I opened the door, put my head out and said softly, “Giselle!”

She looked round in surprise at the untidy French soldier in dark glasses and then her face lit up in the same lovely way I had seen it so often in my imagination and she ran across towards me.

“Hallo, Pierre!” she said.

“Hallo, my sweet. Jump in quickly.”

She took my outstretched hand and I hauled her up and shut the door.

We set off for the hospital, bumping along the pave, while Giselle sat tightly sandwiched between d'Angelay and me, and I felt happier than I had done since we left England. We were together again and we had effected our meeting successfully with all the Gestapo and security police in Laon searching for me.

An hour later Giselle and I sat talking on my bed in the little room at the top of the hospital.

She was wearing a light summer frock and around her hung the same fragrant and elusive perfume that I had noticed in Amiens. She looked so delightfully fresh and young and clean that I realised soberly for the first time the responsibility that lay upon us in getting her involved in this hazardous enterprise and linking her fate with our own. It was a hateful thing to do and could only be justified by the great issues at stake.

She turned to me. “Are you very surprised to see me?”

“Not exactly,” I said, “but I'm very relieved. I didn't know if you'd be able to come.”

“But of course,” she said. “You remember the promise I made.”

“Yes, but I thought it might be asking too much of you to help me again. I'm afraid that you are going to get caught up in a very dangerous affair if you stay here with us.”

“Us?” she said. “Who are the others then?”

“There are only two of us. The other is a Frenchman, Charles Carnac, who came out from England with me. He should be here in a minute.”

“Why did you come to France?”

“We were sent out by the British Government to try and stop some very important information reaching the Boche.”

“Have you succeeded?”

“No. We have failed badly so far and were very nearly caught. That's why we decided to ask for your help. It seemed the only way left.”

She smiled. “First of all, suppose you tell me what you want me to do.”

“Wait until Carnac comes. He's the captain of our little team and he'll tell you all about it. Now let's talk about you for a change. I seem to know you so well and actually I don't know a thing about you except that you're called Giselle and you live in Paris.”

“That's quite true,” she said. “I live in Paris with my mother and brother—or did—because René is missing now. He was a lieutenant in the Army. My father was in the Army too,—he was killed in 1918, and he never saw me.”

“And where is your mother now? Does she know that you have come here like this?”

Giselle shook her dark head. “No, she left Paris before the Boche arrived. I think she is in Bordeaux now.”

“And why did you stay on?”

“I was driving for an American Ambulance unit. In any case René and I were always very independent. Father left us both some money and mother never tried to interfere with our lives. She always trusted us to be sensible.”

“I'm afraid you're not being very sensible now,” I said. “This is a mad business, if ever there was one. I feel an awful swine to have pulled you into it.”

“You mustn't feel that,” she said slowly. “I would do a great deal to help you and in any case I told you at Amiens that I had one or two scores to pay off against the Boche. My father and now René —” She stopped abruptly. “But tell me about yourself. How long have you been in France?”

“We landed two days before I met you in Amiens, but we got separated and Carnac came here by himself.”

“And the Boches are looking for you now?”

“Yes, very much so. You see, we killed several of them when we escaped the other night, and if there's one thing that enrages the Hun more than anything else it's using violence against his own troops. They're out to get us now at any price and they've turned Laon inside out in the last few days. They were even here in this room.”

“And where were you?”

“In this bed.”

She looked so incredulous that I told her the whole story of the evening at Mendel's house, how Carnac rescued me and how we managed to reach the hospital.

“You must have been badly hurt,” she said when I had finished. “They are devils, these Boches. Are you better now?”

“Pretty well,” I said. “Not quite hundred per cent. But I will be in a few days.”

There was silence for a moment and then I went on, “You see now why I'm so worried about bringing you into this, Giselle. It's so very dangerous and if we are caught then it's absolutely certain death—and for you too. They will have no mercy.”

“I know,” she said quietly. “But it doesn't make any difference.”

A little later there was a tap on the door and Carnac came in. He and Giselle regarded each other with interest as I introduced them. I think that each of them approved of the other and indeed it struck me that in some indefinable way they were very alike with their dark good looks, their poise and vitality and their quick intelligence.

The three of us sat down cross-legged on the bed and lit cigarettes.

“Good,” said Carnac. “Now that Mademoiselle Saint Brie has arrived we can discuss our plans.”

“First of all, tell her the whole story of why we came to France,” I said.

“Certainly,” said Carnac. He turned to Giselle. “It happened like this—” and he told her the whole long series of events that had led up to the present position. Giselle listened with the keenest interest, asking a question here and there, and when Carnac finished with a description of our complete failure to find Passy she sat in thoughtful silence for a few moments.

“And you ,think,” she said at length, “that I shall be able to find this man for you?”

“Yes,” said Carnac. “You see, Claydon and I are being hunted by the Gestapo. We are in danger every time we leave this building and if we started to make enquiries we should be trapped in five minutes, but with you it is different. They are not looking for you and moreover you are a girl. You can approach it in a different way. You see, this man Passy is not a very pleasant type. He is vain and very fond of women, and if he is still in Laon I think you could get to know him.”

“And when I have found him you are going to kill him.”

“That is so,” said Carnac quietly. “We are going to kill him, whatever happens to us, because he is a traitor to France and because we must stop him giving this information to the Boche.”

There was silence for a moment. Carnac sat watching Giselle, his face hard and set, while she stared out of the window looking utterly miserable and perplexed. I felt intensely sorry for her; it was a hateful task to undertake, and I understood very well her reluctance to agree to it.

“It is a terrible thing that you ask me to do, monsieur,” she said at length.

“War is a terrible thing,” said Carnac relentlessly. “Thousands of French women and children have been bombed and killed by the enemy and yet this Frenchman is working for them.”

He paused a minute and then continued in a softer and more persuasive tone.

“What else can we do, mademoiselle? We cannot stand by and see this man sell this secret to the Boche, can we? We cannot deliberately place England in even greater danger because we refuse to face an unpleasant duty. Ask Claydon what he thinks.”

“That's quite right,” I said. “I don't like the idea much but I know that it's got to be done. There's no other way. You see, Giselle, so much depends on it for both our countries. We've just got to succeed—and even now it may be too late.”

“Very well,” she said. “If you believe in it enough to risk your lives then I'll do anything you want.”

“Good,” said Carnac, and for some reason we all shook hands on it.

“Now for the details,” I said. “How are we going to start?”

“I can see only one way,” said Carnac. “Giselle must go to the Deux Frères tonight and perhaps some other cafés as well. She must enquire casually about Passy as though he is an old acquaintance and perhaps she might meet some Luftwaffe officers who know him. You remember the prisoner of war said he was there with some Luftwaffe officers last week.”

“Isn't that rather dangerous?” said Giselle. “He will know that we've never met and perhaps be suspicious.”

“I think we can arrange that,” I said. “We know of an incident that happened in Abbeville at the end of April in a bar called the Père Jacques. Passy won a hundred francs from an English sergeant who bet him that he couldn't drink a pint of beer straight down. There was quite a noisy party in progress at the time and you could say that you saw him there that night. He was rather drunk at the time so I don't suppose his recollections of the evening are very clear, and in any case he's evidently a pretty vain type where girls are concerned. Probably he'll fall for it

easily and be very flattered that you remember him. Say you spotted him in the Deux Frères the other night, and thought you'd like to meet him again."

"I understand," said Giselle. "Abbeville—Père Jacques—a hundred francs from an English soldier for drinking a pint of beer straight down... Anything else?"

"If you do meet him," said Carnac, "find out where he lives, whether he is expecting to be moved shortly and then make a rendezvous with him for tomorrow night."

"And then—?"

"Then Claydon and I will meet him instead."

"One other point," I said, "Giselle doesn't know this man and it's just possible she might miss him on that account. Shall I go with her? I'm the only one of us who has ever seen him."

"Yes," retorted Carnac, "and don't forget that he has seen you too. Suppose he recognises you as the R.A.F. officer he saw at Abbeville and denounces you?"

"I admit there is that chance but I don't think it's very likely because he saw me for only a brief instant and probably he's forgotten all about it by now. He doesn't realise the significance of that little meeting."

"It's very dangerous in another way," continued Carnac. "When the Gestapo followed us that evening from Mendel's house we went to the Deux Frères and probably they guess that we have some interest in the place so they'll be watching it in the hope that we shall return. They are incredibly patient and thorough in matters like that. You'd be arrested in five minutes."

"Not necessarily," I said. "I've been thinking this out. I got away with it today by wearing dark glasses and I believe if I went as somebody else I might pass it off."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the Huns are looking for Pierre de Buissy, a French airman. That was the name I gave Mendel, you remember. But suppose I go as an American civilian with a convincing story and dark glasses and a different suit—isn't there a chance they'd never spot me? I'd be so completely different from the man they're looking for."

Carnac thought. "Perhaps," he said at length. "It would be the unexpected and bold move which sometimes beats the Boche, but it's risky all the same and it would involve Giselle too."

"No," said Giselle quickly. "We are in this together. If it's worth the risk, let's take it."

"I think it's worth it," I said. "We've lost so much time already and we may get only one chance of meeting Passy. It would be too awful to miss it because Giselle didn't recognise him."

"Yes," said Carnac. "Perhaps you are right. You had better go with her."

Chapter XI

Café des Deux Frères.

THAT evening Giselle and I walked up into the old town. We had spent an anxious few hours working out my new identity and history. I had borrowed a grey flannel suit from d'Angelay (having removed the tailor's label “just in case” as Carnac remarked cheerfully) and a very English looking pin-stripe tie. My hair was parted on the other side and flopped across my forehead producing an almost Hitlerian effect, and finally I was wearing the same dark glasses that had proved so useful that morning. Altogether I think my appearance was changed considerably but despite this I was as jumpy as a cat.

This was a sortie in broad daylight right under the enemy's nose and in addition just to make myself more conspicuous I had Giselle with me. We hadn't gone a hundred yards before I realised that she attracted a great deal of attention, practically everybody who passed us glancing curiously at this graceful, clear-eyed girl. It struck me that the susceptible Hun would be no exception.

As we walked on I kept repeating to myself with a sort of desperate urgency, “You're Eddy Broussard, you're an American, you've been driving for the American Ambulance unit,” because I knew that the only hope of getting away with this bluff was to have my new personality and story so clearly photographed on my mind that any questions and conversation would be answered naturally and without a trace of hesitation.

I still hadn't any papers or an American passport and therefore had to rely entirely on being such a convincing American citizen that no German would think of questioning the fact. If they did notice anything wrong then three minutes intelligent cross-examination would show me up. I therefore thought hard about Eddy Broussard and began to feel that I knew the gentleman fairly well.

Near the cathedral we paused outside a bar.

“This will do to start with,” I said, and we went in and ordered a drink. There were a number of Germans of all ranks, still celebrating hard, but I couldn't see any Luftwaffe officers.

I said in a low voice to Giselle, “When we see some Luftwaffe officers get into conversation with them.” She nodded. “And if we should see our friend I'll say Tally Ho as a signal.”

“What does that mean?”

“It's an old English hunting cry,” I said, “but now it's the R.A.F. term meaning enemy in sight.”

We had another drink and I began to feel a little more confident. So far so good. I had a good look round the room, but couldn't see anything that suggested the presence of the Gestapo though it was impossible to be sure.

After about half-an-hour three Luftwaffe officers walked in. They took the bar stools next to Giselle, sat astride them and demanded champagne.

In the mirror facing us I watched them casually. They were all young, sunburnt, hard looking and obviously out for a party. You could see that they were quite-nicely-thank-you already. I nudged Giselle softly and she replied with a barely perceptible nod. It was going to be very easy. I could see that two of them were glancing covertly at her already.

She unfastened her bag, searched through it as though looking for something and then pulled out a purse, but as she opened it several coins dropped on the

floor and rolled away. I dived after them and the Luftwaffe promptly and very gallantly did the same. It was a heaven-sent opening for them.

We recovered the coins between us and they were restored with much bowing and heel clicking.

"How clumsy of me!" said Giselle. "Thank you so much." She smiled sweetly at them. More bowing. They had very nice manners.

Would mademoiselle and I join them in a drink? Thank you very much, messieurs, we should be delighted. Garcon, another bottle!

We introduced ourselves. Mademoiselle Saint Brie, Mr. Eddy Broussard of New York, Hauptmann Konrath and the other two whose names I forget. The bottle arrived and the cork was drawn with a resounding pop. We clinked glasses, and were now the greatest of friends and all set for a good party.

"Are you staying in Laon, Mademoiselle?" (Yours is a pretty obvious technique my young friend, I thought.)

"I am working at the military hospital," said Giselle.

"And M. Broussard is perhaps a doctor?"

"No," I said cheerfully, "just an ordinary American. I was driving for our ambulance unit, but I kinda lost them since the Armistice. This war's all over anyway. You people have swept the board. I'm going back to the States next week."

They seemed interested to meet an American, and Konrath for the moment stopped making passes at Giselle and wanted to know if I thought England would fight on now and what we Americans thought of the Nazis.

I was beginning to enjoy this, aided perhaps by the champagne, and replied in no uncertain terms that we didn't think very much of the Nazis, and even less of the Italians.

I was careful, however, to be polite and good-humoured about it and avoid any slighting references to the Fuehrer which I knew would start trouble immediately. They took it very well, protesting that we misunderstood them, that the facts had been wilfully distorted by the Jews and the English who were afraid that Germany would rise again to be a great power. But England was finished now, just as France was, and the young and virile nations were going to have their turn. And so on, in the approved Nazi style, ad. lib., ad. infinitum.

"Do you think England is really finished?" I asked at length.

Konrath's face hardened and he banged the bar with his glass.

"Of course they are!" he said loudly. "But for that Churchill they would have made terms long ago. Now they will have to be taught their lesson. England will be Kaput-geschlagen. When the bombing starts we shall be over there in a fortnight—you'll see. And then—"

He laughed. It wasn't a very pleasant laugh. I should hate to see Konrath and his type in a vanquished England. There would be no mercy.

One of the other Germans turned to me.

"Have you always lived in America, monsieur?"

"No," I said, "I've lived in England for some years. I used to work there."

"I thought so," he replied, speaking for the first time in very good English. "You have really no American accent."

I stiffened instinctively. It was a good thing I mentioned working in England.

“No?” I said. “I suppose I must have got out of it in the last few years. It's amazing how quickly one does.”

“Yes,” he said, “isn't it? At first I should have taken you for an Englishman.”

This was getting on to dangerous ground and it struck me that a change in the conversation would be a good thing so I ordered another bottle of champagne. It was pretty poor stuff despite the price; no doubt the wily proprietor was palming off some dud stock on his Teuton guests in the well-founded belief that they would not be discerning judges.

I paid for it and was secretly amused to think that the Chancellor of the Exchequer might not approve much of German officers being treated to champagne on the British taxpayers' money. Not that it worried me much. It was a cheaper alternative than having to pay a pension to the dependants of the late Flying Officer Peter Claydon and it had helped to cover up a rather awkward moment.

Konrath meanwhile was deep in conversation with Giselle. Evidently the American's girlfriend was fair game for a Luftwaffe officer and he was determined to cut me out. Giselle sat forward on her stool, twirling the narrow stem of a glass between her fingers and playing up magnificently to the amorous Konrath. A bit too magnificently, I thought with a tinge of annoyance.

We all clicked glasses again, but this time I drank very sparingly and left it to the three Germans to finish the bottle, which they did with the greatest of ease. I intended to keep a clear head.

For a second I caught Giselle's eye and then blew my nose vigorously. This was the signal to move on elsewhere and a few minutes later she set her glass down firmly and announced that she wanted to move on. The Luftwaffe rose as one man just as I had hoped. Could they show us some other place in the town? They would be very honoured by our company. (You mean Giselle's company, I thought to myself. You'd be only too pleased to lose me.) I looked at Giselle, with an' air of doubt. She nodded her head with alacrity. Yes, messieurs, we should be delighted if that is not too much trouble. No trouble at all, mademoiselle, we assure you.

We marched happily out of the bar, one of those occasions, I think, when everybody was happy. I certainly was; we were making now for the Deux Frères (though the Luftwaffe didn't realise it yet), and that was the danger spot because it was probably still under observation from the Gestapo, and I reckoned that going there in the company of German officers might allay suspicion. I was beginning to realise the truth of Carnac's saying that the impudent and unexpected plan is the one best calculated to deceive the wily Hun.

Outside the evening air was cool and pleasant and the setting sun cast long shadows across the street and touched with gold the lofty spire of the cathedral above our heads. We paused for a moment. “Where would you like to go now, mademoiselle?” said Konrath. Giselle thought and then said, “Let's go to the Deux Frères—it's quite near here.”

We set off briskly, Konrath walking in front with Giselle, the other two bringing up the rear with me. They were all in excellent form and walked very straight and with the intense concentration of the slightly boozed. Konrath talked in a low voice to Giselle. I thought he was probably making what a Frenchman would call “des propositions.” Poor Giselle—it wasn't turning out a very pleasant affair for her, but

she struck me as being a young woman quite capable of keeping amorous airmen at bay.

We reached the Deux Frères. I drew a deep breath and followed the others inside, feeling rather as the early Christians must have felt on entering the lion's den. More faith than hope.

It looked exactly the same as when Carnac and I were there; the mirrors on the yellow wall, the array of gaily coloured bottles on the shelf and the same field-grey mass of Germans drinking themselves stupid, with here and there an odd civilian.

Konrath ordered more champagne. I glanced quickly round the room. Passy wasn't there; we had drawn blank again. I continued my search. The Gestapo man who had read a newspaper by the door certainly wasn't there either, but that didn't mean that they were not watching the place because any one of the crowd present might have been a member of the secret police. I was conscious of a strange inward tension.

The champagne arrived and we clinked glasses again. I drank a little private toast to the hope that Konrath and his two friends would soon meet a hero's death over England. Not that I wished them any harm; they were pleasant enough in their rather arrogant way, but very, very sure of themselves and quite fanatical in their desire to see England made to grovel in the dust.

Giselle evidently thought it was time to start a few discreet enquiries. She said to Konrath, “I was in here a few nights ago and saw a Frenchman I met once in Abbeville. Do you know him?—he was here with some Luftwaffe officers. I think his name was Passy.”

Konrath stared at her for a moment before replying. He was distinctly tight but the question had made an impression and I knew that we had made a mistake.

“Yes,” he said slowly, his eyes fixed on her face. “I may have met him. May I ask, mademoiselle, why you are interested in him?”

“I'm not really,” said Giselle calmly. “It's just that I was rather surprised to see him again in here the other night.”

“So,” said Konrath. There was an awkward pause. I could see he wasn't satisfied and I thought quickly of some way of turning the conversation.

We were standing now in a small circle and I had my back to the bar and was facing the entrance. Suddenly the door swung open and Passy walked in. His appearance was so quick and unexpected that for an instant I stared at him in utter stupefaction and then I felt a great surge of comprehension and excitement. We had found our quarry at last.

He was just the same as I remembered him from that brief meeting at Abbeville, tall, somehow rather dissolute-looking with his sensual face and cruel mouth, and yet his expression was quick and alert. An unpleasant customer, you'd say at a glance, but certainly no fool.

He glanced round the room and then made for the bar; we were now not more than six paces apart, but I was still the only one of our little group who had seen him. I had to warn Giselle quickly. Having said that she knew Passy it would be fatal now if she didn't recognise him.

I raised my glass to her.

“Tally Ho, my dear,” I said, and stared intently over her shoulder at Passy.

She picked it up beautifully, raised her glass as though acknowledging my toast and then quite casually glanced round at the mirror on the wall and her eyes rested for a second on Passy. I knew she was bound to recognise him once I pointed him out; he was the only civilian near us and I had described him very fully to her.

She turned back to Konrath. “Why, there he is now,” she said in surprise. “I never saw him come in.” She walked over to Passy, touched him on the arm, and said, “Do you remember me, monsieur?”

Passy turned round in surprise and looked at her. We had counted on his weakness for the opposite sex and we had not been wrong. Confronted by this striking looking girl, he did what most of us males would do and fell for the deception beautifully.

“Mais certainement, mademoiselle,” he replied slowly. “I remember you but I cannot think at the moment exactly where we met.”

“It was at Abbeville, in April,” said Giselle calmly. “Do you remember one evening at the Père Jacques when you won a bet from an English soldier for drinking beer? I was there then and I saw you in here the other night. How funny to meet again”—and she chatted on gaily.

The slightly puzzled look on Passy's face cleared immediately. He was obviously quite ready to believe that they met before and Giselle brought him across to our little group and introduced him. He and Konrath must have met before because they certainly recognised each other, but Konrath merely bowed coldly and said nothing.

Now it was my turn.

“Mr. Eddy Broussard of New York.” Passy and I looked at each other for an instant and bowed, and then he turned back to Giselle. There had not been even a flicker of recognition in his face.

The conversation began to drag somewhat. Konrath sulked; he was obviously annoyed that Giselle had brought Passy into the party and even more annoyed that she paid so much attention to him. The other two Germans were now glassy-eyed and seemed more or less speechless and I stood quietly by myself, thinking very hard.

We had completed the first phase of the operation and made contact with our man. So much would depend now on Giselle and the way she managed to handle him, but as far as I could see she was doing very well. Passy was obviously interested and talking away to her and gesticulating hard. Soon, if he ran true to form, he would be arranging to meet her again. And Giselle knew the answer to make—tomorrow night. *Tomorrow night...*

You may wonder why, with this man standing by me, I didn't try to kill him there and then. There were several reasons—first that I had not got a revolver because the Germans had already announced the death penalty for carrying firearms, and as we hadn't considered when we left the hospital that there was any real chance of meeting Passy it seemed like taking a very unnecessary risk. Also, in real life it is not half so easy to kill people as might be imagined—witness the number of attempted assassinations that go astray. Merely to wound Passy would be useless; I should be overpowered in a few seconds and there would be no second chance for Carnac or anybody else. Lastly and most important, we had

made up our minds that whatever happened to us we had got to keep Giselle out of the storm of trouble that was bound to follow Passy's death. She had come to help us at our request, and it was unthinkable that we should leave her to face the baffled fury of the Gestapo. But tomorrow night…

I bought another bottle of champagne (the Luftwaffe seem to regard this as the very essence of French luxury and sophistication and refused to drink anything else) and we started to knock this one back also. We all clicked glasses and as we did so I became aware that Passy was suddenly looking at me hard. Something had struck him. It didn't worry me much; I felt pretty safe behind my dark glasses.

After a moment he said casually, “Have we met before, M. Broussard?”

“No, I don't think so,” I replied. “Why?”

“Just that your face is vaguely familiar,” he said slowly. “I feel sure that I've seen you somewhere before.” He tried to think it out for a moment but the champagne was too much for him.

“Maybe in Paris,” I said. “I used to go there quite a lot before the war.”

His brow cleared. “That would be it,” he said. “Yes, that would be it—in Paris.” And he renewed his conversation with Giselle.

In the near future—perhaps tomorrow night—you are going to realise exactly where you have seen me before, I said to myself viciously. But then it will be too late for you to do anything about it. If only you had killed me at Abbeville after you finished murdering that inoffensive Englishman all your black little schemes would probably have succeeded without any trouble at all.

Giselle looked at her watch and decided she had to get back to the hospital. It was nearly curfew anyway. Passy protested but she smiled at him, said goodbye to the sulky Konrath, acknowledged the rather shaky bows of the other two Germans and walked outside with me.

“Well, how did you get on?” I asked.

“Very well,” she said in a voice entirely void of expression. “That man is a devil. You were quite right about him. He has a horrible mind. He thinks—oh, never mind.” She made a gesture of disgust. “But I promised to meet him tomorrow night.”

“Wizard,” I said. “At last we'll be able to do something.”

She made no reply. I knew what she was thinking and after a moment I said gently, “Poor old thing, I know how you hate all this lying and deception and unpleasant advances from these men, but there's just no other way, is there? It will be a terrible thing if this man succeeds. We must stick it out.”

“I know,” she said miserably, “but it seems a terrible thing to lead a man on to his death, however bad he is.”

I slipped my arm through hers and we walked on in silence till we reached the hospital.

Carnac was waiting in our room anxiously. “Well?” he asked quickly.

“We've found him,” I said, and watched his face light up with relief and excitement.

* * * * *

Long after Giselle had disappeared into the nurses' quarters for the night Carnac, d'Angelay and I sat smoking in my little room, trying to work out the best method of executing a traitor under the very nose of the German authorities.

The problem was to find some scheme that was reasonably fool-proof, that would not attract any attention, and would not implicate Giselle in any way. We told d'Angelay that we didn't want to get him into trouble either and therefore intended to see this through on our own, but he protested vigorously that what happened to one middle-aged doctor was of no importance and said that he wouldn't dream of missing any opportunity to annoy the Boche. He was a stout-hearted man, this doctor.

I came up against one snag. Both Carnac and d'Angelay were absolutely determined that Passy should not be shot out of hand. He was a Frenchman, they said, and must be confronted by Frenchmen and told that he had betrayed France and that his life was forfeit. They were quite adamant about this and seemed to regard it almost as a point of honour, and I saw that it would be useless to protest although of course it was bound to add considerably to the delay of the proceedings and therefore to the risk.

The doctor produced the scheme that we finally approved.

"It is very simple," he said. "Mademoiselle will bring this man along to the hospital on some pretext or other, we shall condemn him formally and carry out the sentence and then there will be just one more body in the mortuary. We have to take some poor fellows in there every day and one more—" he shrugged his shoulders. "With luck the Boche will never know. But I feel sorry for a loyal Frenchman having to go to his last rest in the company of this swine."

I went to bed with a dull sense of foreboding and horror.

Chapter XII

Chemin du Nord.

THE following evening, soon after eight o'clock, three of us sat in the doctor's room waiting.

Giselle had just left, unhappy but resolute, to meet Passy, at the Deux Frères and we could not expect her back in less than two hours.

Carnac, with that icy calm he seemed to maintain on such occasions, was cleaning his revolver, and a clip of cartridges lay on the table in front of him; the doctor was absorbed in a game of cards, while I sat and fidgeted and then paced up and down the room. Waiting for a show to begin is torture for me; once it is well under way I feel much better.

The minutes dragged on.

Shortly after nine o'clock there was a tap on the door.

"Yes?" said d'Angelay sharply. Carnac slipped the clip into his revolver.

A man's voice replied from outside. "Pardon, mon capitaine, there is a telephone call for you."

“Very well,” said d'Angelay. We looked at each other anxiously, wondering if anything had gone wrong at the last moment.

The doctor went out. Carnac lit another cigarette and we waited on tenterhooks.

The sound of rapid footsteps came up the corridor and d'Angelay entered again. Something had gone wrong; disaster was plain on his face.

“Giselle,” he said quietly. “She has met our friend. He is going to Berlin tonight. He says he has just received instructions this afternoon.”

Carnac crashed his fist on the table with a furious exclamation.

“At the last moment!” he cried. “Sacre Dieu, but that is too bad! Did she know the train?”

“Yes,” said the doctor. “The night train—it leaves here at 21.40. She is going down to the station with him now.”

I glanced at my watch.

“We could just make it if we dash. There might somehow be a chance to fix him on the train.”

“You'll have to walk,” said d'Angelay. “I dare not take an ambulance.”

Carnac stuffed the revolver in his pocket. “Allons!” he said, and we ran out of the room and tore along the corridor.

Once outside we slowed down to a brisk walk and Carnac turned to the doctor. “I think you had better stay here and tell Giselle what we are doing. And if you don't hear from us within a week then try somehow to get word through to Air Ministry in London that we failed.”

d'Angelay didn't reply for a moment. I knew he wanted like hell to be in at the kill and this request was most unwelcome. However he took it philosophically and said quietly:

“Very well, but I hope that won't be necessary. Bonne chance”—and he turned round and walked back towards the hospital.

Carnac smiled slightly. “Poor old d'Angelay. He hates that.”

I grunted agreement and we strode on. It was nearly two miles to the station and I never covered the distance in better time; past the great shadow of the cathedral, down the hill and into the station. Four minutes to go.

Carnac said curtly, “Wait a minute,” and he disappeared in the direction of the booking office. The station was as crowded as ever and hordes of French refugees jostled with a grey mass of German soldiers in their efforts to return home.

Through the stream of people I fancied for a moment that I saw Konrath with several other Luftwaffe officers walking on to the platform, but they were some distance away and in the fleeting glimpse that I caught it was quite possible to be mistaken, particularly so as I had noticed several times recently that under the incessant strain of the last few weeks my imagination was liable to run right out of control, a somewhat disturbing development.

Carnac elbowed his way back and handed me a ticket. “Liege,” he remarked, “last stop before the German frontier —it's as far as we can go. Come on.”

We went quickly on to the platform and I looked up and down for Passy or Giselle, but couldn't see them at all in the crowd.

I said to Carnac in a low voice, “I can't see them.”

“I can't either. You get in this carriage and I'll walk up the train. He might recognise you.” He left me and I climbed on board.

He had booked third class, probably reckoning that we should be less likely to come up against any Germans there, and I found a third-class compartment, sat down on the hard wooden seat and waited. My travelling companions were a mixed bunch, mostly elderly peasants clad in their black clothes and sitting bolt upright on those abominable seats. Next to me in the corner sat a girl, shabbily dressed, tired looking, holding a baby on her lap. She caught my eye and smiled at me wearily. Poor girl, she looked desperately tired.

The train started with a jerk and we drew out of the station. A minute later Carnac appeared in the corridor. He came into the compartment, wedged himself on the seat beside me and said in an undertone:

"I saw them on the platform. He was standing by the end door of the first class carriages up by the engine, but just then the train started and I had to jump on."

"You don't know which compartment he's in?"

"No. I walked up the corridor but the communicating door into the first class is locked, probably to let the Boches travel in peace."

"What do we do now?"

"Wait till dark and then get through."

"It's the only way."

There was silence, broken only by the crying of the baby who was now awake.

Carnac said reflectively, "Our friend is an unpleasant looking devil, isn't he?" and I realised that it was the first time he had seen Passy.

An old man with a large basket of vegetables on his knee started gabbling away to the woman next to him. I couldn't follow their patois, but I noticed that Carnac suddenly became very interested and when they paused for a moment he leaned forward and said, "Pardon, monsieur, is there a control on this train?"

The old man rattled off an unintelligible reply with a wealth of emphatic gestures.

Carnac nodded and then leaned across to me again and said softly. "You know there's a Boche military control on all long-distance trains? The old man says it starts on this train at Laon—three N.C.O.s get on here and work right through the whole train."

"What do they want?"

"Identity cards, travel permits, leave passes for German personnel—everything."

"How does the old gaffer know where the control starts?"

"He says he's done the journey twice in the last week."

"Well," I said, "we're sunk if they catch us without papers." Why must everything go wrong for us, I thought savagely.

To avoid the control by jumping off the train was to acknowledge final defeat; we had got to stay on somehow and yet without papers it seemed hopeless.

A long-forgotten picture emerged from the recesses of my mind, a picture of two hilarious young Englishmen being chased along the step of a mountain railway by an irate Swiss official as the train rattled into the tunnel above Lauterbrunnen. What I had done once in an excess of joie de vivre might perhaps work again in very different circumstances.

I said in a low voice, "We'll have to climb out of the carriage."

"I was just thinking of that myself, but there's a big risk."

"Not if we're careful."

“Yes if we go through a station they'll probably see us hanging on and telephone the next station.”

“I hadn't thought of that,” I said slowly. We'll have to try and get out just before they come, hop back quickly after they have gone through this coach and hope to hell we don't pass any stations just then.”

“We need a little help,” said Carnac. “Somebody to stand at the end of the corridor and tell us when the Boche is coming.” He glanced round the compartment and rested on the girl with the baby. “Perhaps madame—”

“O.K.” I said. I turned round to the girl and said in a low voice, “Madame will you help us? My friend and I have to get to Liege, but we have no papers to get past the control. Would you stand in the corridor at the end of the coach and tell us when the Boche is getting near?”

She nodded. “Which way do they come?” she said.

I hadn't thought of that. Carnac repeated the question to the old man, who jerked his head towards the engine and gabbled off a string of words like a Browning gun.

“From the front of the train,” I said.

She nodded again and struggled to get up. “Let me take your baby,” I said. She hesitated a moment and then, smiling, handed it over to me and went out into the corridor.

Carnac grinned at me. He always seemed to be particularly cheerful when things were looking sticky.

“What you would call holding the baby, eh?” he remarked.

I didn't feel in the mood for backchat and replied sourly that the joke would be on us if the Germans reversed their usual procedure and started at the back of the train for once.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I don't think so. That's probably why the door up the train was locked, to stop people moving in and out while they work through that section. It may be unlocked later.”

The baby was a pleasant little thing and laughed and dribbled and clutched at me with great gusto, to the amusement of the rest of the compartment.

Half-an-hour went by. I was .getting somewhat restive, and so was the baby who evidently considered that it was time for a little refreshment quite outside my powers to provide. I was just about to make some facetious remark to Carnac when the girl darted in again.

“They're in the next coach now,” she said quickly.

I got up and handed the baby back, surveying ruefully a large damp patch on my trousers and reflecting, not for the first time, that life as a spy had its seamy side.

I started to whisper my thanks to her when another point occurred to me. “Will you do one more thing?” I said. “When the Boches have passed through this carriage go and open the window at the end of the corridor” —I jerked my head in the direction—“and let us know that it's safe to come in again. We shall be hanging on outside.”

She was quick in the uptake.

“Very well,” she said, “I'll put my head out of the window and sing.”

“Thanks awfully. Goodbye.”

Carnac looked cautiously into the corridor and then we slipped out and turned down towards the back of the train till we came to the end of the carriage.

“Well,” he said. “Here we go.” He opened the window and looked out and then, evidently satisfied that the coast was clear, he opened the door carefully, edged out on to the step and climbed round the corner out of sight.

I followed him and shut the door behind me. The wind and dust in my eyes made it very difficult to see but I managed the traverse in safety and joined him in the gap between two carriages, standing somewhat precariously on the buffers.

We hung on there for what seemed an age, the dust blowing up in great eddies from the track, waiting tensely for any sign that things had gone wrong. After a time Carnac leaned across and shouted in my ear. “We're coming into a town. We shall have to get in again before the station.”

It was quite true. We were on the outskirts of a town, rattling along between interminable rows of houses. Three or four minutes more and we should be in the station, two dusty men hanging on to the buffers for everybody to see. We should have to drop off before then. Surely those blasted Huns must have gone down the train by now. We started to slow down and Carnac shouted, “We'll get back inside and trust to luck.”

He was just clambering round the corner when I heard above the clatter of the wheels a girl's voice singing “Madelon.”

“Come on!” said Carnac. “Quick!”

He climbed round the corner, wrenched open the door and was inside in a flash with me behind him. The brakes went on and we drew into Charleroi station.

We looked at each other and laughed. The girl laughed too. “Shaky do, that,” I said. “Now what?”

He glanced at his watch. “It will be dark soon,” he said. “We'll wait for half-an-hour and then pay our friend a visit.”

* * * * *

I sat next to the girl again and watched the daylight fading outside the window. It was nearly dark now. Zero hour. My tummy felt quite empty with hunger and apprehension.

Carnac stood up quietly. I drew a deep breath, squeezed the girl's hand in farewell and followed him into the corridor. We talked outside in low tones.

“How are we going to find him?” I asked. “The blinds will probably be drawn, and if a couple of French civilians start opening all the doors to see who's inside, the Hun officers will be pretty annoyed.”

“I know,” said Carnac, “but we shall have to examine every compartment, all the same. It's the only way, but this is how we'll do it. I shall walk straight in and say that there is a complaint about the black-out on the train, and I have to examine the curtains. It's a pity I haven't some uniform, but we shall have to bluff it out the best we can. You take this—” he pulled out his revolver and slipped it into my hand—“and stand just behind me so that Passy won't see you when we open his door. As soon as you see him, shoot him immediately and make sure you hit him whatever happens because it's our last chance.

“I'll jump back into the corridor again, slam the door to stop the others coming out and then you run down the corridor and shoot anybody who tries to interfere. I shall be just behind you and we'll jump out through the door at the end.”

“M'm,” I said doubtfully. It sounded a hell of a scheme to me. If the train is rocking along at this speed we shall land with a bit of a bump.

“Quite,” said Carnac serenely. “But he will be dead too.”

“O.K., you madman,” I said. “You know that French proverb, don't you, *mangé du lion*. It was written for you.”

He laughed. I slipped the safety catch off the revolver and put it in my pocket, muttered a quick prayer and we started to make our way up the train.

That journey along the swaying and crowded corridor seemed interminable. Carnac elbowed his way along vigorously with me hard on his heels and after passing along about five coaches we came to a door. “This was locked,” he said, and then gave a grunt of satisfaction as he opened it. Somebody had been very helpful in the meantime.

We were now in the first class carriages. Several German officers stood talking and smoking in the corridor, their light collar patches and glowing cigarettes showing up plainly in the dim blue light. Probably most of them were returning to Germany on leave.

Carnac stopped at the first compartment and I closed up right behind him as he opened the door, my finger curled round the trigger in my pocket. I wondered if his bluff would work.

The door slid open and he stepped firmly into the brightly lit compartment. I glanced over his shoulder—no sign of Passy but lots of Huns.

“Pardon, messieurs, there was a complaint at the last station about light from this train, but I see your curtains are in position” —and he stepped back again and closed the door before anybody could reply. Just too easy.

We brushed past the Germans with a muttered “Pardon,” and Carnac opened the next door and stepped in. Again no Passy; Carnac said his little piece quickly and we went to the next compartment and so on without any results.

There were now only three more compartments to search. He was bound to be in one of them. Steady, steady, it's coming in a second now. My mouth was dry with suspense.

We opened the next door. I saw immediately that Passy wasn't there either. A German officer was lying full length along one seat reading a magazine and two others sat opposite him. The recumbent one raised his head as Carnac walked in and glared angrily at the interruption. He was a thin, sharp-faced fellow with a bald head and a pair of beady eyes like an alert sparrow.

He said curtly, “What do you want?” and Carnac without a trace of anxiety made his explanation about the lights being visible.

“Well,” said the German in a more moderate tone, “there’s nothing wrong here, you can see that.”

“Oui, Herr Offizier.” Carnac turned round to come out.

And then the catastrophe happened, suddenly and all the more devastating because it was so unexpected, the final blow of our bad luck.

I was just backing out of the door when I became aware that somebody was standing behind me waiting to come in. I turned round and found myself face to face with Hauptmann Konrath.

He recognised me immediately.

“Why, Herr Broussard,” he said. “Fancy meeting you again like this. I thought you were going back to America.”

“Yes, but I'm. spending a few days in Cologne first,” I said desperately. “What are you doing—going on leave?”

Anything to get this conversation over before the people in the compartment began to notice it. I glanced round again and saw the look of deep concern on Carnac's face, and over his shoulder I saw the sharp-faced officer sit up again. He'd overheard Konrath's remark and the familiar tone in which it was uttered.

“Wait a minute,” he said sharply to Konrath. “Do you know these men?”

“I know this one,” said Konrath with a nod at me. “I met him last night—he's an American called Broussard. What's the matter?”

“So,” said the officer, staring at me hard with his piercing eyes. “Herr Broussard, an American, eh? And what little game are you up to, pretending to look at my curtains?”

I shifted my left leg slightly and said, “I don't know what you—” and then suddenly grabbed Konrath round the waist and heaved him forward across my outstretched leg. He lurched forward and collapsed on the seat by the officer.

I sprang back into the corridor with Carnac just behind me and heard the bang as he slammed the door. We tore down towards the end of the carriage, brushed past two surprised Germans and then I felt the train shudder as the brakes were applied violently. Somebody had been obliging enough to pull the alarm handle. I believe it saved our necks.

I fumbled with the door for an awful second and then it swung open. I jumped straight out and landed on the ground with a terrific bump and rolled over and over, breathless and dazed.

I sat up stupidly and heard Carnac's voice somewhere near me saying urgently, “Peter, Peter, where are you?”

“Here,” I muttered. He loomed up out of the darkness beside me, seized my arm and dragged me off the line.

The red tail light of the train was stationery a short distance away. It had stopped very quickly and there was a confused murmur of men shouting. They would be running back along the line.

We stumbled on in the darkness and then Carnac pulled me down and we lay very still and listened. For some minutes torches were flashed along the line, there was more shouting, and then the lights moved back towards the train and a little later it started again. The red tail light drew away and vanished in the darkness, bearing with it our quarry into the heart of the Reich where we could not hope to follow him.

We had failed and this was the end.

Chapter XIII

We Write a Letter.

THE following day we were back in Laon, having avoided any more controls by travelling most of the way hidden in a slow goods train and jumping off on the outskirts of the town.

Our defeat was bitter indeed. We trudged along the streets in silence each wrapped in his own gloomy thoughts. I was thinking of the mess that had to be straightened up now, and particularly of Giselle who was dangerously compromised by the chance meeting with Konrath. The Field Security Police and the Gestapo would be warned by this time that Herr Eddy Broussard of New York was a person whose activities should be investigated without delay. As far as I was concerned Eddy was no more; he had proved very useful and I was quite attached to him, but he had now outlived his usefulness and would have to fade from the scene. Accordingly I had thrown away my dark glasses and d'Angelay's coat, and clad in shirt sleeves and a pair of torn and dirty trousers I looked very different from the immaculate Eddy.

But Konrath would also recollect that the mysterious Broussard had been a friend of Mlle. Saint Brie who worked at the emergency hospital in Laon. At the best, this was bound to involve Giselle in a lot of questions; at the worst—I didn't care to think.

We had primed her with a story in case she was asked about me. She was to reply without hesitation that she knew Eddy Broussard; she had met him first in a café when he asked her to have a drink, and after she said that she drove for an American Ambulance Unit he replied that he did the same. She had met him only twice and didn't know anything more about him. This might satisfy the enemy; at any rate they would find it rather difficult to disprove. Nevertheless, as we approached the hospital I found my anxiety almost unbearable.

We slipped in cautiously round the back and went up to d'Angelay's room. He was writing at the table and jumped to his feet with an exclamation as he saw us and wrung our hands.

"My God, I'm glad to see you," he said quietly. "What has happened? Two Boches came along this afternoon to see Giselle and wanted to know all about Eddy Broussard. We thought they must have got you."

"What did they do with her?" I said quickly.

"They went away eventually and said they would want to see her again. But tell me what happened to you?"

Carnac told him.

"Mon Dieu," said the doctor at length: "That was bad luck. Another three minutes without being recognised and you'd have got him. You couldn't miss at that range."

"No?" I said reflectively. "You've never seen me perform with a revolver, you know. Still, I think you're right—it would have been an absolute sitter."

A new wave of bitterness came over me and I burst out angrily. “What fools we are! He was absolutely in our hand and he wriggled out. If only—oh hell, what's the use of saying ‘if’? We failed and that's the end of it, but we came so near to success it will haunt me all my life.”

Carnac nodded his dark head. “I know,” he said sombrely, “but luck was all against us. Sometimes during this summer I have felt that perhaps le bon Dieu intends the Boches to win because everything seems to go right for them. It's too bad”—and he broke off with an angry gesture and glared out of the window like a hungry tiger whose prey has just eluded him.

There was a light tap on the door and Giselle walked in and stopped in amazement on the threshold as she saw us.

“Why,” she said breathlessly, “they haven't caught you then? You're still safe! Oh, how marvellous! I was so worried.”

She stepped eagerly into the room, her eyes bright with excitement and stood beside me. I slipped out my hand, found hers and felt her answering squeeze, and then suddenly I understood the meaning of the feelings that had been stirring my mind ever since I met this girl.

Just for a moment everything in my life seemed to stand very silent and still. I was conscious only of her presence, and the little hospital room faded into the background with all our troubles and worries, and left us standing there like two children holding hands in the dark. I was deeply moved and yet conscious of a great exaltation as though my whole existence had led darkly up to this supreme moment and now suddenly everything fell into place like a complicated jig-saw puzzle and I saw before me the whole design sharp and crystal clear. When I spoke again my voice sounded as though from a great distance.

“We were worried too,” I said. “About you particularly because we knew Konrath would remember the connection between us. What did the Gestapo say?”

“Quite a lot, but I thought they were rather stupid men. They wanted to know all about my life and family and political activities, and what I'd been doing since the war. They asked the same questions over and over again, but each time in a slightly different form to see if I gave the same answer. Finally they told me to be very careful in future and said that if ever I met Eddy Broussard again I was to tell the authorities. So I said yes, certainly, and they went away.”

“They were quick in coming to see you, all the same,” said Carnac. “Your friend Konrath didn't waste much time.” He paused for a moment and then went on. “Well, mes amis, let us consider our position now. The main point is that Passy has got to Germany in spite of our efforts. We came very near to killing him and it was only terrible luck that stopped us, but it's no good saying that. What are we to do now? Admit defeat and try to get back to England? It's a terrible thing to admit, but we must face facts and I can see no hope of success now—none at all.”

“It is a terrible thing,” I said. “It’s very difficult for you to realise how important this R.D.F. is to England. So much is going to depend on it during the next few months and if the Huns get to know a lot of the details they may alter their tactics accordingly. I feel the matter is so desperate that we ought to try and follow him into Germany and kill him there.”

“But surely it's too late,” said the doctor. “I gather your task was to stop him getting to Germany. Well, he's there now. It seems to me it's all over.”

“Not. necessarily,” I said. “Carnac, you remember they said in London that what they were really afraid of was this man's long term value to the enemy. He will have told them some things already and some damage may have been done, but what really matters is that he should be stopped from being present month after month to help them in their experiments and research. If we kill him now we'll still have succeeded in the main part of our job, though I don't see how on earth we're going to set about it.”

“I don't either,” said d'Angelay. “We couldn't possibly move across Germany without papers or permits—and even if we could, where are we to start looking for him?” He shook his head vigorously. “Impossible, quite impossible.”

Giselle broke in quickly. “There’s one thing I haven't told you. He gave me his address. It is c/o Telefunken A.G., Berlin, and I promised to write to him.”

“Did you, by God,” said Carnac thoughtfully. There was a long silence and we stared at each other as though a vague hope were stirring in our minds. It wasn't much to go on, but still…

d'Angelay said slowly. “I wonder.”

Carnac turned to Giselle. “That may be a big help,” he said. “I think our only chance now lies with you because I'm quite certain that we cannot get into Germany with our present resources. Is it possible for you to bring Passy back here by some means or other?”

“I’m afraid I can't help much,” said Giselle. “M. Passy entertains certain hopes about me, and I was very careful to let him think so—you know the sort of man he is. But he told me before he left that there was no chance of his coming back for some time.”

“I’m sure that's right,” I said. “Once the Germans have got him working in Berlin and giving them all the stuff they want, then they're not going to let him go off for a holiday. They'll keep a pretty sharp eye on him.”

“Agreed,” said the doctor. “Persuasion from Giselle won't work. But there might be one other way.”

“What?”

“Blackmail. That man probably has a very doubtful history. Suppose—just suppose—there is some incident in his past that could be used as a lever to force him back.”

“Yes,” said Carnac quickly, “but how are we to find out anything about him? The police or the IIme. Bureau might have a dossier on him, but we have no means of finding out.”

“True,” replied the doctor. “I put it forward only as a suggestion. I don't see myself how it could be worked—and yet I feel that Providence has given us this man's address. There must surely be some way of using it if only we could think of it.”

I sat suddenly bolt upright. Something that Carnac said had started a train of thought in my mind and I went back along the incidents of the last few weeks, searching excitedly here and there like a spaniel muzzling in the autumn leaves for some elusive scent.

Somewhere, somebody, some remark….

The penny dropped with a triumphant click. Deuxième Bureau! I'd got it now—Whitehall, and a clock ticking on the mantelpiece, and a man whose name I never

knew talking in quiet sentences of tremendous affairs. Yes, that was it “We have heard that Passy had some connection at one time with the Deuxième Bureau though I don't think it likely.”

Well, it might not be likely but it was the only clue left to us.

I turned to Carnac quickly. “I’ve just remembered something we were told in London—that Passy at one time might have been involved with the Deuxième Bureau. Now, if that's true and we could find out it might be the lever we want.”

Carnac pondered. “I remember it too,” he said slowly. “But they only thought, they weren't certain.”

“They might be certain now. I'm quite sure they will have been scraping up every bit of information about the man since we left.”

“But how can we find out in time?”

“There’s always Charlie,” I said. (I should explain here that our means of escape from France had been arranged before we left London and we always referred to this operation by the code word Charlie. Even now I can't say much about Charlie except that a fishing boat, a short-wave transmitter and a Walrus aircraft all played a part.)

“Yes,” said Carnac, “but suppose one of us went back to England with Charlie and got this information, how could we get back to Laon and tell the others? Parachute can be very uncertain, as we discovered, and every day counts now.”

Giselle had been listening to this discussion, probably not grasping parts of it, but she broke in now.

“If you want some information quickly from your friends in London surely they could send it on the wireless.”

“Difficult,” I said. “We don't know the frequency they'd use, or the time to listen.”

“They could include it in the B.B.C. French news.”

“Very interesting for the Boche.”

“I think with care they might be able to put it in such a way that only we could grasp the true meaning. The Boche would puzzle over it naturally but it would be almost impossible for them to get it.”

We thought this one over for a moment and then suddenly Carnac raised his head. He'd made up his mind.

“How would you like to go back to England, Peter?”

“Nothing doing,” I said. “I came out with you to deal with this bastard and I'm not leaving you to carry on alone.”

“But there's nobody”—He stopped suddenly. “Ah, but perhaps there is. Where is your English soldier, Dalkeith?”

I had quite forgotten about him.

“He’s still here,” said d'Angelay. “His arm is not healed yet.”

“It’s just the chance he's looking for,” I said. “Let’s get him along.”

The doctor got up and left the room and came back a few minutes later with Dalkeith. He looked rather puzzled, I thought; he bowed to Giselle, glanced at me and then sat down in the chair that Carnac pulled up for him. I noticed that his arm was still in a sling.

“Well,” he said, “what’s all this conference about?” Carnac glanced at me. “You tell him.”

“Right,” I said. “Well, sir, to start with, the story I told you about being shot down in France isn't true. Captain Carnac and I came out from England a fortnight ago to do some work for the British Government, and we asked you to come along here because we need your help.”

Dalkeith stared at me. It was obvious that he did not altogether believe the story.

I thought of another approach. “Perhaps I can convince you that I'm speaking the truth Why did you leave your hiding in Laon and come to this hospital?”

“Because I damn well had to,” he said shortly. “The Hun was turning the place inside out to find a couple of men who killed some of their people.”

“Precisely. And we were the men they wanted. That's why they searched the hospital—they thought I was wounded. Now does that help you to believe?”

I saw that we'd won. His brow cleared and his rather hard face relaxed into a grin.

“I believe you,” he said. “Now tell me what you want.”

“We want you to take a message back to England. We'll provide you with the means of escape and with luck you'll be home in two days. Are you game?”

He held out his hand. “I’m your man,” he said. “Sorry I was so rude at first. I can't stand this confounded game of hide and seek.”

“There is one other thing I must tell you,” I said. “If you try to escape at the moment and get caught you're merely a prisoner of war and will be treated as such. If you escape by our route and take our message your status becomes that of a spy and you know the difference.”

“Rot,” he said. “I’ll take any chance to get back and fight again. It will drive me mad if I'm still stuck here when they .start the invasion. Give me this message and I'll leave immediately.”

Carnac took a piece of paper and started scribbling. After a little while he looked up at us.

“Will this do?” He read it out. “Group Captain Leighton, Air Ministry. Our friend went to Germany yesterday despite our efforts. We still possess means of communicating with him. Remembering your mention of Deuxième Bureau, can you give us any blackmail information to force him back here? We consider this our last chance. Reply on evening B.B.C. French news.”

“That seems quite clear,” I said. “By the way, add that Mendel was arrested or somebody else may walk into the same trap.”

“Good,” said Carnac. He scribbled again. “And we must give them a call sign to use so that we can recognise the message.” He cocked an eyebrow at me. “What do you suggest, Peter?”

“Peter Pan,” I said promptly, and for no particular reason that I could think of.

“Eh Bien. Our name is Peter Pan.” He passed the paper across to Dalkeith. “Please learn that by heart, monsieur, and then burnt it. You can start whenever you please and these are the details for your journey.”

* * * * *

For two days we waited on tenterhooks, as the saying goes. d'Angelay warned us not to walk about the hospital as it might cause questions, and so we remained cooped up in that stuffy little room, having our meals brought in by a discreet

orderly, trying to read and then giving it up and staring out of the window like a pair of caged animals. To make matters worse the weather remained perfect and the green lawn beneath our window shimmered in the sun and wounded poilus lay out there on stretchers smoking incessantly while the lazy hum of conversation drifted up to us.

Sometimes Giselle would come in to see us for a few moments though I could never talk to her alone as Carnac was always there. It was only for these brief visits that I would have dispensed with his company; for the rest he was the same gay and ardent companion that he had always been.

So Giselle would come and I would stand there unhappily, trying to appear normal and unconcerned and all the time my heart was full of the things I longed to say to her. I could never tire of watching the way her hair curled like a delicate fern against her neck, or drinking in the dark beautiful candour of her eyes and the pale perfection of her oval face. She was so very lovely, so fresh and clean in her Red Cross uniform that she seemed like the breath of spring in our stuffy little Room.

On the second day she brought disquieting news. She had slipped out of hospital that morning to buy a few things in the town and she had been followed almost as soon as she left the hospital grounds. The man hadn't spoken to her nor had he taken much care to avoid being seen, but he had sauntered along behind her till she returned to hospital. Carnac merely grunted at the news, but when she left the room I saw how concerned he was. We came to the conclusion that although the Gestapo were reasonably satisfied with her story they had decided to watch her in the hope of picking up some connection with Eddy Broussard. Knowing their endless patience I felt sure that this surveillance would continue for some time, and it was bound to complicate matters if ever we managed to draw Passy back. Giselle was the bait we were relying on: I knew perfectly well that this was the case though I hated admitting it even to myself.

This new development was also unwelcome because it showed that the Germans were still investigating the matter. We discussed the whole affair from their point of view in an attempt to foresee their probable reactions.

They would realise that something mysterious was going on in Laon; first of all two unknown persons walked into their carefully laid trap, killed five men and vanished without trace, and then a week later a mysterious American called Broussard was seen in the town and subsequently on a train bound for Germany, evidently up to some mischief because as soon as he was questioned he jumped off the train and vanished again. It was quite possible that they thought Broussard was one of the men involved in the earlier incident, and they were very anxious to catch him. They knew that Broussard had been an acquaintance of Mlle. Saint Brie, who worked at the emergency hospital, and although they interviewed her immediately her story seemed fairly convincing; she knew very little about him. Nevertheless they weren't satisfied and they now followed her in the hope that she might make a slip and give herself away.

But sooner or later their attention was bound to focus on the hospital and they might remember that during the previous search there had been a badly burned French airman whose face and papers they never saw, largely because a French Army doctor, Capitaine d'Angelay, had been rather obstructive on the subject.

That would call for further investigations now and we decided that any day their search might narrow down to the one vital spot where we were hiding. As it turned out our deductions were remarkably accurate.

It seemed awful to sit there helplessly while all the time the net tightened inexorably round us, but it was just impossible to leave. We hated to stay in Laon till the Passy affair was finished one way or the other and if we were in danger in the hospital we should be even more so if we went out to hide somewhere else in the town. As Carnac said, probably the only reason we'd escaped so far was that we had kept out of sight so carefully and hardly sallied forth at all. To emerge from cover now would be fatal. The only hope was to lie low till the very last moment and then pounce, and it struck me that it was going to be touch-and-go whether we got Passy before the Gestapo got us.

On the third day I could hardly bear it any longer. We knew that if all went to schedule Dalkeith would have been picked up in the Channel at dawn that morning and would now be in London. Group Captain Leighton would have our message and if there was anything in Passy's history that might be of help then I knew the whole resources of the British Secret Service would be available to ferret it out. Somewhere in a Whitehall office now the telephones would be chattering urgently and perhaps in an hour or two a B.B.C. announcer would be staring curiously at an item in the French news bulletin that just didn't make sense....

The afternoon dragged on. The doctor brought in a small portable wireless, smiled encouragingly at us and vanished again. Carnac, with his usual appearance of cool detachment, started to play cards. I paced up and down the room. I must have walked miles.

Towards seven o'clock Giselle and d'Angelay slipped into the room. Carnac placed the wireless on the table and switched it on quietly; listening to the B.B.C. was a popular but verboten pastime. Despite his cool manner I could see that he was very excited. He kept tapping the instep of his boot with his other heel, an unconscious little mannerism that I had noticed once before without realising the suspense that caused it.

Big Ben chimed seven. A voice said, “Ici Londres,” and then continued in French. “Before I read the news here is a message for Peter Pan.” I saw the others stiffen suddenly. “Hallo, Peter Pan, we received and understood your message. Reference to an affair in Belfort seventeen years after your birth in England might do the trick.” He repeated this slowly. “That is all we can suggest. Good luck, Peter Pan, good luck.”

Carnac switched off the wireless quickly and looked round at us. His eyes were sparkling with excitement.

“So Dalkeith got through safely. That's very good. Well, what do you make of that? I don't think the Boche Intelligence will get very far with it—that's a good way of giving the date. Your birth in England—when were you born, Peter?”

“1916. Seventeen years later—that makes it 1933. Now what the hell can have happened in Belfort in 1933 to persuade Passy to return to Laon?”

“God only knows,” said Carnac. “Apparently we don't have to. We just say ‘Belfort in 1933,’ and he comes back!”

“Too easy,” I retorted sarcastically. “Well, it looks now as though we've got to draft a letter for Giselle to write to Berlin which suggests to Passy that we possess some very dangerous knowledge about him.”

“Difficult,” said the doctor, “very difficult to suggest that we know something without betraying the fact that we know nothing. Anyway, to whom is this knowledge dangerous if revealed?”

“It can't be the French authorities,” said Carnac thoughtfully. “They must realise in London that at present we have no power to touch a man under German protection. Therefore I think Passy must be afraid of this information reaching the Boche. What do you think, Peter?”

“It looks like it but on the other hand he must know that he's far too valuable to the enemy for them to take any action against him.”

“Yes, now. But after they have sucked his brain dry—what then? He knows the Boche, he knows that when he is no further use they will do anything that suits them. No, I think we have got to suggest to him somehow that unless he returns to Laon the Boche is going to hear of an incident in Belfort in 1933.”

“But what reason can we suggest for returning to Laon?” There was silence.

“I think I know,” said Giselle at length. She borrowed a pencil from the doctor, sat down at the table and started to write, pausing now and again for reflection, and then starting off again. When she finished she read it through carefully and handed it over to us.

It ran as follows:

> Mon cher Edouard,
>
> How are you getting on? I think of you often and wonder when you will come back here. Life is so dull at the moment!
>
> But this is not why I write to you so soon. Yesterday I was in the Deux Frères when a man came up to me—French, middle-aged, tall, he looked like a soldier, but I don't know him. He was very angry in a quiet way and told me that I was mixing with the Boches and also with Frenchmen who were helping the Boches.
>
> I said not but he insisted that it was true and then mentioned your name and asked where you were. Of course I said nothing, so he said, “Tell your friend-of-the-Boche that I know more about him than he thinks. It was once my business to deal with these matters and I was concerned with l'affaire Belfort in 1933. Tell him that and say that unless he does something for me now I shall tell his friends of this incident. They will be very interested.” I asked him what he wanted, but he replied that he would only tell you personally and he refused to write a message. He said he would see me again and hoped to get your answer. Then he left. What does he mean? I cannot understand it. But please write and tell me what to say if he speaks to me again.
>
> Yours,
>
> G. St. B.

“I think that is good,” said Carnac. “But has it struck you at all that this is the riskiest move we've made yet?”

“I don't see that.”

“Yes. It is the first time we have threatened him openly. Though he's been in danger before he's never realised it, but he will now. For the first time we are revealing ourselves to him and if our friends in London have made any mistake about l'affaire Belfort and he has a clear conscience in the matter, then he will merely hand this blackmailing letter to his friend the Boche and ask them to deal with the sender. And it bears Giselle's signature—it must do. Even if we send an anonymous letter it would make very little difference because it has to go to this Berlin address and probably Giselle is the only person to whom he gave his new address. He'd soon remember that, and then the Gestapo will be round in five minutes, they'll find that this man who made threats in the Deux Frères is just an invention, and then—finish.”

“Yes,” said d'Angelay, “I hadn't thought of that. Much depends on London being right. But assuming they are right —what then? If we have really touched him on a tender spot and he is afraid of this information reaching the Boche, what will he do?”

“He certainly can't ignore it,” I said. “Probably he won't dare to negotiate in writing because of the censorship so he will try to come here in person and meet this man that Giselle mentions.”

“I hope you're right,” said Carnac. “It seems the most likely move certainly. But what will he bring with him—money to pay this blackmailer? Never! He will bring a revolver.”

“Why?”

“To kill the man who threatens him, of course. Once his mouth is shut, there's nothing for Passy to worry about—the Boche won't say much about one Frenchman killing another, particularly when the killer is so valuable to them.”

“It wouldn't be his first murder either,” I said. “Well, are we going to send this letter? I think it's just right—it suggests a lot and says very little, and for the rest we'll just have to trust to luck. I think it's rather a clever move.”

Giselle looked at me for a moment in silence.

“No, not clever,” she said quietly. “The most hateful thing I have ever done.”

Chapter XIV

Will You Walk Into My Parlour.

D'ANGELAY posted the letter and we settled down to wait as patiently as possible for the result, either a reply from Passy or a lightning swoop by the Gestapo, or perhaps both.

We scarcely ever ventured out of our little room in the top of the hospital and Giselle had stopped coming to see us because we could never be sure that she was not being watched inside the hospital as well as outside. Carnac grew more silent and taciturn and sat in a chair hour after hour, smoking his Gauloise Blues with a revolver on the table in front of him. He was obviously expecting trouble because

whenever we heard footsteps in the corridor outside I noticed his hand move quickly towards the table in readiness.

It is difficult to describe my feelings during those last days. The long strain that had never relaxed day or night, the depression following our failure, my love and anxiety for Giselle all combined to stretch my nervous tension almost to breaking point. I was eating badly and rarely slept more than three hours at night because of the terrifying nightmares that had begun to haunt me. I had almost forgotten the other Peter Claydon, that pilot in the R.A.F. who less than three weeks ago was flying his Spitfire above Northolt with such a light heart and carefree mind. He seemed to me now to be another man, and this another existence.

But the worst nightmare of all was the feeling, growing more insistent every day, that disaster was impending. I think I mentioned before that I possess at times a curious warning instinct, a mental danger signal that seems to warn me of approaching trouble and I was unmistakeably aware of it now. Yet there was simply nothing we could do to avoid it—that was the maddening thought—nothing we could do to save Giselle or ourselves. We had started this hunt for Passy and now we were tied down to the hospital by circumstances quite outside our control. There would have been one possible way out, one only, and that was to call the affair off and try to get away while there was still time. I think I can say quite truthfully that we never considered this even as a possibility.

We did discuss, however, our chances of escape after Passy was killed and both agreed that “Charlie” would be too risky to use a second time. The only alternative was to get across the demarcation line into unoccupied France and thence perhaps make for Spain or Switzerland, but plans were extremely difficult to make in advance as we had no idea of the date we should want to leave or our circumstances. If, as seemed probable, the Gestapo were hard after us, then the journey would be exceedingly difficult to say the least of it.

The only decision we arrived at was that Giselle must get away at all costs, if necessary escorted by d'Angelay while we tried to hold off the pursuit for a short time. We didn't tell the doctor of this plan, however, as he would only have refused point blank to leave us in the lurch, and we intended to spring it on him at the last possible moment.

On the fifth day d'Angelay came into our room. His round face was alive with barely suppressed excitement and he held a paper in his hand. I knew in a flash what it was.

“Here!” he exclaimed. “Giselle has just opened it. The fish is nibbling!”

Carnac took the letter quickly and I peered over his shoulder. It was written on cheap paper from an address in the Moabit district of Berlin.

> Dear Giselle,
>
> I got your letter. It is very difficult for me to take a holiday now but I would like to meet this man you mention. He may be an enemy of mine but I am not afraid of him or his threats. I shall try to arrive in Laon on Thursday evening and will meet you in the Deux Frères about eight. Tell our friend to meet us there, but he must come alone. I refuse to talk to him at all unless he agrees to this. Say nothing and destroy this letter.
>
> Au revoir,

E.P.

Carnac gave a long low whistle of excitement. “Mon Dieu, but we've got him! They were right in London after all. And tomorrow evening—that gives us just time to get ready.”

“You can see we've touched him on a raw spot,” I said. “He wouldn't be coming as quickly as this otherwise. And he wants to see this man alone—that rather confirms your theory about his intentions, Carnac.”

He pondered for a moment. “There is just one other point—I can't see why we didn't think of it before. If he kills this man who threatens him, one person is still left who knows something of l'affaire Belfort in 1933, and who might mention it to the Boche if they interrogated her—Giselle.”

“That’s true,” said the doctor. “It looks as though he intends to shoot her too.”

“I think so. That is why he says destroy this letter. It might come to light afterwards, but if it is destroyed then there's only his version of the whole matter and he will find a way of explaining it to the Boche.”

Carnac was absolutely right. I saw it immediately and, oddly enough, I was rather relieved. Always at the back of my mind there had been a slight feeling of revulsion at the prospect of killing a man in cold blood, traitor and murderer though he was, but now with the realisation that he would stop at nothing to save his skin, even the murder of a girl, the last trace of this feeling vanished and it never troubled me again.

We discussed our final plans for the morrow. They were but little changed from the previous attempt. Giselle would meet Passy at the Deux Frères as arranged and bring him along to the hospital on the pretext of meeting the unknown man. We should “deal with him” (the doctor's phrase) and d'Angelay was to arrange with two medical orderlies whom he could trust for the mortuary arrangements afterwards. With luck an extra body might never be noticed in the present confusion. The four of us would then leave Laon during the night, if necessary splitting into pairs, and make for the “zone libre” where at any rate we should be in much less danger than we were here.

“It all sounds very simple,” said the doctor doubtfully.

“Too simple,” said Carnac. “It won't be as easy as that.”

* * * * *

I lay that night in my iron hospital bed and listened to Carnac's deep, steady breathing on the other side of the room, envying him that cool detachment that enabled him to sleep so peacefully now, whereas I was so wide awake and taut that sleep seemed out of the question.

I felt instinctively that this was our last night at the hospital, and that the long chase which had started at Abbeville in May was now nearly over. I knew that much without having any dear idea as to the manner in which it would finish.

After dawn I dropped off into an uneasy sleep and wakened about seven o'clock without feeling much better.

Carnac was already dressed in the same shabby blue suit he had worn ever since we came to the hospital, and only his fine face and erect figure belied the

impression of a very nondescript French civilian. He looked positively radiant and greeted me with a broad grin.

“How do you feel, Peter? You know, I feel better than I have done ever since we left England. We've waited too long doing nothing and at last we have the decision. I feel capable of anything now—it is going to be my day”—and he moved round the room whistling gaily.

We had breakfast and the morning dragged on.

The previous day, in response to my requests the doctor had managed to find a few books to help us pass the time, and I began to sort through them. They were a varied lot, ranging from Maupassant to Victor Hugo and I came across Dumas‘ *Three Musketeers*, and held it up to Carnac.

“Coincidence!” I said. “The first time I saw you in London I said to myself that here was D'Artagnan stepped straight out of the book, because you were so like my schoolboy dreams of the man.”

He laughed. “D'Artagnan? You are very flattering, Peter. I must remember that one. Well, I hope we shall be as successful as they always were.”

I tried to read but couldn't concentrate on the story at all and kept looking at my watch. It was just after midday; if Passy had contrived to slip away from Berlin he would now be across the German frontier and drawing down through Belgium into Northern France. There were only another eight hours to go. Please God, let nothing go wrong now. We were so near the end.

Later in the afternoon, d'Angelay came in to see us. He had been operating all morning and I thought he looked tired and strained. He sat down, lit a cigarette and looked at his watch.

“Not much longer,” he said quietly. “I’ve just realised how to dispose of our friend this evening without any noise or fuss. One jab in the arm with a hypodermic and he can go to sleep for good. Simple, eh?”

I nodded and he stretched himself on the bed and blew a series of perfect smoke rings up towards the ceiling. I walked across to the window and then stopped dead in my tracks. The event that we had been half expecting and dreading for the past few days was now about to happen. On the far side of the lawn an open car driven by a soldier was coming up the avenue leading to the hospital. I could see the swastika fluttering on the bonnet and the black collar patches of the two S.S. officers who reclined comfortably in the back.

Somehow the sight gave me no shock, no surprise, just a cold feeling of absolute finality. Twenty-four hours later it wouldn't have mattered; now it might well be the difference between victory and death. I beckoned the others quickly, they came to the window and we watched in painful silence.

The car drew up by the hospital entrance and the officers jumped out and strode up to the door followed by the N.C.O. driver.

We exchanged glances. d'Angelay said, “I've a feeling that means us.”

“Or Giselle,” snapped Carnac. “It doesn't matter much either way. We've just got to hold them off for the next few hours. Hadn't you better go down, d'Angelay? If they want to speak to you they'll only come up here searching for you. If they question you say anything—anything that will keep them quiet till tomorrow. That's all that matters, and if they look like starting trouble make some excuse to get them up here and we'll try to deal with them.”

The doctor nodded and walked quickly out of the room. Carnac stuffed the revolver into his pocket and stood by the door. He said, “Peter, you stand by the window and watch outside. So far only three men have come into the building.”

I peered out and said, “Nothing doing.” Carnac nodded.

A few minutes later footsteps came along the passage. Carnac stood behind the door. There was a tap and the orderly who brought our meals came in.

“Pardon, monsieur,” he said, “I thought Capitaine d'Angelay might be here. The Commandant wishes to see him at once.”

“No, he went out a few minutes ago.”

The door closed again.

“We were quite right,” I said.

“Yes,” said Carnac. He thought a moment and then went on. “Everything depends on how the doctor handles them. I think I'll go across into the lavatory and wait there to see what happens. If they come up, don't make any struggle or fuss—just try to hold their attention somehow and I'll do the rest.”

He opened the door cautiously and then darted across the passage to the lavatory opposite. I heard him shut and bolt the door and then went back to my post by the window.

Nothing happened for perhaps ten minutes. I was beginning to think that the doctor was putting up a pretty good bluff downstairs when I heard the tramp of feet approaching the door. There were several men this time. They stopped outside and d'Angelay's voice said, “In here.” The door was thrown open and a German officer strode into the room followed by the doctor and another S.S. man.

I continued to stand quietly by the window, watching them carefully and making no move at all.

The physical appearance of the first German was disconcerting, to put it mildly. His face was heavy and brutal, yet his eyes, which were very small and fringed with pink, had a hard gleam of intelligence in them. He was certainly no fool and looked a pretty tough proposition with his thick neck, powerful shoulders and massive frame.

The second man who stood by d'Angelay was much smaller. His face and indeed his whole appearance was thin and dried looking and he seemed to glance quickly round everything without keeping his eyes still for more than a second.

The first officer stared at me for an instant and then barked over his shoulder to the doctor, “Who is this man?”

His voice gave you a shock because it was so much higher than you would have expected in such a powerful frame.

I glanced at d'Angelay, wondering what he would say. His manner was very tense and I could see there was an explosion coming in a minute.

“He’s the man I told you about.”

“The man who was burned?”

“Yes.”

The S.S. man took two strides forward, caught me by the shoulder and twisted me round violently so that the light from the window fell on my face. The little eyes glared at me.

“Burned in the face, eh?”

“Yes,” I said stubbornly.

His jaw set in fury. He hit me across the face with his open palm and then shouted, “I’ll teach you not to lie to me! Your face was never burned. Now tell me the truth—who are you?”

I replied as steadily as I could. My voice was shaking with anger; I object to being cracked across the face.

“Phillipe Vitré.” (It was the first name that occurred to me; I knew it was no good anyway.)

The German turned round to the doctor again.

“So you thought you could get away with a story like that, did you? Now you can tell me the truth or take the consequences.”

The other German was still standing near the door. He hadn't spoken yet but I could see him darting quick glances at me as if an idea was beginning to form in his head. He stepped forward now and said something to his companion in a low voice in German. I caught only one word, but it was enough—Broussard. He'd recognised me from the description.

The big man turned round and looked at me again with new interest.

“So,” he remarked quietly. “Eddy Broussard, eh? Yes, you are quite right, my dear Rabe. No doubt at all. Well, Capitaine d'Angelay, you know the penalty for harbouring spies, I suppose.”

There was silence for a moment. Outside the door I heard a faint creak, so quiet and stealthy that none of the others heard it. But I'd been here a fortnight and I knew it was the lavatory door being opened very gently.

The German drew his revolver and came up to me and then, keeping the muzzle jammed in my stomach, he patted my pockets for any firearms.

I looked past him. d'Angelay and the other German were standing together in the middle of the room and behind them the door was beginning to open almost imperceptibly.

I said to the German. “You needn't worry. I haven't got a revolver, but if you look in my inside pocket you'll find my proper identity card.”

He lowered his revolver and put his hand inside my coat. Beyond his shoulder I saw Carnac sliding silently round the door.

The Hun couldn't find anything. He started angrily “Where—” and then Carnac snapped. “Put up your hands and stand still.”

My eyes were fixed on the German's face in front of me. He stiffened abruptly as he heard this curt order and started to turn his head. As he did so,, I leaned forward, grabbed his wrist and snatched the revolver out of his hand. We didn't want any gun play to rouse the hospital.

“Turn round,” said Carnac. The big man never moved.

“*Turn round,*” said Carnac again. There was no mistaking the menace in his voice. I saw the German gulp uncertainly and then he obeyed and as he did so I hit him very hard on the back of the head with his revolver. He took one faltering step forward and fell with a crash on the floor.

I stepped past him towards the other German. He was a nasty looking little brute and his face was the colour of chalk with fear. I gave him a swipe across the face, and as he rocked back Carnac hit him on the head with his revolver butt. He went straight down and never moved. I felt much better.

“Now we've got to be quick!” said Carnac. “What can we do with these men, d'Angelay?”

The doctor bent over them in turn, running his fingers over their heads.

“They're only stunned,” he said briefly. “No fractures, I think. I suppose we want to hide them for a bit?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I can give them an injection that will keep them under for some hours and then we can shove them away somewhere. They won't be likely to find them for a bit and in any case they wouldn't be fit to say anything.”

We started to strip off their uniforms and boots while d'Angelay left the room. He came back a minute later with a hypodermic and gave each of the unconscious men a shot in the arm. He then bundled their uniforms into the cupboard, locked it and threw the key out of the window.

There was a knock and two orderlies came in with stretchers.

“Here you are, Francois,” said the doctor briskly. “I want these two men taken along to the small room at the end of the passage. Just leave them there and I'll see about it later. And you needn't mention this to anybody.”

They heaved the unconscious men on to the stretchers, threw a blanket over them and carried them out.

“That's that,” I said. “Quite neat, I think. Now what about the feldwebel?”

“He’s still downstairs, waiting outside the Commandants office,” said d'Angelay. “I reckon we've got another quarter-of-an-hour before it occurs to him that his officers are taking rather a long time up here. Then he'll come round to look for them and when he can't find them he'll give the alarm to his headquarters. Say half-an-hour in all and then the hunt for me will start in earnest.”

“It sounds a reasonable estimate,” said Carnac. “Now tell us quickly what happened. What were they after?”

“They were very suspicious about me,” said the doctor. “I saw that from the start. I had the impression that they are beginning to take an interest in this place, perhaps with Giselle being here—I don't know. But they seemed to think there was something wrong without actually being able to put a finger on it. They asked a lot of questions. Had I ever met an American called Eddy Broussard? No. Did I know Mlle. Saint Brie? Only by sight. Then they started on the airman whose face was burned—where was he now? This was very difficult to lie about because Colonel Ravel was present and while he is a good Frenchman, I don't think he would allow his hospital to be used for this sort of thing. So I dare not tell lies. I knew it was no good then, so I said the airman was rather better now and offered to take them up to see him. I prayed hard all the way up that you'd have made some plans to deal with them.” He paused and then said as an afterthought, “I'm quite sure that Giselle and I were on the point of being arrested on suspicion.”

Carnac nodded his head slowly. “We're nearly caught, you know. If we can't get this job done tonight and get away we'll be finished. It's only a matter of hours before they find us.”

“We must alter our plans,” I said. “We can't bring Passy along here to deal with him. It's nearly five o'clock now and Giselle meets him at eight. How about marching boldly into the Deux Frères just after eight and shooting him straight off?”

“No,” said Carnac firmly. “The hunt will be up then. We'll be arrested as soon as we show our faces and if he's late for the rendezvous then our last chance is gone. We must stay in cover and somehow get him to come to us. It's the only way we can be certain of getting him.”

“Take a room in some hotel,” suggested the doctor, “then Giselle can bring him along to us.”

“Suppose she is followed and brings the Gestapo along with her—what then?”

“Then we'll have to hold them off for a few minutes while we deal with Passy.”

“The hotel idea seems the best,” I said. “Can you get a revolver for me, d'Angelay?”

“Take mine,” he said, “I'm a hopeless shot. I prefer a good trench knife.”

“We ought to take Giselle along with us now,” I said, “otherwise they may arrest her as soon as the alarm is given.”

“Yes,” said Carnac, “but if she's followed now they will come straight to our hiding place after us. We must try to get her out unobserved.”

“Take an ambulance,” said the doctor. “We can sneak her out that way. I'll go and warn her to get ready.”

He went out and I looked at my watch again. Another five minutes….

The doctor came back. “She's just changing her clothes,” he said. “She'll be waiting by the side door in a few minutes. Now let's get away.”

We left the room and walked rapidly along the passage and down the stairs. At the bottom d'Angelay stopped us and looked cautiously round the corner.

“The other Boche is in the office at the end,” he said softly. “Quickly now!”

We ran across the hall and came out in the yard. Several ambulances were standing about and d'Angelay jumped into one, Carnac sat beside him and I climbed into the back and shut the door. We drove round the corner out of the yard and stopped by the side entrance. I heard Carnac say, “In the back, quickly,” the door opened and Giselle climbed in and we started again.

She sat beside me on the stretcher and smiled. I thought she looked very tired.

“What's happening, Peter?” she said.

“We're having to get out of the hospital quickly. The Boches are after us. I'll tell you later.”

The ambulance bumped on. Once it slowed down and I thought we had been stopped by a patrol, but then we picked up speed again. After about five minutes we turned a corner and stopped. d'Angelay threw open the door and we clambered out.

I saw that we had stopped in a small yard. On one side was a high wall and at the end stood a warehouse bearing a dilapidated sign “Loiret et Cie.” The place was deserted except for two grimy children playing in the sun.

Carnac emerged from the front seat and said briskly, “We'll abandon the ambulance here. I don't think anybody saw us drive in and probably the Boche won't find it for a bit. Now we must get off the streets as quickly as possible. Allons!”

We emerged into a narrow side street, turned right and walked up to the main thoroughfare. The usual crowd of Germans wandered about and peered into windows but nobody seemed to pay any attention to us. Carnac and the doctor walked in front; I wondered where they were heading for. A little further on they

turned suddenly into a doorway and as we followed them I saw a sign above the door “Hotel Normandie.”

In the gloomy little entrance hall Carnac spoke to the landlord. We wanted a room on the first floor for a little party tonight; a thousand francs clinched the matter, the man bowed and said that would be quite all right. Carnac had to complete an arrival form for the German authorities and I wondered what set of names he would be giving this time. It really didn't matter much now.

We then mounted the stairs to our room. It was bigger than you would have expected in such a second-rate establishment, with an old-fashioned chandelier suspended from the ceiling and some particularly hideous red plush chairs; I remember them distinctly. In the middle of the room was a large table.

Carnac ordered a bottle of cognac and shut the door, while I looked at my watch for the hundredth time that day. It was just after six o’clock; the alarm would have been raised at the hospital now and probably the drugged officers discovered; very soon the Gestapo would be combing the town for us. We had got under cover only just in time.

“Now,” said Carnac, “let's have a drink and decide what to do.”

d'Angelay opened the bottle and poured out a stiff brandy apiece.

A lot was going to depend on whether the Germans were looking for Giselle as well as the doctor; if so we might well lose our bait before the fish was caught. On the other hand, if they saw her at the Deux Frères they might follow her as they had done before to see if she gave anything away, and in this case she would inevitably lead them straight to the hotel. It was a difficult problem but in the end we decided that the risk had to be taken. She was to go to the café to meet Passy and we would ring her up soon after eight to find out the position and whether Passy was willing to come along to the Normandie.

It not, then we should have to walk straight along to the Deux Frères, shoot at sight and damn the consequences.

“So that's all fixed,” said Carnac. He walked across to the window and beckoned me. I glanced out and saw that we were at the back of the hotel looking out on to a cluster of buildings and yards. I understood now the reason for the first floor; immediately below us was a flat roof and from there it was only eight feet or so to the ground. A narrow passage ran down on one side and disappeared beneath an archway.

We looked at it carefully. I knew what he was thinking.

“I'll go down and have a look at it,” he said, and went out. I remained by the window and a moment later he emerged from a door below and walked down the passage under the arch. He came back a few minutes later.

“It runs through into a narrow street,” he said. “If we have to leave in a hurry it may be useful.”

He poured out another cognac and turned round to us, half smiling, half serious. I noticed again the little trick of tapping one foot against another that betrayed his inward excitement.

“One other thing,” he said, “I spoke to the patron just now. His wife has just come in and says there is a great commotion in the street. German troops have cordoned it off and they are going through all the houses. It looks as though our

friends have been very quick in finding the ambulance and connecting it with our disappearance from the hospital."

He shrugged his shoulders with a typical gesture. "But what does it matter? They're only searching round the place where they found the ambulance—they won't be here for a bit yet. Something tells me we shall not fail now."

Giselle sat on the edge of her chair and twirled the stem of the glass between her fingers. She had spoken scarcely a word since we left the hospital. I think she hated more than ever the part she was to play and was trying to steel herself to see it through. She looked utterly miserable and her eyes were dark ringed with anxiety.

On the other side of the table the doctor was equally silent. He had scarcely touched his cognac and his round rather plump face was quite inscrutable, but I knew him fairly well by this time and I don't think he was either worried or unhappy. At the moment he was certainly the calmest one of us all.

* * * * *

The minutes dragged on. At quarter to eight Carnac raised his head.

"Now we start," he said. "It is time for you to go, Giselle. Walk straight there, meet our friend and bring him back with you. I'll ring the Deux Frères just after eight to hear your news, and remember you are doing your duty, however unpleasant it may seem, so don't worry about it."

She smiled wanly and stood up, pale but resolute. My heart went out to her.

"I shan't fail you, I promise," she said quietly. "Wish me luck"—and she picked up her bag and left the room.

"Poor girl," said Carnac. "She is very unhappy." He poured out another cognac apiece. "Now we can settle matters that I prefer not to discuss in front of her. Peter, my friend, I want you to leave this affair to me. You have played a big part in it, but now it is a private matter between one Frenchman and another—you understand?"

I nodded. d'Angelay drew a knife from under his coat, laid it on the table and said grimly: "Yes, certainly, it is for us to deal with him."

There was no mercy in their faces, just a cold and inflexible determination. I suppose we should feel the same with an Englishman who sold himself to the enemy.

At eight minutes past eight Carnac went out to telephone. He came back very quickly, his voice shaking slightly with excitement.

"She has met him!" he said. "They are coming along now. Get ready."

I drew my revolver, took up position behind the door and waited.

Chapter XV

The Trap Closes.

A STAIR creaked faintly, and then a man's voice only too familiar said, "Where?"

An instant later they halted outside the door, the handle rattled as it was turned and the door swung open with me behind it. Passy came into my line of vision as he stepped into the room and paused with his back to me looking at the two men seated at the table.

I took a pace forward, jabbed my revolver in his back and said, “Don't move or I shall shoot you.”

He started violently and jerked his head round in surprise and I slid my hand quickly into his side pocket; the bulge was very obvious. I pulled out a small automatic and then shut and locked the door, seeing Giselle for the first time as she stood motionless on the other side.

Carnac spoke; I had never heard him use this tone before. “Sit down.”

Passy was recovering from his surprise. He said angrily, “What's all this nonsense? Who are you people?”

Nobody answered. I stepped in front of him towards the table and he saw me for the first time.

“Oh, so you're in it, are you? Broussard, the American, I remember you.”

“We met before that,” I said grimly. “Do you remember the afternoon of May 21st at Abbeville when you murdered that English engineer? I'm the R.A.F. officer you saw on the path —the one you tried to kill.”

That shook him. I think he understood then that he had been tricked, that he was surrounded by his enemies, and that we intended to kill him. His face went very white and he turned on Giselle in fury and spat out a torrent of language. I have never heard anything so venomous as that outburst of a baffled and frightened man, but nobody replied and Giselle looked him coolly in the face. When he had finished she turned to Carnac.

“I think we were followed here,” she said. “I never noticed anything wrong in the café, but as we left two men came out after us and they were just behind us all the way here. I think they are making enquiries downstairs now.”

“Very well,” said Carnac calmly. “We must be quick. Sit down, M. Passy.”

Passy swore at him furiously. The doctor rose quietly, picked up his knife from the table and walked up to him.

“Sit down,” he said ominously. Passy obeyed slowly in a sudden frightened silence. His face was the colour of a fish's belly and great drops of sweat were gathering on his forehead and trickling down his face. He was not a pleasant sight.

The spectacle aroused not the slightest sense of pity in me. I kept thinking of the scene at Abbeville, of a middle-aged Englishman being beaten up brutally by this man and his Nazi thugs in order to extract information and then being murdered in cold blood. I could still see Stephenson dying on the floor with his blood forming a little dark pool under his shoulder.

The doctor sat down next to Passy, knife still in hand, with Carnac on the opposite side of the table and Giselle remaining motionless by the door, silent and still as a marble statue. I stood just behind Carnac, hoping that he was going to get a move on and not do any cat-and-mouse stuff. There were but a few moments left to us.

Carnac spoke again. His voice was calm, polite and somehow very deadly.

“Now, M. Passy, let me explain the position. First of all, I am Captain Carnac and the officer beside you is Captain d'Angelay both of the French Army. We have

information that you have been working for the Boche and giving them certain secret information. You are a French citizen and such conduct amounts to treason. The French Government obviously cannot try you under the present circumstances because the Boche would protect you, but I have been given the authority to deal with you in any way that seems suitable. We have decided, my friends and I, that unless you can give some satisfactory explanation you will be shot immediately. What have you to say?"

Passy kept swallowing nervously and his eyes flickered quickly round the room before he replied. I guessed what he was thinking, that it was almost impossible to kill him here under the very nose of his German protectors. Also he'd understood that remark of Giselle's about being followed and the men downstairs. I think he decided to keep it going as long as possible in the hope that the Hun would intervene.

"I deny it," he muttered. "I've never done anything for the Boche."

This was too much for me and I forgot Carnac's request to keep out of it.

"What were you doing with those two Germans at Abbeville?" I said hotly. "Why did you torture that Englishman and then shoot him?"

Passy gave me a quick look and then his eyes dropped again to the table and the revolver which rested there just by Carnac's hand. The sight seemed almost to hypnotise him. He never replied to my remark.

After a moment he said to Carnac rather unsteadily, "You're making a mistake, you and your friends. I have never done anything against France."

"Do you care to explain your visit to Berlin?"

The reply was too quick, too automatic.

"I have never been to Berlin."

"Then how did you get the letter we sent you there?"

No reply. I saw the sweat dripping steadily off his face on to the table.

Carnac went on. "We know more about you and your movements than you realise. You were at Abbeville till the Boche captured the place. You had a rendezvous with them to try and stop the destruction of the R.D.F. equipment, but this had already been carried out. You captured an English engineer, tortured him to try and get some information and then either you or the Germans shot him. Sometime after that you came to Laon, because we know you were out at Laon aerodrome on June 12th"—Passy looked up suddenly startled—"and in the Deux Frères around the same date. You left for Berlin ten days ago to work at Telefunken R.D.F. research and you have already given the Boche some details about R.D.F.

"Now, unless you have any explanation to make about your conduct you will be dealt with immediately by your fellow countrymen. We find you guilty of treason and espionage against France."

Passy said nothing for a moment and remained slumped in his chair. He was a big, powerful man, but now he looked so soft and flabby that he might have been filleted.

Very deliberately Carnac picked up the revolver and turned to me.

"Please take Mlle. Saint Brie outside," he said quietly. "We will join you in a moment."

Passy understood what he meant. Suddenly he crashed his fist on the table and shouted in a voice that shook with anger and terror.

“You’ll never dare to kill me! I am working for the Boche —it's quite true—and they'll see that nothing happens to me. They're all round you now and by God you'll pay for it if you even touch me! The Gestapo will get hold of you and your girlfriend as soon as you try to leave and you know what they're like. But if you let me go we'll forget all about this business and I'll say nothing, I promise. You can save your own lives if you want.”

Carnac never moved a muscle. He might not have heard the threat for all the response he made.

I put the revolver in my pocket and walked over to Giselle, touched her on the arm and said in a low voice: “You must leave now. Come away quickly.” She turned round as though in a trance and I opened the door.

Two men were standing outside. I didn't even need the guns they carried to tell me who they were. Just behind them I saw the anxious face of the landlord.

I grabbed Giselle and tried to slam the door again but both the Germans leapt forward and one of them shouldered the door open. Then everything seemed to happen at once, Passy saw his chance, gave a wild shout for help and dived across the table for the gun. But Carnac was too quick; he had already fired past me at the man in the doorway and almost simultaneously out of the corner of my eye I saw the quick flash of steel in the doctor's hand as he struck a tremendous downward blow at Passy. Carnac hit the leading German as he came into the room and he gasped and then fell at my feet, while the other one fired two shots in quick succession and skipped back into the corridor. I slammed the door and jumped round to see what was happening.

Passy was lying sprawled across the table. Driven hard in between his shoulders was the doctor's knife. He was obviously dead. d'Angelay had dropped to the floor and lay there in a curiously twisted and unnatural attitude. Carnac was bending over him and for a moment I couldn't think what had happened.

Suddenly a succession of shots was fired through the door and the wood splintered and cracked. I had my revolver out now and fired back and heard a shout from the other side. I hope I got him.

“Allons!” said Carnac quickly. He grabbed Giselle and pulled her towards the window.

“d'Angelay?” I said, and he snapped “through the head. Quick!”

I understood then. One of the shots fired at random had killed him.

Carnac opened the window and jumped out on the sloping roof below. Giselle wriggled through and dropped lightly beside him. I swung a leg over the window sill and took a last glance into the room. The wounded German by the door was groaning and moving his head slightly. Passy's legs dangled over the edge of the table, almost touching the doctor's body on the floor; I remember clearly the bright mauve socks he was wearing. d'Angelay had fallen towards the window. I could see his face now. He might have been asleep.

From beyond the door came a confused shouting in the corridor. They would be through in a moment. I jumped down on to the roof and then down again into the passage and sprinted after the other two.

Carnac stopped under the arch. “We’ve got to get away from this place somehow,” he said tersely. “It will be surrounded in a few minutes and then we're finished.”

“Let’s get into the street—” I broke off suddenly. Footsteps were coming down the passage behind us. We sprinted along the last few yards, slowed down suddenly and emerged in the little side street that Carnac had described.

On the opposite side of the road was a café with a large sign “Floria,” and several cars were parked outside. A few yards away two German officers were climbing out of a large open Mercedes. The soldier driver sat at the wheel. Behind us I could hear the hunt approaching.

“Car,” I whispered. Carnac nodded and we walked towards it, quickly but not too quickly. The officers looked round and one of them made some remark. They both laughed. We were nearly up to them now. *For God's sake, look the other way, do anything, we can't take on three of you.* Just in time they turned round and started to walk across the road towards the Floria.

At this moment there was a loud shout behind us. The pursuit had emerged from the passage and seen us, but now we had reached the car. Fortunately the driver was sitting on the pavement side and as we drew level I stepped suddenly towards him and smashed my fist into his face. He grunted in astonishment and I pulled open the door and dragged the dazed man out. Carnac knocked him on to the ground and I jumped into the seat while the other two piled in behind.

Everybody seemed to close in on us then. The officers were running back, three or four men came streaming out of the passage, all converging on the car. I heard Carnac swearing furiously behind me and then he started firing.

I turned on the switch, pressed two buttons on the dashboard before finding the starter and then got the engine going and rammed in the gear. The car started off with a tremendous jerk and we accelerated down the street like a bullet. The men in front scattered wildly as we tore past and then there were several more shots and the windscreen suddenly starred and splintered. I lowered my head a little and kept my foot hard down. They were the most hectic few moments I have ever known.

At the end of the street I slowed down before emerging into the main road, turned right and accelerated again, and then changed up with a resounding crash of gears and drove fast through the traffic as it thinned out on the outskirts of the town.

Carnac leaned forward and put his hand on my shoulder. “Nice work, Peter,” he said. “Mon Dieu, but they nearly got us then! What do you think now—drive hard for a few kilometres and then abandon the car?”

“We can't get far,” I shouted. “They’ll cordon all the roads. I'll go like hell for a bit and then we'll bale out.”

We were clear of the town now and I started to drive really fast. That Merc. was a beauty and it certainly possessed what the squadron would have called “bags of urge.” We tore along at nearly 90 m.p.h. hooting furiously to get traffic out of the way. The speed intoxicated me; there was going to be absolute hell to pay and at that moment I just didn't give a damn for anything.

After a few miles Carnac leaned forward again. “I think we ought to get out now. If we come against a barricade or lorry across the road we haven't a chance.”

I nodded and looked round. The long stretch of road was deserted. On the left was a large wood. I slowed down and drove off the road down a rough track for a few hundred yards and then stopped. We got out and looked at each other, Giselle pale but composed, her raven hair blown loose across her face, Carnac dishevelled, cool as ever but very serious. My exhilaration vanished suddenly. I realised what a hopeless mess we were in.

Giselle hadn't spoken for a long time. She said now, “Well, what do we do?”

“It's nearly dark,” said Carnac. “Probably they won't find the car till daylight. We'd better get into the wood for the night.”

“Hadn't we better start marching now?” I said. “The further away we can get before dawn the better.”

“We can't walk far across country in the dark, and it's a very short night anyway. There's going to be a tremendous hunt for us. I don't think a few kilometres will make much difference. Also—” he nodded his head slightly towards Giselle—“I think we need a rest.”

It was quite true. We trudged off towards the trees in the gathering darkness.

I began to think of d'Angelay. When events come crowding on top of each other like this you don't have time to think about anything, and I had scarcely realised till now that he was dead, or for that matter that Passy was dead too, and we had succeeded in our mission. It didn't seem very important now when we were probably going to die ourselves within twenty-four hours and our success aroused no satisfaction in my heart. Nothing seemed to matter now.

“Poor d'Angelay,” I said to Carnac. “He would have been alive now if we hadn't dragged him into this business. I feel very unhappy about it.”

“It was nothing to him,” said Carnac. “It was for France.”

Just before we entered the wood several cars went tearing along the road behind us, their headlights shining brilliantly through the trees. The hounds were in full cry.

Chapter XVI

The White Cliffs.

THE day had been very sultry and soon after midnight the storm broke. It lasted for nearly an hour and the thunder boomed and roared like a great artillery barrage, while the flashes of lightning, at times an almost continuous flicker, revealed us clearly as we crouched under a tree trying to shelter from the beating rain. It was no good; we were soaked to the skin in five minutes.

After a time the storm faded away in the distance and the wood fell quiet again save for the steady drip from the soaking trees. Carnac and I took off our coats and Giselle lay down on them and tried to get some sleep while we walked a few yards away and talked in low tones.

For the first time since we came to France my companion's fertile imagination and ready wit seemed to have run dry and I must confess that I could do no

better. We discussed every possibility, but there seemed no chance of escape at all. At this moment a man hunt on the very greatest scale was being organised for our benefit. All roads and villages would be watched, all transport searched; by now they would have traced our escape route from Laon and by enquiring further along the road they would know that we had not travelled far. That narrowed down the field of search considerably and the discovery of the car at dawn would clinch the matter. As Carnac said, a few kilometres either way made no difference.

I had escaped a search once before, but this was going to be on a much greater scale and moreover there were three of us now, including a girl. One of us alone might have made it, but three....

"Well," said Carnac, "if this is to be the end, at any rate I wouldn't have missed it for anything. We've done what we set out to do and we've killed a few Boches as well as that bastard Passy, and we may kill a few more tomorrow, before they get us. It's been worth it all right."

I grunted agreement. It had been worth it, by God, and looking back now I wouldn't have missed it either. But for Giselle I would have been quite content and I had made up my mind to shoot her at the last moment rather than let the Gestapo get her.

* * * * *

Just before dawn I rose stiffly from the ground and rubbed my arms and legs to get the circulation going. It was bitterly cold and our wet clothes hung miserably round us. Giselle was still curled up on our coats fast asleep. She was wet and muddy and altogether very different from the exquisitely turned-out French girl of the previous evening. I touched her lightly on the arm and she opened her eyes, looked round for a puzzled moment and then smiled at me. Her smile was the same anyway.

"Oh, Peter," she said, "I dreamed I was at home in my own room and the rain was coming in at the window. How silly! Still it was very nice and thank you for your coat."

We shared a bar of chocolate which Carnac produced and then he sat off to reconnoitre the road. It was just starting to get light and in the wood there was a deep, profound silence.

He was soon back. "It's no good on that side," he said. "I crawled to the edge of the trees and lay there for a bit watching the road. At first I couldn't see anything but after a few minutes I saw a man move and start to walk slowly down the road, and then I spotted a few more. They're all along the road now, and as soon as they find the car they'll probably start to beat the wood from this side. I think we must get moving."

We set off through the trees, moving with the utmost caution in case we met any patrols and after a little while the trees thinned out and I saw open country ahead.

Carnac was leading. He turned round and whispered, "You stay here. I'll go and see what's ahead."

We settled ourselves down in the undergrowth and waited. After about ten minutes he wriggled back silently along the ground. I could see from the expression on his face that he'd got an idea.

“You won't guess where we've wandered to,” he said. “This wood is on the corner of an aerodrome and there are some aircraft at the other end. What do you think? Is there a chance?”

“What type are they?” I said quickly.

“I can't be sure. They were single-engined aircraft, all of them. Go and look, Peter, but be very careful. There are probably some sentries about.”

I crawled off towards the edge of the wood, raised my head very cautiously in the long grass and peered round.

It was an aerodrome all right (I identified it later from photographs and the wood was easily recognisable; it was Laon Athies).

Dispersed some distance away by the hangars were perhaps twenty Messerschmidt 109s, their mottled camouflage and characteristic tails showing very clear in the growing light.

The sight gave me a faint hope. Perhaps, just perhaps, we might be able to pull something off. And then, of course, I saw the snag. The Me. 109 is a single seater and a very small one at that. It might be possible to fit Giselle in the cockpit and fly the aircraft sitting on her knee (an enterprising R.A.F. type once got into trouble for flying his girlfriend in a Hurricane in this manner), but to take Carnac as well was out of the question. On the other hand it seemed the only chance of saving Giselle.

I looked carefully for anything larger. There was a twin-engined type by the hangar, either a Heinkel or a Ju. 88, but it wouldn't be possible to grab that one; men were already moving about near it. For that matter I didn't see either how we could get hold of a Messerschmidt. Any civilian who approached would be nabbed at once and even if I were in the cockpit I couldn't be sure of starting the confounded thing. Modern aircraft are somewhat complicated affairs with their fuel systems, fuel cocks and priming pumps and while no doubt I could puzzle it out in time this would have to be done very quickly and without a single slip. It was no good. We should have to find some other way.

That was the problem—having to start up. Once the engine was going I could manage reasonably well. Suppose we waited till they've run up the engine and then try to take it in a rush? No good, I said immediately; there would be a fitter in the cockpit and several more round the aircraft and chocks under the wheels... N.B.G.

And then I had an idea. It was just a chance, but it was the only one. I glanced up at the sky. It all depended on the wind. There wasn't a breath at the moment. I licked my finger and stuck it up. No wind at all. Well, there might be later on.

I crawled back into the wood. “They're Me. 109s,” I said “Not much good because they're single seaters and it's going to be awfully difficult to pinch one anyway, because I don't guarantee to start it. They're very different from out fighters.”

There was a pause. I believe we were all thinking the same; that this was the last chance.

Then Carnac said quietly. “Just suppose you could start it, you could fly it, I suppose?”

I nodded.

“And could you fit Giselle in?”

“I think so. It's been done before. I'd have to sit on her knee. But what about you? I'm damned well not leaving you here to face the music.”

“No,” said Giselle emphatically, “I'm not either.”

“You’re not doing anything of the sort. One man has far more chance than three and by myself I think I can get away. You see, I have one great advantage—I'm a Frenchman, and I can just fade away and become part of the countryside. Believe me, man cher Peter, your risk in going would be just as great as mine in staying here and if we don't do this, what then? Wait helplessly till the search party arrives? I see no other way.”

“Very well,” I said. “If you look at it that way it suits me though I still don't like it. Now about the details. I think our only way is to get hold of a machine as its taxiing out for take-off. With luck there'll be nobody to deal with except the pilot and if we could wave him to stop and then drag him out of the cockpit, Giselle and I could jump in and take off. But it all depends on the wind. If they taxi up to this end to take off it's O.K., but otherwise it seems hopeless. The wood only covers this end of the aerodrome and we can't come into the open till the last minute. Does it sound possible?”

Carnac laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “It sounds mad, but I believe you're right. It's the only way.”

* * * * *

Two hours passed. We lay in the grass at the edge of the trees and watched the distant aircraft with an anxiety that I cannot describe.

Once or twice I fancied that I heard the baying of dogs in the woods behind us and I believe Carnac did too because he cocked his head up and, listened. Our time was running out.

The anxiety wasn't lessened by a discovery that Giselle made. We were scanning the aerodrome carefully when she touched my arm and pointed away to the left.

“There are some men hidden over there,” she whispered. “Just to the right of that clump of bushes.”

We stared at the spot. She was quite right. About four hundred yards away was a well camouflaged light flak position and occasionally we could see the gun crew moving inside. As soon as we got up they were bound to see us, and they couldn't miss at that range if they were quick-witted and let fly with their gun.

Soon after eight o'clock several aircraft were started up and the roar of their engines reverberated across the aerodrome. A few minutes later Carnac seized my arm in a grip like steel.

“Look,” he whispered, “they're moving.”

Three aircraft were taxiing out. After they had gone a hundred yards there was no mistaking their direction.

“It's no good,” I said as steadily as I could. “They're not coming over here.”

They took off straight ahead and roared into the air over the wood where we lay, disappearing behind the trees in a gentle climbing turn. I dare not look at the others just then. England was less than an hour's flight away. We were so near home and yet we might be a thousand miles away for all the difference it made.

I can't remember how long we waited. I was past knowing or caring about time.

Sometime later I heard the sound of engines in the sky. The Messerschmidts were coming back. They circled the aerodrome, put their wheels down and came in to land.

By now there was a little wind and suddenly I was alert again. They were landing up towards our corner.

I whispered to Carnac. “They’re coming in this way. It's now or never. We must run out and get the last man as he taxies past.”

He never questioned it, but nodded and said, “You bring Giselle. I'll deal with the pilot.”

I gripped her arm. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

The three fighters rumbled in to land. They were in echelon starboard and they touched down some distance short of us. For an awful moment I thought they would pull up before reaching us, but they were going very fast and rolled on past the wood. They pulled up, gave a burst of engine as they turned round and came taxiing back towards us. The last man had swung away a bit on landing and he was a good hundred yards behind the others.

The leader and Number Two came rolling past. Number Three ambled along in their wake. In front of me Carnac crouched like a panther in the grass. I drew up my feet in readiness, put my hands on the ground and braced myself for the effort of a lifetime. A silly pun occurred to me suddenly. “The quick and the dead.”

NOW! Carnac bounded to his feet and went off like an arrow towards the 109. I never saw a man sprint like that. I seized Giselle by the wrist and we ran forward.

Carnac had nearly covered the distance now. The other two 109s in front couldn't see us; we were out of their line of vision and the pilot of this one was peering ahead. He never saw the man running in from the side till it was too late. Carnac sprang on to the wing, wrenched open the cockpit hood and gave the surprised pilot several tremendous blows in the face. Unfortunately the throttle still remained slightly open and the aircraft rolled gently forward.

I caught up and jumped on beside Carnac who was fumbling with the quick release harness, not knowing quite how it worked. I pulled out the pin, tore loose the oxygen and R.T. connections from his helmet and then bent down and with a supreme effort hoisted the nearly unconscious pilot out of his seat. Carnac got hold round his waist too and we toppled him out of the cockpit. He fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Carnac jumped down and helped Giselle in. She sat down immediately as I'd told her and I climbed in and sat on her knees, and then glanced round.

Carnac was standing by the wingtip. He waved and grinned a little breathlessly. I never admired his guts or unselfishness so much as at that moment.

“Now run like hell!” I shouted desperately. “Go on! And good luck!”

He waved again and then turned round and started to run back towards the wood. Still not a shot was fired. It had all happened within sixty seconds; perhaps nobody had seen us yet.

My last vision of Carnac was a small figure in a blue suit running very easily but very fast and nearly into the trees. God bless you, Charles.

I swung the 109 slightly, closed the hood and opened the throttle. She accelerated rapidly and just as we left the ground I saw the other Messerschmidts

flash by close underneath with their pilots looking up in obvious surprise. I bet they wondered what damn-fool tricks their Number Three was up to.

We came near to crashing within ten seconds of take-off. The pilot had left the tail trim wound back after landing and as I hadn't time to alter it the aircraft tried to climb at far too steep an angle. She was very nearly stalled and it required a tremendous effort to force the stick forward and keep her down. I glanced round the cockpit quickly to find the trim. There were two wheels down on the left hand side, in much the same position as a Spit or Hurricane. I took a chance, wound the nearest one forward and the pressure ceased and she flew easily again.

As soon as I got her trimmed I turned left and flew along at about a hundred feet trying to puzzle out the cockpit and find the undercarriage and pitch control. It wasn't easy to do while travelling so fast near the ground, but I knew that low flying all the way was the best hope of getting away from both flak and pursuing fighters.

There seemed to be no gate for the undercart as on our fighters, but I saw a handle on the dashboard with two positions AUS and EIN. The arrow was at AUS now. EIN must be UP. I pulled and turned the arrow. The vibration of the aircraft lessened considerably, the speed rose and two red lights appeared on the dashboard. Lucky again.

I couldn't see the pitch control and decided to keep in fine pitch and trust to Herr Daimler Benz or whatever his name is designing his engines to stand up to a bit of bad handling.

I throttled back a little and left it at that. The engine ran beautifully and never gave me a moment's anxiety there-after. I reckoned that the fuel would be sufficient to reach the English coast and the main danger now was being intercepted near the French coast by fighters who had been warned to expect me—and also of course R.A.F. fighters. That would be worst of all. I decided to put my undercart down and hope they'd understand the signal. Even that wouldn't work with people like Johnny whose motto always was, if in doubt, shoot first and apologise later. I couldn't find a map in the cockpit but steered about 330° which wasn't a bad guess actually and a little later we roared across the roof tops of a town. I believe now it was Arras. I glanced back once; still no pursuit. I began to hope a little, and twisted my head round to see Giselle. She must have been horribly uncomfortable with my bulk on top of her, but she smiled cheerfully. An anxious few minutes ensued. I knew we ought to see the coast soon if my course was right. I peered anxiously at the countryside sweeping past our wings and then glanced again at the compass, hoping that the Luftwaffe was more conscientious about regular compass swinging than I had been in the past. Oh God, I said, don't let me make any mistake now. And then, quite suddenly, the coast loomed up in front, and we roared out over the beach and across the sea. The little waves danced and sparkled in the sun and I didn't care any longer. We were out of the power of the Gestapo whatever happened, and as the French coast slipped away rapidly behind I felt like a man waking from a long nightmare. The worst now would be to descend in the drink and get drowned, and that was a clean death anyway. (These were my feelings at the time; they aren't now.) A few minutes later I saw the white cliffs 'of England ahead. I was determined to land at the first possible moment to avoid being shot down and I held the 109 right down on the

sea and then pulled her up at the last moment and we lifted easily over the green fields of Kent. I throttled back and looked for the flaps but couldn't find them. What the hell anyway! I was just in that dangerous mood; I've not forgotten it either.

I saw a field, circled it once and then came in to land far too fast, with neither flaps nor undercarriage down. We touched the ground, still going at a hell of a speed, and slewed round violently. I realised in a flash that I'd asked for it and was probably going to get it. There was a terrific crunching and tearing, clouds of dust, tremendous thuds and then we hit a bank and stopped dead. I had no harness and was thrown forward with my head on the reflector sight and nearly stunned myself.

I crawled out of the wreckage feeling more dead than alive and helped Giselle out. She had me as a very substantial cushion in front of her and seemed none the worse.

There remains a hazy recollection of men running across the field towards us, farmers, policemen, Home Guards and small boys all waving truncheons and sticks and shotguns and cups of tea in the best 1940 tradition and standing over us in a most threatening way.

“It’s all right,” I said wearily. “You can put away your bloody guns. I'm English.”

They didn't seem to believe it all, and gazed in astonishment at Giselle. “Gawd!” shouted a small boy in the crowd, “they've got women pilots!”

And Giselle, who had been so composed, so cool and so brave all through this terrible business, now suddenly broke down and burst into tears. I suppose it was the reaction after a long strain that had been nearly intolerable for her. I put my arm clumsily round her and kissed her forehead while the crowd looked on in silent astonishment. But she went on crying and I thought she would never stop.

A little later we were escorted to the police station. I was feeling light-headed by this time and very dizzy and faint. Everybody seemed to be standing a great distance away. I refused to say anything but demanded to see Group Captain Leighton at Air Ministry. They told me I couldn't do anything of the sort. I was in a very serious position, etc., etc. What was my name? Who was my companion? What was I doing in civilian clothes.

I still declined to reply, and said finally that if I couldn't see Group Captain Leighton, would they at any rate send a message? A big conference ensued between the police and the Home Guard, both of whom seemed to regard me as their own private trophy. At length they said yes, what was the message?

The room and everybody in it was going round and round. Their faces swam in blurred shapes before my eyes. I knew I was going to pass out and also knew enough to realise that it must be a guarded message.

“Tell him,” I said suddenly, “that Peter Pan has killed Captain Hook and brought Wendy back from the Never Never Land.”

And then everything spun round very fast indeed and a shutter seemed to close in my brain.

* * * * *

That evening I sat wearily in the Group Captain's office in Whitehall.

He had been very pleased to see me and to hear the news about Passy, but seemed to take it all very much as a matter of course, an attitude which rather nettled me at the time but which I can understand now. It was all in the day's work for him.

“Don't worry too much about Carnac,” he was saying, “I know a few things about the gallant captain and you can take it from me that he's very capable of looking after himself. He's got a much better chance with you two off his hands. In my opinion you did the right thing and it was the only way to save the girl.”

I was very glad to hear it. The thought that we'd got away safely and left him behind was beginning to haunt me already. I knew I'd never be really happy again till I heard of him.

Leighton went on, “I’m glad to hear our little suggestion did the trick. After you left for France we continued to rake up everything we could find about Passy and we'd got most of these particulars already, but as soon as Major Dalkeith arrived with your message I went round myself to see both the French Ambassador and a member of de Gaulle's staff. They both agreed that it seemed the only way to force Passy back, but we found it very difficult to phrase the message without giving it away to the wily Hun. Apparently we succeeded.” He laughed quietly. “I'd like to see their faces when they find their prize quisling has been disposed of right under their noses. There'll be a terrific enquiry into it, and a hell of a row for somebody.”

He lingered for a moment over this pleasing thought, then went on. “And this Capitaine d'Angelay—he sounds to have been a gallant fellow. Damn bad luck that, being killed by a stray shot. Its men like that who restore my faith in France and her greatness.”

There was another pause. I was still curious. “May I ask one question, sir?”

“You can always ask,” said Leighton drily.

“It's this, sir. What was behind that reference to Belfort in 1933 that made Passy come back to Laon?”

“Oh, I can tell you that all right. Go back a few years, —do you remember a big spy trial at Nancy and Belfort in 1933?”

I had a hazy recollection of reading it in the papers and nodded.

“Well, the details don't matter much, but briefly this is what happened. The Germans were just starting to get very interested in the Maginot Line and they had a number of agents at Strasbourg, Nancy, Belfort and other places. One of these men, an N.C.O. in a French artillery regiment, was an Alsatian called Fuchs. He seems to have been an unpleasant bit of work and he lived with a very dubious woman in Belfort. Passy happened to be working in Belfort at the time and he met this girl friend and fell for her; you know the type he was. I don't know all the details, but apparently Fuchs did a bit of talking across the pillow and Yvonne (or whatever her name was) had a pretty shrewd idea of his game. In some way or other Passy wormed the information out of her and of course saw immediately that here was a cast-iron method of getting rid of his rival, so he denounced Fuchs to the authorities. They arrested him and got him talking quite a lot and in the end they roped in most of the bunch. There was a big court martial and they all got very stiff sentences.

“Passy’s name never leaked out at all; he remained an anonymous informer and only the Deuxième Bureau people knew his name, so you can imagine what a

shock it must have been years later when somebody threatens to denounce him to the Boche as the man who gave away their spy ring in Belfort. They'd have pretended now to disregard it, but he knew his Boche pretty well and realised that when the day came that he was no further use to them they would take their revenge in no uncertain fashion. So you see, he really had to do something to stop it."

Leighton went on, "One more thing—you'll see a bit in the papers about your flight to England. It won't be strictly true, but it may serve to fox the Hun about the identity of the people involved. You don't want this held up against you if ever you become prisoner of war."

At length I rose to go. Leighton shook hands with me. "Back to the squadron, I suppose? Well, you will probably find it pleasanter work than you've been doing recently, even if—" he smiled faintly—"there isn't the same feminine interest in it. You've helped to do a useful job of work and we have got rid of a very dangerous traitor. I'll let you know if I pick up anything about Carnac. Goodbye and good luck."

* * * * *

Within the next few days two small paragraphs appeared in the English papers. You may remember seeing them, but I don't suppose you or anybody else thought there was any connection between them or guessed at the long story of intrigue and bloodshed that lay behind these simple accounts. Yet they spoke of an affair which very nearly gave the enemy a priceless secret, and which, but for the chance recognition of a photograph on a dead German pilot, would have placed England in even greater danger. In truth, great events spring from small beginnings.

The first paragraph appeared in one of the London papers and gave a highly coloured account of how two young French-men, making up their minds to come over to England and join de Gaulle, stole an aeroplane from a German aerodrome, "having distracted the attention of the sentries by a clever ruse," and then flew it across to England where "despite their inexperience" they contrived to land with nothing worse than a few bruises. Well, I thought, that probably refers to us and it's as near the truth as a lot of other things in the papers these days. But I hoped the squadron would never learn of my connection with it. That bit about "despite their inexperience" would not be forgotten for many a long day.

The other paragraph appeared in *The Times*, very short and to the point.

"From a correspondent in the unoccupied zone. It is learned that following a fight in a Laon café one Frenchman was stabbed to death and another was shot. Two German police who tried to intervene were also wounded. The assailants, who are believed to be de Gaullists, managed to escape in the confusion, and a rigorous search is being made for them."

* * * * *

Two months later, one afternoon in September, I walked into the mess for tea and took the mail from my rack. We had just landed after a tearing fight with a great mass of German bombers over the Thames and I was tired and mentally

fagged out. I opened a letter, read it absent-mindedly and then turned to the postcard underneath. It bore a Grenoble postmark and a moment elapsed before I realised who it was from and then I sat up suddenly and read it over and over again with the most intense interest.

It had been forwarded by Air Ministry and was addressed to Peter Claydon, R.A.F., London.

The date was August 10th, 1940.

> My dear Peter,
>
> I was very worried till today and then I saw a story in the English papers about two French boys and my heart was happy again. Please give the other boy a kiss and my affectionate regards. I arrived here without too much difficulty and am travelling in the right direction. Perhaps I shall see you again soon.
>
> Your friend,
>
> D'Artagnan.

* * * * *

We had to celebrate this. Giselle, Leighton, Dalkeith and I dined at the Berkeley. The major seemed happy at last and was busy digging trenches near Hythe and waiting for the Day, which he assured us would provide some damned good shootin' for all concerned.

We drank two toasts, one to Giselle, who sat smiling happily at the end of the table, looking more radiantly lovely than ever, and the other to Carnac.

“And damnation to the Boche,” added Leighton.

About ten o'clock the Group Captain announced that he had to go back to the office. Dalkeith seemed to think this was a hint for him, as he also rose and said he must be off. We shook hands and they departed.

Giselle and I stayed on, finished the Liebfraumilch and danced to our hearts' content. I felt strangely happy and at peace.

Later we walked along Piccadilly. A raid was in progress and the deep hum of enemy bombers could be heard above the crash of guns and the “whoom” of bombs bursting in the distance. We seemed to be the only people in London. By my side Giselle was humming softly “j'attendrai”; she had done so once before and I remembered the tune; it recalled that anxious day in Amiens when we first met.

In Piccadilly Circus we stopped. “Shall I try to get a taxi for you?” I said. “I think the Underground would be safer just now.” She didn't reply but slipped her arm through mine and we were silent for a little while. Life was very uncertain just now; I think we both hated to say goodbye.

“Au revoir, my Peter,” she said at length. “Take care of yourself.”

“Yes,” I said, “but before you go there's something Carnac asked me to do for him.” Despite the darkness I saw her smiling at me and I folded her tightly, very tightly indeed, in my arms and kissed her. It was the first time I had ever kissed her properly and all my long pent-up love and yearning for her lay behind that embrace. She raised her face to mine and returned my kisses with a sort of

controlled ardour that I had never known before, and for a little while there seemed no sound in the world but her gentle breathing.

I remember as if in a dream stroking her soft hair and saying over and over again:

"Oh, Giselle, my darling Giselle, don't ever leave me now."

"Goodbye, Peter my darling," she said at length. She put her arms tightly round my neck, gave me one more kiss and then broke away and ran quickly down the steps, leaving me with the words of that haunting song still running through my mind.

"*Le jour et la nuit, j'attendrai toujours ton retour.*"

(3-1) Author: Now known as Radar or sometimes Radio Location.

(3-2) Author: This was in 1940, and enormous strides have been made since then.