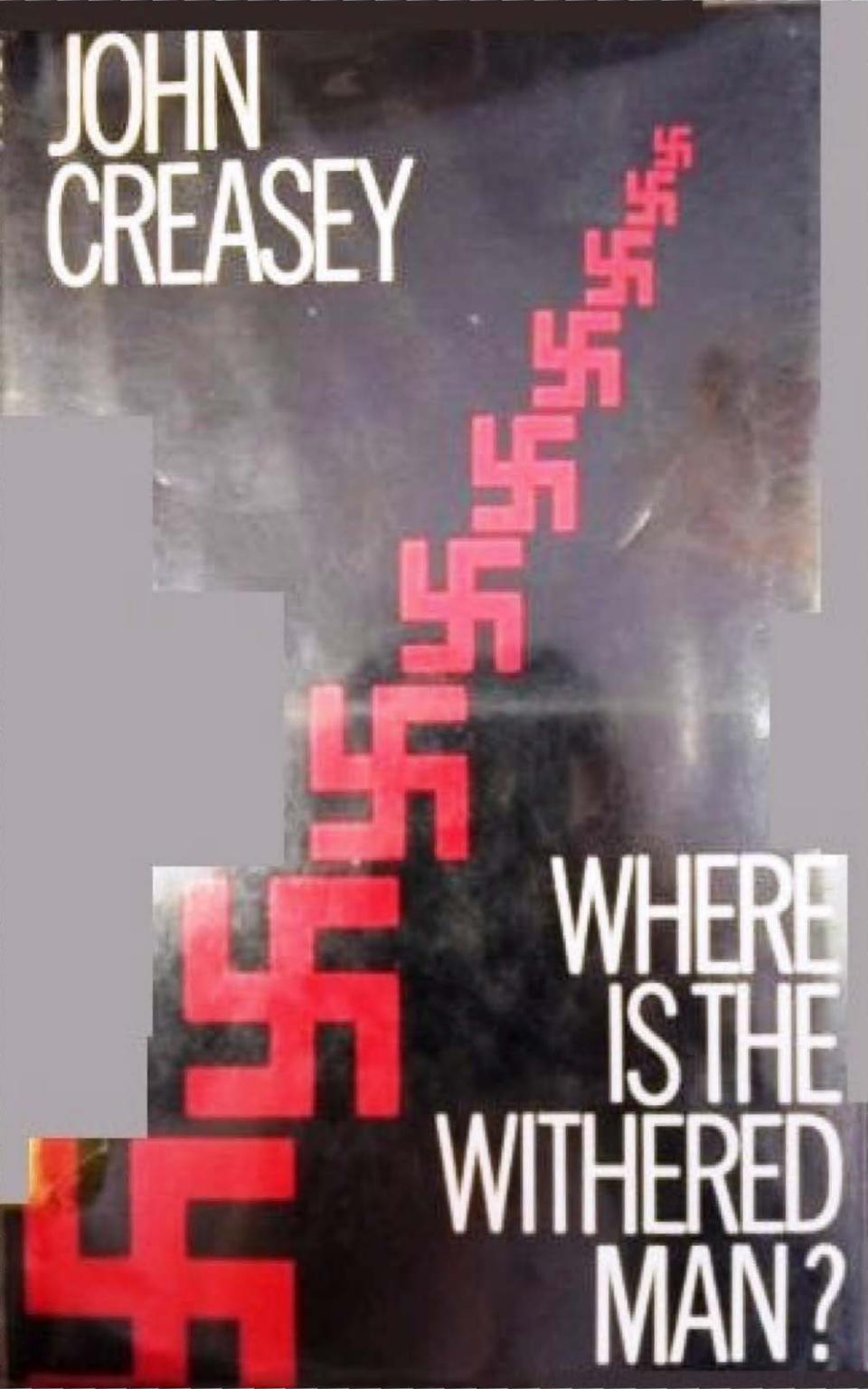
JOHN CREASEY



WHERE IS THE WITHERED MAN?

WHERE IS THE WITHERED MAN?

NOVELS BY JOHN CREASEY

Bruce Murdoch, Mary Dell and The Withered Man Saga

DANGEROUS JOURNEY
I AM THE WITHERED MAN
THE WITHERED MAN
WHERE IS THE WITHERED MAN?
UNKNOWN MISSION

Superintendent Folly Mysteries

THE GALLOWS ARE WAITING
CLOSE THE DOOR ON MURDER
FIRST A MURDER

WHERE IS THE WITHERED MAN

John Creasey

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1

Of Premonitions

I was firmly convinced that once Baron Ludvic von Horssell was dead, or his influence completely expunged from the continent, the war would be over bar shouting.

Bruce, I know, has always been tempted to laugh at this premonition, although usually he manages to keep his laughter in his eyes while discussing the matter with me. I don't think that he ever realised the full effect of the Baron on me. Only a woman could really plumb the depths of the horror which that gross, pot-bellied creature could inspire, only a woman could know the reality of terror accompanying the *thump!—thump!—thump!* which almost invariably heralds his coming.

Even when I have been in the midst of friends, sure that von Horssell could do me no immediate harm, I have felt icily cold, and been compelled to clench my hands and my teeth; such is the effect of the man on me, although I think, and hope, that I have managed to hide it most of the time.

There was a period when even von Horssell's other name had a peculiar, frightening effect on me. When I first heard it from the Pink Un I held my breath for a measurable moment. The Pink Un is a dear soul, often more of a child than a grown man—in fact, all the maturity in him has been poured into his control of Secret Intelligence (S.I. Branch), and in the brief intervals of relief from the strain of that command he is childishly playful, or arrogant and irascible. But if ever a man deserves the title 'genius' I think he does. There is some talk about his receiving a baronetcy after the war; it would be only a tithe of the reward the country owes him.

But I was talking of von Horssell.

The Pink Un occasionally lowers his squeaky voice and becomes really impressive, and the outstanding example of that histrionic power came when he called Bruce and me,

early one morning, and told us that von Horssell was in the country. He said in effect: 'Do everything, but get him. *Get the Withered Man*'.*

That is von Horssell's other name.

In cold print, it doesn't look so frightening. Its full effect only comes when it is uttered slowly, as the Pink Un uttered it. Then it conjures up all manner of nightmare visions, and although I have known von Horssell now for eighteen months, and have seen him often enough to develop a contempt which so frequently comes with familiarity, these visions get worse rather than better. A gross, pot-bellied man I have called him, but those words do him more than justice. He stands over six feet at his full height, has vast shoulders and a thick chest, making his enormous paunch look odd. His face is square, fleshy and florid; it is pitted as if he once had smallpox badly. He has no shape to his lips, which are almost bloodless, and on the few occasions when he smiles his large teeth show yellow and sharp-pointed. Despite his fleshy cheeks, there are no bulges beneath his eyes, which appear to make two deep pits, darkening the light grey of his pupils. He has to turn his head to glance sideways, for the pits of his sockets are too deep for him to look right and left. He has little hair, and what there is of it is cropped close to his head. He is like a smooth-pated vulture, sitting in the long chair which he needs to use.

Am I giving a sufficiently eerie picture?

I doubt whether that is possible. But I do know that few people see him for the first time without shivering; it is as if they know that they are looking into the face and the eyes of a man as corrupt as Satan.

If he could walk all the time, if there was anything normal and natural about him, the weirdness of his presence would lose effect. But his right side is withered, and he walks only in great pain, with the help of a thick ebony stick—a sword-stick, as I have learned to my cost—which makes the terrifying *thump*! Recall the effect of the first bombs that dropped near you, before you grew accustomed to the crumps and almost contemptuous of them. That is the effect of von Horssell's slow approach. Like a stick of bombs, each one drawing nearer.

* *The Withered Man*, by Norman Deane.

Thump—thump—thump—thump!

Something grips my vitals when I hear it. Of course, I have always contrived to force reluctant muscles to move, and I doubt whether he knows how deep a fear grips me when he appears. But before his arrival I am hypnotised into helplessness. When he has arrived and the thumping stops, my heart beats again and I am possessed by an unnatural excitement.

I am not trying to explain why it happens; I am simply putting on record the effect on me of Baron Ludvic von Horssell, *alias* the Withered Man, once an intimate of Goering, and, in the opinion of the Pink Un, Bruce, myself and several others, the most dangerous of the misbegotten thugs in the Wilhelmstrasse.

When this history reaches print, the gang may have disintegrated, for I *think* the end is near for them. I think, hope, and pray—and, of course, work—for it. I would be more confident if I were sure von Horssell was dead.

Some idea of the almost supernatural influence of the man can be gleaned from the fact that twice he has failed to succeed in a mission entrusted to him by his Führer, twice he has been retired, in disgrace; the operative word is 'retired', not liquidated. Any other man would have been sent to a concentration camp, or had a bullet in the back.

But von Horssell outlived disgrace at least twice, and returned to be high in the councils of the Nazis.

He is a Prussian, one of the old Junkers class, a survival of all the worst that there was in Germany during the First World War. Between the first and the second he grew more foul and obscene, because of his hatred of England, his fanatical devotion to the dream of *Herrenvolk*. He has no more regard for Hitler than I have—except that he sees in Hitler the leader of a German nation astride the world, the instrument of an England depopulated and sterilised, an Empire dispersed, a world at the heel of the Hun.

So much for the Baron Ludvic von Horssell.

* * * * *

I have always been sure that the end of the war will be in sight when the threat from von Horssell is finally dispelled. I was saying so to Bruce one day in the late autumn, a per-

fect day of a glorious week of Indian summer. There can be few better places to enjoy such weather than the Dorset coast, and Bruce had bought an old cottage some years before. There, in the brief intervals we had from work, Bruce and I repaired, to laze, read, laugh and love. We did even before we were married, a year ago—but we have since dispelled the illusion that marriage must needs take the sheen from romance.

That particular day Bruce was lolling back in a deck-chair. Although I have known no man who can live with so much discomfort, I certainly know none who will go to such lengths to be comfortable if he can. He wore khaki shorts, an open-necked and short-sleeved shirt, and had kicked off his shoes, but for some absurd reason wore golf stockings turned down just beneath his knees. He is fair, but, unlike most fair men, he tans to a pleasant golden-brown. The wind—there is nearly always a stirring of wind at that point on the cliffs near Lulworth Cove—ruffled his short, crisp, fair hair. His blue eyes were narrowed in the heat as he looked towards the shimmering surface of a gentian-blue sea, white-topped near the water's edge. A faint hiss of the waves on shingle reached our ears, and occasionally the shrill cry of gull or guillemot.

On a table at Bruce's right hand were cigarettes, pipe and tobacco, two bottles of lager on ice, and a political treatise; he is much more serious about politics than I, and I sometimes wish he would not condemn dead or retired English politicians quite so roundly as he does. Some of our acquaintances are convinced that he is a dyed-in-the-wool communist. He isn't, but you might think so, to hear him discoursing with vehemence and obviously genuine feeling on the follies of the past.

(We happened to be on leave during the week when Hitler turned on Stalin; there was a noticeable increase in the number of our visitors, an amusing curiosity about Stalin's Russia expressed by people who hitherto stiffened at the first mention of the topic.)

I was saying lazily:

'If he is dead, it won't be long now. And things have been so quiet over here—we seem to be doing all the fighting and bombing across the Channel—that it looks as if he might be.'

I spoke without thinking; the words came from that conviction, or premonition, about von Horssell.

I was in a backless flowered linen frock, and I spread my toes out in unfamiliar but luxurious sandals, while the wind blew a strand of my dark hair across my eyes.

Bruce's lips curved.

'And who is "he", darling?'

'Don't be an ass. Von Horssell, of course.'

Bruce chuckled. 'I suppose if the war ended tomorrow and von Horssell rang you up in the afternoon, you'd expect another outbreak next week?'

I pushed the hair out of my eyes, and sat up.

'How nice it must be to feel so superior,' I said a little sharply. (I don't pretend that I always maintain the unruffled temper which is Bruce's most lovable and most irritating quality. 'It won't end until he *is* finished, and . . .'

There wasn't much more I could say; intuition is a surprisingly difficult thing to support by logic. I sat back, a little out of temper, for I had been brooding over the German for the past twenty minutes, remembering how we had left him nine months or so before, after our escape from Vichy at the culmination of many months of Fifth Column work there.

'Sorry, sweet,' Bruce said. 'As a matter of fact, I always feel there is a little something in what you think about the gentleman. I'm as sorry as you are that we didn't kill him, but why worry about it now? We may actually have another month here. Von H. is five hundred miles away, and probably all hotted up trying to stem the dissatisfaction in the occupied countries. Imagine him going about trying to rub out "V" signs! He's too busy to be aggressive now. They're all on the defensive.'

'I don't think so,' I declared.

'Well, I suppose it's as much to do with mood as anything. I'm thoroughly enjoying the laze, and,' he added, placing a hand on my knee, 'I wish you were.'

I did not respond immediately. He was telling me that it was foolish to worry about von Horssell and the progress of the war, which had turned into lines so much more favourable to us than might have been expected a few months before. And Bruce, of all people, deserved a rest.

He had been much busier than I.

For nearly the whole of the summer I had been in England, working hard only in odd spells, spending most of the time in London with the Pink Un, Sir Robert Holt, O.B.E. Bruce had been abroad, to Russia as well as Finland and Rumania, to Spain, France and, for a few days, in Germany itself. I had grown so used to frequent separations and the knowledge that he was in countries where, if found, he would be shot forthwith. As Bruce was wont to say, I had been with him often enough on these dangerous missions to know quite well that there was as good a chance of getting back from them safely as coming unscathed through a London *Blitz*.

Bruce was tired. He would never tell me how many sleepless nights he had had abroad, of course, and I was angry with myself for not realising that he had certainly gone through ordeals which had tested even his strength. He needed this spell, divorced from anxiety or worry about von Horssell and S.I. Branch.

I should have known something of what he was feeling, for I recalled how his lips tightened when the telephone rang, and once when a telegraph boy from the village had brought a telegram instead of 'phoning it, he had been standing behind the curtains of the lounge, hands deep in pockets, face quite expressionless. He had expected a summons from Holt, of course; instead, it had been a message from my sister, postponing a promised visit.

Feeling myself in the wrong, yet not in the mood for admitting it, I smiled and leaned back, closing my eyes, although aware that he was looking at me. His hand remained on my knee, pleasantly warm and growing warmer. Bless him! I opened my eyes, and said:

'Sorry, darling. I suppose it's just that von H. gets into my system.'

'I know,' said Bruce. 'It wouldn't be a bad idea if we used up a gallon or so of petrol this evening for a spin. The best antidote to the heeby-jeebies is to see how normal everything looks in England.'

'We won't take Percy,' I decided. 'And I'll do the driving.'

The words had hardly left my lips before I realised that I wanted that spin through the narrow roads of Dorset more than anything else in the world just then. It was almost as if I feared I would never get another chance.

2

Percy and Others

Percy brought our tea to the lawn beneath the elm trees at the end of the garden. The first intimation of his coming, and the fact that it was half-past four, was a clatter of crockery and the sharp crack! heralding a breakage. I glanced over my shoulder quickly. Percy had overloaded a tray, and it looked as if a cup had fallen on the flagstones just outside the cottage—Cliff Cottage. Percy, not knowing that I was looking, made a vicious kick at a piece of broken china, and sent it skimming across the lawn.

Carrying the tray in both knuckly hands, short and lean, his chunky face browned to a colour almost of mahogany, and wearing a cream-coloured linen suit which was his summer pride, Percy marched towards us. I leaned forward, and cleared the table of Bruce's oddments. Percy was scowling pugnaciously as he reached us, putting the tray down with a clatter, and then drawing himself stiffly to attention. Percy did not know the happy medium between behaving like a brass hat's orderly or the too-familiar barman of a local pub. He had been Bruce's man, and, thank heavens, he accepted me with approval, if not enthusiasm. Sharp-witted as became a Cockney, fiercely loyal, incredibly brave where courage was needed, those three qualities more than made amends for divers shortcomings.

'Regret to report, ma'am, breaking one cup,' said Percy.

'Not one of the set, I hope,' I said, forcing myself to speak sharply.

'Don't you fret, I can git anovver,' said Percy, immediately losing his martial bearing. 'See one in Dorchester lars time I was in, *and* I'll pay for it. Shall I pour aht?'

'No. I'll do it,' I said.

'Okay.' Percy drew himself up to attention again. 'I wish to indent, sir,' he added with a stern look at Bruce, 'for one

tray—a large one.' He turned away, and under his breath I heard him add: ' 'Ow'd yer 'spect me ter carry everything on a postige stamp?'

Bruce leaned forward, smiling reflectively.

'Percy hasn't been at his best lately,' he remarked. 'I think he's chafing under inaction, too.' He paused, and then added more quickly: 'Sorry, I'll take back that "too"!'

'You needn't,' I assured him. 'You're quite right, darling, but we've settled that question for the time being.' I poured tea, and wished I had not been quite so sharp about the broken cup, for the sponge sandwich which Percy had contrived to make from the basic rations was excellent; he made food for three stretch so far that I sometimes suspected he had a private arrangement with the tradespeople.

We were half-way through tea when we heard the 'plane.

Aeroplanes are not rarities in the south; more often than not, the drone of them is in the skies, usually from a great height, where they are hardly visible to the naked eye. At times, when daylight sweeps are starting, they pour over the little bay near us, in full formation. But I have not yet lost the habit of looking up quickly, and although I must have heard the engines of every kind of 'plane used by any side in the war, I can never distinguish between a single-engined fighter and a tri-engined bomber.

A machine was flying seawards at no more than three thousand feet. Bruce looked round, and said at once:

'It's all right. It's a trainer.'

The aircraft went a few hundred yards out to sea, then turned in a wide circle and came back, this time much lower. It was so low, in fact, that I could see the heads of the two men inside the glass-enclosed cabin, as well as the markings of the red, white and blue circles on the wings and fuselage. It passed over us, and I fancied that one of the men waved. Then it went off, and the engine faded to a low hum, only to grow louder again as it made another turn in the distance.

'They'd probably like to drop in to tea,' said Bruce.

'I won't send for more cups yet,' I said, keeping the 'plane in sight. Frowning, I went on more sharply: 'It's flying very low. It's nearly disappeared.'

'Ye-es,' said Bruce, and suddenly he stood up quickly, to get a better view over the hedge at the back of the cottage,

adding: 'What are the fools playing at? I—Good God! They've landed.'

The engine continued to drone, but there was no sight of the 'plane. I jumped up and followed Bruce towards the field on the other side of the narrow road which served the cottage and one or two neighbouring hamlets. The ground sloped downwards towards the edge of the cliffs, making it easier to see the small, flat field. In it were several posts to stop—theoretically at least—the landing of invasion 'planes.

I was not interested in the posts then.

The engine of the 'plane shut off abruptly, and I saw that it was at a standstill, the wings very close to the posts. From the cabin a man was climbing, and my heart began to beat fast.

'Well I'm damned!' exclaimed Bruce. 'That's Ted.'

'And Mick,' I echoed blankly. 'Oh, *damn*!'

I don't think Bruce was sorry; I don't think he will ever be sorry to see Mick Fuller or Ted Angell, who have worked with us on all our missions for the Pink Un, including those against the Withered Man. But his pleasure was tinged, even then, with a knowledge which my 'damn' expressed—a conviction that Mick and Ted would not have come by air, without warning, unless they had been ordered so to do by the Pink Un.

We passed through a gap in the hedge, crossed the road, and climbed a stile into the field. As we reached it, we saw Percy.

He had beaten us from the house, hidden by the building, and was standing with his back to the hedge, and with an old shot-gun in his arms. He was glaring pugnaciously, and as we saw him he shouted:

'Stay where you are!'

Percy is short-sighted, although he refuses to admit it.

From the training craft, Mick and Ted began to walk slowly, not altogether unheedful of the order and the shot-gun, but probably sure that we could curb Percy's aggressiveness. Bruce called to the little Cockney with a laugh in his voice:

'All right, Percy. You can get two more cups. They'll be thirsty.'

'They . . .' began Percy, peering forward and not lowering his gun.

Mick and Ted were near enough then to be recognised, Mick a man of medium height, looking much shorter because of the width of his shoulders and depth of his chest. He has between-coloured hair which is never tidy, and was very wind-blown then. Ted is six inches taller, a thin, often tired-looking man, good-looking where Mick is no more than attractively ugly.

'Gaw bless my soul!' exclaimed Percy. 'I never seed 'em. Okay, Mister B!' To him Bruce, when in favour, is Mister B, and when out of favour, Mr. Murdoch, *sir*.

We met Ted and Mick half-way to the aircraft.

Both were smiling widely; both looked very fit and well. They gripped our hands, and there was no lack of enthusiasm on our side despite that deep-seated conviction that this was the end of our rest period.

'And how are the idle rich?' boomed Mick, a deep-voiced man. 'Tea on the lawn, if you please. Don't you know there's a war on?'

'Let 'em alone,' counselled Ted, tucking an arm about my waist—we have known each other for ten years. 'You hadn't finished, had you? We're famished.'

'There must be a stronger word than famished,' declared Mick.

'The Murdoch household has never failed us with a meal yet,' declared Ted, 'and by the look of Bruce's tummy they haven't started going short yet. What do you feed him on, Mary?'

Bruce being a little too lean even for my liking, I put the remarks down to their need for saying something. Bruce himself is far better than either of the others in hiding his true feelings. I usually know if he has anything to tell me, but I have known him keep a thing—usually a pleasant one —to himself for several days.

Mick Fuller and Ted Angell were simpler souls.

Moreover, their method of arrival spoke for them, although it was clear that they did not want to broach the main topic of their visit until they were alone with Bruce. As the Pink Un's semi-permanent secretary, which, when translated, means his secretary when I am not actively at work abroad, I like to feel that I am in his confidence.

I was tempted to be aggressive, and to wait while Percy prepared a meal for them, but there was always the possi-

bility that they had received orders from the Pink Un not to tell me. If that were the case, it was hardly fair to get in their way. So I left them on the lawn, Ted sprawling on the grass and Mick in my deck-chair.

Percy rarely actively resented my intrusions there, although in the early days he was obstructive. He had read somewhere that a woman of 'class' spent her life ordering this and that to be done for her, and was convinced that the baking of a cake or the making of jam or a trifle were degrading tasks for me, preventing me from attaining—or maintaining, I was never sure which—the courtesy of 'lady'. We reached a tacit understanding that on the days when I wanted to prepare lunch or dinner or to do some baking, he would find work in the garden or would clean the car.

After the incident of the broken cup, I would not have been surprised to find him haughty. Not a bit of it! He looked up eagerly as the door opened, and beamed across the small, modernised kitchen. The kitchen was modernised, that is, in all but its ceiling, and it was annoying that Percy could stand upright, where in places I had to stoop.

' 'Ere's a fine old 'ow d'ye do,' said Percy, who was in the larder, uncovering what remained of a small joint. ' 'S'all very well, poppin' in by road, but when it comes ter droppin' out've the very skies—strewth, it's a bit 'ot. *Mind yer head*!' He always warns me of a low beam by shouting. I ducked. 'Are they 'ungry, or just feeling like a snack, Mrs. B?'

'Very hungry,' I replied.

'Cor luv a duck!' exclaimed Percy. 'I bet Mr. Ted said 'e was famished. Well, there ain't much left on *that*,' he added, regarding a wilting half-shoulder of lamb with a frown. ' 'Ave to get dinner from a tin. Wot abaht one o' them steak puds? A bit 'ot for them today, d'you think? I could do some peas, and—*mind yer head!*—an' I left over plenty of spuds for fryin' up for breakfast.'

'There's a little bit of bacon . . .' I said tentatively.

'But no heggs,' said Percy firmly. 'Bacon without heggs won't do no good to Mr. Mick's hinside; it'd just tease it. Steak pud,' he added firmly, and then with a quick glance at me, 'if it's okay by you.'

He was right; if they were hungry, a steak pudding even out of a tin would be more welcome than a scrap of grilled

bacon. 'All right,' I agreed. 'But there's no time to do peas.'

'Shelled 'em all ready fer dinner; they won't take long cooking; picked 'em meself this morning.'

I wanted to be doing something; but, seeing that I had a chance of cooking only one week in four or five, and in view of the difficulties of catering with next to nothing, it was wiser to leave the task to Percy. He had a carpenter's apron tied about his cream linen trousers, and was in his shirt-sleeves. He reached up for a tin, asked me to pass him a tin-opener, and urged me to sit down if I didn't want to bang my head.

All the time I was thinking of the trio on the lawn.

Percy, of course, knew that, and he maintained a running fire of comments until everything was in hand. Then he leaned against the white-tiled sink, looked squarely at me, and said:

'You reckon Pinky's goin' to do the dirty on you agen?'

'It's beginning to look like it,' I admitted.

'Well, d'yer know what I'd do if I was you?'

'No,' said I.

'Well,' said Percy, lifting a fork and prodding it forward in slow deliberate movements, 'I'd say to Pinky, I'd say, "Nar look 'ere, I've 'ad enough of it. Never you mind abaht it not bein' work for a woman," I'd say. "I've done plenty o' work fit fer a man, *an'* you know it. I'm on this 'ere job," I'd say, "and don't you think I ain't." *That's* what I'd say."

'Hmm,' I said.

'Oh well, if you ain't got the g—pluck,' amended Percy off-handedly, 'I shan't say no more abaht it. But *I* ain't stayin' on me own, oh, no, betcher bottom dollar I ain't.'

I stood up slowly, gradually realising why Percy had delivered himself of an oration. He was also afraid of being left behind.

'Percy,' said I, 'I believe you think . . .'

'Mind yer 'ead!' roared Percy. 'Coo blow, look at them peas, boilin' their blinkin' 'eads orf. That's a question for yer: Do peas 'ave 'eads? Pass the salt, will yer, I think I fergot it—do they like a lot o' salt, or just so-so?'

It was impossible to be annoyed with him, and in any case I was not so much annoyed by his blatant ruse as worried by the conversation doubtless ensuing on the lawn. There being nothing I could do in the kitchen, I went into

the lounge, where I could see the garden.

All three men were talking earnestly.

I took a cigarette, lit it, and sat on the arm of a settee. I smoke comparatively rarely, but felt the need for a cigarette then. It was particularly vexing, for the blue sky and, beyond it, the equally blue sea, looked quiet and serene, and there was no craft in the air or on the water. I was suddenly angry with myself for the momentary restlessness which had made me talk as I had before the arrival of the training 'plane.

The telephone rang.

It was on a table, almost within my reach. I twisted round, leaning backwards and sideways for it. There was a knitted cover, and when I pulled it off I almost upset the instrument and, in saving it, nearly lost my balance, so that the telephone kept ringing, and Percy appeared suddenly in the doorway.

'Mind yer 'ead!' he roared again.

I banged it on the corner of the table as I recovered myself.

'I *did* tell yer,' said Percy reproachfully.

I rubbed the spot, stood up, and lifted the telephone; had I done that in the first place I would have had no difficulty. Percy's expression inferred that I should be old enough to know better, while he waited in the hope of hearing who was on the line.

I don't know whether he was expecting a call.

I know that I was not, and even had I been, the voice at the other end of the wire was the last I would have dreamed of hearing in that quiet room overlooking the peaceful, deceptively peaceful, waters of the English Channel.

'I vish to speak to Mrs. Murdoch,' the man said, and as my fingers tightened about the telephone and my features grew tense, I recognised von Horssell's voice.

3

Sir Robert Is Talkative

I was staring towards the door, but I did not see the startled expression on Percy's face when he saw me, although I did vaguely realise that he turned and hurried outside. I waited until the man at the other end of the wire spoke again, and said: 'Mrs. Murdoch speaking.'

I hardly knew how to form the words. That was partly through shock—and it *was* a shock!—and partly because of the peculiar effect von Horssell has on me. I would be self-possessed in a matter of minutes, but to be self-possessed all the time was the only effective way of dealing with this man.

He went on as if he had limited time at his disposal.

'Goodt. I have word for you. Murdoch is to be asked to work again, against me. For him, it vill be fatal. Also, for you. Please to remember that. Prevent him from vorking, and all will be safe for the two of you.'

I heard the click of his receiver going down, but stood holding mine to my ear. Confused sounds were coming over the wire, and others from outside. Suddenly my mind cleared and I pumped the receiver up and down urgently. The voice of the operator answered at last, and I said:

'Where did that call come from, please?'

'Which call?' asked the operator.

'I just received a call at Lulton 89,' I said carefully. 'Find where it came from, please, and let me know at once. The police will confirm the request.'

'I'll do what I can,' said the operator more briskly.

As I replaced the receiver, the smoke from my cigarette curling up from my fingers, a footstep sounded in the hall. Bruce entered, and I knew from his face that he was alarmed. He stood still for a moment, as if tremendously relieved to see me all right.

'What's the trouble, darling?'

'Trouble?' I said weakly.

'Percy came running out and said you'd seen a ghost!'

I drew a deep breath. Things were falling into a better perspective, although that hoarse voice still echoed in my ears, and I had not altogether managed to convince myself that it had been real. Mick and Ted crowded into the room after Bruce.

'I heard a ghost,' I said unsteadily. I suppose I must have looked pale, a little beside myself. Bruce put a hand on my arm, and asked quietly:

'Von H., was it?'

'Can you say it as calmly as that? Can you—Bruce! Did you know?'

'So it was the gentleman,' Bruce said evasively. 'What was it—the usual threat if we don't keep off the grass?'

'Yes.'

'It's odd how the gentleman sticks to the old and tried methods,' Bruce said musingly. 'Anyone with a penn'orth of commonsense would have given them up years ago. I suppose he finds that they work sometimes. Did he let himself go in any other way?'

I said: 'No,' and explained exactly what had passed. Ted Angell relaxed a little, and sat on the arm of an easy chair.

'Well, you didn't lose any time getting it traced. I wonder if they'll have any luck?'

Bruce shook his head.

'He won't have left a trace.' He spoke so mildly that part of my own astonishment at the discovery that the Withered Man was in England faded. For Bruce was not surprised; nor were the others.

Things were better after that, aided by an announcement from Percy that dinner was ready, and would we like it on the lawn or in the dining-room? Ted and Mick voted for indoors, and Percy carried in his tin-made triumph. From the way the two men tucked in, there was nothing the matter with the 'steak pud'.

Bruce said little during the early part of the meal, while I was trying to make myself realise that we were sitting in the small, low-ceilinged dining-room, cool because it faced north-east, with the breeze fluttering the curtains which I had chosen with great care, while von Horssell was near

enough to telephone me. Percy hovered about the room, clearly determined to miss no crumb of conversation, but none was vouchsafed him, and he went out after clearing the table, barely concealing his exasperation.

Bruce's humorous glance as the door closed behind Percy with a pronounced bang did more than anything to restore my sense of perspective. It made me realise that the others were thinking about a situation very nearly unique in the history of Secret Intelligence, S.I. Branch. I say very nearly, because von Horssell had been in England once before, during the tense days following the collapse of France.

Mick pushed a plate aside and leaned back in his chair.

'I don't know who cooked it,' he said, 'but that was good.'

'It was Crosse and Blackwell, with a little stirring up by Percival Briggs,' said I.

'I don't believe it,' declared Ted.

'There are things more difficult to believe than that,' I retorted.

'Yes,' Bruce admitted. 'And von H. is one of them! He's fantastic at all times, and this . . .' He shrugged, and paused. 'Well, the Pink Un might not approve, but I'm going to take the chance and take Mary into our confidence.'

My heart leapt; if Ted had not been in the way, I would have leaned forward and kissed Bruce! I waited, eager and expectant, when a loud rat-tat-tat sounded at the front door.

It was so sharp and unexpected that it made us all jump. I muttered an imprecation, for an interruption just then could put an end to talking.

Bruce cocked an eyebrow towards the door, which opened so promptly that obviously Percy had been in the hall. Percy began to say 'Good afternoon,' but went only as far as the 'Good'.

'Good . . .' he said, and then let himself down badly, although with droll caution. 'Well I'll be—jiggered! Cor luv a duck! Come in, woncher?'

Then followed a voice as familiar as von Horssell's.

But it brought with it friendliness, a feeling of confidence, of warmth. It was not much of a voice as men's voices go, deep only on some words, squeaky on others. Sir Robert Holt suffers from a minor affliction of the larynx which he steadfastly refuses to have attended, being, he maintains, hereditarily and organically distrustful of surgeons.

' 'Lo, Briggs. Looking well. Where's everybody?'

' 'Avin' some grub—food,' said Percy. 'Strewth, who'd ha' thought it! 'Ere, excuse me, sir—any chance fer *me*?'

I laughed; I couldn't help it. I could imagine the tense expression on Percy's face, and thought the Pink Un smothered a laugh before he said:

'It wouldn't surprise me, Briggs. Nothing should surprise a man these days, eh? Come along, now, come along, I haven't got all day to waste. Which room?'

The door opened, and Pinky entered.

Pinky and the Pink Un were inevitable nicknames. Sir Robert Holt was, and is, a short, tubby man, immaculately garbed, with a big face and large features, except for a button of a mouth, big owlish eyes, and two well-developed chins as well as one in embryo. Sitting, the third chin grows more mature. His face and neck are pink, and it is hard to believe that he ever shaves, for his cheeks appear to have only a little feathery down on them. His forehead and the front of his head—he is virtually bald—are also pink, baby pink which ebbs and flows with his mood.

'S'Robert 'Olt,' bellowed Briggs from behind him.

Bruce stood up, as did Mick and Ted, Mick nearly knocking a plate off the table. The Pink Un came in on his absurdly short legs, beaming widely, and proving that he was in the best of moods. He waved a plump, pink hand vaguely.

'Don't get up,' he said. 'Phew! Too hot for the time of the year. Bring me a cold drink, Briggs, will you? 'Lo, Mary. You look prettier than ever.' Trust Pinky to talk in clichés at the beginning of an interview. ' 'Lo, the rest of you. Look here, don't have to sit and swelter here, do we? Deck-chairs on the lawn. I saw 'em.'

As we went through the garden he paused by some late dahlias—everything was late that season—and admired them at such length that I could have screamed. He approved the lawn, but deserted horticulture at last, only to be interrupted by another arrival.

This time it was a policeman.

The man had cycled, for his bike was resting against the drive gates. Behind him were several farm-labourers, and pitch-forks were well in evidence, while one man wore the blouse but not the trousers of a Home Guard uniform, and

also carried a rifle. Somewhat hesitantly, the policeman approached our party, and I was not surprised when the Pink Un stepped towards him.

'Well?' he growled, caught on a low note.

'Good-day, sir,' said the constable, and thus established an attitude of deference. 'Thick men do say they see an aryplane come down over thick field.'

Pinky frowned, but I did not think it was due to any difficulty with the Dorset dialect which, in hybrid form, the constable was using.

'Hmm, they do, do they? Well, what about it?'

'Seems I should know who was drivin' un,' declared the constable firmly.

'Oh, it does, does it?' growled the Pink Un. 'It came down nearly an hour ago, didn't it?'

'Ar, sir.'

'Then why the devil have you been so long getting here?'

'We bin looking,' the constable declared.

'If you'd spent much more time looking,' growled the Pink Un, 'a dozen aeroplanes could have landed.' A glimmer of a smile curved his lips. 'All right, Constable. All right The military are looking after this area, aren't they?'

'Ar,' said the constable. 'I bin thinking, sir. No one took interest in un, mebbe they didn't see un. So I come.'

'Between you and me,' said Holt, leaning forward and speaking confidentially, 'the military expected this 'plane, and let it through.' He took a card from his pocket, showing it to the policeman, who read it carefully and then looked at the Pink Un squarely, clearly relieved.

'Thank 'e, sir!'

'That's all right, all right,' said Holt. 'Just as well to keep your eyes open. The military might need looking after sometimes, eh?' He laughed, explosively, and the final note went up to a shrill falsetto. He passed a coin, or perhaps two, and added: 'Thirsty work, hunting aeroplanes in this weather, eh? Buy everyone a drink.'

The five of us watched the constable turn, after offering due thanks, and rejoin the labourers. There was a moment of earnest consultation before the party moved off, the sun glinting on the three pitch-forks mustered amongst them. Short, sturdy, broad-faced men all of them, typical Dorset

natives, whom I had come to like although at first they had regarded me with suspicion.

Pinky turned and made a bee-line for the nearest deck-chair. Percy had brought more lager and another bucket of ice. Pinky opened his coat, showing a pair of red braces, drank with noisy enjoyment, and then looked deliberately at me.

'Well, Mary? What do you think of things?'

'I haven't had time to sort them out yet,' I said.

'H'mp! Well, let's see what we can do. In the first place, I sent Ted and Mick down here to talk to Bruce. Didn't want you told about it. No need, I thought. After all, you don't want more truck with von Horssell.'

He uttered the words casually, and I knew that he expected to create a sensation. He loves the dramatic, and will go to inordinate lengths to get effect. But his words fell obviously flat, and his button mouth relaxed slightly as he swung round on Bruce.

'You've been talking!' he snapped.

'I have not,' said Bruce spiritedly.

'Then how does she know. *You've* been talking,' he flung at Mick and, when Mick shook his head, at Ted. Ted also presented a firm denial, and Holt could be sure of one thing: none of the men would lie to him.

I told him what had happened.

A remarkable change came over Pinky then. It was a metamorphosis which I have often seen, yet it never fails to surprise me. The geniality, the love of drama, the childish *naiveté*, dropped away. It was no more than a subtle change in expression, yet was very obvious to any who knew him well. In a surprisingly level voice, he said:

'So he's down here. I suppose I shouldn't really be surprised.' He drummed his fingers on his taut trousers, by his thigh, and went on: 'I knew he was in England, of course. That's why I sent Ted and Mick. A job for you three, obviously.'

'Four,' I interpolated. 'And Percy thinks five.'

'H'm. The last time wasn't so good for you, Mary. Not a woman's job, von Horssell.'

'Don't be absurd,' I said sharply, and with the familiarity which ten years excuse, at least with the Pink Un. 'It's essentially a woman's job. Elsa will be with him, won't she?'

'Not necessarily,' said Holt. 'He can't travel much without her, though. Well. He's here. I've kicked up a hell of a stink in Whitehall. He shouldn't have got into the country. Don't know how he did it, but I'm going to have someone's whiskers for letting him through. However, that doesn't get us anywhere. We'll find him—we've got to. It isn't going to surprise me if he's here to organise a final effort. The Nazis are getting desperate. I don't have to tell you that. They can't last much longer, as things are. But von Horssell probably thinks he can see a way of getting results. No other reason why he should come. The question is, how to stop him? We can make things so hot for him that he'll be driven to try to get away again, and get caught. Question is: Do we want that to happen? Or would we be wiser to let him start whatever he's come to do?'

4

Plan of Campaign

I did not follow the last remark closely. I was thinking that Pinky's manner held tacit agreement to let me work on this new hunt for the Withered Man; and I wanted nothing better. I was absorbed in that when he stopped, and the last sentence echoed in my mind. When it came home to me, I sat up with a jerk and said:

'What?'

'That's right. That's right. Make useless comments,' squeaked the Pink Un. 'If you didn't hear, you should have. We want to know what he's up to, don't we?'

'Yes,' I said. The men seemed determined to keep silent.

'Well, how can we if he doesn't start it?'

Again there was a pause, and since Bruce and the others maintained their non-committal policy, I replied:

'If he gets anything started, he might succeed. Can we risk it?'

'Of course there's a risk, but not so great a one as there was a year ago. Now, try and follow this. He's never been known to come here without a good purpose or to go anywhere without one. Right?'

'Too true,' I said fervently.

'Then he has a good purpose now. We thought that the country was prepared enough to prevent any Fifth Columnist from working. Well, *he* doesn't think so, or he wouldn't be here. What's given him the idea that he has a chance in a million of starting anything?'

It is a little difficult to make it clear just how Holt spoke. He uttered the words with his usual mixture of bass, tenor and falsetto, yet made them so impressive that I grew apprehensive, even frightened. He made it crystal clear that there was a danger of which he was unaware in the country; and S.I. knows, or should know, every conceivable outlet for subversive activities.

Bruce spoke next. He was lying on one side on the grass, his pipe drooping from his lips, the sun shining through the elm trees and making a tracery of light and shadow on the back of his head.

'Aren't we missing something?' he asked.

'What?' snapped the Pink Un.

Bruce replied equably:

'Well, he 'phoned Mary. The ostensible purpose of the call was to frighten her, and we know him well enough to be sure he'd think that worth trying. But he wouldn't have 'phoned if it gave anything away. He would know perfectly well that once he called her, she would tell me, and I would tell you. Therefore he either (*a*) wants us to know he's here, or (*b*) thinks that we're aware of it already, and sees no purpose in hiding it.'

'Good Lord!' I exclaimed. 'Of course!'

'That stands to reason,' said the Pink Un, although I doubt whether he had worked it out as precisely as Bruce. 'It doesn't alter what I've said. Are we to let him start work?'

'Well,' said Bruce slowly, 'I don't see that we can stop him making a start. We want to know whether (*a*) or (*b*) really explains his telephone call. If it's (*b*), and he knows that we know, how did he come to know?'

'Don't keep repeating the same word,' said the Pink Un irritably. 'Of course, that's the problem. Why do you think I came down here?' He paused, rubbing his second chin. 'The thing is, only five people know that von Horssell is in the country, including me, not including any of you. In short, *four* people besides myself knew this morning. If von Horssell was aware that we knew, *one of those four must have told him.*'

That made me sit up, and it made Ted Angell speak for the first time. Ted is not a constructive talker; he is essentially a man of action, and admits that he is much happier when working under orders than when in full control of a situation. But he often makes a succinct observation.

'Who are the four?' he demanded.

Holt answered promptly.

'Palethorpe, of the Ministry of Propaganda. Hill, of the Foreign Office. Keverne, of Intelligence—he told me—and Beecham, of the *Echo*.'

It is never a pleasant thing to contemplate the possibility of treachery in high places, and the first three men whom the Pink Un mentioned were high officials in their particular departments, all virtually beyond suspicion. True, several men in high places had been convicted of treason, but so early in the war that they were forgotten by most people except those actively engaged in counteracting Fifth Column activities.

It was hardly surprising, therefore, that my mind turned towards Montague Beecham, of the *Echo*.

As the leading foreign correspondent of the *Echo*, an independent daily paper with a circulation approaching the two million mark, he had experienced many vagaries of fortune in the past five or six years. When Hitler first began his policy of expansion, Beecham was with the *Courier*, that lordly paper which followed the Government blindly in whatever course it took. Beecham believed that Hitler meant war, and condemned co-operation with him. As the then Government wanted co-operation, Beecham was soon a correspondent without a job. The trouble with the man was that, although a first-class reporter, he was a difficult personality. He thrived on arguments, and quarrelled one after the other with editors and managements, since they would not always accede his points. Then the war started and his gloomy prognostications were fully justified; virtually everything he had prophesied came true.

The *Echo*, thriving on sensation and success, took him to its bosom, and put up with his temperament. He spent six months in England, doing a praiseworthy best to stir the Government and the country to an awareness of the immensity of the task. That was after he returned from Poland. In the April following he went to France, scenting the spring attack, and he had been on most of the fighting fronts since then. His war-cry, and that of the *Echo*, was more guns, more tanks, more machines of every kind—or I should say it had been his war-cry. He wrote flamboyant articles too, on the degeneracy of British military policy.

I thought at the time that he carried his theme too far. But the *Echo* gave this stormy petrel of foreign correspondents full rein. From every fighting front came the same cry, the same wholesale condemnation of the lack of equipment and intelligent leadership, the same demand for a full

inquiry in the cause of it. His articles would often be headed something like this:

WHO SABOTAGES PRODUCTION?
1916 METHODS RAMPANT AGAIN

and, because there was at least a germ of truth in everything he wrote, and more than a germ in much, he became the mouthpiece, not only of the *Echo*, but of disgruntled people throughout the land. He supported the Prime Minister but maintained that general support for the nation's leader was far short of what it should be. Undoubtedly he was a thorn in the flesh of the Government, and it was hardly surprising when, in the previous summer—during the early days of the Russian campaign—he was offered a semi-official post.

I expected him to reject it, and to write a scathing article on an attempt to muzzle him. So did Bruce. I remember we both heard with something akin to contempt that he had accepted, for we had believed the man to be wholly sincere. After his immersion into semi-official ranks, his rantings became vapourings, and although he still worked for the *Echo*, much of the punch had gone from his articles.

Thus Beecham: the only man, outside surely irreproachable permanent officials, to know of von Horssell's arrival in England. And Bruce's (*b*) seemed the most likely theory —that von Horssell had let me know of his presence in the country because he believed Holt already aware of it.

There was a long silence after the Pink Un gave his list, and again it was Bruce who broke it.

'We're all thinking of Beecham, of course.'

'H'm,' grunted Holt.

'Can we be sure no one but those four knew?' demanded Mick.

'I think so,' said Holt, rather cautiously. 'Beecham has seen von Horssell several times, and says that he saw him yesterday afternoon in London. He tried to follow him, but failed. He went at once to Keverne—they're working together—and Keverne was with Palethorpe and Hill. Keverne sent for me, and I suggested that they sat on the news until I could find something out about it.'

'We aren't a lot further on though, are we?' Bruce

remarked. 'What do you propose to do?'

'Haven't worked it out yet.' Holt glared at Bruce's reclining figure. 'I've been playing with this idea and that. As I say, there seems a good deal to be said for letting von Horssell start what he's doing. If we don't, someone else will come over.'

'Meaning?' asked Mick.

Bruce said slowly: 'Meaning that if we could get von H. right away, before he's started his dirty work, we probably wouldn't get any further, someone else could follow him, someone we didn't know.'

'Assuming there is a working party,' interpolated Ted.

'We've got to assume there is,' insisted Bruce. 'Von H. wouldn't have come over if there wasn't.' He looked up at me, smiling a little. 'What do you think, darling?'

Pinky snorted. 'Darling' always makes him fidget.

I ignored that, however, for mentally I had not been inactive, and had in mind one fact which could not be overlooked. I voiced it:

'You seem to be assuming that you can catch von H. whenever you want to. I'm not so sure.'

Bruce chuckled. 'Cold feminine logic! Yes. There's a lot in that. Anything else like that to come out?'

'Well,' I said, 'there is one thing. Pinky says that because only four people apart from himself know that von H. is in the country, one of those four has been up to no good *if* von H. was aware that he'd been spotted. Well, that's only half-true, even as a theory.'

Holt turned his head to look squarely at me.

'Why?' he demanded in a dangerously quiet voice.

'Isn't it obvious that von Horssell could have deliberately allowed Beecham to see him?' I demanded. 'Isn't it possible that his 'phone call to me was part of the same trick—that he wants you to know he's here?'

'But why the devil should he?' snapped Holt.

Bruce had sat up abruptly. He had seen what I was driving at long before any of the others.

'Good God! Of course! Von Horssell would publicise the fact that he's here if he wanted us to concentrate on him while someone else is doing the real job. That it, Mary?'

'It's what I was thinking,' I agreed.

Ted was smoothing his chin, Mick pushing his fingers

through hair already untidy, and Holt was leaning forward with his hands on his knees. I would not have been surprised by an outburst of pseudo-annoyance, for he usually rejected a theory at its first offering.

Instead, he said: 'Ye-es. Yes. That could be what he's doing.'

'It looks a bit far-fetched to me,' put in Ted. 'I know he's a tortuous-minded beggar, but isn't that a bit too tortuous?'

'It holds only as a theory,' said Bruce. 'We've nothing else to work on at the moment, but if von Horssell is advertising his presence in the country, it could be for only that one purpose—to attract attention while someone else does get on with the job. The problem is: who is the someone else?'

'As far as I can see,' Mick said, 'we'd be a lot wiser to get on to von H.'s tail and get him under lock and key. He may be counting on us letting him go for a bit. I wouldn't willingly let him stay free for five minutes.'

There was a disquieting matter-of-factness about Mick's voice, which came like a douche of cold water. When everything was reduced to the essentials, moreover, it was clear that he was right. Von H. was too dangerous to be allowed to stay in England on the chance of finding what he was doing. He must be found, and quickly.

I was thinking like that, and I believe the others were of the same mind, when for the second time that day Bruce and I heard an aeroplane very low.

It was coming over the sea, flying almost straight out of the sun, so that it was impossible to identify it immediately. I disliked the powerful hum of the engine, but, as I have said, I always do.

The men peered towards it, hands shading their eyes.

It was Mick who recognised it first, when the engine was deafening, and the earth seemed to shake about us. That was purely an illusion, of course, but it seemed like that.

Mick was on his feet in one bound.

'Get down!' he bellowed. He grabbed my wrists, pulling me from the chair and, in the same movement, pushing me flat on my face. Bruce and Ted had seen what the 'plane was a split second later, and they manhandled the Pink Un as roughly as Mick did me.

The roar of the 'plane grew nearer. I imagined that I

could see the shadow of it passing over us, like the dark shroud of a beast of prey hiding the sun. I did not imagine the scream of a bomb as it began to fall. Oddly enough, I felt better then—I suppose that was the false exhilaration which often comes in the moment of greatest danger.

The first bomb burst.

Another, and a third.

While the din was in our ears, nearly deafening us and while the blast was actually moving us along the grass, helpless against its power, we heard something else. It was the falling of masonry, and I knew what it meant even before I dared open my eyes, before I was lying still again on the ground.

The cottage had been hit.

5

Out of the Ruins

I remember Bruce's voice, sounding as if from a long way off, saying urgently:

'Are you all right? Mary, *are you all right*?'

I managed to gasp: 'Yes.' I was afraid that one or more of the others would be badly hurt, but all of them were getting to their feet. Mick and Ted took the attack too casually, for Mick was already dusting down his trousers, and Ted was complaining of a grass stain on one knee.

Holt was glaring skywards, dancing with rage. It was an absurd sight to see that little plump man, a deeper shade of pink than before the attack, standing with his feet planted firmly on the turf and shaking a clenched fist.

Bruce helped me up.

The next moment proved that the reactions of Mick, Ted and the Pink Un had been false ones, exaggerated nonchalance after a moment of great danger. For with one accord, the two younger men began to run towards the house.

I said: 'Go on! I'm all right.'

It was a miracle that no flying debris had injured any of us, for bricks and pieces of granite, glass, wood and metal were lying about the garden. The bed where dahlias were blooming so late was untouched; the brilliance of the blooms was undimmed, although the flowers were near the lounge window.

For the rest, there was very little left of Cliff Cottage, very little remaining of a home which, although used so rarely, had come to mean sanctuary for Bruce and me. Yet, although I saw it vividly, I had only a great fear within me.

Percy had been in there.

Some of the walls were standing.

I stepped over broken pieces of furniture and noticed another small thing, a picture lying face upwards on the

grass, its glass unbroken; it was a water-colour by a friend of Bruce.

Damn the water-colour!

Bruce and the others were out of sight behind a swaying wall. The walls of the kitchen were standing, and although the glass was blown out, the frames were still at the windows. A glance through them, however, showed the kitchen in chaos; the middle seemed to be only a heap of rubble, for the ceiling had caved in, as well as the floor above. Pieces of rafters were swaying downwards, floor-boards were broken, and the corner of the spare bedroom carpet flapped against the inside wall.

There was Percy.

He was pressed against one wall, and a piece of floor-board prevented him from freeing himself. There was a cut on his forehead, but he was moving his arms freely enough, and his language suggested that he was more frightened than hurt.

'Steady, you idiot!' Bruce called. 'You'll have the lot down on top of you.'

The words brought a welcome touch of matter-of-fact-ness, while Percy's response did even more. For Percy started to make a lurid comment, saw me, and tightened his lips while at the same time assumed a completely blank expression.

'Sorry, m'm,' he said. 'Nasty people, them Nazzis.'

A lump in my throat made it impossible for me to speak. I watched Bruce and the others moving pieces of debris, and realised that Percy was not badly hurt even below the waist; he was surrounded by plaster more than heavy brickwork. It was Sir Robert who pinched my elbow, and said a little thickly:

'Better see what we can salvage.'

He wanted to keep me busy. As soon as I began to pull odds and ends from the kitchen, I felt better. Things happened very quickly afterwards. Among them, the Pink Un went to the nearest A.A. box—mercifully his car had only a few scratches, while ours in the garage was probably all right, for the garage was still standing.

Built some distance from the house, which had absorbed most of the blast, the garage was the only habitable part of the premises. But it was surprising how many unbroken

oddments I pulled from the kitchen, after making sure that the men wanted no help with Percy.

He was nearly free when I went to the garage and took the car out. At one end there was a Primus stove and a picnic hamper, while I had salvaged tea and some tins of milk. Percy was able to walk from the kitchen, once freed, but he sat down in a deck-chair brought from the lawn, and was obviously glad of tea, with a lacing of whisky from Mick's flask.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about it all was the normalcy with which we accepted what had happened.

When Pinky returned, after 'phoning for assistance from Lulton, we examined the house more thoroughly. The dining-room had escaped comparatively lightly and I could see that most of the furniture was whole, and certainly repairable. The bedrooms were quite gone. Three bombs had dropped on the house, one direct on the front bedroom and the lounge, one near the small morning-room, and one on a wing which jutted out at the back. Mercifully, the kitchen had not received a direct hit.

I began to count my blessings.

Most of my clothes, and Bruce's, were in the London flat. Nothing would restore the furniture of the cottage; but the War Damage Act covered us financially. Percy had recovered from the shock and was at his best, stimulated by the near-disaster. And the bombing had had another major effect: it made us all more cheerful, by some peculiar perversity, as well as making us forget temporarily what we had been discussing.

We were lucky in other respects. Help soon arrived, and there was a country inn several miles away, which had room for us. We went there about seven o'clock, leaving a dozen men clearing the cottage as best they could; the idea, I gathered, was to get the furniture out before another wall collapsed.

Settled in an upstairs lounge at the inn, comfortable, and feeling ravenously hungry, I heard Mick say:

'Well, there are more troubles than von Horssell, after all.'

'My dear, sweet man,' said Mick slowly. 'We were bombed on von H.'s orders. He drew us nicely together, then bombed the place, including us, to Jericho. I know I

said something about being far-fetched before, but it fits von H. like a glove. Get us worried, let us know he's in England, take it for granted that we'll get into a huddle about it—and this is the obvious place to meet—and then have a go at us. How does it sound?'

'About right,' Bruce said. 'He's got his staff-work working in good order. I wonder how long the gentleman has been in the country? We all more or less assumed that because he'd only just been seen he had only just arrived, but he could have been here for months.'

That was so; but it was not pleasant to realise. There followed some desultory conversation, and then Ted Angell said with exasperation:

'Damn it, haven't we anywhere to start from?'

'Not yet,' said the Pink Un.

I think it was then that I realised that he had come down to us in order to think aloud. Twelve hours or more had passed from the time he had heard of von Horssell's presence in the country, and in that time he would not have been idle. There was no doubt that he had put all the tentacles of S.I. into operation, and that he had given the problem a great deal of thought.

'Perhaps his call was traced,' Mick suggested.

The faint hope of news from the telephone exchange was extinguished later in the evening. The call had been traced, and a report made to the police. The call had come from a call-box in Dorchester, but police investigation had shown only that a powerful car had drawn up outside the call-box about the time of the call.

The position was simply this: a man whom I believed to be the most dangerous in the world was loose in England. My estimate of his importance might have been exaggerated, but it was undoubtedly shared by both Bruce and the Pink Un.

Finally, after a passable dinner, and towards half-past nine, Sir Robert said:

'Well, you'd better come up to Town. Your flat's all right, isn't it?'

'I think so,' said Bruce. 'After this, I wouldn't like to be sure.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' said the Pink Un. 'You'd have

heard if it had been damaged. We'd better all get up there, and you can see Beecham.'

'Wouldn't it be better if Mary and Percy stayed here overnight, and joined us in the morning?' Ted asked.

'No,' I said promptly. 'It would not.'

'We'd better all keep together for the time being,' said Bruce, and I knew from his manner that there was something on his mind—something apart from the disasters of that day. He was quieter than usual, and spent a lot of time looking blankly ahead of him. He has a peculiar ability to see through things which I find impenetrable. It amounts almost to a sixth sense, although he discounts it.

'But,' he went on, 'I'm not so sure about going to the flat.'

'Why?' demanded Sir Robert.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Bruce offhandedly. 'We'll stay at one of the lesser hotels, I think. The Regal. There's bound to be plenty of room in mid-week. Mick and Ted can go ahead with Percy, and we'll come along with you, if it's all right.'

'Please yourself,' growled the Pink Un.

'Thanks.' Bruce heaved himself from a chair. 'It's time we were off. It'll be a lousy run in the black-out.'

Mick, Ted and Percy—quite recovered apart from some stiffness and a scratch or two—left the inn just after ten o'clock, and five minutes later we followed. It was not so bad as I expected, for there was a moon, and driving was very much easier than on a normal black-out night. We made a fair speed, and all the time kept sight of the red tail-lamps of the first car.

The rear-lights disappeared, although only for a moment.

The dark shape of the car was hidden, also, but another took its place.

The sight was eerie in the moonlight, although there was a reasonable explanation of it; a car had turned out of a side-road, and was now travelling in the wake of the others. Bruce glanced at me, and said easily:

'I wonder if we're being followed, too?'

I turned abruptly, while Sir Robert, who had heard the comment, also turned. The big head covered most of the rear window, but could not hide the twin side-lamps of a car about fifty yards behind us.

'Someone's there,' Pinky grunted, and turned abruptly.

'If you thought this was coming, Bruce, why didn't you say so?'

Bruce said: 'I did, as near as damn it. Isn't that what we wanted? Our followers might know something. Supposing we stop at the next bend.'

6

Foreign Correspondent

Bruce's casualness often robs a situation of its piquancy, although in other ways increases it. I rarely feel that the next moment might be my last, when with Bruce, although that is often enough true. He is always a restful, comfortable man to be near one, and although I was startled to know that we were being followed, the fact that he had anticipated it was comforting.

In fact I felt a little sorry for Sir Robert.

He has often been in danger himself, although Bruce and others have gone to great lengths to make him cautious. I think he is one of those men who is quite convinced of immortality, and he has sometimes walked into an appallingly dangerous situation as if quite unaware there was anything the matter. His reaction therefore was not surprising.

'We don't want to be too late getting to Town,' he said.

'Five minutes here won't do us any harm,' Bruce said. We turned a corner as he spoke, and he put on the brakes slowly. That was all he did do slowly, for he stretched across me and opened my door, adding: 'Out. Quick!'

I slid out.

He climbed down from the other side, and the Pink Un remained, leaning back, keeping his head below the window. The moonlight cast faint shadows and bathed the countryside in a lambent milky whiteness, so that the trees, with their leaves colour-blanched, so different from the glorious tints of day, were like pallid sentinels. The car looked a long, blunt-nosed thing of silver.

'Keep to the hedge,' Bruce ordered.

As he spoke he stepped into the middle of the road, and the other car came round, at a pace enough to make my heart go into my mouth. But there was no danger, for the

driver jammed on his brakes, while Bruce moved aside swiftly.

Bruce has often said that he finds the common sense of a situation the best key to it. Obviously the common sense of that situation was that had the occupants of the car behind us wanted to complete the work that the Stuka had started, some kind of attack would have materialised. Bruce counted on that, of course.

I kept by the hedge, while the Pink Un cautiously opened his door.

'What's he doing?' he whispered.

'Just approaching the car,' I said, and wished that I could be at Bruce's side. I climbed up on the bank from which the hedge was growing, and could see over the top of the car to the two men then standing in the road. I could see the interior of the second car, moreover; it was empty. The only occupant had been the driver.

I recognised the other man, even in the moonlight. The big, burly figure, the shock of untidy hair on which was jammed a hat two sizes too small, were unmistakable. So was the deep, laconic voice which greeted Bruce.

'Well, what's your little game?'

That was Beecham of the *Echo*.

. . . . .

Bruce responded in a quieter voice, but his words were quite audible.

'I was about to ask you that.'

'I have a perfect right to use the road.' Beecham's voice itself is not particularly unpleasant. It is his manner which annoys, arrogant and domineering. He has a swagger which obtrudes even into his voice and his figure when he is standing still.

'I've never liked being followed and I don't like it now,' Bruce said. 'Just a moment, Beecham.' His voice sharpened, and I saw that the foreign correspondent had half-turned, as if about to go back to his car.

The mention of his name stopped him.

He turned back abruptly, while Bruce said:

'That's better. Why are you following us?'

'You think you're important enough for that, do you?'

sneered Beecham. 'Now that you've got out of my way, I'll go on.'

'Is it worth the lies?' Bruce demanded.

'Sure, it's worth whatever I think it's worth,' said the correspondent glibly.

I was disappointed that Bruce let him go so easily, but there was little else to do. Beecham climbed into his car, a powerful Hispano, and drove off; the engine made only a purring sound as the car disappeared. Bruce rejoined us, leisurely. I had already climbed back, and the Pink Un was sitting forward, plump hands on the back of my seat.

'Beecham?' he demanded.

'Yes,' said Bruce slowly. 'And that's interesting, to say the least. I'll certainly look him up tomorrow.' He let in the clutch and started off again.

The encounter had been disappointingly short and fruitless, and I began to think that everything about the affair would be. If only von Horssell had not telephoned, I would have felt much better.

I should have been grateful, I suppose.

I might have been had I known the higher speed at which events were going to move within twenty-four hours. It was a slow, deceptive beginning, and although I was relieved I was also puzzled when, at the Regal, we found Ted and Mick waiting in the foyer. They had been followed to the outskirts of London, they said, and then the other car had taken a different road. They remembered a powerful car passing them, but had no idea that Beecham had been driving. Moreover, they were tired. Percy had already gone to bed, while they had been able to arrange for some sandwiches and tea or coffee. Which would I prefer? I said tea, for it never makes me restless. I was still a little depressed, and remained so until, after getting into bed, I felt Bruce's arm tighten about my shoulder and, very quickly, I was asleep. I slept well.

I was alone when I woke.

I felt heavy with sleep, although it was broad daylight, and the sun was coming through a corner of the window. I stayed quite still for some minutes, drowsy, a little dispirited, but not knowing why. Then I remembered what had happened, and sat up.

Bruce was not only up, but his clothes were gone.

It is rarely that he can get up and dress without disturbing me, and I was annoyed with myself. I rang for some tea, and looked at my watch; it was nearly nine o'clock. I had tea, bathed, and dressed again slowly, conscious of the backless linen frock which was my only apparel until I sent to the flat. I decided to have breakfast in my room and send Percy for a suit out of my wardrobe, but before I had started to make arrangements for either, Bruce came in.

I was brushing my hair, always rebellious and needing a great deal of attention, and I saw his reflection in the mirror. But for that I might not have realised that there was anything amiss. For the moment, before he knew that I could see him, his lips were set tightly and his eyes were narrowed. Then he smiled and, tossing a hat to the bed, said:

'Awake already, sweet?'

'That's more than enough sarcasm from you,' I said, turning as he reached me and kissed my forehead. He rested his hands on my shoulders. I gripped his right wrist quickly and tightly. 'Darling, what is it?'

I was looking up at him; he was looking down at me, so that neither of us saw the other in the normal perspective, and could not see the other's expression. He stayed silent for a few moments, and then said quietly:

'We need a new flat, too.'

I stiffened, and he did not move.

'You mean . . .' I began, and then stopped.

'It caught fire,' he said briefly. 'Apparently it happened about three o'clock this morning, or an hour after we might have been expected to get there.'

'So *that's* why you came here?'

'Well,' said Bruce, 'it looked to me that if they wanted to get us, they would try both places. It wouldn't take them long to find that we'd escaped harm at the cottage, and as the obvious place for us to go was the flat, they would probably put paid to that. They did. Incendiarism, without a doubt. They didn't even leave us a tea-cup, this time.'

Despite the greater issues my first thoughts were personal; I suppose selfishness to a certain degree is ingrained in us all. Cliff Cottage, rendezvous for so many halcyon days, and now the flat, a little place which Bruce had furnished completely as a *pied-à-terre*, as precious in many ways as the cottage by the cliffs.

All gone . . .

With the rest of my clothes! The hundred-and-one little things which money can never replace, well-thumbed books we had kept from childhood, some etchings my sister had given me on my marriage—delicate things she had done herself.

I could not keep the tears back altogether, although after a sniff or two, and taking the handkerchief he held out and dabbing my eyes, I felt more composed. He took his hand away, and sat back in an easy chair by the side of the dressing-table. He looked at me with a little, one-sided smile, as he took a cigarette case out, lighting one for me and another for himself.

'And so we've got some refurnishing to do,' he said, easily but not lightly. 'I think we'd better finish with von Horssell first, don't you?'

I said: 'Has anything else developed?'

'Not yet. We're having Beecham watched, and I'll see him a little later in the morning. I'm more than tired of theorising, but there's one thing we can't evade, unless we want to be deliberately blind: von H's right on our heels.'

'Well,' I said, 'that's elementary.'

Bruce made a face. I remember thinking that what had happened did not really matter while he could sit back in an easy chair, legs crossed, long, lean body at ease, eyes revealing the inner laughter which few things have ever dulled. I remember, also, that in and out of my mind there passed a determination not to visit the flat.

'Sorry, Holmes,' he said. 'But there's a secondary stage, I think. He is in England, we've assumed that.'

'There's no assumed about it,' I said with spirit.

He looked at me for a few seconds, mut went on without referring to my retort.

'But we haven't yet gone beyond reasoning that he probably wants us to know about it. We need to know why he took that line, just as much as we want to know why he's making a dead set at us. Yes, yes,' he added with a touch of impatience. 'I know S.I. is his *bête noire*, but there must surely be a particular reason, beyond that, for him to make us his objective.'

I asked the obvious question.

'What can there be?'

'One thing's pretty clear . . .' Bruce began, and I knew that he had been going through the whole business in his mind, and I wondered how long he had been up, whether he had seen Sir Robert. I wished I had not slept so late, but was concentrating on following Bruce's line of reasoning when the bedside telephone rang.

I started, proof that my nerves were not as steady as they should be. Bruce stood up, and kneeling on the bed, reached over and pulled the instrument towards him. Still kneeling, he said:

'Bruce Murdoch speaking.'

When I saw the sudden change of his expression, and the tightening of his grip on the stand of the old-fashioned instrument, I thought immediately of von Horssell's voice, remembered vividly the moment at the cottage. But that did not last for long, for Bruce said quietly:

'Yes. I will speak to Mr. Beecham. . . . What's that? . . . Oh, I see. Yes, I'll see him. Up here, please, immediately.'

He replaced the receiver with a click, and turned his head sharply, still kneeling. I looked at him with rounded eyes.

'So our famous Foreign Correspondent knows where we are, darling, and wants to have a talk. I wonder why? He didn't take the opportunity last night.'

I finished brushing my hair quickly, tucked in one or two grips, ran a puff over my face, and was acutely conscious of the backless dress. Bruce was regarding me with an amused smile, and suddenly he leaned forward and kissed my back between the shoulder blades.

'Like a little powder on here?' he asked gently.

'Idiot,' I said, and then there was a tap on the door.

A pageboy opened the door, and Beecham came in.

But for his heavy jowl, he would have been good-looking and he had enormous hazel-brown eyes. He thumped across the carpet, hand outstretched, and Bruce did not reject the olive branch. Beecham's vast fist crushed Bruce's—who has a small hand for a man—and his very white teeth showed in an expansive, well-what-do-you-think-of-this? smile.

'Very glad to see you, Murdoch—I've been hearing things about you, and you've been lucky, what? Lot of people are lucky in this show, aren't they? Good morning, Mrs. Murdoch.' He nodded my way, but really paid me no attention. He was not a ladies' man, and had an abominable

habit of virtually ignoring anyone whom he was not particularly interested in seeing.

Bruce said: 'Yes, aren't they?'

'First of all,' boomed Beecham, 'about last night. I can't tell you how sorry I am. Had I known you were the fellow, I wouldn't have been so damned rude. Bad light, y'know,' he went on, 'and my eyes aren't as good as they might be. No offence intended. All over and forgiven, I hope.'

Bruce shrugged, obviously not proposing to use soft-soap.

'It's really neither here nor there, is it?'

'Oh, come,' said Beecham, gripping his elbow. 'Don't bear malice, old man! After all, I didn't know who you were or what you were doing. Actually I've popped in to do a little explaining. It's demanded, what?'

'It wouldn't be amiss,' agreed Bruce drily.

'That's the spirit!' The people in the rooms on either side must surely be able to hear every word he said, I thought. 'Between you and me, Murdoch, I don't like this von Horssell business. I've met him, y'know.'

'We're acquainted, too,' said Bruce.

Beecham emitted a bellowing laugh.

'Acquainted, b'Gad. That's good. Acquainted! I fancy von Horssell would give a pension to see the last of you, what?' His voice sank abruptly to a whisper, a loud whisper, but at least one which would not pierce the walls. 'Has he been after you, d'you think?'

'Before we go on, are you here as a representative of the *Echo*,' Bruce asked, 'or the Ministry of Propaganda?'

'What? My dear fellow, the Ministry, of course! This isn't a matter for the *Echo*. It's impossible to be too careful about what one says.' This from the least discreet of foreign correspondents! 'You can talk quite freely, quite freely. I've been dull-witted, and I admit it! It took me several hours to realise that the bombing of your place down in Dorset and the fire at your flat might be connected with von Horssell. That's why I was down there last night. I'd heard a rumour that the brute was in Dorchester, and I went *post haste*. I'd 'phoned Holt, but he was out. Better do it myself, I thought, rather than leave it to some half-witted underling, so I chased down.'

I felt my pulse quickening as Bruce asked:

'Did you have any luck?'

'More's the pity, no,' replied Beecham. 'However, he's bound to show up again. Well, that's that. If I'd recognised you last night—haven't really forgiven myself for not doing, yet!—this explanation wouldn't have been necessary. All happy about it now?' He waited for no answer, but went on: 'That's fine. That's fine! Now tell me, old man, what do you make of the situation? What do you think he's doing in this country?'

I wondered whether Bruce would evade an answer, and whether we were in for yet another spell of theorising, perhaps arguing—when opposed, Beecham always grew boisterously argumentative—but I did not for a moment anticipate what he actually said.

'Between you and me,' he told Beecham, 'I'm a long way from sure that von Horssell is in England. But that's purely a personal opinion, I've nothing to support it.'

7

Says Bruce

I leaned forward in my chair.

Although I was looking at Bruce, I saw Beecham's lips part in an expression of surprise, and I believe he was as startled as I. There was a moment of silence, and then Beecham said:

'But that's damned silly. We know he is.'

'Hang it, I heard him!' I interpolated.

'I'm not giving you or anyone else the lie,' Bruce said easily. 'I'm just expressing an opinion, and I'm not sure that I should go further into it with you, Beecham. I have to see Sir Robert in half an hour, and there isn't time. Supposing you ask him for a report about twelve o'clock?'

Beecham grabbed at his elbow.

'No, that won't do, old man. I'm not going to be stalled off like that. Damn it, it's as good as calling me a liar. I was in the City, and von Horssell came out of one of those little alleys—you know 'em. Damn it, I know von Horssell as well as I do Hitler! And he was reported in Dorchester yesterday afternoon.'

Bruce shrugged; when he wanted to be secretive, nothing could make him talk. When it became obvious that he did not intend to expand, the foreign correspondent began to shout, and I saw him at the first stage of one of his famous rages. He went a dusky red, pushed a hand through overlong hair and began to mix invective with his rhetoric. I don't know how long he would have gone on had Bruce not raised his voice for the first time.

'I won't have this, from you or anyone else. Stop bawling!'

Beecham did stop, his mouth agape. I don't think that it was Bruce's attitude which affected him, however; and for the first time I saw the possibility that Beecham's tempestuous outbursts were coldly considered and calculated to

yield results. When he realised that they would avail him nothing, he cast temper aside.

'Sorry, old man, sorry,' he boomed. 'You know your duty, and I'm the last to want to shift you from it. But what a tantalising thing to say.' He was all bonhomie again, leaning forward and glancing for the second time at me. 'What about lunching together, if your wife can spare you?'

'I'm afraid I'm engaged,' said Bruce. 'Ask Sir Robert for a report.'

'What? Oh, yes.' Beecham turned towards me then for the first time; I don't think he had given me a moment's serious thought before. 'Can I hope you will lunch with me, Mrs. Murdoch? I know a little place where luncheons can still be gourmet delights. Don't say no, please.'

The ruse was so transparent that it was almost laughable; he could not get what he wanted from Bruce, and hoped to have better luck with me. I hesitated, rather assuming that Bruce would want me to reject the offer, but waiting for a cue from him.

I got a slight nod, indicating 'Yes.'

Acting on the faintest of indications has become so automatic between Bruce and me that I don't think Beecham could have noticed the brief pause. I spoke a little hesitantly.

'Well, I have some shopping I must do . . .'

'Ample time for that. Ample!' declared Beecham. 'Bond Street, Oxford Street? Look here, meet me by Oxford Circus Station at one o'clock. I'll promise you the meal of the war! Right-ho, old man.' He pumped Bruce's hand, then actually leaned forward and patted the top of my arm. 'One o'clock.'

And he went out as breezily as he had entered.

I heard the door slam, and looked a little helplessly at Bruce.

There was more than Beecham's manner to contend with; there was Bruce's astonishing statement. But as I stared I thought I began to see the explanation of that. He had wanted to start Beecham thinking along the wrong lines.

Bruce turned from contemplation of the door.

'A thoroughly good fellow, what?' He imitated Beecham's deep bass perfectly, and the way he smiled, showing all of his teeth, was in perfect mimicry of the reporter. 'Darling, I'm sorry I wished that lunch on you, but I think we'd better

find what is in Mr. Beecham's mind. I've got to see Pinky, and you'll want to get some odds and ends . . .'

He would have gone to Sir Robert alone, had I let him.

'Oh, no,' I said. 'I'm coming with you. If I don't have time to get some clothes afterwards, I'll lunch at Beecham's precious restaurant in this.'

'Oh, well. I didn't expect it would be so simple. Actually,' Bruce added much more seriously, 'I was hoping you'd rest. You aren't a hundred per cent fit, you know.'

'I'm as fit as you are,' I said with spirit.

'Please yourself, my sweet! I don't know how long I'll be at Sloane Square, and the dress problem might really get serious.'

'I am not going to be put off,' I declared, annoyed at the fact that he wanted to prevent me being at the interview. Then he swept criticism from under my feet by taking out his wallet and putting a little pile of notes on the dressing-table.

'If you get time for any shopping, that will help,' he said. 'Have you seen Percy this morning?'

'No,' I confessed.

'Or either of the others?'

'No.'

'H'm. I told them to let Percy sleep in, but I expected Mick and Ted about by now.' He had been up just after seven, it proved, and had dressed at once, going to the flat and, I gathered, half-expecting what he found. He described the visit graphically. Firemen had been playing hoses on that part of the building affected by the fire which, starting from our flat, had taken a good hold on the whole premises before it had been discovered. Practically nothing had been salvaged from the flat, or from those adjoining, but at least there had been no casualties.

He had telephoned Sir Robert and arranged to see him at Sloane Square during the morning, although he had no fixed time for the interview, despite what he had told Beecham and tried to tell me.

Neither Mick nor Ted had been in evidence.

We discovered them in the dining-room, having a late breakfast, and Mick's expression altered comically when Bruce told him he had had his at half-past seven. I felt hungry, but would not admit it—I wanted to give Bruce no

excuse at all for seeing the Pink Un on his own. But he divined both my hunger and my thoughts, for he pulled two more chairs to the table, and had coffee while I did justice to a cold breakfast.

Mick and Ted took the news of the flat badly.

They might have outrivalled Beecham in invective about the Withered Man had not Bruce led them from the subject to that of Beecham, and then said casually:

'If you two really want to be doing something, why not keep an eye on Beecham? You don't know him, do you?'

'He doesn't know us, if that's what you mean,' said Ted, and his eyes looked bright. 'It's time we were after him. Anything else to do?'

'Just see where he goes,' said Bruce. 'I think you'll find him at the *Echo*. Pinky told us last night that he's often there in the morning.'

We left the dining-room together, and I went with Bruce into Shaftesbury Avenue, to get a taxi. There was none in sight, but there was a gown and mantle shop specialising in two-, three-, and four-guinea models, a gaudy emporium and the last place I expected to find what I wanted. Yet there, in a corner of the window, was a two-piece costume in grey, a neat over-check which looked about my size, priced at seven guineas; I imagined it was standing to one side as if apologetically because its price as well as its quality would put the other 'models' in the shade.

Bruce did not notice me looking, and tugged at my arm.

'Just a moment,' I said, and disentangled myself to take a closer inspection. Bruce came alongside and whispered:

'Coupons?'

'I've got my ration book in my bag,' I said, and with a quick glance sideways: '*And* yours.'

'Oh, too bad,' said Bruce. 'It doesn't look much of a place, does it? See Pinky first, and then . . .'

'If that fits, I'm going to have it,' I said. 'I can get the accessories afterwards. It won't take ten minutes.' He smiled teasingly, but came in with me.

The full effect of the suit could not be judged over a linen frock, and I had nothing on beneath that but a brassière and panties. But the fit seemed excellent, and Bruce passed it; he is not a finick about clothes, but he will say when he doesn't like a thing—always provided I show it him before

a deal is concluded. Then I had another stroke of luck: they had a department for blouses, and I found a white silk which was just right.

The whole transaction had not taken twenty minutes; and all I needed now were shoes and stockings; I could manage without a hat. Bruce told the shop people to deliver the parcel to the Regal, and when we left a taxi was crawling past.

'We might still have been waiting for one,' I said. 'We probably haven't lost a minute.'

'Do you think I'm as dumb as Beecham does?' demanded Bruce, and when we were in the cab he went on: 'There may not be much chance of talking later, sweet. At this luncheon with Beecham, lead him along gently. The more we know about him the better. He isn't the type you would call attractive, is he?'

'Beast,' I said. 'Meaning you.'

'That's all very well,' retorted Bruce. 'He may lead us to unsuspected places, and he may also have a liking for brunettes—married brunettes, I imagine. I can't see the gentleman allowing himself to get entangled. Will you do what you can?'

'For a reputedly loving husband, you give me too much credit for Circe's accomplishments,' I said.

'I wish I did!' flashed Bruce, gripping my arm. 'Sweet, you'll thoroughly enjoy it, and he's fair game. Handle him as well as you can. You've had a fairly good start,' he added.

'Meaning?' I demanded.

'About the only thing you said when he was there was that I was absurd,' grinned Bruce. 'He won't forget that. Play on the angle that you think von Horssell is in the country, and you're very annoyed at my reaction. If you haven't learned his pet name by the end of lunch, you've fallen down on the job. I doubt if he likes Monty.'

'Beast again,' said I.

Bruce tucked an arm about my waist, and insisted on talking thenceforth in whispers, fool-talk of which, to a stranger, he would appear quite incapable. There are many surprising things about Bruce, and I think I am the only one acquainted with most of them. I would not put it beyond him to be jealous—or I hope he could be!—but he

has a rare outlook for a man. He subscribes to the view that if I were to tell him I found no pleasure in a mild flirtation with another man, he wouldn't believe me. Consequently, I never have at the back of my mind the thought: 'Bruce wouldn't like it.' It gives me a mental freedom which strengthens the bond between us.

The cab stopped, we climbed out, and I knocked at the door of Sir Robert Holt's *ménage* while Bruce paid off the driver.

The front door is flush with the street, and when it is opened there is a narrow passage barely wide enough to allow anyone to pass the stout figure of Gordon, the Pink Un's man. The house is little more than a cottage. When he lives there—as apart from works—he has a bedroom and a dining-room on the ground floor, and Gordon has a room as well as the kitchen and scullery. Gordon keeps the place scrupulously clean.

The whole of the upper floor, with the exception of a bathroom and W.C., has been converted into one long, narrow room, well-furnished—although clearly a bachelor's room—and with Sir Robert's desk in one corner, away from the door, the light from a small window shining directly on it. The colour *motif* is brown—both light and dark. The desk is small, and usually piled with papers, with only a tiny gap in the middle for Pinky to work on.

Gordon opened the door.

'Good morning, Miss Dell.' He is a punctilious man, and since in S.I. I am still listed as Mary Dell, he observes my maiden name at the office, but if he sees me outside, accredits me with married status. 'Good morning, sir.' He inclined a massive head, and his pale face appeared the only bright thing in a gloomy hall. 'Sir Robert is expecting you.'

'Good,' said Bruce.

Gordon went ahead, so typically a stage butler that, after ten years, I wonder sometimes if he is real. Yet he reveals a surprising number of little human characteristics, and I believe he worships the Pink Un. That stout gentleman is not, as will have been gathered, the easiest of men to serve, particularly in the combined domestic-cum-business capacity demanded of Gordon. The Pink Un has confided in me many times that he doesn't know how Gordon stands him; but Gordon continues, as inevitable as the little house and

the pink chins of Sir Robert. The latter was sitting at his desk.

He was scribbling furiously, but that meant nothing; he often scribbles to impress callers with the fact that he is very busy, and although I know the habit well, he persists in it even with me. His bald pate was lowered towards us, and we had a peculiarly distorted view of his face.

'Miss Dell and Mr. Murdoch, sir,' announced Gordon, and disappeared.

I sat down. Bruce took out a cigarette case, and leaned against the wall. Pinky finished his scribbling, tore a sheet of paper from a pad, and screwed it into a ball. He says he finds it easier to remember a line of argument or a theory if once he has written it down.

'H'm,' he grunted, and went on sarcastically, 'Too bad of you to call in the early hours.'

'We came as soon as we could,' said Bruce.

'Well, I don't think much of it,' snapped the Pink Un. 'However, we'd better see what there is to talk about.' He began to rummage amongst the papers on his right side, while Bruce and I exchanged glances.

It was quite clear that the Pink Un was worried.

He is an unpredictable little man in some ways, and there have been times when I have been thoroughly angered by his irascibility, although I am so used to it that more often than not I am not affected. I was quite sure, however, that he would not have greeted us that way unless there was something weighing on his mind; and something unpleasant.

So we waited, tense and expectant. He pushed his lips forward while he considered what he was to say, then abruptly pushed his chair back and stood up.

'Bruce! Mary!' The names came explosively. 'It was bad yesterday. It's ten times worse today. I've evidence—conclusive evidence—that he's been in the country for six weeks or more. Six weeks! Von Horssell, the most dangerous of those hell-hounds! Six weeks—and, Good God, we've been taking holidays, sitting around as if there's nothing the matter. What's he done in six weeks?'

I felt very cold inside, and I saw Bruce's lips tighten into a thin line.

'That's what we have to find out,' roared Holt. 'What has he *done*?'

8

Luncheon Postponed

I felt sick at the realisation, at the discovery that von Horssell had been here for a period long enough to do enormous damage. It was frightening that he had worked unhindered in England for so long.

I said nothing.

Bruce also kept silent, probably because he knew that Holt had paused mostly for effect. And he had, for he moistened his lips from a glass of water at his side, and then went on:

'Well, there we are. We've a late start. Have either of you any ideas?'

Bruce slid a hand into his pocket and prepared a statement which he probably knew would receive an explosive 'Nonsense!'

'I've had one, and I've told Beecham about it,' he said. 'I doubt whether von Horssell's in the country.'

There was a pause of several seconds, after which Pinky reacted very differently from what I had expected. He turned back, went to his chair, and sat down deliberately.

'What makes you say that?' he asked.

'I don't believe he would let us know he was in the country, but I do believe he would like us to think he is.'

Holt said flatly: 'He has been.'

'That's possible,' admitted Bruce.

'Thank you, Mr. Murdoch, I'm very glad you are prepared to give consideration to a statement from me. Possible be damned! 'Pon my living say-so, I don't know what young people are coming to! Of course he's been here. I've just told you so. But . . .' The fieriness soon faded, his voice squeaked upwards: 'But, has he gone? That's the question.'

'As I see it,' said Bruce quietly, 'he's probably finished what he came to do. Whether he finished what he wanted

to do is a different matter. But there's one pretty certain way of preventing us from discovering what he's been doing: and that is to get us busy looking for him. He probably wants to kill us, but his second choice would be to set us into working in a fruitless direction.'

'H'm, yes,' said Pinky, and cocked an eyebrow. 'Not entirely senseless, my boy. Glad to realise it. As a matter of fact, after our chat last night, I came to the same or a similar conclusion. However, Beecham *did* see him. And a man answering his description was seen in Dorchester yesterday. The evidence that he's in England is pretty strong. We dare not *not* look for him.'

'You can put someone else on the job while we try to find what he's been up to,' said Bruce.

'H'm. Yes. Not easy.'

'We don't expect it to be.'

'Any more ideas?' Pinky demanded.

'Nothing that isn't very vague,' said Bruce. 'We have to be vague at the moment.' He believed that he felt as hopeless as I did. The Pink Un shrugged.

'Well, I can't blame you for that. We start from nothing to look for nothing, done by someone who isn't here. Work that out.'

Bruce said: 'We've still got Beecham,' and he explained the morning's call. He also said that he had told Beecham he didn't think von Horssell was in England, and I was surprised that Pinky just nodded; apparently he realised why Bruce had done that. If Beecham was working with von Horssell, and that had to be considered as a possibility, the cryptic statement would worry the man. A worried man could be expected to make mistakes.

The Pink Un looked at me, his bright blue eyes unsmiling.

'So your luncheon party is our only hope, is it? Do it well, Mary. Don't let us down. Surprising how often we've had to rely on you. But'—he spread his hands on the desk deliberately, and looked back at Bruce—'this time I don't mind admitting I'm completely at a loss. I don't know where to start, I've no idea of what has been happening. Don't tell me I've already said as much. I know I have! I'm bankrupt of ideas, and I'm damnably worried.' He added fierily: 'And I'm not the only one. Why did it have to happen just now?'

The last sentence was uttered almost inaudibly.

'Is now any worse than any other time?' asked Bruce.

'Is it any . . . ?' began Pinky explosively; then he leaned his elbows on his desk and pushed his head and shoulders forward. He went on in a milder, almost gentle voice, like that of a benevolent teacher remonstrating with backward pupils. 'My dear good friends, try to realise the days we are living in. Try to understand that just now we *hoped* for big news from Germany. Or have you been hibernating in that little lullaby cottage of yours?'

I tightened my lips. Bruce frowned. And it was probably that which made Holt realise he had gone too far.

He sat back abruptly.

'H'rrump. Testy, touchy couple, aren't you? Should have thought you were used to me by now.' He paused, and then said gruffly: 'Haven't you read the papers lately?'

'Yes,' said Bruce, and answered: 'Da-da-da-*da*.'

The 'V' for Victory campaign with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony its theme, had been an unqualified success in occupied Europe and promised even better results. There was, moreover, a series of reports coming from Germany itself that the sign had been adopted by an anti-Nazi organisation the strength of which was variously assessed.

One or two of the wilder journals—including the *Echo*—had come out with banner headlines and leaders suggesting that subversive elements in Germany would revolt openly. There were many hints that secret arsenals were spread throughout the country, mostly supplied by Russia, and there were even rumours of riots throughout Germany itself.

'Yes, you've read the papers,' Pinky conceded. 'Now look here, you two. The Press hasn't been allowed to print all of it—there's much more unrest in Germany than you realise. I've been working my head off to get information. There's hope of revolution and it shouldn't be long in coming to a head. The question is—will it succeed?'

It is not often that Bruce looks really angry, but he did then. He went white, and I recognised the metallic note in his voice, telling me that he was keeping himself under control with a great effort.

'You didn't think it worth sending us over there to help?'

'Eh?' Pinky stared. 'Good Gad, Bruce, don't be a lunatic.

We're timing that! You've been busy, need plenty of rest Hell and damnation!' roared the Pink Un. 'What d'you think I've let you all have a holiday for? Your own silly pleasures? You've been resting so as to be ready for the German revolt the moment it really breaks.' He gave Bruce no opportunity for withdrawing his criticism. 'Now *this* has to happen. I tell you it's not only worrying me, it's worrying the Cabinet. I've been talking to them this morning.'

'How long do you think a revolt will be coming?' Bruce asked. I knew he felt that the Pink Un should have told him earlier, but I felt kindly towards Holt, however. Bruce had desperately needed rest. We knew that S.I. and other Departments had for a long time been sapping the morale of Hitler's masses; a full-scale rebellion was a hope nursed by many.

'Eh? How do I know? A week, a month—six months. We aren't considering that now. We're thinking of von Horssell.'

Holt went on to tell us that earlier in the morning he had sent word to Number 10 and, at an emergency meeting of the War Cabinet, had made a full statement of what he knew. It would not be pleasant for the Pink Un to admit that his knowledge was negligible.

It was as if Hess had reached the country and been at liberty for weeks before his arrival had been discovered. But in my opinion Ludvic von Horssell was a far more dangerous opponent than Rudolf Hess.

And our one faint hope was Beecham.

I was not at my best when I reached Oxford Circus. although I had bought both shoes and stockings, and was regarding a nearly empty clothes-page in my ration book with equanimity; it was as well I had gone sparingly with new clothes before. I would get supplementary coupons, of course, in view of the damage by enemy action.

Why was my mind running on trivialities? I saw a large car drawing up against the kerb while I waited.

I took no particular notice of it until the door opened, and a man leaned forward from the tonneau. I went cold, I could not believe it was true, half my mind was telling me that it wasn't so. Yet but for the doubts thrown on von Horssell's presence in the country by Bruce and Sir Robert, I would not have questioned the evidence of my eyes.

The heavy jowl and pitted face, the shapeless mouth and

the deep-set eyes—they *must* be von Horssell's.

A chauffeur hurried round from the driving seat.

I was standing by a newsvendor and a flower-seller, staring, clenching my teeth. I believed the next few seconds would tell me whether this most incredible thing was happening, whether von Horssell himself dared to leave a car in the middle of London. His big, ungainly body moved only with difficulty. By drugging himself, he can move fairly freely for an hour or so, but even then he needs helping from his car.

This man needed no help.

True, he grunted as he climbed to the pavement. He was big at the stomach, a gross, sweating figure of a man, dressed in heavy dark clothes. He had to turn his head to look sideways, because of the deep pits of his eyes. But once on the pavement he moved freely, much more freely than the Withered Man could ever move, although I saw that one of his shoes was built up, and he walked with a limp.

He uttered a single word to the chauffeur, in English which was good but held a guttural note.

'Wait,' he said, and walked briskly along Oxford Street, limping a little, but not relying on the ebony stick he carried.

It wanted ten minutes to one o'clock.

I did not seriously hesitate; I knew that something could be substituted for the lunch with Beecham—any apology would be sufficient to excuse my non-appearance, and I had to follow this man.

To me, it was as if Goering walked along Oxford Street in broad daylight. I had to walk fairly fast to keep up with the man, and that was further evidence that it was not von Horssell, for even at his best he walks slowly. Yet so great was the likeness that as he went I was wondering whether it could possibly be that he had improved his physical condition, had triumphed over the disability of his withered leg.

He turned into a flower shop.

I walked past, taking a quick glimpse. He was talking to a girl dressed in a green apron, and as I passed she went to a vase of late roses. The man so much like von Horssell was taking his hand from his pocket. I confounded my solitariness in the midst of the crowded street. But I was a little

too previous, for a voice spoke in my ear, suddenly, softly, and very welcome.

'So you've seen him too?'

I turned abruptly: it was Mick Fuller.

I felt a wave of relief, and could have laughed with excitement. Mick was standing only a foot away from me, looking towards the flower shop. In his eyes there was a bewildered expression which I could easily understand.

There was no time to ask Mick what he was doing there, and why he was not following Beecham, for the big man came out of the flower shop, and retraced his steps towards the car. That was a puzzling thing; why had he not been driven straight to the shop? With Mick at my side, I hurried in his wake.

He reached the car; and as he did so I saw Beecham.

The two men were much of a size, and although I had a poor opinion of the foreign correspondent, he looked a wholesome man besides that amazing replica of von Horssell. I thought at first that Beecham had seen me, and was searching for some excuse, when I saw that he was heading for the car.

Before the limping man started to get in, Beecham gripped his elbow. The chauffeur was standing by the open door; and as Beecham drew up the chauffeur turned, and drove a clenched fist into his stomach.

9

Stagework

The man so much like von Horssell was obviously prepared for the chauffeur's action, and dived into the car—literally, and much more agilely than the real Withered Man could have done. Beecham gasped and doubled up. Several people stared in surprise, but I think only Mick and I actually saw the blow.

The chauffeur ran for the driving seat.

But Mick was there first, and fifty people certainly saw the way he sent the chauffeur staggering from the car. A dozen of them shouted, and a man yelled: 'Police!'

Beecham was trying to straighten up as if the blow had been painful, although I considered the possibility that the whole affair had been staged. Something else puzzled me, although I could not put it into words. There was little time for abstract thinking, for two policemen appeared and Mick was gripped by powerful hands. The chauffeur, an undersized, pale-faced man, was rubbing his chest. He started to gabble some nonsense about breaking Mick's neck when I stepped forward, saying with absurd pedantry:

'Constable, the man in this car must be detained.' I took a card from my bag, one giving me authority, in certain circumstances, to give instructions to the police. The man looked startled, but after eyeing the card glanced towards the car.

'Very good, miss. I . . .'

He stopped; and I saw why.

The pseudo von Horssell was no longer in the tonneau, but out on the pavement again. Beecham was by his side, and the newsman put out a hand to try and stop him. But Beecham's effort was either deliberately weak, or else he had not recovered from the blow in the stomach.

The limping man brushed him aside, and began to run.

Mick, no longer being held, moved so fast that he sent

the chauffeur staggering against the side of the car. By then several cars had pulled up, and a crowd of fifty or sixty people had gathered on the pavement. But the fools let the pseudo von Horssell pass, although they closed round again to hem in Mick and myself.

Mick showed an automatic pistol.

I have rarely seen people scatter as quickly as these did then, and a passage was cleared immediately. Mick went through like a bullet, his quarry no more than twenty yards away.

But Mick was not to get him.

A shot came from a car approaching the traffic lights of the Circus, and it so happened that the lights were green. There was a sound, although so muffled that the traffic noises prevented it from being noticeable. I saw the limping man stop abruptly, throw his hands upwards, drop his stick, and crumple up. He was in a heap on the pavement when Mick reached him, and on the pavement also there was a splash of blood from a wound in his head.

The killer car went on.

. . . . .

Many things happened quickly upon one another. At least a dozen people were prepared to swear that Mick had fired the shot, although he had been behind 'von Horssell', and the wound was in the forehead. He had to show the police that every chamber of the drum was loaded before they were satisfied that the shot came from someone else. By then, of course, the car could have been a mile or more away.

The man with the limp was dead. Within ten minutes the body was in an ambulance, on its way to Cannon Row Police Station. The chauffeur was also taken into custody, and a police-sergeant drove the big car away.

Mick went with them; I thought that I was alone when I saw the tall figure of Ted Angell. For the second time within half an hour I was tremendously relieved to see a familiar face. Ted winked but drew no nearer. He nodded his head towards Beecham, also, and I realised that he had played no part in the fracas because he wanted to hold himself in reserve.

That man had recovered from the blows. He had made a statement to the police, but a vague one and given in nothing like his usual arrogant manner. The police would not have been satisfied, I know, but for the authority of the card which I had shown. Beecham approached me slowly. His smile was a shadow of its morning self, and his ruddy face was pale.

'I—er—I am afraid I don't feel up to er—eating,' he said.

'That's perfectly all right,' I assured him. 'Were you badly hurt?'

'Er—no. My stomach—always weak.' He looked really ill, and I felt sorry for him. 'You will—excuse me?'

'Of course.' I had no desire to lunch with him then; I wanted Bruce to know what had happened, and hoped he was back at the hotel.

'Thank—thank you,' said Beecham, and essayed another smile. 'Your husband quite wrong, you see. Looking forward to the pleasure another day.'

He made a clumsy bow, turned, and lifted a hand for a taxi.

I remember feeling annoyed that he did not have the courtesy to offer me a lift, and wondering whether anything beyond the blow in the *solar plexus* was the matter with him. He was like a man who had received a considerable shock. I watched him get into the cab, and saw Ted get into another, just ahead. I did not need to worry whether Ted would follow him successfully.

Bruce was not at the Regal.

I went up to our room, which was on the north side of the hotel and cool despite the mid-day heat, in the hope that he would soon get back.

I had already been upstairs, found the bedroom empty, and then made a quick run through the lounges and the dining-room, as well as having Bruce paged. That took some fifteen minutes; over a quarter of an hour passed between the time I left the bedroom, and the moment I returned.

It did not occur to me that anything could happen in the interval.

I went in, and a stiff breeze blew into my face from the open window.

I released the handle of the door, which blew to with a

bang enough in itself to make me jump. But there was something else: the window had been open a few inches when I had last been there, but now it was wide open, and the curtains were billowing into the room.

I put a hand to my bag, and a small automatic. But I had no chance to open the bag. I caught a glimpse of a man by the wardrobe, and saw him toss something towards me. I felt a sharp impact, heard the breaking of thin glass, which cut my cheek a little, and was conscious of a cloud of white vapour.

Then my eyes began to smart, and my mouth became painful, my breathing laboured. I should have known they were no more than the first effects of tear gas, but I was too frightened to reason. I tried to hold my breath, but tears were streaming down my face and it was almost impossible, even before something hit me, not hard, in the stomach.

Convulsively, I breathed in.

I felt much worse, although I was conscious of a man's hands gripping mine. Something clicked; I did not notice the cold contact of handcuffs, but handcuffs they were. I felt a hand at my mouth, and then something was dabbed across my lips, so that I could breathe only through my nose, and that seemed red-hot. The pain was not acute, but the irritation was unbearable.

Then I had a sharp blow on the temple. I must have lost consciousness immediately, for I remembered nothing for a long time.

* * * * *

My eyes were swollen and painful, and breathing through nose or mouth was difficult; both felt so sore. There was a smarting at my lips, also, and at my wrists. When I opened my eyes, it hurt so much that I closed them again immediately, getting no glimpse of the room I was in.

Apart from my face I felt comfortable.

I was lying on something soft, and I believed that blankets were covering me. I moved a hand, to find the movement constricted by a sheet or a blanket; it was heavier than a sheet, and rougher.

I could hear no sound of breathing or of movement.

I do not know how long I lay there; it seemed a long time, but may have been only a few minutes. I was scarcely conscious. Vague thoughts seeped through my mind, depressing although not clear-cut. It was like awakening after a restless night with bad news lingering in the mind from the midnight bulletin. Then I heard a sharp voice from somewhere not far off.

'How much longer will she be?'

The voice itself meant little, but the language everything: *for the man spoke in German.*

I went very stiff, my hands rigid by my side. I peered towards the direction of the sound, daring to open my eyes again. The pain was less acute, but I could see nothing. Each breath seemed to be shallower than the preceding one.

I remembered everything. The bombing, the first aeroplane, the Pink Un's manner that morning; of all things that made the greatest impression.

I thought of Beecham and the visit to Oxford Circus. I remembered everything vividly, including the 'something' unusual or unexpected at the time of the shooting.

The man pretending to be von Horssell had gone into the florist's; the assistant had started to take flowers from a vase—roses, I remembered. And Beecham had taken his hand from his pocket, as if with money. But when walking from the shop to the car, he had held no roses; I was quite sure.

The fact even made other things subservient for the time being, although eventually it faded, and I next remembered seeing Ted in the wake of Beecham: the visit to the hotel: and the billowing curtain.

Then I knew what was the matter with my face.

Pressing questions, urgent anxieties—and here I was lying helpless. I knew that when I tried to move my legs; they were fastened to the bed or the couch, on whichever I was lying. I sweated freely as I waited; and soon after the man's question there was the scraping of a chair.

Then a light fell on my eyes.

It was not brilliant, but was very painful. I closed my eyes tightly, and I felt the tears streaming down my cheeks. The peculiar noise which came into my ears muffled the soft approach of an unknown, but when eventually I could

hear I knew it was a woman; and she did not sound unfriendly.

'How are you, *fräulein*?'

I muttered something in English, although she spoke in German. By then I was hardly able to credit that there should be a place in England where German was the accepted tongue. For a few frantic minutes I was afraid that I was no longer in England. A week might have passed since I had lost consciousness.

She said: 'Yes, your eyes. I will not be long.'

She went away, soft-footed, and the light disappeared, so that I was much more comfortable. Soon she returned with a bowl of water and some towels. She spread one of the towels about my pillow—I knew then that I was actually in bed—and began to bathe my eyes with a soothing lotion. After ten minutes of her soft hand sometimes brushing my forehead, I was much more at ease physically.

'Where am I?' I kept repeating. 'Where am I?'

'It is all right, *fräulein*,' was all she would say. She was a middle-aged, soft-featured woman, and her German was soft and pleasing. Yet she *was* German.

'I must know where I am!' I cried. 'I can't stay here not knowing.'

'Rest, *fräulein*. Rest at your ease. All will be well.' She repeated the words gently, and continued her ministrations so efficiently, that for a few minutes I relaxed. But then the same insistent question obtruded: a few hours before—surely no more than a few hours!—I had been in the bedroom of a hotel in the centre of London.

She went away at last, smiling from the door. My eyes felt nearly normal, but she left a shaded light on, and I was able to see the barely furnished room. It was a bedroom with a narrow wardrobe and a small chest of drawers, two chairs, and a small book-case. The books were out of my reach, and I could not read the titles.

I tried to free my legs, but could not.

I was forced to stay there, my mind churning over the events leading up to this, reason telling me it was true, everything else persuading me that it was impossible. Then out of the silence I heard a sound, a single sound at first, but one which sent my heart racing and my nerves jangling.

I gripped the sides of the bed, and raised my head to stare towards the door.

Thump! came the sound, and after a pause: *Thump—thump—thump!*

A limping man had died, but coming towards my door was the Withered Man!'

10

Bad Company

I was in a sweat of terror, the worse because I could not move my legs. I clenched my teeth while each long, dragging step brought von Horssell nearer. I had not felt like that about the man who had died in Oxford Street; he had not inspired the same dread as the eerie *thump!*—a pause—*thump!*—a pause—*thump!* did then, in a strange room in a house of which I knew nothing.

I brushed my hand over my forehead; my palm came away damp. I kept telling myself that it would not do, that I must force the fears away, that I could not face von Horssell like this. The man thrived on fear he caused in others. But as the thumps drew nearer I grew worse rather than better.

A *thump!* came from immediately outside.

Then, thank God, I began to feel in better control of myself. I watched the door opening slowly but was able to narrow my eyes. I heard a different kind of thud, and then saw the brass ferrule and the first stretch of his ebony stick coming through; he always pushed against doors with this stick.

I closed my eyes.

That was the best thing, I decided. He would not know how I had been lying in wait for him if I seemed asleep—or if I were feigning it.

It was not easy to lay quite still while he drew near, twice more thumping his stick, then moving with the laborious, shuffling movement I knew so well. But I managed it, hearing his heavy breathing, harsh and laboured like his speaking voice. I felt a movement at the end of the bed, and then suddenly I felt a sharp, burning touch on my shoulder.

I flinched, but I kept my eyes closed, and turned a little, although I knew what had happened; he had pressed a

lighted cigarette on my bare skin. The effect of that was not to increase my fears, but to cover them in a new flood of hatred against him. I think the factor which has enabled me —and Bruce and the others—to fight against von Horssell is the triumph of hatred for the man over fear of him.

I set my muscles against a further burn.

It did not come.

Instead I felt his hand, cold and clammy, against my shoulder and then my neck. It was his withered hand; I had felt it before, and I am never likely to forget the spasm of repulsion accompanying it. But I waited for a moment. He put the weight of his hand against my throat and pressed, so that for a second I could not breathe.

I opened my eyes.

Yes, it was von Horssell; and oddly enough my first thought was of amazement that the man in Oxford Street should have seemed so much like him. I had thought this florid, pitted face, with the porcine eyes and the square colourless lips, imprinted indelibly on my mind; but it was not, for I had imagined that the other man resembled him, whereas he had been only a pale imitation.

'How easy it would be to strangle you,' said von Horssell, and it was obvious that he knew I had been feigning sleep. 'How easy, Mary Dell, but how quick and comfortable, *hein*?'

The pressure at my throat had eased, but his hand still rested there. I looked into his eyes, but did not try to speak. After a pause, he moved his hand. I made myself turn my face away, to look at my shoulder; the burn was small, smaller than the sharpness of the pain had led me to expect.

I said: 'Experience has taught you nothing, Baron.'

That puzzled him; I saw the muscles of his face working. I saw also that his nostrils were very wide open, and his breath was whistling through them; the effort of walking, always great with him, had made him weak. Only the will-power of the man makes it possible for him to walk at all.

He straightened up, pushed out his stick and hooked a chair close to the bed; he sat down, grunting as he did so.

'Vot experience is that?'

'If your dull wits can't tell you,' I said, 'I'm not going to sharpen them for you.'

Perhaps it was foolish; but I knew that the man was less

dangerous when angry, and it was comparatively easy to make him angry. To call him a fool or a coward, to curse his Fatherland—any one of them made him lose the rigid control he maintained over his mind.

'Ach!' he grunted, and leaning forward, struck my cheek with his left hand. His left hand as well as his left leg is powerful, and the blow stung, but even had I wanted to move I could not have done. But hatred surged up in me, and I glared back at him.

'Go on! Go on!' I said. 'Brute force and bluster are your only two qualities.'

I stopped, realising that I was beside myself. It would not have been surprising had he struck me again, but he managed to exercise some self-control. There was silence for several seconds; they might have been minutes. Then he spoke harshly, but of something entirely different.

'Murdoch thinks I am dead,' he stated.

In that moment I saw the reasons for the telephone call, for the attacks, for the advertising of the fact that he was in England, for the existence of the pseudo von Horssell. He had carefully staged his 'appearance', and then had arranged for the murder of his stooge. This way he believed he would make Bruce and Sir Robert Holt think him dead.

His lips parted, his discoloured teeth showed in the nearest approach to humour of which he was ever capable.

'So,' he said. 'A shock to you, *hein*? Murdoch believes I am dead; so do the others. And you—you thought so, too.'

I made myself seem worse than I was. I knew one thing was of paramount importance; von Horssell wanted himself believed dead, and for the time being I must do everything I could to encourage him to think he had succeeded. It was no time to study the ramifications of the ruse, no time even to think that he would be quite sure I did not get away, since I could tell the others the truth.

I said: 'So that—that was it. You . . .' I hesitated, and tightened my lips, knowing quite well that he would force me to speak, and saying what I did deliberately. His eyes narrowed, and he brought the lighted cigarette close to my face.

'Go on,' he said, while I felt the glow of the burning tobacco against my cheek. I strained back, and said tensely:

'That—that is why someone like you was in London. That

explains everything that has been happening.'

'Ach, yes,' he said, and he leaned back, so overcharged with vanity that for the moment there was nothing to fear. 'Murdoch is fooled, also Holt. They think I am dead.' He opened his lips more widely and laughed, a guttural sound coming from his belly. 'It was easy, yes. But—*you* know different.'

I wondered then why he had come here to talk to me instead of having me brought before him in his room. I began to wonder for the first time why I had been brought here at all. It would have been easy for the man in the Regal bedroom to have killed me, yet I had not only been allowed to live, but at considerable risk had been brought away.

Why? Why? Why?

I could answer in part, at least. He believed that I could do something to help him, that he could force me to play a part in whatever scheme he was hatching. It was impossible to speculate beyond that.

'So,' he said. 'You are thinking. You are wondering why I go to the trouble of bringing you here, yes? I will tell you, soon. You play a part most important, yes. That does not sound good to you, Mary Dell?' He sneered the name, for, like Gordon, he thinks of me more in my maiden name than as Bruce Murdoch's wife. 'For you to help me—the great shoke, yes?' He laughed again, an ugly, obscene sound. 'In two ways, also. The first, that is clear even to you. Murdoch will be looking for you, when he should be doing other things. He believes me dead, but he will need to find you. A great hunt he will have! For a long time I have been planning this, yes, and it will not fail.'

It was useless for me to try to understand every innuendo, but part of the scheme was growing clear. He believed that Bruce would concentrate all his energies on searching for me. He had the wit to know that if Bruce really believed him dead, the search for me would be even more intensive, since von Horssell would not be the prior objective.

I said, as if very wearily: 'Yes, I see.'

'And there is one other thing,' said von Horssell, so carried away by his certainty of success that he was in a good temper. 'A fine hunt Murdoch will have! yes. Looking for—this!'

He had his left hand at his pocket while speaking, and then drew forth an envelope. I did not have to feign curiosity. I watched the clumsy movements of his withered right hand while he held the envelope in his left. At last he drew out a photograph and held it up in front of my eyes.

It looked like me, yet it was not. Even in the photograph, a good one of half-cabinet size, that was obvious. Apparently the girl had dark hair, long and wavy and not unlike mine. There was a similarity in the general line of our faces, but no more. The likeness was there, but I could not see what von Horssell was driving at until he moved the photograph, to show a second beneath it.

Then I drew in a short breath.

The second photograph might have been of me, at first glance, although while I stared I could see the differences well enough. But at first glance, or from twenty yards away, the girl in the photograph could have deceived close friends. In fact, the factor which convinced me it was not my photograph was the dress; it was a half-length study, and I had never worn a dress with so high a neck—almost a Russian collar—or with the same rigidly square shoulders.

Von Horssell said hoarsely:

'It is good, yes! She will be here, there, as you call it, everywhere. In Scotland, in Wales, in the north and the south. Everywhere she will be seen, and from place to place Murdoch and those who search for you go. Always she was seen just before they arrive; always she is gone.' He chuckled again.

I closed my eyes and rested my head on my pillows, too depressed for words. It was useless to expect von Horssell to clarify the situation, but he made me think more of Bruce's problems than of my own plight.

He stood up slowly, levering himself on his left leg. At least he was going, and for a while I would be alone. He took the photographs away, and then dropped them on the bedspread, with a gesture which was as good as saying: 'You will want company. Keep them.'

At his full height, he towered above me.

I felt the depths of his hatred; it was at least as great as mine for him. I knew that he had sworn to avenge himself on Bruce and me, and all who had opposed him. I saw in his expression then something which was more frightening

than there had been during the whole interview.

'While she goes from place to place,' he said, 'you cannot move. Of that I make sure. Two things I do, with one. You cannot move, and when it is over, your leg you cannot use. How often you have mocked at my infirmity—mock now yourself!'

Leaning forward, he picked up the corner of the blanket and bedspread, and flung them back towards the foot of the bed. I started; I glanced down, seeing that I was wearing my blouse and skirt, so recently bought, and for a moment I was absurdly relieved by that.

Then I saw what he meant.

My right leg—God! No wonder I had not been able to move it.

My right leg was in a plaster cast to a point a few inches above the knee, and the cast itself was bound to the bed. My left ankle was also bound, but that mattered little.

Von Horssell *laughed.*

11

How Slow is Time

Von Horssell stared at me as he laughed, with his mouth wide open and his eyes buried in their deep sockets. Then he turned and, supporting himself with the stick, lurched towards the door.

The *thump—thump—thump* followed. He hooked the door open and went out, and the heavy thump—caused by the stick as he banged it down and then dragged his withered right leg behind him, until he could take another step with his left—faded away.

The door was not locked.

And there was no need for it to be. I felt sick, physically sick. It was a nausea which was understandable, for the sight of my leg imprisoned in that plaster cast had frightened me—that, and his reference to his own infirmity.

He would think we had laughed at him, of course, whereas at times we had actually felt sorry for his infirmity.

Surely the cast could not bring serious consequences? Broken legs were put into plaster; it was nonsense to think that any lasting harm would result. Yet I knew that I was trying to reassure myself without good reason. Through my mind his words were echoing—'*your leg you cannot use.*'

I was as close to panic then as I had been when he had first approached and the thumping had grown nearer, but it was a different kind of fear. '*Your leg you cannot use.*' It mingled horror with all other things, and for the time being it drove thought of Bruce, and the other girl, of von Horssell's ultimate scheme, out of my mind.

He knew the refinements of mental as well as physical torture.

I did not doubt that he had set himself to consider how best he could make me suffer, and he had staged that demonstration so that when he had gone it should be in the forefront of my mind.

I thought of injections. I wondered whether he had injected something to paralyse the muscles of my leg, or to wither the flesh, as his was withered. The thoughts went round and round in my mind until I could have screamed. I stretched my hands down, to touch the plaster; it felt cold.

Putting my hands behind me and resting them on the bed, I managed to lever myself into a sitting position, but it was uncomfortable, even painful, and I sank back again. I tried desperately to concentrate on Bruce, on the Pink Un, on the possibilities of von Horssell's purpose. I ignored the photographs for what must have been an hour, and when I did look at them again I tossed them aside, and lay back, staring at the ceiling.

After a long time, a sound outside made me look towards the door, which I was facing. It opened, and the gentle-voiced woman with the Bavarian accent came in. She was thin, but kindly-featured, gentle in movements as well as in voice, but she would only say:

'It is all right, *fräulein*.'

I know German well, and I talked to her quickly, feverishly, but I could make her say nothing else. With that gentle smile and soothing touch she handled me, piling pillows behind my back, then sponging my face and hands, drying them and, finally, putting good food in front of me.

That was like von Horssell.

There was chicken broth, with rusks, breast of chicken, green peas and potatoes. The best of food—yes, he would feed me well, he would arrange for the nurse and her comforting manner, to make the contrast between that and the horror of my useless leg the greater.

I asked her to bring me cigarettes, and for a long time after she had gone I listened tensely in the hope that she would return, but she did not. After a long time, I noticed the book-case again.

At first I thought it was within reach, but when I tried to touch the books, I found that I could not; I was six inches too far. I strained every nerve. For a while all I wanted was to get one of those books.

But I could not get one.

I stopped trying, my body wet with sweat.

Soon afterwards, it grew dark.

There was an electric light immediately in front of me—about a yard in front of my eyes, just out of my reach. The switch was by the side of the bed. I managed to reach it, but when I switched it down, nothing happened. The lamp was there in the socket, but the current was off.

It was worse lying there in utter darkness, seeing nothing, only occasionally hearing sounds nearby, than it had been in daylight. The bed grew insufferably hot, but I could do no more than move my shoulders, and each time I soon had to get back to the straight position in the centre of the bed.

How slowly time dragged!

I grew hotter still, bathed in sweat, but could do nothing to ease it, except throw the clothes back from the bed. Nothing helped for long. I began to feel frantic until I realised what caused the heat.

Behind the bed there was a hot-water radiator.

I touched it; it was burning hot.

Knowing that it was there, radiating heat all the time, made things worse for me. If only I could turn the thing off, if only I could call for someone to do it for me. But it was useless. I fell asleep, and there was a merciful respite from the heat and the torment.

When I woke, it was daylight.

I stirred, and ran my tongue round my parched lips. The heat remained, the room was like an oven. The clothes stuck to my back, to my arms; it was unbearable.

But that spell came to an end.

The woman returned, so soft-featured and gentle, and attended to my essential needs, treating me as she would an invalid, murmuring that quiet: 'It is all right, *fräulein*,' all the time. I began to wonder if they could be the only words of German that she knew, and I spoke to her in French, Spanish, Dutch and Danish. The result was always the same.

I begged her to turn off the heat, but did not know whether she would do it.

She gave me tea, which I drank greedily. But I could not touch the toast and marmalade which she offered me, or a little bacon. When she went out, the long day dragged on. I could not reach the books, and she had moved the case still further away.

Later, she returned; but the radiator remained hot.

I picked at a lunch, and asked for water to follow, but none came. There was some tea, and I had only the meals to give me any guide to time. By the evening I was not only hot, but feverish. I wanted the linen changed, for it was so damp with perspiration, but no clean linen was forthcoming.

Darkness drew near.

I was terrified of it, and kept shouting for a light. I can vaguely remember spasms of crying and of shouting, of appeal and of condemnation. But for some time the pitch darkness was about me, although when the woman had last come she had pulled heavy curtains over the window, and made me think that I would get a light during the night.

I did.

It came on when I was sinking into a coma which would pass for sleep. I had fought for it, but as it was about me the light flashed on, immediately in front of my face, so brilliant that I closed my eyes against the painful glare.

Soon, I opened them a little.

The light was from a powerful bulb, against a white reflector. It hurt my eyes. They grew more hot and prickly, as if filled with sand. I turned my head from side to side, but there was no relief. On and on the hours dragged, and my frenzy of delirium increased, until I suppose my nerves and body could not stand more strain, and I lost consciousness.

It was daylight when I awakened, and the bright light was gone.

But the room was still stiflingly warm, the temperature of a hot-house; even the mirror in the dressing-table was steamed over. I lay there, listless, no longer too frightened and terrified. But sluggishly my mind worked, and I tried to understand the motive behind this madness.

Madness!

As the word flashed into my mind so did an explanation, and for the first time for twenty-four hours I was cold, icily cold with horror. For it came to me that von Horssell was trying to drive me mad.

12

A Word of English

The acuteness of that horror eased, at last.

The heat was too enervating for concentrated thought, and my head was aching with dull throbs. I hardly knew that I had legs, they were both so numbed. Only vaguely did I know that the woman came in, and moistened my lips with water. I wanted to drink greedily, but she would not let me, and I was too weak to take the glass. I heard and saw her moving about the room, until she went again and silence descended.

I had a horror of night then.

I saw the lamp above me, and remembered the awful glare of the previous night. I could not stand it again. I could not bear it. Then, and only then, I realised that if I took the pillow-case from the pillow and folded it across my face, I could get some relief. I held on to that hope, yet still dreaded the approach of darkness.

I had lost count of time.

If only I could get cool. I tossed and turned within those limits possible, trying to find coolness, not realising that each movement made me hotter. I had not had food for some time; and the gnawing of hunger had developed into a sickening nausea. My mouth was dry, my lips swollen and painful. I was in such a state of mental sloth that I was not frightened by the weird pictures which flashed from time to time across my mind.

Grotesque pictures, some of them, particularly of von Horssell as he had leered down on me before going out of the room.

Darkness drew near.

It was dusk, but the curtains at the window had not been drawn. I did not know how long had passed since the woman had been to see me, although vaguely I recollected that she had been twice that day, presumably at breakfast

—breakfast!—and lunch-time. The gathering gloom told me that it was approaching half-past eight.

I do not know whether I heard movements, or only thought I did.

There seemed a great many of them, always along the passage. Stealthy, rustling movements. I thought each time that it was the woman approaching, to draw the curtains. My eyes fixed themselves on the single lamp, which was still not lighted. I had the folded pillow-case by my side.

It grew dark.

The curtains remained by the sides of the windows. The noises, imaginary or real, faded. I kept very still for a long time, without realising that it was no longer so unbearably hot.

That thought made me move my arm quickly, so that I could touch the radiator. It was cool!

I drew a deep breath, hardly able to believe that it was true, but my fingers did not lie. It explained why I had been able to lie still for so long in comparative comfort, but it did not explain the continued absence of the woman.

Had she stayed away deliberately?

Did von Horssell propose to leave me, now, without food or water? Did he want me dead, not mad?

It was in the middle of the night when the light went on.

It was abruptly; I had been dozing, and the sudden glare awakened me. I lay with my eyes closed and the light like hot lead against my eyes, too startled at first to put the pillow-case into position, filled again with dread. Then I put the folded case over my eyes, but before doing so I saw the window.

The curtains were drawn.

Light was shining through the glass, of course, light in the black-out. It is hardly credible that my main thought was anxiety lest there should be German 'planes passing over. I did not realise the full implications of the light.

Utter silence was all about me.

Then, quite suddenly and from the other side of the door I heard a voice, a few words ordinary in themselves but to me a miracle.

'I wonder what we have here?' said Ted Angell.

The door, of course. He meant the door! He was outside, and someone else was with him. He was trying the handle; I heard it squeaking. I sat up as far as I could, heedless now of the glare, the folded pillow-case lying on my shoulder.

I opened my mouth and shouted, *but no sound came.*

It was a nightmare, to know that the muscles of my throat were so relaxed that I could make no sound, not even one that I could hear myself. Ted would go past, because the door was locked. I was in a frenzy of fear. I struggled desperately and tried to get off the bed, but it was impossible. I kept shouting in that tense whisper, calling Ted's name. My head felt like bursting, my heart was thumping so that breathing was difficult. My elbows pressed deep into the bed, as I supported myself on them, glaring towards the door.

And then it opened.

I had heard nothing for what had seemed so long a time that I was convinced Ted had gone on; not until afterwards did I know that he had been opening the door with a skeleton key, and that the thunder of the blood in my ears had prevented me from hearing the scratching sounds. Someone else was with him, who it was I did not know.

I saw Ted only vaguely.

His face seemed blurred, his lips were parted. I know that he stood quite still for a moment, one hand raised. Then he exclaimed something; it sounded like: 'My God!'

He reached me very quickly.

I remember crying, putting my arms about his shoulders, sobbing, laughing, shivering. I remember his soothing words, absurd words, meaning nothing and yet meaning so much. I knew that someone else had come into the room, for I felt a hand on my ankle, followed by another exclamation. Of course, the other man had discovered the plaster cast.

Ted said something sharply. After a pause he swore in a low-pitched voice but very audible because his lips were so close to my ears. He spoke to me, but I did not understand him. My head was whirling, I was dizzy and unbalanced, I felt as if I had been standing for a long time and could not keep on my feet for a moment longer.

I must have lost consciousness.

Ted told me I was right out for an hour, and delirious

when I came round. By then, he said, I had been moved from the house to a cottage hospital nearby, and a doctor had given me a draught of some kind, for I slept again.

When I woke, I was no longer unbearably hot, but pleasantly cool. The linen on the bed was fresh and clean. The walls were painted green, a restful colour for my tired eyes. My mouth was dry, but much less than it had been.

Sitting near the bed, knitting in her hands, was a young nurse with a stiff apron and cap, and very big, blue eyes. When I first came round, and saw her, I was fascinated by them. The lashes were long, brushing her cheeks. She did not look particularly attractive, except for her eyes, although she was looking down at her knitting—dark blue wool, vivid against her white uniform.

The click-click-click of the needles was comforting.

I was like that for perhaps ten minutes before I tried to speak; my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, and I emitted only a series of little grunts, but the nurse turned at once, putting the knitting on to a table next to her.

'Hallo? Awake?' she said, and the obvious words were comforting and reassuring, English words spoken quietly and calmly. 'Like a drink?'

'I would,' I managed to say, and I think the words were audible. She went to a white trolley, and I heard the gurgle of water pouring into a glass. A glorious sound! It was only tepid water, I was told afterwards, but to this day I remember that it tasted so smooth and cool and sweet, it worked its way into my dry mouth and lips, soothing like a healing balm. I wanted more, but she limited the allowance.

After a short while I began to ask questions, but to my surprise soon went to sleep again while she was evading them.

When I woke for a second time in that quiet, peaceful room, Bruce was there.

* * * * *

Not only was he there, but he was smiling, and looking at me in the way I love so much. And I felt much better! I wanted another drink but not so urgently as before. I exclaimed: 'Bruce!' and he leaned forward, one arm went under my shoulder, another about my waist. It was heaven to feel his hair brush against my cheeks, to feel the firm

pressure of his arms and hands. For a few minutes I cried, helplessly.

Then, in that inimitable fashion of his, he began to talk; I can't remember what he said, but it was not long before I was sitting up on my pillows, laughing a little, my mind beginning to work again. But I remembered very little and was actually puzzled when he said that a plaster cast had been taken from my leg. He would not let me try to talk, and left when a doctor and a nurse came in, and, odd though it seems, I was not long awake.

But I was even more myself when I came round for a third time.

The blue-eyed nurse was with me, with chicken broth at hand, small pieces of bread broken up in it. There was an egg custard, too, a small dish, and I scraped the skin which stuck to the edges while she looked on and smiled, the needles click-click-clicking.

Then: 'Is Mr. Murdoch here?' I asked.

'No,' said the nurse. 'But he will be in some time during the evening. How do you feel?'

'Fine!' I assured her.

'That's wonderful. Mr. Angell is waiting downstairs. Would you like to see him?'

I asked her to fetch him at once, and felt excited while I lay there on my own, no longer afraid. It was surprising how the horrors of the past few days had faded; they were to return more vividly, but I did not know that then.

Ted came in.

Next to Bruce, I would rather have seen him than any man in the world. Before I met Bruce, I think Ted had quite taken it for granted that one day I would marry him. No man could have taken disappointment better, and the fact that he and Bruce are such close friends is one of the most gratifying facts in my life. He is better looking than Bruce, with more regular features, except for a wide mouth which smiles very easily. He has a flippant manner, and for physical courage I don't know his equal—Mick Fuller and Bruce apart, of course.

'Hallo, hallo!' He sat on the edge of the bed, leaning forward and kissing my forehead. 'Salutations, Mrs. Murdoch. You're a nice girl. You had us scared stiff for a couple of days.'

'How . . .' I began.

'No. My questions first,' said Ted, leaning back and clasping his hands about a knee, so that he looked as if he would fall off the bed at any moment. He looked down on me with one dark eyebrow raised a little above the other, and his teeth just showing as he smiled. 'If you feel up to answering them.'

'I can't tell you anything, Ted!'

'Too bad,' he said. 'What is it? Amnesia, or just plain obstinacy? That's a Murdoch trait, I know.'

'Don't be an idiot! There—there's just nothing worth telling.' Under his steady gaze, I felt a little ill at ease, although only for a moment; it was as if he was so sharply disappointed that he could not prevent himself from showing it. Then I went on suddenly, loudly: 'Except—Ted, von Horssell was here!'

It was then that he slipped from the bed.

In any other circumstances I would have laughed, for his expression and antics were so ludicrous. Even while he put his arm down to save himself from hitting the floor too heavily he was staring at me wide-eyed, his lips parted. There was a thump, and for a moment all I saw of him was his back; then, one hand raised, he pulled himself to his feet, and said slowly:

'Well, well, well. The gentleman's been here, and you don't know anything? Where? How? When? Take it easy, of course,' he added hastily, and I think he had just reminded himself that I was no more than convalescent.

This time he pulled up a chair.

Now I remembered, I told him what had happened, completely and comprehensively. Although he seemed to think the story of paramount importance, I was aware of a feeling of dissatisfaction. There was very little I could pass on, except what we had already known—that von Horssell was busy on some scheme, and had taken extreme precautions to prevent Bruce from working against him. Vain precautions, as it turned out.

Ted did not take notes; he had an almost photographic memory, and would pass on what I said almost *verbatim*. I have often taken down his reports, given strictly from memory but accurate down to the last detail.

When I had finished, he said:

'I'll toss with Bruce for the privilege of strangling von H. this time, but I'll swear one or the other of us will do it. Now, general report on you, first. The doctors say that you are sound in wind and limb, that you will be able to leave here in forty-eight hours provided you rest for a week after that. Bruce has fixed up the little place where you're going, and one or the other of us will be around all the time. Your leg isn't a source of danger. The swine really meant to let it wither! All these are genuine facts, signed and delivered by specialists, and you haven't a thing to worry about.'

'Thank heavens for that,' I breathed.

'Amen,' said Ted, and he was not jesting. 'Well, you'll have gathered that we found something to work on—it was a bit of luck, I think, someone exactly like you was seen near here—and the report came through so quickly that we were able to get going. We had a Home Guard cordon flung round the place, but two carloads of the inhabitants made a getaway, von H. among them, no doubt. The girl we had reported would be the sweet thing von H. had in mind to impersonate you, of course.' Ted grinned crookedly. 'His plans have miscarried again, I feel *very* sorry for him!'

'Where's Bruce now?' I asked. 'And what are you all doing? Has anything developed with Beecham?'

'Oi! One at a time. Bruce is with Pinky. We are after von H. And we haven't discovered anything more about Beecham, unless it's the fact that he has a very weak stomach. But we've got on to one thing more or less important,' he added, so casually that I was quite deceived.

'What's that?' I asked.

'We know what von H. has been doing,' said Ted equably, and smiled down on me with one eyebrow raised. 'He's come to get Ernst Kless back.'

13

Hard to Believe

The name of Ernst Kless is as familiar as that of Rudolf Hess; Kless was the second Nazi leader to get away from Germany in the conviction that (*a*) the days of the Third Reich were numbered or (*b*) because he knew that he had not long to live in Germany. He came by sea, in a rubber dinghy, and the miracle is that he lasted long enough to be picked up by a coastal patrol boat. His arrival was staged more effectively than that of Hess, and the Ministry of Propaganda, its hands unfettered for once, achieved a major triumph.

An interview with Kless was published in every newspaper. He declared that he had come because he had seen the uselessness of continuing with the Nazis, which made enormous propaganda value throughout the world. Kless was the Chief Economic Adviser to Hitler, and it was known that he had been in bad odour for some time; obviously he could tell the authorities a great deal of the internal economic condition of Germany.

On the third day at the country hotel in Shropshire, where I convalesced—with Ted, Mick or another S.I. agent on duty to watch me—I saw the headlines of the *Echo*. It was a front page article by Montague Beecham, with a photograph of myself prominently displayed—Beecham wrote it in a pungent and factual style.

Documents proving von Horssell's main purpose had been found in the house where I had been kept prisoner near Guildford, in Surrey. A wireless receiving and transmitting set had also been discovered, and a message on an hitherto unknown wavelength, and in code, had contained last-minute instructions from Berlin for von Horssell. They had been received just after Ted had found me.

Beecham misrepresented my part, suggesting that I had

been kidnapped while following von Horssell, but a disclaimer would have served little purpose.

Beecham concluded:

'Let there be no doubt about it. The discovery of the purpose of the most dangerous Nazi criminal ever in this country is of stupefying importance. Hitler needs to free Ernst Kless. Berlin, from the lowest-paid clerk to the highest official, is frightened. But—nothing Kless has yet told the Government accounts for this fear.

'What else does Kless know?

'That is a question that must be on millions of tongues today. Here is a man who holds information of vital importance to this country, to the whole Allied cause, to the cause of justice and freedom throughout the world. Von Horssell came to free Kless, *or to kill him*. Let there be no doubt of that. The mouth of this Nazi runaway must be sealed, says Berlin. Whitehall will have taken every precaution against this, but that is not enough. Kless must be made to talk. The Nazis are experts in forcing their victims to tell the truth. For once we British must forget the rules of the game, must use Nazi methods against this foul creature, must discover why Hitler thought it necessary to despatch his greatest envoy, Ribbentrop not excepted, to free or to kill Ernst Kless.

'I have told here the story of the heroic efforts of a small group of men, and a woman, to frustrate von Horssell's efforts. So far they have succeeded. I submit that no people in this country are better qualified to extort the truth from Kless.

'They must be allowed to try.'

I thought the latter part of the article worth about as much as the paper it was written on, but there was the possibility that Bruce would be given the job. He wouldn't like it; but he would be capable of executing it.

Bruce told me, on a brief visit, that the search for von Horssell was nation-wide. Papers found at the Guildford house gave some indication of where von Horssell had been, and step by step his hiding-places in the country were discovered. There were numerous arrests; and every prisoner

talked admitting the same thing: von Horssell *had* come to get Kless.

The Economic Adviser was in a prison camp in the Western Highlands of Scotland, and a dozen or more of von Horssell's agents had been arrested near the camp. From each came the assurance that it had taken von Horssell five of his six weeks in the country to find Kless; the other week had been spent preparing for the attack on the camp.

On my last day at the hotel, when I was beginning to chafe under inaction, Bruce came *post haste* with news.

Percy was with me at the time.

We were sitting on a lawn under some beech trees, already turned a glorious medley of colours, and Percy was leaning back in a deck-chair, wearing the first brother to his spoiled linen suit. His ugly face was set in a frown while he looked towards the road leading to the hotel, which was set on a rise. The road approaching it could be seen several miles away.

'Blimey!' said Percy. 'That bloke—Sorry, Mrs. M. But that's what I fink, think, ought ter be stopped. Look at 'im. Drivin' at seventy or eighty; too fast on that road; that's wot I say. Ijit, that's wot he is.'

A car was certainly coming at speed, but I said:

'I don't think you'd better tell him so, Percy.'

'And why not?' demanded Percy, screwing up his eyes. 'The truth's the trufe, ain't it? It don't matter who—strewth! It's the boss! Blimey, it's somefink important. I'll just pop down to the gates.'

'You'll stay right here,' I said firmly.

'Yes'm,' said Percy. ' 'E probably wouldn't stop fer me, anyway. All the same,' he added under his breath, 'he's coming too fast, I don't care what no one says.'

Soon we heard the hum of the powerful engine of Bruce's Bentley. We heard him change gear to tackle the sharp rise of the drive. A few seconds later he came into sight again beyond a belt of trees, and Percy made a rush for the middle of the drive, waving and shouting. Bruce slowed down, but Percy jumped hastily to one side.

'Careful. Careful now,' called Percy. 'I'd better drive when you're in an 'urry. Anyfink up sir?'

Bruce braked the car and climbed out slapping Percy's broad back as he came towards me.

'A lot is up, Percy! Hallo, darling. Lord, you look lovelier than ever!' He hugged me. 'And you look a hundred per cent fit again,' he added, his eyes brimming over.

'Guv'nor . . .' began Percy pleadingly.

'What's the hurry?' I asked as casually as I could.

'You're both rest-curing, not working,' said Bruce, and then apparently realising that I would shout at him unless he explained, he added hastily: 'All right! All right! We've got somewhere at last, we know what the double-take was about.'

I gripped his hand.

'You mean why 'e put up a stooge?' asked Percy.

'Nicely expressed,' said Bruce. He looked younger, and excited, and the lines of anxiety and worry which I had seen too often before that day had been smoothed away. 'We've had a report from Berlin, delayed several weeks in transmission.' I knew that 'report' meant word from one of Holt's agents in Berlin; there is no town of consequence in Germany where he has not an agent. 'Our boy discovered what von H. was up to some time ago.'

I said: 'Well I'm damned!'

'Strewth!' exclaimed Percy.

'Yes,' said Bruce, sitting down on the grass and taking out his cigarette case. 'The Nazi's found out that our man had the full story of Horssell's visit and purpose, the rescue of Kless, and the pseudo von H. was put up to attract our attention. It is as easy as A B C to understand, now that we have the key. He put up his stooge—thanks, Percy!—simply to keep us hunting on the wrong lines. He also had a stooge prepared for you, Mary, to keep us occupied if anything went wrong with the pseudo von H. Oh, everything fits in very nicely.'

'What else does the report say?' I demanded.

'Not a lot in words,' said Bruce, although I knew that he was getting to the thing which caused the excitement in his eyes, and made him look so much younger. 'But plenty in fact, my sweet! They're scared stiff in Berlin that Kless will talk. Beecham was right—we must make him. There isn't a shadow of doubt that Kless has a lot of secret knowledge, and we're going to get it.'

Percy exclaimed: 'Wot, us?'

'Yes, us,' said Bruce, lighting his cigarette at last. 'We've

just been detailed, all five of us. We're going north today, and I'm to see Kless tonight. How does it sound?'

* * * * *

It isn't often that Bruce is really excited, but there was no doubt that he was exhilarated at the prospect of forcing the truth out of Ernst Kless. I was surprised. It might need third degree, and it was not like Bruce to exult over that. But in itself, that did not explain my disquiet. I thought:

Papers found at the Guildford house, telling us of Kless's visit.

A radio message, just as Ted and Bruce took possession, confirming the context of the papers.

A message from one of Holt's Berlin agents, delayed several weeks.

There were three things each in itself feasible, but, I felt, too much to believe when taken altogether. Was it possible that there was still something wrong? that we were being tricked into believing we knew everything?

Bruce must have noticed that my reception was lukewarm, and when Percy had gone hurriedly to pack—we were to fly north, and to pick up Ted and Mick at an airfield a few miles away—he tucked an arm about my waist, and said:

'What's the worry, sweet?'

'It sounds a little too good to be true,' I replied.

'Oh, I don't know. We've checked everything as carefully as we can do, and everything seems watertight. We've an explanation which covers all that has happened.'

'I wish it didn't,' I said.

I was damping his enthusiasm, but could not help myself. Bruce and I don't hide our feelings from each other. We stopped trying a long time ago. Yet he was so sure of himself then that I wished I had kept my unnamable fears in the background.

'Another premonition?' Bruce asked, and went on: 'I did wonder once or twice whether I was taking too much for granted, but it seems to stand every test. Anyhow, we'll see Kless. I've reports of all his statements here, and we'll study them again on the way up.'

At least he was not refusing to see the possibility that something was wrong, and that was comforting.

I suppose my fear was of a gigantic bluff to get us working on the wrong lines. It had started out like that, and it looked as if we had seen through the effort. But could there be another, deeper one? Could von Horssell be playing a bluff against a bluff, letting us get a little further on the trail, putting these false explanations in our way, distracting our attention and diverting our main effort?

By 'our' I meant not only S.I., but all connected with the interrogation of Kless.

I could not rid my mind of the fact that von Horssell had been so pleased with himself when he had come to see me. His manner at the time had suggested that the limit of what he wanted was to cripple me, and to get Bruce searching for me instead of for him. But—*could* he have told me that solely for me to pass on to Bruce?

Why had the Guildford house been silent for so long *before* Bruce and Ted had arrived? Why had I been left alive?

The flinging of the Home Guard cordon about it might explain that, of course.

Despite these forebodings, I was excited enough as I changed, packed and, just after two o'clock, was ready for the jaunt to the airfield. We were taking only a minimum of luggage; the rest of our clothes were to follow.

The aerodrome was a tiny one.

We were to fly to Oban on the west coast of Scotland in a bomber, and then continue our journey north by road, said Bruce.

Mick and Ted were waiting, and two sergeant-pilots were also at hand. A four-engined bomber was standing massively at the edge of the airfield, and mechanics were tuning-up, as mechanics always are; they can have as much time as they like on any one machine, but are never fully satisfied.

Within ten minutes of reaching the field, we were in the cabin. It was surprisingly comfortable, gratifying since it was the first time I had been up in one of our newest bombers. The smooth take-off was comforting and reassuring. The clouds were few, and ahead of us there stretched a wide expanse of gentian blue, with the sun shining from

the south-west, and bathing the 'plane in brightness and warmth.

'How long will it take?' I asked Bruce.

'We should make Oban in an hour and a half,' he said. 'If we don't have trouble, that is.'

I wished he had not said that. Until then, I had pushed my forebodings to the background. I have always enjoyed flying, and the thrill of being in one of the big four-engined machines was in itself enough to hold my attention. But that 'If we don't have trouble' got on my mind. I found myself searching the sky for a speck which might be a hostile fighter, although I knew the pilot and his companion would miss nothing, and the sight of the machine-guns and cannon was reassuring.

When the attack did come, it took us completely by surprise.

It was from the south-west. A Messerschmitt came out of the sun, and the first thing we knew about the attack was the splintering of something in the cabin—a sharp, rending sound, followed by a gasp from the pilot.

I turned my head, to see him collapsing over the controls.

14

Near Miss

It happened so quickly that there was barely time for thinking, certainly none for being frightened.

I saw the shadow of the Boche machine over the cabin, then the Messerschmitt—a 109—in front of us, turning for a frontal attack. Almost as the outburst of shooting came, the second sergeant had reached the injured man, and was easing him away from the controls. The stick was locked. There was no sign of change in the speed or behaviour of the machine. It flew on steadily.

Mick helped the sergeant.

Bruce and Ted went towards the two side guns; they had not told me, but I had no doubt that they had prepared for such emergency in advance. Bruce said easily:

'Keep low, sweetheart. Duck your fat head, Percy!'

We obeyed.

I waited just long enough to see the Messerschmitt swooping down on us, and to hear the rat-tat-tat of one of the for'ard guns. In a surprisingly short time the wounded pilot was out of his seat and the other had taken over. Mick was crouching over the wounded man, who was bleeding from a wound in the shoulder and another in the chest.

I said: 'Get the box down, Mick.'

The first-aid box was held by steel clips to the side of the cabin. Mick glanced up, running a hand through his tousled hair and smiling as he did what I asked. I crawled across the cabin to the wounded man, with Percy at my side. Mick handed me the box.

'Do something for your living,' I told him.

'I'll talk to you later,' he said.

There had been no spatter of bullets in the cabin that time, and I believed that the second fusillade had missed. The bomber was climbing, noticeably. It was not easy to attend to the pilot, although with Percy's help we took off

his leather jacket, and I cut through his blood-sodden shirt. The only thing to do for the time being was to pad the wounds.

Percy prepared the pads, while I searched for other dressings.

Rat-tat-tat! One of the side guns was operating; I saw that it was Bruce's, and saw also that the Messerschmitt swept past. Things happened so swiftly that it was almost impossible to realise what. That was the third swoop into attack, and only the first had caused any serious damage.

The wounded pilot was conscious, and smiling with his lips set thinly.

'Don't often have a nurse on board,' he said.

'Then you should,' I retorted. 'They'd make you keep quiet.'

He grinned while I padded the wounds; the bleeding had been dangerously free, but I hoped that I had stemmed it for the time being. As I fastened the pad I heard the stutter of Ted's gun, and then one for'ard. As I raised my head I actually saw something force its way through the safety glass of the cabin, and a split second later there was a sharp explosion, and a blaze of fire near the control-panel.

The crack! of the breakthrough, the snort of the explosion—and then fire was everywhere. It was an explosive incendiary shell.

A piece alighted close to the pilot's head. I had a pad of cotton wool in my hand, and thumped it down on the flaming fragment. The cotton wool flared at the edges, but the wad itself was thick enough to put the flame out.

Mick, Ted and Bruce were busy beating out flames, using their hats. Three men, crouching like that, their hats padded up in their hands and being thumped on the flaming pieces with grim regularity. But for the danger of it, the nearness of disaster, it would have been funny.

Then from the controls there came a positive whoop.

'Oh, got him nicely! Good show!'

I looked up; to have kept my head down then would have been virtually impossible. I saw what the second pilot meant, and my heart leapt.

Two other 'planes flashed across the nose of the bomber; I did not see the difference between them and the Messerschmitt, but Percy gasped:

'Spitfires, Gaw' bless 'em!'

Then I saw the German fighter going down in an almost vertical dive, and flame streaming from it. I watched, fascinated. I saw the smoke coming behind the flame, and then suddenly I saw a little white dot, getting larger for a few seconds, and then slowly smaller.

' 'E jumped,' said Percy. 'I 'ope 'e breaks 'is neck.'

Looking out again, I saw the Messerschmitt crash in a billow of flame which was suddenly covered by a pall of smoke.

I heard Bruce exclaim, and heard a curse from the sergeant-pilot. The wounded man was scowling, the others were silent. Percy had his mouth wide open as he peered ahead, while I saw that two of the engines, both to starboard, were aflame.

My heart seemed to turn over.

The flames and smoke pouring backwards came into the cabin, through the pitted glass. The smoke increased, until it grew so thick that it was almost impossible to see. I felt a movement close by me, and head Bruce say:

'It doesn't look so good, does it?'

'What are we going to do?'

'Jump, probably. He'll tell us.'

We had parachutes strapped on to our backs, and I had often jumped from 'planes; it is necessary to try most things when working for S.I. But I had never actually jumped from a blazing 'plane before, and at the back of my mind there was a fear that the petrol tanks would catch fire.

I heard the pilot shout something. I did not catch what it was, but Bruce said:

'Ladies first as usual? You know what to pull, don't you?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Good girl! It's as safe as houses, and I'll try to come down close by. Don't forget it's worth damn-all if you forget to pull the string.'

I could not see him clearly, but I could imagine the smile on his face. I straightened up, and then suddenly exclaimed:

'But Bruce—this man . . .'

The wounded sergeant was lying quite still, forcing a grin. It was courage of a high order, and yet just then I did not realise it; courage is too often taken for granted.

'They're going to try to make a landing,' Bruce said.

'Hurry, sweetheart. We'll only be in the way.'

The escape-hatch was open. I could see the green and brown countryside flashing past. Actually, it appeared to be flashing because of the smoke which, going under the cabin, showed me it only in patches. Every moment I lingered might reduce the chances of the others in getting away.

I eased myself to the edge, then dropped through.

I was sitting one moment, with my legs dangling and forced backwards painfully by the rush of air; then I propelled myself forward, and began dropping. The rush of air seemed to choke me; I had forgotten to hold my breath. My mind was in a maze, until an essential thought flashed into it.

The rip-cord! I must pull it.

I pulled.

Nothing happened, and that frightened me, but the fright did not last for long. Suddenly I felt a jolt, and when I glanced upwards I saw the envelope billowing out. Instead of falling like a bullet, I began to float. The fall was surprisingly fast and smooth.

The earth approached much more quickly than I expected, and I doubled my legs beneath me. I saw people moving, and cars on a road. A ploughed field floated beneath me, dark and forbidding. A gust of wind carried me along for a hundred yards or more, within ten feet of the ground.

Then I touched *terra firma*.

My legs were jolted, but not seriously. I fell, was jerked up again by the lift of the parachute, which then began to collapse. I was dragged for perhaps fifty yards, most of the time with my feet on the ground. Then I collapsed, gasping for breath, for the time being conscious only of the fact that I was on the ground and quite safe.

A man reached me. I have no more idea now than I had then of what he looked like, although I believe he wore a light brown suit of plus-fours, and I know he carried a whisky flask, for a sip did me a world of good. Then someone said: 'There's another!'

Another parachutist, of course. Was it Bruce?

Sitting on the ground, and with too many people crowding me, I saw the parachute slowly descending. It was im-

possible to identify him, for he was at least a mile away. I started to get up, exclaiming: 'I must see who it is!'

'Hop in, then,' said the man with the whisky.

There was a car in the field, and I reached it in a hop, skip and jump. The man slipped into the driving seat, and I clung to the roof while standing on the running board. The progress was slow and jerky, but I was barely aware of that. I was looking upwards, at three parachutes and one bomber.

Three parachutes.

Not four; oh, God, why wasn't there a fourth? Bruce, Ted, Mick and Percy—one of them had not come down, or perhaps had come too fast, perhaps hit the ground before the parachute had opened. The 'chute which I had first seen had stopped descending by then; I could see it dragging across another field. The others were further away still, one at a good height, the other only a few hundred feet up.

The bomber was at least three miles away, low, obviously preparing to land. It was only just possible to see the tail and part of the undercarriage, for part of it was enveloped in flames and smoke.

I recognised Percy on the second parachute.

There were other cars; why there had been so many in the field I didn't know then, but I felt at ease in pleading:

'The others, please. On to the others.'

The driver obliged me; that unknown man will never know how grateful I was.

The next parachute was on the ground, its wearer already standing up. It was Mick. My heart turned over as we went on to the next, with me asking all the time: 'Go on, please.'

Would it be Bruce or Ted?

Bruce or Ted?

I drew near enough to see, at last; and I recognised Ted Angell. I just stared towards him, not thankful that he was alive and safe, conscious only of one thing. Bruce wasn't here. Bruce had either come down without the parachute opening, or was in the burning 'plane.

'The—the 'plane,' I said. 'Can—can we get there?'

'We can try,' said the driver, and as another car reached Ted we went onwards over the bumpy fields, towards the blazing mass of the bomber still two miles or more away.

Each moment I dreaded to hear an explosion.

15

Broken Journey

There was a gate wide enough for the car to pass into a by-road, but on the other side was a thick hawthorn hedge. We were no more than fifty yards from the bomber, which was still blazing furiously. At a narrow gap in the hedge the man in light brown braked the car abruptly. At the same time two men on cycles reached us and, pushing their machines ahead, started to cycle up a stretch of gorse-and-grass-clad land towards the blaze. It was possible to feel the heat, although the wind was blowing in the other direction and the smoke was carried away from us.

Three figures were by the side of the blazing 'plane.

Three, thank God!

Two of them were stooping, the third was on the ground in a half-sitting position. That would be the wounded sergeant. Bruce and the other sergeant were bending, to try to lift him. I saw a sheet of flame envelop them for a moment, and Bruce's hair seemed to be alight. It was fancy, but it frightened me. I started to run, with the motorist crashing through the hedge behind me.

The cyclists were first on the scene.

They acted with a prompt and unhesitating courage too fine for words to describe. They did not hesitate, but plunged forward. I heard shouting, and saw Bruce and the first sergeant begin to run from the machine, while the cyclists, comparatively fresh, stopped and picked up the injured man, making a chair for him.

Then they too ran.

I expected the explosion at any moment, although I was heedless of it as I ran blindly into Bruce. He was breathing heavily, and his face was hardly recognisable because of the smoke and grime, but he seemed unhurt. He gasped something as I gripped his wrist. I was able to run more quickly than he, and I increased his rate of progress. The

motorist did the same for the sergeant, while the cyclists, running together, made such speed that within thirty seconds they were out of the range of an explosion.

Actually, the explosion never came.

The petrol tanks had leaked badly in mid-air, and what little petrol had remained in the tanks had not created enough vapour to make an explosion in contact with the flames.

Soon a sizable crowd had gathered, while not far away were two cottages, with thatched roofs and ramblers over doorways and windows. The occupants had hurried towards the scene, while by then a policeman and two Home Guards had arrived and the crowd was forced to a safe distance.

The cyclists reached the cottages.

The wounded sergeant, now badly burned, was unconscious. We had to get him to hospital without losing time. We were near Kendal, I was told, and the brown-clad motorist offered to take the pilot into the Westmorland town. With the help of others, a seat was removed from his car, the sergeant laid down; and the motorist drove off. I did not see him again; I had not even said thanks.

If he should read this, he will know what I thought, and will guess how I reproached myself afterwards. He was one of many attending a cattle sale, it proved.

Other things happened so swiftly upon each other that consecutive thought was difficult. The cottagers brewed tea, and the slight burns of Bruce and the pilot were dressed—neither was seriously hurt.

Percy, Ted and Mick arrived; it transpired that the bomber had crashed on a hill and had been visible for miles around. That the trio should get to the cottage as quickly as possible was like them; they were not hurt except for scratches and bruises, a blessing which made me weak with reaction. In fact, only a strong brew of sweet tea—the cottagers refused to spare their sugar, saying that the sweeter the better it was for me—saved me from making a complete fool of myself.

By then, Bruce had been driven to a nearby farm, and telephoned Holt. He did not pass on exactly what the Pink Un had said, but when he came back he was smiling, if grimly, and said that a car would arrive within an hour to pick us up.

A newspaperman came out from Kendal *post haste*; and that was the worst trick we were served, for he recognised me from the photograph at the head of Montague Beecham's article. His slow, pleasant Westmorland dialect took on a sharper, tenser note, and from being the near-victim of an accident I became a national, almost legendary figure, of whom they stood in some awe. I confounded Beecham, but was so pleased at the way things had turned out that I was not really angry.

The police asked questions which Bruce was able to answer. They were discreet enough, although the article had the inevitable result, and by the time a high-powered car arrived (from Lancaster, I learned afterwards, and driven by one of Pinky's agents, the crowd outside the cottage had grown to two or three hundred strong. Moreover, a news camera-man, appearing by some miracle in a 'plane which landed in a nearby field, was in time to take several pictures, and we left him with two hundred or more Westmorland country folk posing for their photographs in front of those two grey-walled cottages.

By then it was half-past five.

There was room for Bruce, Mick and Ted, as well as myself, in the back of the car, a Daimler. Percy rode with the driver, and although we could not hear him through the glass partition, we could see him talking non-stop.

'Nothing really worries Percy,' Bruce remarked, 'and we ought to be thankful for that. Well, now, what's the betting?'

'Be more explicit,' said Ted.

'He can't be,' declared Mick, and I sat back in my corner marvelling that they could talk like that, amazed at their normalcy. I don't think either of them ever thinks of the nearness of escapes, once the danger is past. They live for the day, and they live finely. If they brooded, they would be useless for Pinky's job.

Bruce is, I think, rather different. I say 'think' because it is obvious that I am likely to be of that opinion. He has a finely tempered mind, and his ability to assess the pros and cons of a situation is so marked that he at least rivals Pinky. But, balanced though I know his mind is, he showed no hesitation as he said:

'A broken journey, but we can't help that. There'll be another 'plane waiting for us at Carlisle.'

'I don't know why it couldn't have been at Lancaster,' grumbled Ted. 'And you haven't been explicit, yet.'

'Were we attacked because of what we're doing, or were we just attacked?'

Ted stared at him, both eyebrows raised, lips pursed a little, as though good-natured tolerance mingled a little with contempt for Mick's mental processes.

'My dear lout, don't assify yourself more than needs be. Of course they had a shot at us because we're going north.'

Bruce looked at me.

'It seems likely,' I said cautiously.

'Yes,' agreed Bruce. 'I had a word with the sergeant while we were coming down—he did a fine job, it was a belly landing and he judged some trees to within a foot. Anyhow, he told me that there haven't been any Nazis about here for months. It's too much of a coincidence to think that we were attacked by accident.'

'H'm. Yes,' said Mick, doubtfully.

'It's too obvious even for you to miss,' said Ted.

'Oh, is it,' retorted Mick with spirit. 'Let me tell you that, if we were attacked because we're going up to see Kless, it's a damned sight worse than any coincidence. How many people knew what 'plane we would be in, Bruce?'

'Or where we were starting from?' I demanded.

'Good Gad!' exclaimed Ted Angell. 'I hadn't thought of that!'

'Hush!' said Mick patronisingly. 'Every time you say a word you make yourself sound dumber.'

Beneath their cross-talk, of course, was anxiety; and I shared it. The organisation of the Withered Man must be formidable if he could arrange for that attack. It meant that he knew what 'plane we were using, and from where we had started. But, of course, I missed the obvious. Bruce didn't, and he said easily:

'If we were watched to the airfield, and that wouldn't be hard—anyone with a good pair of binoculars could have seen us from the hotel, for instance—it would be fairly simple. They'd have wireless transmitters, and the ME. could have picked up a message, probably watching us from a great height all the time. Ours was the only 'plane to leave the airfield about that time, too. We needn't get worked up

by the possibility of super-spade work. Ordinary staff-work would cover it.'

'I duly apologise,' murmured Mick.

'What worries me far more than that is the possibility that Mary is right, and that von H. is being a lot cleverer than we can see,' Bruce said. 'We thought the stooge and the general fuss was to keep us off the right track. Supposing this is, too; supposing the attack was staged to make it *seem* imperative for him that our visit to Kless be postponed? In short, have we been sold a dummy by the Kless angle?'

I hated the idea when it was put as bluntly as that.

Obviously the idea was a new one to both Mick and Ted. Mick wrinkled his already short nose, and Ted eyed me reproachfully.

'You'd take the bread out of our mouths,' he complained. 'Here we are convinced that we are squashing von H. before he gets going, and you suggest that it's a mammoth bluff. If he didn't come here to get Kless away, why did he come?'

'Don't talk drip, Ted,' Mick said. 'We rose to the other bait, if bait it was. I suppose we'll have to rise to this one, Bruce?'

'I don't see what else we can do,' he admitted.

That hunt for the Withered Man was one of the most depressing affairs on which I have ever been engaged. It was like hunting for something vague and unformed, even something that might not be there. Supposing Bruce concentrated, now, on the interrogation of Kless? Supposing Kless maintained his silence, insisting that he knew nothing startling?

'If there is one thing I like,' said Ted suddenly, 'it's being a sitting target. That's all we've been in this show so far. We sit, and von H. pounces.'

'We hit, and he bounces,' put in Mick promptly, 'and I didn't have time to think that one up!'

I laughed; what else could one do with the idiots? But although I know them so well and have worked with them for so often, I have never shared their light-hearted approach; I think it must be a solely masculine quality. All the same I was in better spirits for the rest of the journey by road.

The driver went fast along the narrow and often steep roads through the mountains and we drew into the outskirts of Carlisle towards nine o'clock. The driver had precise instructions from the Pink Un. We skirted the town and, with dusk falling, we reached a small military airfield. There were perhaps a dozen craft on the ground, and one of them was being tuned up.

We were climbing out of the car when we heard the hum of a powerful engine above us. I clutched at Bruce's arm tightly, although only for a moment. There were no flares, but the pilot of the incoming machine judged his landing perfectly, pulling up about fifty feet from the twin-engined bomber which I imagined would be waiting for us.

A dozen men sprang as if from nowhere, armed with rifles and fixed bayonets. It happened with a miracle of speed, and I stared at them getting together. No one coming from the 'plane could have broken that cordon; I even saw two men with tommy-guns, and I wondered what was the matter.

Bruce peered through the gathering gloom, to exclaim suddenly in a way which made me start, and try to identify the two men climbing from the 'plane. I did, but not without help from Mick, who called:

'Well I'm damned—*Beecham*!'

The big journalist, feet firmly on the ground, began to talk in his loudest and most arrogant voice, waving a piece of paper in the face of an officer who had approached him.

* * * * *

In the light of a torch the paper was examined; it satisfied the officer, and the cordon disappeared at least as quickly as it had formed. Beecham, with the officer at his side, came swaggering towards us. The gloom failed to hide the ebullience of his smile.

'Hallo, there! Glad to see you again, old man!' This to Bruce, accompanied by a heavy slap on the shoulder. 'Well, well, Mrs. Murdoch! *Very* glad to see you looking so well! Surprised to see me, eh? Ah-ha!' He wagged an enormous finger not two inches from my nose, while he completely ignored Mick and Ted.

'What's brought you up here?' asked Bruce.

'My dear fellow, I had to come,' declared Beecham. 'After all, I smelt him first, ah-ha!' He positively roared, and then gripped my wrist, not tightly, and certainly not in a manner I liked. 'What about dining with me, eh? Nice little restaurant I know near here. No hurry for you, is there?'

'You seem to know all the restaurants,' Bruce said.

'Yes, don't I! Actually, I'm quite a gourmet, Murdoch! In peacetime—but I won't tantalise you with talk about that now.' He lowered his great voice to a resonant whisper. 'Heard what had happened to you. Had a word with Holt —good fellow, Holt. "Pick me up here", he said, and here I am. He said you'd cover me for the rest of the journey— sly beggar, he wouldn't tell me too much in one instalment. You're going up to see K., of course.' He used the initial in a thunderous whisper, and then added in his normal speaking voice: 'You owe the privilege to me, you know. I stirred 'em up in that article. Full weight of the *Echo* behind me, you know. That counts, these days. A little bit of wire-pulling, too!' He leaned forward and winked at me, and his face seemed positively ogrish. 'How long have you got?'

Bruce smiled.

'About five minutes,' he said. 'You'd better go back to Pinky and row with him. He told us to tell no one where our next stop is to be.'

'Oh, nonsense, nonsense!' boomed Beecham. 'He didn't include *me*. Damn it, I've just come from him.'

'Oddly enough, he must have overlooked you,' said Bruce gently. 'I'm sorry, Beecham, but I can't disobey my orders.' He handed his papers to the officer as he spoke, and the youngster indicated the bomber from which the mechanics were climbing.

It must have been the first experience in Beecham's later life of being pushed aside with as little concern as an insignificant outsider. He followed on our heels, muttering under his breath, or what he probably thought was under his breath.

We reached the bomber.

I had climbed in, helped by a youthful-looking pilot-officer standing by the machine, when Beecham stepped forward and grabbed Bruce's shoulder.

'Now look here, Murdoch, I've done you a good turn.

At least have the decency to return good for good. I'll be as quiet as a mouse.'

'I'm sorry,' said Bruce firmly.

At least the man acknowledged defeat. He stood aside, swearing audibly, glaring at the men as they entered the cabin. It was probably Beecham's arrival and his manner which made me forget, temporarily, what had happened when we had last left the ground for the skies.

The door closed.

We had two pilots with us again, youngsters to whom this was a routine job. The engines needed no warming up, and roared as the pilot widened the throttle. The gloom was too great for me to see anything but vague shadows as we moved off, and I smiled at Bruce, who was sitting opposite me.

'The man's simple-minded,' declared Ted. 'Did he expect us to tell him where we were going?'

'It wasn't even done with *finesse*,' said Mick. 'Y'know, Bruce, Beecham's gone just a bit too far.'

'Yes,' said Bruce crisply. 'But I hope he'll go a bit further. There are a lot of things the gentleman will have to explain, but we haven't reached the stage where we can make him talk, yet. I wonder,' he added slowly, 'if he'll manage to make Ballas?'

Ballas is a small village on one of the few flat stretches in the Western Highlands, approached by a single-track road over wild, mountainous country, and peopled sparsely by crofters and their families. Unknown to the vast majority of English people and a great number of Scottish, two years before the war its name had been plastered over the headlines of the national Press; and I remembered then that Montague Beecham had taken a leading part in what he called a Crusade against Cardinal Crime; I can remember his expression vividly, for the *Echo*—although at the time Beecham had been on the *Courier*—adopted the slogan strongly, as in pre-war days it adopted anything which had the promise of sensation.

The only known constituent of value on the land in and near Ballas is peat; even that cannot be easily obtained, for during eight months of the year the land in the slopes of the foothills is a morass, due chiefly to the fact that several small rivers run underground near it; secondly to the wash

of rain and melted snow from the heights which surround it.

In the early summer, at the beginning of its dry period, Ballas was surveyed by Ministry officials, and approved of as a landing ground; air bases in that part of Scotland were few, and new ones difficult to get. Deceived by the season of the year, and undoubtedly by the contractors who accepted the order for buildings and levelling the slopes, the Ministry believed that it had conceived a major triumph by buying the land and paying for the improvement. The work went smoothly until early autumn, after the heavy rains of late summer; then the ground grew so bogged that it was postponed until the following spring. The Ministry did not cancel the contract, but spent many tens of thousands on trying to drain the land; and then, when it was admitted a useless project, Beecham and others started their crusade against the cardinal crime of waste, quoting Ballas as the worst example.

There were several dozen buildings there, however, intended as barracks, and soon after the large-scale air raids began they were utilised as prisoner-of-war camps. Bruce spent some hours working out the cost per prisoner; he made it into prodigious figures.

At Ballas, we were to see Kless.

I did not seriously consider the possibility that Beecham would know where we were going, for there are a number of similar camps in Scotland, where we were obviously heading. I dozed after a meal of chocolate and barley sugar, washed down by sweet coffee which came boiling hot from vacuum flasks. I was startled when Bruce touched my shoulder, saying:

'We're about to land. Mind the bump.'

I saw the pilot look round, then vaguely saw the glare from a landing-flare some way beneath me. I held tight, but we landed as smoothly as if it had been broad daylight.

'Nice work,' said Bruce to the pilot.

'Good trip,' said the latter. 'It's nice to have a flip without the ack-ack knocking at the window.' He opened the door, and stooped to get out. 'I expect you'll find a car waiting; the landing field's about two miles from the camp. Aircraft can't get any nearer.' He smiled as if to say that he knew the story of the Cardinal Crime, while we trooped

out into darkness. A car was waiting—a large one, with a sergeant in khaki at the wheel.

We bundled in, with Percy again next to the driver.

The road was bad, and the journey along it ten times more uncomfortable than the flight. We held on grimly, unable to see each other in the darkness, although I could just make out Bruce's profile next to me. Progress was painfully slow, and Bruce kept looking at the dial of his illuminated watch. I leaned back with my head against comfortable upholstery, wondering whether the pilot had talked in countryman's miles, when Bruce said in a low voice:

'I don't like this. We've been twenty minutes.'

'Twenty!' exclaimed Mick. 'We ought to have been there ten minutes ago.'

'That's what I'm thinking,' said Bruce, and he leaned forward. As he did so I saw the flash of a match from the driving-seat. It seemed very bright, and showed Percy's profile vividly. He was looking towards the driver, and seemed to be shouting.

It was then that the driver hit him.

Percy fell against the side door, while the driver opened his and, with disturbing agility, climbed out of his seat and disappeared. That would not have mattered so much had the car not been moving over a mountain road in those lovely highlands which spell disaster to a careless driver.

16

Into the Night

The utter darkness was unnerving.

Although I knew the Western Highlands fairly well, I had not been to Ballas and the immediate vicinity, while it was too dark then to see the towering heights on the one side and the almost sheer drop on the other. Imagination could conjure up nightmare visions, but in fact we knew the car was travelling fairly smoothly, on a better road than most near there, and presumably it was wide, since the 'sergeant' had jumped down.

That he was no sergeant, but an emissary of von Horssell's, was so obvious that I doubt whether it occurred to any of us to think of it in those words. I could not even see the shape of Bruce next to me, nor Percy's silhouette huddled against the window. The match which the driver had tossed away after the light had served its purpose had deepened the blackness to a Stygian gloom.

We could not have remained completely still for more than a few seconds.

Bruce moved first; and spoke before anyone else.

'Stay where you are, all of you,' he said. I felt him moving out of his seat, and imagined him to be stretched past Mick and Ted, on the tip-up seats opposite him. By then I could just discern his head and shoulders, and I thought also that I could see Percy, huddled against the side of the car.

We went on—slowly, it was true—but nevertheless we moved. The road was not so good as it had been; there was more gravel and flint on the surface. I strained my eyes to try to see out, either to the right or left, but it was impossible.

Bruce made slight squeaking noises; I imagined that he was trying to find the winder of the glass partition between the front seats and the tonneau. Mick said *sotto voce*:

'Had we better jump for it?'

'We'll see,' said Bruce. Their voices came eerily from the darkness. 'Look towards the left first.'

I knew what he meant a moment later.

There was a *click!* and then a beam of brilliant light from his torch, which was stabbing through the blackness of the left of the car. The light was so powerful that at first it dazzled us. Then I saw that he was poking the front of the torch through the open window, and the long beam stretched into what seemed illimitable space.

I stared, almost petrified.

I saw the end of the beam, not elliptical in shape, but irregular, for as the car moved so the beam travelled along the valley by which we were moving.

I could see the tops of giant crags and boulders, I could see the sheer drop which we passed from time to time when, even worse than on boulders and rocks, for the light shone on nothing, the valley was so deep that the light did not reach the bottom of it.

I saw, oddly enough, two or three sheep move abruptly in the light suddenly passing them; they leapt up and scurried into the darkness.

I heard Mick say:

'Are we travelling faster, or am I imagining it?'

'Don't be crazy,' said Ted.

But we *were* gathering speed, and the nose of the big car was pointing downwards.

Something of the tension showed itself in Mick's voice then. 'Can't you open the partition, Bruce?'

'No,' said Bruce.

'Then damn it, we can smash it.'

Bruce did not answer with words, but for a moment flashed the torch on to the glass partition. It was thick, and the criss-cross of wire netting also showed. It was 'unbreakable' glass; I had not noticed it before, but its full significance struck me then; every possible precaution had been taken to make sure that we could not force a way out.

The torch-light shone towards the right, but offered no better help. Crags and boulders showed and an occasional sheep, but most of the time the light faded away until it was only a faint, diffused glow. Once or twice it was iridescent when it shone into a patch of mountain mist.

It was bitterly cold, too.

'We asked for this, and we've got it,' said Bruce in his matter-of-fact voice. 'We should have dunned that sergeant for his identification papers; but what's done can't be undone. I wish Percy would come round.' There was a brief, barely perceptible pause, and then he added: 'Open your door, Mick.'

Neither Mick nor Ted asked why.

I could imagine that both of them wanted to do what Bruce meant to, but they knew as well as I that he would not delegate the job.

'Hold the torch,' he said to Mick.

Mick held it. His hand seemed enormous as he reached for it and was suddenly fully illuminated by the beam.

He shone it towards the door near him—on the other side of the car to me. I felt Ted's hand brush against my knee. He sought and found my hand, and gripped it. I sat quite still, not so frightened as tense, hardly capable of coherent thought.

The light shone on mist, now, nothing but mist all the time, it was like a great white glow, moving continually and hiding terrors of which we knew nothing. And it showed Bruce climbing to the running board.

I thought in despair: 'Oh, God, why didn't they do it before?' For at first the car had been going steadily, whereas now it was moving much faster, and swaying from side to side. I imagined the road had become little more than a track, leading towards the depths of the glen. And, of course, there would be a sharp bend; there could be no doubt of that. There would be a bend, and, instead of taking it, we would go straight on. Downwards.

What else could have been planned?

I felt the same constriction at my throat, the same distended feeling at my eyes. I gripped Ted's wrist tightly, and his pressure was equally firm.

Bruce was outside, crouching on the running board, holding the door with one hand. Mick kept the light playing on the running board and the driver's door, which was hanging open. That was one thing in our favour, thank God! Bruce would not have to open that.

The car kept gathering speed. On the rough road it seemed much faster than it was. The light was jerking up

and down, Bruce did not keep steady for a moment. He moved with agonising slowness until he reached the open door; then with one quick movement he slid into the driving seat.

'Nice work!' exclaimed Mick Fuller.

'Bless his heart!' breathed Ted.

I felt the brakes going on slowly, and the speed gradually slackened. We were crawling at no more than two or three miles an hour, and I was sitting back with my heart beating fast from the relief, when the front of the car went over the edge of the road.

One moment we were going slowly, the next, the front of the car lurched forward, and we heard the rending sound as the chassis grated against the rocky edge. The jolt sent Mick lurching forward, and the torch shot from his hand, falling on the floor and then going out. I thought I heard it fall through the open door. The car was swaying from side to side, and also going forward very slowly, grating against the rocky road-edge.

I was thrown against Ted.

We must have been at an angle of forty-five degrees or more from the road, and there was nothing we could do as we slithered forward. Only the chassis frame, acting as a brake, prevented us from going headlong after the first plunge. I could not see Bruce.

I imagined him to be pushed forward against the steering wheel, as helpless as we were.

There was a heavy rumbling, and lesser sounds, exaggerated because of the darkness. The car was trembling, and although it seemed a fact I hardly dared to hope that it was no longer creeping forward. But it was not.

The rumbling had been caused by small rocks falling down the side of the valley after being dislodged. I heard them fading into the distance. The engine had stalled, and silence was added to the darkness.

At last Bruce called easily:

'All right, back there?'

'All present,' called Ted.

'What the hell's stopping you?' growled Mick. 'We don't want to stay here all night.'

I heard a chuckle from Bruce, and after a pause he went on conversationally:

'The trouble is that I don't know how much it will take to get us going again, and I fancy we're on the wrong road. Being serious, who do you think should unload first? The back or the front?'

'The front,' said Mick promptly.

'Why?'

'Hang it, man, it stands to reason. The more weight at the back the more likely we are to hang on until we're all out. Can you manage to move Percy?'

'I think so,' said Bruce.

'I'll get out and give you a hand,' Mick said. 'These two are heavy enough to keep some ballast in the back.' He did not wait for an answer, but cautiously shifted forward, and I could pick out his silhouette. He slid forward on his buttocks until his feet touched the road, and then as cautiously he eased himself forward. A moment later he brought another, smaller torch from his pocket, and said *sotto voce*:

'Why the hell didn't I think of this before?'

It shed only a faint glow, but it enabled us to see the road, no more than a track, as I had suspected. The car was half over the edge, only the rear wheels and part of the chassis touching the road. Every time Bruce moved, slowly and carefully though he did, the car quivered. Once it grated forward an inch or two. I stifled an exclamation.

Gradually Bruce eased Percy towards the open door and, with Mick's help, lowered him to the road. I did not see until afterwards that we had gone further on the near-side, except for the front wheels the whole of the off-side was immediately above the road.

Once Percy was out, Bruce followed him, and Ted spoke in my ear: 'Gently does it, Mary; and mind you don't ladder your stockings.'

'Fool,' I said helplessly.

Then Bruce and Mick gripped me, and before I realised it I was standing on the road surface. Bruce gave Ted a hand, then we all moved back cautiously from the car, helped by Mick's torch. We searched for Bruce's, but could not find it; I doubt, after all, whether it was imagination when I heard it fall over the edge of the glen.

We were quite still for several minutes, and then Bruce drew a deep breath.

'Well, here we are by the grace of God and a little ingenuity. Percy's still out, he must have been clumped hard. Has anyone got any chocolate?'

'I've two or three slabs,' I said.

'Bless you,' said Bruce.

'Well, isn't her job to provide the provender?' demanded Ted airily. 'After all, a woman is a woman, and her heart should be in making meals. What's next?' he demanded hastily. 'It's perishing cold.'

'There's only one wise thing to do,' said Bruce, 'and that's to keep walking, after we've packed Percy into blankets. I dragged two from the car. Share out the chocolate, sweet, and then we'll get going.'

He was right, of course, although none of us wanted to leave Percy. We made him as comfortable as we could while we munched and talked.

I dreaded the thought of walking along that unmade road in high-heeled shoes with thin soles, and very soon sharp pieces of gravel and flint were pressing against them uncomfortably. And it was really bitterly cold, a mockery of the heat of the day, while as we started forward, Ted and Bruce in front, Mick by my side for the first half-mile or so, the mist swirled about us.

The torch light was only enough to show the road a few feet ahead of us, so it was impossible to make fast progress. Nevertheless, walking made me warmer, and I forced myself not to pay too much heed to the pain at the soles of my feet. After a while, Mick and Ted went in front, and Bruce tucked an arm round me.

'What shoes are you wearing?'

'The new ones,' I grimaced: 'Court shoes at that.'

'Not so good,' said Bruce. 'We should come to a better patch of road a bit further along, but until then—stop a moment.'

We all stopped, and before I knew what he was planning to do he had put one arm under my knees, another round my waist, and lifted me. I protested vainly, and I think we actually made better speed.

I could feel Bruce's breath brushing against my cheeks, and felt absurdly tired, although I kept trying to listen for the smoother footsteps on the better surface. When we reached it, I was dozing! But Bruce awakened me putting

me down. 'Easier going now,' he said. 'And we ought to be near the airfield soon.'

I rubbed my eyes, and then began to step out briskly. The road was a good one, walking was much more comfortable. The cold seeped into me again, and only the faintest glow came from the torch, and that forced us to slow down, for there were deep drops on either side of the road.

Bruce said slowly: 'We could strike matches.'

'And we could lay down and die,' said Ted. 'I think we ought to go on. It'll be dawn soon, and the road's pretty wide.'

'Yes. I wonder if Indian file would be best?' suggested Bruce. 'We could try it—what's that, Mary?'

I had exclaimed, not loudly, but enough to make him break off.

It so happened that the others were looking towards the sides of the road, and I was the only one then to be looking straight ahead. I did not answer immediately, and then I said:

'Look straight in front.'

I had seen a flicker of light, and as all of us stared the flicker became a steady glow, a considerable distance beneath us. After a few seconds it was obvious that it was the beam of a torch.

'Friends, I hope,' said Bruce in a low voice.

'D'you know,' said Mick, 'I fancy the road turns here. If it does, those people are in the glen.'

'We could shout,' said Mick.

No one answered immediately, and before a word was spoken, while the light of the torch moved unsteadily some distance ahead of us, and much lower than the road, there came a sound over the mountains and the moorland, a high-pitched wailing sound, swaying up and down, reminiscent of a siren and yet somehow very different. It maintained its long, weird note, and I shivered; it was like the howl of the banshee, just as sudden and unexpected, just as frightening.

Then, from a long way off, there came a glare of a powerful light—a searchlight, but not one combing the skies.

It was Bruce who said in a tense voice:

'So that's it. There's been an escape from Ballas Prison.'

17

Escape to What?

High and eerie, the wail of the warning of escape came to us across the moorlands, piercing the mist and the silence and the darkness like an evil thing. The first searchlight, brilliant in itself although far away, was joined by others, forming a network of light about the ramparts of the prison.

Bruce said slowly:

'They're too late. They can't see this far.'

'Meaning?' asked Ted.

'The little light down there,' said Bruce.

Then I realised what it probably meant.

I felt Ted stiffen, for he was standing close to me, and I heard an exclamation from Mick. I think all of us turned towards the smaller light, perhaps a hundred feet beneath us, and almost level with us now.

In the reflection behind it we could see at least three men, although it was possible that there were more than three. The movement was unsteady, and we guessed that was because they were walking on uneven ground. But they seemed to know exactly where they were going, for their pace did not slacken.

'Well, what?' asked Ted.

'No ruddy torch between us!' growled Mick.

'A torch wouldn't help, they'd see it,' Bruce said. 'I wish I knew what the ground was like down here.' He paused, and the rest of us waited, for there was no doubt that he had some plan of action in the making.

I stared towards the searchlights.

The wailing had stopped, but that hardly mattered now. The great beams moved with slow precision about the prison, but the escape party was too far away to be seen. I did not doubt for a moment that the men moving below us were the escapees and, although his name had not been

mentioned, I felt quite sure Ernst Kless was with them.

'All right,' Bruce said, obviously to get our attention. 'Ted and I will get down somehow; Mick and Mary hurry along to the prison and report what we've seen. There's enough light to show us around now.'

That at least was true.

Although it was obvious that the searchlights were some miles away, the combined glare was so great that it illuminated great stretches of the countryside. We could not see clearly, but could make each other out, and see the pale blur of one another's faces.

Mick said reluctantly: 'All right, Bruce.'

'We ought all to follow the party down there,' I protested.

'Sorry, sweetheart,' said Bruce. 'We've got to split our forces, and with those dancing pumps of yours you won't be able to make any speed this way.'

'All right,' I conceded, miserably.

His hand brushed against mine for a moment.

'We'll be seeing you,' he said. 'Off we go, Ted.'

There was no hedge or wall along the road, but it was possible then to see that there were no crags, no rocks, immediately beneath the road, and the slope down was gentle. The moorland would be still difficult going in the darkness, but much better now that the searchlights were working.

They made little sound as they started down.

I stood still for a moment, until Mick said in my ear:

'We've a job, too, you know.'

'Sorry,' I said, and we began to walk towards the camp. The gloom had swallowed Ted and Bruce, and my heart was heavy. I had seen Bruce go away like that before, and I always felt a nagging fear that perhaps I had seen him for the last time.

We had not gone fifty yards before Mick stopped.

I had been thinking too much of Bruce to pay any attention to anything which might go on about me. When we stopped, however, we could make out the faint movements of people approaching us. There was no light, except the faint glow which spread everywhere, like moonlight.

Mick said: 'The side of the road, I think.'

I nodded, although that was purposeless, and obeyed him. Cautiously, we stepped off the road on to the grassland, and

then we crouched down, so that we could not be seen by the others. I knew that it might be the first search party, although, if the escape had not been discovered until the wailing warning, there had been no time for anyone to get this far.

A moment later I had no thought of a search party, for I heard a low-pitched voice, the words quite clear. I heard Mick take in a sharp breath, but he could not possibly know how the voice and the words affected me.

They were in German; that was startling enough, although in the back of our minds we had half-expected it.

But the words themselves, and the soothing, feminine voice, were so familiar. It was as if I was thrown back a fortnight, to the nightmare days in the room in the Guildford house.

'*It is all right, fräulein,*' said the soft-voiced woman. '*It is all right.*'

. . . . .

There, in nine words, was everything I needed to know just then.

Von Horssell's connection with this affair was proved beyond all doubt, although there was no way of telling where the others had come from, and why the woman used the word *fräulein* again. There must be another woman with her, and my mind flew to the photograph of the girl who looked like me.

The footsteps drew nearer.

I could hear heavy breathing, and I knew that there were men in the party, as well as women. There were some whispered words, also—so low-pitched that it was impossible to distinguish them, yet clear enough for them to be recognised as men's.

The party drew immediately above us.

Then they passed us; and, following them with our eyes, we could see three men and two women, all walking quickly and surely, guided by the faint light which helped us to pick them out.

Neither Mick nor I spoke.

We gave them perhaps sixty seconds, and then scrambled back on to the road. Neither of us thought of continuing

the journey to the camp; obviously this party had to be followed.

Mick put a hand into his right coat pocket.

I opened my bag, and drew out my small automatic. I knew that his movement had been for a gun, and we both felt happier and safer as, with the guns pointing ahead of us, we walked in the wake of the party.

We made little sound, and their footsteps made noise enough to drown anything behind them; and, even if they had not, our footsteps must have sounded like echoes.

I thought of the rougher road, not far ahead, and wondered how I would manage. I was amazed, then, that I had not thought of the obvious thing before. I should go back to Ballas. I ought to leave this job to Mick. He could do it on his own, and once we reached the flint-covered road I would be no more than a passenger.

I knew what I ought to do, and I thought bitterly about it, every step I took forward making me more reluctant to suggest it. As I went on the light grew fainter, and it was only just possible to see the five silhouettes.

I fought an inward battle with myself, but still went on.

I did not think that Mick and I had quickened our pace, but it was soon obvious that we were nearer the party than we had been. Moreover, another sound merged with that of footsteps; it was like sobbing, stifled but recognisable. Then the woman's voice again, with that deceptively gentle, soothing note.

'It is all right, *fräulein*.'

All right, I thought; she had told me that when I had lain in mental torment and physical prostration she had played a vicious, hideous part in trying to drive me mad. And now she was trying the same thing on someone else.

A man's voice, also in German, followed:

'*Gott in himmel*, be quiet! If you are not . . .'

He did not finish, but he had said enough to make the threat apparent. I was suddenly overwhelmingly sorry for that unknown girl, who was crying to herself.

Then quite suddenly there was a development which solved one problem, and made my mind up for me.

It was too vague to see well, but I saw a disturbance in the middle of the group, and I heard a high-pitched voice in English say:

'I won't go on. I won't.'

A sharp oath in German, what sounded like a scuffle, and then quick light footsteps. The girl was running towards Mick and me. I saw the vague shadows of two men turning to follow her, and it was then that Mick decided it was time to shoot.

He fired low, but I know he scored at least one hit, for there was an exclamation of pain, and a man stumbled. I thought the victim fell over the side of the road, for there was a thud, another gasp of pain, and the sound of falling stones.

The flashes of flame were very bright, and the reports of the shots startlingly loud. They drowned any sound from the others of the party, although as the echoes faded the scraping of more hurried footsteps came. The party was running away from us, the girl had passed us in the other direction—and one man, I thought, was falling down the slopes of the side of the valley.

Mick snapped: 'Get her, old girl!'

I turned after the girl. She was running fast, and since she was going towards the searchlights, quite visible. She seemed tall, and her legs were a nice shape. I could hear her heavy breathing, although she did not look over her shoulder. She appeared to be running blindly, heading anywhere, provided she escaped.

I comforted myself with the thought that she would be met eventually by search parties which must soon be on the way from the camp, as I tucked my elbows into my sides and pulling my skirt up well above my knees. She ran much better than the average woman, and she was getting further ahead, becoming a clearer silhouette all the time.

Looking back, it is hard to believe that so much happened, although my thoughts were concentrated on the one thing—catching up with the girl. I did not even find time to wonder whether Kless had been freed, or why there should have been two parties. I was not even worried; I was busy.

Moreover I grew angry with myself, and tried to make a little extra speed, but I could not. My shoes were wearing through and my feet and ankles jarred with every step. I was perspiring; the coldness of the night seemed an illusory thing.

Then the girl fell down!

One moment she was running smoothly; the next she kicked against a stone which I heard skidding along the road, and pitched forward. I was able to see that she put her shoulder to the ground to break the fall. The breath was knocked from her, and she was gulping noisily as I drew up.

I was not in very good shape myself, and for some seconds could not speak. I had dropped to a walk as soon as she fell, and since she made no attempt to get up again I continued my slow progress. When I reached her she was sitting up and staring at me; I could not see her face clearly because it was in the shadows of the searchlights, now much brighter.

I said at last: 'I don't think you've anything more to worry about.'

I heard her draw in a sharp breath. Then she cried:

'Worry about! It's all worry! I can't stand more of it, I tell you I can't stand it!' She began to climb to her feet, still breathing hard but this time because of nervousness or excitement.

'How—how do you know? Who are you?'

'I'm quite sure,' I told her, and I opened my bag to take out cigarettes. As I withdrew my case, I added casually: 'It won't mean anything to you, but my name is Murdoch, Mary Murdoch—*née* Dell,' I added, trying to infuse a light-hearted note. 'Will you have a cigarette?'

She stood staring at me, her mouth wide open; I could just see the white line of her teeth.

'Come along,' I said sharply. 'Staring like that won't help anyone.'

And then she said: 'It's a lie. It's a lie, I'm Mary Dell! I'm Mary Dell! You're one of them. You're another of them!'

And she turned and began to run again.

18

Not Right in the Head

It would hardly have been surprising had she managed to get away, for her words sounded so crazy; surely they could only be the words of someone demented?

'I'm Mary Dell! I'm Mary Dell!'

A kaleidoscopic picture ran through my mind, including sight of von Horssell and the story he had told me, the photographs of a girl faintly resembling me and another—after make-up—very much like me. Then, as she turned, I did an automatic thing, stretching out my leg.

My foot touched the back of her ankle, and for the second time she pitched forward, this time unable to save herself from the full force of the fall. The thud as she went down was sickening, and I took two quick steps forward, and heard myself say so clearly, sincerely:

'Oh, I'm sorry! I . . .'

I stopped, for she kept quite still.

For a moment I thought that she was foxing me, but when I touched her shoulder and then her arm, she did not move. Bending down, I turned her on to her back as gently as I could. The strange distant light illuminated a pale face, and eyes which were tightly closed; but I was astounded, for I might have been looking at myself.

For a few moments I stared down at her. I do not really know how long it was before I opened my bag, taking out a bottle of smelling salts and, after unstoppering it, held it under her nose. She stirred, and moaned. I put the salts aside, and then examined her swiftly; she had grazed her knees and elbows, but otherwise she seemed all right except for a bruise or two on her forehead.

Her eyes were flickering open.

'Feeling better?' I asked in a quick, matter-of-fact tone which I hoped would reassure her.

She said nothing, but after a period of tense quiet, she began to shiver. It could not be with the cold, although I was feeling the chill mist striking at me again. It was too violent for that, and I was reminded of a man I had once seen with malaria, unable to stop himself from trembling, or to prevent his teeth from chattering. Searchlights were shining now against the mist, which was rising from the ground in thick patches; part of the girl was covered completely once, and then materialised eerily out of the mist.

I slapped her face.

It had no immediate effect, and I tried the smelling salts again. The tremors were nervous ones, and had nothing to do with fever; if it were fever, there was nothing I could do to help her while on my own.

She began to quieten. The important thing was to get her somewhere warm and comfortable, to assure her that she need have no more fears. Only God knew what mental torment she had suffered, but if she were an unwilling agent of von Horssell's, I had some idea.

'Can you get up?' I asked at last.

She did not answer, nor try to move, and I stood up abruptly, and said sharply:

'Oh, bother you! What is the use of trying to help?'

Even that had no effect. I stood upright, and then a swirling patch of mist covered her again. It also covered my legs from the knees downwards; while as I peered it drifted sluggishly away and her head and shoulders reappeared, like a figure materialising out of ectoplasm.

I heard other sounds.

They came from ahead of me, and out of a confused rumbling they grew clearer, into the steady beat of motor-cycle engines. The staccato note grew louder and nearer; I knew that the search party on this road was approaching, and my relief was tempered with anxiety, for it would not be easy to tell a convincing story.

The loud note grew into a stuttering roar.

The girl was on the side of the road, and I edged towards it, for the motor-cycles might go past at a good speed, and I wanted no accident. Actually, they sounded much nearer than they were, for not until then did the powerful headlights they were carrying pierce through the mist and the strange, diffused light from the distant beams, which were

continually moving about the land immediately outside and telling me that the escapee was important; the lights would not have been maintained for so long for an ordinary prisoner, I felt sure.

Ernst Kless: it *must* be.

The barking of the two engines was getting on my nerves. I did not realise that they were on a steep section of the road, and climbing very slowly because of bad visibility. At last, however, the beams caught me and the other girl clearly. The first of the motor-cycles drew up. A grotesque figure in a high domed crash-helmet stopped his engine, and the second man followed his example.

A slow, clear English voice said:

'Hallo, what's this?'

I blessed the man! No sharp question, no quick suspicion, just a casual comment. He peered closer, and in the light of the head-lamp from the other cycle, saw me.

'Great Scott,' he said. 'Didn't you come by 'plane some time back?'

It was an officer from the airfield: half the need for explanations was gone; afterwards I learned he had been there when the treacherous sergeant had started our drive. I said, 'Yes,' and would have gone on, but he looked down at the stranger. I saw his head jerk up, and then felt his gaze on me. He could see me clearly, although his face was in the shadows.

'Hmm,' he said. 'How many more twins do you have?'

I began to laugh. Tears came to my eyes, and I felt a strain at my stomach. I must have been slightly hysterical. I did not see him put down the fork-stand of his machine, climb off, and approach me.

'Sorry,' he said. 'You've not had a good time, I gather. What are you doing here? I thought you'd gone to the camp?'

There was something of Bruce in his casual expression and in the way he formed it, and I was at once ashamed of my outburst and grateful that the man had some understanding. I drew a deep breath, and said:

'Will you listen carefully?'

'Of course. Carry on.'

'The sergeant chauffeur took us on a wrong road, and stranded us,' I told him. 'We nearly crashed. We started to

walk back, and the escape warning went off.'

I paused, and he nodded; either he was not surprised, or covered his feelings well.

'We continued in this direction, and then saw some people walking in the valley. Two of us went down into the valley, to follow the party. The fourth member of our group and I came on.'

'Weren't there five of you?'

'Yes. The fifth was knocked out. We wrapped him up in blankets and left him near the car—he couldn't walk.'

'Bad show,' said that blessedly casual lieutenant.

'Wasn't it?' I said, a little helplessly. 'Well—we—the second couple—met another party, including two women. This was one of them. We followed. This girl broke away. My—friend—started shooting. The others turned tail and ran, and he followed them. I followed the girl.'

'And here you are,' he said. 'Very nice work indeed! So two parties went along here, did they?'

'One here, one in the valley.'

'There's another road down the glen,' he said musingly. 'It branches off a few hundred yards along. We-ell, we'll have to get along.'

'The noise of those things will warn them a mile off,' I said.

'They're all we've got, unfortunately, but there'll be a car along soon. Can you walk towards it, do you think?'

'Then I shall have to tell the story over again. Can't you see me back?'

He hesitated. I imagined that he was feeling he should see me to the car, and at the same time was anxious to get on, but the *impasse* was broken soon, for a car was not far behind. It was being driven by a sergeant, and I gathered from the lieutenant that it was on the road to pick up the prisoners, whom the motor-cyclists expected to round up. There was a reassuring confidence in their approach to the chase. I wished I shared it.

The other girl was lifted into the car, and I climbed in next to her. I had a momentary qualm, for there had been a sergeant as reliable-looking as the present driver before, but there was no ground for my fears. The car was driven a few hundred yards along the road, then carefully reversed. Soon I was being taken at a good speed towards the prison camp.

As I drew nearer the searchlights grew brighter, but suddenly one and then another went out. The ensuing darkness was trying, although after a few seconds it was possible for me to see the beam from the single headlamp of the car in which we were travelling.

The journey did not take long.

We reached a collection of small buildings, beyond it a barbed-wire fence, eight or nine feet high. By a gateway in it half a dozen men were standing, with fixed bayonets. An officer was with them, and the sergeant jumped down to report.

I was a little afraid that there would be a spate of questions this time, but the second officer proved as amenable as the first. The car was allowed to pass, and we were taken to a long, narrow building about a hundred yards away from the wire fence.

A door opened, and a glow of shaded light came through.

I was helped from the car, and the other girl was lifted out.

She had not said a word on the journey, and although her shivering had lessened, at times I had heard her teeth chattering. I was too weary, then, to be able to think clearly, although the first glimmering of a plan which might yield results entered my head as I was ushered into the bright light of a comfortable room which, it proved, was the officers' mess. There were half a dozen men present, and no time was lost. The other girl was carried in carefully, and one of the men in the room said:

'A job for you, Doc.'

'Yes.' A grey-haired, thick-set man approached me. 'Is there anything much the matter with her?' he asked, quite casually and without any hint that the circumstances were so unusual; until that night I had not fully understood the meaning of English adaptability—and for that matter Scottish, for half of the officers were on their native soil.

I told him a little wearily, sitting back in an easy chair:

'I think she's been living under strain for some time, but I don't know. She ran away from some—some people, and seemed frightened out of her life.'

There must have been a strange note in my voice, for the M.O. looked at me curiously.

'Anything else?' he asked.

'We-ell—she has a peculiar idea that her name is the same as mine. Or, rather, the same as mine was. Dell, Mary Dell.'

'Hmm,' said the M.O. in a tone which might have meant anything. 'I'll see how she is. For you I'm going to prescribe a good hot meal, and sleep,' he added. 'I think that will set you on your feet again.' He turned from me, and regarded the girl. All of the men were looking first at her and then at me, very curiously. I suppose the question in their minds was already dawning in mine; I should have known that eventually they would have to ask it.

The M.O. voiced it; I was overwhelmingly glad that he did not wait until I was out of earshot.

'Of course,' he said musingly, 'we're going to have a lot of trouble in telling you apart, you know. It isn't easy to be sure which one of you came here by air, is it?'

. . . . .

I stared at him, my heart sinking. Only the informality of the question eased its effect a little, but it was there with all its inference, and I had to find some way of answering it convincingly.

They could not be sure whether I had any right at Ballas, or whether the girl who looked so much like me was really Mary Murdoch, *née* Dell.

19

Two Missing

I think it was the fact that at least a dozen pairs of eyes were turned towards me that I managed to keep a hold on myself, and to answer almost casually:

'It shouldn't be hard to prove, should it? My friends are nearby.'

The M.O. nodded, smiled, and virtually apologised for suggesting there were any doubts, but I felt sure that he had not dismissed them. Leaning back in my chair while two orderlies carried the other girl out on a stretcher, I closed my eyes, and pictured the party of five walking along the otherwise deserted road, and recalled vividly the way the girl had cried, and turned to run away.

She might come round quite soon; but, on the other hand, she might stay in her present condition for a long time, and that would be bad, unless Mick, Ted or Bruce returned quickly. As the M.O. had spoken, I had realised that everyone who could identify me was in the mountains.

I did not enjoy the soup which was brought soon afterwards, or the grilled chop and *sauté* potatoes which followed, although there was nothing the matter with them. I remember looking a little wistfully towards the bar, and some long-necked bottles of Pilsener. A youthful subaltern came over, smiling, and said:

'What will you have to drink—long or short?'

'I've a craving for lager,' I confessed.

'We can soon satisfy that,' he assured me. 'D'you mind if I drink with you?'

I welcomed him, tired of sitting alone, although, with the others present, knowing that I was a curiosity if nothing else. It was just turned one o'clock, I saw from a clock over the bar. I was not only tired but in a state of acute depression. The subaltern, a pleasantly ugly man with a deeply

tanned face, crisp brown hair and very white teeth, had obviously taken it on himself to put me at ease. He chattered amiably and discursively, and once or twice had me laughing.

The beneficial effect of the food and the satisfying tartness of the Pilsener began to have effect. I found it easier to convince myself that my identity would not be seriously questioned. I wished that the Commanding Officer would interview me: but I realised that he was busy organising the hunt for whoever had escaped.

In spite of the subaltern's cheerfulness, I found myself nodding when I was back in an easy chair. I finished the last of my Pilsener, tapped the ash from a cigarette; and the next thing I remember is waking up with a start.

The big, bare room, with the bar at one end and the bottles in serried rows behind it, the cartoons and photographs on the walls, mostly of lovelies and virtually all in *décolleté*, was unfamiliar and puzzling. The walls were green, what could be seen of them, and coconut matting or druggeting covered the floor. Three or four men were there, and one was at my side. It was a broad-shouldered captain I had not seen before.

'Sorry to disturb you,' he said easily. 'There's no hurry. Wake up slowly!'

'Th-thanks,' I said, sitting up abruptly and opening and shutting my eyes against the glare. 'I—er—Oh, I remember.'

'Major Hedley would like a word with you,' said the captain easily. 'You'll need a coat. It's pretty nippy outside.'

He held out a khaki greatcoat, and I was glad of that when I stepped from the mess-room into the broad, grey expanse of the ground beyond. A bleak, desolate prospect met my eyes, stretching for a long way, lost in the mountains in the distance, their grey tops and bleak slopes were still half-hidden by swirling mists which showed very white in the first watery streaks of the morning sun.

The cold air cleared my mind, and I remembered everything that had happened, including the obvious doubts which the M.O. had entertained; and then I thought of Bruce.

I said sharply: 'Have my friends come in?'

'I don't really know,' said the captain apologetically.

I took that to mean 'No', and something tightened within

me. But I had little time for worrying unduly, for we reached a smaller wooden building, outside which two men were standing with fixed bayonets. They put their rifles to the salute as we arrived, and then the captain pushed open a door, led me through two bare rooms empty of everything but desks, chairs and maps, then into a larger room, warmer and more comfortably furnished. The main item of furniture was an enormous desk, behind which sat a grey-haired man in khaki.

I glanced at, and beyond, him.

I ignored him, the desk, the room, and everything else but one thing, the little fat man standing by the Major and grinning so widely that his third chin came out of the embryo stage, and grew fully mature.

'Pinky!' I shouted, and rushed forward. *'Pinky!'*

* * * * *

'Hallo, hallo. No. Don't do that!' ejaculated Pinky hastily. I think he thought I was going to embrace him; he was not far wrong. 'Well, Mary me dear, what the blazes do you mean by dragging me all the way up here to identify you? What's it all about? 'Pon my living say-so, you get up to some fine tricks, don't you?'

I was too excited to answer back in kind, and I suppose I said, 'Where's Bruce?' quite automatically.

Pinky frowned.

'H'm, yes. Where's Bruce? I wish I knew.' He patted the back of my hand, and then said absurdly: 'I've just ordered some tea. D'you feel like some?'

'Do I!' My mouth was very dry, and my elation had gone completely. Bruce had not returned, and I was suddenly very frightened. The fact that I was identified beyond all possible doubt, and that Sir Robert had come in person to make sure that no mistake was made, lost much of its significance. I must have shown something of what I felt, for the captain put a chair behind me. I sat down, telling myself not to be a fool; Bruce had been away a hundred times on far more dangerous missions than this.

Far more dangerous?

I knew as I thought the words that they were nonsense, for there could be nothing as dangerous as von Horssell.

An orderly brought in some tea, weak but very hot, and it freshened me. I brushed my hair back from my forehead with my hands and, for the first time, realised what a mess I must look. I was suddenly and overwhelmingly aware of the need for a mirror, and I actually started to open my bag; but I closed it again firmly, and in the middle of a sip, said:

'Mick?'

'What's that?' demanded Pinky.

'Sorry,' I said. 'Have you found Mick or Percy?'

'Yes,' said the Pink Un crisply. 'Briggs is all right—recovering now in the hospital here. Nothing too serious, but concussion is likely. Mick—he's had a nasty time.'

'Oh,' I said, and stared, ignoring the tea.

'Seems to have had a running fight with two fellows,' said the Pink Un gruffly. 'Then'—he began to squeak—'he put paid to 'em. Found all three at the bottom of a slope. Oh, he'll be all right. No need to look like that! Bless my soul, what's the matter with you this morning?'

'I'm all right,' I said with an effort. 'How—how is the other girl?'

While I spoke I was imagining Mick fighting in the darkness with two men, while another man and the soft-voiced Bavarian woman escaped somewhere into the Highlands. I was seeing another picture, too; it was more imaginary, and yet to me it seemed much more real.

I was wondering what had happened to Bruce; whether he too had had a fight, which had not ended the right way.

I wished I knew how many people had been in the party travelling along the glen.

'Delirious, poor child—surprisingly like you.' He shot a glance at me from under his eyelids, a prodigiously sly, cunning glance. 'Not so much when you look into her, of course. But still. Same hair, same colouring, and similar features. Made up, I should say she'd pass off very well. We know she could—we heard she was at the Guildford house. That's what took Bruce there; but you know that.' He paused, and I found him staring at me, while I was aware also of the steady gaze of the C.O., a Major Hedley whose grey eyes were narrowed, and whose lined forehead was wrinkled in perplexity.

The captain envoy appeared to be staring at me with the same intensity.

I said: 'Pinky, what are you driving at?'

Pinky pursed his lips.

'H'm, yes. Driving at. I suppose so. Mary, this is the position. Ernst Kless escaped from here last night. I won't go into details of how it was done; don't know everything myself yet. But he got away. It's clear now that three parties left the prison soon afterwards—the two parties you met, and another which went north. Obviously the idea of the rescuers was to leave three trails, to confuse us in the hunt.' He paused, and shot that quick, shrewd glance quickly. 'Got all that?'

'Yes,' I said expressionlessly.

'Good. Get first into your mind that it was Kless. Whether he's so important we don't yet know. Anyhow, Berlin wants us to think so. Berlin sent von Horssell to get him away, and von Horssell has started well by getting him out of the prison. However. Not all the way yet, by a long way.'

'*Will* you get to the point?' I demanded.

'But don't be insolent, my girl! Have some more tea?' He stetched out a podgy hand for my cup, and began to pour me out a refill as he went on: 'The party you and Mick followed was broken up; most unlikely Kless was with the woman you've talked about. The party that went north has been caught. So far, very good. Smart work on the part of the Major here.' The Major shuffled in his seat, and I fancied there might be a back-hander inferring that the escape should never have been allowed. 'All right, then, all right. The main party, with Kless, took the valley. They could be hiding anywhere. It wouldn't be impossible for them to have a 'plane hidden somewhere.'

The Major cleared his throat, a protesting noise.

'Oh, it's not likely, not likely,' said the Pink Un hastily. 'Country's pretty well covered. I know that. Talking of possibilities only. All right, then. An obvious one is that they could land a 'plane, hydroplane, call it what you like, somewhere in the mountains, and collect von Horssell, Kless, and the rest of the bunch. But it would have to be by night—right, Major?'

The Major rumbled something that sounded like 'Possibly.'

'Good,' said the Pink Un briskly. 'We accept the premise. Bruce is either on their trail, h'mp, or temporarily put off it. Thing is, they're somewhere in the Highlands and will be all day. Not a single car will be allowed to pass, not a single ship will leave any of the lochs. However, we've got to find 'em. No doubt about that.'

He paused, as I finished my second cup of tea. I said very slowly:

'If you don't get to the point, I *am* going to scream.'

' 'Pon my soul, never known such impatience. Never!' exclaimed Pinky. 'Want everything done at once. Now be reasonable, Mary. You ought not to need an explanation. The girl was used to make us think she was you. A bit involved, but there it is. Now—what's to prevent you from making them think you are her?'

20

Quite Alone

I stared at him over the edge of the empty cup, seeing the bright gleam in his blue eyes, and the contrast of his pink forehead and scalp. A glimmering of the idea had been in my mind the previous night, and while the Pink Un had been talking, yet it took my breath away.

I said: 'You'd never trick von H. that way.'

'Don't you be so sure,' squeaked Pinky. 'Don't you start saying a thing can't be done until you've tried it. It's not like you. He might not be, no. I know that only too well. But he might be. Dressed in her clothes, a little alteration or two here and there—you could do that yourself. Will you try?'

I was thinking quickly, and to cover the fact that I hardly knew what to make of the proposal, I fell back on a dogmatic:

'How could it work? Even if we're sufficiently alike, and I don't think so, what good would it do?'

'Now don't talk such imbecile nonsense!' snapped Pinky, and I coloured to the ears; it would not have been so bad had the others not been present. I prevented myself from answering back, and he went on: 'What you probably mean is: how are you going to find him? Well, we know where he started. We know the party went along the valley. We also know that we could organise a man-hunt on gigantic lines and not see a small party hidden in one of the caves. Searchers could be avoided, quite easily. But'—he leaned forward, and wagged a stumpy finger at me—'supposing you went along there *alone*? Just ask yourself that? Supposing you went there, and you were seen? He'd send out for you. That's reasonable, isn't it?' he bellowed, his larynx letting him down and the last four words echoing like a clarion cry about the room.

'I suppose so,' I said slowly. 'But supposing I do trick them—and they did mistake me for her at a distance—what am I going to do?'

The Major pushed his chair back, and under his breath said something that sounded like: 'No. I don't like it.' The Captain cleared his throat, but the Pink Un was the only man who mattered there. It was as if he had grown in stature, his face was very large and seemed very near; I was probably the only one there who saw what was suspiciously like appeal in his eyes.

'That's it,' he said. 'The nail on the head. Trust you. Well, Mary. I won't mince words. Never have with you; no need to, thank God. Thing is, they mustn't be allowed to get out of the country. Better they be killed than that. Understand?'

I stared back without answering, and he went on in a measured voice, for once thoroughly in command of it.

'Well, I think you do. I can give you a little bomb—it looks like a lipstick, safe as houses while you keep the pin in it. Very powerful explosive. With that, you can make sure they're all blown to smithereens.' He paused, and then his voice went upwards in an absurd falsetto. 'There y'are. Do it myself if I were anything like the gel. Take it or leave it, Mary. No coercion. Most important that we stop them from leaving the country, and we'll keep the cordon going; we've got the district packed with night-fighters, too. However—your way seems the most likely. Almost a guarantee. Like some time to think it over?'

I stared back for a long while.

I saw the Major only vaguely, although I can well imagine that he was repeating to himself that he did not like it; he was thinking it was no job for a woman, of course; whereas I think the only jobs a woman can't do are those of which she's physically incapable, but a man—especially a soldier—can hardly be expected to agree.

The Pink Un began to fidget.

'Let me have a bath and a decent breakfast,' I said, 'and find me some stout shoes—I can't walk in the things I was wearing last night. And then—but wait a minute. I shall have to look as if I've been wandering about all night. I'd better miss the bath.' I grimaced, hesitated, and then went on: 'But I insist on the shoes.'

'Bless your heart, you can have all the shoes in Scotland!'

cried Pinky, and he jumped from his chair, rounded the desk, and gripped my hands. 'I knew you'd do it. Hell of a job, and don't I know it? But it's in the blood. Yes, it's in the blood.' He paused, pushed his head on one side, and said reflectively. 'No reason why you shouldn't have a tub, provided you don't wash your neck or face. Freshen you up a lot. Eh, Major?'

The Major rumbled something which I didn't catch, and made me feel foolish by insisting on shaking hands.

There were other problems on my mind, of course, in addition to the immediate task. There was the whereabouts of Bruce. It was clear that Pinky believed he had come off second best in a collision with the party which I had first seen walking through the glen; I could not bring myself to believe it. I saw visions of finding Bruce and Ted still on von Horssell's trail—or the trail of the party in the glen.

I had the bath, and breakfast. There was a bustle of activity afterwards, the clothes of the other girl were brought to me; they fitted remarkably well. She was examined, too, for any distinguishing marks, and a small mole was found behind her left ear; one was painted on me. Pinky fussed a great deal, and was like a broody hen, several times voicing uncertainty about the wisdom of letting me go, giving me obvious loopholes to withdraw.

I had no desire to change my mind.

Next to starting out, I wanted most to find how the escape had been contrived, but investigations were still in progress. It seemed likely that several of the men stationed at Ballas had been bribed—like the sergeant who had met us at the landing field. I could imagine the Major sifting the facts and mumbling under his breath in that big, bare room.

It was seven o'clock when I was ready to start.

The other girl's shoes needed felt socks, so as to fit me. She had a capacious handbag, and all of its original contents were put in it. I was supplied with several slabs of plain chocolate, to be thrown away immediately I was sighted by any of von Horssell's men, but to sustain me if I wandered about the mountains all day.

And I was given the gilt metal lipstick bomb.

A fierce discussion among myself, Pinky and the Major ended in a decision not to send anyone after me, but to have a look-out 'plane always on duty in the air. The Major

wanted to send men out an hour afterwards, but Pinky and I persuaded him—that was like Pinky, despite the fact that he was in a position to give orders and be rigidly obeyed—that it would not be wise. Von Horssell would train his men to make quite sure that no one else was in the vicinity.

It was not practical, either, for me to leave a trail of any kind behind me. That possibility was examined thoroughly, with many hopeful and dogged suggestions from the Major, including the use of aniseed, which he said could easily be followed afterwards by bloodhounds or retrievers. I think Sir Robert would have been persuaded to try that; but there was no essence of aniseed available, which was hardly surprising.

Before I left the encampment, I had an interview with the other 'Mary Dell'.

The M.O. was with her, as well as a nurse. Her wide-staring eyes were too bright, and her cheeks were flushed a deep red. It was clear that the M.O. was puzzled. She said virtually nothing, when asked her name she insisted that she was Mary Dell, and that she could not remember anything else.

Outside the ward of the wooden hospital, the M.O. wrinkled his lined forehead and stirred the dust with his foot. There was dust everywhere in Ballas at that season of the year.

'She's had a bad time,' he said. 'There are one or two faint weals on her back. Not nice. What kind of people are these who looked after her?'

'Looked after her!' I echoed. 'Looked after . . .' I drew a deep breath, and saw the M.O.'s kindly, tanned face alter its expression as if he were alarmed. 'That isn't understatement,' I said. 'It's laughable. How does Hitler look after the victims of Dachau? How does he look after the Poles and Czechs, the Jews, the . . .'

I stopped myself abruptly.

I knew that my thoughts were running away with me; a vision had been conjured by the words, 'There are one or two weals on her back,' but the fact that I had seen so many infamies and so much horror, so great a mutilation and such grievous wounds inflicted on human beings in occupied Europe, was hardly the fault of the Medical Officer at Ballas Prison Camp.

'I'm sorry,' I said more evenly. 'But they don't "look after" at all. They're friends of Kless, and worse than that. They wanted her to obey them implicitly, and she wasn't amenable at first, but they found a way of making her. Drugs?' I made the word a question. 'Fear? I don't know, but they forced her to her limit and beyond, that's why she's like this, and why she ran away. God knows how she found the courage to run from them.'

The M.O. eyed me very oddly.

'I see,' he said. 'I'm sorry.'

I did not see then why he was so confused, but I understood a few minutes later. Sir Robert and the Major were in the latter's office when I went in just before leaving. I heard the M.O.'s voice as the door opened.

'But it's infamous,' he said. 'Positively infamous. You can't send a woman into that kind of situation!'

'Stuff and silly nonsense!' roared the Pink Un. 'I can send a woman, just one woman, probably the only woman, God bless her. She'll find a way of stopping them or sending them to Kingdom Come, and she knows the odds. 'Pon my living say-so, she taught me what the odds were. I could tell you things that pretty woman has done that would make your hair stand on end like the quills of a fretful porcupine.'

Quite oblivious to the absurdity of the comparison, Pinky uttered it in a voice which would have been impressively deep but for a quiver with the last word, and a single syllable in falsetto. He cleared his throat, looked up and saw me. His immense face broadened, his third chin appeared.

'Hallo, hallo, Mary. Just talking about you, wondering if you'd like to think better of it. Now's the time, me dear; now's the time.'

'You pink-and-white hypocrite,' I said, 'I heard every word. Half of them weren't true, and the other half were exaggerated. I'm ready.'

'Good girl,' said Pinky, beaming happily. 'Good girl.'

* * * * *

When the project had first been discussed one of the main difficulties raised by the Major had been the problem of getting me into the glen where Bruce and Ted had gone,

while avoiding the possibility of my being seen early on the journey by one or more of von Horssell's men. It was an argument which Pinky blasted witheringly with the one word:

'Mist.'

'Not at eight o'clock in the morning,' objected the Major.

'Then, damn it, make some,' said Pinky.

Actually the Major had been trying to prejudice his case, for there was a ground mist even this late in the morning—it was not so clear, in fact, as it had been just after dawn. Taking advantage of the natural cover, I was driven to a point some two miles along the road, and then given a final briefing on the locality. I was taught to avoid reeds and similar growths, to beware of patches of brownish-looking grass, probably peat-bogs, and was advised to keep to the path and, if that ceased, to rocky land. I had been given a slip of paper, telling me the outstanding peaks in the district, two tiny lochs, a small waterfall—those and several other natural features of the terrain. The distinguishing features of each was clearly described, and each was marked on a pencil-drawn map.

I found that the glen—which took its name from the village, and was Glen Ballas—went for some twenty miles almost due west, although there were several twists and turns, so that at one point the road, developing into nothing more than a footpath, ran nor'-nor'-west. It ended at the meeting-place of two of the smaller lochs, one of which led to the sea. At the Ballas and the western end of the glen the Major had established a barrier which could not be passed, but north and south along the length of the glen were tracks that would lead right out of the district with a good chance of being unseen. None of these tracks was suitable for vehicles, but a good walker could get out of Glen Ballas at several points.

The operative words were 'a good walker'.

If von Horssell was ahead, then there was only one way in which he could get away from the mountains—by air. He had no chance at all if forced to walk, I doubted whether he could walk for half a mile along that rough moorland.

I did not seriously doubt that von Horssell was ahead.

I was convinced that the man himself was lying in wait for me, I could not throw off a feeling akin to panic, which

the approach of a meeting with him always inspired.

To counteract that, there was the possibility of finding Bruce.

It was an eerie journey, the worse because I felt that there was a probability of being watched all the time. As I went deeper and deeper into the glen, walking as quickly as the rock-strewn path would allow, sometimes forced to go ten or fifteen yards round boulders or patches of bog, often stumbling at a sharp incline and nearly falling head first when the ground dropped unexpectedly ahead of me, the sun rose slowly, and it began to grow hot. This thickened the mists for a while, so that there were times when I was walking through a pale, gossamer cloak of haze, feeling the heat without being able to see the sun, forced to feel my way ahead, and once or twice compelled to stop until a puff of wind blew the mist away and revealed the path.

In other places the air was so clear that I could discern the ridges on the rocks miles away from me. I could see the little moving figures of sheep, and marvelled that sheep and shepherd trod this barren land.

I felt that from each rock, from every hill and mountain-side, I might be watched. Several times I heard the drone of an aeroplane high in the heavens; the observer was looking for me, watching through special glasses for the tiny figure which I represented. Photographs were doubtless being taken, and the eye of the R.A.F. was working at full pressure. Yet, although it was the only company I had, it offered no comfort. It was worse, I think, because I knew that thousands of feet in the air the 'plane's occupants could do nothing. It made my loneliness seem greater. Yet no single period of five minutes passed without the droning of the engines in my ears.

The path began to go upwards, not in a series of sharp ascents, but in a low, gradual pull. The backs of my legs were aching, and there was no need for me to pretend to look dishevelled and weary; I was both. I had not combed my hair that morning. I felt dirty and my eyes were hot and uncomfortable as I narrowed them against the glare of the rising sun, and its reflection on the distant hills. I passed a tall, granite-like boulder, some fifty feet high, and almost round—something like one of the rocks at Stonehenge; on

the list I had been given it was clearly described. They called it the Stone Giant of Glen Ballas.

There is a story attached to it; the young Scot who had prepared my 'guide-book' had told me in quick, simple phrases of the legend of the Stone Giant, going back far beyond the days of border fighting to the earliest history of the Scottish clans. How a McGen had entered into an unholy alliance with a McLin, wedding the daughter of his clan's worst enemies, how, together with his wife, he had been slain by his own followers, and how above their sepulchre a rock had appeared overnight, marking the boundary between the land of the McGens and the McLins. Beneath the Stone Giant were the remains of the traitor and his spouse.

I shivered when I first saw it.

Absurd, perhaps, in the midst of the morning. But the great stone was like a natural vault, ten feet across at top and bottom, pointing straight upright towards the skies, bare-faced, surrounded by a stretch of barren earth on which neither grass nor heather grew—the soil was polluted by the ashes of the traitor's body, said legend.

It marked, also, a change in the characteristics of the glen.

Hitherto it had been wide, although on either side the mountains rose, frowning down on me with disdainful detachment, crags overhanging their summits and looking likely to fall at any moment. The mountainsides were strewn with boulders, while down some of them trickled little streams leaping and dancing and silvery in the early sun, inhabited they said by the wee folk who ran at the sight of a human being and hid in the banks of the streams, which to them were raging rivers.

Beyond the Stone Giant the defile grew narrower; in places the mountains stretched almost perpendicular towards the sky, towering, brooding masses of rock, each one throwing a shadow, each one seeming to hold a thousand men prepared to reveal themselves and stalk me down slowly, remorselessly.

This was madness; this was fantasy.

I had never been so utterly alone in the mountains of the west. I had not known them well, and I was seized with vivid fears of imagery which pushed my real quest to the background. I knew that it was nearly one o'clock, that I

had been walking—with occasional rests—for nearly five hours. I had perhaps covered ten miles, no more—the 'guide-book' told me that the Giant was eight and a half miles from the entry to the glen.

I ate a little chocolate, rested for twenty minutes, then dabbled my hot feet in one of the streams, the delicious coolness of the water refreshing me immediately. My head was turned on the Stone Giant, and the commonplace task of bathing my feet brought me back to some degree of normalcy.

Then, without any reason, I felt that I was being watched.

This time it was not the eerie, frightened feeling of being followed by the eyes of the past, by the ghosts of Glen Ballas, of massacred members of Clan McGen and Clan McLin. It was the feeling that often comes when one is being stared at.

My heart had suddenly started to beat fast. I took the remaining chocolate from my bag, wrapped it in the paper of the 'guide-book', and thrust it under a rock near where I was sitting. I stared into the rippling water, seeing the grains of white sand beneath, some moving sluggishly. I looked a little way upstream, and then knew that it was not imagination. I could see the shadow of someone standing not twenty yards away; the shadow fell over the stream and to the other side, large, dark, menacing.

There had been cigarettes in the other girl's bag; I took one out and lit it before I turned my head.

I did not have to pretend that I was startled, that my nerves were jangling. I increased the effect by opening my mouth and letting the lighted cigarette drop, by raising clenched hands as I stared towards the man.

Not at von Horssell—nor any of his men, unless Montague Beecham *did* work for him.

21

The Stone Giant

I had seen Beecham angry, arrogant, annoyed, jocular, persuasive—oh, I thought that I had seen him in every possible mood and guise; but there was something new in the way he stood quite still and stared at me.

His florid face was set, his eyes were not smiling; they were grey, and they looked very cold.

He was dressed in a suit of plus-fours which made his big frame look monstrous, and he carried a stout walking stick; he had the ferrule pressed against the ground, and was leaning on it.

Because the sun was behind him I had to narrow my eyes against the glare. That seemed to put his face still more in the shadows, perhaps explained something of his forbidding expression, but I did not think so then. I almost forgot that I was *not* Mary Murdoch, I almost gave myself away. But I recovered in time, as I returned his stare. I clenched my hands, and began to rise.

Beecham moved.

'Oh, don't get up. Don't get up,' he boomed. 'Of all the people to meet, here! Well, well, well! I subscribe now and for ever after to the *cliché* that it's a small world—eh? By George, you look tired! Positively done up. Where's your hubby, eh? What's the fella doing, leaving you here on your own? Doesn't he know that good things ought to be looked after?'

I was crouching then, and staring. I did not answer, but as he drew within a yard of me I backed quickly; my mouth worked. I saw the puzzled expression on his face, and his voice grew sharper.

'Now, steady! I won't bite you!'

I let my lips quiver. I was in full control, and although my mind was asking a hundred questions I was primarily

grateful for the chance of testing my 'identity': could I make this man seriously doubt who I was? I concentrated on that, pushing questions to the background, even the paramount ones. Why was he here? How had he reached this spot?

'Who—who are you?' I demanded.

My voice was hoarse, my breathing heavy. I stood so that I could move away quickly if he attempted to get near me. I watched the bewilderment in his big face, and saw the frown of annoyance line his forehead.

'Oh, that won't do. What the devil's the matter with you? Come, Mrs. Murdoch!'

I gasped, and saw him start. I moved very slowly at first and then quickly, jumping to the far side of the stream, and shouting as I went:

'You're one of them! No! Keep away. You're one of them!'

'Good God, what is this?' Beecham asked in an audible whisper. I felt that I was succeeding, and watched him more narrowly, ten feet away. His expression eased a little, and he went on soothingly: 'You're all right, y'know. I won't hurt you. I'm a friend. Oh, damn it, you remember me!'

'No,' I said. 'No. But you must be one of them.'

Beecham's eyes narrowed until I could hardly see them; and then he spoke again in an audible whisper, drawing a deep breath as a preliminary.

'Good Lord!' he exclaimed. 'So this is the other woman. Incredible. Absolutely incredible. Like as two peas—but are they? Thinner, yes, thinner.' He took the stick from the ground, and, without moving, spoke with elephantine tact:

'I'm just on my own, my dear. You needn't worry about *me*. D'you know, just for the moment I confused you with someone else. But see here, what are you doing here, on your own? Bad place to get lost in, you know.'

Dully, I said: 'I ran away.'

His eyebrows went upwards abruptly.

'Ran away? Who from?'

'Them,' I said. 'Last night. And then I walked—oh, I walked so far.'

I stopped abruptly when I saw him move his right hand to his pocket; but, instead of the gun which I was afraid would be revealed, I saw a slab of chocolate. He was going

to try to bribe me to more confidences. I saw, also, a remarkable change come over Montague Beecham, as though he was no longer puzzled or bewildered, but quite sure of himself.

'You're tired then, eh? Too bad. Hungry, are you? How about some chocolate?'

I stared at the slab as if I had not seen food for days. I put everything I knew into feigning hunger so great that the thought of eating almost stunned me. I let my mouth open, and breathed heavily.

'Oh, come on, come on,' said Beecham. 'I won't bite you. Good Gad, girl. I'm a friend. Understand, a friend? Come and sit down, now, and have some chocolate.'

He lowered his huge form to a rock, sat down and, without looking at me, began to take the wrapper off the chocolate. I knew that he was offering it solely as a bribe, and believed that I would get none unless I went for it. I hesitated for some seconds, then went forward very quickly, snatching it from his hands. Half-prepared, he was not quite prompt enough in withdrawing it. I took the whole slab, and promptly sped back to a spot ten feet away from him.

'Oi, confound you!' boomed Beecham, suddenly annoyed and very nearly angry. 'Damn it, play the game! What do you think I'm going to do to you?'

I snapped off a large piece of chocolate, and ate it as though ravenous. Apparently my manner made him forget his annoyance.

'Well, well,' he said. 'Starving, eh? Never mind—and don't eat it too fast. That won't help you. Have a drink of water between mouthfuls; help to fill it out. I can tell you that,' he added, owlishly serious. 'I've lived for a week on a couple of slabs of chocolate and a pint or two of water. Out East. Earlier in this damned war. Didn't lose a stone, either; only ten pounds. You see? A mouthful, slowly, then a pause, a sip of water, and you'll enjoy it more. I'm not joking. That's a reliable way of making it seem three times as much.'

I ate half the chocolate quickly, then began to lick my lips, while putting on my shoes. I was thirsty—there had been no time for a drink after eating the slab from Ballas. He shrugged his massive shoulders and from a haversack which he was carrying over one shoulder, took out a thermos flask. He unscrewed the cup, stood up, stopped

over the stream and filled the cup with water. He handed this to me, across the stream.

'I won't hurt you,' he promised.

I took the cup. The water was very cold and refreshing. I drank greedily and then refilled the cup, drinking again before handing it back to him. He watched me with a frown of disapproval.

'All you'll do is distend your tummy, and get wind. Deuced painful, I can tell you. Don't be a little goose. Come and sit down and talk reasonably.' He paused, and as I made no move, he re-seated himself and went on: 'All right, all right. If you feel safer that side of the stream, I don't mind. Now what's it all about? Who have you run away from?'

'Them,' I answered, very quickly.

'Yes, yes. But what are their names?'

'I can't tell you!' I shouted. 'They'll beat me again if I tell you!'

I watched his big face, and the changing expressions on it. His eyes were very narrow, and his lips worked. I did not understand what was in his mind. I was beginning, then, to wonder just what his appearance inferred.

It could be that he had guessed that our party had gone to Ballas, followed, landed somewhere in the mountains, and learned the story of the escape. Then I realised that it was not likely that the story had been released for the radio yet, and wondered whether he knew that Kless had been spirited away.

There was the other possibility and, I thought, the most likely one: that he was an emissary from von Horssell, *au fait* with what had happened because he was in touch with the German, and setting out to make sure that I was von Horssell's stooge, not Mary Murdoch. Many of the things he had said would take some explaining away, of course, but they may have been uttered with the sole idea of deceiving me.

From the beginning, Beecham had been on the list of suspects. What could I do to check on him now?

After a long pause he went on:

'No, they won't beat you. I won't let 'em. Tell me all about it, my dear. Don't be afraid—look, have a cigarette. I saw you smoking when I came up, didn't I?'

Involuntarily my eyes fell on the cigarette I had dropped

when he had appeared. He was offering me a gold case, glittering in the sun. I stepped nearer, took a cigarette, and let him light it.

'That's fine, that's fine,' he said heartily. He showed good sense in not pawing me, as I sat on a rock next to him. 'Now confide in Uncle Monty.' He beamed as I looked at him sharply; I wondered what he would have thought had that careless 'Uncle Monty' nearly succeeded in making me laugh; Bruce had doubted whether he answered to Monty. I was nearer to giving myself away then than I had been all the time.

I had to tell a story which, if he contacted with von Horssell, could not be refuted. Obviously I had to describe what had happened in the past twelve hours; to go further back by calling on my imagination would be fatal. He was watching me closely, one fat hand near my knee; once or twice he moved it closer, then drew it away; I imagined that 'Uncle Monty' thought himself quite irresistible.

'I—I mustn't talk,' I began.

'Just tell me,' urged Uncle Monty. 'Never mind about anyone else, they can't hear. I don't suppose there's anyone within a dozen miles,' he added extravagantly.

'Don't you?' said a voice from behind him, very softly, rather harshly, and with an accent unmistakably German.

. . . . .

There was a gasp on my lips when I first heard the voice, but, instead of checking it, I turned it into a scream. The scream echoed about the glen and up into the mountainside. The rocks and the caves and the boulders caught the echo and flung the sound back on us. I think it startled Beecham as much as the man's voice, for, as I watched very closely, I saw that he had controlled himself well as he turned his head slowly.

I was quite sure that he was not as surprised as I.

There had been no audible warning of approach; my ears were too carefully attuned to anything that was out of the ordinary, and had there been a noticeable sound I would have heard it; I was sure of that. Yet Beecham was not surprised. Turning, he stood up slowly and majestically, and looked down on the man behind us—a little man with blunt features and an ugly face.

'And who might you be?' demanded Beecham loftily.

'No friend of yours,' rasped the other, glancing at me. There was an ugly smile on his lips, and the expression in his eyes told me that he thought he knew me; thank God for that. In a suaver voice he went on: 'So you've come back, my little dear. You won't forget running away in a hurry.'

Beecham said: 'Now, listen to me. This lady is under my protection.'

It was cleverly done, of course—beautifully done. It was like all who worked for von Horssell, I thought; nothing was neglected, no possibility of a mistake was made. Beecham was not even going to let me know—the second 'me', the half-demented girl who called herself by my maiden name—that he was acquainted with the little man. Yet I felt sure he was.

'*Ach*, don't waste words,' snapped the latter. 'Come on the two of you. And understand this: I have heard all you have said.'

The fact that he had heard me talking to Beecham explained why he had been so certain who I was, and might save me from going through another, more stringest test. All I had to do was to look frightened; that wasn't hard! Then, as he drew a pace nearer, I wondered whether it would be more effective if I turned and ran.

I did.

I heard an oath from behind me, but did not look over my shoulder. I heard something else: the crack of a shot, which echoed and re-echoed. I was suddenly very frightened indeed. I looked round, taking a single wild glance, still running.

I almost stopped then, for I saw that Beecham had his stick high in the air, and I saw also that the gun had fallen from the little man's hand; Beecham had knocked it out of his grasp. I saw the man kick at Beecham, who promptly bowled him over with a push from his free left hand. The man who would have shot me toppled backwards, and I even saw the expression of utter bewilderment in his eyes.

He fell into the stream.

It was no more than six or seven inches deep, and not wide enough to take him even lying full length; there was no danger there for him. The amazing fact was that

Beecham had struck him so promptly, had ignored the threat of the gun with such complete disregard for personal danger.

I forgot Beecham; I had to make up my mind as to my own course. I did not want to get away, and to let myself be caught, to take a chance of what they did in the way of punishment for my 'escape'. I had to lose this chance of escape naturally, however.

So I fell over.

I managed to land in a position where, without getting up, I could see what was happening with the others.

Beecham stooped down from the waist—he could not bend his knees because of his enormous girth—and I heard him grunting. He picked up the automatic with one hand, and still bending down, stretched out and tapped the little man softly on the buttocks.

'Get up, get up, you oaf,' said Beecham clearly, straightening up with another grunt. 'What do you think you are? *Where* do you think you are? You can't do that kind of thing here, you know.'

He looked towards me.

'Whatever the little girl's done,' he went on, 'you can't treat her like that—not while Montague Beecham is about. Get up, and be sensible.'

He placed his large rear carefully on the rock again, and beamed across at me; I was, I suppose, twenty yards from him.

'Don't worry, little girl,' he called. 'I'll look after you, I promise you that. You needn't be frightened. Come and have a closer look at this chap, you'll never be frightened of him again.' He was smiling, and toying with the automatic as he spoke, while I was trying to get my thoughts into good working order.

If he knew von Horssell, why was he acting like this?

He might have knocked the gun out of the man's hand, of course, although on reflection I thought the shot had been fired to frighten me more than to do me harm. But, believing that I was 'Mary Dell II' why should he behave as he did now? He was acting as if he was truly on an errand of inquiry, not as one of von Horssell's organisation.

A few minutes before I had been so sure that he was a traitor that the new realisation stupefied me. I believed for

the first time that Beecham was genuine. I did not think that otherwise he could talk or act as he was doing.

I stared at him, and positively his smile seemed pleasing, the arrogance in his voice and manner no longer grated on me!

'Come along, come along,' he said. 'You can't lie there all day, you know, and the ground's probably damp.'

I began to obey.

It crossed my mind that I might be able to confide in Beecham, but as I reached my feet I suffered another reversal of feeling. I saw the possibility that he had seen through my pretence, and was trying to trick me into some kind of admission. The ease with which he had put the little man out, ignoring the threat of the gun, had made me dangerously careless. Had the mood persisted I might easily have done great harm, I might even have lost the chance that remained.

'That's a good girl,' boomed Beecham. 'Come to Uncle Monty and tell him all your troubles.'

I stepped hesitantly towards him, staring first at the man still lying in—or rather across—the stream, hesitant in mind as well as movement. I was within a few feet of him, seeing his great body outlined against the massive girth of the Stone Giant fifty yards further away.

Had it happened a second later, Beecham's bulk might have hidden what I saw.

As it was, I saw a movement at the base of the great stone, and then from the side of it—*out of the stone*, not from behind it—came two men with guns in their hands.

22

All Together

Beecham saw the expression on my face, and must have judged what was the matter, because he shouted:

'Lie down! Lie down, girl!'

Then he turned about with an agility incredible in one so large and fat. He went down on his stomach, taking the fall easily, and finding cover behind the rock on which he had been sitting. Quickly as he moved, his right hand moved faster, and from his pocket he took an automatic.

He already had one in his left hand.

The two men who had come from the rock increased to four, and then began running towards us. Beecham fired, and in front of my eyes one of the men fell and I heard his scream echoing until it was lost in the vast heights and depths of Glen Ballas.

The other three split up.

They were close enough for me to see the expressions on their faces, and to know that they were out to kill. Then they took cover behind big stones. Bullets began to hum, one struck a rock not two feet away from me and chippings flew in all directions, one grazing the back of my hand, others lodging in my hair.

Beecham was shooting back, quite calmly, and talking as he did so.

'All right, little lady. Don't you worry. We'll handle this bunch. Get up close behind me. You'll be all right then.'

I saw the blood on the forehead of the man who had fallen, and the shooting would not have been so accurate had there been any hint of stagework. Beecham, shooting to kill, being attacked by three men, and in danger as great as any man could face. But he talked to me soothingly, and took the fight so much for granted that for a moment I was lost in admiration for Monty Beecham!

'Don't show your head,' he urged. 'And don't get worried. This shooting will be seen up above, no doubt about that. There'll be help here very soon; count on that.'

As he spoke I heard the drone of an aeroplane engine high in the skies, and I knew there was some justification in what he said. But I didn't want that kind of help! And he had to know—and know why.

I was close behind him.

A bullet struck the face of the rock sheltering him, and Beecham fired at a man who showed himself for a moment. There was a pause, but as the crash of the shot faded, Beecham sniffed.

'Missed the beggar. I'm looking into the sun; it's not too good. However, it won't last long—not frightened, are you?'

I said in my normal voice:

'I'm frightened to death, but I'll get over it.'

The answer made Beecham start, and he turned to face me, showing part of himself for a split second. A bullet tore a hole through the shoulder of his coat; it probably touched his flesh, for he winced.

But he stared at me, wide-eyed, apparently ignoring the need for shooting back.

'*What* was that?' He positively bellowed the words.

'Turn round!' I said urgently. 'Keep it going, and for heaven's sake lower your voice. Yes, I'm Murdoch's wife, but don't shout.'

'Well, for eternal damnation!' exclaimed Montague Beecham, yet he spoke *sotto voce*. 'You perishing little devil. You had me sorry for you!'

He turned again, more careful this time, and as he did so one of them ran from the cover of a rock towards another several feet nearer. Beecham fired at sight; his marksmanship was an astonishing thing, for it accounted for the man, who stopped half-way between the two rocks and then fell forward, crumpling up in a slow-motion movement which seemed unreal, and thus told me that it was genuine.

'Two,' said Beecham, and then: 'What's the game?'

'Bruce and Ted—I mean . . .'

'I know who you mean.'

'They're here somewhere. I think von Horssell found them. I want to find where they are. I've orders to make sure that von Horssell and Kless don't get away.'

'How can you make sure?' he demanded, and added: '*Ah!*' On the 'Ah' he fired again, and the crash of the shot prevented him from hearing my answer. 'Missed,' he grunted, then demanded: 'What?'

'If I can't hold them until help arrives, I'm to kill them. That's why I'm posing as the false Mary Dell.'

'Oh,' said Beecham, and squinted round. 'You're quite a girl, aren't you? Putting it over them, eh? Pretending to be the girl they pretended was you? So you must let 'em catch you. Damn your eyes, why didn't you tell me before I started shooting? I've been thinking myself no end of a hero, and wondering how long we could hold out. Those fellows up there are bound to notice something.'

'Up there' was the sky; he glanced towards it.

'They will,' I said. 'I wasn't sure of you.'

'Of all the nerve!' roared Beecham. He fired again, then squinted, the most appallingly detached man I have ever met. He wasn't afraid; I didn't think he knew the meaning of fear.

'What are we to do?' he added. 'They won't forgive me easily. And you think von Horssell's near, do you?'

'Don't you?'

'I came to find out. I—just a minute, my beauty, just a minute! They're bound to recognise me. Damn it, everyone knows me.' He actually grinned: 'And I'm a member of the Ministry of Propaganda, aren't I? A good catch for 'em. All right, I'll surrender.'

He suddenly fired three shots from his left-hand gun, and two from his right—and then he tossed both guns over the rock! I gasped, for it seemed insane. But he kept under cover, dipped a hand into his pocket and brought out a snow-white handkerchief. He picked up his stick, put the handkerchief on the ferrule, and lifted it above the rock.

'Now we hope for the best,' he said. 'Be a good girl, and get my flask out of my haversack. I don't know about you, but I can do with a spot of whisky.'

Silently I opened the haversack and took out a flask. I unscrewed it and handed it to him. He tossed back his great head, and the neat spirit gurgled down. He lowered the flask, raised an interrogatory eyebrow at me, and when I shook my head wiped the mouth of the flask on the lapel of his coat.

'Put it back, will you?' he said.

I did.

I could not see the men but heard their movements, and I thought it most likely that we were being encircled. I did glance over the rock once, to see that other men were coming from the rock, also armed. Then a voice spoke from behind us.

'Put your hands up, Beecham.'

Beecham looked down on me, and actually winked.

'There you are,' he whispered hoarsely. 'They do know me! Don't forget, girlie, anything I can do.'

Then he put up his hands, and men approached from several directions. I felt my heart racing, and was almost sick with excitement—it *was* excitement more than fear—until I realised what was happening, and exulted in it.

Beecham was the star captive; I didn't matter. They believed they knew who I was. There was nothing more that I could ask, then.

The foreign correspondent lost nothing of his swagger as he stepped forward. It crossed my mind that he might be shot, but nothing worse happened than a quick frisking. One man pushed him aside, and Beecham's lips tightened. It was no accident that he jabbed his elbow into the aggressor's ribs.

'The fool,' I thought. 'He's carrying it too far.'

But he was not.

As we were led towards the Stone Giant, myself between two of the five men who were still alive, he was talking all the time in his great booming voice. Cavernous echoes came down from the mountain, so that sometimes it was difficult to hear his words; the echoes confused them.

'Never come across such outrageous cruelty in my life, damn it. The girl's scared, positively frightened to death! There'll be a reckoning, you mark my words.'

Little or nothing was said in response.

I do not know whether that surprised Beecham; it did not surprise me, for I was used to the methods of von Horssell, knew that his underlings would not talk, because they had received orders to do nothing but bring Beecham and myself in.

Although I had been aghast to see men coming from the stone pillar, things had happened so quickly since then that

I had grown accustomed to the idea that the Stone Giant was a hide out for the Germans. I was so pent-up with my own hopes and fears that the fact that they had made it into a hiding-place lost a great deal of its significance, but I knew one thing: Pinky had been quite right. No amount of searching in the mountains would have revealed the whereabouts of the escape party.

I had felt all the time that von Horssell was there, and the certainty increased as I neared the jagged sides of the immense rock. It stood fifty feet above my head, and was larger at the base than any tree I have ever seen. When I drew nearer, I saw one of the escorting men, Germans all of them, and eerily silent, step forward and pull at a piece of rock which jutted forward.

A door in the face of the pillar opened.

I saw that chippings of rock had been stuck on the outside of the door, to make it look solid and guard against the curiosity of anyone who might pass. The face looked identical all the way round until the door opened.

Inside, it was dark. I felt a cold sweep of air as I was pushed towards the door. I knew that I must not appear unfamiliar with it, but I was able to cover any appearance of strangeness by a show of fear. I stood quite still for a moment, then made myself shiver. I felt a man's hand buffet my head, and heard Beecham growl a protest. Then my wrist was gripped, and I was dragged inside, ahead of Beecham.

The darkness eased.

True, the doorway was shadowed for a moment as Beecham's mammoth body was squeezed through. Then the light shone again, showing the bare rock walls—a passage had been tunnelled out of the rock, and I needed no more telling of the 'activity' which von Horssell had directed.

I saw more clearly why he had put up the other man to attract our attention. He had wanted time to work here, and before Bruce and the others had discovered that there was an attempt to get Ernst Kless away, the main work had been finished.

Although it was cool in here, I felt stifled.

I was at the headquarters, and for the first time I doubted whether I was right, wondered whether I had allowed a

premonition to lead me astray. Would von Horssell be here? And Kless?

And—Bruce?

The passage sloped downwards, and soon I realised we were no longer under the solid rock of the Stone Giant, but beneath the earth. Three times a glow of light illuminated the passage, each time from a hole in the ceiling. Above the hole, and through a tracery of heather and grass, I could see little patches of sky. Once a shaft of sunlight appeared, very bright and dazzling.

Then we reached a door.

It was a rough thing, not of solid wood, but of hurdle fencing. The man in front of me pushed it open, and then I was hustled into a wide, square, low-ceilinged room. It was quite shadowy and dark, but I was able to see another door, and also to discern camp beds, pillows, chairs and tables about the walls. This was the living-room of von Horssell's men.

I wished my heart would stop beating so fast.

I heard Beecham rumble something, but did not catch the words. Then after a tap on the door ahead of us there came a guttural voice, horribly familiar, relieving me of one anxiety and facing me with another.

It *was* von Horssell.

'Open,' he said in German.

The door opened and I was pushed through. I saw him in a room much lighter, although much smaller, than that through which I had passed. He was sitting at a rough table, spread with a cloth, with food in front of him. He was not alone; that was obvious the moment the door opened. He was sitting at one end of the table, and a much smaller, shorter man was at the other, a man with a bullet-shaped head and the blunted face of Ernst Kless, Chief Economic Adviser to the Third Reich.

Kless turned in his chair and stared at us, and then I realised that he had come from one prison to another, for there was a leather belt about his waist and, by a steel chain attached to the back of the belt, he was fastened to a chair.

And I knew that Kless was far more frightened than Beecham or I.

23

Except Bruce

The little German's eyes were wide-open; they were very large and a peculiar light grey. His face was thin and bony; it was a skull's head more than the head of a living man; he was grotesquely like his photographs, which had always seemed too ugly to be true. The fear that possessed him showed in his eyes and his bearing—he had the cringing manner of a dog which is used to being whipped. The fact was made more obvious by the startling contrast between his manner and Beecham's swagger. Despite the gun poking into the back of his ribs, Beecham ducked through the doorway, no more than five feet high, straightened up and strode up to the table, incredibly sure of himself.

Von Horssell looked up at him.

The man was picking at a bone; literally picking at it with his teeth. There was grease on the sides of his lips, and a touch of it on the end of his blunt nose.

By his side was the hooked ebony sword-stick. His withered leg was propped up on a form alongside the table, and his back was pillowed in cushions. He did not stop eating as we entered, but lowered his face so that his mouth was close to the table. He stayed like that for several seconds, then leaned slowly back. He dropped the bone to a plate, picked up a serviette, and wiped his mouth and hands; he missed the shining spot of grease on his nose.

He looked past me to Beecham.

I had been frightened of that moment, but it passed; he accepted me as the girl he had made so much like me, and the light, although much better than in the first room, was surely not good enough for him to discern me clearly. If we remained in a room so full of shadows I would be quite safe.

I had Pinky's lipstick bomb tucked into the top of my

brassière, very easy to get out but not noticeable because of the fullness of the borrowed blouse I was wearing. I knew that would destroy the whole of this underground hiding-place, and if necessary the rock above it. It was powerful enough to do that; Pinky had said so, and Pinky would know.

I could feel it pressing into my breast.

I saw von Horssell look past me towards Beecham, but it was Beecham who spoke first.

'So I've caught up with you, have I?' he growled.

Von Horssell leaned back, his lips parted, his eyes narrowed. He has a trick of immobility, one of the most frightening things about him. I could see the veins swelling in his neck and his forehead; his pitted face seemed very pale.

'So you have caught up vit me, Beecham. And now, vot is your pleasure?'

'Just looking at you,' said Beecham, and his voice echoed about the room. 'Just looking at you, Baron. I always loved to do that. When are you going to grow up?'

It was so hard to believe that *Beecham* could adopt this attitude. I remembered how he had reacted after the shooting of the pseudo von Horssell; that had seemed to be the measure of his courage, but I had never made a greater mistake.

I knew that Beecham was a far bigger man than I had suspected. He was in some ways a match for von Horssell, a miracle in itself.

'When are you going to grow up?' The implied sneer and the innuendo of ridicule were carefully calculated to get under von Horssell's skin; Bruce might well have used the same methods. In pre-war days Beecham had met von Horssell frequently, and in his violent articles he had often described von Horssell as the most dangerous of the Nazis, although at the time I had put that down to Beecham's general over emphasis. Now I knew that these men were really old adversaries.

The scene was hypnotic; the tension grew as they eyed each other, and the veins in von Horssell's neck were swelling and pulsing. Any effort, mental or physical, was a great strain on him.

Ernst Kless, the man who had seemed so important, the

man who had started this strange chase, was but a cipher, utterly insignificant just then.

'You are reckless, Beecham,' said von Horssell slowly.

'I say what comes into my mind, and if you don't like it you can do the other thing.'

'You do not fully understand the position.'

'No?' Beecham let his voice go upwards, contemptuously. 'Come off it, von H. You've played at spy games too long. Why don't you retire? This—*all* this'—he waved a hand about, embodying the whole room, the man behind us, and the man at the table—'this is hokum. A kid could do it better. You wouldn't have got Kless if they hadn't wanted you to.'

I started.

I saw von Horssell's lips open, and I knew that he was as startled as I. But I was also aware that Beecham might be right. Many of the things which I could not understand would be clarified if the authorities *had allowed Kless to escape*.

Von Horssell said: 'Ach, it is a lie.'

'Don't fool yourself,' said Beecham. 'Don't let yourself think that your li'l boy scouts could put one over the British. We're a hard race, although you haven't realised it. They let you get Kless for what he's worth, and that's not much.'

Von Horssell moved, not suddenly, but slowly, gripping the corner of the table and pulling himself to his feet—or rather to his one sound foot. He was livid with rage, and must be grappling with the possibility that he had been deceived, that his own bluff had been out-manœuvred by an even greater one.

He supported himself with a hand on the table, and looked into Beecham's eyes with a hatred with which I was all too familiar.

'So,' he said. 'You think so.'

'I know so,' said Beecham truculently.

'It iss good, Beecham,' said von Horssell, and I knew he was more dangerous when he spoke softly, like that, than when he shouted. 'You know so much, and I shall get it from you. Yes, get it from you. Doubtless much of it is a lie, but . . .' He shrugged his shoulders, and then looked across at Kless. 'You will be interested to see how we deal with Beecham, my dear Ernst?' His voice was an ugly purr.

'You will see how we deal with those who oppose us—and those who would do us some disservice. You will know all about those things, yes.'

Kless let his tongue run along his lips.

'Beecham!' Von Horssell's voice rose sharply, his expression grew more ugly. 'I come to get Kless—and here he is! I alvays get vot I come for, Beecham—alvays. I came this time for Kless, and for Murdoch and Dell, I shall get them all. Murdoch is in the mountains, closely watched. His woman, she will come for him, and they shall all be mine. It will happen today. By night, when I have all that I vant, I shall leave here. By then I shall have heard vot you haff to say—everything you haff to say. Child-play, you call it. There iss nothing childish about red-hot steel, Beecham. You do not know that.'

'If you're trying to give me the heeby-jeebies, forget it,' said Beecham. 'I'm not scared of you, von Horssell, because I've got something you want, and I won't part with it on any terms but mine. You can't try your red-hot pokers and castor-oil methods, you haven't got the time. You'll come to my terms. It's the only way you'll get what you want.'

I went quite cold.

For a moment I had been lifted out of myself by the statement that Bruce was in the mountains, and that von Horssell's men were watching him, for that meant that Bruce was safe and well.

'You'll come to my terms. It's the only way you'll get what you want.'

I was suddenly very frightened lest I had made a mistake. He could tell von Horssell the truth about me, and it was vital that it was not known yet; there was the rest of the day ahead of us, so many things could happen between now and the approach of darkness, when von Horssell clearly believed he would get away. Pinky had said there could be no escape until darkness, and I had taken that for granted.

Von Horssell eased himself from the table and peered into Beecham's face.

'Explain,' he said.

'In words of two letters,' said Beecham, as if wearily, 'I will trade with you, but try just one of your torture tricks, and I shall close up.'

'You will—trade?'

'I said so.'

'You will exchange information for what?'

'I'm not going to be both seller and buyer,' declared Beecham roundly. 'You can't have it all your own way all the time, von H. The trouble with you is that you've been spoiled. All your boy scouts play around with you, kow-towing and getting jittery when you raise your voice, and you get the idea that you're first cousin to Almighty God. Well you're not.'

Von Horssell was clenching his teeth; what surprised me most was that he did not strike the other man.

'What is it you know?'

'Among other things, why Kless was allowed to escape,' said Beecham. He was looking almost full face towards me, and although it seemed incredible, I saw him wink. It was no more than the twitch of an eye, but it did an enormous lot to restore my self-confidence.

'And the reason?' Von Horssell's voice was low-pitched, and the words difficult to hear.

'That's where the bargaining starts,' said Beecham cheerfully. 'One of the things you'll have to do is to let this little girl go. You've given her a rough time, but she's had the last of it.'

It seemed too blatant to succeed, despite the casual way in which Beecham uttered the words, and the fact that he nodded nonchalantly towards me, as if I mattered nothing at all.

Von Horssell glanced round at me, and then away.

'Ach, she is a nothings. She tried to run away, but she came back. Alvays they come back.'

'She got lost, poor kid,' said Beecham. 'You're going to give her safe passage out of here, von H., and then we'll start talking business. Is that clear?'

'Pusiness,' said von Horssell reflectively, and he screwed up his eyes. 'Pusiness.' He turned towards me slowly, raised his stick from the ground, and prodded me with the ferrule. It went close to the lipstick bomb, and I flinched back, without having to pretend. I widened my mouth so that my teeth showed, as if I was still in a frenzy of fear.

I saw him stiffen.

'So, Mary,' he said. 'You vould leaf me, yes? You vould run avay from me, when for so long I treat you vell. It iss

a shame. Tell the shentleman that you are happy wit' me, my dear. Tell him that. He vill understand then that you do not vish to go away. It is the imagination; yes, all imagination.' His eyes bored into mine and I saw the muscles of his cheeks working. '*Tell him, my dear,*' he went on very slowly. 'Tell him how happy you are.'

'You can't put that over on me,' said Beecham abruptly. 'I've known you too long.'

'No,' said von Horssell. 'I do not, my dear Beecham. But you—you make the big mistake, *you and Mary Dell.*'

I heard the way he uttered the name, as I had heard it so often. I stared at him, suddenly knowing that he was not deceived—or rather that he had been, but that something had happened to make him realise the truth.

I went very stiff and cold; and despairing.

'You—and Mary Dell,' he ground out slowly. 'It would be der big bluff, yes. To have her go free, to bring help while you vaste my time in talk. But it fails, Beecham—and it fails, you English bitch!'

Then he raised his stick and struck me across the head, a sharp blow but one partly nullified by my hat and my hair. I staggered a little to one side.

Beecham swung round, a hand towards von Horssell's shoulder, but before he could touch him the two guards sprang forward; Beecham's arms were gripped, and there was nothing he could do. I leaned against the table, with the silent Kless beside me, seeing the glitter in von Horssell's eyes.

Beecham shouted:

'You damned fool, she's the little kid you've been manhandling.'

'Ach, that iss nonsense!' rasped von Horssell. 'The other girl, at the back her teeth are capped with gold; *yours* are not.' He leered at me, and I knew that he was so pleased with himself at his discovery that he was less dangerous than he might be in a short while, although so many hopes crashed. 'So, you try to deceive me that way, and Beecham, he would have you free to go for help. It vould be clever, yes, if it was not so childish. You hear that, Beecham. You are childish, not me.'

He actually laughed, a deep guffaw from deep in his chest. It was a bigger effort than he should have made, for he lost

his balance and would have fallen but for the quick movement of one of the guards. He sank slowly into his chair, his face a deathly greyish-white. His breathing was hoarse and laboured, for he was a sick man; I knew that well. I watched him in his physical helplessness, and was appalled at the fact that he was capable of doing so much damage, that the lives of all of us were in his hands.

There was a long, tense pause.

He recovered slowly, but I knew that he needed rest, and would have to have it; nothing else would enable him to regain his strength; the effort of the interview had been too much for him.

Beecham broke the silence.

'That was a bad break,' he said. 'You didn't look your gift horse in the mouth, Mrs. Murdoch.' His lips twisted wryly, but tightened when one of the guards jerked his wrist; his right arm was held behind him in a half-nelson.

Von Horssell said:

'Take them away, Kurt. I vill see them later. I vill rest for one hour; that iss all. Just one hour, you understand.'

The man named Kurt said: *'Ja, your Excellency.'*

'Go,' said von Horssell.

I was half-pulled out of the room, leaving Kless, a terrified man in whom fear was so great that I could not altogether understand it. I could not understand why the man should be in deadly fear of von Horssell and the other Nazis.

Why was he chained to the seat?

There was not only fear in him, I knew as I was pulled into the larger room. It was as if he were trying to tell me something, trying to convey a message of vital importance, but one I could not conceive. The contrast between the little man and the gross figure of von Horssell leaning heavily against the table, temporarily weak and useless, was an almost frightening thing. There was Kless, trying to send a message, and von Horssell helpless; yet the man Kurt was dragging me away, and Beecham being pushed into the larger room.

The door closed.

For the first time I saw yet another door, on one side. It was ajar, and when it was pulled open it showed a small, dark space, cell-like in size. There was barely room to stand

upright, and I banged my head against the ceiling; then my foot stubbed against something on the floor.

I pitched forward, dazed and gasping.

Beecham apparently dodged the low ceiling. I heard him breathing heavily before the door closed, but I was thinking less of Beecham than of the thing against which I had stubbed my foot. I even forgot Kless and von Horssell, while with the first realisation my mind cleared, the pain in my head seemed to fade away.

The 'something' was soft, and I heard a grunt or a gasp come from it.

Beecham rumbled in his vast whisper:

'My Lord, we slipped up there. A bad show, Mrs. Murdoch. Goldarn that girl's gold teeth. I—but what's the matter with you?'

By then he could see me, on the floor, fallen across the body of a man, one who had done no more than grunt when I had kicked against him. I was feeling for his face, since I could not see clearly, although with every second my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom.

Beecham's voice rose upwards.

'That's not Murdoch?'

He voiced the fear that was in me, an unreasoning fear, and my hands were trembling as I felt the face of the man, cold and motionless. Then I drew back, and with a mingling of relief and anxiety saw the unconscious man clearly enough to recognise Ted Angell.

Bruce was not here.

24

Open Air

Beecham was sitting at Ted's feet, his legs wide apart, and his back against the door. The light came from small holes in the roof, deep ones bored through rock or peaty earth, none of them larger than a drain pipe. They admitted the air as well as light, and we had dragged Ted beneath one of them. He was breathing, but his respiration was low.

'At least your hubby's outside, as free as the air,' said Beecham with a geniality so natural and unlaboured that I knew this *was* the man. He was not forcing himself to be cheerful; he was cheerful. 'And we can't say we haven't tried, you know. We did a good best, and we failed. We scared von H.—I think he really thought I knew why they let Kless escape.'

'Don't you?' I asked.

'Bless your eyes, no! But I couldn't see Kless or a hundred like him getting out of Ballas; there isn't a stronger camp in the world, and it's guarded by hundreds of the boys in khaki. Believe me, Kless didn't get out by accident; our people wanted him to get out.'

'Ye-es, it's possible,' I said. 'I'd suspected that before. They'd do it so as to catch von Horssell. The authorities knew von H. was looking for him, and saw it as the only way to catch them both.'

'Oh, I see.' Beecham sounded disappointed. 'It may be. Von H. is a bit of a rascal'—I gasped at that understatement—'but it isn't like he's as important as that, is it?'

'You don't know as much about him as you think you do.'

'Perhaps not. Perhaps not,' rumbled Beecham. He was eyeing me queerly. 'I've played him up as a strong man, but to me, he's always seemed like a big stiff, bloated with his own importance.'

'That simply proves you don't know him.'

'All right, all right. I'll grant you that possibility,' conceded Beecham. 'So they let Kless escape so that he led 'em to von Horssell? Supposing that's right, and it's a bit too cunning for our people, I think, they're only good at thinking in straight lines—Holt excepted, maybe—but supposing it's right? That doesn't answer the big question. Why is Berlin so anxious to get Kless back?'

'*You're* asking that? Don't you read your own articles?'

Beecham chuckled; the sound came from his stomach, and made his whole body shake.

'Read 'em? Damn it, don't you think they're bother enough to write? Look 'ee, Mrs. Murdoch, I wrote a lot of tosh about Kless. Got to let your hubby have a go at him, etc., etc., Kless knew something he hadn't yet put across, but that *was* only blah. As a matter of fact,' he said, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, 'I wrote it under orders.'

I echoed: 'Under *orders*!'

'That's right. I'm working mostly for the Government, the paper is only a cover. They think!' he added, again with his throaty chuckle. 'Try to buy Monty Beecham off with a thousand a year job at the M.o.P., would they? They'll get their eyes opened! I took it, wouldn't refuse their money, but I'm a correspondent, first and foremost. I wrote that article like I write a lot—under orders—but it also suited my book.'

There was one thing about Beecham; he made it impossible to feel sorry for oneself. He even lifted me out of a dreary awareness of the hopelessness of the position, despair relieved only by the knowledge of the bomb in my bra, and there is never great relief in the knowledge that the only way to freedom is to die!

'You wrote it because it suited you?' I echoed faintly.

'That's right, my dear. I'm a newspaper man first and foremost, and no tuppenny-ha'penny Ministry is going to buy my silence. But I took the job about the time Kless landed here—remember? The Kless job stank, or I thought so. So did the Ministry. I got the job of watching the affair, that's how I learned of the phoney von Horssell—you know, the guy who was killed in Oxford Street.'

'I know,' I said.

'You've got a memory! I followed the Kless business

right the way through, and thought I was on to something when I learned von H. was in the country. I made a mistake, and your Bruce put me right. I thought the first man was the real von H. and still thought so, even after Murdoch told me that he didn't. But at that Oxford Street shindy I realised it wasn't von H. That made me ill—that's why I postponed our lunch. I don't like being proved wrong! So I sat back, and concentrated. I reckoned the Pink Un, the old fraud, was serving me up with a nice sweet dish which meant damn-all, so what did I do? I followed you and Murdoch about. The only sensible thing to do. I got as far as Ballas when the siren was hooting last night, so I slipped away to some friends I've got nearby, borrowed this outfit, and came along. I followed you from Ballas—not a bad idea, eh? Not all the way. From three miles along Glen Ballas, and I had a shock when you said your piece earlier on, I quite thought you were real. However, we needn't go into that again, eh?'

'No,' I said.

'Bruce Murdoch doesn't know how lucky he is! Not many women can listen the way you do,' declared Beecham. 'Well, we're here, and so what? I came to get the whole Kless story, and if I get it I'm going to raise a stink. *If* I get it. I haven't got it yet,' he added, and added craftily: 'Any ideas?'

'No more than you,' I said.

'That's too bad,' admitted Monty Beecham. 'We'll have to wait until von H. finishes his forty winks, and think up some new ones. However, it wasn't—isn't I mean—all done to give Montague Beecham something to do. Kless, I mean. Maybe he left Germany because he was scared of losing his life, and I'll bet a gorilla to a tame mouse that he's scared all right. But why did Hitler send von H. over for him? That's the question, Mrs. Murdoch. Believe me, that's the question. Answer that, and you've done a good job of work.'

I laughed, I had to. 'I don't know,' I said.

'The secret's here,' declared Beecham. 'Right here, because von H. knows if anyone does. We've got to force it out of the gentleman, ducky, and don't you make any mistake about it. However, talking won't do us any more good. And I'm thirsty already.'

'If von H. keeps up to his reputation, we'll stay thirsty,' I said. 'If only Bruce were here,' I added, under my breath.

'What's that?' demanded Beecham.

'It doesn't matter.'

'Damn it, we're both in this together,' said Beecham with some heat. 'What did you say?'

'I said I wished Bruce were here,' I told him, a little hot and very nearly annoyed.

'Oh.' He sounded like a disappointed schoolboy. 'Is that all? A fat lot of good he'd be.'

I was no longer nearly annoyed. I coloured furiously, and before I realised what I was saying, flashed:

'He'd be more good than a dozen of you!'

I regretted it a moment later, largely because of the look of astonishment on his face.

'Good gracious me,' he said, and the invocation sounded so absurd from a vast and slangy man that it restored me to a better sense of humour. He stretched forward a big hand and patted my knee, but there was nothing offensive in the gesture. 'Now come, my dear, don't get me wrong. Useful customer, Murdoch, and I've always said so. After all'—his lips twitched—'remember what I wrote about you, and it wasn't all at Government orders!'

I began, 'I'm sorry I said . . .'

'Tush! There's no need to apologise. Possessive female angry in defence of her brood, and why not? Why not? One of the most mysterious prodigalities of nature, a woman's love, and I wouldn't have it different. Oh, dear, no! *I* have to apologise. What I meant was, he's a darned sight more use to us outside than he is inside. Von H. would like us to think he's got your hubby taped, but that isn't so easy. Von H. has about used half his rest-period, hasn't he?' he added. 'Peculiar business, that. What's the cause, do you know?'

'Heart, I think,' I said very slowly. I was thinking of Bruce, outside, and the possibility that von Horssell had lied when he had said he knew just where to find him. 'He smashed up his leg in an air crash. You knew that, surely?' He nodded. 'They tried to patch it up, failed, and he strained his heart doing too much. He still does too much, but for some insane reason he doesn't die. If he were to die, it would soon be over.'

'What would?'

'The war.'

'By Lebanon and Jerusalem!' declared Beecham hoarsely. 'You've a far higher opinion of the man than I have!' He regarded me oddly, and then asked: 'Of course, you were with him in France, weren't you? Bad time. He can walk sometimes, I'm told.'

'Yes. He can inject a serum into his leg which gives him full use of it for an hour or two, but usually he has a bad relapse after it. And the relief period gets shorter each time.'

'Odd customer,' said Beecham. 'Used to travel about with a woman, Else or Elsa, didn't he?'

'Elsa, yes. She doesn't seem to be here this time.' I knew that there had been a period when von Horssell had been almost entirely dependent on the full-bodied, full-blooded Elsa, bound to him by some unnatural affection I could never understand; she was beautiful; he was beastliness itself. (Later, I learned that the Bavarian woman acted as von Horssell's nurse during the Kless affair because Elsa was ill, in Germany.)

'Tell me more,' said Beecham. 'I won't use it without permission,' he added as I hesitated, and I found myself talking of her and von Horssell, going through many of the ordeals again. My mouth grew dry.

When I stopped, I said: 'Oh, I'm too thirsty for words!'

'Thirsty work, talking,' declared Beecham with the manner of a man who had made a *bon mot*. 'Always has been. Moral, don't talk, I suppose.'

I had to laugh at the obvious inference.

'I'm hungry, too,' he went on mournfully. 'I thought the condemned men always got a feed? I know a little restaurant—the place I was going to take you!—where they positively laugh at rationing. Don't get me wrong; they observe all the laws! Alphonse always says it's not the name of the food that makes the flavour, but the hands of the chef and their behaviour. Rhyme, see? More or less right, I suppose.'

'More or less,' I echoed.

Although it was quite cool, I felt listless, thirsty and hungry. Ted was breathing more heavily, and once or twice he had stirred; his lips looked parched. We sank into a semi-stupor, perhaps because we were underground, and the air was not as fresh as it might be.

I thought I imagined the sound at first.

It seemed to come from a long way off, a shuffling, scraping sound. When I realised it was not imagination, I opened my eyes, expecting to find Beecham moving a foot or a hand. He was leaning back with his eyes closed and, as far as I could see, quite motionless. Ted was not moving, but the sound remained, a continuous rustling noise like an animal burrowing.

My heart missed a beat.

I thought that the sound came from one corner of the underground cell and, getting up carefully to avoid disturbing Ted too much, I stepped towards it. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw that Beecham had one eye open, and was staring at me. I put a hand to my lips, enjoining him to silence.

Quite abruptly, some things fell through one of the little holes.

There were several pebbles, a little trail of dirt, and then something white: a piece of paper, screwed into a ball. I had to clamp my teeth together to avoid crying out. I stooped to pick up the paper, then looked at the hole. In it, just poking beneath the level of the ceiling, was a sharp-pointed stick.

Beecham rose to his feet, swiftly and not cumbersomely; he was at my side before I had smoothed out the paper. So we read together:

'We won't be long now. Keep talking.

'Stall von H. for at least an hour. Bruce.'

25

Beecham Tries Hard

Beecham was resting a hand on my shoulder. As he read the note I was surprised that his fat fingers could be so firm. He finished before me—or rather one reading was enough for him, while I read the pencilled words half a dozen times. Bruce's writing, Bruce's absolute confidence. 'We won't be long now'—a phrase telling me everything, the 'now' indicating that he had known that I had been there for some time, that whatever he had planned was practically finished.

It might not be easy to stall von Horssell for an hour, but it had to be done.

I felt Beecham's slow breathing on my neck, and turned to find him regarding me with a smile in his eyes.

'Well, wasn't he more good outside than in?' he whispered.

I stopped myself from going into rhapsodies, and read the note again. As I started to do so, the rustling noise came from above my head. I looked up and a small piece of rock struck my forehead. As I moved quickly aside I saw what was happening, and what had caused the noise. Bruce had pushed the message down one of the ventilation holes at the end of the stick and a similar sound came when he withdrew it.

For a moment the light was cut off from that hole.

Bruce was immediately above it, of course, near the Stone Giant. I could not understand how he managed to be there, quite free to move.

Beecham released my shoulder, and looked at his watch. His thick lips pursed. He kept his voice very low.

'Just on half-past three. Murdoch reckons he can see us through by half-past four. We ought to be all right, didn't we? We've assumed that von H. can't do much until it's dark.'

'We ought to do something. We ought to try to find out more about what's going on. We don't know enough yet.' Beecham had said exactly the same thing a short time before, but I was oblivious of that. My mind was working quickly, stimulated by the good news. 'There's one obvious question: Why is Kless tied up?'

'*And* scared stiffer than any hypnotised rabbit,' sniffed Beecham. 'That would tell us plenty if we knew, but he may not know himself. Damn it, he came here because he was scared of losing his head! And von Horssell has come to take him back to make sure he can't talk to us.'

My mind was working very quickly.

'No,' I said. I also kept my voice low. We were standing opposite each other, near the spot where Ted Angell was lying. 'There's something so big that we can't see it.'

'Now what's under your skin?' Beecham demanded.

'They simply wouldn't go to all this trouble to take Kless out of the country just to prevent him from talking.'

'Then what would they do?'

'Kill him,' I snapped. 'Shoot him. I tell you they wouldn't take all these precautions, they wouldn't have so many men here, just to capture Kless so as to shut his mouth.'

Beecham did not sniff, but stared at me wide-eyed. Slowly he pulled at his jowl, nipping the flesh between finger and thumb, and then letting it go; it was like slack elastic.

'So-ho,' he said in a deeper whisper, and the word might have been audible outside. He dropped his voice quickly as he went on: 'Too big to see. I didn't see that it is a lot of fuss and bother. H'm—yes. One well-directed shot could have silenced him. My experience is that the obvious usually explains the situation. The obvious thing is that they want him to do some work, something only he can do.' He paused, looking at me eagerly, and added 'Eh?', a staccato question which was ridiculously like that of a schoolboy asking for approbation.

The suggestion fell flat with me.

'It could be,' I admitted, 'but it's hard to imagine. There must be other men as good as Kless.'

'All right, have it your own way,' said Beecham with a touch of irritability. 'I haven't got any idea. I never have.' He glared at me, but suddenly he grinned. 'This place is a bit too small for me. Claustrophobic, eh?'

It wasn't really so hot, but the confinement was trying, although I was praying that we would be kept there for another three-quarters of an hour at least. By half-past four Bruce would put into operation whatever plan he had been preparing. We had a little over fifty minutes to wait. The more of them we spent in the cell, the better our chances of stalling von Horssell.

Suddenly, Ted grunted loudly, and opened his eyes. Both Beecham and I turned at the sound, to see him staring up at the ceiling which was hewn out of solid rock, except for the air-holes. The light was shining on his face, where his stubble showed thick and dark.

Then he looked at me.

He stared at first as if he could not believe his eyes, then began to struggle to a sitting position. I stepped to him quickly, going down on one knee.

'Easy, Ted, easy. It's all right.'

'All right?' His voice was thick and uncertain, and he was staring hard into my eyes. 'Mary, good God, they've got you! But no—it's too bad; it's damnable.' He moistened his lips, while I held his hand lightly.

'Mr. Angell feels jittery,' I said lightly.

'Jit—no damn it. I'm all right. Perishing thirsty.' He licked his lips again, and I saw that his eyes were dazed; he was not really in full possession of his senses. But before long he was sitting against the wall, and telling us his story.

It was not a long one.

He and Bruce had succeeded in following the party in the glen until dawn. By then they had been within a few hundred yards of the Stone Giant, and in the first grey light they had seen the party go into the pillar. Bruce had recognised Kless as well as von Horssell, and had given instructions: Ted was to go back for help while he, Bruce, kept watch.

Ted started on his journey but been trapped so easily that the memory hurt him. He had been hurrying past a boulder, and tripped over a stick pushed between his legs. Before he had been able to shout to Bruce, he had been seized by two men he had not seen, gagged, and brought to the pillar. An interview with von Horssell had followed; the Withered Man had wanted to know just what Ted knew, and had learned nothing, of course.

Then:

'They pumped something into me,' said Ted, looking at a needle-puncture in his right arm. 'I faded right out as soon as they brought me here.'

'Odd,' said Beecham unexpectedly.

Ted glanced up, licked his lips, and asked what was so odd about it. I don't think he had really accepted Beecham as an ally, for I had told him nothing of what had happened.

'It's odd because they didn't kill you,' Beecham went on.

'They didn't kill me, either,' he added, in a voice which suggested that he could understand that much more easily. 'Or Kless.'

'What the devil are you talking about?' Ted demanded.

'I think I know, more or less.' I did not want conflict between the two men, and I could not imagine Beecham remaining passive indefinitely. 'We can't understand why they went to all this trouble to keep Kless free, when they could have killed him as soon as he was out of prison, Ted. And why have they let you live, *and* Monty Beecham—Monty had a shooting match with them, he hit two or three.'

'What with?' demanded Ted.

'Automatic pistol bullets,' I said a little sharply. 'There was quite a scrap.'

There was a new expression in Ted's eyes as he looked at the big man. I took the opportunity, then, of telling Ted what had happened. I made it brief, for my tongue was sticky and dry, and once or twice the words did not come freely, but were hoarse and whispered, as if I had a sore throat. When I had finished Ted put his head on one side, and regarded Beecham crookedly.

'Sorry,' he said.

'Oh, that's all right, quite all right, old man,' said Beecham. 'My actions were open to suspicion. I can see that now. Newspaper men don't often have to worry about that! Y'know, it's peculiar. Thirty-five minutes have gone past the hour, and von H. hasn't sent for us again.'

'He's doing something somewhere,' said Ted inanely.

'Supposing you try walking, in case we have to move,' I suggested, and laboriously Ted got to his feet. The fact that he had to stoop made it more difficult for him to move about, but after five minutes the blood was circulating in his legs, and he was reasonably steady. Whatever drug had

been pumped into him had no permanent effect.

The only thing I had not told him—or Beecham—was the means by which I could destroy Kless and von Horssell.

I don't know why I thought it essential to keep that to myself. It was so much a secret between Sir Robert and me, I don't think I would have confided in anyone but Bruce. Sometimes I brushed my hand against the hump, and several times marvelled that so small a thing could do the damage which the Pink Un said.

Beecham looked at his watch.

'Fifteen minutes,' he said. 'If that hubby of yours is on time, the balloon will soon go up.'

'He'll be on time,' said Ted confidently. 'The deuce of a lot can happen in fifteen minutes, of course, but . . .' He paused, smiling so widely that Beecham and I asked as in one voice:

'What's the matter?'

'Bruce,' said Ted, and chuckled. 'Mary, you know those little phials of nitro-glycerine we've carried about with us from time to time?—for sabotage and what-not,' he added for Beecham's benefit. 'Nitro's safe enough if it's insulated against shock or sudden movement, and we have some special phials made up.'

'I've heard of 'em,' said Beecham. 'So what?'

'So what?' Ted's voice rose upwards. 'He had three in his pocket all the time, when the bomber crashed, *and* while we were in the car! If I'd known that I'd have been jittery every minute.'

There was a short silence, until Beecham spoke. I kept remembering Bruce, in the burning bomber and the nitro-glycerine in his pocket.

'Astonishing man, Murdoch. Astonishing. However, the question is whether he'll get here in time.'

Ted frowned.

'He'll be on time,' he declared confidently. 'But if von H. starts moving, a lot can happen in five minutes.'

'By the Sphinx and pyramids!' ejaculated Beecham, 'I don't think I've met a dismaller Jerry. Jerry—that's good, eh? I've a feeling that we're going to get through without any serious trouble. If you ask me, von H. had found something going wrong.'

'It could be,' I admitted.

It was on my words that the door opened abruptly, and the stooping figure of one of the men, an automatic well in evidence, showed for a moment.

'Come, at once.' The man spoke in German, and all of us understood him.

I followed Beecham and Ted brought up the rear. We stood in the larger room for several minutes, seeing two other armed guards besides the man who had summoned us. We saw that the door opposite us—von Horssell's door—was ajar, and from there was coming a flow of conversation, the gutturals following fast upon each other, but none of the words clear enough to make out.

Then von Horssell laughed, the belly-deep sound that was so obscene. There was a deep, confident note in it, and I stiffened; it was a stronger laugh by far than that which had proved too much of an effort, and I believe I knew the explanation as soon as I heard it. Ted did, too. We exchanged glances.

Suddenly, the door opened.

Ernst Kless came through, but he was no longer frightened, no longer looking at me with terror-stricken eyes. He was laughing, on a lower note than von Horssell, who was just behind him. He wore a leather belt, but there was no chain attached.

'Ach, it will be easy, easy,' roared von Horssell. 'And afterwards—*mein Gott*, do we haff to worry about afterwards?'

Then Kless saw us.

He stopped abruptly, so that von Horssell knocked against him. I realised that Kless had received something of a shock, but I was thinking far less of that than the fact that *von Horssell was walking freely, and without his stick.*

He had used the serum which enabled him to do it. I knew that, yet the sight of him made my stomach turn; it was so strangely different from the von Horssell who had almost collapsed because of the strain of laughing.

I heard Beecham exclaim.

The laughter faded, and left a long, tense silence. Von Horssell looked across the room, seeing us by the cell-door. There was a moment when everything seemed quite still. Then he pushed past Kless, and walked towards us, not quickly, but with powerful strides. He reached the guard

first—and he raised his left hand, then crashed his fist into the man's jaw.

It was a stupefying thing.

The guard, not one of us!

Where was the sense of that action? What was the reason?

I thought von Horssell was going to strike Beecham then, but he restrained himself. In harsh German he swore at the guard, who had lost his balance, and was then on his hands and knees. The other men stood by, their guns pointing towards us.

Von Horssell drew back his foot and kicked the other man in the ribs. The kick was so vicious that we heard the rib crack, and the man screamed, stifling the sound in his throat, and then collapsing.

It was bestial; yet I gave it less thought than I might have done, for I was trying to see the implications of it. There could be only one effective reason; we had been allowed to see something which should have been kept from us.

Von Horssell and Kless? But we had known that both of them were there. It was something different from that, and there was only one possible answer. *We had seen Kless laughing and free.*

There was absolutely nothing else which could explain the action, or the livid rage which showed in von Horssell's eyes. I tried to see beyond that, but I could not.

The guard was lying in a huddled heap on the floor, groaning. Von Horssell turned to one of the others, and growled:

'Take him away. The prisoners will go to my room.'

Kless stood watching, his skull-like face expressionless. He looked better than when we had first seen him. The essential characteristics of his face remained, of course, but his skin looked healthier, and the expression in his eyes was so different. He was like a man suddenly reprieved when a sentence of death had seemed inevitable, but there was more in it than that, for he was as enraged as von Horssell.

My head was aching, my ears throbbing.

What was happening? Why couldn't I see beyond the surface?

We were led to the other room, and the door was closed. The guard stayed inside, however, with his gun in sight. It might have been possible, then, for us to have overpowered

him, and we might have tried but for the knowledge that Bruce's hour was nearly gone; it wanted five minutes to half-past four.

I heard von Horssell say:

'Ach, yes, they haff seen too much. It iss useless, now.'

Too much? Useless? The words hammered themselves against my mind, I could not fathom the deeper meaning, although it was easy to understand what followed.

'We need lose no time. Bring der gun, Klaus.'

Beecham stared at Ted and then at me. Ted swallowed a lump in his throat, and I felt very cold—so cold that I did not think immediately of the bomb tucked against my breast.

There were shouted orders, and then von Horssell appeared in the doorway. No one looking at him then would have believed that normally he was a cripple. He stood upright, and there was something so beastly in the expression in his eyes that I was hypnotised by it.

There were footsteps behind him.

'It has been a long time coming,' he said. 'You were to haff been allowed free, but now it iss too late, the fool allowed you to see too much, yes. Soon after you, Mary Dell, and you, Angell, Murdoch will go. Alvays I intended to be sure that you did die, but I was in no hurry, when we are in occupation of der country would haff been time enough. But it will happen now.'

He stepped aside; and a man came in, carrying a sub-machine gun.

It was so clear and vivid, although it did not seem real. The man with the tommy-gun was small, and the weapon seemed too large for him. He held it nestling against his hip, the big drum dark and ominous; in my fancy I could hear it rattle.

So suddenly—could it be going to happen?

It was like von Horssell, part of the man. The utter ruthlessness was a horrible thing, but to him natural. I expected the order to fire, and at long, long last I had to resort to the bomb.

But using it was not so easy as it might seem, for there was the knowledge that Bruce was nearby. If I used the explosive now, Bruce might be blown up with the rest. Even that in itself was not the whole risk, since it was possible

that he had some means of getting us free without complete disaster.

Yet I put my hand to the neck of my blouse; a pop-fastener or two needed to be pulled apart and I could get at the bomb which the Pink Un had given me. It had to be done, I thought dully, and I wondered whether I would be in time.

Then Beecham moved.

'Why, you German slug,' he bawled, 'I'll break your fat neck!'

He was between us and the tommy-gun when the man opened fire, but by some prodigious effort Beecham reached the gun and pushed it down. I know that was the only thing that saved us, although a stream of bullets spat out and several buried themselves in Beecham's thighs and legs. He went down heavily, but made himself fall forward so that he crushed the gunman. It was a superb exhibition of courage.

I took out the 'lipstick,' and my forefinger nail caught the pin, to pull it out.

26

Change Over

Only Beecham had saved us, of course, and gave me the opportunity for preparing the bomb. I would have been quicker but for the fact that as Beecham sprawled over the gunman the gun fell, and knocked against von Horssell's leg. He staggered, and for a moment there was confusion.

Ted moved.

He had been quite still until then, but when he went into action it was so swiftly that I hardly realised what he was doing. I saw him grip the snout of the tommy-gun, and realised what he was doing. I kept back; I dared not go to help, and dared not put myself in a position where I could not use the bomb; I had to concentrate wholly on that.

But could we escape without it, and make sure the others were caught?

Beecham was badly wounded; there was blood on the floor, where it soaked through his trousers. But he had not lost the use of his hands, one of which he shot out to grip von Horssell's ankle. It prevented the Withered Man from using the gun at his waist, and it gave Ted the opportunity to get at the tommy-gun. He was familiar with the make, and lifted it easily, cradled it in his arms, and then, still kneeling, covered von Horssell.

'Our turn, I think,' he said.

I could see through the open door towards the big room; there was only one guard in there, and he was standing petrified, for the tommy-gun covered him as well as von Horssell. There was no sign of Kless.

I pushed the pin back, and held the bomb tightly in my hand . . .

It was then that we heard an explosion.

It sounded muffled, yet it shook the door, and made me jump. I saw von Horssell start, but he looked back again

abruptly when Ted called him. The guard outside was looking towards the door of the cell, which was tightly closed. I stared towards it for what seemed an unconscionable time. I heard Ted order von Horssell to move to the table, but the Withered Man kept quite still. I had no doubt that he would prefer to die than to live and admit another failure. There was another explosion, then, but further away than the first.

Beecham was crawling towards the wall, leaving a trail of blood. He was muttering:

'Don't mind me. Don't worry about me. I'm all right. Get out and get the others.'

Then I saw the cell door open slowly, and I snapped:

'Watch the cell door, Ted!'

I knew that it was more essential to guard against a surprise attack than to force von Horssell to do what we wanted then. I saw Ted glance towards the opening door, his finger on the trigger; but when it opened I could have cried with relief.

Bruce was coming through.

He was scarcely recognisable, for dust and grime covered him from head to foot, but he had an automatic in his right hand. I did not spend time in trying to think, although I knew then what had happened; using the nitro, he had blasted a way in. I realised that as I stepped forward, exclaiming:

'All right. It's Bruce.'

'Well I'll be goddarned,' muttered Montague Beecham. 'He don't carry a whisky flask, does he?'

Ted stepped back a pace as Bruce came through. He was not smiling, although he raised a hand towards me, and I could imagine the expression in his eyes. He spoke in a swift undertone:

'I blew a part of the ceiling out in there, to get down. Where's Kless?'

He said that so simply, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary, had merely opened a door. I knew that how he had reached here did not matter; the thing of importance was in his question—where was Kless?

'He went out just now,' Ted said.

'Which way?'

None of us knew, none of us spoke.

It was von Horssell who broke the short tense silence which followed. There was a sneer on his face, and his porcine eyes seemed to blaze with all the malevolent hatred there was in the man, although I had to admire his courage; if courage and culture went together, how different the world would be.

'Ach, you fool. Kless is safe and gone.'

'Yes?' Bruce seemed almost casual. 'Which way did he go?'

'Der great Murdoch, he vill find a vay of telling that,' sneered von Horssell. 'He is gone, he vill do what was arranged, yes. You think you have beaten me, but it is I who vins, Murdoch. I was meant to vin. Soon now der Third Reich will colonise England, and ven that happens you and those who belong to you—*ach*, you vill find out vot happens.'

'Very interesting.' Bruce stepped towards the Withered Man, raised a hand and struck him across the face; there was no real weight behind the blow, but it sent von Horssell staggering back. 'Where is Kless?'

Bruce's voice had hardened; I had rarely seen the same expression in his eyes, but I knew it well enough to realise that the one thing that mattered, the *only* thing that mattered, was to find Kless.

Von Horssell hit against the wall. He had his hand raised, as if he would strike back, but he did not. Bruce struck him again, a harder blow, while he said to me:

'Light a cigarette, Mary.' He went on to von Horssell with concentrated hatred in his voice: 'Listen, Baron. You have tortured thousands, and have always escaped yourself. You have mutilated them and burned them, but not been touched. Well, it's your turn now. I'll treat you as you've treated all the others. If burning won't do it, I'll break your bones. If I've got to tear your nails off one at a time, I'll do it to make you talk. You'll find out what it is to feel your flesh burning and your bones cracking *and* I don't mean later, or tomorrow: I mean now.'

He took the lighted cigarette from me.

Von Horssell struck at him, but Bruce was ready for it, and he drove his clenched right fist into the man's stomach. Von Horssell gasped, the wind knocked out of him. Bruce struck him again, and this time made him fall. He drew on

the cigarette, and without waiting to speak again he pushed the burning tobacco against von Horssell's left hand.

I was hypnotised by the sight of it.

Bruce—*Bruce*—was doing this. I knew that there must be some all-demanding reason for it, knew that the finding of Kless was of vital importance, that Bruce would let nothing stand in his way.

I did not even think of the amazing speed with which events had moved. I just stared, while von Horssell looked upwards, fear merging with the horror in his eyes. *Fear*, in von Horssell. I had always looked on him as a man who inflicted pain and caused fear but would not acknowledge it himself; this was so complete a metamorphosis.

Von Horssell flinched back.

'No, Murdoch, no!'

'Where is Kless?'

I thought then that he would talk. I thought that for the first time he was faced with his own methods he would crack. But I was wrong; oddly enough, I am glad I was wrong. There would have been nausea too sickening about the sight of that man grovelling there, talking comparatively easily. I saw him heave his great body up and strike at Bruce again. I saw Bruce evade the blow and grip the other by the throat . . .

Von Horssell lost consciousness.

I did not think it was bluff, even then; I knew the weakness of the man, and the collapse was not surprising. I saw Bruce touch the cigarette against his cheek, but von Horssell did not move, his eyelids did not flicker. I saw Bruce stare for a moment, then stoop down and feel his pulse. He stayed like that for some seconds, but finally turned. His voice was low-pitched and strained.

'He's either dead or in a coma. And we must find Kless.'

From the floor Beecham grunted:

'What's all the fuss about Kless? He can't get far.'

'He mustn't get far,' said Bruce in a hard voice.

As he let von Horssell's wrist go, he turned towards Beecham, a hand at his hip-pocket. He drew out a whisky flask, put it into Beecham's hand, and said:

'Can you manage on your own?'

'Yes, yes, old man, of course.' Beecham's lips were twisted

in the pain from his wounds, his voice an echo of its usual self.

'Watch von Horssell,' said Bruce.

He put his automatic down at Beecham's side, then turned to Ted and me. He smiled; but there was no humour in his eyes, he was seeing dreadful things.

'We'll have to search,' he said. 'How many rooms are there here?'

'I've only seen two,' I answered.

'These two?' It was a question, although he seemed to answer for himself. He went across the outer room and I took the automatic from the listless hand of the one remaining guard. He opened the cell door. I saw that one corner was filled with rubble, and there was a big hole in the roof. Not until later did I know that he had sent two messages down on his return and, receiving no reply to either of them, had blown off a piece of the roof; that had been his idea from the moment he had discovered the ventilation holes of the cell. He had planned to have us herded into one corner while he broke through, but that had not been necessary.

The room was empty.

He turned to the man standing in front of him, and said harshly:

'Where did Kless go?'

'I—I cannot be sure,' the man muttered in German.

'You'd better be. What other way is there out of this place?'

'The—there are two ways,' gasped the man; he must have seen what had happened between Bruce and von Horssell, for I have never seen anyone so utterly afraid. 'Two ways, Excellency.'

'I know the front way. Where is the other?'

I wondered whether the man would tell us, or whether he too would collapse. He was sweating at the forehead and the upper lip, and trembling as he moved towards the wall alongside the room where von Horssell and Beecham were together.

With an unsteady hand he began to touch it.

As I watched, I wondered where the others were, for the underground chambers were unnaturally silent. I was tempted to look at the front entrance; I did not know until

afterwards that Bruce had blocked that with an explosion—he had carried with him two small charges of the nitro-glycerine, and he had seen the need for blocking the main entrance; that explained the second explosion I had heard. So Bruce was sure that there was no need to look in the rough-hewn passage.

The seconds ticked by.

The bomb grew hot and sticky in my hand; there were moments when I forgot it. I saw the muscles of Bruce's face working, and once he took a step forward, snapping:

'Hurry!'

I think he knew that the man was doing his best, for he did not go further. There was a wait of several seconds, and then the man exclaimed:

'I have found it, Excellency!'

There was no sound for a moment; then a slight whirring, and a square section of the wall began to open inwards. I had expected something of the kind, and was not surprised. I heard Bruce ask where the passage ahead led to, and the man answered:

'To the mountain-side, Excellency.'

'Go first,' Bruce said.

The man glanced once at the gun in Ted's hand, then went ahead. Bruce followed, Ted went afterwards, and I brought up the rear.

The passage was wide enough for two to walk abreast. It was very dark, although in several places dim lights showed —more ventilation holes, drilled through rock or the peat of the mountain side. There was a stuffy, unpleasant smell, and the walls as well as the floor and ceiling were dripping wet.

In the patches of light we could see the footprints of men who had passed not long before; the ridges of the prints were oozing with water in some places.

The hollow echoing of our footsteps seemed ceaseless, merging with our breathing. The man ahead was muttering under his breath, while through my mind there were passing two ugly thoughts. One, that we were going into a trap; that was the more insistent and urgent, although it did not explain the heaviness within me. The second thought was that Kless *had* escaped, that von Horssell had not boasted

idly when he had said that he had won in the greater issue.

At last the light grew better.

Moreover, the passage widened, and we could walk four abreast, although we let the guard go ahead on his own, never more than a couple of yards ahead of us. The echoing grew louder, the time seemed to drag much more, until we came to a place where there was a sharp ascent, started by a sloping floor, and ending in three short steps. We had been climbing steadily for at least a hundred yards.

A blank wall appeared to face us.

But it was not blank; there was another passage, and more steps, again leading upwards. We waited for a moment at the foot of it, before Bruce led the way. The guard followed him, with Ted immediately behind the guard.

There were a dozen steps upwards, leading towards a powerful patch of daylight. We reached the top one after the other, and as we did so a strong wind blew fresh and clear from the mountains.

The daylight was dazzlingly bright, and it was almost impossible to believe that we were standing on the slopes of the mountain above the Stone Giant. The level of the opening was some fifty or sixty feet above the top of the Giant. Glen Ballas stretched below us in either direction, looking vaster even than it was. Sheep were there, moving sluggishly. A few bids swooped down nearby. There were no clouds, and the heat of the sun had driven the last of the clinging mist away.

The air was gloriously fresh, its coolness on my parched lips was almost like water; nearby, a small stream was trickling, cool, fresh and fascinating. I could hear the music of it dropping over the rocks, and I moved towards it, dipping my hands in and then lifting them to my lips; the water was so cold that it stung my lips and gums.

Ted did the same.

It stimulated us; the long walk through the semi-darkness and the uncertainty of what we were going to find had depressed us; and Bruce's manner had done nothing to ease the feeling. But the water and the keen air sent some of the depression away. It was a glorious place, the scenery was of that rugged grandeur essentially belonging to the Western Highlands; there is nothing like it in the world.

The guide was saying in a low, frightened voice:

'I know no more, Excellency, I know no more.'

'I don't think you do,' said Bruce. 'Turn round.'

There was no relaxing in his tension, and there was livid fear in the other man's eyes as he obeyed. With the butt of his second automatic, Bruce hit him on the nape of the neck. It was not a heavy blow, but knocked him out.

Ted was pulling some cord from his pocket; he bound the guard's legs and wrists securely; there was no possibility of attack from the man. While Ted worked, I stepped to Bruce's side. He glanced down at me with something like his old smile in his eyes, although I knew there was a nagging fear within him.

'What is it?' I said as steadily as I could.

'I'm not sure that I'm right, but I think I am,' Bruce answered. 'Von Horssell told us from the first and we should have seen it. His mind has always run on the same lines, once he starts on a system he flogs it to death. He had the girl who looked like you, he had a man who looked like him.'

'Well?'

'Why didn't they just kill Kless?' demanded Bruce fiercely, and I started at the realisation that it was exactly the question which had been in my mind. 'Why go to all this trouble?' He paused, and while my heart raced he went on: '*There is someone else like Kless.* I've seen him twice—or I thought I had—once frightened out of his wits, once swaggering as if he had nothing to fear. Two different men to look at.'

'I saw it, too! Bruce, that's what we saw, why von Horssell decided to turn the tommy-gun on us.'

He gripped my arm.

'It affected him like that? Then we've no further to look, there *are* two men, two men who can pass for Kless! They've freed one; they're going to let the other be caught. I can see it so clearly, so damnably clearly. They're going to let the authorities recapture Kless, *but it won't be the same man.* They've let us prove to our own satisfaction, God pity us, that Kless knows something of vital importance. They've drummed that into us from the very start. They've made it obvious that at all costs they must get Kless away, because of what he knows. And then, when we've "recaptured" him —actually taken the wrong man, the second man, he'll give

us information aplenty. He'll tell us a story fabricated by Berlin, designed only to blind us to the true position. They have built up this whole stunt to sell us a dummy—but what dummy? What can it be?'

I said, dry-voiced: 'Guessing won't help.'

'No. And we've got to look for the Klesses. They're here, the real and the false one, and there are at least a dozen other men in the mountains. Near here, of course. We may get away too. If we do we can tell the Pink Un what the game is, but supposing we don't? They'll put the fraud over; von Horssell will be right, he will have won. We've got to find both the real and the false Kless, and we've got to get them away.' He glanced at me, his lips set tightly. 'What a hope,' he added, low-voiced. 'What a hope.'

Then, on his words and quite suddenly, the rattle of machine-gun fire came from a rock not far away. Bullets spurted at our feet, one ricocheted from a rock and grazed Ted Angell's hand.

Bruce pushed me down.

The mountain-side had been cleared of rocks and boulders, and we were exposed. We lay flat, and began to crawl backwards, Ted just ahead of Bruce and I. The rattle of the gun was constantly in our ears, until it paused when the louder tap-tap-tap came from Ted as he returned the fire.

But bullets came from other directions.

The main force of von Horssell's men had been brought here, and were surrounding the back entrance to the Stone Pillar. The fusillade from all directions could not be stopped, and we were lucky to reach the mouth of the exit without injury.

It was then that I saw a man running over the mountain-side towards us, and I recognised Kless. It was not the second Kless, full of swagger and self-confidence, but the first pallid man, frightened as he ran, coming at a fast rate towards us.

The concentrated fire from machine-guns and automatics was directed towards him.

27

Full Story

The fugitive came on.

He drew so near that we could hear his harsh breathing, and see that his mouth was wide open as he drew in deep gasps of air. His right arm was hanging by his side, obviously hit.

He plunged forward, three yards away from us, with a wound in the leg.

The fire from the others was withering, but Bruce went forward slowly, wriggling on his stomach. He gripped Kless's wrist, and began to drag the man forward. Kless was almost crying with pain and fear, and he shuddered convulsively as Bruce drew him into the cover of the exit.

Ted kept the attackers at a distance, while I wondered why the sky just then was clear of aeroplanes, clear at a time when they were so needed. I heard Bruce speaking to the pitiful, frightened Economic Adviser, and I heard Kless say:

'Grenades. They will throw them. They will kill us all.'

'Not just yet,' said Bruce, and his voice was almost normal. 'What is their plan, Herr Kless?'

Both men were speaking in German: I understand it much better than I can speak it, although I have passed previously for a German in several German districts. I was tense and on edge, yet believed that Kless could explain everything that had happened.

He said unsteadily:

'They take me away; they replace me with another. That other, he will make statements to your Government.'

'What statements?' Bruce asked.

It was fantastic; there we were, with a ring of men slowly closing in on us, at any time likely to get within grenade-throwing distance. It might be a minute, or ten or twelve,

before the grenades began to fall. Once they did it would be the end, I did not doubt that for a moment.

And Bruce asked quietly: *'What statements?'*

'You cannot guess?' There was a wondering note in the German's voice then. 'They come to tell of revolution in Germany, to advise your Government that it is time to invade soon, very soon. The man who pretends to be me, he will give information as to how you can land men, where a part of the Dutch coast has been prepared by saboteurs for you to come, yes. The whole of Germany, it will seem, will be in upheaval, will be in revolt. Hitler, Goering, Goebbels, they will be fleeing for their lives; a new Government will take over to come to terms with you.'

Kless paused, and Bruce said: 'Yes?' I could only just hear what was being said, for the clatter of machine-guns was getting nearer. Then there was a louder explosion, and dust blocked the mouth of the exit; hand grenades were falling short. They were behind the rocks, getting nearer every minute. Ted was shooting in shorter bursts, and I knew that was because his ammunition was getting low.

'There will be peace,' said Kless hoarsely. 'The new Government will submit to your terms, the Army will pretend to lay down its arms. But you will be appalled by the fewness of them, it will seem that a great bluff has been played, that Hitler was finished a long time ago. But it is not so! *The Bulk of the Army and Luftwaffe is in France.* From France, when the peace has been established, will come the attack on Great Britain. Do you see? Do you see?'

I just stared at him.

Bruce was looking bleakly towards the dust-covered entrance. He saw, as clearly as I did. The realisation was a horrible thing, because it was so clear that it could work. A puppet Government, the Nazis supposedly in flight, Kless —the false Kless—giving details of the impending revolution so that the Allies concentrated on that. Peace, the answer to the prayers of hundreds of millions—and then out of France the devastating blow.

Of all the colossal traps that Hitler had prepared, of all the mighty tricks and subterfuge he had contrived, nothing could compare with it. A false revolution, a false peace, a false flight—and then the attack on a country wild with the joy of victory.

I did not ask myself whether it could happen; I knew it could. I knew also that if we could not kill the other Kless, it was over for us. For I did not think there was any chance for us to escape alive.

There was a flash in front of the opening, and then a cloud of dust and debris falling into it. I heard the stutter of Ted's gun, which stopped them abruptly. He called sharply:

'Up to you two, now. I'm out of stock.'

I had the bomb in my hand; but on the mountainside it could explode and do little harm, it might kill some of them, but there were a dozen or more. But so far Bruce did not know of it. I drew a deep breath and told him as he crept forward, leaving Kless behind us. The smoke was thick and choked us, but we could just see through it in patches. We saw half a dozen men making a rush from the rocks which had covered them, as if they knew that the tommy-gun was finished. They all carried grenades.

Then I saw the other Kless.

He was standing perhaps a hundred feet away, with two men near him. I shouted to Bruce, who now had the bomb which was so hot and sticky. He was taking out the pin, and I knew he had seen as much as I had.

He climbed out of the exit and stood upright, while the half-dozen men drew within ten yards of him, arms drawn back. I saw him draw his own right arm back, measure the distance, and throw the little cylinder.

It sailed easily through the air, curving a wide arc.

The pseudo Kless saw it coming, and ducked behind the rock. The bomb hit the ground where he had been standing —and then it stayed there for a second, while the half-dozen men came on, only five yards away from us now.

'Back!' snapped Bruce.

He pushed me into the hole, and almost fell on me. As we crouched there several small explosions came just outside, smoke, cordite, dust and fragments filled the mouth of the tunnel—but it lasted only for a few seconds.

The big explosion dwarfed them all.

It created a roar and a flash like nothing I have ever seen or heard. It was so devastating that the mountainside shook and trembled. We heard rocks crashing, we felt the roof come down, we were buried beneath small rocks and peat

and dirt. The earth was not steady even then, it was writhing like a living thing in torment.

I felt my head struck not once but a dozen times. I knew that Bruce was gripping my shoulders, trying to give me cover, but I could see nothing. I heard the thunder of falling debris, an avalanche of rock growing louder and fiercer. I felt an awful pressure at my chest, which grew worse. I had a sensation of slipping, of being carried remorselessly downwards. I did not lose consciousness, although I was aware only of a series of vivid impressions, one after the other.

The noise diminished so slowly that I was hardly aware that it was going. From thunder it developed into a distant rumble, until only occasionally was there noise. I was aware of water dripping over me; it was cool and I felt so hot that I wished there could be more of it.

I tried to get up.

I was surrounded by earth and rocks, but I was not alone. Bruce was huddled near me, buried to the chest in earth, but with both arms free. He was unconscious, and with increasing panic I began to work feverishly at the earth about him. I saw that Ted had been flung clear, but there was no sign of the real Kless.

I had to stop at last, for my shoulders and arms ached until I could not move another handful of the heavy earth. Wearily and despairingly, I sat there, and then gradually I grew aware that the terrain had altered; much was different, but one of the things that made me stare in stupefaction was that the Stone Giant was gone.

Where it had been there were masses of rock and debris; pieces of the mountainside which had jutted out had completely disappeared. It dawned on me that the explosion had caused a landslide but that by some freak the upper exit from the subterranean chambers had escaped the worst damage.

It was then that I heard the droning of aeroplanes, and when I looked up all thought of Bruce—yes, even of Bruce —was driven from my mind. For there were a dozen 'planes, and men were dropping from them, parachutes billowing out. Two or three had already reached the ground.

The overwhelming fear that they were German passed when I saw a man land not twenty yards away from me. He

was a youngish officer in khaki. He struggled up, and crawled towards me, calling:

'I'm in good time, I hope?'

I just stared at him, and others who followed him. I saw them start on the work of getting Bruce free, before I fainted.

* * * * *

A monstrous pink face loomed over me. A pair of startlingly blue eyes danced in front of mine, and a cool, plump hand rested on my shoulder. Bemusedly, I tried to look about me. I was in a small room, painted white and green. It was cool, and I was comfortable.

Out of the mists came the Pink Un's voice:

'Hallo, hallo, Mary. 'Pon my living say-so, you've slept long enough for a lifetime! Don't start worrying, now. I can see it in your eyes. Bruce is all right; nothing the matter with him at all except a few cracked ribs. Ted's busted his legs, he'll be annoyed about that, it'll keep him quiet for a bit. But he's swearing like a trooper already, so it could be a lot worse.'

'Thank the Lord,' I said faintly.

'And so you should,' said Pinky. 'By jingo, that was some explosion, I knew that 'lipstick' had a little something! Er—Mary.' His voice was sharp, and I knew he was anxious. 'What about Kless?'

I said stupidly: 'Which Kless?'

'Now come, come,' said the Pink Un. 'Ernst Kless. I—sorry, my dear, I don't want to worry you. Just tell me if you got him all right. Did you?'

'If I didn't, it doesn't matter,' said I.

The Pink Un stared, not sure whether I was wholly sane. A nurse, nearby, gave me water, and after a while I felt that I could not only talk, but remember. So I told Pinky the story, seeing his button of a mouth push forward agitatedly, until I related what the real Kless had said. He scowled at me then, and kept bouncing about on his chair. When I had finished, he said:

'*Very* well done. Colossal! Faked revolution—b'Gad, it might have come off. We've had those stories of impending revolution pouring out of Germany for months past. All

faked. *All* faked. Good God, what an effort! Incredible, but —here, I must go. You'll be well looked after, m'dear, and Bruce is in a ward near you. Ballas Prison Hospital.' He chuckled, but was on edge to be away, although I held on to his hand.

'Have you found von Horssell? Or Beecham?'

The Pink Un shook his head.

'No, Mary. Not yet. Nor likely to. Bruce talked a bit, in delirium. I gathered they were under the Giant—right?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Hopeless,' said Pinky. 'Covered by hundreds of tons of rock. Just after we'd got you safely away, there was another landslide. Miracle you got away at all. You, two or three Germans badly injured, that's all. Nothing else came out alive.'

He went away then, and I rested on my pillows and wondered whether it could be true, whether von Horssell had really been buried beneath the landslide. Of course, there can be no reasonable alternative, but I would have preferred to see his dead body. There is, even now, a fear in my mind that he may have escaped by a miracle; after all, it was a miracle that Bruce, Ted and I should come out of it alive.

. . . . .

With the war taking a turn for the better, with the chances of an early peace on us, I wonder about von Horssell.

Officially, he is considered dead, of course.

The official record of the case, which Bruce and I helped to compile while we were convalescing in the Highlands, claims other things, too. Both Kless and his impersonator-to-be are also considered dead, with Montague Beecham.

I often wish I had taken an opportunity of telling Beecham how much I admired his titanic courage. I know he would roar with laughter if he could hear how Ministry of Propaganda officials reject the statement that he accepted their job while following his own, believing it could help him to get the full story for the *Echo*. Yet the newspaper was what he lived for; what he died for.

The muttering of rebellion in Germany died down, and reports came from Berlin of the disappointment that the

failure of the Kless Commission caused. Hitler raged, it was said, but so many things are said of that ill-begotten creature that one wonders how many are true. Of the attempted plan to lull us with a false peace with a false Government while the real attack developed from France, however, there is no doubt at all.

We gathered information from the injured men, too, of the long work done by night in and underneath the Giant, of a 'plane assembled and ready for flight in a shallow cavern in the mountain-side—I knew von Horssell would make full preparations for his escape.

Well, he failed—for the third time.

The full story of his plot will never be told, I suppose, although the care with which he tried to keep us on the wrong trail speaks for itself. There was one development; the men who had fired at the pseudo von Horssell at Oxford Circus were caught, claiming to be members of a fascist organisation, actually von Horssell's hirelings. I have never solved the mystery of the roses. I suppose it doesn't matter.

If the Withered Man is dead, buried with the dust of the traitorous chieftain in Glen Ballas, then there is every reason for me to feel at ease and satisfied. For Bruce and Ted, Mick and Percy are as fit as they have ever been, although Percy has developed a distrust of sergeants in khaki. Nor is there anything the matter with me, beyond the scars in my memory.

The other 'Mary Dell' was nursed to good health, and she helped to fill in some pieces—for instance, that I was left alive at Guildford so that later, if needs be, she could pass herself off as me. Von Horssell worked on her with every threat in his repertoire, breaking down her mental resistance; at a chance meeting he had seen her resemblance to me, and determined how to use her. At first he wooed her with bribes, then he had worked on her fears and made her do just what he told her, until she cracked and ran away. Von Horssell had told her that in her own name she was wanted by the police; and told her to adopt 'Mary Dell' if she did not want to be shot for treason. Incredibly thorough? I think it typical, and certainly it explains her cry when I told her my name.

The Pink Un was not responsible for the escape from the prison; Beecham had been bluffing von Horssell there.

Three men were concerned, including the treacherous sergeant-driver. The latter presumably died in Glen Ballas; the other two were tried and shot for treason.

There are ends I cannot tie up because I have not been able to get full information; but I believe I know all that matters, although some of the events fade. Yet they come again when I am in Dorset, near Cliff Cottage—Bruce is trying to find a similar place, but isn't likely to succeed until after the war.

After the war? How long does that mean?

Not long, I think; I am as nearly sure of that as I am that the Withered Man is dead.