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The Thirty-nine Steps

Hogeita hemeretzi mailak

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Lagunek laguntzen gaituzte, laguntzen digute…

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1 - Hil zen gizona 6

2 - Esneketariak bidaiatzeari ekiten dio 17

3 - Tabernari literarioaren abentura 23

4 - Hautagai erradikalaren abentura 34

5 - Bide-langile betaurrekodunaren abentura 44

6 - Arkeologo burusoilaren abentura 53

7 - Errekako arrantzalea 66

8 - Harri Beltzaren etorrera 76

9 - Hogeita hemeretzi mailak 83

10 - Talde anitz kostaldean elkartzen dira 90

Hitzatzea 102

1 - Hil zen gizona

Maiatzeko arratsalde hartan, hirurak aldera, bizitzaz nazkatuta itzuli nintzen Londresko Citytik. Arbasoen herrialdean hiru hilabete neramatzan eta kokoteraino nengoen. Urtebete lehenago norbaitek horrela sentituko nintzela esan izan balit, barre egingo niokeen; orain, ordea, horrela zen. Eguraldiak gaizki sentiarazten ninduen eta britainiar arrunten elkarrizketek nazka ematen zidaten. Ezin nuen kirol nahikorik egin eta Londresko dibertsioak eguzkitan egon den freskagarri bat bezain ahulak iruditzen zitzaizkidan.

"Richard Hannay, adiskide —esaten nion neure buruari behin eta berriro—, bide okerrean sartu haiz, eta hobe duk hortik ateratzea".

Lehenengo urteetan Bulawayon egin nituen planak gogoratzen nituenean, hozka egiten nien ezpainei. Dirutza biltzea lortu nuen —ez zen dirutza handia, baina niretzat aski zen—, eta ondo pasatzeko modu asko pentsatuta neuzkan. Sei urte nituela, aitak Eskoziatik eraman ninduen, eta, geroztik, ez nintzen inoiz etxera itzuli. Beraz, niretzat, Erresuma Batua Mila gau eta bat gehiago ipuinetan agertzen diren lekuen modukoa zen, eta nire bizitza han pasatu nahi nuen.

Hala ere, hasiera-hasieratik etsipena izan zen niretzat. Astebete igaro baino lehen, monumentuak ikusteaz nekatuta nengoen, eta hilabetea igaro aurretik, jatetxeez, antzerkiez eta zaldi-lasterketez ere bai. Ez nuen benetako lagunik, eta, seguruenik, horixe zen nire egoeraren arrazoia. Pertsona askok etxera gonbidatzen ninduten; baina ez zuten niregan interes handirik, antza. Hegoafrikaren gaineko galdera bat edo bi botatzen zizkidaten, eta, gero, beren aferekin jarraitzen zuten. Dama inperialista askok tea hartzera gonbidatzen ninduten, Zeelanda Berriko irakasleak eta Vancouverreko editoreak aurkezteko asmoz, eta hori zen denetan gauzarik etsigarriena. Hor nengoen ni, hogeita hamazazpi urterekin, sasoi onean, ondo pasatzeko diru nahikoarekin, eta, halere, egun osoan ahozabalka nenbilen. Alde egiteko eta Veldeko zelaietara itzultzeko erabakia ia hartuta neukan, Erresuma Batuko gizonik aspertuena nintzen eta.

Arratsaldea inbertsioei buruz hitz egiten pasatu nuen artekariekin, batez ere neure burua entretenitu nahian, eta etxerako bidean, klub batera sartu nintzen; ez zen klub oso dotorea, eta kolonietako bazkideak ere onartzen zituen. Konbinatu bat hartu eta iluntzeko egunkariak irakurri nituen. Ekialde Hurbileko gatazken informazioz beteta zeuden, eta artikulu bat Karolides Greziako presidenteari buruzkoa zen. Gizonak jatorra zirudien, nire iritziz. Iturri guztien arabera, afera hartan garrantzi handiko gizon bakarra zen; eta, horrez gain, zintzo jokatzen zuen —eta ezin zitekeen besteei buruz horrenbeste esan—. Ulertu nuenez, Berlinen eta Vienan gorroto handia zioten; baina gu haren

aldekoak ginen, eta horrela jarraitzeko asmoa geneukan. Egunkari baten iritziz, Karolides zen Europaren eta hondamendiaren artean zegoen babes bakarra. Gogoratzen dut pentsatu nuela herrialde horietan lana lortzerik ba ote zegoen. Bururatu zitzaidan Albania gizon bati aspertzeko astirik uzten ez dioten leku horietako bat izan zitekeela.

Seiak aldera, etxera joan nintzen, arropak aldatu, Café Royalen afaldu eta, gero, antzoki batean sartu nintzen musika-emanaldi bat entzutera. Emanaldi ergela zen —emakumeek memeloarena egiten, gizonek tximino aurpegia zeukaten— eta ez nintzen luzaroan geratu. Gaua ederra eta argia zen eta oinez joan nintzen Portland Placetik hurbil alokatua nuen apartamentura. Nire inguruan jendetza zebilen espaloietan, giro bizian eta hizketan, eta inbidia nion egitekoren bat zuen jende horri. Dendari, bulegari, dandy eta polizia horiek interesen bat zeukaten bizitzan, eta interes horri esker eusten zioten bizitzari. Nik, aldiz, txanpon batzuk eman nizkion eskale bati, ahozabalka ikusi nuelako: nire sufrimendu bera pairatzen zuen. Oxford Circusen udaberriko zeruari begiratu, eta hauxe hitzeman nuen: beste egun bat emango nion arbasoen herrialdeari niri zerbait eskaintzeko; ezer gertatzen ez bazen, Esperantza Oneko lurmuturrera zihoan lehen itsasontzian alde egingo nuen.

Langham Place atzean zegoen nire apartamentua. Eraikina berria zen eta apartamentua lehenengo solairuan zegoen. Eskailera komunala zuen, eta, atarian, atezaina eta igogailuzaina zeuden. Etxean mirabeak bizitzea gorroto dut eta, hortaz, egunez gizon bat etortzen zen nire gauzak txukuntzera. Goizero etortzen zen, zortziak baino lehen, eta, arratsaldeetan, zazpietan alde egiten zuen etxean inoiz afaltzen ez nuelako.

Giltza etxeko atean sartu bezain laster konturatu nintzen gizon bat nuela alboan. Ez nuen gizona hurbiltzen ikusi, eta bat-batean agertu izanak ezustekoa eman zidan. Gizon argala zen, bizar gorri motzekoa, eta begiak txikiak, urdinak eta zorrotzak zeuzkan. Banekien azkeneko solairuan bizi zela, eta eskaileretan egun on esaten genion elkarri.

—Zurekin hitz egin dezaket? —erregutu zidan—. Minutu batez sar naiteke?

Ahotsa baretzeko ahaleginetan zebilen eta besoan atzaparka egiten zidan eskuarekin.

Atea ireki eta sartzeko keinua egin nion. Atea igaro bezain azkar, atzeko gelaraino joan zen korrika: han egiten nuen erre eta gutunak idatzi. Jarraian, ziztu bizian itzuli zen niregana.

—Atea giltzaz itxita al dago? —galdetu zidan urduri, eta katea berak lotu zuen.

—Ikaragarri sentitzen dut —esan zidan apaltasunez—. Badakit atrebentzia handia dela, baina gizon ulerkorraren itxura duzu. Aste honetan, gauzak korapilatzen ari zirela, eta zuregan pentsatu dut. Aizu, mesede bat egingo al didazu?

—Entzun egingo dizut —erantzun nion—. Hori baino ezin dizut agindu.
Gizon urduri eta txiki horren portaera bitxiaz kezkatzen hasia nintzen.
Edari-erretilu bat zegoen haren ondoan, mahai baten gainean, eta whiski eta soda edalontzi bat prestatu zuen. Hiru zurrutadatan edan, edalontzia erretiluaren gainean utzi, eta kristala kraskatu zuen.
—Barkatu —esan zidan—. Urduri samar nago. Kontua da momentu honetan hilda nagoela.
Besaulki batean eseri nintzen eta pipa piztu nuen.
—Nolakoa da sentsazioa? —itaundu nion. Ziur samar nengoen ero batekin ari nintzela. Haren aurpegi nekatuan irribarre azkarra agertu zen.
—Ez nago erotuta, oraindik ez. Hara, zuri begira egon naiz egun hauetan, eta uste dut ez zarela erraz urduritzen. Gizon zintzoa zara, ez zaitu arriskuak beldurtzen. Dena kontatuko dizut. Laguntza behar dut, beste inork sekula behar izan duena baino gehiago, jakin nahi dut eta lagunduko ote didazun.
—Jarraitu istorioa kontatzen —esan nion—, eta erantzuna emango dizut.
Bazirudien bere burua ahalegin handia egiteko prestatzen ari zela, eta jarraian oso astakeria bitxia hasi zitzaidan kontatzen. Hasieran ez nuen harrapatzen eta eten behar izaten nion galderak egiteko. Hona hemen mamia:
Amerikarra zen, Kentuckykoa, eta unibertsitatean ikasi ondoren, dirua soberan zuenez, mundua ezagutzera irten zen. Denboraldi batean idazle aritu zen, Chicagoko egunkari baterako guda-berriemaile, eta urtebete edo bi eman zituen hego-ekialdeko Europan. Iruditu zitzaidan hizkuntzalari bikaina zela eta hango gizartea ondo ezagutzea lortu zuela. Egunkarietan ikusita nituen zenbait pertsonaz ondo ezagutuko balitu bezala hitz egin zidan.
Politikagintzan parte hartu zuela kontatu zidan, hasieran berezko interesagatik eta, gero, ezin ziolako jakin-minari eutsi. Gizon zorrotza eta urduria iruditu zitzaidan, eta, ziur aski, arazoen muineraino beti iritsi nahi izaten zuen horietakoa. Nahi baino urrunago joana zen, ordea.
Kontatu zidana nik ulertu bezain ondo azalduko dizuet. Aldaketa handiak gertatzen ari ziren pertsona oso arriskutsuek diseinatuta eta gobernu eta armada guztien bizkarrean. Hori kasualitatez jakin zuen. Jakin-minak liluratuta joan zen eta harrapatu egin zuten. Ulertu nuenez, gatazkaren barruan zeuden pertsona gehienak anarkista iraultzaileak ziren; baina, horiez gain, bazeuden diruagatik jokatzen ari ziren finantzariak ere. Gizon bizkor batek etekin handiak atera ditzake erortzen ari den merkatu batetik, eta bi talde horiei Europa hankaz gora jartzea komeni zitzaien.
Kontatu zizkidan gauza bitxi batzuek lehendik harrituta utzi ninduten kontu asko azaltzen zituzten, Balkanetako Gerran gertatutako gauzak, alegia: nola estatu batek tupustean beste estatuak menderatu zituen; aliantzak zergatik egin eta desegin ziren; zergatik zenbait gizon desagertu ziren; gudaren funtsa nondik

zetorren. Azpijoko osoaren helburua Errusia eta Alemania elkarren etsai bihurtzea zen.
Horren arrazoia galdetu nionean, azaldu zidan anarkistek hala uste zutela, horrek emango ziela itxaroten ari ziren aukera. Den-dena nahaspila bihurtuko zen, eta espero zuten horretatik mundu berri bat ateratzea. Kapitalistek txanponak esku-beteka bildu eta, hondamendia erosita, dirutza egingo zuten. Kapitalak ez zuen, gizonak esan zuenez, ez kontzientziarik ez aberririk. Gainera, juduak zeuden gauza guztien atzean, eta juduek Errusia infernua baino gehiago gorroto zuten.
—Eta horrek harritzen zaitu? —garrasi egin zuen—. Hirurehun urtean zehar jazarri egin dituzte, eta hau pogromen ordaina da. Juduak leku guztietan daude; baina topatu nahi baditugu, klandestinitatean sartu behar dugu. Pentsa dezagun edozein negozio alemaniar handitan. Harremanetan jartzen garenean, gure lehenengo kontaktua Von und zu zerbait printzea izango da, gizon gaztea eta dotorea, ingelesez ondo baino hobeto hitz egiten duena. Gizon horrek ez du eraginik, ordea. Gure afera handia baldin bada, atzealdera eramango gaituzte eta hor Westfaliako gizon bat aurkituko dugu, kokots handia, bekoki hondoratua eta txerri baten portaera dituena. Hori da Ingalaterrako egunkariak urduri jartzen dituen enpresario alemaniarra. Baina gure lana maila are handiagokoa baldin bada, eta benetako nagusiarekin tratatu behar badugu, litekeena da nagusia aurpegi zuriko judu txikia izatea, kriskitin-suge baten begiak dituena eta gurpil-aulki batean eserita dagoena. Bai, jauna, horixe da gaur egun mundua gobernatzen duena, eta Tsarren inperioan labana sartu nahi du, izeba bortxatu eta aita jipoitu zituztelako Volga ondoan dagoen herrixka triste batean.
Gogorarazi behar izan nion nonbait judu-anarkistak atzera samar geratu zirela.
—Bai eta ez —erantzun zidan—. Neurri batean haiek ere irabazi zuten; baina dirua baino handiagoa den gauza batekin egin zuten topo, erostezina den gauza batekin: gizakien borrokarako sena. Hil behar bagaituzte, bandera eta herrialde bat asmatzen ditugu horien alde borrokatzeko; eta, bizirik ateratzen bagara, berriz, horiek maitatzen jarraituko dugu. Soldadu txepel horiek zer maitatu aurkitu zuten, eta horrek Berlinen eta Vienan egindako plan fina oztopatu du. Baina nire lagunek oraindik ez dute azkeneko karta jokatu, ezta gutxiago ere. Amarrua dute mahukan gordeta, eta, nik hilabete honetan bizirik iraun ezean, erabili egingo dute, baita irabazi ere.
—Baina uste nuen zu hilik zeundela —moztu nion.
—Mors janua vitæ —esan zidan, irribarre eginez. Ezagutzen nuen aipu hori: latin askoz gehiagorik ez nekien—. Horretarako bidean nago; baina, abiatu baino lehen, gauza asko jakinarazi behar dizkizut. Egunkariak irakurtzen badituzu, jakingo duzu Constantine Karolides nor den.

Tente jarri nintzen, arratsalde horretan bertan gizon horren gainean zerbait irakurria bainuen.
—Horrek apurtu ditu haien azpijoko guztiak. Istorio honetan guztian buru argia duen bakarra da, eta, kasualitatez, gizon zintzoa ere bada. Horregatik, jomuga izan da azken urte honetan. Hori guztia jakin dut, eta jakitea ez da zaila izan, edozein kaikuk asmatuko zukeen eta. Baina nik nola harrapatuko duten jakin dut, eta jakintza horrek heriotza-arriskua dakar. Eta, horregatik, zendu egin behar izan dut.
Beste trago bat hartu nahi zuen eta neuk prestatu nion, gizontxoa gero eta interesgarriagoa iruditzen baitzitzaidan.
—Ezin dute bere herrialdean harrapatu, Epiroko bizkartzain errukigabea baitu. Hala eta guztiz ere, ekainaren hamabostean hiri honetara etorriko da. Kanpo Arazoetako Ministerio britainiarrak nazioarteko bilera informalak antolatzeari ekin dio eta data horretan egingo da bilerarik handiena. Karolides gonbidaturik garrantzitsuena da eta, nire lagunek nahi dutena lortzen badute, ez da inoiz miresten duten aberkideengana itzuliko.
—Hori, behintzat, erraza da —ihardetsi nion—. Planen berri eman diezaiokezu, eta, horrela, ez da etxetik irtengo.
—Eta haien jokoari mesede egin horrela? —galdetu zidan zorrotz—. Etortzen ez bada, haiek irabaziko dute, korapiloa aska dezakeen gizon bakarra da eta. Greziako Gobernuak jakingo balu, Karolides ez litzateke etorriko, berak ez dakielako ekainaren hamabostean zer egongo den jokoan.
—Eta Gobernu britainiarra? —itaundu nion—. Ez dio inori gonbidatuak erailtzen utziko. Zerbait aipatzen badiozu, neurri bereziak hartuko ditu.
—Ez litzateke nahikoa izango. Zuen hiria detektibe sekretuz bete lezake, baita polizia-agenteak bikoiztu ere; baina, hala ere, Constantine gizon kondenatua izango litzateke. Nire lagunak ez dira joko hau musu-truk jokatzen ari. Gertaera handi bat nahi dute beren planari hasiera emateko eta Europa osoa gertaera horri begira egon dadin. Karolides austriar batek erailko du, eta ebidentziek agerian utziko dute Berlingo eta Vienako handi-mandiak horrekin ados daudela. Dena gezur madarikatua izango da, noski, baina, munduaren begietan, kontu iluna izango da. Ez naiz tontakeriarik esaten ari. Infernuko azpijoko honen xehetasun guztiak jakin ditut, eta borgiarren ondoren, inork ez du inoiz hain joko maltzurrik eta finik aurrera eraman. Baina ez dute planik burutuko baldin eta aferaren gorabehera guztiak ezagutzen dituen gizon bat, ekainaren hamabostean bizirik eta hemen, Londresen, badago. Gizon hori ni nauzu, jauna: Franklin P. Scudder.
Pixkanaka-pixkanaka gizon txiki hori atsegina gertatu zitzaidan. Ahoa animalientzako tranpa balitz bezala itxi zuen, eta begi sarkor horietan

borrokarako grina antzematen zitzaion. Ipuin bat kontatzen ari bazen, oso ondo zekien antzezten.
—Nola jakin duzu hori dena? —galdetu nion.
—Lehenengo datuak Tirolen, Achensee aintziraren ondoan dagoen taberna batean jaso nituen. Horrek informazio gehiago biltzera bultzatu ninduen. Arrasto gehiago lortu nituen Budako galiziarren auzoan, Vienako bidaiari-elkarte batean eta Leipzigen, Racknitzstrassetik gertu dagoen liburu-denda txiki batean. Duela hamar egun, frogak erabat osatu nituen Parisen. Ezin dizkizut orain xehetasun guztiak kontatu, istorio luzea delako. Datuak erabat ziurtatu nituenean, iruditu zitzaidan desagertu egin behar nuela; hortaz, hiri honetara oso zirkuitu bitxi batetik etorri nintzen. Paristik, frantziar-amerikar dandy gazte alde egin nuen; Hanburgon, diamante-merkatari judu itsasoratu nintzen. Norvegian, Ibsen ikasten ari zen ingeles bat izan nintzen, eskoletarako informazioa eskuratzen ari zena; eta Bergenetik atera nintzenean, berriz, eskiatzeari buruzko filmak egiten zituen zuzendari bat. Leithetik hona, paper-orearen gaineko proposamenak ekarri nituen, Londresko egunkariei eskaintzeko. Atzo arte, nire bidea ondo ezkutatu nuela uste nuen, eta horrekin pozik nengoen. Eta gero…
Bazirudien oroipenak asaldatu zuela, eta, zurrutada batean, whiski gehiago irentsi zuen.
—Horren ondoren, eraikin honetatik kanpo, kalean, gizon bat ikusi nuen. Egun osoa neure gelan itxita igarotzen nuen, eta ilundu ondoren ateratzen nintzen ordu pare batez. Gizona nire leihotik zaintzen nuen, eta uste nuen ezagutzen nuela… Egun batean, eraikinean sartu zen, eta atezainarekin hitz egin zuen… Bart, ibilalditxoa egitetik itzuli naizenean, txartel bat aurkitu dut neure postontzian. Munduan gutxien ikusi nahi dudan gizonaren izena zeukan idatzita.
Uste dut haren begiradak eta aurpegian zuen izuak behingoz eraman nindutela zintzo ari zela sinestera. Ahotsa zorroztu nuen pixka bat, horren ostean zer egin zuen galdetu nionean.
—Konturatu nintzen sardina-lata batean bezain harrapatuta nengoela eta aterabide bat besterik ez zegoela. Hil behar nuen. Nire jazarleek hilda nengoela uste bazuten, berriro lasaituko ziren.
—Eta hori nola lortzen da?
—Nire gauzak zaintzen dituen gizonari gaizki sentitzen nintzela adierazi nion, eta oso gaixo dagoenaren plantak egin nituen. Ez zen zaila izan, mozorrotzeko trebetasun handia daukat eta. Segidan, gorpu bat eskuratu nuen (Londresen beti dago hilotz bat lortzea, nora jo jakinez gero). Kutxa batean sartu nuen, eta lau gurpileko gurdi baten gainean ekarri nuen. Gelara igotzeko, lagundu behar izan zidaten. Kontua da frogak metatu behar nituela ikerketarako. Oheratu nintzen, nire mirabeari eskatu nion lo egiteko botika bat prestatzeko eta alde

egiteko gero. Medikuari deitu nahi zion, baina birao batzuk bota, eta esan nion medikuak ezin nituela begien aurrean ikusi. Bakarrik utzi ninduenean, gorpua mozorrotzen hasi nintzen. Nire tamainakoa zen, eta, itxura denez, alkoholak hildakoa, beraz, botila batzuk jarri nituen han eta hemen apartamentuan. Bion itxuraren arteko aldeen ahulgunea masailezurra zen, eta, horregatik, errebolber batekin suntsitu nion. Segur aski bihar norbaitek tiro bat entzun zuela zin egingo du, baina nire solairuan ez dago inor, eta, hortaz, pentsatu nuen arriskua har nezakeela. Gorpua ohe gainean utzi nuen, nire pijama jantzita. Errebolber bat haren ondoan, dena anabasa handian. Gero, larrialdietarako prest neukan traje bat jantzi nuen. Aztarnarik ez uzteko, ez nintzen bizarra egitera ausartu; kalera ateratzeak ez zuen zentzurik izango, dena den. Egun osoan izan zaitut buruan: iruditzen zitzaidan ez nuela besterik, zuregana hurbiltzea eta zure laguntza eskatzea. Leihotik begira egon naiz, etxera iristen ikusi zaitudan arte, eta, gero, eskaileretan arin jaitsi naiz zure bila… Hori duzu dena, jauna, eta orain afera honen gainean zuk nik bezainbeste dakizu.

Hontz bat bezala geratu zen, begiak klisk eginez, urduritasunak jota; baina, aldi berean, betebeharra egiteko asmo handiarekin. Ordurako nahiko ziur nuen egia esaten ari zela. Oso kontakizun eroa zen; baina egiazkoak zirela frogatu nituen kontu sinesgaitz asko entzunda neuzkan, eta, erabakiak hartzeko, istorioari baino gizonari begiratzen nion. Nire apartamentuan sartu eta lepoa mozteko asmoa baldin bazuen, kontakizun arruntago bat kontatuko zidakeen.

—Eman zure giltza —eskatu nion—, eta gorpuari begirada bat ematera joango naiz. Barkatu zuhurtasunez jokatzen badut, baina zure istorioa apur bat egiaztatu nahi nuke.

Ezezkoa egin zidan buruarekin, triste.

—Banekien eskatuko zenidala, baina ez daukat soinean. Mesanotxe gainean dago, nire katean. Hor utzi behar izan nuen: ezin nuen susmoak sor zitzakeen aztarnarik utzi. Segika dudan jendea oso argia da. Gaur, nire hitza onartu beharko duzu; bihar, gorpuari buruzko frogak izango dituzu, ez izan zalantzarik.

Momentu batez hausnartzen gelditu nintzen.

—Ondo da. Gaurkoz zutaz fidatuko naiz. Gela honetan giltzapetuko zaitut eta giltza gordeko dut. Gauza bat, Scudder jauna. Uste dut gizon zintzoa zarela; baina, horrela ez bada, jakin ezazu armekin ondo moldatzen naizela.

—Jakina —esan zidan, eta arin zutitu zen—. Oraindik ez dakit zure izena zein den, baina utzi esaten zintzotasun handiz jokatzen ari zarela. Bizarra egiteko labana bat utziko didazu, mesedez?

Logelara eraman, eta bakarrik utzi nuen. Ordu erdi geroago, ia ezagutzen ez nuen gizon bat itzuli zen. Begi sarkor haiek baino ez zituen antzekoak. Bizarra egina zuen, ilea erdian artesia eginda orraztuta, eta bekainak txukunduta. Gainera, armadan irakatsi zioten erara mugitzen zen; Indian luze egona zen

ofizial britainiar baten eredua zen, gainera, azal beltzaran eta guzti. Monokulo bat ere bazuen, eta begian jarri zuen. Ahoskeran ez zitzaion batere igartzen amerikarra zenik.
—Arraioa! Scudder jauna… —esan nion totelka.
—Scudder jauna ez —zuzendu zidan—, Theophilus Digby kapitaina, Gurkhen 40. erregimentukoa: baimen-egun batzuk etxean ematen ari naiz. Jauna, ez ahaztu hori, mesedez.
Egongelan prestatu nion ohea, eta nire ohera joan nintzen ni, aurreko hilabetean zehar baino alaiago. Gauzak gertatzen ziren noizean behin, baita Jainkoak ahaztutako metropoli honetan ere.
Hurrengo goizean esnatu nintzenean, Paddock —nire zerbitzaria— izugarrizko iskanbila egiten ari zen egongelako ate ondoan. Paddocki bere garaian mesede bat egin nion Selakwen, eta Ingalaterrara iritsi bezain laster, mirabe hartu nuen. Hizketan, hipopotamo bat bezain trebea zen, eta ez zen oso zerbitzari ona; baina banekien haren leialtasuna apurtezina zela.
—Ez zalapartarik atera, Paddock —oihu egin nion—. Nire lagun bat, zera, hau da… —ezin nuen izena gogoratu—, lotara geratu da. Prestatu biontzako gosaria eta etorri gero, zurekin hitz egin behar dut eta.
Paddocki istorio eder bat kontatu nion: nire lagun hori oso garrantzitsua zela, eta, lanez gainezka ibilia zelako, urduritasunak jota zegoela, eta bakea eta atsedena behar zituela. Noski, inork ezin zuen jakin gurekin zegoenik; bestela, Indiako Ministerioak eta Lehen Ministroak bidalitako mezuz josiko gintuztela, eta lagunaren atsedena suntsitu. Aitortu behar dut gosaltzera etorri zenean Scudderrek oso ondo jokatu zuela. Paddocki monokuloz begiratu zion, ofizial britainiar baten moduan; Boerren Gerraz galdetu zion, eta niri alegiazko lagun batzuei buruzko berriak eman zizkidan. Paddock ez zen gai niri “jauna” deitzeko, baina Scudderri “jauna” esaten zion hil edo biziko kontua izango balitz bezala.
Scudder egunkariekin eta zigarro kutxa batekin utzi nuen eta ni Cityra joan nintzen bazkaltzeko ordura arte. Itzuli nintzenean, igogailuzainak aurpegi larria zuen.
—Kontu beltza izan dugu, ba, gaur hemen, jauna. 15. zenbakiko gizonak bere buruaz beste egin du arma batekin. Oraintxe bertan eraman dute ehorztetxera. Orain, polizia dago hor.
15. zenbakira igo nintzen, eta hantxe zeuden polizia pare bat eta inspektore bat azterketarekin lanpetuta. Galdera txoro batzuk egin nizkien eta berehala alde egiteko agindu zidaten. Segidan, Scudderren zerbitzariarekin egin nuen topo, eta hari ere galderak egin nizkion; baina argi zegoen ez zuela susmorik batere. Gizon kexatia zen, jainkojale aurpegia zuen, baina txanpon txiki batek kontsolatu zuen, neurri handi batean.

Hurrengo egunean, heriotzaren ikerketara joan nintzen. Argitaletxe bateko bazkide batek froga garbiak eman zituen hildakoak paper-oreari buruzko proposamen batzuk ekarri zizkiola erakusteko, eta azaldu zuen enpresa amerikar baten ordezkaria zela, bere ustez. Epaimahaiak bere buruaz beste egin zuela ebatzi zuen, hildakoak burua nahasia zuela, eta haren gauzak —gutxi ziren— Estatu Batuetako kontsulari entregatu zizkioten. Scudderri aferaren xehetasun guztiak kontatu nizkion, horretan interes handia zuen eta. Esan zidan gustura egon izango zela ikerketan, nork bere eskela irakurtzea bezain morbosoa izango zelako.

Atzeko gela hartan nirekin eman zituen bi egunetan oso lasai egon zen. Pixka bat irakurri zuen, erre ere bai. Gauza asko idatzi zituen liburuxka batean, eta gauero xakean jokatzen genuen: horretan, jipoitu egiten ninduen. Uste dut haren urduritasuna gutxitzen ari zela, aurreko egoera estu samarra izan zen eta. Hala eta guztiz ere, hirugarren egunean argi zegoen egonezina itzultzen ari zitzaiola. Ekainaren hamabostera arteko egunekin zerrenda prestatu zuen. Arkatz gorri batekin egun bakoitza seinalatu zuen eta oharrak gehitu zituen takigrafiaz. Hausnarketa sakonean aurkitzen nuen, begi zorrotzak urrunera begira eta, meditazio horien ondoren, lur jota geratzen zen.

Egun hartan ikusi nuen urduri jartzen ari zela berriro. Zarata txikiei adi egoten zen, eta Paddock fidatzeko modukoa ote zen behin eta berriro galdetzen zidan. Aldarte txarrez jarri zen pare bat aldiz eta gero barkamena eskatu zidan. Ez nuen gaizki hartu. Ez nion asko eskatzen, lan zail samarra hartua zuelako bere gain.

Ez zuen bere segurtasunak kezkatzen, prestatuta zeukan planak baizik, arrakastatsu izango ote zen. Gizon txikia bai baina sendoa zen, une bigunik gabekoa. Gau batean, oso serio jarri zen.

—Entzun, Hannay —esan zidan—. Uste dut afera hau sakonago azaldu behar dizudala. Ezingo nuke eraman ni desagertzea, borrokan jarraitzeko prest legokeen beste inor atzean utzi gabe.

Eta ordura arte era lausoan baino kontatu ez zizkidan xehetasunak azaldu zituen.

Ez nion arreta handirik eman. Egia esan, nazioarteko politika-kontuak baino gehiago interesatzen zitzaizkidan gizon haren abenturak. Uste nuen Karolidesen eta gizon horren arteko aferak ez zirela nire egitekoa. Horiek Scudderren kontuak ziren, eta berari utzi nizkion. Horrela, bada, kontatu zizkidan gauza asko ez zitzaizkidan buruan geratu. Gogoratzen dut azaldu zidala Karolides Londresera iritsitakoan hasiko zela arriskuan egoten, eta arriskua goiko mailetatik etorriko zela: inork susmagarritzat hartuko ez zituen goi-mailetatik. Emakume baten izena aipatu zuen: Julia Czecheny, hark egoerarekin zerikusia baitzuen. Ulertu nuen Karolides bizkartzainen babesetik ateratzeko amua izango

zela. Harri Beltz bati buruz hitz egin zidan, baita zizi-zaza mintzo zen gizon bati buruz ere. Horrez gain, beste gizon baten deskribapen zehatza egin zidan: zaharra zen arren, ahots gaztea zuen, eta begiak belatz batek bezala ezkuta zitzakeen. Gizon hori aipatzen zuen bakoitzean, dar-dar egiten zuen Scudderrek. Heriotzaren gainean ere asko hitz egin zidan. Scudderrentzat, lana betetzea hil edo biziko kontua zen, baina bere bizitza ez zitzaion axola.

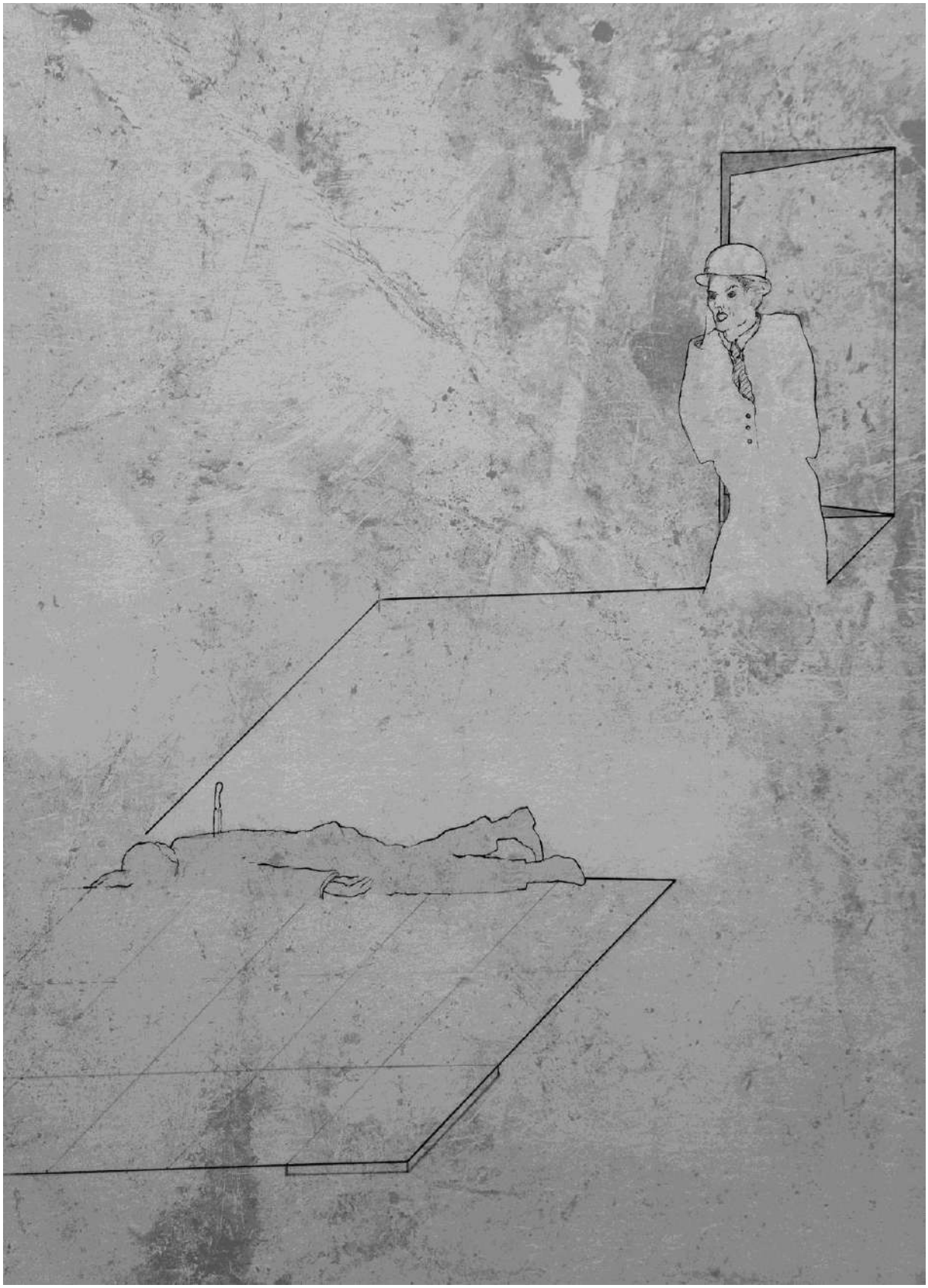
—Nik uste, oso nekatuta gaudenean lokartzearen modukoa dela heriotza, eta, esnatzen garenean, udako egun ederra ikusiko dugu, belar-usaina leihotik sartzen delarik. Blue-Grass eskualdean nengoela, Jainkoari eskerrak ematen nizkion halako goizengatik, eta, ziur aski, hil ondoren ere eskertuko diot.

Hurrengo egunean, askoz alaiago zegoen, eta ordu asko eman zituen Stonewall Jacksonen biografia irakurtzen. Etxetik atera nintzen meatze-ingeniari batekin afaltzera eta negozioei buruz hitz egitera. Hamar eta erdiak aldera etxeratu nintzen, gure xake-jokoa egiteko garaiz oheratu baino lehen.

Gogoratzen dut zigarro bat ahoan nuela ireki nuela egongelako atea. Argiak itzalita zeuden, eta hori arraroa iruditu zitzaidan. Pentsatu nuen beharbada Scudder ohean zegoela dagoeneko.

Etengailua sakatu nuen, baina han ez zegoen inor. Hurrena, urruneneko bazterrean ikusi nuenak zigarroa lurrera botarazi zidan eta izerdi hotzean utzi ninduen.

Nire gonbidatua lurrean etzanda zegoen, ahoz gora eta hankak zabalik. Bihotzean sartuta, labana luzea zeukan; eta gorputza alderik alde igarota, zoruari lotzen zion.



2 - Esneketariak bidaiatzeari ekiten dio

Besaulki batean eseri nintzen, erabat zorabiatuta bainengoen. Horrek bost bat minutu iraun zuen eta, gero, izutu egin nintzen. Ezin nuen niri begira zegoen aurpegi zuri hura jasan; mahai-zapi bat hartu, eta gorpua estali nuen. Gero, armairu batera balantzaka hurbildu nintzen, brandya atera eta zurrutada handi batzuk egin nituen. Heriotza bortitzak ikusiak nituen, nik ere hainbat gizon hil nituen Matabeleko Gerran. Baina pertsona bat bere gelan horrela hiltzea, odol hotzean, hori ezberdina zen. Nire onera itzultzea lortu nuen. Ordulariari begiratu nion, hamar eta erdiak ziren. Susmo batek harrapatu ninduen eta etxea arreta handiz miatu nuen. Ez zegoen inor, ezta inoren aztarnarik ere; baina dardaraka nengoen, eta leiho guztiei morroiloak jarri nizkien, baita ateari katea ere.

Ordurako, pentsatzeko gai nintzen berriro. Gauzak ulertzeko ordubete behar izan nuen gutxi gorabehera. Ez nintzen azkar pentsatzen saiatu: hiltzailea itzuli ezean, pentsatzeko astia izango nuen, goizeko seiak arte edo.

Egoera larrian nengoen, hori nahiko argi zegoen. Scudderren istorioari buruzko zalantzarik banu, gertatu zenak ezabatu zidan. Mahai-zapiaren azpian zegoen froga. Etsaiek aurkitu egin zuten, baita haren isiltasuna modurik eraginkorrenean bermatu ere. Haatik, Scudderrek lau egun igaro zituen nire apartamentuan, eta etsaiek pentsatuko zuten niri sekretuak kontatu zizkidala. Hortaz, hurrengoa ni izango nintzen. Gau horretan bertan izan zitekeen, edo hurrengo egunean, edo bi egun geroago; baina orain iritsia zen nire txanda.

Halako batean, beste zerbaitez konturatu nintzen. Kalera aterako banintz, poliziari deituko banio, edo oheratu eta Paddockek gorpua aurkituko balu, zer kontatuko nieke Scudderren gainean? Paddocki gezurrak esan nizkion eta aferak oso itxura susmagarria zuen. Poliziari egia aitortu eta Scudderrek kontatutako guztia azalduz gero, barre egingo zidaten, besterik ez. Litekeena zen ni atxilotzea, hilketa leporatuta, eta bazeuden ni urkatzeko behar beste zeharkako froga. Ingalaterran, jende gutxik ezagutzen ninduen, eta ez nuen benetako lagunik ni nolakoa nintzen zinpean deklaratzeko. Beharbada, etsai sekretu horien jokoa hori zen. Nahikoa argiak ziren edozein gauza egiteko, eta Ingalaterrako kartzela bat labana bularrean sartzea bezain eraginkorra zen ekainaren hamabosta baino lehen ni gainetik kentzeko.

Gainera, istorio guztia kontatuz gero —eta, mirariz, inork sinetsiko balit—, haien jokoari mesede egingo nioke. Karolides etxean geratuko zen eta horixe nahi zuten haiek. Scudder hilaren aurpegia ikusteak haren planaren jarraitzaile amorratu bihurtu ninduen, nolabait. Scudder zendua zen, baina nigan fidatu zen, eta sentitzen nuen haren lanarekin jarraitu beharra neukala.

Beharbada, bizitza arriskuan zuen gizon batek horrela pentsatzea zentzugabe irudituko zaizue, baina nik horrela ikusten nuen. Pertsona arrunt samarra naiz, ez naiz besteak baino ausartagoa; baina ez dut gustuko gizon zintzo bat porrot egiten ikustea, eta, haren ordez jokoan parte hartzea lortzen banuen, labana luze hori ez zen Scudderren amaiera izango.

Hori guztia pentsatzeko ordubete edo bi behar izan nituen eta, ordurako, erabaki bat hartuta neukan. Nolabait desagertu egin behar nuen eta ezkutuan jarraitu ekainaren bigarren astera arte. Gero, Gobernuko jendearekin harremanetan jartzeko modu bat aurkitu beharko nuen, Scudderrek kontatu zidanaren berri emateko. Amorru ematen zidan Scudderrek niri gehiago kontatu ez izanak, baita nik arreta handiagorik eman ez izanak ere. Datu sinpleenak baino ez nekizkien eta litekeena zen, nahiz eta beste arrisku guztietatik bizirik atera, azkenean nire istorioa inork ez sinestea. Arrisku hori ere onartu behar nuen eta Gobernukoei nire istorioa baieztatuko zien zerbait gertatuko zelako itxaropenari eutsi nion. Hurrengo hiru asteetan bizirik jarraitzea, hori nuen aurreneko lana. Maiatzaren hogeita laua zen eta, horrenbestez, hogei egunez ezkutatu beharko nuen, boteredunengana hurbiltzera ausartu baino lehen. Uste nuen bi jende-mota ibiliko zirela nire bila: Scudderren etsaiak, ni akabatzeko, eta polizia, Scudderren heriotzagatik atxilotzeko. Ehiza nahasia izango zen eta, nahiz eta bitxia izan, ideia horrek lasaitzen ninduen. Hainbeste denbora ezer egin gabe igaro ondoren, ia edozein ekintza hartzen nuen ontzat. Gorpuaren ondoan eserita, bakarrik, eta niri zer gertatuko zain nengoela, zizare zapaldu bat baino ez nintzen. Baina, bizitza nire adimenaren mende baldin bazegoen, prest nengoen hori aldarte baikorrez onartzeko.

Une hartan bururatu zitzaidan: Scudderrek paper batzuk izango zituela beharbada, nik afera hobeto ulertu ahal izateko. Mahai-zapia kendu nion eta sakelak miatu nizkion. Ordurako gorpuak ez zidan beldurrik sortzen. Bat-batean eraildako gizona zen arren, oso itxura lasaia zuen. Bularraldeko sakelan ez zegoen ezer, eta txalekoan, txanpon batzuk eta zigarreta-euskarria baino ez. Praketan, labana txiki bat zuen sakeletako batean, eta txanpon batzuk, berriz, bestean. Jakaren alboko sakelan, krokodilo-larruz eginiko zigarreta-kutxa. Ordea, ez nuen gauzak idazteko zerabilen liburuxka beltza aurkitu. Hiltzaileak eraman zuen, zalantzarik gabe.

Begirada altxatu nuenean, tiradera batzuk idazmahaitik aterata zeudela ikusi nuen. Scudderrek ez zituen horrela utziko, munduko gizakirik txukunena zen eta. Argi zegoen norbait zerbaiten bila ibilia zela; agian, liburuxkaren bila.

Apartamentuan zehar ibili nintzen eta dena hankaz gora jarrita zegoela konturatu nintzen: liburuen barrualdeak, tiraderak, armairuak, kutxak, baita armairu barruko arroparen sakelak eta jangelan zegoen ontzitegia ere. Baina

liburuxkaren aztarnarik ez. Ziur asko, etsaiek hartu zuten; baina ez zuten Scudderren gorpuan aurkitu.
Segidan, atlas bat atera nuen eta Uharte Britainiarren mapa handi bati begiratu nion. Eskualde basati batera joatea bururatu zitzaidan. Han, Veldeko zelaietan ikasi nuena erabilgarri izango zitzaidan; bestela, hiri batean harrapatuta dagoen arratoia izango nintzen. Eskozia aukerarik onena iruditu zitzaidan nire familia eskoziarra zelako eta edonon eskoziar arruntzat hartuko nindutelako. Bururatu zitzaidan turista alemaniar gisa mozorrotzea, aitak bazkide alemaniarrak eduki baitzituen eta, txikitan, ondo samar ikasi bainuen alemana. Horrez gain, hiru urte eman nituen Damaralanden kobre bila. Baina eskoziarra izatea ez zen horren deigarria izango, eta poliziak niri buruz zekienarekin zerikusi txikiagoa zuen. Erabaki nuen Gallowayra joatea zela onena. Eskoziako eremu basatien artean hura zen hurbilena, ondorioztatu nuenez, eta, mapa ikusita, jende asko ere ez zen bizi.
“Bradshaw” gidan ordutegia kontsultatu ondoren, ikusi nuen St Pancras geltokitik 7:10ean tren bat ateratzen zela, eta tren hori hartuta, Gallowayko edozein geltokitan egon nintekeela arratsalde amaierarako. Hori ondo zegoen, baina hori baino garrantzitsuagoa zen St Pancrasera nola iritsi asmatzea, Scudderren lagunak eraikinaren kanpoaldean egongo zirela ziur samar nengoen eta. Horrek kezkatu ninduen une batez. Baina bat-batean inspirazioa etorri zitzaidan eta, horrela, oheratu egin nintzen; bi ordu hala moduz lo egitea lortu nuen.
Lauretan jaiki eta logelako leiho-ateak ireki nituen. Udaldiko goiz eder baten argi fina hasia zen zabaltzen eta txolarreak txorrotxioka ari ziren. Zalantza izugarri batek hartu ninduen, memelo hutsa sentitu nintzen: zergatik ez nuen dena bertan behera uzten eta ez nintzen fidatzen polizia britainiarrak nire kasua behar bezala aztertuko zuela. Hala eta guztiz ere, egoera berrikusi ondoren, ez nuen aurreko gauean hartutako erabakiaren aurkako argudiorik aurkitu eta, horrenbestez, aldarte garratz batekin, planarekin jarraitzea erabaki nuen. Ez nengoen oso izututa, baina, nolabait esateko, arazoak erakartzeko ere ez nuen gogorik.
Tweedezko traje zahar bat jantzi nuen, bota sendo batzuk, zoletan iltzeak zituztenak, eta flanelazko alkandora lepokoduna. Sakelan beste alkandora bat sartu nuen, oihalezko txano bat, musuzapi batzuk eta hortzetako eskuila bat. Bi egun lehenago banketxetik urre-kantitate handia atera nuen, apika Scudderrek dirua beharko zuelako. Horrela, berrogeita hamar libra hartu nituen, eta Rhodesiatik ekarri nuen gerriko batean sartu. Ez nuen hori baino gehiago behar. Gero, bainatu eta bibotea moztu nuen. Luzea zen eta motza utzi nuen.
Ondoren, hurrengo pausoa. Paddock zazpi eta erdietan puntual iritsi ohi zen, eta atea giltza batekin irekitzen zuen. Banekien —esperientzia txar baten

ondorioz— zazpiak hogei gutxi aldera esneketaria iristen zela, zarata handia ateratzen zuen ontziekin eta atearen ondoan uzten zidan botila. Batzuetan, goiz altxatu eta paseo bat ematera nindoanean, esneketariarekin topo egiten nuen. Gaztea zen, nire garaierakoa, gutxi gorabehera, bibote txikia zuen eta mantal zuria janzten zuen. Nire itxaropen guztia harengan jarrita zegoen.

Sartu nintzen egongela ilunean. Goizeko argi-izpiak leiho-ateetatik sartzen ari ziren pixkanaka-pixkanaka. Armairutik atera nituen whiskia, soda eta galleta batzuk eta gosaria hartu nuen. Ordurako, ia seiak ziren. Pipa sakelan sartu eta tabako-poltsa bete nuen sutondoan zegoen ontzi batetik.

Hatzak tabakoan sartu ahala, gauza gogor batekin egin nuen topo: Scudderren liburuxka beltza atera nuen…

Seinale ona iruditu zitzaidan. Gorpua estaltzen zuen mahai-zapia baztertu nuen eta hildakoaren aurpegi duin baketsuak harritu ninduen.

—Agur, lagun —esan nion—. Ahal dudana egingo dut zure partez. Zortea opa iezadazu, zauden lekuan zaudela.

Gero, atarira joan nintzen eta esneketariaren zain geratu nintzen han. Hori izan zen okerrena, etxetik lehenbailehen ateratzeko irrikaz nengoen eta. Sei eta erdiak, zazpiak hogei gutxi… ez zen iristen, ordea. Urteko egun guztien artean, kaiku hark egun hura aukeratu behar berandu iristeko!

Zazpiak hamalau gutxitan ontzien zarata entzun nuen kanpoan. Atea ireki nuen, eta han zegoen gizona, nire ontziak ateratzen eta hortz artean txistu egiten. Ezustekoa jaso zuen ni ikusi ninduenean.

—Sartu pixka batean —esan nion—. Zurekin hitz egin nahi dut.

Eta jangelara eraman nuen.

—Nik uste joko-gizona ere pixka bat bazarela zu —xuxurlatu nion—, eta mesede bat eskatu nahi dizut. Txanoa eta mantala hamar minutuz niri utzi, mesedez, eta hona hemen libra bat eragozpenen truke.

Urrea ikustean begiak ireki zituen eta irribarre zabala atera zitzaion.

—Nondik nora, ba? —galdetu zidan.

—Apustua egin dut —esan nion—. Ez dut dena azaltzeko astirik, baina apustua irabazteko, esneketaria izan behar dut hamar minutuz. Zuk egin behar duzun guztia da ni itzuli arte hemen geratzea, besterik ez. Beranduxko joaten bazara, ez da inor kexatuko, eta libra hau zurea izango da.

—Ederki! Ez naiz ni izango apustu bat zapuztuko duen gizona. Hartu arropa, jauna.

Azkar jantzi nituen txano urdin laua eta mantal zuria, ontziak hartu eta txistuka jaisten hasi nintzen eskailerak. Atezainak isiltzeko agindu zidan. Antza, nire mozorroak bere betebeharra ondo betetzen zuen.

Hasieran uste nuen kalean ez zebilela inor. Orduan, ehun metrora, polizia bat ikusi nuen eta, haren parean, eskale bat zebilen arrastaka. Bihozkada batek

bultzatu ninduen begirada ondoko etxera zuzentzera, eta lehenengo solairuan aurpegi bat ikusi nuen. Eskalea azpitik igaro zenean, gora begiratu zuen, eta iruditu zitzaidan seinale bat egin ziotela elkarri.

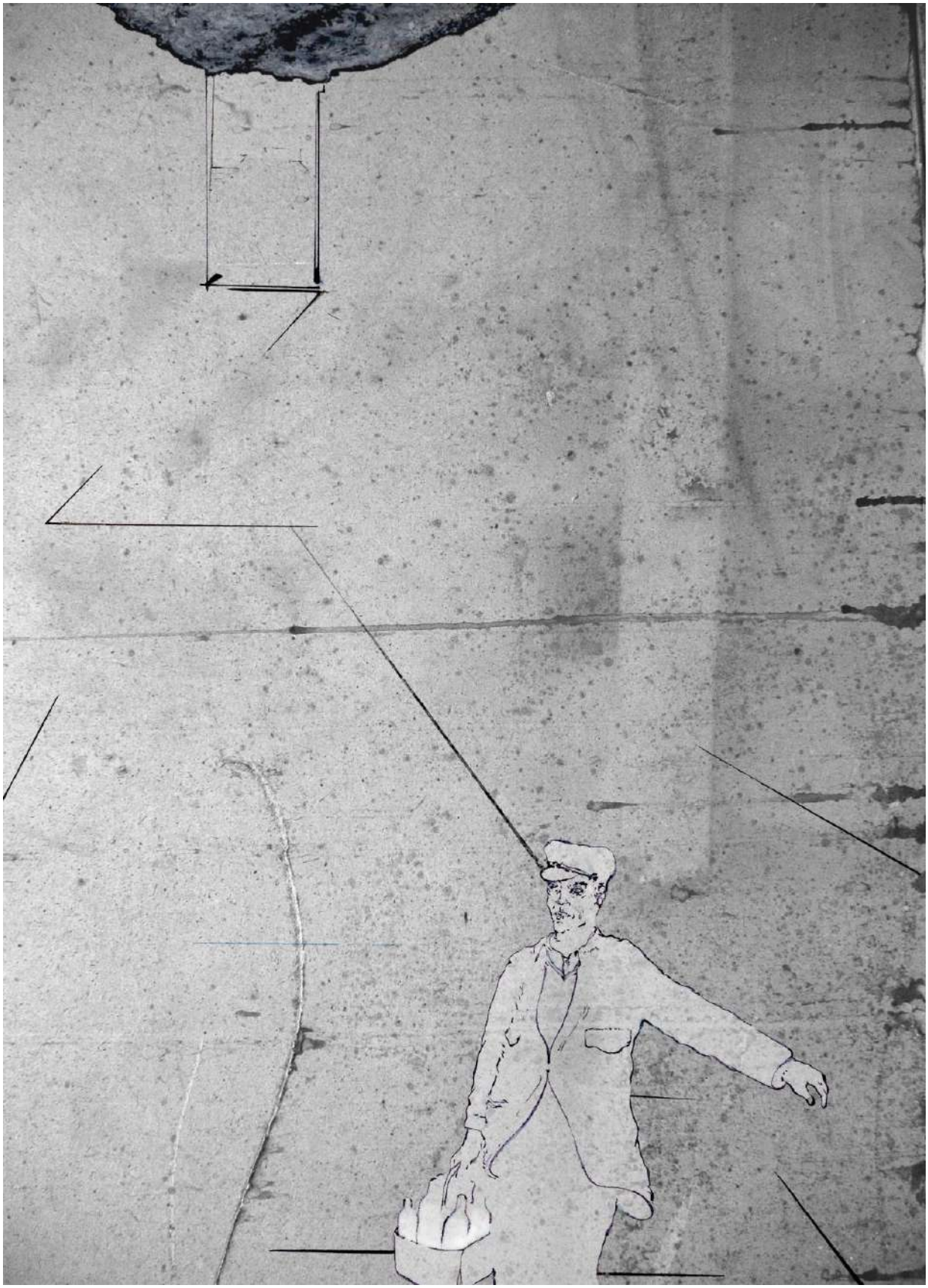
Kalea gurutzatu nuen, alai, txistuka eta esneketariaren ibilera baikorra imitatuz. Lehenengo kalean sartu, ezkerretara biratu eta orube baten ondotik igaro nintzen. Ez zegoen inor kale txiki hartan eta, beraz, esne-ontziak han utzi nituen, txanoa orube hartara bota nuen eta mantala ere bai. Nire oihalezko txanoa dagoeneko jantzia neraman postari bat sartu zenean kalean. Agurtu nuen eta susmorik gabe erantzun zidan. Une horretan, gertu zegoen eliza baten erlojuak zazpiak jo zituen.

Ezin nuen segundo bat ere galdu. Euston kalera iritsi bezain laster, korrika hasi nintzen. Euston geltokiaren erlojuaren arabera, zazpiak eta bost ziren. St Pancras geltokian ez nuen txartela erosteko astirik eta, gainera, artean ez nuen helmuga erabakita. Maletazain batek nasa zein zen adierazi zidan eta, nasara iritsi nintzenean, trena abian zela ikusi nuen. Geltokiko bi ofizialek bidea oztopatu zidaten, baina saihestu eta azken bagoira igo nintzen.

Hiru minutu geroago, Londres iparraldeko tuneletan bizkor eta zaratatsu gindoazela, guardia haserre batek hitz egin zidan. Newton-Stewarterako txartel bat saldu zidan —herri horren izena etorri zitzaidan bat-batean gogora—, eta lehen klaseko konpartimentu hartatik hirugarren klaseko batera eraman ninduen. Marinel bat eta ume batekin zihoan emakume gizen bat zeuden han. Guardia marmarka aldendu zen eta, bekokia lehortu ondoren, nire ahoskera eskoziarrik biziena erabiliz bidaia-lagunei esan nien noski ez zela lantegi ederra gaur egun trenak hartzea. Erabat sartuta nengoen neure paperean.

—Esango nuke nik ere, zaindari horren kopeta! —esan zuen emakumeak haserre—. Eskoziar bat behar zen haren lekua zein den gogorarazteko. Kexatu da haurrak txartelik ez duelako, abuztuan egingo ditu eta bi urte!. eta gizon honek tu egitea ere gaizki iruditu ez zaio ba.

Marinelak baieztatu egin zuen petral, eta, horrela, bizitza berriari ekin nion autoritateen aurkako gaitzespen-giroan. Gogora etorri zitzaidan astebete lehenago mundua aspergarria iruditzen zitzaidala.



3 - Tabernari literarioaren abentura

Iparralderako bidaia gauza serioa izan zen.
Maiatzeko eguraldia ederra zen, elorri zuria loretan zegoen landare hesi guztietan, eta ez nuen ulertzen zergatik, lehenago libre nintzenean, Londresen geratu nintzen mendialde eder hauetara atera ordez. Ez nintzen ausartzen kafetegi-bagoira joaten; baina Leedsen saski bat bazkari erosi eta emakume gizenarekin partekatu nuen. Goizeko egunkariak ere eskuratu nituen. Hainbat gairen gaineko albisteak zeuden: zaldi-lasterketak; cricket denboraldiaren hasiera; eta paragrafo batzuek zioten Balkanetan gauzak lasaitzen ari zirela; eta gerraontzi-eskuadra britainiar bat Kielera zihoala.
Albisteak irakurri ondoren, Scudderren liburuxka beltza atera, eta aztertu egin nuen. Oharrez beteta zegoen, zifraz batez ere, baina izen batzuk ere bazeuden. Esaterako, “Hofgaard”, “Luneville” eta “Avocado” hitzak askotan aurkitu nituen, eta, batez ere, “Pavia”.
Banekien Scudderrek ez zuela inoiz ezer egiten arrazoirik gabe eta ziur samar nengoen liburuxka kodetuta zegoela. Gai hori betidanik interesatu zait, eta, Boerren Gerran espioi ofizial nintzela, Delagoa badian, horretan aritu nintzen denboraldi batez. Xake-jokoan eta buru-hausgarrietan trebea naiz eta uste nuen kodeak asmatzen ere trebea nintzela. Kode horrek zenbakizkoa zirudien eta zifra-multzo bakoitza alfabetoko hizki bati zegokion. Buru pixka bat duen edonork kode horien gakoa aurkituko luke, ordubetez edo biz jorratu ostean. Dena den, ez nuen uste Scudderrek horren kode errazik erabiliko zukeenik. Horregatik, hitzetan kontzentratu nintzen. Zenbakizko kode on samarra egin daiteke, hizkien segida ematen digun hitz-gakoa lortuz gero.
Orduak eman nituen horretan, baina ezin izan nuen hitz baliagarririk asmatu. Gero, loak hartu ninduen eta Dumfriesen esnatu nintzen justu garaiz trenetik azkar atera eta Galloway gurutzatzen zuen tren motelean garaiz sartzeko. Nasako gizon baten itxura ez zitzaidan batere gustatu, baina ez zidan ezta begiratu ere egin eta, neure burua makina automatiko bateko ispiluan ikusi nuenean, ez nintzen harritu. Aurpegi beltzaranarekin, tweedezko arropa zaharra jantzita eta ibilera erdi-makurrarekin, hirugarren klaseko bagoiak betetzen zituzten baserritarren itxura peto-petoa nuen.
Baserritar haietako dozena-erdiren batekin ekin nion bidaiari, tabako merkez eta buztinezko pipaz inguratuta. Asteroko azokatik zetozen eta salneurrien gainean baino ez zuten hitz egiten. Ardien erditzeei buruzko berriak entzun nituen, Cairne, Deuche eta beste dozena bat ibar txikiri zegozkienak. Askok bapo bazkaldu zuten, whiski-usain handia zerien eta ez zidaten kasu handirik egin. Pixkanaka eta burrunbaka haran txikiz eta basoz osatutako eskualde bat

gurutzatu genuen. Gero, zuhaitzik gabeko landa zabalean sartu ginen; aintzira txiki distiratsuz zipriztinduta zegoen. Iparraldera begiratuta, mendi handi urdinak ikusten ziren.
Bostak aldera, bagoia hustu zen, eta, espero nuen moduan, bakarrik geratu nintzen. Hurrengo geltokian jaitsi nintzen, lokazti baten erdi-erdian. Ez nion herrixkaren izenari erreparatu. Karrooko geltoki txiki eta ahaztuak ekarri zizkidan gogora. Geltokiko arduradun zaharra baratzean ari zen aitzurrean. Pala sorbalda gainean hartu, treneraino motel gerturatu, fardel bat hartu eta patatetara itzuli zen. Hamar urteko ume batek nire txartela hartu zuen eta landa marroia sigi-saga gurutzatzen zuen errepide zurira atera nintzen.
Udaberriko iluntze izugarri ederra zen eta muino guztiak amatista landuak bezain argi ikusten ziren. Airean, lokaztien usain bitxi sustraitsua sumatzen zen, baina giroa ozeanoaren erdialdekoa bezain arina zen, eta horrek oso eragin berezia zuen nire aldartean. Izan ere, alai eta lasai sentitzen nintzen. Polizia atzetik zeukan hogeita hamazazpi urteko gizona baino errazago izan nintekeen udalekuetara zihoan mutikoa. Veld garaietan izotz zuriz estalitako goizetan ibilbide luze bat egitera nindoanean bezala sentitzen nintzen. Beharbada ez didazue sinetsiko, baina txistuka hasi nintzen errepide horretan aurrera nenbilela. Ez neukan kanpatzeko edo gelditzeko asmorik, usain atsegineko landa muinodun eta zoriontsu hartan aurrera joan besterik ez nuen nahi. Zenbat eta kilometro gehiago egin, orduan eta hobeto sentitzen nintzen.
Errepide ondoan zegoen hurritz bati adar bat moztu eta makila bat egin nuen. Geroxeago, errepidetik atera eta erreka arin baten pareko bide batean sartu nintzen. Iruditzen zitzaidan edozein jazarpenetatik oso urrun nengoela eta gaua horrekin goza nezakeela. Aspaldi jan gabe nengoen, eta oso gose nintzen, bazter batean, ur-jauzi baten ondoan zegoen artzain baten etxolara iritsi nintzelarik. Aurpegi beltzaraneko emakume bat zegoen atari ondoan eta landako jendearen portaera lotsati atseginaz agurtu ninduen. Gaua han pasatzerik al nuen galdetu nionean, ganbarako ohea erabil nezakeela erantzun zidan eta handik oso gutxira afari handi bat eskaini zidan: urdaiazpikoa, arrautzak, opilak eta esne kondentsatu lodia.
Iluntzean, senarra itzuli zen menditik. Erraldoia zen eta oso argala, haren oinkada bat gizaki arrunton hiru oinkada adinakoa zen. Ez zidaten ezer galdetu, mendialdeko herri horietan jaiotako biztanle guztien jokabide zuzena baitzuten. Hala ere, argi zegoen tratularitzat hartu nindutela eta ahalegindu nintzen burutazio hori indartzen. Azienden gainean asko hitz egin nuen: horri buruz gutxi baitzekien nire anfitrioiak eta Gallowayko azokari buruzko gauza asko ikasi nituen. Memorian gorde nituen, beharbada aurrerago erabiltzeko. Hamarrak helduta, aulkian eserita lo geratzen ari nintzen eta ganbarako oheak oso gizon

nekatua hartu zuen. Ez nuen goizeko bostak arte batere begirik ireki, ordu hartan hasten baitzen etxalde txiki hura martxan.
Edozein ordainketa jasotzeari uko egin zioten eta seietarako, gosalduta eta oinkada luzez, hegoalderako bideari ekin nion berriro. Nire ideia trenbidera itzultzea zen, aurreko egunean baino geltoki bat edo bi urrunago jaitsiko nintzen, eta, hurrengo egunean, atzera egingo nuen. Uste nuen horixe zela planik ziurrena. Seguru asko, poliziak Londresetik urruntzen ari nintzela pentsatuko zuen, mendebaldeko porturen baterantz. Abantaila txiki bat nuelakoan nengoen. Ziurrenik, ordu batzuk behar izango zituzten hilketaren errua niri egozteko, eta beste hainbat, St Pancras geltokian trena hartu zuen gizona identifikatzeko.
Eguraldia aurreko egunaren berdina zen: udaberrikoa, garbia, alaia. Ezin nuen neure burua kezkatuta imajinatu. Izan ere, aurreko lau hilabeteetan baino aldarte hobea nuen. Landako gailur luze baterako bidea hartu nuen, muino garai bat —artzainak Cairnsmore of Fleet deitu zuena— alde batera utzita. Habiak egiten ari ziren txirritxoak eta kurlintak txilioka, eta, erreken ondoko larre berdeetan, bildotsak zebiltzan. Joaneko hilabeteen mugimendu-falta hezurretatik joaten ari zitzaidan eta lau urteko mutiko baten gisa nenbilen. Segidan, erreka txiki batera iritsi nintzen, eta, kilometro bat eta erdi aurrerago, txilarren artetik gora, tren baten kea ikusi nuen.
Iritsi nintzenean, ikusi nuen geltokia nire planetarako ezin hobea zela. Mortuak inguratzen zuen, eta ez zuen askorako espazioa uzten: errei bakarra, bazterbidea, itxarongela, bulegoa, geltokiko arduradunaren etxe txikia eta lorategi oso txiki bat, andere-mahatsekin eta krabelinekin. Bazirudien ez zegoela hara eramaten zuen inongo errepiderik, eta, bakardadea gehiago areagotzeko, aintzira baten olatuek granito grisezko hondartza laztantzen zuten kilometro-erdira. Txilar trinkoen artean itxaron nuen, zeruertzean ekialdera zihoan tren baten kea ikusi arte. Orduan, txartel-bulego txikira hurbildu eta Dumfrieserako txartel bat erosi nuen.
Bagoiko bidaiari bakarrak artzain zahar bat eta haren txakurra ziren. Txakurrak begi hotzak zituen eta ez nintzen harekin fidatzen. Gizona lotan zegoen eta bere ondoko kuxinen gainean ikusi nuen goiz hartako Scotsman egunkaria. Grinatsu heldu nion, informazio baliagarria emango zidala uste bainuen.
Portland Placeko Hilketaren —horrela deitzen zioten— gaineko bi zutabe zeuden. Paddock zerbitzariak poliziari deitu zion, eta horiek esneketaria atxilotu zuten. Gizagaixoa: libra hura garesti atera zitzaion. Baina niretzat merkea izan zen. Antza denez, poliziak ia egun osoa igaro zuen horretan. Azken albisteetan istorioaren jarraipena aurkitu nuen. Esneketaria askatu zutela irakurri nuen eta, poliziaren ustez, benetako hiltzaileak —ez zuen haren identitatea azaleratu nahi— Londresetik iparraldera trenez egin zuen ihes. Niri buruzko ohar bat ere

bazegoen, pisuko jabea nintzelako. Pentsatu nuen ohar hori poliziak jarri zuela, susmagarria ez nintzela sinetsarazteko saiakera traketsa.
Egunkarian ez zegoen albiste interesgarri gehiagorik, ez nazioarteko politikaren gainean, ez Karolidesen gainean, ezta Scudder kezkatzen zuten gaien gainean ere. Utzi egin nuen, eta orduan jabetu nintzen hurbiltzen ari ginela aurreko egunean trenetik atera nintzen geltokira. Patatak lantzen zituen geltokiko arduradunak zeregin txiki bat zuen eskuartean. Mendebalderako trenaren zain zegoen, guri aurrera egiten uzteko. Tren hartatik hiru gizon jaitsi ziren, arduradunari galdera batzuk egitera. Uste izan nuen bertako polizia zela, Scotland Yardek zirikatuta, eta geltoki txiki-txiki horretaraino nire arrastoaren bila etorri zirela. Atzerantz eseri nintzen, itzalak babestuta, eta kontu handiz begiratu nien. Batek liburuxka bat zuen eta oharrak egiten ari zen. Antza denez, patatazale zaharra haserre zegoen, baina nire txartela hartu zuen mutilak ez zirudien kezkaturik eta gogoz hitz egiten ari zen. Guztiak landari begira zeuden, errepide zuriaren norabidean. Espero nuen nire arrastoari harantz jarraitzea.
Geltokitik urrundu ahala, bagoi-kidea esnatu zen. Begirada galdu batekin so egin zidan, zakurrari ostiko bortitza eman zion, eta non zegoen galdetu zidan. Argi zegoen oso mozkortuta zegoela.
—Hauxe duk abstemio izatearen ondorioa —esan zuen minduta eta damututa.
Esan nion ez nuela hain zuzen abstemio amorratutzat jo.
—Ene!, abstemio handia egina nagok ba —erantzun zidan oldarkor—. San Martin egunean erabakia hartu, eta geroztik ez diat whiski-tantarik ere probatu. Ezta Urtezaharretan ere, eta tentazioa handia zela ez diat ukatuko.
Orpoak aulki gainean jarri zituen eta buru narrasa kuxinetan murgildu zuen.
—Ezer edan gabe, hola nebilek —kexatu zen—. Burua infernua baino beroago diat, eta begiak egutegian, igandea noiz iritsiko.
—Zer hartu duk? —galdetu nion.
—Brandy izeneko edari bat. Abstemioa naizenez, ez nioan whiskiari usainik ere hartu nahi, baina egun osoan brandy horri hurrupaka jardun diat; hamabost egun hauetan ez nauk ederki ibiliko, ez diat uste.
Ahotsa totelka itzali zitzaion eta gogoz hartu zuen loak berriro.
Nire plana urrunagoko geltoki batean ateratzea zen, baina, bat-batean, trenak hori baino aukera hobea eman zidan. Pendiz baten ertzean gelditu zen, errekasto marroi baten ondoan. Burua atera, eta ikusi nuen bagoi guztietako leihoak itxita zeudela eta inguruetan ez zegoela inor. Beraz, atea ireki nuen eta bide ertzeko hurritzetara salto egin nuen.
Infernuko txakur hori izan ez balitz, dena ondo aterako zen. Jabearen gauzekin alde egiten ari nintzelakoan, zaunka egiten hasi zen eta ia-ia praketatik heldu zidan. Horrekin artzaina esnatu zen eta, neure buruaz beste egin nahi nuelakoan, garrasika hasi zen. Sasien artean katamarka joan nintzen, errekaren

ertzeraino iritsi eta, zuhaixkekin babestuta, ehun bat metroz urrundu nintzen. Hor ezkutatuta, atzera begiratu eta han ikusi nituen guardia eta hainbat bidaiari bagoiko ate irekitik nire aldera begira zeudela. Ez nuen ihesaldi nabarmenagoa egingo turuta joz eta haize-instrumentuzko orkestra batekin atera izan banintz.
Eskerrak artzain mozkortuak arreta desbideratzeko modua eman zuen. Gizona eta txakurra —soka batez gerritik helduta— bagoitik behera erori ziren bat-batean, eta pendizean behera joan ziren biraka tarte batez. Erreskatean, txakurrak norbaiti hozka egin zion, eta oso hitz gordinak entzun ziren. Pixkanaka-pixkanaka nitaz ahaztu ziren, eta, laurehun bat metro gehiago katamarka ibili ondoren, atzera begiratu nuen berriro. Trena martxan zegoen, eta lubaki artean desagertzen ari zen.
Zirkulu-erdi itxurako mortu batean nengoen, erreka marroia erradio gisa, eta muino garaiak iparraldeko zirkunferentzia osatzen. Ez zegoen gizakien seinalerik, ezta soinurik ere: uraren mugimendua eta kurlinten txilio etengabea besterik ez zen entzuten. Hala ere, nahiz eta bitxia iruditu, lehenengo aldiz nintzen harrapatzaileen beldur. Ez nintzen poliziaz gogoratzen, beste jende horretaz baizik, Scudderren sekretua banekiela zekiten jendeaz, ezin baininduten bizirik utzi. Ziur nengoen legegizon britainiarrek ezagutzen ez zituzten kemenaz eta arretaz ibiliko zirela nire atzetik eta, harrapatuz gero, ez luketela gupidarik izango.
Atzera begiratu nuen, baina ez zegoen ezer inguruetan. Eguzkiak bideko metaletan eta errekako harri bustietan egiten zuen distira, eta, ziurrenik, ez zegoen munduan ikuspegi hori baino baketsuagorik. Hala ere, korrika hasi nintzen. Lokaztiko erreka txikietan makurtuta, izerdiak itsutu ninduen arte egin nuen korrika. Ez nuen sentsazio hori burutik kendu gailurreraino iritsi nintzen arte, eta han, erreka marroiaren iturburuari begira, lur gainean etzan nintzen, arnasestuka.
Talai hartatik, landa osoa ikusten nuen burdinbideraino eta are hegoalderago —txilarren ordez larreek betetako eremuraino—. Nire ikusmena belatz batena bezain ona da, baina inguru osoan ez nuen ezer ikusten. Orduan, gailurretik ekialdera begiratu eta beste paisaia bat ikusi nuen: sakonera txikiko bailara berdeak, izei basoez gainezka, eta hauts-lerro finak ostertzean, errepideen salatari. Azkenik, maiatzeko zeru urdinari begiratu nion eta beste gauza bat ikusi nuen han, zainetako odola azkarrago mugiarazi zidana…
Hegoaldean, zeruertzean, hegazkin bat ari zen airean igotzen. Norbaitek hala esan izan balit bezala, ziur nengoen hegazkin hura nire bila zetorrela, eta hegazkina ez zen poliziarena izango. Ordu batez edo biz txilar arteko zulo batetik begiratu nion. Muinoaren gailurretik gertu egin zuen hegan, eta ni nengoen bailara gainean biribil estuak egiten zituen. Orduan, antza, iritziz aldatu zen: gorago igo eta iparralderantz jo zuen.

Ez nuen aire-espioitza hori gustuko eta pentsatzen hasi nintzen babeslekutzat aukeratua nuen eremua ez zela hain egokia. Etsaiak zeruan bazebiltzan, txilarrez estalitako muino horiek ezin zidaten babesik eman eta, hortaz, beste babes mota baten bila joan behar nuen. Gailurretik harago zegoen paisaia berdea egokiago iruditu zitzaidan: han basoak eta harrizko etxeak zeuden.
Iluntzeko seiak aldera, landatik atera, eta errepide zuri batera iritsi nintzen. Errepidea erreka apal baten haranean gora zihoan. Aurrera jo ahala, larreen ordez sasiak agertu ziren, bailara zabaldi bihurtu zen eta, aurreraxeago, mendate-itxurako leku batera iritsi nintzen. Etxe bakar bat ikusi nuen han, tximiniatik kea zeriola. Errepideak zubi bat gurutzatzen zuen eta gizon gazte bat zegoen han, karelaren kontra jarrita.
Buztinezko pipa luze bat ari zen erretzen, eta urari begira zegoen betaurrekoen atzetik. Ezkerreko eskuan, liburu txiki bat zeukan, hatz bat orrialdea markatzen. Motel errepikatu zuen:

«Grifo batek, lur basatietan zehar,
hegaka, muino eta landa gainean,
arimaspoak jazartzen dituenean bezala»

Galtzada-harrietan nire pausoen hotsa entzun bezain laster, bat-batean biratu zen, eta haren aurpegi beltzarana, atsegina eta gaztea, ikusi nuen.
—Arratsalde on —esan zidan seriotasunez—. Gau giro ederra oinez ibiltzeko.
Haizeak ikatz-ke eta haragi errearen usaina ekarri zidan etxe barrutik.
—Leku hau ostatua al da? —galdetu nion.
—Zure esanetara —erantzun zidan adeitsu—. Ni nauzu ostalaria, jauna, eta espero dut gau bat igaroko duzula gurean. Izan ere, egia esatearren, aste honetan ez dut konpainiarik izan.
Zubiaren karelaren gainera igo nintzen eta pipa bete nuen. Gaztea aliatutzat hartzen hasi nintzen.
—Ostalaria izateko gaztea zara —esan nion.
—Urtebete pasa da aita zendu zela eta negozioa utzi zidala. Amonarekin bizi naiz hor. Gizon gazte batentzat lanbide lasaiegia da, ez da nik nahi nuena.
—Zer egin nahi zenuke?
Gorritu egin zen.
—Liburuak idatzi nahi ditut —aitortu zidan.
—Eta hori egiteko hau baino aukera hoberik espero al duzu? —ihardetsi nion ozen—. Askotan pentsatu izan dut ostalariek izan behar dutela munduko kontalaririk onenak.
—Orain ez —esan zidan grinatsu—. Beharbada antzina, erromesak, trobadoreak, bidelapurrak eta diligentziak errepidean atzera eta aurrera

zebiltzala. Baina orain, ez. Autoan datoz bazkaltzera, emakume lodiz betetako autoetan. Udaberrian, arrantzale bat edo bi agertzen dira, eta, abuztuan, ehiztariak. Baina ez beste inor. Eta horietatik ez dago gauza handirik ateratzerik. Bizitza ikusi nahi dut, munduan zehar bidaiatu, eta, Kiplingen eta Conraden gisako istorioak idatzi. Baina, orain arte, Chamber's Journalen poema batzuk argitaratzea izan da nire lorpenik handiena.

Ostatura begiratu nuen, ilunabarrean urre-kolorez jantzia muino marroien aurrean.

—Mundua ikusi dut pixka bat, eta ez nuke halako aterpe bat horren erraz gutxietsiko. Edo zer uste duzu, abenturak tropikoetan edo jaka gorriz janzten den jendearen artean baizik ez dela bizitzen ahal? Beharbada une honetan bertan zaude abentura batean murgilduta.

—Hori da Kiplingek esaten duena —erantzun zidan, begiak gero eta distiratsuago, eta «9:15eko trenak abenturak ekartzen dizkigu» olerkiko lerro batzuk errezitatu zituen.

—Hona hemen bada benetako istorio bat zuretzat —esan nion—, eta hilabete barru eleberri bat idatzi ahal izango duzu horrekin.

Zubi gainean eserita, maiatzeko iluntze goxo hartan, istorio ederra kontatu nion. Funtsean, gainera, egiazkoa zen, nahiz eta xehetasun txiki batzuk aldatu. Kontatu nion Kimberleyko meatzaritza-handiki bat nintzela, diamante-erosketa debekatuekin arazoak izan zituena. Gaizkile talde batek jazarri ninduen, nire lagunik onena hil zuten, eta orain nire bila zebiltzan.

Ez nuke nik esan behar, baina istorioa ondo kontatu nion. Ihesaldi bat imajinatu nuen Kalahari basamortuan zehar alemaniarren Afrikaraino: egarria pizten zuten egun beroek, belus urdinezko gau ederrek.

—Abenturak nahi dituzu —esan nion, garrasika ia—. Ondo, bada, hementxe dituzu. Deabru horiek nire atzetik eta polizia haien ondotik. Nire asmoa lasterketa hau irabaztea da.

—Jainkoarren! —xuxurlatu zuen, arnasa azkar hartu zuen harrituta—. Rider Haggardek edo Conan Doylek idatzi duela ematen du.

—Sinesten didazu? —esan nion esker oneko.

—Jakina —eta eskua eskaini zidan—. Ohikoa ez den guztia sinesten dut. Gauza arruntez izan behar dugu mesfidati, besterik ez.

Oso gaztea zen, baina hura zen behar nuen gizona.

—Uste dut momentuz galdu ditudala, baina ezkutatu behar dut egun pare batez. Lagunduko didazu?

Ukondotik gogoz heldu zidan, eta etxerantz eraman ninduen.

—Hemen goxo-goxo egongo zara. Eta inork ez du ezer esango. Hori, nire esku. Zure abenturei buruz gehiago kontatuko didazu, ezta?

Ostatuaren atetik sartzerakoan, motor baten burrunba entzun nuen urrunean, eta hantxe ikusi nuen, mendebaldean ilunduz zihoan zeruan aurrera, hegazkinaren silueta.

Etxearen atzealdean zegoen gela bat eman zidan —zabaldira begira zegoena—, eta gazteak liburutegia erabiltzen ere utzi zidan. Haren autore kuttunen edizio merkeez beteta zegoen. Ez nuen egundo amona ikusi eta ohetik ez zela altxatzen ondorioztatu nuen. Margit izeneko emakume adineko batek janaria ekarri zidan; ostalariak ez ninduen bakean utzi. Pixka batez bakarrik egon nahi nuenez, zeregin bat asmatu nuen berak egin zezan. Motozikleta bat zuen, eta hurrengo goizean egunkari bila bidali nuen. Normalean postarekin batera iristen zen, arratsaldean. Erne egoteko esan nion. Ezohiko pertsonarik ikusiz gero, gogoratzeko eta, batez ere, hegazkinei eta autoei ondo begiratzeko. Gero, Scudderren liburuxka sakonki aztertzeari ekin nion.

Ostalaria eguerdian itzuli zen The Scotsman egunkariarekin. Ez zekarren ezer, Paddock eta esneketariaren gaineko hitz batzuk izan ezik eta, lehengo egunean bezala, hiltzailea iparraldera joan zela zioen. Haatik, Karolides eta Balkanetako aferen gaineko artikulu luze bat ageri zen, The Times egunkaritik hartua; baina ez zuen Ingalaterrara egin beharreko bisitari buruz ezer aipatzen. Arratsaldean, ostalariaz libratzea lortu nuen, eta buru-belarri aritu nintzen kodearen gakoa asmatu nahian.

Esan dizuedan moduan, zenbakizko kodea zen eta, esperimentu-sistema nahiko konplexua erabiliz, zeroen eta etenen esanahia aurkitu nuen. Arazoa hitz-gakoa zen, eta, erabili izan zitzakeen hitz-andanan pentsatzen nuenean, itxaropena galtzen nuen. Aitzitik, hirurak aldera, bat-bateko inspirazioa izan nuen.

Izen bat gogora etorri zitzaidan: Julia Czechenyi. Scudderrek esan zidan Karolidesen aferan gakoa zela, eta kodea asmatzeko erabiltzea bururatu zitzaidan.

Funtzionatu zuen. “Julia” izenaren bost hizkiek bokalen kokapenak eman zizkidaten. ‘A’ hizkia ‘J’ zen, alfabetoaren hamargarren hizkia eta, ondorioz, kodean ‘X’ zen. ‘E’ hizkia ‘U’ zen eta ‘XXI’ bezala agertzen zen kodean, eta horrela ondoz ondo. “Czechenyi” abizenak kontsonante nagusien zenbakiak eman zizkidan. Datu horiek paper-zati batean azkar idatzi eta Scudderren orrialdeak irakurtzeari ekin nion.

Ordu-erdi geroago, aurpegi zuriz eta hatz-muturrez mahaian jotzen nuen bitartean, irakurtzeari ekin nion.

Leihotik begiratu nuen eta ikusi nuen turismo handi bat zetorrela bailaran gora, ostaturako bidean. Atarian gelditu zen eta autotik jendea ateratzen ari zela entzun nuen. Antza, bi ziren: bi gizon, biak gabardinaz eta tweedezko txanoaz jantzita.

Hamar minutu geroago, ostalaria sartu zen gelara, begiak distiratsu.

—Behean, zure bila dabiltzan bi gizon ditut —xuxurlatu zidan—. Jangelan daude, whiski eta soda hartzen. Zutaz galdetu didate eta esan didate zu hemen aurkitzea espero zutela. Oso ondo deskribatu zaituzte, botak, alkandora eta guzti. Esan diet atzo egon zinela, eta motozikletaz joan zarela gaur goizean. Haietako batek birao piloa bota du.

Haien deskribapena eskatu nion. Bata argala zen, eta begi ilunak eta bekain iletsuak zituen; besteak irribarre egiten zuen etengabe eta zizipaza. Ez ziren atzerritarrak, horretaz erabat ziur zegoen nire lagun gaztea.

Paper bat hartu nuen eta, gutun baten zati bat izango balitz bezala, hitz hauek idatzi nituen alemanez:

"…Harri Beltza. Scudder horretaz konturatu zen, baina, hamabostaldi batez ezin zuen ezer egin. Ez dut uste orain ezer lagungarririk egin dezakedanik, Karolidesek ez dakielako oso ondo zer egingo duen, batez ere. Baina T. jaunak esaten badu, egin dezakedan guztia egingo dut…".

Nahiko txukun idatzi nuen, gutun pribatu baten orrialde solte bat zela pentsa zezaten.

—Eraman behera, eta esan iezaiezu nire logelan aurkitu duzula eta niri itzultzeko, ikusten banaute.

Hiru minutu geroago, autoa abian jarri zela entzun nuen eta, errezelen atzetik ezkutatuta, bi gizonak ikusi nituen. Bata argala zen eta bestea txukuna. Ezin izan nuen hori baino gehiago ikusi.

Ostalaria agertu zen, erabat asaldatuta.

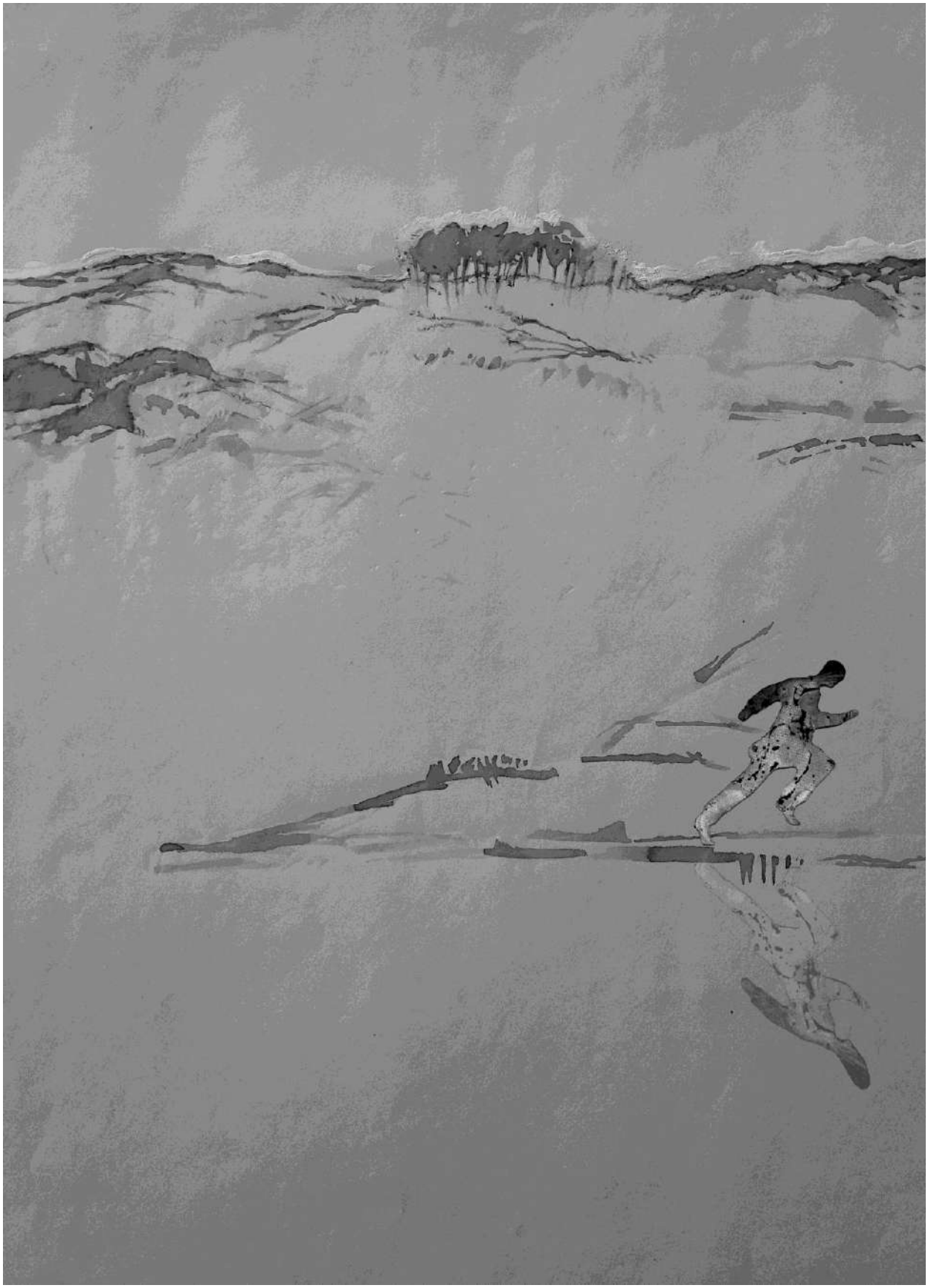
—Zure paper horrek arreta piztu die. —Alaitasun handiz esan zidan—. Beltzarana hildako bat bezain txuri jarri da eta biraoka hasi da; lodiak txistu egin du eta keinu itsusia jarri. Edariak libera-erdi batez ordaindu dituzte eta ez dute atzerakoak jasotzeko itxaron.

—Orain esango dizut zer nahi dudan zuk egitea —esan nion—. Hartu motozikleta eta joan Newton-Stewarteko polizia-buruarengana. Deskribatu bi gizonak eta esan iezaiezu uste duzula Londresko hilketarekin harremana dutela. Arrazoiak zeuk asma ditzakezu. Biak itzuliko dira, ez izan zalantzarik. Gaur gauean ez dira itzuliko, errepidean hirurogei kilometroz jarraituko nautelako; baina bihar goizean etorriko dira. Esan poliziari bihar goizeko lehen orduan hemen egoteko.

Ume zintzoen moduan gelatik atera zen eta nik Scudderren oharrekin jarraitu nuen lanean. Itzuli zenean, elkarrekin afaldu genuen eta niri nahi beste galderaegiten utzi nion —zer gutxiago, ezta?—. Lehoi-ehizen eta Matabele Gerraren gainean luze hitz egin nion eta, aldi berean, pentsatzen nuen. esku artean nuen aferarekin alderatuta, abentura horiek oso lasaiak zirela Ohera joan zenean, gelan eseri eta Scudderren liburuxka amaitu nuen. Egunsentira arte erre nuen, aulkian eserita, ezin bainuen lorik egin.

Goizeko zortziak aldera ikusi nuen bi polizia eta sarjentu bat iritsi zirela. Haien autoa garajean gorde, ostalariak hala aginduta, eta etxean sartu ziren. Hogei minutu geroago, leihotik ikusi nuen beste auto bat hurbiltzen ari zela zabaldiaren beste aldetik. Ez zen ostaturaino heldu: ehun eta laurogei metrora zegoen zuhaizti txiki baten gerizpean geratu zen. Ikusi nuen bidaiariek autoa atzera begira jarri zutela kontu handiz, atera aurretik. Minutu bat edo bi geroago, hartxintxarrean entzun nituen haien pausoak.

Nire plana logelan ezkutatuta geratzea zen eta, handik, gertatuko zena ikustea. Uste nuen, polizia eta jazarle arriskutsu haiek elkartzea lortuz gero, abantailaren bat aterako nuela. Baina orduan beste ideia hobe bat bururatu zitzaidan. Nire anfitrioiari eskerrak emateko ohar azkar bat idatzi nion, leihoa ireki eta, zaratarik egin gabe, andere-mahats zuhaixka batera jaitsi nintzen. Inork ikusi gabe, erreka gurutzatu nuen, erreka-adar baten ertzean behera lau hankan joan eta errepideraino iritsi nintzen baso txikiaren beste aldean. Autoa zegoen han, txukun eta eder goizeko eguzkipean. Xasisaren hautsak erakusten zidan bidaia luzea egina zuela. Motorra piztu nuen, gidariaren aulkira jauzi egin, eta zabaldirantz egin nuen ihes isilean. Jarraian, errepideak behera egiten zuen, eta, hortaz, bistatik galdu nuen ostatua; baina iruditu zitzaidan haizeak ahots haserreen soinua ekartzen zidala.



4 - Hautagai erradikalaren abentura

Imajina nazazue auto handi hori ahalik eta lasterren gidatzen landako errepide garbietan, maiatzeko goiz distiratu hartan. Hasieran, atzera begiratzen nuen batzuetan eta hurrengo bidegurutzea ikusteko irrikan nengoen; geroago, arreta handirik gabe gidatzen nuen, errepideari jarraitzeko behar nuen baino gehiagorik ez. Izan ere, murgilduta nengoen Scudderren liburuxkan aurkitu nuen horretan.

Gizon txiki hark gezur pila bat kontatu zizkidan. Balkanen gaineko istorioak, anarkista juduak, Kanpo Arazoetako Ministerioaren hitzaldia, Karolides… dena gezurra zen. Baina ez erabatekoa, ikusiko duzuen erara. Haren istorioa erabat sinetsi nuen, eta desengainatu ninduen. Orain, haren liburuak beste kontu bat esaten zidan eta, nahiz eta ur beroak erreta egon, ez nintzen ur epelaren beldur: erabat sinesten nuen. Ez nekien zergatik. Benetakoa iruditzen zitzaidan, oso, eta lehenengo istorioa ere, nolabait, funtsean egiazkoa zen. Ekainaren hamabosta patuaren eguna izango zen, eta patu hori atzerritar baten heriotza baino garrantzitsuagoa zen. Hain zen kontu handia izango, non ez bainion Scudderri ezer leporatzen ni jokoz kanpo utzi eta bakarrik jokatu nahi izateagatik. Horixe zen haren asmoa, ziur samar nengoen. Istorio garrantzitsua kontatu zidan, baina benetako afera hain zen handia, ezen hura aurkitu zuen gizonak harentzat bakarrik nahi baitzuen. Ez nuen gaizki hartu. Azken batean, egoerak zituen arriskuengatik zen horren zuhurra.

Kontu osoa liburuxkan zegoen, hutsune batzuk kenduta, eta hutsune horiek memoriarekin beteko zituen. Iturriei ere markak ematen zizkien: bakoitzari zenbaki bat ematen zion eta, gero, istorioaren une bakoitzean zuten sinesgarritasun-indizea idazten zuen. Letra larrietan idazti zituen izenak iturriak ziren eta gizon bati, Ducrosne jaunari, puntuazio gorena ematen zion, bost puntu, alegia. Beste batek, Ammersfoot jaunak, hiru jasotzen zituen. Istorioaren oinarrizko datuak baino ez zeuden liburuan eta dozena-erdi bider errepikatzen zen esapide bitxi bat, parentesi artean. Esaldia hauxe zen: («Hogeita hemeretzi maila»). Azken sarreran, honela agertzen zen: («Hogeita hemeretzi maila, zenbatu egin nituen: itsasgora, 22:17»). Ez nion inolako zentzurik hartzen.

Lehenbizi ikasi nuen ez zegoela gerra ekiditeko modurik. Gauza ziurra zen, urtero Gabonak etorriko direla bezain ziurra. Scudderren hitzetan, hori 1912ko otsailetik hitzartuta zegoen. Karolides izango zen abagunea. Fitxatu egin zuten, eta ekainaren 14an hilko zuten, maiatzeko goiz hartatik bi aste eta lau egunera, alegia. Scudderren oharren arabera, ez zegoen inor munduan hori saihestuko zuenik. Haien amona larrutzeko gai ziren bizkartzain epiroten kontu hori txorakeria hutsa zen.

Ikasi nuen bigarren gauza izan zen gerra hori Erresuma Batuarentzat ezusteko handia izango zela. Karolidesen heriotzak Balkanak harrotuko zituen erabat eta, orduan, Vienak ultimatuma emango zuen. Errusiari ez zitzaion gustatuko eta hitz larriak esango zizkioten elkarri. Aldiz, Berlinek bakezalearena egingo zuen eta egoera baretzen saiatuko zen. Gero, bat-batean, haserretzeko arrazoi bat aurkituko zuen eta, bost ordu geroago, guri erasoko zigun. Hori zen ideia eta ez zen ideia makala, gainera. Eztia eta hitz goxoak eta, bat-batean, ohartarazi gabeko kolpea. Alemaniaren fede eta asmo onez ari ginen bitartean, gure kostaldea itsasontzien kontrako minez beteko zuten ezer esan gabe, eta itsaspekoak gure gerraontzi guztien zain egongo ziren.
Dena dela, horrek guztiak hirugarren gauza baten beharra zuen, eta hori ekainaren hamabostean gertatuko zen. Ez nukeen hori inoiz ulertuko, mendebaldeko Afrikatik itzultzen nintzen batean Estatuko ofizial frantziar bat ezagutu izan ez banu. Ofizial hark gauza asko kontatu zizkidan. Besteak beste, azaldu zidan Frantziaren eta Erresuma Batuaren artean benetako aliantza praktikoa zegoela, legebiltzarrean tontakeria asko esaten ziren arren, eta bi estatuburuak elkartzen ohi zirela batzuetan elkarlanean aritzeko, gerra piztuko balitz. Ekainean, oso ofizial garrantzitsua etorriko zen Parisetik eta britainiarrek mobilizatu beharreko flota nazionalaren kokapenak jasoko zituen. Nik, behintzat, halako zerbait zela ulertu nion; nolanahi ere, ezohiko garrantzia zuen gauza bat zen.
Hala ere, ekainaren hamabostean, beste batzuk ere Londresen izango ziren, eta beste horien nortasunaz irudipenak baino ez nituen. Scudderrek “Harri Beltza” izenaz aipatzen zuen talde osoa, baina besterik ez. Ez ziren gure aliatuen ordezkariak, etsairik arriskutsuenak baizik, eta Frantziara bidali beharreko informazioa haien sakeletan bukatuko zuen. Informazio hori erabiltzeko asmoa zuten, gogoratu astebete edo bi geroago arma masiboekin eta torpedo azkarrekin etorriko zirela, ustekabean eta udaldiko gau baten ilunpean.
Horixe dezifratu nuen mendialdeko ostatuaren atzealdeko gela hartan, leihotik aza-baratzea nuela ikuspegi. Istorio horrek egiten zidan burrunba burmuinean, auto handia haran batetik bestetara eramaten nuela.
Burura etorri zitzaidan lehen ideia Lehen Ministroari idaztea izan zen; baina, pixka bat hausnartu ondoren, konturatu nintzen hori alferrikakoa izango zela. Nork sinetsiko zidan? Seinale bat behar nuen, egiaztatzeko froga bat, eta auskalo zer aurki nezakeen. Batez ere, aurrera jarraitu behar nuen eta, unea iristen zenean, esku hartzeko prest egon. Ez zen lan erraza izango. Erresuma Batuko polizia atzetik nuen; baita Harri Beltzaren zelatariak ere, nire arrastoari isilik eta azkar jarraitzen.
Ez nuen oso argi nora helduko nintzen; baina, eguzkiaren laguntzaz, ekialdera gidatu nuen. Mapan ikusitakoa gogoratuz, banekien iparraldera joanez gero

ikatz-meategiz eta industria-herriz betetako eskualde batera iritsiko nintzela. Une hartan, landetan behera nindoan, eta ibai baten haran zabala zeharkatzen ari nintzen. Kilometro askotan zehar, lursail bat inguratzen zuen harresi baten parean gidatu nuen eta, zuhaitzen artean, gaztelu handi bat ikusi nuen. Lastozko teilatuak zituzten herri zahar eta txikiak gurutzatu nituen, lur beheretako erreka lasaiak ere bai, elorriz eta otalorez gainezka zeuden lorategiak atzean utzi nituen arte. Horren ingurune baketsuan nengoen, ezen ezin bainuen sinets bi gizon zeudela nire atzetik ni erail nahian eta, hilabeteren buruan, izugarrizko zortea izan ezean, mendialdeko aurpegi biribilek izuturik begiratu zutela eta Ingalaterrako zelaiak gizon hilez beteko zirela.

Eguerdi aldera, herri luze eta sakabanatu batean sartu nintzen, eta erabaki nuen geldituko nintzela zerbait jateko. Herriaren erdian, postetxea zegoen eta, horren eskaileretan, postetxeko arduraduna eta polizia bat telegrama bat dezifratzen ari ziren, ahalegin handiz. Ni ikusi bezain laster ohartu egin ziren eta poliziak, esku bat altxatuz, gelditzeko oihu egin zidan.

Kasu egiteko bezain memeloa izan nintzen kasik. Orduan, bat-batean bururatu zitzaidan telegramak nirekin zerikusia zuela. Ostatuan zeuden guztiak ni berriro ikusteko gogoz zeuden eta, ziurrenik, erraza izango zen nire eta autoaren deskribapena telegramaz bidaltzea gurutza nitzakeen hogeita hamar herritara. Balaztak doi-doi askatu nituen. Hala ere, poliziak autoari heldu zion esku batekin, eta ezkerreko eskuarekin begian ukabilkada jo nion arte ez zuen laga.

Ohartu nintzen errepide nagusiak ez zirela egokiak niretzat eta bigarren mailakoetan sartu nintzen. Maparik gabe ez zen erraza. Haziendaren bateko bidexka batean sartzeko arriskua zegoen eta, horrela, ahate-putzu edo ukuilu bateko patio batean amaitzeko. Ezin nuen halako atzerapenik eduki. Orduan ohartu nintzen autoa lapurtzea tontakeria izan zela. Erraldoi berde hark nire kokapenaren berri emango zuen Eskozian zehar. Autoa utzi eta oinez jarraitu izan banu, ordubete edo bi geroago jazarleak aurkituko zuketen eta ez nukeen alderik edukiko ihesean.

Premiazkoena errepide aldenduenetara iristea zen. Laster aurkitu nituen, ibai handi baten adar batera iritsi nintzenean. Haranean barrena, muino aldapatsuz inguratuta nengoen eta, amaieran, errepide bihurri batek mendate bat gurutzatzen zuen. Ez nuen inorekin topo egin, baina, errepide horretatik, gehiegi urrunduko nintzen iparralderantz. Horrenbestez, ekialderantz zihoan bidexka txar batean sartu nintzen eta, azkenean, trenbide bikoitz handi batera iritsi nintzen. Beherantz begiratuta, beste haran bat ikusi nuen, zabal samarra, eta bururatu zitzaidan hura gurutzatuz gero beharbada urrutiko ostatu batean gaua pasatzeko aukera izango nuela. Iluntzen ari zuen eta oso gose nintzen, okin baten orgatik erositako opil pare bat baino ez bainuen jan gosariaz geroz.

Orduantxe entzun nuen zarata bat zeruan eta, hara! Han zegoen hegazkin madarikatu hura, lurretik gertu hegaka, hogei bat kilometro hegoaldera, eta azkar zetorren nire norabidean.
Eskerrak garaiz ohartu nintzen landa biluzian hegazkinaren mende nengoela eta nire aukera bakarra haraneko zuhaiztien pean sartzea zela. Tximista bezain azkar joan nintzen muinoan behera eta, noizean behin, burua biratzera ausartzen nintzen, makina hegalari nazkagarriari begiratzeko. Berehala, ertzetan hesiak zituen errepide batera heldu nintzen eta erreka baten ibar sakon batera eraman ninduen horrek. Orduan, baso trinko batera iritsi nintzen, eta abiadura gutxitu egin nuen.
Bat-batean, beste auto baten klaxona entzun nuen nire ezkerretara eta izu handiz konturatu nintzen errepidera ematen zuen bide pribatu baten zutoinekin talka egitear nengoela. Nire klaxonak alarau ahula atera zuen, baina beranduegi zen. Balaztak zapaldu nituen, baina autoaren oldarra handiegia zen eta, nire bidean, beste autoa zihoan irristaka. Segundo bat gehiago igaro izan balitz, izugarrizko hondamena izango zatekeen. Egin nezakeen gauza bakarra egin nuen, hau da, eskuineko hesiaren kontra jo, horren atzean zerbait leuna egongo zelakoan.
Aitzitik, oker nenbilen. Nire autoak hesia gurutzatu zuen gurina balitz bezala eta, gero, zorabiatzeko moduko jauzia egin zuen. Gertatuko zena ikusi izan banu, eserlekuaren gainean zutik jarriko nintzen, autotik jauzi egiteko prest. Elorri baten adarrak, ordea, bularretik harrapatu ninduen, altxatu, eta sostengua eman zidan, tona bat edo biko metal garestia nire azpitik irristatzen zen bitartean. Erori eta iraulka ibili zen, eta hamabost metro beherago zegoen errekaren uretan talka ozena egin zuen. Elorriak pixkanaka-pixkanaka askatu ninduen. Hesiraino jaitsi nintzen lehenbizi eta, gero, emeki-emeki, osin batzuetara. Baldarki zutik jartzen ari nintzela, esku batek besotik heldu zidan, eta ahots adeitsu eta beldurtu batek galdetu zidan mina hartu ote nuen.
Gizon gazte eta garai bat aurkitu nuen aurrez aurre, gidatzeko betaurrekoez eta larruzko beroki batez jantzita, aieneka eta barkamena eskatzen etengabe. Arnasa berreskuratu ahala, pozik egoteko arrazoia baino ez nuen ikusi. Hori bai autoa gainetik kentzeko modua.
—Errua nirea izan da —erantzun nion—. Eskerrak ez diodan hilketa bat gehitu nire tontakeria-zerrendari. Eskozian egin nahi nuen auto-bidaia amaitu da, baina nire bizitzaren amaiera ere izan zitekeen.
Ordularia atera, eta begiratu zion.
—Une egokian agertu zara —esan zidan—. Ordu-laurden bat libre daukat eta nire etxea hemendik bi minutura dago. Arropa emango dizute, eta janaria, baita ohe on bat ere. Hala ere, non daude zure gauzak? Autoarekin batera erre egin al dira?

—Sakelan ditut —esan nion, hortzetako eskuila bat erakutsiz—. Kolonietakoa naiz eta gauza gutxirekin bidaiatzen dut.
—Kolonietako bat! —oihu egin zuen—. Jainkoarren, nire otoitzen erantzuna zara. Kasualitatez, librekanbismoaren aldekoa zara?
—Banaiz —erantzun nion, zer esan nahi zuen ideiarik ez nuen arren.
Sorbaldan kolpetxoak eman zizkidan eta autoan azkar sartu ninduen. Hiru minutu geroago, itxura atsegineko etxe baten aurrean gelditu ginen, pinuz inguratua, eta barrura sartzeko keinua egin zidan. Lehenik, logela batera eraman ninduen eta dozena-erdi traje nire aurrean bota zituen, nirea suntsituta zegoen eta. Sargazko traje urdin handi bat aukeratu nuen, aurreko arroparekin alderik handiena baitzuen, eta lihozko lepoko bat hartu nion mailegutan. Orduan, jangelara joateko esan zidan eta han azken otordutik geratutako janaria zegoen mahai gainean. Esan zidan jateko bost minutu nituela.
—Mokadu bat sakelan eraman dezakezu eta, itzultzen garenean, afalduko dugu. Masonen aretora, zortzietan iritsi behar dut; bestela, nire agenteak kargu hartuko dit. Kafe bat hartu nuen, baita urdaiazpiko hotz pixka bat ere eta, bitartean, nire anfitrioiak hitz egiten jarraitu zuen sutondoan.
—Ikusiko duzu anabasa handian nagoela… Bide batez! Ez didazu zure izena esan. Twisdon? Hirurogeigarren erregimentuaren Tommy Twisdonen senidea al zara? Ez? Bada, ni eskualde honen hautagai liberala naiz, eta, gaur, badut mitin bat Brattleburnen. Horixe da nire herri nagusia eta, tamalez, kontserbadoreak oso indartsu daude han. Lehen Ministro kolonial ohia, Crumpleton, gaur nire alde hitz egitera etortzekoa zen, publizitate handia egin diogu mitinari, eta lekua gainezka egongo da. Baina, arratsaldean, lotsagabeak telegrama bat bidali dit esanez Blackpoolen dagoela, gripeak jota, eta hementxe nago ni, kontu osoa bakarrik egitera behartuta. Nire asmoa hamar minutuz hitz egitea zen, baina, orain, berrogei minutu izango dira, eta, hiru orduz burua hausten ibili naizen arren esateko zerbait aurkitu nahian, ez zait gauza nahikorik bururatu. Beraz, gizon jatorra izan eta lagundu, mesedez. Librekanbismoaren aldekoa zara eta protekzionismoak kolonietan egiten duen kaltea azal diezaiekezu. Zuek guztiek badaukazue hitz egiteko gaitasuna; nik ez, tamalez. Zurekin zorretan egongo naiz betiko.
Ezer gutxi nekien librekanbismoaren alde edo aurka, baina, nahi nuena lortzeko, ez nuen beste aukerarik ikusten. Jaun gaztea hain zegoen bere gauzetan murgilduta, ezen ez baitzen konturatzen zeinen zen arraroa heriotzari ihesi egin eta auto izugarri garestia galdu berri duen ezezagun bati mitin batean hitz egiteko eskatzea bat-batean. Aitzitik, nire premiak ez zidan unearen bitxikeriari buruz hausnartzen uzten, ezta nire euskarriak aukeratzen ere.
—Ondo da —ihardetsi nion—. Ez naiz oso mintzalari fina, baina Australiari buruz hitz egingo diet.

Hitz horiek sorbaldetako zama izugarri hura arindu zioten, eta poz handiz eman zizkidan eskerrak. Larruzko beroki handi bat utzi zidan,eta ez zidan galdetu zergatik nenbilen auto-bidaian berokirik eraman gabe; hautsez beteta zeuden errepideetan genbiltzala, bere istorioa kontatu zidan. Umezurtza zen, osabak hezia. Ez naiz osabaren izenaz gogoratzen, baina gobernuan zegoen eta haren hitzaldiak egunkarietan irakur ditzakezue. Cambridgeko Unibertsitatean lizentziatu ondoren, munduan zehar bidaiatu zuen eta, gero, lanik ez zuenez, osabak politikagintzan sartzeko aholkatu zion. Ohartu nintzen berdin zitzaiola alderdi bat edo bestea.

—Bietan, gizon onak daude —esan zidan alai—, baita lotsagabeko asko ere. Ni liberalen aldekoa naiz, nire familia betidanik hala izan delako.

Politikan epela bazen ere, beste gauza batzuei buruzko iritzi sendoak zituen. Zaldien gainean asko zekien eta gauza asko kontatu zizkidan Derbyko lasterketan parte hartuko zuten zaldiei buruz; gainera, bere tiro-gaitasuna hobetzeko plan asko zituen. Oro har, gazte gardena, zintzoa eta heldugabea zen.

Herri txiki bat gurutzatzen ari ginela, bi poliziak gelditzeko keinuak egin zizkiguten esku-argiekin.

—Barkatu, Sir Harry —esan zuen batek—. Auto bat bilatzeko agindu digute eta deskribapena bat dator zurearekin.

—Ondo da —esan zuen nire anfitrioiak, eta nik eskerrak eman nizkion Jainkoari, era arraro batean izan arren, neure burua salbatu nuela ikusita. Horren ondoren, ez zuen hitz gehiagorik esan, egin beharreko mintzaldia buruan zuen eta. Marmarka ari zen, begiak noraezean zebiltzan, eta bigarren hondamendi baten beldur nintzen. Neu ere saiatu nintzen zer esango nuen irudikatzen, baina nire burmuina harriak bezain lehor zegoen. Ohartu baino lehen, kale batean gelditu ginen, ate baten aurrean, eta dominaz betetako jaun zaratatsu batek ongietorria eman zigun.

Aretoan, bostehun bat lagun zeuden, gehienak emakumezkoak, burusoil dezente eta dozena bat edo bi gizon gazte. Mahaiburuak –konfiantzarik ematen ez zuen apaiz protestante sudur gorridun batek– barkamena eskatu zuen Crumpleton ez agertzeagatik, gripea zuela adierazi zuen eta baieztatu zuen ni “Australiako pentsamenduaren benetako aitzindaria” nintzela. Atean, bi polizia zeuden eta espero nuen gorazarre hori entzun egingo zutela. Orduan, Sir Harry hasi zen.

Ez nuen inoiz halakorik entzun. Ez zuen hitz egiteko ideiarik ere. Ohar mordoa zuen, eta haiek irakurtzen zituen; baina, horiek uzten zituenean, totelka hitz egiten zuen. Noizean behin, buruz ikasitako esaldi batez gogoratzen zen eta, bizkarra tente, Henry Irvingek bezain ondo esaten zuen. Gero, paperen gainean makurtuta egoten berriro, galduta. Ez nuen inoiz halako tontakeria handirik

entzun. “Alemaniako mehatxuaren” gainean hitz egin zuen eta kontserbadoreen asmakizuna zela, txiroei haien eskubideak lapurtzeko eta gizarte-aldaketa handia eragozteko; baina “langile antolatuak” horretaz konturatu ziren, eta kontserbadoreei barre handia egiten zieten. Gure borondate ona erakusteko, itsas armada murriztu nahi zuen eta, ondoren, Alemaniari ultimatum bat bidaliko zion gauza bera egiteko; bestela, jipoitu egingo genuen. Kontserbadoreengatik ez bazen, Alemania eta Erresuma Batua elkarlanean ibiliko ginen bakearen eta aldaketaren alde. Sakelan nuen liburuxka beltzean pentsatu nuen! Scudderren lagunei bakea eta aldaketa bost axola zitzaizkien.

Hala ere, mintzaldia gustatu egin zitzaidan, nolabait. Gizonak tontakeria hutsak irentsiak zituen arren, haren zintzotasuna agerikoa zen. Gainera, zama handia kendu zidan gainetik. Agian ez nintzen oso mintzalari ona izango, baina Sir Harry baino mila aldiz hobea banintzen.

Nire txanda iritsi zenean, ez nuen hain gaizki hitz egin. Australiaren gainean gogoratzen nuen guztia kontatu nien, han bertan Australiako inor egongo ez zelako esperantzan. Hango alderdi laboristaren, emigrazioaren eta soldadutzaren gainean hitz egin nien. Ez dut uste librekanbismoa aipatzearekin gogoratu nintzenik; baina esan nien Australian kontserbadorerik ez zegoela, alderdi laboristak eta liberalak bakarrik. Horrek txaloak piztu zituen eta pixka bat esnarazi nituen, eta esan nien gure inperioa oso gauza loriatsua izan zitekeela, guztiok ahalegin handia eginez gero.

Oro har, uste dut arrakasta hutsa izan zela. Aitzitik, ez nintzen apaizaren gustukoa izan eta, publikoari eskerrak emateko eskatu zionean, esan zuen Sir Harryren mintzaldia “estatu-politikari baten mailakoa” izan zela eta nirea, berriz, “emigrazio-agente baten elokuentzia”.

Autoan berriro sartu ginenean, aldarte onenean zegoen nire anfitrioia.

—Mintzaldi izugarria, Twisdon —esan zidan—. Eta orain, etxera etorriko zara nirekin. Bakarrik nago eta, egun bat edo bi geratuz gero, arrantzan joango gara.

Afari beroa genuen —horren desiran nengoen ni— eta pontxea edan genuen, egongela alai batean, karraska egiten zuen sutondoaren alboan. Uste nuen egia esateko unea iritsia zela. Begietan ikusi nuen fidatzeko moduko gizona zela.

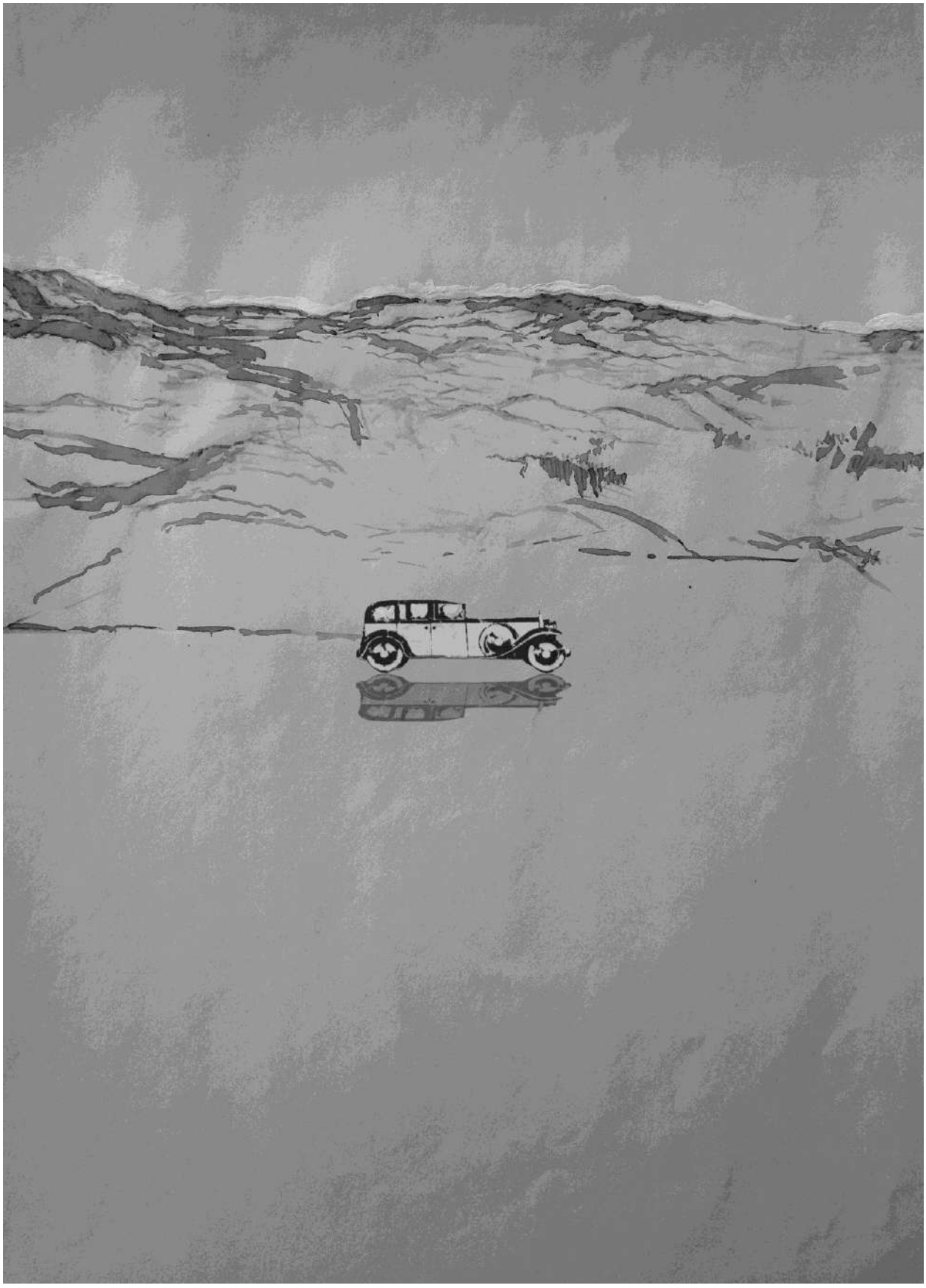
—Entzun, Sir Harry —esan nion—. Gauza garrantzitsu samar bat azaldu behar dizut. Gizon jatorra zara eta zintzoa izango naiz. Non demontretik hartu dituzu gaur bota dituzun tontakeria pozoitsu horiek?

Aurpegia ilundu zitzaion.

—Horren txarra zen? —galdetu zidan lotsatuta—. Nahiko ahul geratu da, bai. Gauza gehienak Progressive aldizkaritik eta nire agenteak bidaltzen dizkidan panfletoetatik atera ditut. Baina ez duzu uste Alemaniak gure kontrako egingo duenik, ezta?

—Galdera hori sei aste barru egiten baduzu, ez duzu erantzunik behar izango —ihardetsi nion—. Ordu-erdi bat ematen badidazu, istorio bat kontatuko dizut.
Oraindik, gela argitsu hura ikus dezaket, orein-buruak eta grabatu zaharrak hormetan, Sir Harry urduri sutondoko harrizko ertzaren gainean eta ni besaulki batean etzanda, hizketan. Beste pertsona bat banintz bezala ikusten nuen dena. Nire ahotsa entzuten nuen eta istorioak sinesgarria zirudien ala ez arretaz epaitzen nuen. Lehen aldia zen egia osoa —nik ulertzen nuena behintzat— norbaiti azaltzen niola eta oso lagungarria izan zitzaidan, gauzak argi ikusten lagundu baitzidan. Ez nuen xehetasunik ezkutatu. Scudderren gainean hitz egin nion, baita esneketariarena kontatu ere, liburuxkarena eta Gallowayn egin nuena ere bai. Urduri jarri zen eta sutondoko alfonbraren gainean aurrera eta atzera ibiltzen hasi zen.
—Beraz —amaitu nuen—, Portland Placeko Hilketagatik bilatzen ari diren gizona etxean duzu. Zure betebeharra zure autoa poliziarengana bidaltzea da, haiek nire atxilo nazaten. Ez dut uste oso urrun iritsiko nintzatekeenik. Istripu bat gertatuko litzateke eta, atxilotu eta ordubete edo bi geroago, labana bat izango nuke saihetsen artean. Baina, herritar zintzo zaren aldetik, zure betebeharra da. Beharbada hilabete barru damutuko zara, baina ez duzu zertan horrekin pentsatu.
Begi distiratsuekin irmo begiratu zidan.
—Zer lan mota egiten zenuen Rhodesian, Hannay jauna? —galdetu zidan.
—Meatze ingeniaria —esan nion—. Nire dirutza zintzo lortu dut eta horrekin ondo pasatu dut, gainera.
—Ogibide horrek ez die gizon baten nerbioei eragiten, ezta?
Barre egin nuen.
—Horri dagokionez, ez daukat arazorik.
Ehiztari-labana bat hartu nuen horman zegoen apal batetik; Mashona tribuaren amarru zaharra egin nuen: airetara bota, eta hortzekin harrapatzea. Hori egiteko, tentua behar da.
Irribarre batez begiratu ninduen.
—Ez dut frogarik behar. Beharbada mitinean tuntunarena egin dut, baina badakit gizon bati neurria hartzen. Ez zara hiltzailea eta ez zara memeloa eta uste dut egia esaten ari zarela. Eta orain lagunduko dizut. Zer egin dezaket?
—Lehenik, idatzi gutun bat osabari. Ekainaren hamabosta baino lehen gobernukideekin harremanetan jarri behar dut.
Bibotetik tira egin zuen.
—Horrek ez lizuke lagunduko. Hau Kanpo Arazoetako Ministerioaren afera bat da, eta osabak ez du zerikusirik horrekin. Gainera, ez zenuke inoiz konbentzituko. Ez, hori baino gauza hobea egingo dut. Kanpo Arazoetako

Ministerioko idazkari nagusiari idatziko diot. Aita pontekoa dut eta fidatzeko modukoa da, erabat. Zer esango diot?
Mahai baten ondoan eseri zen eta diktatu egin nion. Gakoa zen Twisdon deritzon gizonezko bat —uste nuen izen horrekin jarraitzea hobe zela— ekainaren hamabostean baino lehen agertzen bazen, ondo hartu beharko zukeela. Twisdonek bere nortasuna egiaztatzeko, "Harri Beltza" aipatu eta "Annie Laurie" abestiaren melodia txistukatu egingo zuen.
—Primeran — esan zuen Sir Harryk—. Hori da jarduteko modua. Bidenabar, aita pontekoak Sir Walter Bullivant du izena eta, egun horietan, landatan duen etxean egongo da. Artinswelletik gertu dago, Kennet ibaiaren ertzean. Beraz, gutuna idatzita dago. Orain zer?
—Nire garaierakoa zara, gutxi gorabehera. Utzi iezadazu zure tweedezko trajerik zaharrena. Edozein trajek balioko du, arratsaldean suntsitu dugun arroparen kolorearen desberdina bada. Gero, erakutsi eskualdeko mapa bat eta azaldu hemengo orografia. Azkenik, polizia nire bila etortzen baldin bada, erakuts iezaiezu haranean dagoen autoa, besterik ez. Besteak agertzen badira, esan iezaiezu hegoalderako trena hartu nuela mitinaren ondoren.
Gauza horiek guztiak egin zituen edota egingo zituela agindu zidan. Geratzen zitzaidan bibotea kendu nuen eta traje zahar-zahar bat jantzi nuen, (uste dut heather mixture deitzen zaiola materialari). Mapari esker, inguruaren ezaugarriak ezagutu nituen eta jakin nahi nituen bi gauzak esan zizkidan: hegoaldera zihoen trenbidea non hartu eta inguruko alderik basatienak zein ziren.
Ordu bietan, egongelako besaulkian nengoela esnatu ninduen eta, begiak etengabe kliskatzen nituela, gau ilun izardunean barrena eraman ninduen. Tresna-etxola batetik, bizikleta zahar bat atera zuen eta eman egin zidan.
—Lehenik, izei-baso luzean, eskuinetara jo —esan zidan—. Egunsentirako, mendi artean egongo zara. Orduan, bizikleta lokazti batera bota eta joan oinez mendixketara. Artzainen artean, astebete eman dezakezu Ginea Berrian izango bazina bezain seguru.
Hartxintxarrezko bidexketan gora, oinpekoei eragin nien, egunsentiak zerua argitu zuen arte. Eguzkia behe-lainoa kentzen ari zela, mundu berde eta zabal batean aurkitu nuen nire burua; haran txikiak alde guztietara eta urruneko zeruertza urdinerantz zabaltzen ziren. Han, behintzat, berehala jabetuko nintzen etsaien presentziaz.



5 - Bide-langile betaurrekodunaren abentura

Mendateko lekurik altuenean eseri nintzen eta nire egoera analizatu nuen.
Nire atzean, errepidea zegoen. Errepideak gora egiten zuen muinoen artean, arrail luze batean, ibai ospetsu baten goiko ibarrean. Aurrean lautada zegoen, beharbada kilometro eta erdikoa, lokaztiz eta sasi basatiz betea eta, harago, errepidea azkar jaisten zen beste haran batera, beste lautada bateraino. Lautada horren iluntasun urdina urruntasunean galtzen zen. Ezkerretara eta eskuinetara, profil leuneko muino berdeak zeuden, madalenak ziruditen. Hegoaldera, hots, nire ezkerretara, txilarrez estalitako mendi altuak ikusten ziren eta gogoratu nuen mapan babesleku gisa aukeratu nituen mendiak zirela. Garaiera itzeleko landa baten erdian nengoen: kilometrotara zer gertatzen zen ikus nezakeen handik. Errepidearen azpian zeuden larreetan, etxola bat zegoen, tximiniatik kea zeriola. Hori zen gizadiaren seinale bakarra. Bestela, txirrien txioak eta erreka txikien txilin-hotsa baino ez ziren entzuten.
Zazpiak inguru ziren eta, han geldirik nengoela, airean berriro entzun nuen mehatxuzko taupada hori. Orduan konturatu nintzen nire talai hori benetan tranpa bat izan zitekeela. Txoririk txikienak ere ez zuen ezkutatzerik leku berde biluzi horietan.
Taupada handitzen ari zela, geldirik geratu nintzen eserita, etsita. Orduan, ikusi nuen hegazkina ekialdetik zetorrela. Altu hegan egiten zuen, baina, hari begira nengoela, ehun bat metro egin zuen behera eta muino multzoaren inguruan hasi zen hegan, belatzak eraso egin baino lehen zirkulutan hegan egiten duen bezala. Orain, oso baxu zegoen eta hegazkin barrukoek ikusi ninduten. Bi kideetako batek prismatikoez aztertzen ninduela ikusi nuen.
Bat-batean, kiribil azkarrez igotzen hasi zen eta, abiadura handiz, ekialdera abiatu zen, goizaldiko zeruan izpi txiki bihurtu arte.
Horrek azkar eta sakon pentsarazi zidan. Etsaiek bazekiten non nengoen eta, handik gutxira, inguratuko ninduten. Ez nekien zer baliabide zituzten, baina ziur nengoen behar adina izango zela. Hegazkinetik, nire bizikleta ikusi zuten eta errepidetik ihes egiten saiatuko nintzela ondorioztatuko zuten. Hala izanda, landetan zehar eskuinetara edo ezkerretara jotzen banuen, aukera bat izan nezakeen. Bizikleta errepidetik ehun metrora eraman nuen eta goroldioz betetako urmael batera bota nuen eta, han, barrabas-belarren eta urrebotoien artean hondoratu egin zen. Orduan, muino batera igo nintzen eta, handik, haran bata eta bestea ikusten nituen. Inguruko zinta zurian ez zen ezer mugitzen.
Aitzitik, ez zegoen arratoi bat ezkutatzeko lekurik ere. Eguna argitu ahala, argi gardenak lekua bete zuen, Veldean egoten den giro eguzkitsuak egiten duen

antzera. Beste egoera batean, lekua nire gustukoa izango zitekeen, baina itogarri iruditzen zitzaidan orduan. Landa ireki horiek kartzelako hormak ziren; muinoetako haize ederra, ziega baten kiratsa. Txanpona bota nuen airetara: aurkia, eskuinetara; binperra, ezkerretara. Aurkia atera zenez, iparraldera abiatu nintzen. Hortik gutxira, gailur batera iritsi nintzen, mendateko hormara, alegia. Errepidean zehar, hamar kilometrora ikusten nuen eta, urrunean, zerbait mugitzen ari zen. Uste nuen auto bat izango zela. Gailurretik haratago, landa berde malkartsua ikusi nuen, basoko haranetara eramaten zuena. Veldean izandako bizimoduak arrano baten ikusmena eman zidan eta, horregatik, urrun dauden gauzak ikus ditzaket, nahiz eta gizon gehienek gauza horiek ikusteko teleskopioa behar. Maldan gora, hiru bat kilometrora, gizon batzuk zebiltzan, ehizaldi batean dabiltzan bilatzaileen gisan. Bistatik kanpo jarri nintzen, zeruertzaren atzean. Bide hori itxita neukan eta errepidetatik harago zeuden mendietan babeslekua aurkitzen saiatu nahi nuen. Lehen ikusitako autoa hurbiltzen ari zen, baina, momentuz, urrun zegoen eta aldapa handiak igo beharko zituen. Korrika egin nuen gogoz, makurtuta sakanetan izan ezik eta, aurrera joan ahala, aurrean nuen muinoaren gailurrari begiratzen nion tarteka. Nire irudimena zen ala pertsona batzuk ikusten ari nintzen (bat, bi, beharbada gehiago) haran gainean mugitzen, errepidez haraindi?

Lursail batean alde guztietatik setiatuta egonez gero, aukera bakarra duzu ihes egiteko. Lursailean geratu behar duzu eta, etsaiek bilatu arren, ez zaituzte aurkitu behar. Hori zentzuzkoa zen, baina nola demontre ez ninduten ikusiko leku laukizuzen horretan? Lokatzetan leporaino murgilduko nintzatekeen; edo ur azpian etzan; edo zuhaitzik altuena igo: baina ez zegoen adarrik; lokazti zuloak putzu txikiak ziren; eta, errekaren ordez, ur-ildo fina zegoen. Txilar motza baino ez zegoen, muino biluziekin eta errepide zuriarekin batera.

Orduan, oso bihurgune txiki batean, harri-tontor baten ondoan, bide-langilea aurkitu nuen. Iritsi berria zen eta mailuari nekez eragiten zion. Zuhurtziaz begiratu zidan eta aharrausi egin zuen.

—Zorigaiztokoa laborantza utzi nian eguna! —oihu egin zuen, munduari esango balio bezala—. Orduan, nire buruaren jabea ninduan. Orain, gobernuaren esklaboa nauk, bide bazterrari lotua, begiak higatuak eta bizkarra makur.

Mailua hartu zuen, harri bat kolpatu, eta birao batzuk botata, berriz eragin zion. Eskuak belarrietara eraman zituen.

—Otoi! Burua zapartatzen ari zaidak! —garrasi egin zuen.

Itxura basatia zuen. Nire neurrikoa zen, gutxi gorabehera; baina oso okertuta zegoen, astebeteko bizarra eta pastazko betaurreko handiak zituen.

—Ezin diat egin —oihu egin zuen berriro—. Ikuskatzaileak sala nezala. Ohatzera joanen nauk.

Arazoa zein zen galdetu nion, nahiko argi zegoen arren.

—Arazoa duk mozkortua naizela. Barda, alaba Merran ezkondu zuan eta lauak arte egin zitean dantza. Ni eta beste batzuk edateko jarri gintuan, eta hemen nauk. Domaia duk nik ardo beltzari inoiz begiratu izana!
Oheratu behar zen; ados nengoen.
—Hori erratea erraza duk —kexatu zen—. Baina atzo karta postala errezibitu nian ikuskatzaile berria gaur jinen zela erraten ziana. Etortzen denean ez naik aurkituko, edo, aurkituz gero, gaizki aurkituko naik, beraz eneak egin dik. Oheratuko nauk eta gaizki nagoela erranen zieat, baina horrek ez nauk lagunduko. Nire eritasuna zer den bazakitek.
Eta orduan bururatu zitzaidan.
—Ikuskatzaile berriak ezagutzen ote hau? —galdetu nion.
—Ez naik ezagutzen, ez. Aste bat bakarrik duk lanean ari duala, gehiago ez. Auto ttipi batean ibiltzen duk eta izigarri zorrotza duk.
—Hik non duk etxea? —galdetu nion, eta, hatz dardaratiaz, erreka ondoan zegoen etxola seinalatu zidan.
—Ongi, habil etxera —esan nion—, eta egin lo lasai. Memento batez hire lana eginen diat, baita ikuskatzailearekin mintzatuko ere.
Sinesgaitz begiratu zidan, eta, haren buru nahasia ulertzen hasi zenean, mozkortien irribarre distraitua azaldu zitzaion aurpegian.
—Hi bai mutiko gisakoa —oihu egin zuen—. Egitekoa erraza duk. Harri-tontor hori egin diat, eta, beraz, goiz honetan ez duk gehiago zilatu behar. Errota hartu, eta, hor den harrobitik, bihar beste tontor bat egiteko bezainbat ekarri. Nire izena Alexander Trummle duk, eta zazpi urte hauetan ari nauk lan honetan. Lehen, laboraria ninduan Leithen Wateren. Lagunek Ecky deitzen naitek, baita Specky ere, begi-lagunak badizkidalako, bista ahula baitiat. Ikuskatzaileari jendeki mintzatu, "jauna" erran iezaiok, eta kontent izanen duk. Ni eguerdi irian itzuliko nauk.
Betaurrekoak eta txano zikin eta zaharra hartu nizkion; nire jaka, txalekoa eta lepokoa kendu nituen eta eman egin nizkion. Buztinezko pipa zikina ere maileguan hartu nion. Egin beharreko ataza sinpleak azaldu zizkidan eta, besterik gabe, lasai abiatu zen oherantz. Oheratzea zuen helburu nagusitzat, baina nik uste botilan ere pixka bat geratzen zitzaiola. Espero nuen nire lagunak iritsi baino lehen gizona tapaki artean egotea.
Nire papera betetzeko jantzi nintzen. Alkandora ireki nuen. Koadroduna zen, urdina eta zuria, baserritarrek eramaten dituztenen modukoa eta lepoa ijito batena bezain marroia zuen. Maukak igo nituen eta besaurrea erregementari batena izan zitekeen, eguzkiak belztua eta zauri zaharrez betea. Errepideko hautsarekin botak eta prakak zuritu nituen. Gero prakak igo egin nituen eta belaunaren azpian soka batez lotu. Segidan, aurpegiarekin hasi nintzen. Hautsarekin ur-marka bat egin nuen lepoan, ziur aski Turnbull jaunak igandero

garbitzen zuenaren muga. Masail beltzaranak hautsez igurtzi nituen. Bide-langile baten begiak handitu samar egongo ziren; hortaz, hauts pixka bat sartu nuen bietan eta, igurtziz eta igurtziz, lausotuta utzi nituen.
Sir Harryk eman zizkidan sandwichak nire jakan zeuden, baina bide-langilearen bazkaria, musuzapi gorri batean bilduta, eskura nuen. Gose handiz, opil lodiak eta gazta zati batzuk jan nituen, baita te hotz pixka bat edan ere. Musuzapian, bertako egunkaria zegoen, sokaz lotuta eta Turnbull jaunaren izenarekin, ziur aski eguerdiko etena arintzeko. Fardela berriro lotu nuen eta egunkaria haren ondoan utzi nuen, oso agerian.
Iruditzen zitzaidan nire botak ez zetozela egoerarekin bat eta ostiko batzuk eman nizkien harriei, bide-langile baten oinetakoen granitozko itxura har zezaten. Orduan azazkalak hozkatu eta urratu nituen, ertzak arrailduta eta berdindu gabe utzi arte. Nire bila zetozen gizonek ez zuketen xehetasunik galduko. Lokarri bat apurtu nuen, eta berriro lotu nuen korapilo trakets batez; bestea askatu nuen, galtzerdi gris eta lodia agerian uzteko. Momentuz, ez zen errepidean ezer ikusten. Aski seguru, ordu-erdi lehenago ikusi nuen autoa etxerantz zihoan.
Mozorroa osatu eta gero, gurdia hartu nuen eta ehun metrora zegoen harrobira joan-etorriak egiten hasi nintzen.
Gogoratzen dut Rhodesian ezagutzen nuen esploratzaile zahar batek –bere garaian ezohiko gauza asko egin zituenak– esan zidala plantak ondo egiteko pertsonaiaren paperean benetan barneratu behar dugula. Ezinezkoa zen rola ondo egitea pertsonaia hori gu geu ginela sinetsi ezean. Hortaz, nire pentsamenduak itzali nituen eta errepideen konponketa-lanetan kontzentratu nintzen. Etxola zuri txikia nire etxetzat hartu nuen; Leithen Waterren abeltzain eman nituen urteak gogora ekarri nituen; neure burua ohe txiki batean gozo-gozo lo egiten imajinatu nuen, whiski-botila merke baten ondoan. Ez zen ezer agertu errepide zuri luzean. Noizean behin, ardiren bat txilarretik ateratzen zen eta begira geratzen zitzaidan. Lertxun bat zegoen errekan eta putzura jaitsi zen arrainak harrapatzera; baina ez zidan kasu txikienik ere egin. Jarraitu nuen harri-zama handiak eramaten, profesional baten pauso astunekin. Laster berotu nintzen eta aurpegian nuen hautsa benetako zikintasun bihurtu zen. Zenbatzen hasi nintzen zenbat ordu falta ziren Turnbull jaunaren lan monotonoari amaiera emateko.
Bat-batean, errepidetik, ahots garbi batek hitz egin zidan. Altxatu nintzen eta Ford txiki bat ikusi nuen, baita onddo-kapela zeraman aurpegi biribileko gazte bat ere. —Alexander Turnbull al zara? —galdetu zidan—. Konderriko Errepide Gainbegirale berria naiz. Blackhopefooten bizi zara eta Laidlaw-byresetik Riggserainoko zatia zurea da? Ederki! Errepide ona da, Turnbull, eta ondo diseinatua. Kilometro eta erdira, bigun samar dago eta ertzak garbitu behar

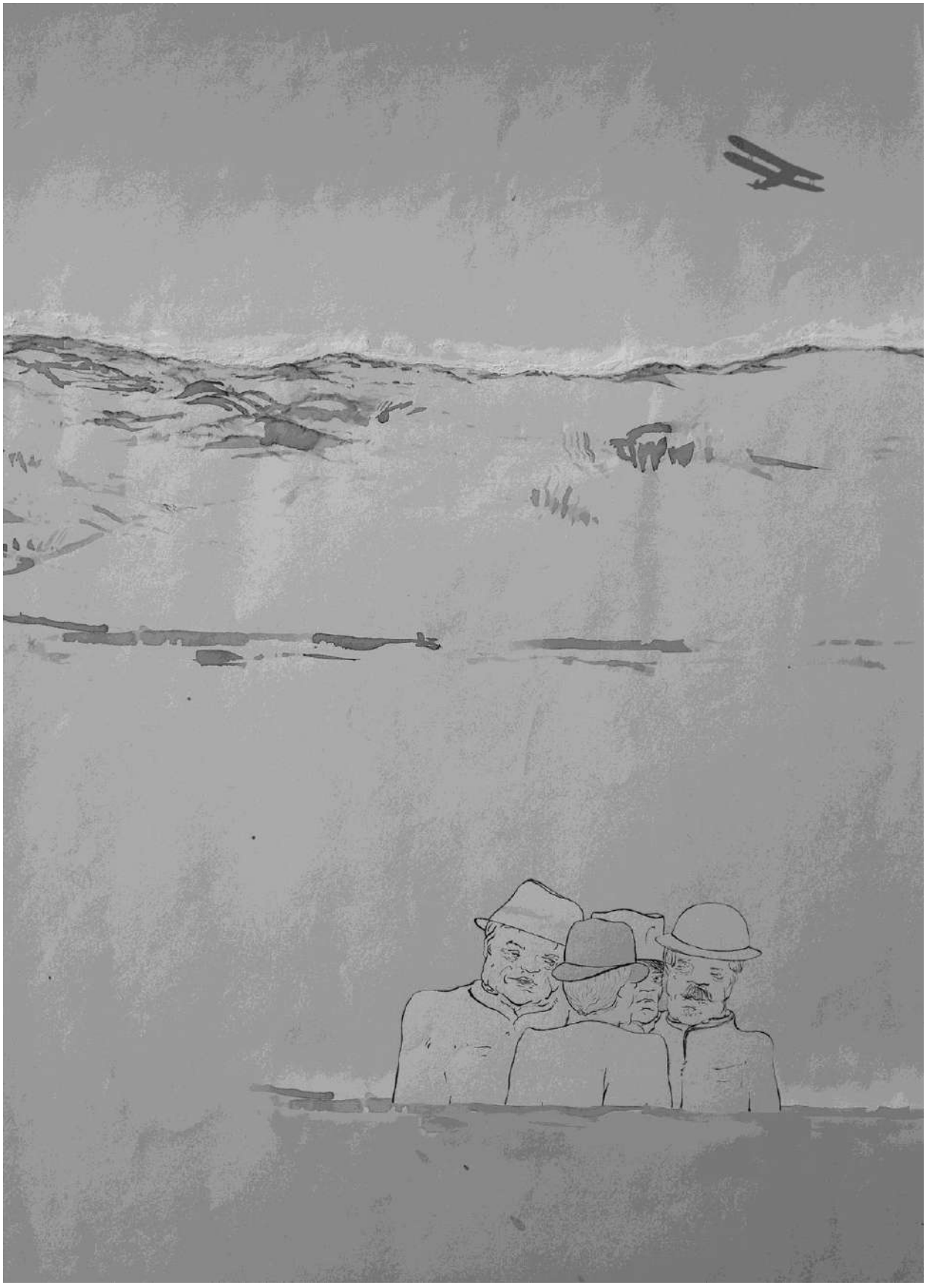
dira. Hori egin beharko duzu. Egun on. Ikusten nauzun hurrengoan, ezagutuko nauzu.
Argi zegoen mozorroa gainbegirale beldurgarriarentzat nahikoa zela. Lanarekin jarraitu nuen eta, goiza eguerdi bihurtzen ari zela, zirkulazio pixka batek alaitu zuen giroa. Okin baten furgonetak muinoan gora egin zuen eta poltsa bat jengibre-galleta erosi nuen; praketako sakelan gorde nuen larrialdietarako. Une hartan, artzain bat agertu zen, ardiekin batera, eta aztoratu egin ninduen ozen galdetuz:
—Speckyri zer gertatu zaiok?
—Ohatzean duk, marranta ederra bildurik —erantzun nion, eta artzainak aurrera jarraitu zuen…
Eguerdi aldera, auto handi batek muinoan behera egin zuen, nire ondoan lasai pasatu zen eta, ehun eta berrogei bat metro aurrerago, gelditu egin zen. Hiru bidaiari jaitsi ziren, nagiak ateratzeko itxurak egiten, eta niregana etorri ziren lasai.
Haietako bi Gallowayko ostatuko leihotik ikusi nituen: bata argala, zorrotza eta iluna; bestea lasaia eta irribarretsua. Hirugarrenak landako gizonen itxura zuen, albaitaria izan zitekeen, beharbada, edo baserritarra. Gaizki egindako bonbatxoak zeramatzan eta begiak oilo batenak bezain distiratsuak eta mesfidatiak.
—Egun on —esan zidan azkenak—. Lan erraza duk hirea.
Hurbiltzen ari zirela ez nien begiratu, eta orain, niri hitz egin ondoren, motel eta min handiz, bizkarra altxatu nuen, bide-langile batek egingo lukeen gisa. Gogoz, listua bota nuen, eskoziar baldarrek egiten duten modura, eta irmo begiratu nien erantzunik eman baino lehen. Ikusten nituen sei begiek ez zuten ezer galtzen.
—Lan hau baino pisuagoak badira, baita hobeak ere —serio esan nien—. Nahiago nikek zuen lana ukan, eta egun osoa ipurdia kuxin horien gainean jarririk ukan. Zuek eta zuen auto handiek nire errepideak funditzen dituzue! Gauzak zuzenak balira, funditzen duzuena konpondu beharko zenukete.
Begi distiratsuak zituenak Turnbullen fardelaren ondoan zegoen egunkariari begiratu zion.
—Egunkariak tenoreko errezibitzen dituk, ezta? —esan zidan.
Lasai begiratu nion.
—Bo, tenoreko. Egunkari hori joan den larunbatean atera zutela ikusirik, sei egun berantean baino ez nauk.
Hartu zuen, data irakurri zuen, eta han utzi berriro. Beste batek nire botak ikusi zituen, eta hitz egiten ari zenari begiratzeko esan zion alemanez.
—Botetarako gustu fina duk —esan zidan—. Ez zitian kanpañako zapatagin batek egin, ez.

—Segur duk —arin erantzun nion—. Londresen egin zitiztean. Iaz ihizira jin zen jaun batek eman zizkidaan. Zein zuan haren izena? —Buruan hatz egin nuen, memoria deika bezala.
Argalak alemanez hitz egin zuen berriro.
—Jarrai dezagun —esan zuen—. Gizon hau garbi dago.
Azken galdera bat egin zidaten.
—Goiz goizean, hemen norbait ikusi duk? Bizikletaz edo oinez jinen zuan.
Tranpan erori nintzen ia, eta egunsenti grisean txirrindulari bat azkar pasatu zela esan. Aitzitik, arriskuari garaiz antzeman nion. Sakon pentsatzen aritzearen plantak egin nituen.
—Ez nauk biziki goiz iratzarri —esan nien—. Gauza duk barda alaba ezkondu zela, eta berant oheratu ginela. Etxeko atea zazpiak irian ireki nian eta orduan ez zagoken nehor errepidean. Orduz geroztik, okina, Ruchilleko artzaina eta zuez gain, ez duk nehor hona jin. Haietako batek zigarro bat eman zidan eta, kontuz usaindu ondoren, Turnbullen fardelean sartu nuen. Autoan sartu ziren eta, hiru minutu geroago, bistatik desagertu.
Bihotzean arindura itzela sentitu nuen, baina harriak garraiatzen jarraitu nuen. Eskerrak, hamar minutu geroago autoa itzuli baitzen, eta bidaiari batek eskuz agurtu baininduen. Jende horrek ez zuen ezer zoriaren mende uzten.
Turnbullen opilak eta gazta bukatu nituen eta, laster, harriak ere bai. Ondoren ez nekien zer egin behar nuen. Ezin nuen errepidea konpontzen luze jarraitu. Jainko errukitsu batek Turnbull jauna etxe barruan mantendu zuen; baina, agertuz gero, arazoak izango nituzkeen. Irudipena nuen lerro estu zegoela haranaren inguruan eta, edozein norabidetan ibiliz gero, galderak egingo zizkidaten. Hala ere, atera egin behar nuen. Ez dago espioien begiradapean lasai egon daitekeenik egun bat baino denbora luzeagoz.
Lanpostuan, bostak arte geratu nintzen. Ordurako, erabakia nuen iluntzean Turnbullen etxolara joango nintzela eta, gauean, muinoak gurutzatzen saiatuko nintzen. Baina, bat-batean, beste auto bat errepidean gora agertu zen eta niregandik metro batera edo bi metrora gelditu zen. Haize freskoa zebilen eta bidaiariak zigarroa piztu nahi zuen.
Turismoa zen eta maletategia fardelez beteta zeukan. Gizon bat zegoen barruan eta, kasualitate itzelez, ezagutzen nuen. Marmaduke Jopley zuen izena eta iraina zen kreaziorako. Broker odol zurrupatzailea zen. Oinordekoak, aristokrata gazteak eta emakume zahar tuntunak limurtzen zituen. “Marmie” oso ezaguna zen, antza denez, dantzaldietan, polo-partidetan eta opor-etxeetan. Bazekien zurrumurruak trebetasun handiz hedatzen eta edozein tituludun edota aberatsengana katuka hurbil zitekeen. Londresera iritsi nintzenean, haren enpresa ezagutzera eraman ninduten eta, jator-jator, haren klubean afaltzera gonbidatu ninduen. Han, bere burua nabarmentzen aritu zen eta dukesen

gainean hitz egin zuen, haren esnobismoak zorabiatu ninduen arte. Gero, beste bati galdetu nion zergatik ez zuen inork jipoitzen: esan zidan ingelesek sexu ahula errespetatzen dutela.
Nire aurrean zegoen orduan, dotore jantzita eta auto eder berri batean, lagun elegante batzuei bisita egiteko bidaian, ziur aski. Bat-batean erotu egin nintzen, autoan sartu nintzen saltoka eta sorbaldatik heldu nion.
—Kaixo, Jopley —esan nion—. Aspaldiko partez, motel!
Beldurtu zen oso. Niri begiratu, eta ahozabalik geratu zen.
—Nor demontre zara? — esan zidan kostata.
—Hannay dut izena —erantzun nion—. Rhodesiakoa, gogoratzen?
—Jainkoarren, hiltzailea! — esan zuen itota.
—Horixe. Eta, adiskide, esaten dizudana egiten ez baduzu, bigarren hilketa bat izango dugu. Eman iezadazu beroki hori, baita txanoa ere.
Esan niona egin zuen, beldurrez itsututa zegoen eta. Nire praka zikinaren eta alkandora arruntaren gainean, haren beroki dotorea jantzi nuen: botoiak goraino iristen ziren eta, horrela, nire lepokoaren gabeziak ezkutatzen zituen. Txanoa buruan jarri nuen eta eskularruak gehitu nizkion mozorroari. Minutu batean, hautsez betetako bide-langilea Eskoziako gidari txukun bilakatu zen. Jopley jaunari Turnbullen txano aipaezina jarri nion buru gainean, eta jarrita uzteko esan.
Orduan, zailtasunez, autoa biratu nuen. Nire plana zen hura etorritako errepide beretik itzultzea: zelatariek, autoa lehendik ikusia zutelako, seguruenik ezer esan gabe pasatzen utziko zioten, nahiz eta Marnieren gorpuzkera nirearen modukoa ez izan.
—Eta orain, txiki —esan nion—, geldirik egon eta ondo portatu. Ez dizut kalterik egingo. Ordubetez edo biz autoa hartuko dizut, gehiagorik ez. Baina zer edo zer egiten baduzu eta, batez ere, ahoa irekitzen baduzu, Jainkoak daki lepoa moztuko dizudala. Ulertzen?
Iluntze horretako bidaiarekin, gozatu egin nuen. Haranean, hamabost kilometro egin genituen, herrixka pare bat gurutzatu, eta itxura bitxiko pertsona batzuk ikusi nituen bideen ertzetan. Zelatariak izango ziren eta ni beste mota bateko arroparekin edo beste konpainia batekin ikusiz gero, gauza asko esango zizkidaten. Aitzitik, gauzak horrela, jakin-minik gabe begiratu zidaten. Batek begirunez ukitu zuen txanoa, eta nik, heziera onez, erantzun egin nion.
Iluntzen ari zela, haran txiki batean sartu ginen. Mapatik gogoratzen nuen biztanleria gutxiko muino batzuetara joaten zela. Laster, herrixkak atzean utzi genituen, gero etxaldetxoak eta, azkenean, bide ertzetan zeuden etxolak. Gero, landa bakarti batera iritsi ginen; gauak lokatz-putzuen ilunabarreko distira iluntzen zuen. Gelditu egin ginen eta nik, adeitsu, autoa biratu eta Jopley jaunari gauzak itzuli nizkion.

—Mila esker —esan nion—. Uste nuen baino gehiagorako balio duzu. Eta, orain, zoaz poliziarengana.

Muino hartan eseri nintzen, autoaren atzeko argiak desagertzen ikustera, eta pentsatzen hasi nintzen zenbat delitu-mota probatuta neuzkan. Gehienen ustearen aurka, ez nintzen hiltzailea; baina izugarrizko gezurtia bihurtua nintzen, baita iruzurti lotsagabea eta auto garestiak maite zituen bide-lapurra ere.



6 - Arkeologo burusoilaren abentura

Malda hartako ordekatxo batean igaro nuen gaua, harri batek babestuta, non txilar luze eta leuna hazten baitzen. Gau hotza zen eta ez nuen jakarik, ezta txalekorik ere. Turnbull jaunak zituen jantziak, baita Scudderren liburuxka, nire ordularia eta, okerrena, nire pipa eta tabako-kutxa ere. Dirua baino ez nuen gerrikoan, eta berrehun bat gramo jengibre galleta.

Galleten erdia afaldu nuen eta, txilarretan sakon murgilduta, berotasun pixka bat lortu nuen. Animatuta nengoen eta ezkutaketa-jolas ero horrekin gozatzen hasia nintzen. Ordura arte izandako zorte ona miraria izan zen. Esneketaria, ostalari literarioa, Sir Harry, errepide-langilea, Marmie memeloa… merezi ote nuen hain zorte ona? Hasieran izandako arrakasta horrek sentiarazi zidan helburua lortuko nuela.

Arazo nagusia zen oso gose nintzela. Cityn aberats batek bere buruaz beste egiten duenean, egunkariek jakinarazten dute hildakoa “ondo elikatua” zegoela. Gogoratzen dut pentsatu nuela lokatz-zulo batean hilko banintz ez ninduketela ondo elikatutzat hartuko. Etzanda, nire burua torturatu nuen Londresen horren gutxi estimatu nuen janari onaren memoriarekin. Jengibre galletek barruko zuloa handitu baino ez zuten egin. Paddockek prestatzen zituen saltxitxa kirrikatsuak, usain oneko hirugihar zati finak eta ur irakinetan egindako arrautza ederrak. Zenbat aldiz muzin egin nien! Klubean egiten zituzten txuletak eta hestebeteen mahaian egoten zen urdaiazpiko hura… nire arima haien irrikan zegoen. Elikagai guzti-guztiekin gogoratzen nintzen eta, azkenean, parrillan egindako xerra eta litro bat garagardo aukeratu nituen eta, azkenbururako, welsh rabbit. Ezinezko plazer horien grinaz, loak hartu ninduen.

Egunsentitik ordubete igarota zegoela, hotzak hilik eta zurrun esnatu nintzen. Une bat behar izan nuen non nengoen gogoratzeko, bezperan oso nekatuta bainengoen eta sakon egin bainuen lo. Lehen orduko zeru urdin argia ikusi nuen txilarren azpitik, gero muino baten profila eta, azkenean, nire botak ahabia-zuhaixka baten azpian, txukun-txukun. Besoen gainean bermatuta altxatu nintzen eta goitik begiratu nion haranari. Ikusi nuenak lokarriak abiadura eroz lotarazi zidan.

Behealdean, gizon batzuk zeuden. Nigandik laurehun metrora baino ez zeuden, muino gainean haize-errotak bezala sakabanatuta eta txilarrak kolpez joka. Marmiek ez zuen bere mendekua lortzeko itxaron.

Ordekatxo horretatik, katuka atera nintzen arroka batek ezkutatuta eta sakonera txikiko lubaki batean zehar sartu nintzen, hura mendian gora joaten zen. Erreka baten trokara iritsi nintzen eta gailurrera igo nintzen, baldarki.

Hortik, atzera begiratu nuen eta ikusi nuen momentuz ez nindutela ikusia. Nire atzetik zetozenak kontu handiz miatzen ari ziren aldapa eta gora zihoazen.
Zeruertzaren atzetik, zortzi ehun bat metroz egin nuen korrika, ustez haranaren lekurik altuenaren gainera iritsi arte. Orduan, agerian geratu nintzen eta, berehalakoan, nire harrapatzaileetako batek ikusi egin ninduen eta bestei jakinarazi zien. Behetik zetozen oihuak entzun nituen eta ikusi nuen bilaketak norabidea aldatu zuela. Gailurretik atzera joateko keinua egin nuen, baina, horren ordez, etorri nintzen bidetik itzuli nintzen eta, hogei minutu geroago, lo egin nuen lekuaren gainean nengoen. Talaia hartatik, kontent ikusi nuen ehiza-taldea haranaren goialdean azkar joaten ari zela, arrasto faltsuaren atzetik.
Aurrean, hainbat bide nituen aukeran, eta gailur harekin angelua egiten zuen beste gainalde bat hartu nuen. Horrela, etsaien eta nire artean, haran sakona izango nuen. Antza, mugitzeak odola berotu zidan eta primeran pasatzen ari nintzen. Gelditu gabe, geratzen zitzaizkidan jengibre-galleta hautseztatuak gosaldu nituen.
Inguruaren gainean, oso informazio gutxi nuen eta ez nekien zer egin behar nuen. Nire hanken indarrez fidatzen nintzen, baina nire atzetik zetozenek ingurua ondo ezagutuko zuten eta nire ezjakintasuna oztopo handia izango zen. Aurrean, amaigabeko gainak ikusten nituen. Hegoalderantz, altuera askoz handiagokoak ziren, baina iparralderantz gailurrak zabalak ziren, sakonera txikiko haran zabalek banatuta. Ikusten nuenarengatik, gutxi gorabehera bi kilometrora, aukeratutako gailurrak behera egiten zuen eta han landa bat zegoen, haran arteko sakela bat balitz bezala. Beste edozein norabide bezain ona zirudien.
Nire amarruak abantaila ona eman izan zidan —hogei bat minutu—, eta haran oso baten zabalera nuen atzean, harrapatzaileen buruak ikusi arte. Argi zegoen poliziak bertakoen laguntza eskatu zuela eta ikusten nituen gizonek artzainak edota basozainak ziruditen. Ikusi nindutenean, oihu egin zuten eta esku batekin agurtu nituen. Haietako bi haranean barneratu ziren eta nire gailurrera igotzen hasi ziren; besteak euren lekuan geratu ziren. Harrapaketa-jolasean dabiltzan eskola-umeen gisara genbiltzan.
Hala ere, laster galdu zuen jolas itxura. Nire atzetik zeuden gizonak indartsuak ziren, tokikoen tankeran. Atzera begiratu nuen, eta hiru bakarrik zetozen nire atzetik zuzenean; ziur aski, besteek zirkuitu bat egingo zuten, niri bidea mozteko. Ingurua ez ezagutzeak hondamena ekar zidakeen eta erabaki nuen haran-korapilo hartatik atera behar nuela, eta landa-sakelan sartu. Distantzia nahikoa handitu behar nuen haiek gainetik kentzeko eta uste nuen, inguru egokia aurkituz gero, lor nezakeela. Zuhaitz batzuk aurkitu izan banitu, horietan ezkutatzen saiatuko nintzatekeen; baina, aldapa biluzi horietan, euli bat kilometro batera ikus zitekeen. Itxaropena hanken luzeran eta arnasaren

indarrean jarri behar nuen; baina, hori egiteko, lur errazagoa behar nuen, ez bainaiz mendizale petoa. Hego Afrikako poney on bat izango banu!
Biziki bizkortu nuen erritmoa, gailurretik jaitsi nintzen eta landara iritsi nire atzeko zeruertzean inor agertu baino lehen. Erreka bat gurutzatu nuen eta errepide batera iritsi nintzen; bi haran lotzen zituen mendate bat osatzen zuen. Nire aurrean, txilardi handi bat zegoen, zuhaitz zaharrez zipriztindutako gailurrean gora zihoana. Errepide ondoko hesian, ate bat zegoen eta, hortik, belarrak estalitako bidexka batek landaren lehengo zatia gurutzatzen zuen.
Hesiaren beste aldera salto egin, eta bideari jarraitu nion. Ehun metro ingurura, belarra desagertu zen, eta bidexka errepide ona bihurtu. Argi zegoen norbaitek zaintzen zuela. Ziur nengoen etxe batera helduko zela eta erabaki nuen ni ere etxe horretara joango nintzela. Ordura arte, zortea aldekoa izan nuen eta, beharbada, nire aukerarik onena urrutiko bizileku hori izango zen. Dena dela, zuhaitzak bazeuden eta, horiekin, ezkutatzeko aterpea ere bai.
Ez nuen errepidetik jarraitu, eskuinetara zegoen erreka ondotik baizik. Garo altua hazten zen han eta, horrekin eta ibar garaiekin, nahiko holtz ona nuen. Erabaki ona izan zen: sakonunera iritsi bezain pronto atzera begiratu, eta jazarleak utzi berri nuen gailurra gurutzatzen ikusi bainituen.
Horren ondoren ez nuen berriro atzera begiratu, ez nuen astirik. Erreka ondotik korrika abiatu nintzen, leku irekietan katuka eta, askotan, sakonera txikiko errekaren gainean. Etxola abandonatu bat aurkitu nuen, zohikatz-tontor zaharrez eta basati bihurtutako lorategi batez inguratua. Gero, belar berriaren artetik sartu nintzen eta, laster, haizeak zigortutako izeidi baten ertzera iritsi. Hortik, ehun bat metrora, kea zerien etxe baten tximiniak ikusi nituen ezkerretara. Errekatik urrun nintzen, beste hesi batean gora jauzi eta, konturatu baino lehen, belardi latz baten gainean nengoen. Atzera begiratuz ikusi nuen jazarleen bistatik kanpo nengoela. Momentuz, ez zuten landaren lehenbiziko igoera gainditu.
Belardia oso leku latza zen. Igitai batekin moztuta zegoen, makina erabili ordez, eta narriatutako errododendroak zituen parterretan. Hegazti beltz pare bat — ezohikoak lorategietan— ni hurbiltzearekin aireratu ziren. Aurrean nuen etxea landako etxalde ohikoa zen, baina karez zuritutako hegal handiustea gehitua zioten. Hegal horri kristalezko karrerape bat jarri zioten, eta, kristaletik, lasaitasunez niri begira zegoen gizon adinduna ikusi nuen.
Mendiaren legar latzezko ertza gurutzatu nuen eta irekita zegoen karrerapearen atetik sartu nintzen. Barruan, gela atsegin bat zegoen: alde bat kristalezkoa zen eta, bestean, milaka liburu zeuden. Barrualdeko beste gela batean, beste liburu batzuk zeuden. Zoruaren gainean, mahiaren ordez, museoetan ikusten diren erakusketa-kutxak zeuden, txanponez eta harrizko gailu bitxiez beteta.

Gelaren erdian, belaunentzako hutsunea zuen idazmahai bat zegoen eta, zenbait paper eta irekitako liburukiak aurrean zituela, borondate oneko gizon adinduna. Aurpegia biribila eta distiratsua zuen, Pickwick jaunaren antzera, eta betaurreko handiak zituen sudur-muturrean. Buruaren gainazala beirazko botila bat bezain distiratsu eta biluzia zuen. Sartu nintzenean, ez zen batere-batere mugitu; baina bekain lasaiak altxatu zituen eta nire hitzen zain geratu zen.
Bost minutu baino ez nituen ezezagun bati nor nintzen eta zer behar nuen azaltzeko, eta hori ez zen erraza. Ez nintzen saiatu ere egin. Aurrean nuen gizonaren begiak hain ziren zuhur eta jakintsu, ezen ezin bainuen hitzik ere aurkitu. Hari begira geratu nintzen eta totelka hasi nintzen.
—Badirudi presaka zabiltzala, lagun hori— esan zidan astiro.
Leihora begiratzeko keinua egin nion buruarekin. Zuhaitz arteko hutsune batetik, landa ikusten zen eta han, zortziehun bat metrora, zenbait gizon txilarren erditik hurbiltzen.
—A, ulertzen dut —esan zidan eta prismatikoak hartu zituen pertsona horiek pazientziaz aztertzeko.
—Justiziatik ihesi zabiltza, orduan? Bueno, horren gainean lasai hitz egingo dugu. Momentuz, ez zait ondo iruditzen mendialdeko polizia traketsek nire pribatutasuna apurtzea. Liburutegian sartu eta, parean, bi ate ikusiko dituzu. Ezkerrekoan sartu eta zure atzetik itxi. Erabat seguru egongo zara.
Eta aparteko gizon hark idazluma hartu zuen berriro.
Esan zidana egin nuen eta gela txiki batean sartu nintzen. Gai kimikoen usaina zegoen eta argia hormako goialdean zegoen leihotik sartzen zen bakarrik. Atea nire atzetik itxi zen, klik batekin, kutxa gotor baten antzera. Berriro ere, espero ez nuen babesleku bat aurkitu nuen.
Hala ere, ez nengoen eroso. Jaun zaharrak bazuen harritzen eta hein batean beldurtzen ninduen zerbait. Lasaiegi eta prestuegi zegoen, nire zain egon balitz bezala kasik. Eta begi azkar horiek izutzekoak ziren.
Leku ilun horretan ez nuen soinurik entzuten. Nik nekiela, bazitekeen polizia etxea aztertzen aritzea eta, hala izanez gero, atearen atzean zer zegoen jakin nahiko zuketen. Saiatu nintzen pazientzia izaten eta nire gose biziaz ahazten.
Orduan, jarrera baikorragoa hartu nuen. Jaun zaharrak nekez ukatuko zidakeen otordu bat. Hirugiharrarekin eta arrautzekin nahiko izango nukeen, baina kilo bat hirugihar eta berrogeita hamar arrautza beharko nituzkeen. Otorduarekin pentsatzen ahogozoa egiten zitzaidala, klik bat entzun nuen eta atea ireki zen.
Eguzki-argitara atera nintzen eta etxeko jabea besaulki sakon batean eserita aurkitu nuen, liburutegi esaten zion horretan niri so, begiak jakin-minarekin distiratsu.
—Joan egin dira? — galdetu nion.

—Joan dira, bai. Mendia zeharkatu duzula sinetsarazi diet. Ez dut gustuko polizia nire eta ohore handiz hartu nahi dudan pertsona baten artean sartzea. Zorte handiko goiza da hau zuretzat, Richard Hannay jauna.
Hitz egiten zuela, betazalek dar-dar egiten zioten eta begi gris zorrotzak erdi estaltzen zituzten. Tupustean, Scudderren esaldi batekin gogoratu nintzen. Munduan gehien izutzen zuen gizona deskribatzen ari zenean, honela esan zidan: "Begiak belatz batek bezala ezkuta zitzakeela". Orduan, ulertu nuen etsaiaren egoitzan sartu nintzela.
Gaizkile zaharra itotzea eta kanpora abiatzea izan zen nire aurreneko ideia. Nire asmoari aurrea hartu zion, ordea. Irribarre txikia zuen, eta, buruarekin, nire atzean zegoen ate aldera egin zuen keinu. Bira egin nuen eta pistolaz hornitutako bi zerbitzari ikusi nituen.
Bazekien nire izena, baina ez ninduen aurretiaz inoiz ikusi. Horrekin konturatu nintzenean, aukera txiki bat ikusi nuen.
—Ez dakit zer esan nahi duzun —esan nion haserre—. Zein da Richard Hannay hori? Nire izena Ainslie da.
—A, bai? —esan zidan, irribarrea galdu gabe—. Eta beste izen batzuk ere badituzu. Baina ez dugu horri buruz eztabaidatuko.
Lasaitasuna berreskuratzen hasi nintzen, eta ohartu nintzen arropak ez ninduela salatuko, jakarik, txalekorik eta lepokorik ez bainuen. Amorru aurpegia jarri nion, eta sorbaldak jaso nituen.
—Beraz, azkenean, poliziara bidaliko nauzu eta zikin jokatzea da hori. Arraioa, auto hori ikusi nuen unea madarikatzen dut! Hartu dirua eta zoaz pikutara! —eta lau libera bota nituen mahai gainera.
Begiak ireki zituen pixka bat.
—Ez, ez, ez zaitut entregatuko. Nire lagunek, zuk eta laurok akordio pribatu bat egingo dugu, hori da dena. Gehiegitxo dakizu, Hannay jauna. Antzezle bizkorra zara, baina ez da nahikoa.
Ziurtasunez hitz egin zuen, baina zalantza bat sortzen ari zitzaiola ikusi nuen.—Jainkoarren, utzi hitz egiteari behingoz —oihu egin nion—. Den-dena nire aurka dago. Leithen lurreratu nintzenetik, ez dut zorte izpirik ere izan. Horren txarra al da gosez dagoen gizajo batek suntsitutako auto batetik dirua hartzea? Horixe da nik egin dudan gauza bakarra eta horregatik polizia malapartatu horiek nire atzetik ibili dira azken bi egunotan, mendian gora, mendian behera. Nazkatua nago, bai horixe. Nahi duzuna egin, agure! Ned Ainsliek ez du borrokan jarraitzeko gogorik.
Zalantza handitzen ari zitzaiola ikusi nuen.
—Mesede bat, kontatuko didazu zer egin duzun azken egunotan? —galdetu zidan.

—Ezin dut, jauna —erantzun nion gizajo baten ahots kexatiarekin—. Bi egunotan ez dut ezer jan. Jateko pixka bat eman, eta benetako egia entzungo duzu gero.
Ziurrenik, gosea aurpegian nabaritzen zitzaidan, atarian zeuden gizonetako bati seinale bat egin baitzion. Haragi-pastel zati hotz bat eta edalontzi bat garagardo ekarri zituen, eta txerri baten modura irentsi nituen, edo, hobeto esanda, Ned Ainsliek egingo lukeen eran, paper hori bete egin behar nuen eta. Otorduaren erdian, bat-batean, alemanez hitz egin zidan eta zur eta lur geratu izan banintz bezala begiratu nion.
Orduan, nire istorioa kontatu nion. Archangel itsasontzitik Leithen lurreratu nintzela zuela astebete, eta anaiarengana abiatu, Wigtownera. Oso diru gutxi nuen —parranda egin nuela eman nion aditzera— eta, ia sosik gabe bidean nengoela, hesi batean zuloa aurkitu eta, handik, auto handi bat ikusi nuen errekan. Gertatutakoa ikustera gerturatu nintzen eta hiru libera aurkitu nituen aulkiaren gainean, eta beste bat, zoruan. Ez zegoen inor, ezta jabearen seinalerik ere; beraz, dirua sakelaratu nuen. Baina polizia nire atzetik hasi zen nonbait. Okindegi batean libera bat aldatzen saiatu nintzenean, emakumeak poliziari deitu zion eta, hortik pixka batera, aurpegia erreka batean garbitzen ari nintzela, harrapatzeko zorian egon ziren, eta, ihes egiteko, jaka eta txalekoa han utzi behar izan nituen.
—Dirua har dezatela! —oihu egin nuen—. Niri ez dit ezer onik ekarri. Madarikatu horiek gizon gaixo bati jazartzen ari zaizkio. Zuk liberak aurkitu izan bazenitu jauna, inork ez lizuke arazorik sortuko.
—Gezur-kontalari ona zara, Hannay —esan zidan.
Neure onetik atera ninduen.
—Txantxekin nahikoa da, demontre! Izena Ainslie dudala esan dizut eta bizitza osoan ez dut Hannay izenekorik ezagutu. Nahiago nuke polizia zu eta zure Hannaytarrak eta pistoladun tximino horiek baino. Ez, jauna, barkatu, ez nuen hori esan nahi. Janaria asko eskertzen dizut eta, orain, nire atzetik datozenek alde egin dutenez, eskertuko dizut joaten uztea.
Argi zegoen ez zekiela zer egin. Kontua zen ez ninduela inoiz ikusi eta, segur aski, argazkietako gizonak alde handia zuen une hartan aurrean zuenarekin, argazkirik ikusi bazuen noizbait. Londresen dotore jantzita joaten nintzen eta, orain, benetako eskalea ematen nuen.
—Ez dut joaten uzteko asmorik. Esan duzuna egia bada, laster izango duzu hori baieztatzea. Baina nik uste dudana bazara, ez dut uste luze iraungo duzunik bizirik.
Txirrina bat jo zuen eta hirugarren zerbitzari bat sartu zen karrerapetik.
—Bost minutuan, Lanchester-a hemen nahi dut —esan zion—. Bazkaltzeko hiru izango gara.

Orduan, irmo begiratu zidan eta hori izan zen probarik gogorrena.
Zerbait bitxia eta maltzurra zuen begietan: hotza, gaiztoa, naturaz gaindikoa eta izugarri adimentsua. Suge baten begi distiratsuek bezala liluratzen ninduten. Gupida izateko erregutu eta haren aldeko bihurtuko nintzela ziurtatzekotan egon nintzen kasik. Afera horretan guztian nituen sentimenduak kontuan hartuta, bulkada erabat fisikoa izan behar zuen, espiritu sendoago batek liluratu eta menperatu duen burmuin baten ahulezia. Baina horri eusten lortu nuen, baita irribarre egiten ere.
—Hurrengoan ezagutuko nauzu —esan nion.
—Karl —atarian zeuden gizonetako bati alemanez hitz egin zion—, sartu gizon hau biltegian itzultzen naizen arte. Zure ardura izango da.
Gelatik atera ninduten, pistola bat belarri bakoitzaren kontra nuela.
Biltegia gela hezea zen, etxalde izandako eraikina. Zoru malkarraren gainean ez zegoen alfonbrarik eta, eskola-aulki bat izan ezik, ez zegoen non eseri. Ikatza bezain beltz zegoen, leihoak leiho-atez estalita zeuden eta. Ikusi nuen hormen kontra kutxak, upelak eta gauza astunez betetako zakuak zeudela. Lizunaren eta erabilera faltaren usaina nabaria zen. Kartzelariek giltzez itxi zuten atea eta kanpoan geratu ziren, ni zaintzeko, eta tarteka urratsak sumatzen nituen.
Iluntasun heze hartan eseri nintzen, erabat ezkor. Agurea auto batean joan zen aurreko egunean elkarrizketatu ninduten gizonen bila. Haiek errepide-langilez mozorrotuta ikusi ninduten eta nitaz gogoratuko ziren arropa bera neramalako. Zertan ari zen errepide-langile bat lanpostutik hogei kilometrora, poliziak jarraituta? Galdera batek edo bik bide onean jarriko zituzten. Ziur aski, Turnbull jaunarekin egon ziren, baita Marmierekin ere. Sir Harryrekin ere lotuko ninduketen eta, orduan, dena argi baino argiago geratuko zatekeen. Zer aukera nuen landako etxe horretan, hiru gaizkilerekin eta haien zerbitzari armatuekin?
Nostalgiaz, poliziarekin gogoratu nintzen; orain nire mamuaren atzetik ibiliko ziren mendietan zehar. Haiek, behintzat, aberkideak eta zintzoak ziren, eta haien errukia atzerritar krudelena baino gozoagoa litzateke. Dena dela, ez zidaketen entzungo. Betazal bereziak zituen deabru zaharrari ez zitzaion denbora luze kostatu haiek uxatzea. Bururatu zitzaidan harreman ilunen bat izango zuela polizia-gorputzarengan. Litekeena zen Gobernuko ministro batzuen gutunak izatea, esanez erabateko laguntza eman behar ziotela Erresuma Batuen aurkako azpijokoetan. Herrialde alai honetan, modu zentzugabe horretan egiten dugu politika.
Hirurak bazkaltzeko itzuliko ziren eta, hortaz, itxaroteko bi ordu baino ez nituen. Hondamenaren zain nengoen, ez bainuen korapilo hartatik irteteko biderik ikusten. Scudderren ausardia izan nahi nuen: aitortuko dut ez nintzela oso indartsu sentitzen. Nire haserreak bakarrik eusten zidan zutik. Hiru espioi horiek

irabaziko zidatela pentsatzeak sutan jartzen ninduen. Espero nuen gutxienez haietako baten lepoa bihurritzea haiek ni erail baino lehen.
Zenbat eta gehiago pentsatu, orduan eta haserreago jartzen nintzen. Gelan atzera eta aurrera ibiltzen hasi nintzen. Leiho-ateak mugitzen saiatu nintzen, baina giltzaz itxita zeuden eta ezin nuen. Kanpoaldean eguzkipean zeuden oilo batzuen kakara ahula entzuten zen. Orduan, zakuen eta kutxen artean miatzen hasi nintzen. Ezin nituen kutxak ireki eta, itxuraz, zakuak txakur-galleten antza zuen kanela-usaineko zerbaitez beteta zeuden. Baina, gelan miatzen ari nintzela, horman eskuleku bat aurkitu nuen eta otu zitzaidan interesgarria izan litekeela hori aztertzea.
Horma-armairu baten atea zen —Eskozian "press" deitzen dioten horietako bat—, eta giltzaz itxita zegoen. Astindu nuen eta bazirudien nahiko arina zela. Beste ezer egitekorik ez nuela, indarrak ate horren kontra kontzentratu nituen. Ateari hobeto heltzeko, galtza-uhalak lotu nizkion. Azkenean, zarata handi batekin ireki zen eta pentsatu nuen horrek kartzelariak ohartaraziko zituela eta etorriko zirela zer gertatu zen ikustera. Pixka batez itxaron ondoren, armairuko apalak aztertu nituen.
Hainbat gauza bitxi zegoen. Praka baten sakeletan, pospolo batzuk aurkitu nituen eta haietako bat piztu nuen. Segundo bat geroago itzali zen, baina gauza bat erakutsi zidan. Apal batean, bazeuden linterna elektrikoak. Haietako bat hartu nuen eta bazebilen.
Linternaz lagunduta, gela hobeki aztertu nuen. Bazeuden usain arraroak zituzten botilak eta kutxak, esperimentuak egiteko gai kimikoak, dudarik gabe; haril batzuk, baita kobrezko kable fina eta zetazko soka koipeztatu ugari ere. Kutxa bat detonagailuz beteta zegoen eta fusible soka asko zegoen. Apalaren atzealdean, kartoizko kutxa potolo bat aurkitu nuen eta, horren barruan, egurrezko kutxa bat. Kostata ireki nuen eta barruan dozena-erdi adreilu txiki gris zeuden, bakoitza hiru bat zentimetro karratukoa.
Haietako bat hartu eta ohartu nintzen eskuan erraz birrindu zela. Orduan, usaindu eta mihiaz ukitu nuen. Gero, pentsatzera eseri nintzen. Ez nintzen meatzari-ingeniaria alferrik izan eta banekien lentonita zela.
Adreilu horietako batekin, etxea infernura bidal nezakeen. Rhodesian erabili nuen eta haren indarra ezagutzen nuen. Arazoa zen nire jakintzak ez zirela zehatzak. Karga egokiak zenbatekoa behar zuen eta hura nola prestatu ahaztuta neuzkan; eta denborari zegokionez ere, zalantzak neuzkan. Indarraren gainean ez nuen oso ideia zehatzik; baliatua nuen bai, baina ez nuen nik neuk neure eskuekin maneiatu.
Hala ere, irtenbide bat zen, eta nuen irtenbide bakarra, gainera. Bai, arriskua itzela zen; baina, bestela, etorkizun beltza baino ez zegoen. Erabiliz gero, banekien ehuneko laurogeiko probabilitatea nuela nire burua zuhaitzen

goialdera bidaltzeko; baina, erabili ezean, ilundu baino lehen, lorategian lurperatuta egon nintzen, bi metroko zuloan. Horrela pentsatu behar nuen. Aurreikuspen biak txarrak ziren; baina bazegoen aukera bat, bai niretzat baita nire aberriarentzat ere.
Scudderrekin gogoratzean, erabakia hartu nuen. Nire bizitzako momenturik txarrenetako bat izan zen, ez bainaiz batere ona erabakiak hotzetan hartzen. Aitzitik, bihotz hartu eta balentriari ekin nion, pentsamendu ezatseginak baztertuta. Burua hustu nuen eta nire baitari sinetsarazi nion su artifizialekin esperimentatzen dabilen umea nintzela.
Detonagailu bat hartu, eta bost zentimetro fusiblea lotu nion. Orduan, lentonitazko adreilu-laurdena hartu nuen eta, atetik gertu, zaku baten azpian lurperatu nuen, zoruan zegoen zirrikitu batean. Detonagailua lotu nion. Ordura arte ikusitakoaren arabera, kutxa haien erdia dinamita izan zitekeen. Armairuan lehergai hilkorrak bazeuden, zergatik ez kutxetan? Horrela izanez gero, zerurako bidaia zoragarria izango nuen, baita zerbitzari alemaniarrek ere, eta inguruko landaren hektarea batek-edo. Beste arrisku bat ere bazegoen: eztandak armairuan zeuden beste adreiluak ere leherraraztea, alegia. Lentonitari buruzko ia dena ahaztuta neukan. Dena dela, aukera horien gainean pentsatzea ez zitzaidan komeni. Apustu txarra zen; baina onartu egin behar nuen.
Leiho-ertz azpian ezkutatu nintzen, eta fusiblea piztu. Momentu batez itxaron nuen. Isiltasuna erabatekoa zen. Korridoreko bota astunak eta kanpoan eguzkipean zeuden oiloen kakara baino ez ziren entzuten. Jainkoari nire arima zaintzeko eskatu nion, eta neure buruari galdetu nion handik bost segundora non egongo ote nintzen…
Zorutik bero-uhin izugarria igo, eta airean geldi geratu zen istant larri batez. Orduan, parean neukan hormak eztanda egin zuen, urre koloreko horia hartuta, eta burrunba izugarri batekin desegin zen. Zaratak burmuina astindu zidan, ahi bihurtu arte. Zerbait erori zitzaidan gainera, eta ezkerreko sorbaldaren gainaldea harrapatu.
Eta uste dut orduan konortea galdu nuela.
Horrek segundo batzuez baino ez zuen iraun. Ke hori eta trinkoak itotzen ninduen, baina lortu nuen zutik jartzea, hankapean nituen hondakinetan artean. Nire atzean, airea sentitu nuen. Leihozangoak erori egin ziren eta, zulo zakar horretatik, keak udaldiko eguerdia inbaditzen zuen. Ateburu apurtutik atera, eta patio batera iritsi nintzen, laino trinko eta garratz batez inguratuta. Gaixorik eta zorabiatuta sentitzen nintzen, baina gorputz-adarrak mugi nitzakeen eta itsumustuka aldendu nintzen etxetik.
Patioko beste aldean, errota kanal labur batek egurrezko ubide batera ematen zuen eta horretan erori nintzen. Ur freskoak suspertu ninduen eta ihes egiteko buru nahikoa nuen. Kanalean, mugimendu txikiz ibili nintzen, lohi berde

irristakorrean zehar, errotako gurpileraino iritsi arte. Orduan, ardatz zuloan zehar bultzatu nuen gorputza, errota zaharrean sartu nintzen, eta lasto gainean erori. Iltze batek praken atzealdea katigatu zuen, eta tweed zati bat utzi nuen.
Errota aspaldi erabili gabekoa zen. Eskailerak urteengatik ustelduta zeuden, eta arratoiek zulo handiak egin zituzten ganbarako zoruan. Goragalea nuen, buruan, gurpil batek bira eta bira egiten zuen, eta ezkerreko sorbalda eta besoa paralizatuta neuzkan. Leihotik begiratu nuen. Etxea lainoz inguratuta zegoen, eta, goiko leiho batetik, kea ateratzen zen. Goiko Jauna! Etxeari sua eman nion, eta beste aldetik zetozen ahots nahasiak entzuten nituen.
Baina ezin nintzen hor geratu, argi zegoen errota ez zela ezkutatzeko leku ona. Nire bila zebilen edozeinek kanalari jarraituko ziokeen eta, nire gorputza biltegian ez aurkitzean, bila hasiko ziren. Beste leiho batetik ikusi nuen errotatik harago harrizko usategi bat zegoela. Haraino iristea banuen, arrastorik utzi gabe, ezkutaleku ona izan zitekeen. Mugitzeko gai nintzela ustez gero, landetara joan nintzela ondorioztatuko zuten, eta han bilatuko ninduten.
Apurtutako eskaileran behera joan nintzen motel eta, oinatzak estaltzeko, lastoa sakabanatu nuen nire atzean. Gauza bera egin nuen errotako zoruan, baita erlaitzean ere; atea banda apurtutik zintzilika zegoen han. Ezkutalekutik begiratu nuen eta ikusi nuen usategiaren eta nire artean zegoen lurra harzolaz eginda zegoela. Oinatzak ez ziren hor nabarituko. Gainera, errotari esker, ez zen etxetik ikusten.Tarte hori azkar gurutzatu nuen, usategiko atzealdera iritsi, eta nola igo aztertu nuen.
Inoiz egin dudan lanik zailenetako bat izan zen. Sorbaldan eta besoan, izugarrizko mina nuen, eta hain nengoen gaixo eta zorabiatuta, ezen edozein unetan erortzeko zorian bainengoen. Baina nola edo hala lortu nuen. Aterata zeuden harri batzuk, hargintzaren zirrikituak eta huntz-sustrai gogor bat erabiliz, goraino iritsi nintzen. Karel txiki bat zegoen eta han etzan nintzen. Orduan, konortea galdu nuen pixkanaka, aspaldi egiten zen gisa.
Esnatu nintzenean, burua sutan nuen eta eguzkia, begietan. Luze geratu nintzen mugitu gabe. Antza, ke nazkagarri horrek gorputz-adarrak ahuldu zizkidan, baita burumuina baldartu ere. Etxetik zetozen zaratak entzun nituen. Gizonak haserre hitz egiten ari ziren eta geldirik zegoen auto baten bibrazioari ere antzeman nion. Karelean zirrikitu txiki bat zegoen, mugimendu txikiez gerturatu nintzen eta, handik, patioaren zati bat ikus nezakeen. Gizon batzuk etxetik ateratzen ikusi nituen: burua bendaz lotuta zuen zerbitzari bat eta bonbatxoez jantzita zegoen gizon gazteago bat. Zerbaiten bila zebiltzan eta errotarantz joan ziren. Orduan haietako batek iltzean zegoen oihal-zatia ikusi zuen eta besteari oihu egin zion. Biak etxera itzuli ziren eta beste bi gizon ekarri zituzten oihala ikustera. Nire harrapatzaile ohiaren gorpuzkera biribila ikusi nuen, baita zizipaza egiten zuen gizona ere. Konturatu nintzen guztiek pistolak zituztela.

Ordu-erdi igaro zuten errota arpilatzen. Handik entzun nuen upelak ostikoz bota eta ohol ustelduak nola altxatzen zituzten. Orduan, atera egin ziren eta usategiaren ondoan geratu, eztabaida garratz batean. Benda zuen zerbitzariari kargu hartzen ari zitzaizkion. Usategiko atea irekitzen saiatu zirela sumatu nuen eta, une txar batez uste izan nuen igoko zirela. Aitzitik, iritzia aldatu zuten eta etxera itzuli.

Arratsalde sargori eta luze hura osoa teilatu gainean igaro nuen. Egarria izan zen torturarik handiena. Mihia idor-idorra nuen eta, hori gutxi balitz, errotako kanalaren uraren jario freskoa entzuten zen. Landatik zetorren erreka txikiari begiratu nion eta, nire buruan, haranaren goialderaino jarraitu nion. Han, iturri izoztu batetik aterako zen, garoz eta goroldioz inguratuta. Mila libera eman izango nituzkeen aurpegia iturri horretan murgiltzearen truke.

Landa guztia ondo ikusten nuen. Autoa eta bi bidaiariak azkar aldendu ziren eta gizon bat ekialderantz abiatu zen, poney baten gainean. Nire bila zebiltzala pentsatu nuen eta bilaketa horretan zortea opa nien.

Baina hori baino gauza interesgarriago bat ikusi nuen. Etxea gailur gainean zegoen ia eta hori baino lur altuagorik ez zegoen hamar kilometrora zeuden mendi handietaraino. Gailurra bera, lehen aipatu bezala, zuhaizti txikia zen. Gehienak izeiak ziren, lizar batzuk bazeuden, baita pagoak ere. Usategi gainean, zuhaitzen goialdearen maila berean nengoen eta harago zegoena ikus nezakeen. Basoa ez zen trinkoa, eraztun bat baino ez zen, eta erdialdean belardi obalatua zegoen, kriket zelai baten gisakoa.

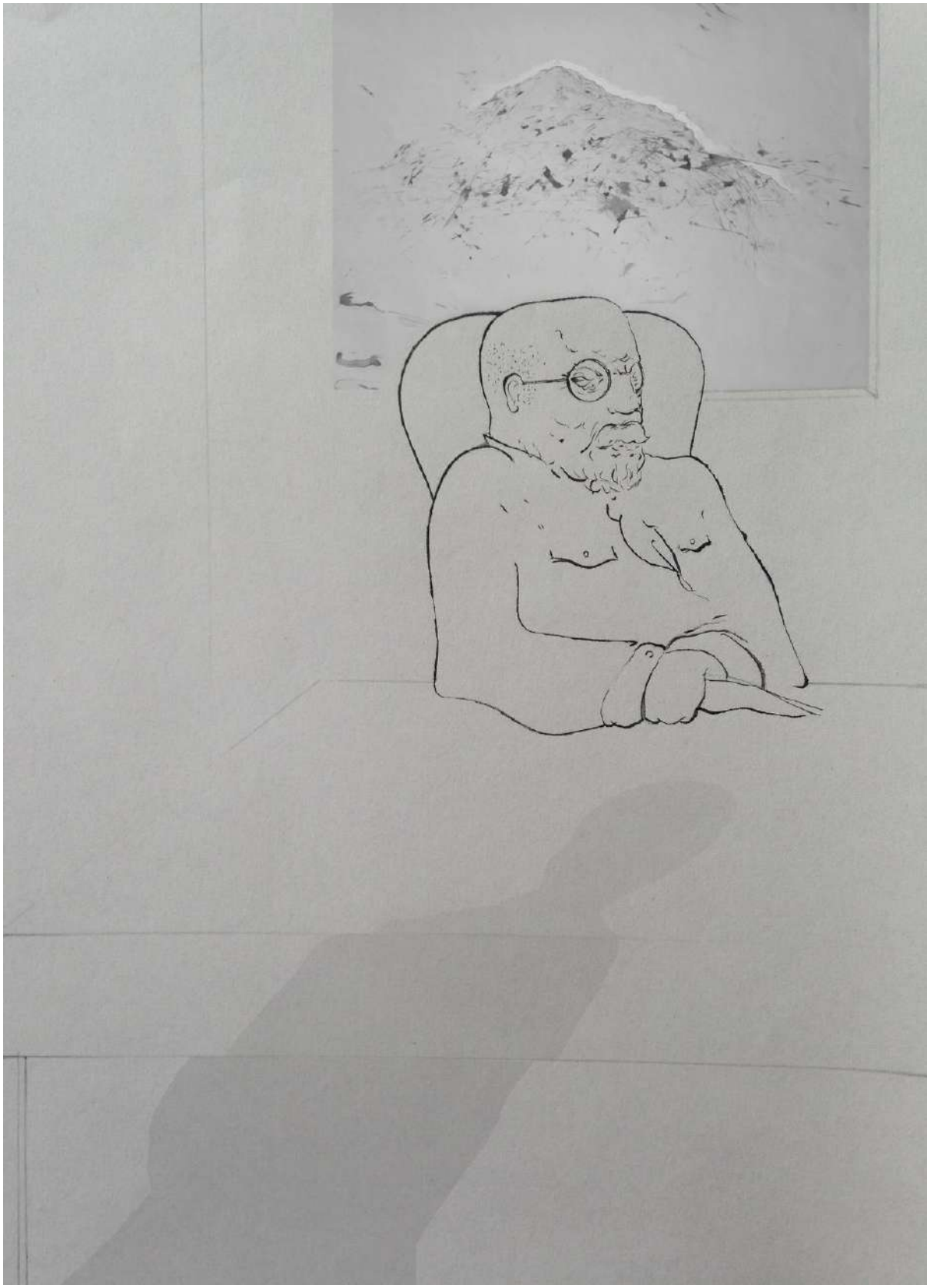
Ez zitzaidan asko kostatu hori zer zen asmatzea. Aerodromo bat zen, aerodromo sekretua. Lekua adimen handiz aukeratu zuten. Inork hegazkin bat hemen lurreratzen ikusiz gero, pentsatuko zukeen zuhaitzetatik harago zeuden muinoetan gora joan zela. Lekua anfiteatro handi batean erdiko goialde baten gainean zegoenez, edozein lekutatik begiratuta ere, ondoriozta zitekeen muinoen atzean ikuspegitik atera zela. Oso gertu egon behar zuen batek konturatzeko ez zela muinoaren gainetik joan, baso erdian lurreratu baizik. Prismatikoak erabilita eta mendi altuago batean kokatuta ohar zitekeen norbait egiaz; baina artzainak bakarrik joaten ziren haraino eta artzainek ez dute prismatikorik eramaten. Usategitik begiratuta, urrunean, lerro urdin bat ikusten nuen, eta banekien hura itsasoa zela. Etsaiek talaia sekretu hura gure urei behatzeko erabiltzen zutela pentsatze hutsak haserrarazten ninduen.

Orduan konturatu nintzen hegazkina itzuliz gero, aukera handia zegoela ni aurkitzeko. Beraz, arratsaldean etzanda geratu nintzen eta ilunabarra noiz etorriko zain gelditu nintzen. Eguzkia mendebaldeko mendien atzetik jaitsi eta landara iluntzea iritsi zenean, poztu egin nintzen. Hegazkina berandu zetorren. Ilunabarra aurreratuta zegoen hegazkina entzun nuenean. Motorra itzalita, baso erdiko argigunera planeatu zuen. Argi batzuk ikusi ziren tarte batez eta etxean

joan-etorri ugari izan ziren. Orduan, erabat ilundu zuen eta isilpean geratu zen dena. Eskerrak gau iluna zen. Ilbehera zegoen eta ilargia ez zen berandura arte aterako. Egarriak ez zidan itxaroten uzten eta, beraz, bederatziak aldera jaisten hasi nintzen. Ez zen erraza eta erdibidean nengoela entzun nuen etxeko atzeko atea ireki zela, baita linterna baten argia errotako horman ikusi ere. Minutu mingarri batzuez, huntzetik zintzilik egon nintzen, eta erregutu nuen pertsona hori usategira ez etortzeko. Orduan, argia aldendu zen, eta ahal nuen bezain isilik, nire burua erotzen utzi nuen patioko lur gogorraren gainean.

Sabel gainean arrastaka harrizko hesi baten estalpean barna joan nintzen etxea inguratzen zuten zuhaitzen ingurunera iritsi arte. Nola egin jakinez gero, hegazkina zapuzten saiatuko nintzatekeen; baina konturatu nintzen halako edozein saiakera alferrikakoa izango zela. Nahiko ziur nengoen etxe inguruan defentsa-motaren bat egongo zela eta, ondorioz, basoa katuka gurutzatu nuen, bidearen zentimetro guztiak aztertuz. Eskerrak horrela ibili nintzen, lurretik hirurogei bat zentimetrora kable bat aurkitu bainuen. Horrekin estropezu egin izan banu, ziur aski, etxe barruan txirrinen bat joko zukeen eta horrek salatuko nindukeen.

Ehun bat metro harago, beste kable bat aurkitu nuen. Trebetasun handiz, erreka txiki baten ertzean zeukaten jarrita. Harago, landa zegoen, eta, bost minutu geroago, garoz eta txilarrez inguratuta nengoen. Laster, gailurrera igo, eta errotako kanala elikatzen zuen ibar txikian nintzen. Handik hamar minutura, aurpegia iturrian sartuta neukan eta litroka irentsi nuen ur zoragarri hura. Baina ez nintzen gelditu bizileku madarikatu horretatik hamar bat kilometrora egon arte.



7 - Errekako arrantzalea

Gailur baten gainean eseri nintzen, eta nire egoera analizatu nuen. Ez nengoen oso pozik. Nahiz eta ihes egiten lortzegatik kontent egon,ondoez handia nuen gorputzean. Lentonita-keak zeharo pozoitu ninduen eta usategiko teilatuaren gainean emandako orduek ez zidaten mesederik egin. Buruko min izugarria nuen eta benetan gaixo sentitzen nintzen. Horrez gain, sorbalda gaizki nuen. Hasieran uste nuen ubeldura baino ez zela, baina hanpatzen ari zen, eta ezin nuen ezkerreko besoa erabili.

Nire plana Turnbull jaunaren etxolara itzultzea zen. Han, nire arropa berreskuratuko nukeen eta, batez ere, Scudderren liburuxka. Gero, trenbidera abiatuko nintzatekeen eta hegoaldera itzuli. Sir Walter Bullivant, Kanpo Arazoetako Ministerioaren arduradun horrekin zenbat eta azkarrago harremanetan jarri, orduan eta hobeto. Ez nuen ikusten lortutako frogak baino gehiago eskuratzeko modurik. Nire istorioa sinetsiko zukeen edo ez eta, gertatzen zena gertatzen zela, harekin deabru alemaniar horiekin baino hobeto egongo nintzen. Polizia britainiarra jatortzat hartzen hasia nintzen.

Gau izartsu ederra zen eta errepidea ez zen zaila. Sir Harryk erakutsitako mapari esker, ingurua pixka bat ezagutzen nuen eta hego-mendebaldera baino pixka bat mendebalderago joatea baino ez nuen. Horrela, errepide-langilea ezagutu nuen errekara iritsiko nintzen. Ez nituen bidaia horretan ikusitako lekuen izenak ezagutzen, baina uste nuen erreka horrek Tweed ibaiaren hasiera izan behar zuela. Kalkulatu nuen hogeita hamar bat kilometrotara nengoela eta, hortaz, ez nintzatekeen goizaldera arte iritsiko. Beraz, egun bat ezkutatuta eman beharko nuen. Nire itxura bitxiegia zen eguzkipean ibiltzeko. Ez nuen jakarik, txalekorik, lepokorik, ezta txanorik ere. Prakak zeharo urratuta neuzkan eta, eztandaren ondorioz, aurpegia eta eskuak belztuta neuzkan. Esan behar da bestelako erakargarririk ere banuela, begiak izugarri narritatuta nituela sentitzen bainuen. Oro har, ez nengoen herritar zintzoek errepidean ikusteko moduan.

Egunsentia iritsi bezain pronto, muino gaineko erreka batean garbitzen saiatu nintzen eta gero artzain baten etxola batera hurbildu, janaria behar nuen eta. Artzaina ez zegoen eta emaztea bakarrik aurkitu nuen. Bizilagunik gertuena zortzi bat kilometrotara zegoen. Emakume zahar indartsua zen, baita ausarta ere. Ikusi ninduenean izutu zen arren, aizkora zuen eskura eta, maltzurra nintzela irudituz gero, erabiliko zukeen. Kontatu nion erori egin nintzela —ez nion azaldu nola— eta, itxurarengatik ikusi zuen nahiko gaixorik nengoela. Samariar hutsa zen aldetik, ez zidan galderarik egin. Katilu bat esne eman zidan, whiski pixka batekin, eta pixka batez sukaldeko sutondo ondoan esertzen utzi zidan. Sorbalda garbitu nahi zidan, baina hain minduta zegoenez, ez nion utzi.

Ez dakit zertzat hartu ninduen. Beharbada, damututako etxe-lapurtzat. Izan ere, esneagatik ordaindu nahi izan nionean, libera bat eskaini nion —ez nuen hori baino txikiagorik—, eta hark buruarekin ezetz egin, "horretarako eskubidea zutenei eman" edo halako zerbait esan zidan. Horren kontra indartsu egin nion protesta eta, azkenean, zintzoa nintzela sinestarazi eta dirua onartu zuen. Horren truke, plaid berri bat eta senarraren txano zahar bat eman zizkidan. Plaida sorbalden inguruan nola lotu behar nuen erakutsi zidan eta, etxolatik atera nintzenean, Burns bardoaren olerki-liburuetan dauden ilustrazioetako eskoziar baten itxura nuen. Baina, edozein moduz, gutxi gorabehera jantzita nengoen, behintzat.

Eskerrak, eguerdia baino lehen eguraldiak euri-jasa ekarri baitzuen. Errekaren bihurgune batean zegoen harkaitz bat hartu nuen babeslekutzat eta, garo zahar batzuekin, nahiko ohe ona prestatu. Gaua baino lehentxeagora arte lo egitea lortu nuen, baina, esnatu nintzenean, gorputza zurrun nuen eta gogo txarrez nengoen. Sorbaldako mina haginetako mina bat bezain latz zen. Emakume adinduak eman zizkidan olo-tarta eta gazta jan nituen eta, erabat ilundu baino lehen, berriz abiatu nintzen.

Muino heze artean gau hartan igarotako miseriak labur kontatuko ditut. Ez zegoen izarrik norabidea ikusteko, eta maparen oroitzapenekin, ahal nuena egin behar nuen. Bitan galdu nintzen, eta zohikatzeko lokaztietan hainbatetan erori. Zuzen joanda, hamabost bat kilometro baino ez nituen egin behar baina, akatsen erruz, ia hogeita hamar egin nituen. Azken kilometroak hortzak estututa eta burua hutsik eta zorabiatuta egin nituen. Hala ere, lortu egin nuen eta egunsentia sartu berri zegoela, Turnbull jaunaren atea jo nuen. Lainoa trinkoa zen, eta etxolatik ezin nuen errepidea ikusi.

Turnbull jaunak berak ireki zidan atea. Lasai zegoen eta mozkorrik ez. Ondo zaindutako traje zahar beltzaz jantzita zegoen eta bizarra moztuta zuen, bezperan asko jota. Ezkerreko eskuan, biblia txiki bat zeraman. Hasieran, ez ninduen ezagutu.

—Nor haiz hi, igande goizean honat etortzeko? —galdetu zidan.

Ahaztuta nuen zein egunetan bizi ginen. Beraz, horrela jantzita zegoen igandea zelako.

Horren nuen zorabiatuta burua, non ezin bainuen erantzun koherente bat osatu. Orduan, ezagutu ninduen, eta ikusi zuen gaixorik nengoela.

—Nire begi-lagunak ba ote dituk? —galdetu zidan.

Praken sakelatik atera nizkion eta eman.

—Paltoa eta barneko motzaren bila etorri haiz, bistan da —esan zidan. —Sartu, ba. Putxas, mutikoa, ze ahul dituan zangoak! Hago, aulki bat ekarriko diat.

Jabetu nintzen malaria-krisi bat izango nuela. Barruan sukar handia nuen eta gau hezeak sorrarazi egin zidan. Horrek, sorbalda eta kearen eragina erantsita,

nahiko gaizki sentiarazten ninduen. Konturatu baino lehen, Turnbull jauna arropa kentzen laguntzen ari zitzaidan eta sukaldeko hormetan zeuden bi armairu-ohetako batean sartu ninduen.
Zailtasunetan, errepide-langile zaharra benetako laguna zen. Emaztea aspaldi hil zitzaion eta, alaba ezkondu zenetik, bakarrik bizi zen. Hamar egunez, behar nituen zaintza sinple guztiak eman zizkidan. Nik bakea nahi nuen sukarrak bere bidea egiten zuen bitartean. Azala berriz epeldu zitzaidanean, ikusi nuen krisialdiak sorbalda ere sendatu egin zuela, gutxi gorabehera. Dena dela, nahiko krisi latza izan zen eta, nahiz eta bost egun geroago ohetik atera, denbora gehiago behar izan nuen hankak bere onera bueltatu zitezen. Turnbill jauna goizero ateratzen zen, esnea uzten zidan eta atea giltzapetzen zuen. Iluntzean itzultzen zen eta isilik esertzen zen tximinia bazterrean. Inor ez zen etxolara hurbildu. Sendotzen ari nintzela, ez zidan galderarik egin. Batzuetan, bi egun lehenagoko Scotsman bat ekartzen zidan, eta ikusi nuen Portland Placeko Hilketari buruzko jakin-mina lasaitu egin zela. Ez zen aipatu ere egiten eta irakurtzeko ezer gutxi zegoen, Batzar Orokorra zeritzonari buruzko albisteak izan ezik. Ulertu nuenarengatik, eliz parranda edo horrelako bat zen.
Orduan, egun batean, giltzaz itxitako tiradera batetik, nire gerrikoa atera zuen.
—Sos anitz baduk, ezta? —esan zidan. —Hobe duk kondatzea, ea dena hor den.
Ez zidan izena galdetu ere egin. Galdetu nion errepide-lanetan egindako saioaren ondoren norbait etorri zen galderak egitera.
—Baa, gizon bat autoz etorri zuan. Galdetu zidaan nire lekua nork hartu zuen egun horretan eta inoxenta nintzela pentsarazi nioan. Baina galdetzen segitzen zian eta, azkenean, Cleucheko nire koinatari buruz ari zela esan nioan, batzuetan laguntzera etortzen zela. Itxura bitxia zian, eta ezin nian haren ingelesa ongi konprenitu.
Azken egun horietan, nahiko urduri nengoen eta, nire burua sasoian sentitu bezain pronto, alde egitea erabaki nuen. Hori ekainaren hamabian izan zen eta, zorionez, goiz horretan, behizain bat agertu zen, Moffatera abere batzuk eramaten ari zela. Hislop zuen izena eta Turnbullen laguna zen. Gosaltzera sartu zen etxean eta esan zidan berarekin eramango ninduela.
Ni zaintzeagatik, bost libera onartzera behartu nuen Turnbull, eta kostata lortu nuen. Ez dut inoiz gizon hura baino independenteagorik ezagutu. Tematu nintzenean, jarrera zakarra hartu zuen, gero lotsatu eta gorritu zen eta, azkenean, eskerrak eman gabe dirua hartu zidan. Asko zor niola esan nionean, “fabore bat beste baten truk” esan zuen marmarka. Agur esaterakoan, bazirudien elkarrekin haserre geundela.
Hislop gizon alaia zen. Mendate osoan eta Annango haran eguzkitsuan zehar hizketan aritu zen. Nik Gallowaygo azokaren eta ardi-salneurrien gainean hitz egin nion eta erabaki zuen ni hango borda-artzaina nintzela; auskalo zer izango

den hori. Plaidak eta txano zaharrak, esan bezala, eskoziar itxura nabarmena ematen zidaten. Dena dela, abereak eramatea lan motela da, oso, eta ia egun osoa eman genuen hogei bat kilometro egiteko.
Urduri egon izan ez banintz, gozatuko nukeen. Eguraldia urdina eta argitsua zen; paisaian mendixka marroiak eta larre berdeak txandakatzen ziren, eta hegatxabalen, kurlinten eta erreken soinuak entzuten genituen bidaian zehar. Baina burua udalditik urrun nuen eta arreta gutxi ematen nion Hislopen elkarrizketari. Izan ere, zorigaiztoko ekainaren hamabosta hurbiltzen ari zen eta nire ekimenaren zailtasun gaindiezinek zama izugarria jarri zidaten gainean.
Moffateko taberna apal batean afaldu nuen eta oinez egin nituen trenbide nagusiko lotunerako hiru kilometroak. Hegoalderako tren azkarra ez zen gauerdira arte iritsiko eta, hortaz, denbora pasatzeko, muino batera joan nintzen lo egitera, ibilaldiak neka-neka egin utzi baininduen. Gehiegi egin nuen lo eta korrika joan behar izan nuen geltokira. Atera baino bi minutu lehenago sartu nintzen trenean. Hirugarren klaseko kuxinek eta tabako zaharraren usainak izugarri alaitu ninduten. Behintzat, orain lanari heltzen hasia nintzela sentitzen nuen.
Trenak Crewen utzi ninduen goizaldean, eta sei orduz itxaron behar izan nuen Birminghamerako tren bat hartzeko. Arratsaldean, Readingera iritsi nintzen eta, han, Berkshire-n barrena zihoan aldirietako tren batean sartu nintzen. Larrez eta errekastoz zipriztindutako eskualdea zeharkatu genuen. Iluntzeko zortziak aldera, bidaiek nekatu eta zikindutako izaki bat —laborariaren eta albaitariaren arteko zerbait— atera zen Artinswellgo geltoki txikira, koadrodun plaid zuri-beltza beso gainean zuela —ez nintzen Eskoziako mugaz harago jantzita eramaten ausartzen—. Nasan, bazeuden pertsona batzuk eta uste nuen hobe zela handik urruntzea, norabideak galdetu baino lehen.
Errepideak pagadi handi bat gurutzatzen zuen; gero, sakonera txikiko haran batean sartzen zen, eta muino batzuen gailurrak ikusten ziren urruneko zuhaitzen gainetik. Eskozian egon ondoren, aireak usain astuna eta apala zuen, baina oso goxoa, aldi berean: gaztainondoak eta lila-zuhaixkak lorez gainezka zeuden. Zubi batera iritsi nintzen eta, haren azpian, errekasto garbia zebilen lore horien artetik. Haraxeago, errota bat zegoen eta iluntze lurrintsuan, soinu freskoa eta atsegina egiten zuen. Lekuak eroso sentiarazten ninduen nolabait eta barruak lasaitzen zizkidan. Paisaia berde horri begiratzen ari nintzaiola, txistuka hasi nintzen eta “Annie Laurie” melodia atera zitzaidan.
Arrantzale bat erreka ertzetik igo zen eta, hurbiltzen ari zitzaidala, hark ere txistu egiteari ekin zion. Nire melodia itsaskorra zen eta hura ere melodia berarekin hasi zen. Gizon alimalekoa zen, flanelazko arropa narrasez eta txano zabal batez jantzita, eta, sorbalda gainean, olanazko poltsa zaharra zeraman. Buruarekin keinu egin zidan eta pentsatu nuen ez nuela inoiz inor ikusi hura

bezain aurpegi burutsua eta aldarte onekoa. Hiru metroko kanabera zubiaren aurka utzi zuen eta, nirekin batera, urari begiratu zion.
—Oso gardena, ezta? —galdetu zidan atsegin—. Gure Kenner ibaia Test ibaia baino gehiago gustatzen zait. Begiratu arrain handi horri. Bi kilokoa da, gutxienez. Baina ilunabarra pasatu egin da eta ez dago harrapatzerik.
—Ez dut ikusten —esan nion.
—Begiratu! Hortxe! Ihietatik metro batera, ur-lasterretan.
—Orain ikusten dut. Harri beltz bat ematen du.
—Hara —esan zuen, eta "Annie Laurie" abestiaren beste zati bat txistuka egin zuen.
—Twisdon duzu izena, ezta? —esan zidan buelta eman gabe, oraindik errekari so.
—Ez —esan nion—. Zera, bai, esan nahi dut—. Ezizenaren kontua ahaztuta neukan.
—Azpikari jakintsuek beren izenak ezagutzen dituzte— esan zuen, zubiaren itzaletik atera zen uroilo bati irribarre eginez.
Zuzen jarri nintzen eta begiratu egin nion. Elutxadun masailezur karratua zuen, kopeta zabala eta zimurra, eta masail sendoak, eta hasi nintzen pentsatzen ondoan edukitzeko moduko aliatu bat aurkitu nuela azkenean. Bat-batean, haren begi urdin alaiak bizitu ziren.
Betondoa ilundu zitzaion. —Lotsagarria iruditzen zait— esan zuen, ahotsa altxatuz—. Lotsagarria da zu bezala sasoi onean dagoen gizon bat eske ibiltzen ausartzea. Nire sukaldean, jateko emango dizute, baina nigandik ez duzu dirurik lortuko.
Gizon gazte bat guregandik gertu pasatu zen gurdi txiki batean, eta arrantzalea zigorrarekin agurtu zuen. Hura aldendu zenean, arrantzaleak kanabera hartu zuen.
—Nire etxea hori da— esan zidan, ehun metrotara zegoen hesi zuri bat seinalatuz—. Bost minutuz itxaron, eta gero atzeko atera joan—. Eta, hori esanda, hantxe utzi ninduen.
Agindu bezala egin nuen. Herriko etxe polit bat aurkitu nuen. Belardia errekaraino iristen zen eta, bidexkaren ertzetan, alezuriz eta lilaz osatutako oihan zaindu bat zegoen. Atzeko atea irekita zegoen eta etxezain serio bat, nire zain.
-Etorri nigaz, jauna— esan zidan, eta korridore batean barrena eraman ninduen, atzeko eskaileretan gora eta, azkenean, logela atsegin batera. Ibaia ikusten zen handik. Niretzako jantzi asko utzi zituzten: arropa formala osagarri guztiekin, flanelazko traje marroi bat, alkandorak, lepokoak, gorbatak, bizarra kentzeko tresnak eta ile-eskuilak, baita zapata distiratu pare bat ere.

-Sir Walterrek pentsatu dau Reggie jaunaren gauzak zuretzat egokiak izango dirazala— esan zidan etxezainak. —Arropea izten dau hemen, asteburu askotan etortzen da eta. Ondoan bainugelea daukazu eta bainu bero bat prestatu deutsut. Afaria ordu-erdi barru izango da, jauna. Gonga entzungo dozu.
Izaki serio hark alde egin zuen eta, kalikoz estalita zegoen besaulki batean eserita, aho zabalik begiratu nion denari. Komedia musikal batean banengo bezala sentitzen nintzen, eskale izatetik erosotasun txukun honetara. Argi zegoen Sir Walter nigan fidatzen zela, nahiz eta nik horren zergatia ez jakin. Ispiluan, nire buruari begiratu nion eta gizon basatia, beltzarana eta begipetsua ikusi nuen, bi asteko bizarra zuena, lepokorik gabea, alkandora merke batekin, formarik gabeko tweedezko arropaz jantzita eta ia hilabetez garbitu ez ziren botekin. Arlotea ematen nuen, edo azokako abeltzaina, eta etxezain txukun batek erosotasun handiko tenplu honetara ekarria ninduen! Onena zen oraindik ez zekitela nire izena zein zen ere.
Erabaki nuen gehiago ez hausnartzea eta patuak eman zizkidan opariak onartzea. Luxu handiz, bizarra kendu eta bainua hartu nuen. Arropa formalez eta alkandora garbiarekin jantzi nintzen, nire tamainakoa ere bazen gutxi gorabehera. Bukatu nuenean, ispiluan begiratu, eta horren itxura txarrik ez zuen gazte bat ikusi nuen.
Sir Walter jangela ilun batean zegoen nire zain. Mahai biribil txiki bat zegoen han, zilarrezko kandelez argituta. Hura ikustean —horren agurgarria, errotua eta segurua, gobernuaren, legeen eta arau guztien ikurra—, harrituta geratu nintzen eta lekuz kanpo sentiarazi ninduen. Ez zekien ni benetan nor nintzen; bestela, ez nindukeen horrela tratatuko. Ezin nuen aitzakia faltsuekin haren abegia onartu.
—Ezin dizut egindakoa nahikoa eskertu, baina gauzak argitu behar ditut —esan nion—. Errugabekoa naiz, baina polizia atzetik daukat. Hori kontatu behar nizun eta, etxetik botatzen banauzu, ez naiz harrituko.
Irribarre egin zuen. —Ondo da. Ez diezazun horrek jateko gogoa hondatu. Afaldu ondoren hitz egingo dugu gauza horien gainean.
Ez nuen inoiz otordu bat hain gustura egina, egunean zehar treneko sandwichak baino ez bainituen jan. Sir Walterrek primerako afaria eman zidan. Xanpain ona edan genuen eta, afaldu ondoren, Oportoko ardo paregabea. Oso urduri jartzen ninduen han egoteak, zerbitzari batek eta etxezain dotore batek zerbitzatua, eta gogoratzeak hiru astez bidelapur baten eran bizi izan nintzela, guztiak nire aurka. Sir Walterri Zambesi ibaian dauden tigre-arrainen gainean hitz egin nion; horiek aukera izanez gero, hatzak jaten dizkigute. Ehiza munduan zehar genuen hizpide, ehiztari ibilia zen bera.
Kafea hartzera bulegora joan ginen. Gela atsegina zen, liburuz, garaikurrez, anabasez eta erosotasunez beteta. Erabaki nuen afera honetatik bizirik atera,

eta noizbait berezko etxea lortzen banu, halako gela bat izango nuela. Kafe-kikarak jaso ondoren, eta zigarroak piztuta genituela, anfitrioiak besaulkiaren ertz baten gainean jarri zituen hanka luzeak eta nire istorioa kontatzeko esan zidan.
—Harryk esandakoa egin dut —esan zidan—, eta hura onartzeko agindu zidan esnaraziko ninduen zerbait kontatuko zenidala. Prest nago, Hannay jauna.
Nire benetako izena erabiltzea ezustekoa izan zen.
Hasiera-hasieratik hasi nintzen. Londresen aspertzen nintzela kontatu nion. Gau batean Scudder nire atarian aurkitu nuela farfuilatzen. Scudderrek Karolides eta Kanpo Arazoetako Ministerioaren biltzarren gainean esandakoaz hitz egin nion eta, horrekin, irribarre egin zuen Sir Walterrek. Orduan, hilketarena kontatu nion eta serioago jarri zen. Esneketariarena azaldu nion, eta Gallowayn egin nuena, eta ostatuan Scudderren oharrak dezifratu nituela.
—Badituzu hemen? —galdetu zidan azkar. Arnasa sakon hartu zuen liburuxka sakelatik atera nuenean.
Edukien gainean ez nion ezer esan. Sir Harry nola ezagutu nuen deskribatu nion, baita aretoan egin genituen hitzaldiak ere. Horrekin, barre-algarak egin zituen Sir Walterrek.
—Harryk tontakeriak esan zituen, ezta? Sinesten dizut. Munduko gizonik onena da, baina osaba tuntunak txorakeriaz bete dio burua. Jarraitu, Hannay jauna.
Errepide-langilearena egiten pasatu nuen egunarekin asaldatu egin zen. Autoan zeuden bi gizonen deskribapen zehatzak eskatu zizkidan eta iruditu zitzaidan memorian bilatzen ari zela. Jopley memeloaren patuarekin, berriro alaitu zen.
Baina oso serio jarri zen landako etxeko zaharraren gainean mintzatu nintzenean. Berriro, itxuraren xehetasun guztiak eskatu zizkidan.
—Leuna eta burusoila eta begiak hegazti batek bezala estaltzen zituena… Ehiza-hegazti gaiztoa ematen du! Hark zu poliziatik salbatu ondoren, haren bakarlekua lehertu zenuen. Hori lan adoretsua hori!
Eta handik gutxira, bidaiaren narrazioa bukatu nuen. Sir Walter zutik jarri zen, poliki, eta sutondoko alfonbratik begiratu zidan.
—Poliziaz ahantz zaitezke —esan zidan—. Ez duzu arazorik herrialde honen legeekin.
—Arraioa! —garrasi egin nion —. Hiltzailea harrapatu dute?
—Ez. Baina azken hamabostaldi honetan ez zara susmagarrien zerrendan egon.
—Zergatik ez? —galdetu nion harrituta.
—Batez ere, Scudderrek gutun bat idatzi zidalako. Gizona apur bat ezagutzen nuen: lan batzuk egin zituen niretzat. Erdi eroa erdi jenioa zen, baina erabat zintzoa. Arazoa zen oso gustuko zuela bakarrik aritzea. Eta horregatik ezin zuen lan egin zerbitzu sekretuetan. Lastima, ezohiko dohainak zituen eta. Nire uztez,

munduko gizonik ausartena zen. Beti izututa eta dardarka zegoen, baina ez zegoen amore emanarazten zion ezer. Maiatzaren 31n, haren gutuna jaso nuen.
—Baina, ordurako, astebete zeraman hilik.
—Gutuna 23an idatzi eta bidali zuen. Argi zegoen ez zuela espero horren laster hiltzea. Normalean, haren mezuek astebete behar izaten zuten niregana iristeko: Espainiara bidaltzen zituen eta, hortik, Newcastlera. Arrastoa ezkutatzeko mania zuen.
—Zer esaten zuen? —galdetu nion totelka.
—Ezer ez. Arriskuan zegoela, baina lagun on baten babesa zuela eta ekainaren hamabosta baino lehen haren berri izango nuela. Ez zidan helbiderik eman, baina Portland Placetik gertu zegoela esan zidan. Uste dut ez zuela nahi zuk arazorik izatea zerbait geratuz gero. Gutuna jaso bezain pronto, Scotland Yardera joan nintzen eta ikerketaren xehetasunak aztertu nituen. Orduan ondorioztatu nuen zu lagun hori zinela. Zuri buruzko galderak egin genituen, Hannay jauna, eta ondorioztatu genuen errespetagarria zinela. Uste nuen ulertzen nuela zergatik desagertu zinen, ez poliziaregatik bakarrik, besteengatik ere bai, eta, Harryren oharra jaso nuenean, gainerako guztia ulertu nuen. Aste honetan, zure zain egon naiz.
Imajinatuko duzuen bezala, horrekin, zama handia kendu zitzaidan gainetik. Gizon askea sentitu nintzen berriro. Orain, nire herrialdearen etsaiak baino ez nituen aurka, baina ez herrialdeko legegizonak.
—Begira diezaiogun liburuxkari —esan zuen Sir Walterrek.
Ordubete behar izan genuen dena ikusteko. Kodea azaldu nion eta oso azkar harrapatu zuen. Puntu batzuetan, nire interpretazioa zuzendu zuen, baina, oro har, nahiko zuzen ibili nintzen. Amaitu baino lehen, oso serio jarri zen eta, gero, luze geratu zen isilik. —Ez dakit zer pentsatu —esan zidan azkenean—. Gauza batean arrazoi du: etzi gertatuko den hori. Baina nola demontre jakin zuen? Hori, berez, nahiko gauza iluna da. Baina gerraren eta Harri Beltzaren kontu horrek, horrek guztiak melodrama eroa dirudi. Tamalez ezin naiz Scudderren zuhurtasunaz erabat fidatu. Haren arazoetako bat zen erromantikoegia zela. Izaera artistikoa zuen eta istorioak Jainkoak nahi baino hobeak izatea nahi izaten zuen. Eta aurreiritzi arraro asko zituen: juduak, esaterako, gorroto zituen. Juduak eta goi-mailako finantza.
—Harri Beltza —errepikatu zuen—. Der Schwarzestein. Eleberri merke bat ematen du. Eta Karolidesi buruzko guztia. Kontakizunaren zatirik ahulena da hori; izan ere, badakit Karolides estimatua gu biok baino luzeago biziko dela ziur aski. Europan ez dago gizon hori desagerrarazi nahi duen estaturik. Horrez gain, azkenaldi honetan, Berlinera eta Vienara hurbildu da pixka bat eta horrek arazoak sortu dizkio nire nagusiari. Ez! Scudder ildo okerrean sartu da horrekin. Egia esan, Hannay, ez dut istorioaren zati hori sinesten. Kontu ilunen bat

mugitzen ari da. Gehiegi jakin zuen eta horregatik erail zuten. Baina apustu egingo nuke espioitza arrunta dela. Bada estatu europar handi bat bere espioitza-zerbitzua oso gustuko duena eta erabiltzen dituzten metodoak ez dira bereziki arduratsuak. Somara ordaintzen dutenez, haren gizatxarrei ez zaie axola hilketa bat edo bi egitea. Gure itsas armadaren kokapenak nahi dituzte Marineamten duten bilduman sartzeko; baina ez dituzte lortuko, hori da gertatuko dena.

Momentu horretan, etxezaina sartu zen gelan.

- Dei bat Londresetik, Sir Walter. Heath jauna da, eta zugaz egin gura dau berba.

Nire anfitrioia telefonoz hitz egitera joan zen.

Bost minutu geroago itzuli zen, aurpegia zuri. —Scudderren mamuari barkamena eskatu beharko diot —esan zidan—. Karolides tiroz erail dute gaur zazpiak pasatxo zirela.

8 - Harri Beltzaren etorrera

Hurrengo goizean, gosaltzera jaitsi nintzen zortzi orduz lo egin ondoren; lo ederra eta ametsik gabekoa. Sir Walter han zegoen, opilez eta marmeladaz inguratuta, eta telegrama bat irakurtzen ari zen. Aurreko eguneko itxura baikorra joandako oroimena baino ez zen.

—Zu oheratu ostean, telefonoz ordubete eman nuen —esan zidan—. Nagusiari itsas armadako nagusiarekin eta Guda Ministroarekin hitz egiteko esan nion. Telegrama honek argi uzten du. Londresera bostetan iritsiko da. Bitxia da Frantziako jeneral batentzako kode-izena "Txerritxoa" izatea.

Plater beroetarantz zuzendu ninduen eta hitz egiten jarraitu zuen.

—Baina ez dut uste gauza handirik lortuko dugunik. Zure lagunak lehenbiziko plana aurkitzeko gai izan badira, bigarrena ere aurkituko dute. Burua emango nuke satorra non dagoen jakiteko. Uste genuen Ingalaterran bost gizonek bakarrik zutela Royer jeneralaren bisitaren berri, eta ziur geunden Frantzian horiek baino gutxiago zirela, han hemen baino hobeto antolatzen baitituzte gauzak.

Jaten ari zela hitz egiten jarraitu zuen. Harrituta geratu nintzen afera guztia kontatu zidalako.

—Ezin da plana aldatu? —galdetu nion.

—Alda lezakete —esan zidan—. Baina, aukeran, nahiago dugu hori ez egin. Asko hausnartu ondoren prestatutako plana da, eta edozein aldaketa okerragorako litzateke. Gainera, kokapen bat edo bi ezin dira aldatu. Hala ere, ziur aski zerbait egiteko aukera egon liteke, behar-beharrezkoa izanez gero. Baina arazoa ikusten duzu, Hannay. Gure etsaiak ez dira hain tontoak Royerri sakelatik lapurtzeko, edo halako zerbait egiteko. Badakite horrekin iskanbila sortuko luketela, eta, horrekin, gu ernai jarriko ginatekeela. Haien helburua da xehetasun guztiak lortzea gu konturatu gabe. Horrela, Royer Parisera itzuliko da afera osoa sekretupean dagoelakoan. Hori lortu ezean, porrot egingo dute. Guk susmorik izanez gero, badakite dena aldatuko dugula.

—Orduan, frantziarrarekin egon behar dugu hura etxeratu arte —esan nion—. Parisen informazioa lor dezaketela uste izango balute, hor saiatuko lirateke. Horrek esan nahi du Londresen azpijoko sakon bat martxan dagoela eta uste dutela irabaziko dutela.

—Royer nire nagusiarekin afalduko du eta, gero, nire etxera etorriko da. Han, lau pertsona egongo dira haren zain: itsas armadako Whittaker, Sir Arthur Drew, Winstanley jenerala eta laurok. Itsas armadako nagusia gaixorik dago eta Sherringhamera joan da. Nire etxean, Whittakerrek dokumentu bat emango dio Royerri eta gero Portsmouthera eramango dute autoz. Bidaia hori

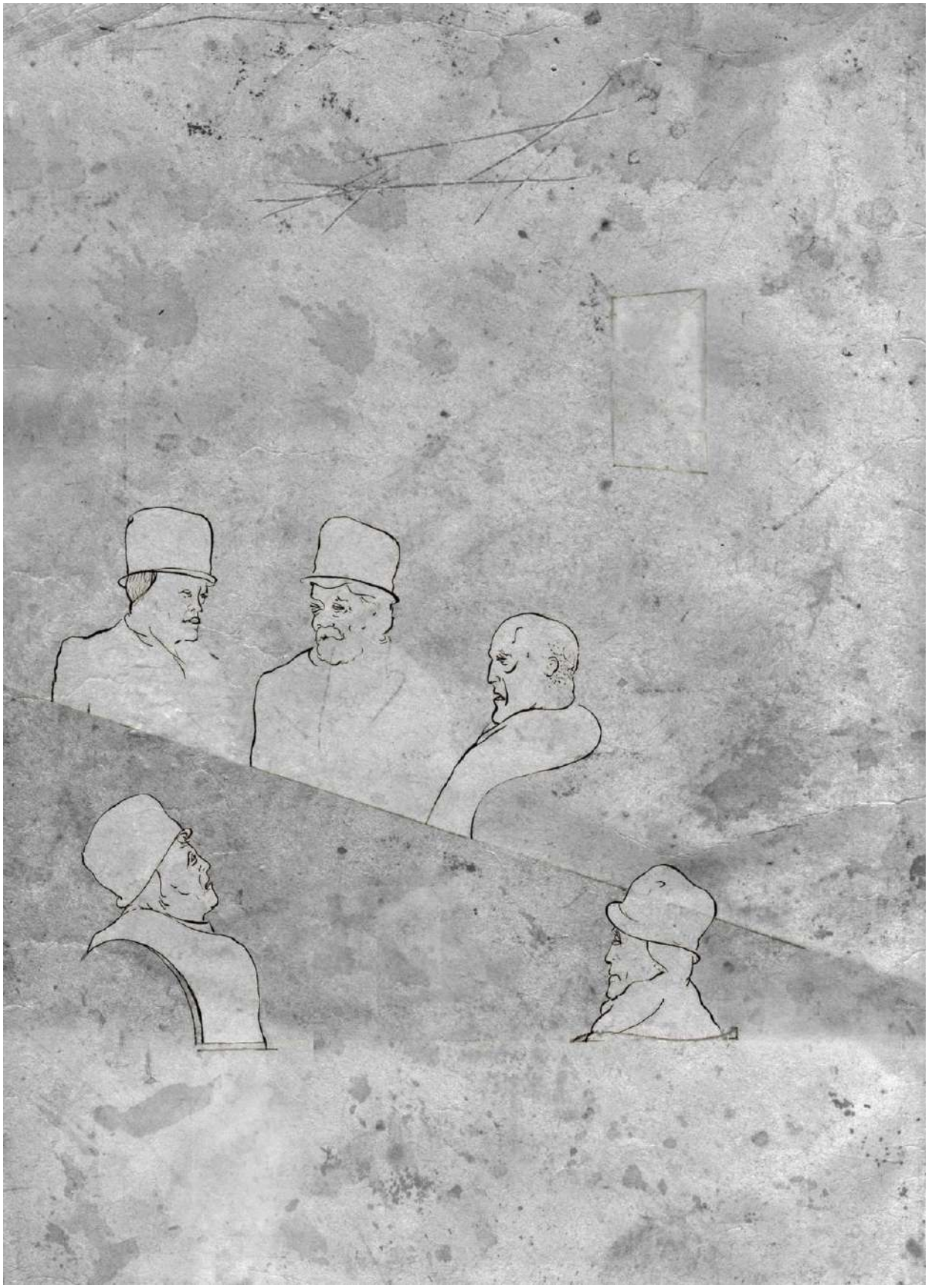
garrantzitsuegia da trenez egiteko. Frantziaraino iritsi arte, ez da inoiz bakarrik egongo. Eta Whittaker ere ez da bakarrik egongo Royerrekin elkartu arte. Hori da egin dezakegun onena eta zaila dirudi hutsunerik gertatzea. Baina onartuko dizut izugarri urduri nagoela. Karolidesen hilketak anabasa sortuko du Europako Kanpo Arazoetako Ministerio guztietan.
Gosaldu ondoren galdetu zidan ea banekien autoak gidatzen.
—Ondo, gaur, nire gidaria izango zara eta Hudsonen arropaz jantziko zara. Haren neurrikoa zara, gutxi gorabehera. Afera honetan parte hartu duzu eta kontuz ibiliko gara. Gure aurka gizon arriskutsuak ditugu eta ez dute errespetatuko lan gehiegi egiten duen funtzionario baten bakarlekua.
Londresera iritsi nintzenean, auto bat erosi eta, dibertsioz, Ingalaterrako hegoaldea esploratzen ibili nintzen; beraz, zertxobait ezagutzen nuen. Sir Walter Bathetik Bath-eko errepidetik eraman nuen eta laster iritsi ginen Londresera. Ekaineko goiz hura samurra eta haizerik gabekoa zen, gero sargori izango zelako seinale, eta plazera izan zen garbitu berri zituzten herri txikiak gurutzatzea eta Thames ibaiko lorategien ondotik pasatzea. Sir Walter hamaika eta erdietan utzi nuen Queen Anne's Gaten zuen etxean. Etxezaina trenez etorriko zen geroago, maletekin.
Lehenbizikoz, Scotland Yardera eraman ninduen Sir Walterrek. Han, jaun txukun bat ikusi genuen; bizarra moztuta eta abokatu itxura zeukana.
—Portland Placeko hiltzailea ekarri dizut —aurkeztu ninduen Sir Walterrek.
Bestearen erantzuna irribarre ironikoa izan zen.
—Hori opari atsegina izango zatekeen, Bullivant. Eta gizon hau, ziur aski, Richard Hannay jauna da, egun batzuez nire departamentuan interes handia sortu zuen gizona.
—Hannay jaunak interesa piztuko die berriro ere. Gauza asko kontatuko dizkizu, baina gaur ez. Arrazoi batzuengatik, kontakizun horrek hogeita lau orduz itxaron beharko du. Orduan, zin egiten dizut ondo pasatuko duzula eta, beharbada, gauza batzuk ikasiko dituzula. Eskertuko dizut Hannay jaunari eragozpen gehiagorik izango ez duela bermatzea.
Hori entzun bezain pronto, baieztatu egin zidan.
—Zure bizitza lehen zen moduan berreskura dezakezu —esan zidan—. Apartamentua zain duzu, nahiz eta ziurrenik orain ez duzun hor bizi nahi izango, eta zerbitzaria ere hor duzu. Ofizialki ez zintugunez salatu, uste genuen ez zegoela zertan errugabetzat jo. Baina, horri dagokionez, zuk esan.
—Beharbada, geroago, zure laguntza beharko dugu, MacGillivray —esan zion Sir Walterrek ateratzen ari ginela.
Orduan, aske utzi ninduen.

—Bihar, niregana etorri, Hannay. Isilik egon beharko duzu, badakizu. Zure lekuan, ohera joango nintzateke. Lo-zor handia izango duzu ziurrenik. Zuhur ibili, Harri Beltzeko zure lagunen batek ikusiko bazintu, arazoak sor daitezke.
Nolabait ere, galduta sentitu nintzen. Hasieran, gizon askea izatea oso atsegina izan zen, nahi nuen tokira joan nintekeen ezeren beldurrik gabe. Hilabetez bakarrik eta legez kanpo bizi izan nintzen eta hori, niretzat, nahikoa izan zen. Savoy jatetxera joan nintzen eta, kontu handiz, oso bazkari ona eskatu nuen eta, ondoren, eskain ziezadaketen pururik onena erre nuen. Baina ezin nion ezinegonari utzi. Erretze-gelan niri begira zegoen edozein ikusten nuenean, lotsatzen nintzen eta hilketaren gainean pentsatzen ari ote zen galdetzen nion neure buruari.
Gero, taxi bat hartu nuen eta kilometro batzuk egin nituen Londreseko iparraldera. Zelaietatik eta txalet-lerroetan paseatu nuen eta, gero, etxe txikien artean, auzo pobreetan eta kale arriskutsuetan barrena. Ia bi orduz ibili nintzen. Egonezina handitzen ari zitzaidan etengabe. Gauza handiak, beldurgarriak, gertatzen ari ziren eta gertatuko ziren eta ni, afera guztiaren ardatza, jokotik kanpo nengoen. Royer jenerala Doverren lurreratuko zen; Sir Walter planak prestatzen ari zen Ingalaterran sekretua ezagutzen zuten pertsona bakanekin eta, iluntasunean, nonbait, Harri Beltza lanean ari zen. Arriskua eta hurbileko hondamendia sentitzen nituen eta, aldi berean, sentitzen nuen nik eta nik bakarrik saihets nezakeela, neuk bakarrik borrokatu nintzatekeela haren aurka. Baina orain jokoz kanpo nengoen. Ez, gauzak ezin ziren beste modu batean egin. Ez zegoen kabineteko ministroek, almiranteek eta jeneralek beren sekretuak niri kontatzeko aukera handirik.
Hasi nintzen pentsatzen nire hiru etsaietako batekin topo egin nahi nukeela. Horrekin zer edo zer gertatu zitekeen. Gogo handia nuen jende horrekin borroka arrunt bat izateko. Zerbait kolpatu eta zapaldu nahi nuen. Aldarte txarrez jartzen ari nintzen bat-batean.
Ez nuen apartamentura itzultzeko gogorik. Uneren batean, hala egin beharko nukeen, baina, momentuz, diru nahikoa nuen eta erabaki nuen hurrengo goizera arte ez nintzela bueltatuko Egun horretan, hotel batean egingo nuen lo.
Afarian ere, haserre nengoen. Jermyn Streeten zegoen jatetxe batean afaldu nuen. Ez nintzen gose eta plater asko ukitu gabe itzuli nituen. Borgoinako botila bat ardo ia osa edan nuen, baina horrek ez ninduen alaitu. Egonezin jasanezinak hartu ninduen. Hor nengoen ni, oso gizon arrunta, adimen arruntekoa; baina, nolabait, ziur nengoen beharrezkoa nintzela afera aurrera eramateko eta, ni gabe, dena oso gaizki joango zela. Nire buruari esan nion hori handikeria hutsa zela. Munduko lau edo bost pertsona adimentsuenetakoak lan horretan zebiltzan, inperio britainiarren botere guztia haien esku. Hala ere, ezin nuen

onartu. Bazirudien ahots bat nuela belarrian, ekiteko esanez edo, bestela, ez nuela inoiz berriro lorik egingo.
Ondorioz, bederatzi eta erdiak aldera erabaki nuen Queen Anne's Gatera joatea. Ziurrenik, ez zidaten sartzen utziko, baina saiatzeak kontzientzia lasaituko zidan.
Jermyn Streeten barna joan nintzen eta, Duke Streeteko kantoian, gizon gazteen talde bat aurreratu nuen. Arropa formalez jantzita zeuden, nonbait afaldu zuten eta antzerki batera joan behar zuten. Marmaduke Jopley jauna zen haietako bat.
Ikusi egin ninduen eta gelditu egin zen.
—Jainkoarren, hiltzailea! —garrasi egin zuen. —Aizue, mutilak, harrapatu! Hori Hannay da, Portland Placeko hiltzailea!
Besotik heldu zidan eta besteek ere inguratu ninduten.
Ez nuen arazorik izan nahi, baina nire aldarte txarrak tontakeria bat eginarazi zidan. Polizia bat hurbildu zitzaigun; egia esan behar niokeen eta, nire istorioa sinetsi ezean, Scotland Yardera ni eramateko exijitu edo, bestela, gertuen zegoen polizia-etxera. Baina, une horretan, edozein atzerapen onartezina iruditzen zitzaidan eta Marmieren aurpegi memeloa ikustea gehiegi izan zen niretzat. Ezker eskuarekin ukabilkada eman nion eta poz handiz ikusi nuen arekan botata.
Eta, orduan, izugarrizko iskanbila sortu zen. Guztiak nire gainera etorri ziren, eta poliziak atzetik harrapatu ninduen. Kolpe on bat edo bi eman nizkien eta uste dut, joko garbia izanez gero, guztiak garaitu nitzakeela; baina poliziak atzetik heldu zidan eta haietako batek eztarritik eutsi ninduen.
Haserreak itsututa entzun nuen poliziak galdetu zuela ea zer gertatzen ari zen eta Marmiek, hortzak apurtuta, ni Hannay hiltzailea nintzela adierazi.
—Arraioa! —oihu egin nuen—. Isilarazi gizon hori. Ohartarazten dizut, agente jauna, utzi bakean. Scotland Yardek badu nire berri eta niri eragozpenik jarriz gero, kargu hartuko dizute.
—Nirekin etorriko zara, gazte —esan zidan poliziak—. Ikusi dut jaun hori krudelki kolpatu duzula. Zu hasi zara, hark ez du deus egin. Ikusi zaitut. Hobe duzu lasai etortzea; bestela, lotuko zaitut.
Sumindurak eta gertatzen zela gertatzen zena ezin nuela atzerapenik izan pentsatzeak zezen baten indarra eman zidaten. Polizia bat ia lurretik altxatu nuen, lepotik heldu zidana lurrera bota nuen, eta ahalik eta azkarren, Duke kalean barrena ihes egin nuen korrika. Txistua entzun nuen eta gizonak nire atzetik lasterka.
Azkar egiten dut korrika eta, gau horretan, hegoak nituen. Aitaren batean, Pall Mallera iritsi nintzen eta St James Parkera abiatu. Jauregiko atarian zegoen polizia saihestu nuen, Mallen sarreran zeuden guardia-multzoan murgildu nintzen eta zubirako bidean nengoen jazarleek kalea gurutzatu baino lehen.

Parkeko bide zabaletara iristean, erritmoa bizitu nuen. Zorionez, ez zegoen jende askorik eta inor ez zen ni geldiarazten saiatu. Queen Anne's Gateraino iritsi behar nuen kosta ahala kosta.
Kale lasai hartan sartu nintzenean, ematen zuen hutsik zegoela. Sir Walterren etxea parte estuan zegoen eta kanpoan hiruzpalau auto zeuden. Handik pauso batzuetara nengoela, abiadura moteldu nuen eta ateraino ibili nintzen kementsu. Etxezainak sartzen ez utziz gero, edo atea irekitzen berandutuz gero, nireak egingo zuen.
Ez zuen denbora asko behar izan. Ia txirrina jo bezain pronto, atea ireki zen.
—Sir Walter ikusi behar dut —esan nion arnasestuka. —Gai izugarri garrantzitsua da.
Etxezaina izugarrizko gizona zen. Gihar bat ere mugitu gabe ate irekiari heldu, eta nire atzean itxi zuen.
—Sir Walter lanean dago, jauna, eta inori sartzen ez izteko esan deust. Itxarongo dozu, arren?
Etxea antzinakoen modukoa zen, atondo handia eta gelak bi aldeetan. Atzeko aldean, txoko bat zegoen, telefonoarekin eta aulki pare batekin, eta etxezainak han esertzeko esan zidan.
—Entzun —xuxurlatu nion. —Baditugu arazoak eta ni tartean nago. Baina Sir Walterrek badaki, eta harentzat egiten dut lan. Norbait nire bila etortzen bada, gezurren bat esan.
Baietz egin zidan buruarekin eta, segituan, zarata entzun nuen kalean, eta, gero, indarrez jo zuten txirrina. Ez nuen inoiz beste inor etxezain hori bezainbeste miretsi. Atea ireki zuen eta, aurpegia erabat asaldagaitz, galderen zain geratu zen. Orduan, ederra sartu zien. Etxea norena zen eta haren aginduak zein ziren azaldu zien eta, besterik gabe, ataritik uxatu zituen. Nire eserlekutik, dena ikus nezakeen eta edozein antzezlan baino hobea zen.
Handik gutxira, txirrina jo zuten berriro. Etxezainak bisitari berriari sartzen utzi zion zalantzarik egin gabe.
Berokia kentzen ari zela, ikusi nuen nor zen. Ezinezkoa zen egunkari edo aldizkari bat irekitzea aurpegi hura ikusi gabe: horizontalean moztutako bizar grisa; sudur labur eta karratua; eta begi urdinak eta zorrotzak. Konturatu nintzen Itsas armadako nagusia zela. Esaten zutenez, Erresuma Batuko itsas armada berria sortu zuen. Nire eserlekutik gertu pasatu zen eta atondoaren atzean zegoen gela batera eraman zuen etxezainak. Atea irekitzean, xuxurlak entzun nituen. Atea itxi, eta bakarrik nengoen berriro.
Hogei minutuz egon nintzen han, ondoren zer egin behar nuen pentsatzen. Erabat ziur nengoen beharko nindutela, baina ez nekien noiz edo nola. Ordulariari etengabe begiratzen nion eta, hamar eta erdiak motel iristen ari

zirela, pentsatu nuen bilera laster bukatuko zela. Ordu-laurden baten buruan, Royer jauna Portsmoutherako errepidean abiatuko zen ziztu bizian…
Orduan, kanpaitxoa entzun nuen eta etxezaina agertu zen. Atzeko gelaren atea ireki, eta itsas armadako nagusia atera zen. Nire ondotik pasatu zen, nire aldera begiratu zuen eta, segundo batez, elkarri begiratu genion.
Segundo bat baino ez zen izan, baina hura nahiko izan zen bihotzak jauzi egiteko. Ez nuen gizon garrantzitsu hura aurretik inoiz ikusi, eta hark ez ninduen ni inoiz ikusi. Baina, denbora-tarte labur hartan, zerbait nabari nion begietan eta zerbait hori elkarrenganako ezagutza izan zen. Nahastezina da hori. Istant bat da, argi-izpi bat, esanahi bat eta bakarra duen ñabardura bat. Nahi gabe nabari zitzaion, ustekabean; baina berehalakoan desagertu, eta gizona joan egin zen. Burua ideia biziz korapilatuta nuela entzun nuen kaleko atea haren atzetik ixten zela.
Telefono-gida hartu nuen eta haren etxeko zenbakia bilatu nuen. Berehalakoan komunikatu ninduten eta zerbitzari batek hartu zidan.
—Jauna etxean al dago? —galdetu nion.
—Jauna duela ordu-erdi itzuli da —erantzun zidan, —eta oheratu egin da. Gaur ez dago oso ondo. Mezuren bat utzi nahi al diozu, jauna?
Eseki nuen eta aulkitik erori nintzen ia. Ez zen afera hartan nire parte-hartzea oraindik bukatu. Doi-doi, baina garaiz iritsi nintzen.
Ez zegoen astirik galtzeko eta, beraz, atzeko gelako ateraino azkar joan, eta jo gabe sartu nintzen. Bost aurpegik harrituta begiratu zidaten mahai biribil batetik. Han zeuden Sir Walter, Drew Gerra Ministroa (argazkietatik ezagutzen nuen), gizon adindu argal bat ere bazegoen, Whittaker ziur aski, itsas armadako ofiziala eta Winstanley jenerala, kopetan zuen zauriagatik nabaria. Azkenik, gizon txiki eta gizen bat zegoen, burdin koloreko bibotea eta bekain iletsuak zituena. Esaldi baten erdian harrapatu nuen.
Sir Walterri harridura eta haserrea nabari zitzaizkion aurpegian.
—Hau aipatu dizuedan Hannay jauna da —esan zien besteei, barkamena eskatuz. —Bisita hau, Hannay, lekuz kanpo dago.
Lasaitasuna berreskuratu nuen. —Hori ikusteke dago, jauna —esan nion—, baina, beharbada, garaiz iritsi naiz, doi-doi. Jainkoaren izenean, esan iezadazue nor atera den hemendik duela minutu bat?
—Lord Alloa —erantzun zidan Sir Walterrek, haserreak gorrituta.
—Ez zen hura —oihu egin nien—. Haren itxura osoa du, baina ez zen Lord Alloa. Ezagutu egin nau eta azken hilabete honetan ikusi dudan norbait da. Hura kalera atera bezain pronto, Lord Alloaren etxera deitu dut eta esan didate duela ordu-erdi itzuli dela eta oheratu ere bai.
—Nor… nor…? —norbaitek totelka esan zuen.
—Harri Beltza —oihu egin nuen, hutsik geratu berria zen aulkian eseri, eta nire inguruan izuak jota zeuden bost gizonei begiratu nien.



9 - Hogeita hemeretzi mailak

—A ze tontakeria! —garrasi egin zuen itsas armadako ofizialak.
Sir Walter jaiki eta gelatik atera zen. Guk, bitartean, mahaiari begiratzen genion sorgor. Hamar minutu geroago itzuli zen, aurpegia oso serio.
—Alloarekin hitz egin dut —esan zuen—. Ohetik aterarazi dut, aldarte txarrez dago. Mulrossekin afaldu ondoren, etxera joan da zuzenean.
—Hori erokeria da —eten zion Winstanley jeneralak—. Esaten ari zara gizon hori hona etorri dela, nire alboan ia ordu-erdiz eserita egon dela eta ni ez naizela iruzurraz konturatu? Alloak burutik jota egon behar du.
—Ez duzue ikusten zeinen argiak diren? —itaundu nien—. Beste gauza batzuetan interes handiegia zenuten, begiek erabili ere egiteko. Ez duzue Lord Alloa zen ala ez pentsatu ere egin. Beste inor izanez gero, ziurrenik arreta handiagoaz begiratuko zenioketen, baina hori hemen egotea naturala zen eta horrek lokarrarazi zaituzte.
Orduan, frantziarrak hitz egin zuen, oso motel eta oso ingeles onez.
—Gazte honek arrazoia du. Psikologia ona da. Gure etsaiak ez dira tontoak!
Bekain jakintsuak zimurtu zizkien.
—Pasadizo bat kontatuko dizuet —esan zuen—. Senegalen gertatu zen duela urte asko. Eremu galdu batean ari nintzela lanean, denbora pasatzeko barboak arrantzatzera joaten nintzen ibaira. Arabiar behor txiki batek eramaten zuen nire bazkari-saskia; garai hartan Timbuktun erosten genuen dun arraza arre horietako bat zen behorra. Goiz batean, arrain asko harrapatu nituen eta behorra, arrazoi argirik gabe, urduri zegoen. Entzuten nuen irrintzi eta karranka eta ostikoka ari zela eta ahotsarekin lasaitzen saiatu nintzen, buruan arrainak nituela oraindik ere. Ez nuen begi-bistatik galdu, hala uste nuen behintzat, zeharretik begiratzen nion etengabe; hogei bat metrora zegoen zuhaitz betetik lotuta zegoen… Ordu pare bat geroago, janarian pentsatzen hasi nintzen. Arrainak olanazko poltsa batean sartu nituen eta errekan barrena behorrari hurbildu nintzaion, kanabera hartuta. Harengana iritsi, eta, poltsa bizkar gainera bota behar nuenean…
Etenaldia egin zuen eta guri begiratu zigun.
—Usainak ohartarazi zidan. Burua biratu nuen, eta, metro batera, lehoi bat ikusi… Lehoi zahar gizaki-jalea, herrixka izuturik zuena. Behorraren hondakinak, odolez, hezurrez eta larruz osatutako mordo bat, zituen atzean.
—Zer gertatu zen gero? —galdetu nion. Ehizan nahiko ibilia nintzen benetako istorio bat zela jakiteko.

—Kanabera baraila artean sartu nion eta pistola atera nuen. Zerbitzariak ere errifleez armatuta zeuden. Baina arrastoa utzi zidan—. Esku bat altxatu eta ikusi genuen hiru hatz falta zitzaizkiola.
—Pentsa —esan zuen—. Behorra ordubete baino gehiago zeraman hilik eta piztia niri begira egon zen lasai. Ez nuen behorra hiltzen ikusi, haren ezinegonetara ohituta nengoelako. Ez nintzen jabetu falta zela, nire buruan orban horixka baino ez zelako, eta lehoiak betetzen zuen hutsune hori. Nik halako akatsa izan banuen zentzumenak ernai izatera behartzen duen herrialde batean, zuek uste duzue hiriko jende okupatuok ez dugula kezkatu behar?
Sir Walterrek baiezkoa egin zuen buruarekin. Inor ez zen kontrakoa esatera ausartu.
—Baina ez dut ulertzen — jarraitu zuen Winstanleyk—. Haien helburua zen kokapenak lortzea gu konturatu gabe. Gutako batek gaurko bilera Alloari aipatuz gero, faltsukeria osoa agerian utziko zukeen.
Sir Walterrek lehor barre egin zuen.
—Alloa aukeratzeak haien zorroztasuna erakusten digu. Gutako zeinek hitz egingo zion gaurkoari buruz? Edo hark gaia aterako ote zuen?
Gogoratu nuen jakina zela itsas armadako nagusiak gutxi hitz egiten zuela eta erraz haserretzen zela.
—Harritzen nauena zera da —esan zuen jeneralak—. Zer lortu du espioi horrek hona etortzearekin? Ezinezkoa da diagramez eta izen bitxiz betetako horrenbeste orrialde buruz ikasi izana.
—Hori ez da zaila —erantzun zion frantziarrak—. Espioi onei memoria fotografikoa lantzen erakusten diete. Zuen Macaulay bezalakoa da. Konturatuko zineten ez duela ezer esan, baina paperei behin eta berriro begiratu diela. Onar dezagun xehetasun guztiak burmuinean dituela. Gaztetan, nik ere egin nezakeen.
—Bueno, orduan, planak aldatzea baino ez zaigu geratzen —esan zuen Sir Walterrek triste.
Whittakerrek oso aurpegi serioa jarri zuen.
—Lord Alloari kontatu al diozu zer gertatu den? —galdetu zion—. Ez? Bada, ezin dizuet ehuneko ehunean esan, baina nahiko ziur nago ezin dugula aldaketa handirik egin Ingalaterrako geografia aldatu gabe.
—Eta beste gauza bat esan beharra dago — gehitu zuen Royerrek—. Gizon hori hemen zegoen bitartean, askatasunez hitz egin dut. Nire gobernuaren plan militar batzuen gainean hitz egin dizuet. Baimena eman zidaten hori kontatzeko. Baina, gure etsaientzat, informazio horrek milioiak balio ditu. Ez, lagunak, ez dut beste biderik ikusten. Hona etorri den gizona eta haren gaizkideak harrapatu behar ditugu.
—Jainkoarren! —oihu egin nuen—. Eta ez dugu pista bat bera ere.

—Gainera —Whittakerrek erantsi zuen—, posta-zerbitzua dago. Informazioa bidean dago dagoeneko.
—Ez —esan zuen frantziarrak—. Ez dituzu espioien ohiturak ezagutzen. Berak jasotzen du ordainsaria eta berak entregatzen du lortzen duen informazioa. Frantzian, ezagunak ditugu horren gisakoak. Baina badugu aukera bat oraindik ere, mes amis. Gizon horiek itsasoa gurutzatu beharko dute eta itsasontziak eta portuak zelata ditzakegu. Sinets iezadazue: ezinbestekoa da, bai Frantziarentzat eta bai Erresuma Batuarentzat.
Royerren sen onak eta seriotasunak lasaitu gintuzten nolabait. Gizon trakets haien artean, hark jartzen zituen gauzak martxan. Hala ere, ez nuen inoren aurpegian itxaropenik ikusi, ezta nik sentitu ere. Uharte hauen berrogeita hamar milioi biztanleen artean, eta hamabi bat ordu baino ez genituela, nola aurkitu Europako hiru gaizkilerik azkarrenetakoak?
Bat-batean, gauza bat etorri zitzaidan burura.
—Scudderren liburua non dago? —oihu egin nion Sir Walterri—. Azkar, han dagoen gauza batekin gogoratu naiz.
Idazmahai bateko tiradera giltzez ireki zuen, eta liburua eman zidan.
Orria aurkitu nuen. —Hogeita hemeretzi maila —irakurri nuen, eta berriz errepikatu— hogeita hemeretzi maila — eta zenbatu egin nituen—. Itsasgora, 22:17ean.
Itsas armadako ministeriokoak ero banengo bezala so egiten zidan.
—Ez al duzue ikusten? Pista bat da! —oihu egin nion—. Scudderrek bazekien gizon horien ezkutalekua zein zen, bazekien nondik aterako ziren herrialdetik, baina izena beretzat gorde zuen. Bihar da eguna eta, leku horretan, 22:17ean izango da itsasgora.
—Beharbada, gaur joan dira —esan zuen norbaitek.
—Haiek ez. Bide sekretua dute: eta daukate presarik. Alemaniarrak ezagutzen ditut eta planak jarraitzearekin oso zorrotzak dira. Non demontre ikus dezaket itsasaldien gida?
Whittaker alaitu zen.
—Aukera bat bada —esan zuen—. Goazen itsas armadako ministeriora.
Zain zeuden bi autotan sartu ginen, Sir Walter izan ezik: Scotland Yardera joan zen, “Macgillivray mugiarazteko”, bere hitzetan.
Garbitzaileak lanean zebiltzan korridore eta areto hutsetan, eta azkar zeharkatu genituen, liburuz eta mapaz betetako gela txiki batera iritsi arte. Hango bulegari egoiliarra aurkitu genuen eta hark itsas armadaren itsasaldi-gida ekarri zigun. Ni mahai aurrean eseri nintzen eta besteak zutik zeuden nire inguruan. Nolabait, espedizioaren arduradun bihurtu nintzen.

Ez zuen ezertarako balio izan. Ehunka sarrera zeuden eta, ikusi nuenez, berrogeita hamar bat lekutan izango zen itsasgora ordu horretan. Aukeren kopurua gutxitzeko moduren bat aurkitu behar genuen.
Burua esku artean hartu, eta pentsatzen hasi nintzen. Buruhauste hura ebazteko eraren bat egon behar zuen. Zer esan nahi zuen Scudderrek mailekin? Bururatu zitzaidan kai bateko mailak izan zitezkeela; baina, horrela izanez gero, ziur aski ez zukeen kopurua aipatuko. Eskailera ugari zituen lekuren bat izan behar zuen, eta eskailera batek baino ez zituen hogeita hemeretzi maila.
Bat-batean, beste gauza bat otu zitzaidan eta ferry guztien irteerei begiratu nien. Baina ez zegoen kontinentera 22:17ean ateratzen zen itsasontzirik.
Zergatik zen itsasaldia hain garrantzitsua? Portua izanez gero, portu txikia izan behar zuen itsasaldiak garrantzia izateko edo, bestela, gila sakoneko itsasontzia erabiliko zuten. Baina ordu horretan ez zen ferryrik ateratzen, eta ez nuen itsasontzi handi batean joango zirenik uste portu arrunt batetik abiatuta. Beraz, portu txikia izan behar zuen eta horregatik zen itsasaldia garrantzitsua edo, beharbada, ez zen portua.
Aitzitik, portu txikia izan ezean, ez nuen mailen esanahia ulertzen. Ez nuen inoiz eskailerak zituen porturik ikusi. Eskailera berezi batzuk ezaugarri zituen leku bat izan behar zuen eta, han, 22:17ean izango zen itsasgora. Oro har, iruditzen zitzaidan lekuak kostalde ireki batean egon behar zuela. Baina ez nuen eskailerarena ulertzen.
Orduan, ikuspegia zabaldu nuen. Nondik aterako zen Alemaniara joan nahi zuen gizon bat, presaka zebilen norbait, azkar eta inork ikusi gabe alde egin nahi zuena? Portu handietatik, ez. Ezta Mantxako Kanaletik ere, edota mendebaldeko kostaldetik edo Eskoziatik ere ez. Izan ere, gogoratu Londresetik abiatzen zela. Mapan, distantziak neurtu nituen, eta etsaiaren buruan sartzen saiatu nintzen. Ostendera, Antwerpera edo Rotterdamera joaten saiatuko nintzateke, eta ekialdeko kostaldetik itsasoratu, Cromer eta Dover artean. Hori guztia susmoak baino ez ziren, eta ez dut esango ondorio zientifikoak zirenik, ezta bereziki adimentsuak ere. Ez nintzen inolako Sherlock Holmes. Hala ere, nik uste beti izan dudala nolabaiteko sena halako aferetan. Ez dakit behar bezala azaltzen ari naizen, baina ahal den neurrian adimena erabiltzen dut eta, gehiago lortzen ez dudanean, igartzen saiatzen naiz eta, normalean, emaitza onak izaten ditut.
Beraz, nire ondorio guztiak itsas armadaren paper batean idatzi nituen. Hona hemen:

«NAHIKO ZIUR:
Leku horretan, hainbat eskailera daude; horietako batek hogeita hemeretzi maila ditu.

Itsasgora 22:17ean. Itsasgoran baino ezin da itsasoratu.
Mailak ez dira kai batekoak, eta, ondorioz, baliteke portu bat ez izatea.
Ez dago ferryrik 22:17ean. Garraiobideak itsasontzi komertziala (aukera gutxi), yatea edo arrantza-ontzia izan behar du».

Nire arrazonamendua ez zen harago joaten. Beste zerrenda bat egin nuen, "igarrita" izenburuarekin, baina aurreko zerrenda bezain segurua zena.

«IGARRITA:
Lekua ez da portua, kostalde irekia baizik.
Itsasontzia txikia da: arraste-ontzia, yatea edo txalupa.
Lekua ekialdeko kostaldean dago nonbait, Cromer eta Dover artean.»

Bitxia iruditu zitzaidan idazmahai hartan eserita egotea kabineteko ministro batekin, mariskal batekin, gobernuko goi-mailako bi ofizialekin eta jeneral frantziar batekin, guztiak niri begira hildako gizon baten oharretatik sekretu bat ateratzen saiatzen ari nintzela; eta sekretu hori hil edo biziko kontua zen guretzat.
Sir Walter gurekin elkartu zen eta, gero, Macgillivray ere etorri zen. Aginduak eman zituen portuetan eta tren-geltokietan Sir Walterri deskribatu nizkion hiru gizonak harrapatzeko. Dena dela, hark zein beste guztiok ez genuen uste horrekin ezer lortuko zenik.
—Hona hemen atera dezakedana —esan nien—. Hondartza batera ematen duten hainbat eskailera aurkitu behar ditugu. Eskailera horietako batek hogeita hemeretzi maila ditu. Uste dut kostalde irekia dela eta itsaslabar nahiko handiak daudela. The Wash eta Mantxako Kanalaren artean dago eta, han, itsasgora 22:17ean izango da bihar.
Orduan, beste ideia bat bururatu zitzaidan. —Ez dago kostazainen artean-edo ekialdeko kostalde osoa ezagutzen duen ikuskariren bat?
Whittakerrek esan zuen bazegoela eta Claphamen bizi zela. Autoz haren bila joan zen eta gainerako guztiok gela txiki hartan geratu ginen, bururatzen zitzaigunaren gainean mintzatzen. Pipa piztu nuen eta afera guztia berriz aztertu nuen, burmuina nekatu arte.
Goizeko ordu bat aldera, kostazaina iritsi zen. Planta onekoa zen, itsas armadako ofiziala zirudien, eta besteei begirune handia zien. Gerra Ministroari utzi nion galdera egiten. Uste nuen nik galderak egitea lekuz kanpo zegoela irudituko zitzaiola.
—Jakin nahi dugu ekialdeko kostaldean zer leku ezagutzen dituzun itsaslabarra eta eskailerak dituztenak.
Momentu batez pentsatzen aritu zen.

—Zer motatako eskailerak, jauna? Leku askotan, errepideek itsaslabarrak mozten dituzte, eta errepide gehienetan, zenbait maila daude. Edo eskailera arruntak esan nahi dituzu, mailarik baino ez duten eskailerak, nolabait esateko?

Sir Arthurrek niri begiratu zidan.

—Eskailera arruntak —erantzun nion.

Minutu batez edo biz hausnartu zuen.

—Ez dut halakorik ezagutzen. Itxaron momentu batez. Norfolken badago halako leku bat, Brattlesham, golf-zelai baten ondoan, eta eskailera pare bat dago jokalariek galdutako pilotak berreskura ditzaten.

—Hori ez da —esan nuen.

—Itsasaldeko pasealeku asko daude, horretaz ari bazara. Opor-leku guztiek badituzte. Ezezkoa egin nion buruarekin.

—Hori baino ezkutuagoa izan behar du —esan nion.

—Bada, jaunak, ez zait beste lekurik bururatzen. Beno, The Ruff ere hor da…

—Hori zer da? —galdetu nion.

—Kenten dagoen klerazko erdiuhartea da, Bradgatetik gertu. Goian txalet asko daude eta eskailerak dituzte etxeetatik hondartza pribatuetara joateko. Oso leku dotorea da eta hangoek bizimodu pribatua dute.

Itsasaldiko gida ireki nuen, eta Bradgate bilatu. Ekainaren 15ean, itsasgora 22:27ean zen.

—Azkenean, arrastoa aurkitu dugu —oihu egin nuen adoretsu—. Nola aurki dezaket The Ruffen itsasaldia zer ordutan izango den?

—Hori nik esan diezazuket, jauna —ihardetsi zidan kostazainak—. Behin hango etxe bat utzi zidaten ekainean eta arrantzan joaten nintzen gauez. Itsasgora Bradgaten baino hamar minutu lehenago da.

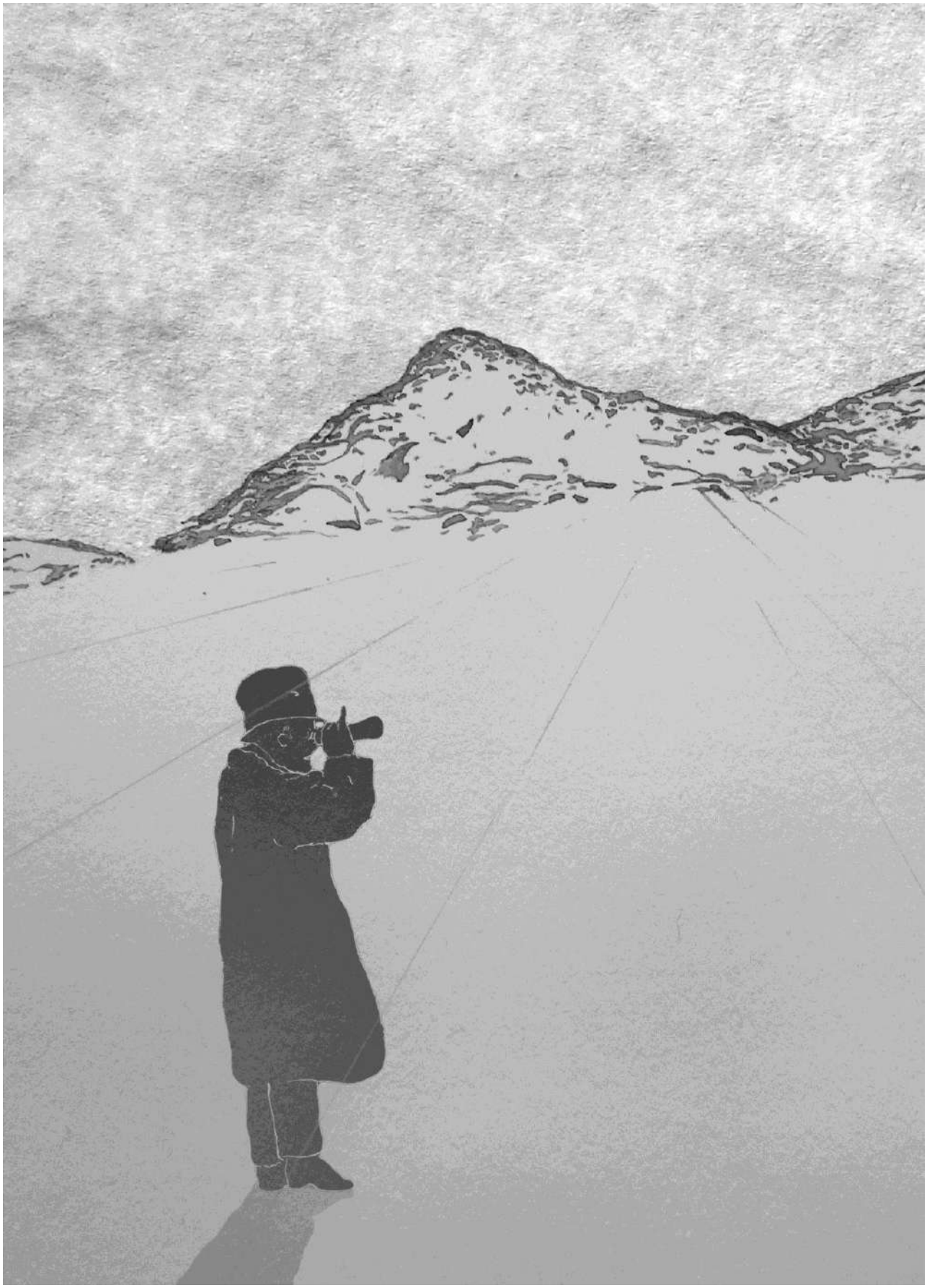
Liburua itxi nuen eta kideei begiratu nien.

—Eskailera haietako batek hogeita hemeretzi maila izanez gero, misterioa argitu dugu, jaunak —esan nien—. Zure autoa utz iezadazu, Sir Walter, eta errepideen mapa bat. Macgillivray jaunak hamar minutu ematen badizkit, uste dut biharko zerbait presta dezakegula.

Zentzugabea zen nik ardura hartzea halako afera batean, baina bazirudien ez zitzaiela axola eta, azken batean, istorioaren hasieratik hartu nuen parte. Gainera, lan latzetan eskarmentua nuen, eta goi-mailako jaun horiek adimentsuegiak ziren hori ez ikusteko. Royer jeneralak eman zidan agindua.

—Niri, behintzat, —esan zuen—, ondo iruditzen zait Hannay jaunaren eskuetan uztea.

Hiru eta erdiak baino lehen, Kenteko hesien paretik nindoan ziztu bizian ilargipean, Macgillivrayren poliziarik onena ondoan nuela.



10 - Talde anitz kostaldean elkartzen dira

Ekaineko goiz arrosa eta urdin batean iritsi nintzen Bradgatera. Griffin Hoteletik, Cock hondartzako itsasargiari begiratu nion; distantzia hartatik, buia bat zirudien. Hiru bat kilometro hegoalderantz eta kostaldetik askoz gertuago, gerraontzi txiki bat ainguratuta zegoen. Scaife, Macgillivrayren polizia, itsas armadan egona zen eta itsasontzi hori ezagutzen zuen. Haren izena eta kapitainarena ere esan zizkidan, eta datu horiek telegramaz bidali nizkion Sir Walterri.

Gosaldu ondoren, higiezinetako agente batek The Ruffeko eskaileren ateetako giltzak eman zizkion Scaiferi. Elkarrekin ibili ginen hondartzetatik eta, dozena-erdi eskailera horiek aztertzen zituen bitartean, itsaslabarrean zegoen sakonune batean eseri nintzen. Ez nuen nahi inork ni ikustea, nahiz eta ordu horretan ez zegoen inor eta kaioren bat baino ez nuen ikusten noizean behin.

Scaifek ordubete baino gehiago eman zuen lan horretan eta ikusi nuenean paper-zati bati begira niregana etortzen ari zela, urduritu nintzen. Kontua zen dena nire susmoetan oinarritzen zela.

Eskailera bakoitzean zenbat maila zeuden irakurri zuen.

—Hogeita hamalau, hogeita hamabost, hogeita hemeretzi, berrogeita bi, berrogeita zazpi — eta— hogeita bat, itsaslabarrak baxuak diren lekuan—. Ia zutik jarri nintzen oihu egiteko.

Herrira presaka itzuli ginen eta Macgillivrayri telegrama bidali nion. Dozena-erdi gizon behar nuen eta hainbat hoteletara joateko agindua eman nien. Orduan, Scaife hogeita hemeretzi mailen gainean zegoen etxea aztertzera joan zen.

Itzuli zenean, ekarri zizkidan berriek harritu eta lasaitu ninduten. Etxeak Trafalgar Lodge izena zuen eta Appelton abizeneko jaun adindu batena zen. Higiezinetako agentearen arabera, burtsa-agente erretiratua zen. Appleton jaunak denbora luzea ematen zuen han udaldian eta, momentu hartan, han zegoen. Ia astebete lehenago iritsia zen. Scaifek ez zuen haren gaineko informazio handirik: gizon zintzoa zen, fakturak garaiz ordaintzen zituen, eta bertako ongintzazko erakundeei dirua ematen zien. Scaife etxearen atzeko atetik sartu zen, josketa-makinen saltzailea zela esanez. Hiru zerbitzari zeuden —sukaldaria, neskamea eta garbitzailea—, klase ertaineko edozein etxalde arruntetan bezala. Sukaldaria ez zen asko hitz egiten zuen horietakoa eta atea itxi zion ia; baina Scaifek esan zidan ziur zegoela ez zekiela ezer. Etxe ondoan etxe berri bat zegoen eta behatzeko ezkutaleku oso ona izan zitekeen. Beste aldean zegoen txaleta alokatzeko zegoen eta zaindu gabeko lorategi basatia zuen.

Scaifek teleskopioa utzi zidan eta The Ruffen barna ibiltzera joan nintzen, bazkaldu baino lehen. Txalet-ilararen atzean geratu nintzen eta, golf-zelaiaren ertzean, talaia egokia aurkitu nuen. Handik, itsaslabarren gainean zegoen belardia ikusten zen, banku ugariz hornituta. Lursail karratuak ere bazeuden eta, handik, eskailerak jaisten ziren hondartzara. Trafalgar Lodge ere oso garbi ikusten nuen. Adreilu gorriko txaleta zen, karrerapea zuen, tenis-kantxa atzealdean eta, aurrean, berriz, kostaldeko lorategi arrunta, bitxilorez eta geranioz beteta. Bandera makila bat zegoen, eta bandera britainiar erraldoia zintzilik, geldirik erabat, haizerik ez zebilen eta.

Orduan ikusi nuen norbait etxetik atera eta itsaslabar gainera joan zela paseoan. Teleskopioaren bitartez, gizon adindu bat ikusi nuen, flanela zurizko prakez, ehun urdinezko jaka batez eta lastozko txano batez jantzita. Prismatikoak eta egunkaria zeramatzan; burdinazko banku batan eseri zen eta irakurtzeari ekion zion. Batzuetan, egunkaria uzten zuen eta itsasoari begiratzen zion prismatikoekin. Gerraontziari luze begiratu zion. Ordu-erdiz aritu nintzen behaketa-lanetan. Orduan, zutik jarri zen eta etxera itzuli zen, bazkaltzera. Ni ere hotelera itzuli nintzen, bazkaltzera.

Ez nengoen oso ziur. Etxebizitza arrunt eta errespetagarri hori ez zen espero nuena. Gizona landako baserri beldurgarri horren arkeologo burusoila izan zitekeen… edo ez. Hiri-inguruko auzo eta opor-leku guztietan ikusten diren gizon lasaien eta kontenten estereotipoa zen. Kalterik sortuko ez duen pertsona baten eredua marraztu nahi izanez gero, ziur aski, halako pertsona bat litzateke.

Baina, bazkaldu ondoren, hoteleko arkupean eserita nengoela, ikustea espero nuen eta galdu nahi ez nuen hori ikusi nuen. Yate bat etorri zen hegoaldetik, eta The Ruff parean ainguratu. Ehun eta berrogeita hamar tona izango zituen, gutxi gorabehera, eta bandera zuriagatik ikusi nuen armadakoa zela. Beraz, Scaife eta biok portura joan ginen eta bote bat alokatu genuen, arratsaldea arrantzan emateko.

Arratsalde epela eta lasaia zen. Elkarrekin hamar bat kilo bakailao eta arrain zuri harrapatu genituen, eta, han, dantzan ari zen itsaso urdinaren gainean, gauzak baikorrago ikusi nituen. The Ruffeko itsaslabar zurien gainean, txaleta berdeak eta gorriak ikusi nituen eta, batez ere, Trafalgar Lodgeko bandera makila handia. Laurak aldera, nahikoa arrantzatu ondoren, botezainari yatearen ingurura joateko eskatu nion. Txori zuri txiki baten modura, edozein momentutan ihes egiteko prest zegoen. Tamaina ikusita, Scaifek esan zidan itsasontzi azkarra zela eta motor handikoa.

Itsasontziak Ariadne zuen izena, letoia distirarazten ari ziren gizonetako baten txanoan ikusi nuen. Harekin hitz egin nuen eta Essexeko dialekto leunean erantzun zidan. Beste marinel bat agertu zen eta Ingalaterrako azentuaz agurtu ninduen. Gure arrantzaleak haietako batekin eguraldiari buruzko eztabaida bat

izan zuen eta, minutu batzuez, gure arraunak haien istriborreko brankatik gertu egon ziren.
Bat-batean, gizonek guri kasu egiteari utzi zioten eta lanean murgildu ziren ofizial bat yatearen bizkarrera igo zela. Gazte atsegina eta itxura onekoa zen eta arrantzaren gainean galdetu zigun, oso ingeles onean. Hala ere, ez zegoen zalantzarik. Ile motzeko buru hori, lepokoa eta gorbata ez ziren inolaz ere ingelesak.
Horrek baretu ninduen pixka bat, baina, Bradgatera arraunez itzultzen ari ginela, ezin nituen zalantzak baztertu. Kezkatzen ninduena zen etsaiek bazekitela informazioa Scudderengandik lortu nuela eta Scudderek leku horren kokalekua ere eman zidan. Scudderrek arrasto hori zuela jakinez gero, ez zituzten haien planak aldatuko? Plan haien arrakastaren mende zegoen dena, ezin zuten arriskurik hartu. Giltza zen ea zer puntutaraino ohartu ziren Scudderrek zer zekien. Bezperan, erabat ziur esan nuen alemaniarrek planak beti betetzen zituztela; baina, ni beren atzetik nenbilela susmoa izanez gero, tontakeria zatekeen arrisku hori ez saihestea. Nire buruari galdetu nion bezperan ikusitako gizona konturatu ote zen ezagutu nuela. Nolabait uste nuen ezetz eta hori zen nire itxaropena. Alabaina, afera ez zitzaidan inoiz arratsalde hartan bezain zaila iruditu, nahiz eta orduan, kalkulu guztien arabera, arrakasta ziurra ospatzen ibili beharko nukeen.
Hotelean, gerraontziaren kapitaina ezagutu nuen. Scaifek elkar aurkeztu zigun eta harekin hitz egin nuen pixka batez. Orduan, Trafalgar Lodgeri ordu pare batez behatzea erabaki nuen.
Aldapan gora, leku bat aurkitu nuen, hutsik zegoen etxe baten lorategian. Handik, tenis-kantxa ondo ikusten zen eta bi gizon jokatzen ari ziren. Bata dagoeneko ikusita nuen gizon adindua zen; bestea gaztea zen, klub baten koloreak zeramatzan gerri inguruan zuen zapian. Adore handiz jokatzen zuten, poroak irekitzeko ariketa bizia egin nahi zuten hiriko bi jaunek bezala. Hura baino ekintza tolesgabeagorik ezin nuen imajinatu. Garrasi eta barre egin zuten eta, neskame batek erretilu gainean bi pitxer ekarri zituenean, edateko eten bat egin zuten. Begiak igurtzi nituen, ez ote nintzen ni munduko memelorik handiena izango. Eskoziako landetan hegazkinez eta autoz ehizatu ninduten gizonak misterioz eta iluntasunez inguratuta zeuden, batez ere infernuko arkeologo hori. Erraza zen jende hori Scudder zoruan iltzatuta utzi zuen labanarekin lotzea, baita munduko bakea apurtzeko planekin ere. Baina aurrean nituen bi herritar errugabeak, inori kalterik egin gabe kirola egiten ari zirenak… Laster, etxeratuko ziren afari arrunta hartzera. Burtsaren prezioen gainean hitz egingo zuten eta azken kriket-emaitzak eta Surbitongo esamesak ere komentatuko zituzten. Putreak eta belatzak harrapatzeko sare bat egin nuen, eta begira! Bi txolarre potolo sartu ziren hutsegitez.

Gero, hirugarren bat agertu zen, gizon gazte bat bizikleta baten gainean. Golf-makilak zeramatzan bizkar gainean, poltsa batean. Tenis-kantxara lasai gerturatu zen, eta jokalariek zarata handiz egin zioten ongietorria. Argi zegoen adarra jotzen ari zirela; kontu guztiak izugarri ingelesa zirudien. Orduan, gizon potoloa, kopeta setazko musuzapi batez igurtziz, esan zien bainu bat hartu behar zuela. Haren hitz zehatzak entzun nituen:

—Izerditan blai nago. Honekin, pisua eta handicapa jaitsiko ditut, Bob. Bihar jokatuko dugu eta erraz irabaziko dizut—. Ez zegoen ezer hori baino ingelesagorik.

Etxean sartu ziren eta benetan ergel sentitu nintzen. Oraingo honetan, ildo okerrean nenbilen. Beharbada, gizonak antzezten ari ziren, baina, hala izanez gero, non zegoen publikoa? Ez zekiten ni hogeita hamar metrora nengoela, errododendro batean. Ezinezkoa zen pentsatzea gizon osasuntsu horiek ez zirela ziruditena: hiri-inguruko ingeles arrunt, jokatzen; aspergarriak, beharbada, baina erabat errugabeak.

Hala ere, hiru ziren eta haietako bat zaharra zen; beste bat, lodia, eta hirugarrena, argala eta beltzarana. Etxea Scudderren oharrekin lotuta zegoen, eta, hortik kilometro batera zegoen motordun yatean, bazegoen ofizial alemaniar bat, gutxienez. Karolidesekin gogoratu nintzen, Europa osoarekin, dar-dar eta lurrikara jasateko zorian. Londresen utzi nituen gizonekin ere oroitu nintzen, hurrengo orduetako gertaeren zain. Argi zegoen nonbait gauza txarrak gertatzen ari zirela. Harri Beltzak irabazi egin zuen eta, ekaineko gau hartatik bizirik ateraz gero, saria jasoko zuen.

Gauza bakarra egin nezakeen: zalantzarik ez banu bezala jarraitu eta, tontoaren plantak egin behar banituen, muturreraino eraman. Ez nion inoiz lan bati hain gogo gutxirekin ekin. Momentu horretan nahiago nuen gordeleku anarkista batean sartu, guztiak Browning bat eskuetan zutela, edo nire kontra erasoan zetorren lehoi bati jostailuzko pistola batekin aurre egin, hiru ingeles alai horien etxean sartu eta azpijokoa bukatu egin zela esan baino. Gogoz barre egingo zidaten! Halako batean, Peter Pienaarrek Rhodesian behin kontatutako gauza batez gogoratu nintzen. Peter dagoeneko aipatu dut kontakizun honetan. Ezagutu nuen esploratzailerik onena zen eta, gizon agurgarri bihurtu baino lehen, legez kanpoko jardueretan ibilia zen askotan, polizia haren atzetik zuela adore handiz. Behin, Peterrekin, mozorroei buruz hitz egin nuen eta bazuen deigarria iruditu zitzaidan teoria bat. Azaldu zidan iheslaria trebea izanez gero, ezaugarri fisikoak ez zirela oso lagungarriak pertsona bat identifikatzeko, ziurtasun osoa eskaintzen zuten frogak kenduta (hatz-aztarnak, kasurako). Ile tindatuak eta bizar faltsuak barregarriak iruditzen zitzaizkion, umeentzako tontakeriak ziren horiek. Peterrek “giroa” deitzen zuen hori omen zen garrantzia zuen gauza bakarra.

Gizon bat lehenbizikoz ikusi zuten lekutik oso desberdina zen inguru batean sar bazitekeen eta, garrantzitsuena, inguru berri horretan etxean bezala aritu eta hortik kanpo inoiz egon ez balitz bezala jokatzen bazuen, munduko detektiberik argienak ere nahasiko zituen. Eta istorio bat kontatzen zuen: behin, jaka beltz bat hartu, elizara joan eta, han, ereserki-liburua partekatu zuen bere bila zegoen gizonarekin. Gizon hark aurretiaz pertsona agurgarriz inguratu ikusi izan balu, ezagutuko zukeen; baina taberna batean argiak pistola batez itzaltzen baino ez zuen ikusi.

Peterrek esandakoak gogoratzean, egun hartan lehenbiziko aldiz adorea sentitu nuen. Peter eskarmentudun txoria zen, baina gizon horiek txoritegiko bizkorrenak ziren. Eta Peterrek azaldutakoa egiten ari baziren? Gizon txotxolo bat beste itxura bat hartzen saiatzen da; gizon bizkor bat ez da itxuraz aldatzen, baina ezberdina dirudi.

Peterrek bazuen beste esapide bat, errepide-langile nenbilenean oso lagungarri izan zitzaidana: «paper bat betetzean, ezinezkoa da paper horri eustea gure buruari pertsona hori dela sinetsarazi ezean». Horrek tenis-partiduarena azalduko zukeen. Gizon horiek ez zuten antzeztu behar. Heldulekuari bira eman, eta beste bizimodu batera pasatzen ziren, eta, bigarren bizimodu horretan, lehengoan bezain eroso zeuden. Klixea dirudi, baina Peterrek esaten zuen gaizkile handi guztien sekretua zela.

Ia zortziak ziren eta Scaiferi aginduak ematera itzuli nintzen. Poliziak non kokatu esan nion eta ibiltzera atera nintzen. Ez nuen afaltzeko gogorik. Golf-zelaian ibili nintzen, hutsik zegoen ordu hartan, eta txaletetik iparralderago eta itsaslabar gainean zegoen leku bateraino joan nintzen. Bide berrietan eta txukunetan, flanelaz jantzita zegoen jendea ikusi nuen, tenisetik eta hondartzatik etxera zihoala. Telegrama bulegotik zetorren kostazain bat ere ikusi nuen, baita astoak eta canicheak etxerako bidean ere. Itsasoan, iluntze urdinean ikusi nuen Ariadnen eta hegoalderago zegoen gerraontzian argiak piztu zituztela eta, Cock hondartzatik harago, Thameserantz zihoazen ferryetan ere bai. Hain zen baketsua eta arrunta dena, non gero eta goibelago sentitzen bainintzen. Adore guztia behar nuen Trafalgar Lodgeraino abiatzeko bederatzi eta erdietan.

Bidean umezain baten ondoan zihoan erbi-txakur bat ikusteak animatu ninduen. Rhodesian nuen txakur bat gogorarazten zidan, baita harekin Pali mendietara igarotako ehiza-egunak ere. Rhebok arreen bila joaten ginen. Gogoratu nuen behin animalia baten atzetik genbiltzala txakurrak eta biok arrastoa galdu genuela. Erbi-txakurrak ikusmenarekin gidatzen dira eta nire begiak nahiko onak dira, baina rhebok hura atera egin zen paisaiatik, besterik gabe. Geroago, jakin nuen nola egin zuen. Kopje grisen artean, belea ekaitz-hodeien artean bezain ikusezina zen. Ez zuen ihes egiteko beharrik: geldirik egotearekin nahikoa zuen atzean zuenarekin bat egiteko.

Bat-batean, oroimen horiek guztiak burmuinean nahasi zitzaizkidan, aurrean nuen kasuan pentsatu nuen, eta denak uztartu nituen. Harri Beltzak ez zuen ihes egiteko beharrik. Paisaian, lasai ederrean desagertzen zen. Bide onetik nenbilen. Hori buru barruraino sartu nuen eta zin egin nuen ez nuela inoiz ahaztuko. Peter Pienaarrek edukiko zuen azken hitza.

Ordurako, Scaifen poliziak beren lekuetan egongo ziren, baina ez zen inor ikusten. Etxea azoka bat bezain irekita zegoen, edozeinek ikusteko moduan. Metro bateko burdin hesi batek banatzen zuen itsaslabarreko errepidetik. Beheko leiho guztiak irekita zeuden; argi eta ahots baxuek esaten zidaten afariaren bukaeran zeudela. Dena ongintzazko erakunde baten azoka bezain publikoa eta agerikoa zen. Munduko tontorik handiena sentituz, ataka ireki nuen eta txirrina jo.

Nire motako gizonok, munduko leku basatietan ibiliak garenok, oso ondo konpontzen gara bi motatako pertsonekin: goikoak eta behekoak, nolabait esatearren. Guk haiek ulertzen ditugu eta haiek gu. Gustura nengoen artzainekin, eskaleekin eta errepide-langileekin, baita Sir Walterrekin eta bezperan nirekin egondako gizonekin eta halakoekin ere. Ez dakit zergatik, baina horrela da. Baina nire motako gizonok ez dugu klase ertaineko mundu erosoa eta lasaia ulertzen: txaletetan eta hiri-inguruetan bizi direnak. Ez ditugu haien ikuspuntuak eta ohiturak ulertzen eta, aukeran, haietatik ihes egiten dugu, manba beltzetik ihes egiten dugun bezala. Neskame oso txukun batek atea ireki zidanean, ia ezin nuen hitz egin.

Appleton jaunarekin hitz egiteko eskatu nion. Jangelara zuzenean sartzea izan zen nire plana, eta, ustekabean agertzean, agerian geratuko zen gizonek ezagutzen nindutela. Aitzitik, atondo txukun hartan, lekuak menperatu ninduen. Etxe britainiar mordo batean izaten diren golf-makilak, tenis-erraketak, lastozko txanoak, kaperak eta ibiltzeko makilak hor zeuden. Txukun tolestutako berokiak eta gabardinak harizko kutxa zahar bat gainean, kutxa luzeko erloju batek tiki-taka egiten, hormetan letoizko lapiko distiratsuak, barometro bat eta zaldi-lasterketa baten koadroa. Lekua eliza anglikano bat bezain konbentzionala zen. Neskameak izena galdetu zidanean, automatikoki esan nion eta egongela batera eraman ninduen, atondoaren eskuinetara.

Gela hura are okerragoa zen. Ez nuen astirik aztertzeko, baina, tximinia-apalaren gainean, zenbait kirol talderen argazkiak ikusi nituen markoetan, Ingalaterrako eskola edo unibertsitate pribatuetakoak ziruditenak. Begiratu bat baino ez nien bota, berehalakoan bihotz eman eta neskameari jarraitu bainion. Baina beranduegi heldu nintzen. Jangelan sartua zen dagoeneko eta jabeari nire izena eman zion. Ez nuen ikusi hiru gizonek nola hartu zuten.

Gelan sartu nintzenean, mahaiburuan zegoen gizon adindua altxatu, eta bira eman zuen ni agurtzeko. Arropa formalez jantzita zegoen, jaka motza eta

gorbata beltza, eta nik potoloa deitzen nuen hori ere bai. Hirugarrena, beltzarana, traje urdinez jantzita zegoen, lepoko zuri leunarekin eta klub edo eskola baten koloreekin. Gizon zaharraren portaera perfektua zen.

—Hannay jauna? —nigana zuzendu zen zalantzati—. Nirekin hitz egin nahi duzu? Momentu bat, lagunak, oraintxe itzuliko naiz. Joan gaitezen egongelara.

Nahiz eta neure buruarengan batere konfiantzarik ez izan, nire burua jokoan sartzera behartu nuen. Aulki bat hartu nuen, eta eseri nintzen.

—Uste dut gaur baino lehen elkar ezagutu dugula —esan nion—, eta badakizula zergatik etorri naizen.

Ez zegoen argi handirik gela horretan, baina, haien aurpegietan ikusten nuenez,oso ondo egin zuten ez ulertuarena.

—Agian, agian —esan zuen gizon zaharrak—. Nire memoria ez da oso ona eta, tamalez, esan beharko didazu zertara etorri zaren, jauna, ez baitakit.

—Ondo da —esan nion eta iruditzen zitzaidan tontakeria hutsetan nenbilela—. Jokoa bukatu egin dela esatera etorri naiz. Zuek hirurok atxilotzeko egiaztagiria ekarri dut.

—Atxilotzeko! —garrasi egin zuen gizon zaharrak eta, itxuraz, harrituta zegoen benetan—. Atxilotzeko! Jainkoarren, zergatik?

—Franklin Scudder Londonen erailtzeagatik, maiatzaren 23an.

—Ez dut inoiz ere izen hori entzun —erantzun zidan gizon zaharrak, ahots harrituz.

Beste batek hitz egin zuen.

—Hori Portland Placeko hilketa izan zen. Irakurri nuen. Jainkoarren, erotuta zaude! Nondik etorri zara?

—Scotland Yardetik —erantzun nion.

Minutu batez, isiltasuna erabatekoa izan zen. Gizon zaharra aurrean zuen platerari so zegoen, intxaur batekin jolasean eskuetan, ezer ulertzen ez duenaren itxurarekin.

Orduan, gizon potoloak hitz egin zuen. Totelka hitz egin zuen, bazirudien hitzak kontu handiz hautatzen ari zela.

—Ez urduritu, osaba —esan zuen—. Hau guztia zentzugabeko nahasketa da. Baina, batzuetan, halakoak gertatzen dira, eta erraz konponduko dugu. Gure errugabetasuna frogatzea ez da zaila izango. Maiatzaren hogeita hiruan atzerrian nengoela froga dezaket eta Bob bainuetxe batean zegoen. Zu Londresen zeunden, baina egin zenuena azal dezakezu.

—Oso ondo, Percy! Erraza da, bai horixe. Hogeita hirua! Hori Agatharen ezkontzaren ondorengo eguna da. Ikus dezagun… Ni zertan nenbilen? Wokingetik etorri nintzen goizean eta Charlie Symonsekin bazkaldu nuen klubean. Gero… A, bai, Fishmongerstarrekin afaldu nuen. Ondo gogoratzen dut, txanporrauak gaizki egin zidan eta hurrengo goizean ez nengoen oso ondo.

Arraioa, hor dago afaritik ekarri nuen zigarro-kutxa—. Mahai gainean zegoen objektu bati seinalatu zion eta barre egin zuen urduri.
—Uste dut, jauna —esan zidan gazteak adeitsu—, onartuko duzula oker zabiltzala. Edozein ingelesek bezala poliziari lagundu nahi diogu, baina ez dugu nahi Scotland Yardek tontoarena egitea. Ezta, osaba?
—Jakina, Bob—. Zirudienez, gizon adindua ahotsa berreskuratzen ari zen—. Jakina, autoritateei laguntzeko gure esku dagoen guztia egingo dugu. Baina hau… Hau gehiegi da. Ezin dut sinetsi.
—Nelliek barre egingo du —esan zuen gizon potoloak—. Beti esan du asperraldiak hilko zintuela, ez zaizulako inoiz ezer gertatzen. Eta orain benetako arazoak dituzu — eta atsegin handiz hasi zen barreka.
—Jainkoarren, bai. Pentsa! Hau bai klubean kontatzeko modukoa! Benetan, Hannay jauna, ziurrenik, haserretu behar nuke nire errugabetasuna frogatu behar izateagatik, baina dibertigarriegia da! Eman didazun izuarengatik barkatzekotan nago ia! Hain zeunden serio, ezen pentsatu dudan lo-ibiltaria naizela eta lo nengoela norbait erail dudala.
Ezinezkoa zen itxurak egiten aritzea: benetakoegia zen. Goibeldu nintzen izugarri eta barkamena eskatzea eta alde egitea izan zen lehenbiziko pentsamendua. Baina erabaki nuen bukaeraraino joan behar nuela, nahiz eta Erresuma Batuko guztiek nitaz barre egin. Jangelako mahai gainean zeuden kandelek ez zuten argi handirik ematen, eta, nire nahastea argitzeko, zutik jarri eta atera joan nintzen, argi elektrikoa piztera. Bat-bateko argiak begiak kliskarazi zizkien eta ni, zutik, hiru aurpegi horiei so geratu nintzen.
Ez nuen ezer garbirik atera. Bat zaharra eta burusoila zen; beste bat, potoloa eta hirugarrena, beltzarana eta argala. Haien itxuran ez zegoen ezer Eskozian nire atzetik ibilitakoak ez zirenik frogatzen zuenik, baina ez zegoen ezer haiek nor ziren jakiteko. Ez dakit zergatik nik –errepide-langile nintzela begietara begiratu zien eta beste behin Ned Ainslie izan zen horrek–, nire memoria eta behatzeko trebetasun onekin, ez nuen behar nuena aurkitu. Bazirudien esaten zuten hura zirela eta ezin nuen kontrakoa zinez esan.
Han, jangela atsegin hartan, hormak akuafortez apainduta eta mantelinaz jantzitako emakume zahar baten erretratua tximinia gainean zegoela, ezin nuen landetako gaizkileekin lotzen zituen ezer ikusi. Nire ondoan, zilarrezko zigarro-kutxa bat zegoen eta ikusi nuen Saint Bede Klubeko Percival Appletonek golf-txapelketa batean irabazi zuela. Peter Pienaarrek esaten zuenari gogor eutsi behar izan nion etxe hartatik korrika ez ateratzeko. —Orduan —esan zidan gureak adeitsu—, ikusi duzunak lasaitzen zaitu, jauna?
Ezin nuen ezer esan.

—Espero dut zure betebeharren artean egotea afera barregarria hau bertan behera uztea. Ez naiz kezkatzen, baina ulertuko duzu herritar zintzo garenontzat hau ezatsegina dela.
Ezezkoa egin nion buruarekin.
—Alajaina! —gazteak garrasi egin zuen—. Hau gehiegi da!
—Polizia-etxera eramango gaituzu? —galdetu zidan potoloak—. Hori liteke irtenbiderik onena, baina, segur aski, hemengo polizia-etxearekin ez zenuke nahiko izango. Zure baimena ikusteko eskubidea badut, baina ez dut zure gainean susmorik jarri nahi. Zure eginkizuna betetzen ari zara, besterik ez. Baina onartuko duzu oso ezatsegina dela. Zer egin behar duzu?
Bi aukera baino ez zeuden: poliziei deitu hiruak atxilotzeko, edo nire akatsa onartu eta alde egin. Lekuarekin eta giro errugabearekin tentelduta nengoen eta ez zen errugabetasuna bakarrik, bazik eta aurpegi horietan ikusitako kezka eta benetako nahastea. —Ene, Peter Pienaar… —xuxurlatu nuen nire baitan, eta, istant batez, nire burua ia memelotzat hartu nuen eta haiei barkamena eskatu.
—Bitartean, bridgean joka dezagun —esan zuen potoloak—. Horrekin, Hannay jaunak hausnartzeko denbora izango du eta, badakizue, laugarren jokalaria behar genuen. Jokatuko duzu, jauna?
Klub bateko gonbidapen arrunta izan balitz bezala onartu nuen. Afera harekin zur eta lur nengoen. Egongelara joan ginen: mahaia kartetan jokatzeko prest zegoen eta erretzekoa eta edatekoa eskaini zidaten. Mahaira eseri nintzen, amets batean banengo bezala. Leihoa irekita zegoen eta ilargiak itsaslabarrak eta itsasoa argi horiz margotzen zituen. Ilargi-argia nire buruan ere bazegoen. Hiru gizonek lasaitasuna berreskuratu zuten eta eroso hitz egiten ari ziren. Edozein golf-klubetan entzuten den elkarrizketa erlaxatua zen. Itxura bitxia izan behar nuen han eserita, kopeta ilun, begiak galduta…
Nire bikotekidea gizon gaztea zen. Normalean, bridgean nahiko ondo aritzen naiz, baina, gau hartan, oso gaizki aritu nintzen seguru asko. Ikusten ari ziren nahasi nindutela eta horrek inoiz baino gehiago lasaitu zituen. Hiru aurpegiei begiratzen nien, baina ez zidaten ezer esaten. Kontua ez zen itxura ezberdina zutela, baizik eta ezberdinak zirela. Peter Pienaarren hitzei ahalegin handiz heldu nien.
Orduan, zerbaitek esnarazi ninduen.
Gizon zaharrak kartak mahai gainean utzi zituen puru bat pizteko. Ez zuen berehala hartu. Momentu batez atzera mugitu zen aulkian eta hatz-muturrekin belaunen gainean jo zuen.
Mugimendu hori landako baserrian ikusi nuen, ni haren aurrean nengoela eta haren atzean bi zerbitzari pistoladun.

Gauza txikia zen, segundo batekoa, eta hori ez ikusteko aukera itzelak ziren, kartetara adi nengoelako, besteak beste. Baina ez nuen aukera hori galdu eta iruditu zitzaidan tximista bezain azkar, airea lainoz garbitu egin zela. Itzala desagertu zitzaidan burmuinetik eta hiru gizonak ezagutu nituen zalantzarik gabe.

Tximinia gaineko erlojuak hamarrak eman zituen.

Hiru aurpegiak nire aurrean aldatu ziren eta beren sekretuak azaldu zizkidaten. Gaztea hiltzailea zen. Aldarte onaren ordez, krudeltasuna eta bihozgabekeria ikusten nituen. Ez nuen zalantzarik haren labanak utzi zuela Scudder zoruan itsatsita. Karolides haren gisako batek erail zuen tiroz.

Potoloaren hazpegiak desegin eta, berriro ere, nire aurrean berregin ziren. Ez zuen aurpegirik, ehun mozorro baizik, nahi zuenean janzteko edota aldatzeko. Aparteko antzezlea izango zatekeen. Beharbada, bezperan berak egin zuen Lord Alloarena, edo agian ez. Ez zitzaidan axola. Nire buruari galdetu nion hura ote zen lehenbizikoz Scudderren aztarna aurkitu zuena, eta Scudderri txartela utzi. Scudderrek zizipaza egiten zuela esan zidan eta imajina nezakeen zizipazak izua areagotzen zuela.

Baina zaharra zen onena. Burmuina hutsa zen: izotza bezalakoa, kalkulatzailea, mailu erraldoi bat bezain errukigabea. Orain ikusten ari nintzela, ez nekien zergatik pentsatu nuen onbera zela. Masailezurra altzairu hotza bezalakoa zuen eta hegazti baten begien argitasun ankerra begietan. Jokatzen jarraitu nuen eta, segundoak pasatu ahala, bihotzean nuen gorrotoa handitzen ari zen. Gorroto horrek ia ito egiten ninduen eta kidearen galdera bat egin zidanean, ezin izan nion erantzun. Ezin nuen konpainia hori askoz luzeago jasan.

—E! Bob! Begiratu ordua —esan zuen zaharrak—. Trena hartu beharko duzu. Bobek Londresera joan behar da gaur —gehitu zuen, niri begira. Orain, ahotsak doinu faltsua zuen erabat.

Erlojuari begiratu nion. Hamar eta erdiak ziren kasik.

—Tamalez, bidaia atzeratu beharko du —esan nion.

—Ene, bada —esan zuen gazteak—. Uste nuen tontakeria hori bertan behera utzita zenuela. Joan beharra daukat. Nire helbidea emango dizut eta nahi duzun bermea ere bai.

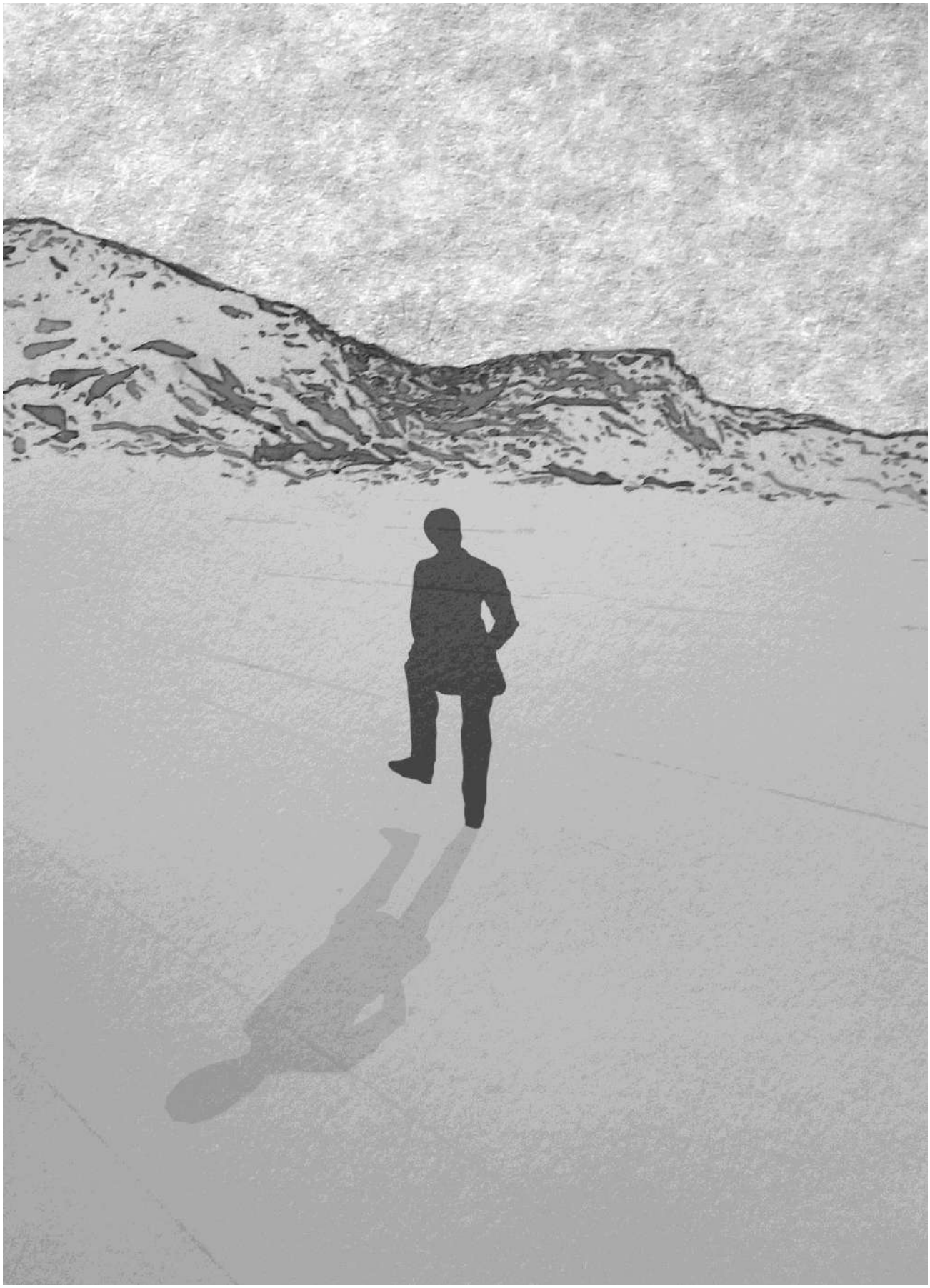
—Ez —esan nion —, geratu behar duzu.

Uste dut orduan konturatu zirela jokoa larria zela. Aukera bat eta bakarra zeukaten: niri sinestarazi oker nenbilela eta porrot egin nuela. Zaharrak hitz egin zuen berriro.

—Ilobaren fidantza ordainduko dut. Horrekin nahikoa izango duzu, ezta, Hannay jauna? —Nire imajinazioa zen, ala ahots koipetsu horretan zalantza nabari nuen?

Ez zegoen zalantzarik: hari begira ari nintzela, betazalak jaitsi baitzituen belatz batek bezala.
Txilibitua jo nuen.
Istant batean, argi guztiak itzalita zeuden. Pare bat beso indartsuk gerritik heldu zidaten eta sakelak estali, badaezpada ere pistola ote neraman.
—Schnell, Franz —ahots batek egin zuen oihu—, das Boot, das Boot! —Hitz horiek esatearekin batera, bi polizia ikusi nituen ilargiak argitutako belardian.
Gazte beltzaranak leihotik egin zuen jauzi, hortik atera eta hesi baxu batean gora pasatu zen aitaren batean. Zaharrari heldu nion eta gela pertsonez bete zen. Potoloa harrapatu zutela ikusi nuen, baina nire arreta etxetik kanpo zegoen. Franzek azkar gurutzatu zuen errepidea eta hondartzarako eskaileren aurrean zegoen sarrerarantz zihoan. Polizia bat zihoan haren atzetik, baina ez zuen aukerarik. Eskaileren sarraila iheslariaren atzean itxi zen eta horri begira geratu nintzen, eskuekin zaharraren eztarriari eutsita, gizon batek eskailerak jaisteko beharko zuen tarteaz.
Bat-batean nire gatibua nigandik askatu zen eta hormaren kontra aurka jauzi egin zuen. Klik bat entzun zen, palanka bati tira egin izan balio bezala. Lur azpitik eta oso urrundik, burrunba bat entzun zen, eta leihoaren beste aldean ikusi nuen eskaileretatik klerazko hauts-hodei bat ateratzen ari zela.
Norbaitek argiak piztu zituen.
Zaharra, begiak sutan, niri so zegoen.
—Seguru dago —oihu egin zidan. — Beranduegi da hari jarraitzeko… Joan egin da… Irabazi egin du… Der Schwarzestein ist in der Siegeskrone.
Begietan, garaipena baino gehiago zuen. Hegazti batek bezala ezkutatuta zeuzkan ordura arte, eta, orain, belatz baten harrotasunarekin kartsu irekita zeuden. Fanatiko baten sugarraz, dir-dir egiten zuten eta lehenengo aldiz konturatu nintzen aurka nuena benetan beldurgarria zela. Gizon hori espioia baino gehiago zen eta, modu nazkagarri batean bazen ere, abertzalea.
Eskuburdinak jartzen ari zitzaizkiola, azken hitz batzuk esan nizkion.
—Espero dut Franzek garaipena ondo hartzea. Jakin ezazu azken ordu honetan Ariadne gure menpean egon dela.

Zazpi aste geroago, guztiok dakizuen bezala, gerra piztu zen. Lehenengo astean, armada berrian eman nuen izena, eta, Matabelen hartutako eskarmentuari esker, kapitain egin ninduten berehala. Baina uste dut lanik onena uniformez jantzi baino lehen egin nuela.



Hitzatzea

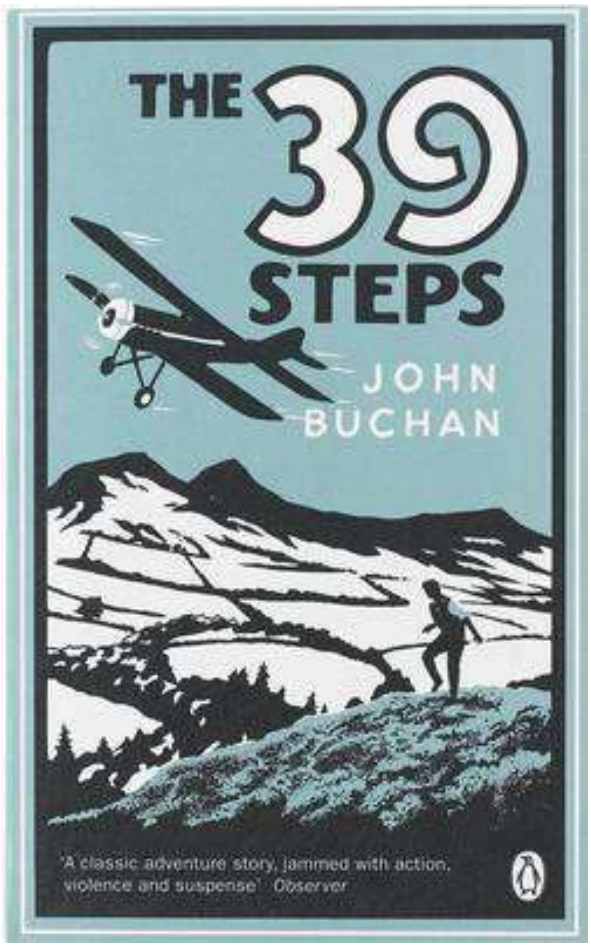
'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak' John Buchan egile eskoziarraren hamazazpigarren liburua eta zortzigarren eleberria da. Lehenbizikoz, Blackwoods aldizkarian atera zen, 1915eko abuztua eta iraila bitartean; urrian, William Blackwood and Sons argitaletxeak liburu-formatuan plazaratu zuen. Abentura-liburua da.

Hasieratik, 'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak'-ek arrakasta handia izan zuen. Lehenengo Mundu Gerra 1914an hasia zen, eta lubakietan zeuden soldaduek –baita haien ahaide eta beste milaka britainiarrek ere– gogoz irakurri zuten liburua: lehenengo hiru hilabeteetan 33.000 ale saldu ziren (garai hartan, nobelako 1.000 ale saltzen ziren, asko jota). Geroztik, 'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak' beti egon da herrialde ingelesdunen liburu-dendetan; ikastetxeen literatura-eskoletan irakurtzen da; liburuaren kontakizunean hiru film oinarritzen dira; eta antzerki- eta irrati-bertsio batzuk ere egin dira.

Irakurleak Richard Hannay protagonistarekin identifikatzen dira edo, behintzat, haren aldekoak dira liburuan zehar. Itxuraz, Hannay gizon arrunta da, eta, nahi gabe, arazo larri batzuei aurre egin behar die: arruntasun hori urtu egiten da ataka estu batetik ateratzen den bakoitzean.

Ondorengo hogeita bat urteetan, Richard Hannay protagonista izan zen Buchanen beste lau eleberriotan: 'Greenmantle' ('Kapaberdea', 1916; non alemaniarrek profeta musulman turkiar bat erabiltzen duten Ekialde Hurbileko biztanleriaren atxikimendua eskuratzeko); 'Mr. Standfast' ('Sendoegon jauna', 1919; non espioi alemaniar talde bat –irakurleek espioien nagusia 'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak'etik ezagutzen dute– guda modu zikinean irabazten saiatzen den); 'The Three Hostages' ('Hiru bahituak', 1924; non itxuraz establishment britainiarraren parte-hartzaile garrantzitsua den gizon batek hiru pertsona gazte bahitzen dituen, gizarte osoa suntsitzeko); 'The Island of Sheep' ('Ardien Irla', 1936; non Hannayk maltzur batzuen azpijokoa oztopatzen duen, eta oinordeko aberats bat salbatzen duen).

Lehenengo Mundu Gerraren hasieran, Buchan inteligentzia-zerbitzu britainiarretan aritu zen, eta, neurri batean, 'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak' propaganda egiteko idatzi zuen: liburuan zehar alemaniarren azpijokoak gaitzesten dira, eta britainiarren portaera noblea eta zuzena agerian geratzen da. Baina egilearen asmo propagandistikoak ez zion liburuaren kalitateari kalterik egin, ezta irakurleen plazera oztopatu ere.



Egilea

John Buchan 1875ean jaio zen, Fifen, Eskoziako ekialdean. Aita apaiz protestantea zen. Fifeko kostaldeak eta eliza protestanteak 'Prester John' ('Apaiza Johannes', 1910) eleberrian leku garrantzitsua izan zuten.

Familiak oporraldiak Eskoziako mugaldean ematen zituen, amaren gurasoekin, eta hango kultura eta paisaiak garrantzitsuak ziren Buchanen ipuin askotan, baita 'Witchwood' nobelan ('Sorginbasoa', 1927) eta 'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak'-en ere.

Unibertsitatean ikasteko diru-sari bat irabazi zuen eta, hari esker, kultura klasikoa ikasi zuen Glasgown eta, geroago, Oxforden, elite britainiarraren gazteekin batera. Unibertsitate-garaian, poesia- eta saiakera-sari ugari jaso zituen, eta sei liburu argitaratu zituen.

Lizentziatu ondoren, 1901ean, Buchanek inperio britainiarraren goi-mailako administrazioan lan egin zuen Hego Afrikan. Bigarren Boerren Gerran parte hartu zuen.

Ingalaterrara itzuli zenean, 1903n, Thomas Nelson & Son argitaletxeko bazkide izendatu zuten, baita The Spectator aldizkariaren zuzendari ere. Zuzenbidean lizentziatu zen. Aldi berean, liburuak idazten jarraitu zuen; 1914 arte, hiru biografia, sei eleberri eta zazpi saiakera-liburu argitaratu zituen.

1907an Susan Grosvenor aristokratarekin ezkondu zen. Bikoteak lau seme-alaba izan zituen.

Victoria erreginaren aldian jaioa eta hezia, Buchan abertzale eta inperialista zen, herrikide ia-ia guztiak bezala. Erresuma Batua eredugarria zela uste zuen eta, ondorioz, inperio britainiarrak mundua hobetzen zuelakoan zegoen. Inoiz, liburuetan erabili zituen esapide batzuengatik, iruzkingile batzuek arrazakeria leporatu izan diote; baina arazo hori ez zen Buchanena bakarrik, gizarte oso baten joera baizik. Hala nola, inoiz esan da Buchan antisemita zela; kasu horretan, aldiz, kritikak ez dira sinesgarriak, batez ere Buchan sionismoaren aldekoa zela ikusiz.

Familia xume batean jaiota eta gaztetatik –Oxfordeko unibertsitateko garaitik– lagun boteretsu eta aristokratikoez inguratuta, Buchanen gizarte-maila horrekiko eta titulu eta dominekiko lilura nabaria izan zen. 'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak'-en, esaterako, ministro bat, almirante bat eta bi jeneral agertzen dira.

Lehenengo Mundu Gerran, Buchan inteligentzia-zerbitzuetan aritu zen; The Times egunkariaren berriemailetako bat izan zen Frantzian; armadan izena eman zuen, eta, gudaren bukaerako, koronel izan zen; gerraren historia ofiziala idazten lagundu zuen; eta sei liburu plazaratu zituen.

Gerra ondoren, liburuak plazaratzen jarraitu zuen (1918 eta 1940 artean, hemezortzi eleberri, zazpi biografia eta hogeita sei saiakera-liburu, azken horietako gehienak historiaren gainekoak). 1927an, alderdi kontserbadoreko legebiltzarkide izendatu zuten.

1935ean Jurgi V.ak lord izendatu zuen, eta Buchanek Tweedsmuir titulua hartu zuen. Urte haren azaroan, erregeak Kanadako gobernadore jeneral izendatu zuen. Hurrengo bost urteetan, Buchanek Kanada osoa ezagutu zuen; hango herri guztien alde lan egin zuen, aniztasunaren balioaz konbentzituta; alfabetatze-kanpaina garrantzitsu batzuk martxan jarri zituen; eta Kanadako literaturaren alde lan egin zuen.

John Buchan 1940an hil zen, Kanadan. Eskoziarraren azken eleberriak –'Sick Heart River' ('Bihotz gaixo ibaia', 1941)– Kanadako iparraldean zahartuta eta gaixorik zegoen gizon batek egin zuen bidaia gogorraren gainekoa da. Buchanen liburu askotan bezala, gizonezko bat hiritik kanpo bizitzera behartuta dago, mendialdean eta egoera latzetan, baita beldurra eta oztopo anitz gainditzera ere. Nobelaren esaldi bat Buchanen aipurik ospetsuenetakoa da: “Bizitza hau zoragarria da, ahultzen ez garen bitartean”.

Pertsonaiak

Richard Hannay da liburuaren protagonista, Eskozian jaioa eta Hegoafrikan hezia. Kolonia britainiarrean meatze-ingeniari aritu da, eta, lan horri esker, dirutza irabazi du. 1914an, Erresuma Batura itzultzea erabaki du, dauzkan baliabideez Londresen gozatzera. Hiriburuan, aldiz, aspertu egin da, eta bakarrik dago gustura liburuan zehar gertatzen diren zailtasunei aurre egiten dienean. Hirian ezeroso sentitzen da; mendialdean, ordea, bere lekuan dago.

Irakurle askoren beldur bati eta nahi bati ematen die gorputza Hannay pertsonaiak: batetik, gizartean –edo edozein egoeratan– deseroso sentitzeko beldurra, lekuz kanpo egotearena; bestetik, maltzurrak agertzen direnean, Hannayk bezain sendo eta ausart egin nahi genieke aurre.

Franklin Scudder estatubatuar geldiezina da, hizkuntzalari apartekoa, zerbitzu sekretu britainiarrei informazioa ematen diena, eta espioi-talde alemaniar baten sekretuak jakin dituena. Espioiak horretaz konturatu direnez, Scudder, beldurrak jota, Londresera joan da babes bila, eta, azkenean, babes hori Hannayri eskatu behar izan dio, eta datu sekretuak kontatu dizkio. Scudder pertsonaiak beldurra eta jazarpen-sentsazioa txertatzen ditu liburuan, hasieran bere jazarpenarena eta, geroago eta liburuan zehar, Hannayrena.

Espioi alemaniarrek Scudder erail dute, eta Hannay jazarri dute Londresen eta Eskozian barrena. Mozorrotzen eta nortasun anitzak hartzen adituak dira. Haien helburuak lortzeko bidean ez dute eragozpenik onartzen; maltzurrak dira.

Onartu behar da Buchanen ikuspuntua espioiei dagokienez ez dela koherentea: alemaniarrak maltzurrak dira nortasun faltsuak hartzen dituztelako; Hannay, aldiz, heroi ausarta eta bertutetsua da gauza bera egiten duenean.

Pertsonaia 'xume' asko daude, xumeak paper txikiak dituztelako kontakizunean, eta gizartean dituzten estatusak xeheak direlako. Nahiz eta protagonismo handirik ez izan, kontakizunari kolorea ematen diote, baita umorea ere. Hannayk Eskoziako mendebaldeko pertsonaien bertuteak goresten ditu, eta haiekin barre egiten dugunean, begirunez eta modu amultsuan egiten dugu. Londreseko pertsonaiekin, aldiz, Hannayk erabiltzen duen umore-mota ezberdina da, eta, batzuetan, haietaz egiten dugu barre, burugabeak direlako; kasu, Marmaduke pertsonaia penagarria agertzen denean.

Gizon 'handi' batzuk –ministroak, jeneralak eta almiranteak– liburuaren bukaeran agertzen dira. Ziurrenik, goi-mailako politikariek eta militarrek ez lukete parte hartuko halako benetako krisialdi batean: istorioan parte hartzea Buchanen klase horrenganako miresmenaren lagin bat da.

Garai historikoa

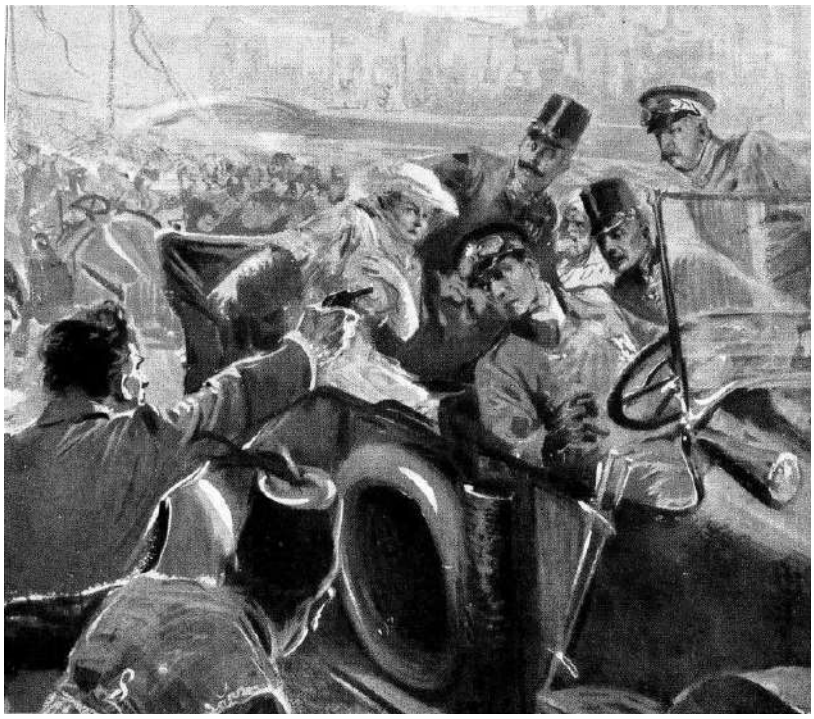
1914an, gizarte britainiarra industrializatuta zegoen, neurri handi batean, eta, hirietan, hiritar gehienek lan- eta bizi-egoera zailei aurre egin behar ohi zieten. Baina biztanleriaren ehuneko handi bat hirietatik kanpo bizi zen oraindik, eta, herrialdearen industrializazio-prozesua 1830 aldera hasi zenez, mendialdearekin nolabaiteko harreman zuten ia herritar guztiek. Esan daiteke 'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak'-ek aurreko bizimoduaren oroi-mina islatzen duela.

Erresuma Batua munduko demokraziarik zaharrena dela askotan esaten den arren, garaiko hautesle-erroldak beste ideia bat ematen digu: emakumeek ez zuten bozkatzeko eskubiderik, ezta gizon guztiek ere (gizonezkoen ehuneko hirurogeik bazuen parte hartzea hauteskundeetan; hauteslea izateko eskubidea etxe-jabetzan zetzan). Hala ere, nahiz eta gaur egungo ikuspuntutik hiritarrek eskubide murriztuak izan, biztanleria ia-ia osoa abertzalea zen, oso, baita inperialista ere.

1914an, Britainiar Inperioak 450 milioi biztanle zituen, gutxi gorabehera, eta 30 milioi kilometro koadroko hedapena zuen. Munduan zehar, ez zuen benetako lehiakiderik, baina, Europan, egoera ezberdina zen: alde batetik, Erresuma Batuak Frantzia eta Errusia zituen aliatuak; bestetik, Alemaniak, Austria-Hungariak eta Italiak elkarren arteko hitzarmen militarra zuten. Ekainaren 28an

anarkista batek Franz Ferdinand Austriakoa tiroka erail zuen eta aste batzuk geroago, Lehenengo Mundu Gerra lehertu zen. Gudan, hamar milioi bat lagun hil ziren.

'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak' gerraren bezperan kokatuta dago, eta guda-arriskua kontakizunean zehar antzematen dugu. Liburuaren hasieran, gerra saihestea da kezka; geroago, Erresuma Batuko eta Frantziako datu militarrak alemaniarrengandik babestea, gerra saihestezina dela-eta.



Izadia eta paisaia

Herri batean jaioa, Buchanek haurtzaroko oporraldiak mendialdean eman zituen, Eskoziako mugaldean. 'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak'-en, alde handia marrazten du hiriaren eta landaren artean. Hirian, Hannay aspertzen da, ia gaixorik sentitzen da; inguruan dituen pertsonaia asko funtsik gabekoak dira. Mendialdean, aldiz, bizirik sentitzen da, adimentsu eta bizkor; bertako pertsonaiak benetakoak dira, eta sustraiak dituzte, nolabait.

Izadi-deskribapen ederrak daude Buchanen liburu askotan, eta ‘Hogeita hemeretzi mailak’-en ugari dira. Hirugarren kapituluan, Londresetik trenez atera denean, Hannayk zera pentsatu du: «Maiatzeko eguraldia ederra zen, elorri zuria loretan zegoen landare hesi guztietan, eta ez nuen ulertzen zergatik, lehenago libre nintzenean, Londresen geratu nintzen mendialde eder hauetara atera ordez».

Liburuan zehar animalia anitz aipatzen dira –besteak beste, txori-mota asko–, baita landare-espezie ugari ere. Buchanek trebetasun berezia zuen inguru naturalak deskribatzeko, eta egiten dizkigun paisaiek kontakizuna girotzen dute.

Gaiak

Buchanek hainbat gai lantzen ditu: pertsona baten barruko sendotasuna, adimena eta ausardia; ezezagun bati ematen zaion laguntza; gizartearen eta egonkortasunaren onurak; aberria; espioitza eta gerra. Hala ere, egileak ez digu hausnarketa zuzenik eskaini gai horien gainean: akzioen eta pertsonaien hitzen bitartez mintzatzen zaigu, eta, horrela, geure ondorioak ateratzen ditugu.
Estiloa

'39 mailak' lehenengo pertsonan kontatzen da, eta Hannayk zuzen hitz egiten digu. Kontatzen digunagatik eta hitz egiteko moduagatik, irakurleak protagonistarekin identifikatu egiten dira hasieratik. Beste pertsonaia batzuek ere parte hartzen dute kontakizunean estilo zuzenean, norberak bere hizkera erabiliz. Zuzentasun horren poderioz, '39 mailak' arin eta gustura irakurtzeko moduko liburu bat da.

Maltzurrak badaude –espioi alemaniarrak–, mozorrotuta eta maltzurkeriengatik bakarrik ezagutzen ditugunak. Baina 'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak' ez da zuri-beltzezko liburua. Maltzurren aurkakoa, Hannay, ez da ipuinetako printze bat, haragizko gizonezko bat baizik, eta ezaugarri bereziak ditu. Bigarren mailako pertsonaiak ere pertsonak dira, hiru dimentsiokoak, norberak bere hizkera eta ezaugarriekin: ez dira pertsonaia grisak, eta istorioari kolorea eta xarma ekartzen dizkiote.
Dialektoak (edo hizkuntzak)

'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak' ingeles batuan idatzita dago, baina pertsonaia batzuek Londreseko mintzairaz hitz egiten dute, eta beste batzuek –gehiago– eskozieraz edo Eskoziako hegoaldeko dialektoaz.

Eskoziako hegoaldeko hizkeraren gaineko eztabaidak –ea hizkuntza ala dialektoa den– hizkuntzalariak bi taldetan banatzen ditu. Batzuek azpimarratzen dute ingelesak eta eskozierak duten antza handia; beste batzuek ingelesdunen mintzaira hori ulertzeko zailtasun handia dagoela ohartarazten dute.

Bide-langilearen esaldi bat aipatzearren: «Just take the barry, and wheel eneuch metal frae yon quarry doon the road to mak anither bing the morn»; ingeles batura eramanda: «Just take the wheelbarrow and bring enough stuff from the quarry down the road to make another mound tomorrow morning»; alegia: «Errota hartu, eta, hor den harrobitik, bihar beste tontor bat egiteko bezainbat ekarri».

Dena dela, egileak hizkera hori erabiltzeak pertsonaiei sinesgarritasuna ematen die, baita kontakizunari kolorea eta giroa ere.
Filmak eta antzerkia

'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak'-en oinarritzen diren zinema-bertsio, antzerki-lan eta irrati-bertsio batzuk daude; besteak beste, lau film. Haietako ospetsuena Alfred Hitchcocken '39 mailak' (1935) da eta, aditu batzuen arabera, zuzendari beraren 'North by Northwest' (1959) ere Buchanen kontakizunaren moldaketa bat da. Hitchcockek izenburua aldatu izana –'hogeita hemeretzi' '39' bihurtu zuen– esanguratsua da: pelikula nobelan oinarrituta dago, baina ez du modu zehatzean islatzen Buchanen istorioa.

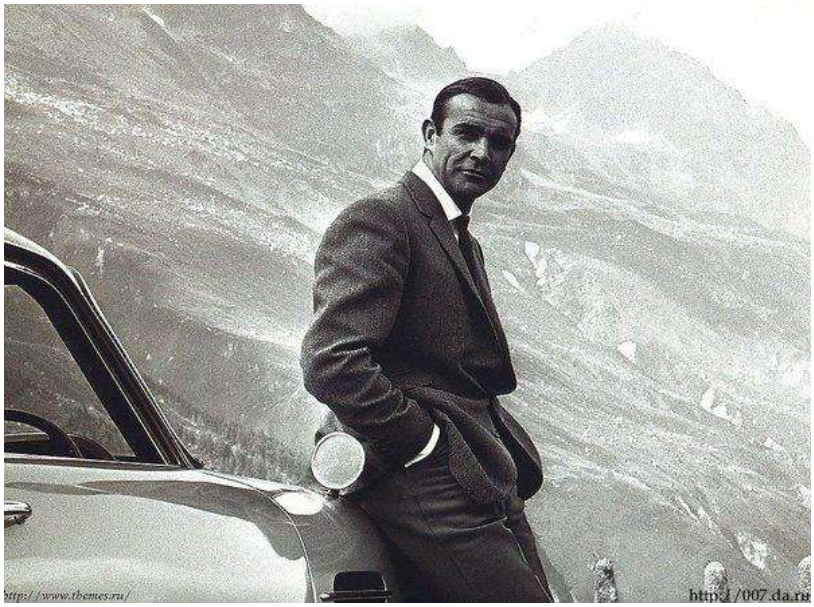
Iturriak eta ondarea

Espioitza-nobela generoan, 'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak'-ek bi aitzindari ditu: Joseph Conraden 'Agente sekretua' (1907) eta Erskine Childersen 'Misterioa hareetan' (1903).

Buchan eta Edmond Ironside jenerala ezagutzen zituzten lagun batzuen arabera, Buchanek Richard Hannay pertsonaia osatzeko militar britainiarren bizitza oinarritzat hartu zuen.

'Hogeita hemeretzi mailak' ihesaldi-kontakizunen aitzindaria izan zen eta, besteak beste, Geoffrey Householden 'Rogue Male' (1939) eta Ian Flemingen liburuak (1953-1964) –James Bond protagonistarekin– horren ondorengo zuzenak dira.

Aritz Branton
Donostia, 2017ko otsailean



The Thirty-nine Steps

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1. The Man Who Died 113

2. The Milkman Sets Out on his Travels 123

3. The Adventure of the Literary Innkeeper 129

4. The Adventure of the Radical Candidate 139

5. The Adventure of the Spectacled Roadman 148

6. The Adventure of the Bald Archaeologist 156

7. The Dry-Fly Fisherman 168

8. The Coming of the Black Stone 177

9. The Thirty-Nine Steps 184

10. Various Parties Converging on the Sea 191

1. The Man Who Died

I returned from the City about three o'clock on that May afternoon pretty well disgusted with life. I had been three months in the Old Country, and was fed up with it. If anyone had told me a year ago that I would have been feeling like that I should have laughed at him; but there was the fact. The weather made me liverish, the talk of the ordinary Englishman made me sick, I couldn't get enough exercise, and the amusements of London seemed as flat as soda- water that has been standing in the sun. 'Richard Hannay,' I kept telling myself, 'you have got into the wrong ditch, my friend, and you had better climb out.'

It made me bite my lips to think of the plans I had been building up those last years in Bulawayo. I had got my pile - not one of the big ones, but good enough for me; and I had figured out all kinds of ways of enjoying myself. My father had brought me out from Scotland at the age of six, and I had never been home since; so England was a sort of Arabian Nights to me, and I counted on stopping there for the rest of my days.

But from the first I was disappointed with it. In about a week I was tired of seeing sights, and in less than a month I had had enough of restaurants and theatres and race-meetings. I had no real pal to go about with, which probably explains things. Plenty of people invited me to their houses, but they didn't seem much interested in me. They would fling me a question or two about South Africa, and then get on their own affairs. A lot of Imperialist ladies asked me to tea to meet schoolmasters from New Zealand and editors from Vancouver, and that was the dismalest business of all. Here was I, thirty-seven years old, sound in wind and limb, with enough money to have a good time, yawning my head off all day. I had just about settled to clear out and get back to the veld, for I was the best bored man in the United Kingdom.

That afternoon I had been worrying my brokers about investments to give my mind something to work on, and on my way home I turned into my club - rather a pot-house, which took in Colonial members. I had a long drink, and read the evening papers. They were full of the row in the Near East, and there was an article about Karolides, the Greek Premier. I rather fancied the chap. From all accounts he seemed the one big man in the show; and he played a straight game too, which was more than could be said for most of them. I gathered that they hated him pretty blackly in Berlin and Vienna, but that we were going to stick by him, and one paper said that he was the only barrier between Europe and Armageddon. I remember wondering if I could get a job in those parts. It

struck me that Albania was the sort of place that might keep a man from yawning.

About six o'clock I went home, dressed, dined at the Cafe Royal, and turned into a music-hall. It was a silly show, all capering women and monkey-faced men, and I did not stay long. The night was fine and clear as I walked back to the flat I had hired near Portland Place. The crowd surged past me on the pavements, busy and chattering, and I envied the people for having something to do. These shop-girls and clerks and dandies and policemen had some interest in life that kept them going. I gave half-a-crown to a beggar because I saw him yawn; he was a fellow-sufferer. At Oxford Circus I looked up into the spring sky and I made a vow. I would give the Old Country another day to fit me into something; if nothing happened, I would take the next boat for the Cape.

My flat was the first floor in a new block behind Langham Place. There was a common staircase, with a porter and a liftman at the entrance, but there was no restaurant or anything of that sort, and each flat was quite shut off from the others. I hate servants on the premises, so I had a fellow to look after me who came in by the day. He arrived before eight o'clock every morning and used to depart at seven, for I never dined at home.

I was just fitting my key into the door when I noticed a man at my elbow. I had not seen him approach, and the sudden appearance made me start. He was a slim man, with a short brown beard and small, gimlety blue eyes. I recognized him as the occupant of a flat on the top floor, with whom I had passed the time of day on the stairs.

'Can I speak to you?' he said. 'May I come in for a minute?' He was steadying his voice with an effort, and his hand was pawing my arm.

I got my door open and motioned him in. No sooner was he over the threshold than he made a dash for my back room, where I used to smoke and write my letters. Then he bolted back.

'Is the door locked?' he asked feverishly, and he fastened the chain with his own hand.

'I'm very sorry,' he said humbly. 'It's a mighty liberty, but you looked the kind of man who would understand. I've had you in my mind all this week when things got troublesome. Say, will you do me a good turn?'

'I'll listen to you,' I said. 'That's all I'll promise.' I was getting worried by the antics of this nervous little chap.

There was a tray of drinks on a table beside him, from which he filled himself a stiff whisky-and-soda. He drank it off in three gulps, and cracked the glass as he set it down.

'Pardon,' he said, 'I'm a bit rattled tonight. You see, I happen at this moment to be dead.'

I sat down in an armchair and lit my pipe.
'What does it feel like?' I asked. I was pretty certain that I had to deal with a madman.
A smile flickered over his drawn face. 'I'm not mad - yet. Say, Sir, I've been watching you, and I reckon you're a cool customer. I reckon, too, you're an honest man, and not afraid of playing a bold hand. I'm going to confide in you. I need help worse than any man ever needed it, and I want to know if I can count you in.'
'Get on with your yarn,' I said, 'and I'll tell you.'
He seemed to brace himself for a great effort, and then started on the queerest rigmarole. I didn't get hold of it at first, and I had to stop and ask him questions. But here is the gist of it:
He was an American, from Kentucky, and after college, being pretty well off, he had started out to see the world. He wrote a bit, and acted as war correspondent for a Chicago paper, and spent a year or two in South-Eastern Europe. I gathered that he was a fine linguist, and had got to know pretty well the society in those parts. He spoke familiarly of many names that I remembered to have seen in the newspapers.
He had played about with politics, he told me, at first for the interest of them, and then because he couldn't help himself. I read him as a sharp, restless fellow, who always wanted to get down to the roots of things. He got a little further down than he wanted.
I am giving you what he told me as well as I could make it out. Away behind all the Governments and the armies there was a big subterranean movement going on, engineered by very dangerous people. He had come on it by accident; it fascinated him; he went further, and then he got caught. I gathered that most of the people in it were the sort of educated anarchists that make revolutions, but that beside them there were financiers who were playing for money. A clever man can make big profits on a falling market, and it suited the book of both classes to set Europe by the ears.
He told me some queer things that explained a lot that had puzzled me - things that happened in the Balkan War, how one state suddenly came out on top, why alliances were made and broken, why certain men disappeared, and where the sinews of war came from. The aim of the whole conspiracy was to get Russia and Germany at loggerheads.
When I asked why, he said that the anarchist lot thought it would give them their chance. Everything would be in the melting- pot, and they looked to see a new world emerge. The capitalists would rake in the shekels, and make fortunes by buying up wreckage. Capital, he said, had no conscience and no fatherland. Besides, the Jew was behind it, and the Jew hated Russia worse than hell.

'Do you wonder?' he cried. 'For three hundred years they have been persecuted, and this is the return match for the pogroms. The Jew is everywhere, but you have to go far down the backstairs to find him. Take any big Teutonic business concern. If you have dealings with it the first man you meet is Prince von und Zu Something, an elegant young man who talks Eton-and-Harrow English. But he cuts no ice. If your business is big, you get behind him and find a prognathous Westphalian with a retreating brow and the manners of a hog. He is the German business man that gives your English papers the shakes. But if you're on the biggest kind of job and are bound to get to the real boss, ten to one you are brought up against a little white-faced Jew in a bath-chair with an eye like a rattlesnake. Yes, Sir, he is the man who is ruling the world just now, and he has his knife in the Empire of the Tzar, because his aunt was outraged and his father flogged in some one-horse location on the Volga.'

I could not help saying that his Jew-anarchists seemed to have got left behind a little.

'Yes and no,' he said. 'They won up to a point, but they struck a bigger thing than money, a thing that couldn't be bought, the old elemental fighting instincts of man. If you're going to be killed you invent some kind of flag and country to fight for, and if you survive you get to love the thing. Those foolish devils of soldiers have found something they care for, and that has upset the pretty plan laid in Berlin and Vienna. But my friends haven't played their last card by a long sight. They've gotten the ace up their sleeves, and unless I can keep alive for a month they are going to play it and win.'

'But I thought you were dead,' I put in.

'MORS JANUA VITAE,' he smiled. (I recognized the quotation: it was about all the Latin I knew.) 'I'm coming to that, but I've got to put you wise about a lot of things first. If you read your newspaper, I guess you know the name of Constantine Karolides?'

I sat up at that, for I had been reading about him that very afternoon.

'He is the man that has wrecked all their games. He is the one big brain in the whole show, and he happens also to be an honest man. Therefore he has been marked down these twelve months past. I found that out - not that it was difficult, for any fool could guess as much. But I found out the way they were going to get him, and that knowledge was deadly. That's why I have had to decease.'

He had another drink, and I mixed it for him myself, for I was getting interested in the beggar.

'They can't get him in his own land, for he has a bodyguard of Epirotes that would skin their grandmothers. But on the 15th day of June he is coming to this

city. The British Foreign Office has taken to having International tea-parties, and the biggest of them is due on that date. Now Karolides is reckoned the principal guest, and if my friends have their way he will never return to his admiring countrymen.'

'That's simple enough, anyhow,' I said. 'You can warn him and keep him at home.'

'And play their game?' he asked sharply. 'If he does not come they win, for he's the only man that can straighten out the tangle. And if his Government are warned he won't come, for he does not know how big the stakes will be on June the 15th.'

'What about the British Government?' I said. 'They're not going to let their guests be murdered. Tip them the wink, and they'll take extra precautions.'

'No good. They might stuff your city with plain-clothes detectives and double the police and Constantine would still be a doomed man. My friends are not playing this game for candy. They want a big occasion for the taking off, with the eyes of all Europe on it. He'll be murdered by an Austrian, and there'll be plenty of evidence to show the connivance of the big folk in Vienna and Berlin. It will all be an infernal lie, of course, but the case will look black enough to the world. I'm not talking hot air, my friend. I happen to know every detail of the hellish contrivance, and I can tell you it will be the most finished piece of blackguardism since the Borgias. But it's not going to come off if there's a certain man who knows the wheels of the business alive right here in London on the 15th day of June. And that man is going to be your servant, Franklin P. Scudder.'

I was getting to like the little chap. His jaw had shut like a rat- trap, and there was the fire of battle in his gimlety eyes. If he was spinning me a yarn he could act up to it.

'Where did you find out this story?' I asked.

'I got the first hint in an inn on the Achensee in Tyrol. That set me inquiring, and I collected my other clues in a fur-shop in the Galician quarter of Buda, in a Strangers' Club in Vienna, and in a little bookshop off the Racknitzstrasse in Leipsic. I completed my evidence ten days ago in Paris. I can't tell you the details now, for it's something of a history. When I was quite sure in my own mind I judged it my business to disappear, and I reached this city by a mighty queer circuit. I left Paris a dandified young French-American, and I sailed from Hamburg a Jew diamond merchant. In Norway I was an English student of Ibsen collecting materials for lectures, but when I left Bergen I was a cinema-man with special ski films. And I came here from Leith with a lot of pulp-wood propositions in my pocket to put before the London newspapers. Till yesterday I thought I had muddied my trail some, and was feeling pretty happy. Then ...'

The recollection seemed to upset him, and he gulped down some more whisky.
'Then I saw a man standing in the street outside this block. I used to stay close in my room all day, and only slip out after dark for an hour or two. I watched him for a bit from my window, and I thought I recognized him ... He came in and spoke to the porter ... When I came back from my walk last night I found a card in my letter-box. It bore the name of the man I want least to meet on God's earth.'
I think that the look in my companion's eyes, the sheer naked scare on his face, completed my conviction of his honesty. My own voice sharpened a bit as I asked him what he did next.
'I realized that I was bottled as sure as a pickled herring, and that there was only one way out. I had to die. If my pursuers knew I was dead they would go to sleep again.'
'How did you manage it?'
'I told the man that valets me that I was feeling pretty bad, and I got myself up to look like death. That wasn't difficult, for I'm no slouch at disguises. Then I got a corpse - you can always get a body in London if you know where to go for it. I fetched it back in a trunk on the top of a four-wheeler, and I had to be assisted upstairs to my room. You see I had to pile up some evidence for the inquest. I went to bed and got my man to mix me a sleeping- draught, and then told him to clear out. He wanted to fetch a doctor, but I swore some and said I couldn't abide leeches. When I was left alone I started in to fake up that corpse. He was my size, and I judged had perished from too much alcohol, so I put some spirits handy about the place. The jaw was the weak point in the likeness, so I blew it away with a revolver. I daresay there will be somebody tomorrow to swear to having heard a shot, but there are no neighbours on my floor, and I guessed I could risk it. So I left the body in bed dressed up in my pyjamas, with a revolver lying on the bed-clothes and a considerable mess around. Then I got into a suit of clothes I had kept waiting for emergencies. I didn't dare to shave for fear of leaving tracks, and besides, it wasn't any kind of use my trying to get into the streets. I had had you in my mind all day, and there seemed nothing to do but to make an appeal to you. I watched from my window till I saw you come home, and then slipped down the stair to meet you ... There, Sir, I guess you know about as much as me of this business.'
He sat blinking like an owl, fluttering with nerves and yet desperately determined. By this time I was pretty well convinced that he was going straight with me. It was the wildest sort of narrative, but I had heard in my time many steep tales which had turned out to be true, and I had made a practice of judging the man rather than the story. If he had wanted to get a location in my flat, and then cut my throat, he would have pitched a milder yarn.

'Hand me your key,' I said, 'and I'll take a look at the corpse. Excuse my caution, but I'm bound to verify a bit if I can.'
He shook his head mournfully. 'I reckoned you'd ask for that, but I haven't got it. It's on my chain on the dressing-table. I had to leave it behind, for I couldn't leave any clues to breed suspicions. The gentry who are after me are pretty bright-eyed citizens. You'll have to take me on trust for the night, and tomorrow you'll get proof of the corpse business right enough.'
I thought for an instant or two. 'Right. I'll trust you for the night. I'll lock you into this room and keep the key. just one word, Mr Scudder. I believe you're straight, but if so be you are not I should warn you that I'm a handy man with a gun.'
'Sure,' he said, jumping up with some briskness. 'I haven't the privilege of your name, Sir, but let me tell you that you're a white man. I'll thank you to lend me a razor.'
I took him into my bedroom and turned him loose. In half an hour's time a figure came out that I scarcely recognized. Only his gimlety, hungry eyes were the same. He was shaved clean, his hair was parted in the middle, and he had cut his eyebrows. Further, he carried himself as if he had been drilled, and was the very model, even to the brown complexion, of some British officer who had had a long spell in India. He had a monocle, too, which he stuck in his eye, and every trace of the American had gone out of his speech.
'My hat! Mr Scudder -' I stammered.
'Not Mr Scudder,' he corrected; 'Captain Theophilus Digby, of the 40th Gurkhas, presently home on leave. I'll thank you to remember that, Sir.'
I made him up a bed in my smoking-room and sought my own couch, more cheerful than I had been for the past month. Things did happen occasionally, even in this God-forgotten metropolis.
I woke next morning to hear my man, Paddock, making the deuce of a row at the smoking-room door. Paddock was a fellow I had done a good turn to out on the Selakwe, and I had inspanned him as my servant as soon as I got to England. He had about as much gift of the gab as a hippopotamus, and was not a great hand at valeting, but I knew I could count on his loyalty.
'Stop that row, Paddock,' I said. 'There's a friend of mine, Captain - Captain' (I couldn't remember the name) 'dossing down in there. Get breakfast for two and then come and speak to me.'
I told Paddock a fine story about how my friend was a great swell, with his nerves pretty bad from overwork, who wanted absolute rest and stillness. Nobody had got to know he was here, or he would be besieged by communications from the India Office and the Prime Minister and his cure would be ruined. I am bound to say Scudder played up splendidly when he

came to breakfast. He fixed Paddock with his eyeglass, just like a British officer, asked him about the Boer War, and slung out at me a lot of stuff about imaginary pals. Paddock couldn't learn to call me 'Sir', but he 'sirred' Scudder as if his life depended on it.

I left him with the newspaper and a box of cigars, and went down to the City till luncheon. When I got back the lift-man had an important face.

'Nawsty business 'ere this morning, Sir. Gent in No. 15 been and shot 'isself. They've just took 'im to the mortiary. The police are up there now.'

I ascended to No. 15, and found a couple of bobbies and an inspector busy making an examination. I asked a few idiotic questions, and they soon kicked me out. Then I found the man that had valeted Scudder, and pumped him, but I could see he suspected nothing. He was a whining fellow with a churchyard face, and half- a-crown went far to console him.

I attended the inquest next day. A partner of some publishing firm gave evidence that the deceased had brought him wood-pulp propositions, and had been, he believed, an agent of an American business. The jury found it a case of suicide while of unsound mind, and the few effects were handed over to the American Consul to deal with. I gave Scudder a full account of the affair, and it interested him greatly. He said he wished he could have attended the inquest, for he reckoned it would be about as spicy as to read one's own obituary notice.

The first two days he stayed with me in that back room he was very peaceful. He read and smoked a bit, and made a heap of jottings in a note-book, and every night we had a game of chess, at which he beat me hollow. I think he was nursing his nerves back to health, for he had had a pretty trying time. But on the third day I could see he was beginning to get restless. He fixed up a list of the days till June 15th, and ticked each off with a red pencil, making remarks in shorthand against them. I would find him sunk in a brown study, with his sharp eyes abstracted, and after those spells of meditation he was apt to be very despondent.

Then I could see that he began to get edgy again. He listened for little noises, and was always asking me if Paddock could be trusted. Once or twice he got very peevish, and apologized for it. I didn't blame him. I made every allowance, for he had taken on a fairly stiff job.

It was not the safety of his own skin that troubled him, but the success of the scheme he had planned. That little man was clean grit all through, without a soft spot in him. One night he was very solemn.

'Say, Hannay,' he said, 'I judge I should let you a bit deeper into this business. I should hate to go out without leaving somebody else to put up a fight.' And he began to tell me in detail what I had only heard from him vaguely.

I did not give him very close attention. The fact is, I was more interested in his own adventures than in his high politics. I reckoned that Karolides and his affairs were not my business, leaving all that to him. So a lot that he said slipped clean out of my memory. I remember that he was very clear that the danger to Karolides would not begin till he had got to London, and would come from the very highest quarters, where there would be no thought of suspicion. He mentioned the name of a woman - Julia Czechenyi - as having something to do with the danger. She would be the decoy, I gathered, to get Karolides out of the care of his guards. He talked, too, about a Black Stone and a man that lisped in his speech, and he described very particularly somebody that he never referred to without a shudder - an old man with a young voice who could hood his eyes like a hawk.

He spoke a good deal about death, too. He was mortally anxious about winning through with his job, but he didn't care a rush for his life.

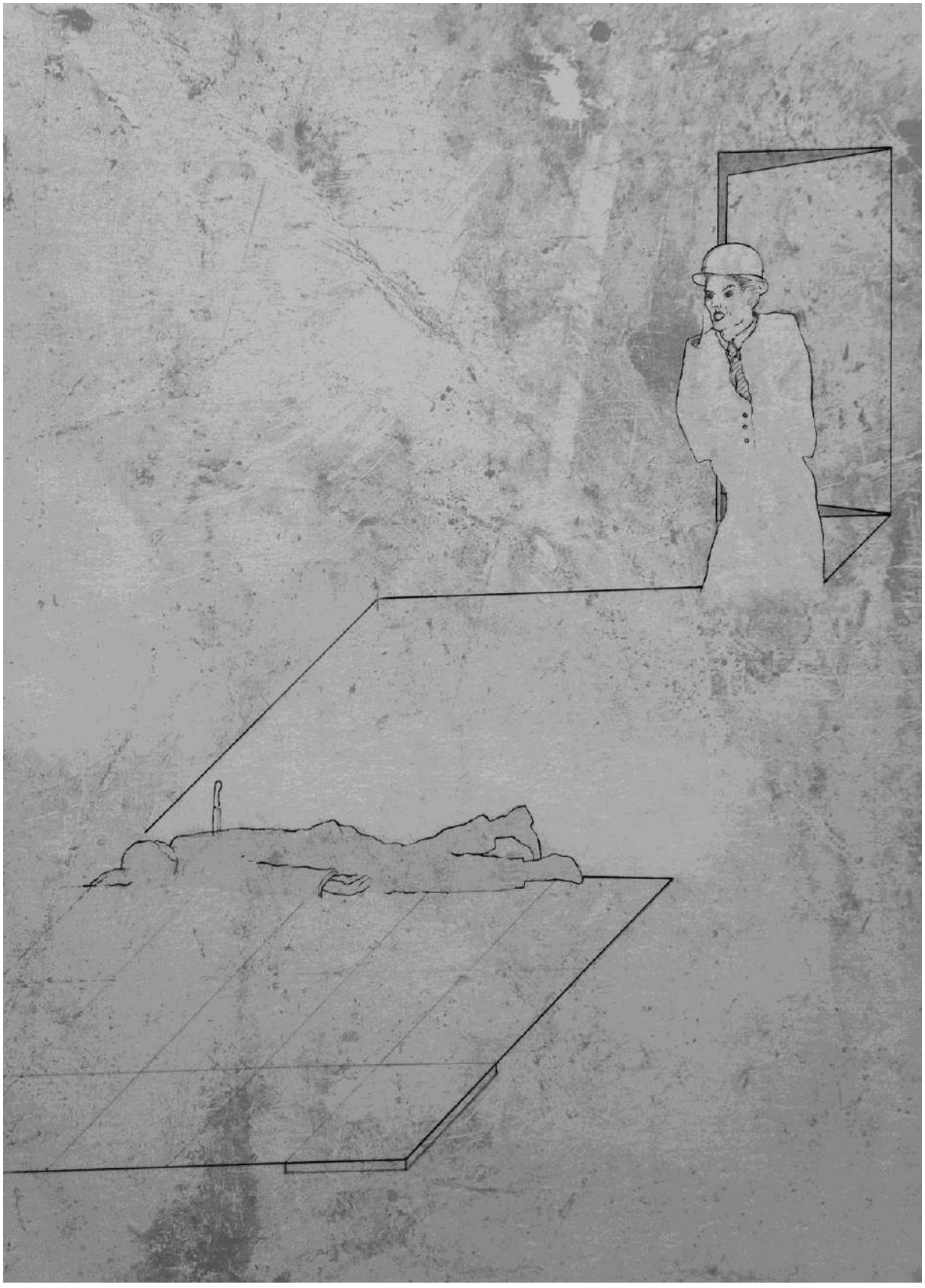
'I reckon it's like going to sleep when you are pretty well tired out, and waking to find a summer day with the scent of hay coming in at the window. I used to thank God for such mornings way back in the Blue-Grass country, and I guess I'll thank Him when I wake up on the other side of Jordan.'

Next day he was much more cheerful, and read the life of Stonewall Jackson much of the time. I went out to dinner with a mining engineer I had got to see on business, and came back about half-past ten in time for our game of chess before turning in.

I had a cigar in my mouth, I remember, as I pushed open the smoking-room door. The lights were not lit, which struck me as odd. I wondered if Scudder had turned in already.

I snapped the switch, but there was nobody there. Then I saw something in the far corner which made me drop my cigar and fall into a cold sweat.

My guest was lying sprawled on his back. There was a long knife through his heart which skewered him to the floor.



2. The Milkman Sets Out on his Travels

I sat down in an armchair and felt very sick. That lasted for maybe five minutes, and was succeeded by a fit of the horrors. The poor staring white face on the floor was more than I could bear, and I managed to get a table-cloth and cover it. Then I staggered to a cupboard, found the brandy and swallowed several mouthfuls. I had seen men die violently before; indeed, I had killed a few myself in the Matabele War; but this cold-blooded indoor business was different. Still I managed to pull myself together. I looked at my watch, and saw that it was half-past ten.

An idea seized me, and I went over the flat with a small-tooth comb. There was nobody there, nor any trace of anybody, but I shuttered and bolted all the windows and put the chain on the door. By this time my wits were coming back to me, and I could think again. It took me about an hour to figure the thing out, and I did not hurry, for, unless the murderer came back, I had till about six o'clock in the morning for my cogitations.

I was in the soup - that was pretty clear. Any shadow of a doubt I might have had about the truth of Scudder's tale was now gone. The proof of it was lying under the table-cloth. The men who knew that he knew what he knew had found him, and had taken the best way to make certain of his silence. Yes; but he had been in my rooms four days, and his enemies must have reckoned that he had confided in me. So I would be the next to go. It might be that very night, or next day, or the day after, but my number was up all right.

Then suddenly I thought of another probability. Supposing I went out now and called in the police, or went to bed and let Paddock find the body and call them in the morning. What kind of a story was I to tell about Scudder? I had lied to Paddock about him, and the whole thing looked desperately fishy. If I made a clean breast of it and told the police everything he had told me, they would simply laugh at me. The odds were a thousand to one that I would be charged with the murder, and the circumstantial evidence was strong enough to hang me. Few people knew me in England; I had no real pal who could come forward and swear to my character. Perhaps that was what those secret enemies were playing for. They were clever enough for anything, and an English prison was as good a way of getting rid of me till after June 15th as a knife in my chest.

Besides, if I told the whole story, and by any miracle was believed, I would be playing their game. Karolides would stay at home, which was what they wanted. Somehow or other the sight of Scudder's dead face had made me a passionate believer in his scheme. He was gone, but he had taken me into his confidence, and I was pretty well bound to carry on his work.

You may think this ridiculous for a man in danger of his life, but that was the way I looked at it. I am an ordinary sort of fellow, not braver than other people, but I hate to see a good man downed, and that long knife would not be the end of Scudder if I could play the game in his place.

It took me an hour or two to think this out, and by that time I had come to a decision. I must vanish somehow, and keep vanished till the end of the second week in June. Then I must somehow find a way to get in touch with the Government people and tell them what Scudder had told me. I wished to Heaven he had told me more, and that I had listened more carefully to the little he had told me. I knew nothing but the barest facts. There was a big risk that, even if I weathered the other dangers, I would not be believed in the end. I must take my chance of that, and hope that something might happen which would confirm my tale in the eyes of the Government.

My first job was to keep going for the next three weeks. It was now the 24th day of May, and that meant twenty days of hiding before I could venture to approach the powers that be. I reckoned that two sets of people would be looking for me - Scudder's enemies to put me out of existence, and the police, who would want me for Scudder's murder. It was going to be a giddy hunt, and it was queer how the prospect comforted me. I had been slack so long that almost any chance of activity was welcome. When I had to sit alone with that corpse and wait on Fortune I was no better than a crushed worm, but if my neck's safety was to hang on my own wits I was prepared to be cheerful about it.

My next thought was whether Scudder had any papers about him to give me a better clue to the business. I drew back the table-cloth and searched his pockets, for I had no longer any shrinking from the body. The face was wonderfully calm for a man who had been struck down in a moment. There was nothing in the breast-pocket, and only a few loose coins and a cigar-holder in the waistcoat. The trousers held a little penknife and some silver, and the side pocket of his jacket contained an old crocodile-skin cigar-case. There was no sign of the little black book in which I had seen him making notes. That had no doubt been taken by his murderer.

But as I looked up from my task I saw that some drawers had been pulled out in the writing-table. Scudder would never have left them in that state, for he was the tidiest of mortals. Someone must have been searching for something - perhaps for the pocket-book.

I went round the flat and found that everything had been ransacked - the inside of books, drawers, cupboards, boxes, even the pockets of the clothes in my wardrobe, and the sideboard in the dining-room. There was no trace of the

book. Most likely the enemy had found it, but they had not found it on Scudder's body.

Then I got out an atlas and looked at a big map of the British Isles. My notion was to get off to some wild district, where my veldcraft would be of some use to me, for I would be like a trapped rat in a city. I considered that Scotland would be best, for my people were Scotch and I could pass anywhere as an ordinary Scotsman. I had half an idea at first to be a German tourist, for my father had had German partners, and I had been brought up to speak the tongue pretty fluently, not to mention having put in three years prospecting for copper in German Damaraland. But I calculated that it would be less conspicuous to be a Scot, and less in a line with what the police might know of my past. I fixed on Galloway as the best place to go. It was the nearest wild part of Scotland, so far as I could figure it out, and from the look of the map was not over thick with population.

A search in Bradshaw informed me that a train left St Pancras at 7.10, which would land me at any Galloway station in the late afternoon. That was well enough, but a more important matter was how I was to make my way to St Pancras, for I was pretty certain that Scudder's friends would be watching outside. This puzzled me for a bit; then I had an inspiration, on which I went to bed and slept for two troubled hours.

I got up at four and opened my bedroom shutters. The faint light of a fine summer morning was flooding the skies, and the sparrows had begun to chatter. I had a great revulsion of feeling, and felt a God-forgotten fool. My inclination was to let things slide, and trust to the British police taking a reasonable view of my case. But as I reviewed the situation I could find no arguments to bring against my decision of the previous night, so with a wry mouth I resolved to go on with my plan. I was not feeling in any particular funk; only disinclined to go looking for trouble, if you understand me.

I hunted out a well-used tweed suit, a pair of strong nailed boots, and a flannel shirt with a collar. Into my pockets I stuffed a spare shirt, a cloth cap, some handkerchiefs, and a tooth-brush. I had drawn a good sum in gold from the bank two days before, in case Scudder should want money, and I took fifty pounds of it in sovereigns in a belt which I had brought back from Rhodesia. That was about all I wanted. Then I had a bath, and cut my moustache, which was long and drooping, into a short stubbly fringe.

Now came the next step. Paddock used to arrive punctually at 7.30 and let himself in with a latch-key. But about twenty minutes to seven, as I knew from bitter experience, the milkman turned up with a great clatter of cans, and deposited my share outside my door. I had seen that milkman sometimes when I had gone out for an early ride. He was a young man about my own height,

with an ill-nourished moustache, and he wore a white overall. On him I staked all my chances.
I went into the darkened smoking-room where the rays of morning light were beginning to creep through the shutters. There I breakfasted off a whisky-and-soda and some biscuits from the cupboard. By this time it was getting on for six o'clock. I put a pipe in My Pocket and filled my pouch from the tobacco jar on the table by the fireplace.
As I poked into the tobacco my fingers touched something hard, and I drew out Scudder's little black pocket-book ...
That seemed to me a good omen. I lifted the cloth from the body and was amazed at the peace and dignity of the dead face. 'Goodbye, old chap,' I said; 'I am going to do my best for you. Wish me well, wherever you are.'
Then I hung about in the hall waiting for the milkman. That was the worst part of the business, for I was fairly choking to get out of doors. Six-thirty passed, then six-forty, but still he did not come. The fool had chosen this day of all days to be late.
At one minute after the quarter to seven I heard the rattle of the cans outside. I opened the front door, and there was my man, singling out my cans from a bunch he carried and whistling through his teeth. He jumped a bit at the sight of me.
'Come in here a moment,' I said. 'I want a word with you.' And I led him into the dining-room.
'I reckon you're a bit of a sportsman,' I said, 'and I want you to do me a service. Lend me your cap and overall for ten minutes, and here's a sovereign for you.'
His eyes opened at the sight of the gold, and he grinned broadly. 'Wot's the gyme?'he asked.
'A bet,' I said. 'I haven't time to explain, but to win it I've got to be a milkman for the next ten minutes. All you've got to do is to stay here till I come back. You'll be a bit late, but nobody will complain, and you'll have that quid for yourself.'
'Right-o!' he said cheerily. 'I ain't the man to spoil a bit of sport. 'Ere's the rig, guv'nor.'
I stuck on his flat blue hat and his white overall, picked up the cans, banged my door, and went whistling downstairs. The porter at the foot told me to shut my jaw, which sounded as if my make-up was adequate.
At first I thought there was nobody in the street. Then I caught sight of a policeman a hundred yards down, and a loafer shuffling past on the other side. Some impulse made me raise my eyes to the house opposite, and there at a first-floor window was a face. As the loafer passed he looked up, and I fancied a signal was exchanged.

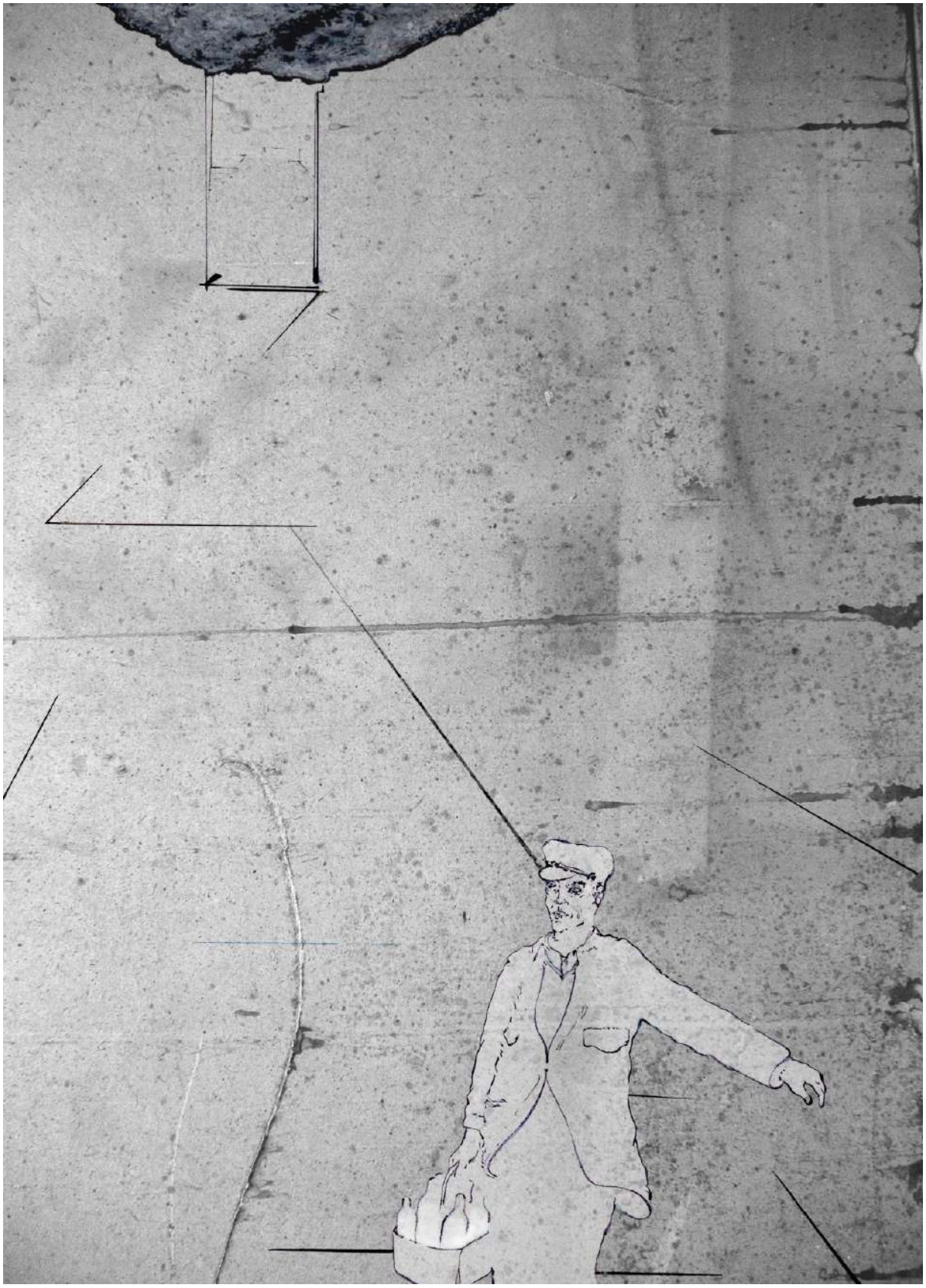
I crossed the street, whistling gaily and imitating the jaunty swing of the milkman. Then I took the first side street, and went up a left-hand turning which led past a bit of vacant ground. There was no one in the little street, so I dropped the milk-cans inside the hoarding and sent the cap and overall after them. I had only just put on my cloth cap when a postman came round the corner. I gave him good morning and he answered me unsuspiciously. At the moment the clock of a neighbouring church struck the hour of seven.

There was not a second to spare. As soon as I got to Euston Road I took to my heels and ran. The clock at Euston Station showed five minutes past the hour. At St Pancras I had no time to take a ticket, let alone that I had not settled upon my destination. A porter told me the platform, and as I entered it I saw the train already in motion. Two station officials blocked the way, but I dodged them and clambered into the last carriage.

Three minutes later, as we were roaring through the northern tunnels, an irate guard interviewed me. He wrote out for me a ticket to Newton-Stewart, a name which had suddenly come back to my memory, and he conducted me from the first-class compartment where I had ensconced myself to a third-class smoker, occupied by a sailor and a stout woman with a child. He went off grumbling, and as I mopped my brow I observed to my companions in my broadest Scots that it was a sore job catching trains. I had already entered upon my part.

'The impidence o' that gyaird!' said the lady bitterly. 'He needit a Scotch tongue to pit him in his place. He was complainin' o' this wean no haein' a ticket and her no fower till August twalmonth, and he was objectin' to this gentleman spittin'.'

The sailor morosely agreed, and I started my new life in an atmosphere of protest against authority. I reminded myself that a week ago I had been finding the world dull.



3. The Adventure of the Literary Innkeeper

I had a solemn time travelling north that day. It was fine May weather, with the hawthorn flowering on every hedge, and I asked myself why, when I was still a free man, I had stayed on in London and not got the good of this heavenly country. I didn't dare face the restaurant car, but I got a luncheon-basket at Leeds and shared it with the fat woman. Also I got the morning's papers, with news about starters for the Derby and the beginning of the cricket season, and some paragraphs about how Balkan affairs were settling down and a British squadron was going to Kiel.

When I had done with them I got out Scudder's little black pocket-book and studied it. It was pretty well filled with jottings, chiefly figures, though now and then a name was printed in. For example, I found the words 'Hofgaard', 'Luneville', and 'Avocado' pretty often, and especially the word 'Pavia'.

Now I was certain that Scudder never did anything without a reason, and I was pretty sure that there was a cypher in all this. That is a subject which has always interested me, and I did a bit at it myself once as intelligence officer at Delagoa Bay during the Boer War. I have a head for things like chess and puzzles, and I used to reckon myself pretty good at finding out cyphers. This one looked like the numerical kind where sets of figures correspond to the letters of the alphabet, but any fairly shrewd man can find the clue to that sort after an hour or two's work, and I didn't think Scudder would have been content with anything so easy. So I fastened on the printed words, for you can make a pretty good numerical cypher if you have a key word which gives you the sequence of the letters.

I tried for hours, but none of the words answered. Then I fell asleep and woke at Dumfries just in time to bundle out and get into the slow Galloway train. There was a man on the platform whose looks I didn't like, but he never glanced at me, and when I caught sight of myself in the mirror of an automatic machine I didn't wonder. With my brown face, my old tweeds, and my slouch, I was the very model of one of the hill farmers who were crowding into the third-class carriages.

I travelled with half a dozen in an atmosphere of shag and clay pipes. They had come from the weekly market, and their mouths were full of prices. I heard accounts of how the lambing had gone up the Cairn and the Deuch and a dozen other mysterious waters. Above half the men had lunched heavily and were highly flavoured with whisky, but they took no notice of me. We rumbled slowly into a land of little wooded glens and then to a great wide moorland place, gleaming with lochs, with high blue hills showing northwards.

About five o'clock the carriage had emptied, and I was left alone as I had hoped. I got out at the next station, a little place whose name I scarcely noted, set right in the heart of a bog. It reminded me of one of those forgotten little stations in the Karroo. An old station-master was digging in his garden, and with his spade over his shoulder sauntered to the train, took charge of a parcel, and went back to his potatoes. A child of ten received my ticket, and I emerged on a white road that straggled over the brown moor.

It was a gorgeous spring evening, with every hill showing as clear as a cut amethyst. The air had the queer, rooty smell of bogs, but it was as fresh as mid-ocean, and it had the strangest effect on my spirits. I actually felt light-hearted. I might have been a boy out for a spring holiday tramp, instead of a man of thirty-seven very much wanted by the police. I felt just as I used to feel when I was starting for a big trek on a frosty morning on the high veld. If you believe me, I swung along that road whistling. There was no plan of campaign in my head, only just to go on and on in this blessed, honest-smelling hill country, for every mile put me in better humour with myself.

In a roadside planting I cut a walking-stick of hazel, and presently struck off the highway up a bypath which followed the glen of a brawling stream. I reckoned that I was still far ahead of any pursuit, and for that night might please myself. It was some hours since I had tasted food, and I was getting very hungry when I came to a herd's cottage set in a nook beside a waterfall. A brown-faced woman was standing by the door, and greeted me with the kindly shyness of moorland places. When I asked for a night's lodging she said I was welcome to the 'bed in the loft', and very soon she set before me a hearty meal of ham and eggs, scones, and thick sweet milk.

At the darkening her man came in from the hills, a lean giant, who in one step covered as much ground as three paces of ordinary mortals. They asked me no questions, for they had the perfect breeding of all dwellers in the wilds, but I could see they set me down as a kind of dealer, and I took some trouble to confirm their view. I spoke a lot about cattle, of which my host knew little, and I picked up from him a good deal about the local Galloway markets, which I tucked away in my memory for future use. At ten I was nodding in my chair, and the 'bed in the loft' received a weary man who never opened his eyes till five o'clock set the little homestead a-going once more.

They refused any payment, and by six I had breakfasted and was striding southwards again. My notion was to return to the railway line a station or two farther on than the place where I had alighted yesterday and to double back. I reckoned that that was the safest way, for the police would naturally assume that I was always making farther from London in the direction of some western port. I thought I had still a good bit of a start, for, as I reasoned, it would take

some hours to fix the blame on me, and several more to identify the fellow who got on board the train at St Pancras.

it was the same jolly, clear spring weather, and I simply could not contrive to feel careworn. Indeed I was in better spirits than I had been for months. Over a long ridge of moorland I took my road, skirting the side of a high hill which the herd had called Cairnsmore of Fleet. Nesting curlews and plovers were crying everywhere, and the links of green pasture by the streams were dotted with young lambs. All the slackness of the past months was slipping from my bones, and I stepped out like a four-year-old. By-and-by I came to a swell of moorland which dipped to the vale of a little river, and a mile away in the heather I saw the smoke of a train.

The station, when I reached it, proved to be ideal for my purpose. The moor surged up around it and left room only for the single line, the slender siding, a waiting-room, an office, the station- master's cottage, and a tiny yard of gooseberries and sweet-william. There seemed no road to it from anywhere, and to increase the desolation the waves of a tarn lapped on their grey granite beach half a mile away. I waited in the deep heather till I saw the smoke of an east-going train on the horizon. Then I approached the tiny booking-office and took a ticket for Dumfries.

The only occupants of the carriage were an old shepherd and his dog - a wall-eyed brute that I mistrusted. The man was asleep, and on the cushions beside him was that morning's SCOTSMAN. Eagerly I seized on it, for I fancied it would tell me something.

There were two columns about the Portland Place Murder, as it was called. My man Paddock had given the alarm and had the milkman arrested. Poor devil, it looked as if the latter had earned his sovereign hardly; but for me he had been cheap at the price, for he seemed to have occupied the police for the better part of the day. In the latest news I found a further instalment of the story. The milkman had been released, I read, and the true criminal, about whose identity the police were reticent, was believed to have got away from London by one of the northern lines. There was a short note about me as the owner of the flat. I guessed the police had stuck that in, as a clumsy contrivance to persuade me that I was unsuspected.

There was nothing else in the paper, nothing about foreign politics or Karolides, or the things that had interested Scudder. I laid it down, and found that we were approaching the station at which I had got out yesterday. The potato-digging station-master had been gingered up into some activity, for the west-going train was waiting to let us pass, and from it had descended three men who were asking him questions. I supposed that they were the local police, who had been stirred up by Scotland Yard, and had traced me as far as this one-

horse siding. Sitting well back in the shadow I watched them carefully. One of them had a book, and took down notes. The old potato-digger seemed to have turned peevish, but the child who had collected my ticket was talking volubly. All the party looked out across the moor where the white road departed. I hoped they were going to take up my tracks there.

As we moved away from that station my companion woke up. He fixed me with a wandering glance, kicked his dog viciously, and inquired where he was. Clearly he was very drunk. 'That's what comes o' bein' a teetotaller,' he observed in bitter regret.

I expressed my surprise that in him I should have met a blue- ribbon stalwart.

'Ay, but I'm a strong teetotaller,' he said pugnaciously. 'I took the pledge last Martinmas, and I havena touched a drop o' whisky sinsyne. Not even at Hogmanay, though I was sair temptit.'

He swung his heels up on the seat, and burrowed a frowsy head into the cushions.

'And that's a' I get,' he moaned. 'A heid hetter than hell fire, and twae een lookin' different ways for the Sabbath.'

'What did it?' I asked.

'A drink they ca' brandy. Bein' a teetotaller I keepit off the whisky, but I was nip-nippin' a' day at this brandy, and I doubt I'll no be weel for a fortnicht.' His voice died away into a splutter, and sleep once more laid its heavy hand on him.

My plan had been to get out at some station down the line, but the train suddenly gave me a better chance, for it came to a standstill at the end of a culvert which spanned a brawling porter-coloured river. I looked out and saw that every carriage window was closed and no human figure appeared in the landscape. So I opened the door, and dropped quickly into the tangle of hazels which edged the line.

it would have been all right but for that infernal dog. Under the impression that I was decamping with its master's belongings, it started to bark, and all but got me by the trousers. This woke up the herd, who stood bawling at the carriage door in the belief that I had committed suicide. I crawled through the thicket, reached the edge of the stream, and in cover of the bushes put a hundred yards or so behind me. Then from my shelter I peered back, and saw the guard and several passengers gathered round the open carriage door and staring in my direction. I could not have made a more public departure if I had left with a bugler and a brass band.

Happily, the drunken herd provided a diversion. He and his dog, which was attached by a rope to his waist, suddenly cascaded out of the carriage, landed on their heads on the track, and rolled some way down the bank towards the water. In the rescue which followed the dog bit somebody, for I could hear the

sound of hard swearing. Presently they had forgotten me, and when after a quarter of a mile's crawl I ventured to look back, the train had started again and was vanishing in the cutting.

I was in a wide semicircle of moorland, with the brown river as radius, and the high hills forming the northern circumference. There was not a sign or sound of a human being, only the plashing water and the interminable crying of curlews. Yet, oddly enough, for the first time I felt the terror of the hunted on me. It was not the police that I thought of, but the other folk, who knew that I knew Scudder's secret and dared not let me live. I was certain that they would pursue me with a keenness and vigilance unknown to the British law, and that once their grip closed on me I should find no mercy.

I looked back, but there was nothing in the landscape. The sun glinted on the metals of the line and the wet stones in the stream, and you could not have found a more peaceful sight in the world. Nevertheless, I started to run. Crouching low in the runnels of the bog, I ran till the sweat blinded my eyes. The mood did not leave me till I had reached the rim of mountain and flung myself panting on a ridge high above the young waters of the brown river.

From my vantage-ground I could scan the whole moor right away to the railway line and to the south of it where green fields took the place of heather. I have eyes like a hawk, but I could see nothing moving in the whole countryside. Then I looked east beyond the ridge and saw a new kind of landscape - shallow green valleys with plentiful fir plantations and the faint lines of dust which spoke of highroads. Last of all I looked into the blue May sky, and there I saw that which set my pulses racing ...

Low down in the south a monoplane was climbing into the heavens. I was as certain as if I had been told that that aeroplane was looking for me, and that it did not belong to the police. For an hour or two I watched it from a pit of heather. It flew low along the hill-tops, and then in narrow circles over the valley up which I had come' Then it seemed to change its mind, rose to a great height, and flew away back to the south.

I did not like this espionage from the air, and I began to think less well of the countryside I had chosen for a refuge. These heather hills were no sort of cover if my enemies were in the sky, and I must find a different kind of sanctuary. I looked with more satisfaction to the green country beyond the ridge, for there I should find woods and stone houses. About six in the evening I came out of the moorland to a white ribbon of road which wound up the narrow vale of a lowland stream. As I followed it, fields gave place to bent, the glen became a plateau, and presently I had reached a kind of pass where a solitary house smoked in the twilight. The road swung over a bridge, and leaning on the parapet was a young man.

He was smoking a long clay pipe and studying the water with spectacled eyes. In his left hand was a small book with a finger marking the place. Slowly he repeated -

As when a Gryphon through the wilderness
With winged step, o'er hill and moory dale
Pursues the Arimaspian.

He jumped round as my step rung on the keystone, and I saw a pleasant sunburnt boyish face.
'Good evening to you,' he said gravely. 'It's a fine night for the road.'
The smell of peat smoke and of some savoury roast floated to me from the house.
'Is that place an inn?' I asked.
'At your service,' he said politely. 'I am the landlord, Sir, and I hope you will stay the night, for to tell you the truth I have had no company for a week.'
I pulled myself up on the parapet of the bridge and filled my pipe. I began to detect an ally.
'You're young to be an innkeeper,' I said.
'My father died a year ago and left me the business. I live there with my grandmother. It's a slow job for a young man, and it wasn't my choice of profession.'
'Which was?'
He actually blushed. 'I want to write books,' he said.
'And what better chance could you ask?' I cried. 'Man, I've often thought that an innkeeper would make the best story-teller in the world.'
'Not now,' he said eagerly. 'Maybe in the old days when you had pilgrims and ballad-makers and highwaymen and mail-coaches on the road. But not now. Nothing comes here but motor-cars full of fat women, who stop for lunch, and a fisherman or two in the spring, and the shooting tenants in August. There is not much material to be got out of that. I want to see life, to travel the world, and write things like Kipling and Conrad. But the most I've done yet is to get some verses printed in CHAMBERS'S JOURNAL.' I looked at the inn standing golden in the sunset against the brown hills.
'I've knocked a bit about the world, and I wouldn't despise such a hermitage. D'you think that adventure is found only in the tropics or among gentry in red shirts? Maybe you're rubbing shoulders with it at this moment.'
'That's what Kipling says,' he said, his eyes brightening, and he quoted some verse about 'Romance bringing up the 9.15'.

'Here's a true tale for you then,' I cried, 'and a month from now you can make a novel out of it.'
Sitting on the bridge in the soft May gloaming I pitched him a lovely yarn. It was true in essentials, too, though I altered the minor details. I made out that I was a mining magnate from Kimberley, who had had a lot of trouble with I.D.B. and had shown up a gang. They had pursued me across the ocean, and had killed my best friend, and were now on my tracks.
I told the story well, though I say it who shouldn't. I pictured a flight across the Kalahari to German Africa, the crackling, parching days, the wonderful blue-velvet nights. I described an attack on my life on the voyage home, and I made a really horrid affair of the Portland Place murder. 'You're looking for adventure,' I cried; 'well, you've found it here. The devils are after me, and the police are after them. It's a race that I mean to win.'
'By God!' he whispered, drawing his breath in sharply, 'it is all pure Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle.'
'You believe me,' I said gratefully.
'Of course I do,' and he held out his hand. 'I believe everything out of the common. The only thing to distrust is the normal.'
He was very young, but he was the man for my money.
'I think they're off my track for the moment, but I must lie close for a couple of days. Can you take me in?'
He caught my elbow in his eagerness and drew me towards the house. 'You can lie as snug here as if you were in a moss-hole. I'll see that nobody blabs, either. And you'll give me some more material about your adventures?'
As I entered the inn porch I heard from far off the beat of an engine. There silhouetted against the dusky West was my friend, the monoplane.
He gave me a room at the back of the house, with a fine outlook over the plateau, and he made me free of his own study, which was stacked with cheap editions of his favourite authors. I never saw the grandmother, so I guessed she was bedridden. An old woman called Margit brought me my meals, and the innkeeper was around me at all hours. I wanted some time to myself, so I invented a job for him. He had a motor-bicycle, and I sent him off next morning for the daily paper, which usually arrived with the post in the late afternoon. I told him to keep his eyes skinned, and make note of any strange figures he saw, keeping a special sharp look-out for motors and aeroplanes. Then I sat down in real earnest to Scudder's note-book.
He came back at midday with the SCOTSMAN. There was nothing in it, except some further evidence of Paddock and the milkman, and a repetition of yesterday's statement that the murderer had gone North. But there was a long article, reprinted from THE TIMES, about Karolides and the state of affairs in the

Balkans, though there was no mention of any visit to England. I got rid of the innkeeper for the afternoon, for I was getting very warm in my search for the cypher.

As I told you, it was a numerical cypher, and by an elaborate system of experiments I had pretty well discovered what were the nulls and stops. The trouble was the key word, and when I thought of the odd million words he might have used I felt pretty hopeless. But about three o'clock I had a sudden inspiration.

The name Julia Czechenyi flashed across my memory. Scudder had said it was the key to the Karolides business, and it occurred to me to try it on his cypher.

It worked. The five letters of 'Julia' gave me the position of the vowels. A was J, the tenth letter of the alphabet, and so represented by X in the cypher. E was XXI, and so on. 'Czechenyi' gave me the numerals for the principal consonants. I scribbled that scheme on a bit of paper and sat down to read Scudder's pages.

In half an hour I was reading with a whitish face and fingers that drummed on the table.

I glanced out of the window and saw a big touring-car coming up the glen towards the inn. It drew up at the door, and there was the sound of people alighting. There seemed to be two of them, men in aquascutums and tweed caps.

Ten minutes later the innkeeper slipped into the room, his eyes bright with excitement.

'There's two chaps below looking for you,' he whispered. 'They're in the dining-room having whiskies-and-sodas. They asked about you and said they had hoped to meet you here. Oh! and they described you jolly well, down to your boots and shirt. I told them you had been here last night and had gone off on a motor bicycle this morning, and one of the chaps swore like a navvy.'

I made him tell me what they looked like. One was a dark-eyed thin fellow with bushy eyebrows, the other was always smiling and lisped in his talk. Neither was any kind of foreigner; on this my young friend was positive.

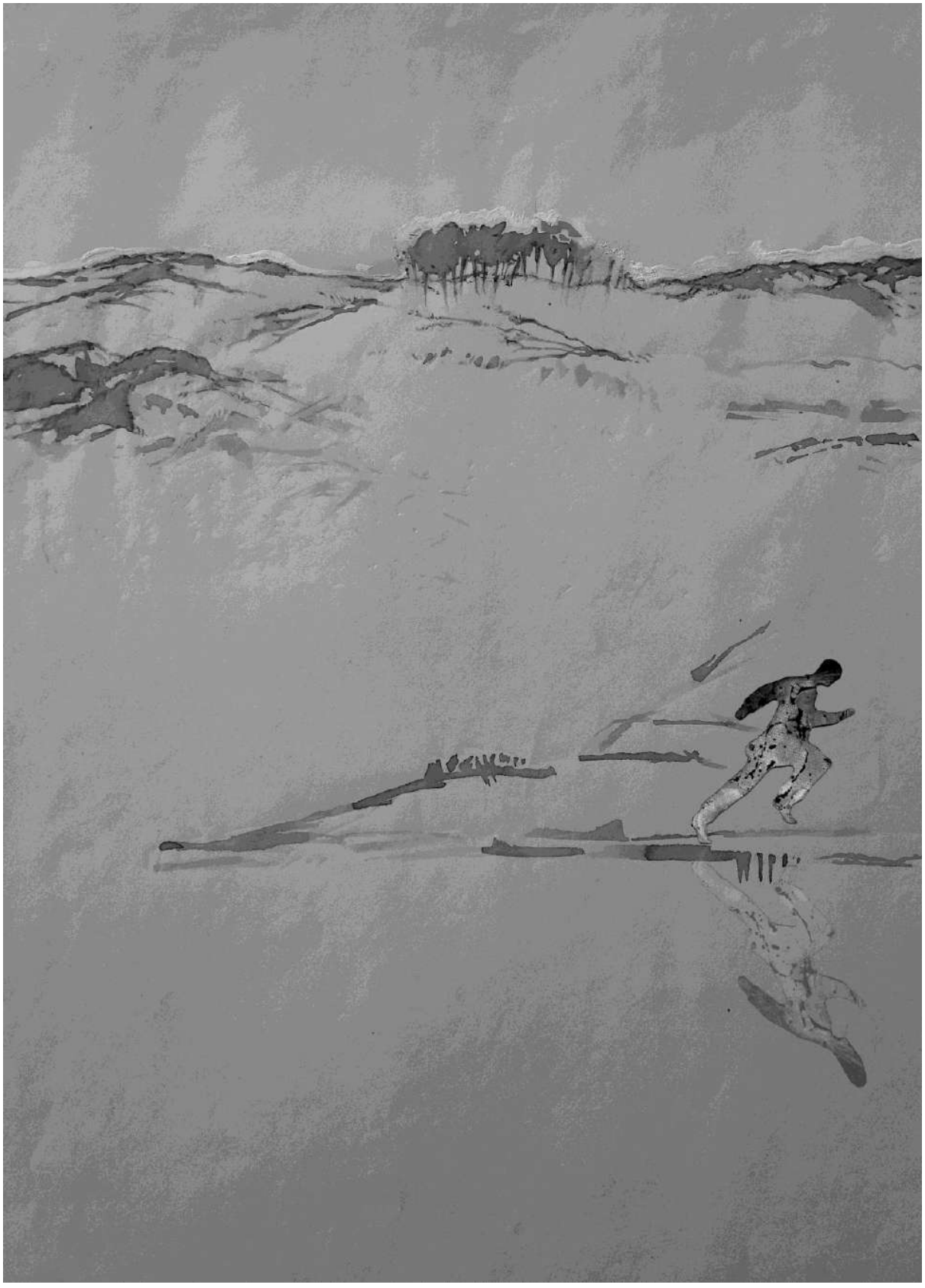
I took a bit of paper and wrote these words in German as if they were part of a letter -

... 'Black Stone. Scudder had got on to this, but he could not act for a fortnight. I doubt if I can do any good now, especially as Karolides is uncertain about his plans. But if Mr T. advises I will do the best I ...'

I manufactured it rather neatly, so that it looked like a loose page of a private letter.

'Take this down and say it was found in my bedroom, and ask them to return it to me if they overtake me.' Three minutes later I heard the car begin to move,

and peeping from behind the curtain caught sight of the two figures. One was slim, the other was sleek; that was the most I could make of my reconnaissance.
The innkeeper appeared in great excitement. 'Your paper woke them up,' he said gleefully. 'The dark fellow went as white as death and cursed like blazes, and the fat one whistled and looked ugly. They paid for their drinks with half-a-sovereign and wouldn't wait for change.'
'Now I'll tell you what I want you to do,' I said. 'Get on your bicycle and go off to Newton-Stewart to the Chief Constable. Describe the two men, and say you suspect them of having had something to do with the London murder. You can invent reasons. The two will come back, never fear. Not tonight, for they'll follow me forty miles along the road, but first thing tomorrow morning. Tell the police to be here bright and early.'
He set off like a docile child, while I worked at Scudder's notes. When he came back we dined together, and in common decency I had to let him pump me. I gave him a lot of stuff about lion hunts and the Matabele War, thinking all the while what tame businesses these were compared to this I was now engaged in! When he went to bed I sat up and finished Scudder. I smoked in a chair till daylight, for I could not sleep.
About eight next morning I witnessed the arrival of two constables and a sergeant. They put their car in a coach-house under the innkeeper's instructions, and entered the house. Twenty minutes later I saw from my window a second car come across the plateau from the opposite direction. It did not come up to the inn, but stopped two hundred yards off in the shelter of a patch of wood. I noticed that its occupants carefully reversed it before leaving it. A minute or two later I heard their steps on the gravel outside the window.
My plan had been to lie hid in my bedroom, and see what happened. I had a notion that, if I could bring the police and my other more dangerous pursuers together, something might work out of it to my advantage. But now I had a better idea. I scribbled a line of thanks to my host, opened the window, and dropped quietly into a gooseberry bush. Unobserved I crossed the dyke, crawled down the side of a tributary burn, and won the highroad on the far side of the patch of trees. There stood the car, very spick and span in the morning sunlight, but with the dust on her which told of a long journey. I started her, jumped into the chauffeur's seat, and stole gently out on to the plateau.
Almost at once the road dipped so that I lost sight of the inn, but the wind seemed to bring me the sound of angry voices.



4. The Adventure of the Radical Candidate

You may picture me driving that 40 h.p. car for all she was worth over the crisp moor roads on that shining May morning; glancing back at first over my shoulder, and looking anxiously to the next turning; then driving with a vague eye, just wide enough awake to keep on the highway. For I was thinking desperately of what I had found in Scudder's pocket-book.

The little man had told me a pack of lies. All his yarns about the Balkans and the Jew-Anarchists and the Foreign Office Conference were eyewash, and so was Karolides. And yet not quite, as you shall hear. I had staked everything on my belief in his story, and had been let down; here was his book telling me a different tale, and instead of being once-bitten-twice-shy, I believed it absolutely.

Why, I don't know. It rang desperately true, and the first yarn, if you understand me, had been in a queer way true also in spirit. The fifteenth day of June was going to be a day of destiny, a bigger destiny than the killing of a Dago. It was so big that I didn't blame Scudder for keeping me out of the game and wanting to play a lone hand. That, I was pretty clear, was his intention. He had told me something which sounded big enough, but the real thing was so immortally big that he, the man who had found it out, wanted it all for himself. I didn't blame him. It was risks after all that he was chiefly greedy about.

The whole story was in the notes - with gaps, you understand, which he would have filled up from his memory. He stuck down his authorities, too, and had an odd trick of giving them all a numerical value and then striking a balance, which stood for the reliability of each stage in the yarn. The four names he had printed were authorities, and there was a man, Ducrosne, who got five out of a possible five; and another fellow, Ammersfoort, who got three. The bare bones of the tale were all that was in the book - these, and one queer phrase which occurred half a dozen times inside brackets. '(Thirty-nine steps)' was the phrase; and at its last time of use it ran - '(Thirty-nine steps, I counted them - high tide 10.17 p.m.)'. I could make nothing of that.

The first thing I learned was that it was no question of preventing a war. That was coming, as sure as Christmas: had been arranged, said Scudder, ever since February 1912. Karolides was going to be the occasion. He was booked all right, and was to hand in his checks on June 14th, two weeks and four days from that May morning. I gathered from Scudder's notes that nothing on earth could prevent that. His talk of Epirote guards that would skin their own grandmothers was all billy-o.

The second thing was that this war was going to come as a mighty surprise to Britain. Karolides' death would set the Balkans by the ears, and then Vienna would chip in with an ultimatum. Russia wouldn't like that, and there would be high words. But Berlin would play the peacemaker, and pour oil on the waters, till suddenly she would find a good cause for a quarrel, pick it up, and in five hours let fly at us. That was the idea, and a pretty good one too. Honey and fair speeches, and then a stroke in the dark. While we were talking about the goodwill and good intentions of Germany our coast would be silently ringed with mines, and submarines would be waiting for every battleship.

But all this depended upon the third thing, which was due to happen on June 15th. I would never have grasped this if I hadn't once happened to meet a French staff officer, coming back from West Africa, who had told me a lot of things. One was that, in spite of all the nonsense talked in Parliament, there was a real working alliance between France and Britain, and that the two General Staffs met every now and then, and made plans for joint action in case of war. Well, in June a very great swell was coming over from Paris, and he was going to get nothing less than a statement of the disposition of the British Home Fleet on mobilization. At least I gathered it was something like that; anyhow, it was something uncommonly important.

But on the 15th day of June there were to be others in London - others, at whom I could only guess. Scudder was content to call them collectively the 'Black Stone'. They represented not our Allies, but our deadly foes; and the information, destined for France, was to be diverted to their pockets. And it was to be used, remember - used a week or two later, with great guns and swift torpedoes, suddenly in the darkness of a summer night.

This was the story I had been deciphering in a back room of a country inn, overlooking a cabbage garden. This was the story that hummed in my brain as I swung in the big touring-car from glen to glen.

My first impulse had been to write a letter to the Prime Minister, but a little reflection convinced me that that would be useless. Who would believe my tale? I must show a sign, some token in proof, and Heaven knew what that could be. Above all, I must keep going myself, ready to act when things got riper, and that was going to be no light job with the police of the British Isles in full cry after me and the watchers of the Black Stone running silently and swiftly on my trail.

I had no very clear purpose in my journey, but I steered east by the sun, for I remembered from the map that if I went north I would come into a region of coalpits and industrial towns. Presently I was down from the moorlands and traversing the broad haugh of a river. For miles I ran alongside a park wall, and in a break of the trees I saw a great castle. I swung through little old thatched

villages, and over peaceful lowland streams, and past gardens blazing with hawthorn and yellow laburnum. The land was so deep in peace that I could scarcely believe that somewhere behind me were those who sought my life; ay, and that in a month's time, unless I had the almightiest of luck, these round country faces would be pinched and staring, and men would be lying dead in English fields.

About mid-day I entered a long straggling village, and had a mind to stop and eat. Half-way down was the Post Office, and on the steps of it stood the postmistress and a policeman hard at work conning a telegram. When they saw me they wakened up, and the policeman advanced with raised hand, and cried on me to stop.

I nearly was fool enough to obey. Then it flashed upon me that the wire had to do with me; that my friends at the inn had come to an understanding, and were united in desiring to see more of me, and that it had been easy enough for them to wire the description of me and the car to thirty villages through which I might pass. I released the brakes just in time. As it was, the policeman made a claw at the hood, and only dropped off when he got my left in his eye.

I saw that main roads were no place for me, and turned into the byways. It wasn't an easy job without a map, for there was the risk of getting on to a farm road and ending in a duck-pond or a stable- yard, and I couldn't afford that kind of delay. I began to see what an ass I had been to steal the car. The big green brute would be the safest kind of clue to me over the breadth of Scotland. If I left it and took to my feet, it would be discovered in an hour or two and I would get no start in the race.

The immediate thing to do was to get to the loneliest roads. These I soon found when I struck up a tributary of the big river, and got into a glen with steep hills all about me, and a corkscrew road at the end which climbed over a pass. Here I met nobody, but it was taking me too far north, so I slewed east along a bad track and finally struck a big double-line railway. Away below me I saw another broadish valley, and it occurred to me that if I crossed it I might find some remote inn to pass the night. The evening was now drawing in, and I was furiously hungry, for I had eaten nothing since breakfast except a couple of buns I had bought from a baker's cart. just then I heard a noise in the sky, and lo and behold there was that infernal aeroplane, flying low, about a dozen miles to the south and rapidly coming towards me.

I had the sense to remember that on a bare moor I was at the aeroplane's mercy, and that my only chance was to get to the leafy cover of the valley. Down the hill I went like blue lightning, screwing my head round, whenever I dared, to watch that damned flying machine. Soon I was on a road between

hedges, and dipping to the deep-cut glen of a stream. Then came a bit of thick wood where I slackened speed.

Suddenly on my left I heard the hoot of another car, and realized to my horror that I was almost up on a couple of gate-posts through which a private road debouched on the highway. My horn gave an agonized roar, but it was too late. I clapped on my brakes, but my impetus was too great, and there before me a car was sliding athwart my course. In a second there would have been the deuce of a wreck. I did the only thing possible, and ran slap into the hedge on the right, trusting to find something soft beyond.

But there I was mistaken. My car slithered through the hedge like butter, and then gave a sickening plunge forward. I saw what was coming, leapt on the seat and would have jumped out. But a branch of hawthorn got me in the chest, lifted me up and held me, while a ton or two of expensive metal slipped below me, bucked and pitched, and then dropped with an almighty smash fifty feet to the bed of the stream.

Slowly that thorn let me go. I subsided first on the hedge, and then very gently on a bower of nettles. As I scrambled to my feet a hand took me by the arm, and a sympathetic and badly scared voice asked me if I were hurt.

I found myself looking at a tall young man in goggles and a leather ulster, who kept on blessing his soul and whinnying apologies. For myself, once I got my wind back, I was rather glad than otherwise. This was one way of getting rid of the car.

'My blame, Sir,' I answered him. 'It's lucky that I did not add homicide to my follies. That's the end of my Scotch motor tour, but it might have been the end of my life.'

He plucked out a watch and studied it. 'You're the right sort of fellow,' he said. 'I can spare a quarter of an hour, and my house is two minutes off. I'll see you clothed and fed and snug in bed. Where's your kit, by the way? Is it in the burn along with the car?'

'It's in my pocket,' I said, brandishing a toothbrush. 'I'm a Colonial and travel light.'

'A Colonial,' he cried. 'By Gad, you're the very man I've been praying for. Are you by any blessed chance a Free Trader?'

'I am,' said I, without the foggiest notion of what he meant.

He patted my shoulder and hurried me into his car. Three minutes later we drew up before a comfortable-looking shooting box set among pine-trees, and he ushered me indoors. He took me first to a bedroom and flung half a dozen of his suits before me, for my own had been pretty well reduced to rags. I selected a loose blue serge, which differed most conspicuously from my former garments, and borrowed a linen collar. Then he haled me to the dining-room,

where the remnants of a meal stood on the table, and announced that I had just five minutes to feed. 'You can take a snack in your pocket, and we'll have supper when we get back. I've got to be at the Masonic Hall at eight o'clock, or my agent will comb my hair.'

I had a cup of coffee and some cold ham, while he yarned away on the hearth-rug.

'You find me in the deuce of a mess, Mr - by-the-by, you haven't told me your name. Twisdon? Any relation of old Tommy Twisdon of the Sixtieth? No? Well, you see I'm Liberal Candidate for this part of the world, and I had a meeting on tonight at Brattleburn - that's my chief town, and an infernal Tory stronghold. I had got the Colonial ex-Premier fellow, Crumpleton, coming to speak for me tonight, and had the thing tremendously billed and the whole place ground-baited. This afternoon I had a wire from the ruffian saying he had got influenza at Blackpool, and here am I left to do the whole thing myself. I had meant to speak for ten minutes and must now go on for forty, and, though I've been racking my brains for three hours to think of something, I simply cannot last the course. Now you've got to be a good chap and help me. You're a Free Trader and can tell our people what a wash-out Protection is in the Colonies. All you fellows have the gift of the gab - I wish to Heaven I had it. I'll be for evermore in your debt.'

I had very few notions about Free Trade one way or the other, but I saw no other chance to get what I wanted. My young gentleman was far too absorbed in his own difficulties to think how odd it was to ask a stranger who had just missed death by an ace and had lost a 1,000-guinea car to address a meeting for him on the spur of the moment. But my necessities did not allow me to contemplate oddnesses or to pick and choose my supports.

'All right,' I said. 'I'm not much good as a speaker, but I'll tell them a bit about Australia.'

At my words the cares of the ages slipped from his shoulders, and he was rapturous in his thanks. He lent me a big driving coat - and never troubled to ask why I had started on a motor tour without possessing an ulster - and, as we slipped down the dusty roads, poured into my ears the simple facts of his history. He was an orphan, and his uncle had brought him up - I've forgotten the uncle's name, but he was in the Cabinet, and you can read his speeches in the papers. He had gone round the world after leaving Cambridge, and then, being short of a job, his uncle had advised politics. I gathered that he had no preference in parties. 'Good chaps in both,' he said cheerfully, 'and plenty of blighters, too. I'm Liberal, because my family have always been Whigs.' But if he was lukewarm politically he had strong views on other things. He found out I knew a bit about horses, and jawed away about the Derby entries; and he was

full of plans for improving his shooting. Altogether, a very clean, decent, callow young man.

As we passed through a little town two policemen signalled us to stop, and flashed their lanterns on us.

'Beg pardon, Sir Harry,' said one. 'We've got instructions to look out for a car, and the description's no unlike yours.'

'Right-o,' said my host, while I thanked Providence for the devious ways I had been brought to safety. After that he spoke no more, for his mind began to labour heavily with his coming speech. His lips kept muttering, his eye wandered, and I began to prepare myself for a second catastrophe. I tried to think of something to say myself, but my mind was dry as a stone. The next thing I knew we had drawn up outside a door in a street, and were being welcomed by some noisy gentlemen with rosettes. The hall had about five hundred in it, women mostly, a lot of bald heads, and a dozen or two young men. The chairman, a weaselly minister with a reddish nose, lamented Crumpleton's absence, soliloquized on his influenza, and gave me a certificate as a 'trusted leader of Australian thought'. There were two policemen at the door, and I hoped they took note of that testimonial. Then Sir Harry started.

I never heard anything like it. He didn't begin to know how to talk. He had about a bushel of notes from which he read, and when he let go of them he fell into one prolonged stutter. Every now and then he remembered a phrase he had learned by heart, straightened his back, and gave it off like Henry Irving, and the next moment he was bent double and crooning over his papers. It was the most appalling rot, too. He talked about the 'German menace', and said it was all a Tory invention to cheat the poor of their rights and keep back the great flood of social reform, but that 'organized labour' realized this and laughed the Tories to scorn. He was all for reducing our Navy as a proof of our good faith, and then sending Germany an ultimatum telling her to do the same or we would knock her into a cocked hat. He said that, but for the Tories, Germany and Britain would be fellow-workers in peace and reform. I thought of the little black book in my pocket! A giddy lot Scudder's friends cared for peace and reform.

Yet in a queer way I liked the speech. You could see the niceness of the chap shining out behind the muck with which he had been spoon-fed. Also it took a load off my mind. I mightn't be much of an orator, but I was a thousand per cent better than Sir Harry.

I didn't get on so badly when it came to my turn. I simply told them all I could remember about Australia, praying there should be no Australian there - all about its labour party and emigration and universal service. I doubt if I remembered to mention Free Trade, but I said there were no Tories in Australia, only Labour and Liberals. That fetched a cheer, and I woke them up a

bit when I started in to tell them the kind of glorious business I thought could be made out of the Empire if we really put our backs into it.
Altogether I fancy I was rather a success. The minister didn't like me, though, and when he proposed a vote of thanks, spoke of Sir Harry's speech as 'statesmanlike' and mine as having 'the eloquence of an emigration agent'.
When we were in the car again my host was in wild spirits at having got his job over. 'A ripping speech, Twisdon,' he said. 'Now, you're coming home with me. I'm all alone, and if you'll stop a day or two I'll show you some very decent fishing.'
We had a hot supper - and I wanted it pretty badly - and then drank grog in a big cheery smoking-room with a crackling wood fire. I thought the time had come for me to put my cards on the table. I saw by this man's eye that he was the kind you can trust.
'Listen, Sir Harry,' I said. 'I've something pretty important to say to you. You're a good fellow, and I'm going to be frank. Where on earth did you get that poisonous rubbish you talked tonight?'
His face fell. 'Was it as bad as that?' he asked ruefully. 'It did sound rather thin. I got most of it out of the PROGRESSIVE MAGAZINE and pamphlets that agent chap of mine keeps sending me. But you surely don't think Germany would ever go to war with us?'
'Ask that question in six weeks and it won't need an answer,' I said. 'If you'll give me your attention for half an hour I am going to tell you a story.'
I can see yet that bright room with the deers' heads and the old prints on the walls, Sir Harry standing restlessly on the stone curb of the hearth, and myself lying back in an armchair, speaking. I seemed to be another person, standing aside and listening to my own voice, and judging carefully the reliability of my tale. It was the first time I had ever told anyone the exact truth, so far as I understood it, and it did me no end of good, for it straightened out the thing in my own mind. I blinked no detail. He heard all about Scudder, and the milkman, and the note-book, and my doings in Galloway. Presently he got very excited and walked up and down the hearth-rug.
'So you see,' I concluded, 'you have got here in your house the man that is wanted for the Portland Place murder. Your duty is to send your car for the police and give me up. I don't think I'll get very far. There'll be an accident, and I'll have a knife in my ribs an hour or so after arrest. Nevertheless, it's your duty, as a law-abiding citizen. Perhaps in a month's time you'll be sorry, but you have no cause to think of that.'
He was looking at me with bright steady eyes. 'What was your job in Rhodesia, Mr Hannay?' he asked.

'Mining engineer,' I said. 'I've made my pile cleanly and I've had a good time in the making of it.'

'Not a profession that weakens the nerves, is it?'

I laughed. 'Oh, as to that, my nerves are good enough.' I took down a hunting-knife from a stand on the wall, and did the old Mashona trick of tossing it and catching it in my lips. That wants a pretty steady heart.

He watched me with a smile. 'I don't want proof. I may be an ass on the platform, but I can size up a man. You're no murderer and you're no fool, and I believe you are speaking the truth. I'm going to back you up. Now, what can I do?'

'First, I want you to write a letter to your uncle. I've got to get in touch with the Government people sometime before the 15th of June.'

He pulled his moustache. 'That won't help you. This is Foreign Office business, and my uncle would have nothing to do with it. Besides, you'd never convince him. No, I'll go one better. I'll write to the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office. He's my godfather, and one of the best going. What do you want?'

He sat down at a table and wrote to my dictation. The gist of it was that if a man called Twisdon (I thought I had better stick to that name) turned up before June 15th he was to entreat him kindly. He said Twisdon would prove his bona fides by passing the word 'Black Stone' and whistling 'Annie Laurie'.

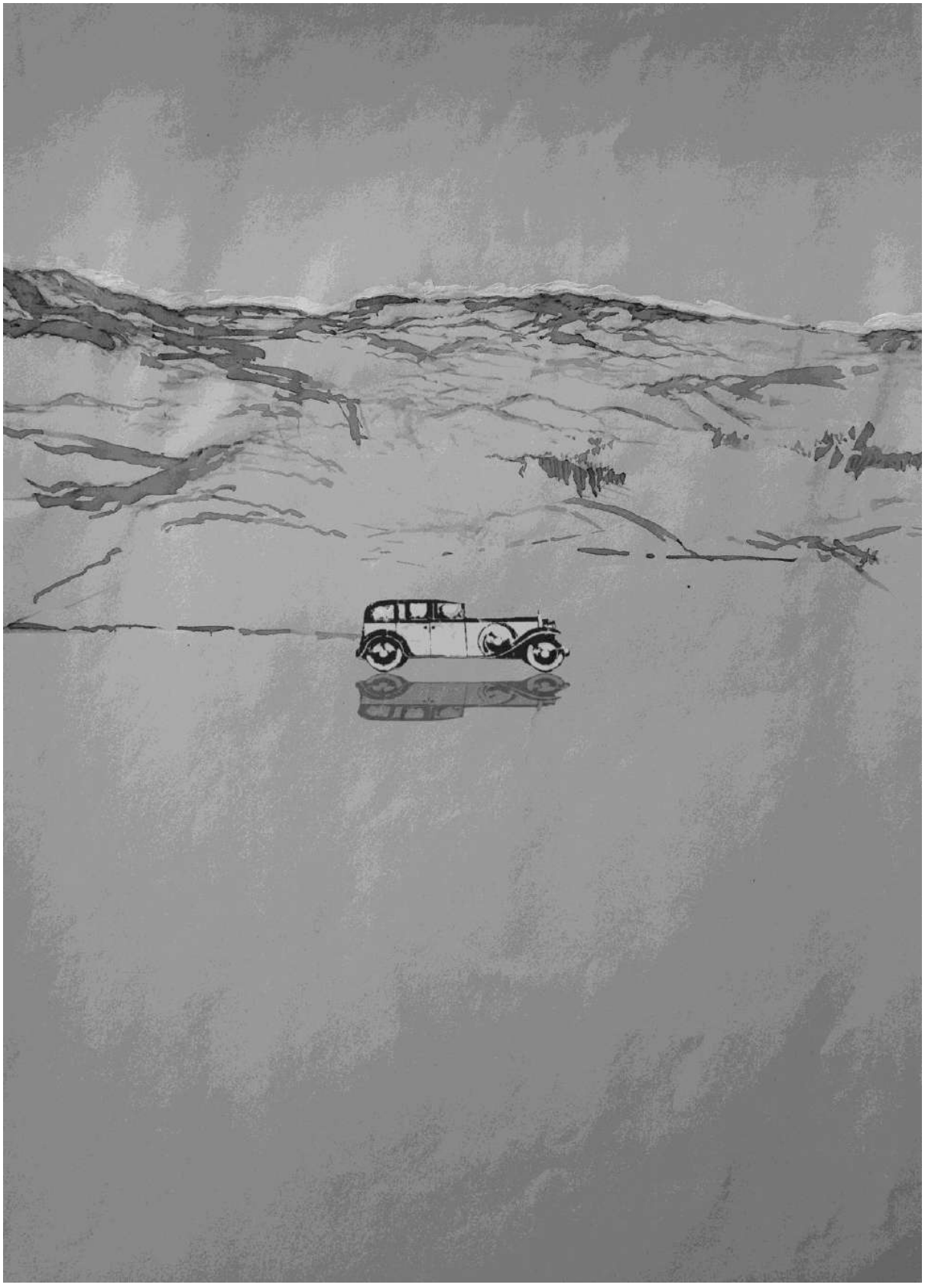
'Good,' said Sir Harry. 'That's the proper style. By the way, you'll find my godfather - his name's Sir Walter Bullivant - down at his country cottage for Whitsuntide. It's close to Artinswell on the Kenner. That's done. Now, what's the next thing?'

'You're about my height. Lend me the oldest tweed suit you've got. Anything will do, so long as the colour is the opposite of the clothes I destroyed this afternoon. Then show me a map of the neighbourhood and explain to me the lie of the land. Lastly, if the police come seeking me, just show them the car in the glen. If the other lot turn up, tell them I caught the south express after your meeting.'

He did, or promised to do, all these things. I shaved off the remnants of my moustache, and got inside an ancient suit of what I believe is called heather mixture. The map gave me some notion of my whereabouts, and told me the two things I wanted to know - where the main railway to the south could be joined and what were the wildest districts near at hand. At two o'clock he wakened me from my slumbers in the smoking-room armchair, and led me blinking into the dark starry night. An old bicycle was found in a tool-shed and handed over to me.

'First turn to the right up by the long fir-wood,' he enjoined. 'By daybreak you'll be well into the hills. Then I should pitch the machine into a bog and take to the moors on foot. You can put in a week among the shepherds, and be as safe as if you were in New Guinea.'

I pedalled diligently up steep roads of hill gravel till the skies grew pale with morning. As the mists cleared before the sun, I found myself in a wide green world with glens falling on every side and a far-away blue horizon. Here, at any rate, I could get early news of my enemies.



5. The Adventure of the Spectacled Roadman

I sat down on the very crest of the pass and took stock of my position.
Behind me was the road climbing through a long cleft in the hills, which was the upper glen of some notable river. In front was a flat space of maybe a mile, all pitted with bog-holes and rough with tussocks, and then beyond it the road fell steeply down another glen to a plain whose blue dimness melted into the distance. To left and right were round-shouldered green hills as smooth as pancakes, but to the south - that is, the left hand - there was a glimpse of high heathery mountains, which I remembered from the map as the big knot of hill which I had chosen for my sanctuary. I was on the central boss of a huge upland country, and could see everything moving for miles. In the meadows below the road half a mile back a cottage smoked, but it was the only sign of human life. Otherwise there was only the calling of plovers and the tinkling of little streams.
It was now about seven o'clock, and as I waited I heard once again that ominous beat in the air. Then I realized that my vantage- ground might be in reality a trap. There was no cover for a tomtit in those bald green places.
I sat quite still and hopeless while the beat grew louder. Then I saw an aeroplane coming up from the east. It was flying high, but as I looked it dropped several hundred feet and began to circle round the knot of hill in narrowing circles, just as a hawk wheels before it pounces. Now it was flying very low, and now the observer on board caught sight of me. I could see one of the two occupants examining me through glasses.
Suddenly it began to rise in swift whorls, and the next I knew it was speeding eastward again till it became a speck in the blue morning.
That made me do some savage thinking. My enemies had located me, and the next thing would be a cordon round me. I didn't know what force they could command, but I was certain it would be sufficient. The aeroplane had seen my bicycle, and would conclude that I would try to escape by the road. In that case there might be a chance on the moors to the right or left. I wheeled the machine a hundred yards from the highway, and plunged it into a moss-hole, where it sank among pond-weed and water-buttercups. Then I climbed to a knoll which gave me a view of the two valleys. Nothing was stirring on the long white ribbon that threaded them.
I have said there was not cover in the whole place to hide a rat. As the day advanced it was flooded with soft fresh light till it had the fragrant sunniness of the South African veld. At other times I would have liked the place, but now it seemed to suffocate me. The free moorlands were prison walls, and the keen hill air was the breath of a dungeon.

I tossed a coin - heads right, tails left - and it fell heads, so I turned to the north. In a little I came to the brow of the ridge which was the containing wall of the pass. I saw the highroad for maybe ten miles, and far down it something that was moving, and that I took to be a motor-car. Beyond the ridge I looked on a rolling green moor, which fell away into wooded glens.

Now my life on the veld has given me the eyes of a kite, and I can see things for which most men need a telescope ... Away down the slope, a couple of miles away, several men were advancing. like a row of beaters at a shoot ...

I dropped out of sight behind the sky-line. That way was shut to me, and I must try the bigger hills to the south beyond the highway. The car I had noticed was getting nearer, but it was still a long way off with some very steep gradients before it. I ran hard, crouching low except in the hollows, and as I ran I kept scanning the brow of the hill before me. Was it imagination, or did I see figures - one, two, perhaps more - moving in a glen beyond the stream?

If you are hemmed in on all sides in a patch of land there is only one chance of escape. You must stay in the patch, and let your enemies search it and not find you. That was good sense, but how on earth was I to escape notice in that table-cloth of a place? I would have buried myself to the neck in mud or lain below water or climbed the tallest tree. But there was not a stick of wood, the bog-holes were little puddles, the stream was a slender trickle. There was nothing but short heather, and bare hill bent, and the white highway.

Then in a tiny bight of road, beside a heap of stones, I found the roadman.

He had just arrived, and was wearily flinging down his hammer. He looked at me with a fishy eye and yawned.

'Confoond the day I ever left the herdin'!' he said, as if to the world at large. 'There I was my ain maister. Now I'm a slave to the Goavernment, tethered to the roadside, wi' sair een, and a back like a suckle.'

He took up the hammer, struck a stone, dropped the implement with an oath, and put both hands to his ears. 'Mercy on me! My heid's burstin'!' he cried.

He was a wild figure, about my own size but much bent, with a week's beard on his chin, and a pair of big horn spectacles.

'I canna dae't,' he cried again. 'The Surveyor maun just report me. I'm for my bed.'

I asked him what was the trouble, though indeed that was clear enough.

'The trouble is that I'm no sober. Last nicht my dochter Merran was waddit, and they danced till fower in the byre. Me and some ither chiels sat down to the drinkin', and here I am. Peety that I ever lookit on the wine when it was red!'

I agreed with him about bed.

'It's easy speakin',' he moaned. 'But I got a postcard yestreen sayin' that the new Road Surveyor would be round the day. He'll come and he'll no find me, or

else he'll find me fou, and either way I'm a done man. I'll awa' back to my bed and say I'm no weel, but I doot that'll no help me, for they ken my kind o' no-weel-ness.'
Then I had an inspiration. 'Does the new Surveyor know you?' I asked.
'No him. He's just been a week at the job. He rins about in a wee motor-cawr, and wad speir the inside oot o' a whelk.'
'Where's your house?' I asked, and was directed by a wavering finger to the cottage by the stream.
'Well, back to your bed,' I said, 'and sleep in peace. I'll take on your job for a bit and see the Surveyor.'
He stared at me blankly; then, as the notion dawned on his fuddled brain, his face broke into the vacant drunkard's smile.
'You're the billy,' he cried. 'It'll be easy eneuch managed. I've finished that bing o' stanes, so you needna chap ony mair this forenoon. just take the barry, and wheel eneuch metal frae yon quarry doon the road to mak anither bing the morn. My name's Alexander Turnbull, and I've been seeven year at the trade, and twenty afore that herdin' on Leithen Water. My freens ca' me Ecky, and whiles Specky, for I wear glesses, being waik i' the sicht. just you speak the Surveyor fair, and ca' him Sir, and he'll be fell pleased. I'll be back or mid-day.' I borrowed his spectacles and filthy old hat; stripped off coat, waistcoat, and collar, and gave him them to carry home; borrowed, too, the foul stump of a clay pipe as an extra property. He indicated my simple tasks, and without more ado set off at an amble bedwards. Bed may have been his chief object, but I think there was also something left in the foot of a bottle. I prayed that he might be safe under cover before my friends arrived on the scene.
Then I set to work to dress for the part. I opened the collar of my shirt - it was a vulgar blue-and-white check such as ploughmen wear - and revealed a neck as brown as any tinker's. I rolled up my sleeves, and there was a forearm which might have been a blacksmith's, sunburnt and rough with old scars. I got my boots and trouser-legs all white from the dust of the road, and hitched up my trousers, tying them with string below the knee. Then I set to work on my face. With a handful of dust I made a water-mark round my neck, the place where Mr Turnbull's Sunday ablutions might be expected to stop. I rubbed a good deal of dirt also into the sunburn of my cheeks. A roadman's eyes would no doubt be a little inflamed, so I contrived to get some dust in both of mine, and by dint of vigorous rubbing produced a bleary effect.
The sandwiches Sir Harry had given me had gone off with my coat, but the roadman's lunch, tied up in a red handkerchief, was at my disposal. I ate with great relish several of the thick slabs of scone and cheese and drank a little of the cold tea. In the handkerchief was a local paper tied with string and

addressed to Mr Turnbull - obviously meant to solace his mid-day leisure. I did up the bundle again, and put the paper conspicuously beside it.
My boots did not satisfy me, but by dint of kicking among the stones I reduced them to the granite-like surface which marks a roadman's foot-gear. Then I bit and scraped my finger-nails till the edges were all cracked and uneven. The men I was matched against would miss no detail. I broke one of the bootlaces and retied it in a clumsy knot, and loosed the other so that my thick grey socks bulged over the uppers. Still no sign of anything on the road. The motor I had observed half an hour ago must have gone home.
My toilet complete, I took up the barrow and began my journeys to and from the quarry a hundred yards off.
I remember an old scout in Rhodesia, who had done many queer things in his day, once telling me that the secret of playing a part was to think yourself into it. You could never keep it up, he said, unless you could manage to convince yourself that you were it. So I shut off all other thoughts and switched them on to the road- mending. I thought of the little white cottage as my home, I recalled the years I had spent herding on Leithen Water, I made my mind dwell lovingly on sleep in a box-bed and a bottle of cheap whisky. Still nothing appeared on that long white road.
Now and then a sheep wandered off the heather to stare at me. A heron flopped down to a pool in the stream and started to fish, taking no more notice of me than if I had been a milestone. On I went, trundling my loads of stone, with the heavy step of the professional. Soon I grew warm, and the dust on my face changed into solid and abiding grit. I was already counting the hours till evening should put a limit to Mr Turnbull's monotonous toil. Suddenly a crisp voice spoke from the road, and looking up I saw a little Ford two-seater, and a round-faced young man in a bowler hat.
'Are you Alexander Turnbull?' he asked. 'I am the new County Road Surveyor. You live at Blackhopefoot, and have charge of the section from Laidlawbyres to the Riggs? Good! A fair bit of road, Turnbull, and not badly engineered. A little soft about a mile off, and the edges want cleaning. See you look after that. Good morning. You'll know me the next time you see me.'
Clearly my get-up was good enough for the dreaded Surveyor. I went on with my work, and as the morning grew towards noon I was cheered by a little traffic. A baker's van breasted the hill, and sold me a bag of ginger biscuits which I stowed in my trouser- pockets against emergencies. Then a herd passed with sheep, and disturbed me somewhat by asking loudly, 'What had become o' Specky?'
'In bed wi' the colic,' I replied, and the herd passed on ... just about mid-day a big car stole down the hill, glided past and drew up a hundred yards beyond. Its

three occupants descended as if to stretch their legs, and sauntered towards me.
Two of the men I had seen before from the window of the Galloway inn - one lean, sharp, and dark, the other comfortable and smiling. The third had the look of a countryman - a vet, perhaps, or a small farmer. He was dressed in ill-cut knickerbockers, and the eye in his head was as bright and wary as a hen's.
"Morning,' said the last. 'That's a fine easy job o' yours.'
I had not looked up on their approach, and now, when accosted, I slowly and painfully straightened my back, after the manner of roadmen; spat vigorously, after the manner of the low Scot; and regarded them steadily before replying. I confronted three pairs of eyes that missed nothing.
'There's waur jobs and there's better,' I said sententiously. 'I wad rather hae yours, sittin' a' day on your hinderlands on thae cushions. It's you and your muckle cawrs that wreck my roads! If we a' had oor richts, ye sud be made to mend what ye break.'
The bright-eyed man was looking at the newspaper lying beside Turnbull's bundle.
'I see you get your papers in good time,' he said.
I glanced at it casually. 'Aye, in gude time. Seein' that that paper cam' out last Setterday I'm just Sax days late.'
He picked it up, glanced at the superscription, and laid it down again. One of the others had been looking at my boots, and a word in German called the speaker's attention to them. 'You've a fine taste in boots,' he said. 'These were never made by a country shoemaker.'
'They were not,' I said readily. 'They were made in London. I got them frae the gentleman that was here last year for the shootin'. What was his name now?' And I scratched a forgetful head. Again the sleek one spoke in German. 'Let us get on,' he said. 'This fellow is all right.'
They asked one last question.
'Did you see anyone pass early this morning? He might be on a bicycle or he might be on foot.'
I very nearly fell into the trap and told a story of a bicyclist hurrying past in the grey dawn. But I had the sense to see my danger. I pretended to consider very deeply.
'I wasna up very early,' I said. 'Ye see, my dochter was merrit last nicht, and we keepit it up late. I opened the house door about seeven and there was naebody on the road then. Since I cam' up here there has just been the baker and the Ruchill herd, besides you gentlemen.'
One of them gave me a cigar, which I smelt gingerly and stuck in Turnbull's bundle. They got into their car and were out of sight in three minutes.

My heart leaped with an enormous relief, but I went on wheeling my stones. It was as well, for ten minutes later the car returned, one of the occupants waving a hand to me. Those gentry left nothing to chance.

I finished Turnbull's bread and cheese, and pretty soon I had finished the stones. The next step was what puzzled me. I could not keep up this roadmaking business for long. A merciful Providence had kept Mr Turnbull indoors, but if he appeared on the scene there would be trouble. I had a notion that the cordon was still tight round the glen, and that if I walked in any direction I should meet with questioners. But get out I must. No man's nerve could stand more than a day of being spied on.

I stayed at my post till five o'clock. By that time I had resolved to go down to Turnbull's cottage at nightfall and take my chance of getting over the hills in the darkness. But suddenly a new car came up the road, and slowed down a yard or two from me. A fresh wind had risen, and the occupant wanted to light a cigarette. It was a touring car, with the tonneau full of an assortment of baggage. One man sat in it, and by an amazing chance I knew him. His name was Marmaduke jopley, and he was an offence to creation. He was a sort of blood stockbroker, who did his business by toadying eldest sons and rich young peers and foolish old ladies. 'Marmie' was a familiar figure, I understood, at balls and polo- weeks and country houses. He was an adroit scandal-monger, and would crawl a mile on his belly to anything that had a title or a million. I had a business introduction to his firm when I came to London, and he was good enough to ask me to dinner at his club. There he showed off at a great rate, and pattered about his duchesses till the snobbery of the creature turned me sick. I asked a man afterwards why nobody kicked him, and was told that Englishmen reverenced the weaker sex.

Anyhow there he was now, nattily dressed, in a fine new car, obviously on his way to visit some of his smart friends. A sudden daftness took me, and in a second I had jumped into the tonneau and had him by the shoulder.

'Hullo, jopley,' I sang out. 'Well met, my lad!' He got a horrid fright. His chin dropped as he stared at me. 'Who the devil are YOU?' he gasped.

'My name's Hannay,' I said. 'From Rhodesia, you remember.'

'Good God, the murderer!' he choked. 'Just so. And there'll be a second murder, my dear, if you don't do as I tell you. Give me that coat of yours. That cap, too.'

He did as bid, for he was blind with terror. Over my dirty trousers and vulgar shirt I put on his smart driving-coat, which buttoned high at the top and thereby hid the deficiencies of my collar. I stuck the cap on my head, and added his gloves to my get- up. The dusty roadman in a minute was transformed into one of the neatest motorists in Scotland. On Mr jopley's head I clapped Turnbull's unspeakable hat, and told him to keep it there.

Then with some difficulty I turned the car. My plan was to go back the road he had come, for the watchers, having seen it before, would probably let it pass unremarked, and Marmie's figure was in no way like mine.

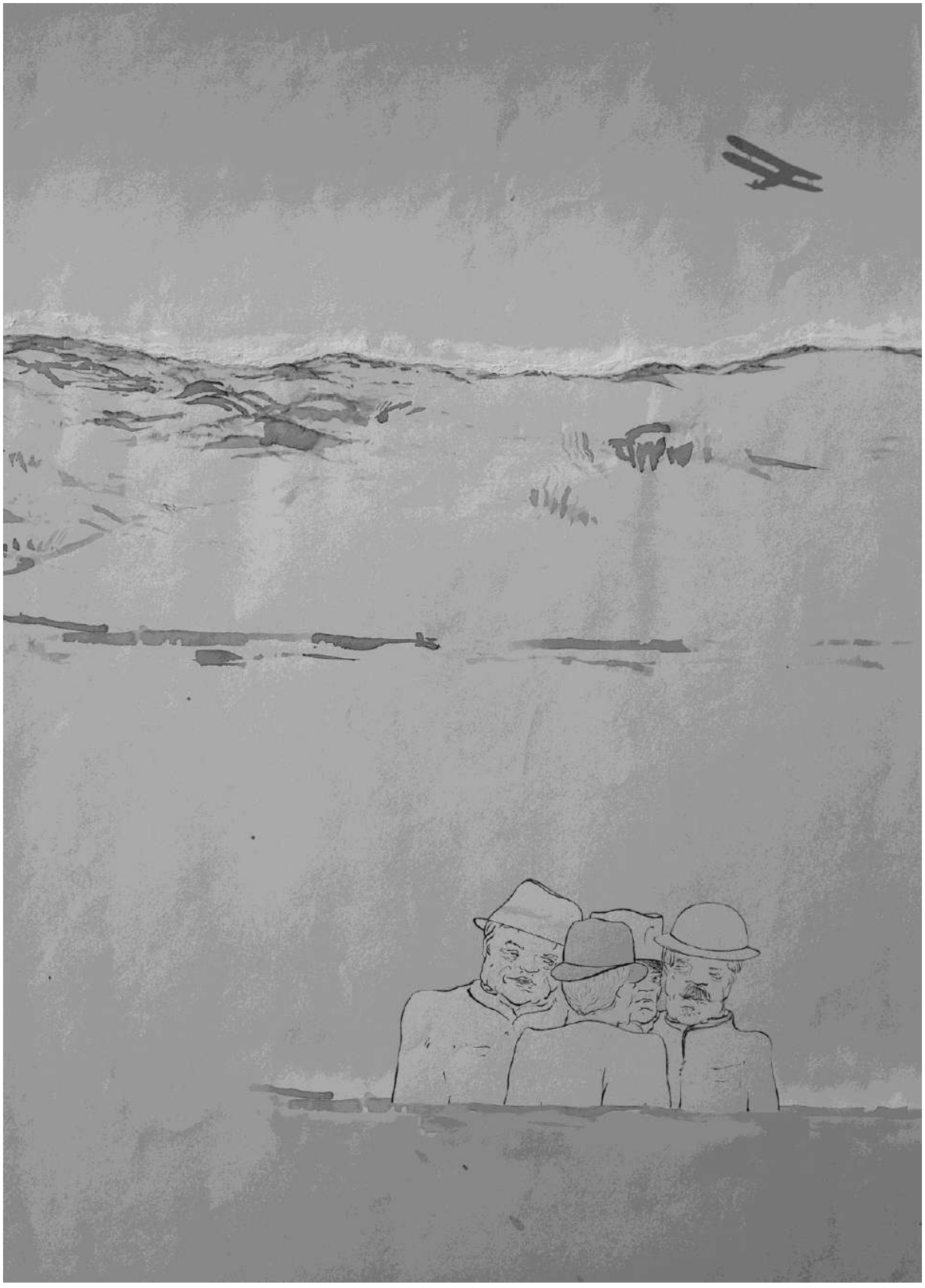
'Now, my child,' I said, 'sit quite still and be a good boy. I mean you no harm. I'm only borrowing your car for an hour or two. But if you play me any tricks, and above all if you open your mouth, as sure as there's a God above me I'll wring your neck. SAVEZ?'

I enjoyed that evening's ride. We ran eight miles down the valley, through a village or two, and I could not help noticing several strange-looking folk lounging by the roadside. These were the watchers who would have had much to say to me if I had come in other garb or company. As it was, they looked incuriously on. One touched his cap in salute, and I responded graciously.

As the dark fell I turned up a side glen which, as I remember from the map, led into an unfrequented corner of the hills. Soon the villages were left behind, then the farms, and then even the wayside cottage. Presently we came to a lonely moor where the night was blackening the sunset gleam in the bog pools. Here we stopped, and I obligingly reversed the car and restored to Mr jopley his belongings.

'A thousand thanks,' I said. 'There's more use in you than I thought. Now be off and find the police.'

As I sat on the hillside, watching the tail-light dwindle, I reflected on the various kinds of crime I had now sampled. Contrary to general belief, I was not a murderer, but I had become an unholy liar, a shameless impostor, and a highwayman with a marked taste for expensive motor-cars.



6. The Adventure of the Bald Archaeologist

I spent the night on a shelf of the hillside, in the lee of a boulder where the heather grew long and soft. It was a cold business, for I had neither coat nor waistcoat. These were in Mr Turnbull's keeping, as was Scudder's little book, my watch and - worst of all - my pipe and tobacco pouch. Only my money accompanied me in my belt, and about half a pound of ginger biscuits in my trousers pocket.

I supped off half those biscuits, and by worming myself deep into the heather got some kind of warmth. My spirits had risen, and I was beginning to enjoy this crazy game of hide-and-seek. So far I had been miraculously lucky. The milkman, the literary innkeeper, Sir Harry, the roadman, and the idiotic Marmie, were all pieces of undeserved good fortune. Somehow the first success gave me a feeling that I was going to pull the thing through.

My chief trouble was that I was desperately hungry. When a Jew shoots himself in the City and there is an inquest, the newspapers usually report that the deceased was 'well-nourished'. I remember thinking that they would not call me well-nourished if I broke my neck in a bog-hole. I lay and tortured myself - for the ginger biscuits merely emphasized the aching void - with the memory of all the good food I had thought so little of in London. There were Paddock's crisp sausages and fragrant shavings of bacon, and shapely poached eggs - how often I had turned up my nose at them! There were the cutlets they did at the club, and a particular ham that stood on the cold table, for which my soul lusted. My thoughts hovered over all varieties of mortal edible, and finally settled on a porterhouse steak and a quart of bitter with a welsh rabbit to follow. In longing hopelessly for these dainties I fell asleep.

I woke very cold and stiff about an hour after dawn. It took me a little while to remember where I was, for I had been very weary and had slept heavily. I saw first the pale blue sky through a net of heather, then a big shoulder of hill, and then my own boots placed neatly in a blaeberry bush. I raised myself on my arms and looked down into the valley, and that one look set me lacing up my boots in mad haste. For there were men below, not more than a quarter of a mile off, spaced out on the hillside like a fan, and beating the heather. Marmie had not been slow in looking for his revenge.

I crawled out of my shelf into the cover of a boulder, and from it gained a shallow trench which slanted up the mountain face. This led me presently into the narrow gully of a burn, by way of which I scrambled to the top of the ridge. From there I looked back, and saw that I was still undiscovered. My pursuers were patiently quartering the hillside and moving upwards.

Keeping behind the skyline I ran for maybe half a mile, till I judged I was above the uppermost end of the glen. Then I showed myself, and was instantly noted by one of the flankers, who passed the word to the others. I heard cries coming up from below, and saw that the line of search had changed its direction. I pretended to retreat over the skyline, but instead went back the way I had come, and in twenty minutes was behind the ridge overlooking my sleeping place. From that viewpoint I had the satisfaction of seeing the pursuit streaming up the hill at the top of the glen on a hopelessly false scent. I had before me a choice of routes, and I chose a ridge which made an angle with the one I was on, and so would soon put a deep glen between me and my enemies. The exercise had warmed my blood, and I was beginning to enjoy myself amazingly. As I went I breakfasted on the dusty remnants of the ginger biscuits.

I knew very little about the country, and I hadn't a notion what I was going to do. I trusted to the strength of my legs, but I was well aware that those behind me would be familiar with the lie of the land, and that my ignorance would be a heavy handicap. I saw in front of me a sea of hills, rising very high towards the south, but northwards breaking down into broad ridges which separated wide and shallow dales. The ridge I had chosen seemed to sink after a mile or two to a moor which lay like a pocket in the uplands. That seemed as good a direction to take as any other.

My stratagem had given me a fair start - call it twenty minutes - and I had the width of a glen behind me before I saw the first heads of the pursuers. The police had evidently called in local talent to their aid, and the men I could see had the appearance of herds or gamekeepers. They hallooed at the sight of me, and I waved my hand. Two dived into the glen and began to climb my ridge, while the others kept their own side of the hill. I felt as if I were taking part in a schoolboy game of hare and hounds. But very soon it began to seem less of a game. Those fellows behind were hefty men on their native heath. Looking back I saw that only three were following direct, and I guessed that the others had fetched a circuit to cut me off. My lack of local knowledge might very well be my undoing, and I resolved to get out of this tangle of glens to the pocket of moor I had seen from the tops. I must so increase my distance as to get clear away from them, and I believed I could do this if I could find the right ground for it. If there had been cover I would have tried a bit of stalking, but on these bare slopes you could see a fly a mile off. My hope must be in the length of my legs and the soundness of my wind, but I needed easier ground for that, for I was not bred a mountaineer. How I longed for a good Afrikander pony!

I put on a great spurt and got off my ridge and down into the moor before any figures appeared on the skyline behind me. I crossed a burn, and came out on a highroad which made a pass between two glens. All in front of me was a big

field of heather sloping up to a crest which was crowned with an odd feather of trees. In the dyke by the roadside was a gate, from which a grass- grown track led over the first wave of the moor.

I jumped the dyke and followed it, and after a few hundred yards - as soon as it was out of sight of the highway - the grass stopped and it became a very respectable road, which was evidently kept with some care. Clearly it ran to a house, and I began to think of doing the same. Hitherto my luck had held, and it might be that my best chance would be found in this remote dwelling. Anyhow there were trees there, and that meant cover.

I did not follow the road, but the burnside which flanked it on the right, where the bracken grew deep and the high banks made a tolerable screen. It was well I did so, for no sooner had I gained the hollow than, looking back, I saw the pursuit topping the ridge from which I had descended.

After that I did not look back; I had no time. I ran up the burnside, crawling over the open places, and for a large part wading in the shallow stream. I found a deserted cottage with a row of phantom peat-stacks and an overgrown garden. Then I was among young hay, and very soon had come to the edge of a plantation of wind-blown firs. From there I saw the chimneys of the house smoking a few hundred yards to my left. I forsook the burnside, crossed another dyke, and almost before I knew was on a rough lawn. A glance back told me that I was well out of sight of the pursuit, which had not yet passed the first lift of the moor.

The lawn was a very rough place, cut with a scythe instead of a mower, and planted with beds of scrubby rhododendrons. A brace of black-game, which are not usually garden birds, rose at my approach. The house before me was the ordinary moorland farm, with a more pretentious whitewashed wing added. Attached to this wing was a glass veranda, and through the glass I saw the face of an elderly gentleman meekly watching me. I stalked over the border of coarse hill gravel and entered the open veranda door. Within was a pleasant room, glass on one side, and on the other a mass of books. More books showed in an inner room. On the floor, instead of tables, stood cases such as you see in a museum, filled with coins and queer stone implements.

There was a knee-hole desk in the middle, and seated at it, with some papers and open volumes before him, was the benevolent old gentleman. His face was round and shiny, like Mr Pickwick's, big glasses were stuck on the end of his nose, and the top of his head was as bright and bare as a glass bottle. He never moved when I entered, but raised his placid eyebrows and waited on me to speak.

It was not an easy job, with about five minutes to spare, to tell a stranger who I was and what I wanted, and to win his aid. I did not attempt it. There was

something about the eye of the man before me, something so keen and knowledgeable, that I could not find a word. I simply stared at him and stuttered.
'You seem in a hurry, my friend,'he said slowly.
I nodded towards the window. It gave a prospect across the moor through a gap in the plantation, and revealed certain figures half a mile off straggling through the heather.
'Ah, I see,' he said, and took up a pair of field-glasses through which he patiently scrutinized the figures.
'A fugitive from justice, eh? Well, we'll go into the matter at our leisure. Meantime I object to my privacy being broken in upon by the clumsy rural policeman. Go into my study, and you will see two doors facing you. Take the one on the left and close it behind you. You will be perfectly safe.'
And this extraordinary man took up his pen again.
I did as I was bid, and found myself in a little dark chamber which smelt of chemicals, and was lit only by a tiny window high up in the wall. The door had swung behind me with a click like the door of a safe. Once again I had found an unexpected sanctuary.
All the same I was not comfortable. There was something about the old gentleman which puzzled and rather terrified me. He had been too easy and ready, almost as if he had expected me. And his eyes had been horribly intelligent.
No sound came to me in that dark place. For all I knew the police might be searching the house, and if they did they would want to know what was behind this door. I tried to possess my soul in patience, and to forget how hungry I was.
Then I took a more cheerful view. The old gentleman could scarcely refuse me a meal, and I fell to reconstructing my breakfast. Bacon and eggs would content me, but I wanted the better part of a flitch of bacon and half a hundred eggs. And then, while my mouth was watering in anticipation, there was a click and the door stood open.
I emerged into the sunlight to find the master of the house sitting in a deep armchair in the room he called his study, and regarding me with curious eyes.
'Have they gone?' I asked.
'They have gone. I convinced them that you had crossed the hill. I do not choose that the police should come between me and one whom I am delighted to honour. This is a lucky morning for you, Mr Richard Hannay.'
As he spoke his eyelids seemed to tremble and to fall a little over his keen grey eyes. In a flash the phrase of Scudder's came back to me, when he had described the man he most dreaded in the world. He had said that he 'could

hood his eyes like a hawk'. Then I saw that I had walked straight into the enemy's headquarters.
My first impulse was to throttle the old ruffian and make for the open air. He seemed to anticipate my intention, for he smiled gently, and nodded to the door behind me.
I turned, and saw two men-servants who had me covered with pistols.
He knew my name, but he had never seen me before. And as the reflection darted across my mind I saw a slender chance.
'I don't know what you mean,' I said roughly. 'And who are you calling Richard Hannay? My name's Ainslie.' 'So?' he said, still smiling. 'But of course you have others. We won't quarrel about a name.'
I was pulling myself together now, and I reflected that my garb, lacking coat and waistcoat and collar, would at any rate not betray me. I put on my surliest face and shrugged my shoulders.
'I suppose you're going to give me up after all, and I call it a damned dirty trick. My God, I wish I had never seen that cursed motor-car! Here's the money and be damned to you,' and I flung four sovereigns on the table.
He opened his eyes a little. 'Oh no, I shall not give you up. My friends and I will have a little private settlement with you, that is all. You know a little too much, Mr Hannay. You are a clever actor, but not quite clever enough.'
He spoke with assurance, but I could see the dawning of a doubt in his mind.
'Oh, for God's sake stop jawing,' I cried. 'Everything's against me. I haven't had a bit of luck since I came on shore at Leith. What's the harm in a poor devil with an empty stomach picking up some money he finds in a bust-up motor-car? That's all I done, and for that I've been chivvied for two days by those blasted bobbies over those blasted hills. I tell you I'm fair sick of it. You can do what you like, old boy! Ned Ainslie's got no fight left in him.'
I could see that the doubt was gaining.
'Will you oblige me with the story of your recent doings?'he asked. 'I can't, guv'nor,' I said in a real beggar's whine. 'I've not had a bite to eat for two days. Give me a mouthful of food, and then you'll hear God's truth.'
I must have showed my hunger in my face, for he signalled to one of the men in the doorway. A bit of cold pie was brought and a glass of beer, and I wolfed them down like a pig - or rather, like Ned Ainslie, for I was keeping up my character. In the middle of my meal he spoke suddenly to me in German, but I turned on him a face as blank as a stone wall.
Then I told him my story - how I had come off an Archangel ship at Leith a week ago, and was making my way overland to my brother at Wigtown. I had run short of cash - I hinted vaguely at a spree - and I was pretty well on my uppers when I had come on a hole in a hedge, and, looking through, had seen a big

motor-car lying in the burn. I had poked about to see what had happened, and had found three sovereigns lying on the seat and one on the floor. There was nobody there or any sign of an owner, so I had pocketed the cash. But somehow the law had got after me. When I had tried to change a sovereign in a baker's shop, the woman had cried on the police, and a little later, when I was washing my face in a burn, I had been nearly gripped, and had only got away by leaving my coat and waistcoat behind me.

'They can have the money back,' I cried, 'for a fat lot of good it's done me. Those perishers are all down on a poor man. Now, if it had been you, guv'nor, that had found the quids, nobody would have troubled you.'

'You're a good liar, Hannay,' he said.

I flew into a rage. 'Stop fooling, damn you! I tell you my name's Ainslie, and I never heard of anyone called Hannay in my born days. I'd sooner have the police than you with your Hannays and your monkey-faced pistol tricks ... No, guv'nor, I beg pardon, I don't mean that. I'm much obliged to you for the grub, and I'll thank you to let me go now the coast's clear.'

It was obvious that he was badly puzzled. You see he had never seen me, and my appearance must have altered considerably from my photographs, if he had got one of them. I was pretty smart and well dressed in London, and now I was a regular tramp.

'I do not propose to let you go. If you are what you say you are, you will soon have a chance of clearing yourself. If you are what I believe you are, I do not think you will see the light much longer.'

He rang a bell, and a third servant appeared from the veranda.

'I want the Lanchester in five minutes,' he said. 'There will be three to luncheon.'

Then he looked steadily at me, and that was the hardest ordeal of all.

There was something weird and devilish in those eyes, cold, malignant, unearthly, and most hellishly clever. They fascinated me like the bright eyes of a snake. I had a strong impulse to throw myself on his mercy and offer to join his side, and if you consider the way I felt about the whole thing you will see that that impulse must have been purely physical, the weakness of a brain mesmerized and mastered by a stronger spirit. But I managed to stick it out and even to grin.

'You'll know me next time, guv'nor,' I said.

'Karl,' he spoke in German to one of the men in the doorway, 'you will put this fellow in the storeroom till I return, and you will be answerable to me for his keeping.'

I was marched out of the room with a pistol at each ear.

The storeroom was a damp chamber in what had been the old farmhouse. There was no carpet on the uneven floor, and nothing to sit down on but a school form. It was black as pitch, for the windows were heavily shuttered. I made out by groping that the walls were lined with boxes and barrels and sacks of some heavy stuff. The whole place smelt of mould and disuse. My gaolers turned the key in the door, and I could hear them shifting their feet as they stood on guard outside.

I sat down in that chilly darkness in a very miserable frame of mind. The old boy had gone off in a motor to collect the two ruffians who had interviewed me yesterday. Now, they had seen me as the roadman, and they would remember me, for I was in the same rig. What was a roadman doing twenty miles from his beat, pursued by the police? A question or two would put them on the track. Probably they had seen Mr Turnbull, probably Marmie too; most likely they could link me up with Sir Harry, and then the whole thing would be crystal clear. What chance had I in this moorland house with three desperadoes and their armed servants?

I began to think wistfully of the police, now plodding over the hills after my wraith. They at any rate were fellow-countrymen and honest men, and their tender mercies would be kinder than these ghoulish aliens. But they wouldn't have listened to me. That old devil with the eyelids had not taken long to get rid of them. I thought he probably had some kind of graft with the constabulary. Most likely he had letters from Cabinet Ministers saying he was to be given every facility for plotting against Britain. That's the sort of owlish way we run our politics in the Old Country.

The three would be back for lunch, so I hadn't more than a couple of hours to wait. It was simply waiting on destruction, for I could see no way out of this mess. I wished that I had Scudder's courage, for I am free to confess I didn't feel any great fortitude. The only thing that kept me going was that I was pretty furious. It made me boil with rage to think of those three spies getting the pull on me like this. I hoped that at any rate I might be able to twist one of their necks before they downed me.

The more I thought of it the angrier I grew, and I had to get up and move about the room. I tried the shutters, but they were the kind that lock with a key, and I couldn't move them. From the outside came the faint clucking of hens in the warm sun. Then I groped among the sacks and boxes. I couldn't open the latter, and the sacks seemed to be full of things like dog-biscuits that smelt of cinnamon. But, as I circumnavigated the room, I found a handle in the wall which seemed worth investigating.

It was the door of a wall cupboard - what they call a 'press' in Scotland - and it was locked. I shook it, and it seemed rather flimsy. For want of something

better to do I put out my strength on that door, getting some purchase on the handle by looping my braces round it. Presently the thing gave with a crash which I thought would bring in my warders to inquire. I waited for a bit, and then started to explore the cupboard shelves.

There was a multitude of queer things there. I found an odd vesta or two in my trouser pockets and struck a light. It was out in a second, but it showed me one thing. There was a little stock of electric torches on one shelf. I picked up one, and found it was in working order.

With the torch to help me I investigated further. There were bottles and cases of queer-smelling stuffs, chemicals no doubt for experiments, and there were coils of fine copper wire and yanks and yanks of thin oiled silk. There was a box of detonators, and a lot of cord for fuses. Then away at the back of the shelf I found a stout brown cardboard box, and inside it a wooden case. I managed to wrench it open, and within lay half a dozen little grey bricks, each a couple of inches square.

I took up one, and found that it crumbled easily in my hand. Then I smelt it and put my tongue to it. After that I sat down to think. I hadn't been a mining engineer for nothing, and I knew lentonite when I saw it.

With one of these bricks I could blow the house to smithereens. I had used the stuff in Rhodesia and knew its power. But the trouble was that my knowledge wasn't exact. I had forgotten the proper charge and the right way of preparing it, and I wasn't sure about the timing. I had only a vague notion, too, as to its power, for though I had used it I had not handled it with my own fingers.

But it was a chance, the only possible chance. It was a mighty risk, but against it was an absolute black certainty. If I used it the odds were, as I reckoned, about five to one in favour of my blowing myself into the tree-tops; but if I didn't I should very likely be occupying a six-foot hole in the garden by the evening. That was the way I had to look at it. The prospect was pretty dark either way, but anyhow there was a chance, both for myself and for my country.

The remembrance of little Scudder decided me. It was about the beastliest moment of my life, for I'm no good at these cold-blooded resolutions. Still I managed to rake up the pluck to set my teeth and choke back the horrid doubts that flooded in on me. I simply shut off my mind and pretended I was doing an experiment as simple as Guy Fawkes fireworks.

I got a detonator, and fixed it to a couple of feet of fuse. Then I took a quarter of a lentonite brick, and buried it near the door below one of the sacks in a crack of the floor, fixing the detonator in it. For all I knew half those boxes might be dynamite. If the cupboard held such deadly explosives, why not the boxes? In that case there would be a glorious skyward journey for me and the German servants and about an acre of surrounding country. There was also the risk that

the detonation might set off the other bricks in the cupboard, for I had forgotten most that I knew about lentonite. But it didn't do to begin thinking about the possibilities. The odds were horrible, but I had to take them.

I ensconced myself just below the sill of the window, and lit the fuse. Then I waited for a moment or two. There was dead silence - only a shuffle of heavy boots in the passage, and the peaceful cluck of hens from the warm out-of-doors. I commended my soul to my Maker, and wondered where I would be in five seconds ...

A great wave of heat seemed to surge upwards from the floor, and hang for a blistering instant in the air. Then the wall opposite me flashed into a golden yellow and dissolved with a rending thunder that hammered my brain into a pulp. Something dropped on me, catching the point of my left shoulder.

And then I think I became unconscious.

My stupor can scarcely have lasted beyond a few seconds. I felt myself being choked by thick yellow fumes, and struggled out of the debris to my feet. Somewhere behind me I felt fresh air. The jambs of the window had fallen, and through the ragged rent the smoke was pouring out to the summer noon. I stepped over the broken lintel, and found myself standing in a yard in a dense and acrid fog. I felt very sick and ill, but I could move my limbs, and I staggered blindly forward away from the house.

A small mill-lade ran in a wooden aqueduct at the other side of the yard, and into this I fell. The cool water revived me, and I had just enough wits left to think of escape. I squirmed up the lade among the slippery green slime till I reached the mill-wheel. Then I wriggled through the axle hole into the old mill and tumbled on to a bed of chaff. A nail caught the seat of my trousers, and I left a wisp of heather-mixture behind me.

The mill had been long out of use. The ladders were rotten with age, and in the loft the rats had gnawed great holes in the floor. Nausea shook me, and a wheel in my head kept turning, while my left shoulder and arm seemed to be stricken with the palsy. I looked out of the window and saw a fog still hanging over the house and smoke escaping from an upper window. Please God I had set the place on fire, for I could hear confused cries coming from the other side.

But I had no time to linger, since this mill was obviously a bad hiding-place. Anyone looking for me would naturally follow the lade, and I made certain the search would begin as soon as they found that my body was not in the storeroom. From another window I saw that on the far side of the mill stood an old stone dovecot. If I could get there without leaving tracks I might find a hiding-place, for I argued that my enemies, if they thought I could move, would conclude I had made for open country, and would go seeking me on the moor.

I crawled down the broken ladder, scattering chaff behind me to cover my footsteps. I did the same on the mill floor, and on the threshold where the door

hung on broken hinges. Peeping out, I saw that between me and the dovecot was a piece of bare cobbled ground, where no footmarks would show. Also it was mercifully hid by the mill buildings from any view from the house. I slipped across the space, got to the back of the dovecot and prospected a way of ascent.

That was one of the hardest jobs I ever took on. My shoulder and arm ached like hell, and I was so sick and giddy that I was always on the verge of falling. But I managed it somehow. By the use of out-jutting stones and gaps in the masonry and a tough ivy root I got to the top in the end. There was a little parapet behind which I found space to lie down. Then I proceeded to go off into an old-fashioned swoon.

I woke with a burning head and the sun glaring in my face. For a long time I lay motionless, for those horrible fumes seemed to have loosened my joints and dulled my brain. Sounds came to me from the house - men speaking throatily and the throbbing of a stationary car. There was a little gap in the parapet to which I wriggled, and from which I had some sort of prospect of the yard. I saw figures come out - a servant with his head bound up, and then a younger man in knickerbockers. They were looking for something, and moved towards the mill. Then one of them caught sight of the wisp of cloth on the nail, and cried out to the other. They both went back to the house, and brought two more to look at it. I saw the rotund figure of my late captor, and I thought I made out the man with the lisp. I noticed that all had pistols.

For half an hour they ransacked the mill. I could hear them kicking over the barrels and pulling up the rotten planking. Then they came outside, and stood just below the dovecot arguing fiercely. The servant with the bandage was being soundly rated. I heard them fiddling with the door of the dovecote and for one horrid moment I fancied they were coming up. Then they thought better of it, and went back to the house.

All that long blistering afternoon I lay baking on the rooftop. Thirst was my chief torment. My tongue was like a stick, and to make it worse I could hear the cool drip of water from the mill- lade. I watched the course of the little stream as it came in from the moor, and my fancy followed it to the top of the glen, where it must issue from an icy fountain fringed with cool ferns and mosses. I would have given a thousand pounds to plunge my face into that.

I had a fine prospect of the whole ring of moorland. I saw the car speed away with two occupants, and a man on a hill pony riding east. I judged they were looking for me, and I wished them joy of their quest.

But I saw something else more interesting. The house stood almost on the summit of a swell of moorland which crowned a sort of plateau, and there was no higher point nearer than the big hills six miles off. The actual summit, as I have mentioned, was a biggish clump of trees - firs mostly, with a few ashes and beeches. On the dovecot I was almost on a level with the tree-tops, and could see what lay beyond. The wood was not solid, but only a ring, and inside was an oval of green turf, for all the world like a big cricket-field.

I didn't take long to guess what it was. It was an aerodrome, and a secret one. The place had been most cunningly chosen. For suppose anyone were watching

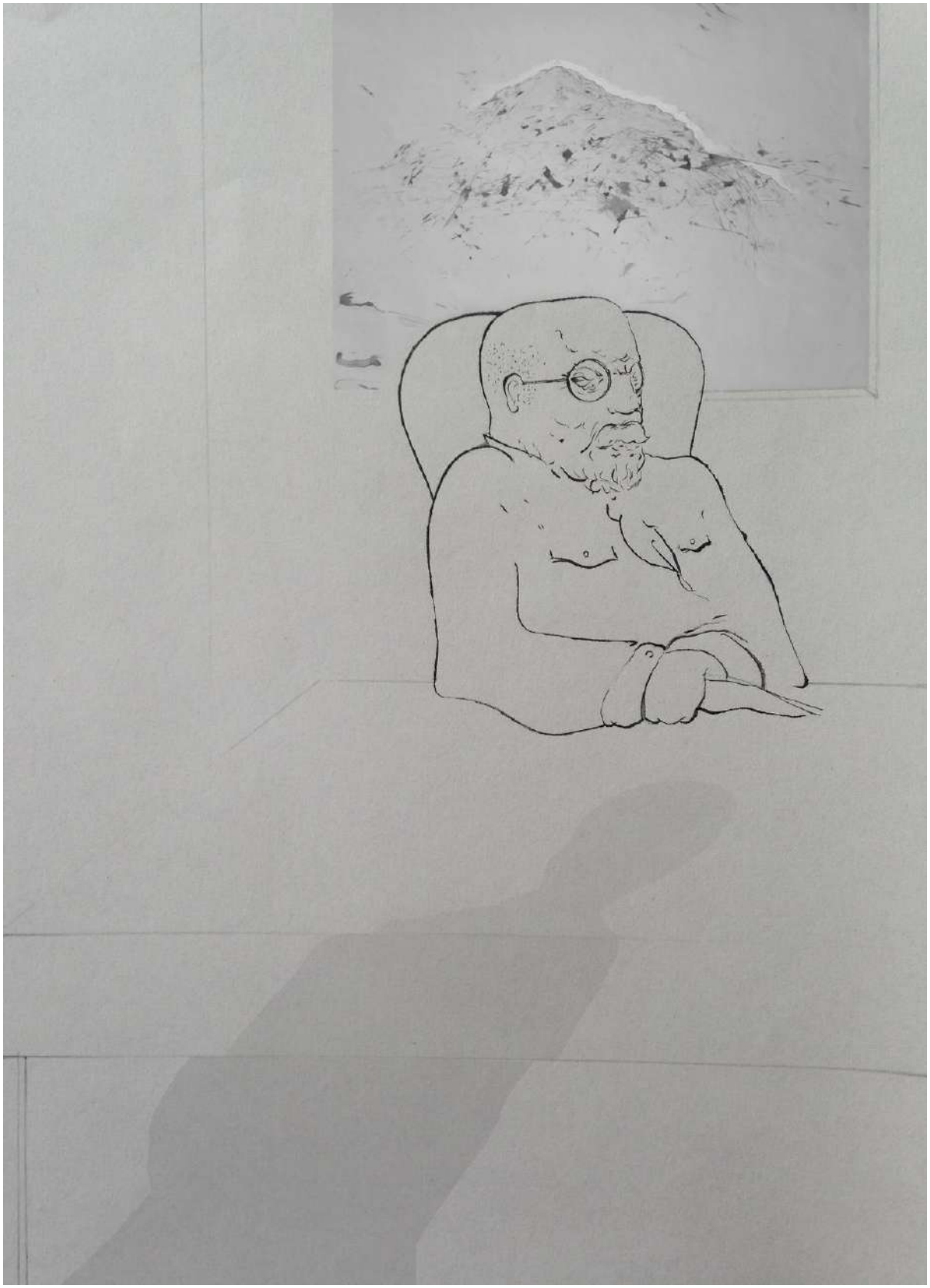
an aeroplane descending here, he would think it had gone over the hill beyond the trees. As the place was on the top of a rise in the midst of a big amphitheatre, any observer from any direction would conclude it had passed out of view behind the hill. Only a man very close at hand would realize that the aeroplane had not gone over but had descended in the midst of the wood. An observer with a telescope on one of the higher hills might have discovered the truth, but only herds went there, and herds do not carry spy-glasses. When I looked from the dovecot I could see far away a blue line which I knew was the sea, and I grew furious to think that our enemies had this secret conning-tower to rake our waterways.

Then I reflected that if that aeroplane came back the chances were ten to one that I would be discovered. So through the afternoon I lay and prayed for the coming of darkness, and glad I was when the sun went down over the big western hills and the twilight haze crept over the moor. The aeroplane was late. The gloaming was far advanced when I heard the beat of wings and saw it volplaning downward to its home in the wood. Lights twinkled for a bit and there was much coming and going from the house. Then the dark fell, and silence.

Thank God it was a black night. The moon was well on its last quarter and would not rise till late. My thirst was too great to allow me to tarry, so about nine o'clock, so far as I could judge, I started to descend. It wasn't easy, and half-way down I heard the back door of the house open, and saw the gleam of a lantern against the mill wall. For some agonizing minutes I hung by the ivy and prayed that whoever it was would not come round by the dovecot. Then the light disappeared, and I dropped as softly as I could on to the hard soil of the yard.

I crawled on my belly in the lee of a stone dyke till I reached the fringe of trees which surrounded the house. If I had known how to do it I would have tried to put that aeroplane out of action, but I realized that any attempt would probably be futile. I was pretty certain that there would be some kind of defence round the house, so I went through the wood on hands and knees, feeling carefully every inch before me. It was as well, for presently I came on a wire about two feet from the ground. If I had tripped over that, it would doubtless have rung some bell in the house and I would have been captured.

A hundred yards farther on I found another wire cunningly placed on the edge of a small stream. Beyond that lay the moor, and in five minutes I was deep in bracken and heather. Soon I was round the shoulder of the rise, in the little glen from which the mill-lade flowed. Ten minutes later my face was in the spring, and I was soaking down pints of the blessed water. But I did not stop till I had put half a dozen miles between me and that accursed dwelling.



7. The Dry-Fly Fisherman

I sat down on a hill-top and took stock of my position. I wasn't feeling very happy, for my natural thankfulness at my escape was clouded by my severe bodily discomfort. Those lentonite fumes had fairly poisoned me, and the baking hours on the dovecot hadn't helped matters. I had a crushing headache, and felt as sick as a cat. Also my shoulder was in a bad way. At first I thought it was only a bruise, but it seemed to be swelling, and I had no use of my left arm.

My plan was to seek Mr Turnbull's cottage, recover my garments, and especially Scudder's note-book, and then make for the main line and get back to the south. It seemed to me that the sooner I got in touch with the Foreign Office man, Sir Walter Bullivant, the better. I didn't see how I could get more proof than I had got already. He must just take or leave my story, and anyway, with him I would be in better hands than those devilish Germans. I had begun to feel quite kindly towards the British police.

It was a wonderful starry night, and I had not much difficulty about the road. Sir Harry's map had given me the lie of the land, and all I had to do was to steer a point or two west of south-west to come to the stream where I had met the roadman. In all these travels I never knew the names of the places, but I believe this stream was no less than the upper waters of the river Tweed. I calculated I must be about eighteen miles distant, and that meant I could not get there before morning. So I must lie up a day somewhere, for I was too outrageous a figure to be seen in the sunlight. I had neither coat, waistcoat, collar, nor hat, my trousers were badly torn, and my face and hands were black with the explosion. I daresay I had other beauties, for my eyes felt as if they were furiously bloodshot. Altogether I was no spectacle for God-fearing citizens to see on a highroad.

Very soon after daybreak I made an attempt to clean myself in a hill burn, and then approached a herd's cottage, for I was feeling the need of food. The herd was away from home, and his wife was alone, with no neighbour for five miles. She was a decent old body, and a plucky one, for though she got a fright when she saw me, she had an axe handy, and would have used it on any evil-doer. I told her that I had had a fall - I didn't say how - and she saw by my looks that I was pretty sick. Like a true Samaritan she asked no questions, but gave me a bowl of milk with a dash of whisky in it, and let me sit for a little by her kitchen fire. She would have bathed my shoulder, but it ached so badly that I would not let her touch it.

I don't know what she took me for - a repentant burglar, perhaps; for when I wanted to pay her for the milk and tendered a sovereign which was the smallest

coin I had, she shook her head and said something about 'giving it to them that had a right to it'. At this I protested so strongly that I think she believed me honest, for she took the money and gave me a warm new plaid for it, and an old hat of her man's. She showed me how to wrap the plaid around my shoulders, and when I left that cottage I was the living image of the kind of Scotsman you see in the illustrations to Burns's poems. But at any rate I was more or less clad.

It was as well, for the weather changed before midday to a thick drizzle of rain. I found shelter below an overhanging rock in the crook of a burn, where a drift of dead brackens made a tolerable bed. There I managed to sleep till nightfall, waking very cramped and wretched, with my shoulder gnawing like a toothache. I ate the oatcake and cheese the old wife had given me and set out again just before the darkening.

I pass over the miseries of that night among the wet hills. There were no stars to steer by, and I had to do the best I could from my memory of the map. Twice I lost my way, and I had some nasty falls into peat-bogs. I had only about ten miles to go as the crow flies, but my mistakes made it nearer twenty. The last bit was completed with set teeth and a very light and dizzy head. But I managed it, and in the early dawn I was knocking at Mr Turnbull's door. The mist lay close and thick, and from the cottage I could not see the highroad.

Mr Turnbull himself opened to me - sober and something more than sober. He was primly dressed in an ancient but well-tended suit of black; he had been shaved not later than the night before; he wore a linen collar; and in his left hand he carried a pocket Bible. At first he did not recognize me.

'Whae are ye that comes stravaigin' here on the Sabbath mornin'?' he asked.

I had lost all count of the days. So the Sabbath was the reason for this strange decorum.

My head was swimming so wildly that I could not frame a coherent answer. But he recognized me, and he saw that I was ill.

'Hae ye got my specs?' he asked.

I fetched them out of my trouser pocket and gave him them.

'Ye'll hae come for your jaicket and westcoat,' he said. 'Come in- bye. Losh, man, ye're terrible dune i' the legs. Haud up till I get ye to a chair.'

I perceived I was in for a bout of malaria. I had a good deal of fever in my bones, and the wet night had brought it out, while my shoulder and the effects of the fumes combined to make me feel pretty bad. Before I knew, Mr Turnbull was helping me off with my clothes, and putting me to bed in one of the two cupboards that lined the kitchen walls.

He was a true friend in need, that old roadman. His wife was dead years ago, and since his daughter's marriage he lived alone.

For the better part of ten days he did all the rough nursing I needed. I simply wanted to be left in peace while the fever took its course, and when my skin was cool again I found that the bout had more or less cured my shoulder. But it was a baddish go, and though I was out of bed in five days, it took me some time to get my legs again.

He went out each morning, leaving me milk for the day, and locking the door behind him; and came in in the evening to sit silent in the chimney corner. Not a soul came near the place. When I was getting better, he never bothered me with a question. Several times he fetched me a two days' old SCOTSMAN, and I noticed that the interest in the Portland Place murder seemed to have died down. There was no mention of it, and I could find very little about anything except a thing called the General Assembly - some ecclesiastical spree, I gathered.

One day he produced my belt from a lockfast drawer. 'There's a terrible heap o' siller in't,' he said. 'Ye'd better coont it to see it's a' there.'

He never even sought my name. I asked him if anybody had been around making inquiries subsequent to my spell at the road-making.

'Ay, there was a man in a motor-cawr. He speired whae had ta'en my place that day, and I let on I thocht him daft. But he keepit on at me, and syne I said he maun be thinkin' o' my gude-brither frae the Cleuch that whiles lent me a haun'. He was a wersh-lookin' sowl, and I couldna understand the half o' his English tongue.'

I was getting restless those last days, and as soon as I felt myself fit I decided to be off. That was not till the twelfth day of June, and as luck would have it a drover went past that morning taking some cattle to Moffat. He was a man named Hislop, a friend of Turnbull's, and he came in to his breakfast with us and offered to take me with him.

I made Turnbull accept five pounds for my lodging, and a hard job I had of it. There never was a more independent being. He grew positively rude when I pressed him, and shy and red, and took the money at last without a thank you. When I told him how much I owed him, he grunted something about 'ae guid turn deservin' anither'. You would have thought from our leave-taking that we had parted in disgust.

Hislop was a cheery soul, who chattered all the way over the pass and down the sunny vale of Annan. I talked of Galloway markets and sheep prices, and he made up his mind I was a 'pack-shepherd' from those parts - whatever that may be. My plaid and my old hat, as I have said, gave me a fine theatrical Scots look. But driving cattle is a mortally slow job, and we took the better part of the day to cover a dozen miles.

If I had not had such an anxious heart I would have enjoyed that time. It was shining blue weather, with a constantly changing prospect of brown hills and far green meadows, and a continual sound of larks and curlews and falling streams. But I had no mind for the summer, and little for Hislop's conversation, for as the fateful fifteenth of June drew near I was overweighed with the hopeless difficulties of my enterprise.

I got some dinner in a humble Moffat public-house, and walked the two miles to the junction on the main line. The night express for the south was not due till near midnight, and to fill up the time I went up on the hillside and fell asleep, for the walk had tired me. I all but slept too long, and had to run to the station and catch the train with two minutes to spare. The feel of the hard third-class cushions and the smell of stale tobacco cheered me up wonderfully. At any rate, I felt now that I was getting to grips with my job.

I was decanted at Crewe in the small hours and had to wait till six to get a train for Birmingham. In the afternoon I got to Reading, and changed into a local train which journeyed into the deeps of Berkshire. Presently I was in a land of lush water-meadows and slow reedy streams. About eight o'clock in the evening, a weary and travel-stained being - a cross between a farm-labourer and a vet - with a checked black-and-white plaid over his arm (for I did not dare to wear it south of the Border), descended at the little station of Artinswell. There were several people on the platform, and I thought I had better wait to ask my way till I was clear of the place.

The road led through a wood of great beeches and then into a shallow valley, with the green backs of downs peeping over the distant trees. After Scotland the air smelt heavy and flat, but infinitely sweet, for the limes and chestnuts and lilac bushes were domes of blossom. Presently I came to a bridge, below which a clear slow stream flowed between snowy beds of water-buttercups. A little above it was a mill; and the lasher made a pleasant cool sound in the scented dusk. Somehow the place soothed me and put me at my ease. I fell to whistling as I looked into the green depths, and the tune which came to my lips was 'Annie Laurie'.

A fisherman came up from the waterside, and as he neared me he too began to whistle. The tune was infectious, for he followed my suit. He was a huge man in untidy old flannels and a wide-brimmed hat, with a canvas bag slung on his shoulder. He nodded to me, and I thought I had never seen a shrewder or better-tempered face. He leaned his delicate ten-foot split-cane rod against the bridge, and looked with me at the water.

'Clear, isn't it?' he said pleasantly. 'I back our Kenner any day against the Test. Look at that big fellow. Four pounds if he's an ounce. But the evening rise is over and you can't tempt 'em.'

'I don't see him,' said I.
'Look! There! A yard from the reeds just above that stickle.'
'I've got him now. You might swear he was a black stone.'
'So,' he said, and whistled another bar of 'Annie Laurie'.
'Twisdon's the name, isn't it?' he said over his shoulder, his eyes still fixed on the stream.
'No,' I said. 'I mean to say, Yes.' I had forgotten all about my alias.
'It's a wise conspirator that knows his own name,' he observed, grinning broadly at a moor-hen that emerged from the bridge's shadow.
I stood up and looked at him, at the square, cleft jaw and broad, lined brow and the firm folds of cheek, and began to think that here at last was an ally worth having. His whimsical blue eyes seemed to go very deep.
Suddenly he frowned. 'I call it disgraceful,' he said, raising his voice. 'Disgraceful that an able-bodied man like you should dare to beg. You can get a meal from my kitchen, but you'll get no money from me.'
A dog-cart was passing, driven by a young man who raised his whip to salute the fisherman. When he had gone, he picked up his rod.
'That's my house,' he said, pointing to a white gate a hundred yards on. 'Wait five minutes and then go round to the back door.' And with that he left me.
I did as I was bidden. I found a pretty cottage with a lawn running down to the stream, and a perfect jungle of guelder-rose and lilac flanking the path. The back door stood open, and a grave butler was awaiting me.
'Come this way, Sir,' he said, and he led me along a passage and up a back staircase to a pleasant bedroom looking towards the river. There I found a complete outfit laid out for me - dress clothes with all the fixings, a brown flannel suit, shirts, collars, ties, shaving things and hair-brushes, even a pair of patent shoes. 'Sir Walter thought as how Mr Reggie's things would fit you, Sir,' said the butler. 'He keeps some clothes 'ere, for he comes regular on the week-ends. There's a bathroom next door, and I've prepared a 'ot bath. Dinner in 'alf an hour, Sir. You'll 'ear the gong.'
The grave being withdrew, and I sat down in a chintz-covered easy-chair and gaped. It was like a pantomime, to come suddenly out of beggardom into this orderly comfort. Obviously Sir Walter believed in me, though why he did I could not guess. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a wild, haggard brown fellow, with a fortnight's ragged beard, and dust in ears and eyes, collarless, vulgarly shirted, with shapeless old tweed clothes and boots that had not been cleaned for the better part of a month. I made a fine tramp and a fair drover; and here I was ushered by a prim butler into this temple of gracious ease. And the best of it was that they did not even know my name.

I resolved not to puzzle my head but to take the gifts the gods had provided. I shaved and bathed luxuriously, and got into the dress clothes and clean crackling shirt, which fitted me not so badly. By the time I had finished the looking-glass showed a not unpersonable young man.

Sir Walter awaited me in a dusky dining-room where a little round table was lit with silver candles. The sight of him - so respectable and established and secure, the embodiment of law and government and all the conventions - took me aback and made me feel an interloper. He couldn't know the truth about me, or he wouldn't treat me like this. I simply could not accept his hospitality on false pretences.

'I'm more obliged to you than I can say, but I'm bound to make things clear,' I said. 'I'm an innocent man, but I'm wanted by the police. I've got to tell you this, and I won't be surprised if you kick me out.'

He smiled. 'That's all right. Don't let that interfere with your appetite. We can talk about these things after dinner.' I never ate a meal with greater relish, for I had had nothing all day but railway sandwiches. Sir Walter did me proud, for we drank a good champagne and had some uncommon fine port afterwards. it made me almost hysterical to be sitting there, waited on by a footman and a sleek butler, and remember that I had been living for three weeks like a brigand, with every man's hand against me. I told Sir Walter about tiger-fish in the Zambesi that bite off your fingers if you give them a chance, and we discussed sport up and down the globe, for he had hunted a bit in his day.

We went to his study for coffee, a jolly room full of books and trophies and untidiness and comfort. I made up my mind that if ever I got rid of this business and had a house of my own, I would create just such a room. Then when the coffee-cups were cleared away, and we had got our cigars alight, my host swung his long legs over the side of his chair and bade me get started with my yarn.

'I've obeyed Harry's instructions,' he said, 'and the bribe he offered me was that you would tell me something to wake me up. I'm ready, Mr Hannay.'

I noticed with a start that he called me by my proper name.

I began at the very beginning. I told of my boredom in London, and the night I had come back to find Scudder gibbering on my doorstep. I told him all Scudder had told me about Karolides and the Foreign Office conference, and that made him purse his lips and grin.

Then I got to the murder, and he grew solemn again. He heard all about the milkman and my time in Galloway, and my deciphering Scudder's notes at the inn.

'You've got them here?' he asked sharply, and drew a long breath when I whipped the little book from my pocket.

I said nothing of the contents. Then I described my meeting with Sir Harry, and the speeches at the hall. At that he laughed uproariously.
'Harry talked dashed nonsense, did he? I quite believe it. He's as good a chap as ever breathed, but his idiot of an uncle has stuffed his head with maggots. Go on, Mr Hannay.'
My day as roadman excited him a bit. He made me describe the two fellows in the car very closely, and seemed to be raking back in his memory. He grew merry again when he heard of the fate of that ass jopley.
But the old man in the moorland house solemnized him. Again I had to describe every detail of his appearance.
'Bland and bald-headed and hooded his eyes like a bird ... He sounds a sinister wild-fowl! And you dynamited his hermitage, after he had saved you from the police. Spirited piece of work, that!' Presently I reached the end of my wanderings. He got up slowly, and looked down at me from the hearth-rug.
'You may dismiss the police from your mind,' he said. 'You're in no danger from the law of this land.'
'Great Scot!' I cried. 'Have they got the murderer?'
'No. But for the last fortnight they have dropped you from the list of possibles.'
'Why?' I asked in amazement.
'Principally because I received a letter from Scudder. I knew something of the man, and he did several jobs for me. He was half crank, half genius, but he was wholly honest. The trouble about him was his partiality for playing a lone hand. That made him pretty well useless in any Secret Service - a pity, for he had uncommon gifts. I think he was the bravest man in the world, for he was always shivering with fright, and yet nothing would choke him off. I had a letter from him on the 31st of May.'
'But he had been dead a week by then.'
'The letter was written and posted on the 23rd. He evidently did not anticipate an immediate decease. His communications usually took a week to reach me, for they were sent under cover to Spain and then to Newcastle. He had a mania, you know, for concealing his tracks.'
'What did he say?' I stammered.
'Nothing. Merely that he was in danger, but had found shelter with a good friend, and that I would hear from him before the 15th of June. He gave me no address, but said he was living near Portland Place. I think his object was to clear you if anything happened. When I got it I went to Scotland Yard, went over the details of the inquest, and concluded that you were the friend. We made inquiries about you, Mr Hannay, and found you were respectable. I thought I knew the motives for your disappearance - not only the police, the other one too - and when I got Harry's scrawl I guessed at the rest. I have been expecting

you any time this past week.' You can imagine what a load this took off my mind. I felt a free man once more, for I was now up against my country's enemies only, and not my country's law.
'Now let us have the little note-book,' said Sir Walter.
It took us a good hour to work through it. I explained the cypher, and he was jolly quick at picking it up. He emended my reading of it on several points, but I had been fairly correct, on the whole. His face was very grave before he had finished, and he sat silent for a while.
'I don't know what to make of it,' he said at last. 'He is right about one thing - what is going to happen the day after tomorrow. How the devil can it have got known? That is ugly enough in itself. But all this about war and the Black Stone - it reads like some wild melodrama. If only I had more confidence in Scudder's judgement. The trouble about him was that he was too romantic. He had the artistic temperament, and wanted a story to be better than God meant it to be. He had a lot of odd biases, too. Jews, for example, made him see red. Jews and the high finance.
'The Black Stone,' he repeated. 'DER SCHWARZE STEIN. It's like a penny novelette. And all this stuff about Karolides. That is the weak part of the tale, for I happen to know that the virtuous Karolides is likely to outlast us both. There is no State in Europe that wants him gone. Besides, he has just been playing up to Berlin and Vienna and giving my Chief some uneasy moments. No! Scudder has gone off the track there. Frankly, Hannay, I don't believe that part of his story. There's some nasty business afoot, and he found out too much and lost his life over it. But I am ready to take my oath that it is ordinary spy work. A certain great European Power makes a hobby of her spy system, and her methods are not too particular. Since she pays by piecework her blackguards are not likely to stick at a murder or two. They want our naval dispositions for their collection at the Marineamt; but they will be pigeon-holed - nothing more.' just then the butler entered the room.
'There's a trunk-call from London, Sir Walter. It's Mr 'Eath, and he wants to speak to you personally.'
My host went off to the telephone.
He returned in five minutes with a whitish face. 'I apologize to the shade of Scudder,' he said. 'Karolides was shot dead this evening at a few minutes after seven.'

8. The Coming of the Black Stone

I came down to breakfast next morning, after eight hours of blessed dreamless sleep, to find Sir Walter decoding a telegram in the midst of muffins and marmalade. His fresh rosiness of yesterday seemed a thought tarnished.

'I had a busy hour on the telephone after you went to bed,' he said. 'I got my Chief to speak to the First Lord and the Secretary for War, and they are bringing Royer over a day sooner. This wire clinches it. He will be in London at five. Odd that the code word for a SOUS-CHEF D/ETAT MAJOR-GENERAL should be "Porker".'

He directed me to the hot dishes and went on.

'Not that I think it will do much good. If your friends were clever enough to find out the first arrangement they are clever enough to discover the change. I would give my head to know where the leak is. We believed there were only five men in England who knew about Royer's visit, and you may be certain there were fewer in France, for they manage these things better there.'

While I ate he continued to talk, making me to my surprise a present of his full confidence.

'Can the dispositions not be changed?' I asked.

'They could,' he said. 'But we want to avoid that if possible. They are the result of immense thought, and no alteration would be as good. Besides, on one or two points change is simply impossible. Still, something could be done, I suppose, if it were absolutely necessary. But you see the difficulty, Hannay. Our enemies are not going to be such fools as to pick Royer's pocket or any childish game like that. They know that would mean a row and put us on our guard. Their aim is to get the details without any one of us knowing, so that Royer will go back to Paris in the belief that the whole business is still deadly secret. If they can't do that they fail, for, once we suspect, they know that the whole thing must be altered.'

'Then we must stick by the Frenchman's side till he is home again,' I said. 'If they thought they could get the information in Paris they would try there. It means that they have some deep scheme on foot in London which they reckon is going to win out.'

'Royer dines with my Chief, and then comes to my house where four people will see him - Whittaker from the Admiralty, myself, Sir Arthur Drew, and General Winstanley. The First Lord is ill, and has gone to Sheringham. At my house he will get a certain document from Whittaker, and after that he will be motored to Portsmouth where a destroyer will take him to Havre. His journey is too important for the ordinary boat-train. He will never be left unattended for a

moment till he is safe on French soil. The same with Whittaker till he meets Royer. That is the best we can do, and it's hard to see how there can be any miscarriage. But I don't mind admitting that I'm horribly nervous. This murder of Karolides will play the deuce in the chancelleries of Europe.'

After breakfast he asked me if I could drive a car. 'Well, you'll be my chauffeur today and wear Hudson's rig. You're about his size. You have a hand in this business and we are taking no risks. There are desperate men against us, who will not respect the country retreat of an overworked official.'

When I first came to London I had bought a car and amused myself with running about the south of England, so I knew something of the geography. I took Sir Walter to town by the Bath Road and made good going. It was a soft breathless June morning, with a promise of sultriness later, but it was delicious enough swinging through the little towns with their freshly watered streets, and past the summer gardens of the Thames valley. I landed Sir Walter at his house in Queen Anne's Gate punctually by half-past eleven. The butler was coming up by train with the luggage.

The first thing he did was to take me round to Scotland Yard. There we saw a prim gentleman, with a clean-shaven, lawyer's face.

'I've brought you the Portland Place murderer,' was Sir Walter's introduction.

The reply was a wry smile. 'It would have been a welcome present, Bullivant. This, I presume, is Mr Richard Hannay, who for some days greatly interested my department.'

'Mr Hannay will interest it again. He has much to tell you, but not today. For certain grave reasons his tale must wait for four hours. Then, I can promise you, you will be entertained and possibly edified. I want you to assure Mr Hannay that he will suffer no further inconvenience.'

This assurance was promptly given. 'You can take up your life where you left off,' I was told. 'Your flat, which probably you no longer wish to occupy, is waiting for you, and your man is still there. As you were never publicly accused, we considered that there was no need of a public exculpation. But on that, of course, you must please yourself.'

'We may want your assistance later on, MacGillivray,' Sir Walter said as we left.

Then he turned me loose.

'Come and see me tomorrow, Hannay. I needn't tell you to keep deadly quiet. If I were you I would go to bed, for you must have considerable arrears of sleep to overtake. You had better lie low, for if one of your Black Stone friends saw you there might be trouble.'

I felt curiously at a loose end. At first it was very pleasant to be a free man, able to go where I wanted without fearing anything. I had only been a month under the ban of the law, and it was quite enough for me. I went to the Savoy and

ordered very carefully a very good luncheon, and then smoked the best cigar the house could provide. But I was still feeling nervous. When I saw anybody look at me in the lounge, I grew shy, and wondered if they were thinking about the murder.

After that I took a taxi and drove miles away up into North London. I walked back through fields and lines of villas and terraces and then slums and mean streets, and it took me pretty nearly two hours. All the while my restlessness was growing worse. I felt that great things, tremendous things, were happening or about to happen, and I, who was the cog-wheel of the whole business, was out of it. Royer would be landing at Dover, Sir Walter would be making plans with the few people in England who were in the secret, and somewhere in the darkness the Black Stone would be working. I felt the sense of danger and impending calamity, and I had the curious feeling, too, that I alone could avert it, alone could grapple with it. But I was out of the game now. How could it be otherwise? It was not likely that Cabinet Ministers and Admiralty Lords and Generals would admit me to their councils.

I actually began to wish that I could run up against one of my three enemies. That would lead to developments. I felt that I wanted enormously to have a vulgar scrap with those gentry, where I could hit out and flatten something. I was rapidly getting into a very bad temper.

I didn't feel like going back to my flat. That had to be faced some time, but as I still had sufficient money I thought I would put it off till next morning, and go to a hotel for the night.

My irritation lasted through dinner, which I had at a restaurant in Jermyn Street. I was no longer hungry, and let several courses pass untasted. I drank the best part of a bottle of Burgundy, but it did nothing to cheer me. An abominable restlessness had taken possession of me. Here was I, a very ordinary fellow, with no particular brains, and yet I was convinced that somehow I was needed to help this business through - that without me it would all go to blazes. I told myself it was sheer silly conceit, that four or five of the cleverest people living, with all the might of the British Empire at their back, had the job in hand. Yet I couldn't be convinced. It seemed as if a voice kept speaking in my ear, telling me to be up and doing, or I would never sleep again.

The upshot was that about half-past nine I made up my mind to go to Queen Anne's Gate. Very likely I would not be admitted, but it would ease my conscience to try.

I walked down Jermyn Street, and at the corner of Duke Street passed a group of young men. They were in evening dress, had been dining somewhere, and were going on to a music-hall. One of them was Mr Marmaduke jopley.

He saw me and stopped short.

'By God, the murderer!' he cried. 'Here, you fellows, hold him! That's Hannay, the man who did the Portland Place murder!' He gripped me by the arm, and the others crowded round. I wasn't looking for any trouble, but my ill-temper made me play the fool. A policeman came up, and I should have told him the truth, and, if he didn't believe it, demanded to be taken to Scotland Yard, or for that matter to the nearest police station. But a delay at that moment seemed to me unendurable, and the sight of Marmie's imbecile face was more than I could bear. I let out with my left, and had the satisfaction of seeing him measure his length in the gutter.

Then began an unholy row. They were all on me at once, and the policeman took me in the rear. I got in one or two good blows, for I think, with fair play, I could have licked the lot of them, but the policeman pinned me behind, and one of them got his fingers on my throat.

Through a black cloud of rage I heard the officer of the law asking what was the matter, and Marmie, between his broken teeth, declaring that I was Hannay the murderer.

'Oh, damn it all,' I cried, 'make the fellow shut up. I advise you to leave me alone, constable. Scotland Yard knows all about me, and you'll get a proper wigging if you interfere with me.'

'You've got to come along of me, young man,' said the policeman. 'I saw you strike that gentleman crool 'ard. You began it too, for he wasn't doing nothing. I seen you. Best go quietly or I'll have to fix you up.'

Exasperation and an overwhelming sense that at no cost must I delay gave me the strength of a bull elephant. I fairly wrenched the constable off his feet, floored the man who was gripping my collar, and set off at my best pace down Duke Street. I heard a whistle being blown, and the rush of men behind me.

I have a very fair turn of speed, and that night I had wings. In a jiffy I was in Pall Mall and had turned down towards St James's Park. I dodged the policeman at the Palace gates, dived through a press of carriages at the entrance to the Mall, and was making for the bridge before my pursuers had crossed the roadway. In the open ways of the Park I put on a spurt. Happily there were few people about and no one tried to stop me. I was staking all on getting to Queen Anne's Gate.

When I entered that quiet thoroughfare it seemed deserted. Sir Walter's house was in the narrow part, and outside it three or four motor-cars were drawn up. I slackened speed some yards off and walked briskly up to the door. If the butler refused me admission, or if he even delayed to open the door, I was done.

He didn't delay. I had scarcely rung before the door opened.

'I must see Sir Walter,' I panted. 'My business is desperately important.'

That butler was a great man. Without moving a muscle he held the door open, and then shut it behind me. 'Sir Walter is engaged, Sir, and I have orders to admit no one. Perhaps you will wait.'

The house was of the old-fashioned kind, with a wide hall and rooms on both sides of it. At the far end was an alcove with a telephone and a couple of chairs, and there the butler offered me a seat.

'See here,' I whispered. 'There's trouble about and I'm in it. But Sir Walter knows, and I'm working for him. If anyone comes and asks if I am here, tell him a lie.'

He nodded, and presently there was a noise of voices in the street, and a furious ringing at the bell. I never admired a man more than that butler. He opened the door, and with a face like a graven image waited to be questioned. Then he gave them it. He told them whose house it was, and what his orders were, and simply froze them off the doorstep. I could see it all from my alcove, and it was better than any play.

I hadn't waited long till there came another ring at the bell. The butler made no bones about admitting this new visitor.

While he was taking off his coat I saw who it was. You couldn't open a newspaper or a magazine without seeing that face - the grey beard cut like a spade, the firm fighting mouth, the blunt square nose, and the keen blue eyes. I recognized the First Sea Lord, the man, they say, that made the new British Navy.

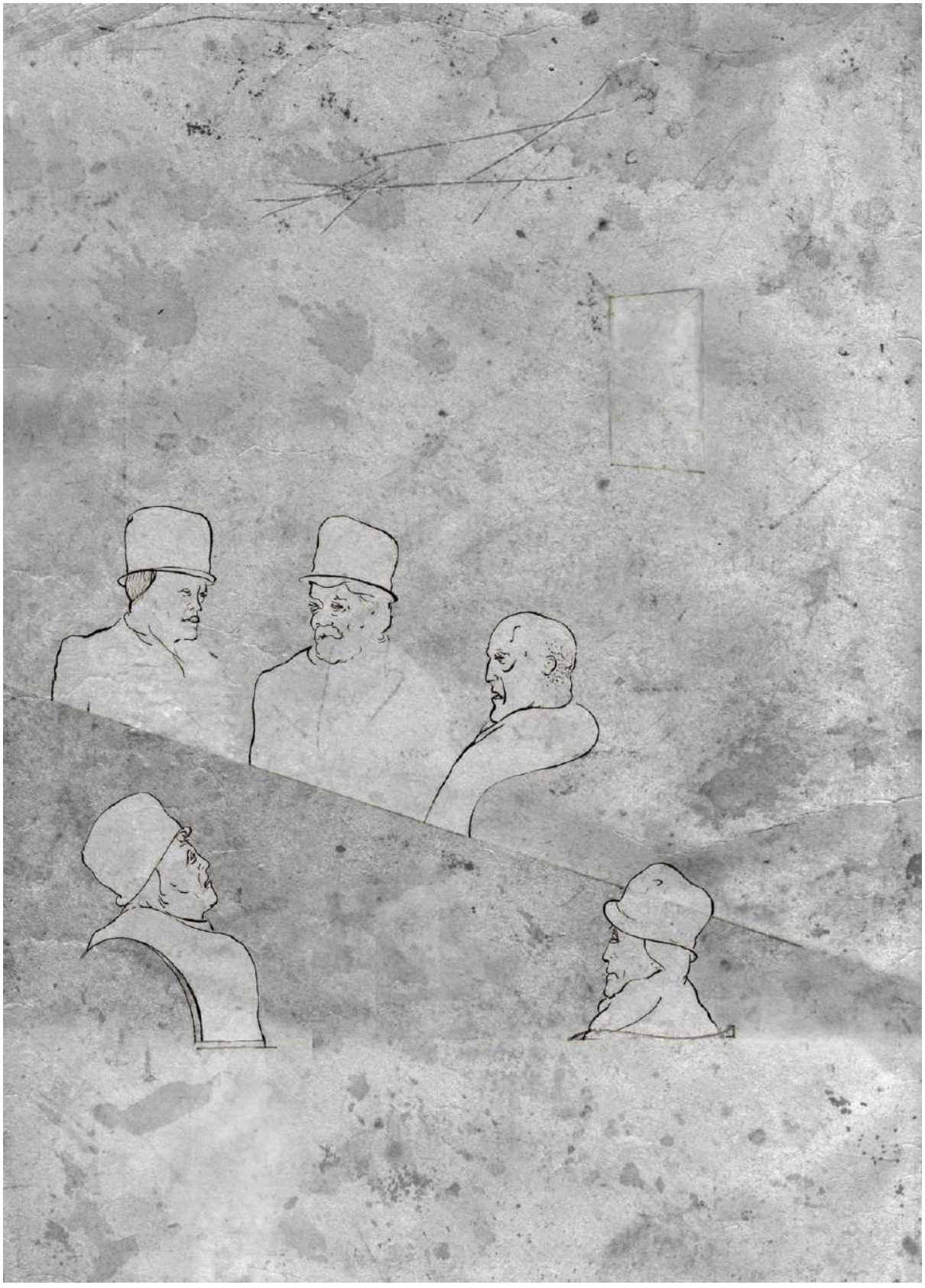
He passed my alcove and was ushered into a room at the back of the hall. As the door opened I could hear the sound of low voices. It shut, and I was left alone again.

For twenty minutes I sat there, wondering what I was to do next. I was still perfectly convinced that I was wanted, but when or how I had no notion. I kept looking at my watch, and as the time crept on to half-past ten I began to think that the conference must soon end. In a quarter of an hour Royer should be speeding along the road to Portsmouth ...

Then I heard a bell ring, and the butler appeared. The door of the back room opened, and the First Sea Lord came out. He walked past me, and in passing he glanced in my direction, and for a second we looked each other in the face.

Only for a second, but it was enough to make my heart jump. I had never seen the great man before, and he had never seen me. But in that fraction of time something sprang into his eyes, and that something was recognition. You can't mistake it. It is a flicker, a spark of light, a minute shade of difference which means one thing and one thing only. It came involuntarily, for in a moment it died, and he passed on. In a maze of wild fancies I heard the street door close behind him.

I picked up the telephone book and looked up the number of his house. We were connected at once, and I heard a servant's voice.
'Is his Lordship at home?' I asked.
'His Lordship returned half an hour ago,' said the voice, 'and has gone to bed. He is not very well tonight. Will you leave a message, Sir?'
I rang off and almost tumbled into a chair. My part in this business was not yet ended. It had been a close shave, but I had been in time.
Not a moment could be lost, so I marched boldly to the door of that back room and entered without knocking.
Five surprised faces looked up from a round table. There was Sir Walter, and Drew the War Minister, whom I knew from his photographs. There was a slim elderly man, who was probably Whittaker, the Admiralty official, and there was General WinStanley, conspicuous from the long scar on his forehead. Lastly, there was a short stout man with an iron-grey moustache and bushy eyebrows, who had been arrested in the middle of a sentence.
Sir Walter's face showed surprise and annoyance.
'This is Mr Hannay, of whom I have spoken to you,' he said apologetically to the company. 'I'm afraid, Hannay, this visit is ill-timed.'
I was getting back my coolness. 'That remains to be seen, Sir,' I said; 'but I think it may be in the nick of time. For God's sake, gentlemen, tell me who went out a minute ago?'
'Lord Alloa,' Sir Walter said, reddening with anger. 'It was not,' I cried; 'it was his living image, but it was not Lord Alloa. It was someone who recognized me, someone I have seen in the last month. He had scarcely left the doorstep when I rang up Lord Alloa's house and was told he had come in half an hour before and had gone to bed.'
'Who - who -' someone stammered.
'The Black Stone,' I cried, and I sat down in the chair so recently vacated and looked round at five badly scared gentlemen.



9. The Thirty-Nine Steps

'Nonsense!' said the official from the Admiralty.
Sir Walter got up and left the room while we looked blankly at the table. He came back in ten minutes with a long face. 'I have spoken to Alloa,' he said. 'Had him out of bed - very grumpy. He went straight home after Mulross's dinner.'
'But it's madness,' broke in General Winstanley. 'Do you mean to tell me that that man came here and sat beside me for the best part of half an hour and that I didn't detect the imposture? Alloa must be out of his mind.'
'Don't you see the cleverness of it?' I said. 'You were too interested in other things to have any eyes. You took Lord Alloa for granted. If it had been anybody else you might have looked more closely, but it was natural for him to be here, and that put you all to sleep.'
Then the Frenchman spoke, very slowly and in good English.
'The young man is right. His psychology is good. Our enemies have not been foolish!'
He bent his wise brows on the assembly.
'I will tell you a tale,' he said. 'It happened many years ago in Senegal. I was quartered in a remote station, and to pass the time used to go fishing for big barbel in the river. A little Arab mare used to carry my luncheon basket - one of the salted dun breed you got at Timbuctoo in the old days. Well, one morning I had good sport, and the mare was unaccountably restless. I could hear her whinnying and squealing and stamping her feet, and I kept soothing her with my voice while my mind was intent on fish. I could see her all the time, as I thought, out of a corner of my eye, tethered to a tree twenty yards away. After a couple of hours I began to think of food. I collected my fish in a tarpaulin bag, and moved down the stream towards the mare, trolling my line. When I got up to her I flung the tarpaulin on her back -' He paused and looked round.
'It was the smell that gave me warning. I turned my head and found myself looking at a lion three feet off ... An old man-eater, that was the terror of the village ... What was left of the mare, a mass of blood and bones and hide, was behind him.'
'What happened?' I asked. I was enough of a hunter to know a true yarn when I heard it.
'I stuffed my fishing-rod into his jaws, and I had a pistol. Also my servants came presently with rifles. But he left his mark on me.' He held up a hand which lacked three fingers.
'Consider,' he said. 'The mare had been dead more than an hour, and the brute had been patiently watching me ever since. I never saw the kill, for I was

accustomed to the mare's fretting, and I never marked her absence, for my consciousness of her was only of something tawny, and the lion filled that part. If I could blunder thus, gentlemen, in a land where men's senses are keen, why should we busy preoccupied urban folk not err also?'
Sir Walter nodded. No one was ready to gainsay him.
'But I don't see,' went on Winstanley. 'Their object was to get these dispositions without our knowing it. Now it only required one of us to mention to Alloa our meeting tonight for the whole fraud to be exposed.'
Sir Walter laughed dryly. 'The selection of Alloa shows their acumen. Which of us was likely to speak to him about tonight? Or was he likely to open the subject?'
I remembered the First Sea Lord's reputation for taciturnity and shortness of temper.
'The one thing that puzzles me,' said the General, 'is what good his visit here would do that spy fellow? He could not carry away several pages of figures and strange names in his head.'
'That is not difficult,' the Frenchman replied. 'A good spy is trained to have a photographic memory. Like your own Macaulay. You noticed he said nothing, but went through these papers again and again. I think we may assume that he has every detail stamped on his mind. When I was younger I could do the same trick.'
'Well, I suppose there is nothing for it but to change the plans,' said Sir Walter ruefully.
Whittaker was looking very glum. 'Did you tell Lord Alloa what has happened?' he asked. 'No? Well, I can't speak with absolute assurance, but I'm nearly certain we can't make any serious change unless we alter the geography of England.'
'Another thing must be said,' it was Royer who spoke. 'I talked freely when that man was here. I told something of the military plans of my Government. I was permitted to say so much. But that information would be worth many millions to our enemies. No, my friends, I see no other way. The man who came here and his confederates must be taken, and taken at once.'
'Good God,' I cried, 'and we have not a rag of a clue.'
'Besides,' said Whittaker, 'there is the post. By this time the news will be on its way.'
'No,' said the Frenchman. 'You do not understand the habits of the spy. He receives personally his reward, and he delivers personally his intelligence. We in France know something of the breed. There is still a chance, MES AMIS. These men must cross the sea, and there are ships to be searched and ports to be watched. Believe me, the need is desperate for both France and Britain.'

Royer's grave good sense seemed to pull us together. He was the man of action among fumblers. But I saw no hope in any face, and I felt none. Where among the fifty millions of these islands and within a dozen hours were we to lay hands on the three cleverest rogues in Europe?
Then suddenly I had an inspiration.
'Where is Scudder's book?' I cried to Sir Walter. 'Quick, man, I remember something in it.'
He unlocked the door of a bureau and gave it to me.
I found the place. THIRTY-NINE STEPS, I read, and again, THIRTY-NINE STEPS - I COUNTED THEM - HIGH TIDE 10.17 P.M.
The Admiralty man was looking at me as if he thought I had gone mad.
'Don't you see it's a clue,' I shouted. 'Scudder knew where these fellows laired - he knew where they were going to leave the country, though he kept the name to himself. Tomorrow was the day, and it was some place where high tide was at 10.17.'
'They may have gone tonight,' someone said.
'Not they. They have their own snug secret way, and they won't be hurried. I know Germans, and they are mad about working to a plan. Where the devil can I get a book of Tide Tables?'
Whittaker brightened up. 'It's a chance,' he said. 'Let's go over to the Admiralty.'
We got into two of the waiting motor-cars - all but Sir Walter, who went off to Scotland Yard - to 'mobilize MacGillivray', so he said. We marched through empty corridors and big bare chambers where the charwomen were busy, till we reached a little room lined with books and maps. A resident clerk was unearthed, who presently fetched from the library the Admiralty Tide Tables. I sat at the desk and the others stood round, for somehow or other I had got charge of this expedition.
It was no good. There were hundreds of entries, and so far as I could see 10.17 might cover fifty places. We had to find some way of narrowing the possibilities.
I took my head in my hands and thought. There must be some way of reading this riddle. What did Scudder mean by steps? I thought of dock steps, but if he had meant that I didn't think he would have mentioned the number. It must be some place where there were several staircases, and one marked out from the others by having thirty-nine steps.
Then I had a sudden thought, and hunted up all the steamer sailings. There was no boat which left for the Continent at 10.17 p.m.
Why was high tide so important? If it was a harbour it must be some little place where the tide mattered, or else it was a heavy- draught boat. But there was no regular steamer sailing at that hour, and somehow I didn't think they would

travel by a big boat from a regular harbour. So it must be some little harbour where the tide was important, or perhaps no harbour at all.
But if it was a little port I couldn't see what the steps signified. There were no sets of staircases on any harbour that I had ever seen. It must be some place which a particular staircase identified, and where the tide was full at 10.17. On the whole it seemed to me that the place must be a bit of open coast. But the staircases kept puzzling me.
Then I went back to wider considerations. Whereabouts would a man be likely to leave for Germany, a man in a hurry, who wanted a speedy and a secret passage? Not from any of the big harbours. And not from the Channel or the West Coast or Scotland, for, remember, he was starting from London. I measured the distance on the map, and tried to put myself in the enemy's shoes. I should try for Ostend or Antwerp or Rotterdam, and I should sail from somewhere on the East Coast between Cromer and Dover.
All this was very loose guessing, and I don't pretend it was ingenious or scientific. I wasn't any kind of Sherlock Holmes. But I have always fancied I had a kind of instinct about questions like this. I don't know if I can explain myself, but I used to use my brains as far as they went, and after they came to a blank wall I guessed, and I usually found my guesses pretty right.
So I set out all my conclusions on a bit of Admiralty paper. They ran like this:
FAIRLY CERTAIN
(1) Place where there are several sets of stairs; one that matters distinguished by having thirty-nine steps.
(2) Full tide at 10.17 p.m. Leaving shore only possible at full tide.
(3) Steps not dock steps, and so place probably not harbour.
(4) No regular night steamer at 10.17. Means of transport must be tramp (unlikely), yacht, or fishing-boat.
There my reasoning stopped. I made another list, which I headed 'Guessed', but I was just as sure of the one as the other.
GUESSED
(1) Place not harbour but open coast.
(2) Boat small - trawler, yacht, or launch.
(3) Place somewhere on East Coast between Cromer and Dover.
it struck me as odd that I should be sitting at that desk with a Cabinet Minister, a Field-Marshal, two high Government officials, and a French General watching me, while from the scribble of a dead man I was trying to drag a secret which meant life or death for us.
Sir Walter had joined us, and presently MacGillivray arrived. He had sent out instructions to watch the ports and railway stations for the three men whom I

had described to Sir Walter. Not that he or anybody else thought that that would do much good.
'Here's the most I can make of it,' I said. 'We have got to find a place where there are several staircases down to the beach, one of which has thirty-nine steps. I think it's a piece of open coast with biggish cliffs, somewhere between the Wash and the Channel. Also it's a place where full tide is at 10.17 tomorrow night.'
Then an idea struck me. 'Is there no Inspector of Coastguards or some fellow like that who knows the East Coast?'
Whittaker said there was, and that he lived in Clapham. He went off in a car to fetch him, and the rest of us sat about the little room and talked of anything that came into our heads. I lit a pipe and went over the whole thing again till my brain grew weary.
About one in the morning the coastguard man arrived. He was a fine old fellow, with the look of a naval officer, and was desperately respectful to the company. I left the War Minister to cross-examine him, for I felt he would think it cheek in me to talk.
'We want you to tell us the places you know on the East Coast where there are cliffs, and where several sets of steps run down to the beach.'
He thought for a bit. 'What kind of steps do you mean, Sir? There are plenty of places with roads cut down through the cliffs, and most roads have a step or two in them. Or do you mean regular staircases - all steps, so to speak?'
Sir Arthur looked towards me. 'We mean regular staircases,' I said.
He reflected a minute or two. 'I don't know that I can think of any. Wait a second. There's a place in Norfolk - Brattlesham - beside a golf-course, where there are a couple of staircases, to let the gentlemen get a lost ball.'
'That's not it,' I said.
'Then there are plenty of Marine Parades, if that's what you mean. Every seaside resort has them.'
I shook my head.
'It's got to be more retired than that,' I said.
'Well, gentlemen, I can't think of anywhere else. Of course, there's the Ruff -'
'What's that?' I asked.
'The big chalk headland in Kent, close to Bradgate. It's got a lot of villas on the top, and some of the houses have staircases down to a private beach. It's a very high-toned sort of place, and the residents there like to keep by themselves.'
I tore open the Tide Tables and found Bradgate. High tide there was at 10.17 P.m. on the 15th of June.
'We're on the scent at last,' I cried excitedly. 'How can I find out what is the tide at the Ruff?'

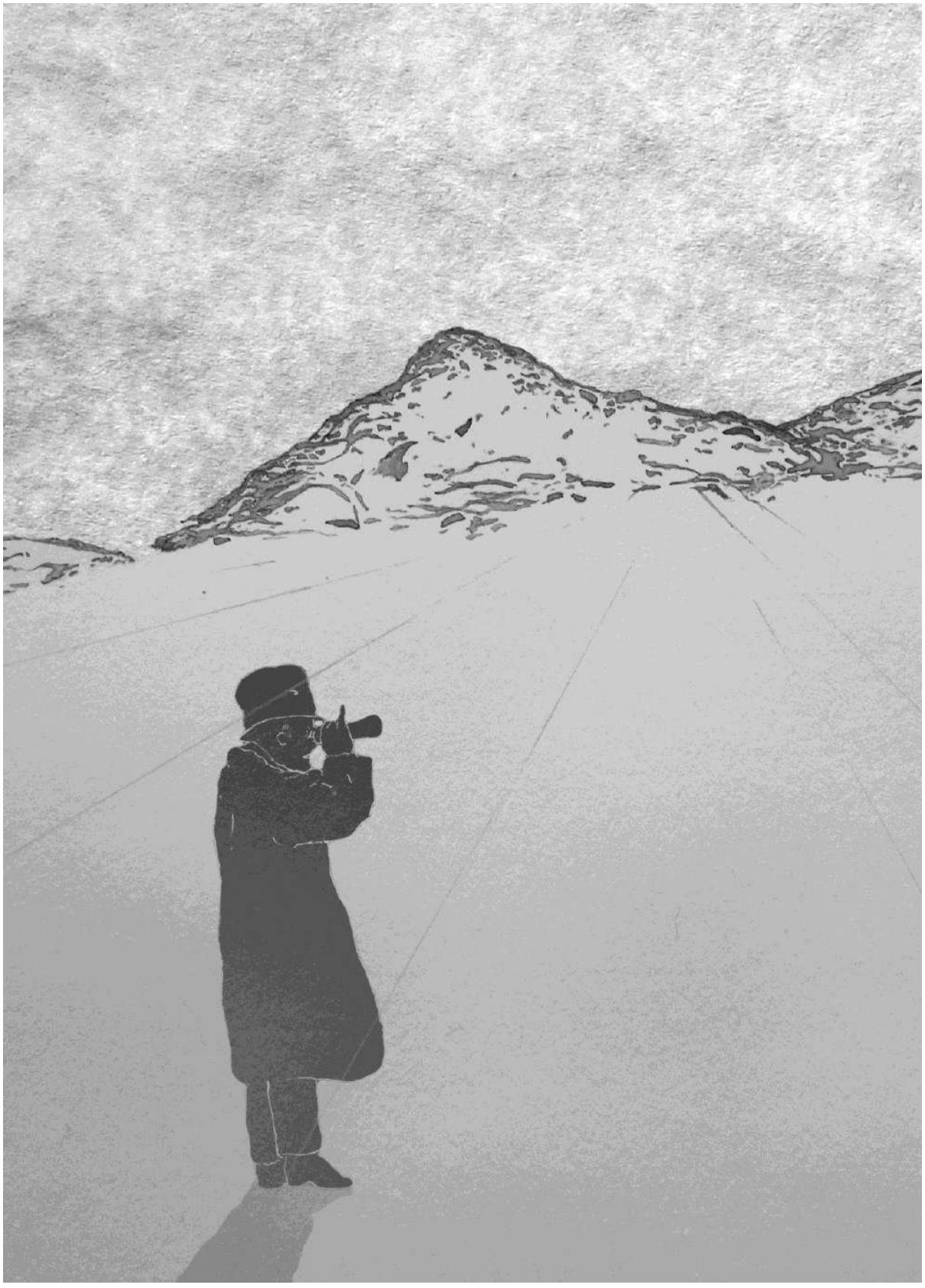
'I can tell you that, Sir,' said the coastguard man. 'I once was lent a house there in this very month, and I used to go out at night to the deep-sea fishing. The tide's ten minutes before Bradgate.'

I closed the book and looked round at the company.

'If one of those staircases has thirty-nine steps we have solved the mystery, gentlemen,' I said. 'I want the loan of your car, Sir Walter, and a map of the roads. If Mr MacGillivray will spare me ten minutes, I think we can prepare something for tomorrow.'

It was ridiculous in me to take charge of the business like this, but they didn't seem to mind, and after all I had been in the show from the start. Besides, I was used to rough jobs, and these eminent gentlemen were too clever not to see it. It was General Royer who gave me my commission. 'I for one,' he said, 'am content to leave the matter in Mr Hannay's hands.'

By half-past three I was tearing past the moonlit hedgerows of Kent, with MacGillivray's best man on the seat beside me.



10. Various Parties Converging on the Sea

A pink and blue June morning found me at Bradgate looking from the Griffin Hotel over a smooth sea to the lightship on the Cock sands which seemed the size of a bell-buoy. A couple of miles farther south and much nearer the shore a small destroyer was anchored. Scaife, MacGillivray's man, who had been in the Navy, knew the boat, and told me her name and her commander's, so I sent off a wire to Sir Walter.

After breakfast Scaife got from a house-agent a key for the gates of the staircases on the Ruff. I walked with him along the sands, and sat down in a nook of the cliffs while he investigated the half-dozen of them. I didn't want to be seen, but the place at this hour was quite deserted, and all the time I was on that beach I saw nothing but the sea-gulls.

It took him more than an hour to do the job, and when I saw him coming towards me, conning a bit of paper, I can tell you my heart was in my mouth. Everything depended, you see, on my guess proving right.

He read aloud the number of steps in the different stairs. 'Thirty- four, thirty-five, thirty-nine, forty-two, forty-seven,' and 'twenty- one' where the cliffs grew lower. I almost got up and shouted.

We hurried back to the town and sent a wire to MacGillivray. I wanted half a dozen men, and I directed them to divide themselves among different specified hotels. Then Scaife set out to prospect the house at the head of the thirty-nine steps.

He came back with news that both puzzled and reassured me. The house was called Trafalgar Lodge, and belonged to an old gentleman called Appleton - a retired stockbroker, the house-agent said. Mr Appleton was there a good deal in the summer time, and was in residence now - had been for the better part of a week. Scaife could pick up very little information about him, except that he was a decent old fellow, who paid his bills regularly, and was always good for a fiver for a local charity. Then Scaife seemed to have penetrated to the back door of the house, pretending he was an agent for sewing-machines. Only three servants were kept, a cook, a parlour-maid, and a housemaid, and they were just the sort that you would find in a respectable middle-class household. The cook was not the gossiping kind, and had pretty soon shut the door in his face, but Scaife said he was positive she knew nothing. Next door there was a new house building which would give good cover for observation, and the villa on the other side was to let, and its garden was rough and shrubby.

I borrowed Scaife's telescope, and before lunch went for a walk along the Ruff. I kept well behind the rows of villas, and found a good observation point on the

edge of the golf-course. There I had a view of the line of turf along the cliff top, with seats placed at intervals, and the little square plots, railed in and planted with bushes, whence the staircases descended to the beach. I saw Trafalgar Lodge very plainly, a red-brick villa with a veranda, a tennis lawn behind, and in front the ordinary seaside flower-garden full of marguerites and scraggy geraniums. There was a flagstaff from which an enormous Union Jack hung limply in the still air.

Presently I observed someone leave the house and saunter along the cliff. When I got my glasses on him I saw it was an old man, wearing white flannel trousers, a blue serge jacket, and a straw hat. He carried field-glasses and a newspaper, and sat down on one of the iron seats and began to read. Sometimes he would lay down the paper and turn his glasses on the sea. He looked for a long time at the destroyer. I watched him for half an hour, till he got up and went back to the house for his luncheon, when I returned to the hotel for mine.

I wasn't feeling very confident. This decent common-place dwelling was not what I had expected. The man might be the bald archaeologist of that horrible moorland farm, or he might not. He was exactly the kind of satisfied old bird you will find in every suburb and every holiday place. If you wanted a type of the perfectly harmless person you would probably pitch on that.

But after lunch, as I sat in the hotel porch, I perked up, for I saw the thing I had hoped for and had dreaded to miss. A yacht came up from the south and dropped anchor pretty well opposite the Ruff. She seemed about a hundred and fifty tons, and I saw she belonged to the Squadron from the white ensign. So Scaife and I went down to the harbour and hired a boatman for an afternoon's fishing.

I spent a warm and peaceful afternoon. We caught between us about twenty pounds of cod and lythe, and out in that dancing blue sea I took a cheerier view of things. Above the white cliffs of the Ruff I saw the green and red of the villas, and especially the great flagstaff of Trafalgar Lodge. About four o'clock, when we had fished enough, I made the boatman row us round the yacht, which lay like a delicate white bird, ready at a moment to flee. Scaife said she must be a fast boat for her build, and that she was pretty heavily engined.

Her name was the ARIADNE, as I discovered from the cap of one of the men who was polishing brasswork. I spoke to him, and got an answer in the soft dialect of Essex. Another hand that came along passed me the time of day in an unmistakable English tongue. Our boatman had an argument with one of them about the weather, and for a few minutes we lay on our oars close to the starboard bow.

Then the men suddenly disregarded us and bent their heads to their work as an officer came along the deck. He was a pleasant, clean-looking young fellow, and he put a question to us about our fishing in very good English. But there could be no doubt about him. His close-cropped head and the cut of his collar and tie never came out of England.

That did something to reassure me, but as we rowed back to Bradgate my obstinate doubts would not be dismissed. The thing that worried me was the reflection that my enemies knew that I had got my knowledge from Scudder, and it was Scudder who had given me the clue to this place. If they knew that Scudder had this clue, would they not be certain to change their plans? Too much depended on their success for them to take any risks. The whole question was how much they understood about Scudder's knowledge. I had talked confidently last night about Germans always sticking to a scheme, but if they had any suspicions that I was on their track they would be fools not to cover it. I wondered if the man last night had seen that I recognized him. Somehow I did not think he had, and to that I had clung. But the whole business had never seemed so difficult as that afternoon when by all calculations I should have been rejoicing in assured success.

In the hotel I met the commander of the destroyer, to whom Scaife introduced me, and with whom I had a few words. Then I thought I would put in an hour or two watching Trafalgar Lodge.

I found a place farther up the hill, in the garden of an empty house. From there I had a full view of the court, on which two figures were having a game of tennis. One was the old man, whom I had already seen; the other was a younger fellow, wearing some club colours in the scarf round his middle. They played with tremendous zest, like two city gents who wanted hard exercise to open their pores. You couldn't conceive a more innocent spectacle. They shouted and laughed and stopped for drinks, when a maid brought out two tankards on a salver. I rubbed my eyes and asked myself if I was not the most immortal fool on earth. Mystery and darkness had hung about the men who hunted me over the Scotch moor in aeroplane and motor-car, and notably about that infernal antiquarian. It was easy enough to connect those folk with the knife that pinned Scudder to the floor, and with fell designs on the world's peace. But here were two guileless citizens taking their innocuous exercise, and soon about to go indoors to a humdrum dinner, where they would talk of market prices and the last cricket scores and the gossip of their native Surbiton. I had been making a net to catch vultures and falcons, and lo and behold! two plump thrushes had blundered into it.

Presently a third figure arrived, a young man on a bicycle, with a bag of golf-clubs slung on his back. He strolled round to the tennis lawn and was welcomed

riotously by the players. Evidently they were chaffing him, and their chaff sounded horribly English. Then the plump man, mopping his brow with a silk handkerchief, announced that he must have a tub. I heard his very words - 'I've got into a proper lather,' he said. 'This will bring down my weight and my handicap, Bob. I'll take you on tomorrow and give you a stroke a hole.' You couldn't find anything much more English than that.

They all went into the house, and left me feeling a precious idiot. I had been barking up the wrong tree this time. These men might be acting; but if they were, where was their audience? They didn't know I was sitting thirty yards off in a rhododendron. It was simply impossible to believe that these three hearty fellows were anything but what they seemed - three ordinary, game-playing, suburban Englishmen, wearisome, if you like, but sordidly innocent.

And yet there were three of them; and one was old, and one was plump, and one was lean and dark; and their house chimed in with Scudder's notes; and half a mile off was lying a steam yacht with at least one German officer. I thought of Karolides lying dead and all Europe trembling on the edge of earthquake, and the men I had left behind me in London who were waiting anxiously for the events of the next hours. There was no doubt that hell was afoot somewhere. The Black Stone had won, and if it survived this June night would bank its winnings.

There seemed only one thing to do - go forward as if I had no doubts, and if I was going to make a fool of myself to do it handsomely. Never in my life have I faced a job with greater disinclination. I would rather in my then mind have walked into a den of anarchists, each with his Browning handy, or faced a charging lion with a popgun, than enter that happy home of three cheerful Englishmen and tell them that their game was up. How they would laugh at me!

But suddenly I remembered a thing I once heard in Rhodesia from old Peter Pienaar. I have quoted Peter already in this narrative. He was the best scout I ever knew, and before he had turned respectable he had been pretty often on the windy side of the law, when he had been wanted badly by the authorities. Peter once discussed with me the question of disguises, and he had a theory which struck me at the time. He said, barring absolute certainties like fingerprints, mere physical traits were very little use for identification if the fugitive really knew his business. He laughed at things like dyed hair and false beards and such childish follies. The only thing that mattered was what Peter called 'atmosphere'.

If a man could get into perfectly different surroundings from those in which he had been first observed, and - this is the important part - really play up to these surroundings and behave as if he had never been out of them, he would puzzle the cleverest detectives on earth. And he used to tell a story of how he once

borrowed a black coat and went to church and shared the same hymn-book with the man that was looking for him. If that man had seen him in decent company before he would have recognized him; but he had only seen him snuffing the lights in a public-house with a revolver.

The recollection of Peter's talk gave me the first real comfort that I had had that day. Peter had been a wise old bird, and these fellows I was after were about the pick of the aviary. What if they were playing Peter's game? A fool tries to look different: a clever man looks the same and is different.

Again, there was that other maxim of Peter's which had helped me when I had been a roadman. 'If you are playing a part, you will never keep it up unless you convince yourself that you are it.' That would explain the game of tennis. Those chaps didn't need to act, they just turned a handle and passed into another life, which came as naturally to them as the first. It sounds a platitude, but Peter used to say that it was the big secret of all the famous criminals.

It was now getting on for eight o'clock, and I went back and saw Scaife to give him his instructions. I arranged with him how to place his men, and then I went for a walk, for I didn't feel up to any dinner. I went round the deserted golf-course, and then to a point on the cliffs farther north beyond the line of the villas.

On the little trim newly-made roads I met people in flannels coming back from tennis and the beach, and a coastguard from the wireless station, and donkeys and pierrots padding homewards. Out at sea in the blue dusk I saw lights appear on the ARIADNE and on the destroyer away to the south, and beyond the Cock sands the bigger lights of steamers making for the Thames. The whole scene was so peaceful and ordinary that I got more dashed in spirits every second. It took all my resolution to stroll towards Trafalgar Lodge about half-past nine.

On the way I got a piece of solid comfort from the sight of a greyhound that was swinging along at a nursemaid's heels. He reminded me of a dog I used to have in Rhodesia, and of the time when I took him hunting with me in the Pali hills. We were after rhebok, the dun kind, and I recollected how we had followed one beast, and both he and I had clean lost it. A greyhound works by sight, and my eyes are good enough, but that buck simply leaked out of the landscape. Afterwards I found out how it managed it. Against the grey rock of the kopjes it showed no more than a crow against a thundercloud. It didn't need to run away; all it had to do was to stand still and melt into the background.

Suddenly as these memories chased across my brain I thought of my present case and applied the moral. The Black Stone didn't need to bolt. They were quietly absorbed into the landscape. I was on the right track, and I jammed that down in my mind and vowed never to forget it. The last word was with Peter Pienaar.

Scaife's men would be posted now, but there was no sign of a soul. The house stood as open as a market-place for anybody to observe. A three-foot railing separated it from the cliff road; the windows on the ground-floor were all open, and shaded lights and the low sound of voices revealed where the occupants were finishing dinner. Everything was as public and above-board as a charity bazaar. Feeling the greatest fool on earth, I opened the gate and rang the bell.

A man of my sort, who has travelled about the world in rough places, gets on perfectly well with two classes, what you may call the upper and the lower. He understands them and they understand him. I was at home with herds and tramps and roadmen, and I was sufficiently at my ease with people like Sir Walter and the men I had met the night before. I can't explain why, but it is a fact. But what fellows like me don't understand is the great comfortable, satisfied middle-class world, the folk that live in villas and suburbs. He doesn't know how they look at things, he doesn't understand their conventions, and he is as shy of them as of a black mamba. When a trim parlour-maid opened the door, I could hardly find my voice.

I asked for Mr Appleton, and was ushered in. My plan had been to walk straight into the dining-room, and by a sudden appearance wake in the men that start of recognition which would confirm my theory. But when I found myself in that neat hall the place mastered me. There were the golf-clubs and tennis-rackets, the straw hats and caps, the rows of gloves, the sheaf of walking-sticks, which you will find in ten thousand British homes. A stack of neatly folded coats and waterproofs covered the top of an old oak chest; there was a grandfather clock ticking; and some polished brass warming-pans on the walls, and a barometer, and a print of Chiltern winning the St Leger. The place was as orthodox as an Anglican church. When the maid asked me for my name I gave it automatically, and was shown into the smoking-room, on the right side of the hall.

That room was even worse. I hadn't time to examine it, but I could see some framed group photographs above the mantelpiece, and I could have sworn they were English public school or college. I had only one glance, for I managed to pull myself together and go after the maid. But I was too late. She had already entered the dining-room and given my name to her master, and I had missed the chance of seeing how the three took it.

When I walked into the room the old man at the head of the table had risen and turned round to meet me. He was in evening dress - a short coat and black tie, as was the other, whom I called in my own mind the plump one. The third, the dark fellow, wore a blue serge suit and a soft white collar, and the colours of some club or school.

The old man's manner was perfect. 'Mr Hannay?' he said hesitatingly. 'Did you wish to see me? One moment, you fellows, and I'll rejoin you. We had better go to the smoking-room.'
Though I hadn't an ounce of confidence in me, I forced myself to play the game. I pulled up a chair and sat down on it.
'I think we have met before,' I said, 'and I guess you know my business.'
The light in the room was dim, but so far as I could see their faces, they played the part of mystification very well.
'Maybe, maybe,' said the old man. 'I haven't a very good memory, but I'm afraid you must tell me your errand, Sir, for I really don't know it.'
'Well, then,' I said, and all the time I seemed to myself to be talking pure foolishness - 'I have come to tell you that the game's up. I have a warrant for the arrest of you three gentlemen.'
'Arrest,' said the old man, and he looked really shocked. 'Arrest! Good God, what for?'
'For the murder of Franklin Scudder in London on the 23rd day of last month.'
'I never heard the name before,' said the old man in a dazed voice.
One of the others spoke up. 'That was the Portland Place murder. I read about it. Good heavens, you must be mad, Sir! Where do you come from?'
'Scotland Yard,' I said.
After that for a minute there was utter silence. The old man was staring at his plate and fumbling with a nut, the very model of innocent bewilderment.
Then the plump one spoke up. He stammered a little, like a man picking his words.
'Don't get flustered, uncle,' he said. 'It is all a ridiculous mistake; but these things happen sometimes, and we can easily set it right. It won't be hard to prove our innocence. I can show that I was out of the country on the 23rd of May, and Bob was in a nursing home. You were in London, but you can explain what you were doing.'
'Right, Percy! Of course that's easy enough. The 23rd! That was the day after Agatha's wedding. Let me see. What was I doing? I came up in the morning from Woking, and lunched at the club with Charlie Symons. Then - oh yes, I dined with the Fishmongers. I remember, for the punch didn't agree with me, and I was seedy next morning. Hang it all, there's the cigar-box I brought back from the dinner.' He pointed to an object on the table, and laughed nervously.
'I think, Sir,' said the young man, addressing me respectfully, 'you will see you are mistaken. We want to assist the law like all Englishmen, and we don't want Scotland Yard to be making fools of themselves. That's so, uncle?'

'Certainly, Bob.' The old fellow seemed to be recovering his voice. 'Certainly, we'll do anything in our power to assist the authorities. But - but this is a bit too much. I can't get over it.'
'How Nellie will chuckle,' said the plump man. 'She always said that you would die of boredom because nothing ever happened to you. And now you've got it thick and strong,' and he began to laugh very pleasantly.
'By Jove, yes. just think of it! What a story to tell at the club. Really, Mr Hannay, I suppose I should be angry, to show my innocence, but it's too funny! I almost forgive you the fright you gave me! You looked so glum, I thought I might have been walking in my sleep and killing people.'
It couldn't be acting, it was too confoundedly genuine. My heart went into my boots, and my first impulse was to apologize and clear out. But I told myself I must see it through, even though I was to be the laughing-stock of Britain. The light from the dinner- table candlesticks was not very good, and to cover my confusion I got up, walked to the door and switched on the electric light. The sudden glare made them blink, and I stood scanning the three faces.
Well, I made nothing of it. One was old and bald, one was stout, one was dark and thin. There was nothing in their appearance to prevent them being the three who had hunted me in Scotland, but there was nothing to identify them. 1 simply can't explain why I who, as a roadman, had looked into two pairs of eyes, and as Ned Ainslie into another pair, why I, who have a good memory and reasonable powers of observation, could find no satisfaction. They seemed exactly what they professed to be, and I could not have sworn to one of them.
There in that pleasant dining-room, with etchings on the walls, and a picture of an old lady in a bib above the mantelpiece, I could see nothing to connect them with the moorland desperadoes. There was a silver cigarette-box beside me, and I saw that it had been won by Percival Appleton, Esq., of the St Bede's Club, in a golf tournament. I had to keep a firm hold of Peter Pienaar to prevent myself bolting out of that house.
'Well,' said the old man politely, 'are you reassured by your scrutiny, Sir?'
I couldn't find a word.
'I hope you'll find it consistent with your duty to drop this ridiculous business. I make no complaint, but you'll see how annoying it must be to respectable people.'
I shook my head.
'O Lord,' said the young man. 'This is a bit too thick!'
'Do you propose to march us off to the police station?' asked the plump one. 'That might be the best way out of it, but I suppose you won't be content with the local branch. I have the right to ask to see your warrant, but I don't wish to

cast any aspersions upon you. You are only doing your duty. But you'll admit it's horribly awkward. What do you propose to do?'

There was nothing to do except to call in my men and have them arrested, or to confess my blunder and clear out. I felt mesmerized by the whole place, by the air of obvious innocence - not innocence merely, but frank honest bewilderment and concern in the three faces.

'Oh, Peter Pienaar,' I groaned inwardly, and for a moment I was very near damning myself for a fool and asking their pardon.

'Meantime I vote we have a game of bridge,' said the plump one. 'It will give Mr Hannay time to think over things, and you know we have been wanting a fourth player. Do you play, Sir?'

I accepted as if it had been an ordinary invitation at the club. The whole business had mesmerized me. We went into the smoking-room where a card-table was set out, and I was offered things to smoke and drink. I took my place at the table in a kind of dream. The window was open and the moon was flooding the cliffs and sea with a great tide of yellow light. There was moonshine, too, in my head. The three had recovered their composure, and were talking easily - just the kind of slangy talk you will hear in any golf club-house. I must have cut a rum figure, sitting there knitting my brows with my eyes wandering.

My partner was the young dark one. I play a fair hand at bridge, but I must have been rank bad that night. They saw that they had got me puzzled, and that put them more than ever at their ease. I kept looking at their faces, but they conveyed nothing to me. It was not that they looked different; they were different. I clung desperately to the words of Peter Pienaar.

Then something awoke me.

The old man laid down his hand to light a cigar. He didn't pick it up at once, but sat back for a moment in his chair, with his fingers tapping on his knees.

It was the movement I remembered when I had stood before him in the moorland farm, with the pistols of his servants behind me.

A little thing, lasting only a second, and the odds were a thousand to one that I might have had my eyes on my cards at the time and missed it. But I didn't, and, in a flash, the air seemed to clear. Some shadow lifted from my brain, and I was looking at the three men with full and absolute recognition.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck ten o'clock.

The three faces seemed to change before my eyes and reveal their secrets. The young one was the murderer. Now I saw cruelty and ruthlessness, where before I had only seen good-humour. His knife, I made certain, had skewered Scudder to the floor. His kind had put the bullet in Karolides.

The plump man's features seemed to dislimn, and form again, as I looked at them. He hadn't a face, only a hundred masks that he could assume when he pleased. That chap must have been a superb actor. Perhaps he had been Lord Alloa of the night before; perhaps not; it didn't matter. I wondered if he was the fellow who had first tracked Scudder, and left his card on him. Scudder had said he lisped, and I could imagine how the adoption of a lisp might add terror.

But the old man was the pick of the lot. He was sheer brain, icy, cool, calculating, as ruthless as a steam hammer. Now that my eyes were opened I wondered where I had seen the benevolence. His jaw was like chilled steel, and his eyes had the inhuman luminosity of a bird's. I went on playing, and every second a greater hate welled up in my heart. It almost choked me, and I couldn't answer when my partner spoke. Only a little longer could I endure their company.

'Whew! Bob! Look at the time,' said the old man. 'You'd better think about catching your train. Bob's got to go to town tonight,' he added, turning to me. The voice rang now as false as hell. I looked at the clock, and it was nearly half-past ten.

'I am afraid he must put off his journey,' I said.

'Oh, damn,' said the young man. 'I thought you had dropped that rot. I've simply got to go. You can have my address, and I'll give any security you like.'

'No,' I said, 'you must stay.'

At that I think they must have realized that the game was desperate. Their only chance had been to convince me that I was playing the fool, and that had failed. But the old man spoke again.

'I'll go bail for my nephew. That ought to content you, Mr Hannay.' Was it fancy, or did I detect some halt in the smoothness of that voice?

There must have been, for as I glanced at him, his eyelids fell in that hawk-like hood which fear had stamped on my memory.

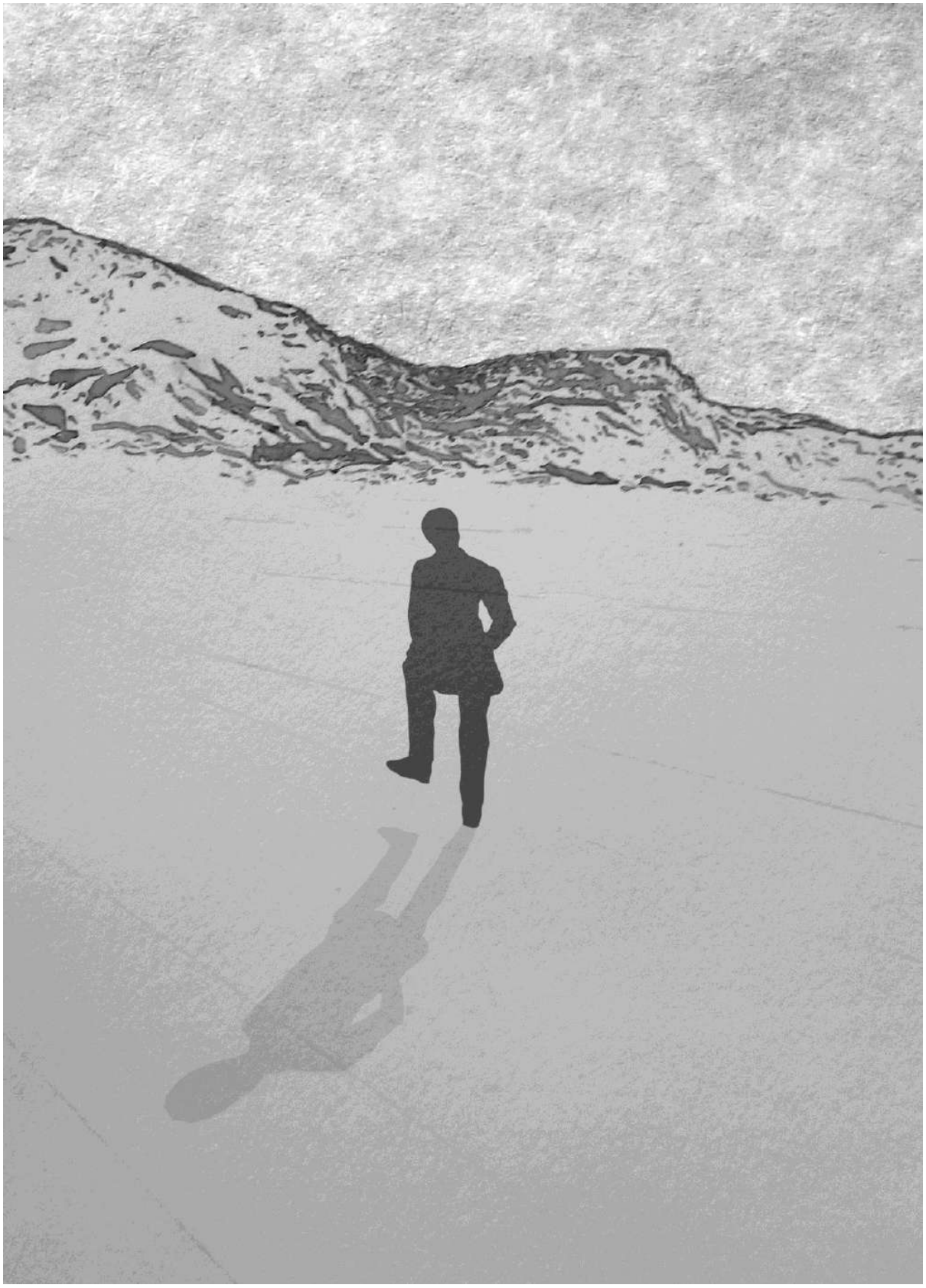
I blew my whistle.

In an instant the lights were out. A pair of strong arms gripped me round the waist, covering the pockets in which a man might be expected to carry a pistol.

'SCHNELL, FRANZ,' cried a voice, 'DAS BOOT, DAS BOOT!' As it spoke I saw two of my fellows emerge on the moonlit lawn. The young dark man leapt for the window, was through it, and over the low fence before a hand could touch him. I grappled the old chap, and the room seemed to fill with figures. I saw the plump one collared, but my eyes were all for the out-of-doors, where Franz sped on over the road towards the railed entrance to the beach stairs. One man followed him, but he had no chance. The gate of the stairs locked behind the fugitive, and I stood staring, with my hands on the old boy's throat, for such a time as a man might take to descend those steps to the sea.

Suddenly my prisoner broke from me and flung himself on the wall. There was a click as if a lever had been pulled. Then came a low rumbling far, far below the ground, and through the window I saw a cloud of chalky dust pouring out of the shaft of the stairway.
Someone switched on the light.
The old man was looking at me with blazing eyes.
'He is safe,' he cried. 'You cannot follow in time ... He is gone ... He has triumphed ... DER SCHWARZE STEIN IST IN DER SIEGESKRONE.'
There was more in those eyes than any common triumph. They had been hooded like a bird of prey, and now they flamed with a hawk's pride. A white fanatic heat burned in them, and I realized for the first time the terrible thing I had been up against. This man was more than a spy; in his foul way he had been a patriot.
As the handcuffs clinked on his wrists I said my last word to him.
'I hope Franz will bear his triumph well. I ought to tell you that the ARIADNE for the last hour has been in our hands.'

Three weeks later, as all the world knows, we went to war. I joined the New Army the first week, and owing to my Matabele experience got a captain's commission straight off. But I had done my best service, I think, before I put on khaki.



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