

***Spies, Planes and Automobiles***  
***An Eleventh Hour/Cambridge Fellows crossover***  
***By Elin Gregory and Charlie Cochrane***

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The car took off, showering Miles with gravel as its narrow tyres fought for purchase on the loose stuff of the road. Miles cursed, his ears still ringing with the shots fired, and lowered Anderson to the ground. "Where are you hit?" He scrabbled at the front of the man's coat, parting the fabric to reveal sodden cloth.

Anderson clutched both hands to his side, panting with the pain of it. "Don't let him get away. Go on. I'll deal with the police."

"You need a hospital, man."

"Flesh wound. Painful, not fatal. First time I've ever been grateful for the extra padding. Get on, Siward. Don't let this be for nothing."

"All right," Miles worked quickly, wadding up Anderson's scarf, pressing it to the wound and closing Anderson's hands over it again. "Just don't die. Naylor will have my guts for garters."

"He'll have your guts for garters if Polzin gets away." He batted Miles hands away. "And so will the police if they catch you dressed like that."

Which was true. Miles got up and darted to retrieve the carefully fabricated files that they had dropped when bullets started to fly. He straightened up when the policeman who had spooked Polzin disentangled himself from his bicycle and shouted a challenge.

"What the dickens ...Miss, what are you doing? Miss, don't you go anywhere."

"Sorry, constable." Miles swung the starting handle then scrambled into the car.

"You stop right there, you cheeky young hussy."

"Government business," Miles yelled and floored the accelerator. A quick look back assured him that Anderson would get the help he needed, but he couldn't risk more. Dust boiled up from beneath his wheels as he went in pursuit of the plume that marked Polzin's progress.

This job had the potential to go belly up from the start. Anderson worked for the Treasury in a more minor role than his talents deserved. He looked like a typical little clerk—soft-bellied, bespectacled, happily married but burdened with the usual debts, aspiring to the usual type of comforts—so it was little wonder that he was approached by one Carl Sorsby, a businessman from Hartlepool, with a proposition that could be to their mutual benefit. In return for letting him know about any lucrative jobs that might be offered for tender Anderson could rely upon a regular and generous payment directly into his bank account, or in cash if he preferred. Anderson could have taken the money and bought Mrs Anderson a new hat and a house in St John's Wood, but he was an honest man with a DCM and Bar in a drawer at home. He'd arrived, shaking with fury, at Broadway House and demanded to see someone who could help him with his problem.

“I’d have sent Sorsby about his business,” Anderson had told Miles on their way to the meeting. “But something didn’t ring true so I looked him up. He has family connections with Sweden, and does a lot of trade there, importing regular shipments of pitch pine, turpentine and rosin out of Norrköping. Who knows what else he’s bringing into the country?”

So for the past six months Anderson had been passing carefully doctored paperwork to Carl Sorsby and the money had been going into one of HMG’s accounts. But then, inevitably, Sorsby had upped the stakes. The information he wanted was far more sensitive and, in return, he had a special gift for Mrs Anderson that he wished to deliver in person.

Which was where Miles came in, dressed to the nines in Vionnet and Ferragamo and driving a car that was, frankly, ridiculous, but whose engine packed a satisfying wallop. The new model Lagonda, snow white with black trim, made short work of Polzin’s lead.

Yes, Sergei Polzin, not Carl Sorsby, readily identifiable despite sober English tweeds and a regal spade beard. Miles and he had met less than a year before under antagonistic circumstances. Maybe Polzin had seen through Miles’s disguise—he had seemed wary even before that inconvenient bobby had turned up—but Miles wouldn’t have expected him to panic, nor the levelled gun and the quick shots that would probably have killed them both if Miles hadn’t returned fire.

Ahead, Polzin had realised he had a pursuer. He braked hard, turned in his seat and fired again, but Miles had no idea what became of the bullet. He accelerated, making a mental apology to the transport department because he’d use the beautiful car as a ram if necessary, and hurtled down on Polzin.

Another shot—this one starred the windshield—then Polzin took off again. He was driving an Austin and Miles remembered another pursuit, this time by night.

“I wish you were here, Briers,” he murmured. Ahead was a narrowing of the road, a stone bridge over a stream. Polzin would have to slow. Miles edged closer, preparing to nudge the smaller car off the road. Then Polzin was swerving wildly, dust billowing up from under his tyres as another vehicle appeared. on the crest of the bridge—a farm cart drawn by two enormous Shires, and beyond it another car. Polzin’s little Austin squeezed past in a shriek of metal on stone but the Lagonda would never make it. Miles had a split second to choose—hit the wall or plough into the great feathered legs of the team.

No choice, really.

###

“Is she dead?” A deep voice. Miles could hear it clearly and suspected he might be able to put a name to it from some deep cavern of memory, but he could neither open his eyes nor respond.

“No, she’s breathing, you clown. Hopefully nothing worse than being out for the count. And a pint of claret down the front of her dress.” Another voice, one that Miles instantly recognised, although what Jonty Stewart was doing here, God alone knew. Unless Miles was dreaming, of course. Or really had died and Dr. Stewart and his colleague—that’s who the other voice must belong to—formed an unusual pair of heavenly ushers. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know. It was that other idiot going far too fast. Worse driver even than you.” The colleague—what was his name again? Wainwright? Copperberg?—sounded beside himself with worry. “We should have gone for the doctor. The car would be quicker than a cart.”

“And leave the farmer here with a team of spooked horses? Have you seen the size of those things or have any idea what sort of damage they could do? Better to look after h— Ah, hello.”

Miles had managed to force his eyes open; there were worse sights to greet a man than Jonty Stewart, even though he must be into his fifties by now. Classically handsome face, high cheekbones, a scar that added rather than detracted from the whole effect. Miles couldn't deny that he'd fancied his tutor during his years at Cambridge and just hoped he hadn't made too much of an exhibition of himself at the time. Although wasn't he making an exhibition of himself now?

“Hello,” he managed. “I don't think anything's broken.”

“Only most of the front of your car.” Stewart, grinning, drew out a handkerchief then applied it to Miles's nose. “And your cover, Miles. Although not as badly as it might have been had I let the farmer perform first aid.”

“Oh.” He morphed Millie's voice into his own; a more nasal version than normal, although he didn't think his nose was actually broken. “Is it so obvious?”

“Only to somebody who admired your Rosalind.” Stewart busied himself with taking Miles's pulse and checking him over. “You remember Siward, don't you, Professor Coppersmith? One of the less vile dunderheads.”

Coppersmith peered closer. “The one who was quite useful at whist. Yes. Is this what they're wearing in London these days?”

“Only when they're involved in Room 40 type stuff. Just as well they didn't ask *you* to get dolled up in a tea frock. You haven't got the legs for one thing. There.” Stewart unbent himself. “Everything seems fine to my untutored eye, although you should get yourself checked over by a doctor, preferably when you're back in something from Ryder and Amies, or wherever you get your suits from these days.”

“No time for that. I'm hot on the heels of the sort of villain who'd make old Owens look like the Archangel Gabriel.” Miles looked ruefully at the wisps of smoke escaping from the car bonnet. “Seems like the pursuit stops here.”

“Nonsense. We've still got the Sunbeam. Professor Coppersmith rarely gets above a matronly speed in it but if we put our foot down she'll fly.” Stewart proffered a hand so that Miles—who'd just noticed that a bullet had passed through one of the points of the Vionnet dress but had somehow managed to avoid both silk stocking and flesh—could alight. “You're a touch too shaken to drive so I'll take the wheel if the professor will get the old girl cranked up?”

Coppersmith, face like thunder and muttering things which clearly didn't concern applied mathematics, took up the starting handle. Maybe the throbbing in Miles's head made him imagine the professor threatening to stick said handle somewhere which would make Stewart's eyes water. The engine burst into life, purring like an overgrown cat, Stewart revved her up and, once Coppersmith was safely back aboard, with a cry of “Tally Ho” from the driver they took off at breakneck speed.

###

The road spooled out ahead between fields busy with the summer haymaking. In the distance the pale plume of dust was dissipating in the breeze. Orlando Coppersmith clamped his hat on his head with one hand and braced himself on the dash with the other. A day that had started out with great promise was turning into a complete mess. Not that any of it was his fault. His driving lesson had been going very well, until the late little

unpleasantness. But it looked like their trip up to Town to take in an exhibition or two and dinner at the Athenaeum would have to be postponed.

“Some idea of where we are going would be useful,” he said, turning a little to try to catch young Siward’s eye. The boy left off adjusting his wrap to hide the blood stains and glanced up. He looked appalling and Orlando prayed that they wouldn’t meet anyone they knew with what looked like an assault victim in the back of the car.

“A little problem there.” Siward leaned forward so they would both be able to hear over the snarl of the engine. Did the cheeky little devil’s gaze linger a little on Jonty’s profile? “I have no idea what my quarry’s plans are. I was there in a support role. The principal was supposed to hand over some carefully doctored papers—you know the type of thing. You can tell a lot about the state of the world by where disinformation resurfaces—but I suspect that the ungodly up ahead had decided to cut his losses and get rid of witnesses. God knows what he had planned. Suicide pact, maybe. But a well meaning bobby turned up on a bicycle and—well, it all got a bit desperate. I shot back but Anderson was hit. Not badly, thank goodness, or I’d never have left him. I shouldn’t be telling you any of this, by the way.”

“You shot back!” If Jonty’s grin had been any bigger the top of his head would have popped off. “Bravo. Did you hit him?”

“I doubt it. He was moving pretty fast.”

“Have you still got your gun?”

“Yes.”

“I say!”

Orlando cleared his throat to bring the two idiots - and what had he ever done to be placed in such a situation? - down to earth.

“I think we’ve got the gist.” He gestured to the road ahead where there were now three little dust clouds. “But my point was that your quarry is far enough ahead for us to have difficulty telling which dust is his and we are approaching a town which means metalled roads. No dust there. Have you any idea where he’s based?”

“Hartlepool, but I think I spotted a case tucked down in his dicky seat. He could be heading for a port. Maybe even an airfield.”

“Or he could dump the car and go on anywhere by train,” Jonty suggested, adding, “Coppersmith, old chap. Is there a Bradshaw in the glove box?”

“Why would there be a Bradshaw? The whole point of travelling in this infernal contraption is to NOT be travelling by train. And besides, I happen to know that the line through Buntingford is just a simple local service, on the half hour which he has missed, so he’d be better off heading for the Great North Road from whence he could get to, well, just about anywhere. Including Hartlepool.”

“I can’t go to Hartlepool like this.” Siward glanced down at his frock with distaste. “I had better find a phone and call in what’s happened.”

“Don’t you dare. We’ll catch the blighter.” Jonty put his foot down and Siward toppled back into the seat with a surprised whoop of laughter.

###

Before they reached the town they reached a decision point.

Somewhere in the dim and distant past, there must have been something jolly important in this vicinity, because four old roads converged on a single place. Ancient man perhaps held flint knapping festivals here, toasting the victor in copious quantities of

Neolithic beer, although now there was nothing to be seen but fields. And four roads, including the one Jonty had just driven up.

"Which way now?" Orlando asked, as they pulled in to make their choice. "Left, right, or blooming centre?"

They'd made up time on their quarry, thanks to a fully loaded haywain, which must have slowed Polzin's progress given the narrowness of the lanes, but which had thoughtfully pulled into a field by the time the pursuit had caught up with it.

"Any clues, Siward?" Jonty peered over his shoulder.

"Hm. I'm pretty certain a car went up the centre road, but there was also signs of movement from the left. Nothing up the right hand side, so eliminate that."

"That eliminated." Jonty revved the engine. "Whither the Great North Road, Professor?"

"Left," Orlando said, decisively. "That would be the logical direction to take. And at the relative speeds we seem to be producing, we should stand a good chance of catching the blighter so long as we can keep on his tail. I'd estimate - what on earth are you up to?" Orlando made a grab for the wheel, one which Jonty successfully fended off before they ended up in a ditch.

"Abandoning logic and using cunning. We think Polzin will head for the main road. If he's guessed we're thinking that, he might have decided to take another route, to shake us off. There's such a maze of lanes around here he could lose us at any point, anyway, so we'll always be relying on luck, and we might as well start right now." Jonty expertly negotiated a bend. "Oh! Did anyone else notice that?"

"Notice what?" Miles shouted from the back.

"The half-fallen branch I so narrowly avoided and which somebody else had hit with a clatter."

"Glass in the road that looked fresh." Orlando suddenly sounded much more enthused. "Just pull in for a moment. It's important."

Miles was expecting his former tutor to argue, but some element in Coppersmith's voice must have indicated the request wasn't to be countermanded. Best to wait and see what was afoot.

"Not just glass." Coppersmith, already out of the car, tracked back up the road. "Oil. If I were to guess, I'd say something sharp flew up from the road around the time of impact, something like this." He turned over a large stone with the toe of his shoe. "Hit a vital part of the machinery. The car's leaking."

"Well spotted." Jonty's appreciative smile tugged at Miles's heart. Just so did Briers look at him, on occasions. Surely this pair couldn't be lovers? Not at their age?

He focussed again on the matter in hand. "Looks like it carries on up the road. Maybe we'll catch up with Polzin quicker than expected."

"Hop in, Professor," Jonty urged. "View halloo and all that."

"No." Orlando, who'd quickly manoeuvred himself in front of the car, stood with arms crossed. "Three versus one in a fast car are odds we could exploit. Polzin would have to drive, shoot and think all at the same time. But if his car fails to proceed and he pulls up, the odds go back into his favour. We could be driving into an ambush."

Excellent point. Miles weighed his gun and his options. "What do you propose?"

"Getting help. Into Buntingford to find a telephone." Coppersmith hopped back into his seat, showing a sprightly turn of pace.

"Let's get about it, then." Jonty turned the car, setting off once more for the four way junction. About a hundred yards on, an Automobile Association patrolman coming in the opposite direction pulled over to let the Sunbeam pass, honouring them with a smart

salute. A shriek of brakes, an oath from Coppersmith - the sort Professors weren't supposed to use - and Miles found himself flung off his seat in an undignified heap.

"What are you up to?" Coppersmith said, bracing himself on the dashboard.

"Using my brains. Ho there!" Jonty caught the patrolman's eye. "Could you just hang on?" He lowered his voice. "Polzin's expecting Miles here, all dolled up like a deb and driving a car. We need a touch of subterfuge."

"What..." Coppersmith's question died on his lips, turning into a broad smile. "Oh, I understand. Very clever. It might just work."

"What's clever?" Miles's head had begun to throb again. "What might work?"

"You'll see."

###

All Miles could say was that Mr Stewart the calm and patient tutor, who had put Miles right on the intricacies of 16<sup>th</sup> century poetic allusion over a cup of Darjeeling and a plate of hot buttered crumpets, was a far cry from this Jonty Stewart, currently shucking his duds in the middle of a sunlit road in a hare-brained scheme to thwart a potential threat to the nation. Miles had always suspected that Stewart had hidden depths—he was reputed to have been a force of nature on the rugby field for instance—and watched in awe as the AA patrolman was persuaded into giving up firstly his bike, then his uniform without a murmur of protest.

The uniform that buttoned a bit tight across the manly Stewart chest made a fair disguise, but the jodhpurs and shiny tall gaiters were positively inflaming.

"So," Coppersmith barked out the word in a way that drew Miles's attention back to business. "While we give chase, you drive the Sunbeam to Buntingford, make your phone calls, check that Anderson received medical attention and make sure that Polzin didn't slip past us and reach a railway station and—"

"For pity's sake, Coppersmith, let's get on." Stewart, astride the motorcycle, revved the engine. "Siward knows what to do and the man will be even further ahead."

The bike purred away, the two academics still wrangling.

"Well, who'd have thought it," the patrolman – whose name he vouchsafed was Jim – remarked. He tilted Jonty's cap to a more rakish angle and gave Miles a very concerned and avuncular look. "I really wish you'd let me drive, Miss. That's a very powerful vehicle, you know, and since you've already crashed one today ..."

"Quite sure I can manage, thank you." Miles gritted his teeth and got the car going with absolute efficiency.

"A little more throttle," Jim said. "Ah, very good. Now into third. You need to be closer to the crown of the road. Mind that pothole."

Miles drove on, dividing his attention between the hazards of the road and the rapidly approaching choice between throttling or crowning Jim first and the subsequent decision of which pothole to plant him in. *How women put up with this all the time, I don't know*, he thought. Followed by the secondary somewhat peevish and ungrateful thought that if he had been in the comfortable tweeds and flannels he wore when on less 'specialised' assignments, he doubted that he would have been so effectively sidelined.

There was a phone at the railway station that Miles could use for a consideration, but he let Jim use it first, leaving him to spout excited exclamations to his office about how he was assisting two gentleman sleuths, while Miles made enquiries at the ticket office about a bearded gentleman with a large case. It appeared that Polzin had not been seen,

which was no more than Miles had expected, and by the time he got back to the office Jim had finished his call.

"They are sending a van for me with a spare uniform. They shouldn't be more than an hour or two." Jim tugged at the hem of his jacket. "So you can have those back then and pass them along to your boss."

"Actually, I have an assignment of my own." Miles was so rattled that he tried to reach into a trouser pocket first, before taking his purse out of his handbag. "Here's ten bob. You should be able to get brown paper and string from the office. Ship them to "Dr J Stewart" although he may be Professor by now as well, of course, "c/o Porter's Lodge, St Bride's College, Cambridge" and then we can both get on. Feel free to keep the change."

"Well I never," Jim muttered and he and the ticket clerk exchanged sympathetic looks while Miles seethed and took the phone off its cradle.

Naylor was not pleased, either. Miles gabbled out a heavily coded version of what had happened and then the thunder broke. Wincing, Miles rested his aching head on his hand and listened until Naylor ran out of breath, then interjected, "Well, sir, and what would you have done in my place?"

"I – er." Naylor took a deep breath. "Yes, I see your point. I suppose you did your best with the resources to hand."

"I did."

"Also, as you are a past student of Mr Stewart, I assume he would be disinclined to take your direction."

"No, sir, but he did take my Browning."

"What?" Naylor sounded shocked. "And you let him? Ah well, with his reputation he's bound to know how to handle it."

"Quite, sir. Anyway, Polzin was last seen heading south towards Thundridge on a series of back lanes. I'm going to take the high road and see if I can cut him off."

"Thundridge. Let me see." Naylor rustled some papers and grunted. "There's a railway station in Ware, a mile or two south of Thundridge. Oh – one of Polzin's past associates was called Dagnell wasn't he? There's a Dagnell's Aviation marked on the map. Place called Cold Christmas, for goodness sake."

"An aeroplane? Good grief. I'll find it, sir. I don't suppose there's any chance of air support?"

"I'll do what I can but no promises." Naylor rustled the papers again. "Are you sure you're up to this, Siward."

"Dear lord, I didn't remove my brain when I put on this skirt, you know!"

"I meant the injuries from the car accident. Also that you're unarmed. Don't be insubordinate, but I'll take that as a yes. Now, get on with it."

Miles put the phone down and turned, his head spinning, then realised that Jim and the ticket clerk were staring. "Oh what?" he snapped, then realised that he had been speaking in his own rather than Millie's voice. "Not a word out of either of you," he snarled and headed for the door.

###

"You look ridiculous in that outfit." Orlando, crammed into the sidecar, clearly had no idea of how ridiculous he looked with his knees almost at his shoulders.

"It wouldn't have fitted you any better. And anyway, you can't drive a motorcycle."

“Hmm.” Orlando snorted, white knuckled hands gripping the edge of the vehicle. “Where did you learn to ride one, anyway?”

“France,” Jonty replied, hoping that would put an end to this particular line of questioning. At first it seemed he’d succeeded.

After a long silence, Orlando said, in a voice that was just a touch too airy, “If you wish, we could discontinue this farce right now. I wouldn’t want to put your life at risk again.”

“I know you wouldn’t. I’ve heard that thought whirring through your brain this last quarter of a mile.” Jonty slowed the vehicle. “If Siward says catching Polzin is important for our country, and that tale he spun us as we sped along in the car suggests it’s vital, then we have to see it through. It’s our duty. And we’ve faced worse, for God’s sake.”

“We have.” Orlando stroked Jonty’s arm; for such a gesture to have been made in public showed his depth of emotion. He drew his hand back and spoke with renewed determination. “I’m certain I can remember how to handle a firearm, although I’m not sure what the two of us can do if Polzin simply abandons the car and tries to escape without a fight. My turn of speed wasn’t what it was. And why have we stopped?”

“For me to admire the view.” Jonty glanced at where Orlando’s ricked up trouser leg provided a glimpse of still shapely ankle. “Perhaps you do have the legs for ‘Millie’s’ sort of get up. Anyway, I believe that leaking car went down this here lane.” He indicated where a narrow road - barely more than a track - set off eastwards.

Orlando peered at the sign, shaking his head in disbelief. “Cold Christmas Lane? Now I know I must be dreaming. I’ll wake in a minute, and all this nonsense with chaps in skirts and you in those ridiculous trousers will be just a memory.”

“I fear things might get more ridiculous still.”

“What on earth do you mean by that?”

“I mean that this day has the potential to be quite extraordinary. And that’s all I’ll say.” Jonty manoeuvred the motorcycle round the tight corner, adjusting his gauntlets and resetting his goggles. “Once more into the - actually,” he slowed the vehicle again, turning to face his partner, “all joking aside, you’re quite right in pointing out that this is a dangerous business. If anything untoward happens today, we shouldn’t forget that this covert war is just as imperative as any overt one. And if anything should happen to me, you must remember that I love you more than any man ever loved a grumpy old Professor of mathematics.”

“I will.” Orlando’s wavering voice belied his stern expression. “If you’ll keep in mind that no man ever loved a capricious, infuriating expert on the sonnets as I have loved you.”

“Good man.” Jonty patted his lover’s shoulder, revved the engine, and set off with appropriate caution. From the amount of oil on the road surface, Polzin’s car must be on its last legs and they could be driving into a trap.

“Ho!” An imperious shout brought Jonty to a screeching halt. “You there! AA man.”

“Yes, sir?” Jonty produced a natty salute and a Mummerset accent.

“Who’s that with you?” The man addressing them had to be Polzin, surely, given both the accent and the dishevelled, windswept clothing.

“He’s my apprentice, sir.” Jonty eased his leg over the bike.

“Apprentice?” Polzin sneered. “Isn’t he too old for that?”

It wasn’t easy to keep a straight face, but Jonty rose to the challenge. “It’s a government scheme, sir. To find employment for old soldiers. Horatio here saw service in the Boer war but he’s been down on his luck. We’re trying to make him employable again.” Jonty ignored the dirty looks Orlando was shooting him.

Polzin waved his hand. "I don't need to hear a hard luck story. I need you to mend my automobile."

"Do that be the one that's been a-leaking oil this last two miles?" Maybe that was overdoing the accent.

"Yes. Go and see what you can do with it."

###

The high road south from Buntingford had been as clear of obstruction as one could hope for, bearing in mind the busyness of this season in the farming year. Miles had his foot down most of the way and the road was wide enough to pass the heavy wains drawn by sweating teams of horses. He only had one real hold up, where two such vehicles had paused so the drivers could have a chat, and he'd made up time since. Even the lanes, once he had turned off, had been clear. According to the map he was a scant quarter mile from the area marked as Dagnell's Aviation so he parked the car out of sight just inside a field, armed himself and got out to investigate on foot. His costume wasn't ideal for even a short hike across country, but needs must.

"Throckmorton is going to kill me," Miles muttered as he picked his way across the tussocky ground. "Cream kidskin from Ferragamo isn't designed to come into contact with cow shit."

Sound travelled well in the still hot air. Not a trace of an aircraft, but he thought he had made out the throaty purr of a motorcycle engine somewhere over to the west. Slowly it approached, giving him some hope that perhaps he and Naylor had guessed correctly. Dagnell was a common name in this area but that Polzin had worked with a Dagnell before seemed too much of a coincidence.

Ahead the hedge thinned. Miles peered cautiously through the hawthorn branches and nodded with satisfaction. There was the airfield and a biplane was on the tarmac with three men fossicking around it. Milers assumed they were doing pre-flight checks and one seemed anxious. Twice in the space of a few minutes he looked down towards the lane then checked his watch.

"What shall I do?" Miles looked at his own watch. There were several options. He could go back to the car, drive it out of the field and block the lane with it so Polzin couldn't get through. Polzin had surely only seen the Sunbeam for a moment so might not recognise it and there had been a great coat on the back seat that Miles could wear to cover up his clothing. Pretending he'd had a breakdown might give him a chance to get the drop on the man. Or Miles could go onto the airfield and try to disrupt the preparations for departure, might even be able to disable the aircraft. Distressed young females tended to be viewed with less suspicion. He might be able to get close enough. Alternatively, he could get back onto the road, wait at a place where Polzin would have to slow down and throw a rock at the boulder. He had seldom wished anything as much as he wished he'd been able to keep hold of his gun.

A sudden absence of sound made him tilt his head, ears straining. The motorcycle had stopped.

"Oh well," Miles said, and felt in his pocket for a coin to toss. There wasn't one. Not just no coin, no pocket in this outfit. He'd have to rummage in his handbag and that would be a bloody waste of time and effort.

A sudden noise of metal on metal made Miles go scrabbling for another peek at the aeroplane, but nobody was belting the thing with a hammer. Or indeed belting anything with anything, so the noise couldn't be coming from the airfield. Somewhere not too far

away somebody was making one hell of a racket and, given that he'd not passed any properties this last mile, there was every chance said racket was coming from Jonty Stewart, pretending to mend a motor car and probably making a dog's breakfast of it.

Miles carefully made his way towards the noise, which appeared to be coming from near the little bridge over the river, although given the open nature of the ground it could be coming from a long way distant. He managed to obtain a decent vantage point on a piece of high ground - ideal for defending the river crossing if he'd had a gun - but couldn't spot any figures, be they disguised experts on the sonnets or not. He'd have to get closer, but that would involve crossing the bridge and then *he'd* be in full view.

Another noise - a distant drone this time - caught his attention. A plane, somewhere in the far distance, but steadily approaching. Coming to rescue Polzin? But wasn't that Dagnell's role? Perhaps the other plane was no more than a coincidence, more evidence of the skies becoming as thickly populated as the roads. For the moment he'd better sit tight and await developments, which of all the things in life was the one he was least good at.

###

"Do you actually know what you're doing?" Polzin, pacing impatiently to and fro, had halted by the open bonnet.

"Ah," Jonty replied, rubbing his forehead and leaving a smear of oil, "there's a world of difference between knowing what the problem is - which I do - and making a proper job of righting it, which is how I'm trying to work out seeing as we don't have an inspection pit."

"So what *is* the problem?" Polzin, arms crossed, tapped his foot.

Orlando, tired of simply standing around passing tools to Jonty when required, said, "It's leaking oil."

Polzin shot him a withering glance. "Even I know that."

"Excuse him, sir. He copped a packet in the side of his head and it's left him a bit..." Jonty finished the sentence by mouthing, "soft in the wits."

Orlando, silently fuming, resolved to have his revenge at the first opportunity. Assuming they got out of this alive.

"Then I ask you," Polzin addressed Jonty, "what is the problem?"

"Well, you've had a rock go through here." Jonty pointed into the depths of the engine. "It's what we call - mechanics' slang, of course - the Plugstreet circuit. Not left a big hole or you'd have hardly gone a quarter mile, but that's not the really tricky bit. As your oil drained out it's left your engine struggling. Mending that's the challenge."

"So, it will take time?" Polzin scowled down at the partially dismantled engine.

"Well, yes, I rather think it will, sir."

"And time is short. I do not have time to wait for you to make the repair." Polzin bent a telling glance at the motorbike. "While you work on the car perhaps your apprentice could take me and my baggage on to the airfield. Dagnell's. Do you know it?"

"Could probably find it on a map, sir," Jonty offered.

"No," Polzin pointed to the motor. "You mend the machine. The apprentice can find it. It can't be far."

"I'll look now." Orlando agreed and fished a map out of the capacious pocket in the sidecar. He cast a glance at the Browning pistol they had commandeered from young Siward but left it in place for the moment. He couldn't help but feel that Polzin might be more inclined to shoot than he was and as long as they were slowing the man down and preventing him from leaving they were doing a useful job. He opened the map across the front of the sidecar and made a palaver of running his finger along the route they had taken.

There was Buntingford, there was Thundridge and here was - oh yes, an airfield. Surely no more than a few furlongs. In fact ...

"Can you hear a plane?" Polzin demanded and shaded his eyes, looking to the west.

"I can." And it provided the ideal distraction for Orlando slipping the pistol into his pocket.

###

High above the airfield a biplane tilted its wings, flashing in the sunlight as it began to describe a wide circle. On the airfield the men around the plane had paused in their work. From their gestures they were not expecting anyone to drop in on them so Miles was cautiously hopeful that this was the support that Naylor had promised. One, a sturdy chap in pilot's coveralls, pointed to the grounded aircraft and the others nodded then began to make their way across to the gate. Going to see what had caused the clanging sound, Miles guessed, while Mr Coveralls carried on fuelling up. This would be the best chance he'd get.

A few minutes' patience and the other two fellows were out of sight. Miles took a deep breath and hurried along the hedge line to find a gap where he could push through without being seen. A rustle from deep cover made him startle then a high voice said, "Hello."

Miles stared into the shadows of the hedge and saw the last thing he had expected - a small bespectacled child, stick and string in one hand, jam jar in the other, with magnificently grubby knees.

"Hello," the child said again. "Hey mister. Why are you wearing a frock?"

Well, that was mortifying. On the other hand, Miles hadn't exactly been Millie-ing it up so there was little point on protesting. "I lost a bet," Miles said. The child nodded as if that was a perfectly reasonable explanation. "And I'm going to lose another one if I don't get onto that airfield."

"Coo, you don't want to go there." The child rolled his eyes. "Not less you want a clip 'round the ear."

He was speaking from experience if Miles was any judge. "Then I'd better go alone. Are you going fishing? You could go to the bridge and keep look out for me if you like."

"Are you a copper or somefing? Like Bulldog Drummond? On'y Bulldog Drummond wouldn't wear a frock."

"No, he doesn't have the legs for it," Miles agreed, adding *the lucky bastard* under his breath. "I have to go. If you keep watch I might be able to fix it for you to have a look at the aeroplane later?"

"Really?" The child gave him the sort of look that suggested he was used to adults forgetting their promises. "There's a stile, over there near the hanger."

"Thank you. You're a Trojan." Miles gave the grubby object a thumbs up and ran. The stile was rickety so Miles swung over the most stable of the fence posts and darted into the shadows behind the little hanger. Rusting corrugated iron felt hot against his shoulder as he edged along it to the corner. The chap in coveralls was stooping over the edge of the cockpit so Miles took the opportunity to whisk around the corner and into the darkness of the hanger.

Another plane, partially dismantled, stood beside a flatbed lorry and a bicycle was propped to one side of the door. There was also a desk and chair. Miles made haste to flick over the paperwork on the desk top then investigated the desk drawers.

"Thank you, God," he muttered as the cold butt of a revolver settled comfortably into his palm. It was a very similar model to the one in the kitchen drawer at home and it

was the work of a moment to pop open the cylinder and check that it was loaded. Miles drew in a deep breath, set aside the fact that his head was aching abominably and that he felt an absolute fool, and let all his worries and misgivings go.

"I say!" The man leaning into the cockpit jumped as though he had been goosed. Miles gestured with the hand not holding the gun concealed amongst his skirts. "I had a little accident with my car. I don't suppose you have such a thing as a phone?"

"Fraid I don't, Miss." Coveralls jumped down from the wing and slid his hand into his pocket in a way that might have seemed casual except that Miles had already spotted the weight bagging the material there. "The pub in the village is your best bet. There's a footpath - over there, see."

"Oh please." Miles levelled the revolver at Coveralls favourite belly. "Hands where I can see them and step away from the plane."

"What?" Coveralls chuckled. "You'll not shoot me, Miss."

"One day someone will actually take my threats seriously," Miles muttered and gave the man time to claw the weapon out of his pocket, just to be fair, just to be sporting, before opening fire. "See, told you so. Oh shut up. You're not badly hurt."

Actually there was rather a lot of blood. Miles took the gun away from him anyway and marched him to the hangar where he made him lay flat on his back holding the damaged limb elevated. But first Miles shot away the wires controlling the plane's rudder.

"You fucking harpy," Coveralls spat.

"Look at it this way." Miles slipped the spare gun into his handbag and waved the other. "This fucking harpy is the only person available to stop you bleeding to death. So show us your first aid kit, there's a good chap."

###

The sound of a shot - ringing out the other side of the bridge - would normally have occasioned more interest than it did in this instance, but Jonty and Orlando had their hands rather full. Quite literally in Orlando's case, his having both his mitts tightly gripped around somebody's collar.

He could just about recall the sequence of events that had led him from hovering by the partly dismantled car, wondering if he could square his conscience with shooting Polzin in cold blood, to being involved in what the much lamented Mrs. Stewart would only have described as a brawl.

He remembered Polzin becoming agitated about the distant aeroplane, and muttering something about Dagnell having too many of his own ideas. He also remembered two chaps appearing from between the trees the far side of the little river, although he'd been slightly distracted at the time, not by the trousers tightly enclosing - and enhancing - the curve of Jonty's backside, but by the spanner which Jonty had dropped with a great clatter and over which he was effing and blinding in a manner unbecoming of any Automobile Association employee.

By the time he'd managed to alert Jonty to the fact these two newcomers were heading in their direction, he'd twigged that Polzin was making subtle signals at them. Orlando had tightened his grip on the gun and gestured at Jonty to pick up the spanner, which was probably the best weapon he could lay hands on.

There'd been time also for some swift calculations about probabilities. If he winged Polzin, would the man produce a gun of his own and finish the pair of them off? If he killed Polzin outright would the two approaching men themselves produce firearms? They hadn't appeared to be armed with anything more than a crowbar and a large spanner, but Orlando

couldn't rely on that. Unless he could dispose of all three before any of them returned fire, he'd have been putting Jonty's life at risk and that was a risk not worth taking.

"What's that there idiot in the airplane doing?" Jonty shielded his eyes against the sun as he scanned the horizon.

"Disobeying orders," Polzin had muttered. He'd evidently not noticed what Orlando had - that Jonty, with spanner in hand, was inching closer to the motorcycle.

Suddenly the two men had broken into a run, shouting and brandishing their weapons, while Polzin leapt onto the motorcycle and started it up. Orlando grabbed the starting handle of Polzin's car, standing shoulder to shoulder with Jonty who'd dropped the Mummerset accent, put on a broad grin and whispered, "Just like the sacred band. Only I fancy my chances more against this pair than I'd have done against Alexander."

"What about Polzin? He's getting away."

"We'll leave him to fortune. We're going to have our hands full."

At that point everything had happened rather too quickly for Orlando's liking, even quicker and more confusing than going over the top had been. He'd taken an almighty swipe at a chap who had twenty years on him but lacked a vital six inches in height, allowing Orlando to connect with the man's shoulder blade. The impact felt surprisingly satisfying, like putting in a huge tackle on a particularly nasty opposition lock forward. The rugby pitch analogy seemed apt given that the man landed a vicious kick to Orlando's shin as he crashed to the ground.

A second blow - one Orlando felt temporarily guilty about because he'd always been taught not to hit a man when he was down but his leg was agony - disabled the opponent entirely, which might have left Orlando free to pursue Polzin had not the second man been getting the better of Jonty.

In the process of landing a mighty whack to his assailant, Jonty's spanner had slipped from his hand, as a result of which he was fending off blows with only the mechanic's tool bag. Incensed didn't begin to describe Orlando's reaction, nor could any words encompass the overwhelming desire he felt to throttle the life out of the swine. Even Orlando's perennially dodgy Achilles' tendon couldn't stop him taking a flying leap at the man, jolting the crowbar from his hand just as it was about to land on Jonty's arm.

At this point the distant shot rang out, although it didn't bring Orlando to his senses the way a frantic, "Steady on there, Professor C!" from Jonty did. He relaxed his grip, allowing the natural colour to return to his victim's face.

"Are you hurt?"

"Just a few aches." Jonty rubbed his left arm vigorously. "I wonder who let that shot off? I don't think it was close enough for Polzin."

"No. I - here! Stop!" Orlando watched in horror as the first man he'd tackled - who'd been all this time nursing his arm and catching his breath - began a dash towards the bridge. "Oof!" He fell back, into Jonty's normally welcome arms, as the other ruffian pushed him off and joined his colleague at a lick.

Jonty fended Orlando off, took a deep breath and with a "Gone aw-ay-ay!" set off in pursuit. He'd been a handy scrum half in his youth - swashbuckling, the local paper had described him as - and he could still put on a turn of speed, so long as it was only over a short distance. And while he wasn't gaining on their quarry, the other men weren't getting away. With great delight, Jonty saw one of them stumble just as he reached the rise of the bridge, clattering onto the road surface with an impressive string of oaths. To his fellow ruffian's credit, the chap returned to help haul his mate onto his feet, but the delay had been enough to let the hunt catch up.

Jonty, head down, launched into the midriff of the man who'd attacked him, knocking the chap off his feet and against the low parapet of the bridge.

"No! Stop!" The chap whose shoulder Orlando had whacked was waving his handkerchief in surrender.

"Over there, then. Next to your friend." Orlando thought of wagging his pistol to encourage co-operation, but the command alone seemed to have been enough. The man scuttled crab-like towards the other side of the bridge, before suddenly launching himself at Orlando, hands grabbing at his throat.

"Now that's not cricket." Jonty gave his lover's assailant a swift kick in the back of the knee, hard enough for his leg to buckle and let Orlando get back on the front foot. And, before his own opponent could take advantage of his distraction, Jonty thrust his hands under the man's shoulders and spun him over the parapet. The resultant, deeply satisfying splash, was accompanied by a distant shout of, "Hurray! 'E's fallen in the water," although who was celebrating Jonty couldn't say. If it was a heavenly choir they certainly needed some elocution lessons.

He watched with satisfaction as Orlando made short work of their treacherous opponent, pinning the man on the floor. The heavenly chorister greeted that with a whistle, one that faded abruptly as a far off scream of pain rent the air.

"Somebody's in real trouble," Jonty remarked, sickened to the stomach. "I hope it isn't Miles."

###

It wasn't. The scream had been part of Coveralls discovering that while Miles was effective at first aid, he wasn't gentle and that a bullet in the arm produced a sensation stronger than just smarting a bit.

"Scotland," he shrieked. "I was flying him to Scotland."

"Big place, Scotland," Miles pointed out. He was applying pressure to the wound to stem blood flow, just as he had been shown in his first aid and battlefield medicine classes. He had also been shown how helping someone with just the right degree of brutal efficiency could be an effective interrogation technique. He tightened his grip over the wad of rags he had applied to Coveralls' forearm and began to wind a bandage.

"Leith," the man yelped. "There's a boat. The Bråviken Star. Leaves at dawn. Oh God, stop."

"The bleeding *is* stopping. Now, you were paid to take Polzin there. Anything else?"

"Polzin? Who's Polzin? I was taking Sorsby. Aagh, you bitch."

Miles glanced towards the door to the hanger as he heard the purr of the motorbike approaching. "Call me what you like. If you haven't told me what I need to know by the time that motorbike stops you'll be dealing with someone who'll make your eyes roll back in your head." Not to suggest that Dr Stewart's lectures had been boring to Miles, but he did know students who had found them hard to handle.

"Just Sorsby, I swear. Plus some baggage he was bringing with him. That's all. I don't know anyone called Polzin. I just flew Sorsby where he needed to go. Carried urgent goods and packages sometimes."

"Then if that's all, you can pour your heart out to the authorities and get back to work - as soon as this heals. Meantime, I'll just tie this off and ..."

The motorbike engine cut off and Miles saw it coast to a halt as the stocky bearded rider leaped from the saddle and scampered towards the plane. "Can Sorsby fly?"

"He was learning, miss."

“Bugger it all to hell.” Miles finished the knot, arranged his patient so the injured arm was supported then got up and ran. Polzin spun the prop with strength born of panic and scrambled up onto the wing. “Get down from there you stupid bastard,” Miles howled, but Polzin was already in the seat and the plane was juddering across the sheep-cropped grass of the runway, the ruined rudder wobbling. So he’d be unable to steer properly, but all Polzin had to do was get airborne. A couple of miles, a rough landing and a stolen car and he’d be clean away.

No wonder women didn’t fight like men; surely it was less to do with their physical attributes than their clothes. How could you run in heels? Miles managed to get in position to take a pot shot just as the plane’s wheels left the turf, but to no avail.

“Bugger it all to hell with a red hot poker!” He took one more shot, sighting along the barrel with braced arms, but the bird had flown. “*Vrag ti kosti glodao*,” he added because English didn’t seem quite enough to express his utter fury. Polzin’s plane climbed steeply and the machine that had been circling the field swooped in pursuit, but what could it do other than follow?

What a fucking mess. Taken alive Polzin could have been encouraged to tell what he knew, dead and his knowledge would be lost but he’d be no further threat. Alive - well, who knew what mischief he could still do. Miles doubted that poor Anderson had been the only usefully placed clerk on Polzin’s payroll. All Miles could do was pray that the measures he’d taken to disable the plane were enough and that nobody else had been harmed. Naylor was going to tear a strip off him for making such a cock-up of things. Worse than that, he imagined a string of awful events that *must* have happened to his old tutor. Dr Stewart would never have let his man get away so easily, would he? Not without paying the ultimate price.

Miles swore again as he felt his eyes prickle then tore his hat off and kicked it, no longer worried if he was keeping up a ladylike persona. At least the tears would look feminine.

“Hey mister!”

Miles span round to see the grubby imp haring across the airfield.

“You missed a lovely fight.” The child, almost barrelling into Miles, stopped to catch his breath. “There was these two young blokes and these two old blokes and the old blokes didn’t arf give them what for.”

“Did they? *Did they?*” The import of the words sunk in. “You mean the older blo - men are all right?”

“Yeah. It was super. Oooh, is that a gun? Can I shoot someone with it?”

“No, you can’t, you little monster. But there’s a man in the hangar that I shot a bit ago.”

“Ooh izzee dead?”

“Might be. Why don’t you go and see?”” Miles grinned at him then they both looked up as a most unexpected sound rattled across the airfield.

Polzin’s plane was spiralling out of control as the other plane swooped in for another run. That metallic staccato surely couldn’t be a machine gun? Perhaps, because its target puffed out a plume of black smoke and dipped sharply towards the trees edging the airfield.

“Hey, why not go see the man in the hangar?” Miles interposed himself between the child and the falling plane. “He was saying so many bad words!”

“Really?” The kid wavered, torn between watching a plane crash and the possibility of learning some really juicy swear words, then skipped off towards the hanger. Miles took a deep breath, watched the frail craft crumple into a tangle of fabric and timber - there was no walking away from that landing - and went to meet the other pilot.

The plane taxied towards the hangar and pulled up, the prop slowing to a stop.

###

“Lift your leg up a bit. Higher.”

“I am not a contortionist.” Orlando snorted. “Can’t we find a gate?”

“We could but how long would that take us? There’s something going on and I want to see what it is.” Jonty made another attempt at launching himself over the fence, managing to straddle the top of it, then sat swinging his legs, smirking. “I’m shorter than you. If I can manage, you can.”

“You forget I’m carrying an injury from that fracas.” Orlando stepped back three paces, ran, jumped, placed both hands on the top of the fence and flipped himself to the other side. “Happy now?” he asked, rubbing his thigh.

“I will be when I’m sure that Miles is safe.” Jonty hopped off his perch and headed towards the hangars. “You’ve got the gun, have you?”

“Yes. And I’ll use it if need be.”

“Good man. Can you - lummy!”

All the palaver with the fence had proved such a distraction that they’d not noticed the pair of planes until they were almost overhead. So close overhead the slipstream practically knocked them off their feet.

“What the hell’s going on?” Orlando broke into a run, following the line one of the planes had taken towards the runway. The other couldn’t be followed, not unless he leaped into the trees.

“I hope that’s Polzin’s plane.” Jonty gestured towards the plume of black smoke. “Poor sod.”

Orlando shuddered. “Who’s in the other one? One of Miles’s colleagues?”

“I have no idea. Let’s go and find out.”

The other biplane had landed safely by the time they reached Miles’s side; the mystery concerning the pilot would provide a welcome diversion from Jonty fussing over his protégé and ensuring he was unharmed.

“Who’s the ‘ace’, Miles?” Orlando asked.

Miles, shrugging, shaded his eyes. “Don’t know yet but one of ours, I should think.”

“Best keep your weapon to hand, just in case he isn’t.” Orlando gripped his gun, watching the pilot descended from the cockpit. The outfit he wore seemed a touch outlandish, but his gait struck a chord of recognition. Only when the mystery man began to remove his helmet - providing a glimpse of a neatly trimmed beard on mahogany skin - did the penny drop.

“Well, who’d have thought it?” Jonty, breaking into a huge grin, took Miles’s arm to steer him towards the plane. “Miles. Millie. Do you remember the one and only Dr. Panesar?”

“Dr. Panesar? Of course.”

Panesar bowed over Miles’s proffered hand. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of this young lady’s acquaintance.”

“You have, old thing,” Jonty clapped the man’s shoulder, “but it’s a long story, one which can wait until we know how in heaven’s name you got here.”

“That’s simple.” Panesar smoothed his pepper and salt hair. “All the airfields on the East of England have been on high alert today. Some chap likely to be on the run and needing intercepting. I’d already taken off from Duxford when word came through that the balloon had gone up. They asked me to...take action.”

"Why ask you?" All trace of femininity had long gone from Miles's voice.

"Ah, you're not the only one who hides his light under a bushel. Or in your case under Vionnet and Ferragamo." Orlando, delighted that he knew something Jonty's protégé didn't, savoured the words. "Every man at St. Bride's has served his country in the best way they can. And when you're a mechanical genius, as Dr. Panesar is" - he didn't specify 'a mechanical genius who's nearly blown the university to kingdom come on three occasions we know of' - "you serve among wings and wires."

Jonty patted his lover's arm. "Very poetic."

A patter of young footsteps bearing down on them broke the mood of mutual admiration.

"That man in the hangar," the child announced, "says a lot of good words. Very loudly. Is that your plane, mister? Can I go up in it?"

Dr. Panesar bent an avuncular eye upon the grubby child and beamed. "A flying enthusiast. And what might your name be young man?"

"Michael. But you can call me," he struck a pose, "The Shadow."

Miles put a hand on Michael's shoulder. "All right, Shadow-

*The Shadow.*"

"All right, *The Shadow*, let me know where you live and I'll arrange something, but I believe that this gentleman needs to be somewhere else."

"Indeed," Panesar inclined his head in a regretful nod. "I have been asked to deliver anyone involved in this affair to - a place of safety where they may be properly questioned. Dr Stewart, Professor Coppersmith, so nice to see you both having fun."

"Enormous amounts of it, and," Jonty checked his watch, "if we get a wiggle on we might have time to get to Town and change in time for dinner."

Orlando gave that suggestion the approval it deserved and soon the injured man was loaded into the plane, Panesar was in the air and he and Jonty were strolling down to where Siward swore he had left the Sunbeam.

It was neatly parked in the shade, and a careful check over proved that, for a wonder, it had suffered no additional damage. Orlando resumed his position behind the wheel and as soon as the engine caught they were off.

"Well," he said once they were back on the London road, "that was interesting, but I'm glad it's over."

Jonty sighed, his chin on his shoulder as he looked back to where a faint plume of smoke was still rising above the sunlit countryside. "Yes, it was an entertaining afternoon. But I can't help feeling a little guilty about leaving Siward to cope with a 'plane wreck, a corpse, a nine year old *and* an AA man's motorcycle."

His mind filled with uncomfortable memories of the attention Siward had been paying to the fount of all Orlando's delight, he fudged a gear change and scowled as the engine raced. "The SIS wouldn't be employing him if he wasn't a coper," he growled.

"True," Jonty turned and gave him one of his best smiles. "I'm looking forward to our evening."

Orlando smiled too and the next gear change went smoothly. "So am I." After all, Siward might look but it was him that Jonty would be dining with, and Jonty with whom he'd be doing his duty. And not for king and country this time.