

Title

Nevil Shute

Marazan

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About this eBook

“Marazan” by Nevil Shute

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MARAZAN

Author's Note

This was the first of my books to be published, and in reissuing it after twenty-five years of obscurity I feel that it may interest young writers if I put down a few reflections about it. It was published when I was twenty-seven years old, and it was preceded by two novels which were quite unpublishable, because everybody has to learn his trade. It was written in the evenings while I was working at Crayford in Kent on the preliminary design of the airship R.100, as chief calculator, or mathematician. The whole book was written through from start to finish three times, so that it took me about eighteen months.

So much is published in this modern age about murder, detection, and prison that a young writer who has yet to learn the nature of drama tends to turn to these threadbare subjects for his story and I was no exception. I don't think I knew a great deal about any of them. The aircraft scenes were built up from my experience with the de Havilland Company in its very earliest days. The character of Philip Stenning derived from half a dozen pilots of that Company's Air Taxi service: in those pioneering days of civil aviation pilots had to be tough.

In spite of its immaturity the book got good reviews. I think it sold about 1,200 copies. In revising it for publication I have struck out a few outmoded expressions, such as "topping" and "ripping", which I suppose were current at that time, but I have made no other alterations.

Nevil Shute

The Sons of Martha

It is their care in all the ages to take the buffet and cushion the shock,
It is their care that the gear engages, it is their care that the switches lock.

Rudyard Kipling

Chapter One

It began in June. I was one of the pilots of the Rawdon Air Taxi Service then; as everyone knows, a civilian pilot, like a dramatic critic, is merely a young man who is too lazy to work for a living. I claim no exception. I had nobody to think for but myself; in those circumstances I didn't see that it mattered much how I earned my living so long as there was plenty of it, and the work not too hard. Moreover, I was a pretty good pilot in those days. I was thirty-two years old that June, and making an income of just under a thousand a year for an average two-hour day. I used to play Rucker for the Harlequins and was making some progress with my golf, though I was never so near to the Amateur Championship as I thought I was. For the rest, I had a small bachelor flat off Maida Vale, and led about as dissolute a life as was consistent with keeping reasonably fit.

I came down from Manchester that afternoon at the conclusion of a photographic tour. It was a Wednesday, I remember, and a very hot day. I flew all the way in my shirtsleeves with my arms bare to the elbow, and without a helmet. Even so I was hot. The air was very bumpy so that we had a rough trip; from time to time I would look back at the photographer in the rear cockpit, white to the gills and retching and heaving every time we hit a bad one. I wasn't sorry to see him like that again; for a fortnight I had been cooped up with the wretched little man in indifferent hotels. If the devil had flown away with him I could have borne up under the blow, I think. Rather he than I.

We got to London at about three in the afternoon. There was thunder about down there; great masses of cumulus were rolling up from every point of the compass, heavy-looking and pink at the edges. It grew more bumpy than ever. I wasn't at all sorry to be home; it had grown suddenly cold, for one thing, and I wanted my coat. I had a thirst on me that I wouldn't have sold for a fiver. I looked forward along the long bow of the machine to the familiar hangars and the aerodrome as I put her on the glide down to land; Collard had got his car out on the grass of the aerodrome in front of the Pilots' Office and was tinkering with the engine. To announce my arrival I opened out my engine again and dived on the car; he looked up and waved an oilcan at me. I passed within a few yards of him, zoomed up again and finished with an Immelmann turn at the top for the sake of that wretched photographer. Then I throttled again, came round in a wide sweep, side-slipped her in over the hedge, and put down gently on the grass by the hangars.

I got out of the machine, cross and tired. I was as deaf as a post through flying without a helmet, and I felt as though my eyes were full of oil. I was shivering. The ground felt as heavy as lead. I'd had a pretty thick night the night before. Annesley had turned up in Manchester and had produced a couple of Flossies; before the night was out we'd done Manchester pretty thoroughly - dealt faithfully with the town. If there was a low dive in the place that we hadn't been in, Annesley didn't know it.

I handed the machine over to the mechanics, swore at the photographer, collected the log-books, got all my stuff out of the rear cockpit, carried the lot across to the Pilots' Office and dumped it all on the floor.

"Had a good trip?" asked Collard.

I told him in a low monotone, while I sorted out my stuff upon the floor and put on a cardigan, what I really thought about my trip, Manchester, the machine, and the photographer. He heard me to the end, and then -

"Been missing his Kruschens again," he observed. "What you want is a holiday."

I stood up and let fly. "If you think I'm going to take a ruddy holiday," I said, "just because Mr ruddy Collard thinks I want my Kruschens, you're barking up a rocking-horse like the puppy." Then I saw he'd got a Bass there, and I remembered I was thirsty. "Give that here," I said. "I'll show you what to do with that." There was a short struggle before I put him on the

ground and got it away from him; there was no corkscrew and I cut my lip against the broken neck of the bottle.

While I was trying to stop the bleeding and thinking what a rotten world it was, the office girl came down to the hut.

"Mr Morris wants to see you in his office, Captain Stenning," she said.

I mopped at my lip and turned to Collard. "If he wants me to do another job of work today," I said, "he can go and - " but the child was there. Then I followed her out of the hut and up through the works to the main office.

I never really got to know Morris, though I quarrelled with him every week. He was Chief Pilot and Technical Editor and Lord High Everything Else in the Rawdon firm. He was one of those lean, saturnine fellows that go about with an air of "I keep myself to myself, damn you." He was a pretty good sort in his own way. A married man; he lived in a house overlooking the aerodrome. I believe he married money.

I went into his office and found him at his desk. "Afternoon, Stenning," he said. "How d'you get on up north? I've got another job for you - want you to take a machine down to Devonshire this evening."

"Damn it," I said. "I've only just come back."

He raised his head and looked at me like a corpse, so that I knew that there was trouble coming.

"Well," he said quietly. "You're going away again."

It was poisonously hot. I could hear thunder rumbling in the distance, but the rain still held off. The air was close and heavy in the office, so that I was sweating and sorry I had put on my cardigan.

"I'm ruddy well not going away again today," I said. "I'll go first thing tomorrow morning, if you like. At dawn."

"That won't do," he said. "You've got to start from there tomorrow morning at dawn, to take the passenger first to Liverpool and then back here. I'm sorry, but the machine's got to go down tonight."

I laughed shortly. "You're going to be unlucky," I said. "I've done three and a half hours' flying today, and I'm tired. You work us too hard, Morris. I'm fed up with it. Besides, you haven't got a machine to send."

"You can take the one you've had up north," he said.

"You can leave me out of it," I replied hotly; "as for the machine, she's due for overhaul in three hours' more flying time, and from what you say this will be an eight hours' job. And the engine's running rough - damn rough."

"Are you putting in a formal complaint about the engine?" he said.

The first drops of rain splashed heavily on the window-sill. I could see that he was getting me into a corner, but couldn't for the life of me see how to get out of it.

"No," I said. "It's no worse than some of the engines I've had to fly since I've been here."

He disregarded that. "You can refuse this job on medical grounds if you feel you aren't fit," he said. "In that case I shall take the machine myself. You know that won't count against you."

"Damn it," I said sullenly, "you know I'm not as bad as that. But you work us too hard, Morris - by God you do. It's going to be a perfectly filthy evening for getting down west."

"If you call three and half hours' flying a day's work," he replied, "I don't. But there it is. You can take it or leave it."

At that I lost my temper. "I'll take it," I said. "But you don't give us a square deal, Morris. You don't play fair. I'll do the job - but I'll tell you this much. I'll take the machine down empty, but if you wanted me to carry passengers this evening I'd turn it down. Now that's straight. Where have I got to go?"

He looked at me doubtfully for a moment. "Are you sure you're fit?" he said.

"If I wasn't I should send in one of your ruddy pink forms," I said irritably. "Come on. What have I got to do?"

He turned to the map on the wall. "You'll go to Westward Ho!" he said, "and put down on the golf links for the night. And, for Heaven's sake, keep off the greens."

I turned on him. "Damn it - you know it wasn't I who went over that green."

"Didn't say it was," he replied. "What I said was - don't. The passenger is Sir Arthur Bardsley, who is staying at Carew Hall, near Northam. You'll report to him, or there may be a message at the club house for you. In any case, I understand he wants to make a start soon after dawn."

Well, that was that. I took my instructions, got my ticket, and stalked out of the office in as vile a temper as any I've ever been in. I wasn't particularly annoyed with Morris; one couldn't help liking the man, and he certainly did work like a nigger to put the show on a dividend-paying basis. No, oddly enough the man I really was annoyed with was Collard for suggesting that I could do with a holiday. The worst of it was that I knew that it was true. For a long time I had been burning the candle at both ends to a greater extent than was altogether healthy, and lately there had been warnings that I should have been a fool to disregard.

"Things can't go on like this," I muttered sullenly, as I walked down to the Pilots' Office. At the same time, I didn't see any real reason why they shouldn't.

I saw the foreman of the mechanics and told him to get the machine filled up again, and then I telephoned for my tea. Then I went to look at the oil, my latest venture. There is not much left now in France of the stuff that was taken over there for the war, but Collard, having occasion to land near some little French village that had been behind the line, had discovered fifty barrels of (alleged) motor lubricating oil mouldering in a pasture. I went into it with him, and we were engaged in tentative negotiations for buying the lot at a price that worked out at a little over a halfpenny a gallon. It certainly had the viscosity of oil, but it was far too light in colour to attract a purchaser; in these circumstances Collard was trying the effect of various pigments in an endeavour to turn it into such a colourable imitation of good oil as to catch some poor simp up from the country and sting him for at least a shilling a gallon. After all, in most motor-car engines the function of the oil is to wash the heat away from the bearings, and for that this oil would probably do as well as any other liquid.

There was a little pan of it there. I dipped my finger in the oil and drew a little picture on the wall in the style that Collard finds amusing. I laughed at it myself, then went out on to the aerodrome and found the rigger ball and started punting it about in the rain. Then my tea came. By the time I'd finished that, a mechanic was in the hut to tell me that the machine was ready; I told him to get her started up and began to look for my leather coat.

By the time I was togged up it was half past four; I had none too long if I was to get my job done before dark. The flight down there would take me over three hours against the stiff westerly wind; after that I should have to find a car and drive it to Bideford to collect fifty gallons or so of petrol, return to the links and fill up the machine. Besides that I should have to report myself at Carew Hall and find myself something to eat and - if the gods were kind - a bed. It was still raining in buckets; the clouds had thickened up and come lower and the barograph showed the glass dropping a little bit - not much. It looked perfectly beastly outside; in any other circumstances I would have put off starting for half an hour. There was none too much time, however, and I felt that, having indulged in the luxury of speaking my mind to Morris, it was up to me to carry the job through without quibbling. So I started.

I felt better when I was in the machine. The rain and the wind had cooled the air and freshened up things a bit. I ran the engine up, waved the chocks away, and moved over to the lee hedge to take off. I have been flying for over ten years and one would expect by now to be getting a little stale, a little tired of it. Yet as I swung her round into the wind that day in the

rain and saw the aerodrome stretching away in front of me, misty and very wide, I felt as strongly as ever the queer indescribable charm of this piloting, the feeling that I should never entirely give it up.

At the same time, I knew that I was very tired.

Then I opened her up and went rolling over the grass and into the air. I never waste much time in getting on my course; ten feet up I swung her round through forty degrees with one wing tip steadily balanced eighteen inches above the grass. Before I was out of the aerodrome I was on my course and climbing steadily as I headed just about due west.

I didn't climb far before I hit the clouds. They were down to six hundred feet or so; I went trundling out over Buckinghamshire at about that height and wished I was in the Long Bar of the Troc, as I might have been but for Morris. Cross-country flying at any time is boring; cross-country flying in the rain can be perfectly devilish. Sometimes I while away the time by writing letters in pencil on a block strapped to my knee, and in a machine with a good windscreen one can always smoke. But in the rain when the clouds force one down to within five hundred feet of the ground one must keep so much on the alert for a possible forced landing that letter-writing becomes impossible. And a cigarette gets wet and comes to pieces in the wind.

All went well as far as High Wycombe, though the clouds were gradually forcing me lower, so that by the time I was over the town I was down to three hundred feet. I could see the Chilterns ahead of me; it proves how low I was that I could distinctly mark the rise of the ground by Dashwood Hill. The clouds seemed to be sitting right down on top of the hills; for a moment I hesitated, and thought of turning away south and following the line of the hills till I hit the Thames and the railway at the Pangbourne Gap. But it was out of my direct course and time was short enough as it was; I could tell by my time to High Wycombe that there must be a stiff southwesterly wind against me. Looking back upon that decision now, I can hardly realize the effect that it had upon my life. As it was, I looked at my watch, swore, and went on.

I came to the hills about three miles south of the Oxford road. The rain had eased off to a drizzle, but the clouds hung so low upon the hills that I was forced down to within a hundred feet of the treetops. Even at that I was flying through wisps of cloud so thick that I could only see the ground immediately below me. The air was terribly bumpy.

Then there came to me what I suppose comes to every pilot sooner or later, whether he be good or bad. The sweet, rhythmic drone of the engine faltered. There was a moment's screaming, and in an instant the whole bag of tricks had gone to glory and was shaking the machine as a terrier shakes a rat. At the first hint of trouble I had jerked back the throttle, a stream of boiling water came spurting down the fuselage and over the windscreen, and I sat dithering at every leap of the engine and wondering if it was going to stay in the fuselage or tear away the bearers and fall out. I had seen that happen once. The machine came down like a falling leaf, turning over and over so fast that the pilot must have been unconscious long before he hit the ground.

In a second or two the vibration began to die away; I swung the machine round in an S turn back on my tracks. Immediately below me there was a small field in the middle of the woods, or rather two fields divided by an iron railing that ran across the middle. It was an impossible place for a landing; a field that nobody in his senses would dream of trying to put down in under normal circumstances. As the matter stood, however, and at the height I was, it was either the field or the treetops. I chose the field.

I made a mistake there, though in equal circumstances I think I should probably do the same again. When I was an instructor, I used to put that very case to my pupils; I had a little speech that I used to make to them. In case of doubt, I used to say, choose the trees, because they're soft. If you put down on the treetops, I would say, you won't hurt yourself and the

machine may be repairable. If you stall in trying to get into the little field beyond the trees the machine will be a write-off and you'll probably be dead.

That's what I used to tell my pupils. In the event, though, one can never overcome a natural reluctance to crashing the machine. If there is a possible chance of getting down undamaged one will always take it, no matter what the risk. Before I fully realized what I was doing I had swung round and was judging my distance for the final turn that would bring me close over the railings into the larger of the two little fields.

I still think that if I had been myself I might have pulled it off. But I was tired; I had flown round the Midlands on photographic work that morning, and then down from Manchester. And Manchester itself - well, I suppose Manchester had something to do with it too. Certainly I made a mess of that forced landing. It was a bad show. I missed the railing by four feet instead of four inches, at a speed of fifty miles an hour instead of forty-two. After that I hadn't a chance. We were nearly into the far hedge and the wood before I could put her on the ground. I swung her round violently in an attempt to miss the wood. She rose from the ground again, cart-wheeled over on one wing tip, and fell heavily on her back.

I can't say that I have a very clear recollection of what happened during the next ten minutes. I was conscious for most of the time, I think, but my memory of the incidents has become blurred with pain. I wasn't strapped in, and as she went over I grabbed at my seat to prevent myself from being thrown out. As it was, I was chucked half out of the cockpit and crashed my head down on to the padded edge of the instrument board. Then the machine turned right over on her back, and the ground came up and pushed me back into the cockpit again upside-down. I remember a keen, agonizing pain in my neck, and then I think I went off for a little. Very likely I was stunned.

I came to myself pretty soon, however. Petrol was running over the seat of my trousers and soaking through my clothes up to my waist; I think it was the cold of it that revived me. I was crammed into the cockpit upside-down, with my shoulders in the grass; I was pretty far gone, I suppose. I remember wondering how soon it would be before anyone found the machine, or if anyone had seen us come down. I knew that I wasn't going to last long in that position.

It was evident that if I was to get out I must act quickly, before I became unconscious again. I could feel the weight of the machine pressing me down into the grass. I got one arm free above my head, summoned all my energy, and with a violent heave managed to lift the machine a little. The movement dislodged my weight; my legs fell down in the cockpit and my body shifted sideways; the machine lurched a little and collapsed on to me again, pinning me in the cockpit.

Then I got my feet drawn up against the floor of the cockpit and tried to raise the machine that way. Again I raised her a little, and again she seemed to hesitate, swung, and collapsed on me again.

That was my last effort. In the new position I could not use either hand to free myself; if I had had the full use of my hands, though, I doubt if I could have got out. The thundering in my head grew terrific.

That, so far as I was concerned, was the end.

I think it was the pain in my neck that roused me again, that and the change of position as I rolled out of the cockpit on to the grass like a hermit crab when you touch the end of his shell with a cigarette. Somebody had lifted the tail of the machine and, there being nothing to hold me in the cockpit, I had tumbled out on to the grass. I lay where I had rolled; I couldn't move, and at first I couldn't see. Then I began to pick up my surroundings, the woods and the hurrying clouds racing past above. At last somebody came and rolled me over and unfastened my helmet and my collar, and began feeling me all over for broken bones.

Finally, I sat up and discovered that apart from the necessity of holding my head on with

both hands I had come out of it with very little damage. I tried to get up without letting go of my head, and started falling about like a puppy.

"I'd take it easily for a bit if I were you," said somebody.

I turned painfully towards the voice. "I must have done it a bit of no good," I said vaguely. "Is the machine a write-off?" And then I managed to look at him.

"Good God!" I said weakly.

He wasn't a bad-looking fellow but for his clothes; a slight, dark-haired man of about my own age. As for the clothes, I've never happened to wear them myself because - for some obscure social reason - when I did my month it was in the second division.

I never really regretted that month. For one thing, the importance of a term of imprisonment depends entirely on the circle in which one moves, and my circle was never exalted. Moreover, I think it was worth it. It came as the result of a very pleasant little evening after a show at one of those places in Jermyn Street; there were about half a dozen of us there, all pilots. It was one of the best little suppers I've ever been at. Everyone was comfortably full but nobody made a pig of himself; it was funny without being vulgar, and this much I can truthfully say, that none of the girls went home next morning any worse than when they came.

At about two in the morning Maddison and I got restive; it seemed to us that an obstacle race in cars would provide a little excitement for the ladies. His car was some old racing chassis into which he had fitted a three-hundred-horse-power German Maybach that he had snaffled off some aeronautical scrap-heap, and he was very proud of it. Mine was nothing like that, but I was pretty sure that I could give him fits when it came to dodging round the lamp-posts. So we started from Jermyn Street.

I'll admit that we were pretty far gone, because I can't remember that we even fixed up a course to race. I had one of the Flossies with me in my two-seater. I forget her name, but she had a bag of oranges in her lap, and whenever she saw a pretty lady she threw an orange at her - whether from fellow-feeling or superiority I was unable to determine. For myself, I was very happy. I had one fixed idea running in my head: that I must on no account run over anyone, because then, as I explained to the Flossie as we shot down Haymarket, I should not only be drunk in charge of a motor-car, but drunk in charge of a manslaughter. I remember impressing on her that this was an epigram.

I am a little hazy as to exactly where we went. I remember a furious game of touch-last at the bottom of Whitehall which had to be abandoned for fear of running over the policemen who were trying to get on our running-boards, and I remember telling the Flossie as much as I could recollect of the Secret History of the Court of Berlin as we went round and round the Queen Victoria Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace. I think we got into Piccadilly by St. James's Street, because it was in Air Street that we met our doom. I spun in here to get to Regent Street, meaning to go up and have a look at Madame Tussaud's. But there was a taxi in Air Street that impeded my cornering; I did the best I could, braked heavily, ran up on to the pavement, and impinged upon a lamp-post. Maddison, following close behind me, ran into my stern and - there the police found us.

I am not very clear about the proceedings at Vine Street. I imagine they were purely formal; I know they let the Flossies go after a bit, but Maddison and me they popped into the cells for the night. I decided then that it was time I pulled myself together; a little cold water and a cup of black coffee that they got me made a new man of me, and by the end of half an hour I had decided that my best line was to plead guilty. Maddison was worse than I. I could hear him in the next cell entertaining with song a small, discreet audience of constables in the passage. He was telling them all about the Yogo Pogo, I think, and I remember that he was particularly insistent on the fact that

*The Lord Mayor of London,
The Lord Mayor of London,
The Lord Mayor of London wants to put him in the Lord Mayor's Show.*

Since then I have often wondered about the Yogo Pogo, but I never learned any more. For myself, I went to bed and slept soundly till they came to call me.

Now the sequel to this had certain elements of humour. I hadn't a chance to speak to Maddison till they stood us up together in court. The magistrate asked me first what I pleaded, and I said that I pleaded guilty and would accept the findings of the court.

Maddison kicked me on the shins, pleaded not guilty, asked for a remand, and was taken away.

A policeman got up and said that my car mounted the pavement. Apparently that set the fashion, because in a minute everyone was saying that my car had mounted the pavement. It was evidently a far graver offence to mount the pavement than to run into the taxi. In fact, that was about all the evidence there was. In extenuation I said that I might have been a little excited, but I was very far from being incapable of driving a motor-car. I pointed out that I hadn't endangered anyone but myself. The magistrate said I had endangered the policemen who were trying to get on my running-board. I said that wasn't my fault, and got sternly rebuked. Then they asked me how much I had had to drink. I asked: Since when? and that didn't do me any good. They said, since six o'clock the evening before. I could see that it was hopeless by that time, so I gave them the account in chronological order so far as I could remember - two cocktails, half a bottle of sherry, about a third of a magnum, a glass of port, six whiskies (during the intervals of the theatre), another half-bottle of champagne (at supper), and after supper a few more whiskies. That finished it. The magistrate told me that he greatly regretted that his powers were limited to a sentence of one month in the second division, and they took me away to Brixton.

Maddison, on the other hand, retained Eminent Counsel for his defence at a perfectly incredible fee, and got off. Maddison was never very bright at the best of times. With a touching faith in the integrity of the Law he paid Eminent Counsel to get him off and gave him a free hand. The result was perfectly appalling. Eminent Counsel started away back in 1915 and took the court through every little crash Maddison had had in ten years' flying. He must have been a pretty dud pupil; we heard that he wrote off two machines in 1915, three in 1916, and two more later in the war. Eminent Counsel was a little hard up for post-war crashes to account for Maddison's mental state, but he made such play with the material at his disposal that by the time he'd finished Maddison was a clear case for detention during His Majesty's pleasure and the Bench were inquiring how it was that the prisoner was apparently licensed to carry passengers in aeroplanes for hire or reward. At that point Eminent Counsel began to hedge a little. Maddison got off, but the evening papers made such play with him that the Air Ministry had to cancel his licence. That was a pity, because he was quite a good pilot.

The Air Ministry had a smack at me when I came out, but nothing like such a hard smack as that. The firm looked a bit old-fashioned at me, too; I didn't really blame them. They were all good sorts, though, and I think each of them felt secretly that it was up to somebody who had never happened to be drunk in charge of a motor-car to cast the first stone. In a month it had all blown over.

But all this is a digression. I sat on the ground in the rain for a bit and looked at the convict, and the convict looked at me.

"What the devil are you doing here?" I said.

I noticed that he was keeping his eyes open for anyone that might be coming to have a look at the machine. He didn't seem to have heard me; I spoke to him again.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

He looked down at me as I sat on the ground, and smiled at me vaguely.

"What a damn silly question!" he said gently. "I'm looking for the Philosopher's Stone; or - the Tree of Knowledge. One should have learned the difference between Good and Evil by this time, though, don't you think?" His voice drifted away into silence. "But I doubt if it grows in this wood...." He roused himself. "I don't think you're much hurt."

I blinked at him. "You'd better get back into that wood and go on looking for it, pretty damn quick," I said. "There'll be people here in a minute." It was a wonder the crowd had not arrived already.

He nodded. "Perhaps that would be wisest," he said reflectively. I noticed that he spoke like an educated man. "Are you sure you'll be all right now? That's good." He moved towards the trees.

"Half a minute," I said weakly. "What about you?" I tried painfully hard to collect my wits. "Do you want any help - is there anything I can do?"

He asked me if I meant it.

There was a sort of wheel and ratchet going round inside my head and I was feeling very sick. I wasn't at all sure that I did mean it; at the moment I hadn't enough go left in me to pull a sprat off a gridiron. I climbed slowly to my feet and stood there swaying gently in the breeze; he ran up and caught hold of my arm to steady me.

My head began to clear a little. "Of course I mean it," I muttered. "One thing I ... one thing. What did they get you for?"

He looked at me in a way that made me feel pretty rotten for having asked.

"Embezzlement," he said shortly.

I planted my feet farther apart on the grass and found it an assistance. "Well, that's a good clean sort of crime," I said vaguely. "So long as it wasn't anything to do with dope or children...." I pulled myself up; I was beginning to ramble.

But he looked at me curiously. "You don't like dope?" he said.

I made an effort and pulled myself together a little. "Get back into the hedge and don't stand talking in the middle of this field like a ruddy fool," I said. He scuttled back to the edge of the wood. "Now see here," I said, "I'll do whatever I can to help you get away. I owe you that. What is it you want - food and clothes? Do you want to get out of England?"

He looked at me suspiciously. "You're not going to give me up?"

I told him to talk sense. "For one thing," I said, "I could give you away now without bothering to get you into a trap, simply by going away and telling people that I'd seen you here. But here I am. I'll do what I can for you if you'll let me, or if you don't want any help I'll go away and forget I've seen you. Now that's square."

He motioned to me to come close; he seemed suddenly afraid. "It's most frightfully good of you," he said, "and I do want a bit of help. It's a thing that you can do quite easily, without any risk to yourself. There's a house about four miles from here on the other side of Stokenchurch. The house is called Six Firs. It's not my home - I daren't go near home. They'll be on the look-out for me there. But there's a cousin of mine lives with her people in this house - a girl, oh, a damn good sort. She'll fix me up if she knows I'm here. Go to the house and get hold of her, and tell her. Don't let her people know - they're too old. Tell her I'll be outside the house from eleven o'clock onwards. Tell her to leave the morning-room window open and to switch on the light in her bedroom when it's safe for me to come in."

"She won't believe me if I go and tell her that," I said. "No girl would. She'd think I was trying it on."

He gripped me by the arm. "You've got to make her believe," he said. "You've got to - you simply must. I must see her - she may have heard - she may know something. Man, I tell you, I've got to be free for the next ten days. After that.... But she may know what's happening."

He was becoming rapidly incoherent. I freed myself gently from his grip on my arm.

"I'll do the best I can," I said. "Six Firs, at eleven o'clock, with a light in her bedroom window. By the way, what's her name?"

"Stevenson," he said, "Joan Stevenson. My name is Compton."

"Right you are," I said. "I'll go there and do the best I can. And see here - if I can't convince her I'll be near the gate myself at eleven o'clock tonight. Now you'd better cut off into cover."

He turned and ran into the wood through the trees till he was out of sight. I noticed that he ran with a limp.

Well, there I was - and the devil of a fine position to be in, too. I turned and walked unsteadily towards the machine. She was in a shocking mess. I looked first at the engine. One of the connecting-rods had poked its way through the side of the crankcase and made a hole big enough to put my head into; through the hole one could see the mincemeat inside. I judged the machine to be a complete write-off; the port wings crumpled up and the fuselage badly injured close behind the engine. It was the worst crash I had had since the war.

I stood looking at it all for a minute, and it struck me that I was very lucky to have got out of it alive. It was now a quarter of an hour or more since it had happened, and nobody had arrived in the field. And then I thought that if Compton had not turned up I should still have been in the machine, pinned upside down, unconscious and dying - if not already dead. The thought of it fairly made me sweat with fright.

I was feeling much better by now. My neck had had a beastly wrench, but I could walk without holding on to it, and apart from that I was hardly hurt. I left the machine and began to walk along the edge of the wood in the direction of Stokenchurch. In all the half-mile that I walked through the fields to the road I never saw a soul. It was evident that nobody had seen me come down; that wasn't difficult to understand, because it was a brute of an evening and I had been flying very low above the trees, half hidden in the clouds. As I went on through the fields and met nobody I realized that I owed my life to this fellow Compton. I don't imagine that my life is worth much or that I've ever done much good with it; at the same time - it's all one has. And then as I walked on I knew that it was up to me to see this business through to the end and to back Compton in every way I could - even if it were to mean another spell in quod for me. Looking back now over the years I'm glad to be able to remember that I stuck to that decision, and backed him till he had no further need of me.

I went on, and presently I came to a road. A little way along it I met a Ford van delivering groceries to some outlying village. I stopped it and asked the boy for a lift in to Stokenchurch. He stammered and looked at me as if I was a ghost, said something in refusal, and tried to drive on. I jumped on to the running-board, leaned in over the wheel, and soon put a stop to that. And then I realized that appearances were against me. The hand that I switched off his engine with was covered in blood and oil; I had no hat and I could feel that something had happened to my hair. I discovered later that there was a deep cut over my right eyebrow that had bled all down the side of my face; it was drying now and my hair was all stuck up with blood on my forehead. I had been feeling so generally ill that I hadn't noticed it.

I told the boy what had happened. When I got him to believe me, his one idea was to go off and have a look at the machine. I told him I was going into Stokenchurch in his Ford whether he drove me or not. He perked up a bit at that, but I pretty soon unperked him, and at last we got going on the road to Stokenchurch.

We got to Stokenchurch at about half past five. I went straight to the inn, postponed giving an account of myself and got on the telephone to Morris, while the crowd fluttered about outside and peeped in at me through the door of the room.

I told him what had happened. "I hadn't an earthly," I said. "The clouds were right down on to the hills I was only a hundred feet up when the engine conked. I told you it was running

rough. What? Oh, yes, the machine's a write-off - absolutely, I'm afraid. What's that? Well, I can't say that it worries me much - only too glad to be well out of it. I don't give a damn about the machine. Yes, I dare say you do, but that's your worry. Oh, nothing to write home about, thanks. I got shaken up a bit and cut my eyebrow - nothing serious. I'm sorry it's happened, but I'm not taking any responsibility for it at all. I told you I wasn't fit to go. As a matter of fact, fit or not, it wouldn't have made any difference to what happened." Which was a lie.

Rather to my surprise he said he was sending down the breakdown gang at once, and told me to fix up a meal for them. I rang off, and immediately found myself the sensation of the evening. I should think half the village crowded into the passages of the pub, all eager to see me and condole before I had my face washed. I managed to get away from the crowd, and the landlord's wife took me upstairs and bathed my eyebrow for me; I would have preferred the barmaid, but didn't like to say so. It was a clean cut and she made quite a good job of it for me, fixing it up with a bit of lint and sticking-plaster. Then I went down and saw the landlord and arranged about a meal for the mechanics over a stiff whisky.

Presently I began to throw out feelers about the Stevensons, and the house called Six Firs.

I said that I thought I knew some people called Stevenson who lived near Stokenchurch; at least, I knew of them but had never met them. He said that they would be the people at Six Firs. I was told that the house was about a mile from the village; with a little encouragement he told me the whole family history - so far as there was anything to tell. Arthur Stevenson, Esq., CB, was a man of about seventy, several years retired from the Treasury. His wife was only a little younger, and both were passionately fond of gardening. They always took first prize for sweet-peas at the local flower show. Before moving to Stokenchurch on their retirement they had lived for thirty years in Earl's Court. Their pew in church was close under the pulpit because the old lady was getting very deaf. There was a son in India, a major in the Indian Army. There was a daughter about twenty-five years old who lived at home and painted pictures - water colours, I gathered - which had been exhibited at High Wycombe. They had a Morris Cowley which the daughter drove. The barmaid had a cousin who was their cook. That was all.

I said that my father had been at school with old Mr Stevenson, and I thought that I would walk up and call on them. He offered to send a boy with me to show me the house, but I got out of that and got directions instead. I borrowed one of his hats, and set off up the street.

As I went I realized the utter futility of the whole thing. It was impossible that such a household should shelter an escaped convict. It struck me at once that it wasn't fair on the old people; at all costs they must be kept out of it. It was evident that if there was any help at all coming from that house it must come from the girl; I can't say that I was too sanguine about her. From the landlord's description she sounded a blue-stocking of the most virulent description; it seemed to me that water-colours and escaped convicts were unlikely to go well together. Evidently I must try the house, but I thought it was more probable that Compton would have to stay in the woods for a day or two till I could get some clothes for him and smuggle him away.

As I drew nearer to the house I began to wonder how I should get hold of the girl without her parents. A succession of ideas passed through my head and were rejected one by one. I might say that I was soliciting custom for a projected milk round - but that wouldn't work in the country. Nor would the gas-meter do, where there was probably no gas. Finally, I fixed on the car as being the one thing in the house that would be solely the domain of the daughter, and decided to make that my line of attack.

The house was a pleasant-looking place on the wooded side of a hill, standing well back from the road in three or four acres of land. It was not a large house, but it was beautifully cared for; the gardens were small, but very neat. There was a large paddock with a decrepit-looking pony in it. It was about seven o'clock when I got there; the rain had stopped and the

clouds were clearing off before the sunset. The garden smelt wonderful after the rain.

I rang the bell and a maid came to the door. "Can I see Miss Stevenson?" I said. "It's about the car - I'm from the garage."

The maid went in and a girl came to the door. She must have been in the hall.

"It's about the car?" she said. "You've come from Weller's?"

That was the first time I met Joan Stevenson. I wish I could recall that first interview a little more clearly. She was a tall slim girl with grey eyes, by her complexion a country girl, rather plain and - which seemed strange to me - without a trace of powder or make-up. She had very soft brown hair, bobbed; she was wearing a brown jumper, a skirt that looked like corduroy, and brown brogues. She looked me straight in the eyes when she spoke, which worried me and made me nervous.

I produced a jet from my waistcoat pocket. "It's about the carburettor on your car, Miss," I said. "The makers sent a letter round to us agents to say as some cars was issued from the factory wiv jets as gives trouble in the morning, starting from cold, like. They was to be replaced without charge. So as I was passing along this evening the manager told me to look in."

"It's very good of him," said the girl, "but she's always been very easy to start. Beautiful." I could see that she was puzzled.

"Could I just 'ave a look at her," I said, "if it won't be inconveniencing? 'Course, if she's going all right, I says leave well alone. There's a sight more damage done messing them about than what there is leaving them alone. But if I might look to see what number jet she has got in, an' then I can tell the boss."

She took me round to the back of the house, and there was the car standing in the coach-house with the doors open. We went into the coach-house, but I didn't open the bonnet of the car. Instead, I straightened myself up.

"Miss Stevenson," I said, "I haven't come about the car. I've come about your cousin, Compton - I don't know his other name. He sent me here to see you. He wants help."

She looked at me incredulously. "He sent you here?" she repeated.

"I saw him this afternoon," I said. "I'm afraid he's in trouble. He broke prison apparently - he's been in prison, hasn't he? He's in the woods close here, and he wants help to get a change of clothes and get away."

"Who are you?" she asked.

I could see that this interview wasn't going at all well. I didn't see what else I could do but to plough ahead and tell her exactly what had happened; if then she chose to disbelieve it I should have done my best. "My name is Stenning," I said. "Philip Stenning." I set out to tell her all that had happened to me that afternoon. When I got to the bit about Compton coming out of the wood and pulling me out of the machine she stopped me.

"I'm sorry, Mr Stenning," she said, "but I don't believe a word of all this. It's quite true that my cousin is in prison, but I don't believe a word of the rest of it. You shouldn't have brought in the aeroplane, you know; it's laying it on a bit too thick. As a matter of curiosity, what were you going to ask me to do?"

I laughed; it was the only thing to do. "For one thing," I said, "I was going to ask you to believe me. I was going to ask you to put out food and clothes for your cousin in the morning-room at about eleven o'clock tonight after your people have gone to bed, and to leave the morning-room window open and to switch on the light in your bedroom when the coast was clear. But I'm afraid you'll find that as melodramatic as the aeroplane."

She smiled gravely. "I'm afraid I do, Mr Stenning. Much too sensational. Now I'm going to go down to the police station tomorrow morning and tell them all about you, so you'd better run away back to London tonight. It's an ingenious tale and for the moment you very nearly took me in, but you spoilt it by bringing in the aeroplane. You wouldn't have got very much

out of this house, though. There's only the silver forks and things and I don't think they're worth very much. We shall have to put them in the dog-kennel or somewhere tonight, shan't we? Now you'd better go."

"Right you are," I said. "You can go to the police station, and they'll probably tell you who I am. But, for God's sake don't tell them anything about your cousin being out in the woods, because he'll have to stay there for tomorrow till I can get him some clothes. So if you go telling the police where he is there'll be hell to pay."

She wrinkled her forehead in perplexity, but before she could speak I stopped her.

"Look here, Miss Stevenson," I said, "I know you don't believe me. But walk down to the village after dinner and collect the local gossip. I promise you that you'll find that an aeroplane crashed this afternoon, and that I'm the pilot. If you find that's true you can take a chance on the rest of the yarn. If you leave the morning-room window open and hide behind the curtains with the morning room poker you can hit him on the head as he comes in and examine him at your leisure. I promise you you'll find he's your cousin."

She looked at me seriously. "If I find that's true," she said, "we may owe you a great deal, Mr Stenning. But my cousin has only six months of his sentence left to run."

"Then he must have a pretty good reason for wanting to be out," I said. "Well, we'll leave it at that, Miss Stevenson."

I walked back through the lanes to the village. It was a wonderfully quiet evening; the clouds and the storm were rolling away towards the east and the sunset was clear. The birds had come out again, and I remember there was a thrush calling somewhere in the trees. It was a long time since I had been in the country. It was time I took a holiday. I thought of the aerodrome and the machines and Manchester and my flat in Maida Vale, and the more I thought of them the more I hated them. I thought what a fool I was to live that sort of life. I didn't want to go back.

When I got back to the pub I found the local constable waiting for me to give account of myself; he seemed a little hurt that I had not come to do so of my own accord. I was a bit short with him till I remembered that this case was probably the most important that he had had to deal with for six months; then I loosened up and stood him a drink. By the time that had gone down the lorry had arrived with the breakdown gang.

I went out and had a chat with the foreman of the men; he clucked his tongue when he heard what had happened, and opined that I was lucky to have come off so lightly with nobody there to help me out of the machine. I passed that off without a blush and hoped that his practised eye would not betray me when we came to the wreck, and then, though it was after eight o'clock, we went off in the lorry to get the machine. We found her as I had left her, lying on her back by the wood surrounded by a crowd of yokels. The ground was hard, being summer, so that we could get the lorry right up to her; the foreman clucked his tongue some more and set the men to work. An aeroplane comes to pieces very easily. In twenty minutes the wings and the tail were off and we were loading the fuselage on to the lorry; in an hour and half we were back in Stokenchurch just as it was getting dark.

We passed Joan Stevenson in the village street. I stopped the lorry, jumped down clumsily in my heavy coat, and went to speak to her. I pointed to the wreckage.

"There it is," I laughed. "I was just bringing it along to show you."

In the dusk I could see that her face was very white. I sent the lorry on, and it rumbled away into the distance with the mechanics all telling each other that the captain was a quick worker.

"It's terrible," she whispered. "I'm so sorry I didn't believe you when you told me this afternoon, Mr Stenning. What are we to do? Where is he now?"

"He's in the woods," I said. "I really don't know what we can do. He'll know what he wants to do, though."

She nodded. "He'll want clothes, won't he? I found some old clothes of father's that he'll never miss. They'll be a terrible fit. Father's so much fatter."

"We must get him something that looks as if it belongs to him," I muttered, "or he'll be caught at once. He'd better have this suit of mine till we can fit him out properly. We're very much the same build."

She looked me up and down. "You're much broader across the shoulders than he is," she said, "but the height is about right. But what's it all for? Where's he going to go?"

"God knows," I muttered.

"How do you think he got here from Dartmoor?"

I started. "He was in Dartmoor? He must have had luck to get all this distance." And then I remembered that I had seen a headline in the morning paper over my breakfast at Manchester - a meagre and a sour breakfast it had been that morning - that a prisoner had escaped and was still at large. I remembered that I had commented on it to the photographer, and had wished him luck. I almost wished now that I hadn't.

"I saw it in the paper this morning," I said. "We shall have to be careful."

"I know," she said. "I'll have the window open tonight as soon as it's safe. Mr Stenning - will you come too? I don't know anything about these things. Would it be frightfully inconvenient for you?"

I laughed. "Not a bit," I said. "I should have been a stiff little corpse by now but for him - and nobody any the wiser."

"It's awfully good of you," she said. "He'll have to get out of the country, won't he?"

"I don't know," I said. "He said he only wanted to be free for ten days. But I'll come up this evening and we can have a talk with him and find out what it is that he wants us to do. I'll be skulking round outside till I see him get in at the window, and then I'll come along. That way, you'll know I'm not playing any funny business on you. Right you are, Miss Stevenson - at about eleven o'clock."

"It's awfully good of you," she repeated mechanically. She hesitated for a moment. "I don't want to tell my father or mother if we can help it," she said. "We mustn't bring them into this unless it's absolutely necessary."

I went back to the pub. The men were in the commercial room, busy over the meal that I had ordered for them. They didn't wait long; they were anxious to get back with the machine to the aerodrome, and so to bed. They grumbled a good deal over the journey, but it appeared that Morris was eager to get the machine back into the works and start on the repair. I wished him joy of it.

I started with them on the lorry. The landlord showed some concern at my departure; I think he was counting on me to stay the night and fight my battles over again in the bar. However, we all crowded on to the lorry in the darkness and pushed off, not without a little song and dance from the men.

Half a mile from the village I stopped the lorry and got down, and the lorry drove on towards London without me. I never heard what the men thought about it, but I doubt if this proceeding did my reputation any harm. That was hardly possible.

It was then about half past ten, and quite dark, I fetched a compass round the outskirts of the village through the fields, and presently found myself on the road for Six Firs.

It was beginning to feel more frightfully rocky. During the early part of the evening I had been almost myself; I think the whisky I was drinking then had something to do with it. Now the cut in my forehead had stiffened up and was aching and throbbing till I could hardly bear it; it was the only thing that prevented me from sitting down under a hedge and going to sleep. I was most fearfully done. I walked up to the house and got there at about ten minutes to eleven; a hundred yards up the lane from the gate I found a gap in the hedge. I got through this into the field and, skirting along the hedge, reached a position where I could command a

view of the whole front of the house.

I sat down on a hummock in the darkness and began drowsily to consider what would be the best thing to be done for Compton. All the little noises of a country night in June conspired to take my mind from the problem and to increase my drowsiness. Somewhere there was an owl hooting irregularly; the air was full of little rustlings and squeaks. I sat there till my head dropped forward and I awoke with a start; then I got up and began to walk up and down the field. The lights were still on in the house. Then as I looked again one of the lights in the downstairs rooms went out, and then all the others. A light appeared in an upstairs room; I interpreted that to mean that the old couple were going to bed.

I began to wonder what I should do if I were in Compton's place and had to cut the country without undue ostentation. I knew the answer to that at once. I would do it on a small yacht. For many years it has been my hobby to knock about the Channel whenever I had the chance; I owned a six-tonner of my own one season in partnership with another man, but for the most part my experience has been gained on charters.

I knew the Channel pretty well. I was convinced that one could slip quietly in and out of England in that way without anybody being any the wiser. Now that the coastguard has been practically abolished there is very little restraint or comment on the movements of small yachts. One goes over to France and cruises the French coast for a time; on one's return to England one may invite the local Customs officer on board by flying an ensign at the truck. Or one may simply join the throng of yachts cruising up and down the coast; it is nobody's business to discover in what country the anchor last bit the mud.

Yes, I decided, that is what I would do. It would need a little organization; one would have to have a suitable boat ready and, if possible, get someone to provision her. Then it struck me that there is little advantage to be gained in these days by escaping from one country to another unless it be to one where there is no extradition. Still, it would be a step in the right direction to get as far as France. And rather than begin on a ten-year sentence I would push off for South America in a decent ten-tonner, though I won't pretend that my seamanship is in the same street as that of Captain Joshua Slocum.

I moved up closer to the garden hedge and began to study the house intently. There were no lights showing now. I remember that I was very cold. I thought I could see that one of the windows of the morning-room was open; for what seemed an interminable time I stood leaning on the hedge, listening to the noises of the night, watching the house.

Presently a light flashed on in one of the upper windows, and almost at the same moment I saw Compton. He was standing on the lawn in the shadow of a clump of laurels; I saw him move silently across the grass and vanish into the shadow by the window.

I sighed with relief. The main part of my job was over; from now onwards I should be acting in a purely advisory capacity. I think I really believed that at the moment. As I have said, I was most frightfully tired.

I waited for a few minutes, then got through the hedge and crossed the lawn to the house. There was somebody standing at the unlighted window; as I drew near I saw it was Joan Stevenson.

"Mr Stenning," she whispered.

I got into the house through the window. It was then about twenty minutes past eleven.

Chapter Two

As soon as I got into the morning-room I made straight for the anthracite stove; I was nearly perished with cold from hanging about outside, though it was June. For some reason connected with the old man's health a stove was kept burning in this room all through the summer; they had not turned on a light but had made up the stove to such an extent that it threw a warm glow all over the room. Compton was sitting on a chair in front of the stove clad only in a shirt, and pulling on a pair of very large grey flannel trousers. Miss Stevenson was moving quietly about the room in the semi-darkness collecting the materials for a meal. I stood warming myself by the fire, and for a time none of us spoke a word.

Compton finished his dressing, stood up, and turned to me. "I'm so sorry," he said quietly, "but I never asked you your name...."

"Stenning," I said. "Philip Stenning."

He nodded. "Yes. I don't think I need try and tell you how grateful I am to you for - for this?" He glanced at the table and the room.

"I don't think you need," I said, and laughed. "What comes next?"

He did not seem to have heard my question. He stood for a long time staring down at his feet, warmly lit up in the glow from the stove.

"What comes next?" he said at last. "If I could tell you that I don't suppose I should be - like this. Plato wanted to know that, didn't he? and Sophocles - certainly Sophocles. But I'm so rusty on all that stuff now."

"Come and have some supper," said the girl from behind the table. "You must be frightfully hungry."

He roused himself. "I'm not very hungry. But thanks, Joan. What's that you've got there - ham? I'd like a bit of ham. And then I must cut off again."

"Don't be a fool," I said. "Where are you going to?"

He shook his head. "God only knows," he muttered. "I must lie low for a bit."

I saw the girl pause in the dim light behind the table, and stare at him. "You must get out of the country somehow, Denis," she said. "You must get to France."

He looked at me vaguely. "I suppose that's the thing to do," he said at last. "But I've got to stay in England for the present."

She looked at him in that uncomfortable, direct way that she had. "What do you mean - you've got to?"

He pulled out a chair from the table and sat down. "I don't know if you imagine that I cut out of prison for fun," he said heavily. "Anyway - I didn't." He relapsed into silence again, and sat for a time brooding with his eyes on the table.

The girl looked at me helplessly.

I cleared my throat. "I don't want to butt in on any private business," I said. "But isn't this going a bit slowly? I don't want you to tell me anything that you'd rather not talk about before a stranger. But I owe you a good bit for what you did this afternoon, and I'm ready to help in any way I can. I've come here prepared to do so."

I hope that I may be forgiven for that lie. I thought for a minute, and then continued: "I didn't quite realize from what you said this afternoon that you really mean to stay in the country. I've been thinking about getting you out. I'll even go so far as to say that I'm pretty sure I can get you to France within the week. I mean that. But if there's any other way in which I can help I hope you'll let me know."

"I don't want to get you into trouble," he said.

"It doesn't matter a damn about me," I said. "But it seems to me that by staying in England you run a great danger of being caught again - in fact, it's pretty long odds against you. But - from now onwards you've got to think about Miss Stevenson here. If they get you they'll