

CHAPTER III

He had only walked about a 100 yards and already his busted ankle and feet were killing him. His ankle pained his every step, while the soles of his feet, were cold and sore. Then he neared a clump of trees surrounding a small cottage. Nothing and no-one stirred and, thus, emboldened, he approached the front door, paused for a few moments and then knocked loudly. The sound reverberated in the still night, but no-one answered the summons, save the shadows of the nearby copse which seemed to jump in the flickering moonlight. Dave knocked again, but it seemed that the whole world was asleep and oblivious to his plight. He was just about to knock a third time, when he heard movement from within and muted voices as if they were discussing a course of action concerning their nocturnal visitor. Then there was quiet and Dave, fearing that they thought he had left, knocked loudly.

A voice called out in Dutch, and Dave, not knowing the language, interpreted it as, 'Who are you, and what do you want?' So he set about giving an explanation: he was a British airman who had been shot down and wanted a new pair of shoes. It sounded ludicrous, almost like a music hall joke, but there was no response from within so obviously they didn't understand what he was trying to convey. The humour of the farcical situation was lost on the inmates. Mutterings continued to filter through the door, and so Dave knocked again and repeated his requirements. Finally, the door opened slowly and a powerful, middle-aged man carrying an oil lamp emerged. He thrust it at Dave's face, blinding him temporarily, and then lowered it to scrutinise the rest of him. Having satisfied that all was correct, he motioned the airman to enter, closed the door behind, and then turned up the wick of the lamp to reveal the other occupants: a stoutish woman - whom Dave assumed was the mother - and two children, a girl, aged about thirteen and a boy about sixteen.

The mother motioned him to sit and there was silence as he became the cynosure of all eyes. They examined him closely; the children his navigator's brevet and sergeant's stripes; the man staring intently at his face as if trying to recall recognition, while the woman seemed to be fascinated by his trousers. He thought something was amiss and glanced down to rectify and button up, only to see his protruding, dried, bloody knee. He moved his hands to close the gaping rent in the cloth and noticed his hands were of the same red hue. No one moved, and for Dave the quiet and intensity of the observation was both unnerving and unsettling. He moved his feet to create a noise and lessen the tension, which created a stabbing pain from his injured knee causing Dave to gasp in pain.

The emission of sound broke the trance and created a stir. The mother moved into the next room and returned with a bowl of warm water and some soap and, with the aid of the daughter, proceeded to wash and cleanse the flesh around the right knee and also the hands. Then she removed Dave's left sock, revealing a very swollen, puffed, blue-mottled ankle. A few words were exchanged, but communication was difficult because of the language barrier and it was left to gesticulation and signs. Then there was food, a glass of milk and two slices of darkish coloured bread with honey.

It was now the early hours of the morning and Dave could hardly keep his eyes open. He was sick with tiredness and every part of his body hurt, from the soles of his feet to his aching head. His host, realising this, beckoned him to follow and he hobbled and limped in his wake to an adjoining room containing an alcove, where a makeshift bed existed. It belonged to the boy and it was indicated that for the next few hours it was Dave's also. The lamplight was removed, and Dave stripped to his vest and pants, climbed in beside the boy and within minutes, despite the aches and pains which plagued him, was fast asleep.

The next morning he awoke to the sound of voices and dressed hurriedly. The pain from his ankle was intense and, in the light of day it looked as if it had been painted blue. The clock informed him that it was almost eight. So he'd made a late, bad start to the day and his resolve to be a successful evader would come to naught, unless he left the present scene immediately.

In the next room, Dave was introduced by his host to three strangers, one of whom spoke a little English. This person informed him that they were neighbouring farmers who had come to see him.

'No bloody good,' ruminated Dave, 'the whole neighbourhood must know I'm here.'

He pointed to his feet and asked for shoes, for it was time he went. If he stayed much longer he was a goner. The woman brought him a gaily painted pair of Dutch wooden clogs which fitted fairly comfortably, despite the swollen ankle. However, when he stood it was difficult to move freely as the shoes seemed to want to stay in one spot, and his ankle hurt like hell. Nevertheless, he had to go and so extended his hand in farewell. However, the woman placed an arm around his shoulders and pointed to the food on the table, insisting that he partake.

Dave was so grateful for her kindness, and, also he realised that the next meal may be a long time coming.

He sat down and was just about to commence breakfast when two Dutch policemen were ushered in by the boy. They motioned Dave to finish his meal, and then carried on an affable conversation with those present.

The meal over, the police stood and motioned that he should accompany them, but before he could do so the visitor, who could speak a smattering of English, grasped his hands and began to apologise, 'Gestapo, shooting, concentration camp, in the night, finished', were words mentioned and from the explanation Dave arrived at the conclusion that during the night the Dutch farmer, his host, had gone to the local police station to tell of his whereabouts. He had done this not for himself, but for his family. Harboursing or helping an evader was punishable by death and his host had to put his family first. Dave understood the predicament as he would have done exactly the same thing if positions had been reversed, so as he moved towards the door, he stopped, looked his host straight in the eye and proffered his hand. The farmer grabbed and wrung it warmly, and Dave thought he detected a tear in the eye. It was as if he were pleased to be forgiven. He was no Judas, but a man, who, rightly so, placed the welfare and safety of his family above all else. Dave smiled at the mother and nodded his head in appreciation for what she had done, then threw a friendly salute at the two children before moving outside to the waiting car.

A friendly atmosphere pervaded the local Dutch police station and Dave was extended every courtesy, being allowed to sit in the office with the policemen on duty, drink coffee with an acorn flavour and carry on a conversation in sign language. Then the ringing and answering of the telephone brought the euphoria to an abrupt end. The word Luftwaffe was mentioned and Dave was bundled into a cell and the door clanged behind him. Within minutes, the cell corridor resounded with approaching steps and Dave, for the first time, was confronted with the greyish-green uniform of the Luftwaffe.

'Bloody good communication system these Dutch have', reasoned Dave. 'they knew these bastards were on the way'.

The cell door was unlocked, and the German officer motioned Dave to follow him to the office, where a Luftwaffe *feldwebel* awaited. A canvas bag was produced, emptied, and Dave was asked to examine the contents - the pitiful, charred remains of five members of 'I for Ink'. It would have been impossible to identify anything or learn to whom they belonged, except that Dave knew what he was looking for and on the blackened, burnt 'dog-tags' was able to trace a few letters, fill in the ones that were obliterated and so make a name which represented a member of his crew. It was as if he were completing a crossword puzzle. The officer informed him that five airmen had been incinerated in the plane crash, while the sixth member had been found dead in a garden about a mile away, the parachute open and surrounding him. Dave was shown the patch of leather on which the airman's name was printed and worn by aircrew as easy identification on the squadron. It was the wireless operator's, Jack Wilson. No reason was given for the cause of death, save that the airman had a large cut on his forehead.

One of the policemen exchanged words with the Luftwaffe officer, and the latter instructed Dave to remove his clogs as they were to be returned to the owner. Then he was conducted, bootless, to the waiting truck, placed in the back with three Luftwaffe members - part of the crew that had been examining the remains of 'I for Ink' - and driven off.

The journey lasted about three-quarters of an hour, and Dave tried to fathom the reason for the wireless operator's death. He had baled successfully as evidenced by the open chute, so what could have caused it? The only conclusion he arrived at was the exploding bomber must have been responsible as the luckless airman would have been in close proximity when the blast occurred. What a way to die! Five of his oppos burnt alive and the sixth also dead. These crew members over the past three months had been like a family. They had lived together in their Nissan hut. They had flown eight previous missions all without incident. He thought of the Irishmen, Jack Wilson and Bill Mussen, the Londoners, John Farmer and Eric Springett, Alf Stuart from Northern England and his close friend John Satchell, with whose family he had shared a meal and the last words John's mother had said to him, was "Look after John". The thought made him shudder and realise that but for the grace of God and that he was the navigator, first in the baling order, he would be dead too

The journey terminated with their arrival at an aerodrome, and from the number of M.E. 109s and 110s, at dispersal points and sprinkling the runways, it was easy to conclude that here was the home of several fighter squadrons, which battled with RAF bomber hordes at night and then cut swaths in the marauding American B17s during the day. Dave was taken into the administrative block and given a pair of RAF flying boots, identical with the ones he had lost. However, when putting them on found that they were both left-footed. He stood and felt like Charlie Chaplin doing the 'can-can', as both his feet pointed in the same direction.

A voice in German drew his attention from the lower half of his body and looking up, he saw a young, fresh looking Luftwaffe pilot observing him. The pilot spoke a few more words and Dave believed he was commiserating with him on his misfortune of having been shot down. Dave just smiled, shrugged his shoulders, then pointed to his two left feet. The German laughed and, as he walked away, said, in an impeccable French accent, 'C'est la guerre', and Dave, who had a smattering of French in his education, knew that although the fortunes of war had been unkind, the gods had smiled upon him during the last twenty-four hours.

Escorted by two guards, he duck walked his way to the cooler and was locked in a cell. Strangely enough, a sense of security came over him with the shutting of the door, as this was a haven from the recent, violent vicissitudes which had stormed around and over him. Here was a refuge where one could rest and recuperate for the gales and tempests ahead. He removed his two 'left feet', lay on the narrow bunk, pulled the blanket up around his shoulders and within minutes was fast asleep.