

Nicholas Boving: *Wings of Fear*

England, 1923

The iron bound door slammed behind him with a bang of awful finality. Hugh Drummond shrugged. If there was a way in, there was a way out. It was an immutable law. The trick was to find it.

A voice came out of the darkness.

“Drummond? Hugh Drummond?”

Drummond froze and slowly turned.

“Who wants to know?” he asked.

A tall, rangy man came out of the shadow.

“Harry Dickson.”

Drummond smiled; an expression that totally transformed what was generally considered an ugly face into a thing approaching, if not handsome, at least acceptable.

“Good God! What the Devil are you doing here?”

Dickson frowned.

“Three damned great thugs dressed as gamekeepers jammed shotguns in my back. It seemed prudent to obey them. What about you?”

Drummond shrugged.

“I’m staying at a pub a couple of miles from here, just doing a spot of shooting and fishing, and generally getting the stink of London out of my system. I was taking the landlord’s dogs out for a bit of a post-prandial run when I saw this place sitting on the end of the causeway, just asking to be poked into. And, like you, I got rounded up by what was probably the same bunch of so-called gamekeepers. The dogs had the sense to bolt for home.” He smiled a bit sheepishly. “Serves me right for being so nosy. But more to the point, why are you here, and how long have you inhabited this ritzy place? This isn’t exactly the old metropolis of London.”

“About twenty-four hours.” Dickson gestured with his chin. “It’s a long story, so pull up a rock.”

When Dickson had finished his explanation there was what is sometimes called a thundering silence, for he had just told a story that, on the face of it, would have got him laughed out of every decent club in London. Not that Dickson, unlike Drummond, belonged to any decent clubs.

“You mean, this thing is genuine, not some stitched-together hoax?” asked Drummond.

“According to the Natural History Museum’s curator of dinosaurs, or whatever you call him, it’s a living, breathing, flying worst nightmare from Hell.”

“Sounds like my aunt Matilda. So it’s real?”

“Absolutely” said Dickson, nodding. “Imagine a cross between a pterodactyl with a ten foot wingspan, a crocodile’s head and claws like a monstrous eagle, and you’ll get some idea.”

“You paint a pretty picture of something that ought to be extinct. Where did it come from?”

“A farmer caught it snapping up one of his sheep. Gave it both barrels of his twelve bore. He said it came out of the setting sun like one of those fighter planes.”

“And he didn’t try to sell it to the local press?”

“Never got the chance.” Dickson shook his head. “Seems some swell called Hannay was staying with a pal in the area.”

“Not Major-General Sir Richard Hannay?”

“That’s the one. Anyway, don’t interrupt. This Hannay spirited the thing away and sent it post haste to the Natural History Museum.” He cocked an eye at Drummond. “You know Hannay?”

Drummond nodded.

“Same club, dear boy. But go on, go on.”

“Well, it seems a couple of days later, Sir Walter Bullivant, you know, the...”

Drummond nodded. “I know who he is.”

“Anyway, he got a hand-delivered note with a photo and descriptions, and a demand for ten million pounds, or the writer was going to let loose dozens of the damned things all over England.”

“How did you get involved?” asked Drummond. “Oh, of course, you were some sort of spook during the war.”

“Bullivant wanted it kept quiet: a secret investigation. He remembered me and roped me in.”

“Why not the police?” inquired Drummond.

“Bullivant said he didn’t want a bunch of coppers tramping across the West of Scotland asking questions and scaring the locals.”

“The farmer?”

“Given untold gold and threatened within an inch of his life.”

Drummond’s next question was deceptively quiet:

“Found out anything yet?”

Dickson wasn’t deceived. He knew his man of old. The slightly loony front hid a startling capacity for getting at the truth, and then dealing with the problem effectively. There was a twinkle in his eye.

“I left the best bit for last. The letter was signed.”

The silence was palpable.

“Does the name ‘Peterson’ mean anything to you?”

The palpable silence deepened. Drummond’s face got uglier and granitic. Slowly he stood up, went to the door, then turned.

“I suppose you know you’ve got my full attention.”

“Rather thought I would,” said Dickson, smiling.

Drummond looked upwards. “Then this is...”

“The lion’s den, yes.”

“How the Devil did you find it? I mean, dear old Carl is a wily bird. He doesn’t usually exactly advertize his presence.”

“How are the mighty fallen.” Dickson looked self-satisfied. “The trouble with this kind of place is, they aren’t quite ten a penny; at least, not livable castles sufficiently far from nosy neighbors. And you can’t exactly go around knocking on doors asking if they’re for rent, or do they have nice dungeons and assorted barns. I mean, you might raise one or two eyebrows.”

“With you so far old bean,” nodded Drummond.

“Discrete inquiries with local bobbies, the aforementioned farmer, and one or two chaps who specialize in arranging rents and sales and so on, and I managed to zero in on this place. Added to which, I narrowed it down when I mention a fellow accompanied by a stunningly beautiful woman. You’d be amazed at how many chaps remembered dear Irma.”

“No wonder Bullivant roped you in.”

“Elementary, my dear chap. Any detective could have done it.”

Drummond digested the information.

“One wonders how dear Carl has managed the impossible this time. I mean, for God’s sake, dinosaurs are extinct and you can’t just whistle up something like that.”

Dickson’s face had also lost its humor.

“You can if you have a tame mad vivisectionist called Doctor Lerne who’s been known to carry out successful organ transplants, both between men and animals. It seems this Lerne was a student of Moreau, or something like that...”

“Sorry old bean, you’ve lost me,” said Drummond, puzzled.

“Moreau.”

“More of who?”

“Doctor Moreau,” sighed Dickson. “Name means anything?”

Drummond’s brow furrowed, then enlightenment dawned.

“Good God! The fellow who had that dreadful island? But that was years ago.”

“That’s the man.”

“The how the deuce does he fit in?”

Harry shook his head. “He doesn’t. But Lerne is ten times more capable than Moreau ever was.”

“And you know this how?”

“Peterson came and gave me an orientation lecture just after I was nabbed.”

Drummond’s slightly oafish exterior slipped away like a snake’s skin. Dickson wondered why he bothered with it, but realized it was actually a very good disguise.

“And old Carl vouchsafed this unto you?”

“Word for word.”

“So this really is a stitched together monstrosity after all, a one-off that got shot,” said Drummond, his expression lightening.

His optimism was lowered several rungs by Dickson’s answer:

“Unfortunately no. The thing is literally a biological creation. God knows how Lerne did it, and the Natural History Museum is utterly mystified. There was a report of a bunch of dinosaurs discovered in a valley in the Auvergne near Gambertin... Perhaps that was the source of Lerne’s samples? Who knows? But there it is. And according to the brains, if he’s done one he can do as many as he likes.” He managed a smile. “It seems Peterson has a bit of a sense of humor because he’s called it *Diablosaurus Petersonii*.”

“And you say he signed the letter as well?” asked Drummond, frowning. “That was stupid: Carl must be slipping. Anyway, he has no sense of humor: more a god complex.” He turned and stared through the bars. “The problem is, how the Devil do we get out of here and put a spoke in his wheel?”

“Well, unless he intends to starve us to death, at some time someone’s going to come along with our dinner. All we have to do is...”

“Biff them over the head, do a bit of wrecking, collar Carl, and put the rest in the hands of the police. Problem solved. Can’t think why I didn’t think of it.”

“If you’re going to be negative and put it that way,” said Dickson, looking slightly put out.

Drummond smiled cheerfully. The thought of action always brightened his outlook on life.

“Not at all, dear boy. Your scheme is perfectly sound. The only fly in the ointment might be that they’ll come in gaggles and have guns, and we’ve got our hands firmly tied behind our backs.”

Irma Peterson fitted a cigarette into her long holder and lit it. She blew a plume of smoke and looked across the room to where Carl Peterson stood silhouetted at a tall window.

“So our nemesis is finally behind bars. I wonder how he found us.

“His usual inane luck,” replied Peterson, shrugging.

“The other will tell him if it’s a coincidence, of course.”

“I do not believe in coincidences.”

“What do you intend this time?”

Peterson continued his study of a pair of hunting falcons.

“A final solution naturally. I cannot risk his meddling.”

Irma seemed amused.

“He does have a way of spoiling things, does he not?”

Peterson turned to face her.

“There are more than twenty diablosaurs in the barn already. They are no doubt hungry. Even Drummond cannot escape such creatures.”

Irma raised one perfect eyebrow. It seemed that even she found such an end disquieting for a man she reluctantly admired. Without comment, she picked up a magazine and absently flicked through the glossy pages.

Peterson strolled slowly to an escritoire, chose a cigar from a humidor and lit it with evident satisfaction.

“I shall be with Lerne,” he said. A mantelpiece clock chimed for attention. He glanced at it. “We dine at eight. After that I shall see to Drummond and the other interfering fool.”

Major-General Sir Richard Hannay looked across the large desk at Sir Walter Bullivant. The great man seemed worried.

“No word from Harry Dickson?” Hannay inquired.

Bullivant toyed with a pencil then threw it down in a gesture of frustration.

“Nothing. He’s missed his schedule. It’s been twenty-four hours. I tell you, Hannay, I’m worried.”

“There may be any number of reasons. He may be close to his man and not able to risk giving himself away.”

Bullivant’s expression didn’t change.

“Perhaps. But his mandate at first was to observe and report back. Dash it all, I’d send in the army if I thought it would do any good. The deuce of it is that it’s on a spit, accessible only by a causeway and cut off by high tide, and he has a steam yacht. The moment our man smelled a rat, he’d be gone and in international waters. We’d be back where we started with this horror still looming.”

“You’re convinced he’s genuine?” said Hannay.

“Horribly.” Bullivant waved a dismissive hand. “The money is nothing. But once he’s got it, what’s to stop him unleashing the things anyway. God knows he hates us enough.”

Hannay crossed one tweed covered leg over the other. His tone was casual.

“I don’t suppose it would help if I went up and took a look?”

Sir Walter jumped at the offer.

“Would you? I mean, could you? What about your wife?”

“Mary’s at Cannes with Janet Roylance, and Peter John’s at school. So, you see, I’m my own man at the moment, just roughing it at my club. I’d welcome a bit of action.”

“I’d be damned glad if you would,” said Bullivant.

Hannay got up.

“As old Peter Pienaar would have said, we shall make a plan.”

Five minutes later Major-General Sir Richard Hannay left the august portals of the Home Office and was striding across St. James’s Park towards his club. There was a twinkle in his eye and a spring in his step. He would take the night train to Glasgow.

Carl Peterson entered the laboratory in the ancient Castle Dubh. He stood in the doorway watching the genius of his newest confederate, Doctor Lerne. His thoughts on the subject of the good doctor were not pleasant, and he wondered what the man would have said if he knew what would occur once his usefulness was at an end. He also thought the castle’s name was appropriate, for it was black indeed.

“Good evening Doctor,” he said. “I trust that all goes according to plan.”

It was not a question, but the doctor was oblivious to the veiled threat. He unbent his back from peering into a microscope and pushed his small round spectacles to the top of his thinning forehead.

“You trust correctly. What may I do for you Mr. Peterson?”

“Exactly what you are doing Doctor, but perhaps at a slightly accelerated pace.”

Doctor Lerne turned back to his study of the microscope slide.

“These matters cannot be hurried.”

His tone was a touch acerbic. Peterson answering smile was thin and lacked any degree of warmth.

“I have obtained two test subjects for you,” he said.

Lerne jerked up.

“Who? Where?”

There was a quiver in his voice and stare in his eyes that betrayed a mind on the verge of madness or in the grip of drugs. Peterson ignored the question.

“How many diablosaurs have we now?”

“I have decided to call them *kraks*.”

Peterson raised an angry eyebrow. “What they are called is for me to...” He stopped. Best to let it ride. He needed the doctor for the time being and, as Shakespeare had written, what’s in a name. Lerne might call the creatures *kraks*, but the world would know them as *Diablosaurus Petersonii*, and tremble.

“How many, doctor?”

“Twenty three. More are... hatching as we speak.” He advanced a couple of steps. “Well, what of these... subjects?”

Lerne’s enthusiasm for the demonstration was replaced by his even keener enthusiasm for his creations. He beckoned eagerly.

“Come Mr. Peterson, come. Let me show you.”

Peterson smiled inwardly. The man was undoubtedly mad, but also undoubtedly a genius. How else could one possibly describe someone who had achieved the impossible and literally created life? He allowed himself to be led into the huge stone barn attached to the castle by a newly constructed passageway.

The passage opened up into a closed off section constructed of steel bars. Beyond the bars was the barn, and in it were arranged in serried rows, a series of strong steel mesh cages.

In themselves, the cages were no different than those used to transport dangerous animals to and from a zoo. But in those cages there strode and hopped on huge raptor's talons, hissing like leaky steam valves, and clacking horrendous beaks as they flapped leather wings in attempts to escape their confinement, the fearsome creatures Peterson had named Diablosaurs.

Carl Peterson was a man whose emotions were as cold as ice water, but even he was glad of the strong bars protecting himself and the doctor. Genius indeed the doctor might be, but it had been his genius to realize the potential the creatures offered. Money indeed, and more than he could use in a lifetime, but, overall, had been the prospect of revenge over the country he had come to hate. An unpleasant smile lurked at the corners of his thin lips. Also revenge against his nemesis, that bungling oaf Bulldog Drummond.

He gave a low growl of anger as a thought crept unbidden into his mind. How had the fool found him? Irma had suggested coincidence: it was a possibility, even though he had no time for coincidences. How else could Drummond have...? He whirled about and returned along the passage to the laboratory. There he stopped while Lerne caught up.

Peterson drew on his cigar and examined the half inch of ash.

"I think we shall have a demonstration this evening after dinner"

He turned to go. Lerne called out, his voice agitated:

"I insist, Peterson. I must know who these... subjects are."

Peterson looked at him coldly.

"It is of no concern to you, doctor." He drew on his cigar and sauntered out of the laboratory. He called over his shoulder. "One hundred, doctor. I require one hundred. It is in our... agreement, remember?"

Not more than an hour after Drummond had been so unceremoniously shoved into the cellar; Major-General Sir Richard Hannay leaned back against the dry stone wall and steadied the telescope in the vee of his walking stick. The range was a little over a half mile. Castle Dubh stood out against the sea silvered by the morning sun. He did not find the sight particularly inspiring.

"The only chance is to go in after dark," he said to the man lounging at his side.

Archie Roylance was equally unimpressed.

"Never did much like night raids. I like to see my enemy."

Hannay lowered the telescope.

"That's because you were up at a couple of thousand feet. Down on the ground, darkness is your friend."

"Does the general have a plan?" Archie's tone was a touch sarcastic.

"A pincer movement should do it."

"There'll be guards roaming or I'm the Queen of Hearts."

"We need to cross the causeway," said Hannay, nodding. "What time is low water?"

"Round about ten, I think."

"And the moon?"

"First quarter and it rises at midnight."

Hannay raised his telescope and peered again at the castle. He snapped the scope shut.

"I think I'll send a telegram to Glasgow. There are a few lads from my old regiment who'd probably welcome a bit of sport."

"And the plan?" Archie insisted.

"We take as much explosives as can fit in a decent-sized push cart, and blow the place up. A ton should do the trick."

Archie Roylance had his own plan.

"Why not just whistle up a gunboat and blow the place to smithereens?"

Hannay rounded on him fiercely.

"Absolutely not. My God! Think of the outrage and questions in the House. The press would have a heyday and heads would probably roll. An explosion can be put down as a mystery, or an anarchist outrage. Bullivant could manage that, but not one of His Majesty's ships shelling private property."

Archie retreated, slightly abashed.

"I suppose you have a source for the explosives?" he asked.

Hannay shrugged as if such a thing was an everyday requisite.

"A lorry can deliver them within two hours of my call."

Archie Roylance reached out and took the telescope. He examined the castle.

"I wish I had that kind of pull," he brightened. "We'll need guns: rifles and whatnot."

"Rifles are a no go with these things," Hannay said. "They're like damned great eagles: vicious and fast. Archie, you're in charge of shotguns, more if possible. Get a dozen. Beg, buy, borrow or steal. And cartridges: lots of cartridges. Bird shot won't do unless it's turkey."

"The farmer got one."

"He was lucky. See if you can get #2 shot, but #4 will do."

Archie Roylance unhitched himself from his seat on the wall. "And he did his master's bidding. I'll be back by dinner time at the latest."

Bulldog Drummond had about him the air of a disgruntled bear. He gave a massive sigh. "Right about now, I could do with half a dozen eggs, a pound of bacon, and at least three pints of good ale."

"I was thinking along the lines of a steak and kidney pie," said Harry Dickson. "What time d'you reckon it is?"

"Getting rather late for dinner," Drummond growled.

"My thoughts exactly. I fancy we're on short commons tonight."

Drummond grunted. There was about him the air of a man concentrating to the full and exerting huge strength. Dickson looked at him.

"You all right, old man?"

Drummond gave one last grunt of effort and suddenly his hands were free. He winced as he massaged life back into numbed extremities.

"Persistence; that's what does it Harry. Never give up."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Drummond stood up.

"Didn't want to get your hopes up." He dragged Dickson to his feet and untied his hands. He grinned wickedly. "We now have two aces up our sleeves. Sooner or later someone will remember us, at which time we shall catch them with their pants down and make our escape. However," he cautioned. "When they come, we must be models of meekness and self-pity, our hands safely behind our backs."

"You don't do meekness and self-pity."

Drummond scratched his chin. "I'm not much of an actor, but the poor light should cover that defect. In the meantime, let sleep re-knit the raveled sleeve of care or whatever."

And, suiting the actions to the words, Hugh Drummond lay down and within a couple of minutes his snores reverberated through their cell like an express train in a tunnel.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK...