

The Floating Dutchman

# Nicolas Bentley

murder one

£ 2.00

'Tough, fast-moving... you can't put it down'

Evening News



Panther

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Mr Bentley's Dutchman is - at first - just one more pathetic body fished out of the Thames by the River Police. At first. Until the police begin to examine him. Someone had systematically worked the man over, removing every trace of his identity. Every trace but one. A small pink card had slid down behind the torn lining of a pocket. And so Scotland Yard moves in. . . .

*The Floating Dutchman* involves enough action, violence and sudden death to satisfy even the most blasé addict of crime fiction.



Nicolas Bentley

# The Floating Dutchman

Panther

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To Paul Rotha  
commemorating a trip to nowhere  
via Cuddington, Liverpool and  
South Kensington





## Chapter One

The launch slid under the dark expanse of the bridge and pulled out on the far side. High overhead Big Ben's twin faces showed the time was half-past one. Higher still, the lantern gleaming above the clock tower indicated that the Mother of Parliaments was still in labour, even at this early hour. The moon in its first quarter threw a speckled track of light across the river, and as though the effort of this illumination was too much for it, left the rest of the scene in darkness.

In the launch were two men of the River Police, one of them a sergeant. The other, who was at the wheel, was steering left-handed, and as he leant forward over the engine cowling, he peered ahead at the navigation lights in the distance. A light breeze blowing up river slapped the water against the belly of the launch as it rose up to meet the waves and then pitched back again. Now and then the man at the wheel shifted a little to ease the position of his steering arm.

'Wind's getting up a bit,' he said presently.

The sergeant, enjoying an illicit smoke, grunted from the stern sheets. He cupped his cigarette in his right hand, took a good pull at it, and then passed it over. Suddenly he stood up, peering astern into the darkness; immediately the man beside him throttled down and pitched his cigarette overboard. The sergeant, gripping the gunwale, leant out over the water and again gave a signal for the boat to slow down. As it slackened speed the man at the wheel, following the sergeant's gaze, peered into the shadows below the Embankment wall, but could see nothing.

'Hard to port - go on, hard!' ordered the sergeant. The launch veered round, rolling as it met the current broadside on. 'Steady - steady - now bring her round - right round,' said the sergeant.

A broad beam of light split the darkness as he turned the launch's searchlight full on. Between the launch and the Embankment a dozen yards away a man lay floating face downwards in the water. The policeman nosed the launch towards him, and as they drew alongside, the sergeant made a grab at the collar of the man's jacket, and between them they raised him out of the water. The beam of the searchlight rocked and quivered as they struggled to bring him aboard; then, as they drew the full weight

of his body over the gunwale and the boat righted itself, the light shot up on to the stone Embankment.

Squatting on his haunches in the bottom of the boat, the sergeant scraped the wet hair away from the man's face, and with the back of his hand felt his cheek for some sign either of life or death.

'I reckon he's had it,' he said, blowing his breath out with a melancholy sound.

The policeman shook the water off his hands and rubbed them against his reefer. Then he turned the searchlight off and went back to the wheel. Throwing it hard to port, he brought the boat round and, with the throttle wide open, headed off down the river.

As the launch came alongside the pier below Charing Cross, the sergeant hopped on to the dimly lit jetty and went into the station house. It was a long floating bungalow, and the charge room inside was no bigger than a cubicle. The night-duty officer looked up from a mug of tea as the sergeant came in.

'Hullo?'

'One stiff, reporting,' said the sergeant. 'Can you give me a hand?'

'Okey doke.' The night-duty man swilled his tea round and drank it off, then reached for the telephone and dialled a number. He waited, tapping his teeth with a penholder, and presently there was an answer.

'Doctor Braithwaite? River police here, landing stage, Charing Cross. Sorry to bother you so late, Doctor. Got a body here, just recovered. Could you pop along and certify? . . . Okay, thank you.'

He took down a box lamp from a shelf by the door and followed the sergeant outside. Between them, while the policeman held the launch steady, they lifted the drowned man out on to the jetty and laid his body down in the shelter of the station house. The sergeant turned the box lamp on to the man's face. It was not a pretty sight - a coarse, foxy-looking face which was now bloated and hideously suffused. The head was lying tilted back so that the jaws hung open, and the light shining down into the man's throat showed gold stoppings in his back teeth.

The sergeant knelt down beside the body and began to go through the man's pockets. He searched carefully but could find nothing. Every piece of property, every trace of the man's identity, seemed to have been removed. The sergeant began to search again. This time he turned each pocket inside out, and then went

systematically through the lining of each piece of clothing. At the top of the inside breast pocket the lining had come unstitched and had left a small opening. He felt carefully round the pocket without finding anything. Then he ran his hand round the hem inside the lining of the jacket, and presently, through the wet stuff, his fingers detected something flat and soft. He took out a penknife and cut a slit in the material, then very gingerly he drew out the sodden remains of a small pink card. It was folded in half and was printed, on one side only, with the words:

SKINNER'S  
30 Arlington Place, W.1

Supper

Dancing

On the other side, in ink which had been almost washed away, was written: Ezra - Museum 2545.

The sergeant handed the card to the night-duty officer. Then he drew a tarpaulin over the body and stood up. Holding the card as though it might be some fragment of a rare papyrus, the night-duty officer looked at it under the light.

'Supper and dancing,' he said, and spat into the water.

From the gangway leading up to the Embankment, there came presently a sound of footsteps as a man fumbled his way out of the darkness on to the jetty. The night-duty officer turned the lamp towards him.

'Evening, Doctor.'

The doctor growled. He came forward, shielding his face against the light, and put down his bag. The sergeant stripped back the tarpaulin from the body and the doctor knelt down and began his examination.

Somewhere up river a tug began bleating for its pilot. Overhead an all-night tram rumbled along the Embankment. The water lapped against the jetty with a gentle, thirsty tongue. No one spoke. Presently the doctor stood up.

'I can't certify this man,' he said, 'not without a post-mortem. Looks to me as if he was dead before he got in the water.'

## Chapter Two

A stone's throw from where Old and New Bond Streets merge, giving the stone a leg-break to the north-west, there lies a broad mews. In happier days for horses, those belonging to the aristocracy had once been stabled here. Now it was the aristocracy's turn to occupy the stables, neatly converted into urban cottages, with here and there a flower shop, a beauty parlour or some princeling of the *haute couture* sandwiched between their modest fronts.

Night had come upon the mews, and over one of the doorways a neon sign in mauve script glittered with the word *Skinner's*. Underneath the sign a pair of striped poles topped with Venetian lanterns stood aslant on either side of the entrance. Inside, a small thick-carpeted lobby opened out into a lounge, from which a staircase on the right led up to a door marked discreetly with the word *dames*. On the right was a long bar. There was an air of elegance about the place, an elegance that seemed as if it had been bought and paid for along with the mirrored walls, the flowers massed in Italianate urns, and the zebra-striped upholstery.

At the back, where a ladder had once led up to the hay loft, a staircase now led down from a balcony on to a dance floor. The floor was more than comfortably filled just now, and the sounds that arose from it, filtering back towards the bar, formed a muted obbligato to the conversation there – or what passed for conversation between the sleek habitués of the place.

Among them, sitting up at the bar, was a girl in grey chiffon. She was a good-looking girl with the kind of good looks that it was once fashionable to compare with an English rose. She had an air of self-possession about her which seemed as though it were the reflection of an inner dignity rather than a hard-boiled shell purposely imposed. But it was a dignity which at this moment had something of a crust on it.

Beside her was a young man between twenty-five and thirty. He was slight and slim, but with the compact, wiry body of an athlete. The tips of his manicured fingers, caressing her bare arm, seemed impervious to frost-bite.

'You're wrong, Rosie,' he said softly. 'There's nothing, Rose, nothing in this world that money can't buy.'

'What are you going to use in the next one?' asked Rose. Her voice was like honey in which the bee had left its sting.

'Not interested in the next one,' he said. 'This one'll do for me.'

'I wish I thought so,' said Rose. The look she turned towards him seemed to see nothing of any consequence. He stared back at her with large, light eyes, eyes that showed little surprise and less warmth. His lips were small and firm, and it seemed as though their smallness and firmness might have come from too little exercise in smiling. He was neither good-looking nor bad-looking, and consequently was undistinguished by anything but his clothes, which were impeccable, and his hair, which was so fair as to be almost white.

'Rose, why not be nice to me for a change? Why not, Rose? You're too nice not to be nice,' he said gently, yet with just a hint of impatience.

'I'm hired to be nice to the customers, not the management,' she said.

'How about getting down on the floor, then, and being nice to them there?'

This was a pleasantry eased into the conversation by a man who came quietly behind them at this moment. He looked an astute, hard-bitten type, with a face as smooth as his manners and an expression of not so innocent *esprit* in his eye. It was a look that seemed to derive less from observing others than from keeping a careful watch on himself. He tossed his soft black hat to a waiter and hitched himself on to a stool at the corner of the bar.

'And Snow White is not the management,' he said. 'I am the management. Will you remember that?' He looked at Rose with a smile in which amusement had no part. Rose smiled back, beating him without much effort in the matter of indifference.

'Is it my fault, Vic, if the customers don't want to dance?'

'Maybe.'

Rose ignored it. She took her bag off the counter and moved away.

'Evening, Mr. Skinner,' said the barman. From underneath the counter he produced a carnation in a glass of water and handed it to Skinner.

'I was giving her a drink, Vic, that's all,' said Snow White. There was a hint of subservience in his manner which seemed to smack not of apology but of veneration, an air of eagerness to please, to notice all that Victor might do or say, and to be noticed in return. 'Just a drink. That's all she takes.'

'Muddy luck, old boy,' said Victor; and then with a slight but perceptible hardening of his tone, 'Well, leave the drinks to the

customers, will you? They pay. Has Ruffo rung?’

‘I wouldn’t know. I only just came in.’

Snow White looked sideways at himself in the mirrored wall of the bar and flattened the ends of his satin bow. He reached for a toothpick off the counter, stuck it between his lips, then wandered away.

Victor took the carnation out of the tumbler and put it carefully in his lapel, then signed to the barman.

‘Harry – anyone rung for me this evening?’

‘Not to my knowledge, Mr. Skinner.’

A noise of distant clapping floated up from the dance floor and the band led off into a new number. Victor picked a cigarette out of his case and felt in his pocket for his lighter; it was not there. He leaned across to a man sitting nearby and tapped him on the arm.

‘Do you happen to have a light?’

The man turned and smiled languidly at Skinner.

‘I do,’ he said, ‘—and it works.’ He flipped open a gold lighter as he spoke, and held it to Victor’s cigarette. Its cap was formed into a diamond-eyed dog’s head.

‘May I see?’

Victor took the thing in his hand and examined it, then jerked the cap open and glanced at the setting of the dog’s eyes.

‘They look like the real thing,’ he said admiringly.

‘Could be,’ said the man. There was an air of easy-going indifference about him that showed itself in a salty smile which seemed to come fairly easily without coming too often. Between himself and Skinner there seemed hardly more than a year or two in the matter of age, and thirty-five would not have been an uncharitable guess.

‘You in the ice racket?’ Victor asked, as he handed back the man’s lighter.

‘In ice? No, not exactly.’

‘“Exactly” meaning what – exactly?’

‘Oh, I do a deal now and again, you know. I don’t make it a habit though.’

‘In stones?’

‘Sometimes.’

Victor looked at him abstractedly.

‘How about the other times?’

This time it was the man who glanced at Victor; he smiled.

‘Well . . . that depends.’

‘On what?’

'Oh . . . on this and that, you know. Maybe on who's dealing.'

'Perhaps we could do a deal together some time,' Victor suggested amiably.

'I don't mind drinking to that. What'll you have?'

Victor turned to the barman,

'Harry, what'll I have?'

The barman grinned and poured some apple juice into a glass.

'I don't drink,' said Victor. 'D'you mind?'

'I'll get over it.'

'Something to deaden the shock, sir?' suggested the barman. 'Brandy and soda?'

'Well, good national health,' said Victor, as he downed his apple juice like a man. 'Any time you've something likely to interest me . . .?'

'Such as?'

Victor paused reflectively; then he slipped down from the bar.

'Let's go into the office,' he said, 'shall we? Bring the poison with you.'

'What do you call the office?'

'I call it the office. I own this place - I'm Skinner.'

'I'm James,' said the other. 'I own practically nothing.'

Victor quizzed him, amused. 'You look as though you manage to get along though?'

'I manage to get along.'

'What goes with the James, incidentally?' asked Skinner.

'Almost anything. In the way of names, Alexander Forsyth.'

'I'll take Alexander,' said Victor.

He led the way towards a door near the balcony. It was marked Private. A waiter coming up the stairs at this moment drew him to one side and whispered something. Victor turned to Alexander. 'Sorry. You'll have to excuse me, will you? Some other time perhaps - come around again and we'll have a talk. I mean that.' He followed the waiter downstairs, leaving Alexander alone on the balcony.

For a while he stood there looking down at the dancers. Their music came from a five-piece set-up on a dais in the far corner. From the sound of it, they seemed to know their business pretty well, with a little of Jango Reinhardt's thrown in.

At a table near the bottom of the stairs was sitting the girl in grey chiffon. She was alone, but as Alexander watched her he saw Victor come to the table and slide down on to the banquette beside her. He spoke a few words to her, and immediately she

turned and looked over towards the music. Then she moved as if to get up. But Victor had his hand on her wrist and with a sudden grip he jerked her back on to the seat.

Alexander, because his eye happened to be upon them, saw the incident, and saw what it was the girl in grey had tried to see. Looking towards the dais, he noticed that the guitarist, a tall, tawny-looking fellow, seemed in some sort of trouble. He sat slouching in his chair, gazing down at the guitar in his lap, then looking slowly about him with an expression of detached amusement. His hands were almost still. No one else, it seemed, had noticed anything unusual. Then a waiter stepped to the side of the dais. Quickly he laid the guitar on a chair, and then somehow, with the minimum of fuss, he had got the fellow off the dais and was piloting him across the crowded floor towards the stairs.

Again the girl in grey stood up. She hesitated for a moment, glancing again at Victor, but this time he sat still. Without a word she left the table and came quickly upstairs. Alexander turned and went back towards the end of the lobby. He gave in the check for his hat, nodded good night to the barman, and went out through the swing doors.

At the far end of the mews a taxi was decanting a fare; Alexander hailed the driver. Before the cab had reached him, the swing doors behind him had opened and the guitarist, with the girl in grey beside him, lurched out on to the narrow pavement. The neon sign over the doorway washed them with an unearthly light as they stood there, the man full of mumbling protests, rolling his head from side to side as he leaned against the striped Venetian lamp-post. It was obvious that he was in no shape for a brisk walk.

Alexander hesitated. He looked at the girl, then opened the taxi door.

'Better hop in this one,' he said. Gently but firmly he took hold of the young man and bundled him inside. The girl began to work out a routine of protest.

'Save it,' said Alexander, 'we're not there yet.' He handed her in, still protesting, then he got in after her and slammed the door.

Behind the cross-draped curtains in Skinner's window, behind the silhouette of the hydrangeas banked high in the window-box, the eyes of Snow White followed the taxi as it moved off. He stood there for a moment, glaring out into the darkness of the mews. Then he turned away.



'Really, I don't know why—' said the girl.

'Forget it,' said Alexander.

'But really, there's no need . . . it's awfully kind of you, but really I can manage.' A little catch in her voice seemed to come undone, letting down the self-confidence of her manner.

'Who is he - your husband?' Alexander asked.

'My brother.'

'Is he often taken like this?'

She seemed to find no answer. Alexander suggested one.

'Looks like an old trouble. I know it. Starts in the elbow; you can't keep it on the table. Your name's Rose, isn't it?' he asked.

'How did you know?'

'I was sitting at the bar. I heard.'

Somewhere in the Sherlock Holmes neighbourhood the taxi stopped before a block of flats. Over the main doorway was the name Bryson Court. Alexander, propping up the guitarist, followed Rose into the lobby. Her brother, with the home stretch in front of him, seemed to weaken. As they worked him into the lift his knees sagged and he slid down against the wall. Alexander jerked him back on to his feet.

'Hold on, Jack, we're nearly there,' he said.

Rose's brother turned, and with a blank expression, looked Alexander close in the eye. Then he smiled. It was a gentle smile, a private smile, as though it were meant for himself alone.

'My name isn't Jack. It's Philip - Philip Reed,' he said slowly. He had a lean, sallow face and a short thatch of light brown hair. Though his colouring was different from that of Rose, there was a clear look of resemblance between them. His eyes, like hers, were honey-coloured, but with an odd look about them that seemed to give them an uncommon depth. The pupil, Alexander noticed, was almost as big as the iris.

The lift stopped at the third floor. Rose fumbled through her brother's pockets, found his key and opened the front door.

'Come on,' said Alexander, 'pick 'em up.'

He took a fresh purchase on Philip's slithering body and lugged him into a small, untidy sitting-room. It was evidently a room much lived-in. Clothes, newspapers, and sheet music were scattered about the place, and on a table near the window were the relics of a poker game. Yet in the comfortable disorder there were certain signs of secondhand good taste which suggested that an interior decorator had been at work. The pickled pine, the glass pictures, the lamp-shade pleated from an antique parchment,

all suggested that a good deal of stylized indifference had gone into the furnishing of the place.

Philip rolled down on to a sofa and lay resting uneasily with his head across the arm and his eyes half closed. There was an expression of beatific joy on his face. Alexander looked at him, then looked at Rose:

'I don't know what you think,' he said, 'but I'd suggest some black coffee - hot and strong.'

Rose examined Alexander with an eye full of uncertainty. It was a shy and troubled look. Then she glanced at Philip and as though her mind were suddenly made up, she nodded.

'I think you're right.'

She disappeared, and Alexander heard her busy in the kitchen.

Philip lay on the sofa as though he were half asleep. Without rousing him, Alexander felt his forehead and then his hands. He seemed to have no temperature and his pulse was normal. Gently lifting one of his eyelids, Alexander again noticed the enlarged pupil. He leant close to the sofa and got a whiff of the boy's breath. It smelt strongly of tobacco - of Turkish tobacco - but there was no suggestion of alcohol.

Alexander stood still and listened. He could hear Rose moving about in the kitchen, and in the distance the dim, indecipherable hum of external sounds. The rest was silence. Quickly he slid his hand inside Philip's jacket and from the pocket brought out a silver cigarette-case. It was empty. He slipped the case back and began to search again. This time it was to bring out a blue leather wallet. In it were some Treasury notes, a driving licence that had been twice endorsed, and a membership card for the Instrumentalists' Union. He lifted the inside flap of the wallet and felt to see if there was anything underneath it. He was not disappointed. From the back he took out three crumpled cigarettes. They smelt of Latakia and were rolled in buff paper as thin as an onion skin. He put back two of them and slipped the other into his own case. Then, very gently, he put the wallet away where it had come from.

Again he stopped to listen, and again all that he could hear was Rose in the kitchen. He turned back to Philip and with quick fingers frisked the outside of his pockets. Philip, it seemed, was a man who travelled light. There was nothing to interest Alexander until his fingers touched something which felt as though it were another cigarette-case. Carefully he slid it out and had a look at it. It was a woman's case and was made of gold with a clasp of

diamonds and rubies. The only thing inside it was an inscription: *To Veronica from Charles, Cannes, 1938.*

He was standing there with the case still in his hand when Rose came back into the room. In her absence she seemed to have resolved whatever doubts she may have felt about Alexander or his intentions. It looked as if her anxiety was now centred on Philip, and it was at him that she glanced first of all as she came into the room.

'I thought perhaps you'd like some coffee, too,' she said, turning to Alexander. 'I've made enough for all of us.' She began to push aside the poker things lying on the table.

'He's not tight at all, this brother of yours,' said Alexander. Rose stared at him, looking uncomfortably surprised, but said nothing. 'Perhaps you knew that?'

'How do you mean? What do you think's wrong?'

'Your guess is as good as mine,' said Alexander, '—probably better.' Rose put the coffee-tray down on the table and took Philip's hand in her own. She stood there looking anxiously at him for a moment or two. Then she let his hand fall.

'You don't want to send for a doctor?' Alexander asked. She didn't answer. 'Wouldn't that be the best thing?' he suggested. 'Unless you've guessed what's the matter.'

There was a pause, then she said quietly, 'You're right. He has been like this before — but only once or twice.'

'You know what it is then?' She nodded. 'Where does he get the stuff, d'you know?'

'I don't know.'

Alexander held up the cigarette-case. 'Is this yours?'

Again she hesitated, then, 'Where did you find it?' she asked quickly.

'It fell out of his pocket.'

'Yes, it's mine. It was a present.' She looked at him with a candid and unconcerned expression.

Alexander glanced inside the case.

'From Geoffrey to Rose,' he said. 'Who's Geoffrey?'

'A friend. He gave it to me.'

Alexander shook his head. 'Not this one, sister,' he said, and he showed her the inscription.

There was a moment of silence, a silence as painful as a wound. Then Alexander asked, 'How about Veronica? Who's she?'

Rose seemed to be fighting a battle within herself and losing it. The struggle was short and sharp,

'I don't know - I know nothing about it, nothing, nothing! Oh, please, leave me alone - will you please go away now and leave me!'

All her elegance, all her dignity seemed suddenly to be dissolved by distress. She crouched awkwardly in a chair, turning away to try to hide from Alexander the tears that seemed to wash away her words.

He filled a cup with coffee for her and pushed it across the table, then poured one for himself. He let her take her time before he spoke again.

'If I said I believed you, it still wouldn't let Philip out, would it?' She had begun to pull herself together now. 'Listen, sister, a gold case like this - exactly like this one - and a lot of gear that goes with it, was lifted from a flat in Albany last week. That flat belonged to Veronica Hurlingham, Countess of. How do I know? Because a little bird told me so; and birds of a feather stick together or they lose their pants. If Philip wants to keep his, I should tell him to stand this on the ice till it cools off. Here, take it away - it burns my fingers.'

He pushed the cigarette-case across the table. Rose looked at him bewildered, as if she didn't know whether to believe him, or, if she did, whether to trust him - whether to laugh or cry or tell him to clear out. Alexander solved the problem for her.

'Now, how about administering some first aid?' he said. He got up and undid Philip's collar, then stripped off his tie. 'Is there any ice?'

'I'll see,' said Rose obediently. She went back into the kitchen and brought in some ice cubes. Alexander took a handful of them and rubbed them roughly over Philip's head and neck. He slapped his cheeks and shook him about on the sofa, pummelling the short hairs on the back of his scalp. Slowly Philip began to show signs of consciousness. Soon, with a little help, he was able to drink the black coffee Rose had poured out for him. Presently he leaned over towards Alexander and said in a dim, puzzled voice:

'Who are you?'

'Me? I'm Saint Christopher. You wouldn't have got here without me.'

Philip rubbed a weary hand across his face. Slowly he licked his lips.

'Don't get it,' he said. Then his eye lit on the cigarette-case lying on the table. For a long time, while Rose and Alexander watched him, he gazed at it. Then he began clumsily and with

growing anxiety to search his pockets. Alexander reached out and put the case into his hand.

'It's all right, it's the same one,' he said. Philip gaped stupidly at him, then looked again at the case. 'It fell out of your pocket. If I were you I'd keep this in a safe place - just for a while. I wouldn't carry it around.'

'Carry it around?'

'That's what I wouldn't do.' Alexander explained it to him clearly and patiently, as though he were speaking to a deaf relation. 'It's too hot.'

Philip nodded sagaciously, and went on nodding.

'Too hot? Too hot. Okay - Rose?' - he looked round for her - 'Rosie, open the window, will you? It's too hot. Let's get a bit of air in here—'

'This - *this* is hot!' said Alexander. He held the case up close in front of Philip's nose. Philip gazed at it uncomprehendingly for a few seconds with a look that seemed at once cunning and alarmed. He gave a sudden, spasmodic grin, then his head fell forward on to his arms and he burst into tears.

'Here, put it away - forget it,' said Alexander. He slipped the case back into Philip's pocket and got up.

It was as though, with Philip's collapse, Rose suddenly forgot her own anxieties. She took his head in her lap and soothed him for a little while, and when he had got over the worst of it, she drew out his handkerchief and wiped his face as she might have wiped a child's.

Alexander stood by and watched her. When she had finished he took up his hat from the table.

'Well, I think I've done all the damage I can do,' he said. 'Try to keep him awake. Give him some more coffee - plenty of it. Walk him round the floor, round the passage outside - anywhere. Just keep him walking.' He lifted up Philip's eyelid - Philip took it as though he were a demonstration case - and looked once more at the pupil. 'He'll be all right.'

'I'll get some more coffee,' said Rose. She took the pot and went back quickly into the kitchen. Philip sat looking at Alexander with a cagey, incredulous look, as though he had said something which he ought not to have said and was now trying to think what it was.

'Any time you need to remember it,' said Alexander quietly, 'I've got a pocket lined with asbestos in my other suit.'

Philip looked at him dumbly for a moment, then he nodded and smiled a slow smile. 'Asbestos,' he repeated.

Alexander nodded, then left him and went out to the kitchen.

'What part do you live in, by the way?' he asked Rose. 'Perhaps I ought to stay and see you home?'

'Thank you, it's kind of you. But I live just across the hall.' She put the glass coffee jar back on the shelf and followed him out to the front door. 'And thank you for helping me, too.'

There was nothing much except the words themselves to make them sound true. Alexander quizzed her for a few seconds.

'What are you doing in a joint like Skinner's?' he asked. 'Working there, I mean. It's no place for a lady, I should have thought - unless you're a customer.'

'Thank you for that, too,' said Rose simply. 'It's a job, that's all.' She gave a shrug.

'If that is all, then I suppose it doesn't much matter. Well - à *bientôt*.'

He slipped away down the stairs. It was a few seconds before he heard Rose shut the door - seconds that told him she had waited there for a moment after he had gone.

Outside in the street he stopped and lit a cigarette. As he did so, a man stepped forward from the shadows beyond the entrance.

'Could I borrow your lighter?' he asked.

Keeping his eyes on Alexander, he held the flame to his cigarette, then handed the lighter back with a word of thanks and disappeared. His face and figure seemed comparatively young, yet Alexander noticed that his hair was almost white.

### Chapter Three

There they stood, row upon row, the embalmed fruits of dead minds, some indifferently preserved against obscurity, others still rich and ripe. Goldsmith, Dickens, Crabbe, Lever, Byron, Borrow, *The Yellow Book*, *The London Spy*, *Young's Night Thoughts*, and, inevitably, *Paley's Sermons*.

Glancing along the shelves, Alexander could see nothing that seemed likely to set the blood coursing through his veins. The stock in Mr. Herring's window looked much the same as that of

any other second-hand bookseller in a modest way of business.

Alexander turned away from the window and went inside. The shop was small and neatly kept, but musty-smelling and rather dark; the window, being filled almost from top to bottom with books, served to keep the light out rather than let it in. At the back of the shop there was a glazed door leading to what seemed to be a combined office and parlour. Through this door could be seen yet another window, looking out on to a whitewashed yard with a fig-tree in it and a line of washing suspended between the walls.

The shelves around the shop were crowded from floor to ceiling with books arranged in categories and classified by hand-lettered labels. The overflow from the shelves was dispersed on a large table which allowed just enough room for a single line of bibliophiles to pass round it. Beside the door of the shop were hanging some small cheap prints and Victorian engravings. Others were lying about loose or in frames wherever there was room for them.

As Alexander came in, a spectacled youth of studious looks was browsing nose-deep among the shelves. With his face half hidden in an ancient *Hudibras*, he rolled a cautious and disapproving eye at Alexander – an eye which he removed quickly when he saw that Alexander had noticed him.

Alexander fingered his way along the bindings set out on the table. Then he moved slowly round the shelves towards the door at the back of the shop. Presently the door opened and a small man in khaki overalls came out.

‘Hullo, Mr. James – good morning,’ said the small man cheerfully.

‘Morning, Mr. Herring. Mind if I have a look round?’ Alexander asked.

‘I’m open till this evening,’ said Mr. Herring brightly. He cackled at this shaft, then took off his glasses and began rubbing them up with his handkerchief. He was a bright, middle-aged, bird-like creature with a bald head and myopic eyes. For a moment or two he busied himself among the shelves. Alexander, edging past him, glanced into the office. A man with an umbrella was standing by the desk going through a parcel of books.

‘Got a caller this morning,’ said Mr Herring briefly.

Alexander said nothing. He took out his cigarette-case and offered it to Mr. Herring. There was one cigarette left – a crumpled, brown cigarette rolled in paper that was almost transparent. Mr. Herring paused for a moment. He glanced at the browsing

boy, and then at Alexander. Alexander nodded.

'Ta,' said Mr. Herring. He took the cigarette and sniffed it appreciatively, then stuck it behind his ear. 'I'll keep it, if you don't mind. I don't smoke in the shop. Well, anything comes along to interest you, I'll let you know.' He pointed to a book on one of the shelves. 'Got a nice *Bewick's Fables* over there you haven't seen. My word, it's a beauty! Mint, almost. Take a look at it.'

He went back into the office, and with an apology to the visitor whom he had left there, he took a clean envelope from the desk and went out through a side door into a narrow hall running parallel with the shop. On the floor there was a strip of polished lino and in the air a slightly rancid smell and the smell of plain cooking that was being rendered downright ugly. On one side of the passage, taking up most of the room, stood an antlered hat-stand, the bottom of it filled with ferns, and a glazed umbrella jar. On the opposite wall there was a dead barometer and telephone with a coin box underneath it.

Mr. Herring took the cigarette from behind his ear and handling it with scrupulous care, sealed it up in the envelope. Then he pulled out a shabby wallet and tucked the envelope carefully inside. Taking two pennies from his pocket, he dropped them into the box and dialled a number. He waited for an answer, and when it came, asked for 'Extension 245'.

'Herring here,' he said. 'Look, I've got something that I think'll interest you. . . .'

'If we're not careful, Collis, we're going to get this case tied round our knees.'

The D.D.I. looked at himself in the mirror, severely and at close range. The mirror, property of the Ministry of Works, showed him a pink, official face, clean-shaven and alert but a little unimaginative. 'It's got more strings to it than a broken harp - burglary, narcotics, receiving, and now, God knows what else we'll find.'

'Perhaps he knows about the brothel-keeping, too,' suggested Collis, toeing his way thoughtfully along the strip of patterned carpet.

The D.D.I. sniffed. 'Shouldn't wonder.'

Collis was a fair, lean young man, well spoken, as the D.D.I. would have said, and with a deceptive air of *laissez-faire*.

'He moves in a mysterious way his evidence to procure,' he said.



'I wish you'd procure a bit.' The D.D.I. spoke fretfully but with good humour.

'I have; I'm only waiting for it to come through.'

'The analysis? Where d'you think that's going to take us?'

'In the right direction - I hope. Dear D.D.I., listen, as soon as—'

'Dear Collis! "Dear" this, "dear" that. Trouble with you is you're too much of a bloody college copper. Why I ever picked you for an assistant I'm blowed if I know.'

'Because of your flair for spotting winners. I couldn't help my parents sending me to a public school, could I? It was just bad luck. Incidentally, what's good for Sandown tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow? I don't know.' The D.D.I. sighed. 'Nigger Star, I should say, as good as anything. Running in the three-thirty. I'm beginning to like the look of that horse, you know - here, what the hell are we talking like this for?'

'Because it amuses us, presumably.'

'Does it?' The D.D.I. was back at the mirror, pinching a spot on his face. 'If I'd been your father, Collis, I'd have taken the strap to you long ago.'

'If I'd been your son, I'd probably have deserved it. No, if this analysis gives us what I suspect - and I bet you anything you like it will - that'll be three in a row; the Cypriot waiter, Garcia; Lady What's-it Blundell; and now this one, whoever it belonged to. All three from Skinner's. You must admit it begins to look more than a coincidence.' He perched himself on a corner of the D.D.I.'s desk.

'I grant you. But listen, it does not give us *proof*.' The D.D.I. slapped his fingers on the edge of his desk.

'Not about drugs, no. But now those houses in Mount Street, and the other one in Clarges Street—'

'It's no offence to be a landlord - not yet, anyway.'

'I know. But the point is that in each case those women were Skinner's tenants. I just don't believe—' Collis's disbelief was interrupted by the telephone. He picked up the receiver. 'D.D.I.'s office . . . very well, I'll take it.' As he listened to what was said he looked attentively at the D.D.I. 'Right, many thanks. Don't bother about the decimals.' He put down the receiver. 'That was the lab.' It was not a phrase capable of expressing much in the way of self-satisfaction, but Collis did his best. 'Twenty-two point six *cannabis indica*, otherwise marijuana. A genuine reefer, the kind my mother used to make.'

The D.D.I. looked at him stolidly.

'All right,' he said, 'but where does it take us? It still doesn't give us anything we can bring a charge on; not against Skinner himself.'

'Not yet, perhaps.'

'Not yet? That's all very well. Give a chap enough rope. But what's going to happen meanwhile? Half the crimes in the bloomin' calendar. There's the body of this Dutchman—'

As the D.D.I. was speaking, the door opened and a man looked into the room.

'The body of which Dutchman?' he asked.

The D.D.I. turned from the mirror and greeted him with surprise.

'Hullo, Mr. Gwynn! You're back, sir?'

'It feels like it. Good morning, Collis.'

'Good morning, sir.' Collis slid discreetly out of the room and shut the door.

'You have a good holiday, sir?' asked the D.D.I.

'Very good, thank you. I got my handicap down to six.'

'Did you, by jove! Sounds more like hard work to me.' A mirthless gurgle rumbled round under the D.D.I.'s waistcoat.

Mr. Gwynn sniffed at a vase of wallflowers on the glass-fronted bookcase. His manner was shy and his looks undistinguished. He seemed like a well-bred sobersides, combining the virtuous civil servant with the man of action, the civil servant winning by a head - a head that was going slightly bald.

'How are the gladioli doing?' he asked.

A gentle smirk transformed the D.D.I. into the proud gardener.

'Not too bad. Took a first at the West Wimbledon show last week, my *brenchleyensis*.'

'Those funny red things?'

The proud gardener dissolved suddenly into the afflicted martyr.

'They are red, sir, yes,' he said quietly.

'Congratulations.' Mr. Gwynn seemed uncertain whether the occasion called for anything further. 'Well, I mustn't keep you, Cathie.' He moved towards the door. 'I thought I ought just to show my face. How's crime been? Flourishing, I suppose?' The D.D.I. sighed like a west wind. 'Like that, is it? Well, back to your dead Dutchman. Is he new since I was away?'

The D.D.I. nodded. He wiped a hard hand over his chin. 'And a real jig-saw it is, too.' Again he sighed. 'Yes, he was fished out down by Hungerford Steps a week or ten days ago. Been a couple

of days in the water – however, sir, I’m keeping you. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be sorry. Go on. It sounds like the beginning of an Edgar Wallace.’ Mr. Gwynn settled himself on the arm of an easy-chair.

‘Well, that’s pretty well all there is to it, sir, so far. No means of identification, nothing. Every single thing removed. And then when they have the p.m. they find a depressed fracture on the base of the skull.’

‘Well?’

‘Inflicted before entering the water. Right. Next thing is, we get an inquiry from The Hague: do we know a Martinus van der Meer? – a jeweller here on business, been missing close on a week. Ministry van Justitty, they send his prints over – he’s on the record there – we check. Same man. Right. Now here’s where it starts getting comic. Only one thing they found on him, and that got there through a hole in the lining of his jacket – a card from Skinner’s place.’

‘Skinner? So we’re on to that rascal again, are we?’

‘And on the card somebody’s telephone number. Right. We check again. Belongs to old Jack Ezra, the fence. Well, old Jack’s a pal of Skinner’s. He’s always in there, we know that. What we haven’t found out yet is why. But he doesn’t hang around anywhere unless there’s business to do, not old Jack.’

‘He’s been questioned?’

‘Denied he’d ever seen or heard of any Dutchman.’

‘No answer to that one, I suppose?’

The D.D.I. shrugged. ‘And he knows it.’

‘Queer little man, Skinner,’ said Mr. Gwynn. ‘If I remember, he had rather a good war record, didn’t he? Didn’t he pick up a D.S.O. or something in Italy?’

‘That’s right, D.S.O. and bar – Mareth and Salerno. Don’t give a damn for danger – or for authority either.’

‘And yet we’ve never been able to touch him?’

The D.D.I. gave something between a snort and a laugh.

‘I’ve touched him often enough. Trouble is I can’t get my fingers to stick. He’s a proper eel, Skinner. I’ve had him here in that chair you’re sitting in, Mr. Gwynn, sir, a dozen times. And every time he slips off it like a piece of jelly. Brothels, dope, the black market, all this mucking around with old Ezra, and no one’s ever got a thing on him yet. Oh, he’s as clever as a cartload of monkeys!’

‘But this Dutchman? That puts rather a different complexion on things, doesn’t it?’

'May do – if we don't side-slip. I said to myself straight away, when I saw it was leading us to Skinner again, I said this is where we've got to start using rubber shoes. . . .'

## Chapter Four

Snow White slid his hat across the cloakroom counter and turned towards the bar. He cocked a leg over one of the zebra-striped stools and looked down critically at his hand-made black moccasins. On his lapel lay a molecule of dust. He flicked it off and squinted down at the sharp edges of the handkerchief folded into his breast pocket.

The bar was almost empty. Faintly the music from the dance floor floated upstairs to where he was sitting. He looked along the bar and caught Harry's eye.

'I'll have a tomato juice, Harry,' he said.

The barman took a jug of tomato juice from the refrigerator, poured some into a glass and pushed it across the counter.

Presently, as Snow White glanced in the mirror at the back of the bar, he saw the image of Rose behind him on the stairs. The rustle of her black moiré dress and the smell of her perfume came to him as she went by. She seemed as unconscious of his presence as of her own reflection in the mirror. As she passed him, Snow White caught her hand, and she turned towards him, taken by surprise.

'Hullo, Snow White. You're up early.'

Snow White ignored it.

'Rose, you look a honey dressed in black,' he said. 'You should always wear black.'

'Thank you,' said Rose. 'When's your funeral?' She looked at his glass. 'What's wrong with the apple juice tonight, Harry?'

Harry shrugged, a picture of mystified innocence.

'Can't I like tomato juice sometimes?' said Snow White.

'Not if you want to grow up like Victor.'

'Who told you that?'

'One doesn't need to be told these things. If Vic lost his

right arm, I believe you'd cut off your own.'

'So what?'

'So you could still look like him, act like him, walk like him. I don't know why you don't live right in his pocket. I should have thought you'd have found it more convenient.'

'Sometimes, Rose, you have a tongue like a tarantula.'

'Let's leave my anatomy out, shall we?'

'Sure - leave it out any time you like. Just let me know.'

Rose looked at him; it was a look of annihilating boredom, and she began to move away. Snow White glanced along the bar towards Harry, who had moved out of earshot, then he caught her hand again. She stopped and stood still without looking back.

'How was the new loved one, Rosie?' asked Snow White softly. All he could see of her was the contour of her cheek, and he watched it closely. Then she turned her head and met his eyes in the mirror. Snow White smiled. 'How was he?'

'What new loved one?' she asked. There was nothing either flippant or sarcastic about her now. She was as bleak as a winter's morn.

'What was his name? Or didn't you have time to find out?'

Rose tried to draw her hand away, but Snow White's grip tightened sharply.

'Snow White, please - you're hurting!' she said.

'What about your hurting me? That doesn't count, I suppose?'

Suddenly his whisper was like the edge of a blunt razor, his lips like a trap. 'Or am I supposed to be so tough that words can't hurt? - that you can spit in my face and I'll like it, just because I'm crazy about you.'

Rose leaned back against the bar, turning her head away from him. She said nothing.

'Rose, be nice to me for a change, won't you?' His voice began to climb back on to its old persuasive level. 'You know that I'm crazy about you, Rose - crazy.'

'I ought to by this time.' She turned and looked at him. 'Snow White, why do you keep up this kind of nonsense?' She spoke more calmly, more patiently now; but he wasn't to be so easily mollified.

'What do I have to do to make you believe me? - cut out my heart and send it round on a dish? Listen, Rose, I've told you, haven't I? - it pays handsome dividends to be nice to me.'

'Are you inviting me to become a shareholder?' Her brief mood

of tolerance seemed to have evaporated already.

Smoothly but suddenly she drew away from the bar, as she saw in the glass the reflection of Victor coming in from outside. With him was a grey, grizzled man with a florid face, a short high-bridge nose and full lips. His clothes were neat and unnoticeable, yet somehow his appearance looked a little shabby beside Victor's immaculate black-and-white.

Snow White nodded to the man. 'Hullo, Ezra.'

Ezra smiled obliquely as they passed. He was soft and paunchy and had a dyspeptic look that gave him an air of carrying some secret sorrow. He greeted Snow White huskily, raising an ivory-headed cane in salute.

'We'll be inside,' said Victor. Across the counter Harry handed him a carnation in a glass. He took it out as he walked past and stuck it in his lapel. Ezra followed him into the office near the balcony and shut the door.

A chromium lamp standing on the desk threw a sharp circle of light on its leather surface, leaving the rest of the room in obscurity. It was a small room, smelling of stale smoke and crowded with over-stuffed furniture and pieces of office equipment. Parcels and packages were littered everywhere; crates filled with bottles, and cardboard boxes full of canned food, exuded straw and shavings on to the carpet. It was an ugly, ill-arranged room, and it seemed like a lapse on somebody's part that the walls had been hung with prints of Moreland's *Rustic Scenes*.

Victor pulled back one of the picture frames, showing it to be hinged to the wall, and opened a safe hidden behind it. He took out a small bundle wrapped in a white handkerchief and laid it on the desk. Ezra tucked his ivory-headed cane under his arm and put on a pair of heavily framed spectacles. He watched Victor impassively as he untied the knotted ends of the handkerchief and drew aside the folded corners. There, underneath the light, lay a little heap of scintillating riches, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and sapphires in settings of platinum and gold.

Ezra curled his lips and blew out his breath between them, but said nothing. He fingered one or two of the jewels appraisingly, then, taking a printed notice out of his pocket, he pushed his glasses up on to his forehead and read the notice, holding it an inch or two away from his eyes. It was headed:

Metropolitan Police Office  
*Notice to Pawnbrokers and others  
of Property Lost or Stolen*

There followed a detailed list of missing property, against which Ezra checked off the pieces of jewellery lying on the desk.

'No cigarette-case,' he said. Then, reading aloud from the list: 'Also golt cigarette-case, clesp studded diamonts end rubiss. Enterior engraifed, "To Veronica from Charles—"'

Victor interrupted him: 'That's right - there was a case. I remember it - a gold case.' He picked up the lamp from the desk, and holding it in front of the safe, he peered inside. The shelves were empty. Thoughtfully, he put the lamp down again. 'I don't understand that, unless, maybe . . .'

'Unless what?'

Victor paused. 'Doesn't matter. I'll check up with Snow White later. What's the break-up of this lot?'

Ezra put his cane down on the desk. He took a watch-maker's eyeglass from his pocket and stuck it in his eye. For a little while there was silence as he looked carefully at each piece of jewellery in turn. From the dance floor down below came, very faintly, the rhythm of the quintette.

'For the neckless,' said Ezra presently, 'two-fifty. The rest' - he shrugged - 'to you - we are olt friends - four hund'ed.'

Victor, watching him with a stony look, picked a cigar out of a tub on the desk. He bit the end and lit it, then pushed the tub across to Ezra.

'Old friends? Since when d'you suppose I've taken up with blood-suckers?' he asked. Ezra, absorbed in lighting his cigar, seemed to have heard nothing. He blew out the match and placed it carefully in an ashtray. 'What sort of a fool d'you think I am,' Victor went on, 'trying to hand me that stuff? This lot's worth a fortune.'

'To you, perheps,' said Ezra quietly. 'To me, what I can afford; no more.'

'Well, you've got to afford a damn sight better than six hundred and fifty quid if you want to do any business this time - or next time.'

'Look who talks!' exclaimed Ezra huskily. 'Do I come here for pleasure? Or do you ring me, I should come without failink, it's important?'

'You came because you smelt business, that's all. If you don't like the smell of it, you'd better open the window. Then you can jump out.' Ezra seemed conscious of nothing but the enjoyment of his cigar. With his mild brown eyes half-closed, he watched the smoke ascending. 'Listen, Ezra - we've done a good deal of

business together in the past, haven't we?' Ezra inclined his head with a movement so slight that it was hardly noticeable. 'I don't recollect that you've ever lost on our transactions?' Victor's tone was harsh but his voice remained quiet.

'Okay - so I've been lucky perhaps.'

'Perhaps? How could you have lost - on the prices you offer?'

'I shouldt benkrupt me to enjoy such dangers? Look here, in this list already.' He tapped the printed list lying on the desk. 'With stuff so hot, you could fry *gefüllte* fish.' Ezra shook his head slowly. 'Vic, Vic, such risks I am takink for you already, you don't understendt. You don't even imagine.'

'I don't. I never imagined you took two seconds risk in your life. Don't try to tell me everything isn't laid off ten - twenty times. Everything you get from me, or from anyone else, goes right down the line, right the way down, so that if anyone catches it it's never you - never. It's some poor little stinking jeweller you've never even set eyes on. Doesn't even know what a sucker you've made of him until he's picked up with the stuff on him and no excuse to show for it. That's a hell of a risk for you to take, isn't it?'

'Listen, do I tich to you how you should learn your business? Do I, Vic? Then why should you tich to me how to run mine? Will you tell me?'

Victor pulled at the carnation in his lapel and sniffed at it.

'Look, Ezra, I didn't ask you here so we could start a debating society. Do you want this stuff or don't you? If you do, it's got to be at the right price.'

Ezra picked out some of the pieces on the desk and re-examined them. Then, as if to point his final offer, he swept off his glasses and thrust them back into his breast pocket.

'Okay then. I give you eight hund'ed.'

Victor looked at him in silence for a moment. 'Get out,' he said quietly.

Ezra's brown eyes seemed as though at any moment they might fill with tears. He gazed sorrowfully at the jewellery glittering under the lamp. Then he took his stick from the desk and turned slowly away. At the door he stopped, looking gravely back at Victor. 'You want I should ruin myself on account our friendship?' He stared reproachfully at him, then shook his head. 'Okay, so I'm ruined - because we are friendts.' He turned back towards the desk. 'But nex' time, nex' time, Vic, remember, will you, how I am generous? With bot' hands I am givink—'

'Get on with it,' said Victor. 'How much?'



Round-eyed solemnity descended suddenly on Ezra. The knuckles of his hand showed white as he gripped his ivory-headed cane.

'I giff you one t'ousand,' he said quietly.

'Cash?'

Ezra shrugged. 'Okay.' He sighed deeply and again shook his head. 'You should certify me in a home - such medness.'

'Nothing I'd like better,' said Victor. He tied the jewellery up in the handkerchief again and put it back in the safe.

'Okay. Tomorrow I am here and collect,' said Ezra.

'Not tomorrow. I want to dig out that cigarette-case first. I'll ring you.'

Ezra nodded and saluted Skinner with his cane. 'Bye-bye,' he said.

As he went out, the quintette downstairs swung into the broken rhythm of a samba. Victor locked the safe, folded the picture back over the front of it, and went outside.

On the balcony Snow White was standing looking down at the dancers. The floor was not a large one and at the moment seemed filled to capacity. At a small table near the bottom of the stairs Rose was sitting with Alexander beside her. If she had seemed no more than distantly grateful to him the night before, it now looked as if some of that reserve had worn off. Tonight things certainly seemed more free and easy between them. Victor, leaning on the balcony rail beside Snow White, glanced down at where they were sitting.

'Love's middle-aged dream,' he said. 'What happened last night?'

'Ask him. He was there for an hour, that's all I know.'

'For what it's worth, my instinct in these things tells me he's a guy who might be worth cultivating. What do you say?'

'I don't have instincts. Either I know something or I don't. If I don't, I check on it and find out.'

'Wise guy, huh? Okay; well, we'll check on him, shall we?'

The music came to an end, the dancers reverted to their tables, and the quintette dispersed. In a few moments the lights were lowered, and a hush of anticipation settled over the room. Then, through the darkness, intersecting spotlights opened on a cooing Frenchman strapped to an accordion. As the words of his song began, Victor straightened up.

'The Nightingale of Provence,' he muttered. 'Christ!' He turned away, and as he did so, found Philip Reed beside him on the darkened balcony.

'Sometime, Vic, when you've got a minute ...' whispered Philip.

'I've got one now.' It sounded as much like a threat as an invitation. Victor turned and led the way into the office. 'Shut the door,' he said.

They stood one on either side of the desk with the shaded lamp throwing its reflection up on to their faces. Philip, watching Victor with an unsure smile, stood drumming his finger-nails against the edge of the desk. The light caught the curling petals of a yellow tea rose in his buttonhole. Victor looked at the rose with a leaden eye, then looked at Philip. Slowly he twisted round the big leather chair behind the desk and sat down.

'There's only one reason why you're not fired,' he said at last. 'That's because I still have some use for you. If you choose to smoke yourself into a coma, that's your business - except when you do it around here. Then it's my business too.'

'I know, Vic, I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to—'

'Shut up!' Victor paused. 'It isn't enough, I suppose, that I have to get you hauled off the floor in front of the whole room? You have to get the customers to see you safely home as well. Who was this guy?'

Philip shrugged. He tried to smile and failed. 'All I remember is he said he was St. Christopher.'

'Pulling your leg, perhaps?' It was drier than toast, but Philip let it go.

'He's on the level, Vic, he is really.'

'Whose level?'

'What I mean is, he's okay. Listen, Vic, he could be jolly useful, that fellow. You'd like his line.'

'Would I? What it got on the end of it?'

'He said to me, any time you need it, he said, I've got a pocket lined with asbestos.' Again what might have been a grin wiped itself off his face as a sharp change came into Victor's voice.

'He did, did he? And what brought that into the conversation?'

Philip wavered. 'Well - we were just talking. . . you know—'

'About what?'

'Well - just talking. I don't honestly remember, Vic. Not about anything special, though—'

'The last I saw of you you weren't in a condition to talk to anybody.'

'Well, I - well, it sort of worked off. I drank a lot of black coffee, and—'

'Understand this,' interrupted Victor. 'If I employ anyone, it's

part of his job to keep his mouth shut. My business is my business – and it's yours, too. If you can't keep your mouth shut about it, well, perhaps we can find some way of shutting it for you – shutting it so that it won't open. If that isn't perfectly and definitely clear, say so.'

There was a pause, then suddenly Philip's half-jaunty, half-embarrassed air evaporated. His face crumbled into a look of misery and desperation. 'I'm sorry, Vic, really I'm sorry about last night. I don't know what it is, only I don't seem to sleep properly any more. I just can't seem to sleep, and – well, with one thing and another, I just got a bit hopped up, I think.'

Victor looked at him a long while. There was no trace of sympathy in his expression, and Philip, though it seemed difficult for him to meet Victor's uncompromising stare, seemed to find it as hard to look away. He stood twisting the telephone cord in his fingers, saying nothing. Victor stubbed out his cigarette in the ash-tray, then got up and moved slowly away from the desk.

'So now you've got nothing left to smoke?' Philip nodded. He kept his eyes fixed on Victor. 'Let's see your case.'

'I've got nothing, Vic, honestly, I've not got—'

'Let's see your case.'

'I haven't got a case, I—'

With the speed and ferocity of a shark, Victor had wrenched Philip's arm up behind his back and now was forcing him forward over the desk until his forehead was touching the crimson leather of the blotter. Philip, after a single agonized grunt, was silent; but the visible corner of his upturned eye was filled with the brightness of fear, as Victor's free hand dived in and out of his pockets.

'Hullo—' He paused, then slowly brought out his hand, holding in it the gold cigarette-case with the jewelled clasp. There was a moment, a long moment, of silence. From downstairs came a muffled rattle of applause, and then once more the distant sound of the accordion. Victor put the cigarette-case down on the blotter, then slid his hand back inside Philip's jacket and brought out his wallet. He jerked it open, undid the flap with his teeth, and shook the contents out on the desk. A single brown cigarette dropped from underneath the flap. Victor picked it up, then let go of Philip's arm and pushed him aside.

'I didn't know there was one there, Vic, honestly I didn't. That's what I was going to ask you for. I never counted them, the lot you gave me. Don't take it away – don't take it, Vic; for

God's sake leave me one, Vic!' All that was left of power over himself began suddenly to dissolve.

'Perhaps you didn't know you had this either?' said Victor, weighing the cigarette-case in his hand. 'How come?' In the blunt and icy issue of the two words was packed more menace than if he had spoken in blind rage. Desperately Philip seemed to cast about for words and resolution. It was some moments before he found either.

'You were on the phone, you remember? The stuff was here on the desk, and you asked me to put it inside the safe, and I did - all except this. But I only meant to borrow it, Vic, really I did. I haven't got a proper case, and I just wanted—'

As Philip spoke, Victor unlocked a drawer in the desk and took out a small box; it was a flat cardboard cigarette-box. His basilisk stare gave way to a look that was less remote but more sardonic.

'Okay, fair's fair,' he said. 'That's all I'm doing with this, just borrowing it. All right?' He dropped Philip's cigarette in among a dozen or so of the same sort, then locked the box back in the drawer from which he had taken it. 'Just a loan, that's all.'

For a moment Philip seemed stupefied. Then, as the last shreds of self-control ripped themselves away, he dropped on his knees beside the desk, and with his nails rasping against its leather surface, he buried his head in his arms and burst into tears.

Victor looked at him for some moments without so much as the movement of a muscle. Then he leaned across the desk, and lifting Philip's head by the roots of his hair, smacked him hard across both cheeks. The outburst came to an end as suddenly as it had begun. Philip gaped, then swallowed a few times and wiped a hand across his face.

'Get up - and get out!' said Victor. 'Go on, get up!'

Philip pulled in a long, shuddering breath. Slowly he got up off his knees, and for a moment they stood there staring at each other across the desk.

'From now on,' said Victor - and as he spoke the door opened and Snow White, coming quietly in, stood leaning against the wall - 'from now on you'd better watch your step, because I'm going to watch it, too, pretty carefully. And remember, I don't have any use for people who are not strictly reliable. Do I, Snowy?'

Philip looked towards Snow White. From a sheath in the waistband of his trousers he had drawn a thin, flat knife and was now paring his nails with it. He looked back at Philip and

nodded. Involuntarily, it seemed, Philip gave him the dead end of a frightened smile.

'I wouldn't take it as a joke if I were you,' said Victor sharply. 'People getting funny with me usually find the joke's on them. And another thing,' he cut in, as Philip began to explain, 'What's this in aid of?' He fingered the yellow rose in Philip's lapel. 'I don't care for people looking conspicuous either. I've told you that.'

He pulled the rose out, crushed it between his fingers, and dropped it in the waste-paper basket. Philip glanced at him and then back at Snow White. Then he looked towards the desk that held the cigarette-box.

'Listen a minute—' He stopped, staring piteously at Victor.

'I'm listening,' said Victor. He wiped the tips of his fingers carefully on the blotter and sat down. Philip seemed about to speak his mind, and then as though he had thought better of it.

'Okay,' he said huskily.

Snow White, from where he stood, jerked the door open for him, and when he had gone out, shut it after him.

Victor was silent for a little while. He tilted himself back in his armchair and sat staring blindly at his finger-nails. Then he reached out and picked up a jade paper-knife off the desk.

'I had some sort of idea we might still have some use for him,' he said, teasing the knife along the edge of the desk 'I think I'm changing my mind, though.'

'Go ahead,' said Snow White, 'change mine.'

'He's getting ideas about acting independently. I don't like that. Also his tongue's getting a damn sight too long and too loose; and that I like still less.' Suddenly he straightened up and struck the knife on the blotter. 'He's liable to get into trouble, Snowy, if we don't look out.'

'He's all right. He's hopped to the gills,' said Snow White, 'that's all.'

'That's it, exactly. He's so damn full of hop he doesn't know what he's saying or doing half the time. That's what I say — he could land us all in a pretty uncomfortable spot.'

'That could work both ways,' said Snow White. 'What's your recommendation?'

'I don't know,' said Skinner abstractedly. 'I don't know yet.'

'I'm tired,' said Rose, 'd'you mind?' As the quintette broke loose again, she and Alexander moved round the edge of the crowded floor back to her table at the bottom of the stairs. 'I'm not really allowed to be tired,' she said as they sat down, 'only I sort of felt you were - well, that you looked more . . .'

'Accommodating?'

She smiled. 'More sympathetic, perhaps.'

'A dirty subterfuge, take no notice,' said Alexander. He held out his cigarette-case.

'Thank you. I don't smoke.'

'Who objects to your feeling tired?' he asked, 'Skinner?'

She nodded. 'Every night from ten till three, fresh as paint for any unattached male who wants to take the floor.'

'Or your feet, I suppose?'

'If it was only my feet, I wouldn't mind. No, it's been a nice change tonight, and I mean that.'

'Tell me things about Skinner?' said Alexander.

'Such as?'

'Who and why.'

As he spoke, Rose glanced idly up towards the balcony, and the light of amusement that was flickering in her eyes went out.

'Some other time,' she said. 'Please - would you do something for me?'

'I should say practically anything.'

Looking where she had looked, Alexander saw that Victor was watching them from above.

'They don't like my staying too long with any one partner, and—'

'I get you.' Already Alexander had moved away from the table. 'Well, the loss is mine tonight not theirs. Here, you'd better finish this.' He poured out some champagne from a bottle standing on ice beside the table. 'It'll bring back roses to those cheeks.'

'And hiccups to this voice. No, honestly I've had enough, really—'

'Never mind. Sit and drink to absent friends.' He stopped near the foot of the stairs and looked down at her over the bronze railing. 'And count me in, will you?' he added.

As he reached the balcony, Victor turned towards him.

'We seem to be becoming a habit with you,' he said, smiling.

'What about a drink to confirm it?' They moved slowly towards the bar. 'Well, how are things?'

'Which ones?' asked Alexander.

'Don't encourage me to start being inquisitive. I get myself in enough trouble that way as it is. What are you drinking?'

'No, no, it's on me this time,' said Alexander. 'What's it to be - apple juice again?' He called for the drinks and spread a fistful of change on the counter. 'May as well get rid of this lot before it burns a hole in my pocket,' he said with unblushing facetiousness.

'I thought your pockets were lined with asbestos?' Although Victor watched him with only half an eye, it was an eye close-peeled for the effect of his remark. It didn't seem to amount to much. Alexander allowed the suggestion to slide away with an oblique answer.

'That guitar player of yours, he was in a bad way last night.'

'I know. I'm sorry you were bothered with him.'

'No bother. We had quite a cosy little chat in the end.'

'So he told me.' Victor hesitated for a moment, then went on. 'Look, if we could drop the double-talk just for a minute, what actually did happen? I don't want to be nosy, but I'm afraid of Philip's tongue landing him in trouble one of these days.'

'Not with me. Still, if you've got any control over him, I think I'd exercise it.'

'In what direction?'

It was Alexander's turn to become the confidence man.

'Well, he was sporting a piece of property last night which I would call - distinctly warm. Not something I should flash around in front of strangers.'

Victor stared at Alexander for a moment, stared without any change of expression or any hint of what was passing in his mind.

'What sort of thing?' he asked. A note of hesitation, barely perceptible, crept into the question.

'A cigarette-case.'

'Oh? Why should you imagine it was warm?'

'It was a woman's case.'

'I don't see that it makes it hot.'

'It makes this one hot.'

'Why?'

'Because I happened to know where it came from. There was an inscription inside.'

'And he actually showed this thing to you?' Alexander nodded. 'He'd never seen you before, though?'

'That's what I'm telling you,' said Alexander.

Victor was silent for a moment. A displeasing glint began to work its way into his eyes. Then almost as though he were speaking to himself, he said with a kind of soft savagery:

'Crazy! He must be *crazy*.'

'I wouldn't disagree. Still, I wouldn't worry unduly about it either. I'm told there are ways and means of unloading this kind of stuff so it won't blow your arm off. Maybe he knows of someone. Or maybe you do.'

'Maybe I do,' said Victor. It was a nice exhibition of underplaying on both sides.

'You do?' Alexander's tone showed a faint but perceptible interest. 'How d'you suppose he'd feel about a new client?' suggested Alexander after a moment's pause.

'You could ask him.' Victor looked at him, as though summing up Alexander and the proposition in a combined survey. 'I've got a little business to do in a day or two. If you'd like to come along...'

'Certainly I'd like to. Ring me and let's fix it, will you?'

'Where will I find you? In the book?'

'Not yet. I'm in a flat belonging to a friend of mine at the moment. You can get me here.' Alexander tore off the corner of a newspaper, wrote down his number, and handed it to Victor. Then he looked at his watch and finished his drink. 'Well, my wife will be wondering where I get to at night, when I get a wife.'

It was three o'clock when Victor came out into the mews with Snow White. They climbed into a big dust-coloured Chevrolet and rolled away westward over the cobbles and out into the open street. Victor's face, if it was anything to go by, showed that his temper had slipped out of gear again. They drove a little while in silence, then Snow White asked, 'What sort of change did you get out of this Alexander guy?'

'Alexander? He's okay.'

'You made a pretty quick check.'

'I've not checked anything yet,' said Victor irritably. 'I know when a man's a safe bet. I am going to check, though, just the same - what do you imagine?'

'I imagine in that case that something else must be eating you. What's the trouble - Phil?'



Victor lit a cigarette before he answered.

'I thought if I cut off the hop for a day or two it might scare him into behaving more sensibly. I see now that it won't work.'

'Of course it won't work. All you'll do is to drive him crazy. I think you're mad, chopping it clean off like that, just because you happened to get wild with him.'

'Nobody asked what you think,' said Victor.

'Okay, nobody need listen. All I'm saying is he's likely to be a bigger bloody menace without any dope in him than he is when he's properly piped up.'

'All right, all right,' said Victor wearily. And then, after a moment's silence, 'I know one thing, though. He's lost any sense of responsibility he ever had, completely and absolutely. He's dangerous to both of us now, Snowy – definitely dangerous.'

'Well, we must teach him to be more careful,' said Snow White, and as he spoke he crashed the lights and swung the car out into Park Lane.

## Chapter Six

Except that George Borrow seemed to have found a buyer, and had been replaced by Gilbert White – in two vols full calf, top edges gilt and with numerous plates – Mr. Herring's window looked much the same as it had the day before. This morning Alexander gave only a quick glance at the display, then he went inside. The shop was empty, but as he came in, Mr. Herring's face showed up over the glass panel in the door at the back. Seeing Alexander, he opened the door and beckoned him inside.

'Bright and early this morning,' he said. His tone was the blithe, blank tone of one who is never at a loss for the right commonplace. 'Come along up, will you?'

He took Alexander through the side door into the passage, where a smell of fried bacon now enriched the customary odour. In silence, except for a melodic hissing through his free dentures, Mr. Herring led the way up a flight of thinly-carpeted stairs to

the first floor. Here he opened the door of a back room and stood aside for Alexander to go in. Then he shut the door, leaving him inside.

A man was standing at the window looking down into the whitewashed yard below. He turned round as Alexander came in. It was Collis.

'Dear Nichol!' he said with a fervour that sounded as though he meant it. 'How's life?'

'Which one? I'm leading two,' Alexander reminded him.

Collis smiled. He tipped a parcel of books off a chair and sat down. The chair was one of a rickety trio, which, with a nest of wooden drawers and a long trestle table, made up the room's equipment. The table was filled to overflowing with books, dilapidated folios and sheaves of musty prints. More books were piled high round the walls in tipsy-looking stacks and others lay in heaps on the bare boards.

Alexander picked up another chair, blew the dust off it and sat down.

'The new life, how's it going?' asked Collis.

'*Ça va*. Quite an experience, being reincarnated.'

'I know. I have a strong feeling sometimes that I was Aphrodite once upon a time. How do you find it?'

'I like it. Brand new set of circumstances all round. No ties, no responsibilities, no occupation—'

'And no results.'

'Don't crowd me. You'll get results. Must I go on contacting you through Herring, though?'

'Definitely. It's too easy to tap the line, or rather the operator, and the porter, too, in a block like yours. Well, what's been doing?'

Briefly Alexander gave an outline of what had been going on since he had made his first contact with Victor.

'You think, then, that the dope looks like a side line?' said Collis.

'Could be. Still, I'm not jumping to any conclusions. I want something soft to land on. What I need now, and I need it quickly, is some sort of proof of my *bona fides*.'

'I like the quiet irony of that,' said Collis. 'What kind of proof d'you mean?'

'That I leave to you. The thing is that I must be able to convince this man Skinner – convince him absolutely – that I'm in the racket, too.'

'Any suggestions?' asked Collis.

'Not a thing. Except that it's got to be something that sticks and doesn't smell.'

'Something adhesive but odourless.' Collis's tone was thoughtful.

'And quick-drying. I'm to meet Ezra tomorrow, don't forget. Whatever you cook up will have to be done by mid-day, or when I bite on it I may find I've got my teeth stuck.'

'You don't ask for much, do you?'

'All I ask for is a little support; something that'll bear the weight of my perjured conscience.'

'By the time you've finished,' said Collis, 'we shall need a block and tackle. You must have some ideas, though, how we ought to go about it.'

'I'm not supposed to have ideas. I'm the P.B.I. Tactics are my worry, not strategy. That's yours and Cathie's.'

'Look, dear Nichol - this case started simply as an inquiry into a drowned Dutchman. We put you on to it, and before we know where we are we have our hands full of vice, narcotics, receiving, extortion, abortion - everything, pretty well, except cattle-thieving.'

'Give me time,' said Alexander. 'There'll be cattle-thieving all right.'

'Seriously, though, what's the use of strategy if you keep shifting your objectives?'

'All right, here's my present objective. Skinner suspects I'm wide, thinks I'm a picaroon. That suspicion has got to be confirmed. That confirmation has got to be watertight, absolutely watertight. Once he's satisfied himself about me, he may open up - I think he will - but certainly not before. That's my objective: to get him to open up and as quickly as possible.'

'Of course. But why not wait till he starts putting out his feelers? Then, surely, you can act and answer accordingly?'

'Because I like to keep a jump ahead. I want to have something ready for his feelers to grip, and I don't want it to be a piece of sponge. If I wait for him to start sounding me out, any kind of awkwardness could happen. I hate awkwardness.'

Collis smiled. 'Dear Nichol,' he said.

'What's the direct evidence against Ezra?' asked Mr. Gwynn. 'None, I suppose.'

'Nothing direct, no,' said the D.D.I. There was a shade of apology in his voice. 'Of the property so far recovered, three lots are from known associates of his, and one from a man believed to

have had dealings with him on two occasions only.'

'So that out of these nine cases – nine cases in, what is it? – just over a year – the proceeds of four jobs, or part of the proceeds, seem to have found their way into Ezra's hands, and then been laid off by him.' The D.D.I. pouted cautiously. 'I'm only putting it as a supposition,' said Mr. Gwynn, 'but now look at the similarities in each case: time, the same, or approximately; means of entry, the same; technique, the same – expert, methodical, obviously not a second wasted. And then the kind of things that have been taken – all much of a muchness, no indiscriminate pickings, good value, but nothing too difficult to dispose of.'

'Not for someone who knows the ropes.'

'Well, I feel it begins to look very much like the same handwriting in each case. Don't you think it does?'

'I agree, Mr. Gwynn, entirely, sir. And I know, sir, what you're thinking of – Skinner?'

'Well, it might well explain their association, mightn't it? They are rather odd-looking bedfellows otherwise.'

'It might indeed, sir.'

'Another thing . . .' Mr. Gwynn ran his pencil down a typed sheet clipped to a pink folder that lay open on the desk in front of him. 'What were all these unfortunate people doing when their places were being ransacked? Was it providence or merely coincidence, perhaps, that every one of them left a house or a flat empty – not even a maid at home?'

'Well, that we could try and check, sir, if you've finished with the papers.' Mr. Gwynn handed him the file across the desk.

'Now, how about Nichol and our friend Delbos? Is he going to play, d'you think?' asked Mr. Gwynn.

'I'm going to see Delbos now, at four o'clock. Oh, he'll play all right.'

'A change to have him with us instead of against us.'

'That's why he'll play. You never know, it may be useful to him to have something on the credit side one day. He's been quite useful to us two or three times in the past, you know.'

'I dare say. All the same, I don't care for using pigeons, call them what you like – *agents provocateurs* or anything else. However, it's your funeral, Cathie.'

The D.D.I. gurgled. 'I've been buried too often, sir, for things like that to worry me.'

He walked back along the passage to his own room and rang for Collis. Then he unlocked a drawer in his desk and took out a

small wash-leather bag drawn together at the neck with a piece of string.

'Here, Mr. Gwynn wants these looked into,' he said as soon as Collis appeared. 'It's these case reports, the ones we listed for him. I want to know exactly where everyone was at the time of the break in, each one. Got it?' He handed the pink folder to Collis. 'Is Delbos here yet?'

'Yes, he's here,' said Collis.

'Right. Let's get cracking.'

Collis left the room, and a few moments later came back as the chaperon of a stolid-looking man in a long, belted raincoat — longer than it need have been, even for an English summer. His white hair and grey moustache were close-cropped and his cheeks badly shaved. His face was a sad face with pouched eyes and skin that had the mottled look of long ill-health.

'Well, Delbos, come and sit down,' said the D.D.I. Something a shade too cheerful, something that wasn't exactly patronizing, though near enough, had crept into Cathie's manner.

Mr. Delbos gave a tired smile and bowed but said nothing. He sat down on the edge of the armchair, as though sitting down were a tentative business, and looked about for somewhere to put his hat. Collis relieved him of it gently and hung it on a stand behind the door.

'Delbos, do you want to make some money?' asked the D.D.I. bluntly. Delbos thought it over looking first at the D.D.I. and then at Collis.

'For doing what?' he asked. 'And how much?'

The D.D.I. watched him. 'Keeping to the straight-and-narrow has sharpened your business instincts, hasn't it?' he said. 'Well, I daresay it doesn't pay like crime. Still—'

'Crime doesn't pay,' said Delbos. He spoke with a faint yet certain echo of a French accent.

'There's not many besides yourself who seem to learn it, all the same. Cigarette?' He opened his case and handed it to Delbos.

'Thank you, no. I don't smoke now. Since eighteen months my heart is bad, getting worse.' The tired smile flickered over his face again.

'That's bad luck. I'm sorry for that.' The change which a minute before had come over the D.D.I.'s manner dissolved as suddenly as it had appeared. He looked sympathetically at Delbos. 'Well, now, first of all I want you to see what I've got here.' He laid his hand on the wash-leather bag. 'Incidentally, this is strictly a matter within these four walls. Understand?'

'Certainly.'

'If anything were to go wrong, it could only go wrong because one of us three in this room had started talking out of turn. You get what I mean, do you?'

Delbos nodded. 'I understand.'

'Right. Now, have you ever seen any of these before? Take a good look at 'em.'

Cathie undid the string round the wash-leather bag and took out first a diamond and silver pendant, then a ring, a bracelet and a pair of ear-rings. They were all of antique design, the pendant a Caroline jewel, and the others of Regency pattern, made to match in gold set with pearls and pink topaz.

Delbos looked at them closely. Then he shook his head. 'No, never,' he said positively.

'What would they be worth, the whole lot?' asked the D.D.I. 'In the trade, I mean.'

Delbos took the pendant first, then the bracelet and then the other pieces, and examined each of them carefully.

'To the trade? I would say near enough three hundred and fifty pounds.'

'In your view that would be a fair price, would it?'

'I think a very fair price, yes.'

The D.D.I. put the jewellery back in the wash-leather bag, drew the strings together and locked the bag away in the drawer.

'Right. Now, I want you, Delbos, to pay very careful attention to this, see?'

Gradually Delbos had relaxed. Now he was leaning back a little in the armchair. His hands were clasped in front of him and his eyes were closed.

'I am listening,' he said.

## Chapter Seven

Alexander had put the radio on a cork-seated stool in the bathroom, and while he shaved Poulenc's *Mouvements Perpetuels* came skipping out into the warm and slightly scented atmos-

phere. With the second lather he took his beard so close that when he touched his chin it felt as smooth as a bottle. He finished shaving and went back into the bedroom. Poulenc followed, at a distance, and was still giving out as Alexander flipped his double-ended black bow into the second position. He was still no more than half dressed when the doorbell rang, and in his shirt-sleeves and soft scarlet slippers he went to answer it.

It was Mr. Herring, looking a little out of place under a bowler hat of heroic proportions.

'Come in,' said Alexander. He took the bowler and laid it in charge of a china Garibaldi on the hall table. 'Sorry, I was just changing.' Mr. Herring made apologetic noises and followed Alexander into the living-room. 'Sit down, Mr. Herring, and tell me what you'll drink.' Alexander picked up the whisky decanter from a tray full of bottles. But Mr. Herring remained on his two feet.

'Thank you very much, but I'm not a drinking man, Mr. James.'

Alexander shook his head. 'You smoke then?' he asked, holding out the cigarette-box.

'No, nor a smoker,' said Mr. Herring, and he smiled agreeably.

'No laughing matter,' said Alexander. 'Be sure your sins will find you out, Mr. Herring. You've brought something for me, I believe - I hope.'

Mr. Herring fished under his overcoat and pulled a small wash-leather bag out of his jacket pocket. Alexander fingered it and smelt it, without seeming much the wiser about what was inside.

'Could this be it? I mean, is this all?'

'It's all I was given,' said Mr. Herring, 'except the name and number. You know about them? Or shall I write 'em down?'

'Please,' said Alexander. He handed him the telephone pad. Mr. Herring drew out a pencil, which he licked with the darting accuracy of a chameleon, and wrote down: Delbos - Regent 5992.

'There you are, that's the lot.' He rubbed his hands together briskly. 'Well, now I'd better be running.'

'Don't I give you a receipt or anything?' Alexander asked.

With a shake of the head and an expressive pout, Mr. Herring dismissed any such idea. 'Strictly on the q.t. this is. They trust me: I trust you. Good enough, eh? Well, we'll meet again, I expect.'

He moved towards the narrow hall, glancing with discreet

curiosity at the books and pictures as he went out. Alexander handed him the enormous bowler, then opened the front door.

And there before him stood Victor.

As though by instinct, Alexander slid the wash-leather bag into his trousers pocket even before Victor's sharp, discerning eye had noticed it.

Back in the bathroom Poulenc had given way to someone with a fiddle and a fondness for double-stopping. It was a change well suited to the overcharged atmosphere of these few seconds. Victor stood where he was, pulling up the carnation in his lapel and sniffing at it with his head on one side. In this attitude of unpremeditated coyness, the smile he turned on as the door opened would have seemed almost roguish, except that his smile at any time was not without something sardonic, something less like amusement than polite cynicism.

'Telepathy,' said Victor. 'My finger was almost on the bell.'

Mr. Herring, who had first flattened himself against the wall to let Victor pass, now undulated in a double-shuffle, uncertain whether to come or go.

'Pardon,' he said at last, and, squeezing out of the hall into the passage, engulfed himself in his bowler hat and disappeared.

Victor looked after him, still smiling, then cocked an interested eyebrow at Alexander.

'He brings me books from time to time.' It sounded as though it were more of an apology than an explanation.

'Books? What do you want with books?' asked Victor innocently, as he followed Alexander into the sitting-room.

'Ah, they come in very useful sometimes,' said Alexander. 'Do for keeping the door open and what-not. I don't bother though; I just read them.' He grinned, not with any condescension but with plain good humour. Victor, if he thought it amusing, managed to keep the fact to himself.

'It occurred to me, as Ezra's on our way,' he said, 'I thought I might as well pick you up. Nice flat you've got here.' He looked round the room with a candid and appraising stare - a stare that seemed almost impertinent in its undisguised approval.

'Hang on while I finish changing,' said Alexander. He pointed to the drinks as he went into the bedroom. 'If there's anything there that won't damp your principles, go ahead - help yourself.'

Victor lit a cigarette and stood for a moment taking in the look of the room. It was a room that reflected its occupant as a man of eclectic taste. It was unmistakably a man's room. On the walls



there were some English and American sporting prints. The modern furniture was mixed, but so as to make the mixture pleasing rather than disconcerting, with a few older pieces, whose antiquity stopped short of late Georgian. The polished floor was covered with Mexican rugs, and on one of them a trail of indoor ivy dripped from a jardinière filled with plants.

All that Victor needed to see, he saw in the first ten seconds. After that his interest went to an open bureau. Among a litter of odds and ends were a cheque book and some bills. He stood near the desk listening for a few moments to the sound of Poulenc's successor scraping his way through a Bach partita. Then all of a sudden there was silence as Alexander turned off the radio with a click.

Victor moved closer to the desk. He sifted through the bills in a moment or two, then glanced at the cheque stubs. Without looking round, he silently opened the door of a tiny compartment dividing two rows of pigeon-holes at the back of the desk. Except for some paper and envelopes, the pigeon-holes were more or less empty. But inside the centre compartment there was a pile of receipted bills clipped together, some business papers, a bank deposit book, and underneath them all a passport. Victor looked first at the deposit book, then put it back and took out the passport. As he read the details of it, he tilted his head on one side, as though to keep the cigarette smoke out of his eyes, and the corner of his mouth stiffened in what might have been the beginning of a smile or the end of a grimace. Gently, slowly, he shut the little door with the point of his finger.

A moment later Alexander appeared in the doorway. He stood fixing a white handkerchief carefully into the breast pocket of his jacket.

'Ready,' he said, 'fully dressed and in my right mind.'

There was a pause.

'But not your right name?' said Victor; and the twist of his lip now turned definitely into a smile. Alexander looked up quickly. 'Or perhaps it is. I wouldn't know.' They stared at each other in silence, Victor with his head still tilted slightly back. He held up the passport. 'Hubert Geoffrey Nichol, British subject. A damn-fool place to keep a passport, if I may say so.' There was a tremulous note of anger in these last words.

'Not all my friends are so bloody inquisitive,' said Alexander sharply. 'I'll try and raise a copy of my birth certificate for you in the morning.'

'Might be very useful,' said Victor. Then without any warning

his face changed. 'Alex, what's the gen about this -- I mean the real gen?'

Alexander looked at him for a few seconds. Then he blew out a long breath, shook his head and threw his hands up slowly. Something like his ordinary *joie de vivre* came back into the expression of his eyes and into his voice as he said, at last:

'So what? I needed to make a fresh start, that's all.'

'Where from?' asked Skinner, keeping his eyes fixed on Alexander.

Again Alexander paused. 'All right,' he sighed, not wearily but, as it were, with resignation. 'I got sent. Sooner or later you'd have found it out, anyway, I suppose. I was unlucky, that's all.'

'Or just not very efficient?'

'I don't think so,' said Alexander. Again he sounded as though he were suddenly on the defensive. 'It was just a bad break, that was all.'

'That's all it ever is,' said Victor dryly. 'What did they hand you?'

'Long enough -- for a first offence.'

'For "first offence" read "first conviction" I suppose? How many times have you been in?'

Alexander smiled rather ruefully. 'Come on now, Vic, charity begins at home.'

'I'm not at home,' said Victor. 'What's the answer?' Alexander held up two reluctant fingers. Victor looked at them impassively. 'Makes things a little difficult,' he said, 'doesn't it?'

'Not for me,' said Alexander cheerfully.

'Possibly not. But I don't care for cutting in people who are awkward enough -- or should I say inexperienced enough? -- to get themselves shoved on the record.'

Alexander looked at him with a look that seemed half amused, half speculative. He pulled out his dog's-head lighter and lit a cigarette.

'I shouldn't take it too fast, Vic, if I were you,' he said. He blew a smoke ring and watched it shimmer into invisibility while they talked.

'Meaning what?' asked Victor.

Again Alexander sighed, this time, it seemed, with the faintest degree of boredom. 'Meaning that I'm not particularly sure I want to be cut in by or with anybody.' He stood tossing the lighter gently in his hand. 'See, I've got accustomed to working things my own way -- you know what I mean. It gives one more

freedom, for one thing, and less responsibility. I like it like that. And on the whole I don't seem to get along too badly. I don't mean that I don't appreciate the offer.' He looked directly at Victor and smiled.

It was Victor's turn to look inwardly amused. 'Mighty big of you,' he said, after a moment's reflection. 'Well, far be it from me to try and change your mind for you, if that's how you feel.'

'That is how I feel - at the moment,' said Alexander.

'Right. Then let's leave it that way - at the moment, shall we?'

The talk was still on the same inconclusive but not unfriendly note when, fifteen minutes later, they turned out of Holborn into a dark, narrow court running off the north side of the street. Victor stopped before the door of a shuttered shop and rang the bell. Through a peephole in the shutter Alexander could see the dark interior of the shop, and at the back a light shining on to the door of a safe. He could see a glass-topped counter, and here and there the dull glint of silver, the reflection of a mirror's edge, and behind the counter, on open shelves, pale shapes in jade, ivory, and quartz.

They waited, and presently a distant glimmer showed up behind the fanlight over their heads. Then the door was opened an inch or two on a rattling chain, and Ezra's husky voice inquired:

'Who is thet - you, Vic?'

'Who else are you expecting?' asked Victor.

Ezra took down the chain and opened the door, and for a moment, as he stood there silhouetted against the light, he looked like an old bear peering out into the darkness. He caught sight of Alexander, and immediately put his arm up against the wall of the passage, barring the way in.

'Who is this?' he asked.

'He's all right. He's a friend of mine. He's got a bit of business he'd like you to attend to.' Victor sounded impatient. But Ezra still stood blocking the doorway.

'I don't do no business this time of night, Vic. You know thet.'

'In that case we're all wasting our time,' said Victor irritably. 'Come on, don't be a fool. I'm here on business, too, aren't I? Let's come in.' He thrust open the door with his shoulder, and reluctantly Ezra let them inside.

'You want I should lose my licence?' he grumbled. 'Such business when I'm closed already. Tck, tck!'

After he had put back the chain, he led them along a passage and into a room at the back of the shop. It was a long, low-ceilinged room lit by a single lamp made of a huge carboy with a pleated shade as big as an umbrella. At first sight the room seemed to suggest that Aladdin, Marco Polo, and Randolph Hearst had each strayed into it, and had then strayed out again, forgetting to take their belongings with them. Cabinets of buhl, of Chinese lacquer and Portuguese mahogany, some inlaid with gold, some with ivory and mother-of-pearl, stood with open doors showing glittering interiors. Chalicees of rock crystal, daggers in jewelled scabbards, carvings and crucifixes, objects which time had divested of all significance except their own intrinsic beauty, were scattered about on chairs and tables, on gilded brackets and carved pedestals. Crowded on the walls were ikons, dishes of porcelain and tortoiseshell, sconces of silver and enamel, with here and there the threadbare glory of a chasuble or a set of Neapolitan puppets dangling in their tinselled finery. It was not a very large room and there was hardly enough space to move in any direction without brushing against some piece of indifferently dusted treasure.

In such a timeless and seemingly unpremeditated collection, not even the streamlined maplewood desk, which stood at right angles to the wall, nor the white telephone or the shark's-skin blotter on it, looked wholly out of place.

Ezra picked up a smoking cigar from an ash-tray on the desk and turned to Alexander.

'What did you say it was, the name?'

'He didn't,' said Victor, 'but it happens to be James. Let's do our business first, shall we?'

From his trousers pocket he pulled out the same small white bundle that he had shown Ezra two days before. He laid it on the desk and undid it, and there among the jewellery that was originally wrapped in the handkerchief was the missing cigarette-case with the jewelled clasp.

Ezra checked each item, then folded them in the handkerchief again, and with the bundle in his hand, went out through a door leading into the shop.

Alexander began to move carefully round among the litter, glancing about him with the discerning eye of an experienced browser. Victor stood for a while looking at his teeth in a Dutch ebony-framed mirror; then, as though tiring of the occupation, he turned away. The dull clang of a safe door sounded somewhere in the shop, and a moment later Ezra came back into the

room and tumbled an armful of paper money on to the desk. There were several bundles of blue and green notes, each bundle done up with a rubber band. Victor sat down at the desk and stacked the bundles neatly in front of him.

'You'll find it all there,' said Ezra.

'That's my intention,' Victor answered, as he stripped the band off the first bundle. Then he licked his finger and began to count.

Ezra turned to Alexander. He looked at him now with less open suspicion than before, though something underlying his glance suggested that this reassurance was not quite complete.

'Now, sir,' he said, in a tone that verged uncomfortably on *bonhomie*.

'Well, looking round here,' said Alexander with some hesitation, 'I'm not so sure that what I was thinking of is quite your line of country.'

Ezra inclined his head. 'In many directions extends my country.' It was said with a smile which could have been interpreted either as cautious or merely diplomatic.

'As far as antique jewellery, for instance?'

'Antique?' Ezra emphasized the qualification. 'This could be Egyptian B.C., could be middle-Victorian.'

'Could be; but it isn't either,' said Alexander.

'I am interested always in jewellery, if it is good condition, good periodt.'

'For instance?'

'You have somet'ng now you would like to show me?'

'Why don't you two birds stop scratching round it,' said Victor, still counting as he spoke, 'and get down to laying?' He flipped the rubber band back on the first bundle and began to count the second.

Alexander put his hand into his pocket and pulled out the wash-leather bag that had been left with him by Mr. Herring. From it he took the jewellery which a few hours before had lain upon the D.D.I.'s desk. Now he spread the pieces out upon Ezra's. Victor paused for an instant to look at them, then went on counting with his head on one side and the cigarette smoke drifting up out of harm's way.

Ezra's geniality, such as it had been, seemed suddenly to evaporate as he looked at what Alexander had produced. He said nothing for a moment, then reached across the desk and opened a drawer. He took out a printed list, and after glancing at it, handed it to Alexander.

'Today's,' he said. It was a later edition of the police list he had shown Victor in his office two days ago. Alexander, looking down the list, saw that it included the jewellery now lying in front of them. 'You t'ink I am lookink for trouble?' asked Ezra harshly.

'Not looking for it, no. But I understood you knew how to avoid it,' said Alexander.

Ezra looked angrily at Victor. 'Well?'

'Shut up a minute, will you?' said Victor, and went on counting the notes.

Ezra watched him in silence, breathing heavily. Once he shot a sidelong look at Alexander, but for the rest of the time stood frowning down at the desk, chewing his cigar until Victor had finished counting.

'You'd like the rubber bands back, wouldn't you?' Victor asked, watching Alexander for an appreciative reflex.

'What iss the idea - bringink to me such business?' Ezra demanded.

Victor looked at him brazenly. 'My God, I've seen you acting quite a few parts, but injured innocence—!' He blew out his cheeks. 'I'd rather see Mickey Rooney as Macbeth.'

'Could happen,' said Alexander ominously. 'But look, I don't want to come between two fingers of a glove.' He smiled a smile of amiable indifference and began to pick up the jewellery off the desk. 'If it's not your kind of business—'

'Wait a minute, wait a minute,' said Victor impatiently. 'What's the matter with you, Ezra, all of a sudden?'

'All of a sudden not'ing. Because I do for you once in a while favours means I should do to averyone favours? No! Such deals I don't do vit' strangers.'

'I told you - Alex is a friend of mine. He's not a stranger.' Victor bit his words off short and sharp.

'To me he is a stranger just the same,' Ezra persisted.

'I dare say I seem strange to a lot of people,' said Alexander, 'but they don't have to go to war about it. Look, I've got no hard feelings, Vic - none at all. Why bother to have them for me?'

Ezra turned to him. His manner had become less aggressive, but it was still a long way short of being friendly. 'Not'ing personal, Mr. James. You understendt? But how can I afford it in my business to take' - he shrugged and fluttered the flat of his hand like a bird - 'such respunsibilitiss?' Again he looked at Victor. 'Bitten once, I am twice shy by strangers.' He caught up a mutter of impatience from Victor. 'Yes? And who brinks to me first this crooked van der Meer, uh? Who tries—'

There was suddenly a look in Victor's eye that left the words stillborn on the end of Ezra's tongue.

'All right; so I brought you together. What of it? What else did I have to do with it – except to get you out of a dirty jam?'

'How you take care of it, that was not my business.'

'Nor mine,' said Alexander, 'even if I knew what all this was about. Look, Vic, if Ezra doesn't want to make a deal of it, I'm not going to break my heart. There're plenty of money-hungries who may be glad to get their teeth in some of this.' He slipped the jewellery back into its little bag and dropped it into his pocket.

'And maybe choke themselves,' said Ezra sourly.

Victor said nothing for a moment. He picked up the notes in their bundles and stuffed them into his pockets. Then he turned to Ezra and looked at him with a steady and uncompromising eye.

'Come on, let us out,' he said.

They went back along the dimly lit passage, Ezra fumbling his way in front of them, till he reached the door. Then he took off the chain, and as he let them out into the street, he said huskily, 'I be seeing you, maybe?'

'Whether you like it or not,' said Victor,

## Chapter Eight

They walked to the end of the court in silence. 'Sorry that didn't work out,' said Victor, as they crossed the road. 'I don't like Jack Ezra though; I've never pretended to. He's mean and he's stubborn. Only I know just a bit too much about him, and he knows that I know; and sometimes that sort of thing comes in useful – you know what I mean? – in an emergency.' Alexander nodded. 'I thought perhaps he might care to spread himself for once and made a good impression. However . . .'

'I seem to have scared him rather.'

'It wasn't you. He had a little trouble lately, that's all. Someone he was dealing with – also a stranger, as a matter of fact – had the idea of trying to do some sort of squeeze.'

'Like trying to get plasma out of a stone, I should think. Who won?'

'I did,' said Victor. 'I'm a very close corporation, Alex. I don't like, and I don't allow, any interference at all in my business. And in so far as it may be business to do with Ezra, that goes for him, too.'

'Why bother with him though? Aren't there plenty of others?'

'Are there? Show me just one reliable man.'

'Certainly.'

Victor glanced at him as they walked. 'Do you mean that?' he asked.

'You don't think I carry hot irons around in my pockets for the fun of it? I want to unload this stuff and unload it quickly,' said Alexander. 'You'd better come along with me tomorrow.'

'Why not?'

'Okay. Pick me up in the morning about eleven. All right?'

'Do we have to start at sunrise?' said Victor. 'I've no business to do - not at the moment - but I'll come for the ride.'

'You may have business some day,' said Alexander.

A fine drizzle had begun to fall as they turned into Berkeley Square, and in the mews a greasy glitter lit the cobblestones under the Venetian lanterns in front of Skinner's.

A few early habitués were already at the bar, and from downstairs came the soft and rapid rhythm of the quintette.

'Has anyone rung for me, Harry?' asked Victor. Harry shook his head. 'Nothing from Mr. Ruffo?'

'Nothing so far,' said Harry.

'Well-' Victor turned to Alexander. 'Have something on the house,' he said benevolently. 'I'm going to fill the safe.' He grinned and slapped the pockets of his dinner jacket.

Alexander bade Harry good evening, then ordered a whisky. Along the bar, in the direction of the office, he saw Rose. She was wearing a different dress from either of those he had seen before, a dress of dark magenta, severely plain and engagingly *décolleté*. Her neck and shoulders, rising very white from its stiff folds, had the still beauty of marble. She was sitting with a tall man whose thick white hair was well trimmed and neatly parted. His wide lips were set in a rubbery jowl and he wore large rimless glasses. The implications of his appearance were confirmed when Alexander took an empty stool near Rose and heard him speak.



'What would your wife have to say about it?' Rose was asking.

'My wife?' said the man, with a half-hearted smile. 'She's in Cedar Falls, Iowa.' He was looking at Rose circumspectly, yet with a kind of glittering anticipation.

Alexander sat watching them in the mirror behind the bar. Rose, with her back half turned towards him, had not yet noticed he was there. She seemed to be handling her transatlantic bore with dignity and even some amusement. Her conversational technique might well have seemed pert in someone less self-composed, and a good deal of its edge was taken off by the simple charm of her manner.

'I always understood absence made the heart grow fonder,' she said with a smile which somehow seemed to avoid cynicism by a hair's breadth. 'But perhaps your wife has a weak heart.'

'She's plenty strong, my wife,' said the American. 'I guess I'm the weaker vessel.' He smiled at her again, this time with a more wolfish expression. Then the smile died away and he put a large lean hand on the upper part of Rose's arm. 'You know, you're a very lovely girl - very lovely indeed.' His tone had become depressingly intimate. Alexander saw his fingers tightening on Rose's flesh and saw her drawing back a little. 'I don't even know your name, but listen, honey, I wouldn't have to. You know, you and I—'

Alexander stood up. He reached out between them without any apology and lifted a soda syphon off the bar.

'The name is James,' he said, 'and it's mine.' He squeezed some soda into his glass and put the syphon back again. 'I have an idea this lady doesn't care for having strangers feel her biceps. I don't mind, personally, if you feel like trying.'

The American, too, was standing up now. His brown eyes were blazing behind his rimless glasses. He glared into Alexander's face at close range, and for a few seconds everything short of bloodshed seemed to loom over that part of the bar where they were standing. Then, with his glass still in his hand, Alexander gripped Rose's elbow and steered her away towards the balcony. A whispered obscenity, in the accents of Cedar Falls, Iowa, followed them.

'You shouldn't have done that,' said Rose as they went downstairs. Her tone mixed reproof with gratitude. 'It's part of the job, putting up with that kind of thing. Besides, I can look after myself.' Then she added, 'But it was nice of you to come to the rescue, all the same.'

'If that's part of your job, the sooner you get another one the better,' said Alexander, as they sat down at Rose's table near the bottom of the stairs. 'I don't know what a girl like you comes to be doing in this sort of job, anyway.'

She sighed. 'Oh, it's a long story.'

'Well, I'm a good listener,' said Alexander. 'Waiter!'

He ordered some drinks, and waited till they were brought before he let her go on. Then, while the quintette made its own sort of music out of Irving Berlin's, Rose told her tale.

'Well, there's really only one reason why I stick it here at all. That's because of Philip.'

'I guessed that,' said Alexander.

He glanced across the floor towards the dais, and between the shifting pattern of the dancers' heads he caught a glimpse of Philip sitting with his guitar on his knees. Tonight he looked quiet and a little dispirited. There was no animation, no vivacity about his playing, though his face had lost that look of glazed indifference which Alexander had seen before.

'The trouble is he's three years younger than I am,' said Rose, 'and in some ways he's still pretty juvenile for his age. If he were older, perhaps I wouldn't feel so responsible. The thing is this: my father died two years ago – he knew he was dying – and I promised him that whatever happened, I'd make sure Philip got along all right.'

'That was a rash promise, wasn't it?'

'It was. But Philip was really the beginning and end of Father's existence. He knew he was a bit wild—'

'He'd spoilt him, I suppose?'

'I suppose so. Anyway, I promised.'

'And that's how you come to be here? How about your mother?' Alexander asked.

'She died when Philip was born. We'd always seemed to be pretty well off. I'd never had to think about money, really – until just before Father died, and then I don't know what happened, but there was some sort of crash and he lost every penny.'

'That sounds pretty tough,' said Alexander.

'It was tough.' She paused. 'When the war came, I went straight from school into the W.A.A.F. When I came out I was twenty-two. I knew nothing about anything except how to work a predictor and peel potatoes, and I didn't ever want to do either of them again.'

'So you did what?'

'Well, I had two marvellous years travelling all over the place

with Father, just wasting my time and enjoying every minute of it. Then quite suddenly he died, and there I was.'

'Left to pay the bill?'

Rose nodded, and again she sighed. 'At least Philip had learnt to play a guitar. I couldn't even do that. I took the first job that came along, in a shop.'

'How did you translate into a nautch girl?'

'I began getting a bit worried about Philip—' She hesitated. 'He started to have sort of . . . getting these sort of attacks. I didn't know what they were then. It never occurred to me.'

'How did you guess?'

'Well, this job cropped up here, so I took it. I knew how to dance fairly well, that was about all. Still, it paid the rent more easily than selling knitwear, and it gave me a chance to keep an eye on Philip. That's how I first suspected something was wrong. And in the end I tackled him about it.'

'Did he tell you?'

She nodded. 'But not till we had had a row.'

Alexander said nothing for a little while. The room had filled up since they had arrived, and sounds of pleasure, mingled with those of catering, had grown imperceptibly all round them. Now the quintette was violating the memory of Waldteufel, and Waldteufel seemed to be enjoying it.

'Who really is the bad influence?' asked Alexander. 'Do you know?'

'I don't know. Oh, everyone, more or less, seems to be a pretty bad influence in this place.' There was a sudden undertone of desperation in her voice. She turned and glanced at Alexander, and her honey-coloured eyes seemed bright with unshed tears. 'I don't even know about you, for that matter — what you are doing here at all.'

'Killing time,' he said.

'What for?'

'For the fun of it.'

'And is it fun?'

'That depends. You'll be here tomorrow?' She nodded. 'Tell me,' he said, 'does the name Ruffo mean anything to you?'

She shook her head. 'What is it? Sounds like something good for dogs.'

'Or bad for them, perhaps. I don't know either. Suppose we dance?'

He glanced up towards the balcony as he spoke, and Rose, following his look, saw Snow White gazing towards their table

with his chilly stare. He gave no sign that he had recognized either of them, and after a few seconds he turned away and disappeared.

## Chapter Nine

Alexander stood by the window, concentrating a lifetime's skill and experience on the filing of his nails. It was twenty past eleven before Victor appeared. Alexander, watching for him, saw him cross the pavement from a taxi, and went to meet him at the door.

'I got stuck,' Victor explained, 'in bed. How about it - are we ready?'

In a short while the taxi, which Victor had kept waiting, dropped them at St. James's in front of a new and neat office block. It was a polite structure in the Gilbert-Scottish taste, with the words Chatham Chambers incised upon the architrave. A porter, neither as neat nor as up-to-date as the building, but with a bright-eyed bibulous look, ushered them into the lift and gave off a stream of banter as they went up.

'All-safe-and-sound-anyone-for-the-down-trip?' he cried with brisk facetiousness as they reached the fourth floor.

Alexander, suppressing a shudder, led the way along the corridor to a room marked 422. On the glass panel of the door were inscribed the words: *St. James's Jewel Mart Ltd. Silversmiths & Jewellers. Repairs, Valuations.* They went into a small outer office. A table, a rexine-covered chair, a hat stand, and a dusty file of *The Jeweller and Metalworker* were its only occupants. Alexander crossed to a door marked Private and knocked on it. Then he led Victor inside.

It was not a large room, but the furnishing of it, which was spare and tidy, made the place seem more spacious than it was. It had the effect of being something between a shop, a workroom, and an office. One half of the room - the half near the door - was carpeted with a haircord carpet; the other half had a bare hard wood floor. Across the middle of the room ran a combined

counter and display case, showing a few pieces of inelegant silver. A pair of office chairs, a filing cabinet, and some framed diplomas, long out of date, made up the effects on this side of the counter.

On the other, the side farthest from the door, there was a desk and a chair, a tall showcase covered with a steel grill, a nest of shallow mahogany drawers, and a small safe standing on the floor. Except for a work bench under the window, that was all. The bench was littered with the tools and appurtenances of a jewelsmith; and on a stool in front of the bench was sitting Delbos. He was wearing a grey alpaca jacket and a green eyeshade.

As Alexander came in, he looked up from his work and pushed the eyeshade back on to his forehead.

'Hullo, Leon,' said Alexander. 'Too busy for business? Or can you spare us a minute?'

Delbos got up from the bench and came forward to the counter.

'I want you to meet a friend of mine, Vic Skinner,' said Alexander, shaking the hand which Delbos held out to him. 'I thought perhaps you two might be useful to each other some time.'

'I hope so,' said Victor shaking hands, too.

Delbos said nothing, but smiled his tired smile and inclined his head. He fixed his eyes on Victor for a moment as Alexander went on:

'Well, Leon, how have things been? How was Geneva?'

'Quiet,' said Delbos. 'Business here, too, quiet as well.'

'Now, don't give me the old line, Leon. I've never known you when business wasn't practically inaudible; not when I've been on the selling end, anyway.' He turned to Victor. 'To hear Leon talk, you'd think everyone in the trade was bankrupt. Well, look, I've got a little something that may revive business a bit. Would you be interested?' He took the wash-leather bag out of his pocket and held it lightly in his hand. 'I want to sell.'

He untied the strings and turned the contents of the bag out on a strip of brown velvet which covered the middle of the counter - the diamond pendant and the ring, the bracelet and the ear-rings set with pearls and topaz.

Delbos looked at them, then he went back to the work bench and picked up a watchmaker's glass which he screwed into his eye. He took up each piece of jewellery in turn and examined it closely. Then, with the pendant still in his hand, he went back to

the bench and adjusted the flexible arm of his working lamp. He stood for some moments with his back towards the counter as though he were re-examining the pendant. But there was something in the turn of his head, in the direction of his glance – though it was something so slight as to be hardly noticeable – which showed that his eye was not really on the pendant. Instead, he was looking at a paper lying on the desk, a single buff-coloured leaflet. It was the notice from Scotland Yard ‘To Pawnbrokers and Others’.

Glancing towards Victor at this moment, Alexander caught his eye. In silence they watched Delbos’s manoeuvre. Presently he took the glass out of his eye and came back to the counter. He put the pendant down on the piece of brown velvet and stood looking at the several pieces of jewellery with a dubious face. Then he looked up at Alexander.

‘What are you expecting?’ he asked.

‘No more than I’d get in the open market,’ said Alexander. ‘No less either, if I can help it.’

‘Why not go then to the open market?’ asked Delbos, with a shrug that moved almost nothing but his eyebrows. He looked from Alexander to Victor and back again.

‘What’s on your mind?’ Alexander asked. He paused, but Delbos said nothing. ‘You needn’t worry about Victor. He knows the right answers.’

‘You know what is in my mind, then?’ asked Delbos. He toyed with the pendant, pressing it gently between his hands.

‘What’s the matter with it?’ Alexander asked.

‘Warm,’ said Delbos in his quiet, abstracted way.

‘Is it?’ said Alexander. He sounded neither surprised nor disconcerted. Delbos, still pressing the pendant between his palms, nodded. ‘Well, I take it it’s still got some value?’

‘Not a great deal.’ Delbos shook his head. ‘Not so hot as this. However, I give you—’ He hesitated. ‘Two-twenty-five for the four altogether.’

It was Alexander’s turn to shake his head. He looked at Delbos with a chiding yet half-humorous look.

‘Now, listen, Leon – a man’s got to eat.’

‘Two men have got to eat – you and me,’ said Delbos indifferently. ‘I cannot afford more.’

‘Listen. You know, I know – Vic knows – they’re worth twice as much as that, this little lot – every bit of it. They’re warm – you say so, anyway. Okay, that’s your information – let it go. I don’t dispute with you as a rule, do I? All right, then; if that’s

how it is, I don't ask you for the full market price. All I ask is fair do's.' Alexander spoke calmly, with no sign of displeasure. He made the proposition sound almost reasonable.

Again Delbos picked up the pendant and stood turning it over in his hand. Then he sighed. 'All right. Two-forty. Yes or no?' he said.

'Yes,' said Alexander.

Delbos went to the safe and took out two bundles of paper money in five- and one-pound notes. Alexander watched him as he began to count.

Victor leaned against the counter and lit a cigarette. He looked about him with a cool, slow glance which seemed to perceive nothing in particular nor yet miss anything that could be of interest. His eyes wandered from the work bench to the safe, from the safe to the desk, and from the desk to the showcase. Behind its thin steel grill a collection of rough-cut stones lay on a velvet tray, glittering and translucent with the colours of fire and water.

Delbos counted out two hundred and forty pounds and handed the notes to Alexander. Then he dropped the pendant, the ear-rings, the bracelet, and the ring back into their little bag and tucked it away in the safe.

'Well, that's put Carey Street a week away,' said Alexander. 'Leon, you're a good scout, I'll be around again some time.' They shook hands.

'I think we could do business, too, Mr. Delbos,' said Victor. 'Another time perhaps?'

'Pleased,' said Delbos quietly. He came round behind the counter, and as he opened the inner door he shook hands with Victor. '*Au revoir*.'

'Going my way?' Victor asked, as he and Alexander reached the pavement.

'Thanks, I think I'll walk a bit,' said Alexander. 'Maybe I'll look in this evening.'

'Okay. I'll see you later.'

Victor watched him go, then crossed the street and went into a call-box. He dialled a number and waited.

'Snow White there?' he asked presently; and then, after a moment, 'Snowy? Listen. I'm giving birth to a big idea. I'm in a call-box, so there isn't much room. . . . Wait, I'll tell you. First of all I want you to get hold of Ezra - get him round right away, this minute. You'll have to move pretty fast, d'you understand? . . .'

## Chapter Ten

Mr. Herring had a customer. Alexander waited a few minutes, letting his eye range slowly along the shelves, then bringing it back to Mr. Herring. They exchanged a look – a look on Mr. Herring's part such as Eliphaz the Temanite might have got from Job, an upward rolling of the eyeball and a tightening of the lips. Then he jerked his head aloft, and Alexander, taking his cue, stepped into the office, along the soap-and-savoury-scented passage and up to the first floor.

As before, Collis was standing at the window looking out on the soot-laden leaves of the fig-tree and the line of washing in the yard below. The look in his eye, as he turned away from the window, suggested that his casing of imperturbability had got a loose joint. Eagerness would perhaps have seemed too strong a word, but anticipation was clearly there.

'Dear Nichol! How did it go?' he asked.

'Not too badly – except that Ezra wouldn't play. Wouldn't even make a bid.'

'Blast Ezra!'

'Well, it helped in a way: it gave me a good and solid reason for suggesting Delbos.'

'How was he?'

'Word perfect. You and Cathie must have done a nice job.'

'And how did Skinner react?'

'Nicely, very nicely. He more or less invited himself.' Collis pursed up his mouth.

'Don't like it when things begin to go smoothly,' he said.

'Well, if that's all you've got to bellyache about, I should forget it,' said Alexander. 'They'll do business; you wait and see.'

'They will?'

'Sooner or later, almost certainly. Victor's pretty fed up with Ezra, I think; and Delbos made himself out very accommodating. Didn't overdo a thing – just a nicely calculated performance. They'll do business all right, you bet.'

'Well, it'll be a touching proof of Skinner's belief in you if they do.'

'Which is what I wanted.'

'I know. But I haven't got quite the same faith in Delbos.'

'How d'you mean?'

'I don't think he'd need much encouragement to relapse.'



'Not if he knows we're watching him. Besides, I should probably know if Victor had got hold of something to offer him.'

'Would you, though?'

'Should do - if my nose doesn't give out.'

Collis still seemed unconvinced. 'There's always a risk you may get your nose caught in the door.'

'Risking my nose is what I get paid for, isn't it? Besides, if I get anything caught in this case, it'll be something more vulnerable than my nose, believe me. Well now, how about palming a few of these?' Alexander pulled out the thick wad of notes which Delbos had turned over to him. 'Do you have to count 'em? Or is my word supposed to be good enough?'

'It's supposed to be,' said Collis. He unlocked a brief-case lying on the dusty trestle table and stuffed the notes inside.

Alexander smiled. 'Now you go round and collect from Delbos, I suppose?'

'Dear Delbos. Now I go round and collect from him.' Collis shut the lock with a snap.

'Well,' said Alexander, 'tell him from me, will you? - it was a very pretty performance.'

'This is it,' said Snow White. 'Cut in behind this bloke.'

Philip pulled his green Lagonda into the kerb and drew up behind a stationary van. Snow White, glancing out across the street, could see directly into Chatham Chambers. The main doors were thrown open against the walls of the entrance, and beyond them, towards the back of the lobby, he could see the lift gates. For a few seconds he sat silently watching the dim interior framed between the open doors.

Philip looked out across the street in the same direction, then glanced at Snow White. But Snow White said nothing. Then, as they sat watching, the lift opened and disgorged a passenger. Another took his place, the gates closed and once more the lobby was empty. Snow White dropped his cigarette over the edge of the window and got out.

'Five minutes,' he said, looking back into the car. 'Give me five minutes. If I'm not back, come up and collect me. Got it? Fourth floor, room 422.' He glanced at his watch and compared it with the clock on the dashboard. 'Don't hang about. Five minutes, no more.'

'Okay. But look, what's it all about, for heaven's sake? What do I have to *do*?' Philip looked at him with an expression of exaggerated innocence.

'What you do is what I've just told you - go to the fourth floor, room 422.' Snow White fixed him with his eye for a second, then with a quick look about him, he crossed the street and went into the building.

There was no one in the lobby at this moment, and the lift had not come down yet, though the indicator showed it was on its way. Snow White, ignoring this, took the stairs. At the first landing he stopped and from his cigarette-case he took a thin, brown cigarette. He broke it in two pieces, tossed one half through the trellised gate of the lift shaft, lit the other with his lighter, and after a few cautious puffs, went on up the stairs. He had almost reached the fourth floor, when a broad-beamed lady carrying a tray of tea-cups went slowly past the stair head. Snow White stopped dead. The woman, glancing neither to her right nor her left, trundled on out of sight, leaving him for some seconds like a man turned to stone. Then, as the genteel patter of her footsteps ebbed away, he moved on up the stairs and walked quickly towards room 422.

Glancing discreetly up and down the corridor, he took out his handkerchief, and holding it so as to cover his hand, opened the door of the waiting room and went in. He pushed it to with his elbow, and tapped on the inner door. Then he opened this one in the same way and went into the office.

Delbos was sitting at his desk, typing with two fingers on a portable typewriter. He looked at Snow White over steel-rimmed glasses, then got up and came towards the counter.

'Mr. Delbos?' asked Snow White, edging his handkerchief carefully back into its pocket so as to preserve its crisp edges. Delbos gave a nod. He folded his glasses and laid them down carefully on the end of the counter. 'I'm a friend of Mr. James. I believe he's just been here a little while ago?'

'He was here, yes, twenty minutes - half an hour ago,' said Delbos, uniting the last words with his faintly guttural pronunciation.

'That's right, I just met him. He told me you'd bought one or two things off him.' Delbos kept a close, impassive eye on Snow White but said nothing. 'A pendant, I believe, a diamond pendant, he said, and one or two other things. I'm not so interested in them, but from what he told me I think I might be interested in the pendant - definitely interested in that. I wonder if you'd let me have a look at it?'

Delbos hesitated. 'I'm afraid it's not for sale, the pendant. It's for a client I bought it. I'm sorry.'

'Do you mind if I ask whether you agreed a price?' Snow White's manner was amiable and open. Even his frosty smile seemed to have been warmed up for the occasion; but it didn't succeed in melting Delbos. He shook his head.

'I have an open commission for such pieces. I couldn't consider another offer, I'm afraid - not at present.' He was courteous but firm.

'I see. Well ...' Snow White, keeping things in the same key, smiled a smile of resignation, but showed that he was not defeated. Thoughtfully he stubbed out his cigarette against an ash-tray standing on the counter's edge. His glance, for all the candour he could infuse into it, had been on a restless tour of observation while they talked, and had missed nothing, from the door of the safe, which stood half open, to the alarm lead attached to the showcase and concealed from innocent eyes in the bevelling of the wainscot. Now he looked once more at the showcase.

'I suppose you could make up a pendant, could you? - from another stone, I mean - like that aquamarine there. I like that.' He pointed to a large uncut stone lying on the velvet tray behind the grill. 'What I want is something unusual - you know, something a bit out of the ordinary. Now, that for instance - could that be made into a pendant? - a stone like that?' Delbos turned his glance away towards the showcase, and as he did so, Snow White's eyes flickered towards his wrist-watch.

'It could be done, yes.' The tone in which Delbos confessed it implied the operation might be a major one, something tricky and perhaps speculative.

There was a restless movement about Snow White's lips. His hands were clasped in front of him on the counter and his nails were biting into the flesh below his knuckles. The note of sweet reasonableness in his voice sounded sweeter yet - and more reasonable.

'Could I just have a look at them, one or two of those stones - or would that be a nuisance? What's that one over there - a sapphire, is it?'

The seeming reluctance of Delbos's manner began to be tempered with a faint - a very faint expression of compromise. He made a slight shrug.

'If you would give me, Mr. ...'

'Wallis.'

'Mr. Wallis, just an idea of what sort of figure you had -'

'I don't think we'd quarrel about price, Mr. Delbos - not if you could make me up what I'm looking for. A stone like that

one, that aquamarine, I should say would do beautifully. Now, how would that work out?’

As Delbos turned back towards the showcase, Snow White flashed a glance towards the door. Then silently he drew from his trouser pocket a leather-covered cosh. . . .

Philip sat drumming his fingers on the steering-wheel, synco-pating the beat of a whispered melody. Beyond the windscreen were dazzling surfaces of chromium and cellulose which held his eyes in fixed abstraction. He stared out along the street as though he were in a trance.

‘Are you supposed to be waiting for somebody?’

A policeman was looking in at him through the off-side window. He was a pale, youthful constable with a self-conscious air of responsibility.

‘I’m sorry. I’m not in the way here, am I?’ Philip asked cheerfully.

‘You will be if you stay here for long.’

‘I never stay anywhere for long,’ said Philip. ‘It’s the gypsy in me. I’m just waiting for a friend. I’d better go up and collect him.’

‘Look out you don’t collect a summons with him,’ said the young policeman, so far forgetting the majesty of the Law as to offer a faint twitch of his fair moustache.

As Philip moved to get out of the car, a one-legged veteran with a crutch and a tray of flowers thrust a poxy face in at the window and croaked at him:

‘Gardeenias, sir? – carnations?’

Philip looked vacantly at the tray of flowers for a moment, then picked out a clove carnation and gave the man two shillings. He settled the flower in his buttonhole, then crossed the road and went into Chatham Chambers. From a cage near the main doors the bibulous porter hopped out and challenged him with an inquisitive smile.

‘Fourth, please,’ said Philip, as they got into the lift.

The upward journey was slow and was made to a running accompaniment of weather criticism, with passing references to the effect of climatic conditions on the porter’s legs.

Philip glanced at the direction board in front of the lift as he stepped out, then turned to the left and set off along the corridor. Suddenly the outer door of room 422 opened and Snow White appeared. He beckoned to Philip, holding out to him the small wash-leather bag which Alexander had left with Delbos.

'Shove this in your pocket and get going—' He stopped short, staring coldly at Philip's carnation. 'What are you wearing that for? You heard what Victor said, didn't you?'

'Who's going to stop me?'

Snow White didn't answer. He stared at him for a second with a freezing glance, then put his hand up and tugged the flower from Philip's buttonhole.

'Get it into your thick skull, will you?' he said, chopping short Philip's protest. 'Making yourself conspicuous will get you into trouble one day. Time you grew up.' He flung the carnation on the floor and pushed Philip away from the half-open door. 'Now, listen: you know Jack Ezra?'

'Not to speak to. I've seen him around with Vic once or twice.'

'Right. I want you to take this to him right away.' He thrust the little bag into Philip's hand. 'You know where to find him — Ten Tanner's Court, off Oxford Street.' Philip nodded. 'Tell him I've sent you with this and get the best offer you can out of him. Okay?' Philip looked at the bag with dumb eyes; then with a light of suspicious interest he glanced again at Snow White. 'Go on, now, get going. Better take the stairs this time,' Snow White added. 'You'll have to wait all day for that damned lift. Go on!'

He watched Philip until he disappeared through the door leading to the staircase; then slowly he picked up the carnation and went back into the inner office.

After a few seconds he came out again and crossed towards the outer door: then he hesitated. In the corridor there was a sound of soft footsteps. As he stood there listening, they stopped; then, after a moment, they came on again, stopped, and presently came nearer. They reached the outer door, and against the frosted panel appeared the silhouette of a man in a peaked cap. Snow White dropped down silently on his knees and remained crouching behind the door. It was not quite shut, and now he could hear the man outside whistling softly. There was a long pause; then some letters rustled through the letter-box into the wire cage on the back of the door, and gradually the man's rubber footfalls passed out of hearing.

Snow White stood up, breathing fast. He listened intently for a few seconds, then taking his handkerchief out of his pocket, and again using it to cover the handle, he opened the door wide enough to let himself out, then pulled it back till it stood as it was before.

Quickly he walked to the stairs and ran down to the second floor. The indicator beside the lift showed that it was down below. He pressed the button and waited a few moments till the light began to move up, then he ran on downstairs into the lobby. It was empty, and so was the porter's cubicle. Unobserved, Snow White walked straight through and out into the street.

A moment after he had gone, the lift came down and the porter stepped out of it. There was a look of wooden indifference on his face. It was the look of a hardened sucker. As he came towards his lair, a man walked into the lobby from outside. The man was Collis. With his brief-case, his black homburg, and his neat grey raglan, he looked the embodiment of all civic virtues - except the one he happened to represent.

The porter returned with him to the lift and they rode in silence to the fourth floor. Collis walked along the corridor to room 422 and knocked on the outer door; then he pushed it open and went across to the office. Again he knocked, and this time waited for a moment before he walked into the room.

It seemed at first as though the office was empty. Then he took a step farther, and caught sight of Delbos. He was lying on his face between the counter and the showcase with one arm doubled underneath him and the other flung out sideways from his body. Collis dropped his brief-case and ran round behind the counter. Delbos was lying with his head turned towards the window, his nose flattened against the hardwood floor, and his mouth wedged open by the impact of his fall.

Kneeling down beside him, Collis bent over and listened to his short, throttled breaths. Then he got up, and pulling out a pair of doeskin gloves, he put them on and lifted the telephone receiver.

'"Emergency", please. But first of all get an ambulance, will you? - then send up the porter, quickly, room 422.' In a few seconds he was speaking to the D.D.I.

'... God knows. I just walked in this moment ...' He turned the glove back from his wrist and looked at his watch. 'I make it twelve twenty-six. Yes, I've done all that. ... Righto, I'll wait.'

He hung up. Then he knelt down beside Delbos again and felt his pulse. With infinite gentleness, and without disturbing his position, he loosened his tie and then his collar. Then he stood up and looked about the room. The strip of velvet that had covered the counter was now lying on the floor near Delbos's feet. His spectacles, with their lenses shattered, lay nearby. The contents of the ash-tray had been spilt, partly on to the counter

and partly on to the floor. Some papers that might have come from the desk were scattered about where Delbos lay, and the chair behind the desk was overturned. Looking among the spilt ashes, Collis noticed the brown stub of Snow White's cigarette, and with the end of a pencil, poked it gently to one side, away from the mess.

Presently he heard someone hurrying along the passage, and darting into the outer office, he met the porter, his face lit with a look of startled self-importance. Collis, standing on no ceremony, knocked the man's hand away as he put it towards the handle of the door.

'Don't touch anything,' he said sharply. 'There's been a bit of trouble here. Mr. Delbos has been hurt.'

'Has 'e, by jove!' the porter began querulously. 'Well, that's no call to go around 'ittin' other people, is it? What's up?' Curiosity fought with affronted dignity and got the upper hand. He craned past Collis, trying to see into the next room.

'Never mind about that,' said Collis. 'Just do as I say, will you? First of all, go downstairs and get a policeman. Don't come up yourself. Wait for the ambulance, it's on its way. Tell 'em they'll need a stretcher and to buck up about it.'

There was a sudden note of authority in Collis's voice, a note which seemed hard to reconcile with the modest civility of that black homburg and that grey ready-to-wear raglan. The porter gaped, allowing Collis to manoeuvre him from the outer office back into the corridor. Then he hurried away towards the lift.

Collis went back to the inner room and took another look at Delbos. Then he stepped across his body and went over to the safe. The door was standing wide open and a small drawer had been pulled out and turned upside down. A few letters and documents, some tied together with pink tape, were strewn in front of the safe. Presently from the street below, baffled by distance and intervening walls, he heard the shrill, imperative clang of an ambulance bell.

In a few minutes there were more footsteps in the corridor, and again Collis hurried back into the outer room. The porter's voice, exultant with authority and pitched a note or two higher than usual, was resounding through the corridor.

'Now don't touch nothing, see? - none of you. Don't get puttin' sweaty 'ands down all over the shop. Just leave everything be. Don't touch—'

Collis pushed the door wide open with his gloved hand and the porter trundled in with a policeman and a pair of ambulance

men carrying a folded stretcher. Taking over the porter's lead, Collis guided the men round behind the counter. Gently they turned Delbos over and lifted him on to the stretcher. Collis watched them bear him out, then stooped down and picked up a red carnation that had been lying underneath his body.

## Chapter Eleven

Philip walked down the narrow court, glancing on either side at the dingy shop fronts. There was a bootmaker's, a fly-blown tobacconist's, a decorator's, a dairy, and then Ezra's shop. From the look of things their daily acquaintance with the sun seemed unlikely ever to ripen into friendship, and Ezra's shop was no exception. The collection which filled his window, the crystal, quartz and jade, the lacquer and enamel, the assortment of carved and gilded objects, gave the outside of his shop, by comparison, a dingier and dustier look than some of its neighbours.

Philip hesitated in front of the window before he went inside. A middle-aged drab was going through the actions of dusting with a small feather brush.

'Mr. Ezra in?' asked Philip.

'I'll find out. What name?' The drab's voice did full justice to her appearance.

'I don't think he'll know it, but it's Reed. I want to see him on business, would you tell him? - private business.'

The drab went out through a door, and in a few moments was replaced by Ezra in his shirt-sleeves. A sudden shyness seemed to come over Philip. He looked at Ezra as though not sure whether to smile, then seemed to decide against it.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Ezra.' Ezra nodded. 'I wonder if - um - I wonder-' Philip came to a stop, glancing round at the loaded shelves and showcases.

'Someth'ing I can maybe show you?' Ezra suggested.

'Not exactly.' Again the shadow of Philip's smile came and went. 'I wanted really to - I wanted to show you something.'

'Ah. To buy, uh?'



'That's what I hope.'

Philip pulled out the wash-leather bag, untied the string round the neck, and sifted the contents out into his hand. There was nothing to indicate in Ezra's glance that he had seen any of the jewels before. He took his thick-rimmed glasses out of his waist-coat pocket, and, carrying the jewellery to the end of the counter, examined each piece separately by the light of a daylight lamp.

'You are recommended there to me?' he asked casually, turning the pendant over in his hand.

'No . . . no, but I've noticed your window. I've noticed you have jewellery like this in it sometimes.'

'What are you askink for these?' Ezra inquired.

Philip hesitated. 'I . . . well, I'll take any reasonable offer, if you like to say what you think they might be worth.'

Ezra looked unimpressed. 'Such t'ings jus' now are not very easy to sell,' he said. He came back to where Philip was standing. 'But I haff one, two clients I could maybe interest. If you would care to leave wit' me what you have here for a day or two, I try, if you like. Od'erwise' - he shrugged - 'I give you if you want a receipt.'

Philip pinched his lips together between his finger and thumb. He looked unhappily at Ezra, then at the jewellery lying on the counter. Ezra waited, his large brown eyes fixed impassively on Philip's face.

'I see. I wanted . . . well, really I rather wanted cash, you see.'

Again Ezra shrugged, and as though to modify his attitude, sighed as well.

'Oh, well,' said Philip tentatively, 'I suppose, then, I'd better leave them.' He stood plucking at his lips while Ezra wrote out the receipt. 'I'll drop in again, then?'

'Two, t'ree days,' suggested Ezra.

'In two or three days. Okay.'

Philip took the receipt, slipped it between the folds of his wallet, then nodded to Ezra and went out.

It was dark by the time Ezra left the shop. He came out through the door next to the entrance, locked it with a key, then walked off down the court with a ponderous and slightly flat-footed step. The last sixpennyworth of a three-shilling cigar was jutting from his flat, mobile lips, and he carried, as usual, his ivory-headed cane.

Presently he was pushing his way through the swing doors

leading to Skinner's bar. He saluted Harry with his cane as he went by, and walked on towards the office. Victor, with a carnation on his silk lapel, was coming upstairs from the dance floor as Ezra got to the door. He greeted him with a face significantly grim, as though Ezra, too, might have been expected to reflect some sense of foreboding. But there was nothing to disturb Ezra's usual air of abstracted melancholy.

Together they went into the office. Victor slid down into the big chair behind the desk and pushed the cigar tub towards Ezra. But Ezra waved it away. He propped his cane carefully against the filing cabinet and leant back against the window ledge, nodding his head, as though in tacit agreement with some unuttered proposition.

'Well? So he comes to me, young Reed. Ah, such a *schlemiel* I could feel sorry for.' He grunted. 'Only me, it seems I am no batter.' His voice was as soft and as hoarse as ever, but there was a hint of impatience in the way he spoke. 'Whut is it all about, we neither understandt. I say whut I am given to say - the boy also. And now whut next?'

Victor sat with his chair tilted back and his knees propped against the edge of the desk. For some few moments he said nothing, but sat fidgeting with his jade paper-knife, staring with eyes unfocused at the circle of light thrown on the desk in front of him. Then, as though with a sudden effort he had jerked his mind back to the recollection of Ezra's presence, he looked up at him.

'What next? I don't know what next.'

'Will you tell me then, please, whut is this goink on? Whut is this I am suppose' to be doink, uh?' Ezra stared moodily at Victor.

Victor leant forward and with the point of his paper-knife stabbed at a paragraph on the front page of a newspaper lying before him on the desk. Ezra put on his thick-rimmed glasses and looked at the paper.

'You want I should read now the evenink paper?' he asked with sullen sarcasm.

'Read that.' Again Victor stabbed the paragraph. It described an assault on *Leon Delbos, a jeweller, of Chatham Place, St. James's. Delbos, said the closing paragraph, was removed to hospital with severe head injuries. His condition is stated to be critical.*

Ezra looked at Victor over the top of his glasses.

'What is this, then?'

'This, then, is a bloody fine mess-up,' said Victor, and he flung the paper-knife down on to the blotter.

'But what happens?' persisted Ezra. He stood staring at Victor; then gradually the weight of some startling and uncomfortable apprehension seemed to fall upon him.

'What happens is that someone's made a mess of things,' said Victor sharply. 'I warned you, didn't I, that you had a competitor? Well, you should be thankful he's been eliminated – for the time being, anyway.'

'Uh? Whut competitor?' The light of comprehension began to dawn slowly upon Ezra. 'You mean this is him? – Delbos? He is then the man you go to wit' James?' He stopped suddenly, gazing at Victor with a look of stupefaction. Then he opened out his fingers quickly and let the newspaper fall on to the desk as though it were something unclean. 'And it iss the same jewellery – but belongink now to Delbos – whut I have this minute in my safe?' His voice dropped to an incredulous croak.

'What are you complaining of?' asked Victor with a look as dry as his desiccated tone. 'You had a chance to buy the stuff; you didn't take it. And now you've got it all the same.'

There was a repulsive sound in Ezra's throat. 'But this! I should know this, whut you are goink to do? Reed, your boy, will bring again the jewellery James offers me already, you say – and now after all I am to arrange a sale; no qvestions esked. This much I undertake, no more, and iss all you tell me I must do – all, ebsolutely.' Ezra leant across the desk, beating the blotter with his hairless hand. He glared into Victor's face, his eyes grown great with fear and indignation.

Victor watched him with a look of distaste.

'Don't get so emphatic. And now listen to what I want you to do—'

'No! No more!' Ezra interrupted. 'Wit' such business I am t'rough – definitely end ebsolutely.'

'Don't fool yourself. There's a lot for you to do yet.' Again Ezra started to interrupt him, but suddenly Victor stood up. In his swift movement and in the change that came over his face there was a sense of authority which seemed to paralyse Ezra. They glared at each other in silence, Victor looking as though to spit on Ezra would be something like a gesture of flattery.

'Listen, we're all in this business, you included.' He spoke quickly, but in his tone there was a sudden and unhealthy note of moderation. 'Either we stick together and get through it together or we fall apart and leave whoever's unlucky to take the can back.'

I don't propose we shall fall apart, and I intend to make sure that doesn't happen. Do you get me?' He paused. 'Because if you don't, here's the time and place to say so. It won't be any use pleading ignorance later on.'

Ezra stared. His expression was pitiable. 'But that someone shall be injured - killedt maybe - you say to me not'ing about such t'ings - such terrible t'ings: only that I shall ect how you tell me. So I ect - and what heppens?' He shrugged and let his hands fall to his sides with a slow, impotent gesture.

Victor reached out for a cigarette and lit it. 'With any luck Delbos will be dead in twenty-four hours - maybe sooner.'

Ezra turned his eyes away. There was a look of revulsion on his face.

'And if he should not then be dead?' he asked huskily.

'You'll have to go on hoping.'

'And in my safe meantime lies this jewellery?' Again he grew vehement. 'It is found there maybe - such things could heppen. Then whut?'

'Who's going to find it there, unless you tell them?'

'But it is in my safe!' wailed Ezra.

'A fat lot of pain and anguish that's going to cause you, isn't it? Well, never mind. You can set your conscience at rest whether he lives or dies,' said Victor. 'Whether you want to live or die is up to you. Now sit down, and I'll tell you what the arrangement is. . . .'

## Chapter Twelve

Harry wiped a cloth over the counter. It didn't need wiping, but the force of habit was strong in him. He nodded to Ezra and gave him a cheerful 'good night' as he trudged past the bar towards the door. But the salutation seemed to fall on deaf ears and trickled off into silence. Ezra walked on like a man in a bad dream, a dream which seemed to cloud his senses and bring out a fine perspiration on his forehead. He pushed his way out through the swing doors and left Harry staring after him with a look of polite curiosity.

Outside Skinner's, Ezra headed back the way he had come. But before he had reached the corner of the mews, the pendulum of coincidence had swung back over the cobbles, bringing Alexander in from the opposite end. As he came into the bar, Harry was still wiping down the counter with a desultory hand.

'Good evening, sir,' said Harry. This time it worked. Alexander smiled.

'Mr. Skinner about?' he asked.

'In the office, I expect, sir. What would you like?'

But Alexander was already on his way. He opened the office door and poked his head inside. Victor was standing by the desk with his back to the door, touching off a corona. He looked round quickly, as though Alexander had startled him, then signed to him to come in, and went on with the leisurely process of setting fire to his cigar, drawing on it two or three times, and rolling it gingerly under his nose. When this was done, he slid down into the big leather chair behind the desk and swivelled round to face Alexander. For a few seconds – seconds which seemed packed with silent, criss-cross speculations – they looked at each other. Neither of them spoke. It was Victor who finally looked away.

'Well, what's your theory?' he asked, dropping his dead match into the ash-tray. His tone was just sufficiently challenging to suggest there might be reservations attached to the question.

'About Delbos?'

Victor nodded. Alexander's glance had drifted towards the newspaper lying on the desk where Ezra had dropped it.

'I haven't any theories,' he said.

'I thought you knew him pretty well?'

'I do know him pretty well. It doesn't give me any theories, though.'

'Well, isn't there anything helpful at all? Any dealings you know of? Anyone he's talked to you about?'

'How d'you mean, "helpful"?''

'What line are we supposed to take?' Victor's tone was hardening. Alexander looked at him with a candid but uncomprehending look.

'Why do we have to take any line? And where to?'

Victor took the cigar out of his mouth and leaned forward over the desk. The muscles were twitching in his jaw, as though it were only by an effort that he was keeping his patience.

'Look: this was in all the lunch-time editions, Alex – in the lunch-time stop press.' By way of emphasis he spoke slowly and

clearly, tapping the newspaper that lay in front of him. 'You and I were with Delbos only about an hour before - possibly less.'

'Well?'

'Whoever cracked him down must have come in pretty close on our heels for it to make the lunch-time editions.'

Alexander's look of candid curiosity was becoming blurred - very slightly blurred - by a touch of ennui.

'What inference am I supposed to draw?' he asked.

Again there was a moment of silence - and again it stretched itself out on tenterhooks of unspoken suspicion. Yet in neither of their faces was there any hint, any flicker, of what might be passing in the minds of either of them.

'There's only one inference that I can see,' said Victor. 'Unless this guy was a first-rate amateur, he must have had an eye on Delbos's office for some time. From the moment we went in, in fact, until we came out again. Makes a nice little alibi for someone, doesn't it?'

Alexander shrugged. 'Could be.'

'But not, perhaps, if we flattened it out in advance.' Whatever the suggestion intended by Victor's tone, it seemed to escape Alexander.

'I don't get it,' he said. 'Are you suggesting we ought to go and stick our necks out just to give the police the fun of biting them?'

'All I'm suggesting is it might *look* rather better if you and I go and talk to them - not wait for them--'

'Hell to that!' said Alexander. 'Why should they connect us with Leon, anyway?'

'Several reasons. Delbos himself for one thing. For all we know, he may get better. If he does, the first thing they'll want to know is where he got the stuff you handed him this morning--'

'If it's still there.' Alexander pointed to the newspaper on the desk. '*It is believed that robbery was the motive.*'

'All right. But if it is still there, don't forget it's in the Yard list. You saw it yourself at Ezra's. And another thing - there's that porter. He's quite likely to know you by sight, if you're often round there.'

'I'm not often round there. Besides, he's never set eyes on me before. He's new.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Absolutely. Why the hell do we have to go out and look for trouble?'

Victor squinted down the end of his cigar and drew on it before he answered.

'You think it might be awkward - for you, I mean?'

'Look, I'm on the record, Vic; you're not - possibly. It makes a difference.'

'It certainly does make a difference. I don't want to be on it; and giving the rozzers a helping hand now and again is just a form of insurance, that's all.'

'Is it? Well, I don't care to be the premium for this instalment.'

There was a note of determination in Alexander's voice. Its vibrations seemed suddenly to crack Victor's composure. He threw himself back in the armchair and barked at him.

'Hell, I don't know what's at the back of your mind, but if it is that you expect to be double-crossed, you'd better say so. Then we shall all know where we stand.'

There was an uncomfortable silence, perforated by the distant throb of music from downstairs and the muffled breath of a ventilator shaft outside the window. Victor got up. His irritation seemed to have subsided as quickly as it had broken out. He laid a hand on Alexander's sleeve as he moved across the room.

'All right, let's forget it. You're on the record and I'm not. I agree, it makes a difference. Well, we'll have to take a chance on Delbos, that's all. If he croaks, he croaks. If he doesn't . . .'

His speculative pause was broken into by the buzzing of the telephone. He took a step towards the desk, but Alexander was nearer, and it was he who answered it.

'Who wants him?' he asked. Then, gagging the mouthpiece, he turned to Victor. 'Do you know someone called Ruffo?'

Victor hesitated, then reached across the desk and took the receiver.

'Wait for me in the bar, will you?' he said. 'Ask Harry for what you need.'

Alexander nodded and went out. Instead of making for the bar, he turned towards the balcony, and stood there for a few moments looking at the dancers down below. Presently, when the music came to an end, he saw Rose. She was threading her way between the tables towards her own at the foot of the stairs. A sallow, ingratiating individual was escorting her. South America seemed to be writ large upon him in a flowery and unpleasing scrawl. If it had been this person's hope to prolong their acquaintance, he was disappointed. Alexander saw Rose excuse herself, and watched the well-nourished dago brush her fingers

with a pair of flat lips. As she came to the top of the stairs Alexander turned towards her.

'I should wash that hand if I were you.'

She gave a little sour smile, and then dissolved it into something prettier for himself. There was still a look of uncertainty, of calculation, in her eyes, as though she had yet to make up her mind about the proper state of her feelings towards him. To Alexander she looked as attractive as ever and he told her so, with a slight abruptness which gave his words more truth than sweetness.

'Who was the gay *caballero*?' he asked.

She drew in a long, expressive breath. 'Oh, just another menace.'

'Have you found a new job yet?'

'I haven't had time.' She leaned back against the flower-decked balustrade.

'Time's getting pretty short.'

'You make that sound like a *double entendre*,' said Rose.

'So it is. One of them's for you.' She saw that he was no longer smiling.

'Who's the other meant for?'

Alexander hesitated. 'Well, it isn't really my business, but if you know what's good for him, I think I should try and get that brother of yours out of this place – right away from it. Get him out of it for good.'

'If only I could.' She sighed.

'Well, if he's such a wizard on that string box of his, he shouldn't have a lot of difficulty getting himself fixed up somewhere else.'

Rose glanced at him; it was a quiet, discerning glance.

'Tell me, what's your real interest in Philip?' she asked.

'Mainly the fact that he's your brother. And what's the interest of any man in a girl like you? – any man who isn't just a wolf – or just a sheep.'

Watching her, Alexander noticed a suspicion of change in her honey-coloured eyes, a change that came and went quicker than a thought. It seemed as if she had settled – at any rate for the moment – whatever doubts she had still had in her mind about him. Then she was looking at him again with that cool look of hers, that look that wasn't exactly critical and wasn't exactly suspicious, but which seemed to suggest something more than detached curiosity.

Down below, the quintette had started up again and the crowd



was beginning to mill round fast and free. There was a lot of noise. Rose stood there watching the dancers, but her mind seemed a long way away from the scene.

'What did you mean just now about Philip?' she said. 'Tell me more.'

'There isn't any more to tell. It's just that last night when you and I were talking, I didn't know then . . . well, there was apparently something in the wind then that I knew nothing about. I don't know much about it now. I'm only guessing.'

'You mean something to do with Philip?' She looked at him with a sharp, puzzled look.

'Could be. I don't know. I only know my skin wouldn't be worth a rabbit's if anyone got to hear I was talking to you in this way.'

'Then why are you talking to me in this way?'

'Dammit, I don't honestly know,' he said softly. 'What could be the reason?' His voice slid off the note of gravity which it had touched for no more than a second. 'Perhaps my skin isn't worth a rabbit's, anyway. Perhaps you look the sort of girl who stands in need of care and protection—'

'D'you mean it seriously, what you said - I mean about Philip?'

Her question cut across what he was saying, but there was no corresponding flippancy in her tone.

'Certainly I mean it.' For the moment Alexander was serious again. 'I don't know how far he may have got himself involved with this peculiar mob that floats round here. But if they should ever happen to get into any trouble—'

'What sort of trouble?'

'How do I know? I only say "if".'

'You wouldn't say "if" unless you knew something. What is it that's happened? I wish you'd tell me.'

He answered her gently. 'I tell you, I don't know what has happened. I only know that whatever it is, it might have some pretty sticky consequences - consequences that might affect a lot of people. And I should hate you to be one of them.'

'Me?' Rose stared at him.

'In so far as Philip might be affected, it would affect you, too, wouldn't it?'

'I see.'

She was standing close beside him, leaning over the bronze rail and looking across the dancers' heads towards Philip. Trouble certainly seemed to have no place in his affairs at the moment. He

was rocking to the rhythm that was part of him, the true and simple part, with his close-cropped head turning this way and that as he bent over his guitar, coaxing, singing, swinging out the sweet harmonies of *Apple Blossom*. Rose turned towards Alexander, and again she seemed to be observing him with her quiet, questioning look.

'You're a peculiar sort of person, aren't you?' she said. 'Peculiar and a little bit contradictory.'

'I don't much like the way you stress peculiar. Makes it sound as if my heredity's showing.'

'That goes for Rose's slip, too.' The approach of Victor had taken both of them unawares. 'Or don't you wear a slip?' he added. 'I must find out some time. Alex ...' Gently he steered Alexander away in the direction of the bar. 'How are you fixed tomorrow evening, Alex?' There was, as usual, nothing to be made out from Victor's expression.

'I'm supposed to have a date; but I might be able to transplant it,' said Alexander.

'Good. Then that's a fixture. Be here around seven-thirty then, will you?' He turned back towards the balcony and disappeared down the stairs. Alexander watched him go, then pushed open the folding doors of the telephone cabinet near the bar and squeezed himself inside. He shut the doors and dialled a number. It was some time before it came up, and then the distant voice of Mr. Herring answered.

'Sorry if I got you out of bed,' said Alexander. 'Listen, I'm speaking from Skinner's. I thought I'd let you know I'll be going out tomorrow night ... about seven-thirty ... Yes, that's all ...'

He came out, and wandering back towards the bar, sat there a while drinking Irish whiskey and passing the time of night with Harry. The public thirst being temporarily slaked, Harry began to speak of this and that. Presently the talk turned to his first meeting with Victor.

'To my mind, you couldn't have had a better C.O. nowhere in the British Army. He got things done, that's what it was - not always according to the rules either. I reckon he wasn't very popular with the brass. Not that that kind of thing would ever worry him.'

'I can believe that,' said Alexander.

'And guts! He'd got guts all right. Mr. White'll tell you.'

'He was with him, was he?'

'All the way from Alamein. He wasn't so lucky though. He stopped one at Salerno. Three days and three nights he was there

— on the beach; lying there, and Mr. Skinner with him. He could have cut and run for it if he'd wanted to. But he never did. He never left him. And in the end he brought him in on his back.'

'I like the sound of that,' said Alexander.

'Oh, he's got what it takes, the boss. I reckon it does something to you, you know, an experience like that. Mr. White, he's been like a kid brother to him ever since.'

'So I've noticed,' said Alexander, downing the last of his whiskey. 'Pretty to watch. Well, it's time I got into a warm bed, if I can find one. Good night, Harry.'

'Good night, sir.'

## Chapter Thirteen

Alexander looked up at the night sky as he came out between the swing doors. A drizzle that was hardly more than a vapour had begun to settle on the cobbles and on the line of cars parked opposite. As he stepped out into the mews, the corner of his eye picked up a tiny trail of light flashing downwards in the darkness. Someone standing behind the line of cars had thrown down a cigarette. Dimly, against the rolling shutter of a lock-up, Skinner's Venetian lanterns threw the shadow of a snap-brimmed hat. Whoever its wearer might be, he stood there so still, with his head cocked so expectantly, that he could have been the Angel of Death, if a snap-brimmed hat is what he wears.

Alexander walked up to the end of the mews, and when he had turned the corner, he stopped short and listened. Farther on down the street someone slammed the door of a taxi and he heard it draw away. For a moment he could hear, far off, the clangour of a fire bell, and somewhere nearer at hand, the amorous puling of a cat. But of footsteps there was no sound.

He walked on out of the mews and crossed the road. The sleek body of a powerful car, immobilized behind plate glass, drew his eye towards a showroom window. But it was not the car that had attracted his attention. It was the entrance to the mews, which he could see reflected in the plate glass.

As he stood there watching, the figure of a man wearing a belted raincoat and a soft hat came silently to the corner of the mews. He stopped, and then shrank back into the shadow of a building on the corner.

Alexander moved on. For a few minutes he walked westwards, pausing only to light a cigarette. While his own footsteps were silent, he listened: but there was still no sound of anyone following. Yet, as he glanced over his shoulder before he crossed the road, it seemed to him that someone not far behind had slipped into the shadow of a doorway. If it had been no more than a suspicion before, it now grew to a certainty in his mind that he was being followed.

Presently he turned off into another street. It was a short street, bounding one side of a triangular block. He walked on, a little faster now, towards an open door where a shaft of light was streaming out across the pavement. Again he looked back. For the moment the street was deserted; he stepped quickly through the open door and came into a long, narrow chamber. It was a power station, spotless and brilliantly lit, with massive plant that lay bedded ten or fifteen feet below the street level. Some of it was in smooth and humming action; the rest was immobile and silent. High up, alongside the red and blue lights and the dials and switches of the long control panel, was a narrow cat-walk with a single rail on the off-side. It ran the full length of the building from the door where Alexander had come in to another entrance on the far side. Nowhere in the whole place was there a soul to be seen.

Alexander flattened himself against the wall, and there he waited. It was not long before he heard the soft pad of rubber-soled shoes on the pavement outside, as a man went past the open doorway. Alexander, unobserved, caught a swift glimpse of him as he went by. It was the man whose reflection he had seen in the shop window – a tall man with a dark, cadaverous face.

By the sound of it, he had gone only a few yards beyond the entrance, when his diminishing footfalls stopped abruptly. There was a long silence. Then came a stifled sneeze. It sounded as though the man was hardly more than a foot or two away – as though he had turned round and was now creeping back towards the doorway. Alexander waited no longer. Close to where he was standing was a short steel ladder leading to the cat-walk above. Gripping hold of its cold rungs, he began silently to make his way aloft.

As he started towards the double doors on the far side of the

station, a man in faded dungarees appeared down below. He was lame and came limping out from a narrow space between two dynamos. He stopped, wiping his hands on a piece of rag, and looked up at Alexander.

'Hey! What's the idea?' Alexander didn't answer. 'Not allowed in here - no one isn't. Come on, you!' He looked a truculent type with hardly enough dignity to stand on, but he made the effort.

Alexander looked round at the place where he had come in, and then towards the doors at the far end. He was about midway between the two, and now he began to run forward. The man below wheeled round with a shout, and almost at once a second man appeared out of a storeroom farther along. He jumped to a ladder at the end of the cat-walk and began to climb up. Alexander, pounding down the narrow steel footway, glanced over his shoulder and saw the stiff-legged man coming up the ladder behind him with surprising agility. In his hand was a powerful monkey wrench.

The two men reached the cat-walk almost at the same moment, and began to close in on Alexander from either end. Only their footsteps on the steel gallery and the quiet pulse of the machines down below made any sound. Gradually they drew nearer to him, coming on more slowly now, as though they expected trouble to begin when they got to close quarters. Alexander kept his ground - and still they came quietly, cautiously towards him. Presently only a few feet separated him from the man in front. Suddenly Alexander ducked under the guard rail and slid down off the cat-walk till he was hanging by his fingers - then he let go.

It was not a long drop, though it was a pretty hard one, on to the concrete floor. But he was up on his feet again and making for the double doors in front of him before either of the men had jerked themselves back into action.

He could hear them still shouting after him as he ran outside and made off up the street. Out of the corner of his eye he saw, as he ran, a solitary figure standing under a lamp on the corner of the block. It was the man in the raincoat.

Whether the man had spotted him, he didn't wait to see. He ran on through a deserted court and out into the bright lights and nocturnal emptiness of a main street. Again he slipped away into a side turning, and in the shadow of a sheltering wall, he stopped to reconnoitre. Close by, through the shaft of a ventilator, came warm air and a sickly smell of cooking. The shaft

opened out of an alcove in the wall, and from inside the building came a sound of muffled music.

Looking back towards the small bright sector of the main street enclosed between the walls on either side of him, Alexander presently saw the man in the raincoat. He could hardly have been more than twenty yards away. This time there was no hesitation as he turned the corner and came silently along, keeping close in to the wall.

Alexander dropped down like a man stunned and coiled himself into the alcove among cans of stinking garbage and scattered refuse. The stale warmth and smell of the kitchen came up through the ventilator and hit him like a wave of nausea, as he wormed his way along towards the far end of the recess. Lying there, his bare hand presently felt the familiar contours of a boot – a boot on the end of a naked ankle; and as his fingers touched the cold flesh, a voice wheezed into his ear out of the darkness.

‘Got a fag, chummy?’

‘Quiet! – you can have ’em all in a minute,’ whispered Alexander. Dimly he could see a pair of bright eyes intent upon him, a face half hidden by a tangled beard, and a tall forehead under a wild mane of hair.

‘Gimme now – or I’ll holler,’ the man whispered.

Alexander got his hand to his case and was feeling for his cigarettes, when the man in the raincoat reached the alcove. At the same moment there was a sudden movement by Alexander’s side, and with a loud, metallic clatter, the lid of a dustbin crashed off on to the pavement. The man stopped dead. He was standing so close now that Alexander could have stretched out a hand and touched him. All of a sudden a cat, dragging a fish’s skeleton, leapt down off the refuse piled in one of the cans and shot away into the darkness. The man lying beside Alexander thrust his head out of the alcove and began to laugh a high, half-witted laugh that went echoing after the man as he moved off down the street. The laughter died away, and Alexander felt the creature plucking at him in the darkness.

‘Come on, chummy, gimme – gimme, will yer?’ He broke off in a paroxysm of coughing. ‘I never gave you ’way, did I? Not me. They all trus’ me; they do. Trus’ me to keep a secret. Oh yes, yes, yes – oh yes!’ He began to giggle again, a silly sound full of phlegm which lost itself in another burst of coughing. ‘Gimme a smoke, chummy, come on. . . .’ Alexander handed over the few cigarettes that were left in his case. ‘Go’bless you, chummy. Do the same for you when me ship comes ’ome. It’ll come ’ome one

day, you know.' There was a sudden note of eagerness, of pathetic conviction, in the man's voice. 'Oh yes, she'll come 'ome, my little ship, she will. She'll come 'ome one day, she'll come 'ome. . . .' The words drooled off into a kind of reverie.

Alexander looked about cautiously before he crawled out of the alcove, but he could see no one. He stood up and brushed himself down, then he started off again.

From this point until he reached his own block no one, so far as he could tell, had followed him; nor had anyone asked for him, so said the night porter, as Alexander stepped into the lift; and there had been no telephone calls.

When he reached his flat, he deliberately left the narrow hall in darkness and felt his way towards the bedroom. The curtains of the room were drawn back, and standing to one side of the window, he looked out along the street towards a row of shops facing the block. Near the lighted front of an all-night chemist's he saw the man who had followed him from Skinner's.

## Chapter Fourteen

A few fathoms below the street level of Bryson Court, where Rose and Philip had their respective flats, the inner man and woman among the inhabitants of the place could take care of themselves, if they were hungry and not too fastidious, in what the management referred to as 'a well-appointed snack bar'.

The appointments included a long, low-ceilinged room, badly lit and worse ventilated, with a tall buffet on one side, and on the other a line of tables boxed in like those of an old-fashioned eating house. To lend the place an air of still greater antiquity there were lattice windows, which didn't open, and would not have looked out on to anything if they had. Under the cornice there was a narrow shelf carrying an array of pewter, and over the high fireplace hung a coaching horn. Only the strip lighting above the bar, the big refrigerator behind it, the electric logs glowing in the fireplace, and the television-set near the door — only these incidentals gave one that feeling of contact with the

contemporary world which served to jerk the inner man or woman back to the harsh realities of the twentieth century.

Towards six o'clock in the evening the jerk could sometimes be accelerated by the sight of a small throng, with a contemporary thirst for hard liquor, which gathered about the bar at this hour. Now and again elements of this throng would detach themselves and drift to one of the boxed-in tables for a well-appointed snack.

This evening the usual slightly raffish crowd was there, and at a table by himself was sitting Philip Reed. His hands were wrapped round the chilled surface of a beer mug and in front of him were the remains of a meal. Against the water jug was propped an evening paper; but at the moment Philip seemed to be more preoccupied by his own thoughts than by the latest news.

Presently his abstracted reading was interrupted by the sight of Rose. He made a move to get up as she came over to the table and slipped into the seat in front of him. There was no preamble of greetings on either side.

'Philip, I want to talk to you,' said Rose.

He looked down into the two fingers of lager left in his glass.

'If it's going to be in that tone of voice, chicken, I don't think I much want to listen.'

'Philip, you've got to listen this time.' He looked at her sideways over the rim of his glass. 'I'm going to leave Skinner's.'

He considered the news for a moment. 'What for?' he asked.

'You know why, Phil.' There was a note of urgency in her voice. 'I've stuck it there so far for your sake entirely – not for any other reason. I've been a fool, perhaps, to think I could stop you from being one; but at least I've tried.'

'And now you're giving up hope?'

'No, I'm not. I want you to leave, too.' She brushed aside the interruption he had begun to make. 'They're a rotten crowd, Phil, I've known it – or at least I've suspected it long enough – rotten, Philip, and dangerous. And you know it as well as I do.'

'What's suddenly brought all this to boiling point?' he asked quietly, still watching her.

She was silent for a moment, and when she answered him she avoided catching his eye.

'I don't want there to be any more scenes like we had the other night – you having to be carted home like that. It was humiliating, Phil, for you and me. It upset me terribly.' Again he was on the verge of interrupting her, this time with a smile of apology. 'No, it isn't something you can just laugh off, not this time. I



don't know – I don't want to know – what sort of thing Victor's been letting you in for. Let him and Snow White get themselves into trouble if they want to, but why should you be involved?'

Philip glanced at her with a look of sharper interest.

'Who's getting anybody into trouble?'

'They're getting you into trouble, Philip – or they will if they can. I know they will. I've told you – they're a rotten, no-good crowd, and, Philip, you *know* it.'

'Who have you been talking to – Snow White?' He was still watching her.

'No, I haven't.'

'Who, then?'

'I've been using my eyes and a bit of common sense, that's all.'

'You should see an oculist. I don't know what's bothering you, chicken, all of a sudden.'

Impatiently Rose gripped his hand across the table.

'Philip, listen to me. You've *got* to do as I say—'

A waiter in a white mess jacket thrust an arm between them and began to clear away the relics of Philip's meal.

'Scuse me,' he said, flashing a mouthful of ill-fitting teeth at Rose.

'Get away,' said Philip quietly.

'Huh?' The waiter's eyebrows shot upwards.

'Take those teeth away. You blind me.'

Astonishment glowed in the waiter's face. He backed away and disappeared.

'Look, get this straight, chicken,' Philip went on. 'I know my way around. I don't intend anyone to get me into trouble—'

'You may not intend it, Phil, but you may not be able to avoid it.'

Philip ignored her. 'Vic isn't the sort who likes losing his friends. You think I'm a mug because I stick to him. Believe me, I'd be a damn sight bigger mug if I tried to walk out on him.'

'Well? What could he do about it?'

'Sometimes, chicken, I think you're as dumb as you are beautiful. A man like Vic has a good many ways of persuading people to do what he wants. I don't like being persuaded: I like doing things of my own accord.'

'But listen, Philip,' Rose began vehemently, 'it's idiotic to talk as though Vic—' She hesitated, looking across Philip's shoulder towards the door. Two men had come downstairs into the small

open lobby beyond the bar and were speaking to the waiter. He pointed to where she and Philip were sitting, and one of the men came forward, leaving the other at the bottom of the stairs. The man stopped beside the table, and as he pulled off his glove, he nodded politely to Rose, then leaned confidentially towards Philip.

'You are Philip Reed?' he asked. He had a soft, nasal voice.

Philip looked at him blankly. 'That's right.'

With a brief, perfunctory movement the man flashed a small cellophane card case in front of Philip's nose.

'Miles is my name,' he said quietly. 'I am a police officer, and I'm here to ask you to accompany me to the West Central Police Station in connection with certain inquiries . . .'<sup>2</sup>

Philip sat in a small waiting-room with a barred window high up in the wall and a solitary light which glared down from under a china shade. There was nothing much to commend the room as a place to wait in, or, indeed, for any other purpose. The only furniture in it was a bare table, a chair, and a wastepaper basket; and on the walls was a silver challenge shield and an optimistic but ill-designed poster for National Savings. Against the open door a policeman was leaning with his hands clasped behind his back. He had that uncomfortable and faintly immodest look which affects a policeman divested of his helmet.

Philip listened to the recurring tick of an electric clock set in the wall above the door, and to footsteps that came and went along the passage outside. Through the open door he watched the traffic that passed along it – policemen carrying documents, carrying cups of tea and bundles of clothing and number-plates and suitcases; policemen in plain clothes – yet still unmistakably policemen – and now and then a nondescript civilian. Occasionally, as some uniformed man went by, he threw a word at Philip's watchdog. The passage was never quiet for long. Sometimes a telephone rang, and each time it did so, Philip gave an involuntary start. Sometimes he could hear voices in another room, sometimes the clack of a typewriter; and every now and then, from a long way off, came a sound of drunken singing.

The clock on the wall had jumped its way through thirty-five minutes, when somewhere along the passage a swing door opened and there was a sound of tramping feet. The policeman standing in the doorway straightened up, as an officer came by leading a group of eight silent men.

'Okay, Roberts,' said the officer, 'we're all set.' He spoke in a

clipped, Glaswegian accent. The group standing in the passage – they were a dispirited-looking crew – turned their eyes towards Philip – inquisitive eyes, eyes that looked lost, shiftless, apprehensive, or indifferent. The officer beckoned to Philip.

‘Come along now, please – follow me.’

Philip looked at him with a bewildered expression. He picked up his hat and joined the group, and they trudged away along the passage and down a stone staircase. At the bottom of the stairs the officer unlocked a door and led the men out into an open yard. Overhead Philip caught a glimpse of the sky, a wide, dark rectangle faintly peppered with stars.

Silently the group followed the officer across the yard to another building and into a room which was half in darkness. At the lighter end, where they had come in, a narrow dais was raised against the wall. It was a brick wall, painted white, and it had a small battery of arc lamps shining straight on to it. The first man in the group, dazzled by the sudden change from darkness to light, stumbled on the step as the officer marshalled them on to the dais.

‘Come along, please – face towards the front, all of you. Straighten up there!’

Philip’s place was towards the end of the line. He glanced at the men on either side of him – on his left a dead pan, on his right a sheepish-looking spark – then looked straight ahead. At first he could see nothing in the darkness out in front. Then, as his eyes adjusted themselves to the harsh lights and the shadows beyond, he could see dimly that there were four or five figures sitting in a group. Presently someone approached the officer and spoke a word in his ear; the officer turned towards the line of men.

‘Now then, all of you, put your hats on, please, will you? Come along—’ One or two of the men fumbled self-consciously as they did what they were told. Then all of them looked stolidly towards the front. ‘Quiet now, please. Stand still there.’

On the right of the dais a door was thrown open and a stocky, red-faced man in a shabby overcoat was led in. He climbed on to the dais and stood looking round foolishly.

‘Go ahead, please,’ said the officer.

‘Me?’

The officer nodded, and the man began to move slowly along the line, looking at each of the men in turn. When he came to Philip he hesitated, but only for a moment. Then he jerked his thumb decisively towards him.

'Just look at the rest of 'em, will you, please?' said the officer.

'I don't need to. That's him,' said the man. It was the porter from Chatham Chambers.

'Okay, then. Thank you,' said the officer.

The porter stepped down off the dais, and as he was ushered out, another man was brought in and took a seat among the group collected out in front. For a few moments there was a whispered discussion in the darkness. Then a cigarette, glowing like the dead end of a firework, showed up between the fingers of an outstretched hand – a hand that was again pointing directly towards Philip.

'Third man there – third from the right – that's the one, positive.'

This time the voice was the voice of Ezra.

## Chapter Fifteen

Again Philip found himself sitting in solitary state – a state of restlessness and acute tension. Again there was a clock on the wall, from which the minutes jumped away and fell into eternity with a click. Again a hard, solitary light beat down on a rexine table top. And again he sat and waited, watched by an uncommunicative guard.

This time he was not kept waiting long. In a few minutes the D.D.I. came in with Collis and Miles, the officer who had brought Philip from Bryson Court. Philip looked up quickly as they came in. The D.D.I. had an amiable but uncompromising air about him. He came straight to the point.

'Well now, Reed, first of all I want to ask you a few questions. You know from Sergeant Miles, don't you, what it is that we're inquiring into – and that you're not bound to answer? You understand that?' Philip nodded. 'Later on, if you want to, you can make a sworn statement. What you say then, though, will be taken down and may be used in evidence elsewhere.'

Collis had pulled forward a standard lamp from a corner of the room, and now he fixed the aluminium bulb shield so that the

light shone full on Philip's face. At the same moment Miles put out the top light. As he did this, Philip bent his head away from the glare and looked sideways at the D.D.I. with an angry, truculent expression.

'I know about all that,' he said sharply, 'but I want someone on my side – a solicitor or someone.'

'You don't need a solicitor,' said the D.D.I. placidly. 'There's no charge against you. I told you, you're free to answer or not, as you wish. If I were you, though—'

Philip brought his hand down on the table with a whack. 'Listen, I've got a legal right to have someone here, haven't I?' he demanded excitedly.

'You listen to me instead,' said the D.D.I. His tone grew a little more brusque. 'I tell you, all I want is to ask you a few questions. If you don't feel safe to answer them on your own – well, maybe you've got some reason. If that's the case, then I shall have to find out what it's all about.'

Philip didn't answer. He looked away from Cathie, down at his own hands with their thin, spatulate fingers spread out on the table.

'Smoke?' Cathie was holding out his case. Philip hesitated. He looked first at the D.D.I., then at Collis; then he took a cigarette and Collis lit it for him.

'Now, to begin with, I'd like you just to give me some account of what you did yesterday, will you?' said the D.D.I., draping his heavy thighs across a corner of the table. 'What time did you get up?'

Philip seemed to be turning the question over thoughtfully. When he answered, it was in a tone that suggested he was a little more willing, though still far from happy, to co-operate.

'Ten-thirty – eleven maybe. I don't know. I get home pretty late as a rule.' His air of deliberate disinterest was not far from being offensive. The D.D.I. ignored it.

'What then?'

'I had a bit of breakfast, and then I ran through some new numbers.'

'How long for?'

Philip shrugged. ' 'Bout half an hour.'

'Were you alone?'

'Except for the woman who comes in to clean up.'

Miles, who was sitting a little way behind Philip with a pad on his knee, took note of the answer.

'And after you'd finished practising?'

'I went out. Someone called me up.'

'Who was that?'

'A friend.'

Cathie suppressed a sigh of impatience.

'Do you know his name?'

'I know most of my friends by name.' Philip blew a sidelong column of smoke between his lips.

'May we have it?'

'White - Desmond White. He's just called Snow White as a rule.'

'Who is he? What does he do?'

Philip shook his head. 'I don't know. I think he was on the stage at one time.'

'On the stage?'

'He had a juggling act or sword-swallowing or something; I don't know.'

'Do you know his private address?' It was Collis who asked the question this time.

'Somewhere round Knightsbridge, I believe. I don't know exactly. I've never been there. You'll find him hanging around at Skinner's as a rule. He gives a hand in running the place.'

Again Miles, sitting in the background, added a note to his pad.

'And this friend,' said the D.D.I., 'whose address and occupation you don't know, rang you up. What did he say?'

'He asked me to meet him. Anyway, I don't know him as well as all that.' The after-thought came out sharply and with a hard stare.

'Where did you meet him?'

'At Hyde Park Corner.'

'At what time?' asked Collis in his mildest manner.

'At twelve o'clock. It was then about ten-to.'

'Did he say why he wanted to see you?' asked the D.D.I.

'He said he wanted to try out my car. He's got some idea of buying it.'

'So you drove to Hyde Park Corner and picked him up?'

'Yes.'

'Then where did you go?'

'We drove once round the park. At least, he drove most of the way, and then—' Philip left his answer in mid-air.

'Then what?' For the moment Philip seemed more engrossed in arranging his fingers symmetrically on the table than in the D.D.I.'s question. 'Where did you go to after that?'

Philip looked up. He glanced at Collis, then back at the D.D.I. 'We drove to Chatham Chambers, off Jermyn Street. All right?' It sounded as crisp and as brazen as he could make it; but if it had any effect on the D.D.I., there was nothing to show it.

'What did you go there for?'

'Because Snow White said he wanted to see someone.'

'Who did he want to see?'

'I don't know. I waited in the car.'

'Why didn't you go into Chatham Chambers with him?' asked Collis.

'Because he told me to wait,' Philip barked back at him, '—to wait five minutes, and if he wasn't down then, to go up and fetch him.'

'And did you go up?' asked the D.D.I.

'I waited five minutes, then I went up.'

'Where did you go to?'

Again there was a pause. Philip rolled his cigarette round in his lips.

'I think it was room 422. I'm not sure about that.' He put his hands up suddenly and pressed the palms against his eyes. 'Look, this light's burning the bloody skin off my face! For God's sake, can't we have it out?'

'Presently,' said the D.D.I. 'When you went up, did you go by the lift or by the stairs?'

'I went by the lift. Why?'

The D.D.I. brushed the question off without an answer. 'What was happening when you went into the room?'

'I didn't go in,' said Philip quickly. 'Snow White came outside. He came out just as I got to the door.' He gave a quick look round towards Collis — a look at once defensive and defiant — then turned once more to the D.D.I.

'Did he say anything?'

Again Philip looked from one to the other before he answered.

'He gave me something — all right, I know! "What was it?" It was a sort of bag — a little leather bag with a string round its neck, and it had some jewellery in it.'

'How did you know? You mean you saw it?'

'I didn't know — not at the time. He asked me to take it to a man called Ezra — the one who was there just now, who picked me out at the beauty parade.' Philip waved an angry finger as he spoke. 'And, incidentally, what I should like to know is what the hell—'

The D.D.I. interrupted him: 'And did you go to see Ezra?'

'Why ask? You know damn well I must have gone to see him. How should I be here now, if he hadn't gone round to the bulls with some cooked-up story? I took the bag along, as Snow White told me, and asked Ezra to make a price. That's what he told me to do.' He let his cigarette fall to the floor and covered it with his foot.

'Who, Snow White?'

'Yes. He said get the best price you can. And that was the first time I had any idea what was in the bag - when Ezra opened it and took the jewellery out.'

'What did Ezra say when he saw it?'

'He wouldn't give me a price. He said if I liked to leave the stuff, he'd try and sell it for me, that was all.' The D.D.I. said nothing. He glanced at Collis. Again Philip looked quickly from one to the other. 'Okay - if you don't believe me, ask him yourself.' He tilted his chair back and pulled a packet of American cigarettes from his pocket. The D.D.I. watched him while he lit up. 'Don't get ideas,' said Philip, 'my hand always shakes like this.'

'When you left this man White, after he had given you the bag you speak of, where did you go?'

'I went downstairs.'

'Down the stairs? Why not in the lift?'

'Why not? Because I thought it would be too slow.' Philip's patience was not of the hard-wearing kind.

'What was the hurry?'

'I didn't ask. Snow White simply said, "Get round to Ezra's as quick as you can."'

'Tell me,' said Cathie, 'how long have you been playing at Skinner's?'

Philip's reaction to this sudden change of tack seemed to be negative. He looked at the D.D.I. with hard indifference.

'I don't remember exactly. Getting on for eighteen months.'

'Is that where you first came to know White?'

'Yes.'

'And Skinner himself is also a friend of yours, is he?'

There seemed to be a split second of indecision before Philip answered, 'I know him pretty well.'

'That doesn't quite answer the question, does it?' Philip said nothing. 'You mean you don't hit it off together?' Again he was silent. 'Look, Reed,' said the D.D.I., 'if you've got any reservations at the back of your mind - if you know of anything—'



'All I know is what's right here in front of me—' Philip hooked his fingers like talons in front of his face, 'that this is a frame-up, the whole business! A cheap way out, that's all it is — a cheap way out!'

'A way out of what?' Philip flicked his half-smoked cigarette on to the floor and trod it out. The D.D.I. waited. But the innuendo seemed to have been still-born: what he had already said appeared to have carried Philip far enough. He sat staring doggedly into the twilight beyond the orbit of the lamp.

The D.D.I. pulled a folded handkerchief out of his breast pocket and patted the corners of his mouth.

'Now, just let's go back a bit. While you were waiting in the car, did you speak to anyone?'

'I told you: I was alone. I spoke to no one.' The D.D.I. looked at Philip steadily and Philip stared back at him. A sudden light of recollection dawned in his eye. 'Wait a minute though — yes, that's right: the chap on the beat — he came and tipped me off not to wait too long.'

'You didn't speak to anyone else?'

'No, I tell you I spoke to no one.'

'That may be what you tell me, Reed. Yet I have reason to believe that when you went up in the lift you were wearing a buttonhole. The constable on the beat says quite definitely that you were not wearing it when he spoke to you.'

'That's perfectly right. I forgot. I bought a flower from a fellow with one leg. That was just after your chap had spoken to me.'

'Yet when I asked you a moment ago whether you had spoken to anyone during those few minutes, you flatly denied it. Now it turns out you spoke to two people.' Quite suddenly the D.D.I. was showing an unpleasantly rough edge.

'Well — what the hell! A copper and a man selling some flowers, that's all.'

'That's all? For someone in the situation you're in, Reed, that's a fairly serious omission, I should say. Perhaps there's something else you'd like to remember?' Philip glared stubbornly at him but said nothing. 'Well, we'll give you a bit of time to think it over. All right, Miles.'

As Philip was ushered out of the room, the D.D.I. slid off the corner of the table. He picked up a house telephone from the window ledge and dialled a number.

'Is MacDougall there?' he asked. 'Tell him to come down here right away, will you? — room 34. And tell him to bring his box of

tricks.' He turned to Collis as he hung up. 'Well?'

They looked at one another as though each was trying to decide what was in the other's mind.

'I think he's in the clear,' said Collis.

'Do you?' said the D.D.I. doggedly. 'And what makes you think that?'

'Well, because I never heard a story so full of holes, for one thing. I don't believe he could have made it up. If he did, it's a work of art. The only thing that worries me is the Skinner angle. I don't understand that. If he has been framed by Skinner, or thinks he has, why did he suddenly shut down about him?'

'Wouldn't you think twice about blabbing if you were one of Skinner's brigade?'

'Perhaps. But you think the rest of the story's just crap?'

'I didn't say so.'

'No, but, dear D.D.I., you implied it.'

'Dear Collis, did I? If I were you I wouldn't trust too much to what people imply. I should just trust to sticking to the facts and to my own powers of reasoning, if any.'

'Which point in what direction?'

'They point to most of what this boy has said as being perfectly true. Pretty well everything he said can be checked all along the line, and he must know it.'

'All along the line till you get to Ezra.'

'Then it's simply Ezra's word against his.'

'And Snow White's, presumably?'

'We haven't got there yet.'

'When you say "pretty well everything", you mean except the cigarette end? I notice you didn't mention that.'

The D.D.I. nodded. 'I like an ace up my sleeve.'

'What do you think about it?'

'You pick your own brains.' The D.D.I. watched Collis with a look of amusement that seemed gently tempered with expectation.

'It could have been planted. I think it probably was.'

'Why probably?'

'Because,' said Collis, 'Reed is an addict. It's not very likely - in fact, it's very unlikely - he would have lit a reefer at that time of day, or out in the open air. A chap like that lights up when he needs the stimulation; and it's at night time, when he's tired for one thing, and when he's indoors and won't lose the smoke, that he'd be most likely to light up - not right in the middle of the morning.' Again the D.D.I. nodded. 'Besides, if he's getting his supply from Skinner, which seems a hundred per cent certain, it

probably wouldn't have been very difficult for White to have sneaked a reefer and smoked a bit of it, or chucked a bit of it away and just dropped the burnt stub in the ash-tray as soon as he got to Delbos.'

'Plausible,' said the D.D.I. 'Come in!'

A long, horse face appeared round the door, bringing with it a long, loose body in a tweed jacket. In one of the long, loose hands there was a leather-covered box.

'MacDougall,' said the D.D.I., 'see what you can get off the top of this table, will you? Should be money for old rope.'

MacDougall bent down awkwardly and squinted along the table through an outsize pair of glasses.

'Righto,' he said. It was a melancholy sound. He put his box on a chair, opened it up and took out a rubber bulb fitted with a nozzle. Very gently he began to blow an even coating of powder out of the bulb on to the surface of the table. Collis watched him with a dubious look, then dubiously he glanced at the D.D.I.

'Mine not to reason why,' he said, 'but I mean to say - fingerprints. After all, we haven't even brought a charge yet. Isn't it faintly unorthodox?'

The D.D.I. nodded. 'Yes: and so is my old granny.'

## Chapter Sixteen

'Here we are,' said Sergeant Miles. He was still in plain clothes and was still every inch a policeman. With him was a constable disguised with no better success. Miles left the pavement and by the light of the last lamp in the street, led the way across a corner of the bomb-scarred ground towards a small colony of pre-fabs. A faint, misty drizzle had begun to fall.

'Nice approach,' said the constable sourly. He pulled his foot out of a mud-filled gully and squelched his way after Miles.

In the darkness the bungalows' bright windows shone out with a makeshift cosiness. A low strip of paling separated the line of gardens from the concrete pavement where Miles and the constable now stood. By the light of a torch they found the gate of

No. 12 and pushed it open. A toy tricycle was lying overturned on the pathway. Miles stepped over it and rang the front-door bell.

It was answered by a woman – a youngish woman with the dead end of a cigarette sticking to her lips. She was wearing slacks covered with a plastic apron, and her hair was bound round with a coloured turban. Although the light was behind her, Miles could see that she had a kind of slatternly good-looks. A child of three or four was clinging to her side, and another, not much older, stood staring at them from a doorway.

‘Good evening, Mrs. Tewson,’ said Miles blandly. ‘We’re police officers—’

‘Well, you can’t see Jack – my husband,’ said Mrs. Tewson quickly. ‘He’s out. He’s on the night shift tonight.’ Instinctively, it seemed, she manoeuvred the younger child gently away from Miles.

‘It’s you we want to see, not him,’ said Miles. Mrs. Tewson took the short stub of cigarette out of her mouth and looked at him sharply. ‘I believe you work as a cleaner at Bryson Court, don’t you?’

‘That’s right,’ she said. She sounded as though she were still on the defensive but might be ready to give ground.

‘Right. I just want you to clear up one or two points for us, if you will. Now, when you went in to do Mr. Reed’s flat this morning, what time was it, d’you remember?’

‘Mr. Reed’s? Round about ten past eleven. I went straight in an’ called him. I always call him first thing. Why, what’s up? Is there something wrong, then?’ Her curiosity began to increase as her apprehension declined.

‘Nothing you need worry about. How did you get into the flat? D’you have a pass key?’

Mrs. Tewson nodded. ‘And I turn it in when I leave,’ she said, giving it a little more emphasis than seemed necessary.

‘You were just cleaning up the place as usual, were you?’

‘I got Mr. Reed his breakfast, too. I always do.’

‘How long would you reckon you were in the flat all told?’ Miles asked.

‘Best part of three-quarters of an hour, I should say.’

‘And during that time did anyone come to the flat? Or did the phone go at all?’

‘Not a soul – no one. Nor the phone neither.’ She was getting back on to the defensive again.

‘How did Mr. Reed strike you? Did he seem okay?’

'Looked all right to me. I never noticed nothing out the ordinary, anyway. What's up, then?'

'Have you ever seen Mr. Reed with a flower in his buttonhole?' asked Miles, ignoring the question.

'Sometimes I have.'

'And did he have one this morning?'

'I didn't see. He didn't have his coat on. Why? What's it all about, eh? Tell us, go on, there's a sport.' She was trying the chummy gambit, the wheedling approach, now.

'What was he doing when you left the flat?'

'Playing his music - like he's often playing when I leave.'

'Righto, then, Mrs. Tewson. Thank you very much. Don't need to bother you any more. Good night.'

'Here, I say . . .' Mrs. Tewson's curiosity evaporated in the night air as the sound of plain-clothes footwear died away along the damp concrete.

## Chapter Seventeen

There was still a slight drizzle falling as Rose paid off her taxi. She pushed her way abruptly through the swing doors and came into the bar. Except for Harry, who was behind the counter peeling a lemon, the place was empty. He looked up as Rose came in.

'Has Mr. Skinner been in yet?' she asked.

'Not yet.' There was something in her voice and in her sudden entry which gave Harry a second's pause. 'Mr. White's along there, though, if you want him.'

Harry's face was not one for reflecting the tender emotions, but there was something sympathetic, something faintly inquiring in his sidelong look as he watched Rose going towards the office. On Snow White's face, too, there was a look of inquiry, though hardly of sympathy, as Rose came into the room.

She hesitated when she saw him, as though on second thoughts she had changed her mind. Then she came in and shut the door and stood there leaning with her back against it.

'I shan't escape,' said Snow White with a wintry smile. 'You're early this evening, aren't you?'

'Snow White - please listen to me, will you? I must talk to you.'

He looked up expectantly from the desk where he remained sitting - expectantly, yet somehow without encouragement.

'Is this a change of heart - or just a change of tactics?' he asked.

Rose came towards the desk. She stood close beside him - so close that he might have caressed the soft-falling folds of her dress. It was not the sort of temptation Snow White could easily resist. He didn't even try to. She moved out of his reach and looked back at him across the desk. Her lips and eyes no longer showed the superficial hardness that she kept to meet this kind of approach. She was fairly eaten up by anxiety, and she showed it.

'Snow White, why have they taken Philip away? What trouble has he got into now?'

It was not in Snow White's face, which remained impassive, that a reflective spark of interest showed. It was in the sudden slight lift of his head, and in the hand with the cigarette that was stayed half-way towards his lips.

'Am I your brother's keeper?' he asked. 'What's been going on?'

'Philip has been arrested—'

'Arrested!'

'Well... I don't know, but, anyway, the police have taken him away. They wouldn't let me go. I begged them to let me go with him. They wouldn't even listen. Oh, Snow White, what do you imagine can be happening?'

'Why ask me? I haven't got any imagination.'

'Oh, for God's sake! This isn't funny. I know this is something to do with you and Victor. It *must* be, I know it.'

Snow White looked at her with his bleak, wide-eyed stare.

'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, Rosie.'

'You don't deny it, then - that it is something to do with you?'

'Look, Rose, don't you think you're being a little hysterical? You're upset, Rose—'

'Philip doesn't know anyone, doesn't see anyone, hardly, except you and Victor - and the boys downstairs in the band.'

'Which proves what?'

'He would never get into any trouble if he were left to himself - never. I know Philip. I know what he's really like. You don't.

You only know the sort of person you and Victor have turned him into.'

Snow White had got up from the desk and now stood leaning against the filing cabinet with his arms folded on the top of it.

'I don't know what you're driving at, Rose,' he said, 'but I don't think I much care for its implications.'

'A year ago Philip was cured – completely cured,' said Rose. 'Now it's worse than it ever used to be. Now he's doped from morning till night, almost.' There was a tearful bitterness in her voice. Snow White said nothing. 'Doped just so that the two of you can do whatever you like with him – so that you can always have someone to put the blame on—'

'For what?' asked Snow White abruptly. He reached out and, catching hold of Rose's wrist, twisted her round to face him. Leaning with one arm still on the cabinet, he drew her closer towards him. 'Better get a grip on yourself, Rose, before you say something you may be sorry for.'

Her face was clouded with anger and desperation as she tried to wrench her hand away, but Snow White wouldn't let her go.

'If I do have anything more to say, it won't be to you or Victor, I should have known better—'

She threw her head back sharply as his fingers tightened and a sudden spurt of pain shot through her wrist.

'Who did you think of confiding in, then?' he asked smoothly. 'The police perhaps? I thought you said just now they wouldn't listen to you.' Rose turned her head away to hide the tears that were pricking in her eyes. 'Or are you counting on having a better story for them next time?'

'Let go of me – you hurt,' she whispered.

'It's the only way you can make some people understand things, by hurting them.'

As he let go of her wrist she turned her back towards him and stood there smoothing her hand against the marks of his fingers. He made no move for a few moments, then suddenly he caught hold of her by the shoulders and kissed her. Quickly she twisted herself out of his arms and as she did so, she turned and struck him in the face. It was the impulse, the over-charged reaction of the moment – a moment in which the door opened and there was Alexander.

Rose, beyond words or tears now, brushed quickly past him and disappeared. Alexander paused, as though he were counting on Snow White to bridge the awkward silence that followed. But Snow White was bridging nothing. For once his self-assurance

showed a slight crease. Alexander looked at his watch, then came into the room and shut the door.

'Victor told me to be here at seven-thirty.' His expression was sultry and his tone resentful. Snow White watched him, smiling, and with a look of calculation in his eye.

'Anything I can do?'

'Yes,' Alexander paused. 'You can keep your hands off Rose. Or can't you?'

The smile faded from Snow White's face, but the look of calculation remained.

'You work pretty fast for a new boy, don't you?' he said.

'Go ahead. Slow me down.' This time it was Alexander who smiled, and his smile seemed as provocative as it was disagreeable.

'Don't tempt me,' said Snow White. 'I might take you at your word.'

'Not a bad idea, that - where Rose is concerned, anyway.'

Snow White gave him a bleak stare. Then the telephone on the desk buzzed softly, and he took up the receiver.

'Who wants him? . . . Hullo, Ruffo. . . . No, he's not here yet. . . . Oh? - what's the matter? . . . I see . . . It can't be helped then. . . . Okay, I'll tell him.' He put down the receiver and turned to Alexander.

'The date's off,' he said curtly.

'The date?'

'Tonight's arrangements.'

'Why - what's wrong?'

Snow White shrugged. 'It's off. That's all I know. So now you can blow.'

'Thanks.' Alexander paused with his fingers on the handle of the door. 'And, you might remember that, will you? - to take me at my word?'

Snow White eyed him unpleasantly. 'So I take orders from you now, do I?'

'Whether you take 'em or not is your business.'

Snow White put a packet of cigarettes to his mouth and drew one out between his lips.

'Listen, I've known Rose a lot longer than you,' he said in a quiet voice. 'If there are any proprietary rights in the product, they're mine. Do you get me?'

'Maybe,' said Alexander.

He left Snow White and walked back towards the telephone box near the bar. But the box, at the moment, was full of dago.



Alexander ordered a drink and sat down to wait. It was ten minutes before the dago came out, and then a woman in a mink coat slipped into the box just before Alexander could get there.

'*Doo* forgive me,' she said, flashing an enchanting smile at him. Though it failed entirely in its powers of captivation, there seemed to be nothing short of brute force that he could use to eject her from the box, so again he sat down beside the bar and waited.

From the length of time the woman took, it seemed possible that her call might be to somewhere in far Cathay and that she was having difficulty in getting connected. For about twenty minutes Alexander could see her through the side of the box, talking with gaiety and animation. Once she even appeared to be listening.

It was half an hour from the time of his leaving Snow White before Alexander could make his call.

## Chapter Eighteen

'Okay...you'll call me if there's any change, will you?... Righto.'

As the D.D.I. put down the receiver, there was a knock at the door and a pale apparition, topped with a towering grey fuzz, slid into the room. It was MacDougall. He carried in his hand a large envelope which he laid on the desk in front of the D.D.I.

'Results from your table top,' he said in a broken voice.

'Any good?'

Words seemed to fail MacDougall altogether. He nodded sadly towards the envelope. The D.D.I. opened it and took out an index card. He studied it for a moment, then rang for Collis.

'Take a look at this,' he said when Collis appeared. He handed the card across the desk. It bore two photographs of Philip Reed, a set of finger-prints, and details of a conviction and sentence for possession of stolen drugs.

'So this is what comes of your grandmother being unorthodox?' said Collis. 'Nice work.'

'Just a little thing he forgot to tell us,' said the D.D.I. 'Have you checked these, Mac, against the prints you got from Delbos's office?'

'I have,' said MacDougall. 'Nothing like 'em.'

'Positive?' MacDougall's glance, as he trailed from the room, sliced the D.D.I. in pieces. 'I don't like the sound of Delbos,' the D.D.I. went on. 'Just phoned up the hospital. He's conscious, but that's about all. Well, what have you found?'

'The cleaner,' said Collis. 'She corroborates. That's all so far. Are you going to pull in this man White now?'

'I am not,' said the D.D.I. 'Not at this stage, anyway. No, you and I are going to pay a call.'

It seemed, ten minutes later, that perhaps the D.D.I. had been optimistic. He stood with Collis on the balcony of Snow White's flat and rang the bell for the second time. Down below in the yard a man in shirt-sleeves was washing a van, a woman was beating a carpet, and there was a brisk mid-morning air about the scene.

Collis stood smelling the geraniums in the window-box. It was an unnecessary subterfuge. The curtains inside the room were drawn and he could see nothing.

The D.D.I. rang once more. This time, after a few moments, the door was opened by Snow White. He wore a yellow dressing-gown of stiff silk and his feet were hidden in seal-skin slippers. His hair, looking like candy floss, was matted across his forehead, and although his eyes were half closed in sleep, a momentary spark appeared in them as he caught sight of Collis and the D.D.I.

'Mr. White?' the D.D.I. inquired.

Snow White nodded discouragingly and gave a tug to the sash of his dressing-gown. 'Cathie's my name, C.I.D. I believe you may be able to help us—'

'Come in before I drop dead.' Snow White shivered as he turned and led them into the living-room. It was a long, low room which seemed to have been furnished by someone with an eye more appreciative of luxury than style; the style, such as it was, being Belgravia-Quattrocento.

Snow White switched on the electric fire and reached for a malachite cigarette-box standing on the window ledge.

'Sorry to have to bother you, Mr. White,' said the D.D.I., 'but we've an inquiry in hand involving a friend of yours - a Mr. Reed.'

'Phil Reed?'

The quick surprise, the faint perplexity, the hint of solicitude in Snow White's glance and intonation, seemed unmistakably sincere.

'That's right. When did you last see Mr. Reed?' asked the D.D.I.

Snow White thought for a moment. He picked up a pocket comb off the mantelpiece and began to run it slowly through his hair.

'It must have been two days ago. Why -- what's wrong?'

The D.D.I. looked shrewdly at him before he answered.

'Mr. White, your friend Reed is detained on suspicion of being involved in a serious charge. You may have seen something about it in the papers -- an attack on a man named Delbos, a jeweller--'

'Yes, I saw about that.' Snow White paused with the comb deep in his hair. 'But Philip! My God, it's absurd! I mean, how? -- why?'

'I'm sorry, but it's not for me to answer questions. If you would just try to answer one or two for me--'

'Certainly I will. Anything I can do to help.'

'You say you last saw Reed a couple of days ago. Whereabouts was this?'

'He picked me up in his car at Hyde Park Corner.'

'Was this by accident -- or had you arranged a meeting?'

'I rang him up. I was going to give his car a try-out. He wants to get rid of it and I'd thought of buying it.'

'I see. And who suggested this meeting -- you or him?'

'I did. I rang him up and said if he had a bit of time to spare, it might be a good idea to see what the car was like.' Snow White wrapped his dressing-gown closer round him and edged his behind on to a narrow refectory table which stood alongside the wall.

'How far did you go?' asked the D.D.I.

'Not very far. Once round the park, that was all.'

'And after that?'

'Phil said he had a call to make, so he dropped me on the way.'

'Where did he drop you?'

'In Jermyn Street. I had a date in Leicester Square and I walked on there.'

'What time would this have been then?'

'I should say -- what? -- about twenty-past twelve.'

'And your date was--?'

'At half past.'

'And Reed was alone when you left him?'

Snow White nodded.

'Did he say at all what his plans were? - where he was going?'

'No, he said nothing to me.'

'Did you happen to notice anything unusual about him in any way? Or did he seem quite normal in his behaviour?'

'He seemed perfectly normal to me.' Again there was a faint hint of surprise, of perplexity, at the question.

'And you went on, you say, to Leicester Square?'

'I went to see a film.'

'That was your date, was it?'

'Yes, I went with a friend. In fact, I believe - wait a minute-' Snow White reached for an overcoat lying over the back of a chair and took some ticket stubs from one of the pockets. He passed the stubs to Collis.

'I'm sorry to have to appear so inquisitive, but--'

'Good lord, if there's anything I can do!' said Snow White. 'It's terrible to think of Philip getting himself in a spot like this.'

'Tell me,' said the D.D.I., 'was Reed in the habit of wearing a buttonhole, do you know?'

'A buttonhole?' Snow White's candid glance was touched with the merest breath of curiosity. 'Sometimes, I believe.'

'You've known him for how long, did you say?'

'A little over a year, I should say.'

'And how often would you say you've seen him with a buttonhole?'

'Oh, I don't know - not very regularly.'

'Was he wearing one when you last saw him?'

Snow White hesitated. 'I can't really remember.'

'Just try to remember, will you? It might be important.' The D.D.I.'s tone was wholly persuasive.

Snow White hesitated. 'Yes, I think he was - I think he was, but I wouldn't like to be absolutely sure.'

The D.D.I. looked at Snow White with an eye of limpid innocence. He said nothing. Snow White sat running the comb through his hair with a slow, rhythmic caress. Presently he reached for the malachite box off the window ledge and handed it round again; but neither the D.D.I. nor Collis seemed in need of a cigarette. Soon the silence had stretched itself to breaking-point, and it was Snow White who broke it.

'It beats me. I don't understand how Philip could ever have got himself tied up in a thing like this. You don't suppose there could have been some mistake?'

'Well, we do make mistakes sometimes, but not very often,' said the D.D.I. 'I believe Reed plays a guitar or something in a band somewhere, doesn't he?'

'At Skinner's,' said Snow White. 'You know Vic Skinner?'

'Oh yes. Skinner and I are old friends – or what shall I say – old acquaintances.' There was a threat of reminiscence in the D.D.I.'s voice, but it came to nothing.

'Before my day,' said Snow White. 'It was Vic, incidentally, that I went to see this film with.'

'Ah, that reminds me.' The D.D.I. turned to Collis. 'Did you ring Skinner?'

'He was out,' said Collis.

'Oh well, perhaps we might try him now. May I use your phone?'

The D.D.I. reached for the telephone; but it was Snow White who got hold of it.

'I'll get him for you,' he said. 'He should be at the chiropodist this morning. We'll try there, anyway.' He dialled a number and then asked: 'Has Mr. Skinner arrived at your place for his appointment yet? Right – thank you.' He turned to the D.D.I. with a hint of his cold, familiar smile, a hint that seemed faintly touched with impertinence, as he put back the receiver. 'He hasn't got there yet.'

The D.D.I. nodded.

'Do you happen to know anything about Reed's relations with Skinner?' This time the pregnant pause belonged to Snow White. He let it go with a shrug.

'You mean they weren't too good?' suggested the D.D.I.

'I believe there was some sort of bust up two or three nights ago,' said Snow White. 'I happened just to look in the office and – well, that was the impression I got, that they were having a bit of a set-to. But what it was all about I don't know. I didn't ask.'

Again the D.D.I. looked at Snow White with a wide, steady eye. Again there was a pause that seemed gradually to bite into Snow White's nerves. He moved over to the mantelpiece and, with his back to the D.D.I., crushed his half-smoked cigarette into the ash-tray.

'Well, thank you, Mr. White. I'm sorry we've had to bother you.'

'I'm never bothered.' It could have been polite or it could have been ironic. 'If there's anything else I can do to help. . . .'

'I'll get in touch with you,' said the D.D.I. 'Good morning – and thank you.'

'You caught me on one leg,' said Collis, as he and the D.D.I. walked away across the yard, avoiding gingerly the wet patches which surrounded a bathed and petrol-scented Rolls. 'Why was I supposed to have rung Skinner?'

'Don't worry. You said the right thing. I hoped he'd rise, and he did. I bet he's trying to get Skinner again now.'

'He couldn't have told him much with us standing there.'

'Enough to hint that we're sniffing the wind.'

'I think I got the number he was trying for,' said Collis.

'You did!' The D.D.I. stopped in his tracks.

'I watched his fingers.'

'Well! – come on then—'

At the entrance to the yard there was a telephone kiosk.

The D.D.I. strode towards it, opened the door and pushed Collis inside.

'Let's see . . . ' Collis fingered the dial. 'It looked to me like six first of all – that's M. Then two – that's A. And nine, that's Y. Mayfair 0104, I think it was. Let's try it, anyway.' He put two pennies in the box and dialled the number. 'Who is that?' he asked, ' . . . good. Also good-bye.'

As he hung up, he turned to the D.D.I. 'It's the chiroprapist all right. Lafitte – you know them? In Burlington Street.'

'I'll find them. You're getting a smart boy, aren't you?'

They had come to where the D.D.I.'s official car was waiting with its plain-clothes driver. 'Do you want a lift?' Collis got in beside him.

'Did you bring away those ticket stubs?' asked the D.D.I. From his pocket Collis produced the stubs which Snow White had handed to him.

'Good. They may be okay, but you'd better check 'em, all the same.' For a little while the D.D.I. was silent; then he asked, 'What did you feel about Snow White?'

'His heart. I could feel it bumping about under his dressing-gown.'

'I wonder. He's pretty cool.'

'You weren't by any chance taken in by that ice-blond hair-do?'

'No. But he's got no need to feel nervous. Not yet, anyway. On the face of it, most of what he said fits.'

'Except the buttonhole.'

The D.D.I. nodded. Unconscious of the speculative pout his lips had assumed, he went on as if he were talking half to himself:

'He's known Reed something like a year, he says. Well, if Reed always wears a flower, but it just happened to be missing that day, surely White couldn't have failed to notice it?'

'You wouldn't think so.'

'And if he had noticed it, he would have remembered it - he *must* have remembered it.'

'Equally,' suggested Collis, 'if Reed only wore a flower now and again, and just happened to be sporting one on that particular morning, he could hardly have forgotten that either.'

'Of course he couldn't. And now, you see, he wants it both ways - "I wouldn't like to be absolutely sure." I bet he wouldn't.'

'Yes, but why? Why does he start hedging?'

The D.D.I. sighed like a tropical wind. 'Why do pigs fly?'

'Speaking for myself, mainly to get from place to place,' said Collis. 'D'you mind putting me down here?'

'Right. Well, I'm going on to Lafitte.'

Collis, tempted by the convenience of a traffic block, nipped out of the car and left the D.D.I. staring abstractedly at the red light.

A few minutes later, as the car turned into Burlington Street, he stopped the driver and got out. Across the road, a little way beyond where the car had pulled up, an oval sign bearing the name Lafitte was suspended above the pavement. In the window below the sign, a quart bottle of emerald-green lotion stood by itself on a mirrored platter.

As the D.D.I. came into the shop, he could smell faint, aromatic odours of soap and shampoo. Behind a glass counter on the right of the doorway stood a tall, bored blonde. She was exquisitely made up and immaculately swathed in a grey short-sleeved overall. She squeezed out a little smile for the D.D.I.

'G'd morning.' The well-bred sounds seemed to be divided equally between her mouth and nose.

'I believe Mr. Victor Skinner has an appointment here this morning?' said the D.D.I.

'Yeas?' If she didn't exactly dispute it, the girl showed no inclination to approve the suggestion. She kept her large, indolent eyes fixed on the D.D.I.

'I'd like to see him, please.'

The D.D.I. laid a gloved hand on the counter, and immediately withdrew it, as though he were afraid the glass might break. He looked about him uncomfortably, then looked back at the girl.

'I'm awfully afraid he's got a pedicure just now.'

The D.D.I. pushed his hand into his pocket and brought out his warrant card. He gave the girl a slow look at it, then put it back. She raised the outside edge of one eyebrow, looking at him with undiminished languor.

'Just a minute then, will youh?'

She undulated towards a plate-glass door scored with a design of undiscovered flora, and disappeared.

In a few moments the door swung open silently and a large child-like man came forward. He was unmistakably a foreigner, and in spite of his baby face there was something a little too sleek in his manner for the D.D.I.'s taste or reassurance. He inclined his head like an expectant turtle. Again the D.D.I. went through the ritual of the warrant card. The young man seemed to be struggling with an innocent perplexity. His tongue peeped out between his lips and stayed there a little while.

'You understand . . .' he began.

'Of course I do. There's going to be no trouble, though, believe me,' said the D.D.I. agreeably. 'I just want a few words with a customer of yours—'

'Wiz a client?' There was no particular emphasis on the word, but also no mistaking the D.D.I.'s *faux pas*.

'That's right. Mr. Skinner. Would you mind telling me first of all how long has he been here this morning?'

'Ten, twelf minutes. Nod more.' The man shrugged.

'Do you happen to know if he's had a telephone call since he came in?'

'I inquire.'

As though by some telepathic means, the glass door swung open as the man turned towards it, and the bored blonde re-appeared.

'Ah — do you know, Miss Dinwiddy, was a telephone call zis morning for Mr. Skinner?'

'There was one, actually,' said Miss Dinwiddy, 'just before he arrived.'

'Anything since?' asked the D.D.I.

'No.' Miss Dinwiddy's negative was like that of a llama endowed with speech.

'Sank you.'

Miss Dinwiddy beat a well-oiled retreat.



'Now, may I see Mr. Skinner?'

Again the foreign head was inclined, this time in pained acceptance of the inevitable, and the D.D.I. was ushered through the glass door into the *salon* beyond. To sounds of snipping, sluicing, and vibratory massage, he walked between two submissive rows of pink-sheeted forms towards a line of cubicles. His conductor drew aside a curtain in front of one of the cubicles and the D.D.I. stepped inside. Victor was sitting with one naked foot resting on the lap of a plump, bright-eyed girl. He looked up at the D.D.I. with a smile. It was no part of Victor's role in life to show surprise at anything.

'Hullo, Cathie - come in, if you can find room. Don't go, Jacqueline.' The bright-eyed chiropodist had made a move to get up. 'Well, it looks as if there's no getaway for me this time. What's the rap?'

'I'll be short and sweet,' said the D.D.I.

'Forget about your physique,' said Victor, still smiling. He slid open a gold cigarette-case as thin as a leaf and held it out. 'Long time no see. How's the Department of Justice?'

'This boy of yours, Reed,' said the D.D.I. 'He seems to have got himself in a spot of bother.'

'So I gather.'

'Who told you?' asked the D.D.I. quickly.

'His sister. She dances at my place.' Victor's smile was one of his blandest.

'What can you tell me about this boy?'

Victor looked carefully at his cigarette, rolling it round between his fingers, before he spoke.

'Not a great deal. Except that it doesn't exactly astonish me, what you say.'

'You mean he was expecting trouble?'

'I mean I was.'

'On what grounds?'

'Well . . . there are some sorts of people you always expect trouble from, aren't there?'

'From most sorts, I do.'

'Of course. But with you it's an occupational risk. I get along pretty well with most types, though.'

'What's been Reed's trouble, then?' asked the D.D.I.

'Oh, I don't know. He seems a bit scatty sometimes. Unreliable type.' Without seeming deliberately evasive, Victor's answers suggested more forethought than they seemed to be worth. They were slow and oblique.

'I gather there was a bit of trouble a few nights ago?' said the D.D.I.

Victor glanced at him. 'Reed told you that?'

The D.D.I. nodded. 'Something of the sort.'

'Did he tell you why?'

'Maybe yours is a different version,' said the D.D.I. amiably. Victor gave a sharp wince and shifted his bare toes.

'Just take off the corn, Jacqueline, will you? Leave the foot.'

'Oh, I *am* sorry! Did I hurt you, Mr. Skinner?'

The girl looked up at him with a disconcerted smile, and blushed as Victor smiled back. He turned again to the D.D.I.

'Yes, well, frankly the trouble is that two or three times lately he's been getting a bit high. I don't like that around the place, you can understand. And the customers don't care for it either. I threatened to fire him if it happened again.'

'And that was all that happened?'

'That was all.'

The D.D.I. paused; then he looked at Victor, and a little smile of open disbelief crossed his face.

'Now do me another favour, will you?' he said. 'Cast your mind back and tell me where you had lunch the day before yesterday.'

Victor looked at him imperturbably for a few seconds before he answered. 'I'll buy it,' he said.

'You didn't have any, did you?'

Victor thought for a moment, then again he looked at the D.D.I., this time with a sly, amused glance.

'Is that what Snow White said?'

'What time did you go in?'

'I met him at twelve-thirty. We saw the programme round and came out about a quarter to three.'

The D.D.I.'s expression was as near cynicism as his homely face would allow.

'Okay. Well, thanks for your co-operation.'

'Come again,' said Victor. 'I'll be in the Turkish baths on Thursday.'

## Chapter Nineteen

Collis waded through the rubber-lined pile carpet towards the manager's office. The chromium-buttoned usher escorting him stopped and tapped reverently at the door. The manager glanced up from his desk as Collis came in, and pushed his pools forecast under the blotter. He was a pale specimen with irresolute eyes and a suave, professional manner. Collis introduced himself.

'I want to know whether it's possible to check these counter-foils,' he said. He laid out Snow White's ticket stubs on the blotter. 'That is, to fix a date and an approximate time for them, if possible.'

'Surely,' said the manager.

He got up and pulled open the drawer of a filing cabinet. With a discreet lick of his forefinger he began to rustle through the files.

'Ah!' Satisfaction was mingled with the sound of adenoids. He drew out a wide, crisp sheet of tabulated figures, which he spread out on the desk, and began to run a well-nicotined finger down the columns 'Here we are - 25531 and 25532. These two tickets were for the midday performance, day before yesterday. Now, as to time ...' Again he consulted the sheet of figures. 'Mind you, this may not be one hundred per cent, but I'd say about twelve-fifteen to twelve-thirty.'

'Not later?'

'Definitely not later. In fact' - again he looked the figures over, screwing up his face in a semblance of concentration 'say twelve-twenty to twelve-thirty, you'd be dead right.'

'Now how about these?'

Collis laid two more tickets on the blotter.

'Ah, they are from the cloakroom. That's not so easy. There's no figures for the cloakroom, you see.' The manager thought for a second. 'Wait a minute though - thirty-seven and thirty-eight. They're off a new roll, I should say, somewhere near the beginning. We'll just see when the roll was issued.' With a careful show of courtesy he piloted Collis out into the foyer and towards the cloakroom. 'Quite a change in the weather,' he said with automatic vacuity as they passed the main doors of the foyer.

Cloakroom trade seemed at a standstill. Behind the counter stood a girl in a tight, gold-laced uniform. Its martial effect was

diminished somewhat by the contours within and by thick brassy curls of shoulder length. On the back of the girl's head was fixed a vast pancake of white felt.

'These tickets, Miss Wilson, when were they issued? Can you check?' The manager laid the tickets side by side on the counter. 'Looks as if they've come off a new roll.'

Miss Wilson fingered the tickets vacantly.

'That's right. I got a new roll out of the box office yesterday.'

'Yesterday?'

'Yesterday afternoon. Here it is.' She held up a roll of tickets.

'Not yesterday? You mean the day before.'

'Yesterday.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yesterday.' It was clear that Miss Wilson's swelling bust and golden curls hid something of the bulldog breed. A look of faint anxiety crossed the manager's face.

'Just a minute, will you?' He plunged back over the spongy carpet to the box office, and a moment later returned. 'That roll was issued yesterday tea-time.' He looked at Collis impressively.

'I said yesterday.' Gall and wormwood dripped from Miss Wilson's tongue, spattering Collis and the manager, as they turned away towards the office.

Collis peeled off his gloves and stuffed them into his overcoat pocket as he came down the corridor. On a bench in front of his door a young constable was sitting with his helmet resting awkwardly on his arm. He jumped briskly to attention as Collis approached.

'Hullo - are you Maybrick, by any chance?' Collis asked.

'That's right, sir.'

'Ah - you're the man I want. Come in.' Collis took off his hat and overcoat and hung them on the stand. 'Now - Delbos: have you had any luck yet?'

'Yes, sir. I found the chap. We're both on the same beat, more or less.' He brought up a little nervous smile and swallowed it again when Collis let the joke pass unnoticed. 'He's outside now, sir.'

'Good man. Bring him in, will you?'

The constable opened the door and signed to a man sitting on the bench outside. He was a desiccated individual, short of one leg; his face was red and mottled, and he had a white silk choker wound tightly round his neck. As the constable beckoned to him,

he picked up a crutch, pulled off his cap, and hobbled into the room.

'Sit down,' said Collis. 'I want to ask you a few questions.'

'Sir?' The man's voice sounded like the whisper of a bullfrog *in extremis*. He eased himself on to a chair and sat clasping and unclasping the greasy pad on top of his crutch.

'You were outside Chatham Chambers the day before yesterday at about half-past twelve: is that correct?' asked Collis.

The man eyed him for a moment with a bleary and entreating glance. 'All right, sir, I was, sir. But, sir, I've got me licence an' all—'

'Never mind about that,' said Collis. 'Did you do any trade between twelve-fifteen and one o'clock?'

The man blew out his loose lips and shook his head mournfully. 'Honest, sir, I didn't sell not fi' bob's worth o' stuff, sir, the 'ole day - not all day, sir.'

'Yes, but do you remember whether you sold anything at this particular time?'

The man hesitated. A look of shrewdness came into his eye. He nodded towards Maybrick. 'Ask the busy; 'e knows.'

'I'm asking you,' said Collis.

'All I sole was one carnation - one, that's all. Right, ain't it, copper?'

He grinned impudently at Maybrick. 'What sort of person did you sell it to?'

'Fella waitin' in a car.'

'What colour was the car, d'you remember?'

The man screwed up his mottled face, as though this was in some way an aid to recollection.

'Yes: it was green, the car - dark green.'

'What did he do with the flower?'

'Ow d'you mean? Shoved it in 'is button'ole.'

'You saw him do that, did you?'

'I saw him, yes.' The man looked at Collis with a puzzled look. 'E put it 'ere, in his jacket.' The man thumbed his own lapel.

'Do you think you would know this man again if you were to see him? Think carefully,' Collis added.

It was clear the man was not used to this process. He hesitated for some seconds before he answered.

'Well - blimey, I don't know - I didn't get - you know, not like a proper dekko at 'im. 'E just took the flahr out me 'and, an' I pushed off, see.'

'All right,' said Collis, 'that'll do. Thank you very much.'

The man's look of bewilderment became a cretinous stare.  
'Eh?'

'Sorry we've had to put you to so much trouble.'

Maybrick tapped the man's arm, and he pulled himself up clumsily from his chair.

'Thank you, sir,' he whispered. 'Good luck, sir.' But Collis was already busy with a stack of files.

Maybrick held the door open, and as the man hobbled out into the corridor he pulled a hideous face at the constable, a face full of triumphant wonder.

## Chapter Twenty

Alexander paused for a look in Mr. Herring's window – and for a glance between the close-set book stacks into the shop beyond – before he stepped inside. Mr. Herring was dealing with a customer, a lady in a tweed cloak fastened with a pewter clasp.

'Nothing on vegetarianism, no – nothing at all. Sorry.' Mr. Herring gave a cheerful smile of regret and godspeed as the lady left the shop. Then he turned to Alexander.

'I told him you wanted to see him.' His air today was confidential, almost paternal, with a pater's mild sense of self-importance. 'Should be here by now. Just take a look round, will you, while you're waiting?'

He left Alexander alone to glance about the shelves and to peer at the antique prints hanging one above the other against the doorway.

Presently Mr. Herring reappeared and with a faint hiss summoned Alexander into the little room behind the shop.

'Just gone up,' he said, and he jerked his thumb towards the ceiling. Alexander went through into the passage and up to the back room on the first floor. There he found Collis.

'Well, what's been happening?' Collis asked.

'I wish I knew,' said Alexander.

'We were imagining all sorts of possibilities on your behalf.'

'I know. I guessed you might be, so I thought I'd better report.'

Victor tipped me off forty-eight hours ago that there was something in the offing for last night – didn't say what – just told me to be round at his place at half-past seven. So I rang Herring straight away—'

'And he rang us. We had a man on to you even before you left the place.'

'So he was yours?' Alexander sounded relieved. 'I hoped so, but I couldn't be sure. He didn't need to tail me all night though, did he?'

'The D.D.I. isn't taking any chances. There might have been a change of plan—'

'There was.'

'So we imagined. But the D.D.I. thought you might not have a chance to let us know. So to be on the safe side, he had you covered. Didn't seem to work out though.'

'I couldn't get hold of Herring to tip him off until it was too late; they'd cancelled everything by that time.'

'What went wrong, then?'

'God knows. I went round there just as Victor told me, at half-past seven. He hadn't arrived. I was in the office with Snow White, and suddenly the telephone goes. He answers it – "Hullo, Ruffo." And that was the only clue I got. Ruffo did all the talking. Then Snow White just turns to me and says the whole thing's off; and that's all I know.'

'And there we were, squad cars at all points of the compass, every exit covered. We were looking forward to your leading us right the way there – wherever that was supposed to be.'

'I'm sorry. As I say, I'd have warned you if I'd had half a chance. The only call-box in the place was blocked just when I needed it.'

'And we're still no nearer to knowing who Ruffo is?'

'We're this much nearer: that apparently he's someone who's in a position to give 'em the green light.'

'Or the red, it seems, in this case. Still, that doesn't take us very much further. I'll tell you one thing though: Snow White's alibi looks as if it's beginning to come unstuck.'

'It does?'

'Along the edges. If it were really to crack, of course, a lot of other things might fall into place.'

'Such as?'

'Well, it might mean that Reed's story is true, for one thing.'

'That it was someone else who clubbed Delbos? What sort of evidence would that leave against the others, though?'

'Circumstantial - purely circumstantial.' Collis leaned back, resting his arm on the top of a stack of books. 'Let's assume that Reed's story is true though, and that Snow White is lying—'

'Why?'

'Shut up, I'm trying to work out a hypothesis.' Collis, gazing out of the window at the barren fig-tree in the yard below, began to tick the points of his case off on his fingers.

'What's the good of a hypothesis without a motive?' interrupted Alexander.

'All right - what is the motive?'

There was a pause. Alexander looked at Collis thoughtfully.

'Well, let's just think back for a minute. We know for one thing that Philip Reed smokes reefers. Where does he get 'em? It's a reasonable assumption, isn't it - knowing what we do of Victor - that he gets them from him? Right. Now suppose they have a row about something—'

'They did have a row.'

'Suppose they have a row. We don't know what it's about. Maybe that doesn't matter.' Alexander seemed to be picking his way carefully among a variety of scattered suppositions. 'But Victor knows one sure way of settling things, and that's by cutting off the reefers. So he cuts 'em off. Or maybe he only threatens to. Anyway, it's enough to frighten Reed. He gets desperate. He probably knows quite enough about Victor's set-up to make a good bit of trouble, if he feels inclined.'

'Which he does, presumably.'

'And Victor realizes then that it isn't any longer just a question of keeping him in reefers. He knows too much, and he can't be trusted. He's got to be fixed.'

'So they fix it by pinning this Delbos business on him - and hatching an alibi for themselves?'

'Could be.' There was a pause.

'It leaves a lot of loose ends,' said Collis regretfully.

'We're dealing with a lot of loose people. What do you expect - they'll send you out clues wrapped in cellophane?'

'No, but it doesn't get us to the bottom of the story. Delbos is simply an incident in it, don't forget - nothing more. Even if we finally pinned that on to White, or perhaps on to someone else, we should still have no case against Skinner. In fact, we might be worse off than before.'

'How d'you mean?'

'If he got scared and decided to lie low for a bit.'



'If *he* got scared? Look, if the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were to ride into Skinner's bar this evening—'

'That would be pure luck,' said Collis.

'Not for them. Don't imagine you can scare Victor. He may be only a small-calibre racketeer—'

'Not so small either.'

'All right. But he's got enough guts and self-confidence to beat Napoleon.'

'Well, he's not up against Napoleon. He's up against you.'

'Sounds like a lucky break for one of us.'

'I hope so,' said Collis. 'Well, keep in touch.' He picked up his hat from the table and wiped the underside of the brim on his sleeve. 'So long.'

He went downstairs and through the passage into the shop. Mr. Herring, mounted on a pair of steps, was going over the bookshelves with a feather duster. He blew along the fore-edge of a book that was in his hand and showed it to Collis with a genial nod.

'Here you are - presentation copy, lovely binding. Rosebery's *Napoleon: The Last Phase*.'

'Try it on my friend,' said Collis.

It was a quarter of an hour later, as he was going into his office, that Collis again found Police Constable Maybrick sitting on the bench in front of his door. The constable was still holding his helmet with the stiffness of a Baptist minister squiring a bathing belle; and again he shot up to attention as Collis approached.

'You want to see me?' said Collis.

'You wanted to see me, sir.'

'Did I?' Collis looked puzzled.

'About the Shapon Finn, sir.'

'The what?'

'Shapon Finn - the restaurant, sir.'

'The Chapon Fin?'

'Yes, sir.'

Collis pushed his hat over his eyes and scratched the back of his head. He looked vacantly at the constable.

'Are you sure it was me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, one of us must be daft.'

'Yes, sir,' said the constable politely.

'Who told you I wanted to see you?'

'Sergeant Miles, sir.'

'Miles? What on earth's he got at the back of his mind? Well, come in - we'll see what it's all about.'

Collis went across to his desk and took up the telephone. On top of his IN tray there was a pink folder. Attached to the front of it was a note in Sergeant Miles's handwriting. Slowly, as Collis began to read the note, he put back the receiver:

'Re your inquiry on the following ...' Sergeant Miles had written. There was then a short list of names and addresses. 'At times and dates concerned, i.e. approx. period of each break in, all above witnesses are stated to have been at The Chapon Fin Restaurant, Ryder Street, St. James's. Concerning restaurant personnel, you may wish for information. Have therefore detailed P.C. 276 (attached W./C. Stn) who is acquainted with staff, to report your office 14.30 hours.'

Collis looked up at Maybrick with a speculative eye. He opened a door leading into the next room and glanced inside. The D.D.I. looked up from his desk.

'Could you spare a minute to look at this?'

Collis laid the file, with the note attached, in front of the D.D.I. Fondly fingering a rising blemish, the D.D.I. read the note.

'Is he here now?'

'Come in, will you?' said Collis. He held the door open for Maybrick, who came in and stood to attention in front of the desk. The D.D.I. continued to glance through the file.

'The old Chapon Fin, eh? Classy joint.' Fighting off a ruminative tendency, he came down to earth. 'What do you know about this place, two-seven-six?'

'Well, sir, it's on my beat, sir. You get to know a bit about these places, sir, you know. The doorman, he's a pal of mine. I don't know much against the place though, sir.'

'Anything for it?'

'It's a pretty expensive sort of place, sir.'

'I said "for it", not against it. Know the manager?'

'Mr. di Maggio, sir.'

'Never heard of him. Who owns the place?'

'He owns it himself, I believe, sir - he and the chef, I think, Mr. Brizard.'

'What else do you know about it?'

'Well, not much, sir; I know the wine waiter, sir, Mr. Colin. And the head waiter, Mr. Ruffo.'

The D.D.I. looked at Maybrick with a long, unblinking gaze. Maybrick stared conscientiously at the wall a few inches above

the D.D.I.'s head. His adam's apple rose and then gracefully descended. The D.D.I. switched his glance towards Collis.

'What's he like, this Mr. Ruffo?' asked Collis.

'I should say about fifty, sir. Tall. Italian, I should reckon. Sad-looking bloke.'

'Must have second sight,' said the D.D.I. 'Anything else you can tell us?'

'About him, sir? No, sir. I only know him, like to pass the time of day – you know what I mean, sir.'

The D.D.I. thought for a moment.

'Okay, two-seven-six. Thanks very much. That's very helpful.' Maybrick turned to go. 'How long have you been in the force?' asked the D.D.I.

'Nearly four years, sir.'

'Reached the age of discretion yet?'

The young man gave a brief, uncertain smile.

'I hope so, sir.'

The D.D.I. nodded. 'So do I. Keep this under your helmet, will you?'

'Very good, sir.'

As Maybrick went outside, the D.D.I. looked at Collis with an expression of virgin innocence.

'Money for old rope, eh?' he said at last.

'How does he work it, d'you suppose?' asked Collis.

'Easy. He's the head waiter. He keeps the list of table reservations, picks the likely ones and tips Skinner off.'

'Sounds all right. He can't always pick a likely one, though.'

'Most times it'd be a cert. He knows 'em all right, you bet. That's a head waiter's job. In a place like that half the clientele are regulars – a good lot of 'em, anyway. All Ruffo needs to do is a bit of snooping on the q.t. Find out where Lady Doughnut lives, how many servants, evenings out, porters, back exits and the rest. Easy. All you need's a good memory.'

'So last night, presumably, somebody cancelled their table at the last minute.'

'I wouldn't mind betting.' There was a buzz from the box telephone on the desk. The D.D.I. picked up one of the keys and spoke into the box:

'Cathie speaking.'

A dwarfed and disembodied voice came through.

'There's a message just come from St. Saviour's Hospital about a Mr. Delbos. The doctor would like you to go along to the hospital immediately.'

'Okay. Ring back and tell them I'm on the way, will you?' The D.D.I. turned to Collis. 'You'd better come along.' He unlocked a drawer in his desk and took from it a large square envelope. 'Let's get going. . . .'

In the quadrangle formed by the hospital walls there was a hard tennis-court fenced with wire netting and bordered by a rough path of cinders. From the window where the D.D.I. stood looking down, an overhanging plane tree hid half the court from view. Of the four players in an enthusiastic mixed doubles, he could see two; the others he could only hear. The bare ante-room where he and Collis were waiting reeked with the sweet, astringent smell of ether.

'I wonder if we're allowed to smoke,' said Collis.

As he felt for his cigarette-case, the door opened and a doctor in a white overall came in. It was an overall big enough for a bathrobe, and from one of the pockets curled the ends of a stethoscope.

'Inspector Cathie?' asked the doctor. He was a youngish man with amiable, obtuse features, set at the moment in a tactfully negative expression. 'I'm afraid the news of your patient is pretty bad.'

'So they told me,' said the D.D.I. 'What are the chances of my being able to put a few questions? I know it sounds a bit hard. Still . . .'

The doctor shrugged. 'Well, I'm bound to tell you, Inspector, that I'm afraid he simply hasn't a chance – not a chance. He may go at any minute.' The D.D.I. made a faint sound of sympathy. 'His heart, of course, is the trouble. He's got over the concussion. He's quite conscious now. It was the shock, though, that did it. You haven't been able to trace any relatives yet?'

'There seems to be a sister travelling about somewhere in France, but we can't get hold of her – not yet, anyway.'

'Well, if you'll just wait a minute,' said the doctor. 'I'll slip in and see what's happening.'

Alone with Collis, the D.D.I. turned towards the window again. He stood watching the tennis players in silence, rocking gently backwards and forwards on his heels. Presently he gave a heavy sigh.

'You know, Collis, I feel badly about this. I blame myself for it, you know. I do.' His tone was brusque, yet somehow he sounded genuinely grieved.

Collis looked with a sympathetic eye at the stolid back view of

his chief, framed against the grey, cloudless sky beyond the window.

'Why blame anyone?' he asked, 'particularly yourself.'

'I do. I blame myself. It was my idea, this plan. Mr. Gwynn didn't like it, you know, not a bit. It was me - I talked Delbos into it.'

'I don't quite see what you're blaming yourself for,' said Collis placidly, 'unless it's because you're not clairvoyant.'

'I should have known - with Skinner around anything might happen.'

'If you're going to let that sort of thing inhibit your course of action,' said Collis, 'I should turn it up - the job, I mean.'

For a few moments there was silence. The D.D.I. still stood watching the tennis players below.

'P'raps you're right,' he murmured at last.

As he spoke, the doctor looked in again. He beckoned them outside and led them along the corridor to another room. Tied to the handle of the door was a card with the words 'No Visitors' on it. The peephole in the door was shut on the inside. Quietly the doctor ushered them into the room. On the other side of a screen drawn in front of the door, Delbos was lying in a high, white-painted bed. Beside the bed was sitting Sergeant Miles.

'We'll take over,' said the D.D.I. in a whisper.

A look of relief came over the sergeant's face. He nodded silently and disappeared.

There was an air of austerity about the room which made it look bleak even for a hospital. The furniture seemed reduced to the barest and least comfortable essentials. On the table beside the bed stood a jug of water and a tray with a few sick-room needs on it. Nowhere was there a flower or a single personal possession. Even the pyjamas that Delbos was wearing were of the routine hospital pattern. It looked like the room of a man who seemed to have forfeited all association with his fellows, all contact with the world beyond his white and solitary bedstead. A faint reminder of that world came from the tennis-court under the window, where the game which the D.D.I. had been watching from next door could still be heard.

Delbos lay as though he might have been asleep, with one hand resting on the coverlet. His face looked wan and shrunken. There was a bluish tinge about his lips and three days' growth of beard was on his cheeks. A small dressing, strapped to his head with plaster, was the only sign of any injury.

The doctor signalled to the D.D.I. who sat down beside the bed.

'Someone has come to see you,' the doctor said, enunciating the words carefully. 'He just wants to ask you one or two questions. I'd like you to see if you can answer them, will you? If it bothers you to talk, you just make a sign with your hand.'

For a moment there was silence. Then Delbos opened his eyes slowly, and in a voice that was low and pathetically weak he began to talk.

'No use, Cathie . . . no use.' He paused and ran his tongue over his lower lip. 'The little plan . . . went somehow wrong.'

'Never mind,' said the D.D.I. gently. 'You did your bit very nicely. You were all right.' He waited, and then went on. 'Now, see if you can just tell me – this fellow who hit you, did he have a flower in his buttonhole? Take your time now, I want you to be quite sure about it.'

He leaned forward a little to catch the answer.

'No . . . no flower,' murmured Delbos. From the envelope which he had brought with him, the D.D.I. took out Philip Reed's index card with the two photographs on it. He held the card in front of Delbos so that he could see them.

'Tell me – have you ever seen this lad before?'

Delbos looked at the card a long time before he gathered enough strength to whisper an answer.

'Never.'

The sounds of a long-drawn-out rally came faintly from the tennis-court, and then there was a burst of laughter.

'The man you saw,' went on the D.D.I. gently, 'was he dark – or was he fair?' He paused. 'Had you ever seen him before? You had done business with him sometime or other perhaps?'

There was a long wait. The doctor stooped close to the bed and put his finger on Delbos's pulse. Then gently he pulled back one of the closed eyelids.

'I'm afraid he's had it, Inspector.'

It was as though the release of Delbos's spirit had released something in the young doctor, a formality, a restraint which seemed to exist only so long as his patient existed. He chatted as man to man, almost cheerfully, as he walked with the D.D.I. and Collis along the corridor to the lift. There he said good-bye to them.

'What do we do with Reed now?' asked Collis, as they stepped out of the lift into the entrance hall.

'Do? What can we do?' said the D.D.I. 'Let him go.'

## Chapter Twenty-One

The bar seemed to be in a lively way of business. Over the noise of idling tongues – a loud and persistent feature of Skinner's – came the cheerful sound of Harry's shaker. For as much as gaiety consists in the extravagance of men and the expensiveness of women, Harry could be relied on to stimulate both.

Victor looked on the scene with some satisfaction, as he handed his hat to the cloakroom girl. He walked slowly through the bar, stopping here and there for a word with anyone who looked likely to be flattered by the attention – a word of discreet admiration, of flippancy or confidence, according to what seemed to be expected. At the end of the bar he found Alexander sitting with Rose. Victor laid a hand on his shoulder.

'I hire this girl out by the hour, not by the week,' he said, with a smile from which Rose seemed somehow to be excluded. 'However, for a small consideration . . .'<sup>2</sup>

'Sure.'<sup>2</sup> Alexander smiled back at him. 'Name your figure.'<sup>2</sup>

'It's hers we're talking about, not mine,' said Victor, looking at Rose with a bland, appraising eye. He reached across the bar and from a tumbler of water which Harry held out to him, he took a crimson carnation.

'You two ought to be stock breeders,' said Rose. If she had any intention of trying to make it sound agreeable, the intention misfired.

'Isn't that what I'm suggesting?' said Victor, working the carnation carefully into his lapel. He smiled at Rose, bending his head coyly to one side as he sniffed at the flower. Then, patting her shoulder in a way that was not entirely paternal, he moved on towards the office. As he came into the small, stuffy room, the telephone rang, and Snow White, who was there already, took the call.

He nodded significantly to Victor as he handed him the telephone.

'It's Ruffo.'

While Victor listened, and occasionally dropped in a word of agreement, Snow White watched his face attentively. Still listening, Victor drew a ring of keys from his pocket, and with a nod to Snow White, tossed them across the desk.

Snow White went over to the door and locked it. Then he picked a key from Victor's bunch and opened the drawer of a

cabinet behind the door. He took out a small, canvas-wrapped kit, untied the tapes and rolled it out on the desk. Inside was a set of tools, small and delicately made. They looked as though they might be useful enough, if properly used; but one or two of them could have suggested nothing but impropriety, even to the most innocent ironmonger.

Victor finished speaking, and as he put down the telephone, he looked at his watch.

'It's got to be a quick one this time, Snowy. We're late already. Where can you raise a truck?'

'In the mews, probably. We've got a full house tonight.'

'Right. But be careful whose you knock off. Here - you'll need these.' He picked a bunch of skeleton keys from the tool kit and handed them to Snow White.

'What are we going after?' Snow White asked.

'Hattie Mason,' said Victor.

Something like enthusiasm glittered in Snow White's eyes.

'Hattie Mason? Nice work.' His little lips curled in a sharp smile.

'Should be nice ice, too. You'll see Alexander up at the bar,' said Victor, as Snow White turned towards the door. 'Tell him I want him, will you? - right away.' There was a pause, then Snow White turned back slowly towards the desk.

'Vic, what is there against handling this thing on our own?' he asked. There was a slight hesitation in the way he brought out the idea, a slight evasiveness in his manner that was not lost on Victor.

'How do you mean, "on our own"?''

'Well . . . we've just got rid of Philip. Now you want to sign on a stranger. I don't get it.'

'Who's a stranger?' asked Victor sharply. Snow White said nothing. 'I don't get it either. Or are you supposed to be smart enough for two?' His voice was quiet, but not so quiet that its cutting edge had been entirely smoothed off.

'I don't see why we've always got to work in a mob, that's all. We've still got to cut Ruffo in as it is.'

'Naturally. Still, if you're not satisfied - okay, I'll make it a bigger cut for you.' Victor watched him closely. 'Now go and tell Alexander, will you?'

'Wait a minute, Vic,' said Snow White. 'It's not just that alone—'

'What else is it, then?'

'Well - all sorts of things. I know you believe Alexander's on



the level, Vic, but how can you be sure – how can anyone be sure?’

‘Exactly. But I told you that as far as Alex is concerned, I’m satisfied.’

‘But, Vic, it’s taking a big risk—’

‘It’s always a big risk. I took a big risk with you.’

‘What risk?’ There was a flash of resentment in Snow White’s voice.

‘I don’t remember any recommendation – unless you count forty-eight hours sitting with you in a fox-hole – you delirious half the time.’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘I don’t need a man to be a blood relation for me to know whether he’s the kind I want or don’t want. I know more about Alexander than you think.’

‘Maybe.’

Snow White put a packet of cigarettes to his mouth and drew one of them out between his teeth.

‘Look, Snowy, I know very well what’s eating you.’ Victor’s charm was turned full on for a few seconds – and then off again. ‘But listen, this is business, Snowy. Forget Rose for a bit, will you? That’s something to be settled between you three. But I won’t have it interfering when there’s a job to be done. D’you get me?’ Snow White looked at him across the flame of his lighter, but said nothing. ‘Now go on, get cracking, and send him in, will you? Come back as soon as you’ve opened up the truck.’

Without a word Snow White left the room.

Victor ran his fingers over the tools lying in front of him and picked out two or three, choosing each one with care, then rolled up the kit, tied the tapes round it, and locked it away in the cabinet. As he slipped the last of the tools into his pocket, Alexander looked into the room.

‘Come in,’ said Victor, ‘and let’s have the door shut.’ He sat down in the big swivel chair behind the desk and propped himself with his knee against the drawer. ‘I’ve just had Snow White in here,’ he said. ‘From what I can see, things don’t look very comfortable.’

It was an admirably off-hand performance, though it was given with a careful eye to Alexander’s reactions. Alexander smiled.

‘What can you see?’ he asked.

‘Trouble between you two.’

‘Well?’ He was still smiling.

'Cut it out - anyway, for tonight.'

'That's easy. There aren't any hard feelings on my part. What's different about tonight, anyway?'

'I've got a little business on hand,' said Victor, 'and I'll need your help.'

'It's all yours. Where's the business?'

Victor squinted down at his finger-nails, paring one against another.

'You know Hattie Mason?' he asked.

'Who doesn't?'

'Personally?' Alexander shook his head.

'Only by the size of her jewellery. As a trollop, she's way out of my class.'

'It's the jewellery I'm interested in,' said Victor. He looked up at Alexander. 'How about you?'

'I could be interested in that, too,' said Alexander, '-failing Hattie in person. What's the cut?'

'Twenty per cent.'

'Of what?'

'Of Ezra's price.'

'Expenses sound a bit heavy.' There was a trace of cynical amusement in Alexander's eye.

'They are. Twenty to you, and the same to the others.'

'In the plural?'

'Snow White and Ruffo. You don't know Ruffo yet.'

'Who is he? The wide eye?'

Victor nodded. The telephone buzzed softly and he took up the receiver.

'Hullo . . . Ezra? No, I shan't be here. Why, what's the hurry?' Alexander, watching him, saw irritation and then anger in his face. 'Dammit, I told you: hang on to the stuff. . . . So what? One safe's as good as another, isn't it? . . . Listen, what's the matter with you? What are you getting the wind up about?' After listening with growing impatience to what Ezra had to say, he finally cut him short. 'All right. I'll be back here in half an hour.'

He smacked down the receiver and sat for a moment staring sullenly at the blotter in front of him. Then he looked up at Alexander with an expectant eye.

Alexander struck the flame of his dog's-head lighter and put it to his cigarette.

'All right,' he said, 'but no squirters.'

'Squirters?' Victor looked at him dryly. 'I don't know what you've been accustomed to in the past,' he said, 'but you're not

dealing with a strong-arm mob now. No one in this outfit's going to be picked up touting firearms, don't you worry.' He looked at his watch. 'Snow White's out there now, in the mews raising a car. If he's not quick, we shall have had it.' He drummed impatiently on the stuffed arms of his chair, 'Hop out and take a look round, will you, Alex? See what's happening. If he's got something ready, stay there and I'll join you in a few minutes. No need for all of us to walk out in a bunch.'

'Right.'

Alexander left the office and turned towards the bar. Suddenly he saw the swing doors at the other end of the foyer flung open, and across and between the shifting concourse of heads, he caught sight of Philip. He looked weary and distraught, as he stood there staring round the bar. Before he could be seen, Alexander had slid into the telephone box near the office. As an observation post it would have done better for a midget; it left Alexander exposed from the ribs upwards. He worked his way into the shadows as well as he could, and waited to see what Philip would do.

Rose was still by herself at the bar where Alexander had left her. In a moment Philip found her and went over to where she was sitting. Her face lit up with pleasure and surprise as she turned and discovered him by her side. But there seemed to be no response from Philip to her questioning look and the entreating hand she laid on his arm. They said a few words – quick and angry words, apparently, on Philip's part – and then, with a glance at Harry, he shot a question at him across the bar. Harry's answer was a shrug and a nod towards the office; and in a moment Philip had brushed Rose aside and was passing the telephone box within a yard of where Alexander was standing. There was a look of sour determination on his unshaven face, and his clothes looked as if they might have been slept in. His usual free and easy manner had disappeared altogether. He looked neither to the right nor the left, but went straight past the box and strode into Victor's office.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Snow White came out beneath Skinner's neon signature, which shone with a cold lustre above the doorway, and stood looking up and down the deserted mews; then he walked away towards the left.

The lamps bracketed at intervals to the walls showed a line of cars parked almost bumper to bumper between Skinner's and the square at the end of the mews. As he went along the line, Snow White gave a quick look of inspection at each car. At the end of the mews he turned round and walked back again, this time more slowly, still sizing the cars up as he went by. When he came to the end of the line, he stopped. Again he looked up and down the mews. Then he edged his way into the gap between the cars and the garage fronts, and moved along until he came to a black Buick.

With the keys Victor had given him, he set to work on the lock, and presently the door was open. He got in, and with the same key, tried the ignition; it worked. He started up the engine and checked the dials by the light on the dashboard; then he switched off and got out again. He walked back towards Skinner's entrance, and as he got there Alexander appeared in the doorway.

'We're to wait here for him,' said Alexander. Snow White didn't even pause. He glanced at him as though he might have been a stranger and moved straight past him towards the door. 'I shouldn't disturb him,' Alexander added over his shoulder: 'He's got Philip with him.'

Snow White's hand seemed to freeze on the broad bronze door rail. He stood quite still for a few seconds with his back towards Alexander. Then he turned round quickly and came up to where he was standing.

'How do you know?' He barked out the question in a voice that sounded shrill with excitement.

'I saw him,' said Alexander.

Snow White hesitated. 'Is that true?'

'You never can tell. I'm such a liar.'

Snow White's pale eyes seemed to be searching for some sort of reassurance in Alexander's face. There was none there.

'Was there anyone with him?' he asked. The crack in the hard shell of his self-confidence was sealing itself, and the old indifference, the old imperturbability, was beginning to return.

'Not that I saw,' said Alexander. Again there was a pause.

'I've got a car waiting,' said Snow White sullenly. 'I'll go ahead.'

He turned and went back alongside the line of cars. Alexander waited, and presently the door behind him opened and Victor came out. He said nothing but followed Alexander along till they came to where Snow White was sitting at the wheel of the big Buick. They got in and the car slid away with scarcely a sound.

'So Philip's turned up?' said Snow White after they had driven for a little while in silence. Victor shifted his head just far enough to shoot a glance at Snow White's profile.

'Yes, he's back.'

'What happened?'

'He didn't say. Nothing much, apparently.' Deliberate or not, Victor's evasiveness struck a spark of impatience from Snow White.

'What did he want, then?' he asked crisply.

'What d'you suppose - a smoke?'

The ends of a smile curled round Snow White's lips. 'I bet.'

For a little while nothing more was said. Presently Skinner pointed down the street that lay ahead of them.

'This is it. Better park a bit farther along. There's a porter on the door.'

They were in a wide street planned with an elegance for which acquisitive landlords of a later era had found no use. Its simple and spacious façade had been cut into and dwarfed by heavy blocks of flats and offices. It was not, at this time of night, a busy street. Except for a few cars and a prowling taxi, there was little traffic about. Snow White drew the Buick into the kerb in front of an empty shop window.

'We're on the fourth floor,' said Victor. 'Give me three minutes - not more. After that it's the usual drill.'

He got out and walked back towards a high concrete block twenty yards from where the car was parked. Snow White turned on the dashboard light and sat with his eyes on the second hand of his watch.

'You keep looking ahead,' he ordered, '-and behind.' Alexander, already glancing out through the rear window, saw Victor disappearing into the entrance of the block.

For a full minute, while Snow White watched the seconds ticking away, Alexander kept a steady lookout. A taxi dropping its fare, and a few solitary pedestrians were all there was to be seen. Straight ahead, in diminishing perspective, the traffic lights

winked yellow, red and green, as each set answered the changes of the next one down the length of the deserted street.

'Time,' said Snow White. He climbed out on the off side and let the door fall back gently until it rested on its catch. The ignition light still glowed on the dashboard.

'You're still switched on,' said Alexander.

'Leave it,' answered Snow White.

Together they walked back towards the block and pushed open the heavy plate-glass door leading into the hall. Inside it was warm and silent and deserted. The air was dry and heavy with the smell of flowers, of tuberoses and syringa massed in a pair of large vases standing on gilded console tables. The place was quieter than a tomb and, in spite of the opulent atmosphere, no less oppressive.

Snow White, leading the way, started quickly up the stairs. Before they had reached the top of the first flight, there came from below the sound of lift doors sliding open. Immediately Snow White pressed Alexander back out of sight. They waited for a little while, but all they could hear was the rustle of a newspaper and then the clearing of a moist throat. After a few moments they went on silently up to the fourth floor.

Victor was there on the stairs to meet them. He signed to them to keep quiet as they reached a long, carpeted corridor, and pointed to a lighted doorway, a few yards from the head of the staircase. It was a service pantry, and from inside came the sound of a man and woman talking.

Turning from the direction of the pantry, Victor went on ahead to the end of the corridor. He walked on round the corner and out of sight. A second later he stepped back into view and signalled to them with a nod; then he disappeared again.

'Go ahead,' Snow White whispered. 'Give me the green when you get there.'

Alexander left him. He walked on round the corner and found that, except for Victor a few yards ahead, the corridor was empty. He turned and signalled back to Snow White, then went on again. Presently he saw Victor come to a stop and begin to busy himself silently with the lock of a door.

'Get cracking!' whispered Victor, as Alexander came to where he was at work. 'Go on to the end, and keep your eyes and ears peeled - go on!'

Alexander went on. Round the next corner another stretch of empty corridor came into view. An illuminated arrow, pointing to the door of a lift, seemed the only indication that somewhere,

on a lower or an upper floor, contact might yet be made with man. Looking back towards the end from which he had approached, Alexander could see Snow White in the distance, and could see his familiar gesture as he drew a cigarette out of the packet with his lips.

Victor, something less than midway between himself and Snow White, was still working silently on the lock of the door. Time, the relentless rival of intention, brooded with a sleepy eye over all three of them. Seconds seemed to stretch to the length of minutes, the minutes into hours; the silence seemed infinite. And then, away down the empty corridor on Alexander's right, someone started to open a door. Before he could be seen, Alexander had stepped out of sight towards Victor; Snow White, at the far end of the corridor, vanished instantly; and Victor himself began walking casually towards Alexander. In the click of a finger respectability yawned over the scene.

Victor returned with Alexander to the corner where he had been keeping guard. Here they both paused to listen. But listening told them nothing; there was nothing to hear. The carpet, like springy turf under their feet, drowned even the sound of their own footsteps as they came round the corner. In front of them, making his way slowly towards the lift, was an aged man-servant leading a white poodle. With his back towards them, he waddled slowly, ceremoniously towards the lighted arrow, pressed the lift button with a nicely calculated touch, and when the lift appeared, bowed his companion into it before entering himself and then sank majestically from view.

Already Victor was on his way back to operations, and again Alexander was left on guard. In a few moments Snow White appeared at the far end of the corridor, and once again the severed ends of suspense were re-entwined. Again the oppressiveness of time seemed to hang like something tangible in the air. Then, as Alexander watched and waited, he saw Victor try the door, and saw it swing silently open. Victor turned and beckoned to him and, as he went forward, Snow White came quickly along to join them.

'Keep prowling,' said Victor, 'and give us the one-two if anything starts. I'll take Alex in with me.' A look of sullen surprise crossed Snow White's face. He made no move. 'Well?'

'Okay.' Snow White turned away, and Alexander followed Victor into the flat. He shut the door and stood still in the darkness until Victor had turned on a light. Alexander saw then that he was wearing a pair of thin rubber gloves cut short below the

knuckles, and was carrying a torch. At Alexander's feet some letters were lying on the floor near the letter-box. He stooped to pick them up.

'Don't touch!' said Victor sharply. 'D'you want to get your fingers bitten?'

They were standing in a square hall on a parquet floor covered with rugs. There was not much furniture to be seen, but what there was looked good of its kind and well chosen. Towards the end of a passage leading off the hall there was an open door, showing the tiled wall of a bathroom beyond. Victor opened the door next to the bathroom and looked inside.

'Put the light out,' he said.

Alexander pushed the switch up with his elbow and followed the beam of Victor's torch. He stood by the doorway of the room while Victor went to the windows and drew the curtains across them.

'Okay.'

Again Alexander put his elbow to the switch. As the light came on, it showed them standing in a bedroom which, for size and elegance, would have done justice to the taste of Poppaea. The air was agreeably heavy with scent – a scent whose briefest aroma suggested high extravagance. The bed was raised from the floor on a low dais. It was of hospitable size, and its head was formed of a huge gilded shell. The dressing-table, loaded with all the necessities of beauty, was topped and fronted with mirrors of antique glass.

Victor began to go through the drawers. His technique was quick and methodical.

'Right – you start and take a look round,' he said, as he began his search. 'See if there's any fire exit – any door out on to a back staircase or somewhere. If you find anything, prop it open – and watch those fingers of yours.'

Alexander made a quick and perfunctory tour of the flat. There was no fire escape, and except for a coat cupboard in the hall, nowhere that seemed to offer invisible sanctuary to a couple of full-grown men. He went back to the bedroom and reported to Victor.

'Okay, then. Stick around by the door there and listen – but don't talk. If Snow White gives the one-two, cut it and get as near the front door as you can.'

Victor had wasted no time while Alexander had been prospecting. The dressing-table, the table beside the bed, and a chest of drawers had all been ransacked. Nylons, underclothes, belts,



gloves, handbags, brushes, makeup bottles and a litter of furs and clothing were strewn about the room. On the bed were two jewel cases. One had had its lid wrenched off, and Victor was running quickly through the box, picking out or rejecting the various pieces with a well-informed eye. The pieces that he chose he laid aside on a handkerchief spread out on the bed. The others he dropped back in the box.

For a few minutes he worked in silence. Then, as Alexander stood watching him, there came the sound of someone turning a key in the front door. There was a split second, in which agonies of apprehension chased themselves across Victor's face, then Alexander jerked his elbow and dowsed the light.

He moved cautiously back a foot or two from the door and stood still. A strip of light fell across the parquet floor outside the bedroom. Then the light in the hall was turned on, and they heard someone shutting the front door. The letters which Alexander had left lying on the hall floor were picked up and dropped on to a tray. Footsteps sounded on the rugs and on the parquet floor – the footsteps of a woman wearing high-heeled shoes. A light went on in another room, a kettle was filled under a tap, and then the switch of an electric stove was turned on.

The light in the hall, reflected dimly from the passage and through the open door of the bedroom, showed Alexander that Victor had moved from the bed, and with the stealth of an adder had come across the room to his side.

For a little while there was silence, interrupted only by sounds of the woman moving about in the kitchen. Then her footsteps echoed once more on the parquet floor of the hall. She turned into the passage, and as she came closer to the bedroom, Victor stepped noiselessly towards the door. He was within a yard of the woman before she saw him. She was a plump, middle-aged creature with glasses, and was dressed in the decorous sepia and muslin of a parlour-maid. With her hand outstretched towards the switch on the bedroom wall, she suddenly saw him. Shuddering, she reeled back, trying to scream, but it was as though terror had paralysed her powers of speech. She gave a croak, then shut out the sight of him with her hands in front of her eyes.

'Keep quiet and nobody's going to hurt you,' said Victor brusquely. 'If you start squawking, though, you'll be for it.'

He pushed the woman past him into the darkened bedroom, and with a square of silk which he seized off the floor, blind-folded her, and then thrust her into an easy-chair. She moaned a little as he bound the scarf across her glasses, but she said

nothing. After that she lay there in the chair, shaking as though she had an ague and pressing a handkerchief convulsively against her lips.

'Light,' said Victor, and again Alexander put his elbow to the switch. 'If this is Snow White's fault . . .' He swore softly but savagely as he turned towards the bed and went to work on the unopened jewel case. In a few moments he had prised off the top of the case and was shaking out the contents on to the bed.

Suddenly, from somewhere in the direction of the hall, there came a low, soft whistle. Victor stood there with the broken box in his hands and his head slightly lifted, like an animal sniffing the scent of danger. His lips were taut. The woman in the chair checked her moaning as she lay there listening to the sound. Then she turned her head away towards the cushions.

Alexander stepped quickly outside into the passage. He stopped to listen again, then crept on towards the hall. Suddenly he ran forward and turned into the kitchen. The kettle on the electric stove was boiling fiercely. He whipped it off the hot plate and the whistle died away with a mournful splutter. On the kitchen table lay an empty hot-water bottle in a blue satin cover.

As he turned off the stove there came another sound, a soft but distinct knocking on the front door. He waited for a moment, and then it came again – one, one-two – one, one-two. He stepped to the door and opened it. It was Snow White.

'Look, I couldn't buzz you. There was a damn fool waiter here talking to her.' He spoke softly and quickly, looking this way and that as he talked. 'He was standing right here with a trolley the whole time till she opened the door. I never got a chance—'

'Forget it,' said Alexander shortly. 'She's tied up. Now get back where you belong.'

The sudden peremptoriness of his manner and its assumption of authority was something new to Snow White – something that pushed the breaking-point of his self-control hard over to the danger mark. As Alexander began to shut the door on him, he tried to wedge his foot against it, but Alexander thrust him away. It was the last straw. A look of blazing enmity glittered in Snow White's eyes as the door was shut in his face. Alexander went back to the bedroom and reported once more.

'Okay,' said Victor, 'we're through.' He folded over the corners of the handkerchief which held the jewellery, tied them together, and slid the bundle carefully into his trouser pocket. Then he went round to the table beside the bed and cut the telephone lead

with a pair of pliers. 'Where else?' he asked.

'Another in the sitting-room,' said Alexander.

'Right, You stay here.' He went quickly out of the room, leaving Alexander to guard the woman in the chair. When she heard Victor leaving the room, she raised her blindfolded head, as though she were trying to follow the sound of his movements, and sat there gaping stupidly, filled with a tense and timorous expectation.

In a few moments Victor was back again. He glanced round at the chaos of clothing scattered about the room, then he pulled a couple of scarves from an open drawer and quickly bound them round the woman's hands and feet. She made no protest at first, lying in the chair like a stuffed sack, until Victor took a stocking and began to gag her with it. Then she let out a few breathless squawks, trying feebly to twist her head aside, but in a few seconds she gave in.

'Come on,' said Victor.

They left the woman in darkness and went back into the hall. Victor turned off the light, and they stepped out into the endless desolation of the wide, soft-carpeted corridor. There was no sign of Snow White.

Alexander shut the front door behind them, and as he did so, the tail-end of his ubiquitous glance picked up three men coming round the corner. The man in the middle was Cathie.

As though it were his instinctive purpose, Victor turned without hesitation and casually set off with Alexander in the opposite direction. They walked a few steps – and then Victor stopped. Round the corner ahead of them had appeared two more men. Even at this distance they were recognizable to his experienced eye as plain-clothes men. He glanced round quickly at the three behind him, then again at the two in front. The muscle in his jaw twitched as he looked at Alexander. It was a look that showed neither fear nor surprise – a look as deadly and as destitute of feeling as the tone in which he said quietly:

'You bastard!'

## Chapter Twenty-Three

'Where I belong!'

In a savage whisper Snow White repeated to himself the words of Alexander's dismissal. He turned away from the door that had been shut in his face and walked back down the empty corridor. His pale face was paler and his small mouth more firmly set than ever, in lines of rage that seemed to stiffen not only his features but his whole body.

Slowly he wandered back and forth across the corner of the corridor, stopping short now and then as if to catch some distant or imaginary sound. Once in a while, he walked a few yards to the right, towards the stairs, or to the left, towards the flat where Victor was at work, then went back to the short diagonal beat which gave him a clear view along both arms of the corridor.

He had kept his patrol for some five or six minutes when his eyes caught the ascending light of the indicator above the lift. He went forward quickly to the top of the stairs. From this point the indicator was out of sight and the lift itself gave no sign of its upward passage until the doors slid open and he heard voices.

Without a sound he moved quickly down the stairs towards the half landing, keeping well into the wall and out of sight, and there he stood listening. Someone on the floor above was giving out instructions. Though the words were indistinguishable, there was no mistaking the voice. It was Cathie. The doors of the lift closed again, and then after a short, whispered discussion there was silence once more.

Snow White stood still on the half landing, seeming uncertain whether to go up or come down. He listened, and in the silence his ear caught first one small sound, then another – sounds that were scarcely perceptible but which told him that somewhere in the corridor, somewhere near at hand, there were men standing in wait.

Still in the same state of uncertainty, he hesitated a little longer; and then, as though his mind were suddenly made up, he crept off quickly down the stairs.

The porter in his office heard the lift bell buzz and put down his paper with a sigh. He crossed the silent, syringa-scented lobby with footfalls that melted away into the carpet, and took the lift

up to the fourth floor. The doors slid open on a little group of men. Victor was standing hemmed in among them, and at the back were Cathie and Alexander. Three of the men stepped forward into the lift, taking Victor with them.

'Charge him and hold him,' said Cathie briefly to one of his men. 'And get hold of Inspector Dacres on your way out. He should be in the van down there. There's one to come, tell him. And say I want him to check the patrols on all exits. Then he's to report up here to me with a search party. Got it?'

'Right, sir.'

While Cathie was giving out these instructions, Victor, standing well back in the lift, was staring out between the heads in front of him, staring at Alexander with a look of wild, unblinking menace. Then the doors of the lift slid quietly together and he was shut out of sight.

'Now then,' said the D.D.I., 'listen, the rest of you.' Two of the party, besides Alexander, had stayed behind. 'We'll wait here for the others—'

'You won't want me, then?' Alexander suggested,

'Why not?' 'Course we shall want you.'

'I've got another fish to try and catch.'

'What other?'

'Ezra.'

Cathie's mouth opened and shut, but answer came there none. He nodded with a kind of solemn approbation, which after a moment melted into a look that was slightly sceptical.

'You kidding?'

'I wouldn't know how to,' said Alexander. The D.D.I. walked over to a sofa standing against the wall of the corridor and flopped down on it with a grunt. Alexander followed him. 'Ezra's calling round at Skinner's place in a little while. I think I know what for, and if I'm right — well, anyway, I think it might be useful for me to have a few minutes alone with him.'

'Useful?'

'Well, informative.'

The D.D.I. looked at him with a glance that was not exactly hopeful.

'Well, if you think you can squeeze hot water out of a cold sponge, go ahead.'

'I might as well try,' said Alexander.

On the mezzanine floor Snow White came out on to a balcony overlooking the hall. At the sound of voices below, he stopped.

Then, going forward cautiously, he peered down through the iron foliage of the balustrade. There were two men standing in the hall. One was in a porter's uniform; the other, a beefy-looking individual, was in the tell-tale raincoat and cheap hard hat of the plain-clothes copper. He was standing there fondling with squat fingers a speckled lily among the flowers on one of the gilded console tables.

This time Snow White didn't wait. He turned and ran back up the stairs to the first floor. There he walked along the corridor till he found the service pantry, and as he went past the open door he glanced inside. At the back of the pantry was another door. It was marked in red letters: EMERGENCY EXIT.

He had got half-way across the pantry when a telephone on the wall started a shrill burr. The sudden sound of it stopped him like a trip wire. He lifted the receiver off its hook, and leaving it swinging gently against the wall, pushed open the emergency door and came out on to a staircase. A faint light glimmered upward through the well of the stairs, and with this to guide him, he felt his way down towards the basement.

At the bottom of the stairs he came to a passage which was cut short on the right by a door. Through a glass square in the upper part of it he saw a bright and silent room with a complex system of pipes threading their way across the ceiling towards huge oil-fed burners. Over on the far side of the room there was another door. It was standing open, and close beside it two men in overalls were playing cards on a newspaper spread out between their knees.

Snow White turned away and went back along the passage. Here underground it was warmer, and but for the sound of his own footsteps, as quiet as the carpeted corridor up above. Away ahead of him the passage took a turn to the right and, beyond this corner, sloped gradually upwards to a back entrance on the street level. Against the wall was a line of metal lockers, and beyond these a card rack with a time-stamping machine alongside it. Snow White peeped out from behind the lockers towards the door at the top of the slope. The street beyond it was not more than a few yards away, and within the bright radius of a lamp which fell like a spot-light on to the pavement, a porter in his shirt-sleeves was chatting with two policemen.

Again Snow White went back on his tracks. Again, when he came to the door of the furnace-room, he glanced inside. The game of cards was still going on. He turned away and started back up the dark staircase.

Outside a door on the first floor he stopped and listened. He could hear the sound of running water and the clatter of dishes, and against a frosted-glass panel in the door he could see the movement of shadows.

In growing darkness he climbed up to the floor above. Here, too, there was a light behind the pantry door, but the place seemed empty, and after listening for a few moments, he tried the handle. The door was locked. He swore softly, and started off again up the stairs, feeling his way towards the third floor.

Again, as he turned a corner of the stairs, he saw a light in front of him, and again stopped to listen. This time he could hear nothing. He tried the handle of the door, it opened and he stepped inside. He stood still and listened again for a moment before he ventured into the corridor; then he came out and walked quietly away.

Towards the back of the building he came to a pair of double doors fastened with a bar-lock. He pushed down the bar, and as the door opened, a cold breeze filtered in from outside. He stepped out on to a fire escape, pulled the door to behind him, leaving the bar undone, and set off quietly down the iron staircase. As he got towards the bottom, he stopped and peered out over the rail. At the foot of the escape there was a blind alley, giving access at its open end to the pavement twenty or thirty yards away. The alley was in darkness, but looking back along it towards the street, he could see the gleam of twin motor-cycles resting against the kerb. And beside them, silhouetted against the entrance to the alley, were two men of a mobile police patrol.

Snow White went back up the fire escape to the third floor. He eased open the escape door which he had left unclosed, and stepped back inside the building. He was breathing heavily now, and on his cheeks, his forehead, and his mouth there glistened a thin patina of sweat. With a set and sullen face he walked back towards the lift. Tentatively he put out a finger towards the call button, then seemed to change his mind. He walked on slowly for a few yards, and then turned and went downstairs.

Between the floors on the half landing there was a window of opaque glass. He pushed it open and looked out. It gave on to a well, and at the bottom there was a raised skylight surrounded by a narrow strip of leaded roof. A section of the skylight had been pushed back, and through the open space he saw an empty floor lit by fluorescent light. He could see also the gleaming fenders of

a car and a stooping posterior in white overalls.

He shut the window and went down quickly to the mezzanine floor. But here, instead of a window, there was a blank wall. He ran back upstairs to the half landing, pushed open the window once more and again looked out. From here to the bottom of the well there was a drop of twenty feet, with odds uncomfortably short on the risk of hitting the skylight. But from the windows which opened on to the well from the mezzanine floor, the drop on to the narrow leads was no more than a couple of yards.

Again he went down to the mezzanine floor, and avoiding the balcony, turned into the corridor and rang the bell of the first flat. As he stood there waiting, he slipped his hand in the waist-band of his trousers and drew out his flat sheath knife with its narrow blade.

He was on the point of ringing once more, when the door was opened by a spruce-looking, elderly buck with a well-trained grey moustache. There was something of a military air about him, a faint air of truculence. Then, as his eye travelled towards the knife in Snow White's hand, there was a sudden and pathetic transformation. His thin lips fell apart, the pink cheeks dissolved to an ashy mauve and his eyes grew wide with consternation.

'Keep quiet,' said Snow White. His voice was deliberately soft, yet deliberately threatening. He gave the knife a sudden jerk towards the pit of the man's stomach. The man recoiled with a horrified gasp. Fearfully he drew his eyes away from the blade, fearfully gazed at Snow White's fixed expression.

'Get in!' said Snow White softly. As the man backed into the hall, Snow White slipped inside the flat and shut the door. 'What's in there?' He pointed to a cupboard. With startled eyes that fluttered between Snow White's face and the knife in his hand, the man pulled the door open. It was a cupboard full of dresses, and as the door opened, a light came on inside and there emerged faintly the smell of stephanotis.

'Get in,' whispered Snow White.

The man wavered, then stepping gingerly among a collection of shoes ranged on the floor, he squeezed himself back among the dresses and stood there looking out at Snow White with a baleful and apprehensive eye. What was left of the military air was dissipated now by a swathe of tulle which wrapped itself about his knees.

'Better stay quiet,' Snow White warned him in a whisper. 'If I have to open this door, I'll rip you up.'



It was the quiet, implacable purpose of Snow White's manner, as much as the gleaming blade held an inch away from his belly, that carried conviction to the man. He nodded silently. Snow White shut the cupboard door and turned the key.

On the opposite side of the passage was a half-open door leading to a room that was in darkness. Farther along, Snow White could see a lighted lounge. Standing back, out of sight from the darkened room, he laid his hand gently against the door and pushed it open. It gave a slow and disconcerting squeak, but inside there was silence. Then, from along the passage, a woman's voice called out:

'Honey?' It had a cloying, wheedling sound. 'Who was it, honey?'

Snow White stepped quickly into the darkened room and went over to the window.

'Honey?'

He got behind the curtain and silently raised the sash, then swung his legs out over the sill.

'Honey! What are *y' doing?*'

The voice sounded nearer this time. The wheedling note had changed to something more imperative. From between the curtains Snow White caught a glimpse of a tall, pretty girl fluttering past the open door. She was dressed in a black *négligée* whose colour alone saved it from invisibility.

Snow White gripped hold of the window ledge with both hands and lowered himself from the sill. For a second he hung there in the darkness, then he let go. He landed with a thud on the narrow leads beside the skylight and keeled over, trying to snatch his balance from thin air. There was a perilous instant when it seemed as though his whole weight would crash through the glass, but somehow he clung on to the stonework and managed to right himself.

Carefully, he worked his way towards the skylight, and crouching close to the edge, looked over into the basement. Below him was a wide expanse of floor leading towards a ramp, which curved upwards and out of sight under an exit sign. Against the white walls, cars were parked in diagonal rows. From over in the office close to the ramp came the sound of a radio, filling the place with the glutinous belching of a theatre organ. There was no one about. Immediately below him Snow White saw a big car, a shining, elephantine roadster with an open hood. He took one look at it, then swung his legs over the skylight and let himself down until his feet were touching the windscreen. Then he

dropped down into the driving seat, and a moment later the car was shooting forward.

As it whipped across the empty floor, a man in white overalls ran out from the office. He stood boldly in Snow White's path with his arms outstretched until the car was almost on top of him. In the nick of time he leapt aside, and the car, purring like a tigress, swerved up the ramp and out of sight.

## Chapter Twenty-four

'Has Mr. Ezra been round?' asked Alexander as he came through from the lobby into the bar.

Harry, crushing some ice in a napkin, shook his head. 'Not this evening.'

'Push him along to the office if he comes in, will you?'

'Okay.'

Alexander paused, then again looked at Harry. 'You might forget that I'm in there though, will you?'

Harry's glance seemed to meet his own more by chance than intention. He confined his curiosity to the raising of one eyebrow and went on with his ice breaking. 'Okay.'

For a few minutes Alexander stood by himself on the balcony looking down at the dancers, then he turned and wandered back towards the office. It was empty, and as he moved slowly but restlessly about the over-crowded room, he first tried the drawers of the filing cabinet and then those of the desk, but both were locked.

Presently the door opened and Ezra looked in. He nodded but said nothing.

'Hullo,' said Alexander, 'Victor was expecting you, wasn't he?'

'I was expecting Vic.'

'I know. He couldn't get back.'

'Tck, tck - I must somehow see him. He will be back when do you expect?'

'You know what Vic is. You never can tell.'

Ezra stood wavering in the doorway. He glanced at Alexander

with a furtive and slightly dispirited look. Alexander stretched out two fingers over his shoulder and gently shut the door. 'What's on your conscience?' he asked.

There was something so amiable, so disarming in his tone that Ezra seemed uncertain whether to smile at the question or take it the hard way. Alexander's follow-up settled the point. 'If it's the weight of what's in your pocket, you'd better let me have it.' He held out his hand.

Ezra's mind and mouth seemed to close in a single instantaneous operation. His pale face and his brown eyes became blank. He rolled them round, standing quite still, and gave Alexander an oblique stare through his thick-sided glasses. Slowly Alexander curled up the fingers of his outstretched hand. 'Come on, give.'

But Ezra shook his head. 'I don't understendt what is this you are sayink.'

'Then listen, it's easy. I'm saying, give me the stuff you've brought along with you. I know what it is. I know where you got it, too. I should do - I sold it to Delbos.'

'I haf notting.'

'Look, there comes a time, Ezra, when honesty's the best policy - even for someone like you.' Ezra remained stubbornly silent. 'Well, it looks as if this is the time. What are you going to do about it?'

Ezra considered the matter thoughtfully. Then swiftly he turned his short, beaky profile towards Alexander.

'To you I haf to say notting.' He took a step towards the door, but Alexander was a move ahead. He turned the key and flicked it out of the lock between his finger and thumb.

'To me you have to say quite a bit before you get out of here - unless you want to go in a plain van.'

There was a long pause. The hostility of Ezra's manner began gradually to weaken under Alexander's firm and faintly disagreeable eye. He was breathing a little faster now, and his fingers were fidgeting spasmodically with the top of his ivory-headed cane.

'Whut I am come here for is business - private business, mine and Victor's between us.'

'It won't be private for long - not if this is the way you're going to act. By tomorrow it'll be in the papers.'

'How should I ect od'erwise?' He gave a prodigious shrug. A sudden feeling of alarm and suspicion seemed to have jacked his voice up to a soft, high-pitched croak. He turned and looked critically at Alexander, then added more slowly, 'Who are you suppose' to be? And whut is it you want?'

'A little information, that's all.'

'Information?'

'About Martinus van der Meer.'

'I tell you I know notting, notting at all.' Again Ezra seemed to close up tight.

'Well, I know something. Either you can cough up or I shall. I happen to have a pal over the fence, name of Cathie—' Too late, Ezra checked a sudden slight movement of his head. 'Ah, so you know him? I guessed that. He's pretty generous about information. It might be worth something to let him know you're here and why you've come.' He waited, then picked up the telephone and began to dial a number.

'Whut are you doink?' asked Ezra sharply. His voice had slid away almost to a whisper.

'That depends on you,' said Alexander.

For a few painful seconds Ezra seemed to be struggling with contradictory instincts, distrust against desire, expediency against self-protection.

'Okay, then I tell you.' He fluttered his hands nervously in front of him until Alexander had put down the receiver. 'He iss just a cheap, double-crossink guy, this van der Meer—'

'Forget that part of it,' said Alexander. 'What happened?'

'He was here in London doing with Vic some business, then Vic sendt him later to me.' Ezra's tone became more reasonable as he went on. 'I try to help him, he iss in difficulty. So by him presently I am framed, such a *schlemiel* I am, out of kindness from my heart. Framed!' He made a wide, dramatic gesture. Alexander watched him, letting him take his time. 'I am maybe foolish. Okay, so who isn't sometimes foolish? But I do notting wrong, ebsolutely, except I trust him. And now he starts his tricks. Bleckmail.' He stared at Alexander with his head on one side, a victim of woeful deception. 'But me, I do notting wronk. I decide okay, I go haf a talk wit' the police.'

'Go on.' The scepticism of Alexander's tone was barely detectable, but it was there.

'But' - again Ezra stared at him dramatically - 'whut heppens? No! No, says, Victor, ebsolutely no! With the police he does not want just now association.' Again he shrugged. 'Okay, he has maybe reasons; I don't esk them. But van der Meer, Vic will look after by himself. I warn him, be careful, be very careful. I know how he is dangerous, this man. But he laughs, Victor - laughs! Me also, he says. Me also!' Ezra rolled his eyes tragically. A sudden expression of fear and disgust came over his face as he

went on. 'And presently to my place they bring—'

'Who does?'

'Vic and Snow White, they bring with them van der Meer. There is talk, terrible talk. They argue. They make to each oder t'reats. I am scared what is goink to heppen there in my place. I haf a respectable business, you understend? I go away, go outside to get me a gless of water, and when I come back—' He closed his eyes for a moment and covered his mouth with his hand. 'On the floor iss lying there van der Meer, deadt, unconscious, I don't know. And here iss stending Snow White, in his hend this figure—'

'This what?'

'I haf then a figure, Flemish sixteen' century. Sain' Jerome, made in lead, heavy like a hemmer. I have gut rid now of him,' he added quickly, then, with a ghastly sigh, sank back against the edge of the desk. 'Oh, my God, my God!' he whispered, shaking his head from side to side. 'Two, t'ree hours they wait maybe, till then begins midnight. Still they wait: t'ree o'clock, then they take him away.'

'Where to?'

Ezra shrugged.

'But you could have gone to the police afterwards, couldn't you? Why didn't you do that?'

Ezra looked up with an incredulous expression on his face.

'For whut? He is deadt already.'

'Dead? I should say so. You know what they call that? An accessory after the fact. You could get yourself five years for that. You should have gone and told them.'

Ezra nodded. 'And get in twenty-four hours killedt also? Fine! Fine! What do you t'ink?' His voice rasped with impatience. 'I should risk my neck because here iss a dead crook, to me a stranger and a liar?'

'Well, it isn't too late even now,' said Alexander.

'Too late?'

'Victor was picked up this evening an hour ago - on the job.'

There was a long silence. Ezra stared at him. Then in a dim voice, still watching Alexander closely, he whispered,

'You are lyink. How do you know this?'

'Because I was there. I was with him. Only I got away.'

'And Snow White also?'

Alexander hesitated. 'I don't know. I don't know whether he made it or not.'

Again there was a pause. Then a spark of comprehension seemed to gleam in Ezra's eye and at the same time an unpleasing smile spread itself about his mouth.

'So? You t'ink you should maybe fool me, yes?' he said slowly and softly. Then with a sudden incisiveness, 'But not qvite. I should make to you a present of this stuff, uh? – what I haf here' – he tapped his chest above the pocket in his jacket – 'on account Victor iss late comink. Smart! Perhaps you are tellink him even that I change my mind, uh? – thet I am sick, maybe – break my leg? That I am after all not comink this evening? And I should tell all this to you instead I should ring him? So he would believe it maybe.' He gave a grunting laugh and sat down in the easy chair beside the desk. 'We see presently who iss right. I am here. I wait till he iss comink.' He pulled a case of shining crocodile skin from his pocket and took out a cigar.

Alexander twisted round the red leather chair behind the desk so that it faced towards Ezra.

'Well, you'd better put your feet up. You've got a long wait.'

He watched while Ezra lit his cigar attentively and with studied indifference blew out a thin wreath of smoke.

'We shall know already soon.' He squinted complacently along the length of his cigar,

'Know what?'

'If it is trut' what you are saying, or is beink only smart.'

'Well?'

Ezra looked at the watch bedded in his fat wrist. 'In one hour if he is not comink, I take it to the police, what I have here.' Again he tapped the outside of his breast pocket.

'That's flying a bit high, isn't it?' asked Alexander.

Ezra shrugged. 'Many times already I return to them whut is stolen. Is this such high flyink?'

'Not if you've got a policy to cover the risk.'

'Pullicy? Risk? Whut is this?' Ezra tried to look aggrieved. 'Already in their list out from the Yardt is this property. I should keep it, so they later find it, maybe?' He gave a short, contemptuous cackle. 'Yes, you are right, ebsolutely. In my business I don't take no risks, understendt? So Victor does not come? Okay – I take to the police. I tell them straight the trut'. This boy here, this Reed, brings to me the stuff so I should maybe want to buy it. Okay? But I am not heppy – suspicious how such stuff is belong-ink to him. I tell him, come presently beck while I find maybe a client. When he iss gone, I look out in the list these t'ings what he has brought – stolen goods. No, my friend, no' – he waved

pontifically – ‘in such a business like mine you cannot afford it, beink wronk side the Law.’

Alexander looked at him in silence, sceptically at first, and then with a slow unwilling smile of admiration.

‘I wonder if there’s any cesspit so deep you couldn’t wriggle your way out of it?’ Ezra glanced at him across the desk with a bored and enigmatic face. ‘Except perhaps the one with van der Meer at the bottom of it.’

Again Ezra rolled his eyes towards Alexander, staring at him fixedly but saying nothing. ‘That won’t be so easy to laugh off.’

‘What I haf told you is all I know,’ Ezra barked suddenly, ‘is the trüt’.

‘The truth has a way of looking different to a jury. They don’t always see it from the same angle as you do in the dock.’

‘Duck? Who is goink in any duck?’ Again Ezra’s contemptuous cackle broke out and again stopped short. He leaned across the desk with his cigar between his fingers and tapped on the virgin expanse of the blotter. ‘My friendt, you haf maybe never heard such a t’ing like Kink’s Avidence?’

## Chapter Twenty-five

A little way beyond Skinner’s pale and shining sign Snow White pulled the car up and got out. He stood there looking this way and that, then he walked quickly back to the entrance, and pushing open the door of the vestibule, glanced into the bar. It was emptier now than when he had left it, and after he had looked all round, he came inside. From behind the bar Harry watched him with a quiet eye – an eye that seemed reserved, yet full of speculation. He said nothing.

‘Seen Rose anywhere?’ asked Snow White.

‘Downstairs, I think. Got some dirt on your sleeve, look.’ Snow White brushed it off and glanced at himself critically in the mirror behind the bar. ‘She was here a while ago. I gave her some coppers for the phone. Haven’t see her since.’

'When was this?' There was a restlessness, an unaccustomed tension in Snow White's manner.

'Just after you went out, I think. She was here with Mr. James. You know her brother's turned up again this evening?' Harry's tongue made a careful exploration of his teeth. It was, with him, a gesture of some eloquence. 'Didn't look too good,' he added.

Snow White hesitated. He glanced away, leaning across the bar, then as he looked back again, he said softly:

'Harry—' His tone was suddenly a different tone, a more confidential one. Harry glanced at him across the counter.

'Any idea who it was she rang?'

Harry shrugged. From underneath the bar he brought out a neatly folded newspaper. On a corner of the back page was scrawled a telephone number. 'There it is, look — he put it down for her—'

'Who? — James did?'

Harry nodded. 'On my newspaper. Here—!'

Snow White, with the paper in his hand, was making for the telephone box. He put two pennies in, dialled the number, and then waited. The voice that presently answered him was the voice of Mr. Herring.

'Who is that?' Snow White asked.

'Terminus one-seven-one-five.'

'Who are you?' he asked.

'Terminus one-seven-one-five.'

'Is Inspector Cathie there?' asked Snow White.

There was a moment's pause.

'No — no one o' that name here.'

'I have a message for him — from Mr. James,' said Snow White. There was another pause.

'Who are you?' Mr. Herring asked.

'A friend of Mr. James. The message is urgent.' There was another pause.

'Very well. You give me the message and I'll see that—'

Snow White dropped the receiver back in its place and left the box. He went quickly towards the balcony and looked down on to the crowded floor. Rose was sitting alone at her table, and over on the dais was Philip with his guitar. He had shaved and changed, and now seemed to be as much in his right mind as *12th Street Rag* would allow. There was a wide-eyed, withdrawn look about him, yet somehow he seemed elated as he sat there pounding out the rhythm. Instinctively Snow White drew back as he caught sight of him. He beckoned to a passing waiter.



'Ask Miss Reed to come up here, will you? Tell her it's urgent.'

The waiter went downstairs. Snow White, watching the man, saw him thread his way towards the table where Rose was sitting and saw her glance up in his direction. She hesitated, then she got up. As she came to the top of the stairs, he drew her aside from the traffic on the balcony.

'I want to talk to you, Rose.'

She looked at him quizzically, faintly surprised.

'About what?'

He shrugged impatiently. 'We can't talk here.'

'Why not?' Gently Rose disengaged herself as he tried to guide her away from the stairs.

'Because this is serious.'

His pale face and his round-eyed stony stare left her in no doubt of the fact. But still she held back, and still looked at him with uncertainty in her eyes. The she glanced away, over towards the band. The music had stopped for a moment, but Philip's fingers were working out a dumb routine, a swift and feverish rhythm which he was beating out on the floor with his heel.

'You know that Philip's come back?' she said. Snow White nodded. 'I don't know what's been happening. He wouldn't talk.'

'No?'

Rose looked at him sharply. 'What does that mean?'

'That he won't talk?'

'The way you say it?'

'Nothing.'

'I wish I knew what was going on.' She sighed.

'Me too,' said Snow White. Again he took hold of her arm, and this time she allowed him to steer her towards the bar.

'Why can't we talk here, in the office?' she asked.

'Because we can't. There's someone else coming.'

'Who else?'

He looked at her but didn't answer. Yet there was something in his look and his silence that seemed to bring her to a sudden decision.

'All right; wait for me,' she said quietly; and she disappeared upstairs into the cloakroom.

As Snow White stood there beside the bar, Harry held out his hand across the counter.

'My paper,' he said.

'Sorry - I forgot.' Snow White handed him back the newspaper.

'You leaving already?' There was a vestige – the merest implication – of reproach in Harry's voice. Snow White took no notice of it. 'Mr. Skinner's not back yet, you know.'

'Well? What are you scared of?' It seemed to be snapped out half unconsciously before Snow White could check himself. Then, as if to take the edge off his remark, he did the best he could by way of a smile. '—With those big broad shoulders of yours?' he added. 'Anyway, I'm going home. I've got a headache.'

As he spoke, Rose came down the stairs with her long satin coat spreading its stiff blue-black folds behind her. Harry watched them as they went out. Words could hardly have been more eloquent than his calculating but impassive stare. It seemed to express a variety of maxims, ranging from 'look before you leap' to 'a little of what you fancy does you good'.

Snow White pushed open the vestibule door, and when Rose had gone through, he came quickly after her, looking first to the left and then to the right, as he stepped out between the two tipsy lanterns. His own car was standing across the way. He opened the door and Rose got in.

'Where are we going?' she asked, as they swept out into the square at the far end of the mews.

'You'll see,' said Snow White.

'Why all this secrecy, then – why can't you tell me?'

Snow White glanced at her but said nothing. Rose likewise shot a look at Snow White from time to time – a questioning look, but one that got no answer from his smooth, uncompromising profile.

Soon the car turned off into an asphalt yard and came to a stop. Snow White sat at the wheel for a moment, peering into the shadows on either side and then behind him through the rear window. He felt in his pocket for a cigarette, lit one, and then slipped the packet back on the shelf underneath the dashboard. He turned off the lights and got out.

The car had stopped close beside a wooden staircase. It was the white wooden staircase leading to his own flat. Rose got out, too, and stood beside the car, peering about the dark, deserted yard. The impression it gave by night was a very different one from its cheerful appearance in daylight. A solitary lamp near the entrance showed some tattered posters on a brick wall; it showed a builder's handcart with its shaft tipped towards the sky, and a large stack of empty cans and bottles. The double doors of the garages and workshops on either side of the yard were closed and the windows empty.

'Snow White - what is this place?' Rose asked.

'Go on up,' said Snow White. He nodded towards the stairs.

'I will not,' said Rose, 'not until I know what's going on here.'

'Please yourself. I'm staying.' There was something in the pitch and tension of his voice that startled her. She noticed that his hand, as he put his cigarette to his lips, was trembling violently.

'What's wrong with you, Snow White?' she asked, not so much with solicitude as with surprise.

'With me? Nothing.' He turned his head away, as though to hide the signs of his anxiety which she had already noticed.

'Well, where is this place? And who's up there?' she asked.

'Better come up and see.'

Still she hesitated. With one foot on the stairs she turned and looked at him; then she went on up towards the wooden balcony. The smell of the geraniums in the window boxes came to her as she paused, waiting for Snow White to open the front door. Then she stepped past him into the living-room, and as he followed her in, shutting the door behind him, there was a faint click. She turned quickly and saw his fingers on the safety catch of the lock.

'Is that necessary?' she asked abruptly.

'I don't know yet,' said Snow White. He smiled at her with a smile that was difficult to fathom and impossible to enjoy.

'Then please unlock it.'

'Don't be silly. Sit down.'

'Snow White - please unlock the door at once.'

He said nothing, but continued looking at her, no longer with a smile but with a fixed and chilly stare. She took one quick step towards the door, but immediately he placed himself in front of her.

'How dare you behave like this to me!' she demanded. She spoke almost in a whisper, as though in her indignation she suddenly found her voice was deserting her. 'How dare you? Do you imagine I'd have come here—'

'Not for a moment,' said Snow White.

'And you had to set a clumsy trap—'

'I said someone else would be here.'

'Well?'

'That wasn't a trap.'

'It was a deliberate lie.'

'Was it? Wait and see.'

'I am not going to wait,' said Rose with a kind of exasperated defiance. 'Please - will you unlock that door at once?' Snow White neither moved nor spoke. 'What do you want me to do? Break a window - start making a scene or something? Oh, this is getting ridiculous!' She turned away from him, furious and disconcerted. Still Snow White made no move.

'I can tell you one thing, Snow White--'

'What's that?' he asked quickly.

'You're going to be very sorry about this--'

He gave a little unnerved laugh as she turned towards him again. There was something almost hysterical in the sound, and in his wide eyes there was a strange look that vanished with the laugh as suddenly as it had appeared. For a moment Rose was startled.

'I tell you, Snow White--' she began.

'More secrets?'

'What d'you mean?'

'You'll tell me this, you'll tell me that! Tell me something that'll interest me for a change.'

He flung his cigarette away into the fireplace and passed his hands over his cheeks as though they were burning. She noticed that he was still trembling.

'I don't understand what all this means, what you're talking about.'

'I'm talking about Cathie.'

'Cathie?'

She paused, looking at him incredulously.

'Seems we have a mutual friend. You never told me.'

'Cathie? I've never set eyes on her.'

It was Snow White now who looked incredulous.

'Never set eyes on who?' he asked slowly.

'On Cathie. I've never even seen her,' said Rose.

It seemed as if Snow White was casting about for words but was unable to find any. He broke into the same unsteady laugh; the same strange look glazed his eye for a moment, then disappeared.

'You talked to Cathie this evening on the telephone, didn't you?'

'I didn't speak to her. I sent a message. But how did--'

'What was the message?' He cut down her question before she had time to ask it.

'I left a message for Alexander, that he'd be--' Again the words died as she spoke them. They died on the breath which Snow

White drew in with a tremor that seemed to run through his whole body. He stared at Rose. Then, slowly, he said:

'And you still pretend you never knew?'

Rose gave a sigh of impatience. 'Never knew what? All I know is that Alexander asked me to telephone a woman called Cathie—'

'Cathie's a man, not a woman,' said Snow White.

Rose looked at him as though it made no sense.

'A man?'

'Yes, a man.'

'But - a man? But Alexander said—'

'What?' Rose still stared at him uncomprehendingly. 'What did he say?'

'He just said would I leave a message for Cathie, and—'

'What was it? What was the message?' Again Snow White's voice cut sharply across what she had begun to say.

'That he was going to Hattie Mason's and hoped they'd meet there. That was all. Why?' She grew impatient under Snow White's stare. 'What on earth does it matter?'

'Matter?' He shook his head. 'To you it wouldn't matter, perhaps. It wouldn't ever matter what happened to me - or to Vic - would it?' Rose didn't answer. 'Would it?' He caught her arm, gripping it so that she winced. But still she said nothing. 'And now, all because of your damned silly interference—'

Rose broke away from him and retreated. But Snow White didn't move. He stood watching her, and the malignancy of his expression gave way slowly to a look of sour, despondent doubt.

'Well, I don't know. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps it doesn't matter in the long run.' His voice was quiet once more - quiet, but with its usual frosty edge on it, and his manner was back to its discouraging normal.

'What d'you mean, "in the long run"?''

'I mean, what have I got that matters? Just that. Listen, all my life I've lived in the present tense - entirely in the present.'

'Well, it's something you should have grown out of by now,' said Rose impatiently.

'Perhaps. Still, you can get along without a lot of things if you stick close enough to the present. I've got no ties, no responsibilities, no affections - never have had.' He was looking directly at her now, and was speaking with a strange, suppressed excitement which seemed to well up within him as he went on talking. 'There's only one person in this world I've ever owed anything

to, and that's Vic. Everything worth while that's ever happened to me, I owe to him; and that includes my life - if you call that worth while. Apart from Vic-' The rest of mankind he dismissed with a gesture. 'I've never asked for any feeling or affection from anybody, so I don't get it. All right, it's my own fault. Isn't that what you're thinking - isn't it?'

If Snow White had expected to strike a sympathetic response from Rose this time, he was still out of luck.

'What anyone could owe to Victor that's worth boasting about, I can't imagine,' she said.

'You never even tried to like him, did you?'

'I think he's evil,' said Rose deliberately.

'Because of little brother? You blame him because Philip's weak and a fool-'

'Shut up about Philip!' cried Rose suddenly.

'-because he comes cringing to Vic and whining for a smoke every five minutes, till he's so hopped up he doesn't know his left hand from his right-'

'And it's entirely the fault of Victor-'

'Go on, say your say, Rosie. Get it off your chest. You think you haven't done him enough damage as it is? Well, listen, you've done plenty. But for the last time. There won't be anything more for those big innocent eyes to pick up, and that pretty mouth - that red mouth, to go squealing to Cathie about.'

All Snow White's latent savagery seemed packed into his outburst, spurting off his tongue and glittering in the expression of his eyes. Rose stared at him, appalled by the change. 'There was a time - I think you knew it - when I could have fallen for you, Rose - when I was just on the verge of thinking maybe there was something special about you, that didn't exist for me in any other woman. Do you know when that was? Do you? It was right up till this evening.' He came a little closer to her, and as she saw the look in his eyes, she drew back. 'I should have known better, shouldn't I?' He searched his pockets for a cigarette but couldn't find one. 'Come on, give me something to smoke,' he said, holding out his hand towards her; then, as though he had suddenly remembered, 'Hell, it's no good asking you, is it?'

He went across and looked in the malachite box on the window ledge. There was a layer of cigarettes inside, but with a sound of disgust, as though the box were empty, he slammed down the lid and went to the front door. With his hand on the catch, he turned round suddenly and looked at Rose, then threw open the door and ran down the wooden staircase towards the car. He felt

about under the dashboard for the cigarettes which he had left there, and when he had found them, turned and silently crept back up the stairs.

Passing the windows, with their curtains drawn back, so that the light in the room streamed out on to the white and scarlet geraniums, he ducked down below the window boxes and moved silently forward until he had reached the door. There he stood still, listening, and from inside the room came the sound of Rose's voice. She was speaking almost in a whisper, with a kind of furtive anxiety.

'... listen, I'm at his flat now. ... Yes ... I don't know ... oh, please do ... please ... I can't tell you now, but ... yes, all right.'

There was a solitary tinkle as she put back the telephone receiver. Snow White waited a moment longer, then stepped back into the room. Rose looked at him silently with frightened eyes.

'So it worked?' he said.

## Chapter Twenty-six

Somewhere in the distance a clock was chiming. From time to time there were sounds of footsteps, of voices, of doors opening and shutting. For the twentieth time Victor got up off the hard bench which was fastened to the wall and went and stood by the door. In the upper part of the door there was an opening about a foot square, a barred opening which showed the walls of a passage outside. The floor of the passage was of stone and the walls were covered to waist height with brown glazed tiles. A bright light somewhere beyond the orbit of Victor's eye was reflected through the opening in the door, throwing the shadows of the bars across his face, as he stood there trying to catch a glimpse of what lay beyond the passage.

From the cell next door came a loud rhythmical snoring. The sound was like someone tearing strips of calico - tearing them with a steady hand into even lengths. Victor curled his fingers slowly, tightly round the bars in front of him, gripping them till

his knuckles looked as though they were frost-bitten. He stood there for some time, listening to the rasping and relentless snores from next door, to dim nocturnal noises, to snatches of distant sound from invisible places; and his body seemed slowly to stiffen and his frame to expand, as though a valve within him were rising under the pressure of his confinement.

All of a sudden he turned away from the door into the darkness and flung himself down on to the hard bench, pounding the wall with his fist.

'Shut up, will you – for God's sake, shut *up*!'

The snoring went on as before, but immediately there were murmurs and answering voices from along the passage.

'Keep 'im quiet . . . ?'

'Shut up yourself, you!'

'Why don't you two pipe down?'

'God! – let some of us sleep, will you!'

Presently footsteps sounded on the floor of the passage. There was a jangling of keys and an iron gate was unlocked. A peremptory voice sounded above the groaning and whining from the cells.

'Quiet, now, quiet along there! What's the idea?'

At the sound of the jailor's footsteps the hubbub died down for a moment; then it broke out again as he came along the passage.

'That bastard's snoring . . . ?'

'Shoov their bluddy 'eads together . . . ?'

'Let's get a bit o' shut-eye, captain . . . ?'

Then came the jailor's voice again: 'Quiet, all of you – d'you hear! Quiet!'

The voices subsided as he went on his way, glancing into the barred window of each cell as he passed by. Victor got up wearily off the bench and went back and stood by the door again. With his face pressed against the bars and his fingers coiled round them, he waited with sullen expectancy for the jailor to appear.

He was a shrivelled-looking man with the sly, hard-bitten look that betrays the meaner aspects of the old soldier. Across the left breast of his tunic ran a string of campaign ribbons. He peered with red-rimmed eyes between the bars into Victor's face.

'Hullo, cheerful.'

Victor said nothing. The man, after eyeing him for a moment, turned and walked back along the passage. At the sound of his key in the lock of the iron gate, a bell buzzed outside one of the cells. The jailor stopped.



'Hullo?'

A half-witted voice answered him. 'Could I have a glass of wather, captain, d'you think?'

'Eh? If you'd taken a drop sooner, you wouldn't be where you are now.'

The jailor's crack drew a laugh from most of the inmates, but not from Victor.

'Please, captain. Jasus man. it's doyin' o' thurst I am! Please, captain, dear . . .'

'Okay.'

The iron gate squealed as the jailor unlocked it. He slammed it behind him and for a few minutes a restless silence brooded over the passage. Then he returned, and Victor heard him unlock the door of a cell. Again there was silence. Then came the voice of the thirsty Irishman.

'Ta, man, ta. That was a noble action, captain - a noble action--'

His thanksgiving address was cut short by the abrupt closing of his cell door. As the jailor moved off, Victor slid his hand over the wall of his cell until he found the bell, then he pressed it.

'Now what?' The note of good-humoured resignation in the jailor's voice seemed to be wearing thin. He walked slowly back along the line of cells and pushed up the indicator which had dropped down outside Victor's door. 'You this time, is it? Well?'

'Could I have a drink too?' asked Victor.

'What's it to be - bubbly?' The man sighed prodigiously. 'Why can't all of you think at once, eh? Okay.'

Again he went back along the passage and through the squeaking gate, locking it behind him. When he had passed out of earshot, Victor went over to the bench by the wall and sat down. He took off one of his shoes and put it on the bench beside him, then he waited. In a few moments he heard the jailor fumbling at the gate again. He was whistling softly to himself as he came back along the passage. When he opened the cell door Victor was sprawling half on the bench and half on the floor, as though he had collapsed. The jailor's whistling stopped. He put down the mug of water that he was carrying and came quickly over to the bench.

As he stooped down, things began to happen quickly and unexpectedly. Victor's right hand shot out from underneath him and the heel of his shoe came down like a hatchet on the jailor's skull. The man gave a grunt, and as he toppled forward, Victor whipped in with a rabbit punch that sliced away all signs of

lingering consciousness. He caught the jailor in his arms as he slumped towards him and laid him out on the bench. Then, as he hurriedly thrust his foot back into his shoe, he took up the whistled aria where the jailor had left it, and carried on. Tearing open the man's tunic, he undid his belt with its long key chain welded on to the buckle, and taking the belt in his hand, went to the door and peered up and down the passage.

At either end there was a tall iron gate. Beyond the one on the left a light was shining through a half-open door. Beyond the right-hand gate was a stone staircase. Still whistling, Victor closed the door of the cell and turned off the light inside from a switch on the passage wall.

On the left were the doors of eight cells, and on the right there were three more. After a moment's indecision, he turned towards the gate in front of the stairs, and ducking down out of sight from the cells, crept along towards the end of the passage. It was only when he got there that he saw there was no way to put the key into the gate without being seen from the last cell. The lock could only be reached by standing up, and standing up would mean that some part of him at least would be visible to anyone inside. He got to the spot and slowly, cautiously, began to straighten up. As his head and then his shoulders rose gradually to the level of the barred window, his face became transfixed and his breathing seemed to cease altogether. Slowly he stood up until he was looking straight into the cell. Beyond the bars there was nothing but darkness and silence.

Gripping the keys on the end of the chain, so that they shouldn't clink against each other, he picked out a likely looking key and eased it silently into the lock. The key refused to turn. He picked another to try in its place, and was on the point of doing so, when the consciousness of some slight movement close at hand made him glance round. From behind the bars of the cell, which a moment ago had seemed empty, a round white face was watching him — a bony face with close-set eyes that seemed to glitter with excitement. As they stood looking at each other, the man smiled a smile full of bad teeth and nodded eagerly to Victor.

'Good luck, pal,' he whispered. 'How've you made it, eh?' His voice was a dim, sepulchral wheeze, so soft that Victor could hardly hear it. 'I'd come with you, pal, but what's the use? I'd never make it, not with this lot—' He held up his hands behind the bars. They were bound in blood-soaked bandages. 'Broken glass ...'

For the moment, as though the shock of discovery had taken away his senses, Victor stood there staring idiotically at the man. Then the fellow jerked his head sharply towards the gate. 'Better get crackin', hadn't you? Go on – and good luck . . .'

He grinned again, and as Victor turned the key in the lock, the gate swung open and the man, raising one of his bandaged paws, gently waved good-bye.

Victor pulled the gate to and crept off down the stone stairs. At the bottom there was a door, and through the fanlight above it he could see the radiance of an invisible light which seemed to be shining in the open air. He tried the door and found that it opened into a yard at the back of the police station. The light came from over an archway formed by a passage running under the building and out into the street. Looking along the passage, Victor saw a policeman on patrol at the far end.

The yard was bounded on two sides by the station block, and the rest of it, so far as he could make out in the darkness, by outbuildings and a high wall. Against the light from a street lamp on the other side, he could see the jagged outline of broken glass embedded in the coping.

Quickly and quietly, keeping himself as far as possible in the shadows, Victor set off towards a low-roofed shed. As he drew nearer, he saw that it was a lean-to with a corrugated roof. Underneath it were three or four bicycles standing in a rack, and strapped to one of them he found a policeman's cape folded into a heavy roll. He unstrapped it and pushed it upwards on to the roof, so that it rested in one of the gullies. Then he crept back to the end of the shed, and, from a pile of empty packing-cases, began to make his way cautiously up on to the corrugated slope. Moving forward to where he had left the cape, he picked it up and unfurled it. Then, feeling in the darkness for a foothold on the undulating surface, he took hold of the collar strap and flung the cape upwards. As it unrolled, it fell neatly across the coping, blanketing the jagged glass.

Gripping the top of the wall through the folds of the cape, he began to pull himself up. At this moment there was a sound somewhere across the yard. Instantly he dropped down flat on to the roof. A light shone out beneath the archway as two policemen came through a door. They shut the door behind them and began to walk towards the shed. Victor could hear their voices as they came across the yard and, as they drew closer, the words of their conversation. They were talking football. He watched them until they disappeared underneath the roof of the shed, then he heard

them wheeling their bicycles out of the rack. As they brought them round to face the opposite way, the light from their front lamps streamed out across the yard. Then one of the men stopped.

'Half a minute - where's my cape?' There was a pause. 'That's funny.'

'Left it up in the lockers, have you?'

'Haven't been up there.' Another pause. 'Well, I'm blowed. I had it strapped on my bike - along the bar here.'

'Think again.'

'I know I did!' A querulous note was creeping into the man's voice. Praise of Stoke City seemed to be superseded by a dawning disbelief of his own senses. 'Here, shine your light round, Charlie. Let's have a look back here.'

Charlie lifted up his bicycle and swung it round. The lamp on his handlebars tilted sharply upwards, shining directly along the roof of the shed. For a moment or two the beam hovered within inches of where Victor lay hugging the wall. Then it dipped as the bicycle was lowered again, and Charlie's friend disappeared under the roof once more.

'You couldn't have had it with you,' said Charlie helpfully.

'I tell you - it was strapped here on the bike. Now who the hell's been and taken it away?'

'Fairies,' suggested Charlie.

'Well, I'll tear their bleedin' wings off if I catch 'em. I'm goin' to report this. . . .'

They moved off and disappeared under the archway with their bicycles. Victor gave them a minute to get clear of the station, then stood up again, balancing precariously on the slope of the roof, and hoisted himself very carefully on to the top of the wall in the small space protected by the cape.

A few feet from where he found himself perched, a street lamp was shining full in his face, so that for some seconds he was completely dazzled. Then he saw that on the other side of the wall there was a narrow roadway, and straight in front of him an empty car park.

It was not a moment for indecision, and quickly but with infinite care, he swung his legs across the top of the wall, and then, gripping the knobs of broken glass through the thick folds of the cape, let himself down by his hands. Then he dropped down on to the pavement a few feet away, sprang over the fence and set off through the car park towards the lights of a street a little way ahead.

At the entrance to the car park there was a call-box. He went inside, put his pennies in and dialled a number. When it came up, Harry's voice was on the other end.

'Has Snow White been back?' asked Victor.

'He's been back, but he's gone home.'

'How long ago?'

'About half an hour. Said he's got a bad headache.'

'More than likely,' said Victor.

'Are you coming back, sir?'

But Victor didn't wait to answer him. He left the box and started walking. Now and again he caught sight of a policeman on the night beat, sometimes uncomfortably close, sometimes in the distance, and each time he turned smoothly aside; he was taking no chances. Once he ducked down into a subway; once into the lounge of a hotel, and walked through the building and out into the street on the other side.

He was still walking, now with the best part of a mile between him and the police station, when he turned a corner and a man fell up against him – a big man dressed in evening clothes. He was tighter than a cork in a bottle, and would have fallen flat on his face if Victor hadn't been there to hold him up. He clung to Victor with the weight and tenacity of a bear, topping him by half a head, and began to make a string of apologies. Each time that Victor tried to disengage himself, the man seemed to swing a long arm round him from some other quarter and catch him in his embrace. His was a tale of woe, told in a series of *non sequiturs* and with much unexplained emphasis.

'... an' then, later on, comes this tiff with ... my wife. ... *Oh*, how lucky you are not to be married!' he suddenly shouted. 'Or p'raps you are married ... p'raps you are, poor fellow. 'M sorry for you, very ... *very* sorry for you, 'n' I'm very sorry ... for myself. We live in a worl' of trial an' shibulation.' He sighed a monstrous sigh.

'Let go of me, for God's sake! Will you let go?' said Victor. He flung the man's heavy hand off his neck.

'Man is born to shuffer ... born to shuffer,' said the drunk, locking himself to Victor with his other arm. Then, quite suddenly, 'Shuffering cats! ... of whom one is my wife an' one ... is my wife's sister. *Oooh*, what a pair!' Again Victor tried to break away, and again was immediately folded to the drunk's bosom. 'Away from each other, mind you ... 'way from each other, they're all right ... I love 'em dearly, both of 'em.' In a sudden burst of inconsequent joy he began to sing, with what were meant

for comic effects: 'How happy could I be with either . . . were t'other dear sharmer a-way . . .'<sup>2</sup>

The aria drooled off and came to a stop, with the man goggling sheepishly over Victor's shoulder. Victor struggled round as well as he could in the man's embrace, and there, standing a few feet away with his hands behind his back, was a policeman looking at them with a sour, stolid expression. There was a long silence.

'What's all the row about?' he asked.

'S'bout my wife,' said the drunk in a broken voice and with a vast, empty gesture.

The policeman looked at Victor. 'He your friend?'

'Sort of.'<sup>2</sup>

'Well, you'd better sort of get him home to bed, hadn't you?'

'Bedybies for me!' said the drunk very suddenly.

The policeman turned on him. 'And you'd better watch out or you'll end up on a hard one tonight.'

'Itch a hard world,' said the drunk, shaking his head pitifully.

'Well, if you don't want me to make it any harder for you, I should keep quiet and get a move on - go on.'

Slowly Victor turned the drunk around, and together they tottered off down the street. They had gone only a few yards, when the drunk stopped. Slowly he veered round, looking back at the policeman, who was still watching them, then nodded to him and pressed a heavy finger to his lips.

'Sssh!'

It was like the sound of a submarine blowing its tanks. Ponderously the drunk turned round, tightened his grip on Victor's shoulder, and again they set off together down the quiet street.

They had gone some way, but were still in sight of the Law, when Victor tried once more to disengage himself. But still the drunk stuck to him, protesting that Victor must 'jus' come in for a snifter . . . jus' teeny weeny snifter . . .'<sup>2</sup> More and more heavily he leaned on Victor, until there came a moment when he tripped, flinging both of them violently against the railings of a house. Half in anger and half in self-protection, Victor struck out to keep the man off. The blow was harder than he had meant it to be and it caught the drunk on the side of his head. At once the hamfisted grip on Victor's collar tightened, and with surprising speed the drunk hit back. It was a good and hefty punch, and more by luck than science, it landed against Victor's ribs. At the same moment the drunk let out a roar. It would have needed no more than a smart tap to unleash Victor's temper, and now he

fairly waded in. But the drunk had got him with his back against the railings and was fighting to keep him at arm's length. For a moment or two the odds seemed pretty even. Victor was all muscle and agility, but the drunk was heavier and his reach a long way beyond Victor's.

It was a situation in which the Law could no longer take merely a passive interest. At the first sound of the drunk's outburst, the policeman had started off towards them, not actually running, but at a pace that was meant to look like business.

Victor, after attacking at long distance for the first few seconds, managed somehow to come in closer towards the drunk; suddenly he brought his knee up - hard. The drunk doubled up with a howl, and as he fell, his head cracked against the stone pillar of a portico. He pitched over sideways through an open gate in the railings and went crashing over and over down the area steps.

Already Victor was on his way, running flat out. For a few moments he could hear the policeman pelting after him, then as the policeman reached the area railings, his footsteps came to a stop and the shrill blast of his whistle began.

Away up the street at this moment a taxi was drawing in to the kerb. As it stopped, a man and a woman got out. At the sound of the policeman's whistle they both looked back. Immediately the man stepped into the road, and a second later the taxi-driver jumped from his cab and joined him. They left the woman bleating behind them in the background, and came running towards Victor, one on either side of the street.

Victor stopped. The two men were still some thirty yards away, but between them and the policeman behind him there seemed to be nowhere that offered much in the way of cover. He turned and ran back down the street towards a small group of blasted and derelict houses, a late and untidy reminder of the blitz. Through gaping doorways and shattered window frames, some half hidden by cascading remnants of Venetian blinds, the backs of the houses beyond could be seen from the pavement.

With a flying leap up the front steps, Victor landed in what had once been a hall. By the light of a street lamp he could see bare laths and mountains of fallen plaster. A radiator lay smashed and overturned beneath the wreckage of a chandelier, and from the floor above a staircase with a twining baluster descended a few feet from the ceiling and was then shorn off in mid-air.

Ploughing his way across the debris towards the back of the

house, he found himself suddenly reeling downwards on an avalanche of rubble. Here the house was nothing more than a shell. The floor seemed to have disappeared altogether, and in the darkness he had run out from the stone-paved hall on to the heaped-up masonry that had fallen from above. Slithering and staggering downwards in the darkness, he beat about him for something to put a brake on his fall. Suddenly the heap flattened out, and he found he had landed up against a low parapet. Behind him in the broken house he could hear shouts and stumbling footsteps and away in the distance the policeman still blowing his whistle.

Victor got up and looked down over the parapet into a static-water tank – a long, brick-built cistern sunk in a gap between two houses, whose walls rose up sheer on either side. The tank was empty, and he could see its dark, mastic sides glistening faintly a few feet below. Here and there, in the backs of the houses facing him, there were lighted windows that looked like holes cut in a façade of black paper. He could see dimly that the tank was divided across the middle by a narrow wall, the far end of it being lost in the darkness below the houses opposite.

Climbing on to the wall, he started to make his way across it. Here, between the backs of the houses, it was darker than in the street, and it was difficult to tell how deep the tank was; but it looked as though a single false step would mean an uncomfortable fall.

He was half-way across the tank and within sight of the far end, when, pausing for a moment to look ahead, he saw a man silhouetted against the first-floor window of the house in front of him. The man, it seemed, had spotted him, and was leaning out of the window peering towards him in the darkness. As Victor caught sight of him, a sudden commotion broke out in the house behind. The men who were chasing him had reached the spot where, a moment before, he had plunged down into the basement regions, and now they were shouting across to the man whom they could see in the window.

'Stop him! Stop that chap! Don't let him get across there – stop him!'

Immediately the man disappeared from the window, dropping away out of sight as though he had been plucked down from behind. At the same moment, as if the bias of providence had suddenly shifted, Victor missed his footing in the darkness, and fell forward across the top of the wall. Fighting for his balance, and looking for some seconds as though he were outclassed, he



clung on with everything he had got until he managed to right himself. Then he scrambled up and in a moment was on his way again.

He reached the end of the tank, and as he jumped down on to the ground, he found himself in a tradesman's passage running between the backs of two rows of houses.

Suddenly, a door in front of him was flung open, there was a blaze of light, and the man from the upstairs window, in his shirt-sleeves and braces, charged out towards him. Victor stood still, absolutely still, till the man was upon him, and then, with a sudden twist, dodged aside and shot out his left leg. The man tripped and crashed heavily on to the pavement, and Victor shot away up the passage. Behind him were voices still calling from the shattered house, and now there was the sharper, shriller note of a second police whistle.

In front of him, at right angles to the passage, there was an alley, a narrow cut running between two of the houses. It was lit by a single gas lamp, and Victor in his haste had almost overshot the entrance before he noticed it. He turned into the cut and darted along it. As he approached the other end, he slowed down, and at the corner he saw in front of him a quiet street lined with tall, stucco-fronted houses. A few yards away a man was standing near an open front door. He had his back to Victor and seemed unconscious that there was anyone near him. He was a bowed, lanky individual with a bald head, and attached to his wrist was a lead, which in turn was attached to a small dog. Together the man and the dog started ambling slowly away past the railings in front of the house.

As he turned out of the passage into the street, Victor could hear the sound of thudding footsteps not far away, and in the distance the shrill drone of the police whistles. Glancing into the house through the open door, he could see a hall leading to a lighted staircase and a wall hung with oriental trophies, with spears, shields, long-whiskered masks, and beaded amulets.

Farther down the street, man and dog seemed to be pre-occupied with their own affairs. Victor looked round quickly, then walked up the steps into the house. He went a few yards down the hall, then he stopped. On his right there was a door leading into a room facing the street. He went in. The light was off but the curtains were drawn back from the high windows, and through an under curtain of net, the lamplight from the street filtered into the room.

The rings of a baize curtain draped across the inside of the

door rattled faintly as he manoeuvred himself into a hiding-place between the door and a revolving bookcase. Across the room he could see a tall screen inlaid with faint, glistening patches of mother-of-pearl. There was a piano, too, loaded with photographs in silver frames, and a marble mantelpiece supporting a high mirror. He could smell the smell of cretonne covers, and could see the dark, uncomfortable outlines of heavy furniture; and he could hear the ticking of innumerable clocks – a solid grand-paternal bass counterpointed by other clocks, some of which he could dimly see, some that he could only hear.

Outside in the street there was a sound of voices, of men calling, and then of quick footsteps dying away along the pavement. But there was still someone in front of the house. A man's voice was talking doggy talk. But doggy, it seemed, was in no mood to listen. After a moment or two of ineffectual wheedling, the voice took on a note of command.

'Suki! Come in – do you hear me? Suki!' And then, 'Oh, confound it, Suki! – will you come indoors?'

A moment afterwards the front door was gently closed, a chain bolt was slipped across it, and Victor heard footsteps moving along the hall and up the stairs.

Presently he glanced out from his hiding-place towards the window. Now at last everything seemed to be quiet outside. By this time, his eyes having grown accustomed to the darkness, he could make things out more clearly, could see firm outlines where there had been only dim shapes before, substance where there had been only shadow. Over by the window the looped curtains, merging with the pattern of leaves in a vase, looked like the silhouette of a woman – a silhouette which presently spoke.

'What was it they wanted? To try and catch you?'

She spoke in a gentle voice, a voice that seemed to be without fear or astonishment. It sounded as though she were a woman in the fading years between middle age and its aftermath. Victor didn't answer. The woman moved forward a little, peering out through the net curtain into the street. Her hair seemed to be coiled untidily about her head and bound round with some sort of ribbon.

'That was Edward – my brother – with the dog,' she said inconsequently. Still Victor didn't answer. 'I saw you come in,' she went on. 'I heard them chasing you. And it's cruel to chase things, don't you agree? – cruel. I've always hated it when I've seen them chasing anything. I can't help it; I've hated it ever since I was a little girl. That was quite a long time ago.' She

sighed a dim, conventional sigh, the kind that dim, conventional minds attach to such remarks. 'Edward, though, could never understand why I so disliked hunting - never. The only person who ever really understood - the only man, at least - was Victor—'

'Victor?'

Instinctively, it seemed, the woman put a hand to her throat. She turned and looked back into the room, peering towards the place where his voice had come from. Then she went on:

'Yes. Victor died, though, you remember? - died of wounds. Were you ever a soldier? Ah no, but you hardly look old enough. I saw you just now outside.' She paused. 'He was at Cambrai, Victor was. Sometimes it still seems, doesn't it, as though it were only yesterday? So many things to remember, one's sense of time gets quite confused, doesn't it?' She was looking out of the window again now, and her tone, without losing any of its tranquillity, had become distinctly social, as though she had lapsed into making conversation for its own sake. 'When you are old, as Henley says - I'm devoted to Henley - so many people seem to have come round to him again nowadays - so it may be, no sad-eyed ghost, but generous and gay, may serve your memories like almighty wine. No sad-eyed ghost.' In spite of herself, and, as it seemed, in defeat of her own proposition, again she gave a heavy sigh. 'Poetry is such a great comforter, somehow - often a very great comforter. Oh, wait a minute - there's a policeman,' she added softly, 'oh, and I see another - no, you stay where you are.'

Victor had begun quietly to move out from his hiding-place. Now he stopped dead. The woman in the window stood like a statue, with one thin hand upraised, as she leaned forward to catch a glimpse of what was going on outside.

'There's one of them on a bicycle,' she said presently, and a touch of excitement sounded in her voice. She was still watching the street intently. 'Oh, wait - now I think they're moving away - yes, they're moving off. The one on the bicycle has gone.'

In the silence that followed there came the sound of a woman's voice calling from upstairs.

'Miss Muriel? . . . Miss Muriel? Is that you down there?'

The woman gave a gasp. Then she shrank back out of Victor's sight among the dark folds of the curtain.

'Oh goodness . . . oh, my goodness . . .'

He could hear her soft, distressed whisper, but still he made no answer. He dropped back again into his hiding-place between the

bookcase and the door, and a moment later the light in the room was switched on.

Peeping out between the slats of the bookcase, Victor could see a woman in a dark flannel dressing-gown. She was a stolid-looking creature with two grey plaits which hung down on either side of her face.

The woman beside the window was standing half hidden among the curtains of thick, faded brocade. Her attitude suggested an uneasy defiance, which her eyes cancelled with their look of rounded apprehension. She was a tall woman and her face was thin and worn, and although it was heavily powdered, she wore no other make-up. Her dark hair was fuzzed out round her face and a loop of it was bound over her forehead by a black velvet band. Her clothes were the clothes of 1916. She stared with small, dark, deep-set eyes at the woman who had come in.

'Miss Muriel, what are you doing? Why have you left your room?' asked the woman.

'Oh, Lacey, I couldn't sleep - really, I couldn't sleep.'

'Well, that's no reason you should be out of your room at this time of night. Why didn't you ring?'

'Because . . . I didn't want to wake you up.'

'Well now, Miss Muriel' - Lacey held up a warning finger - 'I've heard that before. Now, you know what'll happen, don't you - if I catch you out of your room again?'

She spoke firmly but quite kindly. A piteous look came over Miss Muriel's face. She crept towards Lacey, entreating her with a white, wasted hand.

'Oh, please, Lacey - please. I will be good. I'll be good.'

'Very well then. But if not, you go back in the room with the bars. You know that, don't you?'

'But you wouldn't lock me in though, Lacey, would you? You wouldn't, would you?'

'You know what Mr. Edward's orders are.'

'I know. But I promise I'll be good - I *promise*.'

'Well now, you see that you are. Else we'll both be in trouble.'

'Dear Lacey - I won't get you into trouble. You know I wouldn't get you into any trouble.' She looked at Lacey for a long while earnestly and in silence.

'Well? Come along then,' said Lacey, showing for the first time a flicker of impatience.

They had drawn together now near the door. Victor could no longer see either of them, though they must both have been

within a yard of where he was crouching.

'Lacey,' whispered Miss Muriel, 'shall I tell you a secret?'

'What is it?' asked Lacey, disguising with admirable success whatever curiosity she may have felt.

'I spoke to someone tonight – to a man.' There was a sort of throb, a note that sounded like guilty excitement in Miss Muriel's voice.

'Tck, tck. Goodness—'

'He was here – right here in this room, Lacey.'

'Was he really? Fancy that. Now then, up we go, come along.'

'They were after him, you see. They wanted to catch him, and he came here to escape, came in from the street – imagine! Out of the street!'

'Some people have got a cheek,' said Lacey imperturbably. The light went out, and Victor heard their footsteps in the hall, then heard Miss Muriel's diminishing whisper:

'And what do you think, Lacey? He told me he thought I was beautiful, Lacey. He told me so.'

'Did he? Well, that's very nice,' said Lacey approvingly.

Victor waited till silence had descended on the house. Several minutes passed. Then, without a sound, he moved out into the hall and towards the front door. Silently he withdrew the chain, and, leaving the door unlatched, silently departed.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

Snow White leant against the window ledge with his arms folded in front of him. He was pale, and for the moment, very still. Only his fingers moved, grinding their way into the rising muscle under his sleeve. He looked at Rose with a speculative look, a look that was neither hostile nor sympathetic, but simply a look of abstraction – as though for the first time he was seeing her stripped of everything that appetite and imagination had created around her in his mind.

The look faded from his face, and once more he began to move

restlessly, aimlessly about the room, talking as he went, talking all the time.

Rose looked as though she had almost reached the end of her tether, as though she were burned out and utterly exhausted. She sat curled up on the sofa with her face half hidden in the crook of her arm; and while she sat there, her fingers chased themselves backwards and forwards along the braided edge of the sofa cushion, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. . . .

'It isn't a thing that women ever understand,' said Snow White, 'a feeling like that.' His tone was sharper than usual, his voice more staccato, as though he were straining to keep it on the level, to keep it within the normal compass of speech. 'What I said was true - I do owe my life to Vic - my life and a lot more.' This time Rose turned her head slowly and looked at him, but said nothing. 'When I was a kid, all that ever happened to me was that I got kicked around - just kicked around. And I can tell you, I learnt to kick back. No one in this world except Vic - no one - ever showed me a kindness for nothing - not a soul.'

'You almost make me wish I could feel sorry about it,' said Rose. She sounded very tired - tired and completely indifferent.

'No need,' said Snow White. 'I tell you, he's the only one. He could have left me for dead - I know plenty who would have done - but not Vic. And the same after the war. If it hadn't been for him, what do you suppose I'd have been doing now? Still playing provincial flea pits, last turn on the bill - or first after the intermission, with any luck. Still Desmond the Boy Wonder, thrills and chills—'

'That at least might have been—'

'Oh Jesus, forget about the preaching!' Snow White interrupted sourly. 'Listen, all the things I'd never had - never had a chance to get within a million miles of - money, clothes, cars, this flat, a life of my own - a life with the right kind of excitement in it - all of them I got through Vic, every single thing.'

'If that's all you ever wanted, I suppose you're right to feel some sort of gratitude,' said Rose with a kind of weary contempt. 'Though what it's got to do with all this—'

'It's got everything to do with it,' said Snow White. Rose looked up. There was a curious note of deliberation in his tone, a cold, glittering audacity in his eye, as he leant back against the window ledge, watching her. 'A chance for me to say thank you at last - in a way that Vic can understand - so that he'll know I mean it, and know it's a pleasure to say it - a pleasure.'

By the time he had finished, his voice had dropped almost to a whisper. He twitched aside the curtain which was drawn back from the window and glanced down over his shoulder into the yard below. For a little while everything was still.

Suddenly his hand crept back towards the lamp on the table behind him – and then the room was in darkness. Rose caught a glimpse of him as he passed quickly between her and the window, then she heard him moving towards the bedroom. He turned on a light inside the room – a soft light which threw his shadow for an instant on the walls and ceiling inside. Then he came back, leaving the bedroom door a little way open and the light still on. Rose heard him gently unlatch the front door, and could just see him as he stood there listening in the darkness. Down below in the yard there was a sound of footsteps, soft, hesitating steps, like the tread of someone who had lost their way.

‘What are you doing?’ Rose whispered. All of a sudden she found Snow White was beside her, and as she spoke she felt his hand clapped across her mouth. She felt the pressure of his arm as he held her tight against the cushions of the sofa, and she began to struggle. Instantly his grip contracted, and now his hand was on her throat, so that although her lips were free, she could make no sound.

‘God damn you, keep quiet – keep *quiet!*’ He was so close to her now that she could feel his breath as he whispered sharply into her ear. She lay still, quite still, as he had said, against the sofa cushions, until she felt him cautiously release his hand; but it remained about her throat.

Now, with his other hand – she could hear his slow-moving fingers against the ribbed-silk lining of his lapel – he seemed to be searching for something under his jacket. Then there was a quick movement, and faintly in the darkness Rose saw the glint of a blade – a flat, narrow blade which Snow White held with the tip against his fingers and the handle lying snug along the palm of his hand.

Again, as though her unuttered scream, as though the violence of her recoil had been anticipated, she felt him squeezing her throat once more. ‘Quiet! – keep quiet, will you!’

She clawed at his hand, and at once his grip grew tighter, tighter, tighter, till it began to drive her sense out, and still the pressure grew—

Now the footsteps outside had reached the wooden staircase. And now they were softer, now more deliberately cautious than before, pausing, and then advancing slowly. Now they were on

the balcony outside and were scarcely audible any longer. A shadow moved past the window, and again the footsteps ceased. Gently and without a sound, the unlatched door began to open . . .

In the sickness and uncertainty of returning consciousness, Rose saw a figure move into the room – into the lighted rectangle of the bedroom door. She felt a smooth, swift movement near her side, and a hand – Snow White's empty hand – dropped away out of sight. The figure beside the door grunted violently, grew spasmodically taut, and then seemed to keel away in the darkness, twisting and then falling with a crash that shot the bedroom door wide open and threw the light inside on to Snow White's knife, hilt-deep in the man's chest. It was Victor.

There was a moment of silence, dead, horrific silence, and then from Rose there came a solitary, broken cry. She struggled to her feet, aghast and sickened, and began to edge her way past Victor's body. Somehow she got out into the darkness, into the open air, and stumbled towards the staircase. From down below, in the shadows across the yard, came Alexander's voice:

'I couldn't get hold of a cab, or I'd have got here sooner. What's it all about?' Then, as he saw her drooping speechless against the white painted rail of the balcony, his tone changed. 'Rose – are you all right? What is it--?'

He came quickly up the stairs towards her, and at that moment there sounded from overhead a long cry. It was a fearful and unutterably mournful sound, a sound like the howling of a wounded animal.





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