Italy and the Balkans

Short stories and a novella

Victor Canning

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VICTOR CANNING

This collection selected and edited by John Higgins

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PREFACE

Victor Canning (1911-1986) wrote at least a hundred short stories in addition to the fifty-eight novels that he is chiefly remembered for. Several of these stories, as well as two of his post-war books, *The Chasm* and *Venetian Bird*, and three novellas, *The Goldini Bath, Adriatic Crossing* and *The Sleeping Man*, were set in Italy. This collection comprises all the short stories with an Italian setting, one of the novellas (the other two having been included in the published collection *Young Man on a Bicycle*) together with three stories which are set in Yugoslavia.

Italy was a country for which Canning developed an obvious affection during his war service, and several of his short stories seem to be built on personal experience. "Wall of Death" appeared in July 1957 and "Two Good Men" in November 1957 in a series of pieces by various authors in the *Evening Standard* called "Did it happen?" Readers were asked to guess whether the incidents in each story really took place, checking their guesses by turning to a different page, with half the stories being fact and half fiction. Both of Canning's stories were among the ones labelled "fact".

"Don't be a Hero" was originally published in the American magazine *Argosy* in February 1951, and was reprinted in a British magazine, *Magpie*, in August 1951. It is a romantic account of a mercy mission carried out by a damaged hero asked to show courage he thinks he no longer has. The character of the brigand Fabriano is based on the real-life Salvatore Giuliano of Sicily, mentioned in the text, a modern Robin Hood who was shot in controversial circumstances in July 1950.

"Wet Stepping Stones", which first appeared in the *Toronto Star Weekly* in November 1953 and was reprinted as "Watch your Step" in *Argosy* in July 1954, is another piece whose settings and characters clearly arise from Canning's wartime and post-war experiences, though the plot is derived from folk lore.

The next two stories included here are short items from the *Evening Standard* and its sister papers. In the 1950s these papers usually published one piece of fiction a day, contributed by some very famous names. Stories were limited to half a page or at most 2000 words. "Let Sleeping Dogs Lie" is typical of the genre. "Death in the Tunnel" was one of a series of stories by different authors under the main title "Murder on the 7.16".

The next story, "Fill the night with murder", appeared first under the title "Midnight on the Lagoon" in the *Toronto Star Weekly* of April 1956, but was reprinted for a much wider audience in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in 1957. The gondolier Barteo faces a genuine predicament and

finds an ingenious escape from it. The story "Curtains for Mario" from the *Daily Mail* in 1958 contains a strain of humour which was a forerunner of the delightful Minerva Club stories that Canning wrote in the 1960s.

The Italian section concludes with a novella, "The Sleeping Man", which occupied a complete issue of *The Illustrated London News* in 1952. Victor Canning's daughter Lindel told me how her father, always keen to verify the feasibility of his plots, once asked her to put on a swimming costume and get into a bath in order to test the buoyancy of a raft made from corked empty wine bottles tied up in a blanket. I was delighted when I discovered this story, in which the fugitives escape on just such a raft.

In 1948 Canning visited Tito's Yugoslavia in order to research the background for his fourth post-war thriller, *A Forest of Eyes*. One product of this venture was a description of an encounter with the security police when he visited the island of Brioni where Marshal Tito had a country house. This was published in the *Evening Standard* as "You are a Spy, said the Reds" in 1959, once again as one of the "Did it happen?" series, and reprinted as "You are a Spy" in *The Saint Magazine* in 1964. Canning labelled the story "fiction", though the visit to Brioni which supplied the background did take place. Another product of the visit was an excellent short story, "Dialogue behind a Curtain", which appeared in *Lilliput* 1951 and was reprinted in another short-story magazine called *Magpie*, and in the American magazine *Pageant* as "The Smuggler". It features a tense interrogation and an unexpected twist. A third is the much longer story "The Key", contributed to the launch issue of the *John Creasey Mystery Magazine* in 1956, which describes a confrontation between a resistance worker and the secret policeman who has arrested him. All three stories, along with the thriller he was writing at the same time, present a fairly conventional view of Yugoslavia as a police state in which anybody might be an informer but in which Canning found people to like and admire.

John Higgins,
Shaftesbury, March 2010

A website covering the life and works of Victor Canning is maintained at
http://www.victorcanning.com

But I'm convinced that the best place to have a garden is in Italy; the ground is as rich as butter and the climate is good for the soul. From ten acres you can get bread, wine, fruit and poultry, live like a king and work when you want to. Nothing will keep me in England after the war.

(From a letter Canning wrote to his parents in 1945)

WALL OF DEATH

While I was with the Eighth Army in Italy there was attached to our regiment for a while an Italian interpreter called Giorgio. He was a cheerful little monkey of a man, friendly, dishonest and resourceful—and the most superstitious man I have ever met. If a picture fell off a wall in a billet, Giorgio read death in it … black, cats, hunchbacks, people with crossed-eyes, walking under ladders … he seemed to spend most of his time being dogged by ill omen.

When the weight of his impending bad luck was too much for him to bear he used to go to a fortune-teller to have things put right for him. Giorgio believed in the power of the *fascino*—otherwise he would never have paid out good money for his services.

We were stationed at the time in a small hill town just south of Ancona on the Adriatic coast and one evening Giorgio, unhappy about his luck, persuaded me to go to the *fascino* with him. The man lived in a stuffy little room on a top floor. It was a warm April night and all the windows were closed. The room smelled of garlic and incense and gramophone was playing a very old Viennese waltz. At one end of the room was a small, single bed, and a man was lying on it in his trousers and shirt, smoking, and staring, at the ceiling.

Around the room, perched on various chairs and cushions, were about twelve people—young girls, old women—one of them an ancient, peasant woman, with a large wicker basket by her side full of dirty laundry which she had come into town to collect—a few men, and a mother nursing a child.

Everyone talked and bobbed their heads at one another and the man on the bed ignored them all.

I said to Giorgio: "Is it always like this?"

"Like what, *signore*?"

"Like this … noisy. It's more like a bear garden."

"Wait," said Giorgio, "when the *fascino* finishes his cigarette you will see. He is a master with an eye that looks through the universe. People come from Rome … from everywhere. Some he will talk to … others, no." He shuddered. "Sometimes it is bad for them."

When the waltz finished a small girl went over and put on another record. The room was swamped by the voice of a tenor. Now and again the needle stuck and one word kept beating out until the small girl gave the machine a nudge. Suddenly the *fascino* sat up on the bed and threw away his cigarette. He just threw it to the floor and someone stepped on it. He sat very stiff with his brows frowning as though he had a severe headache.

I was surprised to see that he was a young, good-looking man. The small girl switched off the gramophone.

He stared straight across the room and in a level, emotionless voice said. "There is death in this room. Twice recently it has come close to someone in this room, but feeling its breath they have moved away. It will come again—and this time with less warning. Heed it and act quickly."

Slowly the *fascino* let his eves travel round the room. Then his look fastened on me and for a moment I felt as though I were alone in the room with him. I'm not a superstitious man, but a cold shiver ran down my back.

Then, like a wire snapping, the tension went from the *fascino's* body and he smiled slowly and said: "That is all. It is not a good day. I cannot talk to anyone. Child—put on a Verdi record, and someone give me a cigarette."

Quite frankly, I was glad to get out of the place. I told myself that the thing was nonsense, but the *fascino's* words stuck in my mind and made me uneasy. As the town was shelled almost every other night death wasn't a remote possibility for us all. But the unsettling aspect was his talk of death having been avoided twice before recently. That seemed to pin it on me. Twice within the previous week I had had very narrow escapes from death, and each time I had a curious premonition about it.

And now, so the *fascino* had said, death was coming again, and this time would get me if I wasn't on my toes—I wished I'd never gone to the place with Giorgio.

A week later—on April 20—I was to remember his words. April 20 was Hitler's birthday, and to celebrate it some of the lighter-minded RAF lads from the advanced fighter fields behind us flew over the German lines and showered them with an assortment of kitchen and bedroom chinaware—all of the articles suitably labelled with birthday greetings. Within two hours the Germans retaliated. A Spitfire which they must have captured flew low over the little town, was left alone by the ack-ack guns and dropped three or four bombs around the main square.

With Giorgio and a stretcher party I took a truck down to the town to help collect the casualties. It was an unpleasant half-hour. Coming out of the square I saw, down a narrow alleyway, a figure lying at the foot of the tall wall of a block of flats. I told Giorgio to get a stretcher from the truck and I went down the alleyway.

It was a woman, lying huddled against the wall. I turned her over and saw that a bomb fragment had caught her on the forehead. Her face was-covered with blood and she was groaning. I straightened up to shout to Giorgio to hurry and, as I did so, saw a wicker basket by the wall and spilled laundry on the cobbles. Looking at her face again, I recognised the old peasant woman who had been at the *fascino's* house. A cold shiver ran through me and quickly into my mind came the man's words. "... feeling

its breath they have moved away." Something told me that I mustn't wait there for Giorgio to come with the stretcher.

I picked the old woman up in my arms and began to stagger up the alleyway with her. When I was ten yards away there was an ugly roaring sound. Looking back I saw the whole of the side of the block of flats under which we had been standing collapse into the alleyway.

I remember thinking as I staggered on with her through the clouds of mortar dust to be met by Giorgio with the stretcher, that I had cheated death. I'd felt its breath and acted quickly, but I was wrong. The *fascino's* warning hadn't been for me.

Two days later the old woman died from her head wound in the local hospital. And Giorgio told me that in the three weeks before her death, while stubbornly making her rounds to collect her laundry, she had once been blown off the road by a shell burst and another time, while driving her few goats through a field, had seen them go up on a land mine a few feet ahead of her.

TWO GOOD MEN
COME TO THE AID OF THE PARTY

There were two them. Let's call them Smith and Harmer. Their real names were just as ordinary, but they were neither of them ordinary men. They both had a zest for living and were occasionally victims of their own generous, but uncontrolled, emotional impulses.

They also formed a talented song and dance act, much in demand at Army concerts and very popular with the other men in their unit.

Smith was Gunner Smith—he had made lance-bombardier once or twice but had never held it long. Harmer was an American P-fc. The unit was a mixed American-British affair with an American full colonel in command, a British lieutenant colonel as second in command, myself as adjutant, a few other British and American officers and a mixed bag of other ranks. The place was Italy, a small mountain town where we had been sitting more or less idle for the two months prior to Christmas.

Late one December evening, Smith and Harmer, close friends, strolled down from the villa where we were quartered to have a drink at a small bar on the outskirts of the town.

They had more drinks than they should have done, nothing unusual for them, and towards midnight, in an alcoholic haze, were swapping reminiscences of Pittsburgh and London. In London Smith—a small, wiry, dark-haired little fellow—had been a tailor's cutter: and in Pittsburgh Harmer—a little smaller if anything, but fair-haired—had been a miner. They were nothing much, to look at until Smith got at the piano and Harmer began to sing and dance, and then they were a couple of magicians.

Around midnight a big, tough-looking Italian came into the bar, carrying a suitcase, and disappeared into a back room with the bar proprietor. Smith and Harmer had seen this procedure before. The Italian brought in black market stuff, stolen cigarettes, penicillin, etc. and the bar proprietor bought it and resold the stuff at a fat profit. The black market man didn't do so badly either.

Normally Smith and Harmer didn't give much thought to this procedure. But tonight they had had more than usual to drink and, in addition, they were to appear at a concert in the town in a few days time. The object of the concert was to raise funds for the poor children of the town in order to give them a Christmas party. Our unit had been collecting money for this for a long time.

While the man was in the back room Smith told Harmer what he thought about black marketing while the town children were half-starved,

and Harmer told Smith much the same thing only in a different accent. By the time the man came out of the back room with a suitcase which contained about 30,000 lire in notes, the two had decided to follow him outside and to collect an involuntary contribution to the Christmas party funds.

" 'E's a big bloke. I'll take 'is bleedin' legs and you go for 'is shoulders, Harmy."

"Football tackle?"

"That's it—but don't bother about the referee."

They followed the man outsde and in the darkness of a side alley they tackled him. He was a very tough Italian, and even if he'd known that his money was wanted for a children's party, he wouldn't have been any gentler. The fight lasted ten minutes and in end Smith and Harmer, very much the worse for wear, left the man lying in the alley.

With the suitcase, they made off towards their billets in the villa, staggering from tiredness and drink, but full of pleasure at thought of the extra food and fun the children would have with the money.

The first I heard of the affair was the following morning when the bar proprietor, his black market friend, and an Italian police official from the town arrived to see me. The police official wasn't over enthusiastic about the case, knowing it was black market money (though this was never mentioned; the Italian swearing that his life savings had been stolen from him), and suggested that if the two men could be identified and the money returned everyone would be happy to forget about the affair.

"Of course, if *vostro colonello* wishes to take some disciplinary action against the men, that is his affair …"

We had an identifcation parade and Smith and Harmer were picked out. In my office I told them that if they handed back the money, the civil authorities would forget the affair and I would have a word with the Colonel—a fire-eater—and try to soften his wrath. They both, looking pretty miserable, told me their story and said there was nothing they would like more than to give the money back. The trouble was they didn't know where the money was!

"You see, sir," said Smith, "when we got back here, we got cold feet about what we'd done. So we hid the money around the place."

"Well, collect it up and we'll hand it back."

"Can't do that, major, sir," said Harmer. "We were kind of well lit. This morning neither of us can remember sorta where we hid the stuff."

They couldn't either. We turned the villa and its garden upside down. Out of thirty thousand lire we found about ten thousand hidden all over the place … in garden urns, stuffed up the arms of broken statues, in boots in the barrack room, behind pictures and the cooks' salt dredger … little bundles of dirty notes all over the place. After a day's hard searching;

everyone cursing Smith and Harmer, we were still twenty thousand lire short.

The Colonel was adamant. If all the money couldn't be found, Smith and Harmer were for the high jump. He had the welfare of the town children as much at heart as they; in fact he had with the help of a very attractive Italian Contessa, who was the lady bountiful of the town, organised the whole Christmas party project. What was more, he said, Smith and Harmer wouldn't be free to put on their shows at concerts for a long time.

I tried to get the two to remember, but the most that Smith could offer was: "It was a special place, sir … but I can't remember."

"Sure was, major, sir," said Harmer. "Kind of real good it was. But it beats hell … I mean I can't remember, either."

We carried on the search and the boys really combed the place. Everyone liked the two, and more than anything they wanted them to do their stuff at the coming concert. There was talk of having a whip round to make up the money, but everyone was hard up, having already faced one whip round for the party.

Smith and Harmer had a miserable day. Their hangovers passed but their troubles remained. They spent the night in the guard room. The Colonel had given them until the following evening to try and think of the hiding place.

We had all sorts of false leads from them the next day, but no money—not until about four o'clock that afternoon.

It had been arranged that the Colonel should bring the Contessa to the villa that afternoon to receive the unit's contribution to the party. The Colonel liked things done in style and when he and the Contessa arrived the guard was turned out to compliment the lady. Smith and Harmer watched all this miserably from a window in the guard house. The Colonel helped the Contessa from her car, the guard came to the salute, and at the same time—a courtesy thought up by the Colonel since we were billeted in the Contessa's villa—the flag with her coat of arms, long since secretly borrowed from her agent, was run up to the flagpole head and broken.

A little breeze flapped its folds out, and from the gay coloured flag a shower of lire notes of all denominations fluttered down on the guard, on the Colonel, and on the Contessa. The missing twenty thousand lire.

I can still remember the Contessa's excited upturned face and her voice crying delightedly, "But Colonel, what a wonderfully original idea … your contribution to the party dropping from heaven."

The Colonel's face was excited, too, a furious brick-red, but he recovered quickly and gallantly.

When the Contessa left us she had twenty thousand lire more than the unit had really collected. The Colonel, after giving Smith and Harmer a

dressing down they must still remember, made up the extra twenty thousand lire from his own pocket.

DON'T BE A HERO

He sat in the sun, watching the changing blues of the currents across the bay. A man on the beach in a red loincloth waded out and began to throw a casting net. Each time that it fell the water was beaten into a rough platter of dazzling silver. The brown-skinned figure progressed through the shallow water. The slow movement of arms and shoulders as the net was drawn back had a primitive beauty. As primitive and unhurried, he thought, as the whole of this little bit of forgotten Italian coast facing the gulf.

James Burke stretched his long legs and rested them on the balustrade of the terrace. A few loose petals of the bougainvillea sifted down on his white trousers. Someone came onto the terrace from the dark doorway of the hotel behind him. He turned his head. Momentino was standing there, holding a tray with a couple of drinks.

Burke smiled as he reached up for the glass, the movement of his arm stiff and the grasp of the twisted fingers of his right hand awkward around the tumbler.

"Nothing surprises me about you, Tino. Not even thought-reading. I was just this minute about to call you."

"We were born under the same star, *signore*. When I feel like a drink, then I know you do." Tino sat down and took the other drink. As he raised it to his lips, he nodded at Burke's right hand. "Today, it is painful again?"

From Tino, with so much between them, the question gave him no embarrassment.

"A little. After all these years I hardly notice it." That's what you said, he thought. You even tried to believe it yourself, hoping to forget some of the times when it throbbed like hell.

Tino wiped his fleshy, unshaven face with a handkerchief and then slipped it inside his shirt front, mopping his shoulders. "Albergo di Golfo has another guest. I've just fetched her bags from the Canzaro bus."

"Her?"

"English, like you. Speaks good Italian. Very pretty, but bad-tempered."

"Two hours on the Canzaro bus would make anyone bad-tempered."

"Four hours. The *carabinieri* held them up in Gasperini while a troop convoy came through."

"Troops? So it is true?"

"Yes. Fabriano."

"They're really going for him at last."

"He'll be hard to get."

"The people around here don't want them to get him, do they?"

Tino shrugged his shoulders and reached over and took one of Burke's cigarettes. "Fabriano has done more for most of the peasants around here than the troops or the Government will ever do." As he spoke Tino pushed an envelope across to Burke.

"What's this?"

"I came by the post-office. There was this cable for you."

Burke opened it. It was from Lindsay, his editor. It read:

Two weeks. What the hell are you doing? I want personal interview Fabriano.

He dropped it on the table, conscious that Tino was watching him closely. There were times, he thought, when he could spit in Lindsay's eye. This was one of them. This was Lindsay cracking the whip. He looked down wryly at his right hand. Before the war it had been a surgeon's hand, behind it all his skill and love. James Burke, surgeon, a young man making a name in his profession. The war had finished that, and now he was James Burke, a highly paid correspondent; he could manage a pen or a typewriter. He was what his hand was. But he didn't like a whip cracking behind him.

He looked down to the white strip of beach and remembered the darkness of a night seven years before when he had landed there from a destroyer and had first heard Tino's voice whispering to him. A year later had come the bullet which had crushed and mutilated his hand … He picked up his glass and drank quickly.

Tino stirred gently and said, "For lunch it is *scampi* or *fritto misto*, and then a nice chicken. I must go."

Burke flicked the cable. "You know what's in this?"

"Signora Tacci at the post-office has no English, Doctor—"

"Don't call me that!" His voice was hard and ugly.

"Sorry, *signore*. The cable was coming over the wire from Canzaro when I went in. So I took it for her." Tino opened his hands in a gesture of apology. "I have done my best. Fabriano knows you and he knows me, but he is no longer the partisan we worked with. When I can arrange for you to see him, you know I will."

"At a guess, how far would you say Fabriano was from here?" It was annoying to watch the familiar dumb look come over Tino's face. They had gone through a lot together. But Tino had another loyalty, the one he shared with the peasants around here, the silent pride they felt in their Robin Hood of a Fabriano, the bandit hero who robbed the rich to help the poor and, of course, put more than a little aside for himself—Fabriano here, Giuliano in Sicily, men who didn't fit into the strict pattern of modern life.

"Thirty kilometers, maybe a hundred, maybe a thousand."

"I want to talk to him, Tino. In the old days you could arrange anything." That was how he'd got his name. No matter what was asked, he would mutter, *'Si, si, Capitano ... un momentino solo.'* The *momentino* might be a month, but Tino never failed. Now, he sucked at his fat lips and said slowly, "We shall see, *signore*." And then was gone.

There was more than an hour until lunch. Burke went to his room to change into bathing trunks. Coming down the stairs he caught a breath of perfume—too expensive for Maria, the cook, or her daughter. The Englishwoman, he thought.

He swam out through the smooth, lacquered sea to a jagged spire of rocks, and climbed slowly up the steep, boulder-strewn slope.

At the top of the cliff was a small, grassy plateau. The rocks fell away in a sheer drop facing the few white houses of Soraco across the water. For a moment he went to the edge and looked down, but he drew back quickly. Heights made him dizzy.

He sat down with his back to a warm boulder and shut his eyes, feeling the sun beating against his body.

When he awoke later, his eyes still shut, he knew that someone was standing over him. He could smell the perfume and this time he recognized it, wondering why he had been so slow before. He opened his eyes and saw her.

She was standing a few feet from him. The water on her brown skin gleamed in the sun, and her short yellow hair was boyishly untidy. She stood very still, smiling at him, her fingers playing with the lacing at the side of her bathing suit.

He sat up. "Laura! What are you doing here?"

"The same thing you are." She dropped to the grass and. leaning her head to one side, shook the water from her hair. "I was in Rome when the London office got a tip that the troops were moving in after Fabriano. So they sent me here. Should be exciting."

"That's what you like, isn't it?" he said. "Excitement."

"I like my job, if that's what you mean." She leaned back on her hands, smiling, and the line of her young body stirred a fierce hunger in him. "You're not piqued because I'm here, are you? We've been friendly rivals for years. I'd like it to stay that way."

"You know I'm glad you're here. You know why, too."

She sat forward, shaking her head. "Jimmy, you know it isn't any good talking about that." She reached out and laid her hand on his shoulder. "Let's keep off that subject."

"I can't." His voice was calm, covering the despair behind it. "I'm in love with you, and you feel the same about me. Why won't you marry me?"

She stood up and he could see that his insistence was making her angry. "You know why, but you won't face it. It wouldn't work. You're too sorry for yourself. You're letting yourself go. You drink too much, and all because—" She broke off.

He raised his right hand.

"Yes."

"My hand has nothing to do with it!" he said sharply.

"It has." Behind the curt words might have been anger or contempt. "You were unlucky a bullet hit you there. But a lot of other people were unlucky in the war. You never even try to use it except to hold a drink. You keep it in your pocket as though you were ashamed of it. Can't you see that even if it did ruin your career as a surgeon, you don't have to let it ruin you?"

He stood up and said bitterly, "What are you looking for? A hero?"

He saw her lips tighten. "Why not? What's wrong with a hero? A woman has to respect her husband—that's all it means."

"There's nothing wrong with heroes," Burke snapped. "Nothing—except that they come once a century and people call them saints, and they never get married. What you're really looking for is someone with all your own qualities, a strong, healthy body … No nerves, no fears, no doubts—"

"Shut up, Jimmy! You know it's useless!"

She turned and went to the edge of the rock, moving her feet to get a diving grip on the rough, stone ledge.

"What do you think you're going to do?" He began to move toward her.

"Going back to the *albergo*."

"But that's an eighty-foot dive and there are bad rocks down there."

She turned her head to him and he knew at once what was in her thoughts. "I'm going back this way."

"Laura, don't be a fool!" He ran for her, reaching out his arms.

She dived, and he reached the edge in time to see her streamlined figure plummeting downward. She hit blue water between the rocks and surfaced a few yards out. She turned her face up and waved. The crazy fool, he thought, she might have killed herself …

He walked down the slope to the seaward side of the islet and swam back.

That evening they had dinner together on the terrace. They were the only guests in the hotel. She spoke very little, but he knew she was watching him and, almost in defiance, he found himself taking more wine than usual. When Tino had brought their coffee, she got up and sat on the balustrade, smoking.

After a moment she said quietly, "I'm sorry about this morning, .Jimmy. But it was better to have it out."

"Forget it."

"That's what would be happening between us always. I'd get impatient, angry with you and then I'd be cruel."

She came back to the table and, for a moment, her hand rested against his face. "Good night, Jimmy," she said. She left him quickly.

The next day he was away from the hotel interviewing the commander of the section of troops which had moved into the district. They were camped in a little valley behind Soraco. He got little from the commander, who was annoyed at being sent to this part of Italy and who disliked newspaper men almost as much as he did Fabriano.

Burke got back to the hotel at eight and as he passed through the hall he heard voices coming from the kitchen. He moved over to the half-open door.

"But you can't do that, Tino. You can't ask him. You'll have to find someone else." It was Laura's voice.

Burke stood there, listening.

"But there is no-one else, Signorina Hartley."

"He is a doctor, no?" It was a strange voice.

"He was." Laura's voice was impatient. "But he had a bullet wound in his hand during the war. He can't operate. And anyway, there's the climb this man talks about. He'd never make it. He hasn't got the nerve."

"Signore Burke?" Tino's voice broke in incredulously. "Why in the war—"

"The war's over. He's different now."

"If we get no doctor tonight, the woman will die," said the strange voice.

Burke hesitated. Here was the real truth of what she thought about him. He didn't have the nerve. This had been the thought in her mind when she had dived from the rock, daring him to follow. He was suddenly possessed by a cold anger. He pushed open the door and went in. Laura was standing with Tino by the stove, and a peasant in faded battle jacket and serge trousers was eating at the end of the table.

"Jimmy—"

He knew she was wondering how much he had heard.

"What woman is going to die unless she gets a doctor?" he asked quietly.

Tino smiled and came over to him. "Up in the hills, four hours climb. It's this man's wife, and her baby does not come properly."

"What about Doctor Carpacchi?"

"He is not here, *signore*. His daughter in Naples is being married, and yesterday he left."

Laura came forward and took his arm. "Jimmy, it isn't just that. From what the man says it sounds as though she might have to have a caesarean."

Burke dropped his right hand into his pocket. "Only a doctor could tell that."

"But there's a bad climb to get up there. The road's washed out part of the way, and you've got to go along the valley face on a ledge. The man here says that any stranger trying it would have to be roped, and there's a six-hundred-foot drop. You know what you're like on heights."

"I'll face that when I come to it."

"You mean, you'll go?" He could see she was surprised at his decision.

"Of course we're going."

"We?"

"The woman will need a nurse, and I'll need an assistant." He went over to the dresser and helped himself to a glass of wine, then nodded at Tino. "All right. Can you get into Carpacchi's house?"

"The servant is there and understands all the instruments and drugs."

"We'll go by there on our way."

Tino drove them out of the town in his Fiat and when he left them they set out up the first gentle slopes. Gradually the going got harder. Burke, his eyes on the bulky form of the peasant ahead who carried his instrument bag was conscious of the regular breathing of Laura behind him, and knew that the climb was already beginning to tell on him. It was true what she said. He was out of condition, had let himself go. But his laboured breathing and the slowly increasing agony of his body were the least of it. Ahead of him lay a sick woman. He hoped to God that there would be no need to operate.

He saw Laura watching him. Was he doing it for her, to prove her wrong? Or was it for the sick woman? The question stayed with him as he struggled on.

Frequently he had to call a halt for a rest, and he could sense the impatience in the peasant. He was slowing them down because he couldn't use his right hand more often to grasp the shrubs and rocks as they went up.

They had been going three hours when they came round a shoulder of the mountain and found themselves at the beginning of a narrow ledge that ran across the face of a cliff, two hundred yards of track with a black drop below it. He looked down. Far below, the white ribbon of a stream flashed and the spiked crests of pines were raised like evil spearheads in the moonlight. His head spun with fatigue and he leaned back against a rock, his whole body aching.

The peasant spoke. "Rope up."

Laura came up to him and helped hitch the rope around his waist. He saw her eyes, dark and worried in the shadowed face, and she said quietly, "Take it easy. Jimmy, and don't look down. Just keep going, one hand on the rope and the other on the rock face beside you."

They moved out on to the ledge, and he found that with his left hand on the rope he had to use his right to steady and hold himself against the rock face. For a moment, as his right hand touched the rock, he almost stopped. I can't do it, he thought.

The peasant turned and muttered something, and behind him Laura said quietly, "Keep going."

There could be no turning back now. He went forward, crabbed against the rock for what seemed an age. To his left the dark abyss waited. He kept his eyes on the peasant's back, knowing that if he looked down into the depths the last of his strength and courage would be drawn from him. He shut out the thought of it by counting his steps … twenty … thirty … Behind him he heard the steady breathing of Laura, and for a while he almost hated her, wished he had never come into the hotel at that moment. Then they were off the ledge and the peasant was saying, "We shall soon be there."

Burke scarcely heard him.

Half an hour later they walked into the warm kitchen of a farmhouse. The first person Burke saw was Fabriano standing behind the kitchen table, and with him two other men wearing bandoliers around their shoulders.

Fabriano was a tall lean man with a drawn face and hungry, dark eyes. He was dressed in a blue shirt, a black cummerbund and patched trousers.

"Capitano Burke?" The bandit stepped forward, surprised. "But where's Dr. Carpacchi?"

Burke dropped into a chair and reached out for a glass of wine.

"He's in Naples. I've come instead, Fabriano—"

"Fabriano!" he heard Laura exclaim behind him.

"Yes. Fabriano. Tino must have known." He looked up at Fabriano. "This is Signorina Hartley."

Fabriano nodded to her and then his eyes came back to Burke. "But how can you do anything. Capitano?" His glance rested on Burke's right hand. "She's my wife …"

Burke stood up. "Where is she?"

"Upstairs."

"She's your wife?" Burke could hear the excitement in Laura's voice and he knew she was thinking of the story.

"Yes. She has always been with me until now. As soon as I know she is all right I must leave this place. There are too many troops."

Burke moved over to the rough stair ladder and climbed it slowly. As he pushed the trap in the ceiling, the low groan of a woman came down to them. Then the trap closed behind Burke.

Fabriano came over to Laura where she sat by the low fire. He held out a glass of wine and his eyes were on her—dark, fierce eyes with an uneasy sadness behind them. He looked strained.

"Will he be able to do it?"

Laura was silent. He could do it, if he wanted to. She had seen him use his hand. Another life, two lives might hang on it. "His hand is bad," she said, "but it isn't useless. It's a question of nerve."

"Then he will do it, if it is necessary," said Fabriano.

She looked at him in surprise, but before she could speak Burke came back. They looked at him questioningly.

"It's got to be a caesarean, and it's got to be done now."

"You'll do it, Capitano?"

He didn't answer for a moment. He was thinking of the woman upstairs. A few seconds had told him all he wanted to know, told him, too, that in an hour—an hour he could have passed away in pretending that he wasn't sure, or that he wanted to wait for the morning instead of operating by candlelight—she would be dead, her heart unequal to the strain. And then, because of the clear eyes of Laura who would know deceit the moment she saw it, and because of the challenge to his skill and humanity, he had known he must take the risk.

"I shall want all the hot water you can get, all the cloths, and I want the old crone who's up there with her out of the way. Laura. You come with me."

Laura stood up. It was, she thought, the voice of a stranger, crisp, authoritative, and she felt a gladness inside her.

She would never lose the memory of those next two hours; the woman, twisting and groaning like an animal, her hair long and damp on the pillows; the woman drugged, just flesh above which his hands worked; the ugly, ungainly right hand holding the scalpel; his laboured breathing and the silent strain that marked his face as he forced unwilling muscles to an old skill; the angry break in his voice as he called to her for the things he wanted, impatient with her slowness, and then the protesting cry of a child, echoing against the dark rafters of the room. Finally, when she felt that she had been forever in this small room, she heard his voice.

"That's all we can do. Go down and tell Fabriano the baby's going to be all right. Get yourself some sleep."

"But the mother?"

"I'll stay here with her. We won't know for some hours.

She went down and found Fabriano outside the house. The cold morning light was coming up over the peaks. Fabriano said little. He made

a bed for her in the kitchen. She slept and when she awoke it was noon. Outside, she found Fabriano sitting on a rock near the meadow.

"He is still with her, *signorina*." He was silent for a while and, to take his mind off his wife, she began to question him about himself, his bandit life. He told her, and there was a bitterness in his voice as he spoke. After the war he had done a little black market work and one day, cornered, he had shot a policeman and taken to the hills. All the rest had followed. One day the troops would get him and that would be the end.

"The papers," he said finally, "talk about me and the others like me as though we were something splendid. We are not. We are just men who got into something wrong and can't get out."

She smiled. "I can understand that. But people want heroes and we have to make them for our readers."

"Then you should write about Capitano Burke. He is the only hero I ever met."

"A hero? I know he worked with the partisans."

"Do you know how he was shot?"

"In some ambush, he told me."

Fabriano shook his head slowly. "I can see you don't know him very well. We worked together. We were both caught by the Germans. They wanted some information from us—information that would have meant the death of several others. They knew he was a surgeon and they threatened to crush his right hand unless he spoke. He didn't speak, not even at the end when, after crushing his hand, they put a bullet through it."

"He did that!"

"Yes, *signorina*. And when it came my turn … I spoke after only a very little while."

A shadow fell across them. Laura turned to see Burke standing there, and she knew that he had heard what had been said. He smiled at Fabriano and said calmly. "Your wife's going to be all right, Fabriano. Leave her here and the old woman can look after her. I'll send Carpacchi up. If we start off soon we can get down while it's still light."

"*Signore*. Doctor—" Fabriano began to thank him but was waved aside.

"I want two hours sleep and then we'll start off."

Later in the afternoon the two of them came to the rock ledge and, in the same silence which had been with them since noon, roped themselves up.

"You go first. Laura." This time his right hand would be on the rope. He didn't like the traverse, but it would be easier with his left hand on the rock face.

"Jimmy"—she turned to him impulsively—"why didn't you tell me the truth about your hand?"

"I never told anyone. It makes no difference."

"But it does. I've been a fool. The one thing I've always wanted from you has always been there."

"No. That's what I used to be. The man you couldn't marry is still here."

"But he isn't, Jimmy. Even if I didn't know all about your hand—your climb up here and what you did for Fabriano's wife prove it."

He shook his head. "You're confusing bravado with courage."

"You may have started off on bravado—but that's not how you finished. Jimmy, you know what I'm trying to say …"

He put his hand on her arm and said gently, "No. Laura. I'm the one who's being level-headed now. Back there, because I knew what you felt about me, because I couldn't let the woman die without doing what I could—I had to go on. There was no easy way out or I'd have taken it. The rest of my life I'll be looking for the way out of troubles."

She turned from him and walked out onto the ledge, and she had started to cry. He moved behind her, working steadily across, the rope hanging loose between them. Halfway across it happened. Under her feet a part of the loose track slipped away and she fell. He saw her swing out, heard the wild cry from her lips and felt cold horror race through his heart. He flung himself against the rock face, clutching at it with both hands, and took the shock of the rope as it whipped out. His body checked her fall.

"Jimmy!" Her voice came up faintly. He leaned over, still clutching to the rock. and saw her swinging thirty feet below against the cliff face. Cautiously he dropped his left hand to the rope and began to haul on it, but there was not enough strength in his one arm to bring her up. I can't do it, he thought. I can't. His right hand had no strength to haul. Then, suddenly, the strain went off the rope and her voice came up to him clearly. "Jimmy. I've got a hold. Belay the rope around a rock and get Fabriano. You can't haul me up by yourself."

At that he heard himself swearing, swearing viciously, as though some long pent-up rage in him had broken through. Go back for Fabriano? Leave her clinging to the rock face down there, to a hold that at any moment might crumble away? The thought of the drop, of losing her, filled him with a savage frenzy. He braced himself backwards and dropped his right hand to the rope and began to haul. A pain went through his hand and arm. but he welcomed it, pulled harder.

He hauled away desperately with both hands, forcing the stiff muscles and bent fingers of his right hand. and as he pulled he repeated her name to himself. Her face came up over the ledge of the track and she grasped a spur of stone. He bent down and with both hands dragged her up. As she swayed he held her, crushing her to him. He kissed her and whispered to her fiercely, not knowing what he was saying, just talking.

That evening they sat over dinner on the hotel terrace. His hand lay over hers and his fingers smoothed her warm skin. "Well, you know what you're taking on …"

"I know." she said softly. She took a cigarette from the case on the table. Burke picked up his lighter in his left hand and held it to her. Then, smiling, he transferred it to his right hand and clumsily snapped it into flame.

WET STEPPING STONES

Father Rosario and I came down the hill together towards the little port. It had rained during the night and the colours were fresh and vivid. The blue sea sparkled below us, the pink and white houses crowding round the square were bright in the sun, and behind us the tawny hills were studded with the jet shadows cast by the olive trees. To our right brawled the mountain stream, in spate from the rain which had been heavy in the hills. And it all looked the same as it had done eleven years before, when I had been in uniform and not on holiday, and the hills behind us had been full of Germans.

"We are glad to have you back, my son," said Father Rosario. "You will find little changed here, except that there is more to eat, and the men are all at home."

When I had known it last, food had been the big problem, and most of the men had been away in the hills, fighting as partisans.

"I've always wanted to come back, Father. Many times in the past years I've promised myself that one day I should be out there in the bay, fishing. And that I should see you again."

He gave a little nod of his head, a lean, black-robed figure at my side, and I wondered if he knew that it was he who had brought me back. He was a man for whom I had an immense respect, a man of great courage and greater wisdom … but beyond these he had something else, a warm humanity and a gentle understanding of men. He was old and he was thin, and he looked as though a wind would blow him away, a harsh word wither him, but I knew differently.

"We shall ask Giorgio about the fishing." He motioned with his hand towards a small cottage on the left. "He lives there, but at the moment he will be down with the boats. You will not remember Giorgio for he was away during your time here. His wife died just after the war and he now lives alone. He is a fine man, but a little intemperate."

Down below the cottage there was a row of stepping-stones across the stream. Father Rosario gathered up his robe and went across, and. I followed, the water washing over the stones and almost into my shoes. We came to the first of the houses, went down a small alleyway whose walls were overgrown with bougainvillaea and, turning a corner, were in the square. It was quiet and peaceful and on the far side, beyond a low wall, lay the sea.

As we crossed to the wall, there floated up to us, from the sands below, the sound of men's voices raised in argument.

Father Rosario and I leaned over. Small fishing-boats were drawn up on the beach, and some children were bathing from the end of a ramshackle jetty. Below us, gathered about a pile of nets, were five men. Four of them squatted on the sand, working at the nets, and the fifth, a burly, blue-shirted figure, black-haired, his skin burnt a fine mahogany, stood beyond them, shouting angrily, making himself heard above the indignant voices of the others.

At the sight of Father Rosario, all the men were suddenly silent.

"What is it, Giorgio?" Father Rosario addressed himself to the standing man.

For a moment Giorgio looked embarrassed and then he mumbled, "It is nothing, Father."

Father Rosario smiled. "You make a great deal of noise over nothing, Giorgio."

We went down a small flight of stone steps to the sand and joined the men. Father Rosario introduced me. Then he turned to Giorgio. "What is the trouble, my son?"

When Giorgio made no answer a young man, wearing an old army battle-dress blouse, looked up at Giorgio and said angrily, "You accuse us, but you are afraid to speak in front of the good Father."

"And of what does Giorgio accuse you, Beppo?" asked Father Rosario.

"Not me alone, Father," answered Beppo, "but also Mario, Giuseppe, and Carlo." He nodded to the others. Mario was a young man, lean and pale-looking; Giuseppe was much older, fat and bald, with a sleepy grin on his face; and Carlo was a thickset, muscular man of nearly sixty with a greying moustache. They sat there, the four of them, cross-legged and barefooted, working at their nets.

"But of what are you accused?" Father Rosario asked gently.

"Of stealing my watch!" Giorgio suddenly exploded. "It is the gold watch, Father, with the fifteen rubies which I had from my father and he from his father and before that—"

"The good Father knows the watch. You wear it across your chest like a great sun every time you go to Mass," said Carlo. "But no longer, for it is stolen and the thief sits here!"

Father Rosario lowered himself to the gunwale of a boat and cocked his head at Giorgio. "I know the watch, Giorgio. It is very beautiful. But, my son, what makes you think the thief is one of your friends?"

"It is not a thing I say easily, Father. But the truth is the truth. Last night my four friends came to eat and drink at my house. We sat in the little garden and the watch was in the house, in the case on the shelf above my bed, where it always is, and during the evening each of my friends went into the house for one reason and another. The whole evening there

was no one else there, and when they left and I went to bed, the watch was gone.

"It is a great loss to me, Father. Not for the value of the watch, though it is entirely of gold and rubies, not for its usefulness, since it does not go; but for its sentimental worth, Father. It has been in my family so long, being given to me by my father who had it from his father and before that—"

Father Rosario raised a thin hand and interrupted him. "It is a possession no man would wish to lose, Giorgio, and it shall be returned to you."

At this I saw the four men look up, the work of their hands stilled momentarily. Father Rosario settled himself more comfortably on the boat's gunwale and his long dark face no longer smiled. He looked around at the men, his eyes travelling from one to the other, and one by one they turned their gaze from him as though in his searching eyes there was a power that made them uncomfortable.

Then slowly he began to speak. "There have, my children, for a long time now been many such petty thefts in our community. You must know of them as I do. It is not a good thing to have amongst us for it turns friend against friend. If among four men there is a thief, then his guilt touches the three innocent men. However, these thefts which we have had here arise not so much from evil or a desire for gain as from vanity or a desire for excitement. Giorgio, if your watch were returned, would you be content never to know the name of the thief?"

Giorgio hesitated for a while, then he said, "If the watch is returned I shall be happy."

"Then it shall be."

"But how can this be, Father?" asked Giuseppe.

"Because, Giuseppe, I know who the thief is." Father Rosario paused and I could sense the surprise and tension amongst the men. Not a man there doubted his word. Father Rosario went on: "He shall return the watch, and later I shall speak to him in private and he will never steal again."

"But if he hands over the watch now, Father, we shall know him," said Giorgio.

"No. It shall be done this way, Giorgio. Beginning with Carlo, each man—Giuseppe, Mario, and Beppo—shall take it in turns to leave us. They shall go across the square and up to your house. Each man shall be given five minutes and then shall return. The thief will put the watch back and you will never know who it is. But I shall know, and he shall answer to me."

I could see how much respect and simple wonder there was in them for Father Rosario. None of them doubted that he knew already who had the

watch, and the thief himself must have felt very uncomfortable at the prospect of his coming interview with Father Rosario.

Carlo, the old man with the moustache, was the first to go. While he was gone we sat and talked and Father Rosario arranged for Giorgio to take me out in his boat. After Carlo's return, Giuseppe went. He came back grinning. Mario and Beppo took their turns.

As Beppo came down the steps Father Rosario rose. "And now, Giorgio, go and get your watch." Father Rosario sent the fisherman off. He was back very quickly, panting and beaming and holding the gold watch.

"It is a miracle, Father! " he cried.

"No, my son, it is not a miracle," Father Rosario said gently. And now think no more of it. These are your friends and will remain your friends. However, there is one man among you who will come to me this evening and we shall talk. Let him not fail to come for then I shall go to him and make his shame public."

We walked away along the sands.

"And who was the thief?" I asked after a while.

Father Rosario smiled. "You do not live amongst us so I shall tell you. It is Giuseppe. He is fat and full of life and very easily bored. During the war he had the finest partisan record of all. He steals not from evil but from a desire to take risks. I shall talk to him about it and he will do it no more."

"And you knew this from the start?"

"No. Only when all the men had returned. Put yourself in their place, my son. What would you have done if you had been one of them, and innocent, and I had sent you to Giorgio's house?"

"I'd have gone across the square, round the corner, waited my five minutes, and come back. Why walk up the hill to a house if I had nothing to replace?"

"Exactly. And that is what they all did—except Giuseppe."

"But how do you know Giuseppe went up to the house?"

"All the men were barefooted. To reach Giorgio's house you have to cross the stepping-stones which are flooded. When Giuseppe returned, his feet were washed free of sand and his ankles were still wet. The others still had dry, sandy feet."

Father Rosario turned his head towards me and his dark eyes were warm, smiling. "This evening Giuseppe will come to me, and we shall talk together over a glass of wine, and there will be no more thefts."

LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE

Miss Alison Chambers considered herself to be a sensible, virtuous woman.

She was proud, but she kept her pride hidden as became a spinster of forty-five, a clergyman's daughter and—until a few minutes ago—the companion of Lady Hortense Maltby.

Miss Alison Chambers closed the bathroom door quietly behind her. Dabbing at the scratch on her hand with her handkerchief, she walked down the sunlit corridor of the old palace to the sitting-room.

Through the windows to her left she caught a glimpse of the crowded canal, warm and bright under the Venetian sun … warm and bright and romantic, like Gino. It was three months since she had met Gino who had changed her whole life; exciting, masterful Gino who had suggested the whole thing.

In the sitting-room she switched on the small electric stove and began to heat milk in a pan. Under the table, Dinah, Lady Hortense's obese and ancient pekinese bitch, lay curled quietly in her basket.

Miss Alison thought of Gino and heard him saying, "*Cara mia*, why should you give her your life? This fat, evil woman who sucks your spirit and your happiness. You have no money, so she buys you. Two thousand pounds for you in her will. Always that bait so you cannot leave her, dare not leave her. And each day she treats you like a slave. And forever she will live, no matter what the doctors say. You will be an old woman before you get your money, unless—"

And Gino had told her how to do it, worked it all out for her. All she had had to find was courage, and now that had been found. And it had been so easy. Just as Gino had said. One hand on top of the old lady's head, her arms under the knees, and then a little pull. It was not even distressing to think about the thing in the bath back there, the thing which for a puny moment had clawed desperately at her hand as she pushed its head down. In a few moments Miss Alison had found freedom; a nice little fortune and the right to have a life of her own … with Gino. Though he must, of course, keep out of the way until much later.

The future was suddenly colourful. For the first time she was living and had something to look forward to.

When the milk boiled, she mixed it into the patent food the veterinary surgeon had left when he had visited them after lunch to make his daily inspection of Dinah.

She poured the mixture into the bowl to cool and then went quietly back to the bathroom. She had been away ten minutes.

She tried to lift the body out of the bath but it was too much for her and she did not try for long. She pulled the plug to drain the water and then went deliberately to the telephone in the bedroom and rang for the porter. When he answered she let herself go, moving easily into a part she had quietly rehearsed to herself many times.

"Please come up at once. Something terrible has happened. Quickly!"

After that there was the confusion she knew there would be. She appeared distressed, but she was firm and allowed nothing to be done other than the lifting of Lady Hortense out of the bath and on to her bed until the doctor and the police arrived.

It had not been her intention that the police should come … so soon, anyway. But the agitated fool of a porter had telephoned for them at the same time as the doctor, and now here she was with a plump, bald little man who called himself Scarletti and smelled of garlic, standing on the balcony outside the bedroom while behind them the doctor moved about the thing on the bed.

Signor Scarletti of the Polizia was a polite, unhurried little man with a great respect for the English, and no opinion whatsoever of human beings. Twenty years in the police had taught him that everyone was capable of everything given the right circumstances. Not that he suspected anything wrong here in particular. Suspicion was simply a condition of his official thoughts. He suffered from it just as other people suffer from boredom and headaches.

The doctor came out to them. He had attended Lady Hortense since she had been in Venice. As Scarletti cocked an eye at him, he said: "Can't tell without an autopsy, but knowing the condition of her heart I should say she died of shock before she had time to drown. With a man it would have been asphyxia from drowning, but with women it's more often the shock of realising they are going to drown. Academic interest, anyway. Except—"

"Except?" Scarletti scratched the top of his bald head.

The doctor looked at Miss Alison and went on with a chiding note in his voice: "Except that Miss Alison must have disobeyed my instructions. I gave strict orders that whenever Lady Hortense took a bath someone was to be in attendance the whole time. In view of the condition of her heart it was essential to guard against just this thing. She is a heavy woman. She slips down the bath, she gets panic and—"

"Quite." Scarletti nodded and then looked at Miss Alison, who stood there, the front of her dress and sleeves still wet where she had tried to lift her mistress. "Why did you leave her, *signora*?"

"*Signorina*, please."

"*Signorina*. Why?"

"Because she forced me to." Her voice was low but firm and there was no fear in her. It was all going as Gino had promised.

"Forced?"

She shook her head sadly as though she hated to make any revelation of the dead woman's character, and explained quietly, "Lady Hortense was an extremely strong-willed person. I was only her companion. I prepared the bath for her and helped her in. Normally, as the doctor says, I should have stayed. In fact I did begin to bath her, but Dinah began to bark and whine."

"Dinah?"

"That is Lady Hortense's dog. She is old and ailing. Lady Hortense thought the world of her."

The doctor coughed and said, "True. She spent as much on the dog's ailments as she did on her own."

"Lady Hortense told me to go and see to the dog. The vet had called just after lunch to give an injection to Dinah. She said it must be in pain. I was to go and feed it with some patent food he had prescribed. At first I said I must not leave her alone. She got very angry. She had a quick temper."

"That's true," said the doctor. "At her age and in her condition, it could be dangerous too."

"I realised that," Miss Alison went on rather primly. "So I went. If I had refused to go, she would have dismissed me."

"And how long were you gone?" asked Scarletti, and for once he found himself without suspicions. He felt kindly disposed towards this English spinster who could not have had a very enjoyable life.

"About ten minutes. Dinah was in the sitting-room at the end of the corridor whining and barking. I picked her up and calmed her. She scratched my hand." She held out her hand for a moment. Neither of the men could know the admiration she was feeling for Gino at the moment. Gino had said the old lady might struggle for a moment, might scratch her or tear her dress. It was he who had worked out the story about Dinah. How clever he was.

"I settled her in her basket and she calmed down. Then I warmed some milk for her food. When it was prepared I put it to cool before feeding her. Then I came back to the bathroom and found Lady Hortense must have had a stroke or some attack and had slipped down into the bath so that her face was under water. It was …"

Her voice broke off. She began to cry.

The doctor put his hand on her shoulder. "You are not to blame, *signorina*. We know what kind of old lady she was … so difficult to deal with. We understand perfectly how it happened."

Yes, thought Scarletti as he turned back into the bedroom, we know how it is. At that moment the telephone beside the bed began to ring. He picked it up.

"Who is it?"

"I want to speak to Lady Hortense Maltby. This is Dottore Enrico Spalo, the veterinary surgeon."

"I am afraid you cannot speak to her."

"She is not there?"

"Yes, but—"

"Ah, I understand. She is very upset, no?"

"That is one way of putting it."

"I am so sorry. It is all my fault. I know she will never forgive me."

Suspicion came back to Scarletti, roused by some sixth sense. In a gentle voice, not to attract the attention of the doctor and Miss Alison, he said softly, "No, she will never forgive you. But at least you must explain …"

He listened while an excited but contrite voice at the other end of the line poured out its story. When it was finished, he turned back towards the window. Miss Alison was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief and the doctor was smiling encouragingly at her.

Scarletti gave a little sigh and then said: "The scratch on your hand, *signorina*—maybe the doctor should look at it. You know … poison from dogs—"

"It is nothing. Dinah has often scratched me."

"I see. Well, everything seems clear—except one point." There was no change in Scarletti's voice. "Your mistress began her bath at about three o'clock and you left her for ten minutes because of the barking and whining of Dinah."

"That is so."

"And the vet called just after lunch and gave Dinah an injection. That would be about two o'clock?"

"Yes."

"A pity you agree with me, *signorina*. The vet has just telephoned to say that he made a mistake with the injection. Instead of giving Dinah a gland extract, he gave the dog an injection of Nembutal which would certainly kill it within fifteen minutes. It is hard to see how the dog barked or whined or scratched you at three o'clock—"

The doctor moved quickly behind Miss Alison and caught her as she fainted.

DEATH IN THE TUNNEL

Alcide Spadoni of the Questura di Firenze stood at the window and looked down at the movement of people across the station approach. From behind him came the voice of the station-master. "We have had the coach in which the suicide took place detached here and put in a siding. It has been sealed, waiting your inspection."

"And the people who were in the carriage?"

"As you instructed. We have the three of them here. You wish to see them first or the carriage.?"

Spadoni turned away from the sunlit scene, his eye catching for a moment the flash of pigeons' wings over the roofs of Florence. Grey-haired and ponderous, he had the look of a man fighting off sleep. He went slowly across the room to a stretcher by the wall. On it lay a man's body covered with a sheet. He reached down and drew the sheet back.

"I'll see them in here," he said. "The woman—Signora Monzio—first."

He waited, looking down at the body while the station-master went to fetch the woman. The dead man was plump, almost fat, well-dressed, and on the right temple was a small bullet hole, the blood dried around it in a ragged red aureole.

"Signora Monzio," said Spadoni heavily, his eyes lidding against the strong sunlight that fell across the room. "You caught the 7.16 from Bologna this morning?"

"I did." She was a tall, still attractive woman refusing to accept middle age, and Spadoni noted the signs in her clothes of elegance achieved with economy.

"When you entered the carriage, how many people were present?"

"Three others."

"Where was Signor Marani sitting?" Spadoni's head tipped towards the stretcher.

"On the same side as myself, his back to the engine, but in the opposite corner. I was on the corridor side and he had the far window."

"And the other two?"

"A naval, officer was sitting opposite to me." For a moment her dark eyes turned to the stretcher. "Opposite Signor Marani was his partner Signor Betti."

"You know the deceased?"

"I do. He is well known in Bologna,"

"And Signor Betti?"

"Only as his partner."

"Have you ever had any business or personal dealings with either of them?"

She hesitated for a moment and then said quickly: "Three years ago I sold some family jewellery to Signor Marani."

"You were satisfied with the deal?"

Again there was the hesitation, and then quickly she said: "No. But then who in this world, when they have to sell their jewellery, gets as much as they expect for it?"

"Who indeed," agreed Spadoni. "What happened when the train entered the first tunnel?"

"No light came on. After a few moments there was a shot, and then I heard the naval officer shouting. Finally Signor Betti flicked on his cigarette lighter, but before we could really see anything the train came out of the tunnel. Signor Marani was lying in his corner with a revolver on the floor by his feet.

"Did you hear anyone moving?"

"I don't know. In the darkness … it is hard to remember."

"Thank you," said Spadoni. "You may go." Then to the station-master he added, "Send in Captain Zampi."

Captain Zampi was middle-aged, severe and unmoved by the sight of Marani's body. He had little to add to Signora Monzio's story. When he had entered the train at Bologna, only Signor Betti was present, then arrived the deceased and finally Signora Monzio. He estimated the time the train had been in the first tunnel under the Appennines at about two to three minutes. He knew both men as partners in a diamond business, and ten years before had in fact bought his wife's wedding ring from them.

Signor Betti followed Captain Zampi. He was a thin, pleasant-faced man in his thirties, carrying a Panama hat, silver-topped stick and pigskin gloves.

Spadoni handed him a letter. "This was found in the inside pocket of your partner's jacket."

The letter read:

Dear Mario.

Since our last talk I have thought the whole thing over. There is only one thing I can do, God knows, I see no other way. Forgive me the distress I must cause you by bringing it all to a swift end.

Ugo

"This is for me," said Signor Betti. His face clouded as he looked towards the stretcher.

"Does it explain the suicide?"

"It does. We have been in partnership for years. But over the last few months things haven't been right. I couldn't believe it at first, but in the end I was forced to face Ugo with it. In Rome we have a legitimate diamond business, but Ugo—he lived extravagantly and kept a large villa near Bologna as well as in Rome—had taken, when he was doing a deal with people who knew little about stones, to exhibit real ones for sale and then switch them for fakes when the deal was made. It's a deception which can take years to come to light, if it ever does. But I found this out and came to Bologna to see him about it. He was coming back with me to Rome to make a statement to the police. Quite clearly he chose this other way out."

"Have you any of these fake stones?"

"No. But Ugo has." He nodded towards the stretcher. "He carries them in his leather belt. At Bologna I insisted that he bring them back to Rome for the police."

"You stayed at his villa?"

"In the circumstances, no. I could no longer accept his hospitality."

"I see." Spadoni went to the body and undid the jacket. Signor Marani wore no waistcoat. Around the top of his trousers was a leather belt and he could see the faint bulge of the diamond pockets from the inner side of the belt. He stared at the belt for a while, then turned back to Signor Betti. The lids of his eyes were almost closed and his face seemed heavy with sleep. In a dull, slow voice, he said, "I think your story is true, Signor Betti, except in one respect. The roles were reversed. Signor Marani found out that you were passing off faked stones."

"But that is nonsense!" Signor Betti was on his feet, his face flushed with anger.

"So it might be—were it not for the matter of the belt. Yes, I see it all. Signor Marani wrote you that letter some time ago. You came to Bologna to plead with him, but he was adamant. That and the letter sealed his fate. Yes … yes … it would go something like this. You got to the train early from your hotel and you fixed the electric light bulb so that it would not come on. In the dark tunnel you shot him, wearing gloves, with his own revolver stolen from his villa. You slipped this letter into his pocket. Then you took off your belt with the faked stones in it and fastened it around his body. The whole thing could be done in a minute. Then you sat back with a perfect suicide set-up for your partner's death. Except for the belt. Come and look, Signor Betti."

Spadoni took him by the arm and with his free hand pointed to the belt round the plump waist of the dead man.

"It's your belt. You wear it often in your business and the leather is worn by the buckle at the place where you habitually fasten it. But you're

a thin man, Signor Betti, and on a fat man like your partner you have to fasten it four holes farther out thus exposing two things—the worn marks made by your own use, and your own guilt!"

FILL THE NIGHT WITH MURDER

Barteo Mondoni was lying flat on the cushions in the stern of the launch. His hands folded behind his head, he was staring up into the sun-burnished sky. A few pigeons from the Piazza San Marco flew across the patch of blue. The air was full of the chatter of people moving up and down the waterfront, the cries of hawkers, and the shouts of gondoliers touting for customers.

Humming a little tune to himself, Barteo was inwardly cursing Venice, the people in it, and his own bad luck. Somehow, within the next ten days, he had to find 100,000 lire. If he had any sense, he told himself, he would find it in the same way as he had long ago found enough money to make the step from gondolier to launch proprietor.

Two tourists looked down into the boat and Barteo closed his eyes, pretending to be asleep. He was hired for the afternoon anyway, as he had been every afternoon that week. He lay there, a plump man of forty in a blue shirt and white trousers, his square, browned face topped with black curls. In that moment he decided to do it.

"Barteo!" It was a woman's voice calling from the quay.

Barteo slid off his seat quickly and stood up. A smile cracked his face and his strong white teeth flashed. What a beautiful sight! She stood there in a white silk dress, a red belt about the middle and a touch of red scarf at her throat, and the wind from the water took the lovely sweep of her fair hair and gave it life. Whoever Signor Lampson was, thought Barteo, he was a lucky man to have such a wife—and rich. The rings on her fingers would have paid off the debt on Barteo's launch and kept him and his wife, Maria, for years.

"Signora Lampson," he called cheerfully. "*Ben venuto* ...." He reached up and helped her into the launch as though she were a princess.

"Barteo," she greeted him. "Always laughing, always gay! This afternoon I have brought a friend and you must sing some of my favourite songs for him."

As she stepped by him, Barteo saw that a man was standing on the quay waiting to come aboard. Barteo gave the man a little bow and then helped him in. At once he disliked him.

This man, he knew at once, wasn't her husband. She had shown him a photograph of her husband, a large, bulky-shouldered man, well into his fifties. "He goes bald, Barteo," she had said, laughing. "That is because he works so hard to make money for me to spend ..." No, this man wasn't her husband. He was young and expensive-looking—the kind Barteo saw around Harry's bar—with wide shoulders that fell away to slim hips and a

dark, hard-cut face with large, cold eyes. The kind of eyes that remained without expression even when he smiled.

Barteo's afternoon was spoiled. He took them into the shallow lagoons toward Burano. Venice fell back on the skyline in a delicate frieze of towers and domes. He drove fast because Signora Lampson insisted on it, and he sang for them, but his heart wasn't in it, for all the time he could see the two of them sitting in the stern.

Giasone—for he had heard her call him that—could have dropped dead and the launch owner would have been unmoved. Barteo decided that if he had to go back to his old pickpocket ways of finding money he would start with Giasone.

And he did … Two hours later as he helped the pair out of the launch at San Marco, he expertly picked Giasone's wallet from the man's inside pocket! He watched them go off, arm in arm. Then, squatting down by the engine, he opened the wallet; it contained a few letters, a driving license, and 50,000 lire. It was a lucky first haul. In a week if such luck held he would have his 100,000 lire. Giasone wouldn't miss his wallet for some time. By then anyone might have taken it. All Barteo had to do was to throw the empty wallet overboard on his way home. He began to straighten up.

As he did so someone jumped into the launch behind him. He turned quickly to find himself facing Giasone. On the quay was Signora Lampson. Giasone just stared at him with his hard, still eyes. Then he reached back and took Signora Lampson's hand and helped her in.

"Start up and go out," said Giasone curtly.

Barteo looked at Signora Lampson, She was beautiful and poised, but for the first time he saw a hint of ruthlessness about her unsmiling mouth.

"Do as he says, Barteo." There was no warmth in her voice.

Barteo took them out and down toward the Lido and then at a sign from Giasone he shut off the engine.

Giasone broke the silence. "You were unlucky, Barteo: A few moments after we left you I wanted to show Signora Lampson a letter from my wallet. Very unlucky."

Barteo took the wallet from his pocket. "Here it is, *signor*. I ask your forgiveness."

Giasone shook his head. "Keep it. You can tell your story to the police."

"The police? But, *signor*, is it necessary?" Barteo turned toward Signora Lampson. "Signora, cannot the whole thing be forgotten?"

"Why should it be?"

Fear stirred in Barteo. "But you do not understand, signora. Years ago, when I was a gondolier, I served several sentences for theft. If you take me to the police now, I shall get the maximum sentence … and I have been

straight for years and years. It will kill my wife. You understand, she has not been well. I have had to spend money on doctors for her and so the instalments on this boat have fallen behind. Otherwise, I would not have done this … Oh, *signora*, please understand … I had to find the money by the end of the month."

Giasone looked at Signora Lampson. She turned to Barteo

"Barteo," she said gently, and there was a smile on her face now. "How much do you need to pay off your debt?"

"A hundred thousand lire, *signora*."

"We could show you a way of earning that, a way out of your troubles, Barteo—if you would help us. We could forget all about the police."

"*Signora*, I will do anything," said Barteo eagerly.

Giasone chuckled and the sound was like pebbles being washed together by the sea. "It is a little thing, Barteo. But do not try to make fools of us. I have a quick temper. On a dark night a man might find himself in a canal."

"What is it?" asked Barteo.

"Tomorrow Signora Lampson's husband arrives in Venice. You are a man of the world, you will understand that Signora Lampson is no longer interested in her husband, only in his money. It would be convenient if he had an accident. Then I could marry the *signora* … and we should be so happy. You, too, Barteo. We should all be happy."

Barteo knew they were in earnest. They would turn him over to the police as ruthlessly as they planned murder.

"Tomorrow evening," went on Giasone, "you will take the three of us out to Torcello. Signor Lampson wants us to dine at the Locanda Ristorante. He has a passion for the pressed duck they serve there. On the way back you will stop and sing us some songs. Then, unfortunately, Signor Lampson—who will have had too much to drink—will fall overboard. Although we go round and round looking for him he is not picked up. Alas, he cannot swim … So simple, so natural."

"But I can't. That would be—"

"An accident," said Giasone.

"I won't do it!" Barteo shouted.

"So? Then let us go to the police now. *Avanti*!"

But Barteo didn't move. He was in their hands and he knew it. He sat there for a long while and they waited, and in the end he said almost inaudibly, "Very well. I will do it."

"You are sensible, Barteo," said Signora Lampson.

That night Barteo lay in bed by his sleeping wife and tried to find a way out. But he could see none. If he knew where Signor Lampson lived or where he would be staying in Venice, he could tell him the whole story. The man might well pay him the 100,000 lire he needed for the warning

and use his influence with the police to quash any charge of theft. But he had no way of finding Signor Lampson. And if he went to the police—who had no love for him anyway—Giasone would deny everything, and he would never get the money he wanted, his boat would be lost and later the blow would come from the darkness.

He spent the next day in misery, sitting in his boat well out in the lagoon, searching for some solution. But at 8:30 he was waiting in his launch for his party to arrive.

"Barteo!"

She was standing on the quay, gay and smiling, her body sheathed in a gold dress, the sparkle of jewels about her neck and arms, a fur across the lovely bare shoulders. So beautiful, he thought, and so evil. With her, in evening dress, was Giasone and another man—Signor Lampson, a big hulking figure with a ponderous, humorous face.

Barteo went forward and helped them all in. They went out across the waters to Torcello, a half hour away. Behind him Barteo could hear them laughing and joking, and the sound made him feel sick. Once Giasone came forward to him and he felt the hard pressure of a gun in his side.

"*Va bene*, Barteo?" The harsh whisper was close to his ear.

He nodded.

He switched the headlight on as they ran into the narrow canal that led up to the landing stage for the Locanda restaurant. He helped them all out and then sat there, watching them as they went up the little stretch of rough road to the Locanda.

It was nearly three hours, close to midnight, when he heard them coming back. As he helped the man aboard, Signor Lampson said, "My wife tells me you're a good singer, Barteo. You must give us some songs on the way back." His breath smelled of wine and he had a couple of bottles under his arm. "Barteo shall fill the night with song!" called Signora Lampson, and she put her arm about her husband's shoulder and rubbed her cheek against his. Barteo turned away, unable to watch, and started the engine.

From that moment Barteo lived in a black dream full of anxiety. When the lights of Venice were still distant on the steely face of the lagoon waters, he stopped the launch and switched off the headlights.

"Song and wine!" shouted Giasone. Barteo sang, and the bottle went round. Signor Lampson, full of wine and good spirits; joined in. Then, after about ten minutes, it happened. Signor Lampson stood up, announcing that he would sing a song. His great bulk swayed unsteadily. Barteo saw Giasone rise and throw himself against the man. There was a shout, a moment of struggle, and then Signor Lampson was overboard. Giasone jumped forward to Barteo, the automatic in his hand.

"*Avanti! Presto!*"

Barteo started the engine and with a roar the launch moved away into the darkness toward Venice. Not for five minutes would Giasone allow Barteo to put the headlights on.

* * * * *

Barteo sat with Signora Lampson and Giasone in a room on the second floor of the Questura. Outside ran the Rio dei Greci where the launch was moored. Barteo listened to Giasone telling the story of the accident. Signor Lampson had been a little drunk … It was so unfortunate … They had searched frantically … Alas, he could not swim.

Signora Lampson was the picture of a woman numbed with shock. The police captain rested his chin in his hands and nodded now and again. When Giasone had finished, the captain rose and said, "We will send a police launch out to make another search." He nodded at Barteo. "Come, you can take them to the place." Barteo followed him out of the room and, as he walked, he could feel the stiff crackle of notes from the 100,000 lire which Giasone had paid him on the way back.

When the two were gone Signora Lampson and Giasone sat and waited. They waited so long that Signora Lampson said finally, anxiety moving into her voice, "Why are they so long? Why do they leave us here?"

Giasone shrugged. "You know the police … They have no respect for people's feelings." But there was an edge of doubt in his own voice and he got up, glancing at his watch. It was too long. Over an hour. He began to move toward the door, to find someone and make a protest.

But as he neared the door there was the sound of voices from outside and it swung open. Giasone stepped back and Signora Lampson rose and came to his side.

Into the room came the police captain and Barteo. Behind them, wrapped in blankets, was the bulky figure of Signor Lampson.

"*Caro*!" cried Signora Lampson, all her woman's quickness coming to her aid.

The police captain said, "Signora Lampson and you, *Signor*, are under arrest for the attempted murder of Signor Lampson."

Giasone's hand dropped swiftly to his pocket and he turned toward Barteo. "You dirty little—"

Signor Lampson, astonishingly quick for so big a man, jumped forward and took Giasone by the wrist, twisting it vigorously. The automatic dropped to the floor. Signor Lampson picked it up.

"Barteo is my friend," he said. "My very good friend. But for him—and I shall repay him handsomely—I should indeed be floating in the lagoon." There was a grim smile of satisfaction on his face as he looked

from Giasone to his wife. "When I stepped aboard Barteo's launch in Venice this evening, he stole my wallet. On the way over he slipped a letter into it. At Torcello, as he helped me ashore, he replaced my wallet. He is an expert pickpocket, but no murderer. When I took out my wallet to pay the bill at the restaurant I found the letter. I read it in front of you, but you were too busy looking into one another's eyes to notice. Love is blind …"

He laughed. "Barteo explained everything in the letter. He said he would stop the launch in a part of the lagoon where—although far from land—the water was only two feet deep, so I could stand safely waiting for the police to arrive …" He reached out and patted Barteo on the shoulder, but Barteo was looking at Signora Lampson. So beautiful in her golden gown … so beautiful …

CURTAINS FOR MARIO

Mario Marroti had an eye for beauty. The beauty of other people's jewels. To him they were irresistible. A challenge to his ingenuity.

The sparkle of gems had drawn him to the villa perched on top of a crab overlooking the lake.

He pushed open the little iron-grilled gate and walked through the terraced garden oblivious of the star-studded Italian sky and the night air full of the scent of jasmine. Ten minutes spent on inquiries in the town below had told him all he wanted to know. She lived alone here. No servants. He was in luck. More luck—he admitted it—than he deserved.

Mario eased the front door open gently and stepped into a brightly-lit, richly-furnished hallway. A light streamed through an open door at the head of a short flight of stairs.

He went up them silently on the thick carpet and paused outside the door. He could see across the room to a tall French window. Near it was a small table on which stood an empty champagne bucket end two glasses.

At a dressing-table to the right of the window a woman in a powder-blue evening dress was sitting. Her hands were fastening a diamond necklace about her neck. Rings glittered on her fingers, and, as she turned, having seen his reflection in the mirror, there was a sparkle of diamonds from the front of her dress.

She was young, fair, and very beautiful, but her beauty left Mario cold. His eyes saw only the jewels.

"What do you want?" she asked calmly as she rose with a grace that would have melted any other man's heart.

Mario walked into the room, closed the door and drew a revolver from his pocket, "Your patience for a little while, Signorina Dorimundo."

Her eyes moved from his face to the revolver and then back again. "In this house I am Signora," she said in a steady voice, "I am married. Signorina Elisa Dorimundo, the singer, is for the opera. Here I am nothing but a happily married woman. A woman …" she made a grand sweeping gesture with one hand, rings flashing, "who dwells in the fullness of love. So put that ridiculous gun away. Violence has no place in this house."

Mario shrugged then crossed to the French windows and jerked the curtains closed. "You are all great talkers, you singers and actresses—but it is for me to talk. You will listen."

Elisa rolled her eyes a little and said, "A practical man—and so dishonest."

Mario smiled. "Today you left Switzerland and took the train to Italy. I was on the train."

"So? Unfortunately there are all sorts on the trains. That is why I always reserve a compartment."

"I know. And when you left it for lunch I went into your compartment and put a parcel in your suitcase." He nodded to the far wall where a green case stood near the bed.

"What an extraordinary thing to do."

"You are careless about locks, signorina—"

"Signora!"

"Signora. I was lucky to find your case unlocked. You see, the police began to bother me and I had to leave Switzerland quickly. I knew they would all be watching for me at the Italian border—that luggage would be thoroughly searched. So, you brought over for me my little parcel of jewels. The great singer, Elisa Dorimundo. Would any customs man dare to touch her things?"

"Impossible! Elisa Dorimundo to be treated like an ordinary person!"

"Quite, And now I have come to claim my parcel. Let me have it. I will leave without fuss, though, as payment for my trouble, I shall naturally take all the jewellery you are wearing."

He lifted the case on to the bed and snapped the catches back,

Elisa sat at the dressing-table and calmly began to polish her nails. "You are without exception the most unpleasant man I have ever met," she said. "Take your parcel and go. But, if you attempt to take my jewels, I shall show you that I not only sing, but can kick, bite, scratch and generally raise hell. Someone will be bound to hear."

Mario laughed. "There is no one within two miles. And you forget this—" He turned the revolver towards her. With his free hand he pushed aside articles in the case. Then he straightened up and walked across to her.

"The parcel," he said grimly, "it's not there. You have already opened the case."

Elisa shook her head. "No, I have not opened it."

"But I put it there. Don't try tricks with me! Where are my jewels?"

"Are they your jewels?" She arched her brows at him, unperturbed.

Mario slammed the revolver down on top of the dressing-table in front of her.

Elisa stood up and sighed. "`You are a barbarian. To save my room and the things I love, I shall tell you the truth. It will be of no comfort to you."

"Tell me where the jewels are!"

"Where you put them. In my husband's case."

"But there was only one green case in the carriage and no one there but you."

"True. Have you ever been in love, you loathsome creature?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Everything. My husband and I are in love, We are, we were, and we always will be. But lovers, you know, must quarrel—ah, it is the spice of love. Regularly we quarrel. Over nothing, over everything. Over the scent I wear, over the passing of a cloud. But always we come to earth and find the other's arms waiting. So that is why it was my husband's case."

"You've got to make it clearer than that," snarled Mario.

"But it is so obvious. This morning in our Swiss hotel we quarrelled. I walk out to catch the train to Italy, to our summer villa—this abode of love. And I pick up the first case I see. Later my husband walks out after me. When he is on the train, too, but in another carriage, he finds he has my case. They look the same. So he comes to my compartment when I am not there and exchanges the cases—for in his black, beautiful heart nothing will make him think he will come here tonight.

"Ah, but I know he will. As always, no matter where it is, he will come, and always it will be the same … with red roses, with champagne. See, the glasses are ready." She nodded towards the little table.

"To blazes .with all that. You mean he's coming here and he'll have the right case?"

"But, of course. With the jewels, for a famous conductor such as he will not be bothered by the Customs either."

"Good. Then I'll wait."

Elisa pursed her lips. "You would not object to waiting in the kitchen? I do not like you in my boudoir."

"Signora, you don't seem to understand!" he shouted, "You should be scared. I am debating right now whether or not to kill you. You should be afraid of me!"

Elisa looked at him in surprise. "But I am afraid. Why should I not be? But, because I am afraid, do I have to speak differently and permit rudeness?"

Mario didn't get a chance to reply, for at that moment the bedroom door opened and a man swept into the room. He was tall and dark with rugged good looks, and he wore an immaculate white silk suit. In his arms he carried an enormous bunch of red roses and two bottles of champagne. He put them on the table by the glasses and then held out his arms to Elisa.

"Elisa!"

"Edward!" As she went to him, Elisa turned her head towards Mario. "He is English, you know. But do not be mistaken. With the right woman the English are the most romantic men in the world." She fell into his arms and they kissed.

After a moment Edward held her away to look at her.

Mario broke the silence. "Where is the green case you took from the Signora's compartment?"

"Outside the door, of course," replied Edward, smiling. "How could I come in with roses and champagne and—"

"Get it!"

Edward looked at Elisa. "*Cara mia*, you have such strange friends. Should I?"

"It would be wise, *caro mio*. This man is a jewel thief. I will try to explain later."

Edward shrugged, but, before going to the door, he kissed Elisa's hand and said, "Angel, how could I have been so cruel? I spoke like a beast in Switzerland. Forgive me, for now the stars are over the lake and the moth has returned to the light and beats its wings—"

"Get the case!" snapped Mario.

Elisa stamped her foot. "How dare you? It is part of the ritual, this speech. There is such a pretty bit to come about violins singing—"

"Get the case!" shouted Mario.

"But, of course," said Edward, "for we are anxious to be alone."

He brought it in and Mario soon had his parcel in his hands.

"And now," he said, levelling the revolver at Elisa, "your jewels."

Edward, his face suddenly grim, stepped in front of Elisa. "You are a fool, man. Take your own jewels and go—otherwise you will regret your greed."

"The jewels!" Mario moved a step nearer. "Don't think I won't use this."

Edward smiled. "He insists, my love—to his own cost. Give him them and I will open the champagne. We will drink to their going without regret."

"Edward, my love …" Elisa sighed, then began to take off her jewels while her husband eased the cork from a bottle.

He looked at Mario. "You will regret this. Change your mind. Leave her the jewels."

Mario quickly reached out and took the necklace from Elisa. "And the rest," he snapped.

"Greed," sighed Elisa.

"The undoing of so many men," said Edward, and with a flick of his fingers, he released the champagne cork. There was a great pop and then the long curtains of the French windows swung open. Mario found himself staring at four men in dinner jackets. Each was holding a musical instrument.

The violinist bowed to Elisa. "Signora," he said, smiling broadly, "you have the roses. Love is back. And we hear the champagne cork pop, so now we play for you as always."

"As always," sighed Elisa. "There is no detail Edward ever forgets. No matter where we are. No matter the trouble or cost, red roses, champagne and music."

Before she could say more Edward had moved towards the still astonished Mario and cracked him over the head with the bottle, He, fell, stunned, to the floor.

Edward smiled. "Play, maestro. We will tidy the room afterwards."

The sweet sound of violins floated into the air, as Elisa, with one arm round Edward, looked up at him. They raised their glasses to on another.

THE SLEEPING MAN

It had rained during the night. Now, under the late morning sunshine, everything was fresh-coloured and bright. Each olive leaf was spruce and trim and the fat, glossy orange-trees were dark, enamelled bosses studding the hillside. The pools of water in the roadside ditches threw back a pale turquoise-blue to the Italian sky.

There was a smell, too; the smell of fresh, rain-slaked earth, the friendly tang of charcoal and wood from the *contadini's* cottages, and the faint trace of salt coming in from the sea across the marshes on the breast of a gentle west wind.

As he drove, John Fletcher was whistling an old Army tune, evoked by the war memories this road brought back to him. In those days it had been the road to Rome, the road towards home. Frascati, the Alban hills, Anzio away on his right … Then, he had been a tank officer, not an architect, and his chief interest in Italian buildings had been concerned with their suitability as cover or quarters.

The road looped itself up the side of a hill, cut through a defile on the crest and broadened suddenly into a village square. He drew up by the church, beyond a line of market stalls. Across the square a frieze of drying maize cobs caught the sun, golden against the grey, flaking house-fronts. An old man was tightening the panniers on a small donkey by the church. From him Fletcher—who spoke Italian well—got directions for the Villa Carapacci.

The villa was only a few minutes out of the village and he found it easily. He drew up, and got out of the car. Through the wrought-iron double gates he could see the gravelled drive curving away through an avenue of cypresses. There was a glimpse of the house, red-pantiled roof, a corner of a portico and dark, shuttered windows in a long, elegant façade. He rang the bell. No one answered his ring. He rang again after a while, but there was still no sign of life from the villa or grounds. He tried the gate, but it was bolted and locked.

He went back to the car and, sitting on the running-board, lit himself a cigarette. The day was getting warm now, one of the errant summer days that stray into Italian Novembers at times. The light was good, ideal for photography, and he wanted studies of a fountain in the garden. Early that morning he had visited a *palazzo* on the outskirts of Rome and the fine weather had tempted him to come on to the Villa Carapacci. He cursed himself now for not having telephoned for an appointment. If he did not get in he was going to have a lot of wasted time on his hands.

He rose, slipped his Leica in his pocket, and began to follow the line of the wall up the hill from the lodge gates. The wall was about ten feet high, and ridged with a line of tiles. Fifty yards from the gate he found a thick-stemmed growth of ivy growing up the wall. He made a foothold in the creeper and hauled himself to the top. There was only a short drop to the grounds on the other side.

Very shortly he was making his way through the gardens towards the villa. A terrace ran along one side of the house, its balustraded rail lined at intervals with tall *canephorae*, holding great urns on their heads.

As he stood looking at the shuttered face of the villa, he caught the sound of running water. He moved away, down a flight of steps which led to a wide glade, backed on one side by a gothic arrangement of moss-padded rocks, and dark with a tall fringe of cypresses. A great spout of water burst from the top of the rocks and made its way noisily into a pool in the centre of the glade. In the middle of the pool was the fountain-group by Fuga for which he was looking.

He moved towards it out into the warm sunshine and, as he did so, a patch of blue caught his eyes from a stone bench that stood to one side of the pool.

Fletcher crossed to the bench carefully and smiled to himself. An elderly man was lying on it, asleep in the sun. He was tall, with a rather angular body, dressed in a faded blue shirt, dirty linen trousers and with leather sandals on his feet. He lay in an attitude of complete relaxation, one hand couching his head, the other trailing over the side of the bench, and he was snoring quietly. Here, Fletcher thought to himself, was the gate-keeper who should have answered the bell. Even in repose the man's face had a smiling, puckish quality, and a vitality and intelligence which caught Fletcher's interest. He pulled out his Leica and took a couple of exposures of the man.

He turned away and began to make his studies of the fountain. It was a pleasant group of three lions on a raised centrepiece of marble. On each lion's back rode a naked boy. Water spouted from the mouths of the lions and a great plume of spray soared up between the boys' heads, rising high into the sunlight and then cascading upon their laughing faces. For a while Fletcher was happily absorbed in taking the group from different angles. He had almost finished when a voice sounded sharply from behind him.

"May I ask what you are doing here—and how you got in?"

Fletcher turned.

A girl had come down one of the alleyways leading into the glade and stood now a few yards from him. She wore an old pair of beach trousers and a sweater, and the breeze had taken her dark hair and tangled it over her forehead. There was a smudge of garden dirt on her chin and she carried a trug in which he could see secateurs and a bunch of rose

clippings, the young buds just unfurling in a pale flame colour. About twenty-two, he said to himself, and untidy, but with a natural attractiveness that could take disorder and make it arresting. She was frowning and her dark eyes were angry.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I owe you an apology. I was most anxious to take some photographs of this fountain, and I climbed over the wall—"

"You mean you broke in?"

"Well," he gave her a smile, hoping to take the frown from her face. "*Broke in* is a hard phrase. You see, I couldn't get an answer at the gate. Your porter," he nodded towards the old man, "didn't hear the bell."

She glanced sharply at the old man on the bench, who had sat up at the sound of their voices.

"Peppino," she said, "I shall speak to my father if this happens again. Go back to your duties at once."

For a moment Fletcher thought the old man was going to argue with her. Then, with a slow, impudent smile at them both, he turned away and walked stiffly out of the glade.

Fletcher put his camera in his pocket and nodded towards the departing figure. "We're both in trouble. He for going to sleep and me for coming in without authority. But, please believe me, I am quite an innocent intruder. I'm an Englishman, John Fletcher, and I wanted some studies of this fountain for a book I'm writing on Late Italian Renaissance architecture. I couldn't make anyone hear—"

"It would have been better if you had written for an appointment, Mr. Fletcher, or telephoned …" The frown was fading now, but there was still a contained, watchful opposition.

"I agree—but I only decided to come on the spur of the moment."

"Come from where? Rome?"

"Yes." Her inquisitorial tone amused him. "The Hotel Ventura—you can telephone them if you like and verify my story."

She hesitated for a moment and then gave him a brief smile. "I don't think that will be necessary. I'm sorry, too, if I sounded rather sharp …"

"Please . . . I was the one in the wrong."

She made no objection to his taking a few more photographs, but she stayed with him.

He learned from her that she was the daughter of the owner of the villa, Admiral Vincenzo Carapacci.

When he had finished she walked with him to the gate and let him out.

"Good-bye, signorina," he said, and then, his mouth cornered with a smile, he added, "and thank you for not calling the police."

She laughed at that, the sound gay and carefree, the movement of her dark hair framed by the background of pale olive leaves and the arabesque of the iron gate.

"Good-bye, Mr. Fletcher—and don't break into any more gardens."

Lina Carapacci watched Fletcher drive off down the road. She then closed and locked the gateway and, smiling to herself, walked slowly up the gravelled drive. She went up the steps to the villa terrace and found Peppino waiting for her.

He looked at her, one eyebrow cocked, his greying hair loose and stirring in the wind, and said in English, teasingly, "So, now I am the gate-keeper, Lina?"

"We have to be careful. He was an Englishman. He might have recognised you."

"I doubt it." He came over and took her arm, leading her towards the villa. "You take your duties very seriously, Lina, *cara*."

"Someone has to look after you."

"Do you think so? I have managed very well for the last fifty-eight years …" He squeezed her arm affectionately and laughed. "Now from gate-keeper I shall change to cook, and we shall share an omelette and a bottle of Frascati."

* * * * *

For the next few days the weather was bad, with constant driving rain. Fletcher spent most of the time in his hotel, making up his notes and arranging his photographs. Some mornings later the hall porter brought up with his coffee and mail a complimentary copy of *Donne e Uomini*. *Donne e Uomini* was a national weekly picture magazine. The editor, an old wartime friend of Fletcher's, had arranged to develop and print his photographs for him. Seeing the study of the sleeping man amongst the last batch, he had liked it, and Fletcher had given it to him. In the magazine, marked for Fletcher's attention, was a picture page entitled "Sleep." There were studies of men, women and children in different attitudes of repose. It was with a certain tinge of pride that he saw his study of the elderly man amongst them and underneath it his own name. Some day, he thought, his name would be on the cover of a book. He lay there smoking and drinking his coffee and wondering how he would feel when his book was published. He was at peace with the world. The magazine had slipped to the floor and the Villa. Carapacci was far from his thoughts.

* * * * *

At that moment, in a room above the wide stretch of the Lungo Tevere Testaccio, fronting the brown sweep of the Tiber, a man was standing at a window staring across at the ochre-and-pink huddle of houses and

churches of the Trastevere quarter on the other side of the river. He was a bulky, fleshily-built man, dressed very precisely in a well-cut blue suit. His linen was immaculate, and he gave the impression of having come fresh from a barber's chair, the round, rather solemn face, pink and shining, the crisp dark hair laid back in a neat series of waves. He held a copy of *Donne e Uomini* in one hand.

There was a knock on the door of the room and a man came in.

"Signore Gambona—you wanted me?"

The man at the window turned slowly and for a moment he frowned, as though the appearance of the other annoyed him. Then he said curtly, "Yes, Manzo—I did." The voice was resonant and powerful.

Manzo came forward as the magazine was held out to him. He was a man of middle height, untidily dressed in a grey suit that looked as though he had slept in it. One wing of his crumpled shirt-collar escaped over the jacket lapel, and his shock of brown hair looked as though it had been combed with his fingers. The face was lean, the colour of faded parchment, and he had a habit of biting at his lower lip which gave him a grimacing, vicious expression.

"Look at the photograph I've marked—and then, at the ones on the desk over there."

Signore Gambona nodded to the desk, then turned away to the window and lit himself a cigarette. He heard Manzo stir behind him, but his eyes were on the brown flood of the Tiber. A carabiniere strolled along the river-bank under the leafless trees and a flock of schoolboys came sweeping noisily by on bicycles.

Behind him Manzo said with a sudden touch of excitement in his voice, "It's him! It's the same man!"

"Of course. And this time we mustn't let him slip. He's in Italy still and we've got to have him. You lost him once—"

"But I had a man on him right up to the airport and then—"

"Your man was a fool!" The voice was hard, menacing. "Don't employ fools, Manzo. I don't—not for long, anyway."

Manzo was silent for a while. Then he came over to the window, the magazine still in his hands. He was looking at the photograph of the elderly sleeping man taken by Fletcher.

"Fletcher," he said. "That's not an Italian name … the man who took it?"

"American or English. Find him. Find out where the photograph was taken. But do it carefully."

* * * * *

The telephone in Fletcher's room rang. It was the hall porter.

"There is a Signore Rinale here, sir, who would like to see you."

"Rinale?" Fletcher knew no one of that name.

"Yes, sir."

"All right. I'm just coming down."

He had been working since the early morning. He hoped Signore Rinale would not keep him long, because he liked to have a stroll before lunch. He went down and found Rinale waiting for him in the hall.

Rinale was a short, rather harassed-looking little man whose hands moved nervously the whole time he talked. He was like a scared, nondescript bird tensed always for sudden flight. His face, however, was pleasant, and there was a quality about the man which roused a sympathy in Fletcher for him. After their first few words he felt he wanted to tell him to calm down, because no one was going to ill-treat him. They went into the bar where Rinale ordered a *negroni* for Fletcher and *aqua minerale* for himself.

He patted his waistcoat and said apologetically, "I have ulcers. It is a sign of the successful business man … Ha, *Dio* success, she is a hard horse to ride." He leaned forward across the table and gave Fletcher an engaging smile.

"Riding horses usually gives you callouses, not ulcers."

"How? Ah, yes. That is very good." He paused for a moment, as though considering whether there was any hidden meaning behind the joke, decided there was not, and went on. "Mr. Fletcher, I must explain myself. I am a publisher from Milan"—he pulled out a card and dropped it on the table. "I am here for a few days only, but I have seen the photograph you took in *Donne e Uomini*, and I am very interested. From the editor I have been given your address here, and I hope you can help me."

"How?"

"I am thinking of publishing a little book of photographic studies and this kind of photograph is just the type of thing I want. I should be pleased if you went through your photographs and picked me out any others of a similar nature and sent them to me …"

Nervous and ready for flight he might be, but Fletcher realised that he had no trouble in talking: words poured from him like a spring song. He would pay well, the publication would be a *de luxe* one, and it was quite clear that Fletcher had a great talent for capturing the noble beauty of the human face.

"This old man, now—one knows at once that he is Italian, a gardener or a porter; all his days have been toil, the seasons have weathered him and the days have worn him down. You must have been delighted the moment you saw him."

"I was indeed. It's a very fine face."

"Where did you find him? Perhaps we might get more studies of him?"

"He was asleep in the gardens of the Villa Carapacci. I went there to photograph a fountain by Fuga."

"The Villa Carapacci? Where is that? Near Rome?"

"Yes, it's near Frascaati." He would like to go there again. He would like to see the girl again … dark, the wind teasing her hair, the finely-moulded, aristocratic face a little uncertain in expression between annoyance and … and what? There had been some odd quality in her anger which still puzzled him.

It was at this point that the hotel porter came into the bar and stood by him. He looked up enquiringly.

"There is a lady in the hall, signore, who would like to see you. She does not give her name."

He excused himself from Rinale and went into the hall. A woman was standing looking into one of the show-cases full of leather goods and the hall porter nodded towards her. As Fletcher went up to her she turned. It was Signorina Carapacci. But now she was quite a different creature. The untidiness was gone. She stood there, very elegant in a green suit. In the lapel of her loose coat she wore a gardenia spray, and on her head was a small white cap. For a moment it was hard to reconcile the two women, and then he saw that on her face was still that odd expression which escaped his definition.

She came up to him and held out her hand.

"I have to talk to you, Mr. Fletcher. I want your help."

"Well, of course I'll do anything I can."

"I didn't realise that when you were at the villa you took some photographs of Peppino, but I've just seen one in *Donue e Uomini*. Mr. Fletcher, I want you to promise me that you will not tell anyone where that photograph was taken."

He saw her chin come up, a little stubborn movement which gave him the fleeting impression that scmewhere deep within her she was forcing down her own fears.

"But—"

"Please. It is extremely important, to me and to many other people—"

Something in his manner made her break off suddenly

and she put out a hand and touched his arm. "You haven't told anyone already, have you?"

"Well …" Fletcher hesitated.

"Have you?" Her voice was urgent.

He nodded. "I am afraid you've come about five minutes too late." Dismay clouded her face as he explained about Rinale, who was still waiting in the bar.

"Do you think this man is a genuine publisher from Milan?"

"Good gracious me! Why shouldn't he be? Look, what is all this about?"

"I'm sorry," she shook her head. "I can't tell you. You must accept that. I know it sounds silly and I can see it's beginning to irritate you—but it is important, and if I could tell you I would. But it is essential to me to know whether this man is genuine. Do you think I could meet him?"

"If that's what you want. You'd better come and have a drink with him. I'll say you're an old friend of mine. How shall I introduce you?"

"Not as Lina Carapacci. Please invent some other name. If he isn't genuine, I don't want him to know I'm from the Villa Carapacci."

Fletcher could not prevent himself smiling and, as he took her arm and led her into the bar, he said, "You sound as though you've stepped right out of a melodrama."

With Rinale she was charming. She was an old friend of Fletcher's who had just arrived in Rome from Florence. She was gay and attentive to Rinale and talked to him of friends she had in Milan, but Fletcher could sense that Rinale had become uncomfortable. He was obviously a man who became more scared and less sure of himself with women, and the wonderful flow of words dwindled away. Very soon he made an excuse to leave them.

The moment Rinale was out of the bar, I.ina rose quickly.

"Well?" Fletcher gave her a grin. "What do you think of him?"

"He's not genuine. I talked to him about publishing friends of mine in Milan and he pretended to know them. He couldn't have done—they don't exist. I've got to follow him."

Fletcher gave her a puzzled frown.

"Are you really serious?"

She turned on him, her lips tight, a tiny flare of anger in her eyes, and when she spoke her words were crisp, icy.

"Of course I am! However, I'm not asking for any further help from you. You've done enough damage."

She was almost out of the hall before he caught her up.

"I'm sorry—" he held her arm,. turning her round. "If I have caused trouble, I should help. If you're going to follow strange men, I'll come with you."

Fletcher's chief impression of the next hour was that he had strayed into a fantasy. The girl Lina was real enough, the smell of her gardenia, the busy streets of Rome, the swirl of traffic, the loitering crowds on the pavements and groups sipping *apéritifs* at the cafés … all were real, but somehow out of focus.

Rinale was just driving off in a taxi as they reached the, hotel entrance. Fortunately, Fletcher's car was parked outside and he took Lina to it. The

next five minutes proved to him something he had always suspected, that following another car in a crowded city was difficult and highly dangerous. However, by taking risks and breaking several traffic regulations, he managed to keep fairly close to the taxi. It was with some relief that he saw the taxi draw up outside a bar in the Piazza Barberini. He drove his small car round the square and parked on the far side of the Fountain of Tritons. Lina left him and went across the piazza. After a few minutes she came back.

"He's telephoning inside."

"Probably calling his office in Milan. Then he's going to have lunch."

"He's got no office in Milan."

"He might have. If an attractive girl began to talk to me about architects in London whom I knew did not exist, I might humour her. That's what he did to you."

"I'm sure he did not!"

"Sorry. Hullo—there he is now."

Rinale had come out of the bar and was walking along the far side of the piazza. They got out of the car and followed him at a safe distance. Rinale, unhurriedly, went across the square and into the Via del Tritone. He stopped at a kiosk and bought himself a paper. Then he walked on, turning the pages as he went. It was easy for them to follow unobserved for there were plenty of people about. Some way down the Via del Tritone he swung off to the left along the Via della Stamperia and they had to hurry to keep him in sight. They turned the corner to see him half-way down the street and, at that moment, he disappeared into a side alley. Lina began to run and Fletcher followed her.

When they reached the mouth of the alley it was to find that it was a dead-end and deserted. The whole of one side was taken up by the offices and works of a printing establishment. On the other side was a narrow garden with tall iron railings and a padlocked gate, and beyond it a low building with a single doorway. Over the doorway was a run of neon tubing, unilluminated, which spelled the word "Apollodoro." The doorway was painted a shabby red and, flanking it, were framed photographs of cabaret artists.

"Well"—Fletcher looked at Lina—"you've got a choice." He tried the door of the night club as he spoke, but it was locked. "He's either in the night club, the printing works, or the little garden over there. I say the printing works. He's a publisher after all."

"I'm certain he's not a publisher. That story about wanting to use your photographs was nonsense—"

"Oh, I don't know. I take very good photographs."

"Please … this is serious." She was silent for a moment and then, almost to herself, she said: "He took a taxi to get to a telephone. But after that he was in no hurry. I wonder whom he telephoned?"

"I could help more if I knew more."

"You've been very kind, and I'm sorry I haven't been more appreciative. But I can't tell you anything. I must get back to the villa right away. I've got to make sure Peppino's all right."

"I was rather hoping you'd stay and have lunch with me." They were walking back towards the Via del Tritone now.

"I haven't time for lunch. I must get back to Frascati." Her voice sounded overwrought.

Fletcher, who liked her and wanted to help her, said: "In that case, I'll go without lunch, too, and drive you out to Frascati."

* * * * *

They did not talk much as they drove out of Rome. Fletcher realised that she was impatient to get to the villa, and he drove as quickly as he could. Now and again he glanced across at her. She had taken oft her hat and the wind blew through her hair, drawing it back in a smooth, black sweep. It was a fine, sensitive face, the soft red lips taut now with the anxiety which he could not share, because he did not understand it.

It was unfortunate that half-way to the villa the car had a puncture, and he had to walk back to a garage to borrow a jack. He worked quickly to replace the wheel. Lina helped him as much as she could, and he could sense in all her movements her mounting impatience against the delay.

When they started again, he said: "Why don't you tell me what this is all about? If I knew, perhaps I could help you more."

She was silent for a moment. Then she looked across at him and the tension of the mouth relaxed a little as she smiled. "You're being very helpful now. I'm grateful to you. But, please, don't ask me questions I can't answer."

The gates of the villa were open when they arrived. Fletcher drove up the gravelled drive and stopped under the terrace at the front of the house. As soon as the car had drawn up, Lina was out and running up the steps. Fletcher followed her. They went into a wide, marble-tiled hall from which a wrought-iron stairway led to the upper floors. Lina paused in the hallway.

"Peppino!" she called. "Peppino!"

Her voice echoed hollowly about the lofty hall, but there was no answer. Without a word to Fletcher she turned and raced up the stairway and . along a corridor. She stopped before a green-painted door and called: "Peppino—are you there?"

When there was no reply, Fletcher suggested: "He may be asleep—or in the garden."

She shook her head, her face drawn with serious lines, and pushed the door open. In the room was a little silk-canopied bed, and a sandalwood wardrobe and chest. A small table under the window was strewn with paper and books and to one side of it stood a typewriter. A piece of paper signalled whitely from the machine. Lina went over to it and drew it out.

Fletcher watched her as she read. He saw her face go grave, saw the sudden tremulous movement of her lips and then slowly she sat down on the edge of the bed, staring at the paper in her hands. A great tenderness awakened in him for her. He went to her and put. Ifis hand on her shoulder.

"What's happened, Lina?"

Silently she handed the paper to him and he read it.

"Lina cara,

"I have a problem to think over and am going away for a day or so. Don't worry. Everything is all right. I will telephone you tomorrow.

F.L."

Fletcher handed the note back to her and said, "Who's F.L.? Peppino?"

She nodded and then stood up suddenly and moved agitatedly towards the window. He heard her say, almost angrily: "He shouldn't have done this to me … He couldn't have done it. Something's wrong."

He went to her. "What do you mean? Look"—he turned her round gently and held her by the shoulders—"Lina, I don't know what all this is about. But I can see how much you're upset. Why don't you tell me about it? Come on," he smiled, the pressure of his hands on her shoulders tightening a little, "it always helps to talk …"

He saw the hesitation in her. Then she moved away from him and, looking out of the window, she said: "Perhaps I should … I am worried, terribly worried … You see," she turned towards him, "Peppino is really Doctor Francis Longman." She paused, as though she expected him to be surprised, but he said nothing and she went on "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't. He's English?"

"Yes. I'm sure something's happened to him … Oh, I'm sure of it!"

It took him some time to get the story from her. Doctor Francis Longman was a celebrated bacteriologist engaged on work of the highest national importance and he had come to Italy a month before to consult with an Italian scientist who was too ill to travel. He was a man who hated to be accompanied by security guards. In fact, the year before, he had gone

to France and had deliberately slipped his guards. For a while it was thought he had been abducted and there had been a lot of publicity. In the end, he had quietly turned up in Paris, declaring that he had a right to some private life.

"But why should you be so worried about him now?"

"Because he's my responsibility. My father is a naval attaché at the Italian Embassy and we have known Peppino for years. I was asked to come with him on this trip and look after him. The visit was quite secret—but now I'm sure someone has got hold of him."

"I see. You mean someone may have recognised the photograph I took?"

"Yes."

Fletcher shook his head. "I think you're worrying about nothing. The note explains everything. He's gone off again."

"But why should he? It's just the thing he knows would worry me. I think the note is false."

"Why?"

"It's typed and it's signed F.L."

" Doesn't he usually do that?"

"Well … he never has left me a note before. But I'm sure he would sign it 'Peppino.' "

"Lina …" He wanted to share her fears but it was impossible.
"Honestly, I think you're making too much of it. After all, if he *was* in danger of being abducted they would never have sent him alone with you—"

"Don't you see? That was the whole point. We came secretly. And they knew he'd never slip off as he did in France while I was with him … No, something's happened to him."

There was no mistaking her certainty and because he hated to see her upset he became practical and forced himself to assume that her fears were justified, in order to help her.

"In that case we must do something about it, right away."

He suggested that she should go to the police, but she was against that, because—the possibility could not be overlooked—if Peppino had genuinely gone off she might start the same sort of unwelcome publicity, the very thing she was anxious to avoid. He persuaded her that she must go to the British Embassy in Rome, where the details of her visit to Italy with Peppino were known, and tell them what had happened.

He drove her back to Rome and waited for her outside the Embassy. When she came out, he could see at once that she was happier.

"Well?"

She smiled. "They think I'm worrying too much. However, they're going to check on Rinale, and they suggest we wait until tomorrow to see

if Peppino telephones. They're like me—they don't want to start anything in a hurry, in case it's all nonsense. They're telephoning someone in Milan to go round and check on Rinale's business address. He's listed in the directory, but there's no answer from the number."

"I'm not surprised. It's eight o'clock. Even publishers go home to eat and sleep. I think, too, it's time we ate. I don't seem to remember having any lunch. After you've eaten I'll drive you back."

He took her to the Albergo del Orso, where they shared a bottle of *Soave*, had *scampi* and then *tornedos* with young asparagus tips. Although his Italian currency was limited, he gave little thought to the expense of the meal. He would eat at a pizzeria for the rest of the week.

When they came out it was late and there was a moon riding high above the Tiber and the Castello San Angelo. They walked up the side of the river for a little way, a thin breeze stirring the bare branches of the trees, the occasional sweep of a car's headlights picking out the dark trunks, and Fletcher held her arm. It was years since he had walked under the moon with a girl. Since the war there had been a lot of leeway to make up in his profession and time had always crowded in on him. Even here in Italy he had found little time to relax, worrying and working at his book, feeling always indebted to his partner in London who had magnanimously forced him to come to Rome and get the book out of his system. Lina was very silent and he guessed that she was worrying about Peppino.

After a while she said, "Rinale might have something to do with that night-club."

"If it'll ease your mind," he suggested, "we'll go and have a look at the place."

"I would like that."

He put her in the car and drove back into the city. A little later he turned into the alleyway of the Via delle Stamperia. At the far end of the alley, the neon sign of the Apollodoro threw a red pool of light against the shadows.

"I can dance anything but a samba," he warned her.

She laughed, and he could tell that she was glad they had come. There was a commissionaire in a green uniform much too tight for him at the door.

Fletcher said to him, "I'm looking for Signore Rinale. Is he here yet?"

"Rinale? I do not know the name, signore. Is he a regular client?"

"I think so."

The commissionaire smiled and shook his head.

They went down a long flight of stone steps into what at some time had been wine vaults. Most of the supporting pillars had been removed. The low roof was draped with dusty folds of dark crimson satin, from which hung small lanterns whose feeble light struggled against the

cigarette smoke that rose from the crowd around the dance floor. On a gallery to one side of the club was a dance band, led by a tall negro. They found a table and ordered a bottle of *Asti Spumante*. When the waiter brought it, Fletcher said:

"I'm looking for a Signore Rinale—do you know him?"

"No, signore. What does he look like?"

For a moment Fletcher hesitated. How could he describe Rinale? He tried. He was short, he was worried-looking, and his hair was a little grey.

"He's a bit like a fluttery, nervous bird, always waiting for the bang of a gun."

The waiter grinned and then looked round the club. With a pleasant contempt in his voice, he indicated the crowd. "It is a zoo. The signore will pardon—but it is a zoo. Everyone here resembles a bird or an animal. It is a thing I have remarked to my wife about the clients. For the *spumante*, signore—that is two thousand lire. No, I do not know your Signore Rinale. *Grazie*, signore."

When he was gone, Lina looked at Fletcher and smiled. "Waiters have a low opinion of human beings. One can hardly blame them."

They danced. As they moved around the floor Fletcher kept his eyes open for Rinale, but without success. The people there were very mixed, some in evening dress, and others in lounge suits. Their laughter was brittle, overdone, the whole atmosphere in which they moved touched by a feverish, fixed excitement.

For a while the floor was cleared for the cabaret show. It was like many Fletcher had seen: a line of dancing girls, not quite in step, breathing rather heavily, a gypsy singer, then three men dressed as British, American and French soldiers, exchanging a dreary succession of jokes about Marshall Aid and the Atlantic Treaty.

Lina put her hand on his and said, "We're not going to find Rinale lure. I'm beginning to think you're right about him. Let's go when the cabaret's over."

The last act came on. There were two people dressed in tights and leather wrist-bands, a strong man and his female assistant. The strong man was tall, padded with enormous muscles, wearing a yellow wig and a great curling moustache. His assistant was thin and weedy, her lank black hair straggling in rats' tails to her narrow shoulders, and her whole manner one of great gloom. There was a great deal of husband-and-wife bickering between them as they prepared for their act. They were quite funny and, for the first time, Fletcher and Lina found themselves laughing together as the strong man failed to lift his bars and his under-sized wife did it for him.

When the act came to an end the club was noisy with applause. As Lina and Fletcher clapped their hands the couple bowed low to the

audience, then to each other and, straightening up, whipped off their disguises.

For a moment Fletcher and Lina went on clapping, laughing still. Then the laughter went from them. The strong man stood now revealed as a big, soft-faced woman, and the wife as a small, thin man.

Fletcher felt Lina's hand on his. Then without a word, they were both on their feet.

The little man of the act was unmistakably Rinale.

* * * * *

Rinale was standing before a long make-up bench when they entered. He was in trousers and shirt and was frowning as he adjusted a coloured bow-tie in a cracked mirror. Under the naked light of the bulb over the mirror his face was a pale, biscuit colour and the greying hair dusty and lustreless. The room was untidy and smelt of smoke and cheap powder. From behind a screen in one corner the woman's face appeared, large and flaccid, the bushy mass of blonde hair giving her the impression of an untidy lioness.

Rinale recognised them at once in the mirror. He stood there without turning or speaking. Down the corridor outside the dressing-room came the muted sound of the band and a faint echo of voices. Fletcher put out a hand and closed the door. As he did so, the woman, raising her arms to slip a dress over her head, asked petulantly of Rinale, "*Sono i vostri amichi, Guido*?"

Guido turned and, relieving his own embarrassment or fear, snarled at her: "Hurry up—we've only got five minutes."

Fletcher came forward and said firmly: "Of course we're friends of Guido's. Aren't we, Guido?"

Guido for a second found courage to smile. "I hope so, signore. What can I do for you? You must be quick. Mara and I are on again in a few minutes." As he spoke he slipped into a jacket, the shoulders padded, the waist narrowed. He stood there, a rather faded yet oddly elegant figure.

"You've got time to answer a few questions. So your name isn't Rinale?"

There was an exclamation from behind the screen and the woman's voice came irritably to them: "Rinale? What have you been doing now, Guido?"

Guido ignored her and answered: "No, signore. It is Ponzio, Guido Ponzio."

"Not a publisher, either?"

"No, signore." Then, a little proudly, he added: "I am an actor."

"Guido, have you been up to your monkey tricks again?" Mara's voice was sharp with shrewish alarm.

"Shut up!" Guido made an apologetic movement of his arms towards Fletcher and Lina. "You come at a bad moment, signore. In a moment we are on again. I hope you will not be angry with me because of my little joke. This is a sordid life"—he indicated the room—"and sometimes I like to pretend I am not what I am." Talking began to give him courage and invention. "Who has not tried to make a daydream real? An unhappy actor … so for a while I play at being a publisher from Milan. At heart, you see, signore, I am a boy."

Mara came from behind the screen in an evening dress and turned her back to Guido. "Do me up." Over her shoulder she snapped "So you lied to me. Is it this day-dream that suddenly put two thousand lire in your pocket today?"

Mechanically Guido began to fasten her dress. "Quiet, Mara. You do not understand."

"Who paid you the two thousand—and for what?" It was Lina, and Fletcher could hear the tension in her voice. The discovery of Guido had brought back all her anxieties.

"Do not believe a word he says, signorina," said Mara. "He lies as naturally as the smoke goes upwards. If it is more trouble, then this time I am finished with you. Do not expect Mara to pick you out. Who paid you the two thousand?"

Guido pushed her away and, picking up a straw hat from the bench, put it on his head and turned to the mirror to adjust the angle. Over his shoulder he mumbled pathetically:

"Signore, we are on. I cannot stop here to talk."

Fletcher pursed his lips. He put out a hand and swung Guido round.

"Who paid you, Guido? And what for?"

Guido hesitated for a second, then gave in. "It was a man."

Mara laughed waspishly. "That is a good beginning. It commits no one."

"I do not know him. He comes up to me in a café-bar. It is very dark in there and I am a little drunk … He wants to find out where is taken this photograph of yours. Almost I refused, because I had a feeling he was not honest and—"

The rest of his words were lost in an outburst from Mara.

"So, I was a fool to think you would go straight. *Dio*—why have I put up with you so long—" She raised her hand and smacked him on the face. Guido's lips tightened, but he made no protest. Mara turned to Lina and her face was suddenly serious. "Signorina, it is true what he says. We must go on. If you keep him here the manager will be angry. We may lose our jobs. That is no light matter. But for Guido, I will make this promise. When we have finished you will come back and finish with him. He shall tell you everything. This business is serious, eh?"

"Very serious."

"*Va bene*—if he is difficult we shall call a *carabiniere*. He is too wise to lie to a policeman."

There was a loud knocking on the door and a man's voice sang out "Hurry, you pigeons!"

Fletcher looked at Lina. She gave him a little nod.

An uneasy' smile came back to Guido's face. "*Grazie, signore*. It will be as Mara says."

Fletcher and Lina went back to their table. As they sat down, Mara and Guido, backed by a line of swaying chorus girls, were singing a duet. Despite the seriousness of their discovery, Fletcher could not dispose of the warm feeling he had for Guido.

Lina said: "It is no good relying on his word. The best thing to do is to take him to the police or the Embassy. I don't trust him."

* * * * *

Signore Gambona leaned back in his chair. For some time he stared at Manzo without saying anything. He was thinking how much he paid Manzo a week—quite a lot. And from thinking of Manzo's salary, he went on to think about money generally. In his business he could never budget ahead, never quite know what overheads he was justified in carrying. He began to grumble aloud. "The old people at Il Praterello … What will that be? A couple of days at the most—say three. Five thousand lire. They will keep their mouths shut, too. Then there's Arma at Chioggia. There won't be any cutting down on him. He's too important … a shipper." He sighed gently. "It would be nice to be in real business. Arma must fix the boat. After that, it's out of our hands."

"When will the old man get to Praterello?"

"To-morrow morning. I've told Bastini to leave him there and then go on to Arma. We'll go up to-morrow. Pity, it's meant using two cars. Still, I don't see how we could have avoided it. What did you pay Rinale?"

"Rinale … oh, Guido." The edge of a wolfish smile showed for a moment about Manzo's lips. "Five thousand—it was a ticklish job."

Gambona reached for his wallet and counted out three one-thousand-lire notes. He pushed them across the desk.

"You don't fool me, Manzo. Three thousand. You probably paid him two, but you're entitled to a commission."

"How long have we got—before the trouble starts?"

"Three, maybe four days, but that's all we need. Arma won't be able to arrange a boat any quicker. The note that was left should hold the girl for a day, maybe two."

Gambona was silent for a while, wondering to himself whether he could push *them* to a higher figure than the one fixed. He was not sure. They could be hard … and it might lead to trouble in the future.

The telephone rang and disturbed his thoughts. He picked it up, and as he listened, his face began to cloud. When he replied, his voice was curt and vicious. "Guido, you're a clumsy fool ! There's only one way to do this, otherwise you'll see the inside of the Coeli Regina. Those two are dangerous. Mara must help … What? … Of course she'll help. She'll suffer as much as you if she doesn't …" He went on, his voice dominating, giving his instructions. Manzo relapsed into his chair, biting gently at his lower lip.

* * * * *

The second part of the cabaret show lasted half an hour and in that time Mara and Guido were on and off the whole while. Once they were off so long that Fletcher was about to rise and make his way to their room, but at that moment they came on again to join in the finale.

As soon as the dance music started and couples rose to invade the small circle of floor, Fletcher took Lina's hand and began to move towards the small door that led to the dressing-rooms. They went through the door and up a small flight of steps into the dimly-lit corridor outside the dressing-rooms. They were met by Mara, her evening dress looped up over one arm, as she came hurriedly towards them.

"Signore"—her face was angry, her large bosoms heaving like a sea taken with a restless swell as she breathed hard. "He has gone this moment. *Malandrino*! I could not hold him. But if you are quick you will catch him. This way."

She took Lina's arm and began to run down the corridor. She pushed open a door and they crossed a large room full of dancing-girls, who turned and watched them in curiosity. One of them shouted:

"Eh, Mara—you will have to run fast to catch Guido. He is away to another woman!"

Mara shot a stream of abuse over her shoulder and swept Lina and Fletcher through another door and down a curved flight of steps that led into the foyer at the main club door.

"There he is!" she cried, as she ran into the street.

She pointed up the alleyway. The straw hat of Guido shone under a street lamp. He was just getting into a taxi.

"Follow him, signore."

Mara watched Fletcher and Lina run across the alley to his car. As they drove off, she turned wearily back into the club, the false anger gone from her, her face thoughtful, unhappy.

Turning out into the Via del Tritone Fletcher found the taxi was about a hundred yards ahead of them.

"The moment we get our hands on him we'll take him to the Embassy." He glanced at his watch as he drove. It was half-past two. "Will there be anyone there?"

Lina nodded. "I know where to take him." She glanced across at him. "I'm glad you're with me. But I'm giving you so much trouble …"

He shook his head. "Don't worry about me. I'm enjoying it." Then, seeing her face, he said quickly: "Sorry—I know it's serious now. But it's going to be all right."

The taxi turned right, off the Via del Tritone, and a little while later was going down the broad, deserted run of the Via Nationale. It was here that Guido must have realised that he was being followed. The speed of the taxi increased and it suddenly turned sharp left, taking one of the roads that ran south down towards the Colosseum. After a time it turned right into a maze of little streets about the Via Cavour. But now, unhampered by traffic, Fletcher found it easy to keep on its tail. Finally it turned into the Via Dei Fori Imperiali and went at full speed towards the Colosseum. It pulled up two hundred yards ahead of them, and Fletcher saw Guido leap out of the taxi, pause for a moment as he paid the man off, and then—as the taxi moved away—begin to run towards the great, towering bulk of the Colosseum. Fletcher pulled into the kerb. He leaped out, Lina following him.

"He's going to try and lose us in the Colosseum. Come on!"

He began to run across the wide stretch of the piazza towards the black-arched and colonnaded façade of the Colosseum. Ahead of them they could see Guido, hatless now, an insect-like figure, scurrying towards the shadowed arcades of the gigantic ruin.

The street lights in the great avenues converging on the piazza were still burning. But it was late and there was no sign of life except the hurrying figure of Guido, now slipping into the shadow of the Colosseum. Great banks of cloud were rising in the night sky, obscuring the moon, and a cold wind had wakened. A flurry of rain struck across their faces as they ran.

They followed Guido into the ruin and heavy darkness closed over them. Coming out under a little archway, they paused, the darkness defeating their eyes. They stood there, listening, and for a moment there was only the sound of their own breathing and the cold, unfriendly lisp of the wind over the tumbled stones and walls. The moon slipped out from behind a cloud and they saw the grey stones and weed-grown tiers of benches rising grim and deserted around them. Then, from their left, came the sound of a stone, loosened by someone moving.

"This way." Fletcher started forward.

The moon was gone now and they moved along the rim of the amphitheatre, stumbling, their steps uncertain in the darkness. Fletcher began to realise that their hunt might be fruitless. Guido probably knew this place like the back of his hand, but to them it was a maze, He paused again, listening, and then, distinct from the sound of his own breathing and the night wind, he heard the stealthy sound of cloth rustling and the long sigh of someone breathing yet trying to control a hunger for breath. He darted forward, glimpsing for a moment a paleness in the dark before him. The paleness faded from him and he raced on, found himself in a narrow archway and, as the moon emerged slowly from clouds, saw Guido standing, pressed against the wall of the arch vaulting. Seeing them, Guido turned as if to run, but Fletcher leapt forward and had his hands on him. Guido struggled and his arm came up, striking desperately. Fletcher held him, beat down his arm and muttered

"Don't be a fool, Guido ! You can't get away,"

The resistance went from Guido and in the returning darkness his voice, frightened and uncertain, came to Fletcher: "Signore … please. Leave me alone. I have done nothing wrong."

Fletcher took a grip on the man's jacket front and shook him gently. "You're coming with us, Guido—and you're going to tell us everything you know. Everything—"

"John—look out!" Lina cried urgently.

He turned and was aware of other figures crowding in on them from behind. In the darkness he was suddenly encompassed with a press of arms and bodies. A fist crashed into his chest and he stumbled, falling, his hands grasping at the rough walling of the arch. He heard Lina shout again and then the cry choke to silence. He tried to rise, but a body hurtled against him and he felt hands reach out for his throat. Desperately, he lashed out and felt his fist smash into flesh, heard a sharp grunt of anger and pain and then, twisting away over the ground, he jumped to his feet.

The moon slid solemnly into view again. Momentarily the scene was printed in cold blacks and greys before his eyes, the bare sweep of steps and benches, the long curve of the archways and the hunched, advancing figures of two men bearing down on him. Guido and Lina had disappeared. Behind him was the back wall of the vaulting. He ran forward, throwing himself at the two men, and heard one of them laugh contemptuously. They held him, struggling and swaying, and an angry panic took him as he thought of Lina, his mind obsessed with the one thought that he must get to her, must find her …

He struck out madly, and the struggle seemed to last an eternity. His desperation heightened time, movement and menace into a fantasy. Arms tightened around him, trying to still his blows, a foot smashed against his knee, drawing an angry sob of pain from him. Then he had an arm free, his

fist driving towards the paleness of a face, an anonymous blur that suddenly dropped away from him as his arm tingled with the shock of his blow. He whipped around, striking again, felt his knuckles crashing into bone-hard flesh. He swung away, kicking madly at a shape that rose up from the ground and then, as the moonlight passed, he was plunging forward into the darkness, free of his attackers. Behind him as he ran, fending himself off from the stones and masonry that waited in the cavernous darkness, he heard the two men racing after him.

"Lina!" he shouted desperately, and his voice echoed between the crumbling cliffs of masonry.

Moonlight came back and he saw a great black gulf beneath him. He turned away, dropped down a tier and swung into the gloom of an arched tunnel. Somewhere ahead of him he saw the faint edge of a street light. Behind him now the sound of the following footsteps had ceased. He stood motionless, listening. The darkness returned and brought with it an oppressive silence. He leaned back against the stones, breathing hard, and then began cautiously to move down the archway towards the light.

"*Ecco!*"

He heard the shout behind him and the beat of feet ring against the arch. He ran on. The distant opening widened and he saw the great stretch of the piazza and, framed in it, the Arch of Constantine, a pale grey confection, remote and unreal, and then, at the edge of the piazza a car standing and two men hurrying towards it, holding between them a figure that struggled and twisted. He saw something white lift and swirl in the wind to the ground, and knew it was Lina's hat.

He came out of the Colosseum, through a narrow opening that debouched on to the wide pavement. As he did so, a man stepped forward from the side of the opening and tripped him. He fell headlong, his out-thrown hands taking the fall, the loose rubble and stones rasping at his skin. His body hit the ground with a force that drove all the wind from his body. He lay there sick and shaken, his breathing a slow, laboured succession of sobs. He rolled over, impelled still by the urgent desire to reach Lina and, as he tried to rise, he saw a face above him, saw a mouth gape with savage pleasure so that the teeth shone whitely, a face that hung over him, wolfish and pitiless. He raised a hand, but from the darkness of the sky above him something long and black swept down and he was hit over the head. Once … hearing the abrupt jerk of breath forced from his assailant by the effort, and then again … This time the blackness of the sky and the night folded itself around him.

Manzo turned to the two men who had come out of the opening.

"Get him in the car quickly!"

* * * * *

It was raining, hard, slanting rain that slashed viciously against the windscreen of the car. The noise of the tyres made a voracious, angry sound against the wet road. Lina sat very still in the back of the car, her arm round Fletcher's shoulder, holding him against the sway and jolt of the machine. The morning light was cold and unfriendly over the wet hillsides and she watched the country unfold itself like a film without interest, seeing it with her eyes, but her thoughts far from it. They were dropping down now into a valley, the hillside clothed with stiff pines and patches of leafless oak. Below the trees a series of terraces traced with the prim lines of vines marked the ground in neat ruling, and in the valley bottom, as the car took a curve, she saw the white edge of foam from a swollen torrent.

On the other side of her Guido lit himself a cigarette and settled more comfortably in his corner. The two men in front were silent, the driver's attention all on the wet road, the other occasionally fussing with his windscreen-wiper, which was working only spasmodically.

They went through a village and she saw a man in an old army groundsheet standing outside the shabby albergo, saw a road plaque and read—"Bologna 180 Kms." They were not even bothering to hide from her where they were going.

The man beside the driver turned and gave her a smile. "He's sleeping now, isn't he?"

She gave him no answer, her lips tight.

His smile became a little broader, but the movement of his shoulders suggested that he understood her feelings and did not mind.

"He'll be all right. But I agree with you, signorina. I do not like this kind of thing at all. Fundamentally it is not adult … but what is one to do?" He turned back and left her alone.

Fletcher was sleeping, but it was an uneasy sleep. Holding him was a comfort to Lina. It was something she could do, the only thing just now, but in it was all her gratitude to to him and her regret for having brought this on him.

Guido said suddenly, "Signore Gambona, shall I be able to telephone Mara? There will be trouble at the club when I don't turn up to-night."

"The others will have told her."

"It is very inconvenient, Signore Gambona. We were making ten thousand a week there. Something must be done about that."

Signore Gambona stirred uncomfortably and then jerked over his shoulder: "This is no time to discuss business, Guido."

The driver of the car laughed dryly. "You're finished with Rome, Guido, for a while. It won't be safe for you—or any of us—unless Signore Gambona makes up his mind about those two."

"Shut up, Manzo. You drive. That is your job. The thinking belongs to me."

But if the responsibility belonged to Gambona, it was not a prerogative which he relished at that moment. Until these two had appeared on the scene, he had had the problem well in hand. The professor would be shipped off quietly … He had no curiosity about his future, knowing well it would never be satisfied. In the Adriatic there would be a transfer to some timber-ship bound for the Black Sea. He would have then gone quietly back to Rome and collected his money. But now he had this young woman and the Englishman. He was not being paid for shipping them, his clients would not want them, and their disposal was his problem. Already he could see the expense and trouble involved unless … and here his mind rebelled against the violence implicit in the thoughts which would follow. He sighed gently, not wishing to accept the inevitable conclusion. It could wait for a while … And, anyway, he was certain that Guido and Mara made nothing like ten thousand a week. A stirring in the back seat made him turn.

Fletcher was awake, lying still against the curve of Lina's arm. He looked at Gambona without speaking. Gambona gave him a little nod and said, with a faint paternal note in his voice:

"I am sorry, signore, to have had to treat you like this. It is quite impersonal …"

Fletcher raised a hand to the lump on his head. He was still a little hazed and his head was thumping viciously. He found himself replying pedantically, his voice unreal, himself oddly remote from this moment as great swathes of pain were drawn through his head. "Don't think there's anything impersonal about a blow on the head … It's very personal … It's—"

He swayed forward a little and Lina caught him and eased him backwards against the cushions of the car. Guido leaned across her and held out a flask.

Lina accepted it and held it to Fletcher's lips. The brandy drew him together. Some time later Gambona spoke to him again, and this time he was awake, aware of himself clearly and the others.

"Just sit there and don't give any trouble. Heroics"—there was a touch of disdain as Gambona said the word—"won't do you any good and will only compel me to unpleasantness, signore. I should regret that."

Fletcher stirred angrily. "You're going to regret a lot of things. What do you think you're going to do with us?"

Gambona passed a hand gently over his waved hair and turned away. It was a question he wanted to avoid for a while.

" John"—Lina put her hand in his and he held it firmly, finding a smile for her, as she went on—"I'm sorry about all this. If only—"

"Don't worry …" He squeezed her hand, knowing that from him she wanted comfort and strength.

The rain stayed with them, veiling the countryside in long, sweeping grey shrouds as they drove north. Whenever they went through a town or a large village both Guido and Gambona became alert, turning towards them, watching them, but they gave no trouble. Once they were held up for an hour by a lorry that had skidded across a bridge, blocking the road. Manzo drove the car back from the bridge and they waited while some *contadini* and the lorry crew hauled the vehicle off the road. During this time Gambona produced a flask of wine, a length of salami and some brown bread. They ate, silently, and Fletcher found himself hungry.

They came down off the Apennines, avoiding Bologna, as the evening was closing about them. On the plain the fields were flooded. In some places the road was a dark ribbon stretching across the swamped orchards and farmlands. They stopped at a bridge, under which a flooded river roared angrily, while Manzo filled up the petrol tank from an old army 4-gallon container he took from the boot of the car. For a while the two were left alone in the car and Fletcher asked Lina:

"Do you know where we are?"

"Yes—we're going in the direction of Ferrara."

When they started again, Manzo switched on the headlights and the countryside was lost to them. They drove through an unchanging curtain of rain.

Two hours later the car was bumping and swaying across a rough country road. The headlights picked out a long run of wall broken by a roofed gateway, and they moved through into a wide, cobbled yard, flanked by farm buildings. Before them was the tall façade of a three-storied farmhouse.

They were taken out of the car and into the house. In the long, low kitchen a man in corduroy trousers and a red waistcoat embroidered with flowers rose from the rough table, on which stood an oil-lamp. He was very old, his face cut and seamed with years and his hands were gnarled and twisted like olive limbs. A woman, not so old, stood over the stove at the far end of the kitchen, stirring a saucepan. She gave them one look, her face grim and disapproving, and turned back to her cooking.

"Where is he, Meo?" Gambona asked the old man.

"Upstairs." Momentarily Meo seemed to hesitate on the verge of some protest, then, with a slow, resigned movement, he pulled a key from the pocket of his waistcoat and handed it to Gambona. Gambona nodded to the door at the end of the kitchen and Fletcher and Lina were shepherded towards it by Manzo and Guido.

"And Bastini?"

"He went this morning with his friend."

"The sooner you all go, the better! *Dio mio*—that I should have such a son!" It was the woman who spoke, sharp and bitter, and without turning from her fire.

"Mamma—" Meo made a weary gesture of protest.

Gambona laughed and before the old man could say more, cut in "The same old Mamma. She would rather I was here, eating polenta, scratching the earth with my nails." He held out his hand for a moment and looked at the well-kept nails. "I eat four meals a day, Mamma—when did I ever do that in the old times here?"

The old woman made no answer.

Fletcher and Lina were led up the stairs, lit by a lamp the old man carried before them. There was a dark, close smell about the house of mice and corn and clothes and stagnant air.

Fletcher heard Gambona's heavy tread on the worn stairs behind them, and then his voice, saying disdainfully: "This house smells of poverty. Once you've known it, it takes years to get it out of your nostrils." He laughed as he heard Meo mutter to himself angrily.

On the top floor they were taken along a corridor. A gleam of light showed from under a heavy doorway at the end.

Gambona unlocked it and stood aside for them to enter. They went in. The door closed behind them and they heard the key turn and a bolt being pushed over.

It was a long room, with one barred window at the far end. Against one wall were two small beds. In the centre of the room was a terracotta stove with a pipe that went straight up into the ceiling, and close to it a low table with a lamp on it. Along one wall was stacked a great pile of empty wine-bottles and flasks, thick with dust and cobwebs. Near the door the floor was spread with straw which covered the season's crop of apples, and the whole room was redolent with their sweet, faintly pungent aroma.

Seated at the table was Dr. Longman, reading. He stood up, eyed them silently for a moment, and then, with a smile, came to them and put his arm around Lina's shoulders and rubbed the back of his hand gently against her cheek. Then, looking over her head at Fletcher, he said cheerfully

"When I was a boy I used to be locked out of the apple room. Being locked in one is a new experience."

Lina suddenly made a convulsive movement, burying her face in his shoulder. "Peppino—it's awful, awful. It's all my fault—"

"Lina." Peppino held her comfortingly. "Lina, *cara*—Don't worry."

* * * * *

It was a long time before they settled down for the night. Lina had a bed to herself, while Peppino and Fletcher stretched out on the other, head to toe. None of them undressed, for it was cold in the room and they had few blankets.

Fletcher lay there in the darkness, his thoughts and his discomfort keeping him awake. During the war he had known danger and hardship, but they had been legitimate, something he had shared with thousands of others, so that their universality made them acceptable. This was something quite new.

Fletcher had found Peppino wise, friendly, but possessed of an incurable levity which he suspected was a counter to the immense responsibility his profession had brought to him. No attempt had been made to hide anything from him by Bastini and another man who had driven him up. He was to be shipped from Chioggia. Whether he knew anything of importance, whether he possessed research results on paper or only in his head was of no importance to them. "Over there" they would either find ways of making him talk, persuading him to work—or he would be eliminated. Any of these results was valuable, either positively or negatively. He had sat munching an apple, explaining it to them and breaking off humorously to comment that Meo ought to spray his trees against apple pit.

It was clear to Fletcher that Peppino saw no merit in being depressed by their situation. But he, Fletcher, wanted more. His pride and body, resenting the abuses suffered by them, demanded action. He fell asleep wondering what he could do.

The morning gave him little chance for any action. Meo brought them coffee and slabs of bread spread with a cherry *marmellata*. All three ate hungrily, wishing for more. Fletcher stood by the closely-barred window and looked out over the countryside. There was little he could see, and that depressing. The farmhouse stood on a small rise, the long wall running completely around it. At the back of the house, across a flooded field, he could see the embankment of a river that was running high. As far as he could see the land was flooded, the brown water lapping about the boles of the fruit- and olive-trees. Peppino came and stood by him.

"The river," he said, "is a small tributary of the Po. I talked to Meo yesterday. This place is not far from Rovigo. The nearest big village is Aisella about three miles down the river. I've passed through it once or twice when I've been motoring."

Lina came and joined them and, without thought, Fletcher slipped his arm through hers. After a silence she said: "What are we going to do? None of us seems to want to talk about that, but we're all thinking about it. We must do something!"

Peppino turned away from the window, a humorous glint in his eyes. "My only authority for a situation like this is John Buchan. Maybe you younger people have some new authority. The least Buchan would have suggested would be that someone stood beside the door and hit Gambona on the head as he came in."

"The door opens the wrong way," Fletcher pointed out. "Besides, it would probably be Meo … poor old boy."

As he spoke there were the sounds of a key in the door and the bolt being drawn. Gambona came in. He was freshly shaved, his big face shining, and he looked cheerful. With him was Manzo, and they both wore raincoats.

They stood silently watching the three, and slowly, with a deadly clarity and awful conviction of helplessness, they knew that the moment had come. Peppino was going to be taken away.

Lina put her arm through Peppino's, holding him. She would never see him again … never. Peppino touched her hand. She turned furiously towards Gambona.

"No—you can't do it! You can't take him!"

"Signorina … please," Gambona said quietly. Then he nodded to Peppino. "Doctor Longman … please to come with us. You two will stay here. When we come back we will decide about you."

There was a ruthless urbanity in Gambona's manner, a vigorous quality of assurance that suddenly enraged Fletcher. He picked up one of the wine-bottles and stood in front of Peppino.

"If you want him, you'll have to get him!"

Gambona shook his head slowly and pulled a revolver from his pocket. "Don't make me act hastily, signore."

Peppino reached out and took the bottle from Fletcher.

"Thank you, John. I know how you feel—but it would do no good." Peppino picked up his book and accepted a ground-sheet from Gambona. For a moment, as he paused at the door, looking at Lina, Fletcher felt anger rise again in him and would have gone forward, but Lina's hand held his arm.

"It won't help. Peppino … good-bye …" Her voice faded.

"Good-bye, Lina. God bless you both." He was gone.

As the door closed on them, Lina turned towards the window. Fletcher, watching her, saw her shoulders shaking gently and for a while he left her alone. He sat down on his bed, staring moodily at the dusty pile of empty wine bottles. Peppino had gone, and they had been helpless, and soon now they, too, would be taken.

He heard Lina move away from the window. She stood before him and he saw her face, the sadness in it touching him, the courage behind the passing smile she gave him rousing all his tenderness and anxiety for her.

He reached out a hand and she sat beside him. Then with a sudden, abrupt movement her head was on his shoulder and he was holding her, stroking her hair, comforting her as her body shook with the release of her tears.

They sat there for a long time; alone in the musty, disordered room, with its pungent apple smell. The call of Meo's cattle, the clap of pigeons' wings from the birds in the courtyard came distantly to them. But now they were isolated, in this tiny room, removed from the life outside, two negligible ciphers whose cancellation remained only a matter of time. Their unimportance to others drew them close to one another. He began to talk to her, hardly aware of what he said, but knowing there was comfort and strength for them both in his words, in the triviality of talking. Time now was their enemy and its power seemed less compelling when robbed of silence. Yet after a while silence came back.

He kissed her gently and they sat, his arm about her waist, holding her hand, caressing it, seeing the faint, blue lines of veins, dusky beneath the skin.

They were still sitting there when, much later, there came the sound of feet outside the room.

The door opened and then slammed viciously. They stood up. Peppino was standing alone before them, a wry smile on his puckered face.

"Peppino!" Lina ran to him and he caught her in his arms.

"Lina—" He patted her arm and smiled at Fletcher over her shoulder. "Gambona's in a very bad temper. I remember my father slamming a door like that once. It came right off the hinges."

"Why are you back, though?" asked Fletcher.

"They couldn't get out. The road is flooded and washed away in one place."

He took off his ground-sheet and dropped it on a chair and then told them what had happened.

The road from the farm had run across the fields a foot above the surrounding flood-water, a narrow line of embankment bordered with poplars and an occasional mulberry-tree. Two miles from the farm the ribbon of road was broken for about twenty yards where the pressure of flood-water had swept it away during the night. A fulvid, froth-flecked torrent poured through the gap. For half an hour Gambona and Manzo had tried to find a way out on to the main road and had failed. Either the other roads were under water or were gapped, or small wooden bridges had been swept away. The farther from the farm they had gone, the more powerful and deeper seemed the floods. In the end, Gambona had brought him back to the farm.

* * * * *

During the afternoon the rain, which had been falling continuously, stopped. Under the escort of Gambona, Manzo and Guido the three were let out into the courtyard to walk on a raised terrace that buttressed the farm wall on the side nearest the river. Guido sat and smoked at one end of the terrace, while Gambona and Manzo guarded the other end. In the yard, Meo was busy about the outhouses, and once his wife, Flavia, came out and fed the few miserable-looking hens that loitered about the house.

Gambona was worried. Early that morning he had had a call from Arma and Bastini at Chioggia that everything was arranged. But now the flooded road had made him a prisoner too. He had telephoned Arma on his return to the farm, saying that he must wait for the floods to drop. He looked up now at the swollen grey sky and then across the brown stretch of water to the river, which rolled and swirled fiercely between its embankments.

Guido came up to Fletcher. His padded suit was crumpled and he looked now like a bedraggled bird. He rubbed his hands nervously, his smile timid, and said, "Don't be too angry with me, signore. That it was to be so serious I did not know. Underneath here"—he touched his heart—"I am a good man, but always something makes it so difficult. A man has so many worries … money, my Mara—"

"Go away, Guido—I'm tired of your act." Guido retired crestfallen.

Fletcher went back to the others. After a while he said to Peppino thoughtfully, "Could we swim that gap in the flooded road?"

"You could and Lina could. I can't swim."

"We'd get you across somehow."

"What are you thinking, John?" asked Lina. Fletcher nodded towards the house.

"I've been looking at the window in our room. I think with a little persuasion the whole wooden framework that carries the bars would come out. It's like the rest of this house—rotten and ready to fall to pieces. We could rip it out tonight and get away."

Peppino turned and stared up at the house. "There's too much of a drop to the ground." His eye travelled the length of the pink stucco front and the small parapet that ran around the roof-edge. "But an agile man could stand on a window-sill and reach that parapet. He could haul himself up and then help others up. When you can't go down, go up—"

"That's what I was thinking. Once on the roof, there may be a way down. It's worth trying. As soon as it's dark I'll go up and have a look round."

Gambona came down to them.

"Time to go back." He paused for a moment and then, with a friendly smile, went on. "I would like to say to you how much I appreciate your attitude towards this unfortunate situation. Human dignity is the last thing

one should relinquish. Myself, this is business and I like to do business with sensible people. *Maledetto*, you are for me just so much merchandise and business overheads."

"The Doctor may be merchandise, but as one of the overheads, I would like to know what you propose to do with Signorina Carapacci and myself when the doctor has gone?" inquired Fletcher.

Gambona held out his hands and his lips pouted for a moment.

"Signore—you make some suggestion—other than the obvious one which would satisfy us all and I shall be delighted. I cannot let you go. I cannot keep you here for ever. *Allora*—what shall I do?"

It was said calmly, but there was no doubt what was in his mind, and instinctively Fletcher put his arm around Lina.

It was at this moment that Manzo, at the far end of the terrace, gave a cry and came running towards them. "The river! The river!" he shouted.

But already his voice was drowned by the noise of the waters. It was an ill-tempered, powerful sound, the grinding, munching growl of a great monster. Two hundred yards away and just above the farm Fletcher saw a thin line of bushes that marked the embankment top slowly tilt and tremble and then a great slice of the river wall was slowly, ponderously, lifted and, backed by a spouting, brown-plumed outrush of torrent, it slid rapidly down to the flooded field below and in a second was lost in a tumbling spate of cascading water. With a tearing, exultant cry the river shouldered its way through the gap like an uncontrolled crowd, ripping away at the bank, widening and battering it. A poplar on the slope of the embankment shook gently as though a soft breeze had taken it. Then, as the torrent sucked around it and the earth was drawn away from its roots, it toppled majestically and a moment later was lost in the turbulent current. The floodwater of the surrounding fields, placid until now, slowly shook off its lethargy. Long black streaks of waking currents, thick with mud and débris, began to mark its surface. For a while, as the group on the terrace stared, fascinated, the floods wavered, swung current against current, and spouted in conflicting whirlpools so that jets of bright water darted skywards. Then, with a lumbering menace, the waters slowly resolved their warring powers and began to move in a broad, débris-stained stream past the farm. It swept by, the first head of unrestrained river-water, in a rising bore, fifty yards from the wall, washing down the long length of the narrow eminence on which the farm stood, lapping rapidly upwards towards a willow and poplar copse that formed the prow of the high land.

They watched the river embankment rot and crumble for a hundred yards, heard the roar of the sliding river, now a long, smooth slope of mottled glass, as it plunged across the fields and orchards and rapidly rose to make an island of the farm and its immediate lands. A voice, trembling, but with a stoic, aged strength came from behind them.

"Here we shall be safe. Not even in the great flood of the last century was Il Praterello swamped … But this night there will be sorrow in all the Po Valley for, if the bank has gone here, it will be gone in other places."

They turned, to find Meo standing behind them.

By the evening, river and flood-land had become one, a great sheet of fast-racing water that stretched as far as the eye could see on either side of them, an angry spate of flood laden now with uprooted trees, pieces of buildings, sometimes a whole hut or farm outhouse and, here and there, the pathetic bulk of drowned cattle and farm animals. Once a duck-punt with two men aboard went racing by, the men shouting and calling in distress. And as the light went, the rain began again and drove them into the house.

They all sat in the kitchen. Twelve feet of racing flood-water, treacherous with twisting, surface-scarring currents, hidden drift- and snag-wood, made any escape by swimming suicidal. Prisoners and prison-keepers were all reduced to a common plight and for a time there was an unvoiced neutrality between them.

Meo's wife, Flavia, cooked for them a frugal meal of *pasta asciutta*.

" We have enough food," she said, "but who can tell how long we may have to make it last?"

Guido and Manzo sat in a corner of the kitchen, playing cards. On a shelf above them was the radio, which they had just switched off. The news on the radio had proved Meo's words true. The high rains of the last month and the mild weather thawing the snow in the Alps and Apennines had swollen the Po and the Adige and this, combined with strong southerly winds backing the waters of the Adriatic up into the Po delta so that the river waters were held up, had broken the banks and precipitated what promised to be one of the largest floods of modern times. In some places the rivers had risen thirty feet and towns and villages were cut off. Already rescue operations were under way. The whole area south of Rovigo and Adria was under water, and Il Praterello was in the centre of that area.

Fletcher sat with Lina near the stove. For want of something better to do they were looking at some old magazines, talking softly to one another at times. Peppino was reading his book, and Gambona was sitting at the table, with his head on his hands, thinking. Meo sat across the fireplace, a rake stock between his knees, shaping the butt with a sharp knife to fit a new rake-head. They were a depressed company, and Fletcher had the impression that hope had abandoned both parties for the time being and trembled above them, hesitating to choose which side to take. Meo looked up and caught Fletcher's eye.

"The river to-night will be full of death. Men, women and children, cattle … all that the floods will have taken. I have seen it before when I was a boy … homes and families swept away. It is a wrath of God which no man can explain …"

It was as though he spoke to himself, for no one answered. Fletcher suddenly caught sight of Manzo's face. He was watching him and Lina as Guido, a faded, crumpled figure in his smart vaudeville suit, dealt the cards. The dog-like grimace was turned towards them. He had not shaved, his hair was a rough thicket, through which he occasionally ran his fingers. His voice, harsh, but with a persuasive, evil quality, broke the silence.

"Signore Gambona …"

Gambona looked up.

"Signore Gambona. I do not know what you think, but to me it is clear. The floods are for us. They may last three, six days, but we are safe here. The telephone still works … but for how long? Get on to Arma and have him bring a launch up the river from Chioggia. He can take us off … Yes, the floods solve everything. The old man is right, there will be death in the water." He nodded sharply towards Fletcher and Lina. "Do you not understand? What will two bodies more mean amongst so many? It could be done now, this night."

He gave a little dry laugh and then picked up his cards and began to sort them. Fletcher put out his hand and took Lina's. He wanted his touch to reassure her, give her strength, but there was fear in his own heart, pounding, vivid fear for the first time, because he could see Gambona's face as the man rose and, without a word, went to the door and opened it. A skirl of wind drove rain over the threshold and the noise of the lusty, brawling flood-waters beat into the room like the frenzied blood call of an angry crowd. Peppino turned and watched Gambona.

"You don't have to do that, Signore Gambona. Once you've got me away you can let them go."

Gambona stirred, one hand lifting, as though the brutality of the rain and floods angered him. "And what happens to me and the others? They know too much."

"If I asked them, they might give their word—"

Gambona turned, the door slamming behind him. "Trust them! I don't trust anyone! No, Manzo is right …" He raised his hand to his face, rubbing his chin. It was a drawn, sad face, the face of a man. caught in his own evil. He looked at the three of them and was about to speak, when Flavia, who had been knitting in the gloom at the side of her kitchen dresser, stood up and went to him. She stopped a foot from him, and her lined, vigorous face was hard and menacing.

"*Figlio mio*"—but there was no tenderness, no love, as she named him her son—"do this thing, here in this house which saw your birth, which saw the unhappiness of your growth to a man, and you do an evil which God will never forgive you. I know nothing of these people, nothing of your affairs, and wish not to know—but if you harm them here then I will be silent no longer. What you do in violence away from Il Praterello is

beyond my conscience, but here there will be no violence. To be safe you will have to silence me and your father." Flavia's voice suddenly lost its strength and she faltered, one hand going to her eyes wearily. "*Dio mio* … that I should have such a son … What was the sin that brought this on us?" She turned towards Meo and he rose and put his arm around her.

"Your mother speaks also for me."

From behind them Manzo said impatiently, "Don't listen to the old fools—chuck 'em in the river as well."

Gambona moved swiftly. His hand came up and struck Manzo across the face, his eyes blazing.

"They are mine! No one speaks so of them!"

Manzo, tense, half-rose and then relaxed and gave a slow shrug of his shoulders. "*Va bene* … now think for yourself."

Gambona went out of the room into the small parlour beyond the kitchen, and a few moments later they heard him using the telephone.

* * * * *

That night they were locked in. They slept like logs, all thought of escape gone from them. The next morning no attempt was made to keep them to the farm. The floods had now risen so that the river side of the enclosing farm wall was lapped by four feet of water and part of the courtyard was submerged. But on the far side of the farm there was a long strip of high ground that stretched for a couple of hundred yards west of the house. On the tip, facing up like the prow of a canoe against the swirling current, was a group of willows and poplars rising from a thick undergrowth of bushes and briars. Over the island, miserable and restless, moved Meo's cattle and pigs and a few other cows and some goats which, swept down by the flood, had saved themselves by struggling ashore.

The three of them sat at the edge of the wood watching the flood. Meo came up to them, an empty pail in his hand. He had been feeding his pigs. As they turned to him, he said gruffly, "This morning, before you were awake, a police boat came to the island to see if we were safe. My son sent them away. He locked his mother and me in the kitchen. We could not speak for you. Now he has spoken to some friend in Chioggia and a launch comes to take you away—"

"When?" put in Fletcher quickly.

"That is not certain. All the boats have been commandeered for rescue work, but when they get a launch it will come up the river for you … To-morrow, the day after … maybe longer. My son's friend could not say. But it will come."

There was a stir in the bushes behind them and Manzo pushed his way towards them.

"Gambona says you are not to talk to them, old one. And you"—he scowled unpleasantly at the three—"are free to move about, but you must keep in sight of the house."

They walked slowly back to the farm-house. Peppino went up to their room to fetch his book, a copy of Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, which he had found.

"Maybe," he smiled, as he left them, "the launch will be delayed so long I shall be able to finish it."

Fletcher and Lina sat talking. There was a close bond between them now, a promise rising for them which made them restless and impatient.

"We've got to get off here. Somehow … and before the launch comes," insisted Fletcher.

But how? That question stayed with them all day.

Just before the last of the afternoon had gone, Fletcher and Lina strolled hand-in-hand towards the copse at the end of the island. Guido, who seemed now to have been appointed their shadow, was about twenty yards behind them. When they paused at the edge of the trees, he came up to them and, smiling ingratiatingly, said, "Signore, you will excuse me. I have been told to stay with you … However, when one is in love it is bad to have a third person around." He gave Lina an apologetic smile. "My Mara, too, was beautiful like you once. If you wish to be alone … I shall not follow."

They went through the trees and stood on the little bush-covered promontory that jutted out into the flood-waters. Fletcher put his hands on her arms, holding her away from him. Her dark hair was damp with the rain, the green suit muddy and crumpled, and her eyes shadowed with fatigue and stress … But she was Lina, someone now close and precious to him. She came to him, raising her face, and he put his lips on hers, feeling the warmth and softness like a benison. They stood like that, holding each other, not speaking, the caresses between them more poignant than any words; their closeness shutting away all danger for a while.

A crash in the bushes behind Fletcher made him swing round. With the full force of the flood behind it, a large, flat, waterlogged section of wooden roofing from some chicken-house or garage had come sweeping down the current and had been driven partly ashore. Fletcher stood there, holding Lina's hand. Then, suddenly, he jumped forward, reaching out for the nearest edge of the roof which was beginning to wheel under the pressure of the stream and was about to be borne off by the current.

"Quick—help me!"

Lina grasped the roofing as well and between them they hauled it a little way up into the bushes.

Seeing his expression, she realised what he was thinking. "But, John … We could never get away like that."

Fletcher took her arm and drew her back into the trees. "Maybe not. It would be under water with our weight, but there are ways of getting over that … He was silent, thinking.

"If we are going to use it, we'd better not stay here. Guido might come along and see it," said Lina. "Do you think it will stay like that?"

"Not if the water rises any more. We must get it up higher." He was moving towards the roof, when Lina stopped him. Behind them, through the trees, came the sound of voices. They turned at once, leaving the roof, and were only a few yards from it when Gambona appeared with Guido.

Gambona smiled at them. Now that the launch was coming he was in good spirits. The problem of these two he had pushed from him for a while.

"Time to go back," he said. "Mamma has a good supper for us tonight. Chicken …" He turned, following them as they went out of the trees. "When I was a boy here, chicken, or meat, only came once, perhaps twice, a year …"

Later when they were locked up in their room, Fletcher told Peppino about the raft. "If only I can get out and the roof is still there I can haul it up and hide it by piling bushes and grass on top of it—"

"You'll never do that by yourself. I shall come," said Lina.

"Will it hold the three of us?" Peppino asked.

"Not now. But if we can find four oil-drums or something to buoy the corners it would ride much higher in the water and we could use it. We haven't far to go. Aisella, that's three miles away. We could make it."

He picked up the poker which stood alongside the stove and went to the window. He inserted the poker between the wooden framework and the masonry and found that the long, wooden studs that keyed it at each corner to the bricks moved easily. In a few moments he had the framework, complete with its bars, resting below the window.

"It's dark enough to risk it now. I'll go first and then help you up, Lina. Peppino—you must make up our beds with straw and hope that no one comes."

Peppino nodded, and said, "It's a true saying that God never shuts a door without opening a window."

Fletcher hauled himself out on to the window-ledge and then stood up cautiously. Reaching up, lie found that his fingers just grasped the edge of the roof-parapet. He took a hold, braced a foot against the side of the window and drew himself up. A few moments later he was reaching down and helping Lina up.

They stood together on the narrow run of leads behind the parapet. It was drizzling slightly and there was a thin, cold wind with the rain.

"This way." He began to move along the roof, Lina holding his hand as she followed. At the far end of the house they found a small gable, the window of which Fletcher forced with his penknife. They climbed in and found themselves at the head of a narrow run of stairs leading down to a corridor, from the far end of which came a faint light. They moved along the corridor away from the light. Very faintly to their ears came the sound of people talking on the ground floor. Fletcher pushed open a rough door at the end of the corridor. Moving into the darkness, his feet struck something soft. He flicked on his cigarette-lighter and saw that they were in a large loft, most of its space piled with corn-sacks. In the far wall was a narrow half-door. Fletcher pulled the bolt and opened the top half of the door. He found himself looking out over the far side of the courtyard. Immediately below him was a narrow flight of steps leading to the ground, by which the sacks were brought up to the store.

"We're in luck," he whispered to Lina.

In a few moments they were hurrying across the wet grass towards the wood, the same thought in each of their minds: if only the floodwater had not risen and drawn the roof away from its flimsy anchorage. They came running through the last of the bushes and, for a moment, Fletcher thought the raft had gone. Then he saw that the water had risen about three inches and the whole of the roof-length was below the surface, wedged at the landward end under a tree-root which held it fast.

Fletcher stripped to his pants and waded in to take the far end of the roof and pull it backwards from the entrapping root, while Lina pushed and struggled with it from the shore. Shivering and muddy, he suddenly felt it come free and swing out towards the racing current. For a few seconds he hung on desperately to it, his nails digging into the soft wood. Then Lina came wading into the water and helped him. Laboriously they drew it in and dragged it, inch by inch, ashore. With his knife he cut branches and swaths of dry reed and covered the platform so that anyone passing casually by day would not notice it.

As they left the copse, the rain increased. The wind rose and they had to fight their way against it, the rain slashing into their faces. Back in their room, they dropped on their beds exhausted. Peppino replaced the framework and then made up the stove, for which they had collected wood during the day, and hung their wet clothes to dry before it.

"All we want now," said Lina, staring at the flickering shadows on the ceiling, "is four drums, some rope and lengths of wood long enough to use as paddles."

"That shouldn't be difficult," said Peppino. Then, with an impish smile, he went on: "The last time I was on a raft, it fell to pieces under me. I was ten at the time."

* * * * *

The next day, as though the weather, too, would celebrate the return of hope, the sky was clear and the sun unexpectedly warm. The three were up early, searching for their materials. It would have caused too much comment if they had all separated, so Lina worked with Peppino and Fletcher by himself.

It was largely a question of strolling casually about the farm buildings and land, and Fletcher found it hard to control his impatience. Guido kept with him, while Gambona and Manzo stayed with Lina and Peppino.

For a long time Fletcher had no luck. Then, making towards the stable, he leaned against the doorway and lit himself a cigarette. Guido came up and talked. Guido seemed quite genuinely contrite and made every effort he could to be friendly. As they talked, Fletcher's eyes were going round the stables and it was with a swift lift of excitement that he saw against the far wall two oil-drums. Hanging above them, too, was a long length of rope. The drums could stay there until the night, but the sight of the rope made him think of Peppino. The climb on to the roof was hard. The rope would enable them to lower Peppino to the ground and then, when they were at the raft, could be used for lashings. Suddenly he was anxious to have the rope now. Luck was with him. One of Meo's cows, hungry from the lack of feed on the overcrowded patch of pasture left, came wandering into the yard and Meo called to Guido to help him drive her out. The moment Guido had gone Fletcher whipped into the stable and quickly wound the rope about himself under his jacket. He walked across the yard and up to their room, where he hid the rope under his mattress.

When he came down, it was to find Lina and Peppino standing on the terrace, watching the floods. He went over and joined them. There had been no abatement of the great rush and press of water. As far as the eye could see there was a shimmering lake of turbulent flood, gay and sparkling under the sun, shouldering its relentless way seawards, making sport of the flotsam and jetsam of the richest valley in Italy. A dead ox, its body swollen by putrefaction, floated by on the stream, its legs signalling stiffly as its great bulk dipped and gyrated. A sodden mattress, with a hen crouched on it, followed. The flood was gorged with the pathetic debris of human and animal life … rich with sorrow-marked booty … chairs, tables, boxes and pieces of barns and sheds.

Speaking very quietly, for Gambona and Manzo were not far away, he told them of his discovery.

"There's another drum in the scullery behind the kitchen," said Lina. "I went in there with Flavia. At night we could get it out. I slipped the catch on the window."

"That makes three," said Peppino. "We need four to keep the raft stable and high enough out of the water."

"We'll find it, don't worry. What about paddles?"

Peppino smiled. "I've been collecting firewood for the stove. There's enough wood in our room to build a boat … If we had time we might even do that."

They had their lunch in the kitchen with Gambona and his companions and, as they were eating, the telephone-bell rang. By some miracle the line was still intact, the heads of the telegraph-poles stretching away alongside the flooded farm road, not more than two feet above water.

They heard Gambona answering the telephone and after a while he came back into the room. He was smiling, looking happier than he had done for a long time.

He looked across at Manzo and said briefly: "Arma. The launch will be here to-morrow some time."

Fletcher saw Lina's face, the dark eyes turning to him; and he knew what was in her mind. He put his hand across hers and held it openly. If the launch was coming next day it meant they had to get away that night. They had to get away. And they still needed one more drum.

They had to find another drum. All the afternoon they looked. Just looking was difficult. They had to avoid rousing any suspicion in Gambona, had to school themselves to move slowly and disinterestedly. For a time they kept together. Then Lina and Peppino went into the house, hoping they might be able to examine some of the rooms and find something.

Fletcher carried on with his search outside until the light began to go. A drum, another drum … Now that they had something to work for, a chance opening up for them, he found himself moved by a vigorous, challenging excitement. They were going to beat Gambona. They had to beat Gambona. Another drum … the thought kept hammering in his mind. To escape using three would be madness … He thought of the crazily-pitching raft, badly buoyed in the turbulence of the flood … saw Peppino being swept away as it tilted …

He wandered round the house and yard which had become so familiar to him that there seemed never to have existed any other place in his life. This was life, his life … this shabby, poverty-touched farm. Rome and his first meeting with Lina seemed far away. There was only this urgent, present moment. He stopped suddenly. Before him was Gambona's car, parked against the side of the house. He had a swift memory of Manzo refilling the petrol-tank from a four-gallon tin.

He slipped round to the back of the car and opened the boot. The petrol-container was there.

"What are you doing, signore?"

It was Guido standing just behind him. The little man had a puzzled look on his face, his head cocked sideways, like a bird. In his excitement Fletcher had forgotten him.

Fletcher dropped the boot cover with a bang. "Do you really want to know, Guido?"

"But certainly, signore. You have been acting strangely all day."

"Well, I'll tell you. I've a feeling the floods will go down tonight. I just wanted to make sure that there was plenty of petrol in the car. I'm going to break out and drive off …"

Guido laughed and Fletcher knew he had covered some, if not all, of the man's curiosity with his nonsense.

"There is no escape for you, signore. These floods will not go down. And, anyway—Gambona has the keys of the car. Come on—it is suppertime."

Supper was an agony of impatience for him. He had no chance to tell the others of his discovery and it was hard to sit quietly eating. The moment they were alone in their room, however, his elation broke out. He picked Lina up by the waist and swung her round, kissing her as he did so.

"We're all right!" he cried. "I've found it—the fourth drum! All we have to do now is to get out and then we'll be away to Aisella before they know we've gone!"

He could see his excitement pass to them. Peppino, going over to the stove, came back with a flask of wine. "We must drink to the success of our venture," he said. "I found this amongst the empty bottles over there. It's quite a good Chianti."

They drank straight from the flask. Lina's face was flushed, her eyes bright. "They never come up once we're locked in," she said. "We'll give them a couple of hours and then go out. There's a lot to be done."

As she spoke there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs and then the door opened. Gambona and Manzo came in.

Without a word, the two began to move around the room and it was clear that they were looking for something. Eventually Gambona pulled the mattress from Fletcher's bed and exposed the rope. He picked it up and turned towards them. Then he said reluctantly:

"Signore Fletcher,'if you are thinking of going through the window—though what you would do then I cannot imagine—you must do it without a rope and face the drop. Also, do not think I have eyes in the back of my head or can read your thoughts. But since this morning Flavia has been moaning because it was a fine day and she could not find her washing-line. I am a thinking man, signore."

They were gone, leaving the three in the flatness of disappointment. One moment hope had been like a wine in their blood, and now … there was nothing but the dark thought of the coming day and the launch that

would take them away. They sat there in silence, hearing the fret of the wind outside and the distant calling of the restless cattle.

Suddenly Lina jumped angrily to her feet.

"We mustn't give up! We can do without rope! We can use the mattress ticking and our blankets and cut them into strips."

"It'll take ages to make ropes out of that—and the stuff's rotten, anyway," Fletcher pointed out.

"Nevertheless—we're going to try!"

She jerked the blankets off her bed and held out her hand for Fletcher's penknife. He gave it to her. For a moment the two men watched her as she worked, then Peppino came over and began to help her. He gave Fletcher a glance, his mouth touched with a wry smile. "Women are incurable optimists. However—I think we must try."

Fletcher stood up. Anger was with him now—a hard, fighting anger.

"Of course we must. We're going to do it. We're going to beat Gambona." He went towards the window. "You two get on with the rope while I go out and collect the drums. I'll carry them up to the copse and then come back for you and the ropes."

He climbed out of the window and on to the roof. Behind him he heard the framework being replaced. He made his way out of the house, full of confidence.

The rain had held off all day and the night, although windy, was fine and clear, with a moon climbing into the sky from the direction of the Adriatic. He got the two drums from the stable easily and carried them up to the copse. He came hurrying back to the car for the petrol tin. Time was their enemy now. When he went to open the boot, he found it was locked. He swore angrily. Guido must have told Gambona of his actions. But this fresh setback only made him more determined. He found a screwdriver in the car and forced the lock of the boot. He hid the tin in the shadows by the loft ladder and then slipped around the house. The other drum was in the scullery. He went across the yard, giving the lighted kitchen window a wide berth.

The window of the scullery opened easily and he climbed cautiously through it. A few yards away, in the kitchen, he could hear the voices of people talking. He lit his lighter and saw the drum where Lina had said it was, under a shelf by the door. He lifted it out. It was light and empty. The window, which he had left open, suddenly swung on its hinges in the wind and crashed shut, then swung back open and banged again. The noise in the scullery seemed thunderous. He put the drum down, doused his lighter and stood listening. The window slammed again, but before he could move towards it he heard the voices cease and then the rattle of the scullery latch. He had time only to press himself against the wall behind the opening door and pray that he would not be found.

Flavia came into the scullery, holding a small lamp.

"It's that catch again, Meo. I've told you to fix it. It slams about in every wind." Grumbling, she began to move towards the window and as she did so her foot struck against the empty drum. "And why you want to leave this old drum in my scullery, I don't know! I've told you to move it."

She leaned over and shut the window. Guido's voice came clearly from the kitchen: "Signora—bring the drum out with you. With a cushion on it, it will make a good seat. Then.I can sit by the fire."

"If you think I'm having one of my cushions put on it, you're wrong." She turned back from the window. Fletcher prayed hard that she would leave the drum in the scullery. But she went on, as she moved towards the door, "But I'll bring it out and then tomorrow perhaps Meo will remember to put it in the stable."

Fletcher saw her lift the drum and carry it out. He stood there thinking of the two upstairs busy with their ropes, and then of Arma, somewhere even now at the mouth of the river—Arma and the launch which tomorrow would be taking them away …

Hating to go back and give the bad news to the others, he searched the stables and outhouses again for another drum. In the end he had to give it up. He made his way round to the loft ladder. In the room he found Lina and Peppino just finishing their rope-making. They saw from his face that something was wrong.

Lina came to him, catching his arm. "John, you've been so long I began to think … John, what's happened?"

He told them about the drum.

"That only leaves us three—can we do it with them?" asked Peppino.

"It would be madness! They'll be difficult to fit to get the right balance. You know what the flood's like. In places it's a Niagara. We shall be thrown off."

"It may be mad, but anything's better than staying here. We've got to try it," Lina insisted. "We can use one of these ropes tied across the raft to hold on to."

Fletcher was silent for a moment. The roof section was heavy and water-logged. With three drums Peppino could not swim …

Peppino caught his eye and said gently, "You're thinking of me, aren't you? We must try. You and Lina can always swim. I must take my chance …"

"It won't be much of a chance if you go overboard."

Peppino smiled, one eyebrow cocked, and answered, "I'll risk it."

They got out of the house without trouble. The night was fast passing. Crossing the meadow to the copse, the cattle moved restlessly, turning their great heads to stare at the three. Somewhere far distant a stranded cock began to crow. It was a weird sound, echoing across the expanse of

rushing, silver waters. Coming over the fields, Lina whispered to Fletcher: "If anything happens, you try and keep with Peppino. I can look after myself …" And seeing her face, pale and lovely under the thin light of the moon, he murmured: "We'll manage. Somehow, we'll manage." Her hand touched him, and he knew she was with him and that nothing could change their love.

Peppino had brought with him three lengths of board which he had collected during the day on the pretext of using them as fuel in the stove. Fletcher made holes in the soft, water-soaked planks to take the lashings, and while the other two lifted the roof section he placed the drums and the petrol can in position and lashed them as securely as he could. They had no time to experiment with the best position for the drums, and he fitted them, two at the corners of one side of the raft and the petrol can in the middle of the opposite side. The mattress roping was rotten in places and occasionally broke when he put too much strain on it. Working under the moon, a chill wind whipping through the bushes, it was hard to control their impatience.

The noise of the flood was an angry beating in their ears and, moving around the raft, they became wet and muddy. The people in the farmhouse were long asleep, so they had no fear of being disturbed. Finally the drums were in place and Fletcher rigged a spare length of rope across the raft for them to grasp if anything went wrong. Another length he fixed to one end of the raft as a painter when they launched it. Between them they lifted the heavy section and eased it gently towards the water.

"Careful with it. We don't want to tear the drums off," he cautioned.

Eventually it was in the water, and Fletcher stood holding the painter. The current tore at the raft's outer edge, raising a line of creamy foam. It dipped heavily at one end, the water running up the boards, but the other end was a good three inches above water.

"Peppino-get aboard and try it."

Peppino waded to the raft and climbed gently aboard. It teetered, then steadied itself, and he moved away from the submerged end.

"Now you, Lina."

She turned to him, her hair a dark disorder, her eyes shadowed and anxious. For a moment she smiled at him. He helped her aboard, holding the painter still, and the raft lurched with the extra weight, and a wash of water surged across it. The raft was straining at the painter as the grip of the current, shouldering against it, made it suddenly alive and cumbersome like some clumsy animal.

"Easy with it!" he cried. "Steady it with your paddles!"

He eased the painter out and grabbed the side of the raft, ready to pull himself aboard. He saw Lina, a length of wood thrust pole-like into the water, trying to steady the raft, and Peppino moving gently to the far side

to check the balance as he came aboard. There was a sudden warning shout from Peppino, and he was pointing upstream. Fletcher, scrambling on to the roof, had time only to see a great, twisting bulk of a dead tree racing down on them. It struck the raft, tipping it and driving it forward so that a great wave swept across it. The dead tree tilted and then surged clear of the raft. The paddle was torn from Lina's grasp and Peppino was flung into the water.

Fletcher grabbed Lina's hand and jumped for the bank. The raft, relieved of their weight, suddenly rose, buoyantly, and spun round like a great revolving plate. He saw Peppino, water to his knees, wade ashore, and then the raft moving away. He flung himself forward in the water and grabbed the side of the raft. He was drawn with it.

Lina shouted and Peppino raced along the bank. The raft gyrated slowly, and then, caught by some wanton current, slanted shorewards and crashed into a projecting spur of bushes. Peppino got a grip on the edge and Lina hurried to help. Fletcher, now on the far side of the raft, worked his way round it, the cold water striking against his body, and helped them drag it a little way up the bank.

"Look!" cried Lina despairingly. She was pointing to the water. Floating free of the raft was one of the drums, torn away from its lashings by the crash. As they watched, it was drawn into an eddy, spun round and then sped away downstream.

They looked at one another in silence. It was the end. With only two drums, no matter how they placed them, they knew they could never use the raft. They would be in the water a few moments after leaving the island. For some time they stared at the waters in silence. Behind them was the stir and heavy breathing of the cattle. Fletcher saw Peppino's face, strained, tight-lipped, and he tried not to think of the first time he had seen that face … The lifting of a camera, the tiny movement of a shutter … so small, so insignificant, and in it death and horror for them all.

Lina said dully, her voice carrying the despair they all felt, "Well, no one can say we didn't try. John … you're shivering. We must get some of these clothes off."

Later, he sat on his bed, his clothes drying in front of the stove which Peppino had started. Through the window the dawn was coming up. Lina came and sat beside him. Hope had deserted them both, but there was a comfort in being close together. He looked at her as she- rested against him, her eyes closed, the slim body in its dirty tousled green suit full of a tired grace, a faint shadow drawing a curve up the side of her throat. In a matter of hours the launch would arrive … He leaned over and kissed her and then, as her lips slid across.his cheek, he heard her voice, almost a sob, "John . . , oh, *caro mio* . . .!"

* * * * *

The first thing Fletcher saw when he came down from their room the following morning and went into the courtyard was the drum Flavia had taken from the scullery. Meo had carried it across to the stable and left it outside the door. He turned to Lina who was with him.

"If we'd had that one, everything would have been all right."

Idly they strolled across to the stable and Lina sat down on the drum. She looked up at him and there was a tightness about her lips, a firmness of expression which was not far removed from anger.

"Must we give up, John? The launch isn't here yet."

He was silent for a moment. It could be done with three drums. Luck had been against them last night.

"Perhaps we could do it with three. But even if the launch is late—how can we work in broad daylight?"

He felt her hand tighten on his arm. "Let's go and see if the raft is still there."

She looked across at Guido, who had come into the yard after them. "He won't follow us into the wood."

The raft was still there, wedged against the bushes, but half of it was under water.

Walking back to the house Fletcher said: "It still only gives us three drums. Could we risk it again?" Then seeing her face he put his hand on her arm. "Yes, I know. We must—if we get the chance."

As he spoke there was a shout from Guido. The man was pointing out at the floods. Coming down the stream was a small boat already submerged to its gunwales and sinking rapidly. There were two people in it. The boat sheered into the island just above the farm and the two people were thrown into the water close to Guido and Fletcher. The two men waded into the water and grabbed the two, hauling them ashore as the rowboat turned over and then, keel uppermost, was drawn away by the streaming flood.

They found they had saved a man and a woman. The man was Enzo Torio, a railway-crossing gate-keeper. He and his wife had spent two nights on the roof of their little house and then had tried to get away in the small boat which had been washed down to them. He was a little hysterical. His wife was going to have a baby soon … any moment. He knelt beside her, his arm round her shoulder, where she sat groaning on the ground, a fat, anxious man, his dark eyes smudgy and ringed with fatigue.

"What is to be done? It is our first—and if she dies! Maria, *cara mia* … How do you feel?"

The woman made no answer. She sat, her eyes shut, moaning quietly to herself, the water from her clothes pooling around her.

Lina said sharply: "We must get her into the house."

Between them they helped the woman into the farm kitchen, where they were joined by the others. Lina and Flavia saw her into a ground-floor bedroom and were soon busy stripping off her wet clothes.

In the kitchen Enzo paced about anxiously. "What am I to do? She must have a doctor. It is any minute now." Gambona and Manzo looked at him and shrugged their shoulders.

Peppino put a hand on Enzo's shoulder. "Do not worry. As a young man I trained as a doctor. I will look after your wife."

"Only until the launch comes," snapped Manzo.

Peppino stared at him coldly. "Until she no longer has need of me!"

"Quiet, Manzo!" Gambona said. Then to Peppino he went on "Do what you can."

Gambona went to the door and lit a cigarette. This was the most accursed business he had ever had. Trouble, nothing but trouble … This Doctor was a fine man. It would be so easy if he could dislike him, have no feeling about him or his friends … Five hundred thousand lire … he was earning it.

Enzo, who had been listening and watching them curiously, seized Peppino's hands and kissed them. "You are a doctor. The Holy Mother be praised … a doctor, here!" His fat face suddenly beamed and, with a swift accession of arrogance, he continued: "It will be a boy! In my family, it is always a boy first! *Dio*, what a two nights we have spent." Without any warning at all, he suddenly collapsed to the ground in a faint.

Peppino went to the woman. Lina wanted to help, but he told her that Meo's wife would be enough. The coming of Enzo and his wife seemed to have disorganised the farm. Gambona and Guido stayed in the kitchen with Enzo, and Manzo posted himself at the end of the terrace to watch for the launch. Desperation making them rash, Lina and Fletcher openly picked up the oil-drum and carried it up to the copse. Fletcher had brought with him the clothes line, which he had again taken from the stable. With the rope they could lash the drums securely. How they were to get Peppino up to it and all escape without notice they had no idea. For the time being—the thought of the launch ever with them—they could only obey the desperate instinct in them to work on. To drop into apathy offered nothing. Hope was the last thing they must lose.

Suddenly as they were working, Fletcher paused and looked across at Lina.

"What a fool I've been! Lina, I've got it!"

"Got what, John?"

"This raft—it's a mad thing with only three floats. But I know how we can get another. Come on."

He began to hurry back towards the farm, explaining what they had to do. Lina went into the house and up to their room. Fletcher strolled around the outside until he was under their window. This side of the house was hidden from Manzo on the terrace. Lina threw down to him one of their blankets. Then, one by one, she began to drop down to him the empty wine-bottles stacked in their room. Fletcher caught them skilfully, checked that each was securely corked, and made a pile of them in the middle of the blanket. There were about fifty of them in the blanket before he signed to her to stop. He gathered up the corners of the blanket and tied them securely with a piece of the clothes line. When Lina joined him, he said: "You see. We'll lash this under the raft and now we shall have a float to each corner."

There was a kind of madness about them, feverish hope rising in them, and making them heedless of the risks they took. The situation anyway was so desperate that to hold back because of any risk would have been stupid.

They worked for two hours on the raft and no one disturbed them. It was late in the afternoon when they had finished, and they came back to the farm kitchen. Gambona, Guido and Enzo were there. Peppino was still in with Enzo's wife. Manzo was sitting on the terrace, ready to call Gambona when the launch should appear.

All day Fletcher had been dreading to hear the shout which would mean the end for them. Now he sat with Lina in the kitchen and waited for Peppino. Everything was ready. If only Peppino would come. They might have to make a run for it, but at least they would have a fighting chance … Time was running out.… Time was precious. If the launch came while Peppino was still in with the woman, then they were lost. Impatience swept through him like a fever. Hurry, hurry, hurry … the word beat through his mind like a tattoo. He could see Lina, sitting with her hands clasped together, her fingers working nervously. Gambona was leaning back, his eyes shut, taking a nap. Enzo walked up and down nervously. Guido tried to talk to him, but had little success. Suddenly Enzo stopped in front of Fletcher and said abruptly:

"You are prisoners here, no?"

"We are."

"Shut up!" Gambona had wakened.

Enzo shrugged his shoulders defiantly. "I could smell evil when I came. I was right." He looked, at Lina. "The good doctor—who is he? Inglese?"

"He's Doctor Francis Longman and—"

Gambona's hand was on her mouth. Fletcher sprang forward, but already Guido was between him and Gambona, and there was a revolver in his hand.

"Sit down, signore. It is silly to make trouble."

Gambona released Lina. "Don't make me angry, signorina, please. And you"—he turned on Enzo—"keep your nose out of this if you ever want to be a proud father."

The afternoon wore on, and the two sat there, burning with impatience, tortured with the fear that at any moment Manzo might come running in. Lina and Fletcher were silent. The strain and impatience of waiting was a physical pressure that seemed to take the life from them. They could only sit, trying not to think, not to feel, hearing the sound of the kitchen clock hammering away, hearing the soft fall and whisper of the fire, and over all the distant roar of the flood waters.

Just as daylight was leaving them, there was a sound through the house which brought them all to their feet. A little later Peppino came into the room. He was tired, but there was a smile on his long, puckish face as he turned to Enzo.

"You can go in, Enzo. They'll be all right. Your wife—and your son."

"A boy …" There were tears in Enzo's eyes as he took Peppino's hand. "Thank you, Doctor." Then with a sudden stiffening of his body he looked at Gambona and said with an angry dignity. "He is one who plans evil against you, Doctor. But you are a good man and all the time I have prayed to Saint Francis in honour of your name and your goodness. He will protect you and your friends, signore doltore …"

"Thank you, Enzo."

"Get in to your wife—you old fool!" cried Gambona, and he pushed Enzo from the room.

Peppino came over to Lina. "I need some air."

She and Fletcher rose and went with him into the yard. Guido followed them.

The moment they were outside Fletcher began to talk hurriedly, his voice low and urgent.

"Listen, Peppino—we've got the raft fixed. Just come with us now and do as we say. Guido will follow us, but I can settle him. Don't hurry, but just stroll …" He broke off, for Guido had caught them up a little as they walked out of the yard.

It was hard for Lina and Fletcher to walk normally. They wanted to take Peppino's arms and run with him to the copse.

They were almost there, when the thing which they had dreaded all day happened. There was a shout from the terrace and, at the same moment, they heard the sound of a marine motor beating upstream.

"It is the launch. We must go back." Guido came up to them and took Fletcher's arm. Fletcher shook his head.

Guido looked at him, not understanding. "But, signore, it must be … Believe me, I am as sad as you, but—" He broke off. Fletcher's manner had suddenly made him suspicious. His hand went to his pocket.

"We're not going back, Guido."

As Fletcher spoke he raised his fist and hit Guido before he could draw his revolver. It was a vigorous punch and the man went down like a log. "Run for it!" he shouted. They all raced towards the copse. Behind them, as they plunged into the bushes, they heard a shout, angry and repeated.

The raft was well afloat, firmly tied with stout rope and as it rose and fell there was the musical clink of bottles from the great bag that formed the fourth float. Fletcher loosened the painter and held it as Peppino and Lina climbed aboard. This time he took no chances, keeping the painter looped round a tree-trunk, and letting it free only when he was aboard. Even so, it was an anxious moment when they were all on the raft and he loosened the rope.

"Now!" he called, and they all pushed with their paddles. The raft, buoyant with four floats, slid out and was taken at once by the current. Gathering speed, it swept down the island towards the farm, the three of them paddling furiously to work it away from the farmland and over to the river, which would take them down to Aisella and safety. As they swept by the farm pasture, they saw Guido rising to his feet. He stared out at them and then he turned and began to run towards the farm, shouting as he went. A few seconds later they were sweeping by the farm wall and could see a long, thin launch moored against it and a man standing in the bows. The man watched them pass and raised a lazy hand to them.

"We've got a little grace not much," said Fletcher.

Below the farm the main course of the river ran in a series of great loops, a broad fairway clearly marked on either side by the tops of trees from the surrounding flooded land. In the main stream, where the current was strong, the raft was difficult to steer, spinning round and round in the eddies. Gradually they worked the raft out of the river, cutting across the first loop between the tree-tops where the current was weaker. But even here the raft spun round and dipped over the hidden banks and obstructions, sometimes sending water clean over it. Once they were unable to avoid the crest of an olive-tree and they smashed through the branches.

"We mustn't do that often," warned Fletcher. "Our bottles won't stand many hard knocks."

At that moment, loud and clear behind them, came the burst of the launch's motor over the water. Lina looked at Fletcher and he nodded. Their escape had been discovered. Guido had reached the farm. But neither of them looked back. Their eyes were ahead, downstream, where lay Aisella. The light was going from the sky now and a soft dusk was

gathering over the waters. A little later they heard the launch move by them on their right, out in the main stream. For a moment their low craft was hidden by the rising tree-tops. They heard it roar away from them and then begin to quest about the river. After a time it sounded nearer and Fletcher guessed that it was quartering the edge of the flooded land.

The raft was taken by a sudden swirl and crashed against some underwater obstruction. Fletcher grabbed Lina's arm as they were thrown into a heap on the wet planks. The raft hung, trapped by the hidden snag, and the stream swept over them, threatening to tear them away. Fletcher jumped to his feet and began to rock the raft violently. For a moment it lurched and swayed and then, with a vicious grating noise, slid off into the current.

As they sat up and began to paddle again, Peppino pointed to one corner of the raft. It was low, the water rolling over it as the platform tilted.

"Move back!" Fletcher shouted. The crash had broken some of the bottles in the blanket float and the raft had lost buoyancy.

"Look!" cried Lina. The flood had taken them now out of the trees into the main river below the loop. Behind them, just visible in the dusk, was the launch coming slowly down the edge of the trees. They began to paddle furiously, working across the main river to reach the trees on the far side. To stay out in the river was fatal, for there the launch could catch them easily.

The roar of the launch engine broke loudly behind them, and they knew they had been seen. Fletcher glanced back and saw it coming downstream with a great wave spreading from its bows. They were across the river and into an area pocked with the tops of fruit trees. by the time the launch reached them. Fletcher saw it swing away from the trees and hang out in the river, marking their progress. So long as they kept out of the river, he thought, they would be safe. The launch would never come over the shallow, flooded orchards. It was now a game of hide-and-seek, safety lying only in the shelter of the submerged trees.

On the raft little was said. All their attention was on keeping the raft clear of the trees that swam up towards them, and the floating débris that swept by them. But paddle as they might they could do little more than keep going with the main flow of the flood. Time and again they hit snags and Fletcher saw the raft tilting more and more.

They came out of the trees, driving across a clear stretch of water away from the river. As they did so, they saw the launch turning out of the river to their left. It came roaring across the open stretch towards them, taking a chance there would be no underwater obstructions. Fletcher saw the figures of three men aboard—Gambona, Manzo and another, clear against the western sky. It swept round them in a great circle and turned to

come up alongside them against the current. He saw Manzo run forward with a boat-hook. They tried to paddle away from it, but the current took them down inexorably.

Then, when they were twenty yards from it, when he could see Manzo running forward with a boat-hook, the launch shuddered and Manzo was thrown to the deck. They swept by and he heard Gambona shouting furiously, heard the frenzied roar of the motor as the man at the wheel tried to back the launch off the soft bank on which it had gone aground. He saw Peppino and Lina working madly at their paddles and felt his own muscles cracking as they fought to drive the raft ahead.

"We've still got a chance!" Peppino shouted. And now the current took them and swept them out into the main river. It held them, denying all their efforts to reach the security of the quieter waters, racing them along, washing over them as the raft tipped and lurched. Behind them the launch broke free from the bank and came speeding after them.

"Aisella! Look, the bridge!" Lina raised her paddle and pointed. Away downstream, dimly visible in the growing darkness, was the great span of a bridge that marked the town.

Looking back, Fletcher saw that the launch was not two hundred yards behind them and gaining rapidly. But ahead was the bridge and Aisella coming nearer with each stroke of their paddles.

They saw the bridge looming up, a great span of grey brick, a gateway to safety and, as they swept under it, Peppino shouted wildly, "We've done it! We've done it!"

They swept out from under the bridge. The wildness and exhilaration in them died. There was Aisella, a line of houses reaching away down the river, the great tower of the church rising above the roof-tops. The current took them, swung them to the right, forced them in a long, glassy sweep of water between a gap in the houses and they were in the town. But it was not the Aisella they had expected. Here was no safety, no refuge. It was a dead, submerged town.

They stopped paddling, the heart taken from them. Slowly and solemnly the raft glided between the houses. A cat called piteously to them from a roof, bedding and curtains dragged in the current from the window-tops, and the great press of water which had risen to the eaves surged against the walls, and made a fierce, sustained roar that seemed to mock their misery. Aisella was flooded, and the great waters rushed through it, spewing ahead of them into the wide square, from the far side of which rose the baroque front of the church.

Behind them the launch swung into the roof-marked channel, bearing rapidly down on them as the raft moved into the open square, a great lake of water, thick and turbulent with scum and débris. From the far side of the square the waters poured out past the church through a narrow opening.

Fletcher saw the sweep of foam and rapids in the mouth of the opening and knew that the moment the raft was taken in that fierce torrent it would tip. He drove his paddle fiercely into the waters.

"The church!" he shouted. "Make for the church!"

The others saw the danger and they bent to their paddles. Before the church was a flat-topped porch, its roof just above the water-level. They all three paddled hard and gradually they drew away from the narrow outlet through which the waters of the square poured.

"Jump for it!" Fletcher shouted, as the crazily tilting raft swung against the porch. He leapt forward on to the roof, dragging Lina with him. Peppino landed alongside of them and, as they stood up, the raft was sucked along the church and disappeared into the maelstrom of outpouring waters.

They turned, the beat of the launch a sudden thunder, and saw it come down the street and heel into the square. Gambona pointed at them and the launch headed across the square towards the porch. Fletcher put his arm around Lina. Peppino stood beside them. There was no more they could do.

Then, as the launch reached the middle of the square, it gave a sudden lurch. There was a rending, grinding noise and the sharp sound of splintering wood. A tongue of flame leapt suddenly from the launch's cockpit. There was the shouting of frightened men and then a wild scream which was lost in a vicious, shattering explosion.

Before their eyes they saw the launch flung upwards. It broke apart, great pieces of wreckage being hurled into the air, to fall back into the flood, sending up tall gusts of hissing water. In a few seconds there was nothing left of the launch except a flaming mass of wreckage that swept towards the opening by the church and was drawn out of the square.

Lina turned and buried her face in Fletcher's shoulder. He felt her body shake with sobs, with a wild relief, and he held her close. None of the men on the launch could have escaped.

Peppino stood looking out at the square, his tall frame, dark and angular against the pale stones. He said quietly:

"Poor devils …" Then after a moment he turned to Fletcher. "I know this town. This is the Church of Saint Francis."

Fletcher hardly heard him. He too was looking at the rolling waters of the square. "I wonder what they hit out there? It must have been something pretty solid."

"It was," Peppino answered. "Enzo said Saint Francis would look after us—and he has. There's a bronze statue of the Saint in the centre of the square."

YOU ARE A SPY

Just after the war I decided to write a novel with a Yugoslav background. In order to get my details and local colour right I had to go to the country.

Those were the days when Yugoslavia was still very closely linked with Russia and visitors were not encouraged.

After some trouble I got a visa. From Rijeka—once Fiume—at the head of the Adriatic I took a small coastal steamer and started a leisurely journey through the islands and down the coast.

It was a wonderful trip, scenically, but hard and uncomfortable. I found a great deal of reserve and suspicion among the Yugoslavs against Western visitors. Russia's star was high.

After a couple of days travelling I stopped off at one of the islands, found a small hotel in its one town, and decided to look around until the next boat arrived. I knew also that in a small chapel in the island there was a magnificent carved wooden figure of Christ Crucified done by the famous Yugoslav sculptor Mestrovic—who had left the country and gone to America.

My first morning on the island I walked down to the harbour and hired an old man with a rowing boat to take me along the coast to the chapel.

He was an old man of about 70—dressed in a faded blue shirt and patched trousers—with a creased, weather-beaten face and a boyish twinkle still in his eyes. He spoke no English, but we managed with bad Italian.

Once we were free of the harbour and rowing down the coast he became very talkative and told me exactly what he thought of the Communist regime in the country.

He landed me on a little beach not far from the chapel and, seeing that I had a camera with me, asked me to take a couple of photographs of himself.

He had a much younger brother who was a waiter in a restaurant in London. Would I, when I got back, give the photographs to his brother and tell him that he was well? All letters were censored and I could tell his brother far more than he dared to write.

I took a couple of photographs and said I would see his brother. The old man then rowed away because I had decided to make my own way back along the coast to the town.

I found the chapel and Mestrovic's carving—a lovely piece of work—and then I started to walk back.

Somewhere along the way I got lost in an oak forest. I came out on the edge of a long scarp that sloped inland.

Below me was a magnificent white villa surrounded by tall, dark cypresses, and with a small lake to one side of it.

I went closer and saw that there were men working on the villa, repainting it and repairing the roof. I liked the look of the place so much that I took a couple of photographs of it.

As I turned away a couple of rough-looking soldiers with carbines unslung stepped out of some bushes and grabbed me by the arms.

They shouted and shook their heads at me, but I didn't understand a word they were saying. They kept a firm grip on me and began to take me down to the villa. There was nothing I could do so I went along.

Just inside the main gate of the villa there was a low, rather shabby bungalow. Loafing about outside were three or four Yugoslav soldiers, all dressed in rough khaki shirts and denim trousers.

My guards hauled me into the main room of the bungalow and left me there. There was a table, untidy with papers, a couple of wooden chairs, a filing cabinet with a flask of wine on it and a piece of dark looking sausage, and over the fireplace a photograph of Marshal Tito.

After a few minutes an officer came into the room. Except for the badges of rank on his shirt and a belt with a pistol holster he was dressed as roughly as his men.

He was a tall, dark, good-looking man, but with a firm humourless mouth.

He said: "I speak English. I am captain here. It is to hand over camera, passport, and empty pockets, please."

His English, I soon found, was shocking and I shall not attempt to reproduce it with its full obscurity. I handed my things over, including my wallet and my diary.

He sat down and began to go through them. Through the window 1 could see his men outside.

"Why," he said after a while, "of this villa you take photographs?"

"Because I liked the look of it."

He smiled disbelievingly. "Is notice and barbed wire not to come here."

I remembered then that in the wood somewhere I had climbed over barbed wire, but I hadn't seen any notice.

"I didn't see any notice."

"You see wire?"

"Yes."

"Wire says keep away." He called through the window to one of his men. When he came in he handed him my camera and the man went out with it. A few second later I heard a car start up.

The captain looked at me and said: "Here you must wait for a time. This villa is summer house of Marshal Tito. You are a spy."

"I'm not a spy—I'm just a tourist."

"Of course spies like tourists always look." He toyed with a spare roll of film which I had taken from my pocket. "I have my duty."

He began to look through my diary and I suddenly saw him stiffen.

"What is this?" He pointed to the note I had made in my diary of the old man's brother's address in London. I'd put the old man's name down,, too.

I didn't care a damn about the villa business, but I didn't want to get the old man in trouble.

I said: "He's the boatman who rowed me out here. He told me he had a brother in London and I said I would look him some time and give him his greetings. Nothing wrong in that."

"No? And also he says to you?"

"Nothing. We just chatted about fishing."

"You are sure? He says nothing about this country? I know this man. He talks bad things about Yugoslavia."

"Not to me. We just talked about fishing and I took a photograph of him to give to his brother. He is a good man. You have only to see his face to tell that."

The captain smiled grimly. "I know his face."

Well he kept me there nearly four hours. Most of the time I was on my own. I could see that taking, a photograph of Tito's villa could took very bad—particularly in a country jumpy with suspicions about the West still.

Every now and then a soldier came and looked through the window at me. Finally I heard the car return and a little later the captain came in and spread out on the table the photographs which had been developed and printed from my film.

There they were, some shots taken on the boat, two of the old man and two of the villa.

He sat looking at them for a long dine, then he looked up at me and said quietly: "You take very good shots. Very good. Professional?"

I could see the photographs on the table in front of him and they weren't bad. But it must have been luck. I'm the world's worst with a camera.

"I'm not professional," I said. He said nothing, but he picked up the villa photographs and tore them into small pieces. Dropping them into the wastepaper basket, he said: "For taking photographs of the villa there is heavy punishment. Thank you to wait here."

He got up and went outside and I could hear him shouting orders to his men. They moved off. A little later, through the window, I saw them coming back.

I didn't like what I saw. They had all changed into clean uniforms and began to form up before the bungalow with their carbines across their shoulders.

A corporal bullied them into line, and then stood them at ease. At this moment the captain came back into the room. There was a change in him, too. He'd put on a smart tunic, riding breeches, and a peaked cap tilted at a jaunty angle,

He looked at me across the table and he said firmly: "Now come, please, for the shooting."

"What the devil are you talking about?" I cried.

"For the shooting. Come."

"But you can't do that," I said. "Not without a trial; not for shooting. You will shoot me without—"

"No argument. Please to come in front of my men and then I will give you address of English nurse I meet when I am partisan. You will give her the photographs. Still in my heart I have softness for her. Please to come." He smiled amiably.

So I went out into the sunlight and took photographs of him and his men, and afterwards he drove me back into the town.

On the way he said: "This shooting is not a favour one can ask of any visitor. But you are a man who knows how to say nothing. The old man, the fisherman, you know is my uncle.

He shook his head. "I know how he talks. One day there will be trouble with him. He should be like me and keep it here—" he tapped his breast.

It's a pity, but the photographs were no good. Maybe my hands were shaking too much. So, I never got in touch with the nurse.

DIALOGUE BEHIND A CURTAIN

The Great Man stood at the window of the Winter Palace.

Across the paved courtyard, beyond the long sweep of ornamental railings and the still line of grey-uniformed guards, lay the wide bowl of the only harbour the island possessed. He raised a hand and scratched the back of his neck and the movement made the early morning November sun glint on the gilt oak leaves of his epaulettes.

A respectful three paces behind him the Chief of Police stirred uncomfortably and said, "That's his boat coming in now. For a year this has been going on, and until now we have never known which of the many fishermen it might be. This time our information is reliable."

"Denunciation?" The word was harsh and bitter.

"Yes."

"Anonymous?"

"Yes."

"You have suspected him?"

"He and every other fisherman on the island, but until now I would have said that he was the last man—"

The figure at the window turned and a pair of cold, brown eyes regarded the Chief of Police shrewdly. They were eyes which missed nothing.

"You sound almost regretful. You like him?"

"Everyone on the island likes Tasso."

The Great Man walked past the Chief of Police towards his desk and from the shadow of the curtains at the window rose the brown and black length of his great Alsatian. As his master sat down the dog dropped heavily to the floor at the side of the desk.

"Your men are waiting for him?"

"Everything is ready."

"Go down yourself and arrest him and bring him here. Do not question him. Say nothing to him. Bring him here."

The face of the Chief of Police showed his surprise. A large hand with a thick gold ring waved at him, and the ghost of a smile passed across the face of the Great Man. "Bring him here. For once I have time on my hands. I am curious to talk to a man who has found a soft corner in the heart of a Chief of Police. Such men are rare."

The Chief of Police would have spoken again but the cold, brown eyes had grown colder and the ghost of a smile had gone from the other's face. The Chief of Police saluted and left the room.

The Great Man lit a cigarette, eased his short powerful bulk back into the wide chair, and his left hand dropped to the neck of the Alsatian, the squat fingers teasing at the dog's thick fur. After a while there was the clatter of heavy boots on the wide marble stairway outside the room and then the door was opened. Tasso stood on the threshold, behind him two armed guards and behind them the Chief of Police. The Great Man eyed them in silence for a while and, in the long pause, the cries of the stallholders from the market along the quay front seeped faintly into the gilt and velvet stretches of the room.

"Let him come in alone," he said suddenly.

* * * * *

The doors closed behind Tasso and the fisherman came slowly down the room. The dog by the chairside stirred, beginning to rise, but the firm fingers tapped its head gently and the animal relaxed.

Tasso stood before the polished desk. He was a short, powerful man, much like the other in build. His eyes were brown, but with a warmth in them, his face tanned and creased with years of the sea, and about the wide lips clung a subdued smile. He showed no fear, nor embarrassment, though he knew well the identity of the man before him, had seen him resplendent at ceremonial parades and known those cold, brown eyes from a thousand photographs in a thousand public places. He stood there with his shabby blue jacket swung open to show a dirty red shirt, his trousers flaked with fish scales. In the lapel of his jacket he wore a half-opened yellow rose.

"Your name?"

"Tasso Susvid."

"Age?"

"Fifty-three."

"Occupation?"

"Fisherman."

"And smuggler."

"No man willingly puts his initials on a bullet." The frank eyes watched the smoke rising from the other's cigarette.

"You have been denounced."

"The innocent as well as the guilty are often denounced."

The Great Man stirred comfortably and the ghost of a smile came back.

"Let us assume that you are a smuggler for the moment."

"Why not? I have time on my hands. My fish are caught and my wife will sell them."

"Why do you smuggle? It is against the interests of our country."

"If I do it—and we merely pass time with this game—it is to make myself more money. The better off the citizens of a country are, the better off the country."

"There are times when you smuggle out enemies of our country. A man who does that merits death."

"Why not a reward? Surely, a country is healthier without its enemies?"

The lips of the Great Man tightened and for a moment his eyes narrowed. Then he laughed gently.

"What do you bring in so valuable that it outweighs the risk of death?"

"Cigarettes."

"We make our own."

"But the one you smoke now is American."

"What else?"

"Whisky."

"I prefer our own rakia."

"I agree, but there are people in the capital who think differently. There are also nylons and perfumes."

"For the women in the capital?"

Tasso smiled. and shook his head. "For any woman. Every goat girl on this island covets a pair of nylons, and if you tend goats you have need of perfumes."

The Great Man smiled, almost openly now, and said, "And all these things you bring from over there?" He nodded towards the window and blue patch of visible sea.

"If I were a smuggler I should bring them from there, yes."

"How long would it take—in your boat?"

"Ten hours across, four hours there, and ten hours back. Twenty-four hours."

"When did you go out on this fishing trip?"

"At nine o'clock yesterday morning."

The Great Man glanced at the clock over the wide doors of the saloon. "It is now half-past nine. It's odd—your trip lasted exactly twenty-four hours."

"I ran into bad weather last night and we had to heave-to."

"We?"

"My son works the boat with me."

"Your boat is being searched now."

"They will find nothing."

"You have a radio? Maybe someone warned you—"

"There is no radio. No one warned me. Remember, we are only pretending that I am a smuggler."

"It is a game not without its dangers. During the war, you were a partisan?"

"Yes, I fought. Later, because I know the coast, I was a pilot for the Allied naval forces."

"You like the English?"

"They understand the sea, and they keep their heads in an emergency. Both qualities I admire."

"Who doesn't? But even so, everything is passing from their grasp. In politics, in art, in commerce and in sport they are being swallowed up."

Tasso shrugged his shoulders. "In all these things, perhaps. But I like them still because of all these the one thing they will really care about is sport. Only being able to draw with our National football team yesterday—they will find that hard to swallow."

"You are interested in football?"

"Every man on this island is. My son is captain of the town team."

"He will be proud when you are shot for smuggling."

"The bullet has yet to be marked. Remember, this is a private game between us."

"You have been denounced. The game is finished."

"Denounced by whom?"

"I don't know, but I should say your wife."

"Why?"

"She is a woman. Women notice small things…" A large hand rubbed gently across a broad jowl for a moment and the thick gold ring caught the light from the wide windows. "Four hours over there is not long, but it is long enough for a man to forget his wife. You wear a fresh rose in your lapel. A man who lands from sea after twenty-four hours with a fresh rose in his coat gives himself away. After a ten hour trip from over there it would be fresh. Maybe you have made this mistake before. Maybe your wife has noticed it and grown jealous of the one who pins a flower to your coat before you leave. Jealousy makes all women dangerous. Yes, I think it was your wife who denounced you."

Tasso smiled and raised his hand to the rose. "I am fifty-three. At thirty-three my wife was often jealous, but those years have gone. We are still playing our game. Look—" Tasso tossed the rose on to the desk. The movement made the Alsatian rise quickly, but a broad hand went out to restrain it. The Great Man picked up the rose and saw that it was artificial, made of wax-coated silk.

Tasso said, "It was the gift of an American nurse during the war. Ask any man in this town and he will tell you that I always wear it. After six years it is still fresh."

The Great Man was silent for a moment, turning the rose over in his hand. Then he looked up from under his heavy brows and smiled.

"A man who holds my power can resent the mistakes he makes. Out of hurt vanity I might take revenge and none would question my right. A snap of my fingers and our friend here…" he nodded to the Alsatian, "would tear your throat out. Maybe I should let him for you are too frank and your tongue too ready."

But the smile still played about Tasso's mouth and he slowly raised his hand to the back of his neck, saying, "If you should try—there would be two throats cut. The dog's and your own." From the back of his coat he pulled a knife and placed it on the desk. "The Chief of Police is a conscientious man, but your presence here flusters him. He was so anxious to get me up here that he made a bad job of searching me."

The Great Man picked up the knife and gently tried the edge of the blade on his thumb. Then he said, reflectively, "There are a thousand men who would have liked the chance you've just thrown away."

"I am a fisherman, not an assassin."

"And also a smuggler. Some instinct told you to jettison your goods before coming in."

"I am a fisherman."

"No. I may have been mistaken about your wife, but not over the smuggling. Yesterday you were over there."

Tasso shook his head. "I was at sea—hove-to."

The Great Man went on, turning the knife in his hands as he spoke, "You left this island yesterday morning with your son. According to you, you have been twenty-four hours at sea, seeing no one and without a radio of any kind."

"That is what I said."

"And you landed here a little less than half-an-hour ago and were brought straight up to me without a chance to talk to anyone?"

"That is so."

"And yet you knew that our International Football team had drawn with the English team? The game was played in London yesterday afternoon, after you left here. You heard the result over there when you landed. Both you and your son would be interested in the result. If you had been at sea twenty-four hours without a radio you could not have known the result. It is forbidden to go over there, but you went as you have so often gone."

Tasso's face never altered. For a moment the two men stared at one another. Then Tasso nodded slowly. "The game, it seems, is finished."

But the Great Man smiled and shook his head. "No. I have enjoyed the game too much to have it finish this way." He stood up. "You are free to go. What I know I shall keep to myself, and you will have no trouble with the Chief of Police."

"Why do you do this?" Tasso's face showed his surprise.

The other put his hand for a moment on Tasso's shoulder. "You made a mistake, one mistake that could have meant death. That can happen to the bravest and cleverest of men. It might happen to me one day. If it does, I shall know I have a friend on this island with a boat. A man can never have too many friends."

THE KEY

It was a filthy village. The heavy, windless heat held fast all the odours in the straggling main street; the smells of poverty and despair. The village had a bad record, Captain Sistrovic knew that only too well. He was not surprised that everyone except the old garage man kept out of sight. What was the old fool doing? He banged and shuffled about with his cans as he filled the car with petrol, and disappeared for minutes into the black mouth of the decrepit shack he called a garage.

"Where's he going now, Arto?" Captain Sistrovic shouted angrily from the car to his driver who was standing by the garage door smoking.

"We have over eighty miles to go, captain. We need more than two gallons of petrol."

"Hurry him. If I don't get there tonight my head will explode!" The pain in his face made hint angry and impatient.

The prisoner at his side laughed gently, a contemptuous, galling laugh. He turned on him viciously.

"When we do arrive, Dorac, there will be ways to squeeze the laughter out of you for good."

Jan Dorac made no answer. He sat beside the captain in the back of the open car, his wrists in handcuffs, his, thin body relaxed and the intelligent face, despite its weary lines, apparently unconcerned. His look to a man like Sistrovic was infuriating. The Captain smacked him across the cheek, and the blow momentarily eased the pain in his own puffed face.

Jan slid a little sideways under the blow. Then he straightened up. He said nothing. But he was thinking. Fifteen years ago he had been at the same university with Sistrovic. The man had been a bully and a swaggerer then, a big blond animal with a coarse handsome face, so sure of himself, so trusting … It was no surprise to Jan that he had finished up in People's Police, And he was sure that it had been no surprise to Sistrovic that *he* had finished in the other camp. And now? The fighting, the days of resistance, the nights of strain and planning, were they over? Would there be no escape except the dark, eternal release through suffering and torture?

As the car drove off Jan saw the old garage man watching them. The man knew him, Everyone in the district knew Doctor Jan Dorac. For a moment there was a slight movement of the man's face, a timid gesture, a greeting, a farewell?

Sistrovic sat beside him, grunting occasionally at the pain he was suffering from an abscess under one of his teeth, and smoking constantly. The road was a hot, white ribbon between the endless pine forests, the air a

furnace blast that whipped back into their faces. Jan raised his hands and opened his shirt and jacket front. Sistrovic, a dandy even in the remoteness of the country, sat stiffly in his dark blue tunic and tight breeches, the leather belt and revolver holster cutting his figure elegantly at the waist.

They sat in silence, but very much aware of each other, Sistrovic knew it was going to mean promotion for him. Jan Dorac was a big name. His capture was a triumph, and one he, Sistrovic, deserved. He had worked for it; bribed, tortured, cajoled, lied … everything in the book. And in the end he had got him. This day would have been perfect for him—if only he could have forgotten this damned, infernal tooth whose pain had swollen his gum and cheek, probing into his nerves like a hundred knives.

They had been going about an hour when the engine began to splutter and finally died. Arto, slow, stupid, a peasant in uniform, got out. He tinkered with the engine for a while.

"What is it? What is it?" Pain increased Sistrovic's impatience.

Arto came back to him.

"It is water, comrade captain. Water in the petrol—from the last garage."

"That swine!"

Sistrovic heard the light laugh from beside him. He swung round to Jan. "Don't think this will help."

Jan spoke. "It may, Sistrovic. I still have friends, you see. And now I have a little more time, perhaps—"

"Call me Captain Sistrovic, you dirty traitor!" The great hand, flat and powerful, caught the side of Jan's face and drove him backwards, forcing a gasp of shocked breath from him.

Jan sat up slowly. His eves were cold, hating this man.

"Sistrovic," he said slowly and deliberately. "Big, bullying Sistrovic, a pig in uniform."

For a moment Sistrovic would have hit him again. Then with a laugh he got out of the car. Over his shoulder he said, "Get out, Dorac. And remember—when we get to Headquarters I will take my time in teaching you how unwise it is to insult me."

Like a naked thigh a smooth sweep of hillside curved down to the road between the pine forests. Half-way up the slope was a small timber-framed house. A row of short poles ran away from it into the forest and from the top of each pole carne the gleam of white insulators.

"'Up there. We can telephone for another car."

Sistrovic drew his revolver, ordered Arto to do the same and with Jan between them, they began to climb towards the hut.

Sistrovic's behaviour when he reached the but was characteristic. He kicked the door open and walked in. Jan followed with Arto behind him. It was hot, stuffy and gloomy within. They were in large room at one side of

which was a fireplace. On the far side of the room was a half-open door through which Jan had a glimpse of a wide, unmade bed. The whole place smelt of the poverty and the struggle for life amongst which he had passed so many years.

Standing by the fireplace was young woman. She turned and looked at the intruders. There was a bold, statuesque slatternliness about her. Broad-shouldered, full-breasted, her dark hair trailing untidily across one brown cheek, she had a rich, coarse beauty. She wore a green dress, torn in places and her finely-moulded arms and legs were bare.

"Your name?" Sistrovic's voice was like a handful of pebbles dashed at a window.

"Brijida Cernov." There was no fear in her voice, only a sullen indifference.

"The telephone?"

She nodded to the window. The instrument stood on the sill. As Sistrovic walked towards it, she said, "It has not worked for two years. The wires have been stolen from the poles in the forest."

Sistrovic swore violently. He swung back to the woman. "The nearest place I can get a car?"

"Sbeltana. Thirty miles away."

"There is someone I can send?"

She shook her head,

"You have no husband, no brother?"

"My husband is a forester. He has gone away."

Sistrovic swore again, and then turned to Arto.

"You must go. If you hurry you can be back by morning."

Sistrovic motioned Jan to move towards the window. While Arto covered them with his revolver, the captain unlocked the steel cuff on Jan's right hand and snapped it about a stout wooden support that formed part of the wall. Held by his left hand still, Jan could just see out of the window. He was about six feet from the fire.

The girl came forward curiously.

"Who is he?"

Sistrovic turned and eyed her suspiciously.

"Jan Dorac. You have never heard of him?"

The effect on the girl was. startling. For a moment she stared at Jan, then her fact twisted into an angry grimace and she spat towards him angrily.

"His kind! They should all be dead. They stir people up. They make honest men traitors. Why can't they leave us alone to work and find our bread!"

Sistrovic laughed.

"He will soon be dead," Then he stepped forward and gripped Brijida's arm, his fingers biting into it. "But you keep away from him. I trust no one. Come within six feet of him and I will shoot without questioning."

She laughed and her body moved, brushing against Sistrovic's. For the first time the hardness went from her eyes.

"You do not have to warn me, comrade captain, Give me your revolver and I would shoot him myself, now!"

He pushed her away. "I believe you would, too."

She rubbed her arm where Sistrovic's fingers had held her. Then she went outside. Jan, through the window, saw her move to the edge of the wood and begin to feed a few scraggy hens that came at her call. Sistrovic gave Arto his final orders and followed the man outside to see him on his way.

Jan was left alone. He strained against the pole to which he was locked, but he knew at once he could never break free.

Through the window he saw Sistrovic stroll across to Brijida. He talked to her for a moment, then reached out and pulled her to him. Jan saw the compliance, almost eagerness, with which the woman allowed herself to be embraced. It was just his luck that she should be one of the wrong sort. Somewhere along the line, he guessed, she had probably lost father, brother, or lover in the movement and this had soured her, turning her against his kind, He could look for no help from her. By morning Arto would be back. Once they had him in the capital … He shut the thought front his mind.

When darkness came, Brijida prepared a rough meal. The only light in the place came from a candle on a small table close to the fireplace. Covering him with his revolver, Sistrovic handed Jan a bowl of thin soup.

The night brought no abatement of the heat. It pressed down like a weight. Through the window Jan could see the stars over the fir crests smudged by the mist awakened by the day's heat.

The hot soup aggravated the pain in Sistrovic's jaw. He sat at the open door, smoking and cursing. The pain was a small, throbbing hell in his head.

Jan watched him. He was a doctor. He knew how much Sistrovic must be suffering. It was probably an abscess under one of his teeth. However, Sistrovic's pain was no comfort to him.

An hour later, Sistrovic got up suddenly and crossed the room, and thundered on the door of the bedroom into which Brijida ha long disappeared. She came out her hair hanging loosely over the bare shoulders that were soft and shadowed by the candle-light they rose above the low curve of her shift.

"Wine! I need wine!" Sistrovic roared.

"There is no wine."

He raised his fist threateningly. "There is no peasant so poor in this country that he doesn't keep a jar of wine hidden somewhere!"

Brijida made no answer. She went to a floorboard by the fire, lifted it and, reaching under, pulled out an earthenware jar. Sistrovic took it. Brijida watched him. Then her eyes moved to Jan. It might have been some trick of candle or firelight, but for moment he fancied she smiled. She turned back to her room.

Sistrocic sat drinking for a time, then with a lurch he was on his feet and crossed to Brijida's door, the wine jug in his hand. The door slammed behind him. Jan heard their voices; then the girl laughed, and after that there were long silences cut by mutterings, quick bursts of laughter and more silence.

Jan stood there. The ache in his feet and legs began to spread through his body. He leaned against the wall and sleep began to invade him. Three or four times he went off only to be jerked back as his body slipped and his weight came upon the pinioned left wrist with an excruciating jar. Looking round, he saw in the gloom that a tall stool stood some five feet from him. At first he thought it hopeless to attempt it, but finally by stretching out and holding himself to the wall with his free hand, he managed to get the toe of his right foot under a rung of the stool. Slowly he worked it within reach.

Whcn he eventually sat down, the ease that spread through his body was like a swift drug. There was no sound from Brijida's room. The candle guttered itself away with a last spurt of brightness. Jan slept.

He was awakened by the stool being kicked away from under him. He went down with a crash and his weight was taken by his left wrist with a wrench that almost broke his bones. He pulled himself up. It was bright morning, Sistrovic stood a few feet from him, tightening the belt about his waist. His face was puffed and horrible. As he turned away from Jan, his hand went up to his jaw and he swore.

Jan smiled, and conversationally, as though they were two friends on holiday, he said, "It is going to be hot again. Very hot. A beautiful day. It is a pity you won't enjoy it because of your tooth."

Jan broke off as Sistrovic swung towards him, fist raised. Sistrovic at his silence, dropped his arm and turned towards the door. He sat on the step, his back to Jan.

A little later the doorway of Brijida's room opened quietly. She stood there watching Jan, and he was puzzled by the look on her face. The hostile contempt had gone. This was a different woman, her face showing plainly where her sympathies lay. A spurt of hope woke in Jan.

Slowly she raised her hand and he saw something bright held in her fingers. He recognised it at once. It was the key to the handcuffs, He

played with the thought, and then suddenly an idea came to him. Brijida's sacrifice need not be wasted, must not be. Sistrovic's pain was their strength. At once he began to work on him.

When Sistrovic groaned again, Jan said gently, goading, "Shall I tell you what is happening to that abscess under your tooth, Such a beautiful thing—from a medical point of view. A growing and a growing of pus. It will go on until it bursts. But before it bursts it still drive you mad—"

"Each word you shall pay for!" Sistrovic swung round, his eyes, blazing.

"But Sistrovic, I want to help. Just think," he suggested softly, "a pair of pincers—the girl will have some—and it would be out. You would have pain still, but such a gentle, blissful pain,"

Jan kept on. He would be silent for a while, then speak. Sistrovic began to hate the sound of his voice. He sat in the doorway, his face running with sweat from the pain and the heat.

"The pain is increasing, Sistrovic? Does it bring a redness before your eyes? Does your head feel as though it were a tyre, and someone was pumping … pumping … pumping …"

"Quiet, you swine!" Sistrovic was across the room and his fist crashed into Dorac's face, driving him against the wall, Blood flowed from his mouth across his chin, but he was triumphant. It was working. There was still hope.

An hour later, he began again.

"You will go off your head. I have seen men brought into the ward … They were like animals, berserk. I could do it so easily for you. I have pulled hundreds of teeth in my time … during the war with the partisans, in conditions far worse than this."

Sistrovic made no reply. His mind held two things, pain and the desire for Arto's return, but as the one grew, hope of the other faded. It was long past mid-day now. Fearless, practical, the captain knew what must be done if Arto did not return. He would handcuff this man to himself, hold the loaded revolver to his side and set of through the forest. But to start such a journey, when he would need every ounce of wit and alertness, with this maddening, grinding battle in his head … he knew what would happen. The thirty miles would become endless and he would never make it. But Arto did not come. The damned, stupid oaf had either lost his way or—he shut the thought from his mind.

Small things began to annoy him; a bird that called wearily in the heat from the wood, the crack and whisper of the hut timbers as the sun shifted over them. Every now and again the pain was a sheet of red flame over his eyes.

"You suffer?" The sound of that soft voice was a goad and Sistrovic longed for release from it. "You suffer, my captain? But as it grows dark

you will suffer more. At night the body grows weak, the spirit flags … Oh, yes, it is a medical fact. It is then it will happen. You will jump to your feet, shout, rave, smash things, and your own hand will become your enemy—"

"Shut up!"

But Jan did not shut up.

"Your hand will seize your own revolver. You will shoot yourself."

Sistrovic came into the room, revolver drawn and stood swaying a little some feet from Dorac. His voice came controlled and hard for a man in such pain His face was a red mass of ugliness, puffed and streaked, and the choleric blue eyes were bloodshot.

"I know what you want, Dorac. You want a chance to get at me. One chance to have me sitting there while you pull this tooth out. You think I'm a fool?"

Jan shrugged his shoulders. "Yes Sistrovic. You are a fool. I can pull your tooth out with one hand—" he lifted his free right hand "—while you sit on the stool with your revolver pressed against my stomach. What chance does that give me? However … if you prefer the pain and what must follow …"

Sistrovic turned away from him. Dorac said nothing. It grew dark and Brijida came in from working a small garden and lit the candle on the table by the fire. She looked neither at Sistrovic nor Dorac. As she began to get supper, Sistrovic sat in the doorway, watching the room, taking what coolness there was in the night air, and there was always Dorac's voice and, over all, the grinding, dagger-pointed probings of pain and the raging fire of tortured nerves in his jaw.

He got up suddenly and moved towards Dorac. He could stand it no longer.

"All right, Dorac. It must be done."

Jan nodded; holding down his excitement. There was wild hope in him but, even so, now the moment had arrived, he knew that his chances were slim.

Brijida was sent to find a pair of pincers. They were rusty and filthy. She wiped them on her skirt when she understood what was to happen. Sistrovic waved her back across the room after he had taken them. He pulled up the stool, weighed his revolver in his right hand and sat down.

The pistol muzzle was thrust hard into Jan's side.

"One move—accidental orotherwise—and I shoot." He handed the pincers to Jan and tipped his head back, opening his mouth. Jan could see at once which tooth it was; a great decayed tusk in the lower right jaw.

"Brace your head against the wall. I have no free hand to hold you."

The angry bloodshot eyes stared up at him, unwinking.

Jan knew that everything depended on those eyes, on Sistrovic's ability to bear pain. When he pulled, when the tooth moved out—that was the moment. It was then that Sistrovic would close his eyes, wincing and screwing his face up in pain. In that moment he and the girl must act. Everything depended on him to gain them enough time.

He shot a glance across at Brijida. He fancied he caught a flicker of the eyes, a stir of the shoulders which told him she was ready for any call.

Gently he eased the jaws of the pincers round the tooth. Sistrovic's eyes were on his face, the revolver hard against his side. He got a good grip on the tooth and saw the muscles; tighten under the puffy layer of the man's cheek. The great bull neck strained as Sistrovic braced back against the wall.

Jan gripped hard, pulled back and wrenched sideways with the vigour and dexterity of a horse doctor. The tooth came out like a rotten plug. Sistrovic felt a roaring surge of pain and fiery hell sweep over him. His eyes closed involuntarily as he gasped with agony and his face screwed up against the torture. It was then that Jan twisted sideways and, dropping the pincers, grabbed the gun. He had no time to fumble with one hand and fire it. He smashed it down on Sistrovic's skull. Sistrovic fell forward and rolled across the floor.

"Quick—the key!"

Brijida leaped forward, swept up the key and was by his side. Her hands fumbled for a moment, and then he was free of the handcuffs. He stepped forward, the reviolver ready in his hands.

Sistrovic came swaying up from the floor. But when he was on his feet, he steadied. He stood there facing the two. But there was no fear on his face, only a vicious animal cunning.

Jan—aware vividly of Brijida at his side—was pitiless toward the one who had no pity. He raised the revolver and fired. There was an empty click. He fired again and the hammer clicked uselessly.

Sistrovic laughed, a low burble of ugly sound and he shook his head so that the blood running from his mouth sprayed the floor.

"Poor Dorac. Did you think I would sit there with a loaded revolver and give you the chance you wanted? You were wrong. I'm no fool." He dropped his hand to his pocket and pulled out another revolver. "See. I have Arto's revolver. If I had to stay here with you, with your friends around, I had to be well armed. And you—" he swung the revolver towards Brijida, "—you with your pretty little act of hating the great Dorac. Do you think I forget names? Do you think I do not know that Ljubic Cernov, your husband, was shot last month for treason? Get the handcuffs. Put one on him and the other on yourself. Then toss me the key and we will start walking. Quickly!"

He came a step towards them. The girl drew back.

"Do as he says." Jan's voice was deep with despair as he turned to her. "He will shoot." But as he half turned towards her he saw the candle on the table.

"Quickly!" Sistrovic snapped.

Brijida began to move towards the post from which dangled the cuffs. Jan waited, waiting for her to clear the line of fire. When she was well away from him he lashed out backwards with his right foot.

There was a crash of falling glass as the bottle holding the candle went over, and then darkness. Jan leaped forward and, as the flame and powder of Sistrovic's first shot seared by him, he felt his hands on the man's neck. They went down together and rolled crashing across the room.

Brijida, backed against the bunk, heard only the sound of their fighting breath, the scrape and crash of their bodies. It seemed to go on for an age, a noisy, unfathomable horror in the darkness before her. There was another shot, a long, weary sigh of breath and then silence.

Someone stood up in the darkness. A match was struck and hands groped for the candle Jan stood before her. Behind him Sistrovic lay still on the floor.

Dorac said nothing. He put the candle on the table. He moved to her, put a hand gently on her shoulder. For a moment she looked at him. Then they turned towards the door. They went out together.

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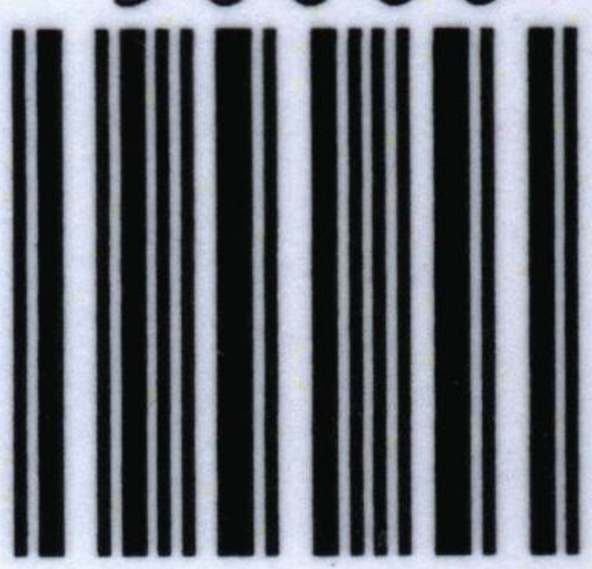

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