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## THE DEVIL'S POST OFFICE

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POST OFFICE



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ARROW BOOKS  
(Proprietors : Hutchinson Ltd.)

*First published by Hutchinson 1955*  
*This Edition 1957*

*Made and printed in Great Britain*  
*by The Anchor Press, Ltd.,*  
*Tiptree, Essex*

To  
MY FATHER  
AND MOTHER





CONTENTS

BOOK I

CALANDER

(*page* 9)

BOOK II

GLAN-Y-COED

(*page* 113)





*BOOK I*  
CALANDER





## CHAPTER I

FROM the fork in the road you can turn and look down on the village, as it were from the back door. The single street is partly obscured by trees and masonry and the eye looks slantwise across the western ends of the houses, over a miscellany of kitchen gardens abutting on to fields and open country. I leaned my elbows on the gate and started to stuff tobacco into my pipe. Looking at Calander in the early evening light I was tempted to conclude that Rogers had died in a drunken brawl, exactly as the Press reports said he had. And the drinking, I told myself, had not begun that night. It had probably reached a nice degree of maturity by the time he sent his last message to McKinnon.

I had been in Calander for three weeks. During that time I had acquired at least a nodding acquaintance with such of its two hundred inhabitants as were old enough to nod. Some of them were cultured, some uncouth, some pleasant, some disagreeable, but if any one of them was not what he or she professed to be I felt prepared to eat the somewhat shabby trilby at present keeping the March breeze out of my hair.

It was nearly ten years since I first met McKinnon, and the circumstances of our meeting were a little out of the common. An officer in the Seventh Armoured Division on a week's leave in Cairo, I spent an evening prowling around the Boullak. I was toying with the idea that one day I would write a book, and on the principle that you never know what might come in useful I set out to pack my mind with whatever impressions or experiences fortune might throw in my track.

After spending several unproductive hours I started to find my way home. It was late, and as I turned the corner of a narrow street leading into Shareh el Qattar I came across four Arabs engaged in what looked like a free-for-all. Two of them were belabouring a third from the front, while another was on the point of sticking a knife in him from behind.

I've always been pretty handy with firearms, ever since the days when I used to knock over running rabbits with a .22



rifle on my father's farm. As the Arab's hand came down my revolver went up, and he dropped where he stood. Another of the gentry was in the process of pulling something from under his dirty galabieh, so I let him have it through the heart. The third dived down an alley like a rabbit going to earth, knocking the victim flat on his back as he went. By the time this one had regained his feet I was prodding my gun in his ribs as an indication that I'd had all the funny business I was prepared to indulge.

When he spoke it was in English, with just a touch of the Scots.

"God's gift to the oppressed. The Archangel Michael in khaki. But in case you're mortal I'm taking you under cover, or you'll be dead yourself inside ten minutes."

The rest of that incident no longer concerns us. It mattered greatly at the time, but the troubled waters of world affairs have travelled far and that particular little vortex has wound itself out. The immediate consequence was that I spent four days absent without leave, but such was the influence of Major Alec McKinnon, of Military Intelligence, that I suffered no reprimand.

McKinnon must have liked having me around, for I was twice transferred to G.H.Q. for special duties. So far as I could see it was mostly fetch-and-carry work. I had no idea what was at the back of it, and it entailed no great responsibility. With the Allied landings in Italy I was moved to this new theatre of war and McKinnon departed for heaven knows where.

I heard from him twice after the armistice, from Pakistan in 1946 and two years later from Malaya. My own war service ending during the advance on the Elbe. They tell me my jeep got mixed up with a land mine, but all I remember is coming to in a base hospital with my right leg in plaster and a head like the father and mother of all hangovers.

It was the following August when I got my discharge. Life as a hack journalist in Fleet Street had lost its appeal. I spent a week in Shropshire with my elder brother Charles, and he pressed me to come in with him on the family farms. For a time I inclined towards the idea. The open-air life appealed to me, but in the end I turned it down. Though I'd a smattering of knowledge I quickly discovered that the little I'd



learned ten years before was almost as dated as the days of Noah, and at thirty I felt I was too old to embark upon so complex a calling. Besides, I'd deserted agriculture in the days of depression to make a fortune with my pen, and I couldn't avoid a distaste for creeping back to it now that it was coming into its own.

I was more favourably placed than many. As a sleeping partner in the farming business I drew a small income, which meant that I was not compelled to go back to my old job or jump into the first new one that offered itself. At first I couldn't settle to anything, but after a while I got round to the idea of writing a book again. At odd times in the past six years I'd played with the notion, working out plots and scribbling passages of dialogue. There was a stack of short-hand notebooks filled with assorted material. I started to work through it, and out of the medley a composite picture began to take shape.

The thing became fascinating. The more I worked, the more my enthusiasm developed. I bought a secondhand typewriter, rented a bed-sitter in Bernard Street and sank my whole personality into the thing I was creating. For four months I scarcely realized what went on in the world around me, and partly because of the concentration of effort and partly because much of the spadework had already been done, *Michael in Khaki* was finished by the end of January. That phrase of McKinnon's had stuck in my mind, and it fitted well enough the theme I had in hand.

After that, reaction set in. It was as though I had crossed the tape and collapsed at the end of the race, only the race wasn't over. There began the dreary business of hawking the manuscript around the publishing houses, and it seemed that everyone in the Services had come home bursting with the desire to write a book. By midsummer, with *Michael* bouncing back at me from every quarter, I started on a second venture. It could be that the public were sated with war and all it stood for, I thought I'd touched a few new notes, but the publishers didn't seem to recognize them. It was just another book about the war.

This time it didn't flow so easily. The preliminary spadework wasn't there and future prospects were causing some anxiety. By autumn finances were getting low. My private



income was insufficient for my modest needs, and my gratuity had all been spent. I could have had more from Charles for the asking, but I was minded to see this thing through on my own resources.

Christmas came, and I was bordering on desperation, when the tide of fortune changed. From a firm of publishers whose existence I'd almost forgotten came an acceptance. I'd never regarded *Michael* as a literary masterpiece, but for some reason he went over in a big way. The critics were more than kind to me. Possibly they'd just endured a spate of mediocrity and were eager to spread themselves. Whatever the cause they did me well, and the public took it up.

The first impression sold out within three weeks. By September we had passed the fifty thousand mark. There was no need to hawk my second book around, for my publishers were almost sitting on the other side of the desk waiting for the last sheet to tumble out of the typewriter.

After that I wrote two more books. The third was sited in the West Midlands, and the fourth had one end in the Border Country and the other in the Balkans. I spent a good deal of time over that one, including a trip into Hungary where I nearly burned my fingers. In 1950 I sold the film rights for *Michael*, and early in the new year my Scottish-Balkan narrative went to the publishers.

About this time I became aware that I needed a rest. I was sleeping badly, smoking too much and my food did things to me that it ought not to have done. With the intention of wandering about the country as the fancy took me I bought a car. It was a Jaguar, just out of covenant, and the price was exorbitant. However, my bank balance was more than adequate, even after the Inland Revenue people had been to work on it, and my income was assured for several years.

The day after I took delivery of the car I received the third letter from McKinnon.

There was nothing in the letter to indicate the grim business which was to follow. It started with a dirty crack about distinguished novelists, and finished by inviting me to dinner. I met him two days later in the dining-room of his Richmond



house, with a March wind lashing the sleet against the curtained windows and a log fire flickering in the grate.

There was a good deal of grey in his hair and he'd lost the sunburn of our Cairo days. Apart from that, and the fact that he looked as if he carried the cares of Empire on his shoulders, he hadn't changed a lot. A little under medium height, lean of face and body, only his hair showed that he must be approaching fifty years of age.

I'd supposed that he had not long returned from abroad, but when I asked him about it he shifted on his feet, a trifle guiltily I thought.

"To tell you the truth, Phillip, I've been in London for the past two years."

I began to smell a very considerable rat.

"And I was thinking you dropped that letter into the first pillar-box after you left the boat train. What brought you round to remembering I was still alive?"

"It was a book I read. A thing called *Michael in Khaki*. There was a Scot in it. He was no more like any Scot I've ever known than an Arab's like a Jew. I thought it time I educated the young man who wrote it."

We grinned at one another. It was the way we'd wrangled, when opportunity permitted, in our Cairo days. McKinnon said: "Seriously, Phillip, I've been meaning to get in touch with you, but you know how it is. You've a lot to do, and time slips by faster than you think. They've made me what's called an executive, put me behind a desk where I stick wee pins in maps and talk into telephones."

"Seriously, Mac, you've just thought up some way I can be useful to you."

He looked more sheepish than ever. "Och, I'll not deny I've a bit of a proposition to put to you, but it'll keep till we've eaten. My wife will be with us just now."

I'd never thought of him with a wife. Certainly he'd not mentioned her in the old days. He must have divined my thoughts, for he said:

"We've been married the two years. I'd never considered it when I might leave a widow the day after tomorrow, but now they've made me settle down. Besides, a man needs some consolation for the wee pins and the telephones."

When Janet McKinnon joined us I thought the wee pins



must be pretty irksome if the compensation wasn't adequate. She would be about my own age, dark, slender, and she moved with a kind of willowy grace. I remember thinking, "This is what we novelists mean when we talk about poise."

The hand she gave me felt cool and confident. She said: "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Mansell. Alec's told me a great deal about you."

"Then he's done it since Monday. Till then he'd forgotten my existence."

She shook her head. "He told me about what he calls your circus act with three sons of Satan. I owe you a debt. But for you I wouldn't have had him."

I was just saying that my conscience was pretty loaded without having that on it as well when a maid came in with the soup. We had chicken, suitably accompanied by a bottle of Niersteiner '43, and the conversation rippled lightly over the surface of life. There was an iced pineapple concoction and a Camembert that would have won the praise of an epicure. Janet left us after the coffee and McKinnon crossed over to the sideboard.

"There's port or brandy?"

I selected the brandy, refused a cigar and lit a cigarette. I sat warming the goblet in my hand, watching Mac as he fiddled with his cigar. Obviously we were approaching the real business of the evening, but for the life of me I couldn't see how I was likely to fit into the kind of intrigue and counter-intrigue in which he'd been embroiled in the past. My only attribute which might be of use to him was an ability to shoot better than most, and even my novelist's mind jibbed at the suggestion that M.I.5 were looking for an unofficial gunman to bump off their suspects.

I had smoked half my cigarette before he had the cigar going to his satisfaction, and not until then did he broach the thing that was on his mind. When he did, he started with a swirl of sentiment which put me on my guard from the outset.

"Phillip," he said, "I've been wondering if you'd care to tackle a job for this old country of ours."

"You make it hard for me to say no. Sorry, Mac, but I'm not falling for your bugle blowing. I've got a job. I'm a novelist, not one of your cloak-and-dagger merchants. Six years of killing and avoiding being killed is quite enough for



me. Besides, I'm not doing even my own job for a while. I'm due a rest, and on Saturday I disappear from the ken of man and take it."

"At least you'll hear my story?"

"I'll sit and hear your stories till the small hours. If they're any good I'll use them in my next book."

"This is one you'll not use till I give you leave. It's way up top on the secret list."

He stared reflectively at his brandy glass. Then he leaned his forearms on the table and looked straight at me.

"You'll recall that there've been some pretty big leakages in the last few years. There was that fellow Fuchs, and if things go the wrong way he'll be in a dock alongside Pontius Pilate for the charge he'll have to answer. There were others—scientists, diplomats—who went abroad and never came home. There were some you've not heard of who didn't go abroad, nor did they come home. Some of them disappeared because they liked Uncle Joe and all he stood for. Others didn't like Uncle Joe, but they vanished just the same.

"Now you'll realize that people don't vanish like that, and hand-picked people, the folks that matter most, unless someone's making pretty careful arrangements for their reception. I can tell you the broad outlines of the set-up. We know a bit, we guess a bit more.

"The chief architect's in Moscow, of course. Below him there's a national headquarters in most of the countries that matter. There's one here, there's one in the U.S.A. There are others. Next to G.H.Q. there's a contact man. He's there as a screen, and he's picked because he's a fanatic for the cause. He wouldn't talk if you fed him into a furnace by inches. There are several stages of contacts between G.H.Q. and the operatives. I don't know how many, but they're well screened. God knows, we've cause enough to be aware of that.

"There are two kinds of operative. First, there's what you might call the con man. He's just any snivelling little bolshevist who knows his comrade and world brotherhood stuff, with a glib tongue to put it over. You find him creeping about in dark corners at most of the universities. They're two a penny in Bloomsbury. When 'The Day' comes and they're no use any more they'll mow them down with machine-guns in communal graves.



"When they've located the man they want they put one of these things on to woo him over. You'd be surprised how often it works. Get a boffin out of his back room and he's the most guileless thing God ever made. Of course, not all of them are so green, and that's where they bring in the second operative.

"He's just a plain thug—the sand-bag and hypodermic merchant. They get the victim out of the country first if they can. It's safer abroad. But twice they've whipped a man away from under our noses. How they do it we don't yet know, though we'll find out. Once he's landed he's given a choice. A house, and all his needs ministered to in return for service to the People's Republic on the one hand. On the other—well, you're a writer and your imagination's as good as mine.

"There's one more character in the set-up. I'll call him the agent. He's a highly trained specialist. Some of them have been scientists, others in the diplomatic service. Their job's to locate the man who's wanted. They're venomous and dangerous. If we discover one of these we lock him up right away. If we find a thug or a con man we leave him loose and put a tail on him.

"That, Phillip, is a general picture of how it's worked. I needn't tell you it's got to be stopped. We can't afford to lose men at the rate we've lost them for the past twelve months, let alone have them going over to the other side. This thing has got number one priority. The best brains in Contra Espionage and Scotland Yard have been on it. Until recently we weren't making much headway. A week ago we got a lead. Did you read an account of a man called Rogers being killed in a brawl outside an East End pub?"

"I haven't your taste for the more macabre sections of the Press but it registers vaguely. Stepney, wasn't it?"

"Stepney it was, but it was not a drunken brawl. We let it go out that way. Rogers was one of my agents and a sound man. He 'phoned me at a quarter to ten last Thursday night. He had to talk fast. He was on a trail and must pick up his man at a pub called the 'Green Man' before closing time. In case anything went wrong he'd located a contact. It was a high-up contact. He was certain it was sound. He didn't know who, but it was in a village called Calander. Calander with one



I, not the Callander in the Trossachs, but a village in Shropshire. He'd make a full report in the morning.

"He never made that report. One assumes that he picked up his quarry at the 'Green Man' and followed him out. One assumes that someone else followed Rogers and another leak was stopped. Only, they stopped it too late. He had some premonition and he 'phoned through to me. We've got Calander, and it's all we have.

"This is what I want you to do. I want you to go to Calander and settle down to write a book. Very soon you'll be part of the community. They'll talk to you. You'll know what you're looking for, but our man won't know you're looking for him. Sooner or later, by word or deed he'll give himself away. That's all I want. From there on I'll take over. Will you do it?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Mac, it wouldn't work. The whole idea's about played out. I couldn't even use it in a book, it's the corniest thing I know. All the dim-wits at Contra Espionage, all the flat feet at Scotland Yard, are standing on their heads. They call in the Distinguished Amateur——"

I thought he was going to blow up. He said "Distinguished Amateur" very quietly, then he said "Distinguished" again and added a very rude word. After that I think he counted ten and got himself in hand.

"Listen, Phillip," he said, "on this occasion it isn't your brains I want. I dare say you've got plenty. I expect they bulge out until they positively embarrass your hairdresser, but just at the moment what I want is your chameleon-like character. I've a score of good agents I can put in. I can send a commercial traveller, a convalescent invalid, even a honeymoon couple, but they wouldn't have your opportunities, your facilities and your background.

"I don't expect results quickly—it'll probably take months. They can check your background until they're tired, they probably will, but they'll do it mainly as a matter of routine. You're a well-known public figure, a successful novelist, and because everyone knows what you are it's not likely they'll seriously suspect you of being anything else. You've written two books about the county and you've come to Calander to write another. They can't trace you back to me. I invited you



down here instead of asking you to lunch in Town because of the remote chance that you might be seen with me.

"You belong to the county. My people would be foreigners for the first twelve months. You can ask any damn fool questions you like, within limits, and they'll only think you're getting local colour for your book. You can work when you like and prowl when you like. They'll probably think you a trifle mad, which will all help. If I put in an agent who so much as arouses their suspicions the one line I've got will go out like a light."

I said: "I'm sorry, Mac. Forgive me if I appear churlish and irritable. Put it down to my liver. I've been over-working and I need a rest. It's not my line, and I'm keeping out of it."

He started to quote:

"We're all creeds and all denominations. Some of us don't even believe in God at all. There's only one common thing that holds us together. Wherever there is evil, we shall be there fighting it. We know it in all its guises. We recognize it as tyranny and oppression. We will go down contesting it because we would not live submitting to it. But we shall not die. We have been here before and we shall be here again. Wherever there is evil down the paths of time we shall be there, until we have destroyed it."

The damned fellow was quoting *Michael* at me. It was from Tony Sinclair's speech, when he got a trifle high at the Mess dinner.

I put my face in my hands. After a while I said: "Blast you, Mac. You make it hard for me to keep on saying what I know I ought to say."

Janet came back into the room. I caught an interrogatory glance between them, and for the first time I realized she was in it too. Till then I'd felt that she at least might see the complete reasonableness of my attitude. I began to wish that I'd never come near the place, that I'd got out of Town where I could pursue the life I'd created for myself and not be sucked down into this maelstrom of ugly things which were no concern of mine.

I heard McKinnon saying: "He'll not touch it. Maybe he's

right. It's not his job. Aye, it's my concern, and it's for me to see it through.

"Did you tell him about the Dennings?"

He shook his head. "I'd not do that. It's dangerous work I'm offering, and there's a limit to the pressure I'd put on a volunteer."

"Mac," I said, rather wearily, "if you've any more ammunition let's have it. Then I can say 'no' and go home with a clear conscience."

"It's best unsaid. No doubt there were worse things in Buchenwald, but, it's grim enough."

"Heavens, man, am I supposed to be squeamish. I saw—and did—some ugly things during the war. If you've anything else that bears on this proposition you've put to me I'm entitled to know what it is."

"It's not unconnected. It doesn't affect the facts of the case; I've told you all of them there are to tell. Maybe you'd say it illustrates the moral issues. We've kept it quiet, but if you press for it you'd better know. You'll maybe recall Raymond Denning? He was one of the most brilliant of our younger scientists."

"The professor who shot himself?"

"Aye. He'd some cause, too. Denning was working on a new development of radiation. He'd fathomed something that looked like detonating the atom bomb. You bring a bomb into a field of force, or some such thing, and off it goes. I'll not need to tell you how much that would mean. Properly developed, not one of the bombs could cross our coasts. We'd blow them to pieces in mid air.

"The agents marked him down. One of the con men was put in to seduce him. His politics were pretty crack-brained, but he wasn't a starry-eyed fellow traveller. He wouldn't play. They got at him through his daughter, a wee lassie of eight. She started home from school one afternoon and wasn't seen again. Two days later he got the usual letter.

"He was in a shocking state. He'd already been to the police, and we were called in. We got a party of backroom boys, and he was one, to draw up something as near the real thing as we could without giving a fact away. Then we drew one of the tightest nets that's ever been drawn. We tailed the first messenger, and the second, and the third. Then we lost it.



As soon as it slipped through we brought in the three men we'd identified. We did everything legal, and a few things that weren't, to make those boys talk. They didn't, because they couldn't. They didn't know a thing.

"For seven days the police of the British Isles dropped almost everything they had and scoured the country for that little girl. It took the other side a week to find our package was a fake. The parcel came on the eighth day."

He stopped talking, and the room became as silent as a tomb. It seemed he couldn't bring himself to frame the words. I looked at Janet and for the first time her composure had slipped away. She was sitting with her hands in her lap and her fingers were twisted together. Then McKinnon found his voice again.

"It was a wee lassie's hand," he said.

Something came up in my throat and nearly choked me. I blundered over to the sideboard, splashed some more brandy into my glass and somehow gulped it down. It was as though a cold wind had swept through the room; even the fire seemed to have gone black. Janet came to me and laid her hand on my arm.

"I'm sorry. Alec was right. We shouldn't——"

I looked at her fingers lying on my sleeve, and I seemed to see another hand.

"No," I said, and my voice was unsteady. "*You* were right. I needed that."

Things seemed to snap into perspective, and I saw them clearly for the first time. My early life on the farm, long, hard, unrewarded days, and a future dim and without promise stretching before me. Fleet Street, where the pavements proved not to be of gold, and the news-hungry machine chewed up and spat back the offerings with which I sought to placate it.

I saw the bomb, which in a split second blew my private dream of heaven into a mess of shattered fragments. The rest of those six years when the iron was in me and I killed, not because it was my job, but with a savage satisfaction because I hated half mankind. The wild struggle to carve a place in a new, changing world, and my too easy success.

When that came I'd thought the need for struggle over. I'd been prepared to settle into a mental luxury suite, with my



bank balance and possessions between me and the sordid things outside. Now I knew that you couldn't build yourself a retreat and shut your eyes to the hell around you. At least you couldn't if you had in you the power to mitigate that suffering. "Wherever there is evil, down the paths of time . . ." Tony was part of me. I'd created him, and I couldn't disown him.

I lit a cigarette and came back to the table. McKinnon hadn't moved. I sat down, and said:

"Mac, are you quite satisfied that I can do this job better than anyone else?"

"I am that. You may succeed, you may not, but I know of no one that I'd rather send. I spent three days on this before my decision was taken. It's unorthodox beyond measure. I'd not do a thing like it without the best of reasons. Man, it's my scalp that'll be hanging in Whitehall if this business goes aglee."

"There'll be a lot of briefing to be done. Can we do it now, or must it wait till morning?"

"If you'll come to my study we can do it now."

I was with him over four hours. Three days later I came to Calander.

## CHAPTER II

WHEN the pipe was going to my satisfaction, I climbed the gate and started to stroll across the meadow. I had already discovered that the quickest way to negotiate the gates around Calander was to climb them. The only exceptions were Peter Scott's. They opened and shut, as well-regulated gates should.

Peter was about twenty-seven. He had bought Mead Farm two years previously because it was one of the few holdings in a land-hungry country that nobody seemed to want. Having very limited capital that was the only way he could get into farming. It was small wonder there was little demand for the place, which consisted of about ninety acres of badly drained clay. I liked the Scotts; they were nice youngsters with plenty of guts. They could barely keep their financial chins above water but the pair of them went around with a dauntless optimism.

In Calander, remote, inaccessible, with indifferent soil and



difficult contours, no-one was likely to make a fortune out of the land. They were a mixed bag: Jenkins, who did no more work than was necessary to keep himself in beer and lived like an animal on forty acres; Robertson, a sound farmer of the old school, stable but unspectacular. I contrasted them with Charles and his thousand acres on the Shropshire plain. Charles made a pretty good income, mainly because he was a master of his craft. It didn't matter what your job, it was a question of the way you did it. Some people thought farming was a way to easy money. They didn't know the Robertsons and the Peter Scotts.

There were others, like the Maitlands, who played at farming and played very badly. A century before, Sir Gilbert Maitland's great-grandfather had owned all the land for miles around. Death duties, profligate living and sheer ignorance of commerce, agriculture and everything else had led to the disintegration of the estate. Caldicott Hall, the family seat, had changed hands twice and was now a sanatorium. The Maitlands had clung to Beck Farm, because it had the best house on the estate. Here they lived, subsidizing their farming losses out of the remains of their investment income.

Sir Gilbert had reached a stage in life at which his principal interests were fishing, stamp collecting and gout. His son, Gerald, a large young man, saw to such losses as were made on the farm. The product of his heredity and a minor public school, he fell both mentally and physically into the family hippopotamus. He had spent two years at an agricultural college, where he learned much about sundry matters, but agriculture was not among them. So far as I could discover the principal recreations of the house of Maitland on the male side had been fox-hunting and casual wenching in the locality. Gerald had stuck to the family tradition, except that he had given up fox-hunting.

My route took me past the churchyard and the back of the "Maitland Arms". I crossed a small field that belonged to Jenkins, and looked like it. One hedge was nothing but overgrown thorn, twelve feet high, and you could walk through it anywhere. Beyond this was a small patch of turf belonging to the inn. It was called "Bennett's Piece", probably after some long-dead licensee. Next to Bennett's Piece was Peter Scott's ground.



It was not often that one found Peter doing anything except work, but today he had finished in the dairy and was indulging in another form of exercise. Someone, I think it was Helen, had told me he had taken up archery as a sport and had bought himself a secondhand long bow, but this was the first time I had seen him in action. The target, which was four feet in diameter with five coloured rings, gold in the centre then red, blue, black and white, had been pinned to a stack of straw bales some fifty yards away. I stood and watched him hitting the target with about one arrow out of six, and after a while I had a go myself.

It wasn't as easy as it looked. My first arrow hit the ground less than twenty yards away. When I discovered that you hooked the fingers round the string instead of taking hold of the arrow between the thumb and forefinger I managed to draw the bow, only to get a most unmerciful whack on my left forearm from the string. The arrows went all over the place, and the last landed in the ditch at the far end of the field.

Peter said: "I think that'll about do for your first lesson. I want some tackle for tomorrow. How about starting a club?"

I didn't see why not. The only communal activity in the village was drinking, and if I could get all the suspects herded together in a common interest it might help me to keep an eye on them. Besides, the fascination of archery had begun to grip me, as I believe it grips most people who try their hands at it.

"I could get Greg and Helen. And Gerald if you're not fussy."

"Can't we keep it clean?"

"Bit awkward in a place this size."

"I suppose so. Lord," said Peter, grinning like a school-boy, "what fun it would be to loose an arrow in his fat behind."

I left him taking down the target and returned to the "Maitland". The place was deserted except for John Gregory polishing glasses behind the bar. Known to all the village as "Greg", he had come out of the army with three pips and a D.S.O. to his name. I thought he must be making quite a nice little income out of the inn. Having people like Jenkins and Donovan among the clientele helped, but most of his success was due to the man himself. The first thing that struck me when I met Greg was that he was about the best mixer I had



ever known. He had a squarish face with blue, good-humoured eyes and one of those crinkly grins that made you feel you had known him all your life.

I ordered a pint of bitter and led straight into the subject of archery. The whole thing was nearly settled when the sound of ancient wheels caused me to look out of the window. One glance told me all I needed to know and I put back the rest of my drink.

"Gerald, full of *bonhomie* and amorosity, and I am in the mood for neither. Tell him I'm deep in work. And put Rosie on a chain."

I went through the door and up the stairs. My rooms were the nearest thing to a suite that the "Maitland" could provide. Normally there were two bedrooms to let. At my special request, and on my very special terms, the furniture from one had been stored in an attic and replaced with a few pieces of my own. There was a desk for my typewriter, an easy chair, a settee, a small table and a few odds and ends.

I sat down at the desk, unlocked the drawer that held the notes for my book and lifted the top six sheets as I must have done fifty times before. I was suddenly aware of a slight pricking sensation at the base of my scalp. The pile of papers was always left neatly arranged with the ends flush against the front of the drawer. There was one exception, the seventh sheet. This was set back a bare eighth of an inch. Thus I had found it on fifty previous occasions. This time it was flush with all the others.

I unlocked another drawer. The bottom was lined with newspaper and it contained, among an assortment of articles, a bottle of ink. The letter "R" in the word "permanent" on the label should have stood directly above a letter "Q" in the newsprint. It had been moved one line forward and three spaces to the right.

My room had been searched, methodically, by someone who knew his job.

It could have been anyone. Gregory and Helen had the best opportunity, but I'd gone out shortly after lunch and anyone in the village might have slipped in for long enough to do the job. Enquiries were out of the question. Only someone on his guard against just such an occurrence could have noticed the tiny, telltale discrepancies. *Bona fide* novelists do



not set delicate traps for those who search their rooms. If I allowed the least suspicion that I was not what I appeared I might as well pack up and go home—provided I got the chance.

Though the incident brought me no nearer a solution it had its value in more ways than one. Whoever had been through my things had found nothing inconsistent with my role, for it was not there to find. The conviction would be strengthened that I was who I claimed to be, and doing what I professed to do. It answered the question that had nagged in my mind for over a week. Rogers had pointed no false trail. There were evil things in Calander, and I was in the middle of them.

Calander was a kind of post-office. If the man at the top wanted to send a message to one of his operatives he did it through his agent in the village. Similarly, if news had to be conveyed to headquarters it went through the same channel but in the opposite direction. Probably nothing moved at all, except when there was a job on hand.

There were three ways of getting information in and out of the village—by telephone, letter or personal contact. I ruled the telephone out right away, unless the Briscoes were the people we wanted. Calander is not blessed with an automatic exchange, and old Mother Briscoe at the switchboard rarely has her ear far from the instrument if anything is moving on the wires. Whatever goes in through her ears has very shortly to come out through her mouth. I suppose there just isn't space inside to contain it for long. If you want to publicize anything you ring up a friend and tell him about it. If you require express service you mention that it is strictly confidential. The best way to tell everyone your business is to put it through the exchange at Calander.

Just to make quite certain I had arranged for the lines to be tapped, and sometimes I experienced a sense of uncharitable satisfaction at the thought that someone was flogging an even deader horse than the one I had been given. I wondered if any of the part numbers for Peter's agricultural spares had found their way to the cipher department of M.I.5 for decoding



Letter post seemed even more improbable. For one thing, it was far too slow. For another, it was too easily traceable in a small place like Calander. That left only the medium of personal contact. In other words, when anything was moving someone either went out of Calander or came into it. I kept a careful eye on people's movements, but I had no idea when trouble was expected and the task was made even more difficult by the fact that McKinnon believed there was at least one alternative channel of communication. For weeks on end people lived their ordinary lives, then there would be a quick movement followed by a return to normality. I had to spot that movement and the person who made it, which was no easy task.

About coffee time on the morning after my room had been searched I looked in on the Scotts. Mrs. Wormsley opened the door. She is the local char, sometimes called the "Calander Clarion", and along with Tommy Trundler the postman and Mrs. Briscoe she disseminates most of the news in the village. She puts in half a day at most of the houses of any size and collects a wealth of information, much of which is inaccurate. I found Peggy in a blue jumper with the sleeves rolled up above the elbows washing some kind of garment in the sink.

She said: "Nice timing, Phillip. I suppose you smelt it." The coffee was simmering in a saucepan on the stove and she poured it into a couple of mugs. I took mine to my usual seat at the table and she carried hers back to the sink.

"For heaven's sake," I said, "let that thing soak for a bit and have your coffee in comfort. Besides, I like something decorative to look at while I'm drinking and I can only see your back."

"What's wrong with my back?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, but it's against the light and I can't see the details."

She went pink. I've never known a girl who blushed as readily as Peggy, and as the result was rather becoming I used to stimulate it whenever I had the chance.

"Well, if it'll keep you happy, but I've an awful lot to do." She brought the mug to the table and sat down facing me. "Will this do?"

"It will not merely do, it is perfection. I'd write a sonnet,



only Peter will walk in at any moment and strike a discordant note."

He did, on my last word, and said something about the bloody weather. I looked out of the window. It had started to rain again. He crossed to the stove and poured himself a mug of coffee.

"Hell fire and brimstone. Who but a lunatic would farm in this benighted climate? Here am I, half-way through March, with half my arable unploughed and lying under water. God never meant this place for a farm, He intended it for a perishing brickyard. We're always months behind everyone else, but even the light-land farmers on the lowlands haven't sown a grain yet in this inundation. With luck we might get ours in by July."

"I shouldn't worry. You're streets ahead of anyone else around Calander."

"That's a nice yardstick to measure anything by. Jenkins and the Maitlands. If I had some of the labour Gerald keeps sitting on their backsides playing shove ha'penny I might get somewhere. Did you know he's just got a new landgirl?"

"I didn't even know there was an old one."

"No, of course. She left about the time you arrived. Rumour has it that Gerald seduced her, and she was packed off to produce the evidence elsewhere."

"Rumour would. Was it true?"

"I doubt it. Of course you never saw her, but even Gerald draws the line somewhere. If Tommy Trundler's to be believed this one will have to watch her step. It seems she has looks. According to Tommy she's a 'smart piece of homework'."

Having seen Tommy's particular piece of homework I decided to form my own opinion. "A spot of fresh blood wouldn't do any harm," I said. "The only trouble with this otherwise delightful village is that all the really attractive women are married."

"That and its stinking climate," said Peter. "And the land and the buildings and the people and the beer. Apart from that it's a lovely place. Anything in the rag?" He pulled the morning paper towards him. He was thoroughly disgruntled since the rain had started.

Peggy said, "I never thought you'd let a few odd husbands stand in your way, Phillip."



"I don't as a rule. Trouble is they're all tough guys, like Peter."

"I fancy you could be fairly tough yourself if you got roused to it. Weren't you in Commandos?"

"After I got out of tanks. I didn't like them, they made me seasick. I'm too old and lazy to get tough. If there's one thing I like more than another it's lying on my back in the sun and catching the plums as they fall off the trees." I crossed to the stove and collected the pan. There was still some coffee left and I shared it round. We got about half a mug apiece. Peter came to life again.

"Good lord, they've lost another boffin. Why don't they keep those bods on a chain?"

I kept my voice casual. "It's our secret service. It's the worst in the world." I wondered if Mac's ears were burning. My paper had gone astray that morning and I hadn't seen the news. "What's he done? Fallen down a drain?"

"There's not much about it." Peter began to read:

"Professor Chekov (there's a good, resounding Anglo-Saxon name for you), a chemist employed at the Harwell Atomic Research Centre, left Oxford for his home in London on Saturday morning and has not been seen since. When he failed to arrive by lunch time his wife became anxious and reported the matter to the police. Scotland Yard, who are investigating the disappearance, state that there is no cause for alarm as it is believed that the professor may be suffering from loss of memory. A photograph of the professor appears at the foot of this column, and anyone who can give information concerning his whereabouts is asked to communicate with the nearest police station.

"The Home Office state that Professor Chekov was engaged on minor work of a routine nature and would be unable to pass on information of value to a foreign power. The Professor, who is 56, was a Polish refugee. He escaped from his country during the German invasion and reached England in the summer of 1940. He became a naturalized British Subject in 1948.

"That's all, except for a picture of a doleful sort of bird, looking like an advertisement for someone's stomach powders. If you've seen that hanging around Calander you tell it to Constable Jenkins." He passed the paper to me.

I had a good look at the professor. He was a lugubrious customer, and had the appearance of being worried stiff. I



would have put him at ten years more than the age given in the report, and I wondered how recent the photo might be. I said:

"It's not unlike Peter when the rain's on. Let Scotland Yard look after their boffins, they're paid for it. How about archery?"

Peter said, "How about paddling." He was glowering at the window, outside which the rain was now falling in a steady downpour. I ignored the comment.

"I got Greg and Helen signed on this morning. We're up to five in less than a day."

"You can't count on five," said Peggy. "I've nothing to shoot with."

I hadn't thought about that one. The price of tackle would be a big item to the Scotts. Peter had been lucky enough to drop on a secondhand bargain, but there was no knowing when the right thing for Peggy might turn up. I wondered if I could help.

"Haven't you a birthday sometime?" I asked.

"I've a birthday on Saturday. All I want now is a fairy godmother."

"I was never cast in that role, but why shouldn't I give the nicest girl in Calander a birthday present if I want to?"

This time she went as red as a peony. "You'll do nothing of the kind. I wouldn't accept. I hardly know you."

"Well, drop in some evening. We can soon put that right."

"It's nice of you, Phillip, but I couldn't possibly. Peter wouldn't let me."

I think Peter got the right idea. She was dead keen to shoot, it was something they could do together outside the daily round and I wanted to help because I liked the pair of them. I wouldn't miss the money anyway. It was either that or his mind was still three parts on the weather.

"Why on earth shouldn't I? There was nothing left in the bargain basement where I got mine. If you can't vamp someone into giving you a bow you'll have to take an axe and hew one out of the yew trees in the churchyard."

She capitulated and gave me a smile. "Are you easy to vamp?"

"Try me and see. What I don't know I'm easily taught. That's settled, then. We shall have a birthday lunch in



Wolverhampton and rig ourselves up as compleat archers. Peter can fend for himself for once. It'll take his mind off the weather."

Peter said: "You're a good chap, Phillip. When my ship comes in I'll give you a golden fountain-pen for Christmas that writes books on its own. Of course, if it had been Gerald——"

"Gerald," said Peggy, "is his *bête noire*. Whenever it rains he keeps getting back to the subject."

"It's that lecherous leer he gives you."

"That's not a leer, it's his natural expression."

"Then it's time someone altered it. One of these days I'll——"

"Peter, you will not. He's twice your weight."

"Fourteen and a half stone of undiluted whale blubber. One good bash downstairs and I'd take him to pieces at leisure."

Peter was fit and strong, but you can't give four stone away and come out whole unless you know an awful lot about the game. Besides, Gerald had done some boxing. I knew that in the same way that I knew a good deal about several of the people in Calander. McKinnon's department had fixed me up with reports on their backgrounds, and there were more to come. I said:

"Cool down, you young fire-eater. Gerald'll get what's coming to him one day, but don't you go offering yourself for a Roman holiday."

Peter got up and put on his oilskin. The rain was easing off. "It's all right," he said. "It's only bluster. I know he'd half murder me. But one of these days the ire will rise in me and blood will fly. Behave yourselves. In my next incarnation I'll write books instead of digging post holes in the wet." He went out.

I reached for my own ancient Burberry and started to put it on. "I must be off too. I've held you good people up long enough and I have to get some more tobacco in Wenlock. Thanks for the coffee. I'll look in again sometime."

"Do," said Peggy. "And thanks for everything, Phillip. Calander will seem dull when you move on."

I went out quickly. I wondered what they'd think if they knew why I was here, but how in hell could one suspect people



like that? I walked back to the "Maitland" and got the Jaguar out of the garage. By the time I was on the road the rain was tumbling down again.

I drove slowly to Much Wenlock. You don't drive fast around Calander if you respect your car or your neck. There are narrow roads, bends and gradients, and pot-holes that would test a tank. I parked the car in the main street and walked round to Morton's, a small tobacconist's shop sandwiched between a grocery store and a shoe shop.

Morton was serving a couple of customers when I went in. I said, "Has the Dunhill come yet?"

"Came this morning, Mr. Mansell. I've got it at the back. If you care to step through I'll be with you in a moment."

I went through and up a flight of stairs. There was a room at the top containing a big desk, some chairs and a telephone. On the desk was a typewritten letter addressed to me. I sat down and slit it open. It was from McKinnon.

*This Chekov disappearance is a bad business, he wrote. The statement that he was engaged on routine work is perfectly true, but unfortunately he had access to other information and was quite capable of understanding it. This may be damaging.*

*Chekov was well vetted by my department and was strongly anticommunist. We think that members of his family still in Poland may have been arrested and pressure brought to bear through them. Possibly a few anatomical parcels have been sent to give point to the arguments. His colleagues say he has been a very worried man for some time.*

*I have no means of knowing whether instructions for this operation passed through Calander or not. I fully appreciate your difficulties and realize that it may be a long time before you can tell us anything, but we are desperately anxious and any movement which may give us a lead will be welcome.*

*Though you have to play your hand alone I need scarcely remind you that the whole of my department and indirectly the resources of the Government are behind you. If you require anything you have only to let me know.*

*I enclose a brief supplementary report on Sir Gilbert Maitland. I do not see that it is of great value, but in this work one never knows when an apparently disconnected fact may complete the picture.*



It was not one of Mac's chatty notes, it was sombrely official and there was no doubt that he was in a state of anxiety. I read the report on Sir Gilbert. It appeared our baronet had had dealings with Mosley and his gang of British Fascists, but had seen the red light and had severed relations in the spring of 1939. It was the first indication that he had dabbled in any kind of politics outside the local Conservative Association. I sat and looked at the report and thought about it for a long time. It seemed I might have to take the Maitlands more seriously. World communism is as good a step ladder to power as Fascism, if one has leanings that way. After a while I locked the papers with the earlier reports in a drawer of the desk and picked up the telephone. I dialled and asked for the supervisor. When he was on the line I said:

"Mansell here. Whitehall 0105, priority." Twenty seconds later I was talking to McKinnon.

"Mac," I said, "this place is as quiet as a tomb. One little thing's happened. It confirms the line's right, but it doesn't advance us any. My room's been searched."

"Aye. Would that not narrow the field?"

"Not a scrap. It was yesterday afternoon and I was out four hours. Anyone could have done it."

He was silent so long that I thought the line had been cut. At last:

"You've the farmer chappie and the publican and the Maitlands. There's the Vicar and yon roaring bolshie, Donovan. There's the grocer and the retired engineer, Bretherton. They're all married except young Maitland and the bolshie. Wives included, that's fourteen. And you're fairly sure our man, or woman, is in that group?"

"I'm pretty certain he can't be outside, but when I look at the suspects I can't see how the blazes he's inside, either. By the way, you can take Lady Maitland out right away. She's just a simpering old fool who married for the title and got what she deserved."

"Phillip, if you were to start a process of elimination, who would you take out first?"

"Lord knows. I think I'd take out the lot. Well, let's see. I'd begin with the Scotts. I know them well, and if they're guilty I'm an embittered cynic for evermore. Then I'd discard Rowlands, the grocer. He's lived in the neighbourhood



all his life. Everyone knows him and all about him. He looks what he is, a moderately prosperous small-town tradesman. With his business in Wenlock he's a better chance of outside contacts than many, but Harding's had that end under a microscope for the last fortnight and swears he's genuine. I'd take out the Padre too."

"Why the Padre?"

"Mac, you've known me a good many years. Conventional religion never cut much ice with me. I've seen more sanctimonious hypocrites in dog collars than ever I've seen outside them. Davison's a man on his own. He doesn't talk his religion, he lives it. He brings Christianity into people's lives merely by being Davison, and it's not just stock Church of England stuff, it's the Christianity of Christ. I went to hear him preach once, and it takes something to make me do that. He was just the same, simple commonsense stuff that ties up with driving a tractor or scrubbing a floor. You've seen his record as a padre in Burma."

"Aye. Maybe. But, man, what a façade."

"You blasted cynic," I said.

"I'm that, no doubt. I've a job that makes me so. Well, how about yon bolshie?"

"In many ways he fits, but in one he won't tally at all. He's an R.C. Not just the nominal type, but a devout, priest-fearing, Mass-attending Catholic. It doesn't tie up with Moscow communism one little bit. You call him a bolshie, but he's not. He's an anarchist. For all his hot air he's not interested in policies or politics, in parties or in law. What Paddy Donovan wants belongs to Paddy Donovan, and let the damn fool stop him that cares to try."

"You're weeding them out. Can you pin it on your landlord?"

"I'd hate to have to." I thought of Gregory, with his square jaw and humorous blue eyes. "Could be, I suppose, but if there's one man I've got where I can really see him it's Greg. I don't know whether there's anything in it, but you've probably heard it said that if dogs and children take to a man there's not much wrong with him. We've dogs in Calander that'll take the pants off anyone who goes near them. They'll run up to Greg and wag their tails. There was one particularly nasty mongrel cur. Its master couldn't do a thing with it.



Inside a week Gregory had it sitting up and begging for a piece of meat, and it wouldn't touch it until it was paid for. If there are half a dozen people in a room and a child comes in I'll guarantee within five minutes it'll be on his knee."

"So you're down to Bretherton and the Maitlands."

"I know. I've done this a hundred times. I don't know a lot about Bretherton, but he seems an inoffensive old buffer. I'd just about ruled out Gerald and the bart, but since I saw your report on the tie-up with the Blackshirt boys I've put them back in the possibles. Honestly, though, I don't think they could hold down that or any other job. If you put both their brains in one pan of the scales and sneezed in the other it'd go down and stay down. Mac, if this Chekov job went through Calander can you give me any idea when it would most likely be?"

"Yes, I think I can help you there. No one, including the professor, knew he was going on leave until last Wednesday morning. My guess would be that the message went up about Wednesday evening and came down not later than Friday afternoon, though what channel was used is more than I can say."

I said: "Thanks, Mac. I'll let you know if anything turns up."

I let myself out of Morton's, through the back door, and walked round to the car. The sky was full of lowering clouds, and the rain descended in a steady stream as I drove back to Calander.

### CHAPTER III

WEDNESDAY brought a fresh crop of gossip to dissect. Mrs. Wormsley was splitting at the seams with a story of how Bretherton had entertained a blonde a week previously while his wife was away for the night. It could have been a messenger but it could equally well have been a bit of light relief, and knowing Doris Bretherton I would not have blamed him if it had. She told me another tale about the police being after Gregory for serving after hours, but as I had heard him refusing her a bottle of stout on just such an occasion I put that down to malice.

Over a pint, Tommy Trundler informed me that Donovan was losing ten pounds a week on horses apart from what he spent on beer. It was a scandal that an Irishman of debatable parentage should be paid such wages for ripping and snorting around after opencast coal at Ironbridge. He ought, said Tommy, to be exported to Ireland, for wanna he a communitist and ripping up the land so as we'd all starve in the next war. Most of the evidence in Calander was like that. It was either grossly exaggerated or quite untrue.

The rain had given way to a bitter east wind threatening snow, and the evening was the best part of the day. I put my head round the door of the saloon bar, saw Gerald and was about to take it out again. Then I noticed his companion, hesitated, and in that split second he spotted me. He let out a roar like a bull.

"Hi, Phil, come and have a drink."

I closed the door and crossed over to their table. Gerald said:

"Jenny, meet our tame celebrity. Mr. Mansell—Miss Ware."

Her back had been to the door, and she turned in her chair to look at me. Time rocked, and the years withered away. Of course, she was not really like Daphne. Daphne had been fair, while Jennifer had soft brown hair framing an exquisite skin. But the eyes were Daphne's, grey-blue, almond-shaped, set rather wide with a ripple of mischief on the surface and the depths of half eternity beneath. The lips were hers too, soft as the petal of a rose, calm in repose but the corners for ever trying to lift into a smile. That friendly smile which endeared her to everyone until some blond lout, crooning over the switches on his bomb panel, had crushed the life from her beneath a ton of masonry—and I had never been quite sane again.

Jennifer was bigger than Daphne, who had been an ethereal slip of a girl. There was no resemblance, really. They could not have been less alike in colour, form, or feature, yet here was the living, breathing spirit of Daphne back to haunt me. I must break this delirium; next, I should have the dream again. She was quite young, twenty, perhaps. Daphne was twenty-one when the lout had dropped the bomb.

I jerked myself back to earth.



"I'm so sorry. I've been seeing ghosts, but I expect you're used to men staring at you. Is your name really Jenny, or is that just one of Gerald's mutilations?"

"It's really Jennifer."

It had to be, of course. It had to be Daphne's slightly husky voice, and this time there could be no mistake. If I had closed my eyes I could have thought that it was Daphne speaking.

"How nice. It's my favourite name. May I call you Jennifer? Mine is Phillip."

Gerald said: "What are you drinking, Phil? Half of bitter? Make it a pint, man. And, Jenny, knock that sherry back and have another."

"Thanks, Gerald, but it's too good a sherry for knocking back."

"Go on, girl, it'll do you good."

She took a sip and put the glass down. I liked the way she did it.

"And mine's a half, Gerald. None of your exercises in multiplication."

"Holy cow! Why you people drink at all beats me. Hi, Greg!"

It was Rosie, not Gregory, who appeared, wagging her hips and ogling Gerald all the way across the room. He stared straight past her, with a bovine expression on his great red face. This was an act put on for Jennifer's benefit. He was not usually so insensible.

"Yes, Mr. Gerald."

"A pint and a half of bitter. How they make enough here to pay your wages beats me. You'd sell more if you served tea. Jenny, I was telling you about that nigger. Most chaps don't know how to deal with a nigger. Keep bashing away at his head. Might as well lay into the garden roller. Only knocks your hands up and makes him laugh."

"Well, I know a thing or two. He was a big nigger. Fifteen-four. Came in like a bull at the start. I kept jabbing my left in his gizzard." I have never discovered where Gerald supposed a nigger kept his gizzard. "Wore him down. By the fourth round he was starting to blow. I fainted high with my left and he left himself wide open. Landed him a right under the heart that dropped him for a count of seven."

There are times when I can regard Gerald with a reasonable measure of tolerance. He is a case of arrested development, and if you remember that, he can be interesting. There are others when he irritates me beyond the limits of good manners, and this was one of them. I glanced sideways at Jennifer. She was obviously bored to the point of embarrassment. After the next pint it struck me that he would be recounting some of his amorous conquests.

He was now chasing the nigger round the ring. It seemed he did everything to the wretched man, except pick him up and throw him at the referee. His fists were moving in illustration of the way he did it. One right hook would have put Jennifer's sherry across the room and through the hatch if I had not seen it coming and moved the glass in the nick of time. His voice was getting louder and louder and must have been plainly audible in the public bar. At last he paused to pour some beer down his throat. I caught Jennifer's eye, and she gave me an appealing look.

"You know," I said, "boxing's not the only thing Gerald does well. He's a crack shot. Shoots the best line in the county."

Gerald spluttered into his tankard and put it down. "Ha bloody ha. I suppose that's out of one of your rotten books."

"No. That's out of a rotten book I haven't written yet."

Jennifer caught up the thread. At least we had broken the monologue.

"Are you writing a book about Calander?"

"Good lord, no. I'd be paying damages for libel actions the rest of my life."

"You could disguise the characters."

"How on earth could I disguise Gerald?"

"Don't you go putting me in one of your lousy books," said Gerald.

"You needn't worry. I have to get it past the censor."

One of these days, I thought, I'll goad him too far and then he'll try his nigger act on me. When I got in a certain mood I just could not resist it. He was such a self-satisfied moron, and rose to every bait you offered him. He sat there now, brooding like a bad-tempered bull. I turned to Jennifer.

"Have you and Gerald known each other long?"

"Not very. I work for him."



So that was it. The new landgirl who would need to watch her step. I did not like it one little bit. She looked a fastidious child, and the thought of her shut up in that morgue with those three insalubrious creatures was like the idea of putting a clean, healthy person in a leper colony. Gerald would have only one idea so far as she was concerned. Maybe she could look after herself, but doing so day in, day out, would be a wearing business. One could not choke him off with a snub; it had as much effect as sarcasm on a rhinoceros.

Well, it was none of my business. I had sufficient on my hands without trying to play knight errant where I was possibly not even wanted. I looked up, and our eyes met and held for a moment. Before she looked away I glimpsed a flicker of loneliness and bewilderment. It was so slight it might have passed unnoticed, but she had Daphne's eyes and I had known Daphne very, very well. Whether or not it was my business I resolved to make it so.

"When you're not working," I said, "I'd like you to meet the Scotts. They're friends of mine."

She looked up again. "Thank you, Phillip. If they're friends of yours I think I should like to meet them very much."

Gerald suddenly recovered from his trance, or brood or whatever it might have been. "Jenny. Oh yes, Jenny manages the herd for us. Just come on the staff."

The Maitlands have a collection of about ten thoroughly bad pedigree Jersey cows which they call a herd. I fancy they think it gives some kind of tone to their farming.

"I know the herd," I said. "They're pedigree, like Gerald. Trace their ancestry back to the Conqueror and can't do anything but breed."

This time I thought I really had touched off the detonator. His beady little bloodshot eyes regarded me malevolently. I said, "We need some more drinks," gathered up the glasses and took them to the hatch. While Rosie was drawing the beer I caught sight of Helen in the background and beckoned her.

"Are you busy, or can you join us for a drink? I've just been baiting Gerald and he's on the point of blowing up. I don't want to break up your nice tidy saloon. Come and hold his hand."

"I'd do most things for you, Phillip, but I draw the line at holding Gerald's hand. Really, you shouldn't bait him, you



know. One of these days he'll set about you, and then what chance would you have?"

"More than you think," I said. "I can run quicker than he."

"You're quite crazy. One morning they'll be fishing your body out of a ditch."

"Well, come and be a buffer state. You needn't touch him, just exercise your charm. I promise to be good and do no more bear-baiting."

"All right, Phillip. Take me a drink and I'll be with you in a minute."

When I returned with the drinks, Jennifer was alone. I said:

"Tell me, if it's not a rude question, what on earth are you doing in that menagerie?"

"I will, one day, but we haven't time now."

"All right, but tell me this. Can you keep things under control?"

"I think so."

"You think so, but you're not quite sure?"

"Well, practically."

"Fair enough, but promise me one thing. If they ever look the least bit like getting out of hand you'll let me know. Will you?"

"Willingly," she said. "I feel much happier since I met you. I was just a little bit on my own."

I took out my case and she accepted a cigarette. "You needn't feel that way any more. Now let's put on our best party manners. Squire Maitland is returning to the fold."

Gerald came lumbering back to his chair. He looked at me balefully, picked up his pint and poured half of it down his throat. He knew what he wanted to do, but had not yet summoned up the moral courage to set about it. Helen joined us almost immediately and I introduced her to Jennifer. She is the last type of person one would expect to find running a pub in Calander. Slight, dark and vivacious she would look more at home in a London night-club. We got on to food rationing and a general vilification of the Government, which was a safe enough topic. For the sake of peace I even ignored Gerald's reference to unproductive sons of bachelors who were lousy with money and did all sorts of obscure things on the black market.



We were a reasonably harmonious party by the time the door opened to admit two men and a woman. Rowlands and his wife I was prepared to see; they dropped in for a drink two or three times a week. What I did not expect was to find them in the company of Detective-Inspector Harding of New Scotland Yard. The fact that Harding was in Calander at all suggested to me that something had gone very wrong indeed. He was staying in Much Wenlock under the name of Benson, his job being to keep an eye on Rowlands' grocery business and also the Irishman, Donovan, who drove an excavator on an opencast coal working at Broseley. He was, too, my immediate liaison with the police should I require one. Only in exceptional circumstances was he to appear in the village. There was a chance that he might be recognized, and the last thing we wanted was the suggestion of any kind of official interest in Calander.

I ignored Harding, greeted the Rowlands and pulled a second table up to ours. I bought a round of drinks and the conversation became general. Harding disposed of his quickly and ordered another round. Jennifer and I sat that one out, while Gerald had his usual pint. As soon as Harding had finished his second beer he turned to me and said in a kind of *sotto voce* that was audible to most of the company:

"Do you know where the lavatory is?"

"Outside," I said, in the same kind of audible whisper. "I could do with a stroll myself. I'll show you the way." As soon as we were outside the door, "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Sorry, sir, I had to come. Message from the Colonel. He's expecting a movement through the village tonight."

That was good news, for I was prepared for calamity. "Blast the man, I wish he could give me more warning. Why the Rowlands?"

"Camouflage. They were in the bar when Morton brought the message. I got into conversation and showed an interest in country pubs. They invited me to try their local. Better than coming on my own, it saves a lot of village speculation."

I nodded. "They're taking you back, I suppose."

"That's the idea."

"We must break that up." I thought hard. "Look, you've been drinking whisky and those two quick beers haven't



agreed with you. I'll tell Rowlands not to worry, I'll run you home."

I waited two or three minutes before going back to the saloon, then I went up to Rowlands.

"Your pal's stomach's gone sour on him. He's been on Scotch, and the chump has to go and knock a couple of beers back in five minutes. Don't worry, I'll see him home."

Rowlands got to his feet. "No, now, look. You're not to put yourself out. I'll see to him."

"It's no trouble at all. I've got him in my car and he's doubled up on the front seat groaning like a land-lubber in the Bay of Biscay. It's simpler that way. He'll only be ill again if we move him to your car."

"It's real good of you. I'm afraid I've made a lot of bother."

"Not a bit. Forget it."

"He looked all right when he went out," said Helen.

"I know. It was the cold air that hit him. He was ill almost before I got him round to the back."

"Another bastard that can't hold his liquor," said Gerald.

He was rocking to and fro on his chair. I'd lost count of what he had drunk, but that must have been at least his eighth pint. By the look of him he wouldn't hold his own much longer. I smiled at Helen.

"Thanks for your co-operation."

"A pleasure, Phillip. Don't forget what I told you."

"No, I'll be good to bears."

As I went through the door I heard Gerald say, "What the hell's he twittering about?"

On the way out I collected my Burberry and put it on. The night was cold with the sky overcast. I backed the car out and turned right down the village street. We went left on the Wenlock road and a quarter of a mile further on left again into Quarry Lane. This is an appalling track, unclassified by any standard and with a terrific gradient. It runs roughly parallel to the village street, skirts a disused quarry and joins the Acton Mole road at the top of the hill. I turned left, stopped the car and switched off the lights.

"I'll give you an outline of the geography. We're now heading back for Calander. Two hundred yards on is Bretherton's place, 'The Firs'. 'Hill Top's' just beyond it.



That's Rowlands'. The road goes on to a fork, left drops down into Calander and right goes to Church Stretton. Acton Mole's behind you. I suggest you take Bretherton and Rowlands. They're outside the village proper. I'm going back into Calander."

"Good enough. How do we make contact?"

"The old owl hoot's as good as anything. Double for safety. There may be a few about."

"Good luck, sir."

I drove on without lights. When the road began to drop I cut the engine and coasted round the bend. There was not a soul about. At the bottom of the hill I turned into a grassy lane by the church and ran the car well off the road. I got out and stood perfectly still, listening. A distant dog was barking. Otherwise there was not a sound.

I went through the churchyard and climbed the fence into the Vicarage garden. There was a light in one window and muffled voices came from behind the curtain. It sounded like a radio play. The Vicarage is divided from the "Maitland" by a privet hedge which was unscaleable. It meant going through into Jenkins' field and thence via Bennett's Piece to the "Maitland" grounds. A rumble of voices came from the saloon bar. I crept up the path by the side of the hotel towards the main road. This was risky, for it meant passing the entrance to the public bar. However, I had been brought up in the country and knew how to move silently at night. As I reached the door to the bar I heard footsteps coming briskly along the road from the direction of Peter Scott's. I edged forward on my rubber-soled shoes, pressing myself close to the garage wall. I was within three feet of him when he passed. The night was dark, but there was no mistaking the figure and its gait. It was Bretherton.

The time was just on half past nine. I waited till his footsteps were dying away, and then turned right long the main road towards Peter's. Harding would check up on Bretherton if he returned home. The Wenlock road turns off a hundred yards from Peter's gate. I had just passed the junction when I heard the sound of an engine starting up. I stopped in my tracks. A car had been parked in the short length of lane on the left of the Wenlock road a couple of hundred yards' distant. It came out, driven on its sidelights, and turned



towards Wenlock. My own car was a good three hundred yards away.

I started to run, as fast as I could go, in the direction of the church.

## CHAPTER IV

IN MY school days I had been a moderately successful cross-country runner, but that was nearly twenty years ago and the dress did not include a raincoat and flannel trousers. By the time I reached the Jaguar my heart felt as if it was nearly coming through my ribs. The other car had a good quarter of a mile start, and I reckoned this would have widened to three-quarters by the time I was on the road. It was fairly certain that my quarry was making for Wenlock, for though the route was crossed by a maze of roads and lanes they led to nowhere of consequence. By Wenlock I would have to be on his tail, as he would have a choice of roads to Shrewsbury, Buildwas and Ironbridge. I ruled out Bridgnorth. Had that been his destination he would have taken the Ditton Strange road from the village.

Driving on my fog lamps I turned into the Wenlock road and settled down to make the best possible time over seven miles of appalling surface. The chase very nearly ended at the first hairpin. I took it over-fast, hit the nearside bank, bounced across the road and missed the deep ditch on the other side by inches. After that I tempered enthusiasm with discretion. Often the bends and gradients sent even my twenty-five horse-power engine down to second gear. I topped the first bank to see the glare of headlamps thrown against distant trees as my quarry crested another rise more than half a mile away.

For the first time I began to be assailed by misgivings. Till then I had never doubted that the other car was connected with the purpose for which I had come to Calander. It was quite likely that I was merely playing gooseberry to a harmless couple who had spent the evening parked in a lane. It had been the same with Bretherton—sex or crime. Lovers and criminals seemed to have similar furtive tendencies.

From the junction with the Bourton road the surface



improved and the bends became less acute. On one straight section I glimpsed a tail lamp a quarter of a mile ahead and put on speed. At imminent risk to my neck I coaxed the speedometer up to seventy and closed the gap a mile short of Wenlock, sufficiently to read GNT 6972 on his number plate. No one except the driver was visible in the car, and it was not Bretherton's girl friend, unless she was wearing a trilby. I dropped back, and gave him a lead of a couple of hundred yards.

At Wenlock he turned left in the direction of Shrewsbury. I nosed out into the main road and let him disappear round the bend before following suit. Going up the incline to the top of Wenlock Edge I got trapped behind a lorry with a stream of traffic coming to meet me, and had to crawl to the bottom of Harley Hill before I had a chance to overtake. In third gear I swept uphill round the left-right turn of Harley village, nearly dispatching one alcoholic-looking gentleman straight into the arms of St. Peter.

Between Harley and Cressage there is no branch road of any importance, but in Cressage the main road bears left while straight ahead lies a secondary route to the A5. As I closed with the leading car I had a nasty shock. It was not GNT at all, but VJ something or other. The car I wanted was either ahead of it, or else it had turned off on one of the minor roads between Wenlock and Cressage.

I had to think quickly, and I decided to put my money on the Shrewsbury road. If GNT was making for the A5 his most direct route would have been through Buildwas or Ironbridge. I took a chance, dropped into third and went past VJ on the bend. The local copper would have to be just round the corner. He jumped into the road and put up his hand. I don't know what he expected me to do, for I could not have stopped if I'd tried. I kept going and he jumped clear in the nick of time. I think he fell in the ditch. If he got my number that was something Harding would have to sort out; I was hanged if I'd pay any fines for pulling Mac's chestnuts out of the fire.

Beyond Cressage is a mile of straight road known as the Cressage straight. As I rounded the last bend I saw a tail light half a mile away, and going like blazes. I switched on to my headlamps and put down the accelerator. The car fairly hurled itself into the night. Half-way along the straight the



needle was flickering around the hundred mark, and as the surface was by no means perfect it took me all my time to hold the car on the road. I went through Cound village with the tyres screaming and just before Cross Houses I got close enough to read his number plate. It was GNT all right. He was a big car and travelling fast.

On the Shrewsbury by-pass he turned left. We went the length of the by-pass, touching eighty at times between the islands, and took the road for Welshpool. For the first time he began to show signs that he suspected pursuit. I had kept the gap between us as wide as I dared, and as we overtook other traffic we were often separated by one or two vehicles. But, if I were to avoid losing him, it was inevitable that at times I should run almost into his tail and then fall away again to a safer distance.

We had been cruising at around seventy when, on rounding a bend, I saw that he had dropped to a crawl. I braked hard, but unavoidably I ran too close upon his tail. For half a mile we dawdled along, and then away he went again. I let him go for a couple of hundred yards, dipped my headlights and went after him. A mile or so further on he repeated the performance, and this time he waved me on but I stayed where I was. Then he stopped, and so did I. There was no longer any doubt that he knew I was trailing him.

I wondered if he was armed, and would have given a great deal to have had with me the .38 automatic I had used on Commando raids. Unfortunately, one could not cart a thing like that around Calander. The one consolation was that he didn't know whether I was armed either. He did not get out of the car and for a time we sat there like a couple of dummies while the traffic passed us by. Then he started off again.

There was no longer any need for subterfuge. I got on his tail and stayed there. The whole aspect of the chase changed. He would be taking evasive action, and I was no longer compelled to conceal my presence. That he would lead me anywhere useful was now out of the question, but it became imperative that I should not lose him. Were he to get through and report pursuit there would be little doubt that it had started from Calander and McKinnon's one line, as he had said, would go out like a light. It would not be long before I was identified as the responsible person and my period of



usefulness would be at an end. As I was beginning to enjoy myself for the first time I had not the slightest intention of getting out.

It was like a state of perpetual check on the chess-board. So long as I stuck to his tail he could do nothing. So long as he did nothing I had to stick to his tail. As we tore through the night I cast round for a means of breaking the impasse. Could I, at the next town, abandon the chase and seek out the police-station? On the production of my card of authority I could have a cordon thrown around the area. If necessary, Scotland Yard would send out an all-station call for the car to be brought in, but I was not certain that the machinery could be brought into action before my quarry reached his destination and went to earth. There was, too, a limit to the time he could be held without a charge, and even were he held indefinitely his arrest between Calander and his destination was bound to reflect suspicion on the village.

The idea contained too many uncertainties to sacrifice the bird I had in hand for any number of doubtful ones that might be in the bush. The only really satisfactory solution was for GNT to meet with a fatal accident, but the means of accomplishing this were beyond my ingenuity. I thought about overtaking him and forcing him into the ditch, but the more I considered it the less I liked it. The most obvious objection was that the wrong driver might become the casualty. Even if I ditched him it was by no means certain that I should kill him, and if I did I should probably find myself facing a manslaughter charge which all McKinnon's influence would be powerless to avert.

While I was turning over the problem in my mind he very nearly solved it for me. It was a brilliant piece of driving, but it was by the narrowest margin that he pulled it off. We were approaching cross-roads and there was a string of cars coming to meet us. Suddenly he braked and flung his vehicle hard right under the very nose of the leading car. With not a chance of getting through I brought my own to a standstill.

Had I been forced to wait for the whole queue to pass it is probable that he would have eluded me. As it happened the driver of the leading car, who was not travelling fast, jammed on his brakes and let out a volley of oaths. The second came over the cross-roads and stopped behind him, while the others,



seeing that something was amiss, slowed down. The first driver was running towards me shouting, "Did you get that fool's number?"

I had no time to waste. I put my head out of the window, yelled "Police" and let in the clutch. GNT was already out of sight round the first bend, and there began the wildest bit of driving of the whole night. On the by-roads I could make no use of my superior speed, but the low lines and cornering capability of my car gave me a slight advantage. He twisted in all directions in an endeavour to shake me off. He was driving on dipped headlamps, but the glow was still sufficient to indicate his manoeuvres several hundred yards away. Within five minutes I was hopelessly lost. The hour was approaching eleven, and the country lanes were deserted. My world consisted of two weaving, winding cars, twisting lanes, jagged hedgerows and an occasional isolated hamlet.

After a while he changed his tactics again. His car stopped and the lights went out. I put on my brakes, switched off the lights and pocketing the ignition key dodged round the back of my car. We were separated by about a hundred and fifty yards, with a slight bend in the road concealing the one from the other. I began to reconnoitre. There was a three-foot grass verge and then a dry ditch. The field stood about two feet higher than the road and was bordered by a dilapidated hedge. This had apparently become overgrown and instead of being properly pleached had been cut back to within thirty inches of the ground, so that it consisted of a series of vertical sticks through which one could pass almost anywhere. I got quietly through and found myself in a grass field. Bending low, I went quickly forward towards GNT until I came to a place where the hedge was almost non-existent. Just beyond the gap I lay flat on the ground, listening intently.

I argued that my opponent would probably use the ditch for cover. In case he came up the field I lay with my back to the ditch. If he came that way I should hear him. If he came via the field I should see him before he saw me lying under the hedge. There was the chance that he did not intend to attack me at all but would simply make his way across country on foot. I thought this unlikely, for we were miles from anywhere and I felt practically certain he would be armed.

After a while I heard him. He was coming up the ditch,



and coming clumsily. He did not sound a bit at home in the countryside by night. I rolled on to my other side facing the ditch and drew up my right knee so that I was in a position to move quickly. He passed directly below me, and came into view through the gap. He was now within sight of the Jaguar, and he paused and raised his right hand. The light was bad, but I thought I could discern the shape of an automatic. Suddenly his plan became clear to me. It was not me he was after; he intended to disable the car and then make a bolt for it.

I waited no longer, but launched myself through the gap on to his back. The pistol exploded and pitched out of his hand, while he went forward with his face in the grass. He was a muscular individual but he hadn't a chance. I had a half-nelson on him, and I hit him below the right ear, a judo blow with the fist clenched and the knuckle of the second finger protruding. He went limp beneath me.

I dragged him out of the ditch and rolled him on his back. Then I got my torch out of my pocket and turned it on his face. He was sallow, with jet black hair and a beard that showed blue under the skin. He had a long jaw and a pale complexion. The lips were thin and the corners of the eyebrows had an upward tilt, giving him a slightly Mephistophelean expression. After retrieving the gun I went through his pockets. Apart from a spare clip of ammunition it was the usual assortment that people carry around. The only thing that looked at all interesting was a small diary. I dropped this in my pocket and restored the rest of the junk. Then I took the clip with the spent round out of the gun and replaced it with the unused clip. I wiped off my prints, pressed on his own and put the gun in his hip pocket. I had some vague idea of staging a suicide, but I didn't really like the notion. Any kind of unnatural death on the way from Calander was liable to reflect suspicion on the village.

There were still no signs of returning consciousness, so I picked him up and carried him to his car where I propped him up in the passenger's seat. Then I lit a cigarette and tried to think the problem out. Here it was that fortune took a hand, for while I stood lost in perplexity I became aware that a light across the field had changed from red to green. It could only be a railway signal, and a sudden thought sent me forward



along the road. Around the next bend was a level crossing, and the gates were shut.

I ran back to the car and drove it to a position some hundred yards short of the crossing. Here I parked it in the middle of the road, lined up on the crossing-gates with the wheels set straight. I dragged my inert companion into the driving-seat and jammed him against the wheel. Then I pushed him forward with both his arms between the spokes. He started to grunt, turned his head sideways and his eyelids flickered, so I gave him another judo blow at the base of the skull which put him to sleep again. I was thinking about the little Denning girl as I did it. There was still no sign of the train, so I went through the pockets of the car but they contained nothing of interest except a flask of whisky. I had a long swig out of that, and poured what was left down the sleeping beauty's waistcoat. It might add a little picturesque detail to the scene. I put the flask back in the pocket and dropped the stopper on the floor.

At last it came, a red glow against the sky. It was moving fairly slowly and looked like a goods train. I started up the engine, and when I judged the train to be about five hundred yards away got down on one knee and depressed the clutch pedal with my right hand. With my left I pushed the gear lever into second, let off the brake and opened the throttle control on the dashboard. Then I switched on the lights and changed hands on the clutch. Now came the trickiest part of the whole business, because from where I was I could not see the train. I had been counting seconds since my last sight of it, and when I got to fifteen I took my hand off the clutch. The car lurched forward, sending me spinning across the road. I picked myself up and dived for cover in the ditch.

From where I crouched I watched events with tense breath. The car held well to the crown of the road. It was within forty yards of the gates and gathering speed when the crossing-keeper saw it. He flung open a window and started to yell blue murder, but the driver, not unnaturally, took no notice of him. The heavy vehicle hit the gates square in the centre, there was a sound of rending woodwork and it burst through, twisting half right up the track with the shock of impact. Partially checked and diverted in its course it slewed into the right-hand post of the far gates and turned over on its side.



It was a beautiful smash. The timing could not have been better and the train was within fifty yards of the crossing. I heard the brakes squealing, but there was not a chance of holding it. Like a clash of giant cymbals the engine hit the overturned car, and with a hideous screech of tearing metal swept the mangled remnant along the track. I saw the crossing-keeper race out of the door and up the line, and I delayed no longer. Turning, I ran along the grass verge in the direction of my car.

I drove backward on my reversing light until I found a lane in which to turn. When the car was facing away from the crossing I proceeded cautiously on side-lamps only for a long way before switching on my headlights. I had no idea where I might be, and to make matters worse the sky was overcast so that it was not even possible to steer a general course by the stars. It felt like hours, though in reality it could not have been, for it was just after midnight when I blundered on to the Welshpool-Oswestry road.

So far as could be seen, my scheme had only one weakness. The agent of Moscow who directed operations in Britain, might be puzzled that the car had been smashed so far from its normal route. There was nothing to be done about that. A number of explanations could be found, and though he might check up on Calander among other things I did not feel that there was any definite pointer towards the village.

It only remained for me to cover my tracks. Although I was no nearer the solution of the problem it had been a good night's work. I had resolved a situation which might have become dangerous in a way which reflected the minimum suspicion on our organization. In doing so it was probable that I had thrown a pretty hefty spanner in the works. The gentleman now cluttering up the permanent way was likely to be a person of some importance, perhaps one of those hand-picked agents of whom McKinnon had said, "He wouldn't talk if you fed him into a furnace by inches." It might be some time before that particular cog in the machine could be replaced. Other things apart, a message had died with the messenger, and at least one scheme for carrying someone or something valuable out of the country had gone awry.

The roads were practically deserted. I swung left for Shrewsbury and settled down to a steady cruising speed. I



started to think about Daphne, and realized that it was Jennifer, not Daphne, of whom I was thinking. There was something to be said for Mac after all. But for him I should not have met Jennifer. But for him I should probably have spent the evening drinking whisky in some benighted pub with a crowd of bores instead of chasing GNT round the countryside. One day, I thought, I'll take him out and buy him a drink.

I began to sing. People are very rude about my voice and I have been told that cats on the tiles are more melodious. As I have no idea of tune they are probably right. That is why I seldom do it except when I am alone in the car and there is no risk of anyone hearing me.

At the top of Quarry Lane I parked the car and hooted twice. Almost immediately there came a queer sound which, presumably, was supposed to resemble an owl. If I couldn't sing at least I could hoot better than Harding, and I did it again. Footsteps became audible and he loomed up out of the darkness with his teeth chattering.

"Hello," I said. "Have a nice time?"

"Like hell. I'm frozen stiff. Is there a heater in that car of yours?"

There was, and we got inside. It was warm in the car. I drove through the village and on to the Wenlock road. For several minutes he just sat there, thawing out. At last:

"Not a thing, except a man who arrived at 'The Firs' at nine thirty-seven and let himself in. I expect it was Bretherton."

"Sure to be. He was walking by the 'Maitland' at half past."

"There were two cars. I saw their lights. One came into view at the bottom of the lane, but by the way his lights were moving, I don't think he started there. I think he may have come from Calander on his side-lights. The other certainly started in the village. He was moving like a scalded cat."

"That was me. Our man was in the front car. I was too late to intercept the contact."

"Did he lead you anywhere?"



"No. He got wise to being followed."

He glanced sideways at me. "That's serious, sir. If he got through and talked we're finished in Calander."

I said: "I don't think he'll talk. He was in too much of a hurry and couldn't wait for the crossing-gates. It was quite a party. I expect they're still cleaning up the mess."

"Why should he do a thing like that?"

"How should I know," I said. "Maybe he was tight."

I saw him glance sideways at me again. "Have you been starting something, sir?"

I drove on for a while. After a bit I said: "Harding, you'll find a case and lighter in my coat pocket. Would you get a couple of cigarettes out." We smoked for a mile or so, then Harding said:

"The Colonel warned me you were a tough egg."

"The Colonel's been pulling your leg. I'm too old and lazy. What I like's lying on my back in the sun."

"And catching the plums as they fall off the trees?"

"The Colonel told you that, too, did he?"

"He did, sir."

"He talks too much," I said.

Harding evidently had some arrangement with his hotel in Wenlock, for he had his own key. When we were inside I asked him if he could get me some whisky. He said:

"At a quarter to two? I doubt it. This place isn't the Ritz."

I was beginning to feel tired. "Look here, Harding, you're put in here on a cushy job to be some use to me if I need you. The first time I want something simple like a glass of whisky you start blathering about the Ritz. I've got to explain rolling up to the 'Maitland' in the small hours. Now go and get me some Scotch. I don't care if you break into the bar and steal it."

He was away about five minutes. Where he got it I've no idea, but he came back with half a tumbler of whisky. I shall always say our police are wonderful. I drank most of it, and poured the rest down my coat. When I'd finished I asked him if he thought it would do.

"If your plan's to get locked up it'll do fine," he said. "Get within smelling distance of any policeman and you'll spend the night in the cells."



I pulled Morton out of bed and put in a report. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of me, but when I spoke he realized I was sober. McKinnon would be tucked up between the sheets, but I got his deputy at the War Office and gave him a detailed account of the night's happenings. He seemed remarkably pleased and said he'd send a man down right away to hold a watching brief on the crossing accident.

Back at the "Maitland" I drove skew-whiff into the garage so that the tail stuck out and the doors would not close. I fiddled about with them for some time, and then walked noisily over and hammered on the door of the inn. After a bit it opened to reveal Gregory in his dressing-gown. I put my arms round his neck, gave him a good waft of whisky and said:

"Greg, ol' boy, lesh go an' have a li'l drink."

He held me off, propped me up and looked at me. Then he started to grin.

"You look as if you haven't done badly already."

"I'm fine. Got that chump home. Met a couple Seventh Armoured types. Two bottles scosh . . . in bedroom. Shaw them off. Lesh have a drink."

"You look as if you'd been rolling round the road."

My raincoat was dirty from my various escapades. I said:

"That! Dropped my lighter. Damn silly thing bounced under car. No room. Mush buy higher car. Crawling there, hours and hours and hours. . . ."

He was grinning more than ever. "So you crawled under the car instead of driving it off the lighter."

I let my mouth fall open and regarded him with admiration. "Greg, you're genius. Never thought of that. Washting your time in one horsh dump. Ought to be going places. Tell you wha'. Lesh go places t'gether."

I let go of him, staggered across the hall and hung on to the banisters, where I hiccoughed several times. Then I sat down on the bottom stair and started to sing "Scots wa' hae". I have already described my voice, and what it lacks in quality it makes up in volume. It must have sounded horrible.

Gregory caught me by the shoulders and started to shake me gently. "Steady on, you'll wake the village."

I stopped singing. "One was Glasgie. 'Shpec' thash why we sang 'Scosh wa' hae'?"



"So that's what it was meant to be. I thought it was 'The Ball of Kirriemuir'."

"Greg, you got nashty min'."

I hauled myself up by the banisters, and with Gregory's assistance started to mount the stairs. Half-way up I stopped again.

"Greg, ol' boy, fri'fully decent of you. I got you up. Believe you gone to bed."

"No," he said, "I put on my pyjamas to go and feed the pig."

I looked at him owlshly while I digested that one. At last:

"Shouldn't feed pig in p'jamas. You'll cash col'."

With a certain amount of pushing he got me up the rest of the stairs. I fell over the top step and went sprawling across the landing. A door opened and Helen appeared in a flowered silk dressing-gown. I rolled into a sitting position.

"What on earth's going on?"

"It's only Phillip, plastered. He's been drinking whisky with a couple of Scots."

"One was Scosh," I said firmly. "Other was Wigan. Or Warrington. Never know Warrington from Wigan. We were singing 'Scosh wa' hae'. It goes like thish."

"For heaven's sake," said Gregory. "Not that again."

They didn't seem to want "Scots wa' hae'". I got up and put my arm round Helen.

"He's a dull dog. Shend him back to pig. Lesh have a party."

"What pig? What is all this?" She nestled up against me though. I had long suspected that Helen would not be averse to a party. The truth of the matter was that Calander bored her stiff, though she did her best not to show it. Gregory passed his hand across his forehead.

"I'm out of my depth. See what you can do with him."

She said: "We can't have a party now. It's too late. Some other time. I'll give you a kiss if you'll promise to go straight to bed."

I took my kiss and enjoyed it. Despite the whisky I think she did, too. Between them they half led, half pushed me to the bedroom and in through the door. Gregory said:

"I'll get you an Alka-Seltzer."



I dropped my jacket in the middle of the floor. My pull-over I hung on a chair, and then knocked the chair over. When Gregory returned I was sitting on the bed with my feet up, fiddling with a shoelace.

"Greg," I said, "some damn fool's tied a granny in this lace. You any good with grannies?"

I think he was about fed up with me. He said: "Mine died twenty years ago. Here's your drink." He put it on the chest of drawers and went out quickly.

I swallowed the drink and got noisily into my pyjamas. I thought they'd been awfully decent about it all. It was nice of him to bring me that Alka-Seltzer. The world was full of decent people. Except GNT. I didn't like GNT at all. I decided it had been a good idea to push him under a train.

## CHAPTER V

WHEN I was up in time I usually had breakfast with the Gregories, but Thursday was not one of those occasions. In point of fact I was perfectly ready to get out of bed at eight, but after the act I had put on it would be a little inconsistent to come down full of the joys of life. I lay there for a long time thinking over the events of the previous night. As a matter of common prudence there was almost bound to be a check up on Calander, but they would not be looking for something in the village, they would just be looking at the village to make sure there was nothing there. Perhaps they would search my room again. I wished them joy of it.

The rain had started once more, and outside it looked dark and dismal. Bed was a better place than most. I lit a cigarette and started to look through the diary I had taken from GNT. Any hopes of clues were quickly doomed to disappointment. Perhaps he carried it to tell him when it was lighting-up time, for there was nothing written in it at all.

However, the diary did contain something. Slipped inside the cover was a passport-size photograph of a man. He had an immense forehead and was practically bald. His age I put at around fifty. The eyes were the cruellest I have ever seen, brooding, sombre, with a glint of malignant savagery. The



mouth was sensual with a pendulous lower lip, and in the high cheek-bones there was a suggestion of the Slav. I have come across a few repulsive characters in my time, but the face looking up at me was as odious as anything it has been my ill-fortune to meet. Written over it was intellect and ruthless strength with an utter lack of humanity or moral feeling.

Just before eleven I put on my dressing-gown, shaved, and sauntered down to the dining-room. Helen was Hoovering the carpet and she greeted me with that self-righteous expression people reserve for the reveller who comes down late for breakfast. It seems to say, "If you've got a hangover there's only yourself to blame." She enquired after my head.

I told her I was trying to forget I had one, but it wouldn't let me. "I'm afraid I was a bit of a bore last night." I said. "I don't often get as plastered as that, but we found we'd known a lot of the same people and places during the war. That's often a good excuse for a binge. Frankly, I don't remember an awful lot about the closing stages, though I do recall that kissing you good night was the highlight of the evening. You must have found it pretty repulsive."

"Between ourselves it was quite tolerable. Without the whisky it might have been rather nice."

There was just a flicker of come hither in her eye as she said it and I decided I should have to watch my step. Normally I should not have turned my back on such an invitation, for there was a fascination about her dark liteness and she had one of those mobile mouths that simply cry out to be kissed. I thought that what she didn't know about love-making wouldn't matter a great deal. Unfortunately, this was not a normal occasion. Things were sufficiently involved without introducing a triangle to complicate them further, and anyway, I had too good an opinion of Gregory to want to start rocking the apple cart.

It might have been a pull between duty and inclination which would have made life in Calander distinctly harassing, had it not been for the Daphne-Jennifer business. It was not that I was in love with the child, but last night seemed to have started up some kind of emotional complex which I was at a loss to analyse. There was a refreshing quality about her, and it made me feel good just to be with her. I had the



impression she was going through a troublesome period, and I wanted to help simply for the joy of doing it. Whether it was just because she was Jennifer, or because of the memories of Daphne she aroused was something I had not even begun to answer. The upshot was that if I started anything with Helen, I had a clear impression that it would very soon begin to feel second rate.

"At the moment it would taste worse than whisky," I said. "What I need is copious quantities of strong tea to swill my mouth down."

"Poor Phillip. How about breakfast? I could fry some bacon and an egg?"

The temptation was horrible for I had had no supper and was ravenous. But the act had to be maintained. I winced. "Please. Don't even mention the word or there'll be a calamity. One very small piece of toast and marmalade and lashings of strong tea." I thought the least they could give me when this was over was the O.B.E.

As soon as I had finished my meagre breakfast I went for the car. It was still in the lopsided form I had left it with half the tail sticking out, and two small boys were eyeing it speculatively. I heard one of them say:

"Cor, bet 'e was stinkin' when 'e put that in."

On the road I saw Mrs. Wormsley and Tommy Trundler in earnest conversation, and they stopped talking to stare at me as I passed. They were still gaping when I turned into the Wenlock road, and I thought with satisfaction that the manner in which I was supposed to have passed the night would be known to all of Calander by evening. In Wenlock I dug out Harding and took him to lunch, where I ate ravenously and refused to talk until I had finished. Then I gave him the photograph to send to his rogues' gallery for identification. I said that McKinnon would need a copy and so would I.

On Friday the level-crossing smash was front-page news in the dailies. The fact that it coincided with a road safety campaign helped to put it there. Apparently what was left of the car reeked of whisky, and the demon drink came in for a good deal of castigation. The driver had not yet been identified. There was a photograph of the smash, and I thought that for a first effort it was not at all bad.



In the evening I rang up Jennifer and took her to meet the Scotts. Gerald did not seem a bit pleased with the arrangement, but that was his business and I left him to stew in it. I tried to draw her out, but she seemed diffident in front of Peter and Peggy so I let it go until some time when we might be alone. We proved to be a particularly happy foursome. I came in for a good deal of leg-pulling over my alleged exploits of Wednesday night, and finally we settled to a game of poker with a sixpenny limit at which I managed to lose a pound.

Peggy and I had our birthday lunch on the Saturday. The weather relented for a day, and in spring sunshine I picked her up and we drove over to Wolverhampton. She wanted to talk about herself, I suppose, because there was no-one to whom she could do it in Calander, and I had most of Peter's and her life history. It matched up pretty well with what I had had from McKinnon. Peter was a doctor's son who had set his mind on farming as soon as he was old enough to set it on anything. His father was against it, but he kept doggedly on in the face of all the opposition. Peggy had been a private secretary with urbanized ideas about the fortunes that were made in farming. When Dr. Scott died, Peter inherited enough to buy Mead Farm and had used it as collateral for stock and working capital. The farm was in such a state of destitution that it had produced very little in the first year; now with the late spring and the prospect of a light harvest the future looked ominous indeed. They were living on credit which was stretched almost to breaking point.

I told her a bit about myself, how I'd reversed Peter's tactics by being born into farming and getting out. I had a distaste for physical work and an adolescent yearning for the flesh-pots. In the middle nineteen-thirties agriculture offered plenty of hard labour and precious little in return. I stuck it for a couple of years and then took a job with the local paper. After six months I decided I was the answer to an editor's prayer and set off to make my fortune in London.

"I don't think editors pray very much," I said, "because none of them seemed to want me. Six months after Munich I joined the army as it was the only place I could be sure of a square meal." I said nothing about Daphne. I never talked to anyone about Daphne.

Over lunch she forgot her troubles and seemed to shed the



years. A couple of Manhattans and a *Château Lafite* with the duck and green peas helped no end. I doubt if she'd had anything like it in years; her face had been buried too long in the trivial round and her molehills were beginning to look like mountains.

We explored the city and found a sports shop with a good selection of archery tackle. It seemed that wooden bows were on the way out and were hardly to be seen at leading tournaments. I bought a 32 lb. steel bow for Peggy and a couple of 40 lb., one of which was for Peter. We nearly came to blows over that. I could not get her to see that, being alone in the world with more money than I needed, one of my greatest pleasures was giving things to the people I liked.

The streets were placarded with posters advertising Collingwood's Fun Fair, and Peggy had the idea of finishing the day in a thoroughly unsophisticated manner. She announced that she was going to take me to the fair.

We found a café for tea.

Half-way through the meal Peggy leaned towards me and said: "Phillip, I think we're being followed. There's a man behind you, two tables away. He came in just after we did. He was at the next table at lunch."

I had already seen him. He had a weasel face and was wearing a blue pin stripe with padded shoulders. He looked like a spiv. Peggy was perfectly right, he had been at the next table at lunch and when we came out of the sports shop he was peering into a tobacconist's window. He had now been joined by a plug-ugly in plus-fours. I had half expected something like this; they'd wasted no time on the check-up on Calander.

"Nonsense," I said. "It's probably coincidence."

"I don't think it is. When you told me your life story did you miss anything out? You're mixed up in something, aren't you?"

"Plenty. Rackets in nylons, black market whisky, and dope smuggling. It's probably a rival gang."

"Do be serious."

"All right, I'm a white-slave trader. That's my body-guard."

"Oh, I give up."

When we had finished our meal I asked her to collect the



bill while I 'phoned Peter. "If plug-ugly starts anything," I said, "just keep on screaming. I eat things like that before breakfast."

I rang Peter and told him what was afoot. He seemed pleased and said: "Good. She needs a change. She's had a dog's life lately. Look after her, she means a lot to me."

I rang off, got exchange and asked for Harding's number. While I was being connected I looked over my shoulder and saw pin stripe propped up outside the box reading the evening paper. Harding was in. I said quietly:

"I'm in Wolverhampton. There's a tail on me, two in fact, and both unattractive. One's dark, rat-faced, blue pin stripe with a dirty fawn raincoat and brown trilby when out of doors. The other's a thug. Ex-bruiser, I should think. Brown plus-fours. I haven't seen his outdoor dress. I'm taking them for a ride round Collingwood's fairground. It may be worth keeping tags on them. I'll be just inside the main entrance at half past five."

"Right. I'll have the Wolverhampton police put a man on to shadow them."

"And check with our people at the post-office. I think you'll find a call came out of Calander just after a quarter to twelve. Get all you can on it."

As I left the box I said, "Sorry to hold you up." He went inside and I stopped to light a cigarette. He was thumbing the pages of the directory. It must have been the quickest call on record for he'd rejoined plus-fours before I'd paid my bill. When we got to the fair, I managed to work it that we were chatting near the entrance at half past five. Pin stripe and plus-fours were hanging around looking about as conspicuous as a civil servant in a hayfield. At first I thought the police had missed the boat, but after a bit I noticed two men in overcoats engaged in animated conversation. One of them was explaining how Dark Ranger had let him down in the three-thirty, and as I strolled past he said, without breaking his narrative, "O.K., Sir, we've got 'em," and carried straight on to say that the damn thing was broken-winded and ought to be shot. Those police boys certainly knew their job, and pin stripe and plus-fours should have taken lessons from them.

We both let ourselves go. There was a miniature scenic railway and we went round and round the thing holding



hands and yelling like a couple of elementary school kids at Blackpool. We had a go on the dodge'em cars and nearly wrecked the outfit. Pin stripe and plus-fours were hanging over the rail looking as miserable as Calvinistic ministers at a cocktail party. I fancy they felt they'd been hired as nurse-maids for a couple of adolescents. We went to the fortune-teller. Peggy was going to have a whale of a time with a fair-haired man, but she said the description fitted both Peter and me, and I said we'd toss for it. Mine wasn't nearly so attractive. I was going to walk with death, whatever that might mean. I told Peggy I could think of a nicer description of her.

There was the usual shooting-booth. Peggy sprayed lead all over the place, and it is testimonial to the way they run these things that no-one was killed. I think I have mentioned that the one thing I can do really well is shoot. When I tired of knocking the centre of the target I got them to put up a card, wrote Peggy's name on it in bullet holes and gave it to her. They had ping-pong balls jumping about in fountains of water, and I gave a demonstration of knocking out two with one shot. Plus-fours was standing there with his eyes nearly popping out of his head. I hoped he'd take it to heart in case he ever felt like shooting it out with me.

We had beer and sandwiches in a low dive where, for the first time, the tail looked thoroughly at home. About half past eight we got the car and set off for Calander. Peggy hadn't mentioned the tail since tea, though she must have seen them, but as we left the park she said, "Those two awful characters are still with us." They were getting into a sports two-seater.

I failed to get the number, but the police were sure to have it. I saw their lights in my driving-mirror all the way to Bridgnorth, and they were with us again as we turned off on the Ludlow road. Peggy never said a word about them, but she glanced nervously through the rear window several times. I felt uneasy myself, though there was no reason for it. There was nothing they could do. They would tail us to Calander and then sheer off.

We turned right on the by-way to Ditton Strange, and the road deteriorated. The other car was about fifty yards behind. I had not gone far when I detected a swaying motion on the rear of the car, and then it started to bump. I cursed under my breath, for a puncture was something I had not foreseen.



There was nothing for it, and I brought the car to a standstill. The two-seater drew abreast, and pin stripe called out:

"Trouble?"

"It's nothing," I said. "Only a flat. I'll have it changed in five minutes."

I got the jack and started to wind up the car. The two-seater pulled in front of us and they both got out and walked back to join me. Pin stripe said: "We'd better stay and see you're O.K. I've known the spare flat when you put it on." Plus-fours said nothing at all. He just stood there with his right hand in his hip pocket looking like a dumb gorgon. There was something ominous about that right hand.

"It's very decent of you," I said, "but you've no need to trouble. I had my spare checked yesterday." I got the wheel brace and started to remove the hub nuts. Peggy got out of the car and joined us. She looked ill at ease.

"Nasty accidents there are nowadays," said pin stripe. "That was a nasty one at that crossing."

"Which was that?" I asked. "Oh, that one with the weird Welsh name that was in the papers?"

"Funny thing that bloke having a gun in his pocket."

I nearly walked into it. In the nick of time I saw the trap. "Did he? There was nothing about a gun in my paper. Where did you see it?" I started to get the spare wheel out of the locker.

"Oh, I dunno. Some paper. You weren't up that way on Wednesday, were you? You'd hear a smash like that for miles around."

I took out the spare and fitted it to the car. "As a matter of fact I was getting canned in Wenlock on Wednesday night." I started to screw on the hub nut.

"Oh! Which pub would that be?"

I decided we'd reached a point in the interrogation at which any ordinary citizen was entitled to assume resentment.

"What the hell's it got to do with you which pub I choose to get canned in?"

He put his hand into his pocket, pulled out a card, waved it in front of my face and said, "Scotland Yard." I looked at the fake. Then:

"If there wasn't a lady present I'd tell you what you could do with that phoney piece of pasteboard. They may have some funny things at Scotland Yard, but they've nothing half so



funny as the pair of you. I don't need your help and I don't like your company. Get in that cockleshell of yours and get moving. Come to think of it," I said, taking a pace forward and peering at him, "I believe I've seen your face before. Weren't you snooping on me outside a call-box in Wolverhampton?"

Pin stripe turned to plus-fours. "I think these guys are genuine, Fred, but it's safe enough. You'd better rub 'em out, just in case." Fred took his hand out of his pocket. He had in it what I expected to see.

I experienced the unpleasant sensation of my stomach collapsing, and my mouth went dry. I had not expected this. If I'd slipped and shown my hand I knew our lives weren't worth two minutes purchase, but I'd never thought they would murder two harmless citizens on the off chance that they might have had something to do with the crossing smash. Looking at it, though, it was not so unreasonable as it appeared. They could kill us in this isolated spot and no doubt had facilities for disposing of the bodies and the car. If we had no official standing it would be supposed that Peggy and I had run away together. If we had official standing we were the people they wanted and the risk had to be taken anyhow.

Pin stripe was talking again. "Get 'em in the back of the car. I'll take the Jag with the bodies. You take the two-seater."

Fred jerked his head towards the back-door. "Git in." It was the first thing I'd heard him say.

"Nothing doing, Freddie boy," I said. "We're saving you no trouble. If you want us in that car you put us there."

He brought the gun up till it was level with my heart. "'Ave it your own way."

There is one trick I know for a situation like that. With one opponent in daylight the chances are twenty-to-one against. With two in the dark there is less than one chance in a thousand. It was better than nothing, and I decided to take that chance. As I was about to move . . .

"Hold it," said pin stripe. "Get that rod out of sight. There's a car coming."

Fred put the gun back in his pocket. Pin stripe said: "You're still covered. Keep perfectly still."

If he thought we were going to stand there like dummies till the car passed so that he could bump us off at leisure he



must have had a lovely opinion of human nature. With the gun in Fred's pocket and a chance of assistance from the car the odds against us had dropped enormously. I hadn't much hope of survival myself, but I thought there was a fifty-fifty chance of Peggy's getting away with it. I shuffled a little nearer Fred, and he growled at me to stand still. Out of the corner of my eye I watched the car.

It was slowing down.

It came to a halt a few yards away. In the glare of its headlamps we must have looked like a tableau on the stage. The doors opened and two men got out. When they came from behind the headlamps we saw that they were police officers. The sergeant said:

"What's the matter here?"

"Armed robbery," I told him. "Chap here with a gun."

He came across to me with his eyes on the thug. "Take that hand out of your pocket."

Fred took it out. The gun was coming with it. I was nearest to him and I caught his wrist. There was no longer any need to be tactful with plug-ugly Freddie and I let him have it, a full shoulder throw. He came down head first on the road, all thirteen stone of him, and lay where he fell.

The constable had hold of pin stripe and between us we put the handcuffs on him. We had to carry Freddie to the back of the police car, and we handcuffed him to his fellow thug. The sergeant did the explaining. They had not had a police car standing by when we left the car-park, but they thought it likely I was heading for home. In case anything went wrong they decided to follow.

"I've orders to handle this the way you want it," he said. "What's the charge?"

"Armed robbery. Nothing more. I'd like you to come and take statements from us tomorrow."

They finished fixing the wheel for us. When we were on the way Peggy said:

"So you are mixed up in something."

"I won't deny it any more. I can't talk about it, it's in the secret drawer but it's the biggest thing I've ever done. Some day I may need some help."

She put her hand on mine. "If there's anything you ever want," she said, "you can count on us."



## CHAPTER VI

*Your methods, wrote McKinnon, are unorthodox and on occasions quite illegal, but by heaven, they work. The gentleman who had the misfortune to get himself under the Llanymynech goods train must have been a very vital cog in the machine. So far as we are able to judge the whole organization, for the time being, is at a standstill.*

That was in the middle of April and GNT had been with Satan for more than three weeks. The letter was handwritten on McKinnon's personal notepaper, and bore the Richmond address. It went on:

*We have not been able to identify your sparring partner. The registration plates were false and the number actually belongs to an agricultural tractor. The license was forged and the engine, chassis and body numbers had been erased from the car. The police are working with the manufacturers and distributors, and every car of that model which left the factory is being traced and docketed, but it may be a long time before this routine work yields any information.*

*I shall call the gentleman Charon until I discover his real name. If he did no trafficking in souls at least it appears that he ferried information in and out of Hell. I think he was the only person who knew the identity and location of the headquarters staff, and therein lies their difficulty. It may take some little time before they find another they can trust with this very vital information. The details of the communication system are beginning to emerge, and it is tortuous in the extreme. Suppose an agent acquires some information and wishes to communicate it to headquarters. He advises his immediate contact, who writes, wires or 'phones Calander. The message will be code—Mabel had a baby, 7 lb. 10 oz. and doing fine, or some such thing. It means that at a certain time on a certain day a messenger will come to the village. Calander arranges a time with Charon. Nothing is even committed to paper. The messenger tells Calander, and Calander tells Charon. I doubt if Calander knows who Charon is, and in all probability he works through an accommodation address.*



There is another post-box similar to Calander. It is somewhere in the south, but we have not been able to locate it. Charon was the link with that, too, so you will see that for the present headquarters are in a state of splendid isolation. The photograph you acquired is not known to Records and we believe he is a foreigner. I think he is visiting headquarters, and the photo was sent in advance so that they might be sure their visitor was genuine. I agree with your remarks, for if appearance is any guide to character some prince of Hell is absent from his estates.

Your bit of sabotage was specially opportune. Denning's work is being carried on by Professor Carr, and there is now little doubt that he was the objective of the scheme you routed. This has given us time to prepare some counter-measures, but Carr is not at all an easy man to work with. He was a rugged blue twenty-five years ago and is well satisfied with his ability to look after himself. Outside his work he has the mentality of a child and takes an infantile delight in trying to dodge his police guard. About once a week he comes into my office and nearly breaks it up with his protests about what he calls these apaches dogging his footsteps. I told him about the Dennings, but he only bawled that if he had any daughters he'd never met them. Such few relatives as he has he hates almost as much as they hate him, and he said he was quite prepared to advertise in *The Times* a reward for anyone who cared to kidnap them.

The work you have already done has been invaluable, but do watch your step. There are some very clever people who will not hesitate to kill you if ever they discover what you have done. Equally, the forces of law will be compelled to act should it become known that you are meting out rough justice. I say nothing against your work at the Pentre-waen crossing, it was worth more than an army division in time of war and was brilliantly executed, but if you feel compelled to take the law into your own hands again, do use the utmost discretion. You were a wild devil during the war, and while I can pull strings within limits, there will be nothing I can do if the public ever gets wind of the fact that you have set yourself up as a one-man court and executioner. As I got you into this I shall not readily forgive myself if you run into trouble.

The letter made me feel good. Despite the sober caution in the last paragraph I felt I would joyfully have gone out and



shot the original of the photograph could I have found him. In my mind I dubbed him Satan, for if GNT was Charon ferrying information in and out of Hades it looked like a picture of his master that he carried in his pocket. Since he was not to be found and nothing was likely to move for a little while, I could make holiday in Calander with an easy mind.

We had tied up the loose ends of the pin stripe and plus-fours episode neatly enough. The police took our statement the following day and I had already coached Peggy in our story. The thugs had pulled a gun on us, and though they asked some fool questions about where I had been on Wednesday night it made no sense and we assumed that their object was robbery. It was true that they had made no actual demands but the arrival of the police car probably interrupted their real purpose. The crooks were willing enough to admit that robbery had been their objective in the belief that they were covering up the true work on which they had been engaged. After a brief appearance at the magistrates' court they were committed for trial at the Assizes. Peggy and I told the tale to anyone who would listen to it, and I think we left no doubt in Calander that we took it for an ordinary hold-up with no sinister purpose behind it.

Harding had checked with the telephone people. As I had surmised, a call had been put through within a few minutes of my leaving the village. It had been made from the public call-box and had gone direct to pin stripe, whose name was Wellings. The only information we could get was that the caller was a man. It eliminated Rowlands who was in Wenlock at the time, and though I had hoped that it might have excluded Donovan I realized that he was off work for a week with an attack of lumbago. The fact that his sick-leave started on the Friday after the crossing accident and lumbago is an easy enough complaint to simulate, made me take a good look at the wild Irishman. A check with the post-office people showed that he never received any telegrams, but that was purely negative evidence as he had plenty of opportunities for contacts during his work.

By this time we had made good progress with the archery club. We called ourselves the "Calander Bowmen", and as there was little enough community organization in the village we received a lively support. I enlisted all of the suspects



except Donovan, and though I had a good try to get him in it is perhaps as well that I failed. With a lethal weapon like a bow in their hands either he or Gerald would not have come out alive.

There was a deep antagonism between them, lacking only the occasion to burst into open conflict. For that matter there was a suppressed quarrel with everyone simmering inside Gerald. His attitude towards me was growing increasingly sullen, and I began to think he was blaming me for his lack of progress with Jennifer. I met her one Sunday afternoon, above the village where a fringe of woodland screens a small escarpment falling some fifty feet. There is an outcrop of rock and she was sitting in a recess like a natural settee. The sun was shining but it was cool. I sat down in the space beside her.

"We like the same places, you and I. Sometimes I come here to write."

"There's fresh air up here," she said, "and it smells nice."

I glanced at her sharply. "Has Gerald——?"

"Gerald's no worse than usual. He must have been lucky with his women. He thought he was the answer to every maiden's prayer. He's just beginning to find out he's not, and he doesn't like the process."

I lit a cigarette for her and started to fill my pipe.

"I feel," she said, "as though I'd known you a long time. In a way I have. I had a cousin who was under you in Commandos. You were an inspiration to all of them. Bill used to say that if we'd had a few more like you the war would have been over in half the time. Killing Germans wasn't just a job to you, it was a religion."

"I didn't like the way they did things. What was your cousin's name?"

"Bill Strange."

Billy Strange. I could see him now. Most clearly of all I could see him the night he died.

She went on speaking: "I read *Michael in Khaki* and you weren't a bit what I expected. It was so full of understanding and compassion. I read *Green Fields in the City* and the author was a poet and a dreamer. *Mixed Harvest* was written by a playboy, and *The Salt Mountain* either by a light-hearted adventurer or an ancient *roué*, I was never sure which. You're



a queer mixture, Phillip. I think you'd make a good friend but a terribly bad enemy."

"Never mind about me," I said, "I'm past praying for. What are you doing in that leper colony?"

"Can you understand anyone setting out to do a thing, being ridiculed and told she couldn't make the grade, and feeling that she'd rather die than go home and confess failure?"

"I should do. I did the same silly thing myself."

She told me how it had happened. Her father was a solicitor and had died when she was seventeen. Her mother, it seemed, was as mean and selfish as they were made. I suppose there are mothers like that, but thank God I have never met any. There were two younger sisters still at school and no money. Mother had spent that as fast as she could get her hands on it. Jennifer, with no commercial training, was almost their only means of support.

A friend of her father had fixed her up with a job in a library, but mother had other ideas. Jennifer was her most saleable commodity and a rich son-in-law would solve all her problems. She tried everything she knew to palm her off on one particularly nasty piece of work. When that failed she systematically wrecked every friendship that might lead to a penniless marriage. Jennifer put up with it for three years, but in the end it was more than she could stand and she walked out.

The one thing for which she had a real liking was the country, and as there was an official scheme to train people for the land she applied and was taken on. After her period as a trainee she found it almost impossible to get a post. There was plenty of demand for labour, but with the shortage of help in the farmhouses living-in posts were scarce indeed. In desperation she applied to the Maitlands.

"I didn't meet Gerald at the interview," she said, "though I don't think it would have made much difference if I had. I was at the end of my tether and prepared to take almost anything. Sir Gilbert engaged me. I put him down as a dirty old man who was getting past it. I still think the first part's right, but I'm not so sure about the second. These Maitlands die hard."

"Don't tell me," I said, "that that old fossil's still active."



"The spirit's willing enough, but the flesh is probably getting a bit worn. He calls me 'my dear' and does a lot of hand patting. Lately he's taken to pressing my foot under the table." The ripple of mischief came back into her eyes. "Last night I returned the pressure, and chose his gouty toe to do it on. It was a scream. He nearly went through the ceiling."

She was glossing over it. I said: "Yes, I dare say it has its funny patches, but the whole menagerie's septic and you ought to be out of it. What's Gerald get up to?"

"He leers and makes innuendoes and issues invitations."

"No physical force?"

"He tried to kiss me the second day I was there. I hit him on the mouth as hard as I could. I don't think it hurt him much, but it made it clear I wasn't playing."

"Good for you. So that's how he got that swollen lip. He told me it was a mosquito bite. It's time someone taught that young ape his manners."

She had hold of both my hands. "No, Phillip, please! I wouldn't have told you a thing if I'd thought you were going to interfere. You're too good a man to be broken up by that great gorilla."

Everyone seemed to be trying to save me from Gerald. "No pedestals," I said. "You'll find the feet are clay. Anyhow, who said Gerald was going to do the breaking up. I did a bit of it myself during the war."

"I know. You were almost a legend. Bill used to say you were one of the best revolver-shots in the army, but you and Gerald can't have pistols for two in peace-time England."

"I learned a little about unarmed combat, too."

"Of course you did, but not against that monstrosity. It's like hitting the side of a house. I know, I've tried it, and I nearly sprained my wrist. Besides, if half he says is true he knows how to fight."

"Nine-tenths of what he says is probably what he wished he'd done."

My pipe had gone out. I gave her another cigarette and put a fresh match to it. For a time we smoked in silence. At last:

"This business is all wrong," I said. "If you were getting neurotic with your mother you'll have a breakdown in that cesspool. The strain must be appalling. The whole atmosphere's fetid and diseased."



"The trouble with you," said Jennifer, "is you're a sentimentalist. You romanticize your women. You look on us as fragile little things that must be kept in a display cabinet where the wind can't blow on them."

"May heaven give me patience. I am nothing of the sort. I'm a normally lecherous male. Left to my own devices I shall probably become a dirty old man like Sir Gilbert in the fullness of time. Any ideals I may have had about your sex went down the drain fifteen years ago."

"Then why pick on me as a kind of Dresden shepherdess?"

"Because you're Jennifer," I said. "Because you're young and lovely and haven't yet been trampled in the sordid things of life. Because there's a freshness on you like the dew on a summer morning, and it ought not to mingle with the vapours of a sewer. Because you're a ghost from the buried past, when the world was gay, if hard, before I tasted blood or the lotus flower. Because——"

I stopped. I realized I was running away with myself, and she was looking at me in a way that made my pulses throb.

"Phillip, am I really all that?"

I grinned at her. "All that and more besides. One day I'll unleash the poet from *Green Fields in the City* on you."

"I'd like to meet him. I'd like to meet all the many Phillips."

"You wouldn't like all of them."

"Wouldn't that be too much to hope? Or would I? I don't know. At least I think I'd sympathize with all of them."

"That's all very well, but what are we going to do about Gerald?"

"Can't I make you understand that Gerald's something I have to see to myself? I started this and I've got to see it through. My self-respect's tied up in it. If it's more than I can handle I'll come to you. I promised you that, and I keep my promises."

"Little though I like it," I said, "I must confess it's fair enough."

She looked at her watch. "Good heavens, is that the time. I have to go and try to coax some milk from Gerald's nanny-goats." She jumped up and stretched out her hands to pull me to my feet. For a moment we rocked together on the steep



slope, and I almost took her in my arms. Something inside me seemed to say:

"Don't crush any more flowers. You killed Daphne. You never brought lasting happiness to any woman. If it's Jennifer you want to help and not yourself you have to do it at a distance." I linked my arm in hers, and we started to walk back towards the village.

Outside the "Maitland" we came across Gerald. We were still walking arm in arm. You read about people snorting, and though it is seldom you hear it done that is the only way I can describe the noise he made.

"Bit chilly for lying around under hedgerows, isn't it?" he enquired.

I kept my temper with difficulty. I said, "Well, you should know."

## CHAPTER VII

BY THE middle of April Peter and I had the archery club in full swing. We set up the targets on one of Peter's fields and he and Gerald showed signs of developing into quite competent archers. The rest of the men were a pretty ragged lot. Bretherton was stolid and conscientious, but Rowlands was hopeless, and his wife was worse. Doris Bretherton, I am convinced, was only there to see that Helen and Jennifer did not get their claws into Geoffrey. The Reverend Davison was good-humoured but undistinguished. Peggy and Jennifer made good progress under Peter's tuition but Helen, who was wise to Doris' games from the start, took more interest in setting her cap at Geoffrey Bretherton. I might have been better had I been less lethargic, but I have to confess that I spent much of my time lying on my back on the grass.

But the funniest thing of all was Gregory. Singly and in unison we did our best, but nothing would get into his head the fundamentals of archery. He had no idea of an anchor point. Sometimes he would draw to his eye and hit the ground half-way to the target; at others his right hand would be wobbling about in the region of his chest and the arrow was liable to go into his own garden. He used to laugh about his own performance more than anyone.



"You know," he would say, grinning all over his good-natured face, "I'm not cut out for this kind of thing." Then he would let the arrow go and as often as not it hit someone else's target or landed in the next field.

We made Sir Gilbert president, and though he did not shoot he came down occasionally to strut around and display himself. He used to say "Gad, sir," and talk about a "smart filly" like a caricature of a Poonah Sahib. I had no idea anything like it existed in real life, and perhaps he was unique for I never met another. He was just like a character out of burlesque.

Within that group, with the sole exception of Donovan, was the person I had come to Calander to find. Among a dozen rather ordinary human beings there was one as false as Judas. Peter, Peggy and the Rowlands were out. So, I was convinced, were the Davisons. Jennifer had never been in. I was left with the Gregories, Sir Gilbert, Gerald, Bretherton with or without Doris, and Donovan. Bretherton ranked as favourite, for though he did not seem at all likely the rest were even less so. After him came Sir Gilbert and Donovan with roughly equal chances, then the Gregories with Gerald as a rank outsider.

In archery the men's championship round is the York—six dozen arrows at a hundred yards, four dozen at eighty and two dozen at sixty. As beginners we attempted nothing more ambitious than a Western round of four dozen at sixty yards and the same at fifty. The experts produce scores sometimes exceeding 700, but we set ourselves the modest target of 300 and it was some time before any of us achieved it.

On a Sunday in early May the sun was warm for almost the first time, and the club turned out in strength to shoot a Western round. I settled myself on the grass to enjoy the warmth.

"Get up, you lazy devil," said Peter. "Come and take some exercise."

I waved him away. "I'll listen to the music of your bow-strings and your blasphemous comment when you miss the target. I was writing into the small hours, and must have rest."

"And up just in time for lunch," said Helen. "You ought to be fit to shoot a York."



I lit a cigarette and watched the smoke curling up against the blue sky. "Later. Maybe I'll join you at the fifties. I have writer's cramp and couldn't loose the bow-string."

At last they gave me up. I got my binoculars and trained them on the targets. Gerald scored a red with his first arrow and a gold with his second. It looked as if he was on form. I lowered the glasses and savoured the colourful pageant, the gay targets, the sound of bow-strings and the smack of arrows against the butts. One rose high in the air and fled away to the right. That would be Gregory, without a doubt. A voice behind me said:

"Slacking again, Phillip?"

I rolled on to my other side. It was Jennifer, with her face flushed and her eyes shining.

"They've just shot the sighters," I told her. "If you're quick you'll be in time for the Western."

"I'll stay and pester you for a bit. I've been chasing Gerald's yearlings, they broke out. They're always doing it, and who shall blame them with Gerald's fences. I must have run two miles. What's going on down there? Has Gregory got a gold?"

All the archers were gathered round the centre target. Gerald was slapping Gregory on the back and there seemed to be some kind of general whoopee in progress. I put up my glasses in time to see him withdraw the arrow.

"Right in the pin-hole."

"Then why's he scuttling away with his knees bent like a character in a Bateman cartoon?"

"Probably because he's supposed to be shooting on the right-hand target. Now he's off to retrieve another arrow from the stackyard fence."

It may have been the angle of her face, the tilt of her head, the light in her eyes. For a moment I was back in a war-time town, with the sirens wailing and the crunch of the bombs around us. In place of the brown hair and the white and green there was a golden head and the navy-blue of a Wren uniform. I heard her voice, as from a great distance.

"Whatever's the matter?"

I passed my hand across my eyes.

"Nothing. Only you remind me of someone I knew a long time ago."



"Someone you never talk about?"

"How did you know?"

"Sometimes one gets a kind of sympathy with certain people. Phillip, my dear"—the words slipped out without, I think, her realizing she had used them—"you've done so much for me. More than you think. Just the fact that you're there and want to help has turned a life that might have been unendurable into something almost pleasant. Won't you let me do something for you, even if it's only to be a sympathetic listener?"

I turned on to my back and gazed up at the hazy blueness of the sky. To me she seemed the loveliest thing on earth, and if I had gone on looking at her I should have said things which could not be recalled. I realized I wanted to talk to her about many things.

"Her name was Daphne," I said. "I loved her very much. In the end, I killed her."

She didn't say anything. I thought, "Hell, I'm dramatizing this." I tried again.

"We met about the end of 1939. It was in a crowded restaurant and I think the seat at my table was the only vacant one in the room. I saw her looking for a place and caught her eye. After that we met a good deal. She was an orphan, in the Wrens, and she'd been married six months. Captain Ronald D'Arcy Fortescue was just about the rottenest egg that was ever laid. He had one asset, charm, and it was his stock-in-trade. Harrow and Magdalen, I believe. The Captain was phoney. He had her money off her inside a month and lost it on the turf. After that he gave her three months of hell, dragged her through every kind of degradation, made her a party to his confidence tricks, jeered at her scruples and ridiculed her in front of his friends. In the end he found she cramped his style, so he walked out on her, leaving her with what she was wearing and no money to settle with the hotel. They caught him not long afterwards and he got three years, with a warning from the judge that if ever he came before him again he'd get the maximum penalty the law allowed.

"I suppose she could have got a divorce in time, but you don't think that far ahead when you may be overseas next week or blown across the Styx before morning. So far as Service life allowed, we lived together. We had one glorious



week in the June of 1940 when our leaves coincided. It was the week Paris fell, seven days of blazing sunshine, and we spent it in a half-timbered inn buried in the Devon countryside. We tramped miles over Exmoor, or splashed in the surf on a rugged coast. For seven unforgettable days we stepped right out of this world.

"We used to talk rather vaguely about being married when the war was over, but in those days you didn't bank too heavily on the future. You just grasped the present with both hands, and thanked God if it was good. In the late autumn I was posted to Portsmouth on a course, and Daphne was stationed there. That was the time the raids were on. We used to meet, every evening, in a little café. I was the irresponsible one—ten minutes, quarter of an hour, I'd get tied up in some fool thing and come bustling along full of apologies. She never reproached me, and I don't think she was ever a minute late herself. The night the bomb fell it was a game of snooker.

"I didn't have to be late. The colours were sticking and hung round the cushion, so that the game went on a quarter of an hour longer than I'd bargained. I'd have left it if I thought more of Daphne than I did about myself. If I'd done so we'd have been in the shelter, and it wasn't touched. Instead, she was sitting at our table waiting for me.

"The sirens went as I started out, and I ran most of the way. I was a couple of hundred yards from the café when I heard the whine of the bomb, and someone shouted 'look out', but I just kept on running. It was a direct hit on the next building, and a big beam had fallen and pinned her to the floor. She died with her head in my lap."

Even now, when I think of that night, something twists my heart until the pain is almost physical. One end of the beam had crushed the lower part of her body, and there was a ton of masonry across the centre of the beam. She was alive, and quite conscious. In a frenzy I started to tear at the rubble with my hands. She said:

"Phillip, it isn't any use. It hurt a bit at first, but now it's all lovely and numb. Come and make a pillow for my head."

I kept on throwing out bricks like a madman. "We'll have you out in no time. Everything's going to be fine."

"My darling," she said, "we haven't very long. Don't let's waste any of it."



In my heart I knew she was right. I sat down and raised her head on to my lap. She said:

"Take me back to Devon, Phillip. Do you remember that cottage at Combe Martin with the honeysuckle round the porch?" We talked about Exmoor and the sunshine and the Devon coast. Time ceased to count. There was a rescue party clearing away the rubble, but I scarcely knew that they were there. After a while Daphne said: "I'm feeling awfully sleepy, darling. Can you hear the breakers on the surf? They always made me sleepy. Do you mind if I close my eyes a moment?" Her fingers tightened in mine for a brief space of time, and then went limp; I sat there surrounded by an awful loneliness, into which crept contempt for myself and an icy hatred of the men who had done this thing.

Jennifer stirred on the turf beside me. I turned over and faced her again.

"I think I had a personal feud with every living German. After the bomb I started to dream. At first it came every night, always the same, until I couldn't sleep for fear of it. Then it came at odd times for more than four years, up to the time I was blown up on the Elbe. Drastic treatment, perhaps, but it was worth it because it stopped the nightmare. Part of the dream was a blond lout who worked the bomb switches; to me he symbolized the whole German race, and I saw his face on every man I killed."

It is not easy to describe the dream, to convey in mere words those cold, clutching fingers of apprehension and despair. It started as pure sound in a void darkness, a distant hum growing to the resonant throbbing of an aircraft's engines. As the darkness lifted in a misty field of vision a black point grew bigger, a winged insect swelling until it assumed the shape of that dreadful vehicle of death. I, like a disembodied spirit drifted in space, at first outside, then within the fuselage. It was there I saw him, the focus of my bitterness in after years, born in the flesh the evil I was driven to destroy.

He sat half crouched over his instruments of destruction, the new deity, Hitler's *herrenvolk*, blond, stupid, arrogant, the brute force that could destroy but not create. In that unreal but seeming real medium of the dream I would become merged, into his body, and it was I who sprawled across the bomb panel, my body dominated by his mind. Through the bomb-sight my



whole vision was confined to a black landscape, studded her and there with points of light, while pervading everything that insidious vibration ate its way into my very brain. Then, from the specks of light one would detach itself, swelling in size, rushing up to meet me until it assumed the aspect of a human face. Daphne's face, begging, imploring, entreating while my hand, no longer subject to my own control, reached out and touched the switch.

The scene dissolved, in cold, explosive fragments. I was alone, alone for all eternity. Around me stretched the barren wastes of ice, around me for a million miles and reaching forward a million years in time. In all that empty wilderness there was no other life, no movement but the moaning wind biting into my aching bones. It was the last bleak desolation of the damned.

Night by night that dream had driven me half-way to insanity. I made no effort to describe it, but instead I said:

"I grew to hate one half of the human race. I killed them where and when and how I could. Later I applied for transfer to Commandos, because there was more satisfaction in killing Germans that way than with a tank. There was no difficulty, for I was the type they wanted. Bred to the country, I could shoot and for years I'd been a member of a London Judo club. People said I was without feeling or pity, and no doubt that's what I became. But it sprang at first from too much feeling and too much pity. Perhaps that explains *Michael*."

I had forgotten the archers, twenty yards away. I had forgotten Calander and Charon and Satan. I was aware that something pent up inside me overlong was coming out, and with it came a sense of uplift and light-headed gaiety.

"I wonder," said Jennifer, "why you had to punish yourself so hard. Because you happened to be late you've blamed yourself all these years for Daphne's death and all the time it was just a scurvy trick of fate. It could as easily have been the shelter that was hit, and the café spared. If so, you'd have seen your unpunctuality as an instrument of divine preservation."

"It's not as easy as that. It's not just that I was late, or even that I had a habit of being late. It's that being late was the symptom of the sheer downright selfishness that was the cause of it. The fault was in me, and Daphne paid the price of it."



"And you went on paying for the next ten years. I still think you're wrong. I think selfishness is a pretty bad fault, though I won't accept that it was in you any worse than the rest of us. But what if it was? There are other faults as bad, and most of us have one of them if we haven't more. If fate dealt with all of us as unkindly as it dealt with you the world would be rather a wretched place."

"So you think I've been the victim of circumstances?"

"Yes, I do. And I think you've earned a rest."

"I thought so too," I said. "Hence the playboy and the *roué*. It didn't work."

"Of course it didn't," said Jennifer. "I was thinking of peace of mind."

On a sudden impulse I put out my hand and smoothed back the hair from her forehead.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"As young as the morning and as old as time. Where did you learn your wisdom?"

"In the same school as you; adversity. Only yours was ten times worse than mine."

"If that is so," I said, "you learn ten times more quickly than I."

For a little while we lay there without speaking. A cloud came up and passed across the face of the sun, and the air went chill. It flitted through my mind as an omen of things to come, and then it moved away. Another and more mundane cloud loomed up on the horizon.

"Quite touching," said the voice of Gerald. "Whispering the secrets of your lives?"

I rolled on to my back and looked at the hulk towering above me. I decided I liked it less than ever.

"As a matter of fact," I said mendaciously, "we were speculating on yours."

He did his snort again. "Well, at least I've lived."

I nearly said, "I know; with your snout and both trotters in the trough," but it was much too hot to have a fight with Gerald on my hands. Instead I said: "You must tell me about it one day, Gerald. There might be a story. *Forever Amber* was a best seller."

He sat down on top of me and pinioned my arms to the



ground. I didn't do anything, it wasn't necessary, for he hadn't the *savoir faire* to know how to handle me, but I thought, "One of these days, fat boy, you're going to get one hell of a surprise."

"Gerald," I said, "you eat too much. Take your two ton and park it on the grass."

He tweaked my nose, rather self-consciously, and got to his feet. I stood up too, and reached out my hands to Jennifer.

"Come and be my mascot. I'm going to beat the hide off Gerald at fifty."

I didn't, but I noticed with satisfaction that Peter turned in a card of 287 against Gerald's 263.

## CHAPTER VIII

FOR the first two weeks in May life remained relatively peaceful. I say relatively, for though events became much more dramatic after the storm burst it was by no means the sleepy little village to which I had come in March. Some day I fear people will begin to look on me as a Jonah, for there is something in me which seems to attract trouble. Though I like nothing better than peace and quiet, wherever I go some kind of upheaval tends to follow in my wake.

In this case it was Gerald, and the man had a devil in him that went round looking for trouble. The first open conflagration was his fight with Donovan, which happened a few evenings after the archery meeting I have just described. I was working on my book, when the sound of angry voices drifted up from the courtyard in front of the "Maitland". The first I heard was Donovan's, and I laid down my pen and crossed to the window.

"So it's a bluidy thief I am," he shouted. "An' what would you be yourself, you an' your feyther an' your gran'feyther, back to the fust Maitland as stole the land from the people?"

Gerald was standing with his hands on his hips, supremely confident with fourteen and a half stone of mixed muscle and fat, and some knowledge of boxing behind him.

"Go on, you bloody bolshie," he said. "Get on your soap-box, Comrade Paddy, and put the world to rights."



"An' now that you have your land, what can you do with it? Would you call yourself a fairmer? 'Tis a disgrace to your profession you are, an' we'll not need to wait for the glorious day of revolution to see you out of it. Wan day there'll come a man from the committee to put you in the road for the muck you make o' your fairm. A fairmer," said Donovan, with deep contempt. "'Tis more good I could do with me bulldozer than you with your plough."

"Shut your mouth, you bone-idle Irishman. What good are you for anything but stirring the men to strike?"

"An' what good would you be for anything at all? sure savin' wan, an' in that the divil himself could not hould a candle to you." Donovan went on to describe in detail the one thing at which Gerald was supremely accomplished, but the matter is quite unsuitable for print. He was half crouched with his fists clenched and his face a shade paler than usual. I pulled a chair up to the window, giving myself a grandstand seat.

"You rotten Dublin bastard," said Gerald. "You'd try to blarney your way out of it, would you. You pinched a bag of my potatoes. Shall I hang you up by your feet till they fall out of your stomach?"

"I'm telling you I've not been near the midden heap you live on. Would I be touchin' your 'taters, when it's rotten with disease they'd be?"

"Touching them and eating them," said Gerald. "And going down to Confession to wash your soul so you could pinch another bag next week. Yes, and giving the priest a meal of 'taters as his rake-off."

When he said that I knew his purpose was to provoke a fight. He may or may not have suspected Donovan of stealing his potatoes, but the fact was incidental. The bad blood had been choked up inside him for weeks, and he meant to take it out of the Irishman. This was going to be interesting, for Gerald would not have it all his own way. He was two and a half stone the heavier, but Donovan was strong, active, and the fitter of the two. If he drank less he would have been fitter still.

His eyes were blazing. "You'll leave the Riverint Feyther out of this."

"Ah," said Gerald, "but did he leave himself out. Or did he



carry one end of the bag? I thought there was a stink of priest about, but it's hard to tell it from pig."

"Mother o' God," said the Irishman, quite quietly. "Will I be tearin' the lyin' tongue out of your head?"

"Will you indade?" mimicked Gerald. "To tear or not to tear, that is the question, isn't it? you yellow-livered Paddy. You'd like to, wouldn't you? you dirty little Dublin bolshie, but you haven't the guts to try. You're all talk and no do."

Donovan went in, as though he had been shot from a catapult. He was as quick as a cat, and though Gerald flicked out a left he went under it and landed a right high up on the jaw. Gerald took a wild left on his guard, and went backwards riding a hail of blows. He took the sting out of most of them but he suffered some useful punches, one of which flattened his already squat nose and drew the blood. Using his weight he slowed up his opponent's onrush, and holding him with his left started to drive in short arm punches to the ribs.

It soon became apparent that Donovan's knowledge of boxing was fragmentary, but he was a natural fighting Irishman and knew enough not to stand for that treatment. His chances lay in keeping the fight at a distance until he could wear Gerald down, and he twisted out of the hold and broke clear.

I watched Gerald with interest, for I felt the day might come when some knowledge of his fighting methods would prove of use. He was a sound orthodox boxer, but painfully slow. Even a man of his weight and ponderous build should have moved more quickly. Donovan was making rings round him, darting in, landing a quick rat-tat-tat to the head, and dancing clear again. At the same time his defence was good, and Donovan would not be doing the damage that he hoped. I felt that he would have been well advised to concentrate more on the body instead of directing the whole attack at his opponent's head.

Gerald was beginning to blow, his face was a mass of blood from the damaged nose, and his left eye was partly closed. Donovan was scarcely marked and seemed as fresh as when he started, but the fight was by no means over. Gerald looked to me as if he was just beginning to measure up his opponent's tactics.

Quite suddenly it happened, the thing I was half expecting.



Donovan came in weaving, his head moved sideways and Gerald anticipated the manoeuvre. Like a pile-driver his left landed square on the Irishman's jaw, stopping him in his tracks and leaving him, for a split second, a wide-open target. It was the quickest move I had seen Gerald make, and he crashed home his right under the heart. I saw Donovan sag at the knees, for it was a killing blow, and though he covered up and twisted out of further trouble his speed was cut to half.

From that moment he hadn't a chance. Gerald started to attack, and though in his unorthodox way Donovan was quite a good attacking fighter he had not the haziest idea of defence. Slowly, ponderously, like a steam roller, Gerald drove him backwards, landing punches to the face and body. A left to the solar plexus doubled the beaten man and Gerald, pivoting at his leisure, brought up his right in an uppercut that took him full in the face and, nearly lifting his feet from the ground, laid him on his back.

Looking like a gargoyle with his blood-stained face, Gerald used his foot to stir the fallen man.

"Get up, you shamming Irish hog. You started it, and I'll finish it. Get up, or do I prop you against the wall and knock your head through the other side of it?"

Donovan was lying there holding his stomach and retching. He was out to the world. Gerald grasped him by the collar and, lifting his head from the ground, hit him across the face with his open hand.

For a moment I wondered if I should go down and stop it, but it was no affair of mine. If Gerald killed Donovan and got himself locked up for it that was two less suspects on the list. Perhaps people were right, there were times when I was without pity. When I got on a job I had a peculiarly objective way of looking at things.

It is on the cards that Gerald might have eliminated two of the suspects if Gregory had not come on the scene. I heard his voice before I saw him.

"Steady, Mr. Maitland, I think that's about enough."

Gerald let go of Donovan's collar, so that his head fell with a thump on the ground. He swung round and glared at Gregory.

"This bloody swine pinched my potatoes and then started to lay into me. I'll settle my affairs my own way."



"I know," said Gregory. "I saw it. What you've done so far's all right. That was self-defence. If you do any more it'll be manslaughter, or worse." He went over and stood astride the prostrate form of Donovan. Gerald muttered something under his breath. I couldn't catch it, but I doubt that it was printable if I had.

His next outbreak was a thoroughly revolting display when he started mauling Jennifer in a strip of woodland known as Beck Coppice. It might have been serious if Peter had not arrived at the crucial moment, and though he got knocked down for his pains the interruption broke up the incident. Jennifer insisted that she had matters in hand and was on the point of biting the lobe off his ear, but I very much doubt that an ear more or less would have deterred Gerald. Other things apart, I was just about tired of seeing Squire Maitland strutting around as cock of the local dunghill.

For over a week he was as docile as an old sheep, and wore about the same expression. Jennifer told me that she gave Sir Gilbert a full account of the Beck Coppice incident, and the subsequent wiggling was a classic. It took place in the study, but much of it was audible over the whole house. Horse-whippings were referred to, and there was some mention of cutting off with a farthing. The honour of the family came into it, whatever that might have been. No-one could have accused Gerald of neglecting the family tradition.

Thus, for a little while, Calander went its normal, peaceful way. In fact, complete harmony reigned until the whole business began to break open. I have an open mind on telepathy and allied metaphysical phenomena. It may have been coincidence, but it could have been something beyond the ordinary physical world, which, on a Friday late in May, induced in me the urgent belief that I had to go out into the village. Had I not done so my own life, and possibly that of nations, would have run a different course.

The day had been better than most, and there was a russet glow around the horizon where the sun had set. Aimlessly I sauntered out of the "Maitland", and felt my steps drawn to the left. I climbed the hill as far as the fork and stood with my elbows on the gate as I had stood on the day my room was searched. Looking back in the light of knowledge it is easy to say that I felt a sense of foreboding, and yet I am sure



that it was really there. My senses were keyed up to a preternatural awareness; my whole body was tensed for instant action. Climbing the gate I started across the fields, not hurriedly, but with a kind of purposefulness without understanding what the purpose was. The light was beginning to fail and the trees stood out like silhouettes against the sky.

I came to the fence against Bennett's Piece, Jenkins' fence of overgrown thorn with the gaps a yard or more in width. Standing not five yards away, her back towards me, her hand on the trunk of a tree, was Jennifer. I stood quite still, looking at her, and it came upon me in a blinding realization that she was the beginning and the end of my whole life. Daphne and the ghosts were dead; without Jennifer I would have very little purpose. In a brief flash of understanding I knew that, to me, she had become the dearest thing in all the world.

Had I spoken I would have startled her. I decided to walk up the hedge and come in so that she would see me approaching from the side. I was about to turn and go.

I suppose it takes an arrow some two seconds to travel eighty yards. It takes the sound of the bow-string a quarter of a second to cover that distance. The nervous reaction is, perhaps, another half second. I had a little over a second to do the thing I did. When I heard the sound of the bow-string I knew, with a kind of deadly certainty, what it entailed. I hurled myself forward and, with my arm around her, bore her to the ground. As we fell I heard the arrow smack into the tree behind us.

We rolled over, and she gave me a stinging blow across the face. I said:

"Steady, Jennifer, this is neither rape nor murder."

I heard her gasp. "Phillip! Oh, my dear, I'm sorry. I thought it was Gerald."

"Naturally. I suppose I'm lucky to have both my ears."

We laughed. I was lying on top of her, and her lips were only a few inches from mine. Somewhere there was a homicidal lunatic with a bow making his escape, and I ought to be after him. I couldn't bring myself to do it. I felt her arm around my neck, and I bent my head towards her.

There was a bellow like an angry bull. Gerald was stamping across the turf from the direction of Peter's fence. As I got to my feet I remember thinking, "My God, this is too much."



"Gerald," I said, "for Pete's sake take yourself out of this. I'm sick of the sight of you."

"I'll bet you are." He was blowing like a grampus. "When I've done with you you'll be a damn sight sicker still. You can't get a girl any other way, so you try this."

"If I did," I told him, "you're the last man that's in a position to object. As a matter of fact, though, you're barking up a gum tree."

"So I can't believe my own eyes, can't I? I saw the whole thing. You pounced on her and knocked her over. She hit you in the face but you overpowered her and got on top of her. You can't talk your way out of this one, Mr. Bloody Story Writer. You're good with your tongue, aren't you? In a minute we'll see how good you are with your fists. I'm going to put your pretty face so that the girls won't ever want to look at it again. After that you can do your talking, if you want to."

"All right," I said, "have it that way if you want it. Only don't forget you started it."

He wasn't in a hurry to start. His sadistic nature wanted to savour all the enjoyment of anticipation first. "You saw what I did to Bolshie Donovan? Well, that's nothing to what I'm going to do to you." He was almost licking his lips with relish. Donovan had put up some sort of a show, but I was just a soft mug of a writer delivered like a lamb to the slaughter.

Jennifer came between us. She had seen the arrow and realized what had happened.

"Gerald, you stupid dumb idiot, you've got this wrong. Just take a look at that arrow and use what brain you've got."

But Gerald was not to be baulked of his prey. He had me where he'd wanted me for weeks and for once, to his little pig's brain, he was fighting a righteous cause. He said: "You keep out of this, Jenny. I know what I'm doing," and putting out a massive arm swept her aside so that she went spinning to the ground.

That settled it. He was my equal in height and far more heavily built. I hit him across the mouth, a judo cut with the edge of the hand braced rigid, and smashed his top lip against his teeth. It was not meant to be particularly damaging, but just to start things off. He let drive with a left that was intended to stave in my face. I moved my head and went



inside it, caught his right sleeve above the elbow and smothered the blow he aimed at my body. Then I pulled him on to his right foot and put an ankle throw on him. Not one of the atemi versions which would have cracked his skull or severed his windpipe, but a good, lively bit of randori that put him smack on his back and knocked most of the breath out of his body.

I went down with him, and put on an arm-lock. He was flat on his back, with my one leg across his face and the other across his chest. His right arm was twisted backwards across my legs, with the elbow bearing on my thigh. He was flailing around with his free arm and cursing, which was about all he could do.

"You damn dirty swine. I'll knock your teeth down your throat. I'll——"

I decided it was time someone hurt Gerald. I brought my free arm over and started to press on the nerve centre in his hand. I felt his muscles go rigid and increased the pressure on his elbow almost to breaking point. He began screaming with pain, and I kept the pressure on till I felt him breaking out in a cold sweat. When I took it off he went on screaming, more out of habit than anything else. I drew up my left leg and kicked him lightly on the side of the jaw with my heel. That quietened him. I said:

"Shut up, and listen to me. That's elementary judo. I know a lot more. In a moment I'm going to let you go. If you start any more strong-arm stuff I'll put you in hospital."

I got to my feet and Gerald followed suit slowly. He looked like a whipped puppy, with his right arm hanging rather limply at his side and his left hand rubbing the graze on his jaw. His upper lip was a mess. I indicated the arrow.

"If you've got the blood-lust out of your system take a look at that and set the thing you think with working. Take a good look at the crest."

He peered at it in the gathering gloom. "It's the arrow I lost on Wednesday night. Some fool's found it and shot it in the air."

"Use your brains," I said. "That arrow wasn't shot at random. Look at the angle of it. It was shot from about eighty yards. Take the range and direction, and it came from behind those bushes. Whoever loosed it meant to kill."

"But who on earth——?"



"It's pretty obvious, isn't it? It's your arrow. You've been after Jennifer for weeks and she won't look at you. She got you a well-deserved wiggling from your old man. There are only two men I know with a chance of hitting a girl at eighty yards, and you're one of them. You appear on the scene twenty seconds after it was shot. Means, motive, opportunity, you've got the lot. It's as neat a case as I've ever seen."

His jaw was sagging open. "But good God, Phil, you don't think I did it? Everyone knows I lost an arrow. You were there yourself. We all looked for it for ages."

"What of it? You've got other arrows, haven't you? Or maybe you found the one you lost. Anyhow, what's it matter what I think? If I were in your shoes I'd think up a better story before the police get here."

For a moment I thought he was going down on his knees. "Phil, old man, you're not going to bring the police into this? I swear to God I didn't do it. I'll prove it, only for the love of Mike keep the police out of it."

"A little bit of you," I said, "is funny. Too much turns my stomach. Get moving, and go and cry somewhere I can't see you."

He stood there hesitating. I took two steps towards him. "If I start anything else tonight I'm going to quit being playful. I'm going to take you to pieces to see what makes you tick. Now are you going?"

He turned and shuffled off into the gloom.

There are a few moments one remembers all one's life, and this was one. The soft air and the twilight, the massive figure with its hunched shoulders fading from view, the wicked-looking arrow, and the lonely girl at my side. I half turned and so did she. I don't think we made any conscious movement, but she was in my arms. I remember saying, "Jennifer, my lovely darling, this was written in the book of destiny at the beginning of time."

In my life I have kissed a great many women, but not till then had I known the sense of two people mingling together, body, mind and soul. For a measureless age we stepped out of time, while the world about us took on new shape, new colour and new meaning which it would never lose. Then she buried her face against my shoulder, I felt her body quivering in my arms and heard her say:

"Phillip, I love you so much. If he'd hurt you I was going to kill him."

"All that belongs to yesterday. Life's just begun."

"I know. I can't quite believe it. It's all rather . . . bewildering." She looked up at me. "Darling, did you mean that, about the arrow being shot on purpose?"

"I'm afraid I did."

"And Gerald?"

"No, he didn't do it. At least I'm pretty certain of that. I rubbed it in, I know, but he's had that coming to him for a long time." Things were beginning to settle into a pattern in my mind.

"Then who——?"

"I don't know, yet, but I'm going to find out." I bent and kissed her again. "Jennifer—darling, precious Jennifer, you're in the most deadly danger and I don't intend to let you out of my sight."

She laid her cheek against mine. "I don't mind the danger, Phillip. I'm not lonely any more. I don't think I shall ever really mind anything very much again."

## CHAPTER IX

THE bar had just closed when we went into the "Maitland", and Gregory was clearing away a few glasses in the saloon. I laid the arrow down on a table and asked him what he thought about it.

He picked it up and studied the crest. "Gerald's, isn't it? Is it the one he lost?"

"I've no idea. Probably just one he keeps for acting the goat. He nearly killed Jennifer with it."

"Seriously?"

"Dead seriously. If I hadn't pushed her out of the way in the nick of time there'd have been a homicide in the village. It stuck in a tree and I had to dig it out with my knife."

"You're not suggesting he shot at her deliberately?"

"Good lord, no. I let him believe I thought so to deflate his ego, and he's gone away jibbering with funk to wait for the



Black Maria. Probably just let it go in a fit of light-hearted Geraldism to see where it would come down."

Gregory handed back the arrow. "How do you know it's Gerald?"

"Well, it's his arrow and he came on the scene just after it had been shot."

"It's a bit circumstantial. Someone may have found the arrow he lost."

"That's his yarn, but other things apart have we any more lunatics in the village who'd do a damn silly thing like that?"

"I hope not." Gregory put the last of the glasses on to his tray. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing more, he's had the shaking of his young life. If it comes to that, Jennifer's had a bad enough shaking too. Get me a bottle of Martell, Greg, we could both do with a drink."

We took the brandy up to my room and settled down with it on the settee, as close together as two people could possibly get. We were still walking on the clouds and the scent of Jennifer's hair was not conducive to logical thought, but even so I felt one or two bits of the puzzle were falling into place. Someone had decided that Jennifer was McKinnon's agent, and had seized the chance of killing her and throwing suspicion on Gerald. Someone had spotted the arrow during the search, pushed it out of sight under the grass and come back for it when no one was about. As the whole club had been out that evening it did not help very much. I was certain Gerald had not shot it himself. Had he done so he would have made himself scarce and not come galloping on to the scene of the crime. Even Gerald was hardly fool enough for that.

"Darling," said Jennifer, rubbing her cheek against mine, "I think you're a crook. First you tell Gerald he tried to kill me, then you tell me that someone attempted a murder but it wasn't Gerald, and finally you tell Greg that Gerald did it by accident while he was playing the fool. Which is the true version?"

"The truth," I said, "is what I told you, and the rest is smoke-screen. As for a crook, you're perfectly right. I committed one murder a few weeks ago, and before I'm through I'll probably litter the Shropshire countryside with corpses. I'm going to tell you about it in a minute. Just at the moment there's something I want to work out."



I had already decided that if I couldn't trust the girl I intended to marry, Mac could come and catch his spies for himself.

"I want you," I said, "to think very hard and see if you can recall any little incident that might make someone in Calander believe you were spying on them. I can't give you much of a line, but have you ever come upon two people who were talking and have them break off suddenly, or walked in on a telephone-call that was cut short. Have you been out late and come across someone in what might be suspicious circumstances? It could be almost anything, but I believe someone in the village has reason to think you're watching them."

She put her hand to her head. "Honestly, Phillip. I can't think of a thing. I've led a blameless life here. Most of the time I've either been working or dodging Gerald. There was one little thing, the night I met you. It was just before you came in, and I'd been to look for a lavatory. That was the first time I'd been to the place and I saw a door and tried it. It was Gregory's office. He was in there with another man and when I opened the door they both looked round. Then the other man turned his back on me and Gregory asked if I was looking for anything. That's all there was to it."

"What did the other man look like?"

"I only got the briefest glimpse of him. That was the one fishy thing about it, he just turned his head instinctively as the door opened and as quickly as he could he turned his back. He had dark hair and a long jaw. I think his face was pale. There was something about him, I don't know what, it may have been his eyebrows—but I got an impression of a slightly satanic expression."

"Jennifer, you and I together can do anything. You've handed me a piece of information I've hunted for the last three months. That was Charon. I pushed him under a train."

She wrinkled her forehead at me. "What is this, Greek mythology or gang warfare?"

"Neither. It's Contra Espionage, Cabinet level and very hush-hush. I'm going to tell you about it as soon as I've sorted this out, for if I can't trust you I can trust no-one in the whole benighted world. We call him Charon for want of a better name because he ferried information to his master, the devil.



And the delightful character who tried to murder you is none other than my charming host, John Gregory."

"Phillip, I don't believe it. Not Greg!"

"My darling," I said, "there's someone in this village who would do worse than murder, should the need arise. For nearly three months I've been saying what you're saying now. Those who would do it couldn't, and those who could do it wouldn't. This time, though, there isn't any question. We know that Charon was in Calander on the Wednesday night, that he came to see one person and took very good care to see no-one else. Therefore, Gregory is that person. We also know that Charon's friend wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone who suspected his identity. The night Peggy and I were held up in the car, that wasn't just a chance bit of highway robbery. It was a very determined effort to eliminate me, on the off-chance that I might know too much.

"Right, then, where are we? We know that Gregory has a motive for murder, and on his record he's prepared to do it. If it wasn't him it was someone else, and the suggestion that there are two people in Calander who want to do you in is stretching coincidence a little too far. The idea that Gerald took a shot at you because you wouldn't go to bed with him is so far-fetched that no-one except Gerald would believe it for a moment."

"Yes, I see all that, but even if he wanted to do it, he couldn't. Greg couldn't hit a haystack if he stood on top of it."

"I know, that's the one piece that won't fit in, but I think there might be a place for it. There's something else that puzzles me even more." I picked up the arrow, and studied it reflectively. "How good are really good archers, Jennifer? I suppose a Master Bowman would be reasonably certain of hitting some part of a girl from eighty yards on a calm evening, but what are the chances that he could place his arrow, an ordinary target arrow, where it would kill?" I went on staring at the arrow. Suddenly I began to curse.

"What lovely words you know," said Jennifer. "You must teach me some time."

I passed her the arrow. "Do you see anything queer about that?"

"I don't think so. As you say, it's an ordinary target arrow, except..." She bent her head a little closer. "It



seems to have gone discoloured around the pile, if that's what you mean. Would that be from lying out overnight?"

"I shouldn't think so. It's a long shot, but it could be curare."

"Curare? The arrow poison?" I felt her shudder. "Phillip, what guardian angel brought you there tonight?"

We held each other very close. It was as though we sought by the strength of our arms, to prevent the forces of destiny from tearing us asunder. After a while I went across to the table and poured out two more big glasses of brandy. "I'm going to tell you the whole story of murder and madness." I did. It started with the sudden death of two Arabs in the Boullak, and ended with two people, quite absurdly in love, sitting on the settee of a village inn. When I had finished Jennifer said:

"I didn't think things like that happened in real life. I thought people like you made them up in books."

"They happen all right, only very few people see the inside of them, and those who do seldom talk." I caught both her hands and drew them to me. "Jennifer, I love you beyond all power of words, but it's only fair to tell you I'm a bird of ill-omen. I've never brought lasting happiness to any woman; moments of ecstasy, yes, but nothing that endures. I'm unorthodox, wild, irresponsible I expect, and trouble follows me like hounds on a scent. If you want the solid, comfortable, familiar virtues they're not in me. If I were honest I should send you away, only I want you more than anything in the world and I haven't the courage to do it."

Jennifer took her hands from mine. She ran her fingers through my hair and drew my head on to her shoulder. "My darling," she said, "I'm floating in the air, and perhaps I shan't say this very well. I don't know what life together may bring. All I know is that without you there is no colour, no gaiety, no light and shade, only the drab monotony of loneliness. If you want me I'll hold hard on to the heaven, and take the risk of hell."

Presently there was a tap on the door, and Helen came in. "You two look very cosy," she said. "John and I have been talking things over, Phillip, and we feel Jennifer can't go back to the Beck with a lunatic like Gerald around. If you don't mind we could fix up a bed in here for the night."



I got to my feet. "That's awfully nice of you, but you'll put yourselves to no such trouble. I'm taking Jennifer to my brother's place."

"Phillip, you can't go barging in on your brother at this hour. It's nearly eleven already. Besides, it's no trouble at all to put up a bed."

"Charles is used to my little ways," I said. "It stops him getting into a rut. Anyhow, he's expecting us. I 'phoned through from the call-box before we came in."

"Well, if it's all laid on all well and good. But if there's anything we can do to help, you know we'd be only too pleased." She gave me a really charming smile.

"I'll bet you would," I said softly as the door closed behind her.

Jennifer took the empty glasses to the table. "Are we really going to your brother's?"

"Lord knows. I should think it most unlikely. Darling, the trouble about throwing in your lot with me is that you never know where you'll sleep, or whether you'll sleep at all. The immediate need is to get out of here, I wouldn't trust those two beauties not to put strychnine in the porridge. I'll just pack a few things."

I went into the bedroom and threw a few basic necessities into a bag. When I came back I said:

"I want to talk to Mac. We'll go round to the Beck and pick up a few of your things; the rest can be collected when we find where we're going to put them."

With our arms round each other we tip-toed out, like conspirators into the night. As we passed Gregory's office I tapped on the door and put my head inside. He was sitting there with Helen, and if they were worried they played their part well.

"So long, Greg," I said. "We're on our way."

He gave me his friendly grin. "If you're going to roll up in the small hours, you'd better have a key. I don't want another three-o'clock session with 'Scots wa' hae'."

"There's nothing like that about it. We're both spending the night with Charles. Maybe I'll be back tomorrow. Maybe I'll take a few days off and get married."

"Why do a thing like that? Look what it did to me."

"Don't you believe it," said Helen. "You should have seen what he was before I started on him."



I threw her a kiss, and we went for the car.

There were a few tantrums at the Beck when we called for Jennifer's things. Sir Gilbert put on an act like a colonel of dragoons at Balaclava and shouted for Gerald to throw me out but Gerald, showing a proper appreciation of his own safety, had made himself scarce. At Wenlock I went straight out on the Shrewsbury road in case Gregory had a man there to check our route. I turned right at Harley and made a circle to enter the town from the other side.

"These people don't leave much to chance," I said. "This game may have its light-hearted moments, but one little slip and you're having tea with Saint Peter. Gregory's playing a difficult hand at the moment. He doesn't *know*, for certain, that we've an agent in the village. All he knows is that Charon left Calander in good order and came to a sticky end away from his route. It looked like an accident, and there may have been a sound reason for being off the route which only Charon knew, and he can't talk. But just in case there might be an agent Gregory has orders to check up.

"Wellings decided I wasn't in it. He practically told me so, but because he thought he could do it safely he decided to bump me off, just to be sure. We fixed things so that Wellings could get a message out of gaol. Gregory decides to write me off and look round for someone else. You saw Charon, and Charon died. Greg gets a chance to do you in, safely as he thinks, and takes it. But he doesn't *know* either you or I are in it, and more important still he doesn't know that we know who he is. And so he daren't do anything that will show his hand, but he's got to keep checking on us in case we give ourselves away."

We parked the car on the outskirts of Wenlock and walked in. The place seemed deserted. For the second time I pulled Morton out from between the sheets and we went up to my lair. I settled Jennifer in the one easy chair and went to work on the telephone.

My first call was to Charles. When he had said his piece about brothers who woke him up in the small hours I told him I was supposed to be spending the night with him, that there might be a call to check if I'd arrived and what to do if it came.

"Poor Charles," said Jennifer. "Did you drag him out of bed?"



"Not on your life. You ought to see the place, you can't turn round without falling over a telephone. He's got two by his bed."

I rang the War Office, but as I expected McKinnon had left hours ago, so I called the Richmond number. I could hear the instrument ringing for a long time at the other end, and then a dreadful noise floated over the line. It sounded like cursing in the Gaelic.

"Mac," I said, "get the sleep out of your eyes and listen to me."

He said, "Och, aye," about half a dozen times. I think he was playing for time while he collected his wits. Then:

"Well, and what can I do for you in the middle of the night? Have you pushed some other laddie under a train?"

"No, but I've got one lined up, all ready for pushing. You remember telling me you expected a further report on Gregory any moment? Have you got it yet?"

"It's in the post. You'll get it in the morning."

"I want it now. Was there anything about archery in it?"

"What's biting you, man. You pull me out of bed past midnight. Can you no wait till morning for your bows and arrows?"

"Mac," I said, "go and put your head under the tap, you're still half asleep. *This thing's breaking open.*"

I think that brought him round. He asked where I was.

"I'm at Morton's. Where the hell do you think I'd be? Now will you put your brains to work and tell me if there was anything about archery in Gregory's report?"

"Aye, there was some mention. He was a member of some club in Surrey. Two years back, it would be."

"Was he any good?"

"He won some wee bit championship at his club."

"Does it give the round and the score?"

"Bide a bit, I mind something of it. I think it said he scored 720 in a York round. Maybe that means something to you."

"It means," I said, "that Gregory was one of the ten best archers in England. It means, too, that he's your man."

That, I think, cleared the last cobwebs of sleep from his brain. "Phillip," he said, "man, that's the best news I've had in months. How's he acting? Does he suspect you?"

"He suspects everyone, and he's as jumpy as a cat, but he's



no cause to single me out. Tonight he tried to kill a perfectly innocent girl on the slenderest of evidence."

"Well, keep an eye on him. Don't alarm him whatever you do, but if he looks like pulling out let me know at once."

"All right, Mac. Even if it's in the middle of the night?"

I heard him chuckle. "Even if it's three o'clock on a Monday morning. Thanks for all you're doing, Phillip."

I hung up. "Jennifer," I said, "do you think two of us could fit in that chair?" We tried, and found that two fitted in very comfortably. "You know," I went on, "there's one thing that's worrying me, and I can't help feeling there's something sticking out under our noses and we're missing it. Gregory takes a shot at you because he suspects you might be watching him. Perhaps you wouldn't be found till morning, but then there'd be Old Harry to pay. Calander would be stiff with police on a murder case; not only would they pry into everyone's past, including his, but their very presence would make the place useless to him for weeks. And if the authorities suspected the village it gives them a heaven-sent opportunity to move in whom they like. What does he get out of it? At the cost of jeopardizing the place altogether he makes it, as he thinks, safe for a few hours."

"Darling," Jennifer said suddenly, "that's it. Safe for a few hours."

I looked at her face, upturned to mine. "My God," I said, "you're right. Idiot that I am. *Something is going to move through Calander tonight.*"

## CHAPTER X

I WAS back at the telephone, and talking to Harding's man at the Wenlock exchange. As he spoke I wrote on the pad in front of me. Jennifer came and leaned her elbows on the desk. When I hung up the copies of three telegrams were on the pad.

The first was to Gregory, handed in at Ealing at 11.37 a.m. of the day Charon came to Calander. It read:

*Seven and a half cases Tio Pepe arriving Wenlock today. Jarvis and Wade.*



I looked at it in disgust.

"The urban mind for you. Why on earth didn't someone spot that as fishy? Do they think we sit quaffing dry sherry in the village pub? Seven and a half cases would last Gregory till his pig grew wings."

The second was handed in at Calander at 12.48 p.m. of the same day.

*H. Smith, 37a, Perivale Street, Wolverhampton. Eight cases light ale required urgently. Deliver today if possible. Gregory.*

The third, brief and to the point, had been handed in at South Kensington at 2.35 p.m. that afternoon. It was to Gregory and read:

*Firefly won. Will forward cheque. Danny.*

In the light of what we knew, the first two were open books. Each mentioned a figure, and the figure was all that mattered. The first meant that a messenger would reach the village at seven-thirty. The second was from Gregory to Charon, telling him to be at Calander at eight. The third was jibberish, and I ruffled my hair at it.

"Nothing that suggests a time."

"I wonder," said Jennifer, "if there's a horse called Firefly running today, and the time of the race is the time of the rendezvous. You know, the two-thirty this afternoon would mean half past two this morning, or tomorrow morning or whatever the day is now."

I yelled for Morton to bring the daily paper, and we pored over the racing columns. There was no such horse as Firefly. November the Fifth was running in the four thirty-five at Kempton Park, but the connection seemed altogether too remote. I went back to the telegram and read it aloud. Suddenly it hit me.

"Jennifer, I've got it. At least, I think I have. It's phonetic. Won. One. You know, won the race, one o'clock."

We both looked at our watches. It was twelve thirty-five. I grabbed the telephone again and asked for Calander 213. After an interminable wait Mrs. Briscoe came on the line, sounding fresh from her bed.

"Whassamarrer?"

Wenlock repeated the number. Mrs. Briscoe said: "No-one won't get Mr. Scott at this hour. I 'eard 'im tell Mr. Bretherton three hours back as 'e was off to bed."

I chipped in. "Never mind if he is in bed, Mrs. Briscoe. You get him out of it."

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Mansell. Well, I'll do me best."

There followed another exasperating delay and we watched the seconds ticking away. Mrs. Briscoe came on again.

"There ain't no reply."

It was twenty to one. I said: "Mrs. Briscoe, you keep on cranking that handle or whatever it is you do till the house falls down, if necessary. I've got to talk to Mr. Scott tonight."

It was nearly a quarter to when Peter's voice came sleepily on the line.

"Peter," I said, "this is Phillip. It's urgent, or I wouldn't have pulled you out of bed. You remember my telling you I was mixed up in something? Well, I want your help."

"God," said Peter, "I'm half asleep. Old Mother Briscoe's sure to have her ear glued to the receiver."

An indignant voice said, "I ain't doin' no such thing," and was followed by a bang as the receiver went on its hook.

Peter chortled. "It always works. Now, Phillip, what is it?"

"A car," I said, "will come to Calander tonight. The most likely time is one o'clock, so you'll need to move. It may park in the slang at the end of the Beck drive, but that isn't certain, so keep an eye on the whole village. The driver will make contact with Gregory, you can count on that. Probably your best course will be to watch the 'Maitland', because the visitor will either go to the pub or Greg will come out and meet the car. I want the number and description of the car, and the road it takes from the village. Ring Wenlock 652, and whatever you do keep out of sight."

"Is Gregory crooked?"

"As a corkscrew."

"The little twirp," said Peter. "If he starts anything I'll break his neck."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. This isn't kiss-in-the-ring; if you show yourself you'll be shot on sight. I wouldn't ask you to do it, only I daren't bring my car back into Calander at this hour or I might flush the nest. Now there's something more. A



second car will come to the village. I can't tell you when, but my guess is it will be within an hour of the first. Again, the driver will contact Gregory, and again I want number, description and route. The second car will be the really vital one, so don't miss it whatever happens. And, for the love of Mike, keep out of sight."

"O.K.," said Peter, "I'm on the way."

I cleared the line and called Harding's hotel. When I got him I said: "I'm at Morton's. Get here as quick as you can, things are happening fast."

There was one thing that puzzled me. No message, by 'phone or telegram, had gone out from Gregory to the new Charon, and I said as much to Jennifer.

"Perhaps he 'phoned it from Wenlock," she suggested. "Did he go out all this afternoon?"

I cast my mind back over the day's events. It was the first chance I had had to look at things in retrospect, and I found myself amazed at all that had happened in so short a time. Four hours ago I had been packing up my manuscript while life in Calander jogged along at its normal, easy pace. Since then a murder had only just been averted; I had found in Jennifer someone I had been seeking all my life; Gerald's nose had been duly rubbed in the dirt; Sir Gilbert had nearly had a fit and Gregory stood unmasked. At the moment Peter Scott would be creeping out into the night while, in the next street the man who was soon to set the police forces of England and Wales in motion would be hurrying into his clothes.

That Gregory could have gone out unknown to me was a possibility, but that he could have taken his car was not. His garage was next to mine, and both were clearly visible from my sitting-room window. They were part of a line of out-houses running forward from the front of the "Maitland", to form a kind of three-sided courtyard open on to the road. Besides, whatever Gregory's car might have been in its younger days, its youth was long since history, and though he might have gone unseen it is perfectly certain that he could not have escaped unheard.

I shook my head. "Either Greg or Helen could have gone out, but they didn't take the car. Without it, I don't suppose they went far enough to put a call through another exchange. Well, it doesn't matter all that much, I expect it'll sort itself



out in time. A much more urgent question is what we're going to do with you."

I was back in the easy chair. Jennifer came and perched herself on the arm and started to ruffle my hair. "Darling, isn't that rather tied up with what we're going to do with you? I've a feeling you're looking round for some cotton wool to pack the Dresden Shepherdess."

"What I do depends upon Greg and his pals. With any luck I shall be on the heels of Charon the Second within the hour."

Jennifer slid off the arm on to my knee and put her arm round my neck. Her skirts had slipped up, and there was a good deal of stockingless leg to be seen. She said "I think we ought to get this straight. If you want me I'm coming with you, but I'm coming all the way, the rough as well as the smooth. I don't just want to share your triumphs, I want to help you to achieve them and I'll take the risk of the disasters. You don't have to marry me unless you want to; I expect I'm a fool, but I happen to love you in that kind of a way.

"I don't mean I'm going to push myself in on something you could do better alone, but sometimes you'd be only too pleased to take a man friend if he was there. Probably I'd be just as much use, and the only reason you won't take me is the sex business."

I kissed her. It seemed the only thing to do. I said: "I don't think there ever was anyone quite like you since the world began. Sometimes I can't make up my mind whether you're a complete *ingénue* or whether you've the cunning of a serpent. We haven't time to talk this out, Harding will be here any moment, but you can't ignore the sex business, you know."

"Of course not, Phillip, I wouldn't want to anyway. Only, we can treat it sensibly."

At the time I thought there was something to be said for keeping her where I could look after her. Helen, I was pretty sure, would know what our relationships were, and if they wanted to get at me it was possible that they would do it through Jennifer. Later, when I lost her and life became a useless thing to be sold as dearly as possible, I saw it as that same selfishness that had killed Daphne. I wanted her so much that I took her into peril rather than be parted from her.

I got up, took off my jacket and unlocked a drawer of the



desk. From it I took my .38 automatic in its shoulder holster and strapped it on. I put on my jacket, dropped some spare clips into the pocket, and said:

"So long as you realize that this isn't fun and games, that it's the most deadly thing outside war, you can come with me tonight. We'll decide the future on its merits. You're under orders, mind."

The door-bell rang. Jennifer stood on her toes and kissed the top of my nose. "Darling," said she, "I really will be useful to you."

It was one o'clock when Harding joined us, and the flag might fall at any moment. I gave him a quick outline of events, and he was at the telephone.

"Operator, if a call comes through from Calander cut in with it at once. Now give me Whitehall 1212. . . . Scotland Yard? Detective-Inspector Harding here. Is Chief Superintendent Reid there? . . . Very well, I'll speak to him."

Morton came in with some biscuits and three mugs of tea. He stooped to light the gas-fire, and we realized that in the tension we had not noticed it was growing chill.

Harding was talking again. "Operation Calander. Plan B. . . . Yes, sir, I should have all stations standing by. . . . Could be any minute, sir, I should move some of the radio patrol cars into position. . . . I'll come through with the number and description the moment I have it. . . . Exchange, I want this line to Scotland Yard held, when I want it I shall need it quick. . . . Yes, all night, if necessary."

He hung up and started to drink his tea. He seemed quite phlegmatic about the whole business. For a moment I experienced a sense of awe at the mighty forces which I had unleashed. It was as though I had thrown a snowball, and started an avalanche. In a dingy little room over an obscure tobacconist's shop I had touched the switch which was already setting men and machines in motion over much of Britain. McKinnon and the Assistant Commissioner were resolved that this time Charon should not slip through the net. I could see the flying keys of the teleprinters and hear the jarring of a thousand telephones. Men would be tumbling from their beds and the dark shapes of patrol cars moving out into the night. Every police-station in the country was standing by for orders.



I sat down on the desk by the telephone. "Of course, this isn't the real thing, yet. This is the car that brings the information in. It's well to keep tabs on it, it may lead us somewhere, but the next is the one we want, the one that takes it out."

"You never know, sir." Harding started to munch a biscuit in his stolid way. "Your theory's all right, but in this game you never know when a theory'll come unstuck. Best be prepared for anything."

"It could be that nothing'll move tonight. So far as I can see Gregory hasn't got a message out to Charon. Perhaps he's holding it till tomorrow."

"Not very likely, is it." Harding helped himself to another biscuit. He was making quite a meal of the things. "Gregory tries to kill Miss Ware. By tomorrow, if he'd succeeded, you'd hardly be able to move in the village without running into a policeman. Whatever he's doing will be finished tonight, and he doesn't mean to use the place again for some little time. It's either that or he's panicked."

I looked at my watch. It was a quarter past one. The waiting was the worst part of the whole business. Harding said:

"Will you be spending the night here, sir?"

"Me? No, I'm joining in the chase."

"It's not really necessary."

"I don't care whether it's necessary or not, that's the way I'm going to play it. I'm backing a hunch that Charon wasn't wise to me until he reached the Welshpool road, and the route was genuine that far. You've a car at the far end of the Shrewsbury by-pass, haven't you? I want a couple of seats on it. Miss Ware's coming with me."

That really shook him. He said, "I'm afraid we couldn't allow that."

"Who's asking you to allow anything? I'm telling you what's going to happen. Have I any authority or haven't I?"

"My orders were to place myself at your disposal, sir, and give you all the facilities you required. But this is a matter of routine. It's most irregular."

"The whole damn thing's irregular," I said. "Now are you going to get on to Shrewsbury and tell them to expect us, or do I have to pull the Colonel out of bed? I've had him out once tonight and he was in no end of a huff. If I get him out again



you'll need to buy yourself a new pair of boots. You'll want them when you're back on a beat."

He looked at me a bit sourly, but he went to the telephone and did what was necessary. When he had finished he said:

"For goodness' sake behave yourself, sir. If anything unorthodox happens I *shall* be back on a beat."

I grinned at him. "Don't worry, I'm the most law-abiding creature on earth."

"Are you, now? I seem to remember folks go trying to smash up goods trains when you're around."

"Well, what of it? You know why that was—driving under the influence. Why don't you read your paper? Now if you coppers would snoop around the pubs a bit more and catch these law breakers drinking after hours things like that wouldn't happen."

He started to laugh. "It's all right, sir, it was the best thing that could happen to him, but for the lord's sake don't do anything in front of witnesses."

Morton came in with some more tea and we sat and smoked in silence. It was half past one. I began to have visions of Peter lying under a hedge with a bullet through his brain. Jennifer shivered slightly. I said:

"Are you cold, darling?"

"No. It's just excitement. It's a bit tense, isn't it?"

Harding looked at me severely. "You shouldn't be taking her, you know."

"She won't let me go without her."

The telephone started to ring, and we all jumped. I grabbed the receiver. It was Peter. I said:

"Are you all right?"

"No, they've shaved my head and painted B.F. on my bald pate. Of course I'm all right. A bit jumpy, aren't you?"

"Thank heaven for that. Well, let's have it, there's no time to waste."

"You were partly right. The car came at five past one, a dark blue Buick, EUX 8987. He went straight up to the 'Maitland', and Greg must have been waiting for him because he opened the door before the car stopped. I didn't get a close-up of the driver, he was tall and thin, over six foot, in a dark raincoat and trilby. He went straight into the pub and was there about a quarter of an hour. At twenty past he came



out, and Greg and Helen with him. Daddy Long Legs got into Greg's old bone-shaker and drove off on the Ditton Strange road. Greg and Helen took the Buick and headed for Wenlock. As soon as they were on the way I ran home as fast as I could go. It took about five minutes to get the old besom out of her bed, but I'll lay a five-pound note she's still glued to the receiver. That's all I have to report."

"Thanks, Peter," I said. "You can go back to bed, I don't think any more will happen tonight. Excuse me, but I have to move fast." I handed the receiver to Harding. "Dark blue Buick EUX 8987 heading for Wenlock. Gregory and his wife in it. Looks as if he's the new Charon. The messenger was six-foot plus, thin, dark raincoat and trilby. Took the Ditton Strange road in Gregory's car, an ancient Ford, UJB 6239. Jennifer, darling, you and I have got to run." I picked up both suitcases and went down the stairs two at a time.

It was twenty-five to two when I swung the car into the High Street. Gregory had left Calander a quarter of an hour ago, and it was a question whether I was in front of him or not. At the Bourton junction two policemen were talking to a foxy-faced man in a cloth cap, and as we approached one of them took him by the arm and led him away.

"There goes Gregory's look-out," I said. "I expect they've picked him up on a 'loitering with intent' charge."

I stopped the car by the policeman and showed my card. "Has EUX 8987 gone through yet?"

"No, sir."

"He'll be here any moment. Keep out of sight and report as soon as you see him. You'll be getting orders shortly."

I let in the clutch. Jennifer had been looking through the back window. She said:

"Foxy nearly had a fit when he saw your number. He made a dive for it, but the bobby grabbed him by the collar and lugged him off."

We swept up to the top of Wenlock Edge, and down the steep slope of Harley Hill on the other side. Jennifer was sitting upright in her seat, her hands clasped around her knees, lips parted and eyes alive. Neither of us spoke for we were busy with our thoughts. I could not rid myself of the haunting phantasy that all this had happened before. Someone else who was young and lovely, gay despite adversity, had drifted into



the orbit of my life. Daphne, in the bitter disillusion of a broken marriage; Jennifer, free from a grasping, inhuman parent only to become the prey of louts like Gerald and his obscene sire. Each time the stable earth was rocked by alien forces, then the universal cataclysm of war and now the more confined miasma of murder and intrigue into which I had been drawn. Then we had built a little heaven for ourselves, and the great juggernaut had reached out a hand and crushed it. And now? That there should be again a sense of lawlessness troubled me. Why must this happen only when normal security had been swept away, so that we were tossed around by forces outside our control?

I glanced at her, from the corner of my eye. Silhouetted in the darkness I could see her profile, and she looked so young, vital and eagerly alive. Whatever happened, no harm must come to her. For me it didn't matter, I had tasted most of the fruits of life, but she had scarcely begun to live. Was this the ultimate test of that elusive thing called love—that one ceased to matter, that one's only happiness existed in the happiness of someone else? I thought of her when she had said "... only I happen to love you in that kind of a way." It had twisted something inside me, and in the same moment lifted me to an exultation I had never known. Then I understood that the same thing was in each of us, and we had found a harmony that is rare indeed. With understanding was the knowledge that another lout, with another bomb, could shatter this rare and precious thing for ever.

Jennifer turned her head. "What is it, Phillip? There's something worrying you."

"It's nothing," I said. "Just ghosts."

"I'll lay them for you."

"Not that kind, you've laid all of those. These are some I have to settle for myself."

"Tell me about them."

"I'm terrified," I said, "for you. There's too much violence and instability. That's how it was before."

I felt her fingers, cool on my free hand. "My darling, I'm no less terrified for you and for myself as well. I was lost, in a frightful jungle, and you found me. There's still an unreality about it all."

We drove on through the night. Cound and Cross Houses



slid behind us, and I turned my mind to the work in hand. The roads were almost free from traffic, and it was going to be the devil's job tailing Gregory without rousing his suspicions. That he could be sure he had not been followed as far as Shrewsbury would help, but from the by-pass onwards I did not see how the task could be accomplished. It was as we came on to the by-pass that I caught a glimpse of a uniform against the hedge, and I trod hard on my brakes. Putting my head out of the window I called:

"Keep out of sight. I can see you."

He detached himself from the hedge, a uniformed constable with a walkie-talkie outfit, and came across the road.

"Now then, what's the matter with you?"

I flashed my card at him, and he drew himself up.

"Beg pardon, sir."

"EUX 8987. You've had the number?"

"Yes, sir."

"He's probably within ten minutes of me. I could see your buttons. If you're seen it may ruin everything."

We drove on, the length of the by-pass, and put the car in the parking-ground of a hotel. I found the police cars, two of them, lying back without lights on the Shrewsbury road. We introduced ourselves and got into the rear seat of the front car. There was a sergeant driving and a constable in charge of the radio, both in plain clothes. I started to give them a résumé of events. After a bit the constable said:

"He's turned on to the by-pass, at the Wenlock road."

We stopped talking, and the tension began to mount. The constable said:

"Over the Hereford road, still holding the by-pass."

I looked at my watch. It was five past two.

The constable said: "Longden Road. . . . Port Hill, still keeping straight. . . . Copthorne Road."

That was the last cross-roads. I looked to the left and could see the glow of headlights against the sky. The sound of an engine became audible, and a car slid out from the end of the by-pass, too far distant to read the number. It went round the island and took the left fork for Welshpool. We began to move forward, on dipped headlights. The constable was reporting to control.

We were lying back a quarter of a mile behind him, and



the glow of his headlights was clearly visible. With the late hour and absence of traffic we could afford a wider gap than I had been compelled to keep the night I followed Charon. Gregory was not hurrying, our speedometer was just short of fifty and we were holding our distance. The constable was reporting progress every minute or so. The sergeant said:

"Where's Mason?"

The constable spoke into the radio. "Just through Bicton, sir."

"Tell him to close up to four hundred yards."

We went on for several miles, and once or twice on a straight length I caught a glimpse of Mason's dipped headlamps. Then the distance between Gregory and ourselves began to diminish.

"He's checking up," said the sergeant. "Tell Mason I'm going by. Tell him to get no nearer than's necessary to make sure he doesn't leave the road."

He switched up his headlamps. Gregory had dropped to about thirty, and we were closing on him fast. I could read his number and see Helen peering out of the back window. As we went by I pulled Jennifer to me and kissed her. I felt our faces would be mixed up too much for Gregory to recognize us, and a police car with a necking party in the back would be the last thing anyone would expect to see. The sergeant caught on, and put the car into a sway as we went by.

"Revellers going home from the ball. That was a nice act you put on. You looked as though you meant it."

"You bet we did," I said. "If you hadn't got your eye glued to the driving-mirror we'd do it again."

We had put on speed and Gregory's lights had faded from view. After a while the constable said:

"He's back to fifty again."

"Well, tell Mason not to get closer than he must, I don't want him to have to pass. Now we're past the Llanymynech junction I'm pretty sure we're going through Welshpool. From there it's probably either the Newtown or Llanfair Caereinion road. I'll pick him up at the Welshpool cross-roads. Tell Mason."

For a time we drove in silence with the speedometer high in the seventies. The only comment came from the sergeant when he said:



"I hope those damn crossing gates are open. I don't want to sit for five minutes with him on my tail."

Fortunately the crossing gates at Buttington were open and we went through and joined the Oswestry road. At the cross roads in the centre of Welshpool we turned left and backed into a side street. The sergeant said:

"Will you go to the corner, sir, and give us the word when he comes over."

I was barely at the corner when the lights of a car swept across. I called out, "Straight on for Newtown."

The constable shook his head. "No, sir, that's an intruder, cut in from the Oswestry road. Our friend's just over the crossing. Hell, would you believe that! Mason's trapped at the crossing gates."

The sergeant swore. "Tell him to get them open unless the train's right on top of them." I could hear them talking in the car.

"There's no sign of the train."

"Then what's he doing?"

"Yelling at the crossing-keeper. It's O.K., sir, they're opening the gates."

I called out: "There he goes. Right for Llanfair."

The car moved forward and I jumped into the back. Gregory was round a bend in the street. He was probably fairly confident, for I doubt if he'd seen a car since we overtook him.

"Damn and blast that crossing," said the sergeant. "I want Mason in front of me. They've seen this car once and I daren't overtake again. Tell him to get a move on and get up in front."

Gregory was putting on speed. We covered the nine miles from Welshpool to Llanfair Caereinion in twelve minutes, and went through on the Dolgelley road. The sergeant was fretting at the wheel.

"Where the hell is Mason?"

"About half a mile behind."

"What's the matter with the fellow? Can't he drive?"

The unfortunate Mason had my sympathy. I thought he'd done pretty well to close the gap at all, this wasn't Brooklands. We kept on going, with our tyres screaming on the bends. I could see the glow of Mason's lights, then he was coming up behind us, a quarter of a mile away. At any moment Gregory



might slow down, giving us the choice of doing the same or going by and being recognized as the car which had overtaken him the other side of Welshpool. If Mason could get past and let us drop back he could overtake safely as a fresh car. We were too far behind Gregory for him to realize there were two cars, but too near not to run up on him if he braked hard. I could see the other police car coming up on us, not two hundred yards away, and I said, "O.K., Sergeant, he's closing in." Our own car slackened speed a trifle, and Mason went by like a thunderbolt. We let him go for a quarter of a mile, and then held our distance.

It was not long after that that the thing happened. I never knew Mason, but he paid the price we should have paid had he not driven quite so well. We came into half a mile of straight, and for a moment all three cars were visible at once, then Gregory was out of sight around a bend. Mason hadn't a chance. A heavy, laden lorry, without lights, lurched out of a concealed junction and stopped right across the road. I heard the tyres screaming, but he must have been doing eighty and the crash was such as would awake the countryside. When we got there it was plain that nothing could live among the wreckage.

There was a sound of distant footsteps running across the fields. The two policemen were over the fence with their torches flashing, but to my mind they had little hope. The fugitive had too big a start in the darkness, and the odds were that he knew the country. I had a different idea, and I pulled myself up on to the cab of the lorry. I was barely there when I found Jennifer beside me.

We stood together, watching the pool of Gregory's lights. He was a mile away, and had eased his speed. I said:

"I've an idea he'll turn shortly, and I want to know which way he goes."

We watched the lights growing fainter in the distance, but they were still visible when they swung off the main road to the right, before they finally vanished in the surrounding trees.

*BOOK II*

GLAN-Y-COED





## CHAPTER I

GLAN-Y-COED is one of the most lovely places on earth, but I doubt that I shall ever visit it again. In its associations, mingled with some of the most exquisite moments I have known, there is too much of agony and despair. As we came upon it that morning, with the first cold paleness of the dawn seeping into the eastern sky, it was as though we had crossed the frontier of knowledge into an unknown world. Only the tumbling water broke the silence of the dead; above us, dimly apparent in the receding night, the shape of tombstones clustered round the tower of the little church. Beyond, far distant in the west, the purple bulk of Aran Mawdddy melted into the blackness of the sky. Ahead and to the north, so near that it seemed to throw a shadow of foreboding on our path, the lesser mass of Bryn Moedre stretched its dome-shaped summit towards the clouds.

When we thrust our way into the lane of rhododendrons which leads from Glan-y-Coed to the outer world the two policemen, who had been talking of mundane things, fell silent. So narrow is the lane that the giant flowers seemed almost to brush the windows of the car, and the shrubs, grown great with age, towered high above us to the darkened sky. The beam of the headlamps cut a tunnel walled with multi-coloured flowers, and the lane itself twisted and turned with a whimsical abandon until it straightened out before the grey-walled bridge which is the threshold of Glan-y-Coed.

After our companions had abandoned their fruitless chase it had taken some time to call up the local police and hand over the smash to them. When the routine measurements had been taken we found the lorry could be moved, and having driven it back into the side road we squeezed past the wreckage of the car. I found what I supposed to be the road where Gregory turned, and four twisting miles brought us to the mouth of the rhododendron lane. Thus it was that we first came to Glan-y-Coed.

By the churchyard I asked the driver to stop, and Jennifer



and I got out of the car and walked back to the bridge. Two mountain streams, their white-flecked waters tumbling over the rocks, joined in confluence to swirl beneath us as a little rivulet. It was not unlike a miniature of Watersmeet, and that semblance of the Devon countryside stirred up in me again the dormant fears. We stood in silence for a time, till Jennifer said:

"More ghosts, my darling?"

She sensed my mood as no-one I had ever known.

"The same old ghoul."

I felt her body, warm against me.

"I'll lay that one for you, too. I want to take all the happiness in the whole world and give it to you."

My heart was too full for words. I put my arm around her and sensed a tremor running through her.

"It is rather eerie." Her voice was no more than a whisper.

"Beautiful, but sinister. Perhaps we do it an injustice, we've stepped out of violence into calm and the hour could hardly be more unnatural. I've seen sudden death a hundred times, but how you stood up to that ghastly crash is something I shall never understand."

"My knees," she said, "are shaking and my mouth is dry. But I wouldn't be much use to you if I cracked at the first bit of unpleasantness, would I?"

"I wish you'd let me keep you out of this."

"Phillip, if I had to do something that involved all kinds of danger, and you had to sit in a safe place wondering day by day if I were still alive, wouldn't it be far worse than facing the dangers with me? That's what you're asking me to do."

I didn't say anything. There was nothing to be said.

"You have to do it, haven't you?"

"I have," I said, "a most impelling yet quite unwarrantable conviction that there's something here which only I can do. I was born in one war and fought through another. I saw my own happiness shattered and the lives of thousands broken. Today, the peace of the world is balanced on a razor edge. Some people think that only the threat of the atomic bomb prevents a new surge of aggression from the east. That may be wrong, but to me it sounds more reasonable than the high falluting theories of the neo-intellectuals. The police states of the world have a preponderance of orthodox weapons, and though we've



started to rearm it will be some years before we reach equality. Take Denning's work alone, the work Carr's carrying on. If that should prove an adequate defence against the bomb and fall into the hands of Moscow, power goes to the people with the men and 'planes and tanks. If, then, the east want war, the time to strike is the moment the bomb is neutralized, before we catch up in the arms race or develop some other weapon giving us supremacy.

"When the times comes, if ever it does come, there'll be no warning and no excuse. Hitler prattled about liebensraum and encirclement, but Moscow will have no use for such old-fashioned tactics. One day at dawn the men and machines will surge towards the west, and the radio stations will blaze out the news that the hour has struck and the armies of liberation are on their way to uplift the workers from the chains of capitalism. In every country in the world the communist movement will rise from underground, and the masses will set to work forging new shackles to chain themselves to the most tyrannical despots history has known.

"Tonight they've won the trick, but not the game and rubber. We lost Gregory, but if I'm right his destination isn't far from here. There's a move on hand of such importance that it's worth closing the Calander channel of communication, and they went to some trouble to ensure not only that Gregory should get through, but that he should not be followed. That lorry was waiting in case it should be needed, and having shaken off pursuit they wouldn't, I believe, do it so far from the destination that there was a chance of the car's being picked up again. I argued that if that were so Gregory would leave the road soon after the smash, and so he did. The thing they didn't reckon on was two cars in pursuit. There may not be another police post between here and Machynlleth on the one hand or Dinas Mawddy on the other. If that were so, all we should have known is that Gregory turned off somewhere on this long stretch of road.

"Maybe it's a conceit to suppose that I can achieve something where all the trained forces at McKinnon's command would fail. There isn't any reason for it, it's just one of those things that gets in your bones. But let's put it at its lowest value and suppose that I get out and this thing, whatever it is, goes through. And let's suppose that it's something that would



turn the scales between peace and war. If that happened I should never be able to forget that but for me the world might have gone another way."

"Twelve hours ago," said Jennifer, "I was dodging Gerald and milking those dreadful cows of his. I never thought I'd have to help anyone make a decision the peace of the world might hinge on. And it might, we can't get away from that. Of course there isn't any choice, we've got to see it through. Only, let's see it through together, Phillip. I'll lie low if ever I'm likely to be in the way, but I don't want just to be a fair-weather friend to you. After all, if I get out and things go wrong wouldn't I think, just the same as you, that if I'd been there to help you we might have pulled it off? There's nothing more we can do tonight, is there?"

"No," I said. "I wanted to see the road Gregory took. When we got here the atmosphere took hold of me and I wanted to steep myself in it. We'll get out before the village comes to life, but we're coming back. You and I'll come here on holiday."

We went back to the car. The sergeant said;

"Nothing to hang around here for, is there?"

I said there wasn't, and we drove on until we found a gateway in which to turn.

"Tell you the truth," said the sergeant, "I shan't be sorry to get out of here. There's something about this place that gets up my back."

"Fair gives you the willies," said the constable.

At the Shrewsbury by-pass we picked up the Jaguar and drove back to Wenlock. It was growing light, and the first of the early risers were on the country roads. Harding was still at Morton's, sitting beside the telephone and looking as badly in need of a shave as I was myself. While Jennifer had first turn with the bathroom I gave him an account of the night's happenings from my end, but he had already heard most of it in the official report. As soon as Jennifer returned I went and got rid of my beard, but Harding seemed quite happy to sit around in his bristles. Mrs. Morton gave us breakfast, and we were ready for it. Over the meal I told Harding my theory. He listened to it in silence, and when I had finished he said:

"It's a nice little theory, sir; but it won't work. Gregory was seen again after you lost him."



"Where did he go?"

"Seen, and lost again. A constable spotted him coming out on the A494 about midway between Bala and Corwen, and turning right for Corwen. We had a car at both towns, but before we could get on to him he was off the road again. Either he doubled back left on the A5 at a place called Druid, or he turned off right on a side road and made for the mountainous country around the Berwyns."

I thought about it. It seemed all wrong. I said:

"If Gregory was heading for Corwen why did Charon go beetling off on the Welshpool road? We know Gregory went that way because he had a trap laid, but Charon didn't, or he'd have used it. Why didn't he take the right fork for Oswestry at the end of the by-pass?"

"Well, sir, I think the answer to that is he suspected you before he left the by-pass. He took the Welshpool road to give you a false lead, hoping to shake you off and cut across country to his proper route. At the Pentre-waen crossing he was heading for the Welshpool-Oswestry road."

"He did not," I said stubbornly. "I never got within two cars of him on the by-pass, and at the Pentre-waen crossing he didn't know where the hell he was. He was as lost as I." All the same, I knew that Harding might be right.

"Ah, well, maybe he was just being extra cautious." But, by the look of him, I could see he thought I'd made a ham-handed job of following Charon.

I tried another line. "What time did Gregory come out on the A whatever-it-was road?"

Harding looked at his notebook. "Three minutes to four."

I tried to work it out. Harding could see what I was doing, and he said:

"We've been over all that, sir. The smash was at 2.58. He had fifty-nine minutes to cover at least thirty miles of difficult, hilly country with narrow twisting lanes most of the way. You think he called at his destination, made his report and drove on. Well, if he drove like a lunatic he couldn't have had more than two or three minutes to make his report. It's possible, but it's most unlikely."

I had another idea. "Perhaps he dropped Helen to make the report and drove straight on."



Harding shook his head. "She was there when the constable saw the car. He saw it from the near side and got a good look at her. Even though the light was still poor there's no doubt it was Mrs. Gregory."

The evidence was against me, but I still wasn't satisfied. "All the same," I said, "I think I'll go and spend a few days at Glan-y-Coed. I'd like to have a look around the country."

Harding was all for it. "I think that's a good idea, sir. We may be barking up the wrong tree, and in this kind of thing it's best to leave no stone unturned."

I don't know which irritated me the more, his gruesome mixture of metaphors or what he was obviously thinking. I suspected that he'd had enough of working with amateurs, and nothing would suit him better than to get me off on some wild-goose chase where I couldn't get in his way. I contented myself with saying:

"Who knows? If the dog digs deep enough we may get to the root of the matter." He looked puzzled, and I left him to work it out for himself.

We had no difficulty in collecting the rest of our belongings. The police were already in possession at the "Maitland", and Gregory's property was being systematically searched. They told me that so far they had discovered nothing either interesting or incriminating. Even at Beck Farm there was peace. If Gerald or Sir Gilbert were there they took care to keep out of sight, and we were met by Lady Maitland, wringing her hands and oozing platitudes. We stacked the luggage in the boot of the car and got on the road again as quickly as we could.

At Shrewsbury the shops were open, and we stopped to make a few purchases. I bought a couple of walking sticks, light oilskins, a ruck-sack and an inch-scale map of the Glan-y-Coed district. We drove slowly into Wales, for Jennifer fell asleep soon after we were clear of Shrewsbury, and I was hard put to keep my attention on the road. The "Dragon's Head" is a sizable inn for so small a village as Glan-y-Coed, but there are good trout in the lower reaches of Afon Mawr and on occasions the hotel is filled with fishermen. We had no difficulty with rooms, for the torrential rains had spoiled the fishing and



the only guests were a Dane and a hardware manufacturer from Birmingham.

We ordered lunch, which we were too tired to eat, and went to bed where we slept till evening. When I came down to the dining-room Nielson and Harvey were already there, sitting at a corner table. I paused for a word with them, after which they went back to their fishing talk, a subject of which I am sadly ignorant. I chose a table by the window and settled down to wait for Jennifer. Reaction had set in since morning, when I had seen myself as a kind of knight in shining armour slaying the dragons of treachery and war. Now I found myself in the middle of miles of Welsh mountain country, and I had not the haziest notion of what I was going to do next. I had been following a hunch, and the more I brought logic to bear on it the more ridiculous it appeared.

Gregory had been seen miles from Glan-y-Coed, and he had had no time to make any kind of report. Nor had there been an opportunity for anything to be committed to paper between the time the messenger reached Calander and Gregory left for Wales. There was the possibility that he had received a written message, but it did not seem very likely. Such a document could have been sent through the post as safely as by hand, and our whole experience of the communication channels suggested that little or nothing was committed to paper. A much more probable explanation was that suspicion had been aroused ever since Charon's ill-fated journey, and a trap away from the true route had been laid for any possible pursuer. Gregory, having shed his tail, had cut across country to his destination many miles to the north.

The more I thought about it the more I began to feel that I had been nothing but a figure of fun from the start. Probably Harding was right, and Charon had been aware of me long before he left the by-pass. The only consolation was that I had had the last laugh, but by killing him I had put the enemy on the alert at Calander. Because of this we had located Gregory only to lose him again, and McKinnon was no nearer a solution than he had been at the beginning of the year. There was some satisfaction in the fact that if anything had gone wrong Mac had himself to blame. He had talked me into something I had never wanted to do, and while I might be accomplished enough at sleuthing foreign agents through the



pages of fiction I had no qualifications whatever for doing it in real life.

Finally, Mac had asked me to do something not for my aptitude as a secret agent, but because of my ability to mingle into a certain background unobserved. Once Gregory was identified he had said that his regular agents would take over. Other things apart, it was pretty clear that anything more I might do would be without official backing, and if I were not very careful I should find myself in trouble with the authorities.

I glanced at the anglers. Nielson was giving a demonstration of what looked like his method of gaffing a salmon. Before long I should be seeing them as villainous agents of the Soviet, and Parry, the landlord, as a second Gregory. I had just about reached the depths of self-mortification when Jennifer came in.

I caught my breath. She was wearing a simple white dress with short sleeves and a vee neck. There was a single red rose on her breast, and she had about her a charm and dignity in which there was something regal. Even the anglers broke off their technicalities to stare unabashed, and she flashed them a smile as she passed. I rose and bowed her into a chair. She looked up at me, her eyes dancing.

"Why the ceremony?"

"Because there are no powdered flunkies to do it for you. You look like a princess of the royal blood. Your entry should be heralded by a fanfare of trumpets, your route lined with liveried footmen and any moment I expect a national anthem to sound out of the air itself."

"Which nation?"

"Ruritania, I should think. Utopia if they have one."

"Darling, is there any Irish blood in you? I recognize a touch of the Blarney Stone."

"Nary a drop. Pure Shropshire, with a dash of the Scots." I passed her the menu. "Can you come down to the mundane matter of food? Nectar and ambrosia are not on it. You'll have to put up with mortal fare."

She studied the card. "There isn't any choice, but I like what there is. Soup, mountain trout, rump steak and fruitsalad. Phillip, where do you suppose they get the steak?"

"Slaughter a bullock illicitly in the stable. I've seen the blood running out." The waitress came in with the soup, and I



asked if there was a wine list. Parry brought it himself. There wasn't very much, but what they had was good. I ordered a Liebfraumilch Blue Nun '43 with the trout, and a '34 Pommard for the steak.

The soup was hot, which was a good beginning. When we had finished it Jennifer said:

"What are our plans?"

"We haven't any." I told her of my misgivings: "I think I've been making a B.F. of myself. I had a nice little theory, but Harding blew it sky high. I wouldn't admit it, but he did. When we were here this morning the place had an eerie atmosphere, which was only natural the way things were. Look at it now. What is it but one of the most delightful spots for a holiday you've ever seen?"

We looked out of the windows where the lawns, rough but well cut, sloped down to the wooded banks of Afon Mawr.

"It's a Garden of Eden," said Jennifer, "but there's a serpent in it."

"Explain."

"I can't. Intuition, I expect. Take no notice of it, I'm probably squiffy with the thoughts of wine."

Parry came in with the hock, and Jennifer eyed it thoughtfully.

"Won't we get frightfully tight?"

"Probably, but what of it? Do you realize this is the first time we've dined together? If we can't get tight tonight life is a dismal business."

"Shouldn't we have a toast?"

"I can think of several. Wait a minute, I'll give you one. To all the people who are in love, wherever they may be."

"We come in that, too."

"Right in the forefront."

We clinked our glasses and drank. The waitress arrived with the fish. When the bottle of hock was half empty Jennifer said:

"About having no plans. Do you mean we're going to stay that way?"

It had been on my mind, and until I made my decision I would have no peace. I resolved to settle the issue once and for all.

"Just that," I said. "If we could do any real good it would



be another matter. Even supposing that by some miracle my theory were right and the place we want isn't far from here, what have we to go on? Only Gregory, and with the police forces of England and Wales searching for him he's not likely to show his face. I draw the line at sleuthing over Bryn Moedre with a magnifying glass. I'm a novelist, not an amateur Dick Barton. Do you mind?"

Her eyes were misty. "Do I mind? My darling, I can't tell you how I've been longing to hear you say just that. If you can leave this business with a clear conscience I ask nothing more. It would have been different if we could really have done some good."

Our hands touched across the table, and I poured out the rest of the hock.

I have tasted better steak, but by the time we got to it we were careless of details, and the burgundy was superb.

"You know," said Jennifer, after her first glass, "I'm going to be horribly squiffy. You'll probably have to put me to bed."

"What's wrong with that? You'll find I'm quite good at bed putting."

"Lots of experience?"

"Off and on. Never with the right person, though."

I drank most of the burgundy. I didn't want her to overdo it, and it was too good to waste. When we went to the lounge for coffee we were both floating a bit. We sat and talked until we were drowsy. Our night on the road was combining with the wine to lull us to sleep. At last Jennifer, stifling a yawn, said:

"Do you think we should look for our beds?"

We supported each other up the stairs. When we got to her door I took her in my arms and kissed her.

"I want," I said, "to come with you more than anything on earth, but we've all our lives before us. Shall we wait?"

"I want you to come, but I love you for saying that. Yes, let's wait."

"Good night."

"Good night."

I kissed her again. We both put everything we had into that kiss.

Parry was used to putting up picnic lunches. Most of the anglers wanted them, and lunch was never a very serious meal at the "Dragon's Head". With sandwiches and a bottle of South African hock in my ruck-sack and our oilskins rolled up on our backs, we set out along the village street towards Bryn Moedre. It was Sunday morning, and the church bells were ringing. That day ranks as one of the most light-hearted in my memory. I had taken my decision and shed my burden. The ghosts were laid, and sleeping at peace in their graves. What I could do had been done, and life was ours again for the two of us to make it what we could.

The village dwindles out with a few scattered cottages, and the road divides, left to Llanysgaden and right through the valley to Llantyfoed. The valley lies between the heights of Bryn Moedre and Cefn Ddu, while ahead a sunken lane winds its way up to the mountainside. The clouds were lifting as the sun fought a valiant battle to struggle through.

"What is it about this place," said Jennifer, "that makes it so much different from anywhere else I've ever been?"

"It's not the place. It's being in love that does it."

"Is that what it is? Of course, you've been through it before, but it's all new to me."

"It's new to me, too."

"There was Daphne."

"It would," I said, "be trite of me to say that that was different. And yet it was."

"How am I different from Daphne?"

"This isn't going to be easy. I'm supposed to be rather good with words, but you'll have me tongue-tied before you're done. Let's put it this way. Most of the time there's enough strength in me for the two of us, but just now and again there isn't any strength at all. When that happens I feel that you're sufficient to carry us both."

There was a gate at the end of the lane, and beyond it the open mountainside. The turf was springy to our feet and the sun, victorious at last, bathed the countryside in a golden light. The common land was sparsely dotted with mountain sheep, Welsh ewes and their lambs which bent a suspicious gaze upon us as we passed. We climbed steadily, chattering, after the inconsequential manner of people in love, but it was well past mid-day before we reached the summit. We found



it marked by a cairn, as is so often the case, and we added our stone to those that had gone before us. I slid the ruck-sack off my back. "We could," I said, "have done without the oilskins."

"We'll need them to sit on," said Jennifer. "It may be warm, but the ground's damp."

"I can see I'm going to be well looked after."

"We can't have you creaking with rheumatism in your old age."

"Must you," I said, "rub in the fact that I'm venerable with years?"

"You're not old. I think you've just reached years of discretion."

"Not everyone would agree with you. Mac, if he heard it, would let out a dirty guffaw, and Charles would raise a sceptical eyebrow. Let's see what's in the pack, I'm famished."

We spread the oilskins on the ground. Jennifer emptied the rucksack while I scanned the surrounding country through my glasses. Aran Mawddy lay to the west, with Cader Idris beside it and beyond. To the south I could detect some peaks which I took for the Plynlimon range, while north-east lay the dark summit of the Berwyns. When I took down my glasses the picnic lunch was spread out on my oilskin. There were sandwiches of ham, tongue, and cheese, slices of fruit cake and apples. The climb had given us tremendous appetites, and we ate the lot, drinking the wine out of tumblers. When we had finished I pulled my oilskin round beside her, and lay down with my head in her lap. She laid her hand on my forehead. My brain and body relaxed in a way that I had never known.

"This," I said, "must be the summit of all human happiness. I ask nothing more of life. Once you talked to me of peace of mind. You've given it to me."

I looked up into the grey-blue eyes. She was trembling, and her hands tightened on my head.

"I suppose," she said, "that there are words for a time like this. Only . . . I don't know what they are."

I dug into my pocket, and brought out a small packet.

"I bought you a present in Shrewsbury. Tell me if you like it."

She broke the seal and opened the box. When she took out the solitaire diamond ring I heard her give a little gasp.



"Phillip, this is the most beautiful thing I've ever had. You shouldn't. . . . It must have cost a fortune."

"Not a very big one. If I've guessed right it should fit the third finger of your left hand. You can flourish it in front of Parry. It'll show him that I have what are sometimes called honourable intentions."

"I don't care what Parry thinks." She slipped it on to her finger. "You're a good guesser, darling. It's perfect. Do you like it?"

I looked up at her hand.

"It looks much nicer there than stuck in a jeweller's window."

"I want to kiss you."

"Presently I hope you will. I shall pull you down from your lofty perch and probably devour you. After that I expect we shall fall asleep in one another's arms."

She started to stroke my forehead with the tips of her fingers. They were pleasantly cool. "Don't you think," she said, "that you're taking an awful risk in marrying me? You hardly know me, I'm just a kind of waif you found in a back-wood. I don't suppose I'm even properly grown up."

"You really are the most original person I've ever met. All right, you're not grown up. I expect you're an elf or a pixie, and I'm fond of elves and pixies. So long as I don't wake up to find you've turned into a toadstool."

"I don't think I'd like being a toadstool. They can't love, can they?"

"I don't know. I've never been a toadstool to find out."

"Do you think this is a frightfully silly conversation?"

"I think it's the only kind of conversation that matters."

Jennifer sat frowning at the ground. I began to think she was contemplating the love life of toadstools, until she said: "It's all going to be strange and wonderful. I haven't any friends or family now. You're having me without any strings, I've cut them all. I've only you."

"And you have the cheek to talk to me about risks. With your spirit of adventure you're out of place in this age of social insurance and pensions. You're Elizabethan."

"Am I? You're Cavalier."

"That makes you older than me."



"I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I am. Phillip, where shall we live?"

"Anywhere you like. Fiji, Honolulu, the Italian lakes? Or would you prefer a temple in the Himalayas?"

"I think I'd prefer England."

"Any special part?"

"I don't know it well enough."

"I have," I said, "a good idea. I get them now and then. We'll stay on in Glan-y-Coed until we're tired of it, then we'll go somewhere and get married. After that we'll want a honeymoon, so we'll take the car and drive all over England. When we see a house we like we'll buy it. I haven't got further than that yet."

"It sounds a lovely idea. Are you disgustingly rich?"

"No one can be disgustingly rich in post-war Britain. There's a fellow called His Majesty's Inspector of Taxes who takes care of that. When we've bought a house and furnished it we'll be broke and I'll have to write another book. That should be easy; since I met you inspiration buzzes out of my brain like bees out of a hive."

"Write another book as good as *Michael*."

"I'll write a better book than *Michael*. Do you like London?"

"I don't know. I've only been there once, and that was twelve years ago. I'd like to see it again. I don't think I'd like to live there, though."

"I'll take you there one day," I said, little realizing how soon it was to be. "How about the Sussex downs? A mile or two back from the sea. A nice compact house we could run with a married couple, and a terraced garden."

"I think I'd like that. Let's look at all the other places first, though. Phillip, what's that bird flying over?"

I followed her finger. "Curlew. Its mate's probably somewhere around. Have a look at it through the glasses."

She put the binoculars to her eyes. "I don't think I've ever seen one before. What a weird call they have."

"It's eerie. I'm sensitive to curlews, they affect me the same way as bagpipes."

"Don't insult the curlews."

"I'm not, I like bagpipes. They stir the primitive in me. Probably the Cavalier. A little while ago you wanted to kiss me. Do you still feel that way?"



"I always feel that way."

"Then come down here, where I can get at you."

She slid down by my side. For a long time we didn't say anything. At last Jennifer, her face tucked away somewhere on my shoulder, said:

"I feel lovely and cosy. Somehow I feel safe."

"We're both safe now. We're the wise people who know when to get out." I moved my head so that my lips brushed her cheek. "I think I'm going to sleep."

"I'm nearly off."

I had never known the world feel quite so good. I closed my eyes. When I awoke it was after four o'clock.

Jennifer was standing on top of a hummock, the wind ruffling her hair and my binoculars to her eyes.

She said, "Do we have to go back the same way we came?"

"No, there are lots of ways back. The one we came is the shortest." I got the map out of the ruck-sack, spread it on the ground and put my finger in the centre of a mass of contours. "That's where we are now. The tops of the trees you can see ahead and on your right are this strip of woodland. The Llantyfoed road's away on our right, about three miles off."

"What's this place among the woods? Vyford?"

"It's a house belonging to a member of Parliament. I was talking to Parry about it this morning."

"Should I know him?"

"I doubt it, but you probably will before long. He's an up and coming, one of the leading back-benchers. His name's Roger Paterson, and he's one of those wealthy men who've turned Socialist. I sat next to him at a dinner in London a year or so ago. He's about my age and height, wavy brown hair, vivid dark brown eyes, and I imagine the girls fall for him right and left. Quite a striking personality. He's tipped for junior ministerial rank if Labour go in at the next election, and I should think the P.M. could well use him in place of one or two of the stuffed shirts he's got at present. His politics are moderate, and he says that the left wing Socialists were born generations before their time. I had a long talk with him, and found him rather interesting. His theory's proper return for service rendered. The lazy, incompetent worker is no more worthy of the same wage as the craftsman than the man in a bow by four office who buys shiploads of goods on paper



deserves the same reward as the efficient manager of industry."

"He sounds sensible."

"He's a lot more sensible than some of the woolly witted boys they get at Westminster. I rather suspect he's quite a power in the Party already, even though his name's not widely known."

"Let's," said Jennifer, "go and look at Vyford, the name fascinates me. Then we can take the Llantyfoed road back to Glan-y-Coed."

"All right, if you can make it. It's all of ten miles."

"Of course I can make it. I've slept all afternoon and it's downhill. We'll be back at the 'Dragon's Head' in time for dinner."

I packed the few odds and ends in the ruck-sack and we set off towards the north-west. It took us nearly an hour to reach the fringe of woodland, and we found it enclosed by a wire fence. A notice board greeted us with the words:

## PRIVATE PROPERTY

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## TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED

"I don't mind being prosecuted a bit," said Jennifer, and started to climb the fence. There was nothing for me to do but go after her. Inside the wood it was cool, and there was a sense of remoteness even more acute than on the mountain top. Jennifer led the way with her head held high, as though she were defying all would-be prosecutors. Despite some undergrowth the going was not difficult, but the crackle of dead twigs beneath our feet fell upon the silence like the noise of gunfire. It was less than a couple of hundred yards through the wood, and on the further side it was bounded by another fence similar to the one we had surmounted. As she came to it Jennifer stopped in her tracks, and stood like something carved in stone.

The great house of Vyford lay below us, in an oval basin of green turf which might have been scooped out of the hills by a giant spoon. At its southern end the lower slopes of Bryn Moedre and Cefn Ddu stretched over to join hands, and here the Llantyfoed road, rearing up out of the valley, swung



right to vanish in the trees which skirted the far wall of the basin. Screened on three sides by woodland Vyford lay open to the south-east, gazing up to the grim heights of Cefn Ddu. The grass within the basin was a lush and vivid green, which stood out like an oasis from the sparse vegetation of the surrounding hills.

The house itself, a massive building in grey Cambrian stone, looked as though it might stand four square about an inner courtyard. Around it ran a grey stone wall, fully ten feet in height, opening no doubt to the drive which approached its eastern side. The gate was screened from where we stood, but our height gave glimpses of the garden and their terraced lawns. On one of these I saw two figures reclining in deck chairs.

"You look," I said, "as though you'd seen a ghost."

She went on staring. "It's beautiful, Phillip. I'd hate to live there, though."

"You won't get the chance. I draw the line at furnishing that."

"When I came to Glan-y-Coed," said Jennifer, speaking like someone in a trance, "I sensed an atmosphere. Here it's twenty times more intense."

"What is this? Your serpent?"

"It might be. I don't know. Oh, this is absurd."

"You'll probably find it's a grass snake or a slow-worm." I put up my glasses. "Here you have a portrait of an eminent politician taking a quiet week-end. Facing us, sprawled in a deck chair, is Roger Paterson with a cigarette between his fingers. His back to us, similarly asprawl, is a bald-headed old gentleman smoking a cigar. He's probably a Cabinet Minister, or a trade union official. Between them there's a small table with the remains of afternoon tea. The benevolent old boy's feeling the evening air. He's getting up."

"How do you know he's benevolent?"

"All bald men look benevolent from the back."

Paterson's companion moved round beside the table and turned into profile. He was not as old as I had supposed. Paterson, too, rose to his feet and they stood in conversation. My attention was drawn to the face of the older man, whose head was now half averted. Something was knocking at the door of memory, an insistence that if I could see him face to



face I should know the man. The politician started to move towards the house, and his companion, dropping the stub of his cigar on the grass, turned and ground it out beneath his heel. He was now facing me, but his head was bent. Then he straightened up, and for a full half second gazed straight at me before he too turned and moved towards the house.

In that half second a face leaped clear and vivid into my field of vision. I saw the massive forehead, the brooding, sombre eyes, the pendulous lower lip, and I knew that the fingers of destiny were too strong for me. The figure shambled out of sight behind the trees, but the face remained photographed upon my mind.

It was Satan.

## CHAPTER II

RAIN had fallen on the Edgware Road, and the tarmac was gleaming black. We had been up at five and on our way as soon as we had breakfasted. For the first two hours the roads were free from traffic, but though I drove fast it was half past ten when we passed Marble Arch and turned into Park Lane. McKinnon was expecting us, for I had 'phoned him the night before and though I had said little enough because of the risk of a leakage on the lines, it had been sufficient to warn him that something big had transpired.

Turning left off Whitehall I parked the car outside the grim-looking building that housed McKinnon's department. A uniformed commissionaire took us up two floors in a lift, and along a corridor to a smallish office where a young lady was seated behind a desk. I say young, but her age was difficult to estimate. It might have been anything from twenty-four to thirty-six. She had bright, golden hair set in an expensive-looking coiffeur, and cornflower-blue eyes. Her make-up had been lavishly but expertly applied. I began to wonder whether we'd come to the right address.

She rose as we came in. She looked like a crooner out of someone's dance band, but when she spoke she made me think of a private secretary to some big business executive. There was a cool capability about her voice that belied her appearance.



She said: "Colonel McKinnon's expecting you. Please go straight in."

She opened a door on the further side of the room, and stood aside for us to pass. As the door closed behind us we were alone with McKinnon. The room was larger than the outer office and there was an austere quality about it, but the chairs looked comfortable. The desk was there with the telephones—three of them—reposing on top of it, and the maps with the wee pins were there too. Occupying most of the one long wall was a map of Europe dotted with little flags of various colours, and there was a larger scale map of the British Isles on an end wall. In a corner stood a battery of four steel filing cabinets; I had noticed a dozen in the secretary's office. McKinnon was on his feet before the door had closed.

"You've had a long journey," he said. "I don't doubt you'd like some coffee." Without waiting for a reply he spoke into one of the telephones to someone called Diane. He greeted Jennifer, and their eyes met and held for a couple of seconds. There is nothing about McKinnon's eyes which seems to bore into your brain. They are grey, good-humoured, almost casual, but they get there just the same. I have never met a better judge of men and women. He said:

"Phillip's a lucky man, but you've taken something on. There's many double your age who'd think about it twice."

"There's many double her age," I said, "who wouldn't get the chance. How's sleuthing, Mac?"

We sat down. His face looked drawn from lack of sleep.

"Unless you've got something, sleuthing's where you joined it in February. Tell me your story. All of it. Don't leave anything out."

I started to tell him about Glan-y-Coed and Vyford. Half-way through Diane came in with the coffee and biscuits. She was the blonde bombshell from the outer office. When she had gone I said:

"Nice company you keep. Is that why it's called the secret service?"

"You've not changed, I see. You could never keep to the point when a fancy pair of legs went by. That young lady knows more of the secret intrigues of Europe than any other woman in the country, and there's no one I'd rather trust. You'd think there was nothing in her head but boys and the



latest dance tune. You'd not think she was a doctor of science, and her hobbies were mathematics and chess. You played a useful game yourself in Cairo. Take her on some day, but don't put too much money on your chances."

"Well, well," I said, "it just shows how careful you have to be. I'd hate to go out for a nice night of whoopee and come home with a headful of the binomial theorem. Let's get back to honest-to-goodness crooks."

He listened to the rest of my story in silence. He was playing with a carved ivory paper knife, a souvenir by the look of it of some dark deeds in Malaya. As the story progressed his frown deepened, and when we came to Vyford he began to look really worried. After I had finished he sat for a long time toying with the knife. At last he laid it down and looked at me.

"How long did you see Satan's face?"

"A full half second. Long enough."

"And how far was he away?"

I thought back. "Maybe a quarter of a mile."

He opened a drawer in the desk and took out some sections of map. They were six-inch ordnance survey maps of the Glan-y-Coed district. He selected the sheet which showed Vyford and laid it in front of me.

"Can you show me where you were standing, and where you saw the two men?"

I studied the map, and put in a couple of pencil crosses to mark the points. McKinnon took a scale rule and laid it across the marks I had made.

"Your quarter of a mile's near enough six hundred yards. What glasses had you?"

"Good ones," I said. "Zeiss, twelve by fifty. I had them off a Hun who didn't need them any more."

For a moment his mouth relaxed in a flicker of a smile. "Looting, too. Is there any crime in the calendar you haven't committed? One of these days they'll put you in the can." He lay back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. "Gregory was seen on the Bala to Corwen road, heading north. He'd had no time to make more than a ghost of a report. Do you know the answer to that one?"

"Yes," I said stubbornly. "I didn't at first, but I do now. For a start you want to get your facts right. No one saw Greg on the Corwen road. They saw Helen and the car and assumed



that he was there. After the smash one of them looks back and sees the lights of our car coming on to the straight. Probably Helen, because Greg was driving. Maybe it doesn't add up to anything at first, but after they're turned right on the Glan-y-Coed road it dawns on her that there could have been two cars on their tail. She tells Greg, and they get worried, so they hatch up a plot. At Vyford there's probably a gang standing by in case of emergency. Greg gets out, someone else gets in and drives like hell until he's seen. Then he turns off along the first by-road and runs the car out of sight into a wood. They lie low till dark, ring up Vyford and a car picks them up. I don't know the details, I wasn't there."

He looked at me in what I took for undiluted admiration, until he said: "Aye, you were right. Writing's your job. What an imagination! There never was anything like it since Hans Andersen. Still, it could be, I suppose. Aye, it could be."

"This is the way it is. We're inclined to the opinion that the Dolgelley road was a red herring from the start. You've put forward a theory to show why it shouldn't be. It's a bit far-fetched, but it could be right. Or it could even be that Gregory put in a two-minute report and drove on. I've reasons for thinking that wasn't so, but we'll not rule it out. I'll grant you it's possible he went to earth in the Glan-y-Coed district."

"A possibility's one thing, a fact's another. You've produced some evidence to support your theory. Two months ago you took from someone we know to have been an enemy agent a photograph of a man. Yesterday you saw a man's face. It was six hundred yards away, you glimpsed it for half a second through glasses, and you swear it's the face on the photograph. You have to admit that it's pretty thin."

"Now this thing's big enough and grim enough to justify a chance, but out of all the men in Britain you have to ask me to take it on Paterson. I know him well, and he's about as level-headed a politician as you'll find. He's right wing Socialist, and if he's hand in glove with Moscow he's masked it well. But, worse than that, the man has influence at the top. I'm under constant pressure from the Cabinet to show some progress, and it's little enough I've been able to produce. If I crown months of apparent inactivity by jumping on one of the Government's pets and the charge can't be made to stick, the sooner Whitehall opens and swallows me the better."



"I'll stake my oath," I said, "that the man I saw was Satan. You can say what you like about the distance, but the light was good and the face isn't one it's easy to mistake. This is one of those times you want to throw your Scottish caution to the winds."

"I'm not turning it down, I'm trying to argue it out. I've had a wee taste of your enthusiasm before, and you're liable to get carried away by it. If we raid now, and Satan's there, we have him cold. Even if he's away, and he could have gone by now, it's not possible that the place could have been used as a headquarters without some evidence being left. Or we could go canny and bide awhile. I could have Vyford watched to see if they'd show their hand. We'd not run so much risk of making fools of ourselves, but it might be that Satan would slip between our fingers. Then there's another reason why I want to move fast, if I've grounds enough to move at all.

"I'm worried, Phillip. That man Carr is very difficult. When you killed Charon you broke up the machine and for two months there's been peace. Now it's running again, and they'll lose no more time than's necessary before they act. It may not be Carr they're after, but he's my biggest worry. Whatever happens, they mustn't get him. I'm as anxious as you to move, but I could wish we'd something more definite to go on. Even if you're right and Satan was there, it still doesn't prove anything. Have you thought that it may be Paterson they're after, for diplomatic reasons, and Satan's job was to sound him or spy out the land?"

"Well, that's all right. You don't have to jump into it with both feet. You can say you're after a wanted man, and can he tell you anything about his visitor?"

"Aye, we'd not go at it like a bull in a china shop. We're not exactly nitwits in the department. Suppose he says: 'Oh yes, I had a visit from a Mr. Satanovitch. I don't know him, but he had an introduction from the Bulgarian Embassy. He wanted to discuss the Parcels for Displaced Persons League. I gave him tea, a diplomatic answer and sent him on his way.' What do you say then? 'We'd still like to look round, in case he crawled back up a drain and he's lurking in the bathroom?' "

"All right, Mac," I said. "I can see it isn't easy. What's the answer to the sum?"



"I want to talk to the A.C. I'll let you know what we've decided as soon as I can."

We were taken to a waiting-room. On the way out McKinnon said: "Ask the A.C. if he'll step around, Diane. Tell him I may have something on the Gregory case."

I had a look at the date on one of the *Tatlers*, but we felt disinclined for historical research and we sat down together on the settee. We both felt that Vyford was the right line. The suggestion that Paterson was being talked into treason left me cold. Moscow, I said, was not so short of material that they'd waste their time wooing back-bench M.P.s. The idea that I'd mistaken someone else for Satan I never even gave a second thought. We were not kept waiting long, for McKinnon was back inside twenty minutes.

"We're taking a chance," he said. "There'll be two squad cars—Scotland Yard and Special Branch men—on the road with a search warrant any minute."

I asked him when there'd be any news.

"Come and see me about nine. I should know one way or the other by then. If you know how, you can pray that I'll not be looking the biggest fool in England by the morning."

Most of the day we spent shopping. Jennifer was short of pretty nearly everything. She said she wasn't, but I decided she was and we organized a bit of a spree. We had lunch at Frascati's, and tea time found us at Knightsbridge prowling around Harrods. There we had great fun on an imaginary furnishing expedition. By the time we'd finished we had constructed the house on the downs, brick by brick, and furnished it several times over down to the kitchen sink. From there we drifted by easy stages back to Piccadilly Circus, where we dined at Oddenino's.

This, I thought, was the best of all ways for the business to end. There could be no frayed edges, no regrets that if I'd stuck to the trail I might, by some miracle, have averted calamity. In later years I could tell myself that I'd been in at the beginning and I'd been in at the end. During the day I tried to argue it out. That Satan had been at Vyford the evening before there was just no shadow of doubt. By now he



might have gone, but if so it was not my job to find him again, nor was he the centre of the plot we were seeking to destroy. He might be even bigger game, perhaps the evil genius around whom the whole international intrigue centred; he might be no more than some ill-visaged messenger, but to us the man that mattered was Paterson. Smash Paterson and Vyford, and we would hew off the British tentacle from the international octopus.

To take Satan, too, would be a double triumph, but even were he gone there must be evidence which would prove the case against Paterson. Probably Gregory and Helen would be on the premises, to say nothing of the documents which must exist in a headquarters of that nature. We had it over during lunch, and on the whole we agreed that this was the neatest possible end. To some extent Jennifer had fallen under the influence of Mac's canniness, and she kept "iffing" and "butting". It was understandable in a way, for I was the only person who had actually seen Satan and with the whole case hingeing on his identity only I could know, with utter certainty, that I had made no mistake.

"But, darling," she said, "you told us yourself that you only saw his face for half a second."

"Half a second is one hell of a long time to see a face like that. This comes of having coffee with a cautious Scot."

After dinner we went to look at the Palace and sauntered back through St. James's Park. The sky was glowing with a pinkish hue, and in it there was some promise that the long weeks of rain and misery might be at an end. We wandered slowly along the side of the lake, Jennifer in a primrose jumper and brown skirt, and I in an old, disreputable but thoroughly comfortable Harris tweed jacket and flannel trousers. The hour was ripe for a pipe, and I began absent-mindedly to stuff tobacco into the bowl.

"One true thing you told me," said Jennifer, as though all the rest had been flagrant lies. "You said we'd never know where we'd sleep at night. Where is it tonight? Or don't we sleep at all?"

"There's always my Knightsbridge flat, if you don't mind being compromised."

"Why should I? If Glan-y-Coed didn't do it, why should Knightsbridge?"



"Knightsbridge is English respectability, Glan-y-Coed was fairyland. Apart from that, there's no spare room. Of course I could always sleep on the settee."

"You'll sleep on no settee for me. But why not Glan-y-Coed? Fairyland by moonlight."

"I like the thought of it. As soon as the good news comes through we'll turn our backs on mortality and our faces to the west. Is there a moon?"

"I don't know. There wasn't one this morning."

"There was nothing but cloud this morning."

"Don't you think," said Jennifer, "that you ought to see Mac and get the news?"

My watch was coming up to nine. I put a match to my pipe.

"He's not far away. I've been putting it off. I've got a touch of your jitters."

"If you don't mind, Phillip, I don't think I'll come. I'd like to sit and watch the water, and have the news from you."

I left her on a seat by the lake. Diane had gone home and my guide took me straight to McKinnon's room. As soon as I saw his face I knew that something had gone very wrong indeed.

"Mac," I said, "has someone bungled it?"

"Bungled? Man, there was never anything to bungle. Only one eminent Member of His Majesty's Government, and he's hopping mad. He's been through to the Home Secretary, and the Home Secretary's been on to me. I told him I'd good grounds to act and the search must go on. I'll not say I blame the man, with talk of a General Election in the Autumn. Aye, there'll be the father and mother of all castigations in the morning."

"You don't mean . . . ?"

"Oh, I'll not be asked for my resignation, if that's what you mean. Only a reprimand such as I've not had since I was a second lieutenant, and the kind of sidelong looks from my colleagues that suggest I'm getting past it. If I make another howler like this it might be a different matter."

"But what about Satan? How did Paterson explain that away?"

"He didn't deny he'd had a visitor." McKinnon glanced at some notes on a pad. "Name of Drew, some kind of trade union



laddie from Cardiff. The Cardiff police checked at once. Drew was away from home, but there was a photo of him on his mantelpiece. There was some resemblance to the one you took from Charon—the Cardiff police had a copy when the general call went out.”

“Some resemblance,” I said, scornfully. “The man I saw was either Satan or his twin brother. If Paterson had said he’d never seen the man before and hoped he’d never see him again I’d be inclined to believe him. He had to admit to a visitor, so he produced Drew on the spur of the moment. I expect Drew’s one of his confidential agents, he knew he was away from home and he’d be able to contact him and get his story straight before the police could do any questioning. They’re making a monkey of you, Mac.”

“I’m making a monkey of myself by listening to that imagination of yours. We’ve not a damn thing to go on. They’re going over the place now, but if there’s nothing more turns up by morning then Vyford’s out.”

“A secret room,” I said. “That’s what it is. They’ve got the stuff hidden in a secret room. A place like that is probably honey-combed with them.”

“D’you think we’ve not thought of that. What do you think I’ve got down there, a party of kindergarten school children? If there’s a secret room they’ll find it.”

One of the telephones started to buzz. He said, “Aye,” and “Aha” into it several times, then: “Go over it thoroughly. Measure it up, every blessed inch of it. I don’t care if he fetches the Prime Minister and the Lord Chancellor.” He hung up.

“That was Vyford. Paterson’s being troublesome. I’ll do what I can, but if nothing comes of it I’ll beat a retreat as gracefully as possible and go after Harding’s trail to the north.”

I got to my feet and started to walk up and down the room. My hands and arms were tingling, as though every nerve in them was on edge. There was a pulse throbbing between my forehead and my brain. I felt as I had in the old days, when the dream was with me, and the rest of that interview I recall hazily, as through a veil.

“Damn it, Mac, Paterson’s got to be stopped. Satan was with him. I tell you I saw him.”



"Sit down, you're all nerves, like a thoroughbred racehorse, when you get like that. I've seen you that way before. Will you not admit you could have made a mistake?"

"I will not." The fellow was obsessed with the idea that I didn't know a face when I saw it. I remember standing over him and driving my right fist into my left palm. "You'll lose Carr, that's what you'll do. He'll be whipped from under your nose while you're playing some fool game of hide and seek in the north."

He crossed to a cupboard, and came back with a bottle of whisky and a couple of glasses.

"Sit down. What you need is a drink."

"Drink it yourself. I want to think." I sat down and put my face in my hands. He poured whisky into the two glasses. I picked up one, looked at it and put it down without tasting it.

"The best thing that could happen would be for someone to bump Paterson off."

"Aye. We'd be rid of one suspect, no matter how unlikely. There's more than six hundred M.P's in the House, and I don't suppose one would be missed. Of course we'd have to hang the man that did it."

His tone was half jocular, as though he thought that the best way to handle me. Suddenly he put down his glass and looked at me.

"Here, you crazy loon, are you thinking of starting one of your gangster episodes?"

I didn't say anything.

"Phillip, don't think I'm not grateful for what you've done. I talked you into this against your will, and though things have not gone quite the way we'd have liked, no man could have done more. I'll not forget the help you were when you got rid of Charon, but it's one thing to kill an unknown man who's proved to be up to his neck in treason. It's another to murder a prominent public figure because you saw him talking to someone whose face you don't like. If you do it I couldn't raise a finger to save you, and I'm not so sure I'd raise it if I could. I got you into this, and I'm getting you out before you land yourself in trouble. From now on you'll forget about Contra Espionage and all that goes with it. There's a wee card I gave you. I'd like it back."



For a moment I looked at him rebelliously, but I took out my card of authority and flicked it across the desk.

"I'm going to finish my holiday at Glan-y-Coed. That's one thing you can't interfere with."

"Can't I though." He looked at me thoughtfully. "I've a mind to have you pulled in on some charge, if only to save you from yourself."

"By God," I said, "you try it." I was really angry now. "You couldn't hold me for more than a few days on a faked charge. I'd write the best seller of the year—'*I was a Secret Agent*, by The Author of *Michael in Khaki*'. Nothing your security johnnies could hush up, just an amusing little tale of how Contra Espionage tied themselves in knots and called in the Distinguished Amateur, and of the mess they got themselves into. I'd offer the serial rights to *The News of the People*. England would remember you when Nelson was forgotten."

I saw him wilt. "You mad, clever, ruthless devil. You'd do it, too, and get away with it. No-one else could. I'd not like to have you for an enemy. Can you not see that it's you I'm trying to help?"

"No," I said, "I'm damned if I can. I say I'm going on a holiday and you talk about locking me up. If that's your idea of help I'll buy you a dictionary. And if you want to play nursemaid go and get yourself a job in a crèche."

I got up and walked to the door. With my hand on the knob I half turned. Under the light he looked tired and dejected, with the cares of a nation on his shoulders, but I was too angry to feel sorry for him. I said:

"I'm going back to Glan-y-Coed for a holiday. I'm taking my fiancée with me and we mean to enjoy ourselves. If I find one of your bloodhounds snuffling along behind us he'll get hurt." I went out, and down to the street.

In Whitehall the traffic was at a low ebb and the pavements strangely deserted. I turned right, and with head bent walked slowly towards Trafalgar Square. I was not feeling very pleased with myself, for I had behaved badly and I was half inclined to go back and apologize to McKinnon. However, the fires of resentment were still smouldering in me, and anyway it was a subordinate issue. The thing that was clear before my eyes was that Paterson had to be stopped, that he had to be stopped quickly and that there was no time for finesse. Often



the man in the street bemoaned the fact that he was a pawn in the hands of Governments, that he must stand by powerless to avert the torrent of events which swept him towards war, plucking him from his background and tossing him as a piece of flotsam upon the waters. I envied him his impotence.

I might be no more than a pawn, but my place on the board was such that I could step forward and give check. The next move was my annihilation, but the sacrifice of that pawn so disposed the pieces that checkmate must swiftly follow. I tried to run away from it, to argue that I was a writer and not a Government agent, that by taking back my card McKinnon had relieved me of any moral obligation to interfere, but the argument would not stand up to honesty. I was as good a killer as a writer, and if there was a killing to be done there were few better qualified than I to do it. Without conceit, I had to acknowledge that I had been endowed with qualities above the average, and perhaps from those to whom much was given, much would be expected. What would the master have said if the man with the ten talents had gone out and buried them in the garden?

I tried to devise a way of moving the pawn without sacrificing it, but there was none. That I could kill Paterson, and with good fortune Satan too, and evade detection was too improbable to be worth consideration. There remained the alternative of being hanged as a common felon or dying by my own hand, and I have always had a great distaste for hanging. The real bitterness lay in the fact that this choice must be forced upon me now when life had begun to matter as it had never mattered before. Three months ago I would not have greatly cared.

I came to the seat by the lake with the first shades of twilight falling about me. Jennifer was not there, but I glimpsed her primrose jumper on the bridge where she was watching the ducks on the further side towards the Palace. I was content for the moment to be alone with my thoughts, and I sat down, my eyes upon the blackening waters.

Life was like a road. Much of it was broad, uninteresting tarmac, stretching straight ahead for miles, the dull, routine tasks without bends to mask the unexpected or to break the monotony. Sometimes the gradient was steep and one toiled against it, to be rewarded by the panorama lying below the



heights and the easy, downward slope on the further side. There were the by-roads on either hand through which at choice one might wander, dallying in the shade of trees or by the banks of streams, making a half circle to rejoin the road one mile on for three that had been travelled. Time was lost but not wasted, for one came back to the highway refreshed in mind and body.

But, now and then, there were those other junctions, the fork where the road divided and each prong stretched out in a diverging sector, never to re-unite. These were the irrevocable decisions of life, where one made one's choice and there was no turning back. By the lake-side I faced the fork in the road where on the one hand it swept down from the summit, curving away through the trees and streams and farmland, losing itself among the verdure wherein there was beauty and comradeship and peace of mind. On the other the tarmac, straight, black and austere, reared up above me till it cut the sky-line, while to and fro the traffic thundered by. There was death on the road and beyond the horizon the great unknown. In the gathering twilight I wrestled with my problem. St. James's Park was my Gethsemane.

She came back silently, as lightly as though a butterfly had settled on the seat at my side. I never heard her, only I glimpsed out of the corner of my eye a shadow as she passed. I turned my head, and heard her say:

"You needn't tell me, darling. It's all gone wrong. I suppose there was nothing there."

Her voice was low and husky, and unbelievably good to hear. I had taken my decision, and with it all the strength had gone out of me. There was nothing heroic about it. Many times, in the war, men had gone out to certain death. Twice it had been my ill-fortune to have to send them there. This time I had to send myself. I felt as though a fire inside me had gone out, and the first chill of death was already creeping over me. Her arm slid around my shoulder, and she drew me to her.

"Beloved, you've done enough. It's my turn now. This is one of those times we spoke about. You don't have to think, or try or make an effort any more."

I could hear her heart beating against her breast, and we lay like fifty other couples in the park. The darkness dropped about us, and slowly the warmth of her body crept into my



chill bones. Later, I don't know how much later, we were walking hand in hand with the lights of London around us. The things we talked of I shall never know. Once, I recall, she mentioned the house on the downs, but I shied away from it like a frightened horse. I couldn't bear to face that vision of happiness which had died in the moment of its birth.

Suddenly I stopped, and looked around me.

"Where are we going?"

"Wherever you like."

I blinked at the scene. It looked familiar. We must have come up Constitution Hill and past Hyde Park Corner.

"This is Knightsbridge."

"Where your flat is?"

"It's not far from here."

"Then why not there?"

"The car," I said, "I put it in the Charing Cross Garage. Our bags are in the car."

"Never mind the bags, they're not important. My dear, you're all in. You've got to get some rest."

We stood and faced each other in the light of a street lamp. All around us people were streaming by, hundreds of them, thousands of them. They didn't exist. I don't know what angels look like, but I think perhaps I looked at one that night. Her face, under the little brown hat, looked like the face of a child, except that her eyes were like something I had never seen before. They seemed to caress me, to exclude me from all that was hurtful in the world. I don't know what I have ever done to be loved like that.

There was an unreality about it all. Perhaps it was a dream, and I would awake in my bed at the "Dragon's Head". Or perhaps I was still in the Knightsbridge flat, and Calander and Jennifer and Glan-y-Goed were figments of the night. Perhaps I wasn't going to die. I thought of that, and after the first surge of relief I knew I didn't want it that way. I would pledge tomorrow for the reality of yesterday. Yet, in my heart, I knew that it was not a dream. It was just that life had run out of control and was racing at express speed towards its end. We were in a train, without a driver, and it was screaming down a slope, gathering momentum as it went. At the bottom of the slope there was a bridge, only the bridge wasn't there any more. Only three days ago I had first held Jennifer in



my arms. In a few more days I should be dead. We were trying to compress a lifetime into a single week.

I put out a hand, in a vague kind of way as though to touch her, and I said:

"You are real, aren't you? You're not some ethereal divinity that will vanish with a dream? I want to kiss you."

She took my hand and came close. "Presently you shall. All you want. Yes, darling, I'm real enough. Shall we go home?"

She had called it home, that service flat in Knightsbridge, and that is what she made it. It was comfortable enough, with my books and pipes and the big radiogram that I sometimes played while I wrote, but after three months I would have expected an un-lived-in atmosphere. I found myself in my own arm-chair with the glow of a single standard lamp and the radiator warming up beside me. She had taken off my shoes, and put on a pair of my old carpet slippers, which somehow she had found. She asked if there was any coffee to be had.

"The telephone," I said. "The hall porter will see to it."

We drank our coffee, with Jennifer on the hearth curled up against my knees. Later, when we were in the bedroom and I was sitting in my shirt-sleeves on the bed, I made some effort to regain touch with reality. I am no moralist and there have been more women in my life than it is good to recall, but Jennifer was like some sacred charge that had been given into my keeping. I said:

"Life's rather running away with us tonight. Are you sure you want it this way?"

She had taken off her jumper and skirt. She came and sat beside me on the bed, with her feet tucked up under her, and took my face between her hands and kissed me.

"I used to think you were a bit of a wolf. Why the sudden solicitude? Did you have these scruples over Daphne?"

"Daphne was married."

"That's a funny sort of excuse."

I suppose it was. I hadn't thought of it that way.

"In a way," said Jennifer, "it's rather nice being your Dresden shepherdess, only it's a bit cold being on the shelf all the time. You took me with you, and I came with you all the way. There aren't any reservations. I came because I wanted to be with you and because you needed me, and tonight you



need me more than ever before. You haven't told me what's happened, but I think I understand. We're back in the thick of things again. Instead of being the end it's just the beginning, and the worst is still to come. Anything can happen, as it could during the war. I expect conventions are all right for people within the law, but we're outside it and we'll make our own. Besides, I love you in a crazy kind of way, and it's so big that nothing else counts for much by the side of it."

At least she hadn't divined my ultimate intention. I'd been afraid that psychic flair of hers might discover it. For a moment I was tempted to seize our happiness in both hands and run away from everything, from Glan-y-Coed with its beauty masking a crooked heart, from Vyford where the evil creature lay, and even the green lushness of its turf was an unwholesome thing, as though the devil himself had spawned upon it and given it evil life. I wavered in my resolution but the decision, taken with so much agony of mind, could not be set aside. I said no more. We still had our life before us, but for me there were now not many days to run.

### CHAPTER III

I 'PHONED McKinnon after breakfast, but the report was as I feared. There was nothing at Vyford except one irate Member of Parliament. I said:

"I'm sorry, Mac, about last night. I got a bit worked up. Now I've had a chance to think it over it's perfectly obvious you were right. I was looking for spies, and I wished Satan on to Drew's silly face. I hope they don't tear off all your strips."

He told me to forget it, and asked after my plans.

"Well, our stuff's at Glan-y-Coed and we'll have to go back for it. I expect we'll spend a few days there, it's a pleasant little spot. After that I'm getting back to fiction, where crooks behave the way they should and don't masquerade with the wrong face. Believe me, this is the last time you'll talk me into one of your cloak-and-dagger acts." I hoped I'd said enough to persuade him I was not worth watching. The last thing I wanted was Special Branch men under my feet at Glan-y-Coed.



Jennifer seemed depressed and at first I thought she was having misgivings over the way we'd spent the night, but when I hinted at it she nearly took my head off. She fell back on the age-old excuse of a headache and I pretended to accept it. It was five days before I discovered the real reason.

Before we left I took a second automatic from a drawer in my desk, a diminutive .22 affair which would fit neatly enough into a lady's handbag. I had no intention of letting Jennifer get where she would have a chance of using it, but just in case things went wrong I felt happier that she had some means of defending herself. The promise of the previous evening had been no illusion, and as the early morning cloud cleared away the sun climbed into a vault of unbroken blue. It was, indeed, the beginning of the first of those two brief bursts of summer with which that dismal year favoured us. We had come to London from the north, by the A5 through St. Albans, but we left to the west by the Windsor road, driving slowly and deviating from the route as the fancy took us.

It was not only that I wanted, in seeing these things for the last time, to share them with the girl who should have become my wife. There was that in it and there were other things as well. I wanted to see again England in all her glory, to convince myself that the work to which I had set my hand was worth the sacrifice. We went by Runnymede, where the first great charter of liberty had been forced upon a tyrant, and for the principles of which men had given their lives throughout the centuries. At Windsor the grey battlements of the castle cut like a monument against the sky, a silent emblem of the things forgotten generations had found great. In it was the story of continuity, a life was no more than a single stone, and a generation of men a wall out of whose multiplicity an edifice was built.

Through Maidenhead we came to Marlow, and here by the river the world was blue and green and white, as a few small, fleecy clouds floated beyond the background of the trees. A heat haze simmered from the road, but on the surface of the water it was cool where the assorted craft moved or lay in indolence. A rowing-boat struggled against the current, father red and perspiring in shirt-sleeves and gaudy braces digging for crabs with an unskilled oar, mother steering an erratic



course and a small boy hanging perilously out of the bows, hoping to catch I know not what. A punt lay in the shadow of an alder, a brown head and a golden one side by side, an hour stolen out of time and a lifetime of dreams. Then an eight, in rhythmic majesty, cut its way through the water, gliding in easy self-assurance past the lesser craft.

A way of life had been built by an island people. With all its faults it satisfied them as a foundation on which to go on building. There were the sordid patches to erase, but what had already taken a thousand years to build could not be perfected by the stroke of a dictator's pen. Today it is unfashionable to speak of patriotism or empire. Honour is melodrama, and Kipling a jingo poet. This period stuff has died and more period stuff is being spun, soon to become the newer and so still quainter jargon of yesterday. We write our poetry with asterisks and staccato words which are not sentences and so make no sense. We paint pictures of the fourth dimension and the mind of man which, if they bear no title, far posterity may immortalize as the organs of a cow. We use our cleverness to mask our feelings, or else to dissect them for the public to inspect. But, underneath it all, the heart of man has not greatly changed. When the third Charles is on the throne of England our young intellectuals will have thought up other ways of being different, and this Georgian era will become the Victorian era of today.

Above it all, unseen or else forgotten, hung the threat of the barbarian. Like the blond beast out of my dream, driven by greed or envy or mere malicious hatred, it could destroy but not create. Fortune had decreed that I should have the chance to strike a mortal blow at the enemy. Once it might have been deemed an honour. In a society whose idols were the Wise Guy and the Smart Alec, where admiration was bestowed upon the man who worked short time or stole his workmate's tools and called it "winning", I suspected that I was the mug. Then I thought of Magna Carta and the concentration camp, of Habeas Corpus and the "people's" court, where the stream of victims drugged to a witless insensibility pleaded guilty like sheep on their way to the butcher.

I thought of a man with vivid eyes secure in his Welsh retreat, a man whose self-appointed task it was to bleed a nation into accepting the alien yoke. To carry such as he to



power the dull, stupid multitude bent their backs, bemused by their silly slogans about the international solidarity of labour and the brotherhood of man. There had been despots throughout history, from Attila to Hitler, but they were the little tyrants beside whom this great surge of oppression might engulf the world. In it was all that was worst out of the east, all that was cold and inhuman and it might, having usurped the science of the west, sit astride the world for a thousand years. On such a wave as this the Prince of Darkness might indeed establish his kingdom upon earth.

And then I thought of the house on the downs, which now was not for me. I thought of it as we drove across the southern slopes of the Chilterns, and the green fields of England lay below us. Perhaps when time had dimmed the vividness of Glan-y-Coed, Jennifer, and someone else who loved her as I did, might make their peace together there. When I condensed it to the personal all my fear and hesitation slipped away. I would give this to Jennifer, and to all the millions who had and loved a Jennifer, their house on the downs wherever it might be, their chance to go on building the way they wanted to build. This should be my last book, the book that was better than *Michael*, and I would write it not on paper but on the fabric of time itself.

By midday we came to Oxford, where we had lunch at the "Mitre". Over the meal we discussed our plans. I wanted, I said, to watch Vyford for Satan's return, or to glimpse him in the grounds. To do this we needed help, and I had in mind asking the Scotts to spend a week with us at Glan-y-Coed. We could establish a good observation post where the house lay open to Cefn Ddu, for there were rocks and gulleys in the mountainside where we might lie and watch unseen. We had come to the coffee when Jennifer said:

"And if we see Satan? What then?"

"I call in Mac."

"Would he listen to you?"

"I'll make the blighter listen." I wondered what Mac would say if I went back with another story of having seen Satan. When the most full-blooded Anglo-Saxon oaths would not measure up to the occasion he generally resorted to the Gaelic. What was to happen when I saw Satan was something which no-one but I must know. There were other things I



wanted to do, besides watch for him. I wanted to list the members of the household, to study their habits and routine and to seek out the points at which Vyford was vulnerable to access. This time there were not going to be any loopholes.

We finished our coffee and took to the road again, to Chipping Norton and across the Cotswolds to Broadway Hill. Here we left the car and lay for a while in the sun, looking across the Vale of Evesham from which, in this late spring, the white carpet of blossom time had not long fallen. When the afternoon was half spent we went on, a little faster now, through Worcester and Bridgnorth on to the by-road that led to Ditton Strange. It was early evening when we came to Calander.

Peter and Peggy were having tea when we walked in on them. Peter was in his shirt-sleeves with his hair tousled, and he said:

"For heaven's sake! Look who's here. I thought you were chasing Ku Klux Klan."

"We caught and tarred and feathered it. We've been to London since. How's Calander?"

"Upside down. D'you leave most places as though a typhoon'd been through them? There's been no beer since Friday."

"How's Gerald?"

"Sulky. I've only met him once, and he made a noise like a bad-tempered lurcher. Did you give him that mouth?"

"No, he was born with it. I just remodelled it."

"I like the style. Next time just tidy up his nose and trim his ears a bit. I suppose you want some tea."

"That's the idea. We're famished. Haven't eaten for four hours."

Peggy said, "You'll get ulcers, going as long as that," and went off to the kitchen. Jennifer went after her, and I sat down and lit a cigarette.

I expected a bit of difficulty with Peter. If you mention going away to a farmer his first reaction is that the place will disappear if he leaves it for a week. However, I had the advantage of knowing something about the job. His sowing was done, and with the late spring on his cold land there would be no grass fit to cut for silage inside a week. There was nothing that his one man could not attend to, with Robertson



to oversee for him. In the end I talked him round, for at heart they were both dying to come in with us. By seven we were on the road again, leaving Peggy to pack and Peter to make arrangements for the farm. They promised to follow us within the hour, and we fixed a rendezvous at the "Dragon's Head" for ten.

I drove fast now, for I was beginning to grow anxious. McKinnon's men had been at Vyford until some time during the morning, and though I felt that nothing of interest would happen until Paterson was sure the police had withdrawn, I did not want the house to remain unwatched much longer. We went through Glan-y-Coed on to the Llantyfoed road, which twists its way up a steady incline to the basin where Vyford lies. A mile short of Vyford we found a narrow lane leading into the trees on the right of the road, and into this I drove the car till it was screened by a bend from passers-by. Keeping the trees between the house and us we started up the slopes of Cefn Ddu, coming to a gulley which ran across the face of the mountain. Here we turned left, following the gulley, which at times widened out until it was no more than a fold in the mountain, for a full three-quarters of a mile. At this point the gulley narrowed and deepened, where it ran amongst the rocks. On the right was a cliff face, rising sheer to a height of forty feet, while to the left on the Vyford side the ground sloped up to a ridge of turf. All around us were boulders and outcrops of rock.

"If," I said, "my judgment's right we should be level with Vyford. And if we are, this place was made for us."

I climbed cautiously until I could see over the ridge of turf. Below me was the open road and beyond, a thousand yards away, the house of Vyford lay bare to the eye. Lying flat on my chest I focussed my glasses on the house. I could see over the top of the wall, and looked down into part of the lawns which lay beyond. Jennifer was lying beside me, her hand on my arm quivering with excitement. I passed the glasses to her and looked around. Our observation post was well screened. Behind us the precipice cut off vision from above, and from the right and left we were hidden by boulders and hummocks in the ground. Only a man standing within a few feet of the cliff edge or following the gulley itself could have detected us.



We stayed an hour, and watched the shadows lengthening around the house, but there was little to be seen. Once Paterson came into view, along the drive which curved round the southern side of the house. He paused on the lawn to light a cigarette, and stood for a while smoking and gazing at a bed of tulips, deep in thought. Then he went off again, and was lost to sight behind the shrubs. We returned to the "Dragon's Head" to find Peter and Peggy there before us. They were waiting in the lounge, and Peter's ancient jeep stood in front of the hotel.

Parry, accommodating as ever, produced some coffee and sandwiches, after which the girls went to bed and Peter and I took the car back to Vyford. It was now dark, and when I had given him a general idea of the geography and fixed a meeting place he drove back to the hotel to snatch a few hours sleep before relieving me at three. Under the cover of night I went down into the park and patrolled under the walls which enclosed the grounds. Except through the gates I could now see nothing of the house. The walls were ten feet high and for the most part unscaleable. The only possible point of access was where they joined the gates. It was an uneventful vigil, for no-one came or went, and so far as I could see the last of the lights went out at midnight.

For three days we lazed around in the sunshine, Peter insisted on taking the second half of the night watch, because he said he was more used to the early morning than I, and for that I was grateful beyond measure. Though I had taken my decision and settled into a state of fatalistic calm, the one time when I might have broken down was during the small hours of the morning. As it was, I could spend that time of low vitality at peace with Jennifer. During the day we watched in pairs, Peter and Peggy, Jennifer and I, and we could make up our broken nights by dozing in the sun while the girls looked through the glasses. Sometimes the pair off duty would drive the jeep up on to Bryn Moedre, taking a picnic meal.

I had had some misgivings about the way Parry might regard our nocturnal comings and goings, but for a country inn-keeper he was the least inquisitive man I ever met. He already knew me for a writer, and I introduced Peter as a naturalist friend who was helping me with parts of a book which included a study of wild life by night. On the Wednesday



I made my Will, and got Nielson and Harvey to witness it for fear of casting a gloom on our own party. It was a simple document leaving everything of which I died possessed, absolutely, to Jennifer Ware. I also made a trip to Llanfair Caereinion where I bought a twenty-foot rope, and that night I concealed it in a hollow oak in the park, against such times as it might be required.

During those three days I gained some knowledge of the Vyford household. Paterson left on Wednesday morning, in a Daimler car driven by a uniformed chauffeur, and he did not return until the Thursday night. This was in part if not entirely to attend to his parliamentary duties, for I read a report of his speech in the Thursday paper. It was a scathing attack on some of his own Party irresponsibles for their suggestion that we might trust Russia and negotiate a working agreement with her, and the blistering hypocrisy of the man disgusted me.

Of the outdoor staff there were two crafty-looking customers who were supposed to represent gardeners, but from the way they handled their tools I thought they would be more at home with a cosh. There was another who might have played the part of odd-job and general handyman, though the only thing I ever saw him do was stand with his hands in his pockets and a cigarette sticking out of the corner of his mouth. I decided that if ever I sat in a school of poker with him the first thing I would ask for would be a new pack.

More convincing was the butler, whom I saw for a brief instant on two occasions. Portly, benevolent of expression, resplendent in an immaculate dicky, he looked, from the distance at any rate, like a genuine specimen of that dying race. I never saw a woman on the premises, though presumably there was indoor staff of some kind besides the butler. A few tactful enquiries of the locals did little to help, for Vyford kept itself very much to itself. There was general agreement that they were all foreigners, but in Glan-y-Coed that might merely mean that they came from the next parish. There seemed to be support for my impression that the entire household was male. Parry came out with the opinion that it was because Paterson could neither stand the sight of an ugly woman nor keep out of the bed of a pretty one.



Apart from unseen reserves, who almost certainly existed, they added up to six, including Paterson. Two or three tradesmen's vans from Llantyfoed called at the house to deliver supplies, and the supplementary shopping was done either by the chauffeur, whose name was Richards, or by Paterson himself. Every evening about eight the card-sharper character would slouch down the drive and lock the gates.

On the Friday afternoon a vehicle I had not previously seen made its appearance. This was a dark-blue van, and the driver, too, was new to me. He was a trim-looking man with a beard, dressed in a chauffeur's uniform, and there was something of a naval look about him. Probably he was on the books as an under-chauffeur. He brought the van round from the back of the house and drove through the gates towards the road. I studied it through the glasses as it came up the drive, and I did not like it. The body was completely sealed off from the driver's compartment, and here was a vehicle in which Satan could be smuggled in or out without our knowledge. However, there was nothing I could do about it, for it was a quarter of a mile away when it turned on to the road, and reluctantly I had to let it go.

On the fourth day things began to happen fast. Jennifer awoke on the Saturday morning with a splitting headache, and this time there was nothing assumed about it. We had done the midday watch the day before, and as the sun had been more than usually fierce I felt it had probably been too much for her. She was hot and flushed, and I persuaded her to spend the morning in bed. Breakfasting at half past seven I relieved Peter, who had nothing to report. I settled down with the binoculars and a grievance against life. I was worried about Jennifer, and in any case it was a dirty trick of fate to separate us now when so little time was left. Vyford was more than usually boring, and nothing happened at all until half past nine, when Slick Simon came slouching out, lighting one cigarette from the stub of another. Sticking it into the corner of his mouth after the manner of his favourite gangster film-star he pushed his hands back into his pockets and stood there giving what I took for his rendering of Al Capone. Then Paterson came round the corner of the house. It was the first time I had seen Paterson and Simon together, and though I had no idea what it was all about I would guess that Simon



had been throwing his weight about while the boss was away. Paterson did the talking, and the scourge of the underworld started to deflate visibly. He took his hands out of his pockets, threw away the cigarette, and generally smartened himself up as much as his physical composition would allow. His face, never very robust, went the colour of the cliffs of Dover. Finally, he said something which I decided was "Sure, boss," and sped off round the corner of the house as though the bull was after him.

Paterson took several turns up and down the lawn with his hands behind his back, then lit a cigarette and went and stared at the tulip-bed. As soon as I had decided that if Vyford was not going to be interesting at least it might be amusing he turned away, went back into the house and the place went to sleep again. And asleep it remained until Peter and Peggy relieved me at a quarter to one. They told me that Jennifer was quite well again, and with that load off my mind I walked back to the car.

It was just after one when I climbed into the driving-seat and switched on the radio. I was on the point of moving off when the announcer's voice came through and caused me to pause.

"There is no further news," said the measured syllables, "of Professor Gordon Carr, whose disappearance was reported in an earlier bulletin. Professor Carr was last seen when he visited a West End cinema yesterday evening. During the programme a false alarm of fire was raised, and in the confusion that followed, the professor was separated from his friends. The police are pursuing their enquiries, and a man has been arrested and will be charged with raising the alarm."

The announcer went on to talk about the dockers' strike, and I switched him off. That would give Mac something to think about, besides wondering if I was behaving myself. I thought that Harding and he must be getting a bit fed up with themselves, chasing nonexistent spies to the north. As I drove out on to the road I was wondering whether the professor's "friends" were his police shadow, when something happened which gave me other matters to occupy my mind.

A vehicle was approaching, and as it drew closer I saw that it was the blue van from Vyford. On the impulse of the moment I brought the car to a standstill in the middle of the



narrow road, and got out. I could always plead engine trouble, if necessary. The driver, the same bearded chauffeur I had seen the day before, stopped with his radiator a few yards from mine and got out too. The disguise was good, and had I not lived with him for weeks I might not have known him. I think he saw the recognition in my eyes, for his hand came out of his pocket and I dropped like a stone behind the front wing of my car. The bullet passed over my head.

"Greg," I said, "that's an ill-mannered way to greet an old friend."

I heard him chuckle. By the sound of it he was crouching behind the off-side front wing of the van. "And what would you expect? Me to come forward with my hands held out for the bracelets? So it was you all the time, was it?"

I had my automatic in my hand. "You damn fool. What do you want to get mixed up with a crowd like that for?"

The vehemence of his reply startled me. "It's you that's the damn fool. You're on the losing side. Can't you see that this old idea of democracy's about played out? How can a country that's governed by six hundred and thirty wrangling idiots stand up to one that's directed by a single leader? What chance have you, when you're squabbling about a forty-hour week, against a country where every man and woman can be ordered to work seventy? I fought six years for your ruddy democracy, and that time I was on the winning side. Now the boot's on the other foot, and I'll be on the winning side again."

"I see. The complete mercenary. No loyalties."

"Loyalty to myself. It's the only sane loyalty."

"You've overlooked the intangibles. It's one thing fighting for something that's worth keeping, quite another fighting as long as you must to keep clear of the firing-squad."

"The dockers are fighting like hell for you at the moment, aren't they?"

There was no short answer to that. I decided we were unlikely to agree on politics or morality, and we'd better get down to brass tacks.

"Just at the moment, my lad, you're very much on the losing side. All you'll get for your cleverness is a bullet. Maybe I should warn you that I happen to be one of the best pistol shots in England. If you'll come out now, with your hands up, I'll see you get a fair trial."



"And dance my last act at the end of a rope? Thanks. I'll take my chance on a bullet."

It was all very well talking. If I rushed his position, no matter how good I was or how bad he, I should present a sitting target. I started to edge backwards towards the rear of the car. I had on my rubber-soled shoes and bent low, walking backwards, I moved away, keeping the Jaguar between the van and myself. I heard him say something, and hoped my silence would not lead him to suspect what I was doing. Ten yards. Twenty. The safety-catch of my gun was off and my finger on the hair-trigger. Thirty yards. My eyes were glued to the car for a sign of movement at the side of it. Forty yards, and still no movement. Fifty.

You have to be pretty good to make sure of hitting a man at fifty yards with a snap shot. I'd no idea how good Gregory was, but the chance had to be taken. Still bent low, presenting the minimum target, I stepped to the left, out of cover from the car. He was crouching close to the front wing. We fired simultaneously, and he dragged his shot for the bullet hummed by on my left. Then he staggered half upright, clawed at the side of the car and rolled on to his side. The revolver slipped from his fingers.

There was no more than a thread of life when I got to him. My bullet had taken him in the chest, and he was bleeding freely. His eyelids were flickering, and he muttered as I knelt beside him:

"Nice shooting . . . pity wasn't bows . . . might been different." His eyes drooped shut and I thought he had gone, but after a little while he looked up at me again. He had gone quite steady, and there was about his face the good-humoured smile with which he played his part at Calander. He said, and his voice was firm:

"You're a good chap, Phillip. Keep out of this. It's too big for you." Then he died. A queer mixture of good and bad, John Gregory. So, perhaps, are we all.

I stood looking down at him, and standing there I took off my hat. I have killed many men, but never one with more regret. I felt that if he needed an advocate to plead his case wherever he had gone, I would have liked to do it for him.

There was, however, no time for the luxury of sentiment. I



went into the middle of the road and scanned the surrounding country. There was no sign of life, but I had to be sure. My Zeiss glasses were with Peter on the observation post, but his pair of six by thirty were in the car. I got them out, and swept the hedgerow where the road wound down to Glan-y-Coed. Then I swore. Trudging along, his blue cap just bobbing now and then above the hedge-top, pushing his bicycle by the look of it, was David Llewellyn. Of all times he had to pick midday on the hottest day of the year to come panting up the Llantyfoed road. David was the local policeman at Glan-y-Coed, and still is for all I know.

I moved fast. There was a raincoat on the front seat of the van, and wrapping it around Gregory to keep the blood off my clothes, I carried him to a point where the hedge was low on the other side of the road and dropped him over. There was no time to go across and attempt to conceal the body, but I picked up his gun in my handkerchief and dropped it beside him. I backed the car to the roadside, picked up the chauffeur's cap which was lying on the ground, threw it into the van and drove up the lane till I was out of sight from the road. Then I ran back to the car and moved it forward so that it was standing over the pool of blood. I was opening the bonnet when David appeared round the last bend. Now that the road had levelled off he had mounted his bicycle and was pedalling stolidly along. I slipped the cap off the distributor, and started digging about inside it with a screwdriver.

David swung off his bicycle and came lumbering to a standstill at my side. Fifteen stone of good-natured flesh, he took his cap off his bald pate and mopped his perspiring brow. His blue eyes regarded me with a child-like innocence, but I had an idea that David was not so simple as he looked.

"Terrible hot it is," he said, "for pushing a bicycle up these hills."

I squinted sideways at him. "You're better off than I. I can't even push this useless lump of metal."

He came and stood by my side, peering over my shoulder. "Trouble?"

"Points," I said laconically. I went on prodding.

"Would it not be easier to take out the rotor?"

That shook me. I had not supposed that David would know the rotor from the spare wheel. I took it out.



"Did you," he asked, "hear shooting going on a short while back?"

"Couple of shots from the coppice. Poachers, I expect." The coppice was above us, on the slopes of Cefn Ddu.

"Well now indeed," said David, "but it would not be a shotgun. Too sharp a crack it was. What would you say, sir?"

"Hanged if I know. I wasn't taking much notice. Rifle, probably."

"But it would not be a twenty-two. Too loud it was for a twenty-two. And what would a man be shooting with a rifle heavier than a twenty-two?"

Blast the man. If he went on probing much deeper I'd recommend him to Harding for promotion to the C.I.D. "Lord knows. Probably used whatever he could pinch. Or some of that high-velocity two-two ammo. It makes a hell of a crack. If you don't get after him he'll be in Welshpool before you work it out."

David took off his cap again and scratched his bald head. "Yes, indeed. Now here is another thing that is very strange. You say that the shooting was in the coppice, and I would have said it came from the Tal-Coed wood."

Tal-Coed was a wood lying directly below us, and the natural way for anyone to get to it was over the bit of hedge where I had dumped Gregory. I began to get worried.

"Nonsense, man. I wasn't taking enough notice to say what kind of gun was used, but I can tell you the shots came from above."

"Certain I am that they came from Tal-Coed."

I straightened up from the car and grinned at him. "David, you lazy old bullock, you're trying to kid yourself it's Tal-Coed because it's easier to run downhill than up."

He avoided my eye sheepishly. "Indeed I am not. I would rather run uphill to some purpose than downhill to no purpose at all." He laid his bicycle down on the unfenced side of the road and started to cross.

I turned my back on him. I gave him just about time to get across the road and then I said:

"My God, there they go." I clapped the binoculars to my eyes.

David was back at my side. "What is it, man?"

"Your poachers. They've just broken cover from the



coppice. A bareheaded man in a jersey and one in a cloth cap carrying a gun. They dived behind a ridge. I think they're crawling along at the back of it towards the gully. Yes, I can just see the one johnny's cap. Here, take a look for yourself."

I passed him the glasses, and turned them right out of focus as I did so. He started to struggle with the instrument.

"I am not very good with the glasses. Terrible blurred it is."

"I expect," I said unkindly, "that the sweat's running into the eye-piece."

He put them down, polished at the eye-piece with his handkerchief and tried again. I caught him by the shoulder.

"Look, you can't miss them now. I can see them without the glasses. They're on their feet, running like hares for the gully. The man in the jersey's in front. Over there." I gave the glasses a shove. "Got them?"

"Yes indeed. I glimpsed them as they vanished into the gully."

I heaved an inward sigh. I had talked him into seeing something that was not there at all. As he handed back the glasses there was a sound of wheels and I turned my head. The Vyford Daimler was coming up from the Llantyfoed side. Paterson was driving, and the chauffeur was sitting by him.

## CHAPTER IV

ONE could not deny that the man had charm. He had the looks of a film-star, but it was from something more fundamental that his personality sprang. There was a kind of suppressed vitality, evincing itself only in the brilliant eyes and an athletic grace of movement. He had stopped the car and came to meet us on foot, his eyes on David Llewellyn.

"Taffy, you old devil! Persecuting another motorist?"

David said: "Indeed no, Mr. Paterson. Poachers it is. On Cefn Ddu."

Then Paterson recognized me.

"Hello, don't I know you? Mansell, isn't it? We sat together at the Publishers' Dinner. Someone told me you were in Shropshire, writing a book."



"I was," I said, "until my landlord did a bunk with the petty cash. Then I had to move on."

"How very thoughtless of him. And what brought you to this sleepy little backwater?"

"I knew it of old. An uncle used to come here fishing when I was a boy."

It was all very well, this verbal fencing. Paterson knew all about my presence at Calander. My chance appearance here was stretching coincidence too far. He might not be certain that I was on to him, but at least he had cause enough to have me watched. Probably he had heard the shots and come to investigate. Richards, the chauffeur, had been prowling up and down and had now stopped to peer into my open bonnet. It was no more than eighty yards to the lane, and if he went that far on foot he could not miss the tracks which our continual traffic had worn. David was hopping about on one foot.

"The poachers, man. Too late it is now to catch them on the bicycle."

That gave me an idea. "David, if I wasn't stuck here with a useless vehicle I'd drive you up to the Penn-y-Cader road. It's odds on we'd either intercept them or get a fresh line on their movements." I paused, and allowed my roving eye to fall on the politician. "Paterson, why not? The *deus* complete with his *machina*. You make the laws, now's your chance to help keep them. Couldn't you give David a lift along the Penn-y-Cader road to help catch his poachers?"

It was not his own constituency, but half his façade was the popular politician, charming to all and sundry. I could see his brain working at lightning speed. He suspected me, but there was nothing he could pin on me. His eyes were darting hither and thither for something that would betray me. He could act on my suggestion with good grace, or he could plead an appointment and take himself off. The one thing he could not decently do was continue to hang around here.

"What poachers?" he asked.

"Couple of chaps shooting in the coppice. David and I both saw them running for a gully."

His eyes darted once more around the scene, and found nothing.

"That should be fun. Why not join us? Richards can stop and fix your car."



"I'd love to, but I'm late for a lunch appointment already and the car won't take five minutes. I've found the trouble. If you want a job for Richards why not let him follow with the bike, it'll save you coming back beyond the Penn-y-Cader fork."

The chauffeur looked daggers at me. He was a tall, lean devil with an ugly mouth. Paterson's eyes were on me, and in them was a measure of respect.

"I think I understand why you write such brilliant books. Stick to it, you've a flair for them. I'll look forward to reading your next. Taffy, jump in the front seat. Richards, you tag along on the bike and wait for us at the fork."

I watched the chauffeur's disgruntled back as he pedalled along the road, and when he was out of sight around the bend replaced the distributor cap and closed the bonnet. Peter emerged cautiously from the cover of the lane, and I beckoned him to me. He was breathing hard and appeared to have been running.

"What went wrong? I heard shots."

"Nothing. Gregory arrived with the Vyford van and wanted a gun-fight. I've dumped the body over the hedge. The van's up the lane."

"I know. I've seen it."

"Then David Llewellyn arrived and Paterson a few minutes later. I had a bit of a bother getting rid of them."

"I saw the end of it. Have you looked in the van?"

"Not yet."

"There's a body in the back."

"Lord," I said, "we'd better set up in business as undertakers. That's two for a start."

"That isn't all. Satan's back."

I put my hand to my head. "Nothing happens for four days, and then everything happens at once. Are you sure?" I found myself reacting instinctively in the same way as McKinnon.

"He was the split image of that photo you showed me."

"You can tell me the full story in a moment. First, though, we'd better tidy up in case the mob comes back."

Between us, we pushed Gregory out of sight under some gorse bushes. With Peter's guidance I manoeuvred the car so that the drain plug to the sump was directly over the blood



stains on the road, and wriggled underneath it with a spanner. The only complaint I have against that car is that the makers never supposed anyone would want to get under it, but at last I managed to run out enough oil to cover the blood. I backed the car into the lane and Peter told his story. There was little enough to it, but that little was ominous.

"I heard the first shot," he said, "and in less than a minute two men came round to the end of the house. One was Paterson and the other your friend of the photo. Paterson started to sweep the hillside with a pair of binoculars and I ducked down pretty low. I don't think he saw me; I was well hidden among the rocks and I took care to keep the lenses in the shadow. He didn't look as if he meant to do anything, and I thought I'd better get along and see if you needed help. I left the glasses with Peggy, told her to keep right down out of sight and started to run along the gulley. I was about half-way when I heard the second shot. It sounded a lot louder. I expect that was the one that decided Paterson to get the car. When I came to the van I took a look inside."

We went round to the van to check on the second corpse, but when I got inside I found a man who was not dead, but merely heavily drugged. Sprawled on his side, a rug across his body, he was what is euphemistically described as middle-aged, on the assumption that we all live to be a hundred. He had a square face, lightly lined, and thinning, sandy hair. I went through his pockets and the first envelope told its story. It was addressed to Professor Gordon Carr.

It was then, I suppose, that I made my first big mistake. Looking back it is easy enough to say that I should have handed Carr straight over to the police. Though I had killed Gregory he was a wanted man, and I had done it in self-defence. I had Carr, who was a very material piece of evidence, in the Vyford van a mile from the Vyford gates. And yet, even now, I can never quite make up my mind. It is true that McKinnon's first reaction was to tell me I was the biggest fool outside hell, and probably bigger than most that were in it, but later he relented to the extent of saying that it was as good a job as could be expected from a crack-brained, trigger-happy loon. He needed proof before he dared touch Paterson again, and all I had to offer was evidence. The number on the van was false, and there was nothing to connect Carr with Vyford.



Played the other way, both Paterson and Satan might have escaped, taking their records with them. As things transpired, it was not as bad as that.

The way I saw it on that Saturday afternoon, with everything happening at once and Paterson due back any moment, there was just no question at all. McKinnon had told me very plainly to keep out, and far from not keeping out I had proceeded to shoot a man and put Paterson on the alert. If I presented myself, with nothing more than Carr as proof of my good intent, I could see myself in the cells while the precious hours slipped away. Nor was I to know that the cards were stacked against me and the work, which should have been finished that night, was to drag on to the small hours of Monday morning. But the thing which clinched the issue in my mind was that I could act on evidence while McKinnon could only act on proof, and once I reported with Carr I was out of the game for good. Whether I did right or wrong at least I have the satisfaction of knowing this. Had I accepted McKinnon's orders in London on the Monday night we would have lost Carr and all the rest besides. And, if that had happened, I would not care to contemplate the future of the human race.

I told Peter to take the van with its contents to Llantyfoed, turn right in the village and meet me on the Dolgelley road. I could not take it through Glan-y-Coed with Richards stationed at the fork, and unless I let him see me in the Jaguar he was going to wonder why, having been broken down with my nose towards Glan-y-Coed, I had turned in the road and driven off elsewhere. Almost certainly that would have led to the discovery of the car in the lane. I waved to the chauffeur as I passed, and he gave me a reluctant salute accompanied by a scowl as black as the pit. Though I was tempted to call at the "Dragon's Head" for a word with Jennifer I did not like to leave Peter sitting in the van or Peggy alone on the hillside. I was first at the cross-roads, that same crossing where Mason had crashed a week before, but Peter joined me in a matter of minutes.

I said: "Peter, I'm worried. Paterson's wise to us. Gregory was bound to have told him when I came to Calander—he'd do it in a routine report—and my turning up again's too much for coincidence. Take the car, find a new parking-place, if you



can, but get back as quickly as possible to Peggy. Jennifer should be safe at the inn for a few hours. If anyone hurts that girl I'll kill him."

As I got into the van he asked where I was taking Carr.

"I'd rather not say. If you don't know and the worst happens you can't be made to talk. I'll be back in good time for dinner. And for God's sake look after the girls."

I can never go to Fenways without a sense of nostalgia. It was there that I was born, and there I spent most of my first twenty years of life. As I recall it best the drive was half derelict and crumbling into pot-holes. The lawns were rough and flecked with a multitude of daisies, the grass scythed off in spring and thereafter cut by an ancient hand mower when someone had the time to push it. In the great garden there had been a tangled mass of shrubberies where Charles and I had sailed the seven seas, sought buried treasure and stalked lions in the depths of tropical jungles. Those were the days when farming offered nothing more than endless toil against the wild growth of nature and the greed of man, who sold his birthright in the soil for a brief prosperity. There was no money, and no time for gardens.

Fenways lies in that fertile tract of country called the Shropshire plain, and there is no better land in England. Today the drive is clad in a coat of immaculate red gravel, and the lawns, green and weed free, lie cropped as close as a bowling green. In its new dress or its old, Fenways is the only place I have ever called home, and the air was tense with a hundred memories as the gravel crunched under the wheels of the van.

Mary met me at the door, one of those calm women who are better described as serene than placid. It was then that things started to go wrong. Charles was away from home. I don't know why the possibility had not occurred to me, for Charles with his many irons in the fire was away nearly half his time. He had been in London most of the week, and yesterday evening he had 'phoned to say that he had to go up to Lincolnshire and would be staying over the Saturday night. I told Mary a most intriguing story about McKinnon and the



Special Branch, of the kidnapped professor, atomic bombs and bearded spies. It was true in essence, but I coloured it up a bit. For some reason which I have never been able to understand, Mary regards me as the black sheep of the family. It has its advantages, for she is one of those women with a soft corner in her heart for black sheep.

She said: "I wonder if any other woman was ever afflicted with such a brother-in-law. Why don't you take him to the police?"

I explained that sometimes the Special Branch had to do things of which the police would disapprove, and until we had rounded up the gang now ravaging the Welsh countryside the police had to be kept out of it.

"What do you want to do with him?"

"We could put him in Waterloo. He's liable to be cantankerous when he comes round."

Waterloo is on the second floor. It was once our nursery, and the bars fixed over the windows to prevent our breaking our necks are still in place. How it got its name I have never been sure, though one story is that Charles and I once fought each other to a standstill there and someone said we had both met our Waterloo. For many years it had served the purpose of an emergency bedroom.

In the end I got her so intrigued that she joined in the game with zest. We backed the van almost to the door and carried Carr up to Waterloo. Mary suggested that if we took his trousers away it might prevent a bid for liberty, but I said from what I knew of him he'd as soon romp round the fields without his trousers as with them if the fancy took him. Finally we got him into a suit of Charles' pyjamas and put him to bed. His breathing was steady and his pulse strong. We locked the door and I went to the telephone, to put through a call to Glan-y-Coed.

I was talking to Jennifer. Her voice came through, low, slightly husky, a little distant and attenuated by the wires, but unmistakably Jennifer. It was hard to believe that only eight hours ago I had heard it last. It seemed like half a lifetime.

I said: "Darling, it's good to hear you. How's the headache?"

"It isn't any more."



"Good. Peter said it was better. Is everything quiet?"

"As Eden without the serpent. Peggy's here. She told me what happened."

"What are you doing?"

"Taking tea up for Peter. We'll all stay there this evening."

"Good. Keep together as much as you can."

"Peggy said you'd be back for dinner."

"That," I said, "is the devil of it. Things are being difficult. Nothing's gone wrong. I can't talk over the 'phone but they're just being difficult. I can't get back till tomorrow."

There was a long silence. I heard her catch her breath.

"Phillip, darling, please. I wanted you so much tonight. Isn't there any way?"

"If there were I'd find it. I want you more than anything in the world tonight." I thought of what should have been our last night together.

Another pause, and then Jennifer's voice:

"Do you still feel the same—about me?"

"No," I said, "I don't. There's nothing static about it. It just grows, and has an infinite capacity to keep on growing. There are beautiful things in the world, but without you there's no beauty any more. I love the hill-tops and the sun and the surf on a rocky coast, but there's no fulfilment in them now, unless you share them with me. With you there's music in the barren places, and without you all the glory of Nature has lost its soul. That's what I feel about you."

"I didn't doubt, and yet I wanted to hear you say it. That's how I feel about you, only I haven't your power of words. I can only show you."

"I ask nothing more."

There was another pause, and then Jennifer said:

"Our next meeting will be the best of all."

The phrase puzzled me. I said: "Of course. We'll make it that, Till then."

"Till then, my darling."

She hung up. I sat staring at the receiver in my hand. There was something different about her, as though she'd grown older or something. Perhaps it was the poor line. I was imagining things. The instrument started to make crackling noises, so I hung it up.

I had had no lunch, but I was disinclined for food. At half



past four I had a cup of tea with Mary, and then went and mooched around the gardens. I went down to the rose garden, where the first buds were bursting into delicate bloom, but their beauty was not for me. I sauntered aimlessly about, sat down on a rustic seat, smoked a cigarette and wandered back into the house again. Here I hunted up a putter and went and knocked a ball listlessly around the dial of the clock golf. Tiring of this I came back again to the dining-room, and stood looking at the photograph of my father and mother over the mantelpiece.

They were both on horseback. It had been taken over thirty years ago, before depression had hit the agricultural industry and they had found time for a little riding. They had both died in the first year of the war. When that photograph had been taken my father could only have been a few years older than I was now. We were fond enough of one another, but there had always been some slight barrier of reserve between us and in a way I had been the odd man out. I had not run true to form. It was not just the farming, our sense of values had often differed in other things. I thought: "I wonder if I'll meet them again tomorrow night? I wonder how it is there? Does the barrier of words and thoughts still lie between you, or do your minds intermingle so that you see things with other people's eyes?" I thought it would be a rather revealing experience, to see things with other people's eyes. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner.* The phrase had always been a favourite of mine.

At half past six the professor came to, and started creating pandemonium. The first we heard was his hammering on the door with his fists, but by the time we reached it he had got the bed and was using it as a battering-ram. I tried to explain that he was with friends, but he did not seem very receptive to the idea. At one time I thought I should have to manhandle him. Eventually I told him that if there was any more nonsense I should stick another needle in him, and I produced one of Charles' veterinary hypodermics filled with water and brandished it under his nose. After I had taken him a meal on a tray, complete with a bottle of whisky and syphon of soda, I think I got it into his head that it was food and drink for well-behaved professors and a shot of dope for noisy ones. Before dark I took the fuse out of his circuit. His window



looked across the open fields, but I was taking no chances on the long-range S O S signalling after dark.

We had supper at half past seven, and then I rang the "Dragon's Head" again. Parry came on the line and said that all three were out. I thought perhaps it was not too good an idea to keep on ringing up, there might be a Mrs. Briscoe at the exchange. I joined Mary for coffee in the lounge. We talked, and later played picquet. At eleven o'clock we went to bed.

The night was oppressive, and I tossed and turned, throwing off the blankets until I was covered by a single sheet, but I could not find sleep. At last I fell into an uneasy dose, troubled by nightmares. I was in a kind of celestial court of disconnected marble sections, drifting through space. In wig and gown I stood high on a pedestal, while far below me in the marble dock stood Gregory, gripped between two jailers. The jailers were not men but beasts, having the body of a wolf, great talons like primeval birds, and on their shoulders the head of the blond lout from my dream. Gregory was a child again, in short trousers, and his frank blue eyes were turned up to me in terror and supplication. On my right, below me and yet above the dock, was the jury-box crowded with those who had gone before me. Two rows back I could see Billy Strange, and other half-forgotten faces from the war, but in the front row were my father and mother, with Daphne standing between them. Wisps of cloud floated around us, and swam like fish within the precincts of the court, straggling at times across the dock and the jury-box. Behind the dock, and on a level with myself, a huge drop-curtain hung to conceal a stage.

I could hear my own voice, rolling out into the vaults of space. "You took this child, threw him into a world of forces over which he had no control, swept him into a bloody maelstrom of carnage, taught him to break every fundamental law of man, indoctrinated him with the belief that no matter how horrible the means, the end justified it. Those beasts that would take him with them are corrupted beyond redemption, but this child has some good in him. For the suffering he sought to cause he deserves to suffer, but he is worth another chance."

Then Daphne was speaking, her voice drifting up through the misty paths of years.



"Phillip, he's one of them. His face is different, but he's one of them. They broke our lives, and tried to break the happiness of all humanity. Another chance? Another chance to succeed where he failed before?"

My mother's arm was around Daphne's shoulders, and I stood perplexed, wondering whether I was lacking in perception or Daphne in compassion. The wisps of cloud had coalesced into a pathway, stretching out into the infinity of space, and Jennifer was walking towards us, slowly, hesitantly, as though she did not know where she was.

I shouted at her: "Jennifer, go back. Go back to the living, my darling. You're not one of these."

She kept coming on, groping a little as though she could neither see nor hear. My mother's voice came to me, one of my earliest memories, out of some garden long forgotten.

"No, Phillip, you mustn't touch. They're very pretty flowers, but they're not for you to pick."

Then the curtain began to rise, very slowly, and behind it there was a great white light. I put my hand over my eyes and started to scream again:

"Jennifer, cover your face, my darling. If you look beyond the veil there's no turning back."

It was very cold, and the light was hurting me. Under the single sheet I shivered and the early morning sun, still low on the horizon, troubled my sleep-clogged eyes. The hands of my watch stood at half past five. I pulled on my borrowed dressing-gown and went to the window, my teeth chattering with fear and cold. I was angry with myself. I had had a singularly stupid nightmare, and I was letting it disturb me. Outside it was very still, and the dew clung like globules of ice to the grass. Away to the horizon the first rays of the sun were sucking up a bank of mist. I stood and stared. I shall always remember it, that prelude to the worst day of my life.

At last I jerked myself away, went to the bathroom where I got under a cold shower and scrubbed down hard with the towel. I felt better when I was dressed. There was no-one stirring in the kitchen, so I boiled a kettle and when I had drunk my tea helped myself to one of Charles' walking sticks and went out on to the farm. I walked for the better part of three hours, and if it did nothing else it gave me an appetite for breakfast.



After breakfast I took up a tray for Carr, and had another chat with him. This consisted mainly of violent invective on his part and patient remonstrations on mine. In the end I had to take out the hypodermic and wag it at him again. I left him, and came back down to the garden where I found Mary. The sun was already growing hot. I asked her when she thought Charles would be back.

She shook her head. "I really don't know. Maybe for lunch, but more likely sometime this afternoon."

"Do you think I could leave you to hand over to him?"

She looked at me startled.

"Phillip, there's an awful lot I'd do for you, but that's asking too much. I couldn't even feed him."

"Let the brute go hungry."

"It isn't only that. I've taken a big risk in taking him in. I've no idea what Charles is going to say. You've got to be here to give an account of yourself. Anyhow, why such a tearing hurry to get back?"

"I'm worried about what's going on at the other end."

"But surely, this Colonel of yours, he'd have plenty of good men on a case like this?"

"Oh, Mac's got plenty of good men," I said. "The trouble is most of them are in the wrong place."

Of course it was unfair to ask her, and I should not have done so had I not been worried half out of my mind. At eleven I rang the "Dragon's Head" again, and spoke to Parry. The two ladies had gone out before seven, and Mr. Scott was in bed. I said he was not to be disturbed, and Parry could expect me back that afternoon. Obviously Peter had been on duty all night. In fact he had probably been on continuously since mid-day yesterday until nearly nine this morning. I tried to look at the thing reasonably. What possible benefit could Paterson derive by doing harm to the girls? It would only be making unnecessary complications for himself.

It was half past three when Charles arrived and came straight in to meet me in the lounge. He is not a bit like the popular conception of a farmer. His height is the same as mine, which is half an inch under six feet, and he has a pale, thin, rather distinguished-looking face. His hair is beginning to grey a little at the temples, which possibly adds to the distinction. If you were trying to classify him according to the common



ideas of what people look like I suppose you would put him down as an eminent barrister.

He said: "Mary tells me you've got something on your mind. What sort of scrape have you got yourself into this time?"

"It isn't only what's on my mind. It's what's upstairs, in bed in Waterloo."

"Have you come home with someone else's wife? Really, Phillip, I do object to being besieged by irate husbands on a Sunday afternoon."

"I'm sorry, Charles, but it's nothing so diverting. Relax, I'm not asking you to play a part in comic opera. This is drama. Ever heard of Professor Carr?"

"I should think all England's heard of him. I was stopped and my car searched coming out of London yesterday morning."

"Poor old Mac," I said. "Rooting around in the wrong place, as usual. If he could take a look in Waterloo he'd save himself an awful lot of trouble."

Charles had just put a match to his pipe. He took it out of his mouth and looked at me rather quizzically. "Are you mixed up in this kidnapping business?"

"No, it's not as bad as that."

"That van outside. Why buy a thing like that?"

"I didn't buy it. I pinched it."

"And chucked the driver over the hedge, I suppose."

"You have," I said, "a tremendous faculty for being right. Only I shot him first. That's the only thing you've missed."

"Suppose," said Charles, "you sit down and start at the beginning. And go right through to the end, without any detours."

I did. I told him the lot. The only thing I left out was what was to happen to me.

When I had finished he said: "It's pretty grim, isn't it. It's obvious something's got to be done. The only thing I don't get is what's going to happen to you. They call it murder in this country, you know."

"I'm not worried about that. If I can get Satan together with Paterson the case is tied up neatly enough. There's a lot of strings in this game, you know, and McKinnon's got his fingers on most of them."



He looked at me in a queer sort of way. I don't think he quite swallowed that bit about the string-pulling. He said: "I don't think people really appreciate you, Phillip. You're a hell of a good liar for one thing. Well, if you're prepared to stick your neck out the least I can do is help. What do you want?"

"Keep him in Waterloo and feed him till tomorrow morning. If he gets noisy, show him this." I handed back his hypodermic. "It's all right, there's only water in it, but he's got a holy horror of the thing. At eight tomorrow 'phone McKinnon. I'll give you his number. He'll probably be damned rude, but his bark's worse than his bite."

When he said good-bye I thought he would break my hand, and there was a look in his eye that I hadn't seen since I went overseas. It was blazing hot, and the roads were thick with week-end traffic, but I made the trip to Glan-y-Coed in less than two hours, which is pretty good going in a thing like the Vyford van. As soon as I got there I went straight up to Peter's room. He was standing by the window, and Peggy was sitting on the bed. They looked white and strained.

I said, "Where's Jennifer?"

They didn't speak. Peggy made as if to get up, but sat down again. I took three steps across the room and had Peter by the shoulders. I felt him wince as the tips of my fingers bit into his flesh.

I said again, "Where's Jennifer?"

He opened his mouth as if to speak, and the words seemed to stick in his throat. His lips moved, and suddenly the words came tumbling out.

"Jennifer's dead," he said. "Satan shot her."

## CHAPTER V

IT HAD all happened before. It had happened among the broken debris of bricks and mortar, while the air was heavy with plaster dust. Daphne's fingers had gone limp in my hand, and her head had rolled lifeless against my knees. Only then the guilt had been shared by eighty million people, and this time it all belonged to one. One gross human body, not



seven miles away, which I could take in my two hands and from which I could squeeze out the evil life.

Peter jerked himself from my grip and recoiled against the wall, his face twisted with fear. Like a pole-cat fighting for its young, Peggy flew at me and had me by the lapels of my jacket. I think, perhaps, I was wearing what she called my avenging-angel look.

"Phillip, it wasn't Peter's fault. There wasn't anything he could do to stop it."

I put my arm around her shoulders and led her gently back to the bed. We sat down on the edge of it, my arm still around her. Peter had turned his back and was staring out of the window, his hands in his pockets.

I said: "It wasn't anyone's fault, except mine and the man's that did it, and both those accounts will be closed by morning. I've nothing but gratitude for the two of you, for all you've done to help me. Peter, sit down and tell me as calmly as you can what happened."

He started to walk up and down the room. "When I left you I went straight back to Peggy. I looked for another place to put the car, but there was nowhere I could find in a hurry. I told Peggy what had happened, and she came straight here to tell Jennifer. Nothing happened all afternoon, except one of the toughs came out with a motor mower and cut the lawns. The girls came back with a picnic tea, and we spent the evening together on the hillside. When Jennifer said you wouldn't be back I could see I'd have to take on the night-watch. They wanted to take on the first half, but I wouldn't hear of it and just before dark I packed them off back to the hotel.

"I spent the night camped under the gate-posts of Vyford. Satan was in, and I meant to make certain he didn't get out. By half past four it was getting too light to stay in the park, and I came back to the observation post. The girls arrived about seven. They'd had an early breakfast. I wanted to stay with them and have a nap on the hillside, but they got quite tough about it. Just to make sure I did what they wanted they hadn't brought me any breakfast. In the end they had their way. I came back here for breakfast and told Parry to call me at half past twelve with a picnic lunch for three.

"It was a bit after one when I got back and we had our meal. Then Jennifer said she didn't think it was a very good



idea leaving the car parked in the lane all afternoon. Besides, you might be back any time and there ought to be someone at the hotel to meet you. That sounded reasonable enough, and she was the obvious one to do it. We didn't think any more about it, at least I know I didn't, and I don't think Peggy did either. She must have gone past the car, across the road and down into Tal-Coed. The first time we saw her was when she came out of the wood, level with Vyford gates.

"Phillip, there wasn't a blessed thing we could do. We were near enough three-quarters of a mile away, and she hadn't two hundred yards to go to the gates. We just had to lie and watch. She walked across the park, her head held up and her bag under her arm, went in through the gates and disappeared behind the shrubberies. She came out on the lawn at the end of the house. She didn't go to the door, in fact she never went into the house at all, she just stood looking at the bed of tulips, you know, that damn thing Paterson's always staring at. While I was wondering whether I could do any good if I went haring down the mountainside to join her Paterson came round the corner of the house. They waved to one another and stood talking for a bit by the tulips. There were a couple of chairs and a table on the lawn, and they went and sat down, facing each other across the table. I could only just see Jennifer. She was almost out of sight behind the corner of the shrubbery, but I could see her face as she leaned forward, and the handbag in her lap.

"They were sideways on to me, and I could see them laughing and talking. He was spreading himself like a blasted peacock, and she was looking at him with a schoolgirl-in-the-presence-of-her-favourite-film-star kind of look. Don't get mad with me, Phillip, I'm only telling you what I saw, but if you'd asked me I'd have said she was trying to vamp him. They hadn't been there long when that great hulk Satan came shuffling across the lawn to join them.

"He stood beside Paterson's chair with his hands shoved into his pockets. Paterson, I think, introduced them, for she smiled at him though he just stood there like a vet looking at a cow when he isn't sure what's wrong with it. Jennifer said something and started to open her handbag. Then Satan pulled a gun out of his pocket, a great cumbersome, old-fashioned piece of artillery, and shot her. There was a nasty,



vicious crack and she slumped forward across the edge of the table, rolled off it and fell on her back on the ground. She never stirred. Satan turned her over with his foot, like a . . . like a . . . Oh God, it was horrible."

He went over to the wash-basin and drank some water out of the glass. I said: "She was pulling a gun out of her bag. I, like a damned imbecile, gave it to her. Satan saw it coming and acted first. Is there any chance she isn't dead?"

"One in a thousand, I suppose. He shot her from less than six feet. I saw the angle of his gun. It might have been left or right, but it was level with her heart. She never stirred, not even when he rolled her over. I don't want to raise any false hopes, Phillip, because if a slug from that thing Satan was carrying hit her in the chest I don't think there's any chance at all. If she was a hospital case they didn't treat her like one. One of the thugs came up, Paterson spoke to him, and he picked her up, slung her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carried her into the house."

I had to keep a tight hold on myself. Emotion was seething in me in a cold, deadly turmoil. I wanted to go storming over to Vyford and shoot my way in. I wanted to put a bullet straight between Paterson's eyes. Then, when I had Satan to myself, I could kill him the way he was meant to be killed. I thought I might take half an hour over killing Satan, and during that half hour he was going to talk the way he hadn't talked for years. Only, of course, that kind of thing wouldn't do at all. Paterson was sure to be expecting me at Vyford, and all sorts of arrangements were likely to have been made to ensure for me an uncomfortable reception.

Peter expected me to 'phone to McKinnon, and I remembered with something of a shock that that was the way I'd led him to believe the game would be played. I'd been so face to face with reality that I'd forgotten the subterfuge. For, he said, we now knew that Satan was at Vyford and all that remained was to close the net.

I said: "You mean you've seen him. I saw him a week ago, we closed the net and there was nothing in it. We've watched the place almost without a break ever since, and no-one's seen him go in. I believe he's been there all the time, and somehow or other they kept him out of sight. God knows how. You can't hide a thing like that in the grandfather clock, but if Mac goes



in with all the majesty of the law behind him they'll do it again. Other things apart, I don't want the brute to hang. It's too humane."

He wanted to come with me, but I was certainly not going to allow that. In any case, he would have been more trouble than he was worth. I'd been trained for this kind of thing and he hadn't. I told him to stay at the inn till morning, and if I wasn't back by eight to get through to McKinnon and tell him everything. When we said good-bye there was a misty look in Peggy's eyes. I think she, at least, realized that I'd no intention of coming back.

Parry gave me the letter when he met me at the foot of the stairs. Jennifer had said he was to hand it to me, but not before three o'clock. She had written the way she might have talked.

*My Darling,*

*I'm afraid you'll be angry with me, and that's the only thing I mind. Only, you see, I know what you mean to do. This isn't intuition. That night in London, you talked in your sleep. And, Phillip, I love you in such a silly kind of way that I'm just not going to let you do it. Even if there were nothing else, you've so much more to give the world than I.*

*Paterson came into the lounge yesterday, while I was waiting for you at lunch time. I'm afraid I made a bit of a pass at him, which probably wasn't necessary because I think women are his weakness. We got quite friendly, and he gave me an open invitation to drop in at Vyford any time I liked. I'm going to take advantage of it this afternoon. If I can get him and Satan together I'll do what you meant to do, but I'll get Paterson anyway. It shouldn't be difficult, because he doesn't take me seriously. He thinks I'm just something that's nice to take into a dark corner.*

*Darling, there's such an awful lot I want to say, only I can't write like you. When two people love the way we do I don't think the ordinary things like death can end it. Nothing would make very much sense if it could, and somewhere we'll find each other again. That's why I said our next meeting would be the most wonderful of all. Don't, please, blame yourself for this. I'm doing it because I want to do it, and because it's the only thing I can do for you. I want you to write that other Michael because it will be our book, and we shall be together in it for the little while until we*



*meet again. A few years can't be so very long in all the time there is.*

*And, Phillip, darling, I want you to know that you're everything I ever had.*

*Jennifer.*

It was no use. There were no more books left in me. All that was there now was the coldest lust to kill I had ever known. I put the letter into my pocket and went out into the village street. The heat of the day had passed and the sun hung low on the crest of Aran Mawdddy. I would not take the car, for fear that the lane was known and watched, and because I had several hours to waste before darkness fell. The road was deserted, but to cover my tracks I turned left and walked slowly in the direction of the Dolgelley road with Vyford at my back.

We were going to win, of course. We were going to clean up the whole rotten nest of intrigue, but at what a price. Jennifer, who had had so little happiness from life, who for one ecstatic week had tasted something of what the world had to give, was dead. My lovely, gay, impulsive darling, for whom I had searched for half a lifetime, had been blown into eternity at the whim of some obscene sadist. I found myself saying: "He didn't have to kill her. She never even drew her gun. He had his in his hand. He could have ordered her to drop the bag." I could feel the fingers of my mind already on his flesh, seeking out the nerve centres of his body till the muscles knotted themselves in paroxysms of agony.

I went across the grey stone bridge, and into the lane of rhododendrons. When I was round the second bend I pressed myself back between two of the shrubs, and stayed there motionless for perhaps a full five minutes. No-one passed me by. At last I pushed through into the field beyond, and turning back headed for the lower tributary of Afon Mawr. In the seclusion of the trees which clothed its banks I took off my shoes and socks, rolled up my trousers and waded across the stream. On the further bank I sat down, dried my feet with my handkerchief and, putting on my shoes, followed the water almost to the confluence. Here, still under cover of the trees, I crossed to the other fork of the little river and began to work my way upstream. I glimpsed the "Dragon's Head" through



the foliage on the further bank, and followed my course under the second bridge where the road from Glan-y-Coed crosses over on its way to Vyford and Llantyfoed. I passed beneath it and went on my silent way, until the trees ahead of me began to thin.

While the cover was still sufficiently thick I chose a dry patch of ground, well screened from view, and sat down with my back against a tree. The whole sorry business was all too apparent. Paterson would know that if I were staying in the locality the "Dragon's Head" was the only likely base. As soon as he had got rid of David Llewellyn he had gone there to confirm his suspicions. Probably called in for a drink, and got into conversation with Parry, or the barman. . . . By the way, he thought he'd seen Phillip Mansell, the novelist, in the village. . . . Yes, he was staying at the inn with a party. One of the ladies was in the lounge now. Mr. Mansell was coming back for lunch. Should be in any moment. . . . Nice fellow, Mansell. He'd dined with him once. Like to meet him again. Thought he'd drop into the lounge and hang around for a few minutes, see if he turned up.

By then he would know that I was in it, up to the neck. I'd rushed off to keep a luncheon appointment, and hadn't kept it. Possibly, and especially if Gregory was already behind schedule, he'd suspect that I'd got Carr. He wouldn't introduce himself to Jennifer, because that would show that he knew I was there. But she, having her own plans, had made the going easy for him. He may have fallen for her, for he was reputed to be a man of affairs. In fact I could scarcely imagine anyone not falling for Jennifer, particularly if she made up her mind that he was going to do so, but it was likely to be subordinate to his real purpose. He wanted her as a hostage, to trade for Carr if I had him, and Satan had wrecked his scheme by killing her.

Not for the first time I wondered what might be Satan's place in the order of things. He had the most inhuman face I had ever seen, but if a massive forehead meant anything he was a man of imposing intellect. The evidence suggested that he was senior to Paterson, for Peter had said nothing of a row between them and had he, as a mere go-between, destroyed Paterson's plans I would have expected him to receive treatment of the kind meted out to Slick Simon. Possibly he was the



arch-genius who controlled the whole network of intrigue, but I could not see a man in that position coming to England at all. I decided that he was probably some kind of Gestapo type, who had been sent over to see that there was no treachery within the organization.

Once I recall I drew my automatic, and it lay in my palm as naturally as though it were a part of the hand itself. I could place a bullet where I liked with that gun. I could lay it so fine that it would crease a man's skull without killing him. I slipped out the magazine. One round had been fired, and that bullet had killed Gregory. I took another from my pocket and slid it into the top of the magazine. I remember looking at the bullet, and wondering into which of the skulls at Vyford it would smash its way.

The shadows blurred into twilight, and twilight deepened into dusk. I got up and stretched, for I was stiff with sitting. Then I moved on, keeping above Tal-Coed on its western side, and setting my course for Vyford. Once a plover wheeled screaming overhead, and a distant dog was barking. There was an occasional bleat from a ewe on the mountainside, answered by the quavering treble of a lamb. Otherwise it was very quiet. I came into the park from its southern end, as Jennifer must have done a few hours before.

My rope was where I had left it in the hollow tree, and I took it to the main gates. Here I stood for a long time with my ears strained, but there was no sound of life. Once a light flickered on for a few minutes in a ground-floor room, but the curtains were drawn. The gates were twelve feet high, surmounted by pointed wrought-iron spikes which would impale a man were he to fall across them. I took the looped end of the rope and, coiling it in my hand, cast it so that it fell across the left-hand gate close in to the post. Reaching through, I took the loop and passed the other end through it so that it ran up to the top cross bar. Then I went up it, with my feet against the gate. Once at the top it was not difficult to reach around the stone gate-post and draw myself on to the wall. I cast off my rope and let it fall inside the grounds, then, hanging at arm's length, dropped lightly after it. The outer defences of Vyford had been surmounted with little enough trouble.

When I had coiled up my rope and tucked it out of sight



under a laurel bush I started to work round to the left, keeping close under the wall. I could see nothing of the house, which was screened for the whole of the way by shrubberies, and I went very slowly, feeling each step before transferring my weight, in case a dry twig might crack under my foot. I had little doubt that sentries would be posted in the grounds. When I judged myself to be opposite the main entrance I left the wall and began to feel my way through the shrubberies. There was a small torch in my pocket but I dared not use it, and I had to work wholly by touch. By this time it was very dark, and now and then a bough would spring back with a slight rustling sound so that I would stop with ears strained. Yet not once could I detect the sound of human movement; the grounds were drenched in the eerie silence of desolation, and if men were posted there they knew how to remain motionless.

As I parted the last of the shrubs I saw that I had come out almost opposite the huge front door. Lights glowed behind three curtained windows on the ground floor, but it was the one immediately to the left of the door which held my attention. This was much bigger than the other two, and the curtains looked like heavy, wine-coloured velvet. With the sultry night the window stood wide open, and a chink of light gleamed from the centre where the curtains had barely closed. It looked like one of the principal living-rooms, and the chances seemed very great that here Paterson, and perhaps Satan, too, would be taking their ease.

In front of the door the drive opened out in a big, semi-circular sweep where cars could turn, but by slanting left I could go around this and reach the window without setting foot on the gravel. Once there I had only to part the curtains another inch and I would have a sufficient view of the room for my purpose. Should my surmise be correct I could step into the room and have them looking into the muzzle of my .38 before they had time to rise from their chairs. What was to happen next was less clear. I could kill them both in a split second, but I was loth to give Satan so painless a ticket to hell.

I stood up and moved forward. I think I had taken six steps when the whole garden went as light as day.

For a moment I stayed there, dazed and bewildered. Four



concealed floodlights of enormous power had lit up under the eaves of the house, and it was clear that there were others around its whole perimeter. Somewhere inside an electric bell was pealing wildly. Recovering from my momentary confusion I turned and ran for the cover of the nearest shrubbery.

I was only just in time. The front door burst open and five men came tumbling out. Four of them had pistols in their hands and the fifth was carrying a sub-machine-gun. I recognized the two gardeners and the chauffeur. There was one I had not seen before, and Slick Simon was carrying the tommy-gun. So that was what he was—a professional gunman. They spread out in a line, from the drive to the outer wall with Simon in the centre, and began to move towards me like beaters driving partridge out of a field of sugar beet. The bell stopped ringing as if someone had thrown the switch, but the lights were still on.

It just wasn't any good, trying to fight odds like that. Had it been dark I might have had a chance. I could have taken Simon first and trusted my superior marksmanship and stalking to reduce the odds against the other four. But, with the light, they would have me within the first two minutes, and for all I knew another posse might be closing in on me from behind. In the few desperate seconds which I had for thought only one plan seemed to offer a ghost of a chance. If I were taken with a gun there just wasn't a hope of bluffing my way out. Without it the prospects were thin enough, but if I could dump it before they reached me there was the slenderest of possibilities that I might recover it sometime when it would be more use. Peeling off my jacket I pushed the gun and shoulder holster out of sight under a big shrub. I had put on my jacket again when I remembered Jennifer's letter, and I put that under the gun. Then I stepped into the open with my hands up.

It was a nasty moment. I half expected some trigger-happy thug to let fly without asking questions, but they closed in silently, five muzzles menacing me. Richards was peering into my face.

He said, "So it's you, is it, you bastard."

"Say, Gus, you know da guy?" This from Simon. He talked like a Cockney who had seen too many gangster films.



"Do I know him? I'll say I do. 'Put Richards on the bloody grid,' he says to the boss, 'and let him shove it up them —ing hills.' This is the bastard as had that sham breakdown an' tied me an' the boss up with the village cop while he took his hook."

Simon said, "Frisk him, Dave."

One of the gardeners frisked me. By the way he went about it he'd done it before. When he had finished:

"He ain't got no rod, Pete."

So Slick Simon was Pete. I said, more for the sake of something to say than anything else:

"I get it, Simon called Peter."

"You shut your trap. What you mean? Who's Simon?"

"It's out of the Bible. You wouldn't know."

"Jeezel!" said Dave. "What we got here? A Holy Joe?"

"Holy rattlesnake. Da guy's poison. Remember Latimer piling up on da crossing? Reckon dis is da guy that fixed him."

Four pairs of eyes regarded me malevolently. Richards said:

"Listen, you ruddy bastard, did you fix Latimer?"

"Augustus, I've never heard of Latimer. I haven't a clue what you're talking about. Half the time I can't even understand the lingo. Do you mind taking me to Mr. Paterson?"

"Sure we'll take you to da boss. March him, Gus."

Richards said, "March." He jabbed the muzzle of his automatic into my kidneys, so that I had to bite my lip to save myself from crying out.

I marched.

The room was big and the furnishings luxurious. The carpet was genuine Persian and would have cost a fortune even before the war. Paterson and Satan were at the far end, recumbent in easy chairs as they faced one another across the hearth. There was a decanter of port on the table, and each had a glass convenient to his hand. Pete was behind me in the doorway.

"Boss, we found dis guy lurking in da grounds. He hadn't got no rod."

"Of course he hadn't, Pete. The only rod Mr. Mansell uses



is a pen. Work right round, in case there are any really dangerous types about."

"Sure, boss. Dave's in charge right now."

"Right. When you're satisfied switch the alarm back in. Join us in a drink, Mansell. Or maybe you haven't dined? No? Then perhaps you'd prefer a Scotch." He pressed a bell, his eyes dancing. As I walked down the room I thought this looked like being cat and mouse. There was a kind of feline grace about him. Satan's untidy bulk was slouched in his chair, his head half turned towards me. Peter had likened him to a vet looking at a cow. The simile which flitted through my mind was an entymologist watching some new insect, of no great consequence but vaguely interesting.

Paterson said, "I hope my men didn't mishandle you."

"No worse than I deserved. I'm afraid we novelists get up to some damn silly tricks."

"Indeed you do. What was it this time?"

I knew the futility of it before I started. "You're going to laugh like hell. I've got a book on the stocks. It involves breaking into a country house by night. I wanted to get the emotional reaction."

The butler knocked and entered. Paterson said: "Whisky-and-soda, and a plate of chicken sandwiches, Preston. Breaking and entering, eh? I ought to hand you over to the police. How'd you like that?"

I wanted to say I'd like it more than anything on earth, and Paterson knew I wanted to say it. I could see it in his eyes.

I said: "I don't think I'd like it at all. They tell me the Welsh cells are quite primitive."

"Beyond belief, according to the locals. I hear some hair-raising stories of their experiences. We can't do that to our guests. Mansell, I want you to meet Dr. Malanov."

I turned my head to look, for the first time, at Satan only a few feet distant. At close range he seemed quite enormous, and there was a quality in his eyes which the camera could not catch. The iris was near black, almost as dark as the pupil. It seemed to me there was a suspicion of Mongolian slant about the corners, and for some reason it seemed important that I should be sure. I went on staring at him. There was a standard lamp behind his head, and in a disinterested way I was aware



that it had gone out of focus so that the whole head stood against a background of uniform yellow light. The features were blurred, too, only the eyes remaining in sharp focus, but that did not matter because it was about the eyes that I had to decide. I felt safe and confident, for the first time since I had entered the room. Then something in my brain began to assert itself. I realized what was happening and by a supreme effort of will I tore my eyes from his.

Paterson, the stem of his wine-glass between his thumb and fingers, was looking at me over the rim. He was smiling at me like a contented cat. I felt compelled to say something, and I blurted out the first thing that came into my mind.

"Russian?"

"Cosmopolitan. Malanov's too big for any one country to hold him. He's a student of hypnotism. He's also one of the greatest brain surgeons in the world. Perhaps the two together suggest something to you? No? Never mind, they will presently. Ah, here's your supper. Do sit down."

It would be misleading to say that it was then that I began to feel afraid. I had been afraid for some little time, but now it was a new kind of fear. Many times have I seen the face of evil, but here were men who had scraped below the surface and buried their hands in the dark regions of its heart. I sensed a blend of science with occultism. Pain and death became trivial things beside a power of domination over mind and soul.

The butler had put the tray on an occasional table beside my chair. I took a long drink of whisky, for I needed it. I had no great wish for food, but as a matter of policy I nibbled at the sandwiches. Paterson sat watching me, with that ghost of a smile playing around his lips.

Quite casually he said, "Tell me, where did you put Carr?"

I stopped with a sandwich half-way to my mouth. "The car? I didn't bring it. I walked."

"I don't mean that nice gleaming black Jaguar whose innards you were tampering with last time we met. I mean Professor Gordon Carr."

I put the sandwich down. "Look here, Paterson, what do you think I am?"

"I know perfectly well what you are. You're a writer of



story books who got big ideas about himself, who thought he could play one of the parts out of his own books and who got out of his depth. You were quite good at Calander. I had you watched, but I never seriously suspected you. In fact I didn't really suspect you until our meeting yesterday. Then quite a number of things fell into place."

He was right. I was out of my depth, fathoms deep and floundering wildly. I thought of Gregory when he had said, "Keep out, it's too big for you." It was a bit late in the day to start wishing I'd taken his advice. I plunged hopefully in another direction.

"All right, I'll put my cards on the table. Maybe it'll help you to see sense. I was at Calander, not because I fancied myself as a sleuth but because I fitted into its background. I followed Gregory here. I've never seen Carr and I don't know how you've got the damn stupid notion that I have. While I'm about it I'll put all the cards down. The police know I'm here and they've been told to suppose that if I'm not back by midnight I've run into trouble."

He just sat there with that mildly contemptuous smile on his face. "When a man says he's going to put his cards on the table I generally know what to expect. A few rags and deuces that aren't much use to him. One or two facts that everyone knows, and at least one thumping lie that he hopes I'll swallow. Your friend McKinnon's in full cry up the Llanberis Pass, after the choicest red herring you ever smelt. It's leading him by easy stages towards Anglesey. The police don't know you're at Vyford because if they did they'd be here in force, and there's been no police moved into the area since yesterday afternoon. The roads are picketed. I was advised when you came in. You came in driving my van."

There was no answer to that, but I did my best. "Your pickets need their eyes seeing to. Whoever was driving your van it wasn't I."

"No? Well, we'll send them to the optician when things quieten down. See if you can think of a better answer to this. When you left in such indecent haste yesterday you were off to keep a luncheon appointment. I suppose it was with your fiancée, unless you'd a date with two women at once. I tried to console her for over half an hour. We got on rather well. Nice girl. I'd like to see more of her."



The old pulse was throbbing in my brain, but I fought it down. It was no good going berserk here.

"You know quite well that neither you nor I will ever see her again. She came here and that great mountain of meat murdered her."

For the first time I thought he looked startled. "What on earth makes you think that?"

"You're not the only man with pickets. I had an observation-post on Cefn Ddu. Two people saw it through binoculars. That's one report that's gone in writing to Scotland Yard."

"Ah, well, it's not important. Would you care to tell me where you went when you were supposed to be lunching with your charming fiancée?"

I drained my glass and set it down. I said: "Paterson, I don't know whether it's occurred to you that I've reached a state when I don't greatly care what happens to me. You've had my story and I'm sticking to it. Now do what the hell you like."

That infuriating half smile was on his face again. "Really, for an eminent novelist you have about the crudest mind I've met. I suppose you think we keep a rack and thumbscrew in the cellar. We're not going to hurt you. You've put your rags and tags on the table. Now I'm going to show you a card of ours. I suppose you know what a Zombie is?"

"Good lord!" I said. "Don't tell me he dabbles in Voodoo as well. Versatile little chap, isn't he?"

He went on, as though I had not spoken. "A Zombie is a body that lives on after the spirit has left it, and becomes an automaton controlled by the witch doctor who has taken possession of the spirit. We don't put much faith in Voodoo. There may be something in it, but to us it seems troublesome and unreliable. We make what you might call synthetic Zombies.

"First, I should tell you something about hypnotism, in case you don't know it already. I've done a little, though I'm not in the same class as Malanov. If he were to put you into a state of hypnosis and tell you that at one tomorrow you would get up on the dining-table at the 'Dragon's Head' and dance a jig, at one o'clock precisely you would get up on the table and give the finest rendering of a jig you've ever given. If we locked you up here you'd drive yourself into a frenzy



trying to tear your way out in order to get there. There are one or two problems in hypnotism. The first is that certain subjects are resistant. That isn't important because resistance can be overcome by drugs.

"A more serious problem is a subsequent subconscious resistance, when hypnotic suggestions come into conflict with basic instincts or moral principles. If Malanov told you to take your car up on the top of a cliff and drive over the edge you would probably go up on the cliff and experience an intense longing to drive over, but the instinct of self-preservation would prevent your doing so. If he told you to shoot the king you would experience an urge to do so, but because you've been brought up with a deep-rooted belief that shooting kings is wrong you wouldn't do it. The inner conflict might leave you a nervous wreck, but the king would go on living.

"Another imperfection of hypnotic influence is that its effect may fade. Definite instructions can be given during hypnosis and these will be carried out, but one cannot induce a changed attitude of mind with confidence that it will persist. The consequence may be neurosis or abnormal behaviour through a disturbance of the mental equilibrium, but the hypnotist can't predict or control the manner in which the abnormality will develop. You follow what I mean?"

I said: "I think that's all pretty elementary and generally understood. I don't see where it's getting us."

"You will. The point is that hypnotism's not quite so powerful an agent as sections of the gullible public think. Or, to put it more accurately, it wasn't until very recently. I told you that Malanov's other line was brain surgery. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that he is the greatest living authority on the human brain. He has recently perfected an operation the effect of which is a modification of the functions of the conscious mind. Following the operation a state of permanent hypnosis can be produced. The patient will accept not only specific instructions, but a modification of outlook. There is no need to induce a fresh hypnotic state in order to communicate new instructions or suggestions. The patient will continue to accept them from the hypnotist or his appointed agents as long as he lives. From the time of the original hypnosis he will remember only what he is told to



remember, and forget what he is told to forget. He will continue to lead a perfectly normal life. He will eat and drink and talk, go to the theatre, play golf, do whatever he did before. His associates will notice nothing unusual about him. His opinions may undergo a gradual change, but that frequently happens to many quite ordinary people. He will become a person of unusual ability, because on to his own intelligence will be added that of his controller. The only other thing I should say is that the condition is, of course, quite incurable."

There was something fundamentally horrible about it. I have seen some of the torture chambers of the Gestapo, but they were decent playrooms compared with this deliberate mutilation of the mind.

I said: "I get it. Malanov's here to operate on Carr, to make sure he transfers his loyalties."

"Really, Mansell, you disappoint me. I thought you had more imagination. We may have to call him in, but when I've talked to the good professor I hope he'll see reason without the humbug of an operation. Do you think Malanov came to England to deal with one obscure backroom boy? Can't you see the possibilities? One by one we shall place our agents among your leaders of thought, your statesmen, your soldiers, your police, your captains of industry and your trade union officials. What an excellent chief of Contra Espionage McKinnon would make if we had him for a few days. No-one will recognize them as our men, because all their lives they will have been models of integrity. They themselves will know nothing, except that suddenly they are beginning to see things in a different light."

The conception was too monstrous to grasp in a moment of thought. I said: "And who do you propose to start on? The Prime Minister?"

"We're not unduly ambitious. No doubt we'll get to him in time. I really am disappointed in you, Mansell, shock must have stultified your mind. I should have thought it was fairly obvious. We propose to start on you."



## CHAPTER VI

I DON'T think I have ever been quite so frightened in my life. In moments of battle I have been afraid like other men, afraid of death and pain and crippling wounds, but not till then had I known what fear could mean. I wanted to say:

"I'll tell you where Carr is. I'll tell you anything you want to know, only for God's sake shoot me decently and have done with it."

With an effort I bit back the surge of panic. I said: "A fat lot of good that'll do for you. I'm not a statesman or a captain of industry."

"Really, my dear fellow, you under-estimate yourself." He was smirking at me like a well-fed Persian cat. I thought of what I would like to do if I had two seconds alone with them with a gun, or two minutes free from interruption with my bare hands. Even the way he was over-working the word "really" was getting on my nerves. "You mustn't underrate the value of propaganda. You may be a rotten secret service agent, but you certainly can write. I've read every one of your books, and I'm looking forward to the next. Into that I think you're going to work a little open-mindedness about the two great conflicting ideologies of our age. Then, in the one that follows, that persuasive pen of yours will begin to kindle doubts in men's minds. No startling change of viewpoint, you understand, but just a gentle evolution. You'll probably start working overtime on newspaper articles. By then we should have one or two editors who're receptive to your line of thought. Don't wear yourself out in your enthusiasm. When we're tired of you we'll probably send you to throw a bomb at the Lord Mayor's Show."

I glanced sideways at Satan. It was the first time I had brought myself to look at him since he had held my gaze and half hypnotized me. That extraordinary individual had taken a gun out of his pocket and was playing with it like a great kid. It looked like the one Peter had seen, a great, clumsy .45 revolver that must have been fifty years old. I thought that anyone who carted a thing like that around in his pocket needed to have his own brain examined.



Paterson was speaking again. "You'll see now why we're not pressing you about Carr. In a little while you'll be babbling your secrets to us as though we were your dear old nanny. We'll keep you here about a week until you're—well, I won't say quite normal. You'll be conscious most of that time, but you won't remember it. In fact you won't remember Malanov or anything inside the walls of Vyford. You'll recall that you set out with your mind full of nasty suspicions and you came across a clue which led you, in a stolen car, to a little place called Bethesda. You'll remember being taken prisoner and confined in a house for a week. You won't know exactly where it is, but you'll be able to describe the interior vividly. Then you'll remember making your escape by night, and you'll suppose that someone stunned you after you got clear. You'll come to finally on the hills outside Bethesda. You'll go and sell another red herring to McKinnon, and then you'll get back to writing. After that you'll not bother much about anything but writing this side of the grave. I'll work the details out by the time they're needed. Malanov, will you operate now?"

The last sentence had a stunning effect. Somehow I'd supposed that I had a few hours grace. Then Satan spoke, for the first time. His voice was low and musical, flowing with a liquid quality, soothing to the ear and soporific to the mind. It was beautiful, and indescribably evil.

"I think perhaps you do not understand. At this hour I am fatigued. One slip, by so much as a hundredth part of an inch, and I would make of it a drivelling idiot. I operate tomorrow, at nine o'clock."

In my relief at the reprieve I even forgave him the neuter gender. Paterson raised his voice.

"Pete!"

Pete and Richards came into the room. They had been standing just outside the door.

"Take Mr. Mansell and lock him up. Richards, you will be personally answerable for his security."

I got up with my eyes on the carpet, a picture of beaten dejection. They closed in on either side of me.

Richards said: "O.K., boss. Do we have to handle him gently?"

"Yes, Richards, you do. The doctor's going to operate to improve his brain and we want him fit and well."



Richards eyed me viciously. I don't think he could forget that bicycle. "Suppose he was to be awkward, and we was to push him around, just a bit?"

"Richards." It was Satan's voice, barely audible, but the chauffeur went rigid and his head turned and remained twisted sideways as though it were held in a clamp.

"Sometimes, Richards, you get a little above yourself. You will deliver this man at eight tomorrow, in good condition. If that is not done I will have you flogged." He stopped speaking and the chauffeur's head dropped forward as if a thread that held it had been severed. He said, "Very good, sir," and his voice shook.

I walked between them down the room. Richards was on my left, and out of the corner of my eye I marked the point of his lean jaw. I hung my head, as though there was no fight left in me. When we were out of earshot I could pivot quickly, bringing up my right in an uppercut. With a little luck I could put Richards straight out of the fight and turning through three-quarters of a circle to face Pete, close with him. He daren't use his gun, except perhaps to wound as a last resort. I could get a judo throw on him, preferably a shoulder throw, and crack his skull against the floor. Then I could take his gun. Once back in the room I would get rid of Paterson straight away. I thought it might be fun to see how Satan performed with his ancient .45. There would be some satisfaction in letting him lug it out of his pocket and then smashing his hand with my second bullet.

I might have saved myself the trouble. Dave and the second gardener were in the hall, and they formed up behind us. Whatever chance I might have had against two of them it was no good starting anything with four. It would only put them on their guard, so that they would take added care to prevent my escape. My only hope, and that a slender one, was to appear so resigned to my fate that they might grow careless.

We passed through a door and out into the open air. The house was built as I had supposed, around an inner courtyard. It was some ninety feet by sixty, dimly lit by a single electric bulb above the door through which we had entered. The ground was cobbled in places, while in others it was no more than the bare earth. Only a half-hearted attempt had been made to hoe



out the grass and weeds which had established themselves. In the very centre of the court was an ancient well.

There was an aura about the place which I cannot describe. It may have been no more than my imagination, inspired by a knowledge of the hideous purposes to which the house was dedicated, and nurtured on an atmosphere of decay, for the neglect contrasted oddly with the well-kept grounds. Real or imaginary, the effect was vivid on my mind. The temperature had dropped as on a November night. There was a dampness, and a smell of must and mould. Beside it a graveyard would have seemed a wholesome place, and the air was laden with some unseen presence till the hair on my scalp bristled under its influence. I wondered if it had once been the scene of some loathsome rites, a Druid's sacrifice or a Witch's Sabbath. Had I come across it on Walpurgis Night I would not have been surprised to find a celebration of the Black Mass with some creature of the Devil presiding over his disgusting ritual.

We passed by the well, and I made an effort to throw off the supernatural awe which sat astride me.

"Primitive kind of water supply you've got."

Richards let out a guffaw. "We don't drink that water. Mebbe we'll draw you a glass. That's where we dumps the stiffs. Sutteranean river. Better'n any crematory."

I stood and looked at the horrible thing. It was a primitive enough structure, the kind you may find on the green in a Surrey village. Four corner posts supported a gable roof, and around a simple windlass formed by a roller rather bigger than that of a household mangle a stout rope was wound a dozen or more times. A big wooden bucket hung from the rope, and far beneath I could hear the faint rumble of running water. Richards picked up a loose cobble and tossed it into the well. The only thing they had not taken from me was my wrist watch, a combined timekeeper and stop-watch, and without quite knowing why I pressed the button as he dropped the stone. A hollow splash resounded back from the bowels of the earth, but the light was too poor to show what the second hand recorded. I stood and stared at the structure with a kind of rooted fascination.

*There was something wrong about the well.*

Pete took me gently by the arm. "Come'n, bud. You don't



hafta worry about da well. Dec's lookin' after you. Make you a nice li'l pet. Kinda guinea pig." There was a note of wistfulness in his voice. In his curious way I felt that Pete was almost sorry for me. I disliked him less than Richards, who was just a vicious brute. Heinrich Himmler would have found good material in Gus.

"Pete," I said, "I don't suppose you'd ever sit in a game of poker with a guy using a crooked deck. You're too cute for that. But that's just the kind of game you're playing. It's heads I win, tails you lose. If our people get you they'll string you up. If they don't, sooner or later you'll stop being useful or else you'll get dangerous to your own crowd. Even though you don't someone'll think you are. Everyone suspects everyone else in your racket. Suppose I cut up rough and you have to manhandle me, Gus is going to get a taste of the knout, or cat or whatever they use. Ever seen a man after a flogging? It's not a pretty sight, and he carries his scars for the rest of his life. If you'll make a break, and turn King's evidence, I'll see you all get a fresh start."

Pete's voice hardened. "That kinda talk ain't gonna get you no place, bud."

I hadn't really supposed it would, but I was growing desperate.

We went in through a door on the other side of the courtyard. We were now in a big, bare hall, brightly illuminated. Vyford generated its own electricity, and the muffled sound of a diesel engine which had been audible before had grown louder. High up on the wall was a mass of switchgear and fuse boxes, looking like the main distribution board. There was, too, a miscellany of fire-fighting gear, buckets of sand and water, three extinguishers and a fireman's axe hanging on the wall. As we went through I glanced at the second hand of my watch. It had taken the stone two and a half seconds to reach the bottom of the well. I felt that might mean something, but I'd no idea what it was likely to be.

We went up two flights of stairs, and along a corridor. The stairways and passages were poorly illuminated. Perhaps they had to economize on current where good light was not essential. The floodlights must have thrown a big load on the batteries when they were in use. We turned left and stopped in front of a door. Pete pushed it open, and Richards took a bunch of



keys from his pocket. They stood two on either side of me. I looked at each of their ugly faces, and then walked slowly forward into the room. The door was closed, and the key turned in the lock.

There was a slight lessening of the darkness from a small window in the opposite wall. I found the switch and pressed it down, but nothing happened. The bulb had been removed or the circuit isolated. I crossed to the window, to find it guarded by iron bars three-quarters of an inch thick and six inches apart. They were let into solid concrete. Not that it mattered very much, for there must have been a sheer drop of thirty feet on the other side. With my hands I began to explore my cell. It was a small room, no more than twelve feet by ten, and there was a camp bed with a hair mattress against one wall. Except for this it was unfurnished, and it smelled damp and unused. It was, according to my calculations, in the north-west corner of the house. The window would face west, giving on the strip of woodland from which we had first seen Vyford, and beyond would lie the northern slopes of Bryn Moedre. I looked at the luminous dial of my wrist watch, and the hands stood at a quarter past midnight.

I sat down on the bed, my chin cupped in my hands. My mind wandered aimlessly back over the weeks. The night I had thrashed Gerald, and Jennifer and I had melted into one another's arms. The picnic on Bryn Moedre. The Knightsbridge flat. If we had come on Vyford five minutes later, when Satan was in the house. If I had listened to Mac when he told me to get out. If I had turned left instead of right ten years ago in Cairo. If, if, if. . . .

For upward of an hour I sat there, my mind abandoned to emotion and futile regrets. First Daphne, and now Jennifer. I was better dead. Dead, yes, but not a slave mind to these architects of hell on earth. I was back at the window, straining at the bars until my muscles cracked. If I could bend them, sufficiently to squeeze through, I could dive headlong to the ground. If! I might as well have tried to bend the wall itself. If not the window, what about the door? Across the width of the room I hurled myself at it again and again, until at last I threw myself on the bed, bruised and exhausted. The door was solid oak, and had not so much as cracked.

As I lay there, in a semi-stupor, my mind went back to the



well. There was something wrong about the thing, something more than the fact that it was used as a graveyard for murdered men. The stone had taken two and a half seconds to fall. Somewhere, I felt, there was a formula to calculate the depth of the well. My mind groped back through the years. For the first time in my life I wished that I had spent more of my physics lessons in absorbing science, and less time composing dubious limericks. From the forgotten years my fumbling mind pieced together the symbols.  $S = \frac{1}{2}gt^2$ . And  $g$  was 32.  $S$ , the space, was sixteen times two and a half squared. Four times twenty-five. The well was a hundred feet deep. So what?

In my mind I could see the thing, as vividly as though it were before me in a lighted room. I could see the windlass with the coils of rope around it. There were twelve turns, perhaps fifteen at the most. The roller was about a foot across. The circumference of a circle was roughly three times its diameter. Three fifteens were forty-five. Suddenly I sat bolt upright on the edge of the bed.

The rope would reach no more than half-way down the well.

It was a good, stout rope, not more than a few years old. It was not a relic of antiquity. Therefore it was used. And why should one want to lower a bucket only half-way down a well? Because there was something half-way down. A platform? A tunnel leading off the shaft? I got up, and started to walk excitedly to and fro. I had solved one problem. McKinnon's men had measured up the house, had sounded the walls and floors, but no one had thought about the well. In a room or tunnel far below the ground Satan had hidden. In that same chamber the records would be stored, names and addresses of agents, information, plans. At last we had them, the proof of their activities and the information which would lead to the arrest of every man.

I stopped walking about, and went back to the bed. I had solved the problem and tomorrow that knowledge was going to be sponged out of my mind. If I could find some way of getting the information out, or concealing it on my person so that it might be found even though it was no longer in my mind. In the darkness I struggled with the problem, at first calmly and then with mounting desperation, until it seemed that I was in



a maze, running in a wild panic up every path that showed itself. I had not so much as a pencil, and I would have given a year's income for a cigarette.

It was five to two when I heard the footsteps, light, cautious footsteps coming from the front of the house. I thought that this was it. Why they should come for me at this hour was past my comprehension, but it seemed that if I did not make a break now the chance would not occur again. The time for caution was past, and from now on I was going to fight like a wildcat. I got up and stood behind the door. The thing that puzzled me was that I could hear only one pair of footsteps. Surely they were not such fools as to send one man to collect me.

There was a sound of fumbling, and a key turned in the lock. As the door opened a pool of light downcast from a torch fell on the floor. I could see the shadow of the intruder in the reflected light, and he was a small man, a full head shorter than I. Stepping forward I caught the wrist that held the torch and swung my left arm around his throat. The torch dropped to the ground and the light went out. In my surprise I nearly let my captive go. It was not a man but a woman, and I knew her. The fragile wrist and a slight fragrance of perfume were familiar. I had danced with her, to the music of a gramophone at Calander.

I said, "Well, Helen, has the great doctor folded up and they've sent you to play Delilah?"

She couldn't make a sound because of the pressure on her throat. From the way her body twisted I knew that I was hurting her, and I took a savage satisfaction in the knowledge. I released the pressure of my left arm a little, and her breath came in gasps.

"Phillip, let me shut the door. There's nothing wrong with Malanov. I've come to get you out of this."

I didn't trust her an inch. Still holding her wrist I took the key from the door, pushed it to and locked it from the inside. I passed my left hand over the body, but she did not appear to have a weapon.

I said: "Nice of you. And what's the quid pro quo?"

"The what?"

"What do you get out of it? I don't see types like you doing things for love."



In the darkness I heard her catch her breath. "Don't you? Perhaps you don't know types like me as well as you think. There's a lot you don't know. This is a hell of a set-up. I know what they're going to do to you, and I can't stand by and watch it happen. There is something you can do for me, if you will."

"Now we're getting to it." Still holding her wrist I led her to the bed, and we sat down. This new turn was perplexing. I was never quite sure with Helen, she was one hell of a good actress for one thing. But it was difficult to see how things could get any worse, and if she was not betraying Paterson why had she come unarmed, alone and without a bodyguard in earshot. Or had she?

"Suppose you put me in the picture."

"I'll tell you as much as I can. There's no time for details."

"Clever girl. The best liars never have time for details. Those are the things that trip them up."

"You're bitter, aren't you. I don't really blame you. Suppose you try listening to me with an open mind. Would you like a cigarette?"

"More than anything on earth."

"If you'll let go of my wrist I'll give you one."

In the flash of the lighter I saw her small, heart-shaped face for the first time since I had left Calander. I glimpsed, too, the torch lying in the corner of the cell.

She said, "The first thing you don't know is that I'm Russian."

"That's hardly likely to inspire confidence."

"I don't mean Stalin's Russia. If there'd been no Bolshevik Revolution I'd have been a Grand Duchess. My grandfather, the Grand Duke Alexander, was murdered in the revolution. We owned estates in Poland, and my mother and father escaped to them. I was born four years later. We were poor by the standards of Czarist Russia, but wealthy enough by the standards of today. My father was a great admirer of the English, and he sent me to school here. When war broke out I was eighteen, and at a finishing school in Paris.

"You know what happened to Poland. I had no news of my parents for eleven years. I was stranded in France with a few friends and no money. After the German invasion I stayed on in Paris with the family of one of my school friends. I passed as a cousin whose parents had been killed by the Luftwaffe



on the road from Amiens. After a bit I started to work with the Maquis. It's a pretty sordid story, Phillip. I hated the Germans with a bitter, personal hatred. To me they were just another part of the same barbarians who began to break up our family in the first war and finished it in the second. We hadn't many weapons in the resistance movement, and we fought with the ones Nature had given us. The only thing I had was being rather nice to look at. Don't think my job was worming top secrets out of high ranking officials, that sort of stuff belongs to the spy stories. Sometimes I'd pick up odd bits of information, but not even infatuated officers in their cups talk very freely about military secrets. If you started fishing on those lines you were liable to find yourself in the Gestapo cellars, where they had all sorts of pleasant little tricks for persuading you to say who your friends were. But they would go places with their girl friends, and my job was to get them where the Maquis could deal with them. Oh, I've played Delilah often enough, but never to Samson.

"John came over with the liberation army. I was never in love with him, but after what I'd been through I felt that kind of thing wasn't for me. He was terribly fond of me, and though I told him I'd been messed about by some of the foulest beasts in Europe he only said that his job was going to be making up to me for all I'd suffered. He was kind and gay, and reminded me of the boys I'd known when I was at school in England. We were happy enough for a few years. John had been in a bank before the war, and he went back to it when he was demobbed. Phillip, can you see Greg as a bank clerk?"

"The only thing I can see him doing in a bank," I said, "is robbing it."

"That's what it came to, in the end. Life was dull, and he found a way of making it more exciting. He started backing horses, and lost more than he could afford. I didn't know about it at the time, or I might have done something. Then he tried to get it back by making the bank do the backing for him. He covered up for a while, but it was bound to come out sooner or later and he got in a terrible mess. Just when he couldn't hide it much longer Paterson's men got on to him. They gave him a job to do and lent him the money to cover up his transaction. After that they had him, body and soul.

"I'd suspected something was wrong for a while, and I began



to question him. At first he hedged, but one night he told me the lot. I was in a miserable position. I had either to betray the country that had adopted me or the man who'd taken me when I thought no-one else was likely to want me. Even so, I wouldn't have let him down, but he was afraid I might and so he did the thing I never forgave. He told them who I was.

"One day a little rat on two legs came to see me. He said they'd be needing my help. I told him that I wasn't going to betray my husband, but they'd get no active help from me. Then, with a nasty, oily smile, he gave me the first news I'd had of my parents. He said they were comparatively well, doing light work in the kitchens of a labour camp. So long as I did as I was told they'd stay comparatively well. Before he left he gave me a little box. He said I could have some more parts of the jig-saw if I wanted them, and I'd know how to get them. There was a human finger in the box, and my mother's rings were on it."

She stopped speaking, and in the absolute darkness which enfolded us there was a sound like a little, choking sob. Her hand touched my sleeve and slid down into mine. The fingers were as cold as though she were already dead. I felt deeply moved by her story, and yet I did not trust her. If what she said was true she deserved a little kindness from somebody. I'd always supposed that I had had a raw deal from the war, but I began to wonder if I wasn't one of the lucky ones. Her icy fingers tightened in my hand.

"Just once I nearly threw it over without heed of the consequence. That was when you came to Calander. Phillip, the war did things to some of us. It did something to me, and it did something to you, too. I don't know what because you never talked, but there were times when I could see it in your eyes, and it was written plainly between the lines of your books. I'd given a big piece out of my life to a cause, and I was giving what was left of it to my parents. For all I know they might be already dead, and I was helping to bring misery to countless others. For a little while I had an intense longing to live my life for myself, and I thought perhaps you and I might help each other. If you'd felt as I did I think I'd have thrown it over and chanced the consequences. Then Jennifer came, and I knew it wasn't any good."

I said: "She came here. They killed her, didn't they?"



"I'm sorry, Phillip, I'm afraid they did. I didn't see it, but I heard the shot and saw Pete carry her in."

"Were you here when the house was raided?"

"Yes."

"Where did they put you and Malanov?"

"There's a tunnel leading off the shaft of the well. A long way down, I don't know how far. A whole section of the brickwork moves back by remote control. You couldn't find it, unless you knew where to look. John wasn't here at the time, but they lowered Malanov and me down in the bucket. It was a horrible experience. There's something about that well, I don't know what it is, but I'd rather be in a Gestapo torture chamber than go down it again."

It sounded like the truth. "How did you get the key to this room?"

"I've got Richards' bunch. I had to be nice to him, so that I could pick his pocket. My mouth still feels dirty."

"Won't he miss it?"

"Not till he tries to use one of the keys. I knew what they looked like, and I made another bunch up similar. I changed them in his pocket. Phillip, I'll tell you everything later. We mustn't waste time."

"All right. What do you suggest doing?"

"This place is mined. There's enough high explosive at the end of the tunnel from the well to blow up Harrod's store. It's controlled from a switch in Paterson's room. Over his bed there's a wall safe behind a picture. The back of the safe's rivetted, and one of the rivets isn't what it looks, it's a press-button switch. I expect that's why the police didn't blow themselves up. They'd find the safe, but wouldn't recognize the switch. It starts a time switch in the tunnel, and the mine goes up half an hour after it's pressed. It's the emergency measure for destroying the evidence if they have to evacuate. The key's in Paterson's pocket and he'll be in bed by now. If I take you to his room can you kill him and get the key?"

"Just take me to Paterson. There's nothing that would please me more. And where do we go from there?"

"You press the switch and we get out. I've got a key to the gates on Richards' bunch. In half an hour Vyford goes up, and everything inside it."

"That's all very well, Helen, but we want those records."



Why can't we slip out quietly and have the place raided?"

"Because they'd miss us, long before you could organize a raid in strength. It's no good bringing a few local policemen, they'd shoot their way out. Once we were missed Paterson would know the game was up. He'd spring the mine and evacuate. You'd lose the records and the gang as well."

"But if I kill Paterson and take the key they couldn't get at the switch."

"It's no good, Phillip. Pete's got a duplicate and Malanov would take charge. I'm not going to let you try and get Pete, because he and Dave share a room. Besides, there's one other little thing. If Vyford goes up with everyone inside it Moscow will assume that I've gone up with it too. If I just quietly disappear there's a chance my parents won't be hurt. I thought you might help me to disappear and make a fresh start. That's the little thing I hoped you'd do for me."

I thought it over. I thought she was probably right. And, if what she'd told me was the truth, she deserved a break.

I said: "How do we get out without waking the household? There's a burglar alarm in the grounds. I walked into the damn thing."

"I know. You hadn't a chance. It's an infra-red beam alarm, and the grounds are criss-crossed with them. I'm not allowed out in daylight in case I'm seen, but they let me go out for exercise after dark. There are certain walks I've been shown. I'm not allowed within twenty yards of the gates, but I know where the things are and I think we can avoid them."

I got up and groped my way to the corner where I had seen the torch. It was not broken, and the light came on when I touched the switch.

I said: "We've been here long enough. Take me to Paterson."

She came across to me and laid her hand on my arm. "Phillip, do you know what happened to John?"

I looked at her, in the diffused light of the torch. Her face was dead white, and her eyes two tragic pools of darkness.

"I don't know how you're going to take this. I killed him. He pulled a gun on me, and I shot him."

Her hand tightened on my arm, and I felt the chill of her fingers through my sleeve.

"Thank you," she said. "That was the kindest thing you could have done for him."



## CHAPTER VII

WE CAME into the courtyard through a small door in its western end. Helen said it wasn't safe to go through the house to the front, because it meant passing the rooms where the men slept. She had brought me down by a stone spiral staircase, and the courtyard was as dark as the unlighted staircase by which we had descended. The light over the main door had been extinguished, and while I was in my cell clouds had come up to screen the stars, as though the brief burst of summer weather was drawing to a close.

I flashed the torch, downcast upon the ground. It fell on a patch of soft earth where there were no cobbles, and from which the weeds had been roughly hoed. There were two footprints, clear cut in the soil. They were the prints of a lady's nailed shoes, and from the right partner one nail was missing. I would have known those footprints anywhere. They had been made by Jennifer's shoes, the ones she wore for the hills round Glan-y-Coed. Emotion began to well up inside me, and my eyes felt moist. It was like hearing a voice from the grave.

Helen's hand was on my arm, and her voice an urgent whisper in my ear.

"Phillip, put that light out. It isn't safe. Take hold of my hand, I'll guide you."

With my hand in hers I followed, automatically. We went slowly, trying to avoid noise, but only half my mind was on the job in hand. I was back in the past, living again that final scene as Peter had made me see it. Jennifer, walking across the park, with her head held high. Paterson and Jennifer standing by the tulip bed. Peter, away on the hillside, his eyes glued to the binoculars.

We had reached the door to the main hall, and Helen let go my hand. I heard the click of the latch, and a creak as the door swung slowly open.

Peter's voice. "She didn't go to the door, in fact she never went into the house at all." I stood there rigid, afraid to believe.

Beyond the door was a dim, yellow light, and Helen's shadow outlined against it.



"Phillip, where are you? Come inside."

I stepped through the door and put the torch in my pocket. She pushed the door gently to, and it made a slight noise as it closed. I took her by the arm and turned her to face me.

"Helen, did you know that Jennifer's still alive?"

She didn't reply at once. I could just see the pallor of her face in the dim light.

"She can't be, Phillip. Pete shot her. He doesn't miss. Not from ~~that~~ range."

She'd as good as told me she'd been in love with me at Calander. I'd always felt she'd have welcomed a bit of a party in the car, or something of that kind, but I'd never supposed her feelings went any deeper. I've seen jealousy do some queer things. If Jennifer was alive, and I pressed the button that blew Vyford and everyone in it to eternity . . . She seemed to sense what I was thinking.

"Oh, my God, Phillip, not that. If you think I've sunk as low as that I wish you'd kill me and have done with it. Life's dealt me just about as much as I can stand. I can't face up to any more."

"I don't know what to think," I said. "Besides, it wasn't Pete that shot her. It was Malanov. I thought you said you didn't see it."

"I didn't, but he was there and I supposed he shot her. That's the kind of thing he's here for. I'd better tell you all I know, only I'm so desperately afraid of wasting time. *What was that?*"

We had been talking in whispers. There was a scuttling noise and we stood with ears strained.

"Rats," I said. "A place like this is probably alive with them."

"What makes you think Jennifer isn't dead?"

"I've seen her footprints in the courtyard. She was shot before she came into the house. That means that after she was shot she was not only alive, but well enough to walk. I shouldn't think anyone else would be wearing her shoes already. Anyway, as far as I know you're the only woman here, and they're too big for you."

"This doesn't make sense. I'll tell you what I saw. I'm not allowed in the east rooms because they face the road and Paterson's afraid someone might see me. I was walking along



the corridor on the first floor and I passed the open door of a disused bedroom. I could see straight through it and out of the window. Paterson and Jennifer were standing on the lawn, talking. That made me curious, and I went to the window and watched. Pete was loafing about on the drive and Paterson drew Jennifer's attention to the bed of tulips. While she was looking at it, he made a sign to Pete. He disappeared into the shrubbery, but because I was watching for him I caught a glimpse as he took up a position behind a shrub and close to one of the chairs on the lawn. Then the other two went across to the chairs and sat down. Jennifer couldn't see Pete, but he was less than three feet behind her.

"Just as they sat down Richards came into the room. I think he'd been skulking around after me. He does it when he's nothing else to do. He took hold of my arm and lugged me out into the corridor. Then he started to get fresh. I don't know why, I suppose I had a sort of hunch, but I suddenly got the idea that I might need to use him sometime. So instead of slapping his silly face I strung him along a bit. That was how I managed to get the keys so easily. You know, I put on a 'I don't mind playing, but I like to be woo'd' kind of act. Just as he was getting all het up and urgent we heard the shot. That broke up his Lothario scene in a hurry. He went off down the corridor like a scared rabbit, and I walked away in the other direction. I was up there in the gallery when they brought her in. Pete was carrying her slung over his shoulder, and Paterson and Malanov were behind him. They took her into the library, without noticing me. You'll have gathered by now that I'm pretty hard boiled, but somehow it made me feel sick. It was such a beastly cold-blooded thing to do. I just had to go to my room and lie down on the bed."

The main staircase led up from the right-hand side of the hall. A corridor ran away to the right; on the left the stairs turned into a carved oak gallery across the end of the hall, leading to the corridor which communicated with the west end of the house. That would be where she stood when they had come in. The thing just would not add up in mind. Suppose Satan had not fired at all. Pete had been quicker on the draw and the shot had come from his gun. If either of them had shot her she would not have walked across the courtyard a few hours later. If Pete had fired only to wound she would not have



rolled over so apparently dead as Peter had described. Could he have creased her skull and stunned her with the bullet? I doubted it. I might have done it myself, and Pete was probably handy with a gun, but there are very few people good enough for a trick like that.

I thought of Peter's words. "There was a nasty, vicious crack," and it seemed to me that they were oddly chosen. People are not always very accurate in their descriptions, but surely no one could describe the noise made by that thing Satan was carrying as a nasty, vicious crack. A roar like a cannon, perhaps, or just a shot, but never a vicious crack. On the other hand, it would exactly describe the noise made by the little gun I had given Jennifer. I thought back again to Peter's words.

"I could only just see Jennifer. She was almost out of sight behind the corner of the shrubbery, but I could see her face as she leaned forward, and the handbag in her lap."

Suddenly the whole thing was crystal clear. As she opened her bag she would sit upright, or even lean back a little. Peter couldn't see her head, but he could see her hands and the bag in her lap, and that was what he would be watching. Satan had seen the gun, or suspected something, and drawn his own. But Pete, standing behind and looking over her shoulder, would see it before anyone else. He had hit her with the butt of his gun or a rubber cosh. She had already slipped off the safety catch and as she slumped forward her finger had closed on the trigger. The only shot had come from Jennifer's gun.

There was a sense of unreality, as though I were floating without substance in the clouds. There was hope again, in a world that once had been filled with black despair. I looked at Helen, looked down into a pitiful white face, upturned to mine. I thought she'd had a hell of a life. She'd risked everything to get me out of the worst trouble I'd ever made for myself, and all I could do was bully her.

She said, "Phillip, you don't think . . ."

I put my arm around her. She was trembling like a leaf, with cold and nervous tension. "Of course I don't. I'm a pretty average brute, and tonight I'm more brutal than usual. You risked your life and more to set me free. If we get out of this I'll make it up to you."

"If we get out."



"Cheer up, we will. I see now how it was done, but this complicates things. I've got to find Jennifer. In case anything should go wrong it would be absolutely fatal to let the information die with us. This is where we divide forces. I want you to get straight away and take the information to McKinnon."

"But my people . . ."

"I'm sorry, my dear, we'll have to chance it. There are too many millions of lives hanging on this to do anything else. I promise you I'll do my damndest to blow the whole of this outfit to hell."

"But, Phillip, you don't know your way around."

"Tell me where to find Paterson, and leave the rest to me. You've done your share and this is where I take over. There's just one thing you might do. I've got a gun hidden in the shrubbery opposite the front door. Do you think you could take me to it?"

She was silent for a moment. "I could try, but it's an awful risk. There are at least three beams across that lawn, at different levels."

"Then we won't chance it. Now listen carefully. If you put a foot wrong and set off the alarm just run like mad. In any case, keep off the roads. If they miss you they'll search there first. As soon as you're outside the gates turn right and keep up the back of Tal-Coed. If they come after you there, which isn't likely, get into the wood and lie low. If not, keep close to the wood and follow its edge. In an hour it'll begin to get light. From the end of the wood bear half right. That'll bring you to Afon Mawr. Try to get to the wooded part before it's fully daylight. Get down among the trees and follow the stream. You'll come up on the wrong side for the 'Dragon's Head', but the water's shallow and you can wade across. Knock up Peter and tell him to ring McKinnon. Tell him the whole story, and don't put a foot outside the inn till the police arrive. Mac'll see you're all right. Now, which is Paterson's room?"

"Up the stairs and across the gallery. The third door on the left."

"Leave him to me. How long will it take you to get to the gate?"

"About five minutes. I have to go carefully."



"Right, I'll wait that long before I move in case I set anything off. Here, take the torch, I shan't need it."

With a quick, impulsive movement she put her arms around my neck and kissed me. In that moment I understood how some of Hitler's minions had gone light-heartedly to their doom. Then, with her cheek against mine:

"I can't bear leaving you here, but I'll do as you say. Phillip, if anything goes wrong promise you won't let them take you alive."

"You bet I won't," I said. "One dose of that is all I want."

We went across to the front door, and I got it open without too much noise. I bent and kissed her again. "Good luck. Tell Parry to be ready with some ham and eggs. We'll be needing them by the time we join you."

When she had gone I closed the door and went to the foot of the stairs. The time was twenty past two. I was very conscious of the appalling odds arrayed against me. The silent house slept around me, somewhere in that unknown vault of desolation Jennifer was hidden, and I, alone and unarmed, must find her. I had parted from my only ally, but in that I was convinced I had acted wisely. Within a few minutes Helen would be free from Vyford. In as many hours McKinnon would learn the truth of Satan's dreadful secret, and at least he would know what it was he had to fight. The only plan which commended itself to me was to go to Paterson's room and, before he could draw a gun, choke the knowledge of Jennifer's whereabouts out of him.

When the minute hand of my watch had reached the figure five I went slowly up the stairs and across the gallery. There was no more than a dim, reflected glow lighting the upper corridor, so that I moved along it with the tips of my fingers touching the left hand wall. I had passed the first door and my fingers were touching the second when the alarm bell began to scream its warning note throughout the house. There must have been a dozen or more bells scattered about the buildings, and the air was filled with the vibrant screeching of their cacophony. My movements masked by the din I opened the door on which my hand was resting and stepped inside.

The grounds beyond the corridor were aglare with the floodlights, and the reflected glow showed a bedroom, furnished but untenanted. Helen, I supposed, had taken more than five



minutes to reach the gates, and in that twenty yards of unknown territory she had cut the beam. I pictured her racing wildly down that last short stretch of drive, fumbling with the gates and running to the right, towards the safe shadow of Tal-Coed. If she could escape beyond the area of the floodlights before they detected her I thought her chances should be good.

I stood in the corner of the room, my fingers on the knob and the door held just ajar. Above the screaming of the bells there was a bump from beyond the wall as Paterson swung himself out of bed. The ringing stopped, and for a moment of contrast the silence seemed more awful than the sound. I could detect a faint noise of movements from the neighbouring room, and the sound of running feet along the corridor. Pete was hammering on Paterson's door, and his voice was raised.

"Say, boss, some guy's left off da gong."

"God Almighty, I can hear that. Get a party out and send that lazy skunk Richards here."

"Sure, boss. Dave's out already. I'll get after him."

The feet departed and there were further sounds of movement from the room. Then came the more ponderous tread of Richards' steps, approaching at a fast amble.

"You want me, boss?"

"Do I want you? Why the hell do you think I sent for you. Is Mansell safe?"

"I ain't had time——"

"You ain't had time! You great, idle bladder of congealed lard, Pete's got a search gang in the grounds and you ain't had time to find out whether Mansell's safe. Get to it, and move or I'll put a whip behind you."

Richards went, more hurriedly than he had come. I toyed with the idea of rushing Paterson, but there was too much coming and going to make it even a long odds chance. Then Richards came back, and this time he really was in a hurry.

"Boss, there's something queer about this joint."

"Queer? You're the queerest bloody thing about this place. What d'you mean, queer?"

"My key won't fit."

"You locked the door with it, didn't you?"

"The whole damn bunch looks odd."

There was a sound of the bedroom door being wrenched open, and Paterson's voice came more clearly.



"Has anyone been to your room?"

A pause. "No." A longer pause. "Only the Gregory dame."

"Richards, what the hell's going on around here? Have you been sleeping with that Russian bitch?"

"Honest to God, boss, I wouldn't do a thing like that."

"Wouldn't you? You'd fall down five flights of stairs to do it if you had the chance. The only thing is, I doubt that she would. What did she want?"

Richards had been thinking fast. "She said you sent her. Said you wanted Mansell at half past seven instead of eight. Said it was important."

"I'll find out if you're lying later. That can wait. Go and call to Mansell through the door. Tell him you're willing to do a deal. Ask him what it's worth to get him out of here. If that doesn't make him answer don't waste time, but bring me that Russian slut. Fetch her in her pyjamas, or naked if you like, but get her here fast."

Richards went lumbering off. He could barely have been round the corner when there was a sound of flying footsteps from the opposite direction. Pete had come up the stairs from the main hall.

"Boss, da gate's open."

"Haven't you got anyone."

"Reckon dere ain't no guy in da grounds. Reckon da gong went off when some guy got out, not in."

There was an absolute silence for perhaps a quarter of a minute, and then Paterson said:

"Tell Dr. Malanov I'm going to evacuate. Have the cars brought round to the front. Tell Jake and Preston to take the Packard and search the road as far as the Penn-y-Cader fork. If they find no one turn and search two miles back on the Llantyfoed road. Be back here inside a quarter of an hour."

"O.K., boss. An' if they see some guy?"

"Take no chances. Shoot him and bring the body here."

Pete departed on his grisly errand. I could hear Paterson moving around the room, opening and shutting drawers. It was still not safe to move. Richards was due back any moment, unless Satan got there first. Gus must have moved, for it was he who made the next entry.

"Boss, there's real trouble brewin'. The dame ain't there. Her bed ain't bin slept in."



"You great, blundering oaf. This is your doing, somehow. Just put one more foot wrong and I'll give you to Malanov to experiment on. Go and get the cars ready, we're pulling out."

"What, now?"

"No, you goddam imbecile. Christmas. Do as you're told and keep your fool face shut."

There was nothing of the Persian cat about Paterson now. Richards departed in great haste and I heard him falling down the stairs. Probably the full understanding of Satan's experimental work had just soaked in. The next character to take the stage was the doctor himself. I heard his curious, shuffling gait approaching along the corridor and he pushed open the door of Paterson's room without knocking.

"What is this stupid story I hear about an evacuation?"

"It's no story, Malanov. Helen Gregory's ratted. . . ."

"Ratted? It is time someone ratted around here, but what has that to do with evacuation?"

"Oh, lord, I forgot you were shaky on English idiom. I don't mean she's gone rodent operating. She's betrayed us. Got a key and walked out. As far as I know Mansell's with her."

"Why should the woman do such a thing?"

"God knows. Why does any woman do any damn thing. I never employ them. I use them for the purpose they were made, and that's not work. I only took her because I had orders to do so."

"I think, Paterson, you have lost your head."

"I only wish you'd use yours. She knows about the underground room. She and Mansell have got enough evidence to hang the lot of us."

"Evidence, yes, but evidence is not of use until it is communicated. Why do you not take steps to intercept her?"

"I've sent Jake to search the roads, but what are the chances? Mansell came across country, and that's the way they'll go."

"And where will they go? Mansell has friends at the village inn. That is where they will go. Send an armed party to intercept them at the inn."

I thought that Satan was probably right. Paterson, awakened by the clatter of the alarm, faced with calamity after calamity, had panicked.



"Look here, Malanov, policy's not your job. Suppose you leave that to me. I had a report sent through on Mansell. I was reading it in bed last night. We thought he was just a poetic sort of johnny who wrote books. You ought to see his war record. The fellow was in Commandos, and he was absolutely dead. If Mansell's got hold of a gun I wouldn't back five men against him in open country in the dark."

"It will be light when they get to the inn."

"Well, it's no good arguing about it now. I've sprung the mine."

"Then you will unspring it."

"I can't. It's a push button operating a relay."

"I do not know about relays, but I know that you are a fool that has lost his head. It will now be necessary that I leave the country."

They had moved away from Paterson's room and were standing outside the door at which I was listening. I looked at my watch and the time was thirteen minutes to three. They had been talking for a couple of minutes, and it would be five minutes before that when Paterson was opening and shutting drawers. I thought it was probably then that he had pressed the switch. As nearly as I could calculate, Vyford would go up at ten past three.

Paterson said: "You're not the only one. I shall have to get out too."

"I do not think that you will be of much use to us outside this country."

"Good heavens, man, it's not a question of being of use. I shan't be safe in England once this place has gone up."

"It is not of great concern to us that you are safe. I do not think Grominsky will be greatly pleased by what you have done."

"But, Malanov, look what I've done for you in the past. I built up the whole organization in England. Surely Grominsky appreciates that. There's bound to be a place for me. I speak five languages."

"We have men who speak ten, and their services are cheap. It is not what you have done in the past that counts, but what you are able to do in the future. And that, I do not think, will be much. However, as you say, policy is not my job. It will be for Grominsky to decide."



"But you have influence with Grominsky. You would persuade . . ."

They moved off down the corridor, still arguing. I peered cautiously around the door and saw them turn out of the gallery and down the stairs. On tiptoe I followed, to the end of the corridor. They were talking in the hall.

Satan was saying: "This report you have on Mansell, where is it? I am interested in that man. Some day it is possible that I can use him."

"It's by my bed."

"Then go and get it. I will await you in the car."

I thought that this might be my chance. Turning, I ran on tiptoe back to the cover of my room. Paterson came hurriedly up the stairs and ran along the corridor. As he went past the door I put out my foot. In the dim light he went flying and landed on his face on the carpeted floor. Before he could recover himself I was on his back, my left arm around his throat choking him. With my other hand I caught his wrist and twisted his right arm up behind his back. Wedging it there with my knee I thrust my free hand into his pocket and took out his gun.

I said: "If you try any funny business or make a noise I'm going to put a bullet through your back. I'm going to put it where it'll smash your spine and perforate the gut. If you're lucky they'll leave you here and you'll go up with the bomb. If you're not they'll come back for you, you'll take about six hours to die and it's a hell of a death. Now take me to Jennifer Ware."

I relaxed the pressure on his throat, and his breath came in gasps.

"How can I? She's dead. You said yourself that Malanov shot her."

He was playing for time. Within a couple of minutes Satan was going to send someone to see what had happened to him. I don't believe in playing with snakes, if you handle them gently you're apt to get bitten. I pushed the automatic into my pocket, tightened the strangle-hold, took hold of his captive wrist and broke the arm with a quick inward twist. His whole body shuddered with the pain of it. I took out the gun again and pressed it hard into the lumbar region of his spine.

"I haven't," I said, "any time to waste. Either you take



me to Miss Ware or I find her without your help. You've got about five seconds to make up your mind."

When I let him get his breath it came in a choking sob. I don't think he was cut out for playing a losing hand.

"All right, you win."

I took him by the collar and yanked him to his feet, the gun still pressed into his back.

"If we come within sight or sound of one of your men that's going to be just too bad. You'll get the first bullet and he the second."

"If I take you to her, do I go free?"

"You're in no place to bargain. All I'll promise you is a painful death if you don't. If I'm satisfied you can have a run for your money. We both know how much chance you've got."

We went along the corridor and up a flight of stairs. We were now on the top floor and Paterson stopped outside a door. As he fumbled for the key with his sound arm I realized that we were not far from the cell in which I had been confined. The door swung open and I pushed him before me into a lighted bedroom. Jennifer, fully dressed, was sitting on the edge of the bed, and when she saw Paterson she seemed to shrink away from him. Then her eyes fell on me, and she was on her feet.

"Phillip!"

"Jennifer, my darling, has this man touched you?"

"Of course not. Phillip, are you all right?"

"It was the way you shrank away from him."

"He wanted me for himself. They were going to do some operation, so that I wouldn't have a mind of my own. They came up here and told me about it. They were laughing, as though it was a joke."

Till then I think I'd had some chivalrous notion of giving him a sporting chance. One of these days we shall learn that you can't fight barbarians with Queensberry Rules.

"Jennifer," I said, "Go and wait for me outside the door." For a moment she looked startled, but she went out of the room. "All right, Paterson, you can turn round."

I think he saw it on my face. The vivid eyes were wide with fear and the hands stretched out in supplication.

"No, Mansell, no. Oh God, man, don't be a fool. I can give you money, power, anything you care to ask. Malanov's the



man you want. He can undermine your country. I'll give you Malanov."

I said: "Not a very dignified curtain, Paterson. Things like you aren't fit to live."

I shot him through the heart.

## CHAPTER VIII

IT WAS seven minutes to three. The gun had killed Paterson, but it was of no further use to me. The spent shell had stuck in the breech, and the round coming up from the magazine had jammed. I dropped the useless weapon into my pocket and went out of the room. Almost before I knew what had happened Jennifer was in my arms.

"Phillip, is he . . . ?"

"Yes, darling. I'm sorry you had to hear it, but the execution was overdue. Come on, we're getting away from here. This spot won't be healthy inside the next two minutes."

Hand in hand we ran down the corridor and round the corner. I could hear footsteps racing along the first floor and up the stairs to the room where Paterson's body lay. We proceeded now as quietly as possible, but with the utmost haste. The passage had narrowed, and there were bare boards for a floor. As I had suspected, we were in the part of the house where I had recently been confined, and we had not gone far when I recognized the spiral staircase by which Helen and I had descended. I could hear Pete's voice shouting orders, but I was unable to catch the words. The thought of the bomb, ticking towards its detonation, was gnawing at my mind. In this vast warren of an ill-lit house I had little doubt that we could lie concealed longer than they would dare to search, but the danger was that they might delay their departure so long that they would not leave us time for escape. What was needed was a device to stimulate their going, and as we went down the first flight of stairs a possibility presented itself to my mind.

I said, "Have you got a torch?"

"The little one you bought me in London. It's in my bag."



"Get it out, darling."

We were at the top of the next flight of stairs, looking down on the blaze of light from the hall below. If I could plunge the place in darkness the enemy might be thrown into confusion. Satan knew I had a gun, and he did not know that it had jammed. If he had taken Paterson's remarks about my war record to heart he might decide to get out quickly and not risk his neck by hanging around longer than he need. He would know that Helen was clear of Vyford, and even if I escaped I could add nothing to the knowledge which she already possessed. The other thing that troubled me was that he might try to intercept her before she reached the "Dragon's Head". He had worked that manœuvre out too accurately for my liking, and there was little I could do about it. The only consolation was that it would be at least an hour and a half before she reached the village.

We came to the bottom of the stairs, and I took down the fireman's axe from its bracket on the wall. We could hear men's voices calling to one another, and it sounded as though they were working around the house in an organized manner, going in opposite directions. It would not be safe to remain in the corridors much longer. I looked at the distribution board. On the left a heavy conduit ran down from the ceiling, and cables led out of it into the various fuse boxes. Praying that it might be what it appeared, the main feed from the batteries, I swung the axe. There was a searing sheet of blue flame and every light in Vyford went out.

With Jennifer's torch in my hand I led the way along the corridor. If someone used his head he would know where we were at the moment the lights went out, and I wanted to get as far from the spot as we could. Here the passage twisted and turned, and it was apparent that we were in the kitchen quarters of the house. I used the light as little as possible, and once we nearly blundered down a flight of stairs into the cellars. Men were calling to one another in confusion, and it seemed likely that some of them had been caught without a torch. The passage had straightened out, and there was a sound of footsteps coming towards us. I opened the first door I could find, and we stepped inside.

Closing the door, we pressed ourselves against the wall so that the door would screen us if anyone looked in. I flashed the



torch for a moment to get a clear view of my watch, and the hands stood at two minutes to three.

I said: "I don't think I'd tell this to anyone else, but you're Jennifer and you don't panic. I think you'd rather know what we're up against." I told her about the bomb.

In the darkness her arm slid round my shoulders.

"How long have we got?"

"As nearly as I can say, twelve minutes."

"I'm not afraid, darling. We're together again, and that's all that matters. We'll do our best, but either we'll go up together or on together. It's heaven either way."

I kissed her. "I wish I had your philosophy."

The footsteps stopped outside the room. Someone else was coming from the opposite direction.

Richards' voice, "That you, Pete?"

"Yeah."

"Doc says to get to the cars."

"Say, what da hell? I got dis guy cornered. He ain't far from here."

"If you got any sense you'll do as you're told. I've found out who this bastard is. I heard talk of him when I was in the army. He was Cap'n Mansell then."

"So what?"

"Best pistol shot here or in the States."

"Oh yeah? Just let me get a sight of him."

"Think you're good, don't you? Well, this bastard 'ud write your name on your waistcoat while you was lookin' for the trigger."

"I'd like to see him try."

"You wouldn't see nuthin'. You wouldn't know what hit you. I've heard tell he can cut the pip out of the ace of diamonds by shootin' round it at twenty yards."

It's wonderful what legend can do. I'm fairly good, but not as good as that. Pete sounded less enthusiastic.

"Well, if Doc says we gotta get out, we gotta." They moved away, in the direction from which Richards had come.

The floodlights in the grounds had gone out when I cut the main, but through the window I could see the lawns illuminated by the headlamps of the cars. Our room looked out on the curve of the drive where it twisted down to the main gates, and the cars parked outside the front door were out of sight, around



the corner of the house to the right. The hand of my watch was just coming up to three o'clock. I thought that things could have been a lot worse. Paterson was dead and Vyford as good as finished. The British limb of the international octopus, deprived of its leader and with its headquarters shattered, had been so mauled that it would be useless, at least for many months. McKinnon would know, even though it might not be proved, that Paterson had been the head of the spy system. But, at the worst, his body would be buried beneath the ruins of Vyford, and no blame could be attached to me. My other victim, Gregory, was a wanted man who would eventually be found to have died by an unknown hand. I felt I could trust Mac to suggest that he had been liquidated by his fellow members of the gang. With luck we should have ten minutes to get clear of Vyford before the mine went up.

The headlamps of the front car began to move. It turned left round the corner of the house, and right opposite the window into the fifty yards of drive leading to the gate. There were three cars in all. It must have been some sixth sense which prompted us to stand and watch them go, rather than seize every precious second that was left to us. Half-way to the gate the rear car stopped, its door swung open and silhouetted against the lights a figure got out carrying a tommy-gun. It was too tall for Pete. As it vanished into the fringe of trees skirting the right of the drive I recognized the loping gait of Richards. Probably Pete knew about the mine, but Richards did not. Satan didn't trust Richards anyway, and so he had decided to make sure our escape was blocked, at the same time leaving the chauffeur to die when the house went up.

"Phillip, did you see that?"

"Yes, darling." I tried to keep my voice steady. "It's a bit of a humbug, but we've plenty of time, so long as we don't waste any of it." We went out of the room, and turned left along the corridor. "There's something I want you to do while I deal with that pest on the drive. In the room where they took me when I arrived I noticed a telephone. I want you to ring the county police and get them to send a strong party to intercept Helen before Satan gets on to her. She's heading for Glan-y-Coed along the banks of Afon Mawr. Tell them to move fast or they may have a murder on their hands. Can you manage?"



"Yes, darling, but wasn't that a machine-gun that man had?"

"Don't worry. It's only Gus. He doesn't know the muzzle from the breech." I kissed her lightly on the forehead. "No time for more, but just wait till we get out of here."

I stepped out through the open front door, hoping I sounded more sanguine than I felt. It's no fun, playing blind man's buff with a machine-gun at the best of times. The beastly thing has altogether too wide a field of fire, but playing it against a time limit is certainly not my idea of a joke. One thing was in my favour. The darkness was still intense, for the heavy clouds held back the dawn. Skirting the gravel I went across the lawn on my toes. I went fairly quickly, for Richards was some little distance away. The first thing I had to do was get my gun which I had left pushed out of sight under a sprawling stenophylla. I had chosen it because it was the only shrub of its kind I could see in the vicinity, and I wriggled cautiously between two rhododendrons whose dim shape seemed familiar. The fingers of my outstretched hand touched the thorny foliage of the stenophylla, I dropped to my knees and thrust my arm beneath it. The contact of my fingertips with the cold leather of my holster was one of the most welcome sensations I have known. Fumbling a little I withdrew the gun and pushed Jennifer's letter into my pocket. Before I stepped out of the shrubbery I could not resist glancing at my watch. It was four minutes past three.

Keeping close to the shrubbery I began to work my way around the edge of the lawn. The temptation to hurry was almost irresistible, but the nearer I got to Richards the more important it was that I should not make a sound. If he heard anything he was likely to let fly on the off chance, and the odds were that one of the bullets from the machine-gun would find me before I could locate him. I reasoned that he would be standing on the edge of the drive and looking towards the house, which was the direction from which he would expect me to come. I was working round the perimeter of the lawn, beyond the tulip bed, so that I could approach him as nearly as possible from the rear.

I found myself thinking of Helen, and wondering what would be the attitude of officialdom towards her. She'd been engaged in treasonable activities, but she had done so only



under extreme duress. At the risk of her life, and perhaps a great deal more, she'd turned on them at the vital moment. But for her Paterson's evil scheme would have proceeded undisturbed. She need never be called to give public evidence. No one but Mac need ever know the part she had been forced to play, and under his dour Scottish exterior he had one of the broadest streaks of humanity I have ever known. There was no reason why Mac should not turn the official eye the other way. I decided that I'd be damned rude to him if he didn't. Then I remembered that unless I did something about Richards, and did it pretty quickly, I should never be rude to anyone again.

I had circled beyond the tulip bed and was bearing back at an angle on the drive. I went forward a step at a time, listening intently for the faintest sound or movement. The temptation to glance at my watch grew more and more intense, for I was assailed by a mounting certainty that the moment of detonation must be drawing very close, but I dared not relax my concentration for an instant. As I stood poised for another step there was a slight scraping sound, as though a foot had fidgeted on the gravel of the drive.

Levelling the torch in the direction of the sound I pressed the switch. Fifteen yards away the figure of a man sprang into relief, leaped into action, firing as he turned, the bullets swinging in a murderous arc that never reached me, for as my own shot took him he pitched forward full length on the grass. I aimed just above his ear and where I hit him I shall never know, but it was near enough to close my account with Gus.

I was waving my torch and shouting frantically, "Jennifer, darling, run like hell." As she came towards me I found time to look again at my watch. The minute hand had crept almost to the centre of the figure two.

Together we ran across the lawn on to the drive, and it was then that we received the cruellest blow of all. It was as though we had finished the course just in the lead, only to fall at the last fence.

They had locked the gates.

I remember standing before them dazed and numb, the thoughts frozen in my brain. I knew that the time must be ten past three, and the words "Any moment now" kept coursing through my mind. And then I remembered that I had fixed



that time as the earliest at which the mine was likely to explode. It was at some time during the five minutes before Satan had come to his room that Paterson had pressed the switch. It could have been any time up to his arrival. Not necessarily now, but sometime within the next five minutes, Vyford was going up.

My rope was where I had left it. I sent the coil hurtling over the gate and pulled it back through the loop from the other side.

I said, "Can you climb a rope?"

She didn't stop to answer, but went up it like an athlete. Pulling herself up by the pillar she stood poised on top of the wall. I shouted at her:

"Get over on the other side."

"Not till you're with me. Nothing's going to separate us now."

I went up that rope, and no monkey could have gone faster. Together we dropped down on the further side.

I think it was the wall that saved us. Fifty yards from the house, it broke the blast and shielded us from the flying debris. How much explosive had been buried no one will ever know, but Paterson had made certain that nothing of Vyford should remain. The earth rocked, and the sound seemed to fill the universe. I have heard nothing like it in times of peace. Hard on the roar of the explosion came an endless rumbling crash, as shaken wall after shaken wall tottered and collapsed. Then came the falling debris, great lumps of masonry, slates, stones and an unending shower of earth. Noise faded into silence, and over it all there hung the acrid stench of smoke.

We were close together, full length on the ground. Jennifer in a shaky little voice said:

"Was I an awful fool to do what I did?"

"If you were, I love that kind of fool as I've never understood the word before."

I drew her to me and kissed her. Then I went on kissing her, with a kind of fierce intensity. I made full atonement for that fleeting brush of the lips in the door of Vyford.

After a while I said: "What a lovely big bump you've got on the back of your head. Just wait till I get my hands on Pete."

"Satan got away, Phillip. In a way we've lost."



"We haven't lost, and we haven't won. It's not often you achieve finality in life. The end of one thing's the beginning of another. For a time we've broken the power of the beast, but we're not alone. There's McKinnon, and all the might of England, and all the millions of people who want to see a decent world. Maybe we'll get him, and if we don't then we, and all the governments of N.A.T.O., will know who he is and what he is and what he's out to do. We've done a little, but we can't do it all. Remember Windsor? It took so many stones to build that castle."

"We were thinking the same things that day, and neither of us knew."

"When I wrote *Michael*," I said, "I set out to paint the dreadful reality of war. But over and around it all, as a kind of fearful background, I tried to show that there were other things still worse and one of these was tyranny. *Michael* won't change the hearts of men, but it might be one little breeze and out of many a new flame can be found. Perhaps tonight we've dried up some of the water that might have quenched the flame."

"I think I see what you mean. One book can't promote all the good there is, and two people can't undo all the evil. Sometimes the little one can do seems so small that it's hardly worth doing, but if we all thought our effort didn't matter because it wasn't very big, the effort of all of us wouldn't be very big either. It's like not voting in an election because one vote won't make any difference."

"That's it," I said. "Ten million nothings still add up to nothing."

The grass was wet with dew and I hadn't realized it. I took off my jacket and wrapped it round her.

"My darling, you must be frozen. You came out dressed for the summer sun."

"Now you'll be cold."

"I'm never cold."

"Your teeth are chattering already."

"That's not cold. It's funk."

"I don't believe you're ever afraid."

"Don't you. You should have seen me when Satan said he'd carve me up."

I felt her shiver against me. "Oh, Phillip, let's forget him."



Let's go away and forget Vyford. It was my serpent. There's something venomous and viperous, even in the name."

"I think it would be rather nice to go and get married."

"I think it would be the nicest thing I've ever done. Then we could go and find the house on the downs."

"Yes," I said, "the house on the downs. It's going to be a real house, after all."

#### THE END



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