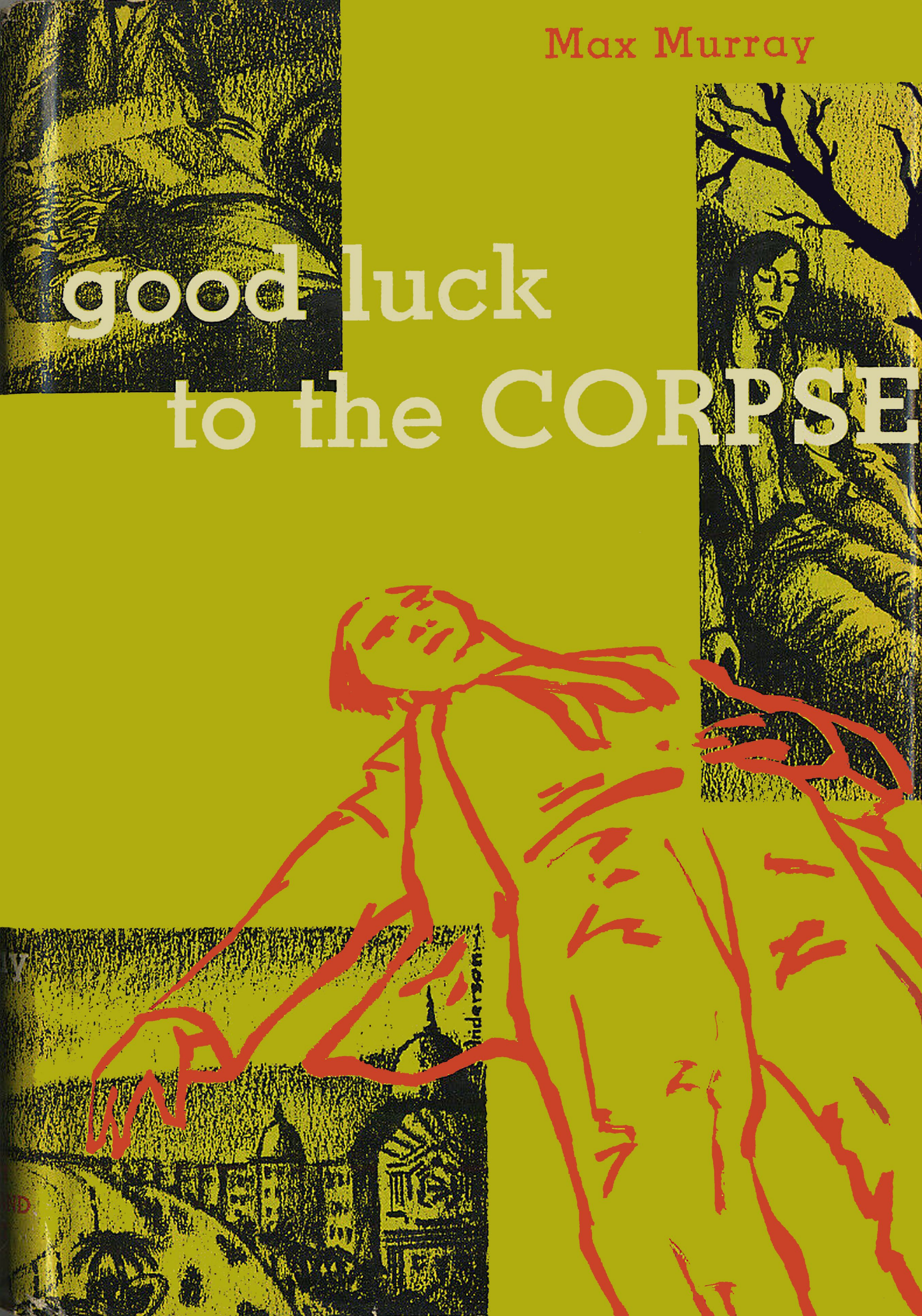


Max Murray

good luck  
to the CORPSE













**GOOD LUCK TO THE CORPSE**



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THE VOICE OF THE CORPSE

THE KING AND THE CORPSE

THE QUEEN AND THE CORPSE

THE NEAT LITTLE CORPSE

THE RIGHT HONORABLE CORPSE

GOOD LUCK TO THE CORPSE



---

*Good Luck*

TO THE



CORPSE

*by* MAX MURRAY

FARRAR, STRAUS AND YOUNG

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**For  
MARION HAY  
With a hand across the sea**



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**GOOD LUCK TO THE CORPSE**





## CHAPTER ONE

**H**E had always known that he would meet Risa again. As abruptly as she had walked out of his life, she would return.

The girl opposite him was not Risa; his mind hesitated, recalling her name. It was Whitecliffe, Penelope Whitecliffe, a blonde girl, with a skin that the sun had turned to luminous bronze. Her eyes were not like Risa's either. They were dark blue and quiet under straight brows, honest, reflecting her moods. He was not thinking of her directly, but thinking how different she was from Risa. Risa would not have spoken as this girl had, because this girl said what was in her mind without any innate fear that she might betray some secrets that had become a part of her life.

And yet he was wrong, Penelope Whitecliffe would have died rather than admit what was passing through her mind: that Julian Ashford was a nice name, that he was thin and brown, that the lines cut deeply in his cheeks must have been etched there by some tragic experience; that there was hardly anybody, nobody she

had met, who was so unaffectedly attractive, who made no effort whatever to create an impression.

She found herself explaining to him a problem that she had considered her own, even her unacknowledged fear. Later she was to be ashamed of herself, but not now. "It all looks wonderful here," she said. "Everybody enters into a conspiracy to make it seem that people come here to forget their worries. But that's not honest either. People bring their worries here because they can't tolerate them any longer at home. Others here exploit them."

He smiled a slow quiet protest. "Exploit worries? Surely that isn't a very profitable enterprise?"

"But it is . . . it is when you create an hysteria of escape. You don't know the background, but I do. I live here. That makes it different."

They were talking in the drawing room of his suite in the Hotel Ruhl in Nice. Reluctantly impressed, he got up and walked to the windows of the oval room, high above the Promenade des Anglais. There was nothing sinister about the view. The water was blue and shining, all around the wide expanse of the bay. A speedboat was racing along close inshore, towing a girl on water skis. She was leaping and curving back and forth through the wake of the speedboat, and she looked wildly exultant. Farther out there were the sedate little sailboats, white triangles on blue water. From the Promenade below he could hear the insistent hooting and tooting of the horns of the taxis. He could see the horse carriages with their white canopies, passing on their way as if they were going to an antique fes-

tival. He could see the endless procession of idlers, some of them grave and some gay, some dressed in the wildest extravagance, some buttoned up and somber as if they were in mourning, some loitering and some bustling as if they had not yet learned that there was no hurry.

He shook his head and turned back to her. "If this is a sinister place, Miss Whitecliffe, the disguise is perfect. I chose it because it was safe."

"Safe?"

"Of course, safe for young Tyler. It's a funny thing, I don't expect you to understand it; but this boy of mine has turned me into a coward." He made a gesture of apology. "You see we've been together alone almost since he was born, and I've had to drag him up and down the world, till this." He gestured to the hotel room. "This is the nearest thing to home that he can recall. You suggest that this is dangerous. I once carried him on my back from Burma to India through the jungles. We have been together in a lot of cities. This one we think is the safest."

She saw that he was affected by having to explain. "Must you go away and leave him?"

"Yes," he said. "I explained that. I have to go on another journey; it's long and exhausting and it might even be dangerous. Of course I want to take him with me because I want to share his excitement in all the new things there are in the world. But on the other hand I want him to realize that there are places where people live without eternally moving on, where he can stay put and make friends."

He could not help feeling that she was genuinely

distressed. "I can't accept the responsibility for your little boy," she said. "I have to leave Nice too often."

"Haven't you rather missed the point?" he asked. "I'm not asking you to accept any responsibility. I'm employing your uncle."

"But you don't even know him."

That was true too. It was also true that on this side of the world he did not know anybody, certainly nobody whom he could ask to take charge of a strange boy.

When he found little Mr. Whitecliffe, he considered himself lucky. Mr. Whitecliffe had looked so exactly what he had claimed to be. A teacher who had found the full routine of a big school too much for him. He had come to Nice for a holiday and had stayed on with Penelope as a part-time tutor. His references had been excellent.

"Are you trying to tell me there is something wrong with your uncle, Miss Whitecliffe?" he asked slowly.

"No, no, of course not. It isn't like that at all . . . but—"

"Yes?"

"My uncle is really quite helpless," she said flatly. "In a crisis he would lose his head completely."

"But why on earth should there be a crisis? Tyler will be staying here in this hotel, and your uncle will stay here with him to see that he does his homework and washes behind his ears. Any crisis in Tyler's life would be on that level. During the day, of course, he will attend the children's section of your school."

Penelope looked at him as if she suddenly realized she



was behaving unreasonably. "You think I'm trying to pass on my own troubles to you, don't you?"

"Of course not, why should you?"

She could not explain that he was the sort of man who invited that sort of feeble-mindedness. "I just wanted to make it clear that you don't know anything about me. . . . I mean about my uncle and me. You see, I . . ."

He broke in. "Let me tell you what I do know about you." He sat opposite her and looked at her in the characteristic appraising way he had. "I wouldn't have been such a fool as not to try to find out something about you. Your father died a year ago and you inherited his schools. You teach languages, and branches of your schools are located in most of the capitals of Western Europe and, of course, you have this little prep school here for the visitors' children. The principal school is here in Nice. Your father knew that he was doing something great as he tried to break down the barrier of tongues; to him it was the same as teaching a pioneer how to live on a strange territory. It was not his idea to make them scholars, but only to teach them to understand and not be frightened by their environment." He gave her a diffident smile. "You see I read about him. I went to the newspaper files and read about his death, and about how his glamorous daughter had taken up the torch, as it were. Now do you agree that I know about you?"

She shook her head. "Not everything. They are trying to take the schools away from me." A sense of indignation gave speed to her voice. "I wouldn't sell, and they told me that I would lose them whether I sold them

or not. They were very nice and pretended that they were sure I was too inexperienced to make a success. That's what they pretended, but it was not what they meant."

He nodded without conviction. "What makes you so sure?"

"Not just one thing, lots of little things: students at the school, for instance. Some of them aren't what they seem to be. They are paying their fees to be taught French, but they aren't interested. Some of them know more already than they can possibly learn from the short courses we give," she added defensively. "But, of course, you know our school never was intended to be like others. People come to us from all over the world. Their main objective is to learn enough French to get along in a strange country. They can't afford the luxury of a long course. Some of them have escaped from places where their political views made it too dangerous to stay. They have to get money from somewhere. I suppose they can't be too particular where it comes from."

"You think they are using your school as a sort of clearing house?"

"Somebody may be, I think. My uncle says he's sure of it."

"He should go to the police."

"He should, of course," she agreed soberly, "but he's very mysterious about it, even with me." She gave a brief smile. "I think he would like to think he was involved in a sinister plot. All his life he has lived in boys' boarding schools. He's still like a boy himself. I suppose that's why he gets on with them so well."

"Who has been trying to buy you out, Miss Whitecliffe?" He was only politely interested.

"Raoul de Wollfe." She saw the name meant nothing to him and explained, "He and his wife have a villa up in the hills near St. Paul. It's a beautiful place and they have money enough to entertain most of the celebrities who come here. It's quite an honor to be invited."

"He hardly sounds the sort of man who would cheat a girl out of her heritage," he suggested.

She colored. "I did not say that he was trying to cheat me. He simply told me that he was determined to get it. I don't like his calm assumption that he can take what he wants."

"Most people get what they want, you know, if they can afford to pay the price for it," he said.

"I'd die rather than let him have it." She stood before him as if it were he who had made the challenge. She looked very young and defenseless.

He stood up too and smiled down at her. "I shouldn't take it too seriously if I were you. This De Wollfe of yours doesn't sound very sinister. This is probably just another whim of the rich. Most likely he's forgotten that you exist, or if he remembers it's to tell his friends of the young girl who defied him." Julian Ashford had begun with the idea of making light of her troubles and he ended thinking that most likely he was guessing at the truth.

She was not convinced but she did look relieved and a little self-conscious. "I still say I can't be responsible for anything that may happen to your son," she said.

He laughed. "And I still say that I didn't ask you to be."

He walked with her to the elevator and came back to stand by the circular windows again. He had been right; nothing could be more innocuous than this city that lived on holiday money of the hundreds of thousands who bought a few weeks of leisure and sun and sea, and then went back to work. Of course there were others, there always were: the too idle, the too wealthy and their parasites. But there were no more here than anywhere else. And it was they who gave its color to the place.

He saw the girl leave the hotel. He saw a young man get up from a table on the terrace, and the girl pause beside him, half reluctantly, Julian thought. She took a chair the young man drew out for her, and for a moment their heads were close together. His hair was as blond as hers, rather long and inclined to wave. He was tall and even from here he looked self-assured, more so than the girl who gave an impression of reluctance.

Julian wondered idly what their relationship was, and if the young man had brought Penelope to the hotel and had waited below. This was a habit he had, to see two complete strangers together, to compare them and speculate about them. A bad habit; he shrugged it aside and went to finish his packing.

His son's door was open and he looked in. The little boy's back was turned and he was bending over his bed. His head was lowered and his shoulders drooped dejectedly. There was an open bag in front of him, one of the small canvas affairs that the airline companies



give away to their clients. His most precious possessions were spread out on the bed, items such as a cowboy gun and a battered hat, a pencil sharpener and a pair of roller skates and some colored chalks.

"Packing, Tyler?"

"No, daddy." His voice was small and lifeless. "I was unpacking. I packed last night because I thought you'd change your mind and I'd be ready." Without looking up he continued to drop his possessions one by one on the bed, as if spelling out his sorrow.

Julian put a hand on his shoulder. "I know how you feel. But you see that it isn't possible, don't you?"

Tyler shook his head without answering.

"I won't be long, only a matter of weeks."

The boy nodded. What was the use of trying to explain that a week can be a year?

"You like it here, don't you? And you like the school?"

"I like Miss Whitecliffe, but she doesn't want to bother with me. I heard her say so. I suppose she thinks I'll be a nuisance, because I don't know anything about women either."

Julian sat on the bed and stood Tyler facing him between his knees. "No, Tyler, you're wrong. Miss Whitecliffe did not say she couldn't bother with you. She said that she could not accept the responsibility, which is quite another matter. And that does not arise because you are nobody's responsibility but mine. You aren't afraid to stay here, are you?"

The little boy considered that. "I'll be afraid that you'll get killed when I'm not with you," he said.

Julian stood up and said flatly, "Tyler, you mustn't even think such rubbish."

"No, daddy, but I can't help it if I dream it, can I?"

Julian went back to his own packing. This time the oil company was sending him to the Persian Gulf. There had been a time when he looked forward to these journeys, to the deserts and jungles. He had liked the men who worked in them, who pushed forward the industrial frontiers because it was in their blood. Almost since he could walk, Tyler had been going along with him, by ship, by train, by camel, by pony; all the time when he should have been at home with a nurse. Now Julian was leaving him at a point when he was strange with other children, and knew nothing about women. If only Risa had been different. . . . He closed the case as if to close out her memory.

He walked to the window again. Penelope and her companion were leaving their seats. They walked to a spectacular-looking car that was parked in the center of the Promenade. They got in and drifted gracefully into the traffic lanes. Idlers turned to watch them, but whether to look at the car or its occupants there was no way of knowing. Julian Ashford felt foolishly resentful. The girl had come to him to implant doubts in his mind about her school. Now presumably she was prepared to leave it to take care of itself.

But he was being unfair to Penelope. To be driven to the school by John Keeble, little as she liked him, was more sensible than to walk there. That, at least, was what she was telling herself. Also, it was a good deal more disturbing.

## CHAPTER TWO

**J**ULIAN ASHFORD was due at the company's office for a last-minute conference. The Franco Consolidated Fuel Corporation occupied a building on the Promenade, a short way beyond the Negresco Hotel. The hotel doorman asked if he wanted a cab, but he said he preferred to walk. Anybody on such a day would have made the same choice. This day was too beautiful to ignore. It was the *apéritif* hour, but then on a fine day in Nice any hour is the *apéritif* hour, or that is how it would seem. The colored umbrellas were out on the sidewalks, so were the vendors of colored spectacles, optimistic, because everybody was already wearing them. The carpet sellers were out, Oriental and vaguely furtive, some of them with goods under the carpets that were not nearly so respectable. But there was nothing particularly sinister about that. There are oriental rug hawkers in every resort in France. But they reminded Julian of Penelope's misgivings. It annoyed him that his mind insisted on reverting to what she had said. There was no need continually to reassure himself that

Tyler would be perfectly safe. He was rubbing shoulders with the most innocuous crowd of holiday makers on earth. Holiday makers. . . .

He was of the very few who were not wearing sunglasses. His eyes had accustomed themselves to the sun where it was far more violent. It had bleached his eyes to a clear gray-blue, and etched the lines at their corners that creased deeply when he smiled. It was not the Nicoise sun that had burned rather than browned his skin. His tan was permanent. He walked looking into the distance, and in his preoccupation was hardly aware of the people about him. He did not notice that women turned to watch him as he passed.

He was thinking of the years that he had been alone with his son. He was thinking of Risa, of how he had met her when he was on leave in Australia, of how crazily infatuated he had been, and of how bitterly disillusioned she had been with the tropics when he took her home. She had not even tried to share his life. He thought how much she would have loved it here, everything would have suited her, the gilded idleness, the brief, shallow encounters and the stimulated excitement. She would have loved it because it was like her. That impression was so strong that when he had finished his conference he did not go back by the Promenade, but walked away from the sea to the Rue de France where the tramcars clatter and grind and the people trade and eat and gesticulate just as they do in any other provincial city in France, where the sidewalks are always too narrow, and the housewives and their shopping combined are too broad. Here it was busily sensible and perma-

nent, and there were a great many healthy, uninhibited children.

Of course it was safe. The greatest danger in Nice was that one would be run over by the fiendish cyclists who presumably are eternally training for the Grand Prix de France.

Tyler was waiting for him in the suite. Julian had expected little Mr. Whitecliffe to be there.

Tyler explained, "He said to tell you, daddy, that he had some urgent business to attend to."

"Oh, he did, did he?" If Mr. Whitecliffe had urgent business while his employer was still in Nice to watch him, he might not be so reliable when his employer was a thousand miles away. "What business?" he asked.

"It was mysterious business," Tyler said simply.

"Now listen, Tyler, schoolteachers and tutors don't have mysterious business. They look after little boys, so don't you try to make a drama out of this."

Tyler protested, "But, daddy, he said he had a letter that put a different complexion on everything. What do you think of that?"

"I think it must have been an advertisement for sun tan, and he has gone out to buy a small bottle because he is a small man." He laughed, not naturally.

"No, it wasn't that. He telephoned to somebody and said, 'I've got you where I want you,' in a funny voice."

Julian had experienced this sort of thing before. "Tyler," he said, "I know that I've brought you up very badly. I know that I've let you look at too many bad movies and comics, but people do not say 'I've got you where I want you,' not in real life, Tyler."



Tyler said with some satisfaction, "Mr. Whitecliffe did."

And then Julian remembered what Penelope had said about her uncle, that he had lived so long with school-boys that he was like one himself. Yes, possibly Mr. Whitecliffe might have said that. It was an uncomfortable thought. "Do you mean to say that he made these threats while you were in the room?"

"No, daddy, I wasn't exactly in the room, but I was listening."

"You had no right to listen."

"I couldn't help it. He was talking in a loud voice that went up and down because he was excited. Truly, daddy. I think perhaps it's just as well that I'm staying because if Mr. Whitecliffe gets into trouble I'll be here to take care of him. He did talk in a loud voice, but I think he was frightened."

"Nonsense." Julian wished that he could put down the ridiculous feeling that this story was not entirely romance. He knew that Tyler was capable of inventing it as an escape into unreality while they were separated. He was almost tempted to let him go on with the make-believe, because it would help to bridge the gap. Tyler would not be the lonely kid who was missing his father for the first time. He would be some mysterious character on the side of the right who at the last dramatic moment would unmask the enemies of poor little Mr. Whitecliffe and the Law. It would tide him over the first few miserable days till he had adjusted himself to the separation. That he was sure was what was behind the story.

**"When did he say he would be back, Tyler?"**

**"He didn't say. He wasn't thinking about us, daddy. His hands were shaking at the thought of his enemies closing in on him."**

**Julian smiled. "I thought it was the other way round, and that he had got his enemies where he wanted them."**

**The boy thought of that. Real or unreal the picture was clear in his mind: "Mr. Whitecliffe was alone and unarmed," he said. "And very little, that's why he was afraid."**

**Julian had no means of knowing whether or not he was serious. Even if this had been a game, young Tyler would have been just as serious as he was now. Nonetheless, he was relieved when there was a discreet knock on the door and Mr. Whitecliffe came in. The color of his cheeks may have been a little higher than Julian remembered when he interviewed him earlier, and he may have been a little more tense; but there was no marked change.**

**"I'm most sorry that I was called away," he said. "There was an urgent private matter that I had to attend to."**

**Julian had to choke down a sense of irritation. "I hope your private affairs are finally in order," he said.**

**"Not entirely, I'm afraid. I have a final appointment at three. The matter will be settled finally then."**

**"I see."**

**"It will occupy no more than half an hour, I assure you, Mr. Ashford," he said.**

**Julian left the hotel early. The plane did not leave**

till four, but he had several things to do on the way to the airport. Tyler stood beside him waiting for the bags to be stowed into the taxi. He was silent and Julian knew that he could not trust himself to speak. He wished that the porters would hurry.

"Well, Tyler, I must be off. I'll be back before you realize that I've gone."

"Yes, daddy."

He ran his hand through his son's blond hair, briefly, as he always did at bedtime. "Goodbye, Tyler."

"'Bye."

He glanced back through the window. The little boy standing beside the tall pillars looked small and forlorn. The tutor was fidgeting in the background. Julian's impression was that Mr. Whitecliffe was impatient to see the last of him.

In spite of the time he had allowed himself, the passengers were filing through the gates as he arrived, and the porters rushed for his bags. An official took his passport, raised his die as if to stamp it, then lifted his eyes to look curiously at its owner. From Julian his eyes passed to two men standing by the gate. He nodded to them and they came to the counter and stood one on either side of him. One of them took the passport and put it in his pocket.

"Mr. Julian Ashford?"

"Yes."

"We should like a word with you."

"I'm sorry, I've no time."

"We are police officers, Mr. Ashford."

**"I can't help that, I have a plane to catch."**

As if in denial the gates shut with a little emphatic click.

He looked from one to the other in amazement. "Do I understand that you are trying to stop me from getting on that plane?"

**"Those are our instructions."**

He saw that the porters were moving his baggage back to the taxi. The airline clerks were watching him with impassive curiosity, waiting to see what he was going to do next, waiting to see if he was going to lose his head. It was quite obvious that he was not to travel by the plane waiting on the tarmac. It was not the first time official interference had preventing him from traveling. In the modern world it had become a commonplace. He had learned to save his breath. He wondered which particular footling regulation he had neglected this time.

**"What other instructions have you?"**

**"We are to take you back to Nice, monsieur."**

**"Why?"**

One of the men had rather furtively taken a notebook from his pocket and had stepped into the background. The other acted as questioner.

**"We thought you might know the answer to that."**

"It might be as well to assume that when I ask you a question I do not know the answer," Julian said curtly.

**"You don't even know that there has been murder?"**  
The man's manner was patiently sceptical.

**"I know there have been hundreds of murders. Is that any reason why you should try to stop me from catching my plane?"**

**“You are not catching any plane till you have answered our questions. The murder I am referring to took place in Nice less than an hour ago. As a result of what is known, we were reached by telephone and instructed to prevent you from leaving the country.”**

**“I see, and if I tell you that I have not the slightest idea of what you are talking about, you will not believe me, of course?”**

**“We will make a note of what you say. You have a son, I believe?”**

**Julian reached out a hand and gripped the counter rail. He was unable to speak. The police officer said with quick sympathy, “The boy is alive and well, monsieur. I asked you to confirm that you had a son.” At the same time he told himself that this man might be acting. One could not be too careful.**

**Julian Ashford passed a hand across his eyes. “Yes, I have a son,” he said.**

### CHAPTER THREE

**J**ULIAN made no attempt to question them on the drive back to Nice, and they offered no explanations. He had expected them to take him to his hotel or to the headquarters of the regional police at the other end of the town. Instead the car drew up under the portico of the Casino Mediterrane. The commissionaire saluted as they got out of the door, and watched their entrance with veiled curiosity. Obviously the policy here was business as usual. The chattering tourists and subdued regular patrons surrounded them as they walked up the broad staircase to the floor of the grand salon. He was not under arrest, but the police officers remained purposefully on either side of him. Near enough to make it quite clear that he was in their charge. They passed the closed doors where the uniformed flunkeys were checking the patrons into the salon, went on to the business side of the establishment, and into what Julian guessed must be the room of the Board of Directors. It had the right look of unhurried dignity, the long table with the unused blotting tablets and correctly placed chairs. But



now at the head of the table there was a man in an untidy dark suit that looked too big for his body. A wide-brimmed black hat was on the table in front of him, and a limp cigarette was drooping from his lips. He had dark black hair and a sallow complexion and a protruding lower lip. Julian was to learn to know him as Inspector Henri Vernier. He changed the character of the room.

And then Julian saw his son. He was sitting in a corner and Penelope Whitecliffe was holding his hand. He had a quick impression that both of them had been frightened and upset.

And then Tyler saw him and flew across the room like a bullet and clung to him. "Daddy, daddy, I knew you'd come back. I knew it, I told Miss Whitecliffe not to worry, I told her." He turned triumphantly to Penelope. "I told you he always comes and rescues me when there's trouble, didn't I?"

Julian said gently, "We have to find out what the trouble is first, don't we? You go and sit quietly where you were, and we'll see what this is all about." He resented the way in which the two men acted as guards as they escorted him to the man at the head of the table. The man who had taken his passport produced it now and placed it on the table before his chief, as if that in itself was an accusation.

"Sit down, please." The man said this as if he found looking up at a man standing too much of a strain, and not from any desire to be polite. "You are Julian Ashford?"

"Yes."



"Can you account for your movements this afternoon?"

"I can, but I would like very much to know first why I should."

This official was different from the others. His approach was direct. "You may know. A short time ago a man in your employ named Ainslie Frederick Whitecliffe, schoolmaster, was murdered here in this Casino."

So that was it. He did not look to the corner where Penelope and Tyler were waiting and watching. He made his mind come to bear on the little man he had employed, on what his niece had said of him, of his vain-glorious telephone calls and his appointment for three o'clock . . . the final appointment in his private affairs.

He said, "I'm glad you were able to stop me before I left the country. He was to have looked after my son. But you know that."

"Of course."

"Am I permitted to ask how he was murdered?"

"The man was poisoned. The doctor has not completed his examination, but we are sure of it. We want to know where you were at the time of his death."

The incredible fact that Mr. Whitecliffe had been murdered had been so much in his mind that he had forgotten that he was personally involved. "Time of his death? When did he die?"

"Shortly after three o'clock."

"I don't know. I was finishing off last-minute business."

Henri Vernier looked at him cynically. "You knew

you had a plane to catch and yet you were not continually looking at your watch?"

"I imagine I might have been. One does that automatically."

"What was this last-minute business?"

"I went to my office to sign some letters I had dictated earlier. I went to my bank to collect some travelers' checks. I went to the American Express Office for my tickets."

"Is that all?"

"I think so."

"And, of course, you visited the Casino. Why did you forget to mention that, monsieur? In case you think of denying it, we have a witness whom you may not wish to discredit. Your son saw you leaving."

He looked down to the other end of the room where Penelope was waiting with his son. The little boy was standing up, shaking with distress.

"I didn't know that it was wrong to tell them, daddy. I was coming back to meet Mr. Whitecliffe. He told me he would be in the Casino for half an hour. I went down the Promenade to play and when I was coming back I saw you come out. I called but you jumped into a car and drove away. They asked me when I saw you last and I told them. I didn't know it was wrong."

He saw Penelope put a reassuring arm around the boy's shoulders.

"Of course it was not wrong, Tyler," he said quietly. "It's not wrong to tell the truth, ever."

The inspector said heavily, "It is strange that you forgot to mention the visit to the Casino, Mr. Ashford."

That was no less than the truth. He had not only forgotten to mention it, but until he was reminded he had forgotten it entirely. He knew that no sensible, polite officer would believe it. "Yes, of course, I came to the Casino. I was passing and I suddenly realized that I had been here last night and had forgotten to cash in my winnings. I had been wearing the clothes I am wearing now, and the plaques were in my pocket. They didn't amount to much, but I knew that Casino Mediterranean chips would not be good currency in Persia, so I ran in here and changed them . . . ten thousand francs I think it was."

"What did you do with the money?"

"I scribbled a note and asked the cashier to post it to Mr. Whitecliffe. I thought he might as well use it for expenses."

"Why do that?"

"You know as well as I do that there is a limit to the amount of currency you can take out of the country."

"But since you knew that Mr. Whitecliffe was in the Casino, why not hand it to him?"

Julian said flatly, "From the brief knowledge I had of Mr. Whitecliffe, this was the last place I would have expected him to be."

"Unless, of course, you had arranged to meet him here."

Tyler broke away from Penelope and ran to the table and stood fiercely by his father's side. "Don't you say that about my father," he said. "Mr. Whitecliffe and I both thought he had gone away. Mr. Whitecliffe was waiting for him to go so that he could come down here."

He told me he didn't want my father to think he was the type who would go into casinos and neglect his duty. He wasn't either. It was only just this once."

The inspector nodded heavily. "You are right. It was just this once."

Julian put a reassuring hand on Tyler's shoulder. "Don't you worry about this." He turned to the inspector. "Is it necessary for him to stay here?"

"Not necessary. He may go." He turned to the girl who had followed Tyler to the table. "You, also, Miss Whitecliffe. I will have a lot of questions to ask you, but they can wait. You will not leave the city."

She turned to Julian and briefly he took her hand. "I'm sorry about this. I'm sure I don't have to tell you how sorry I am," he repeated.

"I'll take Tyler back to the hotel and wait with him till you come," she said quietly.

He smiled bleakly. "I know now what you meant about not accepting responsibility," he said. "Go with Miss Whitecliffe, Tyler. I won't be long." Julian smiled briefly at his son.

As the door closed behind them the inspector said, "I must congratulate you. Obviously she is a very good friend of yours."

"Before this morning, I met Miss Whitecliffe once, when I entered my son at her school," he said.

The police officer raised his eyes and looked over Julian in slow appraisal. "What else can you tell us about this death?" he asked.

"I think," Julian said, "it would save a lot of time if you told me."

Inspector Vernier lighted another drooping cigarette from the one he was about to discard. The ash lodged itself untidily on his dark waistcoat. Then he shrugged and turned to the clerk who had been taking notes at a table to the side. "Ask M. Keeble to come here," he said.

The clerk went out and the room became empty of sound.

When John Keeble came in, he ignored the inspector and held out his hand to Julian. "I'm sure you remember me. I met you when I was a kid in Burma. You knew my uncle, Peter Keeble. He was a planter out there." He laughed pleasantly and added, "You were a hero of mine."

Only vaguely Julian remembered there had been a schoolboy staying for a short time on Peter Keeble's place. It was impossible to identify him with this decorative young man. He looked at the blond hair that waved carelessly over his forehead, the almost too perfect bronze features and the nonchalantly correct clothes. He decided that John Keeble was not one of the world's workers.

"I knew your uncle well," he said. "How is he?"

"Dead, poor chap. The concentration camp was no place for a man who liked his scotch as much as my Uncle Peter did." He looked at Julian speculatively. "You haven't changed. I think I'd have recognized you even if Penelope hadn't set me wondering about your name. She told me this morning that you were going to employ her vague uncle, and I felt quite sorry for you." He had a way of running from one idea to another inconsequentially. "I had often wondered if one day you

would show up here. And now here you are in the toils of the police." He laughed.

Inspector Vernier said coldly, "I brought you here to talk to me. I have not all day. You are a friend of Miss Whitecliffe, Mr. Keeble?"

"As much as Miss Whitecliffe will permit, or should I say as much as her conscience will permit? She doesn't approve of me."

"Yet you were seen driving her in your car this morning."

"That car . . . I think it must be the color. White is inclined to be conspicuous. If for no other reason than avoiding the attentions of the police, I should have chosen black. As it is, they persecute me."

"Why does Miss Whitecliffe not approve of you?" the inspector asked.

John grinned maliciously. "I gather she feels that I should work."

"How actually do you live, monsieur?"

"Consider the lilies, Inspector. They toil not neither do they spin." He looked down complacently at his own clothes. "Yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

"I asked you if you had any means of supporting yourself," the inspector said coldly.

"Oh yes. I have some private means. Also I represent an insurance company."

"Which one?"

Momentarily John Keeble dropped his banter. "Lloyd's of London. If you know of a better one I should be glad to hear of it. But I would be grateful if



you did not ruin my standing here by spreading the rumor that I support myself. My friends here would start being sorry for me."

The inspector looked at him with dawning respect, but still as an adversary. "You knew the dead man?"

"When I was a child, he happened to be one of my many tutors."

"Can you think of any reason why he should have been killed?"

John Keeble looked at the questioner oddly. "Yes," he said slowly. "He had happened on something that was too big for him to cope with. It was something that was affecting his niece's schools."

The inspector looked at him suspiciously as if he were unsure whether the witness was being serious or not. "What was this thing he was not big enough to deal with?" he asked.

"I haven't an idea, Inspector. He was boyishly mysterious."

Vernier placed his untidy hands on the table and pressed on them as he leaned forward. "You knew Miss Whitecliffe, you knew her uncle, and you were present when he died. Will you tell me exactly what happened this afternoon? Are you capable of giving me an exact picture?"

John picked up a pencil from the table and tossed it in the air. He caught it neatly. "If your stenographer is ready, yes, I am quite capable," he said. "I don't usually go to the Casino at that time in the afternoon. Nobody does, I mean nobody but the tourists and the old people who have nothing else in their lives. I just

happened to be near there and was at a loose end. When I went in they hadn't even begun to play. They were setting up the tables. That is quite a ritual, quite dramatic till you get used to it, all the thousands and thousands of francs worth of plaques spread out on the green tables, all arranged according to their values, all in their neat rows. It makes you think of an army in ceremonial dress, the big important generals, the colonels, the captains, the lieutenants, down to the poor little dingy white privates; all getting ready to go to their battle stations to wait for the enemy, which is the poor gullible crowd who think they are going to win."

The inspector said impatiently, "Very interesting, but what actually happened, monsieur?"

John Keeble looked at him in surprise. "That happened . . . that happened first. I thought you wanted to know what happened from the time I arrived. The patrons began to drift in. Some of them went to the bar, but most of them went and sat in chairs by the windows overlooking the Promenade. They spoke in low voices while they waited, like people do in church, waiting for the service to begin.

"When the play began, the regular patrons had got to their regular places. It was very dull. Nobody bets very much at that time of the day. Nobody is very much interested, and the croupiers are mainly occupied with shuffling their chairs, making themselves comfortable for the day. It always takes a time to warm up.

"Then I saw Mr. Whitecliffe. I'm not sure where he came from. I had an impression that it was from the direction of the bar. He was hurrying, but he looked

rather as if he were walking in a trance. He passed close, and I said hello to him but I don't think he heard me. He walked on and up the stairs that lead to the *bureau de change*. When he came back he was carrying a handful of plaques. They were the oblong ones for ten thousand francs each, and he had quite a stack of them. It was no business of mine, of course, but I wondered vaguely if he had been embezzling the school funds. Prim little men do break out like that now and then, and when they do they can't stop.

"He still had the same odd look about him as if he were an automaton. He came to the table where I was standing, and one of the attendants pulled out a chair for him and he sat down, and he still seemed not quite to know where he was or what he was doing. Because I knew him and knew Penelope, I couldn't help being interested. I stood behind his chair and watched. He toyed with his chips for a while and then he reached out and put two of them, twenty thousand francs, on red. Honestly I think I was more excited than he was. They started the wheel and then started the little white ball in the other direction. I held my thumbs. It raced around as if it were trying to make up its mind and it danced across the wheel and out the other side and then it launched itself into a slot and sailed around as if it had just come there for the ride. It was red, all right.

"I wanted to tap the little man on the shoulder and tell him to pick up his winnings and go home. Perhaps I should have done, but for some reason I didn't.

"He left his original stake and the winnings on the board, that was forty thousand. Red came up again.

That was eighty thousand. He left it and red came up again. I wanted to tell him to stop, but again before I could decide he won again. By that time the crowd was pressing close to him, the way they do when someone is winning. It's a sort of instinctive desire they have to be near somebody in luck.

"He looked awfully small, sitting hunched up, not knowing that everyone was watching him. His hands reached out and I thought he was going to collect his winnings. But he did not. His head was lowered till it was almost touching the table. Then the wheel was spinning again, everybody was watching now, everybody but Mr. Whitecliffe. The ball stopped in red again. I saw the little man's body give a convulsive jerk. His hands shot out and his fingers clasped together around his winnings. His head dropped onto the green cloth and he sprawled there without moving. Nobody moved.

"Then Raoul de Wollfe spoke and his voice sounded very loud, 'I don't want to cast a gloom over these proceedings,' he said. 'But I think that man is dead.' " John got up abruptly from the table as if he wanted to turn away from the memory.

The inspector was watching him warily, drumming his swarthly fingers on the table in front of him. "Why should this De Wollfe suppose that he was dead? Why not assume that he had fainted; which would have been so much more likely."

John said impatiently, "How should I know? Perhaps he had more experience, perhaps he was in the best position to see. It's not for me to guess. I'm passing on what I heard."

"This M. de Wollfe . . . do you know him?"

"Of course, everybody knows him. I'm sure you know him yourself, Inspector. He has a villa up near St. Paul and he entertains a lot. You know that as well as I do."

"That is beside the point, monsieur. I was asking what you know of him. Is he a close friend of yours?"

"I know him quite well. One doesn't make lifelong friends in a place like this. We don't move in the right atmosphere."

Julian Ashford had been sitting a little apart, watching the two men. He knew that they were two who would never be anything but antagonists. His respect for John Keeble had increased.

The inspector was looking at his notes. "You said that when you first saw Mr. Whitecliffe he was coming from the bar."

John Keeble shook his head. "I said I was not sure but I had an impression that it was from the direction of the bar . . . quite different."

"You have nothing to add?"

"Nothing."

"You mentioned M. de Wollfe. Did you come with him to the Casino?"

"I met him there."

"By appointment?"

Julian noted that there was a fractional hesitation. Then John Keeble shook his head. "I knew he was going to be there."

"How did you know that?"

The young man answered with amused impatience.



"His wife, Inspector. She said she had arranged to meet him there."

The inspector turned to the clerk. "M. de Wollfe is still in the Casino?"

The clerk nodded. "We asked him to remain. He said that was his intention."

"Ask him to come here, please."

Raoul de Wollfe was what is described as a Well-Known Figure in the south of France. He was presumably rich because he entertained well without being ostentatious. If he gambled in the casinos it was on a scale that suggested that he was indulging a whim and that winning or losing were not really important to him, but he did play seriously and he was a formidable opponent. He was respected by the staff of the Casino because he won more often than he lost and because win or lose he was invariably good mannered. That was rare; so, too, was his habit of treating people he met as human beings. He was an enthusiastic fisherman. He would take a duke or a waiter aside and talk about it. Whether it was May fly on the Test in England, or salmon in Norway, or bass in New England, he knew their ways and their whims. Fish, he said, gave him a good excuse for traveling in strange places. With his gray hair and clipped mustache, with his distinguished features and the unobtrusive elegance of his clothes, he was quite typically a man of leisure and a man of the world.

"Hello, John," he said. "So they roped you in too?" He turned with polite interest to Julian. "You too, sir?"

John introduced them, and Julian found himself wondering why Raoul de Wollfe made an unfavorable



impression on him. It may have been his eyes; they were without expression.

De Wollfe turned and placed himself at the disposal of Inspector Vernier. "I've heard of you, of course, Inspector, but until now I've been denied the pleasure of a meeting. Unfortunate that the occasion is such a sorry one. I only hope I can be of some use to you. It will be very little, I'm afraid."

"I want to know first if you knew Mr. Whitecliffe," the inspector asked.

Raoul de Wollfe frowned. "I don't think I'd met him. No, in fact, I'm sure I hadn't. I'd met his niece several times, however . . . a charming girl. I rather wanted to help her."

"Help her?" Vernier looked interested.

"Financially." Then he raised a hand quickly in protest. "Please don't misunderstand, Inspector. The financial help I would have given to Miss Whitecliffe would not have been for motives generally ascribed to a man of my age." He smiled. "The risk of incurring her wrath would have been much too great. My idea was to help her with her schools. I had considered the idea of becoming her partner."

"Why, monsieur?"

De Wollfe lighted a cigarette. "There are times when too much leisure can be exceedingly dull. When Penelope's father died it seemed to me that most likely the girl had inherited rather more than she had the experience to cope with. The schools had a very fine tradition, but I found out that their financial backing was too slender to allow for expansion. It seemed to me

that there here was an opportunity to acquire an interesting hobby and, in the long term, a profitable one. I am very fond of travel and as the schools are located in some interesting countries they would give me the excuse I needed to travel without my journeys appearing merely aimless. I am a great believer in the spread of languages." He shrugged and smiled. "Or you can simply call it the whim of a man who has more leisure than he knows what to do with."

"And you arranged this matter with Miss Whitecliffe?"

"I did not. Miss Whitecliffe suggested quite politely that I should mind my own business."

"You quarreled?"

De Wollfe answered, "I do not make a habit of quarreling, Inspector . . . particularly with girls as young and charming as Miss Whitecliffe. But aren't we wandering rather from the main theme?"

"The dead man's background is a part of the theme, monsieur."

"In that I am afraid I can give you no help about Mr. Whitecliffe. He was not, if I may say so, a noticeable little man. The only spectacular thing about his life, I should think, was the way he ended it. He should have kept away from the Casino."

"You suggest that because he came here he was killed?"

"I mean that such men as Mr. Whitecliffe are not meant to come into casinos and win fortunes. It simply is not in their stars."

Julian wondered if De Wollfe realized how much contempt there was in his voice.

Vernier said dryly, "You seem to know more about him than you have led me to believe."

"What is there to know? John Keeble was able to tell me all about him in twenty words."

"There is a suggestion that he came to the tables from the bar. Can you verify that?"

"I can't, I'm afraid. I might have noticed him if he'd dropped from the ceiling; not otherwise. I was on the watch for somebody far more striking."

"And that?"

"My wife."

"When did you first become aware of him?" the inspector asked.

"I was aware of something of a stir at one of the tables, the sort of buzz that always is associated with anything unusual. I strolled over to see what was going on and there he was, with this almost indecent fortune piling up in front of him."

There was a pause and the inspector said slowly. "Why was it that you, almost before anybody else knew what was happening, were able to announce that the man was dead?"

"Did I?"

"Quite loudly, monsieur."

"I wonder." Raoul de Wollfe touched his mustache tentatively as he pondered. "Yes, that is interesting, because I did know quite certainly that he was dead. I suppose I knew instinctively that there could be only one possible end to an utterly preposterous scene. If the wheel had turned again and he had lost his money, that would have been merely an anticlimax. No, he had

to step out of his environment, he had to see more money than he would ever dream that he would possess piling up in front of him, and as he reached out to grasp it, the excitement of the moment had to kill him. It was perfect in its way . . . a cameo. Without wishing to sound callous, I confess I'm glad to have seen it."

There could be no doubt that he meant exactly what he said.

The inspector's voice was coldly matter-of-fact. "A perfect cameo perhaps, monsieur, but for the little fact that the man did not die of excitement. He was poisoned."

Julian had been watching closely, noting their reactions. What happened now was quite unexpected. Raoul leaped to his feet and his face flushed darkly with anger.

"Did you bring me here in an endeavor to make a fool of me?" he demanded.

"On the contrary. I wanted your help," the inspector said quietly.

"Then why was I not told that the man was poisoned? Why did you let me go on speculating, knowing what you did know? You wanted to score a little triumph over me in the presence of these men, isn't that it?"

All at once Julian realized that the powerful force in this man's life was his vanity. The inspector had allowed him to propound his theory and then contemptuously brushed it aside and, more unforgiveably still, he had done it before witnesses.

"I resent people who try to make me look a fool, Mr. Inspector."

Henri Vernier was watching him with interest, as if

he had found another man in Raoul de Wollfe's clothing. "I can imagine you would resent it very much. It is something I must bear in mind." He looked over De Wollfe again as if his outward appearance had become significant; the clothes that were so right, the hair and mustache so perfectly in character, the well-kept hands that were hardly those of an ardent fisherman, and the slim, unostentatious gold cigarette case that they were fumbling angrily was too perfect . . . too much time spent on the perfection.

Julian Ashford knew what the inspector was thinking because the same thoughts were in his own mind. . . . Raoul de Wollfe's façade was everything . . . his charm, his success and all the appearances that went with it. They mattered more to him than reality. Julian looked across to where John Keeble was sitting in the window alcove. His expression was that of somebody watching an intriguing play, and one that he had seen before. De Wollfe's outburst was no surprise to him. He slid out of his seat by the window and strolled across and spoke quietly to Julian.

"Quite an actor, isn't he?"

"I wouldn't have said he was acting."

"He's always acting. The role suits him, don't you think?"

De Wollfe had recovered his poise. "There is nothing I can add to what I have told you," he was saying. "My wife will be pleased to confirm that I had arranged to meet her here."

Another police official came into the room. His manner indicated that he had urgent and secret news. He

waited until the inspector had detached himself from his witness and then whispered what he had to say. He handed over a slip of paper.

Obviously the inspector regarded what he had been told as important. His fingers tugged at his lower lip as he considered. He spoke aloud, "You are quite sure of this. They could not have made a mistake?"

"There's no possibility of a mistake."

The inspector nodded. He dismissed the assistant and came back to his place at the head of the table. His fingers took up their irritating tattoo on the wood under his hand. "These schools," he asked De Wollfe, "are you still anxious to gain control of them?"

Raoul answered warily as if he wondered what the question was leading to. "Anxious is not the word I would apply to my feelings. But I am still interested." His vanity made him add, "You see, when I set out to do something, I usually do it."

The inspector said slowly, "It might interest you to know that the money Whitecliffe used to buy his original stake today was counterfeit."

Julian heard John Keeble's low gasp of surprise. The inspector glanced at him briefly, but his interest still centered on Raoul de Wollfe. "Does that mean anything to you, monsieur?"

"Mean anything to me?" De Wollfe leaned back in his chair. "I can't think why it should. I've heard rumors that there is rather a lot of counterfeit money floating about. Almost impossible for a layman to detect it, they tell me."

"You are right, it is almost impossible. The Germans



printed it years ago. Somebody has decided that now is the time to put it into circulation again."

"Very interesting. But Inspector, why do you single me out for these disclosures?"

"It occurs to me that the money may very well have come from Miss Whitecliffe's school."

"What absolute rot . . ." The startled protest came from John Keeble.

Vernier turned to him. "I am assuming that the man was gambling with his own money . . . with his pay, in fact," he added sarcastically. "You know the man. Can you suggest a reason why anybody should have given it to him? He was not, I think, the type who would be given a sum of money in return for his favors." He treated John to a pointed stare. "As are some of those who live so well down here."

"I take your meaning completely, Inspector. You flatter me. But why shouldn't someone have been repaying the little man a loan?"

"Because, " the inspector said, "when a man has become so reduced that he has to borrow from a poor schoolmaster, he is seldom in a position to repay it, because it means that he has exhausted all the more likely sources. I am convinced that the money came from the school."

John had shed his amiable façade. "Are you trying to suggest that Miss Whitecliffe paid her uncle his 'salary in counterfeit money?"

The inspector shrugged. "Not entirely. What I do think is that he was paid his salary and that some other student offered to change it into dollars at the standard

rate. The idea of making a small profit would appeal to him. In his arid life that might seem romantic. Then what happens? He discovers that the money is counterfeit and in a panic he decides that he must get rid of it quickly and he rushes to the Casino to gamble and, if he wins, to cash his winnings into genuine currency. But the man who made the original transaction is shrewder. He knows that the Casino of all places is the most dangerous because here they work closest to the police."

Raoul de Wollfe had been caressing his mustache and listening as if he were interested in all this, but only academically. "But why the school?" he asked. "In fact, the transaction you describe could have taken place on any street corner, or in any bar in Nice. Surely you are letting the school become an obsession with you?"

The inspector agreed. "We are not precisely fools," he said. "And almost as well as you do, monsieur, we know the petty transactions that take place on the street corners and in the bars. We do not take official notice of them because our city has its reputation to consider, but we know them and we know those who indulge in them; be sure of that. Also we have a good picture of the character of Mr. Whitecliffe. He did not frequent bars and he would be horrified at the thought of a street corner transaction. But on the other hand he would be very happy to oblige a student at the school, and he would go even to the length of gambling at the Casino if he thought by doing so he could protect the school's good name."

As he listened Julian remembered what Penelope

had said to him and he knew that the inspector's appraisal could be approaching the truth. Loyalty to the school would be a very potent factor in the behavior of Mr. Whitecliffe.

He saw Raoul de Wollfe raise his hand with a gesture of dramatic protest. "But Inspector, Miss Whitecliffe, that charming girl . . ."

The inspector interrupted him sourly, "I am not thinking exclusively of Miss Whitecliffe. Everybody makes allowances for a student: he is poor, he is trying to educate himself and in his high spirits he breaks many laws and craves much indulgence. With proper organization there is much that a criminal could do with such material."

De Wollfe put his hands on the table and leaned back to laugh with genuine amusement. "Heaven preserve me, Inspector, I had no idea the depths to which I had sunk!" When there was no answering laugh from Vernier he leaned forward and his manner was serious. "I have a rather expensive position to maintain," he said. "Surely you realize that the venture you suggest would have to be most profitable to make it worth my while? The question is, would it pay?"

The inspector said flatly, "In the last month in Nice alone we have identified two hundred thousand dollars in counterfeit money, monsieur."

There was a heavy silence. Then the inspector turned to his clerk. "I will see Mrs. de Wollfe now," he said. He turned his back and strolled over to where Julian was waiting with John Keeble. "Novel experience, be-

ing a suspect in a murder case, isn't it? Or have either of you been through it before?"

Julian said something vaguely polite. John, standing with his eyes on the door, did not bother to reply. Any woman would have been flattered at the air of expectancy with which they waited for Raoul de Wollfe's wife. They waited like a reception committee, facing the door.

The clerk opened it and stood aside with a little bow.

She came in and paused in the doorway, habitually, as most beautiful women do, striking a pose.

Risa. . . .

Julian Ashford took a step forward. Whether he spoke her name aloud he did not know. He stood there with his hands rigid at his sides, looking at her across the years.

Risa had been smiling quizzically at Raoul de Wollfe. Then she saw Julian. Her body stiffened and her head raised. The blood went out of her face and she remained as immobile as a statue. They faced each other in a world of their own.

Julian heard John Keeble say in an oddly stilted voice, "I don't think you have met. Risa, this is Julian Ashford, he was a friend of my uncle's in Burma."

She walked across to where Julian was waiting. It was a fine example of control. She smiled at him. "No," she said. "I don't think we have met, have we, Mr. Ashford?"

He took the hand she held out to him. It was rigid and dry. He answered her with a voice that he barely

recognized as his own. "I am a complete stranger in Nice."

They stood looking at each other. She had not changed except in the sense that maturity brings change. She was more beautiful. Her white-blond hair had been done by an artist instead of the Japanese barber the women used to patronize, the one they used to say was so good; the one who turned out later to be the chief of the enemy's intelligence service . . . and who took charge during the occupation. It was odd that looking at her hair he should have remembered it. Her hair was different now. The artist in Nice had decided that she should look like a madonna. It was parted in the center and drawn back to accentuate her features, the perfect olive skin, the full red lips, the quiet repose of her face. The Japanese had fussed with her beautiful hair, curling and piling it. How silly he had been.

She had control of herself now. She even managed to make her voice politely casual. "Do you hope to stay long in Nice, Mr. Ashford?"

He could almost believe that she really was a stranger, that he was meeting her for the first time. "I had hoped to leave today," he said. "I had hoped to leave my son at school here and go on alone to the Middle East. He has been traveling with me rather more than was good for him."

"How sad for him. Aren't you afraid he's going to be lonely when you've gone? Or will he make lots of friends?"

He had a feeling that they were together on a stage



and that they were speaking lines from a play. But of course she was acting. She had been on the stage long ago, when they had first met. She left the stage to marry him, but she had not stopped acting.

"I hope he will make friends," he said.

Raoul de Wollfe interrupted them. "I'm afraid, Risa," he said, "the inspector here is getting impatient with us. He fears that we are trying to turn his little inquisition into a social affair. Is that not so, Inspector?"

"You may be trying, monsieur, but you will not succeed."

Raoul de Wollfe gave a rueful shrug and turned back to his wife. "You see what I mean, Risa. What he really wants you to do is to give me an alibi for this afternoon."

She raised her eyebrows and then permitted herself an amused smile. "But, Raoul, how delightfully absurd!"

Raoul shook his head. "On the contrary, this officer does not think it the least absurd. In fact, Risa, neither do I."

Perhaps from his tone she interpreted it as an order. A touch of angry color came into her cheeks. "The whole idea is offensive," she said. "I refuse absolutely to be identified with anything so stupid. I am surprised that my husband has not taken the same attitude."

The inspector said, "We have taken a note of your refusal, madam." If anything he looked rather pleased. "Your attitude is remarkable. Most women, when their husbands are involved in a crime, will rush forward to give them an alibi even if they have to manufacture it.



**They consider it part of their duty as a wife."**

**Risa turned slowly around to face Julian, stiffly, as if she were accepting a challenge. As they faced each other she spoke to the police officer. "You are wrong, Inspector. It is not part of my duty as a wife."**

## CHAPTER FOUR

**S**O they had met again. As he walked back slowly along the Promenade des Anglais, Julian's memory of the encounter was more vivid than the actual experience. Mrs. Raoul de Wollfe was Risa Ashford, and yet fantastically he had found himself accepting her as what she pretended to be . . . Mrs. de Wollfe. It was Risa herself who had finally shattered the illusion. He would never forget that swift dramatic moment when she had swung away from De Wollfe, nor when she had denied her duty to him as a wife. Julian wondered if Raoul had realized the significance of what she had said. Probably not; he would have been too outraged at her defiance and too aware that she had made him appear ridiculous. He wondered how well De Wollfe knew Risa, and he wondered further how much did he deserve to know her. It could be that all he desired or needed of Risa was on the surface. She was beautiful, she could be charming, she could be remorselessly cruel, and undoubtedly she could be one of those women who could underwrite a man's success. Perhaps all he wanted

was for strangers who asked to be told that she was Raoul de Wollfe's wife.

But it was not Risa's relationship with De Wollfe that mattered now. It was her relationship with himself. He could easily imagine the panic she must have felt when she came into that room. Until that moment she must have felt completely safe. She must have grown more and more secure as the years passed. She would have forced the past from her mind, memories of Rangoon and Singapore, the ramshackle social structure in which a white woman lost caste if she bathed her own baby or picked up its toys from the floor; where there were too many servants who had too much time, where everybody pretended they were living in exile and waiting only for the time when they could go home. They used to speak as if each and every one of them were waiting to retire to a dream house with sleek horses in its stables and a groom to take the children hacking in the crisp autumn sunshine. They lived in a world they read about in the illustrated society magazines that arrived limp and a month old.

He found himself making allowances for Risa. His own life had been different, and she could not or would not share it. It was not for her to understand the entwining ties that make a man rather die on the fringe of civilization than luxuriate at its center. He never could explain that to Risa, but he could understand how she felt. He could even now condone that last dreadful night they had been together. It struck him, as he walked along the crowded, chattering Promenade, that that might have been their last night on earth.

Today they had met again and it could have been that, instead of meeting him in the room in Nice, she had walked into the bungalow in the tropics and said, "Julian, you know we don't have to stay in this place. For heaven's sake, darling, why stay?" And then, before he could answer, "Oh yes, I know, this is your life. I've heard it all, Julian, but I've taken the trouble to find out the truth. You could go away, you could have twice as much money and twice as much prestige, but you won't leave, will you? You love it better than you love me."

He heard a scream of tires, and a hand on his shoulder dragged him back. John Keeble said mildly, "The trouble with wide open spaces is that you can't take them with you. You were strolling in front of a taxi. They are more lethal than tigers."

Julian smiled. "Thanks for the help. As a matter of fact I was rather far away."

"So I noticed. I've been walking beside you for nearly a block. I wanted to ask you to have a drink, but I hardly liked to interrupt."

It occurred to Julian that a drink was the very thing he was in need of. But Tyler was waiting at home and without doubt tearing his hair in fearful excitement. "I'd like one very much, but I'm afraid. . . ."

"If you are worrying about your son, don't. He has a new governess."

"I'm afraid Miss Whitecliffe has other things to do besides looking after Tyler." Julian spoke rather stiffly.

"You're hopelessly out of date. I rang your apartment five minutes ago to ask if there was anything I could do

for Penelope. She was not there. Mrs. Tilford has the job now."

Julian stopped to look at him in astonishment. "Who the devil is Mrs. Tilford?"

John took him firmly by the arm. "Mrs. Tilford is quite a story," he said. "But from my personal experience I can tell you that if she has decided to take care of Tyler, he's being taken care of. Most of the friends she has now she made when they were about five years old. I'm honored to say that I'm one of them. If you go back now you'll find yourself positively in the way. So come ahead and get that drink!"

John had a house back from the sea on the Boulevard Victor Hugo. There was a high wrought-iron fence in front of it and a flagstone path to the door. There was another little garden with a high, protecting wall at the back. It had all the discretion of an old French dwelling. The drawing room had high ceilings and soft green walls. A bright fire in the grate was making the shadows dance on them silently.

Julian stood looking about him. This was the sort of room people imagined themselves in, when they listened to the whining electric fans in some sweltering make-shift club in the tropics. "Yes," he said as if in answer to a question he had asked himself. "Yes, this is very attractive. Did you furnish this yourself?"

"Partly. Some of the things I took over from the owner. You'd never believe it, but he was a headwaiter at one of the hotels down at the front. He used to keep his own servant here, and collected rare books. People retire and come to live on the Riveria. He retired and

went back to Paris; odd about things you want in life, isn't it?"

A man came in with a tray of drinks. He put it down and rearranged the fire and went out.

"I inherited him, too," John said.

"It seems you were lucky all around."

Julian was grateful for the fire, for the drink, for the atmosphere of the room. He felt briefly remote from what had happened in the afternoon. Suddenly he had another reminder of the past. There was a knife in a sheath standing point downward on the mantle above the fire. He nodded to it and said, "You brought a souvenir back from the East?"

John gave an exasperated laugh. "Yes," he said. "I can imagine a kid getting a thing like that and proudly toting it home. But why I, a grown man, should have been carrying it around ever since, I can't understand. There is one exactly the same in a curio shop in the Rue de France. When I saw the price I felt quite insulted. I could have bought it for a hundred francs." He stretched his hands out to the fire. "I suppose I should congratulate myself that the little man was poisoned rather than stabbed with a knife," he said easily.

Julian looked at him oddly. "Perhaps he would have been, if poisoning had not been more convenient," he said quietly.

"I see what you mean. The inspector has gathered an odd assortment of suspects, hasn't he? What did you think of Raoul de Wollfe?"

"I should say that he finds Raoul de Wollfe a very



satisfactory person. The inspector didn't seem to share his views."

"Raoul's ambition is to be the most popular host in Nice. I think he chose this place because he likes his acquaintanceships to be brief. Most people are happy to oblige him."

"Is there something wrong with him?" It was so against his nature to inquire into other people's lives that his tone was cold, almost hostile.

John, on the other hand, belonged to a world where it was dull not to say exactly what you thought about anybody and everybody. "You don't like or dislike people like Raoul de Wollfe. He's a social careerist. When he gives a party he invites the guests with a view to decorating his table, and so that it will be generally known that he gives the best parties in Nice. He probably has starving relatives all over the place." And in the same casual way he asked, "Wasn't it a shock to see Risa?"

So it was no secret. Julian did not take his eyes from the fire. "Mrs. de Wollfe is very charming. Have you known her long?"

John laughed. "I hope you don't mind, but I fell in love with Risa a long time ago. She didn't know that I existed and I didn't really want her. But out in Burma I used to ride my bicycle past her bungalow about twenty times a day in the hope that I might see her in the garden or on the verandah."

There was a pause between them and then Julian said in the quiet, controlled way he had, "Yes, I can

understand a boy doing that. I suppose we all do at one time or another. Does she know about it?"

John got up and leaned against the mantelpiece. "No," he said. "When next I saw Risa it didn't seem appropriate to tell her. I couldn't tell her that I had loved her when she didn't even remember me."

"Didn't you think she might have been amused?"

"I think she would more likely have been frightened . . . as she was today," he added slowly.

Julian walked to the table and refilled his glass. "If she knew, I'm sure she would be grateful to you," he said.

John shook his head. "There would be no cause for gratitude. It was a sort of schoolboy's dream. She was a young married woman and, as far as I was concerned, utterly unapproachable, on a pedestal in a jungle garden while I sweated by on a bicycle, not even daring to look at her. It may help you to know that I have forgotten her married name. Goddesses don't have married names." He tossed his cigarette into the fire and added lightly, "But I like Mrs. de Wollfe very much indeed, don't you?"

Julian knew that John was reassuring him, but at the same time he was telling him that he knew. In the pause Julian felt as he had often felt in the jungle, when the hunter and the hunted stand in absolute stillness, waiting for the other to make a move. "I think," he said, "it might be a good idea if you could explain to me why you told me the story of Risa's past."

"There are some things you can't explain." John's voice became patient. "Risa is the wife of Raoul de

Wollfe, and they are both living here in the frothy, meaningless way that we all live here, and I don't want Risa and myself to be identified with the schoolboy and his idol in Burma. What have you to say to that?"

Julian got up reluctantly from his seat by the fire. The lines were etched more deeply into his cheeks. "If I had to say anything, John, I would have to say God help you," he said.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**S**HE could not have been more than five feet tall and she was thin as a rail. Her white hair was drawn back in a bun at the back of her head from a parting in the middle. Obviously she regarded Julian's entry into his own apartment as a form of burglary.

"Who are you?" she asked belligerently.

Julian smiled because he had been warned about Mrs. Tilford. "You're Mrs. Tilford, aren't you? You've been nicely taking care of Tyler?"

"About time, too. Somebody had to take care of the child," she said bluntly.

"We do live in an odd way, I'm afraid, but we both rather like it, you know." Julian smiled slightly.

She looked up at him as if she were looking at a not very bright child. "Naturally. You travel from place to place, leaving other people to clean up the mess you leave behind you," she stated.

"That's interesting, won't you sit down and tell me exactly what a wretched parent I am? John Keeble told me you were a tyrant, so I know what to expect."

She deposited herself in a chair. "So John told you that? Let me tell you that as long as there are John Keebles in the world there will have to be tyrants."

Julian found himself strangely glad that she was there in his suite. "Also he said you were a friend of his," he added quietly.

She looked ridiculously pleased, and he went on.

"I didn't even know that you were with Tyler till John told me. When last I heard, Miss Whitecliffe was taking care of him."

"Precisely," she said. "Penelope. Didn't it occur to you, Mr. Ashford, that Penelope might have other things to do?"

He felt properly rebuked. "Yes, Mrs. Tilford. But she took him away and was so charming about it that I'm afraid I took it for granted."

"Every male takes everything for granted, Mr. Ashford. Had it not occurred to you that her uncle had been murdered, and you quietly accepted her offer to come back here and take care of your son?"

He realized with a sense of shock how true that was. He had accepted it . . . a girl whom he had known for a few minutes. He knew very little about girls like Penelope Whitecliffe, and very little about the austere little woman who seemed to have taken charge now. For no reason, they took over responsibilities.

"Yes," he said. "I'm sorry. I should have thought about that."

Mrs. Tilford smiled suddenly and said, "The maddening thing is that we like it." Then she gave a warning scowl. "I am not speaking, mark you, of Penelope. I am speaking of an interfering old woman like me. I like your son, Mr. Ashford. Naturally, of course, a child brought up as he has been is bound to be impossible.

For the first time in his life he is tidying his room."

He took a deep breath. "I don't think I heard you correctly, Mrs. Tilford. Did you *say* that Tyler was tidying his room?"

She nodded. "To the best of his ability, and doubtless he's hating it."

"But how did you manage it?"

She looked a little self-conscious. "I made a deal with him, a bargain. I agreed that tomorrow *I* will take a donkey ride. I understand that he has some sort of business arrangement with the woman who controls the donkeys and that he gets a commission on any business he brings. I agree that it is utterly preposterous and I trust that I shall not meet any of my friends; but I have committed myself to riding the animal and I shall. I understand that part of your son's duties is to walk beside the animal urging it on with a small stick."

Julian saw how she had gained Tyler's confidence and he was not only grateful to her, he was strangely reassured. "Don't you think it might help," he said, "if I acted as your deputy and took the donkey ride? Please, Mrs. Tilford, you mustn't let Tyler talk you into these things. There'll be no end to them."

She looked at him severely. "It is not my habit to back out of a bargain, Mr. Ashford. I have been looking for an excuse to ride around the square on one of those donkeys ever since I have been in Nice."

"Have you been here long, Mrs. Tilford?"

She snorted. "Long enough to be completely out of patience with the place. I prefer to be where people



have work to do. I am down here to keep an eye on my nephew Charles."

"You have a nephew here?"

Mrs. Tilford explained. "Charles," she said, "is one of those aimless young men who are always going to establish themselves in a career at some distant date. At the moment he is preparing himself for the diplomatic service. It is a career in which a knowledge of foreign languages is most essential. But Charles did not go to Paris and enroll himself at the Sorbonne where they would have made him work. He came here instead. I happen to know that he has got himself ensnared by a young dancer named Jane Land, who is down here for the season."

"He sounds quite a problem." Julian smiled. He did not have to be introduced to this nephew Charles to be able to guess what he would be like. He had met too many faithful copies in the past.

Mrs. Tilford picked up her sensible brown bag and thrust it under the arm of her tweed coat. "Tyler has had his supper and bath. His fresh clothes for the morning are on the chair at the foot of the bed. If you tell him to wait for me in the lobby downstairs, I shall walk with him to school."

"Now, really, Mrs. Tilford . . ."

She interrupted him. "Mr. Ashford, I have reached a time of life when I feel that I'm entitled to consult my own wishes. I like your little boy very much. But then I like most children, there are not nearly enough of them in this place."

He could do no more than to escort her to the elevator.

The room was empty when he came back, too empty. He realized now how very much he had wanted Penelope to be waiting here when he came back. It would have been like a return to sanity. But Mrs. Tilford was eminently sane, so it could not have been entirely that. He had wanted it to be Penelope. He walked to the phone with an idea that he would call her . . . to thank her. But he shrugged and turned away. It was very unlikely that she would welcome any approach from him. Even his motives in telephoning would not have been honest. To thank her would have been sincere enough, but it would not have been the whole truth. Nearer the whole truth would be that he was trying to put another woman between himself and Risa. . . .

He went into Tyler's room. He had never seen it so tidy. Not a single item of wearing apparel was lying on the floor, not even a sock. As a man and as the father of Tyler Ashford, he could only think of Mrs. Tilford as a worker of miracles. The little boy was tucked up in his bed smiling in his sleep. His arm lay possessively over the book she had been reading to him. He looked very secure.

Julian stood looking down at the boy. It would not be credible that Risa would not want to see her son. If only out of curiosity she would want to see him, to look for something of herself in him. At that moment he would have given most of what he possessed to be able to wake Tyler from his confident sleep and take him away; to get out of Nice. He realized now that he had

left an impression in the boy's mind that his mother, as mother, was forever out of his range. He might even have left the impression that she was an angel, watching patiently from heaven. Tyler had asked where his mother was, and he had begun weaving the fabric of a legend. And out of his own mind the legend had grown. Because Tyler had never known her, she could do no wrong.

Julian went to his own room. The bed was turned down, pajamas were on the pillow, a dressing gown was neatly folded over the bed rail, slippers were waiting primly for their occupancy. The pajamas were wool with wide brown stripes. The dressing gown was faded green. Everything was as it should be, except that none of these garments were his own. He looked at them with a sense of revulsion. It was enough that he should have been dragged off the plane and brought back to experience what he had been through today. It was too much that he was to sleep in the bed that had been prepared for Mr. Whitecliffe, to find the homely night attire, the sensible dressing gown and the worn slippers, all waiting with inanimate patience for a corpse. The sensible hairbrush and a comb and some toilet bottles and a small picture in a frame were waiting on the dressing table. They were all eloquent of Mr. Whitecliffe, more like him than he had been as he described himself when he applied for the job . . . the personal property of the dead, revealing the pathos of their lives.

He went out of the room and closed the door, and as he came back into the lounge the phone began to ring.

"I'm here, downstairs," Penelope said. "I think my

uncle must have taken his things to your suite. I know you won't want them there. If it isn't inconvenient, I'll take them away with me."

He knew now how much he had been wanting to hear her voice. He said, "Have you had any food?"

"No, I haven't, but . . ."

"Please don't say but . . . I'm coming down." He put the receiver down before she could reply.

To the elevator attendant he said, "My little boy is asleep upstairs. Would you mind keeping an eye on him?"

"Certainly, monsieur, he is a very good friend of mine and of all of us." The attendant smiled. "He knows more people in this hotel than you will ever guess; myself, the porters, the people in the kitchen, the manager. He has had himself appointed a member of the staff."

"Has he indeed? How did he manage that?"

"Because he does not come into a hotel as if it were a hotel but as if it were a home. He expects the same feeling of security, and naturally we all conspire to give it to him," the man said simply.

A hotel as a home . . . it was a bitter comment on the way he had brought up his son. "You must have decided that I am a very bad father," Julian said dryly.

"No, we have decided that you have a very nice boy. We try to make him feel secure." He swung back the gates. "Goodnight, Mr. Ashford."

Penelope was standing by the showcases near the entrance to the dining room.

He walked to her side. "Miss Whitecliffe, I'm sorry,

but I couldn't know how right you were this morning. I did bring trouble into your life."

She raised her head to look up at him. "It was not your fault, but I did try to tell you that my uncle was not very good at taking care of himself."

"I thought you were being foolish. I'm sorry about that too," he said humbly.

There was a flash and he swung around to see a photographer folding away his camera. He was quite obviously satisfied with this one shot. They watched him hurry away through the vestibule.

Julian took her arm and realized that she was trembling. "I know it's only what we should expect," she said. "I suppose this is only a beginning, the feeling of shame, wanting to hide, wanting to run . . . only there isn't anywhere to run."

"There is no need to be ashamed. You haven't done anything to be ashamed of," he said stoutly.

"Do you think that makes any difference?"

He said gently, "Perhaps not. But you must believe me when I say that it won't last long. You see I have been through something like this before."

She looked at him with a flash of interest and then shook her head. "My uncle did nothing to hurt anybody. He was too gentle, he would rather be hurt himself. He couldn't have had enemies."

Somebody obviously had not agreed with her.

"I'm told that the best restaurants here are in the back streets where the local people go. Why not go to one of them, somewhere where we won't be noticed?" he suggested.



She laughed. "Not noticed . . . I live in Nice, but I am one of the Foreign Colony and what we do is bread and butter to every gossip in the Ville. When a foreign resident is involved in a scandal, every man, woman and child knows about it. They depend on us for their entertainment, for their local jokes. If we go to one of the little restaurants, it will be filled in ten minutes with people who have come to have a look at us; because we have gone there together. The people who go from one place to another to sing will sing songs about us. They will sing them in the local dialect and suppose that we don't understand," her voice broke. "Unfortunately I will know what they are all laughing about. You might even laugh, too, because it all sounds so gay. That, of course, would be the cream of the joke."

He realized all at once how little it meant whether you were guilty or innocent. All that mattered was that you were in a trap. If he, as a suspect, were seen dining with the niece of the victim, how pleasurable outraged the onlookers could be. He guided her back toward the elevator. "At least nothing like that can happen in my suite," he said.

The attendant stepped out and waited for them to enter. An odd change came over his expression when he saw Penelope. It became guarded as if a problem had presented itself. Instead of going on up after he had brought them to their floor, he dropped briskly back to the first floor.

Julian took Penelope's coat and he noticed that she ran her hand with a gesture of relief through her hair. She looked at the closed door as if it were a protection.



"I'm sorry I had to run away this afternoon," she said.

"Mrs. Tilford was here when I came back. It was clever of you to find her."

"Find her . . ." It was the first time there had been amusement in her laugh. "You don't find Mrs. Tilford; she's just there. . . . She came here and sent me away because she knew that there were a lot of things I would have to do. My uncle is one of the few relatives I have left in the world . . . at least he was. He always said he wanted to be buried in England. There are things you have to do. You don't think of them, but Mrs. Tilford does. She said you have to go out and face the first formalities of death. She said it was a kind of ritual that made things easier."

"She may have been right. I'm afraid the deaths I have seen have not been very civilized. They have generally been violent." He took her hands and said, "Penelope, I seem to have brought the same violence into your life. Believe me I didn't want to."

"How could you have avoided it?"

The springs of emotion are not predictable. It may have been that they found themselves clinging together in a sea of trouble, but it was more than that. It came not as a desire to survive together but to escape together. In his arms she could have been laughing or crying. Her tears were wet on his cheeks and salt on his lips. But tears spring from many fountains, and pleasure and pain are close neighbors.

## CHAPTER SIX

**P**RESENTLY Penelope smiled at him. "You thought I was hysterical this morning, didn't you?"

"Julian."

"Didn't you, Julian? What do you think now?"

"I think," he said, "you are probably hungry. Don't you remember we were going to have dinner?"

"I won't go to a restaurant. I can't . . . not tonight."

"Then the only other thing is to have supper sent up here."

He took up the phone and asked to be connected to dining room service. He gave his name and asked them to send up a waiter with the menu.

"Yes, M. Ashford, thank you, sir." The voice sounded guarded.

The phone rang almost immediately. It was the assistant manager. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Ashford, I understand that you contemplate having supper with Miss Whitecliffe in your suite."

Julian asked coldly, "Do I have to ask your permission?"

"As a rule, most certainly not. But the circumstances, monsieur, are not usual."

"I think you should explain yourself a little more fully."

"If you insist. The fact that you are staying in this hotel and another man who was to have occupied the same suite has been murdered is bringing us some unwelcome notoriety. If you take my advice, you will not entertain Mlle Whitecliffe in your suite on the very night her uncle was murdered."

"Are you going to put that in the newspapers, too?" Julian asked angrily.

The manager said wearily, "M. Ashford, in a hotel of this size there is always at least one servant in the pay of some news agency or other. You must understand that we are trying to be lenient with you."

"If you will be lenient enough to have my account ready first thing in the morning, I'll ask no more favors of you," Julian said curtly.

He could almost see the man shrug. "Nothing would please us more, monsieur. Unfortunately our instructions from the police are that you are not to leave. You may not have thought of it, but I doubt very much if there is another hotel in Nice that would accommodate you." A note of humanity came into his voice. "Personally I am very sorry, but with the reputation of my hotel to think of, I cannot afford to be personal. Good night, M. Ashford." He had replaced the receiver before Julian could reply.

She was standing in the middle of the room with her arms stiffly by her sides. Obviously she had heard enough.

"I'm terribly sorry, Penelope," he mumbled.

"Why be sorry? I only wonder that you are so surprised."

"I'm beginning to see what you mean." Then he said

as if he were thinking of it carefully, "There's something quite subtle about it, isn't there? I mean about suspicion. You can try to ignore it or strike out at it, but it's like striking at a fog. It's still there to breathe into your lungs." He turned to look out over the darkened empty bay. "I expect tomorrow the sightseers will be taking pictures of the hotel with an X to mark the room where we kept our love tryst on the night of the murder." He turned back and put his hands on her arms. "I said I was sorry, Penelope, but you know I'm not. I would never have forgiven the inspector if he had let me get away from Nice."

She nodded. "When this is all over, you will be able to go away from Nice, and it will be a story to tell your friends. But don't you remember what I really came here for was to collect my uncle's clothes?"

He had forgotten. Mr. Whitecliffe alive had been quite unimportant. His greatest adventure had begun only now, after he was dead, when it had to be lived for him by others.

"Very well," he said. "I'll pack his clothes."

"No, don't bother, please. . . . If you show me where they are." She was very much Miss Whitecliffe. "I don't want to bother you."

"Packing is a large part of my business," he said. "I've been doing it all my life, either that or teaching a native boy how to do it." Then he said gently, "Come with me, Penelope. Just for a little while it was his room. I'll show you how he had arranged it."

He opened the door and switched on the light. They stood in the doorway without speaking. She looked

about, letting her eyes rest on one item after another, the careful, rather threadbare possessions of her uncle against the luxury of the room.

"He would have loved it here," she said softly. "He would have liked being waited on. He would have loved to say, 'I'm staying in a little suite at the Ruhl. The view is rather wonderful and I must say they do take care of you. . . .'" She covered her eyes with her hands. "He was cheated even of that."

Julian took the old-fashioned cases from the closet and opened them on the racks. "He was not cheated of it, Penelope. Believe me he was living every minute of it as he unpacked, and you know as well as I do that the anticipation is always more important than the reality. Nothing would really have lived up to his expectations. He would have begun to notice all sorts of things; how the waiters were slow and gave favors to those who paid for them." He was talking quietly to divert her thoughts, and packing the bags as he talked. "I've lived in a cross section of these places. I don't like them very much. You live in them because your company feels that you should, as a matter of prestige. This suite . . . Tyler and I have lived in scores of them. It's always a relief to get away beyond them, away up into the country . . ."

He had stopped speaking, and she saw that he was standing by the dressing table. He was standing very still holding a sheaf of papers in his hand. His face was rigid. He lifted his eyes from the papers. "Penelope," he said, "I don't know if you have seen these letters. They were hidden in the folds of one of his shirts in this

drawer. I shouldn't have read them, but I couldn't help seeing the name."

His manner frightened her. She reached out her hand and said, "I'll read them when I get home."

"I think you should read them now."

She took them reluctantly. She saw that the letter at the top was headed: *Sangerson and Whyllie: Detective Agency*; and it was addressed to her uncle.

Dear Sir:

Ref: Raoul de Wollfe

We are now in a position to give you the final results of our exhaustive investigations into the background of the above person. As far as can be ascertained, he is a highly respected citizen in that his credit in the City of London is good. There are no judgment summonses out against him. He has never been a bankrupt. He is a member of two exclusive clubs, the James and the Irony. But he did not, as you say he claims, ever attend any colleges at Oxford University, or any of the better-known public schools. This we may warn you is not unusual in self-made men and we find in the routine of our business that the claims are looked upon tolerantly, even by those whose schools they claim to have attended. It may help you as evidence of character, but in no way, we are afraid, beyond that.

With regard to Mrs. de Wollfe, you will find that our earlier advice to you, as result of our wide experience, has borne fruit. As you will see by our appended charges, this has not been within the schedule we first



thought reasonable, but as the inquiry took us to the other side of the world, you will understand that the costs must necessarily have mounted. The appended account and the detailed expenses of the inquiry will inform you of how your money was disbursed.

You will study the details of our investigations as appended. But briefly the details are these:

In 1947, at Paddington Registry office, London, Raoul de Wollfe was married to Risa Defont, who gave her birthplace as Governor Phillip Bay, Sydney, Australia. She described herself as a spinster.

Our Australian investigator has now informed us that in 1939 this same Risa Defont was married to one Julian Clifford Ashford. There is no record of a divorce.

He saw her lower the letter to her knees. It seemed that he could hear it fall.

"Are you Julian Clifford Ashford?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Is it true . . . that you are not divorced?"

"Quite true."

"You came here to meet your wife?"

"I had not seen my wife for more than ten years. I had not the remotest idea where she was. The first knowledge I had that she was here was when she walked in to that ghastly interview we were having with the police. The inspector sent for Mrs. Raoul de Wollfe. Risa walked in and we were face to face. John Keeble introduced us and we exchanged pleasantries." He looked

at her thoughtfully. "You don't believe me, do you, Penelope?"

"I don't suppose it matters whether I believe you or not."

"It matters a great deal."

Penelope faced him. "Perhaps the manager was right in not letting us have supper together. The situation is rather squalid."

He could even understand how she felt. As she said it, it was squalid. "If you think you'll be tarnished by my company, I won't ask you to take the risk." He nodded toward the papers in her hand. "Not after that."

The color flared into her cheeks. "If you think I believe that my uncle was spying on you, you are wrong."

He said dryly, "You must admit that the evidence suggests he was doing something very much like it."

"I had no idea what he was doing. He told me that he had found a way of making De Wollfe stop interfering with my school."

He said patiently, "But that isn't the point, is it? What he has done is to provide the police with enough evidence to have me convicted of murder."

She backed away in horror. "That isn't possible?"

"If you are the wise prudent girl, you will telephone the police now and tell them what you've found. Don't you know you'll be safe then?"

Her frightened eyes were trying to read his face, but it was as calm and emotionless as his voice. "You are trying to frighten me. Why should they arrest you?"

"What they want is a motive. We'll begin at the beginning. A few weeks ago a little boy came to your

school. Probably your uncle filled in his enrollment card."

She nodded and whispered, "Yes, he did."

"That, you see, is the first link in the chain. Father's name: Julian Ciifford Ashford. Mother's name: Risa Ashford. Now where had your uncle heard those names before? But of course, they were all there as a result of his inquiries."

She cried out in protest. "But it wasn't like that at all! I know him too well. He couldn't have kept a thing like that to himself!"

He shook his head. "He kept to himself the fact that he was employing detectives, Penelope."

She answered soberly, "I know he did. That's because he knew that I would forbid it. He wanted to produce dramatic proof to me and everybody else that he was not a man to be trifled with." She stepped forward in her eagerness to be convincing. "Also I'm sure that within a day of getting those papers he had told somebody here in Nice about them. He wouldn't tell *me* because he'd know that I'd be furious. But he'd have to tell somebody, just to prove what a wonderful conspirator he was. I told you this morning, he was like a child." Penelope was like a child, too, he found himself thinking. She did not even realize how she was rushing to Julian Ashford's defense, convincing herself as she went along.

But he said quietly, "We haven't finished the story yet. Mr. Whitecliffe recognized the names on Tyler's enrollment card. You will have to produce that evidence, Penelope, it will be important evidence, particularly as it has Risa's name on it." He went on, "You have to think

as the police think and any other sensible people would think. Your uncle comes to see me and tells me what he knows. I am quite sure that Tyler, who is a talkative kid, told him that I was going away and was looking for someone to take charge of him. Mr. Whitecliffe sees this as a God-sent opportunity. He comes along to apply for the post as tutor and guardian, and he makes it quite clear that it would be unwise of me not to employ him. He moves into my apartment almost before I am out of it, and within a matter of hours he is gambling with more money than ever he'd been known to possess. . . ."

She dropped her hands to her sides and looked at him piteously. "Is that what my uncle did . . . Is that what he *really* did?"

He shook his head. "No, that is not what he did. It is what the police will say he did. But you see he did move into a rather luxurious apartment and he did have money and he did know that a rich socialite who was known as Mrs. de Wollfe is really Mrs. Julian Ashford and he did employ a detective agency to produce all this information. You know, Penelope, any criminal lawyer in France would advise me to throw myself on the mercy of the court and plead that I had rid the world of a blackmailer. Risa, as my witness, would be perfect. She would tell the court how war had separated her from her husband and her son, and how she had mourned them for dead, and how at last Raoul de Wollfe had offered her his love and security. She would say that she had never realized that all this time her husband and son were searching the world for her; she had not realized it till this blackmailer had come to me and threatened to bring Risa's world shattering to her feet, and I,

being the chivalrous gentleman, took the only course open to me. I killed him."

She was looking at him oddly, doubtfully. "Do you hate her, Julian?"

"I have finished hating her," he said flatly. "I found that I was destroying myself."

"But do you really think she would go to court and say the things you say she could?"

The lines were etched bitterly down his cheeks. "Certainly she would. How else could Risa save herself?"

"Would you save yourself in the same way?" she asked quietly.

They were standing by the door of the narrow corridor that separated the two bedrooms. He opened the door to Tyler's room.

"Look," he said.

She came to his shoulder and stood looking down at the sleeping boy. He closed the door softly and guided her to the sitting room. Without speaking he poured her a drink and one for himself. He raised his glass. "This may be the last time we'll meet as friends. Bless you, Penelope."

"Does that mean that you'd let my uncle be branded as a blackmailer just to save your own skin?" There was not so much scorn in her voice as bewilderment.

He paused carefully. "You see, in the first place, your uncle did not try to blackmail me; and on the other hand I did not kill him. But with the evidence in their hands the police will not believe either one or the other. I'm not even trying to influence you. If I do what I will obviously be advised to do, I will blacken the memory of your uncle who was gentle and honorable. Without pre-



cisely saying so, I have permitted Tyler to grow up with the belief that his mother was dead, and somebody who was wonderful. He could accept her as somebody coming back from the dead. I've protected him for so long alone that I imagine some people might think that my wish to have him respect me is almost unhealthy. But then, you know, we have lived an unusual life."

She put her untasted glass on the table. "What are you going to do?"

He picked up her handbag from the table. Then he took the sheaf of letters that she was still holding in her hand. He opened the bag and put them inside and handed it to her. "As I said, Penelope, if you are a sensible girl you will ring the police." He picked up her coat and put it over her shoulders. "But you must decide for yourself. I am entirely in your hands."

"Why are you leaving all this to me?"

"I've told you the truth. What more can I do?"

"Would you have said that my uncle was blackmailing you?"

"I explained to you what difference would it make. Your uncle is dead and can't be a witness. Everybody would assume that it was obvious."

"Would you have said it?" she persisted.

"No, Penelope, if it's a matter of academic interest to you, I would not have said it." He smiled his slow smile. "But you realize I should just as easily have said I would. What more can I do?"

She backed to the door, looking defiant and young. "I have to find out who murdered my uncle," she said. "I thought you might help me."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

**H**ELP her to find the murderer: he knew that he had no alternative. Sooner or later the police would decide to delve into the past of their suspects. It would all come out then, the whole sorry tale. Tyler would have to know about it, and he did not want his son to know about the past. Between them they had created a better past. . . .

He closed the last of Mr. Whitecliffe's suitcases as the porter came for the luggage. He knew it belonged to the man who had been murdered, who had by his death become a sensation. He treated it with subtle respect as if it had become dramatic in its own right.

Tyler, with his schoolbooks under his arm, joined his father in the little procession to the elevator. They had formed up in the same kind of procession dozens of times, leaving trains, leaving aircraft, leaving hotels, leaving ships. It was almost a ritual. Have you left anything? Did you look in the bathroom? the closets? the drawers? You are leaving everything as impersonal as you found it, an unmade bed, an ashtray with discarded cigarettes,

the discarded newspaper. You pause at the door and look back. There was no hint of your identity except discarded trash. In another hour the room will be sleek and smug and discreet, waiting for the next customer.

"Have you forgotten anything, daddy?"

It was odd that Tyler should underline his thoughts, but then, of course, that was what they always asked each other.

"I don't think so, Tyler. But this time is not us, Tyler. We aren't leaving."

"I know, daddy, but did you pack his pipes? He must have liked them because he put them out awfully carefully on his dressing table."

"Were you watching him unpack, Tyler?"

"Of course. He wasn't used to hotels. I was telling him where to put things so that you can find them again quickly when leaving."

"I think I got everything."

"I hope you didn't miss his secret letters, daddy."

They were in the elevator and it seemed to Julian that the ears of the hotel servants grew larger.

"Secret letters?"

"Yes. There was a bundle of them. He hid them with his shirts when he was unpacking. He looked over his shoulder at me while he was doing it, but I could see *quite clearly*."

Julian smiled at the porter. "I wonder if you'd go back to my suite when you have time and see if I left any secret letters behind."

The old man loaned himself readily to the project. "I will search everywhere, monsieur, every corner." And

added with subtlety, "I have a grandson of the same age." He turned gravely to the little boy. "Could you describe fully these documents?"

"Well," Tyler said; "they were letters."

"Oh. When there is a murder one thinks of letters always. There must be letters. Trust me, I will search for them." He exchanged an understanding nod with Julian. But he did search after they had gone and he reported the conversation to the police.

True to her promise, Mrs. Tilford was waiting by the door. She looked from Tyler to Julian as if she judged them equally guilty. "Five minutes late," she said bluntly.

Julian said diffidently, "I know, Mrs. Tilford, but I'm taking you to school in a taxi. You won't be late."

"Utter waste. The amount of money wasted on taxis because people are too indolent to use normal transport is past belief."

He knew that her idea of normal transport was to walk or, if it were more than twenty miles, to be a profligate and go by bus. "I have to take Mr. Whitecliffe's suitcases back to his niece," he said. "So we can all go together."

The school occupied what once had been a private house. A short, graveled walk led up to its high doors. The grounds were enclosed by a typically tall iron fence. The house had the faded grace of an old lady who could remember without malice a better world. On a polished brass plate by the door was written in three languages: *Whitecliffe Language Schools*.

Also waiting as if to welcome them was John Keeble.

Mrs. Tilford confronted him. "Ha," she said. "Punctual for once, I see."

He kissed her and he tried not to look pleased. "I wouldn't have dared be anything else." He grinned and added, "I've been sent back to school."

The taxi driver was dumping the suitcases on the porch. Mrs. Tilford pointed to them. "John, put these things in one of the cupboards in the hall. I don't want Penelope to see them now, they'll upset her and I don't want the servants to see them or they'll gossip. Put them away yourself." She swung to Tyler. "Young man, the children's school is open. Be off with you."

"Yes, sir." Man or woman, he called everybody "sir" if they were firm enough with him. He looked fleetingly at his father. "'Bye, daddy." Then he fled through the door.

Julian looked at the old lady with interest. "Exactly how many people have you under your thumb in this establishment, Mrs. Tilford?"

"I don't try to have people under my thumb," she corrected him. "But I do hate disorder. For the time being, John Keeble is going to take the place of Penelope's uncle as professor of French. Furthermore, I have brought him here to take care of Penelope. She needs a man to protect her."

Suddenly she concentrated her attention on a young man who was walking up the drive. "That," she said, "if it could be of the slightest interest to anybody but myself, is my nephew Charles."

Charles Tilford was very well dressed in very untidy clothes. He needed a haircut, but his heavy blond hair

seemed to have learned by neglect to take care of itself. It curled negligently over his forehead. His weak intelligent face looked as if it had been handed down from father to son for a thousand years.

He wandered up to them and said, "Aunt Helen, isn't it too bad about Penelope's tiresome old uncle? Did you hear?"

She exploded. "Hear? Who but the halt and the dumb and the blind have not heard? Charles, listen carefully: this is Julian Ashford. He's the father of Tyler."

"Tyler; oh yes, of course; very good sort. We're in the same class . . . I mean, of course, French. Absolute tiger for learning, if you ask me."

Belatedly he shook hands with Julian. "Happy to know you, sir." Then suddenly he gave a gay amused laugh. "It would be funny, wouldn't it, if your son and I met in the college sports. Don't let him know it, but when I was at Oxford I set up a record for the high hurdles." He gave his aunt a grin that obviously he knew she would find infuriating. "She won't ever admit it, of course; but down here is the first time that Aunt Helen and I have ever lived together. Naturally we're loving it." He waved vaguely to them and walked into the school.

His aunt watched him go. "It would be nice," she said, "if I didn't see everything that meant anything to me in that creature."

Julian looked at her and saw that she really did love him angrily and possessively.

The adult students were coming up the path. Some hurried as if they had too little time, some shuffled with-

out spirit, as if they were afraid of what lay ahead of them. Some were young, and a number of others were past middle-age. On the faces of some of them there was the stamp of privation. They had come from all over Europe. France had given them asylum. But to live and work, you must speak.

Julian paid off his cab and went to look for Penelope. He found that her office opened off one of the main classrooms. One section of it was glass so that she could see what was going on in the lecture room beyond.

John was with her. "But, Penelope dear," he was saying. "I haven't got any clothes that are more suitable than these. What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing," she said coldly. "Unless you want these people to take you seriously." She turned to Julian in a kind of despair. "Look at him. He and Mrs. Tilford talked me into having him here as a teacher, and look at the way he turns up for his first day."

Julian smiled. "A mite on the gaudy side for a professor, perhaps?"

"When I came to Nice," John said reasonably, "I had no notion that I was going to be a professor."

"Honestly, John, have you the slightest idea about the courses we are teaching here?"

He nodded. "I forgot to tell you that when I do a job, which thank heaven is not often, I do it properly. You see after Mrs. Tilford asked me, or rather ordered me to do this job, I came along last night to find out what it was all about. I must say I was agreeably surprised. The work you do here is really quite sound."



"Well. . . ." Penelope expended a breath that might have been either relief or a protest.

He glanced through the window. "It seems to me those people out there are beginning to feel they are paying for something they aren't getting. I feel I should start work."

He walked out through the door, and a moment later they saw him on the little raised platform confronting the students. They saw the interest of the class center on him, surprised, watching. He had the theatrical sense to wait, to suggest that he was as interested in them as they obviously were in him.

Then he began to speak in simple French. His voice was conversational but it had a beautiful clarity. Even those who knew very little of the language were leaning forward, straining to understand him. He was walking up and down on the little platform. He had his hands in his pockets and he looked as if he were strolling and talking to a companion.

"Learning a language," he was saying, "is like making a friend. You do not expect to know all about him all at once, but the more you do know, the more you want to know. It's not just a question of being able to order your food or sell somebody a suit of clothes. It's the feeling that another world is opening up to you." He stopped and grinned at an earnest little man at a desk close to him and said in German, "Have you the slightest idea of what I am talking about?"

The little man leaped to his feet beaming. "Yes, yes, of course. It is beautiful."

"I hope Miss Whitecliffe thinks so," he said dryly, and

those who understood laughed and explained to their neighbors.

"The arrogance of him," Penelope was saying angrily as she closed the door to shut off the sound. "The complete and utter arrogance. I thought they would laugh at him."

Julian looked at her as she watched through the window. "I don't know if you have noticed," he said. "But the only one who laughs at John is John himself."

She turned to face him as if he had said something revealing. "Yes," she said slowly. "I hadn't realized it. I thought he was going to be quite ridiculous. My uncle was a competent teacher . . . but it's not the same thing. My uncle taught them French. Now they seem to think they are embarking on an adventure."

They watched the young man on the platform. He might look like any other playboy, but he was not. For one thing he had not told about Raoul de Wollfe and Risa. Then there was this business of coming to the school and preparing to take over; there was nothing slipshod about that.

John finished his talk and got down from the platform. He watched the students, busy with their notes, and a second later he was standing smiling in the doorway. But he spoke diffidently in a way that was unlike his normal self-assurance. "I hope you won't judge me on that one performance, Penny. At least, you must admit they didn't laugh at my suit. After what you said, I was so nervous I could barely speak."

Penelope laughed. "*You . . . nervous.*" Then she saw that he was serious. His forehead was covered with per-

spiration. She put a hand on his arm and said impulsively, "You were amazing. But if you hate it so much, please don't go on doing it . . . not for me."

He sat down and swept his handkerchief over his forehead. "Who else would I be doing it for? I'm sorry for those poor devils out there, but not sorry enough to waste my time on them." He stopped, remembering something else. "Furthermore, Penelope, why did you let me come here when there is a much better scholar right out there in the classroom?"

She looked at him in amazement. "What are you talking about? Those people are taking their first lessons in French."

He shook his head. "Out there, there is a man named Leon Topolski. When I was at the Sorbonne he was really studying. For his degree of Doctor of Literature he wrote a paper on the influence of the Moorish invasions on the Dialects of Southern France. He's that droopy-looking man sitting by himself right in the far corner of the room. He's wearing an awful brown suit and he has what's known as a sallow complexion and lank black hair." He laughed. "To have *Doctor* Topolski listening to my performance was an ordeal."

Julian and Penelope moved to the window. All the students were busy over their notes; all but one. The man they easily recognized as Topolski was staring with intensity at the window where they were standing. He dropped his eyes abruptly to the papers on his desk.

Penelope turned away in bewilderment. "But, of course, I know him. He's anxious to learn but he's hopeless. My uncle used to keep him back after the others,

to try and help him. He was born in Poland and the odd thing is that although he's hopeless at French, he speaks English beautifully . . .” She broke off and some of the color left her face.

John said dryly, “When I knew him in Paris, Penny, he couldn't speak a word of English. Pretending that you can't speak someone else's language is a bit like listening at keyholes.”

“But what is he doing here? If you are right, what's the point in this ridiculous pretense?” she asked desperately.

“It might be an idea to find out,” John said.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**J**ULIAN ASHFORD walked in the bright sunlight down through the side street to the Jardin Albert, with its open-air Roman theatre and its children and old ladies, toward the glittering Mediterranean. He told himself that he was held there as a prisoner and that he was rebelling against it. But he was not telling himself the whole truth and he knew it. Not even an enforced stay need be a punishment in Nice. There is always that illusion that nothing matters very much.

“Julian Ashford, how marvelous!” A woman whom he did not recognize jumped up from a table and caught his arm. “Don’t you remember—Claire Williams, but it’s Rogers now. It was in Singapore at the Club. Henry, here’s somebody from my past!”

A man whom Julian thought was a rather nice middle-aged man got up from his chair. There was an air of resignation about him. He smiled and said, “Yes, of course. My name is Rogers.”

In the Far East Julian had met dozens of women like Claire, the ones who came there to get a husband looking

for the lonely young men with bungalows and servants, and who were dreaming of white girls who would talk about home. Now quite obviously this Claire was dragging her reluctant husband about Europe. Before he could protest she had forced her husband to order him a drink.

"Julian," he heard her saying, "when I saw your picture in the paper this morning I practically leaped out of bed."

"My picture in the paper." He looked at her in bewilderment.

"But, of course, don't tell me you didn't know? My dear, you are quite famous. I saw people pointing you out as you came along and telling each other your name. If it hadn't been for that, I might have let you go by without seeing you." She picked up a paper from the chair beside her. "Look, isn't it marvelous, gorgeous blonde and everything."

He looked at the picture. It was the one that had been taken in the hotel the night before. The awful thing was that he had his hand on Penelope's arm and was talking to her as if they had entered into some conspiracy.

"Miss Penelope Whitecliffe," the caption read, "niece of the man who was murdered in mysterious circumstances, with Julian Ashford who was removed from a Cairo-bound plane immediately after the killing. They subsequently spent the evening together in Mr. Ashford's suite. Lucky Mr. Ashford, or should we say, looking at that profile, Lucky Miss Whitecliffe."

He knew that this woman from the past was watching



him avidly. People at other tables were also watching. Claire was basking in the reflected limelight. This was the highlight of her European tour. Without expression he folded the page and handed it back to her.

She was looking at him archly. "Is she as beautiful as she looks in the picture, Julian?"

Julian: as if she were his dearest friend. "Miss Whitecliffe is a very charming girl," he said.

She sighed. "Blondes, always blondes. Your wife was a blonde, wasn't she?"

"Yes." He found himself hating the woman, hating the way she batted her eyelids at him in coy, sidelong inquiry.

"We were all in an absolute dither of curiosity that time when you two broke up. But we never could find out what actually did happen, not even from the servants, and they know everything."

"I can imagine your frustration."

She put a hand on his arm. "Does it still hurt, Julian? I mean, don't you like to talk about it, even now after all this time?"

He finished his drink and stood up. "After all this time there must be very little left to talk about, very little that has not been said, I mean." Then he asked, "You didn't meet my wife, did you?"

"No. Henry and I were on the Coast and you were up country; but of course Julian Ashford and his beautiful wife were quite famous—or didn't you know? But Henry, you met her, didn't you?"

Henry said stolidly, as if he realized that the subject were taboo, "No, dear, I don't recall that I did."

He wished he had not met them. The illusion of freedom he had had briefly was dispelled. He was aware now that people did recognize him and were watching him as he walked on the pavements. The photographers were interested in him. They knew where a good picture would bring good money. He knew too that from now on it would be the same with Penelope. They would be wanting to get another picture of them together—the niece of the dead man and the suspect with their heads together.

“Haven’t we something in common?” The voice had an amused drawl. He looked around and saw that Raoul de Wollfe was sauntering at his side. “I saw you were with a couple of friends. I didn’t want to butt in.”

“They knew me in Burma or Malaya, I’m not sure which. I seem to be becoming a public figure.”

Raoul laughed. “You don’t like it, do you? When you’ve lived in places like this you’ll learn to capitalize on it. The main thing is to get a reputation.”

“Even as a suspected murderer?”

“Especially as a suspected murderer.” He laughed. “Both of us. We’ll sit here and drink together . . . two suspects comparing notes.” He led the way to a table under a red and blue umbrella. “This is not the best place in Nice to have an apéritif; but it certainly is the most public.”

A photographer focused his camera and Raoul de Wollfe posed as if he were quite unaware of what was happening.

“That will be quite good,” he said and smiled. “But, of course, I can’t hope to compete with the one you and

Penelope had in the paper this morning. That was a stroke of genius. If only I'd thought of it I might have posed with the dear girl myself." He beckoned to the waiter. "But then, of course, I'm married, and there is always the possibility that Risa might not approve."

Julian wondered if there were some other meaning to what his companion said. It seemed to him that there were too many people knowing or making oblique references to his past. "The whole thing is very unfortunate," he said. "I'm sure your wife was embarrassed by that interview with the police."

Raoul laughed. "Risa? Good Lord, no. She was simply giving me a rap over the knuckles. My dear feller, Risa knew exactly what she was doing. She knew perfectly well that the police would never dare hold a man of my standing on the evidence they had against me." He laughed. "I have a suspicion, which she more or less confirms, that that little act of yesterday was on your behalf, to switch just enough suspicion to me so that they would have to let you go."

"Mine?" Julian forced himself to look at his companion and express surprise. "Why on earth should she do that?"

Raoul de Wollfe shrugged. "Why on earth? Don't ask me to fathom a woman's mind; sorry for you, perhaps, with an instinctive feeling that you had become embroiled in something that was none of your business. You told her that you had a son alone here. Perhaps that was it. Risa, I am happy to say, is unpredictable. At the risk of sounding suburban, that's why I love her." He smiled confidently. "But the point is that she knew

perfectly well that I was not involved and that at worst I would come home later in a very irritated frame of mind. I may tell you that I got even with her by not coming home at all. I toured the harbor in my speed-boat—saw a gorgeous sunrise. A man must maintain his prestige.”

Yes; Julian realized that it would be his prestige that would count. The social standing of Raoul de Wollfe would have to be maintained at all costs. He was like an actor with his public. Here now, sitting in the sun, looking with amused tolerance on the passing scene, he was playing a part and quite obviously enjoying the role of Raoul de Wollfe.

He had not noticed that they had an intruder. But Julian saw that the student they had been talking about a little time ago was loitering by the table. Dr. Leon Topolski was standing like a servant waiting to catch the master's attention.

“Mr. de Wollfe.”

Raoul looked up, and an expression of annoyance made it plain that this was an irritating guest. “Oh yes, Topolski,” he said. “What is the trouble?”

Topolski did not exactly squirm. He looked servile and at the same time determined. “I would have liked a word with you, sir, in private.”

Raoul de Wollfe was not pleased. “In private . . . what on earth could you have to say to me in private? You may not have noticed, but I am entertaining a guest. If you have a message for me or something you want to say, for heaven's sake say it.”

The student looked crushed but there was an under-

lying confidence. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was wondering if you had lost confidence in me at the school."

"At the school? What on earth are you talking about?"

Topolski's eyes slid to Julian and away again. "Mr. John Keeble appeared there this morning as a lecturer. I know that he's a friend of yours . . . and your wife's. I wondered . . ."

De Wollfe leaned back in his chair, giving Topolski all his attention. "Now please, I know what you have been through, what you have suffered and all that sort of thing, but really this persecution mania of yours is becoming a little tiresome."

"You are not trying to replace me, Mr. de Wollfe?" Without doubt there was a faint threat this time in his voice.

"Replace you? In what possible capacity would I want to replace you?"

Topolski at close range looked even less prepossessing than he had at the school. He was not even clean and his features were set in sullen persistence. "I've done much for you in the past," he said, and then with sudden venom, "If you refuse to listen to me, I'll go to your wife."

Raoul's lips drew back from his clenched teeth. He half rose from his chair, then suddenly relaxed and beckoned to a waiter. "Jules. I brought my friend here for an apéritif." He nodded to Topolski. "I'm sorry to have to tell you that this man is annoying us."

"Certainly, monsieur," Jules said it in the same tone he would have used if he had been taking an order for a drink. He put his tray aside. He gave a little signal



and several other waiters appeared at his side. They stood together without speaking, waiting. Topolski looked from the men to De Wollfe and back again. Then he turned and almost ran down the steps and through the crowds onto the sidewalk. It was humiliating, degrading. Julian Ashford felt a pity for him. A human being should not expose himself to such treatment.

Raoul de Wollfe picked up his glass and looked at the light shining on the bubbles that rose to the surface of his drink. "That," he said, "is one of the penalties of trying to help somebody. I've done it scores of times and it always ends up in the same way. Probably ever since he was a small kid Topolski has been a fugitive from some damned regime or other. Somebody tosses them some small favor and immediately they are suspicious. What is behind that kindness? There must be something. What does he expect to get out of me? You see the point is, half of these people have never benefited by an act of disinterested kindness in their lives."

"I see what you mean," Julian said. "But he didn't seem particularly grateful. He acted more like a man with a grudge."

Raoul de Wollfe sat watching the people go by, but he might not have been really seeing them. "I could kick myself for ever having anything to do with the man," he said finally. "It began in a quite simple way out of a ridiculous passion I have for fishing. I wanted to go to Finland and I found that Topolski spoke the language fluently. As an act of charity I sent this fellow to the country and I must say that he came back with



the whole thing arranged perfectly. It turned out to be one of the best trips I've ever taken. I paid him off and expected that to be the end." He shrugged. "But of course, with these people it never is. I asked him what he wanted to do. He said that he wanted to study the French language and be my secretary.

"I did not need a secretary here. An idle secretary can very quickly develop into a spy: it's amazing how interested they can become in the private affairs of their employers. But there was a little work that he could do for me, part-time, certainly not enough to have him in my house all day. I said I would enroll him at the Whitecliffe school where he could study to his heart's content. I offered to pay for his fees and his keep, and in return he could work for me."

Raoul de Wollfe finished his drink at a gulp. "He misunderstood even that. Somehow he got the impression that I had put him in the school to spy on Penelope. Ever since I put him there he has been sending the most minutely detailed reports of what goes on. Quite honestly, I've not had the heart to tell him to stop."

His tone was so conversational that for the moment Julian overlooked the obvious question.

"But you were trying to buy the school, weren't you?"

De Wollfe laughed. "You are quite right. I made no secret of it."

"And today he thought you had replaced him with John?"

"That, you see, is what I mean about the disadvantages of trying to employ a man like Leon Topolski. Today he saw John Keeble and immediately he thought

I was replacing him and he rushed down here to find me and make veiled threats." He finished his drink. "It never would nor never could enter his mind that I might have been paying for him because I thought he would be happy there, and would be prepared to keep him there till I needed him. I shouldn't be at all surprised if he has decided that one day he will have to kill me."

"Not a very nice way to repay a kindness."

De Wollfe shrugged. "He's been vaguely useful. In these fishing trips of mine I travel to all sorts of places, and people write to me in the weirdest of languages. I turn them over to Topolski and he ferrets out their meaning." He made the explanation as if he realized that Julian was too shrewd to believe that he could maintain Topolski entirely out of charity. "And I did tell him that I was interested in the school and I wanted him to report occasionally on how things were going."

Julian tried to keep a sudden feeling of distaste from reflecting in his voice. "Perhaps he felt he was serving you better as a spy than as a secretary," he said.

## CHAPTER NINE

**T**HE key they handed him at the desk was not to the main door to his suite, but to his bedroom. As he came in he heard voices. Tyler was entertaining a visitor.

Halfway across the room he stopped.

"Your name is Tyler, you say; that's a nice name, but it's unusual, isn't it?"

"It's a family name, you see. The oldest boy in the family is always called Tyler. Daddy's brother called Tyler was killed in the war, so I'm the only one left. In fact, daddy and I are the only ones left of any of our family."

There was a pause. Julian held his breath. The visitor said softly, "What happened to your mother, Tyler?"

"Oh, she died."

"Don't you remember her?"

"No, I was too little."

"I'm so sorry."

He said, "Oh, it doesn't matter. We get along well

by ourselves. Only I wish I could remember her. Daddy said she was beautiful."

"And good?"

"Oh yes, of course."

"Have you got any pictures of your mother?"

"No, we haven't. You see, we had to run away from the Japanese and we couldn't carry any pictures."

"Yes," the voice said. "It was a complete break with the past, wasn't it?" A brief laugh. "But complete."

The boy seemed to realize that no answer was expected of him.

"What time do you expect your father will be home, Tyler?"

"Very soon." He must have looked at the clock because he said urgently, "It's my bath time. Would you care to come to my room while I get ready or would you like to wait here?"

"I think I'd like to see your room very much."

He seemed to hesitate. "It's very untidy, I'm afraid. Mrs. Tilford says it's like a pigsty."

"Why not? You can pretend to be a little pig and have a bath in your trough."

They were both laughing when Julian walked into the room. They both stopped laughing.

"Daddy," Tyler said, "this is Mrs. de Wollfe. She came to see you."

He put his hand on Tyler's shoulder. "Yes, of course," he said. "We met yesterday afternoon I think." He turned Tyler in the direction of the door. "I think I heard some mention of a bath," he said.

The little boy looked at his father. There were signs

and portents he alone could read. They told him whether an argument might or might not be rewarding. This time he decided not. He shook hands with the strange lady he had been entertaining and went without loss of dignity to his own room.

They stood appraising each other, together and alone.

"Julian," she said, and repeated it with a little laugh. "How that name did not escape my lips yesterday afternoon I shall never know."

He found himself wondering why it was that today she looked more the Risa he had known. Perhaps it was deliberate. Her hair seemed loose and the make-up on her face softer, the clothes were not quite so . . . he could not think of a word for it. It was as if she had gone back halfway to meet him.

"I came to thank you," she said.

He smiled at her. It was friendly, but there were no illusions. "No, Risa. Tell me really why you came?"

"Should I remind you, Julian, that I am a mother?"

"Curiosity?"

"Partly. You have a very nice little boy. He told me that he had a very beautiful mother. Thank you, Julian."

"Did you come here to disillusion him?"

"Darling, now is that kind?"

"I'm sorry, Risa. You are beautiful."

"Thank you, I'm not trying to be reassured, but it's becoming important."

"Because of Raoul?"

She gave a little shrug. "Possibly. Naturally Raoul wants everything about him to be the best he can get.

You are quite clever, Julian, so I suppose you've guessed by now that what matters most to Raoul is his vanity." She stood looking at him, appraising him. "I suppose," she said, "you would not be flattered if I told you you were the most attractive man I have ever met in my life."

"Who wouldn't be flattered? But you see I know the facts, Risa."

"Facts?" She gave a sudden savage twist to her shoulders. "Have you ever known what it is to be bored? I don't mean just being bored, but frightened, when you hear your life ticking away second by second, and you are surrounded by dreary people who talk hour after hour about people they pretend to know or scandal about people they do know, people with nothing whatever to interest them."

"You had Tyler."

"Tyler." She laughed. "You fool, Julian, he meant less to me than he does now. The day he was born his nurse took him away from me." Her voice rose in bitterness. "She brought him to me at feeding time as if I were a cow, and then took him away to love him and take care of him and do all the things I wanted to do and couldn't because they were taboo. I began to hate that feeding time because I began to realize that I was a little lower in his estimation than his nurse. Don't you remember how she used to walk about the bungalow as if it had been dedicated to Tyler, and hand him to me to feed and then take him away contented?" She shook her head as she looked at him.



"Julian dear, it would have been no use trying to explain."

"I might have helped," he said.

"I would have had to tell you how much I loathed the place and everything connected with it."

He nodded, realizing that this conversation was not taking place in the Far East but in Europe, in a hotel in Nice. They were back in the past.

"Why did you come here this evening, Risa?"

She shook her head. "I don't quite know. It was the most dangerously stupid thing I could have done, I suppose. But obviously there are things we have to say to each other without an audience."

"There are less dangerous places to meet than in my apartment."

"I realize that, I thought it might be more dangerous to delay."

"Why, after ten years, should you think another day would be important?"

"I thought you were dead," she said. "I made inquiries and they told me you were missing, both of you. There was no record of you being taken to any of the prison camps. The idea that you might escape carrying a baby seemed ridiculous. I knew you wouldn't leave him behind."

"You should have remembered that I knew the country pretty well. I took a gun with me and we lived off the jungle. We walked to India. It was quite a long way."

She nodded slowly. "Yes, I suppose I should have realized that you would get away somehow." Her tone

gave the impression that he had somehow cheated her.

"Did you tell Raoul that you had lived in Burma?" he asked.

"I didn't even tell him I had been within a thousand miles of the place. Till I walked into that room yesterday I had even forgotten it myself. If anyone from those days pretended to know me, I would simply say that I had never set eyes on them in my life." She shrugged contemptuously.

"As a matter of interest, Risa, why did you marry De Wollfe under your maiden name? That was a dangerous thing to do."

A nerve at one corner of her lips twitched spasmodically. She took a step closer to him. "So you have been spying on me, Julian?"

"Not at all."

"Why did you come to Nice?"

He said, "It's quite simple. Ever since he was born, Tyler and I have been living in the tropics. With a belated sense of responsibility, I decided that it was time he began to be educated. I could have sent him to the school I went to in England, but I remembered how cold it used to be in the dormitories and I thought that for a kid born in the tropics it would be hell. Rightly or wrongly, I decided to compromise on a school down here. If I had known you were here, we would have stayed away."

She was not convinced. "You always did know more than you admitted, didn't you, Julian? How did you know I married Raoul under my maiden name?"

He shook his head. "I can't tell you that, or rather

I won't tell you. Tell me, Risa, does Tyler mean anything to you?"

She paused, obviously posing the question to herself. "I told you, Julian, he seems a nice little boy, nothing more." She looked at him speculatively. "Did you think he would? I mean was that the reason you brought him here, that having him near would be a torture to me?" Her voice hardened. "I thought I explained that to you; the wonderful nurse you found for him stole him from me on the day he was born."

He nodded. "I can understand that you might feel like that, but you see, Risa, I don't feel that way about him. I heard him say that his mother was dead. Do you honestly think I would want to bring you back from the dead with all the unhappy history that would go with the resurrection?"

A look of relief made her look younger, more eager. "You always were rather a darling, Julian. We can keep this between ourselves. I'm sure we can." She laughed. "It will be rather fun really, having people introduce us as complete strangers, and we'll make nice polite conversation, and you'll know and I'll know how awfully funny it is, but nobody else will." She looked at him as if she were looking into her own memory. "I'll look at you, Julian, and not a single person in the room will be able to realize that I'm thinking how much we used to love each other, and nobody will know what nice churned up feelings I have inside."

She was reassured now, and the situation was not one of fear but delightful danger. She laid a hand in a caress on his cheek. "Julian, when we've been introduced

a few times, I'll become possessive and I'll say to women, 'Have you met this delightful savage who has come from somewhere or other in the wilderness?' And darling, you'll be there looking so unbelievably attractive as you always do, and you and I will be laughing deep down inside and even Raoul will be jealous."

He knew Risa and he knew that what she proposed would be on the highest level of amusement for her. When she was excited, her excitement was infectious. He felt cruel as he replied to her. "There is one thing wrong with this idea. You and I are not the only ones here who know about the past."

She backed away from him. "You've told already?"

"No, Risa. I don't want this to be known any more than you do. I'm sorry, but what is happening here is no fault of mine."

Anger flamed in her cheeks. "Why did you come here—why did you, of all people? Why did you have to employ that dreadful old man who was murdered? You could have gone away and nobody would have been the wiser; but no, you had to involve yourself in a murder. Now you tell me that other people here know about our past. Julian, why did you let that man come into your apartment and pry into your private affairs?"

It was an astonishing accusation. "Risa," he said, "why should the unfortunate man pry into my private life? All he wanted was a chance to earn some extra money and to live in a suite in a fashionable hotel."

She dropped her hands by her sides. "Did you take any trouble to hide your private papers from him?"

"I have no private papers to hide."

"Your marriage certificate, for instance? Tyler's birth certificate?"

He said patiently, "Risa, when you set out to carry a baby through a jungle infested with Japanese, you don't carry a bundle of documents. You carry quinine and a rifle and some basic food, not the birth certificate and marriage lines. At the time I set out I thought there was very little hope of either of us needing them."

"There must have been something."

"There was nothing in my possession to link Tyler and me with you."

"But you said there were people who know about us."

He nodded. "There are . . . two at least."

"Who are they? I have to know who they are."

"No, Risa. It wouldn't help you to know."

Her hands were clenched and her body stiffened as if she found the strain of keeping control almost beyond endurance. But her voice was quiet, almost casual. "I think I understand, Julian. You told me there are two people, and you won't name them. You want me to look at everybody with suspicion. You want me to feel that everybody I meet is watching me, watching and waiting. Is that your idea of punishing me? For ten years you have been hunting me down."

"That is not true," he said patiently. "Risa, don't you think the simplest thing to do would be to go back to Raoul and tell him the truth about this mess? He loves you, doesn't he? At least it seemed obvious to me that he does."

She nodded. "Yes, he loves me; but not so much as he loves himself. To have to acknowledge that I've been



deceiving him would be more than he could bear. He would think of everything that had happened; he'd realize that the people who had claimed to know me really have. He'd torture himself with the thought that people had been laughing at him behind his back." She paused and looked at Julian, and her tone when she spoke again was almost resentful. "All your life you have been able to behave naturally, haven't you?"

He was surprised. "I suppose I have, but why not?"

"Exactly, why not? You were born to be like you are. That's why you will never understand Raoul. Raoul gives the impression that he went to Harrow and Cambridge. Actually his father was a hairdresser, and his first job was working behind the counter in a department store. Do you find anything distasteful about that, Julian?"

"Of course not. There's nothing shameful about it."

"To Raoul there is. If he realized that I knew, I think he would hate me. I found out by accident. That's why I understand him; he has a past that he wants to hide. He has built himself up piece by piece into somebody he wants to be, into something that he's not. That's why he's had to be so careful all the time, careful about his clothes and his hair and his voice, and guard against the awful feeling that if somebody shouted at him he might turn around and call them "sir." You'd never understand what appearances mean to Raoul, because you couldn't. I do and I think that's why I love him. It's fantastic, isn't it, loving a man because of things he doesn't ever want you to know about?"

She was really beautiful as she stood there defending



him, explaining him. She was not only pleading for Raoul de Wollfe but, without knowing it, pleading for herself.

He walked to the window and stood looking down over the lighted Promenade and thinking back over the tangled wreck of their lives. He had every reason to hate Risa and he did not. Yet she had told him that Raoul would hate her if she told him, even in her own glossed-over version, something of her story.

"Risa," he said, "do you think if I told him about us it would help you? I could leave out everything except the bare facts that he would have to know. I could say that you had gone on a holiday to Sydney and that while you were away everything happened. The Japanese invasion had come and Tyler and I had been engulfed in it; I could tell him that as there was no record of us in the prison camps there was only one chance in a million that we were alive. I could tell him that you took your maiden name because you wanted to shut out the nightmare from your mind, and that by the time you met him and fell in love with him, Tyler and I and the past had ceased to exist."

She replied and her voice was deathly cold. "Have you had that in your mind all the time? Is that what you came here for?"

He looked at her in surprise. Her face was white and still. "Risa, what are you talking about?"

"Don't you know? I think you would like to watch Raoul's life collapse as you told him your story."

"Risa," he said, "that's utter nonsense and you know it!"

He might not have spoken. "But you've overlooked something. We've talked a lot about the life I'm living and what it means to me, but you seem to have forgotten your own life. Your son loves you very much, doesn't he, Julian?"

He tried to be light about it. "I hope so, but now and then I think I'm a bit of an optimist."

"Well, let me reassure you he does. He made it clear to me tonight that he thinks you are a kind of god. So it amounts to this, Julian: if you raise a finger to try to interfere with my life, I promise you he won't have any illusions about either of us." She picked up her bag from the chair where she had been sitting when Tyler had entertained her. "You asked me several times why I came here at such a risk, Julian. Now you know." She walked to the door and turned. "I don't believe there are two other people in Nice who know about you and me, and if Raoul learns anything about our past, I'll know where he learned it. You can go to Raoul if you think you can gain anything by it. But you'll find that his views are the same as mine, only they'll be more violent."

She walked out and closed the door quietly behind her.

He went into his son's room. Tyler was out of the bath and drying himself industriously.

"Who was that lady, daddy?"

"Just somebody I know."

"What did she come to see you about?"

"Oh, just to talk. Did you like her, Tyler?"

"Yes," he said. "She was very nice." He thought a

moment and said seriously, "You'd better be careful of that lady, daddy."

"Why is that?"

"Well, she asked me so many questions about you, I think she might want to marry you."

He thrust his hand through the boy's wet hair. "If you think any woman would want to relieve me of the responsibility of looking after you, my friend, you must be crazy."

Tyler looked relieved. "That's what I thought. She wouldn't want to be bothered with a little boy, would she?"

"Good heavens, no! Let's wait till we find someone who'll fall in love with us both."

The boy laughed happily. "That's a very good idea because it will never happen."

## CHAPTER TEN

**I**NSPECTOR Henri Vernier and his clerk arrived the next morning at half-past ten. They had taken the precaution of warning him not to leave the suite.

The clerk established himself at a table in the corner of the room and put three beautifully sharpened pencils beside a blank pad. Inspector Vernier looked at the room, the view from the windows, and Julian Ashford, all with the same air of vague distaste. His limp cigarette dangled from his lips like a piece of soiled string.

"So this is where you had planned to put him," he said. Julian knew that he would be referring to the late Mr. Whitecliffe.

"Yes, he was going to stay here while I was away."

"I am not perhaps accustomed to thinking of money in the terms that you do, Mr. Ashford, but it does seem a lavish establishment for a tutor."

"If I had had more time, I would have arranged something less expensive," Julian said.

"But you would have paid for Mr. Whitecliffe to live here in luxury for as long as you stayed away."

Julian smiled. "I see what you mean. I engaged him and established him in all this luxury and then at the last moment in a fit of meanness I decided that it would be a great saving if I killed him."

"He had already moved into this apartment, had he not?"

"Yes. He brought his bags around here sometime in the morning, I understand. He must have unpacked as soon as I moved out."

"Where are his things now, Mr. Ashford?"

"Well, naturally enough, I packed them up and took them back to his niece."

"Without asking my permission?"

"Should I have done that?"

"Naturally. When did you do this?"

"I took them round yesterday morning."

"But the packing—when did you do that?"

"Most of it the night before last. I had to have room for my own things."

"Did you do the packing yourself?"

"Of course. I travel a great deal. One becomes adept at it."

"You had no help?"

Julian looked surprised. "No. I suppose I could have had one of the floor servants do it, but it didn't occur to me to bother."

Vernier looked at him as if he were being stupidly evasive. "I was not thinking of the servants. I was thinking of Miss Whitecliffe, monsieur. She was here."

Julian said irritably, "Of course she was here. When you were interviewing us you heard her say that she

would bring my son back to the hotel. There was a picture in one of the papers yesterday morning to prove that she arrived."

Inspector Vernier waited while the clerk caught up with his notes. "I was thinking of a second visit, Mr. Ashford, the intimate one, when you tried to order supper for two in your suite and failed." His tone was deliberately contemptuous. "When the niece of the murdered man and one of the principal suspects thought they would have a little celebration."

It was no pleasure to have to explain. "Miss Whitecliffe came here because she had had to go away before I came back that afternoon, and leave my son in the care of someone else."

"She could have telephoned. That would have been more discreet."

Julian said, "You are more likely to be discreet when you have a sense of guilt. She was worried that her uncle's belongings would be in my way . . ."

"And so after she came here you packed them?"

"Yes, while she was here."

"She helped you?"

"No, I told you I didn't need help."

"Where was Miss Whitecliffe while you were doing this packing?"

"I think she was talking to me."

"Was she in your bedroom?"

"Of course. It would be foolish to try to talk through the wall."

The inspector pulled away the cigarette from his lower lip. He performed the operation carefully because



the paper was stuck to the skin. But that was obviously something he had expected. A fragment of white paper remained glued to his purple lip. It danced as he spoke. "Miss Whitecliffe must have seen the papers you found."

Julian knew that this had been coming. "Yes," he said casually. "I don't see why she shouldn't."

"Did she see what you did with them, monsieur?"

"Of course. I tried to do it as tidily as I could. You know how it is with other people's things. I put the papers in his dispatch case. There were several novels, I think, and some school textbooks. You'll find them. I'm sure I put them in, but where I'm afraid I can't tell you. Is there something that I should particularly have noticed?"

Henri Vernier lifted his lids to stare out of his smoke-stained eyes. "Yes, monsieur. The papers your son was so excited about, those that he hid so carefully in his folded shirts."

Julian laughed. "I think I'd better explain Tyler. This is his first murder case, Inspector. And if you want to keep on the path of reason, you will not call upon the services of my son. If you do, I warn you that you may begin to suspect that you committed this murder yourself."

The inspector's lower lip protruded and pressed firmly against the upper one. He did not smile. "And Mr. Whitecliffe's belongings; did his niece take them away with her?"

"No," Julian said. "I thought if we had taken them downstairs that night it might have caused some comment."

"You might have thought of that aspect before you invited the lady to your suite," the inspector said dryly. "You are ready to swear that Miss Whitecliffe did not take any papers from here?"

"I am ready to swear that Miss Whitecliffe had no part whatever in packing her uncle's things and that she was never in this room alone."

"It seems that you are ready to swear to almost everything, Mr. Ashford. But you've forgotten that Miss Whitecliffe was here alone with your boy, at the same time that you were forgetting that you had come back to the Casino."

It was perfectly true. For a stupid moment he had forgotten.

The inspector took up his black hat and signaled to his clerk. "We will go to the school, Mr. Ashford. Your memory may improve with Miss Whitecliffe to prompt you. Come with us."

Penelope turned white as she saw them come into her room, Julian and the police officers, on either side of him.

He smiled. "They haven't actually arrested me," he said. "At least I don't think they have."

The inspector put his black hat on Penelope's desk. The gesture gave the impression that he had come to take charge. He looked round with unhurried interest. The clerk, as usual, found himself an unobtrusive position in the background. The inspector walked to the glass panel and looked out into the classroom. He saw

John lecturing and turned with a look of inquiry on his face to Penelope, but before she could explain he had turned back to watch the classroom. He watched John for a while and then he gave his attention to the class. His eyes traveled back and forth along the rows, pausing at each face as if to impress it on his memory. The students had seen him and were watching curiously. One of the few exceptions was Leon Topolski. His head was bent over his notes. All that the inspector could see was the lank hair that fell down over his eyes, and the top of his curiously shaped head. But Vernier gave him more attention than he had given the others, and as he watched he passed his long fingers caressingly over his chin.

John Keeble saw that his pupils had lost interest in what he was saying. He turned and saw Inspector Vernier standing like a figure of ill-omen, staring through the glass. He waved and grinned cheerfully.

Inspector Vernier swung away from the window with an angry flush on his face. He said abruptly to Penelope, "Why did you bring your uncle's belongings away from the hotel without my authority?"

She looked at him in bewilderment. "But why not? You said nothing about leaving them there. The room belonged to Mr. Ashford. I knew he would be wanting it."

"You are very solicitous about Mr. Ashford. Particularly as you ask us to believe that you met him so recently."

Julian stepped forward, but Penelope spoke first. She

said stiffly, "I know you have your duty to do; otherwise this would be unforgivable."

He was not perturbed. An angry girl is often an indiscreet one. "As I understand it, he has entertained you twice. In his sitting room in the morning and in his bedroom in the evening."

Penelope turned to Julian in bewilderment. "You told him that?"

He shook his head warning her. "I think," he said, "the inspector would be happy to create what he would consider an atmosphere between us. He thinks it would make his work easier. I told him that you talked to me while I was packing your uncle's clothes."

Vernier turned to him angrily. "Are you trying to warn Miss Whitecliffe that that is how you explained her presence in your bedroom?"

Julian said easily, "Inspector, I don't have to explain her presence there. I told you why she was there."

"Ah yes, of course, she was helping you with the packing, is that so, Miss Whitecliffe?"

"No," Julian said it flatly, before Penelope could reply.

"I asked Miss Whitecliffe."

"No," she said, but without the same conviction. It was as if she suspected that he was setting a trap for them. "No, Mr. Ashford said he knew much more about packing a man's cases than I did."

"And you?"

"I watched him."

"All the time?"

"Yes, I sat on the bedroom chair and watched him

packing the cases." She smiled faintly. "He was not better at packing clothes than I am, but much quicker."

"Was he so quick that you failed to see him take the papers that were hidden in with the linen, Miss Whitecliffe?"

There was a pause. Neither of them looked at the other. Then Julian heard Penelope ask as if she were puzzled, "Was it his laundry bill you were looking for, Inspector?"

"Laundry bill?" Vernier's voice suggested that he had reached the limit of frustration. "Why, mademoiselle, should I be looking for a laundry bill?"

"I don't know," she said. "But if you were looking for a paper between his clean shirts it would be that. It was a funny habit he had. He thought it was very businesslike. When he had worn so many shirts, six I think it always was, he would find the bill. That would remind him that it was time to pack up his laundry and also to pay the bill. He thought it was very clever. He had all sorts of little systems that other people would have thought ridiculous. But you see he was a bachelor and he had lots of prim little ways of doing things. That was one of them. He would count six shirts in his drawer and then he would tuck the bill under the sixth and he would say, 'There, Penelope, how many of your efficient housewives would think of a simple device like that?' "

There was silence in the room, and then Penelope asked, "Did you find the bill, Mr. Ashford? Is that what the inspector is worrying about?"

"No," Julian said. "I didn't find one. But you see I

didn't move the shirts one at a time. I suppose it's still there."

Inspector Vernier looked at his clerk. The young man's face was completely blank. Whether or not he thought that his chief had been making a fool of himself, he was far too wise to betray. But he did think he had taken a lot of notes on the subject of a laundry bill. And the little boy's father had warned them. The child would see something dramatic in a paper slipped carefully into such a hiding place. The young man had his own ideas as to who the murderer was; but he had learned in a hard school that it was not his business to have theories, but to sit still and take notes and watch. And watching, he saw Julian reach out and grasp Penelope's hand briefly in a gesture of gratitude or love or reassurance.

Normally, Inspector Vernier would have resented the way John walked into the room, but now he found him almost a welcome diversion.

"Tableau," John said. "Two innocents defying the tyranny of the law." He walked over to the inspector and tapped him on the chest. "And as to you, my friend, in future be good enough not to stare at my students through that glass. They get the impression they are in an aquarium."

"So you have found other work to do, Mr. Keeble?"

John said, "You make it sound so much like an accusation, Inspector."

"When last I saw you, you gave me the impression that you were doing something different." He turned to Penelope. "Tell me why I find that immediately



after your uncle is killed you have employed Mr. Keeble?"

For some odd reason she looked not at John but at Julian as if she felt she had to explain to him or have him understand. "When my uncle died," she said, "there was no one to take this class. John . . . Mr. Keeble said he would take it." She added defensively, "It's not easy to get a replacement at short notice. Generally it takes weeks interviewing people, taking up references . . . this was an emergency." The inspector looked exasperatedly from one to the other of them, then turned suddenly to Penelope. "I would like to see what you have in your safe." He pointed to a ponderous affair that was standing in the corner.

She hesitated a moment, then walked over and opened the door and stood aside.

He went through the contents as expertly as a customs officer searching for contraband. The contents were orderly, mainly books and documents.

He took out a steel box and carried it to the desk. "This is locked."

"There is money in it." Penelope took the key from her desk and handed it to him.

He opened the lid and began taking out the money. It was in a dozen different currencies, ranging from dollars to Indian rupees.

"I had no idea you were a money changer," he said. "I had thought this was a school."

She flushed, but said quietly, "This is an international school. The people come from everywhere. We try to

help them by letting them pay for their tuition in their own currencies."

"You must be prosperous. There is a lot of money here."

"This is the beginning of the new term," she said. "The students have been paying their fees. Usually we bank our money every day. My uncle used to do that. It made him feel . . . well, that he was part of the organization and not just one of the teaching staff."

Vernier was arranging the different currencies in orderly stacks on the desk. He counted each and dictated the totals to his clerk. Over his shoulder he said, "I will be sending an accountant to check your books, Miss Whitecliffe. We will see if his examination checks with this."

She gave a short gasp. "Not all of that money belongs to us!" she said. "Sometimes the students give it to us for safekeeping."

"You don't keep an account of these sums?"

"Yes, of course. Sometimes, though, if I am very busy I just scribble out a receipt for them and enter it afterward."

"Can you give me one specific instance?" Obviously he did not believe her. "I see. So that will be your answer when we find that your books do not explain the money you have here."

She nodded wearily. "I suppose so. There could be no other explanation."

"This money the students give you? Do they give you large sums?"

"Sometimes all the money they have in the world."

"You don't explain that it would be safer in a bank?"

She shook her head. "You don't know my students. They have been fugitives so long that they associate banks with the government of their enemies."

He stopped counting and looked at her over his shoulder. "I know some of these students a good deal better than you think, Miss Whitecliffe. You may find, or I may find, that they are hiding their money here, not because they are afraid of their political enemies, but because they are afraid of the police. To act as banker for criminals is a serious matter." He turned back to his counting. To the three watching him, the movement of his fingers seemed to be deliberately slow.

He left the pile of dollars till all the others had been counted and set aside. He picked up the sheaf and weighed it in his hand and turned around. "You seem to have a number of Americans in your classes, Miss Whitecliffe?"

"Yes, we have Americans." She saw the implication of his comment as he weighed the bills in his hands and said quickly, "But not all that money comes from my American students. All of them, all of the European students, try to collect a few American dollars. They regard them as a kind of passport to freedom."

He watched as she finished speaking, still absently weighing the money in his hand. "I had always thought of you, Miss Whitecliffe, as a romantic, foolish girl who refused to give up something that had been precious to her father. But I realize now that perhaps I misjudged you. You have found a plausible answer to every question I have asked you."

Julian Ashford said, "What do you find so baffling about the truth, Inspector?" He had seen the drawn, exhausted look on Penelope's face.

The inspector dropped the money back on the desk. "I find nothing baffling about the truth, monsieur. I have not the slightest doubt that I will find a laundry bill in the shirts you packed the other night. It will explain very glibly the papers your son said he saw hidden in the drawer."

He turned his back on them and began examining the sheaf of dollars on the desk; not counting them, but feeling the texture of the paper they were printed on, holding each one to the light.

Then he found what he was looking for.

"I want you all to witness that I found this note in your safe, Miss Whitecliffe."

Penelope gasped. "Yes, of course. You are trying to frighten me, aren't you, Inspector?" He was succeeding.

He took up an envelope from the desk and slipped the note inside. Then he sealed it. "Sign across the seal, please."

Her hand was unsteady but she scrawled her name. He handed the envelope to Julian.

"Suppose you tell us the point of all this, Inspector?"

The inspector half smiled. "Of course, Mr. Ashford. The note in there is a counterfeit. We have the numbers of the notes that were cashed by the dead man at the Casino. The number on this one identifies it as one of the same series. Will you sign now?" He waited and then passed the envelope to John, who signed without comment.

Henri Vernier was obviously satisfied with his morning's work. He was prepared to leave.

"Miss Whitecliffe, may I interrupt please?" Leon Topolski was standing in the doorway. How long he had been there none of them could guess. The look of dogged patience was habitual. "I'm sorry, Miss Whitecliffe, but I wondered if perhaps I might have my money?" His eyes went to the piles of notes on the desk. "I happened to notice that this gentleman was counting it and I thought perhaps he might be from the bank and he might leave you without enough to give me mine."

Penelope seemed relieved. "Yes, of course, Mr. Topolski." She moved toward the desk and then stopped and looked doubtfully at Vernier. He made no move but watched impassively.

"How much? I don't think I recall." She seemed aware that she was in danger and did not know the direction from which to expect it.

Topolski said eagerly, "No, I'm sure you don't, Miss Whitecliffe. I gave it to your uncle . . . I'm sorry, perhaps I shouldn't have bothered you so soon after he . . . he . . ."

Penelope's voice was strained to the edge of hysteria. "It doesn't matter, Mr. Topolski. How much money do you want?"

Inspector Vernier said softly, "Let me help Mr. Topolski, Miss Whitecliffe." He turned away from her to the intruder. "You gave the money to Mr. Whitecliffe. Of course you realize that you could say such a thing knowing that he is not here to deny it?"

Topolski's voice rose in frightened protest. "But I did give to him and I must have it. It's all the money I have in the world. It's not my fault that he died!"

"He gave you a receipt?"

"Yes, yes, of course, he did; for twenty thousand francs." His hand fluttered in an inside pocket and he brought out a crumpled paper. "There it is, you see his signature. I wrote out the receipt while he counted it, and he signed it."

Vernier handed the paper to Penelope. "Is that your uncle's signature?"

She glanced at it briefly. "Yes," she said. "Yes, of course."

Instead of leaving the receipt with her, he took it and put it in his wallet. He turned back to the student. "When did you deposit this money with Mr. Whitecliffe?"

"Two days ago, on the morning of the day he was killed."

"Tell me what happened?"

Topolski looked from one side to the other, not as if he were observing but as if his head were loose on his neck. "What happened? I gave Mr. Whitecliffe my money and he signed the receipt."

"What was he doing?"

"He was counting the money from the safe and he seemed irritated that he would have to add my money to the amounts he had already made out."

"It was all here, laid out on the desk, as it is now?" the inspector asked.

"Yes. It was not tidy as it is now, it was spread out as



if he had been worried in trying to get the amounts right."

Julian could picture the little man performing this operation that was so important to his self-esteem and yet was almost beyond him, could imagine how indignant he would be that there could be other currencies that had to be taken as seriously as English pounds and, as a concession, dollars; and then this student coming in at the last moment with his wretched francs.

"I was sorry for Mr. Whitecliffe," Topolski said, and he added in an odd voice, "Just as he was sorry for me." His eyes turned to John Keeble. "He was so sorry for me in my studies that he persuaded his niece to let me go through this term without paying."

"Well, I'll be damned." From John it sounded like a gasp of amazement.

The inspector turned to him. "Did you say something, monsieur?"

"No, nothing at all."

Leon Topolski gave no sign that he had heard. "He tried to help me in every way he could. He could not understand why I had such a gift for the English language and none for the French. We used to take walks in the evenings and we would have long talks about Chaucer and Milton and Blake." Again he raised his eyes to John as if appealing to him to appreciate this. "He tried his best to make me understand that if only I could appreciate and understand the French language, there are almost as many gems in it as there are in English."

The inspector said sourly, "I think we were talking about money, monsieur."

Topolski jerked away as if he had been threatened with a whip. "Yes, yes. I was only trying to explain that we were friends and that he trusted me."

"Trusted you to do what?"

"He was upset, as I told you. Each time he counted the money the result had been different, and on top of it all there was my money." He took a breath and said diffidently, "I am very good at mathematics. I went to the desk and said, 'Please, Mr. Whitecliffe, let me help you.' I spread out the money and in a few minutes it was all in order. He was very grateful." His eyes moved, as if drawn there against his will, to the pile of dollars. "I had to tell him about the counterfeit American money," he added.

In the silence Inspector Vernier took a step closer to the table. "What do you know about that, monsieur?"

Topolski looked at him as if he wondered why an explanation should be necessary. "I learned about counterfeit dollars years ago. So did thousands like me. Dollars were so much more than just money. They were the key that opened all doors. We would give everything we possessed, and more than we possessed, to get them. I did that and I found that they had been printed in Germany." He lifted his eyes and looked from one to another of his audience. "It cost me too much to learn ever to forget."

Vernier said, out of the silence that followed, "You recognized counterfeit money? How much was there?"

"I do not know. It frightened me. I wanted nothing to do with it."

"What did you do?"

"I told Mr. Whitecliffe that if he tried to put it in the bank he would find himself in serious trouble. He was in a dreadful state. He asked me what he should do. I said he should tell Miss Whitecliffe and that both of them should go to the police. But that made him more distressed than ever. He said there was some sinister influence working against her. He said that somehow he would have to get rid of the money." Topolski ran a hand through his hair. "I said the other alternative was to take this money to the basement and throw it into the furnace." He took a difficult breath. "Mr. Whitecliffe was indignant at that. He said why should these thieving foreigners impose on his niece? I told him that he could take the money to the shops and use it in that way because only an expert could know that it was not genuine. He said that he could not cheat honest tradespeople any more than he could let his niece suffer. And then I said, and I meant it for a joke, 'The only thing I can think of is to take it to the Casino and put it on a number. If it wins you get twice as much good money in return. If it loses, well, at least you have got rid of it.'"

They had all moved closer to him. John said doubtfully, "You think he really did that?"

Topolski nodded. "That is what I think he did. He hated casinos. He would not have felt it cheating. He said that he would not take winnings, but if he did what I suggested he would get back the money that

rightly belonged to his niece, and send the rest back anonymously. He made me swear not to speak of this . . . but he is dead and I think it is my duty now to speak." He turned to Inspector Vernier. "But before you take the money to the bank, may I have my own money, please? I have to go on a journey."

They watched in silence as the inspector counted out the money from his pile of French currency. They watched Topolski put it away in his pocket and hesitate as if about to speak and change his mind and turn away.

Inspector Vernier stopped him at the door. "Whatever you may need the money for," he said, "it will not be for a journey. You will stay where I can find you."

Topolski nodded as if the order were not unexpected. He went out as unobtrusively as he had come in.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**I**N the next room Julian could hear Mrs. Tilford and his son. His son was in the bath and above his splashes he was discussing their plans for the following day. It was still amazing that such a formidable little woman could bully the child and still give him a sense of security.

He heard her emphatic sharp voice. "I am not interested in what you plan for the future, young man. I am waiting for you to wash your ears and get out of that bath."

"Coming, Mrs. Tilford." He heard the swish as the boy left the bath. "But you will promise, won't you?"

She shouted in reply. "I never bribe anybody with promises, you surely know that . . ."

It seemed to Julian that he was no longer in control of his own life or of his son's. The inspector was always at hand. Penelope Whitecliffe carried his fate in her handbag. It was her uncle who had been killed. She must realize that very likely the papers in the handbag provided the motive for his murder. She need not even

go to the police. All she would have to do would be to post them anonymously. John could supply the same information, and so could Risa. The most sensible thing to do would be to go to Vernier and tell him the whole story now. Julian listened to the voices in the other room and he knew that he would never be the one to resurrect the past.

Mrs. Tilford came out of the room. She stood looking at him speculatively. "I find," she said, "that trying to protect somebody is in nine cases out of ten a complete waste of time, yet the idea is dinned into people's heads almost from the time they are born. It has made the English the most nobly furtive race in the world. The teacher says, 'Which one of you boys wrote this illiterate slander on the blackboard?' and they sit with blank faces instead of piping up and saying that it was the work of William Smith. And then with expressions of smug little martyrs they accept an imposition of two hundred lines each. Half of all the education they receive comes to them in the form of punishment. What do you think of that?"

"Not much, Mrs. Tilford."

"No, but you are behaving like a schoolboy yourself."

"I'm sorry. I must try to grow up." He smiled faintly, wearily.

She jerked the lapels of her tweed jacket and took a step toward him. "I know the signs. You are protecting somebody and you know it."

He smiled. "That could be myself, couldn't it?"

"It could be, but it is not."

He looked at her standing in front of him, stiff and



obviously more disturbed than she had intended to be.

"You were going to give me some advice, weren't you, Mrs. Tilford?"

"I was," she said. "But I have changed my mind. I was going to advise you to be more selfish." Her eyes crinkled up in an attractive smile. "I feel that I should warn you, though, that this is a different kind of jungle. Tyler told me how you carried him through the other one. You may find the dangers here more difficult to recognize." She picked up her purse and clutched it tightly under her arm and spoke as if she were feeling her way. "Against my will, Mr. Ashford . . . No, Julian, I think is better . . . Julian, I came down here because I was worried about my nephew, Charles. And I have discovered that the weaklings like Charles are not in any particular danger because nothing matters very much to them. Aimless young men like Charles have been coming to this place for half a century. There is an unnamed organization that takes care of them. They lose their money in the casinos, they become involved with women, and it is always understood that in the background there is a tolerant uncle or guardian or parent who will take them away and pay their bills and hold it over them as a benign threat."

She had given him a picture of Charles. Without meaning to, she had shown him the endless procession of aimless but amusing young men who had contributed more to the character of the Riviera than she would ever know. In the period she was thinking of, they had been the ones who had done everything foolish, everything fantastic, and also they had done everything gay.

She waited a little and went on, "Charles belongs to the past. But you see there is nobody in the background now to rescue him, except myself, and I cannot do it with money." She stopped and looked at Julian as if to give him time to understand. "That is why I came here. I have found that the life here has changed. It is more vicious and less gay. There are no benign guardians or friends in the background." She turned away. "It is none of my business. I think in the jungle the hunters sometimes have a small animal tied to a stake to attract the dangerous animals. My unfortunate relative has no idea, but that is how I see him."

He refrained from smiling at her and said, "From your description it is hard to see how it would benefit anyone to get a hold over your nephew. If he had a lot of money, it might be different."

But she was genuinely worried. "I can't understand it either. All I know is that there's *something*."

He said, "Isn't there always something where your nephew is concerned? You explained that that is why you are here?"

She seemed to decide that it would be useless to explain further, and presently she went away. She left him with a feeling of disturbance he would have been loath to admit. Almost by instinct he went into his son's room. He ruffled his hand through Tyler's hair, and the little boy smiled at him sleepily.

"I like Mrs. Tilford, don't you, daddy?"

"Very much. She's very kind to us."

"Are we paying her?"

"No, she won't accept any money."

"This is the first time anybody has done things for us without being paid, isn't it, daddy?"

It was painful to have to confess it. "Yes, Tyler, I believe it is."

"That shows she must like me, doesn't it?"

"Do you know I believe it does."

But what if there were some other reason? He had engaged Mr. Whitecliffe. That had been providentially, or suspiciously, easy. He remembered again how Penelope had tried to warn him. Then again, equally providentially Mrs. Tilford had appeared and just as providentially she had produced John Keeble to take Mr. Whitecliffe's place at the school. He asked himself what he knew about John and Mrs. Tilford . . . nothing in fact but what they had told him.

He thought of the things she had been saying a few minutes ago. Her talk about her weakling nephew. He had said there would be hardly any point in trying to establish a hold over Charles. But what if through Charles somebody had established a power over Mrs. Tilford?

He watched his son snuggle into the blankets and fall asleep, secure in the belief that he had found a friend and the knowledge that his father had come back to him.

Julian told himself that it is only because a sleeping child is a defenseless thing that he was even entertaining these fears. But now that they were established he could not drive them away. He could even hear an unknown voice in the background: "Now I have something I want you to do, it is a small matter when you

consider what you owe me. This is what it is: this afternoon Ainslie Whitecliffe was murdered. He had been employed by a man named Julian Ashford to take care of his son. I want you to take his place."

She would be able to reconcile that with her conscience. There was nothing criminal about volunteering to take care of a small boy. He was thinking of what she had said in a different light. When she had spoken of Charles and of herself, perhaps she had been trying to warn him. She had made it clear that this nephew was a weakling and that she loved him, and he could also guess that Mrs. Tilford was not a person who made a habit of discussing her family affairs with strangers.

Julian had some dinner sent up and ate it slowly and without pleasure. He forced himself to read for a while but concentration was impossible. He realized suddenly that the telephone was ringing in the other room and that it had been ringing for some time.

"Is this Mr. Ashford's apartment?"

"Yes." There was a diffident note in the voice that was vaguely familiar.

"I would like to speak to Mr. Keeble, please."

"Mr. Keeble? I'm sorry, he's not here."

"Oh, but I'm sure, he must be there."

Julian put the receiver back where it belonged. He had no intention of arguing as to John's whereabouts. Almost at once the phone rang again.

The same voice said, "I am very sorry, Mr. Ashford. I have offended you. I did not intend to do that." The voice had an irritating persistence.

"I told you Mr. Keeble wasn't here and you said that

he was here. There didn't seem much point in debating the matter."

The voice became urgent. "But he said he was going to call on you. I rang and asked if I could come and see him and he said no, he was going to your suite."

"He must have changed his mind, or do you think he's hiding under the bed?"

"No, no, please, you misunderstood me. I insisted that he must be there because I was so upset. It is so urgent you see." The voice changed slightly, lowering discreetly. "Miss Whitecliffe is not there is she, Mr. Ashford?"

Julian said flatly, "Do you mind telling me who you are?"

"No, of course not, I am Leon Topolski. I am a student at the school and in fact I am telephoning from there now."

"Miss Whitecliffe is not here," he said.

"I don't know what to do. I suppose the only thing I can do is to wait here till she comes home. Mr. Ashford, you are a friend of Miss Whitecliffe so perhaps you can advise me."

He was silent for a moment and he could hear the man at the end of the line breathing painfully as if he had been running. "I am a complete stranger in Nice, Mr. Topolski," Julian said. "It would be foolish of me to attempt to advise anyone."

But it seemed that the problem could not wait. "I don't know what to do. Today when I went to get my money and told about those forged notes, I hardly realized what an awful thing I had done to Miss White-



cliffe, after all the kindness I had had from her and from Mr. Whitecliffe . . .

"I telephoned Mr. Keeble and he was very rude to me, and I asked him if I could come around this evening and talk to him and he said no, he was going to visit you. I suppose it was just an excuse, but that is what he said. And I believed him and that is why I was sure he would be there."

The voice had a dogged eagerness. He was determined to have his way before Julian could interrupt. "So when I could not talk to Mr. Keeble who has been kind to me in the past, I decided to come here and see Miss Whitecliffe."

"Did you expect Miss Whitecliffe to be waiting to welcome you?"

"No, no. I could not expect that after what I'd done. But I had some information and I knew that it would more than undo the harm that I'd done. You see I wanted to tell Mr. Keeble and have him come with me to Miss Whitecliffe, but he refused."

Julian said, "You gave the other information to the police. If this new information will undo the harm you have done, surely you should go back to them?"

Leon Topolski's voice rose in protest. "No, no; I can't do that. Miss Whitecliffe would not want me to do that and neither would you, Mr. Ashford, particularly you. It's something Mr. Whitecliffe told me."

"I've no idea what you are talking about," Julian said. "But from the tone of your voice it sounds like blackmail. Does that explain your elaborate reasons for telephoning?"



There was a pause at the other end, and then the voice answered in a tone of quiet resignation. "I wish you had not said that, Mr. Ashford. I suppose you are justified from what you know of me. But there are times when the worst of us would like to make amends." There was the familiar click and the line was dead.

Julian turned away. He was disgusted with himself. He dropped into a chair and picked up the newspaper that the bellboy had delivered earlier. It was the continental edition of the *Daily Mail*, that strange mixture of international news and small town gossip. He read that Pandit Nehru had served veiled notice on the West; that while in practice he was obliged to co-operate with them, in his heart he supported the principle of Asia for the Asiatics. On the same page he read that "Glamorous Mrs. Raoul de Wollfe has had her first experience of what is known as a brush with the police. She had been called upon to provide an alibi for husband Raoul, who was apparently found loitering on the scene of our favorite crime. As Raoul is seldom found loitering anywhere but in this particular locale, and as it was not his fault that somebody chose to be murdered there, the need for the alibi seems rather pointless. Risa, of course, regards it as just another of those experiences. As she describes it, it couldn't have been more droll. But we heard that Raoul became quite hot under the collar when unpredictable Risa refused flatly to give him an alibi. She says she wished we could have seen him. We do."

Clever Risa. He wondered what Inspector Vernier would think when he read that paragraph.

The telephone had begun ringing again. John was calling from downstairs. "I'm establishing an alibi. May I come up or are you engaged?"

"Come up."

He put drinks on the table with a feeling of relief. He had been too much alone with his suspicions.

John helped himself and stretched out in a chair. "I don't know how you feel," he said. "In your case I'd be sick and tired of the whole lot of us."

"There are exceptions," Julian said. "Why do you need the alibi?"

John laughed. "I honestly don't know. It must be that I have a mania for telling the truth. Friend Topolski rang me up and said he wanted to talk to me. Honestly I hate talking to him. He spends half his time being sorry for Poland and the other half being sorry for himself. I told him I had another engagement and on the spur of the moment I said I was calling on you and so, not to make myself a liar I've done it."

"He telephoned here."

John sat up. "There is a dogged ill-mannered persistence about that man. So he was checking to see if I was telling the truth?" He laughed suddenly. "I seem to have been wasting my time and yours. I haven't even an excuse for staying."

"He was telephoning from the school," Julian said. "When you refused to see him, he tried to see Miss Whitecliffe. What he wants to say, I gather, concerns her particularly."

John stood up. "I should have met him. You say he tried to see her?"

"Yes, presumably she's not at home. He is probably waiting there till she comes back."

"Damn lunatic that I am." John went to the telephone and gave the number and waited. He turned backward and forward with the receiver pressed to his ear. Julian could hear the steady depressing sound of an unanswered telephone.

John took the receiver from his ear and turned, holding it in his hand. It was louder now. "Are you sure he said he was waiting at the school?"

"Quite sure."

"If you don't mind, I'll go around and see what happened. If he said he would wait, I'm quite sure he would." He picked up his drink and finished it.

"I'll come with you."

John hesitated as if he would like to find an excuse for going alone. Then he smiled. "I'm not exactly scared of Topolski," he said. "But do come if you feel like it."

They crossed charming little Jardin Albert by the curving paths. The night was soft and warm and so still that they could hear the throb of the music in the old Casino Municipal.

As they came up to the school there was no sound but the crunch of their feet on the gravel. Light was showing in the lecture room on the second floor, but there was none in Penelope's apartment higher up.

John stopped and stood looking at the windows above him. "There's something unpleasant in the thought of that man wandering about up there. I don't think he's dangerous; but I don't think he's quite sane. That persecution mania of his . . . "

Julian put a hand on his arm. "It may not have been so much a mania as you think." He pointed into the shadows where the drive met the wall.

The dark inert shape was outlined dimly against the pale white of the graveled drive. In the outline there was a suggestion of movement, as if the body were endeavoring to crawl.

Julian crouched and held the flame of his cigarette lighter to the half-turned face. The dead lie very close to the earth. The face was caressing the small stones. The coat sleeve on one arm had been pushed back almost to the elbow, and the thin fingers had clutched up a handful of gravel and were holding it greedily.

John took one glance at what was visible in the little pool of light, and then swung away. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "You may be more accustomed to this sort of thing than I am. I don't like it."

Julian clicked off the light and stood up. "Nobody likes murder," he said quietly, and added, "Unless perhaps the police . . . hadn't you better telephone them?"

John said doubtfully, "Yes, I suppose I should." He added more violently, "God, we'll have that damned inspector around here again!"

"Yes, we'll have the inspector. We seem to be making a habit of being on the scene of the crime, don't we?"

"Must we be on the scene of this one?" John's voice was hesitant, unsteady. "We came out for a walk. Is there any reason why we shouldn't continue it?"

Julian said evenly, "We could if we thought it would be a good idea to let Penelope come home and find a corpse on her doorstep."

John drew a breath through his teeth. "I hadn't thought of that."

"There is, of course, another point. This morning Leon Topolski told Inspector Vernier that he had found the counterfeit notes, and this evening here at the school we find him dead. You may not have noticed but he was stabbed in the back."

John swung around to face him. "Are you trying to suggest that Penelope had anything to do with this?"

"I am not trying to suggest it," Julian said. "But don't you see that whoever killed Topolski might have been?"

"Yes," John said. "Yes," as if the suggestion suddenly appalled him, "they'll say it was a plot hatched up here in the school." And then hopelessly, "But what can we do?"

"If I had a car," Julian said, "I would consider it my unpleasant duty to put this body in it and take it away, anywhere away from here."

"I have a car." John's voice was uncertain in the darkness. "It would be a hell of a dangerous thing to do, wouldn't it?"

"It would. You would have to be sure, too, that nobody here had heard or seen anything unusual."

"There are the porter and his wife. If Topolski came into the building they must have let him in."

"I think you should go and ask for him. He did telephone and ask if he could see you. I can be a witness to that."

John hesitated and then walked to the dimly lighted entrance of the school.



Julian turned back to the body. He did not look at the face this time, but concentrated on the handle of the knife. The shape was familiar. John had talked about one of the same kind, and laughed at himself for carrying it about the world when he could have bought an identical one in the Rue de France for a hundred francs.

"Nobody there at all. I should have remembered. Everybody in the school knows that the old couple go every Thursday to the vaudeville show at the Municipal Casino. Everybody laughs at them. The old boy likes the girls and Francine goes along to bring him home."

"So the place is unprotected?"

"On Thursdays, yes. But there's nothing really to protect. If anyone suggested to Penelope that she wouldn't be safe alone in the place, she'd laugh at them. I know, I've suggested it myself."

Julian could imagine that the best way to make sure that Penelope would refuse protection would be to suggest that she needed it. "I think," he said, "if you are going to bring our car you should hurry."

"You'll wait? I—I don't think I could go through with this alone."

"I'll wait." He listened to the urgent footsteps crunching and fading on the drive, then he turned back to the body in the shadows. He took the handle of the knife and gently eased it from the back of the dead man. He carried it into the hall of the school and found the washroom that was in a recess under the stairs. He put the knife in a basin and stood aside and watched the hot water streaming over it. He left it for five minutes.



Then he dried it carefully and put it in the inside pocket of his coat.

He was back in the hall when he heard her quick steps on the drive. They met in the doorway and stood for a moment without speaking, each appraising the other.

Penelope's voice was puzzled. "What are you doing here?"

He smiled. "Calling, is that awfully strange?"

She stood facing him. "Most people telephone."

He nodded. "Yes, I was walking and for some reason I arrived here. I suppose I have developed the colonial habit of dropping in on my friends."

The antagonism left her face and she looked contrite. "It isn't that," she said. "But don't you see that it's foolish to come here? You remember what happened the other night, what they said to us. Please, I don't want to go through that again."

There was nothing he could say. Unless he could have told her about the telephone calls and the body lying in the shadows outside. "It won't occur again, Miss Whitecliffe," he said stiffly. "I must learn that I am not living where people are just good neighbors, but where people are civilized. Good night."

She took an impulsive step forward but he had to go on with what he had begun. He walked past her and closed the door sharply behind him. She might look out the window. He had to carry the body of Leon Topolski down to the drive gate and into the protection of the trees before she could climb the stairs.

The glittering, too-conspicuous white car was waiting

for him and he said grimly, "Must you have a car like this? Is something more modest not good enough for you?"

John recovered his nerve. He said, "I didn't buy it with the idea of transporting corpses, otherwise I'd have had it black. Where's the passenger?"

Obviously he had come prepared. Newspapers were spread over the floor and the covers of the back seat. There was a rug. They lifted the inert body into the car and covered it as if to keep it warm for its last ride.

"You know where you're going?"

John nodded. "I have a place in mind." He pressed the starter. "I'd rather go alone if you don't mind. I don't know why, but I don't want anybody to see me do this. Do you understand?"

"I understand. Would you like me to wait at your place till you come back?"

"Yes." He took a key from his pocket and handed it over. "When I come back I might not want to be alone. You might light a fire, my servant is out." He laughed shortly. "Thursday must be the servants' night." As he was about to move off, he looked through the trees to the school building beyond. "Look up there. Isn't that Penelope's light?"

"She came in while you were away."

John leaned over the door. "Does she know? Did you tell her what happened?"

"Miss Whitecliffe thinks I came to pay a social call."

"That," John said, "is almost as fantastic as if I asked her to come with me now for a drive in my car. I'll see you later . . . I hope."

Julian watched him out of sight and then walked down to the Rue de France. The curio shop that John Keeble had mentioned was a tiny place. Its window was overcrowded and most of its contents seemed to be covered with dust. The knife John had spoken of was there, relegated to the back, as if the proprietor had given up hope that it was salable.

The shop was still open. A bent little man with steel-rimmed spectacles came forward to serve.

"There is a silver snuffbox in the window," Julian said. "If it's Georgian I'd like to buy it for a friend."

"Certainly it is, monsieur. English silver, George the Third. It comes from the villa of the Duke of Montcrief. His own butler brought it to me."

Julian laughed. "Probably he stole it."

The little man was indignant. "Oh no, sir. His Grace, you see, is eccentric and if I may say so is a little mean. At Christmastime he does not give his staff money, but some trinket from his vast collection." He shuffled to the window. "Now let me see, where was it?"

"There in the corner, the front."

The little man leaned forward shortsightedly, and began shuffling through the display. Julian picked up the knife and slipped it into his pocket. Then he paid the little man what he asked for the snuffbox, which was far more than the value of the knife and the box combined. He walked on up the Rue de Rivoli to the Boulevard Victor Hugo. On the way he dropped the purloined knife down a drain that would carry it out to sea.

He let himself into John's house and stood for a

moment in the darkened drawing room as immobile as if he were listening and waiting in the jungle. But when he switched on the light the room was empty. He lighted the fire and waited while its age-old friendliness gave a vitality to the room.

He had known that the space above the mantel where John's knife had been would be empty. He found the sheath lying on a table by the door. He put the knife into it and returned it to where it belonged.

He went to a chair by the fire and waited. He felt relaxed, detached, as if he were watching a drama that involved other people's lives. He was technically involved, as a stage manager might be, in taking care of the props for the actors. The only alternative to what his feelings were now would be to live in a nightmare.

The telephone began to ring. Obviously the call was for John, but an unanswered telephone was something he never had been able to endure.

"Yes?"

The voice at the other end came breathlessly. "Oh, John, darling, I was afraid you were out. Something awful has happened. You . . ."

"Mr. Keeble is out," he said. "Is there a message I can give him?"

"Yes. As soon as he comes in tell him that Mrs. de Wollfe . . ." She stopped and said in a curiously flat voice, "That's Julian, isn't it?"

"Yes, Risa."

She hesitated. "I would not like anybody except John to know that I called."

"There's no need to warn me."

She replied quickly, "No, I don't mean that. I don't want the police to know."

"I don't think you'll find that the police bother too much about these things," he said. "I've not lived here a lot; but I don't think they would think your telephoning John any of their business."

"Unfortunately, it is their business. It's about John's car," she said.

"His car?" He thought of John and the grizzly mission he had undertaken, and his voice became urgent. "What about his car, Risa? What's happened?"

Her voice lowered as if she were afraid there might be an eavesdropper. "Listen, Julian. Tonight we were having a small dinner party up at the Chalet. Well, there was a robbery. An old lady who collects diamonds was being driven up by her chauffeur. She was held up and robbed of everything she was wearing. Instead of the dinner party we've had the police."

"I'll tell John when he comes in. I'm sure he'll be as upset as you are." He was relieved that John had not been involved in something much worse.

"But you don't understand." Her voice sounded impatient. "Somebody has told the police that the car that was used when they robbed her belonged to John."

He said slowly, "What is the message, Risa? Do I have to tell him that police have evidence that he robbed this old lady of her jewels?"

"I didn't say that he did. I wanted to warn him that the police have been told that his car was there."

"I'm sure he'll be grateful. I'll tell him to call you as soon as he comes in."



"No, don't do that; just tell him what I told you." Then as if a door had opened, "Yes, of course, of course we'll be there. I'll tell Raoul that whether he likes it or not he simply must dress. 'Bye . . . "

He knew her technique so well. He walked back to his chair by the fire, thinking about her. Until you knew Risa you accepted everything and then later you began to realize and recognize all the situations out of which she had escaped by the skin of her teeth, and you realized what a thrill she had got from the danger and the escape, and what real fun she found in deception.

John looked white and exhausted when he came in. He poured himself a drink and slumped with his feet out to the fire. "I don't know," he said, "but I have an impression that you are more accustomed to this sort of thing than I am. For me it has been quite an experience. I used to think the drive from here to Monte Carlo over the Grande Corniche was the loveliest in the world. I don't think I'll ever go that way again."

"You went up there?"

He nodded. "Right to the top. I remembered that there was a little road up there, no more than a cart track that leads to a deserted quarry. There was a bare outcrop of naked rock. I lifted him out and leaned him with his back against it and I had a feeling he was reproaching me. He looked lonely. You see, all his life Topolski has lived in cities. He liked narrow streets and cafés full of smoke and noise. Up there where I left him, it was still and empty and he was alone." He shook his head and turned apologetically. "I'm sorry, Julian, I know it had to be done."



He was not like the clever slick young man whom Julian had known.

"While you were out," he said, "Mrs. de Wollfe called."

John seemed to come back from his memories, back to Nice. His voice took on its habitual ease. "Risa? What did she suggest? A party?"

"Apparently she has had one: the police. She rang up to warn you."

John smiled and turned to his guest. "Didn't you tell Risa that you and I are getting tired of the police? I can't speak for you, of course, you may be a stranger here and welcome even Inspector Vernier as a friend, but not me. I'm sick of them."

"Risa wanted to tell you that the police have identified your car at the scene of a jewel robbery."

John seemed to take a little time to accept what he had heard. He put his glass aside and got up from his chair. "Did Risa actually telephone to tell me that?"

"She was quite serious. She wanted to warn you."

He turned to the fire and put out his foot and a flurry of sparks rose up as he pushed the logs. He reached out his hand and picked up the knife above the mantel piece and then put it back again, adjusting it carefully so that it balanced. "I wasn't really thinking about it," he said slowly. "But in the back of my mind it did register that my car started up quickly tonight." He nodded. "Yes, the garage was not locked. Somebody could have taken my car." He moved toward the phone. "Risa is rather a wonderful person."

"She said you were not to telephone."

"Why not?" John stopped and looked over his shoulder.

Julian got up from his chair. "I had the impression Risa was taking a risk warning you."

John turned and came back to the fire. "I don't think Raoul will ever forgive me for deserting to Penélope's camp," he said.

Nor Risa: Julian did not say it, but he was thinking it as, after leaving John at midnight, he walked under the patterned shadows of the trees that lined the street.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**W**

HEN Julian Ashford went out at night and left Tyler alone, he made it a rule to leave at least one light burning in the living room.

When he came in the room was dark. He switched on the lights with a vague feeling that the room was not quite as he had left it. Then he noticed the edge of the carpet was turned up and one of the chairs was facing in another direction. He guessed that Tyler had decided to wake up and play one of his many games.

He went on to his bedroom. The disturbance here was more obvious and violent. The bed was in a mess and every drawer showed signs of a search. This was too much, it was worse because it was something new in mischief. He was angry as he strode across the hall.

The bedroom was in darkness and quite silent. He switched on the light. The bed was empty. The clothes were thrown back and there was a nest in the pillow where a head had rested.

"Tyler . . ." His voice was sharp with fear.

There was no reply. He flung open the bathroom door. It was cold and the only sound was from a dripping tap.

"Tyler . . ." The silence was a mockery.

He must be somewhere, playing around somewhere. He ran back to his own room, to the bathroom and the living room. The apartment was empty. It was as empty as his own heart. It had happened; this was what he had feared and he had thrust fear aside.

He ran to the elevator and as he waited it seemed that the attendant was deliberately dawdling. The man opened the doors and stood aside for him to come in.

"Have you seen my son, have you taken him down?"

The man shook his head. "No, monsieur."

"You know him, don't you?"

The man smiled. "Tyler, of course, we all know him."

"How long have you been on duty?"

"I was here when you went out. I have been on since then."

"The other elevators, what about them?"

The old man was beginning to catch something of Julian's panic. "There were no others at this hour, monsieur. Mine is the only elevator working, it is a quiet period."

"Did you direct anybody to my room this evening?"

"Mr. Keeble, sir. But you know that—I carried you down together a little later. I am almost sure, no, I am quite sure that I have not carried anybody who was not a resident to this floor since you left. I will ask downstairs, sir. He may have gone down by the stairs. He does sometimes on his way to school and we all pretend it is a great surprise to see him on the ground floor. I will ask the boys to look for him. How was he dressed, monsieur?"

"When I went out tonight he was in his bed, asleep."

The old man shook his head. He looked disturbed. "None of the staff would have permitted him to play about the corridors in his sleeping clothes. They would have taken him back to his room at once." He stepped back into his cage. "I will ask everybody, Mr. Ashford, at once." Quite obviously he regarded this as a new development in the Casino Murder Case. Otherwise he would have decided that Tyler was just another lonely little hotel dweller who had wandered away to get into mischief.

Julian telephoned to the reception desk. Nobody had asked him for since John Keeble. The boy was not in any of the public rooms and he had not gone out through the main entrance. Were there other entrances that he could have used? Of course, there were several and because he had made himself known in the pantries and the kitchens he would probably know of them. The clerk said that he would have a quick search made of the hotel. He was sure they would find him in no time.

Julian told himself he would have to wait, that it was idiotic to let himself get into a panic. The clerk at the desk had assured him there was nothing novel about a small boy causing alarm by deciding to explore the hotel.

He began to tramp back and forth from one wall to the other, waiting for the call. It came at last, from the clerk to whom he had spoken earlier. His voice was not resigned as it had been. There was a note of worry in it. "I really can't understand it, Mr. Ashford. The

whole staff have been through the hotel from top to bottom. The boy is not here."

"He must have gone out, without being noticed."

The clerk was doubtful. "Mr. Ashford, it is most unlikely. He would be noticed . . . Unless," he added uncertainly, "he dressed again in his ordinary street clothes. Then it is just possible. Is there anything else we can do?"

"Thank you, no. I'll have to telephone the police."

The clerk could visualize another sensation about to involve the hotel. "But, Mr. Ashford, he really can't be far away. I will send the bellboys to search in the park. I will get the taximen outside to search the streets. There are a dozen of them outside and they will be happy to help us."

"It may not be as simple as that, I'm afraid. He doesn't go wandering about the streets at night."

"You must, of course, decide, sir." The clerk had done all he could.

"Hello, daddy."

He swung around. Tyler was standing blinking at the light and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Julian raised his voice into the telephone. "He's here now. I can't begin to explain it, but he's here in the suite."

"I am glad to hear it, sir." He spoke resignedly as if that was what he had expected in the first place.

Julian hung up and walked across to the boy. "Tyler, where have you been? The whole hotel has been turned upside down looking for you."

"I was hiding in the clothes cupboard, daddy. When



it got quiet, I was still afraid to come out and I went to sleep on the floor. Then I woke up and peeped out and heard you talking so I came out."

He felt weak with relief. "But, Tyler, why did you go into the cupboard? Why were you afraid?"

"Somebody came into the living room. I thought it was you and then I heard them cough and I knew it wasn't. I wanted to go out and see who it was, but you told me that if burglars came into the apartment when you were out, I was to pretend to be asleep."

"It was probably Mrs. Tilford. She has a key and most likely she came back for something she had left behind."

He shook his head. "No, it wasn't Mrs. Tilford. She has a different cough. Mrs. Tilford coughs as if she were growling. Anyway Mrs. Tilford wouldn't go into your room and start opening all the drawers. I thought the burglar would come to my room next. I wanted to jump up and lock my door, but my door was very close to yours, so I got into the cupboard and shut the door. I thought if anyone came into my room they would think I was out. They didn't steal anything of mine either. I just looked."

He put his arm around Tyler's shoulders and walked with him back to his room. Tyler held his hand possessively as he wriggled into the bedclothes. "I wasn't really afraid, but I'm glad you're home."

Tyler was telling Mrs. Tilford about his adventures of the night before as she helped him undress the following night. Julian could hear them in the bedroom.

"At first, daddy thought it might be you," Tyler was saying, "but I said you didn't cough like the person who came last night."

"Hum . . . how exactly do I cough?"

"You growl, like this." He cleared his throat as if he hated it.

"Rubbish." Without realizing it she cleared her own throat in precisely the same manner and, annoyed with herself, added, "You probably imagined the whole thing. I'd say you were messing about in that dark closet and gave yourself a fright."

"No, Mrs. Tilford, I was in bed."

She said grudgingly, "Very well, I believe you." She raised her voice. "And I must say that I'm grateful that you were able to convince your father that it was not I who was messing about in his bedroom."

The little boy was shocked. "Oh, but Mrs. Tilford, he'd never dream of thinking you were robbing his room. You know what people are like. He was just trying to make me not feel scared."

Julian completed the bow in his tie and looked at his image in the mirror. "You know what people are like . . ." He wondered how he really appeared to his son. He remembered the several times he had caught Tyler regarding him with candid appraisal, and the times when he explained something as if their roles were reversed and it was Tyler who was making something clear to a child. Even his voice then was a recognizably fair copy of an adult's.

In the other room Mrs. Tilford was saying nothing to suggest that the explanation was an unreasonable one.

That may have been why they got on so well. She understood his point of view.

He finished dressing and came out into the living room. While he waited he poured himself a drink. He heard the sound of the bath running and Mrs. Tilford's voice. "Go along with you now, and remember your teeth and behind your ears, and don't stay in there forever."

She came out to the living room and looked at him without approval. "Mr. Ashford," she said, "even when it's for your son's peace of mind, I object to being associated with a burglary."

Her indignation was disarming. He could only think of her manner of voice as scolding. He smiled down at her and, for the moment at least, his suspicions went out of his mind. "I shouldn't have said it," he said. "But we were both rather frightened. You see I thought he had been kidnapped."

She looked at him sharply. Her eyes had a birdlike inquisitiveness. "Why should you have thought he had been kidnapped? Children who are left alone wander off alone by the thousand."

He answered ruefully, "I accept the rebuke, Mrs. Tilford."

She said impatiently, "Nonsense. No man can act as a nursemaid for twenty-four hours a day. You are going out this evening. I'll stay till you come back."

"No, no, that won't be in the least necessary."

"I assure you it is necessary. In fact I promised the boy."

"He asked you?"

"Of course he asked me. Any child likes company, even mine."

He felt awkward as he explained. "I have arranged with one of the bellboys from downstairs to stay here in the room. You see, Mrs. Tilford, I'm going to dinner in Monte Carlo and I'll be quite late. You've refused flatly to let me put this on a business basis and I simply can't ask you to sit up half the night here in this suite. I not only can't ask you, I won't let you."

She sat abruptly in a chair and the jaw of her small face looked formidable. "What reason had you for making such a ridiculous arrangement?"

"I thought you'd approve, that after the incident last night it would be better to have someone in the suite."

"Why not say someone you can trust and have done with it?"

He felt ashamed that he had let her guess. "Mrs. Tilford, I told you, I really can't ask you to give up your time. We are complete strangers to you."

"Your son doesn't feel that way, Mr. Ashford. But you quite obviously do." Her tone was hurt, hostile, and then her features softened. "I can well imagine that you could feel that we are all enemies here; or perhaps it is that you know you have one enemy and don't know who it is. I am not an utter fool, you know."

He laughed. "And I'm not such a fool as to accuse you of being one, Mrs. Tilford."

The telephone rang and Raoul de Wollfe from the foyer said, "We are here, Ashford. Do come down when you are ready."

"I'll be down at once."

He turned. "I have to go I'm afraid, Mrs. Tilford. I'm very grateful to you."

She walked with him to the door and as he opened it she said, "You are dining at the Sporting Club, I suppose?"

"I don't know. Mr. and Mrs. de Wollfe are taking me."

"You will go there. Raoul de Wollfe would never dine anywhere else." Her voice took a more subdued note. She sounded embarrassed. "I wonder if you would tell me if my nephew comes in there?"

"Yes, of course." He didn't relish the idea of spying on Charles, but there was nothing else he could say. "Was he going to dine with us?"

She shook her head doubtfully. "I don't think so. But he is desperately in love with that girl I told you about, Jane Land. He invited her out and she told him that she was going to be in the party you are going to join, and I'm sure he'll go there. I told him he couldn't possibly afford to go to these places but he laughed and said he had more money than I thought." She looked very small and a little frightened. "I can't follow him to these places. Would it be too much to ask you to tell me how he behaves?"

The idea was not pleasant. Again, as always, since he had been here he found himself being involved in the lives of complete strangers. Because she was arbitrarily taking care of his son he must report on the behavior of a worthless nephew.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**R**AOUL DE WOLLFE was waiting in the lobby and escorted Julian to the door. "So good that you were free. I felt that it would be nice if we could get away from this atmosphere of suspicion and go over to Monte Carlo. I don't know how you feel here in Nice, but I'm developing an extraordinary sense of guilt. I feel that people are looking at me out of the corners of their eyes."

"I'm beginning to see what . . ."

De Wollfe turned to look at him. "Beginning? I should have thought it would have been brought home to you quite strongly. Aren't you regarded as what is known as number one suspect?"

"Possibly," Julian said dryly. "The police have not given me their confidence."

Raoul said with explosive apology, "Confound it. I invited you out so that we could forget this nonsense and the first words we exchange have to do with this very thing. Come along; Risa is waiting in the car and the dear girl at least will have sense enough not to let us talk about it."

The chauffeur opened the door and De Wollfe said, "Risa, I'm putting Ashford in the back with you. I'll sit with Pierre in front."



"Charming." Her voice in the darkness was quietly indifferent.

He would never remember in detail what they talked about during the drive. Risa or Raoul told him that the road they were taking was the Moyenne Corniche, the middle one between the Grand Corniche and the one that wound and twisted through the resorts on the coast. He remembered that it was beautiful and that the three of them talked quietly, the host and hostess and the guest.

And he was quite aware of Risa. He knew that she was enjoying this; having him sitting beside her in the quiet darkness, talking easily and thinking her own thoughts, having the man who thought he was her husband leaning casually over the front seat, talking to a man whom he thought was a passing guest. It was and it sounded civilized, and under the spell Julian found himself incapable of being critical. Risa was right and the past was not important.

As they went up in the elevator to the salon at the Sporting Club, he had no wish to rid himself of the feeling that he was the stranger who was being entertained by two charming hosts.

Jane Land came into the club as they were leaving their coats. He liked her as he saw her, and liked the way she smiled and shook hands.

"Jane is the working girl of the party," Raoul said. "She says that she does not believe in love, that she earns her living on her own two feet." He held her hand a little long and added, "And every male from

Toulon to Mentone would like to prove that she is wrong."

Julian noticed that she drew her hand away before he wanted to give it up and that Risa had noticed it.

"Jane, dear," she said, "don't mind Raoul. He has a guest and he's trying to prove that he knows you better than he does. Who wouldn't?"

Raoul darkened and looked at Risa suspiciously and then almost at once turned with gallantry to Jane. "Risa knows I adore glamour, but I prefer to spell it Jane Land."

Jane smiled. It was the sort of weighty compliment she had learned to endure. She turned to Julian. "I don't think I've seen you here before, have I?"

He smiled. "I've not been here before. I'd not hope that you'd noticed me if I had."

"You'd be surprised," she said. "I'd have thought to myself, there's somebody different. I do hope he likes me and comes again." She laughed and added, "They would be professional thoughts of course."

Risa slid her hand possessively under his arm. "Not entirely professional, surely, Jane? I found him you know, so I'm immensely pleased with him." She glanced quickly at Raoul, but he was deep in conference with the headwaiter. "Wouldn't you say he was attractive, Jane?"

The young dancer looked at Julian frankly as if she considered the question a serious one. "Yes," she said.

Raoul was shepherding them to their places; Risa said softly to him, "You're awfully attractive, Julian, I'd almost forgotten."

The table was set for six. Raoul sat at the head of the table with Jane on his right. Julian was to the right of his hostess at the other end.

Raoul glanced at his watch and frowned a little. "The others are late. We won't let them stop us from getting on with our cocktails." He leaned toward Jane. "I've told them to bring the ones you liked so much last time. It's my own recipe. Champagne base. The rest is my secret." He spoke down the table to Julian. "In France, Ashford, you find the best food and the best wine and the worst cocktails." He was faintly patronizing.

Julian smiled. "In the tropics we find it better to concentrate on whisky and gin. There are wives, though, who can make good cocktails from what the devil has sent them."

Risa clapped her hands. "There you are, Raoul, and you try to tell me that a woman ruins every cocktail she puts her hand to!"

"You must mix one for me," Julian said.

"I'll make you one just like the wives used to in Burma. What would there be in the pantry? There would be whisky," she counted on her fingers, "gin, and some warm vermouth, rum, lemons and limes, soda and sugar. What sort of cocktail would you like?"

He laughed because she did make the memory sound amusing. "I think I'll compromise on a Tom Collins," he said.

She nodded. "I was afraid you would. We'll have beer with dinner, I think. Do you think you can trust the native beer or should we go on a splurge and have bottled Bass?"

He considered. "They tell me that the native brew is quite drinkable. Why don't we have that and save the imported stock for an occasion?"

Her voice rose in artificial protest. "But darling, this is an occasion. I'm entertaining you and we haven't met for years."

He looked at her carefully, wondering what game she was playing. "Of course. Let's throw care to the winds and have the Bass."

"For dinner we'll have soup and chicken. You do understand that we always have that, don't you, Mr. Ashford? . . . I mean Julian, because we are *very* old friends, aren't we?"

"Of course, Risa, it would spoil everything if you didn't call me Julian after what we've been through." In an idiotic way he was excited. So was she. They were laughing at something that others could not understand.

She drew a deep long breath. "And do you know what we'll do afterwards? We'll open the bottle of old brandy that Uncle Richard sent us last Christmas."

He protested. "No, we can't do that. After all, Risa, your husband is up country, and when it's opened he'll want to be here to share it."

She laughed, "Oh, Julian, you ridiculous darling, don't you know that Li Chin down in the bazaar has dozens and dozens of bottles of exactly the same brand? We can replace it tomorrow and my poor darling angel will never know the difference. Aren't I a horrible deceitful, disloyal wife, Julian?"

"Of course, Risa, but he'll never know and that's the point surely. We'll drink your husband's brandy."

She turned to face him and looked into his eyes. "Yes, Julian, let's do that, let's drink his brandy."

Jane Land clapped her hands. "Wonderful, both of you." Her eyes met Julian's speculatively and he knew that she was seeing something he had not intended to be seen.

"Risa," Raoul was saying, "if I didn't know to the contrary I would have said that you knew the tropics as well as Ashford does."

She laughed, and there was an excited undertone. "But, darling, I do! I read Somerset Maugham. Surely that is how these creatures in the tropics behave, isn't it?"

Raoul laughed. "Well, I congratulate you both. It seems that you have learned how to behave when the husband is away, Ashford."

"Oh yes," Julian said. "I've learned." He looked again at Jane Land. Her eyes were intense, curious.

The champagne cocktails had arrived. She raised her glass to him in a faint salute and then, as if she were condoning a conspiracy, she turned to De Wollfe.

Risa's head was bent over her glass. She raised her eyes as if by compulsion to look at him. There were tears in them.

"At last," he heard Raoul say in a tone that mingled forgiveness and toleration.

He turned and saw John and Penelope standing together in the entrance. John was holding her arm as if he realized that she needed his support.

Raoul walked urgently to meet them. "Penelope, John. We had almost given up hoping."

John said, "We were held up." He did not look happy. "But we did get here. That is the main thing, isn't it, Penelope?"

Penelope sat between Raoul and Julian. He noticed when she reached for her glass that her hand was shaking. She raised the drink quickly to her lips and drank convulsively.

The others noticed, too, and Risa said quickly, "Penelope, are you sure you're all right?"

The girl looked from one to the other as if to reassure herself. "It was ghastly," she said, "ghastly."

"My dear, what happened?"

John explained. "The police found another corpse. Unfortunately, we were there," he said.

There was a passage of silence, and Raoul said softly, "You'll be making yourselves unpopular. Was it somebody we know?"

He nodded. "Leon Topolski."

"Good Lord." There might have been a note of relief in his voice. "But where on earth did all this happen?"

John answered tonelessly, "Up at the top of the Grande Corniche. It was such a lovely night Penelope asked if I'd mind if we drove up over the mountains. When we got to the top we saw the lights of some parked cars, and somebody waved us to stop. Inspector Vernier was there with a squad of underlings.

"He said he wanted our help in identifying a body. I tried to refuse and he said that that seemed to suggest that we might know in advance whom we were going to see. Then I asked him to let me go alone and he



said Miss Whitecliffe might be helpful. He took us along a rough sort of track till we came to the body."

Penelope swept up a hand to shut out the memory from her eyes.

"He was sitting with his back to a rock. At first I didn't realize that he was dead. In the light of their torches he seemed to be watching and waiting for us to arrive . . ."

Julian reached out and caught her hand. She turned to him and tried to smile. "I don't often behave like this."

He said, "There aren't many occasions like this. Would you like one of us to drive you home?"

She shook her head. "I did ask John to take me home, but he said it would make the inspector more suspicious than ever if we didn't come here."

"But you've done that now."

"But I think I'd rather stay. I'd like to—to be with people for a while." She picked up her glass and finished her drink.

"Extraordinary," Raoul was saying. "I've often suspected that that neurotic would end up by making away with himself. I should have been kinder to him."

John Keeble looked at him. "He was murdered. He didn't commit suicide, Raoul. So there is no need to reproach yourself . . . on that score." There was an unspoken antagonism between them. "Somebody shoved a knife into his back."

Risa gave a little cry of protest. "Raoul, must we go on talking about this dreadful business! Penelope has had as much as she can bear."

"You are quite right, Risa." He turned to Julian. "Last time we met, that man succeeded in ruining a pleasant interlude. I'm damned if I see why we should permit him to do it again." He turned to Jane Land. "You must think we live very sordid lives over in Nice, Jane. Next time you come to see us you'll feel that you are slumming."

Risa touched Julian's arm and said clearly, "Mr. Ashford, now that we are reunited after all those years, don't you feel that we should dance? I know it's very forward of me, but as your hostess I feel that somebody should begin."

He saw the look of puzzled astonishment on Penelope's face and as he got up he smiled and said to her, "While we waited for you, Mrs. de Wollfe and I have been playing a game. While her husband was away up country she was entertaining me at a little dinner. You should have been here, it would have served as a warning."

Penelope said slowly, "Would I have known the warning was meant for me?"

Risa glanced amusedly at the others. "Of course, you would, darling. Someday we'll do it again and she'll see what we mean, won't she, Julian?" She put a faint accent on the use of his Christian name. She slid into his arms as they stepped from the carpet to the dance floor. It was a yielding gesture, as if this were something she had been waiting for.

"Poor little Penelope, does she love you very much, Julian?"

He recognized the approach, remembering it so well.

He even remembered the number of times when it had been Poor Little Somebody Else, some attractive girl he had danced with or talked to, and he used to say in protest, "Risa, how can a girl possibly be in love with me when every other word I say reminds them that I have a wife that I adore?"

But this time he said, "I wish I knew. I've not had the courage to ask her."

She danced intimately, and now and then he could feel her upturned lips lightly brush his cheek. "She's very young and innocent. Does she invite your confidences, Julian? If she were seriously in love with you, you'd have to tell her about your past, wouldn't you?"

People watched them as they danced. Women envied her clothes and her partner. Men tried to remember the last time a beautiful woman had looked at them as if this were the moment or the lifetime for which they were born.

Julian was saying, "Of course I would have to tell her about the past. I'd have to tell her that I was married and ask her to be patient till I could get free. And that would be quite impossible, wouldn't it, Risa?"

He could feel her breath softly on his cheek. "Yes, that would be utterly impossible. You do realize that, don't you, Julian?"

"Yes, Risa, it would not only be impossible, it would be dangerous."

Her cheek was touching his, softly. "I'd hate it if there were someone else, just when I've found you again."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**P**ENELOPE was dancing with Raoul. John had just come back to the table with Jane Land, and John at once asked Risa to dance with him. Julian moved to the chair next to Jane.

"Would you be bored if we danced?"

She smiled. "No, I know whom to avoid, I saw you dancing with Risa. I like talk, too."

"Not flattering."

She said flatly, "Mr. Ashford . . . no that sounds awful . . . Julian; I don't have to flatter you and you know it. I watched you and I watched the customers watching you; if only for business reasons I should go and dance with you. But I won't and do you know why?"

"Tell me."

She looked at him with amused candor. "Because," she said, "all the dowagers in here would say that glamorous man danced better with Risa de Wollfe than he did with me."

"Nonsense," he said. "Risa is a very good dancer. It's your profession."

She nodded wisely. "Exactly. Because I am a professional dancer I know that there is something funny about all this. Risa told me she had just discovered you, but let me tell you, as an old trouper, that you and Risa have danced together before, hundreds of times."

"It's your vivid imagination."

She shook her head. "You see, Julian, to me to see people dancing is like reading about them in a book. You have been dancing together so often that you can carry on an intimate personal conversation without missing a step. I do know. You'll see me dancing with my partner in a little while. His name is Hugo Fitchley and he's a darling. We dance as if we adored each other because we have practiced the routine for two years, but we're just friends. But while we are gazing into each other's eyes he can tell me the old man who is such a pest is in the Club again, and I can look at him as if I adored him and tell him that the top has come off his collar stud. You see what I mean?"

"I see what you mean, but I can't see why you should bother to tell me," he said.

She shrugged. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I have a feeling that you are too good for the company you keep."

He owed no loyalty to Risa, but oddly he felt resentful. "We are both guests at the same party," he said stiffly.

She answered impatiently, "Of course we are. I'm here because I make a nice decoration at Raoul's table. I don't know why you are here, but I've read about you in the papers. My guess is that you've been hurt once and if you aren't very careful, Sir Galahad, you are

going to be hurt again." She laughed suddenly, jumped up from the table and seemed to float to her feet. "Come on, if you promise not to talk, I think I might be able to dance almost as well as Risa."

It was not like dancing with Risa, it was like dancing with thistledown, and when she smiled at him he realized that that was exactly how she intended he should feel. As they walked back she said, "You see what I mean, Julian, if we had tried to talk you couldn't have been so marvelous, could you?"

"Was I marvelous?"

"Quite good, anyway. Are you disillusioned?"

He shook his head. "No, Jane, grateful. You were proving something to me, weren't you?"

"Yes, about not talking when you are dancing with strangers." She gave him a quiet smile and turned toward the table.

John Keeble was cupping his glass in his hands, warming the brandy as he rotated it. "Risa deserted me. I don't know why, unless she couldn't stand the competition." He looked across the room and said, "Oh, my Lord, Jane, here comes your nemesis."

A young man whom Julian recognized as Mrs. Tilford's nephew was weaving his way between the tables. A lock of his blond hair had toppled over his forehead, and his eyes were focused purposefully on his destination.

As he stood smiling diffidently at Jane Land, there was an air of distinction about him; but he gave the impression that a line of more robust ancestors had left him bankrupt of vitality. "I'm afraid I must seem



to be butting in," he said. "I wondered if I might have a dance, Jane?"

None of them had noticed Raoul de Wollfe return to the table. When he intervened his voice was coldly unwelcoming. "I'm sorry, Charles, but our party is quite complete. I'll be happy to invite you to join us some other time."

Charles Tilford turned to Raoul and his voice was lazily contemptuous. "I don't know where you learned to mimic your betters," he said. "But even on the stage I never liked impersonators."

Jane had got up quickly from her chair. She of all people could not be involved in a scene where she was employed. "I'd love to dance, Charles. It will have to be quick though because I have to change for my turn."

Raoul watched them walk away. His teeth under his white mustache were biting his lower lip. Julian knew that Charles Tilford, with the instinct of his kind, had known exactly how to hurt him most. Raoul turned back to Penelope. "Will you dance with me again?" The urgency in his voice made it almost a demand. He had to be reassured. All three of his guests knew that his first reaction must be to rehabilitate his vanity.

Penelope looked doubtfully at Julian; he had not danced with her.

He smiled and said, "You are too popular."

He watched them go onto the floor and turned to find John Keeble looking at him thoughtfully. "Trying to fit us into a pattern, aren't you, Julian? But we don't run true to form down here. We improvise, like Raoul did, we keep up the façade. Amazing, isn't it, that

Charles should have known exactly where to hit him where it hurt." He smiled as if amused at himself. "And now you and I are left deprived of the only woman we both love. Has it occurred to you that you and I are the ones who should be quarreling? This is the second time in our lives that a woman has bewitched us both. Why don't we do the traditional thing and go to the bar and have a drink?"

They walked toward the bar, and left the table deserted.

"Risa is offering her condolences to the old lady who was robbed of her diamonds." John nodded to a table where a plump, homely woman was talking to Risa. "Mrs. Fitchley is quite a character. I suppose she did have so many diamonds that she deserved to be robbed. That's what people always say when someone else is robbed, in these parts." As if on an impulse he added, "Come over and meet her. We can rescue Risa."

Mrs. Fitchley welcomed them with the almost pathetic eagerness with which an old woman often welcomes a young man. Julian saw nothing wrong with it unless there was something wrong in loneliness. He saw that John was a favorite of hers and that she looked pleased when he kissed her hand. "Helen Fitchley, you've been avoiding me," he reproached her.

When she was introduced to Julian, she said, "John and I have a little secret between us. We both know how sadly easy it is to flatter old ladies, but of course we don't deceive each other for a moment and, bless his heart, he never pretends that I am not an old lady.

He pretends that he loves me in spite of it, which is much nicer, you know."

A young man came to the table and put his arm across Mrs. Fitchley's shoulder. He said, "Risa, you couldn't look more beautiful."

Risa touched her lips to him and said, "Hugo, if ever you fail to say something nice to me I'll die. Your mother is trading on her age again, and nobody will talk to me."

"I know," he said, and laughed. "Mother has decided that she is the mother of the human race. She pretends that she comes here to watch Jane and me dance, which is nonsense. She regards herself as the unofficial chaperone of every theatrical performer from here to Cannes."

Mrs. Fitchley put Hugo's hand briefly to her cheek. "I've been doing it for thirty years; first in your father's day and now in yours. If it weren't for people like me, Hugo, the professional entertainers would be worthless as their patrons." She looked up at him more intimately. "Jane is dancing with that boy, Charles, whatever his name is, and I don't think she's enjoying it. Go along and rescue her, Hugo, in a nice way, and remind her that your turn is coming." She patted her son's hand in dismissal. "You haven't much time, Hugo."

John said, "Mrs. Fitchley, I wanted to tell you how sorry I am about the robbery."

Without being aware of it, the old lady passed the fingers of one hand over the backs of those on the other, then raised them still searching to her neck, as if half-

expecting to find a necklace. "I lost everything, yes," she said slowly.

"Raoul and I are terribly upset," Risa put in. "Because it happened while you were on your way to our house makes us feel that somehow we are to blame. I wish now that we hadn't decided to have the party. We hadn't till we telephoned you at four."

"You mustn't feel that way, dear, and you did warn me about wearing my diamonds in public, but you see they meant so much to me. . . . My husband gave them to me."

"They were insured, Helen?"

"Yes, of course."

John was looking over across the dance floor. "Inspector Vernier is coming across. He may have some news for you, Mrs. Fitchley."

The inspector had changed into what might be charitably described as evening clothes. He looked rather pointedly at the other men. "I am sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Fitchley. I would like a few words with you."

The other three stood up, but the old lady put a hand on Risa's arm. "Do stay with me, dear. I get so confused with the questions, and without your help, I'll be no better than I was last night."

The inspector seemed about to object, then he bowed and waited for Risa to sit down again.

There was still nobody at their own table. The two men walked to the bar. Charles was there, staring fixedly at an empty glass.

He looked up when they spoke, and focused his eyes on them carefully. "Gentlemen," he said, "you see me

in a classic posture. Here you see the rejected suiter consoling himself with the demon grog."

"You seem to be having quite an evening," Julian said. "Your aunt told me I might meet you here."

"Beloved auntie. Has she enlisted your services in her . . . her crusade to reform the wayward youth? You know, Ashford, there is one nice thing about being a wayward youth, everyone thinks so much about your coming to a bad end that you don't have to think about it yourself. You don't have to bother at all. Everything is provided for."

"We thought of sitting at a quiet table and having a drink. Why not join us?" Julian said.

John was showing an interest in Charles that seemed to be producing little reward. "Listen, Charles," he said, after the waiter had left them, "why don't you face the fact that it's quite hopeless? Jane is a perfect darling, but she has her bread and butter to earn. Why don't you leave it at that?"

"What! After all I've done for Jane?"

John smiled. "Interesting. What have you done for her?"

"Sold myself to the devil," he said morosely.

"You must be a good salesman. What did you get for yourself?"

Julian felt that the baiting had gone far enough. John seemed to realize that he was about to protest and put a hand on his arm. "Go on, Charles, tell us what the devil thought you were worth?"

Charles looked at John. The lines in his thin face



were tightly drawn. "You don't think I'm worth much, do you?" he asked aggressively.

"Not much."

"You are quite wrong. Once a man gets into the mood when he is ready to stop at nothing, he is worth a great deal. But first you have to get over a hurdle, quite a large hurdle, and into the open country on the other side, and then you can really see how valuable you are. Some people call it the pale, beyond the pale. Once you get there, everything is all right." He laughed harshly. "Or all wrong, it doesn't really matter which."

John looked at him thoughtfully. "It must have taken a lot of outside help to get you over the last hurdle, Charles."

The young man laughed. "I was under the whip, certainly. Now I'm happy to say I'm running under a free rein."

The waiter brought their drinks and put the check on the table. Julian reached out to pick it up but Charles forestalled him. "Oh, no, no," he said. "This is mine."

John looked at Julian and shrugged. Charles took a wallet from his inside pocket. "Unlimited entertainment allowance," he said. He was fumbling with notes when it fell from the wallet: a diamond ring that lay glittering on the table between them.

John reached out and picked it up, turning it between his fingers.

Charles was staring at the diamond. "She turned it down," he said. "Absolutely pushed it back across the table when I tried to give it to her."



John looked up from the ring to the young man opposite. "Do you mean to say that you actually offered this ring to Jane Land?"

"Naturally, when one loves a lady, one offers her a ring, sort of thing that's been happening from time immemorial."

"Did she recognize it?"

"Well, naturally, any girl would recognize a ring when it was offered to her. I told you, she pushed it away and wouldn't look at it."

"Did she put it on her finger?" He was testing it on his own.

"No. She pushed it away, but I wanted her to put it on because I knew it would be too big and I thought she might want to change the setting. A man I know would have done the work for me."

"What shop does he work in?"

Charles looked at him with something like pity. "You don't go to a shop for a job like this, particularly in a place like Nice. These fashionable places rob you."

"Well, where did you find him?" John's voice was edged with contemptuous anger.

"Where you would never think of looking, dear boy. This chap is a student in Penelope's school. The poor devil has been hounded all over Europe and now he wants to make a fresh start in France. He explained how you can have jewelry reset at a quarter the price most people pay, and when he is finished with it not even the owner would recognize it as the same job. Amazing, isn't it?"

"He has no shop?"

"Not yet. I understand that he takes the work home to his room . . . homework, as you might say." He laughed.

Julian Ashford was thinking of the brisk little woman who was sitting in the hotel taking care of Tyler; thinking of Penelope Whitecliffe's school. He knew, too, that he had been underestimating John Keeble. Penelope's new French master was watching Charles Tilford as if every next move were going to be a surprise to him.

"Charles, did you know that Jane was a friend of Mrs. Fitchley's?"

"Naturally. Her son is Jane's dancing partner. You aren't suggesting that there is anything between Jane and Hugo, are you, because I took the trouble to find that out."

"Did Jane tell you that Mrs. Fitchley had her diamonds stolen?"

"I hadn't the slightest idea, what bad luck."

"It's been in all the newspapers."

"I can't read enough French to enjoy the local gossip. As a linguist I'm not awfully bright, as you quite well know."

John held up the ring between his thumb and forefinger. "Charles, Mrs. Fitchley is sitting over there waiting for her son. Look, she is sitting talking to Inspector Vernier. Why don't you take this ring across to her and ask if it is hers?" He let it lay in his palm as he held it out."

Charles' jaw fell loosely and he shrank away from John's hand. "I don't know . . ."

"No," John said. "That's the trouble with you. You

don't even know about those hurdles you are talking about. You were asking Jane to go and sit at Mrs. Fitchley's table and show her the ring you had stolen from her, and you wanted Jane to tell Mrs. Fitchley that it was your engagement ring." He stood up. "All right, Charles. It's not too late. Look, Jane and Hugo are coming back to the table. If only because you came from the same country that I do, I like to see how you behave. We'll go with you."

Charles tugged the lapels of his dinner jacket into shape as he stood up. He took the ring from John's hand.

The three men stood before Mrs. Fitchley's table. Jane Land and Hugo were looking on as if something were happening they did not quite understand. Inspector Vernier was watching intently.

Charles took a step forward as if he had been deputed to speak. "Mrs. Fitchley," he said. "This ring . . . I love Jane and I tried to give it to her as an engagement ring. I think it's yours."

She grasped it eagerly. But then she looked up into his white face. She handed it back to him and said tonelessly, "My engagement ring was much less expensive, Charles, but it was much more precious."

He passed a hand across his eyes and without speaking turned and walked back to the table at the bar. He waited for them to come back. His voice was brittle with anger. "That was not very funny, Keeble."

John looked at him in vague surprise. "Funny. It was not intended to be."

"If Jane had not been there I might have forgiven you."

"You knew that ring had been stolen?"

"You said it had been stolen from Mrs. Fitchley. That was a lie."

John shook his head. "If somebody forced Mrs. Fitchley to tell why she denied that the ring was hers, she would say that she had a son of her own. Unfortunately for you, Mrs. Fitchley's soft heart can't save you. Every jeweler from here to Marseilles has a description of her jewelry. If the police haven't a good description of them, the insurance companies most certainly have."

Charles was sober enough to be frightened. "What do you expect me to do?"

"Talk. Nobody would be fool enough to believe that you could plan a jewel robbery. But there are a lot of people who want to know who did plan it."

"I don't know who planned it. All I know is that I was told what to do."

"Who told you?"

"Leon Topolski."

Leon Topolski . . . Charles had talked about getting over the last hurdle. Julian wondered if he realized what a yawning chasm was ahead of him now. "If you don't know already, Charles," he said soberly, "I think it's only fair to tell you now that Topolski has been murdered."

Charles' hands fumbled out and gripped the edge of the table. He gave a travesty of a laugh. "You're trying to frighten me."

"You are quite frightened enough," John said. "Is

that because you didn't have to be told that he was dead?"

"No . . . I didn't even see him."

"Go on."

"He telephoned me. He had told me a few days ago that he would help me to earn some money."

"What did he say you had to do?"

"Drive a car, that's all, and I'll swear that that's all I did do."

John leaned forward and said curiously, "It was my car, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I didn't know what was happening, so I thought you must be in on it too. He said that your car would be around the corner from your house, parked by the curb. I was to drive along Route 7 in the direction of Antibes, and when I came opposite that little place where they have the bird shop, a man would signal me as if he wanted a lift. From then on he would tell me what to do. He promised all I would have to do would be to drive the car, and I swear to you that's all I did do."

"Go on."

"This man was waiting. He got into the car and told me to drive on and take the road to St. Paul. It was pretty deserted when we left the main road, and he told me to stop and wait. He watched the cars that were passing till a black old-fashioned one came along, driven by a chauffeur. He said, 'That's it, go get ahead of it and then stop and see that you are blocking the road.'

"I stopped and as the other car came around the corner he jumped out and ran back. I heard him say

how sorry he was that we were blocking the road, but that we'd had a blowout and like fools we had come out without a wheel jack. I heard the old chauffeur muttering and grumbling as he heaved himself out of his seat. He walked to the back of his car and opened the luggage compartment, and then I saw him fall onto the road. The man with me must have hit him. Then he opened the rear door of the limousine. I thought I heard a cry. Then he came running back to the car. I could see the reflections of other car lights coming up the road, but we got away easily because the limousine was blocking the road. He began taking the diamonds from his pockets and I realized that I had got mixed up in a robbery."

"Clever of you," John Keeble said.

"It was exciting after that." He grinned briefly at John. "That's a very nice car you have. We had to make a bypass or two but we were back in Nice in no time. I dropped him near the airport."

"And he walked off with the loot?"

Charles shook his head. "No, as we approached the airport, he asked me if I had been told what to do next. I told him I was doing nothing next, I had been hired to drive the car and that was that.

"He told me that I was to take the diamonds to the Whitecliffe school and go to the washroom. He said that Topolski's locker would be open and there would be a dispatch case inside it. I was to put the jewels in there and lock the door and then put the car back in the garage where it came from. He walked away and presumably he went to the airport."



"And you did what he told you?"

"Well, naturally. I was being paid to do a job and I did it."

"And you were paid?"

"Oh yes, I forgot to mention it, the money was waiting in the dispatch case in Topolski's locker."

"Brilliant."

"Yes," Charles said. "It was, rather, I thought."

Julian was thinking of Mrs. Tilford, waiting in the hotel with his son. "Has it occurred to you," he said, "that two people could support this story of yours? One of them need never have existed and the other has been murdered, and what's more, you have turned up here tonight with a ring that is part of the loot."

Charles answered stubbornly, "I found the ring in my pocket after I had put the rest of the stuff where I was told to. Tonight, after I'd had a few drinks, I thought how wonderful it would be to be able to give something really beautiful to Jane."

He took it from his pocket and handed it to John. "You keep it," he said. "If Jane is not interested, neither am I." He looked from one to the other of them. "I admit all this was stupid of me, but let's face it. I didn't do anything but take this man for a drive in your car, John. And you know as well as I do that people are continually borrowing other people's cars."

His excuse might have been that of a seven-year-old child, but obviously he expected them to take it seriously. He seemed glad to have unburdened his troubles to people stronger than himself. His own glass was empty. He reached out for Julian's and emptied it.

"You put the jewels in Topolski's locker?" John asked.

Charles nodded. "Of course. I'm not a thief." He brightened. "Look here, you know, I'd not the slightest idea that it was Mrs. Fitchley that man was robbing. Why don't you go back to the school and collect the stuff and give it back to her? After all, she's a friend, one doesn't let that sort of thing happen to one's own people. I confess I did get some cash for the job but after all . . ." His voice trailed off indefinitely.

John Keeble said, "I'll drive you back to the school and see what we can find."

Charles looked doubtful. "Must we? Quite frankly, I'd just as soon wash my hands of the whole thing. But if you insist, I don't mind."

John turned to Julian. "He has something that passes for a car, I'll drive him back. He drove mine, why shouldn't I drive his?" He handed Julian the keys of his own car. "Take care of Penelope and don't go up over the Grande Corniche."

Julian watched him walk away from the bar. John Keeble might have been a hero or a villain, but whichever he was, there would be people to admire him.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**T**HE light shone on her face, light and shadow, as they turned through the quick changes from the bright villages to the echoing solitude of a road carved through the cliffs.

"We didn't dance," he said.

"I understood." Her voice sounded tense. "Why should you dance with me? It must have been exciting, just you two knowing—nobody else. Not her husband, just you two sharing the past. I understand, you don't have to explain."

"I know I don't have to explain, Penelope," he said. "That hadn't occurred to me."

"But shouldn't you both have been a little frightened?"

"Perhaps. But you see, Penelope, that's how Risa wants her life to be, a little frightening."

"It must have been exciting," she said. "Living with her."

"Perhaps it was; but Risa's excitement always involves somebody's being hurt."

She didn't answer but leaned back with her head against the cushion. She drew a long breath and expended it in a tired sigh. "I could drive like this forever. Please don't hurry."

"I'm driving at twenty miles an hour," he said. "If I go any slower I'll stop. Shall I?"

"Yes, a little way along there's a place where you look down over the sea."

It was a small recess, with enough room to park one car. He turned into it and stopped the engine. The silence was complete. There was a gulf of velvet darkness at their feet and a still perfection of stars above their heads.

"The cliffs here are red," she told him, "and the sea away down below is deep blue with little white markings like lace."

"You love it here, don't you, Penelope?" he asked gently.

Without moving she said, "I've lived here all my life. I've traveled to lots of other places and I went to school in England, but in the back of my mind there is this, the sea and the red rocks and the pink villas and the sounds of people's voices. They always seem to be doing things in the most muddling sort of way, and all of a sudden what they are doing is finished and it's lovely and different from anything else. That seems nonsense to you, doesn't it?"

"I don't know it as you do. I don't think I want to. I prefer it like this. I know that the sea is down there and you say the cliffs are red, but when I go away I won't remember the details. I'll remember that we

stopped here and I'll remember how quiet it was. It's a silly thing to say, but you know whenever I see the same stars I'll remember the scent of your hair."

"Will you remember how much you wanted to get away from all of us?"

He said quietly, "That will be different. You and I are not in Monte Carlo now. We aren't in Nice either. Don't you see that at this moment we are not anywhere?"

"But we can't stay."

"No, darling, we can't stay," he said soberly.

Her head was close to his shoulder. He touched her hair with his lips, and she raised a hand and let it lie in surrender on his shoulder. Childlike and at rest. To love, he thought, you don't have to make love, you keep it like this and like this till it is no longer bearable; wait without movement till it is no longer tolerable. Wait because never again will it have this enchantment.

The lights of a swiftly moving car were sweeping the curves of the cliffside, out into space and back to the naked rock. And then suddenly they found Julian and Penelope as if they were illuminating a stage. Sharply, briefly—and there was a little shudder of restless air as the car swept by. Raoul's chauffeur was sitting upright at the wheel and they saw that Risa had turned and was looking back at them through the rear window.

Julian reached forward and pressed the starter. He lifted her hand and touched it to his lips. "You see what I mean, Penelope?"

Without answering, she moved away and waited for

him to start. She sat rigidly with her face turned half away, but he could see she was crying.

He told Mrs. Tilford that he had seen Charles at the Sporting Club.

She accepted it without comment, but at the door she asked, "How badly did he conduct himself? You sound a bit vague about it."

Charles was her nephew but he might have been her son. "I think he's very much in love with Miss Land," he said. "I can't blame him."

She nodded. "It's very sad. Charles would never realize that she is so much stronger than he is and that was why she attracted him."

"He's at home now," Julian said. "John drove him back from Monte Carlo."

"John would," she shrugged. "John is ridiculous and clever and very strong. Sheltered women dream of having boys like him. It makes them frightened and proud as if they had an invitation to a laughing dangerous world."

Julian Ashford knew how dangerous that world could be.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**I**NSPECTOR VERNIER telephoned Julian early and asked him to come to the school.

The grounds seemed filled with police. They were searching methodically. Julian watched for a while, then he joined the inspector who was staring at the newly raked gravel at his feet. "I won't ask if you are searching for something, that would be too obvious," Julian said.

The inspector raised his unfriendly eyes. "Perhaps you also know what we are searching for, monsieur?"

"I haven't a notion."

"And why we are searching in this place?"

"It may be stupid of me, Inspector, but I don't know that either."

"We are looking for a knife, Mr. Ashford; with a thin curved blade seven inches long."

"Well, at least you know precisely what you are looking for." He looked again at the small army of searchers. "To find it must be quite important to you."

"Quite important . . . Unless I have found it already."

He whipped a knife from his pocket and held it out in his palm. "Have you seen this before, monsieur?"

Julian nodded. "I have seen a number quite like it. I spent some time in Burma. You'll probably find that this one comes from there." He shrugged. "On the other hand it may be an imitation. They sell all manner of junk to the tourists out there."

"Have you seen one recently?"

Julian said casually, "As a matter of fact, I have seen two. John Keeble has one, I think, and there was one in a little antique dealer's place in the Rue de France. Is that the one you've been showing me?"

"The one I showed you I brought away from Mr. Keeble's house an hour ago. I may tell you it fits precisely the wound in the back of Leon Topolski."

"Leon Topolski? But surely you found his body somewhere in the hills on the road to Monte Carlo?"

The inspector nodded. "Precisely, sitting comfortably with his back against the rock, in a position where nobody could possibly have stabbed him in the back."

"But what particular reason have you for searching for the knife here?"

"Because of what we found in his clothes, monsieur; fragments of gravel that were identical with what you see on this driveway."

"I don't see anything very odd in that," Julian said. "Please . . . " He reached down and ran a finger and thumb around the cuff of the inspector's trousers and produced several small flakes of stone. "You have collected fragments in your own clothes, but you have not been murdered here."

Vernier darkened angrily. "I am beginning to wonder why you are so anxious to interfere," he said. "But what we found in his clothes could only have got there if he had been lying face down on the ground."

Julian Ashford told himself angrily that Vernier was quite right. He had been interfering in things that were none of his business, but a dogged insistence made him say, "I can't say that he did trip on a step and go sprawling into the drive, Inspector, and you can't say that he didn't. I've no wish to interfere with your investigations. You seem to have forgotten that when you dragged me back to this place I was about to go away on a perfectly straightforward business assignment. You ask me questions and you become annoyed when I don't give you what you consider should be the correct answers." He looked over the smooth drive. "I must say that I see no evidence of a death struggle here."

"No, monsieur, because a half-blind and not clever servant comes every morning with a rake and a hose to remove all the untidy traces of the day before. You may or may not have known it, but you see I still have reason to believe that Topolski was murdered here."

Julian knew that something else was coming, just as he knew that Vernier had not ordered him to come to the school for the doubtful pleasure of his company.

"I think he was killed here, Mr. Ashford. He called you from the school, and you are the last person we know who spoke to him before he was killed."

"Oh yes." He replied as if what he had heard was of academic interest only. What he knew now made it un-

important. His mind was engaged with what it had grasped so suddenly.

"Do you deny that Leon Topolski telephoned you at your apartment?"

A wariness made him reply, "Somebody who identified himself as Topolski telephoned me, yes."

"He said he had an appointment with Miss Whitecliffe and she was not there," the inspector told him.

He dragged his mind back from his other problem to a sense of danger. "You are having my line tapped?"

The inspector shrugged. "He asked to speak to John Keeble and he was not there. When Mr. Keeble did come to your apartment he stayed only a little while, and you went out together. You crossed the garden together as if you had a destination in mind. I think you came here, Mr. Ashford."

"And murdered Leon Topolski?"

The inspector's cigarette dropped over his lower lip. "I think that is quite possible," he said finally.

"As a matter of interest," Julian said, "I encountered Topolski twice. Once you know of, in the school. The other time was when Raoul de Wollfe invited me to have an aperitif with him. Topolski came and stood at our table for a few minutes. Can you think of any reason why I should want to kill him?"

"Yes," Inspector Vernier said, "I can think of a reason because I know a hundred people like Topolski. If he knew something in your life that gave him a hold over you, he would make your life intolerable."

There was another pause. Julian was thinking of Charles and his story of Topolski acting for somebody

unknown, and of the mysterious stranger who robbed the old woman and then handed over the loot and disappeared.

But the inspector was not thinking of Charles. "Naturally we are checking on the past of each of you. I have a feeling that we may discover for ourselves some of the things you have forgotten to tell us."

Julian was aware of a coldness spreading through his limbs. "We all have a past of one kind or another," he said. He turned to watch the men methodically combing the grounds for something he knew they would not find. Not there, but the procedure could be duplicated anywhere. They would search the past as methodically as they were searching this garden. He knew now that he had hardly any time.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**J**ULIAN had lunch with John Keeble on the Quays. They sat out of doors under the awnings at a congested little table. A trick cyclist was performing on the open space across the road. The fishermen were putting their brown nets to dry in the bright sunshine.

John lighted a cigarette and said, "The police have been taking our Academy for Earnest Foreigners seriously."

"So I noticed."

"Paying particular attention to souvenirs of Leon Topolski."

"Did they find the diamonds?"

"Naturally not. I'd been there before them." He frowned. "But then I didn't find them either."

"Perhaps the murderer did."

John shook his head doubtfully. "It's possible. In that dispatch case Topolski left in his locker, there were some books with false backs that had a space inside the binding. They were obviously designed for smuggling. Also they found he was packed and ready to depart,



and his passport and an autobus ticket for San Remo over the Italian border in his case."

"But surely it would be risky smuggling diamonds over the border immediately after a robbery a few miles away?"

John shrugged. "He was choosing the best way. Nobody takes much account of these local busses that go backward and forward over the border. They are always jammed with the local peasantry that never for generations have taken much notice of which side they live on. To search the bags and bundles and bottles and hen coops and heaven knows what, you'd need an army. If you or I were going that way we'd be noticed, but Leon would look no different from all the rest of them, and that poor struggling student of French could speak the local patois with every smallest inflection from Toulon to Genoa."

"So he was going to smuggle the diamonds across the border?"

"I think that was one idea. I think somebody else had others. Perhaps the idea was to let him get away across the border and leave the police with the impression that he had taken the diamonds with him. They'd know that if the police got hold of Charles Tilford they could beat or frighten out of him a confession that he had put the diamonds in Topolski's dispatch case. Leon had disappeared and the police would have a mysterious tip that he had crossed the border."

"In that case why kill him?"

John frowned. "I don't quite know; but I think that

somebody was trying to kill two birds with the one stone! One precious stone."

"They've killed one, which one do you suppose is the other?"

"Perhaps I am. As the police could reasonably say, I have a lot to explain."

Julian had a habit of taking statements at their face value. "Yes," he said. "You were at the Casino when Mr. Whitecliffe was killed, and you stepped into his job. You were the only one who knew much about Topolski and his background. Your car was presumably used at the robbery and you very quickly recognized that ring as Mrs. Fitchley's." He smiled and said, "You did ask for this."

"Yes, go on. You sound like a lawyer who knows that his client is guilty, but is going to do his best on the great day. What next?"

"You were a friend of Topolski's, so he could have told you that he was going to play a part in the robbery. I would guess that he was not a very strong character. You lived and behaved in a way that he might have wanted to do himself."

Unusually serious, John said, "I used to say at one time, when we were students, that his papers were better than mine and that it didn't make the least difference what our backgrounds were."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He didn't believe a word of it, I'm afraid."

"And did you?"

"I tried to." He added with amused self-contempt, "I didn't believe a word of it either."

Julian nodded and said, "Naturally, you would have been quite disconcerted if you had convinced him. We are all alike. I imagine that even Charles Tilford, valueless as he is, thinks he is better than somebody as brilliant as Topolski."

John looked surprised. "Yes, as we drove back last night I was trying to think of ways of saving Charles. His aunt . . ."

Julian interrupted. "If you had never met his aunt it would have been the same."

John looked uncomfortable. "You are not suggesting that Charles might have had anything to do with Topolski's murder?"

"I don't know. You may even be talking about Charles to take attention from yourself. Inspector Vernier reminded me this morning that this Topolski telephoned from the school and asked for you. He'd tried to find you at home and you weren't there. A little later you came to my apartment, and when I gave you the message you said at once you'd go to the school and see if everything was all right. And then when we got there, if you remember, you left it to me to find the body."

"Perhaps you were looking for it," John said slowly.

Julian nodded. "Perhaps. But you know if you really went there with the idea that there was something suspicious in the telephone call, you yourself should have been more observant."

"I was thinking of Penelope." John's eyes turned speculatively to Julian. "In fact I had the impression that we were both thinking of her at that time."

There was a fairly long pause.

"Perhaps I was," Julian said quietly and added, "But I've learned to look where I'm going."

Julian reached out and took the bill from the plate. He counted the unfamiliar money carefully and added the tip. "What would you have done if you'd found the diamonds in Topolski's locker?" he asked.

"I had an idea that I might have them dropped through the old lady's letterbox. She'd have been happy and anxious to forget the whole thing. Vernier would not exactly have dropped the case, but he would have turned his whole attention on the murders. You see, in the case of a jewel robbery, it's the insurance companies that put most pressure on the police, and they have more influence than you'd think."

"So your only idea was to help Charles?" Julian asked skeptically.

"It would be no disaster in my life if Charles brushed up his French in gaol. But, you see, Charles is too weak to be trusted at the Palais de Justice. Inside an hour he would have told all and more. They would have convinced him that the mysterious stranger who committed the robbery and used my car was none other than John Keeble himself. To catch and convict a poor sap like Charles would be no very long feather in Vernier's cap. But if he had the robbery and me and two murders all wrapped up in the same package, he'd probably buy himself a cigar." He laughed.

Julian thought of this as he walked in the direction of the school. He had promised to collect Tyler and take him to a cowboy film with the dialogue in its original English. He also thought to himself how nice it

would be if life were like a cowboy film, where life began one day and ended the next, where the hero just shot the villain and rode off in a cloud of dust and didn't even bother to kiss anybody, all the sinners dead or in gaol and only the goodies at large, including the cattle and the girl.

He was walking under the trees along a back street of Nice, one of the sedate ones where elderly French in somber attire bow to each other and try to preserve a little of what is timeless in a scurrying world.

Mrs. Tilford was almost abreast of him before he noticed her. She was carrying a newspaper, reading as she walked very slowly. There were tears in her eyes.

"Mrs. Tilford."

"Oh," she stopped and brushed her hand with an angry gesture across her eyes.

He turned his head away. He knew that she would not want him to see her tears. "I'm just going to the school to collect Tyler," he said.

She raised her eyes to his now, and they were open and uncompromising as ever. "You should have told me about Charles," she said. "I knew of course that you were keeping something back from me. I hoped that it was just something indiscreet."

She handed him the newspaper. There was a wooden seat under one of the trees. He took her arm and guided her to it.

There was very little new in the paper, but there was a picture of John's car, with John at the wheel, obviously borrowed from one of the social pages because there was a girl sitting beside him.



The story told how this car had been identified at the scene of the robbery, but it also said that messenger boy had seen it standing near Mr. Keeble's residence and had seen a man who was not Mr. Keeble drive it away. The description he gave of the man left no doubt that he was a very observant boy. He described Charles' long face and blond hair and his tall languid figure and the aged Savile Row sports clothes. It was too easy, Charles was too obvious. The boy was even able to say he had seen him with the students at the Whitecliffe school.

He folded the paper and handed it back to her. "You think it was Charles?"

She answered with nervous emphasis, "Of course it was Charles. The police came to the school and took him away . . . an hour ago."

Her hand was lying in surrender on the paper on her lap. He tried to convey a reassurance he did not feel. "Don't worry Mrs. Tilford, I don't think Charles is very much of a villain. He's an incredible young fool."

She turned to face him honestly. "What I cannot bear is the thought that John might have been using him. That would shatter a lot of things that all my life I have believed in."

"I don't believe that he did," Julian said.

"They used his car. There is a murder also involved in this, Mr. Ashford. Charles could never do that." Her eyes as she looked at him were bleak with despair. "But John could. I know his background. I know his people, all of them. John belongs to another century, to a time when they had other words for their deeds. It was not killing, but bloodletting."



For some reason he was angry. "So you think that John crept up on that wretched student and stabbed him in the back?"

"Is that what happened?"

"That is precisely what happened."

The old lady gave her usual characteristic jerk at the lapels of her tweed jacket. "In that case it was not John who killed him."

She was exasperating. "That conclusion may not be very helpful to Charles."

"Neither of them are capable of it."

"Can you think of anybody who might be capable of it?"

She looked at him and said, "Yes, Mr. Ashford, I think you could be. Those two boys are my own people. I've seen them grow up. If I had to choose between them and you, I would of course stick by Charles and John."

Sitting with an elderly lady in a quiet street the conversation was absurd and yet they were both quite serious.

"You think I might have done it?"

"I think," she said, "if you felt it necessary to kill somebody or some animal in the jungle quietly, you wouldn't wait to decide whether it was cricket or not." She looked at him shrewdly. "Have you done it before?"

His mind went back to the nightmare of silence in the jungle when he was carrying Tyler on his back; to the times when you struck first or not at all. "Yes," he said, "I have done it before, Mrs. Tilford."

She nodded as if she understood and sympathized.

"We fight for our own even to the point where killing becomes a habit. I understand that and, God forgive me, sometimes I admire it. You could kill somebody quietly in the dark." She looked at him as if asking for understanding. "But you see I know the others couldn't have done it."

He touched her hand briefly. "This is a foolish conversation at this time and in this place, but I agree with you. I could have done it."

She got up with him from the seat. "However much I disapprove of your methods, I will always approve of your motives." She might have been making a casual farewell to him in an English country lane. "Tyler explained that you were going to the cinema. I will tell them to have his supper ready at seven."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

**C**HARLES and Penelope were both facing Inspector Vernier. Facing was the only word to describe it. They were facing his threats, giving the impression that they refused to back away.

He swung around as Julian came in. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to collect my son to take him to a movie." He smiled as he did when something incongruous makes drama faintly ridiculous. "He hasn't had any excitement in his life. He wants to go to a cowboy film. They shoot the villain and have done with it." And then he laughed because of the absurdity of it. "The villain of course is nearly always the sheriff."

Charles expended the air from his lungs as if he had held it there for too long. "Look," he said, "tell this man that you know my aunt, and I couldn't possibly have been mixed up in all this?"

Julian looked at him and said, "Why not keep your aunt out of it?"

The inspector turned on him. "Has his aunt done something to help him?"

"Yes, Inspector, something quite important. She has had a certain amount of faith in him."

"She is going to require a great deal more," Vernier said. He added contemptuously, "If any human being can have faith in one who stabs another in the back."

"That's a lie. Till you told me I didn't even know that Topolski was dead."

Vernier's sneer was a special brand of his own. "You didn't know that your fingerprints were on his locker till I told you, did you?"

Penelope looked across at Julian. Her eyes were bleak with despair.

There was nothing he could do. Inspector Vernier had found the weak link and with the intuitive knowledge of a clever man, he knew it.

Julian said, "There is this to be considered. Mrs. Tilford met me in the street a while ago and she talked to me and what she said, Inspector, came from a background that you could not have had access to. She told me that her nephew could not have committed this murder because he was constitutionally incapable of it."

Vernier was French enough to be interested in theories. "Did she have in mind somebody who would be capable of committing it?"

"Oh, yes."

"May I ask you to name names?"

"Myself."

Penelope had been leaning back against the wall. She thrust herself away from it violently.

**"Julian, that's ridiculous!"**

He shook his head. "Mrs. Tilford was quite right. You see, Penelope, I've been close to people that you have to kill or be killed by yourself, and if you kill them by stabbing them in the back in the dark, it is really no different from killing them in a romantic duel." He smiled at her. "I'm sorry but there are times when all that matters is that you are the one who survives."

Inspector Vernier pulled away the cigarette that had become glued to his lower lip. "Is this a lecture, Mr. Ashford, or a confession?"

"It's certainly not a confession. I was explaining to you and to Miss Whitecliffe that there are people who are capable of a certain line of action, and those who are not."

Vernier said contemptuously, "If you are trying to explain that you are the kind who cling together no matter what crimes are committed, I agree with you." He swung back to confront Charles Tilford. "Now you . . . do you deny that you opened Leon Topolski's locker?"

"No, I don't." His lips twitched nervously.

Julian moved across and stood close to Penelope. He caught her hand and held it firmly.

"Why did you open it?"

"Because there was something in it that belonged to me."

"What?"

"That is no business of yours." Then he lied hopelessly. "He owed me some money. He left it there for me."

"Why did he owe you money?"

Charles looked at the others as if for help. "I had loaned it to him." But his tone would have convinced nobody.

"It would be better," the inspector said, "if you would realize that I am not an utter fool. Since you have been in Nice you have had no money to lend to anybody. You have been borrowing it wherever you could, and your aunt has been going around doing her best to satisfy your creditors."

Charles backed away from him. "That isn't true," he said.

"It is perfectly true. A number of weaklings come to this city. It is my business to see that they do not involve us in a scandal. I had decided that your aunt was capable of taking care of you. It seems that I was wrong. So when you opened the locker you expected to find money?"

"I did."

"And the money was American currency, twenty-dollar bills, I take it?"

Charles put a hand to his face. "Why do you ask me that?"

"I am not asking you. Whoever employed you, also cheated you. As usual the money was counterfeit. Last night you were throwing it about in the Sporting Club. A colleague of mine in Monte Carlo telephoned me this morning. It is very strange, but the notes you were cashing were of the same series as those which Mr. Whitecliffe cashed at the Casino on the afternoon that he was murdered. You say that Topolski gave you the



money, but he also was murdered. Mr. Whitecliffe was not a man of wealth, but he, too, suddenly had money. Topolski was not rich either but had money, and then you had it. Perhaps you should consider yourself lucky to be alive." He turned to Julian and said, "You will note that I am dealing not with the character of your friends, but with facts."

"I agree," Julian said. "You are dealing with the fact that some counterfeit money is circulating in Nice, but, Inspector, you still do not understand the people you are investigating."

"And you know them better?" His tone was supercilious.

Julian nodded. "Very much better."

"Very romantic. You realize as well as I do that all this money seems to originate here in this school. Miss Whitecliffe's uncle, Topolski, and now . . . " He swung around again to Charles. "Now tell me about the diamond ring you were endeavoring to present to Miss Land?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Charles said stubbornly.

"You don't know." Inspector Vernier shook his head. "You don't know that you were identified as the man who drove the car in which you drove to the place of the robbery, you don't know that I had warned my friends in Monte Carlo to watch you?" He moved closer. "You were too much a fool to plan this yourself. Who was paying you? Who left the money for you in this school?"

"I don't know," Charles persisted stubbornly.

"Who told you that John Keeble's car would be waiting for you?"

"How do I know? Somebody told me that the car would be where I found it."

"Did you know it belonged to Mr. Keeble?"

"Of course. Everybody knows his car."

"But you had no idea who told you to take it?"

"No." He backed further away.

"And no idea who it was you drove to the scene of the robbery?"

"No, I've told you, no."

"And this complete stranger committed the robbery and gave you the jewels?"

"Yes, I've told you that. That is what he did."

"Just handed you the jewels and walked away? That was very trusting of him after he had performed the most dangerous part of the operation."

"He turned them over to me and told me what to do with them. He was carrying out orders the same as I was."

Vernier nodded. "But you decided not to be so docile as they thought you would be. Topolski was waiting for you at the appointed place, but you were not going to give the diamonds to Topolski."

Charles said almost eagerly, "If I had not been going to give them to him why should I have gone there at all?"

"That is simple. You had to have money and you knew it was waiting for you at the school. Even you would realize that it is not easy to go about selling dia-

monds immediately after a robbery. Where are they now?" he rasped the words out sharply.

Charles shook his head. "All I know is that I did what I was told. I put them in Topolski's locker."

"Why did Mr. Keeble drive you back from Monte Carlo in your car when he had his own there?" he asked sharply.

"I don't know . . . yes, I do. I'd had one or two drinks too many."

"I see, and instead of taking you home and putting you to bed, he brought you back to the school. Was there nothing strange about that?"

"I won't say anything, you'll use it against me." It was a weak defiance. He wet his dry lips.

"I'll use a lot of things against you, my friend, including a charge of murder. If there are people behind this with more brains than you have, they have left you in a very difficult situation. Don't tell me that in the circumstances you are trying to shield them."

Charles pushed a strand of blond hair away from his eyes and said in desperation, "But I've told you. I don't know who they are. I only saw Topolski and this other man, this stranger."

"And you can't even describe him. You say it was dark where you picked him up, he kept his hat pulled over his eyes, his back was half turned to you. You can't even tell me whether he was tall or short. And he has melted into the air and Topolski is dead. I might as well tell you that somebody is going to be convicted of these crimes. If I can find nobody else it will be you. What do you say about that, Mr. Tilford?"

Charles took his handkerchief from his pocket and passed it across his forehead. His eyes turned to Penelope and Julian and then away again. "I don't know," Charles said. "When we went back to the school, John opened the locker. The jewelry was not there. . . . When I saw it was gone I was frightened. I had been thinking that perhaps John would give them back to the old lady and ask her to forget the whole thing."

"And you expected that I, too, would forget it."

"I don't know, but with John you feel that you can leave things in his hands. He seems to know what to do," the young man muttered.

The inspector made a brief signal to the uniformed constable who was waiting. "Take him away." And he added, "He is to have no visitors."

Charles took an uncertain step toward Penelope. "I'm sorry," he said. "Penelope, will you tell John? There might be something he can do."

The constable touched his arm and he said, "Oh yes, of course, you're waiting, aren't you . . . sorry."

Inspector Vernier had picked up his black hat. "I am going now, mademoiselle," he said. "You realize, of course, that I will come back?"

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

**T**HEY were walking back from the movie. The cowboy film had been all that they had expected of it. Virtue had triumphed and all the villains were dead or in gaol. The daughter of the U.K. ranch and her old and somewhat senile father were firmly in possession again, and the good cowboys had waved to her before they had disappeared into a cloud of dust.

They had taken a roundabout way home and now they were strolling along the Promenade.

"Tyler," Julian said, "life doesn't end like those cowboy films, you know."

Tyler picked up a small stone and hurled it over the railings and into the sea. "I know," he said, "because they have another story with the same cowboys next week. I like them better than the serials on the radio because those never come to an end at all."

"Well, in real life, things do come to an end eventually, so I suppose life must be something between one and the other."

Tyler looked at him with curiosity. "Why are you about it, daddy?"

"I was thinking about things I remember that you don't. You don't remember your mother, do you?"

"Yes, I do, I remember everything you told me about her."

"What would you think if we suddenly discovered that she was alive?"

"I don't think I would like it, daddy. I think she was too good. I think you and I are better by ourselves." He looked a little afraid. "We won't discover that she's alive, will we? I don't want to live with somebody who had been dead all this time."

Julian went on seriously. "Tyler, you hadn't met many grown-up women till you came here, except of course those who used to take care of you. Now since we have been here and you've met Miss Whitecliffe and Mrs. de Wollfe and Mrs. Tilford, tell me what you think of them."

"Well, of course," he began doubtfully, "Mrs. Tilford is very stern, but you don't mind that because she does good things for you and by the time it's bedtime she's got you clean and made you tidy your room and there's nothing left over that people can grumble about in the morning, not even your lessons."

"And Miss Whitecliffe?"

He said cautiously, "She is very nice. She talks about you. I think I love her, but . . ." He kicked the gravel at his feet.

"But what, Tyler?"



He was not happy. "Don't let's talk about it, daddy. Why would we talk about women?"

"Very well, but you haven't told me about Mrs. de Wollfe."

He was relieved. "Oh, we don't have to worry about her. She doesn't care about us, does she?"

It was no use. If the time was coming when he would have to face the shock it would be better to wait till the time came. There was no bridge.

Mrs. Tilford was waiting for them in the apartment.

"There was no need to have come this evening," he said gently.

She answered almost angrily. "Why not this evening? I had no other engagements." She put a hand with rough affection on Tyler's shoulder. "Come along, young man. You're late. It's past your bath time."

Tyler looked at her as if he suspected that she might use the time to escape her responsibilities. "You aren't going to say that it's too late to read to me are you, Mrs. Tilford?"

"Not if you get a move on," she told him.

He dashed for the bedroom.

She turned to Julian. "Did you see Charles?"

He nodded. "Yes. He was with Inspector Vernier."

"It's hopeless, isn't it? They told me that he'd been charged with the jewel robbery."

"Not quite hopeless," he said.

He went to the telephone and called Penelope. He asked her to hurry because he was afraid he would change his mind; to get a taxi and come to the apartment.

He went to the bathroom where his son was plunging like a seal in the water. "Tyler, I want to talk to you."

He lifted his head indulgently. "Yes, daddy?" Interruptions from a parent were routine. You put up with them.

"Would you mind putting yourself to bed tonight? I know that Mrs. Tilford promised to read to you, but I want to talk to her. Do you mind?"

He raised himself on his hands and knees and considered his father. He saw that the request was serious. "Yes," he said, "I'll read to myself. But she'll make up the time tomorrow, won't she?"

"I promise. Eat your supper and put yourself into bed, won't you?"

"Will you say good night to me?"

"Yes, even if you're asleep."

Penelope was surprised to see Mrs. Tilford. The old lady was standing in the center of the room and she was as uncompromising as a rock.

Julian stepped forward and took her hands. "I'm sorry to have to drag you out like this, Penelope. But I want you to help me."

"Help you?" Her eyes widened. "But Julian, you aren't in trouble." Her voice broke sharply.

"This afternoon Inspector Vernier said we were all building up a sort of common front against him. He was quite right," Julian said quietly.

He picked up Penelope's handbag. Before she could protest he had taken the detective agency's report from it.

She jumped up from her chair and confronted him.

"Julian, what are you going to do with that? It doesn't belong to you. It belonged to my uncle."

"I'm going to send it to Inspector Vernier. I should have handed it over in the first place. It might have prevented the other murder." He went over to his desk and took out an envelope. "I wrote this letter to go with it this morning."

The envelope was stamped and addressed. He put in the little sheaf of papers he had taken from her bag and sealed the envelope. He went to the elevator and asked the boy to drop it in the mailbox. Then he came back.

Mrs. Tilford looked from one to the other of them suspiciously. "What is all this about?"

"Sit down, Mrs. Tilford, and I'll tell you the whole story." She found an upright chair and sat stiffly, with her hands clasped in her lap.

In the silence, after he had finished, they could hear Tyler in his bedroom. He was singing an outlandish lullaby, something that he had learned somewhere in the tropics. It was not a melody, but a quiet monotonous chant. It became softer and softer as if he were singing himself to sleep.

"So you see," Julian said, "I have no alternative."

There were outraged tears in Penelope's eyes. "Don't you see what will happen now?"

Mrs. Tilford said sharply, "He sees quite well, Penelope, and if you had an ounce of sense you would see that he has no alternative either."

Penelope was rebellious. "You've done all the harm you can. Now what are you going to do?"

"Talk to De Wollfe. What else can I do?"

Mrs. Tilford walked to the door of Tyler's room and opened the door. She closed it softly and came back.

"He's asleep," she said. "I only hope he is sleeping as confidently tomorrow night." She picked up her sensible handbag and strode toward the door. "I think if you don't mind, I'll go for a short walk. I'll be back to stay with Tyler."

They stood together looking down over the Promenade. He opened the full-length windows and they stepped out onto the small balcony. A breeze that was hardly more than a caress was coming in from the sea warmed by Africa on the other side. It was quiet between the times of activity. The cocktail hour had finished and the evening sessions had not begun. They could hear the softly crisp sounds of the occasional horse carriages and see the still lighted curve of the bay that seemed to be waiting expectantly for something new, hushed after one experience and waiting for another.

He took her arm and tucked it under his own as they leaned over the balustrade. "Soft," he said. "And gentle and quiet. I wish I could have stayed here, Penelope."

She gasped in protest. "Why did you do it, Julian? There was no need. What you have done is violent. But all kinds of relationships can exist down here; it's what they call civilization; people learn to accept them. You and Tyler could have lived your lives, and Risa and De Wollfe could have lived theirs." She shivered as if the wind had blown cold. "Nobody on this Coast likes things to be forced into the open. They are terribly

cruel to people who do it. They don't want them. It can be dreadful when they let you know that you are not wanted, when you realize there is a conspiracy to get rid of you; the hotels and the casinos and the police."

He pressed the hand under his arm. "Don't worry, Penelope. I don't stay where I'm not wanted."

"No," she said. "But I wanted you to stay."

The telephone began to ring in the living room. He went away to answer it and came back.

"That was John," he said. "Raoul de Wollfe is with him. He has invited us to go around to his house."

She turned slowly away as if she were reluctant to give up a dream. "Had you arranged this before you asked me to come here?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm afraid that's what I did." He took her arm and guided her back into the room. "It's a farewell party, Penelope." He looked about the room as if he were impressing the details on his mind, and she knew that he would always remember her as she was standing here in this setting.

"What will you do now, Julian? I mean when you go away?"

"Do?" He seemed surprised at her question. "What I've always done. I'll go back to where I belong."

"You're running away, aren't you?"

"Running away . . . Penelope, in all my life . . . "

He broke off and walked to her and took her hands.

"Yes, I'm running away."

Her face crumpled like a child's. She said, "What about Tyler? I like him. I'd like to take care of him."

He shook his head. "Penelope, you made that clear to me on the very first day we met. Tyler and I don't want to make demands on anybody."

She pulled her hands out of his grasp. "You don't understand. This wouldn't be making demands."

"I'm afraid it would be, more than you realize." He picked up the light fur cape she had been wearing and laid it on her shoulders. "Tomorrow you'll understand what I mean."



## CHAPTER TWENTY

**R**AOUL DE WOLLFE looked more like the occupant of the house than John Keeble. He seemed to be aware of it and resolved to set the tone for their meeting.

"Well, well," he said. "Well met in adversity. You youngsters seem to have got yourselves into a thorough mess."

John Keeble seemed to be remaining deliberately in the background.

"I envy you this house, John," Raoul said. "One can't describe it without using words like distinction, unpretentious charm and that sort of thing. Risa always thinks of this when she is buying furniture. She asks herself how would such a piece look in John's house."

"That's very nice of her, but the taste isn't mine, you know. It's a headwaiter's." He carried drinks and handed them to Penelope and Julian.

"Risa stayed here for a few weeks when I was away," he explained to Julian. "She was having her own place

decorated. I was afraid that after the Chateau de Wollfe she'd have considered it a bit of a slum.

Raoul laughed. "Too modest isn't he, Penelope? Don't you agree that it's delightful?"

"Very," she said and added, "This is the first time I've seen it."

He took that up at once. "My dear, how very backward of John. The prettiest girl and the most gracious house in Nice, and he has been keeping them apart." He was the amused man of the world.

"You said that we had got ourselves into a mess," Julian said. "I take it that you don't include yourself?"

Raoul looked at him in polite surprise. "But why should I? I take it that the purpose of this meeting is to try somehow to soften the blow of young Tilford's arrest. I'll certainly use what influence I have to help the boy, but I've certainly no intention of getting myself involved in this business."

"But aren't you involved?"

De Wollfe cleared his throat. What he proposed to say he intended to be emphatic. "I've not inquired as to your interest in this business, Ashford. But I must say it sounds odd that a complete stranger should endeavor to interfere at all."

Julian said quietly, "At least they know that Charles Tilford is not a master mind who could plan a jewel robbery like the one the other night. They want to find the man in the background. Unfortunately for Charles, he can't tell them."

"And you think you can?"

Julian nodded. "Yes, I think I can."

Penelope and John moved closer. They knew that the clash between the two men went below the superficial words they were speaking.

Raoul de Wollfe leaned forward in his chair. "That is interesting. Why not tell us how you think you could help the police?"

"I think I know the man."

"Are we permitted to know who he is?"

"I think—yourself."

Penelope gasped. There was a curious immobility about Julian Ashford that she had noted before. When he said something that really mattered he said it without stress and without fear of the consequences.

Raoul de Wollfe lifted a hand and caressed his mustache. He took his time in replying. "You know, Ashford," he said, "I can't really make up my mind whether to be flattered or offended. But what really interests me is how you arrived at the conclusion. You see I can't help believing that you really mean what you say."

Penelope was thinking, people don't behave like this. But they were behaving in this way, Julian with quiet concentration, and Raoul listening with his expression of puzzled interest.

"I suppose," Julian said, "it arises from the places I have lived. If you live in the tropics you develop a kind of second sense about people you meet out there." He turned to John and Penelope as if he were explaining to them. "People can pretend that they are something that they are not, and because nobody contradicts them, they can get away with it. You know that it's not

the truth but that it's all part of a make-believe." He nodded to Raoul de Wollfe. "If he came out there he would be a great success. Everything he did would be so right, almost too right."

Raoul laughed genuinely. "This is fascinating. Do go on talking about me, Ashford. You are better than a fortuneteller."

"You told me about your fishing trips up and down Europe, and then I saw Topolski. He looked so unlike the sort of man you would employ if you were trying to impress people, that I couldn't believe it. If you had sent him to arrange your fishing trips they would not have accepted you. If you really had wanted somebody for that job you would have employed somebody like John here."

John said, "It never would have occurred to me, but it's quite true of course. At least I do know what a trout is shaped like. I'll bet Leon never in his life saw one outside a fishmarket." He paused and shivered, and Julian knew that he was remembering the lonely place where he had left the body.

For the first time Raoul showed signs of unease. He pressed his mustache tightly between his lips. "Academically, this is interesting. I think you were accusing me of a crime. Now it seems that I've been stupid enough to choose the wrong person to arrange my fishing trips."

"No," Julian said, "that's something you would never do, because you've trained yourself never to do the wrong thing with the right people."

"I see, but how does this implicate me in a series of unpleasant crimes in Nice?"

"I don't like telling you this," Julian looked from one to the other of them, "but when I was a stranger here, I was involved in something that seemed dangerous for me and my son. When you are in danger, the first thing to do is to ask what weapons you have. I had only one. The company I work for is very influential and, for a reason I can't explain, they trust me." He hesitated apologetically. "I'm afraid, De Wollfe, they found out that you haven't very much background."

De Wollfe colored angrily. "How dare you inquire into my private affairs?"

"I'm sorry," Julian said. "But you know there seemed to be an idea of accusing me of murder. There are times when an international company like mine can get information more quickly than the police, because there is more telephoning and less formality. What they found was that you had money to spend, but there was no information as to where it came from."

"And from all this background you deduced that I had committed two murders, a jewel robbery and was passing counterfeit money?" Raoul got up from his chair and strolled over to help himself to a drink. "All this in a couple of days; Inspector Vernier is going to blush with shame when you tell him."

"I'm not going to tell him," Julian said. "I think you should."

Raoul laughed. "I came here tonight with the idea of offering my help. You seem to be getting along nicely without it. Before I go, it would be interesting to hear your evidence, let's say one or two small facts."

Julian explained quietly. "First there was your curi-

ous interest in Penelope's school. You said you were interested in it because you considered the spreading of languages to be a great crusade. That is possibly true and it might have been a way to justify your actions to your conscience."

"There is a great deal that I hope to justify to my conscience, but don't let me interrupt you," Raoul said coldly.

"You were paying Leon Topolski's fees at the school out of charity, you said, and for the same reason you gave him these odd jobs to act as your casual secretary and courier. But from what I have seen of you I would say that if you were supporting a charity it would not be an obscure one. You would be more likely to be on a committee headed by a duchess."

"Since you mention it," De Wollfe said, "I am on several. I hadn't realized that it might condemn me."

Julian went on. "No, it's Topolski who condemns you. While the robbery was being committed he was waiting at the school to collect the spoils. Topolski made the contact with Charles Tilford and arranged for him to drive the car. Topolski had his bag ready and was going to make one of those casual journeys you were telling me about."

Raoul de Wollfe nodded in agreement. "I think you are right. I should say he had got it into his head that I could no longer be bothered with him, so he decided to make a killing and get away. It was a shock to me when I heard he was dead. My first thought was that he had committed suicide. Remember I told you myself I thought he was the type."



Julian shrugged that aside. "But unless you told him, he couldn't have known that the old lady was going to a party at your house. You had not invited her till four o'clock on the day she was robbed. The holdup had been organized much earlier than that."

Raoul de Wollfe considered. "It didn't occur to you, of course, that her chauffeur could have been a party to the holdup? It would be fairly simple for him to telephone where he was going to drive her, and the time."

"If the chauffeur was a member of the gang, he must be a glutton for punishment. He's still in a hospital, poor chap," said Julian.

"Most interesting, that leaves only myself and anybody else who cared to take the trouble to keep track of her whereabouts."

"Yes, somebody who knew Topolski, knew also every turn in the road to your house, and had access to John's garage, and knew she had been invited to your house."

"Had I access to John's garage?"

"Your wife lived here. Did she give you the keys back, John?"

"Heaven knows," and he added, "I don't want Risa brought into this."

"Unfortunately, we have all been brought into it."

Raoul de Wollfe gave an exaggerated sigh. "Thank heaven for that! I thought I was the only suspect."

"We are all defending ourselves," Julian said quietly. "In the best way that we can."

"And I," De Wollfe said flatly, "do not even admit that I need defend myself."

Penelope Whitecliffe watched and listened with a

feeling of dread. Julian Ashford was waiting, turning his glass in his brown hands. She knew that he had committed himself to something he intended to finish.

John said explosively, "This is all fantastic!"

De Wollfe shook his head. "No, not yet, John, but it will be. I think our friend is going to accuse me of two murders. The only trouble is that I can't for the life of me think of a reason why I should have murdered Penelope's uncle."

As if he found the glass too heavy in his hands, Julian put it aside. "What caused all the trouble for the murderer," he said, "was that Mr. Whitecliffe was winning when he should have lost. But to explain it you have to go back to the school, and of course to Topolski, to the point when he was helping Mr. Whitecliffe count the money and found the counterfeit dollars and told him the only place where he could safely cash them was at the Casino. That was quite untrue. If my guess is right, the Casino would have been the most dangerous place in Nice. He would have been arrested as he left the building. But you see he was not intended to leave the building. He was expected to take his frightening money to the Casino to stake it at roulette and lose. Then it would have been obvious to everybody that he had had the last wild fling and committed suicide. But he did not lose, and a man who is winning a fortune does not suddenly decide to kill himself."

"You've forgotten to supply me with a motive," Raoul said.

"I can supply you with a very good one," Julian said.

"Splendid, you seem to have thought of everything."

"Mr. Whitecliffe," Julian said, "knew that Risa was not your wife."

Raoul de Wollfe turned and regarded Julian as if he were trying to interpret the mind of a lunatic. Where there had been tension in his face before, there was now relief, as if a dangerous pursuer had taken the wrong road.

"That would certainly be a motive for murder," he said. "It would be most unfortunate if somebody came along with the knowledge that I was not married to my wife." Raoul de Wollfe smiled at John and Penelope, and then he must have realized that he alone was not treating the accusation seriously. They were watching him, waiting to hear what he would say next. If the accusation was a joke they were not seeing it.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," he went on. "There is nothing irregular about my marriage. It took place on a fine spring morning at Paddington Registry office in London. We went for our honeymoon to a small village in Devonshire: a little inn; charming simple people."

Julian Ashford hated himself. He got up from his chair and walked away. "You are probably right," he said. "I believe you may have done all you say you did. But you see your wife was already married to someone else."

Raoul de Wollfe jumped to his feet and followed Julian to where he was standing by the window. His face was white. "This is an awful, monstrous thing to say about any woman," he said. "Why are you saying it? Are you a murderer trying to fix the blame on some-

body else? Are you a blackmailer trying to gouge money out of people? What is the idea of all this?"

Julian turned to face him. He knew that he could never like Raoul de Wollfe, but at least he could pity him. "I came here by accident," he said. "My life with Risa came to an end years ago. She thought I was dead. I imagine she was as willing to forget the past as I was. Unfortunately, it won't be forgotten. Risa and I were married, we lived together and we had a son and, as I said, she believed that I was dead. She had every right to believe it. I think the first time she realized that I was alive was when she walked into the room where Inspector Vernier was making his inquiries and saw me alive."

Raoul de Wollfe said, "What utter nonsense! I noticed myself you met as complete strangers. Do you think I'm an utter fool where my wife is concerned? I love her enough to be jealous of her. When she speaks to a man I watch her. I know I should be man of the world enough not to do that, but I do. John introduced you to each other and you met as strangers." He swung around. "That is true, isn't it, John?"

John Keeble shook his head. "I'm sorry, Raoul. I felt that what had happened in the past had nothing to do with me."

Raoul de Wollfe backed away as if John had betrayed a trust. "Are you trying to suggest that you knew about this?" he asked hoarsely.

"It was none of my business." John turned unhappily away.

Raoul swung around to Penelope. "And you too? Did you know?"

She nodded without looking at him. "My uncle thought you were trying to force us to sell out to you. In some ways he was cleverer than you'd think. He said that you would take over and get rid of us both, and he loved this place and he knew what the school meant to me. Perhaps he knew more of what was going on than I did. I think perhaps Leon Topolski might have hinted it to him on one of those walks they used to take together. He used to say that he was sure there was something in your past, and that if we knew what it was we could make you leave us alone." She gave a laugh that was half a sob. "It was the sort of way a schoolboy would think. He did find something." She paused sharply.

Raoul had moved away from them. He was gathering up the strings of his vanity. "So everyone in this room has been sharing this secret joke. That means, of course, that everybody in Nice is sharing it."

"It is not a joke," Julian said. "And we three are the only ones who know it. The police will know it in the morning."

"The police?" he asked sharply.

Julian nodded. "I've written to them. I don't in the least mind Charles Tilford going to gaol for what he did in the robbery, but, incredible fool that he is, he's not a murderer."

Raoul walked to the telephone. He pulled himself together as if he were going to meet a foe. "There is only one person who can put an end to this nonsense,"

he said. "That is Risa herself. I'll ask her to come here, and then heaven help you all."

Penelope realized then that it was not Raoul, the vain exhibitionist, who mattered, but Risa whom he loved and leaned upon.

He looked smaller when he came from the telephone. The perfect clothes looked oddly as if they had been made for somebody else. The vanity had gone out of his face and it sagged.

"Risa is dining with friends at the Ruhl Hotel," he said. "She says she has not the slightest desire to come around here and take part in a discussion of her marital past. She says that if I have been foolish enough to get myself involved in a series of squalid little crimes, that is entirely my own affair." He drew himself up as if under the power of his own words. "And she is quite right. Risa is quite right."

He did not say good night to them, and the three of them stood without speaking as he walked out of the room.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

**R**ISA was waiting for him. As he came through the door he saw her standing before the mirror, touching her hair with her fingers in a self-caress.

She said, "Oh, there you are, Julian. I hoped you wouldn't be long."

"Risa, what are you doing here?"

Still caressing the hair that curved above her ear, she said, "I've come home, Julian. I sent the nurse away."

"The nurse?"

She turned her eyes from the mirror to look at him casually. "Yes, of course, the little old lady you had hired to take care of Tyler."

"Mrs. Tilford?"

"If you say so. We've had so many of them, I never can remember their names. It seemed silly to keep her up so late. They get upset when you keep them out of their little beds. I explained to her, of course, that I was your wife."

"Risa . . . " There was something frightening about her. Her eyebrows were raised in vague surprise.

"But Julian, let's face it. You told Raoul we were married. Why not let's be married? We have our son and nobody is going to dispute it, are they? Surely this is one marriage that nobody can break up. It's so genuine, and we don't even have to live in Burma."

"Did you tell Tyler?"

"It's always Tyler isn't it, Julian? No, I didn't tell him. I thought it would be better if we told him together in the morning. Don't you agree, Julian?"

"What about Raoul?"

She laughed. "That's a funny question from you, Julian. Do you suppose that Raoul's vanity will be able to bear me in the future? I was part of his life, like his fashionable villa and his clothes and his car." She laughed contemptuously.

But she had chosen him. She had loved the life he could give her, but as always Risa had known to the penny the value of the goods she had bought. After all the years it was interesting to see the same mind reacting in the same way.

"We have nothing to offer you Risa," he said flatly. "You decided that long ago."

"I would rather stay with my husband and son in Nice than be abandoned in Nice," she said.

He saw that she had ordered up from the hotel room service small caviar sandwiches, and there was a bottle of champagne in a bucket by the table. It was so like Risa. He opened the champagne because no matter what happened next it was expected of him.

She looked at him as she raised her glass. "Is this hail and farewell?"

"I think so, Risa."

"Why did you tell Raoul?"

"Because he was going to find out from another source."

"The scene must have been interesting. I almost wish I had been there."

"I rather gathered that you preferred to stay with your friends. You were dining here I understand."

She nodded. "I've been visiting this hotel quite a lot since you arrived, Julian. Do you suppose it's from an instinctive desire to be near you?"

"Are your friends staying in the hotel?"

"Yes, oddly enough, they are on the floor below this one."

He nodded thoughtfully. "So that's how you managed to get to my suite the other evening? You walked up one flight of stairs."

Her eyebrows rose in artificial surprise. "Julian, dear, whatever are you talking about?"

"The night you searched my room. You've made yourself over quite a lot since we were together, Risa, but for some reason you've never changed your perfume. When I came back to my bedroom there was something oddly familiar. Do you know it was only when I came in here tonight that I realized what it was. What were you looking for, Risa?"

She laughed. "Haven't you ever heard of a wife going through her husband's pockets, darling? It's being done all the time. I wondered if there was another woman in your life."

"I don't think that interested you, not then. You were looking for something more important."

"Was I?"

He nodded. "Yes, but you were too late. The papers you were looking for I'd given to Penelope Whitecliffe."

"Penelope Whitecliffe." Her voice was quite soft, hardly above her breath. "Why didn't you tell me this before, Julian?"

"I had a very good reason. I thought it was safer not to tell you."

"Why did you give them to her?"

"They belonged to her uncle. She was here when I found them."

"Here with you?"

"Why not? We were packing her uncle's suitcases."

"I suppose," she said, "it was a kind of fate that you and she should come together. The other night when I saw you take her away to drive her home in John's car, I could have killed her."

With an act of finality he put the half-emptied wine glass back on the table. "Risa, that is the reason I didn't tell you that Penelope had the papers you were looking for. You not only could have killed her, but I know you would have."

She straightened and leaned back rigidly in her chair. Her eyes were very dark and it seemed as if she were absorbing the image of his face into her memory. She spoke as if explaining something to him. "Julian, I suppose you think I must have felt terrible remorse about what I did. But I didn't then, and I don't now. It was unfortunate, that's all."

Unfortunate. The casual word was staggering. He remembered it all, every detail. He saw, again, the tiny Malay servant with her shapeless smock buttoned tightly at the neck, her delicate face, and her black hair in a bun at the back. She was the one who had taken care of Tyler, had worshiped him. She was the one he had found in the kitchen with a knife in her back. He remembered how, when he shouted for her, Risa had come running, and her scream of horror. Risa had told him that there had been quarrels in the kitchen. Some native lover had been making trouble while he had been away.

Then he had seen the stain of blood on Risa's lovely white evening gown.

She had not realized that it was there till she saw him looking at it and saw the realization coming into his eyes that she had been lying to him. He remembered how in the first uncontrolled minutes of fear she had justified herself; that the woman had been trying to alienate the affections of her son, and she had even dared to try to pretend that she was the real mistress of the house. But he knew now that the real truth had been that Risa had been having an affair while he was away. It was difficult now to remember the man's name—somebody who was traveling through. The servant had threatened to tell the master and Risa had killed her . . .

It had all come out that night in a tumult of emotion. It was vivid with them in the room now in Nice. He remembered how he had burned her evening gown after the servants had gone back to the compound. He remembered seeing her off on the train to Rangoon on

a hot steaming day when they both were keeping up appearances. Her friends thought they were seeing her off on a holiday. She was going forever.

He looked down at her now. Her eyes had a still quality as if they were lenses in a camera.

"Julian," she said, "that stupid affair while you were away never meant anything to me. But you mattered, and if she had told you it would have ruined everything . . . a native servant."

She had forgotten the knife in the girl's back and the blood on her white evening gown.

"Risa, I accused Raoul de Wollfe tonight of killing Penelope's uncle. But that was not true was it?"

She made a slight gesture of appeal. "Does it matter, Julian? All this will be over soon. The police may think he did, but they can't prove anything, can they?"

The fact that they might not be able to prove anything was what mattered to her. She had no sense of guilt.

"If I had gone to the police a long time ago, Risa, and told them what had really happened, as I should have done, nothing here in Nice would have happened either." But it was useless to explain to her. Her shoulders were half raised in a shrug when he stopped speaking.

"A native servant. Julian, don't you realize I loved you too much to lose you because of kitchen gossip? I've told you that wretched affair had had nothing to do with us. He was sailing in two days and I'd never have seen him again."

"The point is, Risa," he said, "it will always be like



that. Mr. Whitecliffe was no more important in your life than the native servant."

As if she were interested in this merely as a discussion, she asked, "Why are you so sure I killed him?"

"Because it's the first thing that would occur to you," he said. "Everybody seems to think that Raoul de Wollfe is the important person in your household. I don't believe it."

She smiled as if he had paid her a compliment. "How clever of you Julian." She got up from her chair. "I can do anything with Raoul, but I must have those papers back from Penelope Whitecliffe. I don't really want to interfere in your life, Julian, but I can't bear the idea of anybody's interfering in mine. If you let them do it, it will be your responsibility, you know that, don't you?"

"Yes, it will be my responsibility this time, Risa."

"You'll get them back from her?"

"It's too late, Risa."

She stiffened again. "Aren't you frightened? You've seen how I can come in and out of this apartment when I want to."

"You've stolen one of the keys, haven't you?"

She laughed. "You gave it to me, darling. At least I picked it up from the table. It's the one to your bedroom door, the door that leads off the corridor, the one you don't use. Julian, dear, in Nice lots of women have keys. Clerks in hotels don't question people like Mrs. Raoul de Wollfe, surely you know that? Silly Julian, don't you realize that I am one of the five important hostesses, and you are a passing stranger who has got into a mess with the police?"

"I realized that, Risa," he said. "That's why I sent the papers you want to the police."

It was a dreadful moment for both of them because it was so final.

"Why did you do that?" she asked hoarsely, at last.

"Because," he said, "if there was another murder, I wanted them to know where to look. I wrote a letter telling them what happened in Burma."

"Do you think they'll believe you?"

He said, "I don't care whether they believe me or not."

"And did you tell them that I had committed the murders here?"

He spoke gently as if he wanted to save her pain. His face was white and tired. "You'll get out of this, Risa. You always will get out of everything. You've got men involved—Raoul, Charles Tilford, John Keeble and of course, myself—and also you are a beautiful woman; so what does it matter what I told the police?"

She had finished her own drink, now she walked across and picked up the one he had set down. She let it touch her lips and looked at him over the glass as actresses do in a dramatic scene. "Tell me what you really think happened, Julian?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll tell you what I think happened." He lighted a cigarette without knowing that he did it. "Mr. Whitecliffe knew before I arrived that you had committed bigamy."

"The horrid little man! He telephoned me and threatened that unless we stopped trying to get the school away from his precious niece, he would go to Raoul with

what he knew. The effrontery of it." She referred to him in the same contemptuous way she had spoken of the dead servant in Burma. "I actually had to pretend that I was frightened of him and said that I would arrange a meeting as soon as possible. When Leon let me know that he had advised the foolish man that the only place to cash the bad money was at the Casino, I telephoned the Whitecliffe man and said I would meet him there in the cocktail bar."

"But weren't you afraid your friends would recognize you?"

"I wasn't afraid, but I didn't want to be seen talking to that drab little man. I brought a suitcase to the ladies' cloak room and put on a last year's tweed suit and changed my hair and make-up and put on a frightful hat. I didn't even recognize myself." She laughed.

"He was so nervous that he could scarcely keep his voice steady. I let him order us a drink and promised that there was no need for him to worry about the school. I knew that he would have something more serious to worry about when they arrested him for passing counterfeit money. He was quite grateful and began fumbling in his pockets for the papers, and then he remembered that he had left them in a suite in the hotel where he was taking care of a small boy. He told me not to worry because he had hidden them most carefully." She laughed again. "Most carefully . . . he had probably hidden them under the mattress!"

She made a gesture of dismissal. "I got the number of the suite from him and went back to the ladies' room and made myself respectable. I should have gone directly

to the hotel. But I thought I could come back and see what he would do at the table. I never dreamed, I must say, that he'd win all that money before he—committed suicide. And then we were all kept in that tiresome place for the whole afternoon." She took a breath. "And then, of course, I had to meet you."

"History repeating itself," he said.

Without realizing it she agreed. "Yes, like that. . . . like seeing a ghost."

"The police will know why you killed Leon Topolski, Risa. You won't like the way they do it. It will be humiliating."

"How could they possibly!" She raised her head as if to defend herself against something that really mattered to her.

"Jealousy, Risa. You would hate to stand up in a court here in Nice and listen to the prosecutor explain how you tried to implicate John Keeble because Penelope had taken him away from you."

Her face tightened and her full lips shrank so that little vertical lines appeared. "Jealous of that little schoolmarm? Please don't be silly, Julian!"

"I'm sorry but that's how it will appear. Try to think of it yourself, Risa. The knife that killed Topolski was taken from the mantelpiece in John's drawing room. You lived there and still have the keys. I told the police that it needn't have been John's knife because there was an identical one in a shop along the tram lines. They inquired and found that it had disappeared. I didn't tell them that I had stolen it."

She looked at him somberly. "Why did you do that, Julian?"

"Because it was a replica of the knife that had killed Tyler's nurse in Burma. You must remember it, Risa, it was standing like a trophy on the mantelpiece in John's sitting room. Last time you had seen one like it, it was covered with blood."

"Of course I remember it," she said. "It reminded me that John must have seen me when he was out there."

"He didn't tell you?"

"No, but you guess these things and I remembered him, the shy boy on his bicycle who used to ride past the bungalow and rush away when he saw that I'd noticed him. We never mentioned it, either of us. I knew that he knew who I was, Julian. I was grateful to him."

"And felt that he belonged to you because he had been loyal?"

"Why not? There is a certain warmth in sharing a secret, even if it's a guilty one."

"And then he went to help Penelope at the school. And then when he found Topolski's body where you'd left it, he went away and brought his car and took the body away up into the mountains."

She backed away from him. "Obviously, because he realized that to leave it there would make him one of the suspects."

He shook his head again. "He didn't do it for himself, Risa. He did it for Penelope. John Keeble wouldn't have left that knife in Topolski's back if he'd killed Topolski. Too many people had seen it in his house. I took



it out and brought it back to John's house." He looked at her and realized that she was the same person he had known from the beginning: Risa against the world. "I know that you were in John's house, Risa, just before I arrived there the other night, because of that lingering scent you have always used. I knew it the minute I came into the room, when I came to put the knife back where it belonged."

He turned away and said, "I don't know whether you realize it, but all your life you have depended on a male, Risa; but this time none of us can help you. You didn't even realize that a little man like Mr. Whitecliffe would be likely to tell his secrets to another man and that he and Leon Topolski were in their lonely way good friends. But you discovered that Leon Topolski was more dangerous than Mr. Whitecliffe. You had been using him, treating him as something beneath contempt, and then expansive little Mr. Whitecliffe on one of their walks confided in him. It's quite possible that they may have decided that you and Raoul were not what you seemed. They may even have decided that Raoul was the shell we know he is."

Risa took up her coat. It draped on her shoulders as he held it for her. She accepted it as a tribute, as a guarantee that she was a success.

As he stood behind her, she turned her head over her shoulder and the fur made a soft line for her cheek. "At least I have one male that I can depend on, Julian. Would you mind very much if I saw him?"

Without waiting for him to reply, she walked to Tyler's door. He followed her and stood at her shoulder.



Tyler was sleeping, with his head pillowed in one arm, the other arm flung out helplessly as if he had not known what to do with it.

They stood looking down without speaking, and then with a gesture she tightened her coat about her shoulders and turned away. "They say there is such a thing as mother love," she said. "I'm sure that if anything could inspire it, your son could, Julian." She gave a dry cough. "I'm sorry, but it just is not there."

She had gone, and before he could open the door for her, it had closed in his face.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

**T**HE sun was bright on the water, glittering and dancing. Away at the end of the Promenade the fishing boats were coming in, and as always everywhere, there was a little gathering waiting to see what they had brought. All returning fishermen everywhere have an audience because the return of the fishermen is the oldest drama in the world. Nothing is so beautiful as his harvest from the sea, or so primitive; and nothing so lovely as his nets as he spreads them out in the sunlight to dry and to be mended.

Julian could see the bright blond hair of his son as he darted from one boat to the other, looking at their cargoes.

He knew that after today there would be nothing to prevent him from leaving and for the first time he wanted to stay. He was seeing it all as Penelope saw it and knew it, the colored rocks and the bright sea, and high behind them the mountains and the pines with little patches of snow that hid in their shadows. Every-

thing was there, the toilers and the idlers, the light and shade . . .

He had finished dressing when Tyler burst into the room. "Daddy, daddy. Do you know what the fishermen brought in . . . a body!"

"Hundreds of bodies, I hope," he said. "Fishes' bodies."

"No, daddy. A woman's body. The policemen came and took it away."

He knew then. He put his arm around Tyler's shoulder, tightly, till the little boy squirmed away with instinctive embarrassment.

"What's the matter, daddy?"

"Nothing, Tyler. What would you like to plan for today?"

"I don't know yet," he said. "Mrs. Tilford thinks that she and I might go sailing. You needn't come if you don't want to. She says she needs a man to help her manage the sail, but she thinks I can do it. I'm going to meet her downstairs."

"Fine," he said. "When she said a man I know she meant you. I know these little sailboats, one man is quite enough. Run along now and don't keep her waiting, and for goodness' sake take care of her."

"Of course I will," he said. "These women are so helpless, aren't they, daddy?"

"Aren't they," he said. "That is a good thing they'd like you to remember."

Tyler had darted out of the room before he had finished speaking.

Inspector Vernier put his black hat on the table and lighted a cigarette.

"An unfortunate accident happened last night," he said. "The fishermen in the bay found Mr. Raoul de Wollfe's speedboat drifting and unoccupied. They took it in tow, and at dawn they made a search and, knowing the drift of the currents, they found the body of his wife." His cigarette as usual drooled from the corner of his mouth. "It is a great tragedy."

Julian said nothing because there was nothing he could say.

"The husband is a broken man, it appears to us now that without his wife he is a broken man, a shell. He talks at random. I have recommended to him that he should leave Nice." He brushed the falling ash from his coat. "As usual in a case, when one thing breaks, all breaks. This morning a special messenger delivered her jewels to the lady who was robbed. There was no card enclosed but we know that the last call the lady made before she died was on Mr. Keeble. He is a great gentleman, that young man. We would be proud to think he was staying with us."

"Your case is closed then," Julian asked.

The French police official looked at him under his heavy eyelids. "Unsolved murder cases are never closed, monsieur. They remain on our files." He cleared his throat rather loudly. "However, we have been lucky enough to find the source of the counterfeit money and have confiscated the entire supply. There will be no more bad dollars circulating in Nice."

"What about young Charles Tilford?"

The inspector shrugged as if it were quite unimportant. "He will be charged, of course. We will keep him one month, two months, three, according to our pleasure, and then we will discharge him for lack of evidence. Naturally we will tell him to keep away from Nice."

He got up and picked up his dilapidated black hat. He smiled and all at once looked completely different. "Mr. Ashford, I would be honored if you would join me in an aperitif," he said.

It was a painful thing to find Raoul de Wollfe waiting for him when he came back to the hotel. He was waiting in the lobby as if he were not quite sure that he would be welcome. His clothes gave the impression that he had lost weight. Julian took him up to his suite and gave him a drink which he accepted not as a guest but gratefully.

"You've heard what happened to Risa?" he asked finally.

Julian nodded. "Yes, I heard. I'm sorry."

He toyed with his drink, sitting forward on the edge of his chair. "I don't know what will happen to me now, because without Risa I'm nothing. I've wanted to tell you that, ever since you've been here, I'd known about you. I would never have dared tell Risa that in my jealousy I'd inquired about her past, but I did. So I knew that she had lied to me, but that didn't matter. I knew that without her nothing mattered. She wanted a kind of life and she decided to make me a part of it. She showed me how to wear my clothes and speak and even how to be rude to people I would have liked.

"She showed me that if you are hard enough, there's

nothing you can't do. She brought me down here and on the money she had we established ourselves, but we had to live. Risa knew how; we built up this business of diamond robbery and counterfeit money. We became so fashionable that nobody suspected us." He took another grateful sip of his drink. "That is, nobody but John Keeble. I don't know why I knew that, but I did. He was different from both of us. He looked like the usual young men one meets here, but I knew that it wasn't true. He was hard, and Risa fell in love with him." He finished his drink at a gulp. "Risa had decided that the school was what we wanted, and she was right. We could have used it for all our operations—but then John went over to Penelope."

Raoul de Wollfe got up and held out a hand. "I wanted to explain," he said simply. "Perhaps you understand me, perhaps you know why I loved her."

Julian shook hands with him as he left. "I understand," he said.

They were standing in a little group waiting for the train. It came in majestically. John Keeble went off to supervise the porter who had their baggage, two sensible cases for Mrs. Tilford and the others for Tyler and Julian. There was no need for him to have done it. Mrs. Tilford bustled Tyler into the carriage. There was no need for that either, there was plenty of time.

Julian and Penelope stood alone on the platform in a brief vacuum.

"Mrs. Tilford is going to take care of Tyler in Eng-



land, while I'm away," he said. "She insists that what he needs is a feeling of security."

"Yes, that is what he needs."

There was a pause. The movement on the platform about them became a little more urgent, a little louder.

"It was nice of you to come to see us off," he said. "I didn't think, when you knew the whole sordid story, that you'd want to come."

She said with sudden rage, "Julian, haven't you ever in your life asked for anything for yourself? Do you always want to spend your life protecting somebody else?"

He thought of that and he seemed to feel that he had the whole day to devote to it. "I suppose I do feel that way," he said and paused again. "Tyler seems to be in good hands, and I can think of only one other person who might need the sort of protection I could give her."

She said flatly, "And so you are going back to her?"

"No," he said. "I'm coming back to her after a while. And I'll see if she is still free, Penelope, when all that has happened has been forgiven . . . or perhaps forgotten." He paused again and added slowly, "But you don't ask people to wait, and of course they don't . . ."

"They do wait, Julian."

"How true, Penelope dear. People, yes, trains never." John Keeble was smiling at them as if they were as foolish as he had always expected them to be.

The Blue Train, with its doors closed, was moving with goliath stealth out of Nice. His son and Mrs. Tilford were waving to him as if they had played a joke

on him. Julian made a move as if to chase it and stumbled over his own suitcases.

John Keeble stopped him. "I wouldn't," he said. "Mrs. Tilford felt that you would only be in the way. It seems that she has decided that Tyler must get used to the idea that normally there is a woman in the house. You couldn't have gone on that train anyway because Inspector Vernier still has your passport; Mrs. Tilford asked me to remind you to collect it."

A very young gendarme arrived, flushed from waiting till the train had gone, and handed Julian his passport. He was very apologetic, the inspector had not realized that Mr. Ashford was leaving.

A porter came and picked up Julian's bags and John Keeble explained, "I told him to put them in my car. It's terribly conspicuous, I know, but at least it will take both of you out of my sight." He grinned and made a little wave of dismissal. Then he walked away.





