

BY W. E. JOHNS

NO MOTIVE FOR MURDER



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MOTIVE
FOR
MURDER**

W. E. JOHNS

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CHAPTER I

WITH the slight hesitation of one who is not sure of his ground the man who had just paid off his taxi considered the unpretentious doorway in Baker Street, London, at which the cab had put him down.

He was not a big man; perhaps five feet ten inches tall, built on fine lines without being thin. Face and figure were those of a student rather than those of an athlete or the type broadly called sporting. His complexion was pale; eyes bluey-grey, clear, and steady with the self-confidence of one who knows exactly what he is doing. His expression was calm and thoughtful and conveyed no hint of what he was thinking. His clothes, which he wore as one accustomed to them, were well cut and immaculate without being foppish. He wore a glove on his left hand and carried the other clasped to a furred umbrella with a malacca handle.

Turning his back to the bitter spring draught that was funnelling down the street, he took a letter from his pocket and glanced at the heading as if to confirm the address. Having done so, he entered, climbed a short flight of uncarpeted wooden stairs, and walked down the corridor to which they gave access until he came to a glass-panelled door on which had been painted in white letters the announcement: Chalson & Co., Solicitors. Inquiries. Please Ring.

He pressed the button provided for the purpose.

The door was opened by a girl. "Yes?" she queried.

"I'm Mr. West, for Mr. Chalson, please. I have an appointment." The voice, soft and evenly modulated, was in accord with the rest of the speaker.

"Oh, yes. Come in, sir. Mr. Chalson senior is expecting you. Won't keep you a moment. Please sit down."

"Thank you." The visitor accepted the chair, removed his bowler hat, placed it with the umbrella across his knees and waited.

The girl returned. "This way, please."

The caller followed her to be ushered into an inner book-lined office where an elderly man, semi-bald and spectacled, rose from a massive desk and came forward, hand extended.

"Good morning, Mr. West. I'm the Mr. Chalson who wrote to you," he greeted. "Please be seated and make yourself comfortable. Our business may take a little time. Cigarette?"

"Thank you."

The lawyer resumed his seat. "No doubt you are wondering what this is about."

"Naturally. I shall be interested to know. Good news is always welcome."

The lawyer regarded his visitor over his glasses. "I said in my letter that if you would call on me you might learn something to your advantage, which is not quite the same thing," he corrected gently.

"I'm sorry; I failed to observe the fine distinction."

"No matter. Let us proceed." The lawyer opened a correspondence file. "First, would you be kind enough to tell me your full name?"

"Antony Carrington West."

"And you still occupy the flat in Bryanston Square at which my letter found you?"

"Yes. How did you find me?"

"The address was given to me and I checked it with the telephone book. Have you brought the documents to prove your identity, as I requested?"

"I have my birth certificate, passport and a bank reference."

"Good. They should be enough."

The lawyer took the documents, scanned them, and having compared the photograph in the passport with the man before him, handed them back. "Thank you. You will need these later, by the way." Again looking at his visitor over his glasses, he went on: "Have you any idea what this may be about?"

"No."

"No idea at all?"

"None whatever. I couldn't even make a guess."

"I see. Well, Mr. West, I must first inform you that I am not the principal in this matter. We are the London agents for Boulenger, *Père et Fils*, of Paris. You may have heard of them."

"The name means nothing to me."

"To save time and trouble they have asked me to confirm your address and if possible make personal contact with you with the object of conducting preliminary inquiries. Do you mind if I ask you one or two questions?"

"Not at all. But you're making this sound rather mysterious, if I may say so."

"Possibly, Mr. West. Presently you may realise why. Tell me, do you know anyone in Paris who might have a personal interest in you?"

"Not a soul."

"You know Paris?"

"Very well. I was born and spent my childhood there. My father was in the Diplomatic Service, for some years at the Embassy."

“You have no relations in Paris?”

“None.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Quite sure.”

“What relations have you, Mr. West?”

“Only a brother. He went to Australia seven years ago and I’ve heard nothing of him since.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Can you tell me your brother’s full name and age?”

“Peter Adrian West. He’s five years older than me. I’m twenty-nine. That makes him thirty-four.”

“Would it surprise you if I told you your brother lived in France for quite some time?”

“Not particularly. He must know Paris even better than I do. Being older, he spent more time there. I speak French pretty well, but he could pass for a Parisian. I gather he is in some way responsible for this interview. Is he in trouble again?”

“Again?”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Have you been to Paris lately?”

“I was there last September. I usually go over at least once a year.”

“For what purpose?”

“No particular reason. I like Paris. It holds memories.”

“Quite so. You never met your brother there?”

“No. I wouldn’t have expected to. I’ve told you, I thought he was in Australia.”

The lawyer hesitated. “I’m afraid I’m going to give you a shock.”

“No doubt I shall be able to take it.”

“Your brother Peter is dead. He died in Paris and was buried there about a month ago.”

Tony West stared. “Good God! So that’s it. Did you have to bring me here to tell me?”

“There’s rather more to it than the bare announcement of your brother’s death, Mr. West. You see, he left a rather large sum of money and some property. In his will, which is in the office of Monsieur Boulenger, he made you his sole heir.”

“That *does* surprise me.”

“You mean that he died well off?”

“No. That he should leave his money to me.”

“Why should that surprise you?”

“Does it matter?”

“It could be important. The fact is, Mr. West, there are certain complications concerning the estate and it would be helpful to both of us, and indeed, to Monsieur Boulenger, if you would be frank about your brother and your association with him. I need hardly say that any information you may care to give us will be treated in the strictest confidence.”

“What do you want to know? There’s little I can tell you.”

“How did you feel about your brother?”

Tony West pondered the question. “It’s hard to say. He was my brother, and that usually means something. As a boy I admired him tremendously, but latterly I have felt rather bitter about him.”

“Why?”

“He let the family down, and was, I believe, partly responsible for my father’s death. He never got over the shock. But there was a time when I thought the world of Peter, even though I was always a little afraid of him.”

“Why afraid?”

“His personality was overwhelming. He could talk me into doing things I didn’t want to do. He feared nothing and seemed to take a delight in daring me to do things he knew I’d be afraid to do. I admired him for his courage, his self-confidence and his charm. I suppose it was the admiration of the weak for the strong; the nervous for the bold. He could get anything he wanted. He won all the games. I was always on the losing side. He could jump to the answer of any problem. I had to plod my way to it. It was, I suppose, because I was timid by nature that I always had a feeling he hadn’t much time for me. We got on well enough, but I was always conscious of a—what shall I say?—a little condescension on his part . . . a sort of friendly tolerance. Which makes it all the more remarkable that he should leave his money to me.”

The lawyer studied the face of his visitor with the shrewd eyes of experience. “You may be doing yourself less than justice, Mr. West,” he opined. “Underestimation of one’s own character and efficiency is a common result of prolonged contact with a dominating personality. Moreover, I can tell you that those who jump to conclusions slip on landing more often than those who proceed with caution.”

Tony’s face relaxed in a little smile. “Thank you, Mr. Chalson.”

The lawyer went on: “Why did your brother go to Australia? From what you have told me he was hardly the type to emigrate. Was there some reason for that step?”

“Does that come into it?”

“It might.”

“Why should it?”

“I see that I shall have to tell you that Peter had a police record. Perhaps I should say dossier. Nothing serious. But he had for a time been under surveillance. Does that surprise you?”

“Yes.”

“Was it that sort of trouble that sent him to Australia?”

Tony considered the question. “Yes and no. As it’s past history you might as well know the facts. He had been to prison.”

“For what?”

“Driving a car under the influence, and manslaughter. He knocked a man down and killed him. He did twelve months. We never saw him again. When he was released, without saying a word to us, he went to Australia. We learned that from a friend who saw him go; after that his name was rarely mentioned at home. My mother was dead, but my father was terribly upset. When he died he left what money he had to me. It wasn’t a lot, but it was sufficient to enable me to carry on at the flat and live in reasonable comfort without working. Peter’s wife divorced him. He didn’t defend the case.”

“So he was married?”

“He had been married about two years when this happened.”

“Was he normally a heavy drinker?”

“No. But he was drinking too much at the time and we were worried about it. He used not to drink to that extent. He seemed suddenly to go off the rails. God knows why. There seemed no reason for it. He had everything: good looks, popularity, ability, a nice home. Now he’s gone. What a pity. Somehow I can’t imagine him lying on a bed of sickness. He was always so fit. What was the cause of his death?”

“You’ll find out if you go to Paris, so I might as well tell you now,” answered the lawyer slowly. “He never did lie on a bed of sickness.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was murdered.”

“*Murdered!* Good God! How?”

“He died from bullet wounds.”

Incredulity followed horror in the eyes of the man on the other side of the desk. “Who did it, and why?”

“That’s something the French police would like to know. It seems that they haven’t been able to find an acceptable motive for the murder.”

“But they must have some idea.”

“They may have ideas, but ideas are not evidence. They are still investigating. Monsieur Boulenger, who was your brother’s legal adviser in Paris, may be able to give you further details. In order to claim the inheritance it will be necessary for you to go to Paris to see him. In any case,

someone will have to clear up your brother's personal effects, papers, and the like. No doubt you would wish to do that."

"Of course. What exactly did Peter leave?"

"A furnished apartment in Paris, a cottage in the country, a car, and some thirty million francs—say, thirty thousand pounds—in the bank."

"You astonish me. He was clever at figures, but that's a lot of money, and I can't help wondering how he managed it."

"You may not be the only one to wonder, Mr. West, although I believe it's true that he gambled with some success on the Bourse. Incidentally, currency restrictions may make it difficult for you to get this money out of France, although no doubt Monsieur Boulenger will be able to advise you on that. That is, should you decide to go to Paris and proceed with your claim to the estate."

Tony looked slightly surprised. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

The lawyer looked vague. "I find that a difficult question to answer. You appear to be comfortably off."

"What has my financial position here to do with it?"

"Monsieur Boulenger has hinted to me that should you decide to go to Paris you should be prepared for a little trouble."

Tony frowned. "What do you mean? What sort of trouble?"

"The police may wish to interrogate you. I'm not saying they will. But they may."

"There's nothing I can tell them. Surely it's up to them to find out who killed my brother."

"That's what I mean. You may be sure they will leave no possibility unexplored."

"But what has that to do with me?"

The lawyer leaned back in his chair, fingers together. "Just now you spoke of motive. What are the usual motives in a case of murder?"

"Hate—jealousy—revenge—money."

"Quite so. As you have profited by your brother's death to the tune of about forty thousand pounds, it may be thought by those whose business it is to deal with crime dispassionately that you were not without a motive. I'm not saying——"

"But that's preposterous," broke in Tony. "I have had no contact of any sort with my brother for eight years."

"Could you prove that?"

Tony thought for a moment. "No, I suppose I couldn't," he admitted.

"I didn't raise this point seriously, of course," explained the lawyer on a note of apology. "You asked me why the police should have an interest in you, and I have given you a reason that has occurred to me. As they are

looking for a motive for the murder you must not be surprised if they ask you questions. They may not. On the other side of the fence is the man who killed your brother. He will have a definite interest in the case—or so we must presume. Please understand me. My remarks are opinions based on what Monsieur Boulenger has told me.”

“Are you by any chance suggesting that Monsieur Boulenger thinks I’d be well advised to stay at home?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as that,” returned the lawyer quickly. “But you must bear in mind that he knows more about this business than I do.”

“I’ll go and find out just how much he does know,” asserted Tony shortly. “At least be frank enough to tell me this. Was Peter a criminal?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Because if he was, and Boulenger knows it, it puts a different complexion on the matter.”

“I think you had better put that question to my French associate; he is in a better position to answer it,” returned the lawyer, a trifle stiffly. “But I can tell you this. Your brother was under suspicion—I repeat, suspicion—of being concerned with transactions of a questionable nature.”

“Can’t you be more explicit?”

“Well, he was known to associate with people of—er—doubtful character. Let us put it like that.”

“What do you mean by doubtful character?”

“Two of the men had been to prison. Another escaped a long prison sentence by shooting himself.”

“I see.”

“Monsieur Boulenger may be able to give you further particulars should you press for them: but he will probably advise you to ignore this aspect of the case. What you decide to do may be resolved by the contents of this letter which, as you will see, is addressed to you.” Chalson took an envelope from the file and passed it over.

“Have you any idea of what’s in this letter?” asked Tony as he took it.

“No idea at all. As you see, it’s marked private. My instructions were to hand it to you when I was satisfied with your bona fides.”

“Why didn’t you give it to me earlier?”

“In the first place I had to satisfy myself that you were the Antony West to whom it is addressed, and, secondly, I thought it better that we should discuss the case first.”

“Why?”

“The discussion could not then be influenced by anything the letter might contain,” said Chalson suavely.

“Well, that’s frank, anyway,” conceded Tony. “Do you mind if I read it now?”

“I’d be glad if you would. Now that we have covered most of the ground it might bring to light some of the answers to your questions, or aspects on which you would care to have my advice. I may say that the letter caused Monsieur Boulenger some embarrassment.”

“Why?”

“The police are dealing with a case of homicide. Had they known of the existence of that letter they might have demanded it.”

“From which I gather Boulenger said nothing about it.”

“Exactly. As they did not know of it they couldn’t very well ask for it.”

“That seems to be sailing a bit near the wind . . . however. Excuse me.”

Tony slit the envelope, took out the letter it contained, and having observed that it was undated, and that the only address it carried was the single word “Paris”, began to read:

My dear Tony,

Should this letter reach you, you will know that you need fear no more the reappearance of the black sheep in the family fold. That it will reach you is highly probable because I have for some time been on ice so thin that I can hear it crack. The hell of it is I’m too far out to get off. My position poses a problem. Having been at some pains to acquire what I consider a fair share of the world’s wealth, I know of no one except you to whom, should the ice break, I might leave it with a fair assurance that it would be used to the best advantage. You always were the steady sort.

There is one other person I would like to help if I knew how to do it. Anything I offered now would be refused. Maybe you will be able to work out a plan to help her. Yes, it’s a girl. Her name is Colette Dufoy. She lives on the top floor of No. 7, Rue Vatel, which is a little street off the Bou. Saint Germain, near the river end. Oddly enough (you may think) she’s a good girl, one of the few I’ve met who can say no and mean it. Perhaps that’s the appeal. I doubt if she would have married me had I asked her; but I didn’t ask her for reasons which I needn’t go into now. It wouldn’t have been fair to either of us. When you’ve read on a bit you’ll understand what I mean. I haven’t had much time for women.

I might as well tell you what went wrong at home. It was Anna. The other man was that dago band-leader Parcello, at the place where she used to work. The affair started before we were married and was resumed afterwards. There’s no need for me to say any more except that when I knocked that man down I was drunk more with shock than liquor, although it’s true I’d had a few in the hope of pulling myself together. I

know there are people who can take this sort of thing in their stride, but I couldn't take it at all.

I thought often of slipping over to see you after the Old Man died, but decided it would be better to let the past remain buried in the Australian grave where you may have supposed it to be. There could be a little trouble in collecting my estate. If you're sitting pretty you might be wise to forget it. On the other hand, to see something of the big bad world might bring out the best in you. I leave it to you to decide. By the way, you needn't be afraid to touch this money. I struck lucky in Australia and in Paris played the Bourse with fair success. I've been lucky in everything except the thing that mattered most. I realise now, rather late in the day, that it wasn't really the money that I wanted. It was the hell of getting it that satisfied something in me. Maybe I was trying to get a bug out of my system. I know now that you can't do that. When you've lost what I lost it's gone for good.

That's all. Mind how you go. Without regrets,

Pete.

Tony stared at the letter for some time after he had finished reading it. And as he stared the clouds of doubt and misunderstanding that obscured so much of the past seemed to roll away, leaving the sky clear. He stared for so long that the lawyer had to prompt him with a cough and a gentle "Well?"

Tony drew a deep breath and looked up. "You were right in thinking this might make a difference," he said grimly. "It certainly lets the daylight in. You might like to read it. There's no reason now why you shouldn't."

He passed the sheet of paper, and while it was being perused lit another cigarette with hands that were not quite steady.

"Well—well," said Chalson when he came to the end. "*Cherchez la femme*. Who was Anna?"

"His wife."

"He gave no hint of this at the time?"

"Not a whisper. Knowing him, I can see that his pride wouldn't let him. My father was against the marriage, but he didn't oppose it. I don't think he would have said I told you so in actual words, but being one of the old school he might have looked it."

"Who was this lady, Anna?"

"A girl he met in a Mayfair night club. She did a singing act in the cabaret. She was fascinating I must admit. Claimed to be Russian by birth and it could have been true. She was a Slavish type."

"What became of her after the divorce?"

"God knows. She never came near us. Just faded out."

“What about this man Parcello? Did you know him?”

“I knew him by sight.”

“He didn’t marry the lady?”

“He couldn’t.” Tony stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray. “You see, he happened to be the man Peter knocked down and killed.”

“Oh.” The lawyer looked grave. “Was the accident theory not questioned at the inquest?”

“The only person who could have suspected it was not an accident was Anna, and she had a good reason for keeping her mouth shut. She couldn’t tell the truth without admitting that her adultery was the cause of Peter’s breakdown.”

“Quite so. She’d done enough mischief without trying to send her husband to the gallows. Tell me, Mr. West, have you formed any impression as to why your brother wrote this letter?”

Tony reached for another cigarette. “I can think of several reasons. Obviously he hopes I’ll do something about the girl he mentions, Colette Dufoy, for whom he seems to have fallen. Again, what he says about Anna could be in the nature of an apology for his behaviour, to which he may have thought I was entitled. He must have known the whole thing would be a mystery to us. He wanted me to know the truth. Yet again, he could be up to his old trick, for the last time, of daring me to get out of my shell and do something dangerous.”

“I could think of another reason,” offered the lawyer softly.

“What is it?”

“As a man knowing his days might be numbered, he had to get something off his chest; something that was worrying him; and you may have been the one person in the world whom he knew he could trust implicitly.”

Tony smiled wryly. “I suppose it could have been that. Whatever else he may have thought of me, he knew I’d never let him down.”

The lawyer closed the file. “Well, Mr. West, that seems to be all there is to say, except have you decided what you are going to do?”

“This letter has dispelled any doubts I may have had. I shall go to Paris.”

“Very well. I’ll get in touch with Monsieur Boulenger and tell him to expect you. When will you travel?”

“As soon as my bank can get me an allowance of francs.”

“I’m sure Monsieur Boulenger would let you have any money you might need.”

“I’ll take my own with me, thanks. I’ll aim to get away next Tuesday.”

Chalson picked up a pencil. “And what will be your address in Paris?”

“Where I always stay, the Hotel St. James, in the Rue Saint Honoré. You might get Boulenger to phone an appointment for me through the *concierge*. Where is Boulenger’s office, by the way?”

“In the Rue Mallorais. I’ll write it down for you. You know the Place Saint Michel?”

“Of course.”

“Turn along the Quai Saint Michel a little way and you’ll see an opening on the right. The ground floor is a *bistro*. That should help you to find it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Chalson.” Tony stood up. “May I have the address of my brother’s apartment?”

The lawyer went through the file. “I don’t appear to have it. Monsieur Boulenger, assuming you would see him if you went to Paris, may have thought it unnecessary to forward it. He will give it to you, with the key, no doubt, when you call on him.”

“Thank you,” acknowledged Tony. “Well, that seems to be all. I’ll look in to see you when I return from Paris to let you know what transpired. Meanwhile I’ll say good morning.”

“Good morning, Mr. West,” said Mr. Chalson.

CHAPTER II

BY the time Antony West had arrived in France he had had ample opportunity to ponder the business that had sliced through the orderly routine of his life with the efficiency of a guillotine blade.

He had recovered from the initial shock. His dormant sensibilities had been jerked from their lethargy; but he had arrived at no conclusions beyond the fact, now revealed, that in spite of what had happened in the past, and the years of silence since the events he had narrated in the lawyer's office, his regard for his brother which he had thought was dead had been very much alive. He saw that his arbitrary condemnation of Peter had been hasty and unjust. The disaffection he professed had been self-imposed and superficial. In the light of what he now knew all such emotions had been swept away by a wave of sympathetic understanding. The fallen idol of his childhood was once more on its plinth. The bitterness had become a smouldering resentment against the woman whose infidelity had touched off the tragedy that had ended in Peter's death.

It was this anger more than any other factor that had spurred him to action. It cut deeper against Anna than against the unknown man who had shot Peter. That was something in the abstract, a matter for the police. With Anna his animosity was personal.

What he was doing now, he told himself, as through his carriage window he watched the treeless fields of Northern France repeat themselves with tedious monotony, was for Peter, not for himself. He didn't need the money, but he was determined that no one else should have it—unless it was Colette Dufoy. She was a complication that promised to be a nuisance, but could not be ignored on that account. He tried without success to visualise the woman who could make the dent she so obviously had in the armour of a man accoutred by experience against the weapons of her sex. Anna had been the dark, glamorous, flashing-eyed type, super-sophisticated by the life she had led. A product of the hothouse that looked well in the artificial sunlight of its environment. She knew all the answers. What sort of woman, Tony wondered vaguely, could follow her into the frozen sterility of Peter's heart?

He was a little puzzled by his reactions to the affair now that shock was wearing off. Over the years Peter had receded so far into the indistinct background of another world that he rarely thought of him. At first, for a time, he had held firmly to a hope that he would one day come home; but even that had perished and he had become resigned to the improbability of

ever seeing him again. He had drifted into a memory, fading with every passing year, as memories do, farther into a painless zone of unreality. Now, as it seemed, it had taken death to bring him to life, to stand once more a cynical figure daring him to do—what?

Tony didn't know. He had re-read the letter until he could recite it; but still he didn't know. It posed more questions than it answered. The only vital piece of information was that concerning Anna, the cause of all the trouble. She could make no difference now. The fate of her lover left him unmoved. Such things had always happened and would continue to happen while human nature was what it was, regardless of laws, logic or religion. The rest of the letter was vague and merely left him groping for what was not there.

What had been Peter's real purpose in writing it? he asked himself over and over again. To let him know that he was dead? He would have learned that, anyway, sooner or later, from the lawyers. He had known his life was in danger. So much was clear. But having decided to write why had he left so much in the air? Had his real motive been concern for the girl Colette? If so, why hadn't he said more about her, given him a clue as to what he might expect? Had he before it was too late been moved to explain his conduct? Was the money an attempt to make amends, a token of acknowledgement that he had behaved disgracefully? Or was the purpose of the letter no more than another "dare", prompted by a contumely sense of humour?

To these questions Tony could find no answer, and it seemed unlikely, he thought morosely, that he ever would, unless Monsieur Boulenger could turn a spotlight on to the gloom. Where did the French lawyer fit into the picture? Tony had, or thought he had, detected a certain evasiveness in Chalson's references to the man. In the circumstances he would naturally refrain from saying more than was necessary. However, Peter must have had confidence in Boulenger or he would not have employed him.

Tony knew exactly what he was going to do. His plan, such as it was, was simple. He would see Boulenger, lodge his claim to the estate and from him gather what he knew about Peter. He would go to Peter's apartment and do the necessary tidying up. All that would then remain to be done would be a visit to Colette to ascertain how much she knew and perhaps make some provision for her should she be in need of it.

He arrived at the Gare du Nord on the six o'clock train and after the usual scramble on the pavement outside the station for a taxi managed to get one to take him to the hotel in the Rue St. Honoré, having booked a room there by telegram.

"Any messages for me?" he asked the *concierge* as a *chasseur* took his bag.

The *concierge* handed him a green telephone slip with his key.

It was, as he expected, and as he ascertained at a glance, from Monsieur Boulenger. It made an appointment for eleven o'clock the following morning.

He went up to his room, had a wash, unpacked his bag, and presently, still deep in thought, had dinner in the hotel restaurant.

It was still early when he had finished, so not being in the mood for entertainment and unwilling to waste time, having abandoned his bowler for a less conspicuous soft hat, he took a taxi to the Place St. Michel to locate the office of Monsieur Boulenger in case difficulty in finding it should make him late in the morning.

In the event he found it without trouble, the *bistro* on the ground floor providing an easy guide. It was well patronised. Its name, he noticed, was *Chez Gaspard*. A girl sitting outside behind a row of baskets was busy opening oysters. He didn't go in. Buttoning his jacket, for the early spring wind was chilly, he retraced his steps to the Place Michel and walked slowly up the Boulevard St. Germain, looking for the Rue Vatel, in which at Number Seven, according to Peter's letter, was the apartment occupied by Mademoiselle Dufoy.

This, too, he found after a little trouble. It was a narrow and to all appearances miserable little street, badly lighted, plaster peeling, shutters awry as if exhausted from crying out for paint. But, as he knew, it was no worse than thousands of others off the great boulevards. In fact, the tall, dilapidated-looking houses, shouldering each other for support, were the vital organs of Paris. From them came the sounds and smells that were so much a part of Paris. With their passing, if ever the day should come, would depart from Europe something the world would never see again. In their place would rise the hideous four-square concrete blocks of dwellings which were already infiltrating into the suburbs.

He walked with care along the usual uneven pavement that might have been designed to trip the unwary, to Number Seven. A tiny florist's shop, still open, occupied the ground floor.

Seeing him stop, the woman in charge, perhaps scenting a customer, brought a genial smile to the door. "*Bonsoir*, monsieur. Do you want something?"

"Could you tell me if Mademoiselle Dufoy still lives here?" asked Tony.

"Certainly. You want to see her? Shall I tell her you are here?"

"No, thank you, madame. This is not the hour. I'll call another time." Tony walked away.

The woman shrugged, a gesture that was as much a part of Paris as the house in which she lived, and after watching Tony up the street, retired.

Deciding that his reconnaissance had served its purpose, Tony strolled as far as the *Deux Magots*, spent ten minutes over a brandy watching the tide of mixed humanity that ebbs and flows, unchanging through the years, along that busy boulevard, paid his bill, stopped a taxi, and returned to his hotel to bed.

The morning was as fair as could be expected for the time of the year, with a breeze that still clung to the hem of winter, as Tony discovered when, after dressing leisurely and taking time over his coffee, he went out. He walked a little way to kill more time and then, conscious of a mounting sense of expectation, took a taxi to the office of the man who, he hoped, would be able to answer some of the questions that still exercised his mind. He was far more concerned with Peter's life in Paris than with the money he had left him.

A tired-looking waiter was sweeping out the *bistro* mechanically and without enthusiasm. Ignoring him, he went up to the first floor and knocked on the door that bore the name of the man he had travelled from England to see.

"Monsieur West?" queried the girl who opened it.

"*Oui*, mademoiselle."

"Enter, monsieur. Monsieur Boulenger expects you. *Voila*." The girl opened an inner door.

Tony walked in and accepted the hand of the man who came to meet him with a cordial, "*Bonjour*, monsieur. I am happy to meet you. Monsieur Chalson tells me you know Paris and speak our language. That is good because my English is not good. Please sit down. Monsieur Chalson has spoken to me on the telephone and I have had a letter from him confirming your identity and telling me of your conversation in London. So you are the brother of my client, Monsieur Peter?"

"I have brought my passport."

"Good. I have everything ready for your signature. It is now all merely a matter of formality."

"Will there be any difficulty in transferring the money to my bank in England?"

"It may cost a little to cut through the red tape, but you won't mind that."

"I see," said Tony, knowing how such matters could sometimes be arranged in France.

He made a swift appraisal of the man now arranging some papers on his desk. His age he put in the middle forties. In the street he might have been anything, but he would have been a Frenchman anywhere, one who ate well and drank well. His hair started rather far back on his head. His eyes were

dark and alert; his expression shrewd and calculating. A gold signet ring was conspicuous on his right hand as he picked up a pen.

“Now, would you please sign here?” said the lawyer smoothly.

“Before we talk of signing anything, Monsieur Boulenger, there are some questions I would like to ask you,” said Tony evenly.

“But of course.”

“About my brother.”

“Naturally. What shall I tell you?”

“I want to know about his life in Paris.”

“I know very little about his private life, if that is what you mean. In Paris people keep such matters to themselves if they can. A client does not tell his lawyer everything.”

“You knew he had been under police surveillance?”

“I learned that only after his death, when the police told me.”

“Why were they interested in him?”

“Because, I understand, of the company he kept. He was seen with men who were well known to the police. Two of them were in fact criminals who had been to prison.”

“You don’t know why he associated with such men?”

“No. But does this matter now?”

“I would like to know who killed my brother, and why.”

“The police would like to know that.”

“I was wondering if he could have been the victim of gang warfare.”

“It is possible. The police, for the want of any other motive, have considered that theory.”

“Did my brother carry a gun?”

“Not to my knowledge. He wasn’t carrying one when he was killed. I know that.” A frown had appeared between the lawyer’s eyes. “Have you come to Paris to investigate the death of your brother, m’sieur, or claim the estate?”

“Is it surprising that I should want to know what happened?”

“If the police cannot solve that mystery, what could you, an Englishman, hope to do?”

“Is there any reason why I shouldn’t try?”

“None, except that it might be dangerous.”

“I see. I gathered from Mr. Chalson that you had some concern for my safety.”

“That is correct.”

“Tell me why.”

The lawyer spoke earnestly. “Monsieur West, your brother was murdered. Why, we don’t know. Nobody, except you, appears to have gained

anything from his death. Let us for the moment ignore the motive. If the man responsible thought you were here to interfere, might he not make an end of you in the same way? He has nothing more to lose by committing another murder. He has only one head. You cannot bring your brother back from the grave. You might easily join him where he lies. Therefore I strongly advise you against asking questions about his private life. Take your money and go home.”

“You must have known him very well.”

The lawyer shrugged. “No better than was necessary for the conduct of our business transactions.”

“Would he bring his business to a stranger?”

“I was not exactly a stranger. We had met in the little restaurant below where I sometimes eat when I am busy. I often saw your brother there before I knew him. One day we sat side by side—the seats are a little one on the other, as we say—and we got into conversation. After that we often sat together. I knew he was English, but nothing more. He knew I was a lawyer with an office upstairs. One day he said he was thinking of buying a little property in the country and asked me to do the business for him.”

“Did he say why he wanted a place in the country?”

“He said he would like to get out of Paris at week-ends.”

“How long ago was this?”

“About three years. We still met sometimes in the *bistro*. Then one day he came to my office and said he had some more business. It was to make a will. That was about six months ago. He said it was urgent.”

“Did he tell you why it was urgent?”

“Why does a man make a will quickly, monsieur, unless he thinks he may die?”

“Dying is one thing. Being murdered is another. Did he look as if he might die?”

“His face was a little thin and pale. He seemed worried.”

“But he said nothing about the possibility that he might be murdered?”

“He hinted that he was in some sort of trouble.”

“But no details?”

“No details, monsieur. He did not take me into his confidence, so I did not ask for it.”

“I understand he was shot?”

“That is correct.”

“Where did it happen?”

“I don’t know. The police don’t know. It seems likely that the only person who does know is the assassin. But he must have been in his car at the time. You can see the bullet holes in the door. It happened on a Monday

night very late, and knowing that he usually went to the country for the week-end it is my opinion that he was shot at on the way home. That is supported by the fact that the key of the country house was in his pocket with the keys of the car and the apartment here in Paris. The car still stands where he left it—in the small forecourt outside the steps leading to his apartment.”

“I don’t quite follow you,” Tony said, looking puzzled.

“I will explain. Peter was not killed outright at the spot where the assassin fired at him. He was wounded by two bullets. He managed to reach home and get to his apartment. There, it appears he tried to telephone, either for the police or a doctor. But he knocked over the instrument and died before he could use it. It was lying on the ground beside him. Those are the facts, monsieur.”

“Who found the body, and when?”

“His *femme de ménage*, Madame Charlot, when she took his coffee in the morning at about eight o’clock. She lives below the apartment.”

“Then he must have been lying there all night?”

“Without a doubt.”

“And there is no clue of any sort?”

“If the police have a clue they have kept the information to themselves. As I have said, the difficulty appears to be to find a substantial motive for the crime.”

“There was nothing in the car to throw any light on the matter?”

“I understand there was nothing in the car. Nothing at all.”

“Did my brother ever mention any of his friends to you?”

“Never.”

“No girl friend?”

“He never mentioned any girl to me, but since the crime it has been ascertained that for some time he did support a mistress. But that had been broken off. The police have a theory that she could help them if she could be found, but she disappeared on the night of the murder and hasn’t been seen since. I understand from Mr. Chalson that your brother was married some years ago.”

“Yes. He may also have told you that he was responsible for the death of his wife’s lover. Are you thinking that she might have killed him for revenge?”

“That possibility did cross my mind.”

Tony shook his head. “It’s unlikely that she could have known where he was. Besides, why wait for eight years? Hate seldom lives as long as that.”

“True,” conceded the lawyer.

“How did you learn Peter had been murdered?”

“The police informed me. Their inquiries brought them here.”

“Where was Peter buried?”

“In the Cemetiere du Montparnasse.”

“Who arranged the funeral and paid for it?”

“I did. There was no one else. You will receive the account later.”

“Were you ever at Peter’s apartment?”

“Not until after his death, when I went with the police as his legal representative.”

Tony thought for a few seconds. “How long will it take to get this business completed?”

“It should not take more than two or three weeks.”

“Weeks!”

“These things cannot be hurried, monsieur.”

“My francs won’t last for weeks.”

Boulenger brushed aside the difficulty. “If it is money you need, nothing could be more simple. Why am I here? Besides, you have plenty of money in France.”

“It isn’t mine yet.”

“A mere formality. May I ask what you intend doing with the properties?”

“I shall probably sell everything. Perhaps you will attend to that for me when the formalities are complete.”

“With pleasure, monsieur.”

“In the meantime, am I allowed in Peter’s apartment?”

“Of course. The place is yours except for a few signatures. You may live there if you wish.”

Tony considered the suggestion. “That thought hadn’t occurred to me. If, as you say, I shall be here for some time, it would be less expensive than the hotel. Moreover, I would be on the spot to do what is necessary in the way of clearing up instead of having to go to and fro.”

“Madame Charlot, who acted as your brother’s *femme de ménage*, would no doubt be happy to do the same for you. She lives below and has a key. You will find her garrulous, but not more so than most of them, and at the moment, as one would expect, it inclines towards the macabre. But don’t let that worry you. Here is your brother’s key. It was sent to me by the police with the other things that were found in his pockets—his wallet, cigarette-case, lighter, etc. They are correct with the inventory. The things include the keys of the car in case you want to use it.”

“I don’t think I shall want to do that,” Tony said. “I’ll go along this afternoon and have a look at the place. Where is it?”

“Eleven, Rue Varonesse, second floor. It is a piece of old Paris. You’ll find it on the north bank, not far from Notre Dame. Don’t judge the apartment by the street. It is a pleasant one, offering a view over the river.”

“Have the police quite finished there?”

“I think so.”

“Should I report to them?”

“For what purpose?”

“They might be able to give me some information.”

“Even if they know more than I have told you, it is unlikely they would tell you. I’d keep away. If they want you they’ll send for you, or call on you.”

Tony remembered something. “By the way, this cottage in the country. Where did you say it was?”

“In La Sologne.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s a large area, very wild, south of Orleans.”

“Good God! As far away as that?”

“The property is about a hundred and fifty kilometres from Paris, as near as I can judge.”

“Did he have to go as far as that to get into the country for week-ends?”

The lawyer shrugged. “Perhaps he liked the district. Perhaps he went for the sport. There is very good shooting. Sometimes he brought back some game. Once he presented me with a pheasant he had shot.”

“Of what does the property consist?”

“What was once a gamekeeper’s cottage standing in a small estate of fifty hectares, none of it cultivated. It still goes by the name of Montmarron although the original mansion house of that name was burnt down some time ago. The cottage has two rooms and a kitchen on the ground floor, and two bedrooms. The place is so far away from anywhere that it was not possible to get a woman to look after it, for which reason your brother managed for himself, taking some food with him.”

“Have you ever seen this place?”

“Only once, when your brother took me down to look at it before he bought it.”

“Do you happen to have a key?”

“I have the one that was in your brother’s pocket, the one which, as I told you, suggested he had been there the week-end he was killed. Are you thinking of going down?”

“I don’t think it’s likely, but I might.”

The lawyer opened a drawer and put a key on the desk. “In case you decide to go,” he said. “Actually, monsieur, my advice to you would be to

keep away.”

Tony’s eyebrows went up. “Why?”

“Because I have a feeling that this place is somehow linked with your brother’s death.”

“Surely that’s all the more reason why I should go there?”

“Please yourself, monsieur.”

Tony got up and put the key in his pocket. “Thank you, Monsieur Boulenger. Now I’ll sign your papers so that you can proceed. I shall return to my hotel tonight. Should I decide to move into the apartment I’ll let you know.”

“*Entendu.*”

Ten minutes later the lawyer saw Tony to the head of the stairs. “*Au revoir*, Monsieur West. I’ll advise you of any news.”

“Thank you, Monsieur Boulenger. *Au revoir.*”

Outside the *bistro* Tony hesitated. He looked at his watch. The time was twelve-fifteen. More because the restaurant was handy than for any other reason he went in and found a seat with his back to the wall.

The place was the usual noisy mixture of bar and plain eating establishment. The waiter he had seen earlier sweeping out the place handed him the card. He ordered one of the several *plats*, *entrecôte* with fried potatoes and a glass of Beaujolais.

While he was waiting for it he was caught in a tide of brooding sentiment. So this was one of Peter’s haunts. He could visualise him sitting there. He might even be sitting in his usual seat. The man behind the bar and the woman in the *caisse* must have known him well by sight. Some of the regular customers, too, no doubt, for he knew how these places became a habit—the same faces, same places, same dishes, day after day provided the food was good, as it had to be if the *bistro* was to survive. Should the quality of the food or the cooking deteriorate, in a week the place would be empty. The clientele now crowding in was sufficient advertisement of value for money.

The waiter brought his *entrecôte*. It was excellent, but with so much on his mind he ate it without enthusiasm, pondering his interview with the man upstairs.

He could find nothing in his behaviour to suggest that he was not all that he purported to be, but he could not shake off a feeling that the lawyer knew more about Peter’s business than he was willing to reveal. He had felt the same way about Chalson. The two men were professional colleagues. What one knew, the other was likely to know. What, if anything, were they holding back? Was it for his benefit or otherwise? Or was he making a

mystery where none existed? Perhaps Madame Charlot would provide the answer. Or the woman, Colette Dufoy.

CHAPTER III

TONY paid his bill, went out and raised a hand to the first cruising taxi. “Eleven, Rue Varonesse,” he told the driver.

The man took out a little book and began thumbing through the pages.

“Don’t you know where it is?” challenged Tony.

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“All right. I’ll walk,” said Tony impatiently, feeling that as the address was no great distance away this would probably be the quickest way in the end of getting to it. He had too often suffered the expensive meanderings of drivers who knew only the principal buildings in the city.

He crossed the river by the Pont Notre Dame and began his search for the Rue Varonesse. This turned out to be a longer job than he expected, and before he had found it, which he did eventually by having the location explained to him at a nearby *bar-tabac*, he was offering the taxi-driver a mental apology for his summary condemnation.

When finally he arrived at the top of the street he stopped, convinced that Boulenger had made a mistake; for not by any stretch of the imagination could he see Peter living in such an insalubrious quarter. But the name of the street, almost obliterated by time and weather, high on the wall over the inevitable *defense d’afficher*, confirmed it, so he went on, looking about him with doubts and disapproval.

The street turned out to be no more than a cobbled impasse sixty or seventy yards long, with gaunt decaying houses on either side that might have been anything. There were one or two shops on the ground floors: a café, exuding a sickening reek of stale cooking fat and garlic, with a warped tariff card, yellow with age and fly-spotted, hanging in the window; an *epicerie*, where a thousand mixed aromas dominated by salted fish occupied the door; a *plomberie* establishment, and a second-hand shop wherein the usual fantastic and apparently utterly useless articles were offered for sale, completed a dismal parade. A blowsy-looking female of uncertain age making signals from a doorway on the other side of the street gave a clear indication of the sort of establishment she ran.

Even now Tony had some difficulty in finding Number Eleven. Ultimately he found it at the extreme end, where the street did a twist before expiring, beyond a wide, stone-arched entrance, in a courtyard enclosed by towering walls of crumbling plaster supporting at regular intervals the usual sagging shutters. From the sill of one window, high up, a potted geranium

seemed to glare red-eyed defiance at its colourless surroundings. Heavy solid wooden gates, now open, guarded the approach to this melancholy terminus, as if it might have been a prison. Just inside, on the left, an almost illegible notice indicated the quarters of the *cordonnier*, the door-keeper responsible for the gates. A few yards farther on, looking as out of place as an orchid in a pigsty, stood a motor-car, a sleek, blue, and apparently nearly new Buick.

Tony considered the picture with disfavour and something like dismay. Could this really be the place? All he could think was, if so, what in the name of God could have induced Peter, or for that matter any man with money at his disposal, to tuck himself away in such an insanitary dive.

He walked on slowly to the car and was staring with morbid fascination at two small holes in the door when the *cordonnier* appeared at the door of his dwelling. An old man, bleary-eyed, smoking a drooping pipe the bowl of which rested on an unshaven chin, he did nothing to brighten the scene. Blue-bloused and carpet-slippered, with a greasy beret dragged over tousled hair, he regarded the visitor with a face in which hope had never been born or from which it had long ago departed.

“Is this the car of Monsieur West?” inquired Tony, not because he needed the information, but because he felt he had to say something to explain his presence.

The *cordonnier* removed his pipe with unhurried deliberation. “*Oui, monsieur.*”

“Do you live here all the time?”

“*Oui.*”

“Then you can show me the door of Number Eleven.”

“*A la bas.*” The man pointed with the stem of his pipe to an opening in the wall at the far end of the yard.

“Who do you want?”

“I am going to the apartment of Monsieur West,” Tony told him.

“There’s no one there.”

“I know that.”

“Then who are you looking for?”

“I am the brother of Monsieur West. I am going to his apartment. I have a key.”

For a brief moment interest flickered on the face of the *cordonnier*. “Monsieur West is not there,” he volunteered without emotion.

Tony turned towards him. “I am aware that Monsieur West is dead,” he said succinctly. “You must have known him well.”

“*Oui.*”

Tony did not pursue a conversation from which it seemed he could hope for little profit. "Where can I find Madame Charlot?"

"She has gone to the market."

"When she returns please tell her I am here. I want to speak to her."

"*Oui.*"

"*Merci.*" Tony walked on to the sombre entrance at the end of the yard and mounted the broad spiral stairway that confronted him. The stone steps were the size of coffins and presumably as a result of subsidence in the foundations now tilted towards the centre. On the first floor he came to a door. It was shut. It bore no name. There was no mat, no bell, no knocker. It might have been the entrance to a tomb. The silence was the silence of one. He continued on up to the second flight. It brought him to another door, as devoid of decoration as the one below except that it had been fitted with a modern brass lock. This at least gave it an air of reality, thought Tony, as he inserted his key and pushed the door open.

For a few seconds he stood there, halted by a feeling that he was violating something private, of almost committing sacrilege. Then he took a slow pace forward and closed the door behind him.

Instantly, from the furnishings in the little hall in which he found himself it was evident that he was in the quarters of a man of money and of taste. The very smell of the place threw it out of character with its drab, poverty-stricken exterior. A curtain on the right covered a door. He opened it to see a small, compact kitchen. He closed the door and went on, presently to find himself in what was clearly the chief room of the apartment.

After the sordid approach it was with a sense of relief and satisfaction that he gazed upon the appointments of a man of education and culture. It was a low, deep room with double windows at the far end, tall windows with old wrought-iron balconies overlooking the Seine. To the right there was a red lacquer cabinet, and in the corner a comfortable arm-chair in faded coral leather. Opposite was another in celadon green velvet. The whole of the left wall was occupied by a low bookcase fitment. On the wide shelf above were displayed some exquisite pieces of Chinese porcelain from which the furnishings obviously took their colourings. Between the windows was a large desk, and behind the door an oblong galleried table of the Chinese Chippendale type laden with drinks and glasses. Over all hung an atmosphere of peace and utter quiet that told Tony why Peter had chosen to live in this forgotten backwater of old Paris.

Some portrait photographs stood about, most of the subjects, from their costumes, being in show business.

With the slow deliberation of a sleep-walker Tony poured himself a drink and lit a cigarette to give himself time to get over a desire to rush out

and never come back. Almost overcome with an emotion he had not experienced since he had learned that Peter had been sent to prison he sank into a chair. So this was it. This was where Peter had lived, and died. He could feel his spirit, lingering, watching.

After a while he got up, opened another door and found, as he expected, the bedroom. Peter's room. More luxury. More photographs. He didn't touch anything, but returning to the sitting-room, went over to the desk. It was fitted with a long central drawer and three short ones on each side. He half-opened them in turn. All were full of papers and the odds and ends that accumulate in a bachelor establishment. The centre drawer was stuffed with papers which, it struck him, appeared to have been pushed in anyhow. That was not like Peter, unless he had changed. He had always been so methodical in his habits. Perhaps the police had been through them, Tony thought. That probably was the explanation. It would take some time to go through them and burn those not required. That would apply to most of them.

A knock on the door brought him round with a guilty start to face it. Without waiting for an invitation to enter a woman strode in. She was dark, fifty, stalwart, deep-bosomed and neatly dressed in black. She carried in her hand a laden shopping basket from the top of which protruded at an angle a foot or more of bread. She put the basket on the floor and came forward.

"*Bonsoir*, Monsieur West," she greeted with the utmost amiability, but in a voice so strident that after the silence it struck like a blow. Tony winced as she continued: "I am Madame Charlot. François told me you were here."

"François is the *cordonnier*?"

"*Oui*, monsieur."

"Your husband?"

"No, thank God." Madame Charlot made an eloquent gesture of disdain. "One was enough for me. François Legendre! That animal! I wouldn't have him touch me for all the money in the Bank of France. And what a liar. To hear that man talk, monsieur, you'd wonder how a German was left alive in Paris during the Occupation. According to him, he had Boche for dinner every night. It takes him all day to get his pension on Mondays. So he says. Don't believe it. What he hopes is I'll fetch it for him. Pretends that walking hurts his leg. He was wounded in the first war. He pours his pension down his throat. Absinthe. That's what he drinks. He's rotten with the stuff. Living there alone like a dirty old beast. Live with him!" Madame Charlot sniffed.

"I gather you don't like François Legendre, madame," interposed Tony, smiling. "Where do you live?"

"Below. The little door on the right."

"Who lives on the first floor?"

“Mademoiselle Floriet. She’s sixty. Never had a husband and never will. I’d be sorry for her if she wasn’t so mean. She counts everything in the house. She goes out every day to teach music. On the top floor is old Doctor Bertelle. He’s over ninety, nearly deaf, dumb and blind. How he goes on living I don’t know. He’s been there, so he says, for sixty years. Think of it! I look after both of them. I look after this *appartement*, too. I hope you find it looking well. I’ve done my best with it since the police finished making a mess. Do you stay here, monsieur?”

“Later, perhaps.” Tony smiled wanly. “Having just arrived, I still feel a little *triste*.”

“But of course. I understand that. I felt like that when my husband died. But only for a little while. He was an animal like the rest of them, may God forgive him. Do you want me to continue working here, monsieur? I like the place. It has class. That’s why I do my best. I am a good cook. I washed your brother’s shirts, and——”

Tony held up a protesting hand. “We can talk of that later, madame. But I’d be glad if you would carry on for the time being.”

“*Bon*.” Madame Charlot strode with a purposeful step to a mark on the carpet and scraped it with the toe of her shoe. “I rub and rub and still it comes back,” she complained.

“What comes back?”

“The mark of the blood.” Madame Charlot’s voice took on a confidential tone. “Blood is always difficult to get out. I remember——”

“Wait,” protested Tony. “What blood are you talking about?” he asked, although he knew what the answer would be.

“The blood of Monsieur West. This was where he was lying when I came in. I wondered at the marks on the steps outside. When I saw him I knew. He must have crawled all the way from the car. *Mon Dieu*——”

“Stop,” broke in Tony, flinching. “Madame Charlot,” he went on, “I would be obliged if you would tell me slowly and quietly exactly what happened here the night my brother was killed.”

“I wasn’t here when he came home,” answered the woman, accompanying her voice with mobile hands and shoulders. “François asked me if I would go round the corner and get him some absinthe. He doesn’t walk very well, or pretends he doesn’t, because he got a wound in his leg in the fourteen-eighteen war, and it has never healed properly. He says he suffers much with it, but I think he’s a liar. He tells that tale to save himself trouble and keep his pension. That man is always grumbling about something. My husband was the same. But because I have a good nature I went for the absinthe. I had a glass of wine myself while I was out. When I came back I saw the car there and François was waiting for me to come in to

close the gates for the night. He said Monsieur West had gone in before he could get out so he hadn't seen him. He took the bottle and went in without even saying thank you. But François is like that, monsieur. An animal. So I went to bed. In the morning I came here as usual to make the coffee and there was poor Monsieur West on the floor—dead. What a tragedy. Who would kill a beautiful man like that?"

"How did you know he was dead?"

"How did I know? I know a dead man when I see one. He was cold. I saw the blood. The shock! I shall never forget it."

"What did you do?"

"The telephone was on the floor. I picked it up and called the police. When they came, what an affair! The questions they asked. *Mon Dieu!* The questions."

"Did you know any people who visited my brother?"

"No. Sometimes there was a girl—you understand. That was not my business. Sometimes, but not lately, there have been men, but always after dark, so I did not see them."

Tony indicated the photographs with a sweep of his hand. "Do you know any of these people?"

"No."

"You don't know their names?"

"No, monsieur."

"Do you still receive your wages?"

"Every week."

"From whom?"

"Monsieur Boulenger. He sends the money by post."

"I suppose he has asked you questions?"

"My God! The questions that man asks."

"What about?"

"Monsieur West. What he does. Where he goes. Who comes to see him. What time he goes out. What time he comes home. Everything. He asks as many questions as the police."

"Thank you, Madame Charlot. That will be all for now."

"Would Monsieur like me to make him some tea?"

"Tea? Do you make tea?"

"Every day at five o'clock, when he was here, I made tea for Monsieur West."

"Then I would be glad if you would make me some."

"*Toute de suite.*" The woman bustled out.

Tony, hands in his pockets, strolled to the window and stared down at the river, as, he imagined, Peter had done a thousand times. One of the regular

tourist boats was passing, lights already on, a loud-speaker blaring Ravel's *Bolero*.

Madame Charlot brought the tea.

"Do you know anyone who might have killed my brother?" asked Tony bluntly.

"No." The woman lifted an expressive shoulder. "Perhaps it was over a woman. Men are always fighting over women. If it isn't a woman it's something else. Everything is fighting something else. Countries fight. Families fight. Even the churches fight. Fantastic! The world, monsieur, is mad. People are like dogs. As soon as one has a bone the others want it."

With this primitive philosophy, expressed with unction, Tony agreed.

"Is there anything more I can do?" asked the woman.

"Not tonight. I'll lock the door when I go. I may come back tomorrow."

"Bien entendu. Bonsoir, monsieur."

"Bonsoir, madame."

Tony sat and stirred his tea in an atmosphere of unreality, a prey to solicitude, wondering if he had been wise to come to Paris after all. He still felt that in some strange way Peter in dying had done something to him which in life would not have been possible. Had Peter, living, written to him for help, it would have been different. It was the knowledge that Peter was dead that induced a feeling of loneliness he had never experienced while he believed him to be alive, even though he might be at the other side of the world. He was oppressed by a sense of tragedy. Aware of the futility of such thoughts, he felt that things had happened which never should have happened. Nothing could be done about it now. Nothing.

Thus he sat, despondent, chain-smoking cigarettes while shadows crept into the room to dim a scene that seemed as remote as a dream of yesterday.

Having decided that such uneasy brooding could serve no useful purpose he was moving towards his hat to go when a knock came on the door to banish in a flash the gathering ghosts of memory. There was something about the knock he did not like; for a knock can say as much as words. There is the knock of familiarity, meaning nothing, a mere formality, such as the one employed by Madame Charlot. There is the peremptory knock of authority. There are knocks of truculence, of urgency, that can convey the purpose of the knocker. This was not an honest knock. It could have been the nervous knock of a conspirator.

He walked to the door, switching on the light in passing, and opened it with the assurance of possession to come face to face with a girl whose anxious eyes, as they looked up at him, were an appeal for tolerance.

"Excusez, monsieur," she breathed. "I must speak to you. May I come in?" Without waiting for an answer she took a step inside.

“Mademoiselle——” began Tony sternly.

“Please close the door,” she pleaded.

A request so made was not to be refused. Tony closed the door. “Who do you wish to see?” he asked.

“I have come to speak to you.”

“To me? So you know who I am?” Surprise raised Tony’s voice a tone.

“Yes. You are Tony, I think, the brother of Peter.”

For a second astonishment held Tony’s tongue. “How did you know I was here? Who told you?”

“Give me time, monsieur, and I will tell you all.”

“Very well, mademoiselle,” agreed Tony, not too pleased, but showing no more disquiet than he could prevent. “Come in.” He took her to the living-room. “Please sit down. Now tell me, who are you and what do you want? First, what is your name?”

“My name,” said the girl, with nervous sincerity, “is Colette Dufoy.”

CHAPTER IV

THE sound of a name so trenchant with meaning, spoken by the owner of it, fell on Tony's ears like the boom of a gong, and he had to wait for the reverberations to die away before he could think of anything appropriate to say.

So this was the girl who had apparently thawed a spot in Peter's frozen heart. He had imagined many types, but never one like this. That of itself was sufficient to invite critical inspection.

She was not more than twenty, and when standing came no higher than his shoulder. She was slim—perhaps a little too slim—with dark blue eyes which, wide with apprehension or embarrassment, looked too large for a face so pale that a little artificial colour could with advantage have been employed. The pallor of her skin, with features finely cut, suggested either undernourishment or a delicate constitution. A coil of auburn hair made its way without restraint down one side of her face to her shoulder. She wore a plain brown sweater, without ornament, and a dark skirt. Both fitted neatly, but had obviously seen better days. A little hole in the sweater had been darned with meticulous care. Well-worn but clean light fabric gloves covered hands in one of which she carried an imitation hide handbag. This, like the little brown beret on her head and the shoes on her feet, were of the quality sold at a *prix unique*.

"How did you know I was here?" was Tony's first question.

"Madame Delmas, who keeps the flower-shop in the Rue Vatel, told me that an Englishman had been asking for me. I could think of no other Englishman except you."

"Why not?"

"The only other Englishman I knew was Peter. Sometimes he spoke of you. One day not long ago he said that if anything happened to him you would come. So now that Peter is dead, and I heard that an Englishman had been asking for me, naturally, monsieur, I thought of you. I came to Madame Charlot to ask if she knew where you were staying in Paris. She told me you were here, in the apartment. Were you looking for me, m'sieur?"

"Not exactly. I was interested to see where you lived because I intended to call on you later."

"Peter told you of me?"

"Yes, in a letter. Why did you come here as you did? Are you by any chance the girl the police are looking for?"

“No. They know where I live. They have been to see me, to ask questions. Please, what did Peter say about me?”

Tony smiled faintly at the naïve question. “Not much. He said you were a good girl.”

For a moment a suspicion of colour brushed her pale cheeks. “I wonder why he spoke of me,” she almost whispered.

“Let us say it was because he liked you very much, m’*moiselle*. Now tell me why you came here as if you were afraid of something or somebody. That wasn’t just because you thought I was looking for you.”

“That is true, m’*sieur*. I wanted to ask your permission to look through Peter’s papers.”

Tony’s eyebrows lifted. “That’s a strange request. May I ask for what reason?”

“I wrote him a letter. I would like to have it back, to destroy it.”

“Was it so important?”

“If some people knew I had written it they would kill me. I am afraid now all the time for fear they have already found it. Until I know what has happened to it I shall have no peace of mind.”

“When did you write this letter?”

“I wrote it on the Friday before he was killed on the Monday. Either it came too late to save him or he ignored it.”

“Do I understand it was a warning?”

“Yes.”

“Then you knew he was in danger?”

“Yes.”

“He knew that himself?”

“Yes, I believe he thought that. I knew there was a definite plot to kill him.”

“How did you learn that?”

“By accident. I overheard a conversation. It is a long story. I will tell you about it one day if you like.”

“You appear to know a lot about Peter,” said Tony thoughtfully, his eyes on her face. “With whom do you live in the Rue Vatel?”

“I live alone now. My father was killed in the war. My mother, who lived in Lyons, where I was born, died soon after I came to Paris.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I paint pictures.”

“What sort of pictures?”

“I am flattering myself, *monsieur*. I make little *aquarelles* for the tourists.”

“You mean the little water-colours of Paris I see everywhere at three or four hundred francs each?”

“Exactly. Old Pierre, the *bouquiniste*, who has a second-hand bookstand on the Quai de Conti, sells mine for me.”

“How many?”

“In an average week five or six. When things were good a little while ago as many as ten.”

Tony did some quick mental arithmetic. Six at four hundred, two thousand four hundred francs. The price of two reasonable meals. Good God! he thought. No wonder the girl looked half starved. He could put that right, anyhow.

“I came to Paris on a scholarship, but it is finished,” Colette said. “Now I must earn my living. It isn’t easy. When I have paid for my room there is not much left for food, and still less for clothes. I manage, but life here for a student is not easy.”

“It sounds grim to me,” muttered Tony.

“May I have the letter?”

“Certainly, if it can be found.”

“May I look for it now?”

“It’s getting late. I was just about to leave when you came. A thorough search would take some time. Forgive me if I say I’m more interested in the plot against Peter. Why not come back tomorrow? You could then stay as long as you wished. We could go through the papers together.”

Colette looked disappointed, but she said: “If that is how you would prefer it.”

“I’ll tell you what,” said Tony, trying to strike a cheerful note. “Let’s go out and have something to eat and you can tell me what you know about Peter. That, really, is what brought me to Paris. Tomorrow we’ll look for the letter. How’s that?”

“It might not be safe for us to be seen together.”

“Not safe!” Tony was incredulous. “Who is in danger, me or you?”

“Both of us if it were known I’d written that letter. If then you were seen with me they’d think I’d told you.”

“They? Who are you talking about?”

“The men who may have killed Peter.”

“Have you reason to think they followed you here?”

“I’m always afraid now of being watched. This house may be watched.”

Tony smiled tolerantly. “Mademoiselle, are you sure you are not imagining things?”

“Monsieur does not understand.”

“Then the sooner I do understand the better,” asserted Tony. “We’ll find a little place where we can eat and talk in peace and you can tell me all about your troubles.”

“Very well, monsieur.”

“What did you call my brother?”

“Peter.”

“That’s what I thought. As we may be seeing more of each other you might as well call me Tony. Do you mind if I call you Colette?”

A smile that almost died at birth parted the girl’s lips. “I would be happy—Tony.”

Tony looked at her curiously. “You needn’t answer this question if you don’t want to. Were you in love with Peter?”

Colette hung for a moment on her answer. “Once, for a little while, I think, some time ago. Or it seems a long time ago. Much has happened since.” She sighed. “And once, for a little while, I thought he was in love with me.”

“Are you sure he wasn’t?”

“Had he felt like that he could have asked me to marry him. But he never did.”

“Would you have married him?”

“Yes.”

“Did he tell you he had been married before in England?”

Colette looked up quickly, her eyes searching Tony’s face. “No, he never told me that. Was he still married?”

“No. His wife divorced him.”

“Was she mad?”

“No. She was bad. She ruined Peter’s life.”

“Ah! Now I begin to understand.”

“What do you understand?”

“Why he would sometimes be so cruel when he spoke of women.”

“He had reason, Colette. But let us——”

Tony broke off, looking towards the door as on it came a sharp rap for admittance.

Colette snatched a breath and half rose in her chair. “Don’t answer it,” she whispered tersely.

“Why not?”

“It may be those bad men who killed Peter.”

“It might be anybody. It might even be the police, who have perhaps been told I am here.”

“I’d rather no one saw me here, not even the police.”

Tony frowned. “Have you some reason to be afraid of the police?”

“I didn’t tell them about the letter.”

“Why didn’t you tell them?”

“I was afraid those men would get to hear of it and come after me.”

“All right. Come in here if you don’t want to be seen.” Tony pushed open the door of the bedroom.

She went in. He closed the door, but left it slightly ajar.

The knocking was repeated, now with impatience.

“All right. I’m coming. Don’t be in such a hurry,” called Tony. He went to the door and opened it.

Facing him were three men. “Come on,” said one in English. “What’s the idea keeping us standing here?” Without waiting for an answer he pushed past, and followed by the other two, walked on into the living-room. There the man who had spoken remained standing. The other two dropped into chairs.

Tony was not incapable of anger, but holding it to be a sign of weakness he tried not to show it. “What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded coldly, speaking in English to the man who had spoken.

The question was ignored. “So you’re the brother of Peter the Great,” drawled the man with a studied nonchalance that amounted to insolence, looking him up and down. His accent was American.

He was small, dark, dapper, with deep-set eyes now narrowed with calculating malice. His hat, which he had not taken off, was snapped down in front. A tie like a bursting rocket confirmed his nationality.

Tony’s smouldering indignation burst into flame. “And who the hell do you think you are to walk into my apartment as if it belonged to you?” His voice had an edge on it.

“Take it easy, pal,” sneered the other.

“Get out or I’ll call the police.”

“We’ll get out when we’re ready to go, and that’ll be when we get what we came for.”

Remembering Colette’s fear, Tony asked: “What did you come for?”

“The money that double-crossing brother of yours owes us.”

Tony’s eyes made a swift reconnaissance of the speaker’s two companions. One, with a smooth face and large heavy-lidded eyes, could have been anything. The third member of the trio was a square-featured, grey-faced, massively-built man with close-cropped iron-grey hair, and a dome-shaped head that fell off so sharply behind that it could only have been moulded in Germany. He wore dark glasses and sat very still.

“If it’s money you want you’ve come to the wrong address,” stated Tony frostily. “I haven’t any, and if I had I wouldn’t give it to you.”

“What about Peter’s dough?”

“That’s my business.”

The spokesman shook his head sadly. “Listen, brother. I guess you haven’t yet figured out the set-up.”

“I’ve figured out I don’t like the look of you, and that’s enough. So get out and don’t come back.”

“That’s how you feel?”

“That’s how I feel.”

“Not going to offer us a drink even?”

“I’d watch you choke first.”

“Not even though we were buddies of your brother?”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Okay, have it your way. But remember this. Your smart brother owed us each a pile of money and we aim to get paid.”

“If he owed you money he’d have paid you.”

“That’s just it. He didn’t. He held out on us. Now he can’t. But you can. And if you’re wise you will.”

Tony’s lip curled. “Or you’ll do to me what you did to him. Is that the idea?”

“Are you suggesting I did that job?”

“Yes.”

“Waal, you’ve got it wrong, smart guy. We had plenty of reason to knock him off, but someone else did the job for us. This wasn’t the gun that killed Peter, and the cops know it.” The man produced and toyed with a pocket automatic.

“Oh, stop playing the big shot,” rapped out Tony contemptuously. He was thinking: Peter knew he might be murdered, and who more likely to kill him than these gangsters? He said: “If you didn’t kill my brother, who did?”

“Don’t ask me. Find the girl friend and ask her. She could tell you.”

“What girl friend are you talking about?”

“The one who was here the night it happened.”

“Have you told the police that?”

“I tell the cops nothing.”

“All right. All I have to say to you is this. If you have any legal claim on my brother’s estate send it in and it’ll be paid. Now get out.” Tony spoke as if he meant it, as in fact he did. He walked to the telephone and put a hand on the receiver.

The German-type stood up. “Let us go,” he said. “We get nothing here.”

“You’re damn right you won’t,” said Tony, with iron in his voice.

“Okay,” agreed the American. “I guess mebbe you’re right. Let’s get outa here before I lose my temper trying to make this nut see sense.”

The three men filed to the door. Reaching it, the American, who was last, looked back. "You've seen that car in the yard?"

Tony didn't answer.

"Have a good look at it."

"I've seen it."

"Have a look at the door, and think it over." The man went out, slamming the door behind him.

Tony lit a cigarette. "All right, they've gone," he said.

The bedroom door opened and Colette came out. "You see," she whispered breathlessly.

"Did you hear that conversation?"

"Yes."

"So you speak English?"

"A little. Enough to understand."

"Do you know those men?"

"Yes."

Tony's expression hardened. "You do! Are they friends of yours?"

"Friends!" Colette looked horrified. "Those are the men I fear. They may have killed Peter."

"Do you think they followed you here?"

"No. Had they known I was here they would have looked for me."

"Who are they?"

"They are three of the worst men in Paris."

"What are their names?"

"The American is called Delano. The others are Louis le Lapin and Stanislaus Schultzer."

"Were they really friends of Peter's?"

"He knew them. They sometimes spoke to him. But I don't think he liked them. How could a man like Peter like them?"

Tony tapped his cigarette. "They appear to be well informed."

"How?"

"They knew I was in Paris. They knew I was here in the apartment. How did they know? Someone must have told them."

"Such men have spies."

"Who told the spies? Even spies must get their information from someone. But never mind. Let's forget them."

"I don't think they'll let you forget them. Please be careful. These men are really dangerous. They carry guns."

"That's a game that two can play. Tomorrow I'll buy myself a pistol."

Tony did not mean it seriously, but apparently she took it so.

"That would be a good thing to do."

“You know,” said Tony thoughtfully, “those men gave me the impression of having been here before.”

“I have never seen them here.”

“So you’ve been here before?”

“Two—three times, when Peter gave a little party. I never saw those men here.”

“Where did you see them? How did you know their names?”

“That would take a long time to tell.”

“Very well. Let’s find somewhere to eat and you can tell me all about it.”

Alarm leapt into the girl’s eyes. “But we can’t just walk out of here.”

“Why not?”

“They may be watching.”

“Let them watch. I’ve no intention of being penned in here by three cheap crooks. I’m not living here. I’m staying at an hotel. And you will have to go home some time.”

“They must not see me with you.”

“Do they know you by sight?”

“Yes.”

“And they know where you live?”

“Yes.”

“They seem to know a lot about you.”

“If they knew how much I knew about them they would kill me. I’d rather they didn’t know I’d been talking to you. That would be dangerous for you, too. Monsieur——”

“Tony.”

“Tony, I implore you to be careful. These men carry knives as well as pistols.”

“Do you really believe they killed Peter?”

“If they didn’t do it I know of only one other person who it could be.”

“Peter’s girl friend?”

“Yes.”

“Who was she?”

“I’ll tell you about her in my story. There was one other woman. I will tell you about her, too. But not here. I am worried about how I shall get home in case they are watching.”

“So the question is how to get you out without being seen by anyone.”

“Please, if it is possible.”

Tony weighed the problem, feeling that the atmosphere of drama was false and ridiculous. It was the stuff that films were made of. The thought nearly moved him to rebellion. Had he been alone he would not have given the men another thought. Who the hell were they to impose on him the

behaviour of a mouse in a cat-infested barn? he thought irritably. But Colette was obviously so sincere in her conviction that her life was in danger that he felt bound to take the precautions she advised. Peter had practically put her in his care. Apart from that, if anything should happen to the girl he would never forgive himself. She was a responsibility he had to accept. Moreover, he knew she had already made a breach in his seclusion, possibly because, being alone in Paris, he liked the thought of having a companion who might turn out to be a useful ally.

“I have an idea of how we might get away,” he told her. “It depends on whether or not Peter’s car is still in running order. If it is, we could go down quietly. You get in the back seat and keep low while I drive out.”

“How will you know if the car is working?”

“There’s only one way to find out, and that’s by trying it. Are you prepared to take a chance on that?”

“Of course, if there’s no other way.”

“There’s no other way. Assuming they don’t know you’re here, and that’s what you believe. I still can’t see what object they can have in watching me, or the apartment.”

“To see where you are staying. They won’t leave you alone until they get what they want. That, I’m sure, is how it was with Peter.”

“What they want is money, and I won’t stand for blackmail even if Peter did, and that’s what it begins to look like. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go. When we get to the bottom I shall put you straight in the car.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to find out first if it is working?”

“No. Because once that engine starts I have a feeling it would be impossible for you to get in the car without being seen by somebody. The *cordonnier* or Madame Charlot will come out to see what is happening. If we must behave like burglars, speed is everything. Come on.”

Tony took from his pocket the two keys that would be required, the door and the ignition, and held them in his left hand ready for instant use. They went to the door. He switched off the light. Slowly and with infinite care he opened the door a little way and listened. Outside, the stone steps were in darkness. The stillness was the stillness of death. He thought there should be an electric switch somewhere, but not knowing where it was he flicked on his cigarette-lighter. Its feeble flame cast a small but sufficient circle of light. The silence persisting he pulled the door behind them, frowning at the soft click made by the lock as it snapped. Holding Colette by the elbow, they began the descent, pausing from time to time to listen. Neither spoke. They reached the door on the first floor landing and passed it with no more noise

than fish in water. Continuing, more slowly now, a step at a time, they reached the bottom. Through the arched entrance a little light was falling from above. Otherwise all was in darkness.

Tony closed the lighter, no longer required, and put it in his pocket. "Wait here," he breathed, and went on a little way alone.

A swift reconnaissance revealed that the door of Madame Charlot's apartment was shut. Beyond the car, wan light from a street lamp showed that the gates had not been closed by François. Not a soul was in sight. That was all he needed to know. He backed a pace, touched Colette on the arm and whispered: "Come. Quietly."

Together, keeping close to the wall, they walked to the car. He opened a rear door. Colette climbed in. "On the floor," he breathed, as he closed it silently behind her. He got into the driving seat, wound down the windows, slipped in the ignition key and switched on. Light flooded the instruments. His chief anxiety had been that the battery would be flat. The needle of the petrol gauge was nearly on the pin, but the tank was not dry.

The moment had come. He gave the engine a little choke. The starter groaned, the engine reluctant to be disturbed. With his eyes on the door of the *cordonnier's* house he tried again. The engine caught and his foot on the accelerator picked it up.

The *cordonnier* was out in a flash, almost as if he had been waiting. But the car was moving. Without stopping, Tony put a face out of the window and called: "It's only me. I'm going to put the car in a garage. *Bonsoir.*" Then he was past, turning into the narrow street outside. A car was parked near the top, leaving him barely enough room to pass. It began to move as he approached, but holding his breath he managed to squeeze through. Too taken up with what he was doing he was unable to snatch even a glance to see who was at the wheel of the other car, so whether or not it was concerned with him he did not know. He did not stop to find out. Swinging out on to the main road, he put down his foot and in two or three minutes was in the stream of one-way traffic racing down the Rue de Rivoli.

"Bravo!" said a voice behind him.

He did not look round, for he had still two worries on his mind. The first was petrol. The second was a fear that one-way streets had been changed since he was last in Paris. But for the moment his chief concern was to get away from the Rue Varonnesse. In the reflector he could see Colette looking back through the rear window.

He turned left at the Tuileries, crossed the river by the Pont Royal, and running straight on found a place to park a little way down the Rue de Bac.

"This should do us," he told Colette as he opened the door for her. "There's a little restaurant at the top, at the corner of the Quai Voltaire,

called *La Frégate*. It's usually quiet at this hour. It isn't *Maxims*, but I don't know where we could eat better for the money. Were you looking to see if we were being followed?"

"Yes. I didn't see anyone. I don't think they'll find the car here."

"Do you mean they may look for it?"

"Perhaps. They must know the number."

"Are you sure you're not letting your imagination run away with you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because this whole business seems crazy to me."

"What's so crazy?"

"Tearing about Paris in a strange car with a young woman I didn't know two hours ago."

"That's how things happen in Paris."

"Maybe, but I'm not a Parisian," said Tony as they walked up the incline towards the Quai Voltaire. "I can't see what we've gained by this wild stampede, anyhow."

"We got away from the house."

"I was only concerned with getting you away without being seen, as that was what you wanted. I'd no reason to run away. It's my *appartement*, and I shall go back tomorrow. I may live there for a little while. I imagine after what's happened tonight you won't be coming back to look for that letter. Would you like me to look for it?"

"I think you had better listen to what I have to say before we talk of that," said Colette seriously as he pushed open the glass doors of the restaurant.

They found seats at the back that could not be seen from the road.

"I think we deserve a drink," he went on as the waiter with deft hands prepared the table. "In fact, I need one. I can't afford whisky in Paris, but I'm having one tonight. What would you like?"

"May I have a Dubonnet?"

"Anything you like. I suggest we eat first and talk afterwards over the coffee."

Colette agreed.

"Before we do any more rushing about I need time to think," said Tony, handing her the menu card.

CHAPTER V

TONY had by this time realised that in coming to Paris he had become involved in something more sinister than the hints of the two lawyers had led him to expect; for which reason he had told no more than the simple truth when he had said he wanted to think. There was plenty to think about.

If the news of Peter's death had jerked him upright in his chair of easy respectability in London, the events of the last few hours in Paris had thrown him out of it. He was now trying to pick himself up. Having been warned that Peter's affairs were complicated, he had come to France prepared for irritating official delays and inconvenience; but not for what had happened. He felt he had done his best to keep pace with things, but they were moving too fast for him. He needed time to get his breath and look ahead to see where he was going.

Here and there a ray of light was breaking through the overcast of mystery, but they only served to darken the rest of the sky. Who had told those three men he was at the apartment? They had known he was there. As far as he knew that information must have been provided by one of the three people who knew he was there, or at all events in Paris: Boulenger, François and Madame Charlot. The hotel he ruled out. It followed, therefore, that one of them was in touch with the unsavoury characters who, hard though it was to believe, had in some way been associated with Peter. As far as Boulenger was concerned, it was through him that he had come to Paris. He suspected the man was not a hundred per cent straight according to his own inflexible standards of legal morality, but he couldn't see why the lawyer should have brought him to Paris had he known he would be in the way. Perhaps Colette would be able to provide the answer.

They had a good dinner. Mademoiselle Dufoy might look delicate, he thought, but there was nothing delicate about her appetite. Not a course from the *hors d'œuvre* to the *tarte maison* had been declined. Clearly the girl was really hungry, and presumably making the most of an opportunity to catch up on a lagging diet. This pleased him because he felt it was a practical if unromantic beginning to the fulfilment of Peter's last request. The continuation, without her suspecting what he was doing, might be more difficult, but he had at least made a start.

When at last the waiter had cleared the debris and brought the coffee he lit the cigarettes and settled down to listen.

"Now," he prompted, "tell me who you think killed Peter, and why."

“I can’t tell you that because I don’t know,” said Colette simply.

“Very well. Tell me what you do know,” he requested.

“How shall I begin?”

“Tell me where you first met Peter and carry on from there.”

“That will be the best way, I think.” Colette sipped her coffee and began:

“One evening I was sitting with Isobel Brice, who was then my friend, outside *La Boule d’Or*, in the Place Michel, having coffee. I had just collected my money from Pierre, for the pictures he had sold, so I was feeling generous. To a student in Paris who must count every sou even a cup of coffee is an extravagance.”

“Who is Isobel Brice?”

“A girl who used to share my room. We first met at the Art School. She was two years older than me, blonde, very pretty. There is a photograph of her in Peter’s room. I saw it tonight.”

“How long ago was this?”

“More than a year.”

“I see. Sorry to interrupt. Continue.”

“A man parked his car in front, by the kerb. He was tall, good looking and very well dressed. He took a seat near us and ordered a cognac. That was the first time I saw Peter. I thought he was English, but I wasn’t sure. He spoke French so well. He took no notice of us; but after a little while he spoke. You know how it is in Paris. I don’t think he was really interested in us. He was just amused, like a kind uncle. He invited us to have a drink, and of course we said yes. We talked again. I forget what about. It is not important. I think something was said about life being hard for unknown artists in Paris, of which, as you know, there are many. Then he said he was going to eat. He was alone, so would we care to join him? We said yes because we were always hungry. That was the beginning.”

“Did he strike you as having plenty of money?”

“A man with a big car must have money.”

Tony smiled. “Then what happened?”

“Nothing. After dinner he said good-bye and went off in his car. But, as I have said, that was only the beginning. We saw him often after that. I must admit that when things were bad we sometimes went to the *Boule d’Or* hoping he would be there. He did not always come, but when he did he spoke to us. Sometimes it was only a drink, sometimes a little dinner. One night, because it was raining, he took us home in the car. When we got to know him better he would take us to other places to have a drink and talk—the *Café de la Paix*, *Webber* in the Rue Royale, or one of the places along the Champs Elysées.”

“Did he talk about himself?”

“Never. In those days we didn’t even know where he lived. All we knew was his name, Peter. We called him our good Englishman. It was at the *Café de la Paix* that I first saw those men who came to the apartment. They spoke to him. He looked angry. He gave them some money and they went away. Once he put some money on the table to pay for our drinks and went away with them.”

“How long did this go on?”

“For some months. He was a strange man. Always I expected him to make the suggestion a man makes when he pays for meals. That is understood. After all, why should he feed a girl like me? But no. Sometimes he looked worried and sad. Then he would drink much and say little. I was sorry for him. He seemed so lonely. I think that was why he talked to us. It was hard to understand why a man like Peter should be lonely in Paris, where no one need be alone. Women often smiled at him, but he took no notice. It was as if he had only contempt for women. Then things began to change.”

“In what way?”

“He began to look at me differently. He paid more attention to me. I could see Isobel didn’t like that, but what could I do?”

“How did he look at you?”

“He looked as if he had a big problem and was trying to make up his mind to tell me about it. I think, too, he was getting to like me. Not so much like an uncle, you understand.”

“Did he ever tell you this problem?”

“No. But one day when Isobel wasn’t there he told me he had a cottage in the country where he sometimes went at week-ends, which was why we didn’t see him then. He lived there alone, buying the food he would need at shops on the road. He said he would leave Paris and live there all the time if he had someone to run the house. He asked me if I would go with him. I said no. That would spoil everything. It was not easy to say that, and it made me sad. That night I cried in my bed. I think it was then I was nearly in love with him. But not enough. I thought if I said no he would ask me to marry him. But I was wrong.”

“And you thought if you said yes he wouldn’t marry you?”

“That is exactly what I thought. It is a difficult question for any woman; certainly for one who doesn’t know where the next meal will come from.”

“Would you have married him?”

“Yes. But he didn’t ask me. He didn’t seem to care very much. He was very kind. He said he hated to see me work so hard for so little and he wanted me to take some money. But how could I do that and give nothing in return? Already I had taken too much from him. He had the right to expect

something. I was cheating. I knew that. But the temptation to accept what he offered was great. I used to lie awake at nights thinking about it. I was ashamed. Have you ever been hungry?"

"Never."

"Imagine if you were, and lived in Paris, where there are restaurants and food shops in every street and all you had in your purse was ten francs. There is only one way you can get something to eat. There comes a time when a girl must decide if she will eat or throw herself in the river like the *Vierge Inconnue*. Some eat and then jump into the river. That's why I can't blame Isobel."

"Did she—decide to eat?"

"I think so. Sometimes suddenly she had money. She didn't tell me where it came from and I didn't ask her. Well, only once after that did Peter ask me to go away with him, but then he had been drinking. He drank a lot, but he was never drunk. By this time Isobel was looking at me with hate in her eyes because she knew what he had asked me. Women have an instinct about these things."

"You never saw him making love to Isobel?"

"Never. I don't think he trusted her. Sometimes when she talked about men the way she did I saw him frown. Sometimes now I am sorry I didn't go with him. Perhaps I could have made him happier, given him something he was trying to find."

Tony shook his head. "I don't think so. Had you gone with him your acceptance of his suggestion would have killed the very thing he most admired in you. No, Colette. When a man of Peter's type has lost what he had lost it's gone for always. He said that himself in his last letter to me."

"What had he lost?"

"His faith in women."

"Yet he married. Was she the cause?"

"Partly. It really began before that."

"Then why did he marry her, or any woman, if he felt like that?"

Tony beckoned the waiter for more coffee. "I don't know. Who does know? It seems to be a trick of nature to perpetuate the species, that in spite of experience, regardless of what he sees going on around him, in the face of what he reads every day in the newspaper, every man believes his chosen woman to be the only one in the world incapable of infidelity."

She looked at him. "Do you feel like this?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. All I know is that when what is called love throws dust in my eyes I shall be as blind as other men so afflicted. No doubt I shall take my chance. It's a gamble we all must take to get what we want. Peter swore he would never marry, yet when his time came he fell for

Anna. But never mind that. Tell me about these men. Did you still see them?"

"Occasionally one would come. Sometimes they came together. There were arguments, but I didn't know what they were about."

"Did Peter speak to you about them?"

"Never."

"Then how did you learn their names?"

"That was a strange affair. One day I came down to find a man waiting for me in the flower-shop. He asked me if he might speak to me, and as he looked a nice man I said yes. We went to a café and he asked me questions. First he said he knew I was a friend of the Englishman, Monsieur West. He thought I was his mistress, but I told him that was not true. Of course, I asked him what business this was of his. He said he was just a man who had a personal interest in Peter. Then he asked me if I knew these men who came to Peter. I said no. He said did I think Peter knew these men were crooks? I said how could I know that? Then he told me to be careful. He told me the names of these men. That's how I know them. He said if I found myself in trouble would I get in touch with him. Then he told me who he was. I had decided he was a private police officer from the Sûreté Nationale, but it turned out he was a newspaper man, Denis Coulestin, of Paris-Presse. He gave me his telephone number. I have it at home."

"Have you been in touch with him?"

"No."

"I think you might have done that. If he was interested in Peter, and apparently he was, I'd like to have a word with him myself. Had it occurred to you that Peter might be a crook?"

"Never. But when I thought about these men and how Peter gave them money I began to wonder."

"Naturally. Go on with the story."

"About three months ago the end came suddenly. It was tragic. I will tell you exactly what happened. Peter said it was his birthday, so we should have a little celebration. He seemed happy. Tonight it should be the *Sanglier Bleu*, in the Boulevard de Clichy, with champagne and caviare. We went in the car, Peter, Isobel and me. There was nowhere near to park, so we had to leave the car down by the Place Pigalle. That, although we didn't know it, was to bring disaster."

"For whom?"

"For Peter, I think. For me, certainly, and perhaps for Isobel. I don't know about that. I was happy because she seemed better disposed towards me that night. You must understand that she changed after she saw Peter paying more attention to me than to her. She was jealous. Perhaps that was

natural. She need not have hated me, as I could she see did. We had once been such friends. Well, we had a merry party. My heart still aches when I think of it.”

“Tell me about this disaster.”

“We were walking arm in arm down the Boulevard towards the Place Pigalle where we had left the car when a woman came out of one of the night clubs. We all came face to face. Peter stopped. The woman stopped. For what seemed a long time they stared at each other. Then the woman laughed and walked on. It was the most wicked laugh I have ever heard. I think she was drunk. It was like a witch laughing in hell. Peter stood still. His face was terrible, white and pulled into lines as if he had been struck by a bad pain. He turned and looked after the woman as if he would follow her. But no. Without a word he turned again and walked down the Boulevard like a man who can't see where he's going. He knocked into people. He had forgotten we were there. We came to the car, but he didn't stop. He turned into a bar. We sat down and he shouted to the waiter for cognac. Bring the bottle, he said. Then he began to drink. Nothing could stop him. Isobel drank with him. They laughed at me because I wouldn't drink. They made so much noise that people were looking at them. I begged Peter to come home, but he only drank more and shouted, 'Home. Where the hell is home?'” Colette covered her face with her hands as if trying to shut the picture from her memory.

She went on: “When I could bear it no more I left them and caught a bus. That was the last time I ever saw Peter; laughing with his face, but not with his eyes, holding up a bottle of cognac.” Colette stared mistily at the soiled tablecloth. She drew a deep breath and finished her story.

“That night Isobel didn't come home. The next morning, rather late, she came to the room, packed her things and took them away. She didn't speak to me. I was trying to paint without tears falling on my work. She never came back. I knew she wouldn't come back.”

“This woman you saw in the street. What did she look like?”

“She looked like a woman of the street.”

“I mean, can you describe her?”

“I shall never forget her face. She had, I think, been beautiful and chic; but something had happened to make her grow old too quickly. Or it may have been the life. Her face was pale with hollows in her cheeks and too much rouge on the high bones. And too much lipstick. Her eyes were black and turned up a little at the corners. Her hair was black and flat, parted in the middle and drawn back like a Madonna.”

“I thought so,” said Tony softly.

“You know this woman?”

“It must have been Anna, his wife. You have described her. Besides, no other woman could have affected him like that.”

“Did he love her very much?”

“I think so . . . until . . .”

“So. One man was not enough for her. There are such women.”

“She must have come to Paris. What brutal luck for Peter, meeting her like that. As if what had happened before that was not bad enough. You say you never saw him again. What about Isobel?”

“I saw her once only after she had left me. It was some time later.”

“Do you think she was living with him?”

“She must have been, unless he gave her money. She had no money of her own. The day I saw her was in the Bou. Saint Germain, a fine lady in a new coat and hat. She didn’t see me. I followed her to see if she was going to Peter’s apartment. Perhaps I was jealous. She didn’t go to the apartment. She turned down a side street to a place called the *Colombe d’Argent*. She went in, came out and looked about as if she were expecting someone. I thought it would be Peter, so I waited. Instead, who did she meet but Louis le Lapin. That made me afraid. What could she be doing with this crook? Do you know the *Colombe d’Argent*?”

“No.”

“I went there once, before I knew the place had a reputation. There are partitions so that people can sit without being seen by others. The place is much used by lovers. Also there is a side door. I went in and sat where I could hear Isobel talking. She always speaks with a loud voice, but now, because she was furious and drinking cognac she spoke so loudly that Louis kept saying, ‘Ssh! Not so loud.’ So I learned that Peter had put her out. She called him horrible names. Louis consoled her, saying he ought to be shot. Isobel said she would shoot him herself if she had a gun because he would give her no more money. Louis asked if she knew how much money Peter kept at the apartment. Isobel said she didn’t know, but she would find out because she still had a key. Then they spoke in whispers and I heard no more. I was so worried that I went home and wrote a letter to Peter telling him what I had overheard at the *Colombe d’Argent*. Three days later I read in the newspaper that he had been shot.”

“Have you told the police this?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I was sick with grief that day and when the police came I told them I knew nothing. Having said that then, I was afraid to speak afterwards.”

“Did the police come to you?”

“Yes. To my room. They were looking for Isobel. They couldn’t find her.”

“They still haven’t found her. Have you any idea where she might be?”

“No. Knowing she has a key, my fear all the time has been that she would go to Peter’s apartment, find the letter and show it to those crooks. I am afraid of Isobel, too. She hates me.”

“Which of them do you think killed Peter? If he had no other enemies it must have been one of them. Could Isobel have done it?”

“No. She could talk fiercely when she was in a temper, but I can’t believe she’d do a thing like that. She must have loved Peter once, in her own way.”

“She wouldn’t be the first woman to kill the man she loved. She must have had a vicious streak in her to behave as she did.”

“She was not as bad as that. It makes me sad to think she hates me. There was no reason for it.”

Tony stubbed his cigarette. “I can understand how you feel about that letter. Obviously the police haven’t found it or they would have confronted you with it to ask what it meant. That goes for those crooks, too. We must try to find it. Shall I look for it or will you come to the apartment tomorrow when we could look for it together?”

“I will come.”

“Shall I fetch you in the car?”

“No, thank you. The crooks know that car. If they saw me in it in Paris it would set them thinking. I’ll make my own way to the apartment.”

“You’ll find me there. Don’t you want me to run you home tonight in the car?”

“No. It isn’t far to walk. I’ll go down the Rue du Bac and enter the Bou. Saint Germain from that end. Isobel knows that car very well, too.”

“I wonder where she can have hidden herself. The police are certain to take her disappearance as a sign of guilt.”

Colette shook her head. “I don’t understand it. But after what you’ve told me there may be another woman in Paris who might have killed Peter. The police can know nothing about her.”

“You mean Anna?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t see how she could have known anything about Peter’s movements. It looks as if neither knew the other was in Paris until they met in the Boulevard de Clichy.”

“She might have found his address in the telephone book.”

“I suppose so.”

“Was it through her that Peter hated women?”

“I wouldn’t say he hated them; you may know more about that than I do. Let’s say he didn’t trust them.”

“Then why did he marry one?”

Tony twiddled his empty glass. “It’s a queer thing, but have you noticed how often the man who doesn’t trust women marries the sort of woman who is not to be trusted? It seems to be precisely that type who appeals, and breaks down his resistance.”

“But why should Peter be like that before he married Anna?”

“I fancy that goes back to something that happened when we were boys at school. It’s a silly story, really, but it shows what the impact of one trivial incident can be on an impressionable youth. And Peter was impressionable. Even though he was not directly affected, it seemed to shatter an illusion and leave him, as we say, with a chip on his shoulder.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Our games master at school caught pneumonia and died. Peter, who was very fond of him, was terribly upset. Now this master was engaged to marry a charming girl. To us she was a goddess to be worshipped from afar. She was at the funeral with the rest of us. As the coffin was lowered she tore a rose from a wreath, held it against her heart, and threw it in the grave, crying, ‘Good-bye, darling, I shall soon be with you.’ Then she fainted, or pretended to. There was not a dry eye anywhere. Even Peter wept. It was a touching scene, reported in the local newspapers.”

“Did she die?” asked Colette wistfully.

“Nothing so dramatic. Within a year she had married another man. When Peter knew this you should have heard what he had to say about women.”

“Why shouldn’t she marry another man? Was she expected to pine away, or go into a convent as they do in opera?”

“Peter would have said yes, definitely. Having a romantic nature, he was all burned up with loyalty for the master, whom he held had been betrayed. He was convinced we had all been fooled. He swore that even at the grave that girl had put on an act to attract sympathy to herself. He was disgusted. If women could behave like that, he said, they must be rotten inside. He swore he’d never marry.”

“Yet he did.”

“Of course he did. His mistrust must have been temporarily smothered by infatuation. But I doubt if it was entirely extinguished. It had smouldered for too long. One can imagine how it burst into flame when he discovered—God knows how—that Anna was false. His contempt for himself, for allowing himself to be fooled, would probably be greater than his anger with her. He went to pieces, took to drink, and made a bad business worse by

knocking down and killing the other man, for which he had to go to prison for a year.”

“Now I understand many things,” said Colette softly. “I can imagine his feelings when he met Anna looking like that in the Boulevard de Clichy. She had been his wife, and that must always leave something, if only ashes, after the fire is out. But you, being a man, see only one side of this. There is another. If Peter distrusted Anna in his heart she would know it. Her love would die, and so she might turn to another man for sympathy.”

“Are you making excuses for her?”

Colette’s eyes explored Tony’s face. “Are you married?”

“No.”

“Is that because you have this same chip on your shoulder?”

“I’ve never thought about it,” answered Tony tactfully. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you looked at me so strangely when you first saw me.”

Tony smiled. “The reason for that was because you were the answer to a question that had puzzled me for days. In his letter Peter gave me no indication of what Mademoiselle Dufoy was like to look at. I asked myself many times what sort of woman could this be? Sometimes I imagined a ravishing brunette, *à la* Josephine, from the French West Indies, or perhaps Algeria or Morocco. Was she a glamorous blonde from Alsace or one of the Greek types from Nîmes? A fascinating little thing from the French Orient? Or an ultra-sophisticated model in mink from the Champs Elysées. I visualised all types, but——”

“Never one like me,” put in Colette. “A poor little Paris sparrow pecking for crumbs.”

Tony patted her on the arm. “Your crumb-pecking days, I hope, are over. Now let’s get back to realities. Will you come to the apartment tomorrow?”

“Yes, if I may.”

“Good. You’ll find me there. Before you come there’s one thing I’d like you to do for me. Ring up this reporter, Denis Coulestin, and tell him I’m in Paris. I’d like to speak to him because apparently he knows something about Peter’s life here. I shall be at the apartment. Tell him to come early.”

“Very well.”

Peter looked at his watch. “Good Lord! Look at the time. No wonder the waiters are getting fidgety. We’d better be moving.”

He paid the bill. They went out and walked together as far as the car. From there, after a parting handshake in the French manner, she went on alone. With a curious expression on his face he watched her out of sight down the Rue du Bac before getting into the car and heading for his hotel, calling at a garage for petrol on the way.

CHAPTER VI

THE following morning Tony packed his bag, having decided to move to the apartment. There seemed to be no point in travelling to and from the hotel; and if, as Boulenger had predicted, he was likely to be in Paris for some time, his francs would last longer.

This was the only major decision he had reached in a night spent mostly in a maze of doubt, perplexity and self-examination, in which, in some curious way, he saw himself more clearly as Peter had seen him than hitherto he had seen himself. For this the remark in Peter's letter, to the effect that the big bad world might bring out the best in him, may have been responsible. This, he recognised, was a challenge. It could be read no other way. France was to be a proving ground. To prove what? The stuff he was really made of? He could see no necessity to prove anything. Why should he choose a difficult path when the easy high road provided by financial independence was available, as it always had been?

With the possible exception of Peter's crash from grace he had never had a serious problem to face; and that had been more Peter's problem than his own. The only difference it had made to his way of life was to cause him, for the time being as he had thought, to go into a sort of purdah until the affair was forgotten. From this he had never really emerged. His life had become adapted to a mode that suited the retiring side of his nature. If there was another side, as Peter seemed to think, he had never had occasion to look for it. He had taken over his father's directorships, but they did not occupy him full time. He was not tied to a desk. This, his club and the theatre, with occasional visits to tailor, tobacconist, wine merchant or bookshop, had become a routine from which he rarely departed. If this was an empty life, as some of his more frivolous acquaintances of both sexes seemed to think, with it he was content.

In retrospect he surprised himself by the line he had taken with the three men who, unbidden, had had the effrontery to walk into the apartment. That they were criminals was not to be doubted. One of them at least was armed. He felt he should have been afraid of them, whereas he was not. His first reaction, which had been anger and indignation, for all Delano's bombastic oratory and threats had ended in contempt. That they might be capable of murder did not change them from the human jackals they so obviously were.

The role of amateur detective which he now found himself playing whether he liked it or not, he really in his heart resented. He was obeying

more the call of what he thought was his duty than following a natural inclination. For which reason the little hills of difficulty he had seen ahead in the broad light of day had, as so often happens, during the dark hours become mountains.

He had thought a lot about Boulenger. Why hadn't the man told him about the three unpleasant types whom he must have known had been associated with Peter? Why had he been so vague? He may have had reasons, conceded Tony, one being that he was concerned for his safety. There was perhaps no real reason why he should mention them by name.

Another decision he had to make was whether or not to tell the police of Anna's presence in Paris. It seemed unlikely that they had ferreted out that piece of information. As a law-abiding citizen he felt he should tell them. It might give them a new line to follow. But he recoiled from the post-mortem this might open. In it he would inevitably become involved and there was no knowing where it would end. Wherefore he resolved to defer the matter for later consideration.

He had spent a lot of time, too, thinking about Colette, trying to work out what it was about her that made an appeal of which he was already uneasily aware. Her charm defied analysis. From what did it spring? Men could be fascinated by physical beauty of face or form or by an outstanding accomplishment. Again, by a sparkling wit or even a voice—wherein, he recalled, according to Dion Cassius, lay the unique magnetism of Cleopatra. For Colette he could claim none of these attractions. Far from striving towards any one of them, it seemed that she was more inclined to shrink away, even in her meagre use of make-up and the poverty, perhaps unavoidable, of her clothes. Was that the answer? Was it that her naïve simplicity called silently for masculine protection? Or was he fooling himself, flattering his vanity by trying to play prince to a beggarmaid? If she had captivated Peter, and apparently she had, it was, he reflected moodily, no matter for wonder that she had become the central figure in the tangle of facts and theories into which, like a fly in a cobweb, he had blundered.

Having paid his bill, he rang Boulenger's office to tell him of his intention to move into the apartment, as he had said he would, should he decide to do so. The lawyer had not arrived, so he left a message to that effect.

Driving round in the Buick, he arrived in the Rue Varonnesse to find another car parked in the yard, the owner standing beside it smoking a cigarette while he waited. He was a man in the late thirties or early forties, tall, loose-limbed, clean-shaven, with alert eyes and an intelligent face on which the expression was one of cheerful good humour. He wore, somewhat

carelessly, a well-cut semi-sporting suit over spotless linen. He watched Tony park his car and then came forward with a smile to greet him by name.

“Good morning to you,” returned Tony. “You must be Monsieur Coulestin.”

“Denis Coulestin, at your service, monsieur.”

“You’ve heard from Mademoiselle Dufoy?” said Tony as they shook hands.

“She rang me up this morning. May I ask how it happens that you know Mademoiselle Dufoy?”

“My brother mentioned her to me in a letter. Actually, before I could call on her she came to see me last night. She told me of your conversation with her, for which reason, since you appear to have an interest in my brother, I’d like to have a chat with you about him. Will you come to the apartment?”

“With pleasure.”

Tony collected his suitcase from the car.

“I see you’ve brought your baggage,” observed Denis. “Does that mean you’re going to live here?”

“For the time being,” answered Tony, opening the door and observing that Madame Charlot had already been in to do her work. “Please sit down,” he went on. “You will have guessed what has brought me to Paris and what I want to speak with you about?”

“The death of your brother, I imagine.”

“Yes. Did you know him?”

“By sight. Not to speak to.”

“I gathered from what Mademoiselle Dufoy told me that you knew something of his life here in Paris. Of that I am completely in the dark. I didn’t even know he was in France. I’ve heard nothing of him for years and believed him to be in Australia. Cigarette?”

“*Merci.*”

“I suppose your interest in this affair is no more than a story for your newspaper in connection with the murder,” challenged Tony, eyeing his guest critically and deciding that he liked him. But prudence counselled caution and he resolved to feel his way until he knew him better.

“The murder of your brother is only a small part of a larger, more sensational, story, that I have for some time been trying to put together,” stated Denis.

“Well, I’ll tell you frankly that I’m not interested in newspaper stories,” said Tony bluntly. “I’m only concerned with the facts of my brother’s death. I hope I’m no more vindictive than the next man, but I’d like to see the murderer go to the guillotine. Have you any idea of who shot him?”

Denis spread his hands, palms upwards, in a quick movement, essentially French. "I have many ideas, m'sieur, but there are objections to all of them. I know by sight or reputation most of the people your brother knew in Paris. The difficulty is to pick the one who had a really convincing motive for killing him."

For a brief moment Tony considered telling him about Anna, but decided to leave her out of it for the present. That could come later.

"You've heard of a girl named Isobel Brice?" he said.

"Of course. She was the friend of Colette Dufoy."

"Has she been found yet?"

"No. By the way, I suppose you know she had been living with Peter?"

"Colette told me she thought she had. I've learned quite a lot in the short time I've been in Paris, enough to make me feel there's more behind this murder than appears on the surface. If you'll tell me what you know I'll do my best to fill in the gaps. Then, between us, we might arrive at something like the truth."

"Certainly."

"One thing I'm curious about is my brother's connection with those three men whose names you gave Colette."

"Oh, so you know about that pretty bunch."

"They've been here to see me. Colette was here, but they didn't see her because she went into the bedroom."

"What did they want?"

"Money."

"Nothing else?"

Tony's eyes widened. "What else would they be likely to want?"

Denis ducked the question. "So Colette came here! You have been busy."

"So damn busy that I hardly know what I'm doing or what to do next. Actually, as I've told you, I knew of Colette's existence before I came to Paris because my brother mentioned her in a letter that was written in anticipation of his death. It was handed to me a few days ago by the London lawyer who told me Peter was dead. It was largely responsible for bringing me to Paris."

"What did Colette want with you?"

"With me, nothing. She wanted something she thought might be here."

"Did she get it?"

"She's coming today to look for it. But what about these men—Louis, Schultzer and Delano? It looks to me as if one of them killed Peter. He knew his life was in danger. He made a will—incidentally, in my favour. Who else could he have been afraid of?"

“I don’t know of anyone. My first impression was the same as yours. But since they’ve been here I don’t think they killed him because in so doing they would have been acting against their own interests. Moreover, they would have gone into hiding. The fact that they’re still in circulation, short of money, means they haven’t got what they wanted. I’ll tell you what I mean by that presently.”

“They’re crooks?”

“Oh, yes. Delano has done time for smuggling. Louis was a well-known dope peddler while he could get the stuff. In fact, all three of them should be in prison now, and would be had it not been for that clever *avocat* Boulenger.”

Tony started. “Did you say Boulenger?”

“Yes.”

“The lawyer in the Rue Mallorais.”

“So you know him?”

For a moment Tony did not answer. Was this why Boulenger hadn’t mentioned the men? he thought.

“Boulenger,” he said deliberately, “is the man who is winding-up my brother’s estate for me.”

It was Denis’s turn to stare. “The devil he is.”

“Didn’t you know that?”

“No.”

“Don’t tell me he’s crooked, too. What do you know about him?”

“He’s probably the cleverest criminal lawyer in France. The heads he’s saved from the guillotine would make an exhibit in the *Musée Grévin*. He’s defended both Louis and Delano. That’s why they’re still free men. Of course, there’s nothing wrong in that. It’s his job to get people off.”

“He was Peter’s lawyer,” murmured Tony. “Now he’s mine. I don’t like the hook-up with these crooks. I wonder did Peter pay for their defence?”

“Someone paid. Boulenger doesn’t work for nothing.”

“Why does he stay in that back street office if he’s as good as that?”

“Perhaps he doesn’t want to advertise what he makes in a year. I doubt if anyone knows—even the tax collector.”

“Tell me frankly. Do you think Peter was a crook?”

“I’d say not. No charge was ever brought against him. He mixed with some queer people, but his interests may have had nothing to do with common crime.”

“Then what could he have been doing with these three professional crooks? It’s queer.”

“The whole thing’s queer. It’s my opinion the murder was bungled. I believe it was intended that Peter should be shot dead. He wasn’t. As you

probably know, he managed to get home and then died here in his apartment.”

“That’s peculiar, too. Why didn’t he stop somewhere and have his wounds attended to?”

“There may have been something in the car he didn’t want seen had he been taken to hospital.”

“There was nothing in the car. Nothing at all. I’ve ascertained that.”

Denis smiled sadly. “I told you all my theories come unstuck.”

“Do you know what type of weapon was used?”

“A Webley forty-five revolver. Your brother was struck by two bullets, one in the chest and the other in the neck. From the fact that two shots were fired in quick succession the police believe that either the car was stationary at the time or Peter was shot from another car overtaking him.”

“How did you get this information?” Tony asked. “Was it made public?”

“No. But a wise scribe keeps on good terms with the police.”

“Then you may be able to tell me this. Have these crooks been questioned?”

“Of course. They say they spent the evening at the Dome, in Montparnasse. The proprietor says he saw them there, but couldn’t swear that they were there all the evening. As an alibi that sounds weak, but a good lawyer could make much of it. The person the police really want to get hold of is Isobel Brice, but she can’t be found.”

“I wonder if Louis and his pals know where she is?”

“They say no.”

“Naturally. But they were on good terms with her. Colette saw her with Louis three days before Peter was killed.”

“I didn’t know that. Where was this?”

“At a bar off the Bou. St. Germain called the *Colombe d’Argent*.”

“What was Colette doing in a shady dive like that?”

“She wasn’t actually there. She says she saw Isobel on the boulevard and followed her to see if she was coming here. Isobel went to the *Colombe d’Argent* and was joined there by Louis le Lapin. Colette went in a side door and heard her raging because Peter had thrown her out.”

“Oh. So that was the mood she was in! And this, you say, was only three days before Peter was shot?”

“Yes.”

“That would be the Friday. Peter may have left town. He usually went away on Friday or Saturday. Isobel would know all about that. She would also know about the time he usually returned. He was shot on the way home. He had a cottage in the country, a place called Montmarron, near La Ferté St. Aubin, in La Sologne. Did you know that?”

"I only know of it because it's included in the estate. It now belongs to me. I haven't had time to look at it, but I may before I return to England. No doubt Peter will have left some personal things there. It seems strange that he should choose a place so far from Paris."

"It will not sound so strange when I tell you what I know," rejoined Denis. "I came here this morning wondering if I should tell you. Now I think you ought to know. I have been working on this story for months. It will take a little time to tell."

"I am gratified by your confidence, Monsieur Coulestin," Tony said. "I have already told you, without appearing discourteous, I hope, that I am not interested in stories. I am only concerned with what happened to my brother."

"I understand that. But it may be that you have now stepped into his shoes. What happened to him could happen to you. If you don't like that position my advice to you is to return at once to England."

"You are making a great mystery of this," said Tony. "So I may be in danger. What about Colette? Is she in danger, too?"

Denis shrugged. "From what you have told me she may know more than is good for her health."

"In that case please proceed with your story. I wouldn't like anything to happen to Colette."

The Frenchman smiled; an understanding smile. "Of course not. I appreciate that. She is a very charming girl. I found her *naïveté* enchanting. Have you noticed her legs? They are quite perfect."

"You talk as if she were a horse."

"Why not? The legs of women and horses are of equal importance. A horse with bad legs is no use to anyone. A woman with ugly legs can never be beautiful, however kind God may have been to her face. Her eyes can lie, but not her ankles. They are as important as the way she smokes a cigarette."

"What has smoking to do with it?"

Denis looked pained. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed the natural elegance with which Colette smokes a cigarette."

"I have not."

"You should," reproved Denis. "It is a telling point in a girl. A woman will go to much trouble in the choice of a hat or the set of her hair and then ruin it all by blowing smoke as a whale blows spray, or, what is even worse, talking with a cigarette wagging in the corner of her mouth like a terrier's tail. Could you love such a woman?"

"For God's sake," expostulated Tony. "Have you spent your life studying women?"

Denis flashed a sincere, disarming smile. “Much of it. And I shall continue to do so until I find a subject more worthy of my attention, which I hope I never shall.”

“Have a drink,” invited Tony abruptly.

“A little Martini with a dash of syphon, thank you.”

“Now suppose we forget women for a little while and return to the subject that is engaging my attention,” suggested Tony.

Denis sipped his drink and accepted a cigarette. “I believe the history that eventually led to the death of your brother, Monsieur West, began as long ago as 1943,” he announced.

“That’s impossible,” declared Tony. “Peter wasn’t here in 1943.”

“No,” said Denis softly. “But the Germans were.”

CHAPTER VII

TONY looked long and wonderingly at Denis's face as if he found it hard to reconcile his statement with the affair that had brought them together. But at last it registered. "I see," he said slowly. "So it's like that. I'm sorry I spoke out of turn. Please continue."

"Montmarron, your brother's country property—or yours as it is now—is in La Sologne," said Denis evenly. "Do you know La Sologne?"

"I'd never heard of it until I came here."

"That would probably apply to most foreigners," opined Denis. "I must tell you briefly the sort of place it is, because it is not what you would expect to find in the middle of a civilised country like France. You'll find it on the map south of Orleans. It is, in simple words, what most of Europe must have been like ten thousand years ago—forest, lakes, swamps, miles of tall reeds, heather as high as a man and jungles quite impenetrable. Here, in this sanctuary, are found the wild beasts which in most places have disappeared, great stags, smaller deer, the formidable wild boar, foxes, snakes, rare birds, wildfowl, and pheasants by the thousand. A strange, savage domain, a place of silence, with always the smell of decay and rotting leaves in the nostrils; a place where a man may walk for days without seeing another; where a man might die without ever being found."

"How did this happen?"

Denis shrugged. "For the answer to that read your history book. The way things are going all Europe may one day be like Sologne. For centuries this was the battlefield of armies fighting for the crown of France. You English did your share. When the armies were disbanded came the bandits called Free Companies of which your Conan Doyle could write so well. They lived on the land, robbing and burning until there was no one left to rob and nothing left to burn. Then they, too, passed on, leaving only desolation where nature could work its will."

"Why hasn't it been restored?"

"For two reasons. First, it would cost more money than any government could find. Secondly, curious though this may sound, it is more valuable as it is. Early in the nineteenth century, to induce people to go back, a law was made by which money spent in Sologne should be free from taxation. People went back. Who were they? Millionaires, to build fine hunting houses, for here was to be found the best sport in Europe. But after three wars few people could afford to staff the mansions so that their greatness has

departed and many of them are falling into ruins. Travellers on Route Nationale 20 cut through Sologne from north to south, but few have any idea of what lies on either side.”

“And Montmarron is one of these houses?”

“Not exactly. The mansion house was destroyed by fire. Your brother lived in what was a gamekeeper’s cottage. There is no garden. Nothing. Just the house, in a clearing of the forest, with its feet in weeds and brambles. There is no road to it. Only a track.”

“You speak as if you’d seen it.”

“I have. I wrote a book on La Sologne, and it was in doing so that I struck the story I am still pursuing.”

“If my brother wanted peace and quiet he must have found it.”

“I don’t think that was what took him there. He was looking for something else; something, shall we say, more tangible. Shall I continue?”

“You have aroused my curiosity,” admitted Tony.

“I thought that might happen. Very well. During the war, as you can well imagine, a place like Sologne was an automatic retreat for Maquisards, Resistance agents and prisoners on the run. The Cross of Lorraine sprouts everywhere to show where many fought and fell. British agents, both men and women, have left their bones in Sologne. Who remembers them today? Even to the local people who daily risked their lives to help them their names begin to fade, like memories of a nightmare.”

“Perhaps it is better to forget such things,” suggested Tony.

“You may be right,” conceded Denis. “Now I come to the point of all this. One of the chief Gestapo agents trying to control the area was a Prussian named Ernst Leffers, who made his headquarters near La Ferté St. Aubin, where, should you go down, you will see, at the entrance, forty-five of the graves I spoke about just now. Now Leffers, like some others, was as much concerned with feathering his own nest as destroying others. He could collect money in many ways, and, as we know now, he must have amassed a small fortune. British and other agents dropped in were all well provided with money. According to the local people it was possible to buy a man’s life from Leffers if you had enough money. It was dangerous to have money. It invited the arrest of the man of the house so that his life could be bought by his wife. Women parted with all they had to save their men; jewellery, even their wedding rings. In this way Leffers piled up his wealth against, as he supposed, the day of victory. I am not suggesting that the German higher command knew anything of this. It was Leffers’ own private racket. As it happened, he didn’t live to enjoy it. He was shot dead by a woman he was questioning.”

“That’s one bright spot in a murky story, anyway,” said Tony.

“Where Leffers hid his hoard has never, to my knowledge, been discovered. His men must have known what had been going on. There is reason to think they looked for the money. But Leffers had hidden it too well and they didn’t find it. But one of them at least did not forget it. After the war he came back in disguise to look for it. What his real name was I don’t know, but today he passes as a Pole named Schultzer. Stanislaus Schultzer. You tell me you have seen him.”

“Yes. He was one of the three who came here.”

“That he is still hanging about can only mean that as far as he knows Leffers’ hoard has not been found. Otherwise surely he would have departed.”

“Why don’t the police arrest him?”

“I understand he has a Polish passport.”

“Do the police know about this money?”

“Perhaps. But there are many such rumours in France, so little attention is paid to them. Now you see the story I am after.”

“That’s all very well,” protested Tony. “But how does my brother come into this?”

“I will tell you what I think, for now we must fall back on surmise. Let us for the moment switch from Leffers’ cache to your brother. He arrived in France with a British passport five years ago. He had some money, but not very much, I think, or he would not have become associated with Serge Rodinsky.”

Tony frowned. “That name rings a bell. Wasn’t he a black market currency manipulator?”

“That’s the man. Eventually he made the mistake they all make—how it happened is not important—and the police got what they had been waiting for. When Rodinsky knew the game was up he committed suicide. Naturally, your brother, who had often been seen with him at the tourist bars round the Madeleine or the Opera, came under suspicion. In fact he was questioned. But apparently nothing could be proved against him, so the matter was dropped. He may have been innocent or he may have been lucky. I don’t know. He was certainly lucky on the Bourse and made a lot of money gambling. We now come to a new phase in the affair.” Denis finished his drink and declined another.

“Having been in the Resistance myself, I was collecting material for a book on the Maquis. This, as I have told you, took me to La Sologne, and it was there I first heard the rumours of Leffers and his hoard. Going through official captured documents, I came upon a photograph of a group of men who had been on Leffers’ staff. I recognised one of them as one of the three men I had seen together in Paris. The man now known as Schultzer. The

other two I knew from covering the Rodinsky case. Both were men who had somehow slipped through the net when the collaborators were rounded up after the war. They were Louis le Lapin, who had been born in Salbris, which is in La Sologne, and an American named Delano, who during the war arrived in Sologne pretending to be an escaped prisoner, but was in fact a deserter from the United States Army. All these men, therefore, knew La Sologne. One of them had been on Leffers' staff. That started me thinking."

"Where does my brother come into this?"

"I don't know for certain, but the hook-up wasn't hard to surmise. Peter knew Rodinsky. Louis and Delano had worked for Rodinsky as currency touts near the travel agencies. When Rodinsky killed himself they were arrested, but Boulenger defended them and they got off. They were then out of a job. I worked it out that these three men, Schultzer, Louis and Delano, had known each other in Sologne. Your brother must have known Louis and Delano through his association with Rodinsky. They introduced him to Schultzer, who had come to France hoping to find Leffers' hoard. Being short of money, they let your brother into the secret to get financial backing while they continued the search. I was working on it, too, and my suspicions were more or less confirmed when your brother bought a house in Sologne and started going there for week-ends. That, I believe, was the original association of your brother with these crooks."

"Do you know in what particular area of Sologne this hoard is supposed to be hidden?"

"It's reasonable to suppose it was near Leffers' office."

"Where was that?"

"Montmarron. The big house, of course."

Tony stared. "Good God! My brother's place. My place."

"The big house has gone. It was destroyed by fire. What's left of the estate is yours. Now do you see where you come in?"

"All too well."

"And where, if you aren't careful, you might go out."

Tony lit a cigarette. This was something else to worry about. "Do you think Schultzer had a clue to Leffers' hoard?" he asked.

"I don't know. He may have had an idea. It couldn't have been much of a clue or he would have helped himself. In my opinion, if anyone found that money it was your brother."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because of the way the party broke up, although once a man mixes with scum he's bound to find it difficult to shake off. Those three crooks followed your brother about demanding money. Now they're going to start on you. They came to see you to survey the ground, to judge the sort of man you

were. But let me finish. I was still watching the game when a new factor crept in. Your brother, who, to the best of my knowledge, had no affairs with women, suddenly took up with two I couldn't place at all."

Tony waved a hand towards the photographs. "Who are these?"

"Theatre people. When Peter was gambling on the Bourse he was doing the night life regularly. He gave parties and that naturally brought the parasites along. Being a good-looking man with charming manners, not to mention money, he was popular. But I don't think he had a serious affair. Suddenly he dropped all this and started taking about two unsophisticated young girls with whom he could have had little in common. They were two struggling student artists sharing an attic room."

"Isobel Brice and Colette Dufoy."

"Yes. I couldn't work that out. Then Colette dropped out of the party and he seemed to be keeping the other. Once or twice I believe he took Isobel to Sologne. Then that broke up and I was left as much in the dark as when I started."

"And you thought Peter had found Leffers' money?"

"Yes. I had no way of confirming it, of course."

"So you called on Colette to find out how much she knew."

"Yes. She didn't know anything about what I was really after, which was finally complicated by the death of your brother."

"She may know more now."

Denis shook his head. "She doesn't think on the lines of Isobel Brice. It didn't take that one long to dig gold once she knew it could be found in Peter's pocket. That's her, by the way." He pointed to a photograph of a laughing girl, a sultry-eyed platinum blonde, sitting on a cocktail-bar stool with her skirt pulled up over her knees to show plenty of leg.

Denis went on. "That's about all. My story of the Leffers affair came to a dead end the day your brother was murdered."

"But you must have a theory about that," insisted Tony.

"No, except that in some way the murder was tied up with Sologne. I can't help feeling that Montmarron would be a good place for you to keep away from."

"Where exactly is it?"

"Keep on N.20 until you're some kilometres through La Ferté St. Aubin. You come to some straggling houses—call it a village. Just past the last house, which has some firewood stacked against the wall, there's a turning to the left. After seven or eight kilometres you'll come to a fork. A signboard points to the right. It's only a track. The house is about three kilometres from there."

"I may run down," said Tony.

“Be careful.”

“Those crooks won’t get any money out of me.”

“Don’t underestimate them. Little rats can have poisonous teeth.”

“But you don’t think they bit Peter.”

“They would have done had it suited their purpose, but I can’t see what they had to gain by it. Your brother may not have been a golden goose, but he did sometimes drop a few *mille* notes to save them from starvation. Colette saw Peter give them money. They had no other source of income.”

“It sounds mighty like blackmail to me.”

“Probably you’re right. It’s hard to think of any reason why he should give them money except to keep them quiet.”

“Well, I’m much obliged to you for this information, although it still doesn’t answer the question of who killed my brother,” said Tony. “But I’ll tell you this. I can’t believe he had any interest in Leffers’ hoard.”

“Why not?”

“For two reasons. In the first place he had no need of the money, and secondly, it wasn’t the sort of money he’d care to touch. He told me in his letter that his money was clean, and I believe that. Had it not been true he wouldn’t have said it. Peter may have done some queer things, and he may have dropped a rung or two down the social ladder in his choice of companions, but I can’t see him sinking as low as that.” Tony flicked the ash off his cigarette. “Now I’ll tell you something you may not know, something I don’t think the police know. For the moment at any rate I don’t want them to know for fear it would drag me into something I’d rather forget. I have good reason for thinking that Peter’s ex-wife is in Paris, working, if not as a harlot, as something unpleasantly like it.”

Denis pulled a face. “That is news. Did Peter know this?”

“I believe he ran into her by accident one night near the Place Pigalle.”

“Had she any reason for killing him?”

“No more reason than any of the others. But she certainly had no love for him.”

“How was that? Had he done something to her?”

“He killed her lover in London, if you’d call that something.”

Denis whistled softly. “To a certain type of woman that would be something.”

“She was, I’d say, just that type of woman,” said Tony in a hard voice. “She claimed to be Russian. I’ll admit I may be prejudiced against her because, without any doubt whatever, she ruined my brother’s life.”

“Hm. This is a new angle,” murmured Denis.

The door opened and Madame Charlot, dressed for outdoors, marched in.

“*Bonjour*, M’sieur West,” she greeted breezily. “I saw you arrive with your baggage. Does that mean you are going to stay?”

“Yes.”

“*Bon*. That is what I thought. I am going to the market. Can I get you something?”

“Yes, we might as well have something in the house to eat. I don’t want to go out to lunch.” Tony took a five-thousand franc note from his case. “Get some cold food, meat, bread, cheese, wine, a salad—anything you like.”

“Certainly, monsieur. Leave it to me.” The woman took the note and departed.

Denis looked at his watch and got up. “I must get back to the office. Call me if I can do anything at any time.”

“That’s very kind of you,” acknowledged Tony. “I’ll let you know if there are any developments. Don’t for the moment say anything to anyone about what I’ve just told you.”

“Not a word,” agreed Denis.

Tony saw his visitor to the door.

“Remember: be careful,” were Denis’s last words.

CHAPTER VIII

IT was after twelve when Colette arrived.

“Why are you so late? I expected you earlier,” said Tony, taking her coat.

“I thought you would wish to talk to Monsieur Coulestin without me. Besides, I have my work to do; my little pictures.”

“How’s business?” inquired Tony lightly, with a smile.

Colette made a little grimace. “Not good. Perhaps it is the season, but Pierre says there are not many customers. Many look, but they do not buy. Did Monsieur Coulestin come?”

“Yes. We had a long talk.”

“Did you like him?”

“Very much. I found him most entertaining—and on certain subjects instructive.”

“Did he tell you anything about Peter?”

“Yes. He was able to give me some very interesting facts. I’ll tell you about that later. We must try to find your letter. With Monsieur Coulestin here I haven’t had an opportunity to look for it. Now we can start, unless you’d rather go out first and have some lunch. Madame Charlot is bringing in some food, so you needn’t go out if you don’t want to.”

“I’d rather stay here if you don’t mind,” returned Colette quickly. “I am always a little afraid now when I am out. When I have found the letter, and destroyed it, it will be different.”

“Of whom are you most afraid?”

“I think Isobel. She hates me now because she knows Peter would rather have been with me than with her. She would hurt me if she could. If she saw that letter she would hate me more. I wouldn’t like that to happen. I didn’t write it because I hated her. I was sorry for her. But I was afraid for Peter.”

“There’s still no news of Isobel.”

“That is very strange. I can’t think of anywhere she might go.”

“Has she always lived in Paris?”

“Always.”

“Then she may have relations here.”

“She never mentioned any to me. She once told me she was an orphan.”

“Well, let’s forget her and get on with the work. I have plenty to do apart from the letter. I’ll make a fire in the grate and burn anything not wanted. We’ll start with these.” Tony began collecting the photographs, pausing

when he had taken the one of Isobel from its frame. So this was Peter's girl friend, he thought, contemplating the smiling face.

Colette was watching. "You find her beautiful, m'sieur?" she asked quietly.

"She's pretty," Tony had to admit. "But I wouldn't trust her from one end of a bar to the other. And if Peter did he must have been out of his mind," he added, tossing the photograph into the fireplace.

"You said yourself that a pretty face can put men out of their minds," she recalled.

"Not all men," came back Tony. "She wouldn't have a chance to put me out of mine. She's not my type."

"So you have a type."

"I imagine all men have a type they admire although they may not know it until they meet it. Then it's seldom the type they thought they admired."

Tony pulled a side drawer right out of the desk and put it on the table. "You start with this," he ordered. "Keep any papers separate and I'll go through them afterwards. I'll tackle this one." He pulled out the long middle drawer and took it to a small table nearer the window.

For some time there was no sound but the rustle and crackle of paper as he took letters, mostly bills and receipts, from their envelopes, crushed them and threw them into the fireplace. There were a lot of press cuttings, Australian as well as French. These, too, went into the fireplace.

It was when he turned to put a match to the growing pile that he saw Colette sitting at the table with her face in her hands and her elbows resting on a stack of what appeared to be white cards.

"Have you found it?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

He went to her. No further question was necessary. The answer was there before his eyes. The pile of white objects were the marginal mounts of water-colour drawings. Of Paris. He didn't know what to say. A wave of compassion swept through him as he realised what had happened and how she must be feeling. Plainly the blow had been a double one, right on the heart. It was not simply Peter's action in buying up her pictures that hurt. She was an artist—or striving to become one. She had thought her little pictures, from the way they were being bought, had genuine merit. The knowledge that they had been bought for a different reason, the prosaic one of providing her with pocket money, must have struck like a knife thrust. She knew now why her sales had dropped since Peter's death.

Tony cursed the luck that had caused him to give her that particular drawer, for had he found the pictures he would have taken care she didn't see them.

He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Never mind," he said awkwardly. "Peter was only trying to help you." He frowned as he spoke. The remark sounded so futile.

She raised a tear-stained face. "I worked hard because I thought I must be improving when Pierre told me the drawings were selling better. And all the time it was only Peter buying them."

"Somebody else would have bought them if he hadn't."

She shook her head. "No. They were bad. I always knew they were bad."

"You must not say that, because it isn't true." He picked up a sketch of the flower sellers at the Concorde end of the Rue de Rivoli. "There's nothing wrong with this," he declared. "To me it looks good."

She looked up. "You really think so?"

"If I didn't think so I wouldn't say it."

"Then why don't people buy my pictures?"

"Because with thousands of artists in Paris trying to make a living the market is flooded with *aquarelles* like this. They hang in rows in every art shop and on every stand along the river bank. There are more pictures than there are tourists. Why don't you break away from what everyone else is doing and try something different?"

"How would I live while I was doing that?"

"Listen, Colette. You would have to start by eating your pride. Peter would have helped you. You know that."

"I had nothing to give him back."

"You gave him the thing he needed most. Can't you see that had you been more generous you would have given him less? You would have destroyed the very thing he most admired in you. I know that to many of the new generation to talk of virtue in anything or anybody sounds antiquated and pretentious: but there are still people to whom it means something, and Peter, although he might have scoffed at the idea, was one of them. That may have been his weakness. He expected everyone to live up to his own standards. That included me. As boys he often made my life miserable by taunting me for falling short of his own ideals. Most men boast of their conquests with women, but in his letter to me Peter boasted of his failure with you."

"Is it true?"

"One day I'll show you his letter. He didn't mention Isobel. But he asked me to call on you. That was why, as soon as I was in Paris, I came to see where you lived. How otherwise would I have known about you? I'll admit I was curious to see the girl of whom Peter thought so highly that he could put her on a pedestal."

"Is that why you're looking after me now?"

“That’s not a fair question, Colette. I confess it was the original reason.”

“Peter didn’t trust me. I always knew that in my heart.”

“That didn’t stop him from falling in love with you.”

“He didn’t ask me to marry him.”

“That was not so much because he didn’t trust you as because he couldn’t trust himself. That was where he was foolish. He should have married you. You would have restored his confidence. Had you let him down he would have thought no worse of women than he did already. But why talk of this now? He tried to help you in the only way he could think of without causing you embarrassment. That was why he bought your pictures and why you must forgive him for doing that.”

Colette looked at the pile. “What can I do with them now?” she asked lugubriously.

“You can’t do anything with them.”

“Do you mean nobody will buy them?”

“No one will have the opportunity. These pictures are not yours. Peter bought them. Now they are mine, and I’m going to keep them.”

She half smiled. “Of course. I hadn’t thought of that. How silly of me to think they were mine.”

He patted her on the shoulder. “Come on now. Dry your eyes and let’s get on with our work before Madame Charlot comes in. If she sees you looking like that she may jump to wrong conclusions.”

When Madame Charlot arrived a few minutes later the search had been resumed. She turned on them the shrewd eye of a woman for whom life held no more secrets. If she did jump to any conclusion she made no comment.

“Just put the things in the kitchen and we’ll help ourselves when we’re ready,” Tony said with studied nonchalance. “Mademoiselle Dufoy is helping me to turn out the things I shall not require,” he explained.

“*Oui, monsieur.*” Madame Charlot departed. Being French, she no doubt realised that there are times when the services of a *femme de ménage* are not required either.

“You might have a look to see what she has brought us for lunch,” said Tony presently.

“Would you like me to lay the table?” offered Colette practically.

“If you would, please,” replied Tony, wondering what Peter would think could he see what was going on in the apartment. Nothing is more futile than to imagine the impossible, but it is a common human weakness.

The meal was taken almost in silence. What little conversation there was to Tony sounded forced; the almost inevitable result, he supposed, of a mounting consciousness of the intimate nature of his relationship with Colette. In this he did not try to deceive himself. His interest in her, he knew,

was more than her mere existence as a factor in Peter's affairs. How far, he wondered, were his feelings towards her being actuated by sympathy? Certainly his sympathy was sincere. The sight of her sobbing over the little pictures that meant so much to her had done something to him. What alarmed him was the urge that had made him want to show his sympathy in something more expressive than words. Only by an effort of will had he restrained himself from taking her in his arms and whispering condolences as one comforts a hurt child. The reason why he did not was because he felt it would be taking an unfair advantage. At least that was one reason. Another was because Colette was not a child. At first he had thought of her as one, a kid in a mended pullover with a cheap handbag and an ingenuous manner. But not now.

Actually he wanted to think about the extraordinary story Coulestin had told him, a story that had let in a flood of light but had done little or nothing towards solving the mystery of Peter's behaviour and death. All Coulestin had done, he thought, was dazzle the picture so that nothing could be seen clearly.

He told Colette some of the things he had learned. But they obviously meant little to her. She had no interest in Leffers' alleged hoard, and very little in Peter's possible association with it. Peter was dead, so what did that matter now? she argued with some force. The people responsible were alive, and should they learn she had overheard the conversation in the *Colombe d'Argent* they might kill her, too. They knew where she lived. She couldn't leave Paris. She would feel safer, if not happier, if the letter she had written could be found and destroyed. If it was still in existence sooner or later someone would find it and her part in the affair be exposed. The police would blame her, too, for concealing what she knew.

Lunch finished, the search was continued. Tony wanted to leave the table for Madame Charlot to clear up, but Colette wouldn't have that. So they cleared up together and proceeded with the main task.

Before long, as he threw more and more papers on the fire, Tony found himself wondering what was going to happen if and when the letter was found. He regarded with something like dismay the idea of Colette walking out of his life. If for no other reason than that it was Peter's last request he felt morally bound to help her. How? That had been Peter's difficulty. She would no more take money from him than she would from Peter. After what had happened, to go on buying her pictures secretly was unthinkable. He was beginning to doubt if they would find the letter, anyway.

By tea-time they had been through all the likely places. There was a great heap of ashes in the fireplace. He finished by going through the pockets of Peter's clothes, although that seemed even more like sacrilege.

"It's no use, Colette," he said at last. "The letter isn't here."

"No," she said hopelessly. "It isn't here. And you know why."

"What do you mean?"

"Somebody has taken it. Things were pushed into these drawers anyhow. Peter wasn't like that. Someone has been through these papers."

Tony did not deny it. The same suspicion had struck him early in the search, but he had not mentioned it for fear of alarming her.

"It must have been the police," he said. "Naturally, they would search the apartment."

"It was not the police." Colette shook her head.

"How do you know it wasn't?"

"Because had they found that letter they would have come to me for an explanation," said Colette, meeting Tony's eyes squarely.

Tony did not argue. He knew that what she had said was true. Had the police found that letter they would have gone to her hot-foot to ask what it meant. It would have been a deadly piece of evidence against Isobel, a discarded mistress who had once been Colette's friend and room companion. The police wouldn't be likely to overlook that. They would accuse Colette of trying to shield her.

"There is still one place where that letter might be," he said pensively.

"Where is that?"

"In Peter's house at La Sologne. Have you ever been there?"

"No. But I know of it."

"Peter usually went there for week-ends. According to Monsieur Coulestin, he went sometimes on Friday, sometimes Saturday. It was on Friday that you saw Isobel with Louis at the *Colombe d'Argent*?"

"Yes."

"And you wrote the letter to Peter the same day?"

"Yes."

"And posted it?"

"Yes."

"Then he should have got it on Saturday morning."

"Yes."

"You see what I'm getting at? Had he gone to Sologne on the Saturday he might have taken the letter with him. To put it in his pocket would have been a natural thing to do. Or, of course, he may have read it and burnt it. We must always consider the possibility of that. If he took the letter with him the chances are that he would read it again when he got there. In fact it's practically certain that he would. After all, it was no ordinary letter. It was a serious warning, and coming from you, he wouldn't just toss it aside as a joke or a thing of no account."

“Well?”

“Let us assume that he received the letter before he started for Sologne. Having read it, he wouldn’t leave it about for Madame Charlot to read. He’d put it in his pocket and take it with him. When he arrived he’d read it again. Would he put it back in his pocket afterwards? I don’t think so. He’d put it down. Or he’d put it somewhere. Peter was no fool. I can’t see him coming home with that letter in his pocket knowing that if an attempt was made on his life, and it succeeded, the letter would be found on him and involve you—never mind anyone else. In fact had he put the letter in his pocket the police would have found it, in which case you’d have known about it.”

Colette accepted a cigarette. “Yes,” she said. “I didn’t think of that. The letter could be at Sologne. What can we do about it?”

“I’ll go and look for it. I have a key—Peter’s key as a matter of fact. The house is mine now, so really I ought to see it. Would you like to come with me?”

“We couldn’t get there and back in a day, and search the house. No doubt there will be more clearing up to be done.”

“I had intended staying the night.”

“That means I can’t come.”

“Hm. No, I suppose not. I don’t like the idea of leaving you alone in Paris with those crooks on the prowl and Isobel still at large. If you came I could probably find you a room at an hotel not too far away. I could stay at the hotel myself if it comes to that. It’s up to you. Will you come?”

“Yes. It would be nice to get out of Paris for a little while.”

“When shall we go? It’s too late to think of going today.”

Colette did not answer at once. Slowly, as she stared at him, her eyes opened wide. A little frown creased her forehead. “An awful thought has just occurred to me,” she breathed.

“What is it?”

“Isobel. She may be hiding there.”

Tony, looking concerned, thought for a moment. “She couldn’t get into the house without a key.”

“She may have a key.”

“That seems most unlikely. Why would she need a key? I doubt if she ever went there alone. I could understand her having a key to this apartment, but not for Montmarron—that’s the house at Sologne. She couldn’t get there without Peter. The place is miles from anywhere.”

“I wonder could she have gone with him the last time he went there?”

“She was obviously on such bad terms with him when you saw her with Louis on the Friday that it’s hard to imagine her going off to spend the week-end with him.”

“She might have pretended to patch up the quarrel to get money.”

“Even so he wouldn’t leave her there. She would have come back with him in the car.”

“Perhaps she didn’t come back with him. It’s strange that she hasn’t been seen since.”

For a moment he didn’t get it. When he did, horror leapt into his eyes. “Are you suggesting that Peter took her there—and—came back—without her?”

“No,” cried Colette. “No. That isn’t possible.”

Tony was silent. He was thinking of the fate that sometimes overtakes unwanted mistresses who throw their weight about, in conjunction with Coulestin’s description of the place. Colette was emphatic that such a thing was not possible; but she didn’t know what he knew—that in a fit of blind rage Peter had killed a man. The argument that men had been doing the same thing for the same reason since the dawn of history didn’t alter the fact. He had slain a man. In the same mood might he not kill a woman? The bare possibility made Tony feel sick.

He said: “I shall definitely go to La Sologne. I’m not looking forward to going to the place, but it’s something that will have to be done, and the sooner the better.” His tone of voice was grim.

As a matter of fact he was fast becoming sick of the whole business. He didn’t want to hear any more about Peter’s past, which was revealing little to his credit. He was becoming afraid of what he might uncover next. The implication that he might have killed Isobel came as a shock that had made his brain reel. He knew that had it not been for Colette he would have packed his kit forthwith and gone back to England, leaving Boulenger to wind up the estate. That, he felt sure, was what Boulenger would like him to do.

“Do you still feel like coming with me to Sologne?” he asked abruptly.

“If I may.”

“Do you think you should?”

“Yes.”

“How about tomorrow? We could make an early start.”

“I will be ready at any time you say.”

Tony switched on the light. Things were gloomy enough without sitting in fading twilight. From the river came the blare of music.

“Let’s have some tea,” he suggested. “Or would you prefer coffee?”

“Shouldn’t I be going home?”

“Have you any urgent reason to go?”

“No. But I shall soon have to start work on some more pictures.”

“Try to forget them,” he pleaded. “Don’t think I don’t know how you feel about them, but being miserable——”

“Won’t make them any better.”

The muscles of Tony’s face stiffened. “Now you listen to me, young lady,” he said firmly. “You’re not going to do any more painting unless you want to. I don’t care whether you paint well or badly; I’m having no more of this nonsense of you starving yourself to death, to say nothing of ruining your eyes, by clinging to some well-meaning but cockeyed principle that you can’t take anything without giving something for it. That may have worked with Peter, but it won’t work with me. You’re going to take what I give you, and I don’t expect anything in return. The sooner you forget this crazy notion, that a woman has only one thing to offer a man, the better. If I sound brutal it’s because I can see I shall have to be. Now you get this into your little head. Keep your imagination off the one commodity with which the market is always overstocked. As far as I can see, it’s about the one cheap thing left in the world, and Paris in particular. Now do you understand?”

“*Oui, monsieur,*” answered Colette with a meekness that her eyes belied.

“Good. Now let’s get on. For a start, what you need is good red wine,” decided Tony. “This is my idea. Tell me what you think of it. We’ll have a cup of tea and tidy up some of this mess we’ve made. Then we’ll go and dine at any place you care to suggest.”

Colette smiled. “I think that’s a very good idea. Had you said that to Isobel you’d have had an expensive evening.”

“Oh, forget Isobel. Let’s forget everybody except ourselves.”

“Then let’s go again to the *Frégate*. It’s quiet there, and we can talk.”

“That suits me,” declared Tony. “I can eat without music. We’ll make arrangements for tomorrow. How’s that?”

“*Formidable,*” said Colette.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN, a little before midnight, Tony dropped Colette in the Boulevard St. Germain, having arranged to pick her up at ten o'clock the next morning, it was in an introspective mood that he returned to the Rue Varonesse, and having parked the car in its usual place walked on through the gloomy portal and up the steps to the apartment.

From the contemplation of a day in the country with Colette he was jerked to the sterner realities of life by the movement of a scarcely discernible shadow on the landing outside his door. A shoe scraped on stone.

"Who's that?" he asked crisply.

"It's me—Louis," came the reply from the darkness.

"What the devil do you want?" Tony spoke with his back to the wall, eyes probing for the speaker.

"A word with you, M'sieur West."

"What about?"

"I'll tell you inside. Not here."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Where are the others?"

"I don't know."

"Are you sure they didn't follow you?"

"By God! I hope not."

"I can believe that, anyway," said Tony, not troubling to keep a sneer out of his voice.

"In this world, monsieur, it is every man for himself," stated Louis shamelessly.

"Don't try any tricks," warned Tony.

He unlocked the door, and reaching in switched on the light. "Come inside," he invited, side-stepping to allow Louis to go first so that he could keep an eye on him. He closed the door. "Well, what is it?" he inquired caustically.

Louis moistened his lips with a nervous tongue. "Can I have a drink?"

"No. Get on with whatever it is you have to say."

"I've come to tell you something."

"Why should you tell me anything, and why should I believe you?"

"Because I need money."

"Ha!"

“I haven’t eaten for two days.”

“It wouldn’t worry me if you never ate again.”

“I must have food.”

“If you expect to feed here you’ve come to the wrong place.” Tony’s voice was still brittle.

“I can tell you something you want to know.”

“What you mean is you’ll sell me some information.”

“Exactly, m’sieur,” admitted Louis unblushingly.

“What’s this information about?”

“I can tell you who killed your brother.”

“Have you told the police?”

“I tell the police nothing. To hell with them. Let them find out. I shall tell you nothing unless you promise not to repeat what I can tell you.”

Tony hesitated. The idea of a transaction with a scoundrel such as he knew Louis to be, and who, he suspected, driven by necessity was prepared to play Judas, turned his stomach; but he perceived it might be the easiest way to the answer of a problem that was becoming more instead of less abstruse.

“How much do you want for this information?” he asked.

“It would be cheap at a hundred *mille*.”

“It would be too expensive for me. You look like staying hungry. I’ll let you out.”

“Fifty *mille*.”

“You seem to forget I’m an Englishman with a small allowance of francs. I’ll give you twenty *mille*. No more. Don’t argue. Take it or leave it.”

There must have been something in Tony’s voice that told Louis that haggling would be futile. “All right,” he said. “Give me the money.”

“Not so fast.” Tony took two five-thousand franc notes and laid them on the table. “You’ll get the rest when you’ve finished.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Not one centimetre.”

Louis picked up the notes, put them in his pocket and regarded Tony with half-lidded eyes. “Your brother, monsieur, was murdered by Isobel Brice. You will have heard of her.”

“The police know that already.”

“They suspect. They don’t know. I do know.”

“How do you know? Were you there?”

“I wasn’t far away.”

“Go on.”

“I’ll tell you exactly what happened. On the Friday before your brother was killed Isobel was spitting like a wildcat in a trap because your brother

had kicked her out.”

“How do you know?”

“I was with her.”

“Where?”

“We had a drink together at the *Colombe d’Argent*. She swore she’d kill him. I told her not to be a fool.”

Tony realised that so far at any rate he was hearing the truth. “Peter was killed on Monday night,” he reminded.

“Correct.”

“You told the police you were at the Dome at the time it must have happened.”

“The others were there all the time, but not me. I went out.”

“Go on. I’m listening.”

“It was like this. I was at the Dome with Schultzer and Del. We were near broke and wondering what to do for money when Isobel came in. She’d had plenty of drink and was looking for more. She was still mad. We told her she’d come to the wrong place. We’d no money either. After a while she said she knew how she could get some. Peter had gone to Sologne.”

“How did she know that?”

“The car wasn’t in the yard. She’d been there to look. She knew what time he’d get back because she’d been there with him and he always started for home at the same time. She said she’d go and wait for him.”

“Just a minute,” interposed Tony. “Why did she suppose he’d give her more money?”

“She reckoned she could make him.”

“How?”

Louis smiled unpleasantly. “Her idea was to tell him she was in the family way.”

“By him, I suppose?”

“You’ve got it.”

“Was that true?”

Louis made a noise like a corncrake, which was apparently his way of laughing derisively. “Of course it wasn’t. She was too smart to step on that banana skin. But Peter wasn’t to know it. Isobel swore he’d pay.”

“Why should he?”

“If he refused she’d spread the news.”

“In a word, blackmail.”

Louis shrugged. “Call it that if you like. Her trump card was she’d tell Colette Dufoy.”

“Why her in particular?”

“Peter was soft about her. Isobel knew that. It was one of the things that made her mad and started her on the booze.”

“Go on. Come to the point.”

“Isobel said she’d go to the yard and wait for Peter to come. When she’d got some money she’d come back to us at the Dome. I said I’d run her down to the Rue Varonesse in the car and wait for her.”

“Why?”

“Why? To make sure she came back, of course.”

“That’s how far you trusted her?”

“I’d trust that little slut about as far as you’d trust me, and you’ve said how far that is. So I took her down, dropped her at the corner, parked a little way down the street and waited. I saw her turn in the yard. Oh, yes, up to that point she was on the level. A little later I saw that old cow, Madame Charlot, who does the apartments at number eleven, come out. She didn’t see me. I took care she didn’t. We reckoned Peter would get back at a quarter to twelve and that was the time he came. I know that blue Buick. It turned in the yard. I waited. Isobel didn’t come. Charlot went home with a bottle in her hand. That worried me because I thought Isobel would bump into her, or come on them arguing in the yard. I heard François shut the gates. That meant Isobel couldn’t get out without calling to him for the cord. He swears she didn’t call to him.”

“How do you know that?”

“We asked him a day or two afterwards.”

“So you know him?”

“Sure I know the drunken old sot.”

“What did you think had happened?”

“What could I think? What could anyone think? Naturally, I thought that crooked little bitch had patched it up with Peter and was spending the night with him, leaving us to starve. That’s what I told the others when I went back to the Dome. Of course, I know now that didn’t happen.”

“What do you think now did happen?”

“That’s easy. Only one thing could have happened. Peter wouldn’t stand for her story and refused to pay. There was a row, at the end of which she did what she swore in front of me she’d do. She shot him. Then she gave me the slip. It’s dark at the bottom end of the street, and it wouldn’t be difficult for her to get out without me seeing her. She must have been out and hiding somewhere before François shut the gates. I went back to the Dome. There was nothing else I could do.”

“Did you hear any shots fired?”

“No, but I wouldn’t, on account of the traffic in the street behind me. Remember, I was sitting in the car all the time.”

“How do you account for the bullet holes in the car?”

“They prove what I say. Peter wasn’t in the car when he was shot. The police stepped off with the wrong foot when they saw those holes in the door. They took it for granted he was inside. Work it out for yourself. He got a bullet in the body and another in the neck. That’s what the police say. From the position of the holes in the door he should have got two in the body had he been sitting in the car. A shot in the neck would have been higher. It would have gone through the window unless it was open. Sit in the car yourself and you’ll see what I mean. Peter was out of the car when it happened. And it happened in the yard, not on the road, as the police seem to think. When I heard Peter had been killed I was never in any doubt about what had happened. It was all too easy. That silly little bitch Isobel was tanked up like an Atlantic plane. She should never have gone near Peter in that state. As it was, she went mad and shot him. Seeing what she’d done, she crept away without me or anyone else seeing her.”

“Why should she be afraid of you?”

“She knew it wouldn’t suit us to have Peter bumped off.”

“Why not?”

“He owed us money.”

“For what did he owe you money?”

“We were in a deal together. The four of us. We reckon it came off, too. He got the money and pulled a fast one on us.”

“My brother wasn’t that sort of man. If he owed you money he would have paid.”

“Then why didn’t he?”

“You should be better able than me to answer that question. By the way, did you come here after my brother was killed? I don’t mean when you came to see me.”

“I believe the others looked in one night.”

“Don’t lie. If they came here you came with them. What did you want?”

“We were looking for something.”

“Did you find it?”

“No.”

“Why did you come to see me?”

“To have a look at you and maybe find out how much you knew.”

“About what?”

“I didn’t come here to talk about that. You’ve had your money’s worth.”

Tony took two more notes from his case and put them on the table. Louis picked them up, put them in his pocket and moved towards the door. “I’ll give you a tip,” he said slyly. “Keep clear of Schultzer and Delano. They still reckon to get their cut.”

“From me?”

“Who else?”

“They’re wasting their time.”

“I’ve told you. But you needn’t worry about me. Remember that. I aim to keep my head on my shoulders. Like all Yanks, Delano talks big. That damn Boche, Schultzer, doesn’t say much, but he’s poison. Not that I’m afraid of him. I know enough to send him to six guillotines if he had six heads. That’s all.” Louis went on to the door.

Tony let him out. “François will have closed the gates. You’ll have to shout because he may have gone to sleep.”

“Okay.”

Tony turned, closed the door, poured himself a stiff drink and dropped into a chair. Again he felt he needed time to think.

Did Louis really believe that Isobel had shot Peter? That was the first question he asked himself. And the answer was yes. His story had rung true. It fitted with the known facts. His meeting with Isobel at the *Colombe d’Argent*, for instance. He could not have known that part of the conversation had been overheard and passed on by Colette. Again, how could he have known about Madame Charlot’s excursion had he not been in the vicinity on the fatal night? If these things were true, and they were, then the whole story might well be true, in which case his summing-up of the situation was reasonable. The reason why he had not told his story to the police was obvious. His character being what it was, he preferred not to be involved. Indeed, had he admitted taking Isobel to the Rue Varonesse, even without mentioning her purpose in going there, which was plain blackmail, he might have found himself held as an accessory. Hence his assertion that he had been at the Dome. That, on his own admission, was a lie. Was the whole story a fabrication to shift the blame from his own shoulders?

Then there was the question of the bullet holes in the car. His argument made sense. Without giving the matter serious thought, his mind being occupied with other things, Tony remembered he had thought there was something odd about this when Coulestin had given him details of the wounds from which Peter had died. Without much difficulty it was possible to visualise the picture. Isobel was waiting in the yard when Peter had driven in. There would, inevitably, be an argument. Isobel in a fit of temper had shot Peter deliberately or by accident. But had it been an accident there would not have been more than one shot. It now looked as if there might have been three. One of the first two had struck Peter in the body. Peter, either because he could not, or would not, return the attack, had run, trying to escape, whereupon Isobel had fired again, hitting him in the neck. Then

she, too, had fled. Peter had managed to reach the apartment when he had collapsed and died.

Tony was thankful that Louis' visit had relieved his mind in at least one respect. Isobel had not gone to Sologne with Peter. That being so, there was no risk of finding her there.

Thus reasoned Tony as he reclined in his chair, still groping for the truth. Not that it was of any great importance now. Feeling that he had arrived at somewhere near it, although there were still one or two weak spots, he finished his drink and, weary of the whole business, went to bed. There was, however, one bright spot. Colette. He knew that were it not for her he'd pack up and catch the next train home. He couldn't leave her now. Apart from any wish of Peter's he didn't want to leave her.

CHAPTER X

THE morning saw Tony up and dressed by eight. It was, he was please to note, a fine day, with only a few wisps of cirrus cloud flying high in a turquoise sky. The sun, still anaemic, but gathering strength as it advanced from its winter retreat, was able to make itself felt through the window.

When Madame Charlot brought in the coffee and a *croissant* Tony was watching the familiar picture of a line of barges chugging up the river. In the stern of one, flying the Belgian flag, a buxom female was preparing her vegetables for the day while a boy swilled water, pulled up from the river in a bucket, across the after-deck. On the far bank the usual anglers were already engaged or putting up their rods, watched with astonishing patience by the usual curious spectators. How many times, reflected Tony, must Peter have looked out on that same scene? He had by now accepted the fact that Peter was dead, but in some strange way he now seemed more alive than he had at any time during the past seven years.

A question to which he had given some thought was should he tell Boulenger he was going to Sologne. In the end he had decided against it, firstly because it seemed hardly worth while since he expected to be away less than forty-eight hours, and secondly because he was in a frame of mind to keep his movements to himself.

“*Bonjour, m’sieur. Beau temps,*” greeted Madame Charlot with boisterous cordiality.

“*Bonjour, madame,*” returned Tony. “On such a fine day I do not feel inclined to stay in Paris. I shall take a trip to the country and return tomorrow.”

“An excellent idea, m’sieur. Shall I bring in some more food? I still have money left from yesterday.”

“Yes. You might get something in. I leave it to you. You can tidy the room after I’ve gone.”

“*Entendu, m’sieur.*” The woman bustled out.

Tony was finishing his coffee with a cigarette when the phone rang. With some anxiety, hoping that nothing had happened to upset his arrangements, he picked up the receiver.

It was Denis Coulestin, speaking from his office. “A piece of news has just come in that I think will interest you,” he announced.

“I’m listening.”

“Louis le Lapin was fished out of the river early this morning just below the Pont Neuf.”

Tony could hardly comprehend. “Do you mean he’s dead?”

“Very dead.”

“Good God!” Tony was genuinely shocked.

“I thought you might like to know that you have one rogue less to deal with,” said Denis cheerfully.

Tony thought swiftly. “What do the police think about this?”

“From the fact that there are no marks on the body they’re inclined to think it was suicide. He had no money in his pockets. Not a sou. The doctor says he hadn’t eaten for days.”

“What about the other two—Delano and Schultzer?”

“They appear to be out of town. They didn’t sleep last night at their usual lodgings.”

“Where did you get this information?”

“I told you the police were friends of mine.”

“I suppose there’s no doubt about this?”

“None whatever.”

“Who identified the body?”

“The police themselves. They know Louis. They had his fingerprints.”

“Are you going to put this story in your paper?”

“A small paragraph, perhaps. The affair is of no importance. This sort of thing happens here too often to have any news value.”

“Are you busy?”

“Not particularly. Why?”

“Because if you like to come round here I’ll return the compliment by telling you something; but make haste because I am to meet Colette at ten for a day in the country.”

“*Toute-suite*,” said Denis.

Five minutes later he walked in. “You know something about this affair of Louis?” he inquired.

“Yes. Sit down. I can tell you something, but I must ask you not to put it in your paper—not yet, anyway. The last thing I want is publicity: nor do I want the story of my brother’s death raked up again. After I’ve left France you can do what you like.”

“I understand.”

“First, tell me this. Who found Louis’ body?”

“A man fishing caught a fish he didn’t want.”

“When was this?”

“Soon after daylight this morning.”

“And you say he had no money in his pockets?”

“Not a franc.”

“Then it doesn’t look like suicide to me. He was here last night. When he left, just after midnight, he was in good health and spirits with twenty thousand francs in his pocket.”

Denis whistled. “Name of a dog! Where did he get that?”

“I gave it to him.”

“The devil you did. For what?”

“A piece of information he claimed to have. When I came home last night he was waiting for me. He told me he hadn’t eaten for two days and needed money for food. He said he could tell me who killed Peter. He asked a hundred *mille*, but because I hadn’t that much on me he accepted twenty.”

“And who did he say killed Peter?”

“Isobel Brice.”

“How did he know?”

“He said he was outside in the street at the time it happened.”

“Do you believe this?”

“He believed it. Even allowing that he was a prize liar, he had good reason to believe it. He said he himself brought Isobel here in a car and was sitting in it outside, waiting for her, at the time the murder must have been committed. His story was feasible, and part of it was certainly true because it confirmed something Colette had told me.”

Denis stroked his chin reflectively. “The trouble is, these people are not only liars, but clever liars. In the sort of life they lead they have to be. Also they are schemers. This move of Louis’ last night may have been a plot for a new line of approach to you, or a way of putting themselves in the clear should Isobel be found and squeal on them. You may be sure her story of the murder would be very different from the one Louis told you.”

“His story sounded plausible to me. I couldn’t see a weak spot in it. Part of the story was certainly true because, as I say, I was able to check it with what I knew to be fact. This business of Louis meeting Isobel at the *Colombe d’Argent* on the previous Friday, for instance. She was in a blazing fury with Peter and making wild threats. Colette saw them there and heard part of the conversation. Again, how could Louis have known what time Madame Charlot went out and came back if he hadn’t been there? He even knew that when Charlot came back she was carrying a bottle—which in fact she was.”

“Somebody may have told him that.”

“Who?”

Denis shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ll admit Louis’ story has the ring of truth in it, but it would have to have that to make any impression on you. A

story that could have been pulled to pieces would have been no use at all. But to me there is one questionable spot in it, perhaps the most important.”

“What is it?”

“The motive behind the murder.”

“Isobel was a discarded mistress.”

Denis smiled wanly. “Oh, come, Tony. If that was a sufficient motive for murder the male population of France would drop at the rate of ten per cent per annum.”

“Isobel has a passionate temper. Colette admits that.”

“In an affair of the heart any woman can have a passionate temper,” argued Denis. “But that doesn’t mean she’s prepared to commit murder in cold blood.”

“I’ll tell you something else,” went on Tony. “Those crooks broke in here after Peter’s death. Louis, naturally, wouldn’t admit he was in the party. They came to look for something, and in view of what you told me I can guess what it was.”

“Did they find it?”

“Apparently not.”

“What do you think they were after?”

“Leffers’ loot, or a clue to its whereabouts. They believe Peter found it and held out on them.”

“It’s possible.”

“I don’t believe it. Had Peter found that money as a result of what they told him he would have given them their share. If he didn’t, he must have had a damn good reason.”

Denis got up. “Well, watch out for Delano and Schultzer. They must be desperate for money and I fancy they’re still hoping to get their hands on Leffers’ hoard. Their big problem at the moment is to decide how much you know about it or if you know anything about it at all. That of course is why they came to see you. Had you known anything about it you might have given yourself away. As it happens, you didn’t.”

“I don’t know about being desperate for money,” said Tony, trenchantly. “Unless I’ve missed my guess they must still have the best part of the twenty thousand francs I gave Louis last night. He wasn’t as smart as he thought he was. He ratted on the others and practically admitted it by bragging to me it was every man for himself. He fooled himself when he said they didn’t know he came here. They were watching him. Alternatively the three of them had concocted the scheme and Louis merely acted as spokesman. It doesn’t matter which because it came to the same thing in the end. With twenty *mille* in his pocket Louis had no reason to drown himself. You can forget about suicide. If that money wasn’t found in his pocket what became

of it? I'd say Delano and Schultzer followed Louis here. They waited outside and asked him what his game was. Louis may have been fool enough to tell them. If he didn't they must have guessed it. They knocked him on the head, took the money, put him in the car and dumped him in the river. Then they beat it out of town. Nothing could have been easier. By the way, which of them owns the car?"

"Delano. It's an old black Citroën on its last legs—or rather, tyres."

A thought struck Tony. "If the money I gave Louis was found on them they'd find it difficult to explain how they came by it."

"They would; but unfortunately five *mille* notes are common currency and one is like another."

"Not exactly. Notes, you may remember, have numbers. It happens I can tell you the numbers of the notes I gave Louis because they were new ones from the bank and should be in sequence with those I have left."

"Ah!" breathed Denis. "That is interesting. Show me your notes."

Tony took out his case and peeled off the top note.

Denis took it. "Are you going to change this?"

"I shall have to change it presently."

"I'll change it for you." Denis took his own case from his pocket, counted out five one-*mille* notes and handed them over. "Thank you," he said politely. "It's useful to be able to help the police. It encourages them to be co-operative with people like those of us who earn our livings on the newspapers."

Tony looked at his watch. "I must be getting along. I'm to pick up Colette at ten opposite the statue of Danton, in the Bou. St. Germain."

Denis chuckled. "What place more appropriate for a modern Scarlet Pimpernel. La-la. How your Baroness Orczy hated our Minister of Justice of the Revolution."

"At least she told the world about that bloody-minded devil," said Tony, coolly.

Denis waved a reproachful finger. "Propaganda, my friend, the sort of sugar-coated propaganda snobs adore. Why do you think we raised a statue to him?"

"God knows."

Denis smiled sadly. "Our Revolution derived its sinister reputation from the unusual circumstance that the heads that fell in the basket on that occasion happened to be noble. Had they been proletarian there would have been no Scarlet Pimpernel and the affair would have occupied no more pages of the history book than similar events through the centuries. France is still paying for the follies of its Kings. But let us admit that the ingenious

Baroness told a good story and leave it at that. This is not the time for politics. In case I need to get in touch with you where are you going?"

"I'm going to have a look at Montmarron, Peter's cottage in Sologne."

A twinkle appeared in Denis's eyes. "And Colette is going to advise you on the interior decorations, eh?"

"Possibly."

"You'll have to go fast to get there and back in a day."

"I shan't attempt it. I'll come back tomorrow."

Denis smiled. "Well, good luck."

Tony scowled. "If I stay the night at Montmarron Colette will go to an hotel," he said, coldly.

Denis looked mildly surprised. "But why go to all that expense? There's plenty of room in the house."

"Monsieur Coulestin," returned Tony, curtly, "I don't want you to get any wrong ideas about this trip. You may find this difficult to understand, and even more difficult to believe: I realise this sounds stagey, priggish and puritanical, but my intentions where Colette is concerned are sincere, and if I may use the word, honourable."

Denis bowed, making a little *moue* as if to acknowledge that he had gone too far. "A thousand pardons, monsieur." Then he beamed. "Bravo! Colette is a charming girl. Have a happy day."

Tony's face relaxed. "Listen, Denis. I think it's time I made it clear how I feel about this whole business. I didn't come to France with the intention of hunting down my brother's murderer. That is a matter for the police. I came here to see Peter's lawyer and sign some documents in connection with the estate. A secondary consideration was Colette who, when I arrived, was no more than a name. In his last letter Peter asked me to try to help her, and I was prepared to do that if I could find a way of doing it without making it so obvious as to hurt her pride. He was, I believe, in love with her. From the outset I seemed to get caught up in a current which carried me along regardless of where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do. To complicate matters I have myself become—er—interested in Colette. I admit she is now my chief interest."

"But that is magnificent," declared Denis, enthusiastically. "What more of life can a man ask than to be in Paris and in love? Congratulations!"

"It's a bit early for the congratulations," said Tony, dryly. "Colette doesn't know anything about this yet."

"No? Excuse me if I smile. If she doesn't know already I'd make a little wager that she'll know by the time you come back." Denis suddenly became serious. "If you are going to Sologne watch out for Delano and Schultzer.

They have an interest there, don't forget. They have left Paris and there is a chance that they also may be on Route Twenty. *Au revoir*, and good luck."

"*Au revoir*."

They shook hands.

Tony put on his hat and coat, picked up his suitcase, and presently followed Denis out.

François was sitting on his doorstep sunning himself and smoking his crooked pipe.

"*Bonjour*, Monsieur Legendre," said Tony, opening the door of the car.

"*Bonjour*," mumbled François, bleary-eyed, hardly taking the pipe from his teeth.

It struck Tony that he hadn't yet heard the *cordonnier's* version of the events in the yard on the night of Peter's death. It could wait, he decided, for another delay would make him late at the rendezvous. Apart from that it was not really important. He had heard the old man's story from others. Moreover, if Madame Chariot's opinion of his veracity was justified it seemed more than likely that he would by this time have allowed his imagination to elaborate on it.

So he went out, and on the stroke of ten found Colette waiting on the pavement with a canvas travelling bag at her feet. He smiled, for she had obviously dressed for the occasion.

She wore a little dark grey wool dress with a touch of crisp white pique at the neck as only a Frenchwoman knows how to twist it. On her head was a wisp of something in white brushed wool, neither hat nor beret. On her shoulders sat a glowing red coat, by no means new, but again shrugged on as a Frenchwoman seems to know by instinct how to do it. Perhaps it was this that gave her a glow, a little more colour as she waved a greeting.

"We have a fine day," she observed brightly, as Tony jumped out to open the door for her.

"Perfect," agreed Tony.

"You see I have put on my best dress for you?"

Tony bowed. "Mademoiselle looks adorable. I will try to show my appreciation of the honour by making the day a happy one for you."

"I am happy already," asserted Colette, with virginal candour.

"Then I am happy, too," returned Tony. "And we can begin the day on a piece of news that relieves my mind, and will, I think, do the same to yours. I have learned, no matter how, that Isobel did not go with Peter to Montmarron the last time he went there. So, if she did not go with him he couldn't have left her there. She was in Paris the night he died. You understand what I mean."

“You were, I think, a little afraid of what we might find at Montmarron,” said Colette, softly.

“Just a little, perhaps, because I know that Peter could have a violent temper when he was upset. The bare possibility of what might have happened made me feel ill. But we can forget that now. Here we go.”

CHAPTER XI

TONY left the city by the Porte d'Orleans and was soon speeding down the broad highway of Route 20. Conversation was inclined to be sporadic. For the first time since their first meeting there seemed to be an atmosphere of restraint, as if both of them were at loss for words. Colette, nestling low in her seat, seemed content, so Tony did not persist in making remarks merely for the sake of saying something. He did consider telling her of the fate of Louis le Lapin, but refrained on the grounds that it would strike a discordant note.

By noon the Buick was in Orleans, feeling its way through big American cars from the United States units stationed there. Tony stopped long enough by the cathedral to enable Colette to buy a basket and fill it with food in case it should be required for a picnic meal later in the day.

They went on again, crossed the Loire, and a little later pulled up for lunch at an *auberge* overlooking the Loire. The temperature had risen appreciably since they had left Paris, and with the sun now spreading heat with a lavish hand they were able to have their meal outside.

They did not hurry. With time their own there was no need for haste. Such establishments are not conducive to gastronomical speed, anyway.

By the time the coffee stage was reached conversation had brightened considerably, with the result that it was after three o'clock before they were again on the road.

The eternal open plain and flat fields of the country north of Orleans, across which the road with its *betteraves* warnings and interminable avenues, ran as straight as the flight of an arrow for mile after mile, with only an occasional church tower or electric cable pylon to break the horizon, now gave way to what Tony had been led to expect from Denis's description of La Sologne: wide stands of natural deciduous timber and conifers alternating with jungles of herbage indigenous to the country—heather, reeds and scrub, much of it secondary growth of silver birch. And so it continued, with now and then a carriage drive on one side of the road or the other, signposting the estate to which it led, all the way to La Ferté St. Aubin.

At the entrance to the straggling little town Tony took his foot off the accelerator to allow the car to cruise to a stop by lines of wayside headstones. "What's all this?" he asked.

“*Champ de Repose*,” said Colette, softly. “*Morts de la Resistance*. They were schoolboys massacred by the Gestapo.”

“For what?”

“For not working for the Germans.”

Tony had heard of this, but to see the site in its stark reality brought the tragedy home in a way that made him feel cold inside.

“My God!” he muttered, through his teeth. “Some of the people in my country who think they had a hard time in the war should see this. It would give them an idea of what occupation really means.”

He drove on. “I may be a moral coward when it comes to this sort of thing but I wish I hadn’t seen that. It has taken the warmth out of the sun. And to think that rat Schultzer has had the damned impudence to come back here.”

Tight-lipped and silent he went on, now following Denis’s instructions for finding Montmarron. After what he judged to be the right distance, a scattered village, ending in a cottage with poles of firewood leaning against the gable end, gave him his turning.

After some kilometres of dusty lane with pit props stacked at intervals he came to a fork where a lopsided board on a stick, with the word Montmarron just discernible, gave him his direction. Trees now interlaced their branches over a track that deteriorated rapidly to a winding band of weedy sand. An occasional pheasant, dusting, paid no more attention to the car than to stand aside for it to pass. This went on for some distance. Eventually it dipped over a rotting wooden bridge which spanned a sluggish stream that snaked darkly through the forest. Rising again, the track turned sharply, and after another hundred yards or so lost itself in an acre or two of open ground shared by heather, thistles and other weeds with here and there the whitening skeleton of a long-fallen tree.

On the far side of the clearing, at a distance of seventy or eighty yards, facing them as they approached, was a small house, its shuttered windows staring sightlessly like blinkered eyes.

“Well, I suppose this is it,” said Tony dubiously, creeping on in bottom gear. “What a place to choose to live—alone, too. If Peter wanted solitude, a house in the country, he certainly found it. This isn’t a home for a man. It’s a hole for a hermit. Peter was no Diogenes. Why he should choose a spot so far off the map defeats me, unless . . . I’ve no objection to a little rural life but this is too much.”

He swung the car round and brought it to a stop on a patch of weedy sand and gravel whereon a rabbit, a survivor of the myxomatosis, had left its marks and made some exploratory scrapes.

On all sides, nowhere more than fifty paces distant except in the direction of the track, outposts of the natural forest, chestnut, oak and birch, knee deep in tangled brambles, stood silent guard over the gloomy battalions behind them. There was no sound: not even the chirp of a bird. Nothing moved. The scene was as devoid of life as a photograph. Not even a twig moved. So still were the trees that they created an impression of being spectators, watching the intruders. The crash of the car door as Tony slammed it was like a challenge, an affront to the Almighty who, in a moment of irritable disaffection had laid a curse on His own handiwork.

“We’ve come at the wrong time of the year,” said Colette.

“This place would be grim at any time of the year,” returned Tony.

Together they looked at the house, holding hands in the manner of lost children in a fairy tale. It was little more than a square brick box with twin dormer windows upstairs. Between them a single chimney pointed a forlorn finger at the sky. Some new tiles, healthy with the bloom of youth, lying shoulder to shoulder with others far gone in senile decay, suggested with some fresh green paint on door and windows that a comparatively recent attempt had been made at restoration. A climbing rose had been planted at the door. Abandoned and unable to climb without support it had fallen, and in falling, died. A little to one side, with a new bucket on the rope, was a well.

Tony unlocked the front door and pushed it open. It did not creak as he felt it should but swung smoothly on its hinges.

“We’ll open the shutters and let some air into the place,” he said, dropping his voice a tone to be in accord with the mute surroundings.

“I wouldn’t care to live here,” murmured Colette.

“You won’t have to,” Tony assured her. “Let’s get on with what we came to do before we’re stricken with melancholia.” He opened the shutters, picked up the two cases, and followed by Colette carrying the food basket, entered, leaving the door open.

There was no hall. They stepped directly into the living-room and into the musty aroma of a house that has been closed for some time; but it was not as objectionable as might have been expected. Colette put down her basket, drew the curtains and together they looked around.

The furniture was of the simplest possible nature, provided for utility and reasonable comfort without any attempt at decoration. A single rug partly covered the brick floor in front of a large open fireplace flanked by two arm-chairs. Two common kitchen chairs were pushed under a central table on which stood an old-fashioned oil-burning lamp. There were no pictures on the walls. The places where they might have been were occupied by two mounted roe deer heads and the grinning mask of a fox which, from

their condition, had been gazing at each other through a layer of dust since the days of the gamekeeper tenant. A cheap bookshelf was fully laden with French and English titles. Under it, on a side table, was an untidy heap of French newspapers and periodicals. Beside them were several packets of cigarettes. Also on the table a heavy paper-jacketed edition lay open, as if it might have been put down a few minutes earlier. Peter must have been reading it the last time he came here, Tony thought, and his eyes focused on the title. It was *La Sologne, au Temps de l'Héroïsme de la Trahison*, by Paul Guillaume. It lay open at a page listing columns of names under the heading, *Fusillés en Sologne près de La Ferté St. Aubin*. Some of the names had been ticked.

With a resurgence of hatred for Hitler's henchmen laying a cold hand on his heart Tony turned away to explore the rest of the house. There seemed to be no getting away from death in Sologne. What a depressing book for Peter to sit and read in his lonely retreat, was all he could think.

The second ground floor room had not been furnished except for a cheap deal table pushed against the wall. Apparently Peter had used it as a gun room for on the table lay a double-barrelled twelve-bore sporting gun, some loose cartridges and cleaning materials. From a hook on the wall depended a leather cartridge belt still holding some cartridges, a gamebag, a well-worn mackintosh and an old tweed hat from the band of which protruded a row of woodcock pin-feathers. There were some pheasant feathers on the floor. A cardboard carton held a few bottles of wine. Some empty whisky and brandy bottles stood beside it.

A door from this room gave access to a small kitchen equipped with a few ordinary cooking appliances. From here yet another door led into a lean-to fitted as a toilet. The centre was occupied by a large portable tin bath with a mat beside it. There was no towel, no soap or brushes. A pair of gum boots had been thrown in a corner.

Investigation upstairs, reached by complaining wooden stairs, revealed two bedrooms, one double and one single, both furnished with a certain amount of taste but in a fashion as simple as was compatible with comfort. There were curtains in both rooms. Each had a chest of drawers. Each was empty. Tony opened the windows a little way to let in some fresh air.

They made their way back to the living-room.

Tony lit a cigarette from one of the packets on the side table. "If the letter you're so worried about is here, Colette, it shouldn't take long to find it," he remarked. "There are few places where it might be. But as we're here I suppose we might as well look for it."

Colette began her search. Tony pulled one of the hard chairs from under the table and watched her, occasionally making a suggestion. As he had

observed, there was so little furniture that, assuming Peter had brought the letter with him, unless he had been at pains to hide it, it must have been found in a matter of minutes.

“It isn’t here,” said Colette hopelessly, after going through the papers and magazines on the side table. “I wasn’t optimistic about finding it, anyhow.”

“You’d better try to forget it,” advised Tony. “I can’t believe it’s as important as you seem to think. It’s certainly less important than it was yesterday.”

“How can that be?”

“Of those three crooks the one from whom you had most to fear was Louis, because he was the one you saw with Isobel when she was talking of shooting Peter. I imagine you mentioned him in the letter. Is that right?”

“Yes. But I’m just as much afraid of Isobel, because if she knew what I said she’d fly into one of her passions. When she’s like that she doesn’t know what she’s doing. But what is this about Louis?”

“Louis is dead,” stated Tony, shortly.

“Dead?” Colette’s eyes sauced. “How?”

“His body was fished out of the river early this morning.”

“How do you know?”

“Denis Coulestin rang me up to tell me. He said he thought I’d be interested. Actually, I was more interested than he imagined.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Because I didn’t want to upset you. Or, to be quite honest, I didn’t want to spoil our day by talking about the miserable business. I wanted to escape from Paris with its unhappy memories. If you must know the truth I wanted to be with you. Coming to La Sologne gave me an excuse for that. Now it seems that far from escaping all I’ve done is set myself another problem to solve. I’m dizzy with trying to work out who killed Peter but I can’t shut my eyes to it.”

“Of course not. I understand that. Peter was your brother. What’s the trouble now?”

“The trouble is, there’s something about this place that doesn’t fit with what we know or what most people believe. Denis was right when he told me there is always something in this affair that doesn’t fit. I’m becoming more and more convinced that the reason for that is either because we’re on the wrong track altogether or else there’s more behind it than we’ve even begun to suspect. Everyone—the lawyer, the police, Denis—is quite sure that Peter had been here for the week-end when he was shot; one of the reasons being that the key of the house, the one I used to get in, was found in his pocket. Louis was certain he’d been here. So was Isobel.”

“How can you know that? Nobody has seen Isobel since the night of the murder.”

“Louis told me.”

“When?”

“Last night. He came to see me. When I went home last night after leaving you he was waiting for me outside the apartment. He told me he’d had nothing to eat for two days because he had no money. He was desperate. He offered for twenty thousand francs to tell me who shot Peter. He knew for certain who did it.”

“And you gave him the money?”

“Yes. I hated doing it, but it seemed worth it to have the truth—if he really knew it.”

“And who did he say did it?”

“Isobel.”

“*Isobel!* Could he prove it?”

“I’m sure he believed it himself, unless he was a better actor and a more astute liar than I’m willing to allow. According to him Isobel was with them that night at the Dome. None of them had any money. Isobel produced a plan to get some by blackmailing Peter by pretending she was going to have a child by him. Actually, that was not true. Louis said he drove her to the Rue Varonesse where she was to wait for Peter to come home from Sologne. As his car wasn’t in the yard she assumed that was where he had gone. As a matter of fact Peter did arrive home at exactly the time he would have returned had he been to Sologne. They all believed he had been here. Louis didn’t claim to have seen Isobel shoot Peter but he saw her go into the yard, and was still waiting for her outside in the car when Peter drove in. He didn’t see Isobel come out. At the time he thought Isobel had gone into the apartment with Peter and was spending the night there; and we can’t blame him for thinking that. When he heard Peter had been shot he came to the quite natural conclusion that there had been an argument in the yard which had ended with Isobel doing what she had threatened to do. She shot him and then bolted without anyone seeing her.”

“I suppose that could have happened.”

“On that evidence Isobel wouldn’t have a hope of escaping conviction by the judge. The fact that she had been drinking wouldn’t make her chances any brighter.”

Colette looked at Tony inquiringly. “Has something happened to make you doubt this story?”

“Not entirely. But I don’t believe Peter came here that week-end, and if he didn’t, where did he go? Who did he see? Those questions introduce the new factor of a person or persons unknown.”

“Why don’t you think he came here?”

“Because if he had he would have brought with him the things a man takes with him for a week-end. I expected to find them here. Toilet things. Razor, brush, towel, toothbrush, pyjamas and so on. They aren’t here. I assumed they would be because they’re not at the apartment. What happened to them? I’m assured there was nothing in the car, absolutely nothing, when the police arrived at the Rue Varonesse. Peter wouldn’t just throw his things loose in the car. He would have put them in a bag or a suitcase. Where is it? What happened to it? I don’t pretend to be a detective but it boils down to this. If Peter left his things here they’d be here now. They’re not here, so he must have taken them home with him, which is what one would expect. If he took them home they should have been in the car. There was nothing in the car. The things aren’t in the apartment. What became of this bag or case? Obviously, somebody took it. That raises the question, why?”

Colette shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t know, either. But what I do know is, somebody is lying.”

“If Isobel had been here with Peter she would know he always took a case.”

“Would she be interested in it? Even if Isobel did shoot Peter why should she bother with the case? His things would be no use to her. What she wanted was money, and Peter would hardly put money in his travelling bag. A man carries his money in his pocket. I’ll speak to Denis about this when I get back to Paris. There may be a simple solution. There’s just a chance the police may have taken the case and said nothing about it, perhaps forgot it. But let’s not worry about that now. The important thing is your letter isn’t here.”

“It might have been in Peter’s bag which has disappeared,” said Colette, anxiously.

“In that case it’s no use looking for it.” Tony glanced at the window. “It’ll be dark in half an hour. Let’s close the house and get away. I’ve seen enough of it. I don’t feel like driving back to Paris tonight and I’ve no intention of staying here. The place gives me the creeps, both inside and outside. I don’t know which is the more depressing. We’ll find an hotel in the village or, failing that, in Orleans, for the night.”

Tony went out and, with Colette lending a hand, fixed the shutters.

As they went back to the door she stopped suddenly. “Listen,” she said, tersely.

They listened attentively.

“I hear a car coming,” went on Colette.

Tony frowned. "Who the devil can it be at this hour?" Although he asked the question he thought he could answer it. "Let's get inside," he said.

They went in. Tony remained in the doorway, watching the spot where the track ended.

The sound of the car came nearer. A car appeared, ran on a little way into the clearing, stopped for a minute, did a tight turn and came to a halt with its nose pointing down the track. It was an old black Citroën.

"Has it stopped?" asked Colette, from behind.

"Yes. It stopped when the people in it spotted the Buick."

"Who could it be?"

"I know who it is," said Tony, grimly.

"Who?"

"Delano and Schultzer."

"Oh, no! Don't tell me that," cried Colette.

"It's true," Tony had to admit.

"What can they want here?"

"No doubt we shall know that before very long," replied Tony. "If you asked me to guess I'd say they came here for one of two reasons. Either they followed us here, or guessed I would come here, or, what I think is more likely, they came here to hide not knowing I was here. I happen to know those two nasty pieces of work know their way about La Sologne."

"Why should they hide?"

"Because they know the police may be looking for them to question them about Louis who, without the slightest doubt, they threw in the river. I fancy the body was found rather sooner than they expected. I should have thought of that. In fact, Denis warned me that they might head in this direction. I'm sorry, Colette: I should have had more sense than to bring you here. I'll go and ask them what they're doing on my property."

Colette clutched his sleeve. "No! Stay here," she pleaded.

"I'm not having them hang about here."

"They may shoot you. With no one for miles it would be so easy." Colette was near panic.

"Rubbish. Like all cheap crooks their bark is worse than their bite."

She clung to him. "For God's sake, Tony, don't leave me here alone. Think of me if not of yourself. If they hurt you I couldn't get away. I can't drive the car."

"There's no need to get upset. They may go away now they know I'm here."

"They haven't gone. The car is still there."

"They're probably talking it over."

“Then let us stay here. Please, Tony. If anything should happen to you _____”

“But listen, dear. We can’t shut ourselves up in the house. In order to get away we must go down that track. We shall have to go sometime. It’s getting dark. If we don’t go now we shall be here for the night.”

“Do you think I mind that?”

“All right. If you don’t mind, I don’t. All the same, I object to having my movements governed by those two crooks.”

“At least give them a chance to go away. Remember, they may have killed Peter, and if they did they may kill you.”

Tony made a gesture of resignation. “Very well. I could kick myself for bringing you here.”

“Did you buy a pistol as you said you would?”

“No. I wasn’t serious. Come to think of it, though, there’s something here better than a pistol should those rascals start any nonsense.”

He went through to the gunroom and returned with the twelve-bore and a handful of cartridges. With a feeling that he was being melodramatic he loaded the gun and put it on the side table with some spare cartridges.

“Now,” he said, cheerfully. “If they try being tough with me they’ll find I can be tougher with them. Are they still there?”

Colette was peeping. “I don’t see them. The car’s still there. I can just see it. It’s nearly dark.”

Tony closed the door and locked it. Then he lit the lamp.

“That’s a bit brighter,” he observed. “Let’s have something to eat. I see no reason to starve. It’s a good thing we brought something in with us. Ha!” He laughed softly.

“Is there something funny about this?” asked Colette, wonderingly.

“That depends on how you look at it,” answered Tony. “The odd thought just struck me that if poor old Peter could see what was going on in his house at the moment he’d be more than somewhat amused.”

“Amused? At what?”

“At me, playing knight errant, holding the fort, so to speak, with you, of all people. I may be flattering myself but I fancy he’d highly approve. What can I pass you, mademoiselle?”

CHAPTER XII

TONY fetched a bottle of wine from the gunroom and opened it.

For some time they ate in silence, each knowing the other was listening. What was happening outside they did not know, for deep night had fallen and the windows were shuttered. Inside, the oil lamp cast a limited circle of light on the table. Once, resenting his imprisonment, Tony made a tentative suggestion about going out to see if the car was still there; for apart from the Citroën he was concerned about the Buick, fearing that it might be stolen or immobilised, leaving them stranded. But Colette wouldn't hear of it.

"It would be madness to open the door now; you couldn't see anything in the dark," she argued, with sound common sense.

As time wore on without incident the tension relaxed. Tony was sure the men had gone. He could think of no reason why they should stay there, doing nothing. He said so.

Colette could find two reasons. "They are either waiting for you to open the door or they're waiting for us to go," she declared emphatically.

That this might well have been so was brought to their notice when, following a sharp rap on the door that brought both of them to their feet, a voice called, in English: "Say, West, are you going to stay there all night?" The voice, unmistakably, was Delano's.

"What has that to do with you?" came back Tony, crisply.

"You saw us. Are you going to leave us shut out here?"

"I'm not leaving you anywhere," returned Tony. "You can go where the hell you like but you're not coming in here."

"It's getting cold."

"That's fine. I hope you freeze to death."

"You're not going to let us in?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't like you. I don't like anything about you. And I like your friend even less. He must have a brazen hide to come to Sologne."

"We were pals of your brother."

"That doesn't make you pals of mine."

"You're not forgetting what happened to him?" Delano's voice was becoming harsh.

“I shall never allow myself to forget it; and if you were responsible for that I’ll see that you don’t forget it, either.”

“Do we have to go on yelling through the door?”

“If you want to go on talking you’ll have to. But you needn’t yell. I’m not deaf.”

“Let us in and we’ll talk it over friendly.”

“There’s nothing to talk over. Go away.”

There was a brief interval, then Delano came back. “You give us a fair share of the dough and we’ll call it quits and leave you to it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” This, of course, was not strictly true. Tony had a pretty good idea.

“Don’t give me that,” sneered Delano. “Peter told you plenty. We know that’s why you’re here.”

“Peter told me nothing. Now push off.”

“Listen, pal. If you don’t open this door we’ll bash it in.” Delano spoke as if his patience was exhausted.

“Go ahead,” invited Tony, calmly. “But I warn you, the first man who comes into this house will meet a charge of buckshot coming the other way. And I’m not fooling. Did Peter never tell you that he kept a shot gun here?”

In the interval that followed, a conversation in low tones could be heard going on outside. Tony lit a cigarette and threw a reassuring smile at Colette who, a little pale, was staring at the door.

“That’s given them something to chew on,” he murmured.

Delano came back on another tack. “Listen, West. Let us in and give us a drink and we’ll tell you the whole story.”

“I’m not in the mood for fiction.”

“Hell’s bells! Don’t you want to know who killed your brother?” It was clear that Delano was becoming exasperated.

“I know who killed him.”

“Like hell you do. You’ve been listening to that yellow squealer Louis.”

“He won’t talk any more.”

“How do you know?”

“You should know.”

“We know he was with you last night.”

“Who told you?”

“François.”

This was an answer Tony did not expect. He probed further. “So François is on your pay roll?”

“He kept an eye on things for us.”

“You mean he kept an eye on Peter and told you what he was doing?”

“He had damn-all else to do. He’d sell his soul for a bottle of absinthe. We had to know what Peter was doing. We know why Louis came to you.”

“His coming to me had nothing to do with my coming here.”

“I guess he told you his yarn about who shot Peter.”

“What if he did?”

“I reckon he blamed it on to Isobel. If you believe that you must be nuts.”

“All right. So I’m nuts.”

“You believe that?” Delano’s voice cracked with incredulity. “For God’s sake! Your brain must be rolling in your skull. Shall I tell you who really shot Peter?”

“Please yourself.”

“It was Louis—Louis himself.”

“Now tell me why Louis should shoot him.”

“He wanted what he thought Peter was bringing back with him, the dirty double-crosser.”

“I still think it was Isobel,” said Tony, still prompting. “She had a better reason to shoot him.”

“With what?”

“A Webley forty-five.”

“Ha! Are you kidding? Now I know you’re nuts. Are you dumb enough to believe that that bit of a kid was totin’ a lump of iron weighing close on three pounds, loaded? Where would she keep a thing like that? Down her jumper? Up her pants? In her stocking, mebbe. Don’t make me laugh.”

Tony’s forehead puckered. He was shaken. He hadn’t thought of this. There was something in it. Here was a weak point in Louis’ story, he thought.

“Are you going to let us in?” shouted the American.

“No.” Tony was thinking fast. “Why are you so anxious to come in? Is there something here you want?”

“We reckon so.”

“And you think I know what it is and where it is?”

“Sure.”

“I see. Now you listen to me, Delano,” said Tony coldly. “Up to the time he was shot I hadn’t seen or heard from my brother in eight years. There’s nothing here I want. I only came to look at the place because it happens to be mine now. Tomorrow I shall go back to Paris. Keep out of my way and you can do all the looking here you like but don’t tear the place to pieces because I intend to sell it. I never want to see it again.”

Another short silence. Then Delano said: “You got somebody in there with you?”

Tony saw no reason to lie. "Yes."

"Who is it?"

"Go on guessing."

Delano laughed coarsely. "I get it. Okay. For the last time are you going to open up?"

"No. Go to hell."

Now Schultzer spoke. He had a deep harsh voice, taut with malice. "Open the door, Englander."

"Don't you dare to talk to me, you murdering Hun," rasped Tony.

A gun crashed. The bullet, ripping through the door, tore a long splinter on the inside before burying itself in the wall at the far end of the room.

It may have been that the shot, the first angry shot he had ever heard fired, awakened in Tony something which Peter must have suspected was there. For two seconds he stared at the hole in the door. Then his lips came together in a hard line and he moved swiftly.

"Get on the floor and stay there," he told Colette tersely, snatching up the gun in passing as he made for the stairs. Reaching the bedroom he crossed the floor to the window, and without exposing himself more than was necessary, with the gun barrels in front of him he looked down.

Delano and Schultzer were standing a few yards back from the door, looking at it. He could see them clearly.

"Start walking," he ordered trenchantly. "I'm going to count ten. Then I start shooting. And I have windows at the back as well as the front."

The two men began to back away in the direction of their car, fading from sight in the gloom before they reached it. This they may have realised, for with a spurt of flame a pistol spat. Considering the range and the poor light it was a good shot, and glass tinkled as a window pane shattered.

Tony fired his left barrel at the spot where the pistol had flashed and had the satisfaction of hearing his pellets smack against metal, presumably the body of the car.

Colette came breathlessly into the bedroom. "Are you all right," she panted, in a voice stiff with anxiety.

"I told you to keep down," retorted Tony, curtly.

"I couldn't. Oh, Tony, I was terrified they'd shot you."

"Listen," ordered Tony. "And keep away from that window."

In the hush they heard the car started. The sound receded.

"They've gone," said Tony.

"They may only have moved the car."

"Ssh."

They waited for some time, listening, but no sound came from the darkness.

At last Tony turned away. "They didn't fancy their chance against this," he murmured, patting the gun. "I should have shot them while I had the chance," he added viciously. "Let's go down."

They returned to the living-room and resumed their chairs.

Silence fell, and this time it persisted. Tony sat with the gun across his knees listening for any sound that might indicate the return of Delano and his companion. None came. He smoked steadily. Colette stared at the door as if it fascinated her. An hour passed. Tony relaxed and put the gun on the table.

"As we seem to be here for the night you'd better try to get some sleep," he advised. "Go and lie on one of the beds. I'll stay here in case those thugs come back."

"I'd rather stay here with you."

"Please yourself."

Presently she curled up in her chair. For a long while her eyes remained open, but some time after midnight they closed, and her regular breathing told him she was asleep. Which suited him, for again he felt that he had plenty to think about.

Some of Delano's remarks had gone home, notably the one about the murder weapon and its weight. He could not fail to see that it was fantastic to imagine a girl carrying it about with her, even in a handbag. A forty-five revolver was a man's gun, a weapon of war rather than for civil use. Any one of the three men might have carried it. Any one of them might have obtained possession of a Webley during the war. Was Delano's story the true one? Was Louis the murderer?

After a while, seeing that Colette was still asleep, he took off his shoes very quietly and again went up the stairs to the bedroom. Crossing on tip-toe to the window he looked out upon a scene which, even in the cold white light of a crescent moon suspended in a sky of immutable serenity, still looked hostile. Against the solid blackness of the forest the trunks of the outpost trees, where the moonlight caught them, stood stiff and stark, like a row of exclamation marks on a blackboard. The world seemed to have fallen into a trance. Silence so profound that it was almost something tangible was falling from the sky.

By straining forward he could just see the Buick, standing where he had left it, painting its shadow on the ground with ink. He stared towards the track where the Citroën had stopped; but the light was deceptive and the car black, so if it was there he couldn't see it.

A movement caught his eye, so vague, so sinister, that it might have been the ghost of a fallen Maquisard. He watched. It hardened, and presently a roe with a fawn at hoof told him what he wanted to know. With steps as

light and halting as those of a nervous ballerina the roe moved slowly forward from the mysterious wings of the forest to the moonlit stage of the open ground, and, after turning an ever-suspicious nose to the cardinal points of the compass, began to graze.

Knowing that the nose was more to be trusted than his eyes, and that no man could be within a quarter of a mile of the house, Tony returned to the parlour, there, in the second easy chair, to doze, if not to sleep.

From time to time he opened his eyes to look at Colette. With her face in repose she looked more like a child than ever. A tired child. In the unconsciousness of sleep one knee had been drawn up, raising her skirt to above her knee so that a little more of the other had been exposed. He recalled what Denis had said about legs and, not without a slight feeling of shame at the unfair advantage he was taking, perceived that Denis, the expert, had been right.

Slowly his contemplation turned to introspection, and from it the truth, no longer to be denied, emerged like a butterfly from a cocoon to display its wings on the sombre wall of conscious thought.

My God! he told himself. I'm in love with this girl.

CHAPTER XIII

TOWARDS dawn he must have slept, for it was with a start that he saw grey light filtering through the cracks of the shutters. Wide awake on the instant he looked at Colette, and seeing that she was still asleep returned on tip-toe to the bedroom once more to reconnoitre the scene outside.

The air struck chill, even in the house, and when he looked out through the window he saw the reason. With the dawn had come a ground mist, cold and pallid, to people the world with wraiths. Drops of water were pattering from the eaves, the slight sound they made exaggerated because there was no other.

The forest was a sombre mass, a shadow, a thing without outline, shape or colour. Dimly as through a sheet of gauze he could see the roe and her offspring, a little nearer to the forest, grazing her way back to cover for the day. She was alert, but not alarmed. That being all he really wanted to know, that the men were not there, he returned to the parlour to find Colette doing her hair, her handbag open in front of her.

"Bonjour, m'sieur," she greeted, smiling.

"Bonjour, mademoiselle. Although in the circumstances I'm not sure it shouldn't be madame," he bantered.

"I heard you go upstairs," she said.

"I went to the window to have a look round," he explained. *"I think we are once more alone. You slept well?"*

"Very well, thank you. Why do you think those men have gone?"

"Come here and I'll show you." Very carefully he unlocked the door and slowly drew it open. *"Look,"* he whispered. *"The deer."*

"Charming."

They watched the roe disappear and turned away. He put out the lamp. *"Ugh. It's cold,"* she said.

"Would madame like to make some coffee?" he suggested.

"With pleasure, monsieur."

"I'll fetch some water from the well. You may have five minutes to complete your toilet."

"Thank you."

He went out, drew a bucket of water from the well and took it in to her. Then he went out again to survey the scene. Already the mist was lifting, allowing a little insipid sunshine in through the thinner parts as it broke up in separate clouds of vapour. The air was cold, and felt thin, but smelt clean

and fresh with the tang of pine. Clearly it was going to be another fine day. Sitting on the edge of the well he smoked a cigarette until she called that the bathroom was free.

“The Citröen has gone,” he was able to tell her as he passed her in the kitchen on the way to the primitive bath house.

When he came out, washed and shaven, a few minutes later, coffee was on the table with the unconsumed portions of the previous meal. Leaving the door open for light rather than bother to take down the shutters, they sat one on either side. Colette, he thought approvingly, was looking better already. She had more colour in her cheeks.

“Don’t forget that after this you’ll never be able to swear you haven’t passed the night alone with a man,” he teased.

“Perhaps I don’t want to forget,” she parried, her eyes dancing provokingly.

“You’re very chirpy this morning, mademoiselle,” he accused.

“I am very happy this morning, monsieur.”

“I am flattered to know it, m’moiselle.”

She became serious. “What do you think has become of those horrid men?”

“I don’t know. I can only suppose they went off to look for a bed for the night. I made it clear they wouldn’t get one here.”

“Now you know what they are really like. They tried to shoot you.”

“I think it’s more likely they were trying to frighten me. They soon packed up when they found I could shoot back.”

After a short silence Colette went on: “What shall we do now?”

Tony considered the question. “I suppose we had better go back to Paris since I can’t think of any excuse for keeping you here. I must tell Denis Coulestin what——”

He broke off as a footstep crunched on the stones outside. Jumping up he snatched the gun from the table and advanced swiftly to the door, only to pull up short when he saw the visitor.

It was a priest. With the body and arms of a blacksmith he was no porcelain-smooth product of a pontifical palace but a man whose face had been graven by his heart and coloured by storm as well as sun. Shod like a carthorse for rough roads he really looked like a labourer who did the spade and shovel work for God on earth. The eyes that looked at the gun in Tony’s hands were clear and unafraid, as if they had seen such cylinders of death too many times to fear them. His voice when he spoke had the quality of calm that denotes the man who accepts life as it comes and sees no cause or reason to dissemble.

“What’s this?” he asked in a slightly bantering tone. “Are you going to shoot me?”

“I’m sorry, Father,” stammered Tony, smiling weakly in an attempt to cover his embarrassment.

“Is this how you usually greet your visitors?”

“That depends on the visitors. Those I expected were not exactly friends.”

“So I gather.”

“Were you looking for somebody, Father?” asked Tony, his momentary astonishment overcome.

“Yes. I have come to see Monsieur West.”

“Monsieur West?” Tony looked puzzled.

“Yes. Monsieur Peter West is a good friend of mine. I was told in the village that his car had gone past. I see it here. Would you be so kind as to tell him that Father Delamain has arrived?”

By this time Tony had the situation in hand. “Mr. Peter West is not here,” he said. “It was I who brought the car. I am his brother, Anthony West. If Peter was a friend of yours you will be sorry to learn that he is dead. I’m surprised you didn’t know that.”

Astonishment furrowed the priest’s forehead. “Dead,” he echoed, incredulously. “Is it possible? The last time I saw him he looked the picture of health. Was it an accident?”

“Not exactly,” said Tony, dryly. “He was murdered.”

“Where?”

“In Paris. You should have known. It was in the newspapers.”

“I didn’t see it. But then, I seldom see the Paris newspapers. How terrible. When did this happen?”

“About five weeks ago.”

“Ah. That explains it.”

“What does it explain?”

“Why he didn’t keep his appointment with me.”

“You knew him well?”

“Very well.”

“Were you in the habit of meeting him here?”

“Either here or at my house. He always hooted his horn in passing to let me know he was here—that is, if he was alone. That was why, when I was told the car had gone through, I couldn’t understand why he hadn’t made the signal. I came here to find out why. He assured me when he came next time he would be alone.”

“There’s no need to stand outside,” said Tony. “Come in, Father, and have some coffee. You have had a long walk.”

“Thank you.”

The priest advanced to the door and of course saw Colette sitting at the table. “Ah. *Bonjour*, madame,” he said, with a slight bow. “Forgive my intrusion at such an early hour. Monsieur did not tell me his wife was here.”

Tony was at first inclined to allow the natural assumption to pass; but on second thoughts he decided against it for fear of future complications. “Permit me,” he corrected. “This is Mademoiselle Dufoy.”

“*Pardon*.” The priest raised a questioning eyebrow. “You must have started very early. I understood the car passed through the village yesterday.”

“It did,” stated Tony, frankly. “We’ve been here all night.”

“Oh. I see.” There was the faintest hint of disapproval in the priest’s voice.

“It was not intended that we should spend the night here,” explained Tony, evenly. “We had no choice in the matter.”

“How was that?” The priest accepted a cup of coffee from Colette. “Thank you, mademoiselle.”

“Absurd though it may sound we were besieged.”

The priest looked at Tony with a queer expression. “Indeed. By whom?”

“Two men who demanded admittance under threats of violence. We locked the door against them and in the circumstances thought it would be safer to stay here rather than risk an encounter with them in the dark. Their threats were not idle, as you can see.” Tony pointed to the bullet hole in the door. “I have spent most of the night on guard. When I heard you coming I thought they had returned. Hence my uncivil reception.”

Tony unloaded the gun and put it back on the side table. “Sit down, Father. You must be tired after such a long walk.”

“I cycled as far as the track was safe and then left my bicycle against a tree.”

“Did you, on your way, see an old black Citroën car with two men in it?”

“No. But I saw such a car in the village, outside the hotel. Did you know these men?”

“Only by sight and by name. They are both bad men. They were suspected by the police of being implicated in the murder of my brother, but nothing could be proved. There were three of them. I believe these two murdered the other. His body was found yesterday in the Seine.”

“And so the war continues,” said the priest, vaguely, shaking his head. “Is it not known who killed your brother?”

“No.”

“Please tell me what happened.”

“It was thought that my brother had been here and was shot on his return. It must have happened near the apartment because he managed to

reach it. Nobody saw or heard anything. He died in the apartment and was found there the next morning by his *femme de ménage*.”

“Poor Peter,” said the priest, sadly. “I warned him this might happen but he only laughed.”

Tony stared. “You warned him?”

“Yes.”

“What do you know about it?”

“These three men. Were their names Delano, Schultzer and Louis, called le Lapin?”

“Yes. It was Delano and Schultzer who were here last night. Louis is dead. I gather you knew them?”

“I knew them many years ago, in the bad times,” said the priest, heavily.

“How did you come to know my brother? I may say I only came here to look at the house, since it is now mine, my brother having left it to me in his will.”

There was no immediate reply. The priest, misty-eyed, stirred his coffee.

“This is tragic news about your brother,” he said at last. “He was a good man. I had a great affection for him. We spent many hours here, talking. I brought him books. That is one of mine.” He nodded towards the book on La Sologne that still lay open.

“What interest had you in common?” asked Tony, curiously.

“La Sologne. He was not the first Englishman to be profoundly impressed by what he saw here. Now, alas that interest has cost him his life. He should never have come back. I, and many others, would have been sorry to see him go, but it would have been better so.” The priest shook his head. “Well, now we can only say it was God’s will.”

“When did you last see Peter?”

“It would be—yes, five weeks ago. He came here. I spent part of the day with him, on the Monday. He gave me a lift in his car as far as the tree where I had left my bicycle.”

“It was that night, on his arrival in Paris, that he was murdered,” said Tony.

“He was coming back the following week-end,” resumed the priest. “He never came. I wondered why I had no word from him. Now I know.”

“I gather you had some business with him.”

“Yes. A strange business. It was a secret between us. But as Peter is no longer here, and the circumstances being what they are, I had better, for your safety, tell you what our business was.”

“If I might make a guess, it had something to do with the Resistance here, and the Gestapo occupation.”

“Yes.”

“And the three men of whom we have spoken were here then?”

“That is so. And now those infamous traitors, as if they hadn’t enough blood on their hands already, must kill your brother.” The priest stirred the almost finished coffee in his cup. “At the bottom of every cup, monsieur, are the dregs, unseen until the cup is stirred. At the bottom of the richest wine lie the lees, ready to rise the moment the bottle is shaken. Thus with nations, my son. War is the agent that gives the slime its chance to foul what is good and noble in the land. Here, even in Sologne, we had our traitors, and although it could never be proved, Louis, *dit* le Lapin, was one of them.”

“War also produces the best,” reminded Tony.

“True, but the tragedy is it is those who die,” said the priest. “And in the war it was some of the best that you could send us from England who died here in Sologne. I am honoured to have known some of them, for I, too, was in the Resistance. I shall never forget the courage of those men and women; for there were women among them. In my dreams I see them still. Muriel Byck, to us Michele, who died at Romorantin. She was not of my faith; she was a young English Jewess, but her heart and soul were one with ours. André Borrel, of the *Reseau Prosper*, to us Denise. Yvonne Ruellat, whom we called Jacqueline.”^[1] The priest sighed. “What women! What courage! And the men, among them my fearless friend, the Abbé de Saint André, shot by the Germans in 1944.” The priest shook a tear from an eyelash. “Forgive me,” he said, brokenly. “I cannot forget; nor can I forget that men like Delano and Schultzer go free, although Louis seems at last to have met the fate he has for so long deserved.”

[1] These three names appear with others on the memorial Roll of Honour in the church of St. Paul, Knightsbridge. *Ed.*

“I believe there was a man here named Leffers at the time of which you speak,” prompted Tony.

The priest looked up quickly. “You know of him?”

“The name was mentioned to me in Paris by a friend, Denis Coulestin.”

“I know that name. Yes. I have it. He called to see me one day, seeking information. He was collecting material for a book on the heroes of La Sologne. He worked for a newspaper.”

“That’s the man.”

Again the priest thought for a minute. Then he looked up and said: “I think I had better tell you the whole story of the events that led to the death

of your brother, monsieur.”

“I would be interested to hear it, Father.”

“Naturally. Somehow I did not think these villains would go as far as cold-blooded murder in Paris, because I am sure they are cowards at heart. However, let me tell you. First I must introduce myself. My name is Delamain, and I am the *Curé* in the village.”

Father Delamain settled down in his chair and began.

CHAPTER XIV

“DURING the war there was a Gestapo officer here named Leffers, as you have heard,” said Father Delamain. “He was a bad man. God forgive me for saying so but there was rejoicing here when he was shot, although innocent blood was shed in the reprisals that were bound to follow. He was shot dead by a woman whose grandson he had murdered. She, poor woman, paid the penalty, but for that she was prepared. Now this man Leffers was an extortionist. By his crimes he made much money.”

“I was told he had made a fortune,” put in Tony.

“Not a fortune. Such stories become exaggerated in the telling. But he did collect a lot of money; that we know. Most of it was in francs, dollars and English pounds, much of it taken from agents who were dropped in by parachute and caught. They came well provided with money. There was nothing unusual about this. Leffers was not the only one to play this game. Some such men had plundered their way across Europe. I remember one, an officer who, in civilian clothes, tried to reach the coast when the Germans withdrew. He had on him a large sum of money in many currencies. He even had Finish *marks* and Greek *drachmas*. But that is by the way. I mention it only to let you know the sort of men our visitors were. Leffers was one of that type and here he was in a good position to collect such wealth. You’ll find the names of some of the people he robbed and killed in that book.” Father Delamain indicated the work on La Sologne.

“This man Schultzer, I believe, was here with Leffers, although I couldn’t prove it,” he resumed. “Here also at the time, having taken refuge in the *Reseau* Buckmaster pretending to be an escaped prisoner, was this American Delano. I believe he was introduced by Louis, called le Lapin, at one time an associate of the traitor Lussac.”^[2] The priest passed a hand over his forehead. “Now it is all like an evil dream,” he muttered.

^[2] Presumably Pierre Lussac, who in July 1946 was caught at Orleans, tried, condemned and shot. *Ed.*

“After the war,” he went on, “more than one man tried to find what had become known as Leffers’ treasure. It was known that he had been collecting money. It was assumed that he had hidden it somewhere because

it was not on him when he was shot. How that got out I don't know. It must have come from members of Leffers' staff who knew what had been going on. One of them had the audacity to come back here shortly after the war had ended. That was too soon. He was recognised, and fled before vengeance could overtake him. Schultzer, as I have said, was, I believe, another of Leffers' staff. How these men of whom we have spoken came together I don't pretend to know, but it would not be difficult to guess. They had one object, the recovery of Leffers' treasure—as it was called. They did not find it. The man who found it, Monsieur West, was your brother, Peter.”

Tony stared at the speaker. “Are you sure of that?”

“Quite sure. He heard of it through Louis, whom he had met in Paris. The château in which Leffers made his headquarters is not far from this house. All that remains of it is a heap of ashes, for that place of evil memory has been burnt to the ground—possibly by someone searching for the treasure. I don't know. But this I do know. Peter knew of Leffers' hoard when he bought this house. He told me so. In fact, he bought the cottage to be on the spot to look for it. And if you ask me why, I can tell you. It was not that he wanted the money for himself. He was determined that those rogues shouldn't have it. It was some time before he found it. At the finish he found it here, when he was not looking for it. In the room where the bath now is there was a heap of logs for the fire. He threw them out. Under them he found some haversacks such as German soldiers carried. In the haversacks was the money. Fantastic, yes. But life is like that.”

“What did he do with this money?” asked Tony, uneasily.

“He thought for a while; then he came to see me.”

“He told you he'd found it?”

“Yes.”

“Why did he come to you?”

“I had met him one day in the village, where he had stopped for petrol. He asked me about the little crosses of wood that he saw everywhere. I, having been in the Resistance, could tell him about some of the men and women who lie under those crosses. In all humility I think he decided I was a man to be trusted. So he came to me to tell me what he had found. He had an idea. To let it be known that he had found the money would raise difficulties, perhaps with the Government. There would be arguments about to whom the money belonged. We decided that I, knowing everyone, should return the money secretly to those from whom it had been stolen, or, failing that, give it to the widows and children of men who had died in the Resistance in La Sologne. We knew it would have to be done carefully to avoid suspicion. Also, it would take time. Well, that is what we did. He kept the money here. Where he hid it I don't know. He never told me. He gave it

to me in small parcels, in a way that I suggested, as seemed most fair. It was not so easy as you may think. Indeed, it was a complicated business. I had to swear to secrecy all those to whom I gave money. But we had had some practice at secrecy in the war. There were other difficulties. The franc notes were out of date. The foreign notes had to be changed into francs without it being known where this foreign currency was coming from. That had to be done in Paris, of course. Peter arranged with a man to change the money for him at a small rate of commission.”

“Do you remember the name of this man?” asked Tony, dry-mouthed in a flood of understanding.

“I did hear it but I have forgotten.”

“Would it by any chance be Rodinsky. Serge Rodinsky?”

“Yes! That’s the name. Peter mentioned it to me the day he told me the man was dead. Fortunately by that time most of the foreign notes had been changed into French money.”

“Was all the money distributed in the way you have described?”

“Yes. All of it.”

“There was none left?”

“None. Peter told me that was all. He gave me the very last the week-end before you say he was killed. We were both relieved by that. It was not a comfortable feeling to carry such large sums, particularly after Peter thought Louis and his friends suspected he had found Leffers’ money. How they learned that I don’t know. It may have been because Peter stopped looking for it. Perhaps Rodinsky was indiscreet and talked. I don’t know. Peter used to carry the money in his suitcase, but they could hardly have known that.”

“You say you saw Peter here the week-end he was murdered?”

“That is correct.”

“Did he have a suitcase with him then?”

“Yes. A small one of brown leather. I can see it standing there now, on the table, as we talked. It had his travelling things in it.”

“But no money.”

“I don’t think so. He had brought the last money with him when he came, and when he gave it to me he said that was all. I remember the occasion well. When I arrived he was standing here reading a letter. I said I hoped it was not bad news. He smiled that sad smile of his and said no; it was a warning from a friend that an attempt might be made to kill him.”

“Did you see this letter? I mean, did you read it?”

“No.”

“Do you remember what he did with it?” asked Tony, quickly.

“Yes. He took out his petrol lighter, put it to the paper and dropped it in the fireplace where it burned to a cinder. Look, you can still see the ashes of

it there, even now.”

Tony and Colette looked at each other.

“Well, that settles one question,” said Tony, softly.

“I think he had a premonition that something might happen,” said the priest. “I knew he was not a happy man.”

“How did you know that? Did he tell you?”

“No. He never told me anything about his private life.”

“He didn’t tell you he had made an unfortunate marriage years ago?”

“No. But he drank much whisky and I thought it was to drown a secret sorrow. For the same reason, perhaps, he once or twice brought a young lady here with him.”

“Did she ever see your money transactions?” asked Tony.

“I don’t think so. If I knew she was here I didn’t come.”

“How did you know whether or not she was here?”

“I came to understand that if he did not give the signal in passing he had the lady with him. She did not come very often. The last time I saw him he said he would not be bringing her again. That’s why I expected him to hoot. I came to find out why he didn’t.”

“Did you ever see her?”

“Once. A pretty girl with hair very fair. This behaviour of Peter’s made me sad, but he was not of my flock and it was not for me to interfere. Peter was a good friend to me. If in this way he found a little happiness who was I to complain? A priest knows when to shut his eyes, monsieur. Ah, well. Now Peter will suffer no more. May God rest his soul.”

Tony hardly knew what to say. In fact, he felt there was little more to say. The unfolding of the mystery of Peter’s behaviour in Paris left him for the moment speechless. The bitter pill he had now to swallow was the thought of how he had misjudged him. The returning of the money to the local people whom Leffers had robbed was more in character with the man he knew than the illegal currency transactions of which he had been suspected by the police, and also, Tony suspected, by Boulenger.

He said to Father Delamain, who was sitting with his face in his hands: “This adventure of Peter’s nearly got him into trouble with the police. His association with Rodinsky brought him under surveillance. Did you know that?”

“Yes. He told me the police were watching him. It seemed to amuse him. He was like that. A man of strange moods. Once, for a little while, he was almost gay. He seemed to have lost some of his bitterness, his cynicism. But it didn’t last. When the relapse came he was more despondent than ever, drinking and sitting here alone, which was bad for him. It was then he

started bringing with him his female companion. By the way, are you going to stay here?"

"No. We shall return to Paris. Why do you ask?"

"If you are carrying anything for which a *congé* is needed you had better apply for one. As I came here the police were setting up a control post on the main road, stopping all cars."

Tony smiled. "Thank you, but I don't travel with cases of brandy. Can I give you a lift to the village? We shall be starting fairly soon."

"No, thank you," declined Father Delamain. "I have my bicycle. Well, I am happy to have met you, Monsieur West. Should you change your mind and come to live here you have my assurance that you will be very welcome. Many people here have cause to be grateful to your brother."

"I'll bear it in mind," said Tony, as they shook hands. "*Au revoir*. What you have told me has explained many things I did not understand."

"I am happy to have been of service, monsieur. *Au revoir*. *Au revoir*, mademoiselle."

The priest strode off at a swinging gait.

From the door they watched him go.

"We didn't waste our time in coming here, after all," remarked Tony. "You know what happened to your letter, which must relieve your mind, and I know Peter was straight, which relieves mine. We also know, I think, why Peter was murdered. He was killed by someone for what was thought to be in his bag. You will remember I said that bag should have been in the car. The murderer got the bag only to find there was no money in it. That, perhaps, explains why Delano and Schultzer think the money is still here. But we can talk about that on the way home. It was a stroke of luck that we happened to be here when Father Delamain came."

"I didn't think so at first. I could see in his eyes that he thought the worst of me."

"If he thought the worst of anyone it would be me."

Colette shook her head. "No. You're a man, and the man is never to blame. He didn't look at you. He looked at me and I saw his expression change when you said we'd been here all night."

"If it did it was only for a moment. Really, Colette, do you have to be so sensitive? He understood when I told him what had happened. If it comes to that, in a place like this what's the difference between being here all day or all night?"

"He thought——"

"A priest shouldn't have such thoughts. I was tempted to let him believe we were married, as he assumed; but I was afraid he'd notice you wore no wedding ring. Then he would have had cause to be suspicious. But what's all

this about, anyway? Let's not argue. We should look silly if those crooks came back and found us standing here talking nonsense. According to Father Delamain they're still in the district and that can only mean they haven't given up hope of getting what they want. We'd better pack up and go before they can make a nuisance of themselves."

He might have added, "or before I lose my head and make a fool of myself."

They had a last look round, locked the house, and keeping a watchful eye open for the black Citroën set off on the long run to Paris. They saw nothing of the other car, and the reason was provided by Father Delamain who, as they approached the village, they saw standing in the road, waving.

"He wants us to stop," said Colette. "He must have remembered something."

"He's probably going to suggest that to save our reputations he's determined to marry us forthwith," murmured Tony, flippantly, as he brought the car to a halt and wound down the window as the priest approached. "What now, Father? More good news?"

"You will think so, I am sure," returned Father Delamain, coming up. "You won't be troubled again by those two villains who attempted to molest you last night."

"How's that?"

"They have been arrested and taken to Paris. That, it seems, is why the police were here, as I told you."

"Do you know on what charge they have been arrested?"

"The story in the village is of murder. One of the police officers told a friend of mine that in their pockets had been found money which was identified as belonging to a man killed in Paris."

"That was Louis," stated Tony. "Father, you are as full of good news as Sologne is full of sorrow. When I'm depressed I shall come to see you for consolation."

"You'll find me here," replied the priest, smiling as he stepped back. "*Au revoir* and *bon voyage*."

"*Au revoir* again, *monsieur le curé*."

"Well, that lets us out," remarked Tony, as he drove on. "With your letter burnt, Louis dead, and those other two rascals in the dog-house, you've nothing to be afraid of now. I have one more piece of business to do and then our time should be our own."

"Which means, I suppose, that you'll be going back to England," said Colette, quietly, staring straight ahead.

"That depends."

"On what?"

Tony was tempted to tell her but decided it was not the moment. “We’ll talk about that later,” he said.

The one more piece of business to which he referred occupied his mind for most of the journey back to Paris, as, indeed, it had for most of the night. The silence had been conducive to concentration, and while the mist had been gathering outside some of that which filled his head had been banished by what Delano had told him. The priest had done even more to roll away the clouds. The sky was clearing. That Colette seemed content to sit quietly without talking suited his mood, and without hurrying they reached Paris in time for dinner at *La Frégate*. By that time he knew what he was going to do.

“Tomorrow will be Sunday,” he reminded Colette as he took her home. “With our troubles over I think the occasion calls for a little celebration, so you think of somewhere to go. I’ll be round to collect you in time for an aperitif before lunch—say, twelve o’clock.”

With this arrangement Colette professed herself content, so after a few last words he went on home.

Madame Charlot must have heard the car door slam, for as he went past her rooms her door opened. “Ah, monsieur, you return,” she said. “You gave me quite a turn. That was just how your poor brother used to come home. I have a message for you.”

“From whom?”

“Monsieur Coulestin. He rang up a little while ago when I was in the apartment. He asked if you were back. I said no. So he asked me to give you a message, as he has news for you. Will you ring him up early tomorrow morning. He gave me the number. You’ll find it written on a piece of paper beside the telephone.”

“Thank you.”

“Will you require anything tonight?”

“No, thank you.”

“You had a good trip?”

“Yes. I went to see my brother’s house in La Sologne.”

“What sort of place is this Sologne? Your brother never spoke of it to me.”

“It is a strange place, sinister, where the talk is still of Maquisards and the Resistance.”

“Some people haven’t forgotten that business here,” declared Madame Charlot. “That old liar François still talks of the Germans he killed. To hear him talk you’d think he was the only man in the Resistance. I don’t believe a word of it. The only thing that man ever killed was a bottle of alcohol.

Today he asked me to fetch his pension for him on Monday. I told him to go himself. I have work to do.”

Tony forced a smile. “Quite right, madame. Now I’ll get along to bed. *Bonsoir*, madame.”

“*Bonsoir*, m’sieur.”

Tony went on to the apartment.

CHAPTER XV

THE next morning, as soon as he had finished his light continental breakfast, which was about nine o'clock, Tony called Denis, whose news, as he expected, was of the arrest of Delano and Schultzer. Three of the four five-*mille* notes which Tony had given to Louis had been found on them, wherefore he thought their chances of escape were slim, even if Boulenger again undertook their defence, which he thought unlikely.

Tony said that he had heard the news on the way home from Sologne with Colette and gave a brief account of how it had happened.

"Are you engaged to Colette?" Denis wanted to know.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I haven't proposed to her yet."

"My God! What have you been doing?"

"Behaving ourselves."

"La-la. What a lot of time you Englishmen waste. Mind you don't leave it too late."

"What do you mean?"

"Somebody else may snatch her from under your nose. Girls like Colette are as rare as pearls in oysters. I should know. I've eaten enough oysters. Did you observe what I meant about the way she smokes a cigarette?"

"I did."

"And those entrancing ankles?"

"I don't marry a woman for her ankles," stated Tony, frostily.

"My dear fellow! Of course you don't. Neither would——"

"Listen," broke in Tony. "I didn't ring up to discuss with a connoisseur like you the merits of female anatomy. I have something more important to talk about."

"That's impossible."

Tony sighed. "Denis, you're incorrigible. Forget your favourite pastime for the moment and be serious. I have news that will rock you on your heels, but it's a long story and I don't feel inclined to shout it over the telephone."

"Is it urgent?"

"Yes. Can you come round to the apartment? I shall be in all morning but I'm meeting Colette for lunch, so don't make it too late."

"Is it about the business I mentioned to you?"

“Partly. The money was found. I know who found it and what became of it.”

“The devil you do! And I’ve been working on that story for months. I’ll be round right away.”

Half an hour later Denis knocked on the door and Tony let him in.

“This kills me. After the time I’ve spent chasing that will-o’-the-wisp you go to Sologne and catch it in one night,” he began without preamble after the customary handshake. “Who found the money?”

“Peter, my brother.”

“Ah! I suspected it. What did he do with it?”

“He gave it away to relatives of Maquisards who were shot at La Sologne.”

Denis stared helplessly. “*Mot de Cambronne!* Who told you this?”

“A priest named Father Delamain. He did the actual distribution.”

“I remember him. I called on him.”

“So he told me.”

“He appeared to know nothing about Leffers’ hoard.”

Tony smiled faintly. “That wouldn’t be hard for a Maquisard. He was under a promise to Peter to say nothing, so he couldn’t tell you.”

“Did Peter go to Sologne to look for the money?”

“Apparently. He was moved by what he had heard of the Resistance and was determined that those damn crooks shouldn’t have it. I don’t think there is much doubt that it was through them he heard about it. They suspected he’d found it. That was why they wouldn’t leave him alone. Incidentally, this explains Peter’s association with that racketeer Rodinsky. The money was in currency notes of half a dozen different countries. Rodinsky changed them for him into francs.”

“My God! That was a dangerous game. No wonder the police were hot on him.”

“Peter liked dangerous games.”

“That one could have landed him in prison.”

“Well, it didn’t. But in the end it seems to have cost him his life.”

Tony gave an account, as concise as possible of all that had happened at La Sologne.

“I told you I didn’t come to France with the idea of trying to find the man who killed my brother,” he went on. “But now I think I have a line on the murder I can’t just turn my back and walk away because I happen to have fallen for a girl. That, frankly, is what I’d like to do. I’m sick of the whole miserable business. But I owe it to Peter to bring his murderer to justice if I can, particularly as I know now that he was not the sort of man

everyone took him to be. And when I say everyone I mean myself, you, the police, and also, I suspect, Boulenger the lawyer.”

“So you think you know who killed him. You’ve thought that before.”

“I admit that. But this is a new trail. I believe I know who knows the truth, but to confirm that I would need help.”

“What gave you this idea?”

“Several things. Call them clues if you like. I spent some time last night trying to fit them together. Where they didn’t fit I threw the pieces out. You were right, I believe, when you said you thought the motive for the murder was hooked up directly or indirectly with Leffers’ money. Certain people thought that money had been found. They also thought it was coming back from Sologne in Peter’s suitcase. Peter always took a smallish brown suitcase when he went to Sologne. He took it on the last occasion. I confirmed that with Father Delamain. He saw it and could describe it. What became of that suitcase? It must have been in the car when it arrived in the yard. By the time the police got here it had disappeared. Somebody stole that case for what was thought to be in it. I suspected that as soon as I arrived at Montmarron. Peter’s toilet things weren’t here. I expected to find them there. They weren’t there. Where were they? They were in the case that disappeared. Actually, the thief had his trouble for nothing. There was no money in the case. Father Delamain told me so. The last of the money had been distributed.”

“This sounds as if Isobel took the suitcase. She had been with Peter to Montmarron. She may have seen something.”

“It could have been Isobel or it might have been Louis. I don’t think it was Louis because I’m convinced he thought it was Isobel. Delano didn’t think it was Isobel and he had a good argument against it. He thought it was Louis.”

“Why?”

“Because he claimed it was ridiculous to suppose a girl would walk about with a gun which, when loaded, weighs well over a kilo. If Isobel bought a gun she’d hardly clutter herself up with a small cannon.”

“That’s true. Did Louis have a Webley?”

“I don’t know. He may have got hold of one during the war. But it’s hardly likely that even he would lug about a thing of that weight. Now another point. Peter couldn’t have got far with two bullets in him, either of which might have killed him. He was shot in the yard; and the bullets that struck him didn’t make those holes in the car door. One of them, the shot that hit him in the body, might have done. But not the one that hit him in the neck. It looks to me as if three shots were fired in the yard that night. Nobody saw them fired. Nobody heard them fired.”

“Well?”

“There was one other person in the yard that night. If he didn’t hear those shots, as he says, either he’s a liar or the gun had been fitted with a silencer.”

“You mean François, the *cordonnier*?”

“There was no one else. Louis was outside, watching. Had anyone gone in or come out of that yard he must have seen him. And if, as François boasts, he was in the Resistance, and made a practice of killing Germans, not only might he have had a service revolver but he must have had one that made no noise, or he wouldn’t have dared to use it in Paris.”

“Are you going to tell the police this?”

“I’d rather be sure of my ground. Now you see the lines on which I’m thinking will you answer some questions for me?”

“Certainly.”

“Were you in the Resistance?”

“Yes.”

“What was your job?”

“I had several.”

“Did you have anything to do with the distribution of weapons in readiness for D-Day. I believe a lot were sent over.”

“Yes. I attended more than one *droppage* and helped to distribute what came.”

“Did you ever receive any Webley revolvers?”

“Yes. And some of them, I remember, were specially fitted with silencers for work that had to be done without noise—such as dealing with sentries, and that sort of thing.”

“Was François in the Resistance?”

“I don’t know.”

“Could you find out?”

“Oh yes, quite easily.”

“He claims that he was. You see what I’m getting at. If he was in the Resistance he might have been issued with a revolver.”

“Certainly. But here we come back to the question of motive. Why should he imagine there was a lot of money in Peter’s suitcase?”

“He was working for those three crooks. Not actually working, perhaps. It’s more likely that for an occasional drink he was prepared to watch Peter and report his movements. That would save the gang from hanging about the place where they would be seen by Peter. They may have let something drop about the money; or said enough to make François wonder what was in the suitcase.”

“Do you seriously believe François might have done the murder?”

“Not necessarily. But if he didn’t do it he must have a good idea who did. Only he could have snatched Peter’s suitcase, anyway. Delano and Schultzer were at the Dome. I don’t think there’s any doubt about that. Louis said he left them there when he went off with Isobel in the car. Louis was convinced Isobel killed Peter. Delano and Schultzer were equally sure that Louis had done it.”

“Why should he?”

“To get the suitcase—and leave Isobel to take the blame.”

“Well?”

“If each believes the other did it the implication is that none of them did it. In my opinion they’re all guessing, and they’re all guessing wrong. Two people know the truth. Isobel and François, who were both in the yard. There was only one other person in Paris who had a grudge against Peter and might have killed him from sheer spite. Anna, his ex-wife. But I fancy she would have used a stiletto. I can’t see her using a heavy revolver.”

“Anna didn’t do it.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve checked on that. She lives in Brussels. She was only here on a short visit. She went back the week before Peter was killed.”

“All right. That puts her in the clear. So we come back to François. I’m not saying he killed Peter, but he knows what happened to that suitcase. I’d say it’s in his house now, because I can’t see how he could have got rid of it. And if he has that case he knows more about the murder than he pretends.”

“It would be difficult to confirm that.”

“There’s only one way to do it. By looking. Tomorrow he goes to collect his pension. That takes him all day because according to Madame Charlot he stays out drinking. I’m considering entering the house while he’s away to look for that suitcase.”

Denis’s eyebrows went up. “Name of God!”

“I shall need help,” went on Tony, dispassionately. “He’ll lock the door when he goes. Skeleton keys would be needed to get in. Could you get some for me? Better still, will you bring them and come with me, to act as a witness?”

Denis paced the room, hands in his pockets, looking worried. “I don’t like this idea of breaking into François’ house in his absence,” he muttered. “We’ve no right to do that. Why not tell the police what you suspect and leave them to handle it?”

“Because that would mean telling the whole tale, of how Peter had found Leffers’ money and disposed of it. That would start something. It would be a front page story in the newspapers. Peter wouldn’t want that. Neither do I. All I want to know at present is if Peter’s suitcase is in François’ house. If it

isn't no harm will have been done. If it is, then I shall have to tell the police all I know about the whole business."

"I don't like it," said Denis, shaking his head. He stopped pacing. "Let's compromise," he suggested.

"How?"

"I have a friend in the Sûreté who has been working on this case. Let me put your suggestion to him. It might suit him to be certain that Peter's case is in François' house and so be sure of his ground before taking action."

"All right," Tony agreed. "That's fair. Bring him along and we can have a word while we watch for François to go out. If we find nothing I shall do my best to forget the whole affair as quickly as possible, and for the rest of the time I am in Paris waiting for Boulenger to finish the business I can devote myself to Colette."

"Very well. Let's leave it at that."

They had a drink. Then Denis departed and Tony prepared to spend the remainder of the day with Colette.

CHAPTER XVI

MADAME CHARLOT brought Tony's breakfast at eight the next morning and with it the newspapers. Glancing at them over his coffee the first item that caught his eye was the arrest of Delano and Schultzer on a charge of murder, their victim being their one-time accomplice known as Louis le Lapin. Much to Tony's relief nothing was said about the stolen notes that had led to their arrest. He had been afraid that his name might be mentioned, or, what would have been even more distasteful, Peter's name, since it was known to the police that he had been associated with these criminals. The business of the notes would, he did not doubt, be divulged at the trial, since it would be the prosecution's unassailable piece of evidence.

"Has François gone to collect his pension?" Tony asked Madame Charlot, casually, when she returned to collect his tray. With so much depending on it he was a little afraid there might be a hitch in his plan.

"Yes, he's gone," was the reply. "He came again this morning and asked me to go for him. Said he felt ill, the old liar. For some reason he doesn't want to go out. It's always something. If it isn't his bad leg it's the weather, or somebody coming to see him."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said I had something else to do. The next thing he'll be wanting me to do up his room for him. That pigsty."

"So you've been in it."

"Once. Never again. The stink nearly made me sick. Why doesn't he look after it himself?" Madame Charlot departed with her tray, an indignant nose held high, leaving Tony wondering if François' disinclination to leave the house arose from something more than laziness.

Twenty minutes later Denis arrived with a companion, whom he introduced as Captain Bertrand Pascal, of the *Deuxieme Bureau*. He was a sturdily built man of forty-five or so, with dark, restless eyes, a heavy black moustache and a face devoid of humour. His manner of speech was short and uncompromising. The police officer was in plain clothes.

It was soon evident that without mentioning Leffers' hoard Denis had given him a broad account of Tony's suspicions and what he proposed to do to confirm them. The conversation ran like this.

Said the police officer, "I understand, Monsieur West, that you believe this man Legendre killed your brother for some valuables which he thought were in his suitcase."

“I believe he stole the case.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because in my opinion the case couldn’t have gone anywhere except in that house. I know there was a case in the car when it arrived here. At least, my brother started with it. I know a man who saw him put the case in the car. It was a priest with whom he was friendly.”

“Where was this?”

“At La Sologne.”

“Don’t you think your brother might have disposed of the case on his way here?”

“No. He had been away for the week-end. The case contained his toilet things. He wouldn’t be likely to dispose of those.”

“These valuables in the case. Do you know what they were?”

“I have reason to think there was nothing of value in the case on this occasion although the thief was not to know that. My brother was in the habit of carrying large sums of money.”

“Yes,” said Pascal, dryly. “We have often thought that.”

“I can assure you, monsieur, that the sort of money my brother carried was not what you may have imagined it to be. When you have caught the man who murdered my brother I will tell you exactly what the money was and why he was carrying it.”

“So you know this?”

“I know it now. I didn’t know when I came to France.”

“You have been busy, monsieur.”

“I may have been lucky, monsieur. Believe me, I have not been trying to do your work for you, but I could not ignore information that came my way by chance.”

“Would you recognise this case if you saw it?”

“I have never seen it, but it has been described to me. If it can be found there should be in it my brother’s personal articles of toilet, things that Legendre would not be likely to use.”

“Have you spoken to Legendre of this?”

“Of course not. If he had the case he would deny it, so questions would only put him on his guard. That was why I proposed taking the course I suggested to Monsieur Coulestin. Have you come here to interrogate me or see if the case is in Legendre’s house? A suitcase is not an easy thing to hide in a house of two or three rooms.”

Denis stepped into the conversation. “There was a François Legendre in the Resistance. I have checked that with the records. The name is not an uncommon one so there is no proof that your *cordonnier* is the same man. But he could be. The character is the same. The Legendre of the records was

not amenable to discipline so he was allowed to work alone, doing as much injury to the enemy as he could in his own way. He claimed to have killed several Germans near the river so that he could dispose of the bodies by putting them in the water. That could be true, for such bodies were found. Whoever did it must have had more than an ordinary grudge against our enemies.”

Tony resumed. “According to Madame Charlot, Legendre hated the Germans to the point of fanaticism on account of a wound he received in the war of fourteen-eighteen. His hatred was personal rather than national.”

“Whoever was responsible did more harm than good,” said Denis. “Our enemies employed a weapon called reprisals. For every German soldier killed here innocent people had to pay with their lives.”

“Are we going to talk about the war or do as I suggest?” asked Tony. “While we stand here the opportunity is passing.”

Captain Pascal rose. “Let us go,” he said, curtly.

He led the way to François’ door and tried it. It was locked. Taking a bunch of keys from his pocket, after one or two failures he found one to fit. He pushed open the door and walked in. The others followed.

Madame Charlot’s claim that the place was a pigsty was at once confirmed, and Tony’s nose wrinkled at the smell that greeted them. Souvenirs on the walls also went far to support François’ boasts of what he had done in the war. They included a German steel helmet, a cloth service cap of the *feldgendarmarie*, regimental badges, an iron cross and a belt.

Captain Pascal glanced at them and smiled grimly. “Look for the case,” he said. “Don’t move anything or he’ll know we’ve been here.”

Although the room was in a general litter there were few places where a suitcase could be hidden. It was not necessary to touch anything. Failing to see in the living-room what they sought they went on to the bedroom which, not counting the kitchen, was the only other room in the apartment. Here again there were few places where a suitcase could be concealed. The bed was a mere heap of filthy blankets. A washing bowl was still half-full of dirty water.

As Tony glanced at it in passing he caught a fragrance, vaguely familiar, but here as out of place as a rose in a sewer. He traced it to a tablet of soap. It had been used, but the imprint of the maker’s name could still be read. He called Pascal’s attention to it.

“Would a man living in these conditions buy the most expensive soap in France?” he asked, meaningly.

The police officer, who had been looking into the kitchen, came back, his restless eyes alert and curious. He raised the soap to his nostrils. “Ah,” was all he said.

“I’ll tell you something else,” remarked Tony. “There’s a new tablet of that same soap in the bathroom cupboard of my late brother’s apartment. Could that be coincidence?”

Pascal, still taciturn, made no reply, but it was with a different expression on his face that he returned to the kitchen. There was another door. He opened it. A flight of stone steps dived into a well of darkness. He glanced behind him, and without wasting words pointed to a piece of candle in a cheap, grease-encrusted holder.

Denis passed it.

The detective lit it with his petrol lighter and holding it aloft proceeded cautiously down the steps. They ended, as was to be expected, in a cellar, cold and dank; and if the smell in the rooms above had been unpleasant here it was nauseating. There was not much to see. Nothing, in fact, except a heap of boxes broken for firewood, and, against the far wall, an untidy accumulation of empty cardboard cartons, packets, old newspapers and other rubbish.

“So,” muttered the detective. “There is no suitcase.”

He had half turned away when an idea seemed to strike him. He turned again and looked hard at the heap of rubbish. Walking up to it he began to move the cartons aside, one at a time, carefully, with a thumb and finger as if reluctant to get his hand dirty. Suddenly he stopped. Then, stooping, he pulled out a small brown suitcase.

“Was this your brother’s case?” he asked, crisply, looking at Tony.

“It answers to the description given to me. His initials are on it if you need proof.”

“Ah! So I see. There’s still something in it.” Pascal opened the bag. A suit of pyjamas and some miscellaneous toilet things fell out.

Denis was looking at the cavity in the heap of rubbish from which the case had been removed. “There’s something else there,” he said, bending low to peer. “What is that?” he asked, in a queer flat voice.

Tony leaned forward. “It looks like an old shoe,” he said, stooping to pick it up. He stepped back with a strangled cry breaking from his lips. “No! My God! It’s a foot.”

With one swift sweep of his arm Pascal knocked the cartons aside. With another, even swifter, as if he had been stung, he sprang back, with a shuddering intake of breath.

The reason was not hard to find.

In the yellow glow of the candle’s flickering flame a face was looking up at them, a face with half-closed eyes and lips slightly parted; a face the colour and texture of blue-veined marble, half hidden in a tangle of blonde hair.

Said the detective, in a voice like cracking ice: “Who’s this? Do either of you know her?”

“Yes, I know her,” answered Tony, through dry lips. “Her photograph was in my brother’s room.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name was Brice. Isobel Brice,” said Tony.

CHAPTER XVII

THERE was a short intense silence.

“That’s the woman you’ve been looking for, the woman you thought might have killed Peter West,” Denis told the detective.

“Ah, yes. His mistress.”

“She was, at one time,” confirmed Tony.

“No wonder we couldn’t find her,” muttered the police officer. He turned sharply to Tony. “Did you suspect this?”

“No. The possibility never entered my head. I was thinking only of a suitcase and perhaps a Webley forty-five revolver.”

What Tony was thinking at the moment was the explanation, so obvious now, of why Louis hadn’t seen Isobel leave the yard. It stuck out a mile, as the saying is, yet no one had guessed it. All their theories had been wrong.

“We’ll find that old devil and he can tell us why he did it,” said Pascal, grimly. “Have you any idea of why he should kill the girl, Monsieur West?”

“No idea at all. I——”

The detective whipped round as from above came shuffling footsteps and the mumbling voice of a man muttering to himself.

“That must be him now,” said Tony. “He’s come back early and found the door unlocked.”

“He’ll see the cellar door open,” warned Denis.

For all his bulk and the speed at which he moved the detective went up the steps with no more noise than a cloud crossing the face of the moon. But before he got to the top it was clear that if he hoped to reach the kitchen before the man upstairs, he would fail. Steps were striding towards it.

For a split second Legendre appeared silhouetted in the doorway at the top. He let out a bellow like an enraged bull and had gone in a flash. Pascal, no slower, went after him. The others followed.

Tony came up with them in the living-room. Legendre, snarling in his throat, had pulled open a drawer in the dresser and was groping for something. Pascal, with his left arm round the man’s neck was trying to drag him back. Legendre grabbed the edge of the drawer. It came right out and fell with a crash to the floor, spilling its contents. Among them was a revolver with a muzzle attachment. Legendre dived for it and reached it. Pascal knelt on the arm. The gun went off, filling the room with muffled noise and cordite vapour.

By this time Tony and Denis, dodging the kicking legs, were taking a hand. Against such odds the old man had no chance. Pascal wrenched the gun from his hand, and taking it by the muzzle with scant ceremony hit him on the head with it.

“A dangerous beast,” he said, breathing heavily, as Legendre sagged at the knees and crumpled. He produced handcuffs and clicked them on. “Phew!” he breathed as he straightened his disarranged clothes. “What an affair. What brought him home so soon?”

Tony answered. “It may have been that.” He pointed to a newspaper that had been flung on the table. “That wasn’t there when we came in. He bought it outside. Reading of the arrest of Delano and Schultzer he lost his nerve and came straight home. He knew them. He may have thought they’d squeal and drag him into the case.”

The detective nodded. “Exactly. Will one of you go to the telephone and call for a police car and an ambulance while I keep an eye on him. I fancy we’re dealing with a madman.”

“I’ll go and phone from my apartment,” offered Tony.

Having done so, and given himself a stiff drink which he felt he needed, he returned to the gate-house to find Madame Chariot standing outside with her arms akimbo.

“What’s going on?” she wanted to know.

“Go back to your room,” ordered Tony, crisply. “There’s a dead woman in there and they’ll be bringing her out presently.”

“Who’s the woman?”

“Mademoiselle Brice.”

“My God! That one! I always thought she’d end up in the morgue. That sort always——”

Tony cut short the vituperative vocabulary he knew was coming. “Go away,” he snapped. “And for the present say nothing of this to anyone.”

The woman, after a glance at his face, retired.

Tony went on into the house to find Legendre sitting up, talking, and Pascal taking his statement in his notebook.

“Has he said anything about Peter?” he asked Denis, quietly.

“Plenty. Everything. He’s been boasting about how he did it. I’ll give you his version as soon as the police have cleared up the mess. I’ll use your phone if I may, to get my story off. It isn’t every day a reporter happens to be on the spot in an affair like this.”

“I’ll wait for you there,” answered Tony. “I’ve seen enough. I’m expecting Colette. If she comes before the police are away send her straight up to me. Don’t say anything to her in the yard. This is going to upset her.”

“All right,” agreed Denis. “We shouldn’t be long. Ah! Here come the police cars now.”

Tony walked back to the apartment.

Denis arrived a little while later. Tony poured him a drink while he phoned his story to his office.

“Now,” said Denis, as he hung up. “I must get back to work so this must be brief.”

“Did that old devil say why he killed Isobel?”

“Yes. And I won’t ask you to guess the answer because I doubt if you could, although his reason was logical enough.”

“Why did he do it?”

“He says he had to shoot her because she saw him shoot Peter.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” gasped Tony. “So that old devil did kill Peter.”

“He not only admits it. He seems to be proud of his night’s work.”

“He must be mad.”

“Pascal thinks he isn’t quite sane.”

“Has François said how all this came about?”

“Yes. From what we know, and the rambling statement he has just made—he’s still a bit groggy—the affair looks like this,” said Denis. “There’s no doubt that he had realised Peter had been in the habit of carrying something valuable in that suitcase. On the fatal night two people were waiting in the yard for Peter to come home; Isobel on your steps, intending to try her hand at blackmail, and François, who was after the money he imagined was in the suitcase. Neither knew the other was there. The only other person who might have got in the way was Madame Charlot, so she had been sent out on the excuse of getting a bottle of Pernod. That was the position when Peter arrived.”

“What beats me is why François should think he could get away with murder literally on his doorstep.”

“He very nearly did. The cunning old devil realised that was the strength of his position. Why should he suddenly and for no apparent reason kill a man who had been going in and out for months? He reckoned on no one suspecting him and no one did. But let me go on. François says he waited until Peter got out of the car and then asked him for money. Peter refused to give him any, whereupon François pulled out the old Webley he had used in the war and demanded the case. Apparently he thought this was a safe bet because he had got it into his head that Peter wouldn’t want the police to know what was in the case. Anyway, François swears that Peter hit him and knocked him down.”

“Which might be true.”

“François now claims that he fired in self-defence. The fact is, of course, the old devil boiled over and deliberately shot him. Peter, having no defence against the gun, and knowing he had been hit, abandoned the case and made for the apartment to call for help—the police or a doctor. François, realising what he would do, shot at him again, and this must have been the shot that hit Peter in the neck—still without dropping him.”

“What about Isobel?”

“Standing where she was she must have seen all this. Don’t ask me why she acted as she did. According to François she came tearing up screaming for help, whereupon he shot her to keep her quiet. He had to, he says. We can now see how there came to be two bullet holes close together in the car door, which had been left open. I imagine that Peter, who was trying to get to the apartment, had no idea of what was going on in the yard. Not having a weapon there was nothing he could do, anyway. As we know, he managed to reach the apartment where he collapsed and died, never knowing what had happened to Isobel.” Denis finished his drink.

“François now found himself in the yard with the body of the girl and the thing he wanted—the suitcase. We can imagine the scene. Naturally, his first thought was to get them both out of sight before Madame Charlot came back and saw them. I fancy it was lucky for her that she didn’t come back until later or he would probably have shot her, too. There was nothing he could do about Peter. He carried the bag and dragged the girl inside his room and closed the door. Later he disposed of them in the only way open to him. Not knowing what had happened to Peter we may suppose he passed an anxious night; but in the morning, when he learned he was dead, he must have thought he had nothing to worry about. Who would suspect an old *cordonnier* with no motive for the murder? His story was plausible and practically watertight. Louis and Delano must have been as mystified as anyone when they heard Peter had been shot, and of course, each formed his own opinion. May I have another quick drink? Then I must get along.”

Tony passed the bottle. “What about the suitcase as a motive for robbery, if not for murder? Of course, I realise that no one had missed it. But how did François intend to explain its disappearance had it been missed and had the police questioned him about it?”

“That’s where his plan went wrong, and did, at the finish, let him down. He had intended putting it back in the car as soon as he had taken the money out of it. But he hadn’t time. Isobel crashing in upset the scheme. That must have got him agitated. By the time he had disposed of her body and then searched the suitcase for the money that wasn’t there Madame Charlot had returned. After that I can only imagine he was in too much of a sweat to do anything outside for fear the woman came out again, or, what was more

likely, the police arrived. He wasn't to know that Peter was dead, and had died without calling for help. All François could do with the suitcase was hide it, hoping that if no one knew anything about it, it wouldn't be missed. Actually, that is exactly what did happen—until you went to Sologne and had the wit to notice Peter's toilet things weren't there. François left everything in the case, not daring to have Peter's property about for fear somebody called. Apparently he took a chance on that tablet of soap."

"I'm sorry about that wretched girl Isobel," said Tony, lugubriously. "Whatever she'd done or intended to do she didn't deserve that sort of end. Colette will take it hard."

"It's certain to give her a shock."

"What will happen to François?"

"They'll probably put him in a mad-house. What else can you do with such a man?"

"I'm not surprised the police were baffled by this business," went on Tony. "Several people had an interest in Peter but none really had a motive for murder. When I saw Boulenger I thought his attitude a bit odd, but now I can see why. He had to bring me to Paris to sign the documents for probate but knowing the reputations of some of Peter's associates he was afraid that if I tried to interfere I might be bumped off too. He must have thought one of them had killed him. As Louis and Delano had been clients of his he didn't want to say too much about them. I have no doubt he'll open up when he learns what has happened today."

"It was clever of you to hit on the truth," declared Denis.

"I didn't hit on it," denied Tony. "Say, rather, it hit me, having been thrown by men each of whom was playing his own hand for what he could get or perhaps to dissociate himself from the crime. The information you gave me put the nail in the right place and Father Delamain happened to come along to knock it in."

Denis held out his hand. "I really must go now," he insisted. "I'll see you later." At the door he turned, a twinkle in his eyes. "Don't forget to ask me to the wedding."

Tony was still a bit shaky from shock when a knock announced the arrival of Colette. He let her in.

"What is happening?" she asked, pale with apprehension. "There are police in the yard. Two are standing at the door of François' house."

"Sit down and I'll tell you," answered Tony, pouring her a whisky and soda. "Here, drink this. You'll need it. I have tragic news and I'm afraid it's going to hurt you."

Colette's eyes, open wide, found his face. "Tony! You frighten me. What is it?"

“There’s no need to be frightened. That’s all finished. At last we know who shot Peter.”

“Who was it?”

“François.”

“Can it be true?”

“It is true. And that’s not all. This morning I went into François’ house with Denis and an officer of the Sûreté. We found a body.”

“Who—was it?” Colette held her breath.

“Isobel.”

The colour drained slowly from Colette’s face. “No! Oh no! Don’t tell me that.”

“I’m sorry, darling, but it’s true.”

“Mother of God! Why did he kill her?”

“Because she saw him kill Peter. She was in the yard, waiting for Peter to come home. Now we know why Isobel disappeared.”

“Poor Isobel.” Colette bowed her head, her hands over her face.

Seeing her distress Tony’s resistance melted like ice in hot water. He put a caressing arm round her shoulders.

“There—there,” he said, soothingly. “It’s all over now. We must try to forget the whole ghastly business.”

“It’s terrible.”

He put a finger under her chin to raise her face and kissed her wet eyes. “Yes,” he agreed, “it’s terrible. But who am I to complain? After all, had these things not happened I would never have known you, and that’s an even more terrible thought.”

She looked up at him. “Is it?”

“Do I have to tell you?”

“Tony—you’re not joking with me?”

He caught her in his arms. “Come here, darling, and judge for yourself if I’m serious.”

Presently, still in his arms, she tried to break away. “Wait, Tony. Are you sure you know what you’re doing? Remember what you said about dust in your eyes making you blind!”

“Yes, sweet, but I had it the wrong way round. There was dust in my eyes when I said that. It’s gone now. I can see all I want to see. What more can I say? Give me time and I’ll think of nice things to say to you. But not here. Let’s go somewhere and talk about ourselves. But first of all, have you decided where you would like to go for lunch. Somewhere with music?”

Colette smiled through her tears. “*La Frégate*.”

“What, again?”

“Please.”

“Why?”

“Because it was there I first knew I was in love with you!”

He kissed her tenderly. “That, darling, is all the music I want to hear,” he whispered.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *No Motive for Murder* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]