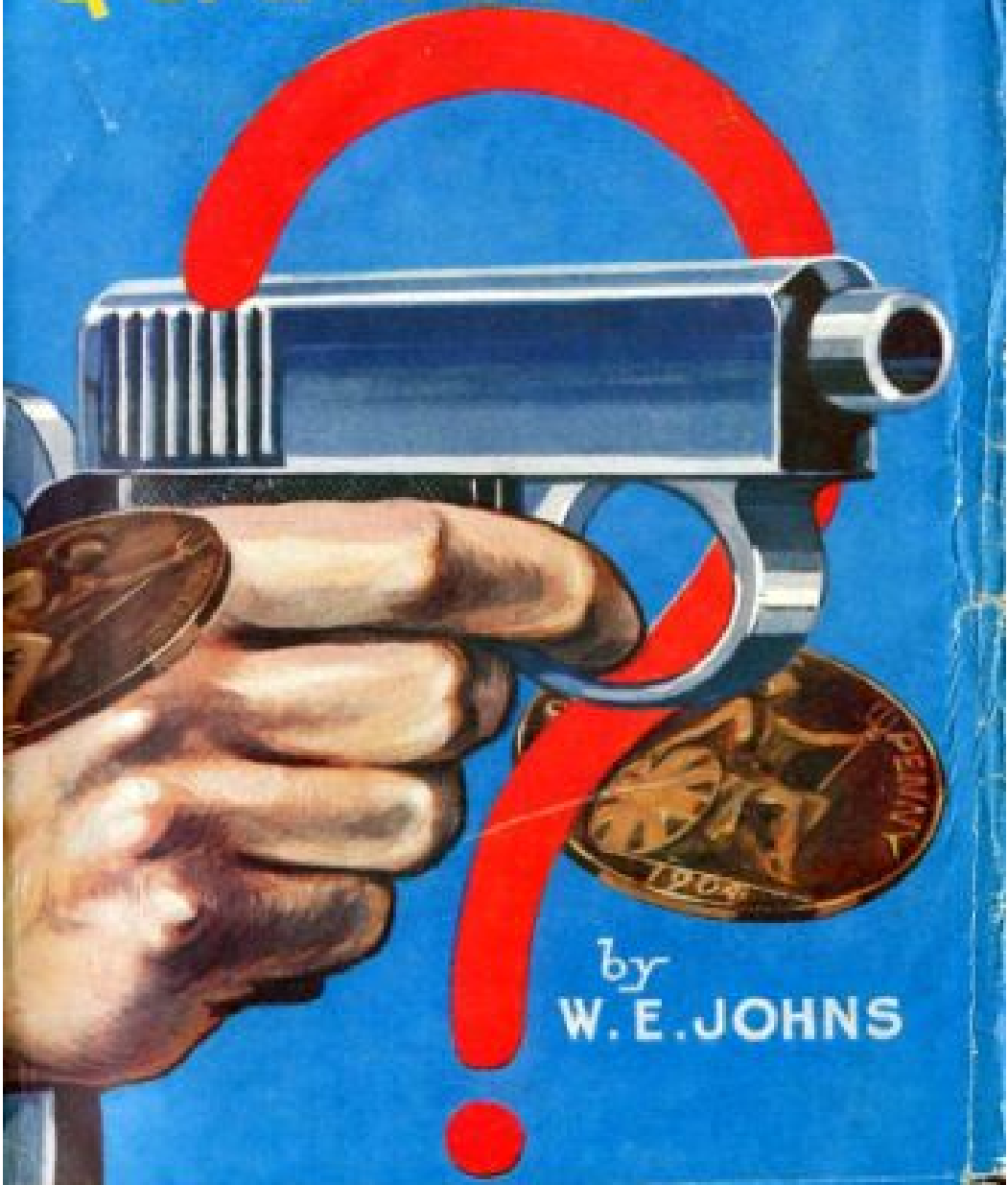
THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY



by
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THE
UNKNOWN QUANTITY

BY

W. E. JOHNS

AUTHOR OF
'DESERT NIGHT,' 'THE CAMELS ARE COMING,' ETC.

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THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY

CHAPTER I

A SPATTER of late spring rain drummed a harsh tattoo on the leaded panes of a cottage that stood on the edge of the forest, as forlornly alone as a castaway, its feet in an undulating tide of grey-green heather that flowed with imperceptible slowness, and never ebbed. Over it the sky lowered, sullen, menacing, except for a streak of watery orange low over the western horizon where the departing sun had found a misty spy-hole in the rolling storm clouds. For a brief moment it tinged the sombre landscape, the cottage, and the face of the man who stood at a window gazing down a puddled drive that meandered through a belt of sagging firs to a wider road as if distance were a thing of no account; then the conquering clouds rushed in to fill the breach, and it faded; and with their victory the twilight deepened. But the man did not move. A flurry of wind snatched the raindrops aside, leaving a silence broken only by a clock which continued its deliberate measurement of time regardless of the weather and the concerns of men. Night fell.

Nigel Deane, sometime known at Charterhouse as "Gunga," turned away from the bleak landscape which he could no longer see, and crossing to the open fireplace kicked a log into protesting flame. Returning to the window he drew the curtains, lighted an oil-lamp that stood on a table in the centre of the room, and took a cigarette at random from a half-empty cardboard box which, with a bottle and a syphon, kept it company. He was in the act of raising it to his lips when he stopped suddenly, listening intently until the purr of an approaching motor-car became plainly audible. He tossed the cigarette back on the table and picking up the lamp walked quickly to the door. By the time he had opened it the car was stationary on the drive, which ended at the cottage.

"That you, Gunga?" called a voice.

The man in the doorway answered in the affirmative.

"Where can I put the car?"

"You'll have to leave it where it is," answered the man with the lamp, raising it higher. "The garage will only hold one, and mine's in it. There's nowhere else. You can put your lights out."

The twin beams died abruptly; a door slammed, and a figure splashed quickly through the mud towards the lighted doorway.

The other stepped back, "Come in, Guy. I'm glad to see you," he said warmly.

"Hell's bells, what a night! What in God's name made you park yourself in this wilderness?"

The other ignored the question. "Take your coat off; throw it there—anywhere. Come and have a drink."

"Thrice welcome words. I can do with one, believe me."

"Whisky?"

"Thanks."

"Say when."

"You'll do." Nigel Deane passed the drink, poured one for himself and regarded his younger brother seriously. "Cheerio," he said, without enthusiasm.

"Cheer-ho."

The older man sipped his drink and then put the glass on the table. "Sit down, Guy," he said, quietly. "I'm sorry to drag you down here, but I have something important to tell you."

Guy sank into a Chesterfield near the fire. "About Peter?"

"Yes—about Peter."

"I thought so. I was more than a little shaken when I got your message asking me not to go to the funeral, not to send a wreath, and ignore the B.B.C. SOS for next-of-kin. I presume you didn't go to the funeral either?"

"I did not."

"Well, I suppose you had a reason, but a more extraordinary——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted the other. "But as you suppose, I had a reason—a good reason. After what the three of us have been to each other you can imagine how I felt about not showing up at Pete's funeral; but—well, you'd better brace yourself, because I am going to shake you again."

"Go ahead."

"Pete was murdered."

An attentive silence fell. Only the clock somewhere in the room continued ticking out the seconds and dropping them one by one into the

past.

Very slowly Guy sat upright in his chair. "*What* did you say?" he asked, in a curious tone of voice.

"I said Pete was murdered," repeated his brother, dispassionately.

"God in heaven!" Guy breathed the words. "By whom—for what?"

"That's what I brought you here to tell you," continued the older man, evenly, almost relentlessly. "It's a long story. Pete was murdered. You can divorce from your mind any doubts you might well have concerning that. I asked you not to go to the funeral, and to ignore the B.B.C. appeal, because it may not be known to those who murdered him that he had two brothers. I believe the radio broadcast was made—unknown to the higher authority at the B.B.C., of course—with the deliberate object of ascertaining if Pete had any relations. I——"

"My dear Gunga. Forgive me—but—you're sure you haven't been out in the sun without your Bombay bowler?" Guy's voice was frankly incredulous.

"Please don't interrupt; presently I shall furnish you with conclusive proof of what I am telling you," returned his brother with a touch of asperity. "I say that it may not be known that Pete had relations. You've been in Palestine for the past three years. I've been in India for nearly five. A junior officer in the R.A.F. and a skipper in the Indian Army are nothing to brag about, so Pete may not have mentioned our existence to anyone. I sent that message to you because I was anxious that such an impression, if it exists, should persist. In any case, even if Pete did refer to us, nobody knows what we look like. As a reporter on the *Daily Echo* Pete must have been fairly well-known in Fleet Street, so the paper might have sent a photographer to his funeral—you know what they are for sob stuff—and we might have appeared in print standing at the graveside, or something equally distasteful. That was the last thing I wanted to happen, so I kept away, and warned you to do the same."

"For a man who evidently has reason to suppose that his brother has just been murdered your manner seems strangely calm—I might say indifferent."

"Perhaps. I hope you're right. I've been schooling myself to think that way . . . to behave like this. It is necessary that I should. But don't let it deceive you, old boy. Underneath what you can see of me I am a simmering volcano of hate, hatred of the man, or the men, who murdered Pete. You will recall that our grandmother was a Corsican. Perhaps that is why I begin to understand the meaning of the word *vendetta*. It takes more than two generations of Anglo-Saxon blood, and a few years at an English public

school, to breed that out of a man. I loved Pete. He was four years older than me, seven years older than you. From the time I was a kid at prep. school he was my idea of everything that a man should be. When I went on to Charterhouse he took me under his wing. It was he who nicknamed me Gunga after my deplorable display of stage fright while reciting Kipling's poem at my first speech day—little dreaming that I should go to India and see the thing enacted more than once in the field. It has stuck to me ever since, as school nicknames so often do. In those days I admired him for all the things he could do that I couldn't do . . . and yet with it all he was as gentle . . . I'm sorry, laddie, but even now I just can't bear to think that I shall never see that ready smile of his again." The speaker's voice wavered for a moment. When it went on it was as brittle as cracking ice. "It is unlikely, then, that I shall allow his death to go unavenged," he announced, curtly.

"But the coroner's verdict was 'Accidental death.' I read the account of the inquest, and I thought he went into the thing very thoroughly. Pete must have been driving like hell."

"The speed Pete was travelling was not the primary cause of his death. Most people drive fast on an open road. He was killed in circumstances which had every appearance of an accident—as was, in fact, intended. He smelt of whisky, and there was a half-empty bottle in the car, which supported the assumption that he was drunk when he drove into the back of the stationary lorry. That whisky was planted on him after the crash. I happen to know that Pete had been on the water-waggon for months—not that he was ever drunk in his life. He told me so, in the last letter he wrote to me in India. But this is all beside the point. We need not conjecture. It was not an accident. Pete was as foully murdered as if he had been shot through the head; and I think he suspected that he might be, or he would not have written me the letter I now propose to read to you. I brought you here for that purpose."

"How long have you been here?"

"A couple of days. I'll tell you about that presently."

"So Pete wrote to you?"

"He wrote to me what must be the longest letter he ever penned in his life. He wrote it just in time. I received it the morning his death was announced in the newspapers. Pour yourself another drink; you'll need it." Gunga took a letter from his pocket, unfolded it, and waited for his brother to resume his seat before he continued.

"There is one thing I should mention, though, before reading Pete's last letter. About three months ago he wrote me what was on the face of it one of his brief, snappy notes. I needn't read it, but somehow it created in my mind an impression that he was worried about something. The gaiety was a trifle forced. He concluded by asking me when I was coming home on leave, because he was anxious to see me. He wouldn't have said that out of mere brotherly affection, because it was unnecessary. That alone told me that he had something on his mind. I applied for leave immediately and sent you a letter air mail telling you that I had done so in the hope that you would make your leave coincidental, and so effect a reunion. Pete assumed, rightly, that on getting off the trooper at Southampton I should go straight to Uncle Hubert's at Winchester, and get in touch with him from there. Incidentally, Uncle Hubert has aged; he is a very old man, and even now does not realize that Pete is dead. Frankly, I was rather disappointed that Pete didn't meet me on the quay. However, I thought I would slip up to Town the next day and see him. Instead, I received his letter, and half an hour later saw in the morning papers what had happened. I was in a bit of a stew to know what to do about you, because I knew you'd got to report to the Depot at Uxbridge before proceeding on leave, and I was very anxious to get in touch with you immediately. I rang up the Air Ministry. They told me that you were due home, and that you were flying home by Imperial Airways, but they weren't sure of the day, or whether you were coming overland or by flying-boat from Alex to Southampton. Otherwise, of course, I should have met you, I went to Imperial Airways' headquarters and told them the matter was urgent, so they kindly offered to make enquiries and get a message through to you. I then packed my bag, looked through the *Times* for suitable quarters, found this place in Ashdown Forest, and took it furnished for three months direct from the owner who has had to go abroad for his health. I fixed the thing by telephone and paid cash in advance. He didn't even see me. I then 'phoned Imperial Airways asking them to give you this address as soon as you landed. It was a bit complicated but it couldn't be helped. I was afraid you'd act before I could get in touch with you."

Guy shook his head. "I think I was too stunned to do anything," he said, bitterly, "although I should have gone to the funeral if you hadn't stopped me. After Imperials gave me your message at Croydon I went to the Club for the night, bought a second-hand car and dashed down to Uxbridge in the morning. I came on here as soon as I could get away. I'm still in a daze. Tell me about this letter."

Gunga began to read.

"My dear Gunga,

"I cannot say in a few words what I feel I ought to tell you, so please forgive what must at first sight appear to be unnecessary verbosity. Do not let my news concern you unduly, but the fact is, I am sailing single-handed in rather tricky water, and,—well, an accident might happen, so I would like you to know the truth—just in case.

"You will remember that I started work on the *Echo* as a cub under old Sammy Notley, one of the finest crime reporters who ever padded the pavement of Fleet Street—which was why the *Echo* often got two sticks on the first page while the others were rushing through a fudge. Sammy taught me my job. He died in harness. (I've thought a lot about the manner of Sammy's death since—he was 'accidentally' shot through the eye at a rifle range on Epsom Downs on Derby Day two years ago.) One of the last things he said to me was, 'Pete, my boy, there is more in this than meets the coroner's eye!' It was a homicide case—verdict suicide. (He might well have said the same thing about his own death could he have foreseen it.) Anyway, I realized from odd words he sometimes let drop that he suspected something was going on behind the scenes; something in a big way. After he had gone I followed up. I owed it to him.

"It would take too long to go into the details of how I got my teeth into the gristle of the thing. Oh yes, it was there. The biggest stunt I pulled—for which I shall never get the credit—was to fake a breakdown at the office and get sent on indefinite leave to recover. I said I would go for a cruise. Actually, I hung about a big house in Hampstead with a jemmy in my pocket until a policeman picked me up. Under the name of Lewis Warrington I got three months in Wormwood Scrubs for loitering with intent to commit a felony. That got me where I otherwise couldn't have got. And it got me into the gang. They approached me as soon as I came out. When I reported back at the office they thought I looked better for my cruise. I did. I'd got what I was after, which was one foot on the ladder. It was only the bottom rung, but I started climbing step by step hoping one day to reach the top and so break the biggest scoop in newspaper history by exposing the most fantastic crime business ever organized in any country. You've probably heard of Edgar Wallace. He wrote fiction about this sort of thing—or was it fiction? If it was, then he wrote nearer to the truth than he knew. I'm not writing fiction, old boy. What I am telling you is fact; truth, as grim as a gas-mask, and as cold-blooded as an executioner.

"As I went up the ladder my steps necessarily became slower, partly because they became more dangerous, and because there was a sharp dividing line between each one. Precautionary measures, of course. I don't know how high the ladder goes, but it goes high; very high; nothing short of Royalty at the top would surprise me. Officially, I'm still working on the paper, so I have other stories to cover; but you'd be surprised how often they take me back to the ladder. It's incredible. Naturally, I don't want to fire a squib. I want the big story. But a short time ago the going got so desperately dangerous that I went to Scotland Yard and told them enough to put them on the trail. I saw Drysdale—Detective Inspector. He didn't even hear me out. He laughed at me. But I think I must have made some impression because I'm being watched, presumably so that they can step in in case there is a story in it.

"But you will want to know more about the activities of this organization—it's too big to be called a gang. It is international, and it may be political. I don't know yet, but I am convinced that the headquarters is in this country. It stops at nothing. Murder is merely part of its business. Usually it is effected to look like an accident or suicide—or just natural death. I could tell you of a case where the doctor who signed the victim's death certificate, and the undertaker who buried him, were both members of the organization. I know they've got an agent in Broadcasting House, so there are probably others in Government departments. That will give you an idea of the ramifications of the thing. But such operatives are only small fry. There are hundreds of them, in every walk of life. It isn't the work of a year, or five years; someone has spent a lifetime organizing it, developing it, strengthening the weak points and ironing out the creases. Money is no object. The head man must be a millionaire. All the information I have gathered is in my head. I daren't put it down on paper because nowhere would be safe for the document. I wouldn't trust the Bank of England, and when I say that you may judge what I am up against. But it seems a pity that all this information might go west if I made a blunder, and in turning it over in my mind I thought of you. Do nothing about it—yet. But if anything happens to me—well, you must act as you think best. But as you value your life never mention what you know to anybody. *Anybody*—understand?

"Curiously enough, the machinery of this thing is simple. I suppose in such a huge system it must be. Anything complicated would break down somewhere, sooner or later. Everyone is known by a number; as far as I can make out members know many of the lower numbers but no

member knows the identity of the higher numbers. The smallest (or highest) number I've struck yet is seventeen, who seems to be a sort of brigade major in charge of operations in the London area. When I get to Number One my job will be finished, not before. What an eye-opener it will be! The signet, or counter-check, is merely an ordinary penny bearing the date 1904—possibly the year the thing came into existence. It's rather clever, that, because it is something any member can replace immediately in case of loss, and there could never be anything incriminating about it. I picked that up in Wormwood Scrubs.

"What finally decided me to write this letter was indisputable evidence that my activities are known to the organization. By this morning's post I received a registered packet. In it were two hundred £1 notes, with a typed chit 'You would do better by transferring your abilities elsewhere. Acknowledgement to unknown donor from grateful recipient in to-morrow's *Times* will signify acceptance.' I've acknowledged acceptance as requested. If it pans out as I hope it should take me another step up the ladder. I am sending you the notes for safe custody in case they are ever wanted for evidence. The chit was the first document I've picked up. I had already hinted at my suspicions to Brimswade, my editor, and I showed it to him as conclusive proof. He was very interested, and I spent an hour with him, telling him all about it. I was rather surprised at his attitude because lately he has been putting the soft pedal on my stuff. There are a lot of other things I should like to tell you, but I have already written more than I intended, so the rest will have to wait until we meet. Don't try to get in touch with me. I'll ring you and fix a rendezvous. (It might do you no good to be seen with me.) I hoped to meet you at Southampton, but I find I shall have to run down to Blandford to-night, to snoop round something which I fancy is not all that it pretends to be. I've had to tell Brimswade, of course, but I shan't tell anyone else, so it ought to be safe enough. I'll ring you as soon as possible—probably within the next couple of days.

"Until then, Thine,
"Pete."

Gunga Deane folded the letter into its original creases and replaced it in his breast pocket. "Pete was killed the night he wrote that letter," he said slowly. "They knew he was on their trail. I should say he was on the scent of one of the low numbers."

"Yes, that's about it."

“Then you don’t doubt the existence of such an organization as Pete describes?”

“Good God, no! Although had anyone else but Pete written that letter I should have said he was nuts.”

“Does anything strike you about it as odd?”

“The oddest thing to me is that he wrote the letter at all, knowing that he was going to see you.”

“Precisely. Anything else?”

“I haven’t had much time to think about the context.”

“It’s hardly necessary to think. One sentence jumped out and hit me in the face.”

“Which was that?”

“ ‘I’ve had to tell Brimswade . . . but I shan’t tell anyone else.’ ”

Guy eyed his brother with sympathetic toleration. “You mean . . . ? The editor of a London daily? My dear Gunga, you’re crazy.”

“Pete said nothing short of royalty would surprise him. Why should it surprise us?”

“Why didn’t Pete suspect him?”

“I should say he did. Listen, old boy. This is how I read the thing. Pete knew damn well that he was in danger. He didn’t want to scare me, or appear guilty of overstatement, so he merely said that he was sailing in tricky water. He knew that it was becoming more dangerous every hour. The morning of his death he had to make a decision. He wanted to meet me. Why didn’t he? There is only one possible answer to that question. He had got his teeth into something big, and he wouldn’t—or couldn’t—let go. The trail took him to Blandford. The fact that he sat down and wrote that letter to me, knowing that he would be seeing me within the next day or two, is sufficient indication that he knew what thin ice was under him. In short, he knew that there was a chance that he might be killed at any moment, and he wanted me to know the truth before it happened. The next significant factor is that he told Brimswade. The wording of the letter suggests that he had to tell him in order to get time off to go to Blandford—but he needn’t have made a point of telling me that. No, as I see it, what he was doing either had some connection with Brimswade, or else he deliberately set a trap, knowing that if his plan miscarried due to an informer, the informer could only be Brimswade. If that was so, he succeeded only too well. He was caught and killed in his own trap. I must admit that much of this is conjecture, but there is no getting away from the fact that Brimswade was the only person who

knew that Pete was going to Blandford that night. The crash occurred just outside the town. To kill a man as cunningly and effectively as Pete was killed needed preparation. Therefore Brimswade must have immediately passed the information on to somebody before sitting down with his tongue in his cheek to write that smug little obituary paragraph which appeared in the next issue of the paper. Incidentally, I have ascertained that the *Echo* was the only paper to carry the story in its first edition."

"It's unbelievable."

"Pete was well aware of it. He said as much in the early part of his letter. He would rather be guilty of understatement than exaggeration, so you may be sure that he confined himself to what he knew to be fact."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I hope you won't be upset when I tell you."

"Go on."

"Exactly. I'm going on where Pete left off. I'm going to kill the men who killed him—not from any moral principles, but out of revenge. Every instinct in me recoils from letting them get away with a thing like this. To-morrow it may be somebody else's brother."

"The police will scoff at such a story."

Gunga laughed harshly, a bitter sound devoid of mirth. "Police?" he sneered. "After what Pete says in his letter? With all due respect to the force, there isn't a man in it whom I would dare to trust. Can you suppose that an organization the size of this one would fail in such an elementary matter as omitting to plant a man in the building from which it has most to fear? Pete was watched from the time he went to Scotland Yard. He knew it, but he could do nothing about it. I've made a mental note of the name of the man he saw—Drysdale. No, Guy, I've thought this out very carefully and I'm going to tackle it my own way. I'm going to find the man, or men, directly or indirectly responsible for Pete's death. I'm going to fight them with their own weapons—death and the fear of death. They've got numbers. I shall be the unknown quantity—the recurring decimal who dots his numbers with bullet holes. One by one I'll mark them down, and as I find them I shall kill them. And I shan't stop till I tick off Number One."

"Where are you going to start looking for them?"

Gunga's face was grim as he looked at his brother. When he spoke his voice vibrated like taut elastic. "I'm not going to look for them. They are going to look for me. They hand out death—the swine. Well, I'm going to hand it out, too, as cold-bloodedly and as mercilessly as they do—but they won't know where it's coming from. I'm going to be a will-o'-the-wisp with

a score of names and no address, a Jack the Ripper, with a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other. And, by God, I'm itching to be at them, blast them!"

Guy got up. "That, soldier, is exactly how I feel," he said quietly, but distinctly. "I've got six months overseas leave. If necessary I'll resign. Count me on your strength."

"Just a minute, laddie. On the frontier I've looked on death too often to fear it, or shrink from handing it out. But what about you? Do you feel capable of killing men?"

Guy laughed shortly. "I've been killing the King's enemies for the last three years, so it doesn't seem unreasonable if I claim the privilege of killing a few of my own. When do we start?"

Gunga Deane took a cigarette from the box and tapped it on the back of his hand. "We start right away," he said.

"With whom?"

"With Brimswade."

"Know anything about him?"

"Enough, I think." Gunga reached to the mantelpiece for a book, and opened it at a dog-eared page. "This is the *Authors' and Writers' Who's Who*," he said. "Listen. 'Brimswade, Oliver Oakes, B.A., Oxon. Born London, 1892. Bachelor. Publications: *Economy at Home*, etc. Special subject: Interior Economy. Recreations: golf, gardening. Newspaper appointments: foreign editor *The Globe*, 1924; editor, *Daily Echo*. Address: Railsden Lodge, Dorking Road, Reigate, Surrey.' "

"Well, you have at least one thing in common," observed Guy.

"You mean gardening? We'll forget about flowers until we start handing out the wreaths. Have you got a pistol?"

"I've got my service automatic in my kit."

"That should be enough. Get yourself a pair of cotton gloves, and wear light shoes with plain soles. We've got to be careful. We shall be fighting the law as well as the lawless, so we'll start by eliminating the risk of leaving fingerprints and other funny marks about. We'll stay here as long as it suits us. There are a few other minor details, but we'll go into those later. We shan't need two cars. Take yours back to Town in the morning and park it, and leave word around that you are going into the country for a bit. I shall come up with you in my own car. I'll pick you up at nine pip emma outside the Air Force Club in Piccadilly. We will then go and call on Mr. Brimswade."

"Fine," agreed Guy. "Let's have a drink on it. What I need is action."

CHAPTER II

WHEN GUNGA'S car ran to a standstill precisely at nine o'clock the following night outside the Royal Air Force Club in Piccadilly, Guy was waiting on the steps. Without a word or a signal he got in beside the driver, and the car moved forward into the stream of traffic.

"You've seen the score, I suppose? Australia two-fifteen for seven," remarked Gunga presently.

"Serves us right. We should have played Larson," returned Guy briefly, but with a finality that discouraged argument.

Thereafter neither spoke until they had crossed the River and were cruising down the Sutton road.

Judging from appearances nobody would have suspected that the two men in the car were brothers; nor was there anything about either to suggest the Latin blood to which Gunga had referred. Both were familiar types of the class to which they belonged; both carried themselves with that air of slightly bored indifference known facetiously as Old School Tie—which, in fact, can only be acquired at an English public school—and is more apt to create an impression of affectation because it is genuine and not affected. Both had that quality of quiet self-confidence that comes from commanding men. But externally they had nothing in common. Gunga was the heavier of the two, being both taller and broader across the shoulders. He was fair, clean-shaven, with eyes of steely blue, the blue intensified to an almost startling and unnatural degree by a skin tanned to bronze by the Indian sun. A straight mouth and firm chin added strength to a face that just missed being handsome. His actions were deliberate, and he moved and spoke in the authoritative manner of one who is accustomed to responsibility.

His brother was dark, slim, and of medium height; a small toothbrush moustache, which he often fingered reflectively, gave him a maturity rather beyond his years. His eyes, too, were dark, and inclined to be restless, although they could twinkle at the slightest provocation. Immaculately dressed, his manner was debonair almost to the point of being inconsequential. Looking at his face, no one would find it difficult to believe that he was regarded both as a responsibility and an asset by the commanding officers of the squadrons in which he had served. He had been court-martialled and reprimanded for dangerous flying at home, and

awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for the same thing on active service. A marked lack of respect for senior officers, amounting almost to irresponsibility, had retarded his promotion. His fitter and rigger complained bitterly to each other of his inhuman treatment of aeroplanes, but re-engaged on completion of their service in order to remain with him.

"Get everything fixed up all right?" asked Gunga after a long silence.

"Yes."

"Got your gun?"

"Yes."

"Gloves?"

"Yes."

"A nineteen-o-four penny?"

"No, I forgot that. I knew there was something else."

"Never mind; I've got half a dozen. I was some time finding them."

"Is that what you've been doing all day?"

"No. I've been making final arrangements. I think I told you that I took the cottage under an assumed name. You'd better make a note of it—William Black. You might as well remain my brother, so choose your own Christian name. I've been to see Turnbull, the Guv'nor's old lawyer."

Guy looked startled. "Good God! You haven't told him anything about ——?"

"Of course not. I told him that I was doing intelligence work of a highly important nature for the Government, but as my movements were uncertain I proposed to post to him from time to time certain documents for safe custody, addressing them to myself care of his office. They will be put in a special box where I can get at them at any time. I thought it would be both unwise and unsafe to carry on our persons any documentary evidence we may collect—Pete's last letter, for instance. He was up against the same difficulty. The only person I could think of not likely to be inquisitive was Turnbull. I'm also going to keep a brief diary of events from the time I received Pete's letter. I've told Turnbull that in the event of nothing being heard of me for six months he is to hand the box to the Commissioner of Police. I doubt very much if the Commissioner would believe our story now, but by the time that box reaches him—if ever it does—he's going to sit up and take notice."

Guy fingered his moustache thoughtfully. "Yes," he said, "I see your point, but if we were both bumped off I don't see that it matters much."

"I wasn't thinking so much about being bumped off by the gang as being handed over to the public executioner for disposal. I should hesitate to shoot an innocent policeman even if failure to do so meant arrest. One can't always trust one's memory, so in such circumstances a written record would be useful."

Guy nodded. "I see," he agreed, casually. "You turn right at the bottom of the hill, I think."

The car ran down Reigate Hill to the railway station, where Gunga turned to the right along the Dorking Road, travelling slowly enough for the names of the houses to be read.

"Here it is," murmured Guy presently.

"Good," acknowledged Gunga, without slackening speed.

"Aren't you going to stop?"

"My dear Guy! Leave a car outside Brimswade's house on this night of all nights? The police have developed a deplorable habit of noting registration numbers. Now we know just where the place is we'll go back into the town and leave the car in a public car park." He waited until the road was clear of traffic and then turned back to the town to find presently what he announced was the ideal place to leave the car—the crowded car park of the Majestic Cinema. Leaving the vehicle with the others they walked at a moderate pace back to their objective in the Dorking Road.

Railsden Lodge was one of those large, red bricked Victorian houses that appear to have been built not so much as homes as places to live in. Cowering behind an overcrowded colony of evergreens, it was without character, without a feature to remember, a mere refuge from the weather. The windows were small and mean. The porch that pretended to harbour the front door had abandoned itself to the embrace of the green vampire ivy, which was now flinging out triumphant tentacles in search of further prey. The front gate was an ornate affair of many timbers surmounted by a *cheval-de-frise*, its bristling points pointless since the gates stood open and gave access to a short, lawn-bordered drive which made a loop before returning to the gate.

Two windows were lighted, at opposite ends of the house, the one on the left, curtained with a thin material, obviously being the kitchen; the other, the largest window of all, was clearly a reception room. It was curtained, but the curtains had either been carelessly drawn or were ill-fitting, for narrow beams of light escaped from the centre and both sides to form a yellow pattern on a well-kept lawn. A closer reconnaissance revealed that this room

had a second window in the end of the house, a French window that opened on to a terrace from which a short flight of stone steps led into the garden.

Standing in the gloom of the evergreens Gunga drew on a pair of cotton gloves and warned Guy to do the same. Then he walked across the lawn to the French window and endeavoured to see into the interior of the room; but the blind fitted too closely and frustrated his intention. "Wait here," he said, softly, and made his way cautiously to the other window. He was soon back. "Brimswade is in there alone," he said. "He is writing at his desk."

Very gently he tried the French window. "No luck," he said, turning away. "It's locked. I shall have to knock."

"Knock?"

"Of course. I'm not going to the front door and allow the staff to see us. You'd better leave the talking to me." He took a coin from his pocket and tapped softly on a window-pane. The noise it made was negligible, but it was insistent and unmistakable.

A moment later the blind was drawn aside, and a broad, heavy, clean-shaven face peered through the glass. Gunga held up a penny within three inches of it. Instantly the blind was raised and the door opened.

"What the devil do you want here?" asked Brimswade, harshly.

"*Ssh!*" cautioned Nigel. "There's no need to rouse the house. I've got a message for you, and I didn't want to use the front door." He laid the penny on the palm of his hand for a moment, and then put it back into his pocket, at the same time stepping forward.

"I can't have you people coming here like this," grumbled Brimswade, retreating into the room which was furnished as a library.

"I said I had a message," repeated Gunga. "Please speak quietly."

"From whom?"

"Number seventeen."

"Why didn't he use the telephone? What the hell is the use of having a private wire if it isn't used?"

Gunga glanced towards the inside door. "You'd better lock that in case anyone comes in," he told Guy, with an inclination of his head towards the door. He turned back to Brimswade who had re-seated himself at the desk at which he had evidently been writing when he was interrupted. "You don't mind, I hope? Merely a matter of precaution. It might save both of us embarrassment."

Brimswade frowned and muttered something about impertinence.

"May I have your number, sir?" asked Guy, courteously. "I haven't met you before, and I don't want to make a mistake."

"Twenty-three."

"Thank you."

"Well, whatever you've got to say, say it. I don't like you people coming here like this," muttered Brimswade irritably.

"You'll appreciate that I am acting under instructions which I should be ill-advised to question," returned Gunga, smoothly.

"Of course—of course. I understand that," agreed Brimswade, in a resentful but somewhat mollified tone of voice. "Well, what is it?"

"Number Seventeen orders me to convey his compliments but to say that he is displeased about the way you handled the Deane business."

Brimswade hesitated for a moment. "What has he got to be displeased about?" he asked, cautiously.

"You shouldn't have put that paragraph in the paper before the story had been sent out by the agencies."

"I was told that it was all right. In fact, I was given to understand that the story was released immediately after the . . ."

"Accident," suggested Gunga.

"Yes—exactly."

"Well, he thinks that any mention of it until the later editions was both ill-advised and unnecessary."

Brimswade flushed, glaring belligerently. "What the devil else was I to do? Damn it, I couldn't do more—or less—than I did."

"I'm inclined to agree, but my opinion doesn't count. However, Seventeen thinks that there is just a chance that you may have misunderstood his instructions."

"Instructions! What instructions?"

"He rang you up after you had warned him about how much Deane knew, and that he was on his way down to Blandford."

"Rang me up? I haven't spoken to him since."

"You mean—you didn't get a message from him at all after you told him about Deane?"

"I certainly did not. You seem to know a lot about this. I was given to understand that no one, in any circumstances, would be told——"

Gunga held up a hand. "It's all right," he said, softly. "You see—I was in charge of the lorry."

Brimswade looked relieved. “There should be no complaints about the way you did *your* part of the job,” he sneered.

“No—none,” admitted Gunga in an expressionless voice. “I think I’ll have a word with Number Seventeen now, if you don’t mind my using your line. I think we can smooth out any misunderstandings.”

“Very well, but make haste. I don’t like this sort of thing. I’m busy, anyway.”

Gunga walked round the desk to the private telephone, which was a wall fitment, unhooked the receiver and turned the call handle. “Hello,” he said. “Hello, is that Number Seventeen? I’m speaking from the house of Number Twenty-three . . . you know that? Yes, of course. You don’t understand? You’ll understand better in the morning. I just rang up to say . . . my number? I haven’t one. I’m the unknown quantity. Make a note of that because you’ll be hearing from me again. That’s all.” Gunga hung up the receiver and returned to the front of the desk.

Brimswade was watching him curiously. “What was all that nonsense about?” he asked curtly, rising suspicion in his voice.

Gunga shook his head. “It wasn’t nonsense, Brimswade,” he said quietly, taking out his automatic. “No—keep your hands on the desk.”

Brimswade had turned pale. The white podgy fingers that lay on the desk had begun to tremble. “I don’t understand,” he said, breathing fast.

Gunga’s eyes were steady as they rested on Brimswade’s face. “We’re Deane’s brothers—perhaps that makes things clearer.”

Brimswade blanched. “Deane’s——” he moistened his lips with his tongue.

Gunga nodded. “We don’t mind you knowing that now because the information will be of no value to you in the place where you’re going,” he said, grimly.

Brimswade half rose in his seat and then sank back again. He was trembling violently. “Now—just a minute—you fellows,” he panted. “It was all a mistake.”

“The biggest mistake you ever made,” agreed Gunga, relentlessly. “And it will be the last,” he added. “Sit still, you swine. I can’t invoke the law because I know only too well that from my point of view it would serve no useful purpose; therefore I must take it into my own hands. I’m going to kill you, Brimswade, but I won’t deny you the chance of saving your soul. You have ten seconds to live, so if you have any prayers to say, say them now.”

Brimswade could only stare, slumped in his chair, his face ashen. Twice he tried to speak, but only a whimpering sound passed his pallid lips.

"Your time is up," said Gunga, and raised the automatic.

With a convulsive effort, terrible in its desperation, Brimswade snatched open a drawer of his desk and jerked out a revolver. But even as he did so he must have seen Gunga's finger tightening on the trigger. He flung his left arm over his face as if to shield it. "No!" he screamed.

"Yes," said Gunga, and the automatic spat.

The stricken man swayed on his feet, staring with fascinated eyes at the still-smoking instrument from which death had come to him. The revolver dropped to the floor with a thud. Then he crashed forward across the desk and slid slowly to the carpet.

Guy walked round the desk and looked down at him. "I don't think he needs a *coup-de-grâce*," he said.

There came a sound of hurrying footsteps. The handle of the door turned. Someone knocked, loudly and repeatedly.

With a swift movement Gunga picked up some letters that were lying on the dead man's desk and put them in his pocket. "Time we were going," he said, evenly, and followed Guy to the French window. He closed it behind him.

A dozen paces took them to the shrubbery, and as many more to the gate. Inside the house someone was hammering on a door.

Gunga reconnoitred the road. "All clear," he said, stepping out on to the path and glancing at his watch. "A quarter to eleven," he observed. "That should suit us nicely. The crowd should just be coming out of the picture house by the time we get there."

They walked unhurriedly along the road, deserted except for an occasional car, to the town, and reached the park just as it was emptying. They took their place in the queue waiting to get through the gateway, and a few minutes later were cruising down the Horley road towards East Grinstead.

They reached the cottage on the edge of the forest just before midnight. Gunga put the car away and then joined Guy in the living room. "Well, that's Number Twenty-three out of the game," he said.

Guy was pouring two whiskies. "I hope they're not all going to die like rats or the thing will become boring," he said in a pained voice. "Having seen the heathen die it makes me wonder how we ever became the ruling race."

"Oh, forget it. They won't all be like that."

"What have you got there?"

Gunga took a drink and put the glass back on the table. "These are the papers I picked up on his desk on the off-chance that there might be something in them to give us a line. I'm afraid we're out of luck, though . . . demand for rates, gas bill, tradesmen's bills . . . good God, the man owed some money. What's this?—it's the thing he was writing when I scouted through the window. Well, well; believe it or not, it's an order for flower seeds."

Guy fingered his moustache. "Somehow, flower seeds don't seem to fit with that nasty piece of work," he murmured thoughtfully.

"Nevertheless, here it is—a printed order form going to a firm of London seedsmen—Herman Groot & Co., King's Road, Chelsea. I've never heard of them. I wonder why he bought his seeds from a retailer, instead of direct from the growers? It would never occur to me to do that. Let's see what he was getting. Delphinium macrocentron—nice thing, that; aquilegia canadense nana—don't think much of that, the habit is a bit too straggly. What's this? Primula sonumbulensis alba. That's a new one on me, and I thought I knew most of the primulas, too. I took three weeks off last year and went up into the Burmese hills with Dick Grainger, collecting primula seeds, but we didn't find anything new. Very odd. Well, I don't think it's worth lighting a fire, so what about hitting the hay? We've several things to do to-morrow," Gunga yawned. "I feel better for to-night's outing," he declared.

Guy nodded and finished his drink. "Undoubtedly," he agreed.

CHAPTER III

THE following morning Guy came down to find Gunga frying bacon and eggs over a primus stove. "Ah-ha, that's the stuff for G-men," he announced, cheerfully.

Gunga smiled. "You didn't lose any sleep?"

"No, *sir*. I slept like a hashish-soaked wog in a Baghdad doss-house. It didn't rain, after all. What about slipping up to Lord's?"

"Work before play. We might look in this afternoon for an hour."

"What's the programme?"

"We'd better have a look at the morning papers for a start; we must keep up-to-date with the proceedings. The newsagents don't deliver as far out as this, but we can get them at Forest Row."

"Having exhausted its grief-stuff superlatives on the usual daily ration of slush, the *Echo* should look like a barrage of tear gas. Well, I'll forgive it. A paper doesn't have the chance of announcing the bumping off of its commanding officer every day. Beneath the sackcloth and ashes it ought to be possible to perceive a certain pride in the establishment of such a unique precedent. Cleaned your gun?"

"Oh come, sir, and me a soldier?"

"Disposed of the empty shell?"

"I beat it out flat with a hammer and heaved it into the heather a quarter of a mile away, where it should be slightly more difficult to find than a Mahsud in his home *nullah*."

"What have you done with that correspondence you took?"

"Burnt it and crumpled the ashes, as laid down in the manual of crook training. Oh, I know all the tricks."

"I can see you don't need a refresher course. Where are we going?"

"King's Road, Chelsea."

"To see that seed-wallah?"

"I think his quarter calls for an inspection."

"And then?"

"We'll see what transpires. By the way, don't leave your things lying about. Put everything except your small kit in a bag ready for quick marching-orders in case departure becomes necessary. We must make that a daily routine order."

"Spoke like a soldier. It shall be done."

"Where do you think would be a good place to get a jemmy and a bunch of skeleton keys?"

"Hell's bells! For what sinister purpose——?"

"Oh, nothing at the moment. It occurred to me that we might need them, though, and it's no use waiting for a war to start before issuing equipment."

"What about these West End stores that are always shouting about supplying the needs of mankind?"

"I doubt whether we come officially into that category. However, never mind. We'll leave them pro tem. Sit down and nibble the unconsumed portion of yesterday's rations. Incidentally, we'd better bring some more home with us—some iron rations, too, in case of a siege or a forced march."

"I'll remember it. And by the way, a melancholy thought occurred to me last night as I was about to close my eyes in slumber. What happens if we run into any women in this business?"

Gunga stopped in the act of lifting his coffee cup. "I hadn't thought of that," he confessed. "I don't see that it need make any difference," he added, continuing his meal.

"Suppose she's a young rapturous maiden?"

"I can't see that either glamour or virginity should be regarded as extenuating circumstances where guilt is proved. Anyhow, that's the way the law looks at it."

"Hm, I just wondered. I feel one ought to have a special ammunition for women."

"If you're going romantic the sooner you retire on half-pay the better. And if you've finished you might go and get the car out to save time."

In ten minutes they were speeding up the London Road. Gunga stopped the car outside a newsagent's in Forest Row. "Judging from what I see there has been what is officially called, I think, a bad business," he observed, looking through the side window at a row of bill-boards outside the shop.

"I never saw a prettier battery of posters," declared Guy. "The type setters have certainly brought out their heavy stuff. 'London Murder Mystery.' Dear, dear, *The Times* is getting quite garrulous. 'City Editor Sensation,'—yes, even he would agree with that. 'Shot Editor Drama,'—

that's gross exaggeration. Take a dekko at the *Echo*. 'Murder Most Foul'—you can see the tears fairly dripping down the ink. Pity he can't see that little lot or he might indent for a halo."

Gunga went into the shop and returned with several papers. He opened the *Echo* on his knees and they both read for some time in silence.

"Nobody saw us, apparently," murmured Guy presently.

"I think not, but I wouldn't take it as gospel because the paper says so."

"Nobody in the house heard anything, either, until the shot."

"That seems likely enough; it was a heavy door, and according to this, the butler and his wife were in the kitchen. That is consistent with where we saw the lights."

"The police are hopeful," read Guy.

"They always are. You can take hopeful to mean optimistic. What they will be up against, and what will finally defeat them, is complete absence of motive. There is nothing said about my telephone call."

"Did you think there might be?"

"No, but I was by no means sure. The police will find the private line, and they will soon be at the other end, so Number Seventeen may have to make a statement. No doubt he will have a plausible one ready. I've thought a lot about that line. It shook me when our late friend told us that there was one. I did some fast thinking, trying to work out if there was any way by which we could ascertain who lived at the other end, or even where it was. I decided that there was no way. I doubt very much if Brimswade knew."

"The post office would know."

"Of course, since they installed it. But they wouldn't tell us—and this is hardly the time to make enquiries. It will be interesting to see if any reference is made to the line in the newspapers, but I fancy the police will keep that piece of information to themselves. In any case, Number Seventeen won't want any limelight in the affair, so you can bet that he'll pull all the strings he can with the police to keep it quiet. Incidentally, you noticed *The Times* says that Drysdale is in charge of the investigations? That's intriguing. Of course, there is a chance that he was given the job in the ordinary course of his duties; on the other hand, wires may have been pulled to put him on it to keep Number Seventeen's name out of the papers. Number Seventeen must be an important man. The fact that the editor of a London daily was Number Twenty-three gives us an idea of how high up the social scale the very small numbers must be."

"But might not the police themselves attach some suspicion to Number Seventeen, in view of the private line?"

"I don't think so. There would be nothing extraordinary in a politician or a big business man having a private line to the editor of a newspaper. If it happened to be the *proprietor* of the newspaper then it would be perfectly normal, and there would be no occasion for anyone to refer to it."

Guy raised his eyebrows. "My God! I didn't think of that," he muttered. "Who owns the paper?"

"Lord Glenbold."

"Know anything about him?"

"Nothing. I've been abroad too long. But we'll soon find out—it shouldn't be difficult. We'll attend to that presently. At the moment we can be certain of two things. The first is that Number Seventeen will not tell anyone outside the gang that the murderer rang him up from Brimswade's study; and the second is that there is a flutter among the small numbers this morning when Number Seventeen tells them—as he will. We have, as you might say, given them something to think about."

"Have you thought of going to the funeral, to see who Brimswade's friends were?"

"I have, but I've turned it down. The police will be there, too. Not knowing who his enemies were, the melancholy function will bristle with plain-clothes men who from experience are well aware that such an event invariably exerts an uncanny magnetism on the person responsible. So we'll keep away. All the same, we'll make a note of the list of mourners. There will probably be a picture in the *Echo* the following day; we'll cast an eye over that, too. I'd like to send a wreath, from the Unknown Quantity, just to worry Number Seventeen and his co-directors, but it would be dangerous. The police might trace it back to us, and so get a description of us. They're rather good at that sort of thing. In the circumstances I think it would be wiser to leave well alone. That appears to be all, so we may as well proceed." Gunga tossed the papers into the rear seat and went on towards London.

"What are you going to do in this seed shop?" asked Guy, as they turned into King's Road.

"Buy a few packets of seeds and reconnoitre the landscape generally. I'm anxious to see these primulas. There is no need for us both to go in; in fact, it would be sound policy for you to remain in reserve in case the enemy is present in force and launches a counter-attack. This looks like the place, on the left. Stand by while I do the patrol." Gunga slowed down and pulled

up against the curb a short distance beyond the shop; leaving Guy in the car he strolled back along the pavement. Reaching his objective he stood for a moment or two inspecting the garden accessories offered for sale in the window and then walked into the shop.

An elderly, stockily-built man, going grey at the temples, was standing behind the counter. He wore a white apron over his waistcoat and trousers. There was nothing remarkable about him except the unhealthy colour of his face; he looked as though he had just recovered from an illness. He regarded his customer with heavy, questioning eyes. "Yes, sir?" he said, smoothly.

Gunga noted a faint suspicion of a foreign accent. "I want one or two packets of seeds," he said, casually.

"Yes, sir. What would you like? We have a wide selection."

Gunga took a note from his pocket. "I want a packet of delphinium macrocentron."

"Yes, sir." The shopkeeper took a packet of seeds from a pigeon-hole and laid it on the counter.

"A packet of aquilegia canadense nana."

The second packet joined the one on the counter. "Yes, sir?"

"And a packet of primula sonumbulensis alba."

The man had turned towards the pigeon holes, but at the name he stiffened to immobility. For perhaps a second he remained thus, an arm upraised; then, slowly, he turned. "I'm sorry, sir, but we're out of stock," he said, apologetically.

Gunga did not alter his off-hand manner, but he noted that the man was no longer looking at him; he was looking past him at something beyond. A slight movement behind him told him more, but he resisted the temptation to turn immediately. Instead, he felt in his pocket, took out some loose change, and dropped a penny carelessly on the counter, tails upward. It was done so casually that it might have been an accident. Not until then did he look over his shoulder. It was not a mere furtive glance; he turned deliberately as if looking round the shop.

A powerfully-built man with the broad, flat face of a professional pugilist was standing by the pedestal of a bird bath in a badly-lighted corner, his hands thrust deeply into the pockets of his jacket. Ostensibly he was another customer, but when Gunga turned his interest was focused not on the bird bath but on the counter.

"Sorry—I didn't know you were waiting to be served," murmured Gunga, politely.

"I'm not," returned the man, with a curtness almost amounting to rudeness.

Gunga turned back to the counter. The shopkeeper's eyes met his own. "You should not have come here," he said, quietly. "It's against the rules."

Gunga picked up the penny and dropped it back into his pocket. "Yes, I know, but I was in a hurry," he said in an explanatory voice.

"I can understand that, but you should not have come here. It might lead to trouble. Always in future apply through the post with the proper forms."

"I was out of forms. Can you let me have one or two?"

"What's your number?"

"Five-nineteen."

The shopkeeper took a few apparently simple tradesmen's order forms from a cupboard, and a third packet of seeds. He folded the forms round the packets, put them into an envelope, and laid it on the counter.

"How much?" asked Gunga.

"Two guineas. The delphiniums and aquilegias are charged a shilling a packet."

Gunga counted out the money, picked up the envelope and put it in his pocket. "Thanks," he said.

"You're welcome, but don't come here again—for primula species. Use the forms."

"Thanks again." Gunga turned to the third man. "Nice bit of work you did the other night," he said, brightly.

The man frowned. "What are you talking about?" He appeared to speak without opening his mouth, his lips moving slightly after the manner of a ventriloquist.

"Sorry," murmured Gunga, apologetically. "I had an idea I saw you on the Blandford road, that's all."

"You want to watch where you're going, or maybe you'll run into something one dark night," answered the man, evenly, with just the slightest emphasis on the word 'you'll'.

Gunga nodded. "I'll watch it," he promised, cheerfully, and went through the door. Outside the shop he lighted a cigarette and flicked the match away; then he strolled along the pavement, passing the car without any sign of recognition, and took the first turning that he came to. He had walked nearly a hundred yards before Guy cruised slowly past him. Gunga glanced up and down the street before signalling to him to stop, and getting into the car. He said nothing, nor did Guy ask any questions until they were

in the park, but he looked frequently through the rear window at the road behind them. “All right,” he said at last. “I think we can stop.” Guy brought the car to a standstill by the grass verge.

Gunga took the envelope from his pocket. “I’ve bought some seeds,” he said. “Those that were being ordered by our late friend. I’m all agog to see them. I don’t think we need bother with these,” he went on, putting the delphiniums and aquilegias in his pocket. “But at two pounds a time these primulas ought to be very choice.” He looked at the packet. There was no wording on it except the name of the species across the bottom, above which appeared an attractive picture of a small white flower. “Pretty little thing, isn’t it?” he murmured, glancing at Guy.

“Do you know it?”

“Never seen it in my life. Nor has anyone else, I fancy.” He felt the packet. “They’re very small, even for primula seeds,” he remarked, tearing the corner off the packet and trying to shake the contents into the palm of his hand. Nothing emerged, so he enlarged the hole. “Ah, they’re done up in tissue paper,” he went on, extracting the contents. Unfolding the tissue he exposed to view a small quantity of white powder. “These seeds would take an awful long time to germinate,” he said softly, throwing Guy a curious smile. “This looks like racket number one!”

“Dope?”

“What else can it be? I’ve never seen cocaine in my life, but I have no doubt that this is it.” Gunga refolded the paper carefully and returned it to the packet which he put in his breast pocket. “I am curious to know what other rare seeds they sell at that shop, but I don’t think it would be politic to go back just at present,” he continued. “But what a clever scheme, distributing the stuff in these nice little packets—just the right size and shape. Who would suspect it?”

“It looks as if Number One provides the rank and file with something they can’t do without, and so retains the services of those who might be tempted to desert,” opined Guy. “Brimswade evidently took the stuff, since he was about to order some when we called.”

“The man in the shop was also an addict, judging by his nasty colour.”

“Did you ask him his number?”

“No, I daren’t go as far as that. He was a bit suspicious of me, but the penny did the trick.”

“What action do we take in a case like this?”

“We’d better think about it. There’s no hurry. We’ve done a fair day’s work, so I think we might run up to Lord’s and see how the match is going.”

CHAPTER IV

By tea time it was obvious that the Test Match would end in a draw; it was also obvious to Guy that Gunga had lost interest in it, for he sat gazing down the long field with a far-away look in his eyes, oblivious to the occasional desultory applause.

"Well, I think it's all over as far as we're concerned," murmured Guy at last. "What are you trying to work out?"

Gunga turned slowly, a ghost of a smile on his face. "How to get letters out of a letter-box from the outside," he answered.

Guy raised an eyebrow. "With whose correspondence do you propose to tamper?"

"Messrs. Herman Groot & Co. If the demand for rare primulas is what I imagine it to be, their correspondence should be worth our inspection."

"Ah! You'd like to know these gardeners?"

"Precisely. One supposes that they would all be members of the big party, so the addresses would give us something to work on if we ran out of more direct clues. We might even be lucky enough to locate one of the low numbers."

"I've been thinking about that myself. If we've got to shoot our way up the ladder one rung at a time it's going to be rather a grim business."

"With luck we ought to be able to jump an occasional rung—say, from Number Twenty-three to Number Seventeen; that is working on the assumption that if we wipe out Number One the whole thing will disintegrate. At present it's all rather intangible. We don't even know the purpose of the organization, or its applications. I've been sitting here trying to work the thing out logically."

"Have you reached any conclusions?"

"Not conclusions—shall we say reasonable deductions? Let us start from zero. We know that the organization exists. The first question that arises is, for what purpose was it formed? There can only be one answer. To acquire wealth. Never mind what social or political ramifications are involved, in the end they must come back to the fundamental impetus behind all big operations, both honest and dishonest—the acquisition of money."

"What about aspirations to power?"

"Power for the mere sake of power must be something of a flat tyre. In any case, power would soon seize up without wealth to lubricate the gears. Wealth does not follow power. It is wealth that creates a lust for power—and more wealth. Very well. Let us ask ourselves from what sources is wealth to be acquired—I mean real wealth. There are very few capable of producing a revenue large enough to support such an organization as the one we are tackling; armaments and the major commodities alone could do it, commodities such as gold, oil, wheat, rubber, steel, and so on. To control these, local agents would be necessary, and I think that is what Pete meant when he said something about the thing being international in its scope. It would have to be. Now let us consider what operators would be vitally essential to the smooth running of such a concern. First of all there is the press. We have a shrewd idea of how that was managed. We may assume that Brimswade was not alone; somebody pretty high up in one or more of the news agencies would tell him which strings to pull. Then there are the banks. No big financial operations could be conducted without the goodwill of the banks, so I fancy we shall find a banker among the low numbers. The same may be said of the Stock Exchange. There must be at least one big broker in the racket. And since it would be dangerous to move without an inside knowledge of international politics, with all the wangles of inflation, deflation, and budget balancing generally, we may even find, if not a Cabinet Minister, a private secretary among the single numbers. Pete suspected that there was an agent in the B.B.C. I think that's certain. It's as important as the press. Then there's the police force. I don't think such a concern as this could operate indefinitely without complaints coming in from speculators and others whose money has gone to swell the headquarter's chest. Number One would want to know about them—would have to know about them. The agent might be Drysdale or it might be somebody else, but we may take it that the police are in it. To sum up, I think that next below Number One and his personal staff we may expect to find a politician, a banker, a stockbroker, a police official, and press and radio operators. They in their turn would have their associates in Europe, America, and in the Dominions. With such men, and the vast wealth the organization must now control, anything would be possible. Revolutions could be effected; wars could be started; awkward kings could be pulled off their thrones. If gold and diamonds could cause a war, if oil concessions could start many wars—and they have—think of what may result from the machinations of an organization with a grip on all the vital commodities. This concern doesn't dabble in petty pilfering; I'm sure of that. It does its

juggling in millions, and it allows nothing to stand in its way. How can any poor devil hope for a peaceful or reasonably secure existence while such a thing persists? This little private war of ours started as a purely personal matter, and even now I am not particularly concerned with the ethical aspect; yet, fantastic though it may seem, our success might actually benefit the world more than any other single factor. So, while we need not let this aspect influence us unduly, or introduce heroics into the affair, we might bear it in mind."

"To come back to this question of intercepting Herman Groot's mail, isn't it going to be rather difficult?"

"I don't think so."

"How are you going to set about it?"

"In the first place by finding out what time the postman makes the first delivery in King's Road. The information should be available at an estate agent's office. Come on, let's go."

They returned to the car and cruised quietly back to Chelsea. Gunga stopped outside the office of a house-agent not far from the seed shop, and went in. In two minutes he was back. "First delivery about six-thirty," he announced.

"Excellent, my dear Watson. If it all works out as easily as that we shall make rapid progress."

"I think it will. I'm going to drive slowly past the seed shop to refresh my memory. If it serves me, there is the usual slit for letters in the front door. There is also, above it, I believe, a brass plate bearing the registered name of the firm—yes, there it is."

"Are you interested in the brass plate?"

"To some extent."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you presently. We parade at six-thirty in the morning. It means staying the night in Town."

"We can stay at the club."

Gunga shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "It may sound rather silly, but I don't like doing this sort of thing from the club. It isn't done. We'd better find ourselves a small flat somewhere. It is likely that we shall be in Town quite a lot, so a depot would be handy in many ways. In any case, I have a feeling that we shall shortly be evacuating the cottage, so we shall need new quarters. Look here, I tell you what. I've got some shopping to do. There's no need for us to trail round together. You go and find a

furnished flat; I'd suggest somewhere in the Baker Street district. Take it on a monthly tenancy and pay a month in advance. Have you got some money on you?"

"Plenty."

"All right. You get the flat fixed up. Don't take it under your own name. I took the cottage under the name of Black. We might as well change over to White. If the agent needs references, tell you've just come from abroad—but I don't think he'll bother if you pay cash in advance. Anyway, you can leave a deposit if there's any difficulty. I'll meet you in the sherry bar at the Savoy at seven-thirty, having done my shopping. We'll dine there—maybe we'll do a show afterwards."

Guy nodded. "Good enough," he said. "Will you take the car or shall I?"

"You take it."

"Where do you want me to drop you?"

"Marble Arch will do as well as anywhere; it will be handy for both of us. Don't worry about any shopping other than food and a bottle of whisky. I'll get pyjamas and small kit for both of us."

Gunga stopped the car at the top of Park Lane, got out and walked away. Guy drove on, turning up Baker Street and watching for the offices of an estate agent.

He had no difficulty in finding what he sought, for he was not concerned with the amenities normally demanded. He was well satisfied, as was the agent, when for four pounds a week he took and paid cash in advance for a rather dilapidated three-roomed first floor flat, with what is usually described—with more humour than truth—as plate and linen, over a public garage in a mews at the shabby end of Baker Street. Contiguous to the main stream of traffic, from his point of view the mews was a convenient backwater, and the fact that it was a cul-de-sac was an advantage in that it would only be frequented by those having business there. The garage, which offered a twenty-four hour service, ran the length of one side. Other flats occurred at the end and on the opposite side of what was, in effect, a small private yard, paved with the original cobbles. From a nearby shop he acquired provisions for breakfast, a bottle of whisky and a syphon of soda water; he also made arrangements with a small restaurant for meals to be sent in as and when they were required. Then, parking the car in the garage, he took a taxi to the Strand. Outside the Savoy Hotel he bought the evening papers and then went into the sherry bar to wait.

At seven-thirty precisely Gunga arrived. He sat down and ordered a drink. "I've left a suitcase in the cloakroom," he told Guy. "Don't let me

forget it. Did you get everything fixed up?"

"Yes—no trouble at all."

"Any news in the papers? I haven't had time to look at them."

"Nothing of importance. Drysdale is on the trail and is confident of success."

Gunga smiled. "I'd like to lay him a hundred to one against. Anything else?"

"They've got on to the question of motive. They've discounted robbery, and admit that it makes the whole thing inexplicable because Brimswade hadn't an enemy in the world."

"How little they know. What about the inquest?"

"Quite a brief affair, apparently. The verdict was 'Death caused by a gunshot wound by a person unknown.' The coroner made great play on the deceased's gallantry in attempting to defend himself with his revolver against his brutal assailant."

"Poor fellow. Again, how little they know. Let's go in to dinner. The brutal assailant's appetite is not affected."

They dined *au prince*; rather than hurry they vetoed a show and lingered over their coffee and brandy until nearly ten o'clock, when, Gunga announcing that he had several things to do, they collected the suitcase from the cloakroom and took a taxi to Baker Street. In the flat, concerning which Gunga made no comment, he took from the suitcase several articles besides the pyjamas and toilet kit he had mentioned. There was a well-worn combination suit of blue jane, a tin of metal polish and a duster. "This is my equipment for the morning," he remarked, putting the things together on the table. Finally he produced an alarum clock, which he wound and set for 5.45 a.m. "I hate these damn things," he murmured, "but we've got to be on the job early, so we can't risk oversleeping. That's the lot," he concluded, closing the suitcase. "We might as well have a nightcap and turn in."

"What exactly is the programme in the morning? You'd better tell me now, because I hate having to think before brekker."

Gunga helped himself to a drink. "At six-fifteen you will drive me to the corner just beyond the seed shop in King's Road. While I am walking up to the shop you will turn the car and watch me. When the postman gives me the letters I shall continue what I am doing until he is a reasonable distance away, when I shall proceed in the opposite direction. You will overtake me and pick me up. That's all."

Guy lit a cigarette. “Aren’t you just a trifle optimistic to suppose that the postman will give you the letters?”

“I don’t think so. We shall see. If he doesn’t no harm will be done.”

Guy yawned. “Well, I think I shall turn in. Don’t make a habit of these early morning parades, will you? I don’t mind working late but I always did hate these cock-crow affairs. They give me a feeling like just before the battle, mother.”

Gunga nodded and tossed him his pyjamas. “Yes, I know. It’s too bad. I’ll try to time operations at a less plebeian hour in the future. Well, reveille at five-forty-five.”

“Cheerio.”

In accordance with the usual practice of such instruments, the alarum shattered the silence not at the hour for which it was set, but twenty minutes later. Gunga got up at once, jerked the blankets off Guy’s bed and proceeded to make coffee. In ten minutes he announced that he was ready for the road.

Guy regarded him with frank disapproval. The combinations were even dirtier than he had supposed. His brother was unwashed, unshaven, and his hair had been roughly combed forward low over his forehead. “This business is degenerating into cheap burlesque,” complained Guy, bitterly. “Do you expect me to drive you through the streets of London in that nauseating outfit? What would my friends say?”

“They would probably say that you had found your own set at last,” returned Gunga lightly. “Do I look like a British working man, ready for work?”

“You look more like the bo’sun of a Dutch onion boat out of a job.”

“Then my disguise is perfect,” announced Gunga. “More coffee?”

“No, thanks.”

“Then if you’re ready we’ll move off.”

They went down, got the car out and drove unhurriedly to King’s Road, overtaking the postman at the top end. The time was six-twenty. Guy pulled up about a hundred yards beyond the shop and Gunga got out, a tin of metal polish and a duster in his hand. “Watch me,” he said. “If everything proceeds according to plan drift along and pick me up as soon as I start walking away. If there’s trouble of any sort hurry along and I’ll make a dash for it.”

“That’s all clear,” replied Guy.

Gunga walked along the pavement to the seed shop. It was, of course, closed, as were the shops on either side. Only a few pedestrians and cyclists,

and a Number 11 'bus were in sight. The postman was still some distance away so Gunga lit a cigarette to kill time; but he watched the postman closely, noting precisely how the letters were delivered. He observed that the usual procedure was for the man to simply put them through the letter-box and knock, or ring the bell. When there were packets or small parcels for delivery, too large to go through the letter-box, he waited for the bell to be answered. Frequently this caused a delay; consequently it took the man longer to reach him than he expected. Gunga waited until he was only a few doors away and then began applying metal polish to the brass plate and the rim of the letter-box, humming quietly to himself as he did so, at the same time keeping an eye on the postman. A soft footfall behind him made him glance over his shoulder. A policeman was standing on the pavement watching him.

"You're new on the job, aren't you?" queried the officer.

"Yes—first morning," replied Gunga without hesitation.

The constable regarded him curiously. "You ain't always been on this sort of job, either, have you?"

"You're right, mate, I haven't. Still, we've got to do something for a living," returned Gunga, philosophically, shaking out his polishing rag. Inwardly he was cursing, for the postman was at the next shop.

The policeman nodded heavily, regarding Gunga with sleepy eyes. "Ah, well," he said, vaguely, and walked on. "Mornin', Charlie," he greeted the postman.

Gunga was applying a further coat of metal polish to the rim of the letter-box when he heard the postman stop behind him, so he turned, wiping his fingers on his overalls.

The postman was not looking at him; he was counting out a number of letters from a string-tied pile. With the packet in his hand he looked up. "One registered," he said.

Gunga's expression did not change. "That's right," he said. "They're expecting it. They told me to sign for it if it came."

"I shouldn't give it to you by rights."

"Just as you like, but I'm going in as soon as I've finished me brass."

"Right-ho." The postman handed Gunga a green slip and a stub of pencil. Gunga signed 'T. Brown', taking care not to touch the paper with the balls of his fingers or thumb, and handed back the slip.

"Thanks, mate," said the postman, and went on to the next door.

Gunga laid the letters on the step, and whistling quietly between his teeth began polishing the brass; but his nerves tightened when there came the sound of a movement inside the shop. A bolt was drawn, and he knew that it was only a matter of seconds before the door was opened. He glanced at the postman. He was still only three doors away—too close not to notice the departure of the cleaner if he left his work; yet to stay clearly meant inviting discovery. On the spur of the moment he picked up the letters, took two or three off the top of the pile—excluding the registered one—and put them through the letter-box. Then he rang the bell. Listening intently he breathed more freely, for he could hear nothing. He could imagine the person inside picking up the letters, perhaps looking at the postmarks or even opening them. Another glance at the postman revealed that he was now twenty yards away, walking briskly down the pavement; the policeman was strolling leisurely in the opposite direction. He looked at the car, still standing where he had left it, and raised his hand in a swift signal for urgency; then he walked away, following the policeman along his beat. He heard the car coming along behind him but he did not turn; he was watching the policeman, for he did not want to be seen getting into the car.

Guy pulled up alongside. Gunga thrust the letters through the open window with his left hand, at the same time pointing with his right as if he were giving an unknown motorist directions. Not until he was satisfied that there were enough pedestrians between him and the policeman to prevent his actions from being seen did he open the car door swiftly and get inside. “Turn back,” he said, tersely. “Don’t pass that policeman.”

Guy turned, and went back down the road, Gunga crouching low until they were some distance beyond the postman. As they passed the seed shop he observed that the door was open; two men were examining the polish-smeared brass. “Take the next turning,” he told Guy, and not until the car had entered a side street did he resume his seat.

“Pretty work,” murmured Guy.

“Not bad for an amateur,” admitted Gunga. “I always did say that the dangers of the crime business were overrated. All right, let’s go back to the flat.”

“How many letters were there?”

“About a dozen. There were more, but I had to push two or three through the letter-box to prevent someone inside from opening the door until it was safe for me to retire.”

Nothing more was said until they entered the flat, having left the car outside. “You might fry a slice or two of bacon and make some coffee while

I am examining the haul," Gunga told Guy as he unlocked the door.

When they sat down at the table Gunga had the correspondence in a neat pile beside him.

"What luck?" asked Guy.

"Fair."

"I was hoping that there might be a letter from Blandford."

"So was I, but that was rather too much to expect. No doubt we should get one from that district if we went on collecting the mail long enough, but this morning's programme is not to be repeated. There are eleven documents altogether, with twenty-eight pounds in Treasury notes; apparently you only get primulas for cash with order. Nine are simply order forms, the order including in every case the little white primula. The sad thing is, there are no addresses—merely numbers; from which we may assume that the addresses of the holders of numbers are known to the gent who runs the shop, or, as is more likely, the forms are passed on to another depot for necessary action. Our only clue to the districts whence they came, is, therefore, from the postmarks on the envelopes, and that's not very helpful."

"What is the lowest number you found?"

"Twenty-seven. The postmark is illegible."

"Not very encouraging."

"No. The tenth form differs only from the nine in that it orders another unbotanical species of primula, which leads one to suspect that the shop deals in more than one variety of dope, or at any rate, illegal merchandise. The registered packet provides us with our most interesting document. To start with, it bears an address—Bethwold Manor, Sussex. It reads, 'Miss Lola Daring regrets that she left home without her order forms. Would Messrs. Herman Groot & Co. be kind enough to forward immediately two packets of primula sonumbulensis alba, for which she will pay immediately she returns to London.' In writing that letter I should say that Lola has committed an indiscretion—an example of how the best laid plans can run off the rails."

"Lola Daring! Good God! That's——"

"The one and only Lola; The once-famous Lola of musical comedy. There can hardly be two ladies in the land of that name. The wording of her letter suggests that she is short of cash, which is easy to understand if she has been in the habit of spending money regularly on primulas. But she needs the dope. What happens in a case like this, I wonder? Dare the shop risk cutting off her supply? Do they let her have it, knowing that it will never be paid for—in cash?"

"You mean, it might be paid for—in kind?"

"You follow an argument well. It seems likely that she would be asked to pay by services to the organization—the only way she could write off her debt."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"For the moment, nothing, but that one letter makes our raid worth while, in that it gives us another peg to hang our hats on. It should turn out to be a useful one, for if what is said of dope is true, then an addict without any is likely to be a two-edged weapon. But before we call on Miss Daring I should like to submit for your consideration an idea which occurred to me after I went to bed last night. Before we proceed further I cannot help feeling that it is very necessary that we should know how Drysdale stands in this business. If our suspicions are groundless, then we can dismiss him from our calculations; but if, on the other hand, he is in the gang, we ought to know. We're now provided with a means of settling this important question."

"Proceed."

"I propose writing a letter to Drysdale personally, from the cottage, under the name of Black, exposing the seed shop racket. When he receives it one of two things will happen. If he is an honest man the shop will be watched and subsequently raided, to the confusion of our enemies who must have been to considerable trouble bringing it into operation. If what we have reason to believe is the case, that Drysdale is a crook, he will at once inform his higher authority—probably Number Seventeen—who will at once take steps to ascertain the identity of the interfering busybody who knows so much, and possibly—in the language of the classics—bump him off. Having written and posted the letter we will repair to the cottage and there await events. Should the genuine police wish to interview us, we can have a story ready for them. If a professional bumper-off arrives—and we know that the organization employs such men, for that is how Pete was killed—then we may find it expedient to—well, bump the bumper, so to speak."

Guy nodded. "I think it's a good scheme," he declared. "As I have remarked before, you seem to be rather good at this sort of thing."

"It must be the Corsican corpuscles doing their stuff," murmured Gunga. "All right, if that's settled I'll slip out and get a writing block and practise a new form of handwriting. We'll get the letter in the post as soon as possible. If it's posted within the next hour or two it should be delivered this afternoon, so we might expect a visitor at the cottage any time, say, after six o'clock. We'll leave everything here as it is."

CHAPTER V

It was late in the afternoon when they got back to the cottage, having posted the letter to the detective in accordance with Gunga's plan. The letter was, in fact, a genuine document with the exception of the signature, for which purpose Gunga used the name under which he had taken the cottage.

Guy put the car in the garage and joined him in the living room, where he found him reading the evening papers. "Any developments?" he enquired.

"None. The news value of the Brimswade affair has dwindled to a mere paragraph, and refers only to the funeral, which was this afternoon, from which we may take it that the police have made no progress. After to-morrow the matter will be allowed to die. The police will not be anxious to call attention to their failure to effect an arrest; the newspapers will put the soft pedal on and the public will forget. It is quite on the boards that the papers will have a new front-page story to-morrow."

"How so?"

"If Drysdale is a wrong 'un, and causes a raid to be made on the cottage. In any case, I think it is a cert that we shall have visitors either to-night or to-morrow morning."

"I fancy this is our first really dangerous undertaking—not that I mind. In fact, I find it rather exhilarating."

"It depends on what you call dangerous. There are risks, of course, but they can be largely discounted if we play our cards properly. It goes without saying that we have got to be careful. It is hard to be specific in the matter of a plan, because, frankly, I don't know what to expect. The thing is, to be prepared for anything. I think what we had better do is this. When it gets dark we will draw all the curtains; we should be mugs to allow ourselves to be sniped from the outside. If anyone comes to the door I'll answer it; you, with your pistol handy, will take up a position in the lobby—we'll arrange the lamp so that it is in darkness. You watch events. If it is a pukka police visit you do nothing at all—don't even expose yourself. I'll handle the situation. If anyone tries any rough stuff—well, you'll have to use your discretion. If it comes to a show-down and I am obviously at a disadvantage don't hesitate to shoot."

"You bet I shan't."

"That's all, then. We'll have an early bite of dinner and then mount guard at the upstairs windows. I'll take the front and you take the back. I'm not expecting that we shall be attacked Indian fashion, but someone *might* come scouting round—I mean, as opposed to knocking at the door—and we might be caught napping. Make no mistake; if Drysdale is a crook, a unit of the organization, this house will be under surveillance within an hour of his receiving our letter. I shall be disappointed if nothing happens. As I told you in the beginning I'd rather they came looking for us than we had to go looking for them. If we can induce them to come here it should save us a lot of trouble."

Guy smiled. "It depends on what you call trouble," he said, smoothly. "I, too, shall be disappointed if the thing just fizzles out; I always did hate anti-climax."

"I don't think you need to worry about that. Just keep an eye on the road while I open a tin of bully. Has it ever occurred to you what civilization owes to the man who first thought of cramming beef into a tin? The fighting services could hardly get on without it, and if there were no fighting services there would be no wars. Think what the armament manufacturers would miss. You could run a war without aeroplanes, battleships, tanks, or even artillery; but not without bully."

"There are such things as biscuits."

"The modern soldier would go on strike if you tried to stuff him with hard tack. And the days when an army could live on the land are past; such methods would be condemned as brutal. Anyway, a couple of million men immobilised in trenches would soon consume all the grub within marching distance. Yes, it's bully that keeps the soldiers on their feet. I'll have a bite first and then relieve you."

Gunga made a makeshift meal and then took Guy's place at the window. Afterwards they sat together over a drink, still watching, until the sky began to darken.

"I think it's time we took up our final positions," observed Gunga, at last, looking at his watch. "Eight o'clock. The enemy should be on the move. I think we may smoke, but don't strike matches near the window. We'll take our drinks with us." He lighted the lamp in the sitting room and arranged it so that the lobby was in darkness. He then drew the curtains and spent a minute or two arranging the chairs. "I shall sit in this one," he said, putting a chair a little apart from the others. "I shall then be out of your line of fire if it becomes necessary for you to resort to musketry."

"Suppose there is an attack in force?"

"In that case we just fight it out. There is nothing else we can do."

"Pity I didn't know about this or I'd have brought a Vickers gun and a few grenades home with me."

"And damage the furniture unnecessarily. It isn't ours, remember. Come on, let's get into position."

They took their places at the bedroom windows, Gunga covering the front, which commanded a view of the drive and the main road, and Guy looking over the forest in the rear. Time passed. Darkness fell. The moon had not yet risen, but the sky was clear and the stars gave a fair visibility up to a hundred yards. What small amount of traffic there was on the main road could, of course, be seen clearly, on account of headlights.

"This is rather dull," remarked Guy, after a long silence, the bedroom doors having been left open to facilitate conversation.

"You flying blokes get your action much too fast," complained Gunga. "I've sat like this for a week in a *nullah* waiting for a bunch of blasted *mahsuds* to move; they, of course, were waiting for me to do the same thing. Frontier operations great stuff for teaching you patience. The man who gets bored first is the one who collides with a piece of metal travelling in the opposite direction. I remember once—wait a minute, what have we here? I believe our uninvited guest is arriving."

"Can you see him?"

"No, but a car has just slowed down rather quickly. It's stopping at the gate . . . no, it's going on . . . but I fancy it's our man. Yes, he's put his lights out about a hundred yards past the drive entrance. He's coming back—I can just see him. All right, you can come here now—they're not likely to attack from two points."

Guy joined Gunga in time to see a car backing slowly into the drive. It entered the inky-black shadow of the belt of firs, but it did not emerge.

"He's going to leave the car," murmured Gunga. "Here he comes, all square and above board by the way he's walking up the drive. Damnation! It's a policeman."

"You're right, it is."

"We'll go down. I'll let him in. Take up your position and don't make a sound."

They went quietly down the stairs. Guy turned into the lobby. Gunga sat down in the living room and picked up a book. He had not long to wait. There was a sharp double knock. Without haste he laid the book on the table,

walked to the door and opened it. It was nearly dark, for the direct light of the lamp was cut off by an angle of the wall, but he could just see the figure of the constable silhouetted against the sky. “Good evening, officer,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“Does Mr. Black live here?”

Something in the voice made Gunga put his hand quickly into his pocket, and close over the butt of his automatic. “Yes, I’m Mr. Black,” he answered.

“Find it a bit lonely here, sir, don’t you?”

“It is rather.”

“Particularly if you live here all alone.”

“I do. I can’t be bothered with staff. Won’t you come in?” Gunga opened the door wide and stepped back, keeping his face averted from the light. “Go through into the parlour,” he invited, and followed the uniformed figure into the sitting room. “Take a seat,” he went on, and walking past the policeman dropped into the chair he had placed in position for the purpose. Not until then did the two men come face to face.

Gunga’s nerves stiffened. It was the man of pugilistic aspect whom he had seen in the seed shop the previous day. In his hand, which he held low down, almost in his lap, he held a heavy revolver.

For a few moments neither spoke. Then, “I reckon you didn’t expect to see me,” said the man in uniform out of the corner of his mouth.

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t,” admitted Gunga. “And if it comes to that I reckon you didn’t expect to see me.”

“That’s as may be. You’re a clever feller, aren’t you?”

“I try to be reasonably intelligent. But—if you don’t mind my mentioning it—why this display of hostilities?” Gunga glanced down at the revolver.

“I can always talk better this way. So can the cove I’m talking to, usually, wise guy.”

“You’ve been going to the films,” accused Gunga. “But suppose we cut out the compliments and get down to business.”

“That’s what I’ve come for—and you’d better talk straight. What made you rat on the business by writing that letter to the Yard?”

Gunga realised instantly that the man assumed, probably from the penny episode in the shop, that he was a member of the organization. He thought swiftly. “If you want to know, because they gave me a dirty deal over the Blandford business.”

"What do you mean?"

"I was promised a hundred quid for driving the lorry; then, at the last minute, they gave the job to somebody else."

"That's a lie."

"How do you know?"

"Because I drove the lorry myself, and there wasn't ever any question of anyone else driving it."

"Then you're two-one-seven? They told me two-one-seven was going to do the job."

"I'm telling you I did it, and I'm one-nineteen."

"Well, I must admit that you did the job well."

"I usually do. You know what I've come here for."

"I've a pretty good idea."

The man smiled unpleasantly. It was clear that he was enjoying the situation. "Yes, I reckoned you might," he said.

"Wait a minute," put in Gunga, quickly. "Before you do anything desperate, do me a last favour, will you? Tell me, who sent you down here?"

The man hesitated. "Well, there's no harm in your knowing that—now," he decided. "Number Seventeen—who else?"

"I might have guessed. Have you ever seen him?"

Suspicion suddenly clouded the man's eyes. "All right, that's enough," he said, harshly. "You've asked for it, and you've got it comin'."

"Another mystery for Drysdale to solve, eh?"

"There won't be any mystery about this. By the time the fire brigade gets here all that'll be left'll be cinders. Too bad for poor Mr. Black who went to bed drunk and set the place—afire." The man's grip tightened on the revolver.

"Don't be in a hurry," said Gunga, tersely. "There's just one more thing ____"

"Spit it out."

"Do you know who killed Brimswade?"

The other started. "No—do you?"

"Yes. I did."

"What the hell for?"

"You remember the man you killed with the lorry—Deane his name was? I happen to be his brother—all right, Guy, let him have it."

The man was still staring at Gunga when Guy's pistol flamed. Too late he tried to jerk his gun up. With a quick movement Gunga stepped aside an instant before the sagging revolver roared, the bullet ripping a hole in the carpet between the legs of the chair. Collapsing, the man still stared at Gunga with an expression of utter incredulity on his face. The revolver fell from his hand as he clung to the chair, trying to get on his feet.

"Remember me to Brimswade," said Gunga, coldly. "Some of the others will be joining you presently."

The man tried hard to speak, but a spasm convulsed his face and he slid forward like a swimmer in smooth water. His helmet fell off and rolled away.

Gunga moved swiftly. Snatching up the evening papers he put them under the fallen man's head where it was bleeding. "Get the towels out of the bathroom," he called sharply to Guy.

In a few seconds Guy was back. Gunga dropped on his knees, took a heavy bath towel and folding it into a thick wad substituted it for the newspapers. There was a short silence while he felt the man's heart. "He's dead," he said, looking up. "You got him through the base of the skull. You damn nearly missed him, though. Aim a trifle lower in future; these pistols are apt to throw high at the first shot, particularly if there is oil in the barrel."

"So that was the devil who killed poor old Pete?" breathed Guy. "Whatever happens in future I shall reckon that we've done a good job of work."

"And he lived long enough to know why we killed him. I'm glad of that. There is no satisfaction in just killing for the sake of it; I want these swine to know *why* they're being killed. I should say that shock as much as anything was responsible for his death. I've seen men flop out like that from mere flesh wounds. I remember old Colonel Charteris of Edward's Horse once saying that in a battle shock kills more men than bullets."

"I'll polish up my shooting," promised Guy. "At the moment we seem to be faced with what is technically called, I believe, the disposal of the body. We can't leave it lying about. What do you suggest?"

"There are two or three things we could do," replied Gunga. "We could do what he intended doing—leave the body here and set fire to the place. I'm afraid we shall have to burn the house, anyway; this business will bring Drysdale down in person, but unfortunately he won't come alone, and we don't want to get involved in a rough house with police officers who may be entirely innocent. I think our best plan is to make a present of the corpse to Drysdale. I've found out where he lives, in Finchley. We'll put the body in

the fellow's own car and leave it outside Drysdale's house. It will be interesting to see how he reacts, or what official reason he can find to account for a thug being in a police uniform—for this nasty piece of work was never a policeman. You follow me up in our car. We'll take all our kit with us and set fire to the place when we leave. I hate to do it, but the furniture must be stiff with fingerprints and I'd rather Drysdale did not have them—particular with these bloodstains about. The case calls for ruthlessness; weakness would ultimately land us in trouble. One of the minor tragedies of life is that those who have educated their consciences to blind obedience regardless of any considerations get farthest in the end. The place is insured, anyway; I was told that when I took it. You can pick me up after I've abandoned the car and we'll go straight to the flat."

"It means cutting out the seed shop as a source of information."

"We can afford to do that now because we still have two loose ends to work on—Drysdale and Lola Daring. Naturally, we will not cut an end off short until we have another to pick up."

The preparations for departure were soon made, for in accordance with their standing order the bags were already packed. "Go down and bring the car up to the door," ordered Gunga. "The casualty must weigh a tidy bit and there is no need to carry him farther than is necessary. Put your gloves on before you touch anything. I'll make a final inspection of the premises to make sure that we've left nothing behind."

Guy picked up his cap and went out.

Gunga put on his gloves and collecting the dead man's revolver wrapped it in a sheet of newspaper before putting it in an empty shoe box. This done he went through the pockets of the uniform. They yielded five pounds and some loose change in cash, a 1904 penny (in a waistcoat pocket) a carton of cigarettes, matches, a key and a scrap of paper. A glance revealed that it was a betting slip. It was headed "Dave" and signed Lucky Jim. A line and the word 'paid' had been scrawled across it. Gunga was about to return it to the pocket when he saw something written in pencil on the other side. It was the address of the cottage. Under it was scribbled 'Phone Mayfair 02317 11.15 if O.K.'

Guy came back while Gunga was still staring at the paper, memorising the telephone number. "My God! that's useful," he said sharply.

"Not so useful as it may appear to be at first glance," answered Gunga. "It's the name of the person who lives there that we want and the post office won't tell us."

"If necessary we could go right through the directory."

"It doesn't follow that the name or address will be there. However, we'll go into that presently." With the exception of the key, which he kept, Gunga replaced the articles in the pockets from which they had been taken. "Got the car?" he asked.

"Yes—it's a taxi."

Gunga stared. "The devil it is! A policeman driving a taxi——"

"He wore an old mackintosh over his uniform and brought the helmet with him. The mackintosh and a peaked cap are on the seat. I've noted the number of the cab for reference, and had a good look round, but there appears to be nothing else."

"Is the meter registering?"

"No—but you may be hailed."

"You may be sure that I shan't stop. Right-ho. Give me a hand with the corpse. I'll take the head. Pass those clean towels; I don't want to get any blood on my clothes."

Together, not without difficulty, they got the body into the cab and then put their own luggage into the car. Gunga went back into the house and fetching the oil can from the kitchen emptied it over a pile of papers under the stairs. He threw the blood-stained towels on top, washed his hands and then threw a lighted match on the oil-soaked papers. This done he returned to the car, locking the front door behind him. The latchkey he flung far out into the heather. "Keep fairly close behind me," he told Guy, and putting on the chauffeur's cap got into the cab. Guy, in the car, followed it down the drive and on to the main road.

The two vehicles stopped only once, and that was at a bend in the road about a mile away. A ruddy glow in the sky told Gunga all he wanted to know, and he drove on carefully.

He was hailed twice on the journey to Town, once at Thornton Heath and later at Norbury, but he ignored the signals and went on.

An hour and a half after leaving the cottage he was cruising down the Finchley Road looking for the name of the house he sought—The Larches. He was some time finding it, a small, typically surburban house. There was a fair amount of traffic on the road, and an occasional pedestrian on the pavement, but waiting until there was nobody near the detective's house he brought the car to a standstill by the kerb and got out. Tossing the chauffeur's cap on the mackintosh, which was still lying on the seat, he closed the door and walked away, peeling off his gloves.

Within a minute Guy had brought the car up beside him. He got in, and Guy drove on. "It's a few minutes after eleven-fifteen," he said, "but I

daren't risk stopping on the way up. Drop me at the first telephone cabinet you see."

They found one outside the Tube Station. Gunga went over to it and dialled the Mayfair number. "Is that Mr. Smith's house?" he enquired, when the call was answered.

A man's voice replied. "You've got the wrong number."

"Just a minute—don't cut me off," went on Gunga quickly. "I have a message from one-nineteen."

There was a brief pause. "Why didn't you say that at once?"

"Is the Boss there?"

Another pause. "This is the Boss speaking."

Gunga bit his lip. It was obvious that the man was not going to divulge his name.

"Where is One-nineteen?" asked the voice, sharply.

"In hell, where he deserves to be, and where, presently, you will join him," answered Gunga, coldly. "This, for your information, is the Unknown Quantity speaking. Anything you want to say?"

There was a longer pause. "I should like to have a few words with you sometime," said the voice, slowly.

"You will—when your time comes," returned Gunga, and hung up the receiver. He waited for a minute and then called the operator. "I'm trying to locate a friend of mine," he said. "I believe the number is Mayfair 02317, but I'm not sure. Will you tell me who lives at that number?"

"If you will tell me the name of your friend I will find the number for you," answered the girl, in a professional monotone.

Gunga smiled, hung up the receiver and went back to the car.

"Anything doing?" asked Guy.

"Nothing to shout about. I spoke to the Boss, possibly Number Seventeen, but he was too wily to give me his name. Nor would the operator be friendly. We have at least made contact with enemy headquarters, however. That ought to shake them. Let's get back to the flat. To-morrow, all being well, we will call on the lovely Lola."

CHAPTER VI

THE following morning while Gunga was preparing breakfast Guy went out and bought the newspapers. "There's nothing in them that we don't know," he observed, throwing them on the settee. "I imagine most of the papers had gone to press by the time the police released the story. One or two late editions have managed to squeeze a paragraph on the front page—'man found dead in taxi' sort of thing—the others had to use the stop press column. The scream will come in the early editions of the evening papers—in the absence of a political crisis."

"Anything about the fire?"

"Not a word."

"I suppose it was hardly worth reporting. Naturally, the two events would not be connected—at least, I can think of no reason why they should be. It's a fine morning so we'll run down to Sussex."

"I'm ready. In fact, the car is outside. I got it out to look up Bethwold in the A.A. Guidebook. It's about ten miles north of Hastings."

"Good. It should be a pleasant run. Let's lock up and get along."

"You realize that it is Saturday—not always a convenient day for calling?"

"I don't think it matters in this case."

In a quarter of an hour they were on their way. Although it was not yet ten o'clock the early editions of the evening newspapers were already being distributed by the time they reached Kew, and before crossing the bridge Guy got out and bought a copy.

"Read it aloud," Gunga told him, as he drove on.

" 'Another Murder Mystery. Man Found Shot in Taxi. At a late hour last night the body of a man, at present unidentified, was found in a taxicab outside the Finchley home of Detective Inspector Drysdale, head of the special murder squad at Scotland Yard, who is at present in charge of the Brimswade case. At about 11.30 p.m. police sergeant Thompson noticed a cab standing unattended outside the Inspector's home. Looking through the window he saw the body of a man lying in a heap on the floor. He reported the matter immediately to Inspector Drysdale who happened to be at home, and who at once took charge of the investigations. Medical examination

revealed that death had been caused by a bullet wound in the head. It is thought that the man had been dead about three hours. A further statement will be issued later.' "

"Not a word about the man being in police uniform," murmured Gunga. "Drysdale is going warily, which is not to be wondered at, for he must be finding the going rather sticky. If he says anything he may say too much. Take the cab, for example. He must know perfectly well where it came from, yet he has got to pretend that he knows nothing. If he rides that particular scent too hard he may expose a confederate. For instance, the proprietor of the cab, or the manager of the garage that owns it, may be in the gang. So what? He has got to think out a story that fits the case. So have the other people concerned. And they've all got to lie, for the simple reason that they daren't tell the truth. How many people were aware of the dead man's mission last night we don't know, but Drysdale certainly knew all about it—or he knows by now. He knows that the trail of that taxi leads to a cottage in Ashdown Forest, but he daren't say so without providing a reason for his seemingly miraculous discovery. There is no connecting link between the two events, the fire and the killing, so before he can issue a statement to account for his line of investigation he has got to think of one—that is, if he wants to bring the cottage into it. If he doesn't, then he will have to lie. The dead man must be known to him, but he can hardly admit that. He has got to go through all the rigmarole of pretending to find out, and before he can do that he has got to see Number Seventeen to ascertain how far the revelation will involve others. I'll bet the head lads of the gang are in conference at this moment, and Drysdale is the most worried of the lot. We are giving them something to think about."

It was nearly half past eleven when the car entered the single winding street that comprised the village of Bethwold. Proceeding slowly it brought them to a pleasant green on which a well-attended cricket match was in progress, the ring of willow on leather in complete accord with the rural surroundings. Gunga stopped the car and asked a labourer the way to their destination. The man pointed to a gracious, wisteria-garlanded house a little way beyond the church. They went on and in a few minutes were level with the gate, beyond which a short, neat drive wound through a low avenue of flowering shrubs to a small but dignified manor house built in the Georgian style. A Rolls was standing under a cedar round which the drive described a loop. From it, towards the house, was walking slowly and apparently deep in thought, a tall, aristocratic-looking man of about fifty years of age; his expression was serious as became his cloth, for he was dressed as a dignitary of the church. At the sound of the car he stopped and glanced up quickly; no

more could be seen for the car passed on and an instant later the hedge hid him from view.

Gunga did not stop.

"I don't quite get the hang of this," muttered Guy, reflectively. "Your assumption that the lady is hard up doesn't fit in with her friends—or that car."

"It probably belongs either to the house or another guest."

"Then this place doesn't belong to her?"

"I think not. I looked up her address in the 'phone book while you were out getting the papers this morning; it is given there as one of these new blocks of flats near Victoria. That sort of woman seldom lives in the country. In fact, I supposed from the moment I saw her letter that she was staying with friends."

"Don't you feel a bit diffident about calling—I mean, we don't want to butt into a house party, or anything like that."

"Having come all the way down here I don't feel like going back without making an effort to see her. No harm can be done by enquiring, anyway. Are you coming in with me or will you stay in the car?"

"I may as well come with you and hear what the lady has to say—if she will see us. It will save you the trouble of repeating her story."

"In that case we'll run back and park the car on the green; I noticed that there were several others there. It won't be far to walk back. You may think me over-cautious, but I am very conscious of our number plate and the fact that the car is registered in my name. It might be a good thing if we sold it and bought another, in the Midlands or somewhere out of the way, under a *nom-de-guerre*. If ever Drysdale or his associates get hold of our names it will make things much more difficult."

While he had been speaking Gunga had driven the car back to the village green and parked it in line with several others whose owners were presumably watching the match. It took them only a minute or two to walk back to the manor. Gunga went straight up to the front door and rang the bell.

It was answered by a parlourmaid, a rather hard-faced woman of middle age who regarded the callers dispassionately. "Yes?" she enquired.

"I would like to see Miss Daring if it is possible," said Gunga courteously.

The woman did not move. Her eyes met Gunga's steadily. "You can't," she said. "Miss Daring is indisposed," she added, curtly.

Gunga hesitated. He thought for a moment. Then he put his hand in his pocket and took out a penny. “Would you mind showing——?” he began, but the maid interrupted.

“Why didn’t you show me that at first?” she said with a change of tone. “Stay where you are.” She turned, and they could see her going up a wide sweeping staircase.

Gunga looked at Guy with a curious expression on his face. “I don’t like that,” he said. “We had better step warily.”

There was no time to say more for the maid returned. “Miss Daring will see you,” she said, opening the door wide. “Follow me.”

The visitors removed their caps and followed the maid into a quietly but expensively furnished hall. Gunga sniffed inaudibly and caught his brother’s eye; he said nothing, but he recognised the odour of iodoform.

“This way,” repeated the maid, and went on up the staircase. She led the way down a richly-carpeted corridor and stopped before a door bearing the number 38 in small brass figures. She knocked, and without waiting for an answer, walked in. “The gentlemen,” was all she said, and went out, closing the door behind her.

Gunga found himself standing in what was clearly a boudoir, staring almost to the point of embarrassment at a woman so unlike what he had expected that for a moment he was convinced that he had made a mistake. He knew that the Lola Daring of the stage could not be more than forty-five, but the woman who was now regarding him with pale, lacklustre eyes, could not, he thought, be less than sixty. Her hair was white. Her cheeks were lined and sunken, against which the artificial colour on her lips was as incongruous as it would have been on a Greek marble. She wore a lace negligee adorned with many ribbons, and reclined on a settee that carried more cushions than she could employ. Her fingers plucked nervously at a handkerchief. “Well, what do you want?” she demanded querulously.

“In the first place, I have brought you something which I think you will be glad to have,” said Gunga, softly.

The woman caught her breath and half raised herself. Then she sank back, breathing fast.

To save her embarrassment Gunga went on quickly. “You wrote to King’s Road the day before yesterday——”

“*Ssh!*” The woman moistened her lips and glanced furtively at the door. “Speak quietly,” she whispered, and held out a shaking hand. “Give it to me.”

"Please don't think me discourteous, but I must delay that for a moment," murmured Gunga, apologetically. "Why did you not send the money?"

A faint flush stained the woman's pallid cheeks, but it faded quickly. "They know why," she said, bitterly. "I haven't any."

"But this house—your friends——?"

The woman's eyes opened wide, the dilated pupils almost filling the iris. "This house! What are you talking about?" she almost hissed. "Surely you know where you are?"

"Frankly, I do not; you see, this visit is unofficial, but we have come here as friends. I want you to believe that. The truth is, we are in a similar position to you—and there are others. The things we need—you understand—are denied us, and we must therefore pursue other methods to obtain them."

The last vestige of colour drained from the woman's face leaving it ashen. "For God's sake be careful," she breathed. "You must be mad. They will kill you."

"That is a risk we are prepared to take. If the question is not too personal, why was it necessary for you to write that letter?"

The woman's lips curled unpleasantly. "Because they won't give me what I want," she answered. "It is their way of forcing me to give *them* something."

"Exactly. We are not going to submit to this treatment."

"What can you do?"

"We are going to tell Number Seventeen——"

The woman made a gesture of terror. For a ghastly moment Gunga thought she was going to faint, but she made a surprising recovery. "You know what that will mean? He will kill you," she said, simply. "For God's sake think what you are doing."

"We have. Our difficulty is, we do not know Number Seventeen or where he is to be found."

The woman only stared.

Gunga took the primula packet from his pocket and instantly regretted it, for her eagerness to secure it was heart-rending. "Please give it to me," she said.

"Have you ever seen Number Seventeen?"

"Yes, of course—no, no, what am I saying?" A sudden shrewdness leapt into the woman's eyes. "What are you driving at?" she asked, sharply. "Are

you the police? If you are, say so."

"Good heavens, no," Gunga assured her. "Far from it. Our mission is to see Number Seventeen and tell him what we have decided. Where can we find him?"

The shrunken shell that had once been a beautiful woman faltered. Then, "All right," she whispered, almost fiercely. "I'll tell you. Look what knowing him has done to me. God, how I hate them all!"

"His name?" prompted Gunga, revealing no sign of his impatience.

The woman's lips barely moved. "He's here now," she breathed.

There was a moment of palpitating silence. "Here! You mean in this house? What is this place?"

"This is a private nursing home." The woman's voice was a quivering sneer. "*Their* nursing home. The convalescent home for those whom they know are near breaking point—and may be dangerous. It is a murder home, that's what it is. That's why they've brought me here. I wouldn't mind if they'd only give me the dope. It's hell without it. The sooner I go the better."

Gunga winced at the bitterness of the woman's words. "But can't you escape?" he asked.

"Escape? You must be crazy. Has anyone ever escaped? They never take their eyes off me. I got out the other night, though. I went to see an old friend, but even he wouldn't help me. They brought me back."

"Then all the people here are in the—organization?"

"Of course."

"Who is in charge here—Number Seventeen?"

"No, the doctor. But Number Seventeen comes here often. His car is outside now."

"Do you know Number One?"

"Of course not—nobody does."

"What is the name of Number Seventeen?"

The woman opened her mouth to speak, only to start violently as a knock came on the door. The same maid who had shown them in entered, and glanced at the two men suspiciously. "I thought I had better warn you that someone is coming up to see you," she said.

"Who is it?"

Again the maid glanced at the two men.

"All right. You needn't be afraid of them. They know. Who is it?"

"Number Seventeen."

In the silence that followed the only sound was the song of the birds in the trees outside. The woman on the couch stared at the maid with such an expression on her face that Gunga could not bear to look at it. It did not register fear, hate, or even surprise. It was an expression of hopeless resignation as one might expect to see on the face of a person going to the gallows.

"Did you—tell him—that these gentlemen were here?" she said at last, in a dead voice.

"No."

"Thank you. That was thoughtful of you. Where is he?"

"I left him in the hall, at the bottom of the stairs, talking to Number Twenty-one."

"Twenty-one." Miss Daring's lips did little more than form the words. "That's Drysdale. What does he want here?" She turned her eyes to Gunga. "You can't get out without them seeing you," she said.

"I don't mind them seeing us; they have nothing against us," replied Gunga evenly.

"They will have, if they know you've been talking to me." The actress turned again to the maid. "This is only a personal matter, Violet," she pleaded. "If I ask these gentlemen to wait in my bedroom until he has gone, could I trust you not to tell him?"

The maid shrugged her shoulders. "It doesn't make any difference to me," she said callously.

"It might," put in Gunga, pointedly. "It might be worth, say, fifty pounds."

A curious, rather unpleasant, smile crossed the maid's face. "All right," she agreed. "I'll see you afterwards," and walking to another door, opened it. "In here."

As soon as the door had closed behind them Guy threw Gunga a grim smile. "We're running things a bit tight, aren't we?" he said, in a low voice.

"Damn tight. Who would have expected Drysdale to turn up here this morning? We may have to make an unorthodox departure. What does that far window overlook?"

Guy moved swiftly. "The back of the house."

"How far is the drop?"

"About fifteen feet."

"What's underneath?"

"A flower bed."

"Good! Open the window—quietly." Gunga waited until Guy returned; then he laid a finger on his lips and opened the communicating door perhaps a quarter of an inch. A moment later a man's voice could be heard, "Ah, there you are, my dear," it said, in a deep, cultured tone. The inflexion was friendly, too friendly for sincerity, and it seemed that the woman knew it.

"What do you want with me?" she asked, dully.

"You must know why I have come."

"How should I?"

The next words made Gunga stiffen. "Drysdale is here. I have just been talking to him. What made you kill Brimswade?"

"Kill Oliver? What nonsense."

"You killed him."

"Ridiculous."

"Then you took a man with you to do it. Who was he?"

"I repeat, I don't know who killed him."

"You often threatened to."

"That I'll not deny."

"And—perhaps from your point of view—you had reason to kill him."

There was a brief silence. When the woman spoke again her voice was vibrant with emotion. "Only God and I know how true that is," she said, brokenly. "Can it be possible that in this same world I once loved him?"

"I told you to stop annoying him."

"Who are you to tell me to keep away from the man who ruined me?"

"That is a question I need not answer. Please don't get dramatic. The police have been informed that you were with Brimswade on the night of the murder. Your voices were heard raised in anger."

"Then that is because it suits your purpose."

"Drysdale is here to formally arrest you."

Another pause. "So that's it? And send me to the scaffold, no doubt. To think that you could behave like this after what I've done for you." The words terminated in a sob.

"All right. Don't let us have any more hysteria. Be reasonable and we will take care of you. Now, where is your diary?"

The woman laughed; in it grated the essence of bitterness tinged with a note of triumph. "I've told you before, it's where you'll never find it. Put me in court and I'll tell the world——"

"Be quiet, damn you."

Guy moved forward, nostrils quivering, but Gunga held him back.

"I will not be quiet," went on the woman, her voice rising. "I've been quiet for too long."

There was a change in the man's tone. "Don't be silly," he said. "I've told you, we'll look after you. Why did you go to Brimswade's house?"

"To get some snow. I knew why you'd cut me off."

"Who was the man you took with you?"

"I took no man. I went alone. That I'll swear."

"Very well. I'll take your word for it. Now what about this diary? There is no need for us to fall out over a little matter like that. Give it to me and you can have all the snow you want. I've brought you something even better—something that will steady your nerves."

"Then for God's sake give it to me."

"When you have told me what you have done with the diary. It isn't in your flat."

"So you've been there? If I tell you the truth will you swear to me on your oath that you'll let me have some snow?"

"Certainly. You can have all you want."

There was another pause. "I haven't got it."

"Please explain what you mean by that."

"That man—that newspaper man—Deane—stole it the night he came to my flat."

There came the sound of a sharp movement. "Why didn't you say so before, you fool?" grated the man.

"What are you going to do—oh!" The woman's voice was shrill with fear.

"It won't hurt you—merely steady your nerves."

"It makes me feel—strange. My God! If you've poisoned me you won't get away with it." The woman spoke jerkily, as if she were panting. "No, you won't get away with it this time," she gasped. "I've got witnesses—yes, witnesses. . . ."

"What do you mean?" The man's voice was tense.

The woman's only answer was a moan.

Gunga had already drawn on his gloves. In his right hand he held his automatic. With the left he pushed against the door. It swung inward without a sound, revealing the scene in the boudoir.

The man was bending over the woman, who was in a state of collapse. It was the man, the cleric, whom they had seen near the Rolls Royce. In his hand he held a hypodermic syringe. He must have seen the movement of the door out of the corner of his eye, for as it opened he looked up sharply and took a pace backwards.

"Stay exactly as you are," said Gunga, coldly. "Guy, lock the bedroom door . . . now keep him covered." He turned to the woman and laid his hand on her heart. There was no movement. "So you've killed her?" he observed, dispassionately, turning back to the man. "No doubt at the inquest it will be an easy matter to prove that she died from an overdose of dope—you loathsome hell-hound."

The man's composure did not desert him. He tossed the syringe on the settee beside the woman. "And you, my indiscreet friends, will be the next," he observed, calmly. "Purely as a matter of detail, who are you?"

A ghost of a smile passed over Gunga's face. "I am the Unknown Quantity," he said, slowly. "The man who killed Brimswade. The man who killed your hired thug last night. Call me Nemesis if you like, for my name is Deane, brother of the man you murdered at Blandford. I've been looking for you, and I've found you sooner than I expected. That's all I have to say. Your time has come."

"Wait!"

"The only reason I have waited for so long is that it may sink into your crooked brain *why* you are going to die."

Suddenly the man shouted. "Drysdale! Help!"

Gunga went on imperturbably. "It's coming to you. Now let's see how *you* can take it. Hold this." A streak of orange flame leapt across the room. It started at the automatic and ended at the cleric's black silk vest.

The doomed man twitched convulsively, but he did not fall. Again the automatic roared, and yet again. The man's legs collapsed under him and he fell, coughing blood, clutching at a chair.

Guy took a pace forward. "I'm not going to be done out of my share of this," he said quietly. "This is one for Pete," he added, and fired point blank into the writhing body. It rolled over, moaning faintly.

The handle of the door rattled. "Open this door!" called a man's voice, tersely.

"All right. That'll do. We'd better be going," said Gunga softly. "We'll go by the window. Shoot anybody who gets in the way; they're all in the racket." Shooting from the hip he sent a shot splintering through the door. "That ought to discourage them for a minute or two," he said, evenly,

following Guy into the bedroom and locking the door behind him. “Cover me while I get down—I’ll do the same for you when I’m on the ground.” He put his automatic in his pocket and climbing through the window allowed himself to hang at full length of his arms before dropping into a flower bed, where, pistol in hand, he waited for Guy to join him. “This is our best way, I think,” he suggested, walking towards some extensive outbuildings, beyond which was an orchard and a kitchen garden. The church tower rose above them.

“I do hate this rushing about,” complained Guy.

“You wanted action. You’re getting it,” announced Gunga. Keeping close to the buildings they reached the orchard. “I don’t think Drysdale saw us,” he remarked.

“What about waiting and having a crack at him as he comes out?”

“No, we’ll get on.”

“Where are we making for?”

“The village green—and the car. We’ve no time to lose. Drysdale is probably on the ’phone by now—or he will be, as soon as he recovers from the shock. In twenty minutes the police will be on the look-out for two desperadoes in a car coming from the direction of Bethwold. Still, we ought to be in Hastings by then. Here is the church; the green ought to be on the other side of the graveyard. We shall have to get through this hedge since there doesn’t seem to be a gate.” However, the hedge was sparse and presented no serious obstacle. From the churchyard a wicket-gate opened on to the green not far from the spot where they had left the car. No one noticed them; all eyes were on the match, for a batsman was putting in some brisk work. In five minutes they were in the car, speeding down the Hastings road.

“Pity we couldn’t have stayed and watched the cricket for a bit,” murmured Guy. “That chap was knocking ’em for six.”

“It wouldn’t have been wise to hang about,” returned Gunga. “This morning’s work is going to set things really buzzing.”

“A good show, taking it all round.”

“Excellent. I think we can call it the end of the first round,” declared Gunga.

CHAPTER VII

It was six o'clock when, after a roundabout but eventful journey from the South Coast which had included lunch at Hastings, Gunga parked the car outside the front door in case it should be wanted again and led the way upstairs into the flat. He poured out two whiskies and passed one to his brother. "We've had quite a day," he observed. "It's getting time we steadied up a bit and took stock of the situation."

Guy fingered his moustache and sank down in an easy chair. "As far as your first observation is concerned there is more than a modicum of truth in it. Regarding the second, if we continue to maintain this pace, my thinking gear, not being supercharged, will get overheated and seize up. In which direction do you propose to make the next sally?"

Gunga took a drink, lit a cigarette and leaned back against the mantelpiece. "It would be better, I think, if, before we went into that, we pondered for a moment or two on what we have done to see how far the situation has changed since we launched our offensive. At that time our immediate objective was Number Seventeen, director of operations in the London area. He is now off the score-board. We have also washed out Number One-One-Nine, a minor thug, admittedly, but one for whom I cherished an intense dislike since he was the willing tool employed to kill Pete. Number Twenty-three, Brimswade, concerned with same affair, has also been dealt with. Altogether, from the purely personal aspect, it has been a most satisfactory show, and we could, at this juncture, retire with the honours of war. The first question that arises is, therefore, do we relinquish the field or do we consolidate the ground we have gained with the object of making another push?"

Guy thought for a moment. "All these men were executives," he said, at last. "But the villain of the piece is still Number One. If we withdrew now I should always have a feeling that we had abandoned a strong point having gone to heroic effort to gain it. Having taken the enemy's first line trench without getting pipped—so to speak—surely it would be a sign of weakness to retire, or even dig ourselves in? I am all for making another frontal attack if it can be carried out without too much physical effort."

Gunga nodded. "That's how I feel about it," he agreed. "Very well. Let us examine the ground in front of us. Unquestionably the most important

circumstance in our favour is the fact that the enemy has not once caught sight of us. We have sniped three of them, including two senior officers, and they still cannot have the remotest idea of the direction from which the shots are coming. Our striking force is therefore as efficient as ever it was, except that the enemy leaders, now being thoroughly alarmed—as they must be—will by this time have thrown out their best scouts to locate us. Presently some shots will start coming from the other direction; we should be guilty of criminal optimism to suppose that we can go on having it all our own way. Not that it matters. I am merely remarking that henceforth we must be prepared to find the country beyond our immediate parapet bristling with weapons of all descriptions and calibres. We know no more about Number One than when we started, so we cannot expect to reach him in a single jump. What, then, is our next objective? Of the several paths open to us, which is the best to follow?"

"Suppose we turn our binoculars on the paths?"

"Good idea. First, there is Drysdale. His nerves must have been severely shaken by the events of the last two or three days, and we may assume safely that he is rushing up all his guns to lay down a barrage to stop us. Then there is Bethwold Manor, the gang's nursing-cum-murder home. There must be quite a big staff there, all in the racket. Number One, knowing that we are aware of the place, and probably its true purpose, will either evacuate it, or fortify it in such a way that for us to go near it would be to invite annihilation. The same applies to the dope shop in the King's Road. Did our friend with the pugilistic face, Number One-Nineteen, live there? I saw him in the shop, but it does not follow that it was his place of residence."

"What does it matter?"

"Only this; amongst his effects I found a key, you remember. I kept it. It may or may not be the key of the shop. Is it worth investigating?"

"I can't see that there is much to be gained to make it worth the risk of going back, even if the key does fit the door. The shop will probably be abandoned, anyway, after what has happened."

"That's a reasonable assumption. What about Blandford? One day we shall find ourselves there. Something will take us, just as it took Pete. Had we even a remote inkling of what that was I would vote for Blandford next; but as it is, mere vague exploration at this stage would probably be a waste of time. Another path that invites investigation is Lord Glenbold, the proprietor of *The Echo*. Was he, or was he not, aware of his editor's curious associates? We don't know, but here again the matter becomes personal, since it affected Pete. Finally, and this has intrigued me not a little since it

was brought to our notice, what about Lola Daring's diary? You heard her say that Pete took it, and I think she was speaking the truth. What did he do with it?"

"It may still be in his rooms, in Bloomsbury."

"Impossible. The rooms would be ransacked within an hour of his being killed, you may be certain of that."

"Have you been there—I mean, since then?"

"And reveal that Pete had a brother! Good God, no! I kept well out of the way."

"What happened to his things?"

"I don't know. Unless she has disposed of them the landlady must still have them. He merely used the rooms as a workshop and sleeping place. There was nothing there of value—or there wasn't when I once called to see him, although that was some time ago. All his trophies and things are in a box at Uncle Herbert's."

"Could he have put the diary in that box?"

"No. The first thing uncle told me when I got home was that he had not seen or heard of Pete for three months. Now I know why, of course. Pete wouldn't risk laying a trail to uncle's house and so perhaps involve him in trouble. In his last letter he said there was no place, nobody whom he could trust with the safe custody of anything. Yet Lola said he took the diary! What did he do with it? No doubt it was one of those things he hadn't time to tell me about in the letter; had he lived for another twenty-four hours he might have shown it to me. It must be a valuable document, or, shall we say, an incriminating one? Lola must have been crazy to let the gang know about it. No wonder Seventeen was anxious to get hold of it."

"If Pete couldn't trust anybody with anything the implication is that he had the diary with him when he was killed."

"That's hardly possible. We know from Number Seventeen's conversation that the gang haven't got it. Had it been in the car they would have found it immediately. It is far more likely that it is where Pete put it. Knowing him, I should say that he put it in some simple place where its character would not be suspected. It would be a great stroke if we could get hold of it; but let us not lose sight of the fact that the gang is also looking for it, so at any place we decided to search we should be likely to encounter other people on the same mission. We have this advantage, however. We are the only people who know that Pete had it—unless, of course, Number Seventeen lived long enough to tell Drysdale, while we were evacuating the manor. If we knew definitely where the thing was it would be worth going to

almost any risk to get hold of it; but we don't, so for the moment it is best left alone, for a search would be a dangerous undertaking. Well, that, I think, pretty well covers the situation as it stands at this moment. The Bethwold business ought to be in the papers by now; you might slip out and buy them; I am curious to know the name of that damned hypocrite in black cloth—Number Seventeen."

Guy was soon back. There was a peculiar smile on his face. "The newspapers ought to give us a pension for providing them with top-sized headlines. Listen to this," he said, and began to read.

" 'Mystery of Unsolved Murders Deepens. Is an Armed Madman at Large? Another spectacular murder was committed just before noon to-day in the rural hamlet of Bethwold, not far from Hastings. In the manor house, which for some years has been run as a very select private nursing home, Archdeacon Brindon, the well-known philanthropist, was foully done to death by an unknown assailant who, with unspeakable brutality, shot him no less than four times. It appears that the archdeacon, whose London home is in Ryanstone Square, had on more than one occasion attended the nursing home for treatment. It was through his generosity that the once-famous musical comedy actress, Miss Lola Daring, whom he found living in London in straightened circumstances, had been taken there. Miss Daring has for many years suffered from insomnia. Only a few hours before the murder it appears that she obtained possession of a large quantity of morphine, for she was found dead in her room—the very room in which the murder was committed. By a remarkable coincidence, Detective Inspector Drysdale, of Scotland Yard, was actually in the building at the time, and even heard the shots. It will be recalled that he is already investigating two murders, that of Mr. O. O. Brimswade, Editor of the *Daily Echo*, and a man still unidentified whose body was left in a taxicab outside the Inspector's house. In view of this latest crime, almost in front of the Inspector's eyes, official opinion inclines to the theory that they are all the work of the same man. Developments are expected at an early date.' " Guy folded the paper and laid it on the table. "The rest is a brief account of Lola's stage career and the archdeacon's contributions to philanthropy."

"Taking it all round, that is a fairly faithful representation of the facts," observed Gunga. "Not even Drysdale can know for certain that the archdeacon killed Lola. Only we know that. There is one odd thing. Unless Drysdale is keeping something up his sleeve—that maid—what was her name? . . . Violet? . . . didn't rat on us, otherwise it would be known that two men were concerned with the killing."

“She may have told Drysdale—may even have given him a description of us.”

“True enough, but somehow I have a feeling that she said nothing or the newspaper account would not have been worded like that.”

“Why shouldn’t she tell? She was one of the gang.”

“For a very good reason. Don’t lose sight of the fact that if, after the affair, she told Drysdale that she knew two men were in the room, she would betray herself, in that she should have warned Number Seventeen that we were there. She did not—we know that for certain. She struck me as a curious creature, and may have private reasons for acting as she did. I said nothing at the time, but it struck me that Lola was taking a chance in asking her to say nothing about us to Number Seventeen. There may have been a bond of sympathy between the two women—particularly if the maid, like Lola, was sick of the gang.”

“Hm. That’s an interesting point.”

“I’d like to see that maid again; with a little persuasion she might become communicative. Well, to-morrow morning’s papers will have something to shout about. Three first-class murders right off the reel. The poor old Commissioner of Police must be getting a bit uneasy.”

“He’s going to lose his job if we continue shooting our way——”

“Right up to Number One?” Gunga laughed. “I don’t think it will be quite as bad as that. We should run out of ammunition. No, we ought to reach Number One now in two or three jumps.”

“Well, where do we go next?”

“There’s no hurry. I’d like to think about it. We must learn more about this precious archdeacon. What a role! Talk about Jekyll and Hyde. No wonder poor old Pete was up against it. Who would believe that a wealthy, benign old parson was one of the big men in a murder combine? I can hardly believe it myself. Had we not heard what we did I should have been a long time bringing myself to puncture his silk vest. As it was it gave me no small satisfaction. I’ve plugged the King’s enemies with far less malice. Even now it makes my hackles rise to think of the cold-blooded way he killed that unfortunate woman. The more I see of this gang and its methods, the more merciless I feel; the more convinced I become that we are doing a good job of work for society.”

“Society who would demand our scalps if we were caught.”

Gunga smiled. “Martyrdom is nothing new.”

“All the same, I’d rather wear a bowler than a halo.”

"We shall wish we had tin hats before this business is finished." As he spoke Gunga's eyes became fixed on the back of one of the evening papers which lay as Guy had thrown them. He took a swift pace forward and snatched it up. "Damn," he said, with feeling.

"What is it?"

Gunga, still staring at the paper, laughed bitterly. "That's the sort of thing we can't compete with—take a look." He pointed to a photograph. There was no mistaking the scene depicted. It was the village green at Bethwold showing a cricket match in progress. In the foreground was a line of cars, but only the end one was in such a position that the number-plate could be seen. Two men were in the act of getting into the car, one on either side; one was already too far in for his face to be seen, but the other, looking towards the Manor, was Gunga. It was not a good photograph, but anyone knowing him well would instantly recognise him. Underneath the picture was the trite caption, "While this pleasant function was taking place on the village green at Bethwold, murder was being committed in the old house in the background."

"I'm afraid we have left the disposal of the car just a day too long," said Gunga, quietly. "I had a feeling about it, too. But who the hell would expect some damned amateur photographer to take a snap just at that moment and from that particular spot? He couldn't have chosen it better had he known who we were and what we had done. I suppose that as soon as he heard of what had happened at the Manor he rushed the photograph to the paper and got a fee for it. The paper, lacking anything pictorial to hook on the story, would naturally jump at it. Well, there it is. Drysdale will see it. He'll find the photographer and ask him what time he took it. Thus, he will learn that the snap was taken a few minutes after the shooting. He's bound to follow it up. Before the night is out he'll know the name of the man who owns the car, and put two and two together. We'd better get rid of it, and quickly, although I'm afraid we shall find it harder to dispose of than a body."

"Why not run it down to Uncle Herbert's and shove it in the old coach-house?"

"That's a sound scheme." Gunga crossed to the window from where the car could be seen. "That is to say, it'd have been a sound scheme five minutes ago," he concluded, slowly.

"What are you talking about?"

"We're just too late. Drysdale must have seen that photograph and got the gang's agent at the B.B.C. to radio an SOS for it. Our garage man must have reported that it was here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that at this very moment Drysdale is standing beside the car making a note of the licence, which happens to be in my name, that's all."

Guy walked swiftly to the window. "My God! you're right," he said, in a low voice.

"Stand back. Don't let him see you. Look at his expression as he stares at the flat. You can almost see what is passing through his mind. He's wondering if he ought to investigate immediately or report the matter to Number One."

"Even money he reports to Number One."

"You'd lose your bet. He daren't risk our giving him the slip. Here he comes. Thank God he's coming alone, and not bringing the driver of his car."

"Which suggests that the driver is an honest man."

"His efficiency where we're concerned will not be impaired on that account. You'd better get in that bedroom and leave the door ajar. I'll talk to him. You should find the conversation most entertaining."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"I might as well tell him everything. With the number of that licence in his notebook it's only a matter of hours before he finds out that the owner's name is Deane. That's the key of the whole situation—that, and the fact that he will have seen me, which is unavoidable since we daren't risk any shooting in this cul-de-sac. The entrance may be stiff with police. Still, I think it is a case where we carry the war into enemy country. It is going to make things more difficult later on, but it can't be prevented."

"Suppose he tries to arrest you?"

"He won't."

"If he does?"

"It will be the last arrest he ever makes. Hark!"

The sound of quiet footsteps could be heard coming up the stairs.

"He hasn't even troubled to knock," went on Gunga, quietly. "You'd better get under cover—take your glass with you or he'll know I'm not alone." Then, as Guy moved swiftly to the bedroom, he picked up a paper and dropped into an easy chair. An instant later there was a sharp rap on the door. Without waiting for an answer the detective opened it. He halted on the threshold.

Gunga did not even glance up. "Come right in, Inspector," he called, cheerfully. "I was hoping you'd look me up sometime."

CHAPTER VIII

THE detective did not move so Gunga got up, tossed the newspaper on the table and turned to meet him. Not until then did he realise how far the photographs published in the press had failed to do justice to his personality. On a thick bull neck that rose from Herculean shoulders rested a massive head crowned by a rather shabby bowler hat. Below a tight-lipped, downward-curved mouth projected a clean-shaven jaw as blunt and aggressive as the bows of a tug. From a broad, rugged face, his eyes, set rather far apart, gleamed as coldly grey as ice-bound pools on a frosty morning. The only weak thing about him was the cigarette that projected at the angle of a barber's pole from the side of his mouth, as disproportionately out of place as a pinnace's flagstaff on a dreadnought. His hands rested in the side pockets of his jacket, filling them so that they bulged like inflated water-wings.

For a moment Gunga was almost intimidated, although he did not reveal it. He looked from the Inspector's face to his pockets with a reproachful frown. "Come, come, Inspector," he said in a lightly bantering tone of voice. "Don't do anything rash, will you? My henchmen are covering you from all sides, and the very sight of a number as low as Twenty-one is bound to irritate their trigger fingers. One false move and you'll have more holes in you than Twenty-three, One-Nineteen, and Seventeen put together. Come in and make yourself at home. Have a drink?"

The Inspector's eyes went slowly round the room before he advanced. He took off his hat, put it on the table and sat down carefully in an upright chair.

Gunga picked up the whisky bottle. "Have a drink?"

"Thanks—if it isn't poisoned."

"We haven't got to poison yet—although it may come to that," announced Gunga smoothly, as he poured out the drink. "We've a nice line in rat poisons in case it does."

Drysdale eyed Gunga with an expression that was something between curiosity and hostility. "What's your name?" he demanded.

"When I tell you it will be a revelation, so brace up. But as you will learn it in any case I may as well tell you. As a matter of fact, it's Deane."

A flicker of understanding crossed the Inspector's eyes. He nodded heavily. "What relation——" he hesitated.

Gunga went on "To the man you murdered at Blandford? Brother."

There was another pause. "I understand," said the Inspector. He broke the edge off a matchbox and began picking his teeth with it.

"I thought you would," Gunga told him.

"Any more of you?"

"Good gracious, yes. And we're all on the blood trail—as you may have noticed. Incidentally, you're next on the list. What does it feel like to be on the spot yourself for a change, instead of putting other people on it?" Gunga's manner was still cheerful.

The Inspector stared at him but did not answer.

"Perhaps I ought to tell you why we have spared you so long," continued Gunga, reflectively. "We always hoped that one day you would rat on your crooked pals and lead us to Number One."

The Inspector ignored the suggestion. "How long do you think you can get away with this?" he asked, coldly.

"That's rather a leading question. I might ask you the same thing." Gunga's manner became confidential. "Between ourselves, Inspector, we're going on until we've bowled you all out. But I must say this. If you have any idea of tackling us in your official capacity, you'd better forget it. We're keeping away from the law as far as we can, and you should do the same thing; otherwise we may all go to the scaffold together. We've got enough evidence to hang quite a lot of people. Your name figures in Lola Daring's diary—you know about the diary, of course? But you may not know that she gave it to my brother. She was unwise enough to tell the arch-villain—I mean, archdeacon—that. That was why he killed her. Nasty business, killing women. We had to punish him—although, of course, he had got it coming to him anyway. And now, since I've told you so much, what about a little reciprocity? Who's taking on Number Seventeen's job?"

"I shouldn't tell you if I knew."

"I was afraid not. How about changing your coat and rounding up the whole gang? That would save us trouble and assure your name of an honourable place in the archives of the Yard instead of the Black List. It does so damage public confidence when a Yard official is involved in a scandal."

"I'll stay as I am."

"All right, Inspector. Every man to his taste. And now that you have learned far more than you hoped when you invited yourself into my flat, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm thinking of taking you to the Yard for a nice long chat."

"Then take my advice and turn your thoughts to more practicable channels. You've not a shred of evidence against us, you know that."

The Inspector went on picking his teeth. "You're getting in my way," he said, slowly.

Gunga smiled. "That I can well believe."

"Pity."

"Why this sudden sympathy?"

"I was just thinking . . . they're bound to get you in the end, the same as they did your brother. He came nearer than anyone ever did to seeing Number One. Then he made a bad blunder."

"Confiding in you."

The Inspector nodded heavily. "Not only me, but Brimswade. I shall never understand why he did that. But that's by the way. As I say, they'll get you."

"That will be my funeral."

The Inspector's manner suddenly changed. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said, briskly. "I'll do a deal with you. You give me your word that you'll get right out of the business from this minute and I'll say no more about it."

Gunga shook his head. "Nothing doing. I was brought up to finish what I start."

"No use trying to buy you out?"

"Not until money will bring a dead man to life."

"I see. Have it your own way. You don't know what you're up against."

"I do."

"You think you do. You haven't a chance. In the long run you'll thank me for picking you up. Let's get along."

"Still toying with that idea? What charge have you in mind?"

"One that will keep you safe for twelve or maybe eighteen months. Carrying a gun is a serious offence these days. I'll trouble you for your firearms certificate—if you can find it."

Gunga smiled sympathetically. "That's just too bad for you, Inspector. I don't need one."

"Is that so? What makes you think you're different from other people?"

"I happen to be a serving officer in the regular army; and, at the moment, did he but know it, I'm serving His Majesty well—better than some who wear a uniform. By the way, I'm keeping my regiment informed of our progress. I mention that in case you are under the impression that you outnumber us. Even Number One would hesitate to shoot, drown, crash or otherwise murder a regiment of cavalry."

The faintest suspicion of a smile flickered over the detective's stolid face for a moment. "Yes, I reckon you're right there," he conceded, sucking a tooth thoughtfully. "I still think it's a pity you've got yourself mixed up in this. If you weren't satisfied with the inquest on your brother why didn't you go to the Yard?"

Gunga's laugh made the Inspector flush. "That's the best joke I've heard in years. I'll see it's noted in the classics. No, Inspector, that won't do. In fact, we don't seem to be getting anywhere. I think you'd better run along before one of my men shoots you in a moment of passion; now that you know why you're on the spot you're eligible for the high jump without further warning. The others all knew. I made a point of telling them. Twenty-three went out like the craven he was—which reminds me, I hoped there would be some pictures of the funeral in the newspapers, but there weren't. Was that your doing?"

"Partly."

"Ah, I suspected it. Never mind. Number One-Nineteen, being all brawn and no brain, died like a bull in a slaughter house. It was thoughtful of you to send along the man who killed my brother. I suppose you know that he was the driver of the lorry? It was really in the hope that you'd send someone along that I wrote that letter to you. You know all about Seventeen? I was so irritated after listening to his conversation with Miss Daring that my shooting was erratic. Just one other thing before you go. What's going to happen at Bethwold Manor?"

"It hasn't been decided yet."

"And the dope shop?"

"That hasn't either. It depends on how long you last. With you out of the way they could both go on."

"Yes, of course. I hadn't thought of that. Personally, I should say Number One made a blunder by going into the dope business."

"Why?"

"If he ever cuts off supplies there will be trouble. It was on that account that Lola Daring turned rebel. Others will do the same. Suppose I gave the post office the tip and they examined the mail—what then? Even you might

lose your job, Inspector. You can't allow that sort of thing to go on. Have another drink before you go?"

"No." The Inspector rose slowly to his feet and picked up his hat. "I'm glad we've had this chat," he announced.

"Yes, it's cleared the air a lot."

"I'll be seeing you again."

"You certainly will."

"On a slab of slate."

"Then we shall be able to keep each other company. Never forget that there's a bullet in my little bag with your number on it."

"And there's a nice new rope at Pentonville booked in your name."

"Cancel it. You'll need all the hemp you've got when I'm through. Remember me to all the boys and girls."

The Inspector walked slowly to the door, his head bowed in thought. Reaching it he turned. "If you find Number One you might let me know," he suggested.

Gunga smiled. "You'll know all right," he promised, grimly.

There was a moment of silence as the Inspector stood in the doorway regarding Gunga with an expressionless face. Twice his lips moved as though he was about to speak, but finally they came together in their habitual hard line and he went without a backward glance.

From the window Gunga watched him get into the car and drive away. "It's all right, he's gone," he said, loudly, for Guy's benefit.

Guy joined him at the window. "Strewth! You certainly spilled a bibful, as they say on the flicks."

Gunga's brows were knit in a thoughtful frown. "It was no use messing about in a case like that. What I've told him is no more than he would soon learn, anyway, and what he knows the others will soon know."

"I can't help feeling that in letting him go with all that information we have made a mistake that we shall regret."

"Possibly. But this was neither the time nor place for shooting. We don't know what's going on outside. The place may be surrounded by police for all we know. But come on; we shall have to be moving."

Guy frowned. "I don't like this idea of their getting us on the run."

"There's a lot of difference between a discreet withdrawal and a rout."

"Where are we going?"

"Anywhere, laddie, anywhere." Gunga's manner was detached. His eyes were on the yard below.

Following their direction Guy saw a man wheeling a "Stop me and buy one" ice cream barrow. He paused to speak to the garage attendant who was washing down a car in a private lock-up opposite; then, with the barrow, he crossed the mews and disappeared from view in the public garage underneath them. A moment later he re-appeared, walking quickly towards the street, without the barrow.

Gunga moved swiftly. He snatched up his hat. "I don't think we want any ice cream to-day," he said, tersely, "Grab your small kit and let's get outside. We shall have to leave our bags. Make it snappy."

"Curse this rushing about," grumbled Guy as a minute later they went quickly down the stairs.

As they emerged from the door the garage hand threw them a sidelong glance. Gunga noted it and went over to him. "Did you ring up the police and tell them that our car was here?" he asked, crisply.

The man looked uncomfortable. "No."

"Who did you tell?"

"I told the B.B.C.—I reckoned it was my duty."

"Quite right—always do your duty. I may be mistaken but I fancy that the gentleman you spoke to has sent you a present for your trouble."

"Where is it?"

"I may be quite wrong, mind you, but I suspect it's in that ice cream cart."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll learn—although if you took my tip you'd control your curiosity and go home." Gunga walked on and did not stop again until they reached the street.

"Aren't you getting a bit jittery—?" began Guy, but the end of the sentence was drowned in the roar of an explosion that sent a blast of air whirling round them.

Gunga jumped on a passing bus. "By God! Drysdale didn't lose much time, did he?" he muttered to Guy who had followed him.

"What made you think that barrow——?"

"Oh, just a hunch. I'm a trifle super-sensitive at the moment about things being pushed underneath us."

The conductor came forward. "Don't you know better than to get on a bus like that? One of these days you'll be getting hurt."

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” returned Gunga, blandly. “Hello, there’s the fire engine. I wonder where it’s going?”

“What was that bang I ’eard?” queried the conductor.

“Oh, some fool letting off fireworks, I suppose . . . two tickets to Oxford Street.”

CHAPTER IX

As they got off the 'bus in Oxford Street Guy looked up at a clock. "Seven o'clock," he announced. "A lot seems to have happened in the last hour."

"A lot may happen in the next unless we keep our eyes open," answered Gunga, glancing around.

"What's the matter? Do you think we are being followed?"

"I don't know, but before we do anything else we had better make certain that we are not." Gunga stopped a passing taxi. "Victoria," he said.

At Victoria they mingled with the crowd, entered a news-theatre and left by an emergency exit without sitting down. Another taxi took them to the Strand; they jumped out at the Wellington Street traffic lights and made their way on foot through Covent Garden Market to St. Paul's church where they stood for some minutes in an entry watching the occasional passers-by. Finding nothing suspicious they cut through Long Acre to Coventry Street, where Gunga turned into a popular teashop and took the lift up to the fourth floor.

"I thought we weren't going to run," complained Guy, after they had sat down and ordered fish with fried potatoes and coffee.

"We're not running," replied Gunga. "But the battle is on and there is no sense in standing still while we're under fire. The manual says—and from experience I agree—it is better to take cover at such times. We shall have to find ourselves another dug-out since Drysdale has been so inconsiderate as to put a mine under——"

"Just a minute," interrupted Guy. "I've been thinking about that. It doesn't necessarily follow that Drysdale was responsible for that bang. You heard what the garage man said—he told the B.B.C. The radio operator probably passed the information on to his contact man in the gang. Drysdale, having seen the photograph, may have called on us on his own initiative."

"What makes you think that?"

"The timing of the bomb. It was cut rather fine. The thing went off within five minutes of Drysdale leaving—yet he was in no hurry to go. I should say that had he known what was afoot he would have looked at his watch at least once—but he didn't."

"By God! that's true. That certainly makes it look as if he and the gang were acting independently—not that it really matters."

Guy was fingering his moustache. "And here's another thing; I'd better tell you while I remember it. Did you notice the slight start Drysdale gave when you mentioned the diary? It was the only time he registered emotion."

"That was understandable."

"Maybe, but it made me think, and the result may have been one of those astonishing inspirations which with the celebrated Sherlock Holmes were an everyday occurrence."

"Go ahead."

"First of all consider what data we have concerning this diary. The first point is, it exists; there's no doubt of that. Point two, Lola hadn't got it when she died. Point three, the gang hasn't got it or it wouldn't have been necessary for Number Seventeen to ask her where it was. That, I think, makes it practically certain that it was not in Pete's flat, which would have been searched. Finally, Pete stated in his letter that he had no place for the safe custody of documents. Doesn't that suggest anything to you?"

Gunga thought for a moment. "No."

"Doesn't it suggest that Pete had the diary on him—or, at least, in the car—when he was killed?"

"No, because in that case the diary would have been found by the man who killed him and handed over to Number Seventeen."

"Exactly. That brings me to my point. You are assuming that the man who found it gave it up."

Gunga looked steadily at his brother. "Yes," he said, "I'm taking that for granted."

"Why take it for granted? You can't take anything for granted in this affair. Lucky Jim was the driver of the lorry, so it is safe to suppose that he was the first man to reach Pete's car after the crash. He would certainly search it, and if the diary was there he would find it. Yet the diary did not reach Number Seventeen. That implies, I think, that Lucky Jim kept it."

"For what purpose?"

Guy made a gesture of irritation. "I wish you wouldn't always try to foozle my ideas," he complained. "I could think of plenty of reasons which might induce him to keep it."

"Such as?"

"His own name might have been in it, and he would prefer to retain such an incriminating piece of evidence."

"Yes, there's something in that."

"If he recognised its full value he might have withheld it to use as a lever in an emergency—against Number One, Number Seventeen, or any other member of the gang who happened to be mentioned in it."

"That's more likely."

"I am really not so much concerned with his reason for keeping it as the fact that if you eliminate those who haven't got it, the only probability that remains is our late friend Lucky Jim, whom we know was probably once in a position to acquire it."

"Yes, I see that. But wait a moment. If Jim had found it it would have been discovered in his effects—assuming that his kit would be subjected to search by the gang when it was known that he had been killed."

"If he lived at the shop—yes; but not if he lived at a private house."

"Number Seventeen would know the address."

"Admittedly, but Number Seventeen died himself so soon afterwards that he may not have had time to order a search."

"Yes, by thunder, you're right. That certainly is a possibility. What's come over you? You're positively brilliant."

Guy made a deprecatory movement of his hand. "Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary. You don't half know me yet."

"It looks as if an inspection of Lucky Jim's kit would be worth while—if we can find out where he lived. How the devil can we find his address?"

"Think, man, think. Don't leave it all to me."

"All right, give me a minute or two." Gunga finished his coffee, lit a cigarette and smoked for some time in silence. "I think I've got it," he said, at last. "But we shall have to move quickly, or Number Seventeen's successor may forestall us. We needn't bother about the shop. I can't see any point in going there. It is one of the gang's bases, so even if Jim found the diary he would not have taken it there. As I see it, our only chance is to find his private address—if he had one. We've one pointer that may lead us to it—no, two. First of all there's the latchkey. If that doesn't fit the shop door then it's ten-to-one he had another address. That's the first thing we shall have to ascertain. The second is the betting slip. Lucky Jim was evidently a racing man, and, as you would expect, he made his wagers with a street bookmaker. That in turn suggests that he made bets regularly. The bookie's name was Dave and he's the man we've got to find. It shouldn't be difficult. These street bookies have their own districts and usually pay out in a local

pub—so my batman once told me. I'll bet every barman in the Chelsea district knows Dave—if they'd admit it."

"Would Dave know Lucky Jim's real name?"

"Ah, that's something I can't answer, but you'll find that his name was Jim something-or-other. The 'Lucky' part would automatically occur to him as a nom-de-plume—it's an old tag. Everybody uses a nom-de-plume for street betting, naturally, in case the bookie is picked up by the police. If you've finished I think we'll reconnoitre the King's Road taverns. We can't do any harm, anyway."

They paid the bill, and took a taxi to the King's Road. The seed shop, as was to be expected at that hour, was closed. Without any subterfuge Gunga walked up to the door and tried the key. "Nothing doing," he said, as he rejoined Guy on the pavement. "That's the first point established."

"What's the idea?" asked a voice. A constable stepped out of a doorway. He was young and fresh-complexioned, little more than a youth, and could not have been long in the force.

Gunga hesitated only for a moment. "Look, officer," he said, quietly, "we're private detectives . . . divorce case . . . not in your line of business. But we've stumbled on something which may put you in the way of quick promotion. You needn't believe me if you don't want to—I'm just telling you. It's up to you to do what you like about it. This seed shop isn't all that it pretends to be; it's the headquarters of a dope ring. On the far side of the counter you'll see a lot of pigeon-holes. In the third row down from the top, and the fourth from the right, you'll find some seed packets with a picture of a little white flower on the front. Inside those particular packets you'll find cocaine. That's all. Help yourself."

The constable's face expressed incredulity. "Do you expect me to believe that?"

"No," admitted Gunga, frankly. "I'm just telling you. Be very careful how you tackle the job or you may get a bigger packet than you bargain for. Good night."

Leaving the constable staring after them they walked on.

"Now that Drysdale knows who we are I'm going to make things just as difficult as I can for him," declared Gunga.

"That fellow may have been one of the gang."

"Not he. He was too much of a kid. I should say he hasn't been in uniform more than a month or two. Did you see his expression? That was quite enough to tell us that he knew nothing about the shop. He isn't following us by any chance, is he?"

Guy glanced over his shoulder. “No.”

“Good. Here’s a pub; let’s try our luck.” Gunga pushed open the swing doors of the saloon bar and threaded his way through the crowd to the barman. “Have you seen Dave?” he asked, quietly.

“No, and I don’t want,” returned the man, curtly, but with such sincerity that Gunga wasted no further time.

“Not one of Dave’s calling places, evidently,” he observed, as they walked on down the road. “What’s this over the way? Not quite so classy as the last place, which means that it’s more promising.” He went into the taproom and employed the same tactics as before.

In reply to his question the barman paused in the act of drawing beer. “He’s gorne,” he said. “He leaves ’ere at eight.”

“Where does he go next?”

The barman frowned suspicion. “Wot do you want to know for?”

“I owe him some dough, that’s all.”

“I see. Well, if you ’urry up you may catch him in The Lion’s Head.”

“Thanks.”

In a few minutes they were in the public house of that name. Gunga stopped an overworked barman and asked him the same question as he had put to the others. Without hesitation the man nodded towards a marble-topped table round which three men were sitting drinking beer. There was, however, no indication as to which of the three was Dave.

Guy remained at the bar, calling for two whiskies, while Gunga crossed over to the table. “Can I have a word with you, for a minute, Dave?” he said, looking at no particular member of the party.

A rather stout, red-faced man answered. “What do you want?”

Gunga inclined his head and lifted a shoulder in a manner signifying that what he had to say was of confidential nature. The man got up and joined him as he moved aside out of earshot of the others.

“I’ve got a message for you from Jim,” Gunga told him.

“Jim who?”

“Lucky Jim.”

“Oh! Jim Harrington. What the hell’s happened to him? He owes me a couple of quid for an ante-post bet.”

“I know.” Gunga put his hand in his pocket and took out two one-pound notes. “He asked me to pay you. He’s stuck indoors with a touch of

lumbago. He says why didn't you call at his address—you know where he lives."

"How should I. I know he lives somewhere in the Vauxhall Bridge Road because he leaves his bets with Fred Owen, but that's all."

"Well, it doesn't matter. That's fixed everything, hasn't it?"

"O.K. Thanks, mate."

Gunga joined Guy at the bar and swallowed his drink at a gulp. "Come on," he said, "we're on the trail."

Outside the tavern he stopped a taxi and told the driver to drop them at the top end of Vauxhall Bridge Road.

"Did you get the address?" inquired Guy.

"No, but I've established the fact that Jim's name was Harrington and that he lived in the Vauxhall Bridge Road." Gunga explained briefly what had transpired.

"That mean's we've got to find Fred Owen."

"That should be easy. It's probably a shop with the name over the door—possibly a newsagent's, the place where Jim bought his racing literature. Most of these places collect for street bookies."

This surmise proved to be correct, for after walking a short way down the Vauxhall Bridge Road they came to a small, untidy shop, a newsagent's and confectioner's, that carried the name they sought. They went in, and Gunga addressed the little bespectacled proprietor.

"I'm Jim Harrington's cousin, but I've lost his address. I know he lives somewhere handy, and I was told outside that you might be able to help me."

The little man nodded, "I deliver to his house every morning, so I ought to know where he lives. Now you mention it I ain't seen 'im for the last couple of days. He lives at 427a—it's right down the bottom end."

Gunga took advantage of the man's garrulousness. "I guess he'll be surprised to see me. Did he ever get married?"

"Not as far as I know. I've seen gals come out once or twice so I should say not. I always understood he lived alone."

"I suppose he still follows the gees?"

"Does he? I'll say he does. Luckiest punter round 'ere for miles. He backs more winners than anyone I ever knew."

"So Dave tells me."

"So you know Dave? Well, 'e'll tell you. Matter of fact, he mentioned to me on the quiet the other day that he thought of telling Jim to take his bets somewhere else. It ain't natural the number of times they come off."

"How does he do it?"

"Gawd knows. He gets all Radkin's stuff—and that's a hot stable."

"Radkin's? Let's see, where does he train?"

"Down Blandford way somewhere."

Gunga gave no indication that the word Blandford had meant anything to him. "Who does Radkin train for now? I've been away for some time and I've lost touch."

"Lord Glenbold mostly, but there are some others—all top class."

"Really? Well, I'll be getting along. Many thanks."

"You're welcome."

Outside the shop Gunga caught Guy's arm. "What-ho," he said. "Did you hear that? So Lucky Jim backed all Radkin's winners. Radkin trains for Lord Glenbold—at Blandford. I told you that Blandford would drift into the picture sooner or later. It's getting time we honoured Dorsetshire with a visit. But first of all we'd better have a look at Jim's place. How do the numbers run? I don't think we need call a cab, it can't be far. Just a minute. I'll slip into this ironmongers and get an electric torch. It will probably be useful."

A longish walk brought them, at the dingy end of a not very salubrious thoroughfare, to their objective. It was a drab, dismal-looking house, as devoid of self-respect as a vagrant, flaunting its poverty since it could not conceal it, worse even than those which stood on either side of it, for they did at least attempt to hide their shame behind tawdry muslin-curtained windows. Originally it had been part of a larger dwelling, but an extra door had been fitted converting it into what a Bayswater resident would describe as a maisonette. There were a few pedestrians about and a fair amount of traffic; occasionally a taxi would bustle past, busily, as if anxious to disassociate itself from such surroundings, while every few minutes a tram, with a screech of protesting steel, as intolerant of obstruction as a drunken man, would forge one way or the other, pitching slightly as it clung to its uneven track. In the distance at a cross-roads a policeman was on traffic duty, but he was both too far away and too concerned with his task to be a menace.

Gunga waited for a tram to pass and then, walking up the three iron-railed steps that led to the door, knocked loudly. The hollow echo of the summons died away, but no one answered. He waited for another minute,

when, as the silence within the house persisted, he tried the key in the lock. It turned easily, and the door swung open disclosing a vague corridor. He went in. Guy followed, closing the door behind them.

Gunga's torch cut a wedge of white light through the gloom. "I wonder if we dare risk lighting the gas?" he murmured, as the ray rested for a moment on a cheap wall bracket.

"It would be better if we could do without it. We might open the window, though; the fug reminds me of a *kasbah*."

Gunga did not reply. He pushed open a door on the right-hand side of the corridor and entered what had evidently been a living room. "God in heaven!" he said, in a low voice. "What a pigsty! Why must some people live like hogs?" He switched off the torch, observing that a fair amount of light found its way through the dusty window from a nearby street lamp. "Apart from what they taught me at Sandhurst, my instinct warns me to look for a line of retreat out of this place which seems to have all the essentials of a very nasty trap. I remember once getting stuck in the end of a *nullah* with a bunch of Wogs at the only exit. Let's explore the rear."

They went through a long-disused kitchen into a scullery where a back door opened into a small area containing a battered ashbin and the accumulated rubbish of years. Beyond the low wall on the far side was a similar but larger area, but it differed in that it contained a butcher's van. Some distance beyond it, through an arched entrance, could be seen the passing traffic of another street.

"That's better," murmured Gunga. "We could go out that way if necessary. With the back door open I shall proceed with the job with more confidence." They returned to the living room, leaving the back door ajar. "All right. Let's make a start," he continued. "Pile all the bits and pieces on here." He indicated a cheap deal table that stood in the middle of the room. A newspaper lay open on it.

"I see Jim read *The Echo*," commented Guy. "I . . . well I'm damned."

"What is it?"

"Nothing much. Quite a natural thing, I suppose, but just for the moment it gave me a jolt. This is the issue of the paper that contained the account of Pete's death. There's the paragraph. I suppose Lucky Jim gloated over it."

Gunga glanced at the paper and was about to move away but turned back sharply. "What's this?" he said crisply. "This isn't the account of Pete's crash."

"Yes, it is—here's the paragraph."

"I was looking at this." Gunga laid a finger on an item which bore the heading in bold type BLANDFORD TRAGEDY. "Were there two accidents at Blandford? Let's see what it's about." He read for a moment in silence. "My God, just listen to this!" he muttered suddenly, in a tense voice. " 'A verdict of Accidental Death was returned at the inquest held yesterday at Blandford on the body of the late Captain Gordon Alister-Bowes, only son of Sir Roland Alister-Bowes, who, it will be recalled, died on Thursday last as a result of a shooting accident. Sir Roland's estate adjoins that of Prince Serge Rubenoff. The deceased, who is home on furlough from India, was on his way to visit the prince when the accident occurred. Apparently the dead officer was in the habit of carrying a gun when walking about the estate, and there is no doubt that on this occasion he was guilty of the same tragic carelessness which has cost many other sportsmen their lives—that of climbing over the stile with a gun at full cock. The body was found by one of the prince's gamekeepers, who, giving evidence, said that although he ran all the way to the village for a doctor, he knew that the unfortunate young officer, whom he knew well by sight, was already dead. The tragedy has cast a gloom over the district, and many of the prince's guests, which included Lord Glenbold, have returned to their homes. Our deepest sympathy is extended to Sir Roland Alister-Bowes, whose name is well-known to the public as the head of the great tea firm of Bowes & Company.' "

Gunga straightened his back and looked at Guy. His face was grim. "What does that sound like to you?" he asked.

"The accident must have happened only a few hours before Pete was killed."

"Glenbold was there."

"I wonder . . ."

"What?"

"If Pete was going down to see Alister-Bowes."

"It is more likely that he was going to the prince's place."

"That's where Alister-Bowes was going."

"I wonder could that be coincidence? I once met Alister-Bowes in India, about a year ago, in the Moplah country. The labourers on the tea plantations —why, damn it, I remember him telling me that the plantations belonged to his father's firm. We lost a lot of men cleaning things up after the labourers got out of hand—they'd managed to get a lot of rifles from somewhere and I don't think it was ever discovered where they came from. The plantations were burnt out. I have a feeling that there is more in this than we suppose even now. But let's do one thing at a time. Where is this confounded diary?"

For half an hour they worked fast but systematically, piling the small objects from receptacles that had been emptied on the table out of the way, but there was no sign of the book they sought.

Guy wiped the dust from his face with his handkerchief. “We’d better try the bedroom,” he suggested.

They found the diary under the discoloured mattress. Guy, groping between it and the spring, pulled it out, and a single glance at the first page told him that it was the document for which they were looking. “I’ve got it!” he announced, with a faint note of triumph in his voice.

“Good work. We can’t stop to look at it now. The sooner we get out of this place, the better.”

They returned to the living room where Guy laid the book on the accumulated odds and ends that had been piled on the table. “We’d better close the back door,” he said. He stiffened suddenly as there came a faint sound, but from which direction it was impossible to say. It was like a door being closed quietly. “Did you hear that?” he breathed.

Gunga nodded.

“Somebody about?”

“I think so.”

They stood still, listening, but the sound was not repeated. Gunga drew his pistol and began to move stealthily towards the scullery. Guy, also with his pistol ready, followed at a distance to guard his rear against surprise attack. And so they reached the back door. It was shut. Gunga eyed it with suspicion.

“The wind may have closed it,” whispered Guy. “I felt a draught.”

Gunga did not answer. Very slowly, keeping his body under cover of the wall he reached out and turned the handle. With a sudden pull he jerked it wide open. There was nobody there. “I’m not going out into that yard to be pooped at,” he said, shortly. “There’s enough cover there for a score of thugs, and we shouldn’t see them. Let’s go out the front way. Did you say you felt a draught?”

“Yes.”

“You closed the front door behind you when you came in, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t see how there could be a draught. We’d better go and have a look at it.” Moving cautiously he made his way back to the living room. “Where did you put the diary?” he asked, sharply.

“On the top of that stuff on the table.”

“It’s gone! Watch out! Keep an eye on your rear.”

Suddenly a self-starter whirred outside the house. Gunga darted to the window just in time to see a car speed down the road. Instinctively his eyes went to the number-plate. “XYB 9048,” he read aloud. “Damn it!” he added viciously.

“XYB—why, that’s Drysdale’s car; I noted it outside the flat this afternoon.”

Gunga turned back into the room. “Quite right,” he growled. “I’m afraid he’s got away with it. My fault. I should have put the diary in my pocket. We can’t afford to make slips like that. However, the damage is done now and it’s no use bleating. We may as well go. We’ve got to find quarters for the night. Have your gun handy as we go down the steps—Drysdale may have left a pal about to have a crack at us.”

CHAPTER X

THE departure from the house in the Vauxhall Bridge Road was in the nature of an anti-climax, for after taking elaborate precautions against surprise attack they saw nothing remotely suspicious, and in the end boarded a tram for Victoria, where, having bought an evening paper to see what reason had been advanced to account for the explosion in Baker Street, they repaired to the buffet for refreshment. They found that most of the front page of the paper was occupied with urgent political news, but a paragraph reporting the explosion occurred inside. From it they learned that the garage hand had been killed, and a tradesman's delivery man, who was near at the time, injured. Fire, due, it was thought, to a gas explosion, had destroyed all the buildings in the mews and a motor-car that had been left outside one of the flats.

"That means my car has gone west," observed Gunga. "Probably the best thing that could have happened to it. Remind me to put in a claim to the insurance people."

"I'm just beginning to realise how little one really knows about what is going on in the world," remarked Guy, cynically, as he handed the paper to Gunga.

"What is more to the point, I'm just beginning to realise that it is Saturday night, we've no pyjamas, the shops are closed and we have nowhere to lay our heads."

"You'd better drown your scruples in another drink and spend the night at either your club or mine. We can borrow pyjamas from a valet."

"I agree. The circumstances are becoming too urgent for squeamishness. To-morrow we'll get a car from one of the hire companies and move out of Town for a bit—in a westerly direction."

"Blandford?"

"That way. I see in the paper that they are racing at Salisbury on Monday and my Lord Glenbold has a horse in the three o'clock, so if he is still staying with his princely host the odds are that they will turn up to watch the race. Naturally, Glenbold will be particularly anxious to lead in the winner, so we may get a line on how this desirable state of affairs is achieved."

"You think it's crooked?"

"What else could it be? It doesn't matter a damn how much you spend on horseflesh, no one can go on winning races indefinitely—you know that. Luck comes and goes, but to win races consistently needs something more than luck; and that Lucky Jim, by backing Radkin's horses, did win consistently, we know from the newsagent fellow. How is it done? A man in Glenbold's position daren't play monkey tricks like in-and-out running, which the stewards would not fail to notice. A little man can get away with that sort of thing once in a while, but a fellow in Glenbold's position wouldn't risk it. I feel certain that if we can get under the skin of this thing we shall perceive racket number two."

"You've set yourself a task this time."

"Possibly, but I don't altogether agree. Look at it this way. Lucky Jim was obviously getting his information straight from the stable. Very well; that means the stable was confident that the horses were going to win. Confidence is all right once in a while but no stable can go on being confident unless there is crooked work behind it. Every racing man knows that you can't turn out a racing certainty by honest methods—at a price that makes it worth backing. When a man runs his horse straight all the world knows what that horse can do, and any advantage it may have either in a handicap or a weight-for-age race is as apparent to the public as to the trainer. You can't make money that way—at least, not by betting. Frankly, I think the chances are against us spotting the fly in this particular pot of ointment immediately, but we may, because we are in possession of facts of which the public and the stewards are in ignorance. In short, we are looking for something which they do not know exists. Anyway, even if we discover nothing a day's racing will do us no harm."

"Quite right. We've been working too hard lately. Let's get along to the club. Shall we go to yours or mine?"

"Mine, it's nearer."

As they went in the hall porter stopped them. "Funny you should walk in like that, sir," he said. "There was somebody on the telephone not five minutes ago asking if you were staying here. I told 'im no."

"Quite right. Who was he?"

"The gentleman wouldn't give a name, sir."

"I see. Make a note that I am not staying here and forget that you've seen me. Between ourselves the police want to get hold of me to give evidence in a paltry motoring offence case. I'm going into the country and I don't want to be kept hanging about over a ridiculous thing like that."

"Right you are, sir. I understand."

As they anticipated, a valet provided them with all they needed for the night. It was not late, and although there were only a few members in the club they went straight to their rooms to avoid encounters which might have led to embarrassing questions, or possibly invitations which their self-imposed task prevented them from accepting. For the same reason they left the club early the following morning, Gunga carrying a borrowed suitcase containing their pyjamas which by arrangement with the valet they had retained, and toilet kit. They went straight to the garage of the nearest car hire company, where they became the temporary owners of a Standard "Fourteen."

"What I'm rather concerned about is, the only clip of ammunition I have is in my pistol, and it's going to be difficult to get more," remarked Gunga as they halted at a traffic light in Piccadilly.

"I've one spare clip," replied Guy. "Let me see; I've only fired one shot so I should have six rounds left in my gun. Had I known what we were embarking on I would have brought some spare clips home with me, but for ordinary purposes—in this country, at any rate—one would have thought that a full clip would see one through most arguments. I think there are some in my valise at Uncle Hubert's—it's been there since my Cranwell days. Maybe we shall capture some from the enemy. By the way, where are you making for?"

"I can't quite make up my mind. Originally I intended drifting down to Salisbury, lunching somewhere on the way, but I have an increasing inclination to go on to Blandford and call on Sir Roland Alister-Bowes."

"Hell's bells! Would that be in the best taste after what has happened? He may be very distressed."

"It's only that which makes me hesitate. But I must say I should like to hear his version of this shooting accident. Coincidence is all very well up to a point, but two accidents with Glenbold in the background in each case rather strains my credulity. Even my average commonsense tells me there is something fishy about it. If Sir Roland is not entirely satisfied with the coroner's verdict he may say enough to put us on the track of something."

"What excuse have you for calling?"

"Only that I knew his son in India. That ought to be sufficient. If the old boy is in a bad way—well, we'll just say we're sorry and push off. Everything points to Blandford being one of the enemy's major strongholds, so as we've got to start making enquiries somewhere it may as well be there. In any case, we ought to keep out of Town for a bit. Drysdale will be looking for us, you may be sure of that. I imagine it was he, or one of his

sleuths, who rang up the club last night. No doubt he's rung up every Service club and hotel in London. From the moment that damned photo appeared in the paper we became marked men. No doubt by this time the entire resources of the organization are being employed to find us, with the understandable object of preventing us from causing further trouble. That was bound to happen sooner or later, I suppose, but it has come rather earlier than I expected. However, we can't do anything about it now; we've just got to keep our eyes wide open to ensure as far as possible that they don't catch us napping. We are at least wide awake to the strength of the forces arrayed against us, so they should not find our removal as simple as some cases they have dealt with."

"Pete was no fool."

"No, but Pete was on his own, and it's difficult for a lone operator to guard every point of the compass. There are two of us. What is even more vital, Pete's methods were altogether different from ours. From the point of view of retaliation, or even defence, his hands were tied. He may have carried a gun, but as a law-abiding citizen he would hesitate to use it. Most people need legal backing—such as we've had on active service—before they can bring themselves to shoot a man deliberately. Pete might as well have attacked a machine-gun nest with his bare hands. We're not tied by any finer feelings; the futility of such an action was so obvious that—as you know—I lined up my conscience to meet all possible demands on it before I declared war. Pete was inspired primarily by enthusiasm for his paper; our motive has its foundations in revenge, and that's a very different proposition."

"Quite right, laddie. We'll make things hum before they get us. As you suggest, I think Blandford is indicated. By the way, that means going through Aldershot, doesn't it?"

"I think that's as good a way as any."

"Then it wouldn't take us far off the road if we called at the Guards' Depot at Camberley. Tony Myford is stationed there—or he was, the last time I heard from him; he's regimental bombing officer but I've no doubt he could let us have a couple of clips of regulation ammunition. If he asks why, I could say that I've got to give a demonstration and I've come away without my equipment—either that, or I'm going in for the competitions and want to put in a bit of practice."

"Fine! Let's do that, by all means."

Nothing of interest happened until they were approaching Aldershot, when Guy began looking through the rear window with increasing

frequency.

"What's worrying you?" asked Gunga, noticing it.

"There's a Buick behind us; it has had plenty opportunities of passing but it hasn't taken them. It has started to come up once or twice and then dropped back when something has appeared coming the other way."

"What speed is it doing now?"

"The same as we are—about forty-five. It's keeping its distance."

Gunga's foot came down on the accelerator and the needle of the speedometer crept up to the sixty mark. "How about it now?" he asked.

"It's still keeping the same distance."

"Then it looks as if it's following us." Gunga turned down the Camberley Road. "Is it still behind us?"

"Yes."

"That makes it pretty well certain." Gunga was racing down the lonely road, taking chances at corners which normally he would not have contemplated; but the bigger car gained steadily and was close behind when they reached the Guards' depot. "Keep your head down," he muttered, as the other car came on, now at reduced speed. "We don't want them to see us."

Peeping through the rear window as the Buick passed the depot they could see only one man in it, the driver. The car disappeared round the next bend.

"He's following us, I don't think we need argue about that," observed Guy.

"He? I should say there's more than one man in that car. If there isn't then we're making fools of ourselves."

"How the devil do they know we're in this Standard, anyway?"

"The fellow we got it from must have told them."

"Did you give him your name?"

"I had to. He asked to see my driving licence, you remember."

"Of course. But even if he tipped them off how did he know which way we were going?"

"He didn't. He kept us waiting for a quarter of an hour while he got the car ready, don't forget. I thought nothing of it at the time, but it begins to look as if that was an excuse to delay us while he 'phoned them, and they came round. We've evidently been followed from the time we left the garage."

"We shall have to change our plans. It would be crazy to let them know we were at Blandford."

"Quite apart from that I don't feel like crossing Salisbury Plain with that Buick on our tail, and we're not fast enough to lose it; you can see for miles in each direction, and if dirty work was intended it would be the ideal place."

"Then let's have a crack at them. I'm not going to stand for being chased up and down the country like this."

"It would be better to avoid open hostilities if we can or we shall have the police chasing us, too, although as presumably the fellows in the Buick are more of Number One's hired assassins, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to push a dose of their own medicine into them. But I think we can throw them off our trail—they haven't actually seen us yet . . . I mean, they don't know us by sight. You slip into the officers' mess and see if you can get hold of Tony. I'll stay here and watch in case the car comes back."

"Good enough." Guy got out.

"By the way," Gunga called after him, "if you can borrow a Mills bomb it might come in handy."

Guy nodded and disappeared into the officers' quarters.

It was half an hour before he returned.

"You've been a hell of a long time," Gunga told him irritably.

"We had to go across to the armoury."

"And, of course, have a drink?"

"Of course."

"Where's Tony?"

"He had to dash off to a defaulters parade—he's orderly officer."

"Did he let you have the clips?"

"Four—I thought that would be enough." Guy handed his brother two.

"What about the pineapple?"

"It's in my pocket, detonated, complete with a five seconds fuse."

"Lovely. Well, we'd better be getting along; we've some way to go yet."

"Did you see anything of the Buick?"

"Not a sign."

They returned to the road and raced back to Aldershot, but before they reached the town Guy announced that the Buick was behind them.

Gunga pulled in sharply at a garage. "Keep your head down," he said.

The Buick, still with the solitary man at the wheel, swept past; it was obvious that he had seen the Standard.

Leaving the pump attendant frowning with surprise Gunga turned the car and took the Winchester road. “Watch the rear.”

“There’s nothing behind us,” stated Guy, presently.

“There soon will be,” replied Gunga, grimly. “And there’s a nice stretch of wild forest country in front of us,” he added, significantly.

“I wonder if Drysdale is in that Buick?”

“I shouldn’t think so; he’s got his official duties to do.”

For a quarter of an hour the Standard raced on and there was still no sign of pursuit. Guy was of the opinion that they had given the Buick the slip, but Gunga was doubtful. “I’m going to pull up at the field gate on the top of that next rise,” he decided. “By getting on the gate it ought to be possible to command a view of the valley we’ve just come through. That will settle any argument.”

Reaching the gate at the top of the next hill he jammed on the brakes and brought the car to a dry-skid standstill. He jumped out and swiftly mounted the gate. He was down in an instant. “They’re coming,” he said. “They’re about a mile behind. Bring the car in here and run it behind the hedge—buck up.” As he spoke he opened the gate wide.

Guy scrambled into the driving seat and obeyed.

“Leave it there—come on,” snapped Gunga, closing the gate.

“What the devil are you going to do?” asked Guy in astonishment as he climbed the gate and overtook Gunga who was walking back down the middle of the road in the direction from which they had come.

“We’ll put an end to this damn nonsense. I’m not going to be chivvied about like a stray leveret. Give me that bomb.”

“This is deliberately looking for trouble.”

“That’s what we’re here for, isn’t it?”

“What if they recognise us?”

“Unless my reasoning is all wrong, they won’t—Drysdale is the only man who has seen us. Even if they do we shall be better off in the open than we were in the car. They would have overtaken us. If it comes to field work we ought to be able to show them something. Here they are. I don’t think we’ve got anything to worry about, but in case they make a dive at us be ready to beat your own long jump record.”

“They’re slowing down.”

"That's all right. Remember their technique. They have to make murder look like an accident—and there's nothing accidental about revolver shots. Their job was to run us down—or something of the sort."

Gunga moved naturally to the side of the road as the Buick neared them. It had slowed down and was obviously going to stop. Three men could be seen; the driver, a man sitting next to him, and another behind. A door window was wound down and the passenger beside the driver, a dark, middle-aged man with an alert face, called, "Have you met a Standard coming down this road?"

Gunga advanced towards the speaker. "No," he said, "there's been nothing down this road for the last ten minutes or so except a motor-bike and a couple of cyclists. At least, I don't remember seeing a car—do you?" He turned to Guy, who was chewing a grass stalk reflectively.

Guy shook his head. "No car has come this way," he confirmed.

The man made a casual acknowledgment and said something in a low voice to his companions, whereupon the car was turned to retrace its course. The window was wound up and it began to move forward.

Gunga glanced up and down the road. There was nothing in sight. "Get the car out," he told Guy in a swift aside, and stepping up to the Buick opened a door.

The faces of the occupants registered surprise. "By the way, do you gentlemen like pineapples?" he asked blandly.

The car was still moving, slowly gathering speed. "Why?" demanded the man who had already spoken. His manner was threatening.

"I thought you might like to share this one between you." Keeping it below the level of the window Gunga pulled the safety pin out of the bomb, tossed it into the car, slammed the door and raced back towards where the Standard was coming jerkily through the gateway. As he ran he counted. When he reached the number four he turned. The Buick was still running down the hill, steering an erratic course, and he could imagine the driver joining in the frantic search for the bomb. There came a muffled roar. With smoke streaming through a shattered window the big car ran on the verge on the wrong side of the road. Its wheels sank into a shallow ditch and it fell on its side.

The Standard accelerated as Gunga got into the seat. "With the rest of the day our own we can now lunch in Winchester without having to exercise our minds on matters entirely irrelevant," he observed calmly.

"I never saw a Mills put to better use," declared Guy.

"Forget it."

Proceeding after lunch at a leisurely pace it was nearly four o'clock before they reached Blandford. From a telephone directory they learned that the address of Sir Roland Alister-Bowes was Steadworth Grange, some distance from the town itself, and with a little difficulty they found it.

The Grange, a mellow red-brick building in the best Tudor style, stood in its own extensive grounds in typical, rolling Dorsetshire country, parkland and pasture, with groups of fine old trees softening the outline of the landscape. A gravel drive, flanked occasionally by dark rhododendrons not yet in flower, cut a dull orange scar across the pleasance to the house.

Gunga allowed the car to run gently to a standstill in front of the dignified portico. They got out, closing the doors quietly, for in the brooding hush that hung over the place anything in the nature of noise would have been as unthinkable as raucous laughter in a cathedral. The staccato abuse of a party of jackdaws in a nearby oak only made the silence more profound.

Gunga, with Guy at his elbow, walked up to the front door and rang the bell.

It was opened almost at once by a housemaid. They looked at her. She looked at them. Nobody moved. There was no possibility of mistake. It was the same woman who had answered the door at Bethwold Manor.

CHAPTER XI

GUNGA was the first to recover. "I see you've changed your place," he remarked evenly.

The woman's face set in even harder lines than nature had graven. She pursed her lips and her eyes narrowed. "What do you want here?" she asked, in a low voice.

"What do *you* want here?" demanded Gunga smoothly.

"That's none of your business."

"I may have to make it my business. I've come to see Sir Roland."

"You can't."

"You mean not if you can prevent it. By the way, I haven't forgotten that I owe you fifty pounds. You probably realise why I did not stop to give it to you at Bethwold. We had to leave rather hurriedly."

"I don't want your money."

Gunga shrugged his shoulders and then changed his tone. "Look here, Violet, I'm glad I've met you again. There is a little matter that has troubled me tremendously. Why didn't you tell the Archdeacon we were in Miss Daring's room?"

For the first time the woman showed embarrassment. "That's my affair," she said at last.

"Surely that's taking a one-sided view of it? It was very much our affair. By the way, what's your number?"

"You find out."

"We shall, you needn't doubt that. I'm going to ask you a straight question, and your answer may make a lot of difference to several people—including yourself. Were you a friend of Miss Daring's?"

The woman hesitated. "Yes—I was her dresser in the old days."

"Ah, now I understand. You know the Archdeacon murdered her?"

"Of course I do."

"Doesn't that inspire in you some desire for vengeance?"

"What's the meaning of all these questions?" broke out the woman suddenly. "You're trying to trap me into saying something."

"Put it this way, rather. I'm trying to induce you to say something from which you yourself may ultimately benefit."

"Why should you be concerned about my welfare?"

"I'm not particularly concerned about it." Gunga met the woman's eyes squarely, noting the enlarged pupils. "Do they send your dope here, too?"

Violet flushed slightly. "I've nothing more to say," she snapped.

"In that case we'll see Sir Roland."

"Sir Roland is resting."

"Then you will have to rouse him."

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Very well, we will." Gunga pushed past the woman and entered the hall. At precisely the same moment a door at the far end opened and an elderly man in slippers and a black smoking jacket came out.

"What is all this noise going on?" he demanded indignantly.

Gunga advanced to meet him. "I'm very sorry indeed to trespass on your privacy in this way, but my errand is one of urgency and importance. I assume you are Sir Roland Alister-Bowes?"

"That is my name. Who are you?"

Gunga glanced at the maid, still standing within earshot. "If you will give me a moment, sir, I will satisfy your very natural curiosity."

"Very well. Come in." The old man led the way back into the room he had just left and closed the door. It was a large, panelled room, furnished partly as a library, or study, and a lounge. "Be seated," he continued, curtly, indicating two chairs before returning to the desk at which he had evidently been writing when he was disturbed.

Gunga glanced at the door to make sure that it was shut. "In the first place, sir," he began in a low voice, "my name is Deane—Captain Nigel Deane. I am an officer in——"

"Deane . . . Deane . . . ? I don't understand. Weren't you coming here . . . when . . . but the accident?"

"You must mean my brother, sir. He was killed a short while ago on his way to Blandford."

"Ah, now I understand. It was your brother who was killed in the motor-car accident?"

"That is how the coroner regarded it. As a matter of fact, sir, my brother was murdered."

A curious change came over Sir Roland's face. "Are you *sure* of that?" he asked, in an odd tone of voice.

"Beyond all doubt or question. Do I understand from your remark that my brother was on his way here?"

Sir Roland glanced at Guy. "Who, may I ask, is this gentleman?"

"My younger brother, sir, Flight Lieutenant Deane of the Royal Air Force."

"Thank you. Yes, your brother was coming here—not necessarily to this house, you understand—to meet my son."

"May I ask for what purpose?"

"I do not know. My son did not inform me further. He only mentioned in passing that a gentleman named Deane was coming here from London to see him. My son's death, of which you have no doubt heard, put all further thought of it out of my head, although I read in the papers that Mr. Deane had been killed in a motor-car accident when he was on his way here."

"It was a pity your son did not tell you more."

"Why have you come here?"

"I will answer that question frankly. We have devoted ourselves to the task of finding the people responsible for our brother's death."

With his eyes on Gunga's face Sir Roland shook his head slowly. "If my suspicions have any foundation you would be well-advised to abandon your quest."

A puzzled frown wrinkled Gunga's forehead as he realised the significance of the words. He was silent for a moment. "I am very loth to refer to a subject which may be painful to you, but have you any reason to suppose that your son's death was not an accident?"

Sir Roland looked at Gunga for some time without answering. "My judgment is that you are an honest man," he said at last, as if he had been faced with a decision. "One cannot live, it seems, without taking risks, and I must take one now. My son's death was not an accident."

"We suspected it. Have you proof of it?"

"Yes."

"Why did you not report the matter to the police?"

"Why did you not report the case of your brother to them?"

Again Gunga had to think for a moment. "Because we happened to be aware of the strength of the forces to which we were opposed and realised the futility of attacking them by orthodox methods."

"Exactly. So what did you do?"

"We are proceeding in our own way to—er—deal with the matter."

"You hope to find the man who killed your brother?"

"We found him. He is dead. The man under whose orders he was working is also dead."

It was the baronet's turn to stare. "Good God!" he ejaculated.

"You still have not answered my question as to why you did not hand to the police the information concerning your son's death which you evidently possess."

"I will tell you. It was because I was afraid. That's why, my boy. You see, I still have a daughter. She is all I have and they may take her, too."

"Thank you for your confidence, Sir Roland. With fortune on our side we shall, I hope, shortly remove the risk of that."

"Then may God help you."

"I knew your son in India."

"Did you indeed?"

"Yes, we were together in the Moplah Rebellion."

"Yes, my son was there, trying to safeguard my property." The old man got up and paced the hearthrug for two or three minutes. At last he returned to his chair. "I have decided to tell you everything," he announced. "Oh, yes, there is far more behind all this than you could possibly expect. Still, the information may help your cause, so I will tell you. I need hardly say that it is in the strictest confidence."

"That is understood. We shall listen with the greatest interest."

"The trouble—which I fear has not yet ended, although it has involved the death of my son—" The old man's voice nearly broke, but he recovered himself,—"began nearly three years ago, when a man came here to see me from a newspaper called *The*——"

"*Daily Echo.*"

Sir Roland started. "You knew?"

"We know a little. Please continue."

"He came here, here to my house, and had the effrontery to try to blackmail me."

"You astonish me, sir. In what way?"

"I was invited to order the publicity manager of the company of which I am Chairman to take a certain number of pages for advertising purposes in his wretched paper at a very high price per page."

"You refused?"

"Of course I refused. I had the fellow thrown out of the house."

"In what way was blackmail employed?"

"He dropped hints, vague hints as to what might happen if I refused to fall in with his outrageous proposal. I thought little of this at the time, but shortly afterwards trouble broke out among the labourers on my Indian plantations, and the threats came back to my mind. When, a day or two later, the same man returned and repeated his proposal I began to understand. I threatened to send for the police, but his manner was so confident that it restrained me. But I still refused to—as he called it—co-operate. Shortly afterwards the trouble on the plantations became open incendiarism and damage was caused far in excess of the sum demanded by the man who came to see me—as he had warned me would happen. What could I do? I consulted my legal advisers, but they told me my unsubstantiated word was insufficient to bring a case against the paper. I realised well enough by this time that the trouble on the plantations was being caused by agents of the newspaper who even went so far as to supply the natives with firearms. But this was not the end. Following all this, a doctor, stated to be the head of a nursing home in Sussex, made a public announcement that he had traced several cases of cancer to tea imported from a certain district in India—the Moplah region. *The Daily Echo* took up the story, which was, of course, without foundation—and the result was a staggering fall in the sales of our product. My protest to the paper resulted in a visit here of no less than Lord Glenbold, the proprietor of the paper. There was no question of blackmail, but the purpose of his visit was plain enough. He came ostensibly as a friend—I've known him for some time—and actually apologised for the article that had caused the damage. He said it was all a mistake—which could not have happened had we been regular advertisers in the paper. To make a long story short, faced with ruin I submitted."

"You mean—you paid?"

"For more than a year my Company has paid that blackmailing concern a thousand pounds a week."

"Then how did your son become involved?"

"He came home about three weeks ago on sick leave. I told him the whole story which, I need hardly say, threw him into a state of violent anger. He went to London with the object of making enquiries among the other advertisers in the paper to see how far they, too, were being victimised, and it must have been then that he met your brother. Gordon returned home to learn that Lord Glenbold was actually a member of a house-party at the

home of Prince Rubenoff whose estate adjoins mine. He said nothing to me beyond the fact that a Mr. Deane had interested himself in the case and that he had arranged to meet him by appointment. Later in the evening—it was actually dusk—he took a twelve-bore from the gun room and went out. You know what happened."

"Do you think he went out with the intention of trying to see Lord Glenbold?"

"I don't know, but it is quite likely. He was in a turbulent state of mind. In any case he was to have met your brother. Possibly they were going to see Lord Glenbold together . . . I don't know. All this is surmise."

"But the accident? You asserted just now——"

"My son was murdered."

"How do you know that?"

"My son was shot dead with his own gun—at least, the choke barrel had been fired. The wound must have been inflicted from a distance of a few inches. Naturally, it was taken for granted that an accident had occurred. Why should anyone suspect otherwise—except myself? Without giving any reason I asked the doctor—it happened to be my own doctor who was called—to obtain for me some of the shots which had entered my son's body. I have them here." With trembling fingers Sir Roland opened a drawer of his desk and took out a wisp of paper. Unfolding it he displayed the contents. "You recognise the size of that shot?"

"Of course. It's number five."

"Yes—number five. Those are the actual shots that killed Gordon. But the cartridges he took with him were number six, which he habitually used for rough shooting. If proof were needed there was a broken box of number six shot cartridges left on the gun room table from which he had taken those that were found in his pocket."

"And nobody noticed that?"

"It is understandable. After all, there is very little difference between number five and number six shot, and unless anybody looked deliberately it would escape observation. The truth is, it was a foregone conclusion that my son's death was an accident—the inquest was little more than a matter of form."

"What do you think really happened?"

"My son was deliberately shot at point blank range with a twelve bore gun as he was getting over the stile. The person who fired the shot then picked up my son's gun and fired the choke barrel into the ground—or into

the air. He then threw the gun down again and went away. What could be more simple?"

"Have you any idea who actually did this?"

"Yes, but suspicion is not proof."

"Whom do you suspect?"

The baronet paused. "I may as well finish the story," he resumed. "I suspect the gamekeeper—a man named Tredwell. I know him quite well. You see, he was one of Lord Glenbold's keepers before he came down here to the Prince. Apart from that, my son once had occasion to warn him about trespassing on my estate, and so incurred his displeasure. Again, the stile at which the crime took place is on private land, not far from the keeper's cottage—you must have passed it on the way here—and I can think of no one else who would be there at such a time—at any rate, with a gun."

"Could it have been a poacher?"

"Would a poacher be walking about before dark with a gun under his arm within sight of the keeper's cottage?"

"I must admit it is very unlikely."

"From his house Tredwell watched my son coming, and went to meet him."

"But dislike is not sufficient excuse for cold-blooded murder."

"Good heavens, no, I'm not suggesting it. It would merely make the murderer's task less odious, that's all. He was ordered—or paid—to do what he did. I am confident that word of my son's interest in my case reached those who were obtaining money from me by threat of violence. It was the same, I imagine, with your brother. Did these people know that he was aware of their methods?"

"Yes, they knew."

"Then that leaves little room for doubt. My son and your brother had become a definite menace and it was decided to kill them both."

"You say you are of the opinion that the murderer was acting under orders. Whose orders?"

"The orders of those who have been demanding money from me by menaces, and since Lord Glenbold was aware of that—in fact, was a party to it—and was actually staying at The Towers at the time, I am bound to suspect him."

"You say you know Lord Glenbold. What sort of man is he?"

"I have met him because he is a frequent visitor to The Towers. A rather unpleasant man. I understand he made his money during the War—I don't

know how. He probably bought his title."

"And the keeper—Tredwell? Is he married?"

"No. Until recently he had a woman living with him, a so-called housekeeper, but they fought like cat and dog and she left him. At least, she disappeared suddenly from the district."

"And since then he has lived alone?"

"Presumably. But what I am most anxious to learn is, do these people know what you are doing?"

"Unfortunately, yes. They learned yesterday."

"Then you must be in danger?"

"Undoubtedly. An attempt was made to kill us last night and another attempt would have been made a few hours ago had we not forestalled it."

"Good God! Did they know that you were coming here?"

"No, we did not know ourselves until this morning. But I imagine they will know now that we are here."

"How—why?"

"Because your maid, the one who opened the door to us, is a member of their organization."

Sir Roland sank back in his chair, agitated. "Here? They've got one of their people here?" was all he could say.

"I am telling you what I know."

The baronet seemed to shrink into his chair in an attitude of hopeless resignation. "Then what in heaven's name can I do?" he breathed. "I think the woman only came here yesterday."

"It is hard to see what you can do except guard your conversation in her presence—if you allow her to stay. You can't very well confine her to her room. Anyway, it seems probable that by now she has warned her real employers of our presence here. I need hardly say that we were as astonished to see her as she must have been to see us. Now that the damage is done I don't see what more she can do."

"I am still thinking of my daughter."

"Does she know the truth about her brother?"

"No."

"She knows nothing?"

"I have not told her. Naturally, I hesitate to alarm her, and in any case it would create an extremely awkward situation because I have reason to suppose that of late Lord Glenbold has shown more than a passing interest

in her. It also explains what may appear to you to be excessive nervousness on my part."

"Yes, that makes it very difficult," agreed Gunga.

"By the way, where are you staying?"

"We have no fixed abode at the moment. We had intended finding quarters in Salisbury to-night."

"Why Salisbury?"

"We have business there to-morrow."

"In connection with this affair?"

"Yes. Lord Glenbold has a horse engaged in a big race to-morrow and I am anxious to see it run."

The baronet looked surprised but he did not comment. "Tell me, Captain Deane, what ultimately do you hope to gain by this?" he enquired.

"The break-up of this gang of murderers; primarily for personal reasons of revenge, and secondly for the good of the state."

"If I were a few years younger I would join you. As it is I can only wish you the best of luck and offer you the hospitality of my house."

"Knowing what it may involve, do you really mean that?"

"Of course I do. Have I no cause to wish them ill? Stay here by all means while you are in this district; it may be safer than an hotel."

"It may bring trouble on you."

"I've had trouble enough but the worst has already happened. Only my daughter remains to concern me, so your protection would be welcome."

"You realise that our methods are outside the law?"

"So are theirs."

"Blood may be shed."

"It has been shed already."

"Very well, sir, if you feel like that we will accept your offer and stay here."

The door opened suddenly and a girl half came into the room. Seeing the men she said quickly, "Oh I'm sorry," and would have withdrawn but Sir Roland called her back.

"Yes, what is it, dear?" he asked, anxiously.

"Purely a domestic matter. I wondered if you knew why Violet, the new parlourmaid, has suddenly packed up her things and gone. I've spoken to Blake but he knows nothing about it. Did she tell you she was going?"

“No. By the way, dear, how did she come here?”

“Prince Rubenoff rang me up and asked me if I could find a place for a very deserving woman. Of course I said yes.”

“Ah, I understand. Come in, dear, and allow me to introduce you to friends of Gordon’s.”

The men stood up as the girl advanced slowly into the room.

“Captain Deane—Flight Lieutenant Deane, this is my daughter Ann,” said the baronet.

The girl acknowledged the bows unsmilingly.

“I have asked them to stay for a day or two and see something of the county. Would you be kind enough to see that rooms are prepared?”

For a moment Ann stared at her father in undisguised surprise. “Of course,” she said, quietly, and with an almost imperceptible bow to the brothers she left the room. Gunga opened the door and closed it behind her.

“There is one other thing you might do, sir,” he said as he returned to the others. “That is, if you are—how shall we say?—on the war-path.”

“What is it?”

“Write to the advertisement manager of *The Daily Echo* and cancel all further advertising.”

“I wonder what would happen if I did.”

“The first thing that would happen would be a visit either from Lord Glenbold or from the scoundrel who forced the contract on you.”

“And then?”

“We should be here to see him.”

“He would at once go back and report your presence here.”

Gunga shook his head, smiling grimly. “Not necessarily,” he said significantly.

CHAPTER XII

PASSING through the hall on their way to put the car in the garage they encountered Ann, who had obviously been waiting for them.

"Captain Deane, can you spare me a moment or two?" she asked, coldly.

"Certainly, Miss Alister-Bowes," replied Gunga, without hesitation.

"Then let us go in here." Ann led them into what appeared to be a small breakfast room and closed the door. "Why have you come here?" she enquired without preamble, quietly, but with such intensity of feeling that for a moment Gunga was taken aback.

"I came to see your father on a matter which I am not at liberty to discuss," he answered in apologetic tones.

"Concerning my brother's death?" It was a statement rather than a question, and the direct way in which it was made was too disconcerting for evasion. "You need not be afraid of me. I know—more than you think," went on Ann, quickly.

Gunga moved uncomfortably. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"My brother told me everything."

Gunga shrugged his shoulders. "You surprise me," he said. "Also, you embarrass me."

"Why? Why not be honest with me? What are you doing here? I trust that you are not going to give us further trouble. We have had enough."

"You would rather we went?"

"I would rather you told me what brought you here."

"We come as friends, you don't doubt that?"

"Your name convinces me of that. What relation to you was the Mr. Deane who was killed?"

"He was our brother."

"Then you should understand how I feel. Look at this room, Captain Deane. There were only the two of us, Gordon and myself. Here we played together as children, grew up together, had our meals together, and a day or two ago . . ." Ann broke off, her lips trembling.

Gunga drew a deep breath and looked at Guy helplessly. Then he went over to the girl whose face revealed the extent of her emotion. "Why give

yourself this pain?" he said, softly. "I know how you feel."

"Why was I not born a man?" Ann forced the words through set teeth.

"What would you have done?"

"What would I have done? I would not have rested until I had found the man who was responsible for Gordon's death."

"And having found him—what then?"

Ann faltered. "I should do something," she said, desperately.

"How did you learn that your brother had been—killed?"

"Why not say murdered?"

"Very well—murdered."

"Because only an hour before it happened he warned me of its possibility. I implored him not to go to meet your brother."

Gunga hesitated no longer. "I think it would be better if you told us all you know," he urged, frankly.

"There is not much to tell. When Gordon came home from India my father gave him the confidence he had withheld from me—presumably because I am a girl. He still thinks of women in Victorian terms. But Gordon told me—we have never had any secrets from each other."

"Just what did he tell you?"

"All that my father had told him—about his being blackmailed. He was determined to put an end to it, although neither of us then realised what a dangerous thing he was undertaking. He went to London where he met your brother, who, I think, told him a good deal and warned him to return home; but Gordon was not the sort of man to accept advice of that sort."

"I can well believe it. I met him in India—on active service."

"Then I need say no more about that. The night he was killed Gordon was to have met your brother in Prince Rubenoff's grounds, which were, of course, familiar to him. Just what they hoped to do he did not tell me, but I know it was something dangerous. The rest you know. They brought my brother home, and later I learned that Mr. Deane had also been killed, in a motor-car accident."

"You realised that it was not an accident?"

"The coincidence was too remarkable for that. Now please tell me why you have come here."

"Very well. You have honoured us with your confidence; we can do no less than take you into ours. We are looking for the man who killed your brother."

"Why not the man who killed *your* brother?"

"We have already found him."

"And what have you done?"

"What you would have done, perhaps, had you been a man."

Ann's eyes opened wide. "You mean——?"

"I mean what I have said and I can say no more beyond the fact that we also found the man who betrayed him, and who, I suspect, betrayed Gordon at the same time. He will betray nobody else. But there is a vast conspiracy afoot and these men were only puppets. We hope to reach the root of the thing, and by destroying it destroy the whole. Now you know why we came to see your father."

Ann's eyes were gleaming mistily, like a November moon. "I wish now more than ever that I was a man, because then you would let me join you," she breathed.

"This is not a job for a woman."

"How like a man to say that."

"Let us not discuss it."

"Have you told my father all this?"

"Not in so many words, but he will have guessed what we are doing."

"There seemed to be some discussion in the hall when you arrived. May I ask if this had any bearing on our new maid leaving so suddenly?"

"Grief does not appear to have dimmed your perception," returned Gunga, grimly. "The woman was a member of the organization that killed your brother."

Ann stared. "Good heavens! How dreadful!"

"That is what your father said."

"You told him?"

"It was necessary."

"Is he going to do nothing about it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because he fears for you. And now that all the cards are on the table, would you rather we went?"

"No, I would rather you stayed here."

"Our movements may be uncertain—and our actions questionable."

"They will not be questioned by me. If there is anything I can do to help . . . ?"

"You can help us now by allowing me to ask a rather personal question."

"Do not hesitate to ask me anything."

"You know Prince Rubenoff?"

"Of course—quite well. He is our neighbour."

"What sort of man is he—I mean, is he old, or young . . . ?"

"He is a very charming man, about . . . sixty, I should think. I am quite sure he could not possibly know anything——"

"You would be well-advised to be sure of nothing. Trust nobody, and on no account mention this interview to anybody—you understand that?"

"Yes."

"The Prince is entertaining a house party at the moment, I believe?"

"He was, but most of them have gone now."

"Who remains?"

"Lord Glenbold—but he is an old friend of the Prince's and is often down here."

"You know Lord Glenbold is the proprietor of *The Daily Echo*?"

"Yes, of course . . . *The Daily Echo* . . . why, that's the paper your brother . . ." Ann broke off as an extraordinary expression swept over her face. "But surely you don't suspect . . . ? It's impossible. . . !"

"Nothing is impossible. We are here to determine how far the impossible is possible. Who else is staying at The Towers?"

"Ernest Philpson."

"Who is he?"

"I only met him once, so I know very little about him, but I believe he has some connection with one of the big banks."

"Anybody else?"

"Sir Percival Leston."

"The armament manufacturer?"

"Yes."

"Any more?"

"There are one or two others, I believe, but I don't know them."

"Thank you. Do you know Lord Glenbold very well?"

Ann hesitated. "Yes—I've known him for some time."

"You are . . . very friendly?"

Ann did not answer.

"Very well, I won't press that question."

"I think—you should."

"I don't understand."

"It would be unfair to you if I did not tell you that Lord Glenbold has asked me to marry him."

Gunga stared. "In that case, I think we had better not stay here," he said, slowly. "Does your father know this?"

"No."

"But surely, in the circumstances you should have told him?"

"I was afraid it would distress him further."

"He does not like Lord Glenbold?"

"No."

"Forgive me, but you must see that this makes my next question inevitable. Do you—like Lord Glenbold?"

"No."

Gunga breathed a sigh of relief. "We seem to be getting on delicate ground," he said, lightly, to ease the tension. "In view of what you know now do you propose to continue your association?"

"No—of course not."

"Would that be wise?"

"Please explain."

"I mean, wouldn't a too sudden breaking off of—shall we say, friendly relations?—suggest to him that you have cause for displeasure—that possibly you associate him with your brother's death? Or he might suspect that your father has told you about representatives of his paper demanding money by menaces."

"I did not think of that. Perhaps I should continue . . ."

"I think it would be better—for a little while."

"I have an invitation to dine at the Towers to-morrow evening; it came some time ago and I accepted it. But that was, of course, before the accident. In view of what has happened I shall not be expected—but I could go. Do you think I ought to go?"

"If you could arrange to take two old friends with you. They have turned up unexpectedly, and you can't very well leave them—you understand?"

"Perfectly, but when it is learned who you are, that you are Mr. Deane's brothers, might it not be dangerous? Something might happen to you, too."

"Something might happen to them. They need not know who we are. The name Deane would undoubtedly lead to awkward questions, but Greene is just as easy to remember."

"What would you do there?"

"That would depend upon the circumstances."

"Very well, I think it could be arranged."

"Then let us leave it at that." Gunga smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. We'll see it through."

Ann held out her hand. "I'm sure you will," she said softly. With that she left them.

They put the car in the garage, and returned to the house. The butler showed them to the bedrooms, which were adjoining rooms on the first floor.

Guy, after a quick wash, went along to his brother. "This is becoming a devilishly complicated business," he declared, sitting on the bed and lighting a cigarette.

Gunga was brushing his hair. "On the contrary, it is clarifying more quickly than we could have hoped. Things are moving fast."

"So fast that I doubt the wisdom of staying here."

"It will be safer than the village."

"Violet will have told them that we're here."

"I'm taking the possibility of that into account, but on secondary consideration I am by no means sure that she will. I can't get that woman weighed up. As a member of the gang she doesn't ring true. I feel there is a flaw in her loyalty, but she's as close as an oyster and it's hard to find it. She was Lola's dresser, so it is almost certain that she was attached to her, and the fact that she didn't give us away when we were in Lola's room pretty well confirms that. The trouble is, I think, she can't weigh us up, either. She doesn't know which side we're on, and she daren't take a risk."

"She's bolted."

"Of course she has. You wouldn't expect her to stay, knowing that we know—what we know. The question is, where has she gone? If she has gone to the gang and reported that we are here it is probable that we shall soon know about it. That will at least tell us where she fits in. In fact, it is one of the reasons why I am glad we are staying here."

"Is it fair to risk dragging Sir Roland, and Ann, into danger?"

"To-morrow night will, I hope, see us on our way. We can only trust that nothing happens before then. Frankly, I think Sir Roland is glad to have us

here—and so was Ann when she realised what we were trying to do. A very charming girl."

"I thought we were keeping off the knight errant stuff."

"Have I done anything to suggest otherwise?"

"Nothing beyond devoting yourself mentally to Ann's service."

"You're not suggesting that we walk out on her?"

"Of course not. On the contrary I feel that it is time that the skunk who murdered her brother was pipped in a vital spot."

"When you interrupted me I was devising ways and means of bringing that to pass."

"It does not appear to offer insuperable difficulties."

"I was thinking of Glenbold at the same time. Tredwell would not have killed Gordon on his own account. It must have been Glenbold who issued the instructions."

"According to the classics, the killing of two birds with one stone is a noteworthy achievement."

"Particularly if you can get somebody else to throw the brick. I'm afraid we can hardly hope to tour the country leaving a trail of corpses behind us without arousing a certain amount of curiosity on the part of those whose job it is to keep the peace."

"You're not going to let these two skunks get away with it?"

"Certainly not, but I feel that a little circumspection is indicated. I have an idea which may or may not mature; but it has this advantage; if it doesn't no harm will be done."

"When and where do operations commence?"

"Immediately—in the cottage which I can see in the middle distance. From what Sir Roland told us that must be the house where Tredwell lives."

"You're just going to call and leave your card?"

"More or less."

"Shall I get the car out?"

"No, we'll walk. It's no great distance, and there is, I think, a footpath across the fields."

"Forgive my curiosity, but just what is this idea?"

Gunga finished brushing his hair and put the brush on the table. "It depends almost entirely on the sort of fellow Tredwell turns out to be. If he is tough—well, I may have to think of something else. But if he is nervous, as I anticipate—and since he has just murdered a man he has every reason to

be—I hope to intimidate him by putting the fear of God into him. We shall see. I am ready."

They went out quietly, and without difficulty found the footpath which Gordon Alister-Bowes must have used on the evening of his death. After climbing the fatal stile they cut across the park to the keeper's cottage. Gunga knocked. There was no answer, but a dog growled inside.

"Not at home," murmured Guy.

"He is. I saw the curtain move." Gunga knocked again, sharply. "Come on, it's all right," he called.

A moment later the door was opened by the man whom they had come to see; his green velveteen uniform left no doubt of that. He was rather tall, thin, with a dour expression and suspicious eyes that were slightly bloodshot, as if from want of sleep. A stubble of black beard on his chin did not improve his appearance.

"What d'ye want?" he asked, harshly, with a northern accent.

Gunga held out a penny in his hand. "We want a word with you," he said. "Let's get inside."

They went in. The man made no demur. "Is something wrong?" he asked, a trifle hoarsely.

"Yes—a lot," returned Gunga tersely, following the man into a parlour the walls of which were decorated with amateurish examples of the taxidermist's art.

"Who are ye from—Number Three?"

"Who told you Lord Glenbold was Number Three?"

"He told me so himself."

"Well, we're from Number One."

"God A'mighty. I heard he was comin' doon. Is it anything serious?"

"Damn serious—for you."

The man quailed. "How so?"

"There's been a slip. You used the wrong shot."

The man's tongue flicked over his lips. "How was I to know?"

"That's neither here nor there. The fact remains you used number five shot. Number six shot was in his gun and in his pockets. The police are working on it."

"Then I'm gettin' oot."

"Oh, no, you're not—not yet. You've got a job to do first. The police have interviewed Number Three. They've got him rattled and he's likely to

squeal."

"But 'e can't do that without lettin' 'imself in. It was he who told me ____"

"Could you prove that—in court?"

The man was silent.

"If the police say it was murder—and that is what they are saying, we've had it from the inside—they're going to nail the man who fired the shot. Now listen. The police have got the idea that Number Three knows all about it."

"What put them on to that?"

"Because he was blackmailing Sir Roland and the old man's blown the gaff. If they press Number Three hard enough he'll squeal—that's Number One's opinion. He doesn't say he will, but he's not taking chances of putting everybody in bad—including you. He's got to be stopped before he can say any more and it's in your interest to do the stopping. You've nothing to worry about. He will be sent down here to-morrow night. There will be poachers about. One of them will do—what's necessary."

"But what about me? Won't it look queer after that accident last week ____?"

"There'll be a car waiting to take you to Scotland with a thousand pounds in your pocket as soon as the job's done, and there will be plenty of witnesses to prove that you went to Scotland to-day. That will give you a cast-iron alibi. You're going to Number One's deer forest. All you've got to do now is shut yourself in here and not be seen. Get packed ready to go. The car will come to the door as soon as the shot has been fired."

Again the man moistened his lips. "I don't like it," he muttered.

"You'll like it less if Number Three squeals and puts a rope round your neck."

"Does Number One say I've got to do it?"

"He sent us here to tell you. Do you want us to go back and tell him that you won't do it?"

"No, for God's sake don't do that."

"Then we can tell him it will be okay?"

"Aye—ye'd better. What time will Number Three be along?"

"We don't know exactly. He's going to Salisbury Races to-morrow."

"Aye, that's right. He told me to back his horse."

"Well, that's all. We shall be at the Towers for dinner to-morrow night, to see that everything is all right."

"But suppose he doesn't come?"

"In that case you will do nothing; but I think he will."

"A'richt."

"We'll get along now. Keep inside."

"What aboot the money—the thousand ye spoke of?"

"It will be in the car. Number One says if you'd like to take a trip to Canada afterwards, until everything blows over, you can."

"That's fine. I'm a wee bit jumpy lately."

"You'll get over it." Gunga nodded and walked to the door. "To-morrow night—just about dusk," he said quietly, and went out. "We'd better go this way," he went on softly to Guy, and went up the road as if they were going to the Towers. But as soon as they were out of sight of the cottage they doubled back to Sir Roland's land and returned to the Grange.

"You're getting subtle," remarked Guy, as they walked between the rhododendrons. "What happens after he's shot Glenbold?"

"What does it matter? I imagine that when there is no car there to take him to Scotland he will get in a panic and make a fool of himself. The police will probably pick him up and hang him. Can you think of a more satisfactory way of ensuring that he gets what is due to him?"

"No," agreed Guy, "I can't."

"I thought you couldn't. Incidentally, you did not fail to notice Tredwell's remarks that Number One is expected down here? That was an unexpected piece of information. It rather looks as if things were heading for a show-down. But we'd better go in; it must be dinner time. It's rather a bore but I'm afraid we shall have to take turns to mount guard to-night."

CHAPTER XIII

RATHER tired after a night of vigilance in which, however, nothing happened, ten o'clock the following morning saw them on their way to Salisbury in one of Sir Roland's cars, an arrangement to which the baronet had readily agreed when it had been suggested to him over dinner the previous evening, and Gunga had pointed out that the registration number of their hired car was known to the enemy. They left early by deliberate intention, before their host or his daughter were down, in order to avoid difficult conversation. Vigilance was maintained during the journey, but again nothing transpired to suggest that they were being watched, and Gunga's view that Violet had not notified her employers of their arrival was strengthened.

They lunched in the town and then went on to the races, taking tickets for Tattersalls ring that would admit them to the paddock.

The first two races, a selling race and a small handicap, were of no interest to them, but when the horses were brought out for the big race Gunga moved across to the rails of the saddling enclosure. "Aquarius, Glenbold's horse, is number eleven," he observed after a confirmatory glance at his race card. "There it is. That's Glenbold talking to the jockey—I remember his face from photographs. He looks a nasty piece of work. The aristocratic-looking old gentleman with him must be the Prince, and the fellow just coming across to them, Radkin, the trainer." Turning to a man near him he confirmed this. "Now get your grey matter functioning and try to spot how it's done," he continued. "Glenbold told Tredwell that he could back his horse. Lucky Jim would doubtless have received the same information had he remained where he could take an interest in such things. That means Aquarius is expected to win. Why should it win? On form it hasn't a chance. Yet by some means or other Aquarius is going to win. Mind you. I don't think this is altogether Glenbold's affair. It's another of the gang's rackets; Glenbold is merely the agent. His name looks well on the race card. Here comes number seven; that's Joy Girl; they've made her second favourite in the betting forecast. A nice looking mare, and a winner last time out. On paper she's easily got the beating of Aquarius. Here comes Lorando, the favourite—nice horse that. On looks and breeding alone it ought to win, and its form makes it something of a certainty. Why, I ask you, does Glenbold think his horse can beat it? Aquarius is an exposed horse; the

handicapper has given it plenty of weight to carry so there's no question of it having anything in hand on that account."

"Have they given it a shot of dope, do you think?"

"They wouldn't dare. It's too dangerous."

The horses were now walking round the enclosure and several people moved up to the rails to see them. Milly, a popular well-backed fancy, was walking alone, and it may have been this that attracted Gunga's attention to her. She jibbed suddenly, and lashed out viciously, but the stable lad had her well in hand and she continued the parade, crab-walking.

"That mare's nervous," observed Gunga. "Hello, did you see that? Joy Girl did exactly the same thing in the same place. There must be something there they don't like."

"A loose piece of paper might do it. They're always on their toes just before a race."

"I don't see anything. There's Aquarius, going past the place now . . . watch . . . no, nothing doing. That's Lorando following. Watch him."

The favourite was walking placidly, with all the dignity and calm assurance of a thoroughbred that knows its job. But as it passed the spot where the others had jibbed it curveted wildly, almost knocking over the lad who was leading it. Hanging on to the head-collar he got the animal under control again, looking around—as far as he was able to—with a puzzled frown to see what had started his charge.

Gunga was already walking quickly round the rails towards the spot, and arrived just as the one man who had been standing there was strolling away. With binoculars hanging on his chest and a race card in his left hand he appeared to be a typical racegoer.

"Do you notice anything queer about that fellow?" Gunga said, turning to Guy, who had followed him.

"No, I can't say that I do."

"Did you ever see a man, other than a cripple, carrying a walking stick at the races? You needn't trouble to look round—you won't see a single walking stick."

"You think he had something to do with behaviour of those horses?"

"I'm pretty certain of it. Why should three horses jib at exactly the same spot?—incidentally, the three horses most likely to supply the winner. Don't ask me to believe that that is just coincidence. I'm going to have a closer look at that walking stick."

As they hurried after the man who carried it he slowed down, stopped, and then looked back towards the ring. With an unnecessary flourish he took a white handkerchief from his breast pocket and blew his nose; but his eyes were on the ring. Gunga turned swiftly to see who or what he was looking at, but there were too many people moving about in that direction to make individual selection possible. “I should say that was a signal,” he told Guy. “Let’s have a look at the walking stick.”

The man was now moving quickly towards the Members’ car park, and had, in fact, reached the nearest cars before they came up with him. He was just opening the door of a big saloon when Gunga, apparently hurrying past, collided with him, and knocked the stick out his hand. The man stooped swiftly to pick it up, but Gunga was faster. “Sorry,” he said, as he picked it up. Then, slowly, he came round until he was facing the man, now standing with one foot on the running-board of the car, holding the door open, reaching out for the stick.

Gunga was examining the handle. When he looked up his face was white. His eyes glittered frostily. “You swine,” he said softly. “You unspeakable blackguard. What have you shot into those horses?”

The man’s face was pale. He seemed to have difficulty in breathing. “It was nothing,” he said, shortly, glancing around.

“Then if it was nothing it won’t hurt you,” muttered Gunga, turning the ferrule of the walking stick so that it pointed directly at him.

The man released the door and threw up his hands as if to protect his face.

There was a soft *zut*, like the noise made by an air gun when the spring is released.

The man uttered a sharp cry. “Oh.” His face twitched and he doubled up, holding his stomach. Then he settled down on the running-board of the car, groaning.

Gunga caught Guy by the arm. “Come on. The stewards will be interested in this,” he said, and began walking back quickly towards the Members’ enclosure. The horses were on their way towards the racecourse.

Gunga would have gone straight into the stewards’ room but a commissionaire stopped him. “You can’t go in there, sir,” he said.

“I must see the stewards at once. It’s urgent,” answered Gunga, curtly.

“What’s it about?”

“Never mind what it’s about, my man, you take my card to the stewards or you’ll be sorry.” Gunga’s tone of voice was peremptory.

"Very well, sir, I'll see what I can do. Who do you wish to see?"

"Any of the stewards will do."

The man disappeared, to return almost immediately. "This way, gentlemen."

In the room Gunga found himself face to face with three men all of whom were standing up, apparently just on their way to watch the race. They looked at him askance.

"I'm sorry to intrude like this, gentlemen," began Gunga quickly, "but I have to report a matter of singular urgency. I sent in my card so that you know my name. This is my brother. A few minutes ago the behaviour of three horses in the saddling enclosure excited our curiosity—and suspicions. We investigated and caught a man walking away with what appears to be a walking stick. Actually, it is nothing of the sort. It is a gun. Just what it discharges, I do not know, for I have not had time to look into it, but it is obviously something calculated to interfere with the horses' running. Watch." He turned the handle of the walking stick to the wooden panelling with which the room was lined. Again there came the soft but vicious *zut*. In the panelling quivered a tiny dart. He walked over to it and pulled it out. As he did so a drop of liquid moistened the tips of his fingers. "A hollow needle, gentlemen," he said. "It is filled, I imagine, with a preparation which your advisers will no doubt be able to identify. That is all I have to say, but I thought you had better know how some people win their races. I will leave this weapon with you."

The faces of the three stewards expressed pardonable incredulity. "Can you tell us the names of the horses that have been subject to this treatment?" asked one.

"Lorando, Joy Girl and Milly, to our certain knowledge. We saw them shy when they were struck. Each of those horses must have one of these needles embedded out of sight in its quarters. I suggest that you advise their owners to have them X-rayed."

"Have you any idea of the particular object of this outrage—I mean, who was most likely to profit by it?"

"That, I think, is obvious. With the three form horses out of the race, Aquarius, Lord Glenbold's horse, will win. As a matter of fact, I learned by accident that Aquarius would definitely win this race, and it was with the deliberate object of finding out how the horse was going to reverse all previous form that we came here to-day. For that reason we were watching the horses closely as they paraded, and so remarked the curious behaviour of

the three animals which were most likely to finish in front of Lord Glenbold's horse."

Somewhere outside a bell rang.

"They're off!" cried the steward who had first spoken. "We must watch this."

From a private box they watched Aquarius win easily. The favourite, still running, finished nearly last, but Joy Girl was tailed off, and her jockey, seeing that he had no chance, pulled up. Milly finished somewhere in the ruck.

Gunga nudged Guy and inclined his head towards the door. Leaving the stewards in earnest conversation they went out without being observed and mingled with the crowd. "Having spiked racket number three I don't think we can serve any further useful service by remaining here," murmured Gunga as they moved towards the exit. "We may as well drift back to Blandford."

"What about the fellow you poked the needle into?"

Gunga smiled grimly. "It may sound callous, but I am absolutely devoid of sympathy. He won't win any races for a bit, so we may as well strike his name off the card."

CHAPTER XIV

THEY arrived back at the Grange to find Sir Roland and Ann at tea in the lounge.

"I'm glad to see you've got here safely," the baronet greeted them. "I must tell you at once that while you have been away I decided to warn Ann of possible danger, with the result that she has told me of the details of her conversation with you last night."

"Then you are *au fait* with the whole situation."

"I think so—yes. Would it be asking too much to inquire what you propose to do at the Towers to-night?"

"I could not do that even if I thought it were advisable, for the simple reason that I do not know myself," replied Gunga, frankly. "As I told your daughter last night, it will depend entirely upon circumstances. It is not unlikely, though, that we shall leave Blandford to-night."

"So soon?"

"Much as we should like to stay, Sir Roland, it would be an ill return for your hospitality to involve you in the scandal which sooner or later is inevitable. Things are moving fast and they may come to a head to-night; that is why it is unlikely that we shall remain here after we have brought your daughter home." Gunga turned to Ann. "I take it that you have definitely decided to go to the Towers?"

"Yes, but we shall not stay for dinner. I rang up this morning and spoke to the Prince—he was just off to the races. He told me that in view of what has happened he had dismissed all thought of a dinner party from his mind. The ladies have all gone; there are only gentlemen staying at the Towers and they may be leaving to-night. In the circumstances would I mind cancelling the dinner arrangement and look in for a glass of sherry about half past seven instead. I agreed to do that."

"Splendid. In fact, I am not sure that it will not suit us better. I have an idea that neither the Prince or Lord Glenbold will be in an entertaining mood."

"Why, has something happened?" asked Sir Roland quickly.

"Very much so. There was rather a nasty business at the races to-day. I don't know what the end of it will be, but at the time, acting under the

impulse of anger—justifiable, I think—I put a stop to an ingenious but dastardly method of winning races." Briefly, Gunga described what had happened.

They heard him out in silence. "There would seem to be no end to the criminal practices of this organization," murmured Sir Roland, when he had finished.

"If my judgment is correct we are only on the fringe of its real business. Still, we must be making things very difficult for them. There may be further developments to-night, but I would prefer to let them take their course rather than make any disclosures now."

"Very wise, my boy, very wise. Make this your home while you are in the district, anyway."

"Thank you, sir."

After tea Ann joined them in the garden, where they wandered until it was time to leave for the Towers, but beyond asking if there was anything they particularly wanted her to say or do she made no reference to the purpose of their visit.

"Just behave perfectly naturally," Gunga told her. "Don't forget that my name is Greene, and do not be surprised at anything I may say or do."

The sun was sinking behind a distant group of elms when they got into the car, and after travelling a short distance down the road turned into a noble drive which, a few minutes later, brought them to the Towers, a large, rambling stone mansion built in the most pretentious Victorian style. Three cars were already standing at the foot of a wide flight of steps that mounted to the portico.

"You've been here before, of course," remarked Gunga to Ann as they got out.

"Many times. Here's the Prince coming to meet us."

The man whom they had seen with Lord Glenbold at the races appeared at the door and came slowly down the steps, smiling, his right hand raised in greeting. "How are you, my dear?" he called, in a cultured voice, with no trace of the accent which, considering his name, might have been expected. However disturbed in mind he might have been after what had happened at the races he showed no sign of it. Not so with Lord Glenbold, who now appeared and followed his host down the steps. His plebeian, rather saturnine face was set in a scowl which he strove in vain to conceal behind an exaggerated and obviously forced gaiety.

Ann introduced her escort. "Meet my friends," she said, "or rather, they were friends of Gordon's. Captain and Flight Lieutenant Greene. They are

staying with us for a day or two—you don't mind my bringing them along?"

"My dear child, you should know better than to ask such a question," chided the Prince gently. "Shall we go in, or, as it is so pleasant outside, would you rather stay on the terrace?"

"It's rather chilly; I think we'll go inside." Ann went up the steps followed by Guy. Gunga remained behind, apparently admiring the fine cedars that spread their sombre branches over a wide sweep of lawn. The prince remained out of courtesy to his guest; Lord Glenbold stood on the bottom step as if impatient to follow the others inside. Gunga turned, and seeing that he was alone with the two men enquired, in a casual tone of voice, "By the way, what is going on at your lodge, Prince Rubenoff?"

The Prince's forehead knit in a frown, but his lips still smiled.

"My lodge? Which one—there are three?"

"The one we passed on the way here."

"Why, what is happening there?"

"I don't know. That is why I asked. The place seemed to be full of police when we came past—ah, of course, I had forgotten. That must be where your gamekeeper lives, the fellow who found poor Gordon."

Lord Glenbold came down the steps. His eyes were on Gunga's face.

"I suppose you've heard that there is a surprising development," went on Gunga, evenly.

"No, I have heard nothing," returned the Prince, in a curious tone of voice. "Why—what has happened?"

"Apparently the police are not satisfied with the coroner's verdict. It seems that poor Gordon was killed by a cartridge charged with number five shot, whereas those in his gun, and those in his pocket, were number six shot—the size he habitually carried. Rather an odd thing, that. Shall we go in and join the others?"

In dead silence Gunga walked slowly up the steps. Nearing the door he glanced over his shoulder to see the Prince and Lord Glenbold, still where he had left them, in earnest conversation. He went on and joined the others in a magnificently furnished reception room where a butler was serving sherry; and there, presently, the Prince came to them.

"Where is Lord Glenbold?" inquired Gunga, blandly. "I meant to have congratulated him on his win to-day."

"I think he has gone to the billiard room," returned the Prince, suavely. "A rather thrilling match is being played between some gentlemen who are

staying with me for a few days. They cannot even tear themselves away to meet my guests—most discourteous of them."

Gunga smiled, sipping his sherry, and thereafter they talked of commonplace things while the daylight slowly faded. Twice the Prince glanced at his watch, and apparently Ann noticed it, for she put down her glass and made a move towards the door. "We ought to be getting back," she said. "Really, it was outrageous of us to gate-crash into your party like this, Prince Rubenoff."

"It has been a pleasure, my dear lady," murmured the Prince, but he made no attempt to detain them.

As they went down the steps the last ray of sun was burnishing the copper trunks of the cedars and throwing veridian-tinted verdigris on branches outspread as if to shield vague shadows that were materialising slowly on the lawn, turning the green to bluey-black, like deep pools in shallow water. An almost sinister hush had fallen as nature composed itself for sleep. Suddenly a car, purring softly, looming huge in the half-light, emerged from the avenue that tunnelled the drive, and came quietly to rest near the others.

Gunga was opening the door of their own vehicle to allow Ann to get in, but he lingered deliberately until the driver of the new arrival stepped out.

It was Detective Inspector Drysdale. He looked up, and saw Gunga standing there. Not a muscle of his face moved. He gave no sign of recognition. He looked at the Prince, still standing on the bottom step, and then back again at Gunga.

At that moment a gunshot shattered the silence. The echoes died slowly away to a chorus of protest from a nearby rookery. Still nobody spoke.

The Prince stared fixedly in the direction of the report. "What on earth was that?" he said, in an odd tone of voice.

"I hope there hasn't been another accident," murmured Gunga, evenly, after closing the door of the car so that what he said could not be heard by those inside.

There was another brief silence. It was broken by the Prince. "What is that noise I can hear?" he said in a strange voice.

Distinctly, in the still air, could be heard a sound as of feet swishing through long grass, and with it a faint whimpering, punctuated by sobs, and once by a deep groan.

"It sounds like—somebody coming—across the park," answered Gunga, and a moment or two later a figure came into view, a figure that clawed at the air as it staggered across the lawn.

"My God! It's Glenbold!" jerked out the detective, and he ran forward.

The others followed, but Lord Glenbold had fallen before they reached him, and lay doubled up on the damp grass coughing and groaning at the same time.

The detective turned him over on his back. "What's the matter?" he asked hoarsely, and then looked at his hands. They were no longer white. "He's been shot," he said in a swift aside to the others.

"I think you'd better telephone for a doctor, Prince Rubenoff," put in Gunga, and without a word the Prince ran towards the house.

Drysdale was kneeling by the prostrate man whose groans were becoming more feeble. "Who shot you?" he said. "Try to tell me. Who was it?" He lifted up the lolling head.

Lord Glenbold's eyes suddenly opened wide. "He shot me," he whispered.

"Who?"

"Tredwell."

Gunga spoke. "Tredwell? Why, that's the man who found the body of Gordon Alister-Bowes."

"That's right—Captain Greene," breathed the obviously dying man.

Gunga's face was pale and grim as he looked down. "You've got the name wrong, Lord Glenbold," he said, coldly. "My name is Deane, not Greene. I am the man without a number—the Unknown Quantity. My brother was killed not far from here quite recently—you remember?—the same night that Alister-Bowes was shot."

Lord Glenbold ceased groaning. With an effort terrible to watch he half raised himself on his elbow. "Deane," he said in a loud voice, and there was a world of understanding in his eyes. Then his head sagged sideways.

The detective rose to his feet. He looked at Gunga. "He's dead," he said.

"Yes. He's dead. Killed by the man whom he paid to kill others. Think it over, Drysdale. I've a lady in my car so I think I had better take her home." With that Gunga turned on his heel and walked away.

"What has happened?" asked Ann, nervously, as he got into the car and started it.

"There has been an accident."

"You mean—that shot?"

"Yes."

"Who has been hurt?"

“Lord Glenbold has been killed.”

There was a short silence. Gunga stared straight ahead.

“Did he say—who shot him?”

“Yes.”

“Who was it?”

“Tredwell.”

After another silence, “Why should Tredwell—do that?”

“How could I possibly know, Miss Alister-Bowes?”

“What will happen?”

“I imagine Tredwell will be arrested for murder—unless his friends can prevent it, and they have good reasons for trying to prevent it.”

Ann said no more. In fact, nobody spoke until they were at the entrance of the Grange drive, where Gunga stopped the car. “I wonder would you mind very much taking the car home alone?” he said. “I’m rather anxious to know what is happening at the Towers.”

Ann gave no expression to the surprise she must have felt. “Certainly,” she said.

“One other thing. Would you mind leaving the garage open so that in emergency we could get our car quickly, without disturbing you.”

“If you wish. Shall we see you at dinner?”

“I can’t be sure of that. Perhaps it would be better if you did not wait. We’ll come if we can.” Gunga got out. Guy followed and the car drove on leaving them standing on the road.

CHAPTER XV

THEY turned back towards the Towers. Just before they reached the gamekeeper's cottage a man came out, slammed the door, and ran up the road in front of them.

"I should say that was Tredwell, going to see why the car isn't here to take him to Scotland," remarked Gunga.

"If he's killed Glenbold he must be in a devil of a state."

"Nothing to the state he'll be in when he arrives at the Towers and tells them that it was he who killed Glenbold."

"You mean the Prince? What do you make of him?"

"He's one of them. He must be. So is everyone else at the Towers, including the staff. It is obvious that the place is a sort of general headquarters to which the heads of departments retire when a conference is indicated—and one is indicated now. All the signs and portents point to Number One coming down to-night. You saw the Prince looking at his watch. Up to that time I half suspected that he might be Number One himself, but evidently he isn't. He was glad when we went—so much so that we may assume Number One is due to arrive shortly. We've given them plenty to talk about the last few days."

"Drysdale will have told them who we are."

"Undoubtedly. It should stir things up; but the last thing they'll expect is another visit from us to-night. That's why I'm going back."

"What about Violet? Have you forgotten her? She must be there."

"God knows what's happened to the woman. We took a chance on running into her earlier in the evening. I was prepared for trouble. One can only conclude that either she did not tell them of our arrival at the Grange, or else she didn't see us when we went up to the Towers—this is assuming that she went to the Towers herself. I can't fit that woman in anyhow; we shall have to ignore her until she shows her hand."

"What are you going to do when you get to the Towers—shoot them up?"

"No, I think not. We can't indulge in an orgy of slaughter; it would be too dangerous from every aspect. What I am chiefly concerned with is

getting a glimpse of Number One."

"There will be dirty work if they see us."

"I'm not so sure of that. The people here won't want to be involved in murder pure and simple. It's one thing to be quiescent while accidents occur, but another to make a mess in one's own nest. They've got a dead man on their hands already—Glenbold."

"What will they do with Tredwell?"

"I don't know, but it is certain that they daren't let him go into the dock."

"What exactly are you going to do when you get to the house?"

"I've no idea. I only know that this opportunity of getting a glimpse of Number One is too good to miss. I may leave you outside while I go in and have a look round."

"Good God! you're crazy. What are you going to say if they see you?"

"Oh, no doubt I shall think of something. I might say that Ann left her gloves behind, and I've slipped back for them."

"They wouldn't let you get away with a yarn like that."

"We shall see." Gunga halted and surveyed a low stone wall that accompanied the road on the left-hand side. "I think we might cut across the park," he suggested. "It would be better than walking up the drive. If possible we'll get to the house without being seen."

From the point where they now stood, in a direct line it was less than a quarter of a mile from the Towers, and guided by a light which glowed like a beacon in the darkness they had no difficulty in reaching it. Proceeding with increasing caution as they neared the building they came to a halt in the dead shadow of the shrubs that bounded the front lawn, a position which commanded a foreshortened view of two sides of the house and from which two lighted windows could be seen, one on the ground floor and the other immediately above it. In neither case was the blind drawn, a fact which drew from Gunga the remark, "I should say Number One hasn't arrived yet, or they wouldn't leave themselves open to observation—anyway, not on the ground floor. I think we might go across to see what is happening."

Taking advantage of the ample cover available, and keeping on the grass, they made their way quickly but quietly to the house, and hugging the wall, came to a stop near the lighted ground floor window. It was closed, but a muffled murmur of voices, punctuated by the click of billiard balls, gave them an indication of what they might expect to see inside.

After telling Guy to remain where he was, Gunga went forward to the window. Only for a moment was his head silhouetted against the light; then

he returned. “There are five of them in there,” he whispered. “I could only recognise one—Drysdale. Two fellows are playing billiards; the others are talking round the fire.”

“The Prince isn’t there?”

“No.”

“I suppose there’s no chance of hearing the conversation?”

“Not from here.”

“What about the upstairs room?”

“Stand fast.” Gunga backed a little way across the lawn and explored the stonework with his eyes. “There’s no way of getting to it,” he said when he returned.

“What about that tree? From the second branch it ought to be possible to see into the room.”

“That’s an idea. I’ll try it. Stay where you are.”

The tree to which Guy had referred was a cedar standing some twenty yards from the house. Gunga disappeared into the darkness beneath it and for a few minutes there was no indication of his presence beyond the occasional snapping of a twig or creaking of a branch. He was gone about five minutes. “The Prince is there with Tredwell,” he announced, when he returned. “Judging by his manner the Prince is giving him hell.”

“You couldn’t hear anything?”

“Not a word.”

“What sort of a room is it?”

“It looks like a study. I should say it’s the Prince’s private office.”

“Well, what’s the next move? I’m all against this crawling about like a couple of cheap burglars.”

“Very well, then let us go to the front door—that ought to be prosaic enough for you.”

“With what particular object?”

“It would be interesting to hear what the Prince and Tredwell are talking about.”

“Are you serious?”

“By God! you don’t know how serious I am!”

“But this front door business is asking for trouble.”

“What else can we do? Staying here won’t get us anywhere. If we’re not going in we may as well go home. If we’re going in, can you think of any other way?”

"No."

"All right, then let us see what the luck is like. We can look for the gloves which Ann did not leave behind."

Abandoning their position they walked round to the front of the house and up the steps to the front door. It was closed. Gunga opened it. The hall, lighted by a crystal chandelier, was silent and deserted. They went in and closed the door behind them. At the far end, and on one side, an imposing staircase curved upwards. Without hesitation Gunga led the way towards it, mounted the stairs and took the corridor to the right, the direction of the room in which the Prince and the gamekeeper were in conversation. But after a few paces he paused, undecided, for the corridor ran on for some distance and there were doors on either side.

While they stood hesitating a door some distance further along was opened; simultaneously the Prince's voice could be heard, speaking in tones which indicated clearly that the interview was at an end. "That's all I have to say. You will do as you are told," he said, harshly.

Gunga glanced down the passage behind him and saw that they were too far from the head of the stairs to reach it before the Prince or the keeper, or both, came out, in which case discovery was inevitable. There were two doors within a few paces. Gunga, with a swift gesture, chose the nearest. The room was in darkness. Pushing Guy in he followed, leaving the door open half an inch. A moment later a figure passed down the corridor on the way to the stairs.

"Who was it?" breathed Guy, for Gunga had his eyes to the crack of the door.

"Tredwell."

Further along the passage a door closed. Silence fell.

"If Tredwell has gone the Prince must be alone in his room," murmured Guy presently.

"What about it?"

"I was thinking we might have a few short words with him."

"I'm not concerned with him. The man I want to see is Number One."

"I'm getting nervous."

"Relax. We'd better see where we are before we do anything else." Gunga felt his way round the end of a bed to the window and looked down. "Hello!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?"

"A car has just arrived. We're directly over the front door so I only had a bird's eye view. I just got a glimpse of what looked like two men helping another up the steps."

"Then they've come into the house?"

"Yes."

"That should be Number One. We ought to be able to see him from the top of the stairs—*ssh!* . . . somebody's just gone down the corridor."

"Which way?"

"Towards the stairs."

"It must have been the Prince—going to meet the people who have just arrived. I'm going to have a look. You'd better stay here in reserve, in case there's trouble."

Gunga opened the door and peeped out. There was no one in the corridor, but from the direction of the hall came a murmur of voices, one, shrill and insistent, raised above the others. He walked on quietly until he stood at the head of the stairs, looking down on the scene below.

Four men were standing just inside the front door. One was Prince Rubenoff, but Gunga hardly noticed him. His eyes were on the central figure which was that of a man either bent with years or crippled by an infirmity; it was impossible to determine which, for he was almost entirely enveloped in an opera cloak, and although he leaned heavily on a black cane he was supported on either side by two footmen in black velvet liveries, with knee-breeches. On his head he wore a sable skull-cap. But it was not that which made Gunga frown with disappointment. The top part of his face was concealed by a mask. His bearing was that of an autocrat, and when he spoke there was a cold, bitter quality in his voice that made Gunga wince. "Is everyone here?" he inquired in tones that a medieval tyrant might have employed.

"Yes, sir, everyone," answered the Prince in a manner so obsequious that it left no doubt as to the position of the new arrival.

"Very well. Lock up."

The Prince took from his pocket a small instrument and raised it to his lips. A thin, piercing whistle bit into the air.

It was followed instantly by sounds all over the house, a soft metallic scraping that would have been difficult to understand had Gunga not seen what happened at the front door, which was directly in his line of vision. A shutter moved across it, as stiffly as the fireproof curtain of a theatre. He

realised at once what had happened, but there was no time to appreciate its full significance for the newcomer spoke again to the Prince.

"We will go to your room," he said. "I wish to speak to you in private."

The Prince bowed and the cavalcade moved towards the staircase.

Gunga hurried back to the bedroom.

"What the devil's going on?" asked Guy, irritably.

"Has anything happened here?"

"Yes, something has blotted out the window. It sounded to me like a steel shutter."

"I was afraid of it. I imagine the same thing has happened to every door and window in the house. Number One has arrived. He's coming up the stairs on the way to the Prince's room."

"Do you mean that we're shut in?"

"In the language of the classics, we're trapped,—ssh, not a word."

They stood motionless while vague sounds passed down the corridor. A door closed and again silence fell.

"They've gone into the Prince's room," breathed Gunga.

"You think it's Number One?"

"Without a shadow of doubt."

"Did you see him?"

"Everything except his face; he wears a mask, damn him."

"The thing grows dramatic."

"There will be a sensation if we're discovered, I can promise you that."

"And you think there is no way of getting out?"

"That, I fear, is the case. Those shutters were not installed as ornaments. We're here until they go up—which, I suppose, means until Number One departs. If we want to go before that we shall have to find the device that operates the shutters."

"In that case we had better stay where we are. Incidentally, hadn't we better decide what we are going to do if we're spotted?"

Gunga thought for a moment. "We know enough of these people to make all thought of surrender merely futile," he said, slowly. "Apart from the mischief we've done we know too much—much too much. If it comes to a show-down we shall have to fight it out—there's nothing else we can do. We're outnumbered, but if we can get Number One before they get us we shall have done a good job."

"That's how it looks to me. What about a spot of reconnaissance?"

"See if there is anyone in the corridor."

With infinite caution Guy opened the door and peeped outside. He closed it again just as quietly. "It's a good thing we didn't go barging out," he whispered. "There are two flunkeys on duty outside the door of the Prince's room."

"That settles any question of leaving here for the moment. Sooner or later there will be a conference in which the fellows downstairs will join—that is, if my assumption as to why Number One is here is correct. We'd better leave the door open a fraction of an inch or we shan't know when they go back downstairs."

"I suppose there's no way of forcing a window?"

"There would be no object in the shutter if there was. They must all be electrically controlled—open and close like the door of a lift. Don't worry, sooner or later they will open up."

"If they don't open until Number One goes we shall lose him."

"Yes—it's difficult. I could have had a shot at him as he stood in the hall, but there's no satisfaction in killing the fellow unless he knows the reason. There ought to be enough evidence in this house to hang the lot of them, but even if we saw the Commissioner of Police himself and he had the place raided—not that I think he'd do that—Number One would probably slip out of the net. The only way he'll be caught is by direct action such as we have administered to some of the others. For the present we shall have to wait here to see what happens."

The waiting was tedious. No sound of any sort broke the silence that had settled on the house. Time passed; it may have been twenty minutes or it may have been half an hour; Gunga, standing at the crack of the door, did not know. It is difficult to judge time in such circumstances.

At last the door of the Prince's room opened and voices could again be heard coming slowly down the corridor. The Prince was speaking; it was easy to recognise his deep, cultured voice, but he spoke in a tone so low that it was not possible to hear what he was saying. As the party moved past the door the man with him uttered an exclamation of petulance. "There is no alternative," he said, icily. "Sir Roland and his daughter will have to go—and at once. They're dangerous—definitely dangerous—you understand?"

"Very well, sir," replied the Prince. "It shall be attended to immediately."

"To-night."

"As you say, sir—to-night."

"Burn the place afterwards—that's always the best way. . . ." The party moved on down the corridor.

Gunga closed the door. "You heard that? I don't like the sound of it."

"My dear fellow, what we heard leaves no room for doubt. Something is going to happen to the people at the Grange—and very shortly."

"In that case we've got to get out."

"Lead on; you're in command."

"Just a minute. I have an idea. There's a telephone in the Prince's room—I saw it on his desk when I was in the tree. We can call up the Grange."

"If the Prince hasn't locked his door."

"We'll soon see."

A quick reconnaissance revealed that the corridor was empty. Gunga walked straight along to the Prince's room and tried the door. It opened. In a moment they were inside. Gunga turned the key and switched on the light. "This looks like the holy of holies," he remarked grimly as he strode to the telephone.

He did not know the number of the Grange, nor was there a directory available, so he lifted the receiver and called the operator. Without difficulty he persuaded her to give him the number of the Grange and put a call through. "Keep your eyes on the door," he told Guy, with his hand over the mouthpiece. "If anyone tries to get in let him have it. This is no time for argument. Hello, yes?" he went on quickly, into the telephone. "Is that Steadworth Grange? . . . I want to speak to Miss Alister-Bowes. It's Captain Deane here." There was a brief interval. "Hello, Ann, this is Captain Deane here," he went on. "We're in The Towers—locked in. Get——" The line clicked. "Hello . . . hello . . . are you there?" Gunga jangled the instrument. There was no answer. "Damnation," he grated. "I've been cut off. Operator . . . operator . . ." There was no answer.

For more than a minute he strove impotently to establish connection. "I can't even get the operator," he told Guy, helplessly.

Guy was lighting a cigarette. "It doesn't seem to have occurred to you that you were cut off—deliberately; that the local telephone operator would necessarily be one of the party. There must be some strange calls on this line."

Gunga drew a deep breath and pushed the instrument aside. "Yes, of course," he muttered. "What a damn fool I am—I didn't think of that." He glanced at the window and saw the steel curtain in place. "Well, it means

that we've got to get out," he announced, quietly. "We can't sit here and let them bump off Sir Roland."

"Of course not—nor Ann," agreed Guy, smoothly, taking out his pistol and examining it.

Gunga was walking towards the door when the handle was turned sharply from the outside. "Who's in there?" called a voice, harshly.

CHAPTER XVI

GUNGA caught his brother's eye. "You were right about the telephone operator," he said, bitterly. "She's tipped them off on another line. Get behind the door; they may not know that there are two of us."

The handle of the door was rattled impatiently. "Who's in there?" came the voice again, sharply.

Gunga turned the key and opened the door. "It's only me," he said, blandly.

A man in footman's uniform stepped into the room, a revolver at the ready, his eyes on Gunga's face. "Who are you?" he asked, curtly.

"Just a friend of the family," returned Gunga lightly.

"Come on—downstairs."

"What do you think I am—a burglar?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

Gunga shook his head. "On the contrary, I want you to tell me something. Where do you keep the instrument that operates the shutters?"

"You'd like to know. Come on, don't argue."

"I don't want to hurt you, but if you persist in your attitude I shall have to. Look behind you."

The man smiled. "You can't fool me. That trick's played out."

Gunga thought for a moment. "I'm afraid you'll have to hit him, Guy," he decided, sadly. "We're wasting time."

Something in Gunga's manner gave the man warning. Fear narrowed his eyes, but before he could act Guy's voice cut in. "Drop that gun."

The man stiffened.

"You'd better do as he tells you," murmured Gunga, evenly.

The revolver fell to the floor with a thud.

Guy stepped forward. "What shall I do with him?"

Gunga picked up the fallen revolver. "I'm afraid we shall have to hit him on the head; but before we do that we'll give him one more chance." He addressed the man. "Where is the instrument that works the shutters?"

The man hesitated only for a moment. "In the butler's pantry."

“Thank you.” Gunga walked across to the telephone and jerked the flex out of the wall. “We are going into the corridor,” he said. “One sound from you and we’ll come back and do what we really ought to do now.”

They went out and locked the door behind them, leaving the man inside.

“The thing is to find the butler’s pantry,” suggested Guy.

“You keep pace with the situation well,” Gunga told him, with faint sarcasm. “It will be downstairs, but we may be some time finding it unless we can persuade somebody to show us just where it is. We’ve no time to lose. It’s Sir Roland I’m thinking about.”

“And Ann.”

“Quite right. Come on, we’ll try the front stairs.”

They walked quickly along the corridor to the head of the staircase where a glance revealed a man on duty inside the front door. It was the butler who had served them with sherry earlier in the evening.

Gunga drew Guy back into the corridor. “If I can get near him without being seen I may be able to persuade him to show us the pantry,” he breathed. “It’s a chance worth taking. If he sees me coming his first thought —unless he has been told about us—will be how I got shut in. You stay here and keep me covered.” With that he went on down the stairs. The butler did not even glance up.

The plan might have succeeded, but Gunga was only half way down when in a moment the situation was entirely changed. The door of the billiard room was opened and the man in the mask, with his escort, followed by the Prince, came out into the hall. Gunga stopped, but it was too late. The man in the mask glanced up and saw him standing there. He pointed with his cane. “Who is that?” he exclaimed sharply.

The Prince answered. “That is the man we’ve been talking about.”

After a moment of intense silence, “How did he get in here.”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Again the man in the mask pointed with his cane. “Come here,” he ordered, in a curious tone of voice.

“For what purpose?” inquired Gunga, evenly.

“I want to talk to you.”

“Anything you have to say can be said from where you are.”

“Insolence! Are you the man who calls himself the Unknown Quantity?”

“I am.”

“Ah, I thought we should meet one day.”

"I was almost sure of it."

The man in the mask turned to one of his escort. "Bring that man to me," he ordered.

"Stay where you are," returned Gunga, crisply.

The man in the mask seemed to lose control of himself. "Shoot him!" he cried, shrilly.

His attendant did his best to obey. Indeed, the speed with which he drew a revolver almost caught Gunga off his guard. The weapon blazed. But Gunga had leapt back, and the bullet, after splintering the banister, thudded into the wall. A second shot followed immediately. It came from the head of the stairs. The man who had fired the first shot staggered and fell. The others backed quickly into the billiard room and slammed the door—just as Gunga fired; his shot split a panel, but whether it hit anybody behind it he had no means of knowing. The butler, who had remained standing near the door, ran into the lounge, leaving the hall empty.

Gunga, with a terse "Watch me," dashed to the front door and attempted to move the shutter, but a moment sufficed to convince him of the futility of it. A revolver barked; the bullet flattened itself against the steel and he ran back up the stairs to Guy. "Damn! I'm afraid the affair is going to end in a common brawl," he said, apologetically.

Guy started down the stairs, but backed quickly as another shot crashed into the wooden banister. "We'd better try the back stairs," he suggested. "If they think of it and come up behind us we shall be between two fires."

Gunga did not reply, but hastened along the corridor.

Just beyond the Prince's room the passage turned sharply to the left. They approached it cautiously, their feet making no noise on the pile carpet. They had nearly reached it when a man appeared suddenly coming the other way. Seeing them he darted back before they could fire.

"One of us will be getting hit presently if we go on strolling about like this," remarked Guy, dispassionately.

"Can you suggest anything?"

"How about fusing all the lights?"

"Apart from handicapping us as much as them it might jam the mechanism that operates the shutters."

"Damn it—that's true."

They went on. Gunga reached the turn, dropped flat and peeped round. His right arm jerked forward and the pistol spat.

"Get him?" asked Guy.

"Winged him. He's gone into a room about ten yards along. Keep an eye on the rear." They went on down the corridor until the open door of the room in which the man had taken cover could be seen. "He's in there," continued Gunga. "Give him three rounds rapid while I go past."

Guy raised his pistol and fired three shots in quick succession. Splinters flew. Gunga dashed past the door, and spinning round opened fire until Guy joined him.

A dozen paces further on, and although the corridor continued, a flight of wooden stairs, guarded by a flimsy banister, dived towards the ground floor.

"That's our way," said Guy, softly.

Gunga eyed the stairs suspiciously from a distance. The top two or three treads could be seen, for an electric light bulb over their heads illuminated the corridor; but thereafter they melted into a sea of sombre shadows. "They've put the lights out down there by the look of it," he murmured. "To show ourselves on those stairs would be asking for trouble; we should be in plain view of anyone below. Just a minute." He turned the handle of the nearest bedroom door and disappeared, to return a moment later with a pillow. Standing well clear he flung the pillow down the stairs.

Its appearance on the top step was greeted by an explosion of surprising violence. The electric light globe burst, leaving everything in darkness; plaster rained from the ceiling.

Gunga had fired instantly at the flash. "Some skunk is using a twelve bore," he said, in a low voice.

In the darkness at the foot of the stairs a man was groaning.

"You must have got him," suggested Guy.

"Keep back; it may be a trap. I'm not taking on those stairs. We shall have to try different tactics. Let's go into the bedroom for a minute—there should be a light there."

They groped their way into the room, closed the door and switched on the light. Gunga faced his brother. "I'm afraid we shall have to abandon our plan of trying to find the curtain control," he said seriously.

"Too dangerous, eh?"

"Not only that, as we don't know where the damn place is it puts us on the defensive all the time. If they get us on the run we're sunk. I'm all for attack, and that means storming an objective the position of which we know. There's only one—the billiard room. If we can make things hot enough they may open the curtains themselves. At present we hold the first floor, and it's

as dangerous for them to come up as for us to go down; the trouble is, knowing that we've got to come down they can afford to wait for us. They also know from our shots that we're at this end of the corridor. I think our best plan is to split. You continue playing hell on these stairs. I'll go down the front. They won't expect me so I may take them by surprise. Remember, we've one big advantage; we're more accustomed to this sort of thing than they are. If I can get in a good position I'll knock hell out of the billiard room. If you can get through on the ground floor, join me, but let me know that you are coming or we may shoot at each other. See you later." Gunga went out and disappeared quickly in the direction in which they had come.

Guy, left alone, unhooked a large coloured print that hung on the wall. He then put the light out and went into the passage where he opened his offensive by throwing the picture down the stairs. The crash of breaking glass was followed instantly by the double report of the sporting gun. Marking the flashes he sent three shots a gun's length behind them and then slid down the banister. He fell off the end, and before he could pick himself up, the lights came on. Realising his danger he twisted sideways as he sprang to his feet. Quick as he was a hammer-like blow in the left shoulder nearly brought him down again, but he fired from the hip at two men who were running down a wide, stone-flagged corridor. One fell; the other disappeared into a kitchen and slammed the door behind him.

Backing to the wall Guy made a quick survey of his position. The place in which he found himself was a large chamber, or rather, an area, bounded by sculleries, store-pantries and cupboards, making it clear that he was in the servants' end of the house. Two corridors led out of it in opposite directions; one was the stone-flagged passage in which the man whom he had shot was now dragging himself along; the other, carpeted, with panelled walls, clearly led to the front of the house. The only person in sight apart from the wounded man was one of the black-jacketed flunkeys who lay crumpled up over a twelve-bore near the foot of the stairs.

A momentary attack of giddiness made him reel; shaking his head impatiently he fired a shot blindly down each corridor to cover his temporary disadvantage and then began edging towards the front one. The noise of the explosions died away. Heavy blue cordite fumes sank slowly in the still air. An attentive silence fell.

It did not persist. A few seconds later it was shattered by three shots in quick succession from the unseen end of the panelled passage. An instant later the butler appeared, panting, looking furtively over his shoulder as he ran.

Guy took deliberate aim at him and fired; and missed. The butler darted back in the direction from which he had come. Another shot rang out followed by a cry and the crash of a falling body.

"Are you all right, Guy?" came Gunga's voice, clearly, but strangely unreal.

"Yes. I'm holding this end. Go ahead."

"Watch your fire; I'm at the bottom of the stairs working towards the billiard room."

Guy staggered up the passage and arrived in sight of the hall just as Gunga ran across it from the stairs towards the billiard room. It was obvious from the way he moved that he was unaware that Drysdale was standing just inside the doorway of the lounge, a heavy revolver in his hand. Gunga's back was towards him and the distance between the two men not more than six yards.

Guy threw up his pistol and pulled the trigger. The weapon announced the expiration of its ammunition clip with a faint click. Cursing, he flung the empty automatic at the detective.

With the deliberation of a slow-motion film Drysdale took aim and fired.

Guy felt the bullet whizz past his face. A cry behind him made him spin round, ducking, in time to see the butler, gun in hand, collapsing on the floor. Realising that it must have been Drysdale's shot that had hit him he looked back at the detective wonderingly.

"Look out! There's another one in that cloakroom," snapped Drysdale, side-stepping with surprising agility as Gunga, who had turned at the sound of his voice, threw up his pistol. "Don't shoot at me, you fool—I'm on your side," he added, harshly.

Gunga, his body pressed against the wall near the door of the billiard room, stared incredulously. "What the hell——?"

"Hell nothing. Watch that cloak——"

The man in the cloakroom, one of Number One's velvet-clad attendants, made a dash for the passage. Drysdale's revolver spurted flame and he sprawled headlong.

"Nice shooting," murmured Guy, weakly, stooping to pick up the small automatic that had flown out of the man's hand when he struck the ground. He staggered suddenly; his knees crumpled and he sat down limply. "Blast!" he muttered.

"Never mind him," Drysdale barked at Gunga. "Find the thing that works the shutters."

"Where's Number One?"

"In the billiard room with the others."

Someone began beating on the outside of the front door.

"Who's that?" asked Gunga, tersely, looking at the detective.

"My fellows, I expect. They've heard the shooting. You've made a bloody nice mess of things. Watch——"

At that moment the steel shutters crashed back.

Drysdale started forward in alarm. "Who did that?" he cried and made a dash for the billiard room door. "They'll all be out through the window," he snarled. He flung open the billiard room door and jumped back, the muzzle of his revolver poised like the head of a snake about to strike. Two shots roared as one. His weapon, smoking, seemed to jerk out of his hand, and he clutched at the doorpost, cursing luridly. "Look out—the window!" he croaked.

Gunga dashed forward. The first thing he saw when he looked into the room was the Prince, on his knees, struggling vainly to get up. Beyond him the window was wide open; a man in black was climbing like a monkey over the sill. "Number One!" yelled Gunga. "Take this with you—from Peter Deane." He took quick aim and fired.

The climbing figure twitched, and then plunged forward out of sight.

Gunga turned to Drysdale who was shaking blood from his fingers. "Where are the others?"

"They'll be all right. I've got a score of men outside—they'll look after 'em."

"Why the devil didn't you tell me what you were doing?"

"Tell *you*? Why the hell should I?" The detective flopped down in a chair, and taking off his jacket tried to stem the flow of blood from a wound in his forearm. Several policemen had appeared suddenly. "Get me a bit of rag, somebody," ordered the detective. He glanced at Gunga. "You'd better go and see about your brother."

"I'd better see about getting a doctor, I think."

"We shall need half a dozen to clear up this bloody shambles from what I can see of it."

"I must get down to the Alister-Bowes."

"You needn't worry about them. I've had a couple of men watching 'em from the time I got here and found you on the snoop. I guessed we were on the way for a show-down. Your butting in put me in a hell of a mess."

"Sorry."

“So you damn well ought to be.”
Smiling faintly Gunga went across to where Guy was lying.

CHAPTER XVII

An hour later the hall resembled a field-dressing station after an engagement. Guy, still pale, sat in a chair with his arm in a sling, a whiskey-and-soda in his sound hand. Gunga stood near him, smoking a cigarette. Drysdale, his forearm bandaged, his jacket over his shoulders with the sleeves hanging loose, stood at the door watching the departure of the prisoners and the casualties in vehicles that had been assembled for that purpose.

"Well, I think that's about the lot," he remarked casually, as he came back into the hall. "The doctor says the Prince is a gonner—hasn't a chance; but the old man, Number One, may pull through." His face twisted into a grotesque smile. "Sort of clean up, eh?"

"Now it's all over bar the shouting, who is this Number One?" inquired Gunga.

"I don't know much more about him than you do. I've never seen him before and I doubt if we shall ever know his real name. He's got a title, I believe, but God knows what it is. As far as I've been able to make out he got into a mess when he was a young man—blackmailing affair with a woman in it. That must have been towards the end of Victoria's time. The thing was hushed up to save a scandal but for some reason or other he reckoned he'd had a dirty deal and went sour on Society. He's lived by preying on it ever since. He must have started an organization pretty soon after the affair because the thing's been going on since 1904, getting bigger all the time. Glenbold told me that—incidentally, you can tell me later on how you got Tredwell to do that job for you. He's going to swing and I shall want you as a witness."

"We can talk about that later; tell me more about Number One."

"That's all I know—apart from his having a mint of money. He couldn't have spent it all if he'd have tried, so he must have gone on with the business as a hobby."

"Or because it got too big to stop."

"Maybe. We shall know more when we find out where he lives."

"Don't you know that?"

"No—but I shall, presently. We've got his chauffeur. He won't talk now—but he will. I shall be disappointed if we don't find papers that tell us the whole story. By the way, what gave you the idea that we fellows at the Yard were all dumb?"

"My brother's death, chiefly."

"You don't know how upset I was about that. I did my damndest to warn him—but it was no use. I'd been on the trail of this lot for a couple of years when he butted in. Poor old Sammy Notley, who taught him his job, knew that. He was after the story, too. They got him in the end. Then your brother started. Maybe I should have put him wise straight away, but he was young and apt to fly off at the handle, and—well, I daren't risk it. I went to some trouble to have him watched to save him if I could, but that night he went to Blandford he gave me the slip. It was all over when I heard about it so it was no use doing anything about it then. He was after Number One, the same as me. I could have cleared up all the small fry months ago, even one or two of the big noises, but what good would that have done? Even if I'd got a conviction, which might not have been easy, the fellows I'd grabbed would have been replaced and the thing gone on as usual—with me a marked man and less chance than ever of stopping it. Maybe I should still have been looking for Number One if you hadn't butted in. You sort of set things alight. I couldn't figure it out at all for a bit—not till that lucky photo at Bethwold gave me a line and we had that chat. I could see we were liable to get in each other's way and I as near as damnit told you to keep clear because I was doing the job. Pity I didn't. But I daren't. I was getting high up the ladder myself and one slip would have sunk me. I mean, suppose they'd caught you; you'd only got to let one word drop and I should have been the next one on the spot. I had you followed, of course."

"You followed us down the Vauxhall Bridge Road."

"One of my fellows did. He rang me up to say you were inside and I came along."

"Did you know what we were after?"

"I hadn't the foggiest notion. But I knew about Lola's diary. When I saw it lying there—well, I picked it up. That saved me a lot of trouble."

"Did you know about the dope shop?"

"Not till you told me. The cleverest part of the organization was the way it was cut up into watertight compartments. Incidentally, we raided the dope shop last night and got a list of names that make interesting reading."

"Did you know Brimswade was in the gang?"

"I wasn't sure, but I suspected it. His private wire led me to Glenbold—I'd suspected him, too. We had to move quick, I can tell you. Number Seventeen——"

"Then you knew about the Archdeacon?"

"You bet I did. I took my instructions from him. He was the man who came to me in the first place and bought me into the organization—two thousand a year they paid me to keep 'em *au fait* with what went on inside the Yard. But they didn't trust me. They watched me and my mail; that's how they came to see your letter about the dope shop. *They* sent Lucky Jim after you—not me. It was on Number Seventeen's instructions that I went to Bethwold to scare Lola into coughing up her diary—the silly woman had used it as a threat. The scheme was to arrest her for Brimswade's murder. I knew she hadn't done it, but it's a fact that she went and saw Brimswade that very night and I could have framed a pretty black case against her. She used to be his mistress; in fact, he got her into the gang."

"Did you know Glenbold was blackmailing Alister-Bowes?"

"Call it Glenbold if you like, but he was only taking orders. The *Echo* was Number One's mouthpiece. I knew something was going on with Alister-Bowes, but I didn't know what. I was staggered when they killed the son. It's my belief that Number One was getting more and more vindictive in his old age. A damn shame, killing the boy like that. I nearly went down and interviewed Sir Roland myself, but it was too risky. I had an idea I was being watched, and I daren't take a chance."

"Did you know about the racing racket?"

"What racing racket?"

Briefly, Gunga told him.

The detective shook his head. "That's a new one on me," he declared. "I never so much as smelt it. But don't you kid yourself that you pulled all the chestnuts out of the fire. You were only on the fringe. One of these days I'll tell you a few things about the big operations this gang put over—armament deals involving millions and God knows what else. They once kidnapped a Prince and got half a million ransom for him. Well, well. When the Archdeacon was pushed off he had a big scheme on, and they had to start reorganizing the whole thing. That upset 'em. Apart from your brother you gave them the only serious trouble they've ever had."

"Do you know what happened to that woman Violet—the maid, nurse, or whatever she was?"

"She's all right. I've got her. She'd been losing her nerve for some time and Lola's death finished her. She was put into the Alister-Bowes to watch

them, but I knew she wouldn't stick it. When you turned up she bolted. She went to the Commissioner of Police and spilt the whole works. She daren't tell me, of course; she thought I was in the gang. In fact, she told the Commissioner I was, which might have put me in bad if I hadn't already told him what I was after. She'll be a useful witness."

"Did you tell the Commissioner about us?"

"I had to. He's checked up with your regiments. We're not so dumb as we look."

Gunga smiled. "What is even more important, you're not so crooked as we thought you were."

The inspector tightened his jacket. "Well, I must be getting along," he announced. "Can I give you a lift anywhere? I shall want to know where I can find you. We shall need statements—in fact, the Commissioner will probably want to see you personally. Where are you going now?"

Gunga glanced at his brother and then back at the Inspector. "For the moment we shall be staying with the Alister-Bowes," he said, casually.

Guy finished his drink and shook his head. "I had an idea we should be," he murmured softly.

THE END

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 *The Unknown Quantity* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]