

Hunter Hunted

HENRY TREECE

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DESPERATE JOURNEY
ASK FOR KING BILLY
THE EXILES
THE HAUNTED GARDEN
THE BLACK SEASONS
INVITATION AND WARNING

HUNTER HUNTED

by

HENRY TREECE

illustrated by

RICHARD KENNEDY

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Contents



1. MAN IN A RAINCOAT	page <u>11</u>
2. COUNTRY CLUB	<u>17</u>
3. MEETING IN PROGRESS	<u>21</u>
4. A TALE TOLD	<u>31</u>
5. IN THE NET	<u>37</u>
6. STRANGE MEETING	<u>43</u>
7. QUARRY ENCOUNTERED	<u>52</u>
8. MATADOR AND SILENCER	<u>62</u>
9. REPRIEVE	<u>68</u>
10. THE PLOT THICKENS	<u>75</u>
11. BELTENHAM HALL	<u>81</u>
12. AMONG THE TENDRILS	<u>87</u>
13. PASS-ON AT PORCHESTER	<u>100</u>
14. THE SPOTTED COW AND THE BUDGERIGARS	<u>105</u>
15. BACK ALLEY BOYS	<u>115</u>
16. SURPRISE RETURN	<u>120</u>
17. INVITATION TO A JOURNEY	<u>127</u>
18. SALVATION AND A DOCTOR	<u>129</u>
19. THE LIGHTED WINDOW	<u>135</u>
20. SAM	<u>140</u>
21. SIEGE	<u>149</u>
22. BURNT OAK	<u>165</u>
23. APOLOGIA	<u>170</u>
24. DAI AND MYFANWY	<u>174</u>
25. THE GARAGE ON THE BRIDGE	<u>180</u>
26. RESTLESS PEACE	<u>189</u>
27. FATEFUL DAY	<u>197</u>
28. THE STORM CLOUDS GATHER	<u>204</u>
29. THE STORM BREAKS	<u>210</u>
30. AMPHITHEATRE	<u>215</u>
31. EPILOGUE	<u>220</u>

HUNTER HUNTED

One

Man in a Raincoat



AT first, all I could see was Jimmy Pugh's nose. It appeared rhythmically and then disappeared again, over the top of a rather dingy grey towel which he flapped at me vigorously. It was not a very beautiful nose, I decided, as I lolled back on my stool; altogether too flat and shapeless. It bore a patient, punished look, I thought, as I gazed up into the blue smoke that swirled about the bright electric light above the ring. Too many fists had found their mark on it, in too many resin-and-leather encounters. Poor Jimmy Pugh, I sighed. How sad a fate, to end up as a University boxing coach! Alas, alas, alas!

Jimmy Pugh's nose came at me without warning. The tired-looking towel had stopped flapping. Then I even saw Jimmy Pugh's eyes, small and serious, grey gimlets. They were boring right through me. He seemed quite angry, for him.

"For Pete's sake, snap out of it, sir," he said, "or we shall be *carrying* you out, inside sixty seconds. That man opposite you is a killer. He means to have you down next round. You're not playing kiss-in-the-ring, sir; *this is an Inter-club Championship!*"

I tried to smile through thickened lips and to reassure Jimmy that everything in the little square garden of canvas was well, but he was pushing my gum-shield in again and I couldn't talk then. A spongeful of icy cold water trickled over the back of my neck and down my back. I shivered. Then I felt that towel wiping the surplus moisture off my shoulders. I sensed my stool being pulled from under me. I heard a nasty little "ting" as the gong went for the next round. It gave me quite a lonely sensation, that bell.

"For goodness' sake, earn your keep!" said Jimmy, trying to look sternly at me. But he couldn't keep it up. I winked at him, though I didn't feel like winking.

Then somehow I was in the middle of the ring once more, surrounded by a whitish blur of faces, hearing a subdued hum of voices and the resined

squeak of my opponent's shoes as he came over the canvas to finish the contest quickly.

He was a big, dark, raw-boned Scot, his hair cropped close at the sides, giving it a bluish look. The light-heavyweight champion of Metropolitan, with hardly a mark on him after fifty fights. I noticed that his nose still held to the shape Nature intended, unlike poor Jimmy's—and what was more, there was a curious, almost whimsical smile on his lips as he slithered at me, as though he was saying, "Sorry, chum, this is going to hurt you more than it will me, but what can I do about it?"

I appreciated that kindly feeling, in a strange way, and almost felt I would like to say, "Go ahead, old boy. Don't mind me!"

But the old temptation was too great. As he drew back his vicious right to put an end to the affair, he left himself just that bit too wide open. Even I could see that, dazed as I was. Indeed, it was the only thing I did see, and I observed it for a split second with a quiet and clinical accuracy. I saw no point in waiting, and brought over my own right, short and crisp, with hardly a curve in it. The shock up my arm was more than I expected. I heard an "Ooh!" on all sides among the audience. Then I saw my opponent fall forward on to his knees, his head almost touching the canvas.

I had just sense enough to stand away and to back into the corner farthest from him, although my inclination was to help him up! During the timeless silence, he tried twice to get to his feet, glaring at me glassily as he did so. But at the third attempt, his arms buckled under him and he fell, spread-eagled, out to the world, his fighting all over for that evening.

Then I heard Jimmy Pugh calling out, "Smasho! Just what the doctor ordered! Come on, lad, and sit down!"

I sank on to the stool while he unlaced my gloves and threw that towel over my shoulders. We were amateurs and did not sport the coloured silk dressing-gowns that enlivened the professional ring. I looked over Jimmy's shoulder and saw his second guiding my opponent back to his corner. His legs were wobbling and he seemed to have lost interest in things generally.

"My, but that was an almighty clout," said Jimmy, grimacing. "I'd rather miss a week's pay than get in the way of that one!"

"Oh, stop kidding," I said. "I think I bust my hand doing it!"

Jimmy grinned again. "Well," he said, "a bust hand is worth it. You've won the championship for the University, and that should add up to something!"

I gave him a playful dig in the ribs and then was immediately afraid that he'd give me one in return. If he had done, I should have measured my length, for Jimmy was one of the old-timers, with a fist like a lump of bog-oak and muscles up his sweater the size of young footballs. He was merciful and did not retaliate.

"You can buy me a pint for that later," he said, smiling wickedly. It was his time-honoured retort.

"Right," I said, and went across to my opponent's corner. They had put a wet cloth on his neck and he was fully conscious again. He forced a grin and held out his hand to me.

"Thanks for the dance," he said. "I'd like another one with you later in the season."

I admired his pluck. "You'll return the compliment next time," I said.

"Shouldn't wonder at that," he answered, "but I'll have to bring a hammer into my corner to do it!"

I climbed out of the ring and ran into the University fly-weight, who had finished and dressed earlier in the evening, having put his man down straight away. He slapped my shoulder. "Good show," he said. "I never thought you'd make it. Oh, by the way, there's someone in the dressing-room asking for you. Seemed quite anxious."

"Male or female?" I asked, smiling.

He snorted with pretended disgust. "I imagine it's Jack Solomons with a fat contract for you to meet the American world-champion," he said. "Or it might be a character in a coon-skin cap—I didn't notice. But it's urgent, by the look of it. I should go!"

I went along the aisle to the far end of the hall, up the passage-way and into the dressing-room set aside for the University team.

All of our fellows were out in the hall, watching the last bout, so the dressing-room was empty, except for my visitor. He stood at the far end of the room, in the shadows away from the light. He was a slightly built man, wearing a light raincoat, his soft hat pulled well over his eyes. I stared at him, wondering who should speak first. He did . . . if you could call his measured nasal whine speaking.

"Get your clothes on, china," he said. "I've got no time to waste."

His tone annoyed me suddenly, nor did I care for the slow snarl of his voice. After my recent victory, I felt that I should be treated with a little more consideration. After all, you don't win a championship every day, or even every other day.

So I said, "Take it easy, Bogart. You mean nothing to me. Why you should barge in here and order me to dress I don't know, and I don't care, old boy. Now, what do you want? I'm busy."

He moved forward out of the shadows and I saw that his pale lips were smiling. It was not a pleasant smile to see, either.

"I said get dressed," he repeated. "I mean that. Get dressed, and don't keep me waiting."

That was too much for me, strained as I was. I rose from my bench and stepped towards him, my right hand half-cocked. Then I saw that he had a razor in his hand, held so that the blade was ready to be swept across my chest or face. And *his* hand was as steady as a rock, there was no mistaking that. He had not budged an inch before my threatened attack. I knew that I must do as he said or take the gory consequences. I sat down and pulled on my shirt and trousers. There is sense in all things.

"That's right," he said quite amiably. "There's no point in getting nasty, is there, china! Sorry I can't give you time to get a shower, but I might lose you if I let you out of this room."

"What do you want?" I asked, struggling with my socks.

He grinned in a twisted way. "You'll hear that from someone else, not me," he said. "My orders were just to *bring you in*, that's all."

He walked behind me to the street door, his hand still holding the razor before him, in case I might change my mind. But I knew better than to risk such a stupid thing. I went out into the street. I was very annoyed indeed, but I didn't like the look of that razor. Besides, I was tired, after all. It makes a difference.

Two

Country Club



AN innocent-looking little green Morris Minor stood in the light of a street-lamp. As we approached it, the front door swung open.

“Get in,” said my visitor. “That’s right, next to the driver. Don’t try any silly business with him. I’m sitting right behind you, and I shall keep Alice out!”

I couldn’t help saying, “Why Alice?”

I heard him grunt behind me. “She’s the girl who takes you into Wonderland,” he said. “Where were you dragged up?”

Then I was in the car, conscious of the huge shape of the silent driver; conscious also of my visitor’s warm breath on the back of my neck. I shuddered, thinking of Alice, that vicious little razor.

“Nice and cosy, these buses,” said the man in the light raincoat. “Not like some of them Rolls jobs where you have to communicate with the other passengers by postcard when you hold a conversation.”

The driver growled, “Oh, stow it, Joey! They told you to bring this fellow in; they didn’t say torture him with your funny cross-talk.”

I said, “Thanks. You obviously have a sense of humour!”

The driver growled again. “And you shut up, too. I like to concentrate on my job, I do.”

Indeed, he made it the sort of job one *has* to concentrate on. He swung the little Morris about as though it were a yo-yo on a string. He treated traffic lights with the gay abandon of a young American hurdler who has a race to win. He passed beneath the noses of heavy and stolid Birmingham buses like a gad-fly, deaf to the blistering comments which floated down from the driving-seats above him. Yet he was not a *bad* driver—just a very reckless one who paid no heed, it seemed, to any man-made rules and regulations.

Raincoat in the back seemed to sense my consternation. "He used to drive an armoured car, china," he said. "It's made him a bit wheel-happy, that's all. When he gets a job in anything as small as a Morris Minor, well, he just slings it round his finger. Has no end of fun!"

"It's good to know that someone has the fun," I said, drawing my finger round the neck of my shirt, which somehow had become too tight for me.

"No sense of fun," growled the driver, half-glancing at me. "All right, we'll go slow just to please you."

He turned the car into a long straight road that led out of Birmingham and pressed the speed up to a steady sixty. The arc-lamps above us seemed to fuse into one beam. The trees planted along the dividing verge of the road melted into a hedge. I sighed in resignation; the only hope I had now was for a police car to draw out of a side-road and flag us down for speeding. But that did not happen.

Then I felt that the air in the car was getting thick and I began to grope for the window-winder. As I did so the driver coughed in warning and immediately the man behind me said viciously, "Sit up, china! You'll lose an ear if you try that one again!"

I said, "You're nervous, you two. I only wanted air!"

"Nark it," said the driver. "You'd break your perishin' neck getting out at this speed. We've got to keep you alive for a little while longer at least."

This was the last straw! I was suddenly incensed by the self-satisfied way in which these two thugs assumed they could treat me. What was more, I sensed something artificial about the whole proceedings, something too much like a third-rate gangster film to be convincing. I decided that there was no really good reason why these two men, whom I did not know, should treat me in this manner. I weighed it up—one of them was occupied at the wheel. The other was probably playing the part of a tough guy, as seen from the ninepennies at his local cinema in Deritend or Aston Cross.

To make my anger more frightening, as I thought, I chose my time and then, letting out the loudest roar I could muster, I swung round, dodging sideways and intending to punch the razor-man into a quiet oblivion against the back-cushions of the car.

But I had worked it all out incorrectly. The moment I moved, the fat driver slapped his foot down on the brakes. I shot forward, powerlessly, to hit my head on the base of the windscreen. In the small crumb of consciousness that stayed with me then, I saw the man in the light raincoat

lean over and raise his arm. And in that same speck of consciousness, I heard the driver's thick voice say, "Hold it, chum. He's had it for the moment." Then I *knew* they meant it, and passed out for a while, strangely disinterested.

When I came round, we were still going quite fast, but along a secondary road. There were no bright lights, and the houses were few and isolated. They were of the solid, tree-girt type, some of them in mock-Tudor styles, beloved of retired coal-hauliers in search of cultured rest.

I rubbed the side of my head. "Where are we?" I asked. "Is this Hall Green?"

The driver said, "Could be. How's your bump?"

I said, "Not so bad, you maniac. You might have killed me."

The man behind me chuckled. "You asked for it, china. We warned you. After all, we have a job to do. It's bread and butter to us—kids to feed and all that."

I said, "Well, you're the strangest gangsters I ever heard of."

The driver said, "Oh, stow it! We're not gangsters. Just workmen with a job to do. We don't want you to beat us up, so we beat you up first. All right?"

I began to argue but the man in the light raincoat said, "Look, sonny, we saw you fight to-night. We take no chances. Now try to smarten yourself up a bit, we are getting near the place we want."

Set back from the roadway, at the far end of a wide gravel car park surrounded by ornamental bushes, was a low white building, gay with red and yellow neon lights. I read the words, "*The Green Man Country Club*". The park was full of expensive cars which glistened in the bright glare. There was an air of wealth about the place. Dance music from a small and no doubt select band floated towards us. We swung into the crunching park and stopped. "All change," said the man with the razor. "This is it!"

Three

Meeting in Progress



WE did not go through the open front door, beyond which I saw men in dinner jackets talking to women in frilly evening-frocks, laughing, holding glasses in their hands. Instead, we passed round the side of the low white club house, and along a loggia festooned with flowering creepers. Away to my left, in the moonlight, I saw the shadowy hills of the west beginning, the hills of Shropshire and Hereford. It would have been a beautiful setting, if only one could have visited the place for pleasure, and not as a grim necessity.

“Come on, this way,” said the driver, leading me into a cream-panelled passage-way. We stopped before a pale-blue door, on which was pinned a small notice: “*Meeting in progress. Keep out, please.*”

The man in the light raincoat knocked four times on the door, in a peculiar little rhythm, and waited. A high voice from within said, “Send him in, Joey.”

My guards opened the blue door, pushed me inside, and then faded away, back down the cream passage-way. The door closed behind me and I blinked in the brightly-lit room.

Three men in masks stared towards me, across a white-wood table, against a rich background of maroon brocaded paper and gilt wall-brackets. Each had a glass before him.

I was so overcome by the theatrical atmosphere of the occasion that I’m afraid my sense of the ridiculous tempted me. “So the Black Hand Gang strikes again, eh?” I said. I made an effort to smile as I spoke, to give an effect of nonchalance, of unconcern. But the silence that met my remark cut into my jocularly like a razor blade—a razor blade made of particularly keen ice. I suddenly felt rather small, in spite of my sense of outraged liberty.

“We are delighted to observe that you have a sense of fun, my friend,” said the man who sat opposite me. “It is a helpful attribute in times of stress.”

My eyes were fixed on his hands. They were long white hands, carefully tended. Their finger-tips were pressed lightly together, almost in an attitude of prayer. They looked very cold too—as cold as the voice that spoke above them.

I raised my eyes towards the face of the speaker. By contrast with the black velvet of the mask, it looked pale and ascetic, the face of a thinker, a scholar, almost—thin, strongly etched with lines about the mouth, and very firm. The whole effect was of hardness; the eyes that looked at me through the holes of the mask were grey, steel-grey; the carefully brushed hair above the mask was grey, steel-grey too. Even the well-cut lounge suit that clothed this austere figure was grey. I almost felt like congratulating him on his fine taste—he might easily have been wearing an old sports coat, and then the whole sinister effect would have been lost!

But there was no time for such observations. I was tired and very cross. I felt that I should come to the point.

“I’m glad you like a bit of fun,” I said, “but don’t let your taste for it lead you astray. You have put me to a deal of trouble to-night, and I’m in no mood for it. I’ve had a busy day and I want nothing more than to drink up my nice warm glass of milk and sink into a dreamless slumber. I’m afraid you must find another little playmate if you want any more fun with masks and gangsters to-night. I’m going, and you can think yourselves lucky that I don’t give you all in charge for abduction, or whatever they call it when harmless citizens are shanghaied with razors into Morris Minors.”

I half-turned from the table. “Good night,” I said, moving towards the blue door.

As I swung round I caught a glimpse of the grey man nodding to the one who sat on his right. I heard the quick rustle his movement made and I swayed sideways, with that sixth sense which comes from training in the square ring. A big hand shot past my face, then seemed to recollect itself and grabbed again, catching me by the shoulder before I could swing away. There was no mistaking the strength of that grip; I was caught.

I looked up at a massively built man, in a fawn gaberdine suit and wearing a broad red and yellow tie. His face and thick neck were the colour of old leather—something suitable for slippers in a Moroccan bazaar, I found myself thinking. A faint scent of cigar smoke came from his clothes as

he took a firmer grip on me. I was not a bit surprised when he spoke and I heard the flat nasal tones of the American Mid-West.

“Take it easy, son,” the voice said. “You mustn’t go round getting hurt any more to-night. I see you have an egg-sized addition to your dome already!”

I felt that this was the last straw. I would have to try out that right cross-counter again, unless this man let go straightway. I knew where I would plant it—just above the mid-way button on his white nylon shirt. That would bring the mountain down, I thought. But I gave him another chance.

“If you don’t let me go immediately, my friend,” I said, as evenly as I could, “you will develop sudden stomach symptoms that Alka-Seltzer will do nothing to help!”

He chuckled, a big deep bear-like chuckle, and almost in spite of myself I drew my right fist back, just the necessary nine inches.

“You asked for it, Elmer,” I said quietly.

Then, in sudden surprise, I heard myself grunt with pain and felt my right arm being twisted behind my back in a grip that I knew I was powerless to break.

The American said, “Thanks for the warning, chum. A real English gentleman, I must say! Now sit down and take it easy, like I said before.”

I was glad to sink into the white-wood chair in front of the table. The big man leaned over me and smiled. I saw the gold tooth that glimmered like a column of magnificence in the cavern of his mouth.

“Sorry it had to be like that, son,” he said, “but I’m a sight too old to let young mavericks go hornin’ me around the corral now! Got to take precautions, son!”

I had almost hated him a moment before; now I wasn’t quite sure—he made the whole thing seem so much more reasonable by his slow prairie drawl, by his curiously open smile.

I heard a cluck of annoyance from across the table. It came from the third man, who sat at the left of the grey eminence. I took in his dark complexion, his thin and clipped black moustache, the mobility of his lips. I

would have staked my last sixpence that this was a Frenchman. I was not mistaken.

“My friends,” he said, moving his hands gently away from each other. “Oh, my friends, please let us *discuter*; it is a matter of some urgency, *vous savez*. Let us not waste moments in horseplay of this nature. We are here for business, you understand.”

Once more, I am afraid, my sense of the stupid led me astray.

“Ah, the talent scout for the *Folies Bergère*,” I said. “Enchanted to meet you, Monsieur. And how is the Left Bank looking at this time of year?”

He turned away from me with a grunt of irritation.

“I thought you said this young man was a person of intelligence, of sensibility?” he said to the one in grey.

The elderly chairman of this strange tribunal sighed and pushed a neatly-bound folder of papers from him.

“He belies his dossier, I’m afraid,” he said, with a curious expression of resignation.

Now I sat up with a jerk. So I had a dossier, had I? I reached forward for the sheaf of papers. No one stopped me.

“I’d like to see this,” I said. “I had no idea that a Police State had crept up on us overnight!”

The man in grey bowed his head slightly and said, “This is not a police matter. Your record has been built up privately, for private consumption. You will find it accurate.”

I read those thin blue sheets, and as I did my head whirled with the thoroughness of the observations contained in them:

“William Charles Frankland, born in 1934 at Bewdley, Worcestershire. Pupil at Childe’s School, Cleobury Mortimer, until 1952; Senior Prefect, 1951; Victor Ludorum, 1950, 1951; Cricket Captain, 1949, 1950; State Scholarship in History, English and French, 1952. Second Class Honours in History, Birmingham University, 1955; President of the University Conservative Association, 1954; Captain of Boxing, 1953, 1954. . . .”

And so the facts and dates went on, covering my Army Service and promotions, the posts held, the places visited, the sports records attained.

They even had my height and weight, and a photograph of me, reprinted from a newspaper, at a sports meeting.

I flipped over the other sheets; they were headed “Personality assessment”, “Intelligence assessment”, and so on, each one a carefully prepared analysis of some stranger to me—called William Charles Frankland.

I pushed the papers back. I even smiled, a little grimly, I recall. They certainly knew most of what there was to know about me, but they didn’t know the final, important thing—what was in my mind as I sat there facing them.

“Right,” I said, “you’ve been to a lot of trouble. Now what do you expect to gain by it? Where do you go from here?”

As I waited for a reply, I heard that small and select band playing from the rose-lit ballroom, not so far away. For a moment, my tired mind relaxed and I listened to the tune wailed out by that solitary and no doubt select saxophone—“Smoke gets in your eyes.” It brought back a place we had all visited in Aden, fellows from my platoon, on a last binge before we sailed. A fiddle had been playing that tune then. I remembered the thick smoke in the atmosphere and the bead curtains that jangled whenever any one came in. And at last I recalled an olive-skinned Syrian girl, with fear in her dark eyes, who leaned over our table as she passed by with her burly escort and whispered, “Save me, I am a prisoner. Save me, English soldiers!”

I remembered how two of us got up then and followed the girl and her companion until they were out of that horrible hot-house atmosphere. Then we marched up and took the man by the shoulder. He was very fat and quite smart in his white suit and red tarboosh. He wore a heavy gold wrist-strap to his watch, I recall. We said, “You must let this young lady go.” While we spoke, she looked up at us with wide and innocent eyes as though she had never seen us before.

Then the man in the red fez nodded into the darkness and there was a sudden scurry behind us from the alleyway. We woke up ten minutes later when our soldier-friends were dragging us back to camp, and we hadn’t a penny between us. Our watches, fountain pens, everything had gone—everything but our identity discs!

I thought: “I’ll never forget that tune!”

Then I heard the big American’s voice behind me. He said, “Strange, a man could be shot while that music is going on, and no one would ever hear

the pistol.”

I came back with a start. The grey-haired man was staring into my eyes and speaking, his white finger-tips still pressed together.

“I will answer your question, my friend,” he was saying. “What do we expect to gain from it? We expect to persuade you to do a job of work for us, that is all.”

I said, “But there is nothing in that dossier by which you could, let us say, blackmail me.”

He smiled and shook his head. “My dear young man,” he replied, patiently, as one might speak to a stupid child, “we do not blackmail anyone. We are not, as *you* might say, crooks.”

I stared at him in astonishment. “Then what the deuce are you?” I asked.

The three men exchanged glances and smiled, as though at some private joke which I must not share. I felt my temper rising, and I think that they too noticed my suddenly clenched hands and my movement in my white-wood chair. At least, the president of this curious assembly held up his white hands and said, almost hurriedly, for him, “Please do not attempt anything hasty, Mr. Frankland. I can explain everything.”

“Even those two thugs who kidnapped me?” I asked, with an attempt at sarcasm which, I am afraid, failed miserably.

The man in grey smiled again. “They are hardly thugs,” he said. “We would rather call them ‘necessary strong-arm assistants’!”

“You can call them what you like,” I began; but he cut me off with one wave of his hand.

“We had to exert *some* pressure, my young friend,” he said, “otherwise I cannot imagine that you would have come here so quickly and so—inevitably. It was a case when the end justified the means, as you, a historian, will appreciate.”

I said, “You didn’t get me here to discuss Machiavelli, I am sure.”

The man in grey said softly, “No, but we asked you here because you will appreciate the necessity of force, in the right place, being both an intelligent reader of history and a boxer of some repute. Moreover, we know from your activities as President of the University Conservative Association that you are politically minded, and would wish to do the best for your country.”

I stood up. "Gentlemen," I said, "this is, frankly, fantastic. You have me dragged off in a car and brought here, with masks on your faces, to praise my politics. It makes no sort of sense that I know. I must go now, I'm sorry, and you must find another little blue-eyed victim for your gang games."

I pushed my chair under the table, prepared to act if any of the three tried to prevent my walking out. But no one moved. I think that unnerved me for a moment.

Then the man in grey pushed something across the table towards me. It was a green slip of paper, a cheque. It was made out to me, for three thousand pounds. There was a scrawled signature at the bottom of the slip, which I could not decipher at my distance away from it.

The man in grey said, "Don't go so fast, my friend. This is a little present for you, if only you'll see sense and do a job for us."

My head whirled at the silliness of the situation. I had never seen so much money in my life before. It was beyond my most stupid dream. Yet another part of my brain told me that this money would let me do what I had always dreamed of doing, to fit out a digging expedition in Macedonia, where I was sure I would find Celtic remains. I would get an M.A. out of that, too!

But I put that fantasy behind me and said, almost wearily, I recollect, "The answer is as before. I am a busy chap. I have work to do. Good night."

I turned from them and walked to the door. I recall the bright blue and maroon pattern of the thick carpet on which I walked. Then I heard a voice behind me say, "Stop, Mr. Frankland! If you open that door, I shall shoot!"

I glanced back. The man in the grey suit was pointing a little automatic at my back. His white hand was very steady. His face was set beneath his mask. The faces of the other two men were also set, still as stone masks themselves.

I had no more to say. I shrugged my shoulders. The door-knob was in my hand. It was very cold, I noticed. I turned it, wondering when that thing would go off, when I would feel whatever it is one does feel when a bullet strikes into one's back.

But nothing happened. With the door half-open, I turned again in amazement. The man in grey was sitting smiling, and so were the others. He had laid down the pistol and his fingers were touching each other in the attitude of prayer once more.

“Come back, Mr. Frankland,” he said. “You are a brave man. You are the man we want, but did not hope to find. I do implore you, sir, come back.”

His voice was so gentle, so quietly authoritative, what could I do? I, a scholar of a University, trained to set such a high store on culture and civility? And perhaps I was curious, too.

And perhaps that cheque for three thousand pounds helped—since it was being offered so genteelly now, with such a show of grace.

I turned back into that room, sat down again and said, “Gentlemen, please take off your masks.”

And no one was more surprised than I when they did so, gravely, almost sedately, as though wearing masks was an everyday routine with them.

Four

A Tale Told



THE man in grey spoke first. His words came fast and I listened intently, my eyes still on that cheque.

“My young friend,” he said, “I must first introduce myself. I am Doctor Phipps, of the Nuclear Science Department at Warnmere. I am a research scientist—and I knew that you and I would speak a similar language, for you too are a research man, in your own line.” He smiled a little as he said this, almost as though my form of research was inferior to his own, but I let that pass.

He went on, “I have known your Professor of History since childhood. When I asked him the name of a trustworthy young man, he willingly suggested you—though, in his defence, I must say that I did not tell him exactly what we wanted you to do. Anyway, that being so, we investigated your career so far, and that investigation only confirmed your Professor’s opinion. Your boxing victory to-night clinched it all. Had you lost that little fight”—he grinned as he used the word “little”—“you would have lost this money also, I might say, for we need a strong man, as well as an intelligent one.”

I said, “Doctor Phipps, the world is too much with me right now. Would you order me a strong cup of coffee, please?”

He smiled and pressed a bell in the wall behind him. A waiter knocked three times on the door before entering. I was impressed by the security of the whole occasion. I was equally impressed by the fine quality of the coffee. It brought a new spirit of cheerfulness into my outlook.

Meanwhile, Doctor Phipps waved his white hand about him. “This is a nameless friend of mine from the French *Sûreté*; and this, an equally anonymous friend from the European Bureau, American Zone. At present, I dare say no more.”

I leaned back now and smiled. "So," I said, "because I am a scholar, of sorts, and a boxer of recent successes, you ask me to do something for you, in return for which you give me three thousand pounds?"

They nodded, but the Frenchman immediately chipped in with, "*Mais, Monsieur, vous comprenez que . . .* oh, you understand that the money is to be paid, *quand vous avez*, what is it, when you have done the business, *compris?*"

"Yes," I said, perhaps a little bitterly. "I understand that: no business, no money. All right, go on, *mon ami!*"

The American chewed on his cigar and leaned back on the delicate legs of his white-wood chair. For a moment I was afraid for that chair; he was a very heavy man.

He laughed and said, "Boy, I take a fancy to you." Then he seemed to recollect himself and said, "Just so long as you are on the other side of a table, and I have a little cannon like that to keep you in place!"

The man in grey clucked impatiently, as though he disapproved of these transatlantic asides.

"Mr. Frankland," he said, directly, in his precise and clipped voice, "I must come to the point, I see, or we shall get nowhere to-night. I am going to risk a great deal in speaking frankly, but I shall do so, because I think I know what your reactions will be. They will be those of a gentleman and a scholar; you will be discreet."

He waited so long after that, that I began to feel embarrassed, but I lasted it out and he went on.

"My Department has recently perfected a device which, we feel convinced, will be of the utmost use to the civilization of the western world. I must tell you a little of it, but you will appreciate that I may not go into details, even if you could understand them—and I say in all confidence that you as a historian will grasp my meaning."

I bowed ironically to him. "I find it difficult to add up my change in any shop where there is an efficient salesman," I said.

He bowed in return and said, "I understand, Mr. Frankland. A common situation among Arts students, if I may say so. The great chain stores make their dividends out of such dear people as yourself, and they are legion."

The Frenchman rattled his wine glass. He was about to intervene when the man in grey went on hurriedly, "You see, we have at last made a directed

missile which can project, as it rotates, a limited degree of radiation. Enough, let us imagine, to make any area over which it passes, untenable for a fortnight. It is not, as one might say, lethal; but it is *very damaging*, in that it would hold up production for a set time, and cause some confusion amongst the enemy civilian population.”

The American almost leered at me, over his cigar. I noticed his wonderful gold tooth; his splendid coloured tie. I felt that this was a type a young fellow might like.

He said, in his slow drawl, “We don’t kill ’em; we just stop ’em from killin’ us, boy!”

“Precisely,” said Doctor Phipps, precisely.

I felt it my turn to speak. “Very well, where do I come in? I am no scientist.”

Then, in a great rush of words, the Doctor told me; this device was already in production, all over the country and also in France and America. It was a matter of the utmost secrecy, of course.

But here the snag arose. There was a man, a John Hawke, by name, of a good family, educated at Rugby and Oxford, an athlete and an explorer. A man in his early thirties who lectured up and down the country on his unusual experiences among the Masai and the Esquimaux, and so on.

I said, “And what is wrong with that, may I ask?”

The little Frenchman muttered, “Nothing, *mon ami*, as such. But we happen to know that his sympathies are not our own. We know that he is working for another way of thought. His mother, you see, *Monsieur*, was not British. He takes his name from his late father, a respected man, but his mother was a Central European. He loved his mother, *mon ami*; but he is still British, and he is accepted in the circles of his late and respected father here.”

The American scratched his head. He took the cigar from his mouth for a moment. “We have this problem in the States, boy,” he said. “It’s nothing to get worried about. You’ll come to know all about it, one day. But right now, let me tell you that I’ve followed this Hawke guy half over Europe in the last few months. He’s a smart guy, a contacts man. And he’s got some terrible contacts, believe you me!”

Now I could contain myself no longer. “What has this to do with Doctor Phipps’s protective device?” I asked bluntly.

And Doctor Phipps answered me. “Hawke is in England,” he said. “And he is looking for our secret. He has the entrée to that type of house which may have some knowledge of it. He lectures in the old houses, up and down the country, about his silly adventures with the Tartars, and so on, and having established confidence, may gain the secrets he wishes to pass on, across the Channel.”

I felt that it was time to speak up. “Doctor Phipps,” I said, “it beats me how a man can find out such things. It also beats me how a man could pass on such things if he found them.”

It was the Frenchman who spoke. He was precise and typical. “My young friend,” he said, “we of the *Sûreté* have known him long. He found and passed on the British radar system to Yugoslavia. He passed on the American firepower of Fortresses to Japan—at a time when such things mattered. We know that this fellow’s potentialities are dangerous.”

“Yes,” said Doctor Phipps, “and now Hawke is touring England, seeking a lead. A lead which he will pass on, it doesn’t matter where; but it could mean death to thousands if we let him do it.”

The American strained his chair to the utmost. He chewed his cigar and slapped his ham-like hand upon his great thigh.

“Millions, Bud,” he said laconically. “Millions. We’d have no deterrent to anything *they* wanted to do.”

I said, “All right. What do you want me to do?”

In his prim grey voice, Doctor Phipps said, “Drag him down, my dear fellow. Drag him down before he passes the secret on.”

The Frenchman’s voice pierced me to the bone.

“*Attendez un peu*,” he said. “He is a tough proposition, as my friend over there might say.”

And our friend over there, the American, said, “He is such a man as I would not wish to meet alone, boy. He makes the James Brothers look like small fry and Al Capone like a kindergarten nurse.”

I said again to Doctor Phipps, “What do you want me to do exactly?”

He sensed my desperation, being British.

“I am a scientist, my boy,” he said. “I am not a man of violence, you realize. But I would say, in my heart of hearts, put an end to him, if you legally can. It is a great moral problem, you know.”

I was still awake enough to understand that.

“So,” I said, “you unload your moral problems on me, a patriot, a scholar and a boxer? Why don’t you get the police to arrest this dangerous character? Why pick on me?”

The little Frenchman smiled then. “Because,” he said, with an admirable logic which I had to admire, “he hasn’t *committed* the crime yet. Your police cannot act until that happens. Besides, though, *naturellement*, I respect the intelligence of the English policeman, I respect more a young man of learning who can box in the manner of Georges Carpentier—and who will walk to the door with a pistol directed at his back.”

At last I said, “All right. I will do what I can.”

Doctor Phipps said, smiling greyly, “Then this cheque will be paid into your account the moment he is finished, one way or the other.”

I met his gaze. He knew what I was thinking—that the English are hard customers to deal with, whatever they say about themselves.

“We know your Bank,” he said. “And, if you are worried, we also know your address. Your landlady, Mrs. Maguire, will not wait up for you. She knows that you are going walking in Scotland for the next three weeks. Your family in Shrewsbury have received a wire to the same effect.”

I looked at Doctor Phipps then, in his prim grey suit, and didn’t know whether to call him my enemy or my friend.

I think he was both, as things turned out!

Five

In the Net



I WAS given a room at the Green Man Country Club that night, but before I was allowed to go up to bed, the big American took me aside and said, “You’ll be going off early to-morrow, so I’d better put you in the picture. This guy, Hawke, travels with two bodyguards, a Spaniard called Pedro Moreno, and a Corsican who calls himself Jacko. They’re both first-rate knifemen. We’ve got nothing on Moreno, except illegal entry to the country; but we *could* have taken Jacko in without any trouble, in every place he’s been in, for assault, robbery with violence, and even murder. He’s the boy to watch, my friend, this Giacomo.”

I began to feel a little uncertain of my ability to deal with the situation, and told him so. He smiled and slapped me hard on the back.

“Don’t forget,” he said, “you’ll take ’em by surprise, and that is worth two extra guns any time.”

I looked at him in bewilderment. He leaned over to me and said, “Hawke is getting a bit breezy. He feels he wants another bodyguard, an Englishman this time.”

“And I’m to be that bodyguard?” I asked.

“Hold on,” answered the American, “it’s not that simple, buddy. I can see I’ll have to explain a bit more of his set-up. Well, Hawke has an agent in London, Poplar way of all unlikely places. This man is by day a fruit merchant and well-known, if not exactly respected, in the district. A fruit merchant by day—an intermediary for any sort of shady traffic by night. He can supply anything from a faked passport to a paste replica set of the Crown Jewels—and no questions asked, provided the price is good enough. Now this man may or may not be a foreign agent, we are not sure yet—we’re keeping tabs on him. But we do know he is no lover of Britain, or any other country for that matter. He’d sell his grandmother for cat’s meat and think nothing of it.”

“And this man is to provide Hawke with a new bodyguard?” I asked.

The American nodded. “He has already done so,” he said, “nasty little fellow with a taste for spring-knives, Rat O’Connell is his name. We picked him up at Finchley Road station on his way north this morning to join Hawke in Stratford-on-Avon. Took him in on a charge of petty larceny.”

I gazed at him in despair, “But what do I . . . ?” I said.

He smiled back at me. “You take his place,” he said. “You tell Hawke you were an old friend of Rat’s. You were on the train with him when the cops, rozzers, I should say, took him. Rat asked you to stand in for him. That’s your story and you must stick to it—or else!” “Or else,” I echoed as I trod the thick carpet to bed.

But I hadn’t finished with my new friends yet. I was hardly in bed before there came a discreet knock at the door, and Doctor Phipps walked in, carefully locking the door behind him. He looked a trifle embarrassed, I thought, as he stood by my bedside.

“Pray forgive this intrusion, Mr. Frankland,” he said, “but there is something I wish to make clear to you, to emphasize now.”

I nodded to him, I was too tired to do any more. He smiled and went on, “You understand, we are all doing something quite illegal in this scheme of ours.”

I still did not see what he was getting at. “Go on,” I said, “tell me the worst.”

He shrugged his shoulders and said quietly, “You see, this plan, of which you have agreed to become a part, is a purely private undertaking and has no backing by law in the slightest degree.”

“But,” I said, “what about the American Bureau man and the French *Sûreté*—they are *official* policemen, aren’t they?”

He answered, “Yes, I am afraid so—but not *British* policemen. Our police have refused to take action—indeed, the British constitution would not allow them to do so. But both America and France take a different, more realistic, view. The persuasion of their police, and my own enthusiasm as the inventor of this mechanism, have caused me to take the law into my own hands, you understand?”

I nodded, vaguely. “Then who provides that cheque for three thousand pounds if I remove the danger to your invention? Do you?”

He smiled greyly and shook his head. "No, my boy," he said. "That money comes from a Research Fund, of which I have the administration. It will go down as 'Incidental expenses'. It will be quite in order, I assure you."

I turned over in bed. I was feeling very tired now. "I see," I said. "I become part of the Research overhead expenses. That makes me feel comfortably anonymous."

He placed his hand on my shoulder, "For Heaven's sake, my boy," he said, "never feel that. You are as much an individual as any crusader, any upholder of a faith. You are working for Britain, for the safety of your country and its people. Always remember that, whatever your momentary scruples at what you might have to do."

Then coldly I said, "What if I am put into such a position that I must kill John Hawke, in order to keep your secret safe? What happens then?"

He sat down at the side of my bed and passed his white hand over his face.

"Then," he said with an effort, "we must hope that the British Government will see sense, will see the patriotic intention behind the act."

I pressed home my attack. "And if they do not, what then?"

He got up and walked towards the window, looking out into the darkness. "Then," he said, "we shall all be in this together. All the financial resources available to us will be diverted to your defence. It will be a trial that will go down in history. I can say no more."

He turned back abruptly. "Are you still our man?" he said.

"Why not?" I replied. "Perhaps the worst will not come to the worst. Perhaps I may have luck enough to get rid of this traitor Hawke without going to the last extreme."

"Perhaps," said the Doctor, at the door. "Perhaps, but, my dear young friend, I doubt it."

He smiled once, in his austere way, and then, without another word, he passed through the doorway and I heard his footsteps sounding along the corridor. I was not to see him again for a long while.

When I was sure that he had gone, I got out of bed and quickly scribbled a letter to my people in Shrewsbury. I felt that I owed them a few words of explanation. I tried to be discreet, merely telling them that I was well but

would be very busy for some weeks perhaps and would not be able to write to them or visit them. I said that I might have exciting news to tell them when we next met, though.

Then I got back into bed and slept—not like a mere log, but like a whole Canadian lumber-camp of logs! I was still deep in sleep when I heard a car start up outside the clubhouse. I looked at my watch. It was seven-thirty.

I remembered that letter I had written and got out of bed. My window gave on to the front of the clubhouse, on to the drive that led to the dance hall. I saw a red pillarbox not twenty yards along the road. If I didn't post that letter now, it might never be posted.

I dressed immediately and went quietly from my room. Downstairs I heard noises in what I took to be the kitchen, and the sound of a vacuum cleaner whirring in the hall room. But I saw no one.

I went out into the road and was not more than five yards away from the postbox, that letter already in my hand, when a voice called out behind me, "Hold it, china! That's no way to behave."

Involuntarily, I turned to see the little razor-man of the night before, getting out of a car in the park before the club.

He had been waiting there, it seemed, and moved with a remarkable speed. He was by my side even before I had decided that I might beat him to the postbox, and my letter was in his hand.

"Ho! Ho!" he said, derisively, "so you want to write to Mum already, eh?"

I snatched out for that letter, but it was already in his pocket, and he was two yards away from me.

"Nah, nah," he said, "take it easy, son. You'll get nowhere by violence, you know."

I said, "I'm rapidly coming to believe that, comrade."

He grinned and said, "Now you go right into breakfast, it's waitin' for you. And I'll post this in a special little box I just happen to know of."

I looked at him with new eyes. He was a friend after all, it seemed. "Will you really?" I asked.

"Yus," he said, and very gravely tore the letter into small pieces and flung it into a waste-paper basket at the entrance to the drive.

“C’mon,” he said grimly, “we’ve got work to do.”

I followed him into the club again, my appetite gone. I knew that I was caught then; and what is more, I knew that, righteous as their plan was, these men would not let me get away so easily.

There was a note by my plate, from Doctor Phipps. It merely said, “Trust Joey. He knows the ropes. Good luck! Phipps.”

I looked across the table at the little man and said, “Are you Joey?”

He nodded. “Yus,” he said, “and also *Keen Boy*—a reference to my favourite instrument—and *Midget*, and even *Man Mountain*.”

“Good Lord!” I said, “this is the end!”

He took another piece of toast. “No, china,” he said. “It ain’t even the beginning—yet! You’ll see, my fine feathered friend!”

Six

Strange Meeting



I WAS in that green Morris again, heading towards Stratford-on-Avon, with the same two companions as I had had the previous night. But this time I sat in the back, with Joey, who was “giving me the griff”, as he put it—or “putting me wise”, as the big American would perhaps have said.

“Nah, don’t forget,” his nasal voice went on, as the green countryside sped past us, “your new name is *Billy Flash*. That’ll account for your silk shirt and that nice way of talking you have, see? Moreover, you come from Shoreditch and have served two stretches for assault and battery. Got that?”

I nodded, already a little disgusted. I did not know that honest citizens ever did this sort of thing, out of patriotism—though slyly I told myself that they would doubtless do it for that green cheque I had seen the night before.

“Right,” said Joey. “Now repeat it back to me.”

I did so, feeling rather embarrassed.

“Good,” he said. “Now latch on to this, china. I shall put you in touch with this fellow Hawke and then it’ll be up to you to convince him you’re *with him*, see? If he gets windy, he may do something rapid-like, and quite unpleasant. He’s a hard chap to please, they do say.”

I said, “All right, but how do I convince a man like that?”

Joey gave a chuckle which the big driver echoed. It seemed that they were sharing a joke.

Then he said, “Simple. The old gag—you save his life, see?”

I said, with irony, “I see. I dive into the Avon and save him from drowning, or I throw him a rope when he is hanging on to the roof of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, rock-climbing?”

Joey gave a snort and turned away in disgust. Then he said, quite sternly for him, "Nah look here, this is serious. Lives may depend on it."

I nodded, as gravely as I could and he went on, still angry. "You save him from getting shot, see?"

"No, I don't see," I said.

"Well, you will," he replied, pulling a sawn-off rifle from under the car seat. "See this? No good for anything over ten yards, now, but pretty slick at that range. I shall sling a slug out of this at him. You will knock him aside and save his life, see? Simple."

"And when does this happen?" I said.

"If possible, the second night you know him," said the driver. "We shall stay in Stratford and keep tabs on you. I shall be driving round. And on the second night, I'll find you, never fear. So keep an eye open, my friend. Joey will lean out as we pass your lot and let Hawke have one in the shoulder, unless you push him away. It's got to look real. Do you know what this car looks like?"

"Do I not!" I said. "I could never forget it."

"Right," said Joey. "Now don't be so thick-headed next time I try to explain anything. Otherwise I'll report back to the Old Man that he's picked a wrong 'un."

I said, with a wry smile, "I almost wish you would, Joey. I think I was cut out for quieter things, you know."

He slapped me hard on the back and smiled back. "Don't talk so dreamy-like," he said. "Why, if I could fight like you, I'd be having a crack at the real big money. Heavy-weight Champion of Aston Cross, I'd be—nothing less! Ten quid or nothing!"

So, laughing perhaps a little shakily, I came into Stratford-on-Avon.

They put me out of the car on the bridge. "Turn yourself loose, now, china," said Joey. "Make yourself familiar with the place—you might find that necessary. Don't try anything till to-night, when you will go to the Back Bar of the Hawk and Handsaw at eight-thirty and ask for Mr. Hawke. Tell him you've come off the six o'clock London train. You call yourself *Billy Flash*, remember? You needn't talk any different from what you do, see? And you are an old friend of Rat O'Connell, who was snaffled yesterday. Say you were lying low, to see if the rozzers were after you too, before you came up here. Got that?"

I nodded, “Yes,” I said weakly, “I’ve got that.”

“Right,” said the driver, “and to-morrow night, somewhere in Stratford, I shall find you and *a certain incident* will take place. Got that?”

I bowed slightly. “And at what time does that happen?” I asked sarcastically.

The driver looked right into my eyes as he said, “Some time between six and ten. We can’t be more definite, I’m afraid, your lordship. Now get going and earn your money, boy!”

When I looked round again, that fateful little green Morris had merged with the other traffic and was no longer visible. I suddenly felt very, very lonely.

“Billy Flash! Billy Flash! Rat O’Connell! Rat O’Connell!” I said to myself, as I walked up and down the gardens.

“Assault and battery! Shoreditch! Assault and battery! Shoreditch!” I whispered, as I gazed at the white swans, bobbing on the quiet blue river.

It was the loneliest day of my life.

“The rozzers snaffled Rat at Finchley Road,” I convinced myself, as I lay on the green sward, staring at the great Shakespeare Theatre, over the river. “The dirty rozzers nabbed him, just like I said, guvnor. Rat’s an old china o’ mine, guvnor. We been on bags o’ jobs together, sir. Like brothers, we was.”

I was getting along wonderfully with my piece when I recalled that I was not required to do any character acting—just be myself. Billy Flash! Billy Flash! Me, a graduate of a University, a son of respectable parents, a pillar of Conservatism!

I could not help myself—I broke out into laughter, there on the towpath of the sweet River Avon.

It came to me with a start then that I was not alone. A young girl with flaxen plaits and a blue tunic was staring at me with great concern. I have a young sister of my own and I have grown up to believe that girls of that age, or any other, should not be encouraged. I tried to stare back through her, over the river, towards the immortal red brick edifice that looks like a biscuit factory but is a poetry assembly room. It was no good. She came towards me and bent over me.

“You are not very well, sir,” she said—as though I was ninety at least. “You have been lying in the sun and have a touch of sunstroke. First, I must loosen your collar, then . . .”

I rolled away from her. “Hey,” I said, “what goes on?”

She smiled coolly and answered, “Girl Guide, on camping holiday here. Must do my good deed, sir. Keep still and I will loosen your collar.”

“Go away,” I said, “I’m quite all right, thank you.”

She clucked efficiently. “They all think that,” she said, “but *we* know. We are trained to give First Aid, sir. Please keep still, I can’t help you if you don’t.”

She made another dive for me, her professional training at stake. I dodged away, rolling on the grass. I noticed that people were looking at us, some smiling, some disapproving.

At last I could stand this no longer. I reached up and took the young girl by the wrist. “Now, be a good child and feed the swans, or something,” I said. “Go and polish the tombstones in Shakespeare’s church, if you want to do a good deed. Be off with you!”

I gave her a push, meant to be good-humoured, which turned out a little harder than my intention. She fell over, half-laughing, half-crying, in a bundle of arms and legs and plaits.

A burly young man wearing a coloured silk shirt outside his trousers stopped and glowered at me. “Hey,” he said, “that’s no way to go arahnd, knocking kids abaht, mister. Pick one yer own size, me for example.”

I said, “I wouldn’t pick you if you were the last one left in the shop, chum. Go on now, beat it and mind your own business.”

I had tried to speak in a jocular, yet firm tone. But the young man wouldn’t take a hint. He slung his camera off his shoulder and put it down on the grass. He clenched his fist and put on what he must have intended to be a threatening face. Then he came forward.

“Right!” he said. “Right! You’re just abaht my drop, mate!”

Frankly, I didn’t know what to do then. I might have used my right on him—just where a brown bit of his midriff showed between the buttons of his Hawaiian shirt; but that would have hurt him, and perhaps have got me into trouble. I might have swallowed my pride and have begged his pardon—but that was unthinkable in the circumstances.

However, I was saved the trouble of a decision for my new friend, the Girl Guide, took a hand. She snatched up the young man's camera and swung it round her head in high glee, shouting, "Hiya, look what I'm doing! I'm going to throw this right into the middle! Bet me I don't!"

The young tough turned round in dismay, his eyes starting.

"Hey," he gasped, "that cost four pahunts ten, you idiot!"

He ran at the girl, who led him a lively little dance for twenty yards, then dropped his camera into a convenient clump of nettles. As he groped among the green leaves, muttering, she lolloped back to me laughing. "That fixed him!" she said. "Aren't you glad?"

I watched the young man retreating, tapping his forehead to indicate that we were both mad, the girl and I. Then I said, "Thank you for nothing, miss. Now go about your business and leave me to mine."

Her eyes were suddenly moist. "Just when I was getting to like you," she said. "I'll never trust men again."

"It's a good thing to learn some ideas young," I said callously, recalling the attitude I would have adopted to my young sister if she had spoken in this way.

The Girl Guide clenched her teeth at me. "Oh, you are heartless," she said. Then she sat down on the grass and twisted her rather grubby handkerchief in her fingers. "Nobody likes me," she whimpered. "Last night I got into trouble for borrowing Sheila's fountain-pen to write home. I got put on camp duty all day while the others went on a bus tour—and now *you* turn against me."

I thought she was really going to cry then.

"There's no harm in borrowing a pen, surely," I said.

She gazed up at me, her blue eyes very damp, and said, "No, but that silly clot Sheila thought I'd stolen it and started an awful hullabaloo! I'll strangle her to-night, I declare, I will!"

I took the girl's hand and raised her up. I hate getting involved in other people's emotional troubles, but I felt really sorry for this well-meaning young scallywag.

"Look," I said, "if you'll go right back to camp afterwards, I'll take you into town now and buy you a fountain-pen of your own."

She began to grin immediately, looking up at me. "Will you, honest?" she said. "Oh, you are a dear! Better even than Rock Hudson, I do declare!"

And before I could dodge her, she had flung her arms round my neck and was doing her damp best to kiss me. I put on a stern expression—which didn't seem to do much good. "I shall take it all back," I said, "if you don't stop being so forward, young woman."

But she was already trotting along the towpath. "Come on, handsome," she called back. "I know just the shop!"

So she got her pen—and a bottle of green ink to fill it from—and a big writing pad to use them both on. "Oooh!" she said. "Whatever shall I write on this lovely mauve paper?"

I was feeling just a little overpowered by then. "Oh, go back to camp and write your Memoirs," I said abruptly. "No doubt a forceful character like you has got lots of affairs to write about! Good-bye."

She stood on the pavement, clutching her loot. "Not even a farewell ice-cream together?" she said wistfully. "Look, I have just enough for two raspberry wafers." She fumbled in her pocket and drew out a handful of copper coins. I gave in once more. As we sat on the high stools in an Ice-Cream Parlour, she dangled her legs and said, "I can tell you are a fool where women are concerned! Now, aren't you?"

I said, "Wipe that lump of vanilla ice off your nose, and we'll go—our separate ways."

She stared down into her Peach Melba. "I *had* hoped we might be together till the bus comes back to camp. Then I wouldn't be lonely, you see. It will be back just before nine, Miss Thompson said. I have to have a warm drink ready for the Troop."

"Nine o'clock!" I said, with a gasp. "Why, I have a most pressing date long before that."

And as I said it, a strange shudder passed over me. Here was this child trying to keep me from my assignment with—what? I suddenly wondered whether she had been sent by some laughing Fate, to keep me from death . . . a grubby angel in disguise.

But I brushed that idea away; the disguise was too good, I thought, glancing at her grubby finger-nails and the holes in the knees of her black stockings. No, definitely not an angel! A minor imp, perhaps.

"I'll really have to go," I said. "It is nearly six."

She sighed, with all the resignation of womankind the world over, when confronted by man's stupidity.

"Well, at least tell me your name," she said. "Mine's Angela."

Angela, the angel!

And for a moment I almost did. Then I drew back just in time. I leaned over her and said, "Billy Flash. But keep it dark. I am not the sort of person who courts publicity, can't afford to."

She gazed at me. "I know what you are," she said suddenly. "You are a gentleman gangster!"

Wryly, I nodded. She gave a little squeal of pleasure. "Oooh," she said. "Fancy that—and me, a Girl Guide!"

I put my finger over my lips. "Mum's the word," I said. "Remember that pen. You are an accessory after the fact now, you know."

She clutched it tightly to her and nodded. "I won't breathe a word to a soul," she said.

She walked off in the direction of Holy Trinity church, stopping many times to wave back to me, and bumping into passers-by as she did so. Once she dropped her writing pad and caused a minor diversion of traffic as she picked it up. In a way, I was sorry to see her go—and indeed, I should have been. She was the last decent, gentle person I was to meet for some time.

Seven

Quarry Encountered



THE church clock was striking half-past eight when I reached the Hawk and Handsaw. It was a renovated Tudor inn, built on two sides of a cobbled courtyard, complete with heavily tarred black beams and an inn sign that showed a gaily painted falcon swooping on to an equally bizarre heron. I passed beneath the archway and made my way to a black and white door on which the words “Back Bar” were outlined in tarnished gold.

With my hand on the door-knob, I paused, wondering what I should find inside that room. I tried to tell myself that I was not scared—but I felt that my heart was thumping double-time, in spite of that self-assurance!

In cases like this, I have always held that the best course is to keep moving, to take action without too much thought about the consequences. I have known even the bravest soldiers go to pieces if they have been forced by circumstances to wait, to think, before a dangerous mission. The thing to do, when you have made up your mind about a plan of action, is to put it into operation *without delay*.

I told myself that as I turned the knob of that black and white door, and entered the Back Bar of the Hawk and Handsaw.

I found myself in a small, square room, with a low ceiling crossed by a heavy oak beam. The lights in the wooden chandelier were rose-red and warm; the walls were panelled in a limed oak; the window was curtained with a heavily woven mock-tapestry, portraying a medieval hunting scene. There was a small bar counter in one corner, where, against a background of many variously-shaped and coloured bottles, a young woman with yellow hair stood smiling as she polished a wine glass. There was only one other person in that room, a broad-shouldered hunched figure in a soiled leather motoring coat. He wore a black beret, pulled well down over his brows. There was a half-empty glass of some golden liquid on the table before him, but he seemed to be sleeping, for his eyes were shut.

The girl said, "Good evening, sir," in a flat voice, which carried little welcome in it, I thought.

I went over to the bar and smiled at her. She allowed herself a token smile in return. "What can I get for you?" she said, without enthusiasm, putting down the glass and looking at herself in the mirror as she patted her bright hair.

I said, "A glass of cider, please. It's been a thirsty day travelling."

She poured out my drink without speaking.

"Very hot in London to-day," I said.

"That will be ninepence," she said, staring over my shoulder.

I got a definite impression that my presence in that little room was not particularly desirable. When she returned to her glass-polishing, I looked round at the man in the beret. He was bulky and swarthy. His hair was black and oily; definitely a Mediterranean type, I thought. Could this be Pedro Moreno—or could it be Jacko the Corsican Giacomo?

As I looked at him his eyes opened and met mine immediately. His heavily-jowled face did not change its somnolent expression in the slightest, but his dark beady eyes were bright with menace. He had obviously not been sleeping—just sitting slumped there in the corner, relaxed and wary, a watchdog on guard and keeping quiet until he was needed to do his bit of biting.

I nodded towards him and smiled. "Good evening," I said. He did not smile. He did not speak. His brown eyes stayed fixed on mine, in an unblinking stare. I shrugged my shoulders and turned back to the little bar.

The barmaid was watching me coldly too, though I found her gaze less positively menacing.

Then, as casually as I could make it, I said to her, "Is Mr. Hawke anywhere about, miss?"

She did not answer me, but I saw her eyes flicker behind me, towards that corner where the man in the black beret sat. And then I felt a big hand grasping my upper arm in a very strong grip.

I turned and said jocularly, "Hello, there! What's troubling you, mister?"

The man in the black beret must have moved from that corner table like lightning, I thought. As he stood near to me I caught a strong whiff of garlic—and then there was no doubting his continental origins.

He said thickly, "You ask for Mistair Hawke. Why should that be, hey? Tell me why?"

Very deliberately I disengaged his thick fingers from my arm with my left hand. I felt their brutish power as I did so, and knew then that this man would be more than a merely tough opponent, if it came to a rough-and-tumble.

"That's better," I said, when my arm was free again. "Now we can talk. Why, you've got a grip like a policeman, chum!"

As I said that he spat and a grim line showed where his mouth had been.

"What is this of police?" he said. "What you want, hey?"

I tried to sound as rakish as I could, putting on a jocularly that I didn't feel.

"Oh, the old coppers know how to handle a bloke," I said. "I ought to know, they've had the old lock on me enough times."

Once more, the big man said, "What you want with Mistair Hawke, hey?" He came closer, his dark eyes staring into mine.

I said, "Look, chum, you can't frighten me, see? I've got business with Mr. Hawke himself, and I'm not telling you what it is. It's private business, see? You can't be too careful about things like that, can you, Miss?"

I pretended to appeal to the barmaid, who suddenly turned away and went through a little door beside the bottles, ignoring me completely and leaving me alone with the swarthy-faced watchdog. Suddenly, I sensed that she was indicating to him that if he wished to get down to business on me, she would not be there to bear witness on my behalf. Then I felt very lonely indeed!

I had decided to play the game through, however, and I said once more, "Look boy, I don't deal with assistants. It's the big man or nothing with me, see?"

Before I had finished speaking, I felt myself being swung round by the lapels of my jacket. I saw the man's right hand go into his inner breast-pocket.

Then the outside door opened and a young man and a girl came in, chatting happily, their faces red with that day's sun.

"What'll you have, Mavis?" asked the young fellow.

"I'd love a lemonade in a long glass, with lots and lots of ice in it, Phil," the girl said. "Gosh, I'm thirsty!"

The big man's hand had come away from my lapels and I was free again. But I could feel the dampness of perspiration on my forehead and my right leg was trembling uncontrolledly, as it always does when I am in danger.

Then the big man suddenly linked his arm through mine, as though we were close friends, and almost dragged me through the little door by which the barmaid had gone.

As we went, I heard the girl say, "Oh, Phil, look at the funny way these foreigners go on! Quite comic, ain't it!"

The young man sniffed and said, "They look as if they've had a drop too much, if you ask me!"

Then we were in a narrow passage-way. The big man said, "Right, mistair, you ask for the Boss—you shall see him. Then maybe you wish you didn't, see?"

"Lead on, chum," I said, trying to smile. "That's all I've been asking."

We went up two flights of stairs, and stopped before a white door. I saw no point in hanging back, and was about to push open the door when the man in the black beret caught my arm.

"Mind your manners, you," he said, glaring at me once again, with something of the effect of a film close-up. I grinned back at him.

He snorted and tapped quietly on the door three times. Within that room someone was playing a guitar, though *playing* is perhaps the wrong word to describe what I heard. It was as though someone was thinking his thoughts on to the strings—vibrantly sad thoughts, that sometimes rose and soared in a wild melancholy that almost verged on violence. I had heard something like this before and knew it to be Spanish gipsy music. Then the sounds stopped suddenly and a voice called, "All right, Jacko, come in. What are you waiting for?"

It was a balanced and cultured voice, with what I would have called "an Oxford accent". But I had no time to speculate on that matter, for Jacko gave me a strong push in the middle of the back as he opened the door—and then I was in the room.

By contrast with the harsh glare of the electric lights in that passage-way, the room was almost restful, being lit only by two standard lamps at opposite ends of the room. Beneath the dangling fringes of one sprawled a

man in a dinner jacket, his long fingers still lying across the strings of a great black guitar. He was gazing up at me with a faintly amused expression, as though half-expecting me, or someone like me, and finding the whole occasion humorous in a gentle way. In the light of that lamp, I saw his sleek black hair, which grew down his cheeks almost to the jaw; I saw the long narrow face, the heavy eyelids and the thin, ironical mouth. This was undoubtedly Pedro Moreno. He smiled dryly and I caught a glimpse of a gold tooth.

Then my attention was called to the other side of that elegant room, from which the same voice that had bidden us enter now spoke again.

“Well, Giacomo, what have you found, you scoundrel?”

At a delicate table, covered by a scatter of papers, sat another man. His forehead was half-hidden by a green eyeshade and he was wearing a crimson dressing-gown over a white dress shirt. I observed his lithe frame, his immensely broad shoulders, his light golden hair and the set of his jaw. I had not the slightest doubt that this was John Hawke, the man I was hired to drag down, as Doctor Phipps had put it—*my man*.

Jacko pushed me towards him. “In the bar this man asks for you, Boss,” he grunted. “So I bring him.”

The man at the table shot such a glance at Jacko as I would not wish to have sent in my direction just then. His mouth twisted into a bitter shape and his cultured voice took on an unpleasant rasp.

“So you bring up any Tom, Dick and Harry who asks for me, do you, you moron?” said John Hawke. “How do you know this fellow ought to come up here?”

Jacko said, “I frisked him, Boss, on the way up. He has no weapon, no knife, nothing. If you don’t want him, we can. . . .”

The guitar began to whisper again behind me, a plaintive little melody, as though Moreno had lost interest. A spasm of annoyance passed over the pale face of John Hawke. “Stop that damned noise, Pedro!” he said. The melody ended on a broken note and the room was silent once more.

Then John Hawke rose from the table and came towards me, flicking off the eyeshade as he approached. I was amazed at his height. I am not a small man, but he towered over me.

He lit a cigarette with a gold lighter and stood a yard away from me, blowing his smoke over my head and looking down at me through half-

closed eyes.

He stood like that perhaps thirty seconds, until I was almost afraid that I might tremble, or make some sign which would give me away to his keen gaze.

“Who are you?” he said quietly. “A policeman?”

I grinned widely and, speaking as naturally as I could, with perhaps the slightest coarsening of accent, I said, “No, mister! Just the reverse, as you might say. Why, Rat O’Connell would laugh his socks off to hear a crack like that!”

John Hawke did not move a muscle. He blew a smoke ring and watched it rise into the air. Then he said, almost in a whisper, “At this moment, Rat O’Connell would find it hard to raise a grin even, my friend.”

I stared at him in genuine surprise. “So, you know?” I said.

He stubbed out the cigarette viciously into a heavy glass ashtray on the table behind him. When he turned round he said, “Yes, why shouldn’t I know?”

Then he smiled, like a blonde tiger, wondering whether to eat now or to wait a few minutes longer.

“What do you know of Rat O’Connell?” he asked.

I made myself smile again and said, “Why, I was with him when the rozzers picked him up at Finchley Road. Just as the train was coming in.”

He looked me straight in the eye and said, “No, as the train was pulling *out*. And O’Connell was alone, my friend. You are a liar.”

Behind me that guitar began to mutter once more, but this time John Hawke made no move to stop it. At my right side, between myself and the door, I could hear the thick and laboured breathing of that big man they called Jacko. My chances of getting out of that room were remote, I thought, should my courage fail me. There was only one thing to do, brazen it out. I grinned and shrugged my shoulders.

“Right,” I said. “I’m a liar. I wasn’t with Rat, but I should have been. He asked me to be—and I let him down. I didn’t mean to, but a fellow barged into me just as I was getting up to him. Then the rozzers took him and I hung back. There was no point in getting pinched as well. That was the agreement we had—if *he* couldn’t get up here, *I* was to stand in for him.”

John Hawke bored into my eyes with his own grey ones, then, almost as though he half-believed me, he nodded. "I know nothing about you," he said. "Nor does the man who sent Rat to me. He knows nothing of a stand-in."

I looked down at my toe as it traced a pattern on the carpet. "I'm down on my luck," I said. "Got no money to pay agents yet. Rat was letting me in on a job, he said, if it came off. I've done quite a bit of strong-arm stuff for him from time to time."

I came out of my act to see John Hawke's hand, held out towards me—a well-manicured hand, sensitive but broad in the palm. The hand of a man of action, I thought.

"Rat O'Connell is a pretty tough proposition," he said, smiling grimly. "Any man who has looked after Rat would have to be quite something."

His hand was still held out towards me. I knew what he meant and I took it, bracing my muscles as I did so—and I needed to. His grip was that of the proverbial vice. I grinned at him as his long fingers clenched round mine. Then, getting the feel of his hand, I began to exert what force I had, trying not to hurry. And soon he stopped hurting me and I felt my own bone and muscle telling on him.

Once I paused, anxious not to go too far, but he was still smiling at me, as though teasing, daring me to go on. I have seen that sort of look before, in the ring, when everything looks fine—but you don't go for the kill because of that look in your opponent's eyes, that "come hither" look.

Instead, I made a small grimace, as though Hawke was starting to hurt me, and relaxed my grip slightly. Taken by surprise, his own grip slackened, whereupon I twisted my hand round in his and getting a better position, turned on everything I had.

He did not say a word, but a small gasp escaped from his open mouth, and I saw that his upper lip was moist with the sudden shock of my attack.

Then I felt Jacko's huge fingers squeezing the nape of my neck. I had to let Hawke's hand go to prise off those brutal maulers.

John Hawke was rubbing his hand quietly and staring at me, his eyes grim, but his lips making the pretence of a smile. The muffled guitar was still playing, a laughing accompaniment to the little drama that had been played out in that fine room.

"I shall need a secretary to do my writing for me, as well as a strong-arm man, for the next few days," said Hawke, lighting a new cigarette. I noticed that he used his left hand for the purpose, and that pleased me. At least I had convinced him that I was capable of holding my own, of looking after Rat O'Connell, for instance—or John Hawke.

Then Jacko said from behind me, "What shall I do with him, Boss? Take him for a moonlight ride?"

John Hawke sat down once more, beneath that restrained pink light and smiled across the walnut table towards us. He shook his head slowly and said, "No, old friend. Perhaps you can do that later on, but not now. There is just the chance that he is what he says—in which case he might be useful to us all, you see. More useful than Rat, for example. At least this one was smart enough, if we believe him, not to get picked up; and if we find that he is not what he says—why, then, Jacko, we can make appropriate arrangements then."

I shuffled to my feet deliberately on that fine carpet, as though in some embarrassment and said, "Honest, Mr. Hawke, I'm here to look after you, nothing else, I swear."

I felt a strange satisfaction as I spoke those words, for they were true, *very true*—but not in the way they sounded, on the surface.

To my surprise, he stared back at me, his face deadly serious. Then he nodded, "Curiously enough, my powerful friend, I think you are. I think you might well be what you say—but I am not sure. And I *must* be sure."

He called over my shoulder to Pedro Moreno. "Get him a room for to-night, next to Jacko's." Then he turned to Jacko and said, "While Pedro and I are out to-night, keep an eye on this one. See that he has what he wants, but don't let him go downstairs. Understand?"

Jacko grunted and then tapped me on the shoulder.

"Come on," he said, "you might as well turn in, have an early night. Your room is up on the next floor."

I said, "Oh, what a nuisance. I wanted to see the picture that's on at the corner, Humphrey Bogart it is, my favourite."

Jacko snorted. "Ugh! Gangster rubbish," he said. In the light of the pink lamp, John Hawke was smiling broadly, as though he enjoyed the joke too.

Eight

Matador and Silencer



THAT evening seemed endless. Jacko brought up a tray of sandwiches and a pot of coffee and then left me. The clock down the street chimed ten and the streets below were a little quieter than they had been. Out of curiosity, hardly anything more, I tried the door gently. It was not locked.

Then a fantastic idea came to my mind; what if I were to go down to that private sitting-room again and look at the papers on the table? Let us suppose that they were documents of importance to international security. Would I not be doing a service to my country if I were to steal them, to grab them up in my hands and rush downstairs and out into Stratford, to the first police station I found?

The suddenness of it all appealed to me. John Hawke would realize that the game was up, and then he might do something foolish, like shooting at me, or at a policeman—and the noose would close on his neck. It would all be so simple—so much easier, and perhaps less dangerous than this cat and mouse game, which as yet I had not got worked out.

I slipped quietly from the bed and switched out my light. Then gently, very gently, I eased the door open—first an inch, then two inches, then a foot. The passage-way was empty. I stepped out and trod very carefully past the next white door; that was Jacko's room.

At the end of the passage were the stairs that led down to the sitting-room—a distance of fifteen yards, no more. I walked almost noiselessly along that thick carpet, my heart already thumping.

I was about to step on to the top stair when Jacko came out of a doorway, his hands in his pockets.

“The bathroom's in there,” he said, jerking his head back.

“Thanks,” I said, and went in. I turned the taps on for a while.

He was waiting outside for me when I came out at last, but did not speak as he led me back down the passage-way. I heard the lock click when once more I was in my own room.

There was nothing more for it; I was caught. I went to the window and looked out. It was a sheer drop down to the street, three storeys below, with not even a drainpipe to shin down.

In the light of the lamps, people were moving about, most of them gaily, dressed as for holiday. Under one street-lamp two young men, their light raincoats slung over their shoulders like cloaks were talking excitedly, gesturing, waving their arms, striking poses. Even at that distance, the sound of their animated high voices came up to me. They had been to the Theatre and were acting it all again, telling each other how it had been played—and how it should have been played.

But somehow, in that moment, Shakespeare seemed very remote to me, very artificial—even unimportant!

Then, shocked with that thought, I rolled into bed and resigned myself to sleep. I had found my quarry—now if I was to earn my three thousand pounds and gain a name as a public benefactor, I had only to keep an eye on him, prevent him from stealing Doctor Phipps' secret weapon—and then find some watertight occasion for handing him over to justice.

Overwhelmed with the immensity of that task, I fell into a deep sleep and did not wake until the breakfast gong rattled the walls about my ears.

It was a bright summer morning. I rose from my bed and tried the door. It was still locked. And that made me very annoyed. Did they intend to treat me as a prisoner? I asked myself, and then felt most ill-used—until I recalled why I was there in any case. Then my anger left me, for, after all, they had every reason to protect themselves, hadn't they?

I laughed at my own earlier self-pity and sat on the edge of my bed, whistling and waiting. I did not have to wait long. Soon there was a knock on my door; I heard the lock click, and then Pedro Moreno came in. He carried a tray of ham and eggs, toast, marmalade and coffee, which he set down on my dressing-table, with an air of resignation.

He was about to go out through the door again when I said, "What's the big idea, mister? Do you want to send me stark ravers with loneliness?"

His long Spanish face relaxed into a tired smile. He bowed his fine head slightly and said, "I will send Jacko up to you for company, when he has had

breakfast. That will be in another hour. He is fond of the pleasures of the flesh.”

I smirked and said, “Don’t bother. I’d rather be alone after all.”

He came into the room again and approached my bed. So near, I could have kicked his feet from under him, I thought; or could I? This man’s imperturbable calm impressed me more than any show of violence would have done. You know how to deal with violent types—but quiet ones . . . never!

He looked down at me and said drily, “You will pardon me, señor, but I think you are a fool to get caught up in a thing like this.”

I jumped at the chance. “What do you mean?” I asked eagerly; perhaps too eagerly. He gave a tired shrug to those wide shoulders and smiled again, as though he found my presence distasteful. Then he turned back to the door. “The little matador should choose a little bull,” he said. “The big bull is for the giant.”

I said, “And who’s talking of bulls?”

He paused then, his hand on the door-knob; and I flung myself forward in an instinctive action, trying to break out past him into the corridor. I don’t know what possessed me; perhaps I resented being locked up on a fine summer morning, with the sun striking down over Stratford. Perhaps I felt sick of the whole affair and wanted to go no further in it. Perhaps I was just crazy. I don’t know, but I made that attempt—and I swear that with almost anyone else standing guard, I would have got through. But not this time!

As I came forward, in a rugger tackle, Pedro Moreno leaned over me and struck downwards with the edge of his long hand, exactly on the nape of my neck. I measured my length on the carpet, stunned and defeated.

All the same, I recall looking up at him and saying, with as much of a smile as I could muster, “That would be a foul in the boxing ring, old boy!”

And I recall equally well his cold reply. “It is the place we strike at in the bull ring, though, amigo!”

Then I saw his shoes going away from me and the cream wood of the door closing. When I came to again, the coffee was cold—but I drank it, all the same. I needed nourishment. I could not face the cold eggs, however, and the congealed fat of the ham almost made me retch as I looked at it. I flung the table napkin over it and then sat down by my window to work out a plan of escape.

Outside the street was vivid with colour; a coach-load of trippers from Birmingham was in, blowing red-striped cardboard trumpets and scattering potato crisps far and wide for the hovering pigeons.

A stout man with a massive gold watch-chain dragged a dark-brown bottle from his pocket and stopped in the middle of the road to quench his thirst. Seeing a friend on the opposite side he shouted out, "What price Shakespeare now!" The other man laughed and called back, "If it wasn't for the likes of us, there'd be no Shakespeare!"

I puzzled over that strange remark for a long time—so long in fact that I did not hear my door open to admit Jacko. He was still wearing his beret, but not his long overcoat. He stood with his thick arms folded and said, "Come with me. Boss wants you."

I bowed in irony, but he cut me short. "Pack it in," he said. "Come quick when the Boss sends."

He let me go first down the stairs, and even through that dainty door that led into John Hawke's sitting-room.

John Hawke was sitting by the window, his back towards us. The door had opened without a sound, and the carpet was a thick one. Yet he had heard us enter.

"Leave us, Jacko," he said. "Go away and test the sparking-plugs, or something."

Jacko made a protesting step forward. "But Boss," he said.

Hawke waved a white hand wearily. "You heard what I said, Jacko. Go away. If he gets troublesome I shall deal with him myself. You can drive the body out to Shottery to-night and leave it in Anne Hathaway's garden."

Jacko went out, scratching his greasy head.

Then Hawke said, still without turning, "Do you mind shutting the door? That clumsy lout will never remember."

I did as I was told, wondering whether I should go on through that door and out into the street. But I didn't go out—perhaps because Jacko might still be on guard somewhere; perhaps because I was anxious to come face to face with this mystery man at last, and alone.

Yet now that I had my chance, I was silent. This man exerted a strange hypnotic influence, I felt sure, on all who came into contact with him. I did not know what to say; indeed, there was nothing to say. I waited for him to

speak, which he did at length, turning round slowly in his chair and looking me straight in the eye.

“You are a fool,” he said. “I do not know what your game is, but you are a fool. I have been on the phone all morning, trying to check up on you—and no one knows you.”

He saw my protest forming and held up his hand. “Don’t try to brazen it out,” he said, “I know all the channels. *No one* knows you. Is that clear?”

I swallowed and said, “I met Rat O’Connell by chance. I took to him and he took to me. We decided to go round together without any agents, without any gang interference, see?”

John Hawke stared through me. Then he slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and slowly pulled out a snub-nosed pistol. With one long finger he indicated a silver attachment to its muzzle. Then, leaning slightly to the left, he pressed a switch in the wall. The radio lit up and the strains of a dance band filled the room.

He smiled bitterly. “Victor Sylvester, my friend,” he said. “What an accessory after the fact! He and this little silencer, eh?”

I could not resist raising my hand to wipe away the beads of perspiration that I felt forming on my forehead.

“Talk fast,” said John Hawke. “I have not long to waste. Tell me about yourself, dear friend, and tell me convincingly. For I swear to all the dark gods of forest and river that I shall shoot you through the head if you don’t come clean.”

Nine

Reprieve



I N my time I have made a parachute jump; I have met the Midland Area Heavy-weight champion over six rounds; and I have attended at least four *viva voces* with eminent archaeologists! One might say I had had fair experience of danger, in a quiet sort of way.

But I had never sweated as I did then, before that elegant Chippendale table, on which lay a gold cigarette-lighter side by side with a blue-steel automatic.

I said, "You are making a big mistake, Mr. Hawke."

He smiled, his thin mouth rising more on one side than the other, mirthlessly, bitterly. Then he slowly raised the automatic pistol until it pointed at a spot above my eyes, and took aim, frowning a little as he did so.

The music of Victor Sylvester's dance orchestra suddenly grew in volume. They seemed to be having a good time. I was not.

I suppose I might have blurted out the whole story then—or even have flung myself on to the floor, hoping to escape the blast of that vicious instrument. But I think I was too petrified to take either course. Instead, I did something which made no sense at all—but something which came to me instinctively.

In a loud and clear voice which surprised me, I suddenly said, "John Hawke, if you are a man, put that thing down and come round that table. And if I don't break every bone in your body within five minutes—then turn your blood-hounds, Moreno and Jacko on to me."

For a moment I was amazed at what I had said. For another moment that frown of concentration stayed on his face. Then his hand wavered suddenly and the pistol was lowered slowly to the table top.

His face white and drawn, John Hawke said, "I have half a mind to take you at your word, my friend. And if I did, you might regret speaking out of

turn.”

Then just as suddenly he walked over to me and stood about two feet away from me, his hands by his side.

“Only a brave man would have reacted as you did then,” he said. “I swear, I would have shot you like a dog—but I sensed courage in you, and courage is a quality we should not destroy, wherever we find it, it is so rare.”

I sneered openly at him then. “Thank you for nothing,” I said.

He glanced at me as though I had become a worm again. Then he said icily, “You may be what you say you are, I do not know. You may have been one of Rat’s *private* friends. I shall take a chance with you—just one. And if it goes wrong, then God help you, for I shall go on where we have just left off. I shall shoot you down with as little mercy as I would a wolf. Now go back to your room and wait until I send for you.”

I gave him a mock salute and turned on my heel.

Pedro Moreno was waiting for me in the passage-way. He was just putting a long knife back into the left lapel of his jacket—a very slim knife, I noticed, hardly much thicker than a knitting needle, but so much more wicked-looking.

His face gave no signs of his emotions. “Keep right on, up the stairs,” he said, “señor.”

I did not reply.

At my door he said, “You are a lucky man, señor, I think. I know no one else who would have taken the chance you did.”

I turned to him and said, “What do you take me for? I come here to help him and he tries that stuff on me. Anyone would do the same, chum.”

The long Spanish face allowed itself the slightest show of sarcasm. Then, without a change of inflection, he said, “Get into your room and stay there. Those are your orders, my friend.”

The lock clicked behind me, and strangely enough, I was so relieved to be back there in safety, I fell on to the unmade bed as though I had never slept before.

I woke up in a flurry of anxiety, troubled in my mind, yet not knowing what it was that troubled me so. Then in a flash I remembered—this was the *second day*—the day when my friends—if I might call them such—were going to shoot at Hawke and I was going to save him!

Sitting up in my bed, I scratched my head and wondered just how one was supposed to achieve that impossibility from the height of three storeys!

“My, oh my! But you do like to do things the hard way!” I said to myself, laughing in spite of my depression.

Then Jacko was standing beside me and glowering, as usual.

“Get up, you lazy lay-about,” he said. “The Boss wants to take you somewhere.”

“For a ride?” I suggested, drily. “For a one-way journey, for example?”

He relented far enough to let one side of his thick mouth slip down a little—his closest imitation of a smile—and said, “Maybe! Who knows? Maybe!”

Then he put out his hairy hand to grasp me and I slid away from him, to the other side of the bed.

“All right, I’m coming without your help,” I said. “And just a word of friendly warning—keep your paws well away from me, my old gorilla, or you and me are going to get really tangled up.”

A dark cloud seemed to cross his swarthy face for an instant and I thought that this fiery tempered man was going to rush forward to attack me there and then. But I stood my ground, my right hand ready. He seemed to hesitate, and then he shrugged his bear-like shoulders and went to the door.

“Come on,” he said. “Don’t keep *him* waiting.”

“After you, dearest one,” I said smiling. “I’d rather walk *behind* you, if you don’t mind.”

He gave an ugly snort and set off down the passage-way. I followed him then, a grin on my face, but with a flutter in my chest that only meant one thing—that I was excited, in spite of myself.

In the little Back Bar where I had first met Jacko, John Hawke and Pedro Moreno waited, their soft hats pulled down.

Hawke looked at me searchingly. Then he said, without any expression, “Come along, my daring friend. We are going to take you out with us.”

I said, “Are you going to bring me back, that is more to the point!”

Pedro Moreno smiled, a slow Spanish smile, full of sardonic humour, of quiet guile.

Hawke smiled too. "Perhaps," he said. "We may even bring you back—if you behave. We are taking you to the theatre with us, my friend. You shall see Sir John playing Hamlet."

I let my tongue run away with me then.

"Yes," I said, "there might be a moral for us all there:

*'So oft it chances in particular men . . .
That, for some vicious mole of nature in them . . .
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect . . .
Their virtues else, but they as pure as grace,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. . . !' "*

Hawke said, "I shall forgive the condensation, my friend, for it helps you to make your point. Yes, how truly he speaks, our friend the Bard—that every man has his weaknesses, however strong he might be in other respects. It will be a pleasure, of a sort, to sit with you through this performance. I shall look forward to your commentary—*Billy Flash!*"

He said no more, but led the way through the courtyard towards the street. Strangely, time seemed to stand still for me. I was actually looking forward to a visit to that Theatre! I felt that I had been a prisoner for years, locked away from the world.

And it was only when we stood on the pavement, waiting for a gap in the traffic that I realized what was going to happen.

I saw two things at the same time—both of them rather frightening. Coming down the pavement on our side, not ten yards from us, was a troop of young Girl Guides, led by Angela, the girl for whom I had bought the fountain-pen only the day before. She saw me and ran forward with a great whoop of joy.

And coming down the road, tucked snugly into the stream of traffic, was the little green Morris that I knew so well—already edging over towards the kerb edge so as not to miss. I saw that it carried red trade plates and not its legal registration number—and my heart sank within me.

John Hawke was standing a little behind me and to my left. Angela must have to pass before him to reach me, as she intended to do. And at the speed it was travelling, the car would reach us at the same instant.

I forgot all about John Hawke as I realized this.

“Go back,” I yelled at the child, waving my arms at her.

She waved in reply and scampered on towards me.

Then she was a yard away and still running, and the green Morris was alongside.

In that curiously sharp-edged way that one has in dreams, I saw the snub nose of the sawn-off rifle suddenly poke over the window ledge of the car, and I flung myself forward, in front of the girl and in front of John Hawke.

I remember hearing a little *pop*, and then a scream. Then the traffic was moving off into the distance and I was lying on the pavement, with Angela holding my head and yelling out to her Guides.

“Don’t panic,” she was saying, “it’s a simple case of abrasion on the temple—nothing serious—quite superficial. You, Sheila, tear a strip off your pants, you idiot. It will stop the bleeding.”

I saw the wide-eyed cluster of young female faces above me. And behind them I saw the tense face of Hawke and the long sardonic face of Pedro Moreno. They looked like men suddenly caught on the wrong foot.

I had to smile at them, even as I felt myself slipping off into a faint. After all, it had been quite a thump I took . . . harder than anything I had ever met in the square ring!

When I woke again I was lying in my bed, back in that hotel bedroom that I had got to know so well during the last two days.

I groaned and put my hand up to my head. Then I saw that John Hawke was sitting on a chair at the bedside. He leaned forward and took my hand for a moment. Then, as though regretting his action, he let go of it again.

“Thanks a lot,” he said. “I have a feeling that what you did was not for me—but thanks all the same.”

I grinned and said, “Don’t mention it—just send for me any time you are about to be shot at. Only too pleased to stand in, I’m sure!”

There was a longish silence then, and at last he said, “I asked that young girl-friend of yours what your name was. She seems to think it is what you told me it was.”

I shut my eyes; the pain was coming back in little throbs.

“Is that surprising?” I said. “A name doesn’t change, does it?”

John Hawke passed his long white hand across his forehead. "Either you are a very truthful man—or a very dangerous one, to me," he said. "I don't know which."

I shook my head as much as I dared. "I don't feel very dangerous, my friend," I said. "Moreover, I've never heard it said that you've got to take cracks on the skull to be classed as dangerous."

John Hawke said, "Perhaps I was wrong there, Billy. Perhaps you are what you say you are. Perhaps you are just an idealist, of some sort. I don't know. After what you've done for me to-night, I'll just have to take a chance on it. Good night."

He was gone from the room before I could reply.

Pedro Moreno came in a little later with a tray of chicken and asparagus and a half-bottle of Sauternes.

I looked at the bottle wryly. He said, "Mr. Hawke wanted to send champagne, but I thought your head would not stand it right now."

I said, "Would he feel too insulted if I asked for a bottle of grape fruit instead? I feel very thirsty—not festive."

Pedro put down the tray. "Just now," he said, "I think you could ask for a decanter of liquid gold—and get it."

He went out then. The chicken was very good—almost worth that crease in the head, I thought, as I sank off again into slumber.

Ten

The Plot Thickens



I SPENT the next day in bed, having been visited by a spry young doctor, who grinned as he said that my skull was fortunately thick enough to take a knock like that, but who warned me about playing about with rifles at the fairground in future.

When I expressed some surprise, he wagged his finger at me and said, “Oh, I’ve heard all about it from Mr. Hawke. Fancy walking in front of a chap who was just about to shoot—really, you asked for it, old boy!”

He left, after advising another day in bed on a light diet.

Giacomo did not come in to see me. Apparently, he kept watch downstairs most of the time, in that little back bar. It soon struck me that Pedro was the favoured one. He spent much time with John Hawke in the sitting-room, talking and laughing, or playing on that guitar. I wondered if the bull-necked, bull-brained Corsican resented this, and I even began to work out a plan by which I induced Giacomo to rebel and so to help me drag down John Hawke.

Then the respectable side of me set up a squawk; Yes, it said, but what do you do with Giacomo after that? Don’t forget, he has a few charges of murder hanging over him, against the time when the forces of Order catch up with him.

I gave that plan up; I couldn’t let even Giacomo down, once he had helped me.

I was still puzzling this out when the door opened and John Hawke entered quietly and smiling. He sat down by my bedside and began without any preamble.

“Look,” he said, “I’ve taken you on, more or less, Billy. Now I’ve got to let you in on a few things, if you are to be of any use to me.”

Somehow, I was not prepared for this almost friendly approach. I like an enemy to stay an enemy, a friend a friend; otherwise, it's hard to work up enough hate or enough liking to keep the old wheels going round.

I said, "Please don't tell me anything you don't feel I should know. I'm just standing in for Rat O'Connell, as private bodyguard. I shall expect a living-wage and all found. That's enough for me."

Hawke dug me in the ribs and grinned. "Come off it, Billy," he said. "I've taken a fancy to you. You're a tough man, and an educated one; I can talk to you in a way that I can't always to—the others. You are British, you see; we speak the same language."

For a moment I almost let slip something about his other side, his Slav side; but fortunately I held my tongue. He went on then.

"I'll make no secret of it," he said. "I'm on to something pretty big and pretty important. If it comes off, I shall make a fortune—and so will those who stick by me. But I've got to be ruthless, Billy—just that. I've got to do things at times which might look bad to anyone who didn't see what I was driving at."

I dared to say, "Such as what, Mr. Hawke?"

He got up and walked towards the window, his long chin in his hand, thinking. Then he said suddenly, "I may have to take the law into my own hands. I may have to do things which look like the acts of a saboteur, a traitor, even. But whatever I do, I shall do it with the knowledge that I am fulfilling my destiny, fulfilling the pattern laid down for me at my birth; a pattern for which I am not responsible. That is my satisfaction."

He was standing at the foot of my bed, looking at me intently. I said, "I do not follow you entirely, Mr. Hawke. What pattern are you speaking of?"

He snapped his fingers lightly and smiled. "Let me put it this way, Billy; you don't expect a tiger to lap milk out of a saucer and to come when he's called, do you?"

I shook my head, smiling back at him.

He went on, "The tiger's allegiances are with the jungle and not with the keepers at the Zoo. He will tear them if they put themselves in a position to be torn, will he not? And in a way, I am the same. You see, my friend, in spite of my name, my appearance, my education, I am not entirely British. My mother was a Central European, you see. Though my distinguished

father gave me his looks, she gave me her mind, her outlook, her allegiances.”

I dared to ask, “Your mother, is she alive, Mr. Hawke?”

He turned away from me as he replied. “No,” he said bitterly. “She was killed by a British bomb, my friend. She went back to visit her own people just before the War started and was never able to return to England again. The train she was in was destroyed in a British bombing raid.”

I said, “I am sorry, Mr. Hawke.”

With a sudden violence, he picked up a poker that lay in the hearth and slashed out at a vase of flowers standing on a table. It lay smashed on the carpet, the flowers torn and bedraggled, the water splashed up the wallpaper.

He flung the poker back into the hearth and said, “I was sorry too; but I am beyond that now. Now, *there is only revenge*. That must be my sorrow.”

Without another word he walked to the door. There was nothing for me to say—nothing I could say. He went out, along the passage.

That afternoon, I got up, too bored to stay any longer in bed, despite the doctor’s orders. I made my own way down to the sitting-room, and no one tried to stop me.

Pedro Moreno was alone, in the centre of the big room, in his shirt-sleeves, swinging his light gaberdine jacket before him and making small gliding steps across the carpet. He hardly noticed my entrance.

I watched him for a while, swinging the coat this way and that, whistling and swaying sideways, then leaning over forwards, as though he saw something hunched before him and was trying to baffle it.

Suddenly he flung the coat away from him, on to a settee and turned smiling, rolling down his white silk sleeves.

“No, amigo,” he said, “I am not loco, not mad, yet! I was once a matador, in my silly days, and sometimes I like to see if I can still use the cape. That is all. You like the bull-fight?”

I said that I was not competent to judge, since I had never seen one—but that I disapproved of blood sports in general, unless the creature hunted had the chance of defending itself.

Pedro laughed and slapped me on the back. “Have no fear, amigo,” he said, “if you saw a black Miura bull, well, you would not pity him too much! He can defend himself, my friend, and a bit more besides.”

He flicked open his white silk shirt and I saw the livid puckered scar that ran across his brown chest. It had been a ghastly wound.

“You see,” he said. “And I was not a poor matador—no novice, I assure you. That one put me in hospital for a year, but I didn’t begrudge him that. I was able to put the little sword in before I passed out. They dragged us both from the arena together, I think!”

He turned from me and poured himself a glass of sherry. He held the glass up solemnly and said, “To the memory of the best bull out of Andalucia!”

Then he said wryly, “But I’d rather face three black bulls than climb into a boxing ring with a Midland Area heavy-weight champion, amigo.”

I looked at him in amazement. “Who told you that?” I asked.

He turned up his eyes humorously. “A little bird,” he said. “No, my friend, don’t forget, after that bullet knocked you out, you had quite a chance to talk in your sleep—which you did!”

I shuddered at the thought. What had I said!

“I suppose I told you about my Aunt Emily at Southport?” I said, in a sudden sweat of apprehension.

He shook his head. “No,” he said, “but you made it pretty clear that you knew what the inside of a ring was like. We also gathered that you were interested in the Mediterranean area and had political associations.”

I breathed an inward sigh of relief. They assumed that my interest was in their part of Europe, in their form of politics. They now looked on me as a sympathizer, of value to their cause. Things could not be better, I decided.

Pedro Moreno confirmed my view. He flung himself on to the settee, one leg dangling over its arm.

“Amigo,” he said, “just be yourself. You are among friends. We are on to a big job very soon. You will need all the courage you have got, but it will work out well in the end.”

Things had happened a little too fast for me. I sat down in an armchair and said, “What is to happen, Mr. Moreno?”

He gave me a sharp look and said, “Call me Pedro, amigo. We are to be associates; then let us be as friendly as is necessary. It is a little different with Jacko, you see; he is—as you might say—*crude*. A brutal man, not an artist, you understand.”

I sensed once again the enmity between these two followers of John Hawke—and I wondered which one I would support, if it came to a showdown.

Then Pedro said, “To answer your other question—we are going to spy out the land, as you say, to-morrow. A place near here, where John Hawke will give one of his lectures—something about Esquimaux, or Orinoco Indians, I forget which, he has been everywhere. But after the lecture, there will be a reception, and we shall meet certain people who may be useful to us. That is all.”

He looked down at the toe of his brightly polished shoe in silence. I said, “What sort of thing are we interested in, Pedro?”

He did not speak for a moment; but then he said, with all the ice of the Arctic in his voice, “That is something you must ask your employer, amigo. I may not answer things like that—even if I knew.”

Suddenly I felt the iron walls of his loyalty to Hawke closing round me, making me a prisoner once again. I might just as well be back in my bedroom, or in the little back bar with Jacko, I thought.

I got up and said, “Thanks for the chat, Pedro. I’ll be seeing you later.”

He bowed his dark head gravely. “*Hasta la vista*,” he said, “and do not upset the Corsican, whatever you do. He is a good bulldog—although he would love to get his teeth into me!”

Eleven

Beltenham Hall



I DID not see John Hawke again until early the following evening. Jacko mumbled that he had been preparing his lecture notes. He said it in a slighting sort of way, I thought, as though he felt that reading and writing were hardly the occupations for a real man.

Pedro watched him as he spoke, quizzically, his eyes half-closed, a faint and bitter smile playing about his lips. Then, like one speaking to a disobedient dog, he said sharply, "Get the car out, Jacko. Less talk, man."

Jacko started with anger, but then turned on his heel and went to the hotel garages, kicking the cobble stones in his irritation as he walked.

"You must watch that one, amigo," said Pedro Moreno. "He is a good man—for the purpose; but he is hasty. *I warn you.*"

I made a mental note to plant my right on Jacko's jaw immediately, if anything started! Once he had time to get that knife out, then all the right counters in the world would not be much use, it seemed!

Then the car appeared, a long black Jaguar, and shortly afterwards John Hawke came out, dressed immaculately in a dark grey suit, and carrying a hogskin brief-case. He got into the car without a word, sitting next to Jacko in the front.

So we pulled out of Stratford, over the bridge and away south. I caught a glimpse of the great red-brick theatre again, of the flowing Avon with white swans gliding over its clear waters, of the coloured summer dresses of the young girls as they floated, lying back in punts, smiling up at the equally young men who laboured with the pole. . . . I saw all this, and wondered for an instant whether it might not be for the last time. For indeed, now my true mission had begun.

The Midlands countryside was rich with summer. Here and there farm-workers slaved like anxious ants, getting in and storing the year's harvest,

urging on their combine harvesters, their threshing machines. There was life everywhere. And for some of us, perhaps, death lying behind it all.

The countryside lay green and golden under the amber sunshine of that early evening. An old man with a scythe moved gradually and rhythmically down the grass-grown verge, cutting the lush greenstuff and laying it in swathes on either side of him as he inched his way onwards. There seemed something symbolic in that—the scythe, the reaper, time slowly eating one's days away. . . .

I gave an involuntary shudder and looked again at my companions in that roaring car. Suppose they suspected me? Suppose when we came to a lonely stretch, Jacko made use of that knife of his and then rolled the body into a convenient ditch? Who would know?

Soon John Hawke took the wheel of the Jaguar. If Jacko drove well, this man drove like a master. The car shot along the road as though propelled from some immense bow. We cornered at speeds which put my heart into my mouth.

Pedro looked at me, smiling, and said quietly, "Never be afraid, amigo. It makes no difference to what will happen, you see. If the book says that you are to die, then die you will, I assure you, afraid or not. It is therefore stupid to spoil your last hour by being afraid, is it not?"

Jacko leaned against the window, asleep, it seemed. These men had complete confidence in John Hawke, I could tell. I tried to be as relaxed as they were, but it was not an easy thing to do.

Pedro said, "Motoring is the only sport of the future, amigo. The only one left in which a man may test his courage, impersonally, without the help of others. Not even bull-fighting can give you that—it is exciting at first, yes, but it becomes a drug. In any case, there are always a dozen others to assist you if the play goes wrong."

The tyres screamed as we rounded two very sharp bends. John Hawke was grinning when he spoke. "You shall bring us back, Pedro," he said. "You shall see if you can frighten us, my friend."

The Spaniard yawned and said, "I should like that. Four of us in the car will keep the wheels down."

Then John Hawke said, "Perhaps there may not be four in the car—when we come back, Pedro."

My heart gave a sudden thump—and then he went on, “Perhaps Billy, here, may want to go back to Birmingham and write about Macedonian tunnel-graves, or something.”

So, I had told them *that*, when I had been half-delirious, after the gunshot! I wondered what else they knew, but there was nothing I could do about it now. I put on the bravest face I could and said, “There is nothing I find less interesting than graves at the moment, Mr. Hawke, I can assure you.”

He smiled but said no more. Then we were in Beltenham.

We passed through the Spa. Along the tree-lined avenues, gentle middle-aged folk strolled sedately like superannuated galleons, thinking of gardenias or stocks and shares, greeting their holiday acquaintances with a courtly inclination of the head, or an easy wave of lemon-coloured gloves.

In the distance, an orchestra played selections from “Iolanthe”. The striped blinds of the Ice-Cream Parlours were painted in delicate pastel shades. The policemen controlling the quiet traffic wore that eternally patient look of men in training for the Papal Guard. Had a common earthy smash-and-grab raid taken place at Beltenham that fine evening, the world must surely have come to an end, have dissolved in a sudden shivering of Venetian bubble-glass and meringues!

Jacko was staring through the window. “More poodles here than anywhere else, Paris included,” he grunted. “And I should know. I drove a taxi in Paris for five years.”

Pedro said, “You couldn’t drive a haycart, Jacko, my friend.”

Giacomo laughed hoarsely. “I could drive a nail through a board with my fist, *mon ami*,” he said. “Could you do that?”

As he spoke, he beat one fist against his massive thigh, illustrating the boast. Then, as though that ended the argument, he stared through the window once more.

Soon we left the main thoroughfares and turned into a side road, green and shadowy from the many trees which bordered it. There were few houses here. Then we swung between two high gate-posts, the tops of which were adorned by eagles, clasping stone shields in their worn claws. Before us, at the end of a long avenue of oaks, I saw a low Tudor building, a manor house, mellow in the light of the setting sun.

“Beltenham Hall,” said Hawke, smiling. “Perhaps our journey’s end, my friends. Who knows?”

A tall and grey-haired man stood at the top of the steps that led into the house. He smiled as we drew up before the house and then came down to meet us, his hand outstretched.

“I am Colonel Mitchison,” he said. “My wife asks me to greet you, she is busy inside with a few guests. You must come and join us for a glass of sherry before the talk. We have Professor Lypne with us to-night, I’m pleased to tell you. The Head of the local research station, you know. He spent some time in Africa himself, and wants to hear what you have to say.”

He led John Hawke into the house. Pedro and I followed them. Jacko lifted the car bonnet and began to look inside.

“He does not care to leave the car,” said Pedro. “It is a mania with him, amigo. He thinks it may suddenly decide to drive itself off and leave him stranded. A simple man, my friend, a primitive, one might say—but very loyal. Oh, yes, very loyal.”

In the high drawing-room, a group of people stood, their sherry glasses in their hands, their voices jostling each other like a colony of starlings. When they saw John Hawke, the talk stopped for a moment, and some of them nodded to him, or bowed, as though they had met him before. He passed among them like a powerful potentate, towards his hostess, who immediately led him over to a short, thickset man in a rumpled tweed suit.

This was Professor Lypne, then. The man who also had the secret that Hawke wanted. I edged close towards them, wondering what would happen now.

The Professor brushed back his shaggy hair with a heavy hand and peered at John Hawke over his thick glasses. I noticed that he swayed on his feet slightly, as though he might be tired from overwork, or perhaps even a little tipsy.

“Ah, Hawke,” he said, “glad to meet you, my boy. Knew your father way back—a fine fellow in his own way. Come over here and have another of Mrs. Mitchison’s glasses of sherry. Grand stuff, hey?”

Before Hawke passed out of range, I heard him say, “I am glad to meet you, Professor. You must tell me about things. I have been out of the country so long, I have quite lost touch.”

And the Professor said thickly, "Knew your father, my boy. Glad to show you round any time. Come on, here's your drink."

I would have followed them, but I felt the pressure of Pedro's hand on my arm. He smiled down at me. "Stay right here, amigo. The Master can take care of this alone. Our job is to wait, nothing more."

Then he began to talk to a horsy-looking woman about cattle-raising. She was saying, "An Angus bull, sir, is the summit of creation, in my humble opinion." Her voice was very loud for such a humble person.

Pedro Moreno was nodding gravely as though he was giving great consideration to her words, as though fifteen wild horses would never drag from him his own cherished belief that, if there was such a thing as the summit of creation, it would be a snorting black Miura bull, and not a lumbering beast that couldn't walk ten yards without stopping for a rest.

And then our hostess called out, "Well, if we are all ready, we will go to the conservatory and listen to Mr. Hawke. Please leave your glasses anywhere. We will come back to them later."

Pedro was still with the horsy woman. I turned back, a wild plan in my mind suddenly, to find Colonel Mitchison. He was shepherding a lady with a black velvet band round her neck, who leaned rather heavily on a thin ebony stick.

"Colonel Mitchison," I said, in some haste, "I want to warn you. . . ."

He smiled at me urbanely, but waved me aside without any qualms. "Must see Mrs. Fitzwater in, my dear fellow," he said. "Later, if you please. Later, over a drink, eh?"

He passed on and there was nothing else I could do.

Twelve

Among the Tendrils



I LOOKED anxiously at my watch. It was already nine o'clock. I felt that this meeting had gone on long enough. We had been sitting, about seventy of us, in a long cream-painted conservatory for almost an hour, among the tendrils and the vines, the dark-green varnished leaves of Mediterranean shrubs and the deep blood-red blooms of exotic plants. It was a long narrow place, with windows giving on to the ballroom on our right, and on our left tall glass panes through which we saw the Cotswolds in the last rays of the sun.

But it was too hot, and the narrow canvas chairs too uncomfortable.

John Hawke stood before us in that warm conservatory, completely confident, never even glancing at his notes, persuading the menfolk, captivating the women. His hold over them was magnificent, I had to admit that. It was hard to believe that this handsome man with the splendid voice was a foreign agent, a potential murderer of the very folk to whom his words were addressed that night—a fine but vicious animal, a beast of prey, no less. Yet that was the truth of the matter.

Among the clustered flowers, his voice rose imperceptibly to an almost ecstatic level. He ended by describing a Masai lion hunt in which he had been allowed to take part, standing with the warriors, armed only with a light hide shield and a thin spear. His listeners sat on the edges of their seats, enthralled.

Even the old lady, Mrs. Fitzwater, had stopped whispering, and now gazed at him with rapt attention. Colonel and Mrs. Mitchison were smiling at each other, congratulating themselves on the success of their lecture-party. Only Professor Lypne seemed unmoved; he had slumped back in his canvas chair and, with his thick hand over his face, had all the appearance of a man who had gone to sleep.

In the sunset, among the warmth, the sighing leaves and the heavy scent of flowers, Africa came to life for most of us, however, and it was only with

the greatest difficulty that I kept myself to my resolution to warn Mitchison at the first possible opportunity.

Then I was aware of another voice, speaking enthusiastic words of thanks, and afterwards of the rattle of handclapping. I rose quickly, hoping to cut off the Colonel or the Professor. Just as I did so, an elderly man wearing a snuff-coloured waistcoat and heavy checks put his hand on my arm. "A good bit of speaking, that," he said. "Don't you think so, sir?"

I nodded, trying to move away from him.

He caught my sleeve. "Not old Gilchrist's lad, are you, sir? I seem to see a strong resemblance, what?"

I assured him that I was not the person he took me for, and then made for the Colonel. But I was too late; he was supporting old Mrs. Fitzwater once more, proceeding at the pace of a hearse. In my haste, I made a spot decision—I would get into the drawing-room before them all and hope to catch the Colonel, or Mrs. Mitchison there.

At the end of the glass-walled passage-way that led into the house again stood Giacomo, his hands deep in his overcoat pockets, in an attitude of waiting, for something, for someone.

If I rushed past him, he would become suspicious, I knew. I did the only thing I could think of and linked my arm in that of a calm-looking young woman in a dark suit. She looked at me with mild surprise, her mouth open slightly. I saw that she was very pretty.

I spoke rapidly, giving her no time to reply.

"A most amazing fellow, Gerald," I said. "Known him years. Why, only last year, on the Nursery Slope at Saint Anton, he bet me he dared go right through the fence at the bottom and into the station yard—and, by gosh, he did! Almost caught the train to Innsbruck at the same time!"

We were past Giacomo then. He was standing with his eyes wide open, the expression of a pole-axed elephant on his face. I waved to him slightly.

The young woman said, "I'm sorry, but I don't know your friend. Naturally, if he interests you so much, I should be pleased to hear more about him, but. . . ."

I said, "Thank you for your help, madam, and please forgive my bad manners."

"It was a pleasure," she began, with a smile, but I had to leave her then. She stared after me as I hurried, shrugged her shoulders very prettily, and then walked on, convinced that I was a lunatic, no doubt.

I almost burst into the drawing-room, and then I stopped. Mrs. Mitchison was there, *but she was talking to Pedro*. They had come in by another door, no doubt, and had beaten me to it while the man in the snuff-coloured waistcoat had been discussing my lineage.

Pedro said, "Ha! Amigo Billy back again. Do come and talk to our hostess, Billy. She is interested in growing orchids. I am sure you will be able to advise her."

Now I do not know an orchid when I see one, if I ever do, which is unlikely. And as for keeping up a conversation about them—well, I should find it easier to discuss the Theory of Relativity. But there was little I could do. I found myself between Pedro and Mrs. Mitchison, very neatly caught, and that was that.

In the tall mirror before me, I saw John Hawke come in, together with Colonel Mitchison and the Professor, and I knew I was hamstrung then.

"Well," Mrs. Mitchison was saying, "and so I bought another dozen of the same sort. And do you know, every one of them turned out to be failures. Yes, complete and utter flops! Now what would you put that down to, Mr. Billy?"

Pedro smiled slyly as I struggled for breath.

I said, "Madam, I imagine you must have fed them too lavishly. That is all I can think of."

She considered for a moment and then touched me lightly on the shoulder. "My dear boy, I do declare you are right," she said. "Look, I will go and tell Arthur. He will be most interested."

I saw her go, in the mirror, and saw her husband try to shoo her away from his conversation with Hawke and the Professor. Then she disappeared into another part of the long room, hailing an old friend.

Pedro said austere,ly, "These women are charming, but oh so difficult, once one becomes entangled in their conversation. In Spain, now, it is unknown for women to mix on such sociable terms with the men. We keep them, as one might say, in their place. It makes for ease of working, amigo!"

Then I saw Hawke nod to him as though calling him over. When Pedro returned to me he said, "They are going down to look at the Research

Station. We are to wait here till they return.”

On an impulse, I said, “Not in Hawke’s car, I hope. It might be recognized later.”

Pedro looked down at me, the tiny creases in his dark face showing as he smiled.

“Do not tell Hawke his business, little one,” he said. “He knows what he is doing. But, to satisfy your curiosity, I will tell you, they are going in the Colonel’s car. He will bring Hawke back later. We wait for him here. See?”

Then I saw them go out. I suppose I could have shouted out to all present that this man Hawke was an enemy agent, that he should not be shown anything of importance—but no one would have believed me. I should have been thrown out of the place, for Giacomo to deal with, no doubt. So, I was quiet. I accepted another dainty sandwich and another glass of Chablis, and then I sat down to await the return of Hawke, with Mrs. Fitzwater on one side of my chair, and Mrs. Mitchison on the other.

It would not have been so bad if I could have sat with the young lady in the dark suit—but she was surrounded by young men with flowing moustaches, and the sort of clothes which proclaimed them to be either horsemen or the drivers of high-powered sports cars.

I sighed silently and settled down to listen to the gossip of the two mature ladies. It was concerned largely with Christian names; marriages, deaths and births came into it with depressing regularity. My opinion was not now asked. I was beaten.

It was almost ten o’clock when the Colonel’s Bentley purred to a stop outside the door. Most of the guests had gone and Mrs. Fitzwater had talked herself gently into a state of coma.

Pedro touched me on the shoulder. “Come,” he said. “The Master is waiting outside.”

The Colonel and Mrs. Mitchison saw us off, waving as we went down the drive.

Hawke said, “Pair of delightful morons! But I would shoot a wife who was as talkative as that.”

Pedro said, “English women are given too much freedom. They are a hindrance to men of action.”

Jacko grunted and said, “You forget, Englishmen are not men of action.”

In the back of that car I smiled, hoping that one day I might blow a hole in the Corsican's theory.

As we drove on into the open country, John Hawke said, "It looks a simple job, my friends. Lypne had had a little too much of Mrs. Mitchison's good sherry to be as discreet as he should have been. He has an immense regard for my late dear father, I'm afraid, and that, I fear, lulled him into the traditional false sense of security."

Pedro said, "He showed you round? Showed you everything?"

Hawke nodded. "As much as I need to know. The papers we want are in a little safe in his office. We can blow the office door in with the large calibre pistol. A stick of the other stuff will open the safe."

Jacko said lazily, "Are there any guards?"

The Master said quietly, "Three works policemen, that is all, apart from a young fellow who sometimes works late. We saw his light on while we were going round. Some brilliant young physicist who is looking for fame quickly."

"He may get it," said Jacko. "But he may not know about it!"

My blood ran cold at his callous words.

And then we turned up a heavily rutted lane, and soon passed away from the belt of trees we had traversed, and so out on to a rolling stretch of countryside, flattish and surrounded by a high fence of barbed wire supported by iron posts.

Hawke waved his hand towards the fence. "Electrified," he said. "Connecting to the police hut at the far end of the grounds. We shall have to take a chance and cut it with the insulated shears, then we must work fast. I suggest that Jacko stays with the car at the point where we cut it, and we two"—he indicated Pedro—"dash for the office block. Then the police will be put off the scent long enough for us to get what we want."

He turned and stared at me. "Stay with Jacko," he said. "We may need some strong-arm stuff, if we are to get back into the car safely."

I began to say something, I forget what, I was so worried—but Hawke gave me such a blank stare of hostility that I could go no further. I nodded, as though I meant to obey his orders.

Then we drew up about two hundred yards from a low block of buildings, apparently of white concrete, that gleamed in the rising summer

moonlight.

Pedro patted me on the knee. “Just stay in the car, amigo,” he whispered. “This is work for experts. Jacko will tell you when he needs your help. Just keep that car empty of policemen for when we get back—that is all we ask. Good luck!”

I did not reply. If I had tried to do so, I am afraid my teeth would have chattered. Then they were out of the car, bending down near the high wire fence. I saw that they were both wearing dark shining gloves which came up to the elbows.

In the front seat, Jacko lit a vile-smelling cheroot and grunted, “If they work fast, they should get what they want inside ten minutes. But if the police are awake, they should be here within five. The Boss says there are three policemen, but only two are likely to investigate this. They must leave one by the phone. That makes it two for two, my friend. And let me tell you, they are likely to be old policemen! Works policemen, you know, not big rough ones, eh?”

He laughed, confidently, and drew on his cheroot until the car was full of the raw fumes. I opened the window.

Hawke and Pedro were through the wire and were streaking off into the dusk, in the direction of the concrete block of buildings. I lost them quickly in the failing light.

Somewhere over that expanse of rolling grassland, an owl hooted as it floated above the ground, looking for mice. Above our heads a small flock of birds hurried home, chittering with fear. It was a very lonely place.

I listened at that open window then, wondering if I would hear anything from the building. I thought I heard what might have been a pistol shot, but I was not sure.

But there was no mistaking the dull roar of the explosive. It sounded like the distant boom of an immense drum, somewhere below the earth.

Jacko turned in his seat and smiled. I saw his yellow, irregular teeth in the moonlight and hated him. “That is it,” he said. “*Tout va bien, mon ami!* All goes well.”

Even as he spoke, a dark figure materialized on the other side of the wire fence from us. It was a policeman on a bicycle. He was puffing with the effort of pedalling across that rough expanse of grassland.

“Hey, you,” he called. “What’s the big idea?”

His was the voice of a middle-aged man. Jacko smiled evilly, I saw his face in the glow of his cheroot.

The policeman flung down his bicycle and bent near the hole in the fence.

“So that’s the game,” he said. “A break through, hey?”

He turned and blew his whistle. Away across the field, in a gleam of moonlight, I saw another policeman, pedalling furiously but moving slowly, like a comic policeman in a dream.

Then I saw Giacomo slide his long knife from his jacket and climb from the car to meet the policeman, who was now struggling to make his way between the cut strands.

I was out of that car immediately, right behind the Corsican. As he raised his arm, I caught him by the wrist and held him.

“Not that way, Jacko,” I said. The Corsican half-turned, his eyes full of fury. I think he would have stabbed me at that moment, if he could have shaken himself free.

Then the policeman was upright and coming at us. He was a brave man.

“All right, mister,” he said, “you can drop that knife.”

He rushed at Jacko and caught him by the arm.

I shouted at the man, “Get away, you fool. You’ll get hurt. You can’t do anything now. Get away!”

“Oh, can’t I?” said the policeman, and he grasped Jacko about the waist, wrestling with him. I broke away from them, Jacko’s knife in my hand. At least I had disarmed him, but that was not enough.

As I watched the struggling figures, waiting for an opening, Hawke and Pedro burst out of the dusk, flung themselves through the hole in the wire fence and came towards the car. They were so intent on their own affairs that they did not see what was happening, immediately.

Pedro called out, “Start the engine Jacko, you fool. There is a policeman coming on a bicycle. He’ll be here in thirty seconds!”

Then they saw that two men were struggling, in the shadow of the long black car, and that Jacko was pinned down in a wrestling hold by the grey-

haired policeman.

Pedro flung open a door and said to me, "Get in. This is a bad business."

His sudden strength was such that I found myself sprawling on the back seat then. Through the window I saw Hawke bend over the policeman. Pedro ran towards him. "No!" he said. "No!" I heard the muffled report of a pistol and a sudden sharp cry. Then Hawke swung himself into the driving seat, almost dragging Jacko with him. Pedro got in beside me: he was trembling.

The car engine roared, he let in the clutch and trod hard on the accelerator. And we were screaming away down the loosely metalled lane again, into the dusk.

I looked back through the window for an instant and saw that the second policeman was now bending down over the still form in the roadway. I think I heard him blowing his whistle, helplessly, lonely on that deserted road.

Then I was aware that Pedro was talking to me. "We did wrong, not leaving you with a weapon. You could have helped Jacko, then," he said. His voice was strained, as though this sort of work did not suit him entirely.

Jacko said, breathing thickly, "He stopped me from settling that policeman. He took my knife."

"What could I do?" I answered. "I couldn't let you *kill* a man, just like that. If you'd left him to me, I could have knocked him cold. But you can't *just kill a man*."

From the driver's seat, Hawke said coldly, "But that is what we have had to do, my friend."

Beside me, Pedro gave a sudden little groan. "That young scientist met us, when we blew the door in," he said. "He was still working late. He had met us when we visited the place with Professor Lympne. He would have recognized us again. It had to be."

I buried my face in my hands. This was horrible. Yet I was powerless to do anything. I had done what I could.

At last I said, "Is the policeman—dead, too?"

Hawke shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows," he said. "In times like these, the death of two may prevent the deaths of thousands. The papers we have taken may cancel out the deaths of two obscure creatures many, many times."

When we had turned again into another quiet lane, Jacko got out of the car and changed the number-plates. He put the old ones back into the boot and very carefully locked them up.

As we still stood by the roadside, a young man on a motor-bike pulled alongside us. In our lights, his face was ruddy and cheerful.

“Can I trouble you for a light, mate?” he said to Hawke. “I’ve just been to a dance over at Sodbury and left my matches there!”

I sensed that Jacko was moving over towards him, a spanner in his hand, and for a moment I thought of appealing to this young man to stand with me in a rough and tumble with the three. Then Hawke flicked his lighter and the young man smiled up at him.

“That’s a nice lighter, mate,” he said, cheerily as he drew on his cigarette. “Bet your girl gave it to you. Birthday present, hey?”

Hawke nodded, gently. “That’s it—mate,” he said. He reminded me of an eagle trying to be mildly sociable with a plump pigeon.

The young man nodded, as though pleased with his powers of observation. Then he kicked his machine into life again and bumped off along the road.

Hawke passed his strong hand over his brow and then started the engine up again.

Jacko sat down beside him, glowering and cheated, his mouth open and sagging. I realized then that he was a natural killer—nothing more; worth no more consideration, no more mercy, than a man-eating lion.

We stayed that night at a quiet grey stone inn in the Cotswolds. Hawke greeted the landlord cheerfully, as though they had met before.

“Been up in the Lake District again, Mr. Cooper?” asked the landlord, as he led us into the dining-room.

Hawke nodded. “Yes, Jack,” he said. “We’ve had nothing but rain all the five days.”

The landlord clucked. “Oh,” he said, “you should’ve spent your holiday down here, sir. Lovely weather we’ve been having, right glorious weather. Can’t say when we’ve had such a good summer.”

Pedro sighed and the man turned to him. “I see your friend, Mr. Foster, is as tired as ever! Well, sir, we’ll soon have some supper laid for you. Some

nice beef and pickled onions, hey? And a pot of good strong tea? Just the sort my Missus knows how to make, hey?"

He went out, chattering to himself.

Pedro rolled his eyes. "English food," he said, putting his hand to his stomach. "Oh, but it kills me!"

I thought of the two men lying dead in the research station when he said that. Bitterly I punched my fist against the oaken doorpost, accusing myself of betraying them, of hanging back when I might have saved them.

Then reason came back to me again. What could I have done, after all? What could I have done, apart from lying out there with them, under the moon and no longer able to get revenge for them on these wild beasts?

Thirteen

Pass-on at Porchester



I GOT downstairs before the others. The landlord was sweeping out the bar-parlour and whistling.

“Looks like rain to-day, sir,” he said. “And after what I was saying to Mr. Cooper last night! It just shows—it pays to keep your mouth shut.”

“I wonder,” I said, staring at him. He swept on past me.

Then I asked him if the morning paper had come. He shook his head. “Nay, it never gets out to here much afore dinner time,” he said. “We have to be contented with the B.B.C. Morning News.”

He brushed on for a moment, while I pretended to examine a row of horse-brasses that hung from a low beam. Then he said, “Shockin’ affair, that shootin’ business out at Beltenham last night.”

I did my best to seem disinterested. “Oh,” I said, “what was that?”

“They don’t seem to know, rightly, yet; but it seems some fellows cut their way through the wire and blew a safe. Then they shot a man who works there—didn’t kill him, as luck would have it. On the way out they shot a policeman. A fellow with a family too.”

I hardly dared ask the question. “Is he dead?”

The landlord nodded, bitterly. “They ought to get a taste of their own medicine,” he said. “But no doubt they will—the fellow they wounded, the scientist chap, has given a description of them, the B.B.C. says. And another policeman who came up a bit too late saw their car. Says it’s a dark blue Austin, he thinks. Or a black Morris. He can’t swear which—but he got the first three letters of their registration, so that should help.”

I nodded. “Yes, that should help,” I said bitterly. “How many men broke in then?”

The man scratched his greying head. "The scientist says two, I think; but the second policeman thinks there were at least three, perhaps another one in the car."

He leaned on his brush and grinned, "Why, sir," he said, "if they'd only been in a black Jaguar and only four of 'em—why, it might have been you, hey?"

He began to laugh at his joke, and I was as near as anything to saying simply, "Yes—it was us. Go for the police, I beg you!"

But then Jacko came in, stumbling over the uneven floor and glowering at both of us. The landlord wished him good morning, but he did not answer. And when the man had gone out to order our breakfast, Jacko continued to glower at me, as though he wished he might say something but could not frame it in words sufficiently brutal.

I looked back at him, daring him to speak his thoughts, and at last his eyes fell away from mine and he struck himself again and again with clenched fist on the thigh, a speechless brute.

Before we had all finished breakfast, the rain which the landlord had forecast came down in torrents.

Hawke took me aside and said quietly, "I can see your point of view about last night. But don't let it get to be a habit; I'm warning you, my friend."

I said, "One of them died. The scientist is alive."

He nodded. "I heard the News on a radio in my room," he said. "It would have been better if it had been the other way about. The policeman didn't see us. But the other one has given descriptions of myself and Pedro. That means you will have to carry out the next step yourself—Jacko hasn't the brains—he's a butcher, nothing more. No one saw you."

I said, "What is the next step?"

He placed his long finger at the side of his nose and with half-shut eyes said, "Don't be so anxious. I shall begin to think you want to know too much, my friend. Perhaps you do already, but I must take a chance."

Then he turned away from me and went back to Pedro who lolled in the only easy chair in that room. I was left standing by the window, wondering whether, after all, John Hawke was playing a cat and mouse game with me. Then I noticed that my legs were trembling, as they always do when I am excited. I felt that I must control such evidence of weakness, and went out to

the backyard, where Jacko was polishing the sinister-looking black Jaguar, and giving an extra rub to the bright number-plates—as though inviting anyone who wished to take a look at them.

He ignored me when I stood beside him. I smiled down at him then, for I had his measure, I thought. How mistaken one can be, though, in matters such as this!

Early that evening we set off to Porchester in a cold grey drizzle of rain, the sort of weather one may expect at almost any season in England.

On the way Hawke sat with me at the back of the car. He spoke quietly and with authority, as one who gives orders and does not permit questions.

“Precisely at seven,” he said, “you will go into a Milk Bar in Porchester—the ‘Spotted Cow’—and there you will see a man with a black brief-case, bearing the monogram ‘G.R.’. He has the middle finger missing on his right hand. I cannot describe him any further since I do not know what particular character part he may be playing at the moment.”

“What if he is not there?” I said.

Hawke pursed his lips tightly before he replied. “He will be, never fear. His life would not be worth a button if he slipped up on this assignment. He would be of no further use to anyone. He would be found on a railway line, or in a public incinerator.”

I said, “Very well, what do I do then?”

He glared at me and then said, “You will stand by him at the counter and let him see that you are wearing a ring which I shall give you. Then he will drop his brief-case, as though by accident, and you will pick it up. The flap will be open and you will put this package into the case before you rise and hand it back to him. Do you understand?”

I nodded and John Hawke handed to me a long manilla envelope, not very bulky, but somehow electrical to the touch. As I stared at it he put a ring into my hand.

“On the third finger of the right hand,” he said. “Don’t lose it.”

It was a broad silver ring, with the letter “H” engraved on its front, nothing more.

Then he said, “When you have done that, you will walk back to the car, which will be waiting for you.”

I dared to ask, “And what after that?”

He smiled and said, “Who knows, my friend? Ah, who knows?”

I put on what show of annoyance I could and said, “What about a pay-off for me, Mr. Hawke? I’ve done what you asked, so far. What do I get?”

He gazed through the window of the fast-moving car for a while. Then at last he turned back to me and said, “The best I can offer you is a berth on a boat that sails from Cardiff the night after to-morrow. You will travel with us, and perhaps make your fortune—somewhere or other.”

I said, “What if that doesn’t suit me, Mr. Hawke?”

He lowered his head as he said, “I have only told you what the best offer is, my friend. I have not mentioned the worst. Do you understand me?”

I nodded. He slapped me on the thigh and said, “Grasp your chances when they come, my friend. Sail to a new life with us on the *Nautilus*, my boy. But don’t try to do anything at all silly to-night. On an occasion like this, I would even risk sending Jacko after you, if any—misunderstanding arose. See?”

I nodded, and then we came into Porchester.

Fourteen

The Spotted Cow and the Budgerigars



No doubt in Roman times, when it was first built, Porchester was a pleasant enough place, with a broad river flowing through it and gentle hills standing round it, mellow in the clear light. But as I first saw it, in the early evening, the town had lost all claim to beauty. The oily river was spanned by gaunt and rusty iron bridges; the hills looked dark and gloomy against the rain-clouds, their only function being to give some foundation to the massive electric pylons which straddled the smoking town. The grey rain slanted down through the grey air on to the grey roads. Even the passers-by in their grey raincoats had a certain greyish look about their faces.

Pedro said wryly, “Ah, Mexico City is the place I shall retire to, with its sun and its great white roads. And I shall keep my memory of this place as a convenient nightmare to turn on when I become too complacent there and want a change.”

Jacko grunted. “Budapest is the only place, *mon ami*,” he said. “There a man may do as he pleases, without policemen standing at his elbow at all hours of the day.”

Pedro smiled at him and answered, “You will never see Buda again, my ox. The policemen will hang you for six murders before then!”

Hawke tapped him on the shoulder then, and said sternly, “Keep your mind on the job, bull-fighter. You turn right at the next traffic lights. The Spotted Cow is five hundred yards along the road, just past a narrow alleyway with a lamp stuck on to the wall.”

It was as he said. We pulled into the kerb. The car clock said six fifty-eight. In two minutes I should meet the man with the black brief-case.

“Pedro will wait for you a hundred yards down the road. He will keep the engine running,” said Hawke. “Waste no time, my friend. Mistakes can happen in the craziest ways. And don’t forget, if you are not back here

within five minutes, Jacko will come to look for you. Good luck. I hope you don't put him to that trouble."

I nodded casually to him and walked through the rain, dodging cars, towards the bright window of the "Spotted Cow". The Jaguar purred on down the road and stopped again by the kerb.

As I entered the Milk Bar, I was met by the sound of raucous voices and the heavy smell of damp clothes. The place was crowded with young folk and with men from the factories, to judge by their oil-stained clothes. I tried to push my way to the counter, and met with some opposition.

"Hey, who're you shovin'?" asked a big man with a smear of coal-dust across his face.

"Sorry, chum," I said, "I've got to catch a train. Just had word my brother's got home from abroad—forty-eight hours leave—want a bit of grub before I go down to Southampton to meet him."

The big man nodded and smiled. "Right, mate," he said. "We'll move some o' these lazy layabouts. Hey there, gangway, mind your backs, you lot!"

I found myself at the counter. "Glass of malted milk and an egg sandwich," I told the tired faced girl.

She wiped a damp wisp of hair from her forehead and turned to get my order. "Some folk are never happy unless they are pushin' and shovin'," she said to the other girl.

Then I noticed him—the man with the black brief-case. He was standing next to me, on my right. I placed my hand on the counter, so that he could see the silver ring. He laid his on top of his coffee cup and I saw that he lacked the middle finger of his right hand.

The girl said, "Wake up, dreamboat! You were in a hurry a minute ago. Well, here's your order."

I apologized and paid her. She went away, muttering to herself about the world in general, and Milk Bars in particular.

The man with the black brief-case said, "Turned out quite miserable, hasn't it?" His voice was thin and nasal, a mean and undistinguished voice.

He was a thin-faced little fellow with a clipped brown moustache and a rather tired-looking black homburg hat. His dark grey overcoat was badly

frayed at the sleeves. I would have put him down as an unsuccessful commercial traveller at the best.

I nodded to him. He smiled, a pale, weary smile. His teeth were discoloured by tobacco. His finger-nails were not particularly clean. I noticed that they were ragged at the edge, as though he bit them.

My mind raced; is this what a spy looks like? I asked myself. I had always thought of them as being, well, more in the John Hawke class—perhaps dark and suave, well-dressed, even flashy. But this nondescript mouse of a man . . .

Just then he said, “Oh, bother it! And I can’t bend. This leg of mine, you know. . . . Got it hurt at Alamein.”

The brief-case fell on to my feet. This was going exactly to plan. As I bent to retrieve it, I suddenly knew what I must do if I was to satisfy my conscience, to avenge those good fellows who had been shot and killed the night before, if I was to serve my country! I must see that this little rat was handed over to the police and must then set the hue-and-cry on John Hawke and his murderers.

I made the movement of slipping that envelope into the bag and then rose with it in my hand. “Your bag, sir,” I said, smiling.

“Awfully kind of you, I’m sure,” he said, grinning and reaching out for it.

The next moment, under cover of that black brief-case, I was gripping his wrist with all my force. I saw his eyes widen so that the little black pupils stood out in a circle of blue and white. His pale mouth began to word some startled protest.

And I muttered to him, between clenched teeth, “That’s the lot, son. You’ve run your course. *Come on quietly outside. I’ll find a home for you.*”

Then, crushed against the counter by the crowding workmen, I suddenly felt an agonizing pain as the little man brought up his knee into my groin. I gasped but held on to him, and then I heard his thin voice cry out, “Pickpocket! Hold him, he’s got my watch!”

He had slipped his wrist clear from my hand and flicked that covering brief-case away. Yes, I was left clutching his gold watch and bracelet. It was the most perfect frame-up one could have imagined.

Instantly the good fellows behind me hustled forward to grasp my arms. The little man edged along the counter and towards the door.

“I’ll get a copper,” he said. “Hold him, I’ll be right back.”

The man with the smear across his face looked at me with contempt. “So that’s your lark, is it, chum?” he said. “And I got you a place by the counter, you dirty dog!”

At first I thought he was going to punch me in the face. So did the two men who were holding me. Some instinct of fair play made them loose me so that I could defend myself, and in that moment I had ducked down and was bundling my way to the door.

“That man is a spy!” I yelled. “I’m no thief!”

The chorus of sneering disbelief would have upset me at any other time. But now there was no time for self-esteem—I had got to get out quickly, before that little man had somehow warned Hawke and his thugs.

I was through that swing door like a rugger forward, then, ducking low so that they would not see which way I took, I swung left and into the little alleyway that Hawke had mentioned earlier, the one with the pale gas-lamp on its corner. Then I was racing like a madman along the cobbles.

If they had followed immediately, they would have seen me; but my final rush had taken them all by surprise, and gave me five extra seconds in which to get myself sorted out.

Fifty yards up the alleyway there was another turning, which swung round in a wildish arc. I took that, and as I turned into the sweep of this narrow street, I saw lights in a shop window on a corner. It was a tobacconist’s and its blue blind was just coming down. They were shutting shop.

Even as the door came slowly to, I pushed inside and stood, gasping for breath, staring about me in that bright gas-lit place. A man wearing a blue apron looked at me quickly. Then he pushed the bolt across the shop door and turned down the gas.

I had time to see his lined and haggard face, the thin fringe of grey hair above his ears, his bare shirt-sleeved arms, muscular and wiry. He seemed a capable man.

“Go through that curtain into the back room, mate,” he said.

I did as he said, edging past piles of magazines, comic papers, sweet boxes and cigarette cartons, towards the long strip of red plush which he indicated.

As I drew the curtain behind me I heard the sound of running feet. I paused, at the foot of the narrow stairs, tense with fear. There was a knock on the door and I heard the man drawing the bolt. He seemed to be looking outside, for another voice came to me clearly.

“ ‘As anybody come in here?’ ” said the voice. “There’s a pickpocket on the loose.”

The man in the apron said slowly, “I ain’t ’ad nobody in ’ere since six-thirty. There was a few chaps listenin’ to my wireless then, Sports Report, it was. But nobody since.”

“Well, lock your doors to-night,” said the voice. Then the footsteps moved away again.

The plush curtain opened and the man stood there, staring me hard in the eye.

“Go in there,” he said, “it’s my back room.” His voice was cold.

It was a square box, nothing more, its walls covered with a dark varnished wallpaper. Here and there, hung photographs of a woman with thick black hair done up in the style of an earlier reign, her face pale, her eyes heavy and staring out of the faded pictures. A fire glowed in a small square grate. A tin kettle was hissing on the hearth.

“Sit down,” said the man, in a voice so expressionless that I did not know whether he liked me or hated me. It did not matter which just then.

I sat in a hard Windsor chair beside the fire. He went to the corner and reaching up whipped a square of green baize from a big cage that hung there. In it were three budgerigars, blinking in the light, swinging on their trapezes, chuckling and whistling away with the excitement of their nightly treat.

The man had forgotten me it seemed. He spoke to the birds calling them by their pet names, telling them how lovely they were, letting them take seed from his lips, but ignoring my presence. At last he turned round to me and said, “They were my wife’s birds. They kept her company. She adored them.” He pointed to the pictures about the wall. “That is my wife,” he said. “Of course, that was when she was much younger. She left this world three years ago. These are her birds.”

I thought I understood the man's sad voice, his haggard looks, but I was wrong. I knew nothing.

Suddenly he came to where I sat and stood before me.

"What did you pinch, matey?" he asked, in as quiet a voice as before. "Let's see it. What was it?"

I smiled and said, "I'm no thief, sir. I was wrongfully accused in the 'Spotted Cow'. They said I took a man's wrist watch. But he was trying to fix me, so that he could get away."

The man still looked down at me, his expression unchanged.

"What did you take, chum?" he said. "Come on, let's be knowing, or out you go. I'll help a man in trouble, but he's got to own up."

I said, "I swear that I am not a thief, that I have done nothing wrong. It is a misunderstanding."

He walked back to the cage of budgerigars and stood talking to them for a moment. Then he turned and said, "Jacky and Sammy believe you, but Liz doesn't. Ah, she's a knowing one, is that bird. My wife's favourite."

He paused for a moment, his great knuckles resting on the edge of the plain deal table. Then he said, "I was put down—Wormwood Scrubs—for three years once. My wife died while I was inside. Only these birds to keep her company while I was away. I swore, when they let me out, I'd fight the police till the day I died for that. That's the only reason I had for letting you in to-night, mate."

I stood up and said, "Thank you a thousand times. I still say that I did nothing. I can say no more."

He looked through me, into a past that I could not share. Then he sighed and slowly walked towards a little back door.

"You're not my sort, mister," he said. "Sorry, and no offence meant. You can go out the back way. The door's nailed up, you'll not open it. Climb over it and you'll come into a passage-way between two walls. There's a gate at the end of it that you'll have to shin over. Then you're in a little street that runs parallel to the main road, the one the 'Spotted Cow's' in. Good luck. But don't come back, you're not my sort. I've never seen you."

He had shut the door even while I was struggling through his backyard, among the empty crates and packing-cases. I stumbled many times, to the music of the three budgerigars, which were now singing as though their

pathetic hearts would burst. Then I was over the gate and into the little passage he had told me of. It ran between two rows of houses, back giving on to back, and most of my time I was trying to avoid stepping into the little runnel at my feet.

Somewhere behind me, far away, I heard a policeman's whistle blowing, again and again, and the sound of angry voices. I bent low, foolishly, between the two high and jagged glass-topped walls, and ran onwards in the direction the man had told me of.

The cold damp air beat on my face for a time, and then, in the darkness, the draught ceased. I realized that I must be near to that last gate which he had mentioned. *I was*—I had hit it with my head before that sixth sense, which warns one in the dark, could take control.

There were two horizontal beams to that gate and it was an easy matter to climb it. The only difficulty was a row of sharp spikes at the top. All my attention was focussed on them, so that I should not tear a piece out of my shin as I jumped down on the other side.

I was poised in mid-air, feeling the sharp spikes through my shoe soles, about to fall forward into the alley below me, when I first saw Jacko. He was waiting for me, under the wall at the other side of the narrow street, a strange expression on his dark face.

As in the terror of a dream, I felt myself moving towards him against my will. I had jumped and could do nothing about the force of gravity. If I could have done so, I would have shot backwards on to that gate, into that little passage, into that friendly shop with the budgerigars.

But Isaac Newton had spoken, and I must go forward! Then as I fell, I cursed myself for an idiot. I still had those papers in my pocket, in their neat manilla envelope—and I could have destroyed them, have burnt them in that little box-like room, with the birds whistling in the corner, and that pale face staring through space into sad eternity.

Fifteen

Back Alley Boys



I HAVE to admit that as I fell I was suddenly very afraid. Then, almost automatically, I leapt back a pace, into the middle of the narrow alleyway, where I could get a glimmer or two from a street-lamp to help me in whatever I had to do.

I called out. "Stay where you are, Jacko! I'd hate to hurt you!" But this was more to keep my own courage up than to scare him, I knew.

Hunched and snuffling like the ancient bull of Crete, he came out of the shadows at me. I knew that it was no use trying to run away from him; he had already shown his turn of speed by the way in which he had run round the block to cut me off. Besides, if I ran back up the street, I should undoubtedly meet any other pursuers who might be on my trail. I knew that I had to stay and fight this out, so, without another thought I whipped off my hampering jacket and flung it from me into the road.

Then Giacomo was on me, his great hands outstretched to break my neck. I slipped gently to my right as he came in and gave him a hard short-arm jab with my left. I heard him grunt, but I knew that I had not delivered a killer. I could feel that he was heavily dressed, with layer on layer of clothes. It was no good trying to impress him there, I thought, I must come up a bit!

His hands were on my shoulders then and I did the only thing possible, pulled back and uppercut him just as hard as I could. And this time I *knew* I had hit the mark! He staggered back, his arms wide open, and fell on to his back, his brown eyes rolling.

I stood away for a moment, getting my breath, and just a little satisfied, too satisfied, when with an astonishing recovery he kicked sideways, knocking my feet from under me. I had sense to stagger and get my balance, and then he was at me once more, driving me like fury against the opposite wall.

Now I knew that I must fight for my life, for his face was contorted with anger and humiliation. Giacomo, a born bully, could not tolerate such contemptuous treatment as I had given him. He was of the type who would rather die than be beaten, once he started to fight.

Then I did something which I despise myself for. Pinned against that concrete wall, my arms by my side, I used my knee on him. I felt a coward as I did so, but it was my life against the Queensbury rules at that moment.

He doubled up, loosing my arms, and I slipped away from him along the wall. At first I thought I was free, but he had snatched out and caught my shirt-sleeve and would not let go. All the time he was wheezing hard and trying to get his breath back. But his grip was that of an oak vice. I could not get away from him.

Once more I broke the rules and kicked back, hoping to get his shins. Instead, he caught my leg and flung it upwards violently. Then I was down on my face in the road and Giacomo was on me. I knew that this was *it*—for he was so heavy that I could not hope to budge him.

I said, with an attempt at humour, “All right, Jacko! You win! Let me get up or you’ll break my ribs!”

His answer was to clench his two fists together and bring them down on the back of my neck. The shock was terrific. My forehead hit the roadway so hard that for a moment I felt that the Space Era had truly dawned and that I was in amongst the thickest star-splashes! Then it came again and again. I writhed and groaned, trying to beg him to let me get up. I was willing to surrender to him or anybody just then, I must admit.

But the only reply I got was an animal grunt each time he slammed that human hammer down on my defenceless neck. I knew that if he did it again, I would be knocked right out, or blinded. With more strength than I knew I had, I twisted over, upsetting his balance just a little. I saw him above me, his face distorted.

Then that face disappeared sideways to my right and my chest was free of his great weight.

Pedro Moreno gazed down at me, grave and sallow-faced in the distant lamp-light.

“You certainly do pick yourself some spots of trouble, amigo,” he said. He rubbed his own knuckles and I saw that they were grazed. Giacomo was on his knees now, trying to get up on to his feet and falling back again, groaning.

Pedro must have hit him such a blow as won me the Amateur Light Heavy-weight Championship, I thought.

“Not bad for a bull-fighter,” I said, sitting up and trying to grin, but suddenly feeling very sick.

But Pedro was not smiling. “I don’t know why I should help you,” he said. “You asked for everything. A man who does what you did to-night deserves the full treatment. You’ve ruined our hopes in this place now. You’ve set back our programme more than you or anyone knows. The game is up as far as Porchester is concerned.”

Now I was able to grin, in spite of myself. “Then it has been worth it, every bit of it,” I said.

Pedro dragged me to my feet. “It’s only just begun, amigo,” he said grimly. “There will be more to come later, my friend.”

He glanced up and down the street and I sensed that he was wondering what to do with me. Then the silver nose of Hawke’s black Jaguar poked round the corner gently, oh very gently. He had come down the narrow street so quietly that, in the pounding of my heart, I had not heard that purring engine.

And Giacomo was on his feet, shambling towards the car, pointing back and trying to say what had happened. He seemed terrified of John Hawke, judging by the tone of his thick voice.

Pedro gave a strange sigh and grasped me by the arm. “Come on, my friend,” he said slowly. “When you’ve got to go, you’ve got to go.” For a moment, I even thought he was my friend.

Hawke flung open the door at the front of the car. I got inside. He did not even look at me. Pedro slung my coat across my shoulders and sat down beside Giacomo in the rear seat.

The car turned round the block and so back to the well-lit main streets. Then it headed towards the outskirts of Porchester.

There was complete silence in the car. This is what it must be like as one walks to meet a firing squad, I thought. Or in that strange still moment before one’s plane hits the ground . . .

I put my throbbing head in my hands and waited, unable to think, even to feel fear, any longer.

Then, behind me, a hand felt into my jacket pocket and I heard the crisp sound of the envelope as it was withdrawn.

And I knew that I had been a failure—to my country, to Dr. Phipps, to the grey-haired policeman at Beltenham Research Station, shot in the execution of his duty.

But, most of all, a failure to myself. I could have wept as this realization swept over me, relentlessly as an ocean wave.

Sixteen

Surprise Return



THE rain had started again. Now the windscreen-wipers set up a solemn whirring undertone to this grim night. We passed along a main street, cobble-stoned and shining, and then bumped over a narrow level-crossing. I could see various isolated lights, set at differing levels, here and there. Two red lamps winked down at me, almost malevolently, as we reached the other side of the railway lines. A shunting-engine chuffed up and down in the distance, its couplings clanking.

Here and there, solitary walkers, with umbrellas or dressed in gleaming mackintoshes, made their way, head down, towards some obscure sheltering place. It was not much later than eight o'clock, yet the streets were almost deserted.

Then we swung into a curving street, whose dark terraced houses gave on to the great goods yard of the railway. I caught a glimpse of the street sign as we passed: "Shelley Crescent," it said. Earlier I had seen a small decrepit street marked, "Keats Avenue". Poor Shelley! Poor Keats! But perhaps more to the point, poor inhabitants of these sad and dreary warrens. . . .

Then the Jaguar stopped. "Number forty-seven, isn't it?" Hawke asked. Pedro said, "Yes, that's the number *he* said."

They bundled me out of the car. I saw that we had stopped before a narrow house with a small bay-window and a hall door decorated with coloured glass. Two of the panes were broken and had been replaced roughly with squares of ragged cardboard.

Before the window, tired privet bushes abandoned the fight to give an air of privacy to a small square of dried grass, in the centre of which a minute flower bed provided sustenance for one bedraggled rose and a score of assorted weeds.

Pedro carefully pushed open the hall door. In the passage-way a naked gas-jet burned low.

“Upstairs,” said Giacomo, giving me a hard punch in the small of the back. The stairs were steep and narrow, and covered with old linoleum. My foot slipped once and I almost fell. Giacomo was not taking any chances this time. He punched me again as I fell. I gasped and staggered on.

John Hawke said with a vicious quietness, “Not now, my friend. There will be time! Patience, patience.”

I was leading the way, for Pedro had left the procession to knock on a brown-varnished door at the end of the hall-way. I heard him say, “All right, we’ve come. Put some coffee outside the door. Hurry, *pronto!*”

Then I heard a girl’s adenoidal voice say, “Okey-doke, Mr. Jackson. I’ll see to it straight away. The kettle’s on. We’ve been waiting for you.”

I heard his feet ascending the stairs behind us, then I came to a flaking green door.

Giacomo said, “In there,” and pushed the door open before me.

The room was what is known as a bed-sitter—that is, a narrow iron bedstead stood under the window, and a small table and three wooden chairs crouched by the tiny fireplace. There was a strip of coarse brown matting across the boards of the floor, and a shiny colour reproduction of a famous Victorian painting on the wall. It showed a Puritan sneering at two kitchen wenches as they stood laughing back at him, their red hands on their buxom hips. A stained cream paper blind flapped raggedly before the window. Outside, the shunting engine kept up its monotonous reiteration.

John Hawke looked round the room and sniffed with disgust.

“It is an appropriate place for such a man to live,” he said, with contempt. Then he turned away, his white handkerchief to his nose.

Giacomo shrugged. “One room is as good as any other to kill a man in,” he said. “I have known worse—much worse. You should live in Budapest, Boss—then you would know these things!”

John Hawke turned to him and said, “Lie on the bed, Jacko amigo. You are tired. This Englishman has exhausted you.”

The Corsican glared at me and then slouched over to the bed. I heard a tin tray being put outside the door. Pedro waited a moment and then strode across the room. He came back with a coffee-pot and three cups.

“No saucers, amigo,” he said to Hawke.

“Jacko will find it hard to drink out of a cup,” said Hawke, pulling up a rickety chair and sitting down. He glanced across at the bed, but Giacomo had his eyes shut and did not seem to be listening.

Pedro set the cups on the table and began to pour out the coffee, offering the first cup to Hawke.

He looked at it for a moment and then pushed it aside. “I am not thirsty,” he said, “I could not drink that. It is an affront to the stomach, bull-fighter.”

Pedro placed the cup before me. After my fight, I was not so fastidious. As I sipped, I thought how well their plan had been laid. This was obviously no regular stopping-place, but a temporary pied-à-terre. The girl below had called Pedro “Mr. Jackson”, so she could not know much about him. Moreover, she had brought three cups upstairs, under the impression that only three men had entered the house. I saw from the litter about the fireplace that the room was not often cleaned, and that, in itself, sent a shiver down my back. A body could lie in this room for days, perhaps weeks, before anyone came in and discovered it. . . . Perhaps on that bed, where Giacomo now grunted like a pig. . . . Perhaps under the bed, who knows?

Pedro leaned on the small marble mantelpiece, waiting, his cup in his hand. Hawke rested his long chin on his knuckles and gazed at me steadily, frighteningly now.

“Sit down,” he said. “I want a word with you.”

Wearily, I did as he ordered, and waited for him to speak. When he did at last his voice was different from the one I had heard at any time before.

“You know, my friend,” he said, “I am disappointed in you. No, don’t misunderstand me, this is no fatherly lecture because the boy’s school report is not up to standard. This is *something different*, you understand.”

I drank the miserable coffee and gazed back at him as calmly as I could, though my heart was now beating so fast that I thought it must show some evidence in my throat.

Hawke said, “I was suspicious of you from the first, you know. I never did believe in you, my friend. That was why I kept you with us, so as to know just what you were up to. But then I sensed in you some quality which was tolerable to me, some affinity, in a way. And, I must admit, you looked like being useful, at Porchester.”

I broke in, “I am not a traitor, John Hawke!”

He waved his hand gently. "Who knows what you are? Please let me finish. I might have trained you in time to see things the realistic way. But I see now that you are an incurable romantic, in the way you British so often are, without even knowing it. You let your heart control your head, you know, and that is bad, for heart is a stupid creature—only head has sense."

He paused and began to beat out a little rhythm on the dirty table top. Then he looked up and said, "To-night, in that Milk Bar, you lost control, didn't you? After all I had done to bring this affair to a satisfactory conclusion, you lost control, and blew the whole thing sky high, my friend!"

I said a little stupidly, "I am glad I upset your plans, Hawke. I would do it again, if I could."

He looked through me and said simply, "I am not of your world, amigo. I do those things which seem right in my own world. Can you not see that I am perhaps sufficiently intelligent to believe in what I do?"

He shrugged his fine shoulders and said, "I am wasting my time with you. You might have come with me. Now I must dispose of you. You had your chance. That is all."

Pedro said quietly from behind me. "Any man can make a mistake, when his mind is unbalanced, amigo. This fellow could still be useful to us, if he agreed to toe the line. The cards are on the table now; we know who everyone is. It would be easier to train him. He is good material, Master. He will improve now that he knows what we want."

John Hawke looked at Pedro, who returned his stare unwaveringly.

"You seem to have taken him under your wing, my friend," he said softly. "He has become quite a favourite with you, hasn't he?"

Pedro's wry face twisted into such a smile as I would not have cared to see, had I been facing him in enmity.

"I have looked death in the eye so often, *hombre*," he said, "that I have come to know his features as well as I know yours." I noticed Hawk wince a little when Pedro used the familiar and almost contemptuous term, "*hombre*". But Pedro went on, relentlessly, "And I have looked men in the eye so often, *hombre*, that I know when I have met a true one."

He flung out his arm towards me. "This young fellow is brave. He may be a fool, but he is brave, grant him that, at least, and be patient with him. Try to train that foolishness out of him so that you may use his bravery for your own advantage. That makes good sense, does it not—*hombre*?"

His dark and sardonic expression was such that for an instant, even John Hawke seemed small before it. But only for an instant; then he seemed to breathe in and become magnificent once more. He smiled and lowered his grey eyes.

“You might have made a good lawyer, Pedrito mio,” he said, “if the bulls hadn’t claimed you! But there, a man moves along strange paths in his lifetime. He comes to death in his own perverse way, whatever his good sense may have advised him earlier!”

He rose and walked gravely across the room, his hands behind him. I felt that it was my turn to speak now.

“Don’t put yourself out, Hawke, considering this problem any longer,” I said. “I’m grateful to Pedro, but I’d rather die than join up with your sort. I’ll never see you as anything but a traitor, a murderous mountebank. The sort of man who gassed Jews and gipsies in German prison camps, who shot up women and children in Poland, who got your practise in bombing Guernica!”

As I said the last words, John Hawke came forward like a savage and struck me full across the face, knocking me over into my chair.

I was afraid that for a moment he would strangle me as I lay. But he stopped and stood away from me, glaring.

“My own brother was killed at Guernica,” he gasped. “I have reason to remember it too, you fool.”

Pedro helped me up and his face was grim to see. “My father and sisters died there,” he said, tight-lipped, “but I do not go about the world weeping.”

For a moment the smouldering fires of his eyes met that of Hawke; they stood like two great stags, their antlers locked until death should part them.

I do not know how the situation might have gone then, for the air was heavy with tension. Then the door opened without warning, and Joey stood framed in the doorway, his soft hat on the back of his head, a cigarette in his mouth. He was smiling, like a man in complete charge of the situation. Joey the razor-man from Birmingham, my dear friend—who had tried to kill me in that little green Morris! In my relief, I ran towards him. “Thank God you have come, Joey!” I said.

He stared through me and then spat. “Are you having trouble with this kid, Pedro?” he asked, easily, looking past me coldly.

I gazed at him in amazement. Then light dawned.

“Why, you double-crossing rat!” I said.

Joey struck me across the mouth with the back of his thin hand. Giacomo was behind me, pinning back my arms. I could not retaliate.

Seventeen

Invitation to a Journey



THEN JOEY came forward into the room, his hands in his raincoat pockets. He stopped by the table and looked round, but easily, as though he knew this room well.

“A bit of a dump,” he said, “but it suits my purpose when I’m this way on a job. On my pay, you can’t afford soft lights and sweet music in every town.”

He looked sharply across the table at Hawke, who drew out a notecase and flung a tight wad of notes on the table. Joey swept them up and put them into his jacket pocket with a grin and a mock bow. There was a certain light contempt in all his actions, I noticed now.

“Thanks, chum,” he said. “That’ll keep the old wolf from the door for a few more weeks.”

Surprisingly, Pedro said bitterly, “Mind that the wolf doesn’t find a way down your chimney one day, my friend!”

Joey turned to him and said easily, “In my trade, that is always a possibility. That’s why the fees are so high—I’ve got to protect myself, mate. But it won’t be long now and then I’ll be on that boat to Australia! That’ll be a relief, I can tell you! How do you think I’ll look as a newly-fledged emigrant, Frankland?”

I said, “You look better as a fully-feathered double-crosser, you stinker!”

He wagged a finger at me. “Naughty, naughty,” he laughed. “Little boys trussed-up like chickens shouldn’t say such wicked things. It offends their dear friends and then it makes them get hurt, like this, for instance!”

As he leaned forward to put his lighted cigarette end on to my cheek, I slipped from Giacomo’s grasp and punched him twice on the jaw; once to give him the feel of it, and the second time as he fell backwards. I gloried in

those punches! Then his head struck against the marble fireplace and his hat fell over his eyes. He lay very still.

And Hawke said, “You fool! And you could have been doing that for me—and not against me!”

I saw that Pedro stood, barring the door, a strange smile on his face.

Then, as I gasped with my recent effort, Giacomo took my arms again. Joey struggled to his feet, rubbing his jaw and looking bewildered.

Hawke said to him, “Have you got a car outside?”

Joey nodded: “But I don’t feel like driving,” he said.

John Hawke nodded to Pedro: “You take Joey,” he said. “This one can travel with Jacko and myself.”

Pedro shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette slowly. Now I observed that his hand was shaking. What had happened in that room to-night had worried him—though I could not think why.

Then, smiling, John Hawke turned to me and said, “Come, my friend, it is time that we went for a drive into the night, you and I.”

I dared to say, “Where are you going then?”

He said airily, “Why, *we* are going to Cardiff, to catch a little boat called the *Nautilus*. But, have no qualms, my friend, you will not be there!”

Eighteen

Salvation and a Doctor



So we left Porchester, Pedro and Joey in that same little green Morris, Hawke and Giacomo with me in the Jaguar. Five men going out—only four coming back, it seemed.

The road flicked underneath our wheels, and soon the houses gave place to hedgerows. I leaned forward and covered my face with my hands, trying to think. . . . Giacomo was sitting beside me. He took a handful of my hair and dragged my head upright again.

“Don’t do that,” he said.

I said, “There’s no law to stop a man from thinking, is there, ape-man?”

He grunted and pushed me sideways. I lay where he had flung me, too tired to move. And there I remembered an occasion in Korea when we did a parachute jump on to what had been described by our Intelligence types as “good hard terrain”. It turned out to be quite the reverse.

Sixteen of us landed in a paddy-field, and the stinking slush was up to our thighs before we could disentangle ourselves from our harness. It had been a hopeless affair, our submachine-guns had fallen in the stuff, and were irretrievable. We had to flounder out of the middle of that morass without delay. There was not even time to bury or hide our parachutes.

I remember a young Corporal saying grimly to me, “Well, for the last six months, Sarg, you’ve been knocking blazes out of us, making us go through the drill about preserving weapons, burying parachutes, etc., etc., etc., and now when it comes to the first push, we don’t do any of it!”

He was a young Londoner, with a quick turn of wit, and bright red hair. I liked him even when he was pulling my leg—which was almost always.

Then, as he finished speaking and looked round for support from the other men, a burst of fire came from behind a ragged clump of trees and he fell into that mud, still smiling.

Miraculously, a few of us were left after that terrible burst. We floundered on, to what looked like solid ground, always afraid that another burst would come from the trees. But it didn't and we got there, into a ditch, where we lay gasping and helpless for a while, as though we had struggled through the Valley of the Shadow—nothing less.

Shortly, we realized why there had been no more machine-gun fire, when a formation of U.S.A.F. fighters swept over. They had scared away the gunners. They kept up their strafing swoops until we were picked up. Sixteen had jumped; four got back to Base.

And in that purring black Jaguar, leaning against the cold window, I recalled that incident, recalled that even when things look their worst, there may still be a large-sized hope just waiting to be grasped, just as we had grasped it once in that stinking paddy-field.

And then we were coming to a village—a little grey stone Cotswold place, a few handkerchief-sized windows with geraniums in them, and whitewashed fences. Perhaps the stray cat walking through the headlights on his way home, his eyes gleaming green and malevolent.

And here I staged my last “hope”!

“Let me get out,” I growled, holding my hand over my mouth. “I feel awfully sick. Let me get out! Out!”

Jacko grinned but did nothing; Hawke was a fastidious man—it would not have suited him for me to put my threat into action. The immaculate Jaguar slid smoothly to the roadside and he jumped out to wait for me, to make sure.

But stumbling out of the car, I judged where he was and swung that door as hard as I could into his body, and then I set off running, zig-zagging wildly, like a rabbit on the stubble of a harvest-field, expecting the shot in the back at every step.

An old lady with a woollen shawl was standing by her gate, waiting for her cat to come home. She saw me race, bent-backed, past her gentle gate and almost fell over, clasping her hands to her chest. “Oh my!” she said, as I ran past. I wish I could have consoled her at that moment.

Then the narrow street curved down a little slope. I took the turn, and to my utter disbelief, I saw a lighted house, with a lamp outside its gates, on which the magic words “Police Station” were illuminated.

It was a new red-brick building, quite out of keeping with the rest of that quaint place, but I was no architectural purist just then. It was as beautiful as Blenheim Palace, as rich as Solomon's temple, to me then.

I staggered through the white wicket-gate and over the green lawn, and up the two new concrete steps. I was in an austere but refreshing white-painted room. A police sergeant stared at me from behind a blanket-covered table, where he had been writing laboriously with a steel-nibbed pen.

"Hey, now," he said, "what's all this about?"

I was sprawling on the drugget matting then, smiling and safe, but still sprawling.

The sergeant bent over me and said, "You drunk, sir, by any chance?"

I shook my head violently, trying to get back my breath. "Lock me up, Sergeant," I said. "I'll tell you everything later. It's a matter of national concern. Atomic secrets and all that."

I tried to make it sound real—but even as I spoke, I realized how plain daft it sounded.

The sergeant was patting me on the shoulder.

"Now, look here," he said, "you go on home quietly and we'll forget all about it. And to-morrow, you make a decision never to be so silly again. All right, sir?"

I said, "No, it's not all right. I want protection, Sergeant. If you don't give it to me, then I'm sunk. Four spies are on my heels and if you let them take me, they will kill me, I swear, Sergeant."

He was still gazing down at me, scratching his ear with his penholder, when footsteps sounded on the gravel outside the place.

John Hawke came into the room, smiling quietly, wearing his dark suit, carrying his brief-case, straightening his grey silk tie.

"Good evening, Sergeant," he said pleasantly. "You have been put to no trouble, I hope?"

The policeman stared at him and then smiled.

"Not really, sir," he said, "but I am a bit worried about this gent, like. He says such funny things, as you might say."

Hawke waved his white hand, "I shouldn't think of saying them," he said. "I know the sort of thing he says. No, I shouldn't dream of saying them

—not even in a nightmare, Sergeant.”

The policeman looked at me with a frown. “Is he a bit er. . . ?” he said, tapping his forehead.

Hawke said lightly, “Now, Sergeant, no insinuations, please. This gentleman is a patient of mine, but I will not have him maligned.”

I had got up and was leaning on that blanket-covered table, my breath coming back to me now.

I cut across his words and said, “Look Sergeant, if you let these thugs take me away, you will be making a big mistake.”

Hawke said to the astonished policeman, “You see, he always speaks of many men being on his trail. Whereas there is only myself and the male nurse.”

As he spoke I saw Jacko standing outside the door, waiting—Jacko, the perfect male nurse, his hands folded before him, a beatific smile on his swarthy face, his eyelids lowered.

“They are spies, I tell you!” I said. “They killed a man at Beltenham last night.”

I had expected the policeman to jump forward then and arrest Hawke. But all he did was to stare at me as though I had crept from under a flat stone. I could see that I had shocked him, in a way that did me no credit in his mind.

“That policeman was an old mate of mine,” he said. “I don’t like hearing him talked about by drunken fellows who should be home and in their beds.”

He took a decisive step towards me, hands outstretched. “Come on, sir,” he said. “Get moving with this gentleman, like, or I shall have to be annoyed with you.”

I said, “Why, you stupid ape—you are playing into their hands. Well, if you won’t help me, I’ll have to help myself.”

I turned round to John Hawke, who still smiled, and said, “If you lay a hand on me, Hawke, I’ll do something I should have done in Stratford—knock your treacherous head off.”

He said, quite calmly, “Now Mr. Ferguson, you know you *always* say that, and then you regret it the next day. Now come on home, sir, gently does it.”

He stepped towards me, and smiled at the policeman as he did so. "You may think you have a hard job, Sergeant," he said sweetly, "but a doctor could tell you things, believe me!"

"I bet, sir," said the policeman, smiling. Then as I moved towards Hawke, he took me from behind, pinning my arms by my side. I was powerless.

"I'll lend you a pair of handcuffs, sir," he said, "until you get him home."

Hawke smiled serenely and said, "Thank you Sergeant, but that will not be necessary. We deplore violence." He waved to Giacomo who shambled forward into the room. "My male nurse, Mr. Whitchurch, is an expert in these matters. He understands Mr. Ferguson as no one else does. In his more lucid moments, dear Mr. Ferguson adores him—but not now, of course, you understand, not while the fit is on him."

The sergeant nodded. "I understand perfectly, sir," he said.

I was speechless now. The stupid well-meaning fool had given me back to them and there was nothing I could do. Jacko had such a grip on my arm that if I had tried to break away, it would have had to be with a fractured arm.

We went down the two concrete steps, across the green lawn. Hawke stayed behind a moment with the sergeant, offering him something for his kindness.

I heard the sergeant say, "No, sir, certainly not. I was only doing my duty, and that is a reward in itself."

Then they got me back to the black Jaguar, and in the darkness they tried to make me understand how angry they were. Giacomo held me, while Hawke practised a few right cross-counters, from very close quarters. He couldn't miss at that range.

I remember saying to him, "Right, boy, just step outside with me—I swear I will not run away this time—and I'll show you just how to do it. I challenge you, John Hawke!"

But Jacko did not let me go, and I tumbled down into the limbo of unconsciousness still shouting, "I challenge you, John Hawke!" My cries echoed in my inner ear like the mouthings of a madman, along the endless corridors of time. Then I knew no more.

Nineteen

The Lighted Window



Now the road sped towards us again, white in our strong beam. I was being taken for a final ride, and I knew it. Moreover, I didn't seem to care. I was apathetic, punch-drunk and apathetic, now. In his fury, John Hawke had worked on me pretty thoroughly. I felt disinclined even to help myself. I slumped down to sleep away what was left of my life after Giacomo let me go again. The rain had stopped now, and as we got out into the open country, the moon rose white and round, shedding its light on trees and hedgerows. It was so peaceful. . . . With the hum of the great engine in my ears, I dozed off, dazed, finished.

In the past, when I have read adventure stories, I have always been extremely sceptical about the hero's capacity for going to sleep even in the most difficult and painful situations. Nonsense, I used to say; no man could possibly fall asleep like that.

But in that purring car, I found that they could. It was, indeed, extremely easy to do. All that was needed was almost complete physical exhaustion and a quite complete lack of interest in one's future; the two went hand in hand with me that night.

But I also found something else—that in moments of stress, the body and mind recuperate very quickly, given the slightest amount of rest.

So, suddenly, I found myself awake again and in full possession of my faculties. The weariness and pain had fallen from me, and, what was more important, my mood of deep depression had gone. I no longer felt fatalistically willing to accept death.

I opened my eyes and realized that the engine of the car was not running. I looked round cautiously to find that I was alone in the Jaguar. My next reaction was to feel for the ignition key—but there I was disappointed, for it was not there. My hopes fell slightly as I tried the catch of my own door and that of the driver's side, to find both locked.

Very carefully, and keeping my head down, I felt over the back seat; the door on the near side was fastened, but the other, the one giving on to the open road, was not!

I sat back again and listened. Voices sounded in the darkness from behind the Jaguar and the dimmed lights of a car shone through the back window on to me. I raised my head and saw, through the rear window, that the small Morris was parked by the grass verge, perhaps forty yards from the car I was in, and that men were bending over the engine, shining a torch into it as though seeking the cause for some engine failure.

Then it came back to me. Joey had obviously had some trouble and had hooted for Hawke's car to stop and give a hand. Hawke and Giacomo had left me, dead to the world, as they thought, having locked the doors. But one door had been left unlocked by sheer chance, it appeared. And now I was determined to use that stroke of luck to the full.

I wished, all the same, that it had been the other door, the one near the verge, for I did not relish that dash across a fully-lit open road, into the shadows on the far side.

My only hope was that the men would be so occupied in staring into the engine of the Morris that they would not notice me.

I looked out of the front window first of all, to get some sort of bearings. We were in the depths of the country, it seemed to me, with only hedgerows and fields to be seen. Then, over the road, to my right, I observed the silhouette of a tall spinney, black against the indigo sky. It must be about a hundred yards away, I guessed, and to get to it I had to cross a narrow field, in which corn was stooked in long rows. Between me and that field was a hedge, not a very high one—but a hedge, all the same!

And between me and that hedge was a stretch of lighted road. . . . But it was a chance too fortunate to ignore. I bent down in the car and took off my shoes. There was no time to tie their laces and hang them about my neck, or to do anything very efficient like that; I merely dropped them on to the floor of the car and then slid over the seat, trying to make myself as flat as I could! I have seen cats do this, when they are hunting; I did the same thing myself, now, but I was the hunted one!

Once, when I was half-way over the dividing seat, I heard John Hawke's voice, clear through the darkness. He said, "I think there is one in my toolkit. Jacko, go and see!"

My heart stood still, and I fell down on to the rear seat and pretended once more to be asleep. But just then I heard Pedro call out, "Okay, Jacko! Don't bother—I've got one here."

I pictured Giacomo turning, cursing Pedro, and then shuffling back to the group bent over the Morris. I must take advantage of Jacko's turned back, and the sudden renewed interest that the others must be taking now that they had found what had been lost.

I eased the catch of the rear door gently, opening it gradually, inch by inch. Light seemed to flood into the car! I almost shut the door again, in my sudden panic. But somehow I controlled myself, and continued my snail-slow movement until the door was open almost eighteen inches. Still no one shouted, no footsteps came racing down the road towards me, no shots were fired!

For a horrible second, I imagined that they had seen the door opening and were observing it quietly, waiting to see what else I would do before they pounced. Then that fear passed and a coldness I had scarcely ever known before swept over me.

I eased myself on to the road, let the door slowly fall back and, pressing myself against the body of the car, worked my way to the front, then quickly ducked behind the bonnet. There for a little while I felt secure, out of their sight, able to breathe again.

In that moment of respite, I formulated my plan of action. I would run forward down the road, trying to keep the Jaguar between myself and my enemies. Then, when I was quite out of reach of the headlights, I would strike across the road towards the spinney.

Such was my sudden enthusiasm for this plan that I was almost over the hedge before I realized what a fool I was!

With a freezing heart, I stood stock still. Obviously, when they came from the Morris and found that I had gone, they would look at the door by which I had made my exit and then they would look towards the spinney, my obvious goal. Thereafter, it would merely be a matter of searching behind each stook, behind each tree, in every bush—and they would find me, sore-footed without my shoes, and ready to give in without a fight, no doubt.

I scooted back across that road like a frightened rabbit, scrambled across a deep ditch at the bottom of which the water gurgled, and over a barbed-wire fence. I lay down for a while then, and heard their voices, perhaps three hundred yards away. They sounded excited in the darkness.

Suddenly the foremost car's headlamps were switched on at full boost. The bright light flashed down the road and I was almost caught in its glare. I flung myself down, behind a clump of nettles and hoped for the best.

Then as soon as I heard heavy bodies bursting through the hedge into the corn field, I went on all fours out of the glow, over a little rise, and began to run downhill like a madman.

I fell many times, and banged my unprotected toes on stones and pieces of flint. The ground below me was hard and tussocky, not good farming land. I stumbled from lump to lump, over sudden ditches and murderous gorse-bushes, until at last I thought my feet would surely give out.

Then below me, half a mile away, I guessed, I saw a light, a small light such as might come from a window.

There were many fences and ditches between me and that light, I felt sure; but at that moment it was the only thing I wanted to achieve. I ran on and on towards it, my heart leaping as though it would burst through my chest, my throat so restricted that I could hardly suck in the clean cold Cotswold air that I so much needed to keep me alive, in every sense of the word!

Twenty

Sam



How long I ran, I do not know. Perhaps there is no clock capable of measuring such a headlong and painful flight. How far I ran is another matter; in all reason, it could not have been more than half a mile in all. Yet half a mile over uneven and dangerous country, at night, is no matter for joking; especially after such a punishing; especially with such enemies as I had behind me, somewhere in the darkness.

But at last I staggered among the stones, up a small rise, and at the top, overbowered by hawthorn and elder trees, I saw a small cottage. To be more accurate, perhaps, I should describe it as a hovel, for it was little more than a box of dry-stone walling with a flat roof of corrugated iron, and an unglazed window-hole. It was through this hole that the dim and reddish-orange light of an oil-lamp had shone at me when I had left the road, bringing new hope to me and drawing me on over the harsh valley and up the stone-littered hillside.

As I approached the place, I realized that behind it lay a biggish walled enclosure, from which came the cracked and mournful noises that sheep make. This then would be the shepherd's hut, this hovel towards which I crept.

As noiselessly as I could, I stretched up and looked through the window. The scene which met my eyes might have been a painting from Victorian times, framed as it was by the stone oblong of the aperture; a painting of simple and impoverished country life. No doubt it would have been given such a title as "Dreaming of the Happy Days gone by"; or, "Memories".

A white haired old man sat in a rocking chair, gazing into a wood-fire which burned in a crude and open stone fireplace. His face and neck were burned brown by the summer's sun. He wore a tarpaulin jacket and red neckerchief and his legs below the knee were wrapped round with sacking.

Beside him, on a tattered hearthrug, a big sheepdog bitch lay curled with a litter of small puppies. The old man's left hand rested on the bitch's head,

almost as though he had gone to sleep while caressing her.

Before him, on the flat stone mantel, stood a rusty tin alarm clock, whose tick came strongly to my ears as I gazed in through the window. And above the clock hung a glistening and over-coloured portrait of King Edward VII, splendid in a red tunic and Field-Marshal's feathers.

On a blanket-covered card-table behind the rocking chair stood a bottle and a blue tin mug. A half-finished loaf and a piece of cheese completed the tableau, leaning against each other on a newspaper.

The frugal meal was the spur which drove me on to disturb the old man, for suddenly I felt terribly hungry, and then I recalled that I had not eaten for six hours or more, and I had used up a great deal of energy, fighting and being fought and running!

I walked up to the rough plank door and knocked. The sheepdog bitch growled protectively and then the old man's voice said, "Come in!"

I pushed open the door and entered. The bitch rose, rolling her puppies aside with the movement, and came forward menacingly to sniff my legs.

The old man half-turned and gazed at me with pale-blue eyes, the eyes of old age. Then he smiled, "She'll not hurt yer, mister," he said.

I patted the bitch and she turned, wagging her tail, and went back to the black and white puppies which were now staring about them in a frightened way, and whining.

The old man started to get up but I stopped him, saying, "I'm very sorry to bother you, but as a matter of fact I've lost my way."

He surveyed me from head to foot and said wryly, "Aye, 'tis a longish way from Birmingham, mister." He saw my surprise and added, "Oh, I could tell where yer come from, as soon as I heard yer talk, then. Used to go there a lot, times gone by, in the pony and trap, when I worked for the old master at Blackrigg Farm. But he's been dead an' gone many years now—just after the 1914 War started. Lost a son then, he did, and never looked up again. I haven't been to Birmingham since then. But you've hurt your face, mister."

I told him that I was on a walking tour and had got rather off my track. I said I'd run into a tree in the darkness and made a mess of my face. He dropped his chin and whistled.

"Do you reckon to walk without boots, mister?" he said, at last, looking down at my tattered socks.

I tried to make light of it and said, “No! But a funny thing happened. I got a blister a bit earlier on and about an hour ago I climbed down to dangle my feet in a ditch. Like a fool, I put my shoes on the edge and as I scrambled back, they fell in. Sank right away and I couldn’t find them in the mud!”

He scratched the side of his nose and screwed up his mouth. “That was a careless thing,” he said. “Good shoes cost money, and money ain’t easy to come by these days. Where did you say the ditch was?” He began to rise. “I’ll get the lantern and come to look for them with yer. Mayhap we can rake ’em out wi’ my crook.”

I said, “Please don’t bother. I’ve been walking hard for an hour since then. We’d never find that ditch again.”

He sat down and stared me in the face. “I know all the ditches for an hour’s walk from here,” he said. “On both sides of the Monmouth Road. There’s Grimsdyke, Dumbledyke, Frogdyke—all over the hill, here, and coming t’other way there’s . . .”

I suddenly felt weak and sat down in a heap by the sheepdog bitch, who ignored me and went on suckling her pups.

The old man’s face clouded. “Hey,” he said, “you’re fair done in, lad! You’ve been on this walking caper too long, I thinks.”

He poured something from the bottle into the blue tin mug. I observed that his hand was shaking, for the neck of the bottle clinked against the enamel cup. I observed also that he poured with his left hand and that his right sleeve hung empty by his side. I took the mug he offered and drank. The light amber stuff sent a glow down into my chest and for a moment set me coughing.

After that I felt better. He smiled and said, “That’ll make a new man of yer, lad! Right old parsnip, it is; nigh on five year old. Mrs. Fallows sends me a bottle up here every week to keep the cold out. She’s a good soul, is Mrs. Fallows. Best farmer’s wife I know. And he’s the best I’ve worked for, for many a year, since old master died what I was tellin’ you about.”

I said, “Do you think you could spare me a bite of bread and cheese? I’d be most willing to pay for it.”

He looked at me sternly and said, “If you talk about paying here, me lad, out you’ll go, neck and crop, shoes or no! Bumps on the face neither!”

I smiled and said I was sorry. Then he cut me off a slice of bread and put a thick slice of cheese on it.

I said, "You're very kind."

He sat down again as I ate. "Fiddle faddle," he grunted. "Have you ever been a soldier?"

Then time stood still. I told him that I had, that I had once even reached the dizzy heights of Sergeant-Major!

He slapped his leg with his left hand and chuckled. "Well, old soldiers should stick together," he said. "But I never thought I'd live to feed a Sergeant-Major, no, that I never!"

He gazed at the picture of Edward VII for a moment and said, "I was soldiering long afore *his* time. I doubt he was no but a young chap when I put on the red and went to Africa."

I said, "You lost your arm there?"

He nodded, smiling and flicking the empty sleeve. "Aye, lad, I left that 'un in Africa. Them black men took it off me, in a way. Terrible fellows, them were. But it was all a mistake, as you might say. We weren't meant to be fightin' them at the time. . . ."

As I listened to the old man's rustic voice bumbling on in that little stone room, I forgot my tiredness; forgot Hawke and Pedro and Jacko and that double-crosser Joey. I went back into another century, relaxed with sheer exhaustion. . . . The old man's story was a simple one, but it had the ring of authority; it was his great moment, I think, the focus of his whole life. Nothing that had happened since ranked very high in his memory compared to that day he spoke of, that grim and sunlit day when he, and a company of other young rustics called to the Colours, marched over a kopje to clear out some Boer irregulars, and found that they had walked into a hornet's nest. As he rambled on, I saw the bare brown hillside that suddenly confronted them, and the black-skinned tribesmen sitting on the hillside in the cruel sun, waiting for such an eventuality.

"Aye, sittin' on their hams," he said, "just as though they knew we would come sooner or later. Laughin' in the sun, they were, and shoutin' out to each other. They had spears and knobkerries, no guns. We had guns, but most of us threw them down when we saw how many them blacks were. Why, that hillside was covered with them. We'd done no fightin', you see, just young lads from the country mostly. We thought we had got an easy job

when we set out to chivvy the Boer chaps, but we hadn't bargained for this. . . ."

Then I saw the chieftain in his leopard skin kaross standing and waving his white stick, and the tribesmen sliding up from their haunches and coming down the hillside like a black river of death, their harsh voices echoing up to the waiting vultures in the deadly blue sky.

"They was on us then. We tried to tell 'em we meant no harm to them, but they didn't understand. When we saw it was no good runnin' away, some of us got together and started hitting back at them with rifle butts. And I remember our officer, a young chap from Gloucester way, called John Parrish. Oh I remember that lad as well as anybody I know! His father had the Manor House over Camden way. Aye, he sat on his white horse and kept popping off his little pistol in their faces, till three of them threw their great long spears into him. Then he galloped off, with the things sticking out of him like a pin cushion. A big Zulu fellow hung on his horse's tail laughing like mad, till the young fellow tumbled off. Then they pulled their spears out and carried him to the king. Him in the leopard skin. He stopped the fighting then and said some words. I think he was saying he'd stopped it because our officer was such a brave 'un."

I saw the small party that was left, ten only, he said, turning and shambling back to their base, wherever it was.

I said, "And you walked with an arm missing?"

He shook his head. "Nay, lad," he said. "I had two arms to go back with, only one of them had a slice out of it from one of them spears I was tellin' you of. The surgeon had to take my arm off when we reached camp. It had got a disease in it from the dirty spear, he said. And I was glad to lose it, in a way. It had given me beans on the way back."

Against this quietly told story of violence, Joey and his razor seemed small beer. Even John Hawke shrank a little in comparison with this fine old man.

He said, "And I'd go again, if the Queen wanted me, mister. Though I doubt I'm a bit old now to fight with them big Zulu chaps."

I stood up and said, "The Queen would rather you looked after the sheep and the pups. She has all the soldiers she needs—but she hasn't all the shepherds."

He thought that one over for a while, half-suspecting I was teasing him. Then he nodded and said, "Mayhap you're right, lad. Aye, mayhap you're

right.”

I said to him, “What’s your name, sir? Mine is Bill Frankland.”

He looked a bit puzzled and then said, “Why they calls me Sam. Sam Bowmandale, I used to be. But they calls me Sam, hereabouts.”

I felt that the time had come to lay my cards on the table. “Look, Sam,” I said. “If you want to serve the Queen, you will help me to-night. Men who are the Queen’s enemies are looking for me. I don’t know where they are, but they might strike on this place before they’ve done. Have you got a gun of any sort?”

Sam looked at me quizzically. “You’re not a Keeper?” he said. “You’re not one o’ them Government chaps who come for licences?”

I said, “No, I swear it, Sam. I have deceived you, saying I was a walker, but I swear I am not a Government man.”

He got up from the chair. “I knew yer wasn’t a walker the moment you said it,” he said. “Yer feet are too soft. I could see that. And them bumps never came off no tree I know of!”

He bent over a big deal cupboard that was set at the right-hand side of the fireplace and drew out a twelve-bore sporting gun. Its barrel was pitted with age and neglect and its stock was bound round with tarry twine.

“I use this for frightening rooks and things at lambin’ time,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “And mayhap I get a rabbit or what not when the moon’s at the full. It keeps the pot boilin’ like.” He placed a box of cartridges beside the gun on the table.

“What do you want it for?” he asked.

I hoped that my answer would not scare him.

“I want to put a few pellets in the legs of the men who are trying to get me,” I said. “That is, if they dare come here to-night.”

He smiled broadly as I spoke and slapped his one hand on my shoulder. “That’s the lad,” he said. “By Jingo, but you must have been a real rare Sergeant-Major! The Queen must have been right proud of thee, lad!”

I smiled in embarrassment and turned away. Then I gave a gasp of astonishment. Pedro Moreno was standing silently at the far end of the room. He had come from behind a long piece of ragged sacking which hung down the wall, opposite the door.

He was smiling, sallow in the lamp-light. The sacking blew inwards as he stood there and then I realized that there had been another door, which I had not noticed, a door which no doubt led into the sheep fold, for now the sound of bleating had increased in volume.

“You were so busy talking, I thought I would just walk in,” he said.

I snatched up the old gun and pointed it at his chest.

“Stay where you are,” I said.

But Pedro still came on, his hands empty and hanging by his sides.

“Put that thing down,” he said. “Your finger is trembling and it might go off. It could do you a lot of damage, amigo!”

I was amazed at the man’s courage. I lowered the muzzle of the shotgun, almost in spite of myself, in respect for this man’s stark courage.

He held out his hand towards me. “I am in this with you, you stupid fool,” he said. “I would not like to see a man as brave as you get taken for a ride by them.”

Old Sam gazed at Pedro. “Have a drink, mister,” he said. “You seem a right good chap to me.”

Pedro smiled at him and said, “Thank you, I will. It may be the last drink I shall get.”

He held the blue tin mug up as though toasting old Sam, and then drained off the parsnip wine at a gulp.

Twenty-one

Siege



OVER the hill a fox barked in the moonlight. Nell, the sheepdog bitch, looked up from her sleeping puppies, her nose twitching, as though she thought she might pick up the scent of the intruder, even at that distance.

Old Sam rose to his feet. "I'd better go out there and see what I can see," he said. "Lend me the gun for a minute, lad."

Pedro smiled grimly and said, "Stay where you are, friend. The fox that's out there might be running on two legs—then what would happen to you?"

I said, "How do we know that a fox on two legs has not visited us already?" I was not yet sure of this strange man.

For a moment, I thought Pedro Moreno would lose his temper. He punched one hand into the palm of the other in silence before he spoke, and when he did answer, his voice was menacingly quiet.

"My friend," he said, "there are some men it is a waste of time to help. I think that you may be one of them, after all."

I was nettled at this remark and burst out, "Well, how do I know that you mean well, that you have not got into this place to trap me, to hold me here until the others arrive?"

The Spaniard passed a hand over his brow, as though he was too weary to explain to such a fool what must have been so obvious.

"Frankland," he said at last, "this is one of the occasions when you will just have to take a chance on it. Life is a gamble anyway, from start to finish; you will just have to accept the odds that Fate offers. You have no alternative in any case. But I will tell you now, and you may believe me or not as you please, that if they ever get into this room you will see beyond all doubt that *they* no longer regard me as a friend."

I said, "There has been enmity between Giacomo and yourself for a long time."

At first I thought that he was going to tell me to mind my own business. But he converted his emotion into action and with a violent movement, dragged the heavy cupboard from its place beside the hearth-stone and set it fair and square against the door to the sheep-pen, the door by which he had himself just entered.

Then he turned and looked at me gravely and said, "Giacomo is a punch-drunk killer. He has *no* gentle feelings. He is a beast of the forests, nothing more."

I said, "John Hawke seems to trust him, in spite of what you say."

It was a cruel stroke and to this day I am shocked that I should have said such a thing. If Pedro Moreno had struck me down there and then, I should have deserved the blow.

Indeed, he drew in his breath in a sharp little hiss and then turned away from me, as though I had spat in his face. With his broad back to me he said, "Even a God may choose wrong. Read your Greek legend and you will see."

I said no more, but overturned the card-table and dragged it to the side of the room opposite the fireplace, setting it so that it provided a shelter from which I could cover the door and the window-hole. Somehow, Pedro's last remark, almost blasphemous as it had at first seemed, had convinced me. I would question him no further, I decided, and if he double-crossed me, then that was that. Death must come sooner or later, I thought.

I turned the oil-lamp down and set it in a corner of the little room, alongside the window, so that it would be out of danger from any missile that might otherwise throw us into sudden darkness; and then I ran forward, bent double, and let down the heavy wooden catch that was the only means of securing the thick plank door.

Old Sam sat watching me, making no attempt to stop me from disarranging his small home. But when I told him that he must go into the corner, where the cupboards had been, so that a stray bullet through the window-hole would not blow him off his chair, his face took on a stern expression.

"What!" he said. "I'll not be ordered about in my own house. If there's fighting, I mean to be in it, young fellow. Don't forget it, I was fightin' the Queen's enemies before you were thought of. Before there were any to think

of you, even! If I could stand up to them great blacks, then I can stand up to any fiddling little pipsqueaks out there!”

If I had had the dealing with him, I might have pointed out that we were not speaking of the same Queen—much water had passed under the bridges of the world since he had stood terrified by the great black men on the hillside, and he was no longer a young man, no longer a fighter. I should have said that sort of thing, no doubt, and have ended up by annoying him so much that he would have insisted on staying where he was, and have ended that night as a dead man, very probably.

Fortunately, Pedro answered him instead, almost without saying a word. The wry-faced Spaniard bent quickly and with a single sweep of the arm took up old Nell’s sleeping puppies and placed them in the shelter of the hearth-stone, in the space left by the cupboard. Their mother followed immediately and curled herself round them. Pedro then looked at old Sam firmly.

“If you sit there, she’ll stay,” he said. “If you don’t she’ll come out to you and the pups will follow. I want no dead pups on my conscience, old friend. I’ve had dogs of my own.”

Old Sam looked long at Pedro’s unsmiling face. Then, without a word he got up and dragged his rocking chair alongside the sheepdog. Only then did his face relax.

“That’s man’s talk,” he said. “I know a man when I meet one.”

Pedro took up three old kitchen knives from the stone mantel. He thrust them towards Sam.

“Here, friend,” he said, “get your scythe-stone and bring these down to a point. Then put an edge on both sides that I could shave with. That’ll keep you out of mischief.”

The old shepherd looked at him, amazed. “Them’s my best knives,” he said, plaintively. “I’d spoil ’em.”

Pedro shrugged his shoulders. “If I live after to-night,” he said, “I’ll buy you a canteen of silver-handled cutlery to remind you of this. Go on, do as I say.”

As Sam worked, grumbling at his task, Pedro came to me behind the table and said, “They should be here soon. I slipped away from them when they had searched the corn field and were going into the spinney. They won’t stay that side of the road. They won’t miss any chances. I saw this

light when I came back to the cars and I'm sure they would see it too. So, be ready. Shoot to kill, if you dare. *They* will have no doubts about what to do. You and I hold their secret. They will not let us live."

I nodded and set the trigger at half-cock. Pedro crept back and took the two knives which old Sam had prepared. Then he went to the corner of the room at the other side of the window. Anyone coming through window or door would be skewered before he could turn his head to see where Pedro was. I was chuckling at that grim thought when a voice called from the front of the little hovel.

"Come on out, Frankland, the chase is over."

It was Joey. I was about to reply, but Pedro held up his hand for silence.

"Let them be puzzled," he whispered.

Nell, upset by this mysterious behaviour, began to bark, but old Sam immediately quietened her.

"We know you're in there," came the same voice. "Come on out and we'll talk business, maybe."

Pedro drew his forefinger across his throat, expressing the sort of business that was on their minds. Then he smiled and deliberately licked the edge of one of his knives. The coolness of the man amazed me. I was beginning to shiver, though it was not a cold evening.

Then John Hawke's voice sounded, clear and cool, from the darkness. "We have no wish to harm anyone but you, Frankland. Give yourself up now. And you, Pedro Moreno, come out with him. No harm will come to you. I shall remember the days when you used to be my friend. You shall go free."

I looked in sudden concern at Pedro. His expression of rock-like disdain had not altered. He twitched his eyebrows and then licked the edge of the second knife, as though making himself completely familiar with it.

"I shall count ten," called Hawke, "and if you are not outside then, we shall be forced to take you in other ways."

We heard his voice begin to count. I might have been lulled by that sound had not Pedro suddenly raised his hand and pointed to the window. I saw the top of a hat appearing slowly in the aperture. I knew that Pedro could not reach it from his angle, so I levelled my shotgun and fired.

The shock to my shoulder was terrific. The rotten, twine-bound stock shuddered in my hands and my face was stung by the flying particles of powder. The room was suddenly filled with bitter blue smoke.

Joey's hat flew into the air and by some strange accident of forces, fell into the room, riddled with shot.

Outside the window Joey howled and then began to curse violently.

Old Sam seemed to enjoy that. "Hm, you've nobbut half-scalped him," he said. "He'll be back soon for some more! Dang me if he won't!"

Pedro made a wry face. "With luck you'll get six shots out of that relic of Waterloo. After that—pouf! She'll take you with her!"

Old Sam looked shocked at first. Then he came to terms with reality and sighed, shaking his head. "Aye," he said, "'er won't stand this rough handling, won't the old firepiece there! One shot a month I fires out of 'er. That's quite enough, at 'er age."

Just then a heavy blow resounded on the plank door. It shuddered as though about to give way under the shock, and the bar which held it fast jumped up in its sockets and almost fell to the floor.

"Jacko has found a battering-ram," said Pedro. "We must stop that straight away or they will be in here with us before we are ready for them."

Then he ran swiftly across the room, head down till he got to the window, and raising himself suddenly, he leaned out and threw one of his knives towards the door.

Immediately a shot cracked out and Pedro fell to the floor, smiling. A trickle of blood made its way down the side of his face. But he did not seem to care. He was listening.

Outside we heard a man groan then, a low and almost animal sound. Yet there was no mistaking Giacomo's voice.

Pedro said calmly, "He will never forgive me, amigo. I had the good fortune to fix his hand to the door!"

Then it seemed that Giacomo had got himself free, for there was a great bellowing and shouting of threats, and after that—silence.

"They have withdrawn to lick their wounds," Pedro said. "Now we must watch out, for they will wish to avenge what we have done. Joey may even come through the window to get his hat back. He is a very mean man, that one!"

He was staunching the flow of blood from his temple as he spoke. "I have not known Hawke to miss before," he said lightly. "Perhaps he has some softer feelings for me after all!"

Just then we turned to find that old Sam had crawled over the floor with the bottle of parsnip wine.

"Here, gentlemen," he said, "take a pull at this. It will put new heart into you for the next shoot!"

He spoke with a dry humour, for all the world like an old retainer who brings a bottle of Napoleon brandy out to the master and his friend on a cold day, when the shooting is a bit slow and the pheasant are not rising.

We drank, passing the bottle on from one to the other. The amber fluid had a warming effect. I felt that I had a little more confidence now in that decrepit old piece of ironmongery I held so gingerly in my hands.

Just then a dustbin lid appeared in the window-hole. At any other time, the apparition would have sent me off into roars of laughter. But now the deadly purpose behind that ordinary utensil was enough to put all laughter out of my mind and throat. Behind that shield, a man could fire into the room through the window.

I acted automatically and pulled the trigger. This time a piece of the stock flew away from me. Pellets from the cartridge pinged about the room. I looked through the smoke to see that the lid was still there; marked by shot, but still there.

Then Pedro bent, snatched up a loose piece of Cotswold stone from the hearth, and, raising it above his head, flung it with all his force at the dustbin lid. The impact knocked the thing away, and we heard it clatter down below the window outside.

After that there was a long silence out on the hillside. Occasionally we heard the hoot of the hunting owl, and sometimes in the distance, the barking of a dog at some far-away farm. Old Nell raised her head and listened, but did not reply. The sheep in the pen at the back of the hovel were quiet now. The total effect was a little unnerving.

Then, from afar off, Joey's voice carried to us on the night air. "Don't think we've left you, Frankland. We shall come back. It won't be long now, china!"

We heard Giacomo shouting out some incoherent insult at Pedro. Then all was silence once again.

Pedro said, "Watch out now! They wish to give us the impression that they are going away. But they may indeed be circling us again."

We waited, hardly daring to speak any more. But they did not come as suddenly as we had expected them.

I worked out later that the two must have gone back to the car for their new equipment. They had been speaking the truth when they spoke to us last.

As we waited, Pedro said to the old man, without any preamble or embarrassment, "My friend, in my country when a matador is in an awkward situation, he will sometimes say, quietly, so that no one can hear him: 'Give me a good afternoon and a clean kill and I will buy fifteen candles for the little altar in the Chapel.' He means the one where the *toreros* go before the thing begins. Well, to-night, my friend, I say to you: Give me a good night and *three* clean kills, and I will buy this old man a new house, and a new suit of clothes to wear in it."

He smiled when he said this. But old Sam looked at him as though he was rambling in his mind.

"I never could a-bear them bull-fights," he said. "A young chap in the village saw one of they things once, and it fair turned his stomach over, he said."

He shook his head in the dim light, again and again, staring at Pedro with wide pale-blue eyes.

I said quietly, "Sam, this gentleman is offering to buy you a new house and a new suit if we come through this night safely."

Old Sam half-turned in his rocking chair and glowered at Pedro. "Then he must be a maniac," he said. "He never asked my opinion, did he? Well, you tell him from me that this place suits me well enough. Mayhap it ain't Windsor Castle, but it's mine, every stick and stone. I'll be having no new houses, I tell you, with them electricity lights and baths. They ain't natural. As for a suit; why, what I've got on has worn me well for fifteen years, and I reckon it'll wear me out, when all's said and done. I'd look a fine fool, tending the sheep at lambing time in one of they smart city suits with a flower in me buttonhole and all." He turned strictly towards Pedro. "Look here, young fellow," he said, "if you want to make a fool of me, just you say so, and I'll be ready for you. The very idea!"

Then, while the old man was chattering and Pedro was looking first from him and then to me, I caught the sound of scurrying footsteps outside, right

below the window-hole. While we had been talking, *they* had returned. I had no time to say anything to Pedro. I raised my shotgun and took aim at the window. But I need not have bothered. What came through that hole would not be deterred by my decrepit twelve-bore.

A great bundle of cloth and sacking, tied up with binder-string, and soaked with oil and petrol, came flaming through the window. It lay in the middle of the room, sending off thick clouds of black smoke, and spurting so that it was difficult to get near to it.

Nell shrank back into the corner, afraid for her puppies. Old Sam leaned over her so that the flames should not harm her. Pedro ran forward and kicked at the flaring bundle, moving it away from the old man and the dog. His trousers were scorched, by even so brief a contact.

And while we stared at it, helpless, the crazy plank door fell inwards with a crash, and Giacomo stood hunched in the doorway for a second, peering through the smoke, trying to find Pedro.

But Pedro did not wait to be found; he bounded through the oily whirls and leapt at the big man. They both went down and I lost sight of them. My attention was turned to something more urgent; Joey had come through the open doorway, his razor in his hand. And he was making for me, his red-rimmed eyes full of fury.

My finger tightened on the trigger, automatically. There was a report which sent me deaf straightway. I was flung backwards with the explosion and my face burned with the terrible smart of the powder. The old gun had fired her last shot.

But, fortunately, she had sent some of her charge in the direction I had aimed for, and Joey's hands were flung violently outwards as he fell over in the doorway.

I tried to get to my feet, and found it rather difficult as I was suffering from shock. But at last I crawled over to where Joey lay, his hands over his face. The spray of pellets had certainly cut him about, but not mortally. As I bent over him, I saw that all his wounds were superficial ones—he had the debility of the old gun to thank for that—and his eyes were not touched. He groaned and cursed alternately. But I could see that all the fight had gone out of him. When he recognized me, he said, "I give in, china! Swelp me, but I

didn't want any part of this fight, to-night. I give in, chum, I swear. Let me be! I'll do anything."

I turned to see how Pedro was getting on. He was standing in a corner, his hand raised in the act of throwing his knife. Giacomo lay, half-winded on the floor, his eyes wide with a mortal terror. The sweat of deathly fear stood out on his face, bright in the lamp-light. He was gibbering in Italian, beseeching Pedro not to throw that knife. And Pedro's hard, brown face had the fixed look of a man who intended to finish this feud, once and for all, and in the most primitive way known to man.

I do not think any word of mine would have deterred him; indeed, for a strangely callous instant, I did not feel like making the effort to stop him. I too was full of a great and incomprehensible savagery, for these enemies were brutes and nothing more. Let them go free, and they would turn round and strike to kill at the man who had forgiven them.

But Pedro was not intended by the fates to strike Giacomo down then. In fact, only by some singular act of grace did any of us survive the next three seconds.

Without the slightest warning, a sudden burst of fire from an automatic weapon of a fairly heavy calibre tore its way through the sheep-pen door behind us, into the room, scattering fragments of wood over us, the bullets humming and ricocheting from the stone walls like demented hornets.

Pedro's hand was poised in mid-air. A strange tremor passed over his face. At first I thought he had been shot.

"Hawke," he said. "We forgot the Master."

Then the voice of John Hawke came through the blocked door. "Open this door," he said. "I shall fire again if it is not opened when I have counted five."

It was the voice of a man who would have killed us all without a qualm. The voice of a power-crazed maniac.

I had just sense enough to run forward and drag away the heavy cupboard with which we had made fast the door earlier. I did not do it

entirely from fear for myself, but because I had no wish to see old Sam lying dead in his own hovel after the next insane burst of fire.

Then John Hawke was standing in the room, the bright German sub-machine rifle under his arm. He was turning from side to side, his wide eyes lit up with something I had not seen in them before; it might have been the lust of battle, or sheer berserk excitement—or it might have been sheer madness. Whatever it was, it was terrible to see. Had he gone back on his word at that moment and mown us all down, Giacomo and Joey included, I should not have been greatly surprised.

Joey and Giacomo stared at him as fearfully as I must have done. They even began to beg him not to fire.

He spat in their faces.

“Get up, you useless cowards,” he snarled. “Get up and act like men for once in your dog’s lives.”

Then he seemed to see Pedro for the first time. He walked slowly towards him, kicking the still-smouldering bundle of rags out of his path. Pedro stood still, facing him, his dark face impassive. As Hawke came nearer, the knife fell from the Spaniard’s hand and tinkled on the stone floor. Old Nell began to whimper in the corner. Sam’s eyes almost stood out of his head. But not one of us had the power to move. We were in the grip of a nightmare, in that lonely Cotswold hut.

And when he was close to Pedro, John Hawke stopped and spoke to him in a voice that was urgent, even vicious, but so low that we could not hear what he said. Pedro’s face did not change, nor did his eyes waver from Hawke’s own.

Then suddenly the Master began to strike him about the face, sometimes with the back of his hand, sometimes with the butt of the short gun. Pedro did not make any attempt to defend himself. He swayed like a man who has given up any wish to avoid a punishment which he had long expected. And at last his knees gave way and he slumped to the floor, his head between his hands.

And when John Hawke turned from him, I saw that his lips were still moving, but he made no sound. What emotions he felt were wordless. But the tears ran unchecked down his fine and doom-driven face.

Old Sam came to his senses suddenly and shambled forward with a crook.

“Dang me,” he cried hoarsely, “but if no one else will, I’ll put an end to this nonsense!”

He struck out at Hawke, catching him twice on the shoulder. As he took aim for the third time, Hawke turned and gently warded off the blow, putting his hand out like a blind man. Then he seemed to smile sadly at Sam and his lips moved. He said quietly, “I have no quarrel with you, old man. Go back to your chair and try to forget what you have seen. Good night, and may you never give shelter to a traitor again.”

Then he passed through the door, stumbling like a drunk man, down the hillside and into the darkness. It was as though he had forgotten us all.

Twenty-two

Burnt Oak



A DISTANT church clock struck two as we rolled along the upland highway of the Forest of Dean. On either side the tall trees embowered us, seeming to lean down over the cars, as though to make us go through a tunnel.

In spite of the nagging ache of my tightly-bound wrists, I could not help recalling the now ironical lines from *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*:

*“Oh! there the chestnuts, summer through,
Beside the river make for you
A tunnel of green gloom, and sleep
Deeply above; and green and deep
The stream mysterious glides beneath
Green as a dream and deep as death.”*

In our headlights the trees emerged from the surrounding gloom in more than naturally vivid shades of green. There was certainly *death* in the air; only Brooke’s river was lacking to complete the picture.

Pedro sat beside me, in the back of the Morris, his hands bound and resting on his thighs, his head bowed in silent defeat or sleep. Joey and Jacko sat in the front seats, speechless and grim. Ahead of us the big Jaguar, driven by John Hawke, began to slow down. We saw his braking-lights flash once, twice, three times. Then his car gathered speed and ploughed forward once more into the deep green tunnel, away from us, into the night.

Joey half-turned to me and said, “Right, this is the place. The Boss has just given us the signal. This is where you get off.”

I said tiredly, “And where are you going?”

He almost grinned, and then, pulled short by the stiffness of his lacerated face, muttered under his breath. His tone was vicious. “We shall follow him to Cardiff—when we have fixed you up for the night.”

The Morris pulled into the grass verge. Giacomo got out and flung open the door.

“C’mon, you swine,” he said slowly. “Get walking now!”

They dragged us out of the car and across the grass. The boughs of trees reached down and brushed our faces but we were too weary now to move away from them. I do not think that Pedro even saw them; his head was sunk on his chest and he stumbled over the rough grass like a man walking in his last sleep.

At last we left the thickest rim of trees and made our way over a gently sloping area of open glade. Joey stopped for a moment, as though to get his bearings. Then he pointed to a tall tree which stood out from the others by reason of its height and the thickness of its great trunk. It was an immense oak.

At first I thought they were going to hang us outright on that tree; but I reflected that neither of them had brought a length of rope, and you can’t hang a man without rope.

But when we got near to the great tree and Giacomo flashed his torch on its trunk, I saw with increasing horror that the end they had decreed for us was even more terrifying than hanging. I do not know why I became suddenly so certain of their intentions. Perhaps it was by reason of some intuition, some increased awareness and sensibility which only visits man’s mind when he is in a peculiar state of receptivity—such as when he is about to die. . . .

The gnarled bark of the oak tree was split open, leaving a hole in the shape of a much elongated triangle, perhaps two feet across at the bottom and reaching, at its apex, to the height of a man’s chest. As the white beam of the torch penetrated that doorway in the tree, I saw that there had been some effort to burn the oak down from inside, for the walls of that hollow were thickly charred. I saw also that the space within the tree might accommodate two grown men—if they were *forced* inside. . . .

Giacomo stepped back with a brutish grimace and waved his torch towards the ghastly hole.

“This is your hotel for the night, gentlemen! You observe, we were thoughtful! We reserved this nice snug little apartment for you, and you alone! Go on, get inside, no one will disturb you, of that you may rest assured!”

Joey began to smile too, in spite of his torn face.

“The walls are thick enough for you to scream your perishin’ heads off,” he said. “Just relax when you get inside—it won’t make any difference, but it’ll be more comfortable to go out that way, instead of struggling like!”

Giacomo nodded, violently, like an animal. “Yes,” he grunted, “we shall tap on the bark of the tree and you will know we are wishing you good-bye. Perhaps if you tap back, we may let you out again.”

Joey slapped him respectfully on his fat shoulder. “Yes,” he said, “and perhaps we shan’t, eh Jacko?”

Then he laughed almost as though he were hysterical, a little too immoderately even for Giacomo, who turned and gave him a fixing stare. Joey stopped laughing then. With a remarkably sudden change of manner, he began to push and punch us towards the doorway of the oak tree. I glanced at Pedro, but he walked obediently, like a hypnotized automaton.

I did not want to go down without some sort of fight, and so as Joey came at me from behind again, I lashed out with my feet, as hard as I could, one after the other. My right missed him, for he was nimble. But my left caught him on the wrong foot, and he sprawled his small length, groaning with agony and rubbing his shin.

I said, “Too bad, china! You should have thought of that!”

He scrambled up and began to run at me. I swung my foot again, this time forwards. He stopped and backed away. Pedro turned and stared at us as though we were creatures of a nightmare he was having. Then he turned away again, all the fight gone out of him. When I saw that, I think I gave up the ghost too.

Joey said, “Right, you swine, we were going to put you inside with your legs free at least. But now you shall have a little more to think about!”

A man with his hands tied can do little against two. They tied our ankles with a length of electric flex which the thoughtful Joey carried in his raincoat pocket against all eventualities it seemed. Then, pushing us along, they forced us inside the oak, so that we leaned, facing each other, against the charred wood of the interior.

Outside, Giacomo’s torch shone brightly. Then they began to pile soil and turfs against the hole, and the beam of the torch faded gradually. At last, just before they placed the last sod in position, Joey whistled through to us and said, “What ho! my merry boys! Keep your chins up, the sheriff is near at hand—I don’t think!”

Then he burst into peals of maniacal laughter.

Giacomo's face appeared in the small hole. He spoke quietly, like a man who is triumphant and does not need to shout.

"Vaya con Dios, amigo!" he said to Pedro. "May you reach whatever Heaven you desire! As for me, I would rather have life! I will sometimes think of you, in Budapest, you fool!"

He paused for a moment, then, when we thought he had gone, he looked in again and said, "Go to your death with my hatred, Pedro Moreno, and may the black bulls haunt you as you choke!"

Pedro did not answer: his eyes were closed.

Then they rammed the last turfs in, and we saw no more. Nor did we hear any more, for the oak was so thick. They may have tapped on the outside to wish us good-bye—but we did not hear them.

Twenty-three

Apologia



THE thoughts of a man who is about to die can be of little interest to the living, for they are set on a curious plane of half-reality, half-dream, and that to normal men is a state of silliness. I shall not say what went through my mind in the first sweltering hours of that ordeal. All I will record here is that the heat became very intense and the air very thick. Sleep was impossible, standing at the slope in that tree, with wrists and ankles tightly bound. But after a while, the agony of restricted limbs seemed to wear off, for, I think, the nerves became satiated with pain and went into their own sort of coma for the while. I found myself gasping for air like a man who has taken a mouthful of salt water when swimming—but the gasp produced no results, for the air in the tree was almost exhausted of its oxygen.

From time to time I lapsed into a half-state of waking-nightmare. Then I would come to again, and would think as clearly as I had ever done, for a few moments.

And in one of those seconds of clarity, I became conscious that Pedro was talking to me. At least, he was talking as though he expected someone to be listening—not in the way a man might talk if he were musing alone.

“Hell,” he said, “what could I do? You understand, my friend, we lived in caves down there. In caves. I can tell you that almost anything is better than a cave. But that is what it was like then in Spain, in Andalucia. . . .”

There was a pause, which might have been a minute, or two hours. I do not know, the air was stifling by that time.

Then he spoke again.

“We were a large family. My little sister Chispa danced for the tourists in her gipsy dress. My big sister Ana sold peanuts and *limonada* at the Theatre, dressed also in her gipsy dress. Yet both of them hated their gipsy dress. They wanted American clothes, and to blazes with gipsy dress! My brothers

were younger than I was. They wanted motor-bikes, or new trousers, or a loaf of bread. Usually a loaf of bread, for we often went hungry.”

I husbanded my breath, and whispered, “What did you want, Pedro? What, for yourself?”

He said simply, “Nothing, only to give them what they had missed. And so I fought the bulls, the black bulls of the South. Our father had died, and so I must look after them, the others of my family.”

Now his voice became remote, as though he had lapsed into an old dream.

“Even as a little boy I would go at night, in my rags, you understand, and tease the black bulls in their stone pens. Sometimes we would arrange to go there, when the *ganaderos* were asleep, half a dozen little gipsy boys, like me. And we would call to them softly in the moonlight, ‘Ha! Toro! Toro!’ Call to the great bulls of Andalusia, we little frogs, shaking our ragged drawers or shirts to attract the bulls in the silver moonlight. . . . And they would snuffle, the great killers, and smell man in the moonlight. Then they would come at us, at the little frogs with their shirts held out like *capas* and their hearts beating like castanets . . . and we would either run away altogether or stand there and make the cloak passes. . . .”

I said, “Were none of the boys ever killed?”

After an eternity Pedro said, “Only sometimes. Their families did not miss them for long, there were so many of us. But usually the great bulls sniffed that we were boys and left us alone, in our pride and our new courage, wagging our torn shirts in the moonlight. And so we became convinced that we should be matadors . . . when we grew up, *one day*. . . . Matadors in dove-grey suits and black sombreros and a little rubber ring to put our hair through at the back . . . and food to eat, always, for ever. . . .”

I fell against the charred oak and almost howled with the pain of my tied ankles. Then I think I lost consciousness completely and deeply. When I came to I was almost sitting, so far had I slumped down. It was an agonizing experience to inch my way back again to a standing position when the cutting wires would hurt me less.

Pedro said, “When I left that manager, I was a rich young man. My sisters had married well on my earnings, and my brothers had their bread and their trousers, and their motor-bikes. The family did not live in a cave any longer. My mother had her own house, outside Madrid now, and a nice

little bank balance and insurance policy. I was happy for the first time. Then the war came, the Spanish Civil War, as you call it. . . .”

I said, “War is a bad thing, Pedro. We all know that.”

As I said it, I heard the foolishness of my remark. It was so trite and unconvincing. Luckily, he did not seem to hear it, but went on, slowly now.

“After the war was over, I did not go back to the bulls. Things were different then. There was no one of my family left, no one to work for, to love, any more. Spain was no longer my home, it was a wilderness to me. I went to Italy, full of bitterness and revenge, to fight for whoever had work for me to do, and money to pay my price. And so at last I became the man you know—a rootless wanderer, a professional killer, if you will: the right-hand man of another lost soul, John Hawke.”

I tried to make sense of Pedro’s story, his reasoning, but could not. I shook my head in the blackness of the tree, and then I felt myself sinking down again, but gently now, away and away, and then again away, beyond the reach of sense and logic, into oblivion, and, I sensed, death.

“Good-bye, Pedro,” I said. “It was interesting to meet you, in a funny way.”

Even as I spoke those words, I thought how stupid they sounded—but there was nothing I could do to change them. I felt myself slipping away rapidly.

Only once at that time did I know anything. Distantly I heard Pedro’s voice, sounding faintly and frighteningly, as from along vast corridors, the labyrinthine underground ways of Minos, in the years beyond all human knowing.

“They are coming for me,” he groaned. “The black bulls I killed once. . . . They are coming in their herds with the swords in their backs, the black bulls! They are passing by the cloak. It is the *man* they want. They want the *man*!”

Twenty-four

Dai and Myfanwy



THEN suddenly the heavy doors of unconsciousness grated back again, and Pedro was silent, yet I sensed that he, like me, was aware of something strange that was happening. Within the thick darkness of the burial-tree, the air was stiff with our tension. It was as though a message from the upper world had penetrated down to the grave's dark depths. Indeed, that is exactly what *had* happened.

Wordless, we listened intently, hopeful and hopeless, at the same time; glad and afraid. For outside, someone was knocking on the bark of the oak tree.

I tried hard to bring my scattered senses together, to concentrate on the intermittent sounds which penetrated dully and faintly that thick casing of bark and outer wood. It was a hard task for me to accomplish, gasping as I was for breath. But I made out at last a rhythm that I knew. Whoever tapped on the bark of the oak was thinking of "Baa-Baa Black Sheep!" of all things! I recognized the childish run of the notes: long-long-long-long-short-short-short-short-long; long-long-long-long-long-long-long. . . .

It was incredible. I gasped, "Pedro, do you know that tune?"

He answered slowly, "What tune, amigo? I hear no tune." It was clear that he thought me mad. I did not pursue the point, for I realized then that it was unlikely that Pedro would know a British nursery rhyme.

I realized also, at the same time, that this could be neither Giacomo nor Joey; the first like Pedro would not know the thing; and Joey would be too hard-bitten to remember it even if he wished to taunt us. In any case, his childhood had probably been spent in places where such a childish jingle would be unknown. He would not know it, the child of sad, sunless alleys.

Then the idea struck me that I might try to answer by tapping the same rhythm back. . . . But the foolishness of that plan soon struck me when I made the attempt. My hands were bound before me and I couldn't turn to

use them on the charred wall of the tree. Nor could I raise my bound and now almost senseless feet. If I had had a thick enough skull, I think I would have tried using my head. But not even *my* skull was hard enough for the task I would have imposed on it. I could have wept with frustration then.

Once more the tapping came. This time the beats formed themselves into: short-short-short-long; short-short-short-long; short-short-short-short-long-long-long-long. . . .

At first the thing baffled me; and then, as it was repeated again, I suddenly tumbled to it. It brought back to me the memory of an elderly uncle, who had one of those gramophones with a great green tin horn. He often used to play an ancient and very scratchy record for me and say, twirling his handlebar moustache as he looked over the Birmingham rooftops from his little bed sitting-room, “Ah, Bill, my boy, you don’t get singers like that nowadays! A real comic, Harry Champion was, in his day! Yes, a *real* comic!”

Someone was tapping out, “Any Old Iron!” I felt like weeping.

In the darkness of the oak, I groaned with anxiety. Three inches away a hand was tapping out tunes on the side of the tree—and that hand could set us free, if we could only make our existence known. My brain slid over half a dozen schemes, each one wilder than the last.

Then, in despair, I gasped to Pedro, “There is someone outside this tree; someone whose attention we must attract, if we are to live. How can we do it, Pedro?”

There was a long pause, and I thought that the Spaniard had fallen into a comatose sleep once more. But he did answer in the end.

“Are you willing to take a chance on death, amigo?” he said, weakly, but with his old laconicism. “Take a chance on death to win life, eh?”

I said, “I will do whatever you think will get us both out of this coffin.”

Again there was a long interval, and then Pedro said, “In my right-hand jacket pocket, there is a cigarette-lighter. I cannot reach it with my hands tied before me. But if I try to come towards you, you might be able to find it, and then we can only do our best.”

I did not stop to discuss this with him. Instead, I tried to lean forward as he inched towards me. In the thick darkness, I heard the sound of his body rubbing against the charred blackness of the wood.

It was painful to lean out of my semi-recumbent position against the wall of the oak—but it was the sheerest agony to feel into his pocket when at last he came close to me. Yet I did it, and my almost nerveless fingers at last recognized the shape and texture of his cigarette-lighter. At a snail-like speed, I withdrew the metal object from his deep pocket. Once when it was almost out, my throbbing fingers lost it, and the weary business had to begin again. I could have cried out in sheer disappointment. What if the people outside go away! I kept thinking.

Then finally I had the lighter in my hands, my palms sweating against the coldness of its metal.

I said, “What shall I do now, Pedro?”

He laughed weakly and said, “If you press it, there will be a flame. Make that flame and then set it against the dry turf with which they have walled us in. That may burn, and some time or other the flames will work to the outside and will be seen. Then, if we are still alive and lucky, our visitors may become curious and pull down the prison wall.”

I said, “All right. I’ll do it, if you’re game.”

He spoke sleepily now. “I am game, amigo,” he said. “For if the plan does not work, then it will only hasten a process which has already started. . . . We shall die quicker, that’s all.”

I waited a while, to gain strength, then I pressed down the plunger of the lighter. The flame burned my hands until I found how I could hold it without getting hurt too much.

I groped for the dried turf, and set the little light against it. The stuff smouldered for a moment and then flared out, sending up dense clouds of smoke, which flung me back against the tree, choking.

It was then that an idea came to me so sharply that in spite of all my discomfort and pain, I could have laughed at the sudden simplicity of it.

“Why, Pedro,” I said, “what a pair of idiots! We could burn through our ropes and *push* our way out!”

He grunted but said nothing. I think that he was almost unconscious then, and that made me all the more anxious to do as I said. I grabbed at the lighter and pressed it. Nothing happened. I pressed it harder still and a tiny flame came from the wick, which lived only for a second before going out. The thing had run out of fuel. In my annoyance I dropped it and tried to curl away from the billowing smoke of the burning turf. The tears were

streaming down my face from the acrid fumes, and my lungs were almost about to give up the nightmare struggle—when suddenly daylight streamed into the tree. A hole appeared, becoming bigger and bigger. The sunlight swept across my face. I saw another face staring in amazement at me. I tried to smile—then I pitched forward, towards the yellow sunlight. I felt hands about me, and knew no more.

When I came round, I was lying on my back on the grass of a green glade. I saw the leaves above my head—they were oak leaves. I shut my eyes again in nausea!

Then a voice said, “Here man, drink this cuppa. It’ll put new life into you, man!”

I looked up and saw a dark earnest face above me; a thin, intense, brown-eyed face, rather aquiline in the way Welshmen often are—the dark little Welshmen of the South; the little Celts who played such havoc with Claudius, and ran amok for Boadicea, killing seventy thousand Romans before they were quelled . . . the little longbow men of Crecy and Poitiers! The black-faced miners of the Rhondda . . . the bards of the Eisteddfod at Llangollen, or Mountain Ash—or indeed anywhere where there is a poem to be declaimed and a song to be sung.

“Thank God for Wales, Dai bach!” I said, grabbing at the plastic mug of tea which he held for me.

He was not more than twenty years old. His young face took on an expression of startled surprise.

“How did you know my name, boy?” he almost gasped.

I said, “That’s an official secret, man!” Then I turned and saw that a young girl kneeled at my other side. Her hair was of a glorious shade of golden-auburn, and it was done up in what I believe is called a Pony’s Tail. Her eyes were wide and blue. Her skin was of the ivory sort that so often goes with such hair and such eyes. She was perhaps eighteen but might have been older. I saw that she wore a black sweater and jeans. I said, foolishly, “And I bet your name is Blodwen and you are Dai’s young lady.”

She said coolly, “You are wrong then. My name is Myfanwy and I am his sister, so there!”

I grinned and then groaned. “How is my friend?” I managed to gasp. “Is he all right?”

Dai said, “He is a strong man. When we cut him loose he helped to carry you here before he passed out. You have a lot to thank him for, man.”

I tried to get up to see Pedro. But suddenly I felt very sick and rolled over, helpless.

When I came to once more, the sunlight leapt at me from a different angle. It was not surprising for by now it was afternoon. We had been rescued in the morning—and now the sun was hinting that, before too long, it would be falling once more below the horizon.

And when I opened my eyes this time, Pedro was sitting close to me, smoking a strong black cigarette, his hands bandaged with handkerchiefs, his face black with smoke and charcoal, but smiling, his long Spanish smile.

“Hello there, friend Bill,” he said, “and how would you like a hard-boiled egg? We have saved one for you! Though, I must admit, it was a great temptation for me to steal it while you slept.”

I said, “Give it to me, amigo! I am ravenous!”

The girl with the Pony’s Tail smiled and said, “That’s good. He is hungry. It is a sign that he will live! Pass that egg over, Dai, you greedy airman, you!”

Twenty-five

The Garage on the Bridge



As we ate the last of the picnic food and drank the last cup of coffee from the thermos flask, Dai said, “You could have knocked me over with a feather, a budgerigar’s feather, look you, when I saw that smoke coming out of the tree. Spontaneous combustion, like, I said to myself.”

Myfanwy winked shamelessly at me, “My brother, Dai, is a *clever one*, you see. Dai Big-Head they call him in the Royal Air Force, where he is doing his Service. So clever, he is, they will make him a Group Captain one day, if he is not careful. But at the moment, you see, he is only an A.C. Plonk!”

Dai got up and began to threaten the girl but she rose and ran round the oak tree, laughing.

He nodded back to her and said, “My sister Myfanwy is a shameless woman. And she is a schoolteacher in Newport, look you! What manner of woman is that to have charge of the innocent minds of the younger generation! Ashamed I am, very often, when she is up to her cheeky talk. One day I shall forget my promise and tell father about her!”

He grinned as he spoke. I felt that Dai Big-Head was a Good Chap. “If I felt stronger,” I said, “I would help you to catch her, Dai. I have two sisters. I know how it is!”

Pedro flicked his cigarette butt into the gorse and said, “And I should be on her side, my friends! So sort that one out!”

Myfanwy came from behind the tree. “Good for you, Pablo, or whatever your name is. I like you already, I must say!”

Pedro said drily, “My name is Pedro. But I am glad to be rechristened Pablo by one such as you, señorita!”

He made a little bow in her direction. She blushed and looked away.

“Aye, aye!” said Dai, teasing. “I can see we are intruding. Come on, let’s put the picnic basket in the car.”

With mocking pretences of leaving the others alone, he and I carried the wicker-basket out of the glade. When we were beyond the bushes, Dai turned and said seriously, “Look, mister, I’m not going to ask you how you got into that mess. All I can say is that you seem all right to me—and that’s good enough. The types who put you inside must be the wrong ’uns as far as I am concerned.”

I patted him on the shoulder and said, “Good old Air Force! A pity I was in the Army.”

He grinned and said, “Oh, I dunno, there’s good blokes even in the Army—if you look hard to find ’em, like!”

He said no more about the tree incident then; but before we came to his car, I felt that I must take him into my confidence.

I said, “I’ve got to be frank. The men who put us there are dangerous—really dangerous. They have no pity, as you may have guessed. They want us dead. We might even meet them on the road. They are heading for Cardiff—but with such men, one never knows.”

He turned, wide-eyed and said, “Have they got a fast car, chum?”

I nodded. Just then we came round a hedge and I saw an Austin Seven, of a vintage that was becoming a little long in the tooth even before Munich. Not even the bright colours in which its aged bodywork was painted could disguise its senility. In the little back window a piece of coloured cardboard announced to all other road-users:

“PLEASE PASS—ABOUT TO BREAK DOWN!!!”

Dai said, “We shouldn’t stand much of a chance, should we?”

I shrugged my shoulders and looked away. There was nothing I could say.

Just then Myfanwy and Pedro appeared smiling. “I’ve just been telling Pablo,” she said cheekily, “that it was my idea to play that guessing game, where you knock out the rhythms of tunes. We were waiting for the primus to start, you see. I tapped out a Nursery Rhyme, and Dai tapped out some silly Cockney song he’s picked up in the Air Force.”

Dai said, “She just wants you to praise her intelligence in rescuing you, that’s all. She doesn’t say that it was me who got burned doing the donkey

work!”

I glanced at his hands and wrists for the first time then. They were burnt.

I said, “Let me drive, Dai. Those burns will cause you some trouble, maybe.”

He grinned and said, “We’re tough in the Raff, old boy! Besides, you’d never be able to drive Maggie here. She’d baffle Mike Hawthorn, I tell you. Won’t go for anybody but me!”

“She only goes for you when she feels like it, as well,” said Myfanwy, dodging away again. Dai gave her a nasty look and did not reply.

Somehow we squeezed into Maggie, and somehow Dai got her to start. We bumped over the grass and then on to the road once more.

Dai said, “The only sensible thing is to take you with us. My old man’s got a little garage in Caerleon, right on the bridge. No one would think of looking for you there, man. Safe as houses you’d be, I tell you.”

Myfanwy, in the back seat with Pedro said, “That is the best idea you’ve had since you have been on leave, Dai. We can put them both in the spare room. I can take a blanket off your bed, and off Dad’s, and that would be just right. I only hope Dad has thought to get some bread in, then we could have some nice fried cheese on toast when we get in.”

Pedro was smiling quietly to himself. I caught his thoughts, briefly. He was suddenly back in a world he had once known so well—the world where you had to count the blankets you could lay your hands on, the world where every crust of bread meant something important. I sensed this, but I sensed something else as well—that Dai and Myfanwy were the good honest folk of Britain, my own folks, whose lives might be in danger one day if that crazed maniac, John Hawke, was allowed to get away with the papers in that innocent-looking manilla envelope.

I came out of my reverie to hear Dai’s voice. “Just got another six months to do,” he was saying. “Then I’ll be out of the Service and back at the garage. Dad’s not so young as he was, and it’ll be a good thing when I’m back in harness.”

Myfanwy said, “Yes, then I might have an occasional night out, at the pictures, or somewhere, instead of doing all the housework. Dai has had so much practice peeling spuds in the cookhouse, he’ll be a treasure when he does get out! Can you imagine him in his little pink apron, eh?”

She went off into peals of laughter again. Dai trod savagely on the accelerator and got almost another mile an hour out of the old car.

I looked back again. Pedro was asleep. For the first time since I had known him, his lined face wore an expression of relaxed peace. His long frame almost filled the back seat, causing the smiling Myfanwy to squeeze herself into a tiny corner. But Pedro was more comfortable in that little car than he had ever been in John Hawke's great Jaguar.

And so we rolled on our way towards Caerleon, up and down hills, alongside rivers, over old stone bridges. Once the sun came out from behind a cloud and shone in all its fulness for a moment on a field of mustard or charlock, which lay on the other side of the great Severn. The sight was a revelation of beauty to my aching eyes, for the patch of ground suddenly burned with a light golden fire. It was such a field that Princes might once have ridden over, and chroniclers have called later, the Field of the Cloth of Gold. . . .

And I thought of the words of the *Mabinogion*, that wonderful set of old Welsh tales. . . . "The Emperor Arthur lay at Caer Llion on Usk. . . ." Suddenly, out of the violent turmoil of the present-day world—the world of cars and revolvers and political treachery—I was to find a brief sanctuary in an ancient town, where once, as the old bards had said, King Arthur himself had sought rest.

"The Emperor Arthur lay at Caer Llion on Usk." The words drummed in my aching head. Was there really a King Arthur? I wondered, idly. On a sudden impulse, I turned to ask Myfanwy what she thought. After all, she was Welsh and a schoolmistress—so she should know!

But at that moment, she knew nothing. She was leaning her auburn head on Pedro's broad shoulder, fast asleep and smiling a strange, secret little smile. The dark Spanish black of his hair against the bright Welsh red of hers made a striking contrast. I turned away, a little embarrassed.

Then I saw that Dai was grinning as he drove along. He had seen them fall asleep together, in his small cracked driving-mirror, and he was amused, in the ironical way of brothers the world over.

"It's turned out quite nice, like, to-day," he said wryly. "Shouldn't wonder if the weather keeps up to-morrow too." He paused a moment and seemed to nod over his shoulder. "And the day after," he added, "with a bit o' luck."

I didn't quite know what to say, so I said nothing. Dai was suddenly curious, though, it seemed.

"Your friend back there," he whispered, "what might his trade be, like?"

Now, I thought, I'll drop a bombshell on this amused little Celt—one that will make him remember this day for ever, that will make him wonder if Rugger isn't after all, a game for cissies!

"He's a bull-fighter," I said, as casually as I could.

Dai took it on the chin without batting an eyelid. He clucked for a second and nodded his dark head wisely. Then he said, "Quite a boyo, hey? Yes, sir, quite a boyo! There's a young fellow who keeps a pub, I forget its name, a nice whitewashed place just below Cader Idris, you know, and he's just crazy about bulls and bull-fighters. Got his saloon bar all covered with paintings of these chaps doing their stuff, like, with the cape and the sword. Quite colourful it is too, you know, when you are quaffing a nice pint of shandy, like. Gives *tone* to the place, you see. It's a nice pub, too. I wish I could remember the name—there's a little lake by it, like, and a phone kiosk on the roadside; not that anyone out there would want to use a phone, like. Deader than Caerleon it is, by all accounts."

I said, "Is Caerleon dead, then?"

Dai replied, "Well, perhaps I shouldn't have said that. My old man likes it, maybe because my mother used to say she'd like to settle there, before she died. And then Dad shut up shop in Cardiff and came out here. So I reckon Caerleon ain't so bad."

I said, "Is Caerleon on the road to Cardiff then?" I tried to cover the sudden tremor in my voice as I spoke. Dai did not seem to sense my concern.

"Yes," he said. "You can get to Cardiff that way. Did you want to go there?"

I thought quickly; what could I do in Cardiff now? I would be too late to stop John Hawke from getting there. But perhaps if I could warn the Cardiff police, I might stop him from boarding the *Nautilus*.

"No," I said at last. "I don't want to go to Cardiff. All I want is a couple of day's rest, to get my thoughts straight again. Are you on the phone at home?"

Dai shook his head. "No, but there's one on the bridge, like, only twenty yards away. You have been through a tough time, man," he said. "Anybody

can see that. I shan't try to pry into your business. I'm satisfied you're on the level. I'll take you at face value and leave it at that. You can have two day's rest and quiet with us, if you wish. And no questions asked. I think my sister would like it, in a way, you know. And I feel like a bit of company, like. But all I ask you is, don't breathe a word about that tree business to my old man; he won't stand for any weird stuff. A proper tartar he can be if he thinks things aren't on the straight and level. So let's just say we met you, eh?"

I said, "That won't convince him, will it?"

Dai grinned. "It will if we say your car broke down and we gave you a lift back here till you could get it right. We could make it realistic, like, say it caught fire and your friend back there burnt his hands trying to put it out."

I smiled. "What if your father wants to go out and see the car," I said, "in a professional capacity?"

Dai said, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. In the meantime, here's the bridge at Caerleon, and that's our place at this end."

A long grey stone bridge leaned low over the Usk, its balustrade warmed by the last rays of the sun. On either side the gently undulating hills rose, seeming to shut in this little place of peace and tranquillity. In the shallows a man fished in long rubber waders, casting his line again and again, patiently. He seemed as timeless and as peaceful as the town itself.

At the near end of the bridge was a garage, a small place, painted red and displaying car tyres and lubricants, accessories and cleaning materials. A row of petrol pumps stood before the window.

Above the doorway a sign proclaimed: "Elwyn Lewis and Son. Car Repairs a Speciality."

"That's us," said Dai proudly. Then, pointing beyond the garage, "and that's our bungalow."

I saw a small red-brick house with a high chimney, and rambler roses climbing up the front porch. A light burned in one room and showed me a bright, clean picture of homely comfort. In the windows, red geraniums stood in whitewashed pots.

"Who's the gardener?" I asked.

Dai grinned, "My old man," he said. "He's fonder of flowers than he is of cars, to tell the truth. I think he'd rather prune his roses than sell a pumpful of petrol any day!"

We stopped and Dai leaned over to waken Myfanwy. I stepped into the road and then let out a groan. It had been newly gravelled.

“What size shoes do you take, Dai?” I asked.

“Eight and a half, man,” he said. “Why?”

“You’ll be short of a pair once I get inside,” I said. “That’s the size I need—but I’d borrow them if they were twelves, the state my feet are in.”

He laughed, “You’re welcome,” he said. “We’ll tell my old man you lost yours in the fire! Come on, Myfanwy girl, we’ve reached Kings Cross!”

In the red kiosk, twenty yards from the little garage, I phoned the Cardiff police. Somehow I didn’t dare give my name though they demanded it. But when I told them that the murderer of the policeman at Beltenham would try to board the *Nautilus*, they listened. I described Hawke, Giacomo and Joey—and then I put down the receiver. Suddenly I too felt a traitor, for I had in a way begun to pull the noose round Pedro’s neck. He had been with Hawke that night at Beltenham—but now he was my friend.

Twenty-six

Restless Peace



“VERY well, gentlemen, we’ll look at your car later then. In the meantime, we shall be glad of your company,” said old Elwyn Lewis, knocking his pipe out carefully into his hand, so as not to leave a speck of ash where Myfanwy had dusted.

I lay back in the broad brown corduroy chair and eased my tired limbs in a way I had not known for days. Everything about this little house was right—just right. One might scoff at it, but down in the deep heart of things, it was *right*. Just as everything John Hawke stood for was wrong, desperately *wrong*. I shuddered to think of what might happen should this right and his wrong ever meet. . . . I thrust this thought away and looked round the room again.

On an oak rail round the wall, bright blue, willow-pattern plates were neatly arranged. Two china dogs, spotted red, stood guard on the brick fireplace, gazing with beady black eyes at the narrow Welsh dresser, on which paraded four highly polished pewter tankards. In one corner of the room a small glass-fronted cabinet housed porcelain replicas of ships and bulldogs and lighthouses and castles—a “Present from Harlech” . . . “Souvenir of Beddgelert” . . . “Memories of Snowdon”. In another corner, a curiously carved three-legged oak chair stood, unsat on, but dominant, as though conscious of its dignity and status among the more ordinary pieces of the little room.

Myfanwy saw me looking at the chair and said, “That’s Dad’s bardic chair. He won it at Aber in 1927, didn’t you, Dad? Say your poem for us, Dad, the one that won the chair, then.”

Elwyn Lewis smiled and shook his head. “Finished I am with such tarradiddles, girl,” he said. “Poetry is for the young, not for old fogies like me, now.”

Myfanwy put her arm round his shoulder. “Why, you’re not old, Dadda bach,” she said, “only *mature*, that’s all. If I ever married a man, it would be

someone like you, then.”

The old man smiled and turned away. “Pour me another cup of cocoa, girl,” he said, “and stop talking nonsense.”

He sat, slightly built, like his son, his back as straight as a ramrod, at the table with the little red and white checkered cloth. His white hair and close-clipped moustache gave him the appearance of a soldier who belonged to some earlier war. He did not look like a bard—but then, he did not look like a garage owner. He resembled perhaps more than anything else an elderly ex-officer, fallen on humble but quite happy days.

Dai said, “One of Kitchener’s Army, weren’t you, Dad? See that picture, Mr. Frankland? That hole in it is where Dad pushed the broomstick through it when we were kids. Trying to show us how to shoulder arms, weren’t you, Dad!”

Myfanwy said, “Yes, you should see his medals, Mr. Pablo. Splendid they are at that, aren’t they Dad?”

As I listened to the two of them, gently teasing their father, yet teasing him with words which only thinly covered their pride in his achievements, I understood even more clearly into what a happy family we had stumbled. Britain must be full of such families, I thought—and each one of them was worth a score of such men as John Hawke, handsome and courageous as he was. And whoever brought Hawke crashing to the dust would be protecting such men as Elwyn Lewis and their children.

As she wandered about, filling our cups, watering the red geraniums in the windows, Myfanwy was singing—“Dafydd y Garreg Wen”. The plaintive melody lingered about the little room and Dai took it up in a light tenor voice, embroidered the air, turning it into something richer and more complex.

“I cannot stand this,” said Elwyn Lewis. “It gets on my nerves, unless I join in too, look you!”

Smiling, he added a baritone part to the ancient song, so that now the three voices wandered, sometimes in harmony, sometimes providing counter-melodies, all spontaneously yet with perfect control.

And when they had brought the song to its dying fall and were silent again, Pedro said, “I have heard many people make music, of their sort, but this is a music which I could come to love more than most I have heard. It is the music of an old people, I think. A people who have seen many changes, and yet have lived through them all with courage.”

Dai said, “We have our language and our songs and they keep us happy enough, don’t they, Dad?”

The old man said, “Once, when I was a green youngster, I thought we should break away from England and live our own lives—even if we had to do it with guns. But now I know that we who thought like that were wrong, even wicked. Wales is a little country—we could not support ourselves. We should soon die. It is a geographical necessity for us to live in a great family with England and Scotland if we are to live well, as men should. It has taken me many years to understand that we are all parts of a family—whoever we are, wherever we come from—Africa, Israel, India, anywhere. All one family. And no man has a right to split that family.”

Pedro said, “Do you not believe in the glory of your race? Are you not proud to be Welsh?”

Elwyn Lewis turned to him with a smile and said quietly, “I am a bit of a historian in my way, Mr. Pablo, and I have thought quite a lot about these things, when trade has been slack, like. I will answer you—yes, I am proud of the glorious things we Welsh people have done, and I am glad they have at times shown their English brothers and their Scottish brothers and their Breton brothers that they can hold their end up. When Wales wins a rugby football match, I am as pleased as any man. When we men of the Welsh Fusiliers held our salient against the German, I was proud to serve with them. But so should any man feel about his country. Yet he should see the good in another country too, man. And I tell you this, Mr. Pablo, any man in these islands who pats himself on the back too hard for his racial purity is living in a fool’s paradise, as they say. Who are we, I ask you? Some of us, such men as myself, came here at the dawn of history from the Mediterranean—our brothers were the Berbers, even your own people; others of us came from Gaul much later—my daughter, Myfanwy, bears the trace of that ancestry in her golden hair; others of us come from Germany, and Norway, and even Phoenicia. Who are we to boast of racial purity?”

Dai said, “And judging from the length of time those old Romans were in these parts, there’s no knowing how Italian we are, look you!”

Pedro said drily, “Then you would not mind if your daughter married a foreigner? A man from India, perhaps, who sold carpets for a living?”

Elwyn Lewis turned and faced the Spaniard. “Mr. Pablo,” he said gravely, “the man my daughter marries will be the man she loves. And I have never heard yet that the colour of a man’s skin makes any difference to the heart that beats in his breast. As for selling carpets—well, we’ve all got

to sell something to live, haven't we? I sell petrol; Myfanwy sells what learning she has; you no doubt sell something, if the truth be known. So why not carpets? They are beautiful things and give pleasure."

He rose from his chair and taking up his pipe, walked from the room. Near the door he stopped, as though afraid he might have hurt Pedro. He turned back and smiled, as though passing the whole thing off as a joke. Then he went outside.

Pedro bowed his head gravely after him and then said, "Your father is a good man, Myfanwy Lewis. He has more sense in his head than many a politician."

Myfanwy smiled at him and said, "We love him, Dai and I. He has always been kind to us, like that. The world would be a good place if all men saw things his way."

Dai said, "I'd kill anybody who harmed him."

As he spoke his brown hands clenched. I was not prepared for such a sudden show of emotion. I looked at the young fellow. His brown eyes stared back into my own. And then I knew that if John Hawke ever intruded into this home to destroy this peace, Dai Lewis might well be the little dagger that tumbled him to the ground.

I saw this in a sudden flash, and then I smiled at myself. I must be tired, I thought.

I rose and said, "I've had a tough day. If you don't mind, I'll turn in."

Dai said, "Yes, get a good night, we shall go up the hill and see the Roman remains to-morrow. It's early closing day, so Dad can join us and tell us all about it."

Myfanwy said, "Yes, Mr. Pablo, there's a wonderful Amphitheatre—a bull ring, sort of."

Pedro said, "I shall be interested to see that. It will be more in my line, perhaps, than many other things."

That night in the little low bedroom which we shared I heard the many voices of the river, and the sudden crying of the owl. Sleep would not come to me, I was so full of the problem which lay before me. Was I now to abandon my hunting-expedition entirely and to let John Hawke go his own way; or was I to go on, to seek him out again and risk what might happen to me?

Then Pedro stirred in his bed and leaning over to the bedside table, lit a cigarette and sat up smoking it. The red glow shone through the darkness like a minute lighthouse beam, throwing his face into some measure of light whenever he drew on the cigarette. I could see that his eyes were closed and that his face wore a worried expression. He was silent, though I think he knew that I was still awake.

At last I ventured to say, "What's on your mind, Pedro?"

He replied gently, "I am thinking that I ought to leave this place, to go away. If I went through the window now and they never saw me again, perhaps it would be the best thing."

I said, "What's come over you, Pedro? You could be happy here, at least for a day or two, while you give yourself a chance to make up your mind what lies in the future for you."

He threw the cigarette through the open window and said at last, "These folk make me feel like a traitor. I should betray them if I stay any longer and shared their hospitality. I fancy I might go to America and start again. There no one would know about me. I could maybe get to Mexico City and find myself some sort of job in the Stadium. It's the life I know. I think I might learn to be helpful to somebody, a useful man again."

I hardly knew what to say to this, and when I spoke, my words sounded fatuous, even to me!

"I reckon you could be a useful man if you stayed in this country," I said. "You're the one exception that breaks the rule about the leopard not being able to change his spots. What's more, you are my friend. I never thought you would ever be my friend, but you are."

He moved quietly over to the window and stood there, looking out in the moonlight over the broad river Usk.

Then he said cynically, "I am not sure that I have it in me to be a friend to anyone, amigo. Once I thought I was John Hawke's friend, but see what I did to him—I betrayed him."

I said, "You must not call it betrayal. You did right. You acted as any normal man should act."

He said almost bitterly, "My friend, when a man has pledged himself to another, he should be prepared to sacrifice what men call right. He should be prepared to do anything for his friend—and I betrayed Hawke. I shall not

stay to betray you, or these good people who have given me shelter and friendship.”

I said, “Would you stay if I pointed a pistol at you?”

He said in a whisper, “I almost wish you would—and pressed the trigger.”

From the tone of his voice, I knew that he was suffering, deep in his heart. His break with John Hawke had meant more to him than any ordinary man could have realized, I could hear that.

At last I said, “Pedro, listen to me; I’ve got a confession to make too.”

And then, hiding nothing, I told him how I had come to hunt John Hawke. He listened silently and when I had finished he said, “You took money to hunt the man down, so what?”

I said, “What do you think of me now?”

He laughed lightly and sardonically. “My friend,” he said, “my dear simple friend, I would have done just the same if I had been you, if I had been British.”

He paused for a moment and then punched one fist into the bandaged palm of the other. “In fact,” he said, “though I still respect the courage of John Hawke; though I still set him among the bravest men I have known, or could know, I think that to gain my own peace of mind, I must soon hunt him myself—but my task would be simpler than yours, amigo, for I should kill him if I found him, without any qualms. I should kill him because I have seen that he is evil as well as brave, and that for the sake of his own revenge, he would destroy the good folk of this world.”

He stopped and then said with a groan, “I would kill him with these hands.”

I said, “Sleep to-night, Pedro. To-morrow you will see more clearly what we have to do. You are tired, as I am; your heart is speaking now, not your mind.”

He began to shudder and I led him back to his bed, as though he were a child or a blind man. He lay down when I ordered him to do so and seemed to sleep at last.

As for me, I stayed awake half the night, tired as I was, to see that he did not change his mind and slip away.

Twenty-seven

Fateful Day



By half-past seven the next morning I was out on the bridge at Caerleon, looking over the river which was now bright and golden in the early sunshine. The surrounding hills were green and pleasant.

An enthusiastic fisherman was already up to his waist in the water, hoping no doubt to take home a catch for his breakfast. Dai was out in front of the garage, polishing his old car, Maggie, and hissing like an ostler as he rubbed at her battered flanks. Suddenly, in spite of my doubts and fears, life seemed simple and fresh and clean once more. It was summer, and the summer-time of life—what more could one say?

And then something happened which cast a strange shadow across the morning. I should have been pleased, but I was thinking of Pedro.

The newspaper boy came over the bridge whistling in the sunshine, his sacking bag at his side. He saw that I was somehow connected with Dai and held out the morning paper to me. “Save me going round to the back of the garage,” he said with a grin, before he walked on.

Casually I opened the *Western Mail*. Then my hands began to shake. The bridge and the garage went out of focus for a moment, and my ears no longer heard Dai’s hissing song.

And when things were clear again, I walked on to the bridge and opened the paper once more. There was no mistake about these heavy black headlines:

“NAUTILUS” RAIDED IN DOCK: BATTLE ON BOARD!

The account which followed was classically stark; yet there was something in its very brevity which was chilling, an air of finality which five full pages could not have achieved.

“Last night, just before she was due to sail for Buenos Aires, Cardiff policemen made a surprise raid on the cargo-ship *Nautilus*. In an engine-

room gun-battle, two policemen were seriously wounded. Police are now searching for two men, one of them a Corsican, who made their escape in a stolen car. A third man, committed at Birmingham Assizes on previous occasions for robbery with violence, was apprehended. He has since made statements with regard to the Beltenham murder.”

So the hunt was on! So Joey had blabbed! My brain whirled as I tried to work out what this all meant. . . . The papers were safe, but Hawke and Jacko were on the loose, in a car: but they were not likely to be travelling by daylight during such a hue-and-cry. They would more probably hide out by day and travel at night, along relatively unused roads.

The irony of it all was that Pedro was not mentioned, and then I realized why not—as far as Joey was concerned Pedro—and myself, for that matter—was dead and safely tucked away where no one would find him. Joey would never put a noose round his own neck by bringing us into the story.

But what would happen if the police *did* catch Hawke and Giacomo? Would they mention him—would they say that he had been one of them, but they had murdered him in a hollow tree in the Forest of Dean? And that I lay trussed-up with him . . . ?

No, somehow I felt that we should not be mentioned. We had passed out of their world. . . . That was convenient. Now all that remained was for Hawke and Giacomo to be retaken before they might pass on the Beltenham papers to another agent—and for them to pay the final penalty for what they had done that moonlit night, alongside the barbed-wire fence at the Research Station. . . .

And as I thought that, I felt a prickling realization that my comfortable dream was going to shatter itself against hard reality. . . . It just couldn't happen as simply as that. To convict them, there had to be witnesses of the Beltenham affair, and the works-policeman who had already given evidence was so uncertain about the men involved, or the type of car they used, that no jury could bring in a satisfactory verdict on such haphazard statements.

No, if Hawke was to be brought to justice, I must step forward now and give evidence. But if I did, then one way or another Pedro would have to be mentioned. . . . And that was what I wanted to avoid. I owed him something—my friendship. Yet I owed something to that dead policeman and his family—even more than I did to Pedro.

My dilemma was too great. I felt that I must play for time, and then . . . and then . . . I did not know.

I put the paper in my pocket, tightly folded. I felt that Pedro mustn't know yet at all costs. That would be the last straw, for he would surely swing back to Hawke in his distress and try to help him.

As I walked back across the bridge, I knew that Pedro was the sort of man who would sacrifice all for a friend in trouble. He had shown as much to me, when he knocked Jacko down in the dark alley after the meeting at Porchester.

Dai said, "Where's the paper, man? I want to see how that big South African boxer is shaping, like. A real killer, he is, by all accounts."

I said, "Paper?"

Dai smiled. "Come off it," he said, "I saw the lad give it to you when I was cleaning the car."

I put on a stupid expression and said, "Oh, you mean the paper! Was that what it was? Look, Dai, you'll think I'm the craziest coot in the world, but I just rolled it up and pushed it through the balustrades, into the river. I was thinking, preoccupied, you know how it is, and I just pushed it overboard. That's all."

His eyebrows raised and he scratched his head. "Well," he said, "if that's what happened, then there's nothing we can do about it, I suppose, but you'll have to take a beating when Myfanwy knows you've lost it. She reads the serial."

I said, "I'll get another one later for her."

But when I tried to tell Myfanwy, she waved me aside with a smile and said, "Serial, indeed! I'll be too busy looking after you men to-day to have time to read serials, look you." And she bustled me to my chair and set a plate of bacon and eggs in front of me. Pedro was already down, smoking his black Mexican cigarettes as he sat at the table. He regarded me with a narrowed eye.

"What was in the paper, amigo, that you threw it away?" he said, so quietly that no one else heard.

I said, "Another Rail Strike threatened. I got so fed up with it all, I threw the wretched paper away in disgust."

He stared through me and said ironically, "Why should you worry about Rail Strikes? You seem to ride in cars most of the time, from what I have seen of you."

A wicked little smile played on his thin lips.

He stubbed out his cigarette then and said, "I'll get a paper, maybe, when we go out, and see for myself about this Rail Strike that causes you so much anger, my friend."

I shrugged my shoulders then and said, "Please yourself, it's a free country." I began to demolish my breakfast.

Pedro got up and walked round the room, touching this and that, as though he had already become fond of it. At last he turned towards me and said softly, "I've got a fair idea of what was in the paper, amigo. John Hawke has come unstuck, that's it, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"And Joey has blown the whole works sky high?"

I nodded again.

"And now Hawke and Jacko are on the run—and the police are looking for them everywhere?"

I nodded for the third time.

He whispered, "Then it is time for me to go. This settles it. This is the parting of the ways, amigo."

Myfanwy came in with his breakfast then. "Carry on, Mr. Pablo," she said, "I'll be in in a minute with mine. Dai and Dad never eat breakfast. They say it dulls the brain!"

She bustled out again into the tiny kitchen.

I said, "If you have any sense, Pedro Moreno, you'll stay where you are. No one would think of looking for you here, even if they knew you existed. The Lewis's are respectable folk and would not harbour enemies of the Government, would they? Think of it—an ex-soldier like old Elwyn, a National Serviceman like his son, and a schoolmistress like Myfanwy."

He said, "I should be sheltering in the protection of a British family whose way of life, no doubt, the Press will claim we intended to destroy. That would be a cowardly thing to do."

I said, "You are just being a heroic fool, now, Pedro. You know that if you go, you will upset at least one of this family."

He was about to say something sharp to me then, but Myfanwy came in with her own breakfast and sat down with us, chatting gaily about the

Roman ruins we were to visit that afternoon.

When we had finished breakfast and she had left us to go into the kitchen, Pedro said, "Very well, amigo. I will meet you half-way. I shall go to-night. Say no more, I shall go to-night."

I could see that there was no point in trying to change his mind on the matter, however much I hated the idea of his going. I wondered how we should break the news to Dai, and especially to Myfanwy. . . .

Then something rather curious happened. We were standing in the little garden behind the bungalow, beneath an archway over which red rambler roses grew, when Dai came up the narrow path towards us. His face was very solemn and he held out something in his hand. It was a pair of dark green sun-glasses. He walked to Pedro and held them out to him, "Put these on," he said. "The sun gets pretty strong down here, by the river. You might get eye-strain."

Pedro smiled a little sourly and took them, trying them on. They changed his appearance considerably.

He said laconically to Dai, "You bought them for me at the paper shop, my friend?"

Dai turned away and began to kick a stone along the path. He did not answer.

But later, as Pedro and I were sitting beside the river, with the sun warm on our backs, he came down the bank towards us and said, "Look, you two, I don't know anything about you, and what bit I know at all may be all newspaper blah—but taking it all round, I think it would be best if you got on your way as soon as you can, without rousing too much *suspicion* here. It looks like you are mixed up in this *Nautilus* affair. One of them is a Corsican."

Pedro slapped him lightly on the knee and said, "Dai, my friend, that idea was already in my mind, too. What do you suggest?"

The young Welshman skimmed a stone across the water pensively and then said, "I'll take you out to Tintern Abbey to-night, about dusk time. We'll say you want to see the ruins by moonlight, or some such. You sound a bit like an American, so you can put on the old tourist act, if you wish. But whatever you do, from then on it's all yours. You might make your way to Bristol, I don't know. But my advice to you would be to find a hotel in Tintern and lie up there for a few days. I don't know whether I'm doing

right, but Dad and Myfanwy have taken a liking to you, and I'm doing it for them, not for you. Understand?"

Pedro smiled gravely and said, "I appreciate what you say, my friend. I'll try not to let you down."

Dai turned to me, "Perhaps there's no reason why you shouldn't stay on here, if you want to," he said. "You're not one of *them*, are you?" I could see that he was bewildered by the complexity of the affair.

I said, "No, Dai, I'm not one of the gang you read about in the paper—but I'll go along with Pedro just the same."

For a moment the little Welshman stared at me. "You are ready to betray your country for him?" he said.

I shook my head. "No," I said, "but I'll just see him off the premises safely, so to speak, if I can. That would be a good thing, wouldn't it?"

Once more little Dai scratched his dark head in bewilderment and said, "I dunno! Really, I dunno."

Then an idea struck him. "I was told to fetch you in for dinner," he said. "Dad's closed the shop and Myfanwy's hopping mad that the omelettes will be burnt. She wants us to make an early start for the ruins."

"Lead on, my friend," said Pedro, more gaily than I had heard him speak for a long time. "Let us at least part friends—they tell me the quickest way to make an enemy of a woman is to spoil her lunch arrangements!"

Twenty-eight

The Storm Clouds Gather



IT is remarkable how, even in times of the most intense stress and anxiety, the mind may find for itself small sunlit islands of peace.

We found such a moment in the little white-pillared Museum up the hill. Accustomed as I was to vast and echoing mausoleums that went by the name of Museum, grim and foreboding vaults of mustiness, this one-roomed building in the form of a minute Roman temple, through the broad open door of which the afternoon sun struck towards our feet, seemed the friendliest place in Britain. It was a room in which one might forget the world's troubles for a while, forget even John Hawke and the insane Jacko, and the many terrible problems they had brought into our lives.

And there we bent over the inscribed stones and the glass cases—gazing at relics of those ancient days when Caerleon was *Isca Legionis*, and when the proud Second Legion of Augustus built its fortress and city there. *Isca Legionis*, where once King Arthur set up his golden turrets and coloured banners, and gathered together his host of cavalry that was to crush the flaxen-haired invader at the Battle of Badon. I thought, as I stared at dagger-blades, sling-stones and ballista-balls, that this little Museum perhaps held the secret of our national strength; the essence, the core of our fighting-legend.

But Myfanwy would not let me drift away too romantically far. “Look,” she said pointing, “what lovely brooches! All bronze, they are. And those great heavy rings! What does it say? ‘Onyx’, ‘Cornelian’, ‘Jacinth’, ‘Chalcedony’. What lovely names! I’ll bet some young lady was fond of those rings, eh Mr. Pablo?”

Pedro smiled thinly and said, “No doubt the centurions gave them to local British girls in return for a breakfast of bacon and eggs.”

She smiled back at him roguishly and said, “I wish you were a centurion, Mr. Pablo, then!”

Pedro shrugged and said sternly, "Who knows? Perhaps I was, once, long ago. One can persuade oneself that one has been to places before, especially when one is surrounded by such things as these, which bring back so many half-forgotten emotions."

Old Elwyn gave a little snort and said abruptly, "Look there, now! Over three hundred coins, and some of them gold too. Dug up in Jenkin's Field and Myrtle Cottage, you know. I would like that lot set on a tablet in my drawing-room. Make a nice decoration, it would, Myfanwy fach!"

Jenkin's Field . . . Myrtle Cottage. . . . Such ordinary names again. The dream had faded. Dai Lewis stood in the sunlight at the doorway and said, "Come on, now, it looks as though the clouds are gathering over there. We want to see the ruins before a storm starts."

And so we went out into the street again and along a narrow lane, to the open land above the little town of Caerleon.

Away to our right rose half-exposed walls and broken columns. In deep ditches we saw tiles and pottery, left as it had been dropped nearly two thousand years before.

Myfanwy said, "Come away—this is death. It is not like the pretty rings. They are still alive. One could wear them now!"

As she spoke I felt a shudder move quickly up my back. *It is death*, she had said. I recalled a shrieking ivory mask in the little Museum, a small thing from one of the eastern islands, brought by some foreign legionary, no doubt. There had been something I did not like in the set of its open mouth, and its blank and empty eyes. It seemed to be calling down an ageless curse upon all who visited the ruins. . . .

Dai said, "Look over there. That used to be an ancient British settlement, a camp. They would look down here on the Romans and say what they would do to them one day, when they could break in and catch the Legion sleeping."

I saw a lowering hill, a mile away, dark under the cloud bank now, with the sun trying to fight its way across it towards us. The afternoon had taken on a sombre tone suddenly.

Old Elwyn said a little grimly, "Aye, they may have threatened, but they never *did* break the power of Rome. Those hard-faced little soldiers were too good for them."

Myfanwy smiled and said, “You talk as though you were one of the Romans and not one of the others, Da!” she said. “And in any case, how do you know that we never broke the Romans down? This place lasted for three hundred years and then fell into decay—but the Saxons didn’t do it. They never dared come as far West as this. So who did do it?”

Dai said laconically, “Perhaps the Romans moved out because they couldn’t stand the sound of the Welsh women’s tongues clacking all day long.”

She began to chase her brother across the field, back to the path. We followed them and then Pedro stood almost aghast at what we saw below us.

“That place,” he said, pointing. “That is what I know. The scent of something terrible comes back to me from that place. I know it as though I had lived near it all my life.”

Hollowed out of the hillside was an oval arena, almost two hundred feet in length, I would have guessed, and circled by a great mound of grey stone blocks. Though the floor of the place was covered now by close-cropped green turf, the dark and gnarled hawthorns that crouched above it took away from it any air of gentleness. Along one rim of the arena the sun threw a long shadow from the hunched rocks.

Pedro said, “The audience would pay more for their seats in the shade to watch a man killed here. It is the same with us and the bulls.”

Old Elwyn said, “Once, they say, this wall was thirty feet high, and the Amphitheatre held almost six thousand spectators. It would be a fine sight, then, no doubt.”

I saw a little shudder pass over Pedro’s face. He was remembering the little bull-rings in the sun where he had faced death many times in an afternoon while the dark-faced villagers drank raw wine from goatskin winebags and spat nutshells over the barrier, bored with waiting for another’s death. . . .

Down below us, Myfanwy’s auburn head bobbed as she ran across the green sward.

“Come on down, Mr. Pablo,” she shouted. “It’s smashing down here!”

He turned away suddenly, shaking his head like a man trying to free himself from a ghastly trance.

“No, not even for you,” he said. “I would not go into that place of death to-day.”

As we walked back down the hill towards the garage, Dai said earnestly, "There's a funny little place behind the wall, like a little chapel, you know, and. . . ."

Pedro said absently, "There is a little altar stone in it. It is the Shrine of Vengeance, I think. The gladiators would go in there and kneel in the darkness and pray that the Goddess would bless their sharp knives that afternoon. They would hope for a quick kill, one way or the other."

Myfanwy said, "But how did you know, Mr. Pablo? You did not go down there with us."

Pedro passed his hand over his forehead. "I have been in other places like that," he said. "They are all the same. I do not think things have changed much in two thousand years, the essential things of blood and pain. They are always there, and the Goddess of Vengeance is always waiting for a man's prayers."

Old Elwyn touched him on the shoulder, "What about a nice cup of tea, lad," he said. "You look depressed. If I'd known, I wouldn't have dragged you up there to see that old place!"

The thunder came just when we had got indoors, and then the rain began to beat down as though it meant to punish us for the lovely summer we had enjoyed.

Old Elwyn said, "I'll just switch the six o'clock News on. It'll pass the time away till this storm's passed over. It shouldn't be long now; there's a streak of light over the hill already."

I sat in that little room perspiring with anxiety. At last the announcer's cool voice came through, punctuated by the atmospheric crackles of the storm.

"The police are still searching for the two gunmen who caused such a disturbance in Cardiff last night. . . . It is thought that they might still be in hiding, somewhere in the Cardiff area, since road-blocks have so far produced no result, although all cars have been searched. . . ."

Pedro lit another strong black cigarette and then looked the old man straight in the eye. I felt that he was about to tell Elwyn Lewis what had happened.

Dai was twisting and untwisting his tie, in an attitude of intense anxiety.

Myfanwy suddenly switched the control knob over and the wireless set was silent.

“How you can stand all that noise, I don’t know, Da!” she said. “When there’s thunder about, I can’t bear all that crackling.”

Old Elwyn looked up at her. “What’s that, my love?” he said. “I’m afraid I wasn’t listening. They’re always up to some nonsense or other in Cardiff nowadays. I’m glad we left and came out here to peace and quiet. No, I was just thinking that if I’d known, we wouldn’t have gone to the Museum today. We’d have gone for a nice picnic in the Forest of Dean.”

Dai said, “What, and have got caught in this storm under all those oak trees! Not on your life, Dad! Why, the lightning might’ve struck Maggie!”

I looked through the long window towards the garage. Maggie stood in the rain, her bashed and dented sides now gleaming with wet.

“She looks as though you’ve had her sprayed with cellulose, Dai,” I said, to change the conversation.

He nodded. “When I get out of the Raff, I plan to get weaving on this cellulosing lark. Dad won’t bother with it, but there’s a nice bit of money to be made at it, I can tell you.”

“Money, money! That’s all you think of, money!” said Myfanwy, coming in with the teapot.

I smiled ironically as I thought of the cheque that Doctor Phipps had pushed across the table towards me—so many centuries ago! That fantastic cheque, which might never now be mine!

Twenty-nine

The Storm Breaks



WHEN the end came, it came suddenly, as though wishing to achieve with one swift cut the undoing of a knot over which men had already spent too much time.

We had sat through the evening with the light on, because of the lowering sky, each one of us tensed up by the almost tangible electrical atmosphere of the storm, until we felt we could bear it no longer.

Dai said, as though struck by a good idea of a sudden, “As soon as this storm drops, let’s ride out to Tintern. It’ll be a change after that Amphitheatre! And you chaps might like to find yourselves a pub to stay in for a day or two.”

Myfanwy said, “Why, of all the ideas, Dai! You make it look as though we’re turning them out! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, that you should.”

Old Elwyn said, “She don’t want you to go, see. You’re a bit of company for her, like. Not that I want you to go either, for that matter. But do as Dai says by all means if you’d like to. You can always call back here when you’ve seen what Tintern has to offer.”

Dai said, “Well, that’s settled then.” He breathed an audible sigh, as though he was relieved that his plan should be working out so well, and went out in the lessening shower to have a look at his car.

Suddenly Pedro said quietly to Myfanwy, “Would you mind walking with me to the bridge? There is something I wish to say to you, something I would like to tell you.”

His voice was so serious and urgent that the girl gazed up at him in mild surprise and then, smiling gently, rose and followed him outside.

Old Elwyn took his pipe from his mouth and looked at me quizzically. “I think that silly girl has taken a fancy to your friend,” he said solemnly. Then

his face relaxed and he went on, "I must say he's a well-set up young chap, and if they like each other, that's their affair, not mine. Come on, everybody else has gone out, we might as well see what the weather's like too."

As we walked to the front of the garage and stood, looking at the dark sky, with the petrol pumps behind us, I saw that Pedro and the girl were leaning over the balustrade of the bridge, gazing down into the water. Their heads were close together and their whispered voices came gently back to us across the road. I saw that Pedro was stressing some point with his hand and that Myfanwy was nodding, as though agreeing with him. As she moved her head, her auburn pony's tail bobbed up and down, giving her much of the look of a little girl, shaking her plaits!

Away up the street, perhaps fifteen yards, Dai was sitting inside his old car, Maggie, pressing the accelerator down and then releasing it, again and again, as though listening for some defect. We were almost a static group, a tableau, on the bridge at Caerleon in that moment. We were temporarily at peace again.

Then, as we stood, a long green car came over the bridge, a Riley, low and powerful. I had never seen the car before and so had no reason to pay particular attention to it, or its driver. I just noticed that it was mud-splashed, as though it had driven fast through the worst of the storm, and that its bumper on the near side had been badly bent and dented, as though the driver might have struck a wall as he turned suddenly. And I put him down as a pretty reckless sort of chap, with no respect for a fine piece of machinery.

I was about to say as much to old Elwyn, when so many things happened that I had no time even to form the words for such a trivial message.

For the green car suddenly slowed down when it approached Pedro and the girl, as they leaned on the grey stone coping, and, from the driver's side, I saw a sharp spurt of flame, and heard the stuttering report of an automatic weapon. I even saw two chips of grey stone flick viciously upwards into the air and disappear.

It was all so sudden that everything seemed to happen *at once*, without any sequence. I think Myfanwy screamed, but I am not sure. I saw Pedro stiffen strangely and then, almost with the same movement, swing round to face the car, his arms widespread, so that he covered the body of the girl.

Then the green Riley was alongside us, gathering speed, and I saw the great hunched figure in the passenger's seat seem to wave to us. His arm

came over, out of the window. And with horror I watched a small metal ball, that glinted in the evening light, swing just over our heads, to fall behind us.

I heard Elwyn Lewis call out sharply, "Myfanwy girl!" His eyes were wide with fear. I flung him down sideways to the hard ground, trying to push him away from the petrol pumps. And then the pavement beneath us seemed to rock and a terrific blast of scorching vapour passed over us. My ears were dulled and for a moment I thought I was blinded.

Yet it all happened within a small part of a second, this explosion, and then I was rolling clear of the blazing pumps and the ruined garage, dragging the old man's limp body with me in terror.

And as my sight cleared I saw Dai's eyes open in horror and his mouth shouting, but I could not hear his words. I only knew that his old car, Maggie, had leapt forward into the path of the green Riley. I saw it meet the big car and then shoot back from it, crushed, to be flung across the pavement and against the wall of a house.

I left the old man and ran towards the little car. Dai was not dead. He flung open the smashed door and began to run crazily after the great green car that now wobbled and swerved like a drunken thing, its steering damaged from the crash.

I ran with him, instinctively, for I had seen Myfanwy break from the wall of the bridge and run towards her father. I had seen Pedro on his knees in the middle of the road, coughing and holding his chest with one hand. And my deafened ears had suddenly come alive again to hear his hoarse words, "*Por el amor de Dios, amigo. Muerte a Hawke! Muerte! Muerte!*"

And I knew just enough Spanish to understand that. "Death to Hawke! Death! Death!"

I did not stop to ask myself whether we could ever hope to catch the murderous car, for though it was going slowly now, yet its speed was so much greater than any we could have mustered. No, I followed Dai, followed a friend whose vengeful anger gave him the strength and speed of a hunting hound for the while.

And when the big car went out of sight round a corner, and Dai turned up a small side street, I did not question his direction. Nor did I try to shout to him, for from his sobbing grunts, I knew that he was now beyond conversation of any sort.

And as we reached the top of the winding alley way, the car passed across before us, for we had taken a short cut that must bring us into line

with it again.

Once more I saw that little Museum, with its white Roman pillars, though now it glimmered at us from the dusk, and no longer smiled in the sunshine. The great car roared past it and into the narrow lane which led only to the ruins.

Dai stopped for a moment, ten yards before me, and flung up his arms in a savage triumph, "Trapped, you swine! You've had it now!" he shouted, and then began to run forward like a madman.

Before us the white moon rose, above the dark hills from which once the Celt had looked across at the busy Roman builders, waiting, watching, full of hatred.

A screech owl rose and fluttered away from us in sudden fear, crying towards the moon. I ran after Dai, anxious not to lose him.

Thirty

Amphitheatre



WHAT happened then was so terrible that even now I shudder when I think of it.

Before me, along the slope, the green car swayed and lurched, with a roaring of engine and a screaming of tyres. The road, such as it was, had never been meant for any sort of wheeled traffic.

The headlamps had been switched on now, and swung dizzily from side to side. Against their glow I could see Dai's dark shadow always flitting towards the car.

I think that Hawke must have seen him approaching too, for he suddenly swung the wheel over, veering to the right, away from the narrow white path. I heard the car crash through a wire fence, and then it was bumping up and down, over heaps of debris left by the excavators, and across deep ruts.

Then, in the powerful headlamps, I saw the machine head straight for a grey stone wall, the wall of an ancient Roman shop, but right itself before striking this obstacle and try to sheer away from it. John Hawke drove like a maniac over the old site of the Legions, not knowing where he was going, but anxious only to get away from the dark little shape that raced after him, relentless as a hound on the scent.

But though the car swung round, it could not find the solid ground again. The headlamps danced like immense fireflies, then the red tail lights heeled over, and I heard a great crash and grinding of metal. The hunched black shape of the Riley seemed to shrink, almost as though it had dissolved into the earth. It had fallen, sideways, into the deepest of the culverts, among the broken tiles and the fragments of pottery—the rubbish of the Twentieth century alongside that of the First. . . .

I heard Dai's high voice once more, in a shout that bore only the faintest resemblance to the utterance of a sane man. It was more like that of his savage ancestors at that moment. And I saw him dash towards the wrecked

car. But as he approached it, another dark shape broke from the wreckage and ran back across the road. Dai flung himself forwards after that shape, his breath sobbing through the night, his feet thudding on the damp ground like the muffled drums of doom.

By the car I stopped to regain my breath. I looked through the window but could see nothing. Then I put my hand inside and felt for the light switch. In its glow I could see that Giacomo had taken the full force of that crash. His head hung on his chest as though his neck had been wrung by a giant hand. I felt for his heartbeats and then I knew that there was nothing I could do for him. Nothing anyone could do for him. On the seat beside him lay the neat manilla envelope. I put it into my pocket. Then I turned away and ran as quickly as I could after Dai. And as I approached the great Amphitheatre, the moon came out full upon us, lighting up the scene almost as brightly as when I had last seen it, under the lowering clouds of afternoon, before the storm broke.

Below me the smooth green sward stretched in an immense oval. I stood at the top of the grey stone slope, among the crouched hawthorns, wondering how best to get down. Then suddenly I knew that I had come too late to do anything for anyone, even if I *did* find my way among the many shadowy obstacles of that place.

I saw John Hawke running across the arena, his moon-flung shadow long beside him, like a lithe hunter. But this time it was the hunter that was hunted, for not five yards behind him ran Dai, his heavy breathing clearly audible from where I stood aghast.

I heard John Hawke call angrily over his shoulder, "Leave me, you fool. Leave me. I do not wish to hurt you!"

And I heard Dai's crazy high laugh as he still came on, his hands outstretched to grasp the big man and drag him down in that place of death.

And in the moonlight, that pitiless moonlight, I suddenly saw that Hawke held the shining German automatic which he had once carried into the shepherd's hut, it seemed so long ago, the gun with which he had shot Pedro down there on the bridge, to leave him a coughing ruin of a man.

I tried to warn Dai, to tell him that Hawke was still armed, but my voice would not come into my throat. I could only gasp wordlessly.

Once more, as he ran, Hawke cried out, "I shall kill you, you fool, if you do not leave me!"

Then, as I watched, I saw this scene as something older than us, something as old as history. I saw Hawke as the foreign conqueror, and Dai as the little vengeful Celt from the hills, and I sensed that they were working out an age-old pattern that lay beyond all I was conscious of.

And now Hawke had left the arena and had swung into a little square stone annexe, from which I could see there was no escape, only back into the Amphitheatre.

It was the Shrine of Vengeance, I saw with a shudder. And I think John Hawke somehow sensed that too, for he turned and looked about him in the moonlight and smiled coldly up towards me as I stood by the dark hawthorn. I am certain that he saw me—saw me and smiled.

Then, with little Dai only a pace away from him, he raised the gun and, almost leisurely, set it at his golden temples and fired, twice.

The shots re-echoed across that gaunt place. For a moment Hawke stood swaying, with Dai gazing at him in the sudden shock of it all.

And then he seemed to shrink almost to nothing at Dai's feet, to become another shadow in the moonlight on the green carpet of that place of death.

And, as I saw this, I suddenly found that the tears were running down my cheeks, and that I was incapable of going down the slope, even to help little Dai, who now staggered back towards me, his arms held wide open, as though he walked in a blind dream.

As he reached me, I held out my hand to him, and then fell down, no longer able to fight off the effects of that explosion.

Thirty-one

Epilogue



IT was a pleasant October afternoon, but as I sat in the broad airy waiting-room of the Monmouth General Hospital, I felt a cold chill of doubt at what I might be told. Everyone seemed so impersonal here, so wrapped in private hopes and fears. Even the clock seemed as though it did not wish to commit itself; its hands were hardly moving.

As I let my mind wander away from this austere place, I thought again of my own first day out of hospital . . . sitting in a deckchair on the lawn, with my sisters fussing round me, bringing cushions and iced lemonade. . . . Then the sound of a car on the drive and at last Doctor Phipps standing before me, as grey as ever, but smiling like a boy as he held out his delicate hand.

I took it with one almost as delicate, I shudder to say.

At first he seemed speechless. But when my young sister had made him sit down, and had given him a lemonade with a long straw, he said, “Mr. Frankland—my boy—I shall never be able to express our gratitude, indeed, your country’s gratitude, for all. . . .”

I had to stop him then. I wasn’t strong enough yet to take that sort of thing.

“He killed himself,” I said. “I didn’t do it. All I did was get myself blown up. The others did everything.”

In his agitation, Dr. Phipps was trying to drink through a bent straw. My young sister clucked and said, “I thought you were supposed to be brainy. Here, have another.”

Phipps nodded and then went on, “I cannot discuss the matter any further, my boy. The fact is, you were the necessary driving-force to it all, the nucleus: you held it all together. We picked the right man, I must say.”

I shut my eyes. I was too tired yet to discuss these things.

He sensed my feelings and stood up. "Have no fear, my boy," he said gently, "I understand more than you give me credit for. My committee have sanctioned a substantial increase to the cheque I promised you, and. . . ."

I sat up with a jerk of indignation.

"Too late," he smiled, retreating across the lawn. "It's already in your Bank. There will be enough to share with Dai—and Pedro."

"Come back," I said. "I want to ask you something."

He put on his hat. "Another time," he said, "when you're better. All you need know is that there has been an act of intercession for him *at the highest level*, my boy. And our mutual friend Joey, will give no more trouble for at least twenty years. Good day to you."

My young sister said, "Bats! Abso-jolly-lutely Bats!"

And suddenly I remembered Angela—the Girl Guide at Stratford.

That was the way she spoke, too. . . .

Then she said, "Now you're so filthily rich, Bill, what about a new fountain-pen and some mauve writing-paper?"

It was too much, in my weak state.

"Oh, go and—join the Girl Guides!" I said.

She danced round my deckchair like a horrible fairy.

"Too late! Too late!" she croaked. "I am already one!"

"I might have guessed it, you wretch," I said. "All right, you shall have your pen and paper. . . . But on one condition. . . ."

She had run whooping into the house before I could tell her the condition. . . . And now I had forgotten what it was. . . .

In the chilly waiting-room of Monmouth General Hospital, I racked my feeble brain, trying to remember what condition I had been about to lay down that day to my unruly sister. . . . But it was impossible. . . .

"You're getting to be a decrepit old so-and-so, Bill Frankland," I told myself, glancing up at the Hospital clock in case it had stopped after all.

And then an Air Force Sergeant came smartly through the double doors, smiling all over his dark face and holding out both hands towards me.

"Dai!" I said, "I'll never be able to tell you how good it is to see you again! And a full Sergeant too! Oh boy!"

He pumped my arm, until I pretended to threaten him with a left hook, and then he sat down beside me on the bench, grinning happily.

“A lot can happen in two months, boy,” he said, as cocky as ever. “A lot *has* happened, anyway! After all those newspaper blokes wrote about me smashing Maggie up on that green Riley, do you know what happened? Why, the firm presented me with a new sports model! They said it wasn’t every day one of their cars had a chance of fighting the Queen’s enemies, like! A wizard little job it is too, Bill! I’ll let you drive her, one day, when you’re down again—but woe betide you, and I mean it, if you as much as scratch her! No Maggie tricks with Margaret! A real Group Captain’s car she is, and no mistake!”

I touched his bright new tapes gingerly. “Talking about Group Captains,” I said, “what about these? Have you signed on for ever?”

He shook his head and grinned, “Not bloomin’ likely,” he said. “I got these by another fluke, boy. After that yarn you spun the papers that night, about me being the Celt Incarnate, or some such, dragging down the Foreign Power, my old C.O. got a bit breezy, thinking he hadn’t recognized my worth enough in the past. I bet he thought the newspaper boys would be round the camp, asking why I wasn’t a Warrant Officer—so he made a special citation and pinned these on me, pronto!”

I said carefully, “And everything else? Is it all right?”

He almost laughed aloud, “Too good to be true, boyo,” he said. “The Insurance are fixing a new garage and bungalow and Dad can hardly wait to get out of Newport Cottage Hospital to see that the builders are doing exactly what he ordered! His shock’s finished and the burns on his back are next to right now. He sends his love and says he’ll give you a tousling at dominoes when you get together again!”

There was a curious little pause then. I knew why he had stopped and stared at me, so I told him the answer.

“Yes,” I said, “they’ve passed me fit for work again. No further danger, if the doctor’s orders are obeyed! They got the hair to grow on the back of my head again, which was a good thing. I’d have loathed to wear a hat permanently after that petrol squirt! I hate hats!”

Dai said laughing, “Can’t get one to fit you now, eh boy?” Then he looked serious for a moment. “You should have seen yourself, boyo,” he said. “I never thought they’d get a man to look human again after that—and you never seemed to notice it, what’s more, up there on the hill.”

I said, "I think I was too angry, too scared and angry, to know what *had* happened."

Dai said quietly, "But Dad knows, Bill bach. He'll never forget, nor shall we." He paused, "What train have you got to take back to Birmingham?"

I said, "The tea-time special, in an hour. I've got a job to do to-night."

"What," he said, "catching some more spies, like?"

I smiled and shook my head, "Wrong this time, Dai bach," I said. "No more spies for me. I had the whole works this time and I'm satisfied! No, I'm seconding a new welter-weight in the Birmingham inter-clubs Championship."

He said, "Phew, as though boxing hadn't cost you enough!"

I said, "It was worth it. It gained me quite a few friends."

Dai was strangely silent. Then he said, "I'm on leave for ten days. I'll get a chance to come here again. In any case, I only came to fetch Myfanwy back home. She's in with him now. Been every visiting day, she has, since they let him see folk again."

I said, almost afraid to ask, "How is she now, Dai? The bullets made a bit of a mess, didn't they?"

He laughed, as though I had made a joke. "Why, man," he said, "those doctors did a wizard job with it! You'd never notice, indeed you wouldn't. No more than vaccination marks, she says! If I tell you the truth, she'd rather have 'em than not, since Dad and Pedro got a packet. It's in the family, like, then, you see. Share and share alike, you know!"

It was only then that I dared ask him. "How is—he?" I said.

Dai's laughter stopped for the first time. I could see then that it had been a camouflage for his true feelings. He scratched his long Welsh nose and looked away through the window for a moment. Then, as though opening a new conversation, he said slowly, "They'll let you see him, after a longish journey, like."

I said at last, "Is he changed much, Dai?"

The Sergeant's eyes began to flicker a little and I saw him shut them tight a time or two. "Blast this weather," he said. "It gives me migraine. Can't hardly see sometime, bach, you'd never credit it. What did you say? I didn't catch it."

I said, "It doesn't matter, Dai. I'll go in and see him myself if they'll let me."

And then the high cream-painted door opened and a Sister came through. Myfanwy was with her. She smiled to see us and pushed a handkerchief away quickly into her handbag.

"Well there," she said, with a marked Spanish-American accent. "Hiya, Bill! Fancy you getting along here after all that!"

"I've been trying for some time, Myfanwy," I said. "Only they kept holding me down. If I'd had my right arm out of bed, I'd have shown 'em!"

She placed her hand lightly on my arm and said, "Come down to Caerleon again, as soon as you can. We'll put you up if it's only in the builders' cabin!"

Then she and Dai smiled and the Sister clucked impatiently. "If you wish to see Mr. Moreno," she said, "you must hurry. I can't have his afternoon rest disturbed at this stage."

I followed her into the Ward annexe, half-afraid to keep up with her quick steps. I noticed that there were pink flowers on a little white table, and that the wireless was playing softly, some Continental music that seemed strangely out of place there.

I noticed also that there was a white screen round the bed.

And then, when I was so fearful that I had almost asked to be taken out of the Ward again, I saw a thin spiral of deep blue smoke rising slowly over the screen! Thank goodness Pedro could smoke, I thought.

I almost ran forward then. "His little privilege," the Sister said severely. "Now don't tire him. I shall give you twenty minutes and then I shall come and kick you out. He *must* have his sleep if he is to get well again."

I heard her feet clicking across the wooden flooring and then I dared to go quietly round that white screen.

Pedro Moreno lay still on his pillow, his eye closed, his strong face thin and drawn, and very pale. He seemed to have got so much smaller than when I last saw him. There was a bandage covering one side of his face. His once-black hair was almost as grizzled as that of old Elwyn Lewis. I did not know in what words I ought to address him.

But his one visible eye opened suddenly. It was as dark and piercing as ever. A strange wry smile creased his pallid features and he held out his

hand, his left hand, towards me stiffly.

As I took it, I felt the strength of the man coming back into the frail hand, his left one in my right.

He said, "It's got to do for two now, amigo Bill."

Then I noticed the bandaging on his right shoulder and I knew what had happened when Hawke's heavy calibre bullets had whined their way across the narrow bridge that night.

Pedro said, in something a little above a whisper, "No more bulls and guitars for me, hombre. But they tell me there's a chance of me getting British nationality—Myfanwy has been bullying some M.P. or other—and now I'll look the part—like your Nelson, eh? One eye, one arm! Just the job!"

I said, "You're a tough guy, Pedro. I take my hat off to you, amigo."

He shrugged with his eyebrows because he could not do it with his shoulder any more.

"Sure," he said, nonchalantly, "sure, it was tough. These things are, like anything else is. But that's over now, boy. I look at it this way; once I used to say I'd give my right arm for John Hawke. Well, that's just what I did—and so the debt's settled with a clear conscience. I can start to *live* again now, amigo!"

I looked at his frail body, outlined in the hospital sheets, and that pale face.

"What will you do?" I said, as ordinarily as I could make myself speak.

He looked at me shrewdly. "I can sell car-parts and petrol with one arm as well as you could with two, I guess. Dai and I have plans for that garage when he gets out of the Air Force next year, I can tell you. Things will hum in old Caerleon, Bill."

I didn't dare look at him when I spoke again.

"Look, Pedro, there's something I want to ask you. It's almost a favour, in a way, and I wouldn't like you to take it wrong."

He waited for me to go on and then said drily, "Well, Bill, and what is there about me now to scare anybody?"

I said, "Well, there's a bit of money I'd like to spread around, to invest, you understand."

The music from the Continental station droned on sleepily and a woman singer sang another verse about a village merry-go-round. The big white antiseptic clock on the far wall beat out three centuries. Rome rose and fell and so did the Colossus of Rhodes. Then the Eiffel Tower got itself built.

At last in a queer dry voice that came from the outermost planet in space, Pedro said, "So they paid you off for what you did to Hawke, after all?"

I nodded. "For what we *all* did to Hawke," I said. "That's why it's got to be shared out, if we are to get anything good out of it. I took the liberty of visiting old Sam, the shepherd who let us ruin his home, last week. He's got his share. He sends his thanks to you for the knives and forks, though he says he never uses forks."

Pedro said, "Light a cigarette for me, Bill. Don't strike the match too hard or Sister will hear. She allows me only one an hour."

I did as he said. Then he eased himself over and said, "How are those little pups Nell had got that night we were there? I'd certainly like one of those little pups."

I said, "That sort of dog grows into a very big fellow in two months and over. They are all away to various farms now, Pedro, no doubt rounding up the sheep on their own account!"

He thought for a while, then said, "My, but life just goes on and on, boy! There's no stopping it, is there!"

I said, "No, there's no stopping it, amigo. What about that money? It's waiting for you to get better."

Pedro said, "Yes, I reckon we'll need it if I go into the motor business! I'd sooner bust 'em than mend 'em! Look, Bill, we'll have that money on one condition—that the new firm gets to be LEWIS, FRANKLAND and MORENO. Okay?"

I shook his left hand again. "From to-day," I said, "I'm in the car business, so help me! I'll leave my dry Mycenaean bones in Birmingham at week-ends and sell the odd gallon of petrol and a sparking-plug in Caerleon. Will that suit?"

Pedro smiled and said, "Don't bother with trains, amigo. They always go on strike. You told me so, one bright morning. Look, Myfanwy and I will fetch you in a little Jaguar we are getting when I finally dodge away from this haven of rest."

I hadn't dared to ask that particular question. Now I touched him on the shoulder. "Congratulations, amigo," I said. "When is the happy day to be?"

His drawn face wrinkled into a smile. "Gently, gently," he said. "We sober Spaniards take longer about such things than you hot-blooded English, you know!"

He stopped then and made a little motion towards his head. Then he smiled helplessly and said, "Will you feel under my pillow, Bill? I can't reach it with this hand. There's something there I was keeping for you to see. You are the first, even before Myfanwy. I met her because of you."

I did as he said, and drew out a little red box. At his nod I opened it. On its black velvet cushion lay a magnificent gold ring, its rich metal coiled in heavy Celtic ornament. At its centre gleamed a deep Cornelian. He was looking up at me in pleasure.

I said, "But this is terrific! It's like the one we saw in the little Museum, that day—only better!"

He lay back slightly and said, "That was the idea, amigo—just the idea. And I'd love to be able to tell you the trouble it caused Sister to draw it on a piece of paper at my direction, when I didn't feel so well you know, so that the goldsmith could do his stuff!"

I visualized this strange hard man, lying near to death and forcing a tired Sister to do what seemed to her a crazy thing, for a girl whose life he had saved, and of whom he was so fond though he had known her so short a time.

He sighed and his eye closed. He spoke like a man in a dream. "Now I can show it to her and we can get engaged. I think she likes me a bit—though why she should care for a wreck like me, I wouldn't know. Do you know, amigo?"

I said, "Yes, Pedro Moreno, I think I know, boy."

He shrugged his dark eyebrows again and said, "You British are crazy." Then his pale lips curled in a smile.

I said, "Yes, and you'll make a pretty good addition to the crazy gang, yourself, amigo."

But he did not answer, though he still smiled quietly. Then I knew that he was asleep. I turned the radio down and stubbed out the cigarette that still dangled from his hand and went quietly round the white screen. Sister was just coming to call me away.

Outside it was raining gently from a light sky. The streets seemed fresh and clean, and there was hope in the air.

True enough, I thought, every year Winter has to come—but how splendid that makes the Spring which follows it!

THE END

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[The end of *Hunter Hunted* by Henry Treece]