



SEND FOR THE SAINT

LESLIE CHARTERIS

When the two trainers had gone, Rockham poured port for himself and Simon from the crystal decanter in the corner cabinet.

He brought the drinks and said: "You have a taste for the good life, Gascott."

"Who hasn't?"

Rockham shrugged.

"Lembick, Cawber. They only work for the money. And the chance it gives them to boss and bully a number of subordinates that I supply."

The Saint saw the likely drift of Rockham's thought, and decided that his best course was to play up to him.

"Natural-born deputy Führers," he said, nodding.

"Ah! You agree!"

The Saint raised an eyebrow that asked if disagreement were sanely possible.

"That the world's divided?" he rasped. "Shepherds and sheep? Of course. It always has been and it always will be."

Rockham beamed.

"You understand! But so few people do. And yet it's so simple. Some men are born to lead, others to follow."

"That's for sure," the Saint said, drawing him out.

"It's always been the one sure thing. Once you've grasped that —once you've freed your thinking from all this democratic garbage —then you can act."

"As long as you're one of the lucky tribe of born leaders."

"Luckily for us, we both are." Rockham drank with evident enjoyment, studying the Saint for a while before he spoke again. He said: "It's three years now since I made the break with society—with the law. But most of all with the unworkable idea that men are equal—in anything. Democracy!" He thumped a fist on the table. "Democracy is dedicated to the protection of the weak and the stupid."

"Numbers against quality," rasped the Saint sycophantically.

Rockham put down the glass and stroked his square jaw with that hand whose potent karate chop Simon had seen in action.

"We speak the same language, you and I. I sensed it from the start. Most men—you said it yourself—are no better than sheep."

They're fit for nothing but to be herded about. Mindless obedient imbeciles! Or they're like chess pieces—expendable, all but the king, in the larger interest of the game. Most men are only fit to be shuffled about like pawns—forces to be marshalled, pitted against one another . . . sacrificed."

"And one by one, back in the closet lays,'" the Saint quoted.

"Exactly," the other man agreed, evidently recognising the line. "But what the verse doesn't say is that when Destiny moves men about on the chessboard of life, it operates through other men. Through the leaders, Gascott. Through men like you and me."

While he was talking, he had strolled over to a small square table that stood between two armchairs near the drinks cabinet.

"I believe you're a chess player yourself," he said; and he slid most of the tabletop aside to expose an inlaid board with a hollowed-out compartment at either end holding the pieces.

"I've occasionally done a bit of wood-pushing," Simon admitted, as Rockham picked out a white and a black pawn.

Rockham said: "I'm interested to see what kind of a game you play." And there was an odd, almost fanatical glint in his eye as he spoke.

He shuffled the two pawns about behind his back, according to the established schoolboyish convention of the game, and then brought his closed hands into view to offer Simon the choice.

He chose. Rockham opened the hand and showed the black pawn.

"I have the advantage of the move, I think," he said after they had rapidly set out the pieces and sat down. And he pushed a white pawn two squares forward along one of the centre files.

The Saint made an exactly matching move, which left the two pawns head on to each other in the middle of the board.

"Pawn to king four, pawn to king four," Rockham commented as he brought out his king's knight on its devious lopsided course. "Let's see what you do with knight to KB3."

Again the Saint made the same move, leaving the position symmetrical; and then Rockham slid a bishop forward through the gap that his advancing pawn had left, and once more Simon made an exactly complementary move from his own side of the board.

Rockham eyed him shrewdly.

"Hmm. You join me in *Gioco Piano*. Probably the way most games at amateur level begin—but also the classic of classic openings. The quiet game."

"Mentioned in the Göttingen manuscript of fourteen ninety," the Saint concurred.

"You do know your chess," Rockham smiled. "But let's see if we can't do something to hot things up." And the smile faded as he advanced another of his white pawns two squares, on a file nearer the queen's side of the board, so that it threatened to capture, on the next move, the bishop Simon had advanced.

But there was nothing to prevent the bishop from taking the pawn in a pre-emptive strike right there and then.

The Saint sat back and eyed the board for a moment.

Then he commented encyclopaedically: "Evans Gambit. An interesting line. The aim is to prevent black's pawn to queen four and to attack the weak spot at his KB2. White offers a free pawn, and in return he gets—possibly—a winning attack. This particular gambit was thought up a hundred and twenty years ago—appropriately enough by a soldier, Captain W. D. Evans. And it's been used by a host of world-class players since. Bird, Blackman, Staunton, Anderssen—"

"Morphy, Steinitz—" Rockham continued the list with enthusiasm. "But it's the conception, man—the strategic *conception* of a gambit, any gambit—that's so magnificent. Don't you agree? To sacrifice a minor piece, early in the game, so as to give yourself time to manoeuvre, space to attack. The idea couldn't be bolder or simpler. You put yourself at limited risk, to open up the battlefield or to make a quick strike. And then—" He made a rapid throat-cutting movement with his hand. "Of course, it's a gamble. If you can't capitalise on the sacrifice, if your attack collapses, all your forces are in danger. But if you can, if you can! Then what a magnificent strategic beginning the pawn gambit is!"

The Saint inclined his head, acknowledging the point but with reservation.

"Still," he said, "gambits can be refuted, and often are. This one included. And the best way to refute a gambit is to accept it." With one swift pass of his hand the presumptuous white pawn was gone and the black bishop was in its place. "Do your worst."

He dropped the pawn into one of the recesses in the table; Rockham blinked at the prestidigitatory feat, and then moved up another pawn to threaten the black bishop again.

"The second pawn," he said, eyeing the Saint keenly, "is properly protected. Now you're going to have to withdraw that epis-copal venturer in one direction or another, I'm afraid."

"True enough," admitted the Saint, imperturbably making just such a strategic retreat.

They played on for a while, without any serious edge of competition to the game; until Rockham suggested they abandon it as a draw.

"The position's more or less equal," he said. "I can see you're a worthy opponent. Sometime we'll have a marathon. Soon. But there's something I want to show you, now."

The Saint watched as he crossed to the wall safe and twiddled the combination dial. He brought out a small leather bag and spilled the contents out on the table.

The contents consisted of a large handful of irregularly shaped glassy beads with a semi-opaque sheen to them.

"Uncut diamonds," Rockham said. "One hundred thousand pounds in negotiable, transportable pebbles!" And Simon Templar knew at a glance that those pebbles were exactly what Rockham said they were, and were worth every penny of the figure he had named.

"Nice," said the Saint, and meant it.

"A down payment on Friday's job," Rockham crowed. "It's a form of currency I much prefer to large cheques." He picked up a half-handful of the diamonds and let them trickle in a miniature waterfall into the other hand. "Beautiful, aren't they? Concentrated wealth."

"Friday's job must be a big one," Simon observed casually, "if that little lot's just the down payment."

Rockham eyed him speculatively.

"You'll be briefed in the morning," he said. "But you'll have a starring role, all right. And I can tell you one thing: the prize you'll be after, the prize that my—clients put such a high value on, is a man!"

Rockham gathered up the diamonds carefully and poured them

back into the little leather bag. His eyes had never left them for one instant the whole time they had been on the table.

Simon Templar too had his moments of concentrated attention from which it would have been difficult to deflect him. For example, he watched now with expert interest as Rockham locked the little bag of diamonds away in the safe; and he had watched with even greater interest a little earlier, when that same safe was being opened.

CHAPTER 11

When he kept a prearranged rendezvous at Ruth's car that night, outside the wall, she drove him just a few miles towards Petersfield for a conference with Pelton—and an Albert Nobbins who was somewhat the worse for wear.

"I'm glad you managed to keep all the bullets in the area of the bullet-proofing," Nobbins told him.

"I'm only sorry you had to go through the experience at all," Simon sympathised, looking hard at Pelton. "A Wilkinson vest is a lot better than nothing, but you must be feeling pretty sore all the same."

"Badly bruised, all right." Nobbins put a brave face on it, but he looked pale and shaken.

"At least, I hope there are no bones broken." To Pelton the Saint said: "But why the conference?"

Colonel Pelton put his neat fingertips together and tilted his head over, pigeonlike.

"The answer's in a name," he said. "James Anthony Instrood. Head of the European Desk, Chinese espionage. In other words, the man in charge of their whole network in Western Europe. The man the Resident Directors take their orders from."

The Saint raised a lazy eyebrow and looked politely impressed. "What about him?"

"Normally he stays in Peking. But a couple of days ago he slipped over to Hong Kong—there's a girl, it seems. And we managed to grab him. We've been waiting for this chance for years."

"Sounds like quite a prize," Simon agreed. "What are you doing with him?"

"Bringing him to the U.K. for interrogation." Pelton smiled faintly. "Which Mr Nobbins here will begin."

Nobbins went a little pinker.

"He's got more useful information in his little finger than a whole sackful of Chinese agents," he said. "Of course, he'll take time to break. But when he does . . ."

"When he does, we could knock out half the Chinese network," Pelton said drily. "If he does. So you can see how important he is to us—and to the Chinese."

"They'll want him back pretty badly. . . ." The Saint tugged reflectively at his moustache. The connection was obvious enough, but the words had to be said, so he said them. "You're working on the assumption that the Chinese may be Rockham's current employers—bearing in mind his recent visitors?"

"I believe that to be a hypothesis to which we should give consideration," Pelton said pedantically.

Simon Templar gave consideration to the hypothesis for a moment.

"Rockham's certainly hatching something big," he said, feeling under no obligation at that moment to mention the down payment he had seen. "And it's a man-snatch, all right—of some kind. But that's about all I know. Except that I'm going to be in on it myself, and I'm due for a briefing in the morning, and the job's scheduled for the next day—Friday."

Pelton's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"That would fit the hypothesis very well," he said. "Instrood's plane arrives late tomorrow night. "We're landing him at Blackbushe and he'll be driven under convoy guard straight to Braizedown Hall, which is just a few miles away. The debriefing will begin at once. Any operation to abduct him would need to be mounted very fast."

"Instrood won't be worth a red cent to the Chinks once he's spilled the beans," Nobbins put in superfluously.

"And Friday," Pelton continued, undeflected by his subordinate's contribution, "is about as soon as Rockham could sensibly plan to make some kind of rescue bid. I'm assuming that if he is aiming to snatch Instrood back for the Chinese, then he has access to inside information, as usual. Which means he knows when and how we're bringing Instrood into the country, and he may even know where we're taking him."

"All this is more or less speculative for the present," Simon pointed out. "But if your analysis is correct, what's to stop you changing the venue for putting the matches under Comrade Instrood's toes, preferably at the last minute?"

David Pelton's glittering dark eyes darted over the faces of the other three.

"We've given it careful thought." He looked at Nobbins, who nodded. "And our conclusion is that if Rockham *has* got this commission from the Chinese, then the time has come when we can't afford to leave his activities unchecked any longer. The Squad will have to be wiped out. If that's the league they've got into, they're too dangerous to be left alone any longer."

"I see," said the Saint slowly; and he meant more by that than either Pelton or Nobbins or Ruth Barnaby realised. "So if Rockham's a big enough fish to be dangerous, he'll swim straight into the net. Or you hope he will."

"Exactly." Pelton smiled faintly again, the merest quiver of the lips. "If Rockham makes a bid to get James Anthony Instrood away from us, he's going to run into much more than he bargained for. His forces will be divided—one party on the raid, and the rest back at base. And we'll have the advantage of surprise—as well as a man in the enemy camp."

"You mean in the firing line," said the Saint.

Pelton shrugged.

"If you're in charge of the raiding party, so much the better—so long as you remember to dodge the bullets when the crucial moment comes. But we'll be relying on your help beforehand—we'll need to know what sort of attack he intends to mount, so that we can prepare to meet it at minimum risk to our own forces."

"The probabilities look right," Simon said as he stood up. "But it's still guesswork at this stage. I'll pass on whatever I find out tomorrow." He paused, looking speculatively at Pelton. "By the way, just so that I can settle a bet with myself—are you a chess player, by any chance?"

Pelton looked mildly surprised and said: "As a matter of fact, yes. I enjoy a game occasionally. Why do you ask?"

"Just tell me what your favourite opening is," Simon said, "the

one you like to use yourself, when you're playing as White, let's say."

"King's Gambit," Pelton said. "Or one of the other pawn gambits."

"Thanks," said the Saint with the ghost of a smile. "I just won a bet with myself."

On the short drive back, Ruth asked him about that parting remark.

"I don't know the game," she said. "What did you mean—about openings, and gambits?"

"It would take too long to explain now," he told her. "Let's just say I discovered something your boss has in common with Rockham."

His occasional excursions to the wall and over had become almost routine by now, and in a few minutes he was back in his room, his denims, shirt, and pullover were neatly folded over the chair, and the black plimsolls neatly aligned under it, with absolutely no sign of any hurry in the manner of their arrangement. And in a few minutes more he really was peacefully asleep again, as if he had done nothing else since going to bed the night before.

In those few minutes, however, he had administered himself a sober warning: not to push his luck with these nocturnal excursions too far. Until then, Lembick and Cawber had had no reason to be suspicious of him and hence to subject him to special surveillance. Now, even without suspicion, they had motives to look for or even to manufacture some evidence that would discredit him. And it could hardly be long before even their slower wits visualised his room as a tempting site for some nefarious operation.

He was roused in the morning by a weird sound that droned mystifyingly over the blurred threshold of his consciousness. At first it seemed like the despairing death-cry of a stricken poltergeist . . . or was it a wailing banshee come to mourn in anticipation of an imminent human demise . . . or was there some still more unearthly explanation that would occur to him once he was properly awake? It was a plaintive penetrating sound that rose and fell in ear-torturing cadences, a plangent ululation such as never came from the mouth of man nor beast.

The Saint rolled out of bed and looked out of the window.