

NEW ENGLISH LIBRARY
ED MAZZARO

A TERRIFYING FIGHT
FOR SURVIVAL IN THE
SEEDY ENTRAILS
OF LONDON'S SOHO

PAWN TO KINGS CROSS



PAWN TO KING'S CROSS

Ed Mazzaro

NEW ENGLISH LIBRARY/TIMES MIRROR

First published in Great Britain in
1978 by New English Library

© 1978 Ed Mazzaro

First NEL paperback edition June 1979

Conditions of sale: This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

NEL Books are published by
New English Library Limited from
Barnard's Inn, Holborn,
London EC1N 2JR.

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Hunt Barnard Printing Ltd.,
Aylesbury, Bucks.

45004017 8

This book is dedicated to the memory of Wing-Commander J. M. Bryan, DSO, DFC, shot down over France at the age of 22 in the summer of 1944 . . . with the hope that the eight years in between were good ones.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Among the many books, newspaper files and old magazines contributing background material for this story, Claud Cockburn's *The Devil's Decade* and *Abdication*, by Brian Inglis, have been especially helpful in supplementing the author's memory. Grateful acknowledgement is made to Messrs Sidgwick and Jackson, London, for permission to quote a short extract from the former, and to Robert Laffont, Paris, for permission to quote a short extract from the French edition of the latter.

E. M.

PROLOGUE

London, September, 1936

Lepke took money from the businessmen who hired workers and from the wages of the workers they hired. During his trial it was estimated that ten million dollars a year from a variety of sources went into Lepke's pockets. We all paid it to Lepke, yet he earned it for no other reason than because he had guns . . . Dutch Schultz hit on a scheme to shake down restaurants. Large restaurants all over Manhattan and greater New York paid two million dollars a year for 'protection'. The Dutchman's men protected the restaurant owners from stink bombs going off at dinnertime, broken windows and mayhem upon the body of the restaurateur himself. Whenever a restaurant owner expressed doubts that such things could happen, the Schultz gang was quick to show him that they could.

DON MACLEAN, *Pictorial History of the Mafia.*

The car was so long that the chauffeur had difficulty turning out of the lane that led from Golden Square into Brewer Street. There was a cast-iron bollard at the corner of the alleyway, and to avoid scraping the coachwork he was obliged to run his near-side front wheel up onto the opposite sidewalk. It had been raining earlier and there were puddles along the street. As the fat, heavy tire thumped back onto the roadway, muddy water splashed up and spotted the silk stockings of a prostitute patrolling in a fur tippet and red beret. The woman swung around, her painted face ready to scream abuse . . . and then, before the angry words could leave her mouth, she shrank back into a doorway, recognizing the car.

It was a Packard Super Eight limousine, with whitewall tires and a thin scarlet line running around the olive green custom-built body. A silver mascot in the shape of a swallow topped the fluted chrome radiator shell; silk blinds masked the rear windows.

The narrow street was almost deserted. Soon it would be dark, and the October sky was heavy with the promise of more rain. The Packard glided past the gasoline pumps outside the Lex garage, past the Chinese laundry and the lampshade shop and Floris's hand-made chocolates. Then, by Isow's restaurant, there was a minor traffic jam. Cars and taxicabs and delivery trucks were momentarily held up while some stranger in town backed an ancient, blue Morris Cowley tourer out from among the fruit and vegetable stalls crowding the Berwick Street market. The driver of the Packard permitted himself two short, impatient blasts on the twin-tone horn. Gradually, the stalled vehicles dispersed; the big sedan turned north into Wardour Street and sped silently toward the maze of cobbled lanes and entries behind Soho Square.

Ten yards past a cul-de-sac near Richmond Buildings, it stopped and the chauffeur reached behind him to open one of

the rear doors. The man who got out was tall and solidly built, with a craggy face and a wrestler's shoulders. He was wearing tan-and-white shoes and a brown houndstooth topcoat over a tweed suit. A shallow-crowned green porkpie hat was pulled down over his low forehead.

He walked unhurriedly into the cul-de-sac, pulling on a pair of black kid gloves. Despite the latent power of his big frame, despite the strength in the shoulders constantly shrugging within the topcoat, there was something curiously effeminate in his gait. The two ends of the unfastened houndstooth belt flipped this way and that behind him as he walked. Four steps led between iron railings to a doorway in a peeling stucco façade. Above the doorway a glass transom bore the words 'Paradise Club' in faded red letters. The big man climbed the steps and went inside.

In the street, the Packard waited with the motor silently idling. Blue smoke from the twin exhausts condensed behind it in the moist air. The light thickened. Here and there along the darkening sidewalk, shop windows were illuminated. A man on a bicycle rode down the street, tipping the switches that lit the street lamps with a long pole.

It was fifteen minutes before the Packard's passenger reappeared. He walked back to the car slowly, stripping off his gloves. When the chauffeur opened the rear door, he leaned down and handed a wad of banknotes into the interior. 'I steam in and ast him real nice,' he said hoarsely. 'But the geezer come at me with a chiv. Ripped the sleeve of me coat an' all.' He held out his left arm, showing a slit in the thick material reaching from the elbow almost to the wrist. 'Course I had to put him to sleep for a few minutes. Then the bastard tells me there ain't but a pony in the till. That got 'im a stripe. Even then I could only choke just under two Cs from the bugger.'

'Never mind, Billie-boy,' a voice said from the back of the sedan. 'We'll call back for the rest at the end of the week. If he doesn't have it, we'll send in the team. Get back in the car now: there's work to do.'

The big man climbed into the tonneau; the driver slammed the door, switched on his lights, and pulled away from the curb. Three blocks to the east, the limousine parked at the end of a cab rank and Billie-boy sauntered down a paved walk between two tall, red brick buildings. Several of the houses fronting the passageway were shuttered and empty, but there was an ill-lit grocery store halfway along, flanked by a second-hand clothes

dealer and a newsagent and tobacconist whose grimy window displayed a selection of lurid romances behind a wire grille. Below the grille was a newspaper placard announcing *Spain: Latest*. In the roadway beyond, a young man was thumping one of the headlamps of a stationary car with his fist. It was the same old Morris which had caused the hold-up in Brewer Street. Now apparently there was a bad connection in the electric wiring.

Billie-boy turned into a doorway beside the newsagent's. A girl in high-heeled shoes and a shiny black mackintosh undulated out of the shadows. 'Like to come home with me, dear?' she murmured. 'Give you a good time.'

He turned furiously toward her. 'Do me a bleedin' favor!'

She stepped back a pace as the light fell across his features. 'Billie-boy! Christ, I didn't see you, mate! I didn't know -'

'Who the hell d'you think I am?'

He slapped her heavily across the face. 'Make a ricket like that again and you'll find yourself with a stripe down your boat. No cheap little brass is going to take me for a mug! Now beat it for ten. I got business in the gaff.'

'But Billie-boy, this is my pitch! The other girls -'

'Sod the other girls. Go treat yourself to a cuppa. Now scarper!'

She stepped past him into the alleyway and hurried off with her head lowered. 'And tell your ponce to come across on time this week if he knows what's good for him!' he shouted after her.

Billie-boy trod lightly down a wooden cellar stairway and pushed open a padded door covered in red felt. There was a worn patch above the handle where innumerable hands had rubbed the material through to the wood beneath. A stocky, blue-chinned man with a bald head was polishing glasses behind a bar at the far end of the low-ceilinged room. A dozen tables covered in pink checkered oilcloth stood in front of threadbare banquettes around the walls. 'Billie-boy!' the bald-headed man exclaimed. 'You're a half hour early, chum. You know we don't open until half five. The law's been leanin' on us; I dare not serve you a drink -'

'Fuck your bleedin' drink,' Billie-boy said conversationally. He walked across the room toward the bar, pulling on the black leather gloves.

The bald-headed man licked his lips. 'If you come about the gilt . . . ' he began nervously.

'You bloody know why I come, Frank. A double century, wasn't it? Well, the boss says you can add another pony now by way of interest.'

'Billie-boy, I ain't got it. Honest to God! I swear it! You gotta give me time. For pity's sake . . .'

The big man looked around the tawdry room. He gestured at the tables under the pink-shaded wall lamps, at the console victrola piled with phonograph records, at the rows of bottles behind the bar. 'Yòu mean you got no clients? The girls ain't comin' across with their percentage? All the mugs is emigrated to fight the reds in Spain maybe? Come on, Frank! Friends of mine been in your gaff havin' a butcher's this week. You had fifty-three people in last night and forty-nine on Sunday. Cochrane's delivered you a case of Haig and three of gin this morning, along with four dozen dry ginger and six bottles of Rose's lime. An' you're tryin' to tell me business is bad?'

'I didn't say that! I . . . Jack Hinds's boys were in!' the bartender burst out. 'They smacked the wife in the chops and threatened to break the place up. There were six or seven of them. They took all I had. I couldn't do anything else, Billie-boy; I couldn't, I couldn't . . .'

'There you are, you see,' Billie-boy said softly. 'That's what happens when you fall behind with the insurance payments. That's what you pay protection for – to help us stop tearaways like that turning a geezer's place over. You better cough up the premium now, didn't you – in case it happens again?'

'I don't have it, I told you. I need time. You gotta give me time.'

Billie-boy leaned his gloved hands on the bar and nodded genially. 'That's a nice wireless you got there,' he said, jerking his head at a radio in a domed walnut case that stood on a shelf above the victrola. 'Let's have some music, huh?'

The blue-chinned man switched on the set and turned one of the knobs beneath the illuminated dial. His fingers were trembling. At once the room was filled with the heavily accented beat of an accordion band playing a tango.

'Louder,' Billie-boy said. 'I always like to hear a good tune.'

The volume of the music increased as the barman turned the knob again. 'Billie-boy . . . ' he said.

The big man moved very quickly for a person of his size. His two hands left the bar and shot out to seize the lapels of the barman's jacket. Leaning back and bending his arms, he dragged the man face-downward across the counter. And then,

as Frank cried out in fear and alarm, Billie-boy hauled him bodily over and his knee came up to smash into the prostrate man's face.

Frank dropped to the floor, groaning. Fingers locked in his collar and dragged him to his feet. Billie-boy was as swift and as light on his toes as a boxer or a ballet dancer. One leather fist darted in and split the flesh over Frank's cheekbone. A hook to the pit of the stomach doubled him over, and then he jerked upright on rubber knees as a vicious kidney punch slammed into the small of his back. That was when the edge of the big man's hand, hard as a plank, caught him across the throat.

The sounds of the struggle were drowned by the radio. Frank's mouth opened and closed each time the blows thudded home, but the only voice audible was a nasal tenor issuing from the fretted loudspeaker, singing:

*I once had a heart, Margherita,
Until I lost it to you at the masquerade;
And I knew at the start, Margherita,
On my heartstrings you would play a serenade . . .*

Billie-boy danced around his victim before he fell and grabbed him under one arm and behind the neck in a half-nelson. Locked together, the half-conscious bartender and his attacker swayed drunkenly between the tables in a grotesque parody of a pas-de-deux.

*I said 'Dance with me, my pretty stranger!'
And, with a laugh, you said 'Si! Si!' . . .*

Kneed suddenly at the base of the spine, the lower half of Frank's body arched forward so that the corner of a table dug into his groin. As he was dragged back toward the bar his legs jack-knifed froglike to ease the agony in his genitals.

*. . . I never knew my heart was in such danger
Until that night you danced with me . . .*

The rest of the song was lost in a shrill scream of fear that could be heard even over the amplified clamor of the accordions. Frank was struggling desperately to free himself from the forearm that was now wedged rigidly under his jaw. Billie-boy had shifted his grip and the gloved fingers of his free hand held an open cut-throat razor in front of the terrified man's eyes. Light flashed on the blade as he drew it tenderly, almost

caressingly, across Frank's cheek. Instantly the thin trickle of blood from the split flesh over the bone was eclipsed by a curtain of scarlet masking the whole right-hand side of the wounded man's face. Billie-boy snatched his arm away before the red cascade splashed onto his sleeve, and allowed Frank to slump to the floor.

He walked around behind the bar, wiped the razor on the glasscloth, and switched off the radio. Then he poured himself half a tumblerful of neat whisky and drank it slowly. Almost as an afterthought, he took the bottle by the neck and smashed it down on one of the glass shelves, sending brandies and cordials and siphons and beer tankards crashing to the ground. As he walked to the door, the only sound apart from his footsteps was the hoarse sobbing of the man bleeding in front of the bar and the rhythmic splash of liquor gushing from one of the broken bottles. Billie-boy paused at the foot of the stairs, holding the door open with the toe of one shoe. 'Today's Tuesday, Frank,' he said quietly. 'You got until midday Thursday. You won't forget this time, will you?'

It was quite dark outside now, and a thin rain misted the pools of light cast by the street lamps. The Packard was waiting at one end of the alley. The old Morris was still stalled with a blank headlight at the other. The young driver was in a nearby telephone box.

Soon afterward, he pushed his way out and the door banged shut behind him. Turning up his collar against the drizzle, he bent over the front of the car. Whatever advice he had been given must have been good, because the dead lamp flickered and then shone brightly almost at once. The young man grabbed the crank handle, gave it a sharp quarter-turn upward, and then hurried around and slid into the driving seat before the motor stalled.

He drove slowly down Greek Street, turned right into Old Compton Street, and then left past the York Minster pub to await his chance to cross the stream of rush-hour traffic clogging Shaftesbury Avenue. But evidently it wasn't his day: by the time the Morris had threaded its way through the double line of honking cars and trucks and cabs and buses, the engine was spluttering. Two blocks farther south, in a small cobbled square off Lisle Street, it backfired twice and then died altogether. The driver lifted the clasps securing the louvered hood and folded it back to expose the motor. He fetched a pocket flashlight from the interior of the car and poked around

among the electric leads and hoses behind the radiator. It was very quiet in the little square. The sounds of traffic from Coventry Street and Charing Cross Road were muted by the drumming of rain on the car's roof.

On the opposite corner, the plate-glass front of a café-restaurant had recently been broken, and the pavement was littered with jagged shards glinting in the lamplight. Through the gap in the façade a desolation of smashed crockery and splintered wood was visible in the dim radiance of a single low-power bulb hanging from the ceiling. The place looked as though a grenade had exploded in the entrance.

Feet crunched across the broken glass. A tall man wearing a brown houndstooth topcoat walked out of the ruined café and crossed the road to an olive green limousine with whitewall tires. The driver of the Morris straightened quickly and walked to a row of telephone boxes. The first stank of urine. In the second, the instrument had been ripped from the wall and the bakelite handset broken. The third was usable, but the young man seemed to prefer the last, where one of the smaller glass panels in the door was missing. Lifting the receiver, he kept a finger pressed down on the rest so that no dialing tone sounded in his ear. Then, leaning his back against the heavy door so that it opened slightly, he listened.

The limousine was only a few yards away. He heard the click as the rear door opened. 'What happened?' a voice asked from inside the car.

'Hinds again,' the big man rasped. 'The gaff's been done to rights. Pintables wrecked, furniture sorted out, all the equipment bugged up. You never saw anythin' like that kitchen!'

'How long ago?'

'They had it away about six. A whole team. We can't have missed 'em but by a few minutes.'

'And yet there's no rubbernecks? No neighbors come by? Nobody even called the pōlice?'

'Well, they been warned off, ain't they?' the big man said.

'What about Hobson himself?'

A brief snort of laughter. 'This time he had no choice! Flat out on the deck behind the counter with his Isle of Mull bashed in. I think they come it too strong and croaked the bastard.'

'Get in, Billie-boy,' the voice ordered curtly. 'Mr Hinds and his slags are going a little too far and I won't stand for it. What we need in this game is a little more planning and a lot more organization!'

The door slammed. The limousine hissed away along the wet street.

The young man in the phone box released his breath. He dropped two pennies into the coin box and dialed. A moment later he pressed the button labeled 'A' with his thumb and spoke into the mouthpiece.

'Whitehall one-two one-two? Superintendent Rawlins's office, please . . . Hallo, Super? Sergeant Brearley here . . . Yes, sir. I have . . . Kept the subject under observation as instructed. I'm speaking from Lisle Street now. I think you'd better send a squad car and an ambulance to Hobson's place PDQ. It seems that Hinds's plug-uglies got here first.'

He listened for a moment, and then added: 'No, sir. I could hear what they said but I couldn't see inside because there were blinds over the Packard's windows. I can tell you one thing, though. The voice giving the orders was a woman's . . .'

PART ONE

Jason Mettner

As Prince of Wales he had been a star, adapting himself so well to the role that one could scarcely distinguish between the prince and the man. To be King, it was necessary for him to change his character, and his education and his past had in no way prepared him for this new role . . . Those best disposed to show tolerance toward a 'difficult' friend or parent, bearing in mind that he had had an unhappy or maladjusted childhood, were hardly inclined to extend the same advantage to a king.

BRIAN INGLIS, *l'Abdication d'Edouard VIII.*

ONE

The weather in Chicago was lousy that Fall but I didn't want to go to England. Especially to London. Especially in November. The medics tell me I smoke too much as it is, and that fog's hard on the bronchials. I'd never cared specially for the British anyway. The story was a dead duck too. I mean you get the picture: the assignment was about as attractive to me as the thought of a month's vacation in the Tombs, all expenses paid. 'For Chrissake, Harry,' I said to my editor. 'Mussolini's decimated Ethiopia, Hitler's remilitarizing the Rhineland and threatening to invade Austria, the Spaniards are dropping bombs on their own capital. The whole of Europe's likely to burst into flames! Even here, the Mafia -'

'This story'll be bigger than any of those,' Michaelson interrupted.

I mashed out my cigarette in his ashtray. 'Look,' I said, 'if it's just that you want me on the far side of the Atlantic, if you want to get me out of your hair or something, just say so. I'll take a vacation. I'll study newsprint production in Sweden. I'll write up the Paris gangs. If it has to be the United Kingdom, at least let me try Wales. There's a dame, a redhead, some kind of a congresswoman called Ellen Wilkinson, who led the Jarrow March. Now she's trying to organize a miners' hunger -'

'Chickenfeed, Mettner!' Michaelson's horse teeth guillotined a cigar and spit the end into the cuspidor by his desk. 'I'm tellin' you - this story's got everything. Folks are sick to their stomachs reading about wars. Manchuria, Spain, Ethiopia - what's the difference? This is a human interest story, the greatest since Caesar and Cleopatra. It's Cinderella with an American accent! The King -'

'The hell with the King!' I cut in. 'And the hell with his romance! I'm a crime reporter. I've been on the crime desk since Big Bill Thompson was mayor. Okay, before that I

pounded the nightclub beat a while – but I'm no goddam society gossip writer. I'm the guy who drinks with flatfeet and stoolies and two-bit hoods, remember?"

'So in court circles you'll be drinkin' with five-dollar hoods. Look on it as a kinda promotion.'

'Send Halloran,' I said. 'He knows about lords and ladies. Send Schneider. Send Sally-Ann Cabot, for God's sakes, if you want a private line to London's Four Hundred!'

Michaelson pushed back the swivel chair and lumbered to his feet. It was a little after noon, and the *Globe* local room hadn't warmed up yet. There were empty spaces along the subs' table, and the copy reader was taking his time feeding the yards of tape vomited by the teletype machines through his inky hands. A carrier from the City News Bureau baled out of the pneumatic tube behind Michaelson's desk and thumped into the basket below. Michaelson ignored it. He was standing beside a world map on a wall hanger. Pushing the green eye-shade up on his forehead, he stabbed the map with a nicotine-stained finger. 'What have these places in common?' he growled around his unlit cigar, maiming untold millions in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, Malaya, the Caribbean and most of southern Africa.

'They're all candy pink,' I said.

'Right. Part of the Empire on which the sun never sets. But if this story runs the way I figure it, some of those places could be puttin' in for a respray pretty soon!'

I released the scowl and let the eyebrows climb for the first time. 'You mean . . . ?'

'I mean there's a constitutional crisis gonna blow up over there. If he sticks to his guns and marries the broad once the divorce is through, that is – an' I think he will.' The finger took off from Kenya and made a crash landing on my chest. 'And lemme tell you something, Mettner. You think you're wise to all the snide tricks, all the finagling and cross-ups and suchlike, just because you were around the gangs during Prohibition? Well, think again, brother. That's kid stuff once you get a load of the back-stabbing and intriguing them Limey dudes can pull! That's why I'm sending a *crime* reporter to cover the story. I like the guy on the job he should feel at home!'

A copy boy lifted the pneumatic from the wire basket, unscrewed the cap, and smoothed out the wad of flimsies from the carrier on top of the papers cramming Michaelson's In-tray. Beyond the desk, a reporter sat tapping out some story that

would probably be spiked before the edition. I looked past him and out the window at the skyscraper apartment buildings lining Lake Shore Drive. Between those ritzy blocks and the County buildings in the Loop, the *Tribune* tower reared up over the water. Was *their* chief crime reporter being briefed to write up a royal bedding, I wondered?

Michaelson was right, of course, but in my book the story was old hat already. Shit, hadn't the guy been screwing her for more than two years? They'd been a twosome ever since Thelma Furness threw him over for the Ali Khan. Now, just because his old man had croaked and he was Edward VIII instead of plain Prince of Wales, everyone had started to belly-ache as though they represented all seven of the Deadly Sins and had broken each of the Ten Commandments in public! I didn't get it. So the woman in the case was American. So what? Whether the butler called him Your Royal Highness or Your Majesty, it didn't make any difference to the lay, did it?

'It makes one hell of a difference to the way people react,' Michaelson told me later that day. 'You been around the underworld too long, Mettner. You see everything in black and white, but in Britain it's all shades of gray.'

'So they tell me,' I said. 'Especially in November.'

We were sitting in a booth in back of McCluskey's saloon on North La Salle, just inside the Loop. Michaelson had dragged me out for a lunchtime shot on a plea that I had to be filled in on the background. Don't ask me why, but he'd been working his ass off on a rundown of the British political scene all the way from the *Globe* building – past the dance halls and flophouses and burleycues and pizza parlors and whores' hotels that make such an impressive approach to Grant Park and the Public Library and the terminal of the Illinois Central electric railroad. 'Protocol,' he said, sipping his beer. 'That's what counts in Britain. Just so long as he ain't a fairy, a Prince of Wales can have as many mistresses as he wants. With a king, it's different: he can have a mistress, but he has to be discreet about it. What he can't do is have a mistress . . . and then marry her!'

'Why the hell not?' I said. 'The prince always marries the girl in the end.'

'Only in fairy stories – and like I tell you, the British don't go for fairies, even with a royal family that's basically German.'

'What's to stop him marrying her if he wants to?'

'They'll stop him.'

'Who are they?'

'The people who run Britain.'

'The government? They tell the *King* where he gets off? Don't make me laugh!'

'I didn't say the government. I said the people who run Britain.'

I sighed. 'All right folks – roll up and take your places for Professor Harry H. Michaelson's All-American, Hundred Percent, Two-Dollar lecture on the Powers Behind the English Throne! Every conspirator unmasked; no stone left unturned. Pour it on, boss, you have a captive audience.' And then, to the bartender: 'Hey, Jake – make it two more of the same, huh?'

'So laugh,' Michaelson said. 'Have yourself a good time. Be my guest. I'm tellin' you, they'll stop the marriage – or make him give up the throne.'

'They could do that? But why, Harry, why? And who *are* they?'

Michaelson sighed. It was his turn. 'You have to step back a little, take a look at the broad canvas before you can understand,' he said.

'Yeah, that's what I was afraid of.'

'Western Europe's a collection of capitalist countries. How do those countries get by? The same way we do: cheap labor and high prices. And what's one thing that could louse up the system there? The same thing that could louse it up here: too much organization in the labor market. I mean the bosses there are as scared of communism as they are here.'

'Look, Harry . . . ' I said.

'Hitler's the Number One anti-communist,' Michaelson said swiftly. 'So the powers-that-be in England – the real powers, that is – are all for Adolf. But they can't afford to be *openly* pro-Hitler. Too many inconvenient associations: Jew-baiting, forced labor camps, breaking agreements and treaties. Also it would kill the armament boom, because the country's rearming to meet "the Hitler menace", and there's money in that too.' Michaelson took a long pull at his stein of beer and then continued. 'To walk that kind of political tightrope, you need the people behind you, asking no questions – and that means the people of the Empire as well as Britain. So what's the one unifying symbol all those guys are gonna recognize?'

I slit the wrapping on a pack of Camels with my thumbnail, tapped out a cigarette, and flipped it into my mouth. 'The Crown?' I offered, firing a match with two fingers and the same nail.

'Hole in one! Just so long as the guy wearin' that crown is universally respected. Which ain't the case with the present incumbent.'

'Why not? I thought he was the most popular ever,' I said through smoke.

'So he is . . . with the people. But not with the Powers. Too many strikes against him for that. For one thing he's on record as being in favor of Hitler. Like I say, that's coming it too strong. For another thing, he's come out on the side of the Welsh miners. Went there to see for himself, said the conditions were an all-time low. Worse still, he said he'd see something was done about it!'

'That makes the guy sound like a fascist and a commie at the same time,' I objected.

'Right. And kings mustn't be contradictory. Upsets the apple cart. So what with that an' the dame --'

'Yeah,' I said. 'The dame. So what's so terrible about *her*? She's American? She's a divorcee? She ain't no princess? You think maybe they'd rather he married some Russian grand duchess, the daughter of a cab driver in Paris?'

'Yes to all those questions,' Michaelson said. 'None of 'em mattered so long as *she* was safely married. But now that she's gonna get herself a divorce -- for the *second* time already! -- she's a big risk. She's free to marry *him*. Plus they ain't discreet. At the public proclamation of him as King, with the bugles and the cavalry an' all that, she was seen behind him, laughin' and jokin' at the palace window. He turns down an invitation to open some Scottish university on account of the Court's in full mourning for his pa; sends his brother -- some Duke or other -- instead. Then he arrives in town *the same day* off the train with the broad . . . on their way to a dirty weekend at Balmoral! At the same time he decrees that the usual six months' Court mourning for his old man's gonna be cut . . . so's he can take Mrs S with him to the Ascot horse races!' He shook his head. 'Won't do what's expected of him, see. Won't do what he's told to do. Mark my words: either he'll have to drop her or they'll have his balls.'

'I should have thought there'd be less scandal if he married her than if she stayed on as his mistress,' I said. 'I mean she doesn't have to be *Queen*. Isn't there a morganatic marriage -- where neither the wife nor the children inherit titles or possessions?'

'Sure there is. But he wouldn't go for it: he's said so. And

they wouldn't go for it either, not in her case.'

'Because of the divorce?'

'Because of the divorces. There's the Church, you see. The Archbishop of Canterbury's decreed that next year's gotta be Back-to-Religion Year. It's a big campaign, designed to keep the masses quiet while the boys get on with their Hitler and Mussolini deals. An' it's all tied up with the Coronation next spring.' Michaelson laughed. 'Two more beers, Jake!' he called.

I stared at him. I hadn't seen him laugh since the proprietor got his ass blasted full of pellets during a duck shoot in the fall of '33. I mashed out my cigarette, shook the pack, and bit another from the open end. 'Part of this old-time religion deal,' Michaelson said, 'is naturally a call back to morality. No more cocktails, no more loose living, and hey for the sanctity of marriage! In particular,' he went on slowly, 'the flock must avoid the flippant *American* attitude to marriage instanced by Hollywood movie stars and Reno divorces. Can you imagine how the old bastard would feel, having such a crusade spearheaded by a guy whose old lady already had *two* of those divorces?'

'She was the - uh - innocent party in each case,' I said.

'What the hell difference does that make? She's a *divorcee*, a scarlet woman, a breaker-up of Christian homes. How could he *crown* a man married to such a Jezebel? It would make a mockery of the whole campaign!'

'He could refuse? The Archbishop could refuse to crown him?'

'He could. My spies tell me he would. Theoretically. But it would never come to that. They'll see to it that His Majesty keeps his nose clean.'

'There you go again!' I saw that my cigarette was still unlit. Maybe the story did have something, somewhere. I set fire to the farther end. 'Just who are *they*? Who are these people you tell me run the place over there?'

'Industrialists, commercial bankers, top civil servants, newspaper magnates, Fellows of All Souls.'

'What kind of fellows?'

'All Souls. Oxford University. Imagine a group of Phi Beta Kappa Rotarian Elks, all of 'em Masons . . . and all presidents. But eggheads, the whole bunch. That kind of thing.'

'Jesus!' I said. 'That's some imagination you got going for you!'

'The Cliveden Set, too. You musta read about them. They count as much.'

'Sure I have. But half of them are American anyway! The Astors are. Emerald Cunard is. Sir Henry Channon was born here. Churchill's mother -'

'It depends what *kind* of American,' Michaelson cut in. 'Right now, the leaders of this group are the editor of *The Times*, the Archbishop, Baldwin, the Prime Minister, and a handful of heavies among the plutocrats. And for their money, despite Ernest Simpson being a naturalized Coldstream Guardsman, his wife is the wrong kind. Definitely.'

'A naturalized *guardsman*?' I echoed. 'What the hell . . . ?'

He took a cigar from his vest pocket. 'Anglophile, like the Astors and the Guinnesses. Served as an officer in the Coldstreams. Took out naturalization papers and works in the City. Stockbroking and shipping. Maybe the horns don't show if you wear a derby hat.'

'But wouldn't that make her a British citizen too?'

Michaelson shook his head. He lit the cigar and fanned smoke away from his face. 'Uh-huh. Even though they were married in London in '28.'

'Yeah, but . . . Jesus, Harry! Edward's had American girlfriends before. Thelma Furness is one of the Morgan twins: her sister Gloria married a Vanderbilt. Tilly Haddon's a Bostonian. Daisy Fellowes -'

'He wasn't going to marry any of them, was he?' Blue smoke blanked off the far side of the table. 'The British want a monarch who obeys the rules: a guy with no personality who keeps his trap shut and wears the right clothes. This sonofabitch don't even do that! He shoots off his mouth about this an' that, he dresses like some college sophomore . . . and the broad's no better. She won't play ball the British way, yes-dearing and no-dearing, letting the men get on with it while she intrigues behind their backs. This gal comes right out and says what *she* thinks too!'

'If I hadn't been working with you for ten years, Mr Michaelson,' I said, 'I could almost bring myself to believe you were a cynic.' I batted away some of the smokescreen. That was a mistake. His eyes frowned at me through the murk. Maybe there was something to be said for the old London Particular after all. 'I kind of get the picture,' I added. 'Just how do you read this - uh - situation?'

'I see it as a slur on American Womanhood. I see it as Re-

action blocking the route to Progress. I see it as a supreme example of British hypocrisy, of Democracy not working, of those frequenting the Temple of Mammon –'

'Okay, okay. You don't have to shout,' I soothed. 'I can mark in the caps myself.'

'I also see it as one of the more disgraceful moves in the shoddy game of international power politics played by their masters and ours. Ribbentrop, the German ambassador in London, is one of the gang who've been spreading rumors about the King and Mrs S and their friends. You know – orgies at Fort Belvedere, everybody drunk all day, State secrets left in the summerhouse.'

'Got it,' I said. 'You see it as Love versus Loot.'

'I see it as a five-deck pyramid across six columns on Page One,' he leered. 'From Our Special Correspondent at the Court of St James. With banners on the followups – which had better be damned near every day, if you know what's good for you.'

'Depends what there is to pick up. Those British newspapers –'

'You won't get anything out of *them*!' Michaelson said. 'So far as the British press, and the British people, are concerned, there ain't no crisis and there ain't no story. There ain't even any Wallis Simpson, for all they know.'

'Jesus! You can't mean . . . ? But every paper and every magazine here has been running will-they-won't-they pieces ever since last May!'

'Here and in France and Germany and Italy and Holland. Even in Greece and Cuba and Japan, for Chrissake! Everywhere but in England. Believe it or not, there's not been one single word published about the affair in that country.'

'But that's crazy! You mean they *censor* – ?'

'Shit, no! Nothing so vulgar. Gentleman's agreements not to embarrass His Majesty or upset the Establishment apple cart. A discreet word – oh, so discreet, in one of those clubs you read about! A hint from the editor of *The Times*. That's all you need, and – presto! – the lovers never even met.'

'Harry, I can't believe it!' I cried. 'Christ, they went on a *cruise* together on a yacht in the Mediterranean last July! They were photographed everywhere. The pictures were published in everything from *Time* magazine to *La Stampa*, from *Paris-Match* to the *Frankfurter Zeitung*!'

He nodded. 'And the distributors of those papers, the guys who import them into England, made sure that every picture

and every caption was cut out of each copy before it went on sale. I hear some guy plans to sue one of the big news-stand companies for passing off damaged articles as new!

'All this stuff,' I said. 'You're telling me the British public knows sweet damn-all about it? Is that what you're saying?'

'Not officially they don't. Sure, they know about it on the cocktail circuit and in Mayfair drawing-rooms. Church leaders know about it, and some of the politicians. But so far as the handling of *news* is concerned – no, like I said, the story don't exist. The divorce comes up tomorrow, the 27th. She filed in some hick seaside town on the East Coast. It'll receive no more space – and no less – than any other routine divorce in a provincial resort. There'll be no comment and no backgrounding in any of the press reports on the case.'

I slumped against the back of the booth and shook my head. 'Jake!' I called. 'You better bring us a coupla straight ryes. With chasers.' I turned to Michaelson. 'That could never happen here,' I said. 'If the *News* agreed to squash a story, the *Post* would splash it; anything Hearst tried to suppress, McCormick would lead with it.'

'Well, this is a democratic country,' he said smugly.

'Sure it is. A racketeer can run any town he likes.'

'Don't be like that, Mettner. I want objectivity and colorful reporting from you. I want what I just told you brought up to date – with all the inside dope. So far, the only place Mrs Simpson's name has appeared in England is the Court Circular.'

'What the hell's that?'

'Kind of an official newsletter telling about the royal family: where they go, and what hospitals they open, and who came to dinner and like that. It's published in *The Times* and a couple of quality sheets. Her name's been on the guest list – usually with her husband's – a few times.'

'And that's really the *only* reference? For real?'

He reached inside his jacket pocket and fished out a crumpled piece of paper. He was smoothing it out on the table when Jake set down the drinks and took away the empty steins. There were a couple of lines of typing on the paper. Michaelson took the shell glasses from a breast pocket and balanced them on his nose. McCluskey never was extravagant with the electric light. 'There's another kind of newsletter in Britain,' Michaelson said. 'It ain't exactly a review and it ain't important enough to be called a paper. But sometimes it comes up with pay dirt,

being run by characters you might say were on the Left. On the 14th – twelve days ago – they published this in a gossip column.' He cleared his throat and read:

Plans are afoot to explode a social bomb under the King. The ideal method envisaged by those planting the bomb would be for a reference to be made from the pulpit to – quote – the very different standards of conduct set to his subjects by the late King – unquote.'

I whistled. 'You mean the Archbishop is going to preach a sermon against him? Carpet him like some naughty schoolboy in church?'

'That's the way I read it. Naming no names, of course. Making no specific accusations. That would be too direct for the British. It might not even be the Archbishop. But *some* Bishop. You know: a word to the wise, old chap, and don't let down the jolly old side, what!'

'If they really talk with an accent like that,' I said, 'I resign, as of now. You're assuming your scandal sheet is right, I guess?'

'It's called *The Week*. They often do get inside material . . . and it's often right. I want you there, Mettner, when that Bishop opens his mouth.'

'Well,' I said, 'it's three years since they shot Mayor Cernak, three months since Dutch Schultz got his in New York, and three weeks since Bottles Capone came out of jail to run Chicago until Brother Al's served that tax evasion rap. Tom Dewey's put Luciano inside on white slavery charges, and the Syndicate's been taken over in the East by Vito Genovese, with Anastasia's Murder Inc., boys as enforcers. I guess you could say that things are so quiet there ain't no market for a righteous crime reporter!'

McCluskey's was filling up. It was difficult to make yourself heard over the babble of voices without raising your own. There were half a dozen subs from the *Tribune* in the next booth to us, and I could see two or three *Herald and Examiner* leg-men at the long bar. 'Maybe you better tell me the rest of it someplace else,' I said.

Michaelson nodded. As he got to his feet, an inch and a half of cigar ash sailed down to swell the reserves he kept stashed in the creases of his vest. He slapped ineffectually at his paunch as we made for the door. I coughed and hurried into the street.

There'd be time enough for that kind of atmosphere if I ever made London.

Chicago was doing its best to break me in to the idea. The sky was gray, the lake was gray, and there was an icy wind blowing gum wrappers, empty cigarette packs and yesterday's racing results along the gray sidewalk. I turned up the collar of my coat as we waited for the semaphore to clang up to *Stop* at the Randolph Street intersection. 'I still think you're making a mistake, Harry,' I said. 'However crooked the characters are, Bill Schneider's your star man on personalities. He knows far more than I do about socialites. He's been to London. He understands protocol. He's habituated to the snob circuit and the embassy crowd.'

The lights changed. Brakes squealed. A train rumbled overhead on the elevated. 'What was that?' Michaelson shouted as we stepped into the roadway.

'I said I know damn-all about royalty.'

He chuckled. 'You will, Oscar, you will,' he said. 'I booked you a passage on the *Queen Mary*.'

TWO

So there I am on this boat-train steaming up from Southampton to London. And the first thing I notice about Britain is the class system, like they say. On this train there's First Class and there's Third Class . . . but no Second to be seen! I guess it's one of the ways they preserve the Us and Them distinctions. Certainly there was a difference. All of the cars had this crazy corridor along one side instead of down the middle. This was so each car could be further subdivided into more private compartments with sliding doors. But the First Class cars had dusty druggets on the floor and antimacassars in starched white linen to stop the heads of gentlemen and ladies soiling the dusty upholstery. Apart from the fact that the upper-crust passengers were either foreign or looked as though they wore bad smells under their noses, and that they sat three-to-a-side while the hoi-polloi sat four, there didn't seem much visual difference. Some of the Third Class rabble even wore shoes.

Apart from this, I didn't feel too much like a visitor from outer space. We passed through a slice of Connecticut and another stretch of country that was the best replica of Massachusetts I ever saw. There was even a touch of Virginia away to the west at one time. Waterloo station could have been the Illinois Central except for the Cockney accents. The *Globe* didn't keep a regular correspondent outposted in London: Michaelson used a Britisher who worked for a highbrow literary magazine as a stringer. He figured there'd be less conflict of loyalties that way than if he used a guy from a Fleet Street daily. In fact all it meant was that we missed out on the sensational stuff we needed and got flooded with a load of egghead bullshit that we didn't. Anyway, Robin Douglas was to meet me off the train.

You know me: I'm tall and thin, so thin that I can never buy a suit off the peg that doesn't wrap around me about three times if it's long enough in the arm and leg. Customarily, there's printer's ink on my hands, my jacket pockets bulge with packs of Camels, matches, and folded copies of the latest

dition, and there's a cigarette stuck between my lips.

Robin Douglas was as tall as me but well built. His cigarette was in an ivory holder tweezered between manicured fingers. There was a yellow waistcoat beneath his Prince of Wales necks and he carried a pair of hand-stitched washleather gloves. The hotel he'd booked me into had what they called an American bar. So far as I could see this meant there was wall-to-wall Axminster, waiter service at the tables, and free pretzels, nuts and olives along the counter. Apparently the ordinary moon provided none of these amenities. We hadn't even ordered up the second round before Douglas had slotted himself into Category D.12 on the Mettner Type Identification chart.

He knew his stuff all right – but you had to know he knew it too. He was the guy who always laughed aloud at the witticisms in foreign movies just *before* the sub-titles showed on the screen. His dark hair curled slightly at the nape of the neck.

'Bit of a rum do, sending over a crime man for a routine situationer, isn't it?'

'How did you know I was on the crime desk? Michaelson's table just gave my name.'

He looked faintly surprised. 'One does read the rag, old boy. Only to check that one's being paid for what they use.'

'Anyway what's so routine about the situation?'

Douglas was staring at the beer in his tankard. We were standing at the bar and he held it down at arm's length, his fingers curled around the glass handle and the thumb hooked inside the rim. 'Well . . . I mean to say . . . no bloody story, really, is there? Delicate situation and all that. You know.'

I didn't. But I figured on finding out. 'Michaelson thinks Baldwin and Láng and some of the others will pull a fast one. He suspects blackmail and villainy in high places. That's why he sent me. I *run* the crime desk.'

He looked kind of shocked. 'But . . . Good God! . . . I mean to say you can't treat this as you would some Chicago gangster story!'

'We can treat it any way we want. But, just for the record, why not?'

'Well, dash it all, it's not exactly cops and robbers, is it?'

'In Chicago,' I told him wearily, 'they don't play cops and robbers any more. The game is called cops and cops. And that's exactly what this story looks like: corruption in high places, which is what gangsterism is all about.'

'I don't see why you say that. Just because the bloody woman's been divorced a couple of times . . .'

I stared at him. 'You really don't know, do you? Even in the business, you don't know! Look – it's not what your King's doing, or the broad he's doing it with. The corruption I'm talking about is on the other side.'

'The other side, old boy? What other side?'

'So far as we're concerned, the story is that he wants to marry the dame now that she's divorced, and there's a conspiracy set up to stop him.'

'Oh, come now! Surely that's putting it a bit strong, isn't it?' He drained his tankard and signaled the barman. 'I agree, it would hardly be the thing if he did marry her, what! But a conspiracy . . .' He shook his head.

'Hardly the thing?' I mimicked him. 'I don't see why not. She's never "been divorced": she's gotten rid of two unfaithful husbands. Period. Nevertheless, the story is that he'll be forced either to drop her or quit the throne.'

'But you can't go writing up that sort of thing!' He sounded alarmed.

'You're out of touch, sonny,' I told him. 'You know what one of the New York papers used as a headline for the divorce – the story you put below the fold on page seventeen? *King's Moll Reno-ed in Wolsey's Home Town!* So far as foreign readers are concerned, it's already a contest between the King and the Church – otherwise they wouldn't have made the allusion to *Henry VIII* and his cardinal. Believe me, nothing I write is going to sensationalize the story more than it has been already. Just because your press here is muzzled –'

'Not muzzled, old lad,' he said sharply. 'Gents' agreement, voluntarily entered into by the Newspaper Proprietors' Association. Mustn't rock the bloody boat.'

'The boat's already down by the head.' I felt rather proud of that one. 'And listing . . . to starboard, I reckon. Which side suggested this – uh – voluntary abstinence from the best story of the decade?'

He'd know, of course. Nobody that fond of himself was going to get caught with his pants down when it came to gossip from below the Fleet Street stairs. All that naïve, no-story-here routine was just a stall until he decided whether he could trust me and how much he wanted to part with. 'They do say,' he began, 'that it started with confidential requests from Himself – probably to Beaverbrook, who's by way of being a mate, then

later to Rothermere. That would silence the *Express* group and the *Mail*. After that it was simply a matter of a few words to the boys in the club. Mustn't embarrass the bloody Monarch. Reith at the BBC and Dawson at *The Times* went along with it – but for very different reasons. They're both prigs. Even if their betters won't toe the jolly old line, the masses have no right to know about it.'

'You mean the press blackout started at the King's request but now it's started to work against him?'

'That's about the strength of it, old boy. Couldn't have put it better myself. Smoke?' He flipped open a small cardboard box covered with black and white stripes. The cigarette tasted like the fog I'd expected to see as soon as I stepped ashore. In fact the weather was mild, with sunny intervals, and the lack of fog wasn't the only thing that surprised me about London.

I'd been prepared for the red club-sandwich buses, of course. Everyone's seen pictures of them. But I hadn't reckoned on the buildings being pint-sized: the highest I could find were apartment blocks and they never made more than ten floors. Can you imagine that! Except in the narrowest streets, even the church spires showed above the roofs. They *were* narrow too; maybe that's why the automobiles were so much smaller than ours. But the thing that fazed me the most was the language. I expected the dude accents, of course, but I'd always thought that underneath we spoke out of the same dictionary. Think again, Mettner! There were similarities, but as far as total understanding went, it could have been Oklahoma. Even when I'd gotten used to calling the hood of an auto its bonnet, the fenders wings, and an elevator a lift, it still stopped me in my tracks to see the subway marked as the underground! And as for the Third Class passengers, the old woman selling flowers on the sidewalk, the guy in the cigar store, some of the bell-hops in the hotel – they could have been eskimos for all I knew. There seemed to be only one vowel, kind of a guttural 'I', shared out amongst the whole working population. And they weren't too generous with the consonants either.

The hotel was okay, a big, solid place with flowered carpet all over and hot water brought to your room in copper cans by women looking like Florence Nightingale with starch. There was no steam heating, of course: each room sported a gas burner with a coin box at one side. My window looked across a busy street at a severe, soot-black building beside a big church called the Oratory. Uptown was the Kensington neighborhood

— a crumbling quarter of run-down Victorian terraces whose jumbo porticos had once sheltered ladies and gentlemen waiting for their carriages but now served as entrances to rooming houses and cheap hotels. Downtown was Knightsbridge, Piccadilly, the West End. And in between, in back of the hotel, was the cutest part of northern Chelsea — small, elegant houses in cream stucco, arranged in rows or set around squares with yew trees and green lawns behind railings in the center. Most of these houses had yards planted with ornamental shrubs or flowers in urns. Some even boasted herbaceous borders around patches of grass, with fruit trees against a wall. I never saw anything like that in Chicago or New York.

I soon discovered that the gossip I could pick up was strictly geared to the neighborhood and its pubs. This quarter behind the hotel, for instance, was Robin Douglas country: passengers holding First Class tickets only. Apart from the ritzy waterfront homes, the rest of Chelsea was drab and uninteresting, full of argumentative drunks explaining why the manuscript had been turned down or the painting rejected. Nobody there gave a shit about the King or his private affairs. Rich veins could be mined among the business fraternity in Mayfair and north of Oxford Street, but Whitehall was stiff upper lip and what a long time to wait until the cricket season starts again. Strangely, the most vociferous opinions came from the drinking dens in bohemian Soho and those bars catering for the whores staked out along the wide streets of Bayswater. All these places could give me man-in-the-street reaction — and there *was* reaction, even without the newspapers. But to latch on to the *informed* comment, I had to go to Fleet Street, on the way to St Paul's, where those papers were so busy holding their collective tongue. The guys who worked on them had no trouble loosening theirs, however. I don't know if it was a coincidence that I saw more two-horse drays unloading barrels there than anywhere else in town. What I did know was that I could be sure of getting the lowdown on the situation there — in twelve different versions, every one guaranteed absolutely spot-on, straight out of the horse's mouth, old boy.

It was November 4th, and still nothing in the papers, so I hatched a piece for Michaelson using that fact as a lead and adding on some of the wilder rumors it had led to. That day's edition of *The Week* — Michaelson's 'scandal sheet' — gave me the postscript that rumors of a royal marriage or an abdication had raised the premium for those who wanted to insure against

a postponement of the coronation to eight per cent! But so far as actual hard news went, it was zero all the way. Two anti-Franco delegates from Spain had attended the Labour Party conference. The Prime Minister had been received in audience at Fort Belvedere. The Portuguese Ambassador had presented his credentials at Buckingham Palace. Queen Mary, the King's mother, had opened an antique fair in St John's Wood. According to *The Week*, she had also invited Wallis Simpson to lunch at Marlborough House – but that was so unlikely that I wouldn't even cable it as 'unconfirmed reports'. Robin Douglas was scandalized. 'Absolutely out of the question, old boy,' he said. 'She'd *never* . . . I mean to say, not even for tea at Gunter's! You don't want to believe what you read in that bolshie rag, you know.'

'I don't believe it,' I said. 'But I have to get stories somehow.' That was why I was in this ritzy square outside the US Embassy the following day. I figured I might as well latch onto a few fellow-countrymen as they went in or out and get *their* reactions to the crisis . . . if they knew there was a crisis.

The secretaries had just flounced back from their pub lunches when I saw him – a tall, thin, blue-chinned character with flinty eyes in a face that looked as though the frost had gotten behind it. Mario Ralfini.

Automatically, my mind started flipping through the cards in the morgue index. Mario Ralfini, second generation American, born Chicago 1902, of naturalized parents who had emigrated during the great Sicilian exodus in the late nineties; Mario Ralfini, leg man for Samoots Amatuma when he was president of the Unione Siciliana in 1925; Mario Ralfini, who'd later been associated with Scalise, Anselmi and Frank 'the Enforcer' Nitti in Capone's heyday and subsequently worked for Meyer Lansky in New York; Mario Ralfini, who slotted neatly in between Big Al Polizzi and Philip Rastelli in the Mafia's ABC of hit-men.

What the hell was he doing in London? I remembered that he'd gone to Vegas when Benny Binion had been run out of the numbers rackets in Dallas, Texas. Binion had been his boss and there were rumors that, because of his Cosa Nostra associations, Ralfini had crossed him up at the instigation of the Syndicate men who'd taken over his pitch. The last I'd heard, Ralfini had hired a Beechcraft to fly him from Nevada to Mexico because he'd been tipped off that the Inland Revenue Service were after his balls on a tax evasion rap. So

why would a well-heeled hood with connections be heavy-footing it through London on a windy day in November when he could be lying on the beach at Acapulco with a rented blonde?

Don't ask me why, but I decided on the spur of the moment that I'd like an answer to that question. It might have been simply as a relief from the boring leg work I'd set myself; it might even have been because we knights of the keyboard develop kind of a sixth sense for news. Whatever it was, I decided to give it a whirl for a couple of hours. After all; it seemed reasonable that if there was a story behind Ralfini's appearance in London I might as well go after it. Just because I'd been assigned to this regal dead duck, it didn't mean I had to pass up a crime story if I happened on one.

So I figured I'd stick close to the hood, now that I'd recognized him, and see what turned up. It might be nothing; he could be in London buying treasury bonds or visiting his Aunt Giovanna. Or it could turn into some kind of scoop. You never knew. One of the best crime stories I ever wrote fell into my lap simply because I was playing leech to a torpedo named Bruno Farrell. As it happened, the guy turned out to be a G-man working undercover, but the principle's the same.

Anyway, here I am outside the Embassy waiting to say, 'Excuse me, sir: I represent the *Chicago Globe* . . . ' when Ralfini's rogues gallery mug whistles past under a broad-brimmed fedora and the name to go with it registers in the frame a few hundredths of a second later. I don't know what he was doing there. He hadn't come down the steps from the entrance, and in any case an IRS runaway would hardly check in with the local diplomats on a foreign trip. I do know that I fell in behind him and when he turned the corner into Brook Street a little later I was only a dozen paces to the rear. There was a cab rank outside Claridge's, and Ralfini jerked open the door of the first and climbed in. 'I know this sounds like a bad movie,' I said to the Jehu behind the wheel of the second, 'but I'd like you to follow that taxi.' Only a couple of days in the city, you see, and he's already learned to cushion the blow in the British way. If I'd just rapped: 'Follow that cab!' the guy would simply have stared at me, figuring he'd fallen on a fare who'd flipped his lid. As it was, he chuckled hoarsely, pulled that double-jointed back-bend of the arm that cabbies use to open the rear door, and said: 'Right you are, Slim Callahan. Hop in and we'll see what we can do.'

These London cabs look like a sawn-off Model-T with the back half blown up tight like a football, but the inside's cleaner than ours, and those babies have a steering lock that can turn the whole midget auto on a nickel. Ralfini's made a U-turn that didn't even take him over the center-line of the street, and my boy followed close behind. He slid back the glass panel between driver and passenger, and tilted his head toward the rear. I heard his gruff voice over the grind of gears: "'Ere, guv - this geezer suss that he's bein' tailed?"

'Absolutely not.' That was one thing I could lay money on.

'Would he tumble to it if he lamped your phiz?'

'How's that again?'

'Would it tip him off if he saw you?'

I saw what he meant. Traffic was heavy, the streets were narrow, and there were stop-go lights. I'd happened on a driver who used his head. Keeping a screen of other vehicles between us in the classic technique would have been a quick recipe for losing the quarry. 'He never laid eyes on me,' I said. 'Wouldn't know me from Adam Smith if he did. You can close right up behind him and he won't suspect a thing. Not even if you drop me at the same street number.'

He nodded and slid the panel shut.

Ralfini's driver strongarmed his way across Bond Street and started the slow motion merry-go-round circling Hanover Square. At one point in the jam the two cabs were side by side and I stole a glance at the guy. He wasn't sitting on the edge of the seat, or shouting at the cabbie, or biting his nails. He was lounging back against the upholstery with no expression on that blue-jowled puss, taking an occasional gander at the watch in his vest pocket. He didn't look like a bigtime hoodlum planning a heist. He looked like a guy who was just beginning to become impatient because his cab was stalled in Hanover Square.

Along the whole crooked length of Maddox Street, the whores wore today's fashions with yesterday's faces. I never got over the way they were allowed to promenade in London. France has its brothels, Holland its shop-window cribs, New Orleans its sporting houses and New York its bars. But these curbside crusaders in Britain are something else! I mean it's like 3.30 in the afternoon! Robin Douglas told me it was because the middle classes preferred crumpet to cucumber sandwiches, but I'm not sure I got the point. Anyway, things speeded up once we were across Regent Street and past the

sham-Tudor frontage of Liberty's. Ralfini's taxi twisted through the top end of Soho, turned south, and put him down at the corner of Dean and Old Compton Street.

'Three and a tanner, Guv,' my driver announced, putting up the flag that switched off his taximeter. He'd made another turnaround and let me out on the opposite side of the street. Smart guy. I handed him five shillings. 'Keep the change,' I said. 'Could be I'll need a reliable man some time. Do you have a card?'

'Much obliged, sir. Yes, I do.' He unfastened two layers of topcoat, thrust his hand inside a third, and fished out a surprisingly crisp and clean rectangle of pasteboard. 'That's the number of the rank I work from,' he said. 'Top end of Sloane Street. The geezer in the shelter takes messages if I ain't there. The other number, the one wrote in ink, is me home. But you'd have to phone early in the mornin' or after 8pm to get me there. Unless of course you left word with the wife.'

'Okay. Be seeing you,' I said. I tucked the card into my breast pocket and hurried across the street. Ralfini was half a block away and I opened the throttle some to shorten the distance between us.

It's a crazy neighborhood, Soho. Architecturally, it could be Durham, North Carolina, with the top sawn off. From the aesthetic angle, I mean. Socially, it's a mixture of Times Square, Greenwich Village, Little Italy and Storyville - but it's nothing like any of them. At street level, the narrow, grimed brick buildings are bright with small delicatessens, wine stores, foreign groceries and shoe shops. Upstairs, there are offices, wholesale garment showrooms, cold water walk-ups. And the fifth floors, right under the slate roofs, seem to be reserved for hustling apartments, judging from the flesh hanging out to dry over the windowsills. But the things you notice most are the restaurants and clubs.

The clubs are nothing more than a loophole in Britain's crazy drinking laws. They never had Prohibition - except in the afternoons and before eleven in the morning. Those are the hours when the pubs have to close. But the law doesn't apply to private members' clubs. So for half a buck each, you take out membership in a number of clubs in different areas . . . and as soon as the pubs close, you just move to the nearest one and carry right on drinking! Douglas told me there are something like ten thousand of these one-room gin-mills in London alone: the same number of speakeasies there were in

Chicago during Prohibition!

From what I saw, most of those must have been packed into the square mile of Soho! I passed twenty in the first three hundred yards, but only four of them were called the Colony. The restaurants were something else again – Italian, French, Greek, Chinese, Spanish, they had 'em all, from the cheapest to the most chic. Within a couple of blocks I'd inhaled the after-lunch atmosphere drifting from Genaro's, the Czardas, Casa Pepe, Ley On's, l'Escargot and Spiegelhalter's Salt Beef Bar. Before that, Ralfini had led me past a news cinema, the Café Bleu, a paper shop displaying magazines from all over the world, Valerie's French pastrycook's, and a window full of copper pans with the name *Cadec* in raised white letters on the glass. Then suddenly we were in a cross street, with the multi-racial sidewalk conversations and the cries of the barrow boys selling fruit behind us.

I've been in a lot of crummy neighborhoods in my time, from Smoky Hollow in Chicago to the Bowery, but I'm here to say that Bateman Street, W1, in the City of Westminster, has them all beat for sheer insalubriousness, if that's the word. Half way along was an intersection and a wide alley, at the far end of which you could see grass and trees in Soho Square. But I never saw a place that radiated evil and the sleazier side of crime more obviously.

There was no traffic in the street. Most of the houses were shuttered, the paint on the woodwork cracked and peeling. The only store was a dirty bookshop with girlie magazines racked inside and the boss behind a one-way mirror. There weren't even any streetwalkers to be seen – just half a dozen guys propping up walls or slouching against iron railings. I'm telling you, ten paces away from the barkers and the tourists and the off-duty waiters arguing in Greek, I was in the middle of a gothic horror movie! One hard-faced little runt in a cloth cap and a white muffler was picking his teeth with a match. Two more stared with blank eyes from a doorway at the end of a passage lined with trash cans. The most sinister was perched on the curb like a vulture – a lean character with a hooked nose, a razor scar down one side of his face, and skin like used sandpaper.

None of them moved as I rounded the corner. They didn't even turn their heads. But everyone was watching me. For an instant I checked my step. Ralfini was striding into an entry about fifty yards away. The gray London wind blew low clouds

across the strip of sky between the rooftops and skittered torn scraps of paper along the street. Nothing else stirred.

Then I thought: what the hell! This is London in daylight in the middle of the afternoon! Surely a respectable American visitor can walk through Soho without risking . . . what? A mugging? A knife between the ribs as the billfold is lifted? A beating up because I was following Ralfini? Don't make me laugh! Be your age, Mettner, I told myself.

I walked on toward the entry. I saw some pretty lowdown goons during the booze wars, but even the meanest bums, even the most soulless killers had more human warmth in their faces than those toughs in Bateman Street that afternoon. The guy with the scarred face had the coldest stare I ever saw.

Like I say, they only looked . . . but my flesh was crawling by the time I was into that entry and out of view. It was a paved walk about five yards wide with a street lamp half way along in the center. Ralfini was turning into an archway at the far end when I heard the sounds of the fight.

The squalid four-storey terraces on either side of the alley were railed off from the pavement, with rusty gates opening on steps leading down to narrow, stinking areas. In one of these was the inevitable drinking club. An open doorway, garish with yellow paint, displayed a sign decorated with palm trees and the word 'Zanzibar'. The noise was coming from somewhere beyond – feet stamping, voices shouting, the crash of furniture and the breaking of glass.

I guess I'd simply have quickened my step and closed up on Ralfini – especially in that neighborhood – if I hadn't heard the scream.

It was a girl's voice, high-pitched and taut with terror. And if I'd been in a gothic movie, now I was plunged into a horror comic, for the words came up from that area as corny as speech balloons in a Ginger Meggs strip: '*Help! . . . Help! . . . For the love of God, HELP!*'

I hesitated. Ralfini was already out of sight: another moment and I could have lost him. On the other hand, I didn't *know* there was a story in him. Was it worth following up what was no more than a hunch when things were happening, really happening, quite literally under my feet?

Before I'd made up my mind, the girl screamed again – and the scream was stifled in mid-flight as though a hand had been clapped over her mouth. That did it. I wheeled around, flung back the iron gate, and charged down the steps.

THREE

It was the usual promise-all-give-nothing clip joint in a world where guys with the wrong values rejected anything they hadn't paid too much for. In the evenings, there'd have been a tout in a doorman's cap under the neon on the main drag, directing suckers to the yellow door with murmurs of 'Private club, sir; lovely girls!' Outside there might have been a showcase displaying titty-pix or girls with whips, none of whom would be – or would ever have been – on the premises. Inside it would be the stock scene: canned music, dim lighting, half a dozen over-painted and underdressed harpies at the bar, and a cocktail atmosphere compounded of one part cheap scent, one part wood alcohol and three parts stale perspiration.

There were only four or five men in the place, but it seemed like a regiment of Marines flushing hostile snipers out of a foxhole. There was just one large room behind the yellow door, and the only light came through a busted shutter over the area window and down a stairway behind the bar. Dim figures threshed and heaved in the gloom. I heard groans and grunts of pain and the thud of blows. As I burst through the door, I tripped over something soft and heavy and my feet crunched on broken glass.

The girl screamed again. She was struggling with a big man behind the bar, clawing at his face as he tried to lift her bodily in a bear hug. 'Shut that bitch's mouth . . . and get her out of here!' someone shouted.

The big man shifted his grip and raised a fist. And that was when I joined the fight – not entirely through any decision of my own. I don't know what the hell I thought I was going to do anyway, when I ran down those stairs. But the impetus of my entrance, plus the trip in the doorway, carried me clear across the room between the antagonists. Then I stumbled over some piece of smashed furniture and hurtled toward the bar. The edge of the counter caught me across the hips and I slid on over like a getaway car in a bank robbery, butting the big guy under his lifted arm with my head.

Even attacked unexpectedly, from the side, in the dark, no hood is going to fold up winded by the impact of a Mettner head. He might be surprised for a moment, though. This one was. He grunted, fell back a pace, and loosened his grip on the broad. By this time my flailing hand had connected with an unbroken bottle lying on the bar. Mister Big was silhouetted against the light from the inner stairway. As I lurched to the floor on the operating side of the bar, I swung the bottle and connected at the base of his neck. I seized the girl's arm and dragged her away from him while he was staggering, and lashed out again. The bottle smashed on his skull and he dropped in a Niagara of shivered glass and alcohol.

The battle was still raging all round. I shoved my prize violently at the stairs and yelled: 'Run! Get up those stairs and keep going!'

Something thudded against my left shoulder, half paralyzing my arm. A blade sliced through my sleeve. Then we were climbing like a Fourth of July rocket, and a voice below was screeching: 'Don't let that slut get away!'

'Who the hell's that bleeder?' someone else shouted.

'What the fuck . . . ?'

'Do the bugger in!'

'Get after them!'

And then the sudden pounding of feet.

All I could think of as we made the hallway above was: Thank Christ they don't all pack rods in England! Thank Christ they don't all pack rods in England! Then we were faced with a short passage leading to the front door, or an open window with a refuse-strewn backyard beyond. Remembering Bateman Street, I opted for the window. I pushed the broad through and was scrambling over the sill – a perfect target for any torpedo! – when they hit the top of the staircase. I didn't look back as they clattered in pursuit. No newspaperman likes to be turned into a pillar of salt, and anyway they hadn't seen my face yet. I was quite happy to leave it that way.

Something whistled over my head and smashed the glass in the upper half of the window. I dropped to the flagstones in the yard in company with half a battalion of lethal fragments, staggered upright . . . and found my coat skewered to a packing case with a throwing knife. I jerked free and legged it after the girl, who was already running for an open gateway at the end of the yard. I reckoned we'd be okay if we could just make a street with real people in it; they'd hardly dare continue the

assault and battery in broad daylight, with an audience. But there was still a way to go.

The guys spilling out through the window were only a few yards away. I toppled over a stack of beer crates as I dashed past, and then upended a trash can to roll behind me and block the pursuit.

There was a cobbled alley running left and right beyond the gateway. I grabbed the girl's arm and turned left, because I saw the lane ended there on the far side of the arch I'd seen Ralfini pass through. Gasping for breath we ran between windowless brick walls, over stones greasy with nameless garbage, through an atmosphere sickly with the stench of rotting food. In back, someone slipped, cursed, and fell. But the nearest hood couldn't have been more than ten yards away. I could practically feel hot, beery breath on my neck.

'Get the girl!' the same hoarse voice cried, farther back. 'Smash that fucker's head in, but bring back the girl!'

A bottle shattered at my feet. Something heavy hit me in the small of the back and dropped. Another knife hissed past my ear, struck sparks from the wall, and caromed to the ground. Then we were at the archway, turning into the blind end of a short cul-de-sac at the far end of which I could see traffic, shop fronts, guys and dames walking this way and that. Even the blind alley was inhabited. The driver of a panel truck was delivering a rail of dresses to one of the buildings. Beyond it, a dark green limousine with whitewall tires waited with two wheels up on the sidewalk.

'It's okay,' I panted. 'We made it, baby. You can relax now. We're safe!'

It was true. Nobody had followed us out of the alleyway. I slowed to a walk, realized that I was still clutching the girl's arm as fiercely as a drowning man, and released her. For the first time, I had a chance to take a look at my prize. I whistled to myself. I'd sure picked me an able Grable this time around!

She was an ash blonde with a page-boy bob and a body by Fisher. Right now, a lot of the coachwork was showing because the green silk blouse she wore was ripped in several places and there was no brassière beneath it. Her hair was mussed, there were runs in her stockings, and the black skirt was gray with dust all down one side. I couldn't see the face because she was sobbing for breath and her head was down. 'Relax,' I said again. 'It's all over now.'

She looked up then. Jean Harlow's younger sister before

they told her about gin. But there was a graze on one cheek, her lip was split, and she would have a black eye pretty soon. Somebody had been thumping this kid, but good. 'It's not over,' she said tearfully. 'It'll never be over.'

'Ah, c'mon, baby . . . ' We turned the corner and found we were in Frith Street. Off-duty waiters were still arguing in Italian and Greek. I took her elbow and steered her toward a café. 'C'mon, we'll wrap you around a nice hot cup of coffee and you'll feel better. You had one hell of a shock - '

'No!' she interrupted hysterically. 'Not here! Nowhere around here!'

'Okay, okay. No sweat.' I raised an arm and a cab cruised into the curb. 'This lady has been in an accident,' I said. 'Please take us to the nearest hospital as quickly as you can.' I shoved her inside.

'I don't want to go to any hospital!' she cried as I sat beside her.

'Shuddup. We aren't going to any hospital: that's just a stall. We'll get off there and find a quiet place in the neighborhood where we can talk.'

I didn't hear any more until we were on the other side of Oxford Street. The hospital was called the Middlesex and turned out to be only a couple more blocks north - a big red brick place with a deep courtyard off Mortimer Street. We got off there and I piloted the girl east. 'I haven't thanked you,' she said as we turned into Tottenham Court Road. 'I don't know who you are or why you did it, but I have to thank you for getting me out of there. Why *did* you do it?'

'They call me the St George of the Middle West,' I said. 'I couldn't resist a tilt while I was in the old country. Who were your particular dragons?'

She shuddered. 'It was the Team,' she said in a low voice. The cap initial was just discernible. 'Charlie didn't have the money, and they said if he didn't come across by lunchtime today they'd . . . they'd . . . they'd break the place up and see that he never walked again.'

'Charlie?'

'Charlie Farnsbarn. Oh, that's not his real name, of course but that's what everyone calls him.'

'What is his real name?'

'I don't know. McEvoy? McTavish? Mackintosh? Something like that. Kind of a Scottish name, though he comes from Barbados.'

'Barbados! He was a black man? I mean . . . is a black man? hope?'

She nodded. The tears were running down her cheeks. 'Poor Charlie. I know the Zanzibar was a clip joint, but he did run two other places, real classy clubs with a band and dancing and all. The Sugar Loaf and the Plantation. And he's always been . . . g-g-good to me . . . ' She was sobbing aloud now, the slender body shaking each time she caught her breath.

'What happened?' I prompted as gently as I could.

'What happened? Well they broke the place up, didn't they? They did what they said they would, the way it always happens when the Yank's involved.' The blonde bell of hair tolled a silent knell. 'I had a date with him at half three . . . I was auditioning for the floorshow at the Plantation . . . but it had already started when I got there. Not the noisy part but the . . . I tried to run away but Billie-boy grabbed me. They wanted to take me with them. The Yank don't like witnesses and they hadn't known I was . . . '

She paused fractionally and then went on. I was seething with questions but it seemed best to let her get it all off that knockout chest. 'They wrecked the place,' she said, 'and then they started on Charlie. Beat him up and then put the boot in when he was down. He managed to get hold of some wire on the floor, and all the lights fused when he jerked it . . . then he . . . he made a run for the door but they caught him.' She bit down hard on her lower lip and her eyes closed for a moment. 'They cut the tendons at the back of his knees with a razor,' she said.

'Jesus!' I said. That must have been Charlie I tripped over when I came through the door. 'If they hamstrung him, it's true, he never will walk again.'

'I told you. They do what they say. It always happens when - '

'I know,' I cut in. 'When the Yank's involved. Who's the Yank?'

'Well he took over when they turfed Hinds out, didn't he?'

'You tell me, baby. What's his name? Is he American? And who the hell is Billie-boy?'

Suddenly she shook her head violently. 'I don't want to talk about it!' she cried. 'Leave me alone! Why are you asking me all these questions? Who are you, anyway?' She was running, the high heels tapping away along the pavement, the blonde hair flailing left and right.

I caught up with her and grabbed her elbow. 'Take it easy!' I growled, forcing her to slow down to a walk again. 'You're in a hell of a mess. Folks are looking at you. You want to draw *more* attention to yourself?'

She took aboard enough breath to float the *Hindenburg*, released it again and then turned to me. 'You're quite right. I'm sorry. I should be saying thank you instead of running out on you!'

'It's okay,' I said. 'You had a hell of a shock. You're still in shock. What you need is a drink.'

'We can't,' she said automatically. 'They don't open for another hour.'

'For Chrissake!' I protested. 'Everything in England seems to be governed by *them*!' I stepped into an arcaded store-front to light up a Camel.

'Oh!' the girl gasped. 'You're hurt!'

I was too, although I hadn't noticed. Blood had run down my left arm and congealed between the fingers of my hand. I remembered the knife or razor or whatever it was that had nicked my sleeve as I made my fleeting appearance on the stage of the Zanzibar. Sure enough, the shirt was stuck to my skin just below the elbow, and the muscle was kind of sore. 'It can't be serious,' I said, 'or I'd have fainted. C'mon, honey. Let's go on in here and grab us a cup of coffee. They gotta have a washroom where we can freshen up.'

We'd walked back to the corner of Oxford Street. Across the road from this big movie house was something that looked like Grand Central station without the trains. Outside in gold letters it said *Lyons Corner House*. Inside there were enough glazed tiles to equip a public lavatory accommodating the entire population of Illinois.

We sat down at a table by a marble balustrade linking a half circle of Ionic columns. Below us there were a lot more tables on a checkerboard floor, and then, so help me, a stage with potted palms and an orchestra of men in tuxedos! 'This seems kind of formal,' I said when I could make myself heard over the roar of conversation, the clatter of crockery and *Tales From The Vienna Woods*. 'Allow me to introduce myself: Jason Mettner, special correspondent for the *Chicago Globe*.'

For the first time she smiled. It was nice. 'Dorothy Kimble,' she said.

'Nice to know you, Dorothy. You mentioned an audition . . . ?

'I'm a dancer.'

'A stripper?'

She shook her head. 'Speciality. I don't have too much on to begin with!'

I made a mental note that this was an act I must catch. A plump woman in a black dress and a starched white cap and apron was standing by the table, notepad and pencil at the ready. I reached for another cigarette and raised an eyebrow. 'A coffee for me, please,' Dorothy said. 'Oh - and a toasted tea-cake. I missed out on lunch and I'm ravenous!'

'Make that two of the same,' I told the woman. I'd had no lunch either.

'Oh, my God! My hair!' The Ionic column was faced with mirror-glass and the girl had just caught sight of her reflection. 'I must go and fix it this minute.' She stood up and clutched the edges of the torn blouse together. 'No wonder that waitress stared!'

'That goes for me too. But we can't both leave together: we'd lose the table. You go ahead first, Dorothy. I'll stay here and hold the fort.'

I watched her walk away toward the blue mosaic signaling *Telephones - Toilets*. In my book - and I'm talking of sex here and nothing else - women can be divided into two classes: the worthwhile and the grannies. The former category, that is to say the dames you'd like to be seen out with and that your pals try to take off you, can again be divided. Class One are the stunners, the smasheroos, the pinups whose size and color and proportions shape up with what we've been led to think of as allure. We want to get them into the sack because all our given standards - and those of our friends - tell us it's what we want. Class Two are more rare. They are the gals, some of them not even pretty, who unconsciously signal - with the flare of a nostril, a curling lip, the hair growing on the nape of a neck or the way flesh creases at the elbow - that they're going to be the best, most enthusiastic, most *enjoyable* lay a man ever had. I don't need to tell you which category Dorothy Kimble was in.

When she walked, her legs swung from the hip, but they were slightly bent at the knee. There was no corny wiggling of the can: this was a body that was aware of itself and what it could do, confident and almost arrogant in that knowledge.

Her upper lip, curved at its inner as well as its outer margin, was lifted conspiratorially away from her teeth. The face as a whole was slightly blurred (she was probably short-sighted). And the net result was an overt sexiness that already had me jumping.

The waitress had brought our order. The orchestra had finished Strauss and were beginning to dismantle Weber. What the hell had I gotten myself into? Who were Billie-boy and the Yank and poor loose-legged Charlie Farnsbarn? Could there be any connection between Mario Ralfini and what sounded like some kind of protection racket? Above all, *who were the other guys still fighting when I made my entrance?*

Come to that, where was Dorothy herself? Could she have passed out in the ladies' powder room? I got suddenly to my feet and made for the stairs beneath the blue mosaic.

There was a large lady in spectacles behind a table just inside the door. She was wearing a white coverall and reading an evening paper spread out over the top of the table. 'You can't go in there!' she protested. 'Yours is on the left! Can't you read?'

'A blonde girl,' I said. 'Medium height. About twenty-four. She was wearing a green blouse that was torn and her face was all bruised. Did you see her come in here about ten, maybe twelve minutes ago?'

'Of course I did. She *was* in a mess, poor love! I dunno what -'

'Is she all right?'

'I think so, dear,' the woman said. 'She seemed fine. Give me a tanner when she left.'

'She *left*?' I screeched. 'Which way did she go?'

'You must only just have missed her. She went up the stairs leading direct to the street half a minute ago.'

There was a line of cabs standing in the center of the roadway between the Corner House and the movie theater. I caught a glimpse of a green sleeve as Dorothy Kimble closed the door of the leading one and it moved away.

'Taxi!' I yelled, stepping into the street, waving. 'Taxi!'

A heavy hand fell on my arm. 'Just a moment, sir, if you please. I am a house detective employed by the management and I have to inform you that I have observed you attempting to leave without paying for a meal which you ordered. I'm afraid I must ask you to accompany me to the manager's office...'

FOUR

It was crazy! A goddam house dick of all things! I tried to break free but the grip on my arm tightened as he mouthed the formula required by the law. And he was a big guy – as tall as me and three times heavier. Dorothy's cab was already half way down Charing Cross Road and the lights had changed. I accompanied him to the manager's office.

It all sorted itself out of course. The skin on the two cups of coffee was unbroken; the tea-cakes, marooned in butter as congealed as the blood between my fingers, were virginal. Nothing therefore had actually been *consumed* – so what crime was there, I demanded, in not paying for something you hadn't had? The manager saw the point. I paid the one shilling and sixpence owing, added a sixpenny tip for the outraged waitress, and left. But I was given to understand that, had I taken a single sip of that gray coffee, it would have been a one-way trip in a Black Maria, whatever foreign sophistry I could dredge up in support of my actions. His Majesty's prisons were crowded to the point of overflowing with characters like me.

Talk of the Monarch reminded me. I was in London on a story – but it seemed that I had stumbled, following up my hunch about Ralfini, on another. Maybe two more. I took a quart of Scotch up to my hotel room, and the two of us went over the possibilities together. First, though, I had to clean up. My shoulder was stiff and bruised where the blackjack had hit me, but the skin wasn't broken. I was black and blue where whatever-it-was had thumped into my back during the chase down the alley. The wound on my arm was the worst, and that was three times nothing at all: a deep cut but clean, easily fixed by a shower, a dab of disinfectant, and broad strip of plaster. As soon as it was done, I poured myself half a tumbler of man's second most faithful friend and put my feet up.

The most acute problem was how could I sweet-talk that bastard in the Accounts Department into replacing one shirt,

one jacket and one topcoat, each with the left sleeve slashed and bloody? I read the minor difficulties this way.

There seemed to be some kind of Mafia-style protection racket going on in Soho, maybe in other neighborhoods too. This must be checked. Ralfini was a Mafia-style hood who'd been involved in protection – among other activities – back home. His presence could therefore be a coincidence . . . or something much more, which would mean that I was onto a good story. Leave this on top of the pending tray.

Circumstantial support for the theory that he was involved came from Dorothy Kimble's mention of 'the Yank'. But this too could be a coincidence. Since I happened to be tailing a fellow-countryman at the time that I met her, I'd naturally made the connection, but I could be wrong. It could just as well be a nickname for some local tearaway.

Other questions that needed answering were: who or what was 'the Team'? Who was Billie-boy? Who was Hinds and how had he been 'turfed out'? And most important of all, why had the girl run out on me?

Obviously she was shit-scared. But was there a protection story and a separate Ralfini story, or were the two linked? Whichever way it turned out, I was likely to come up with something more newsworthy than bar-room gossip about an officially non-existent royal romance. Dorothy Kimble was the one link I had between all the unanswered questions . . . beside which I had hot pants for her and the hotel bed was wide. But how do you set about finding one girl among seven million people if she wants to stay hidden?

All I knew about Dorothy Kimble was the fact that she was a dancer, that she had apparently known Charlie quite well, and that he had two other clubs. I unhooked the phone beside the bed, took another swallow of Scotch, and called Robin Douglas. 'Robin,' I said when the connection was made, 'do you happen to know a couple of joints called the Plantation and the Sugar Loaf? Do you know where they are?'

'Yes, old lad.' His voice was guarded. 'Why do you want to know?'

'Just a line of gossip I was checking out,' I lied.

'But . . . my dear chap! . . . you're not likely to find anything we can use *there*. I mean to say, well, they're run by blackies for a start.'

'You mean they're specifically colored clubs?'

'Well, no, not exactly. Just the management and the band and some of the girls. But there's everything that goes with that. You know.'

I didn't know and I said so. I was only a foreigner after all.

'They're the kind of places that are *not quite*,' Douglas explained. 'Drugged cigarettes under the counter in the cloak-room. Jewboys and their rag-trade girlfriends who think they're cutting a hell of a dash. Daughters of the bloody aristocracy on the lookout for a black cock. Middle-class radicals slumming in the cause of racial equality. Actually, some of the hostesses are practically tarts.'

'You don't say!'

'The Plantation's smarter than the Sugar Loaf, but they were both intended to be places where people from all over the Empire could meet. Theoretically, that is. In fact they turned into high-class knocking shops with music. The kind of people you want wouldn't be seen dead in either of them.'

'What kind of people do I want?'

'If you want gossip about you-know-who, you want something a little higher up the social scale, old boy. Try the doorman at the Embassy or one of Quaglino's band boys or the clicker who fixes taxis at the Four Hundred.' He chuckled. 'For the insidest of inside stuff, apply for a private audience with Ambrose.'

'Ambrose?'

'Bandleader at the May Fair. He supplies small groups for all the debs' balls and society parties. Very much *in* with the Right People.'

'Right now,' I said, 'I'm not interested in the Right Young Things. I told you - I'm following up a line of gossip I already heard. Where are these two clubs?'

Douglas sighed audibly. 'The Sugar Loaf's in Mason's Yard off Duke Street, St James's. The other one's in Hassett Street. That's a kind of mews behind Berkeley Square.'

'Fine. Are they genuine clubs? I mean, do they check membership?'

'M'hm. They ask to see your card and check it against a list at the door.'

'I'm surprised you should know such a thing, a man of your standing!' I said sourly. 'Does a British press card get you in to private clubs?'

'Yes, as a matter of fact it does.'

'Good. So get into a cab, come on over, and lend me yours.'

'My dear fellow, I can't -'

'That's an order, Douglas!' I said, and I hung up.

Mason's Yard was south of Piccadilly, a wide square of slanting cobbles in the heart of clubland - and I mean real clubland: White's and Boodles' and the Carlton and all that. I wasn't surprised to see the pedigree automobiles parked there when I walked in through the narrow lane from Duke Street. They had Rolls-Royces the way other squares have Fords, and I checked out Delahaye, Isotta Fraschini, Alfa Romeo, Invicta and Bugatti among the exotica as I passed. What did surprise me was to find a club like the Sugar Loaf there. I mean it was only a jolly old stone's throw from Marlborough House! Not quite the thing really! Somebody was letting off fireworks over the roofs too!

Inside the door, a black guy with a Jamaican accent sat behind an open membership book. The bouncer behind him was black too, but he didn't speak. Since there was no question of checking names against the list, I was able to flash Douglas's press card and keep my thumb over most of his photo. 'Glad to have you with us, friend,' the Jamaican said. 'Always happy to see the gentlemen of the press. The bar's right on through.'

'Is Dorothy Kimble in tonight?' I asked.

He shrugged and shook his head. 'Right on through, sir.'

The bar was a room at the far end of a long passage with no doors, but the action was evidently in the basement below. From the top of the stairs I could hear a combo down there playing pretty hot music, and crowd sounds that meant the scene was jumping. A high-yellow with frizzy, henna-ed hair, a scanty sequinned top and an impudent bottom was leaning against the bar. 'Hi, handsome,' she said lazily as I loped in. 'You look like I could do with a drink. What you gonna buy me, man?'

'I always did go for the subtle approach,' I said. 'Keep me in the dark a little while longer and order for both of us.'

The bouncer had followed me in. He whispered in the barman's ear. That was to tip him off that I was press and save me from rotgut. In fact the rye-and-dry I was handed was cold, it was good, and it was genuine. I ordered a couple more, just to make sure. I was right the first time.

'You like to dance?' the girl said.

'Is that a question or a statement?'

'What question isn't basically a statement? Come to that, what statement, scientifically speaking, isn't a question?'

'I like to dance,' I said. 'I majored in English and that gave me enough Gertrude Stein for a lifetime.'

'That's not Abner Stein's sister, is it?'

'I don't think so. Countrywoman who lived in Paris, France. The story is that on her death bed she asks: What is the answer? And when none of the mourners gathered around can find a reply, she says: Very well - what is the question?'

'Oh,' the girl said. 'France.'

Her name was Candy and she must have been all of nineteen. Downstairs, she hooked her forearms over my shoulders and draped four-fifths of her body, from the tips of the sequins to the tips of her silver sandals, against me. The top fifth leaned back and looked me in the eye. At least, that's my guess: I couldn't actually see her doing it, because there were about eight hundred people jammed into a space the size of a Lincoln Continental, and the only light in the place came from a single lamp above the piano keyboard. Dance was a euphemism. We stayed pressed together and swayed while the four guys on the tiny stand earned their money. The music was good, quiet enough so you could talk but plenty of drive. Guitar, bass, piano and alto - with the alto man really wailing. 'That's Freddie Grant,' Candy said. 'He plays like Benny Carter, but he's from Trinidad, isn't it.'

'It sounds more like *benedicatur*,' I said. She didn't get it. Maybe they didn't teach Latin in her school. I tried again. 'That's a real cute accent you have yourself. You're not Trinidadian, are you?'

She laughed. 'There's funny you are, man! I'm from Tiger Bay.'

'Tiger Bay? Is that in the Caribbean?'

Candy's mouth was the color of ripe plums, and I was crazy for summer fruit. She laughed again. 'Don't be daft! It's the dock area of Cardiff.'

I let that one go with the tide. She hummed the blues that Mr Grant was ornamenting for a few bars, and then I said, oh, so casually: 'Isn't Dorothy in tonight?'

'Dorothy?' The whites of her eyes gleamed up at me in the dusk.

'Dorothy Kimble. The dancer.'

'I never heard of her.'

'I thought she was supposed to be in the floor show. Isn't there one?'

'Only on Sundays here. Why mess with her when you can dance with me?'

'I have a message from her mother in Wichita, Kansas,' I said.

'I could add a PS that would make you forget the message.'

'And how would that read?'

Her fingers laced together behind my neck. 'Candy kisses,' she said meaningly.

It was about this time that the stamping of feet overhead intruded on a guitar solo. It was followed by a succession of sounds that were becoming disturbingly familiar: the noises of combat, breaking glass, splintering wood, shouts and curses. A communal tremor passed through the crowd of dancers packed in front of the stand. 'My God, it's not another police raid, is it?' someone near me asked plaintively.

Knowing that the Sugar Loaf belonged to Charlie, I thought probably not. Abruptly, light flooded the room from wall brackets on three sides of the floor. I took a quick glance around. Being a private club, the premises were exempt from fire regulations. Apart from a narrow doorway in back of the band which led to a dressing-room, the stairway was the only exit.

There was a lot of yelling up there in the bar now. Some of the men on the floor ran for the stairs. At least one was carrying a razor. A few girls screamed. The band had already played Harry Houdini, but there was a big guy standing on the edge of the stage telling everybody not to panic, please, everything was all right. I was figuring him for an optimist when all the lights went out, including the one above the piano.

In total darkness there was a moment's frozen pause in which the mayhem above sounded unnaturally loud. Then, beneath the sudden uproar bursting around us, I was aware of an under-current with purpose, a whispering, a shuffling of feet. Somebody seized my arm and shoved me toward the stage. I tripped over the edge, cursing, and Candy's hand, which had stayed in mine, jerked me impatiently forward.

It was one of the things I'd first noticed during the gang wars in Chicago in the twenties – the apparently effortless ability of jazz musicians to take an instant powder at the first hint of trouble. What made it remarkable was the fact that, no matter

now cumbersome, the instruments always went with them! There was a case in point here: apart from the piano, the little stage was clear! A cool breeze blew through the door behind it. Quite a crowd of people were pushing through but there was no jam-up – just an occasional staying hand, a murmured ‘Easy here, man!’, ‘No cause to panic!’, ‘This way now’. The dressing-room was minute. Beyond it, signaled by the odor of carbolic, was a pint-size washroom . . . and yet this regular, slow stream of guys and dames seemed to be piling in there!

A conveniently placed step-ladder stood beneath an open trapdoor in the washroom ceiling – and those in the know, aided by Charlie’s stewards, just climbed up and disappeared into the night. Obviously it was a tested escape route, established mainly to help members wishing to avoid embarrassing encounters with the law. Organized like that, who needs fire regulations!

We surfaced in a narrow lane leading to St James’s Square. Evidently that long passageway leading to the bar took you into a different block, because Mason’s Yard was nowhere to be seen. ‘Well, Candy,’ I said when the outflow had thinned some, ‘it seems I owe you the other half of that drink we left in there. Where do you want to go?’ A rocket burst in a shower of green stars over the park.

She took my arm. ‘We could try the Plantation,’ she said.

That was just what I’d hoped she’d say. In the circumstances, it seemed a reasonable hunch, and if I was going to rubberneck around asking questions, it would be easier with an habituée, one of the girls whom everybody knew. ‘Suits me,’ I said. ‘Is it far?’

‘Not far. On the other side of the Dilly and turn left.’

It was around eleven o’clock. There must have been a rain shower while I was in the Sugar Loaf because the streets were damp and the lamps of the home-bound theater traffic on the south side of Piccadilly threw long streamers of light across the shiny macadam. We fought our way past the high heels and fox furs and hullo-dear smiles grouped at the bottom of Bond Street, Dover Street and Albemarle Street. As we were walking up toward Berkeley Square I risked another probe. ‘You figure it’ll be okay at this place . . . the Plantation? I don’t want to lose another genuine rye. I mean, like it belongs to Charlie and all that – they won’t wreck that one too?’

‘No, no,’ Candy said absently. She was staring at a slight, fair woman in mink who was being handed into a Rolls-Royce by the side entrance to the May Fair. ‘He’s only a part-owner.

Besides there's a double payoff – Vine Street as well as the people who muscled in.'

'You mean the . . . Team? . . . chiseled him out of a piece of the action? And there's protection from the boys in blue as well?'

Candy let go of my arm. 'I don't know what you're talking about, man.'

'Ah, c'mon, baby – don't give me that! What's the matter? You afraid of the Yank or something?'

'Better to say nothing about things like that, look you.' The Welsh accent was suddenly very strong.

'Why the hell won't one single goddam person –'

'You know that woman getting into the Rolls?' Candy said. 'There is *certain* I am that it was Marlene Dietrich!'

The Plantation was on the second floor of a narrow building that was a bakery at street level. I was thankful for the change: basements were beginning to give me claustrophobia. Robin Douglas had been right. It was a ritzier joint than the Sugar Loaf, but only just. The crowded bar was bigger, garish tropical silhouettes decorated the walls, and there was waiter service at the tables surrounding the dance floor. There was a drummer in the six-piece on stage too.

'You'll never guess why they opened over a bakery!' Candy said when I'd bribed our way in and ordered.

'No complaints about the noise, because bakers work at night?' I offered.

'That too. No, but the real reason is the smell! You can't tell charge from tobacco over the smell of baking bread. Not for sure, isn't it. Did you know that?'

I shook my head. 'So everybody lights up as soon as the ovens are fired?'

'Or before. Talking of which . . . look you, man, I could do with a smoke just now.'

Acting dumb, I produced a pack of Camels. If the Plantation had offered prizes for the miming of epithets, Candy's reaction would have won three years running and gained her the trophy in perpetuity with the terms Scornful and Derisive. 'All right,' I said peaceably. 'All right. It just happens that I'm not in the habit of walking around with my pockets stuffed full of reefers. Where I come from, it just happens to be illegal.'

'Here too, silly. If you want to be stuffy, I mean. If you want to please the lady you're with, you go get one from Joe.'

'I see. Joe.'

'The guy in the men's room,' she said impatiently.

There were a lot of people dancing now, but not so many that you couldn't identify several categories of client — a minority of black couples who kept very much within their own groups, a few foreign visitors who took the Empire friendship routine seriously, jaded socialities slumming, breathless debts parading a colored lover. The majority were hookers of one kind or another with visiting firemen in tow. There were also a few kids who'd apparently come to listen to the band.

At the far side of the floor, I ran into our waiter, ordered up another round, and asked the way to the men's room.

'Right away, sir,' he said cheerfully. 'Rye-and-dry for two comin' up. You'll find the men's room beyond the office. Other side of the entrance.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'By the way, isn't Dorothy in tonight?'

The shutters came down over the dark face. 'Dorothy?'

'Dorothy Kimble. The dancer. I thought she was supposed to be part of the floorshow?'

'We don't have a floor show. I don't know who you mean. Now, if you'll excuse me, sir . . .'

The attendant in the men's room was a bald, fat Creole with an accent like Candy's. By the time I'd waited around for the place to be empty, hedged about some, slipped him half a dollar, and finally put the question, I had an eight hundred word Sunday magazine-section piece on his life story. Even then he just shook his big pale head. 'I is des-o-lated, but it cain't be done.'

'But I thought . . . ? They told me . . .'

'Sure, sure. Of course. But I cain't give you what I ain't got, can I? My supplier done let me down.'

'That's too bad,' I said with some relief. 'I was hoping . . .'

'I know, friend. Others too. But Dorothy didn't show to-night.'

'Dorothy?' I was on my way out but that spun me on my heel. 'Dorothy Kimble? You don't mean Dorothy Kimble, the dancer?'

Down came those shutters again. I pried them open a crack with another half dollar. 'Tallish girl with blonde hair? Page-boy cut? Pretty girl?'

'Dunno. Just a girl who comes in and then goes out, look. Dorothy.'

'You don't know her other name?'

He shook his head. 'Uh-huh. Never heard nobody use one.'

And that was as far as he would go.

I paused. Through the frosted glass window behind him I could hear police machine-gunning the rebels. Either that or somebody was letting off firecrackers in the street. 'You don't know where I could get in touch with her?' I said. 'Her address? Any place she hangs out? It's important.'

The plump shoulders heaved. 'Everythin's important to someone, isn't it. You could try the Mandragore, Ben's Grotto, the Coffee Ann, the Cosmo. Some of 'em go there, daytimes. Sometimes.'

I still didn't know if it was the right Dorothy, but I took a note of the names. I'd paid for them – Michaelson had, anyway, although he didn't know it yet – and it was the only lead I had. Right then, to be honest, there were other things on my mind. Everything's important to someone, and to me, at that moment in history, it was lips like ripe plums.

'That's too bad,' Candy sighed when I returned to the table with the bad news. 'I guess we'd better go back to my place then'. But she couldn't – or wouldn't – say anything about the girl who was indirectly responsible for our going there.

We had to walk down to Piccadilly for a cab. For a while there I thought I was back in Chicago. Exploding stars fell out of the sky all around us. Colored lights whirled in among the trees beside the Ritz, and the sound of shooting echoed in every side street. There was even a bonfire blazing down by the lake. 'Look, honey,' I said thickly, 'either that rye was spiked or Al Capone must be running for king. Unless of course I'm using the wrong diary and it's the Fourth of July.'

'It's the Fifth of November, silly,' Candy said, squeezing my arm. 'Guy Fawkes night. Please to remember, an' all that.'

'You lost me around the end of October,' I said. 'Kindly e-lab-orate.'

'You don't know? It happens every year – fireworks and bonfires an' burning the Guy.'

'What guy, for Pete's sake? I thought the witchcraft acts had been –'

'No, *no!*' Candy laughed. 'Guy *Fawkes*. Some rebel who tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament . . . oh, hundreds of years ago. But they caught him and he was topped. And ever since, they've made Guy Fawkes dummies and burned them on that same night so people won't forget. It's an English tradition.'

'If it's anything like the House of Representatives,' I said,

'they should have given him a medal and voted him Most Likely To Succeed.'

I woke up the next morning with three headaches. One because rye and charge don't mix. Two because I didn't know which way to turn next, following up this goddam story or stories. Three because they don't issue receipts for sin, and now there was another fifty bucks I had to fake somehow on my expense sheet.

FIVE

The Mandragore was a basement under Meard Street – a simple bar and a couple of dozen tables with chairs. Most of the people at the tables were playing chess. The doorman was a busker whose night-time occupation was reciting Shakespeare to theater queues. He must have known practically the whole of the First Folio by heart, because he kept up a kind of running commentary on the action – and on the members coming and going – with couplets and fragments of speeches that were sometimes uncannily apt.

I sat at the bar and ordered a drink from a huge Russian with a tiny head and no neck. The chess players were engrossed in their maneuvers. Most of them looked like superannuated students, Trotskyites, or sub-editors waiting to fracture someone's syntax. The busker came and stood beside me. He picked up a half-finished pint of beer. 'Why looks your Grace so heavily today?' he murmured. 'Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to demand that truly which thou would'st truly know.'

I turned and stared at him. '*Henry IV, Part One*,' I said automatically, 'with a prologue line from *Henry V*. This fellow's wise enough to play the fool . . . and to do that well craves a kind of wit.'

He picked up the *Twelfth Night* tag at once. 'This,' he said meaningly, 'is a practise as full of labor as a wise man's art. How much do you want to pay, cock, and what do you want to know?'

I laid a pound note on the bar. 'I want to get in touch with a blonde called Dorothy Kimble. I believe she comes in here sometimes.'

'Ay, marry,' he said. The bill disappeared. 'But not in the afternoons. You want to try the Coffee Ann – or Gilchrist Court, off Berwick Street.'

As I climbed the stairs, he called out: 'You are now sailed into the north of my lady's opinion; where you will hang like an icicle on a Dutchman's beard unless you do redeem it by some laudable attempt, either of valor or policy!'

The Coffee Ann was yet another basement, not far from Cambridge Circus. It was full of people I was learning to call bohemians: guys with beards in clothes that didn't fit them, broads with no foundation garments who looked like they should be in dirndl skirts around a candle stuck in a chianti bottle. Dorothy Kimble, they told me, would be in Ben's Grotto.

She might have been. I wouldn't know. Press card or no press card, they wouldn't let me past the door because I wasn't a member. I trudged up the stairs (yeah, you guessed it: the entrance was in an area) and asked my way to the Cosmo. It was a cheap restaurant in New Compton Street, sandwiched between a sexy drapery and a bicycle repair shop. The place smelled of french fries and garlic. Most of the tables were occupied by mechanics in blue coveralls from an auto tire specialist across the road. Some of the girls on the early shift were eating there too, but none of them looked like Dorothy. The owner knew her though: she'd been there only yesterday for her morning coffee. He advised me to try a pub in Rathbone Place.

I discovered this was just behind the economy-size Taj-Mahal where Dorothy had walked out on me the previous day. I also discovered that I now had a guide and mentor. The busker from the Mandragore, surfacing for air, had homed on a soft touch, seeing me pass again. We went to a lofty pub called the Fitzroy where I was goosed by Australian faggots beneath a ceiling plastered with banknotes from all over the world. We drank at the Marquis of Granby, where I almost lost my virginity for a second time incautiously traversing the flight of a dart. At the Bricklayers' Arms, in a cobbled square off the Tottenham Court Road, I heard a short, plump man with a red face and curly hair declaim poems of wild and improbable beauty.

A gaunt woman in a black suit peppered with cigarette ash careened into the saloon bar. Her painted mouth was a little to one side of the real one and she was smoking a cigarette through a heavy veil attached to a pillbox hat. 'Lo, here she comes! This is her very guise,' the busker said tipsily. 'Which times, she chanteth snatches of old tunes, as one incapable of her own distress.'

'Piss off, Kevin,' the woman said. 'Unless you're going to buy me a drink.'

'That's Nina Hamnet,' the busker confided. 'You know – *Dancing Torso* an' all tha'. Didja hear wha' Dylan said at the Marquis, now?'

'I thought he was the one here – the one just went to the men's room.'

'So he was, so he was,' the busker mumbled. The woman in black lifted her veil, stuck a cigarette in her mouth and lurched across toward us.

'Even if she is,' a man behind me said, 'I don't see why they should let some blasted American adventuress worm her way on to the British –'

'She's not an adventuress!' an angrier voice interrupted.

'Of course she is! Aren't there enough decent English girls – ?'

'Too bloody many! That's why he's soft on her. Why the hell should she be chucked aside to please some slimy political – ?'

'Soft on her? I should've thought the opposite . . .'

'Oh, balls! You know bloody well . . .'

'Fucking Hitlerites, the whole lot of 'em,' the woman in black said. 'Give us a light, dear, will you?' She leaned toward us, swaying.

Kevin struck a match. As he held the wavering flame toward her cigarette, the veil fell forward and dropped between them. There was a sudden blaze of fire. A tall dark guy in a corduroy jacket who'd been sitting at the corner of the bar laid his cigarette holder in an ashtray. He reached for a pint tankard and emptied the beer carefully over the burning hat, extinguishing the flames.

'Hey, that's my drink!' one of the quarreling men exclaimed.

'For Chrissake let's get out of here,' I hissed at the busker. Even then he was starting as we made the door:

'She burns with bashful shame; he with his tears

'Doth quench the maiden burning of her cheeks –'

'Come on! Kevin!'

He flung off my hand and stood with outstretched arms, shouting.

'See, now her cheek is pale, but by and by

'It flashed forth fire, as lightning from the sky.

'So was she just before him as he sat;
'With one fair hand he heaveth up her hat!'

Nina Hamnet stood dripping over a puddle of bitter, the sodden cigarette drooping from her lower lip. 'Must be a hole in the paper,' she grumbled. 'The bloody thing won't draw.'

I got out of there and asked the way to Gilchrist Court. It was through an archway in back of a street market not far from Piccadilly Circus. The roadway was jammed with people searching for the best bargains among the barkers by their barrows of fish and meat and flowers. In between the fruit and vegetable stalls lining the sidewalk, some creep had stalled an old blue runabout with the top down. He was tinkering with the motor as I pushed my way through the noisy crowd.

Half a dozen doorways punctuated the forest of stackpipes climbing the sooty brick façades, and there was a salt beef bar opposite the entrance to the arch. I made the round of the doorways. Inside each there were plaques, hand-painted signs, business cards, sometimes even tarnished brass plates fixed to the walls. I was familiar with the routine. I could have shown you a dozen neighborhoods in Chicago bursting with similar properties. On the upper floors there'd be sweatshops full of felling hands producing cheap garments for the rag trade, film processing laboratories, bent solicitors' offices, hustling flats — anything and anybody that went with a low rent, one toilet per floor and the odor of dry-rot and bugs.

I drew a blank until I got to the fourth door. This one was closed, and someone had slapped a coat of paint over the other seventeen during the past few months. Five porcelain bell-pushes were set into the brickwork beside the jamb, and there was a strip of card enclosed in a narrow metal frame under each. Evidently this one had been turned into apartments fairly recently. I looked at the cards. Rain and soot had done their best to erase the names but the faint letters on the top one were still readable: *Kimble — 5th Floor*.

I leaned on the bell. There was no reply. I rang again, listening. Nothing. I knocked with my knuckles as loudly as I could. Nobody came. I stepped back a few paces and stared up at the top floor. Three sash windows under the eaves, all of them closed. I couldn't see anything beyond the glass — just the reflection of gray clouds parading across the sky.

The noises from the market were making my head ache. I'd drunk too much, too quickly, up in Bloomsbury with the

busker. Apart from a sausage on a stick at the Fitzroy, I'd had no lunch – and I'd woken up with a hangover anyway! I reckoned it was time to run Mettner, J., in for a quick service. I went into the salt beef bar and ordered a coffee and a sandwich. I sipped and munched and stared at the elongated reflections in a silver urn behind the bar. Two attenuated barrow boys slid around the curve of metal, flattened into grotesque dwarves as they passed behind me, and sat down farther along the counter. The door opened again and a blonde, nine feet tall and as thin as a pencil, appeared in the urn. Her deformed head raced across the surface as she leaned forward to speak to the man behind the bar.

'Two on rye to take away, Eddie,' she said hurriedly. 'And a carton of hot coffee. Black.'

Counter-clockwise, I spun slowly on my stool. 'Yesterday, it was white,' I said. 'But then of course you didn't drink that, did you?'

Dorothy Kimble stared at me with her mouth open. She had good teeth. 'Oh, my God!' she said. But the recovery came quick. 'I feel so awful! I don't know what to say to you – leaving you in the Corner House like that!'

I nodded. 'They missed you at the Plantation last night,' I said.

'The Plantation?' If she was acting, she was doing it very well. The penciled brows knitted, the nose wrinkled, the blonde hair swung as the head tilted to one side. 'What do you mean? I wasn't expected there. I hadn't *done* the audition: Charlie was in hospital. You know that.'

'They don't have a floorshow either. *You know that.*'

The man behind the counter finished sharpening his knife and began carving the meat for her sandwiches. 'What do you mean they don't have a floorshow?' Dorothy demanded angrily. 'Why else would Charlie ask me to do an audition?'

'You tell me,' I said. 'Maybe he felt like a smoke.'

'Of *course* they have a floorshow.'

'Joe didn't think so. Nor did the waiter.'

'Joe who? What do you mean?'

'Joe said he missed your visit. The clients were disappointed.'

She stared at me. 'What on earth are you talking about?'

'Look,' I said. 'This isn't getting us any place. I have to talk to you. Why don't we go take a drink in some nice quiet club you know – preferably on the first floor or even higher?'

'No!' Her voice was pitched so high that the barrow boys looked up from their lemon teas. The salt beef man plunked a paper sack and a waxed carton down in front of us. 'There you are, love. Two-and-three to you.'

'Take it out of this. Mine too.' I slid a ten-shilling note across the counter, keeping my eyes fixed on the girl. She was wearing a fawn showerproof, belted tightly at the waist, with the collar turned up. 'You can help me,' I said. 'I have to talk to you. Please.'

That one worked better. Muscles around the gray eyes relaxed. The flesh softened. She smiled at me. 'Walk me back to my door?' she asked.

I swept my change off the bar and nodded. We left the place and started to cross the yard. Dorothy took my arm. 'I'm treating you very badly,' she said. 'After all, you did rescue me most gallantly from a nasty situation.'

'So why won't you at least have a drink with me? Why did you run out on me? Why don't you give me honest answers to my -'

'Because I'm scared!' she interrupted fiercely. 'That's why.'

'So tell Uncle Jason all about it. Maybe I can rescue you again.'

She shook her head. We had arrived outside the painted door. She turned to face me, still keeping one hand on my arm. 'You don't understand,' she said. 'It isn't safe for me to go anywhere. Anywhere. I'm holed up in this tatty little flat until the heat's off - if it ever is. I only come out to run across to Eddie's for something to eat.'

'Well, if you can't come out, let me come up to your place and talk,' I said. 'Otherwise I'll just play watchdog, lie right here on the mat, and compromise you.' I waved a hand around the yard. 'Just think what the neighbors'd say!' Her hand tightened on my arm. She smiled again, that upper lip lifting away from her teeth, the outer edges curling in the sexy way that had turned me on before. 'That might be nice,' she said. I hoped the sigh she gave might be one of relief.

'Swell.' I dragged my eyes away from the curve of showerproof above the tight belt. 'Look - why don't I go on out the market, pick up some cold meat or something at a delicatessen, and drop by a wine store? Then I'll come right back . . . and invite you to dinner at your own place!'

'That would be lovely,' she said. 'But not tonight.'

I frowned. 'Why the hell not? If you're hiding out . . .'

'There are things I have to do . . . phone calls to make . . . the place is in a mess . . . ' Once more she sounded confused, panicky. I was reminded of a rabbit dashing frantically up and down a run as the fox dug its way in.

'So I'll wait a half hour, give you time to straighten things up,' I said.

'No, no. You don't understand.'

'There's plenty I don't understand. Okay. But there's one thing I do know: you're in a hole, honey, and I'm here to help if I can. Look – this ain't no freshman's first date where the girl has to play hard to get the first time because of the social conventions. You're in big trouble. Some of it I've seen, some of it I found out, some I can guess. But any problem eases once it's shared.'

'You're sweet,' Dorothy said. She was standing very close to me.

'Sure I'm sweet, baby. And I can be sweeter. But I can't help unless you confide in me . . . and I guess there's nobody else in the queue right now, or he'd be here already and you wouldn't be in this mess. Believe me, I'm on your side, whatever it is.'

'Of course I believe you. But –'

'So what's to stop us attending to the matter now, tonight?'

She shook her head decisively. 'There are things I have to find out too. I can't explain, but I think I can sort out certain . . . problems . . . tonight. Come tomorrow night. Please. I'll tell you the whole story then, I promise.'

'Well . . . ' I still wasn't too happy. 'You promise?'

'All of it.' She nodded. The gray eyes suddenly softened, glistened. 'If we can find time. Among other things.' She put her arms around my neck and kissed me. 'Nice Mr Mettner,' she said.

One of Shakespeare's heroes – I guess Kevin could tell me which – said of his girlfriend: 'Her lips suck forth my soul!' Souls don't lie too thick on the ground around Chicago newspapermen, but I could see what the guy meant the instant that prehensile, tempting, sensuous mouth closed over mine. The hot little tongue flickering between Dorothy's lips was the most positive 'Yes: do let's!' I'd ever heard outside of a bedroom.

I could still feel the trembling of her knees and the pressure of her breasts against my chest as I walked out through the archway, stepped over half the motor from the blue tourer which the owner had laid out on the sidewalk, and zigzagged

away among the fruit and flowers.

She was on my mind for the whole of the next twenty-four hours. What the hell had she gotten herself into? I'd have laid money on the fact that she wanted no part of the underworld. Could she really be some kind of drug peddler or pusher? The guy at the Plantation had never confirmed that his Dorothy and mine were one and the same, sure enough. But if they weren't, why should she have lied about the floorshow? And why were the thugs in Charlie's basement so eager to take her with them if she was just an innocent dancer come for an audition? Come to that, why should such a dancer walk out on the guy who rescued her? I mean walk out, okay. But without saying good-bye?

Finally, if she was still in such danger from those same guys who hamstrung Charlie and wrecked his two joints, that she dare not leave her apartment, why did she put off my bodyguard offer a whole day? What could she do on a phone to fix the kind of mess she seemed to be in? If she had a phone, that was. I'd checked the directory and there was no entry listed under her name. I was stuck with a situation that smelled, a burning impatience, and a long, long wait. I figured I might as well do some leg work to occupy my mind.

I don't want to give the impression that the *Globe* employs luses, but pubs seemed to me the best hunting ground from every point of view. A stranger in town was more likely to pick up comment, reactions and gossip on the royal romance there than any place else; and, if he picked the right pubs, he was more likely, too, to get himself a lead on the Soho scene.

I started in Soho Square, worked my way southeast to Covent Garden, west to Leicester Square and Shaftesbury Avenue, and finally up into the Dean Street-Wardour Street neighborhood, so that I wouldn't have too far to go for my date with Dorothy. I drank in the Coronet, the Compasses and the Eagle, in the Oxford and Cambridge, the Coach and Horses and the York Minster, in Mooney's and Snow's and Sherriff's. I ate cold ham in the Captain's Cabin and pickles in the Duke and hot sausages with mustard at the King's Head. They found headache powders for me at the George, and I even got coffee with my brandy at the Champion. And the only difference between those public and private bars and a lot of American saloons I know was that at home we have cuspidors while the British print notices saying you collect a twenty-dollar fine if you spit!

I'm talking about the general atmosphere, of course. Visually

there were differences. And the conversation was something else. A French-Canadian woman came into the York Minster and said she was sorry she was late, but she'd been to Canada House to read the newspapers. 'Why not just buy one?' said the guy she was with.

'*Chéri*, you are not so smart,' the woman said. 'They 'ave all the *journaux* from North America there. You know what they say in the *Toronto Star*? They say this Madame Simpson's mother . . . ' She laughed. 'They say the mother complain: "All this talk about commoners – you would think we come from the wrong side of the tracks or something!" Then there was this garden party . . . '

'I got it from Basil,' a red-faced man told another red-faced man in the Captain's Cabin. 'And his brother's an equerry, dammit, so he should know. Baldwin's given him three weeks to make up his bloody mind. If he hasn't dropped her by then, the government will resign.'

'Irregardless of what's said,' the bartender confided to the potboy at the Duke, 'it does make life easier now they got themselves organized, and that's a fact.'

The potboy shuffled his feet in the sawdust covering the floor. 'Bleedin' fuckers ought to be behind bars, the whole bloody lot of 'em. Stuff the bleeders inside, that's what I say.'

'Well don't say it too perishin' loud, if you want my advice. No, but you have to admit: when Hinds and his lot were around, and all them other tearaways, you risked gettin' done to rights two, three times over. If you ask me, it's better this way. Once you cough up, you can bloody get on with it.'

I heard two chorus boys in stage make-up talking in a velvety pub near the New Theatre in St Martin's Lane. 'But, darling, it's as much as one's life's worth,' said one, 'trolling after dark in that grisly Dean Street now. You know what that bitch David said . . . '

'I know dear, but for once she was right, you know. One's sit-upon has scarcely touched a *seat* these days before one is surrounded by Billie-boy and those big, rough men. It's too discouraging, really it is.'

I whipped around from my position at the bar. The two queens were just leaving. 'Pardon me – uh – gentlemen,' I said at the door. 'I happened to overhear you mention a personal friend of mine: Billie-boy . . . ?'

'Billie-boy Francis?' one of the chorus boys said.

'Right. I'm very anxious to contact him. I wonder could you

tell me where he lives, or at least some place he goes where I could get in touch?"

They looked at one another, penciled brows raised superciliously. 'He doesn't exactly encourage visitors *chez-lui*,' one of them said. 'No - don't call him, he'll call you!' the other tittered. 'If you *really* want to see him, you could try the Priory, of course.'

'The Priory. Thank you.' I decided, having ventured this far, to plunge in the deep end. 'Say, I don't suppose either of you guys know where I could fix myself up with a snort, do you? Or maybe just a little charge?'

They exchanged glances and laughed again. 'You're a friend of Billie-boy's and you're asking *us*?' the first one cried. 'How droll can you be!'

'Really!' he said to his friend as they flounced off toward the Coliseum. 'Some people . . . !'

Apart from one or two isolated references to 'the Yank', heard but unidentified in a bleak, crowded pub near Bateman Street, those four fragments made up the sum total of information gleaned during my odyssey that day.

At seven o'clock, I began my marketing. The Priory, wherever that was, Billie-boy Francis and his connection with drug-peddling, Ralfini, 'the Yank', and their supposed connection could wait while 'some people' prepared to have themselves a ball. For the twentieth time I censored memories of loose, pointed breasts under a bra-less blouse, a sexy, bent-kneed walk, a certain upper lip. I bought some smoked salmon, a cold roast chicken, potato salad, a carton of mayonnaise, lettuce and tomatoes, and two out-of-season peaches. I remembered Dorothy's parting remark: 'If you're bringing wine, darling, I'm mad about white Alsatian . . . though I'm afraid it makes me a little pickled!' Suppressing a vision of the breasts without the blouse, of the legs languorously draped over my own, I bought two bottles of Gewurtztraminer and a half of brandy at Kettner's. On the way to Gilchrist Court, I stopped by a flower stall in the market and added pale yellow roses to the stock. And thus, laden like some conspiring Groucho Marx, I arrived at the freshly painted door at the end of the yard.

'I'll leave it open,' she'd said. 'But give us a ring just the same, so I'll know it's you and can open the one at the top. Three long and two short, followed by three short and two long. That's my private code: special friends only!'

I dumped the paper sack of delicatessen, the vegetables, the

chicken in its greaseproof bag, the bottles, the flowers and the fruit, and thumbed the bell the way she said. Then, shouldering open the door, I restocked the Mettner Mobile Supermarket and lurched up the narrow stairs. I could find no switch for the lights, and I was panting by the time I made the fourth floor and leaned against the wall to regain my breath for the final assault.

It was completely dark in the hallway. I'd heard no sounds from the other apartments as I passed; no voices, no radio, no street noises filtering through. All I could hear now was a dripping faucet and a creak somewhere above as an old beam settled. There was a faint odor of fresh paint in the air.

I sucked some in and started on the last flight of stairs. As I turned on the half-landing, I could see light around the edges of a door that had been left ajar at the top. Would she open it herself? Would she run forward and kiss me again, or would she wait for me to find her inside? What would she be wearing – something demure, leaving me to make the pass? Or would it be cards on the table, that body naked beneath a loosely fastened housecoat?

My pulses quickened at the thought. Then suddenly I went cold. *If she was there at all . . .* I'd heard no sound. She couldn't have run out on me again, could she? Not after the promises in that kiss? Could she? I shoved open the door and walked in.

She was there all right. She was naked too, without even the housecoat I'd imagined. The only thing on her was the knotted silk scarf with which she'd been strangled.

SIX

The door opened straight into a kind of studio-living-room – rugs and cushions and woodcuts of rustic scenes on the wall. Flowered drapes hid the windows overlooking the yard and there was a fringed Indian shawl covering a settee beneath the sloping ceiling on the other side of the room. Dorothy was in the small bedroom beyond. I walked through, calling her name, and found her face down on the edge of a divan with one bare arm trailing on the floor.

I'd seen stiffs before, of course: it's an occupational hazard in my racket. I'd seen plenty too, female as well as male, naked and dressed, mangled and unmarked. I'd even watched a mortuary drawer slide out to reveal a broad I'd once laid. But I'd never busted in on a woman I wanted to make and seen her nude for the first time when she was dead. I almost put my nails through the palms of my hands.

I turned her over on her back. But although the body was still warm, I knew before I saw the contorted, purple face, the staring eyes, the tongue protruding. There's something about the dead that's unmistakable: that complete lack of muscular *tonus*, the kinetic energy that knits the frame together, which you never find in the unconscious, even when they're in deep coma. The unconscious sag; the dead flop.

For perhaps a tenth of a second I stared at her, at the long legs I'd hoped would be scissoring around my hips, at the tuft of blonde hair between them, at the tawny nipples. No blood pumped through the blue veins marbling the flesh surrounding them now. And then suddenly I jerked into reflex action. At that point the hows and whys and whens hadn't started to intrude: what I did was conditioned, semi-automatic. If she was still warm, couldn't I be mistaken? Might there not be a chance? Artificial respiration? Turn her on her face again, hands on the back – but wait! the scarf! Got to be untied or the air can't get in there! Check pulse first. Nothing. Heart? No

sound. Not a flutter. Some trick with breath and mirrors? No time. *Get that scarf untied!*

The knot was at the back. The killer must have been behind her. Someone she knew then? But in that case why not fight once she realized? Bruises on her wrists: must have been two of them, one to keep her hands down, the other to . . . *Can't get the goddam knot undone!* My fingers scrabbled at the small, hard lump of silk half buried in swollen flesh.

Mouth to mouth once I had gotten the thing off her? Not quite the kind of kiss I'd dreamed of. Stop being flippant. Wait and see. Have to turn her over again, see that dreadful face. But it's too late, too late, too late. My nails were breaking but I couldn't loosen the sonofabitch a millimeter. I thought of cutting it with a knife, a razor – dismissed the idea in case I loused it up and cut her, realized how buck-stupid that was, realized too that I was, must be, wasting my time now, but continued just the same my frenzied efforts to unknot that scarf.

That scarf? *My scarf!*

It was a one-off, hand-painted confection I'd bought extravagantly in the Burlington Arcade two days before. In case of the fog, I'd told myself by way of excuse. So far as I knew, it was in the top left-hand drawer of the dressing-table in my hotel room in Knightsbridge, along with the Tiffany cufflinks and my one Sulka tie. What the hell was it doing here, sunk almost out of sight in the neck of a strangled girl in Soho?

The muscles behind my knees were shuddering so much I could hardly stand. Why the hell did I continue this useless attempt? Why not simply call the cops, a doctor, an ambulance? *Did* she have a phone? Involuntarily, I half turned to look around the room. The body slid off the edge of the bed and thumped to the floor.

I gave a yell of . . . what? Horror? Surprise? Alarm? My left foot was imprisoned under her hip. I stooped. I guess it was some innate, bourgeois sense of decorum that made me pick her up and put her back on the bed.

That's how I was when the police bust in – crouching down with one arm beneath her and the other hand on the knot of the scarf that killed her.

You may find this hard to believe, but I didn't catch on for quite a while. Superintendent Rawlins, the cop in charge of the posse, wasn't exactly an orator. He was built like Babe Ruth

with a mustache, his voice was quiet, and he only used it for business purposes. I mean trying to discuss the weather, or asking his opinion on the latest Warwick Deeping, would be about as fruitful as an attempt to fly an airplane to the moon. His face showed much the same expression as the north face of the Eiger. Neither the young plain-clothes sergeant nor the two uniformed constables with him had much to say to me: there were formalities to attend to, photographers and doctors and ambulance men to organize. And me, I was too stunned maybe to add things up. At any rate it wasn't until they'd all gone and there were just the five of us left that I realized the spot I was in. And five gets you ten you don't guess the giveaway phrase, the all-time whodunnit cliché that tipped me off.

'Why did you do it?' Rawlins asked.

'Come again?' I was sprawled on the settee in the living-room. The two boys in blue were standing in front of the entrance door. Rawlins was pacing up and down, his sergeant squatting rather uncomfortably on a pile of cushions with a notebook and pencil at the ready.

'Why did you kill her?'

Suddenly I was sitting up straight. 'Me? You don't think . . . ? But surely you can't be serious? I had a date with her. The door was open and I walked in and found her there. I was just going to call -'

'Come on, Mettner, if that's your name. You don't expect me to swallow a load of old moody like that? We actually caught you red-handed, dammit!'

I opened my mouth to give him the horse laugh - and then I saw it from their point of view. A dead girl. The body still warm. A man standing over her with his hand on the murder weapon, as it were. They didn't know yet that the scarf was mine, but it wouldn't take them long: there was a label in one corner, it was the only one of its kind, and the salesman at Fisher's would remember me because I'd paid with an American Express check. Mrs Mettner's boy was going to have to do some fast talking to get home before midnight, I could see that! 'Look,' I said, 'why for Chrissake should I kill her? Jesus, I don't even know the kid.'

'You just said you had a date with her.'

'Sure. I *wanted* to know her. But she was scared. She -'

'Scared of what?'

'That's what I wanted to find out. She was mixed up in some kind of racket, kind of a local protection routine, I guess.

Maybe with drug connections too. I don't know. But I figured her for an innocent bystander, and I was trying to help. That's why I came here: she was too frightened to meet me any place else.'

'I suggest your reasons for coming here were quite different,' said Rawlins.

I contrived a nonchalant laugh. Like man to man. 'Oh, sure I hoped to lay the broad. Who wouldn't - she was as sexy as all getout! But why in God's name would I want to kill her? What motive could I have?'

'Motive becomes an academic point - a debating point for judges and juries and counsel - when the murderer is actually seen committing the crime.'

'If your doctor's half as smart as you are, the autopsy'll show she was dead before I arrived.' I was getting angry now.

'We don't know when you arrived,' the superintendent said. 'We have nobody's word for it but your own.'

'Well, before *you* arrived then. What I mean is, it'll show that I couldn't have been killing her when you came in. It'll show she died before that.'

'Possibly. The body was warm. It's difficult for a post mortem to establish a precise time of death within the short period before it cools. In any case, even if you weren't tightening the ligature when we saw you, you could have been in the act of removing it to destroy the evidence. The important thing is that you were seen by four police witnesses at the scene of the crime . . . ' Rawlins favored me with a wintry smile ' . . . in circumstances *suggesting* that you had just committed it. That's the mildest way it could be put.'

'But why? Why, why, why?' I stood up abruptly, stooping to avoid the sloping ceiling. The two cops moved closer together in front of the door. 'We were going to have *dinner* together, for Chrissake! I'm asking you - does a guy planning to knock off a girl arrive loaded with groceries and flowers and bottles of wine? Does he?'

'He might - if he was planning to make the point you're making now. Or he might not have planned the murder at all. It might have been the result of a quarrel.' He shot me one of those X-ray glances cops use to signal a hit coming up. 'If he was planning to seduce her and she had other ideas, for example.'

'Oh, be your age,' I said impatiently. 'Just look at all that stuff I lugged up those - ' I broke off in mid-sentence. I was

staring at a table just inside the door, the table on which I'd dumped the bottles and cartons and paper sacks when I came in. They weren't there any more: the polished wood was as bare as a girl on an *Esquire* calendar.

'Did any of your flatfeet move that stuff?' I demanded angrily. But I knew they hadn't. I'd been in the room all the time. Even if I'd temporarily forgotten it, I'd have noticed if anyone had shifted it. Something else that had been worrying me surfaced. 'Superintendent,' I asked, 'how *did* you happen to show up here just when you did?'

He shrugged. '999 call from the people in the flat below. They heard screams and the sound of a struggle.'

Suddenly, for the first time, I was scared.

This was some kind of a set-up I'd walked into. I remembered the loud creak I'd heard on my way upstairs. That was no ancient beam settling! The killer or killers had been up there, somewhere on that dark landing, waiting for me to walk into the trap before they left, taking my corroboratory evidence with them. They'd already gotten into my hotel room and stolen my scarf, to tie me in definitively with the murder. I wondered whether they'd actually made the emergency call from the silent apartment below Dorothy's, or whether I'd been watched from outside and the call cued in from some place else. How many other clues had been planted pointing at me?

Then I realized. They didn't have to bother . . . not when I myself had spent the past two days leaving pointers all over London, asking for Dorothy Kimble at every pub and club and café I visited! Probably, if they wanted the girl out of the way for some reason, it was those enquiries which had decided them to pin the killing on me. Meet Patsy Mettner.

As for who 'they' were, for once it didn't seem too difficult a question. Presumably the characters wrecking the Zanzibar who'd been so eager to keep Dorothy with them. Why they should want to kill her – or frame me – was something else, something as veiled in mystery as the girl's own actions and reactions in the twenty-four hours before her death.

'You claim to be a special correspondent for this newspaper in Chicago?' Rawlins was asking me. He talked like a man expecting lies.

'I am the *Globe's* special correspondent in London,' I said.

'Yet you are carrying a British press card bearing another man's photograph and made out in a name not your own?'

'It's not my card. I borrowed it. It sounds complicated but I can explain exactly -'

'Where is your own card,' Rawlins interrupted, 'if you have one?'

'In my hotel room.'

'Apart from this - er - borrowed - card, do you have any means of identifying *yourself*? Can you substantiate your claim to be -'

'Of course I do, you creep! Of course I can!' I was shouting. 'Letters and cables addressed to me. Office memos. Blacks of my messages to Chicago. A driving license. My passport.'

'Ah, yes. A passport. And where would this valuable document be?'

I sighed. 'In my hotel room, along with my press card and all the other stuff.' Rawlins ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip and nodded. 'Just so. Well, I'm afraid I must ask you to accompany me to the local police station while further enquiries are made,' he said.

The further enquiries, I was to learn later, were kind of negative from my point of view. Neither the passport nor the license was in my hotel room. Nor could the law find my press card or a single scrap of paper relating me in any way to the *Globe* or even carrying my name. The guy who stole the scarf had been well briefed.

In the meantime I was given free accommodation at His Majesty's expense. Once I was in the cell, I tried to figure out what to do. I knew British and American law differed on the reporting of crime cases. Back home, we could write: 'Police today were grilling John Doe, arrested last night on suspicion of murdering his wife Frankie, who was found drowned in her bath.' An English paper would have to say: 'Mrs Frankie Doe was found drowned in her bath last night. Later a man was detained. He was still helping police with their enquiries.' In other words you can't publish a suspect's name or link him in any way with a crime until he's been formally indicted in court - in case it prejudices a possible future juror.

There were just two things I had to do: convince them of my identity, and get out of there. As soon as they knew I really was a respectable American newspaperman, they'd naturally believe my story . . . and I could go ahead genuinely helping them with their goddam enquiries, finding out what had actually happened last night and why. Erase Patsy; substitute Greenhorn.

Okay, convince them of my identity. How? My check book had been in my pocket: Rawlins said it could have been stolen. No supporting testimony. Call someone who knew me, then. The story of Dorothy's murder would be splashed in the late editions of the dailies, probably with non-committal follow-up quotes from Rawlins in the evenings. But my name wouldn't appear in either, so nobody who did know me would be wise to what had happened. Newsagency stories cabled to the United States would carry no mention that could tip off Michaelson. None of the guys in the foreign press club would be on the inside track. There was in fact only one runner in the race: Robin Douglas.

He knew me; he was working for me. It seemed reasonable therefore to ask the law to rope him in – especially as he could explain the business with his press card. He could also advise me. I was pretty sure that *habeas corpus* applied, but I didn't know any British lawyers and I wasn't certain of my rights.

In the event, Rawlins beat me to the punch. When I was taken to his office the following morning, Douglas was already there, wearing a blue chalk-stripe suit, a crimson Paisley neck-tie and an embarrassed expression. There was a uniformed bobbie by the door. The superintendent sat like a mustached buddha behind his desk, with the plain-clothes sergeant and his notebook off to one side. 'I have to caution you,' Rawlins said, 'that anything you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence.'

'Haven't you forgotten something?' I asked.

His gray eyebrows rose fractionally. 'Forgotten . . . ?'

'I thought they always said: " . . . will be taken down and used in evidence *against you*." '

'A crime writers' invention. It depends what you say. How it's used is a matter for the prosecution, if a charge is made. Whether or not it's against you is a matter for a court. We just obtain the evidence.'

'Well, it's nice to have that cleared up,' I said. 'Now perhaps we can wrap up this nonsense about who I am. Robin – you can do that for me, can't you, sport?'

For the first time I realized that the guy was avoiding my eye. He was standing by a window, staring at gray stone and red brick and slate roofs shiny with rain. It was pretty gloomy in the office too. Too many dossiers, too many scarred wood filing cabinets, not enough light. The walls were a bilious green

up to waist height, a grimy cream above. 'Do you know this man, Mr Douglas?' Rawlins asked formally.

Douglas swung around. The sergeant's pencil poised over his book. 'Yes, I know him. I've known him for a week or so.'

'Can you identify him?'

'He represented himself to me as a journalist named Jason Mettner, who is employed by an American paper I work for sometimes.'

'What the hell d'you mean - "represented himself"? ' I interrupted. 'I *am* Jason Mettner and you damned well - '

'Be quiet!' Rawlins snapped. 'Please elaborate that statement, Mr Douglas.' The sergeant's pencil was flying across the page.

'Well . . . I mean I was expecting Jason Mettner. The office had cabled me to meet him. And when this johnnie turned up, I naturally assumed . . . '

'Naturally you assumed this was the genuine article. Are you saying now that subsequent events caused you to modify that view?'

Douglas shifted his feet uncomfortably. 'Not exactly. But . . . '

'Yes?'

'Well . . . he seemed to be going about the story we were working on in an odd way, you know.'

'What story?'

Douglas darted me a glance out of the corner of his eye and then looked away. 'I'm afraid I can't tell you that. Professional secret, what!'

'Can you tell me in what way his behavior was odd?'

'Well, yes. I mean the story . . . that is to say the story had nothing whatever to do with the places he went to. He kept asking me how to get to certain low-life haunts. Soho and that kind of thing. And it - well it just isn't the kind of story remotely connected with that.'

'What the hell do you know about it, you prettified dumb-bell?' I yelled at him. 'You don't know the first thing about the way an American paper works! You only have to look at the copy you turn in to see that!' I was half out of my chair; the cop on the door stepped forward and shoved me back down again. 'Different countries work different ways,' I said. 'Look at you, for example. You smoke cigarettes through a holder, you're wearing suede shoes, there's a watch on a band around

your wrist. But folks don't think of you here as a pansy, do they?

'My dear chap!'

'Exactly. The idea amazes you. But it might interest you to know that any one of those things would get you whistled at in the street back home. The three together would damn you as effectively as though you had a label around your neck saying "Pouf" or "Fairy". You see what I mean?'

Rawlins had listened to this exchange impassively, his hands flat on the desk in front of him. Now he asked Douglas: 'Was it to gain entry to these places that he took possession of your press card?'

Douglas nodded.

'And you gave it to him? Despite the fact that the card explicitly states that it's non-transferable?'

Our man in London reddened. 'He was rather . . . persuasive.'

'He talked you into giving him the card? He insisted?'

'I suppose so, yes.'

'In view of this man's . . . unexpected . . . actions since you first met him, have you now, on reflection, any reason to modify your original opinion that this is Mettner?'

'I . . . That is . . . I don't have any comment to make on that,' Robin said.

'Thank you, Mr Douglas. I don't think we need detain you any longer.'

On his way out, our hero shot me a sheepish grin. 'Sorry, old lad,' he said apologetically. 'Got to own up in front of the beak, what!'

'Okay,' I said to Rawlins, 'let's quit horsing around, shall we? This is a frame. Surely you can see that? Nobody in their right senses is going to leave themselves wide open like that – a foreigner without papers of *any* kind! – and then go around murdering girls in Soho. Come on, now!'

'Murderers are rarely in their right senses,' the policeman said. 'Even if they were, the killing could be an impulsive act, the anonymity deliberate, as a cloak for other illegal activities unconnected with it.'

'What do you mean? Look, for Chrissake let's at least get this identification routine over with, huh? Cable my editor. Call him on the transatlantic phone. Send for my Bertillon measurements, my fingerprints – they're on file in the Chicago

police department. You can send pictures by wire now. Ask for one of Jason Mettner.'

'It's not so much a matter of *who* you are,' Rawlins said, 'but of what you are and what you've done. The name's just a label. Whether or not you're really an American reporter called Jason Mettner doesn't affect the evidence.'

'What evidence? Apart from the fact that you found me in the apartment of a murdered girl – and the fact that somebody's stolen my papers – there isn't any evidence. There can't be.'

He sighed. 'You better tell him the strength, Brearley,' he said. The sergeant flipped back about forty pages of his notebook and cleared his throat. Rawlins levered himself out of his chair and walked to the window. 'This is off the record,' he told the rain. 'No notes are being taken. I'd just like you to know the score. It might save time.'

'Observation kept over the past two months in the Soho, Bloomsbury and Covent Garden areas,' Brearley read aloud, 'suggests that the following conclusions can be drawn. One, an organized system of extortion is in operation – mainly among the proprietors of drinking clubs, small restaurants, strip shows and quasi-legal gaming establishments. The system appears to work like the so-called protection racket in the United States; that is, victims agree to pay the racketeers a certain percentage of their profits, or a fixed sum every week, in return for "protection" against other, similar racketeers. In fact the payments merely buy immunity from the attentions of those taking the money. Failure to pay involves the wrecking of the establishment, sometimes with injury to the owner or his family; a second refusal results in more serious assaults or in some cases even death.'

I was watching the guy as he read. He was a young cat, probably in his mid-twenties, with ginger hair and a small, bristly mustache. He was wearing a tweed sport coat and flannels, but they weren't going to make Robin Douglas feel he should change his tailor. Somehow his face looked kind of familiar.

'Two,' he went on. 'Although this crime technique has been practised in London for some time, it has until recently been confined to isolated areas, with a number of smalltime gangs each terrorizing comparatively few victims. Within the past few months the situation has altered. Today there is a single highly organized group operating on a city-wide basis. Other

gangs have been eliminated or frightened off and it is now thought that the group are engaged also in prostitution, gaming and the supply of drugs.'

Brearley turned a page. His fingers were ingrained with dirt – or oil – and suddenly I remembered where I'd seen him before. He'd been the driver of the old car stalled outside Gilchrist Court the first time I went there. Had he been keeping a watch on Dorothy's apartment? Or was he just briefed to observe Soho as a whole? If so, I wondered how many more of my recent movements had been noted . . . and how incriminating they might seem once they were observed in the light of a murder investigation.

'Three,' Brearley said. 'There was of course opposition to this crime cartel – principally from the Soho gang led by Jack Hinds. For a time the situation was fluid, with many establishments being terrorized by both groups, but there appears to have been some kind of climax in the middle of October and Hinds has not been seen since. Underworld gossip supposes that he was assassinated and his body dismembered and dropped into the sea from an aeroplane. There is now virtually no obstacle to the main protection gang, known locally as "the Team", ruling the whole of London's illegal population.

'Four. Although it is known that the Team's strongarm enforcement squad is led by Billie-boy Francis, their methods are so ruthless and so violent that victims refuse to complain for fear of further reprisals. We have so far been unable to find out the name of the planner behind this racket. Francis himself is a homosexual sadist with convictions for robbery with violence, uttering menaces, conspiracy and GBH.'

'What's GBH?' I interrupted.

'Grievous Bodily Harm,' Rawlins said without turning around. 'Like when they put the boot in.'

'Five,' Brearley continued. 'It is nevertheless known that the campaign which led to the Team's success was masterminded by a member of the American Mafia specially hired to come to London and plan the operation. So far this criminal has only been referred to by the nickname of 'the Yank'. But he has been described as very tall, thin, of saturnine complexion, and speaking with a pronounced Middle-Western accent.'

Tall, thin, saturnine, I thought to myself; that *has* to be Ralfini. It's just the kind of organization job he could pull. I had to admit, though, that the description applied equally well to me! 'If this has been going on since the middle of last

month,' I said aloud, 'that lets me out. I came over on the *Mary* last week, and there's fifty people who could testify to that.'

'I don't doubt it,' said Rawlins. 'It doesn't mean you couldn't have been here before. Several times perhaps.'

I was beginning to feel like the hero of a Kafka novel. 'For God's sake,' I said. 'Before this trip, I hadn't left Chicago for three years! I can produce *hundreds* of witnesses to prove it. What is this crap, man?'

'There's one more point.' The superintendent looked expectantly at his sidekick.

'Yes, sir. Six. The leader of the Team is known to have accompanied the thugs on a number of bloody affrays in a green Packard motor car, registration number 617 GGT. No description is available of this person, nor can a direct link with the American be established. The Mafia man is known however to have had a liaison with a mystery - er - that is to say, a young woman with no known criminal connections - who is thought to have acted as a contact for him in certain activities concerned with drugs.' Brearley closed the notebook with a snap. 'The girl is . . . was . . . originally a dancer. Name of Dorothy Kimble.'

In the silence that followed that little revelation, I heard the rumble of traffic, the greasy noise of tires on the wet street, an occasional honk from a taxi horn. 'I want a lawyer,' I said. 'I want to see someone from the American Embassy.'

'You will, you will.' Rawlins maneuvered his hull and upper-works around to face the room. He leaned toward me, supporting his weight on arms lowered to the desk. 'Look, lad. This isn't your manor. You may be smart but you don't know the form. You just heard *some* of the stuff we've got against you.'

'None of that's against *me*,' I protested, wishing my voice didn't sound kind of shrill. 'You got a load of facts concerning London crime; you got a lot of gossip concerning *an* American . . . and you got nothing to connect me with either that's not entirely circumstantial. Any lawyer could blow that case wide open - with witnesses - in ten minutes!'

'Aha!' A hand came up and a finger wagged. 'Perhaps he could at that - if we were proceeding on an extortion charge. I'm not saying you'd be wrong. But we're proceeding on a murder charge here, and all that's admissible because it tends to show character.' He straightened up and scratched the back

of his neck. 'Why not make it easier for yourself, son, and come clean? Save a lot of time and trouble all round. I could put in a word and you'd probably get away with life. Otherwise . . . ' He shook his head. 'You may be able to frighten them into silence when you're out, but once they know you're in the nick, there'll be more grasses than you'd see in a field, mark my words.'

There was only one reply to make to this kind of copper's baloney. I made it. 'Superintendent,' I said, 'go fuck yourself.'

Rawlins sighed. 'If that's the way of it,' he said, 'we'll waste no more time rabbiting but go ahead with arrangements for a commital hearing. Brearley - you'd better set up an I.D. parade.'

That was a laugh, that identification line-up, I'm telling you. They were supposed to pull in a dozen guys off the street, guys whose general description tallied with mine, and then ask witnesses if they could pick out the man who.

Well, London must have been clear out of thin, seventy-three-inch Middle-Westerners that day, because they only managed to find two characters who came anywhere near my height. One guy was about four feet six, with red hair; another looked like he'd been sleeping rough for eleven years. But at least they both had their own teeth.

Brearley's underlings had done their homework all right. There'd been book matches from the Plantation and a couple of bills in my pockets, and they'd roped in the whole shooting match - the door man from the Sugar Loaf, the salesman from Fisher's, the Cosmo boss, the bartender at the Mandragore, and the waiter and Joe from the Plantation. Even Candy was there.

With one exception, all those people could testify how eager I'd been to locate Dorothy Kimble. And the exception would tell how I'd bought the scarf I was supposed to have strangled her with. If they succeeded in picking me out, that is.

They did. I was fingered by all the men except Joe, who swore he'd never seen any of us before - on principle, I guess. Candy was the last to be shown into the room. She walked up and down the line twice, shook her wild head, and turned to Rawlins, who was standing in back, smoking a short pipe with an oversize bowl. 'I never saw any of these gentlemen before,' she said, 'but I like the look of this one.' She grabbed my arm. 'I'll take him.'

'This is no time for joking, Miss,' Rawlins reproved. 'An

identity parade's a serious matter. A crime may have been committed.

Candy pouted. 'If the King can take an American home with him,' she said, 'I don't see why I can't!'

She was at the door on her way out when Rawlins said gently: 'Since nobody spoke, Miss, how do you know he was an American?'

That was when I began, as they say, furiously to think. The way I read it, the frame was serving three purposes. For some reason – because she knew too much, because she'd crossed them, because she'd loused up some deal; you tell me – Dorothy had been silenced. At the same time a nosey newspaperman whose enquiries were likely to blow the Ralfini connection wide open had been gotten out of the way. And lastly, because my investigations had left a trail in the right places, I was the perfect fall guy to take the heat off the mystery Yank behind the protection racket.

The trouble was, the frame was too good. Once I'd been formally charged with the murder – which would be any time now – the next step was a magistrate's court hearing, when the cops would roll out their witnesses and his honor would decide if I had a case to answer. I knew the answer to that one already. The case made sense and I'd be sent for trial on a murder rap.

My only chance, like the hero in the thriller, was to find out who the real killers were and hand the evidence to the law on a plate. You can imagine how easy that would be for a prisoner remanded in custody. I was three strikes and out unless I could somehow take a powder and leave Rawlins at the tapes. I'd got to escape and go underground before I was sent for trial.

PART TWO

An American Underground

The heavy swells merged at many points with the more strictly political Establishment. The politicals also distrusted the new King. He did not, they noticed, seem to know his place . . . A whispering campaign against the Fort Belvedere lot was set in motion. Unbridled licence about summed up what went on there: licence often tantamount to orgy. The King and Mrs Simpson were reported seen pruning roses in their pajamas. There were boos from the dress circle for a sketch in which an emissary of [the Prime Minister] arrived to find the King, Mrs Simpson, loose Society women, Lord Louis [Mountbatten] and others frivolling around a table littered with the most secret of official documents, these documents themselves being scandalously defiled and ringed with the moist marks of cocktail glasses.

CLAUD COCKBURN, *The Devil's Decade.*

SEVEN

The police court in Great Marlborough Street is three hundred yards from Oxford Circus, just past the stage door of the London Palladium. A broad flight of steps in the center of the brick-and-sandstone façade leads up to the main entrance. Inside, there is a wide lobby with a marble floor. A balustraded stone staircase leads to the upper storeys, and the courtroom doors are diagonally to the left.

The paneled, windowless room is surprisingly small. From his high rostrum, the Metropolitan Magistrate looks across his desk at a single bench running around the well of the court. Behind and slightly above are three rows of enclosed seats rather like extra-wide church pews. The dock and the witness box stand level with the rostrum on either side. And apart from tables for lawyers and the Clerk of the Court, who sits on the magistrate's left, that is all.

It was 10.30 on a damp morning, with wisps of fog still veiling the trees in the park, when Jason Mettner was 'put up' to answer a charge of wilful murder. The magistrate had already dealt with three cases of vagrancy, one of shoplifting, twelve of soliciting and two of petty theft. Those who were attending court on a summons entered through the double doors leading to the lobby and sat in the three rows of public benches until their case was called. Those, like the vagrants, one of the thieves, and Mettner himself, who were already in custody were escorted through an inner door by uniformed officers who stood behind them in the dock while the case was heard.

Very few members of the public got to hear the Mettner case. The benches were already crammed with reporters, officials from the American Embassy, transatlantic news-agency men, and those prostitutes, drunks and vandals whose sins had yet to be exposed. The witnesses stood about on the black-and-white checkerboard floor in the lobby, waiting to

be called. It was anticipated that the proceedings would take only a few minutes. After formal identification, the police would outline their case, produce their witnesses, and ask for a committal. The accused was expected to plead Not Guilty and reserve his defense.

In fact the proceedings took even less time than the know-alls had predicted. The accused didn't plead at all. When he was asked, he opened his mouth . . . and was then seized with a paroxysm of coughing. He spluttered an apology to the magistrate, said he was unused to the fog, and then doubled up with another fit. During it, his right elbow jerked sharply backward, catching the warden with him in the pit of the stomach. As the officer folded at the hips, winded, Mettner placed a hand on the wooden rail surrounding the dock and vaulted over onto one of the lawyers' tables. Papers, briefs, pens and document cases scattered as he raced across, the cough miraculously cured, and sprang to the floor in the tiny well of the court. Two strides took him to the gap between the public seats and the bench – and then he was only a yard and a half from the doors.

The moment was shrewdly chosen. The doors opened inward and the usher who would normally have been standing in front of them, barring the way, had just opened one to call the first witness in from the lobby when Mettner made his break. He was still off balance, half in and half out of the courtroom, when the American reached him. Rawlins was on his feet on the far side of the well, shouting. The magistrate was banging his gavel. There was confusion among counsel and the newspapermen in the public seats, and three policemen had started in pursuit from the doorway leading to the cells.

Mettner shoved the usher violently out into the lobby, skipped over him as he tripped and fell, and slammed the door behind him. It only held up the pursuers for an instant but it gave the accused man the lead that he needed. Sergeant Brearley, one or two lawyers, witnesses, and police on duty were standing on the black and white squares like pieces on a chessboard. Brearley and the uniformed men, hearing the noise and seeing Mettner erupt from the court, moved automatically toward the entrance doors to cut off his escape to the street. But instead of the diagonal rush that a queen might have made, the runaway adopted the tactics of a rook, moving laterally to the staircase.

While the opposition milled around in the lobby below, he

took the shallow stone steps three at a time and raced for the first floor.

He was past the mezzanine by the time the sergeant and his uniformed colleagues made the bottom of the first flight, and his long legs increased the lead up the next and across the landing above. There was a cleaner from a commercial firm supplying towels to the offices on the second floor. She was leaning over the balustrade, peering down the stair-well to see what all the noise was about when Mettner appeared by the trolley she had left on the landing. He swung it violently around on its castors and sent it hurtling down the stone steps toward his pursuers, shedding towels, buckets, brooms and bottles of cleaning fluid as it went. He was already on the third landing by the time they had disengaged themselves and reached the floor below.

Mettner was panting. He glanced up the next flight of stairs and then along the corridors stretching to left and right. Lower down, there had been people opening the doors of offices, curious to know what was going on; here, for the moment, the stone-flagged passages were deserted. As feet clattered on the stairs he came to a decision and ran swiftly to the corridor on his right. A few yards along, leading toward the back of the building, there was another passageway branching off to the left. At the far end of this was a door with a small notice announcing: *WC - Private*. Mettner jerked it open and slipped inside.

Gently, he eased the door shut and shot the bolt. Gasping for breath now, he leaned his back against the panels and listened. The chase swept up to the fourth floor, hesitated, and then split into separate sections. Footsteps receded, thumped overhead, stomped back down the stairs. He heard Brearley shouting: '... every door into every office - and the cupboards inside those offices!' Then Rawlins's voice from farther away calling something unintelligible. He looked around his refuge. Apart from a wash-hand basin and the lavatory bowl, the closet was empty. The cistern, he saw, had been patented by somebody called Shanks. He wondered if it was the same one that built the scenery for theaters in the West End - or perhaps the one who had the pony? What interested him more right then was the small window below and to one side of the cistern. It was about eighteen inches square, just wide enough for a thin man to squeeze through.

Mettner peered through the grimy glass. The window looked

out on a kind of air shaft. It was around fifty feet across, faced with glazed tiles that had once been white – presumably to reflect light into offices on the lower floors – and webbed with a complex of stackpipes draining the guttering, lavatories, sinks and bathrooms of the buildings surrounding it. He leaned his forehead against the glass, squinting sideways as he shielded the reflections with one hand. As he had hoped, a fat pipe ran down the wall close by the window, receiving the outflow from lavatory and basin. It was only a few inches away. The odds were fairly long, but it was the only possible out and he had to take it.

There was just one thing wrong with the idea. The window wouldn't open. It was designed to open inward, but clearly nobody had used it for years, and the last time it was painted, the cracks had become filled and seized up solid. Mettner heaved and tugged desperately, cursing under his breath as the sweat ran down between his shoulder blades. Doors were opening and voices calling not very far away. He couldn't even shift the handle of the latch. Finally he snatched the roller-towel from its bracket beside the basin and smashed the glass with the wooden spindle.

Outside the door, somebody shouted as the window pane shattered. Mettner wrapped the towel around his hands and began frenziedly pushing out the fragments of broken glass still sticking to the frame.

Heavy footsteps pounded down the corridor. The handle of the WC door turned. The door rattled. Mettner stood on the toilet bowl, thrust one leg cautiously out through the window, and sat astride the sill. Doubling up his lean body, he managed to twist the other foot out so that he was now draped over the sill with his head and shoulders inside and his legs outside. The door shook to a sudden impact. Mettner fed more of his long body out over the sill, leaning his weight on his forearms and elbows. He stretched a leg sideways, feeling with his foot for the junction where the outflow from the lavatory basin ran into the stackpipe.

Wood splintered as someone charged the door. Mettner found the junction with his toe, wedging the foot into the wide vee and transferring some of his weight to it. Moving with infinite care, he withdrew his head and shoulders from the window frame, feeling his jacket rip on fragments of glass still implanted in the wood. The door shivered to another assault. Mettner was still grasping the windowsill with one

hand, reaching now for the stackpipe with the other. His fingers touched the smooth, cold surface of the pipe, curved around it. He was spreadeagled on the face of the building with one leg dangling in space.

Inside, the bolt was ripped away from the jamb and the door burst open with a crash. Mettner quickly transferred all his weight to the foot wedged between the two pipes, let go of the sill, and clasped the stackpipe with both hands. He was hunched there like a monkey on a stick when the beefy uniformed policeman thrust his head and one arm and shoulder out the window. 'You come back here!' the policeman ordered.

'Come and get me!' Mettner panted.

The policeman compressed his lips. The situation was ridiculous. He could just touch the escaped prisoner with his outstretched fingertips, but he couldn't grab him, much less support his weight with one hand if he did grab him. The most he could do would be to dislodge the man and send him hurtling to his death. And the window was far too small to allow two men to operate. He withdrew inside to ask for further instructions.

Mettner looked over his shoulder. That was a mistake. The airshaft plummeted down sixty or seventy feet to an area at sub-basement level. He broke out in a cold sweat. An incautious move, and he would end up with a broken back among the garbage cans down there.

Below the window through which he had escaped there was another, and under that another still. Evidently the floor plan of each storey was identical, with the toilets one above the other to facilitate drainage. But even if he could manage to get in at any of them, the police could be there waiting for him long before he had slid down the pipe and made the difficult transfer to the sill. If, on the other hand, he could climb upwards . . . ?

He tilted back his head and looked toward the roof. There was one more washroom window and then, another eight or nine feet above, the gutter which ran around the shaft. The glazed tiles stopped at window height, leaving a wall of blackened brick. And between the two there was a string-course – a narrow projecting ledge running along the face of the building. Mettner drew a deep breath. Mercifully there were rubber soles on his shoes.

Sergeant Brearley's head and shoulders had replaced the policeman's in the shattered window frame. 'Don't be a bloody fool, Mettner!' he called. 'You'll kill yourself, man! Come on

back in here. We'll give you a hand and no monkey tricks, eh?"

Mettner made no reply. He was hauling himself up the stack-pipe like a slow-motion frog. 'We'll have a dozen men on the roof before you touch the gutter!' Brearley shouted. 'Even then you could still fall and do yourself in.'

The American hardly heard him. He aimed to leave before he got as far as that. If he could last that long. The air was moist, leaving a thin film of damp on the grimed surface of the pipe. Each time he tightened his grasp and hauled himself up a little farther, each time he gripped it with the soles of his shoes to maintain his position while he slid his hands higher, the risk of slipping increased. The distance to the next junction in the pipe, below the window on the fourth floor, was hardly more than twice his own height — perhaps a dozen separate maneuvers, flexing and stretching — but to Mettner it seemed like a thousand feet.

To look down was impossible. If he looked up, the gray clouds sailing over the roof gave him the illusion that the building was toppling toward him and made him giddy. The muscles in his calves, wrists and biceps were screaming for relief, and although the stackpipe was solidly cast and nine inches in diameter he had the recurring impression that it was about to pull away from the wall and crash to the ground with him still clinging to it.

Police crowded the dormer windows above the guttering now, and crawled along the edge of the mansard roof. Mettner gasped with relief as his outstretched fingers touched the junction. Sweating, he pulled himself up level with the window and rested for a moment with both feet in the vee. There was a roaring in his ears: the voices shouting to him from above and below sounded immeasurably far away. Six more feet and his smarting eyes were staring at the string-course surmounting the tiles . . . another agonizing sequence of pushes and pulls . . . then he was leaning against the pipe just below the gutter with one foot braced against the string-course.

The stone ledge was three inches wide, the corner of the air shaft six feet away. Keeping one hand curled around the stack-pipe, Mettner edged his foot out along the string-course. 'For God's sake!' somebody shouted. 'Don't, man, don't!' Warily, Mettner transferred his other foot to the ledge. He let go of the pipe and stood on his toes, facing the wall with his arms spread.

Gingerly, inch by inch, he began moving away from the pipe.

In theory, a three-inch strip of stone should be wide enough

for a man to move along. But when the ledge is attached to a sheer wall, the bulk of the body becomes critical, for if the center of gravity moves too far away from the median line of the ledge it will overbalance and fall. To succeed, a man must either face the wall and move on the balls of his feet, with his heels projecting into space; or rest on his heels with his back to the wall, in which case he is excruciatingly conscious of his exposed position and will probably suffer from vertigo. In either case the center of gravity will be farther out than the ledge, so the body has to be flattened against the wall as much as possible and prevented from falling outward by the tension and thrust of muscles in the legs and feet.

Jason Mettner was only able to balance on the string-course at all because he was exceptionally thin. With his arms flung wide and every available square inch of his lean body pressed to the damp brickwork, he advanced one foot a few inches, shifted his weight, brought up the other foot, moved the first again . . . thrusting desperately upward and inward with his calf muscles all the time. His cheek lay against the wall and his eyes were fixed on the corner of the shaft. He knew that if he looked down and saw the space between his heels he would fall. Even to turn his head and stare at the bricks would displace his weight enough to overbalance him. He felt as though the trembling of the blood in his veins was sufficient to shake him from his perch and hurl him into oblivion.

The sounds around him became exceptionally important. They were invested with special significance; loud enough to drown the world, they became his lonely universe. The slither of his soles along the stone . . . the rasp of his jacket on brickwork . . . the scrape of boots above as some policeman followed his progress out of sight beyond the guttering . . . the hoarse, quick gasps of his breathing (for the deep breath he needed so badly could push him away from the wall). Somewhere over the rooftops a clock chimed three quarters. It was only fifteen minutes since he had climbed the steps to the dock!

There was another stackpipe in the corner. Without it, Mettner would have been lost. Because to traverse a right-angle – to step across ninety degrees and flatten yourself against an adjoining wall with nothing to cling onto – would have been impossible with that gap yawning below. He clung to the smooth, cold, tubular casting sobbing with relief.

The adjoining wall formed part of a building that was two floors higher than the one he had left. The courthouse roof

therefore ended in a blank cliff of stonework, and the police following Mettner were forced to return to street level, run to the alleyway leading to the entrance of the next-door building, and try to cut him off there . . . once they had checked exactly where he was making an entry. It was this which had decided him to make his near-suicidal traverse – this plus the gamble that he could beat them to it. For above the string-course on the next leg of the journey there were windows, and the nearest was less than three feet away.

Mettner would have given anything to have thrown in the towel at that point, to have reached above his head for the guttering, to have climbed the stackpipe to safety and the helping hands of the police from whom he was escaping. But enough of his determination remained to spur him on. Biting his lip, he set out on the last few perilous feet – and somehow they were the worst of all.

He was bathed in an icy sweat. A breeze sprang up from somewhere and plucked at his clothes. He was more than ever conscious of the chasm beneath him, of the hairline separating his life from his death. His calf and thigh muscles were on fire.

But at last the puragtorial trip was over. He stood in front of the window: it was open and there was nobody in the room beyond. As he lowered his outspread arms to grasp the sill, a fragment of the string-course crumbled under his weight and broke away.

Mettner fell.

His legs dropped away into the void. His flailing arms struck the sill with an impact that shocked the remaining breath from his body . . . and miraculously one of them hooked over it and held. For a dizzy moment he hung suspended over the air shaft with all his weight tearing at that arm. Then he managed to reach up with the other hand and find a purchase, lightening the strain. It was only at the fourth attempt that he was able to will his muscles to haul him back up to a position where he could collapse over the sill and tumble into the room.

It was a kind of store-room, not much bigger than a broom closet, packed with cartons of cleaning materials and drums of paraffin and carpet sweepers. Behind the door hung a navy-blue lightweight showerproof – the kind of garment a park-keeper or a janitor might wear – together with a uniform cap with a shiny black peak. Mettner put them on and opened the door. He was sick to his stomach, he was shuddering all over, and he was suffering from the intolerable tension of those last

few minutes of ferocious concentration. But he dare not let up for a moment: even from here he could make out the distant shouts of the pursuers, shouts that would grow louder with every second that passed:

The door opened onto a hallway. And on the far side of the hallway were the doors of three elevators.

The whole operation was very simple once it got under way. Mettner pressed the buttons of all three elevators. One arrived almost at once. The others whined upward from the ground floor. Before they had made half the distance, Mettner was riding down to the sub-basement. He heard the advance guard of the police squad clatter into the entrance and deploy up and down stairs as he walked out into the area at the bottom of the air shaft. He walked quickly to the fire exit of the building opposite the courthouse and ran up the stairs to the street. Three minutes later he was sitting on a bar stool in a pub off Oxford Street.

'Yessir? What can I get you, sir?' the bartender asked.

'Scotch,' Mettner said hoarsely. 'The best you have. Straight.'

'Large or small, sir?'

'Large. Make it two large Scotch.' The newspaperman passed the back of his hand over his brow. And whether you like it or not, he said to himself, I'm going to drink them both myself!

EIGHT

The sidewalks along the eastern half of Oxford Street were crowded. '*Star, News, Standard!*' cried the paper-boys outside the Underground station. 'Racing edition. All the runners!' And the posters flapping below their waists added in vermillion capitals: BISHOP SPEAKS OUT! . . . KING TO SEE BALDWIN? . . . MADRID SEIGE - LATEST. At every corner, ladies with trays of red calico poppies mounted on pins rattled collection boxes.

Jason Mettner buttoned his raincoat up to the neck and pulled the peak of his cap down over his eyes as he waited for the lights to change. Above the entrance to Waring and Gillow's department store the clock began striking the hour. There was a muffled explosion nearby, then another farther away. The lights changed. Mettner ran across the roadway - but the line of cars and taxis waiting to come out of the side streets did not move. The lights changed, once more. Neither of the files of traffic in Oxford Street advanced. People on the pavements too seemed suddenly bewitched, incapable of movement as a crowd caught by the photographer. Even through the glass doors of Bourne and Hollingsworth, shopwalkers and customers could be seen frozen into stillness like flies in amber. By a flag at half-mast in the grounds of Chelsea Hospital, a line of Pensioners in scarlet tunics stood shakily to attention in front of the classical façade. In Whitehall the King, in naval uniform, placed a wreath on the Cenotaph, stepped back three paces, and saluted.

Maroons exploded again. London surged onward. There were already Christmas decorations in the shop windows. 'What the hell was all that about?' Mettner asked a barrow-boy selling hot chestnuts at the corner of Wells Street.

The youth stared at him. 'You kiddin'?'

'No. What got into everyone back there? The whole shebang stopped dead - as though someone had pulled a switch. Tell me, what gives?'

'Well, it's your Two Minutes' bleedin' Silence, innit?' The barrow-boy raised eloquent eyebrows at a friend standing by his charcoal brazier. 'I mean it does happen to be Armistice Day – or di'n' you know?'

'Oh, sure . . . I'm sorry . . . Yes, of course: Armistice Day, the eleventh.' Mettner nodded and hurried away.

The barrow-boy sniffed. 'Foreign!' he observed. 'One of them Yanks, I shouldn't wonder! . . . All hot! All hot! . . . Chest-nuts! . . . Now come along, folks, come along. They're all hot!'

Mettner walked one more block north and turned right. He found himself in the center of a crowd milling around half a dozen barrows loaded with fruit and flowers. Behind was a wide courtyard filled with ranks of parked cars. The brick and sandstone building surrounding three sides of it seemed vaguely familiar . . . and then he realized: he was outside the Middlesex Hospital, and it was the morning visiting hour.

At the end of the street, bells shrilled. A police car, and then another, careered down from the Tottenham Court Road direction and turned south. A third patrol advanced more slowly and stopped at the corner of Newman Street. Two uniformed men got out. On an impulse, Mettner bought a bunch of dahlias and joined the queue shuffling toward the hospital entrance. It was the best camouflage he could think of. In the wide stone-flagged corridor leading to the stairs, he stopped and snapped his fingers as an idea came to him. He could use the hospital not just as a cover but as a positive step along the road he wished to travel. If the luck stayed with him. And since he was here . . . ?

He turned around and went back to a glassed-in information desk by the main doors. A middle-aged man in blue uniform sat over an Admissions book behind the screen. Mettner waited while two women made enquiries about a relative suffering from gallstones. What *was* it the girl had said? He tried to cast his mind back over the eventful days. *That's not his real name, of course, but that's what everyone calls him . . .* Charlie. Charlie Fairlawn? Charlie Fairbarn? Charlie Farnsbarn – that was it! Evidently some British equivalent of John Doe or Jean Dupont or Billy Whosis. But what was his real name? Had she ever said? *Kind of a Scottish name, though he comes from Barbados.* McEvoy? McTavish? Mackintosh?

'What can I do for you, mate? The man behind the desk was looking at Mettner's cap. 'Mate' was a concession, as one

underling to another. He would help all he could, though toffs would have to fill in the requisite forms.

'Kind of a problem,' Mettner confided, doing his best to de-Americanize his accent. 'Would somebody who was injured . . . that is to say who had an accident in Soho be brought here?'

The man pursed his lips. 'Depends. What kind of injury. What part of Soho. Which ambulance answered the 999 call. Could just as easily be UCH in Gower Street. Or St George's or even Bart's. Hardly be St Mary's, though.' He shook his head. 'Not from Soho. Too far east, you see.'

'I see. It *could* be here, though? It was a . . . a severe leg injury. In Bateman Street.'

The lips were still pursed. Breath whistled inward between them. The eyebrows rose. 'It could be. Yes, from Bateman Street it could be. Date of admission, mate?'

'The fifth. In the afternoon.'

'H'mn. Mostly burns that day. Perishin' fireworks ought to be banned.' He turned the big pages of the book. 'We'll have a butcher's, anyway. And the name . . . ?'

'Well, that's the trouble,' Mettner said. 'I'm not sure. I don't know the person too well. I just saw the . . . accident . . . and I wanted to enquire. It's . . . kind of a Scottish name, like McTavish or Mackintosh. The first name is Charles. Oh - and the guy's black. From Barbados.'

The information clerk chuckled. 'We don't log the color of their skins or where they come from.' He was running a stubby forefinger down the column of handwritten details. 'Scottish, eh? . . . Cameron, C. H.? No, that was an acute appendicitis . . . McDougall, C.? Multiple internal injuries and a severed arm? No, come to think of it that was the van driver went under the tram. Anyway, you said legs, didn't you? . . . Here! What about this one!' The finger halted at the foot of a page. 'MacFarlane, C. D. H. Severe damage to outer hamstrings and adductor magnus?'

Mettner knew before the injuries were listed. MacFarlane was so obvious a candidate for distortion to Farnsbarn. 'That'll be it!' he said. 'Is he still here?'

'Uh-huh. Transferred from Emergency to General Surgical three days ago.' The man wrote the name of the ward on a card and handed it through the pigeon-hole in the glass. 'Second floor, turn left.'

'I'm obliged,' Mettner said. 'Thanks a lot.'

'Any time,' the clerk replied. 'I hope he appreciates the flowers.'

Mettner grinned and made for the stairs. Charlie MacFarlane was in a big general ward at the end of a long corridor smelling of chrysanthemums and rubber tubing with an after-flavor of ether. There were groups of relatives sitting or standing around the patients in their high, white-painted iron beds. Others stood uneasily in the passageway outside, awaiting their turn. A woman cried behind screens masking one corner of the ward.

It wasn't even necessary to ask a nurse where MacFarlane was. He was the only man without a visitor and the only black patient: a bulky Negro with iron-gray hair and thick lips which still bore the marks of a beating. He was leaning back against the pillows with his eyes closed when Mettner sat down in a chair beside the bed. Behind the newspaperman, a stout woman was talking in whispers to an elderly man with one arm in a sling. Around the bed beyond MacFarlane several over-dressed females fussed over a pale and sickly youth, arranging flowers in vases and fruit in bowls.

'Charlie?' Mettner said softly.

The Negro opened his eyes. His cheeks, already blanched to an unhealthy pallor, turned more sallow still. He dragged himself to a sitting position. 'Who the hell are you? If it's the cops, I told you three times already, I've nothing -'

'Take it easy, Charlie!' Mettner interrupted. 'Relax. It's nothing to do with the law. You got no call to blow your top.'

MacFarlane looked more frightened still. 'An American! You're not -?'

'No!' The newspaperman played his joker early in the game. 'I haven't been sent by Ralfini, if that's what you mean. Me and him ain't exactly buddies.'

The maneuver was successful; the gamble paid off. 'Well, that makes you a mate of mine for a start,' MacFarlane said viciously. 'He gestured toward the foot of the bed, where a frame beneath the blankets held the bed covers away from his legs. 'They tell me I'll have to learn to walk again - with a steel fuckin' cage at first, and then with leg irons for the rest of my life. I was a fast bowler, man. I used to run for Barbados . . .'

'Okay, okay,' Mettner soothed. 'That makes two of us. Me, I'd -'

'What did he do to you?'

'Only paid a phoney murder rap on me, that's all. Nice guy.'

'Hey!' MacFarlane reached for a crumpled newspaper lying

between the bed and his night table. 'It says here there's a geezer up before the beak at Marlborough Street this a.m. on a charge of -'

'He didn't wait to hear the result,' Mettner said. 'Charlie, I'm on the run. I don't have too much time. I'm trusting you because I have a hunch we're on the same side. And we both want to get Ralfini, right?'

'You can say that again.'

'To put you in the picture, it was me got Dorothy away after they'd done the Zanzibar - when you were already out.'

'Jesus, I wondered what the hell . . . and then I saw that she . . .'

'Okay. Now listen, Charlie. I'll give it to you straight, the way it happened. After that, I'd like for you to answer one or two questions, if you would.'

The man in the bed frowned. 'Depends on the questions.'

'Dorothy walked out on me a half hour after we left the Zanzibar,' Mettner said. 'I spent the whole of the next day looking for her. I combed every dive in Soho and Bloomsbury. Finally I found her outside her own apartment and I made a date with her the following night. For some reason she wouldn't see me that night. We were going to talk about . . . the Team and their activities. She was going to answer questions too. But I never got to see her again. Alive, that is. When I showed for the date she was already dead - and every clue pointed my way. Including some they'd stolen from my hotel room.'

Charlie nodded. 'That sounds like the way they work. Efficient.'

'Right. Now I can understand why they'd want to pin the killing on me. I'm a newspaperman and I'm American. If I went on poking around I could blow Ralfini and his connection with the racket. But why should they want to murder Dorothy in the first place, Charlie? Why?'

MacFarlane shrugged - and then winced as the movement disturbed some dormant pain in his savaged body. 'You tell me, man. They don't follow no rules.'

'Okay, let's take it from the top. Simple questions first. Ralfini and the Yank are one and the same, right?'

'Right.'

'And he masterminded the campaign that put the Team at the top in the protection racket?'

MacFarlane nodded.

'The Team being led, so far as the strongarm stuff goes, by this Billie-boy character?'

'Billie-boy Francis, the iron fist in the pouf's glove, yes.'

'They were doing the Zanzibar – and the Sugar Loaf later – because you hadn't come across with the loot?'

MacFarlane nodded again. 'Bastards. As if they hadn't got enough, muscling in on the Plantation for a percentage. I said I'd see them in hell –'

'Okay, Charlie,' Mettner cut in. 'So they took you up on it. But they were still fighting after they'd put you out. Who were the other soldiers?'

'Friends of mine. Geezers who'd been strongarmed out of the same racket themselves. It was strictly a business operation, but they wanted to do it.'

'All right. Now for the sixty-four-dollar question. Who was Dorothy? How did she fit? What was her connection with the Team – and with you? She told me she'd come to see you about a spot in the Plantation floorshow. The Sugar Loaf too. But there's no floorshow at the Plantation – and only one on Sundays at the other place. How come, Charlie?'

A bespectacled nurse in a starched cap and apron wheeled a trolley loaded with enamel bowls and thermometers in glasses through the ward. She stopped by the bed beyond MacFarlane's. 'Mrs Lewis, I've told you before,' she said severely. 'Only two visitors at a time. The others'll have to wait outside and take their turn. It exhausts the patients.'

'Dorothy was Ralfini's ex,' Charlie said. 'Nothing legal, but they were shackled up together a while. Things were kind of tough when she walked out on him and I helped her a little, found her the apartment in Gilchrist Court, fixed her up with a job, that kind of thing.'

'Were you laying her?'

'Not specially. I mean no more than anybody else.'

'What was all this floorshow mularkey?'

'That was just . . . ' Charlie shrugged again, winced again. 'It was kind of a cover. Not that we needed one. But it gave her a reason to come and see me in case folks were nosey, see. She'd been a dancer once. Me, I was always saying I must start a floorshow at the Plantation, expand the show at the Sugar Loaf, like broaden out. The story was that she'd come to discuss what kind of show it might be. Understand?'

Mettner nodded. 'The guy in the Plantation men's room told

me she was his connection for charge. Or some girl called Dorothy was.'

Charlie lowered his eyelids and plucked at the hem of the sheet with chocolate hands. 'I wouldn't know anything about that.'

'For God's sake, Charlie,' Mettner said urgently, 'it can't hurt her now. I've got to know the full story if I'm to nail Ralfini. It's tough enough as it is, being on the run. If I don't know the score, how in hell can I help?'

'I guess you're right,' MacFarlane sighed. The eyes closed altogether. 'Okay. Well, yes, to tell the truth, we had a little business together. Being the boss, I couldn't afford to be caught with the stuff. Besides I wasn't always there. Also the kid needed the money. You understand?'

'So you figured nobody would suspect a pretty blonde of being a pusher? And *that* was why you needed the floorshow cover. Was this connection with or without the Team's knowledge?'

The man in the bed was silent for a moment. 'Please don't *fuss*, Mother,' the pale youth next to him said. 'I've got plenty, really I have.'

MacFarlane opened his eyes. The whites were the color of chicken fat. 'That was the trouble,' he said to Mettner. 'Dorothy's business with me was private. I reckoned those bastards were taking enough off of me anyway.'

'But they found out?'

'They found out. Ralfini was mad as hell because she wasn't using one of his wholesalers – and because we were holding out on him and he wasn't getting his cut. That was why the Team were told to take Dorothy with them when they'd wrecked the Zanzibar – so they could choke the details of the operation out of her and fuck it up.'

'But they choked the life out of her instead, two days later. Why the hell should they have waited? Just to pin it on me? Why should they want to kill her anyway?'

'You tell me,' Charlie said. 'Maybe just because she knew too much. Maybe as a lesson to their own pushers. They play rough, those fuckers. Maybe because of something else – something we don't know about.'

'Yeah,' Mettner said slowly. 'Maybe. She said she couldn't see me that night because she had to try and fix something . . . something she figured she might be able to fix on the phone. Was there a phone in that apartment?'

Charlie shook his head.

'It doesn't make sense,' Mettner said. 'It doesn't quite add up. Almost but not quite. From the little I saw of her, what you've told me figures – and yet there still seems to be something missing. If she was too scared to leave the apartment, how could she fix anything – with no phone? She *was* scared too: that was genuine enough. Maybe there was nothing to fix. But in that case why bother to tell me there was?'

'People aren't simple,' Charlie said. 'This was a complicated girl. She was a bit of a nympho, for a start. She couldn't say no. So she'd get herself in a mess – and say the first thing came into her head to get out of it. She'd tell you one thing in the morning, meaning every word of it, and then tell you something entirely different that night, meaning that too. Finally she'd get to believe her own lies, and lie again to explain that away.' He compressed his lips and shook his head once more. 'That didn't stop her looking pretty, and it didn't stop fellows trying to make her. Talk about bees!'

'You mean all that crap about having something to fix might have been a stall? It was just that she already had a date that night . . . but she wasn't prepared to admit it?'

'I would think. Girls catch on pretty quick that there's a lot of men like to think they're the only horse in the race. That doesn't stop 'em playing the field when they feel that way – but they have to hide it. And once you're on that kick, it becomes a habit, like anything else.'

'Yeah,' Mettner said. 'You could be right at that. It would stack up with the details, so far as I know them.'

'Let me bring you a nice piece of *gedampte* meat in a Pyrex dish,' the woman at the next bed urged. 'Boiled chicken they give him! And carrots any *mensch* she would have thrown them in the dustbin already!'

'What I can't understand,' Mettner said, 'is why they waited those two days. If it was so important to get the girl at your place, important enough to kill her, as it turned out, why didn't Ralfini go straight to her apartment that same night? They knew where it was, after all.'

'Maybe you're talkin' about two different things,' MacFarlane said. 'I mean the need to kill her may have come out of something that happened that night she wouldn't see you. Perhaps it had nothing to do with what they wanted her for at the Zanzibar. You never know.'

Mettner was plucking with a finger and thumb at his lower

lip. 'The only thing is - that implies she was in some way, directly or indirectly, in contact with Ralfini or the Team on the night in question. From what you know of Dorothy, do you think that's likely? Could she have been playing some kind of double game?'

'The only person could answer that would be Ralfini's boss.'

'Ralfini's *boss*? You mean . . . ? But who the hell's that?'

'You tell me!' Charlie MacFarlane said.

NINE

On November 12th, it started to rain before dawn and it continued to rain all day. At Southampton, the King embarked on the royal launch at 6am and started the exhausting tour of the Home Fleet known as the Spithead Review. It was while his party were examining Fairey Swordfish torpedo bombers on the rainswept flight deck of the aircraft-carrier *Courageous* that ratings first noticed the discrepancy: His Majesty scorned to protect himself with a waterproof; Sir Samuel Hoare, First Lord of the Admiralty, wore one buttoned to the chin.

In London, the ex-Mrs Simpson looked out the window of her new house in Cumberland Terrace and told her maid to be sure there was an umbrella and gumboots among the clothes she was taking to Fort Belvedere for the King's weekend house party. A Select Committee of the House of Commons met in Westminster Hall to consider the implications of the new Public Order Act, under which political demonstrations, parades and public meetings could be banned if it was thought they might lead to a breach of the peace. Later in the day Nathan Korsun, a Jewish skirt manufacturer of Estonian birth, was beaten up in Cavell Street, Stepney, by four members of the British Union of Fascists and left unconscious in the roadway.

Jason Mettner awoke early in an atmosphere heavy with the odors of soot, fish and smoke from a coal stove that would not draw properly. He had slept in a waiting-room at King's Cross station, among the handful of travelers condemned to catch the milk train to the northeast and those who had arrived too late to get home on the last buses and subway trains the previous night. He had walked straight to King's Cross from the Middlesex Hospital after leaving Charlie MacFarlane. Although his one aim was to locate Mario Ralfini, it was obviously absurd to start combing the underworld for him immediately, especially when Soho and other suspect areas would be under intense police surveillance from squads briefed

to bring in Mettner himself. He would have to lie low until the hue and cry died down a little. It would even, he thought, be unwise to check in to a cheap hotel yet. He was unsure of British police procedure and there was always a chance that all new registrations would be scrutinized. A rail terminal, it seemed to him, was as good a compromise as any. The police would certainly be watching it – but they would be at the barriers, casing people who were leaving town, not paying attention to the floating population centered on the station itself. In any case it would be safer than roaming the streets on the day of his escape.

On the way there, he picked up a paper from a bench in Russell Square and turned to the entertainment section. In the immediate neighborhood, he saw, there was a choice of Myrna Loy, Clark Gable and Jean Harlow in *Wife Versus Secretary*, or a double-header teaming the Astaire-Rogers *Top Hat* with Charles Farrell and Janet Gaynor in *Silver Streak*. He rejected the idea. He would have to ask the way to the cinemas; they were in streets he didn't know. Through the leafless trees in the big public square he could see the terra-cotta Gothic extravagance of the Russell Hotel. There was a Turkish Baths next door. Would that be an idea for an all-night sojourn? Mettner thought not. It was too early. If he went in now, just after lunch, and then elected to remain for something like eighteen hours, that would surely be too suspicious to escape attention of the wrong kind. In the end, he returned to his original idea.

There was a tiny news theater at one side of the station concourse. Mettner went in and sank gratefully onto the hard plush tip-up seat. Throughout the afternoon, he watched the endlessly repeated adventures of Bonzo, of Felix the Cat, of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck; he was deafened by the oratory of three separate newsreel commentators pontificating on the plight of Spanish refugees, the Paris collections, a Laval-Mussolini conference, various sporting events and a re-cap of the Abyssinian campaign; he saw Don Bradman hit fifty off the English bowling at Melbourne, and a *March Of Time* documentary on the glass-blowers of Plsen, in Czechoslovakia. And then, at seven o'clock, he came out and joined the crowd of late commuters under the severe glass canopy over the platforms.

There were police at the barriers all right. But, as he thought, they were only scanning the faces of passengers actually travel-

ing. He ate bacon and eggs with a cup of gray coffee at the cafeteria and went back to the news theater until it closed at eleven.

Now, stiff from a few hours sleep on a wooden bench, he limped downstairs to the washrooms and splashed cold water on his face. Thankfully, his money had not been taken from him. Doubtless it would have been once he was committed. In the meantime, he would have to buy a razor, and a replacement for his ripped jacket.

He buttoned up his stolen raincoat and came out of the station with the city-bound workers in the morning rush-hour. 'Extra! Extra! Read all about it!' the newsboys cried into the rain at the head of the taxi line-up on the approach ramp. 'Wanted man escapes from court! Read about his death-defying climb!'

Mettner glanced at the display posters. FRANCO SHELLS HOSPITAL . . . UNITED FOR THE CUP? . . . SPITHEAD REVIEW: DETAILS . . . SOHO MURDER MAN ESCAPES! He bought a copy and hurried through the downpour to a cheap café on the opposite side of Euston Road. Over a cup of tea and a plate of toast and marmalade, he folded the paper to an inside page and read:

A suspect in the 'Soho blonde' murder case eluded police yesterday in one of the most daring escapes in recent years. It happened at London's Marlborough Street police court, where the man expected to be committed for trial on a charge of strangling Dorothy Kimble, twenty-seven, a dancer, in her Gilchrist Court apartment last week.

Simulating a fit of coughing as he entered the dock, the man assaulted a police escort, leaped into the well of the court and ran for the doors. Felling an usher, he made for a staircase and gained the upper floors of the building hotly pursued by police.

The man - who was charged in the name of Jason Mettner, thirty-nine, a journalist of American nationality - succeeded in climbing out of a third-floor window. Watched by astonished pressmen and court officials, he made his way to an adjoining building along a narrow stone coping eighty feet above the ground . . .

Mettner skipped the rest of the description and half a column

of background on the Dorothy Kimble case. At the end of the news story he read:

Superintendent Hector Rawlins, the Scotland Yard man who arrested Mettner, told our reporter: 'He won't get far. All stations and ports are being watched and we are already following a definite lead. I expect him to be back behind bars within forty-eight hours.' The police description of the wanted man is: over six feet tall, of spare build, with a thin face and dark hair. When last seen he was hatless and wearing a gray suit, but it is thought that he may now be dressed in a dark blue raincoat and a peaked, military-style cap.

The story was embellished with a grainy, unrecognizable, single-column blow-up of Mettner's passport photo sent by wire from the Chicago police department.

Turning to another page, Mettner casually removed the cap from his head and placed it on a shelf beneath the wall counter at which he was sitting. There would be plenty of tall men in blue raincoats about today, many of them thin; and some of those thin men might wear military-style caps. But a combination of all three – together with an American accent – would be tempting fate! He must re-outfit himself at the first possible moment, preferably with garments that already had a used look. He left the café and walked west along Euston Road.

The rain fell ceaselessly from a gray sky. The wind that drove the ragged clouds over the rooftops sent it gusting across the wide street in squalls to splash calf-high from the streaming sidewalk. By the time Mettner found a secondhand clothes store near Great Portland Street subway station, his pants were sodden from the knee down, and the lightweight shower-proof was letting in water at the shoulder. It seemed a good enough reason to want a change of trousers, jacket and raincoat. 'I just arrived from the north,' he told the old man behind the counter. 'It was raining some when I left – but not like this! I gotta lot of calls to make today. I guess I have to think of something a little more robust!'

Suits were impossible because of Mettner's leanness and his height. Rather than draw attention to this, he bought separates: a pair of gray flannels and a sport coat in brown tweed. The pants were baggy around the hips and the sleeves of the jacket a trifle short, but it didn't look as though they'd been stolen

from somebody's kid brother, and he was able to select them quickly enough not to draw the old man's attention to his difficulty with sizes. A beige trench coat sufficiently grubby around the sleeves and collar to have been worn for more than one season completed the ensemble.

'Now what about these, sir?' the dealer said, gesturing toward the pile of wet garments on the scarred wooden counter. 'I could make you a small discount if you'd care to - ?'

'No, no. The wife would kick up hell if I came home without that suit. Thanks just the same.' Mettner dare not admit his desire to get rid of the clothes. As soon as he was gone, the old man would see the telltale rips in the shoulders of the jacket. If he read the papers, or if the police checked out secondhand dealers, he'd make the connection at once. And then the law would have an up-to-date description of what the fugitive was wearing. Folding the jacket carefully inside out, he wrapped it in the wet pants and the showerproof, and allowed the old man to make a brown paper parcel of them.

He walked out into the rain, bought a narrow-brimmed fedora from a department store in Tottenham Court Road, and headed for Soho. Between Whitfield Street and Charlotte Street he left the incriminating package in an alley by an assortment of bins stuffed with the offcuts and throwouts from a tailor's workshop.

Twelve o'clock noon. In Buckingham Palace, Major Alec Hardinge, private secretary to the King, stared out the window of his office at the rain sweeping across the lawns of the Palace gardens. In front of him lay the draft of a letter destined to be delivered to His Majesty at Fort Belvedere on his return from the fleet review at Spithead. Hardinge was struggling with his conscience. Should he send the letter, or shouldn't he? For the tenth time he read the phrases he had written and rewritten.

... My duty to draw your attention . . . facts which I know to be true . . . Silence of the British press can no longer be maintained . . . probably a matter of days . . . Resignation of the government cannot be ruled out . . . Dissolution of Parliament and a General Election in which Your Majesty's private affairs would be the main topic; and I cannot stop myself thinking that even those sympathizing personally with Your Majesty would profoundly resent the harm which would inevitably be done to the Crown - the cornerstone on which the

whole Empire rests . . . Permit me to say that the only way out of this dangerous situation is for Mrs Simpson to go abroad without delay . . . a matter of extreme urgency . . . Hardinge sighed and unscrewed the cap of his pen. He crossed out a line and started to write again.

On the other side of St James's Park, Stanley Baldwin surveyed the ministers sitting around the table in the Cabinet Room of No. 10 Downing Street. He laid his pipe in an ash-tray, settled a pair of spectacles on his large nose and cleared his throat. 'We have to consider,' he said, 'the situation which has arisen in the light of the King's infatuation for this American woman he threatens to marry. I have already spoken to His Majesty's private secretary and the editor of *The Times* . . .'

Across the rain-wet roofs of Westminster, Cosmo Gordon Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury, sat in his study in Lambeth Palace and picked up the telephone. 'Get me *The Times* newspaper in Printing House Square,' he said, unhooking the receiver. 'I wish to speak to Mr Geoffrey Dawson . . .'

North of Trafalgar Square, Jason Mettner perched on a stool at one end of the long bar dividing the saloon from the lounge of the Duke's Arms. He was reading an early edition of the evening paper. According to the political correspondent, there was a possibility that the Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, might resign if the government – and indeed the King himself – did not make their disapproval of the Fascist regime in Italy more explicit. The diplomatic correspondent hinted that Mussolini's revelation of the existence of a secret protocol establishing a Rome-Berlin 'Axis' was likely to be followed by an 'anti-Comintern' pact between Germany and Japan. In France, Mettner read, the sales of bicycles had trebled since Léon Blum's *Front Populaire* government had passed a law guaranteeing paid holidays for all Frenchmen. During the same period, the country had suffered more industrial strikes than ever before. The accused man in the Soho Blonde case had been sighted near the cross-Channel ferry terminal at Newhaven. He had also been positively identified at Barnsley in Yorkshire, the American noted with satisfaction, at Croydon airport, and among the crowd in a Brighton dance hall. An early re-arrest was expected.

It was nevertheless difficult for Mettner to decide on a plan of action. The physical resemblance which had enabled Ralfini or his associates to frame the newspaperman would now work

equally against the hood. Since the police description fitted Ralfini as well as Mettner, he was unlikely to show himself until the heat was off, for fear of getting hauled in by the law himself. How then was a stranger in town to locate the Mafia man?

By hanging around and hoping to pick up a lead – and then following it up one hundred per cent, Mettner thought. But he had to find a base. He would search out a likely location – or, rather, the most unlikely that he could find – during pub closing hours in the afternoon. In the meantime, he would continue to sip his beer and, under cover of his evening paper, eavesdrop on the conversations around him.

‘Hitler . . . Mussolini . . . Franco . . . I can’t see what all the fuss is about. We did the same here. We stopped the bastards in ’26, didn’t we?’

‘. . . tootled out to the Spider’s Web for a spot of bubbly, and then finished off with a-little-of-what-you-fancy in an Aston Martin at the back of the car park!’

‘So I said, Expensive? I said. Feel the cloth, I said! You should be so lucky a legitimate tailor he offers you a suit-length at such a price, I said!’

‘The thing is, Jardine was a heck of a sight tougher – as a captain, I mean – than Percy Chapman ever was, especially in Australia . . .’

‘Two Scotch, Jim, a gin-and-lime, and three Guinness by the neck.’

‘. . . lot of bloody nonsense, if you ask me. What the hell do we need a bloody fleet for anyway? If people don’t have arms they can’t fight, can they? The only way to stop wars . . .’

‘Well, at least he got the roads and the railways running efficiently, didn’t he?’

‘. . . told to scarper by some geezer with red barnet and a stripe down his boat! ’Course we had it away faster’n you could say. Charver or no charver, I didn’t fancy tanglin’ with no slag like that!’

‘Might as well hand the whole bang shoot over to the niggers and have done with it, that’s what I say.’

‘Two sausages, Jim! With mustard!’

‘Actually it’s a Chenard-Walcker. The OHC model with a drive shaft at the back of the block.’

‘Baldwin’s finished. Past it, old chap. That’s all there is to it. Time he pushed off and made way for Chamberlain.’

‘No, no! Three brown ales and *one* milk stout!’

'There's nothing wrong with your jewboy. It's just that . . . '

'My brass was over an hour late, and the Team was waitin' for the gilt. At first I thought she'd been nicked on suss, but it turned out she'd clocked this mystery she used to room with before she come to the smoke . . . '

' . . . lot of bloody rot, old man. Baldwin stands for what every decent chap . . . '

'Couple of large pinkers, please!'

In the afternoon, Mettner found the kind of base he was looking for: an ultra-respectable temperance hotel in Bedford Place, off Russell Square. Fashioned through the symbiosis of three separate Georgian terrace houses, it was called the White Hall and it was run by three elderly spinster ladies. The clientele seemed to consist of gentlefolk in reduced circumstances, widows exiled from Bournemouth and retired tea planters who shuffled along the creaking, heavily carpeted corridors as slowly as the aging waitress who served stewed apples and cottage-pie among the ketchup bottles in the dining-room. Mettner left the small grip he had bought by the brass bedstead in a third floor single and went out again as soon as the pubs opened.

The last place he had seen Ralfini was under the arch near the Zanzibar. Since the Mafia man had gone there by taxi, Mettner figured that maybe he was holed up in the neighborhood and so, despite the risk of discovery, he concentrated on drinking places in the Bateman Street area. But half a dozen pubs and a hundred conversations later he was no nearer his quarry than he had been when he left the Middlesex Hospital the day before. Here and there among the welter of gossip about sport and politics and private lives and world affairs he caught a hint, an echo, of the underworld that Ralfini was supposed to control – but much of it was in the kind of Cockney back-slang that he found almost impossible to understand.

When the barman at the last pub called time at 10.30, Mettner left with the crowd and found himself weaving past streetwalkers patrolling the alley above the club where he had first seen Dorothy Kimble. There was a new sign above the yellow door now. *THE OUTBACK*, blue capitals beneath the electric strip-lighting announced. *Come Down Under for a Real Aussie Welcomel*

Friday the 13th was a dull day, but the rain held off until the

early evening. The papers were full of pictures illustrating reports of the Spithead Review. There were photographs, too, of towns and villages destroyed in the Spanish Civil War. It was estimated that Franco's forces were receiving ten times more professional aid from Germany and Italy than the amateur help volunteered to the republicans by the International Brigades. A crofter on holiday from Blairgowrie, in Scotland, woken by strange snuffling noises in the middle of the night, had seen the Loch Ness monster by moonlight. In southern England, a man arrested at Newhaven on suspicion of being the 'Soho blonde' murderer had now been released. the police were satisfied it was a case of mistaken identity.

In the late afternoon, Wallis Simpson, accompanied by her aunt Bessie, was taken to Fort Belvedere in one of the royal Daimlers. The King returned from Southampton soon afterward, still elated by the ecstatic reception accorded to him by the men of the Royal Navy. After greeting the guests, he retired to his study to read a dispatch from his private secretary marked *Urgent*. That was the end of his good humor for the day. He telephoned an old friend, Sir Walter Monckton, asking him to arrange a meeting with the Prime Minister at Buckingham Palace on Monday evening.

In the private bar of the Cock Tavern in Greek Street, Mettner listened to a conversation between two overweight platinum blondes in short skirts and black silk stockings. 'No good will come of it, you mark my words, Tracy,' the fatter of the two said over her port-and-lemon. 'The signs are all against it. Always have been.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Tracy replied. 'Can't say as I'm superstitious, myself. I mean, all right, I won't walk under ladders, but . . .'

'The crown fell off of the coffin at the old King's funeral. Nancy was there and she saw it. Now if that's not a bad omen, I'd like to know what is!'

'It wasn't the whole crown. It was the cross on top of it, actually. The Cross of Malta, they call it. A hundred diamonds surrounding a blue sapphire - eight big 'uns and ninety-two tiddlers. Not that I'd mind havin' a basinfull of them goldfish myself!'

'That Honorable - Ralph Shirley, his name was - he predicted in 1903 that the Prince would never be King, or if he was that the Duke of York would chuck him out and take his place. A gipsy told the Duchess in Scotland that one day she'd

be Queen. An' that was when she was only Lady Bowes-Lyon!

'Yes, I dare say. But, Alice . . .'

'One of my gentleman friends told me,' Alice said firmly, 'that this astrologer Cheiro wrote five years ago that the stars foretold the Prince of Wales'd give up the Throne for The One He loved.'

'So much for him then, silly old queen – Because he *is* King ain't he? And *she* didn't become Queen, did she? She's just an old Duchess still!'

'Yes, but he could give it all up, couldn't he? Then she would be.'

'Oh, don't talk daft, lovey! You'll be trotting out the one about the stamp next! . . .'

Mettner listened to the exchange with amusement. He had sent Michaelson a light piece on much the same lines the day before he was arrested. The affair of the postage stamp had in fact caused a certain amount of comment. It was the custom in Britain for the heads of successive monarchs to face alternately left and then right on coins and stamps, to distinguish one reign from another. Through an engraver's error, the first issue of Edward VIII's reign portrayed the King facing left, as his father had done, instead of right. When the mistake was pointed out, Edward refused to have the stamp altered, because he preferred his left profile to his right. But this left the image staring into, instead of away from, the dark half of the graded background . . . and that, the Jeremiahs said, was the worst omen of all.

'Come forth, thou fearful man,' a voice murmured at Mettner's elbow, 'affliction is enamored of thy parts, and thou art wedded to calamity!'

Mettner swung around. It was Kevin Deegan, the busker from the Mandragore. 'What sorrow craves acquaintance at my hand,' he replied, 'that I yet know not?' He raised a finger to signal the bartender.

'Too familiar is my dear son with such sour company,' Kevin said. 'Thou fond, mad man, hear me a little speak. If you'll take a person's advice, you'll have it away from this area PDQ. The word's gone around, and the Team's after your balls.'

'What are you going to drink, Friar Laurence?' Mettner said.

'Something short, be the Lord's grace – for if we're not away

outa here in about two minnits, there'll be a hot time in the ould town tonight, I'm tellin' you.'

Mettner laughed. 'A large John Jameson for the gentleman!' he said to the barman. And then: 'I sure appreciate the tip-off, Kevin. But what gives? And, to be brutal, why trouble yourself to warn me?'

'I'll answer the second question first. It's just that any man that can bandy the bard about seems worth savin', if it's only for the gift of his gab.' He raised his glass and drank. 'And as for what gives, boyo, why nothin' at all; everything has to be paid for, that's the way of it. And it seems you're havin' to pay for a certain, shall we say, curiosity and inquisitiveness that could inconvenience various parties who shall be nameless.'

'And the price?'

'At bargain basement rates, a beatin', a heavy one. In the higher price range, an unexpected encounter with the demon barber – or maybe even a headstone. Unless they just hand you back to the law.'

'Would the salesman without a name answer maybe to Billie-boy?'

'I wouldn't like to say,' the busker replied truthfully. 'C'mon now – finish that drink and away, you, to the toilets. I'll join you there in a minnit.'

'I didn't know you cared!' Mettner drained his glass and left the bar.

The window in the men's room looked out on a narrow passage that ran between Greek and Frith Streets. Mettner and the busker dropped to the pavement and hurried through. It was dark and the thinnest of drizzles misted the pools of light thrown by the street lamps. Footfalls were deadened on the moist asphalt; cars gliding down Frith Street appeared and disappeared in the murk as mysteriously as Banquo's ghost. Unless a breeze sprang up from somewhere, there could be fog before morning.

'How the hell did they know I was in the Cock?' Mettner asked. 'I guess they did know, from what you say?'

'Sure they knew. Did you ever hear tell of the Mafia, mister?'

The newspaperman chuckled. 'I think somebody mentioned the word once.'

'Well, that's what they're doing here, in a manner of speakin'. But like the old-time stuff, the Black Hand an' that. There's

an Italian colony here in Soho and another up near Russell Square. What the Yank done is to put the Team onto them. He don't just put the bite on the kayfs and clubs; he's strong-armed all the eye-tie shopkeepers into workin' as his leg-men and look-outs, see. Once the word goes around in this part of the smoke, every move you make goes straight back to him quick as you can dial a phone. Likewise when the word goes out that a geezer has to be brought in - like with you tonight.'

'You heard they were planning to come and get me at the Cock? That might be difficult, might it not? With all those people . . . and those girls! Or did you just hear that the word, as you say, had gone out . . . and you happened to know where I was? You'd heard someone tell somebody, perhaps?'

'Sure it doesn't pay to look too closely at some things, but, I seem to recall a proverb or some such regarding the gift horse.'

Mettner shrugged and forebore to press the matter. It was enough, as the busker said, that he'd been spirited away unharmed. And, if nothing else, it must mean in some way that his search was growing warm!

They crossed Soho Square. The rain was definitely turning into a mist now. Cars swam past on the greasy road like fish in a bowl, their yellow eyes hooded. The few pedestrians they saw materialized and then vanished like wraiths. 'Where are we going?' the American asked curiously.

'Somewhere where a man can talk without being interrupted.'

There was a narrow lane linking the square with Charing Cross Road. At the far end, a cul-de-sac ran behind a cinema. As they passed the mouth of the entry a huge car, dark green in the lamplight, turned into the lane and stopped. The rear door opened and two men got out. One was the vulture-like thug Mettner had seen in Bateman Street. The other was equally tall but more heavily built. He wore a brown dogtooth topcoat and a green hat. Too late, as they closed on him, Mettner saw the cunning - and the simplicity - of the plan. Of course they couldn't snatch him in a crowded pub! Much better decoy him to a deserted alley through the use of someone he trusted. It was safer too than any attempt to follow him in a car and then hope to find an opportunity to shanghai him.

As the realization flashed through his mind, the newspaperman turned to run - but he was seized above the elbows by hands which could command a vise-like grip. Perhaps the

busker's nightly gesturing had lent the muscles of his fingers an unusual strength. Before Mettner could attempt to break free the two hoods were beside him. The heavier one was buttoning a black kid glove on his right hand.

Mettner opened his mouth to yell. The vulture-like man flicked out an arm and hit him flat-handed across the throat. As Mettner gargled for air, the black glove, balled now into a fist, pistoned once, twice, three times lazily, almost casually, to the pit of his stomach. He folded forward and dropped to his knees on the sidewalk, retching. The two men grabbed him under the arms and dragged him with feet trailing the few yards to the car. He turned his head as they bundled him into the back. The busker was standing staring, an unfathomable expression on his face. 'Put money in thy pocket,' Mettner croaked, 'Iago!'

The rear door slammed. The car accelerated silently away.

Mettner slumped on the seat with his arm crossed over his middle while the breath wheezed back into his lungs. Fingers twined in his hair, dragging back his head and jerking him upright. The gloved fist hit him again several times, always around the solar plexus or in the belly. He tried to raise his arms to defend himself but a hand slapped him repeatedly across the face, bringing tears to his eyes. The car stopped, started, slowed and stopped again. There were blinds over the windows, but he guessed they must either be in Oxford Street or Tottenham Court Road. 'Why . . . go on lambasting a guy when . . . already gotten . . . in car?' Mettner choked.

'I like hitting people, dear,' the man wearing the glove said. His face was as bleak as an Easter Island statue, with granite chips for eyes. 'Besides we don't want no bleedin' cries for help while we're fuckin' stalled in the smoke, do we?'

'Not a dicky bird,' the Bateman Street thug said. 'You want me to hold a chiv against his mince, B.B.?'

The man with the glove shook his head. 'Might as well enjoy meself and put him on the deck now. There ain't enough perishin' meat on this one to make any fun once the duds is off of him.'

The car was rolling again. From the layout of the interior and the Bedford-cord upholstery, Mettner figured it was either a custom-built Packard or a Buick Super Eight. 'I guess the fairy must be Billie-boy Francis?' he said to the Bateman Street man. 'I'm surprised to see a nice guy like you in such low company. Some of the shit that pansy grows in could rub

off on you – and it don't smell good.'

Mettner's head snapped back on his shoulders as the fist crashed against his jaw. 'Sweetie, I don't like a geezer he should be rude,' Billie-boy said. He punched the American in the guts while the other hood held his arms. 'Cop this one as a start of what's comin' to you if you don't stay schtum.' The black glove slammed into the pit of Mettner's stomach again.

Mettner jack-knifed forward until his chest was against his knees. He made gagging noises with his mouth. The hinges were at the leading edge of the door; so it *was* the Packard. That meant that the chrome handle beside the arm-rest opened downward, and not upward as in the Buick.

The crooks had made two mistakes, perhaps over-confident once their quarry had so easily been led to them. Instead of effectively neutralizing Mettner by sitting one each side of him, they had crowded him into a corner of the back seat, leaving the Bateman Street thug on his left and Billie-boy facing him on the tip-up occasional seat. Between Mettner and the outside world on one side there was thus nothing but the door of the limousine.

The car swung around a sharp right-hand curve and slowed. The two hoods swayed toward the center of the tonneau – but their prisoner had been waiting for just such a movement and he leaned outwards, against the thrust of centrifugal force. As if to steady himself, his right hand shot out, hitting the chrome handle and depressing it. The heavy door swung suddenly open.

From his doubled-up position, Mettner somersaulted forward and pitched into the roadway. He hit the wet macadam with his shoulder, after a confused impression of lights and wind and squealing brakes and the oily hiss of tires, rolling frantically toward the curb after the stunning impact, in case there was traffic following close behind.

Brakes screeched again. There was an angry honking of horns. Someone shouted something. Then he was on his feet, running for the sidewalk, dodging among the scattering of pedestrians in the misty lamplight. But the Packard made no attempt to stop. The door closed. The big car picked up speed and turned left at the next intersection. Evidently Mettner had been right: they weren't going to risk anything in front of witnesses. He saw books in an illuminated shop window, a red sign spotlight above the doors of a pub, another shop displaying stationery and box files. He was in Store Street, leading to the site where the new London University Senate House was to be

built. It was less than three blocks from his own hotel.

Ten minutes later, he was asking for his key by the potted palm just inside the polished brass and mahogany swing doors of the White Hall.

Like the King and his lady at Fort Belvedere, Stanley Baldwin and the Leader of the Opposition at Chequers, and Hector Rawlins in his Neasden semi-detached, Mettner spent the whole of that Saturday indoors. It wasn't until the middle of the afternoon that he was certain the hotel was being watched. A Ford 14.9, a tiny Jowett two-seater, and then a low-slung S.S.II coupé parked across the street one after the other – and in each case the driver affected to be reading a newspaper, waited an hour, and then moved off. If they knew where he was holed up, it was hardly surprising that the men in the Packard had not troubled to give chase the previous night. They might have loused up the easy way, having him led to them and then losing him, but it wouldn't be all that difficult to make a snatch again if they could pick him up the moment he left base.

He went to the window of his room once more. Nobody was parked by the opposite curb, but the Ford was back, on the nearer side this time, a couple of houses away but still in full sight of the steps leading to the entrance doors. Mettner went to a bathroom in back of the building and looked out the window there. Beyond the strips of backyard, most of them planted with trees or shrubs or plants in pots, a lane ran along the rear of the block. On the far side of the wall bordering this, he could see the soft top of a tiny two-seater. He didn't need to walk out into the mews to know that the name on the narrow, rectangular radiator would be Jowett.

There was only one thing for it, Mettner reckoned. He would have to change base, find another hole where there wouldn't be a Ford and a Jowett and an S.S.II parked outside. There were two ways of going about it: he could leave openly, draw them after him, and then contrive to lose the tail someplace, or he could attempt to leave without them knowing and start from scratch.

As darkness fell, he drew the curtains in his room but left the lights burning. Stuffing his razor and a few personal belongings into the pockets of his trench coat, he spread enough bills to settle his account on top of the dressing-table and slipped into the corridor. He had very little money left now, but he dare not

change any more American Express checks – not with his name in all the papers. And if he could prevent the elderly White Hall personnel reporting anything to the police, so much the better.

The first part of the escape was not too difficult. The hotel's clients were all in the funereal dining-room, waiting to drown their slices of warmed-over beef in ketchup. Most of the staff were occupied there or in the kitchens, and the three spinster owners would be eating in the office behind Reception. The back stairs, designed for servant use, led past the kitchens to a basement laundry room which opened directly onto the yard. Mettner's plan was to scale the wall dividing this from the next-door premises, cross the yard there and climb the next wall, and finally let himself out into the mews several houses behind the Jowett. Such doubts as he had related to the weather and his own physical condition.

It had been raining on and off all day, and now the darkness had brought down the mist again. The sooty surfaces of brick and stone would therefore be slippery and treacherous. He was encumbered by the heavy trench coat and the cargo in its pockets – and in addition his body was lacerated, bruised and sore all over from the beating he had received, and his fall into the roadway the previous night. Fortunately the Packard had been going at no more than ten or twelve miles per hour when he threw himself from it, but even so the shock had been considerable.

He stole down the dimly lit stairway, treading on the inside of each step to minimize the risk of creaks, and paused outside the bar of illumination streaming through the open kitchen door. A cook in a white coverall stood in front of a stove with her back to him. Otherwise the pace was empty. He tiptoed past and hurried downstairs and out into the yard.

Getting over the first wall was easy: there was a row of garbage cans lined up outside the exit door, and it was just a matter of climbing up, sitting astride the brickwork, and dropping down on the far side. The yard here had been turned into some kind of patio, with french windows leading from the basement to a flagged terrace ornamented with vines and flowers in tubs. The garbage was kept in a bin just inside the door opening onto the mews. This was too close to the waiting Jowett for Mettner's comfort.

Using one of the tubs as a springboard, he jumped for the asphalt roof of a garden shed built against the wall near the house. He made it successfully, but his foot brushed against

something as he hauled himself up – something that shifted and then dropped into space. There was a shattering crash.

Mettner froze, spreadeagled on the wet roof.

Light lanced into the darkness of the yard below him as someone jerked aside a curtain. A broken flowerpot lay on the flagstones by a small mound of earth and leaves. A sash beside the french windows was flung up, silhouetting a man's head and shoulders.

'Those blasted cats!' a voice called angrily. 'There's another of the fibrous-rooted begonias gone! . . . Shoo! Piss off! Get out of it!' The man clapped his hands loudly, muttered something under his breath, and then slammed down the sash. The light, and the drifts of rain it revealed, vanished.

Mettner released his breath in a long sigh of relief and turned back to the wall. The next yard gave him no trouble, nor the one after that: it was stacked with lumber and the descent was as easy as walking down a staircase. Cautiously, he unlatched the door in the end wall and let himself out into the mews.

The Jowett's single red tail light was three houses away. Mettner turned up his trenchcoat collar and headed for Bloomsbury Square. He was almost at the end of the mews when he heard the Jowett's two-cylinder motor cough to life. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the little two-seater turn around and accelerate toward him. The driver must have recognized him even in the mirror – which meant it had to be someone who knew him: Billie-boy, the Bateman Street thug, or perhaps even the busker. Mettner broke into a run and cut across the center of the square.

As the Jowett raced around the perimeter of the small public park, he sprinted over the far roadway and plunged beneath a pseudo-classical arch into Sardinia Street – a pedestrian precinct that sliced the block diagonally and led to Southampton Row. By the time his pursuer had driven around the block and negotiated the lights, Mettner had crossed the Row and jumped a tramway car turning into the street from Theobald's Road.

The Jowett tailed the tram past Holborn Underground station and down Kingsway . . . but was forced to abandon the chase at the top of Aldwych, where the tracks dived underground and did not emerge again until they reached the Thames embankment near Waterloo Bridge. The driver didn't have a hope of making it: Mettner had hopped off and taken a train at the Temple station before he'd even turned off the Strand.

He changed at Charing Cross, took the Northern Line back

to Tottenham Court Road, and then rode one stop east on the Central to surface finally at Museum, only a few hundred yards southwest of the hotel he had escaped from less than a half hour previously.

Mettner had no clear idea how he was going to set about locating Ralfini with both the police and the underworld after him. Nor did he know what he would do once he had contacted the Mafia man. But find him he must – or face the thought of remaining a hunted man with a faked-up murder charge hanging over his head. Once more the first step seemed to him to find a base from which he could mount his clandestine operation. The safest place to look for this, he reckoned, and the one least likely to be patrolled by the men who wanted to kidnap him, was the very neighborhood he had just fled. There were, he knew, any amount of rooming houses, and hotels even more anonymous than the White Hall, in the Coram Street and Guilford Street areas on the far side of Russell Square.

Veils of mist swathed the street lamps as he crossed Bloomsbury Square for the second time that evening. Southampton Row was deserted, roadway gleaming, lighted store fronts reflected in the moisture varnishing the empty sidewalks. Mettner walked up toward the Imperial Hotel and then turned in under an arch framing the entrance to a lane heading east.

The arch pierced a big Victorian office block. Half way through it was the side entrance to a pub. Mettner looked at the pink light behind the mullioned windows, listened to the chatter and laughter inside, and wished he could take time off to go in there too. As he passed, the door opened and a man came out. Mettner saw him clearly in the light flooding the arch from the bar behind him. It was Brearley, the Scotland Yard sergeant working with Superintendent Rawlins.

The recognition was mutual. For an instant the two men froze . . . and then, as the policeman exclaimed, 'Hey! Just a minute . . . !', Mettner pushed past him and broke into a run.

Brearley shouted something and dashed after him. A police whistle shrilled. For the second time, the newspaperman thanked his lucky stars that the British police were unarmed. If Brearley had been a Chicago cop, Mettner would have been lying on the wet cobbles by now with a couple of slugs from a .38 Police Special letting the air into his back.

He pelted down the alley and turned into a narrow street. The sergeant's footsteps pounded behind. The whistle blew again. Mettner lengthened his stride to increase his lead. He

reached an intersection, ran across a wide roadway shining with tramway tracks, continued down the narrow street. For the third time the whistle shrilled. Brearley was falling behind. But this time there were answering blasts off to one side and dead ahead.

Mettner's breath was rasping in his lungs as he turned left into a paved walk . . . and stopped in his tracks. The walk was only about fifty yards long and it ended in a blank brick wall. There were small houses on each side of the pavement. By the area railings outside one of the nearest, a tall dark girl loitered beneath a street lamp. She was wearing a shiny black raincoat, tightly belted, and a latchkey dangled from the ring she held in her hand.

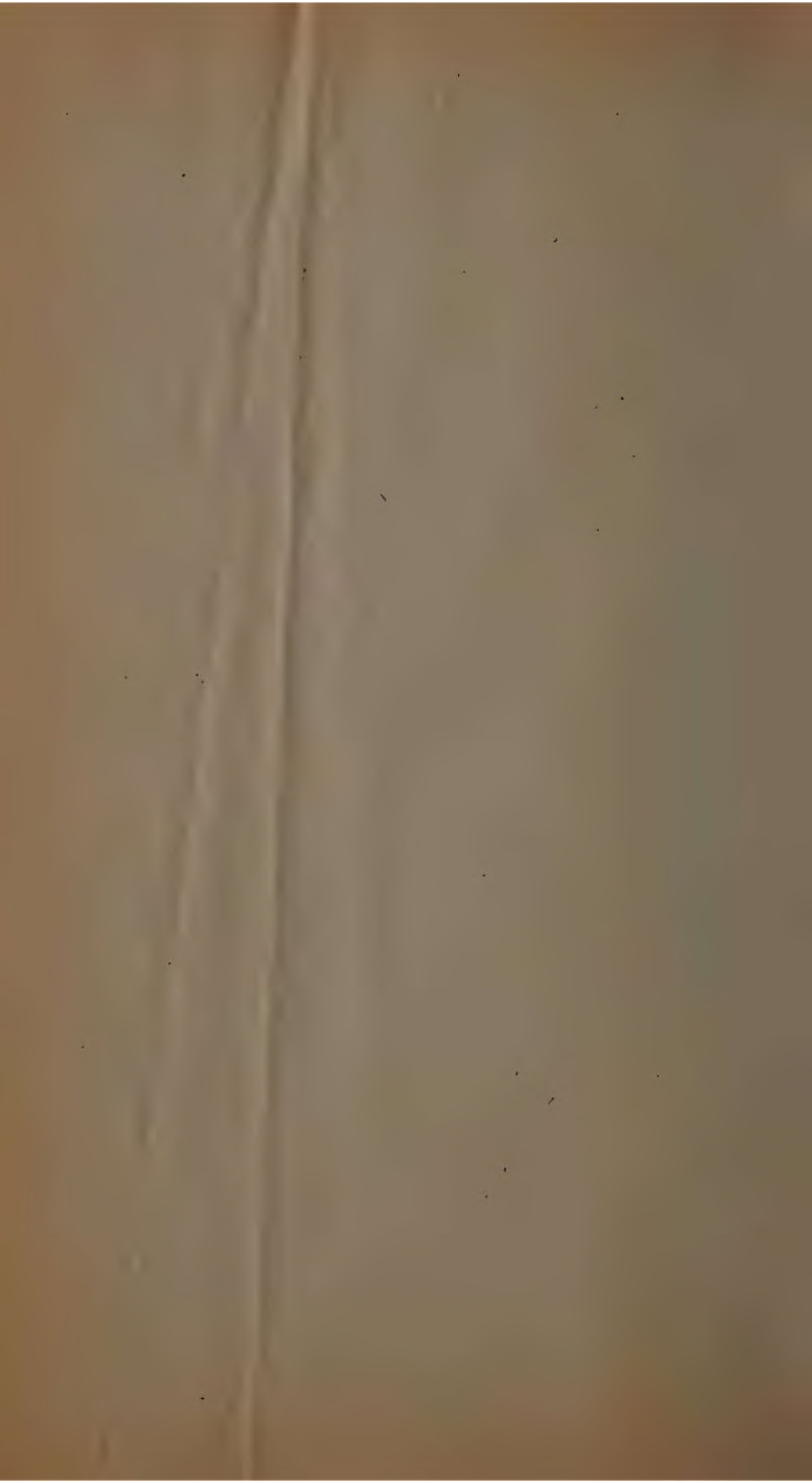
'All right, baby,' Mettner panted. 'Any price you say. But let's make it fast, huh?'

For a moment she stared at him, registering the approaching footsteps and the chorus of whistles. Then she smiled. 'Come on then!' she said.

She ran up the steps, unlocked the door and pushed it open. Mettner slid inside as Brearley reached the end of the walk and stopped. The girl eased the door shut, took the American's hand, and led him to a room at the far end of a dark hallway. She switched on a light.

It was a pleasantly furnished sitting-room with corn colored easy chairs on a sage green carpet, and Victorian seascapes around the walls. The girl was beautiful - not as young as Mettner had thought. She must be well over thirty, but with good bones under the make-up and finely modeled features. She unfastened the belt of her raincoat and smiled again.

'I'm sorry to disappoint you,' she said, 'but I'm afraid I'm not on the bash, actually. Since you're here though, the least I can do is offer you a drink.' She walked across to an oak cupboard standing against the wall. 'Do you prefer whisky or gin, Mr Mettner?'



PART THREE

Jason Mettner

We trust that the King will put the interests of the nation above all personal feelings, however strong.

The Scotsman

If private inclination were to come into open conflict with public duty, inclination should not be allowed to prevail.

The Times

TEN

I stared at her. If I was a guy in a popular novel, where the hero's jaw drops, mine would have been at the bottom of a well. 'How the hell . . . ?' I began.

The girl smiled. Good teeth, wide brown eyes crinkling at the corners, a lot of lipstick, shining in the light. 'Wouldn't you like something to drink?' she asked again.

'I guess I'd better,' I said. I collapsed into a chair. 'Make mine a Scotch, if you would.' I got up again and took off my wet trench coat. The yellow velour on the chair would mark easy, and there were soot stains all over the garment. 'Look,' I said, 'pardon me for asking, but how the hell did you know who I was?'

She was busy with glasses and bottles at the sideboard. 'I saw your picture in the paper.'

'Ah, c'mon!' I was pacing up and down. 'I saw it too. A police department mug sent by wire! My own mother wouldn't have recognized it!'

'Very well. I read the stories. I saw the photo. I get around. So when I see a man running from the bogeys who answers that description - a man who speaks with an American accent - I dig. You have to in my business.'

'All right,' I said. 'I'll buy it. What is your business?'

'I run a night club,' this girl said.

'A night club? Jesus, isn't that kind of a tough business for a dame? I mean . . . especially right now, with the shakedowns and that?'

'Shakedowns?'

'The protection racket. They tell me it's all the rage this side of the Atlantic. Pretty rugged for a woman, trying to duck that kind of routine, huh?'

She shook her head. Her dark hair was short, with a natural wave to it. 'Not if you run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.'

I took the glass she handed me. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'A woman can please several kinds of customers at once – ugly customers included,' she said. 'A man could never get away with that. I can and I do. I play my cards right – and I hold them close to my chest.'

I dropped back into the chair. 'Lucky cards!' I said.

She ignored the compliment. 'I did draw the lucky ones to begin with,' she said seriously. 'But you still have to play them right. The Priory –'

'The Priory?'

'That's the name of my club.'

'I get it. What kind of club? A clip joint? A strip joint? A hog-and-hopper? Something ritzy with a floorshow?'

'I was just going to tell you – if you could forget you're a newspaperman for five seconds and stop throwing questions at me,' she said sharply. Touch of color about the cheeks, the eyes flashing, quick to take offense. I like them that way. 'Sorry,' I said.

She sat down opposite me and sank what looked like half a tumblerful of straight Scotch. 'The Priory's kind of special,' she said. 'I aimed for a particular mixture of people and I got it. We serve excellent food. There's a good five-piece on stage. The floorshow's just one act, but it's always out of the top drawer – Dietrich, Crosby, Gracie Fields, Fred Allen. And of course it costs.'

I said nothing. She was going to wise me up anyway, because obviously she was proud of the place. The whiskey tasted great.

'But it's the clientele itself that's the real attraction,' she went on. 'I get the top people from lots of different walks of life, and most of them find it kind of intriguing to be amongst the others. Three out of Scotland Yard's Big Five are regulars, for instance. But so are the brains behind the off-track betting syndicates and some of the more important gang leaders. I get sportsmen from the Albany and most of the boxing big noises along with Mayfair punters, fences and the spenders in show business. Along with these there's a sprinkling of columnists . . . and of course the socialites who get a kick out of rubbing shoulders with the underworld. Right now that's a very chic thing to do!'

'You must be quite a girl!' I said. 'No scientists, politicians or literary geniuses?'

'No,' she said. 'I don't have any of those. But I do get movie

directors and some of the top brass from the army. That's what I mean, running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. No bogey's going to trip me up on the licensing laws when his boss may be at the next table – and some villain at the bar could tip him off to a bank raid planned by a rival. No mobster's going to try and put the bite on me when I run a place that's going to varnish him with a coat of respectability! Up and down, whichever way you look at it, people are snobs.' She shrugged, drained her glass and got to her feet. 'I make it my business to cash in on it, that's all.'

'You must have been reading Dumas the younger,' I said.

'Come again?'

'“Business?”,' I quoted. '“That's easy: it's simply other people's money!”'

She laughed. Deepish voice, slightly husky; more of a chuckle really. 'I must remember that,' she said. She unbuttoned the raincoat, stripped it off, and threw it over the back of a chair. 'Let me get you a refill.'

For a moment I didn't reply. You don't have to believe this, but I couldn't. I mean I'd realized there was no circus freak under that raincoat, but the stiff rubberized material had concealed the clues that could have tipped me off. Of course there was nothing to it really: just a pencil-slim charcoal skirt sheathing perfect thighs, a plain citron sweater with a thin gray waist belt. It's just that I have this weakness for Petty Girl figures.

Finally I cleared my throat and said: 'A refill would be swell. Thanks. Uh . . . I don't have to introduce myself. You know I'm Jason Mettner. My friends call me Jay, unless they're being truthful. May I know . . . ?'

'Maya Coloris,' she said. I learned later that her mother was French and her father had been Greek – a bigtime Soho restaurateur who was killed when the R.101 airship crashed at Beauvais in France on its maiden flight in 1931. Everything she'd learned from him – and everything she'd inherited from him – had gone into the Priory, when she started it four years ago. Now it was one of the most successful night spots in town. It was something else too; something about it was floating just below the level of my consciousness – something I'd heard, maybe, but couldn't remember? I failed to catch it, but I knew the name should mean more to me than a word in caps among the small ads on the entertainment page of an evening paper.

'Look, Maya,' I said. 'I'm going to be inquisitive again. But first I have to apologize for thinking you were –'

'Taking me for a brass?' She grinned. 'Forget it. With this black coat, hanging around outside a door with a latchkey in my hand . . . well, I could hardly blame you!'

'That's what I was going to ask. Why *were* . . . that's to say, how did you happen to be – uh – hanging around like that, just at that time?'

'I heard police whistles blowing and the sounds of a chase . . . somebody running in my direction . . . naturally I waited to see what was happening. Wouldn't you? Of course you would: especially you, in your business!'

'Why didn't you turn me in . . . when you realized . . . ?'

'When I realized who you were? Why do you think?'

I shook my head. Anglo-French-Greek night club owners are a mystery to me.

'Three reasons,' Maya said. 'One, I'd just come back from a meeting of some club-owners' association: most of the members were screaming queers, and I like men. Two, it sounded from the newspaper stories as if you *were* a man – but obviously there was a lot more to it than you read in the paper, and I wanted to hear the full story at first hand.'

'And the third reason?'

We were standing by the sideboard. She came very close to me and picked a thread from the sleeve of my jacket. 'I like tall men,' she said.

Maybe the liquor helped. Maybe it was my day. Perhaps those fantasies we have work out once in a hundred years. I don't know. I do know that the whole of that evening's kind of hazy – but that somewhere around that time Maya and me found ourselves in the hottest clinch since Paolo and Francesca. And that if ever I'd thought Dorothy Kimble's mouth was promising, I had to admit now that it was strictly junior league material.

After a time, though, even with a body as pliant as that draped against you, the mind goes on working; the thoughts spiral up through the quickened breaths and the fumes of Scotch. She'd started a bell ringing a while back. Something she'd said when I asked her why – Yeah! That was it! Screaming queers. She'd been to a meeting packed with fairies. Trying to visualize it, I saw two chorus boys in a pub off St Martin's Lane – and I remembered why the name of Maya's club was familiar. *He doesn't exactly encourage visitors*, one of them had lisped. *If you really want to see him, you could try the Priory, of course . . .*

Billie-boy Francis. The iron pouf in the velvet glove, as someone said.

About three drinks later, when Maya and her tall man were re-upholstering a chaise-longue not too far from the sideboard, I asked casually: 'You said some of the gang leaders use your club. Ever see a character there by the name of Billie-boy Francis?'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Another queen - though you wouldn't think it to look at him! Yes, he comes in from time to time. Why do you ask?'

'He's connected with my own story,' I said. 'I figure him for the baddie in the Dorothy Kimble case. Did you know her too?'

'The blonde pusher? The one you were supposed to have killed? I knew her by sight. I had to have her thrown out of the club a couple of times. Even with my clientele, I have to be discreet. I mean, you know . . . ' Maya shook her head. 'I'm afraid she was a little tramp,' she said.

'And Ralfini?'

'The Yank, as they call him?' The dark head was shaken again. 'I've heard about him of course, but I never laid eyes on him. I don't think he's ever been to the Priory. Why - is he part of your story too?'

'You could say that!' I said grimly. At least I intended to say it grimly, but somehow the words came out kind of sideways. Splashy, too. The room was dilating and contracting in front of my eyes and Dorothy . . . No, not Dorothy! Maya! . . . yes, Maya was becoming blurred at the edges, like the pinup on the cover of a pulp magazine whose red mouth doesn't quite correspond with the line of the lips. Her voice came from a long way away. 'I said - did you eat any dinner this evening?'

I couldn't understand why I was sitting on the floor. I started to shake my head, but the furniture went on swinging from side to side when I stopped. I filed the idea away for use another time. 'When did you last have something to eat?' Maya called through the cotton-wool padding my ears.

When?

I didn't have lunch at the hotel because I'd been checking out on all those automobiles. I certainly hadn't had any dinner. Breakfast? I couldn't remember - but I'd had a couple of . . . Shit! That was it! Of course. All those whiskies we'd been knocking back! I hadn't suffered a stroke. Nobody had slipped me a Mickey Finn. I wasn't in the San Francisco earthquake. I'd tied one on, that was all. I had one hell of a buzz on and if

I wasn't careful I'd go out like a light!

'Too much liquor on an empty belly,' I mumbled. I struggled to my feet and started to walk toward Maya on an invisible sheet of glass about six inches off the floor. She floated away to one side and a chair came at me.

'Don't get up, Jay,' she said. 'I'll call a cab and we'll go eat at my place, all right?'

'I thought I was in your place,' I said.

'This house belongs to me, but I don't live here,' she said. 'I have an apartment over the club: that's where I feel really at home. And I can get them to send up something nice from the kitchens. How would that be?'

So far as I was concerned, that would be great – but I don't remember what I replied. Tell you the truth, I don't remember a goddam thing for some time after that: there's kind of a blank in my mind. I guess she got me out of there and into a taxi. Maybe the cold air sobered me up some. Maybe I even passed out for a while. I wouldn't know. The next thing I recall distinctly is sitting at a table in a room I'd never seen before. There was a white cloth on the table, and silver, and tall glasses and a bottle of Burgundy in a cradle. In front of me was a plate with a half-eaten Tournedos Rossini sheltering a gang of french fries and some salad. Off to one side, a dumb-waiter carried a silver tureen and two used soup bowls.

Maya was sitting across from me holding a glass of wine. She was wearing some kind of housecoat in gold – I think it was gold – and it had a deep vee neck that plunged out of sight below the edge of the table. The lights were low and I lost myself in the shadows of that vee. I never did know if the music I heard was in my mind or whether there really was a band playing someplace nearby. 'Welcome back, Jay!' she said, raising the glass. 'Here's to a beautiful friendship!'

It must be a dream, I thought. Here I am with this fantastic broad . . . it has to be a dream! But suddenly everything sharpened into focus and all the edges became crystal clear. Her teeth were a dazzling white. Her lips, smiling, were the reddest I'd ever seen. Her eyes were the darkest in the world. The glass I raised reflected all the colors of the spectrum from its elegant base. Rainbows weren't good enough for Maya and me. I leered at her across the pool of light isolating the table, and the shapes of furniture humped in the shadows around us vanished into the unknown reaches of the strange room.

'Eat your steak,' she said. 'If what you've been saying is more

than a boast, you're going to need your strength later!'

Later was cheese. Later was coffee and brandy in front of a log fire I hadn't even noticed. Later was lips and arms and legs and a scalding wet softness and then whispered confidences between crisp sheets. Later was waking in the blackness and feeling Maya's hand on me and her breast against my arm. Jesus, I wish the hell I could remember the details of later. It must have been marvelous!

ELEVEN

Identical twins armed with sledgehammers were trying to batter their way out of my skull when I woke up the next morning. I opened my eyelids to help them make a quicker getaway, but someone pierced the eyeballs from outside with two stilettos and then shone a bright light through the holes. I groaned and rolled over onto my back.

A soft, warm body rolled on top of me, wedging a thigh between my legs. I felt the gentle weight of breasts against my chest. I opened my eyes again. Maya was supporting herself on her elbows, chin resting on cupped hands, staring at me with an amused smile on her face.

'Big joke!' I said. 'That's the trouble with these mail-order heads: can't take the same kind of punishment as the custom-built models. This one ain't even out of guarantee!'

She laughed. There weren't many laughs that I could have tolerated that close to my ears right then. Hers sounded good. 'Poor baby,' she said. 'I'll go fix you some strong black coffee and orange juice! You stay there.'

'Did anyone see me try to leave?' I croaked.

The twins went onto short time once I'd gotten some coffee down, though there was a stone-crusher in back of them that I heard from time to time. Maya sat on the edge of the bed and dunked a French roll into a large cup of coffee and cream. She was wearing a crimson silk kimono with a black dragon embroidered across the back. I looked at the parts of her it wasn't covering. It was a pleasure. She was slender, but what the boys on the night club beat call nubile. Generally that means a certain amount of top hamper, a small waist above a soft belly, and flesh around the hips. This time was no exception. In daylight, with no make-up, her face was handsome rather than pretty: the skin was maybe a little coarse and the jaw was determined. I guess it had to be, the business she had chosen! Anyway, with those eyes, that mouth, and a body like that, who

cared? I'll tell you something else about Maya Coloris. She was more adventurous with that body – and she knew more tricks – than any dame I'd ever met.

Eventually, I looked around the room. One whole wall was a fitted clothes closet. An original Lautrec lithograph hung beside the dressing-table. I couldn't see out because the oyster silk drapes were still drawn, but a black and green bathroom was visible through one door and a corner of the room we'd eaten in last night through another.

'Look, honey – I have to make plans,' I said, when I'd finished the coffee and orange juice.

'Later,' Maya said. 'I'll do anything I can to help. But first you need more sleep. You're bushed, Jay. Otherwise the drink would never have affected you like that.'

'Can you tell me one good way I could get back to sleep?' I asked.

She lifted the covers and slipped in beside me. 'Yes,' she said. 'I can.'

She was right too. It wasn't until around one o'clock that I finally surfaced and shifted into top. The drapes were drawn back and I lay looking up at small patches of blue amongst the clouds. I swung my feet to the floor, stood up, and walked to the window. The men with the hammers had been laid off.

The apartment appeared to be on the second floor. I stared down at a gray street lined with young plane trees. Drifts of fallen leaves, orange and yellow and brown, covered the sidewalk, and the roadway was still moist. There was a row of red brick terrace houses on the far side, and a big building that looked like a hospital or some kind of institution farther along. Below the window and to one side a red striped canopy projected over the pavement. It seemed an odd place for a night club. There was no traffic in the street, I could see no stores, and there were very few cars parked between the canopy and a T-junction with stop lights, beyond which I could see more trees.

Maya came into the room. She was dressed in jade green lounging pajamas with wide pants and a loose jacket. 'My God!' she said. 'I know we make sweet music together, but did I do that?'

She was staring at my naked body. I glanced down and saw that the beating I'd received, plus the fall from the Packard had left me looking like a relief map of the Andes, with blue for the uplands, dirty amber for the plains and purple for the forest

areas. 'Baby,' I said, 'it would have been a pleasure – but rougher hands than yours done cut this good man down!'

She laid a hand between Quito and Bogota. 'Poor darling. I'll have them send us up some lunch, then I'll rub you in some liniment or embrocation while you tell me all about it.'

'Swell,' I said. 'Does your club open for lunch, then? Where are we anyway, for God's sake? I've been trying to pinpoint the location but I can't make it. It looks more like some outskirts-of-town neighborhood than clubland.'

'I wanted my club to be different,' Maya said. 'I didn't want to be just another joint in the square mile.'

'The square mile?'

'Soho and Mayfair. London's square mile of vice. I wanted to be out of that – which helped with the no shakedown situation, incidentally: no competition means no trouble. I wanted to be in an area that was easy to get to, but where the clients could always find a space to park. And I also wanted a place that wouldn't attract wandering drunks, tourists, football supporters and visiting firemen. The kind of place, in fact, that I got. The lights you can see are in Woburn Place and the trees beyond are Russell Square. We're between Guilford Street and Red Lion Street, just behind the hospital.'

'Jesus!' I said. 'That's just the neighborhood I was heading for when I bumped into the law last night! I knew there'd be a cheap flophouse somewhere around!'

Maya ignored that one. I guess she was right too. 'To answer your question,' she said. 'Yes, we do open for lunch. And it'll be up here in about three minutes, so you'd better shower and get shaved quickly.'

Lunch was a dozen oysters followed by smoked salmon and a bottle of Chassagne Montrachet. It was served by a guy in a white mess jacket whose face looked like the roof of a Baptist chapel. 'Are they all like that?' I asked when this character had swung off from branch to branch. 'Or is it just that one who doubles as sparring partner for Carnera?'

'A woman running a late-night club has to have a certain amount of muscle around,' Maya said, 'or people will try to take advantage. If you can get strong men who are also good waiters – and that one is – then you're half way there. Now pour me some wine and tell me all about this mess you got yourself into.'

I poured her some wine and told her all about this mess I'd gotten myself into. I gave her the complete rundown, telling it

the way it happened, right from Michaelson's briefing to the moment I first saw her. The only thing I left out – women are funny that way – was the fact that I'd hoped to lay Dorothy Kimble. I pretended the meeting had been arranged simply in the hope of finding some lead that might get me nearer to Ralfini.

'The whole shoot in fact,' Maya said when I'd finished, 'arose out of your hunch that there might be a story in this Mafia man's presence here?'

I nodded. 'I was right too. There is a story. But following it up landed me the star part in a bigger story myself – and I can't write the end to that one until I get to Ralfini and choke the truth out of him. Which should wrap up the whys and where-fors of the first story too!'

'Until you get to Ralfini . . . how d'you think you're going to do that?'

'Go on doing what I was doing. Find a new base . . . stick around until I pick up a lead . . . follow it through and –'

'Jay!' Maya interrupted. 'You must be out of your mind! You're mad! You wouldn't last a day, the way things are now.'

'How d'you mean – the way things are now?'

'I made a few – shall we say? – discreet enquiries this morning,' she said. 'I floated off a few decoys and waited to see who was going to bite.'

'And?'

'And you dare not step outside my flat, darling, that's the truth. You're on the spot two ways at once. The bogeys are after you. Having missed you last night, they're putting everything they've got into the murder hunt. And the Team are after you too, as you know. The word's gone around the underworld: there'll be money paid to anyone that turns you in, and a beating given to anyone who recognizes you and doesn't. Honestly, the moment you leave here, you'll be surrounded by so many grasses, you'll think you're –'

'But I can't stay here!' I cut in. 'I have to –'

'Why ever not? There's something wrong with the food? You have some fault to find with the . . . service? You don't like the company?' There were those two red spots on her cheeks again. The eyes were flashing danger signals through the mascara.

'Don't be a dope,' I said. 'You know it's not anything like that.'

'If this man Ralfini's around,' Maya said, 'And if he's doing what you say he is – I don't know for certain that you're right,

but *if* you are – then you'll see him a lot quicker than you expect if you leave here. Only it won't be on your terms; it'll be on his. And I should imagine that if there's any choking to be done, it'll be your neck rather than your hands that'll be involved.'

I didn't say anything. Maya was right. She was making sense.

'Stay here with me,' she said. 'A place like this – downstairs, I mean – I can put out feelers, sound people out. You can do a hell of a lot more for yourself, working on the information I bring you, than you ever could on your own.'

'Yeah,' I said doubtfully, 'I guess you're right. But would there *be* any information? I mean, you know baby, I'm in a spot. I have to get to the bottom of this frame somehow, and that means facts and it means proof – which in turn means some kind of leg work. It has to. Do you really think you'd be able to . . . ?'

'You don't know the people I know,' Maya said. 'You don't know what influence a girl in my position can have. Trust me, Jay. I'll do everything I possibly can. I promise. In the meantime . . . well, there could be worse ways to avoid jail, don't you think?'

I drained my glass and set it down. 'What do *you* think?' I said.

'I think you should take off that bathrobe and let me smother you with liniment.'

The Andes had never been explored in such depth. This time, Chile was strictly *con carne*, and by the time she got to Tierra del Fuego the joints were jumping. It must have been the first time the American flag was raised in Patagonia.

That evening, Maya changed into a clinging black crêpe dress with a red rose on one shoulder, and went down to play hostess in her club. She'd shown me over the place earlier, in the zero spot between six and eight, when the afternoon drunks had gone home after their hard day's work in the boardroom and the sugar-daddies hadn't yet shown to wine and dine their mistresses. It was a ritzy dive all right. A single line of tables surrounded a small sunken dance floor. There were two more rows behind a balustrade a couple of feet above this. On a third level, another balustrade partitioned off the tables for the hoi-polloi, and a long bar stretched between the entrance stairs and a door leading to the washrooms. The band occupied a postage stamp stage at one side of the shallow stairs linking the three levels.

We came into the place through padded double doors with windows like ship's portholes. On the way down we'd passed an office floor full of accountants sorting through bills and invoices in an attempt to kid the Inland Revenue people that Maya was losing money. Above that was the apartment, and above that again an attic storey used for stores. I looked around at the white tablecloths and gold chairs and red carpet. Oak beams striped the ceiling above the bar, and there were stained glass partitions, cute little fake mullioned windows, and wrought iron decorations here and there to carry out the Priory motif. 'This is a hell of a place to find in a residential street,' I said, 'even in the Russell Square neighborhood! What's the exterior look like, anyway?'

'Apart from the awning over the pavement,' Maya said, 'you wouldn't know it was here. It's made out of two or three of the terrace houses knocked together. There's no electric sign, no neon, not even a nameplate. From the outside it looks exactly like the rest of the street.'

I nodded. 'Just like the White Hall,' I said. 'Except for the ketchup bottles.'

Behind the distant surf of conversation, I could hear faint strains of music as the evening dragged on. So far as I could tell, it was a pretty small group – maybe clarinet, alto and three rhythm. They'd hardly be using Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians on that stage. Mostly they played syrupy commercial favorites – *Sweet Leilani*, *In The Chapel* *In The Moonlight*, *Love And Learn*, spiced with an occasional rumba such as *Mama Inez* or *Cuban Pete*. But every now and then they'd take off on a jazzier like *Deep Henderson* or *Caravan* or one of Raymond Scott's specialities. During these flagwavers, I caught bursts of alto that signaled a guy who knew what the word swing meant. The most persistent sounds of all, however, were the slamming of car doors and the gunning of motors in the street outside. Anyone who could believe the Priory wasn't doing good business needed to have his head examined – or maybe to take a job as a tax inspector.

To help make the time pass, I read all the newspapers Maya had had sent up. **BALDWIN MUST GO! – BUT WHO WILL REPLACE HIM?** asked one headline. According to the front-page story, there was a hell of a row going on in Parliament over a rearmament debate that had taken place just before the weekend. Apparently the Prime Minister had inadvertently revealed that he had vetoed any move to rearm Britain in 1933,

at the beginning of the Hitler scare, because he figured it could lose the Conservative party an election. 'He has been called a master of political intrigue, guile, bluff and chicanery,' one mass-circulation daily said. 'But it is only now that he stands revealed in his true and shabby colours: a man who puts his party before his country! The Empire must rid itself of this unworthy leader. Without delay!'

Another paper led with a story from Paris. France was furious with Britain, the correspondent said, because London refused to intervene in Spain. Léon Blum's Popular Front government wanted to honor its treaty with the democratically elected Spanish government and send war materials across the Pyrenees to the Republicans. But the British had warned that if any arms crossed the Spanish frontier they would abrogate their own defense pact with France and refuse to go to her aid in the case of an attack by Nazi Germany.

In *The Times*, following the pro-Hitler policy of editor Dawson, a leading article urged that if only the rest of Europe could bring itself to grant Germany's reasonable requests, the unreasonable ones would naturally be dropped. Several sports commentators assured me that the English XI could not hope to win at Sydney unless there was a marked improvement in close fielding. I myself was only mentioned in one tabloid. Three people had recognized me boarding the Irish boat at Fishguard – but I had disappeared by the time the *garda* came aboard on the other side of St George's Channel.

Clearly, Sergeant Brearley wasn't making any press releases out of the fact that he'd seen me – and missed me – in London last night! That didn't mean he was doing nothing about it nevertheless. Maya came upstairs to have a drink with me when the gorilla in the white jacket brought in a casserole of coq-au-vin and a bottle of Volnay around ten o'clock. 'Don't say I didn't tell you,' she began, 'but you can thank your lucky stars I persuaded you to stay with me today, sweetie.'

'With food like this,' I said, twisting the corkscrew, 'astrologers can rest assured of a constant stream of gratitude. So what's new, Nostradamus?'

'One of the bigwigs from the Yard was in,' she said. 'There's a cordon around this area as tight as a hairnet. Once they lost you last night they knew you must have gone to ground somewhere in the neighborhood. It seems they had every street and every alleyway covered within a half hour. If you'd gone out this morning you wouldn't have lasted a minute.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Okay, honey. So I stay here until the heat's off. And seriously, don't think it won't be one hell of a pleasure. Tell me one thing though: I need fresh clothes and I need loot. Do you know any way I could cash American Express checks? Without it being a give-away, I mean. I hate to ask you . . . but I guess I really mean like undercover. Illegally.'

She smiled. 'Don't be silly. We cash them here. Give them to me and I'll put them through Accounts myself.'

'Gee, thanks. That'd be great. But wouldn't it put you . . . ?'

Maya shook her head. 'I'll pre-date the transaction . . . make it look as though you cashed them before the police were after you, before that girl was killed. I can fake up a duplicate bill to make it look better still.'

'Swell. Now, there's another thing bugging me. I'm going to get kind of restive, up here on my lonesome while you're working down there. And there's a hell of a lot going on, I see from the papers. If I was to amuse myself writing a couple of pieces for my editor, do you think you could get them cabled to Chicago - not under my name, of course?'

She grinned. 'No trouble at all. I'll have a typewriter sent up.'

The idea pleased me. I hadn't been directly in touch with Michaelson since my arrest. He'd arranged to get me the best lawyers in London, once the agency wire services had wised him up to the situation. And naturally I'd sent messages through them assuring him of my innocence and relaying my thanks. But I hadn't used the lawyers much; he'd have heard nothing since my escape. It would please the old bastard to get a situationer from Our Man On The Run, tying in the whole British scene with the life of a fugitive . . . and they couldn't pin an obstructing-the-course-of-justice rap on him because he genuinely wouldn't know where the scoop came from. 'How will he know it's from you at all, if there's no address and your name's not on it?' Maya asked.

'You just hand the cable in at Western Union or Cable & Wireless,' I said, 'and there'll be a phoney name at the end that'll tip him off.'

'Such as?'

'Such as Ronald Graeme O'Naught.'

Maya looked puzzled. 'R. G. O'Naught,' I explained. 'R. Gonaught. Argonaut. Now who or what do you associate with an argonaut?'

'Jason!' she exclaimed. 'A cigar for the gent with the golden fleece!'

'I never did go for blondes,' I lied. 'I like my fleece brunette. How long do I have to wait before you come to bed?'

'I'm afraid it may be almost two,' she said. 'But don't you dare be asleep!'

I'll say one thing for that girl: if her middle name wasn't Enthusiasm, I wouldn't be allowed to print it anyway. She had a thing about clothes too. I don't think I ever saw her in the same outfit twice. She wore classic Chanel suits and tailor-mades, cocktail dresses and tea-gowns, demure twinsets and outrageous models glittering with sequins and nodding with plumes. Once she spent an evening downstairs swathed tightly in cream colored satin with her hair coiled up like Wallis Simpson's. Another time she surprised me at my borrowed typewriter dressed like a whore with high-heeled black patent pumps, fishnet stockings and a shiny mackintosh!

The thing that slayed me about Maya was that she changed character to suit each costume. I don't mean that she was *acting* roles. She didn't affect a strangulated Mayfair accent when she was dolled up like a deb at a Palace garden party; she wasn't communicating in Cockney rhyming slang when she looked like a Soho tart. But somehow her *behavior* went with the image she'd created. She'd be arrogant and supercilious when she was playing the socialite, for instance – and then, when I'd been needled enough to tear the clothes off her, she'd come across with a stream of whispered obscenity that couldn't be matched by a motorman on the elevated. She was dominating, dismissive, almost contemptuous when she made it with the hustler routine – but there'd be nothing but a garter belt and a see-through brassière under the rubberized raincoat. The sweater-and-pearls girl had to be wooed with sweet talk and promises of undying love. Her terrifying Modern Miss, on the other hand, took over completely and demonstrated every trick in the book with an additional appendix of her own. The last was the easiest for me – not because I like women to take the initiative: as a rule I don't – but because it seemed to come the most naturally to Maya, and therefore left me in no doubt as to the role I was expected to play.

I'm telling you, there was never a dull moment with Madame Coloris: it was like being the master of a harem, or laying women taken at random from a crowd. Except of course that the choice was always the lady's and not my own.

Time passed quickly. I checked that through the press digests, and club gossip passed on to me by Maya, both of which I wrote up and cabled to Chicago the way we'd agreed. Baldwin went to Scotland for an important policy speech on Britain's non-intervention in Europe. The King went back to visit the miners in Wales. Stafford Cripps, the famous socialist lawyer and MP who was said to lose the Labour Party 100,000 votes every time he opened his mouth, opened it again – in private. Opposition to Edward's marriage, he declared, was purely social. He had little doubt that if the lady in question had happened, under precisely similar circumstances, to have been an aristocrat, then the government would have taken 'an entirely different decision'. That was another front-pager for the Argonaut!

Better stuff came later that week. Someone in the House of Commons asked the President of the Board of Trade if there was a special censorship on magazines and newspapers imported from abroad. The question of course had been inspired by readers angry at finding their copies of *Time* and *Paris-Match* mutilated by the importers. When Walter Runciman, the minister, said that he did not fully understand the question, Ellen Wilkinson, the broad who'd led the Jarrow hunger march, spelled it out for him. Why had two reputable American publications had two, sometimes three, pages torn out of them recently, she asked – and what exactly was it that the British public was not allowed to see?

Runciman replied weakly that it was not the business of his department. Then, on Monday the 23rd, the *Daily Mail* attacked the government. The King, the paper said in a reference to his Welsh visit, actually went to see for himself when something was wrong. His ministers, on the other hand, simply sat on their asses and formed committees to talk about it. Readers were invited to judge for themselves which was the more estimable attitude.

A day later, Dawson of *The Times* screeched that it was a 'monstrous maneuver' to capitalize on His Majesty's solicitude for the workless in order to make a cheap political point. The *Mirror* started a daily column highlighting Edward's public engagements. Beaverbrook's *Express* underlined the inestimable value of a monarch who was popular throughout the Empire. Dawson ran a snide leader mentioning no names but stressing the importance of duty in a world too full of diversion. And by now another kind of point had been made as well: the

papers were clearly taking sides for and against the King. I figured therefore that the crazy press silence on his love affair must soon be broken. If folks were lining up pros and cons in a dispute centering on the Crown, readers were going to want to know what the hell the argument was *about*, for Chrissake!

I knew how they felt. After all there was something I was dead keen to know too. Like where in God's name was this gorilla Ralfini? I'd been shackled up with Maya for over a week now, and although she'd come up with a stack of interesting stuff on other subjects, on this one the cops and the robbers using the club seemed equally cagey: there hadn't been a whisper about the guy!

I didn't know it then, but another whole week was going to pass before the bottled-up British press finally drew the cork on the Simpson affair. And that was exactly the length of time I was going to have to wait before I heard anything definite on Signora Ralfini's boy Mario.

TWELVE

Things began to move the following week in the world outside Maya's apartment. There was some doubt whether Nuvolari's *bi-motore* Alfa-Romeo would be able to hold the Mercedes-Benz racers in the Grand Prix of Tunis. The Blairgowrie crofter had seen the Loch Ness monster again – just in time for the Sunday features pages. Maya herself bought an imported Schiaparelli cocktail suit. The English cricketers in Australia were still failing to hold their catches. On Wednesday the 25th, as the *Daily Herald* printed a picture of Baldwin under the headline *THE NATION NO LONGER HAS CONFIDENCE IN HIM!* the Prime Minister was received in audience by the King . . . and the King deftly fashioned a noose for himself, which he then invited Baldwin to tighten.

It was my voluptuous hostess who put me onto the last story. It was one of the best tip-offs she gave me the whole time I was there – the result of a lunchtime indiscretion by some Downing Street secretary who had too much to drink at the club. I rolled paper into the typewriter and began:

The royal romance that everybody (except, of course, the British) is talking about took a dramatic turn today. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin lumbered into Buckingham Palace, knocked out his pipe, and shaped up to King Edward for their third confrontation on the subject of the Monarch's playmate and putative bride. John Bull Baldwin, who has staked his political career, and that of his government, on the promise that Britain never, never shall have an American Queen, told the King bluntly that press silence could no longer be guaranteed and he must make up his royal mind.

Faced with the decision to renounce either his way of life or his way of love, Edward asked if the Prime Minister had heard the suggestion (conveyed unofficially by a go-between) that he should contract a morganatic marriage. This device

(nothing to do with J.P. of the same name) permits a sovereign to wed a person of non-royal blood while denying to the lady herself or their offspring, if any, the rights and privileges accorded those entitled to wear the Crown. Specifically, no children of such a marriage can succeed to the Throne.

Bulldog Baldwin said he had heard the suggestion but had not had the time to consider it. If he were to be asked for an unofficial off-the-cuff opinion, it would be that the idea was a bum steer. Too many previous monarchs had used it to 'legalize' a liaison with what was in fact no more than a mistress; foreign kings had even run one morganatic wife and one 'official' wife in tandem. In other words the British would consider the word practically synonymous with 'illegal'.

If, on the other hand, he were to be asked for an official opinion – said the wily premier – he could not give this without consulting his colleagues. Did the King wish him to do this? The King did.

Did His Majesty realize, Baldwin pursued, that 'colleagues' in this case meant not only the Cabinet but also the Governors of all the British Colonies and Dominions – because a morganatic marriage would involve the passage of a special Act of Parliament and the Statue of Westminster provided that any such affecting the Crown must be okayed by the whole Empire? His Majesty did so realize. And he wanted that official opinion.

Although he didn't know it – and still doesn't know it – from that moment on Edward lost any chance he might have had of leading Wally Simpson to the altar with the Crown on his head. Until then, nothing could have stopped him marrying her in theory. The government could have resigned, Parliament could have refused to vote the Civil List (a polite name for the Royal salary), but nothing could actually have stopped him. Alternatively he could have said he'd decided not to marry, waited until he'd been crowned and had the loot – and then changed his mind. And again there would have been nothing anyone could have done about it. But by submitting the marriage to Parliamentary approval, Teddy lost out.

He was relying on his enormous popularity throughout the Empire – gained while he was still Prince of Wales. But the decisions sought by Baldwin were not made by the crowds

who had lined the streets to cheer, and in fact he had already secretly sounded out the Governors, the members of his own Cabinet, and even the opposition Labour Party. The answer was an almost unanimous thumbs-down. No American divorcee, thanks very much! The only real choice left, as bully Baldwin well knew, was between dropping the dame and quitting the Throne.

A socialite who saw the Prime Minister smirk his way out of the Palace said he looked as though he was the only person who knew the secret of the Emperor's new clothes. The courtier misread the signs: Baldwin was simply carrying the King's head on a plate.

'My goodness, Jay,' Maya said when I'd corrected the copy and handed it to her to take to the cable office, 'this should put up Western Union shares about five points!'

By this time I was feeling kind of constricted in the apartment, much as I loved its owner. The police cordon had been withdrawn days ago and I wanted out. Maya was against it because, according to underworld gossip, I was still on the spot. If I went out, she argued, even if I wasn't nailed they might follow me back to the apartment – and there was my cover blown again. I went along with her reservations because I didn't want the Team to associate her in any way with me. The Priory might not be on their list now . . . but if they knew the boss was sheltering their No. 1 target, things might get rugged for her.

Eventually we compromised and went out a couple of times together . . . in a hired car which took us to a dine-and-dance place somewhere southwest of the city. We figured on repeating the dose on the 29th, which was a Sunday, so the club was closed. But it turned out to be one of those days when England showed itself in its true colors, all thirty-six of them gray. Apart from which it was raining like there was no tomorrow. So we spent the day in bed.

When tomorrow came, however, there were patches of blue up there among the clouds and I had itchy feet again. Maya was out for the whole day, visiting wine merchants and butchers and suchlike. I was staring wistfully down into the street, wishing I dared risk the dangers she had outlined, when I knocked my billfold off the edge of the dressing-table as I reached for a pack of cigarettes. The contents fanned out over the floor. Cursing automatically, I stooped to pick them up – £1 and £5

notes, a few American dollars, a slimline address book, my press card, a sheet of airmail stamps, a small rectangle of pasteboard...

A rectangle of pasteboard? What was that? It looked like some kind of business card. I turned it over and read: *Geo. T. Alderton - Hackney Cab Proprietor. Day and Night Service.* And then, beneath, two telephone numbers. I frowned. How did that card come to be in my billfold? And then I remembered. Of course! The cabbie who had used his head when I was following Ralfini - how many days ago?

Seeing his card gave me an idea. With transport available, I could visit one or two of the places I wanted to go while minimizing the risk of being picked up - and so far as compromising Maya was concerned, I could wait until I was dead sure there was no tail before I was driven back to the apartment. Again, if it came to losing a tail, what could be more anonymous than a London taxi? I dialed the South London number. There was no reply. A gruff voice at the Sloane Street cab rank told me that Alderton had taken a fare to Liverpool Street station. 'When will he be back?' I asked.

'Gawd knows. Depends on what he picks up at the station, dunnit?'

I left Maya's number and asked for him to call me as soon as he returned to the rank. In fact it was less than forty minutes before he rang. 'Hullo there,' I said, 'this is Slim Callahan on the trail again.'

He caught on at once. 'Wotcher, guv. What's it to be this time? Conducted tour through the back streets of Soho? Keepin' watch on the Nazi embassy?'

'Not exactly,' I said. 'I'd like to hire you for the whole day. Stop, wait, start, stop again, and like that. Do you know the Priory Club?'

'I'll say. Had it away from there with a drunk or two!' He chuckled.

'Okay,' I said. 'Be there in a half hour and we're on our way.'

Department of disbelief and coincidence coming up. It seems too good to be true, but I'd been with Alderton less than an hour when I actually saw Ralfini! Nobody saw me leave the club: the waiters were laying up the tables for lunch, the bar wasn't open yet, and I slipped through the padded doors and out the entrance while everyone's back was turned. I was waiting fifty yards down the street when the cab arrived, and

I told him to take me straight to Frith Street. I figured on retracing my steps the first day I'd hit Soho, and maybe trying to scare one or two folks in the cheaper dives into talking. I even had a crazy idea that I could kid them I was a G-man tracking Ralfini, and that they might sing rather than get involved in some bigtime investigation with its attendant publicity. With the cab waiting, I figured, I could always take a powder if I walked into the wrong joint or if the going got tough. It shows you how even a professional can underrate the opposition when he's working unfamiliar territory!

I told Alderton to park at the corner of the cul-de-sac into which Dorothy Kimble and I had escaped from the alley at the back of the Zanzibar. At the far end there was an arch leading to the court off Bateman Street – and that was where I'd last seen the Mafia man.

Looking into the cul-de-sac was like seeing a favorite movie second time around in an all-night house. There was a panel truck with the doors open and a guy delivering a rail of dresses to some rag trade showroom. There was a dark green limousine with whitewall tires waiting with two wheels up on the sidewalk. And there was Mario Ralfini walking through the arch into the entry.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to see him there: a reverse-shot of the scene I'd watched before. There were just two alterations to the screenplay during the re-run. This time I recognized the green limousine as the Packard I'd been beaten up in – plus I knew now who'd be sitting in back of it; and this time there was a short extra scene.

Ralfini opened the rear door of the sedan and got in. The Packard moved off, turned left, and headed south down Frith Street.

'Change of plan,' I said to Alderton, sliding aside the glass panel separating the driver's compartment from mine. 'I want you to follow that car. But for Chrissake do it discreetly, because those are tough characters in there!'

'Righty-o, guv. All aboard for today's Mystery Tour!' The cabbie slammed the lever into first, pulled out in front of a truck, and threaded his way through the traffic in the narrow, congested street after our quarry.

A couple more pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place now. If any confirmation was needed of the link between Ralfini, Billie-boy Francis and the Team, I had it. Secondly, the events of the afternoon when the Zanzibar had been

wrecked were now a little clearer. Ralfini must have done the same thing that day too. He'd walked through the arch, gotten into the Packard, and sat there waiting . . . for what? For Francis and his hoods to report that the job had been done. For Dorothy – his own ex-girlfriend who'd been cheating him on the dope pushing routine – to be hustled out of the back alley and delivered to him. Nobody seemed to know what was supposed to have happened to her after that, but it wouldn't have been pleasant. In any case, it must have shaken them up some to see the girl walk past the Packard hanging onto my arm!

Maybe, I thought as we swung around Eros and into Coventry Street, that was when Ralfini decided he'd better run a check on me and find out who the hell I was. Probably it was then that he'd spawned the bright idea of knocking off the girl and saddling me with the killing. There remained the enigma of Charlie Farnsbarn's last words to me: if Ralfini wasn't the brains of the organization, who did he take his orders from? Rawlins and Brearley too had said that the Mafioso had been *hired* to mastermind the Team's operations. Charlie again had suggested that the motive for Dorothy's murder might have arisen out of a meeting with this Mister Big on the night she refused to see me. If her dope connection was already blown wide open, what could they have had to quarrel about?

We followed the Packard across Trafalgar Square, down Whitehall and over Westminster Bridge. In the Old Kent Road it pulled right, across the oncoming traffic, turned into a side street and stopped. 'Don't follow it,' I said. 'At least not for the moment. Wait here until we see what gives.'

Alderton borrowed fifteen feet from a bus stop and cut his motor. Billie-boy Francis, the Bateman Street plug-ugly and two other guys with faces like bucket-dredgers crossed the side street and piled down the steps to an area. There was some kind of sign over the area gate but I couldn't read the message from where I was. I noticed that Francis was pulling on a pair of gloves as he walked. Ralfini stayed in the Packard with the driver.

It was about ten minutes before they reappeared. Two of them were straightening neckties and adjusting jackets as they approached the car. One had a rip in his sleeve. I didn't need a pocket calculator to work out what had happened in that basement. The Packard made a U-turn and continued toward

the southeast. It stopped at New Cross and the Elephant and at three different places in Brixton, and then went on via Lewisham and Catford to Bromley. Most times, the routine was the same: the waiting Packard with idling motor; the team of heavies vanishing into sleazy side-street premises for a few minutes, and then the quick getaway. Twice, ambulances with bells shrilling passed us in the opposite direction within a few minutes of our leaving a place. A couple of times, it was Ralfini himself who crossed the street alone, to return a few minutes later with a nod and a satisfied smile. I didn't need a guide to work that one out either. The Packard was evidently on what the protection racketeers call a milk run – collecting a rake-off from those who had already been intimidated (that was the Ralfini number), or making with the muscle to show those who hadn't yet coughed up the error of their ways.

From what I saw – and we couldn't always park too close in case we tipped off the Packard's driver – most of the joints were drinking clubs or illegal betting shops. Some of the ones in slightly classier neighborhoods were probably undercover gambling dives. I didn't see one that I'd care to have gone into myself without an escorting squad of US Marines.

After Bromley, though, with Ralfini still heading out of town, I began to wonder. This was strictly commuter country, with flowering shrubs in the front gardens of neat little rows of brick villas. Most of the backyards seemed to run down to railroad embankments, and behind every house there was a radio aerial stretching from the eaves to a slender pole at the far end of the plot by the bonfire. The clouds were blowing away and the smoke from those bonfires drifted blue in the winter sunshine. What the hell, I wondered, were Ralfini and his heavies doing in a neighborhood like this?

We were in the open country, with stubbled fields contouring a rolling landscape and rooks speckling the pale sky above ridges of leafless trees. Once clear of the snarl of traffic, the Packard had picked up speed some; in Orpington and some of the ritzier suburbs we'd even been able to shift into top. But out here in Kent county the lack of cars on the road was an embarrassment and could prove dangerous. London taxis are higher, squarer, shorter and older-looking than ordinary automobiles, and outside of a few big cities like Glasgow and Manchester, you don't see them any place else. The farther we got into Kent, therefore, the bigger risk we ran that Ralfini's driver would suss that he had a tail. Even in Sevenoaks, after-

noon shoppers turned their heads to look as we cruised through a couple of hundred yards behind the big sedan.

Outside the town, we turned right onto the A21 for Tonbridge. There was an ancestral home about the size of the State of Nebraska lying among acres of formal gardens in a valley below the road. 'Nobs,' Alderton announced over his shoulder. 'Can't remember the moniker – all gorn except the bleedin' hyphen! – but the wife's some kind of a writer. Poetry, I daresay. They let you in to see the gardens, weekends. If you like that kind of thing. Me, I prefer the flicks any time . . . Now where does he think he's goin'?' The Packard had turned into a graveled drive between white gates. I could see a large red building behind a row of trees.

A quarter of a mile down the road, there was a gas station. 'I'll pull up there,' the cabbie said. 'We're a bit short of juice, any old how, and there may not be another chance.' He coasted past the decorated globes surmounting the pumps and braked to a halt by one sporting a winged Mercury's head in yellow and black. 'National Benzole,' he said to the overalled mechanic who strolled out from the tin-roof workshop wiping oily hands on a piece of cotton waste. 'You better fill 'er up.'

I got out of the cab to stretch my legs. On a rise behind us, I could see stables with a clock tower in back of the red brick building. The green Packard was parked between a shooting brake and a couple of smaller cars. Five men were walking slowly toward a portico with white pillars. 'What's that place?' I asked the garage hand as he manipulated the hose. 'Some kind of hotel?'

'Colonel Redfern's?' He shrugged. 'New people. Moved in a couple of weeks ago. They sold the horses when they took over from the Colonel. They do say it's goin' to be some kind of country club.' He spit on the ground and shook his head. 'More like a knocking shop, if you ask me. I seen some of the judies they got in there.'

I whistled to myself. It looked as though Ralfini was broadening his activities to include classier joints in the stockbroker belt. As this place had just changed hands – and as Ralfini had gone in as well as the four toughs – it looked as though this might be just an exploratory visit, a softening-up operation before the screw was turned. I wondered where the next stop would be – and as I reflected on the possibility of my cover being blown if I stayed with Alderton's taxi, I had an idea. 'Hey,' I said to the youth, 'do you rent out cars by any chance?'

He stared at me, scratching his head. 'Not as a rule. I mean to say not as a business, like. There's one or two bangers you could hire if you want.' He gestured at a line of automobiles parked beside the shed. 'How long would it be for?'

'Not long. Just the rest of today. Maybe only a couple of hours.' I looked at Alderton and then, meaningly, at his cab. 'I have some business to attend to and I don't want to be too conspicuous.'

The cabbie caught on once again. 'You want me to pick you up later, sir?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Someplace around here, after I check in the car. Is there a good pub back there in town?'

'There's half a dozen,' the youth said proudly. 'There's the King's Head, and the Sun, and the Compasses, and the Crown -'

'I'll meet you in the public bar of the Crown at seven,' I cut in. 'Okay?' And then, as Alderton nodded his assent, I turned toward the cars. 'Now what can you offer me?'

'You could 'ave the V-8 or the Riley or the Talbot,' the boy said. 'Or what about that Singer Nine?' He pointed at a tiny scarlet sports car covered with chrome stoneguards and auxiliary lamps. 'She's a nippy little bus.'

'I guess I'll take the Ford,' I said. 'I want something - uh - nippy. But nothing as flash as that Singer, you understand? Mustn't give the wrong impression in my business.'

'Whatever you like,' the boy shrugged. 'Five bob an hour. And a tenner deposit. In cash. All right?'

'Sure,' I said. 'What do we owe you for the gasoline?'

He hooked the hose back on the pump. 'Thirty-two shillin'.'

I gave him a ten-pound bill and a five. 'If there's any change, I can pick it up when I bring back the car,' I said. He stuffed the money in a pocket of his overalls and backed out a 1934 Model A sedan, the first Ford had equipped with the V-8 motor. It was just the kind of buggy I wanted: fast, not too big, and used enough to be unnoticeable. I drove it back toward the town and parked a hundred yards before the white gates. As I left the gas station forecourt, I heard Alderton say confidentially: '... yes, a Yank. Some kind of a 'tec, I think, or maybe a G-man.' If those are ugly customers you got up there ...' I grinned and prepared to wait.

The cab turned around and drove back toward Sevenoaks. I waved to Alderton as he passed. A few minutes later, the Packard rustled down the driveway and headed for Tonbridge.

I'd seen it coming through the trees, and I was moving and past the gates before it turned into the road. I trod on the pedal and kept ahead through a belt of hilly, wooded country, letting him zip past as we entered a sad piece of ribbon development labeled Hildenborough. I had my head bent, lighting a cigarette, while he was actually passing.

I figured he might stop at a ritzy place called Hilden Manor, but the green sedan drove right through Tonbridge town. We passed a half-Elizabethan, half gothic complex of battlements and towers among quadrangles and lawns, went down and then up a hilly main street of half-timbered stores, over a railroad bridge and finally uphill again among beechwoods laced against the clear sky.

I breasted a rise . . . and then I was standing on the brakes and wrenching at the wheel to steer the Ford away down a dirt road through the trees. The Packard had stopped just over the crest, and Ralfini and Francis were getting out as I came over the brow of the hill!

Beyond them, I saw a movie still of Bentleys, Alvis, Lagondas and Lea-Francis parked along a grass verge in front of a low white stucco building. The place was only one storey high, designed around three sides of a central patio with a pool, springboards, diving towers and summer garden furniture stacked under a tarpaulin. I allowed the V-8 to freewheel through the wood until we were out of sight, and then I cut the motor. I climbed to the ground and started treading back as quietly as I could through drifts of beech leaves.

I'd just caught sight of the white stucco among the denuded trees when I stumbled on the edge of a depression and half fell through a screen of bushes onto two kids who were squatting down in the hollow by their bicycles. They wore dark blue suits a little shiny about the ass and elbow, and straw boaters with a magenta and black band encircling the crown. As I appeared unexpectedly in their private retreat they sprang guiltily to their feet, trying to hide the cigarettes they were smoking. I guess I was as astonished as they were. Before I'd had time to think, I rapped out: 'Who the hell are you? What the devil are you doing here?'

The taller of the two boys - he must have been about sixteen - had a long, clown's face with a protuberant lower lip. He flushed, his head tilted to one side, and stammered: 'J. M. Bryan, sir, and P. M. J. Leslie, Judde House. I know we shouldn't be -'

'We have chits, sir, to come below Bordyke,' the other boy broke in. He was very fair with chiseled, almost girlish features. 'Mr Herman himself signed them, sir. We thought . . .'

I suddenly remembered. Alderton had told me about Tonbridge. That wasn't a university campus I'd passed, or a seminary for aspiring Jesuits. It was what the English call a public – which means to say private – school. 'For the sons of toffs,' the cabbie had said. 'Pay about four hundred nicker a year to teach the little buggers how to play cricket. They give 'em food you wouldn't accept from an East End soup kitchen, and some of the pranks those lads get up to you wouldn't believe!'

'Look,' I said. 'I don't have anything to do with your school. I don't give a damn how or why you're here, so relax and quit worrying, huh?'

'Gosh, that's a relief!' the boy called Bryan said. 'There's an exchange beak in charge of Parkside while Paggers is away, and he's a Yank. We were afraid . . . Er . . . that is to say . . .' He flushed again and shuffled his feet in the leaves.

'Forget it,' I said. 'Look – what's this place in here? By the road?'

'That?' The fair boy jerked his head toward the stucco, 'Beechwood Court. It's kind of a roadhouse. Out of bounds to us, of course. But a fellow I know in Ferox Hall went there with his people and he says there are super girls at the bar.'

'S'posed to be rather a fast set,' Bryan said admiringly. 'You know, chaps who gamble and take girls to the races in fast cars. Wizard!'

I could hear distant voices through the trees. There was a roar and crackle of sports car exhausts. Doors slammed. The cigarette Bryan was hiding behind his back was burning his fingers. He dropped it among the leaves.

'You'll have half the county burned down!' I said, swiveling my foot on the thin spiral of smoke. 'Here – put yours out and take these.' I tossed the remains of my pack to the fair boy. He caught it left-handed, low down near the ground. 'I say, that's jolly decent of you,' he said. 'Thanks awfully, sir. Gosh! Luckies too!' He showed the pack to his friend, stubbing out his own fag-end expertly on the sole of his shoe.

'You'd better get along now,' I said, 'before I change my mind.'

They grinned and heaved their bikes upright. As they wheeled them away through the trees, I heard Bryan say: 'If

you can catch like that, Peter, you should be playing cricket for the house next year instead of tennis!’

‘I might – if they start allowing the batsman a lucky strike!’ the other replied, ducking away from the blow that rewarded the pun. ‘Anyway, bags I the extra fag if there’s an odd number!’

‘If there *is* an odd man out, we’ll share it. Do come on. We’ll be late for roll-call, and we must call in at the record shop on the way.’

‘Gosh, yes! Look, Mike – maybe we should buy that Scott Wood *Basin Street Blues*. There’s a wizard –’

‘No, fool! Don’t you remember? They have this super *Dixieland Band* vocal by Helen Ward, with an ork led by some fellow called Goodman . . .’

I smiled and shook my head. Benny Goodman had been a kid in knee pants, sitting in with the Austin High School gang when I was a cub reporter in Chicago. Small world! I waited until the boys were out of sight and then went on toward the roadhouse. As I came to the edge of the clearing, the Packard was accelerating away toward Tonbridge Wells. All the other cars had gone. I shrugged. What the hell! I hadn’t a hope of getting back on their trail now. By the time I’d regained the V-8, turned it, and driven back to the road, they could be five miles away.

I walked openly up to the building, rounded a gable end, and crossed the deserted patio. It would soon be dusk. Rooks were cawing among the bare branches and there was a smell of woodsmoke in the air.

‘Call the police, Frank,’ a woman’s voice said angrily. ‘Who the hell do they think they are? Frightening away customers . . . acting like –’

‘Ah, cut it out, Vera,’ a man interrupted. ‘What’s the use? You know as well as I do . . .’

I looked along the inner façade of the roadhouse. A french window was standing ajar just beyond the pool. I sidled toward it. ‘That fucking pansy,’ the woman said. ‘That bitch! If I could get my hands –’

‘Don’t make yourself silly, sweetheart. What could the rozzers do? What evidence do we have? They could put us out of business . . .’ (Fingers snapped) ‘ . . . like that, and you know it. All they have to do is sneak in some bleeding minor, some under-age kid who takes a drink, and then tip off the law . . . and that’s our licence gone! All they have to do is stage a few drunken brawls and rough up a couple of clients . . .’

and there's our customers gone. All they have to do in these woods is start a little fire . . . and bang goes our capital. Apart from that, you know as well as I do that no place like this is run strictly on the level. There's the girls, the bedrooms, the three sets of books. They could easily find . . .'

I stepped through the half-open french window. 'Excuse me . . . ?'

I was in a small oak-beamed bar with paneled alcoves and a wall-to-wall red carpet. A woman of about thirty-five with short, platinum blonde hair and a lot of make-up was standing by an overturned chair holding the torn edges of a silk blouse together. Behind her, a thickset man with a heavy mustache leaned over the bar as if he had the belly-ache. Maybe he had too, because when he raised his head to stare at me I could see that there was dirt on his face and all down the front of his suit and shirt. His lips were split and one of his eyes was almost closed. 'Who the hell are you?' he demanded thickly. 'What do you want here?'

It was the same dialog I'd handed the boys only a few minutes before. 'Forgive me for intruding,' I said in what I hoped was a scholarly voice. 'I am presently working at Tonbridge. You know, in the school below. Two of our lads are temporarily missing and they were seen coming this way. I just thought I'd ask if you happened to have seen - ?'

'For God's sake!' the woman interrupted. 'We have enough troubles of our own without running a bureau for missing schoolboys!'

'Easy, Vera,' the man said. 'Easy.' And then, turning to me: 'Naturally, sir, we discourage any members of the school from coming here. If any boy did come, we should refuse to serve him and ask him to leave. But in fact none have so far - and I certainly haven't set eyes on any today.'

'I didn't really think you would have,' I said truthfully. 'But I thought I'd just ask. If you *should*, perhaps you'd be good enough to ring the headmaster's house?'

'Sure,' the man said. 'Of course.' I murmured my thanks and backed out. I'd seen and heard all I needed to. As I walked away, I heard the woman say: 'I still think we should call the police . . .'

I drove back to Sevenoaks in the dark, checked in the Ford, and walked to the pub for my rendezvous with Alderton. As we headed for London, I saw a curious pulsating light above the trees that reminded me of a picture book I'd had as a child.

I folded down the occasional seat, changed places, and slid aside the glass panel. 'Say, you don't have the Northern Lights around these parts, do you?' I asked.

The cabbie shook his head. 'Nah. Leastways not often. Matter of fact we saw 'em last year. Or was it '34? Like a fan of searchlights in the sky, pale blue and green and white, switchin' positions, like. I reckon that was the first time ever. Not far enough north, you see.'

'That wouldn't be a repeat performance?' I said. 'Over there . . . above those woods beside the farm.'

He glanced across and shook his head. 'Nothin' like it, guv. They was pale and shimmery; that's too bright and too red. Too far to the west too.'

'Would it be street lighting reflected on low cloud then? The lights of London brightening the night sky?'

Alderton chuckled. 'Do us a favor, mate: it's twenty-five miles away! They got them new sodium street lights at Beckenham and Swanley and Foot's Cray, but that's kind of a dirty yellow. Anyway, the night's clear as a bell, with stars all over. There ain't no clouds for them to reflect from.' He stared out the side window again. 'That looks more like a big fire to me.'

We were aiming northwest now and the light was directly ahead – a strange glow, now crimson and now orange, that dimmed and brightened over the roofs. Between Petts Wood and Bromley there could no longer be any doubt. Somewhere ahead the daddy of all fires was reddening the sky half-way up to the zenith. Folks were standing about in the street in excited little groups, gesturing toward the north. 'Strewth!' Alderton exclaimed. 'Looks as though the whole bleedin' city's alight!'

It did too. Reflections from the blaze stretched across half the horizon, silhouetting chimneys and apartment blocks and gasometers against the furious core of the fire, from which tongues of flame could occasionally be seen licking skywards. At first I figured maybe Ralfini and his boys had put one of their threats into practice. Then I realized that this was something a lot bigger than some two-bit sabotage attempt by a handful of torpedos. I was letting the conversation I'd overheard at the roadhouse influence me! I might even be in on the second Great Fire of London! From 1666 to 1936 was thirty years short of a tricentenary, but what the hell – a guy has to find an angle somewhere!

That was an overestimate. Once past Bromley, we could see down the hill that there was a lot of London beyond the blaze.

But it sure was a nice little conflagration. We could hear the continuous clangor of fire service bells over the cab's motor now, and the air was scorched and dry, bitter with the odor of burning.

A few minutes later we ran into a traffic jam. There was a police roadblock ahead and all northbound vehicles were being diverted. Alderton got down from his cab and wandered up to one of the cops signaling with an electric lamp. 'What gives?' I asked when he came back.

He shook his head. 'It's the poor old Crystal Palace,' he said. 'The Crystal what?'

'Palace. Bloody great exhibition hall about twelve times the size of St Pancras station. They built it in Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition in 1851; made entirely of glass. On a steel frame, of course, a bit like an old-fashioned railway station.'

'What the hell's it doing here?'

'Took up too much room in the park,' Alderton said. 'But they'd got kind of fond of the place. So when the exhibition was dismantled, they moved it out here to Sydenham. Rebuilt the whole shoot, from the ground up.' He shook his head again. 'My grandfather went to see that exhibition,' he sighed. 'Said it was the eighth wonder of the world, he did.'

He let in his clutch and we started to move again, skirting the fire a dozen blocks away to the west. On the brow of a hill in some suburban street, I told him to stop. I joined the line of rubbernecks on the sidewalk and looked down at the inferno below. In the middle of a dark lozenge of parkland, the building was awash in a sea of fire. Great towers and pinnacles of flame boiled hundreds of feet into the sky from the white-hot center as fused glasswork and molten metal dripped glimmering jewels of blue and orange and jade green into the incandescent mass. We were too far away to distinguish the frantic activity that must have been going on among the firefighters. All we could see were blurs of movement and an occasional glint of metal on the fringes of the blaze. But I knew there must be men down there, exposed high up on the tips of turntable ladders as they watched the water from their hoses turned to steam by the ferocious heat.

I was scribbling notes on the back of an envelope when Alderton came and stood beside me. This was the first real story the British papers had had for weeks, and I figured I might as well add an eyewitness piece to the roundup I'd send to Michaelson tomorrow.

'I'd stake my davy you was a cop or some such,' the cabbie said in a low voice, 'but now I see I made a ricket. I've took too many of the Fleet Street boys around not to know the signs when I see 'em. You're a reporter, ain't you?'

'We can't all drive green Packards or wear brass helmets in the fire service,' I said.

'No, guv. An' we can't all remember the stories we read in the papers. Or the photos they print. But some folks do.' He paused, and then added: 'A tall, thin, experienced newspaperman. With an American accent. I wouldn't stick around in a crowd for too long if I was you . . . Mister Callahan.'

I turned and clapped him on the shoulder. 'You're absolutely right. You're the best goddam cab driver I ever met, Mr Alderton. Now it seems you're a good friend too! I'll take your advice. C'mon, we're on our way!'

The whole way back to Russell Square, we heard the ringing of fire engine bells racing toward Sydenham from all over London. There was still the stench of burning in my nostrils as I slipped through the crowded club and hurried upstairs to the apartment. Maya was standing by a dumb-waiter loaded with bottles, glasses, and silver entrée dishes. It was almost nine o'clock.

'Jay, *darling*,' she said. 'Where in God's name have you been? I've been back for hours, having kittens at the thought you might have been nabbed.'

'Gee, baby, I'm sorry,' I apologized. 'I'd had a bellyfull, on my own all day, all day yesterday, and all last week. You know? I just had to get out.'

'You know I think you should stay here for the time being,' Maya said. 'It's not safe for you to be around – and it's certainly not safe for you to go through the club when it's full. You never know who might see you. Why did you do it, Jay?'

'I had to see a man about a dog,' I said. 'A dog with a middle-western accent. I'll tell you about it later. But right now make with those entrée dishes, would you? I haven't eaten all day!' I went over and kissed her and then I said: 'With lips like those, honey, you should be living in Sydenham!'

THIRTEEN

My work diary for the next few days reads like an application for a Guggenheim Foundation grant. The part where you list publications and work in progress, I mean. The Crystal Palace fire was naturally the big story on all the London front pages on December 1st. It seemed the only parts of the structure left were two brick towers, and there were pictures to prove it. In *The Times*, Dawson continued the slimiest of his below-the-belt attacks on the King with an editorial asserting – apropos of nothing whatever, of course – that the Crown and its representatives must never under any circumstances allow themselves to be touched by a breath of scandal. (This particular war of nerves – what Beaverbrook called the disguised or coded intimidation of the King – had been started on November 25th, when Baldwin was asked to sound out his colleagues on the possibility of a morganatic marriage. On that day, *The Times* craftily printed a leader proclaiming that the reputation of those in high places was infinitely more important than the individuals occupying them. In fact on December 1st the King asked for his morganatic marriage request to be withdrawn, but Baldwin chose to ignore the demand.)

On the 2nd, a guy called Blunt, who was Bishop of Bradford, made as many column inches as the Crystal Palace fire. Returning from a briefing given by the Archbishop of Canterbury, he told a Diocesan conference that the King didn't go to church often enough and recommended him in future to attend to his duty at the expense of his personal pleasure. The speech was splashed in the *Yorkshire Post* and taken up by the nationals. At last the press silence was broken! The man in the street was wised up to the fact that there was a constitutional crisis. The King had been seduced by a foreign adventuress, his love life was being broken up by a cabal of corrupt politicians, he was turning his back on his sacred duty for a puerile infatuation, he was the victim of a clerical conspiracy, there was a

plot to control England through an American Queen, the King was a crypto-Nazi, he was a neo-Communist, he was being denied the right enjoyed by the meanest of his subjects – marriage with the woman he loved. It depended on which paper you bought.

After another meeting with Dawson, Baldwin called a Cabinet meeting at which, with Dominion and Opposition approval, the morganatic marriage idea was unanimously turned down. *The Times* reflected on the efficiency of Parliament as an institution and trusted that its customary firmness and solidity would be maintained in the face of all crises, exterior and interior. Another piece in the same issue innocently remarked what a good monarch the Duke of York would make.

Baldwin told the King that three options were now open to him: to junk the idea of marriage; to go ahead with it and defy the advice of his ministers; to abdicate. But the second of these, the Prime Minister assured him, was 'manifestly impossible'. Somewhat disconsolately, Edward was left contemplating the remaining alternatives, one of which he had himself already ruled out!

December 3rd was the big news day. Wallis Simpson's name was publicly cited for the first time as that of the woman the King wanted to marry. The *Daily Mirror* ran a huge front page picture of her. Editorials began to take sides. Temperatures were raised. Queen Mary visited the ruins of the Crystal Palace, to set an example of the stiffness of the upper class upper lip. Mrs Simpson took the cross-Channel ferry to France under an assumed name to set an example of upper class American tact. In Downing Street, a crowd sang *God Save The King* in front of the Prime Minister's official residence at No. 10. The following day, after the popular press had published a series of articles praising Wallis Simpson's attributes as a hostess, as a woman of the world, as an attractive personality, larger crowds demonstrated their sympathy with the King. Women paraded in front of Buckingham Palace carrying placards saying: *Baldwin should be birched! Down with the bishops!* In Whitehall, noisy manifestations blocked traffic and young people carried banners proclaiming: *Let the King know you are with him!* In Parliament, answering an Opposition question, Baldwin at last 'clarified' the government position. The idea that the King could marry a woman who would not become Queen was without foundation, he said. If he married, his wife would indeed become Queen and their children would

become direct descendants in line for the Throne. The only way of avoiding this would be to vote a special law . . . and this, neither the government nor the Dominions were prepared to do.

Edward knew this already. A friend in Reuters newsagency had tipped him off to the contents of cables arriving from the Dominion prime ministers. When Baldwin arrived to inform him officially, he asked could he make a radio broadcast to explain his point of view. Baldwin said the idea was 'unacceptable'. It was the day after this meeting – Saturday, December 5th – that the King decided to hell with the goddam lot of them: he would abdicate.

I don't know why I kept such a full work diary and made digests and summaries and commentaries on all this for Maya to cable to Chicago. They were using the stuff all right, I saw from imported copies of the paper, but under a 'London Correspondent' byline. I guess Michaelson figured it was too risky to admit the stuff was from a man on the run from a murder charge.

In any event, I kept it up, and it used most of my out-of-bed time that week.

Through the windows of the apartment, I could see the newsboys on the corner with their screaming placards: MRS SIMPSON MYSTERY . . . CABINET'S LONG MEETING . . . PREMIER ON 'URGENCE' . . . TEST: WICKETS TUMBLE . . . KING'S 'FRIEND' IN FRANCE! The situation, I felt, demanded one of those pieces in which your intrepid reporter braves ridicule by asking the man-in-the-street what he thinks of the crisis. The only trouble was that the man-in-the-street would actually be in the pub, whereas your intrepid was stashed away in an apartment off Woburn Place. It was, furthermore, a Sunday. The Priory was closed; Maya was feeling amorous; the editor of *The Times* was at Eton planting trees with a hundred Old Etonian Members of Parliament in commemoration of Founder's Day; Cosmo Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury, was manhandled by a hostile crowd in Downing Street when he tried to get out of his car to pay a call on the Prime Minister.

There was only one of these things that I could do anything about: I passed the Sabbath playing Oedipus to Maya's Jocasta (she'd just bought a pleated white evening gown in the Greek style). The rest would have to wait until I could slip out to some convenient hostelry without alarming my hostess.

I got my opportunity during one of milady's shopping excur-

sions 24 hours later, and I installed myself in the saloon bar of the White Hart – the nearest pub I could find to what I was beginning to think of as Ralfini's Arch. I thought I'd cut the scene about the eyes from our script, but I found out that a reporter – even an ace crime reporter – doesn't have to have his eyes put out to be blind! The revelation came after I'd read the famous *I accuse* . . . column by the *Daily Mirror's* Cassandra in which your man roundly blamed the Church for the crisis.

I was in a tough position, as a newspaperman. Clearly, the way to get what I wanted – man-in-the-street reaction – was simply to ask. But since I also wanted to get to the bottom of the Ralfini mystery, I'd chosen a manor that was too delicate for me to do this. As Maya had pointed out, the risk of my being recognized once I started talking was too great. The best I could do therefore was hang around and listen, hoping someone would provide the kind of comments I needed. The routine was getting to be a habit.

At least however the dialog had been rewritten. Hitler's bombers had just showered explosives on Madrid. Ford were to bring out a smaller, cheaper V-8. The English batting had recovered. But all the talk was about the crisis. Two men behind me were arguing about the parliamentary debates.

'The whole thing's a perfect example of democracy at work,' one of them said. 'The wishes of the people are ignored, those in power stay there, and any obstacles – royal or otherwise – are swept away under the carpet!'

'Absolute rubbish!' the other man said. 'You mean the wishes of the people you know. Or at most the wishes of Londoners. The provinces are solidly behind Baldwin. Why even the *Herald*, and that's a socialist paper –'

'That's just what I mean! The bloody hypocrisy!'

'Oh balls! The working class are pretty straitlaced. Religiously they call them *non-conformists* – but, boy, do they conform! That's why they think it would never do for the King to marry a double divorcee.'

'That's what I mean about hypocrisy. Oh no, they've nothing against Americans!' the first man sneered. 'Only *this* particular American. And why? Because your bloody workers are too narrow-minded. They haven't realized we're living in the twentieth century. And it's the same with the colonials: they're all *non-conformists* too. Prejudiced as buggery. When you come down to it, the political bastards are against Mrs

Simpson simply because she can lose them votes, and that's the truth of it!

'Why is Mrs Simpson like a little girl?' a man on my left asked the bartender in a low voice. 'Because she wants her Teddy bare!' He chuckled. 'Get it? Because she wants . . .'

There was more of the same below stairs, I discovered, when I went to the men's room. 'You know what the real attraction is?' a fat man said to a thinner companion as they passed me in the doorway. 'He happens to be . . . you know . . . exceptionally well endowed, and she . . .'

Whether or not it was true, this was a view shared by the graffiti artists executing urinal murals. Typical of the legends beneath these Pantagruellian graphics was the White Hart's: *If I had one as big as his I'd try to find a Yankee sucker too!*

'If you ask me,' a redhead of about forty said when I came back into the bar, 'he's got a bloody nerve suggesting a mor-ganatic marriage. Who the hell does he think he is?'

'Dora's right, you know,' a blonde with a cigarette in her mouth said. 'It's an insult to womanhood, that's what it is. Making her some kind of second-class wife. If she's fit to marry, she's fit to be Queen.'

'You're both talkin' through your hats,' a fat woman said. 'Point is, she *ain't* fit – and he knows it, but he wants to have his bloody cake and eat it!'

I was sitting on a stool up against a mahogany and frosted-glass partition dividing the saloon from the public bar, and hadn't paid any attention to the bulky shadow on the far side of the Victorian curleycues decorating the frosted-glass . . . not until I heard the voice that went with it.

' . . . have it away to them two gaffs near Sevenoaks to-morrow. The boss thinks the second geezer may shell out, but we'll have to bunny the character at the first a sight more.' A hoarse chuckle. 'I don't think he's onto the strength yet. Jesus, duckie, I never clocked such a flash manor in my natural! It ain't surprisin' he copped a deaf-'un at first.'

That baritone growl with the merest hint of a lisp on the sibilants could only belong to one man: Billie-boy Francis. And if I thought I'd struck pay dirt with that quote, the reply showed me the genuine nuggets shining in the bottom of the pan. 'Yeah,' the other voice said. 'I guess it'd be smart to put the arm on the guy pretty dam' quick. The follow-through's what counts when folks open up a territory. Cut the time in

half again for Number Three, then make with the muscle, huh?’

Mario Ralfini!

At last – even if there was a glass screen between us. The scenario so far only confirmed what I knew already – my hunch was *proved* right. I shifted my position and stared over the barmaid’s shoulder. There was mirror-glass in back of the tumblers and bottles ranged along the shelves behind the bar. The landlord was busy with the whiskey, gin and rum inverted in their dispenser cradles in front of those shelves. The barmaid was hauling on the decorated china handles of the beer engines let into the counter. Between them I could get a slanted, cubist view of the drinkers on the far side of the partition. Ralfini’s lean, blue-jowled face tilted across cherry brandy, pale cointreau and the long green neck of crème-de-menthe; Billie-boy’s shallow hat crowned a stone bottle of Genever-gin as expressionless as his eyes.

‘I gotta meet with the Kelly mob up in the north,’ Ralfini said. ‘Talk some sense into their mouthpiece and get them to play ball, else we’ll have to . . .’ The rest of the sentence was lost as another argument broke out behind me between three men who looked like rag-trade salesmen.

‘Oh, do me a favor, Sidney. Don’t you read no papers? Northcliffe, Rothermere, Beaverbrook – they’re all behind him! What about that Open Letter in the *Mail*? What’s it say? We can’t afford to lose a King he has so *splendid* a collection of virtues, that’s what it says.’

‘Don’t make yourself silly, Michael. Just because the *goyim* . . .’

‘King or no King, he should have more respect for his family. Can you imagine *your* mother’s face if you should decide to marry a *schicksa*?’

I swiveled on my stool and leaned my head back against the frosted glass, but it wasn’t until they moved away that I was able again to hear the two voices beyond the partition. Even then it was only in fragments of sentences. ‘. . . do the bugger bang to rights . . . cash in me bin . . . back in the smoke then?’ (Francis); ‘. . . eight after nine, Friday night . . . King’s Cross . . . got the right idea: act tough and *be* tough!’ (Ralfini).

I did my stare-into-the-mirror routine again, hoping I wasn’t going to meet the flinty gaze of one or the other of those hoods. But they had turned their backs to the bar, crowded into the corner by a party of newcomers shouting out the latest gossip.

Winston Churchill and Beaverbrook were trying to persuade the King to defy Parliament and marry Mrs S. When Baldwin's government resigned, they'd form a King's Party and appeal to the electors. The army, navy and air force were solidly behind Edward. Right now, there was a crowd of five thousand milling around outside the Palace, demonstrating in favour of its royal tenant. 'And you know what?' one of the new arrivals crowed. 'Half of them were carrying banners saying: "God save the King - from Baldwin!" Honestly. My cab was held up in the Mall twenty minutes ago!'

There was a momentary lull as a second round of pints were ceremoniously hoisted. 'I'll tell you what . . . ' I heard Billie-boy Francis say.

And the tale he told provided the answer to the sixty-four dollar question; it was the eye-opener that showed me how blind smart-aleck Jason had been right up to now. Just a few words, but they turned my own particular story upside down. I was crazy to hear more, but those sons-of-bitches were trumpeting again - and anyway the landlord was calling Time. Ralfini and his British sidekick vanished, their voices swamped in closing-time felicities.

'Ta-ta!'

'Ta-rah, love. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!'

'You'd be lucky, mate! If you can't be good, be careful!'

Got to go now.

Got to see a man about a dog.

Got to shake hands with a friend of the wife's.

What I always say is . . .

Ta-ta!

I wasn't able to check out what I'd heard until the following day - and then it didn't fall the way I'd expected. I was all set to sneak out through the club while Maya was marketing and the boys were setting up for lunch. It had worked all right before. This time, however, the padded doors with their port-hole windows were locked. That threw me some. They never had been before. Then I saw the waiter who normally served food in the apartment - the one with the face like a side of beef. I knocked on the glass to attract his attention and mimed that I wanted out. He shook his head and wagged a negative finger. I rapped again and beckoned as authoritatively as I could. 'I have to go out for a few minutes,' I said loudly when he was close to the window. 'Please unlock this door.'

He shook his head again. 'Miz' Maya say no safe for you to

leave today.' The great head nodded. 'Better for you to stay in apartment.'

'I want to go down the road to buy some cigarettes.'

'I bring you cigarette from bar. What brand you want?'

Two misses and one to go. 'Also,' I said, 'I have to call at the post office.'

'I send a boy with message.'

I shrugged never-mind and shook my own head. I went back upstairs. Short of breaking the door down, there was nothing I could do. Even then, that gorilla in the white jacket might consider it his duty to stop me. He was that dumb. Anyway I didn't know how much he knew about my situation and I didn't want to mix it for Maya: she was doing enough for me as it was. I'd wait until she came back and maybe we'd go out together.

Back in the apartment, I found I really did need cigarettes. There was a pack on the table with a book of matches, but no cigarettes inside. All at once I got mad. Women with their goddam maternal streak! What was Maya playing today? Catherine the Great? Medea? Gertrude? Maybe I could guess when I saw what she was wearing! In the meantime I wanted a smoke.

I started thinking. These were old houses. Surely there should be a servants' staircase? Perhaps it had been blocked off from the accounts department and the flat when the transformation was made, but it was worth climbing up to the attic floor just to check. I went out the apartment entrance and walked up instead of down – for the first time since I'd been there.

As Maya had said, the top floor was all stores – stacked tables and chairs, a couple of dressers, an upright piano covered by a sheet, an obsolete refrigerator, and dozens of cartons of canned goods seasoned with liquor cases. There was a back staircase too. It bypassed the apartment, the accounts, the club even, and led straight to the kitchens in the basement. There was no point in my playing Santa Claus among the soup tureens: I'd still have to surface in the club to make the street. What the hell – like I said, I'd wait for Maya after all. I was on my way back up when I noticed a narrow door on one of the half-landings.

I was still holding the book of matches I'd picked up. I struck one. The door was painted the same color as the wall, flush fitting, with a latch handle and a mortise lock. Before the match died, I saw a key hanging on a nail beside the lintel.

By now I was inquisitive. I unhooked the key and pushed it

into the lock. It turned easily. I pushed the door open and saw a long passageway. I walked along it, lighting more matches here and there. There were no doors and no windows, but after around fifty feet there was a right-angle turn. I felt my way along a further doorless and windowless section – longer if anything than the first – and found myself at the top of a steep flight of stairs. At the foot of these was an unlocked door. I opened it . . . and discovered that I'd walked into a broom cupboard!

It seemed a long way to come just to keep the club store-rooms tidy! I struck another match. Sure enough – brooms, mops, a windbag Hoover, shelves of polish in cans and neat piles of yellow rubbers, a galvanized pail. I frowned and let there be light again. This time I got it: another flush-fitting door, at right-angles to the first. I opened it and stepped into the hallway of a comfortably furnished small house. Through an archway I could see corn-colored easy chairs on a sage-green carpet, Victorian seascapes on a wall – and suddenly I dug why the place seemed kind of familiar.

It was the house I'd rocketed into when I was on the run from Brearley – the scene of my first meeting with Maya. She'd told me then that it belonged to her but she didn't live there. Then why . . . ?

Frowning again – even if it gets to be a habit, they tell me, the lines make a face look lived in – I turned and walked into a kitchen that was as bare and sterile and unused as a shot-glass in a church vestry. Beyond the virgin icebox, one more door opened on three steps leading down into a closed garage. In the gloom, the dim shape of an automobile filled most of the floor space. I felt for a light switch, found none, tore a final match from the violated book and scraped it across the emery.

For the first time the gold words printed on the shiny black laminated cover registered with me. *Beechwood Court, Tonbridge. Dining – Dancing – Swimming.*

Click!

And then . . . click again – and a much brighter illumination than the match or its book could provide. The car I was looking at was a custom-built Packard with whitewall tires and green coachwork lined in crimson.

Not Gertrude. Lady Macbeth.

FOURTEEN

I felt like the guy lathering his face with shaving soap – only to find that the rest of the badger was attached to the brush. And snapping.

If I told you the first thing that flashed through my mind, I'd be lying. The man in the ring who just walked into a haymaker that looped up from the floor couldn't tell you whether it was the ceiling lights, the feel of the boards against his head or the referee's voice counting that he was first aware of. After that initial jolt, things kind of crowd in from all sides.

Also the mind works on several levels at once, so you can't fix any cause-and-effect sequence on a number of realizations that may be interdependent yet practically simultaneous. Like I mean it's Click . . . Revelation . . . and then why the hell didn't I see that before?

This is how the score added up. Maya Coloris ran an expensive club patronized by goodies and baddies, and nobody was putting the bite on her for protection. Other club owners, and people who ran dives of various kinds, in and out of London, from the smartest to the cheapest, were paying through the nose – to an organized gang led by Francis and masterminded by Ralfini. These two gentlemen, accompanied at times by certain lieutenants, visited their victims in a large and distinctive green automobile. The last of these trips had taken in Beechwood Court, near Tonbridge.

Maya Coloris lived in an apartment above her club, but she also owned a small house nearby. The two were joined by a passageway that, if it was not secret, was at least concealed. In the former I had found a book of matches emblazoned with the name of Beechwood Court; in the latter I had seen the green car used by Francis and Ralfini . . . and in which I myself had once been snatched.

Obvious deductions: the car belonged to Maya; she had made the trip to Tonbridge with the others, remaining hidden behind

the Packard's curtains except at Beechwood Court, where I hadn't been watching anyway. But I recalled the words of the angry blonde: *That fucking pansy . . . that bitch . . . if I could get my hands . . .* I'd thought the second epithet, like the first, had referred to Billie-boy Francis, the way faggots sometimes are called 'she'; but I'd been mistaken. The blonde was talking about two separate people.

The other thing I recalled was the last quote from Billie-boy just before the pub closed the previous day. 'I'll tell you what,' he'd said to Ralfini. 'I'll put it to the Boss and get *her* okay. Maybe *she* wouldn't mind if we rowed in the South London mob just this once.' It *could* have meant that he was talking about another fairy, I thought at the time. Wrong again.

Inescapable conclusion: the mysterious big noise, the boss to whom Ralfini and Francis were answerable, the brain behind the racket was . . . Maya.

She was also the broad I was laying, the gal who'd taken me in and saved me from the cops, the leg-man who'd given me gossip to send to the paper, my protector from Billie-boy and my playmate of a thousand faces. How come?

I'd got this far when the match burned my fingers. I dropped it to the garage floor and walked back to the sitting-room. I sank into one of the chairs and reached for a cigarette.

Shit! I was fresh out of smokes. I'd forgotten.

Even without, though, I couldn't stop the wheels turning. If Maya was the boss, then apart from hiring Ralfini and planning the racket, she must also have been the one who decided that my investigations were an embarrassment, the kind soul who ordered the Dorothy Kimble killing, and fixed the frame that saddled me with it.

It must have been Maya who put the word around Soho that I was to be brought in after I'd escaped from the police court. Maya who briefed the busker to finger me for Billie-boy. Maya who ordered the day and night watch on the White Hall when I escaped from him.

So why did she take me in like a long lost brother when I ran into her during my third escape . . . from Brearley? Why didn't she go through with her original plans and either hand me over to Billie-boy or to the law?

Why?

I heard myself asking the same question of Dorothy. And in my memory I could hear Charlie Farnsbarn's answer. *People aren't simple. This was a complicated girl . . . a bit of a nympho.*

Could this be the answer with Maya too? It sounded screwy but I guessed it was possible. Was she telling the truth that time? Had she decided on the spur of the moment to keep me, as it were, under wraps . . . because she too was 'a bit of a nympho' and because she liked tall, thin men? In a crazy way it stacked up . . . pride in the popularity of the club, the two houses with the connecting passage, the oversize American automobile, the female gang boss routine, the continuous role-switching in bed and out. Didn't it all add up, quite simply, to an old-fashioned power complex? And if it did, what could boost that kind of ego more than a captive lover whose future – even if he didn't know it – lay completely within her hands?

You tell me! All I knew right then was that this was a dangerous lady who could decide at any time that my future was short. And that I needed a cigarette more than I ever had before in my life . . .

Could there be any here in this unused house that served only as a front? I tried the car. It stank of stale cigar smoke, but there was no spare pack in the glove compartment. The cupboards and drawers in the kitchen were empty. A sideboard in a small dining-room was equally bare. I remembered suddenly that there was a surprising lack of papers or stationery in the apartment. A smart business woman like Maya must do her accounts somewhere – her personal accounts, I mean; not the stuff for the auditors that went on below the flat. It was clear now that half the time she was supposed to be 'marketing' she was in fact riding around in the Packard with Billie-boy and selected members of the Team, waiting incognito in the limousine while they pulled their terrorizing routine. Maybe she spent the other half doing paper work here in the house? And maybe she kept a spare pack of cigarettes with those papers in case the concentration got too fierce?

I remembered that there was a small walnut bureau in the sitting-room. I hurried through and pulled down the hinged flap that made a desk when it was open. There were no cigarettes in there. But the shallow drawers and pigeon-holes were crammed with papers all right. Ledgers, day books, canceled checks, invoices, bank statements, stock certificates, policies of one kind or another fought for space with bundles of letters kept together by elastic bands, and sheaves of typewritten documents. I picked out a couple of the typescripts at random. One was a list of names, addresses, occupations and estimated incomes. I didn't recognize any of the names but I guess they

were possible clients, possible blackmail victims, possible subscribers to something. Possibles, anyway. The second document was similar, but there were fewer names – and after the estimated income of each, was written the name of a club, pub, dive or what-have-you, followed by a thumbnail rundown on the person's tastes, amusements, spending habits and vices, with notes on particular weaknesses, dubious acquaintances, liaisons, undercover activities, tax evasions, and the like. I didn't need a dowser with a forked hazel twig to interpret this one.

The outrage and the self-reproach and the anger hadn't crystallized yet. But something – maybe it was just my news sense, waking after a long sleep – something was telling me that there was usable material here, material that I might be able to turn to my own, rather than the paper's advantage, stuff I could use to solve the Kimble killing and get me out of the mess I was in. Given the power complex that I'd imagined, and given the kind of person exercising it and the means employed, wouldn't it be likely that such a person would wish to celebrate, indeed to perpetuate their cleverness, so folks could see how smart they'd been?

Wouldn't they want to write it all down? And in what form would this lesson for posterity be? By this time I was going through the three drawers beneath the flap of the bureau, and among the stacks of paper they contained, pushed to the back of the middle drawer, I came up with the answer physically, before the word formed in my mind.

A thick red morocco diary, gold tooled, gilt-edged, and closed with a hasp and lock linking the front and back cover across the pages.

Now any reader of thrillers or adventure stories knows that such locks can be opened in about three seconds flat with a hairpin, a small piece of bent wire, or a slender steel instrument not unlike a scalpel. The only trouble was that I didn't – and still don't, if you must know – use hairpins, and Maya didn't seem to have dropped any around. Pieces of bent wire were not lying too thick on the ground in this particular residence. And the only steel instrument I possessed was a cigar-cutter attached to my watch-chain, which wasn't slender and didn't look remotely like a scalpel.

I was reproaching myself for this lack of foresight – and wondering whether the goddam diary was blank or packed with damaging confessions – when I heard the slamming of a door

and Maya's characteristically husky voice. I jumped for the window. *Christ! She was paying off a cab at the end of the walk and heading for the front door!* I don't know what the record is for replacing a diary, closing a desk and making a broom cupboard, but I reckon I clipped three-tenths of a second from it on Wednesday, 9 December 1936 – and if you can't find that in Ripley, it's just because there wasn't an official observer present.

There damned nearly was, just the same. Maya's key was grating in the lock as I eased the inner door of the cupboard shut. I was still out of breath a couple of minutes later when I arrived at the foot of the staircase leading from the apartment to the club and thumped on the portholes to attract the attention of the torpedo waiter. 'I changed my mind,' I gasped when he came to the doors. 'Bring me a pack of Lucky Strike from the bar, Joe!'

I wondered should I try and rush him when he opened up to give me the cigarettes; the bar was fairly crowded and there were already a number of tables occupied by early lunchers. Surely they'd hardly resort to the strongarm stuff in front of the clients? What excuse could they give? The idiot son escaped from the attic? Considering how dumb I'd been, they wouldn't be far wrong at that! Then I saw Billie-boy drinking at the bar with a lad of about twenty who looked like the son of King Kong. All they'd have to do – even if the boy was just Billie's latest piece of rough trade – would be to follow me out into the street and take me there. Because the hood would know for sure that Maya was keeping me upstairs as a tame stud. And would probably be laughing up his sleeve about it if there'd been any room in there beside the arm. I decided, since I was being used as a pawn in this chess game of Maya's, that I'd take the pawn's way out just for now and move one square back. I swooped on the Luckies and went upstairs like a good boy.

She came back to the apartment herself a half hour later. We were the smart, quickfire business woman today – black french-kid gloves, classic Digby Morton two-piece, frilled white jabot at the neck: Rosalind Russell to my Fred MacMurray. Looking at the artfully not-quite-concealed curves beneath the suit, meeting those wide, dark eyes that were only just beginning to wrinkle at the corners, I could scarcely believe what I'd found out less than an hour before. The lies that could be framed by those sexy lips! She was sitting at the table tucking into a steak

tartare. Almost without realizing what I was doing, I shook my head and ran my fingers absently and unbelievably through her short hair.

She shrugged me off a little impatiently. 'Not now, Jay darling,' she said. 'I'm just back from the beautician's and I have people to see this afternoon. Be a love and get my handbag from the settee, would you?' Was it my imagination – an *arrière-pensée* in view of my discovery – or had the ardor cooled some in the past couple of days? Was the prize bull about to be demoted and put on the shelf reserved for fatted calves? I stopped pretending to paw the ground and went to fetch the handbag. It was black crocodile, of course.

I took what I considered to be a bold step that afternoon. I called Robin Douglas at his home number. He was a little surprised to hear me. 'My dear old lad,' he spluttered, 'I didn't . . . that is to say, I hardly thought I'd . . . I mean I imagined you'd still be – er – on the run, don't you know.'

'It's no thanks to you that I'm not, you treacherous bastard,' I told him. 'I see some London stuff in the paper, that I haven't sent, so I imagine you've been in touch and discovered that I really am Jason Mettner, huh?'

'Yes, I'm *frightfully* sorry about that, really I am. Ghastly trick to play on a fellow, an' all that. When I say trick . . . fact is, those jolly rozzers were awfully persuasive, and . . . ' Douglas cleared his throat, suddenly aware that the weight of excuses was going to push him deeper in the shit. 'Well, I honestly did think it was a bit rum,' he finished apologetically.

'Okay,' I said. 'Okay. I know how cops can feed you ideas and get the right answers to loaded questions. Forget it. There are more important things to talk about. Now listen . . . you've realized I *have* cabled stuff to the paper?'

'Oh, absolutely. Jolly good cover too. Don't know how you managed, old boy, I really don't. I mean what with being on the – That is to say –'

'Being on the run, you were going to repeat? Yeah, well, we have our methods, Watson. The thing is, I may be kind of occupied a coupla days. I haven't even had time to go through the papers today. What's the latest?'

'Well, it's a funny thing you should ask,' Douglas told me. 'The fact is, everything's changed. The whole shebang's gone arse over tip – Bing! Just like that.'

'Bing? Hermann before or Crosby after?'

'What? . . . Oh, yes. Ha-ha. Very droll. No, what's happened

is a complete swing of public opinion. Extraordinary, it –

‘Don’t tell me,’ I interrupted. ‘It really is?’

Douglas watched that one float out of sight. Then he said: ‘No, but up to the weekend, even at the beginning of the week, practically everyone but the MPs and *The Times* and the bloody vicars were for the King. Right behind him, don’t you know. Jimmy Agate – he’s our top theater critic – said he hoped HM would tell Baldwin to resign and go to the devil! And that was the way most people felt.’

‘But now?’

‘Quite suddenly, it’s all changed. The crowds in the street, all that talk about the King’s Party, the posters and demonstrations – they’ve all fizzed out a bit. It seems people have begun to think the PM may be right.’

‘Why do you think that is?’

‘Six separate reasons, none too important in itself but adding up to a pretty hefty corpus of anti-Ed feeling. All of them center on Mrs S.’ For once Robin Douglas sounded like a guy who knew what he was talking about. ‘For a start, the lady’s made the great renunciation – issued a press statement from Cannes offering to withdraw gracefully from the scene, if it would help. I expect you saw it in yesterday’s evenings.’

Actually, I hadn’t, but I didn’t see why he should know. I said: ‘I can’t see that makes any difference. According to the gossip I heard, he already decided to quit.’

‘I know, old lad. I know. But the people don’t. So far as the public is concerned that morganatic marriage proposition is still on, don’t you see. And if you ask me, that’s what’s dished him. It’s upset the progressives in this country because it seems, you know, anti-feminist – condemning the dear creatures to a secondary role. It’s upset your people in the USA. Some bishop in Washington said the British monarchy was exhibiting the morals of the stable. Pretty strong stuff, what!’ Douglas crowed with laughter. ‘Then there was Upton Sinclair in the *New York Daily Mirror*. He said that if she didn’t get a slap-up marriage, the whole of the United States would resent it as a slur on the women of America. Not good enough for the toffee-nosed British! Unforgiveable! But I expect you saw that?’

‘Oh, sure,’ I lied. ‘And the other points?’

‘Well of course all that foreign comment’s quoted here, now the cat’s out of the bag, as it were. And it leads to a climate that’s, well . . . rather unpalatable, shall we say? And he hasn’t helped himself, you know: he’s refused to let the papers on his

side put his point of view, refused to be quoted even. Beaverbrook and all those boys would have been glad to, but he muzzled 'em – wouldn't play because it might be embarrassing for *her*. If you ask me, that's what's put the kybosh on the jolly old King's Party.'

'Yeah. The Party. Just how well's the Party going, right now?'

'Basically – politically, I mean – it was the popular press barons plus about forty Conservative MPs plus Winston Churchill and Lloyd George. Frankly I don't believe they gave a damn for the King's romance; they just wanted to keep him on the Throne, preferably with her as his mistress, for the sake of the Empire. But that was unacceptable to him. Then, when the lady made her renunciation offer, they thought *that* was a splendid out. But HM wouldn't wear that either. Wouldn't hear of it. So the movement's rather lost way, as the sailors have it. If old Lloyd George had been here, he might have injected a spot of wind into their sails, but the old bugger can't stand the English winter and he's in the Caribbean. Winston did his best to drum up support in the House, but they wouldn't let him speak.'

'What do you mean – wouldn't let him speak?'

'My dear fellow, you wouldn't believe it! He was literally howled down! He stood there for nearly a quarter of an hour, trying to make himself heard, and they simply sat and screamed at him – "Sit down!", "Shut up!", "Get out of here!", and all sorts of insults. It was like a bloody Mosley meeting. Finally he gave in and sat down without making the speech. *The Times* said it was the biggest rebuff anyone'd had in Parliament for a hundred years, and the biggest setback of Churchill's career.'

'Swell,' I said. 'Do you by chance happen to have a half hour to spare?'

'Yes,' Douglas said dubiously. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Put all of that, exactly as you've told it to me, in a cable and send it Press Collect to Michaelson in Chicago, signed with the name "Argonaut".'

'Oh, I say, look here . . .'

'Don't worry. I'll see that you get credited with it . . . and paid for it. It's just that I'm going to be occupied chasing up that other story – the one you didn't believe in – and for various reasons, in case anyone's checking, I'd like the dispatches that appear to come from me to continue. Right?'

'Yes, old chap, of course. Er . . . d'you want me to add on

Dawson's latest – what Tom Driberg called a piece of “treacherous and vulgar malice it would be hard to equal in the lowest of the gutter press”?”

‘It depends,’ I said. ‘Those are fighting words! What did he do?’

‘*The Times*, in its early editions, printed Mrs Simpson's renunciation statement without comment. And right next to it was a box saying, quote, Thelma, Viscountess Furness, arrived at Southampton yesterday aboard the liner *Queen Mary*, unquote. What do you think of that! You know, of course, that she's . . . ?’

‘. . . the previous girlfriend? Yes, of course. I thought everyone did.’

‘They do. That's the whole point. Shall I add it on?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Forget it. I guess that kind of bitchery is too British to register with readers in Illinois.’

‘Just as you say, old lad. What's this other story you're working on then?’

‘The best crime story this year. You can send Michaelson a service message telling him so, and telling him I've contacted you. You can also say it's the story, if it works out, that's going to get me off that murder charge. Which reminds me – there's one more thing you can do for me. Do you believe I killed that girl?’

‘My dear chap! No, no. Certainly not. Good God, no!’

‘Thousands wouldn't believe *you*, but I do. Okay, call up Superintendent Rawlins of Scotland Yard, the guy you spoke to before, and tell him to expect a message of some kind from me during the next few days. Tell him it'll settle the question of who did murder Dorothy Kimble – and that it won't be a hoax. It really will be from me. Will you do that?’

‘Of course, old boy. Where are you phoning from? Can I call you back?’

‘With your record,’ I said, ‘d'you imagine I'd tell?’ I hung up.

It was a damp, cold day with an overcast sky, and moisture shining the streets bright as boots. But there was no wind, and by the middle of the afternoon the atmosphere had thickened to something like a Scotch mist. Before nightfall the mist had turned into fog. I'd been intending to play hookey while Maya was doing her hostess act down below, letting myself out via the

house in the hope of contacting some of the Soho club owners listed in her desk and getting them to talk. I could leave a window unlatched or arrange to get back in through the garage easily enough. But when I saw haloes around the street lamps, and veils of fog thick enough to hide the stop-go traffic light on the corner, I figured it would probably be simpler, and quicker, if I hired me a native guide. I took my billfold from my hip pocket to look for Alderton's number.

The billfold was empty. The cabbie's business card had gone. So had the few pounds I kept in there.

I frowned, tapping the thin leather envelope against my teeth. The stuff could have been taken any time since I returned from the White Hart in Soho on Monday, since I normally left the billfold in place when I folded my pants at night. What the hell! I'd worry about it later. Alderton would take one of my remaining American Express checks. I'd simply look up his home number in the book.

I sat down by the phone and opened the fat directory. I was leafing through the A's when glasses on the sideboard jingled and the whole room vibrated as an airplane flying very low droned overhead. It sounded like a Ford tri-motor or one of the four-engined crates. Poor bastard, I thought, glancing out the window at the light reflected by the fog; flying through that shit! Looking back at the directory, my eye fell on an evening paper lying beside it on the low table. The paper was folded back to an inside page and there was an item at the foot of column five lightly ringed in pencil. I saw the modest head, **LONDON TAXIMAN'S MYSTERY DEATH**, and picked up the paper. I read:

Streatham police were today seeking clues to the attacker or attackers responsible for the death of Mr G. T. Alderton, 55, the owner-driver of a London taxicab. Mr Alderton's body was discovered in a secluded part of Streatham Common by a patrolling constable whose suspicions had been aroused by the sight of an empty cab abandoned with the engine running. The taxi man had been brutally assaulted and then battered to death with an iron bar. The inspector in charge of enquiries told our reporter: 'It seems an apparently motiveless killing. Alderton had no enemies and there was a considerable amount of money in his cab. Yet the attacker must have been a professional wearing gloves, for there were no fingerprints on the murder weapon.' Mr

Alderton, who worked from a cab rank in Knightsbridge, leaves a widow and a daughter aged 19.

My fingers were shaking as I laid the paper down. 'You murderous bitch!' I said.

I didn't know if the paper had been deliberately left there for me to see, or whether it was an oversight. I wouldn't gamble on the latter. On present form, I thought, very little that lady does is unplanned.

I went into the bedroom and took my jacket off its hanger. The big wallet in which I kept my papers was still in the breast pocket. But my passport, the American Express checks, and the rest of my sterling cash had gone. As a man wanted on a murder charge, the theft would 'imprison' me, in the sense of restricting my movement, almost as much as a locked door.

Okay, I said to myself, King Edward's not the only guy to find there's a dip in his popularity rating this week! Like the King, I was obviously being readied for the high jump – but whereas he was choosing his own time and his own exit line, I was not.

Why was the script suddenly changed in my case? Again, like in his, probably because I wasn't sticking to the rules. Little Innocent Mettner had blabbed the whole story of his Tonbridge trip to man-eating Maya, even though she'd 'advised' him to stay put in the apartment. Since no accusations were made, she must have cottoned onto the fact that I hadn't seen her . . . that is, that I'd happened to miss them unloading and reloading the Packard at Beechwood Court. But she couldn't be one hundred per cent certain. And, as I was beginning to find out, odds of ninety-nine to one on weren't sufficiently short to qualify as a dead cert in Maya's book. They just qualified the runners as dead. I guessed that was why Alderton had to go; *in case* I'd talked to him, *in case* we'd seen her, *in case* he could make the link with Ralfini and Francis and their racket. Which left me where? I wasn't positive – but in the doghouse for sure.

So what kind of event is the high jump and how long's the drop? About as far as it is to the quicklime beneath the trap-door in the death cell? By which, of course, I meant were they simply going to hand me back to the police in a neatly-tied package and hope I'd swing for Dorothy's murder as before? Or was some more sinister end in view – the kind that involved a secluded part of Streatham Common?

The third question that occurred to me was how the hell

was I to react when Maya came back to the apartment? Would I be expected to perform as though nothing had happened? Or was I supposed to have taken some kind of hint from the exposed newspaper item? Maybe, like me, she was trailing a decoy.

In the event, the problem didn't arise. There seemed to be a hell of a night on at the club. The band was louder than usual, jazzier, and the street was choked with cars, never mind the fog. Pug-face brought dinner at eight and said Madame would be occupied with special guests until very late. I took the opportunity and went to bed early; I could always feign sleep later. But in fact she never came back to the apartment all night. Maya wasn't actually sadistic, you see: she was just businesslike. She didn't watch the animals destroyed when they'd outlived their usefulness. She rang the vet and went out for the day.

I was fuming with impatience just the same. The obvious thing for me to do was to take it on the lam. But I had to have *some* money. I could probably touch Robin Douglas for this, on a promise that the paper would repay him . . . but although I dialed all evening, there was no reply from his number. I'd have to wait until the morning; I didn't even have coins for a public call-box! In any case I wanted a look at that red diary before I went, and I dare not risk switching on the lights in the house, even in a London fog. I played with the thought of reading it by flashlight. But do you think I could locate a flashlight in that goddam apartment?

There was still fog hanging around in the morning. Maya wasn't about. I showered and went to the door to collect the papers. The *Daily Mail* was as chastened and defeatist as the weather. ABDICATION FEARED TODAY, the King's champion headlined sadly. All the others led with a disaster story, the first for over a week. Apparently the plane I'd heard last night had been in dead trouble. It was a Dutch airliner, and it had crashed in the fog at Croydon airport, killing its crew and fourteen passengers, among them La Cierva, the inventor of the autogiro.

As soon as the warder had cleared away the breakfast tray, and no doubt locked the double doors at the foot of the stairs, I picked up the phone to call Robin Douglas.

The line was dead. No amount of jiggling the receiver rest would bring me a dialing tone. Evidently the wires were cut or a plug had been pulled out some place.

Okay, I thought, this is evidently where we move into the open warfare phase. What had been planned for me? Well, I wasn't going to wait and see. The condemned man had eaten a hearty breakfast; now he was going to get the hell out!

My guardian angel was located on his usual cloud, just beyond the twin portholes, but he had his back to the stairs. I crept up to the attic floor and made my way along the concealed passageway to the house. This time I gave the whole place the once-over before I settled down. The garage was empty, but there was a smell of coffee in the sterile kitchen. They must have had it sent in from outside. Upstairs I found two bedrooms. One was unused; in the other there was an extra-wide unmade bed with rumpled sheets. The bathroom was still misted with condensation and the steamy air was heavy with the scent of expensive colognes.

No prizes, I thought, for guessing where my hostess had spent the night. Or with whom, for that matter. There was a cabinet-size portrait in a leather photo-frame standing on the night table. *For Maya - my love!* said the heavily inked dedication slanted across the lower left-hand corner. And the face staring soulfully out at me was the face of Mario Ralfini.

So much for all that innocence. So much for the pretense of knowing damn-all about 'this man Ralfini'. So much for those persistent 'enquiries' at the club, none of which, strangely enough, had produced anything specific.

Downstairs, so far as I could see (and I had contrived tell-tale pointers), the red Morocco diary was exactly as I had left it in the center drawer of the bureau. That meant that, empty or full, it certainly wasn't entered up every day.

I'd determined to break the lock. Shit, I was getting out anyway, and after what she'd done to me, don't try to tell me it wasn't gentlemanly. I went out to the kitchen and found a knife. Slipping the blade beneath the lock and levering it was no sweat to spring open the hasp. I tapped a Lucky out of my pack and felt in my pocket for matches. There were still a couple left in the dog-eared Beechwood Court book. As I sucked in smoke, I opened the diary . . . and saw at once that I'd struck oil!

There was a spread of two pages for every day of the year. Many of them were blank; more still were covered with Maya's obsessively neat, back-slanting handwriting. I'd guessed right too: she hadn't been able to resist that what-a-clever-girl-I-am routine, and it was all down there - dates, places, figures, de-

tails of operations, easily identifiable initials for the cast. I flipped through the past couple of months, catching a line here and a line there. *Golden Slipper taken apart by BBF plus three . . . Visited Blue Lagoon with R: £250 . . . BBF returned to Slipper to collect £300 . . . R thinks we should talk CMcF into letting us have a piece of the Plantation . . . BBF on milk run delivers two warnings (DDG and FY) and collects from McF: £200 . . . R thinks we should attempt to bring the North into line . . .* I stopped reading suddenly. What was somebody trying to pull? I'd just remembered: Ralfini couldn't have spent the night with Maya, in this or any other London house. He was in the North; I'd heard him talking with Billie-boy about it. *I gotta meet with the Kelly mob . . . talk some sense into their mouthpiece . . .* And then, in reply to the gorilla's enquiry about his return: *Eight after nine, Friday night . . . King's Cross . . .*

Today was Thursday.

Since Ralfini wasn't due back in town until eight minutes past nine tomorrow night, all at once it looked to me as though that love-nest routine up in the bedroom was some kind of set-up. Of course she could have slept alone with just Ralfini's photo for company. After all, she liked tall, thin men. Or she could have slept with someone else and not troubled to remove the picture – except that Maya, however crooked she might be, always did things with a certain style and that wouldn't have been chic. No, that Sicilian mug gazing out over the artfully mussed bed covers, with the used bathroom beyond, was just a little too pat, now I came to think of it.

Something smelled. And if it was a case of walking open-eyed into some kind of set-up that looked suspicious even before things started to move, then Mama Mettner's favorite son wasn't going to play. Let's not mince words, huh? I was scared suddenly and I wanted out. Further researches into the diary would have to wait, even if, as I hoped, they might throw some light on the fate planned for me, until I could get home and do a few more minutes reading before I finally took it on the lam. I backed out and made for the broom cupboard.

That was my first mistake.

I got wise to the second as soon as I was safely back in the apartment. I re-opened the book and felt in my pocket for cigarettes. Zero.

All the blood in the body seems to drain down to the feet, leaving the rest of you ice-cold, when you catch on that you

made some specially dumb play. Suddenly I was at the North Pole in a collar and tie. I'd left my Luckies, together with the damning book matches, on the bureau in the sitting-room of the other house . . .

I hightailed it back to that corridor like a swallow who missed out on the migration. Billie-boy Francis was waiting in the hallway when I opened the cupboard door. Three men built like diesel trucks stood behind him.

'Been expectin' you, sweetie,' he said. 'Fancy pulling a stroke like that! Never mind. Me an' the boys got exactly what you need.'

He held up one hand, the hairy forefinger and thumb pinched over my cigarette pack and matches. The fingers of the other hand were wrapped around the rubber-covered butt of a blackjack.

FIFTEEN

You could hardly hear the newsboys yelling in Westminster that Thursday afternoon: the air around the House of Commons was loud with the gnashing of impatient teeth and the patter of bitten nails. It was an open secret than an official abdication message was expected. The King had spent the morning with Walter Monckton and the Dukes of York and Kent, sweating over the wording of his formal quit form. But parliamentary protocol was rigid: the ritual of prayers, followed by the premier's Question Time, had to be followed before any special announcement could be made – and there were over fifty questions demanding an answer on Stanley Baldwin's order paper that day. Paradoxically too, or maybe it was just ironic, the measure to be voted on later was a private Member's bill making it easier for the British to get divorced . . . the very point on which my compatriots, and Wally Simpson especially, had been so bitterly criticized by the stuffed shirts opposing the King! The bill, which was introduced by the playwright A. P. Herbert, made cruelty and desertion valid reasons for cutting the marriage tie in addition to adultery. But the MPs were only interested in the divorce that had led to the crisis and as each clause was voted on, Herbert was forced to race around libraries and bars and committee rooms in the House, rounding up those who had promised to support it. The bill finally scraped through, making it less necessary for folks to go through the farce of an arranged 'adultery' with a professional co-respondent, the way it was assumed Edward and the Simpsons had. But it was a mite too late for that particular trio. In the middle of the afternoon, a 'gracious message' in Edward's own hand was finally read out by the Speaker, announcing His Majesty's irrevocable decision to take a powder, on account of the position he was in made it impossible to carry out his duties the way he would like.

Baldwin then gave out with what everyone agreed was a moving and sincere piece of hypocrisy, telling it the way it wasn't, like how he and the King had been such buddies and all that jazz. Members then adjourned while the Act of Abdication was drafted, and the whole deal was passed in all its stages and became law before lunch the following day. Friday lunch is important, after all: you have to prepare the inner lawmaker for the rigors of the journey out to the weekend country house.

Me, I didn't hear about any of this until it was all over, of course, and the King had definitely been made 'ex' and shown out the back door. While the people's representatives were carrying out their true-blue British duties, Your Special Correspondent in London was out to the wide in a locked apartment a couple of miles to the northeast of the Mother of Parliaments.

I didn't remember too clearly what happened immediately after I ran into that friendly Mr Francis outside the broom cupboard. The cosh was rubber-covered, but I guess it must have had a lead core. Billie-boy's friends kindly held me upright while he tested the balance of his toy. It seemed to work equally well on either side of my neck. I heard him mutter something about not marking up the face . . . yet . . . and then he dropped the cigarettes and matches and reached his hand out toward my groin.

Specialists in the arts of persuasion say that if you want information from a guy, no torture equipment more sophisticated than a hand that knows how and where to squeeze is necessary. I believe them: nothing mechanical or electrical could surpass that particular pain. Only Billie-boy Francis didn't want any information out of me. He just wanted to see me buck and writhe against the hands holding me, to hear me scream as he flexed his own fingers. He was doing it for kicks.

I don't know whether it was the cosh that beat me insensible or the agony that caused me to lose consciousness. The last thing I remember is the glint in Billie-boy's pig eyes, the red tip of his tongue licking his wet red lips before the whole world went red and then faded away.

It was dark when I came to and the inside of my head was hammering like a shipyard on overtime. A dull fire glowed at the bottom of my belly. But these aftermaths of the encounter with my particular bad fairy didn't entirely account for the taste in my mouth or the feeling behind my eyes when I sat up

on the bed and swung my feet to the floor. I knew from way back: this was more than the result of a simple k-o. I'd been drugged and kept under sedation for some time . . . and of course that's what must have happened the first time I'd met Maya. That was no blind brought on by fatigue and too much drink; nobody had manhandled a plastered newspaperman into a taxi and shoved him into the Priory that night. The bitch had slipped me a Mickey and then gotten the boys to carry me there along the secret passage!

It didn't matter now anyway. What mattered was the reason for the second dose. I was being kept under wraps. For what?

I looked around. I was in the bedroom of the apartment. I stood up and fought my way through the colored stars to the door. As I expected, it was locked – and it opened inward, so there was no point hurling the massive Mettner frame against the panels. I heaved at the handle some, but it came away in my grasp and left me worse off than before. The phone was still dead. I went to the window and heaved up the sash. There were haloes around the street lamps again and the air was moist. But this time there was no string course below the sill, no ledge running along the façade – just a sheer brick face dropping about thirty feet to the sidewalk. The nearest stack-pipe was yards away. Those guys knew what they were talking about: history *don't* repeat itself!

It wasn't until a newsie walked under one of the lights with his placards flapping that I got the message. KING SPEAKS TONIGHT, the red letters on one spelled out. And on the other I read: EDWARD'S RADIO FAREWELL. I caught my breath. This was no followup to the news in the last paper I'd read; those must be the evenings of the day after, the Friday papers that the boy was selling. I'd been out since Thursday before lunch!

So, again, what the hell . . . ?

I remembered the one card left in my hand, the one thing they didn't know. I'd brought that red diary with me the first time I'd returned to the apartment the day before. And, thank Christ, I'd hidden it before I walked back like a dumb cluck into Billie-boy's welcoming arms. If I'd any luck left at all, Maya wouldn't have missed it yet. I went back to the bed and felt beneath the deep mattress where I'd stuffed the book. It was still there.

I didn't want to advertise the fact that I'd returned from the land of nod already, so I resisted the temptation to switch

on the lights. I went into the bathroom, where there was no outside window, and pulled the cord operating the neon strips there. I opened the diary and began to read.

Believe me, that little volume was a real eye-opener! For a start, it was obvious that Ralfini had been Maya's lover from the day he hit town over a month ago. And although – reading between the lines – the torch had cooled down some, she still liked tall, thin men and she kept the bed warm for him when there was nothing more exciting around. Which wasn't to say that he had the same freedom! I remembered Maya calling Dorothy Kimble a little tramp. It was clear from the entries dated a month earlier that she had been savagely jealous of the blonde girl, even after Ralfini's liaison with her was over. On the day when I'd rescued Dorothy from the Zanzibar, there was a short entry which read simply: *R is seeing The Tramp again. He says because he's angry over some business deal. I wonder.*

I turned the page. The day I'd wanted to date Dorothy, the day she refused to see me, read: *Caught them together. I heard her apologize for some kind of cross – and then proposition him. The Tramp must go.* I knew then what I was going to find overleaf, but I didn't expect it to be quite so casual. Among a collection of details about club memberships, bulk buying and audit problems appeared the laconic line: *BBF settled the DK affair. Useful for eliminating JM.* Like I said, that was Maya: take the decisions but keep the hands clean. Nice lady.

There was no further reference to yours truly until the day I escaped from Great Marlborough Street. *JM outwitted bogeys. Team to watch.* And then later: *BBK instructed – seek and capture.* There was only one entry for the day I actually met Maya. It read: *JM! R will learn that two can play his game!*

So much for the electric charm of Rudolph V. Mettner, the great lover, the irresistible allure of Don Juan Mettner, the champion bedder of the twentieth century, the compelling virility of Casanova Mettner, whom No Woman Could Resist. When you came down to it, I'd been taken in on a whim, to make a mafioso jealous!

I read on, skimming the stuff I knew because I'd been involved in it . . . and then suddenly I was sitting bolt upright on the edge of the tub, re-reading a detailed instruction, or the blueprint for one, which left me gasping, even after what I'd discovered already. It was no less than a plan to get rid

of me *and* lover-boy Ralfini in a single adroit move!

Now I understood the bedroom set-up in the house behind: it was just that I'd stumbled on a dry run for the real McCoy. Now I realized why I'd been kept on ice for over twenty-four hours. Now I knew why Maya hadn't handed me over to the law once she tired of me. That was much too crude a move for her kind of end-game. What she'd worked out was this: a man's body was to be found beaten to death outside that steamy bathroom, at the foot of that cutely rumpled bed.

Mine.

She'd been having an affair with me – the story would run. She was, as everyone knew, a red-blooded woman. She had no idea, of course, that I was a wanted man. Natch. But there would be plenty of witnesses from the club that we *had* been living it up together. Then suddenly – boom! – the last boyfriend, Ralfini by name, returns from the North, finds us in bed together and kills the interloper in a fit of mad jealousy. Distressed though she was, the lovely club owner would tearfully be able to give an eyewitness, blow-by-blow description of the killing. Others no doubt would testify to hearing the noise of the struggle. Thus I would be gotten out of the way for keeps, Ralfini would be topped for my murder . . . and Maya, now that Ralfini had set up the organization she hired him for, would be able to run the racket on her own, with no need to cut him in, and no inconvenient witnesses to how it was set up and how it worked.

Check-mate, mate!

Would such a crazy routine work? The way it was planned, I figured it would. Ralfini wouldn't have a chance . . . not with such a respectable lady, with such highly-placed connections, saying she actually saw him do it; not with the other perjured testimony she'd fix; not with his record; not the way it had been planned right down to the last detail. They'd even remembered not to mark up my face, so the wounds, when I got them, would be commensurate with the time of death. The murder weapon probably had the poor bastard's fingerprints on it already.

I stood up suddenly. The time of death! *My* death! The hell with mobsters: what about *this* poor bastard? The frame would be fixed for around a half hour after Ralfini's train got in. Just time, in theory, for him to come home and find Mama in bed with a stranger. And the train – could I forget it! – arrived at King's Cross at eight minutes after nine.

I looked at my watch. It was eight twenty. I had less than an hour in which to save both our lives. Jesus! Fight down the panic! You have one thing in your favor: they don't know that you know. So you still have a chance to get out of here. Oh sure – but how? You can't exactly throw up the window and yell for the law – not with a murder rap hanging over you.

No . . . but you could the fire service.

It didn't take long once I'd decided to do it and the hell with the risk. In any case, whatever the odds, they would be better than those against my being battered to death by Billie-boy's goons. Maya kept a bottle of lighter fluid in the cupboard beneath the night table, and there was a patent benzine cleaner in back of the built-in wall closet. I uncorked one, unscrewed the cap of the other, and poured the liquid from both bottles over crumpled newspapers, silk sheets from the bed, the filmier clothes in the closet and anything else that looked as though it would burn. I made one pile of the inflammable material against the door and then pushed the pale oak dressing-table over the top of it. The impregnated garments I heaped on the closet floor. Then I struck a couple of matches and stood back.

The gasoline fumes rising from the pile beneath the dressing-table ignited with a soft *whoomp!* and a moment later flames from the burning paper and silk were licking against the oak. The fire in the closet was a slower starter, but soon the benzine I'd sprayed around in there was ablaze too, incinerating about a hundred thousand dollars worth of feminine glamor from the hem upward.

I waited until smoke was billowing out from the crowded dress rails and the odor of scorched varnish had been replaced by the smell of burning paintwork from the door. Then I did the one thing you're supposed to avoid in case of fire: I threw open the window.

Boy, did that cool moist air streaming in galvanize my home-made fire! It might not have rated as much front-page space as the Crystal Palace, but it would have brought a warm glow to the kids who'd been letting off fire-crackers a month earlier in honor of that guy who tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament! The draft whistled under the door, fanning my private bonfire into a minor inferno which quickly set the dressing-table and door panels alight. Next to catch was the skirting and wallpaper – and a few seconds later the closet floorboards were burning. By now there was choking black smoke pouring from the flaming garments. I hurried to the

window with smarting eyes and leaned over the sill.

I knew there was a fire station less than two blocks away and I was gambling on their efficiency as my get-out. But it was getting hot as hell in there; I had to cross my fingers and hope I hadn't overplayed the hand. I could see folks gesticulating in the lighted windows of houses across the street. Several were frantically dialing 999 emergency calls. The newsie had run into the middle of the roadway, pointing up at the apartment, and there were waiters and club members milling around on the sidewalk by the entrance.

It was two and a half minutes after the fire really took hold that I heard the clanging of bells. Two tenders and a turntable skidded around the corner from Woburn Place and roared up to the Priory. The crews were still fixing the chinstraps of their brass helmets as the heavy scarlet machines maneuvered broadside-on to the street between the lines of parked automobiles. The men scattered, uncoiling hose, running for the fire plug, operating the motor to rotate the ladder. I could hear the fire chief shouting orders over the whine of machinery. I could also hear shouting from the far side of the burning door.

Maya and Billie-boy would be in a jam. A roasted Mettner would kill their plan. They couldn't frame Ralfini for the death of a guy in a fire, especially if he was on a train at the time. On the other hand, if they tried to bust down the flaming door and get me out, the fire would funnel through into the rest of the apartment and be like to burn down the whole goddam building. Even if they could get through. The third alternative – dramatic rescue and Mettner off the hook – might not occur to them at first, not unless they realized I'd started the blaze deliberately. But once they heard the alarm bells, they'd be wise to the possibility and they might try and do something to foul it up. It was my aim to get the hell out before this happened.

I couldn't wait while they telescoped the ladders out and winched a guy up to rescue me. There was another way. I stood silhouetted against the flames and waved my arms as if I was in a panic. As *if* I was in a panic? Who was I kidding? I was black with soot, the heat was searing through my clothes, I could feel my skin begin to shrivel like the crackling on a joint of pork. I climbed out onto the sill and crouched there covering my face.

Behind me the snap, crackle and pop of the fire increased to a dull roar. Below, the chief was waving *his* arms around.

Some of the guys left the turntable and hustled out crabwise onto the sidewalk, stretching a wide disk of canvas taut between them. The chief signaled urgently: I was not to wait for the ladder but to jump.

The signal was what I *had* been waiting for. Clutching Maya's diary, which I'd stuffed under my jacket, I jumped.

A rush of cold air. A confused succession of noises. An impact not much harder than a collision with a Mack truck. And then I was bouncing to rest on the canvas escape sheet. The chief helped me off it, asking was I okay. I mumbled a churlish thank you, brushed him aside and pushed my way through the crowd to the far side of the street. I began to run.

I figured my only chance was to intercept Ralfini as he got off the train, show him the diary as proof of Maya's duplicity, and persuade him to sing to the law. That way, he could get protection against the Team and save his life at the expense of extradition to the US to face those old tax charges . . . and incidentally clear me of the Kimble murder with his evidence.

There were just a couple of difficulties in the way of this plan. I had to get to Ralfini, and there had to be some law for him to sing to.

A fireman at the top of the turntable ladder was being swiveled toward the apartment window, directing the jet from his hose at the blazing interior. Floodlights had been set up, and in their livid glare I saw the unmistakable silhouette of Billie-boy leaning out of the sitting-room window next door, scanning the crowd below. As he saw me, pointed, and then vanished abruptly toward the stairs, I heard the chimes of a church clock over the hubbub. Nine o'clock! I had eight minutes to make King's Cross and locate my man . . . and the only route that gave me any chance of success lay along Marchmont Street, the Italian ghetto Kevin Deegan had told me about - which was under the Team's Mafia-style control.

As I raced up toward Russell Square Underground station, I could see Maya in the entrance lobby of the club, her face a mask of anger as she spun the dial of the pay phone on the wall. Evidently she was phoning instructions ahead to block me while Billie-boy rounded up the pursuit.

As I ran across the street by the blue and white illuminated canopy of the subway station, I saw a small crowd of travelers frozen into immobility around the ticket window - and from behind the glass I could hear a radio with the volume turned up high. '*This is Windsor Castle,*' one of those frightfully

frightful British voices announced. *'His Royal Highness Prince Edward will talk to you.'*

My God! I was making my escape in the middle of the highlight that should have led the story I'd been sent to cover! This must be the King – the ex-King now – making his public farewell . . .

I pounded past a fruit and vegetable store on the corner of Marchmont Street. From the dimly-lit interior, I heard the familiar, faintly Cockney voice: *'I am at last able to say a few words myself . . .'*

Fifty yards on, there was a cross street, and I heard the voice again, coming from an open window on the first floor of a sandwich bar: *' . . . until now it has not been possible, constitutionally, for me to speak . . .'*

A big, blue-chinned fellow in a white apron erupted onto the sidewalk some way ahead of me. He was holding a butcher's cleaver, and the *ristorante* he had come out of advertised canelloni and fritto misto and lasagne verdi in white letters scrawled on the window. He stood blocking my way like an ape, feet planted wide and arms spread to catch me whichever way I swerved, shifting his grip on the handle of the weapon. He wasn't too much trouble, that one, telegraphing the way he expected the horse to run. I turned the form upside down and ran straight at him, planting a foot in the center of his unprotected belly. He was caught off balance with his weight on his heels. He crashed over backward with a roar of rage, cracking his head against a metal crate full of empty milk bottles, and bowed himself out of the scene that way. *'Several hours ago,'* the voice said from inside the restaurant, *'I fulfilled my last duty as King and Emperor; and now that my brother, the Duke of York, succeeds me, my first words must be to declare my allegiance to him. This I do with all my heart.'*

I dodged into an alleyway and raced through to Herbrand Street. A few doors beyond the restaurant, a phone was ringing. Maya was evidently calling the next goon in her address book: maybe I could afford to bypass that one with a one-block detour.

Herbrand was two storeys of grimy brick above pants pressers, felt blockers, a tailor's workshop, a cobbler, and the steamed-up front of a cheap laundry. On the far side of the street there was a huge auto service station, but it was closed, the concrete forecourt deserted, the globes of the gasoline pumps unlit. The street was empty too – no cars, no bicycles,

no trucks, not even a pedestrian. There was just the tired regal voice echoing from every door and window. *'You know all the reasons which have led me to renounce . . . I would like you to understand . . . I have forgotten neither the country nor the Empire which, for twenty-five years . . .'*

The whole goddam world seemed to be listening to the speech. I didn't realize it then, but the whole goddam world *was!* Theaters had arranged their intervals to coincide with it; traffic was halted in Tokyo; in India and South Africa and Belgium and Norway, all radio programs were interrupted to relay it; in New York city, the Bell Telephone Company reported later, not one single call was made during the few minutes the King was on the air. There was one in London though. I found a public call-box at the far end of the service station, hurled myself inside, and dialed the three nines alarm.

'Emergency.' A cool girl's voice. 'Which service do you want, please? Fire? Police? Ambulance?'

'Police!' I panted.

There was a click, and then a man's voice: 'Police emergency. Can I have your name, please?'

'The hell with that,' I yelled. 'This is urgent. Get - '

'Your name, please sir?'

'For Chrissake! Mettner. Jason Mettner.'

'Thank you, sir. Would that be one "T" or two?'

'Help yourself to as many as you want,' I shouted. 'Be my guest. I want to get a message - '

'And the address?' the unruffled voice asked.

I choked back my retort. I guess they had to have their routine. 'King's Cross railroad station,' I said as calmly as I could. 'Get this message to Superintendent Rawlins of Scotland Yard. Fast. Tell him I'll be meeting the nine-eight from the North. Tell him to be there if he wants to solve a murder and stop another. He's expecting a message but tell him to hurry. There's only a few minutes.' I slammed down the phone before the guy could reply and bust out into the street again.

There was a T-junction blocking off Herbrand at the next intersection. Either I had to turn left, take the main drag and lose time, or run back into Marchmont and make the train . . . at the expense of whatever shit Maya would have thrown in my way. For her phone, I knew, would have been busy too! I turned right and trod on the pedal.

Stores were still open along the upper reaches of Marchmont Street - delicatessen and groceries and an ice-cream

parlor; a milk bar and a fruiterer with cases of apples and oranges stacked outside his window. Customers in the delicatessen and people on stools along the bar stayed as rigid as the subjects of a painting as I pounded past each relay speaker, the royal words swelling and fading in my ears: *'You must believe me when I say . . . impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility . . . without the help of the woman I love. But I would like you to know that the decision I have taken was mine and mine alone . . . Until the very last moment, the other person concerned tried to persuade me to take another course . . .'*

One of the paintings turned itself into a movie. Three men came out of the fruit and vegetable store and spread out across the sidewalk into the roadway. They were dark, sturdy guys with tough chins and curly, Mediterranean hair. But they didn't look like professional hoods; they were just neighborhood muscle carrying out the boss's orders. Once again I banked on the belief that they'd be dumb enough to figure *me* for dumb. Instead of trying to force my way through or outflank them, I ran up onto the ranked displays in front of the shop. My feet squelched through tomatoes and pears, skidded on beetroot and squashed melon. I turned my ankle on a tray of potatoes and kicked cabbages, bananas, a huge basket of marrows tumbling to the pavement. By the time the boys were plugged in to the change of plan, that sidewalk was jumping. One of them tripped and fell. Another crashed his shin into one of the wooden crates and staggered off balance toward me. The third – the nearest to the wall – got his hands onto the edge of my jacket. I swung around toward him, chopping at his neck with the flat of my hand as I came down off the displays. He grunted and swung at me with an outsize fist. The blow caught me high up on the left side, just over the heart. It didn't hurt me, but it knocked me off my stride and allowed the goon to wrap his arms around my thighs and bring me down among the November windfalls. For a moment we threshed around in the salad, grappling for the advantage. Then the man who had tripped threw himself down on us with the intention of smothering me by his weight. At the same time the third guy picked up the crate he'd barked his shin on and swung it at my head. The teamwork would have been swell . . . if I hadn't happened to knee my man in the balls and roll to one side at the crucial second. Man Number Two fell on the guy who had floored me, and then had the crate splinter over

his head. By the time they'd sorted themselves out, I was on my feet ten yards away and running.

They started after me, shouting. There was noise farther back down the street too. And by now, Billie-boy would have backed the Packard out of the garage behind the club and belted after me with as many of the Team as he could raise. There was another three hundred yards to cover before I made the comparative safety of Euston Road – and on the far side of that wide stretch of macadam was the ramp leading to the station.

I crammed on as much speed as I could. The blood was roaring in my ears and my feet were beginning to feel as though there were weights attached to the ankles. A husky Italian was moving reluctantly toward a shrilling phone inside a low-ceilinged store hung with sausages and Parma hams and flasks of chianti as I hared past. Behind him a fat woman sat at the counter frowning in the direction of an antique radio whose gooseneck speaker curved over shelves packed with tins of ravioli and tomato paste. *'With his long experience of public life in this country,'* the boxy voice from the speaker said, *'my brother will be able admirably to take my place without the life and progress of the Empire being in any way affected or interrupted . . .'*

I thanked my lucky stars that it took time to dial, speak, replace a receiver, wait for another dialing tone, and then call again . . . even for someone as determined as Maya. I was over the next cross street before the big man made the sidewalk. *'He has also in his favor,'* Edward thundered from the interior of a cabman's shelter, *'that blessing without equal which has been given to so many of you but denied to me: a happy home with his wife and children.'*

Two short blocks separated me from Euston Road now. About a quarter of that distance lay between me and the Roman legions clattering up Marchmont Street in pursuit. A couple of men ran out of the shelter and headed across the street toward me. The phone must have been ringing in there too. Of course they might have been running for the line of taxis parked by the curb, but I was in no position to take chances. I put the palm of my right hand on top of a low iron railing and vaulted over onto a small triangle of grass in front of a pub standing back from the road. *'And now,'* a radio just inside the open door of the saloon bar told me, *'I leave public life and I lay down my burden.'*

Racing past the immobile drinkers in the bar, I almost did the same. A shot – the first fired at me in England – rang out behind the railings. I heard the sonic whip-crack as the slug zipped past me. Glass tinkled and fell amongst cars parked beyond the pub. The pistol, which sounded like a heavy caliber revolver, roared again. This time a ricochet screeched off the brick wall of the building into the night. I sprinted for an alley running along one side of the pub and emerged on the sidewalk of Euston Road. The wet street stretched wide and empty in each direction. I ran across under the yellow lights as the red, amber and green traffic signals winked on and off along the deserted perspective to the west.

The minute hand of the giant clock above the station entrance jerked onto ten past nine while I was laboring up the ramp. I should be safe from lead poisoning now – they must have been pretty desperate to fire at me out in the open like that. But I was two minutes late, and those hundred and twenty lost seconds could alter the odds on who was going to get to Ralfini first. Already six or seven people, including the guys with the gun, were crossing the road by the pink gothic nightmare of St Pancras and heading for the ramp. A big green automobile with whitewall tires shot the lights and raced for the 'In' sign at King's Cross.

There were cabs on the rank beneath the glass entrance canopy, but all the drivers were inside, listening to the broadcast over the station relay speakers. The concourse was crowded with travelers, porters, officials, workmen, in motionless groups. The only thing moving was a locomotive sliding with a hiss of steam to a halt in the bay at the end of track 12. I flashed a glance at the indicator board. It was Ralfini's train all right. Thank God it was a couple of minutes late! That evened up the score some.

'Now,' ex-Kings' voices cried from bookstalls and pillars and baggage checks and the tops of gantries beneath the great glass roof, *'we all have a new King. With all my heart, I wish him – and you, his people – happiness and prosperity in the future. God bless you all.'* The briefest of pauses. And then, with a slight catch in the throat, a final: *'God Save The King!'*

Like the picture from a jammed cine-projector suddenly freeing, the still-life on the station concourse sprang into motion. Many people were dabbing their eyes. 'Well, the bastards finally got 'im, di'n' they?' a porter grunted as he wheeled a barrow loaded with grips toward the cab rank.

'He's well out of it, poor sod,' a man in a trilby hat said. 'You can't buck the system and expect Them to let you get away with it!' A schoolmarm with glasses and steel-gray hair sniffed. 'He should have thought of that first! If That Woman hadn't got her hooks into him . . . ' The tannoy speakers were in action again:

'The train which has just arrived at No. 12 platform is the nine-eight from Nuneaton, Peterborough, Darlington, Newcastle and Aberdeen. Will passengers please . . . '

There were no barriers blocking off Platform 12. As friends and relatives surged forward, doors opened all along the length of the train and passengers carrying their baggage dropped to the platform, hurrying toward the exits to secure a porter, grab a taxi, a phone, a place on the Underground before it became too crowded. I hurried past the locomotive – a 4-4-2 'Atlantic' class engine with mist still dewing the weather-plates and the long green boiler – and fought my way against the tide. It wasn't too easy, locating one human being in that crush – but I couldn't afford to stand still and let him come to me; there were up to a dozen hoods close behind, all looking for the same man, with orders to stop me getting to him first at all costs. And it's not too difficult to maim, silence, knock off or even kidnap someone in a crowded place, whatever you might think. Ju-jitsu holds, nerve grips, cleverly fixed stumbles and trips can all momentarily paralyze a guy. Anaesthetic capsules or impregnated cottonwool can put him out once he's down or while someone else stages a diversion. A stiletto in a sleeve can croak a victim at his own wedding before the priest realizes he ain't just been slapped on the back. The Mexicans invented what they call a knife-gun – a cute little toy with a hollow blade that slips in a couple of inches, say between two ribs, and then releases a powerful spring that fires a slug far enough through the soft tissues to find a vital spot. After that it's just stand back, please . . . Our friend took a bad turn . . . He had a mite too much to drink . . . He gets these attacks . . . If we can just get him to the car . . .

I was aware suddenly of sounds. Footsteps, hundreds of them on the moist platform. The hiss of steam. A curious kind of metal panting from the loco that echoed beneath the high roof. Doors slamming. The gunning of a taxi motor. Italian accents calling through the groundswell of voices (and I don't think I was imagining that). An incomprehensible announcement over the speakers.

There was another sound too . . . and suddenly I realized that the motor I heard didn't belong to a taxi. I could hear the trilling of a police-car bell. And then I saw it – a black Wolseley with an illuminated sign on the roof, maneuvering among the baggage trains and trolleys of fish on the far side of an empty bay next to our platform. Another bell rang out of sight on the other side of the train. As I dragged my eyes away from the faces flooding toward me, I saw the doors of the first car swing open. Rawlins, Brearley and two cops in uniform spilled out and began clambering over the rails in the empty bay. At the same moment I saw Mario Ralfini.

He was getting down from the last coach of the whole train, a tall, lean figure carrying a pigskin valise and wearing a fawn showerproof. There was a cellophane cover shielding his wide-brimmed hat. Summoning my last reserves of strength I broke into a stumbling run. I sure was glad to see that Rawlins had taken my message seriously – and that he had gotten there so damned fast – but I had to get Ralfini alone first.

Behind me I heard a shout. 'Get him! Nail the fucker!' Billie-boy. They must be desperate if they were going to risk an open chase and a possible confrontation with the law! I heard the rush of feet, angry complaints from passengers as they were jostled or their luggage was overturned, curses from the Team and their henchmen. Rawlins was shouting too. Billie-boy's hunting cry had focused his attention on me. But the cops were much farther down toward the entrance and they had a longer way to go.

I pulled up in front of Ralfini. He'd stopped by the open coach door, the narrow brow furrowed, the sallow face with its stubbly lantern jaw alert. Maybe he'd recognized Billie-boy's voice; maybe he'd tumbled to the fact that it was something to do with him; perhaps he just wondered what went on. 'Get back in there!' I snapped at him. 'Fast.'

Urgency must have lent my voice authority, because he turned obediently and climbed back onto the step. It was only when I shoved him into the corridor that he said truculently: 'What the hell . . . ?'

'Get along there if you want to live. Move!'

'Who the hell are you?' he demanded. But he moved.

'Get into the washroom, Ralfini, or you're a dead man.' Feeling like a mobster out of Central Casting in a B movie, I hustled him into the tiny cubicle, slammed the door, swung the

lock over and leaned my back against the flimsy panels. Maybe because the use of his name surprised him, he'd gone along with me so far. But now his right hand hovered between the lapels of his showerproof. 'Look, buster,' he snarled, 'I don't know who the hell you are, but -'

'The name is Mettner. Jason Mettner.' I saw recognition flare in his cold eyes, and then I said roughly: 'Don't be more of a sap than you have been. Get rid of the rod unless you want to go inside for a stretch.' The car rocked slightly as heavy feet stamped along the far end of the corridor. He hesitated . . . and then plucked a .38 short-barreled Police Special from a shoulder holster, looked around, shrugged, and dropped the gun into the lavatory pan. It was too big to fall through the hole. I slammed the lid shut and leaned one foot on it.

'Just what the fuck are you playin' at, mister?' Ralfini said softly. We were jammed together almost as closely as a dancing couple. His breath smelled of mint with an under-flavor of liquor. 'Down there. Try the carsie,' a voice called from outside the door.

'Listen. We've only got a few seconds. You know Maya's handwriting, I guess?'

'Sure I do.' He was scowling. 'What the hell has that - ?'

'Then read this, and read it good . . . Patsy!' I pulled the diary out from under my jacket and handed it to him, open at the page where his fate and mine were blue-printed. 'JM is me,' I said.

A heavy hand explored the grooved brass knob on the outside of the door. The panels against my back shifted to an exploratory shove. 'Holy Christ!' Ralfini said. He flipped back a few pages, more to convince himself that what he'd read was part of a continuing plan, I guess, than because he doubted the authenticity of the diary. 'The dirty, stinking bitch,' he said. 'The whoring goddam -'

'Sure,' I said. 'Me too. Likewise. Thing is - are you going to play ball?' I lurched forward a little as the door behind me heaved to a shoulder charge. Luckily our toilet door was the one parallel to the corridor and not the one set diagonally at the end of the car, which would have given them more room to get up some impetus.

'What's the pitch?'

'There's cops out there as well as that pouf and his hoods. There's nothing against you in this country. No charge has

been made. The flatfeet know what you did but they don't even know your name.'

'So?'

The door shivered and shook to a heavier charge. There must be two of them having a go now. I said: 'Forget your connection with the Team and their racket. Give yourself up and plead to those old tax charges back home. Have them extradite you; get the hell out.'

'The IRS will crucify me. Three to five, most like.'

'Maya's boys will crucify you for keeps. They may not sling rods but they play rough. You must know that. Now we've seen that diary, you and me both, we're for the high jump if we stay here. You can hear - they'll even tangle with the law to get at us!'

There were indeed the sounds of cursing and struggles from some distance away. Feet stamped the platform. The door behind me was splintering and my back was getting bruised. Ralfini's sullen expression tightened. He had made up his mind. He nodded. 'Okay.'

'You'll have to wise them up some on how the Team works if you want the free pass. That includes the lowdown on the Kimble killing.'

He nodded again. From below the frosted lavatory window, somewhere on the tracks lying on the blind side of the train, Rawlins called: 'Give yourself up, Mettner! You can't get away!'

Leaning my back against the disintegrating door for the last time, I launched myself forward with one leg held out in front of me, pushing the frosted glass out of its frame and down on to the line. 'Coming!' I shouted.

Ten minutes later we were squashed into the back of the patrol car with the superintendent, waiting for the lights to change so we could get into Southampton Row. Brearley was in front with the driver, nursing a black eye and a split lip. Three of the Marchmont Street mafiosi had been arrested for disorderly conduct and taken away. Billie-Boy and his Priory mobsters, more professionally, had melted into the crowd as soon as Ralfini and me had escaped through the broken window; there was no point risking good soldiers when the prize was already in the hands of the enemy.

'I'm not going to feed you lads a load of the old moody,' Rawlins said comfortably. 'Corners are there to be cut - and

the Home Secretary is kind of busy at the moment. 'I'll need statements and depositions and signatures, of course, but if you're prepared to skip certain formalities and waive certain rights, I think we can – er – arrange everything to our mutual satisfaction.' He cleared his throat. 'Only thing is, you'll have to be out of the country pretty dam' quick. And by quick I mean tonight. Tomorrow's papers are going to be full of this abdication lark, but after that they'll be looking for stories and questions could be asked.'

I shrugged. I had a feeling my British vacation had about outlived its usefulness anyway. 'Suits me,' Ralfini said.

The lights went green. The car surged forward. 'Don't think I'm handing out favors,' Rawlins went on. 'We've been laying for these buggers a long time, watching and waiting. But your two statements should give us the lever we need to move in and nail them.' He shook his head and tapped the diary I'd handed over. 'And you say the brass behind it all is this *Coloris* woman! There'll be some red faces at the Yard when *that* comes out. The Priory's a favorite haunt of our elders and betters.' He chuckled happily.

'If I give you the lowdown on the whole deal,' Ralfini said, 'how do I know you won't go back on your word? I mean like haul me back to stand trial with the others – use my own stuff against me?'

'You don't,' the policeman said at once. 'You have to take chances, but you should be used to that. Even if the others grassed on you – which they would – the most we could go for would be conspiracy and uttering menaces. And with you turning King's evidence in your statement tonight, the sentence wouldn't be worth your fare across the sea! There'll be nothing else against you if you can help me nick Francis for doing that girl.' The car stopped at a red light by Holborn Underground station. 'Of course,' Rawlins said, 'if you don't want to take my word, you're quite free to get out now and take your chance with that lot. No warrant's been sworn out for you yet, and there's nothing I could do to stop you.' He paused, heavy brows raised, with his fingers resting on the door handle.

'Just let's piss off to the precinct house and get it over with, huh?' Ralfini said.

I had the impression that the Superintendent was hiding a smile. 'As for you, sir,' he said to me, 'it's fortunate that you were able to – shall we say? – remove yourself from the scene of action before you pleaded. I'd never have been able to fix

this on my jack once you'd been committed. And believe me, you would have been.'

I grinned. How do you like that? When it's a question of my word, I get pushed around and shouted at like a long-term con; but on the word of a convicted hood that I've been railroaded and in fact am in the clear, suddenly I'm 'Sir!' 'Maybe you should take a chance too, from time to time,' I told Rawlins. 'Like on the word of an American newspaperman.'

He shook his big head. 'We never take chances,' he said.

Some folks did, just the same. I'll never know what the end product was supposed to be. Wiping out the witnesses and the bogeys who knew about the deal in a single blow? A last desperate throw of the dice? Maybe it was simply fury and frustration at the way things had turned out. When everything had been so meticulously planned, right down to the last detail.

Well, almost the last. Unexpected fires, trains running late and thefts of diaries excepted. Whatever the reason, we were cruising down Kingsway about level with the Stoll theater when this green Packard comes steaming past at about seventy miles an hour. Maya was driving it herself, with Billie-boy in the passenger seat beside her. The blinds were not drawn and four or five of the local muscle were visible jammed in back, including my Bateman Street specimen. They passed us on the offside, the tail of the big sedan wagging some as they hit the moist tramway tracks in the center of the road. Then, just before the tracks plunged underground on their way to the Thames embankment, Maya swung the wheel hard left and cut across the police car's bows.

That, at least must have been her intention - either in an attempt to force us into the curb and dispose of us there by hand, or in the hope of a shrewd, glancing blow that would tip the Wolseley onto its roof and eliminate the occupants. I saw Billie-boy's malicious faggot smile, saw Maya's furious scowl and the angry set of the mouth I'd noticed when she accused me of being dissatisfied with the service. And beyond them I saw what they were too hooked on our destruction to notice . . . a tramcar bucketing up the steep slope from the Kingsway tunnel.

The tram surfaced and bounced onto the level at the very instant that the Packard was turning at a sharp angle across the tracks in front of it. The carman didn't have a chance,

whether he wanted to take one or not. The sedan was still traveling at around fifty, and his massive cast-iron fenders caught it just aft of the rear wheel.

With the impact hurling it one way and the steering and motor another, there was only one thing, dynamically, for the car to do. It leaped into the air and crashed down on its roof, cartwheeled into a steel sand-bin on the edge of the sidewalk, and then bounced back across the road to smash upside-down into the railings protecting the tunnel entrance. Police drivers are supposed to have quick reactions in traffic, but Rawlins's man could have beaten an electric current from the switch to the lamp. He twitched the prowl car neatly to the left, ran between the bin and a plane tree, and nudged the hood to rest against Sir Oswald Stoll's masonry. By the time we had piled out, the Packard was blazing from end to end. A wheel shod with a whitewall tire rolled some way toward the cross street leading to Lincoln's Inn Fields, then leaned over, lay down, and died.

The man from Bateman Street was lying on the pavement with his head at an original angle and triplex diamonds sparkling in his hair. The rest of them were still inside the wreck but I didn't hear any screams. Rawlins looked from the skid marks to the blood splashes and broken glass, and then back at the flames. He shook his head. 'Maybe I shan't need to trouble you gentlemen for a statement after all,' he said.

The tram had screeched to a halt some way up the road. The driver and half a dozen passengers were running toward us. 'Once they know the guvnors have croaked,' the policeman explained, 'every bird who ever had the squeeze put on him is going to sing.'

I guess he knew what he was talking about. Personally, I didn't get the opportunity to check. It was all very British, very casual and – as I was beginning to realize – very efficient. At two o'clock on the morning of the 12th an unescorted destroyer, *H.M.S. Fury*, slipped out of Portsmouth Harbour and headed for France. The late King, henceforth to be known as the Duke of Windsor, was being shoveled out the back door as quickly and quietly as possible – just in case an unplanned resurgence of the King's Party or some other embarrassing manifestation should rock the ship of state. At around the same time, a few miles farther along the coast, two American citizens, who could also embarrass the administration in their small way, were being taken under police escort aboard the

Queen Mary in Southampton docks. The faceless officials who make these things right on paper must have been working late in Whitehall that night.

We were passing the lighthouse off Land's End the next morning before I'd caught my breath enough to take stock. The huge, tapering tower looked like a giant chess piece on its rock among the waves.

Ralfini sat next to me on the promenade deck. There was a cold wind blowing but it was sunny, and there were steamer rugs tucked around our chairs. I'd just finished filling him in on my side of the story, using him like a control on the abdication re-cap I was going to write. He shook his head. 'You,' he said, 'me, the Simpson broad – it seems like that England ain't no place for a righteous American citizen!'

I grinned. He'd just promised to give me an exclusive first-person piece – background of a big-shot, from corner-boy to *capo*, and I was feeling kind of warm toward him. It would help put me right with Michaelson, and it would fill in time until the cops and the IRS jumped him when we got to New York. 'Yeah,' I said. 'If they treat their kings like that, what chance do you have if you're just plain mister!'

'Check!' Ralfini said.

Later I got wise to the fact that, at that time, there was probably no other way the background boys could have handled the deal. The only folks really to rub Edward's nose in the shit were his own family, and the less said about their behavior the better.

But right then I had other problems. Two English girls, a blonde and a redhead with freckles, walked past us arm in arm. The blonde looked back over her shoulder, and if it was the other who sported green eyes, this one was definitely flashing the green light. 'Don't you go for those lean Yankee types, Doris?' she asked her friend when they were just far enough away for the wind to carry the words back to us.

Ralfini and me looked at each other. Then, like two puppets pulled by the same wires, we threw aside the blankets and headed for the bar.

The frame-up was good. Too good. Jason Mettner, ace-crime reporter from Chicago, had come to London to cover the story of Edward VIII's abdication crisis. He had ended up with a murder rap on his head and everything pointing to his guilt.

It had started when Mettner ran into Ralfini, one of the Mafia's top hit men. Then the problems had come thick and fast — the pretty girl about to get rubbed out in a Soho club, the murder charge, the underground racket that was sweeping Soho's backstreets, the contract out for Mettner's body — dead.

In a spiralling vortex of vice and violence, Mettner desperately struggles to prove his innocence — if he is allowed to stay alive that long.

U.K. £1.00

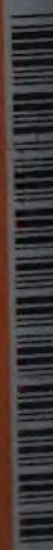
*Australia \$3.50

Ireland £1.10

New Zealand \$2.95

*Recommended

450 04017 8


KR-080-440