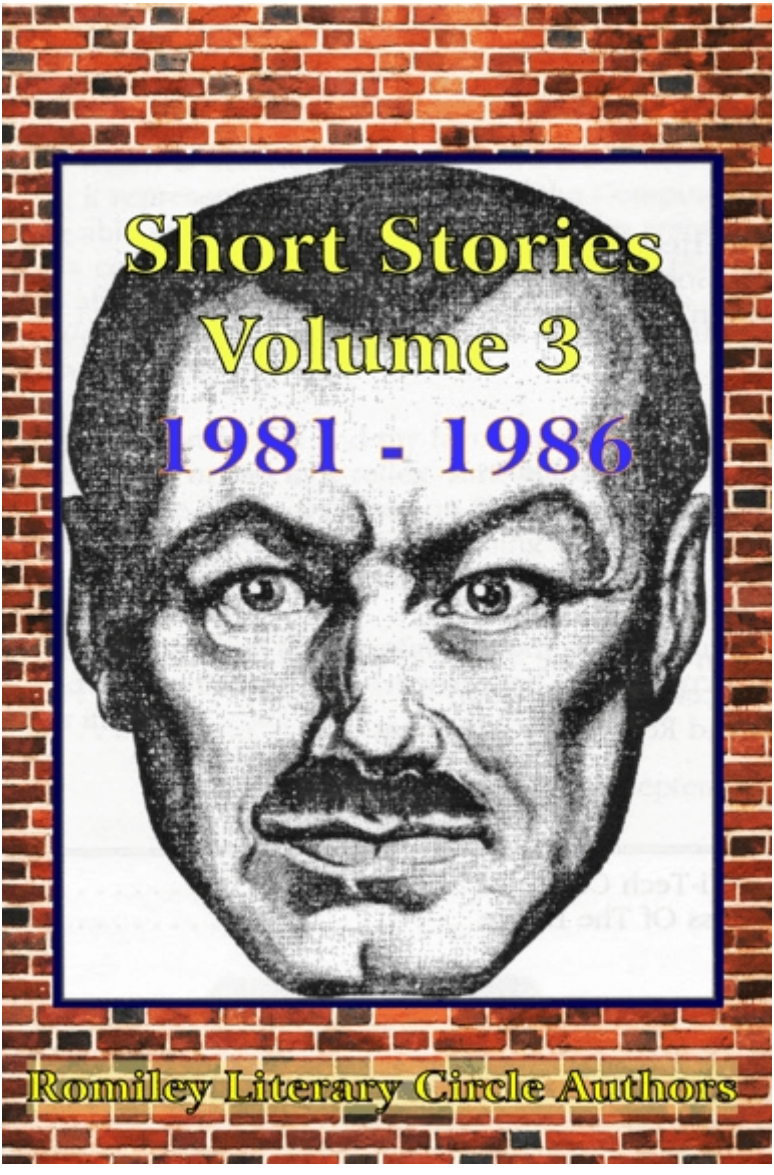
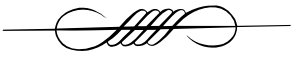


F&F
BOOKS
www.FarragoBooks.co.uk

This Edition published in 2017 as part of a collection created by Farrago & Farrago and featuring the work of members of Romiley Literary Circle

Cover by HTSP Graphics Division
Design & typesetting by HTSP Editorial Division,
10 SK6 4EG, Romiley, G.B. for Farrago & Farrago
www.FarragoBooks.co.uk

Contents



1981

1982

1983

1984

1985

1986

33. The Hurricane Heist

It could have been just another delta sunrise. A big, fat, golden ball of light rose from a restless sea. Brown with silt after the deluge of the previous day, now yellow-tinted, the river crawled through Ainville on its way to the bay. There, fresh water mingled with salt, creating a green fan which merged imperceptibly with the deep blue of the Gulf of Mexico; which terminated abruptly to the south at a black wall. Hurricane Charlie was coming to town.

Sounds of hammering disturbed the stillness of the southern dawn. Most of the townsfolk had been evacuated the previous evening, after the rainstorm. But a few had postponed their boarding up to the last moment. The police were already making their final rounds, warning them to get out of town and onto higher ground. Hurricane Charlie was coming for breakfast.

Weather satellites had been tracking him for days. Charlie was no monster, barely seventy miles in diameter, and he seemed to be travelling in an entirely predictable manner. But he was strolling towards Alabama at a relentless eighteen knots.

Federal cut-backs had retarded the dredging program in the delta and the levee reconstruction work. Charlie's advance guard, the heavy rain of the previous day, had swollen the river dangerously. It was feared that it might back up under the driving force of the hurricane and flood the lower-lying region to the east.

The light morning breeze had developed in to fitful gusts

strong enough to carry discarded candy wrappers the length of Ainville's main street before the hammering stopped. Bursts of rain lashed the town, drumming on the roof of the loudspeaker van as it delivered a final warning. Those who had not left the town were advised to do so immediately and not take refuge in cellars, which could be flooded if the river escaped its banks.

"Charlie's on his way," remarked one of the men in the basement of the Bargain Shoe Emporium. He could just see out onto the main street through a chink in the shutter over a small window at sidewalk level.

"When we can't hear you say that," returned one of his companions, "we'll know he's here."

Water began to pour from the sky, driven in long, sloping sheets by increasingly violent winds. Night darkness swallowed the town. Dandy Jack nudged Lester with a foot and tugged at Dixie's trouser leg. Speech was impossible. The hurricane wail devoured every other sound.

The three men were dressed in one-piece coveralls. They were all gamblers, betting that they could complete the job in hand before the flood waters arrived. Dandy Jack had learned his trade the hard way, struggling to survive in the suffocating jungles of South East Asia. He was thirty-five years old, a former Marine Corps sergeant who had not adjusted well to civilian life. Lester and Dixie were about ten years younger but just as disillusioned with the American Way Of Life in the Eighties. They had picked up their skills in various state prisons. As the fingerprints of all three were recorded in the appropriate Federal files, they were all wearing surgical gloves.

Dandy Jack made a chopping hand signal. The others took refuge behind an ancient and massive iron stove. Every move from this point on had been rehearsed to a faultless

drill. Their leader touched his lighter to a length of fuse. Sparking trails divided to modest charges. Brick powdered to fill the air with brown fog and concrete split to rubble. Lester and Dixie lit cutting torches to burn through reinforcing rods. Masked by the eerie shrieking of Hurricane Charlie, they worked their way through the dividing wall and in to the basement of the Ainville Farmers' Bank.

It was only a small bank. The alarm system had not been designed to cope with an assault through a basement wall. Dixie shut it down in minutes. Then Lester hauled the battery-powered drill through from the shoe emporium. The squeal as it attacked the safe door seemed oddly muffled. Despite the superior soundproofing of the bank's windowless cellar, Hurricane Charlie could still make himself felt as a penetrating background grumble.

Lester circled thumb and index finger in a high-sign. Dandy Jack took over at the safe with modelling clay and nitro. When he blew the locking bar apart, there was the usual surge of pressure but very little additional sound. The hurricane was a very effective ally for the cracksman.

Dixie spun the wheel on the door and tugged. It sagged open willingly. The bank robbers exchanged grins of delight. Everything was going exactly to plan. While Hurricane Charlie raged around the bank, they counted forty-six thousand five hundred dollars in to an airline flight bag.

Low denomination notes made up the bulk of their eight pounds weight of used and untraceable cash. But they had a couple of bundles each of fifties and hundreds to sweeten the pot.

Leaving their equipment where it lay, the trio returned to the adjacent Bargain Shoe Emporium. Impossibly, the storm began to intensify. The very air in the basement seemed to vibrate. Nothing could be seen through the small window.

Exploding rain drops fogged the gap in the shutters completely.

The bank robbers moved up to the ground floor and settled down to wait. A small pool of water had been blown under the store's back door. Dandy Jack looked at his watch and nodded to himself. Five minutes late, in accordance with his calculations, the battering rain slackened, the shrieking wind abated and light filtered past the shutters on the rear windows.

Hurricane Charlie was sitting right on top of Ainville. The town was resting in the calm of his eye.

Lester drew four bolts and pushed out in to the dripping morning. The floods had not yet arrived. Past experience had taught the inhabitants of Ainville to build low and strong. A few signs had been ripped away and all the street lights had been smashed, but the main street looked in pretty good shape, otherwise.

A car lay upside down and wedged across the sidewalk in front of the barber shop. The bank robbers had to step out in to the stream flowing down the main street to get round it. A dry goods store had lost its shutters. The interior had been sucked completely clean. There was no trace of the steel shutters, the windows or the contents; just a cavern the size of a six-car garage. The streets of Ainville had not been swept so clean since Hurricane Julia, eight years earlier.

Their getaway vehicle was safely under cover at the northern end of town. Lester had driven it in to the town the previous evening and stopped at the petrol station to complain about a strange rattling noise under the hood.

The mechanic in the repair shop had listened for a few preoccupied moments, then muttered something about bearings. It was not the sort of problem which could be solved before the arrival of Hurricane Charlie.

Lester had been allowed to crawl to the back of the repair shop and leave the ambulance for attention at a less dangerous time. He had sneaked back during the night to replace the oil which had been drained to create the distressing rattle.

The eye of the hurricane measured about five miles across. Dandy Jack had calculated from Federal Weather Bureau data that the exact centre of the calm region would pass to the east of Ainville. But the bank robbers had just over twelve minutes to get their vehicle on the road before the trailing sweep of the storm caught up with them again.

"Come on, come on," muttered Dixie as Lester struggled with a wind-battered and unco-operative door.

Dandy Jack was an able leader with a persuasive tongue. He had made surprisingly detailed plans for such a small job. And Dixie had been unable to find anything wrong with his forecasts of the hurricane's speed and direction. The local weather bureau was saying much the same on the radio, but in less detail. But the howling battering of the first phase of the storm had brought a terrifying clarity to the meaning of the word *hurri*cane.

Charlie was certainly in one hell of a hurry! The thought of being caught up in the second instalment, when the eye had passed over the town, scared Dixie rigid. To him, the twelve minutes of grace seemed to be dashing past like twelve seconds.

"Got it!" muttered Lester.

They were inside the repair shop. The ambulance started at the first turn of the key. A steel shutter door rattled up to release them and down behind them. They were on their way out of Ainville.

All three stripped off their coveralls. Lester exchanged his surgical gloves for a pair of leather driving gloves and took

the wheel. He was wearing a Confederate grey uniform with yellow shoulder flashes bearing the name of their private ambulance service.

Dandy Jack was also in uniform. Dixie sprawled comfortably on the stretcher and hid his working clothes under a red blanket. If they ran in to a police patrol, he could complain of a back injury.

When they were clear of the town, Dandy Jack threw the coveralls out of the ambulance. Their ally, Hurricane Charlie would take care of disposing of them.

"Keep your speed below twenty," Dandy Jack warned. "And watch out for the turning two miles out of town."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Lester. He was feeling casually confident now that they were on the move.

The ambulance bowled through a pleasant morning. Brilliant sunlight poured down from an untroubled sky. No more than a breath of wind ruffled the huge lakes in the fields on either side of the road. The signpost and a tree had disappeared, but Lester had been too well briefed to miss the turning to the north east.

He could see steep banks of black clouds on the horizon in every direction. Yet there seemed no reason why they couldn't follow Hurricane Charlie clear to Montgomery.

Dandy Jack was planning to cover as much as possible of the one hundred and fifty miles to the state capital before the roads brought them too close to the active area of the hurricane and forced them to take shelter.

If the state police stopped them, he could refer to a mental list of the hospitals on their route and name the nearest as their destination. Should they be offered a escort, the bank robbers were prepared to wait out the hurricane at the hospital and then proceed as planned.

After two uneventful hours on the road, Lester came to a

problem. Dandy Jack was sprawled in his seat, apparently dozing. Lester shook his arm.

"What?" grunted Dandy Jack, coming alive with a rush.

He followed the direction of the driver's pointing finger. The road had disappeared. Instead, a great lake dotted with splintered telephone poles sprawled across their path.

"Keep going," decided Dandy Jack. "It might not be too deep."

Lester slowed right down and rolled in to the lake at five miles per hour. The water was only about four inches deep at the crown of the road. Navigating by the telephone poles, keeping them six yards to his left, he doubled his speed. Long waves flowed away from the gliding ambulance. Spray hissed in the wheel arches.

"It's getting deeper, Jack," warned the driver anxiously.

"And I think Charlie's catching up on us," added Dixie.

The road was travelling north instead of north-east at this point, bringing them closer to the western wall of the eye of Hurricane Charlie.

"Okay, make a left," decided Dandy Jack. "Let's hole up over there."

Lester turned cautiously onto an unseen road which rose out of the water fifty yards away and climbed to a construction site at the crest of a shallow hill. A strengthening wind was buffeting the ambulance by the time they reached a concrete raft and a collection of low walls. Rusty steelwork projected from them, showing that construction was still at an early stage.

Lester bounced over the remains of a shattered wooden sign and stopped in the shelter of the nearest wall. He began to laugh when he spotted another part of the sign. The bank robbers had parked on the exercise yard of the new state penitentiary.

Light rain had started to fall. Dandy Jack hurried over to a low, concrete building. It looked strong enough to withstand ten hurricanes of Charlie's strength. Lester made short work of the lock. Dixie cradled the flight bag full of money anxiously as Lester probed the mechanism, as if afraid that the wind would steal it away. The trio entered a windowless gloom. The door slammed shut behind them.

Lester knocked something over. Glass broke on the concrete floor. A heavy, solvent smell filled the air as Dixie succeeded in striking a match. Dandy Jack yelled a warning. The whole book of matches caught fire. Dixie dropped it at once. Yellow flames licked at his ankles. He let out a yell of terror and scrabbled for the door. He raced out in to the rain with his companions at his heels.

They were half way across the exercise yard before anyone noticed that Dixie wasn't carrying the bag. Dandy Jack slid to a halt and started for the hut. He had time to take three strides. Then a tongue of flame flared from the doorway, riding an explosion.

The flight bag looped in to the rain; and turned inside out. A paper-storm broke over the yard. At once, the three bank robbers began to chase their loot, stuffing soggy paper in to their pockets. They had collected three or four hundred notes, most of them one and five dollar bills, before the weather drove them to take shelter in the ambulance. The wind kept blowing them off their feet. Darkness and the driving rain hid any notes which had not already been blown away.

Wet and miserable, the trio counted their haul with difficulty. The wall was shielding the ambulance from the direct force of the hurricane but vacuum effects created by gusts kept rocking the vehicle. Their wet scavengings amounted to about five per cent of the contents of the flight

bag; in numbers but not in value. The bias of the distribution of the notes to low denominations was heavily against them.

"Okay," said Dandy Jack, just before the hammering of the rain and the screeching of the wind made conversation impossible, "this job was a bust. But what worked once will work again. All we need is another town and another hurricane."

But in the darkness of the storm-tossed ambulance, his optimism gave Lester and Dixie very little comfort.

▪ ▪ ▪

34. August Sixteenth

It had been a long, hard and fairly futile day for Detective Inspector Harris. That dismal Wednesday had begun with a call which had stayed with him through the day. He had been diverted on his way to work. He had spent half an hour in that house between his home and his office at the city's main police station.

The scene in the bathroom had dominated his thoughts through the day. It had almost put him off his lunch; and turning the stomach of a man with fifteen years on the force took a lot of doing.

His watch was showing twenty-five past six. His first-floor window showed that a cold, grey day had become a damp evening, darkened prematurely by solid rain clouds. Enough, Inspector Harris decided, was plenty. He capped his ball-point pen and tucked it in to his breast pocket. Leaving the papers on his desk there they lay, he switched off his desk light and pushed his chair back.

The cream cupboard by the door surrendered a dark green raincoat and the cloth cap which had become a sort of trademark. Harris and his 'ratting cap' were a familiar sight to criminals and the press.

Fifteen yards down the road from the police station, he turned in to *The Greyhound*. If ever a day deserved to be ended with a drink, it was that miserable Wednesday. The bright warmth and smoke haze of the lounge swallowed him. Fellow coppers, about twice their number of civilians, and a sprinkling of reporters half-filled the modest pub.

"Hey, Hawkeye, what about this morning, then?" The speaker was a man of about sixty, a good quarter of a century older than the inspector. He had retained the nose, but he lacked the stamina of younger news hounds. Having established himself as a character in the eyes of his newspaper's readers, he had resigned himself to coasting towards honourable retirement.

"A morning I'd prefer to forget. Cheers!" The inspector passed a pound note across the counter and received a large whisky and twopence change.

"Thought you'd got yourself a murder for a while?" persisted the reporter.

"Not like you to be a bloody ghoul, Billy," returned Harris.

"I was doing some digging in our files this afternoon. Your lot were a bit bloody coy about this morning, so I thought I'd have a bit of a word with Jack the Lad."

"Digging in your files?" The Inspector nibbled at the bait but refused to swallow it.

"Well, it did look bloody odd. A bloke who uses an electric razor suddenly decides to lather his face with ordinary soap and shave with a cut-throat. And half-way through, he slices his neck from 'ere to there, as they say. No note. No hint he was in any trouble or anything. Didn't even wake up with a hangover. But he just ups and does it. Starts you thinking."

The inspector narrowed his eyes and stared suspiciously at the reporter. "You're not planning to trot something out to make us look like berks, are you, Billy?"

"What, me?" protested the reporter innocently. "But if you buy me a pint, I might be able to put some pieces together."

"Go on, then," sighed Inspector Harris. He attracted the attention of the barmaid and bought a pint of mild and another large whisky. Then Billy Norton piloted him to a table in a quiet corner.

"You know what day it is?" began the reporter.

"Wednesday," shrugged the Inspector.

"Date," amplified Norton.

Inspector Harris glanced at his watch. "August sixteenth,"

"You're too young to remember this, but the Japs surrendered at the end of the War on August fifteenth, 1945."

"Apart from the ones that didn't get the news."

"Them and a few others," agreed the reporter. "Including one of their Special Attack Squadrons. On the day after the surrender, they climbed in to their planes, flew out to sea and did their first and only Kamikaze dive in to a bit of empty sea. All except one of them. A young ensign. He was too weak with malaria to fly. About all he had the strength for was falling on his sword. More Roman style than Jap, but it did the trick. He even managed to break the blade while he was at it. A Yank got hold of the pieces, and eventually flogged them to a Brit. Or lost them in a poker game. That bit's not clear."

"Like the rest of it," commented the Inspector.

"Patience, Hawkeye," grinned the reporter. "You young lads are always in too much of a rush."

"Thanks, Billy," laughed Harris. "I don't think I've been called a young lad for about ten years."

"I've got a daughter older than you," countered Norton. "But I'm getting off my tale. The bloke who ended up with the sword was a blacksmith, and he could appreciate a good bit of steel. He thought about mending the sword. Then he decided to make the blade in to something more useful."

"Not a cut-throat razor?" groaned the Inspector.

"Five of them," beamed the reporter. "Sold the others, and shaved with his every day; till August sixteenth, 1946."

"I don't believe it," said Inspector Harris flatly.

"Sliced his throat from ear to ear," the reporter assured

him. "And I found six more in our files. One at the other end of the country on the same day. Another a couple of years later. Three more in the Fifties. Then nothing till the sixth one: in 1975."

"Are you going to print this?" demanded Harris.

"Not right away. Out of respect for the relatives of the deceased. Suicide's always a touchy subject. And maybe not at all if my old woman of an editor gets cold feet. But what I wanted to ask you is: did the razor have any writing on it? In Japanese?"

"You sure you're not having me on?" asked the inspector.

"Did it look anything like this?" Billy Norton took a scrap of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. "I think I copied it more or less accurately."

"There was some stuff on the razor," admitted the inspector. "Nowhere near this much. Maybe something like this middle bit. What does it all mean?"

"In blossom today, then scattered:

"Life is so like a delicate flower.

"How can one expect the fragrance

"To last forever?'' recited the reporter. "One of their admirals wrote it."

"And you're trying to tell me it's still being scattered today?" said Inspector Harris. "By kamikaze cut-throat razors?"

"Well, put it this way, Hawkeye," shrugged the reporter. "Would you be prepared to shave yourself with that bloke's cut-throat razor next August sixteenth?"

▪ ▪ ▪

35. White Heat

Winter had bleached the landscape. A uniform white carpet coated the moors and fells, broken only by the greys and blacks of stone walls and the browns of hedge- and tree-skeletons. Ground and sky merged at the tops of the hills, snow white to snow cloud. I was driving along a narrow road with the heater going full blast. But I still felt cold. It was that sort of depressing day at the end of January.

I had driven past the vision before it registered as remarkable. My double-take was delayed because I was concentrating on the road, trying to anticipate sheets of ice in the hard-packed snow. I braked to a careful halt and looked back to confirm my impression. It was still there, like a rent in the snowy blanket that flopped down the hill and out onto the ice at the edge of the reservoir. I could see a green patch which was devoid of white; apart from the handful of sheep nibbling industriously at the exposed grass.

I told myself that the farmer had cleared the irregular oval. But if he had, what had he done with the snow? He hadn't carted it away because I couldn't see any tyre tracks. I must have spent five minutes chewing over the problem. Then I realized that I would be late for a meeting. I was driving from the firm's headquarters to a branch office about thirty miles away. Curiosity would have to wait.

Snow fell during the night, as it had on every day that week. Wrapped up in wind- and waterproof clothing, I set off for the moorland road at the end of the morning. The green patch was still there despite the fresh snow. I turned

right onto a wind-scoured road, towards the banks of the reservoir.

A thaw in the middle of the month had unblocked burst mains by the score. There had even been talk of imposing drought regulations; until the weather had taken a turn for the worse and re-frozen most of the leaks. Even so, the water level was very low and I could see an unaccustomed island in the distance.

I tugged on a pair of wellingtons and braved the snow. The wind rushing off the reservoir had piled it in to ski-jump drifts against every obstruction. I struggled to a gap where holiday vandals had demolished part of a dry-stone wall. My tracks made it painfully obvious that someone had been trespassing on the farmer's land. But if the half-dozen sheep were prepared to keep quiet about my visit, so was I.

The transition between white and green had seemed quite distinct from the road. It became a diffuse merging on the ground. No other human had approached the spot either on foot or in a vehicle. I had been thinking about under-soil heating experiments. But the snow-free area was so irregular and so far from a power source that it had to be a natural phenomenon.

I crouched down and prodded at the ground with a finger. It was quite firm, but definitely not frozen. The sheep eyed me suspiciously. Baffled, I returned to my car.

Two miles further on, where the road snaked forward again along the next valley, I came to a mixture of old and modern houses seasoned with a few shops and a pub called *The Barley Mow*. I turned onto a rutted car park in search of warmth, lunch, and information.

The pub wasn't exactly crowded. I bought food and a half pint, and mentioned the green patch. The landlord had plenty of time to tell me that it had been known as the *Devil's*

Acre since the Middle Ages. He looked ancient enough to have been present at the naming ceremony. Another old boy added that the witches had been burnt there in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.

The site was cursed; but not with the usual business about grass never growing again. One of the witches had vowed that snow would never linger there as a demonstration of the power of the Dark Lord.

It was a good story. I listened with an air of studied scepticism. Then the landlord drew my attention to a framed newspaper cutting, which was hanging between a couple of routine watercolour landscapes. Intrigued by the legend, a local historian had spent part of the previous winter ploughing through ancient church records from the Town In The Valley; the one drowned at the bottom of the reservoir.

He had found evidence of a witch trial in the sixteen-forties, and indications that Matthew Hopkins, the infamous *Witchfinder General*, had been present. And there had been three human bonfires on the hill above the town.

The records also contained references to curses in the dying shrieks of the three alleged witches. One of then had predicted a catastrophe in the near future. She was only about three hundred and twenty years out if she had been screaming about the flooding of the valley. But it was the sort of prediction that was bound to come true eventually.

The town's register of deaths showed that about 50% of the population had been wiped out a few years later by an offshoot of the Great Plague of London. And fire and flood had taken their toll over the years.

Another witch, according to the historian, had promised that the *Evil One* would create a monument to them. I found a patch of snow-free grass on the site of the burning a pretty impressive coincidence.

Fascinated, I went for a look at the historian's source material, which is housed in the museum, not five minutes' walk from my office. Somebody had gone to the trouble of making typed transcripts of the ancient records, thus saving me a struggle with eccentric spelling and curly handwriting.

I spent most of Monday's lunch hour prowling through a bound volume of transcripts; but I failed to find a single reference to the *Devil's Acre*.

In the afternoon, I mentioned the *Devil's Acre* to a colleague. To my surprise, he laughed and asked me when I had called in at the *Barley Mow*. The gang at the pub had kept quiet about a sequel to the newspaper story. Some spoilsport had revealed that the historian had been a victim of a local tradition; one which had been created in that very watering hole by the current crop of regulars.

My colleague was amused to hear that they were still trotting out their tale for the I benefit of unwary travellers like myself. I assumed that he had been caught in the same way. He told me that the snow-free area was about two years old, and lay the best part of a mile from the real site of the witches' executions. The gullible historian had been guilty of distorting inconvenient facts in his eagerness to uncover the historical basis of the legend.

I experienced a sudden rush of retrospective doubt, which would not have been released had my colleague not cast the first stone. It became clear on the instant that the links between recorded history and the interpretation were very tenuous. A very persuasive argument crumbled away at the first mistrustful tappings. Fortunately, I was not too deeply committed to save face by pretending continuous scepticism.

The *Devil's Acre* was growing. It had started life as a small tennis court. This year, it was half the size of a football pitch and a closer match to its name. An amateur geologist, a keen

student of Open University television programmes, had suggested that there was a geothermal source relatively close to the surface. Translated in to English, this meant that hot rocks were heating underground water, and steam was percolating up to the surface and preventing the soil around the vent from freezing.

It was a good story, but one which could be substantiated; if the farmer who owned the land could be talked round. He had lost little squares of his territory to electricity pylons. Local conservationists had prevented him from clearing a patch of scrub and woodland to increase the effective area of his farm. And when a trespasser with a metal detector had found some Roman coins in one of his fields, he had been forced to stand guard over his potatoes to protect them from marauding treasure-hunters.

In his experience, outsiders were pure trouble. And I was not surprised to hear that the farmer had set his dogs on the last person to ask permission to drill exploratory boreholes on his land.

I made one more trip to the branch office before the snow melted. I was quite surprised to see two men using a theodolite and a measuring pole in the field by the reservoir, charting the *Devil's Acre*. Two others were banging large wooden tent pegs in to the ground around its perimeter. I concluded that they had convinced the farmer, somehow, that he would benefit from their limited investigation. And they weren't creating much of a nuisance.

The field could be used only as grazing land. Several inconvenient hollows and the gentle slope made it unsuitable for mechanical cultivation. And the sheep wouldn't be inconvenienced by a few tent pegs.

We had no more snow that winter. I continued to use the moorland road for my trips to the branch office. The false legend and an irregular row of tent pegs reminded me of the curious hot spot every time I passed the field and the pub called *The Barley Mow*.

Some of the pegs disappeared in the summer. According to an indignant letter in the local paper, irresponsible anglers were *borrowing* them for rod rests. This provoked an outraged reply from the angling lobby; which didn't stop more pegs disappearing. But the patient surveyors kept returning every so often to bang in replacements.

The second snow of the following winter fell on December tenth, a Thursday. I made a trip out to our branch office the next day. Four surveyors were hard at work in a shallow steam-bath when I stopped on the road above the *Devil's Acre*. They were ankle-deep in vapour, which was oozing out of the ground and trying to roll uphill, driven by the icy wind off the reservoir.

An outer ring of pegs wearing triangular yellow flags showed a year's growth of the hot spot. Through gaps in the mist, I noted that it was only about three or four feet wider than the region enclosed by the previous winter's pegs, but a good fifteen yards longer at either end.

I drove on, wondering whether the area was fated to become a winter tourist attraction, full of hot springs and geysers in the snow, like a southern clone of Iceland. Perhaps the farmer was thinking about his own private power plant; something to run his milking machines if he had a dairy herd, and to charge the batteries of a flock of modern electric sheep.

I made the return journey in the early afternoon in a lull between light falls of snow. As soon as the road had taken

me round a hill and in to sight of the reservoir, I noticed that the level was very low. No doubt water mains had been popping and freezing again.

I stopped to look at the gulls' island. They were squabbling on the top of the church tower. The Town In The Valley had raised a periscope for the second time since the drought of 1976, which had dried the reservoir to a pond in a set of mud flats, and revealed parts of the sunken town in all their decaying glory. Looking up the road, I could just see the *Devil's Acre*, which was steaming quite vigorously.

The surveyors had gone. One of them had been wearing a distinctive orange anorak, which had made him highly visible. And their dark blue van was no longer causing an obstruction at the side of the road. I decided that I had enough time in hand for a closer look at the hot-spot. But just as I was reaching for the handbrake, a hurricane blast of air and sound engulfed the car.

Whiteness coated the windows. My seat-belt dug in to me as the car leapt sideways. Then came a teeth-rattling impact. The wipers scraped a path through the packed snow on my windscreen. My car had turned a full circle on its wheels before crashing backwards in to something solid. I was still aimed at the *Devil's Acre* and the immense mushroom cloud sprouting from an enormous crater.

My first thought was: 'They've dropped the Bomb!' Followed by: 'Why here?'

I felt rather than heard a violent concussion. Then the sky fell onto my car. The roof buckled under a succession of hammer blows. Glass fogged and shattered. I wrapped my face in my arms and waited for the end.

Deafened and terrified, I sat through a long period of calm before escaping through the windscreen. Both of the car's doors were jammed solidly shut. I shook chips of glass out of

my hair and clothing. The road was strewn with rock fragments and earth. A chunk of black rock the size of a pillar-box had landed just six feet from my front bumper. The car was a twisted, glassless heap, showing more bare metal than green paint.

Heavy mist was boiling from a vast crater on the reservoir side of the road and the mushroom had battered its head through the clouds. There are times when you wish you had a camera handy, even though you know your hands are shaking too badly to take a decent picture.

An expedition from the *Barley Mow* arrived to find me still staring at the mushroom's stem. Next came a group of space-suited army officers in a helicopter. We civilians stood about grinning as they played with their Geiger counters.

It couldn't have been a nuclear explosion. We knew that the fire-ball of an H-bomb would have wiped the lot of us out in the first fraction of its first second. But we felt reassured when the army failed to detect more than normal background radiation.

There was a sulphurous stink in the air which had started us thinking about volcanoes. Perhaps we had just witnessed a mini Mount St. Helens in action. But it took an expert from the Coal Board to solve the mystery, not a vulcanologist. Sharp-edged pieces of black rock littered the area. They were bits of coal.

According to the expert, spontaneous combustion had taken place in a Victorian shaft to one of the veins which thread the area. A central heating system powered by gently smouldering coal had been responsible for melting the snow in the *Devil's Acre*.

It was probable that the action of frost had widened a fissure in the rock and improved the supply of air to the fire. Underground water had been heated more fiercely. And the

whole affair had exploded like a pressure cooker with a jammed safety valve. Fortunately, it had blown straight upwards. I had been caught by just the fringes of the blast.

It would be a good story to tell the firm's insurance company when we put in a claim for the wreck of my car, I concluded. Not many get written off by a shower of coal! But the loss adjuster would have to be quick off the mark if he wanted to see the missiles that had done the damage.

Leaving the scene in a police car, an hour or so after the explosion, I noticed enterprising locals organizing sacks and transport to take away stocks of free winter fuel, courtesy of the *Devil's Acre*.

▪ ▪ ▪

36. Who Goes There?

The addition of a brand new video-recorder made one corner of Brian Opfer's living room look even more like a part of *Mission Control*. Twin columns of gleaming chrome and satin-finished aluminium hi-fi equipment rose on either side of his television and the new black box. He spent a long time just feasting his eyes on the companion for his sound playing and recording equipment before he confirmed with a test recording that the video machine was in good working order.

Opfer was approaching sixty; a man who had made something of his business life and then opted for early retirement on an inflation-proof pension. He had been a keen amateur astronomer for more than forty years. His new freedom gave him the opportunity to stay up all night if the seeing was good, and to catch up on his sleep during the day with a clear conscience.

His observatory resembled a small gun turret at the bottom of his fairly long garden. Beyond the woven fence lay a golf course, which pushed back light-pollution from the street lights to south and west. As the long winter nights swallowed evenings, he was hoping to carry out some serious comet-spotting. His music centre allowed him to time-shift radio programmes. The new gadget would let him watch any interesting television programmes either later the same night or the next morning.

Everything went well for the first few days. Nothing resembling a new comet appeared in the eyepiece of his six-

inch reflecting telescope, but the video-recorder switched itself on and off as he had programmed it. Opfer began to wonder how many times he could use his one and only tape before it wore out.

He established a routine very quickly. Midnight or half-past became his time for slipping up the garden to unplug the video-recorder and the television, and to refill the collection of hot-water bottles that kept the early October chill at bay. A flask of coffee or soup also helped to keep the astronomer feeling comfortable and enthusiastic.

The Moon was approaching full, a pearly blot in the south-west and an ally of the yellow fog cast up by the street lights beyond his house. Opfer didn't need a torch to find his way up the garden path with his cooling hot-water bottles. He decided not to switch on the kitchen light to preserve his night vision.

A smell of burning garden refuse followed him through the door. Someone was having a late-night bonfire to prevent the neighbours spotting where the smoke was coming from. Opfer abandoned his tepid-water bottles on the kitchen cabinet and went upstairs to make sure that the bedroom windows were closed.

He descended to the foot of the moonlit stairs, started to turn right in to the living room; and stopped dead. A scraping noise travelled clearly through the still night. There was a shape at the window. Shock turned Opfer in to an observer. His past experience had failed to pre-programme him with an appropriate response for the situation.

He heard a sudden click. Moments later, the lower part of the window eased upwards with a rushing whisper.

The intruder leaned info the room, checking for obstacles on the floor. Then he moved the three plants on the window sill to one side. Opfer held his breath as the man hoisted

himself in to the room, his attention focussed on the corner which contained the television and the recording equipment. Moving almost of its own accord, Opfer's left hand reached up and pressed the top part of the light switch.

Painful brightness flooded the living room. The intruder sucked in a startled breath. A face became fixed indelibly in Brian Opfer's memory in a frozen instant.

Suddenly, the man had gone. Opfer realized later that he had dived out of the open window.

Running footsteps padded down the side of the house and away. The intruder had made good his escape by the time Opfer had worked out what to do next.

The police arrived quietly. The absence of sirens in the middle of the night was both a disappointment and a relief. One of the uniformed men looked at the living room window and decided that a ten-year-old could have slipped the catch with a bent piece of wire. Opfer told his colleague that the intruder was young, had dark hair and he had been wearing dark clothing. He could remember nothing more about his appearance; apart from the face, which remained sharp and clear in his memory.

A detective with a bulb of white powder and a brush checked the window and the three plant pots for finger-prints, and confirmed that the intruder had been wearing gloves. His superior told Opfer that the thief had been after his video-recorder.

Opfer was feeling quite small by the time Detective Sergeant Harris had established that he had not yet added the video-recorder to his household insurance and he had neglected to write at least his postcode on it with one of the indelible marker pens which show up under ultra-violet light. And he had not even taken the elementary precaution of recording the serial number.

Opfer found himself in the familiar routine of television cop shows next. He travelled to his local police station to make a written complaint. He found the face, looking bored and very criminal instead of startled, in a thick volume of photographs. The man was well known to the local police. But, surprisingly, they were remarkably non-committal when Opfer raised the subject of an identification parade.

On the way home, feeling remarkably wide awake at two thirty in the morning, he learned that video-recorders have become a popular target for thieves. They represent hundreds of pounds in an easily portable form. It was even possible that the burglar or an assistant had followed the delivery van from the shop to Opfer's home.

In the morning, Opfer arranged for the local Crime Prevention Officer to call. He made sure that his insurance was up to date and he recorded serial numbers and wrote his name and postcode on his valuables with the approved invisible marker pen.

Acting on the advice of the Crime Prevention Officer, he spent some more money on more secure locks for doors and windows; enough to send all but the most determined thief elsewhere. He felt ready for the next burglar; but he was completely unprepared for his next interview with Detective Sergeant Harris.

Harris managed to maintain an apologetic expression through a familiar tale. One Neil Voller, whose photograph Opfer had spotted in the police album, had been interviewed. On the night in question, he had been at home, watching a film on his own video machine with brothers Ron, Mark and Danny as witnesses.

Opfer was outraged. The detective agreed that he had identified the right man, but he explained that there was no physical evidence to place Voller at the scene of the crime

and that a person cannot be convicted on the unsupported testimony of just one witness.

Opfer said some harsh words about a system which accepted four lies over the testimony of an honest man. The detective's expression told him that Harris had heard it all before. Frustrated, Opfer stormed home.

Several days later, he noticed a familiar face in the supermarket. He was trying to work out where he had seen the man before when the awful truth dawned on him. He was standing in the same aisle as the man who had tried to rob him. Again, his past left him without a course of action.

Becoming aware of a concentrated stare, Neil Voller turned to face Opfer and asked, in a hostile tone, who he was looking at. Opfer blurted out an accusation. Voller just grinned and warned him that he could be 'had up' for slander if he repeated the allegation. Adding insult to injury, he pointed out that Opfer would have lost nothing if he was properly insured.

Opfer gave vent to his feelings by telling Voller what he thought of burglars and the system that allowed them to get away with their crimes. Two women in the same aisle turned from the display of biscuits and stared openly at the burglar. He delivered another warning about slander and retreated, looking annoyed.

When he reached his home, Opfer began to wonder whether he had been wise to confront the burglar. Clearly, Neil Voller had no respect for either the law or the property of others. It was possible that he had been irritated enough to risk returning to Brian Opfer' s home to pick up the video-recorder which he had failed to collect on his first visit. As long as he wore gloves and his three brothers were prepared to lie their heads off, he seemed free to come and go as he chose.

If he were an American, Opfer realized, he would be quite within his rights to lie in wait for the returning burglar and fill him full of lead the instant his feet touched the living room carpet. But he lacked both a gun and the courage to pull the trigger.

His mind continued to pick at the sore, making an obsession of bringing the burglar to justice. He found himself unable to concentrate; either on the television or a scan of the night skies for possible comets. He contemplated photographing the burglar against a distinctive background in his home, but he decided that Voller would just knock him down and steal the camera as well as his video-recorder.

Brian Opfer was no physical match for an athletically built twenty-five-year-old. But he had to be more than an intellectual match for a common thief. All that he had to do was devise was a foolproof method of demonstrating beyond reasonable doubt that Voller had been in his home uninvited.

The solution came as a blinding revelation; simple and obvious.

Brian Opfer spent the first night in a state of nervous anticipation. His second vigil was dark and boring. On the third night, he released the security catch on the living room window for the last time. If Voller didn't show up, he would waste no more time on him. Someone else could spot Comet Opfer while he was lurking in the darkness of his own hall.

He switched off the downstairs light and went up to the bathroom. Several minutes later, he moved to his bedroom and drew the curtains, creating the impression that he was retiring. Hoping that Voller was outside, watching the show, he put out the bedroom light and crept downstairs. Minutes crawled by in the gloom of the hall, measured by the monotonous ticking of the living room clock.

A shape appeared at the living room window. The man

stood there for five minutes, just waiting. Then came a distinctive click as the catch was released and the lower part of the window whispered upwards. Opfer peered through the gap between the living room door and its frame, watching a replay of the previous performance.

The dark figure moved the plants on the window sill and checked the floor for obstacles. He waited for several minutes, as if expecting to be challenged, before sliding in to the room.

Opfer stepped past the door, flicking the light switch and extended his arms. He pumped two triggers. A cry of alarm drowned the gentle hissing of his weapons As soon as the intruder had dived through the window, Opfer telephoned the police.

The sales assistant in the toyshop had smiled benevolently as the greying customer had bought two water pistols for his imaginary grandsons. Further down the street, Opfer had been warned not to get any of the dye on his skin. The violet and green stains would not wash off. They would take at least a fortnight to wear away. Justice would not be cheated a second time.

Confident detectives received a shock when they called at Neil Voller's home. With equal confidence, his wife assured them that her husband was visiting friends who lived two hundred miles away.

Brian Opfer had been so sure of his identification that Detective Sergeant Harris refused to believe that he was completely wrong, that he had seen the face which he had been expecting. While another police force was determining the whereabouts of Neil Voller, Harris decided to check on the other brothers, all of whom were occasional customers at the police station. He found Mark Voller attempting to scrub away a violet and green mottling.

The trial was brief. Guilt was still splashed in subdued but still visible violet and green all over Mark Voller's face. The jury refused to believe that he had sprayed himself accidentally with the exact same shades of dyes as in Brian Opfer's twin water pistols. Opfer was astounded by the defendant's air of calm unconcern when he asked for forty-seven other offences to be taken in to consideration

The sentence was two years in prison. Twenty years seemed insufficient for a man who had violated four dozen homes. Opfer was further confused by the faint smirk on Mark Voller's face when he caught his eye; an expression echoed by Ron and Danny Voller. Elder brother Brian was not in court.

Brian Opfer realized why when he started up his drive. His front door was standing open in a provocative fashion. Feeling sick and cold, he trudged down the hall to the living room. His video-recorder had gone; but he had a visitor. Through despair, shock and then hope, he realized that Detective Sergeant Harris was looking indecently pleased with himself.

Harris had noticed Neil Voller's absence from his brother's trial and he had warned his colleagues. They had reached Opfer's home in time to watch Voller, dressed as a television repair man, load a video-recorder in to a van. They had followed him to his fence and they had recovered a large haul of electronic and other loot.

Relief and satisfaction at the capture of his tormentor turned in to mild irritation when Brian Opfer learnt that his video-recorder was evidence and would not be returned until after the trial. When that day dawned, the copper who delivered the video-recorder also brought an interesting snippet of news.

While Neil Voller had been standing in the dock, some evil

person had broken in to his empty house and stolen both his video-recorder and his television.

Not bothering to fight off a grin of delight, Brian Opfer agreed that it was a cruel world but added that one can take comfort from the fact that Fate's random blows sometimes strike a person who richly deserves them.

▪ ▪ ▪

37. Mice In The Basement

On the dot of seven-thirty on a pleasant summer morning, a chauffeur-driven limousine turned off the main road. A car park barrier lifted and the attendant snapped off a precise salute. The vehicle rolled to a smooth stop at the painted oblong assigned to H.P. Hackenpfeffer.

At an unobtrusive double, the driver opened the rear door for his passenger. Receiving a nod of dismissal from the stocky American, the driver locked the car and strolled to the waiting room for a cup of tea. It was H.P.'s habit on sunny mornings to spend a few moments admiring the gleaming office building to the east of the car park.

The ten storeys of the British headquarters of Velt International were an advertisement for one of the company's products. No matter how smart an ordinary building may look when new, time soon begins to leave its mark. Long, two-dimensional stalactites of grime collect under every projection. Joints and patches of rough stone receive a shading of mismatched greyness. But *Veltite*, the company's cladding material for the humblest home and the tallest high-rise, remains smooth and impervious to the best efforts of an acidic, city atmosphere.

H.P. Hackenpfeffer had a double reason for admiring ten storeys of sun-sparkled, snowy façade. For one thing, it looked so good, and for another, he had once begun to despair of ever seeing a start to the construction work. That was the trouble with England. It had too much history.

In the States, you could level a site and rebuild with very

few problems. But some English pest could always be guaranteed to object to any site on the grounds that digging foundations would cut through a part of their heritage. Every block of every major city seemed to be built on two thousand years of history, and there was always an archaeologist crawling out of the woodwork to demand the right to make his excavation first.

Velt International had been besieged by the Viking rehabilitation movement. According to various hairy and/or dried-out professors, the site of the new headquarters could provide vital information on Viking culture: proof that they had been more than looting barbarians, evidence that they had been really quite decent and civilized people.

Naturally, Velt International was not interested in repairing the bad public image of the Vikings. Inevitably, the company had been forced to bow to a campaign which had hinted that the Americans were the new barbarians, raping and pillaging Britain's Viking heritage.

It had been very generous of *VI*, H.P. Hackenpfeffer reflected, to agree to a three month hold on their building program. And *VI* could hardly be blamed if it had rained solidly for most of the three months, if every hole in the ground had become a pond and if the Viking rehabilitators had been forced to spend most of their funds on pumping equipment to fight the relentless floods. Nor could *VI* be blamed if the rain had stopped within days of the contractors moving onto the water-logged site.

Grinning to himself, H.P. Hackenpfeffer started across the expanse of dusty tarmac. He paused to kick at crack an inch wide and a couple of yards long. It was what the contractors called a settling problem. Then he heard a rumbling crash. He whirled round. His car had gone. In its place was a large crater. He advanced cautiously to the rim. Someone had

dropped a bomb on the car park and tossed his car in to the hole. If was standing on its wheels; dusty but apparently quite undamaged.

"Settling problems!" growled Hackenpfeffer.

He turned towards the white building again, intending to drop a bomb on the chairman of the contractors by telephone. The crack in the tarmac was now a foot wide and a couple of yards long. A snapping, glass-splintering sound stopped Hackenpfeffer dead in his tracks.

The Velt International building stood on eighteen pairs of stilts. Floor to ceiling glazing of the ground floor made it a simultaneous exhibition hall and display case for *VI* products. Before the Chief Executive's horrified eyes, large sheets of plate glass were splitting and shattering, and the whole building seemed to be shivering gently.

Fortunately, less than three dozen people were in the building at seven-thirty in the morning. Equally fortunately, one of them had had the good sense to set off the fire evacuation alarm when ten storeys of glass and concrete had begun to shiver like a snowy jelly.

San Franciscan H.P. Hackenpfeffer had not been back there since the earthquake on the day after Apollo 14 had splashed down in February of 1971. Memories of a force seven shaking on the Richter Scale returned after an interval of eleven years.

A small crowd, augmented by shocked and fascinated passers-by, gathered on the fringes of the car park. Suddenly, with a cracking roar, the building shrank. The legs disappeared. The first floor became the ground floor. Glass and pieces of cladding rained down to explode on the car park, sending sharp fragments flying in all directions.

It was a sight so inexplicable and beyond their experience that the spectators knew that they were witnessing the

impossible. And yet it was happening right before their eyes.

There was an investigation, of course; begun almost before the dust had settled and the first legal missiles had reached their targets. The contractors' names became mud overnight, and remained so until the investigators reported. Someone had been tunnelling under the site.

Denied the opportunity to extend their dig, archaeological moles had been recovering Viking treasures by stealth. They became fugitive folk heroes immediately, proving that an act of criminal vandalism can be excused in the public mind if it is on a grand enough scale, and pointing out to *VI* the dangers of saying 'no' to fanatics.

▪ ▪ ▪

38. Helping With Inquiries

The couple were sixty-seven and sixty-six years old, and looked quite frail, but they were still in the grip of shock when the police arrived. They had gone to bed at ten-thirty after watching the news, as usual. Around eleven, the husband had come downstairs to make sure that he had unplugged the television.

Entering the living room, he had been grabbed from behind. Before he had come to terms with what was happening to him, he had been gagged and tied to a chair. He had disturbed the thieves at the end of their raid.

A neighbour, out looking for her cat two doors down, saw two men at a van. The van drove away from her but one of the men walked past the end of her garden and she was able to give the police a fair description of him.

Detective Sergeant Halston returned to his office with a mild feeling of satisfaction. There had been eight similar raids on retired couples in the past three weeks.

During the second, a woman of seventy-three had suffered a broken wrist while being tied up. The other seven couples had come down in the morning to find a rented television gone, along with money and moderately valuable bric-a-brac.

Halston now knew that he was looking for two men and a van. Unfortunately, police records were unable to give him any immediate help. He passed the description on to one of his informers and turned his attention to another of his heavy case load.

In the afternoon of that day, a telephone call was put through to him. Halston was surprised to learn that the caller was the observant neighbour of the last victim of the chain of robberies.

Mrs. Booth had seen one of the men. She had spotted him approaching her house, wearing more or less the same clothing as on the previous night, and carrying two letters. There was a pillar box on the main road a quarter of a mile past her house.

Crossing his fingers, Sergeant Halston diverted a radio car and hoped that it would reach the area in time to intercept the suspect.

Keith Radford worked a flexitime system which allowed him to take an afternoon off when he had built up a sufficient credit balance of overtime. He had just posted a birthday card to his sister and a cheque to his book club.

Absorbed in his thoughts, he failed to notice the car as it slid to a halt beside him. His initial reaction was one of mild curiosity when a uniformed policeman hopped out and. spoke to him.

"Can I have a word, squire?" asked the policeman, who was big, in his middle twenties and looked as though he knew his job backwards.

"I think that's my cue to say you can have two," grinned Radford. "And the second one's 'off'."

"Where are you from?" asked the policeman, ignoring the attempt at humour.

Radford frowned at him. "From? Nowhere. I live here."

"And where's that?"

"Down the way. Selby Close."

"Who are you, squire?"

"You mean my name? Keith Radford. What's up?"

"We're looking for a man who answers your description.

D'you know where Barlow Road is?"

"Barlow Road?" repeated Radford thoughtfully. "Yes, I know the name. That's right, it's back that way." He turned to point. "I've just been along there, posting a couple of letters."

"You weren't along there last night?"

"Last night? Yeah, late on. I went out for a walk. And I posted a letter to get the first post this morning."

"In that case, we'd better have you along to the station to make a statement."

"All right," shrugged Radford. It was clear from the policeman's tone that the invitation could not be refused.

Radford climbed in to the back of the police car. The driver reported by radio that he was returning to the police station with a passenger and asked for the information to be passed on to DS Halston.

Radford left the conversational initiative to the policemen, and was rewarded with silence. Despite the presumption of innocence, the coppers in the car were not fraternizing in case he turned out to be the guilty party.

He was escorted in to the police station by the two uniformed men. Radford gained the impression that they were just waiting for him to make a wrong move, like trying to run, so that they would have an excuse to leap on him. He disappointed them in to an interview room.

Stale cigarette smoke and solvents from the recent paint fought for dominance. The man on the other side of the table was a willowy creature in his middle thirties. He had slightly longish, straw-coloured hair and looked as though he should have been smoking his cigarette through a long holder.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Halston," said the man, looking up from the spread of papers on the table. His accent was local and Radford gained the impression that he tried to

deepen the tone to sound more mature and more in charge of things. "You know you've been asked to come here to make a statement about your movements last night?"

Radford shrugged. "Not as such. Only in general terms."

"Well, you know now. First, I must warn you anything you say may be given in evidence. Is that clear?"

"Am I under arrest, or something?" frowned Radford.

"No," said Halston patiently. "We want to interview a man answering your description in connection with an inquiry."

"Who was up to no good in Barlow Road last night?"

"I understand you were in the area last night, and I need to know whether I can eliminate you from our inquiry. That's why I'm asking you to make a voluntary statement."

"Aren't you going to tell me I have the right to silence, and to have an attorney present during questioning?"

"Do you have a solicitor, Mr. Radford?"

"Well, no."

"Mr. Radford, I'm a very busy man. Is there any reason why I shouldn't know your movements last night?"

"Well, no."

"In that case, can we stop messing about? I need your full name and address, and your date of birth."

"It'll be quicker to write it out myself."

Halston pushed a blank statement form and a blue ball-point across the table. Radford supplied the required information, noticing that the date and time of the interview had been filled in already.

"What else do you want to know?" asked Radford.

"Everything you did between nine-thirty and midnight last night."

"At half-nine, I was watching TV," said Radford, thinking aloud before committing words to paper. "Something that

started at nine and finished just before ten."

"Where were you watching it?"

"At home."

"Put that down too."

"At ten, I switched the TV off and put the radio on. They're repeating the last series of *The Grumbleweeds* on Radio Two. While that was on, I looked through the catalogue from my record club and decided I didn't want anything. At half-ten, I switched the radio off and went out to post the letter and have a walk."

"What time did you leave the house? As near as possible."

"Five minutes later? Ten thirty-five, or so."

"Do you remember your route?"

"Yeah, I've got this standard circle round the block. Up Selby Close, light a cigarette and first right across onto Barlow Road, up there to the main road and across to the pillar box by the sweet shop. Then I lit the second cigarette, went left along the main road to Arlington Street, down there to Birch Road and back up Selby Close to my place."

"How long did that take you?"

"It usually takes about twenty minutes."

"So you were home about five to eleven?"

"Something like that."

"Put it down. Did you see anyone? While you were out for your walk?"

"No one I know. Kid on a bike, woman with a dog on the main road."

"What sort of dog?"

"German Shepherd. She was having a proper struggle with it."

"Did she see you?"

"No, I was behind her. She kept straight on when I turned onto Arlington Street."

"Put that down. What did you do when you got home?"

"Read my book. I put the kettle on about quarter past eleven and made a cup of tea and a couple of cheese and biscuits. I put the box on again at half-eleven. They're repeating the *New Avengers* for the ninety-ninth time. I switched off at twenty-five past twelve and went straight to bed. Alone. That's about it."

"You live alone?"

"Right."

"Did you see a van on Barlow Road?"

"No, I don't think so. Not that there couldn't have been one. There's always stuff parked along there."

"Did you stop and speak to anyone on Barlow Road?"

"No, and I didn't see anyone along there."

"Okay." Detective Sergeant Halston looked at his watch. "I'm going to leave you with this for about five minutes. Think about last night and add or change anything that comes to mind."

Under the vigilant gaze of a uniformed constable, Radford read and reread his statement. Then he lit a cigarette to make his own personal contribution to the atmosphere.

Halston returned after an interval of a quarter of an hour.

"I'll get this typed," he announced, scanning the statement and noting that no changes had been made. "Have you any objections to taking part in an identification parade?"

"Do you still do those?" frowned Radford. "Well, okay."

The sun was shining in to the yard behind the police station. Radford joined a line of bearded men in anoraks, wondering how the sergeant had managed to scare up half a dozen of them at such short notice.

He watched an elderly woman in her best blue coat scan the faces in turn. He felt a profound sense of shock when she stretched out a cautious and bony hand and dabbed at him,

making the briefest contact.

There was a subtle increase in Sergeant Halston's air of confidence when he escorted Radford back to the interview room.

"Anything you want to change?" asked the detective, producing the original, hand-written statement from a buff folder.

"Not a word," said Radford, with more conviction than he felt. "That old dear needs glasses."

"She saw a man last night with a short beard like yours, and an anorak like yours. From a distance of four yards."

"Did she see the drips of paint on the brown suede shoes?"

"And she picked you out of the line. That's something that has to be explained to my satisfaction."

"What's this guy done, anyway?"

"A rather nasty burglary near where that lady lives last night. A sixty-seven-year-old man was roughed up and tied to a chair. By two men with a van."

"I don't know anyone with a dark blue van. And how could she tell what colour it is, anyway? There's sodium lights along there. Any dark colour looks black under them."

"A dark blue van?" said Halston in apparent surprise.

Radford realized that he had dropped a very large brick. The colour of the van had not been mentioned, but he was certain that the vehicle in question was dark blue. A youngish detective constable with an offensively sarcastic manner was drafted in to assist with the questioning.

Radford found himself struggling to keep his temper under a barrage of questions, insinuations and offers of softer treatment if he told. the inquisitors all about his accomplice.

Strangely, when his attention was diverted, he kept letting slip revealing details. And when the detectives picked them up, Radford's protestations of innocence looked more and

more insincere. Doubts started to multiply in his own mind.

He knew that he was not a burglar, but he was unable to explain his incriminating knowledge; which, he remained convince, was accurate.

"Tell you what, Tom," remarked Detective Sergeant Halston, lighting his fifth cigarette of the session, "I think our friend must be a sleepwalker. Or are you bloody psychic?" he added to Radford.

"Phone for you, Sarge." A uniformed constable stuck his head in to the room, sparing the suspect the need to make up his mind.

"Why don't you tell us your mate's name?" asked the DC called Tom. "You've already told us he's got dark hair, and he drives a dark blue van, and he smokes a pipe."

"I keep telling you, I don't know this bloke," protested Radford.

"So how come you know so much about him? Or have you been feeding us a load of drivel? You can be charged with wasting police time, you know."

"I've already explained; these things sound right when I've said them, but I don't know them before you drag them out of me."

"Not much of an explanation, is it?"

"It's the best you're going to get. I don't understand it myself."

"You must think we're a proper bunch of wallies! We've got you for the job last night, and we can tie you in to eight more jobs over the last month. This is like pulling bloody teeth! All right, we'll go through your story once more and see what you come up with this time."

"No, we won't," countered Radford. "I'm bloody fed up with going through my *story*, as you call it."

The DC put on a menacing expression. He was interrupted

by DS Halston pushing in to the room and taking over the interrogation chair. "Right!" announced the sergeant. "I've just had a very interesting phone call. Let's go through your story one last time."

"He doesn't feel like it," grinned the detective constable.

"Oh, yes he does," decided Halston. "Name?"

"Brian Cross," said Radford in a bored tone.

"Address?"

"Fifteen Grove Terrace," said Radford in the same bored tone. Then he stopped and frowned. "Hang on."

"Find out if there's a Brian Cross living there," Halston told his satellite. "And if there is, get us a search warrant."

"Sarge?" frowned Tom.

"Don't think about it, just do it," ordered Halston, offering Radford a cigarette.

"What's this?" asked Radford, taking the cigarette. "A new line? Humour the idiot and prove he's lying in his teeth?"

"That interesting phone call," returned Halston. "It came from Mrs Joan Booth; the lady who picked you out of the line-up. She's had second thoughts. The bearded bloke she saw last night didn't have a full set like you. He'd trimmed it to just round his mouth and chin. So that set me thinking. If this bloke's as innocent as he reckons, maybe he is psychic after all."

"Oh, come on!" scoffed Radford.

"And maybe, if I catch him unawares; he might just give me something really useful. Like a name and address. What's his mate's name?"

"Eddie."

"See? You're full of information if I can sneak up on you."

"I don't believe this." said Radford, shaking his head in wonder.

"It's not unheard of for police forces to use psychics to

clear up crimes," returned DS Halston. "Usually in the United States and on the Continent, and usually for major crimes like murder and kidnapping. And usually it's the psychic comes round bending the coppers' ears, asking to be allowed to visit the scene of the crime to see what impressions he can pick up. Because the slightest hint of success is good publicity for his business. Or hers."

"I'm not in the psychic business," protested Radford. "I'm not even a psychic."

"That you know of. But how would you have found out if we hadn't questioned you? And if you're not one of our burglars, how do you know so much about them? Do you know someone called Brian Cross with a mate called Eddie?"

"No, the names don't ring any bells."

"John?" The detective constable stuck his head in to the room. "There is a B. Cross at that address. Are we going ahead with this warrant?"

"Certainly," nodded Halston. "Acting on information received. If you wouldn't mind hanging on here for a bit longer?" he added to Radford. "We'll fix you up with a cup of tea and a paper to read."

"That almost sounds like I've got a choice," observed Radford.

The cup of tea was hot and fresh, and very welcome. Radford had smoked two cigarettes and read most of the interesting parts of that day's *Guardian* by the time Detective Sergeant Halston returned, looking very pleased with himself.

"Your pal Brian Cross hasn't got much bottle," he announced.

"He's no pal of mine," insisted Radford.

"A copper on his doorstep, and he started shaking right off. Then we told him we knew he'd been out with Eddie and

his van last night, and Eddie said it was him tied up the old bloke. He got quite a shock when we went looking for the brown suede shoes with the paint splashes. He'd just been doing some decorating. You could smell the paint. He had to talk us in to letting him make a statement to give his side of things."

"So I suppose you're out looking for this Eddie now?"

"Right. You know, everyone thought I was daft for taking you seriously."

"I can't say I blame them," observed Radford.

"You hear so many bloody silly stories in this job," countered DS Halston, "you sometimes feel tempted to follow up the odd one or two, just in case."

"This other bloke; his name wouldn't be Eddie Tripp, would it?" asked Radford cautiously.

"I'm surprised you even bothered to ask."

"It's strange, it just sort of popped in to my mind. I had Eddie, and Tripp seemed to complete the name."

"You don't have to apologize to me," grinned Halston. "I don't care how you've done it, but you've given us a couple of evil bastards."

"I take it you don't want me to go to court to give evidence?"

"Not a bloody chance!" laughed Halston. "Well! Thanks for your help. I'm going out your way. I'll give you a lift home."

Radford folded the newspaper neatly and left it beside his empty tea cup. His trip to the police station had been a slightly alarming but eventually interesting way of spending an afternoon off.

He did not know yet that Detective Sergeant Halston intended making a slight detour to drive him past a pharmaceutical warehouse, which had been the target of a

recent break-in; just in case Keith Radford, the reluctant psychic, could pick up an impression of the raiders. The probable rewards were worth the possible waste of a little petrol.

▪ ▪ ▪

39. Double Jeopardy

The man on the parcel delivery van was new to the job and slightly more conscientious than his more experienced colleagues. He rang the doorbell twice, but nobody came. Instead of leaning the parcel against the front door, he carried it down the side of the house, just in case the owners were in the back garden and out of range of the doorbell.

Eight transparent panels in the back door provided the kitchen with another source of daylight. The delivery man looked in at a neat example of appliances and units as he raised his hand to knock. He stopped to stare, his clenched fist locked inches away from one of the panes. The parcel slipped from the nerveless fingers of his right hand.

Jane Madison was still standing on the same spot then the police arrived in response to a slightly hysterical telephone call. A detective sergeant eased the wide-bladed kitchen knife out of her right hand, taking care not to disturb the fingerprints. A WPC guided her in to the living room and made her sit down. She seemed to be in a state of shock and completely unaware of events around her.

A greying police surgeon, who had been called out on what should have been a rest day, had no hesitation in pronouncing Victor Madison dead. About four pints of his blood had soaked his clothing and formed a thickening puddle on the tiled floor. It was reasonable to assume that the four slashing, frontal stab-wounds were the cause of death, but the police surgeon knew better than to commit himself before the post mortem.

Jane Madison took refuge in loss of memory, but the facts of the case seemed so straightforward that the decision to prosecute was a simple one. She was brought before the local magistrates, charged with the murder of her husband and remanded in custody. To those involved in the case, it seemed no more than a domestic dispute which had got tragically out of hand.

Ian Forest was driving along a country road at fifty miles per hour. His job as an instrument engineer involved a great deal of travelling and he considered himself to be a safe driver. Fifty was the safe maximum speed for that stretch of country road under the conditions, which were fairly good. A light shower had made the narrow road slightly greasy, and it offered several awkward bends.

A car shot past him as he was leaving a tightish, descending turn. Forest judged that the idiot was travelling at least twenty miles per hour faster than himself at he reached fifty again. The green executive Rover disappeared from view as the road burrowed through a small wood. Forest slackened his speed in response to an internal urging. Three cups of coffee were fighting to get out.

There was a woman in a dark blue coat standing beside the car when he returned from splashing an area of grass in the wood. She was in her late twenties, around his own age, and about half a head shorter than Forest's five feet ten. She had curly, mid-brown hair and an expression of bewilderment. Forest noticed that she was empty-handed, and wondered why she didn't have a handbag.

"Help you?" he asked through a mild frown of interrogation.

"You don't have a cigarette?" said the woman.

"Ah, yeah." Forest started to dig for the packet, thrown off

balance by an unexpected reply. Another rain shower started vigorously as the woman was taking the cigarette. It seemed perfectly natural for them to take shelter in the car.

"You're a long way from anywhere," remarked Forest as he worked his lighter.

"Where are we, exactly?" said the woman.

Forest's *AA* book of road maps was lying open on the dashboard shelf. He pointed out the approximate position of the wood. "Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

"I don't know," said the woman vaguely. "Where are you going?"

"Here." Forest tapped the map with a finger. "To quite a decent motel, as motels go. That any good to you?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"My name's Ian, by the way."

"I'm . . . Jane."

The hesitation before the first name made Forest wonder if it was genuine; but if the woman didn't believe in giving her real name to strangers, that was her business. He started the engine and moved off. His passenger wasn't too bad looking and he didn't object to having someone to talk to during the final leg of his journey. It made a pleasant change from the unresponsive radio.

A record began to unwind to a natural conclusion but the disc jockey jumped in before it could die a natural death. He cracked a limp joke, then handed the microphone over to one of the announcers for a news flash.

"Police are still looking for Jane Madison, who escaped from the cells beneath Thornbridge magistrates' court around two-thirty this afternoon," said a calm voice. "Mrs Madison, who was remanded in custody on a charge of murdering her husband, is described as twenty-eight, five feet four tall with brunette curls and she was wearing a dark

blue coat. Members of the public are . . ."

Forest's passenger reached forward to switch off the radio. "Well, I suppose there's no use pretending that's not me," she said in a resigned tone.

"I've never given a lift to an escaped prisoner before," observed her driver, wondering what to do next.

"I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you I didn't escape, I was kidnapped?" said Jane Madison, trying for a jocular tone.

"I suppose it can't hurt to hear about it," decided Forest.

"Well, there's not that much to it. I was taken out of a cell by two men. I thought they were plain-clothes policeman at first. But they bundled me in to the back of a car, on the floor, and threw a rug on me. Then they went charging off somewhere. Eventually, they just dumped me near where you stopped."

"It wasn't a Rover, the car? One shot past me going like a bat out of hell."

"It was green, I know that much. And yes, he did have his foot right down."

"You don't know the two men?"

"Never seen them before, as far as I know."

"Or who paid them to get you out of gaol?"

"There doesn't seem to be much point in that if they were just going to dump me in the middle of nowhere."

"It said on the radio, they busted you out about half-two." Forest glanced at the dashboard clock. "It's half-five now."

"We were parked for a long time. In the country somewhere. It was very quiet. They'd brought coffee and some sandwiches."

"And what did you do all that time?"

"Nothing. We just sat in the car or walked round it. I tried to talk to them, but they just told me to button my lip. Then

we all got back in to the car. One of them drove like a madman for about ten minutes. Then they told me to get out of the car and they just drove off."

"Which explains why you didn't seem to know what day it is when I met you."

"Yes, I started walking, and I came across your car just parked at the side of the road. I didn't know whether you were with them."

"The next part of the escape plan?"

"I take it you're not?"

"'Fraid not. What's your next move?"

"I suppose all I can do is walk in to the nearest police station and give myself up. But I can't help thinking there must be a reason for them to kidnap me like that."

"This isn't exactly the busiest road in the world. If I hadn't come along, it'd have taken you about an hour and a half to walk to the nearest main road. They'd have put you out of circulation for at least four and a half hours in total. A lot can happen in that time."

"Such as what?"

"That's where I run out of ideas." admitted Forest. "Do you want me to go in to the police station with you? So you've got a witness you gave yourself up voluntarily?"

"Could I ask you a favour first? Would you mind if I had a shower and something to eat first? Do you think you could smuggle me in to your motel room? If you feel like doing a favour for someone accused of murder?"

"I can't really see you as a murderer," admitted Forest. "What do you fancy for dinner?"

"How does a Chinese takeaway sound? I haven't got any money on me, but I'll get my solicitor to pass on a cheque later."

"Oh, let's not bother about that."

Ian Forest dropped his passenger off at the motel. As far as he could tell, no one was looking their way in the ten seconds Jane Madison took to leave the car and disappear in to his room. Forest parked his car and walked to the nearby Chinese takeaway to give his guest time to take her shower. On the way back, he made a rapid visit to a wine merchant to buy a bottle of dry white wine to wash down the meal.

Jane had switched on the black and white television to find out what was being said about her. Neither she nor her companion was ready for the latest turn of events.

A woman called Mary Richards had been stabbed to death with the bread knife in her own kitchen. The public was being warned not to approach gaol-breaker Jane Madison, who was the chief suspect.

"You were with me an hour ago," said Forest, crunching bean sprouts. "A good thirty miles from where that woman was killed. Which knocks their efforts to make you a mass-murderer on the head. And who's this Mary Richards, anyway? Do you know her?"

"I suppose all this is bound to come out," sighed his guest. "My dear husband was having an affair with Mary Richards. I only found out just before he . . . died."

"Ah, this is starting to make some sense!" said Forest in triumph. "It's a very simple story. You escape somehow or other, you hide yourself somewhere, then you sneak up on your late husband's mistress and stab her while she's making dinner. D'you reckon her husband could have done it? Would he be capable of murder?"

"I don't know if you've heard of Stan Richards? He went to gaol a couple of times before he learned to pay others to do big dirty work for him."

"One of the local Mafia, you mean? And your husband was having an affair with his wife?"

"I told Vic he was being bloody stupid, but he wouldn't listen."

"Yes, I can see all the bits falling in to place nicely. Your husband was having an affair with this bloke's wife, so what happens? First your husband is bumped off and you're found holding the murder weapon. Then this Richards breaks you out of gaol and tries to frame you for his wife's murder."

Jane Madison's expression had become one of resignation. Suddenly, it became awakening hope. "You think the police might believe that?"

"They'll probably try and prove you and this bloke Richards were having an affair too, and cooked up a plot to get rid of your partners."

"I've never even met him. And I wouldn't want to."

"In that case, when you've finished your dinner, we can trot round to the nearest cop shop and defy them to make liars out of us," decided Forest.

"Don't think they won't try," warned Jane Madison.

A stunned desk sergeant accepted the surrender of the alleged double killer and summoned his superiors. Ian Forest was whisked away to an office for a grilling. He had agreed with the fugitive to tell the exact truth about their meeting and subsequent events. Routine threats of serious trouble were made when he admitted that he had taken a gaol-breaker back to his motel room for a meal instead of handing her over to the police immediately. Forest responded with a sceptical smile.

He was able to remember most of the registration number of the green Rover. It was the first A-prefix vehicle that he seen, the number began with a five, and the letters *TRA* had been fixed in his memory as an abbreviation of *tear-arse*. It

had not occurred to Jane Madison to look at the vehicle's number, but she was able to describe the exact shade of the paintwork and the interior.

The police tried to demolish Forest's story. The veiled insinuations of collusion became increasingly pointed as a detective inspector tried to trick him in to admitting that he had known Jane Madison for a great deal more than a few hours. Shielded by innocence and the truth, Forest allowed himself the luxury of losing his temper, knowing that anything said in the heat of rage would not be incriminating.

Eventually, the procession of detectives seemed reasonably satisfied that Forest was telling a consistent story, which might be the truth. He was asked to keep Jane Madison's alibi quiet for the moment.

Four apparently reliable witnesses had seen her approach or leave the scene of the crime. The police officers wanted time to dig in to their backgrounds, and to explore Stan Richards' movements at the time of the murder of Victor Madison.

They were by no means convinced that Mrs Madison had not committed at least one killing, but they were starting to be troubled by reasonable doubts, especially when they learnt that one of Stan Richards' men had taken delivery recently of a green Rover with an index number in the range offered by Ian Forest.

A long time later, Jane Madison had her day in court. The evidence against her remained fairly strong, and she had insisted on being allowed to clear her name.

Inevitably, the murder of her husband's mistress and recollections that she had been sought in connection with that crime; but not charged with it; weighed heavily on the minds of the jury.

Seven men and five women could not be convinced that the woman who had almost been framed for the murder of Mary Richards had killed her straying husband. Indeed, police evidence about her automaton-like condition immediately after the crime suggested that she had been drugged and slotted in to a more perfect frame.

The dust had scarcely settled before it was stirred up again by the arrest of Stan Richards and two of his satellites. Nobody had to be told that they had been charged with the murder of Mary Richards. Two of the 'witnesses' who had 'seen' Jane Madison leaving the Richards home on the afternoon of the murder were charged with conspiracy to pervert the course of justice the following day.

Jane Madison waited a further week, then she invited Ian Forest to her new home for a meal. She wanted to repay his hospitality during a very bleak period of her life. The wine flowed freely once Forest had got the message that he wouldn't have to drive back to his motel that night. It was conveyed during a tour of the new house. Jane had felt unable to carry on living at the scene of the murder.

The old house had not yet been sold, but her husband's insurance company had paid out on his policies once Jane's innocence had been established, and she was now comfortably off.

"That was a motive I didn't think of," said Forest lightly as they returned to the sofa in the living room to finish their wine. "I bet your insurance company is as sick as a bunch of parrots."

"I knew Vic had some insurance," smiled Jane, "at the back of my mind. But the first time I really thought about it was when they sent me a letter telling me under the circumstances, they considered the policies void. I suppose they'd rather Vic had let them lapse. You know he was planning to

run away with that Richards woman?"

"I didn't know it was that serious."

"They were going to raid her husband's safe on the eve of some big deal he was cooking up. And disappear with two hundred thousand pounds."

"Sounds like a bloody big deal!"

"It must have been drugs, or something. Vic had been celebrating in anticipation. He came home and he actually told me he was leaving me flat. And then he started laughing at me. He made me so angry, and he kept telling me what a good time he'd be having while I'm struggling. I think I hit him to try and stop him laughing.

"It was only when he fell down and started bleeding all over the floor that I realized I was holding a kitchen knife. Then I must have gone in to a state of shock. That bit of the police evidence was completely accurate. I just couldn't think or move. I'd been standing over Vic for at least twenty minutes before they found me. I didn't really start functioning again until about the middle of the afternoon."

Ian Forest realized that he was sitting, staring, with his mouth open. "So you did it?"

"Sort of."

"Well, it wasn't murder. If there was no premeditation. Maybe they could have got you on manslaughter, and you could have pleaded diminished responsibility. But they didn't."

"So now you know the whole truth, Ian. I suppose you're entitled to it."

"And you're asking what I'm going to do with it? Well, they can't try you for the same offence twice, can they? I suppose I could offer you my congratulations on getting away with murder, as they say."

"Funny, but I've never felt guilty. Not for a moment."

"I never thought you did it. Not for a moment. But I suppose your husband was doomed anyway. I can't see one of the local Mafia like Richards letting him get away with two hundred grand and his wife. The loss of face wouldn't have done his image any good. He could have put a smoking gun in your hand and let the police find you with two fresh corpses at your feet. You know, you could almost have pleaded self-defence."

"Does that mean you're not going to run for your life to the nearest police station?"

"I think I'm safe enough as long as I don't make you angry."

"That makes me sound like the *Incredible Hulk*," laughed Jane.

"He breaks out of Bruce Banner's body twice a week. I can't see it ever happening to you again."

"Neither can I," said Jane Madison.

"And there's no sense in letting a one-off moment of madness dominate us. Let's leave the past as it is. Rewriting history never seems to do the people involved any good," Ian Forest added.

▪ ▪ ▪

40. Reason To Survive

1. Partners

The last days of the Republic of Vietnam, the territory to the south of the dividing 17th parallel, were a mad scramble. As the Americans pulled out, the North Vietnamese advanced to fill the vacuum and a great many South Vietnamese realized that when Ho Chi Minh's forces took over, they faced poverty, imprisonment and death. Those with money; or convertibles like gold, jewellery or drugs; and those able to beg or steal one or the other, were willing to pay any price for a flight to safety.

Master-Sergeant Roy Fullerton was known as *Buck* because he was prepared to enter in to any sort of deal to make one. His partner, Sergeant Michael Roscoe, answered to *Speedy* because he had a genius for organizing rapid transportation, and because he also dealt in amphetamines in addition to cannabis.

Both men were white, Anglo-Saxon atheists aged twenty-eight, in their prime mentally – and physically in Roscoe's case. Fullerton was a desk-bound warrior, just a few pounds overweight but soft from lack of exertion. Both had decided to accept discharge in the summer.

The end of US involvement in the Vietnamese Civil War marked the end of a source of easy money. They were spending the last days before the fall of Saigon making as much money as they could to ease themselves comfortably in to civilian life.

Fullerton had an active charm that made him a popular and natural leader of men, and perhaps a faithless but fun prize for some lucky woman. He had hair as black, but finer, than any oriental's, and he was of average height, which meant that many of his GI comrades could look down on him and be disarmed by almost unconscious feelings of superiority while Fullerton separated them from their money with his many deals.

A native of New Mexico, Fullerton affected a cowboy hat when he was off duty. It was all part of his hayseed image, designed to create the impression that he was just another not-too-bright cowboy, and that his success was a result of dumb luck.

Roscoe was a six-footer from Scandinavian and Italian stock at a distance. He had his father's dark brown hair and his mother's blue eyes. He lacked Fullerton's ability to maintain a relaxed smile when he was thinking or struggling through a tough situation. Roscoe made no attempt to be popular. His subordinates obeyed him because they had to. They knew that they would not be allowed to get away with disobedience and that Roscoe had a talent for making the right decision on his feet.

He had been at the shooting end of the war before joining Fullerton at the stores complex to make his fortune. Roscoe became one of the boys only when he relaxed with a few drinks or a joint. His normal demeanour was reserved. Roscoe watched and planned. Fullerton persuaded people to carry out the designs of a superior planner. They made a perfect partnership.

With the help of air force personnel anxious to get in on the bonanza, Fullerton and Roscoe exported wealthy Vietnamese men, women and whole families to Luzon in the Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea.

They converted fares in to gold and precious stones. As April of 1975 drew to a close, they had amassed a considerable fortune. The count-down had almost run out.

On the morning of the 29th, at 09:37 hours on a hot, wet morning, a transport aircraft staggered in to the heavy air carrying the travel firm's last half dozen passengers on a thousand-mile journey to Manilla. After a brief rest, the lucky government official and his family would fly on a further 5,400 miles via Guam and Wake Island to Honolulu.

Fullerton and Roscoe retired to their private office for a drink to mark the end of a profitable partnership. Fires crackled and explosions roared as the last supplies were rendered unfit for use by the enemy. Roscoe shot in to the air the cork of a bottle of 1966 champagne, which they had been saving for the occasion. Their supplier had described it as the best. And they had confirmed his opinion by drinking the other eleven bottles in the case on previous occasions.

Forty minutes later, Fullerton and their treasure took off on the 950-mile flight to Hong Kong. Fullerton had told the crew that his partner had made other travel arrangement. The North Vietnamese entered Saigon at noon, watched by nervous pressmen, their supporters and those unfortunates who had been unable to leave. Michael Roscoe woke in to a haze of pain and a red glow a long time later.

Night had fallen. He was lying in a very small room. He knew instinctively that it was the concealed storage compartment under the office which he had shared with Roy Fullerton. Roscoe struggled to his hands and knees in clinging blackness and put his hand in something damp and evil-smelling. It seemed to be a pool of vomit and he had a vile taste in his mouth.

He reached up, raised the trapdoor, and wriggled up to the bare floor of the office. Shifting red light from something on

fire nearby played on the window. He found his way to the door and groped his way along the corridor to the washroom. None of the lights worked. He felt faint, but a sense of wrongness and danger drove him on. The water was still running, allowing him to wash his hands and face and rinse out his mouth.

A drink of water made him feel slightly better, but he was still weak and ill. He heard a burst of firing in the distance; small arms, not artillery. It was either the VC and the NVA assaulting the city or Charlie mopping up. Roscoe's hand went to his right hip. The heavy service .45 was still in the holster. He drew the weapon, pressed the magazine release and made sure that the clip was full.

A door opened with a crash and feet padded along the corridor. Two more doors banged open. Then came a thud and a splintering sound. The intruder seemed to be checking the long, low building for either occupation or loot. Roscoe knew from long familiarity that the central corridor separated facing washrooms flanked by pairs of long store rooms and offices at the four corners of the single-storey building.

The intruder crossed the corridor and kicked his way in to another store room to save himself the trouble of turning a handle. Roscoe became aware of a yellow glow from the door to the corridor. It was competing with the flickering red of the flames beyond the washroom window. The yellow lights dimmed and returned in to and out of two more store rooms.

Roscoe waited in one of the stalls, standing on the toilet seat, peeping over the scarred wooden partition. Sweat generated by the warm evening and a mild fever ran from his body and made his gun hand slippery. In a frozen moment, he took in a figure in black pyjamas, who was carrying a hurricane lamp in his left hand and a rifle in his right.

The distinctive barrel and forward-curving magazine told Roscoe that it was a Kalashnikov-type. His finger tightened on the trigger without hesitation. The impact of the heavy bullet threw the man back against the door frame. His lantern smashed, releasing a flood of burning oil.

Roscoe jumped over the flames, using the body as a stepping stone to the corridor. The fire that was lighting up the compound was another building burning. No one seemed interested in the blaze. Roscoe hoped that the shot and a dead gook would attract as little attention as the fires. Scavengers had smashed through the building, but he was able to assemble a few emergency supplies in a small pack.

Equipped with a carton of Camels, half a dozen tins without labels, a bottle of rye whiskey and a full army water-bottle, he left the building and buried himself in a shadow. He spotted a few dark figures moving around, some with lights, some without, and he evaded them with ease. A hurricane had struck his quarters in a barrack building.

His possessions and his civilian clothing had gone. The scavengers had not found his jungle gear and the M-16 rifle in the closet that was disguised as a piece of blank wall. A label-less tin turned out to contain beef stew. Roscoe forced himself to eat all of it cold, and finished his meal off with a healthy mouthful from the bottle of rye. He was starting to feel better; and able to consider what had happened to him.

It was obvious that he had been poisoned, and that the poison had been in the champagne which he had shared with his partner and buddy Roy Fullerton. Not in the bottle, because Fullerton had consumed his half, but a colourless liquid painted on the inside of his glass, where it would mix rapidly with the wine without his noticing it.

Luckily, Fullerton had overdone the poison. Roscoe had collapsed and Fullerton had dumped him in the storage

compartment. Then his system had rejected the too-strong poison. Fortunately, he had not inhaled his vomit and suffocated. He was alive and possibly the last GI at liberty in Vietnam; which was as good as a death sentence if he hung around the destroyed supply depot for the VC to get him.

A violent hissing beyond the cracked window of his quarters claimed his attention. Heavy rain was falling. The fires would be out soon. Roscoe lit a cigarette and waited for the downpour to pass over before he attempted to get clear of the camp. He was in one of the most densely populated regions of South Vietnam. If he headed south or south-west, he would remain in the relatively crowded area around the Mekong Delta.

Travelling west or north, he would reach Cambodia; and run right in to the VC supply lines. His best bet was to travel a little south of east, more or less in to the prevailing wind and rain, and try to reach the coast fifty or fifty-five miles away in a lightly-populated region.

He would have to make his journey through the hottest and one of the wettest periods of the year. Drenching rain, temperatures in the eighties day and night, and the need for caution would make for slow progress. Mentally prepared, Roscoe flicked his cigarette butt out of the window and followed it in to the night.

Once clear of the city and its surroundings, he was in farm-land. The small villages and groups of farms were sited on roads and watercourses. Patrols of North Vietnamese troops were an additional hazard, but a lone man on foot had plenty of room to evade them.

Speedy Roscoe had seen his fair share of combat before turning to a life of crime. His jungle-craft was a little rusty, but he was under no particular time pressure. He could afford to proceed with caution and live off the land if his

supplies gave out. All that mattered was to get away so that he could walk up to Buck Fullerton some day and blow his head off.

On the evening of the third day, Roscoe emerged from a belt of trees and found himself with a view of the sea. He withdrew to cover and smoked a celebratory cigarette while listening to the waves breaking on a hidden beach. Keeping his cigarettes dry in the rainy season, he decided, was a major achievement.

Feeling that he was starting to get somewhere at long last, he turned left, to the north, and set off on a reconnaissance of the coast during the last hour of daylight.

He had covered about a mile when he came to a small bay. Roscoe took in a vista of fishing boats and wooden houses, all facing the sea. The light was fading as another rainstorm swept in over the water, anticipating sunset.

Roscoe pulled back to make camp for the night. He had reached his destination. The next part of his plan involved a boat ride to safety. The details had yet to be worked out.

2. Escape

In the morning, Roscoe moved forward to a piece of high ground which gave him a view of the bay and the village. There seemed to be plenty of activity; which diminished markedly when a North Vietnamese gunboat came throbbing up the coast and turned left in to the bay. Quite a number of young men of military age slipped in to the trees when they heard the sound of marine diesels.

Roscoe circled the village as the crew of the gunboat poked around the houses, asking questions and throwing their

weight around. He was just wondering how to contact the inhabitants when a brown arm circled his neck. A half-naked man appeared in front of him, preparing to thrust a long knife in to Roscoe's vitals.

Roscoe reacted by stamping his boot onto a bare foot and knocking the knife aside with his rifle. He dipped and heaved the other man over his shoulder. His attackers went down in a tangle of limbs. Then he heard a loud click on his left.

"I guess you guys have got me outnumbered," remarked Roscoe, knowing that he was being covered by a service .45 automatic.

"You a Yank, Joe?" said a voice uncertainly.

"With a face like mine, what else?" returned Roscoe, looking at the man with the gun.

"All Yanks fly out three, four days ago."

"One of them got left behind," shrugged Roscoe.

"What you want, Joe?" asked the man with the knife, having disentangled himself from the strangler.

"Out," said Roscoe succinctly. "You'd better put the safety on that," he added to the man with the automatic. "Shoot me and you'll have them round your neck."

He nodded sideways, towards the village and the North Vietnamese gunboat.

The man with the gun clicked on the safety catch and tucked the weapon in to the holster on his belt. He was wearing baggy, black trousers and a sweat-stained, olive green tee-shirt. Roscoe assumed that the men who had slipped away from the village were deserters from the South Vietnamese army. The one with the gun had probably been an officer.

As if to confirm the conclusion, that man issued a string of orders to one of the others, who trotted away in the direction

of the village. The other man slid his long knife in to a scabbard on his belt. He was wearing just a pair of black trousers, which came to a ragged stop half-way down his calves. Roscoe produced a packet of Camels as a sign of friendship.

"What happened to you?" asked the former officer.

"I was sick. They left me behind," said Roscoe, offering a simple explanation. "What I want is a boat and a crew."

"Where you go?" asked the other man. Roscoe decided that the one with the knife had been an NCO. He deferred to the former officer, but he looked like someone used to giving orders.

"I've got a thousand dollars in a bank in Hong Kong," said Roscoe speaking slowly for maximum comprehension. "Waiting to pay off the crew that gets me there." In fact, his emergency fund was nearer thirty thousand dollars, but he believed in allowing plenty of latitude for bargaining.

"Long, dangerous trip," said the former officer.

"With a nice pay-off at the end," Roscoe pointed out. "Or do you guys like it here? Heading for the hills every time you hear an engine?"

The scout returned and panted out a brief report.

"He say boat gone now," translated the officer. "We wait fishing boats gone. Then we go village, talk."

"Suits me," said Roscoe, issuing the scout with a cigarette.

He put his back to a tree and squatted in to a comfortable position which kept him clear of the damp ground. The former officer, whose name sounded like Doug, told Roscoe that he had eight men with him, three of them married. They had been trying to melt in to the country scene for about six months. The arrival of the North Vietnamese Army to complete Ho Chi Minh's reunification of the country posed a very serious threat to their existence.

Roscoe and Doug exchanged general background information while they were waiting for the coast to clear. Roscoe had no insignia to interrupt his jungle camouflage. He did not specify his rank and he let Doug assume that he was either a captain or a young major.

Doug had been a lieutenant.

Roscoe allowed himself to be smuggled to one of the houses, where he was shown to a small room that was used to store vegetables.

He spent the rest of the morning selling his plan for a trip to Hong Kong in a mixture of English and Vietnamese. Like Doug, he had picked up some essentials of a useful foreign language.

The main problem was the boat. Roscoe had settled on a payment of $300 per man for the crew, to be collected in Hong Kong, on condition that Doug and his unit took along their weapons and fought if the North Vietnamese attempted to stop them. Doug knew of a suitable boat, but the owner would want to go with them and take his whole family of a wife, her sister; three sons, two daughters and a grandmother.

Roscoe had not been planning a major expedition, but he wanted to get out of Vietnam as fast as possible. Buck Fullerton had four days' start on him already. The lead would be extended by the amount of time the boat took to negotiate nine hundred and fifty miles of the South China Sea and the delay in getting himself repatriated from Hong Kong.

Negotiations took four frustrating days. First, the subject had to be broached with the owner of the boat. Then he had to be convinced that the deserters had gained enough sailing experience on the fishing boats to act as a crew.

Finally, came the question of a reward for the owner, an

incentive to make for Hong Kong instead of Hainan, where he had relatives. Roscoe allowed himself to be talked out of another $300.

He had considered taking the boat by force; he was sure that Doug's band of deserters would back him up if they were offered a sufficient bribe, but he had been held in check by a number of practical considerations.

If he stole the boat, the owner would simply tell the new conquerors that it had been taken by a pack of deserters led by an American. Then the gunboats would be out in force, looking for them. There was also the question of the payments that he had promised.

He was carrying about $1,000, an emergency fund hidden with his jungle gear, which showed that he was quite well off. Dollars, of course, had been worthless in Vietnam since the American evacuation, but they were also one of the few ways of taking wealth out of the country.

No one had expressed doubt about his ability to pay out a further $2,000 in Hong Kong, but Doug and his men had no proof of the existence of Roscoe's bank account. He was keeping quiet about the subject and hoping that everything could be arranged by co-operation and faith.

Preparations for the voyage took a further five days. Roscoe spent them in the small store room, living on fried fish and boiled rice and rationing the last of his cigarettes. News of the departure had been passed all round the village. Willing hands had helped to make the boat sea-worthy for its long journey.

Doug and his armed deserters had become something of an embarrassment to the villagers, who lived in fear of a raid by the North Vietnamese and massive reprisals. The villagers were uniformly glad to see them go voluntarily.

3. Pirates

On a Monday evening, a fortnight later than planned, Sergeant Michael Roscoe said a final farewell to Vietnam. Stripped to his tee-shirt and camouflage trousers, carrying the rest of his clothes and his rifle in a long bundle of rush matting and wearing a conical coolie-hat, he was escorted down to the boat with a group of Doug's private army.

The Moon was just two days past new, hanging in a partly clouded sky with a lot of brilliant stars. Burning torches lit the boat and a small area of beach. Roscoe was rushed in to the cabin. The boat looked very small for twenty-two people, but it was under-weigh before Roscoe could find Doug to voice his doubts.

A freshening wind was blowing from the direction of Borneo, adding to the three-knot coastal current to the north-east, and letting the crew edge out to sea to steer clear of the gunboats. Roscoe was sure that he had spent a sleepless night, but he was surprised to open his eyes to full daylight. He went to relieve himself over the side, then he turned to take stock of the craft to which he had entrusted his life.

The vessel had the high stern and venetian blind sail of a typical Chinese-style junk. Roscoe concluded that the design had been brought across the Gulf of Tonkin by the ancestors of the owner and the other inhabitants of the village, which had been left on the other side of the horizon.

There was evidence of a great deal of repair and restoration work to the hull, deck and the cabin at the stern. Roscoe knew that the basic junk design had been tested over thousands of years.

Doug had seemed confident enough that the vessel would be able to ride out any storms that they met on the way. Roscoe found himself wishing that he could share his

confidence. The boat seemed in imminent danger of sinking under the weight of brown bodies.

Breakfast was cooked over an open fire in a stone grate on the deck. Doug and his men were used to the American, but Roscoe fascinated most of the others; the grandmother of about sixty, the wives of the three married deserters and a small mob of children ranging from ten to about three. They kept darting covert glances at the stranger, and asking questions about him in an undertone.

The other two women, the owner's wife and her sister, seemed determined to ignore Roscoe and the others. They seemed nervous in the presence of so many men, even though they were a good ten to fifteen years older than the deserters, and must have seemed hopelessly ancient to them.

After breakfast, some of the men prepared to catch the day's food. They were sailing through some of the richest fishing waters in the world. The diet would be a little monotonous, but the experts seemed to think that the voyage would last no more than five or six days. Sufficient rice, vegetables, water and fuel had been stored for a trip of a week. The fish would be a bonus and provide the owner with something to do.

Roscoe set to work, cleaning his weapons, and touched a military nerve in the idle members of the crew. Seven of the deserters had M-16 rifles, five of which were in working order. Roscoe had sufficient military Vietnamese to tell the careless ones that they had allowed the barrels of their weapons to become so corroded that they were a greater danger to the user than to the target. Doug glared at the men as Roscoe tossed the weapons overboard so that no one would be tempted to use them in an emergency.

Doug and his sergeant had M-3 'grease-guns' and eight thirty-round magazines between them. Roscoe was reluctant

to expend scarce ammunition on target practice to find out how well or badly the deserters could use their weapons.

He had one hundred rounds in the ammunition pouches on his webbing. After dividing the cartridges from the useless weapons, the other fire riflemen had one full magazine apiece. Roscoe contented himself with making sure that the weapons were in working order and ready for use. He could only hope that the expedition would not be challenged by a North Vietnamese gunboat.

The first day passed quickly enough. Roscoe was unable to fathom the method of navigation, but the owner of the vessel seemed confident enough of his position to start to steer a more northerly course on the second day.

A terrifying storm overtook them on the afternoon of the third day. Roscoe and most of the others emptied their stomachs over the side as the sky became solid black, lit only by violent spears of lighting. They could only hang on as mountainous seas and gale-force winds hurled the vessel in every direction, all of them unexpected.

Roscoe still felt desperately ill as the dark of the storm gave way to occasional stars in a clouded night sky. He remained too sick to think about killing Buck Fullerton for subjecting him to this further ordeal. The vessel continued to pitch wildly, but the wind was slackening and the sea was moderating steadily. Some of the crew were able to think about baling out the water sloshing about in the set of compartments below deck.

Doug reported that the mast had gone. Roscoe was surprised to find the cabin still over his head, but the boat had been built to survive rough weather.

In the morning, the weather was back to the normal soupy stickiness of the season. Only the stump of the mast remained to confirm that there had been a storm. The crew

had managed to jury-rig a spar for a sail, and they were discussing landing on the north-eastern coast of Hainan for repairs and water. Roscoe was still feeling mildly seasick and he was content to lie down in the cabin with other sufferers and leave everything to the experts.

He was starting to feel a little hungry and thirsty when the sail was spotted. Roscoe flipped from alert to relaxed. The vessel was clearly not a North Vietnamese gunboat. Hoping for information on their position, the Vietnamese owner and skipper of the boat set course for the other, larger junk.

Roscoe was sent back to the cabin so that he would not give rise to unwanted questions. The women and children were packed in with him to help create the impression of a fishing expedition blown off course by the storm.

The larger junk made a wide turn of 180° to come up alongside the Vietnamese vessel to port. Two crewmen jumped aboard carrying Chinese copies of the Soviet Kalashnikov assault rifle. They were wearing baggy white trousers and ragged singlets, not military uniforms.

Looking through the cabin's ventilation slots, Roscoe counted five others on the deck of the larger vessel, only one of them armed with another AK-47. This man was keeping an eye on the Vietnamese skipper, who was manning the huge rudder.

Roscoe assumed that the men were Chinese pirates. Marine gangsters had been mentioned in passing. Roscoe had not taken the references seriously; but anyone can make a mistake. The leader was a shortish man with a broad grin. Despite the heat, he was buttoned up in a dark blue Mao jacket and matching trousers.

Instead of a cutlass, he had a bulky holster slung on his right hip. The pirates seemed quite confident that they were in complete control of the situation. Their captives had

knives, and their arms were in the air to keep their hands well away from them. No firearms were in evidence on the Vietnamese vessel. Roscoe had to do something at once – before the pirates began to search their prize for loot.

He glared at the women and dabbed an urgent finger to his lips. One of the children started to snivel, frightened by the fierce stranger. His aunt clapped a hand over his mouth. Roscoe dragged his rifle out of its waterproof wrapping and eased a round in to the breech. Then he placed the other weapons within easy grabbing range of the cabin door.

He stood for a moment beside the door, assessing the motion of the boat, planning his explosive burst of action. He was as ready as he would ever be.

Roscoe stepped out onto the deck. He fired a short burst at an armed man. Heads started to turn towards him. Another burst took out the other armed man on his boat. Bullets whacked in to the wood beside him. Roscoe fired an aimed burst at the pirate ship to knock the last armed man in to the sea. The pirate captain was reaching for his holstered pistol.

A Vietnamese arm reached out and a keen fisherman's knife sliced across his throat. Doug and his men made a dash for the cabin. The grandmother appeared, festooned with weapons. Moments later, an armed boarding party was searching the larger junk.

Roscoe, the hero of the moment, found himself feeling much better. Having something to do had pushed away his residual seasickness. He felt ready to tackle some of the vegetable and rice concoction left over from breakfast. Leaving other men to question the prisoners, he returned to the cabin to ask the ladies about the food situation.

He was feeling pleasantly full when Doug came to him for an opinion. According to an ancient and tatty map, which turned out to be a World War Two British Admiralty chart

with Chinese place names added, they were about sixty-five miles east of Tonkon Point on the east coast of Hainan, and two hundred and fifty miles from Hong Kong.

The Vietnamese skipper wanted to use the Chinese vessel, which had an engine, to tow his boat to Hong Kong. There would be much more room for the refugees and a better chance of survival if another storm overtook them. The only problem left was the fate of the five captured pirates.

Roscoe suggested that they be made to walk the plank. Doug gave him a frown of incomprehension. Roscoe had to explain that he had as little respect for the lives of Chinese pirates as they had for the lives of their victims. Doug left the cabin with a smile on his round face.

Roscoe finished his meal to a background of gunfire.

When he left the cabin, a few minutes later, there was no sign of the prisoners and one of Doug's men was washing the last traces of their leader's blood from the deck.

4. Return

The rest of the trip was plain sailing in the most boring sense of the phrase.

Two of the Vietnamese deserters were mechanics. They spent the last day and a half of the voyage watching the engine in the Chinese vessel as it throbbed monotonously, driving the convoy ever closer to safety. Roscoe moved to the shade of an awning on the larger boat, looking for a cooling breeze to fight the sticky heat bouncing up from the flat sea.

In the early afternoon of the next day, a police launch intercepted the two junks as they were manoeuvring between small islands, looking for a large centre of population at which to make their landfall. Roscoe slid in to his

camouflage tunic, buckled on his sidearm and greeted the police officers with his M-16 rifle cradled in his arms. He was a perfect picture of a warrior who had made a tactical withdrawal in good order.

The welcome became a little frosty when the police checked up on him and discovered that Sergeant Michael Roscoe had been reported killed just before the fall of Saigon. Roscoe spent some time in a well-appointed cell while his fingerprints were transmitted to Washington and his identity was confirmed.

His story about being picked up by a long-range North Vietnamese patrol and escaping too late to catch the last aircraft home was accepted as there was no evidence available to contradict it. He was released and transported across to the mainland.

Roscoe made straight for his bank. Someone had been there before him. There was a token fifty dollars in his account. Roscoe could have told the manager that the signature on the cheque presented by the other American gentlemen was a good forgery. Instead, he closed the account and added one more item to the list of reasons for putting his service pistol to Buck Fullerton's head and pulling the trigger until the magazine was empty.

He never saw his Vietnamese travelling companions again, which spared him the embarrassment of disappointing Doug and his deserters. They would have to be content with a share of the proceeds from the sale of a captured junk in good sea-going condition and a chance to make a new life in the rat-race of Hong Kong.

Wearing an outfit of borrowed civilian clothes, Roscoe was put on a flight to Japan. His weapons travelled in the cargo hold. Two MPs met him at the international airport and drove him seven miles north along the coast road to the

United States' embassy in Tokio.

Roscoe was shown to an office. His escorts addressed the occupant as *Major*. Roscoe explained himself to middle-aged officer in civilian clothes, who seemed to be in a tearing hurry to get out to a party. Then he spotted the desk calendar. It was Saturday night.

Roscoe had almost forgotten about Saturday nights. After giving an abbreviated account of his escape, he was passed on to someone lower in the chain of command. He enjoyed a proper American meal, then he settled down in front of a television set with a packet of cigarettes and a supply of beer to begin the process of rejoining Western civilization. He had forgotten how good steak and ice cream could taste.

In the morning, wearing a new uniform and his sidearm, and carrying his much-travelled M-16, Michael Roscoe took a fifteen-minute helicopter ride to the west to a US airbase. He boarded a military transport aircraft for the first leg of the long flight home carrying a collection of recent newspapers. He had a lot of catching up to do.

According to his body clock, it was late afternoon when he reached Pearl Harbor. He had enjoyed a good night's sleep and he was looking forward to breakfast when he landed in the United States at the end of a long Sunday. Roscoe spent part of the night dozing and the rest watching television. Then came the problem of what to do with him.

The Vietnam War had not been a happy experience for the United States' military. It had been an unpopular war, fought far from home for reasons which failed to impress a majority of the American public. The process of forgetting it was three weeks old by the time Roscoe arrived home.

His superiors did not want to give him the ticker-tape parade due to a returning war hero, who had escaped the clutches of an unprincipled communist enemy. Fortunately,

Roscoe was prepared to go along with their wishes. He wanted the quietest homecoming possible so that Master-Sergeant Roy Fullerton would continue to believe that his former partner was dead.

A mistake in the army's computer records was corrected and Sergeant Michael Roscoe was brought back from the dead. Telephone calls to relatives, who had received the bad news, set the record straight.

Roscoe served out the last months of his enlistment quietly at a supply depot in Kansas, circulating paper and selling off unofficially surplus goods to finance the next step in his campaign of revenge. He still intended to kill Buck Fullerton, but he had started to consider what would happen after the gun was empty.

His colleagues at the supply depot were glad to see the back of Roscoe. He had established a reputation for eccentric behaviour in his final couple of months. He had violent nightmares and he was subject to periods of aggressive behaviour for no apparent reason.

Combat veterans recognized the signals. Roscoe had been in Vietnam and something had happened to send him jungle-happy. Some experience kept returning to haunt him. Given average luck, he would get over it. And if he didn't, they expected to be a long way away when Roscoe cracked up.

A civilian again, Roscoe bought a camper and drove west to Colorado. He was planning to spend some time in the wilds, letting his beard and his hair grow. He also bought a hunting rifle and some fishing gear to try his hand at living cheaply off the land.

When he looked more like a hippie draft-dodger than a combat veteran, he would be ready to move. He was going to kill Buck Fullerton in front of witnesses so that there

would be no doubt who stopped good old Buck's clock, and he was going to get away with it. Even though he had been discharged from the army, he had retained his M-16 rifle and his Colt automatic pistol. They were a necessary part of his plan.

Buck Fullerton had been a civilian for over a month longer than his former partner. Discreet inquiries had told Roscoe that Fullerton had returned to his home town on the Pecos River in New Mexico. The poisoner had had ten weeks to settle down when Roscoe and his new beard visited the area.

5. Reconnaissance

The summer weather was hot and brilliant, which allowed Roscoe to wear the added disguise of a battered old hat with a floppy brim and sunglasses. In his light cotton jacket, he looked as though he should have had a mule and a Geiger counter in tow.

Roscoe pushed in to the coolness of a bar – he had left his camper in a supermarket's car park – and flopped onto a stool. The bartender assumed that he was a dusty old uranium prospector when Roscoe pointed to another customer's glass of beer and then tapped the counter in front of himself. The smooth skin on the hand that raised a frosting glass to the beard told the bartender to guess again. Roscoe's throat had been too dry to attempt a verbal order.

Refreshed, he lit a cigarette and took stock of the bar. He had arrived at a slack period in the middle of the afternoon. Seven customers in two groups seemed to be just passing time over glasses of beer.

"Something going on?" Roscoe asked the bartender. "I saw a whole buncha posters out there."

"Election time for the sheriff. Looks like we're getting a new guy at long last."

"Oh," said Roscoe dismissively.

"Passing through?"

"Heading on down to Del Rio," nodded Roscoe. He slid an empty glass across the counter. "Hit me again."

"Come far?"

"Denver," lied Roscoe through a pretzel.

"What's in Del Rio?" frowned the bartender.

"Whole lot more than there is in Denver," said Roscoe with a grin that suggested that he had a girlfriend there. "That the old guy?" He nodded to a poster at the end of the bar, beside the door to the washroom.

"Sheriff Verain. Been in the job since New Mexico joined the Union, seems like," nodded the bartender, who was around forty and who had fallen foul of the out-going sheriff in his teens often enough to build a lasting enmity. "Kinda settled in his ways."

"That mean he sits on his can in an office all day?"

"The new guy, Roy Fullerton, he's a Veet-nam Veteran. It's thirty years since Cal Verain was in a shooting war."

"Get much trouble around here?"

"We had some bikers through only last week. Roy Fullerton would have seen them on their way before their wheels stopped turning. Leave them alone and they'll soon get bored and move on was what Verain said."

"Town doesn't look too bust up," observed Roscoe.

"We don't need that kind riding around, upsetting folks."

Two more customers strolled in to the bar. The bartender moved away to serve regular customers. Roscoe grinned in to his beer. The idea of Buck Fullerton running for sheriff was a real hoot! At the same time, it made a lot of sense. Fullerton was the kind of guy who could make a success of

political life. He could make friends and he had enough experience of breaking the law himself to be able to outguess any criminals in the area.

Roscoe had allowed his former partner time to establish himself somewhere. If Fullerton was running for sheriff, he was clearly planning to stay in his home town, which meant that their travel agency's assets were somewhere close. Old Buck had a bit of the pirate in him. He would have checked out the lie of the land, then buried the loot, intending to dispose of it over many years.

After a third beer, Roscoe took a stroll around the town and bought some provisions. He left the town at the end of the afternoon and headed south, apparently on his way to Del Rio. A track took him off the road and over a saddle in a range of low hills. He found himself a pleasant spot beside a fast-flowing stream and made camp for the night. He felt that he knew Buck Fullerton well enough to be able to predict his actions.

Old Buck would have stashed his treasure, but he would have hidden it somewhere that allowed rapid access in an emergency – and an opportunity to gloat over it. Buck had been a confirmed gloater in 'Nam and, thinking his partner was poisoned and unable to trouble him, had no reason to change his ways.

Roscoe began his scouting operation in the morning. He circled the town at a distance, covering the area within a five-mile radius of Main Street. Old Buck would not want to disappear for more than about half an hour when he went to drool over his treasure.

The area was full of caves; much smaller ones than the caverns in Carlsbad National Park less than a hour's drive to the south, but sheer numbers made up for lack of size. Roscoe looked at a few of them then admitted that searching

caves would keep him busy for the next hundred years.

He came across the abandoned airfield the next day. Lying in the flatter ground to the east of the town, it had been used for training pilots during World War Two and then allowed to return to Nature through neglect. Thirty years of severe weathering and scavengers had accounted for the perimeter fence.

Most of the buildings had been reduced to rubble. The site was four miles from town; up and down two hills and along bad roads. It was just the sort of place where Buck Fullerton would choose to hide something.

His former partner was more at home on a military base than crawling in and out of caves. Fullerton had never seen combat, no matter what the people of his home town thought. Roscoe was the one who had been shot at by the gooks; until he had been assigned to the stores complex while recovering from a troublesome shrapnel wound and seen the error of his ways.

Good Old Buck would have found some unlikely but easily accessible place to stash the loot on the abandoned airfield. Roscoe was so confident of his conclusion that he was prepared to invest some time in finding out where.

Roscoe drove the camper to the concealment of the low, wooded ridge to the south of the airfield, then he established an observation post at the crest of one of the hills. Bushes on the hill and higher ground behind it meant that he would not be sky-lined for the benefit of anyone looking his way from the airfield.

There was a great deal of open ground in all directions around the surviving buildings of the airfield. Anyone approaching them could be certain that there was no one in the vicinity before committing himself to an interest in any one particular building.

Roscoe's observation post was a mile from the remains of the administrative heart of the airfield. The control tower stood in isolation one hundred yards to the east of the ruins. Nothing remained of the hangars.

Anticipation of the reward to come gave Roscoe infinite reserves of patience. He had a portable television and a radio to keep himself amused, large stocks of food, beer and cigarettes, and a pair of the most powerful binoculars that the store had been able to supply mounted on a low tripod.

He watched the airfield from the shelter of a bird-watcher's hide, taking care to keep his binoculars and every scrap of bright metal in shadow to prevent revealing sun-reflections giving him away. An observation post to the south of the airfield would have eliminated that problem, but there was no cover within a reasonable distance.

Roscoe had supplies for a week. He was sure that his former partner would be unable to resist the temptation to gloat for more than seven days.

6. Search

Roscoe had been on his perch for four days when a cloud of dust approached from the west on a Monday morning. He began to lose interest when the vehicle stopped and he saw that it belonged to the town's sheriff's department.

The driver got out. He was wearing most of a blue uniform, a gunbelt and boots. He had left his jacket in the car and rolled up his sleeves. He was about average height and he moved like a young man. When he took off his cowboy hat to scratch his head, he showed short, black hair. Roscoe watched him turn a circle to scan his surroundings, then step over a broken wall and disappear in to the shell of a

crumbling building. Roscoe lit a cigarette and gave his attention back to the John Wayne movie on his portable television. The Japs were getting a real pounding in the Pacific.

Roscoe took a final pull on his cigarette, then dug a hole in the hard ground with his knife and buried the butt. He glanced at the buildings; and noticed that the car with the silver star on its door was still there. He began to take a look through the binoculars at frequent intervals. The fourth or fifth look showed him the semi-uniformed deputy getting back in to his car.

After crossing the runways and the invisible perimeter line, the driver turned right to pick up the road over the hills and back to town.

Roscoe watched the *Duke* slaughtering Japs for a while, then pieces started to fall in to place. He had been expecting Buck Fullerton to show up at the airfield. But if Good Old Buck had won the election, perhaps that had been the new sheriff prowling around the ruins, not a deputy.

Feeling very pleased with his own powers of deduction, Roscoe dismantled his observation post and locked everything in the camper. With a small pack of essentials slung over his left shoulder, he set off down the hill.

Twenty minutes later, he was stepping in to the building which Sheriff Fullerton had visited.

Roscoe had no immediate need of the torch in his pack. Most of the roof of the squat building had collapsed. The first room could have been a briefing room. All it needed was a lot of chairs, maps on the walls, a platform at one end, the usual blackboard and a mob of young, eager, World War Two fliers – who would be in their fifties now if they were still alive.

Beyond the gaping doorway, Roscoe came to what would

have been a corridor had the offices on the left still been standing. Five roofless shells remained on the northern side.

Roscoe spent half an hour poking about the building. Then he lit another cigarette and drained a can of beer to ward off dehydration on a morning that was becoming hotter and hotter. His confidence had taken a battering.

He was beginning to think that the man who had been in the building earlier had been a deputy sheriff after all, investigating a report of suspicious circumstances or just being nosy. If Buck Fullerton had hidden his treasure in that building, then he had managed an almost perfect job of concealment. Which made a lot of sense.

Roscoe crushed the empty beer can and tossed it towards the back of a pile of rubble, out of sight. He spent a further half hour searching without result. Feeling in need of reassurance, he returned to the camper and found a pair of scissors. He looked fairly respectable with his hair and beard trimmed. Changed in to clean clothes, he was unlikely to be recognized as the hippie who had visited the town the previous week. Roscoe kept admiring his reflection in the mirror as he circled to the road to the south of the airfield and headed in to town.

The posters and bunting had gone, confirming that the election had been held. Roscoe bought a six-pack of beer at a liquor store and asked how the election had gone. The Old Guard had received their marching orders. Sheriff Verain and a couple of elderly deputies had retired in favour of younger men.

Whistling cheerfully, Roscoe drove back to the airfield and returned the camper to his site near his observation hill. He jogged down to the buildings in a determined frame of mind. Two frustrating hours later, he was hot, dusty and aware that he had consumed nothing but beer and cigarettes in the

eight or nine hours since breakfast. The dry heat of the airfield was just as sapping as the humidity of Vietnam.

Buck Fullerton had spent ten or twelve minutes at most in the buildings. His hiding place had to be readily accessible. Roscoe had examined almost every square foot of visible wall and floor for removable panels. The answer had to be concealment by rubble. Roscoe started in the briefing room, then moved on to the first of the offices.

He found a clump of brick which refused to move and a thin crack in the concrete floor. Working rapidly, he followed the crack. It defined an area about thirty inches square. There was a trapdoor in the floor, and the bricks had been stuck to it as camouflage. Heart racing in triumph, Roscoe raised the trapdoor. His torch showed a square shaft, which opened out on three sides before it reached bottom, which lay about fifteen feet below the office. A steel ladder was set against a slot in the fourth side.

Roscoe slung his torch round his neck and started down, allowing the trapdoor to close behind him. The door was steel, faced with a layer of concrete and supplementary bricks to merge with the floor, and counter-balanced for ease of movement once it had been raised the first six inches with the aid of a hunting knife stuck in to the crack.

The shaft ended before a sense of claustrophobia could begin. Roscoe found himself descending the final seven feet to the floor of a square tunnel.

One arm ran in the approximate direction of the control tower. The other followed the line of the buildings to the east. A dark mouth opposite the ladder was another square tunnel, which headed towards the airfield. Roscoe scouted each tunnel – and found himself back at the ladder two hours later, none the wiser.

He had been unable to raise the trapdoor that would lead

in to the control tower. The tunnel that led towards the airfield was blocked by a cave-in twenty yards from the ladder. The eastern limb of the main tunnel would have given access to two more buildings if the trapdoors had worked.

After confirming that three of the four trapdoors were buried under more rubble than could be shifted in a quarter of an hour, Roscoe returned to his camper for a long-overdue meal. There was buried treasure is one of the tunnels. All that he had to do was find it.

Roscoe felt no sense of urgency when he returned to the tunnels in the late evening. If there was anything down there, he would find it; even if he had to spend a month on the search. He spent a long time checking the walls of the tunnel to the control tower and the shaft under it. Having eliminated one of the possibilities, he returned to the camper for a wash and a couple of aspirins for a tunneller's headache.

There was a slight draught in the tunnels, evidence of a little residual ventilation, but the air was dusty, stale and not intended for prolonged consumption; which explained why Good Old Buck had spent less than ten minutes gloating. Roscoe decided that he needed some scuba gear – just an air tank and the breathing gear – but Kansas was a long way from the sea.

The summer sun was high in the sky when Roscoe woke the next morning. He had recovered from his mild case of carbon dioxide poisoning, but he was not looking forward to another spell underground. The lure of treasure wiped away thoughts of a lazy holiday from his quest.

He walked out to the airfield with a flask of coffee, sandwiches and a six-pack of beer in his small pack. He had decided to continue his exploration in shifts; half an hour

below searching and half an hour above breathing. Having taken a whole afternoon to penetrate Buck Fullerton's first line of defence, he was not expecting rapid success with the second line.

7. Discovery

Roscoe had made a deliberate policy of not counting the number of brief shifts underground. The morning had been an endless and unproductive round of tapping the brick walls of the tunnel that ran to the east and probing cracks with the blade of a table knife.

He was thinking about coming up for air, lunch and a smoke. He was twenty yards in to a fifty-yard tunnel. His patience was lasting well and he was confident of success either that day or the next. He dropped the table knife in to his pack with the collection of other potentially useful tools and stretched his arms wide apart. A scraping sound froze him at the limit of extension.

Roscoe's hand leapt for his torch and plunged the tunnel in to temporary darkness; just in time for him to see a shaft of light appear, striking down from the entrance. A shape diminished the beam. Without stopping for thought, Roscoe fled down the tunnel on rubber soles, his torch beam dancing crazily in short bursts in front of him.

He reached the final ladder, doused his torch and raced upwards. Light from a camping lantern spilled in to his tunnel before he managed to get his feet in to the square shaft between the tunnel and ground level.

As shoes with hard soles started down his tunnel, Roscoe began to wish that he had brought his pistol, believing that Buck Fullerton had rigged up an alarm to warn himself of

intruders. Roscoe had been outsmarted. He was just bracing himself for a drop and a battle when the footsteps halted and the light stopped getting brighter. Unmusical whistling seeped along the tunnel; an unmistakable sign that Buck Fullerton was in a happy mood.

Moving slowly and carefully, Roscoe threaded the carrying strap of his pack around one of the rungs of the ladder and buckled it securely in place. He stuffed the torch in to the pack and emptied his pockets carefully. Then, cautiously, bracing himself against the sides of the shaft, he lowered his body and twisted in the confined space until he could peep in to the tunnel.

He caught a glimpse of a figure kneeling on the other side of the tunnel, about fifteen yards away, and a white-painted metal ladder. Then spasms of cramp began to stab at his right leg, forcing him to turn his attention to straightening it without losing his grip on the ladder.

Roscoe clung to his ladder and waited. Buck, he learnt, talked to himself when he believed that he was alone; or rather, he talked to the loot. As far as Roscoe could gather, his former partner had sold some jade and he was depositing the cash in his private safe. There was no alarm system. Buck had no idea that his secret had been penetrated.

Relief flooded through Roscoe. He fought a silent battle with an urge to pounce on Good Old Buck and choke the life out of him. His fingers tightened on the steel rungs of the ladder as he imagined them squeezing Fullerton's soft neck. But Buck had to die in front of witnesses so that everyone would know who was responsible.

Eventually, Roscoe heard a metallic scrape and a click. Then the light and the whistling moved away from him. He waited in perfect darkness for a long time. He recovered his torch and switched it on.

Wondering whether he was heading in to a trap, he hurried along the tunnel to the exit. His body braced for the impact of a bullet, Roscoe scrambled out of the shaft. When he peeped over a broken wall, Fullerton's vehicle had become a trail of dust cresting one of the low hills.

Glowing with pleasant anticipation, Roscoe slid down the ladder and trotted along the tunnel to retrieve his pack. He needed a beer to wash away the thickness in his throat. When he had drained one can, he opened another and lit a cigarette before turning his attention to the middle ladder.

The ladder was steel, once painted white, streaked with rust but still sound thanks to the cool, dry air of the tunnel. Its sides were fastened to the side of the tunnel with angle brackets.

A slot the width of the rungs and ten inches deep had been created in the brickwork behind it to make room for the feet of its users. Probing the back of the slot, Roscoe found a panel, which had been painted to look like brickwork and dusted with brickdust and powdered mortar while the paint was still wet.

Whistling Buck's tune, Roscoe manoeuvred the panel and then a collection of metal boxes past the rungs of the ladder. He stacked the boxes in the tunnel and replaced the panel, making sure that it looked undisturbed. The boxes were locked but some of them felt heavy enough to contain gold. Roscoe lugged them down the tunnel to the next ladder and rushed up to daylight.

He was out of breath and feeling quite nervy by the time he reached his camper. As he circled to the cleft in the hills, which would give him access to the airfield, he had to fight against an irrational fear that Fullerton would manage to spirit the treasure away before he returned.

Roscoe made six trips up and down the ladder with boxes.

After checking the tunnel to make sure that he had left nothing behind, he lowered the trapdoor for the last time and kicked a little dirt onto it to hide the almost invisible crack. He loaded the boxes in to the back of the camper.

Without trying to open even one of then, he started the engine and drove away.

He headed north, and then north-east to Roswell. He remembered his sandwiches at Clovis and ate them on the move as he entered Texas. He bought some petrol at Amarillo and continued across the square at the top of the Lone Star State to Oklahoma.

Around midnight, just across the Kansas state line, he turned off the road and made camp. After a meal, he went straight to sleep; with his service automatic under his pillow.

In the morning, Roscoe applied brute force to the boxes and tipped their contents onto his bunk. There was a sizeable fortune in gold bars, jewellery and cash; more than enough to take the new owner to a comfortable old age.

Roscoe had never been much of a gloater, but he enjoyed stacking the small, one-pound gold bars in to a low wall and counting hundred- and thousand-dollar bills.

Completing the first stage of his plan, Roscoe drove on across the Mississippi valley and over the Appalachian Mountains to the east coast. He had rented deposit boxes in Washington, Baltimore, New York and Philadelphia.

When he had divided the loot between the four banks, he sold his camper and took a late holiday with an attractive and available girl, whom he met in a singles bar. Roscoe had fifteen thousand dollars in his money belt.

The holiday would last until he got bored or he had spent the money.

8. Account Settled

Three weeks in to September, Roscoe put his girlfriend on a plane for New York and shaved off his beard. He bought some fatigues at a surplus store and found himself a retired jeep. Looking like a soldier from a distance, but just another civilian in cheap and durable clothing close to, he headed south.

Wondering what conclusions Sheriff Fullerton had reached on his disappearing loot, Roscoe visited a pool hall and two bars before finding the town bully and his pals. Picking a fight with them was the easiest thing in the world.

They called him *Soldier Boy* in a mocking tone. Roscoe called them a bunch of jerk-offs who wouldn't last five seconds in the jungle. The proprietor of the bar told the lot of them to go outside if they wanted to fight, and produced a shotgun to back up his argument.

Roscoe had no qualms about striking first and letting his punches go with full force. He had crippled two of the bully's friends before the others realized that the fight had started. He took a few blows, but he had been taught to look after himself by experts. The locals were just amateurs. Roscoe took great pleasure in leaving the imprint of his boot on the bully's face to make sure that he was remembered.

Leaving the bodies sprawled artistically, he returned to the bar for a victory drink. He made a point of letting everyone know that he was a Vietnam veteran while bragging about the exploits of his unit. Eventually, a representative of the sheriff's department turned up. Roscoe had been counting on the small-town mentality assuming that the stranger was in the wrong when trouble started.

Unfortunately, a mere deputy had turned up to arrest him, not Sheriff Fullerton. Roscoe allowed himself to be escorted

outside, apparently going quietly to be questioned at the sheriff's office.

When they reached the deputy's car, Roscoe knocked the deputy out, took his gun, fired two shots in to the air to scatter a few spectators, leapt in to his jeep and drove out of town shouting about *Charlie*. It was a performance calculated to build on the impression that he had created during his final months in the army. He was another veteran who had been subjected to a great strain and slipped over the edge.

A siren started after him as Roscoe turned onto the road to the airfield. He negotiated the two hills, then drove off the road and waited. As soon as the pursuing car came in to view, Roscoe shot out one of the tyres and put another round through the windscreen.

The car skidded off the road and ploughed in to a big rock. The driver was fumbling groggily out of the car as Roscoe reached it. He had hit the jackpot. Sheriff Fullerton was in the front passenger seat, looking equally groggy after bouncing his head off the windshield.

Roscoe pulled his former partner out of the vehicle, trussed him up and dumped him in the back of the jeep. The deputy came out of his daze and tried the radio. By the time he made contact with the sheriff's office in town, Roscoe had reached the airfield and he was heading for the buildings.

The deputy had a clear view of the jeep driving to the control tower. He found the field glasses in the patrol car's glove compartment in time to see the fugitive lug his prisoner up the steps to the upper floor of the control tower. Several distant cracks told him that the fugitive was shooting at something, even though the deputy was the only other living creature, human or animal, within miles of the control tower.

Roscoe had provided comforts for one on the upper floor

of the control tower, which had retained its roof but not a scrap of glass at its panoramic windows. He had a sleeping bag, food, beer and cigarettes. Buck Fullerton had his bonds and a piece of bare, dusty floor. The appearance of a dead man from his past had solved the mystery of his vanishing loot and filled him with terror.

After firing a few more shots at random, Roscoe sprawled on his sleeping bag and opened a can of beer. The forces of law and order would be closing in soon. He had his M-16 rifle, a .45 Colt automatic pistol, Buck Fullerton's Police Special .38 revolver and history on his side. The final phase of his revenge was running according to plan.

The State Police placed a cordon around the airfield and attempted to approach the control tower as the Friday evening began to darken. They were driven off by erratic rifle fire.

Buck Fullerton found out what had happened to his ex-partner since he had abandoned him full of a lethal dose of poison in Vietnam. Roscoe also treated him to an account of the second hi-jacking of their loot, his adventures with the girl from New York and his plans for future celebrations. Only the fate of Good Old Buck had not been touched on.

The army was called to the siege. The State Police had decided that it was a military problem. A former GI was causing all the trouble, and a bullet-proof vehicle was required if anyone was to get close enough to negotiate with the fugitive.

Daylight became a silvery wash from a full Moon shining out of a cloudless sky. Anything that moved on the airfield would be clearly visible to the fugitive. Roscoe was allowed to cat-nap through an undisturbed night.

The tank moved up at seven-thirty the next morning. Roscoe fired a few shots at it to remind the occupants that he

could pick off anyone who showed himself out of the protection of the armoured shell.

An army psychologist attempted to reason with him. Roscoe grinned at his gagged prisoner and raved. A dreadful certainty began to show in Fullerton's eyes when Roscoe screamed threats at the Vietcong and assured Good Old Buck that he wouldn't let them take him alive.

The game lasted for half an hour. Roscoe let the psychologist think that he had talked him in to a calmer frame of mind, then he exploded again.

He raved on about brainwashing, repeated his assurance to Fullerton, then he emptied the M-16 at the tank, shattering the loudspeaker attached to the turret. He hurled the empty rifle at the tank then drew his pistol and pulled the trigger until the magazine was empty.

The tank was parked on the eastern side of the control tower, on the opposite side from the stairs. When the psychologist started talking to him again with a bull-horn, Roscoe sneaked a glance at the buildings on the western side of the control tower.

He caught a flash of movement. Someone was planning to sneak up on him while the psychologist held his attention. Roscoe decided to go along with the scheme because it fitted in with his plan.

He reloaded the automatic pistol. The tank revved its engine for no apparent reason. Roscoe fired off a few more shots at it and grinned at Buck Fullerton to let him know that the end was near. Imagining an assault team scampering across from the administrative buildings, Roscoe began to fire at the tank with his automatic and Fullerton's pistol.

He emptied the automatic and opened his hand to allow it to fall over the sill of the gaping window and clatter on the control tower's concrete surround.

He was careful to preserve two rounds in the pistol.

The psychologist began to talk to him again in a semi-shout, telling him that he was safe and among friends who had driven the Vietcong away. Roscoe ignored him and went to sit beside Fullerton, grinning to tell Good Old Buck that the end was imminent. The stairs ran up the western side of the control tower to a door in the north-western corner. Roscoe and Fullerton were pressed against the wall in the south-western corner, waiting.

A morning breeze was gusting from the south. Roscoe smoked two cigarettes, keeping his hand moving to disperse the smoke and exhaling downwards in to eddies that rolled over the window ledge. The tank revved up its engine again and began to move with a clattering of tracks.

Roscoe flicked his cigarette butt across the bare wooden floor and tensed himself for action. He could feel someone sneaking up the steps.

He had almost run off the map. He knew what he intended to do, but the way he completed his plan would be a reaction to circumstances created by the other side.

Sunlight flashed from glass. Roscoe realized that someone had raised a mirror on a stick to look in to the control room. He loosed off a shot at the flash of light.

"They won't take us alive, Buck," he screamed.

Fullerton's eyes were full of terror. Roscoe fired through his heart. He had seen men survive a bullet in the head, but never a ragged hole through the heart. Fullerton's body leapt in agony and released the scream that the threat of death had held in check.

Roscoe looked straight down the barrel of an empty gun and pulled the trigger again. And again. And again.

He was aware of figures moving behind the gun. Roscoe continued to pull the trigger. The hammer rose and fell on

spent cartridges. A doctor jabbed a needle in to his arm. Someone eased the revolver out of his hand as Roscoe started to sink in to unconsciousness.

He could hear someone saying, "Jesus H. Christ!" over and over. And then he was in to part three of his plan.

When he woke from his drugged sleep, the doctors had the problem of convincing Roscoe that he was not dead and that he had not killed his friend, and tried to kill himself, to prevent them falling in to the hands of the Vietcong.

The only alternative that he would accept at first was that he had been captured by the North Vietnamese, which was why he met every question or attempt to reason with him with his name, rank and service number.

He was not expecting to be tried for the murder of Sheriff Roy Fullerton. The investigators would find just enough evidence of mental instability to start someone asking why Roscoe had not received psychiatric treatment before his discharge from the army. Guilt about the unpopular Vietnam War and guilt about the damaged survivors would work for him.

He would have to spend some time locked away in a VA hospital, staging a recovery for the benefit of the medical staff, but Roscoe had seen enough crazies to feel confident of being able to bluff his way through with a blend of confusion and hostility. The sacrifice of a year or so of his life for the right to shoot Buck Fullerton in cold blood and in public was a good trade.

He had paid off a score and he had a small fortune to look forward to when he got out. When there is right on neither side, the prize goes to the most ruthless predator.

▪ ▪ ▪

41. A Process of Elimination

The food processor looked sleek and innocent when Janice Layton raised a bright yellow dust cover. Her husband made vague approving noises, not quite sure what to say, and allowed Janice to take over with a catalogue of the new gadget's uses. Graham Layton had no idea at the time that he was looking at a device which he would learn to hate, and then to remember with a certain affection.

Janice's sense of values had been formed before galloping inflation and decimalization. She had a habit of translating new pence in to old money and going in to a state of financial shock. At Christmas, for instance, she had realized that she was putting half-crown stamps on the cards and she had trimmed the list by half.

But she had the strength of mind to overcome her inhibitions. She could see beyond the initial investment at the January sales to the potential savings.

Economy lay behind her purchase of a sewing machine and her evening classes in dressmaking. Prices at the green grocer had led to her replanting of their one-eighth of an acre of back garden with vegetables, soft fruits and dwarf apple trees. Janice had also felt able to buy a basic home computer to organize their lives and a small filing cabinet to store tradesmen's estimates.

Graham was not an artisan by nature. His parents had taught him that hands are for gripping pens and pencils during working hours, not tools. He had been steered in to a clerical job in his teens and he had worked his way up to

the lower levels of his firm's management structure as he approached forty. Strangely, his parents saw nothing wrong with do-it-yourself.

Janice had placed a set of tools on their wedding present list, and bought supplies of screws, washers and the little rubber plugs for ball-valves. When he had mastered simple jobs, she had encouraged Graham to buy an electric drill with a circular saw attachment and a hedge-trimmer. His latest power tool was an electric saw, which was portable, waterproof and could cut through anything from seasoned ash to zinc-coated steel.

Home decoration had been added to his talents, even though Graham would have preferred to pay professionals, even though that would have meant the sacrifice of one of their biannual foreign holidays. Janice disagreed.

They needed their winter and summer breaks. Janice enjoyed taking quotations from decorators and feeding them in to her computer so that it could subtract the cost of the materials used by Graham when he did the jobs and add the saving to a graph of the year's cumulative expenditure total. And anyway, Graham had conquered his fear of climbing a twenty-foot ladder to paint gutters.

Winter was a quiet time on the home and garden front. Graham changed the odd washer, kept the grids free of dead leaves and chopped away dead growth in the gardens, but he was allowed to spend most of his free time relaxing, gathering his strength for the spring offensive on the effects of weather and decay. Janice divided her time between the winter crops in the greenhouse and finding new things to do with her food processor.

By the time the weather was warm enough to allow paint to touch-dry in hours instead of a whole day, Graham had come to hate the food processor. He was fed up of a diet of

mush. He longed for crisp, whole vegetables and fruit instead of nourishing soups and easy-to-freeze purées. He had fantasies about real pieces of meat, which had to be hacked to pieces with a knife, instead of minced savoury fillings in pastries and pasta, which could be cut with a fork.

Her food processor allowed Janice to blend herbs from the garden with meat and vegetables to create new and exotic combinations of tastes. Graham began to forget the pure, unadulterated delights of fried steak, grilled pork chops, roast lamb and steak and kidney pie which contained discrete, identifiable pieces of meat instead of two flavours blended inseparably with half a dozen herbs.

He came to loathe the brief, busy roar of the infernal machine, and to wish that Janice would flush the latest mush straight down the sink. And he could never watch her clean the thing without imagining it coming to life of its own accord and whisking her fingers to bloody froth speckled with white sand-grains of bone.

Graham was a tolerant man – his friends went as far as dull and unimaginative. Ten years earlier, he had been attracted to Janice by both her looks and her ability to organize her life. Graham had been leading a minimal existence, eating convenience foods, relying on the pub and television for entertainment, and not bothering with holidays away from home because he had no idea there to start with the booking arrangements.

Janice had changed almost everything; mainly for the better, Graham was forced to admit. She had smartened him up and helped his career by making him look like management material. She had encouraged him to give up smoking by her own example.

She was a skilled cook, who could keep him well fed without putting on the extra pounds which seemed to cling to

some of his contemporaries. She had taken over their finances and eliminated Graham's wild swings from solvency to crisis. They had several thousand pounds put away in long- and short-term savings accounts. And they had seen most of Europe in summer and winter.

Graham's programmes of maintenance for their home and the car had caused disagreement initially, but Janice had made him realize that his misgivings were based on unwarranted pessimism about his own abilities. He expected paint to retain unsightly brush-marks, glued items to come unstuck and vital pieces to fall off the car while he was driving along the motorway at seventy miles per hour taking his wife to nurse her semi-permanent invalid of a mother.

Success had worked a quiet revolution in Graham's self-image. Some of his early repairs had failed but he had always worked out why and how to do the job properly. He had not learnt to enjoy do-it-yourself, but he could derive satisfaction from a competent job performed in the minimum time, and he remained amazed that Janice had seen such potential in him and that she had had the patience to develop it.

Realizing that he could do things for himself, he had even tried his hand at cooking when his wife was at her mother's, and he had attained a fair degree of proficiency without gadgets. In effect, he was back in his manual days of do-it-yourself: gaining experience, developing the confidence to follow a recipe and learning to deviate from the recipe to suit personal taste or when the cooking time or temperature seemed wrong.

The hated food processor drove him to heresy. As long as Janice handicapped herself with the mush machine, Graham began to believe, he was her superior in the kitchen. One small rebellion led to a full-scale mutiny when he continued his self-analysis in to other areas.

Graham Layton, when a bachelor, had been a fairly useless character. Janice had worked wonders with her husband. In fact, she had done too good a job. The pupil began to think about graduation. He had never been a man of strong emotions. Any love that he had once felt for his wife had become mere habit. And, as Janice had proved to him with smoking, he was capable of shedding bad habits.

One of his neighbours was hanging out washing then Graham approached his dustbin with a collection of tins. They chatted about the May weather and Graham mentioned that his wife was away again, looking after her mother. One of the old girl's imaginary diseases had flared up again.

After a wet week, he rang his mother-in-law. Janice's younger sister answered the telephone. Graham asked her when his wife was coming home. The conversation covered a lot of ground between 'she's not here' and 'she must be there!'

A baffled husband rushed round to the local police station to report his wife missing. As far as he knew, Janice had caught a train the previous Saturday. She had even telephoned him from her mother's home to tell Graham that she would be staying for a week; which explained why he had not reported her missing until the following Friday evening.

Detective Inspector Blythe was suspicious of husbands who lost their wives. Police inquiries soon established that Graham usually drove Janice to her mother's and that she had not used her local station on the day in question. Inspector Blythe visited Graham the next morning to have a look at his man on his home ground.

Graham was in the back garden, renewing the roofing felt on the shed, doing what the computer had ordered rather than worrying about his wife. Inspector Blythe dropped a

sweet wrapper in to the dustbin on the way to the back door. A collection of tins and packets told him that Graham was strictly an 'open it and heat it up' type, who would have no use for things like the mixer and the food processor in a well-appointed kitchen.

The computer confirmed that Graham had been servicing the car the previous Saturday. His wife had told him that she was perfectly capable of carrying her own bags to the nearby station. He had seen her for the last time turning the corner at the end of the road, and he had no witness to the alleged phone call from her mother's. In fact, everything that he had told the police had been based on assumptions and things that he alleged his wife had told him.

Further inquiries produced nothing. Like thousands of people each year, Janice Layton had apparently packed two bags and then just disappeared. She had left behind some clothes, a few bits and pieces and her computer with its maintenance schedules for home, car and garden, and list of clothes and accessories for their summer holiday.

Inevitably, malicious tongues began to wag. Some suggested that Graham had done away with his wife, even though he would be lost without her. It was well known that Janice was the brains of their partnership and Graham was the hands. Other gossips were sure that Janice had abandoned her dull husband in favour of a secret boyfriend.

None of their friends and neighbours had ever seen the boyfriend, but some could remember smelling cigarette smoke in the home of two non-smokers – always during the day, when Graham was at work or on evenings when he was out. Only Graham knew that his strong-willed wife had continued to enjoy the occasional smoke, just to prove that she could take tobacco or leave it alone.

Eventually, Graham Layton began to show an unsuspected

streak of character. He refused to say another word to the police. Between May and August, he had spent a total of fifteen days at the local police station, according to the log on the computer. The questions had narrowed in to endless repetition and patient attempts to force him in to inconsistency. Inspector Blythe knew that he had disposed of his wife.

It was easy to make fun of Graham Layton. He was an average non-entity with very little sense of humour. It was easy to see why an energetic and resourceful woman like Janice would grow tired of him eventually. At first, her friends were surprised that she had stayed with him as long as ten years and hurt by Janice's failure to tell them about her new life. As the period of silence grew, their suspicions deepened. It was one thing for Janice to reject her husband, but rejecting her friends was unthinkable.

His neighbours were thrilled and shocked when the police decided that they had grounds to carry out an intensive search of the Layton house. To Detective Inspector Blythe, it was the logical outcome of a process of elimination. If Janice Layton could not be found elsewhere, she had to be at home.

A team of detectives searched the house from roof to foundations, taking up floorboards, sounding walls and driving iron rods in to the dank earth beneath the house. They looked in to every cupboard and examined the junk under the stairs, which consisted mainly of worn-out appliances that Janice had retained to provide spare parts for their replacements. The detectives even unloaded the large chest freezer to examine the joints of meat.

Graham rescued as much as possible from the vegetable garden. His solicitor made a photographic record of the rest of Janice's planning and his hard work. The police were warned that they would face a claim for compensation based

on the records in Janice's computer of costs and predicted yields. Undeterred, they turned the back garden's eighteen hundred square feet in to a replica of a World War One battlefield.

They went down six feet, and all they found were a few large stones, the remains of a rockery. Both shed and greenhouse were searched and their wooden floors raised to allow further excavation.

The police were puzzled by the squares of plastic foam in the shed. Janice's computer told them the price of a replacement cushion for the settee, the cost of the slab of foam which Graham had bought and Janice had sewn in to the original cover, the saving over a ready-made cushion and added some ideas on uses for the good parts of the old cushion.

The searchers moved round the house to peel the turf off the lawn and dig up the rose beds. Graham watched them leave without saying 'I told you so'. The police had done him a favour, even though he couldn't tell them so. He had no great love of gardening and they had destroyed his gardens.

He posed for pictures and told the press how he felt about official vandalism. Gradually, the reporters lost interest in him. Graham knew that Inspector Blythe would be back if he turned up the slightest scrap of evidence, but he was confident that he had covered his tracks methodically. His late wife had set excellent examples for the student of planning.

Her computer had supplied the list of things to take to mother's. Graham had burned all fabric and plastic parts in the coal-fired central heating furnace. His wonderful electric saw had reduced all metal parts to convenient fragments, which he had scattered during his week of grace over a wide area. His waterproof electric saw had also sliced through bone in a bath full almost to the brim with water to prevent

saw-debris flying around; and reduced the body to convenient chunks.

Eventually, he added the food processor to the collection of junk under the stairs. It was just collecting dust in the kitchen, he was quite happy with the *Kenwood* mixer and in any case, the infernal machine's motor was running raggedly from too heavy use and the cutting blades were blunt.

He had discovered that a box of thick plastic foam muffles the roar of a food processor satisfactorily and stops it driving the owner mad when it is used more or less continuously over many hours. But Graham Layton had no further use for the food processor. It reminded him too much of his dear, departed wife.

Body in toilet charge

AN AUSTRALIAN scientist was accused in Tasmania of killing his wife, cutting up her body and flushing pieces down a toilet. Rory Thompson aged 41, appearing in Hobart court denied murdering his wife last September.

Manchester Evening News –
Monday, 13th February, 1984.

Wife 'butchered'

AN AUSTRALIAN scientist was accused yesterday of killing his wife, cutting up her body, and flushing pieces down a toilet. Rory Thompson, aged 41, appearing in Hobart criminal court, Tasmania, pleaded not guilty to murdering his wife last September. – Reuter.

Guardian –
Tuesday, 14th February, 1984.

42. Beyond Reasonable Argument

It was a sunny Thursday afternoon, early closing day in the medium-sized dormitory town and pay-day for some. The three men reached up to their knitted hats to pull down stocking masks as they crossed the small lobby between the bank's front doors and the inner swing doors. Two of them produced sawn-down shotguns from their sausage-shaped tackle bags. One of them fired a single shot, which crashed through the toughened glass screen at an unoccupied position and proved that they offered no protection from the heavy pellets.

The manager had no option but to open a door and allow the raiders to herd two customers in to the staff area. His instructions were quite clear: in the event of an armed robbery, the safety of his staff and any customers in the bank was to take priority. He was to activate the silent alarm to the police station, if possible, obey orders and attempt to compile as complete a physical description of the robbers as he could manager.

Working quickly and silently, the raiders loaded bundles of notes in to their tackle bags while their companion urged the staff and the customers in to a windowless store room. The shotguns disappeared in to the tackle bags. Having removed their stocking masks, the raiders drew and released deep breaths, grinned at each other and tried to stroll out of the bank looking like satisfied customers.

It was unfortunate that a young and eager police cadet entered the bank immediately after the robbery. He was

wearing an anorak over his uniform jacket because he was on a break and he had decided to nip out to pick up a cheque book. The stillness in the bank, an acrid smell of burnt powder and shattered glass told their own story.

The gang had parked the getaway car with some others, outside the showroom of a garage across the road from the bank. A young woman at a bus stop was perfectly placed to see a man dash out of the bank, pause and then shout at the three men because there was no one else in sight.

She watched with a stunned lack of involvement as one of the men at the car raised a shotgun and fired it. The cadet stopped dead from a run, then fell he backwards. People appeared out of nowhere and suddenly, the car had gone. Knowing that there was nothing that she could do, the young woman left the bus stop and hurried over to the still figure on the pavement. There was a lot of blood. She found out that the dead teenager was a police cadet when a chemist in a white coat unzipped his anorak.

A police car snatched to a halt beside the crowd. Someone pointed out the witness. More police cars and an ambulance arrived. Some preliminary information, based on the bank manager's descriptions, was broadcast to all units in the area. The witness who had seen the raiders' faces was rushed to the local police station to get the murder hunt off to a flying start; but things failed to work out as expected.

Detective Chief Inspector Chandler and his aide Detective Sergeant Moss were assigned to the investigation. It was their job to channel productively the violent emotions generated by the mindless slaughter of a cadet. They had been working together for four years and knew each other's methods well.

Rob Chandler was in his early forties, a solid, no-nonsense

type, who succeeded by covering his ground thoroughly rather than by taking short cuts. He knew that he would see very little of his family over the next few days; his two teenage sons and the patient wife, who had learnt to cope with family crises on her own.

Eric Moss looked much younger than his twenty-eight years, which could have a disarming effect on those who did not know about his ruthless streak. His divorce two years earlier had left him with a distrust of female motives. He continued to take an interest in the opposite sex, but he had resolved not to let another woman exert a significant influence on his life ever again.

Moss interviewed the witness while his superior organized the incident room to his own satisfaction, arranging for the logging, sorting, filling and condensing of incoming information. Carol Evans had been in the interview room for two hours when Chandler poked his head round the door and caught his sergeant's eye. Leaving a solid WPC propping up the wall and the expert struggling with his PhotoFIT kit, Moss stepped out in to the corridor. He was looking very annoyed.

"What's this?" demanded Chandler. He was holding a statement form in his left hand. He took a swipe at it with his right. "This is rubbish, Eric."

"You don't have to tell me," said Moss in a tight voice. "The more I try and get details out of her, the vaguer she gets. And that PhotoFIT's going to be a complete waste of time."

"What's wrong with the woman? Did she have her bloody eyes shut?"

"She doesn't want to help us, Chief, I'm sure of it. Wouldn't even have a cup of tea. Remember when the Russians shot down that South Korean airliner? And all

those left-wing politicians said they didn't have all the facts so they couldn't call them murdering bastards? She's acting like she hasn't got all the facts."

"In other words, you think she knows our murdering bastards?"

"Well enough to want to protect them, Chief."

"All right." Chandler drew back his cuff to look at a gold presentation watch. "Give her another ten minutes. If the Photo-FIT's still a load of rubbish, say thank you nicely and chuck her out."

"She's been making noises about wanting to go home for about twenty minutes."

"Get hold of one of the locals. Someone who really knows his way around. Then sit on her tail. See where she goes and who she meets."

"How long for?" asked Moss cautiously.

"Until relieved," smiled Chandler. "This is our only lead, Eric. All we know is we're looking for three men; average height, average build, age twenty to forty, with two sawn-down shotguns, disposed of by now, a white car of unknown year and make, dumped by now, and eighteen grand that doesn't belong to them."

"You don't have to tell me how thin it is, Chief. I really thought we'd get this one sorted fast."

"Maybe we'll come up with another witness, but they picked a good time for it. The afternoon of early closing day. Anyway, you get on with following her. I'll stir the locals up. Make them lean on all the local villains. Not that it'll take much effort.. The lad they shot was the star striker of their football team."

The crime rate in the area dipped dramatically as every police officer made an extra effort to question every known and suspected criminal. Heavy hints were dropped about

favours for anyone who offered useful information. The death of a police cadet was no greater tragedy than the death of a civilian, but a civilian has the option of turning his back on a crime. Reacting to the situation, the cadet had tried to do something and run headlong in to mortal danger. He had not lived long enough to learn caution.

A press conference was arranged. DCI Chandler put on an optimistic face and made the most of his scraps of evidence. Trying to rattle the fugitives, he began by saying that the police had descriptions of three men and concealed the fact that the descriptions were worthless. It was his policy to release one substantial fact at each press conference to create sense of a momentum and progress.

The stolen car used for the first leg of the getaway was found. Gambling that at least one of the gang did not have a criminal record, DCI Chandler told the press that a clear fingerprint had been taken from the vehicle. He kept another eye-witness in reserve for the next press conference.

A rigger replacing a rotting television aerial had seen three men arrive in a white Ford *Escort* and drive away immediately in a green *Cavalier*. Unfortunately, the witness had seen the three men change cars from above and from an acute angle. He had agreed in broad terms with the bank manager's descriptions of the men's clothing and their tackle bags, and he had been able to confirm Carol Evans' reluctant admission that the fugitives all had longish, dark hair. But he would be unable to identify the men if brought face to face with them.

Carol Evans, DCI Chandler learnt from preliminary inquiries, was twenty-five, single, fairly tall for a woman and a little on the skinny side. She lived alone in a council flat in a tower block a twenty-minute bus ride from the scene of the robbery. She worked in a mini-market fifty yards down the

road from the bank. She had lived in the area for five years and she did not have a police record. Nobody knew anything useful about her previous background. According to the detective sergeant who had carried out the inquiry, Carol Evans tended to keep herself to herself.

Two days after the robbery, DS Moss discovered that Carol Evans had unsavoury friends; or so it seemed initially. Moss was sharing a surveillance van with Detective Sergeant Merryman of the local force. Merryman was reserved, thirtyish, married to a doctor at the local infirmary and not too much fun to be with.

The detectives had watched the press lay siege to Carol Evans' flat, and trickle away when she refused to tell them how she had felt while watching someone blow a massive hole in an eighteen-year-old police cadet. Moss and Merryman were the only strangers in the area, as far as they could tell.

Carol Evans arrived at the tower block at five past two on Saturday afternoon after a morning at work. She plodded up three flights of stairs; the lifts were out of action again; and disappeared in to her flat. The detectives had parked fifty yards away, in a spot which gave them a good view of her front door.

As far as they could tell, she had been following her normal routine and had made no attempt to contact the bank robbers to reassure them. She did not have a telephone at home. If the villains decided to contact her, they would have to do so in person or by proxy if they wanted to leave no traces such as would be left by a threatening letter.

"Hello, hello! Now, there's a proper villain if ever there was one," DS Merryman remarked at two-twenty p.m.

DS Moss picked the binoculars off the dashboard and aimed them in the direction indicated by the pointing finger.

He saw a thickset, balding man of about forty. He lowered the binoculars quickly when the man's apparently casual inspection of his surroundings turned his head towards the van.

"Johnny Aimes," said Merryman. "Drives a van for a part-time fence. Only he's not fencing at the moment. We've been taking too much interest in him. Which can't be doing Johnny's pay packet any good."

"And guess where he's going," said Moss when the stocky figure appeared on the third-floor deck. "He's a bit old for our Miss Evans."

"I wonder if his wife knows what he's up to?" said Merryman. "She's letting him in."

Johnny Aimes left the flat seven minutes later. His face was dead white and his right arm was hanging limply at his side. He seemed to be moving in a daze.

"Doesn't look like he got what he was after," observed Merryman.

"Doesn't look happy at all," agreed Moss.

Aimes left the tower block, walking slowly and carefully, and set a course for a box-shaped, white-and-rust van. Merryman focussed the binoculars on it. "That's Reggie at the wheel," he said thoughtfully. "Johnny's kid brother."

"You stay here and keep an eye on the flat, " said Moss, starting the surveillance van's engine. "I want to find out where those two are going."

Moss reported to DCI Chandler an hour and a half later. "Bit of a rum do, Chief. Big brother Johnny's got a rather nasty broken wrist. The doctor at the casualty department said he's going to have a lot of trouble with it in the future. And he'll probably end up with arthritis."

"And what did the girl have to say about it?" prompted

Chandler through a billow of pipe-smoke.

"She denied he'd been there at first. Then she admitted he'd offered her fifteen hundred quid not to identify the blokes who shot our lad. That was the starting offer. So she told Aimes to get out, and when he wouldn't go, she threw him out on his ear."

"Breaking his wrist in the process?"

"According to the doctor, the injury wasn't accidental, it was inflicted deliberately. Something to do with the way it had been twisted instead of a clean break."

"Sounds like our Miss Evans knows how to look after herself," said Chandler thoughtfully.

"And she doesn't think she needs us. She won't make a statement about what happened this afternoon. She hasn't remembered anything more about Thursday and she also turned down an offer of police protection in case someone else drops in. She said she'll tell them what she told Johnny: she wants nothing to do with criminals."

"Or the police, either. Young Reggie Aimes sounds interesting. Why was his brother trying to buy a bad memory?"

"He's got two mates called Barrymore and Tripp, according to DS Merryman. Same sort of age, twenty-three or four, and they fit our descriptions."

"Such as they are. Well, I think we'd better take an interest in these characters. They've had plenty of time to cover their tracks but they may have missed something."

"You never know," said Moss in a carefully neutral tone. The chief inspector would not tolerate deliberate pessimism.

Reggie Aimes and his friends soon learnt that they were the objects of intense police activity. They were products of the modern age; unemployed and cynical with it. They had watched many a criminal gang disintegrate on television

when the standard police technique had involved telling the weakest member of the gang that the others had accused him of the murder to save themselves.

Aimes and his friends had agreed among themselves to tell their story and believe nothing the police told them until they were actually standing in the dock at the magistrates' court. According to their statements, they had been at Barrymore's home watching a film on videocassette at the time of the robbery. No one else had been in the house and no one had called during the afternoon.

As DCI Chandler had feared, by the time the police were able to ask for search warrants, the loot had been divided and hidden, and the shotguns had been returned to their supplier. The forensic laboratory found heavy powder tattooing on Joseph Barrymore's anorak, which was the same dark blue as the one worn by the bank robbers, but there was a wood at the end of his parents' back garden and farmland beyond it. Barrymore had a licensed shotgun and he helped to keep down the wood-pigeon population. He had been out shooting both before and after firing one shot in the bank and another at a police cadet.

After making their statements, the suspects were led in to the yard of the police station, one by one, and told to stand in line with seven other men of similar age and build. They were not too surprised when Carol Evans looked at them and then walked right past them. Her wanting to have nothing to do with criminals clearly extended to helping to put them in the dock.

Detective Chief Inspector Chandler kept a close eye on his witness's face during the identification parades. Her behaviour helped to crystallize his suspicions.

"It was those three," he stated to Detective Sergeant Moss over a cup of tea in their office. "She looked out for them as

soon as she set foot in the yard, and she spent less time looking at them than any of the others. And the sickening thing is, if she won't stand up in court and say it was them she saw, M'Lud. They're going to get away with killing a copper. We haven't got enough evidence to get them in to court, never mind put them away. And I can't see any of them cracking up."

"I can't see what's up with her," frowned Moss. "They can't have threatened her since brother Johnny offered her a bribe and got his wrist broken. She doesn't know any of them or their families. Just what the hell is holding her up?"

"Has to be something in her past," decided Chandler, fighting an urge to ram the tobacco in to his pipe. "Why else would she have changed her name before she moved here? You keep things ticking over, Eric. I'm going to see that I can find out."

DCI Chandler returned to the office at the end of a long day. It was Thursday again. One week had gone by since the robbery and the fatal shooting. He had been to Carol Evans' flat to confront her with what he knew. The brief meeting had cast him in to a state of profound depression. He collected DS Moss and headed for the pub in a side street near the police station to share his findings.

Six years and two name changes earlier, Carol Evans had been raped on her way home from a party by a man who had taken a fancy to her on a bus. She had managed to get home after the assault, and she had called the police.

"The idiots who answered the call got off on the wrong foot right away," said Chandler, keeping his voice down to an intimate murmur in the moderately crowded pub. "The girl hadn't put up a fight, you see."

"Too scared to resist?" suggested DS Moss.

"Something like that. Of course, they asked her if she hadn't had a drop too much at the party and asked for it. And the WPC on the case just hung about looking bored while the girl was having a medical examination. Then she kept asking Miss Evans what she had done to encourage the bloke while she was taking her statement.

"They kept her hanging about all night, and they didn't even give her a lift home. She had to phone her dad. And he'd just got her home then a car turned up to take her back to the station to see some wooden-top inspector.

"According to her father, this character gave her a cup of coffee, probably to try and keep her awake, told her they'd got the man and then started to tell her horror stories about what the defence counsel would do to her in the witness box. Well, she was nineteen, she'd been raped, she'd had a sleepless night with a bunch of cold-blooded coppers and she was worn out. And there was this nice man telling her she'd go through hell if she didn't drop the complaint."

"So she did? And the bloke got away with it?"

"Right in one." Chandler drained his whisky glass and signalled to the barmaid for refills. "The whole family was angry for a while and they said a lot of rude words about the local force; because they'd kept the girl away from them and she'd realized, when she'd had a bit of sleep and calmed down, she should never have let the matter drop."

"She could have gone back and said she wanted to press charges."

"Except she realized all the chopping and changing would work against her in court."

"Leave a jury not knowing what to think? Did she say maybe and did the bloke take that as a yes?"

"Something like that. Anyway, six months later, she moved away and changed her name. Couldn't stand every-

one trying to be nice to her all the time. Then she became Carol Evans and moved here. Her parents were quite glad to hear she's all right, even if it was a copper brought them the news of where she is now."

"I'm surprised they let you in the house, Chief."

"I spent about ten minutes on the doorstep. Cheers, love." Chandler passed money across the bar to pay for two more large whiskies. "So that's our star witness. According to her dad, she wouldn't cross the road to pee on a copper if he was on fire."

"No way we can get the parents to talk her round?"

"They wouldn't waste their breath."

"So we're stuck?" said Detective Sergeant Moss. "If we don't turn up any more witnesses or forensic, and Aimes and his pals won't talk, the one that killed that cadet goes free?"

"Six years of regretting letting herself be talked in to dropping the charges against the bloke that who her," said Detective Chief Inspector Chandler, trying for a philosophical tone. "Six years of hating the people who should have helped her and didn't. Now's her chance to get back at the force."

"Someone should be able to talk her round, Chief. Make her see that cadet got just as rough a deal as she did."

"Oh, we'll have a try, Eric. But the trouble is, there's no arguing with honest rage. It looks very much like we're going to lose this one by an own goal."

▪ ▪ ▪

43. The Hi-Tech Con-Trick

I never tell people what I really do for a living: not because I'm ashamed of my job, more for security reasons. I work as a confidential courier, someone whose life is all dash and delay; rushing between connections, then spending hours just sitting on trains or planes.

The job is not to be confused with that of a bonded courier, who carries valuable objects. I offer a speedy and reliable delivery service for business papers and computer discs – items of little intrinsic value. The need for security arises because I sometimes carry material of interest to industrial spies or insider traders.

I suppose the job can appear slightly glamorous on the surface with all the travel to foreign parts. Being in transit loses its glamour very quickly if you do it every day of the week. Taxis, trains, airliners and cross-Channel ferries can become very boring if you have to spend hours on end wearing out their seats with your bottom.

If you don't believe me, try making deliveries and collections in three European capitals in the same day, knowing that you have to be back in London before the close of business. There is also the hassle of trying to talk yourself past obstructive customs officials; especially in southern France or anywhere in Italy. Plus a fireworks display from the boss if you exceed your monthly allowance for sweeteners, as bribes are known in the trade.

The main qualifications for my job are infinite reserves of patience, plus low cunning and an ability to look on an obstacle as a challenge to your ingenuity. A good knowledge

of French, German and either Italian or Spanish also helps to bore holes in official brick walls.

Every job has its perks, however. I'm never short of a duty-free bottle or carton of cigarettes; if I don't have to leave them somewhere, accidentally on purpose, as a sweetener. I am also a very well-read person.

A three-hundred-page book fills an average day's travelling and hanging about. *War And Peace* kept me going for a week; both times I read it.

The job also strands me in interesting places. From time to time, travel arrangements break down or a customer wants to think about a contract or some other information overnight. I prefer to be stranded in a city which has a large casino within easy reach of my hotel.

I'm not a gambler. I have more respect for my salary than to place it at the mercy of a scheme that favours the house. But a great many casinos offer free drinks to the customers and the chance of a cheap evening out.

My usual routine is to buy about fifty pounds' worth of chips and to carry them between points of interest until it's time for me to return to my hotel to prepare for the usual early start. Then I cash in the chips.

I have three or four free drinks, and a snack at the buffet if one has been provided, and watch the high-rollers in action. I share at second-hand the joy of winners and the depression of customers who look as if their next stop will be the terrace with a revolver.

A reckless urge to gamble does overcome me occasionally. I surrender to it by making small bets on red or black at roulette. I make a small profit sometimes. If luck is against me, I am careful to make sure that my evening out never costs me more than about ten pounds.

My visits to casinos give me a chance to try out roulette

systems; but only for fun. I started my career as a confidential courier in my middle twenties. Over the last ten years, I must have been offered two dozen infallible roulette systems, including Roland Vane's, but more of that later.

Each system was entrusted to me in confidence. None worked consistently or profitably. The theoretical losses always grew and grew as I played the system mentally and kept a record in my notebook.

And yet, I know that it is possible to beat the house at roulette. Every wheel has a slight imperfection, a bias which causes the ball to favour one part of it. Anyone who has visited the casinos in the South of France will have seen the old ladies clutching their list of the numbers which a particular wheel has produced.

They use the lists to determine which numbers come up more often than random chance predicts. Over a period, working with small stakes, they manage to make enough profit to live from day to day. The casino managers know this, and if the place becomes crowded, they make room for customers more likely to lose by sending the old ladies packing with an average day's winnings.

I could never use their system. My mind is just not geared to solving that sort of puzzle. But I met someone who could through my work: Roland Vane.

Roland is an information expert, a man attuned to the computer's capacity for grinding a large mass of data down to graspable solutions to problems. He has no real understanding of how computers work. He just accepts that they do: in much the same way that I trust an airliner to take me to my destination without knowing anything about aerodynamics or the inner workings of a jet engine.

Roland describes himself as a human interface between problem and programmer. He has a talent for divining the

type of data required to solve a problem and the essence of the style of treatment needed. He was also far-sighted enough to marry Marjorie Bighton, a computer programmer, when they left university in the late Sixties. Their consultancy is a family business in the most democratic sense.

I met the Vanes in connection with a job which they were doing for a firm in Nice. We may be in the age of transferring information by bouncing it between ground stations and satellites, but such signals can be intercepted and computers can beat any code or scrambler. For absolute security, there is still nothing to beat an anonymous bloke like me on a scheduled flight carrying documents or recordings in his flight bag. Our business thrives on paranoia.

Knowing what I carry is not a necessary part of my job. My orders were just to deliver Roland's packages to the French client in Nice, and to take a receipt and a reply back to London the following morning. Roland was always sitting around their suite of West End offices, not doing very much, when I arrived to pick up the packages for Nice. On the third trip, he asked me what I do for entertainment on an overnight stop. I mentioned my cheap nights out and the old ladies who make a living out of roulette.

At the next pick-up, Marge presented me with what looked like a pocket calculator. In fact, it was a roulette computer; a cousin of the small, specialist computers which can calculate exotic things like planetary positions for horoscopes and biorhythm data to work out how you're supposed to feel.

According to Roland, all I had to do was stand beside a roulette table, feed winning numbers in to the computer and wait for it to calculate the bias of the wheel. Eventually, it would give me a group of numbers on the wheel with a winning edge.

My usual hotel in Nice is in the area to the east of the Avenue de la Victoire but not quite in the Old Town, which can be a bit rough and tough. I set off on a round trip of two hundred and seventy kilometres to collect a package from Toulon. There was a lot of hanging about involved, but I managed to get to the casino nearest my hotel by half-past seven in the evening.

By nine, I had had enough of pushing buttons. Roland had warned me that it would take some time to collect a large enough sample of data to calculate the roulette wheel's bias. The trouble was, the computer kept picking a block of eight numbers around the wheel's rim, and then changing its mind! I concluded that either I was doing something wrong or the program had a bug.

I had been getting significant looks from the staff of the casino, which seemed not to attract little old ladies with printed lists. Serious gamblers were allowed to scribble away in their notebooks and use a pocket calculator. I saw one man turned away when he tried to set up a briefcase-size, personal computer at an adjacent table. The staff seemed not to realize that I had a computer that looked like a calculator – for all the good it was doing me.

I put the useless computer in my pocket, helped myself to my fourth free drink and moved to another table to find out how my unaided luck was running. I won two hundred francs, then lost three hundred. Having reached my limit of losses, I was just about to slide off to cash my remaining chips when the man beside me just keeled over. He very nearly knocked me to the ground too.

Most people thought that he was drunk. I knew better because I had heard the elderly Yank refuse a free drink, telling the waiter that his doctor had forbidden anything stronger than tonic water in case it affected his pacemaker;

which doesn't make a lot of sense if you think about it; which I didn't at the time.

Serious gambling resumed as I helped the Yank's son to carry the old man to an office. Trays of drinks were in circulation when I returned to the salon. The punters had already forgotten the moment of drama. I helped myself to another drink as a reward for my public-spirited gesture and watched one of the notebook-set enjoy some success with his system as my deadline for an early night approached.

After about ten minutes, I saw the elderly Yank leave the office with his son, looking healthy enough. In fact, the pair of them looked quietly pleased with themselves. I decided that I, too, had had enough of the casino for one night.

Roland and Marge Vane were baffled when I told them the next morning that their computer didn't work. They were sarcastic a fortnight later, when I turned up to collect another package for Nice. They had given their computer several successful field trials; the latest at the weekend just gone in Atlantic City, where they had been attending a conference on information technology.

I put the blame for the computer's failure on their inadequate instructions. They mocked the thought that they could be incompetent as I glanced through some photographs taken at the conference. Then I stopped at one of the pictures. The delegates had attended one of the dinners in silly hats. I had spotted a familiar face under one of the silliest.

The elderly Yank, who had collapsed at the casino in Nice, was holding a glass of red wine in a toasting position. I pointed out the alleged abstainer. The Vanes knew him. Fred Jefferson the Third, they assured me, did not have a heart pacemaker and he had no inhibitions about drinking. I left for Nice in a state of bafflement.

I returned to the Vanes' offices the following morning convinced that someone was pulling my leg. I had wasted two solid hours pushing numbers in to their computer in the casino near my hotel. The computer had been just as indecisive as before. The Vales just grinned when I reported another failure. Then they told me about a recent trans-atlantic phone conversation with Fred Jefferson the Third.

Fred had also designed a roulette computer for Scotty, his son, who had taken it on a trip to Europe. He had done very well until he had reached the casino near my usual hotel in Nice. Betting with all the confidence of a man who knew that he had a winning edge, he had dropped a bundle.

Scotty's reaction was to squirt the contents of the computer's memory by phone to Fred. After analysing the sequence of numbers on a much bigger computer, Fred decided that the bias of the roulette wheel was changing constantly. It was being controlled in some way.

Fred promptly grabbed some sensitive testing equipment and hopped on a flight for France.

He soon discovered that each of the casino's roulette wheels had its own computer. Two explanations came to mind. The slightly innocent one was that the management was recovering the house edge from people with computers disguised as ordinary calculators. The sinister explanation was that the computer was being told which numbers were being backed heavily to ensure that they never came up.

I met Fred while he and his son were getting their own back. While Fred was 'recovering' from his collapse in the office, Scotty told the casino's manager that the same thing had happened before in an American casino, which had been closed for rigging the roulette wheels. The management team had been sent to gaol not only for cheating, but because a stray signal from one of their computers had interfered with

a customer's pacemaker, placing his life at risk.

An underling was sent to cash Fred's unused chips; five hundred francs' worth. He left the office with fifty thousand francs, which more than made up for Scotty's losses. The manager suggested that if M'sieu's health was so delicate, it might be unwise to return.

When the Vanes completed their contract, my regular overnight stops in Nice ended. They were still modifying their pocket computer to make it corruption-proof when I lost touch with them. My occasional visits to casinos continue; but always for the three drinks and to watch others playing. People still offer me systems. Some even try to charge me for them. I still try out the free ones, without betting, and report their inevitable failure to the creator.

In my experience, the only people who make a living out of roulette are casino employees and the patient old ladies. In fact, I'd advise anyone who wants to try their luck to keep an eye out for little old ladies. If they are making a living by working out a roulette wheel's natural bias, them nobody is messing about with it.

Of course, you have to be sure that the little old ladies are genuine, not actors employed by the casino. The trouble with the Computer Age is that the world we think we know can be changed radically, but so subtly that we ordinary mortals can't tell if we're still playing by the old rules or a completely new and undisclosed set.

That's one reason why I prefer to watch and enjoy the free drinks when I visit a casino. I leave the playing to losers and the experts: the computer-literate and the little old ladies with their printed lists of numbers.

▪ ▪ ▪

44. Mistress of the Dance

1

Ivor Jones paused at the edge of the paved area in front of his rented house and held his breath. A French lorry, recently landed from Roscoff in Brittany, roared past in a cloud of acrid fumes. Jones exhaled slowly as he crossed the road to the steps down to the beach. He flinched when something hit the tarmac of the lay-by with a distinctive, cracking splat!

The gull orbited until he was out of the way, then landed to eat the living flesh exposed through the crack in the crab's shell. Recalling the indignation of a man who had lost his rear window when a gull had bombed his car by mistake, Jones was grinning like an idiot when he passed the woman on the Cornish beach. She smiled a cautious reply to the grin. He walked on a few paces, then stopped.

On a fresh, autumn morning, the tide was half-way out and the sun had been rising through an insulating haze for half an hour. A light, southerly breeze from the sea was blowing the woman's long, blonde hair across her face, but the reason for her slightly unsteady progress was her high-heeled shoes.

She was wearing a long, bright red, evening dress, and a lace shawl around her shoulders. She looked as if she had just come ashore from an all-night yacht party. Three small boats were undulating on the long, Atlantic swell, but they were all working boats, not pleasure craft.

Jones carried on walking towards the low, September sun.

It was part of a personal code of discipline, established on his first morning in the area. If he went for a walk, he had to reach the shelf of rock that jutted out from the cliffs half a mile to the east of the house. Jones liked to have a specific objective when he set himself a task so that he would know when he had completed it.

The sea had carved a much deeper bay beyond the shelf of rock. Jones counted eight joggers on the sends in front of Alviney, obeying their personal code of discipline. He led a fairly sedentary life, but he preferred to walk and to take in his surroundings when he took exercise. Joggers tended to adopt a fixed, glassy stare either straight ahead or at the ground immediately in front of their striped trainers.

The woman in the red evening dress was sitting on a polished boulder by the steps when Jones turned back. She had trapped her hair in a head-scarf. She was looking out to sea, her left hand above her eyes to shield them from the climbing sun, watching the small boats. She glanced towards Jones as he approached the steps.

Sunglasses with large lenses shaded from dark brown to clear hid most of her face. All that Jones could see was a firm jaw and a slightly petulant mouth with bright red lipstick, which matched the dress and her shoes.

"Nice morning," remarked Jones, returning a bright smile.

"Yes, I just had to come out for a drive, and the sand looked so inviting." There was a trace of a foreign accent in the woman's voice, but not enough to allow Jones to identify it. Just the occasional word was affected.

"We seem to be doing rather well now, after that wet fortnight. I wasn't really sure about the forecast of an Indian summer."

"Yes, it's even warmer than before the rainy spell."

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed until next week. They say

the first two weeks in October can be as good as summer around here if they really try."

The woman held out a hand. After a moment, Jones realized that he was supposed to use it to help her to her feet, not shake it. The hand was dry and slightly chilly, and very little effort was needed to bring its owner to a vertical position. A dozen steps raised them ten feet to a gap in the post and rail fence. The treads were made of old railway sleepers, which were worn smooth and rounded by winter storms and many feet. Notices at top and bottom, erected by the local council, advised users of the steps not to do so unshod because splinters.

"That your car?" said Jones at the top.

"Yes, I suppose so." Ownership of the dark blue MG sports car seemed not to be a reflex. The vehicle looked clean and polished, and the chrome was rust-free even thought there was no date-letter in the registration number.

"I suppose these were built to last." Jones was between cars. The last one had been an ordinary *Escort*, which had been written off by a runaway lorry. He had been away from the car, shopping, at the time but memories of the twisted wreck still intruded in to his dreams, three months later.

"My husband bought it for the registration number. For his initials. EMD. Peter says he could have bought two more for the amount of money he's spent on it."

Jones glanced at her left hand as the woman was getting in to the car. She was not wearing a wedding ring.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere?" The woman started the engine. It purred confidently.

"Hardly worth it. I live just across the road." Jones gestured to a two-up, two-down stone house with white windows, black drainpipes and a verdigris roof.

"How very convenient for the beach. I . . . Oh, hell!"

Jones jumped back as the MG's engine roared up to a brash shout and the car rushed off the lay-by and onto the coast road, frightening the driver of an electric milk-float in the process.

Something crunched under his heel. Jones had trodden on part of a crab's claw. The rest of the animal had been reduced to just scattered, inedible fragments. He waited until an executive-bracket Mercedes had purred past, then he crossed the road, wondering what the panic had been about.

He had had a brief encounter with a married woman of twenty or thirty; the sunglasses had made impossible a more accurate estimate of her age. She was impulsive if she went for an early morning drive in her party clothes and a walk on the beach in totally unsuitable shoes. She lived in the area if she knew what the weather had been like before the wet spell.

She was adventurous if she stopped to chat to a thirty-five-year-old stranger as if she had known him for years. She was reckless if she offered the stranger a lift on a quiet stretch of road. She was also a bit of a mystery if she was driving her husband's car but not wearing a wedding ring.

A waist-high, stone wall, ten yards from the house, separated it from the road. There was no pavement on the landward side. Two wooden gates had once filled the gap in the wall. They were in the back garden in an advanced state of decay.

The estate agent had described the paved front garden to him as 'convenient off-road parking', which made up for the lack of a garage. Jones thought it made the house look like a café, which had closed its outdoor section for the winter. Front windows made up of five-inch panes, net curtains and the ornamental black hinges on the dark brown front door reinforced the image.

The door opened in to the kitchen to prevent heat loss from the adjacent living room in winter, and to protect the carpet from drips during wet weather. An orange light was glowing on the silent coffee percolator. His walk along the beach gave it more than enough time to brew six cups. Jones filled a mug and took it in to the living room. The toaster, butter, marmalade and sliced bread were on the dining table, beside a collection of printed pages.

Officially, Jones was on a three-week holiday in Cornwall, but he had taken a free-lance job with him. Having carried out some of the research for a long work on the American Revolution, he had been offered the chore of compiling an index. The payment offered for ploughing through over 1,300 pages of a proof copy had been too good to refuse. He was planning to invest the fee, and the payment from the haulage firm's insurance company, in his next car.

He lowered slices of bread in to the toaster and thought himself in to a working frame of mind. He was making his master list of people, places and events in longhand in a 200-page, A4 notebook, allowing one line for each entry and its proof page-number. The final sorting process would be carried out on his computer, but a fundamental mistrust of technology had persuaded him to store his basic information in a form which could not be erased or lost as easily as material entrusted to a computer's memory.

It was the last Tuesday in September. He had arrived on Sunday to find the house well stocked with food, as promised. The book was 1,322 pages long. It represented 88 pages per day over 15 working days, or just 70 pages per day if he included the two weekends. He had managed 51 pages on Sunday, and 123 on Monday.

Getting ahead of his programme was just routine insurance against delays caused by unforseen circumstances.

On Friday morning, after breakfast, Jones flagged down the bus for a ride of just over a mile in to town. There was an ancient *Lambretta* in the garden shed. The tyres looked all right, there was a valid tax disc taped to the windscreen and some petrol in the tank. The engine had cut out abruptly within seconds of his kicking it in to life. After some poking and prodding, Jones had noticed that the fitting that clipped the high-tension lead to the top of the spark plug had disintegrated. A replacement was top of his shopping list.

He had seen a little of Alviney while carrying two heavy cases from the station to the bus stop and while waiting for the bus. The friend who had told him about the house on the Cornish coast had described the nearest town as half-spoilt.

The sea front was a sweep of boarding houses, hotels and tourist traps two streets deep. Then came a belt of original dwellings for permanent residents spread over about a quarter of a mile. Newer holiday villas and large houses looked down from the hill behind the town.

Cliffs rose steeply out of the sea at both extremes of the bay. Pale sand became ragged rocks. There was a lifeboat station at the eastern edge of the town, with a long slip-way running out in to the water. Looking like a white-painted castle on the eastern point of the bay, the lighthouse seemed to hang on the edge of a dark cliff.

Jones had waited until after nine o'clock to be sure that the shops would be open. There were people about in Alviney but the sea front was hardly crowded. One advantage of taking a holiday at the end of September was that children were back at school and families back at home. Alviney was in the process of shutting down to a winter tick-over, but Jones still found queues at the check-outs in the supermarket.

There was a petrol station on the sea front. Scooter parts had to be bought at the proper garage in the old part of the

town. Feeling like a scout on a reconnaissance mission, Jones followed directions in to the residential area. A figure in black-streaked overalls was doing something under the bonnet of a dark blue, MG convertible when he found the garage. Jones pushed through the wire-reinforced door to the office and lowered his bag of shopping with a grunt of relief. The strap had been cutting in to a shoulder protected only by an orange sweatshirt and a light anorak.

"Hello, we meet again," smiled the blonde owner of the MG.

"Hello," smiled Jones. "Having transport problems too?"

"Just a spot of tuning-up. Edward, my husband, brought it here for so long, the car just turns in of its own accord if it's feeling a little off colour."

"Can I help you, sir?" said the teenage girl behind the counter.

Jones tried to explain his problem and produced the remains of the defunct part. Showing off her knowledge of the subject, the girl asked him for details of the model of scooter and the year, then disappeared in to a stock room.

The mechanic used his foot to open the office door because he was wiping his hands on a piece of rag. "I think that should do it, Mrs Durney," he said. "The mixture was a bit rich, and it was clogging your plugs up."

"Ah, good!" smiled the blonde. "How much do I owe you?"

"Just the tenner for the petrol to a regular customer. Help you, sir?" the mechanic added to Jones.

"I'm being done, thanks," said Jones. He had just realized that Mrs Durney's accent was French.

"Thought we'd got one." The teenage assistant emerged from the stock room with a dusty cardboard box. "It's the last one."

Jones and Mrs Durney settled their bills. She put on her large sunglasses in the watery sunlight of the forecourt. Jones had been slightly disappointed by an uninterrupted view of her face. She was in her thirties, around his own age, and not as good looking as he had expected: but he was old enough to know that his imagination had a tendency to run away with itself. Mr Durney had married an attractive enough woman, who dressed well and who had kept a nice shape.

"Could I give you a lift home now?" she asked, cutting across his thoughts.

"If it's not taking you out of your way too much. I'm Ivor Jones, by the way, English, despite the name."

"Marie-Claire D'Arné. Call me Claire." The name was French rather than English.

"Lived here long?" Jones settled himself cautiously on a warm, brown leather seat.

"About five years." Mrs D'Arné settled a neat, white hat firmly to contain her hair. She revved the engine, gave a thumbs up to the mechanic with all the suave confidence of a cinema *Spitfire* pilot and turned out of the garage. She moved smoothly through the gears. "It's all right in the winter, but most of the interesting people move away for the summer season."

"But you and your husband don't? Business, I suppose?"

"Edward can't. He died last year."

"Oh!" Jones was lost for words. He decided not to offer sympathy for a stranger. "Sorry about that." The apology managed to sound like sympathy just the same.

"No harm done. You weren't to know. Damn!" Mrs D'Arné dropped down a gear and made an abrupt right turn off the coast road. The MG leapt onto a narrow road, which curved up the flank of the hill behind the town. Jones began to wonder how quickly he could release his seat belt if the

car crashed and burst in to flames.

"We're going the long way round?" he shouted above the blare of the engine. Eddies from the slipstream were lashing his hair with what felt like enough force to tear it out by the roots.

The car slid round a bend, following an outcropping of the hill and tuning back towards the sea.

"That bloody man is following me again."

The car was curving to the right again before Jones could look back for pursuit, The MG leapt in to the air for a few yards at the top of the climb, then charged across a plateau to a gap in further hills. Jones thought that he caught a glimpse of the distinctive radiator grill of a Mercedes before dark rock cut off the view to the rear.

Bushy hedges lined the road as it began to descend. Mrs D'Arné shot across a blind junction, inches ahead of a tractor with a huge trailer. Two rapid zig-zags later, she slowed dramatically and slid through a left turn. She completed three right-angle turns on the loose surface of a cleared area, and stopped facing a hedge. A black shape rushed past on the other side of a thick barrier of yellowing leaves, red berries and dark thorns.

Mrs D'Arné reversed, slid to a halt and aimed the MG at the gap in the hedge. Jones had a brief impression of a long, low building and an assortment of vehicles, then the car was slowing for a sharp right turn out of the café's car park. Mrs D'Arné began to retrace their diversion at the same break-neck pace.

"The man in the Merc," shouted Jones as they negotiated the junction without incident. "Does he do it often? You seem used to losing him."

"All the time," called his driver with a laugh.

"Can't you get the police to warn him off?"

"It's not worth the effort. I'd rather make a fool of him every time he tries it."

Jones shut up. He was afraid of distracting his driver. She seemed extremely competent, but the margin for error was extremely small. An unexpected left turn took them away from the road down to Alviney.

Jones told himself that he was in no great hurry to get back to the American Revolution anyway. Hedges gave way to stone and brick walls with solid gates. Most of the houses were so far back from the road that nothing of them could be seen from a low sports car.

"That's where I live," called Mrs D'Arné.

Jones received an impression of white gates between stone pillars and the number 27 in gold. He had found that if he sprawled in his seat with his knees against the dashboard, he was out of the full rush of the slipstream. A winding descent told him that they were going back to the coast road.

Mrs D'Arné made a fast stop on the lay-by at the steps down to the beach, scattering the gulls around the large, concrete waste bin. Jones had just enough time to get himself and his shopping out of the car before she rushed on, eyes on the road but waving back at him with her left hand between gear changes.

Jones watched the road from his living room window for the five minutes required to ease the tangles out of his naturally straight hair. He saw a white Mercedes but there was no sign of the black one. Then he put the shopping away and settled down to work. Two hours later, he stopped for lunch. He had scanned 510 pages of the proof and he was well ahead of schedule.

After lunch, he fitted the new part to the *Lambretta* and decided to give it a road trial. A pair of goggles and an old crash helmet with a white leather finish were hanging in the

garden shed. Jones adjusted the interior fitting and the chin strap until the helmet was a comfortable fit. Zipped up in a light anorak, he buzzed out onto the main road and turned toward Alviney for more petrol.

He had not ridden a scooter since his early twenties, when he had zoomed in and out of London's traffic during a spell working for a messenger service. The road was empty and by the time he reached the outskirts of Alviney, he was batting along at the speed limit with most of his old confidence.

He had no clear destination in mind when he left the garage. After a tour of Alviney, he found himself on the road up the hill. Two false starts later, he arrived at a set of white gates and a gold number 27. On impulse, he stopped and pressed the bell.

A tough-looking man with overgrown black eyebrows opened the smaller of the double gates. He was around thirty, bronzed and wearing a tartan shirt, dark trousers with muddy knees and green wellingtons. He was holding his spade half way down the handle. He looked ready to use it as a weapon, if necessary.

"I'd like to see Mrs D'Arné," said Jones pleasantly, trying not to sound apologetic.

"Mrs Durney don't see nobody." The rebuff was delivered in a firm tone, which considered the matter closed there.

"Tell her it's Ivor Jones."

"I told you, she don't see nobody."

"Look, I'm sure she'd like to know I'm here. Do you think you could tell her?" insisted Jones.

"Who is it, Roberts?" called a female voice with a faint French accent.

"Someone called Ivor." The gardener managed to put both reluctance and derision in to his voice.

"Let him in at once!"

The gate opened wider with a calculated lack of haste. Jones ran the scooter along fifteen yards of brick drive and parked in front of a double garage. The house was of glazed red brick with bow windows at the front and twin white columns on either side of the front door.

The windows were gleaming white and everything else – gutters, drainpipes, front door – was royal blue. 1876 was carved at the centre of a block of sandstone set between the front windows. The house looked a fairly average seven up and seven down.

Mrs D'Arné waved from an upstairs window. "Meet you in the drawing room, on the right of the hall."

"Right!" called Jones,

The front door was standing open. Jones was not used to visiting houses in their own grounds, where the garden wall was the frontier with the outside world. He balanced the crash helmet on the seat of the scooter and brushed his hair in to place with his hands. He wiped his feet thoroughly on a large doormat in the porch before venturing inside.

The wallpaper in the spacious drawing room was the shade of green, which had been popular during Victorian times and achieved by the use of a compound of arsenic. Jones had always considered limed oak panelling tatty and decaying, but the D'Arnés did not agree with him. Mrs D'Arné was standing at the cocktail cabinet, transferring ice from a tray to a pineapple shape.

"Nice to see you again," she smiled.

"I was trying out the scooter," said Jones, "and I found myself on your road."

Someone carried out a throat-clearing operation as a light, high cough behind him. Jones turned and saw a small woman with grey hair and challenging eyes. She looked

about as tough as the gardener.

"Mr Paddon will be here in ten minutes, madam," she announced. "He has something to discuss with you."

"Inconvenient moment?" said Jones apologetically.

"Not at all," smiled Mrs D'Arné. "Thank you, Mrs Blake."

The housekeeper completed her visual inspection of Jones. Totally unimpressed, she swept out of the room. Mrs D'Arné put the lid on the pineapple, then gave Jones a conspiratorial smile.

"I think we'll go out for a drive," she said with the air of a schoolgirl proposing playing truant.

"What about your meeting?" said Jones. "I only looked in to find out if your shadow caught up with you again."

"It's nothing important. And no, he didn't."

Jones had never had the nerve to be so deliberately rude to someone, but Mrs D'Arné was determined to be out when Mr Paddon called. A small detail like the scooter was not going to stand in her way. The housekeeper could be heard using an electric mixer in the kitchen as they left the house.

The gardener was nowhere in sight. There was a red Toyota pick-up truck in the garage. It was equipped with a ramp and an electric winch, which helped Jones to load the scooter in to the back. He chocked it upright with convenient wooden blocks and lashed it securely in place. The gardener appeared out of the shrubbery as they reached the gates.

"Open up," called Mrs D'Arné imperiously.

"Mr Paddon will be here any minute." Roberts' slow, Cornish drawl contained an almost insulting note of patience.

"Open the gates, or I'll drive through them." Mrs D'Arné revved the truck's engine to underline her threat.

Roberts hurried slowly to obey the order. Jones got the impression that the well-used truck had acquired some of the

dents when its owner had proved in the past that she was not bluffing, The truck turned right out of the gates, heading downhill. As his view of Roberts was being cut off by a bend, Jones caught a glimpse of a black Mercedes in a wing mirror.

"They treat me like a silly child if I don't assert myself," remarked Mrs D'Arné. "Mrs Blake must have been on the phone as soon as Roberts let you in."

"Why don't you sack them?" said Jones.

"It's practically impossible to sack people these days, with all the laws on security of employment. And Peter would only hire two more exactly the same. I think of them more as gaolers than servants."

"They'd look right at home in the KGB. Who's Peter?"

"Peter Paddon, Edward's partner. He looks after the business now. And he tries to look after me too. I don't know why I put up with it."

"You could always disappear for a while to assert yourself. Shove some things in carrier bags so your gaolers don't realize you're going, then shoot off to a hotel for a while."

""I might just try that," said Mrs D'Arné with her conspiratorial smile. "Have you been to Hingle yet?"

"No, not yet."

"It's quite a pleasant spot."

They dropped the scooter off at Jones' rented house, then continued westwards along the coast road to the next town. Hingle was the quaint and slightly shabby home port of the only fishing fleet in the area and it had not been dressed up for the benefit of tourists.

Jones bought Mrs D'Arné a coffee and a cream cake at a sea-front café and told her a little about the life of a researcher, who worked for a not very big independent production company, which made drama and documentaries for television. He finished with the free-lance grind of

indexing 1,322 pages on the American Revolution for the sake of a car, which explained his presence in the area at the end of the holiday season.

After their snack, they took a walk along the sea front. The tide was in, butting gently against the foot of a concrete wall. A group of anglers had gathered to hurl lines weighted with huge amounts of lead out in to the waves. Jones had never believed that fish could be caught that way. He was forced to admit that he was wrong when one of the anglers reeled in a miniature shark as long as his arm.

Mrs D'Arné took him home when she had showed Jones a piece of unspoiled rural Cornwall. She had a distinct air of proprietorship, which clashed with her faint but discernible French accent. Jones decided to put in a couple of hours' work on his index before dinner. The doorbell rang as he was turning over to page 534.

The interruption was so unexpected that Jones went to the front window to make sure that he had not imagined the ring. A man in a maroon chauffeur's uniform, with rather too much black hair flowing out from beneath his peaked cap, was standing at the door. A black Mercedes was parked on the lay-by at the other side of the road.

2

As if sensing eyes on him, the chauffeur looked at the window. Jones went in to the kitchen and opened the door. He found himself looking at a stocky man with the face of a tough guy.

"Mr Paddon wants to see you," the chauffeur told him without preliminaries. His accent was local and his abrupt manner reminded Jones of Roberts, Mrs D'Arné's gardener.

"I'm a bit busy at the moment." Jones resisted an order instinctively.

"Mr Paddon is a busy man. He doesn't like people keeping him waiting."

"Well, all right, bring him over." Jones decided that it would be easier to give in than to waste time arguing with the hired help. He glanced at the Mercedes.

"I'm to take you to see him."

The car was empty. Jones began to retreat in to the house. "No, I'm busy now. It's not convenient."

The air rushed out of his lungs. Pain exploded through his body. Jones was in the back of the black car before he could realize that the chauffeur had doubled him up with a solid blow to the solar plexus, caught him on a broad shoulder and lugged him across the road like a side of beef.

Hingle's cup of coffee and cream cake started to come back. Jones offered no resistance. It was not his car. He would not have to clean up the mess.

The chauffeur was about to turn off the lay-by. He pulled on the handbrake and rushed round to the back. Jones kicked the door as he was opening it. The chauffeur landed heavily on his back. Arms folded across his middle to contain the agony, Jones scuttled across the road. The chauffeur had to wait for a bus to go past. Jones was back inside the house before he reached the paved front garden.

Jones took the telephone to the window. Very deliberately, he pressed the 9 key twice, and left his finger hovering over the key.

The chauffeur looked at him, radiating calm hostility, then he turned and re-crossed the road. He produced a plastic container of water and some rags from the boot, then he removed his cap and maroon jacket. Jones watched the cleaning operation for a few moments, hoping that a gull

would drop either a crab or wet excreta on the chauffeur, then he put the telephone down.

A quick dash round confirmed that front and side doors and the ground-floor windows were all locked. The chauffeur completed his unpleasant task, dumped the rags in the concrete waste bin, dressed again and drove off towards Alviney without another look at the house.

There was no sign of a bruise when Jones lifted his shirt but he was still feeling the after-effects of a solid punch. Pain signals radiated from the area of impact if he breathed too deeply, and it was sore if he prodded it with a finger. He considered reporting the incident to the police but there seemed little point. He had no independent witnesses and the chauffeur would deny the attack.

Jones presumed that the man was a trusted employee of a respected local businessman, who would know the senior police officers in the area and be able to exert a level of influence not available to a visitor. Mr Paddon would also know that the chauffeur was handy with his fists. He looked as if he had been hired as a bodyguard as well as a driver.

Seething, Jones returned to work. He had looked at ten pages before he admitted that he was not concentrating. He turned back to page 534, then he started to wonder if he would be ready to eat by the time he had prepared some dinner. The punch had just about worn off.

Something registered on senses, which were still attuned for danger. He had heard a car approaching the house but it had not gone past.

A Mercedes, dark blue not black, had parked on the lay-by across the road. The beefy chauffeur in the maroon uniform opened the door at the back. A dark-haired man in a mohair suit got out. The chauffeur closed the door, then slid back behind the steering wheel. His passenger gave his jacket a

quick tug to eliminate creases, then strolled across the road. He ran a hand down the back of his glossy, black hair as he approached Jones' front door.

Jones took his time about answering the ring on the bell, even though he was sure that the visitor knew that he was being watched. There was a rather fearsome cleaver in the kitchen, left, presumably, by a student of Chinese cooking. Jones collected it on the way to the door.

"Peter Paddon," announced the caller with a confident and friendly smile. "I wanted to sort out the misunderstanding." He tried not to look at the cleaver.

"You just caught me making dinner," said Jones, drawing Paddon's attention to his miniature battle axe.

Jones had his arms folded, left hand cupping right elbow, right forearm resting on left. The pose allowed him to rest the cleaver against his upper left arm. Extending his right arm and swinging it forward would bring the weapon right in to Paddon's face.

"Rolf can be a bit impulsive," added Paddon in a smooth tone. Although intended to be conciliatory, it irritated Jones. "I just wanted to meet you to clear the air. Perhaps we'd be more comfortable inside?"

"I'm rather busy at the moment." Jones tapped his battle axe against his shoulder impatiently. "And I don't really see what we have to talk about. We don't even know each other. Unless it's about a cage for your gorilla."

"I wanted to talk about Marie-Claire."

"I don't see any point in talking about someone I hardly know. And it's not convenient at the moment."

"Yes, I can understand your attitude. All I can do is apologize again. Perhaps you could give me a ring when you have a moment? My number's in the book. P.J. Paddon."

"Good evening." Jones, ungraciously, promised nothing.

He closed the door as Paddon was turning sway. He watched from the kitchen window until the car had turned round and was heading back towards Alviney. He had let sheer awkwardness triumph over curiosity. Jones had been wondering about the mysterious Mr Paddon, who tried to rule Mrs D'Arné's life.

He was not in the habit of being rude to people, however. A researcher had to get on with everyone if he wanted information and assistance. The opportunity to be churlish had been too good to miss.

Peter Paddon looked respectable enough, but so did any gangster with enough money. He was around forty, six feet tall and his build looked distinctly non-muscular under his expensive suit; but a man who could hire a chauffeur cum bodyguard like Rolf had no need to pump iron. Paddon had a longish face with rather vulnerable eyes, and saw no need to hide behind either sunglasses or a beard.

He was clearly successful enough to expect things to happen to his order and obviously cheeky enough to pretend that nothing serious had happened when his chauffeur thumped someone. Jones felt tempted to look him up in the phone book so that he could go for a ride round the posh end of Alviney on his scooter to find out how big a house Paddon could afford.

On reflection, he decided to continue his policy of having nothing to do with the man. He did not want really to get to know a man who behaved like a gangster.

Jones hung the cleaver on its hook and made himself a cheese, tomato and mushroom omelette. The meal was quick and filling, and left very little to wash up afterwards. He saw no point in wasting time on an elaborate meal for one. He returned the American Revolution and his index to their box and watched the Channel Four news with his coffee.

At nine, he went out for a walk. There was a pub half a mile away and up a hill. He could fit a couple of pints in to his one-mile walk for exercise, knowing that the last lap would be down-hill. The pub was basically a late 19th-Century building, to which an L-shaped extension had been added in the 1960s to make it a larger square.

There was an island bar in the middle, and a series of partitions reached out towards it to create half a dozen compartments. Transport through the ages was the theme of the decoration. Jones found himself a seat in an almost empty compartment that was decorated with pictures of vintage and modern sports cars.

The pub seemed well filled for a rural area at the end of September. Friday night had attracted a fair number of younger people. One of the older regulars caught Jones' eye when he had completed a long examination of the pictures.

"You can still see some of them around here," said a man with leathery skin and a full head of white hair. "Bentleys, MGs, Aston Martins. All in their original trim. Mind you, how much is original under the paint is anybody's guess."

"Like a broom someone's had from new?" said Jones. "Just like when he bought it apart from a new handle and a couple of new heads."

"That's the way with money. It lets you pretend you're driving a nineteen thirties Bentley tourer when the tyres, most of the engine and the bodywork are less then a year old."

"Still, if that's the nearest you can get to it, you have to be satisfied with it. There's a lot of posh cars around here."

"Depends what you call posh. I'd rather have a nice Rolls-Royce than one of them boneshaker sports cars. The Earl's got two. Now, there's a car with a bit of room to move in. I was his chauffeur for twenty-two years; until the arthuritis

got too much for me."

The old man looked down at his hands with a wry grin. "Couldn't get the fingers straight enough when I saluted him. Used to like his salutes, did his Lordship. Then he says to me one day, 'Bigger, it's a bit off-putting being saluted by a claw. I think it's about time you went out to grass, old son.' Course, he didn't mention the near misses. I didn't never hit anything, but my hands used to slip on the wheel a bit. Give his old mother a real fright a couple of times, but they do say a good shock tones up the heart."

"You finished with that, Billy?" A young woman with a tray of empty glasses stopped at the table.

"You got any special offers for us old age pensioners?" Billy Bigger looked at the quarter-inch of flat liquid in his pint tankard.

"Let me get you one." Jones fished money out of a pocket to do his duty by a local character.

"Pint of the usual, is it?" said the woman.

"Thanks, me dear." Bigger hooked one of his claws around the tankard and drained it.

"Of course, you see quite a few luxury cars around here," said Jones, determined to get some information for his pint. "Every other one seems to be a Merc."

"Never met one I could like, but them Jerries can make a nice car."

"Some of the people round here have two. Like Peter Paddon."

"You a friend of his?" said Bigger suspiciously.

"Not exactly. I ran in to his chauffeur this evening." Well, more like his chauffeur's fist, Jones added to himself.

"Nasty piece of work. Thinks he owns the road. Paddon's what you might call a foreigner. Only been here five years but he acts like the lord of the manor. A bit like the Earl, but

his Lordship's lot have been round here since Boney was up to his tricks, so he's entitled. Thanks, Mary. You're an angel to us poor pensioners."

"Get off with you!" The young woman deposited a full tankard on the table with a grin.

"What does he do if he can afford to run two Mercs?" prompted Jones.

"He's in business. Don't ask me what. He hasn't got an office round here, but he's got a house like a small hotel. What does anyone need with nineteen rooms?"

"He's not got a large family?"

"Just his wife and a few servants. He used to be in business with Edward Durney, till he snuffed it. His father and his Lordship's dad were real pals. I could tell you plenty of stories about Charlie Durney and his Lordship's dad. They liked their drop of claret. And port, and champagne."

"You don't think Paddon's some sort of gangster? Maybe pretending to be respectable here but terrorizing people somewhere else?"

"You're not a writer, are you?" chuckled Bigger. "We get a lot of them around here."

"Perhaps I've met a few too many," admitted Jones.

"Well, he plays golf with the Chief Constable, and he's been to some of his Lordship's parties, so he's pretty well in. Course, it was Eddie Durney got him in, but his Lordship wouldn't have anything to do with a gangster. He's always going on about standards and stopping moral decline. Pity he doesn't have a word with the brewers about what they put in their beer. But no, if Paddon was a wrong 'un, his Lordship would find out. Then he'd be finished round here, as far as socializing goes."

"So you think he's just an ordinary businessman? No better than he has to be, but not an out-and-out crook? And

a bit above himself because he can live in a small hotel?"

"That's about it. You don't have to be a proper crook if you've got enough money. You can just slip people a few bob and make them see things your way."

Billy Bigger moved in to a story about the adventures of his Lordship's dad to illustrate his point. Jones settled back to listen. The old man had the accent of a stereotype Cornish yokel, but he tended to lay it on a bit too thick to be real at times. He had seen his fair share of life as the earl's chauffeur, and he possessed either a retentive memory or a lively imagination and he had a sly sense of humour.

Jones left the pub after an hour, having bought Bigger a third pint. An early start to the day was catching up with him. He yawned down the hill to his rented house. He locked the front door, then he looked at the kitchen.

A man who had consumed three pints of beer did not need any supper, he decided. The stairs began beside the front door and turned a right angle along the side wall to climb over the door at the other end.

A small bedroom had been converted in to the bathroom when the plumbing had been brought indoors, The remaining bedroom was slightly smaller than the living room. The brass bedstead was single size and had knobs which unscrewed. Jones had investigated them on his first day. He had found just hollow tubes beneath them. No eccentric had stuffed the frame of the bed with fivers or other treasure.

The furniture; a straight-back chair, a broad chest of drawers and a full-length wardrobe; was just as dark and venerable as the furniture in the living room. Modern double glazing helped to reduce the rush of traffic on the road along the coast. Jones felt tired enough to sleep beside a motorway.

Jones had been asleep for an hour when a ring on the doorbell woke him. The bell shrilled again before he realized what it was. Feeling groggy, he rolled carefully out of bed and parted the curtains on the front window. He was surprised to see a small car parked on the paved garden. He pulled his jeans on over his pyjama trousers and thrust sockless feet in to his shoes. He paused in the bathroom to wipe his face with his flannel, then he hurried downstairs.

Mrs D'Arné was waiting on the doorstep, holding two carrier bags. She was wearing a dark green pullover, matching ski-pants and a pure-white sheepskin coat. She looked like a secret agent, ready to shed the conspicuous coat to merge with the night.

"It worked like a charm," she smiled, advancing in to the kitchen. "I put the two bags in the car just after dinner and I told Roberts I was going out for a drive. I had to lose that gorilla again, but I'm quite good at that."

"Paddon's chauffeur?" said Jones.

"Rolf, yes. By then, it was a bit late to look for a hotel, and I don't think they encourage carrier bags as luggage. I was wondering if you could put me up for the night."

"Well, yes. There's only one bedroom, though."

"I'll be quite comfortable on your couch."

Jones found spare sheets, a blanket and a pillow. He felt bound to prevent his guest from doing any more driving until she sobered up. She had clearly celebrated her escape from the house and Peter Paddon's chauffeur. She could talk without slurring her words, but she was excessively cheerful and she had to put abnormal concentration in to her movements.

Jones made up a bed on the settee, then sat down at the dining table. By rights, in permissive times, the damsel in distress should have leapt in to bed with him. Jones was still

feeling worn out, however, and he could be grateful that his body was not included in the hospitality.

Mrs D'Arné came downstairs carrying her clothes and wearing a nightdress and a light dressing gown. She had brought a bottle of vodka with her. Jones supplied glasses and lime juice for a night cap. After running through the highlights of her adventure, Mrs D'Arné started to yawn. Jones wished her good-night and took the glasses in to the kitchen. He yawned up the stairs to his bed.

Jones entered the living room diffidently the following morning. His hesitation was wasted. There was no female shape on the settee. Mrs D'Arné had left behind a trace of her perfume, an empty cup on the table and a note praising his coffee. Jones drew the curtains. Her car had gone too. Jones folded the sheets and the blanket, piled them on the pillow and stuffed the whole lot in a cupboard. He filled the percolator, then left it to get on with brewing six cups while he went for a walk.

The morning was warming up nicely. Just a few fluffy clouds were sailing high in the sky. Jones put on his sunglasses. The low sun was shining directly in to his eyes on the outward leg of his walk and sparking brilliant reflections from the wave crests. More joggers than usual were plodding up and down the sands at Alviney, and a few dedicated sunseekers had staked out territories already with brightly coloured, canvas windbreaks, reminding Jones that it was Saturday morning.

Whistling softly to himself, and looking forward to breakfast, Jones started up the railway-sleeper steps at the end of his walk. A movement across the road drew his eyes as he neared the top, Someone was sneaking about his house. Jones knew before he saw it that there would be a black

Mercedes parked on the lay-by. Rolf was out of uniform but his stocky figure and too-long black hair identified him immediately.

Jones crouched three steps from the top and peeped at the chauffeur. Rolf had cupped his hands around his face to cut out reflections. He was peering in to the living room. Then he looked in to the kitchen. On his way round to the back of the house, he tried the side door. Jones wondered whether he would have time to sneak over to let down at least one of the Mercedes' tyres but his courage was in rather short supply.

While Rolf was out of sight, Jones eased down to the beach, telling himself that there was no need to be quiet but treading softly just the same. Twenty yards along the beach was a slight overhang. Jones felt safer sitting there until he heard a car start nearby. It moved towards, past and then away from him, which meant that it was travelling to Alviney. *Up periscope!* thought Jones as he scanned the lay-by from the level of the top step.

Rolf and the black Mercedes had gone. His muted whistling took on a note of triumph as Jones crossed the road. He had contributed significantly to the frustration of Peter Paddon's chauffeur. He would not be able to follow Claire D'Arné if he could not find her. A small part of a thump in the guts had been repaid in part.

The telephone began to chirrup as Jones was hovering between work and a trip in to Alviney after breakfast. A man with a smooth voice told Jones that he was calling on behalf of Mr Paddon to invite him to drinks and a chat during the afternoon. Jones replied that he intended looking up friends in St Austell. Dinner was also out of the question.

When he consulted a road map of the area, Jones was relieved to find that St Austell was just twelve miles away. He had plucked the name out of the air, knowing only that

the town lay somewhere on the south coast of Cornwall. A day out seemed a good idea. He was well ahead with his work and there was a possibility that Rolf would be sent round to make sure that he was not lurking in the house.

Huge, white mountains rose behind St Austell as Jones approached on the scooter. They were man-made spoil heaps from the china clay industry. He wandered round the shops of a modern precinct for a while, deciding that the town wasn't wildly different from Raynes Park. There was something special about the church, he recalled, but he didn't go in for church spotting, except in the line of duty.

His next stop was Charlestown and lunch on the beach. In the afternoon, he had a look at Bodmin, the county town. He drove home via Liskeard, where Charles I had spent a week during the Civil War. The telephone began to trill while he was having a wash. He ignored it. The latest *James Bond* film was showing in Alviney. Jones was planning to have a leisurely meal before going to see it.

He spent the last half hour of the drinking day in the pub up the hill, which was called *The Twisted Wheel*. A dark sports car was parked in his front garden when he returned to the house but there was no sign of the driver. Jones put on a brew of coffee and transferred cheese, biscuits and butter to the dining table.

The doorbell rang a few moments after the percolator had finished its task. Mrs D'Arné breezed in and parked herself in front of the fireplace. "I've just been for a moonlit stroll on the beach," she smiled. "It's a lovely clear night, if a little chilly."

Jones took the hint and switched on the electric fire.

"Is that coffee I can smell? The trouble with sand is it gets everywhere!" Mrs D'Arné removed her fairly sensible shoes and tapped them on the surround of the fireplace to shake

loose a few grains of sand.

Jones filled cups and moved the cheese and biscuits to a small table with a round top. The visitor ate her buttered crackers and cheese separately. She had taken the edge off her appetite by the time Jones had covered three sesame crackers with different sorts of cheese.

"What time did you go yesterday?" asked Jones. "I was up at eight and I thought that was quite early."

"About half-past seven. My car didn't wake you?"

"The double glazing's pretty efficient, apparently. Did you do anything interesting?"

"I had a drive around, breakfast in St Austell."

"I was there later on."

"Hasn't the place gone downhill terribly? After that, I drove around for a while. I really love just driving for its own sake. I left the car in Alviney and took a taxi home for lunch. Roberts and Mrs Blake tried to behave as if nothing had happened."

"You certainly put one over on them."

"In the afternoon, I went over to Peter's. He was having a garden party, seeing the weather's been so nice. Again, there wasn't a word said about my excursion. So I thought I'd do it again tonight. I let them think I was going to bed early. I waited until Mrs Blake looked in on me, a quarter of an hour after I put my light out, then I sneaked out with another carrier bag."

"You're really showing them who's boss."

"Aren't I just?" beamed Mrs D'Arné. "Anyway, I walked down the hill to Alviney, collected my car and drove out here the long way. Rolf was hovering near my car, but I soon lost him. You weren't in, so I decided to go for a stroll on the beach. There's not a cloud in the sky and the moon's really bright. Oh! Pardon me." She cupped both hands in front of

her face to hide a yawn.

"Do you want your room in the Ivor Jones motel?"

"If you don't mind."

Jones retrieved the pillow and bedclothes from their cupboard. He dumped the dishes in the kitchen. There was not enough to justify the hot water. Washing up could wait until after the next meal.

Jones woke up with a splitting headache on Sunday morning. He had to lie on his back with his eyes closed for twenty minutes before the throbbing eased and he could be sure that he would not be violently sick. His condition felt like a severe hangover, but a thirty-five-year-old in reasonable health had no right to be suffering so long after one and a half pints of Cornish beer. After brushing his teeth and rinsing his mouth to get rid of a vile taste, he felt able to tackle a cup of coffee and some toast. Activity seemed to ease his symptoms.

Mrs D'Arné's car had gone. Jones noticed its absence when he looked out of the kitchen window after plugging in the percolator. The curtains were still drawn in the living room but the improvised bed was empty. This time, there was no coffee cup and no note waiting for him on the dining table. Mrs D'Arné had gone without taking advantage of the motel's breakfast facilities.

Jones went out for a walk along the beach, His headache had gone completely and he was feeling moderately ravenous when he got back to the house. Seeing it was Sunday, he decided to have a proper English breakfast of fried egg with grilled bacon and tomato. There was a record request show on *Plymouth Sound*, the local radio station. Jones switched it on to provide some background noise.

He had missed the news by five minutes. The main item

had been keeping local police and reporters manoeuvring around one another since the early hours of the morning, since the discovery of the body.

3

The keeper of the lighthouse, which was also a coastguard station, noticed a bundle of rags in the surf while out for a breath of fresh air. He watched it for a couple of minutes while he finished a cigarette, telling himself that it was not what he thought it was. The tide was an hour from full and moderate raves were crashing the object against sharp rocks with punishing regularity.

He flicked the cigarette end in to space and went inside for a pair of binoculars. The time was just before six, over an hour before sunrise. A cloudless sky was quite bright but darkness gathered at the foot of the west-facing cliff.

Frank Emmond, the keeper, strained for a clear image of the object in the sea. He could afford to take his time over making up his mind. He was reluctant to raise a false alarm and risk the laughter of friends and colleagues. If it was a body, the person was either dead now, or would be dead long before help arrived.

His wife was still sound asleep. Emmond closed the bedroom door gently and padded downstairs to telephone the police. A quarter of an hour later, the in-shore lifeboat was launched.

The coxswain, one crew member and a uniformed policeman rode round the bay in the rubber boat. They used a portable radio to confirm to Emmond that he had found a body, then they considered the problem of retrieving it.

Very cautiously, the coxswain edged towards the rocks,

trying to balance the tide with his engine. The crewman reached out with the longest boat-hook. At the fourth attempt, he managed to snag the corpse's garments. They towed the body to a safe distance from the rocks before hauling it aboard.

The dead women had been in the water for a relatively short time; not long enough for her to be bloated in to a caricature of a human form. Her face was unrecognizable. It had been battered in to raw meat. A local doctor, who acted as the police surgeon, was waiting at the lifeboat station when the boat arrived. He was pale, yawning, and the collar of a pair of blue and white striped pyjamas projected above his jersey. He took a long look at the deep wound in the corpse's head, then told the uniformed policeman to alert his CID colleagues.

The corpse had lost both shoes. She was fully dressed otherwise in department store underwear, a dark blue skirt and a matching pullover. Her pockets contained just a comb and a sodden handkerchief. She was below average height, grey-haired and aged around fifty. Any further information would have to come from the post mortem examination, Having carried out his duty by declaring the woman dead, the doctor went home to bed.

Detective Chief Inspector William Renfrew was roused by a telephone call. He breakfasted in a hospital waiting room on a cup of coffee from a machine and a cigarette. The pathologist was wearing his 'murder' expression when he joined the detective with a cup of steaming liquid from the machine. Renfrew opened his notebook.

"Dead less than twelve hours," said the pathologist. "We found particles of soil and what looked like peat in the brain at the base of the major head wound. It's very clean. Done with an object with a metal blade; such as a garden spade."

"Wife done in by her husband, maybe?" said Renfrew. "Would it take a man to strike the blow?"

"Given the leverage involved with a spade, it could have been a woman as easily as a man."

"Any distinguishing marks on the body?"

"No scars, moles or tattoos. She was a normal, healthy female of fifty to fifty-five. Height five-two, weight eight stone four. Had children, and wearing a wedding ring. She has enough fillings to identify her beyond doubt if you can find her dentist."

"Local woman?"

"Probably, but that doesn't rule out her being dumped overboard from a passing ship."

"I nearly made you commit yourself there," grinned Renfrew.

"Only nearly," smiled the pathologist.

"What are her fingers like?"

"Rather prune-like. I should wake up some dentists, or wait till someone reports her missing, before you start worrying about fingerprints."

"And what startling piece of information are you going to give me as a parting shot?"

"She had one of those french-bread pizzas for her tea or supper, just before she was killed."

"Well, that must narrow the field down quite a lot. I suppose I can expect a written report in due course?"

"I shouldn't hold your breath, old boy," drawled the pathologist. "It *is* Sunday morning, after all."

"I can remember when you were full of energy on a Sunday," grinned Renfrew. "Cricket and Sunday league football."

"That was before I got married and acquired three teenage children. It takes me all my time to crawl round the golf

course these days. You don't look too energetic yourself, Bill. Smoking yourself in to an early grave? The one you're digging with your teeth and a diet of junk food."

"Not to mention the late nights and the early mornings," added Renfrew.

A car pulled up outside the house as Jones was tackling the accumulated washing up. He rushed to the kitchen window. It was a red Triumph *Spitfire*. Sports cars seemed very popular with the women of the area. A dark, slim woman in a dress that matched the car approached his front door. Jones opened it as she was reaching for the bell-push. She smiled and stepped forward, forcing Jones to move out of her way to avoid a collision.

"These places look as small inside as they do from the road," the woman remarked in a cultured drawl. "I suppose all this ghastly furniture doesn't help."

"Ivor Jones," said Jones from the doorway. "I don't think we've met."

"Mary Paddon."

The visitor turned to offer a hand and a smile. "I'd just love a cup of coffee, if there's one going. Cream, but no sugar, please."

"Have a seat."

The coffee was still hot. Jones switched off the radio, filled two cups and used the top of the milk in lieu of cream. The visitor was standing at the table, glancing at the proofs. Jones had put them out as evidence that he was working in case Peter Paddon or one of his representatives called. He had not been expecting either a wife or a sister.

"You're an author?" said Mrs Paddon. She was wearing a broad, gold wedding ring.

"More a literary assistant," said Jones. "I did some of the

research for the book, and now I'm doing an index for it." He offered a cup and saucer.

Mrs Paddon chose an armchair, turned it away from the blank eye of the television and leaned towards Jones as if preparing to exchange confidences.

"Ethel's speciality is looking helpless," she said with a knowing smile. "Men fall for it all the time. You know Marie-Claire's not really her name? Ethel Susan Darney. What's wrong with that? It's just a label applied at birth, altered slightly when she married, and nothing to be embarrassed about. She didn't go all French until after Edward was killed."

"Killed?" repeated Jones with a frown.

"There was an accident and he had a fall. Fifty feet down a sheer drop. That's when Peter started looking after her. She's a complete fraud, you know, but that doesn't bother my husband."

"You don't get on with her?"

"I don't have too much to do with her. Of course, Peter's hopelessly infatuated with her. So much so that he won't believe she's playing games with him. She'll never marry him."

"Aren't you married to him?" said Jones, looking at the visitor's left hand.

"That's not a factor in his scheme of things. He doesn't really think of me as a wife any more. I'm just someone who lives in the same house. Sort of a non-paying guest."

"Must be difficult for you."

"I suppose one can get used to anything."

"What does he do for a living, your husband?"

"It's a consultancy. Edward started it and Peter bought in to it. They're middle-men, basically. People with problems came to them and they put them in touch with others

qualified to solve them."

"This wouldn't be Charlie Durney's son?" said Jones, giving the name the local pronunciation used by Billy Bigger. "His Lordship's drinking buddy."

"That sounds like you've been talking to that old boy who used to be the chauffeur. The locals seem to know all about us, but they still treat us like visitors, not residents. Edward, of course, was very much part of the old boy network, but he needed Peter's money to keep up with useful people.

"It's an ideal life for Peter. Lots of business lunches, lots of parties, and lots of important people grateful to him, even though he took money off them for his introductions and so on. He's taken over every single one of Edward's contacts with no trouble at all. He can be such a charmer when he wants to. And he's never been slow to take advantage of the efforts of others. I thought he might have pushed Edward off the cliff for a while. Things worked out so beautifully for Peter afterwards."

"He does sound a proper charmer."

"Peter's trouble is an over-inflated sense of his own importance. Helped by the money he got from selling the family business, which he uses to buy the complete loyalty of his staff; and others."

"Like his chauffeur? Who seems to spend a lot of time behaving like a private detective; chasing Mrs D'Arné without too much success."

"Peter likes to know where she is. I just thought you ought to know a little more about the game and the lady you're becoming so involved with. She's played it before with other visitors."

"I wouldn't say I'm becoming involved with her in the romantic sense. She's just someone I've met a few times."

"Peter seems to think you're a rival, and once he's made

his mind up, it's practically impossible to change it."

Mrs Paddon drained her cup and balanced the saucer on the arm of her chair. "You make a good cup of coffee. Well, I'll let you get on with your work."

Jones saw the visitor to the door and watched her drive away. There was no black Mercedes hovering in attendance, proving that Peter Paddon was not interested in his wife's whereabouts. Jones took the cups to the sink and pulled out the plug. The water had gone cold. The rest of the washing up could wait until the next session.

He found himself wondering about Mary Paddon's motive for visiting him. If her husband was chasing Mrs D'Arné, who was just playing a game with Peter Paddon, why had Mary Paddon tried to put Jones off by telling him that Mrs D'Arné was a complete fraud, who was no more French than himself? It would be more logical to encourage Jones to fill a gap in the life of a rival for her husband's affections.

Dark clouds began to gather through the morning. Jones switched on the light and the electric fire. Rain was falling steadily at lunchtime. Jones had reached page 599 of the proof. He decided to have an afternoon off. There was motor racing, golf and then American football on television to take him up to dinnertime.

The path up to *The Twisted Wheel* was slimy mud around the patches of rock. Soggy grass lined it on both sides. Jones had not brought waterproof climbing boots. He decided to spend the evening with the television and his own beer.

Jones found himself listening to every passing vehicle the following morning, waiting for it to stop. He had not seen Mrs D'Arné or the other principals in the game for over a day. The rules, as he saw them, did not permit a telephone call to ask the state of play. He could just drop in on Mrs

D'Arné, but he did not relish the prospect of being sent on his way with a flea in his ear by Roberts, the gardener, if she was out evading pursuit by Rolf or just out of earshot.

Monday was also a working day. If he did not complete the index, he would have to settle for either a cheaper model, or a second-hand car.

Several vehicles stopped during the morning but their occupants remained on the other side of the road, taking a break on the lay-by or the beach. Jones was completely unprepared for the ring on his doorbell towards lunchtime. He sneaked over to the window. A stranger was standing at his front door. The men had arrived in either a white *Cavalier* or a blue and rust *Transit* van.

When he opened the door, Jones was given a brief glimpse of some sort of identity card, which was folded and returned to an inside pocket of a double-breasted blazer without delay. "Mr Jones? Detective Chief Inspector Renfrew." said the caller. "I'd like a few words."

"About what?" gaped Jones.

"Shall we go in and sit down?"

Jones waved the visitor in to the living room, then looked outside.

"Lost something, sir?" said Renfrew.

"I was expecting you to have a sergeant in tow to take notes and things."

"We're not a big city force, sir. We have to spread ourselves more thinly to cover our territory."

Renfrew took the armchair that put his back to the window, leaving his figure an uncomfortable silhouette against the sun. Jones sat at the dining table, near the door to the kitchen, to neutralize the ploy. A seven-pint tin of beer was sitting on the table. A plastic bag of ice and water, sealed to it with a large rubber band, chilled the lower part of the can.

Renfrew directed a stare of great interest at it.

Jones fetched another half-pint glass from the kitchen and held it under the pressure tap. Renfrew clamped a pipe between yellowish teeth but made no move to light it. Half of his beer vanished in one swallow. Jones decided that the caller was around fifty and a wooden, methodical sort. Such was his experience of men who carried pens in the breast pocket of a well-worn suit.

"Ah, that's better." Renfrew replaced his pipe. "Nice drop of beer." His accent was not strongly Cornish, but he was not ashamed of his origins. "I understand you know a Mrs Durney."

"Ah, yes." Jones was-thrown by the abrupt question. "Slightly. I've met her four or five times."

"I understand she stays the night here from time to time. Sounds like you know her a bit better than slightly."

"On the couch." Jones pointed across the room. "Down here. I don't know her any better than that. And only twice."

"When was that?"

"Friday night and Saturday night. She turned up late on, and she was gone before I got up. Both times."

"What sort of time did she turn up?"

"Look, I'm all in favour of helping the police, but what's this about?"

"Routine inquiries, Mr Jones," said Renfrew smoothly.

"In to that?"

Jones found himself wondering if Peter Paddon could command a Chief Inspector to dig out information which his chauffeur could not extract without causing serious damage to the health of the person concerned.

"Her housekeeper was murdered on Saturday night. We just want to find out where everyone was."

"Murdered?" repeated Jones incredulously.

"You mean you didn't know? Don't you listen to the news?"

"I haven't been bothering much. There was nothing about a murder. A woman drowned at the weekend, but I don't remember any murder."

"She was dead before she went in to the water."

"You mean Mrs D'Arné's a suspect? You haven't got her locked up?"

"Mrs Durney is staying with friends at the moment, I believe. Now, if I could have answers to my questions?"

"I've forgotten what you asked me."

"What time did Mrs Durney get here?"

"On Saturday? Half-eleven, Her car was here when I got back from the pub, and she turned up a quarter of an hour later. She'd been for a walk along the beach."

"But you don't know when she left."

"I think I woke up about half-eight. It was before that. She went out at half-seven on Saturday morning. She could have left at the same time on Sunday."

"But you don't know that for sure?"

"Well, no. But you could try asking her."

"Police work isn't a guessing game, Mr Jones. We have to gather facts and then we have to confirm them."

"Yes, I suppose you would have talked to her before me. When was the housekeeper murdered?"

"That's confidential. Did you ever meet her? And the gardener?"

"Briefly. When I looked in on Mrs D'Arné the other day."

"Which other day?"

"Er, Friday afternoon." Jones had to think before answering. The days tended to merge and lose a discrete identity on holiday. "She just came in to the room to tell Mrs D'Arné something, then she went out again."

"I see. What impression did you form of her?"

"None, really," said Jones with a shrug. "I only saw her for less than a minute. I don't even remember what she looks like."

"I see. And what did you think of him? Roberts?"

"A bit of a bolshy sod. I was surprised she put up with him. Come to think of it, I'm surprised it wasn't him that got murdered. He seems pretty ready to pick a fight."

"He tried to pick a fight with you?"

"No." Jones dodged a loaded question. "But he did tell me to get lost without bothering to consult Mrs D'Arné. If he could be that rude to a stranger, he could have been even ruder to someone he knew."

"But you don't know him any better than a bad impression from one meeting?" Renfrew dismissed Jones' amateur psychology. "What I find strange is Mrs Durney staying the night here if she hardly knows you."

"She seems a bit, well, impulsive. Isn't that what you think about her? You must know her quite well."

"Only through her husband."

"I suppose you know his partner, Mr Paddon, keeps an eye on her? I suppose to fend off blokes after her money."

"You know what she's worth?"

"No, of course not. But anyone who lives in a house like hers must have a few bob. I think her coming here was a small act of rebellion."

"Yes, she's been a bit headstrong since Edward's death." Chief Inspector Renfrew drained his glass with another swallow. "How long are you here?"

"Another fortnight yet." Jones sensed that he was being told not to leave town.

"A long journey home?"

"A bit of a slog on the train. I live near London."

"Work there?"

"I'm a researcher for a television production company."

"Ah," said Renfrew, slotting Jones in to a category. "Well, I'll leave you to it for the moment."

The detective lit his pipe when he had crossed the road. He waited until a single-decker bus had gone past, then turned his car towards Alviney. Jones gave him a ten-minute start, then took the *Lambretta* out of its small shed. Work was out of the question. There would be plenty of gossip in Alviney a day or so after the murder of a local woman.

The padlockable box on the back of the scooter could be used for either shopping or to store the crash helmet. Jones chose one of the seafront pubs as a likely source of information. He had consumed one and a half pints during his working morning. He decided to order a pub lunch and a soft drink. He was surprised to spot Mary Paddon sitting alone at one of the outdoor tables as he was crossing the car park.

Jones crunched across a neat belt of wind-blown leaves and blinked in to the relative darkness of the pub. It was October, but a sunny day with temperatures up to 22°C was forecast. Mrs Paddon was still there when Jones emerged from the building with his meal.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked, sitting down before permission could be granted. "It's a bit smoky inside."

"Please do." Mary Paddon looked pleased to see him. "Not working today?"

"I was until a Chief Inspector dropped in."

"Bill Renfrew? What did he want to know?" Mary Paddon took off her blue-tinted sunglasses. The floppy brim of her large, white hat kept the sun out of her eyes, which were dark brown and seemed friendly.

"Whereabouts Mrs D'Arné was on the night her house-

keeper was murdered. Apparently, she's staying with friends at the moment."

"Yes, with us, but I haven't actually spoken to her. Peter's fussing over her rather. But you couldn't give her a compete alibi? With you upstairs and her downstairs on your couch."

"That's right. I could only tell him when she arrived. I don't know when she left."

"It was around three. Peter sent Rolf and Simmons to fetch her."

"You what?" gaped Jones.

"Did you wake up with a hangover?"

"How did you know that?"

"It's called a chemical cosh. Rolf's very good with locks, and he has some stuff to keep people quiet. I suppose he gave you a squirt to make sure you didn't rush to Ethel's rescue. Leaves no bruises and there'll be no trace of it left in your system by now."

"You're telling me your husband's chauffeur and some other character broke in to my place, drugged me and kidnapped Claire D'Arné?" Jones was lost between astonishment and indignation.

"I don't want to say I told you so, but I did mention having anything to do with Ethel would bring you nothing but trouble. I shouldn't waste your time complaining to the police, though. You'll find yourself rather short of evidence, and Bill Renfrew and Peter are good friends."

"How do you know all this?"

"I'm a light sleeper, and I'm a very skilled eavesdropper. I like keeping track of Peter and his minions. It's a sort of hobby."

"Does Claire D'Arné know any of this?"

"Of course not. They'll have coshed her too. Waking up with a hangover's nothing new to Ethel. And strange things

going on around her are nothing new either. She likes to take LSD and shock people by telling them about it."

"Is she a serious suspect? I don't know the gory details."

"Mrs Blake was killed by a clout on the head with the edge of a spade. Bill Renfrew said the blow could have been struck by a woman as easily as a man."

"A spade! I was expecting a shotgun; can't think why. I should have listened to the news more carefully."

"It wouldn't have done you much good. All they said, between the waffle, was a woman with multiple injuries was pulled out of the sea near the lighthouse. I got my information from listening in on an extension when Peter was talking to Bill Renfrew."

"Did he say when the murder was committed?"

"They don't know. The last time anyone saw her alive, apart from the murderer, was about a quarter past eleven, when Roberts, the gardener, had a word with her before he went to bed. At that point, she was watching something on television and eating pizza.

"Apparently, floating about in the sea made establishing the time of death a guess. The police are still giving Roberts the third degree. I understand he's their chief suspect at the moment. Isn't this a grim conversation?"

"We could always talk about the weather. Can I get you another drink?"

"Yes, please. Gin and tonic, with lots of ice."

Jones spent half an hour chatting with the wife of an extremely dangerous man. Mary Paddon was an on-looker rather than a participant in her husband's life. Jones gained the impression that she spied on Peter Paddon more for something to do than with any intention of thwarting him.

Playing games, actively and passively, seemed to be a popular occupation for the wives in the area, if two taken at

random were a representative sample.

Taking a critical look at her, Jones concluded that Mary Paddon was much more attractive than Claire D'Arné when she relaxed. She was better looking and much more open. There had always been an ulterior motive in the background when Jones had been with Mrs D'Arné. He felt that he could speak frankly with Mrs Paddon and exchange information honestly.

He enjoyed talking to Mary Paddon and she seemed to enjoy trying to shock a stranger with accounts of the secret lives the locals. Her husband dealt in secrets as proof of his usefulness and discretion. He did not have to stoop to using them to blackmail clients. His wife had taught herself to use a computer and she had read extensively about code-breaking and psychology in order to sneak in to his files.

Sharing part of her knowledge with Jones was a mildly dangerous game. There was a slight risk of Jones informing on her, but given the state of his relations with Peter Paddon, it was extremely slight.

Mary Paddon looked at her watch. It was time to go on to an appointment with her hairdresser. Jones reclaimed his scooter and returned to the house. The telephone took him away from his work an hour later. The author wanted to know if he was still alive and how the index was progressing. Jones reported that he had reached page 682.

He had added a further hundred pages to the score by the following evening, when he remembered to water the two large tubs of plants in the paved front garden. Nobody had called on him in the meantime. He had assumed that the murder and a police investigation had ended his adventures with Mrs D'Arné, Peter Paddon and Paddon's private army.

Even though he had met the victim and the chief suspect, the affair seemed remote and unreal. Jones could not feel

sympathy for the dead housekeeper, but he could feel relief that a dangerous customer like Roberts had been taken out of circulation. Two jaunty taps on a horn made him turn round. A red pick-up truck was approaching from the direction of Alviney. Marie-Claire D'Arné swung onto his off-road parking area and climbed out, grinning broadly.

4

The wreck of the pick-up truck's front bumper gave Jones a conversational opening. "Had a shunt?"

"I've got a new keeper for the moment," beamed Mrs D'Arné. "Armitage. He didn't believe I'd ram the gates then he refused to open them."

"He will next time. Out for an evening drive?"

"And a game of hide and seek."

"Have you lost Rolf?"

"I've not seen him yet, but he'll be around. I suppose he knows I'm in this, not the MG, by now."

"Have you got time for a glass of wine?"

"Probably."

"I was wondering how you got on after you were collected," said Jones when they were sitting in the living room with glasses of iced white wine.

"That's all rather hazy," said Mrs D'Arné resignedly. "I can't remember much about what happened that night. I did come here, then?"

"And Rolf and someone called Simkins broke in, drugged us and dragged you away."

"Simmons. Peter's secretary is called Simmons. I don't remember any of that. About all I do remember is waking up at Peter's place with a vile headache and some fool of a

doctor asking me about drugs. And then Peter going on about Mrs Blake and a spade."

"Mrs Blake was killed with a blow from a spade. The police doctor thought a woman could have done it as easily as a man."

"And Peter thinks I did it?"

"He's an idiot if he does." A movement across the road caught Jones' eye. A black Mercedes had stopped on the lay-by. "Hello, looks like your friend's found you."

"Time to go." Mrs D'Arné drained her glass.

Ignoring the Mercedes, she said goodbye to Jones at the front door and drove away. To his surprise, the black car made no attempt to follow her. A man in smart, casual clothing got out of the Mercedes and crossed the road. His close-fitting shirt had vertical blue stripes on a white background and his jeans lacked the lighter blue areas that come through wear. He was older and slimmer than Rolf, and his dark hair was cropped in to a neat helmet. He stopped two yards from the front door, apparently taking care not to crowd Jones.

"Good evening," he smiled. "Mr Paddon was wondering if it might be convenient to have that chat."

"And who are you?" said Jones, refusing to be charmed.

"Simmons. Mr Paddon's personal assistant."

"Brought your chemical cosh?"

"No, just my karate training."

"Well, all right."

Jones surrendered to the inevitable. He insisted on taking the front passenger seat for the drive in to Alviney and up one of the hills. There was no smell of regurgitated coffee and cream cake from the rear, but the back of the car had unpleasant associations.

The Paddons' house was twenty yards from massive, black

and gold gates and it looked twice the size of the D'Arné mansion. Jones took time to admire the level sweep of the front lawn, which offered no cover to burglars approaching the front of the house, then he followed Simmons inside.

The rooms were enormous but overheated. They were well supplied with paintings, furniture and ornaments on pedestals and tables. Jones was shown through the hall and a reception room to the study.

Peter Paddon was sitting on a corner of a mahogany desk with a green-leather top, glancing through a folder. Behind him was a huge bookcase of volumes arranged according to the colour of the binding. Blocks of red, green, dark blue and black each stretched for a yard or more. The room looked like a television set for the site of the murder in a country house mystery.

"Ah, Mr Jones, so good of you to come." Paddon looked genuinely pleased to see him.

"Wasn't it?" said Jones. "I didn't fancy the alternative."

"What would you like to drink?"

"I only drink my own stuff these days. There's too many chemical coshes around."

"I can assure you my Napoleon brandy is much too valuable to adulterate."

"But what's your assurance worth next to my experience?" Jones dropped in to a dark green leather armchair with more force than necessary. "What do you want to talk about?"

Simmons handed his employer a brandy glass, then left the room. Paddon took a chair opposite Jones, on the other side of an ornate but inactive fireplace.

"I wanted a word about Marie-Claire. Before you get too involved with her. She became rather, well, unstable when she found out Edward was having an affair. Edward was her husband, by the way. He had a fall when they were out

walking. Marie-Claire told the police a letter blew out of his hands and he got too close to the cliff edge while chasing it."

"You're not trying to tell me she did her husband in?" said Jones incredulously,

"No, of course not," said Paddon quickly. "There was no evidence of foul play. But she does have a history of erratic behaviour, especially then someone frustrates her."

"Are you telling me her housekeeper frustrated her?"

"Of course not! But on the other hand, it is easy to lash out with a spade. And there's a winch on the pick-up truck. And getting a body off it would be a matter of giving it a shove rather than carrying it."

"Have you told any of that to the police? You haven't got Claire insured against going to prison for murder?"

"The police deal with facts, not guesswork, Mr Jones. There's absolutely no evidence that Edward's death was anything other than an unfortunate accident, and as for Mrs Blake . . ."

"All right, I get the message," said Jones, feeling glad that he had no friends like Peter Paddon.

"Another thing you should know is Marie-Claire has used drugs. Not just smoking pot. She's also taken LSD. It's a reaction when she feels life constricting her too closely. She takes something that makes her no longer responsible for her actions."

"Or someone feeds her a chemical cosh."

"That was unfortunate, but one can hardly supervise every single action of one's employees."

"Especially if they're out breaking and entering in the middle of the night."

"I wasn't aware anything had been broken. I'll see it's put right immediately."

"It's not too easy to restore peace of mind."

"I think you'll find it restored if you don't become too involved with Marie-Claire. She really needs people who understand her around her. Strangers only encourage her erratic behaviour. She tends to show off."

"So you're acting in her best interests, really?" Jones knew that the remark was sarcastic.

"Well, I think that's cleared the air," said Paddon, choosing to take the remark at face value. "Simmons will drive you home."

The study door opened in response to an unseen signal. No parting handshake was offered. Paddon's look of contentment followed the caller out of the room.

"I'll drive Mr Jones home," said a voice from the graceful curve of the grand staircase.

Simmons opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again when Mrs Paddon fixed him with a level stare from the first step. Jones waited beside one of the gleaming white columns of the porch until the red *Spitfire* roared round from the side of the house. The low-slung car multiplied the sense of speed as they descended the hill, but when Jones looked at the speedometer, he realized that Mary Paddon was much more cautious than Marie-Claire D'Arné.

"Peter been reading you the riot act?" asked his driver.

"Something like that," said Jones.

"I suppose you know he's been trying to convince Ethel that she killed Mrs Blake?"

"What, seriously? He kept telling me she could have done it but that's ridiculous. If the housekeeper was last seen at Claire's place at quarter past eleven, when her car was at my place, and she turned up with sand in her shoes at half-past, she didn't have time to commit the murder and dump the body in the sea. And what about the gardener? He's a proper nasty piece of work."

"Peter's line has been if Ethel doesn't remember what happened that night, how does she know she didn't kill Mrs Blake? As for Roberts, the police have let him go."

"Let him go!" repeated Jones, outraged.

"He has an alibi. He was in bed at the time of the murder. But it took him rather a long time to admit whose. He was having it off with a Mrs Jenner in Alviney, whose husband is a lorry driver. Her story means Roberts left the villa at a quarter to eleven, not a quarter past."

"How does that stand up?"

"Mrs Blake was watching something on television. Roberts thought the opening titles were the closing credits. He doesn't have a watch. They don't stand up to all the banging about he does, and he was in too much of a lustful rush to ask his ladyfriend the time when he got to her place."

"So Claire could have had time to do it? Hang on, she told me she had to lose Rolf on her way to my place. Do the police know when that was? And where?"

"Peter doesn't want Rolf's activities investigated."

"I'm not surprised. How do you know that, though?"

"I told you, I'm an expert eavesdropper. Did you tell Bill Renfrew about Rolf?"

"I don't remember."

When they reached the house, Mrs Paddon turned onto the paved area and switched off the engine. She came inside with Jones and went in to the living room. Jones heated up two cups of coffee. People in the area seemed to feel free to treat his holiday retreat as a second home.

The visitor stayed for half an hour, talking to her host with a frankness that suggested that they had known each other for three years instead of three days.

When she left, Jones was starting to get to grips with the private lives of the Darneys and the Paddons. Marie-Claire

and Peter Paddon were both playing an elaborate game.

Paddon was obsessed with Marie-Claire and refused to admit that she would never have him. Marie-Claire needed him, but at arm's length.

She had no scruples about involving others in the game. Paddon treated the others as rivals and tried to exclude them. Intimidation was the first step in that process. Jones was reluctant to be sucked deeper in to the dangerous game, but there was something in Paddon's casual exercise of power that made him want to resist.

Looking at his position realistically, the only way to get out of the game was to leave the area if Marie-Claire D'Arné felt free to drop in to and out of his life as convenient.

He had a job to do, however, and the house was booked for a further ten days. Jones decided to bolt the doors and make sure that the security locks on the windows were engaged when he was in the house. He was not going to be pushed around.

Chief Inspector Renfrew interrupted him at just after nine o'clock the following morning. The detective wanted to look over the house. Jones went upstairs with him, exercising his rights and his curiosity. A thorough search of the bathroom was followed by a detailed inspection of the bedroom. Jones began to wonder if Renfrew would suddenly produce a small packet of white powder with a cry of triumph, and calculated his chances of knocking the detective down and flushing the evidence down the toilet.

"Mmm!" said Renfrew, closing the wardrobe door.

"Looking for anything in particular?" said Jones.

"Just looking. Have you had any second thoughts on when Mrs Durney arrived here on Saturday?"

"No, why?"

"It couldn't have been midnight, or later?"

"No."

"How do you know it was half-past eleven?"

"*About* half-past eleven, is what I told you. I left the pub when they called for the glasses, I got here five minutes later and I put some coffee on to brew. That takes fifteen minutes. Don't you want to put this in a statement?"

"No hurry till you're sure in your mind. Anyone likely to remember when you left the pub?"

"I doubt it. I wasn't with anyone. I just left."

"And you don't know when Mrs Durney left here?"

"Hardly!" scoffed Jones. Then he remembered that Renfrew did not know that he had been chemically coshed.

"You were asleep at the time. Are you normally a heavy sleeper?" Renfrew's tone became stiffer in response to the baffling mockery in Jones' reply.

"I don't know if I'm any heavier than average. Normally. Are you telling me if she got here at midnight, Mrs D'Arné could have killed her housekeeper? She certainly didn't behave as if she'd killed someone when she got here."

"Had much experience of dealing with murderers, sir?"

"Well, no, but you'd expect it to have some sort of effect on someone. Especially a woman. If she'd killed someone with a spade and dumped the body in the sea. Haven't you got any other suspects? What about Roberts, the gardener?"

"That's not something we discuss with members of the public. Well, I think I've seen everything up here, Mr Jones. Not lost any buttons?"

"What sort of button?"

The detective opened his hand to show a black, penny-size button with four holes. A strand of black thread was looped through two of them.

"No, not that I know of."

"It's not from anything in your wardrobe."

"Maybe the last person to stay here lost it."

"Possibly. What was Mrs Durney wearing on Saturday night?"

Jones frowned thoughtfully. "I don't remember."

"Suit? Skirt and blouse? Dress? Trousers?"

"Trousers, I think."

"Not very observant, are we, sir?"

"I had no idea it was important to remember at the time."

Chief Inspector Renfrew prowled through the ground floor, finding the bedding in its cupboard, and left in an almost tangible cloud of suspicion. Jones felt both apprehensive and irritated. He had not been called a liar in so many words, but the implication was there.

The thought that he might be suspected as an accomplice to murder was unsettling, even though he knew himself to be innocent. He believed that the detective had not found the button in the house. Renfrew had brought it with him and he had been looking for a match.

Mary Paddon kept telling him that Marie-Claire D'Arné was trouble. Jones was willing to admit that trouble hovered around her, but he was not convinced that she caused it. So many people were eager to condemn her that he felt bound to give her the benefit of the doubt out of something akin to sheer awkwardness.

After lunch, Jones drove in to Alviney on the *Lambretta* to do some shopping. The rest of that Wednesday passed without incident.

Thursday was the local early-closing day. Jones continued his work on the index, took a break for a walk along the beach before dinner and carried on working until the nine o'clock news on television. None of the channels had anything exciting to offer for the rest of the evening.

Jones decided to watch a film, He found a tape of *The Ipcress File* in the collection of cassettes, which was disguised as a row of hardback books.

A remake of *The Long Goodbye* filled side two. Jones made himself a sandwich and a cup of coffee, and settled down to watch the rest of the double feature. Half an hour in to the film, someone knocked on his door. The room was lit by a table lamp in the corner on the right of the fireplace.

Jones moved to the other side of the room and moved an outer edge of the curtain in the front window. A woman with a carrier bag was standing at his door. She was a shape without colour in the dimness of a cloudless night, but Jones knew that her hair was blonde.

"The escape committee strikes again," beamed Marie-Claire D'Arné. "I fooled them by going over the wall with a few essentials."

Jones took the hint, and the carrier bag, allowing his guest to brush at the legs of her jeans, which had patches of white dust smeared around the knees and thighs.

"I walked in to town, then hitched a lift along the road," added Mrs D'Arné, looking enormously pleased with herself.

"Does that mean they'll be along looking for you in a few minutes?" Jones refused to rejoice with her.

"I doubt it," smiled Mrs D'Arné. "As long as my car and the pick-up are still in the garage, my watchdogs will never think I've gone. Ah, is this that Raymond Chandler film? I remember watching the beginning but I went out before I found out how it ends."

Jones had been planning to watch the film until about midnight and save the last forty minutes until breakfast-time. He had no choice but to offer his guest a drink, make sure that all of his doors and windows were locked and bolted, and settle down for a long night.

Getting up early, he told himself, was just a habit, not a necessity.

Waking up the next morning was a slightly disorienting experience. He was usually out of bed before the sun reached his bedroom curtains. Jones started to prepare himself for a splitting headache. There was no pain. His mouth was a little dry, but the vile after-taste of a chemical cosh was also absent. He dressed quickly and went downstairs. His guest waved, then stretched luxuriously when he opened the living room door.

The time was half-past eleven. Jones and his guest had gone on to watch the Peter Sellers remake of *The Prisoner Of Zenda*, and finished a bottle of white wine around a snack, before retiring.

They had coffee and went out for a walk along the beach. The tide was just on the turn. They were ready for a salad brunch when they got back to the house. Mrs D'Arné perched on the kitchen stool, in a convenient alcove between the sink and the cooker, and watched Jones at work.

"What are your plans for today?" he asked, slicing tomatoes. He was wondering whether he would get any work done. He was 200 pages ahead of schedule and he could afford an idle day.

"I think I'll nip in to Hingle for the afternoon."

"I'm surprised we've not had visitors."

"I sometimes stay in bed until two." Mrs D'Arné gave Jones a totally unashamed smile. "As I said, as long as the cars are in the garage, it won't occur to them I've gone missing."

"Pity there isn't a shotgun about this place for protection. Mind you, that inspector would have taken it. He was sniffing around here yesterday. He wanted to know what

you were wearing last Saturday."

"That won't do him any good. Peter says he's destroyed the trouser suit I was wearing. And the shoes. He kept going on about the button that was missing, but it's been hanging by a thread for ages. It could have fallen off anywhere."

"Black, was it? Three-quarters of an inch across?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"The inspector found one like that."

"Well, there you are! It was here all the time. Peter said he found some spots on the jacket that could have been blood. Not that I could see them. So he just burned a three-hundred guinea trouser suit!"

"You mean, he really thinks you did it?"

"He said he was only trying to protect me. I can't remember too much about that night. I had a drink or two, and that put me in a rebellious frame of mind. Rebellious enough to form a one-person escape committee again."

"I don't remember seeing any spots of blood on you when you got here," said Jones, wondering if Mrs D'Arné had been drugging as well as drinking; if the tales about her pot-smoking and LSD-taking were true.

"That's another thing," said Mrs D'Arné in the same unconcerned tone, "the shakiness of my alibi. Peter said you're not sure when I got here."

"I keep telling the inspector it was half-past eleven, but he doesn't seem to want to believe me. What's your motive for murdering your housekeeper, anyway?"

"Peter thinks she might have attempted to thwart me once too often; when I was feeling sufficiently rebellious and uninhibited to slosh her one with a spade."

"That's another thing that doesn't make any sense. What would you two be doing out in the garden near a spade at eleven o'clock at night? It's a bit dark for digging."

"I must ask Peter that. His protective attitude is rather annoying. It's what spoiled things for us when Edward died – Peter's assumption that just because I have occasional lapses of memory, I could kill someone and not know about it. Just because I over-indulge sometimes when I get bored. His trying to make sure not the slightest breath of suspicion falls on me tends to make me look the blackest sinner around."

"Well, I told the inspector you didn't look as if you'd just sloshed someone with a spade and chucked her off a cliff when you got back from your walk on the beach."

"I wish you could make Peter believe that. All his so-called evidence exists only in his tiny mind."

"The impossible achieved daily," quoted Jones. "Miracles take a little longer."

"I'll take these through." Mrs D'Arné picked up two of the dishes and carried them in to the living room. Jones tied a knot in the neck of a plastic bag of discards. He unbolted and unlocked the side door. The sun was out over the sea, low, bright and blinding to his right. Jones dropped the bag in to the dustbin and turned back to the house. He took one step, then stopped to stare.

"I suspect you're going to be sensible, but Rolf would love to show you the error of your ways otherwise," smiled Simmons, Peter Paddon's secretary.

Jones realized that they had sneaked over from the road, out of the sun. Rolf, the chauffeur, shifted his shoulders in his uniform jacket. When he grinned at Jones, he showed off a gold tooth. Jones backed away and sat on the dustbin. Facing fifteen stones of bone and muscle, and a karate expect, the sensible man swallowed his pride and avoided unnecessary bruises.

Mrs D'Arné just smiled and shrugged when she and her

carrier bag were escorted out of the house. Simmons used the side door to inflict the maximum humiliation. Rolf collected the black Mercedes from fifty yards down the road. Jones responded with forced cheerfulness to Mrs D'Arné's final wave and smile. He went back in to the house, not bothering to lock the door. The table in the living room was laid for two. He had lost his appetite.

A car arrived as he was wondering whether to leave everything or put it away until later. Jones had made himself a large vodka-martini and downed most of it. He opened the front door. Mary Paddon stepped out of her red *Spitfire* and unfastened her head-scarf. She looked very casual in designer jeans, pale blue shirt and matching cardigan, and she had obviously paid a lot of money for her air of informality.

"I won't say I told you so," she remarked.

"Good of you." Jones stepped back and opened the door wider.

"You don't look too badly damaged."

"I'm a fast learner."

"So you didn't fight for Ethel's honour?"

"It would have been a bit one-sided."

"And they dragged her away without any lunch? It looks very tempting."

"Care to join me?"

"I'd love to. Tell me, are you sleeping with Ethel? She did stay the night?"

"No, I'm not, and yes, she did."

"Do you find her attractive?"

"She's not bad looking, but we've had more of a platonic relationship of convenience. She's much more interested in showing your husband and her gaolers she can get away from them than in dragging me in to bed."

"What about me? Do you find me attractive?"

"I think you're better looking than Claire. But we have a similar relationship. You keep dropping in to warn me off her. And to say you're not going to tell me you told me so."

"In that case, why don't we spend the evening together and get to know each other better? I could bring some dinner. There's a little place in town that does very good meals to order. I could pick one up on the way here."

"Yes, I'd like that. If you think it's safe?"

"Peter likes a challenge. I gave him a good run for his money before I married him but he's lost interest in me now. He wants Ethel."

"That must make things difficult for you."

"One learns to make the best of one's situation. I have a comfortable place to live, my allowance and my charge cards, Peter's very good at getting tickets for various events and two can play games. To tell you the truth, I've gone off him about as much as he's gone off me."

"I'm surprised you don't get a divorce."

"It makes chasing Ethel more of a challenge if he's a married man rather than a free divorcee. I could stay the night, if you like. I think we owe you a night of passion."

"I'd like to get back at your husband, and sleeping with his wife would be a good way under normal circumstances, but I suppose it doesn't count if he's not bothered about her."

"We could do it anyway, if we feel like it."

"That'll be quite a change," grinned Jones. "Someone around here doing something without an ulterior motive."

After lunch, Mary Paddon drove in to Alviney to place an order with the caterers. Jones went for a walk along the beach. His life was becoming even more complicated. He was no longer sure of Marie-Claire D'Arné's innocence of

perhaps two counts of murder. Chief Inspector Renfrew could have found the button at the scene of the crime. Jones had suspected at the time that Renfrew had not found it in his holiday home.

He knew so little about Mrs D'Arné that he could not assume that she did not fly in to a murderous rage when she 'overindulged'. If Peter Paddon was making such strenuous efforts to protect her, there could be reasonable grounds for suspicion. On the other hand, Jones knew next to nothing about Edward Darney and Mrs Blake, the murdered housekeeper. He felt no sense of loss at their passing. He did not care whether or not Marie-Claire D'Arné was guilty.

Mary Paddon's interest in him was an interesting development, but Jones decided that it might be safer to continue to pretend attraction to Mrs D'Arné to distract Peter Paddon. Even if it was true that he would not be bothered if he found Jones in bed with his wife and on the job, Jones saw no harm in a little deception as insurance.

The sensible thing to do would be to pack up and go home, but he was sure that Chief Inspector Renfrew would not let a key witness in a murder case drop out of sight. All that he could do was get in a few good times to think about when the going became sticky again.

5

Chief Inspector Renfrew turned up again the following morning. Jones was able to greet him with reasonable confidence. He arrived ten minutes after Mary Paddon had driven away. Their night of passion had been more successful than Jones had anticipated. It had begun about half an hour after dinner, when they had discovered that the settee

could be opened out in to a double bed, sparing them a crush upstairs in a single.

Both admitted that they had not fallen magically in love. Lust and vague notions of revenge on Jones' side had been matched by Mary Paddon's desire to sabotage Mrs D'Arné's game with him. She had no intention of asking Jones to stop co-operating with her rival. She was relying on awful warnings and a campaign of personal attention to squeeze Mrs D'Arné out of his life.

In a tolerant mood, Jones allowed Renfrew to run through the events of the previous Saturday night. His account remained the same, despite the detective's scepticism. To his surprise, Renfrew produced a statement form from his briefcase and put down Jones' story on paper in blue ballpoint.

When Renfrew had gone, Jones struggled to come to terms with the detective's methods: his attempts to make Jones change his story and the very informality of the circumstances of the statement.

The only explanation that made any sense was that Chief Inspector Renfrew was in Peter Paddon's pocket. Renfrew had been prodding an outsider to test his credibility. Jones had not wavered in his insistence that his relationship with Mrs D'Arné was incidental, and that she had returned from her stroll on the beach at 11:30 p.m. on the night on which her housekeeper had been killed.

The presence of the car outside the house suggested that she had been in the area for at least twenty minutes before Jones had seen her. The signed statement was an official document, but its existence was known only to Jones and Renfrew. If the detective chose to discard it as inconvenient or superfluous, Jones would not be able to prove that it had existed.

He wondered whether Renfrew had been bought, with

either money or influence, or whether he was licking Peter Paddon's boots on the strength of half or imagined promises, which Paddon had no intention of redeeming. Jones thought Paddon crafty enough to make a copper chase his tail for nothing; or to make him try to pin a tail on a stranger rather than the widow of a solid citizen.

Jones was staring out of the window, watching the tide coming in and wondering if Chief Inspector Renfrew was trying him out as a murder suspect, when a black Mercedes drove past the house. It was moving slowly, perhaps 10 mph, and the driver's face was turned towards him. Rolf's uncompromising features slithered in to a sinister grin when he saw Jones.

Jones dashed in to the kitchen and made sure that the side door was bolted, fearing a diversion and an assault from an unguarded flank. Having bolted the front door, he checked the windows, upstairs and down. Less than five minutes later, the Mercedes returned, driving slowly back towards Alviney. Jones sat at the dining table, facing the window, and resumed work on his index to the American Revolution. Despite the interruptions, the initial work was almost completed and he still had a week of his holiday left.

Rolf drove past the house on the hour, heading for Hingle, and back again at six minutes past ten. He repeated the performance at eleven, twelve, one, two, and three o'clock. Jones began to hope that a gull would drop a crab onto Rolf's windscreen.

Jones went out to look up and down the road at four, when the Mercedes failed to appear; then he rushed back indoors, fearing an ambush. A car drew up outside the house ten minutes later. It was a red *Spitfire*.

"I'm not sure it's a good time for you to be here," said Jones anxiously when he had responded to Mary Paddon's

kiss of greeting, "Rolf's haunting me. He might see you."

"So what?" smiled Mary Paddon. "Anyway, he's gone to London for the weekend. They all have. Peter thought a change of scenery would do Ethel some good."

"That's a relief! So they'll be on a train for the next few hours?"

"Oh, no, they fly. Peter can get the use of a Learjet and Simmons is a pilot as well as a secretary. They'll be there in less than half an hour."

"Isn't it sickening when you find out how the other half live! I spent *ages* crawling down here on the train."

"Just shows you how much money there is to be made out of people with lots of money. Anyway, I thought I'd give the staff a weekend off and visit you."

"You didn't fancy London?"

"I wasn't invited."

"Oh! Like that, was it?"

"We're free to go our own separate ways, Peter and I. So you can stop looking so nervous."

"I've got plenty to be nervous about; a chauffeur built like an all-in wrestler, a secretary who's also a karate expert and a copper who keeps asking me the same questions as if he's going to keep it up till he gets the answers he wants. Possibly a confession from me if he can't get me to torpedo Claire's alibi. Do you seriously think she did it?"

"If she did shove Edward over the cliff, I suppose she's capable of clonking Mrs Blake on the head. The late lamented was about as charmless as Roberts, the gardener. She could have told tales to my husband when Ethel was irresponsible through drink or drugs; or tried to and Ethel stopped her."

"She was telling me yesterday your husband burned everything she was wearing last Saturday. Because there was a button missing and your husband said the jacket had spots

of blood on it. The Inspector has a button off it. I think he found it somewhere incriminating."

"What was she wearing?"

"A dark trouser suit, with plain black buttons on the jacket. Probably dark shoes as well."

"That's very strange. We have a sort of vault at home for valuables with two secret compartments inside. One for my jewellery and bits and pieces, and the other's for Peter's. He keeps changing the password for his but I can usually crack it. I was having a look at his secrets the other day. I couldn't understand what the box with the dark blue trouser suit and matching shoes was doing in there. Mainly because they weren't new and they reeked of Ethel's perfume."

"Was there any blood on it? Or a button missing?"

"I didn't notice. I was too busy wondering if Peter was going transvestite on me, or he'd developed some sort of fetish. I suppose we could go and look."

"We?" said Jones doubtfully.

"There's just the housekeeper there at the moment, and she doesn't bite. She's probably hiding somewhere, watching one of Rolf's video nasties. He has all eighty-two on the banned list, and a few more besides."

Jones sprawled in the passenger seat of the *Spitfire*, trying to lower himself out of the rushing slipstream, which threatened to whip his hair in to a Gordian knot. Mary Paddon used the car's telephone to inform the housekeeper of her return. She slowed as she approached the opening gates, then roared through with inches to spare.

A cupboard off the hall, full of hooks and hangers for the coats of visitors, gave access to the vault. Mary Paddon ran a credit-card-size oblong of plastic down a crack between two of the pine boards that lined the small room. A hinged

section of panelling opened to reveal an alphabet keyboard. *Z* had been omitted to leave a neat, five-by-five square. Mary Paddon tapped out *DIBBLEX*. The opposite side-wall opened behind Jones.

The inner room contained a row of filing cabinets, a single-pillar desk and one chair, and a cabinet of transparent plastic sheet. Three fur coats hung inside; one very dark, one brunette and one almost blond. Jones decided that the extra space had been lost somehow under the grand staircase.

"All ranch mink, of course," remarked Mary Paddon. "I don't believe in hunting wild animals for their skins, but ranch mink is no worse than a leather coat, or a sheepskin jacket. Peter doesn't believe in using proper words for his passwords."

She ran her plastic card down another crack between varnished pine boards to expose another alphabet keyboard. Nothing seemed to happen when she tapped out *ORAQNGG*. "You have to move that filing cabinet."

Jones pulled the third one forward and out of the row. A section of panelling had retracted and moved to one side when he looked up. Mary Paddon reached in to the inner vault and took out a box. It was about a one-foot cube and made of plain brown cardboard. She spread the jacket of the trouser suit on the desk and switched on the lamp.

"A button missing," said Jones. "The one the Inspector had looked just like the others."

"No sign of blood, though. No small stains at all."

"Your husband's supposed to have burned this."

"Perhaps he's preparing the ground for a little blackmail to have his evil way with Ethel."

"If he can prove this belongs to her."

"It's expensive enough to be exclusive, and it reeks of her personal fragrance, which was created specially for her. It

might as well have a name tag in it."

"I still don't believe she did it. Do you?"

"Not really. Despite all the manoeuvring, you can't put her on the spot. Assuming she really did leave her place about twenty past ten, and she spent some time losing Rolf, and she knew when Roberts would be sneaking out to screw Mrs Rosalie Jenner, she had no more than twenty minutes to work herself in to a murderous rage, do the ghastly deed and dispose of the body. You say she must have got to your place by ten past eleven?"

"Maybe a few minutes later," said Jones. "I didn't see or hear her car arrive on my way back from the pub."

"Mind you, she could have parked her car at your place immediately after she lost Rolf. You were out at the time. If she had another vehicle, besides the pick-up, she could have rushed round, murdering Mrs Blake and got to your place for half-past eleven. Just because she had sand in her shoes, that doesn't mean she went for a walk on the beach."

"All right, why didn't the police find the other vehicle?"

"Maybe she got rid of it between your going to bed and Rolf and Simmons arriving to grab her. This is all too complicated for Ethel's tiny mind."

"If not her, then who else could have done it?"

"It wasn't Peter. He was at home playing pool with a couple of his boozy pals. Rolf got back about a quarter to eleven. I saw him reporting to Peter in the hall. Then he went up to his room to watch his video nasties. Come to think of it, Peter told Bill Renfrew that Simmons was at home too but I saw him go out about half-past ten. I heard a car come back around midnight. That could have been him."

"Would he murder someone on your husband's orders? And if so, why?"

"I don't think Peter would tell him to murder someone in

so many words. He may have told Simmons to dish out a strong reprimand to her staff for letting Ethel get out for the second night running. I can just imagine Mrs Blake looking down her nose at Simmons and telling him she works for Peter, not his office boy. He might have hit her to teach her a lesson."

"Hit her a bit too hard, you mean?"

"Something like that. And then covered his tracks."

"Do you think your husband knows what happened?"

"I doubt Simmons has discussed it with him, but he must have put two and two together. Not that he'll do anything about it. A scandal like that would do untold damage to his business."

"Do nothing apart from use a convenient murder to build a cage around Claire D'Arné? Dropping hints she might have done it and letting her know he'll protect her? What a charmer!"

"'"You don't have to tell me that," smiled Mary Paddon. "I'm married to him."

"The thing I don't get," frowned Jones, "is where the button comes in to it. Claire either lost it some time before, or it was on her jacket when she was at my place."

"Don't forget she was collected in the middle of the night. Long before the body was found. Simmons could have planted it on the cliff, or wherever it was found."

"What another charmer!"

"True, but there's not much we can do about it. Well! Shall we raid the wine cellar then get out of here?"

Jones spent a quiet adulterous weekend with Mary Paddon. The fine weather had brought some trippers to the area, but they concentrated on the main sweep of beach in front of Alviney. The tide was high during the early afternoon and

the surf strong enough to attract a group of show-offs to entertain Jones and his companion after lunch. They spent most of the day on the beach, enjoying the warmth of the autumn sun.

Mary Paddon was bored with life in Alviney. Spying on her husband and his staff was becoming a dull routine. Her questions about his flat in Raynes Park began to assume a deeper significance to Jones. Mary seemed to be finding out if the flat was large enough for two, and whether Jones went in for live-in relationships.

Jones had never tried such close togetherness and he was not sure that he wanted to let the bored wife of someone as dangerous as Peter Paddon so completely in to his life. Mary, however, thought that it was an experiment that he should try.

Breakfast and a walk on the beach out of the way, Jones settled down to some work on Monday morning. He was just becoming absorbed in the job when the tuned snarl of a sports car turned onto his off-road parking area. He looked out of the front window, expecting to see a red *Spitfire* driven by a woman with short, dark hair. The woman driving the dark blue MG had long, blonde hair.

Marie-Claire D'Arné was wearing ski pants, which matched her car, and a white jacket of soft leather. A blue ribbon drew her hair in to a pony tail. She looked a convincing advertisement for a life of leisure. Jones began to search for a polite way of telling her that it was a working morning.

To his surprise, Mrs D'Arné was in a hurry. When he opened the door, she called out an invitation to lunch in St Austell. Jones thanked her. She smiled, reversed out of his garden and right across the road, and shot off towards Hingle. A black Mercedes raced after her while Jones was

still waving to the MG.

Mrs D'Arné returned promptly at twelve-thirty. She stopped on the road and tapped her horn. Jones was already on his way to join her. The top was up, making the ride quieter and less draughty.

"No Rolf?" said Jones as the car turned round, using the lay-by for extra manoeuvring room.

"Oh, I lost him ages ago," laughed Mrs D'Arné. "It's nice to be with a man who's not breathing heavily down my neck all the time."

"I'm surprised you went to London with Paddon, in that case."

"We saw a couple of good shows, and I managed to get some time to myself."

"I'm surprised he hasn't got the message by now, that you're not interested."

"Peter still thinks he can go back to the good old days. We'd been having an affair for about a year before Edward's accident. Very discreetly. Certainly much more discreet than Edward's affair. Peter's wife spies on him, you know. She's such a boring little woman, I suppose she needs to live at second-hand through Peter. Not that dear Mary is too good at her spying. She never found out about our affair."

"But it ended?" said Jones, struggling to digest a startling piece of news.

"Peter said we'd better stop seeing each other, just in case some nosy copper made five out of our relationship. Then his attempts to shield me from accusations that I killed Edward turned me off him. All that business of keeping me above suspicion, painting a picture of me as Edward's loving little wife, who existed only for him, well! It amounted to an accusation that I did it, in effect."

"Yes, I can understand that getting on your nerves."

"So I get my own back by keeping him dangling."

"You seem to have been doing that for rather a long time."

"He keeps annoying me. Take us, for example." Mrs D'Arné paused to overtake a lorry with a TIR plate, dancing onto the wrong side of the road at a convenient gap in the traffic. "When he found out I stayed the night at your place, he immediately assumed we jumped in to bed together. As if we would with someone we'd only known a couple of days! Don't you find that down right insulting?"

"It's a bit of a cheek," agreed Jones, wondering if the hypocrisy filtered through to his tone of voice.

Some of his initial amazement had faded by the time they reached St Austell. Jones could scarcely believe that Mary Paddon had not found out about her husband's affair with Mrs D'Arné. The fact that she had not mentioned it to Jones had to be due to deliberate policy, not ignorance.

A leisurely lunch, for which she insisted on paying, put Mrs D'Arné in the mood for a stroll along the sea front and then a dash back to Alviney. Jones returned to work in the middle of the afternoon. When he packed up for the day, just before nine o'clock, the only interruptions had been self-inflicted: for dinner, and a walk along the beach.

He and Mary Paddon had not made a definite arrangement for their next meeting with Mary Paddon. Chief Inspector Renfrew, Jones was starting to believe, had lost interest is him. Indeed, the whole murder story seemed to have dropped out of the news.

There had been no mention of the case on the local radio stations over the weekend.

Irritation turned to unease when a dark blue Mercedes stopped in front of his living room window towards lunchtime on Tuesday morning. Jones collected his cleaver before opening the front door, then dumped it quickly on the

window sill. Mrs D'Arné had arrived in one of Peter Paddon's cars.

"The MG's blown a gasket," she told Jones as they set off for a picnic lunch on the river, about five miles inland of Looe. "Peter lent me his spare car."

"Nice of him," said Jones, "if entirely unexpected."

"Peter never does a favour without an ulterior motive. I think he lent me his car so that Rolf will know what to look out for," smiled Mrs D'Arné. "'When is it you're supposed to be going back to London?"

"Saturday. I'm supposed to be seeing the author for a conference on Sunday and I have to be back at work on Monday."

"How near to finishing are y:u?"

"Less than a hundred pages on the first sweep."

"So you could be finished by tomorrow evening, say?"

"Easily," nodded Jones. "Given a clear run at it."

"Good! I'm planning another escape. I found out, more or less by accident, that Edward had the use of a place near Liskeard. He used it as a retreat when he wanted to get a bit of serious painting done. Did I tell you he was an artist?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Only in an amateur way, but he thought he was good at it. The house is empty at the moment and Peter doesn't know about it. I was just thinking, he'll send his minions straight to you if I disappear. But if you disappear too... You could come over on your scooter and he knows you're not leaving till Saturday, so he'll be completely baffled. Even more so if you turn up again on Friday and tell him you've not been with me."

Jones was non-committal at first. The idea of putting one over on Paddon was appealing, but he was worried about the lengths to which Rolf and Simmons would go to

interrogate him. A delicious meal helped to convince him that he would be all right if he kept his doors and windows locked, and the cleaver handy, until he caught the bus for the station on Saturday.

It was a warm and sunny day, just made for relaxing out of doors. Only the sight of leaves turning brown and red reminded the picnickers that it was October, not July. On the short journey back to his rented house, Jones looked through a guidebook to the area and discussed places to visit to fill two evenings and a day.

As he waved goodbye to the blue Mercedes, Jones realized that he had seen nothing of Rolf. He had been toying with the notion that Paddon had placed a small radio transmitter on the car so that Rolf could keep track of it. If Rolf had been shadowing Mrs D'Arné, he had been doing so remarkably skilfully.

An hour later, just when Jones was getting to grips with the last lap of his holiday job, a sports car stopped in his front garden. Mary Paddon rushed in to the house in a state of high excitement. She kissed Jones enthusiastically, then dragged him in to the living room.

"Isn't Ethel full of brilliant ideas?" she bubbled. "Sneaking off with you to Edward's secret retreat!"

"How the hell did you know that?" gasped Jones.

"Sneaky Pete put a bug in his car. Rolf was following you at a distance, listening in. I used one of his own bugs to listen in on his office when Rolf told him your plans. He's going to send Rolf and Simmons round to sort you out."

"Bloody hell!" said Jones weakly.

"So I thought we could really confuse things if you and I sneak off to *my* secret retreat and you phone Ethel to say the scooter's broken down and you'll be round the next morning."

"Bloody hell!" repeated Jones in an admiring tone.

"You can tell Ethel it might confuse Peter even more if his minions find you still at home on Wednesday night, and then you pull a disappearing act on Thursday."

"And what if the Terrible Twins stroll round to Claire's retreat on Thursday instead, having bugged all her phones and listened in on all the changes of plan?"

"They're not proper bugs. They're more like walkie-talkies, not easy to hide. And Peter's only got two sets. He's not got enough to give effective coverage, Simmons said. And besides, they've found out everything they wanted to know."

"The thing I don't get is how they knew when to bug us."

"That's Ethel," smiled Mary Paddon. "She makes it painfully obvious when she's keeping a secret. It was just a question of judging when she was about to come to the boil, then bug her. There's going to be a lovely row when she gets round to asking herself how Peter found out about the retreat and your plans."

"How long have you been doing your spying on him?"

"Only since Edward died and he started chasing Ethel. There wouldn't have been much point before. Peter was terribly boring and conventional. He reserved all his sneakiness for doing down business rivals. I used to play a lot of tennis, then I broke my ankle. I'd lost the habit by the time it was back to normal.

"Fortunately, Peter was seeing off a local solicitor, who'd taken a shine to Ethel. That's how I got a taste for listening in on his plots and plans with Rolf and Simmons."

"Ah!" said Jones.

He was still unsure whether Mary Paddon knew about her husband's affair, but if she did not, a deficiency in her spying ability was not to blame. It was not his place, he decided, to inform her of the former infidelity.

If she did not know about it, she was happier in her ignorance.

The telephone rang in the middle of the following afternoon. Marie-Claire D'Arné was reporting that, having lost Rolf, she was on her way to her retreat. Jones passed on the news to Mary Paddon, then he made a final check that everything was locked, bolted, switched off or unplugged.

His overnight luggage was already in the boot of the *Spitfire*. Jones had packed the proof of the book and his index in case Rolf and Simmons felt vindictive if they failed to find him. He did not want to return to a heap of shredded paper.

After dinner, Jones dialled a number supplied by Mrs D'Arné and made his apologies. A friend had dropped in on him unexpectedly. He would have to join her in the morning.

He considered the 'friend' more convincing than the story about trouble with his scooter. It avoided the risk of Mrs D'Arné telling him to get a bus to somewhere like Hingle, where she could pick him up.

Jones spent a pleasant evening with Mary Paddon. Her retreat was in the heart of another small town. Her flat had once been living quarters over adjacent shops. They had been closed off to form a hairdressing salon and an office, and then united to provide sitting room, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom.

Traffic zooming past on the high street and a radio woke Jones on Thursday morning. The music sounded much too urgent for eight o'clock in the morning. A tea-maker was gurgling beside the radio. Jones and his companion were half way through their first cups when the news break began.

Jones listened with half an ear. Suddenly, the facts began to take an ominous shape. Liskeard was mentioned. Two men had broken in to a house near the town.

The occupant, whose name sounded like Durney, had

defended herself with a shotgun. The area was swarming with police and ghouls. It was the local news story of at least the decade.

Mary Paddon drove him back to his rented house, then went off to snoop. It was the last time that Jones saw her. He spent the day listening to news reports. There was much speculation about the effect of the murder of Mrs Darney's housekeeper, less than a fortnight earlier and still unsolved, on her mental state.

Mrs Darney was said to be in a state of shock and received generally sympathetic treatment. Jones decided not to attempt to contact her, assuming that she would be under sedation.

In the morning, he returned to London a day early. The double shooting had become a tragic accident. A local businessman had sent his chauffeur and his personal assistant to check on the security of the widow of his former partner.

Mrs Darney had assumed that they were burglars and fired both barrels of a shotgun at them. Simmons was dead and Rolf's right arm had been amputated.

Jones kept a lookout for a report of the inquest. He had completed his index to the history of the American Revolution, and bought his new car, before it was held. The verdict was 'accident'. There was no hint of a prosecution for manslaughter, or reckless discharge of a firearm, at the very least.

Jones learnt from a colleague in the news business that someone had mentioned to Mrs Darney an outbreak of burglaries in the Liskeard area. The shotgun had belonged to her late husband.

In the middle of December, Jones received a Christmas card from Mary Paddon. She has used the blank back to write him a short letter and news bulletin. Ethel Darney had

closed up her house and gone on a world cruise to recover from the shock and her ordeal. Peter Paddon seemed to have admitted that the break was final.

Mary had switched her spying activities to a neighbour, whom, she believed, was having affairs with her golf professional and one of her husband's business rivals.

Mary Paddon asked if Jones was well in a routine way. There was no suggestion of her visiting him next time she was in London. The letter confirmed Jones' opinion that he had been used in a pawn in an elaborate game of human chess. He had had an interesting time in Cornwall, and there was no need for regrets.

The end of his relationship with Mary Paddon had been a relief once he had realized that she had lost interest in him. The lady was a little too ruthless for Jones' tastes.

She had to be the one who had mentioned the burglars to Marie-Claire D'Arné, and reminded her of the shotgun. She had spirited Jones out of a trap. She had brought Rolf and Simmons face to face with a distraught Claire D'Arné and a shotgun.

They had to have broken in to her retreat with noisy confidence, intending to panic Jones before they beat him up.

If Simmons had killed Mrs Blake, the housekeeper, perhaps while administering a physical rebuke for failing to keep a proper watch on her charge, then his death was natural justice.

Rolf would have a tough time keeping his job as a one-armed chauffeur. Jones could not feel sorry for him. Rolf's violent personality had led him to his fate.

Peter Paddon, who had assumed that he was powerful enough to interfere with the lives of others, had lost his former mistress for good. He had been bested by the wife who no longer interested him.

Mary Paddon had achieved a masterly victory in a game, and her triumph was compounded by the fact that only Ivor Jones knew that she had been playing. It was a near perfect feat of manipulation, one of which her husband would have been extremely proud.

▪ ▪ ▪

45. The Constant Companion

Betty Middleton watched the daffodils nodding in a March breeze and admitted that she had time on her hands and no ideas for filling it. She was forty-eight years old, her children had left home and the household had been reduced again to herself and her husband. Trevor was a year older, a former sportsman who devoted his spare energy to the garden, and a successful accountant. He had provided a large detached house and a car each. Betty had provided two healthy children and an island of sanity, to which he could return after a hard day at the office.

Housework and decorating had long since lost any appeal. Trevor could afford to let professionals take care of both activities. Looking after the children, shopping, supervising work around the house and arranging dinner parties had filled Betty's days.

Time had made her redundant from the most demanding job. Years of practice had reduced tackling the others to second nature. She had tried studying to keep her mind active. Three O-Levels later, she needed a change.

The state of the labour market ruled out a job, even though she was prepared to take interesting work for very little money. She had considered voluntary work, but she wanted to avoid regular commitments. Betty and Trevor went out two and sometimes three nights a week, but the days could be very long. Betty's free time was a challenge to an intelligent and inventive woman.

Trevor Middleton had managed to sneak an afternoon off. It was a hot, sunny day in the middle of August. Betty was out when he arrived home but her car was in the garage. He found some cold sausages in the fridge. Two pickled onions, a packet of crisps, a thick slice of well-buttered bread and red wine in a drinking glass completed a pleasantly informal lunch. He watched the television news and finished the paper. Then decided to do battle with the weeds.

Two large police constables found him chipping at the front flower beds with a hoe. One of them took a notebook from the breast pocket of his tunic. The information seemed to relate to Trevor Middleton's car, which was standing on the drive, in front of the garage.

"Mr Middleton? This is your vehicle?" The spokesman had a broad nose and a square chin.

"That's right." Trevor Middleton leaned on his hoe. "What about it?" He tried to keep impatience out of his voice.

"You were using it on the afternoon of the seventeenth?"

"What day was that?" Trevor looked at his watch, which was showing FRI 20. "Wednesday? Yes, I made some calls in the afternoon."

"In that ease, would you mind coming down to the station? Just routine, sir. Everything will be explained there."

Trevor realized that he had no choice. Least time would be wasted if he did what was required of him. One of the policemen hovered in attendance while he put the tools and his car in the garage, collected a jacket and locked the house. A uniformed sergeant joined him in the interview room at the police station. The sergeant had a thin face and glasses, which surprised Trevor. He had assumed that police officers must have perfect eyesight.

"We'd like a statement of your movements on Tuesday afternoon, Mr Middleton," said the sergeant briskly.

"Tuesday?" Trevor Middleton realized that a man who made a living out of figures could make a simple error under stress. If it was Friday the 20th, then the 17th had to be Tuesday. His mistake made him feel even more nervous.

"It's in connection with a road traffic accident, sir," prompted the sergeant.

"I wasn't involved in any accident."

"A witness provided as with a partial registration number. Yours is one of the cars we have to check. If you weren't involved, we have to eliminate you from the inquiry. We'd appreciate your co-operation, sir."

"Oh, well, in that case, shall I start after lunch?"

"But first I must caution you anything you say may be given in evidence. What time did you have lunch?" The caution made Trevor Middleton even more nervous. He struggled to collect his thoughts while the sergeant poised a green pen over a statement form.

Everything was taken down in a very clear copperplate, which provided another shock. Trevor was sure that copperplate had gone out of fashion years earlier and the sergeant was scarcely thirty years old.

"Right, I'll just show this to the inspector," said the sergeant when he had recorded Trevor's arrival at his home at ten to six.

The inspector himself entered the interview room five minutes later. He was in his middle twenties, noticeably younger than the sergeant, and seemed very pleased with himself.

"Just a couple of points to check, Mr Middleton," he said briskly. "You say you had a call in Colthorn, and then another in Ingleby. You travelled via Crayford and Higher Dingle. I was wondering why you didn't take the shorter, more direct route through Benford?"

"It's the longer route at the moment," said Trevor. "With the road works at Benford Bridge. There's a clear run the other way."

"I see. When were you last in Benford?"

"I couldn't say without checking my diary."

"Approximately."

"A month ago?" said Trevor with a shrug.

"You didn't know the road work was completed last weekend?"

"I think a colleague mentioned being held up last week. I went the other way as a precaution. I didn't know the work had finished. Look, what's all this about?"

"A car of the same colour as yours was involved in an accident at the bridge on the afternoon of the seventeenth, sir."

"Well, it wasn't mine. Can I go now?"

"We'd like to get your statement typed up and signed, if you wouldn't mind hanging on a little longer?"

"Well, all right." Trevor Middleton surrendered to a reasonable request put in a reasonable manner.

A long half hour later, the inspector returned, carrying the original, hand-written statement.

"Haven't you had it typed yet?" said Trevor indignantly.

"I want to make sure we have all the information correct first, sir," said the inspector smugly. "One of my men had a look at your car."

"Yes, I saw him. Did he tell you it's undamaged?"

"He noticed some scratches on the nearside front wing."

"A vandal did those yesterday in a car park."

"I see. Did you mention them to the attendant?"

"There would have been no point, had there been an attendant. Proprietors of car parks never accept responsibility for damage to vehicles on their property or

pay compensation. I did mention it to the chap I was with."

"I see. And who might that be?" The inspector took out a ball point and prepared to add to the statement.

"I don't like the way this is going," said Trevor. "I don't want to be kept hanging around here for the rest of the afternoon while you contact him."

"I think we both know how serious this is, sir," said the inspector smoothly.

"What's that supposed to mean? I don't even know for sure there was an accident. I only have your word for it."

"Oh, there was an accident all right. A seven-year-old girl. Perhaps you'd like to come to the hospital to see her?"

"In that case, perhaps you should be out looking for the person responsible instead of wasting my time," said Trevor sharply.

"I don't think we're wasting time, sir." The inspector radiated confidence. "I must say, you're being very hard-faced about this. Not a single word of remorse. You have children yourself?"

"I want to speak to my solicitor," said Trevor firmly.

"In a while, then we've checked some things."

"And besides, remorse is for the guilty. I haven't done anything wrong. Even if you've made your mind up to the contrary."

"I'm just going from the facts, sir."

"Twisting them, more like. I hope some of your men aren't kicking my car, and maybe putting some blood on it, and scratching off paint to find at the scene of the crime."

"I think I'd better let you cool off for a while, sir. Your imagination seems to be getting a little overheated."

"Am I under arrest?" said Trevor.

"Not at the moment."

"In that case, I'm going home."

"We haven't finished the statement yet."

"I'm not saying another word. I'm going."

"I wouldn't advise that, sir."

"Let me give you a piece of advice, Inspector. Arrest me or let me call my solicitor. Otherwise I'll make a complaint about your conduct. I'm not without influence. You won't be able to sweep my complaint under the carpet."

"Threats don't impress me, sir. And we're allowed to hold a suspect for up to thirty-six hours in the case of a serious crime."

"I'm a suspect now, am I? Well, I'm not threatening, I'm promising. The longer you keep me here against my will, the more trouble I'll make for you. Now, am I to be allowed to call my solicitor? I have that right whether you like it or not. For the record, I asked at two twenty-three p.m. We'll need that information for the complaint."

"Very well, sir."

The inspector tried to surrender gracefully. He was not completely sure of his ground and he had done some research on the man in the interview room. Trevor Middleton had enough influence to cause serious damage to a young inspector's career – if he was innocent.

Ronald Atkinson had known Trevor Middleton for almost twenty years. Their links were both professional and social. His immediate reaction was to fear the worst. He had fought many rearguard actions involving middle-aged men, who had either driven too fast or drunk too much. The initial reaction was always indignation and bluster. Getting the client to face the reality of his position was usually a lengthy and delicate task.

As the Middletons' home lay on his way to the police station, Trevor had asked the solicitor to call in to find out if

his wife was at home. Atkinson was used to bearing bad tidings. His client's willingness to let Mrs Middleton know what had happened was a good sign. People with a guilty secret usually tried to keep it from their family for as long as possible. Betty Middleton's first reaction was shock, as expected. She recovered quickly. It was Ronald Atkinson's turn to be shocked when she told him with full confidence that she could prove her husband's innocence.

Trevor Middleton was torn between relief and impatience then his solicitor reached the police station. Atkinson had promised to be with him within a quarter of an hour. He was half an hour late. The young inspector announced that Trevor Middleton had been eliminated from the inquiry and offered a cautious apology for any undue delay.

Trevor Middleton turned aside the olive branch and assured him that there would definitely be an inquiry in to the inspector's conduct.

His wife was waiting for him. There was a strained atmosphere in the solicitor's car as he drove the Middletons home. Trevor became aware of the atmosphere as they made the last turn onto his road. He thought, at first, that he could detect residual suspicion. Then he realized that Betty was embarrassed by something. The signs were unmistakable after twenty-four years together.

Ronald Atkinson's smile as he said goodbyes confirmed that he too knew the reason for Betty's embarrassment.

When he was safely back in his own lounge, Trevor Middleton poured himself a glass of malt whisky, and a sherry for his wife, and flopped in to his usual armchair. He was enjoying a sense of freedom, which he had never known before. He had been resigning himself to being locked up for days on end while police procedure dragged on and on to an uncertain end. He had been tried and convicted by the officer

investigating the hit-and-run and he knew that the police do not willingly release a prime suspect.

"I've got a confession to make," said Betty Middleton cautiously.

"Now's the time to make it," said Trevor expansively. "While I'm wallowing in a sense of utter relief."

"I got you out of the police station. That inspector didn't want to believe what I had to tell him, but he had to in the end."

"Why, what did you tell him?" Trevor frowned at his wife.

"I saw you on that day. Tuesday."

"When?"

"For most of the afternoon."

"How?"

"Ron said I'd better start at the beginning when I told you the story." Betty took a small notebook from her handbag. "I was bored. I'd been bored for quite a while. From not having anything interesting to do during the day."

"What about your O-Levels?"

"I was fed up with studying. Can I tell this all the way through? I've been through it once with Ron. I'm quite well rehearsed."

"Well, all right. Top up?" Trevor refilled the glasses.

"As I said, I was bored. Then I happened to spot you in town when I was out shopping a few months ago. You were on your way to lunch with someone and you didn't see me. Well, I followed you and watched you having lunch with a client. And then I followed you to your next appointment.

"I got so much fun out of it, I did it again the next week. Then I thought it was a bit risky, following you all the time, so I started doing it with complete strangers as well.

"I rationed myself to just twice a week, and only in fine weather. I even started to keep a diary about my expeditions.

It was a nice day on Tuesday, so I was out following and it just happened to be your turn. The inspector didn't want to believe me but he couldn't get round the diary. There was too much for me to have knocked up in half an hour, and too many details that could be checked."

"Well, bloody hell!" said Trevor, looking stunned.

"The inspector said he could keep that I told him confidential, but advised me to stop following people before it gets me in to trouble. Ron said the same."

"They broke the mould when they made you, Bett!" grinned Trevor.

"You don't mind? That I've been following you?" Betty offered a cautious, guilty smile.

"Well, no, of course not. I'm very grateful. You must be very good at it. I never once suspected anything."

"Still, I won't be able to do it to you again, now you know. You'll be looking out for me," Betty said wistfully.

The hit-and-run remained on the police books as unsolved. A stolen car was found abandoned thirty miles from Benford. The letters and first digit of a false number plate matched Trevor Middleton's. The reckless driver had left behind no significant clues, however.

Trevor Middleton decided not to press the issue of the inspector's conduct during his spell in the police station. There was a danger of his wife's secret coming out if there was an investigation. Betty Middleton had no wish to become a target for inquisitive reporters, looking for human interest material, and she had devised another secret hobby. Her husband felt safer not knowing what it was.

▪ ▪ ▪

46. Strike Lucky

Lance Preston needed money: not a fortune, but enough to irritate him. He received a good salary but his mortgage repayments and other domestic expenses, the upkeep of his car, clothes and many other necessities consumed it utterly. Very rarely was there anything left over for trivialities.

Just in case he ever managed to gain control of his expenditure, he had drawn up a list of items needed to improve the quality of his life. He wanted to fill some holes in his record collection – about one hundred and fifty holes. It would be nice to be able to afford to track down *Eagle* annuals to increase his collection of five to a full set. Adult toys for a single forty-two-year-old were also on the list. Preston also wanted a collection of replica firearms.

The list had become an obsession, which devoured his free moments. He was forever consulting his executive pocket notebook to learn whether inspiration was an old idea recurring or something to add to the list. Devoting one line to each item, he was on page twelve of the notebook and progressing steadily toward page thirteen.

There was one ray of hope in the darkness. Preston had spent the whole of his working life at the same firm. An office assistant had risen to the chairman's appointments secretary. It was his job to make sure that Sir John Hall arrived at meetings on time and unflustered.

They had established a conspiratorial relationship, and at a recent ceremony to present Preston with a compact-disc player to mark twenty years' loyal service, Sir John had

dropped a private hint. Lance Preston was mentioned in his will and could expect a nice bonus when the old man had gone to his last meeting.

Sir John Hall was a dried-up seventy-one. He was as tough as they came mentally, but an increasing number of his appointments were with his heart specialist. Despite constant warnings to slow down, Sir John continued to involve himself in every aspect of the business. He had no intention of reaching a ripe old age as a spectator.

At his age, he kept telling his specialist, it was time to please himself while he could. Infirmity had reduced significantly his capacity for enjoyment. A quick end, Preston was convincing himself, could be an act of kindness. Sir John was incapable of giving in but he might be grateful if someone else took the decision for him.

Locals called Sir John's home *The House On The Hill*. It was set in a twelve-acre estate and just the staff lived in. His third wife, divorced ten years earlier, lived abroad. The children from his first two marriages maintained a cautious distance. Disagreements with their father were common and they felt cheated out of their right to run the family business as they thought fit. Father, they insisted, should have done the decent thing and retired at sixty-five.

Preston had been an almost invisible observer at many heated exchanges. Acid comments made by departing offspring had set him thinking. Despite the warnings of his specialist, Sir John was stubborn enough to hang on for a good many years more, just for the sake of thwarting his children. Easing him on his way would increase the store of human happiness considerably. And if anyone suspected foul play, Lance Preston would be at the far end of a long list of much better suspects.

The method kept him guessing for a while. There were no

guns in the house, not even a shotgun. Sir John was not the sporting type. Preston did not feel able to club his employer with the traditional blunt instrument. He was too afraid of blood, flesh or hair flying onto the assailant, to be detected later by a skilled forensic scientist.

There was the same drawback with a gun: metallic particles from the bullet and powder grains flying from the explosion to coat both the victim and his assassin.

His employer's habits provided inspiration. Sir John had been told to get plenty of fresh air during the fine summer weather. He spent part of one weekday afternoon on the front lawn. The house on the hill commanded a fine view, over the trees, of rolling farmland.

Sir John took reports out to read during his two-hour exposure to fresh air. Preston supplied him with two medium-size cigars and a half-bottle of champagne as calculated disobedience of the specialist's orders.

When the master was sunning himself, the gardener found things to do behind the house and the staff kept well out of sight. Sir John had a telescope, which he trained on the house from time to time to make sure that no one was watching his forbidden smoking and drinking.

He used a swivelling chair with a footrest, a sunshade and trays to left and right of the armrests. An electric motor turned it, and a compensator in the swivel kept him at the same comfortably reclined angle whether he was facing up or down the slope of the lawn.

The slope gave Preston his idea. Sir John had a collection of luxury cars. Three of them were parked in front of the house: a Jaguar, a Rover and Daimler. Sir John liked a choice for his trip to the office for the final hour of the business day.

An earlier Jaguar had been written off by a careless chauffeur, who had failed to apply the handbrake correctly.

The vehicle had charged down the front lawn, demolished part of a fence and battered down a young tree while receiving terminal damage. Preston had been in a room at the rear of the house at the time, but he had been startled by the sound of the crash.

Sighting from the sitting room window, he noticed that the Rover was aligned with his employer's chair on that particular day. He had been considering the idea for three weeks. None of the cars had been positioned suitably before. Refusing to think about what he was doing, he collected two pre-prepared wedges of ice from the fridge in the bar.

There was no one about, no one to see him chock the rear wheels of the Rover with the blocks of ice and, wearing cotton gloves, release the handbrake. The car moved forward slightly, then stopped as the chocks took hold. He closed the door carefully then went back in to the house.

Sir John had been sitting out in the sun for ten minutes. It was time to take him his cigars and champagne.

It was a hot day. Preston could feel the sun burning his face as he approached the chair, eyes slitted against the glare. He was carrying a foot-square black box, which could be clamped to one of the trays. Inside were a chilled half bottle of champagne, a glass, the two cigars, a lighter and an extinguisher-ashtray for the butts.

Preston wondered how long the ice would take to melt. He experienced a delicious thrill of fear as he presented his back to the Rover's radiator grill and clamped the box to the tray. At the same time, he was confident that he could get out of the way if the car started to roll while he was in its path.

The drive was twenty yards away. Preston was concentrating so much, straining to hear the sounds of a heavy weight in motion, that he missed his employer's comment at first. Sir John wanted him to read part of a report and marvel

at the author's stupidity. The car was moving before Preston heard it. He looked over his shoulder and tried to make an instant assessment of the car's direction. It was moving in a curve. It would miss the chair.

Preston grabbed the front of Sir John's jacket and heaved. The car was moving to the right of the chair. Preston tried to drag Sir John in to its path. The car hit a bump and veered even further to the right. Preston swung his employer by his jacket. He was able to marvel at the ease with which he could move the old man. Sir John seemed astonishingly light, as if he were just expensive clothes stuffed with plastic foam. Preston hurled him in to the path of the speeding car.

The car hit another bump and turned back toward the chair. Preston tried to jump out of the way but he had left his escape too late. He landed on the bonnet, rolled across it, banged his head on the windscreen and then everything went black.

Preston woke in a bed. Things were very confused for a long time. Out of focus figures made incomprehensible sounds, and he remained conscious for short periods. Then he woke up and everything started to make sense.

A nurse told him that he was in hospital and he had been severely concussed. His right leg and shoulder were badly bruised and he could feel bandages on his head. The doctor assured him that nothing was broken. He would be able to leave the hospital in a couple of days as good as new.

Preston began to believe that he was all right when his employer called to see him. The assassination attempt had taken place on a Tuesday. It was Friday of the same week. Sir John had recovered completely from the shock of his rough treatment. He shooed the nurse out of the private room and drew a chair over to the bed.

"Smashing black eye, Lance," he grinned.

"It feels about as bad as it looks," said Preston. "You're all right?"

"I thought the old ticker might give out, but it kept going. The quack was being very cagey about you. Kept going on about possible brain damage. But you'll be pleased to hear everything is all right and you'll be leaving here on Sunday. Not that you'll be able to do anything but lounge about for a couple of weeks. You know you saved my life? Damn brave thing to do. But you nearly left it too late for yourself."

"Spur of the moment improvisation," said Preston modestly. "There wasn't much time for thinking."

"You know, I have my doubts whether it was an accident." Sir John lowered his voice to a confidential murmur. "The chauffeur was quite positive he put the handbrake on properly. He says he double checked all three cars before he went for his lunch."

"What about mechanical failure?"

"No, there was nothing wrong with the car. I think it was deliberate."

"Oh?" said Preston, expecting to be told next that the police were waiting outside to question him.

"And I've been thinking who'd benefit from my death. Any one of my five ungrateful brats fills the bill."

"Not your own children?" Preston forced disbelief in to his voice, drowning relief.

"Family ties are no barrier to ambition, Lance. Especially when the common opinion is that the old man should have retired six years ago. So I've decided to give them a shock. I'm having a new will drawn up leaving them practically nothing. I'm going to put it in a locked drawer in my desk.

"They should all have seen it by the middle of next week. Of course, I'll rip it up in a month or two, but I won't tell them. They'll be falling over themselves to keep me alive

after that," laughed Sir John. "And watching each other like hawks. That should do the trick, eh, Lance?"

"Sounds very effective." Preston smiled with the left side of his face.

"And I haven't forgotten you," beamed Sir John. "I know thanks are no real use to anyone, so you'll find your salary has taken a healthy leap upwards next month, and there'll be a tax-free bonus waiting when you get out of here.

"I managed to scrape together eight thousand pounds in cash without anyone noticing. If anyone does, I'll say I gambled it away. Or lost it, like a dotty old lunatic."

"I don't know that to say," said Preston weakly. "Apart from thank you very much."

"Don't bother," smiled Sir John. "You nearly got yourself killed saving me. All the thanks are due from me. Well, I'll leave you to it. The doctor said not to tire you unduly. If you want anything, just ask for it. Everything's on the firm."

Preston gave his employer a left-handed shake and watched Sir John leave the room. The luck was with him. It was true that his bungled assassination attempt had nearly got himself killed, but £8,000 would more than clear his list. He could be able to fill a bookshelf with *Eagle* annuals, a cupboard with replica weapons and think seriously about replacing records with compact discs where the choice was available.

Preston was discharged from hospital on Sunday morning. A wheelchair took him from his room to the car. Sir John had brought the Rolls to give him plenty of room for his bruised leg, which was more comfortable straight. His convalescence would be spent at the House On The Hill.

Preston played the part of wounded hero well, delegating most of his work to an assistant but keeping in touch with Sir

John's appointments by telephone. On Wednesday, using a stick, he hobbled out onto the front lawn with his employer's ration of cigars and champagne. On Thursday morning, Sir John's valet found his master dead in bed.

Lance Preston spent several anxious hours until the doctor declared that the death was due to natural causes. Preston had been worrying about one of his employer's children putting poison in Sir John's champagne before he or she read the new will. In fact, a blood clot had travelled to Sir John's brain and lodged there, blocking the flow. He had died a peaceful death in his sleep.

When he attended the reading of the will, the day after the funeral, Preston resigned himself to a long wait until the solicitor reached the minor bequests at the end. He found himself sitting up in his chair with his mouth hanging open, and five indignant offspring staring at him, as the terms of the will sank in.

In the document intended only to frighten his children, Sir John had left half of his estate to his appointments secretary. The rest, apart from minor bequests to other employees, went in to a trust for his grandchildren.

Wearing a completely new outfit from head to toe, bought with the first slice of his £8,000, Lance Preston sat through the rest of the reading in a daze. His plan had been wildly successful for completely wrong reasons.

He had no idea whether the will would stand up in court, and it was sure to be contested by Sir John's children, but he had gambled and won more than his expectations. For once, fortune had favoured the unscrupulous. Lance Preston had no complaints.

▪ ▪ ▪

47. Lucky Numbers

A mile below ground level, the lights were powered by a plutonium field-generator – an irony which lingered in the thoughts of the Survivors' Committee of Nuclear-Destroyed America. They ruled an inverted society, in which politicians and military commanders formed the lowest stratum. The radioactive devastation above was a monument to the failure of traditional leaders. Others had taken their place, confident that they could never do worse.

"Next item on the agenda: a proposal that we do something about Technician Blake," said the chairman of SCONDA, who had been a librarian with a teenage family in normal life.

"Like what?" squawked his aide, abandoning her shorthand notes to pick at a stain on the sleeve of her olive green uniform. The name tag said MURGATROYD, G., but Marta Hellman had just sorted through the treasure house of the military stores until she had found something that was a good fit. Her original garments, along with everyone else's, had been discarded in the decontamination chamber on the way down to the survival shelter.

The chairman winced, recoiling from his aide's strident East Coast accent. It conjured up all the lowest and most common parts of pre-destruction New York. He came from the city of brotherly love but he could not lament the end of New York.

"Something must be done urgently," asserted the director of supplies before the chairmen could gather his thoughts

after the jar. Her name tag read CROSTAN, Y. because she had worked out how to use the embroidery machine and she had replaced the original name tag. "That bastard Blake is digging in to the equipment stores as if the stuff was still rolling out of the factories. If we don't stop him, and stop him fast, there won't be a goddam thing left."

"Thank you, Mary," said the chairman, who was plain Andy Lumm, and Lt.-Col. BOLSTED, V., according to his uniform. The young, black woman's waspish attitude made him nervous. "But as Marta said, like what? We're open to suggestions." His eyes travelled round the plastic table from Hellman to Dr Strad, to Jai Bingham, who made fashion out of olive drab, to Crostan on his left.

"Shove the son-of-a-bitch in the conditioner," said Crostan patiently, stating the obvious. "Shake his brains around till the bastard loses whatever obsession he's got."

"It's a little more complex than that," said Dr Strad, who could write a fair portion of the alphabet after his name. He had been a successful psychiatrist before the former leaders had robbed him of his practice. "The conditioner is experimental, intended to reduce hysteria and loss of perspective through catastrophe. It has to be used with delicacy. It's not a mental rubber hose, you know."

He had been preaching calm and logic for thirty-six years, during time which his hair had become a distinguished grey and he had acquired a pair of half-moon spectacles.

"Shove it, Doc," said Crostan. "You know what I mean. Either you straighten him out or we try it. He's consuming irreplaceable assets."

"Extreme action is not part of our remit," said Jai Bingham, the legal advisor. She was a faded blonde in her late thirties, who was wearing a cool outfit made from naval tropical whites as a means of showing her independence.

"Our *remit*," Crostan sneered through the word, "is what we make it. This is a supply matter. Are you going to let us take care of it? The guy is a nut."

"Mr Blake is not 'a nut'," said Dr Strad in measured tones. "And it could be argued that he's the most valuable member of our society. He merely has a mild obsession about the number thirteen. He isn't dangerous, and as I understand it, he's collecting equipment for which we have no use at the present time and are unlikely to need for some considerable time, if at all. The military packed this place with totally ridiculous quantities of irrelevant junk."

"And lined their pockets from cosy deals with defense contractors," said Marta Hellman, the voice of youthful cynicism.

"Before the world blew up, we had time to sit around on our butts, yapping," groaned Crostan. "Now's a time for action. Before that bastard Blake strips us clean of micro-servo-motors and other things we can't replace because we don't have the fabrication resources."

"Remind me," said Lumm, "what equipment uses those motors?"

"Nothing at the moment," said Crostan patiently. "But they're the sort of thing we'll need in the future. Except we won't have any if Blake keeps sneaking off with them."

"Legally, Blake is as entitled as any of us to take materials from the stores," said Bingham. "More, in fact, because he's our maintenance expert."

"As a taxpayer, he contributed as much as any of us to their cost." Chairman Lumm completed the argument. "But there are channels. His clandestine predations are causing disharmony and if we don't know what he's taking, how do we know he's only taking equipment we don't use?"

"There's so much junk down here," said Hellman

dismissively, "who cares that he takes?"

"We'll have to trap him," said Crostan, ignoring the twenty-four-year-old, former waitress and part-time secretary. "Catch him in the act. Then Doc Strad can give him a quick jolt of aversion therapy to stop him coming back, Does that sound legal enough for you?"

"Vote requested," said Chairman Lumm, cutting across further debate. "In favour?"

"If the alternative is more drastic action." Dr Strad lifted a hand off the table to make a third vote. "We must remember that Mr Blake is an essential part of our survival."

"Carried." Lumm lowered his hand. "Next item?"

"Complaints about work details from our failed leaders," said Marta Hellman with a grin.

Lumm started the clock in front of him. "No more than five minutes. What are they moaning about now?"

Still grinning, Hellman began to read rapidly from a long list. The shelter had a population of 582, of whom about half were former members of the executive class. They had rushed to shelter on receiving a warning.

The others were civilians, who had been lucky enough to be visiting the complex at the time of crisis, and an army maintenance crew. A spontaneous revolution had disarmed less than thirty soldiers and drivers. The lowest level of the new society was good at writing complaints. Their new rulers enjoyed rejecting them.

For thirty-two years, Fred Blake had worked for a company which had danced to the Pentagon's tune. He had become an expert on servo-mechanisms, the devices used to steer missiles in flight and unmanned rovers on other planets, and to operate and deploy the instruments of space probes. In his private life, he had been an inventor in a minor way,

spending hours tinkering with his gadgets, striving for perfection when he had taken an idea to its limit.

Blake was one of the most vital members of the complex's closed society, and the most unassuming. He was happy roaming the four miles of interlinking passages deep beneath the earth, making sure that everything was working smoothly. An assistant towed his large tool-kit in a two-wheeled golf cart. Ryan Edwards had been one of the youngest blue-eyed, firm-jawed colonels in the United States Air Force. Mass devastation had made him redundant.

Blake and Edwards were in one of the hydroponics caverns, looking at an irrigation pump, when Christine Walenski caught up with them. Edwards was smoking one of the diminishing stock of cigarettes and looking blankly at rows of tomato plants. The survivors' diet was mainly vegetarian. Stocks of meat were held in freezers, but they were reserved for special occasions, The occasions were even less frequent for the former executive class, who were deemed to have had more than their fair share of the good things of life.

Christine Walenski was a former secretary with mechanical leanings. She was in her middle thirties and she had lost her entire family. Her husband had taken their two children to the zoo while Mom and a party of neighbours had taken the tour of the deep shelter. She believed that Fred Blake had saved her sanity by letting her tackle small repair jobs to keep her busy in the early days. They had become friends, colleagues and conspirators.

Blake had taken part of the waterproof shell from the pump and found a broken piston. He glanced at the replacement part, in a neat polythene bag with a label, then threw it over to his assistant. "No good, son."

Ryan Edwards gripped the filter with his teeth and snarled

silently round his cigarette. He dug in to a pocket of the golf cart. Blake's obsession with the number thirteen meant that he would use only spare parts with the figures 1 and 3 in their serial number, numbers which were multiples of thirteen or numbers whose digits added up to thirteen.

One of Edwards' most boring duties included sorting acceptable parts out of the vast collections held in the stores and exchanging stock tags if he was unable to find sufficient materials for a job. Sometimes, a non-thirteen part got through the screen. Edwards took an acceptable part over to his boss and retired out of earshot.

"What's new, Doll?" drawled Blake as he worked the new piston in to position.

"A lucky break," murmured Walenski. "I was fitting a new plug in Mary Crostan's office this morning. She didn't think I could see her VDU, but I had a mirror in my toolkit. She was checking some access codes. Including that store on Corridor Thirty-Nine you've been trying to get in to."

"Did you get it?" said Blake urgently.

"Four thirteen twenty-one," grinned Walenski.

"My girl, I think you're ready for a soldier-boy to carry your tools."

"Make him a pretty one, Fred," laughed Christine Walenski.

All firearms had been locked away, but the medical centre could provide a chemical cosh when necessary. When a figure in workman's clothes appeared on her video monitor, Mary Crostan glanced down at the hypo-spray in her right hand. It was shaped like a revolver with a very short barrel. Only one of the six cylinders was loaded - with a capsule of tranquillizer. When the trigger was pulled, a measured dose would be forced through the patient's skin at high pressure.

All around Crostan were shelves full of olive green boxes of various sizes, all stamped with code numbers in white. She could see plenty of thirteens. Blake would spirit them away, either to attempt to make something out of the components or just for the twisted pleasure of having them in his possession.

He had no thought for the future and none for storage under the proper conditions, His obsession drove him to fill his hideouts with thirteens. Only his position of great practical importance to the survival of the subterranean society had made the SCONDA put off and put off the decision to restrict his behaviour.

Fred Blake's undisciplined grey thatch stopped at the door to the store room. Mary Crostan watched him start to prod out a number on the security panel as part of a programme of educated guesses – Blake was too smart to use the right number straight off – then she rushed to her prepared hiding place. A case the size of a locker, without a 'thirteen' number, had been placed beside the door. Crostan felt slightly constricted, but she would be able to open the door soon enough; when Blake had his back to her.

The store-room door whispered open, then closed. Blake walked in to Crostan's field of view through a spyhole. He was wearing his usual grubby, dark blue overall. Shortened sleeves exposed pale arms with curls of thick, black hair. He was towing a two-wheeled golf cart and he had lost his assistant. A wall of thirteens stopped him dead. Each of the small boxes had a serial number in the thirteen hundreds.

While Blake was taking in the glorious sight, Crostan took her opportunity to slip silently out of her hiding place. The hypo-spray hissed softly, forcing tranquillizer solution in to a bare arm. Crostan stepped back quickly and waited. To her surprise, Blake came out of his trance and began to load olive

green boxes in to his golf cart. Crostan wondered whether to risk another dose of the drug, then she returned to her hiding place before Blake noticed her presence.

His golf cart filled with random loot, Fred Blake left the store room. Mary Crostan gave him a five-minute start then hurried to the medical centre. Angrily, she complained to Dr Strad about his ineffective drug. Strad took the hypo-spray from her, fired a sample in to a glass vial and placed it in the auto-analyzer. Within minutes, the print-out gave details of the formula of the drug and its concentration.

"As I agreed, I believe?" said Dr Strad patiently. "A dose sufficient for rapid incapacitation."

"I don't understand." Crostan began to lose the momentum of her anger. "I gave him a dose in the arm."

"And that did Mr Blake do?"

"Do? He just carried on filling that golf cart of his with boxes."

"Allow me to give you a demonstration." Dr Strad placed a capsule in the cylinder of the hypo-spray. "This is just sterile saline. Roll up your sleeve."

Crostan obeyed. The doctor placed the spray-gun against her upper arm and pulled the trigger. "What did you feel?"

"A sharp prod." Crostan resisted the urge to rub her arm.

"And that was a dose administered by an expert. Are you sure you pulled the trigger then you tried to inject Blake?"

"Of course, I am!"

"Then why didn't he feel the injection?"

"I don't know," frowned Crostan.

"Perhaps I'd better handle the next one. I assume he'll return to the store room?"

"Oh, yes. He has hundreds of thirteens to sneak away," said Crostan.

The system of surveillance cameras in corridors and public areas had been declared an undemocratic invasion of privacy. It could be used only in the event of a catastrophe, such as a fire, to assist in rescue work and to ensure public safety. Fred Blake had taken the precaution of carrying out a routine check of the system.

Some 'accidental' cross-circuiting had cut off the input from the camera on Corridor 39 and substituted a view of Corridor 58, a rarely-used passage at the edge of the complex.

Mary Crostan had discovered the sabotage while carrying out last-minute checks before her ambush. A network of human detectors, using the public telephone system, had been thrown around the area to give an early warning of Blake's approach. There had been some confusion initially because one of the watchers had reported Blake's entry in to a service crawlway off Corridor 5, on the other side of the complex, and the presence of his ex-colonel assistant and the tool-kit at the access hatch.

Crostan had not worked out how Blake had managed to reappear in the area of Corridor 39, the plans showed no line of communication available to a human, but she knew that she was up against a very clever man.

Digging in to records and memories, Crostan discovered that Blake had done a lot of work on the surveillance system. She assumed that he had been substituting a view of Corridor 58 every time he raided a store room. Edwards, his assistant, was a fairly regular customer at an automatic coffee shop on Corridor 5. Crostan was in possession of just too few pieces to solve the puzzle.

Crostan alerted her watchers and telephoned Dr Strad the next time that Blake's shadow reported that the maintenance team was heading for Corridor 5. A quarter of an hour later,

when Blake had been spotted heading for Corridor 39 with a golf cart, one of the team shouted in to the access hatch on Corridor 5 to report a defective light panel in neighbouring Corridor 4. Blake's voice told her that it would be attended to next.

Refusing to ask themselves how the technician could be in two places simultaneously, Dr Strad and Mary Crostan crushed in to their respective olive green storage-case hides. A grey-haired figure in grubby, short-sleeved overalls towed a golf cart in to the store room. Dr Strad fired a dose of tranquillizer in to a bare arm while the man was admiring another collection of thirteens. When the drug had no effect, he fired another dose in to the man's neck.

Mary Crostan watched in amazement as the doctor ran a finger up and down the skin at the back of Blake's neck. Dr Strad took hold of the grey hair and pulled a wig came off, revealing a bald dome with a greyish cast. Dr Strad stepped back. He waved a summons to Crostan, then cleared his throat noisily. The bald figure jerked guiltily, then turned round.

"I never knew he was bald," said Crostan, staring in fascination at the greyish scalp.

"The real Mr Blake isn't," said Dr Strad. "Allow me to introduce you to the ultimate conceit. He's built himself an android in his own image."

Two hours later, the Survivors' Committee of Nuclear Destroyed America assembled to view the android and its control mechanism, which had been removed from a hidden room at the end of the crawlway off Corridor 5. Fred Blake climbed in to a spacesuit-like garment in an open framework of steel rods.

When he closed the visor of the helmet, cables attached to

the shoulders lifted the suit twenty centimetres in to the air.

"I have reactive sensors in the control suit," said the android, those wig had been restored. "Which means that all movements I make are transmitted to the explorer module, and resistances to movement are returned to me. So I can walk and change direction."

The android began a circuit of the conference table.

"And I can judge how much pressure to exert to pick an object up."

The android raised an empty water glass to its mouth.

"When the development work on the explorer module is completed," continued Blake, "the next step will be to develop a relay system for the video, sound and sensor signals. Suitably miniaturized and with several channels, so that when more than one module is in service, they will be able to repair each other in the field. There'll come a time when we run out of the parts necessary to repair existing mechanisms and build new ones..."

"You mean with a thirteen in the serial number?" said Andy Lumm, the chairman.

"Parts we can use." Blake refused to acknowledge his obsession.

"Hey, we can use the gadget to take a walk on the surface," squealed Marta Hellman, putting a look of pain on the chairman's long face. "Get away from this dump for a while."

"We can also use it to monitor external radiation levels," said Dr Strad. "Or some simpler form of rover."

"And contact other groups of survivors," said Jai Bingham.

"Hold it!" said Mary Crostan as the enthusiasm seemed to be getting out of control. "We called this meeting to put a stop to Blake digging in my stores. When are we going to carry out the decision of the last meeting?"

"I think that decision has become irrelevant now," said Andy Lumm gravely. "Mr Blake has demonstfated that he's made sensible use of the parts he's been taking from the stores; and opened up a possible route to replacing them from outside. Our only complaint can be his lack of consultation, in all fairness."

"You mean he's going to get away with it?" demanded Crostan.

"In these desperate times, we have to make full use of all our resources, no matter how unlikely," said Lumm. "Mr Blake's obsession is fairly harmless, and it can be positively beneficial. No matter how much it may pain Mary, I think we'll just have to let him work outside the system to a certain extent."

"Or change the system," muttered Mary Crostan, wondering whether she had the resources to rewrite computer records and change packages to eliminate thirteens from the code numbering system, thus forcing Fred Blake to look elsewhere for parts to use in his personal projects.

Conserving stores for the nebulous future was her obsession, but she would never admit that she too was tainted with Blake's condition.

▪ ▪ ▪

48. Hannibal's Children

The first incident took place on a summer night on a beach near Santa Monica, California. Morning joggers were shocked to find the remains of half a dozen teenagers, who had been enjoying a moon-lit beach party.

The bodies had been crushed and pounded in to the sand; as though a fleet of heavyweight beach-buggies driven by fiends had passed over and over the victims until all life was extinct and the bodies mutilated beyond recognition.

A straight trail of disturbed sand ran from the highway in to the sea. As far as the forensic team could tell, the victims had been unlucky. Had the vehicles left the highway a few yards earlier or later, then they would have missed the teenagers completely.

An inch by inch search was made of the area, and many photographs were taken, but no clear tyre tracks were found.

Puzzling depressions, roughly circular and about fourteen inches across, were found at the edges of the disturbed area. The lab report suggested that the vehicles might have had a series of large pads fitted to the tyres, but the reason for the modification remained obscure.

In police headquarters, a file grew thick with pictures and statements. Everyone in the area was questioned. Officers travelled up and down the highway seeking information from regular users.

Nobody had seen a gang of fiends in off-road vehicles with pads on the tyres. The parents of the teenagers buried their dead. Fresher corpses claimed the attention of the Santa

Monica Homicide Squad. The case remained on file; a mystery; unsolved.

Just over a year later, at a conference of police officers at Trenton, New Jersey, a delegate from Los Angeles joined a discussion on bizarre unsolved cases in the hotel's Starlight Bar. He told the group about the Santa Monica Crushers. He was astounded to learn that there had been a similar case just up the coast from Atlantic City two years earlier.

Another officer, a tanned, outdoor type from Washington State who was full of backwoods machismo, had participated in the investigation of an unsolved crushing near a lake in Mount Rainier Park five years earlier. A sergeant from Florida, a tall, pale woman in her middle thirties, was sure that she had heard of a crushing case soon after her graduation from the Police Academy.

The main business of the conference was to discuss advances in the technology used to transmit information between the nation's police forces and the government agencies concerned with federal and international wrongdoing. A study of unsolved crushing cases became part of the agenda as a demonstration and a test.

Requests went out to data centres for files. The delegates were astounded by the level of response. They received reports on crushing cases, most involving property rather than people, going right back to the end of World War One.

When they had eliminated cases which did not fit the pattern of the original four, they were left with twenty-nine incidents. The first had taken place in the summer of 1919. Statistical analysis failed to find a regular pattern to the intervals between subsequent crushings.

The incidents had begun in a small way in Massachusetts and Connecticut. A computer plot of data versus location

showed a mysterious plague sweep westwards before becoming totally random. The last three reports had come from Oklahoma, California and then New Jersey.

Masses of information flowed in to a powerful police computer in Washington, DC. Countless facts were ground down to common factors. All of the crushings discovered more or less immediately had taken place at night. Every report had come from an out-of-the-way area near water; the sea or a lake.

Many incidents coincided with public holidays in the middle of the year: Easter, Independence and Labor Days, and Thanksgiving. As the data was ground finer, the crushings were found also to have a link with the full moon.

Everyone made the obvious connection with werewolves, but Hollywood had failed to provide its public with examples of werewolves crushing their victims to death with off-road vehicles after bloodily dismembering them.

Several investigators noted in their report that the distinctive trail left by the crushers looked like it had been made by a herd of large animals, which had been driven to and from the water. But they had failed to find tracks leading away from the crushed area; left by either animals or the heavy vehicles used to transport them.

Some investigators believed that a kind of tracked vehicle had been used. The suggestions began with vehicles of World War One vintage, such as contemporary tractors and the Renault FT17 tank, and developed to a modern, off-road vehicle. No one could provide a convincing explanation of why the tracks or wheels had been fitted with large, almost circular pads.

The search for common denominators continued. Information from hotel and motel registers, airline passenger lists and credit card purchase records were fed in to the computer

to be matched against the location of crushing incidents first of all, and then public holidays that had coincided with a full moon. The name Smith appeared everywhere in the records. The investigators prayed that the cult of crushers did not have ordinary names.

Weeks went by. The original conference became a distant memory but the delegates continued to devote as much time as they could manage to reviewing evidence, talking to the original investigating officers and passing on everything that turned up to the computer team in Washington, DC.

Labor Day and a conjunction with a full moon approached. Search programs automatically copied details of current airline reservations to the Washington computer. The name Castelar emerged from the mass of data late on the Friday before the holiday.

Castelars had been found in the vicinity of most of the crushings. About twenty male Castelars and their wives seemed to be planning a family reunion at Elk Falls in eastern Minnesota. There was a convenient lake half a dozen miles out of town.

The investigation had become famous in police circles, but the delegates from the summer conference managed to arrive quietly in Elk Falls. Some had reservations at the two motels. The rest had hired campers to use as surveillance vehicles.

The local police chief maintained an attitude of good-humoured scepticism when he recognized a former colleague in a bar. His local Castelar family had lived in the area for forty years and had a record as respectable as any. He could not visualize his Castelars crushing other humans brutally with strange vehicles.

While the police chief felt unable to ignore the findings of the computer's sifting operation, he placed them on a par with the so-called proofs that UFOs contain visitors from

other planets. The Elk Falls police chief believed that there had to be another explanation, even if he was unable to come up with it.

Lake Onan offered good fishing to the visitor and good business to the merchants of Elk Falls. Police chief Hardy Rykowskiy swore the mayor and his top advisors to secrecy before he revealed the details of the computer report. The group decided unanimously that there was no way that they could close the area to tourists on the days around the full moon.

They had been shown a series of connections thrown out by a computer. The visiting police officers were taking the matter seriously, even though they admitted their reservations freely. If the town council closed the area and nothing happened, both they and the regional police forces of the largest nation in the free world - those represented by delegates to the summer conference - would become an international joke.

The sensible alternative, the major and his advisors decided, was to be prepared for trouble, and to be prepared to contain it if anything happened.

A ghostly full moon was well above the horizon when the sun set, sparking fire on a few wisps of cloud. Three campers containing undercover police officers were parked in strategic positions where the road from Elk Falls met the lake. The officers were armed with Magnum handguns, hunting rifles with hollow-nose, big game ammunition and repeating shotguns.

Two helicopters fitted with searchlights and pods of rockets were standing by to tackle the crushing vehicles if they showed up. None of the Castelars, local and visiting, either owned an off-road vehicle or had shown any interest in them.

John Castelar Senior owned a large house with extensive grounds on Riverside Drive, a quarter of a mile out of Elk Falls. As Sunday night darkened, the surveillance teams reported that all of the family had gathered behind John Castelar Senior's home. A barbeque and vast quantities of liquor were being enjoyed. Restricted to coffee and sandwiches, the routine reports from the surveillance teams became increasingly envious.

At half past midnight, the watchers went on red alert. The female Castelars had either gone in to the house or returned to their hotel. Their men were organizing a convoy. Half a dozen vehicles set off up river, past the fifteen-foot drop of Elk Falls, towards Lake Onan. Police vehicles followed at a distance. Helicopter pilots warmed up their engines and prepared for a fast take-off.

Action became anticlimax. The crew of one of the campers radioed that the male Castelars had stopped a quarter of a mile from the lake and were standing around, drinking cans of beer beside their cars. They were about thirty yards from the darkened police observation post.

One a.m. approached. The full moon had almost reached its zenith, flooding the area with silvery light. The police watchers had established a mobile control centre beside the road, a mile from the lake.

Three cars, a van and both helicopters were waiting on a firm stretch of ground. Two of the three campers were positioned on either side of the road and a quarter of a mile from it, watching for the approach of crushing vehicles.

A report on the Castelars from the nearest camper ended in the middle of a sentence. Then came shouts of surprise, amazement, fear. Three shots slammed in to a growing wall of noise. Screams ended in crashes, then total silence.

The police officers in flanking campers reported that they

could hear the crushers and called for assistance. A visiting detective snapped out of his state of shocked inertia. He rushed out of the control van to wave the helicopters in to the air. Heavily armed officers packed in to their cars and screamed up the road toward the lake.

Less than a minute later, the helicopter pilots reported sightings of a group of large vehicles at the edge of the lake. They opened fire with their rockets. Explosions brightened the lake shore. A radio voice shouted something about a herd of animals. When the beasts charged back toward the Castelars' vehicles, the helicopters resumed their attack.

The rockets ran out. Everyone held his or her breath. There was no movement on the ground. Searchlights and headlights probed the battlefield, cutting through walls of drifting smoke, lighting raw craters. Neither crusher vehicles nor large animals could be seen.

The central police camper had been flattened. Both officers were just bloody smears in the wreckage. Pieces of human bodies were scattered along the strip of hard-pounded earth from the wreck to the lake. The rockets had demolished nineteen male members of the Castelar family.

Late-season tourists began to arrive at the scene of the slaughter, drawn by violent explosions. The local police chief quickly created a picket line to give himself time to come up with an explanation for what had happened. Then someone remembered that the helicopters had been fitted with low-light television cameras and video-recorders to capture pictures of the mysterious crushing machines if they put in an appearance.

A technician moved a television monitor to the rear door of the control van to allow the massed police team to view the tapes. They flew to the lake on fast-forward, then slowed. Large objects were frolicking about on the shoreline.

Someone remarked that it looked like a scene out of a *Tarzan* movie.

Trunks squirted water in to the air as a large herd of elephants splashed merrily in the shallows. Then brilliant flashes flared on the screen as rockets struck home. The elephants began to stampede back toward the Castelars' vehicles.

Between brilliant explosion-flashes, the audience could see huge bodies blown apart on the ground, left behind by the racing herd. When the screen-filling, obliterating flashes ended, however, there was no sign of the elephants.

A large object, shrinking like a deflating blimp, passed across the screen in less than a second. The view was distorted as the pilot rotated his machine in search of targets.

Whenever the helicopter steadied, images of shattered human bodies could be seen on the ground.

According to the local news services the following morning, there had been a shoot-out between two gangs of drug-smugglers by the lake. A sustained effort had cleaned up the site of the massacre before morning. Rubber-neckers were allowed to see that there was nothing much too see and they soon lost interest. They had a public holiday to enjoy elsewhere.

The remaining Castelars were rounded up and taken to a nearby National Guard barracks for questioning. Although distracted by grief, shock and anger at the deaths of nineteen of their men, the women refused to answer questions about the deaths of two police officers locally and the deaths of dozens of other citizens around the United States.

The results of extensive investigations were fed in to the police computer in Washington, DC. Space industry experts examined the videotapes recorded in the helicopters, and ran

the pictures through their enhancement computer programs to eliminate the effects of the helicopters' erratic motions and the obscuring explosive flares.

One month after the slaughter at Lake Onan, the police officers involved in the long investigation were invited to Washington for a final briefing. Before he rose to address the meeting, Ed Holstein, the chairman, made sure that everyone had signed a document to pledge confidentiality. He began his explanation by showing enhanced versions of both helicopter videotapes.

"Before anyone else says it, I'll say it for you," Holstein remarked in to a thick silence when the monitor screens went blank. "Yes, it does look like Tarzan meets Ray Harryhausen. You have just seen a herd of African elephants blown to bits by aerial ordnance and, as they died, transform in to human beings. We didn't need silver-plated rockets. High explosive was completely effective against our herd of were-elephants.

"Going back to past incidents, we've shown pictures of the round pads to zoological experts and they've confirmed they were elephant tracks, not pads on wheels or tracks. And some officers involved in the earlier cases recall comments about elephants, but they were not taken seriously at the time because no one could say where the elephants had come from or gone to.

"Dealing with the origins of our were-elephants, the first Castelars came to the States in the spring of nineteen nineteen, from the River Ebro valley in northern Spain. Jim Silverton of Trenton, New Jersey, Police Department made a trip over there and found out some very interesting facts.

"Spain is the only country in the world with a tradition of were-elephants; mainly in the west and north. Elephants are not native to that country, except in zoos, but Jim wondered if the traditions were a carry-over from twenty-five thousand

years ago, when cavemen were sticking spears in woolly mammoths and painting them in caves in places like Altamira. Our were-elephants weren't mammoths, however.

"Jim found that the tradition, in fact, dates back to around two hundred BC, when Hannibal, the Carthaginian general, brought elephants across the Straight of Gibraltar and took them through Spain and France to scare the hell out of the Romans. His equivalent of tanks, I guess. People have been seeing and hearing elephants in remote parts of northern and western Spain ever since.

"Naturally, no one in authority has ever dared to take the reports seriously. We have UFO stories. The Spanish have were-elephants.

"Coming back to the Castelars, four brothers and their families landed in Boston a year after the end of World War One. The early crushing incidents chart the slow spread of their children westwards. Then came air travel, which made family reunions easier and added a larger random element to the spread of incidents.

"As far as we can make out, a male Castelar doesn't become a were-elephant at every full moon. Drink also plays a part in the process. The early incidents seem to be due to one or two members of the family getting drunk, changing in to were-elephants, and making a dash for a body of water.

"The major incidents in the past arose from family gatherings when a whole bunch of them got drunk and charged to the sea or a lake, crushing everything in their path; people and property alike.

"And now we come to the reason for your signing the document at the start of the briefing. One of the most intensive investigations in the history of police operations in the American continent has come, literally, to an incredible solution.

"If we didn't have tapes from the helicopters to show the transformation process happening in real time, no one in his right mind would ever believe such a thing as a were-elephant can exist.

"This is just one thing we can't afford to go public on. If we're correct to assume a gene transmitted in the male line of Castelars is responsible for were-elephantism, there could be many others in the States. But if we release the story, most people will laugh at us and the few that don't will become totally paranoid and we'll end up hip-deep in nuts.

"We've all had cases where some nut has killed a neighbour because they thought the neighbour was a werewolf or a vampire. We don't want to hand them another excuse to add to the list.

"We got away with Lake Onan, but it was a damn near thing. You'll be relieved to hear any further cases won't be our problem. They'll be investigated by the Military. The Department of Defense wants to know pretty goddam urgently how a hundred-and-eighty-pound man can change himself in to a seven-ton elephant.

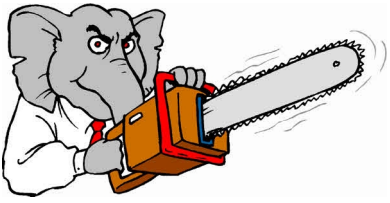
"So that's it. Knowledge of the crushings is now top secret, and every document is classified." Ed Holstein pushed his lecture notes in to a desktop shredder in a symbolic gesture. "That concludes the formal business of the meeting. I suggest we all get good and drunk tonight and forget it ever happened."

"Maybe one of us should stay sober," said Jim Silverton, who had made the trip to Spain, cutting across a buzz of conversation. "And stand by with a bazooka, just in case some of us have Spanish blood. It's a full moon again tonight."

■ ■ ■

The RLC Collection

ROBERT ARION
Brief Candle
JON A. GORED
Dreamers Of The Day
Prey
Rogue Shooter
DOUGLAS GRAMIN
My_destiny.etl
MERIK KATURYAN
The House Under The Hill
Too Boldly Gone
SGC-X: The Refugee
ALAN L. MARSHALL
Bullet In The Brian
Connecting Thread
Dining With The Devil
3 German Officers Crossed The Tyne
Saracens & Crusaders
L. GORDON RANGE
The Empty Sky
The Fantasy Factory
Zone Purple
The War Crimes Commissioner
HENRY T. SMITH
A Desert Hotel
Allah's Thunder
Death In Small Corners
Death Is A Stranger
Death On The Record
Death From High Ground
Doppelgänger
Major Achievements
Merchant Submarine
Parachute For Sale
Sergeant Enterprise
Wacht Am Rhein
L.G. RANGE & H.T. SMITH
Something In The Blood
AMARATH PRETHON
Survivors
PHILIP TURNER
The Adventure of the Dying Detective
Calling Cards
The Charmian Effect
The Cold Fire of Madness
Counting Out Time
Dark Horses Run Deep
Descending Waves
Free Flight
Motive Power
Night Flowers
Not To Be!
Observe & Report
On Borrowed Time
The Red Star Brigade
Roundabout
Pass The Parcel
The Savage Jaw
Sounds Carried On The Breeze
Storm Tide
The Terminal Man
The Windrell Sequence
CLYDE E. WYDEY
Mr. Wydey's Wacky World of TV Volumes 1-24
GROUP PROJECTS
The History of the Millennium Dome after the Bombing
Science Fiction Short Stories Volume 1
Crimes of their Times
BLACKFLAG NEWS
BlackFlag News Reference Editions 1-17
MARION F. EADIE
Collected Writings



Hand-made for Farrago & Farrago at
www.HTSPWeb.co.uk.