

CORGI

JAMES HADLEY CHASE



Why Pick On Me?

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Why Pick on Me?
James Hadley Chase
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synopsis

Milly Lawes a Piccadilly streetwalker, found a strange ring in her room one day. An hour later she was dead, and the ring gone. Scotland Yard knew all about the ring though; so did the Secret Service, and before very long, did Martin Corridon, ex-Commando, ex-MI5, ex-ethics of any kind . . . Corridon didn't really want to know, didn't want to work with the service again, but Milly had been a sort of friend, and the thought of her cut throat and blood soaked bed was enough to send him off on a trail of sabotage and murder. A trail that had him running as a hunter, and hunted . . .

chapter one

Corridon moved through the haze of tobacco smoke that hung over the strident red and yellow room, oblivious of the sudden hushed voices, the quick turning of heads, the furtive lifting of a thumb, jerking in his direction.

He was used to being stared at and whispered about wherever he went in Soho. He carried his reputation with him like a leper carries his bell.

He knew he was envied and distrusted; envied for his strength and his callous indifference to danger. Even now, six years after the event, his war record was still talked about. A man who could do what he did, they said of him, could do anything.

His reputation served him as study serves a doctor, a lawyer or an engineer: it was his livelihood. Whenever there was an off-coloured job to be done, it was offered to him. Those who hadn't the courage to risk their own skins hired him to do the job for them. His terms were invariably the same: half down and the rest when the job is done. More often than not, he took half the promised amount and then refused to do the job. "You can always sue," he would say, and smile at them. But they couldn't sue. The jobs were not the kind you took before a judge.

It was astonishing how long this racket lasted. No one likes to advertise he has been outsmarted, and Corridon relied on that fact. The men he swindled kept a tight-mouthed silence. Corridon continued to listen to the various propositions, make his terms, accept the first payment, and then welsh. He had no qualms of conscience. For five years he had lived in a world of grafters, rogues, crooks, and thieves. He regarded himself cynically as a major parasite living on a host of minor parasites. They didn't have to come to him, but their fear, their greed and their dull-witted stupidity forced them to enlist his aid and, once in his hands, they were helpless.

But it couldn't last indefinitely. Corridon knew that. Sooner or later the word would get round. Sooner or later two or three of these men would confide in each other and then they would realize the ramifications of Corridon's racket. They would find that their cases weren't isolated ones, that Solly and Lew and Petey and a host of others had also been caught and skinned. Then the word would go around, and the door would be slammed in

his face, and he would have to think of a new method of making money.

The word was going round. A month had drifted by without anyone approaching him, and as the days passed, the bundle of pound notes Corridon carried around with him grew slimmer. He had fifteen pounds in his pocket this night: the smallest amount of money he had carried since leaving the Army.

But it didn't worry him. Nothing worried Corridon. He believed that his destiny ran in a straight line: it had a beginning and an ending: what happened between these two points was something he had no wish to control. He found it more satisfactory to know that the shape of his life was given over to chance, and that he himself was nothing more than an interested spectator. He knew he could alter his destiny if he wished, but he wasn't interested enough in himself to bother. He preferred to drift, allowing outside influences, unexpected opportunities and people – particularly people – to weave the foreground of his future.

This night, from sheer boredom, Corridon had come to the Amethyst Club, one of the shadiest night clubs in Soho, in the hope that something would happen to shift him off the sandbank of inactivity into the swiftly-moving current of his previous month's existence.

Zani owned the Amethyst Club. Immaculate in a dark blue tuxedo, his dark negroid features set in a heavy frown, he stood behind the S-shaped bar, his thick, fat fingers drumming soundlessly on the polished wood.

He watched Corridon sit down behind a table in a dimly-lit corner of the room, and his frown deepened. He didn't want Corridon in his club. He had heard that Corridon was running short of money, and he imagined Corridon would ask him for a loan. He had already decided it would be unwise to refuse. Corridon had an unpleasant way of reacting to a refusal of money. Generous himself, lending carelessly to whoever asked him, never bothering about repayment, Corridon expected similar treatment. He had never asked Zani for a loan, but Zani was sure, before very long, he would, and Zani hated parting with money.

Corridon pushed his hat to the back of his head and looked around the red and yellow room. There were about thirty men and women in the club: some of them sitting on stools up at the bar, some at the glass-topped tables scattered about the room, some stood in the doorway, all were drinking, smoking and talking.

They paid no further attention to him after he had sat down, and he grinned jeeringly, remembering the nights when they had crowded round him, offering him drinks, trying to attract his attention, wanting to display their friendship with him as a mark of their own importance.

Corridon didn't mind being ignored. It amused him. But their indifference to him was a warning light. He would have to break fresh ground, not by making an effort, that he refused to do, but by moving to a new district, by displaying himself in an unworked territory, by meeting new people and by dangling his reputation before them as an angler dangles a baited hook.

But where? He rubbed his heavy jaw thoughtfully. Hammersmith? He grimaced. That would be going down a step or two. Perhaps it might be an idea to try Birmingham or Manchester. There were plenty of racketeers waiting to be fleeced in the North, but the prospects didn't appeal to him. If he were going to change his ground, he might as well go to some place where he would be happy: he knew he would never be happy in the grime and wet of Manchester.

Paris then.

He lit a cigarette and beckoned to a waiter.

Yes, Paris. He hadn't been to Paris for six years. Next to London, he liked Paris more than any other capital in the world. He knew a lot of people in Paris. He knew his way around. He knew where to make the necessary connections.

But first, he would have to raise some money. It was useless to go to Paris without money. He would have to support himself for several weeks before he could hope to entice anyone on to his hook. He would have to live in style, too. The bigger the show, the bigger the sucker. He would need at least a couple of hundred pounds.

The waiter stood at his side.

"A large whisky and water," he ordered, then catching sight of Milly Lawes moving through the crowd towards him, he went on, "Make that two."

Milly was twenty-six, blonde, fragile and pretty. Her china-blue eyes were vacant, her wide, painted mouth set in a perpetual smile. She had a baby-daughter, no husband, and walked the streets for a living. Corridon had known her off and on for two years. He approved of her devotion to her daughter, excused her profession, and lent her money when she was hard up.

"Hello, Martin," she said, pausing at his table. "Busy?"

He looked up at her and shook his head.

"There's a drink coming for you," he said. "Want to sit down?"

She glanced over her shoulder, aware that she was being watched.

"Do you mind, darling?"

"Don't call me that," Corridors said irritably. "And sit down. Why should I mind?"

She sat down, laying her umbrella and bag under her chair. She was wearing a grey flannel two-piece suit that showed off her figure. He thought she looked smart and neat enough to take to the Ritz.

"How's business, Milly?"

She pulled a little face, then laughed.

"It's not bad. Not really. Not like it was, of course. It's the Americans I miss."

The waiter set the drinks on the table and Corridors paid. Milly, who missed nothing, raised her eyebrows at the slimness of his roll.

"And you, Martin?"

He shrugged.

"So, so. How's Susie?"

Milly's face lit up.

"Oh, she's fine. I'm going down on Sunday to see her. She's beginning to talk."

Corridon grunted.

"Now she's started, she'll never stop," he said. "Send her my love." He felt in his pocket, separated a note from his roll, screwed it up in his hand and dropped it into her lap. "Buy her something. Kids like presents."

"But Martin, you want this. I've heard..."

"Never mind what you've heard." The grey eyes hardened. "Do what you're told and shut up."

"Yes, darling."

Over in the far corner, Max, a skinny little man in a red and white check shirt and baggy flannel trousers began to play the piano.

Max had been with the club since it opened. It was rumoured he had T.B., cancer, or an inoperable tumour, but he had neither confirmed nor denied the rumour. He hadn't served during the war, but had sat at the piano, playing hour after hour, night after night, without rest, explaining it was a penance for being so useless.

Milly began to hum the tune he was playing, tapping her high heels in time with the steady, infectious rhythm.

“Isn’t he a lovely player?” she said. “I wish I could do something really well. Fancy being able to play like that.”

Corridon grinned.

“Don’t underrate your talents, Milly. Max would be glad to earn half what you do.”

She grimaced.

“I want to show you something, Martin. Keep it out of sight.” She picked up her bag, opened it, dipped into it and dropped a small object into his hand. “Know what it is?”

Under cover of the table, Corridon examined what she had given him. It was a piece of white stone, in the shape of a ring, the top side being flat. He frowned at it, turning it over in his hand. Then he glanced up, looking at Milly sharply.

“Where did you find it, Milly?”

“Oh, I picked it up.”

“Where?”

“What is it, Martin? Don’t be mysterious.”

“I don’t know for certain. It’s jade, and it’s my bet it’s an archer’s thumb ring.”

“A – what?”

“The Chinese used to make them. I should say this is a fake. I don’t know, but if it isn’t, it’s worth money.”

“How much?” Milly’s face was tense.

“No idea. A hundred perhaps. I don’t know. Probably more.”

“You mean archers used to wear a ring like that?”

“Yes. They used it to draw the bow-string. If this isn’t a fake, it’s around 200 B.C.”

Milly’s face was a study.

“B.C.?”

Corridon grinned at her.

“Don’t get excited. It’s probably a copy. Where did you find it?”

“One of my gentlemen friends must have dropped it,” Milly said cautiously. “I picked it up under the chest of drawers.”

“Better turn it over to the cops, Milly,” Corridon said. “If it’s genuine, he’ll

report it missing. I don't want you to go to jail."

"He doesn't know I've got it," Milly said.

"He soon will, if you try to sell it."

Milly held out her hand and Corridon passed the ring back to her under the table.

"Think he'll offer a reward?"

"He might."

She thought about this, then shook her head.

"I've got a hope. If it's worth anything, the busies wouldn't give me the reward. I know them. They'd pretend they had found it themselves."

Corridon thought that was likely, but he didn't say so.

"Better get rid of it, Milly. It could be very easily traced."

"You wouldn't like to buy it, would you, Martin? You could have it for – for fifty."

Corridon laughed.

"It's probably worth a fiver. No, thanks, Milly, it's not in my line. I wouldn't know where to place it. If it's genuine, it's too hot. If it isn't, it's not worth bothering about."

Milly put the ring back in her bag with a disappointed sigh.

"Oh, well. I'll do something about it. Think Zani would give me anything for it?"

"Not a hope. He'd probably turn you in."

"I didn't know it was jade. I didn't know you could get white jade. I thought it was yellow."

"You're thinking of amber," Corridon said patiently.

"Am I?" Milly looked vague. "Oh, well, I suppose I am. I don't know how you know all these things. As soon as I saw it I knew you could tell me what it was."

"If you went to the British Museum sometimes," Corridon said with his jeering smile, "you'd know about things too."

"Oh, I'd die of boredom." She picked up her umbrella. "Catch me in the British Museum. Well, I'd better get along. Thanks for Susie's present. I'll get her a Mickey Mouse."

"Good idea." Corridon stubbed out his cigarette. "And don't forget to get rid of that ring. Give it to the first copper you see and tell him you picked it up."

Milly giggled.

“I believe I will: just to see his face when I give it to him. So long, Martin.”

“So long.”

Later in the evening, Corridon left the Amethyst Club much to Zani’s surprised relief without asking for a loan. The idea never entered Corridon’s head. He walked to his garage flat in Grosvenor Mews.

On his way, he saw Milly standing at the corner of Piccadilly and Albermarle Street. She was talking to a slightly-built man in a dark overcoat and hat. Corridon glanced at her as he passed, but she didn’t see him. She took the man’s arm, and together they walked up Albermarle Street towards her second-floor flat.

Corridon hadn’t given her companion more than a quick, indifferent glance. He was at that moment occupied with his plans for the future. Usually he was extremely observant, and had he been concentrating, he would have been able to retain in his memory a detailed picture of the man. As it was, his mind wrestling with his own problems, the man was no more to him than a featureless, shadowy figure.

chapter two

For a year now Corridon had lived in a three-room flat over a garage behind St. George's Hospital. A woman came in every day to keep it clean, and Corridon had his meals out. He scarcely ever used the small, shabbily-furnished sitting-room. It was damp and dark and noisy.

The bedroom, also damp and dark, overlooked a high wall that shut out the light and ran with water when it rained. But Corridon didn't care. He had no wish to make it a home. He had few clothes, no possessions worth bothering about, and could leave the flat at a moment's notice, never to return.

As a place to sleep in, it served its purpose, and it had several advantages. It was near the West End. It had bars to every window, and a solid front door. The rooms over the other garages were used by commercial firms who moved out at six o'clock each night, and left Corridon the sole survivor of the long, silent mews.

He woke at eight o'clock the following morning, frowned up at the ceiling as his mind immediately took up the problem of raising sufficient capital to leave England.

He was still examining ideas, discarding most of them, as he finished shaving and began to dress. Two hundred pounds! Six months ago it would have been easy. It seemed an impossibility now.

As he fastened his tie, there came a heavy rap on the front door knocker. He went down the steep stairs that led directly to the only entrance to the flat and opened the door, expecting to find the postman. Instead, he found himself looking into the beaming face of Detective-Inspector Rawlins, C.I.D.

"Good morning," Rawlins said. "Just the fella I want to see."

Rawlins was a big, red-faced man in his late forties. He always managed to look as if he had just come from a fortnight's holiday at the seaside, and even after working non-stop for sixty hours he appeared to be exuding energy, good health, and a rather overpowering jolliness. Corridon knew him to be a courageous, hard-working, conscientious policeman, scrupulously fair, but tricky. A man who cloaked a swift working mind with the beaming smile of a country parson.

"Oh, it's you," Corridon said, scowling. "What do you want?"

“Had breakfast yet?” Rawlins asked. “I’ll have a cup of tea with you if you’re just going to start.”

“Come in then,” Corridon said. “It won’t be tea; it’ll be coffee, and if you don’t like it, stay out.”

Rawlins followed him up the steep stairs and entered the dark flute sitting-room. While Corridon added another cup and saucer and a plate to the already laid table, Rawlins moved about the room, whistling softly under his breath, his eyes missing nothing.

“Can’t understand why you live in a hole like this,” he said. “Why don’t you get yourself something more comfortable?”

“It suits me,” Corridon returned, pouring the coffee. “I’m not one of your home-loving types. How’s the wife?”

“She’s fine.” Rawlins sipped the coffee and grunted. “I expect she’s wondering where I’ve got to. Not much of a life being a copper’s wife. Still, she’s used to it by now.”

“Fine excuse for you to spend a night on the tiles,” Corridon returned, lighting a cigarette and flopping on the settee. He stirred his coffee while he eyed Rawlins thoughtfully. Rawlins hadn’t come here to pay a social call. Corridon knew that. He was curious to know why he had come at this hour.

“I’m past the age for a night on the tiles,” Rawlins said, a little regretfully. “Where were you last night, old man?”

Corridon flicked ash on the carpet, and rubbed it gently with the toe of his reverse calf shoe.

“One of these days, Rawlins, you’ll try to be subtle, and I’ll probably faint with the shock. What’s happened?”

Rawlins beamed at him.

“You should never jump to conclusions, old boy. That’s a failing of yours. I like you, Corridon. Of course, you’re a shade over-smart, not as honest as you might be, a bit of a crook, and so on, but taken by and large...”

“All right, all right,” Corridon said curtly. “I’m not in the mood for your jovial lumberings. What’s biting you?”

Rawlins looked faintly embarrassed. Corridon, who knew him well, wasn’t impressed. He knew Rawlins’ expressions, and what they meant.

“Weren’t you talking to Milly Lawes last night?” he asked, and his quick, sharp little eyes swept over Corridon’s face.

Oh Lord! Corridon thought. I suppose she’s been pinched over that ring:

the silly little mare!

“Why, yes. I bought her a drink. What of it?”

“Take her home?”

“Are you trying to be funny?” Corridon demanded, his red, fleshy face hardening. “Do you think I’m the type to take a girl like Milly home as you call it?”

“Now, don’t get excited,” Rawlins said. “You could take her home even if you didn’t stay, couldn’t you?”

“Well, I didn’t,” Corridon said curtly. “Why are you suddenly interested in Milly?”

Rawlins sipped at the coffee, his red face suddenly serious.

“You’re friendly with her, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Is she in trouble?”

Rawlins shook his head.

“Not now.”

There was a long pause while Corridon stared at him.

“What does that mean?”

“She’s dead, old man.”

Corridon put down the cup and saucer and stood up. He felt a little chill run up his spine.

“Dead? What happened?”

Rawlins grimaced.

“She was murdered last night. Around eleven-thirty.”

“I see.” Corridon began to move slowly around the room, his hands thrust into his trouser pockets. He was shocked. Milly had been part of his background. He knew he would miss her.

“We haven’t a lot to work on,” Rawlins went on. “One never has in these cases. I was wondering if you knew anything about it. Did she say she was meeting anyone?”

“She left the Amethyst Club at eleven,” Corridon told him. “I left ten minutes later. I saw her talking to a man at the corner of Piccadilly and Albermarle Street. They went together towards her flat.”

“That would be – what? Eleven-twenty?”

Corridon nodded.

“Don’t ask me to describe him. I wasn’t paying any attention. Damn it! I wish I had now. All I can tell you is he was slight, and wore a dark hat and

coat; a slouch hat, not a Homburg.”

“Pity,” Rawlins said, and rubbed his jaw reflectively. “You’re usually good at spotting people, aren’t you? Well, it can’t be helped.”

Corridon stubbed out his cigarette, and lit another. He stood staring out of the window, frowning. His mind shifted away from Milly to Milly’s daughter. He’d have to do something about the child. He knew Milly hadn’t saved a bean. That made his urgent need for money even more pressing.

“Pretty messy death,” Rawlins said quietly. “Probably a maniac. These girls ask for trouble.”

Corridon glanced round.

“What happened?”

“Cut her throat and ripped her,” Rawlins said. “The fella must have gone off his head. Well, we’ll have to watch the other girls, I suppose. These motiveless sex crimes are the devil.”

“Sure it was motiveless?”

“It conforms to pattern. This isn’t the first time a tart’s been killed by a sadist,” Rawlins said, and snorted. “And it won’t be the last time.” He looked up sharply. “Do you know anything about a motive?”

“Anything stolen?” Corridon asked. “Was her handbag there?”

“Yes. As far as I know there’s nothing missing. What are you getting at?”

“Maybe nothing,” Corridon said. “Last night, she showed me a jade ring she had picked up inter room. She said one of her visitors must have dropped it. She wanted to know if it was valuable.

“A jade ring?” Rawlins was staring at Corridon, his eyes intent. “What kind of ring?”

It was Corridon’s turn to stare at Rawlins.

“It was a copy of an archer’s thumb ring in white jade. At least I think it was a copy. If it wasn’t, then it would be pretty valuable. Those things were made around 200 B.C.”

“Were they?” Rawlins stood up. “Well, well, and she showed this ring to you?”

“That’s right. What’s the matter with you? You look as if you’ve swallowed a hot potato.”

“Do I?” Rawlins stubbed out his cigarette. “Like to come over to Milly’s flat and help me look for this ring?”

“If you want me to. What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing. Come on, let’s get moving. It won’t take us five minutes. I have a police car outside.”

As they walked down the stairs, Rawlins said, “Life’s full of the damndest coincidences, isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is,” Corridon said. “But why particularly now?”

“Just thoughts,” Rawlins said darkly.

They climbed into the police car, and as they were whisked through the park, Rawlins went on, “Was she going to sell the ring?”

“If she could have found a buyer I think she would have sold it. I told her to give it to a copper. After I had drummed it into her head it was too easily traced to monkey with, she said she’d give it to the first policeman she met. Maybe she did.”

“I hope so,” Rawlins said.

There was scarcely any traffic along Piccadilly at that hour, and it only took them a few minutes to reach Milly’s flat in Albermarle Street.

“They’ve taken her away by now,” Rawlins said as he climbed the stairs, breathing heavily, “but the room isn’t very pretty.”

“I can stand it if you can,” Corridon said sarcastically.

“I suppose you can. I was forgetting you’re used to horrors.”

A constable saluted smartly as they reached the top floor.

“Yates still here?” Rawlins asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Come on in,” Rawlins went on to Corridon. “You’ve been here before, haven’t you?”

“Not to her flat,” Corridon returned, following the Inspector’s broad back into a little hall.

Rawlins turned a door handle and pushed open the door. He walked into a big, airy bedroom where Detective-Sergeant John Yates with two other plain clothes detectives were using insufflators, distributing graphite on the bathroom door and the window-sills.

At the far end of the room stood the bed. Corridon came into the room, his hands in his trouser pockets, his face set and hard. The bed, the wall at the head of the bed, and the carpet were splashed and saturated with blood. That end of the room looked like an abattoir. Immediately above the head of the bed were a set of bloody handprints.

“Hers,” Rawlins said grimly. “He cut her throat first so she couldn’t

scream.”

“Save the details. I don’t want to hear them,” Corridon said harshly.

Rawlins went over to a chest of drawers. On the top of it stood Milly’s handbag. He opened it and emptied its contents on to the floor.

He and Corridon bent over the pathetic symbols of Milly’s abruptly ended life. There was a powder compact, a cigarette-case, a wallet containing six five-pound notes, a grimy handkerchief and a number of visiting cards held together by an elastic band.

Rawlins poked about inside the bag and then dropped it.

“It’s not there. Here, Yates.”

Yates, a short, broad-shouldered man with iron-grey hair and searching blue eyes came over. He eyed Corridon without interest, and then concentrated on Rawlins.

“Seen a ring made of white stone around?” Rawlins asked. “Probably white jade.”

“No. We’ve been over the place, but we’ve seen nothing like that.”

“Go over it again. It’s important,” Rawlins said. “Make a job of it. I don’t think you’ll find it. I’ll be surprised if you do.” As Yates moved away to start the search, Rawlins opened the bathroom door and beckoned Corridon to follow him.

The bathroom was small, and there was scarcely room for the two men to move. Rawlins closed the door, edged his way to the toilet, lowered the flap and sat on it.

“Squat on the bath. I want to talk to you.”

“Why not talk outside?” Corridon said, sitting on the edge of the bath, “Or are you being mysterious again?”

“That’s right,” Rawlins beamed. “This is something I don’t want to broadcast. Seen Colonel Ritchie lately?”

Corridon made no attempt to conceal his surprise. He stared at Rawlins blankly.

“Why bring him up?”

“Play along with me,” Rawlins pleaded. “You know I like my fun. Just answer the questions. You’ll be put in the picture before long.”

Corridon took out a packet of Players, offered it. While he lit Rawlins’ cigarette, and then his own, he said, “No, I haven’t seen him. I haven’t seen him since I quit in 1945.”

“Nice chap,” Rawlins said reflectively.

Corridon didn’t say anything. He drew in a lungful of smoke and cast his mind back into the past. He had a vivid picture of Colonel Ritchie even after five and a half years. He wouldn’t have described him as nice. It wasn’t the right word. He could be charming when he liked. He was a man you could trust. He was ruthless. He had sent a number of Corridon’s friends to their deaths, and he had sorrowed for them, but he hadn’t hesitated to send them where he was fairly certain they would die.

“Like to meet him again?” Rawlins asked, studying his big, broad fingernails in an effort to appear casual.

“No, thank you,” Corridon said promptly. “He would want me to work for him. I’ve had all I want of that job to last me a lifetime.”

Rawlins’ face fell.

“Pity. He needs good men. It’s not a bad life either: plenty of excitement, free travel, and the money isn’t bad.”

“The money’s lousy,” Corridon said curtly. “And I don’t fancy that kind of excitement. It was all right during the war: one had to do something; but not now. You might not think it, but I’m quite fond of life. But why bring Ritchie into this?”

“I was only talking to him yesterday,” Rawlins said, and beamed. “He said he had a job for you. You’re a bit short of the ready, aren’t you?”

Corridon lifted his shoulders helplessly.

“Why can’t you keep your nose out of my business? And I don’t want his job. I’m going to Paris at the end of the week.”

“Are you?” Rawlins looked surprised. “Les girls, eh? Well, well, can’t say I blame you.”

“Has this ring anything to do with Ritchie?” Corridon asked. He had a knack of putting his finger on the right spot at the right moment.

Rawlins nodded.

“Didn’t think I’d keep that from you for long. Oh yes, it has something to do with Ritchie. But he’ll tell you about it. That’s what I meant a while ago when I said life was full of coincidences. We’re going to see him now.”

“I’m not,” Corridon said briskly, and stood up. “If I never see him again I shan’t grieve. There are plenty of other men who can do his dirty jobs. I’ve had enough of them.”

Rawlins rose regretfully to his feet. He had been up all night and was

feeling tired.

“Don’t be difficult, old man. He’ll want to hear about the ring. This is a murder case. You must try to be co-operative.”

“What’s it to him?”

“Plenty.” Rawlins stifled a yawn. “Come on, let’s get it over. It won’t take long.”

He went into the bedroom again, and stood looking at the two bloody handprints on the wall.

“Don’t you want to see the fella caught who did that to Milly?” he asked. “With you help, we’ll catch him. She was a friend of yours, wasn’t she? Didn’t I hear you’re the godfather of her child?”

“Don’t be corny,” Corridon said, and grinned jeeringly. “You’ll have me in tears in a moment. All right, come.”

Rawlins beamed.

“I thought you would. I told Ritchie a warrant wasn’t necessary.”

“So he’s still up to his old tricks,” Corridon said sourly. “What was it to be this time? His watch again?”

Rawlins closed one eye.

“As a matter of fact it was to be his cigarette-case. You better give it to me back. I slipped it in your pocket just now.”

Corridon handed it back gravely, his face expressionless.

“And if I didn’t play, it would have been a month’s hard labour. Is that it?”

Rawlins laughed sheepishly.

“The trouble with you, Corridon, is you know the moves before they’re made. Between you and me, I think it would have been more like two months. Ritchie particularly wants to see you.”

chapter three

Fat, dumpy Miss Fleming was rattling away at a typewriter when Rawlins and Corridon entered the outer office. Corridon looked at her with resigned distaste. To him, it was unbelievable that any woman could be so dowdy and unattractive. He remembered thinking the same thing five years ago when he had come to say good-bye to Ritchie and had seen her for the first time. She hadn't changed a scrap over the period of five and a half years. Her nose was as red and as shiny, her hair as unkempt and her clothes as unimaginative. She hadn't even aged, and her total disregard for her personal appearance affronted him.

He knew she was extraordinarily efficient. He knew she could speak ten languages fluently and had been awarded the O.B.E. for secret work during the war. The fact she was Ritchie's personal assistant was proof of her efficiency. You had to be right on your toes if you wanted to remain five minutes with Ritchie. His standards of efficiency were as high and as ruthless as his standards of personal behaviour. But in spite of her usefulness and her capacity to work long hours, Corridon could not understand how Ritchie tolerated her.

She glanced up, looked him over with that impersonal, searching stare that was almost an insult, and waved an ink-smeared hand to a door near her desk.

"Go straight in, please," she said. "Colonel Ritchie's expecting you."

Rawlins enveloped her with his beaming smile. Personal appearances were unimportant to him. Integrity, sincerity and kindness were to him the worthwhile attributes. He was never influenced by a pretty face nor an ugly one. Beauty being skin deep, he preferred to lift the skin and see what it hid.

"Thank you," he said. "What a lovely day. Makes you feel..."

The rest of his remark was drowned by the rattle of the typewriter as Miss Fleming continued her work.

"Save it for the Salvation Army," Corridon said, giving Rawlins a push towards the door. "Fanny doesn't encourage mashers in here."

Rawlins looked reproachfully at him, opened the door and entered the inner room.

Colonel Ritchie was standing before a small, dismal-looking fire, his hands

behind his back, a relaxed expression on his face. Over six feet tall, with broad, heavy shoulders, his back as straight as a plumb-line, he looked every inch a soldier. His greying hair was clipped short, and a black patch that hid his left eye, gouged out by a Turk during the First World War, gave him a swashbuckling appearance.

He glanced beyond Rawlins at Corridon, and smiled.

"Hello, Martin," he said. "I'm very glad to see you."

"I dare say you are," Corridon said sourly, and shook hands. "You're looking a little under the weather."

"We can't all lead a soft life," Ritchie said, continuing to smile. "I'm kept pretty busy." He waved to an armchair. "Take a pew. I can't give you much more than twenty minutes. I have an appointment at the Foreign Office at twelve."

Corridon sat down, searched for a cigarette, lit it, and tossed the match into the fireplace. He looked round the room, aware of a feeling of uneasiness. This annoyed him. He had heard Ritchie was working himself to a standstill, that he couldn't get the right men to help him, that he was even doing some of the donkey work, and Corridon had been tempted in his less sober moments to offer his help. But the thought had no sooner entered his head than he had forced it out. Those days were over. This was no longer a state of emergency. The man who volunteered to help Ritchie was a sucker, and deserved what came to him. But now, once more in this room, seeing the dark smudge under Ritchie's eye and the deep etched lines from his nose to his mouth, aware that these signs meant Ritchie was working too hard, Corridon did feel a twinge of conscience.

Ritchie had treated him well, and they had been friends. It was Ritchie who had called off the police when Corridon had shot the ambassador's secretary. That was ancient history now, but if Ritchie hadn't intervened when he did, things might have been a lot more difficult than they had been. Ritchie had also got him the D.S.O. and the small pension for the wounds inflicted on him by the Gestapo. Yes, Ritchie was a good chap, but that didn't mean Corridon wanted to work for him again.

"You're looking thoughtful," Ritchie said, watching Corridon. Ritchie could read most men like a book. "What are you thinking about?"

Corridon gave him a jeering little smile.

"I was wondering why you still have that awful Miss Fleming out there.

Why don't you get yourself someone bright and snappy to cheer up this ghastly hole?"

For a moment Ritchie looked blank.

"What's the matter with Miss Fleming? She's brilliant."

"Never mind. Perhaps you don't notice her. It doesn't matter. Rawlins is bursting to tell you the news."

Rawlins was. He had been waiting impatiently, and when Ritchie looked at him, he plunged straight into the story of Milly's murder.

"Corridon knows her," he said, after he had covered Milly's background and end. "He spoke to her last night. She showed him a white jade ring she had found in her room probably dropped by one of her clients."

"A white jade ring?" Ritchie repeated, and his face hardened.

"An archer's thumb ring," Corridon said. "I expect you've seen them. They have a number in the British Museum. Possibly the one Milly found is a copy."

Ritchie slipped his finger and thumb into his waistcoat pocket, drew out a small object and tossed it into Corridon's lap.

"Like that?" he asked quietly.

Corridon picked up the white stone ring that had fallen from his lap onto the floor. He examined it, turned it between his long, thin fingers, then shot a quick look at Ritchie.

"Yes. Is this the same ring? It could be."

Ritchie shook his head.

"Oh, no. It's not the same ring. There are a number in existence. They're all numbered, I believe. If you'll look inside you'll see that one is number twelve. Did you notice the number engraved inside the one Milly found?"

Corridon moved to the window to examine the ring. He made out the figures 1 and 2, cut deeply into the jade.

"I'm afraid I didn't," he said. "The light was bad, and Milly didn't want anyone to see it. I only gave it a casual examination."

"Pity," Ritchie said. He looked over at Rawlins. "You didn't find the ring, of course?"

Rawlins shook his head.

"Yates is searching for it now. I doubt if he'll find it."

"He won't find it," Ritchie said gravely. "They've had all night to hunt for it."

“Corridon thinks he saw the chap,” Rawlins said, “only he wasn’t particularly interested, and hasn’t a description.”

Corridon felt a faint flush rise to his face as Ritchie looked at him.

“All right, I slipped up, but I wasn’t to know the fella was going to kill her,” he said, irritably. “I’m not working for you now, you know.”

“Don’t be touchy,” Ritchie said. “Well, it can’t be helped, but I must say it’s not like you. The easy life is making you lose your talents.”

“They’re no use to me now,” Corridon said. “Why should I care?”

“A photographic eye is always useful,” Ritchie said. “There was a time I remember when you had only to look at a sheet of print to be word perfect. Can’t you do that anymore?”

“I don’t know. I’ve had no reason to try,” Corridon snapped. “Well, if that’s all you want, I’d better be going. I have things to do, and besides, you’ll be late at the F.O.”

Rawlins made a clumsy move to the door.

“You don’t want me any longer, do you, Colonel?”

Ritchie shook his head.

“Just a few words with you, Martin, before you go.”

They waited a moment until Rawlins had gone, then Corridon said, “I’m sorry, Colonel. I know you’re busy, so I won’t waste your time. I don’t want a job.”

Ritchie sat down behind his desk. He folded his hands on the blotter and looked gravely at Corridon.

“You want money, don’t you?”

Corridon smiled.

“Not the kind of money the War Office pays,” he said lightly. “It’s no good. I’m not coming back to this racket.”

“Been having a good time?” Ritchie asked.

Corridon frowned at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I hear you’ve become a swindler,” Ritchie said smoothly. “You seem to have established a reputation in Soho of a man who goes back on his word.”

“Rawlins talks a lot of tripe,” Corridon said, but again the faint flush mounted to his face. “You shouldn’t pay attention to his tales.”

“Oh, I don’t. I’ve other sources of information besides Rawlins. I was talking to Isaacs last week. Apparently he wanted you to smuggle in a

hundred Swiss watches. He offered you a hundred pounds for the job. You took fifty, but didn't do the job. You suggested he should sue you for the money if he wanted it back. Is that right?"

"More or less. There's no harm in swindling a rat like Isaacs. How do you come to know him?" Corridon stubbed out his cigarette and pointedly looked at his watch.

"I'm afraid I have to mix with a number of undesirables in my work," Ritchie said, and pushed a silver cigarette-box across the desk. "Help yourself. I agree Isaacs asked to be swindled, but it's the method I don't like. Are you being quite fair to yourself, Martin? Did you have to promise to do the job? It seems to me you could have thought of a less compromising way to get his money. People are saying you aren't to be trusted. I have always found you were to be trusted when you worked for me."

"And Brutus is an honourable man," Corridon said, but his jeering smile didn't quite come off. "The point is, Colonel, I'm not working any more for you, and I'm pleasing myself how I behave."

"Oh, quite," Ritchie said, and suddenly looked tired and bored. "Well, that's neither here nor there. Would two hundred pounds be of any use to you?"

Corridon stiffened.

"Is this a proposition or are you crystal gazing?" he asked. "As a matter of fact I want two hundred pounds very badly."

"I have a job that needs doing. If it is done successfully the pay-off would be two hundred pounds," Ritchie said. "Would you be interested?"

The clear grey eyes were cold and impersonal, and Corridon felt the unspoken contempt. He moved restlessly.

"You don't mean to tell me the War Office would spring that sum?" he asked blankly.

"Why, no, I don't suppose it would. Two hundred pounds is a lot of money. Unfortunately, you seem to be the only man capable of doing this job, and I'm prepared to pay you out of my own pocket," Ritchie said. He glanced up, and added dryly, "I'm afraid I couldn't agree to your usual terms: half down and half when the job is done. The money would be paid to you when the job is completed."

"You can be a bastard at times, can't you?" Corridon said, and laughed. "You know what you can do with your dreary little savings. I don't want your

money, and I don't want your job."

Ritchie smiled.

"Well, I'm glad to hear you don't want my money," he said. "Pity about the job. Perhaps I can appeal to your sense of patriotism?"

Corridon pushed back his chair and stood up.

"You're wasting your breath. Why pick on me? Why don't you do the job yourself if it's that important?"

Ritchie said evenly, "I picked on you, Martin, because the job can only be done by a man without honour; a man who is a twister, a liar, and a cheat. That's why I picked on you."

Corridon laughed.

"I believe you're serious," he said.

The cold grey eyes met his, and his were the first to give ground.

"Yes, I'm serious," Ritchie said. "Your reputation is rotten. You won't be suspected. It's a job after your own heart. There'll probably be some private plunder. I don't say there will, but there may be. Want to hear about it?"

Corridon sat down again.

"It's time you went to the Foreign Office," he said, nodding to the desk clock. "Have you the time?"

Ritchie got up, crossed the office, opened the door and said something to Miss Fleming. He came back slowly to the desk and sat down.

"This is much more important than the Foreign Office," he said. "And that makes you more important, too."

"Go ahead and tell me. I don't promise anything, but at least I'll listen."

"I'll be very brief," Ritchie said, and went on, speaking rapidly. "There exists an organization in this country that is growing in strength and numbers every month. Its object is to do as much damage to this country as it possibly can. I have no idea who is behind it, but I suspect it is financed by our enemies in Europe. I think it is worked in this way: the head of the organization is in touch with a number of foreign powers. He is for hire. Suppose, for example, it is felt by one of the foreign powers that our exports of coal are menacing their own market. They approach the head of this organization. Can he do anything to help them? The money is unlimited. He has a number of men placed in the mines. He gives them their instructions. A month later there is a coal strike, and our export figures suffer.

"Take another example. You may remember the Minister for European

Affairs died through a shooting accident. It wasn't an accident. We have no proof of that, but we're quite sure it wasn't an accident. He was becoming a nuisance to a certain European country and this organization undertook to remove him.

"I won't waste time giving you further examples. The organization is continually at work: sabotage, strikes, murder, and dozens of other means to slow down this country's recovery are being practised under its direction every day. We're trying to find out who is behind it."

Corridon flicked ash onto the carpet and frowned.

"I don't see where I come in. You don't expect me to find him, do you?"

"I think you could," Ritchie said. "I think you could find him much more easily than anyone else I know."

"Because...?"

"Because the boss of this organization is looking for men like you. He is looking for men who have a grudge, who want easy money, who have no scruples, nor any sense of patriotism. You are a trained saboteur. You have an impressive war record, and you have a reputation that might tempt him."

"It hasn't up to now," Corridon pointed out.

"That's because you haven't made any effort to contact him. We caught one of his men. He was attempting to destroy machinery at Harwell. We found the ring on him, and we persuaded him to talk. We know now that every member of the organization carries one of these rings, by which they can recognize one another. We know too that the roadhouse on Western Avenue – it is called The Red Roost – is one of their meeting-places. This man we caught was obstinate, and it was very difficult to make him talk. He killed himself in his cell before we could give him a second examination."

Corridon grunted.

"So you want me to go along to the Red Roost and see what happens?"

"Yes. Do you know the place?"

Corridon nodded.

"It's run by Major George Mainworthy. I've met him. Do you think he's tied up with this?"

"He may be. I don't know. All I know for certain is the place is used from time to time by members of the organization to meet and make plans. Will you do it?"

"I don't know," Corridon said, and stood up. "I tell you what I will do. I'll

go to the place tonight and see what happens. I'm not going to make any effort to get into this, but if I'm propositioned, I'll play along with them. The chances are nothing will happen. In that case I'll look elsewhere for my fare to Paris. I'm not promising anything. You know me. I don't look for trouble."

Ritchie smiled.

"I think you'll fail it, Martin. From now on keep away from me. Don't attempt to communicate with me either by letter or telephone: These people, if they take you up, will watch you. Don't underestimate them. They have been in existence for six months, and they have only made one slip. So watch out."

Corridon lifted his heavy shoulders,

"Don't count your chickens. Nothing may happen, but if it does, how do I tell you?"

"One of my people will contact you. You can leave that to me. The password will be – what shall it be?"

"Spring-time in Paris," Corridon said with a crooked smile. "It'll give me an incentive."

chapter four

Soon after nine o'clock the same evening, Corridon backed the 2½ litre M.G. out of the garage below his flat, and drove rapidly towards Shepherd's Bush.

He drove mechanically, his mind preoccupied.

Since leaving Ritchie he had been busy putting Milly's affairs in order. She had left no will nor possessions, apart from some bits of indifferent jewellery and the six five-pound notes that had been found in her bag.

Corridon had persuaded Rawlins to release the jewellery, and had sold it, striking a hard bargain. With the proceeds he had arranged with his solicitors to take care of Susie's immediate needs. Then rather rashly, he had promised to let them have a further sum of money at the end of the month.

Having taken care of Susie for a few weeks, he was now on his way to the Red Roost.

Ritchie had said that this mysterious organization had unlimited money, and Corridon decided this was probably true. If it was able to organize a coal strike, it must have considerable resources. It seemed possible that here was an opportunity to make some money, not a few hundreds, but real, solid money.

It wasn't likely, Corridon thought, that the organization would keep its money in a bank. There were too many snoopers these days for large sums to remain in any bank without questions being asked. The money would be hidden somewhere where it could be easily got at. The obvious thing to do, Corridon told himself, was to find the hiding-place and help himself.

He swung the car through the gateway of the White City, past the turnstiles, and out onto Western Avenue. Once on the broad arterial road, he increased his speed.

The Red Roost was about two miles beyond Northolt airfield. It stood back from the road and was screened by an eight-foot wattle fence. Corridon had once been taken there by a friend who was a member of the club. He remembered there had been a slight commotion before he was allowed in. Even when accompanied by members, guests were not encouraged.

He wondered if George Mainworthy would remember him. He thought it

possible. He hadn't seen Mainworthy for four years. The last time they had met had been in a Soho pub. Mainworthy had been drunk and was abusing a blank-faced, shifty-eyed youth who was with him. The quarrel was carried on in low, fierce whispers, then Mainworthy suddenly smacked the youth's face who promptly pulled out a knife. If Corridon hadn't intervened, Mainworthy would have been injured. Mainworthy had left the pub white-faced and shaken, and Corridon had bought the youth a drink.

Corridon made a habit of collecting unsavoury information. Time and again, his knowledge of other people's indiscretions had turned an awkward situation into a favourable one. He never knew when some tale he had heard could be used to his advantage, and he was always on the lookout to add to his store of information.

The blank-faced youth had been ready to talk about Mainworthy. Perhaps the pound note Corridon slipped into his hand had helped to oil his tongue, but Corridon had chosen the right moment. The youth was hating Mainworthy just then. He told Corridon why Mainworthy had been forced to resign his commission in the Guards, and a number of other unsavoury details.

At the time Corridon had no idea the information the youth had given him would be of any use to him, but now, as he drove along Western Avenue, he saw how he could handle Mainworthy.

Ahead of him was the red glow from the neon lights that decorated the outside of the Red Roost, and a moment later he slowed down and swung the nose of the car through the imposing entrance.

He came upon the car park, and as he pulled up, a blond youth in a purple and silver livery came up and saluted.

"Good evening," he said, bent forward and peered at Corridon. "Are you a member, sir?"

"Good evening," Corridon said mildly, and got out of the car. "No, I am not a member. I'd like a word with Major Mainworthy."

The blond youth lifted a languid eyebrow.

"I'm sorry, sir, but the Major sees no one except by appointment."

"That's too bad," Corridon said. "Is there anyone here who I can talk to?"

"What's the trouble?"

A cold, hard voice behind him made Corridon turn. A youngish man in faultless evening dress, a blood-red carnation in his buttonhole had come

quietly along the path without the attendant or Corridon hearing him. He was square-shouldered, dark, clean-shaven and arrogant. His eyes were still and hard and black.

“Who are you?” Corridon asked, with his most pleasant smile.

“I’m Brett, the floor manager here. What’s your trouble?”

“No trouble,” Corridon said. “I want to see Major Mainworthy.”

“Does he know you?”

Corridon lifted his broad shoulders.

“He may not remember me,” he said. “We haven’t met for some years. My name is Martin Corridon. If you will be so kind, tell him I want to talk to him about Ernie.”

Brett’s thin mouth tightened.

“Who?”

“Ernie. He’ll know.”

Brett signed to the attendant to go away. He remained motionless, his black eyes on Corridon’s face. When the attendant was out of earshot, he said curtly, “What’s the idea?”

“No idea. I want to see Mainworthy.”

“Who’s this Ernie you’re talking about?”

“Ask Mainworthy. If he wants you to know he’ll tell you.”

For a moment Brett hesitated, then with a quick, angry shrug, he turned on his heel.

“Come with me.”

Corridon followed him along the path, past a big floodlit bathing-pool where a few Spartan men and women were swimming, up stone steps on which stood tubs of black and yellow tulips, cleverly lit by concealed lighting. It was obvious no expense had been spared to give the place an air of sleek luxury.

The club was a long, single-storey building with a thatched roof and rough-cast walls. Neon lights in amber and pale blue outlined the whole building.

Brett pushed open a door and entered a brilliantly lit bar-room. A number of men and women in evening dress sat up at the bar on high stools, drinking. They glanced at Corridon curiously, and two of the women smiled at Brett, waving to him. He gave them a curt nod as he crossed the bar into an office.

“If you will wait here,” he said, opened a door at the fat end of the office and entered the room beyond.

Before the door closed, Corridon had a glimpse of another office, considerably larger than the one he was in.

He rested his hips on the desk while he lit a cigarette. There was a faraway look in his eyes, and his ears were cocked, but he didn't hear anything.

Five minutes dragged by, then the door jerked open and Brett came out.

"You can go in," he said, waving towards the open door, and went out of the office.

Corridon pushed himself off the desk and entered the inner room. It was luxuriously furnished, and a bright fire burned in the fireplace. There was a desk by the double windows, and behind the desk sat George Mainworthy.

He hadn't changed much since Corridon had last seen him. He was a little older perhaps, and stouter, and his dark, swept-back hair was growing thin at the temples. He was, Corridon guessed, in his early fifties. A man with a faded military appearance, a heavily dyed moustache and a slack weak mouth.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked, without moving. His small eyes were suspicious and watchful, his voice hushed like a sidesman whistling in church.

"Why, yes," Corridon said, plainly at ease. He shut the door and crossed the room. "I wanted to join this club."

"Then you don't want to see me," Mainworthy said, and reached across the desk to a bell push. "Brett looks after that side of the business."

"Don't ring," Corridon said, sitting down. "I'd rather deal with you. It's not quite straightforward. I understand there are formalities, and a fifty guinea entrance fee. I haven't fifty guineas, Major, but I still intend to join the club."

Mainworthy slowly withdrew his hand. He stared down at the snowy blotter.

"Indeed? And you know someone who will put you up?"

"There's you," Corridon said cheerfully, "and I dare say if I could find Ernie he would put in a good word for me. Remember him, Major? The last time I saw you with him was about four years ago. He tried to knife you."

Mainworthy sat very still, his face expressionless.

"So it's like that," he said, and his voice was bitter. "I've heard about you, of course. You have a reputation for being dangerous and unscrupulous, haven't you?"

“I’m afraid I have,” Corridon said lightly, “but don’t rub it in. I’m not proud of it.”

“Why do you want to join this club?”

Corridon stubbed out his cigarette, reached for another from the gold box on Mainworthy’s desk.

“Surely that is obvious. My contacts in my own territory no longer seem willing to trust me, and it is affecting my pocket. Here, the idle rich – what is left of them – spend their leisure. It would be an excellent hunting ground for me. You can see that, can’t you?”

“So you intend to fleece my clientele?” Mainworthy said, drumming on the blotter with short, well-manicured fingers. “And you expect me to agree?”

“It wouldn’t be wise not to agree,” Corridon said, with his jeering smile. “Let’s be frank with each other. Ernie was very talkative. At the time he was angry with you, and he told me a number of interesting facts about you. No one wants a scandal, and there could be a scandal, Major. Even these oddities who support your club would drop you like a hot potato if they knew about Ernie, and why you resigned so hurriedly from the Guards.”

With a hand that shook a little, Mainworthy took a cigarette from the box, and lit it. He stared at the gold lighter he held in his hand, a sick look on his face.

“So it’s blackmail. I should have known it.”

“Why, yes. We agreed I was unscrupulous, didn’t we?”

“And if I make you a member?”

“Naturally I shall forget Ernie. Come now, Major, I see we understand each other. Don’t let’s waste any more time. You are quite safe in my hands. You can see, surely, I’m not likely to rat on you and spoil my own hunting ground.”

“I can see that.” Mainworthy made an effort to control his suppressed rage. He jerked open a drawer, took out a card and wrote hurriedly on it. “There,” he said, tossing the card across the desk. “But I warn you, Corridon, if any member complains of your behaviour, the matter automatically passes out of my hands. We have a committee who dulleth with complaints, and they’ll throw you out like a shot.”

Corridon laughed.

“Don’t worry. You won’t get any complaints. My technique is foolproof.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Mainworthy said.

As he spoke, the door opened and a girl came in. Corridon turned to look at her.

She stood in the doorway, making an attractive picture in her white evening dress. She was small and dark and slight. Her glossy hair fell to her shoulders, framing a narrow, lovely little face, brought alive by dark, glittering eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, pausing. “I thought you were alone.”

“Come in, Miss Feydak,” Mainworthy said, rising to his feet. “I’m free now. Is there something I can do for you?”

The girl looked quickly at Corridon. He knew by the expression that came into her eyes he interested her.

He stood up as she smiled at him.

With a sudden quickening of his pulse he managed to give only the briefest glance at the white jade archer’s thumb ring that held the tulle at her throat in a neat little knot.

chapter five

There is nothing else, is there?" Mainworthy said looking pointedly at Corridon. "If you want to know about the rules of the club, Brett will help you."

"Thank you," Corridon said, and picked up the card. As he slipped it into his pocket, he again looked at the girl. In the past he had had a lot of experience with women. He knew she was drawn to him, that he had for her a strong physical attraction.

"Are you a new member?" she asked, smiling up at him. She had a slight foreign accent, and he guessed she was Austrian.

"Just this moment joined," he said. "Do you think I shall regret it?"

"Oh no, it is a good club," she said. "You will find the members very friendly." She glanced at Mainworthy expectantly. Corridon thought it was very neatly done.

Against his will, Mainworthy said coldly, "Mr. Martin Corridon – Miss Lorene Feydak."

"How do you do?" Corridon had to make a conscious effort not to look at the jade ring at her throat. "Are you included among the friendly members?"

"I think so – why do you ask?"

"I was hoping you might take compassion on me and show me round. But of course, you will be with someone?"

She laughed.

"I'll be delighted to show you round. I am waiting for my brother. He is never punctual..."

"Excuse me, Miss Feydak, did you want to see me?" Mainworthy broke in curtly.

"I'm sorry. Yes, I wanted to cash a cheque." She opened her bag and took out a folded slip of paper.

"I will wait for you in the other room," Corridon said, and moved to the door. As he opened the door, he glanced over his shoulder. Mainworthy was staring after him. The girl had her back turned to him. He closed one eye in a heavy, jocular wink and went into the outer office.

The girl joined him a minute or so later.

“Shall we have a drink?” she asked.

“Just what I was going to suggest.” He opened the outer office door and stood aside. She moved into the bar. He noticed how lightly and supple she walked: like a professional mannequin. Perhaps that was what she was, he thought.

He asked her as she sat down at a low, round table in an isolated corner.

“You walk so well, I wondered,” he said, excusing his question.

The compliment pleased her.

“I have done a little modelling, but I am too small to be taken seriously,” she told him, and went on to explain that she had been a dress designer in Vienna.

Corridon nodded. So many people had changed their countries and professions since the war.

“I guessed you were Austrian,” he said. “A refugee, of course?”

She was a refugee because of her brother, she told him. He had been mixed up in politics and had been fortunate to escape from Vienna. He had been sentenced to death in his absence. Both of them were now naturalized, and intended to make England their permanent home.

While she was talking, the barman came over and Corridon ordered champagne.

“I am in a mood to celebrate,” he explained when he saw the surprised look on her face. “A beautiful woman and a good wine are the complements to each other. Are you happy in England?”

Yes, she was happy, but her brother missed Vienna.

“And what do you do?” Corridon asked.

“I design clothes for Dumas in Bond Street, and my brother is a director of Better Travel, the travel agency in Mayfair Street.”

The barman returned with the champagne in an ice bucket. Corridon examined both the cork and the label before tasting the wine. It was very good, and he paid the enormous price without a pang.

He believed in setting the stage. That he should have had the fantastic luck to meet one of the organization so soon, put him in the mood to celebrate. But he was aware that this meeting could be too much of a coincidence, and he decided to move warily. Ritchie had warned him about these people. They may have been watching Milly’s flat and seen him with Rawlins. They may have followed him to the War Office. This apparent chance-meeting might

easily be a trap.

“As we seem in the mood for confidences,” Lorene said, as she watched Corridon pour the wine, “tell me what you do.”

“I am a soldier of fortune,” Corridon said.

“And what does that mean?”

“A soldier of fortune is a man who hires himself out for profit, adventure, and pleasure,” Corridon said with a smile.

“But surely there is little scope for such a profession?”

“There’s not a great deal of scope, but I manage to keep myself fairly busy. When I work, I make enough money to see me over the quiet periods. I’m having a quiet period now, so I buy champagne and talk to you. What could be more pleasant. Salud!”

They drank.

“But I won’t be able to stay long,” she said regretfully. “I am expecting my brother. It is his birthday, and I promised to have dinner with him.”

“That’s quite touching,” Corridon said, leaning back in his chair and examining her smooth, creamy skin that made him think of the lustre of pearls. “It is not usual to hear of a brother and sister keeping a date together. Hasn’t your brother any girl friends?”

“No.” She made a little grimace. “He is very serious and has no time for girls. When he wishes to go out, he invites me.”

“And you are not so serious, and have lots of men friends, and find your brother a little tiresome, although you are very fond of him?”

“That’s it exactly,” she said, laughing. “I can see you are a judge of character.”

“Perhaps I am, but I must warn you I’m not used to entertaining women. There was a time when I had good manners, and, so women have told me, a certain amount of charm. The war changed all that. Life is too short; so much time can be wasted in being subtle. If a woman attracts me, I told her so, then if she reacts badly, I am free to find someone else.” He looked directly into the dark, sparkling eyes. “You attract me enormously.”

“Should I feel flattered?” she asked, and laughed.

He brushed this aside.

“Can’t you get rid of your brother?”

“But that’s quite impossible. It’s his birthday.”

“Yes, that is reasonable,” Corridon said, frowning. “Then I shall have to

wait. A pity, of course. You might not be in the mood when next we meet. Women are moody creatures.”

“And you think I am in the mood now?”

“I am sure of it.”

“Perhaps it is a pity,” she said smiling.

“When do we meet?”

“Sunday?”

“Not before?”

“Can’t you wait three days, Mr. Corridon?”

“Call, me Martin. If we are going to be immoral, let us begin by being informal.”

“You say the most terrible things.”

“I know. Then we meet on Sunday. Where and what time?”

“I have a flat in Bayswater Crescent, No. 29, on the top floor. Come and see me at seven.”

“And you will be alone?”

“You are determined not to be subtle, aren’t you?”

“I live by my rules. You will be alone?”

She smiled.

“If I am in the mood.”

Corridon nodded.

“That’s the right answer. There should always be an element of doubt in such matters.”

While he filled their glasses, she said, “We seem to have some a long way since we first met, don’t we? Do you usually rush your fences so successfully?”

“It needs co-operation,” Corridon said, giving her his quick, jeering smile. He leaned forward and peered at the white ring at her throat. “That is a curious thing. From here it looks like an archer’s thumb ring from China.”

His cold sea-green eyes looked directly into hers, searching for any reaction, but there was none.

“How clever of you! That’s exactly what it is. How did you know?”

“In my moments of leisure I haunt the British Museum,” he told her, a little disappointed she gave no sign the ring was of importance. “It’s an excellent place to increase one’s store of general knowledge. You will find several of these rings in the Museum. Is this genuine? May I see it?”

“Why, yes.” She undid the tulle at her throat and pulled off the ring. “It’s been in my family for generations.”

As she made to give it to him, a hand came from behind her shoulder and took it.

They both turned sharply.

“Why, Slade, dear,” she said, frowning. “You startled me.” She turned to Corridon. “This is my brother; Slade,” she went on, laying her hand on the arm of the man who had come so silently upon them. “Slade, this is Martin Corridon. He has just joined the club. He tells me he is a soldier of fortune.”

chapter six

Slade Feydak was a masculine edition of his sister. He was slightly built, dark, thin featured with the same dark eyes. His wide thin-lipped mouth was inclined to droop at the corners, giving him a disillusioned expression that marred an otherwise pleasant face. He had a broad, high forehead and his eyes were set wide apart: a studious, intelligent face, Corridon thought, a face of a plotter, perhaps, and certainly a fanatic.

“A soldier of fortune,” he said, looking curiously at Corridon, “that’s interesting. May I join you?”

While he was speaking, he slipped the jade ring into his waistcoat pocket.

“Certainly,” Corridon said. “Have some champagne?” He signed to the barman to bring another glass. “Lorene was telling me it is your birthday.”

Feydak nodded.

“What does a soldier of fortune mean?” he asked, sitting down between Corridon and Lorene.

“I’m in the market for any job that pays well,” Corridon said. “I have managed to acquire a reputation in certain circles, and quite a number of jobs fall into my lap.”

“A reputation for what, Mr. Corridon?” Feydak asked as Corridon filled his glass.

“For not being too particular,” Corridon returned, and grinned.

“I see. That’s interesting. You will excuse me if I seem curious. May I ask how you acquired this reputation?”

“Don’t be so inquisitive,” Lorene put in, frowning. It was obvious to Corridon she didn’t welcome her brother’s interest. “Really, Slade, you’ve scarcely met Mr. Corridon. Do you have to cross-examine him like this?”

Corridon laughed.

“Don’t worry about that. I don’t mind a scrap. It pays sometimes to advertise.”

Feydak made a little, impatient movement, signalling Lorene not to interrupt.

“Then tell me, Mr. Corridon. I shall be frank and say I am inquisitive.”

“People have the impression I like taking risks, that I am not fussy about

ethics, that I will twist the Government if I have the opportunity,” Corridon said. “In a way they are right. I am a man with a grudge against authority, and I make no bones about it.”

“Would it be tactless to ask why you have a grudge?” Feydak asked, smiling. “You see. I am still inquisitive.”

Corridon said. “It’s quite a well-known tale, but perhaps your sister is getting bored.”

“She is as interested as I am,” Feydak said before Lorene could speak. “Please go on,” and once again he made the little movement with his hand to Lorene.

“I was one of the in-and-out boys during the war,” Corridon said. “My job was to go into Germany and find an agent, a traitor or someone who was helping the enemy in a specialized way and kill him. My people selected the victim. I hunted him out and stopped his activities.”

“That must have been terribly dangerous,” Feydak said, his eyes glittering. “Were you caught?”

“I was in the hands of the Gestapo for a while, but I was lucky to escape.” Corridon lit a cigarette, went on: “Without bragging, I think I can say I served my country pretty well. When the war finished I was posted to London as an agent. I was sent on a difficult mission. I had to steal papers from a certain Embassy. While I was opening the safe I was surprised by one of the secretaries who happened to be working late. I had to act quickly. He was about to raise the alarm. I killed him. I got the papers and took them to headquarters. The police tracked me to the door and grabbed me as I came out. My people in the true tradition disowned me, and I had to fend for myself. I very nearly went to the scaffold. Since then, I have been shunned by authority and I’m inclined to be revengeful. I feel anything I can do to even up matters is justifiable. I don’t make any excuses. That’s the way I happen to feel.”

“That’s very interesting,” Feydak said. “Actually something like that happened to me. I was forced to leave my country. I can sympathize with you.” He took out his wallet and produced a card. “This is my business address. Perhaps you would care to call on me? I believe it is possible we might be useful to each other.”

Corridon lifted his heavy eyebrows.

“Really? But how?”

“That is something we could discuss,” Feydak said, with a bright little smile. “I assure you I won’t waste your time. Occasionally I have little jobs that need doing by a man like yourself.”

“I shouldn’t have thought that was possible,” Corridon returned. “The jobs I do are scarcely connected with a travel agency, Mr. Feydak.”

“All the same I promise you if you care to discuss the matter with me at my office, I shall be able to interest you.”

“I warn you,” Corridon said with his jeering smile, “I am only interested in substantial money.”

“Even that can be arranged,” Feydak said.

With a disbelieving shrug of his shoulders, Corridon accepted the card and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket. He did this with a studied air of indifference.

“And now if you will excuse me,” Feydak said, getting to his feet, “I will just have a word with the head-waiter. Are you ready, Lorene?”

“In a moment,” she said shortly. “I haven’t finished my champagne. I’ll join you.”

“Good.” Feydak stood up. He held out his hand to Corridon. “I have been very interested to meet you,” he said. “I hope you will come and see me soon.”

Corridon shook hands with him.

“Certainly. When I have a spare moment, I’ll look you up,” he returned in that tone of voice people use when they make empty promises.

When Feydak had walked away, Lorene said fiercely.

“You fool! You mustn’t mix yourself up in Slade’s affairs. Don’t ask questions, but please don’t go near him.”

Corridon pretended surprise.

“You are the most extraordinary girl. You should be pleased your brother has taken a fancy to me.”

“But can’t you see he only wants to use you?” she said, her eyes glowing with repressed anger. “I won’t have him make use of my friends!”

Corridon patted her hand.

“Don’t get angry. I assure you no one has ever used me without regretting it.” He stood up. “Now I must run along. I hope you enjoy your dinner. I look forward to seeing you next Sunday.”

“Please don’t go to his office,” Lorene said, and there was anxiety as well

as anger in her eyes now.

“I won’t. I hadn’t intended to,” Corridon said, smiling. “And don’t forget – watch your moods until Sunday. You are a very beautiful woman.”

He sauntered away, his hands in his pockets, whistling softly under his breath, well pleased with the night’s work.

chapter seven

As Corridon got into his car, the parking lights of another car some distance from his, lit up. He thumbed the starter engaged gear and drove slowly down the drive towards the gates.

The hands of the dashboard clock showed ten-forty-five. He continued down the drive to the main gates. Standing under the battery of red neon lights, the blond youth in the purple and silver livery gave him an indifferent salute.

Corridon swung the car out onto the arterial road, and immediately increased his speed, changing through the gears rapidly, the speedometer needle climbing to sixty.

In the driving-mirror, he saw the two yellow spots of light behind him, and he grinned to himself. Ritchie had said they would watch him. They hadn't lost much time.

He made no attempt to shake off the car behind him. Once he reached Shepherd's Bush and the heavier traffic, he slowed down making it as easy as he could for the man behind not to lose sight of him.

Probably they wanted to know for certain that he lived in Grosvenor Mews, he told himself. Well, that was no secret. He too wanted them to know where to find him.

The car behind him was only a few yards in his rear when he slowed down to turn into the mews. The car increased its speed and swept past him. He had a glimpse of a stream-lined Buick as it passed, and spotted two dark figures in the front seats.

He reached forward, turned off his ignition and cruised down the mews, listening. The Buick had also stopped out of sight, and he guessed they would come into the mews on foot.

He pulled up just outside his garage and turned on the headlights. Might as well make it easy for them, he thought as he got out to open the garage doors.

A figure moved out of the shadows into the white circles of light. For a moment he was startled, and he paused, his muscles flexing, then when he saw the fox-fur cape, the short umbrella and the large handbag, he relaxed.

The girl who came out of the darkness, with short, mincing steps, was tall

and slender and fair. Her painted face was hard, her full scarlet lips were parted in a fixed smile of sensual invitation. She wore a neat black coat and skirt with the chic air of the successful streetwalker.

“Hello, darling,” she said, “are you looking for a naughty girl?”

Corridon gave her a friendly grin as he opened the garage doors.

“I’m not,” he said. “What are you doing down here?”

She lifted her shoulders in a little shrug.

“Looking for a boy like you,” she said, and moved closer. She was wearing a perfume that reminded Corridon of lilac. He rather liked it. “Let’s have a little fun, darling.”

“Not tonight,” he said, and climbed into the car. “You’re wasting your time. I haven’t any use for naughty girls.”

Without waiting for her reply, he drove the car into the garage, got out and closed the garage doors. As he did so, he glanced down the length of the mews. At the far end was a street light, and his sharp eyes detected a shadowy figure half concealed in a doorway.

The girl moved up to him again.

“Change your mind, darling,” she said. “After all it is spring-time in Paris.”

Corridon laughed.

“That has a familiar ring. Where have I heard that before?” he said.

She said in a whisper he could scarcely hear, “If it is white jade, it should be familiar.”

Corridon drew her close to him and stood with his hand on her arm. To the watchers at the end of the mews they made a very ordinary Piccadilly picture: a man striking a bargain with a street-corner girl.

“There are a couple of blokes watching us,” he said, keeping his voice down. “Do you want to come in?”

“Yes. He said they would probably be watching you. It was his idea I should act this way; not mine.”

Corridon smiled at her.

“He never did think much of my morals,” he said. “Well, never mind. I can stand it, if you can.”

Still holding her arm, he led her to his front door, sank the key in the lock and opened the door.

“Straight upstairs. The first door on the right.” He thumbed down the

electric-light switch and stood for a moment watching her climb the stairs. His eyes dwelt on her nylon-clad legs, and he pursed his lips. Quite a girl, he thought. I bet Ritchie hasn't noticed the shape she's got.

He closed the front door and took the stairs three at the time, arriving as she turned on the light in his little sitting-room.

They faced each other. The hardness had gone out of her face, and in spite of the paint and rouge, he could see the fresh beauty behind the mask.

"That's a pretty cute make-up you're wearing," he said. "You had me fooled, and I consider myself an expert."

"It was Ritchie's idea," she said, and made a little face. "He said they wouldn't think twice if I hung about your flat. I hope he's wrong."

Corridon stripped off his hat and coat.

"Ritchie has a sensational mind," he said. "Yes, he's wrong, but the trouble is it's what they would expect of me. That's where he's proved himself smart. Well, sit down. Who are you?"

She sat down on an upright chair by the table. While she settled herself, he examined her curiously. He could see she had been through the rigour of military training and discipline. Now she was no longer playing a part, and had relaxed, her eyes were serious and direct; there was a no-nonsense set to her mouth and she sat well, her back straight and her shoulders square.

"I'm Marian Howard," she said. "I'll be here every Tuesday night at this time for news."

Corridon grinned.

"Looks as if my reputation won't be worth much," he said. "How about a drink?"

She shook her head.

"I don't drink."

"A cigarette?"

"I don't smoke."

"No vices at all?" Corridon asked.

"I haven't the time for them. By the way, I have some money for you." She opened her bag. "They've been fantastically generous: fifty pounds."

Corridon whistled.

"Good Lord! What's got into them? The most I've ever got out of them was twenty-five."

"I know." She took out ten five-pound notes and dropped them on the

table. "They consider this a pretty important assignment. How did you get on?"

Corridon sat on the settee and lit a cigarette.

"You seem pretty sure I've made a start," he said. "I didn't promise Ritchie anything."

She smiled. He decided she was a nice girl, and he liked her. He liked her frank, amused smile and the steady confidence in her eyes.

"Ritchie's a smart old fox," she said. "He knew once you dabbled in this, you couldn't keep out. But we mustn't waste time. I'm supposed to report to him tonight."

"You'd better watch out. There's nothing to stop them following you," Corridon said. "There are two of them at the top of the mews."

"I have a nice little flat in Dover Street," she said. "It's all been fixed. If they did follow me I'm the genuine thing. Another of the boys is coming to see me at twelve-thirty tonight. I'm passing what you tell me to him."

Corridon grunted.

"I suppose Ritchie knows what he is doing. He's certainly taking precautions."

"It's necessary. These people are dangerous. What happened tonight?"

"Too much really," he said. "I saw Mainworthy and persuaded him to make me a member of the club. It wasn't difficult. I was in a position to blackmail him. As he was completing the membership card a girl came into the room. She was wearing a white jade archer's thumb ring as an ornament at her throat. Her name is Lorene Feydak; she lives at 29, Bayswater Crescent in a top flat, and works at Dumas, in Bond Street. She forced Mainworthy to introduce me, and I covered a lot of ground with her. We're due to meet again this coming Sunday, on a much more intimate footing." He grinned. "Probably she'll be in a different mood when next we meet, but tonight she was full of suggestive promises."

"You think she's baiting the hook?" Marian asked.

"It's probable. There are still a few girls left who take shortcuts, but it's more likely a ruse to lead me on. We'll see on Sunday. She has a brother, Slade Feydak, who works at Better Travel in Mayfair Street. We had scarcely met, before he was making me an obscure offer to work for him. I think it is more than likely he had talked to Mainworthy before joining his sister and me. I am quite sure he knew all about me, before making his offer. He wants

me to call at his office to discuss a proposition. As soon as he was out of the way, Lorene called me a fool, and warned me not to have anything to do with him.” He leaned forward to drop ash into the fireplace. “I haven’t had time yet to make up my mind if these two are working together. I asked her about the ring, and she told me it was an heirloom. My first impressions are the whole thing is a put-up job. What worries me is how they knew I was coming to the roadhouse. Obviously they were ready for me. If they had someone watching Milly’s flat and spotted me with Rawlins, I don’t think I shall get very far with them.”

“They could have done that,” Marian said. “Or this man Brett might have told Feydak that you had arrived, and were talking to Mainworthy. Feydak could have sent his sister in there to strike up a friendship with you.”

“That’s an idea,” Corridon said. “In that case it means Brett’s tied up in this thing, too.”

“Do you think Mainworthy is?”

Corridon shrugged.

“I don’t know. He could be, but I don’t imagine he’d have the nerve for that kind of work. Get Ritchie to take a look at both Lorene and Slade Feydak’s background. It might pay him to put tags on them both. Tell him to find out what he can about Better Travel, Mainworthy, and Brett.”

“And you?”

Corridon reached forward and picked up the ten five-pound notes. He flicked them through and slipped them into his pocket.

“I’m making no move until Sunday,” he said. “It depends entirely on what happens then. I think it would be a mistake to see Feydak. I want to give him the impression I’m hard to get.”

“Yes.” Marian stood up. “Then I’ll see you next Tuesday. If there is anything urgent, phone me.” She scribbled down her telephone number. “They may tap your line so tell me to come to you. It’s not far. I can get over very quickly.”

Corridon gave her a sly smile. The situation amused him.

“I wish I could always be sure a pretty girl would come to me if I phoned,” he said. “Nothing like joining the secret service to see life.”

Her steady grey eyes looked into his.

“I’m afraid you won’t see much of me with me,” she said, her voice impersonal as a brick wall.

“I suppose not,” Corridon said regretfully. “Did Ritchie tell you you’d have no trouble with me, and I always act like a gentleman?”

She laughed.

“No, he didn’t. He said you always had an eye on the main chance, and I was to be careful.”

“He hasn’t changed a scrap,” Corridon said, opening the door. “He’s like an old hen. All the same, you’re too good-looking to be an agent.”

She walked past him to the head of the stairs.

“That’s a matter of opinion,” she said.

He followed her down to the front door. As he opened it, he said, “I suppose we had better kiss in the doorway. We have to convince those two blokes, you know.”

“That’s quite unnecessary,” she returned, and stepped into the mews. “Good night.”

She went away into the darkness without looking back.

chapter eight

The two men who had followed Corridon from the Red Roost now proceeded to shadow him wherever he went. They were experts, and it was only because in the past Corridon had had considerable experience of this kind of thing, that he knew they were continually on his heels. It was not until the second day that he managed to catch a glimpse of them.

One was short and thickset with a red, puffy face and a bull neck. Corridon thought he might be a German. The other was tall and thin with deep-set, glittering eyes. His flat-featured face, his close-cropped blonde hair and his habit of smoking cigarettes wrapped in brown tinted paper suggested he might be Russian.

Rather light-heartedly Corridon christened them Huey and Duey.

These two were dangerous. Corridon knew the signs. They were killers. Both of them seemed nervous. Huey, the short one, continually twitched and blinked his eyes. Duey, the tall one, played scales up and down his thighs with his long, thin fingers. Both of them moved like shadows, making no sound on their crêpe-soled shoes, and both had eyes like bits of dark glass; expressionless, cold and inhuman.

Thinking about them, Corridon wondered if he wasn't running his neck into a noose. It was like Ritchie to land him in something that could end in sudden death. Ritchie had no personal feelings for his agents. The country came first. "You can always get another agent," he had once said to Corridon, "but I'll be damned if you can get another England."

Corridon wondered if Marian Howard knew the type of men she was up against. He had taken a liking to her. She had looks, courage and integrity. Although he lived by his own doubtful rules, he approved of integrity in others. He would warn her the next time they met, he decided; not that it would make any difference. Once you were fool enough to get into Ritchie's clutches, you were done for. And besides, Ritchie was just the kind of man a girl like Marian would admire, Corridon thought sourly.

Huey and Duey had moved into the mews flat opposite him. How they got possession of the place defeated him. It had been a bookmaker's office; then suddenly, the bookmaker's sign disappeared, and a pencilled notice informed

his patrons he had moved to Park Court, an alley that ran parallel to Grosvenor Mews, and there were Huey and Duey lurking behind the net curtains.

From this vantage point they were able to watch Corridon with the minimum of effort, and he realized that Ritchie's foresight in establishing Marian as a light-lady was sound. Her weekly visits wouldn't excite the suspicions of these two: it was the kind of behaviour they would expect of Corridon.

The second evening following Marian's visit, Corridon discovered his telephone line had been tapped. He was up to every trick of this kind, having tapped dozens of lines himself during his career as an agent. He also discovered that an attempt had been made to enter his flat. But long ago, he had made certain that no one could get in, short of chopping down the door. There were bars, spaced four inches apart, at every window, and a built-in solid lock on the door.

It was probable, he thought, that they had hoped to plant a microphone in the flat, and although he knew they hadn't been able to force an entry, he took the precaution of searching the place.

It was as well that he did, for he found a small, but highly-sensitive microphone hanging in the chimney in his sitting-room. Some time during the night one of them must have got on to his roof and lowered the microphone into the chimney. He blocked the chimney with an old raincoat, muffling the microphone, but not disturbing it.

The next three days passed slowly. It irritated Corridon to be followed wherever he went. He was careful to do nothing to warn his shadows he was aware of them. He went about his usual business, spent his time in pubs and in the Soho night-clubs, trying to drum up a commission without success. He was relieved when Sunday came round, and he could call on Lorene.

He took some trouble with his appearance that evening. He put on a tuxedo, and even fussed a little before being satisfied with the set of his tie. Then he stood away from the full-length mirror and surveyed himself.

Reflected in the glass, he saw a tall, broad-shouldered, heavily-built man with a shock of red-brown hair. They had called him Brick-top in the Commandos, and the Germans had known him as the Red Devil. His strength and force of character rather than his looks were his assets. He had a blunt-featured with a square chin, a firm, determined mouth and a slightly crooked,

flattish nose. His eyes were grey, turning to sea-green according to his moods. His complexion was beefy and red. He had a reckless, jeering smile that easily infuriated people as he intended it to do, but he had moments of kindness amounting to sentimentality that often irritated him.

Satisfied with his appearance, he slipped on a light overcoat and went downstairs to the front door. The windows of the flat opposite were unlighted, but he guessed one of them was up there, watching him through the dirty net curtains.

He got the M.G. out of the garage, and drove slowly down the mews. When he came into Knightsbridge, he spotted Huey, sitting astride a motorcycle, waiting for him. As he drove past, Huey started the engine and slid into the evening traffic behind him.

Corridon reached 29, Bayswater Crescent a few minutes after seven o'clock. The house was one of a row of tall, flat-faced dwellings, at one time the mansions of wealthy tradesmen, and now converted into flats for the impecunious upper classes.

The open front door led to a forbidding hall, full of heavy Victorian furniture. A broad staircase faced the entrance, and there appeared to be no lift.

Before ascending the stairs, Corridon satisfied himself that Huey had parked his motorcycle at the end of the crescent where he could watch No. 29 without being conspicuous, then he began the long climb.

After negotiating four flights of stairs, he arrived on the top floor a little breathless. Facing him was an apple-green painted door, fitted with a glittering chromium knocker and letter-box flap.

He dug his thumb into the bell push and waited, thinking this was by far the most impressive front door of all the doors he had passed on his way up, and wondered if the flat would be of the same standard of smartness and luxury.

The door opened, and he was a little disconcerted to find Slade Feydak before him.

"Well, come in!" Feydak exclaimed, and grasped Corridon's hand. "What luck! I was hoping to see you again. How are you?"

Corridon entered the small hall and took off his hat and coat. He said he was well enough, but his expression was sour.

"Isn't Lorene here?" he asked abruptly.

“Oh, yes. She’s having a bath,” Feydak said, his forced gaiety jarred on Corridon’s nerves. “I’m afraid we have been talking, and didn’t notice the time. But come in; I’ll mix you a martini.”

Corridon followed him into a large room that seemed full of tulips, narcissi and bowls of hyacinths with fat, bristling bells. It was a nice room, airy, light and colourful. There were big settees and lounging chairs done in amber leather. The Bokhara rugs, scattered on the polished parquet floor, were the colour of old wine and had the sheen of silk.

Before the log fire, boxed in by an armchair on one side and a settee on the other, stood a short, square-shouldered man in a dark blue lounge suit. His thin face, the colour of old parchment, reminded Corridon of the death mask of an obscure Chinese Emperor he had once seen in a junk shop. His age could have been anything from fifty to sixty; his narrow black eyes were alert and piercing. His thin, black moustache gave him the air of a man-about-town, and at the same time, somehow suggested the ruthless cruelty of a Tartar.

“This is Martin Corridon,” Feydak was saying. “Mr. Corridon, I would like you to meet the chairman of my firm, Joseph Diestl.”

Diestl moved forward and held out a small, well-manicured hand. The thin smile with which he greeted Corridon didn’t reach his eyes.

“How do you do, Mr. Corridon?” he said. “I have heard a lot about you.”

Now here, Corridon thought, as he shook hands, is a dangerous man. A man not to be trusted and who could easily be the head of this organization. He recognized the force of character, the ruthlessness and the power of leadership that lay behind the thin smile. Comparing Diestl and Feydak was like comparing a tiger to a kitten.

“Nothing bad, I hope,” Corridon said. “People seem to get hold of exaggerated ideas about me.”

“But you admit you are a notorious character?” Diestl said, and waved to the settee. “I have been making inquiries about you. But sit down. I am anxious to talk to you.”

As Feydak came over with a martini, Corridon said, “I didn’t come here to talk business. I was under the impression I was taking Lorene out.”

Feydak smiled brightly.

“Of course, Mr. Corridon. She won’t be long, but in the meantime while we are waiting...” He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. “We have a

dinner engagement ourselves in twenty minutes.”

Corridon shrugged. He sat down and took the martini Feydak offered him.

“Slade told me he had invited you to call at the office,” Diestl said, waving away the martini Feydak was bringing him. “I think he suggested we might have something for you.”

Corridon frowned as if trying to remember.

“Did he? It’s very likely. Lots of people say that sort of thing to me. Usually nothing comes of it.”

“I hoped you would come,” Diestl said. “I wanted to meet you.”

Corridon waved his hand to convey that if Diestl wanted to meet him he now had his wish.

“I keep pretty busy,” he said indifferently.

“But I understand you aren’t doing anything at the moment,” Diestl said in a slightly acid tone.

“At the moment I am enjoying a well-earned rest,” Corridon said.

“But none of us can live on air.” Diestl sat on the arm of the settee, his hands on his knees. “There’s a little job that needs doing. I was wondering if you would be interested?”

“It depends on the job and the remuneration,” Corridon returned. “I warn you my prime concern is to make the minimum effort for the maximum return.”

Diestl studied him; the black, piercing eyes were unfriendly.

“That seems to be the general trend these days. Some people are in the position to demand such terms. You are, of course. The job would take less than an hour and the fee is two hundred and fifty pounds.”

Corridon lit a cigarette before saying, “Sounds all right. What’s the job?”

“Very briefly, Mr. Corridon, I am acting for a client. I might mention this isn’t the first time I have been asked to arrange private matters for my clients. In my business I meet a considerable number of wealthy men and women, and some of them come to me for advice on personal matters.” The thin smile became more acid. “They appear to have confidence in me. Flattering, of course, but at times a nuisance. This man I am talking about is in trouble with a woman. She is blackmailing him. Let us admit right away that he is a fool and a lecher. But unfortunately for him he is also a public figure. The woman holds a number of his letters, and they are very compromising. If they got into the wrong hands, he would be ruined.”

Corridon pursed his lips.

“Surely that’s a job for the police?”

“Oh, no. He won’t go to the police. He has asked me to find someone who will steal the letters from this woman. It wouldn’t be difficult.”

Corridon glanced at Feydak who was standing behind Diestl, silent and effacing. Their eyes met, and Feydak smiled nervously. Why pick on me? Corridon thought. Either Huey or Duey could handle a simple job of breaking into a house and stealing letters. Why me?

“Let’s be frank,” he said, putting down his empty glass. “I don’t know you from Adam. You come out of the blue with this suggestion. How do I know you have a client? How do I know you are not going to use these letters to blackmail this woman? You see my position? I’m being quite frank with you. Before I consider doing this job, you will have to convince me I’m not being used to get these letters for your benefit.”

“I had no idea you were so particular,” Diestl said, with a tight, little sneer. “But I can see your point of view, of course. If it will set your mind at rest, I’ll destroy the letters when you give them to me, and you can see me do it.”

Corridon hesitated. Something warned him not to do this job, but, on the other hand, he guessed this offer might be a test before they asked him to do something connected with the organization. He knew Ritchie would want him to do it, but his own instincts were against it.

He shrugged.

“All right, if you’ll do that, I’m on.”

Feydak, who had been very tense, suddenly relaxed and reached for Corridon’s empty glass.

“We must have a drink on that,” he said, smiling. “I told Diestl you were just the man for the job.”

While he was refilling Corridon’s glass, Diestl said, “Would tomorrow night suit you? I know she will be out very late. She lives alone. You can work entirely undisturbed.”

“Tomorrow night’s all right,” Corridon returned. “Where is the place?”

“That I don’t know. I shall get details and a map of the flat by tomorrow afternoon. Slade will call for you, and drive you there. I understand there’s a Yale lock on the front door. That won’t bother you?”

Corridon shook his head.

“I’d prefer to look the place over before I did the job,” he said.

Diestl made a little gesture of regret.

“That I’m afraid won’t be possible. The best I can do is to have a detailed map for you. I’m sorry.”

“Well, all right. That will have to do.”

“Everything is arranged then?” Feydak said, as he gave Corridon another martini. “You’ll forgive us rushing away like this, but we are a little late for our appointment as it is. Lorene won’t be a few minutes now. You don’t mind being left on your own?”

“I dare say I’ll survive,” Corridon said.

As the two men put on their hats and coats, Diestl said, “I don’t think Slade knows where you live.”

Corridon smiled.

“Why, no; I don’t suppose he does.” He gave his address, and Feydak scribbled it down on the back of an envelope.

“That’s fine,” he said. “I’ll call for you tomorrow night at ten. When you get the letters we will go to Diestl’s place.”

“And I will destroy them and pay you what I owe you.” Diestl said. “Is that all right?”

“Perfectly.”

“And if you are successful, Mr. Corridon, I shall probably be able to offer you a few more jobs which will be a little more interesting and a lot more remunerative,” Diestl said, as he shook hands.

“I’m usually successful,” Corridon said dryly.

“Splendid. I hope we shall work together in the future,” Diestl returned, “to our mutual advantage.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow night,” Feydak repeated. “In the meantime please say nothing about this to anyone.”

“Including your charming sister?”

“If you please.”

There was a pause, then both of them smiled at him, waved and went out. A moment or so later the front door slammed.

chapter nine

Corridon moved over to the window and looked down into the street. He watched Diestl and Feydak walk briskly past Huey. Neither of them looked his way. Corridon continued to watch the short, thickset figure, astride the motorcycle. When Diestl and Feydak had turned the corner, Huey started up his engine and rode rapidly away in the opposite direction.

On the face of it, Corridon thought, it looked as if they were content to leave him in Lorene's hands. He crossed the room and opened the door to look into the hall. There was a short passage to the right of the front door. At the far end of the passage another door faced him.

Raising his voice, he called, "How much longer are you going to be?"

"Is that you, Martin?"

There was a moment's pause, then the door facing him opened. Lorene in a green silk wrap stood in the doorway, smiling at him.

"Hello," she said, and came towards him, her hand outstretched, her eyes bright and alert. "Did Slade let you in? I had no idea you were here."

Corridon took her hand and held it.

"I've been here for the best part of half an hour. They said you were having a bath."

"So I was."

She tried to withdraw her hand, but he held it firmly.

"How strong you are. You seem very possessive tonight."

"I am," Corridon said and pulled her to him. His arm slid round her waist. "How are the moods?"

"Not working very well, I'm afraid," she said, and put her free hand on his chest and pushed him back. "Please don't play the caveman. I don't find it amusing."

"I warned you women are moody," Corridon said, releasing her. "Now I suppose you are going to be difficult."

"I don't know what you mean. Now look, I won't be ten minutes. Be a dear and go into the sitting-room and wait for me. I promise to hurry."

"I dislike my own company," Corridon returned, and walked past her into the room she had come from. "I'll watch you dress. It'll be much more

amusing than sitting alone.” He stood just inside the room and looked around approvingly. It was a big, airy room, furnished expensively and tastefully. “My word! You know how to make yourself comfortable. This is quite luxury.” He walked over to the bed and prodded it. “Like sleeping on a cloud. No wonder you are so beautiful.”

She came into the room and pushed the door to.

“Aren’t you taking just a little too much for granted?” she said, a sharp note in her voice. “I don’t allow men in here.”

He wandered over to the dressing-table on which stood bottles of lotions, creams, perfumes, and astringents.

“You sound a little out of temper,” he said, picking up one of the bottles. “If you called on me, I would be delighted if you visited my bedroom.” He unscrewed the cap of the bottle and sniffed. “Hmm, very nice.” As he set the bottle down, he said, “That chap Diestl’s an odd card, isn’t he? Have you known him long?”

“I scarcely know him. He’s Slade’s friend,” she said shortly. “Now, please go into the other room and wait for me.”

Corridon wandered over to the bed and sat on it.

“I like being here. I was going to take you to Prunier’s tonight, but I’ve changed my mind.”

“Then where are we going?”

He looked at her.

“We’re not going anywhere. We’re going to stay here.”

“Oh, no, we’re not! I know it’s my fault. I led you on the other night, but I was tight. We’re not going to do anything silly. We’ll go to Prunier’s.”

“Oddly enough,” Corridon said casually, “you were surprisingly sober the other night. I grant you led me on, but obviously you had a reason. Shall I tell you what the reason was? You wanted me to come here so Diestl and your nice little brother could persuade me to do a dirty little job for them. The bait you dangled under my nose was an evening of – love, shall we call it?”

Two bright spots of red came to her cheeks, and her eyes looked stormy.

“That’s absolutely untrue! I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Corridon grinned.

“Don’t you? Didn’t they tell you? It’s supposed to be a secret, but I’m sure Slade must have whispered in your ear. They are offering me two hundred and fifty pounds to pinch some indiscreet letters.”

“I know nothing about it! Now look, Martin, this has gone far enough. Please go. I’m not going out with you tonight.”

“I know you’re not,” Corridon said. “I’ve just said so.” He suddenly reached out and caught her wrist. “Come and sit here beside me.”

She tried to break free, but he was much too strong for her. He pulled her down on the bed beside him.

“Let me go!” she said furiously. “How dare you!”

“I’m afraid you’ve brought this on yourself,” he said mildly. “If you really object you can always scream. Someone’s bound to hear you if you make enough noise.”

“Let me go!” she cried, struggling to free herself. She tried to smack his face, but he caught her flying hand and imprisoned her two wrists in one hand.

“Now what are you going to do?” he asked. “I’m much too strong for you, and I haven’t any ethics to which you can appeal. I’m afraid you are in rather a hopeless position.”

“You’re hurting me!” she stormed. “Let me go at once!”

“Perhaps this will teach you not to make suggestive promises,” Corridon said gently. “I always insist on payment.” He pushed her back, so she lay flat across the bed. “I’m afraid you’ll have to regard yourself as a martyr to the cause.”

“You devil!” she panted, glaring up at him. “I’ll scream if you don’t let me free!”

“Scream away,” he said, smiling down at her. “I don’t mind a bit.”

Still holding her wrists, he bent over her and his mouth covered hers. For a moment or so she struggled to free herself, then he felt her relax and he released her wrists and took her in his arms.

“Scream away,” he murmured. “Before it’s too late.”

“Oh, shut up!” she said furiously, and her arms went round his neck.

chapter ten

I'm hungry," Corridon complained, lifting his head from the pillow and looking across the dim room. The moonlight came in through the window, making a small square of light on the white rug.

"It serves you right," Lorene said lazily. She stretched a beautiful bare arm above her head and sighed contentedly. "You should have gone to Prunier's as you arranged."

"Yes," Corridon said, and closed his eyes. "Oysters and sherry; the breast of duck, green peas and asparagus tips in butter. You're quite right. I shouldn't have dallied here. Pity you were difficult. If you had been compliant, I should have gone."

She thumped his chest with her fist.

"You have the manners of a hog!" she said. "Well, I suppose I must get you something to eat or you won't come here again."

He turned on his side to look at her.

"Now you are being clever," he said. "I was hoping you would say that."

She reached for the silk wrap that lay on the floor. Watching her in the dim light of the moon, Corridon thought she was very beautiful.

"I wish this hadn't happened," she said, as she slipped on the wrap. "I'm afraid it is going to be very bad for me."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it is."

She went out of the room.

While she was away, Corridon turned on the bedside lamp and looked at the time. It was twenty minutes past eleven. He lit a cigarette and frowned up at the ceiling. He knew he should get into touch with Marian Howard and tell her what was being planned for tomorrow night, but he couldn't be bothered. He didn't want to think about that now. Lorene had surrendered so completely to him that he now felt tender towards her, recognizing, with a resigned grimace, that he was about to enter one of his sentimental moods. It wouldn't last, of course, but while it was on him, he was ready to enjoy it. He had forced himself on her for a purpose. He knew women. If she accepted him as a lover, he had an even chance of binding her to him. He had an idea

he had succeeded.

He passed his hands over his muscular shoulders, then swung his legs off the bed and went over to her wardrobe in the quest of something to put on. He found a man's dressing-gown hanging amongst her things. It was a little tight across the shoulders and rather too short for him, but he decided to wear it. He returned to the bed and sat down, running his fingers through his thick hair and frowning.

"Slade would be pleased if he saw you," Lorene said as she came in with a tray. "For goodness' sake don't split it. It looks horribly fragile on you."

Corridon examined the tray. There were slices of cold chicken, thin bread and butter, peaches out of season and an impressively large cocktail shaker.

"Not bad," he said approvingly. "But to have scored a real success you should have cooked me something."

"Be quiet!" Lorene said, setting the tray on the bed. "You really are an impossible creature."

"Why should this be bad for you?" he asked, helping himself to chicken. "Is there something sinister behind that remark of yours?"

"You know as well as I do," she said, not looking at him. She unscrewed the cap of the cocktail shaker and poured two martinis. "Don't pretend you don't know."

"Tell me. This is no time to be repressed."

"I've fallen in love with you," she said. "I hate being in love. It makes everything so damned complicated. I knew it would happen if we misbehaved. Well, it has."

"What's wrong with falling in love with me?" Corridon asked mildly as he dipped chicken in the salt. "You should be pleased, surely?"

"You're not the kind of man any girl should fall in love with. You know that as well as I do. It's not in you to love anyone. The thing is one-sided, and the woman is bound to get hurt."

Corridon didn't like the turn of the conversation.

"Women love to exaggerate. Why should you get hurt? I'll be very nice and kind to you."

"I dare say," she said, handing him a martini, "but you won't love me, and oddly enough, there is a difference." She shrugged impatiently. "But never mind. It's my funeral. Does it amuse you to know I am in love with you?"

"Aren't you being a little bitter? The trouble with women is when they

have an affair they immediately jump to the conclusion it's going to be permanent. Why can't they accept the situation as a man does and be happy for the day instead of moping about tomorrow? Nothing is permanent. In a week's time you'll probably find someone much nicer than I am, and you'll forget all about me. For goodness' sake don't dramatize yourself."

"And that is what is called leaving the back door open," she said lightly, and smiled at him. "Very well, nothing is permanent. When you are tired of me, you can retire gracefully. Let's love for today as tomorrow never comes."

Corridon began to skin a peach.

"I'm sorry you feel like this about it," he said. "But you must admit you have only yourself to blame. You hung out the hook. It's not my fault if you swallowed it yourself. If you must be bitter about it, be bitter with your brother. He's responsible. I take it he wanted to meet me here?"

"All right," she said, still smiling. "I admit it. But it was disgraceful of you to force yourself on me like that."

"I'm not even going to let you get away with that," Corridon said firmly. "If you hadn't encouraged me, I wouldn't have done it. Who has ever heard of an engine-driver stopping his train before a green light? Now, come, let's be truthful about it."

"You are most ungallant," she said. "You don't leave me a shred to hide behind, and I don't care a bit."

"That's honest, anyway," Corridon said, got up and wandered into the bathroom. He rinsed the peach juice off his fingers. When he returned she had removed the tray and was lying on the bed, her hands behind her head.

"Is Diestl to be trusted?" he asked, standing over her.

She made a little face.

"I don't know. I hate him. He's horrible, and I wish Slade didn't work for him."

Corridon smiled crookedly.

While in the bathroom he had found in the pocket of the dressing-gown a handkerchief that had Diestl's initials on it. He decided regretfully his sentimental mood was being wasted.

chapter eleven

Punctually, the following evening at ten o'clock a black Buick pulled up outside Corridon's flat. He went down to the front door.

"Everything is arranged," Feydak said as he got out of the car. "I have the map. Shall I come in and go over it with you?"

"Certainly," Corridon said, and led the way upstairs.

Feydak looked around the dreary little room, his eyebrows lifting with surprise. Corridon watched him with his jeering smile. Feydak in an immaculate suit looked out of place in the room.

"Imagine you're slumming," Corridon said cheerfully, "then have a superior complex. I won't apologize for this hole. I have got out of the habit of fripperies. I find luxury flats make one soft."

Feydak looked embarrassed.

"I suppose so," he said, doubtfully, and sat down. "I hope you had a pleasant evening with Lorene."

Corridon pulled up a chair to the table and sat down, facing Feydak.

"We amused each other. May I see the map?"

Feydak shot him an inquisitive glance, but the blank expression on Corridon's face told him nothing. He took out folded sheet of paper and passed it across the table.

"There should be no difficulty. The flat is on the ground floor, and the front door is out of sight of the main entrance. The porter goes off duty at nine o'clock. If you can open the front door, the rest is simple. The letters are kept in the desk in the sitting-room. That is this room here." He leaned forward and pointed. "You enter here, turn left, and the sitting-room door is here. The desk stands by the window. It may be locked, but I should imagine it won't give you any trouble. The letters are in the top right-hand drawer."

Corridon studied the map.

"Are you sure of your facts?"

Feydak nodded.

"Yes. The woman has been watched. We got at her maid. She is definite about where the letters are kept."

"Not a very safe place," Corridon said dryly. He was suspicious now. This

was a little too easy. He wished he had consulted Ritchie before promising to do the job. There had been difficulties. He hadn't left Lorene's apartment until after noon. Huey had been waiting outside and had followed him. Corridon had felt at the time that Huey might have become suspicious if he had telephoned Marian, even if he had used a call-box. Now he wished he had. "This woman seems an amateur."

"Oh, she is," Feydak said, smiling. "If this chap wasn't such an important man there would be nothing to it. He just can't afford to go to the police. I believe the letters are disgraceful."

Corridon tossed the map across the table.

"Well, it's simple enough. Suppose the letters aren't there?"

"But they will be."

"There is always the possibility the woman will have thought of another hiding-place. If they are not in the desk what do I do? Do you want me to search the flat?"

"I assure you they will be there," Feydak said. "But if they aren't, then you had better search for them. You will have plenty of time. We have promised to get them whatever happens. She has gone to a roadhouse in Maidenhead. It is unlikely she'll return before two in the morning. But we have taken precautions. Diestl has gone out there. He'll watch her. If she leaves early, he will telephone her flat. Should the phone ring, be sure to answer it. He'll tell you the minute she leaves."

Corridon stood up.

"You seem to have taken care of the details. Do we go now?"

"I think so. Are you ready?"

"I shall be in a moment."

Corridon went into his bedroom, opened a drawer and took out a small roll of canvas containing a kit of tools. He dropped it into his pocket, fished out a pair of thin leather gloves and put them on. He eyed the Browning 9mm. automatic pistol lying in the drawer, but decided to leave it where it was.

He returned to the sitting-room.

"Let's go then," he said.

On the way downstairs, Feydak said, "I'll wait outside. If anything suspicious happens I will sound the horn."

"That'll be a comfort," Corridon said, with his jeering smile. "The only snag to that is there's no back exit. If a squad of police turn up, I can't avoid

walking into them.”

“I see no reason why they should turn up,” Feydak said, as he started the engine. He sounded a little irritated.

“One can always rely on the police to be inconsiderate,” Corridon said. “They turn up in the most unexpected places. If there’s trouble, drive to the end of the road and wait for me.”

“Of course; but it will be all right.”

A few minutes fast driving brought them to a quiet street behind the Albert Hall. Feydak slowed down and swung the car to the kerb.

“That’s the house, opposite,” he said. “Number thirty-seven.” He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. “You have plenty of time. I’ll wait here. All right?”

“Yes. If the letters are where you say they are, I shouldn’t be longer than six or seven minutes. Keep the engine running.”

“Yes. Well, good luck.”

Corridon bent and peered at Feydak through the window.

“I hope Diestl has the money in cash for me,” he said. “I don’t part with the letters until I get paid.”

Feydak forced a smile. In the glow of the dashboard light his face was the colour of old ivory, and he seemed very tense.

“There will be no trouble about that,” he said.

“All right,” Corridon said. “Well, so long.”

He crossed the road, looked to right and left before mounting the steps leading to the entrance to a well-lighted hall. He entered without hesitation.

Facing him was an automatic lift, and as he crossed the hall to the corridor on his left, the lift doors swung open and a man in evening dress came out. He looked sharply at Corridon who kept on, moving deliberately and without giving the man a second glance.

It was bad luck he should have been seen, Corridon thought. If the woman complained to the police, this man would have a description of him. It was unlikely she would complain, but there was just that chance.

He heard the man run down the steps to the street, and he glanced over his shoulder. Satisfied the man had disappeared he went on down the corridor towards a solid oak front door which, according to the map, led to the flat he was to burgle.

He took from his pocket a piece of stout celluloid. This he forced against

the catch of the lock; a moment's manipulation was all that was necessary to slide back the catch. He pushed open the door and stepped into a dark little hall. From another pocket he took out a flashlight. He closed the door silently, swung the beam of the flashlight to the left. Before him was a door as the map had indicated. He walked silently to it, listened for a moment with his ear against the panel, then his hand closed round the door-knob. This he turned slowly and gently until it would turn no further. He pressed and edged the door open. Darkness greeted him. He pushed the door wide open and swung the beam of his flashlight round the room. Satisfied it was empty he stepped into the room and closed the door.

The desk stood by the curtained window. He crossed the room and examined it. The lock looked solid, and he made a little grimace. A jemmy would force it without much trouble, but Corridon prided himself on opening locks without noise or damage. From his kit he took a small pick and inserted it in the lock. For some minutes he worked with the pick, then he withdrew it, took out a small pair of pliers and bent the pick slightly. He inserted it in the lock again, fiddled gently and was rewarded by a soft click as the lock turned.

He put the pliers and pick back into the canvas holder, dropped it into his pocket and opened the desk. There were nests of drawers on either side of the desk. He opened the top right-hand drawer. It was empty.

Moving swiftly, he opened the top left-hand drawer. It was full of bits of sealing wax, short lengths of pencils, paper clips and the like, but there were no letters. He examined the other drawers rapidly without finding what he was looking for. The letters were not in the desk!

He stood still for a moment, frowning. She had either changed the hiding-place or the letters didn't exist. He had thought all along the job seemed too easy. Was this a trap?

He went to the window, lifted the curtain and looked into the street. The dark silent street was empty. The Buick had gone.

A trap then, Corridon thought, and showed his teeth in a mirthless smile. Probably someone waiting for him in the hall. A quick glance out of the window showed him if he could open the window he could get out onto the sill and from there, jump over the spiked railings that guarded the basement. It wouldn't be easy, but it could be done. It would be safer than going out into the hall.

First the door must be locked. But as he took a step to cross the room, the

door was thrown open and the room blazed into light.

A tall, handsome woman in an oyster-coloured wrap stood in the doorway. Her long, dark hair fell to her shoulders and behind her Corridon caught a glimpse of a startled-faced man in a silk dressing-gown.

“Don’t move!” the woman said, her voice sharp and steady. She raised a small automatic pistol and pointed it at Corridon. “Put your hands up!”

“Good God!” the man behind her exclaimed. “It’s a burglar! Be careful! These chaps are dangerous.”

As Corridon raised his hands he gave the woman a crooked smile. He was trying to remember where he had seen the man before. His face was irritatingly familiar.

“Phone the police, David,” the woman said. “I’ll keep him covered.”

The man came cautiously into the room. He looked very frightened and white. Corridon recognized him, and felt a prickle ran up his spine. David Lestrangle, Permanent Under-Secretary of European Affairs.

“We can’t have the police here!” Lestrangle said, his voice husky. “What are you thinking of? We’d better let him go.”

“Very wise, Mr. Lestrangle,” Corridon said, with his jeering smile. “Think of the scandal.”

“He should be searched,” the woman said. “He may have taken something.”

“I’m not going to touch him,” Lestrangle said, and wiped his face with his handkerchief. “You – get out of here!” he went on to Corridon, and pointed an unsteady finger at the door.

“Is that all right with you?” Corridon asked, looking at the woman. “I should hate to be shot through a misunderstanding.”

She moved away from him, still keeping him covered by the gun.

“Consider yourself lucky,” she said. “You can go.”

But something was wrong. Corridon had a sudden premonition that she was going to shoot. He saw her finger drawing in the slack of the trigger. There was a cold, ferocious expression in her eyes.

Then he realized what was about to happen, why he was here, and the cleverness of the trap he had walked into. She was about to murder Lestrangle and he was to take the blame!

“Look out!” he shouted, and lunged forward. But the realization had come a fraction of a second too late.

The woman swung round and fired at Lestrangle before Corridon could reach her. Before she could fire a second time, he had grabbed her wrist and smashed the gun out of her hand. He flung her away from him as Lestrangle buckled at the knees and spread out on the carpet.

One brief glance at the small blue hole in the centre of Lestrangle's forehead told Corridon he was dead. He made a dive for the door as the woman began to scream.

chapter twelve

As Corridon came out into the main hall he saw Huey standing in the doorway, leading to the street. Huey grinned at him, showing small broken teeth.

“Stay where you are,” he said in a low, guttural voice. “You’re not getting away.”

“How wrong you are, Fatty,” Corridon said.

A swift glance assured him Huey wasn’t armed. He didn’t hesitate, knowing every second was precious. Moving warily he came across the hall towards Huey.

He knew it would be fatal to grapple with this man who was obviously immensely strong. His only chance of a quick get-away was to put Huey down and out, but as he moved in, Huey lifted his hands. The way he shaped up told Corridon he knew as much about fighting as Corridon did himself.

Weaving as he came in, Corridon jabbed at Huey’s face with a long, raking left. Huey blocked the punch and counter-punched with surprising speed. Corridon, who hadn’t had a fight in months, saw it coming a shade late, but managed to shoulder up in time to half-smother the blow. It was hard enough to send him off balance. He expected Huey to come in, but he didn’t. He stood his ground, grinning, intent only on preventing Corridon from passing him and reaching the exit.

Corridon came in again. A left-hand punch caught him on the side of his head, and the following right whizzed over his shoulder as he ducked to avoid it. He clouted Huey in the ribs with a left and a right before moving out of range.

Huey didn’t like those punches. His grin went and he snarled at Corridon.

Corridon knew it was dangerous to come in against a man with a punch like Huey’s, but he couldn’t afford to waste time sparring for an opening. He feinted with his left, weaved back as Huey’s right hand sailed towards him, then caught Huey with a solid right-hand punch on the side of his neck. Huey staggered and dropped his hands. Corridon jumped in and hit him hard on his jaw. Instinctively Huey raised his shoulder and took some of the steam out of the punch, but Corridon knew he was hurt, and moving in, he recklessly

allowed Huey to grab him. It was like being grabbed by a bear.

Huey's great arms encircled Corridon's ribs, and he felt them creak under the pressure. He shoved the palm of his hand under Huey's chin and forced his head back. For a long moment the two men strained against each other, but Corridon had the extra leverage, and Huey had to release his grip. As he staggered back, Corridon slammed him on the point of his jaw. Huey fell forward on hands and knees, rolled over, and was trying desperately to get to his feet as Corridon sprang to the door.

But the delay had been fatal. Coming up the steps at a run were four flat-capped policemen.

Without stopping in his rush, Corridon whirled round, jumped over Huey's bunched-up body and threw himself into the automatic lift. His thumb sank into the button as the police burst into the hall. The doors swung to as one of them shouted and dived towards him.

Breathing hard, Corridon pressed the top button and the lift began its swift, smooth climb.

He reckoned he would have about two minutes, not more, when he reached the top floor. They would come up the stairs almost as fast as the lift. He had had time to see they were all young, tough-looking men. A ruff up four flights of stairs wouldn't be anything to them.

Almost before the lift had stopped moving, he had the door open and had darted out into a long corridor. He could hear the pounding of feet on the stairs, and he looked quickly to right and left. At the far end of the corridor was a window. A door faced him. There was another door further down the corridor. He didn't hesitate, but made a dash for the window. Reaching it, he pushed back the latch and threw it open. Within reach was a stack-pipe, and immediately above his head was the roof and guttering. He had no fear of heights, and could climb like a mountain goat. The stack-pipe to him was as good as a ladder.

He climbed out onto the sill, reached for the stack-pipe and got a grip on it. He heard a shout from below as he swung himself off the sill. He hung for a moment while his toes searched for a hold, then he pulled himself up the pipe until he was within reach of the guttering. He put out his hand and cautiously tested its strength. It seemed strong enough, and with his heart in his mouth, he transferred his weight to it, pulling himself up with an arm-lift to the gently sloping roof.

The gutter creaked and sagged, and for a moment he thought it was going to tear away from the wall. He heaved desperately, got his chest on the roof, and with a convulsive wriggle, got his legs up, too.

He lay for a moment, getting his breath back, knowing how easy it was to start sliding. Once on the move, he would have nothing to stop the momentum, and he would pitch off the roof into the street.

He examined the roof. The light of the moon was strong enough for him to see it sloped up to a sharp peak and then down the other side. To his right was a flat roof on a lower level to the one he was on. If he could reach the lower roof before the police got there, he would stand a chance of giving them the slip.

Very cautiously he groped in his pocket and brought out a small, heavy jemmy. He smashed a tile, and then another, making foot and handholds. Working rapidly, pulling himself up from tile to tile, he reached the top of the roof. The other side of the peak sloped down to a substantial gutter that connected the roof he was on to the sloping roof of the adjacent house. He let himself go, slithering down the tiles until he landed in the gutter. Immediately he set off towards the flat roof.

He moved silently and swiftly, and as he came to the end of the gutter, he paused to peer carefully ahead. For a moment or so he saw nothing, then he caught sight of a shadowy figure by one of the chimney-stacks, looking in his direction. He crouched down into the shadows and waited.

Two other figures appeared. The moonlight caught the glint of buttons. There must be a skylight on the flat roof, he thought.

“Seen anything of him, Jack?” one of the figures whispered.

“He hasn’t come this way. It’s my guess he’s still up there. He couldn’t climb that roof. No one could climb it.”

“The sergeant’s having a look from the opposite house. The fire-brigade’s coming.”

“All right, you two, cut out the chattering,” another voice said. “Spread out and keep your eyes open. He’s left his gun in the flat, but he may have another. So watch out.” Two of the figures moved away into the darkness. The remaining policeman stood looking to the right and left as if undecided which way to go, then he began to move towards Corridon. He walked softly, but Corridon could see by his movements he didn’t expect to run into him. He was obviously satisfied that Corridon was trapped on the sloping roof, and

there was nothing to be done until the fire-escape arrived.

Corridon crouched down in the darkness. The policeman was very close now: a big, burly figure. Corridon could hear his heavy breathing. He braced his feet against the side of the gutter and prepared for his spring.

The policeman was almost on him now, and must have sensed Corridon's presence for he suddenly stiffened and stared intently into the darkness where Corridon was hiding. Corridon sprang at him, his hands moving out for the policeman's throat. He got his grip, dug his thumbs into the veins either side of the policeman's neck.

The policeman hit him heavily in the body, making him gasp, but he hung on, gritting his teeth and increasing his pressure. The policeman lifted his hand to hit again, but Corridon's grip had cut the blood from his head, and suddenly he blacked out, going limp and making Corridon stagger.

Panting, Corridon lowered him gently to the ground. He stripped off the policeman's cap and jacket in the matter of seconds. Hastily removing his own overcoat and jacket, he put on the policeman's clothes, rolled his things into a tight bundle, tucked it under his arm, and stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight

"You all right, Jack?" a voice called.

He looked to his left. On a nearby roof he saw the silhouette of a policeman who waved to him. He waved back, crossed the flat roof to the shadows cast by a chimney-stack. Somewhere on this roof there must be a skylight, he thought. He looked around. Immediately below him was the roof of a garage; beyond the garage an alley. He could see figures moving about in the street. There seemed a lot of policemen down there. In the distance he heard the clang of a fire-bell. He would have to make his escape before they discovered he wasn't up on the roof or before they found the unconscious policeman.

He decided it would be too dangerous to drop onto the garage roof. They would be certain to see him. It was the skylight or nothing.

After a quick search he spotted a galvanized covered trap in a patch of shadows. He hooked his fingers under it, raised it and looked down into a small room full of trunks and wooden cases.

He dropped into the room, reached up and replaced the trap, then stepped silently to the door. He opened it and found himself on a flight of stairs. There was a light burning in the hall below.

The clang of the fire-bell was very loud now, and he heard voices below him. He leaned over the banisters.

An elderly man and woman stood before the open front door, looking into the street. They were motionless with tense excitement as the fire-escape came rushing down the street.

Corridon started down the stairs, moving deliberately and without a sound. He kept his eyes on the man and woman, expecting them to turn at any moment and see him. But they were far too interested in the arrival of the escape to think of looking behind them.

Silently, he moved down the passage, leading to the rear of the house. He walked sideways, so he could watch the two as he went. The passage curved slightly, and once round the bend, he again paused to take stock. He found himself at the head of a short flight of stairs that led to the back door.

He went down the stairs, turned the key in the lock, and gently pulled the door open. The dark little garden that stretched out before him ended in a low brick wall that ran along the alley he had seen from the roof.

He walked down the garden path to the wall, and glanced over. The alley seemed deserted. He swung his leg over the wall, and dropped quietly to the other side. He paused for a moment to get his bearings; to the left would take him to the Albert Hall, to the right Hyde Park Corner. If he could reach Marian Howard's flat in Dover Street, he could hide there until the search had died down. He began to walk slowly and quietly down the alley.

Suddenly a dazzling white light lit up the sky, and looking up, he saw a searchlight sweeping the roofs. He quickened his pace. It would only be a matter of minutes now before they realized he was not up there.

Haste was nearly his undoing. A figure moved out of the shadows, and he almost walked into it.

"That you, Bill?"

Corridon found himself face to face with a policeman. The man scarcely gave him a glance. He was staring up at the floodlit roofs.

"They'll have him now," he said with satisfaction. "But they've taken their time about coming, haven't they?"

The up-turned face and the pointing chin was too good a target to miss. Corridon knew once the man took a good look at him the game would be up. He set himself, and his fist smashed against the policeman's jaw. The man reeled, then fell over on his back.

Corridon made a dash down the alley.

chapter thirteen

Corridon dodged into a doorway near the Piccadilly end of Dover Street. He paused for a moment to look up and down the street. Satisfied no one was paying any attention to his movements, he groped his way down a passage and began to mount a flight of steep stairs. He was breathing heavily. Knightsbridge, the Park and Piccadilly had been alive with police. Patrol cars were prowling the back streets; plain-clothes men were watching the various underground station entrances along the route from the Albert Hall to Piccadilly.

It had taken him more than an hour to reach Dover Street. For twenty minutes or so he had lain in the bushes in the Park waiting for a chance to dart across Piccadilly to the darkness of Shepherd Market. From there he had gone to Berkeley Square, slipped down a back alley leading to Brewer Street, and from there to Dover Street.

Marian's flat was on the top floor. He pressed the bell push, and then stepped across the passage to look over the banisters.

Marian opened the door, and he turned. For a moment he didn't recognize her without the heavy make-up she had worn when they had first met.

"Hello," he said, keeping his voice down. "Can I come in?"

She stood aside.

"Of course."

He entered a gaudily furnished sitting-room where an electric stove was burning.

"Get Ritchie here," he said, as he took off his overcoat. He tossed it on a chair. "I'm in plenty of trouble."

"They may be watching the flat," she said. "Is it as urgent as all that?"

He grinned.

"I'll say it is. You're supposed to have gentlemen visitors, aren't you? I've got to talk to him."

She looked at him sharply, then went over to the telephone. She dialled, waited, then spoke rapidly and softly. Corridon stood before the electric stove, warming the back of his legs.

She replaced the receiver and turned.

“He’s coming.”

Corridon nodded.

“Have you heard the news yet?”

“What news?”

“Lestrangle was murdered tonight.” He tapped himself on the chest. “I’m it.”

“I’ll get you a drink. You must need it,” she said, and went out of the room.

No fuss, no questions, but only a thought for his needs, Corridon thought approvingly. She moved up even higher in his estimation. He flopped down on the settee, and rubbed his face with his hands. The side of his head ached where Huey had hit him, and his legs felt heavy. The climb over the roof and the excitement of the chase had tired him.

She came back with whisky, a glass and a soda syphon. She put them on the table within reach of him.

“Would you like something to eat?” she asked.

He shook his head and poured a stiff drink.

“I’m fine. He won’t be long, will he?”

“Ten minutes.”

Corridon drank some of the whisky, felt in his pocket for cigarettes, made a half move to offer them and smiled.

“You don’t smoke, do you?”

“No, thank you.”

“I don’t think Ritchie’s going to be pleased with me. I led with my chin this time,” Corridon said, frowning. “Well, he got me into this, and he’ll damn well have to get me out of it.”

“He will,” Marian said with quiet confidence.

“I’m not so sure. There’s going to be a row about this. Someone may want my blood.”

“I’m afraid they’ll want his blood, too,” Marian said. “He doesn’t hide behind his agents, you know.”

Corridon suddenly felt uncomfortable. He had been thinking entirely of himself up to now. It hadn’t crossed his mind that Ritchie was more likely to get shot at than he.

“Well, he shouldn’t have picked on me,” he said irritably. “I didn’t ask to handle the job.”

“You were the best man he had,” Marian said. “He admires you.”

“Me?” Corridon said, startled. “Oh, rot! He picked on me because I have an unsavoury reputation. He’ll break a blood vessel when he hears what’s happened.”

“He chose you because this is the most important and vital job we have on our hands at the moment,” Marian said seriously. “He told me himself he was relying on you. Of course, he admires you.”

“Let’s agree to disagree,” Corridon said, finishing the whisky. “That was just what I needed. Better put the bottle away. He disapproves of agents who drink!” While she put the whisky and syphon in a cupboard, he went on, “And by the way, I don’t think this is the sort of setup you should get mixed up with. The two blokes who are shadowing me are dangerous.”

She smiled.

“I’ve seen them. The short one is Carl Bruger. He was in charge of an execution squad in Poland. The tall one is Ivan Yevski who was responsible for removing the gold fillings from many Jewish mouths. Of the two, I would say he is the more dangerous. But if you want to make an omelette you must be prepared to break a few eggs.”

Corridon shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, if you know what you’re walking into, that’s all right. I just mentioned it, although I knew I should be wasting my breath. Ritchie seems to have the happy knack of picking mugs who don’t know what’s bad for them.”

She laughed.

“It’s not as bad as that, and thank you for thinking of me. I do wish you wouldn’t be quite so bitter about Colonel Ritchie. He is only doing his job.”

“I know,” Corridon stubbed out his cigarette and reached for another. “But he should leave women out of it.”

The front door bell rang sharply.

“Make sure that’s him,” Corridon said, getting to his feet. “They may have spotted me coming here.”

She went out of the room.

Corridon waited, his ears cocked, but he relaxed when he heard Ritchie’s calm voice as he greeted Marian. The door pushed open, and Ritchie came in.

The two men looked at each other while Marian disappeared unobtrusively to another room.

“Well, you’ve started something this time,” Ritchie said curtly. He looked tired, and his eyes were angry. “What in the name of glory have you been up to?”

“They set a trap and I walked into it,” Corridon said. “I have only myself to blame. As I think you know, I had a date with Lorene Feydak on Sunday. Her brother and a man who calls himself Joseph Diestl were at her flat. Diestl offered me two hundred and fifty pounds to steal letters from a woman who was supposed to be blackmailing one of his clients. I jumped to the conclusion this was a test. If I agreed and pulled the job off, I thought Diestl would then let me into the organization. Instead, it was a trap, and they’ve used me as a cat’s paw for Lestrangle’s murder.”

“You met Diestl on Sunday?”

Corridon nodded.

“Why didn’t you report to Marian? Suppose you had been killed? I shouldn’t have heard of Diestl. Surely you can see information like that is vital?”

“I spent the night with Lorene Feydak,” Corridon said. “At the time I didn’t think the information was very important.”

Ritchie stared hard at him, then went over to the settee and sat down.

“If you had told Marian what was in the wind, I would have had someone watch you. You would then have had a witness. It’s not like you to play the fool.”

“All right,” Corridon said savagely. “I’m slipping, but I didn’t want this damned job. You pushed it on to me. I know I should have reported to Marian, but at the time it didn’t seem necessary. I had this girl in my hair until...”

“Yes, I think you are slipping,” Ritchie said quietly. “I’ve never known you to make excuses before.”

“Oh, go to hell!” Corridon exclaimed. “I’m not making excuses. I’m telling you what happened.”

“You realise Lestrangle is a key man?” Ritchie said. “There’s going to be an awful rumpus about this. You seem to have been particularly clumsy. You were seen entering the flat. The woman and a man who lives in the flat above hers have given very accurate descriptions of you. The police know it is you. The woman claims she kept jewellery in the desk, and you took it. She says you shot Lestrangle down in cold blood.”

“There was no jewellery and I didn’t shoot Lestrangle,” Corridon said.

“I know that, but it will be difficult to prove.”

“Well, it’s got to be proved!” Corridon snapped. “I was damn near hanged the last job I did for you. I’m not going through that experience again.”

Ritchie took out a cigarette-case, opened it and selected a cigarette.

“Have you any suggestions?” he asked mildly.

“I’ll tell my story to the police and you’ll corroborate it. If the police work on the woman, she’ll crack.”

“I’m afraid it won’t be as easy as that,” Ritchie said. “Naturally, you are looking at this thing from your point of view. But I see it from many points of view. What you don’t seem to realize is that this organization is not yet aware it has been discovered. They believe we don’t know these murders and acts of sabotage are planned and carried out by this particular group of people. They think they have covered their tracks, and we are floundering about in the dark. They have no idea I am hunting for them. If I come forward and corroborate your story, the cat will be out of the bag, and they will be much more difficult to track down. I’m afraid it is in the interests of the country for me not to come forward.”

Corridon stood very still. His face hardened.

“Let’s get this straight,” he said. “Are you going to throw me to the wolves?”

Ritchie lit his cigarette and put the match carefully in the ash-tray.

“I’m afraid I am. You have stepped out of line, and as you admit, you have only yourself to blame. If you hadn’t fooled with that girl, you could have got word to Marian and I should have been able to cover you. I would have told Saunders to watch you, and as soon as the shot had been fired, he would have entered the room and caught the woman in the act. You would have had the necessary witness and I need not have come into it. But as it is, it’s you or the country. I’m sorry.”

Corridon went to the cupboard and fetched out the whisky and soda syphon.

“Then if I’m not working for you anymore,” he said, “I may as well buy myself a drink.” He poured a stiff whisky. “Like one?”

Ritchie shook his head.

“You don’t think I’m going to hand myself over to Rawlins, do you?” Corridon went on. “You don’t imagine I’m going like a lamb to the

slaughter? You should know me better than that. It's easy enough for you to talk about putting the country first. You're not risking your life. I like my life, and I intend to keep it as long as I can. I'm afraid your little plan is going to misfire."

"I seem to have misjudged you," Ritchie said. "I was a fool to have taken you into my confidence."

"I think you were," Corridon returned. "I warned you. I'm sorry, Colonel, but I'm not falling in with your patriotic plans. I'm going over to the other side. I don't doubt if I tell them you are the boy they should watch; they will favour me. They'll probably be interested to know what happened to No. 12, the fella you worked on and who committed suicide. They'll also be interested to learn something of your methods you have so obligingly taught me in the past. I wouldn't mind betting they'll find a suitable hiding-place for me when they realize just how much I know about the tricks of your trade. What do you say to that, Colonel?"

Ritchie pulled at his long, thin nose while he eyed Corridon thoughtfully. Then his face cleared and he smiled.

"You are quite right, of course," he said. "This is the only way to play it. If they think you and I have fallen out, they might trust you. It'll be a dangerous game, but you might pull it off."

Corridon grinned.

"Damn it! I was hoping to see you fly into a rage. It is the only way now, Colonel. Only it's you who'll have to be careful. If I do this the right way, I'll have to use you as the bait on my hook."

"That's all right. I'll take precautions. It's a gamble, but it may come off. You'll have to tell them all you know, and it's got to be the truth. They'll try to check everything you do tell them, and if they find out you've lied, both of us are sunk. I'll leave the details to you. If they accept you, you should be able to clean them up. There's just one thing: leave Marian out of it. I don't think I told you she's my niece, and I'm very fond of her. Keep her out of it."

"If I'm to get to the top man," Corridon said, "I can't keep anyone under cover. You know that. I won't mention her unless they ask me, but if they do, then I'll have to tell them. It's probable they have been watching her. You'd better get her out of here, and put her where they can't find her. If I'm to pull this off, they mustn't catch me out in a lie."

Ritchie nodded.

“You’re right. I’ll get her out of this.” He stared at Corridon for a moment or so. “I’m sorry I spoke the way I did. I take it all back. You haven’t changed a scrap.”

Corridon smiled.

“I may have got a little soft and careless, but no one makes a fool out of me without getting paid back, and with interest. Diestl slipped a fast one on me. He’s going to be sorry. I’ll get off now. When you go, take Marian with you. She won’t be safe in an hour or so.” He held out his hand. “So long, Colonel. I’ll present you with their scalps before long. That goes for the top man too, and it won’t cost you a thing. I’m doing this for free, and I’m going to enjoy it.”

Ritchie shook hands

“Good luck, Martin, and be careful. If you want any help, you know where you can reach me.”

“It’s not going to be that easy. I’ll have to work this out on my own. When I do call you, it’ll be the finish of them. Well, so long.”

“I think Marian would like to wish you luck,” Ritchie said.

Corridon shook his head.

“No. I have one woman on my hands right now, and I don’t want another.” He grinned. “The trouble with your niece is she’s too attractive. Know what, Colonel? I could go for her. She’s my type of woman. So the less I see of her the better for her – and probably me.”

Marian, who was listening behind the bedroom door, flushed scarlet.

chapter fourteen

Corridon put his thumb against Lorene's front door bell and leaned his weight against it. The time was twenty minutes to three a.m. On his way to Bayswater Crescent he had had two narrow escapes: one from a patrol car, and another from a plain-clothes man who had rashly tried to arrest him without calling for assistance. The patrol car Corridon had got away from by climbing a garden wall and playing a fierce hide-and-seek for twenty minutes or so. The plain-clothes man had been easier. Corridon had hit him on the jaw as the detective grabbed him.

He listened to the shrill sound of the bell, and wondered if Lorene was alone. She was taking her time about answering, he thought sourly.

Then he heard her voice calling through the letter-box flap.

"Who is it?"

He bent and looked into her startled eyes.

"Hello, sweetheart," he said. "Open up, I want to come in."

She opened the front door. She looked very small and charming in a transparent crepe de Chine nightdress, but her eyes were frightened.

"Martin! What on earth... Don't you know it's nearly three?"

He stepped into the hall and closed the front door with his heel.

"Yes, I know what the time is."

He pushed her into the sitting-room.

"I want to use your phone. Go and get something on, and make some coffee."

"Martin! Have you gone mad? You can't come in here like this..."

He caught hold of her arms and gave her a little shake. His sea-green eyes were savage.

"Do what I tell you! What's your brother's phone number?"

"Let me go! How dare..."

He gave her another little shake that snapped her head back and left her breathless.

"I'm not playing, Lorene. I'm serious. What's your brother's number?"

"Berkeley 5445," she said. "But why do you want Slade? What's happened?"

“Plenty,” Corridon said and walked over to the phone. “Your sweet little brother and that pal of his have got me snarled up in a murder.” He dialled the number she had given him. “Don’t stand gaping. Get me some coffee and put on a wrap. That nightie of yours isn’t decent.”

She didn’t move, but stood with her hands across her breasts, white-faced, her eyes wide.

“Murder?” Her voice was off-key.

“Yes.” Corridon heard a click on the line, and then Feydak’s voice asked sleepily, “Who’s that?”

“This is Corridon. Now listen, get hold of Diestl and come round to your sister’s place right away. You’ve had your fun, now I’m going to have mine. And if you think you can start anything funny, just remember I have Lorene within reach, and it’d give me a lot of pleasure to stretch her pretty neck. Understand?”

As Feydak caught his breath in a startled gasp, Corridon dropped the receiver back on its cradle.

Lorene backed hurriedly away.

“But, Martin...”

“Don’t get excited. Nothing’s going to happen to you,” Corridon said, and he gave her a long, hard stare. “Did you know what they were up to?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Martin! You’re frightening me. What’s happened?”

“You know about the letters?”

She hesitated, then, “Well, Slade did say something about them. He – he wanted you...”

“You didn’t know it was a trap?” He was staring at her. “No, I don’t think you did. There weren’t any letters. The woman was entertaining David Lestrangle. When I arrived, she shot him through the head, and I’m the goat. Diestl and your brother engineered the murder. I’m supposed to take the blame.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You will, when you see tomorrow’s newspapers, and you will, when Slade gets hanged!”

“Oh, darling!” She came swiftly to him and threw her arms round his neck. “You frighten me so. But if you’re in trouble, I’ll do anything I can to help you.”

He pushed her away.

“That’s fine,” he said with his jeering smile. “Well, make a start and get me some coffee. And take my tip, precious, get rid of that jade ring. It’s dangerous.”

He saw her flinch.

“Are you sure you are feeling all right?” she asked anxiously. “You’re saying the oddest things.”

“Get me some coffee and quit acting like a new-born baby. You’re as obvious as a neon light?” He turned her and propelled her forward with a light slap on her behind. “Go on, and hurry.”

While she was getting the coffee, he took off his coat and dropped on the settee. He walked. Minutes ticked by. He could hear her moving about in the kitchen. He wondered just how deeply involved she was in this business. Not very deep, he decided. Slade could be using her as a cat’s paw. He thought that was the most likely explanation.

She came into the room, carrying a tray. She had tidied her dark hair and had put on a wrap. As she poured the coffee, he saw her hand was shaking.

“Look, let’s not have any more fooling. Just how deeply are you mixed up in this business?”

She gave him a quick, scared look.

“I do wish you wouldn’t talk in riddles. What do you mean? What business?”

“Slade and Diestl are running an organization the main object of which is to cause as much damage to this country’s economic recovery as possible. Didn’t you know?”

She bit down on her lip.

“I – I knew he was doing something. He’s never told me what.”

Corridon took the cup of coffee from her.

“Well, you know now.”

“I can’t believe it. Please, don’t talk like that. I – I don’t want to hear any more.”

“Why do you wear that ring?” he went on. “Don’t you know each member of the organization wears a ring like that?”

“Slade gave it to me to wear. He’s taken it back now.”

That was possible, Corridon thought. Arousing his interest in Lorene could have been part of the trap.

He put down his coffee cup and swung up his legs on the settee.

"Forget about it," he said. "But stick around when your brother comes. You should hear something that'll interest you."

They waited in an uneasy silence. Later, when the front door bell rang and Lorene jumped up, Corridon reached out and caught her wrist.

"You stay here," he said. "I'll answer it."

He went to the front door, slipped on the chain and opened it a couple of inches. Outside in the passage Diestl and Feydak waited.

Corridon made sure they were on their own, then he took off the chain and opened the door.

"Come in."

They entered. Feydak looked white and shaken, but Diestl was unmoved. His thin set face was expressionless, and his eyes were watchful.

Corridon closed the door behind them and waved them to the sitting-room.

"Let's go in there and have a little talk," he said.

The two men entered. Feydak and Lorene exchanged quick, uneasy glances. Corridon closed the door. He returned to his chair and poured out another cup of coffee.

"That was quite a trick you pulled on me," he said to Diestl. "Congratulations."

Diestl went over to the dying fire. He stood with his back to it, his hands in his trouser pockets. He smiled thinly.

"The police are hunting for you," he said smoothly. "It is my duty to tell them you are here. You realize that?"

Corridon grinned.

"It wouldn't be wise to tell them I'm here," he said cheerfully. "Naturally, you don't want to be drawn into this business. That's why I came here. You hoped I would have been caught after the shooting. That was why you sent your fat bodyguard to see I didn't get away. Unfortunately, I did get away, and now you're stuck with me."

Diestl raised his black eyebrows.

"I don't know what you are talking about. You can't stay here. You'd better go."

"Ring up the police now," Corridon said. "Go on. Tell them I'm here, and don't kid yourself you three will be able to talk yourself out of trouble."

"If it wasn't for Lorene," Diestl said with his thin smile, "I would most

certainly call the police. Naturally I hesitate to involve her in any unpleasantness. It would be better if you left.”

Corridon lit a cigarette.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you. I’m staying here. But don’t let us waste any more time. I intend to be frank with you. Up to an hour ago I was an agent attached to O.S.S.5, the English branch of the cloak and dagger boys. You may have heard of them. Their job is to hunt down spies and saboteurs, and they are under the direction of a certain Colonel at the War Office. He is on to you. I was ordered to contact you and find out as much as I could of your activities. Because you outsmarted me, and I made a mess of this letter-stealing stunt, I have been tossed out into the cold, hard world. In other words, authority has once again washed its hands of me. Does this bore you?”

Diestl shook his head.

“If it amuses you, go on. I have no idea what you are talking about, but no doubt that won’t worry you.”

“It doesn’t,” Corridon said cheerfully. “The Colonel is particularly anxious that you should have no idea he is on to you. That is the reason why he is sacrificing me. I don’t see it his way. Since I am between the devil and the deep blue sea, I have no alternative but to offer you my services.”

“I should have no use for them,” Diestl said. “I don’t make a habit of hiring murderers.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t entirely accurate,” Corridon said. “Carl Bruger is a professional murderer.”

For a second Diestl’s face tightened, then he recovered himself.

“I don’t know who you are talking about.”

“I suppose you have never heard of Ivan Yevski?”

Again Diestl couldn’t control a slight start.

“No, I haven’t,” he said, but his thin smile had gone.

“The fact is,” Corridon went on, flicking ash on the carpet, “we know a lot about your organization. We know about the jade rings. The Colonel has been extremely active. He has quite a dossier on you and your followers. I would be useful to you. Don’t let’s beat about the bush. I’m not fussy who I work for, providing the money is reasonable. I know the inner workings of O.S.S.5. I know their agents. I know their methods. I could tell you who to watch for. For all you know you may have some of them working amongst the group you control. I could ferret them out for you. Besides all that, there’s

nothing I don't know about explosives, sabotage, and the gentle art of removing undesirables. I could teach your recruits a lot. I should need money, of course, and shelter, but I should be an excellent bargain. I assure you of that."

Diestl studied Corridon. The cold, black eyes were piercing.

"I can only conclude you are either mad or drunk," he said. "I have no idea what you are talking about. I suggest you leave immediately."

Corridon laughed.

"Still cautious? Perhaps you'd better ask yourself if you can afford to be without me. No. 12 was caught, you know, and he talked."

A shadow passed across Diestl's face, and his jaw muscles tightened.

"Don't trust him!" Feydak said, harshly seeing the change of expression. "He's up to something."

"Probably he is, but I think he may be right when he says we can't afford to be without him." A small automatic sprang into Diestl's hand. He levelled the gun at Corridon. "What do you know of No. 12?"

"That's better," Corridon said. "At least, you admit you know who I'm talking about. You wondered where he vanished to, didn't you? Well, I'll tell you. O.S.S.5 nabbed him. They took him to a quiet little room in the basement of a silent lonely house and they worked on him. They weren't particularly fussy how they handled him either. After a while, he talked. Then to make sure he wasn't holding anything back, they worked him over again. Perhaps he hadn't anything more to tell them, but they are hard to convince; and extremely enthusiastic. He wasn't quite tough enough to withstand their attentions. He died under the treatment."

Feydak caught his breath in a gasp of horror.

Corridon turned to look at him.

"I doubt if you are anything like as tough as No. 12," he said, smiling into Feydak's white face. "I doubt if you'd last half an hour with these boys. But, of course, you would probably talk before they even started on you."

"That's enough," Diestl said curtly. "Give me the name of this Colonel."

Corridon shook his head.

"Is it likely I would give away one of my best cards? Do something for me and I'll do a lot for you. I want a job and shelter. In return I'll make myself useful to you. Is it a bargain?"

Diestl looked over at Feydak.

“Well, take him to Baintrees,” he said, “We also have methods of making people talk!”

chapter fifteen

Except for the glow of Bruger's cigarette, it was pitch dark in the van. Corridon sat on the floor, his back braced against the side of the van as it swayed and banged over an unknown road. He had now lost all sense of time and distance, and had no idea where he was being taken.

Bruger and Yevski had arrived at Lorene's flat and had taken charge of him. He was content to go with them, knowing his position was dangerous, but realizing it was a risk he had to take. He had made progress. He now knew both Diestl and Feydak were connected with this organization. Whether or not, Diestl was the controlling head remained to be seen. Corridon doubted it. Bruger and Yevski had been very curt with Diestl, scarcely hiding the contempt of the professional for the amateur. It was also obvious that Feydak was only very small beer in the organization. He seemed afraid of Bruger and Yevski, as well he might be. Seen together, they looked a murderous couple, and Corridon was wary of them himself.

Lorene had been hustled into her bedroom by Feydak before Bruger and Yevski had arrived. She had seemed shocked by what had been said by Corridon and Diestl.

"Keep out of it," Feydak had told her. "Don't say anything. Can't you see this is dangerous, you little fool?"

She had gone into her bedroom without a glance at Corridon.

There was a small tradesman's van outside the flat when Bruger and Yevski had taken Corridon down the stairs to the street. Yevski drove and Bruger got into the back with Corridon.

Neither of the two men had said a word to him, and during the long ride, Bruger maintained his cold, menacing silence.

After more than an hour's drive, the van slowed down, turned sharply and went on at a reduced pace. It came to a sudden stop, throwing Corridon off balance.

The van doors were opened.

"Get out," Bruger said in his soft, guttural voice.

Corridon dropped to the ground as Yevski came round the van, a Mauser automatic in his hand.

As far as Corridon could see, for it was almost pitch dark, except for the van's headlamps, he was standing on a gravel drive, surrounded by tall trees. He could make out the dim outlines of a vast, rambling house, and as he turned to look at it, a lamp lit up over the imposing front entrance.

"Come," Yevski said, and moved up the flight of broad stone steps leading to the house.

Corridon followed him and Bruger brought up the rear.

The front door opened and the three walked into a lofty, big hall, panelled in oak and lit by clusters of electric lamps set along the wall.

A man in a wrap-over white coat, black trousers and black, crêpe-soled shoes closed the door behind them.

"You've taken your time," he said to Burger in a cold, flat voice.

"Well, we're here now," Bruger said surlily. "This is him. If you'll take him off our hands, we'll get some sleep."

"All right."

Bruger and Yevski went away together. The man in the white coat gave Corridon a quick, hard look.

"Come with me," he said curtly. "Dr. Homer wants to see you."

Corridon studied the man with interest. He was tall, slight and dark. He had a wide, high forehead, small black eyes, a thin slit for a mouth and a thin, beaky nose. Corridon knew his type well. He was the kind of man the Gestapo employed during the war. A man devoid of human feelings, a machine that did what he was told as ruthlessly and as efficiently as an automaton. There was nothing too horrible that he would not do. If Bruger and Yevski were dangerous, then this man was deadly.

"Follow me," he said, and walked silently across the hall, along a wide passage to a door covered in green baize. He turned the handle, opened the door, and stood aside, motioning Corridon to enter.

As Corridon passed him he smelt a strong aroma of brandy. He walked into a small, comfortably furnished room in which a bright fire burned. A single lamp shed a hard white light on the red Persian rug. Before the fire, half hidden in a big armchair, a man stirred, leaned forward and regarded Corridon curiously.

"It's Mr. Corridon?"

"Yes," Corridon said.

"Excellent. Go away, Ames," the man by the fire said. "I will ring when I

need you.”

The man in the wrap-over white coat went out of the room and closed the door.

“Come by the fire. You must be feeling cold,” the man in the chair said. “Let me introduce myself. I am Dr. Paul Homer. I really am very pleased to have you here.”

“I am entirely sure it is mutual,” Corridon said dryly, and walked over to the fire. He sat down in an armchair opposite Homer, and stretched out his long legs. He examined Homer curiously. He saw before him a big, fat, pink and white man with a round, fleshy face, small unblinking eyes and a wide, grimacing smile. His big yellow teeth dominated his face. They reminded Corridon of the teeth of a horse.

Homer wore a white wrap-over, coat, similar to the one Ames had on. His massive legs were in white and black check trousers. His thick hair, white as a dove’s back, grew thickly above his ears and was swept back in a Lloyd George haircut.

“This is very unexpected,” Homer said, and beamed. “Diestl has told me about you, and, of course, I know you well by repute. So you wish to join us?”

“That’s the idea,” Corridon said, took out his cigarette-case and offered it. Homer shook his head.

“Thank you, no. I find I am much better without smoking. I gave it up soon after the war. I am very glad you have decided to come in with us, Mr. Corridon,” he went on. “You are the kind of man we need here. You have an impressive record, and I am sure you will be of great service to us.”

“I hope so,” Corridon said, a little surprised at the trend of the conversation. “But I must warn you, I expect to make something out of it for myself.”

Homer gave an explosive giggle.

“I see you have a sense of humour,” he said. “Well, of course that is excellent. But for the moment you are on probation, and I am afraid you will have to be content with an amateur status. But once we are convinced you are genuinely with us, then we will reward you suitably for anything you do for us.” The yellow teeth flashed in the lamplight. “I understand Diestl is a little suspicious of you. I am afraid he is a very suspicious person. I don’t believe he entirely trusts me or any other member of our organization.” Again he

gave an explosive giggle. "Of course he's right. It's so much better to be safe than sorry."

"Do I consider myself a prisoner then?" Corridon asked, his face politely interested.

"Well, perhaps that is rather a strong word. Let us say for the time being your liberty is restricted." Homer waved a fat hand airily. "And while we are on the subject, do take my advice and don't attempt to run away from here. We have taken elaborate precautions to prevent people from leaving us. The grounds are surrounded by a ten-foot electrified fence. I assure you it is impassable and extremely dangerous. At night, police dogs are released and they too are extremely dangerous. Personally, I wouldn't dream of going out into the grounds after dark. Then there are extensive zones in the grounds covered by photo-electric rays operating alarm bells. The gates are also well guarded." Again he waved his hand. "And it is an implacable rule that anyone caught attempting to escape must be liquidated. This may seem a little harsh to you. But we have a number of people here in protective custody, and it would be a disaster if any of them did get away." The yellow teeth flashed again. "I am afraid Ames is a little brutal, but he has cut down the number of would-be escapees considerably, and he has instilled an excellent spirit of discipline amongst those who were inclined to be difficult."

"Sounds rather like a concentration camp to me," Corridon said blandly.

"I assure you it isn't like that at all. So long as we get co-operation from everyone, life here can be extremely pleasant. It just happens that the odd man or woman who is difficult is disciplined for the sake of the general harmony."

"Would it be tactless to ask just where this place is, and what it is supposed to be?"

Homer took out a white handkerchief and patted the end of his nose with it.

"Well, I think it would," he said apologetically. "Later, you will be told the exact location, but until you have come through the probation period, it is better for you not to know. You can see it makes an attempt to escape much more hazardous if you don't know where you are. As to the place itself, it is registered as a hydropathic clinic. The police and other busybodies are satisfied that we are genuine, and we have quite a reputation in the district. The only peculiarity is that we are always full, and can never take new patients." He gave Corridon a sly smile. "In actual fact, of course, Baintrees

is the headquarters of our movement.”

“All this is very interesting,” Corridon said. “But I know little about your movement. What I do know is rather one-sided. Would you care to elaborate? Since I am proposing to join you, I think I should hear your side of the story. What exactly do you stand for?”

Homer rubbed his hands slowly, and his still, bright eyes examined Corridon’s face.

“That is reasonable. It is possible to speak frankly since the information I shall give you will not be passed on. In short, Mr. Corridon, no one has yet escaped from Baintrees, and we don’t anticipate that anyone will. Although you are on probation, I have no hesitation to tell you about our movement. It is called the United European Movement, and in a nutshell it is pledged to take from the victors and give to the defeated. To do that successfully, we must reduce this country to a fourth-rate power. It is already struggling in the morass of failure. A steady push is all that is needed for its complete downfall. We are pledged to supply that push.”

Corridon stared at him, suspecting he was joking, but he seemed serious enough.

“And what happens when this country collapses?” he asked.

“France is practically finished. A broken England and a broken France will open a door to a new European regime. I am not saying this can be achieved quickly, of course. It may take some years, but it will happen.”

“The idea seems a little ambitious to me,” Corridon said dryly. “Have you overlooked America by any chance?”

“Well, no.” Homer continued to pat the end of his nose with his handkerchief. “But Russia will be able to keep America employed I think – don’t you?”

“I should have thought it would have been the other way round,” Corridon returned. “However, that is neither here nor there. Frankly, I don’t think what you’ve told me is very convincing. I grant you can make trouble for this country, but surely it is rather like a mosquito biting an elephant?”

Homer looked at him, hesitated, then smiled slyly.

“But think of the satisfaction the mosquito gets out of it,” he said, flashing his yellow teeth. “I see you’re not a good subject for visionary projects.” He lowered his voice. “To be quite candid, I’m not either. But it’s surprising how many people are. So far as I am concerned, and I have no doubt you will feel

the same way about it, providing I see a future for myself and I am able to maintain a standard of life suitable to a man of my background, I don't pay much attention to causes. I am well paid to form the funds provided by interested parties. I have work to do, and I enjoy life. I don't search too deeply for the reason or the doctrines of faith."

"In other words," Corridon said, "you represent a fifth column, subsidized by foreign money with orders to undermine this country's recovery? The rest of the baloney about a new regime is to soothe the consciences of certain cranks who work for you?"

Homer returned his handkerchief to his pocket.

"Between you and me, Mr. Corridon, that is more or less the position, but I do ask you not to be quite so outspoken before the others. Some of them wouldn't like it at all."

"Is this your show?" Corridon asked bluntly.

Homer blinked at him.

"You mean – am I the leader? Heaven forbid! I am merely the figure-head to give Baintrees its touch of authenticity. No more, no less. I have little to do with the running of this place. Actually Ames is my superior when it comes to the actual work of the organization. I appreciate your curiosity, but I must warn you you are treading on highly dangerous ground. The identity of the Leader is a carefully kept secret. Anyone trying to find that out is very severely dealt with." He lifted a thick arm and inspected his wrist-watch. "The time is twenty minutes to five. I think we might get a little sleep now, don't you? I was just about to retire when I learned you were on your way here. I understand Diestl wants to ask you some questions tomorrow. It would be as well for you to get some rest before then. Diestl is inclined to get on one's nerves. And then there is Ames, of course..." He leaned forward to press a bell push on the wall near him. "Ames will show you to your room. Be careful of him, Mr. Corridon, he isn't a patient man."

Ames came silently into the room.

"Mr. Corridon is now ready to go to bed," Homer said, and stifled a nervous giggle. "Perhaps you would take charge of him?"

Ames jerked his head to the door and stood aside.

"Sleep well, Mr. Corridon," Homer said. "I hope we have covered some ground profitably. We will meet again tomorrow."

Corridon got to his feet. He felt tired, and thought longingly of a

comfortable bed.

“Good night,” he said amiably.

As he reached the door, Homer said, “Just one moment.”

Corridon paused and glanced over his shoulder. Homer was smiling.

“Don’t you think we should let our friend see Lehmann before he goes to bed?” The big yellow teeth flashed. “Lehmann was particularly obstinate, Mr. Corridon. He was quite sure he could escape. Nothing I said to him would alter his mind. You should see him. It really is an object lesson.”

“Come,” Ames said in his low, flat voice, and walked down the corridor, down a flight of stairs, along a low-ceilinged passage lit by electric lamps in wire baskets. Corridon kept pace behind him.

Ames paused outside a door, shot the bolts and threw the door open.

“That is Lehman,” he said. “The same thing will happen to anyone who is caught trying to escape. It took him forty-seven hours to die.”

Corridon looked into the room. A figure of a man dangled from the end of a rope tied round a wooden beam across the ceiling. The hands, frozen in death, clutched at a large meat hook that had been driven through the underside of his jaws and which was attached to the rope from which the body hung.

Corridon felt the muscles in his face tighten. He was aware that Ames was watching him with a sneering little smile.

He said in a coldly-level voice, “I see you live up to your traditions here.”

chapter sixteen

The room was small, white, and sunny: a nice room, Corridon thought, opening his eyes and stretching his long, muscular arms above his head. He looked at his wrist-watch. The time was twenty minutes past ten. Well, he had had five hours of undisturbed sleep, and he felt a lot better for it.

Sunlight came through the open window and made bright pools on the fawn carpet. The white walls, the white bed and furniture gave the room a clinical atmosphere. It was a typical room you would find in any well-run private clinic.

Reaching for a cigarette from his case on the bedside table, Corridon took stock of his situation. He was a prisoner. He was in dangerous hands. The dead man in the dark little room in the basement was no fake. He had died horribly and without mercy – because he had tried to get away. That could easily happen to him, and Corridon grimaced.

These were dangerous people: particularly Ames. Homer was a fat fake: grasping, sly, but a fake. Diestl was dangerous, but probably unimportant: a fanatic. Feydak was neither dangerous nor important. Of them all so far, Ames was the one to beware of.

The first important move so far, as Corridon was concerned, was to find out where Baintrees was located. Then somehow, he had to establish contact with Ritchie. That might take some time, and would certainly be dangerous. One false move and he'd find himself suspended on that meat hook. He thought with a wry grin Homer had been shrewd to show him that poor devil. It was a sight to impress even the toughest.

He had no doubt Homer had been telling the truth when he had described the way Baintrees was guarded. An electrified fence, police dogs, invisible rays and guards, and the hook to reward you if you failed. It was vital to gain their trust. Without it, he would get nowhere.

He lay still for several minutes while he stared sightlessly at the ceiling, thinking. How was he to find out where this house was? The telephone exchange on the telephone number label would give him a clue, unless they had removed the label. There would also be the name of the Borough Electricity Department on the meter if he could get at it. That seemed to him

to be the most likely bet. Something they probably had overlooked.

Just then the door opened and Ames came in with a bundle of clothing under his arm. He threw the bundle on the bed.

"You wear these things while you are here," he said. "Leave your clothes in the cupboard. All new arrivals here wear white until they prove themselves trustworthy. Your breakfast will be up in a few minutes. At eleven-thirty you will be interrogated."

Corridon nodded.

"Purely from curiosity," he said, "will you tell me how you propose to get rid of our friend on the meat hook you so thoughtfully showed me last night?"

Ames smiled.

"I see it made an impression on you. We can dispose of him very easily. The furnaces here are extremely adequate."

He went out of the room as silently as he had come, and closed the door. Grimacing, Corridon sat up to examine the clothes he was to wear. They consisted of a white boiler suit made of cotton-twill, and a pair of white crêpe-soled shoes. On the back of the boiler suit was a round yellow disc. Holding the suit against the light, Corridon saw the disc faintly illuminate, and guessed it would shine like a beacon at night. A nice easy target for even a duffer with a gun, he thought grimly. Not the kind of suit you would pick for a midnight flit.

While he was shaving, the door pushed open and Yevski came in carrying a tray which he put on the bedside table. He favoured Corridon with a ferocious scowl before leaving the room.

Corridon noticed there was no attempt to lock him in, and this in itself, he thought, was sinister. He opened the door and glanced up and down the corridor. It was long and brightly lit by electric lamps set behind thick glass in the ceiling.

Shrugging, he returned to his room, finished shaving and put on the boiler suit. Then he poured himself out a cup of excellent coffee, ate the eggs and bacon he found under the silver cover, drank another cup of coffee and settled down in the armchair by the window for a smoke.

Punctually at eleven-thirty, the door opened and Bruger came in. He jerked his thumb to the door.

"Come on," he said scowling.

Corridon got to his feet.

“How’s your poor neck?” he asked with his jeering smile. “It looks a little like the Sunday joint from here.”

Bruger’s deep-set eyes lit up, but his stolid face remained expressionless.

“Follow me,” he said curtly, and went down the corridor, down a flight of stairs to Homer’s study.

Corridon strolled after him.

Homer sat behind the desk in the bay window. Diestl stood with his back to the fire. Ames leaned against the wall near the door. Yevski, slapping his leg with a rubber truncheon, stood in the middle of the room.

“Come in, Mr. Corridon,” Homer said, flashing his yellow teeth. “Do sit down. Bruger, get Mr. Corridon a chair. We’ll have it opposite my desk. Yes, that will do splendidly.”

Corridon sat down. He appeared at ease, but he was conscious of Yevski just behind him; conscious also of the rubber truncheon.

“Now, Mr. Corridon,” Homer said, “we won’t waste any time if you please. You have some information for us. I understand from Diestl that you say our movement is known and steps are being taken to curb our operations?”

“Certainly,” Corridon said. “A special branch of the War Office, known as O.S.S.5 are concentrating on your activities. They know you engineered the murder of the Minister of European Affairs. They know, too, you are behind the various big strikes that have slowed down our export drive recently. They managed to catch one of your agents, No. 12, and he talked.”

“So I hear,” Homer said and took out his handkerchief, holding it screwed up in his hand. His eyes were uneasy. “Who is the head of O.S.S.5?”

“Colonel Howard Ritchie,” Corridon said promptly. “He and I worked together during the war. He is a first class man and extremely dangerous.”

Homer and Diestl exchanged glances.

“Just how much does he know?” Diestl asked curtly.

“That I can’t tell you. But you can take it he has a pretty fair idea of your setup. He knows about the jade rings. No. 12 told him all he knew. You will know better than I what that amounts to. Whatever No. 12 knew, you can be certain Ritchie knows. He is onto Yevski and Bruger. He knows who they are. He warned me about them.”

Homer patted the end of his nose with the handkerchief. He looked

disconcerted.

“Does he know about this place?”

Corridon shook his head.

“No, but he knows you must have a headquarters somewhere, and he is searching for it. He is very thorough. Sooner or later he will come upon it, especially if you continue to employ such obvious characters as Bruger and Yevski.”

Again Homer and Diestl exchanged glances, then Homer said, looking at Ames, “Mr. Corridon appears to be extremely co-operative, perhaps we could continue this discussion without the assistance of these two,” and he waved apologetically to Bruger and Yevski who were glaring at Corridon.

Ames nodded.

“Get out, you two,” he said.

When Bruger and Yevski had gone, Homer said, “And now, Mr. Corridon, just how did you come into this?”

Corridon explained about Milly Lawes, the finding of the jade ring, how Milly had been murdered, how Rawlins had taken him to see Ritchie and what had been said at the meeting. He was careful to conceal nothing, and was aware that every now and then Diestl made a sign to Homer as if assuring him Corridon was speaking the truth.

“You might as well face it,” Corridon went on, “you’re up against tough opposition. O.S.S.5 are the elite of any hunters. They never give up. If you want to exist for any length of time, you’ll have to move carefully and you can’t remain here much longer.”

“And what would you advise?” Homer asked, looking worried.

“For a start, withdraw these jade rings. That secret society stuff is not only dangerous, but puerile. Start a spy hunt yourself. Make sure every member of your organization is to be trusted. Don’t employ such obvious characters as Yevski and Bruger. Ritchie has a file of all petty war criminals. In using men like those two you are showing your hand. Ritchie knows them all.”

There was a long, heavy silence, then Homer said, looking at Diestl, “He’s right. I was against using those two from the start. We’ll have to get rid of them.”

“They can stay here,” Ames said coldly. “We needn’t send them out on missions, but I don’t want to lose them. They are useful.”

“Yes,” Diestl said. “Keep them here.” His black, hard eyes searched

Corridon's face. "What other suggestions have you to make?"

Corridon shrugged.

"As I haven't much idea how you run your organization or how you keep in touch with your members, I can't very well do your thinking for you. I am willing to look your members over, and any I recognize I can point out to you. I think it is most likely Ritchie already has some of his men working for you. You mustn't overlook the fact that he isn't very interested in the small fry. He'll hold his hand until he is sure of nabbing the Leader."

"Would you suggest we get rid of Ritchie?" Diestl asked silkily.

Corridon said without hesitation, "He is the brains and guts of O.S.S.5. Get rid of him and you'd slow down their activities. But it wouldn't be for long. There are always other men to replace him."

"But perhaps not so clever?"

"That is possible."

"So you think it would be a sound move to get rid of Ritchie?"

Corridon smiled jeeringly.

"It would, if you could do it. He doesn't exactly offer himself for assassination, you know."

"But it is possible?"

Corridon shrugged.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

There was a pause, then Diestl said, "Would you care to undertake the job?"

"It depends," Corridon said. "What would it be worth?"

Diestl frowned.

"I don't understand."

"Look, I am in this racket for what I can get out of it," Corridon returned. "I'm not one of your soft-headed cranks who believe in new regimes. I'll remove Ritchie for a thousand pounds, paid into my bank, half down and half when the job is done."

"I understand from what you said just now," Diestl said icily, "that you and Ritchie were friends."

"I didn't say that. I said we worked together."

"And you are prepared to get rid of him for us?"

"Certainly, on my terms."

"Aren't your motive a little mercenary?"

“Certainly,” Corridon said and smiled. “What of it?”

“And if we agreed to your terms, how could you set about it?”

“I have no idea,” Corridon returned. “It would be a difficult job. It would need a lot of planning and thought. But this I assure you, it can be done, and I can do it.”

“We’ll consider your offer,” Diestl said. “It may not be necessary. If Ritchie died, the repercussions might be serious. If you attempted to kill him and failed, we could be in serious trouble. But if we do decide to take the risk, you will be given the first chance of doing the job. If you succeed, I see no reason why you shouldn’t become an active member of this organization and be rewarded suitably. If you fail, then I doubt very much if we shall have much use for you. Is that agreeable to you?”

Corridon lifted his massive shoulders.

“As I have never failed yet in removing a pest, the alternative doesn’t alarm me. We are agreed then, if I do the job, I get a thousand and become a member. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s fine,” Corridon said. “It certainly looks as if I’ve come to the right camp.”

chapter seventeen

The dining-hall was a long, narrow, high-ceilinged room, overlooking the terraced garden. The walls were oak panelled and adorned with a number of modern French paintings. The dozen long tables were laid with glittering silver and decorated with expensive, hothouse flowers.

Corridon took his place between Feydak on his right and Ames on his left. He felt slightly conspicuous in his white boiler suit, and was aware that many eyes looked curiously at him as he sat down.

The tables were occupied by an extraordinarily motley crew of men and women. Some of them were middle-aged, some young. None of them looked what they were: saboteurs, spies and murderers. The girls, Corridon thought, after a quick, calculated stare, were a ghastly lot, wearing shapeless clothes, all shapes and sizes, and most of them with hair like birds' nests. A typical bunch of unwashed Bohemians, he thought, suitable only for causing trouble.

He noticed at a table away from the windows there were six men in boiler suits similar to the one he wore. Most of them were elderly; all of them appeared to be listless and they sat silent, none of them paying any attention to the others.

"Surely I should be with those gentlemen over there?" Corridon said to Feydak. "I feel I'm making the place look untidy by being with you."

"Well, no," Feydak said with his quick, uneasy smile. "You are on probation, but those men are prisoners."

"I am glad to hear there is that shade of difference," Corridon said sarcastically. "How long do you think I shall have to wear this get-up? The disc on my back has unpleasant associations."

"You don't need to worry about that," Ames said with a sour smile. "So long as you don't attempt to escape, you will be all right."

"That is encouraging news," Corridon said. "I have no intention of trying to escape."

"You are to begin work this afternoon," Feydak said. "We have a very special job for you. I believe you understand time-fuses and the like?"

Corridon helped himself to roast potatoes. The food looked excellent.

"I know as much as the next man. What's the job?"

“We wish to disable two generators at a certain power station. Two of the engineers who actually work in the plant are with us. We want you to show them how to disable the generators. We have all the necessary blueprints and photographs. Can you do that?”

“Certainly,” Corridon said. “What do I get out of it?”

“Nothing,” Ames snapped. “You either do what you’re told or you can spend a week in a cell. Please yourself.”

Corridon grinned at him.

“Then obviously I must do what I’m told.”

Later, as they were finishing an excellent lunch, Corridon said to Feydak, “So much has happened since I arrived here I haven’t had the chance to enquire after your charming sister. How is she?”

Feydak changed colour.

“Oh, she’s all right,” he said.

“Shall I see her here?”

Feydak’s face became a grimacing mask.

“Of course not,” he said. “She knows nothing about this organization – nothing at all!”

Ames tapped Corridon’s arm.

“We don’t encourage such talk here,” he said softly and Corridon was aware that Ames’ eyes were on Feydak: inquisitive, hard eyes.

“Have you met his sister?” Corridon said affably. “She’s a lovely girl.” He glanced at the women in the room. “I’m afraid there isn’t much to choose from here, is there? I find these arty-looking, unwashed women a little tiresome, don’t you?”

Ames’ cold eyes flickered.

“They are nothing much,” he said.

“That scarcely comes into it,” Feydak said getting control of himself. “They are here for service, and they do remarkably good work.”

“I should imagine they do,” Corridon said with his jeering smile. “They are not suited for any other pursuit, are they?”

He wasn’t sure, but he had an idea that Ames was tacitly agreeing with him.

“Wasn’t it you who put Milly Lawes out of action?” he went on, turning to Ames.

“What of it?” Ames said with a sneering smile. “She was scarcely better

than this cattle, and besides, she was a thief.”

“Yes, I’m afraid she was. I knew her moderately well. Unfortunately that type of girl usually is. Give me the enthusiastic amateur any day of the week.”

Ames gave him a long searching look, but he didn’t say anything.

“One of these days,” Corridon went on, “you and I must paint the town red. I know a couple of lively girls who are amusing.” He went on to describe just how amusing they were.

He saw a flicker of interest in Ames’ face as he shamelessly extolled each girl’s talents while Feydak regarded him with undisguised disgust.

Ames abruptly pushed back his chair and stood up, cutting Corridon’s licentious descriptions short.

“We will have to get to know each other a lot better than we do now,” he said, his eyes glittering suspiciously, “before we go on that kind of a party.”

Corridon grinned.

“We have time,” he said. “You will find it worth waiting for.”

During the afternoon, Corridon worked with the two engineers from the power station. He showed them how to wreck the generators, and taught them the uses of time fuses, guncotton primers and the like. As individuals they interested him: two dissatisfied young men, full of imaginary grievances, determined to get their own back on society, disinterested in anyone’s well-being except their own. They told him they had joined the United European Movement because they were sick of the present system and wanted to see a change. Corridon pretended to agree with them, secretly astonished that they should accept and believe Homer’s clap-trap about a new regime.

Later, when the lesson was over and Corridon was alone in the laboratory, Feydak came quietly into the big, airy room.

“Were they satisfactory?” he asked.

Corridon lifted his shoulders.

“They’re all right. They’ll do the job if that’s what you mean, but whether or not they’ll blow themselves sky high at the same time I wouldn’t know.”

“So long as they do the job,” Feydak said, and bit his lower lip while he stared at Corridon. “I would take it as a favour if you did not mention Lorene in front of Ames. He is a very difficult man, and he is over-fond of women.”

Corridon raised his eyebrows.

“You can scarcely blame me for mentioning her. I was under the

impression she was one of the movement's most ardent members."

"Certainly not!" Feydak went pale. "You must never say that to anyone!"

"But let us be reasonable. She does know about the organization."

"Very little. I'm afraid I have let slip a word here and there, but I don't want her to get mixed up in it."

"And why not? It seems a very excellent cause."

"It's too dangerous. I am very fond of Lorene," Feydak said, clenching his fists. "I would be grateful to you to say nothing about this to anyone."

"But surely Diestl knows she..."

"He doesn't!"

"This doesn't quite add up, you know. Diestl used her to trap me. You're not forgetting that, are you?"

Feydak caught hold of Corridon's arm.

"Please listen to me. That was a mistake. I shouldn't have allowed it. It was Diestl's idea. He was in the club when you arrived. He knew you were working for Ritchie. He had seen you and the detective go to Milly Lawes' flat. He told Lorene to make friends with you. I swear she didn't know what was being planned. If Ames has the slightest suspicion that she knows anything about the movement, he will have her brought here and put in protective custody. You know what that means."

"Don't get excited," Corridon said smoothly. "I am very fond of Lorene, and I don't wish her any harm. But we may be a little late. Ames is no fool. When I mentioned her, he looked curiously at you. Did you notice?"

Feydak took out his handkerchief and wiped his hands and face.

"If Lorene was brought here..."

"You mustn't worry," Corridon said lightly. "If he asks me about her, I shall endeavour to lull his suspicions."

"Be careful what you say to him. He is very dangerous. He was the head of the Gestapo in Frankfurt during the war. No one is safe from him. I am telling you this because I know you are fond of Lorene. I – I suppose I am putting myself in your power."

Corridon laughed.

"You have nothing to worry about."

"You wouldn't like anything to happen to Lorene?" Feydak said, his eyes searching Corridon's face.

"Certainly not."

“Then I can trust you?”

“Of course.”

Feydak hesitated, then he gave Corridon a ghost of a smile.

“I must go. It’s dangerous to talk in this place. I can rely on you to say nothing?”

“As one party member to another,” Corridon said, his eyes suddenly hard, “you have my word.”

“Thank you.”

For several minutes after Feydak had gone, Corridon remained in the laboratory, thinking. The success of his venture depended on gaining the confidence of Ames. In a way he felt sorry for Feydak who was after all just a weak, easily-swayed young fool. Corridon didn’t hesitate for long. He moved quietly from the room and walked down the corridor towards Homer’s office.

Homer was just coming out of his room and he beamed at Corridon.

“Ah, Mr. Corridon. Have you had a successful afternoon’s work?”

“Highly,” Corridon said. “Can you tell me,” he went on, “where I can find Comrade Ames?”

Homer’s smile stiffened.

“Did you want him?”

“Yes, I wanted him.”

“Ames isn’t a very sociable type of fellow,” Homer said uneasily. “I wouldn’t advise you to – to bother him. Is there something I can do?”

“I don’t think so. Ames told me to see him after I had instructed my pupils, but perhaps it is sufficient to report to you.”

“Oh no,” Homer said hurriedly. “If he asked to see you, that is another matter. You will find him upstairs. His door faces the head of the stairs.”

Corridon came to the conclusion that both Feydak and Homer were afraid of Ames. That could be a useful card to play at the right time.

“Thank you,” he said, and walked down the corridor to the stairs, aware that Homer was staring after him. As he mounted the stairs, he glanced back. Homer was still standing motionless looking after him. He watched Corridon knock on Ames’ door.

“Come in.”

Corridon turned the handle, pushed open the door and walked into a small, neat room furnished as an office with a bed under the window.

Ames was writing at the desk. He glanced up sharply.

“Well?”

Corridon came farther into the room and closed the door. He was again aware of a strong aroma of brandy coming from Ames.

“Feydak has just asked me not to mention his sister in your presence,” he said. “He tells me you are over-fond of women, and if you knew he had blabbed to her about the organization, you would bring her here and keep her in protective custody. He mentioned you are very dangerous, and during the war you were the head of the Gestapo in Frankfurt. That item of information could easily get you hanged, but, you probably know that better than I do.”

Ames pushed back his chair and folded his hands in his lap. His face remained expressionless.

“Why do you tell me this?”

Corridon raised his eyebrows.

“I was under the impression that part of my job here was to ferret out the doubtful members. Feydak doesn’t sound any too reliable, does he?”

“You’re making a quick beginning,” Ames said, with a sneering little smile.

“From your expression,” Corridon said quietly, “I gather my information doesn’t please you. I am sorry. Perhaps I have made a mistake, and should have reported to Comrade Homer, although I admit even Homer seems a little weak at the knees. He didn’t want me to come and see you just now. Perhaps you would advise me? Who should I report to?”

“What’s your game?” Ames asked, leaning forward, his face wolfish. “Are you trying to stir up trouble?”

“Certainly. Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do? Or are you afraid to hear this organization isn’t quite as well disciplined as you think? We can all get into a rut, my friend.”

“It’s easy to make trouble by a few clever lies,” Ames said. “Perhaps it would suit you to make me suspicious of the others. It has been tried before.”

“So it has, and it would suit me to get rid of some of the dead wood. I came here in the hopes of making some money. You would be surprised how important money is to me. A little judicious weeding-out would mean more money and less to share it with. Take Diestl for instance. He knows Lorene has been told about the movement, but he happens to be soft on her. We might get rid of Diestl. You might consider it a good idea to give me his job.”

Ames studied him.

“It wouldn’t be easy to get rid of Diestl. He has the Leader’s confidence,” he said, as if half to himself.

“There’s plenty of time,” Corridon said airily. “If you keep an eye on Diestl, he’ll probably give you enough material to hang him with. What are you going to do about Feydak?”

“I’ll talk to him,” Ames said, and smiled. “If what you say is true, then his sister had better come here. I’ll see him tonight.”

Corridon nodded.

“He may need persuading.”

“I am prepared for that,” Ames said lightly.

As Corridon turned to the door, Ames went on, “You can wear your own clothes tomorrow. Informers should be rewarded.”

Corridon gave him a crooked smile.

“So they should,” he said.

He left the room and closed the door behind him. At the end of the corridor, Feydak was standing, watching him, his face white and drawn.

Corridon gave him a blank stare and then mounted the stairs to his bedroom.

chapter eighteen

Corridon hadn't been in his room for more than a few minutes when he heard a bell ringing violently. For a moment he sat still, listening, then jumping to his feet he opened the door and looked into the passage. There was nothing to see, but somewhere below stairs the bell continued to ring.

The door opposite his room jerked open, and a girl came out into the corridor. She was tall and thickset, and her black hair was cut in a hard fringe across her forehead. Her high cheek-bones and her short thick nose suggested she was Asiatic. Her face was as expressionless and as hard as if it had been carved from stone. Corridon couldn't remember seeing her in the dining-room, and he wondered who she was.

She wore a black sweater and a pair of black slacks. Her long, narrow feet were in open-worked sandals.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Is it a fire?"

Her green, alert eyes swept him from head to foot.

"A prisoner has escaped," she said, and her thin mouth curved into a smile. "That is the alarm bell."

"Oh. Well, they'll handle that without my heir. Thanks for the information." He stepped back into his room.

"You are Corridon?" she said. "I have heard of you." She tapped herself on her deep, high-arched chest. "Kara Yagoda. We are neighbours."

"So we are," Corridon said, not interested. "Be seeing you some time."

As he began to close the door, the sudden choked bang of a revolver from the lower landing startled him.

He took four quick steps that brought him to the banisters and peered over. Below, lying in a huddled heap, was Slade Feydak. The right side of his head was smashed in, and blood ran down his waxen face. A heavy Colt automatic pistol was still clutched in his hand.

Ames and Bruger appeared. Looking up Ames caught sight of Corridon.

"Come down here!" he snarled.

Corridon brushed past Kara who had joined him, and went quickly down the stairs.

"So you let him slip through your fingers," he said, secretly shocked to see

Feydak was dead.

“Some prefer to go this way than wait to be questioned by me,” Ames said, his face white with fury. He drew back his foot and kicked Feydak’s dead body.

“That won’t help,” Corridon said dryly. “What about Lorene?”

“He tried to warn her,” Ames said. “I caught him at it. Bruger’s going to get her now.” He swung round to Bruger. “Take Yevski and bring her here at once.”

“Hold on,” Corridon said sharply as Bruger turned away. “You don’t imagine he can go to her flat and bring her here just like that, do you? Ask him. He’ll tell you the layout. She’s on the top floor. She wouldn’t be such a fool as to open the door without finding out who was calling. There’s a chain on the door. One look at Bruger and she’d scream for the police. If you want her to come quietly, you’d better let me get her.”

Ames stared at him, then looked at Bruger.

“It won’t be easy to get her,” Bruger said. “She’s seen me before.”

“That’s right,” Ames said. “Then you handle it,” he went on to Corridon. “Go with him,” he said, turning to Bruger, “and if he tries anything funny, shoot him.”

Bruger’s fat, red face lit up.

“It’ll be a pleasure.”

“There won’t be any shooting,” Corridon said, “but I’ll go on one condition – I handle the job.”

“That’s all right,” Ames said. “Bruger, do what he tells you so long as you are convinced he is not being treacherous. You understand?”

Bruger grunted.

“Take the van,” Ames went on. “He’s to travel in the back with you. Yevski is to drive.”

Again Bruger grunted. He went away down the stairs.

“I can’t go like this,” Corridon said, waving his hand to the white boiler suit. “I suppose I can change?”

“Yes,” Ames said. “And don’t make any mistakes, Corridon. I want that woman.”

Corridon ran up the stairs and into his room. Kara was still standing in the corridor.

“For a new member and one who isn’t trusted,” she said, showing her even

white teeth, “you are doing very well. Was it you who gave Feydak away?”

Corridon glanced sharply at her.

“He gave himself away,” he said curtly, and closed the door in her face.

It took him only a few minutes to strip off his boiler suit and slip into the clothes he had worn when he had come to Baintrees. He wished he had a gun. Bruger and Yevski were going to be a handicap. He wondered if Lorene would be in. The time was now twenty minutes past six. They couldn’t hope to arrive at her flat before half-past seven. She might well have gone out.

Kara was still standing in her doorway when he came out of his room.

“We must do a job together one of these days,” she said. “It will be amusing.”

“For you or for me?” Corridon asked, scarcely pausing.

“For both of us, my friend.”

He went on down the stairs. An amorous Russian with no great looks didn’t interest him. Just another cram, he told himself.

Feydak’s body had disappeared when Corridon reached the lower landing. Two men in shirt-sleeves were washing the stains out of the carpet. Ames stood away from them, frowning.

“The van’s waiting,” he said curtly. “Don’t try any tricks.”

“If she’s in her flat, I’ll bring her back,” Corridon returned, and went on down the stairs to the hall where Bruger and Yevski were waiting.

Bruger and Corridon got into the back of the van, and Yevski drove.

“All right,” Corridon said to Bruger, as he settled himself on the floor in the darkness. “This is what we’re going to do. You and Yevski will wait in the van. I’ll go up to her flat. She may not be in, but if she is, I’ll tell her her brother has met with an accident and I have come to take her to him. She knows and trusts me. There should be no difficulty. The important thing is for you two to keep out of sight. She mustn’t see you until too late. When we come out, I’ll hustle her into the van, and Yevski must drive off immediately. If necessary, I will knock her over the head. If there’s anyone in the street when we come out, I’ll walk with her to the end of the street and Yevski must drive slowly after us. As soon as the coast’s clear, I’ll bundle her into the van. Have you got all that?”

Bruger grunted.

No further word was said until Yevski warned them through the panel in the diver’s cabin that they were running up Bayswater Road.

“Stop the van at the corner of Bayswater Crescent,” Corridon told him. “Bruger and I will walk to the house. When you see me enter, wait three minutes – time yourself by your watch to make sure – and then drive up. Bruger must get into the back of the van, and both of you keep out of sight.”

“That all right, Carl?” Yevski asked suspiciously.

Bruger grunted.

“I suppose so. It’s his show. The boss said for us to do what he tells us.”

Corridon heaved a silent sigh of relief. If he could be sure that Bruger stayed with the van, half his difficulties were solved.

The van stopped, and Bruger opened the doors. Both he and Corridon slipped out onto the dark, wet road. It was raining hard.

“You understand what you’re to do?” he asked.

“Yes,” Bruger said shortly. “Let’s get it over. I’m getting wet.”

They walked quickly down the deserted road to No. 29. The street door was open, and there was a light on in the hall.

“Wait here for Yevski,” Corridon said. “Get into the van when he drives up and keep out of sight. Okay?”

“How do you know she’ll be in?” Bruger asked suspiciously.

“I don’t. If she isn’t, then I’ll come right down.”

“I’ll give you ten minutes. Then I’m coming up,” Bruger said, and his hand slipped into his mackintosh pocket. “No tricks. You heard what the boss said.”

Corridon grinned at him.

“Relax. You take your job too seriously.”

He entered the hall and mounted the stairs. As soon as he was round the bend and out of Bruger’s sight, he paused to scribble on the back of an envelope Ritchie’s home address. Then holding the envelope in his hand, he went up the rest of the stairs three at the time.

Arriving at the fourth floor, he stepped to the green-painted front door and rang the bell.

He waited, his eyes going to his wrist-watch. He had seven and a half minutes before Bruger started up the stairs. Was she out? If she was, he was sunk, for Bruger would insist on waiting for her to come in, and Corridon would have no chance to warn her.

The door opened and she was standing before him.

“Why, Martin!”

He was vaguely aware she was wearing a dark coat and skirt and her pale little face had lit up with surprised pleasure at the sight of him. He caught hold of her arms and held them tightly.

“Don’t talk – listen!” he said, urgency in his voice. “You’re in immediate danger! The organization your brother works for has decided you know too much. They’ve sent me with a couple of thugs to kidnap you. I’m double-crossing them.” He gave her a little shake. “Concentrate. This is urgent and vital. Your only chance of safety is to go to Colonel Ritchie and tell him everything you know about the organization. Here, take this.” He released her arm and thrust the envelope into her hand. “That’s Ritchie’s address. Don’t be frightened. You can trust him. Go to him or you’ll be caught, and that’ll be the end of you. Do you understand?”

She was staring at him in horrified bewilderment.

“But Martin! What’s happened to Slade? What does this mean?”

“I haven’t a minute. They’re waiting downstairs! Go to Ritchie! Now, listen. I want you to slam the front door as hard as you can. Then dial 999 and tell the police three men are trying to break into your flat. Start screaming. It’s your only chance. Go on; do it now! There’s not a moment to lose.”

She screamed.

For a split second he thought she had misunderstood him, but seeing her eyes were looking beyond him to the stairs, he swung round.

Bruger was watching them from the bottom of the short flight of stairs leading to the landing. He held a Mauser pistol pointing at Corridon, and his thick lips came off his teeth in a snarl.

“This is it, you rat,” he said, and the gun went off with a choked bang.

chapter nineteen

The moment Corridon saw Bruger, his left hand thrust Lorene violently back into the hall, and on the momentum of his push, he threw himself sideways, cannoned off the wall and forwards towards Bruger.

He felt a burning pain in his right wrist, and then his massive weight struck Bruger as Bruger fired again. The bullet went wide and brought down a chunk of ceiling plaster.

Corridon's hands grabbed at Bruger's throat as the two men crashed against the wall, reeled back and then went banging and crashing down the flight of stairs to the landing below.

Corridon didn't release his hold. His thumbs dug into Bruger's thick throat, and he exerted every ounce of his strength, knowing Bruger had to die: that the whole of his plan would fail if Bruger lived to talk.

For a few seconds, Bruger fought, fang and claw, trying to break Corridon's hold. He was immensely strong and clubbed Corridon about the head and body while he thrashed madly on the floor; his thick boots crashing against the wall. Somehow Corridon hung on, and Bruger began to black-out. Corridon shifted his grip, felt bone under his thumbs, and squeezed. Something gave in Bruger's throat; blood ran down Corridon's hands from Bruger's nose and mouth, and Bruger went limp.

Gasping for breath, Corridon scrambled to his feet. He snatched up Bruger's Mauser and pushed it into his hip pocket. Then he looked up and saw Lorene, white-faced and horrified, staring down at him from the top of the stairs.

"Go to Ritchie," he panted. "Do you hear? Go to Ritchie!"

Then he turned and made a headlong dive down the stairs, knowing that Yevski might be up in a moment, and someone in the house, hearing the shots and the struggle was certain to be calling the police. It was essential to get clear before the police arrived. If he were caught, he wouldn't dare return to Baintrees, and he was determined to get back there.

He reached the ground floor as Yevski came rushing into the hall, gun in hand.

"Back to the van!" Corridon panted. "Quick! She's called the police!"

“Where’s Carl?” Yevski snarled, covering Corridon with the gun.

“She shot him. He’s dead. Let’s get out of here!”

Yevski grabbed Corridon’s arm and shook it.

“Dead? You’re sure?” His thin, flat-featured face turned the colour of tallow.

“Yes. Come on; do you want to be nabbed?”

Corridon jerked away, pushed past Yevski and ran down the steps to the van. His urgency communicated itself to Yevski, who followed. They got into the van and Yevski drove off.

“Dead! I can’t believe it,” Yevski said, as he drove recklessly round the corner into Bayswater Road.

“She shot him through the head. The damned fool! It was his fault and he asked for it. She was ready to come with me when he appeared. He had a gun in his hand. She shot him. She must have had the gun in the pocket of her house-coat. I tried to grab her, but she shot at me. She caught me in the arm. Then she slammed the front door, and I heard her yelling for the police.”

Yevski cursed under his breath.

“If only the fool had kept out of sight. Why did you let him come up?” Corridon went on.

“I thought he was going to wait in the hall,” Yevski said sullenly.

“That wasn’t what I told him to do. I said wait in the van.”

“To hell with what you said!” Yevski snarled.

“We’ll see what Ames has to say about that,” Corridon said grimly. “And you’d better slow down. The police will be looking for us. If they spot this van speeding, they might investigate.”

Yevski grunted and slowed down. They went on at a steady thirty miles an hour.

After they had passed Hammersmith Broadway, Yevski said uneasily, “If Bruger’s dead, he’s dead. It wasn’t my fault. He never listened to what I said.”

Corridon grinned in the darkness.

“Forget it. You did what you were told. I’ll see you don’t suffer for it.”

He hung out of the van window and looked back, but they weren’t being followed. The shooting had happened so quickly it was unlikely anyone had caught sight of the van. He wondered if Lorene would go to Ritchie. It was bad luck he hadn’t had time to tell her about Baintrees.

As they swung through the gates of the White City, Yevski pulled up.

“You’d better get in the back,” he said almost apologetically. “The boss said that was the way you were to travel.”

Corridon didn’t argue with him. He was anxious to find out where Baintrees was located, but he wasn’t going to risk disobeying orders. He got out of the cabin of the van. Yevski followed him around to the back and locked him in.

The van started again, and Corridon made a note of the time. It might be possible to help Ritchie find the place if he kept a record of the approximate speed and turns the van made.

He tied his handkerchief around the deep graze in his wrist made by Bruger’s bullet, and then concentrated on the task of plotting the van’s course. They drove for twenty minutes without turning, banging along at fifty miles an hour, then the van took a wide turn, and Corridon guessed it was negotiating a roundabout. A few minutes later the van turned to the right and continued on its way. Corridon continued to jot down the turns and the times, and when finally the van slowed down and pulled up, he had a complete record which he hoped Ritchie would be able to follow: providing he could get it to him.

He climbed stiffly out of the van when Yevski pulled open the doors, and followed Yevski up the steps into the hall.

They went immediately to Ames’ office.

Ames was waiting for them, pacing up and down, his lean, hard face tense.

“Where is she?” he snapped as Corridon entered the room. “Your discipline is not satisfactory.”

Corridon said curtly, “Bruger disobeyed orders. I didn’t get her.”

Ames stood motionless. His black eyes blazed with fury.

“What happened?”

“I told Bruger to remain out of sight with the van. I went up to her flat and rang the bell. She came to the door. She seemed nervous, but pleased to see me. I told her her brother had met with an accident and I had come to fetch her. She was wearing a house-coat with large pockets. She said she would change. As I was following her into the flat, she suddenly screamed. I looked round. Bruger was on the stairs watching. I heard a bang of a gun. I was off my guard. She shot Bruger through the head, then shot at me.” He pulled back his sleeve to show the bloodstained handkerchief around his wrist.

“Before I could grab her, she slammed the door, and was yelling for the police. I made sure Bruger was dead; then I bolted down the stairs and joined Yevski. We got away without being followed.”

Trembling with fury, Ames rounded on Yevski.

“Is this true?”

“Yes,” Yevski said. “I remained with the van. Bruger said he was going into the hall. I told him to stay with me, but he wouldn’t listen. I waited. Two shots came one after the other. As I ran into the hall, Corridon came down. He was bleeding. There was no time to waste. I drove away at once.”

The blazing eyes swivelled back to Corridon.

“So on your very first assignment, you fail,” Ames said clenching his fists.

“I failed because your men are not taught to obey orders,” Corridon returned. “If I had gone there on my own, she would be in this room now.”

Ames waved Yevski to the door. When he had gone, he said, “Have you any complaints about Yevski?”

Corridon shook his head.

“No. He behaved well. It was Bruger.”

Ames sat down at his desk.

“This is unfortunate,” he said, his voice suddenly mild. “I will find out what has happened to her. I had her flat covered before you arrived. We must get hold of her somehow.”

“Do you want a written report?” Corridon asked.

“No.” Ames looked up. “It’s a dangerous thing to fail in this organization. The less said about it the better. Understand, I don’t blame you. Bruger was at fault. I will make enquiries. You must need your dinner. Go and get it.” As Corridon turned to the door, Ames added, “You have nothing to worry about. Only don’t talk about this. If Homer asks you, tell him you have reported to me. We will not advertise Bruger’s disobedience.”

Corridon nodded and went out, closing the door quietly behind him. He felt elated. Bruger was Ames’ man. Bruger had disobeyed orders. The responsibility fell on Ames, and Ames wasn’t anxious to face the responsibility. It would seem, Corridon thought as he walked down the stairs to the dining-room, he now had a slight hold on Ames. Not much of a hold, but something, and it was up to him to drive the wedge home.

He was making progress.

chapter twenty

Corridon found the dining-room practically deserted. Over by the window four men sat over their coffee, smoking and talking. In a corner a fat woman and an elderly man whispered while they made the tablecloth grey with cigarette ash.

Corridon wandered over to a table against the wall where he had a view of the whole room, and sat down.

He was halfway through his meal when he saw Kara Yagoda come into the room. She stood in the door way, and he studied her. Seen from that distance the thing about her that struck him most forcibly was her strength. She looked like a circus strong woman. Her head sat squarely on her broad shoulders, and the short column of her neck was extraordinarily thick. Beneath the dusty black sweater her figure was like a small, compact barrel. He had never seen such a chest on a woman. She had big, long-fingered hands, broad and immensely powerful. He decided she would be a match for most men: definitely not his type.

She came across the room and paused at his table.

"Hello," she said, and pulled out the chair opposite him. "Mind if I join you?"

Corridon cut a piece of pie crust with his fork before saying, "Go ahead. I'm just finishing."

She smiled. Her teeth were even, strong and white.

"I've had mine hours ago," she said. "I thought I'd keep you company."

"Very nice of you," Corridon said without enthusiasm.

"I heard about you when I was in Russia," she said, watching him closely. "They called you the Red Devil."

"So they did," Corridon said, pushed his plate away and drew his coffee closer to him. He lit a cigarette.

"I have asked Ames if I can work with you," she went on. "He said I could. Are you pleased?"

Corridon studied her for a moment.

"Should I be? Are you so useful?"

An expression came into her eyes that irritated and slightly embarrassed

him. It was too frankly inviting for his taste.

“Oh yes,” she said. “There are many things I can do. I am very strong.” She flexed her long, muscular finger. “I shoot very well. I drive a car better than anyone else here. I can climb, I have no nerves. I can make people talk no matter how obstinate they are. I understand explosives. I am a chemist.” She hunched her broad shoulders and looked at him out of the corners of her hard, green eyes. “I make love too – very well.”

“Sounds all right,” Corridon said with a show of indifference. “No doubt Ames will tell me when he wants us to work together. Frankly, I don’t care to have a woman with me when I’m doing a job. I find they are unreliable.”

She threw back her head and laughed.

“You will find I am more reliable than any man. Ask Ames. He doesn’t give praise for nothing. I hear the Feydak woman slipped through your fingers. Bruger is a fool. I am glad he is dead. Ames relied on him too much. Now, this is my chance. I am to take Bruger’s place.”

“That’s nice for you,” Corridon said, pushing back his chair. “I’m going to my room. Please excuse me.”

She stood up.

“I am going to my room, too. We can go together.”

Corridon stood aside and let her go ahead. He studied her back as she walked with a slight sway of her hips to the door.

They went silently up the stairs, and outside her door, she paused and faced him.

“Will you come in? I have something to show you.”

Corridon shook his head.

“Sorry, not now. I’m going to bed.”

“Tomorrow night, perhaps?”

“Perhaps. So long.”

He turned, pushed open his door and entered the room. As he turned to close the door, he found her leaning against the door jamb.

“Why not tonight?” she asked. “You and I could be good friends. I believe in being frank. There are hours of great boredom here. Could we not amuse ourselves as we are so conveniently situated?”

“Sorry,” Corridon said. “I don’t rush into such things without a few preliminaries. Possibly I’m a little old-fashioned.”

“That is interesting,” she said, her eyes hardening. “I don’t recollect there

were any preliminaries so far as Lorene Feydak was concerned. But perhaps you find her more attractive than I am?"

Corridon was fast losing patience, but at the same time he realized this woman could be dangerous. He didn't want to make an enemy of her if he could help it.

"Still sorry," he said gently. "Good night."

She looked at him.

"I see. Perhaps that is why Bruger died. That is interesting. Good night, my friend."

She turned away and went into her room. Corridon stood still, listening to the sound of her door closing, then he frowned, aware that his face and hands were damp.

Later, as he was preparing for bed, the door opened and Ames came in.

"Ah," Ames said, "I looked for you downstairs." He shut the door. His thin, white face was mild. "There is no trace of her. She has vanished."

"Lorene?"

"Yes, Lorene." Ames moved to the bed and sat on it. "I have had a report. A few seconds after you had gone a police car arrived; then an ambulance. Bruger was taken away. Then Rawlins turned up, and Lorene went with him. It was not possible to follow them. We have checked the police stations but she's not in any of the local ones."

"They wouldn't take her to a police station. They've taken her to Ritchie. If she knows anything, Ritchie will make her talk."

"Where is she then?" Ames demanded, leaning forward.

"Where you haven't a hope to get at her," Corridon said. "Probably the Tower. Ritchie has accommodation there. I know No. 12 was taken there."

Ames frowned.

"This is bad, really bad." He leaned forward and stared at Corridon. "It's dangerous for both of us. If it is found out, both of us could get into serious trouble. The Leader doesn't tolerate mistakes."

"I can't see how it affects me," Corridon said smoothly. "I wasn't allowed to handle it my way. Bruger disobeyed my orders. If I make a report, it'll let me out."

Ames slid the tip of his tongue along his thin lips.

"That may be, but it wouldn't let me out."

"Well, no, but do you expect me to worry about that?"

“We could be useful to each other,” Ames said; his smile was forced.

This was the opportunity Corridon had been waiting for. He didn’t hesitate.

“Certainly. You’re the only member of this organization who has impressed me up to now. I’d be glad to work with you. What can I do to cover up this... error, shall we call it?”

“No one knows, except Yevski, you went to her flat. I can arrange for Yevski to keep his mouth shut.”

“Kara knows.”

Ames’ eyes hardened.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. She told me. She knows Lorene got away. Probably Yevski is more of a talker than you imagine.”

“Kara is to be trusted,” Ames said after a moment’s thought. “I will speak to her. Now, listen, Bruger went to Lorene’s flat alone. You understand? He failed to follow out instructions and was shot. I will see both Kara and Yevski support this story. If you will keep out of it, I can handle it all right.”

Corridon lit a cigarette and flicked the match into the fireplace.

“You can rely on me, but be careful of Kara. I wouldn’t trust her myself.”

Ames showed his small, even teeth.

“I happen to have something on her,” he said. “She will do what I tell her.”

Corridon offered him a cigarette, and after a moment’s hesitation, Ames took it.

“Have you any plans for me?” Corridon asked casually. “I think I mentioned this to you before. I don’t care to work for nothing.”

“Have a little patience,” Ames said. “You won’t be idle for long. I have no control over such decisions. They are made by the Leader. But this I can tell you, we have decided Ritchie must go.”

Corridon nodded.

“You still think you could do it?”

“If it is made worth my while, I could do it.”

“That will be seen to. If you succeed I will personally see you will be given a good post,” Ames said.

“I’ll be successful,” Corridon said. “I would need a week to make my preparations, and three good men.”

“You will understand,” Ames said, “that as you are still on probation you would not be allowed a gun? The plan is yours, but the actual shooting will

be done by two competent agents. You appreciate that?"

"That's all right," Corridon said, aware of the bulge in his hip pocket made by the Mauser he had taken from Bruger. "Is there a date fixed yet?"

Ames shook his head.

"In a little while. I'll give you at least a week's notice. As for your helpers, Chicho and MacAdams are both first-class shots, and Kara can drive the car."

"I don't care to have her with me. Isn't there someone else?"

"Certainly not," Ames said shortly. "If there is trouble you will be glad to have her with you. No one can handle a car like she can. What's the matter with her?"

"A little too amorous for my liking."

Ames gave Corridon a leering smile.

"What's the matter with that?"

"Personal taste. The Russian type doesn't appeal to me."

"You can't be too fussy here, Corridon. Kara is extremely enthusiastic. You should try her."

Corridon shook his head

"Those two girls I was telling you about. Frankly, I'm getting a little tired of this restricted life. How about you and I going gay one night this week, and paying them a visit? You won't be disappointed."

"Where do they live?" Ames asked casually, but a sudden intent look in his eyes was not lost on Corridon.

"They have a flat in Curzon Street. I could arrange it by telephone. Shall I?"

"You are not supposed to leave the building," Ames said without conviction. "Still, I suppose if I were with you it would be all right. I think you have earned a reward."

"I dare say it could be arranged that no one else should know," Corridon said with a grin. "How about tomorrow night?"

"Saturday," Ames said, and waved to the telephone. "Fix it for Saturday.

chapter twenty one

The next four days passed slowly for Corridon. He continued to coach the two engineers until they could carry out the work of wrecking the generators blindfolded. He also took over a mixed class, teaching the theory of ciphers and invisible inks. The work bored him, but he kept at it, and Homer, who looked in from time to time, seemed impressed with his knowledge and thoroughness.

He spent the evenings avoiding the attentions of Kara, and to do this he played poker with Homer and three other men until the small hours of the morning.

But as the days passed, he became aware of a declining suspicion, and realized he was slowly being accepted by the other members of the organization. Apart from not being allowed out of the grounds, he had now the run of the big, rambling house and could do pretty well what he wanted.

On Saturday evening, around seven o'clock, Ames came to his room. He was wearing a dark lounge suit and his satanic face was closely shaven. There was a hot, intent glitter in his eyes, and Corridon, looking at him, felt sorry for Hildy, the girl he had picked to take care of Ames. The other girl, Babs, was the less attractive of the two, but more intelligent. Corridon had known them for some time. Both made precarious livings as models for the various art schools, and supplemented their earnings by accommodating rich business men at their discreet flat in Curzon Street.

"Ready?" Ames asked a little impatiently.

"Yes." Corridon adjusted his tie in the mirror, patted his handkerchief in his breast pocket and joined Ames at the door.

"There's a car parked at the back. I'll go first. If anyone spots you leaving, say you are going on an errand for me."

Corridon nodded.

He waited a minute or so after Ames had gone, then stepped into the corridor.

Kara came to her door. She gave him a sneering little smile.

"Going out?" she asked.

Corridon shook his head.

“What on earth gave you that idea?” he said. “I’m going to sit on the roof and keep the pigeons company.”

He walked on, not hurrying, and grinned a little uneasily when he heard her door slam. The woman, he thought, was a damned pest.

Ames was sitting at the wheel of a black Humber car, drawn up outside the rear entrance. Corridon got in beside him, and was immediately aware of a strong smell of brandy coming from Ames.

“Anyone see you?”

“Only Olga from the Volga,” Corridon said carelessly. “She wanted to know if I was going out. I told her to mind her own business.”

“She has taken a fancy to you,” Ames said, as he drove down the curving drive. He sniggered. “It might be wiser to be pleasant to her.”

“Not on your life,” Corridon returned promptly. “She’s just a shade too powerful to get into a clinch with. Are you still sure you can trust her?”

“Yes,” Ames said, slowing up as two guards appeared in the headlights of the car. He spoke to them and they opened the main gates and waved him through.

Corridon was hoping he would recognize the countryside, but he didn’t. It was dark, and Ames drove only with the parking lights on. Corridon didn’t get the chance of reading a sign-post or recognizing a landmark until, shooting up a steep hill, they came out on the High Wycombe end of Western Avenue.

From the time they had taken and the distance they had come, Corridon decided Baintrees was somewhere near the Bucks – Herts border. Nearer to that he could not get.

Once on the broad arterial road, Ames drove like a madman. Corridon was thankful when they swung through the open gates of the White City and were forced to reduce speed. Not once during the run down Western Avenue had Ames driven below sixty miles an hour, and in some stretches he had reached ninety: a lot too fast, Corridon thought, with the dazzling headlights of the home-going traffic to contend with.

Now that Ames had swallowed the hook he had dangled before him, Corridon had to decide what to do. The most obvious thing would be to knock Ames over the head and present him to Ritchie to work on. But Corridon couldn’t make up his mind if Ames knew enough to justify such action. Corridon’s job was to find out the identity of the Leader, and he

couldn't be certain Ames knew this. If he didn't, then Corridon would be throwing away his only chance of finding this out for himself. At the moment he was getting established in the organization. Ames was beginning to trust him. If he worked with Ames, it was possible that sooner or later he would meet the Leader. So he had decided to play this little farce to a finish. It would serve a useful purpose, and give him the opportunity of talking to Ritchie on the telephone.

Ames had been silent during the drive, but now, as he drove along Piccadilly, he said abruptly, "You can trust these two girls?"

"There's nothing to trust them with," Corridon said. "They're just a couple of sporty girls without a thought in their heads."

"One can't be too careful," Ames said, turning into Half-Moon Street. "I forgot to ask – what does it cost?"

"Not a thing. I thought I made that clear," Corridon said, hiding a grin. "They are friends of mine." He went on to explain what Ames was to expect, and by the time they pulled up outside a tall building opposite the back of Shepherd Market, Ames' face was incredulous and his eyes hungry.

The flat door was opened by Babs, a dark, thin, intense girl in a sky-blue house-coat, who greeted Corridon by throwing her arms around his neck with a whoop that could be heard at the end of the street.

Corridon pushed her firmly away.

"Steady on," he said good-humouredly. "Don't strangle me. How are you? Here's a pal of mine. Call him Gerry. Where's Hildy?"

"Here I am," Hildy announced, appearing from behind the door. She was plump, red-haired and wicked-looking. She made eyes at Ames. "Hello, Handsome," she went on. "Come on in, and make yourself at home."

Ames entered the sitting-room, rather like a cat in a strange house. He prowled around, satisfying himself that the four of them were alone in the flat. He opened doors, looked into the two bedrooms, glanced in the bathroom and even inspected the kitchen.

At a sign from Corridon, the two girls ignored Ames, and while he prowled, they prepared drinks. Satisfied, he returned to the sitting-room and sat down.

"Like it?" Babs asked, as Hildy went over to him with a large brandy. She sat on the settee beside him and gave him the drink.

Ames said it was very nice. He now turned his attention to Hildy.

Corridon was nursing Babs on his knees, drinking whisky.

"Is that your only telephone?" Ames asked suddenly, pointing to the receiver.

Corridon gave Babs a slight, warning nudge.

"Yes," she said, looking surprised. "Did you want to use it?"

"No," Ames said. "I just wondered."

Hildy kept his brandy glass full, and after some minutes of aimless talk, he began to show signs of restlessness.

"Shall we leave those two?" Hildy whispered in his ear. "I think they want to be alone together."

Ames nodded.

Corridon, who was watching him out of the corners of his eyes, guessed the telephone was worrying him.

He stood up.

"We're going in the next room," he announced. "Babs wants to show me her etching. We'll join forces later. Okay?"

"Which room is that?" Ames demanded, also getting to his feet.

"Show him, Babs," Corridon said with a grin. "He's nervous I'll run away."

"Why?" Hildy demanded. "Martin's a lovely man. Why should he run away?"

Babs had opened a door. Ames crossed the room and glanced into the bedroom beyond. He didn't see the telephone on the lower shelf of the bedside table as it was out of sight from where he stood.

"Come on," Corridon said to Babs. "Let's go."

They went into the bedroom and shut the door, leaving Ames and Hildy together.

"Lock it," Corridon said, lowering his voice. "And keep your voice down."

Babs looked startled.

"Who's your friend, Martin? I don't like the look of him."

"Nor do I. Never mind who he is. Come and sit here. I want to talk to you." He sat on the bed which was well away from the door.

Babs came over and sat by his side.

"Now look, kid," Corridon said, "all I want to do is to use your phone. I'm in a spot of bother, and this meeting was the only way I could reach a phone without our pal outside knowing about it."

“Well, I like that!” Babs said in disgust. “Don’t tell me I’m not going to make anything out of this.”

Corridon grinned.

“Twenty quid: half to you and half to Hildy. An expensive telephone call. Got a piece of notepaper? I’ll fix it for you.”

Babs stared at him.

“Twenty pounds? Honest?”

“Come on, kid, you’re wasting time,” Corridon said curtly.

She fetched some notepaper, and he scribbled a few lines on a sheet and handed it to her. She read what he had written and gaped at him.

“The War Office? You’re pulling my leg.”

“I’m not. Take that along to a bird called Miss Fleming, and she’ll pay you twenty of the best. She’ll be a little sour, but take no notice. You’re working for the Government now.”

Babs continued to stare at him.

“What is he – a spy?”

“Something like that. Now look, I’ve got to talk to my chief. Try not to listen. The less you know about this the safer it’ll be for you.” He reached for the telephone and dialled Ritchie’s number. “This is big time, Babs. You’re not getting twenty quid for nothing.”

Ritchie’s voice came over the line.

“This is Corridon reporting,” Corridon said. “I have a lot to say and most of it is for the record. Do you want Miss Fleming to take it down?”

“Glad to hear your voice,” Ritchie said warmly. “I was getting worried about you. How’s it going?”

Corridon grinned as he exchanged glances with Babs.

“Pretty good, Colonel. Right now I’m having the time of my life. It’s going to cost your department twenty pounds.”

“Sounds like a woman’s involved,” Ritchie said. “Well, all right, but let’s have value for money.”

“Have you talked with Lorene?”

“She doesn’t know much, but we’re keeping her out of sight and reach. They are looking for her, of course?”

“Yes. You’d better get your niece to break the news to her. Her brother shot himself. Ames was going to question him, but he preferred the other way out. Better give me Miss Fleming. I haven’t much time.”

"I'll see she's told," Ritchie said. "Did you have to kill Bruger? Rawlins is in a flap about that."

"He's always in a flap," Corridon returned. "It had to be done. If he'd got away, I would have been sunk. It's no loss."

"Perhaps not. Well, all right, I'll straighten it out somehow. Hold on for Miss Fleming."

After a moment or so there was a click and Miss Fleming's curt, efficient voice said she was ready.

Corridon began to dictate his report. He spoke rapidly and concisely, covering everything that had happened to him since he had left Marian Howard's flat and had arrived at Baintrees. He gave a detailed account of the journey from Lorene's flat to Baintrees, a description of Homer and Ames, and of the two engineers who were to wreck the generators at the power station. When he had finished he asked Miss Fleming to put Ritchie back on the line.

While he had been dictating, he was aware of Babs' breathless excitement. She drank in every word he was saying, her eyes round with surprise.

"I told you it was big time, didn't I?" he said.

Ritchie's voice broke in.

"Aren't you alone?"

"Certainly not," Corridon said. "I'm in the bedroom of a very charming little brunette, and she'll be along with a chit from me tomorrow morning asking payment for twenty pounds. Pay her promptly, Colonel, or my line of communication is closed for good."

Ritchie chuckled.

"Trust you to combine pleasure and business. Have you anything else for me? The report is excellent."

"They plan to get rid of you," Corridon said airily. "I'm to be in charge of the operation. It can happen any time, so keep your eyes open. When it is definitely fixed, I'll try to tip you off, but if I can't, I'll do my best to see you aren't hurt. Whatever happens, the news must get around you're dead. It's vital the operation should appear to have succeeded. If I pull it off, I'll be accepted as a full member."

"All right," Ritchie said. "Have you any idea how it'll happen?"

"Probably as you are leaving home in the evening. There'll be two gunmen, a woman driving and me. The gunmen know their business, so

watch out and carry a gun from now on.”

“Right,” Ritchie said. “Anything more?”

“How’s your pretty niece?”

“She’s all right, and out of harm’s way. She was asking after you.”

“She was? Well, keep an eye on her. So long, Colonel. You’ll be hearing from me. If you can, try and locate Baintrees. It shouldn’t be difficult. But don’t try to get anyone inside. It’s too dangerous. Okay?”

“I’ll find it. Watch yourself. You’re doing a fine job.”

“So long,” Corridon said, pleased. Ritchie rarely gave praise. He replaced the receiver.

“You mean all that stuff’s true?” Babs asked. “That man out there is really a spy?”

“You’ve heard nothing,” Corridon said. “Now look, kid, this is dynamite. One whisper from you and the whole setup will be blown sky-high, and me with it. These people are dangerous. They stop at nothing. If he suspects what we’re up to, he’ll wipe you out and Hildy too. You’ve got to keep your mouth shut. Understand?”

The hard look in his eyes frightened her.

“I won’t say a thing.”

“You’d better not. Not even to Hildy. You’re working for the Government now. I told you this is big time, and it is. These people are causing a lot of trouble. They’re out to upset our recovery, and if they keep on the way they’re going, they can do it. I’m sorry to have dragged you into this, but I had no alternative. You’re in it, and you’ve got to accept the responsibility. Otherwise you and Hildy and I will get our throats cut. And I’m not footing.” He stood up. “Come on. Don’t look so bewildered. It’s all right so long as you don’t talk. Let’s have a drink.”

He crossed the room, unlocked the door and looked into the sitting-room. It was deserted.

Ames, apparently, was still preoccupied.

chapter twenty two

Two days later, as Corridon was making his way to the class-room, he ran into Homer.

"I was looking for you," Homer said, showing his big, yellow teeth. "There's to be a meeting in my office in ten minutes. I'd be glad if you would attend."

"Certainly," Corridon returned. "I'll get my class going, and then I'll be along."

Homer continued to beam.

"We are very satisfied with your work, Mr. Corridon," he said. "Ames speaks highly of you, and I don't have to tell you he is an exceedingly difficult man to please."

Corridon concealed a grin. Ames had every reason to be pleased with him. Hildy had been a big hit. Already Ames was making plans to visit the flat in Curzon Street with Corridon on the following Saturday. Corridon wondered how long it would be before Ritchie objected to the expense. Twenty pounds a week was a tall price for the new pleasure of hearing Corridon's voice. So far he had nothing new to report. He hoped the meeting would provide some information that would justify the expense: otherwise he would have to find other means of communicating with Ritchie.

He gave his class a complicated code to decipher, and then went along to Homer's office. On his way he met Kara who joined him.

"So at last we have work to do together," she said, looking at him out of the corners of her eyes.

"Have we?"

"So I hear. It is an experience I look forward to," she said "I see very little of you these days."

Corridon made no comment. He rapped on Homer's door, pushed it open and stood aside to allow her to enter first.

Homer sat at his desk. Diestl stood by the fireplace. Ames prowled about the room, his hands in his pockets. Two men Corridon hadn't seen before, stood by the wall opposite the door.

"Come in," Homer said, "and shut the door." He waved to Kara to take her

place beside the two men, and then motioned Corridon to a chair by his desk. "Sit down, Mr. Corridon. We have work for you to do."

Corridon sat down. He glanced curiously at the two men. One of them was short and thickset with a lean, small-featured face and a mop of black hair as stiff and straight as the bristles of a broom. His deep-set eyes peered at Corridon through a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles. There were little clumps of bristles on his badly-shaven face and his flannel suit was threadbare and baggy.

His companion was younger: probably not more than eighteen. He too was shabby and unkept, and a lock of his long, lank black hair hung over his left eye. He was tall, thin, and weedy. His round suet-pudden of a face, his small shifty eyes, his weak, vicious mouth stamped him as a typical loafer you see any day in the amusement arcades in the West End.

Neither of these two were prepossessing, Corridon thought, and wondered what they were doing in Homer's office. He soon learned.

Homer said, "We have decided Ritchie must go. Are you still prepared to do the job?"

Corridon nodded.

"Certainly."

"Then ten days from today: May 20th, on the terms we have agreed. Is that all right?"

Again Corridon nodded.

"And the method?" Diestl asked. "I take it you have been giving this matter some consideration."

"Yes," Corridon said. "The method is simple enough. What is difficult and dangerous is putting the method into operation."

"These three will help you," Homer said, waving to Kara and the two men. "That is Charles MacAdams," he went on indicating the man in the steel-rimmed spectacles. "And that is Chicho." He waved to the youth. "Both of them are first-class revolver shots. You couldn't have a better couple, and Kara, of course, will handle the car."

Corridon nodded to the two men who stared at him, expressionless. MacAdams inclined his head, but Chicho gave no sign of recognition.

"Before I accept these three," Corridon said smoothly, "I should have to satisfy myself they are as good as you say. This is a far too dangerous and important job to fool with. If they pass my tests, I'll take them with me, but if

they fail – I'll want others. That is understood?"

"Certainly." Ames said. "The responsibility is yours. You are at liberty to choose who you like, although we are satisfied these three are the best we have."

Corridon nodded.

"I'll test them this afternoon."

"I should like to hear your plan," Diestl said. "How do you propose to do the job?"

"Until these three have been tested it isn't necessary for them to hear the plan," Corridon said. He looked at the three. "Please go to the lounge and wait for me."

MacAdams immediately moved to the door, but Kara and Chicho hesitated, looking inquiringly at Homer to see if he supported Corridon's order.

"Get out!" Ames snarled, seeing their hesitation. "Didn't you hear what he said?"

"Wait!" Corridon said, and stood up. "I want a complete understanding about this. These three must be under my control. I won't take on the job unless they understand what I say goes. My orders must be obeyed, and if any of them even question what I say, he or she is to be punished."

"Yes," Diestl said. "We agree to that." He looked at the three. "You understand? Corridon is to be obeyed."

Kara smiled. The other two stared at Corridon with blank faces.

"All right," Corridon said. "Now please wait in the lounge for me."

When they had gone, he sat down again.

"Now for the plan," he said. "Ritchie has a house in Stratford Road, a few minutes from Knightsbridge Underground Station. There are only twelve houses in the road; six on each side. The north end runs into Kensington Road, the south end into the Brompton Road. The road itself is quiet and lonely. Ritchie's house is the last but one from Brompton Road end." He leaned forward and took a sheet of paper from Homer's desk. "I'll draw a plan for you." He made a quick rough sketch. Diestl and Ames came to the desk, and the three men watched Corridon's pencil at work. "Ritchie leaves his house at ten o'clock every evening for a stroll in the Park," Corridon went on as he completed the sketch. "He has done this for years."

"A dangerous habit surely?" Homer said, raising his bushy eyebrows.

“Actually it isn’t. For one thing only those he trusts – and they are very few – know where he lives, and for another, he can more than look after himself.”

“And by that you mean...?” Diestl said.

“He is one of the best shots in the country, and that is saying something. He is a man of ferocious courage and has a highly-developed instinct for danger. He can draw a gun and kill you before you could wink an eyelid, and I am not exaggerating. That is why I say the job is highly dangerous. The chances of getting back here alive are small – unless the thing goes like clock-work. Even then I don’t guarantee we won’t have casualties.”

“If we take him by surprise...” Diestl began.

Corridon laughed.

“There’s no such word to Ritchie. Our only hope is for one of your gunmen to draw his fire while the other kills him. Naturally we need not go into that with MacAdams or Chicho, but I think you can be fairly sure one of them isn’t coming back alive.”

“So long as Ritchie goes,” Ames said with a brutal smile, “I don’t give a damn if neither of them come back.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Corridon said. “It’s possible none of us, except possibly Kara, who will be in the car, will get back, but Ritchie will be wiped out – that I promise you. Now look at this sketch. Here is Ritchie’s house. Here is a pillar-box a few yards from his front door and on the opposite side of the road. I propose to station Chicho behind this box. On the same side as Ritchie’s house there is a telephone booth. I shall stand in that, pretending to phone. From there I shall have an uninterrupted view of the road and the house. Neither MacAdams nor Chicho know Ritchie. There must be no mistake. I’ll signal to them when he appears. MacAdams will stand here by this tree. He will be in full view. It is his bad luck, but it is essential Ritchie should see him and suspect what he is up to. Ritchie will concentrate on MacAdams. I am hoping he won’t spot Chicho. MacAdams will fire first – if he gets the chance. It is almost certain Ritchie will fire. While he is concentrating on MacAdams, Chicho will pick him off. There’ll be no second chance. If Chicho fails, then we’re sunk. That’s why I want to satisfy myself both of them can shoot.”

“They can,” Ames said, “but by all means satisfy yourself.”

“And how will you get away?” Homer asked.

Corridon tapped the map.

“Kara will be in the car, parked at Brompton Road end of the street with the lights off. When the shooting is over, we sprint to the car and she’ll drive down the Brompton Road, up Exhibition Road to the Park. I want another car to be parked at Marble Arch Gate. We’ll leave Kara’s car, separate and make our way to the other car. If we are pursued, I will go in the car and the other three – or what’s left of them – will spilt up: Kara going by underground to Shepherd’s Bush, Chicho to Hammersmith Broadway and MacAdams to Park Royal. I’ll pick them up as we go.” He glanced at Ames. “Will you handle the second car?”

“Of course,” Ames said. He seemed pleased to be included in the plan.

“Wouldn’t it be better if MacAdams remained in Kara’s car and shot from there?” Diestl said. “It would give him some protection.”

Corridon smiled without humour.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to make up your mind to lose MacAdams. If Ritchie spotted a parked car outside his house he would be firing long before MacAdams ever raised his gun. Besides, the car would give Ritchie shelter from Chicho’s fire.”

“He’s right,” Ames said impatiently. “It’s a good plan. I approve.”

“Yes,” Homer said.

Diestl nodded.

“Yes, I’m satisfied. You can be ready in ten days?”

“In a week. From now until the day I will hold rehearsals. I propose to use part of the drive and construct the scene there. I take it I can use who I want to help me?”

“You do exactly what you think best,” Homer said, rubbing his fingertips together.

“The three must see the actual ground,” Corridon went on. “Can I send them separately to look at the road and house?”

“Of course,” Diestl said.

“I take it you would be reluctant to let me go down there on my own?” Corridon said with his jeering smile.

Homer waved his hands apologetically.

“When this assignment has been successfully concluded, you will be free to go where you like, Mr. Corridon. You appreciate that until Ritchie has been liquidated it would be a little lax on our part to let you out alone.”

“That’s all right,” Corridon returned. “I know the road well. I don’t need to go.” He felt in his hip pocket and pulled out his cigarette-case. “Then there’s only my fee to be considered. A thousand, I think we said. Five hundred down, and five hundred when the job is done.”

“A thousand when the job is done,” Diestl said quickly. “I’m sorry, Corridon, but your reputation is against you. I’ve heard about your down-payments.”

“Wait,” Homer said. “I feel we should make a concession. Mr. Corridon has been doing most useful work. He is practically a member of this organization. If he is to trust us, I think we should trust him.”

“I agree,” Ames said and gave Corridon a sly smile.

Diestl hesitated.

“I might point out,” Corridon said, getting to his feet, “that you don’t run any risk. Until the job is done I shall have an escort when I go out. I can’t see what you are worrying about.”

“All right,” Diestl said, shrugging. “Then pay him.”

“I’ll have the money in cash for you the day after tomorrow,” Homer said. “Is that all right?”

“Yes. Have I permission to go to my bank if I am accompanied by someone?” Corridon asked, and glanced at Ames.

“I’ll go with you,” Ames said, promptly.

As they left the office together, Ames went on, “We’ll fix up to see the girls when we go to the bank. I don’t believe in wasting opportunities.”

“Nor do I,” Corridon said, and concealed a grin.

chapter twenty three

MacAdams came into Corridon's room and put the model on the table.

"I think this is about right," he said. "If you'll check it over..."

Corridon examined the model. It was exactly what he wanted.

Three days had passed since the meeting in Homer's office. He had been to the bank and paid in the five hundred pounds given to him in cash by Homer. While at the bank, he had left instructions for a hundred pounds to be sent to his solicitor for Susie Lawes' use. Ames, who had been listening, glanced at him enquiringly.

"Believe it or not, she's my god-child," Corridon said. "I owed Milly the money. I'm paying it to get it off my conscience."

Ames plainly thought Corridon was eccentric, but he didn't say anything. His mind was too preoccupied with his thoughts of Hildy, and as soon as Corridon had finished his business at the bank, Ames drove him to Curzon Street.

Corridon had no trouble in getting Ritchie on the telephone. He gave him the details of the plan, the time and date, warning him the affair might end in disaster if he wasn't very much on his guard, but Ritchie seemed confident enough.

"You take care of Chicho," he had said. "I'll look after MacAdams."

"Have police cars within reach," Corridon warned him. "Don't underestimate Kara. She can drive. I don't want her to get away."

Ritchie said he would take care of everything at his end, and told Corridon not to worry.

Corridon had put the three through a searching test. Ames was correct when he had said both MacAdams and Chicho were good shots, but they were nothing like as quick as Ritchie, although Corridon made out to both Ames and Homer that they were. The one person who really did worry him was Kara. If anything, she was a better shot than Chicho or MacAdams, and she handled the big Buick in a way that made Corridon's hair stand on end. Her judgment of distance was astonishing. Driving along the road to Baintrees with Corridon at her side, she had suddenly accelerated, shooting the car down the narrow lane at eighty miles an hour, and then, to Corridon's

horror, had swung the car through the gateway which had barely two foot of clearance each side of the car. She seemed to think nothing of threading the big car through small gaps at impossible speeds, and with Ames sitting at the back, she had driven Corridon along Western Avenue early one morning, taking the roundabouts at fifty miles an hour. He had thought Ames was a mad driver, but this girl was incredible. He wondered uneasily if the police would be able to stop her. Well, he had warned Ritchie, but for all that he was worried.

He had wanted a model of Stratford Road, so they could study the layout and know exactly the parts they had to play. MacAdams volunteered to make it, and within two days he had finished it.

Corridon thought the model was excellent, and said so. MacAdams merely grunted, but there was a pleased expression on his thin face.

Of the three Corridon liked MacAdams the best, but he knew him to be a dangerous fanatic. Chicho he disliked. The boy had no intelligence, but only a ferocious lust to kill with his gun. It was all he seemed to think about, and when he wasn't shooting on the range at the back of the house, he was practising pulling the gun from his belt.

Now he had the model, Corridon intensified the rehearsals. He got Yevski to play the part of Ritchie. Yevski was as good a shot as MacAdams and Chicho, and more often than not he got in the first shot. Soon the word got round what they were doing, and each afternoon quite a crowd collected to watch the rehearsals.

Corridon had selected part of the drive that resembled the shape of the Stratford Road. He had erected a dummy phone booth and pillar-box. A garden gate represented Ritchie's house.

He enacted the scene again and again, watching from the phone booth to see exactly how Chicho crouched behind the pillar-box. This was vital, for Corridon had to put him out of action before he had a chance of shooting Ritchie.

Both Homer and Ames came to see the rehearsals, and they seemed impressed with Corridon's thoroughness.

But it was still Kara who worried Corridon. She seemed dissatisfied and restless with her passive role of remaining in the car, and while Corridon was instructing Chicho to come farther round the pillar-box so he could see him, making out he would be less likely to be seen by Ritchie in that position, she

got out of the car and came over to him.

He turned and frowned at her.

“Did I tell you to leave the car?”

She gave him her insinuating hard little smile.

“I want to make a suggestion.”

Ames, who was standing nearby, joined them.

“What is it?” Corridon asked impatiently.

“I would like to cover Chicho,” she said. Mac fires first; then Chicho, then I could fire from the car. Isn’t that a good idea?”

“No,” Corridon said curtly. “Your job is to drive the car. It’s not necessary to cover Chicho. You are to remain in the car and keep the engine running. That’s your job, so stick to it.”

For a moment she hesitated, looking towards Ames, but Ames gave her no encouragement. She lifted her shoulders in an angry little shrug.

“Very well, but you may be sorry.”

“That’s my business,” Corridon said curtly. “Will you return to the car?”

She walked away, her back stiff.

“Wouldn’t it be wiser to let her join in?” Ames asked, as soon as she was out of hearing. “If Ritchie’s as dangerous as you say, three guns would be better than two.”

“Her job is to concentrate on driving,” Corridon said, anxious Ritchie shouldn’t have a third opponent. “We may have to get out in a hurry, and if she’s blazing away, her mind is off her real job.”

“Well, it’s your business,” Ames said. “I’ll leave it to you.”

That evening Kara came into Corridon’s room. He was relaxing in his armchair with a book, and he looked up, startled to find her standing in the doorway.

“What do you want?” he asked, curtly. “I didn’t hear you knock.”

She closed the door gently and came farther into the room.

“I was lonely,” she said, watching him from under her eyelashes. “I thought I would come and talk to you.”

Corridon waited.

She took out a leather cigarette-case, lit a cigarette, and held the case between her slim, strong fingers.

“Will you be sorry when Ritchie is dead?”

Corridon laid his book in his lap, his finger marking the sentence he was

reading.

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Ritchie is an expert shot, isn’t he?”

“He can shoot.”

“He was in Russia during the war,” she said lightly. “I met him. He is the best shot in this country.”

This was so unexpected that Corridon had difficulty in suppressing a start.

“He was, but he is getting old now,” he said cautiously.

“And yet you are not anxious for me to cover Chicho?”

“That has nothing to do with it,” Corridon snapped, realizing this could be dangerous. “Your job is to drive the car.”

“I know.” She blew a cloud of smoke to the ceiling. “You won’t be armed, will you?”

“Where’s all this leading to?” Corridon demanded. “What are you driving at?”

“I don’t think either Mac or Chicho are coming out of this alive,” she said and smiled. “I don’t care very much. They mean nothing to me, and I wouldn’t be surprised if Ritchie doesn’t die.”

Corridon studied her for a moment, then got up, walked across the room, opened the door and went out. He walked quickly along the passage to Ames’ room and went in.

Ames was lying on his bed, smoking, and going through a book of photographs.

He looked up and grinned.

“Here, have a look at these...” he began, but Corridon made a gesture that brought him to his feet.

“What is it?”

“Come to my room,” Corridon said. “Kara’s there. I would like you to hear what she has been saying to me.”

Ames’ face darkened.

“What’s she been saying?”

“She’ll tell you.”

Corridon returned to his room with Ames at his heels. Kara was moving to the door as they entered. There was a cold, wolfish look in her eyes and when she saw Ames, her mouth tightened.

“Tell Ames what you have just said,” Corridon said.

She hesitated while Ames stared at her coldly.

"It was nothing. Besides, it's nothing to do with him," she said at last.

"Tell him!" Corridon snapped.

She gave him a look of angry hatred, and made to move to the door, but he grabbed her wrist and jerked her round. She broke loose with a quick twist that staggered him, and again made for the door.

"Wait!" Ames said, his voice like the click of a trap.

She paused.

"It's nothing..." she began.

"I think it is," Corridon said. "She said she didn't think either MacAdams or Chicho were coming out of the shooting alive, and Ritchie will escape."

Ames looked at her.

"Why do you say that?"

Again she hesitated, and Corridon guessed she was trying to make up her mind how to get out of the situation.

"I – I was joking," she said. "I didn't mean it."

Ames' fist shot out and his knuckles crashed into her mouth, sending her reeling back. She tried to regain her balance, then sat heavily on the floor.

"Don't joke about such things," he snarled. "Now, get out!"

She got slowly to her feet, her hand covering her mouth, blood running from her nose. She didn't look at Corridon or Ames.

When she had gone into her room and shut the door, Ames said, "She's getting too damned cocky. She'll be all right now."

Remembering the concentrated hatred in the green eyes, Corridon was uneasy.

"Perhaps you shouldn't have hit her."

Ames smiled.

"It's the language women and dogs appreciate," he said. "You'll have no further trouble with her."

Corridon hoped he was right.

It was only later that evening, when he was sure he wouldn't be disturbed, that Corridon opened the bottom drawer in the wardrobe for the Mauser pistol he had taken from Bruger. He had decided to check the weapon and clean it. It was essential to his plan.

He had hidden the gun under the white boiler suit he had put in the drawer, but when he lifted the boiler suit, the gun had gone.

He sat back on his heels, his face set and his eyes hard. Kara has been left alone in the room. He guessed she had taken the gun, and without it he was powerless to help Ritchie.

He remained for several minutes sitting on his heels, staring at the empty drawer, wondering what to do. Then he got slowly to his feet. He had to get hold of another gun. One false move now would be disastrous, but if he was to save Ritchie's life, he had to have a gun.

chapter twenty four

In the hall, a clock chimed two. For the past three hours Corridon had been sitting at his open window, staring into the grounds. The night was moonless, and it was dark, with heavy black clouds moving sluggishly against the white sky. By now his eyes were accustomed to the darkness. While he had been sitting at the window he had seen two men and three dogs who passed below his window every half hour.

He had made up his mind he had to take the risk and break out of Baintrees. There was a telephone booth about a hundred yards down the road past the main gates. He had seen it when he had driven with Ames to Curzon Street. If he could reach that and arrange with Ritchie to get him a gun, all might still be well.

He decided it was time to go. He turned from the window to wedge a chair back under the handle of his door. It was unlikely anyone would visit his room at this hour, but he felt the precaution was wise.

The dogs worried him. He had no fear of the guards. He was experienced enough to avoid them, but the dogs were dangerous. The only weapon he could find in the room was a short steel poker, and this, he decided would have to serve. He wound a towel round his left arm and knotted it securely. With this to act as a buffer between his arm and the dog's teeth, he hoped to escape injury if he was attacked.

He returned to the window. After a few minutes, he again saw the two guards and the dogs on leads as they passed below him. One of the guards was smoking a cigarette, and talked in a low voice. Neither of them seemed to be on the alert. As soon as they were out of sight, Corridon swung his leg over the sill, and reached for the stack pipe. He went down quietly and without haste. Dropping lightly onto the flower-bed, he stepped onto the gravel path and paused to smooth over the footprints he had left in the soil.

He stood listening for a minute or so, then hearing nothing, moved from the path onto the lawn. Silently and swiftly he ran across the lawn to the big clumps of rhododendron bushes. He paused and looked back at the house. It was in darkness. The rhododendron bushes grew all along the drive to the gates. He decided to keep under cover of these bushes and not risk walking

down the wide, open drive. It would take longer, but would be safer.

He moved off, as silently as a shadow, pausing every so often to listen.

After a while he caught a glimpse of the drive through the bushes, and suddenly paused as he caught sight of a figure standing in the drive. He immediately recognized the thin, tall figure of Yevski who was motionless as if he were listening.

Corridon waited, controlling his breathing, the poker gripped tightly in his right hand.

Yevski began to move towards him. Corridon stayed where he was, knowing he was invisible against the black clump of bushes, but sure the slightest movement on his part would attract Yevski's attention.

Yevski paused when he was within three or four yards of Corridon. He stood listening.

"Who's that?" he barked suddenly, and Corridon felt the hair on the nape of his neck bristle. "I know you're there," Yevski went on, his voice a vicious snarl. "Come on out or I'll shoot."

Still Corridon made no move. After waiting a moment or so Yevski stepped back onto the drive.

"What's up?" a voice called, and a shadowy figure joined Yevski.

"Thought I heard something in the bushes," Yevski said. "I can't see anyone. Got a torch? My battery's run out."

The other man said, "You probably heard a rabbit. The place is swarming with them. Come on, the tea's ready."

Yevski hesitated, then turned away. The two men walked into the darkness.

Corridon drew in a deep breath and wiped his face with his handkerchief. He waited a few minutes, then went on, this time moving more slowly and taking care to make no noise.

It wasn't long before he saw ahead of him the electrified fence Homer had told him about. He examined it, keeping well away from it. It was ten feet high, and by the thickness of the wire cable he guessed it carried a lethal voltage. He looked around for a likely tree, and after walking some distance along the side of the fence he came upon a high fir tree. This he decided would suit his purpose. To the average man such a tree would be impossible to climb, but Corridon could climb the side of a house. It took him some time to haul himself up the slim swaying trunk. Once he was above the fence, he

wrapped his arms and legs round the tree and began to rock himself backwards and forwards. Soon the tree was swaying violently, and he watched his opportunity. Then suddenly on the outward swing he flung himself backwards, clearing the fence and dropping in a judo fall, first on his heels, then on his back, his arms breaking his fall. He got to his feet and ran to the eight-foot-wall that surrounded the grounds. This took him only a moment to scale and he dropped into a ditch, running alongside the road.

Before stepping onto the road, he looked to right and left. He saw no one, and he cautiously left the ditch and set off towards the telephone booth. He hadn't been walking for more than a few seconds when he heard a girl's voice say, "Spring-time in Paris," out of the darkness, and he came to an abrupt halt.

"Who's that?" he said sharply.

"Hello, Martin. I was wondering if it could possibly be you," and Marian Howard appeared at his side.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Corridon said. "Where did you spring from?"

"I have a cottage down the road. We've been watching for you ever since we found the place. Are you all right?"

"Fine." Corridon grinned at her. It was too dark to see her face, and he suddenly wanted to look at her. "I was about to phone Ritchie."

"Come to the cottage," she said. "We can talk there."

He fell into step beside her and they walked briskly down the road.

"I can't stay long," he said. "I'm taking a hell of a risk coming out like this, but my gun was stolen. I've got to have another. Have you one?"

"Oh, yes. I'll be able to fix you up." She pushed open a wooden gate and led him up a flag path to a thatched-roof cottage.

"How in the world did you get hold of this?" Corridon asked, as she opened the front door and led him into a small, comfortably furnished lounge. He was glad to see a bright fire burning, and a bottle of whisky, a syphon of soda water and glasses on a small table by an armchair.

"My uncle got it," Marian said, closing the door and shooting the bolt. She turned on the lights and Corridon looked at her. He thought she was looking even more lovely than the last time he had seen her, and he noticed her eyes were bright and her smile warm as she looked at him. "You know what he is. As soon as we were sure we had found you, he scouted around and found this cottage. I don't know how he got the owner out, but he did. I've been here for

the past two nights. Rawlins comes down sometimes. He'll be on duty tomorrow night."

"Your uncle thinks of everything," Corridon said, and sat down before the fire. "Can I pinch some whisky or is it for Rawlins?"

"Help yourself." She lifted a saucepan, warming on a trivet by the fire and poured herself a cup of coffee. "Is it really going all right?"

"So far, but it'll be tricky. Three more days, and the balloon'll go up. I wish Ritchie would get someone to take his place. He could get hurt."

"But then so could his substitute," Marian said, looking at him seriously. "You know he wouldn't stand for that. Besides, he says it'll be all right with you to cover him."

Corridon shrugged.

"His faith in me is touching. Well, all right, so long as you can give me a gun. I was getting in a bit of a spin when I found mine gone. Without a gun I should have been helpless. These two can shoot."

Marian's face paled as she said, "But suppose they take it into their heads to search you before you leave? If they found the gun on you..."

"That's right," Corridon said. "I hadn't thought of that. They might easily do that." He thought for a moment. "Leave the gun in the telephone box for me. That's the safest way. We shall arrive at ten minutes to ten. Get a clip screwed on underneath the directory stand and clip the gun to it five minutes before we're due to arrive. Will you fix that?"

"Of course. I'll tell uncle."

"And now I'd better get back. There's nothing new to report. Thursday at ten. Warn Ritchie the police must concentrate on Kara. She really can drive, and if she gets away, I'm sunk. MacAdams and Chicho won't be difficult to handle, but Kara is something special. They're not to slip up on her!"

"I'll tell him."

"Well, it's nice to have seen you again," Corridon said, and got to his feet, "but Ritchie is acting the goat to let you come here. Doesn't he know these people are dangerous?"

She smiled.

"I persuaded him. At times I can be as obstinate as he is. I wanted to help." She put her hand on his arm. "And if you are in a fix, flash a torch from your window. I or Rawlins patrol the road every night, and both of us can read Morse. You will, won't you?"

“You bet. Well, now I’ll have to find some way to get over that damned fence.”

“It’s all right. We’ve taken care of that. As soon as we spotted it, we arranged to have the electricity cut off every night in case you wanted to get out.”

“And to think I climbed a tree just now. Was that Ritchie again?”

She nodded.

“He certainly thinks of everything,” Corridon said, looked down at her and wondered if he should kiss her. The serious, lovely eyes decided him not to. He contented himself with patting her arm, then with a cheerful grin, he opened the front door and walked briskly down the path to the gate.

chapter twenty five

As Corridon slipped through the wires of the fence, a long, dark shape came at him like the bullet from a gun. He had only time to flash up his arm, protected by the knotted towel as an Alsatian dog was upon him. The weight of the dog's spring bowled Corridon over, and he fell on his back with the dog, silent and frightening in its purpose standing over him.

Snarling, the brute snapped at his throat, but Corridon parried the attack with his bandaged arm, and then he kicked the dog in the chest, sending it away from him. Before he could even get to his knees, the dog was on him again, its teeth narrowly missing his shoulder. Squirming around and kicking viciously, Corridon made himself as difficult a target as possible. He was trying to get into a position where he could hit the dog with the poker, but the animal moved so quickly it was all Corridon could do to block the snapping teeth.

For a moment or so there was a flurry. Corridon expected to feel the dog's teeth sink into his flesh at any second, but he kept kicking and thrusting his bandaged arm at the dog, upsetting its concentration and flustering it.

The dog suddenly jumped away and crouched. Corridon, breathing hard, struggled to his feet. Instantly the dog launched itself at him, in a swift, twisting spring. Corridon ducked and as the animal's long body went over his bowed shoulders he struck upwards with the poker. The dog gave a yelp and fell over on its side. Jumping forward, Corridon stunned it with a blow on its head.

He turned and darted away towards the house. His one thought now was to get back to his room as quickly as he could and before he encountered any more of the dogs. Keeping under cover as much as possible, he passed through the rhododendron grove not pausing until he reached the edge of the big lawn which he had to cross before he could reach the house.

He peered into the darkness, listening, but heard nothing. Gripping the poker, every sense alert, he moved out into the open and began to cross the lawn. Half way across he suddenly saw a red glow of a cigarette end away to his left, and he dropped on hands and knees. It was too dark to see the guard as he patrolled past the front of the house, but Corridon was able to plot his

progress by the cigarette end. One of the dogs with the guard whined suddenly and the guard swore at it. The dog barked.

“Shut up!” Corridon heard the guard growl. “Come to heel!”

Again the dog barked and Corridon could hear the guard lash the dog as it struggled against its lead. The dog gave a yelp of pain.

A voice said out of the darkness.

“What’s the matter with it?”

“After rabbits I guess,” the guard said angrily. “Stop it, you brute!”

“Better let it loose,” his companion said. “Someone might have got in.”

“Don’t talk wet. No one can get in. If I let it go, I’ll never get it back again.” There came the sound of lash thumping on the dog’s back and the dog yelped again. “Now, stop it!”

The two guards moved on, and Corridon drew in a deep breath. As soon as the glowing end of the cigarette disappeared he got to his feet and sprinted across the lawn.

Somewhere behind him he heard a dog barking, and guessed the dog he had stunned had recovered. By now he had reached the stack-pipe leading to his window. He stepped carefully across the flower-bed, got a grip on the pipe and began the hazardous climb.

More dogs began to bark. He heard running footfalls along the gravel drive. Silently, sweat on his face, he continued up the pipe, pulling himself up soundlessly.

“Something’s up,” he heard one of the guards shout. “Let the dog loose, Jack!”

Corridon’s hand reached out and caught the sill of his window. He pulled himself in, as a loud, clanging bell began to ring somewhere in the house.

He began tearing off his clothes. Outside he could hear confused shouting, and suddenly the grounds were lit up by two powerful searchlights. Hastily he scrambled into his pyjamas, hung his clothes in the cupboard, then went to the door, removed the chair and opened it.

Standing in her doorway, looking across at him was Kara. She gave him a sneering little smile.

“Just managed to get back in time, didn’t you?” she said. Her mouth was swollen and bruised, and her eyes glittered.

“Been dreaming?” Corridon said casually. “You’d better go back to bed before someone blacks your eye.”

Her face paled, and her lips came off her teeth. She looked like a snarling cat.

“All right, Mr. Corridon,” she said. “I can wait. Before very long I’m going to get even with you.” She turned and slammed her bedroom door.

Corridon grimaced. As he moved back into his room, Ames appeared at the end of the corridor.

“What are you doing?” he exclaimed, hurrying towards him. “Have you been out?”

“Out?” Corridon repeated blankly. “Why should I go out?”

Ames made an impatient gesture.

“Someone’s been in the grounds.” His hard eyes searched Corridon’s face. “One of the dogs has been hurt.”

“Anything I can so?”

Ames shook his head.

“No, the guards can take care of it. Get back to bed. When the alarm bell rings no one is allowed out of their rooms.”

As Corridon moved back into his room, Ames said. “What did Kara want?”

“She also thought I was out.” Corridon said and grinned. “I wonder what gave her that idea.”

Ames looked at him suspiciously, and still smiling, Corridon shut the door gently in his face.

chapter twenty six

Well, this is it, Corridon thought as he walked down the stairs to the hall. No backing out now.

Although he had rehearsed MacAdams and Chicho again and again until they went through their routine like robots, he knew there was still the possibility that one of them would do something unexpected that might cost Ritchie his life. And now the operation was about to begin, Corridon wished he hadn't undertaken the job. In spite of Ritchie's dictatorial ways, Corridon was fond of him. He was confident Ritchie could take care of MacAdams, but he wasn't at all sure if he, himself, could take care of Chicho.

In the hall Homer, Ames, Kara, MacAdams, and Chico were waiting for him.

"All set?" Ames asked as Corridon joined them.

"Yes," Corridon said, his face expressionless. "There's just one point. If we run into trouble, we may have to take a roundabout route to Marble Arch gate. You'll be there at ten-thirty. I want you to wait half an hour. If none of us arrive by then, will you drive round the park and return at half-past eleven? Wait until midnight. If none of us show up by then you'll know we're not going to show up. All right?"

Ames nodded.

"Then I think I've covered everything," Corridon said. "I'm ready, if you three are."

He was conscious of Kara's eyes on his face, but he avoided looking at her. He turned to Chicho.

"You sit with Kara. MacAdams and I will sit at the back."

While Kara and Chicho were getting into the car, Corridon said to Homer, "Keep your fingers crossed. They've been well drilled. I can't think of anything that can possibly go wrong."

Homer flashed his yellow teeth.

"You've done well. Good luck and safe return." He offered his fat, moist hand. As Corridon shook it, Homer went on, "There's just one little thing before you go. It's been suggested you are carrying a gun. We feel that isn't necessary. Would you please give it to me?"

Corridon grinned at him, blessing Marian for foreseeing just this situation.

"But I haven't a gun," he said and held up his arms. "Go ahead and see for yourself."

With a slightly apologetic expression on his face, Ames stepped forward and ran his hands expertly over Corridon's clothes. Then he stepped back, shaking his head.

"I told you she was making mischief," he growled to Homer.

"Dear Kara again?" Corridon said and laughed. "Never mind, at least she's a tryer."

"I'll have a talk with her when she comes back," Ames said, a snarl in his voice. "It's time she had a lesson." He slapped Corridon on his shoulder. "Well, you get off. I'll be at Marble Arch gate at ten-thirty. Good hunting."

Corridon got into the car beside MacAdams.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," he said. "Someone was under the mistaken impression I was carrying a gun."

Kara didn't look at him, but her face darkened. She engaged gear and shot the car down the drive.

Corridon offered MacAdams a cigarette. As MacAdams lit it, Corridon noticed his hand was very unsteady. In a way he felt sorry for him. It was probable Ritchie would have to kill him. He knew MacAdams hadn't a chance against Ritchie's superior shooting.

"It'll soon be over," he said. "It's going to be a lot worse for Ritchie than you, you know."

MacAdams flushed.

"Well, I hope so," he said, and drew in a quick, hissing breath. "Kara says he can shoot."

"Kara talks too much," Corridon returned. "He was a good shot about ten years ago, but he's getting old now."

"I'll nail him," Chicho said. "Don't worry, Mac. I'll handle him all right. He won't get a chance of pulling a gun."

Corridon was glad it was Chicho he had to tackle. He would take pleasure in putting a slug into him.

"Don't forget, no shooting until I give the signal," he said sharply. "I don't want you fellows getting excited and shooting the wrong man. When I lift the receiver off the phone, you'll know it's Ritchie."

"The way you keep harping on that, you'd think we were deaf," Chicho

snarled.

“Not deaf,” Corridon said with a grin, “just dumb.”

“You won’t always be the boss,” Chicho said viciously. “I look forward to having a little talk with you one of these days.”

“Shut up!” Kara broke in. “Don’t you know he’s Ames’ pet? Do you want to get into trouble?”

Chicho grunted, but lapsed into silence. During the rest of the drive to the White City none of them spoke. Kara drove carefully. There was plenty of time. They reached Shepherd’s Bush at half-past nine.

“We’ll stop in the park and have a final checkup,” Corridon said. “Then we’ll go straight to Stratford Road.”

Ten minutes of slow driving brought them to Knightsbridge Gate, and Corridon told Kara to stop. She pulled up a few yards from the traffic lights. Not once during the drive had she spoken to Corridon or even looked at him. She now lit a cigarette, staring through the windscreen, sullen and scowling.

“Give me your gun,” Corridon said to Chicho.

“What for?” Chicho demanded, twisting around in his seat.

“Your gun!” Corridon barked.

Chico pulled the gun from his shoulder holster, hesitated, then handed it over. It was a Colt .45, and Corridon checked the magazine, satisfied himself it was loaded and handed it back to Chicho. He checked MacAdams’ gun.

“All right,” he said, “you know what to do. As soon as he falls, Chicho is to go to him and shoot him through the head. Mac and I will run for the car. You, Chicho, follow as fast as you can, and away we go. Any questions?”

“For Pete’s sake, let’s get on with it,” Chicho snarled.

“If we run into the police,” MacAdams said, “I suppose we shoot our way out?”

“Only if you’re cornered,” Corridon said. “It’s asking for trouble to shoot a copper. If you have to shoot, wing him. If you kill him, it’s your funeral.”

“Well, no copper’s going to stop me,” Chicho said.

“Okay, Kara,” Corridon said. “Stratford Road now.”

Without looking at him, she started the engine and drove into Knightsbridge Road. A few minutes to a quarter to ten she pulled up at the corner of Stratford Road.

“I’ll go first,” Corridon said. “As soon as I’m inside the phone box, you come on, Mac. Then Chicho follows you. Keep your engine running, Kara.”

None of them said anything. Corridon got out of the car.

“Well, good hunting,” he said, and walked on down the road to the telephone box. He opened the door, entered, and with his back to the car, he put his hand under the shelf supporting the directories. He found the gun, jerked it from its clip and examined it. It was a Smith & Wesson .38 revolver; a nice weapon that balanced well in his hand. He checked to see it was loaded, slipped off the safety catch and dropped it into his pocket. Then he half-turned to look down the road. MacAdams was out of the car, and moving towards him. As he passed, Corridon saw his face was pale and tense. He went on, passing Ritchie’s house, and a few yards farther up the road, he paused under a tree.

A minute or so later, Chicho came down the road, walking like a cat, his round, pasty face set and his hard little eyes glittering. He took his position behind the pillar-box.

Corridon hoped no one would come out of any of the houses until the shooting was over. It was unlikely at this time for anyone to be about, but if someone did appear, his carefully arranged plan might easily be upset.

He glanced at his wrist-watch. Up to now the operation had gone to time. The minute hand was creeping up to ten o’clock. He glanced over his shoulder. He could make out the dim outline of the Buick, standing a hundred yards or so down the road, and wondered what Kara was doing. He hoped she was obeying orders and remaining in the car. He also wondered where the police cars were. They had the hardest job, he thought. Trying to stop Kara wasn’t going to be easy. He doubted if the police realized just what they were up against.

He looked across the road at Chicho who was now crouching behind the pillar-box. Corridon had a good view of his narrow back and head. He slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out the gun. In another minute Ritchie should appear. Gently he eased open the telephone box door. He looked over at MacAdams who half raised his hand, indicating he could see him and was ready. Corridon waved to him.

They waited. The minutes crawled by, and Corridon’s heart began to hammer against his ribs. He wondered how Ritchie was feeling, and thought a little sourly he was certain to be cool and unmoved. Corridon had never known him to get rattled, and they had been in many tight corners during the time they had worked together.

A taxi swung into Stratford Road from the Kensington Road end. It came down the road, past MacAdams, slowed down as it reached the pillar-box behind which Chicho was hiding. He hurriedly stood up when he saw its headlights.

Corridon cursed the taxi under his breath. He looked anxiously at Ritchie's house, but there was no sign of him. He guessed Ritchie had also seen the taxi and was waiting for it to go before he showed himself.

The taxi stopped a few yards from Chicho, and a girl got out. She paid the driver and walked across the pavement to a house nearby. Something about her walk made Corridon stiffen. He looked again: the girl was Marian Howard. As she ran up the steps to the house and opened the front door, Corridon heard the click of a gate latch. He looked quickly towards Ritchie's house, aware that the taxi was moving off towards the parked Buick. Then he realized this was part of Ritchie's plan of defence. The taxi was to block Kara's escape. Probably there were police officers crouching on the floor of the taxi, but Corridon had no time mentally to pat Ritchie on the back.

Ritchie had just come out of his house. He was wearing a light overcoat and a slouch hat, and his hands were deep in his coat pockets.

Chicho had dodged behind the pillar-box again, and Corridon saw he had drawn his gun. He didn't trust Chicho to wait for his signal. Ritchie was looking towards MacAdams who was staring at Corridon, waiting for him to lift the telephone receiver.

Chicho had raised his gun and was aiming at Ritchie. Corridon levelled the .38 and fired at Chicho whose gun went off as he pitched forward on his face. He rolled over, dropped the gun, tried to crawl towards it, then stiffened out in the road.

Two shots rang out as MacAdams and Ritchie fired at each other. Ritchie's shot was a shade ahead of MacAdams.' Corridon saw MacAdams drop his gun and clutch at his arm.

Ritchie ran over to him as MacAdams fell on his knees. Ritchie hit him with his gun-butt on his head, driving him flat.

All this happened in a few seconds. As Ritchie was crossing the road to MacAdams, Chicho struggled up and grabbed at his gun. Corridon shot him again, this time aiming at his head. Chicho flopped to the ground, rolled over and lay still.

Then, as Corridon pushed open the door of the telephone box, there came

another crack of a gun, and a bullet grazed the side of his face, making him reel, and smashing a pane of glass in the booth. He dropped on hands and knees as another shot crashed out.

Looking through the glass he saw Kara standing in the road by the Buick, gun in hand. She swung the gun round and fired at Ritchie as he was bending over MacAdams. Corridon was horrified to see Ritchie stagger, drop his gun and collapse in the road.

Corridon came out of the booth, crouching low. As he raised his gun to fire at Kara, she fired first, and his hat flew off his head. Then the taxi door burst open and two men bundled out and ran towards her.

“Look out, you fools!” Corridon yelled. “Block the way!”

But it was too late. Firing from the hip, she brought both men down and jumped back into the Buick. The taxi-driver tried to swerve in front of her, but she was already on the move, and he missed the Buick by yards.

Corridon levelled his gun and fired. The rear window of the Buick smashed, but before he could fire again, it had turned the corner and was out of sight.

He looked back over his shoulder to see Marian come running down the steps of the house she had entered, followed by two plain-clothes detectives. She went to Ritchie, and Corridon was relieved to see Ritchie was on his feet again, holding his shoulder.

As Corridon made a move to join him, a police car whipped down the road and pulled up beside him.

“Hop in,” Rawlins said, opening the door. “We’ll catch her all right.”

Corridon scrambled into the car which drove off, taking the corner with a screech of tortured tyres.

“Catch her – hell!” he said furiously. “I warned Ritchie to watch her, and you let her get away.”

“Don’t get excited,” Rawlins said, his round, red face alight with a beaming smile. “She can’t get far. Every road’s blocked.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” Corridon said, holding his aching face in his hand. Blood trickled between his fingers. “She’ll be as difficult to stop as an express train.”

The police car turned into Kensington Road. There was a policeman standing on the corner. He waved to the right, and the driver of the police car went in the direction he indicated.

“We’ve men posted all along the route,” Rawlins said. “Hundreds of coppers at great public expense. Just relax, old boy. We’ll have her in a minute or so.”

“I hope you’re right,” Corridon said. He mopped his face with his handkerchief. “She’s spoilt my beauty – blast her!”

“Got to take the rough with the smooth, old boy,” Rawlins said. “Another quarter of an inch and you’d be with your ancestors.”

“Can’t this driver of yours go faster?” Corridon demanded.

This was unfair for the car was whipping down Knightsbridge Road at seventy miles an hour. A flashlight flickered on and off at the corner of Sloane Street, and the driver, cramming on his brakes, swung the car around the corner.

“All organized,” Rawlins said smugly. “I told you not to get excited. She can’t get away.”

“When she’s behind bars, I’ll believe you,” Corridon growled. “And not before.”

“The trouble with you,” Rawlins said, “is you’re a cynic.”

“There she goes, sir!” the driver said suddenly and snapped on his headlights.

chapter twenty seven

The two long beams of light centred on the back of the Buick as it swept down Sloane Street.

"Take it easy," Rawlins said to the driver. "There's going to be a smash."

"Not with her driving," Corridon said sourly, and poked his head out of the window for a better view. He could see two police cars broadside on, blocking the road. The Buick showed no signs of slowing down. Kara had also turned on her headlights. Corridon could see four policemen with flashlights, signalling her to stop. They stood before their cars, confident she would stop, and Corridon wanted to yell to them to get out of the way, but he knew they wouldn't hear him before it was too late.

The Buick swept down on them with the ruthlessness of a Juggernaut. When it was almost on them, it swerved, crashed up on the pavement and went through the gap like a streak of lightning.

"Didn't I warn you she could drive?" Corridon said in disgust and flopped back into his seat.

The driver pulled up with a screech of tyres.

"Go on! Go on!" Rawlins bawled, losing his calm. "Get on after her!"

"A fat chance you've got of catching her now," Corridon said as the police driver mounted the kerb, and edged past the rear end of the car blocking the road. Once clear, he increased his speed, but there was no sign of the Buick.

"Well, yes, she certainly can drive," Rawlins said, shaking a cigarette out of a crumpled packet. "But she still won't get away. I have this district sewn up tighter than Paddy O'Brien on a Saturday night."

"If it's as tight as that last barricade of yours, she'll thrive on it," Corridon said and helped himself from Rawlins' packet. As he lit the cigarette, he saw more lights flashing as policemen from the kerb signalled which way the Buick had gone.

"She's doubling back to the park," Rawlins said as they swung into King's Road. "Well, she can twist and turn all she likes, but she won't get away."

"I wished I shared your fatheaded confidence," Corridon said. "I wouldn't mind betting she does get away."

"I'll have a bob on that, old boy," Rawlins said breezily. "But if she's

going to go on driving like that, she'll kill herself."

"She'll take a few with her," Corridon said uneasily. "She's worse than any of them." He went on, "I hope Ritchie isn't badly hurt."

"Got him in the shoulder," Rawlins said. "To judge by his language, he's all right. Do him good to have a bit of a rest." He broke off as another flashlight flickered at the corner of Sydney Street. "Didn't I tell you?" he went on, beaming as the police car swung into the dark, narrow street. "She's doubling back to the park. We have a nice little trap for her in the Fulham Road."

"I hope it won't be as big a flop as the last one," Corridon said.

"Buick ahead, sir," the driver reported, and again flashed on his headlights.

The Buick was moving at a slower rate now, but as soon as the headlights of the police car hit it, it accelerated, taking the corner into Fulham Road at high speed.

The police car followed, and the two cars raced towards Brompton Road. Suddenly another police car appeared from a turning far ahead and drove straight at the Buick.

"Ramming tactics," Rawlins said, leaning forward. "That's Hillary at the wheel. No better man..."

He broke off with an oath as the Buick swerved. The police car, anticipating the move, also swerved. There was a grinding crash, and the police car rocked violently as the side of the Buick caught it a glancing blow. The Buick fled on, but the police car slewed across the road and thudded against a lamp standard.

"Just a title nudge," Corridon said sarcastically. "You want to employ a heavy-weight against a car that size."

Rawlins had lost his smile.

"I've only two more cars to block her off," he said, suddenly uneasy. "If they can't hold her..."

"You'll lose your bob."

Rawlins leaned over to the driver.

"We'll have a go now, Jack. See if you can draw level and force her to the kerb."

"This should be fun," Corridon said. "You wouldn't care to stop and let me out before you kill yourself?"

"You dry up," Rawlins said, now out of humour. "I gave Ritchie my word

she wouldn't get away."

The police car surged forward, but fast as it went, it couldn't pull level with the Buick that fled on at over eighty miles an hour. The two cars stormed up Brompton Road and into Knightsbridge Road.

"She's got the legs of you," Corridors said. "Better hang on and hope she makes a mistake."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when suddenly from out of a concealed turning a lorry loaded with bricks swept into the main road. Probably the driver was in a hurry and didn't anticipate or didn't care that there'd be traffic at this hour of the night. He shot into the main road, right in the path of the Buick.

"Well, she's had it now!" Corridon gasped as the police driver slammed on his brakes.

The Buick swerved across the road, the tyres screeching, the off-wheels lifting. Corridon caught a glimpse of Kara fighting the wheel. The nose of the lorry caught the back bumpers of the Buick and threw it sideways. For a second Corridon thought the Buick was going over, but somehow Kara managed to right it. But it was moving at too great a speed to be entirely controlled. It mounted the pavement. He saw her pulling frantically on the wheel to correct the skid, then broadside on the car slammed into a plate-glass window of one of the big stores in Knightsbridge, cut its way through the wax dummies decorating the window, slammed through the wooden partition at back of the window and rammed its way into the department.

By this time the police car had stopped and both Rawlins and Corridon scrambled out.

"Get every available man on the job," Rawlins told the driver. "I want this place surrounded. Jump to it!" He began running towards the wrecked window. Corridon joined him.

"Have you got a gun?" he asked as they approached the gaping black hole that was, but a moment before, an elegantly-dressed window.

"No. Have you?"

"You bet I have. I'll go first. This woman's dangerous."

"Nonsense," Rawlins said cheerfully. "We don't want any shooting..."

As he spoke there came a crack of a revolver and a bullet skimmed past his face, raising a blue weal on his cheek.

"You may not want it," Corridon said, "but you're damn well going to get

it.”

Rawlins swerved to one side and dashed forward into the vast, dark hall of the department. He took cover behind one of the counters.

Corridon joined him

“Now then, young woman,” Rawlins shouted into the darkness, “this won’t get you anywhere. Better give yourself up. We don’t want to hurt you.”

Corridon grinned.

“Save your breath. If you get within her reach it’ll be you who’ll get hurt,” he said. “She’s as strong as a horse.”

“We’ll see about that,” Rawlins said, and began to move along the length of the counter.

Corridon let him go. He knew how dangerous Kara would be once she was cornered, and he wasn’t taking any risks. Gun in hand, he looked into the gloom, faintly lit by the distant street lights. He thought he saw a movement near the wrecked Buick. His hand groped along the top of the counter until his fingers closed on a glass jar. He picked it up and heaved it towards the shadowy figure he half imagined was crouching near the Buick. He heard a gasp, then a flash of gunfire greeted the arrival of the jar, and a bullet zipped unpleasantly close to his head. He caught a glimpse of Kara as she broke cover and sprinted down the long aisle, lined on either side by glass-topped counters.

“There she goes!” he shouted to Rawlins, and leaving his hiding place, he went after her.

At the end of the aisle she whirled round and took a snap shot at him, but he was ready for that move. As she turned, he dropped on hands and knees, and fired at her before she could alter aim. She swerved and made a dive round the corner and pelted down yet another aisle.

“Don’t hurt her!” Rawlins shouted as he came thundering down the aisle after Corridon.

Corridon didn’t wait for him but continued the chase. He saw her run into another vest hall that appeared to be full of shadowy figures. He paused at the entrance and peered into the dim darkness. The figures he could see were dummies, displaying women’s dresser, and he realized at once the danger of going in there where any of the figures could be Kara. He edged back and waited for Rawlins to join him.

Rawlins came up, breathing heavily.

“She’s in there somewhere,” Corridon whispered. “Better not go in. Without a light she could pick us off like sitting rabbits.”

Rawlins looked into the department and grimaced.

“My men must be in position by now. She can’t get away. I’ll get the light turned on.”

“I wish you wouldn’t be so damned cocky,” Corridon said. “You keep telling me she won’t get away, but you haven’t caught her yet.”

“And she hasn’t got away yet,” Rawlins said. “Wait here and keep an eye on her. I’ll get the lights on.”

He went away, moving with surprising speed for a man of his bulk. Corridon peered into the department. Nothing moved and he heard no sound. It was an eerie experience to look into this dim, vast hall, peopled by shadowy figures, and not to know which of them was Kara. He knew as soon as the lights went on she would try to shoot her way clear. She would be as vicious and as dangerous as a trapped vixen. If he could only catch her before the lights went on, he might save a number of lives.

He studied the room. To his right was an aisle, leading away into darkness. To his left was a raised dais on which stood a number of dummies. In front of him was an open space, and then another dais displaying more dummies. She could be anywhere, he thought.

He decided to take the risk, and began to move slowly and silently into the hall.

Once clear of the entrance, he paused, his heart banging against his ribs with excitement. Somewhere in the store he could hear the faint sound of voices, and now and then a distant shout. He guessed the police were searching for the main switches. Time was running out. He took two more cautious steps forward, then paused once again to listen. Suddenly he heard a sound behind him, but before he could turn, cold fingers gripped the back of his neck and a hard knee was driven into his spine. He stumbled forward, dropping his gun. A solid weight drove him to the floor, and fingers like steel dug into his throat.

chapter twenty eight

Corridon heaved himself up on his knees with Kara clinging to him, her fingers squeezing into his flesh, throttling him. He reached up, groping for her head, but she leaned away, snarling like a wild cat, and increased the pressure. He knew in a moment or so he would black-out, and then he would be at her mercy. He threw himself backwards, going limp at the same time. His massive weight was too much for Kara to hold and as they crashed to the floor together, her fingers were wrenched from his throat. He squirmed round as she rolled clear of him, and as she got to her feet, his legs shot out, imprisoning one of hers. He exerted pressure, swung sideways and brought her down on top of him. She clubbed him with her fists about the head, hitting like a sledge-hammer. He threw her off, but she was on her feet before he could get to his knees. Her foot shot out, and the toe of her shoe caught him on the side of his head, stunning him. Not knowing what he was doing, he rolled towards her, smothering a second kick. His arms groped for her legs, grabbed them and brought her down on top of him again. Again she clubbed him about the head, but this time he managed to catch her with a swing right-hand punch that sent her away from him.

The lights suddenly went on. Both scrambled to their feet. Her hand went to her hip-pocket as Corridon launched himself at her. She had her gun out as they went down in a kicking, struggling heap to the floor again. He tried to catch her wrist, but the gun came down on top of his head, knocking him silly. His hands slid off her as Rawlins and a constable came rushing in.

Kara rolled clear, swung up the gun and fired at the constable as he blundered towards her. He fell sideways, upsetting Rawlins, bringing him down on his hands and knees.

Kara was on her feet now, and as Rawlins scrambled up, expecting a bullet to smash into him, but not hesitating, he saw her dart away down the long aisle that led to yet another vast hall.

Corridon got up slowly, shaking his head, still dazed. Rawlins was bending over the constable. Corridon didn't wait. He set off, staggering slightly after Kara, and was in time to see her make a dart for a staircase. He arrived at the foot of the stairs as she reached the first landing. He went after her. When she

was halfway up the stairs, she suddenly paused, leaned over the banisters and fired at him. But she was breathless and too hasty and the bullet went wide. Corridon levelled his gun, but she pulled back and continued up the stairs before he could get a shot at her. He went on after her.

Rawlins, followed by three flat-capped policemen, came pounding up behind him. They reached the landing as Corridon was halfway up the second flight of stairs.

When Kara reached the fourth floor, she again paused to lean over the banisters, but this time Corridon was ready for her, and he got in the first shot. But he was too breathless and unsteady to aim straight and she jerked back out of sight and he heard her continuing up to the fifth floor. Panting, he followed, and by putting on a burst of speed he was in time to see her pull open a swing door and disappear into the furniture department.

He reached the door and paused to look into the brilliantly lit department. This was even more dangerous, for here she had unlimited cover. Wardrobes, chests of drawers, tall, heavy sideboards obscured his view. She had stopped running and taken cover. He made no attempt to enter the department, knowing she could pick him off the moment she caught sight of him. He waited for Rawlins and the three policemen to join him.

A few seconds later they came panting up the stairs.

“Don’t go blundering in there,” Corridon said. “She’ll have the door covered.”

Rawlins took out his handkerchief and mopped his streaming face. The run up the five flights of stairs had completely winded him.

“There’s no exit to this department,” a police sergeant said. “I’ve had a look at the plan of the building.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Corridon said, and grinned. “But if she can’t get out, we can’t get in. What are you going to do?”

“Hang on a moment while I get my breath,” Rawlins panted.

“Playing hide-and-seek amongst all that furniture won’t be much fun,” Corridon said, edging once more to the swing doors and peering cautiously into the hall. “We’d better turn the lights off again or we won’t even get past the door.”

Rawlins nodded.

“Jackson, you go down to the switches. Get the lights off, then wait three minutes and turn them on again,” he said, still struggling to get his breath.

“I’m scared she’ll find a phone in there and warn Homer,” Corridon said as one of the policemen ran off down the stairs. “There’s certain to be a phone somewhere in the department.”

“I thought of that,” Rawlins said, continuing to mop his face. “I have a man on the switchboard. Unless there’s a phone in there with an outside line, she won’t get a call through.”

They listened to Jackson pounding down flight after flight of stairs.

“I wish he’d buck up,” Corridon said, and again peered cautiously through the glass doors. “By the way, any news of Ritchie?”

“He’s all right, sir,” the sergeant said. “Just a flesh wound. The fellow in the spectacles has a broken arm, but the young bloke’s dead.”

Corridon grunted. He glanced at his wrist-watch. It was ten minutes to eleven. He had over an hour before he kept his rendezvous with Ames.

The lights suddenly went out.

“Right,” Rawlins said. “Careful how you go. Once in, spread out and take cover.”

While he was speaking, Corridon pushed open the door, and crouching, moved quickly into the darkness. He made for a heavy oak chest he had spotted before the light went out, and reaching it, he knelt behind it waiting for the lights to go on again. He heard the police taking up their positions. The minutes dragged by; then up went the lights.

Corridon peered cautiously around the chest, spotted Rawlins standing behind a wardrobe also peering at the forest of furniture. There was no sign of Kara, nor any suspicious movement.

They waited, knowing that as soon as they showed themselves she would shoot. It was a nervy situation, but Rawlins wasn’t going to remain doing nothing for long. He moved out from behind his cover and made a swift dart to a sideboard behind which he sheltered.

“Hey, you!” he called. “You’d better give up! You can’t get away.”

Corridon grinned. Rawlins didn’t know Kara. Corridon knew she wouldn’t give up. Crouching, he moved out into the aisle, his gun thrust forward. Halfway down the long aisle he spotted a movement and flung himself sideways behind a chest of drawers as Kara’s gun cracked. She nearly got him. The bullet knicked the heel of his shoe.

He remained under cover as he caught a glimpse of the police sergeant, his face set, working his way cautiously from one piece of furniture to another

along the wall, making for the end of the room. Another policeman was moving in the same direction on the opposite side. Slowly and cautiously they were drawing the net tighter.

There was a sudden shout and Corridon jumped up to see Kara out in the open, sprinting the length of the aisle. He jerked up his gun, but Rawlins sprang forward and grabbed his wrist.

"I'm taking her alive," he said, pulling Corridon's arm down.

"You hope," Corridon said, watching Kara as she darted into a room at the end of the aisle. The door slammed, and they heard a bolt shoot home. Across the door in gold letters was the word: Buyer, and beneath, Travellers seen by appointment only.

"You're growing soft," Corridon said, twisting away from Rawlins. "You can bet there's a telephone in there!"

He made a dive for the door and his shoulder crashed against it. Behind the door a gun went off, and a bullet tore through the panel, missing him by inches. He jumped back as the gun banged again.

"Look out!" Rawlins said unnecessarily.

Corridon swung round and ran to a window. Throwing it open, he leaned out. There was a narrow ledge that would afford a precarious foothold to the window of the office Kara was in.

"Hammer on the door to attract her attention," he said to Rawlins. "I'll go this way and see if I can grab her."

"Hey! Wait a minute. I'll do that job," Rawlins said, but Corridon had swung himself through the window onto the ledge. Holding his gun in his right hand and leaning his back against the face of the building, he began to edge along the narrow ledge, aware of the street some hundred feet below. He heard the police rapping on the door with a stick. Four more cautious steps brought him to the window.

Kara was standing at a desk, her back to him, spinning the dial of the telephone. Her gun lay on the desk.

He couldn't bring himself to shoot her down in cold blood, but he knew she had to be stopped at once. He turned sideways, crouched and threw himself against the window pane. With a crash of breaking glass he fell into the room.

Kara dropped the telephone, grabbed at her gun as Corridon kicked her legs from under her. He flung himself on her as Rawlins' heavy shoulder

slammed against the door.

Kara fought like a wild cat, clawing at Corridon's face. He used his weight to overpower her, but it was as much as he could do to pin her to the floor. The door burst open and Rawlins, followed by the policemen came.

They grabbed Kara, pulled Corridon away from her and snapped on handcuffs. As they backed her against the wall, Corridon gently replaced the telephone receiver.

"You dirty traitor," Kara screamed at him, struggling to break the policemen's hold. "I told them you weren't to be trusted!"

"All right." Rawlins said curtly. "Get her out of here."

As they dragged her out, she spat at Corridon, her eyes twin explosions of rage and hatred.

chapter twenty nine

I've got to get moving," Corridon said.

He was standing on the edge of the kerb. The police car taking Kara to the station had just driven away. Rawlins, puffing contentedly at a cigarette, stood by his side.

"Ritchie knows what to do," Corridon went on. "By now the news of his death should be in every newspaper office. I hope they'll make a big splash. It's got to be convincing."

"It will," Rawlins said. "What's your next move?"

"I'm meeting Ames and we'll go back to Baintrees. I'm hoping they'll make me a full member, and with any luck I'll find out who's behind the racket. Once I know that, it'll be simple to put a stop to it."

Rawlins eyed him thoughtfully.

"You don't seem to be getting much out of this," he said. "Not like you. I thought you only worked for big money."

Corridon's face was deceptively innocent.

"I'm patriotic," he said, and closed one eye. "Besides, there might be a bit of money to pick up if I'm lucky."

"Talking about money, you owe me a bob," Rawlins said, and held out a huge, hairy hand.

"Don't spend it all at once," Corridon said, handing over the coin. "Well, I'm off. Keep that Howard girl away from Baintrees. It's dangerous."

Rawlins flicked the shilling into the air and caught it.

"She can look after herself," he said. "She takes after Ritchie."

"So it seems. All the same, don't let her get too enterprising. Give my love to Ritchie."

Corridon moved off into the darkness, leaving a big crowd gaping at the shattered window of the store while police tried vainly to move them on.

The time was half-past eleven. He walked quickly into the park and made his way towards Marble Arch Gate. Reluctantly he had left the Smith and Wesson with Rawlins, knowing if Ames found it on him, it would arouse his suspicions.

As he approached Marble Arch Gate, he kept a lookout for Ames'

Humber. He spotted it, drawn up in the shadows, a few yards from the gate. Ames was standing beside it, a cigarette burning in his fingers. As soon as he caught sight of Corridon, he waved to him and got into the car. Corridon joined him.

“Where are the others?” Ames demanded. His face was set and hard, and Corridon guessed the long wait had tired his nerves.

“Mac and Chicho are either dead or captured,” Corridon said. “I don’t know what’s happened to Kara.”

“And Ritchie?”

“He’s dead.”

Ames swivelled round in his seat to stare at Corridon.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Corridon said curtly. “Chicho shot him through the head.”

“What happened?”

Corridon leaned forward to catch the light from a lamp standard to see his wrist-watch. It was two minutes to midnight.

“We were lucky to get away with it,” he said. “Ritchie had a couple of armed guards. Don’t ask me why. He never had them during the war. Chicho’s first shot killed him. Then the two guards opened up. They got him and Mac. I scooted out of the telephone box. They fired after me, and nearly had me. Kara drove off without waiting for me. I had a hell of a job shaking them off.”

Ames looked at his watch.

“Twelve. Shall we wait any longer?”

Corridon shook his head.

“No. If she’s got away, she’ll be back at Baintrees by now. Let’s go.”

Ames put his hand on Corridon’s knee.

“Gook work,” he said. “You won’t find us ungrateful. From now on, you’re a full member and you can go where you please.”

“Just so long as I collect the second five hundred,” Corridon said carelessly. “Let’s get going. I could do with a drink.”

As Ames drove towards Shepherd’s Bush, Corridon wondered a little uneasily what was happening to Kara.

chapter thirty

Corridon sat in the full glare of Homer's desk lamp. Behind the lamp, half-hidden in the shadows, Homer and Diestl watched him while Ames moved restlessly backwards and forwards at the far end of the room.

"So Kara ran away," Diestl said in a hard, flat voice. "Frankly, I find that difficult to believe."

"I don't," Ames said, coming to a standstill. "These Russians are unreliable. Besides, she hates Corridon."

"What has that to do with it?" Homer asked, looking inquiringly over his shoulder at Ames.

"She saw Corridon was in a tight spot, and she left him to it. What I can't understand is why she hasn't returned."

"Probably the police have her," Corridon said. "It isn't easy to get away in a car. That's why I arranged to leave the Buick in the park. Well, there it is. She didn't obey orders so she must take the consequences."

"And I find it still harder to believe the police caught her," Diestl said. "Isn't it time Fraser phoned?" he went on to Homer.

"He should be through at any moment." Homer glanced at the clock on his desk. "I told him I wanted a full report. He may be having a little trouble in checking up on Kara."

"You two seem disappointed," Corridon said mildly. "I warned you you wouldn't get rid of Ritchie without paying a price."

Diestl lit a cigarette. The flame of the match lit up his thin, hard face.

"But we have only your word that Ritchie is dead."

"What's the matter with you?" Ames asked, coming up to the desk. "If I'm satisfied, you should be, too. It was a very dangerous and difficult job. Corridon has done well."

"If Ritchie is really dead then he has done very well," Diestl said. "But I prefer to wait for confirmation."

Corridon touched his bruised cheek. He had expected them to be suspicious. It didn't bother him. He knew he could rely on Rawlins to spread the rumour of Ritchie's death.

They sat for some minutes in silence, then the telephone bell rang and

Homer picked up the receiver.

“Yes?” He nodded at Diestl. “It’s Fraser,” he said, then went on into the mouthpiece. “Go ahead. I’m ready.”

He sat listening, his face expressionless while Diestl and Ames stood either side of him, and Corridon relaxed in his chair. A lot depended on this report, he thought. At least he seemed to have won Ames over to his side. Diestl was suspicious, Homer a little uncertain, but Ames had accepted Corridon’s story without hesitation, and after all, Ames was the most dangerous of the three.

Homer sat listening for several minutes. From time to time he grunted and leaned forward to scribble on a pad of paper. Finally, he said, “Let me know immediately there is any further news,” and hung up.

“Well?” Diestl asked impatiently. “Is Ritchie dead?”

Homer nodded. There was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

“There’s no doubt about it. Fraser spoke to Rawlins himself. It’ll be in the papers tomorrow.”

Soundlessly Corridon drew in a breath of relief.

“And Kara?” Diestl asked.

“She’s in the hands of the police. Corridon’s story is quite correct. She drove away immediately after the shooting. She was chased, and crashed into a store in Knightsbridge. She’s in Hammersmith police station.”

“And MacAdams?”

“He’s also there. Chicho is dead.”

Diestl grimaced.

“Do you think those two will talk?”

“Kara won’t,” Ames said, “but MacAdams might. I think we should do something about him.”

“But what?” Homer asked. “What can we do?”

Ames smiled.

“He’ll need a solicitor, and solicitors carry briefcases. What could be simpler than to put a bomb in the case that would explode when he opened it? The bomb could be quite small.”

Diestl nodded.

“Yes.” He looked across at Corridon. “Could you make such a bomb?”

“I could, but isn’t it a little unfair on the solicitor?” Corridon said dryly.

“That’s his bad luck,” Ames returned and laughed. “You make the bomb, and I’ll arrange for it to be put in the case.”

“And Kara?” Diestl asked.

“I must think about Kara,” Ames said, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets. “It might be possible to get her out of jail. She is worth making an effort. We have no one to touch her when it comes to driving a car. I think we shall have to do something about her.”

Homer flashed his yellow teeth in Corridon’s direction.

“And now, Mr. Corridon,” he said, “I’m sure you are tired after all your excitement, and would like to go to bed. You’ve done very well. We’re pleased with you. You can consider yourself now a full member of this organization. You are free to go where you like. Arrangements will be made tomorrow to pay you the five hundred pounds we owe you. If you’ll prepare this little booby-trap and let Ames have it, I’ll be obliged. In a few days we’ll have another assignment for you, and you can be sure we shall pay as generously.”

Corridon got to his feet.

“That’s fine,” he said, and grinned at Homer. “I’m ready when you are.”

Homer went on, “Although your movements are now entirely unrestricted so far as we are concerned, you’ll remember the police are still looking for you in connection with Lestrangle’s shooting. You should be careful.”

“Isn’t it time you did something about that?” Corridon said. “If I’m to be useful to you, I must have complete freedom of movement.”

“I don’t see what we can do,” Homer said. “But perhaps Ames has a suggestion.”

“Corridon’s right. If he is to be of real use to us, he must be cleared of the shooting. After all Martha’s served her purpose. I think we can get rid of her. Suicide and a full confession would put Corridon in the clear. I’ll arrange it.”

“You see, Mr. Corridon,” Homer said, smiling, “there’s no problem our friend Ames can’t solve. Until she has been disposed of, perhaps it would be safer for you not to go too far afield.”

“I won’t,” Corridon said.

“The Leader will be informed of your success,” Homer said. “No doubt he’ll wish to meet you and talk to you himself. It’s possible he’ll be visiting us tomorrow. I’ll ask him if he wishes to see you.”

Corridon kept his face expressionless.

“That’s up to him. Well, I’ll turn in.”

As he moved to the door, the lights in the room flickered, went out, and

then came on again.

“There’s someone in the grounds!” Ames said, jumping for the door.

“What are the guards doing?” Homer said, his face turning a blotchy white. He got hurriedly to his feet. “How can anyone get past the fence?”

Ames didn’t bother to answer him, but grasping Corridon’s arm, pushed him down the corridor to the hall.

“That’s the signal,” he explained, opening the front door. “Someone’s passed through the ray zone. You take the right-hand path, I’ll go left. Here, have this,” and he pushed a small automatic into Corridon’s hand. “Don’t use it unless you have to. I want whoever this is alive.”

“How about the dogs?” Corridon asked, not anxious to repeat the encounter.

“Never mind about them,” Ames said impatiently. “They’ll be with the guards. Go on, get off.”

He ran off down the path away from the house, and Corridon, after a quick look to right and left, set off along the path in the opposite direction.

Who could it be? he wondered as he moved silently into the darkness, his ears cocked and his eyes searching the deep shadows. He had warned Rawlins to keep away. It was possible, of course, one of the prisoners had escaped from the house.

As he neared the rhododendron grove, he moved off the path and crossed the lawn. Away to his left he heard dogs barking and he grimaced. He hoped the guards knew he and Ames were in the grounds and wouldn’t release the dogs.

He picked his way silently through the giant shrubs. Suddenly he paused to listen. He thought he heard a sound a little ahead of him. As he paused, a shadowy figure darted to cover.

“Hold it or I shoot!” he exclaimed.

“Martin!”

He stiffened. The shock of hearing her voice was like a blow in the face.

“Marian!”

She appeared before him and caught hold of his arm.

“You little fool!” he said softly. “They know you’re here, and they’re looking for you. You’ve got to get out at once!”

“Listen, Martin,” she said, shaking his arm. “I had to come. Kara’s escaped. I came to warn you. She may turn up here at any moment.”

chapter thirty one

Before he had time to realize the significance of what she was telling him, he heard someone running towards them.

“Run for it!” he whispered, but before she could move Ames burst through the shrubs and came on them.

If he helped her escape now, Corridon thought, his hopes of meeting the Leader and smashing the organization were finished. He cursed Ritchie and Rawlins for letting her come into the grounds. He had to decide whether to sacrifice her or the job he had undertaken. He remembered saying to Ritchie, “If I’m to get to the top man I can’t keep anyone covered,” and he knew, even though Marian was his niece, Ritchie would have put the job first.

He was holding Marian by the arm by the time Ames reached them.

“She ran right into me,” he said, then turning to Marian and giving her a little shake he demanded, “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Ames flashed a torch on Marian’s face.

“Speak up!” he snarled. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see the house,” Marian said, her voice cool and steady. “Must you both spring on me as if I was a burglar?”

“How did you get in?” Ames demanded.

“I climbed over the wall. I’ve heard so much about Baintrees. They told me in the village no one’s allowed near the house so I thought I’d look for myself. Will you please let go of me?”

“Bring her to the house,” Ames said. “She’s lying, of course. She’s from Ritchie.”

“Come on,” Corridon said, and gave Marian’s arm a little squeeze. “Don’t make a fuss. It won’t get you anywhere.” She tried to jerk free, but he easily held her.

“Want any help?” Ames asked, stepping closer.

“It’s all right,” Corridon said. “She’s going to be sensible,” and pulled Marian onto the path, forcing her towards the house.

“This is really ridiculous,” Marian protested. “I only wanted to see the house.”

“You’re going to see it,” Ames said. “Take her to Homer’s office.”

Corridon was in two minds to let her go. If Ames hadn't come on them, it would have been easy. Now it was either Marian or the job. He consoled himself that there was still time to get her out of the house before anything happened to her.

He pushed her up the steps into the hall and along the corridor to Homer's office. Homer was waiting in the corridor. He stood aside and waved Corridon in.

He and Ames followed and closed the door. Corridon released Marian as Ames set his back against the door.

"Who are you?" Homer said, flashing his yellow teeth. There was fear in his small, deep-set eyes.

"My name is Marian Holly, and I live in the cottage across the way," Marian said coolly. "I wanted to see the house and as no one seems to be allowed to see it, I climbed over the wall. I'm sorry to have been so silly, and I apologize. Now may I please go?"

"You work for Ritchie, don't you?" Ames said.

"Ritchie? I don't know what you're talking about," Marian returned, facing him. "I know I was trespassing, but surely there's no need to make quite such a fuss?"

Corridon admired the steady stare she gave Ames. Her expression was the right blend of bewilderment and indignation. He could see Ames was a little doubtful.

Ames looked at him for support.

"You know most of Ritchie's agents. Seen her before?"

Corridon shook his head.

"As far as I know she isn't one of Ritchie's people. I've seen them all."

Homer began to look relieved.

"Is it possible she's telling the truth?" he asked. "People do get curious about Baintrees."

"I do wish I knew what you were talking about," Marian said. "I've already apologized for trespassing. What do you expect me to do – grovel?"

Corridon began to wonder if she wasn't going to bluff herself out of trouble. Both Ames and Homer were looking undecided, and Marian, seeing she was making heady way, pressed them.

"If you want to sue me for trespass, you'd better do it," she said, her voice sharpening. "But you have no right to keep me here against my will," and she

turned and made for the door.

She's going to get away with it, Corridon thought, as neither Ames nor Homer attempted to stop her. She opened the door, then stepped back, and Corridon heard her catch her breath sharply.

Standing just outside was Kara, a .38 automatic in her hand, her eyes looking past Marian at Corridon. Seeing her, he felt a chill run up his spine.

For a moment no one moved or said anything. Kara's black sweater was covered with mud, her black trousers were torn at the knees, and there was a streak of blood on her white, drawn face.

"Get back!" she snarled at Marian. "I know who you are. You're Ritchie's niece!"

Realizing the situation couldn't be more dangerous, Corridon's hand stole to his hip-pocket for his gun, but Kara's eyes were on him.

"Put up your hands!" she exclaimed. "Make a move, you rat, and I'll kill you!"

As Corridon lifted his hands, he gave her a jeering grin.

"Don't be so dramatic," he said. "You should have kept this show of ferociousness for Ritchie."

"Ritchie's niece!" Ames said. "What are you talking about?"

Without taking her eyes from Corridon, Kara said, "He's properly fooled you. They're working together. He murdered Chicho. I saw him."

Corridon looked across at Ames and lifted his shoulders.

"What do you expect?" he said. "She lost her nerve, and now she's trying to lie her way into your good books again."

"It's you who are lying!" Kara cried, her face white. "He and this woman are working together. She's Marian Howard – Ritchie's niece."

Ames caught hold of Marian and shook her.

"Is that right?"

"How dare you!" Marian exclaimed. "I don't know what you're talking about! I warn you. I'll complain to the police!"

"Is she Ritchie's niece?" Ames asked, turning to Corridon.

Corridon shook his head.

"I've no idea. Ritchie has a niece, but I've never met her. Is it likely he'd mix his niece up in any danger? It's my bet Kara's trying to confuse the issue."

"We'll soon find that out!" Ames said savagely. "I'll make her talk!"

He caught hold of Marian's arm and twisted it behind her.

"Now," he said, "are you working for Ritchie?"

"Let me go!" Marian cried. "How dare you...!" she broke off with a little scream as Ames screwed her arm back, nearly dislocating it.

Corridon had to make an effort not to smash his fist into Ames' face. He was aware that Kara was watching him, and somehow, he controlled himself.

"Answer me," Ames said and twisted again, forcing Marian onto her knees.

"Be careful," Homer said anxiously. "If she isn't..."

"Wait," Corridon said. "Let me talk to her."

Still retaining his grip, Ames relaxed the pressure.

"Go ahead," he said. "If she doesn't talk to you, I'll break her arm."

Corridon bent over Marian.

"If you work for Ritchie you'd better say so. He's not bluffing. He will break your arm," and he looked meaningfully at Marian, trying to convey that bluff wouldn't help her.

For a moment she hesitated, then, as Ames suddenly screwed her arm up towards her head, she gasped out, "Yes... I am working for Ritchie."

Ames let go of her and stepped away. Homer caught his breath in a long, hissing gulp.

"Then they must know we're here," he said, and got unsteadily to his feet.

"They've known all along!" Kara said furiously. "Don't you understand? He's fooled you! Ritchie isn't dead. She came to warn him I had escaped."

"She's lying!" Corridon snapped. "I've never seen this woman before. Ritchie is dead." He turned to Homer who was staring at him, his face white. "She's trying to get even with me. After all it's her word against mine."

"She knows him!" Kara said, pointing to Marian. "Ask her. If you can't make her talk, I can!"

Ames caught hold of Marian's arm again.

"Do you know him?"

Marian shook her head.

"No."

"We're wasting time," Homer broke in, a quaver in his voice. "If they know we're here, they may be already in the grounds."

"They can't prove anything," Ames snarled. "Let them come! Keep out of this." He walked up to Corridon, his eyes glittering dangerously. "As you

say, it's your word against Kara's. I'm going to find out who's lying. If this girl doesn't know who you are, then as far as I'm concerned, you're in the clear."

Corridon shrugged.

"I don't know her," he said. "Kara's trying to make mischief. If you believe her, you're playing right into her hands."

Ames' hand dipped into Corridon's hip pocket and pulled out the .38 he had given him.

"I'll keep this until I'm satisfied," he said evenly, and crossed the room to press the bell push on Homer's desk. "The test will be a simple one. If this girl knows you, she'll know your name. I intend to ask her your name under pressure. If she can't tell me, I shall be satisfied."

"She'll tell you!" Kara said viciously. "Let me handle her!"

"Shut up!" Ames snarled at her.

Corridon's heart sank. He knew Ames. He cursed himself for not acting at once.

The door opened and Yevski came in.

"Take this woman to the basement room and prepare her for questioning," Ames said.

Yevski caught hold of Marian, and half-carried, half-dragged her from the room.

Ames looked narrowly at Corridon.

"You and Kara will come with me," he said, then, turning to Homer, went on, "Make certain there're no papers about. Get the prisoners under cover. We shall have adequate watching if the police arrive. Hurry! Don't stand there like a frightened sheep!"

He waved Corridon and Kara to the door. Corridon went first. Kara followed him, still covering him with her gun. Ames brought up the rear.

They went down into the basement to the room where Corridon had seen the dead man hanging from the hook when he had first come to Baintrees.

Marian was sitting in a heavy wooden chair. Her arms and legs were strapped to the chair. She looked at Corridon, her face pale, but her eyes steady. He could scarcely bring himself to look at her.

Yevski stood near the door. Kara moved away to the other side of the room where she kept Corridon covered.

Ames took off his coat, opened a cupboard and took out a white,

mackintosh smock. He put it on, his wolfish face expressionless.

“From experience,” he said in a cold, flat voice, “I’ve found the most brutal method is the quickest. We have no time for elaborate persuasion. Whatever happens, this woman can’t be allowed to leave Baintrees.” He looked at Corridon. “I am going to take out her left eye. I shall do this immediately. Then I shall ask her to give me your name, and if she refuses to talk, I shall take out her right eye. I am satisfied that if she does know, she will tell me. I have had many obstinate people through my hands in the past. This method has never failed.

Corridon felt himself go white. He watched Ames move over to Marian who was looking at Ames in horror.

“This is your last chance. Do you know his name?” Ames demanded, bending over her. “You heard what I said, I’m not bluffing.”

“I don’t know who he is,” Marian gasped, shrinking back in the chair. “Don’t touch me!”

Ames smiled.

“It is done very quickly, but unfortunately with great pain,” he said, and twined his fingers in her hair, dragging her head back.

As she screamed, Corridon said sharply, “Wait!”

Ames looked at him, his glittering eyes darkening.

“Well?”

“Leave her alone,” Corridon said, and forced a grin. “Of course she knows who I am. I’ve always been Ritchie’s man. Kara is right. I’ve been fooling you.”

Ames stood motionless.

“You mean that?” he said, and the corners of his mouth turned down.

“Certainly,” Corridon said. “You don’t think I’d waste my time with a crack-pot organization like yours, do you? If she had kept out of it, I would have had you all behind bars in a few days. A pity. Well, never mind. Luck’s running your way, but not for long.”

Slowly Ames released Marian. He walked up to Corridon.

“So you tricked me,” he said, and with a quick movement, he slapped Corridon across his mouth.

chapter thirty two

Now or never, Corridon thought as his hand flashed up and imprisoned Ames' wrist. He spun Ames round and crashed his foot into the small of his back, catapulting him across the room at Kara.

As he made the move, Kara jerked up her gun and fired at him. But Ames in trying to save himself swerved and the bullet meant for Corridon hit him in the middle of his forehead. His already lifeless body, projected by Corridon's kick, crashed into Kara, bringing her down.

Corridon's attack was made so quickly that Yevski stood rooted, too surprised to move. Taking advantage of this, Corridon sprang across the room. His foot stamped down on Kara's wrist as she grabbed at the gun that had fallen from her hand. Leaning over her, Corridon hit her on top of her head with his clenched fist, coming down with the force of a sledge-hammer, driving her senseless to the floor.

He spun round in time to meet Yevski's bull-like rush. Ducking under a wild swing, he straightened up inside Yevski's guard and drove an upper-cut to his jaw, sending him flying back as if he had been struck by the blast of an explosion. Yevski slammed against the wall, slid down and stretched out on the floor.

Breathing heavily, Corridon rubbed his skinned knuckles and grinned at Marian.

"Well, luck's running our way now for a change," he said, bent to pick up Kara's gun, then crossed over to Marian. He undid the straps and helped her to her feet. "How's it feel?"

She leaned against him, white and shaken, and for a moment or so, couldn't speak. Then, "I knew you'd get me out of that," she said, and tried to smile up at him.

"I very nearly didn't. We're not clear yet." He put his arm round her. "Where's Rawlins?"

"He's on his way here. I told him where I was going."

"You should have waited for him. Ames wasn't bluffing."

She shuddered.

"I know. I was terrified."

Corridon moved away to bend over Ames.

“Well, he’s dead now.” He went to Yevski, turned him and ran through his pockets. He found an automatic which he gave to Marian.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here. I want a word with Homer before Rawlins arrives. I’ll take you to my room. You’ll be safe there for ten minutes or so.”

He opened the door and glanced up and down the passage.

“All clear.”

She followed him out into the passage. He closed the door and shot the heavy bolt.

“They’ll be all right in there for a little while. No one can hear them. I’ll go first. If we run into trouble, don’t take any chances. Shoot first and apologize after.”

Moving silently, with Marian a yard behind him, he mounted the stairs, paused to look into the hall, but seeing no one, motioned her to join him.

“We go up the next flight of stairs,” he said, keeping his voice low. “My room is the second door on the left. If we meet anyone, leave him to me, and run for my room.”

She nodded, and he suddenly grinned at her.

“You’re taking it very calmly,” he said. “I believe you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Oh, no. That awful man frightened the life out of me.”

He moved into the hall. Somewhere at the back of the house he heard voices, but no one appeared. Together they moved silently to the stairs.

“Second door on the left,” he said, pausing at the head of the stairs. “I shan’t be long. Shoot if you have to.”

“You’ll be careful?” she said anxiously.

“That’s funny coming from you,” he said, and gave her a little push towards his bedroom door. As soon as she had entered the room and closed the door, he retraced his steps down the stairs into the hall. He held Kara’s gun out of sight by his side.

After a moment’s listening, he walked silently down the corridor to Homer’s office. The door was ajar and he peered in.

Homer was going through a stack of papers on his desk. His broad, fleshy face was white and he breathed heavily. His movements were hurried and his big fat hands shook as he bundled the papers into a briefcase.

Corridon stepped quietly into the room. Homer stiffened, looked up and

caught his breath sharply.

“Don’t move,” Corridon said, and lifted the gun.

Homer turned to a figure of stone. Only his breathing made him alive.

Corridon closed the door.

“You may as well face facts,” he said, moving to the desk. “You’ve played your last trick. You can’t grumble; you have had a pretty good innings.”

Homer continued to stand motionless. His eyes protruded, making him look like a frightened horse.

“What do you want?” he managed to say.

“Sit down and put your hands on the desk,” Corridon said. “I want the name of the Leader.”

Homer sat down.

“I don’t know,” he said, a quaver in his voice. “How should I know?”

Corridon smiled at him.

“The police’ll show up in a few minutes,” he said. “Whichever way the cat jumps you’ve had it. You’ve two alternatives. Ten years in jail or a bullet in the belly. Which do you fancy?”

Homer blanched. He tried to say something but the words wouldn’t come.

“The position is this,” Corridon went on. “If you don’t tell me who the Leader is, I’ll put a bullet into you. If you do tell me by the way, you haven’t a great deal to look forward to, for I shall hand you over to Rawlins.”

Homer stared at him in horror.

“But I don’t know,” he stammered. “I – I tell you, I don’t know.”

“Then it’s too bad for you. I’m all for wiping you out. Once the police get hold of you, they’ll probably spoil you. The police are notoriously kind.” He lifted the gun. “Just to make it a little more exciting I am going to count. It you haven’t told me who the Leader is by the time I reach ten, I shall shoot, and remember, where I shall shoot you you won’t go quick.”

“But I don’t know!” Homer cried, pushing back his chair. “I’ve never known...!”

Corridon stood very still, the gun pointing at Homer’s paunch.

“...five, six, seven, eight, nine...”

His finger curled round the trigger.

“Stop!” Homer screamed, his fat body sagging over the desk. “I’ll tell you. It’s George Mainworthy.”

Corridon grinned at him.

"I thought so. It would be Mainworthy. He was kicked out of the army, and this is his idea of getting even."

"They'll kill me for this," Homer groaned. "I've got to have protection. They'll kill me."

"Don't be hysterical," Corridon said tartly. "There won't be any of them left to kill you or even bother with you."

He heard the door open behind him and swung round. Rawlins stood in the doorway, a wide, beaming smile on his face.

"There you are," he said. "I was wondering where you had got to."

Behind him lurked three plain-clothes men. They came in and surrounded Homer.

"Surprising little trouble," Rawlins went on, scratching the side of his nose. "None of them seemed anxious to make themselves awkward."

"Get him out of here," Corridon said, motioning to Homer. "He's one of the bigger fishes. Is Marian all right?"

"Most certainly she is," Rawlins said. "She's outside."

He went to the door, beckoned and Marian came in.

"You don't know how wonderful he's been," she told Rawlins, smiling at Corridon. "If you had seen him tackle those three in that awful room downstairs."

"I can imagine," Rawlins said, as Homer was bundled out of the room. He seemed glad to be in the company of three detectives. "He always did fancy himself as a modern Douglas Fairbanks."

"Any sign of Diestl?" Corridon asked.

"We're looking for him now," Rawlins told him. "You've done quite enough for one night. You can leave the rest to me."

"There's something much more important to do than clear up this mess," Corridon said. "I want you to come with me right away to the Red Roost. Homer named our old pal Mainworthy as the boss of the organization."

Rawlins nodded.

"That doesn't surprise me. Ritchie always thought he was behind it. Give me five minutes, and I'll be with you." He went quickly from the room.

Corridon opened a silver box on Homer's desk, took out a cigarette and as he lit up, he said, "Any news of your uncle?"

"He'll be all right. He has a broken collar-bone," Marian said. "He won't even go to bed." She paused, went on, "This has worked out well, Martin."

“So it has.” He looked thoughtfully at her. “If we catch Mainworthy, the whole setup will collapse. But we haven’t caught him yet.” He moved over to the door, opened it and stepped into the hall. He was in time to see Diestl being led down the stairs. Diestl didn’t look at him, but went with his escort across the hall to the waiting police van. There was a bleak look on his face.

Rawlins reappeared.

“You have a couple of dangerous customers in the basement room,” Corridon warned him. “Kara and a Russian, Yevski. You’ll find Ames there too but he’s dead. Kara shot him.”

“Gate’s looking after them,” Rawlins said. “This seems a pretty neat bag, but it’s Mainworthy we want. I’m ready when you are.”

“Coming?” Corridon asked turning to Marian.

“Oh, yes, I don’t want to miss anything. Besides, uncle’ll expect to hear the fullest details.”

“He’ll get them.”

The three went down the steps to a waiting police car. As they drove off Rawlins said, “Think he’ll be there?”

“Probably not. I’ll be surprised if Homer didn’t warn him. We may be lucky, of course.”

But they weren’t. When they reached the Red Roost, Brett, dark and immaculate, with a sardonic expression in his eyes, told them Mainworthy had left the club about half an hour ago.

“He seemed to be in a hurry,” Brett said. “Is there anything wrong?”

Rawlins didn’t enlighten him and stayed only long enough to convince himself Mainworthy wasn’t there. The big office where Corridon had met and talked with Mainworthy was in a shambles. The desk drawers were pulled out, papers were scattered over the floor, and a small safe stood open.

Corridon looked thoughtfully at the safe, wondering how much it had contained. It was probable Mainworthy had gone off with the bulk of the Movement’s funds, and from what Ritchie had told him, the amount must be considerable.

Rawlins sat at the desk.

“We’ll pick him up,” he said. “I’ll just get the machinery in motion, then I’ll run you back to Stratford Road. Colonel Ritchie will want to see you.”

Corridon’s eyes were still on the safe, and following his glance, Rawlins frowned.

“What are you hatching up now?” he demanded. “You look as if you’ve never seen a safe before.”

Corridon grinned.

“I was thinking you owe me a bob,” he said blandly. “Kara got away. Like to give it to me now before you spend it?”

chapter thirty three

Ritchie, his arm in a sling, sat in an armchair in his upstairs study, a whisky-and-soda within reach. Corridon leaned his bulk against the mantelpiece, a cigarette burned between his fingers.

"Apart from Mainworthy," he was saying, "the Movement's washed up. When they've got Mainworthy, it's in the bag. Rawlins seems pretty confident he'll catch him."

Ritchie nodded.

"I think he will. It's only a matter of time. He can't get out of the country."

Corridon pulled at his lower lip.

"He could. If he has the money, he could hire a boat or an aircraft. Still, that's up to Rawlins. It's not our business."

"No. The thing's out of our hands now," Ritchie said, paused and went on, "You've done a good job. You always do a good job when you work for me. Marian's been giving me the details. You risked your life for her. I'm grateful."

Corridon moved restlessly. He disliked praise.

"There was nothing to that. I'm sorry you got winged. I should have known Kara would have had a crack at you."

"It's a damned nuisance, but it could have been a lot worse. I'll be out of action for a week or two." Ritchie paused to sip the whisky. "I need help badly, Martin. The War Office would increase my establishment if I asked them. I need a second in command. It would carry the rank of major, and there would be special pay. How about it?"

Corridon hesitated. He didn't want to hurt Ritchie's feelings, but he knew the job was no good to him.

"I appreciate that," he said at last, "but I have other plans. We've been over all this before. I work better on my own."

"It's a useful and important job," Ritchie said without much hope. "It's time you settled down. Haven't you thought of getting married?"

"Me?" Corridon looked startled. "Why, no. Why should I make some girl miserable? I'm not the marrying kind."

"It depends on the girl," Ritchie said. "Now, Marian..."

But Corridon wouldn't let him go on.

"As a matter of fact," he interrupted, "I'm going to Paris. I have a feeling Paris and I will get along together."

Ritchie studied him, saw it was hopeless and smiled.

"You must please yourself, of course, but I think you're making a mistake. It's time you settled down. You're not getting any younger."

"I'm thirty-eight," Corridon said a little piqued. "I've promised myself I'll have ten thousand pounds in the bank by the time I'm forty. O.S.S.5 wouldn't run to that."

There came a knock on the door, and Rawlins came in. He looked tired.

"I've spread the net," he said, dropping into an armchair. "We must now wait for him to walk into it. Unless he has some means we don't know about of getting out of the country, he's trapped. But I've warned the Continental police to stand by in case he slips out."

"Has he any money?" Ritchie asked.

"I think so. Homer tells me they had fifteen thousand for running expenses, and there's no sign of it."

"I hope you catch him with it," Corridon said and grinned. "That's a nice little sum to hand over to the Treasury."

"We'll catch him," Rawlins said shortly. He paused to light a cigarette, went on, "Homer's been very useful. He's done a lot of talking. We've arrested Brett. According to Homer he is one of them. We've also got hold of the woman who shot Lestrangle. She's confessed." He glanced at Corridon. "So, that lets you out."

"Good show," Corridon said. "Any news of Lorene Feydak?"

"We've let her go. She's at the Mayfair Hotel at the moment. We've given her a strong hint to get out of the country. We've made it easy for her to go."

Corridon pushed himself away from the mantelpiece.

"Well, you seem to have taken care of everything." He looked at Ritchie. "I'm now retiring from active service. If there's any money owing to me, I'd be glad if you'd send it to Fosdick and Butler, my solicitors. I hope to be in Paris by tomorrow afternoon." He held out his hand. "Take care of yourself, Colonel. The next time there's anything like this to do, don't pick on me, will you? It's been a little too much like hard work. So long for now."

Ritchie shook hands.

"Sure you won't change your mind?" he asked. "You'll get sick of Paris

before long.”

“Don’t you believe it,” Corridon said, and moved to the door. “But perhaps Paris will get sick of me.” He grinned at Rawlins. “So long, copper. Mind who you’re arresting?”

When he had gone Rawlins said, “I have a feeling he’s up to something. He’s lost interest in Mainworthy a shade too quickly. I think I’ll have him watched.”

“A waste of time,” Ritchie said and smiled. “He’s far too smart to be watched unless he has nothing to hide. But I think you’re right: he is hatching up something. If you want Mainworthy and the money, you’d better buck up. I have a feeling Corridon is going to look for him himself.”

“Yes,” Rawlins said, and got heavily to his feet. “I’ll take damn good care if he does get his hooks on the money he won’t take it out of the country.”

As Corridon descended the stairs, he caught sight of Marian, hovering in the hall.

“Are you taking the job, Martin?” she asked, coming up to him.

He looked down into the serious grey eyes and shook his head.

“No. It’s not in my line. I’m not cut out for routine work. Besides, I’m off to Paris.”

Her eyes showed her disappointment.

“I suppose you know best,” she said. “I’m sorry. We’ll miss you.”

“It wouldn’t work,” Corridon said uneasily, and held out his hand. “I’ll let you know where I get to. You might feel like a trip to Paris one of these days. I don’t want to lose sight of you.”

She slipped her hand in his.

“Don’t you?” she said. “Well, I suppose that’s nice to know. I’ll think of you, Martin.”

Corridon suddenly felt depressed.

“There’re a lot of people who run after the gilt when the gold’s right under their noses. I’m one of them. So long, Marian. We’ll meet again.”

He bent and kissed her. Then as she began to say something he gave her a crooked little smile, patted her arm and went hurriedly down the steps to the street.

chapter thirty four

The hands of the dashboard clock stood at twenty minutes to three. A big, cold-looking moon lit up the flat road that led through Robertsbridge to Baldslow and then on to Hastings.

Corridon yawned. He would much sooner be in bed, but his business was urgent. He kept his foot down on the accelerator, and the car rushed along at high speed, its big, glaring headlights cut into the shadowy road ahead, making the hedges sharp-etched against the night sky.

He had the road to himself, but from time to time, he glanced into the driving mirror to satisfy himself no one was following him. He wouldn't put it past Rawlins to have him shadowed. Rawlins was no fool. Corridon guessed by the suspicious looks he had given him that Rawlins had an idea what he was up to.

Well, it was a long chance. If it didn't come off, he would have to revise his plans. When he heard Mainworthy had bolted, he had searched his memory for a clue to where he had gone, and he remembered Ernie had mentioned a bungalow in Fairlight, just outside Hastings.

"Nice little place," Ernie had said with a leer. "On the cliffs, overlooking the sea. The Better Ole it was called. He took me there once. Not another house within miles."

Corridon remembered the sneering little grin on Ernie's white urchin face as he described the cottage. It was a long chance, but if Mainworthy was going to escape by sea, it was probable that was where Corridon would find him.

Corridon's mind switched to Marian. Ritchie had given him the hint. Ritchie wouldn't have objected if he married her. He shook his head, frowning. It wouldn't do. He knew he wouldn't settle down. The idea of going to the War Office day in and day out, returning to a flat, living a life of respectable routine was out of the question. At least he was honest with himself. It was a pity. Marian attracted him. An understatement, he thought with a crooked smile, but he wasn't going to admit anything deeper than an attraction.

He drove down the long Cambridge Road that led to the Hastings clock

tower. The town was empty and silent. The lighted face of the clock showed three. A solitary policeman appearing out of the shadows looked sharply at the car that moved a little too quickly past the Queen's Hotel to the sea front.

Twenty minutes' driving brought Corridon onto the Fairlight Road. It took him over an hour to find the cottage, and then he came upon it more by luck than judgment.

He had driven far along the cliff road, and was on the point of turning back when he caught sight of a light away to his right. He pulled up and turned off his headlamps. Getting out of the car, he set off across a field that led him through a spinney. He could hear the sound of the surf beating against the foot of the cliffs, and once through the spinney he came out onto the cliff head.

He stood for a moment looking down at the moonlit sea. There was a thirty-foot motorboat moored to a breakwater immediately below him: a fast, trim craft of mahogany, steel, and glittering brass. Corridon smiled. Well, he hadn't gone yet, he thought, turned, and made his way towards the light.

Coming out from behind a row of poplar trees, he saw the squat cottage. A light burned in one of the downstairs rooms, and as he moved quietly forward, he saw a man's shadow pass across the blind.

Was it Mainworthy?

His hand went inside his coat and came out holding an automatic. He advanced slowly, careful to make no sound. Remembering the precautions taken to guard Baintrees, he wondered if this little cottage was similarly protected, and decided against opening the garden gate and going up the path. Instead he moved round to the back, swung himself over a low brick wall and dropped into a neat, well-laid-out garden.

He moved along the grass that divided two vegetable plots and led directly to the lighted window. He stood by the window, listening, but heard nothing, then he moved away, following the path that brought him to the back door.

He turned the door knob gently, expecting the door to be locked, but it moved inwards at his touch, and he held it open a few inches to listen. Again he heard nothing. The moonlight fell directly through the opening of the door and lit up the small kitchen. He made sure there was nothing standing on the floor over which he might fall, then stepped inside and shut the door.

In pitch darkness, he crept over to another door, opened it and looked into more darkness. His hand groped for the electric light switch and gently turned

it down. The room was well furnished and appeared to be the dining-room. Opposite him was another door. Moving silently, his gun thrust forward, he crossed the room and listened outside the door. He heard movements in the room beyond: something dropped on the floor and a man cleared his throat.

Corridon's fingers closed round the door knob, turned it and eased the door open. He looked into a lighted room, lined with book-cases.

Mainworthy, wearing a trench coat and slouch hat, was standing by a desk, his back turned to him.

Silently Corridon pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

"Don't move," he said quietly.

A shudder ran through Mainworthy's square-shouldered frame. Very slowly his head turned. He stared at Corridon, drawing in a quick, hissing breath.

"Sorry to give you a fright," Corridon said smoothly. He held the gun pointing at Mainworthy's feet. "Sit down. It's high time we had a talk."

Mainworthy didn't move. He appeared to be trying to hide something on the desk with his body, and levelling the gun, Corridon moved forward, circling Mainworthy and watching him closely.

Mainworthy's hand covered something lying on the blotting pad.

"Stand away and put up your hands," Corridon ordered.

Still Mainworthy didn't move.

"You've no right to break in like this," he said through dry lips. His voice sounded like the rustle of leaves.

"Don't act the fool," Corridon said curtly. "Homer's given you away. The future stops here for you. Stand away."

Mainworthy stared at him for a long moment, then his shoulders drooped and he took his hand from the blotter. A small heap of diamonds flashed and glittered in the light of the desk lamp.

Corridon smiled.

"Sit down," he said. "We haven't much time."

Mainworthy dropped into a chair. He rested his hands on the desk, a few inches from the diamonds.

"They're mine," he said, still in the strange whisper. "I'm getting out. We could do a deal, Corridon."

"Could we?" Corridon said, pulling up a chair opposite Mainworthy. He sat down. "What sort of deal?"

“There’s fifteen thousand pounds tied up in those stones,” Mainworthy said. “I’ll give you half. All I want is an hour’s start.”

Corridon rested the gun on the desk so the barrel was in line with Mainworthy’s face. His left hand reached out and he pulled the blotter away from Mainworthy to his side of the desk.

“I said your future stops here,” he said quietly. “The rest of them are under lock and key. You’re joining them.”

“If you give me away, you won’t get the diamonds,” Mainworthy burst out, clenching his fists. “I’ll tell the police. I know you, Corridon. I know your tricks. You came here to fleece me. You’re not going to get away with it!”

Corridon smiled.

“Of course I’m taking the diamonds,” he said mildly, “and I shall get away with it. I’m taking the boat, too. And that’ll put you in a hopeless position. Without funds or the boat you’re sunk. The police are on their way here now. You may perhaps dodge them for tonight, but it won’t be very long before they catch you. Tell them about the diamonds by all means. It’ll be your word against mine. I’m not saying they won’t believe you, but believing a story and proving it are two very different things. By the time they have caught you, I shall be in France. They won’t find the diamonds, and until they do, they can’t act against me, so your deal isn’t a very sound one, is it?”

Mainworthy didn’t say anything. He watched Corridon sweep the diamonds off the blotter into his cupped hand.

“Still, I don’t want to be too hard on you,” Corridon went on. “If the police catch you, you’ll get twenty years, and I doubt if you’ll live that long. You’re not equipped to live behind bars, Mainworthy. You’re a little too soft.” He dropped the diamonds into his pocket and stood up. “I can offer you an alternative. Perhaps you’ve seen these little things before.” He rolled a white capsule across the desk towards Mainworthy. “Other undesirables have used them to save themselves years of misery. They have the great advantage of being instantaneous and painless. If you want to take that way out, you’re welcome, but you’ll have to be quick to make up your mind. They’ll be here in half an hour.” He began to back slowly to the door. “So long Mainworthy. You can’t grumble. You’ve had fun, now you’ve got to pay for it.”

Mainworthy didn’t look at him. He sat staring at the capsule, his face drawn, his fingers twitching.

Corridon went quickly out of the cottage, ran along the garden path, vaulted over the wall and went down the steep path to the sea.

He found the motorboat ready for immediate departure. The electric starter brought the engine roaring into life. He cast off and headed out to sea, keeping the engine at full throttle so its noise could be heard by Mainworthy as he sat in the silent little cottage.

When he was out of sight of land, he swung the tiller and brought the boat around in a wide circle, cutting down the engine to a gentle tick-over. He headed back to the breakwater, and half an hour later he drifted silently up to the mooring, tied up the boat and climbed the steep path to the cottage.

The light still burned in the window. He walked up the garden path, paused at the front door, and lifting the knocker he hammered on the door.

Nothing happened. He waited, then knocked again. Still nothing happened. Stepping away from the door he approached the lighted window and peered into the room.

Mainworthy was standing by the desk. He was like a man turned to stone.

Raising his voice, Corridon shouted, "Open up! This is the police!"

As if mesmerized, Mainworthy's hand reached out for the capsule lying on the desk. He picked it up and carried it to his mouth.

Corridon watched him without pity. He saw him shudder, take two staggering steps forward, his hands outstretched and groping. Then he dropped to the floor, rolled over, his hands going to his throat.

Corridon went round to the back door, gun in hand. Entering the front room, he turned Mainworthy's body over with his foot, satisfied himself he was dead and stepped away. He looked at the desk. On the blotter was a sheet of paper. He read what Mainworthy had written, picked up the paper and slipped it into his pocket. He saw no reason why Rawlins should be told he had given Mainworthy the capsule and taken the diamonds.

Then without looking at the lifeless body on the floor, he left the cottage, got into the car and headed back to London.

chapter thirty five

Corridon was packing a bag, whistling cheerfully, when he heard a knock on his front door. He went down the stairs and looked with bland surprise at Rawlins' scowling face.

"You're always turning up when you're not wanted," he said with his jeering smile. "Now what do you want?"

"Whatever it is, I don't suppose I'll get it," Rawlins said sourly. "Anyway, I'll come in. I've something to say to you."

"You'll have to buck up," Corridon returned, leading the way upstairs. "I'm catching the boat train in about an hour."

"You hope," Rawlins said. He stood with his back to the window, his brows drawn down, and his eyes annoyed.

"What's the matter with you?" Corridon asked as he continued to toss things into his bag. "Not your usual bright, sunny self. Liver out of order?"

"We've found Mainworthy."

"Well, that's something to rejoice about, isn't it?"

"He's dead: cyanide."

"All the more reason for you to be happy. You won't have to waste time in court."

"Homer said Mainworthy had fifteen thousand pounds on him," Rawlins said heavily. "We can't find it."

Corridon glanced round the room to see if he had left out anything.

"Well, of course, you have only Homer's word for it. He may be making it up," he said as he crossed the room to collect a silver cigarette-box. "My regiment presented me with this when I left," he went on. "I don't know why unless they were pleased to see me go."

"Never mind your regiment," Rawlins snapped. "I have reason to believe you went down to Fairlight last night and found Mainworthy."

"But whoever takes you seriously?" Corridon asked, slipping the cigarette-box into his bag. "You get the wildest ideas into that bullet head of yours."

Rawlins breathed heavily.

"Did you go to Fairlight last night?"

"Good Lord, no!"

Rawlins sat down.

“Mainworthy had a boat. He was packed to go. Then suddenly he changed his mind and committed suicide. Why?”

“How do I know?” Corridon said. “Maybe he didn’t like French cooking. Maybe his conscience was worrying him or he thought it was time to talk things over with his ancestors. I wouldn’t know.”

“If he suddenly lost his get-away money, he might decide suicide was the way out,” Rawlins said. “I think he did lose his money.”

“Very careless of him,” Corridon said and locked the bag. “Well, if that’s all, old boy, perhaps you’ll buzz off. I’m in a hurry.”

“Would you object to me searching your bag?” Rawlins asked. “I think you have the money on you.”

“The ideas you get,” Corridon said and laughed. “Search it by all means, if you have a search warrant.”

“I haven’t,” Rawlins said gloomily. “But at least you can show me a little co-operation.”

“I’m right out of it this morning,” Corridon said cheerfully. “Besides, if I did happen to have the money, is it likely I’d have it with me, knowing you were certain to call? Give me credit for a little intelligence.”

“So you have got it?” Rawlins said, getting to his feet.

“I said if I had...” Corridon put on his overcoat and picked up his hat. “Never jump to conclusions. The trouble with you is you don’t trust anyone. It’s a pretty nervous failing. Well, I’m off.”

“I’ll have a little party for you at the Custom’s shed,” Rawlins exploded angrily. “We’ll strip you to the skin!”

“I took a bath this morning so I’ll have nothing to be ashamed of,” Corridon said, grinning. “So long. I don’t suppose you’ll see me for a year or two. Don’t get into mischief while I’m away.”

Rawlins followed him down the stairs. As Corridon locked the front door, he said, “I’m giving up this hole. I feel it’s time I lived in better surroundings. When I come back I’ll set up like a gentleman. I hope to make a pot of money in Paris.”

“You’re not there yet,” Rawlins growled. “I’m hoping to fix you up with free board and lodgings with bars at the windows.”

“To hear you talk one would think you smoked opium,” Corridon said. “Go and buy yourself a nice cup of tea. You’re getting into a tizzy.”

As Rawlins' red face began to turn purple, Corridon patted him patronizingly on his shoulder and walked off, whistling a gay tune as if he hadn't a care in the world.

Three members of the Special Branch were at the Custom's shed when Corridon arrived at Newhaven. He greeted him with an expansive smile and submitted to an exhaustive search both of his luggage and his person.

"I'm afraid poor old Rawlins is slipping," he said, as he began to dress while the three detectives stood around and glowered at him. "He ought to retire. Look at the extra work he makes for you boys."

They said nothing and were still glowering when he made his way up the gangway to the boat. He turned to wave to them but they didn't wave back. They knew somehow he had fooled them, and they knew he would also fool the French police who were waiting patiently at Dieppe in answer to Rawlins' telephone message.

It wasn't until the Paris train steamed out of the station that Corridon felt reasonably certain he had got away with it. The crossing had been a little tense. The French police at Dieppe had been extremely discourteous. It was still possible more policemen would meet him at the barrier when he arrived in Paris. Rawlins was nothing if not thorough. So when Lorene Feydak passed his compartment, he studiously avoided looking at her, and she passed without giving him a glance.

Detectives were waiting at the station barrier. As they closed in on him, he saw Lorene making her way unmolested through the barrier, and he greeted the detectives with such an expansive and jeering smile that they knew at once they were wasting their time.

An hour and a half later, Corridon paid off a taxi outside a modest hotel in Rue de Balzac. He inquired at the desk for Mademoiselle Feydak, pleased to discover his French wasn't as rusty as he had expected. Mademoiselle Feydak was expecting him, he was told, would he go up.

Lorene opened the door leading into a big, airy suite, consisting of a bedroom, sitting-room and bathroom.

"No trouble?" he asked, tossing his hat and coat on a chair and then going over to take her hands in his.

"They were far too occupied worrying about you to worry about me," she said, and laughed. "If you'll give me five minutes I'll hand them over. I've stitched them in my suspender belt."

“There’s no immediate hurry,” Corridon said, thinking how beautiful she was. “There’s seven thousand coming to you. It should give you a new start.”

“Thank you, darling. I was afraid you would say that. I suppose you want to go on from here – alone?”

“Yes,” Corridon said and put his hands each side of her waist. “But cheer up. You won’t be alone for long. You should be a big success in Paris.”

She looked up at him.

“Couldn’t we have a week together?” she asked, her hands on his. “Then I’ll try to be satisfied. You see, I’m utterly shameless.”

“You once said I wasn’t the kind of man a girl should fall in love with,” Corridon reminded her. “You said the girl was bound to get hurt. Be sensible, Lorene. As soon as I’ve sold the diamonds, we part. You know as well as I do it wouldn’t work.”

“I believe you’re in love with Marian Howard,” she said, not looking at him. “You are, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know,” Corridon said, frowning. “Anyway, she’s in London and I’m in Paris. Let me have the diamonds. We’ll go out and celebrate.”

He pushed her to the bedroom door.

“A week,” she said. “Then we part. I won’t make a scene.”

“Go and get the diamonds,” Corridon said.

While he waited, he looked down at the bustling street, golden with sunshine. It was still spring, and the women, he thought, looked very gay. Perhaps, after all, a week with Lorene might be fun. Paris could be as lonely as London when you were on your own. It wouldn’t be permanent. She knew that. Firmly he put Marian out of his mind, and after hesitating, he went into the inner room where Lorene was hopefully waiting for him.

The End