

John le Carre - The Honourable Schoolboy The Honourable Schoolboy John le Carre Hmmm, looks like another genie got out of the bottle Me Fiction



The Honourable Schoolboy

John le Carré

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For Jane, who bore the brunt, put up with my presence and absence alike, and made it all possible.

I and the public know

What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

W. H. Auden

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PART 1 - WINDING THE

CLOCK

Chapter 1 - How the Circus Left Town

Afterwards, in the dusty little corners where London's secret servants drink together, there was argument about where the Dolphin case history should really begin. One crowd, led by a blimpish fellow in charge of microphone transcription, went so far as to claim that the fitting date was sixty years ago when 'that arch-cad Bill Haydon' was born into the world under a treacherous star. Haydon's very name struck a chill into them. It does so even today. For it was this same Haydon who, while still at Oxford, was recruited by Karla the Russian as a 'mole', or 'sleeper', or in English,

agent of penetration, to work against them. And who with Karla's guidance entered their ranks and spied on them for thirty years or more. And whose eventual discovery - thus the line of reasoning - brought the British so low that they were forced into a fatal dependence upon their American sister service, whom obey called in their own strange jargon 'the Cousins'. The Cousins changed the game entirely, said the blimpish fellow: much as he might have deplored power tennis or bodyline bowling. And ruined it too, said his seconds.

To less flowery minds, the true genesis was Haydon's unmasking by George Smiley and Smiley's consequent appointment as a caretaker chief of the betrayed service, which occurred in the late November of 1973. Once George had got Karla under his skin, they said, there was no stopping him. The rest was inevitable, they said. Poor old George: but what a mind under all that

burden!

One scholarly soul, a researcher of some sort, in the jargon a 'burrower', even insisted, in his cups, upon January 26th 1841 as the natural date, when a certain captain Elliot of the Royal Navy took a landing party to fog-laden rock called Hong Kong at the mouth of the pearl River and a few days later proclaimed it a British colony. With Elliot's arrival, said the scholar, Hong Kong became the headquarters of Britain's opium trade to China and in consequence one of the pillars of the imperial economy. If the British had not invented the opium market - he said, not entirely serious - then there would have been no case, no ploy, no dividend: and therefore no renaissance of the Circus following Bill Haydon's traitorous depredations.

Whereas the hard men - the grounded fieldmen, the trainers and the case officers who made their

own murmured caucus always - they saw the question solely in operational terms. They pointed to Smiley's deft footwork in tracking down Karla's paymaster in Vientiane; to Smiley's handling of the girl's parents; and to his wheeling and dealing with the reluctant barons of Whitehall, who held the operational purse strings, and dealt out rights and permissions in the secret world. Above all, to the wonderful moment when he turned the operation round on its own axis. For these pros, the Dolphin case was a victory of technique. Nothing more. They saw the shotgun marriage with the Cousins as just another skilful bit of tradecraft in a long and delicate poker game. As to the final outcome: to hell. The king is dead; so long live the next one.

The debate continues wherever old comrades meet, though the name of Jerry Westerby, understandably, is seldom mentioned.

Occasionally, it is true, somebody does, out of

foolhardiness or sentiment or plain forgetfulness, dredge it up, and there is atmosphere for a moment; but it passes. Only the other day a young probationer just out of the Circus's refurbished training school at Sarratt - in the jargon again, 'the Nursery' - piped it out in the under-thirties bar, for instance. A watered-down version of the Dolphin case had recently been introduced at Sarratt as material for syndicate discussion, even playlets, and the poor boy, still very green, was fairly brimming with excitement to discover he was in the know: 'But my God,' he protested, enjoying the kind of fool's freedom sometimes granted to naval midshipmen in the wardroom, 'my God, why does nobody seem to recognise Westerby's part in the affair? If anybody carried the load, it was Jerry Westerby. He was the spearhead. Well, wasn't he? Frankly?' Except, of course, he did not utter the name 'Westerby', nor 'Jerry' either, not least because he

did not know them; but used instead the cryptonym allocated to Jerry for the duration of the case.

Peter Guillam fielded this loose ball. Guillam is tall and tough and graceful, and probationers awaiting first posting tend to look up to him as some sort of Greek god.

'Westerby was the stick that poked the fire,' he declared curtly, ending the silence. 'Any fieldman would have done as well, some a damn sight better.'

When the boy still did not take the hint, Guillam rose and went over to him and, very pale, snapped into his ear that he should fetch himself another drink, if he could hold it, and thereafter guard his tongue for several days or weeks.

Whereupon, the conversation returned once more to the topic of dear old George Smiley, surely the last of the true greats, and what was he doing

with himself these days, back in retirement? So many lives he had led; so much to recollect in tranquillity, they agreed.

'George went five times round the moon to our one,' someone declared loyally, a woman.

Ten times, they agreed. Twenty! Fifty! With hyperbole, Westerby's shadow mercifully receded. As in a sense, so did George Smiley's. Well, George had a marvellous innings, they would say. At his age what could you expect?

Perhaps a more realistic point of departure is a certain typhoon Saturday in mid-1974, three o'clock in the afternoon, when Hong Kong lay battened down waiting for the next onslaught. In the bar of the Foreign Correspondents' Club, a score of journalists, mainly from former British colonies - Australian, Canadian, American -

fooled and drank in a mood of violent idleness, a chorus without a hero. Thirteen floors below them, the old trams and double deckers were caked in the mud-brown sweat of building dust and smuts from the chimney-stacks in Kowloon. The tiny ponds outside the highrise hotels prickled with slow, subversive rain. And in the men's room, which provided the Club's best view of the harbour, young Luke the Californian was ducking his face into the handbasin, washing the blood from his mouth.

Luke was a wayward, gangling tennis player, an old man of twenty-seven who until the American pullout had been the star turn in his magazine's Saigon stable of war reporters. When you knew he played tennis it was hard to think of him doing anything else, even drinking. You imagined him at the net, uncoiling and smashing everything to kingdom come; or serving aces between double faults. His mind, as he sucked and spat, was

fragmented by drink and mild concussion - Luke would probably have used the war-word 'fragged' - into several lucid parts. One part was occupied with a Wanchai bar girl called Ella for whose sake he had punched the pig policeman on the jaw and suffered the inevitable consequences: with the minimum necessary force, the said Superintendent Rockhurst, known otherwise as the Rocker, who was this minute relaxing in a corner of the bar after his exertions, had knocked him cold and kicked him smartly in the ribs. Another part of his mind was on something his Chinese landlord had said to him this morning when he called to complain of the noise of Luke's gramophone, and had stayed to drink a beer.

A scoop of some sort definitely. But what sort?

He retched again, then peered out of the window. The junks were lashed behind the barriers and the Star Ferry had stopped running. A veteran British

frigate lay at anchor and Club rumours said Whitehall was selling it.

'Should be putting to sea,' he muttered confusedly, recalling some bit of naval lore he had picked up in his travels. 'Frigates put to sea in typhoons. Yes, sir.'

The hills were slate under the stacks of black cloudbank. Six months ago the sight would have had him cooing with pleasure. The harbour, the din, even the skyscraper shanties that clambered from the sea's edge upward to the Peak: after Saigon, Luke had ravenously embraced the whole scene. But all he saw today was a smug, rich British rock run by a bunch of plum-throated traders whose horizons went no further than their belly-lines. The Colony had therefore become for him exactly what it was already for the rest of the journalists: an airfield, a telephone, a laundry, a bed. Occasionally - but never for long - a woman.

Where even experience had to be imported. As to the wars which for so long had been his addiction: they were as remote from Hong Kong as they were from London or New York. Only the Stock Exchange showed a token sensibility, and on Saturdays it was closed anyway.

'Think you're going to live, ace?' asked the shaggy Canadian cowboy, coming to the stall beside him. The two men had shared the pleasures of the Tet offensive.

'Thank you, dear, I feel perfectly topping,' Luke replied, in his most exalted English accent.

Luke decided it really was important for him to remember what Jake Chiu had said to him over the beer this morning, and suddenly like a gift from Heaven it came to him.

'I remember!' he shouted. 'Jesus, cowboy, I remember! Luke, you remember! My brain! It

works! Folks, give ear to Luke!

'Forget it,' the cowboy advised. 'That's badland out there today, ace. Whatever it is, forget it.'

But Luke kicked open the door and charged into the bar, arms flung wide.

'Hey! Hey! Folks!'

Not a head turned. Luke cupped his hands to his mouth.

'Listen you drunken bums, I got news. This is fantastic. Two bottles of Scotch a day and a brain like a razor. Someone give me a bell.'

Finding none, he grabbed a tankard and hammered it on the bar rail, spilling the beer. Even then, only the dwarf paid him the slightest notice.

'So what's happened, Lukie?' whined the dwarf, in his queeny Greenwich Village drawl. 'Has Big

Moo gotten hiccups again? I can't bear it.'

Big Moo was Club jargon for the Governor and the dwarf was Luke's chief of bureau. He was a pouchy, sullen creature with disordered hair that swept in black strands over his face, and a silent way of popping up beside you. A year back, two Frenchmen, otherwise rarely seen here, had nearly killed him for a chance remark he had made on the origins of the mess in Vietnam. They took him to the lift, broke his jaw and several of his ribs, then dumped him in a heap on the ground floor and came back to finish their drinks. Soon afterwards the Australians did a similar job on him when he made a silly accusation about their token military involvement in the war. He suggested that Canberra had done a deal with President Johnson to keep the Australian boys in Vung Tau which was a picnic, while the Americans did the real fighting elsewhere. Unlike the French, the Australians didn't even bother to

use the lift. They just beat the hell out of the dwarf where he stood, and when he fell they added a little more of the same. After that, he learned when to keep clear of certain people in Hong Kong. In times of persistent fog, for instance. Or when the water was cut to four hours a day. Or on a typhoon Saturday.

Otherwise the Club was pretty much empty. For reasons of prestige, the top correspondents steered clear of the place anyway. A few businessmen, who came for the flavour pressmen give, a few girls, who came for the men. A couple of television war tourists in fake battle-drill. And in his customary corner, the awesome Rucker, Superintendent of Police, ex-Palestine, ex-Kenya, ex-Malaya, ex-Fiji, an implacable warhorse with a beer, one set of slightly reddened knuckles, and a weekend copy of the South China Morning Post. The Rucker, people said, came for the class. And at the big table at the centre, which on

weekdays was the preserve of United Press International, lounged the Shanghai Junior Baptist Conservative Bowling Club, presided over by mottled old Craw the Australian, enjoying its usual Saturday tournament. The aim of the contest was to pitch a screwed-up napkin across the room, and lodge it in the wine rack. Every time you succeeded, your competitors bought you the bottle, and helped you drink it. Old Craw growled the orders to fire and an elderly Shanghainese waiter, Craw's favourite, wearily manned the butts and served the prizes. The game was not a zestful one that day, and some members were not bothering to throw. Nevertheless this was the group Luke selected for his audience.

'Big Moo's wife's got hiccups!' the dwarf insisted. 'Big Moo's wife's horse has got hiccups! Big Moo's wife's horse's groom's got hiccups! Big Moo's wife's horse's -'

Striding to the table Luke leapt straight on to it with a crash, breaking several glasses and cracking his head on the ceiling in the process. Framed up there against the south window in a half crouch he was out of scale to everyone: the dark mist, the dark shadow of the Peak Behind it, and this giant filling the whole foreground. But they went on pitching and drinking as if they hadn't seen him. Only the Rucker glanced in Luke's direction, once, before licking a huge thumb and turning to the cartoon page.

'Round three,' Craw ordered, in his rich Australian accent. 'Brother Canada, prepare to fire. Wait, you slob. Fire.'

A screwed-up napkin floated toward the rack, taking a high trajectory. Finding a cranny it hung a moment, then flopped to the ground. Egged on by the dwarf, Luke began stamping on the table and more glasses fell. Finally he wore his

audience down.

'Your Graces,' said old Craw with a sigh. 'Pray silence for my son. I fear he would have parley with us. Brother Luke, you have committed several acts of war today and one more will meet with our severe disfavour. Speak clearly and concisely, omitting no detail, however slight, and thereafter hold your water, sir.'

In their tireless pursuit of legends about one another, old Craw was their Ancient Mariner. Craw had shaken more sand out of his shorts, they told each other, than most of them would ever walk over; and they were right. In Shanghai, where his career had started, he had been teaboy and city editor to the only English-speaking journal in the port. Since then, he had covered the Communists against Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang against the Japanese and the Americans against practically everyone. Craw gave them a sense of

history in this rootless place. His style of speech, which at typhoon times even the hardiest sight pardonably find irksome, was a genuine hangover from the Thirties, when Australia provided the bulk of journalists in the Orient; and the Vatican, for some reason, the jargon of their companionship.

So Luke, thanks to old Craw, finally got it out.

'Gentlemen! - Dwarf, you damn Polack, leave go my foot! - Gentlemen.' He paused to dab his mouth with a handkerchief. 'The house known as High Haven is for sale and his Grace Tufty Thesinger has flown the coop.'

Nothing happened but he didn't expect much anyway. Journalists are not given to cries of amazement nor even incredulity.

'High Haven,' Luke repeated sonorously, 'is up for grabs. Mr Jake Chiu, the well-known and popular

real estate entrepreneur, more familiar to you as my personal irate landlord, has been charged by Her Majesty's majestic government to dispose of High Haven. To wit, peddle. Let me go, you Polish bastard, I'll kill you!

The dwarf had toppled him. Only a flailing, agile leap saved him from injury. From the floor, Luke hurled more abuse at his assailant. Meanwhile, Craw's large head had turned to Luke, and his moist eyes fixed on him a baleful stare that seemed to go on for ever. Luke began to wonder which of Craw's many laws he might have sinned against. Beneath his various disguises, Craw was a complex and solitary figure, as everyone round the table knew. Under the willed roughness of his manner lay a love of the East which seemed sometimes to string him tighter than he could stand, so that there were months when he would disappear from sight altogether, and like a sulky elephant go off on his private paths until he was

once more fit to live with.

'Don't burble, your Grace, do you mind?' said Craw at last, and tilted back his big head imperiously. 'Refrain from spewing low-grade bilge into highly salubrious water, will you, Squire? High Haven's the spookhouse. Been the spookhouse for years. Lair of the lynx-eyed Major Tufty Thesinger formerly of Her Majesty's Rifles, presently Hong Kong's Lestrade of the Yard. Tufty wouldn't fly the coop. He's a hood, not a tit. Give my son a drink, Monsignor,' - this to the Shanghainese barman - 'he's wandering.'

Craw intoned another fire order and the Club returned to its intellectual pursuits. The truth was, there was little new to these great spy-scoops by Luke. He had a long reputation as a failed spook-watcher, and his leads were invariably disproved. Since Vietnam, the stupid lad saw spies under every carpet. He believed the world was run by

them, and much of his spare time, when he was sober, was spent hanging round the Colony's numberless battalion of thinly-disguised China-watchers and worse, who infested the enormous American Consulate up the hill. So if it hadn't been such a listless day, the matter would probably have rested there. As it was, the dwarf saw an opening to amuse, and seized it:

'Tell us, Lukie,' he suggested, with a queer upward twisting of the hands, 'are they selling High Haven with contents or as found?'

The question won him a round of applause. Was High Haven worth more with its secrets or without?

'Do they sell it with Major Thesinger?' the South African photographer pursued, in his humourless sing-song, and there was more laughter still, though it was no more affectionate. The photographer was a disturbing figure, crewcut

and starved, and his complexion was pitted like the battlefields he loved to taunt. He came from Cape Town, but they called him Deathwish the Hun. The saying was, he would bury all of them, for he stalked them like a mute.

For several diverting minutes now, Luke's point was lost entirely under a spate of Major Thesinger stories and Major Thesinger imitations in which all but Craw joined. It was recalled that the Major had made his first appearance on the Colony as an importer, with some fatuous cover down among the Docks; only to transfer, six months later, quite improbably, to the Services' list and, complete with his staff of pallid clerks and doughy, well-bred secretaries, decamp to the said spookhouse as somebody's replacement. In particular his tête-à-tête luncheons were described, to which, as it now turned out, practically every journalist listening had at one time or another been invited. And which ended

with laborious proposals over brandy, including such wonderful phrases as: 'Now look here old man if you should ever bump into an interesting Chow from over the river, you know - one with access, follow me? just you remember High Haven!' Then the magic telephone number, the one that 'rings spot on my desk, no middlemen, tape recorders, nothing, right?' - which a good half dozen of them seemed to have in their diaries: 'Here, pencil this one on your cuff', pretend it's a date or a girlfriend or something. Ready for it? Hong Kongside five-zero-two-four...'

Having chanted the digits in unison, they fell quiet. Somewhere a clock chimed for three fifteen. Luke slowly stood up and brushed the dust from his jeans. The old Shanghainese waiter gave up his post by the racks and reached for the menu in the hope that someone might eat. For a moment, uncertainty overcame them. The day

was forfeit. It had been so since the first gin. In the background a low growl sounded as the Rucker ordered himself a generous luncheon:

'And bring me a cold beer, cold, you hear, boy? Muchee coldee. Chop chop.' The Superintendent had his way with natives and said this every time. The quiet returned.

'Well, there you are, Lukie.' the dwarf called, moving away. 'That's how you win your Pulitzer, I guess. Congratulations, darling. Scoop of the year.'

'Ah, go impale yourselves, the bunch of you,' said Luke carelessly and started to make his way down the bar to where two sallow girls sat, army daughters on the prowl. 'Jake Chin showed me the damn letter of instruction, didn't he? On Her Majesty's damn Service, wasn't it? Damn crest on the top, lion screwing a goat. Hi sweethearts, remember me? I'm the kind man who bought you

the lollipops at the fair.'

'The singer don't answer,' Deathwish the Hun sang mournfully from the telephone. 'Nobody don't answer. Not The singer, not his duty man. They disconnected the line.' In the excitement, or the monotony, no one had noticed Deathwish slip away.

Till now, old Craw the Australian had lain dead as a dodo. Now, he looked up sharply.

'Dial it again, you fool,' he ordered, tart as a drill sergeant.

With a shrug, Deathwish dialled The singer's number a second time, and a couple of them went to watch him do it. Craw stayed put, watching from where he sat. There were two instruments. Deathwish tried the second, but with no better

result.

'Ring the operator,' Craw ordered, across the room to them. 'Don't stand there like a pregnant banshee. Ring the Operator, you African ape!'

Number disconnected, said the operator.

'Since when, man?' Deathwish demanded, into the mouthpiece.

No information available, said the operator.

'Maybe they got a new number, then, right, man?' Deathwish howled into the mouthpiece; still at the luckless operator. No one had ever seen him so involved. Life for Deathwish was what happened at the end of a viewfinder: such passion was only attributable to the typhoon.

No information available, said the operator.

'Ring Shallow Throat,' Craw ordered, now quite furious. 'Ring every damned stripe-pants in the

Colony!'

Deathwish shook his long head uncertainly. Shallow Throat was the official government spokesman, a hate-object to them all. To approach him for anything was bad face.

'Here, give him to me,' said Craw and rising to his feet shoved them aside to get to the phone and embark on the lugubrious courtship of Shallow Throat. 'Your devoted, Craw, sir, at your service. How's your Eminence in mind and health? Charmed, sir, charmed. And the wife and veg, sir? All eating well, I trust? No scurvy or typhus? Good. Well now, perhaps you'll have the benison to advise me why the hell Tufty Thesinger's flown the coop?'

They watched him, but his face had set like a rock, and there was nothing more to read there.

'And the same to you, sir!' he snorted finally and

slammed the phone back on its cradle so hard the whole table bounced. Then he turned to the old Shanghainese waiter. 'Monsignor Goh, sir, order me a petrol donkey and oblige! Your Graces, get off your arses, the pack of you!'

'What the hell for?' said the dwarf, hoping to be included in the command.

'For a story, you snotty little Cardinal, for a story your lecherous, alcoholic Eminences. For wealth, fame, women and longevity!'

His black mood was indecipherable to any of them.

'But what did Shallow Throat say that was so damn bad?' the shaggy Canadian cowboy asked, mystified.

The dwarf echoed him. 'Yeah, so what did he say, Brother Craw?'

'He said no comment,' Craw replied with fine dignity, as if the words were the vilest slur upon his professional honour.

So up the Peak they went, leaving only the silent majority of drinkers to their peace: restive Deathwish the Hun, long Luke, then the shaggy Canadian cowboy, very striking in his Mexican revolutionary moustache, the dwarf, attaching as ever, and finally old Craw and the two army girls: a plenary session of the Shanghai Junior Baptist Conservative Bowling Club, therefore, with ladies added - though the Club was sworn to celibacy. Amazingly, the jolly Cantonese driver took them all, a triumph of exuberance over physics. He even consented to give three receipts for the full fare, one for each of the journals represented, a thing no Hong Kong taxi-driver had been known to do before or since. It was a day to break all precedents. Craw sat in the front wearing his famous soft straw hat with Eton

colours on the ribbon, bequeathed to him by an old comrade in his will. The dwarf was squeezed over the gear lever, the other three men sat in the back, and the two girls sat on Luke's lap, which made it hard for him to dab his mouth. The Rocker did not see fit to join them. He had tucked his napkin into his collar in preparation for the Club's roast lamb and mint sauce and a lot of potatoes.

'And another beer! But cold this time, hear that, boy? Muchee coldee, and bring it chop chop.'

But once the coast was clear, the Rocker also made use of the telephone, and spoke to Someone in Authority, just to be on the safe side, though they agreed there was nothing to be done.

The taxi was a red Mercedes, quite new, but nowhere kills a car faster than the Peak, climbing

at no speed forever, air-conditioners at full blast. The weather continued awful. As they sobbed slowly up the concrete cliff's they were engulfed by a fog thick enough to choke on. When they got out it was even worse. A hot, unbudgeable curtain had spread itself across the summit, reeking of petrol and crammed with the din of the valley. The moisture floated in hot fine swarms. On a dear day they would have had a view both ways, one of the loveliest on earth: northward to Kowloon and the blue mountains of the New Territories which hid from sight the eight hundred million Chinese who lacked the privilege of British rule; southward to Repulse and Deep Water Bays and the open China Sea. High Haven after all had been built by the Royal Navy in the Twenties in all the, grand innocence of that service, to receive and impart a sense of power. But that afternoon, if the house had not been set among the trees, and in a hollow where the trees

grew tall in their effort to reach the sky, and if the trees had not kept the fog out, they would have had nothing to look at but the two white concrete pillars with the bell-buttons marked 'day' and 'night' and the chained gates they supported. Thanks to the trees, however, they saw the house clearly, though it was set back fifty yards. They could pick out the drainpipes, fire escapes and washing lines and they could admire the green dome which the Japanese army had added during their four years' tenancy.

Hurrying to the front in his desire to be accepted, the dwarf pressed the bell marked 'day'. A speaker was let into the pillar and they all stared at it, waiting for it to say something or, as Luke would have it, puff out pot-smoke. At the roadside, the Cantonese driver had switched on his radio full and it was playing a whining Chinese love song, on and on. The second pillar was blank except for a brass date announcing the

Inter Services Liaison Staff, The singer's threadbare cover. Deathwish the Hun had produced a camera and was photographing as methodically as if he were on one of his native battlefields.

'Maybe they don't work Saturdays,' Luke suggested, while they continued to wait, at which Craw told him not to be bloody silly: spooks worked seven days a week and round the clock, he said. Also they never ate, apart from Tufty.

'Good afternoon to you,' said the dwarf.

Pressing the night bell, he had put his twisted red lips to the vents of the speaker and affected an upper-class English accent, which to give him credit he managed surprisingly well.

'My name is Michael Hanbury-Steadly-Heamoor, and I'm personal bumboy to Big Moo. I should like, pliss, to speak to Major The singer on a

matter of some urgency, pliss, there is a mushroom-shaped cloud the Major may not have noticed, it appearce to be forming over the Pearl River and it's spoiling Big Moo's golf. Thenk you. Will you kindly open the gate?'

One of the blonde girls gave a titter.

'I didn't know he was a Steadly-Heamoor,' she said.

Abandoning Luke, they had tethered themselves to the shaggy Canadian's arm, and spent a lot of time whispering in his ear.

'He's Rasputin,' said one of the girls admiringly, stroking the back of his thigh. 'I've seen the film. He's the spitten image, aren't you, Canada?'

Now everybody had a drink from Luke's flask while they regrouped and wondered what to do. From the direction of the parked cab, the driver's Chinese love song continued dauntlessly, but the

speakers on the pillars said nothing at all. The dwarf pressed both bells at once, and tried an Al Capone threat.

'Now see here, The singer, we know you're in there. You come out with your hands raised, uncloaked, throw down your dagger - hey watch it, you stupid cow!'

The imprecation was addressed neither to the Canadian, nor to old Craw - who was sidling towards the trees, apparently to meet a call of nature - but to Luke, who had decided to beat his way into the house. The gateway stood in a muddy service bay sheltered by dripping trees. On the far side was a pile of refuse, some new. Sauntering over to this in search of an illuminating clue, Luke had unearthed a piece of pig iron made in the shape of an S. Having carted it to the gate, though it must have weighed thirty pounds or more, he was holding it two-handed

above his head and driving it against the staves, at which the gate tolled like a cracked bell.

Deathwish had sunk to one knee, his hollowed face clawed into a martyr's smile as he shot.

'Counting five, Tufty,' Luke yelled, with another shattering heave. 'One...' He struck again. 'Two...'

Overhead an assorted flock of birds, some very large, lifted out of the trees and flew in slow spirals, but the thunder of the valley and the boom of the gate drowned their screams. Their taxi-driver was dancing about, clapping and laughing, his love song forgotten. Stranger still, in view of the menacing weather, an entire Chinese family appeared, pushing not one pram but two, and they began laughing also, even the smallest child, holding their hands across their mouths to conceal their teeth. Till suddenly the Canadian cowboy let out a cry, shook off the girls and pointed through the gates.

'For Lord's sakes what the heck's Craw doing?
Old buzzard's jumped the wire.'

By now, whatever sense of normal scale there might have been had vanished. A collective madness had seized everyone. The drink, the black day, the claustrophobia, had gone to their heads entirely. The girls fondled the Canadian with abandon, Luke continued his hammering, the Chinese were hooting with laughter, until with divine timeliness the fog lifted, temples of blue-black cloud soared directly above them, and a torrent of rain crashed into the trees. A second longer and it hit them, drenching them in the first swoop. The girls, suddenly half naked, fled laughing and shrieking for the Mercedes, but the male ranks held firm - even the dwarf held firm - staring through the films of water at the unmistakable figure of Craw the Australian, in his old Etonian hat, standing in the shelter of the

house under a rough porch that looked as if it were made for bicycles, though no one but a lunatic would bicycle up the Peak.

'Craw!' they screamed. 'Monsignor! The bastard's scooped us!'

The din of the rain was deafening, the branches seemed to be cracking under its force. Luke had thrown aside his mad hammer. The shaggy cowboy went first, and the dwarf followed, Deathwish with his smile and his camera brought up the tail, crouching and hobbling as he continued photographing blindly. The rain poured off them as it wanted, sloshing in red rivulets round their ankles as they followed Craw's trail up a slope where the screech of bullfrogs added to the row. They scaled a bracken ridge, slithered to a halt before a barbed wire fence, clambered through the parted strands and crossed a low ditch. By the time they reached him, Craw was

gazing at the green cupola, while the rain despite the straw hat ran busily off his jaw, turning his trim fawn suit into a blackened, shapeless tunic. He stood as if mesmerised, staring upward. Luke, who loved him best, spoke first.

'Your Grace? Hey, wake up! It's me: Romeo. Jesus Christ, what the hell's eating him?'

Suddenly concerned, Luke gently touched his arm. But still Craw didn't speak.

'Maybe he died standing up,' the dwarf suggested, while grinning Deathwish photographed him on this happy off-chance.

Like an old prizefighter, Craw slowly rallied.

'Brother Luke, we owe you a handsome apology, sir,' he muttered.

'Get him back to the cab,' said Luke, and began clearing a way for him, but the old boy refused to move.

'Tufty Thesinger. A good scout. Not a flyer - not sly enough for flight - but a good scout.'

'Tufty Thesinger rest in peace,' said Luke impatiently. 'Let's go. Dwarf, move your ass.'

'He's stoned,' said the cowboy.

'Consider the clues, Watson,' Craw resumed, after another pause for meditation, while Luke tugged at his arm and the rain came on still faster:

'Remark first the empty cages over the window, whence airconditioners have been untimely ripped. Parsimony, my son, a commendable virtue, especially if I may say so, in a spook. Notice the dome, there? Study it carefully, sir. Scratch marks. Not, alas, the footprints of a gigantic hound, but the scratch marks of wireless aerials removed by the frantic, roundeye hand. Ever heard of a spookhouse without a wireless aerial? Might as well have a cathouse without a

piano.'

The rainfall had reached a crescendo. Huge drops thumped around them like shot. Craw's face was a mix of things which Luke could only guess at. Deep in his heart it occurred to him that Craw really might be dying. Luke had seen little of natural death and was very much on the alert for it.

'Maybe they just got rock-fever and split,' he said, trying again to coax him to the car.

'Very possibly, your Grace, very possibly indeed. It is certainly the season for rash, ungovernable acts.'

'Home,' said Luke, and pulled firmly at his arm. 'Make a path there, will you? Stretcher party.'

But the old man still lingered stubbornly for a last look at the English spookhouse flinching in the storm.

The Canadian cowboy filed first and his piece deserved a better fate. He wrote it that night, while the girls slept in his bed. He guessed the story would go best as a magazine piece rather than straight news, so he built it round the Peak in general and only used The Singer as a peg. He explained how the Peak was traditionally Hong Kong's Olympus - 'the higher you lived on it, the higher you stood in society' - and how the rich British opium traders, Hong Kong's founding fathers, fled there to avoid the cholera and fever of the town; how even a couple of decades ago a person of Chinese race required a pass before he could set foot there. He described the history of High Haven, and lastly its reputation, fostered by the Chinese-language press, as a witches' kitchen of British Imperialist plots against Mao. Overnight the kitchen had closed and the cooks had

vanished.

'Another conciliatory gesture?' he asked.

'Appeasement? All part of Britain's low-profile policy toward the Mainland? Or simply one more sign that in South East Asia, as everywhere else in the world, the British were having to come down from their mountain top?'

His mistake was to select a heavy English Sunday paper which occasionally ran his pieces. The D-Notice forbidding all reference to these events was there ahead of him. 'Regret your nice Haven story unplaced,' the editor cabled, and shoved it straight on the spike. A few days later, returning to his room, the cowboy found it ransacked. Also, for several weeks his telephone developed a sort of laryngitis, so that he never used it without including an obscene reference to Big Moo and his retinue.

Luke went home full of ideas, bathed, drank a lot of black coffee and set to work. He telephoned airlines, government contacts, and a whole host of pale, over-brushed acquaintances in the US Consulate, who infuriated him with arch and Delphic answers. He pestered furniture removal firms which specialised in handling government contracts. By ten that night he had, in his own words to the dwarf, whom he also telephoned several times; 'proof-cooked-five-different-ways' that Thesinger, his wife, and all the staff of High Haven, had left Hong Kong by charter in the early hours of Thursday morning, bound for London. Thesinger's boxer dog, he learned by a happy chance, would follow by air cargo later in the week. Having made a few notes, Luke crossed the room, settled to his typewriter, bashed out a few lines, and dried up, as he knew he would. He began in a rush, fluently:

'Today a fresh cloud of scandal hangs over the embattled and non-elected government of Britain's one remaining Asian colony. Hot on the latest revelation of graft in the police and civil service comes word that the Island's most hush-hush establishment, High Haven, base for Britain's cloak-and-dagger ploys against Red China, has been summarily shut down.'

There, with a blasphemous sob of impotence, he stopped and pressed his face into his open hands. Nightmares: those he could stand. To wake, after so much war, shaking and sweating from unspeakable visions, with his nostrils filled with the stink of napalm on human flesh: in a way, it was a consolation to him to know that after all that pressing down, the floodgates of his feeling had burst. There had been times, experiencing those things, when he longed for the leisure to recover his power of disgust. If nightmares were

necessary in order to restore him to the ranks of normal men and women, then he could embrace them with gratitude. But not in the worst of his nightmares had it occurred to him that having written the war, he might not be able to write the peace. For six night hours Luke fought with this awful deadness. Sometimes he thought of old Craw, standing there with the rain running off him, delivering his funeral oration: maybe that was the story? But whoever hung a story on the strange humour of a fellow hack?

Nor did the dwarf's own hashed-out version meet with much success, which made him very scratchy. On the face of it, the story had everything they asked for. It spoofed the British, it had spy written large, and for once it got away from the notion of America as the hangman of South East Asia. But all he had for a reply, after a five-day wait, was a terse instruction to stay on his rostrum and leave off trying to play the

trumpet.

Which left old Craw. Though a mere sideshow by comparison with the thrust of the main action, the timing of what Craw did, and did not do, remains to this day impressive. He filed nothing for three weeks. There was small stuff he should have handled but he didn't bother. To Luke, who was seriously concerned for him, he seemed at first to continue his mysterious decline. He lost his bounce and his love of fellowship entirely. He became snappish acid at times downright unkind, and he barked bad Cantonese at the waiters; even at his favourite, Goh. He treated the Shanghai Bowlers as if they were his worst enemies, and recalled alleged slights they had long forgotten. Sitting alone at his window seat, he was like an old boulevardier fallen on hard times, waspish, inward, slothful. Then one day he disappeared

and when Luke called apprehensively at his apartment the old amah told him that 'Whisky Papa runrun London fastee'. She was a strange little creature and Luke was inclined to doubt her. A dull North German stringer for der Spiegel reported sighting Craw in Vientiane, carousing at the Constellation bar, but again Luke wondered. Craw-watching had always been something of an insider sport, and there was prestige in adding to the general fund.

Till a Monday came, and around midday the old boy strolled into the Club wearing a new beige suit and a very fine buttonhole, all smiles and anecdotes once more, and went to work on the High Haven story. He spent money, more than his paper would normally have allowed him. He ate several jovial lunches with well-dressed Americans from vaguely titled United States agencies, some of them known to Luke. Wearing his famous straw hat, he took each separately to

quiet, well-chosen restaurants. In the Club, he was reviled for diplomat-crawling, a grave crime, and this pleased him. Next, a China-watchers' conference summoned him to Tokyo, and with hindsight it is fair to assume he used that visit to check out other parts of the story that was shaping for him. Certainly he asked old friends at the conference to unearth bits of fact for him when they got home to Bangkok, or Singapore, or Taipei or wherever they came from, and they obliged because they knew he would have done the same for them. In an eerie way, he seemed to know what he was looking for before they found it.

The result appeared in its fullest version in a Sydney morning newspaper which was beyond the long arm of Anglo-American censorship. By common consent it recalled the master's vintage years. It ran to two thousand words. Typically, he did not lead with the High Haven story at all, but

with the 'mysteriously empty wing' of the British Embassy in Bangkok, which till a month ago had housed a strange body called 'The Seato Co-ordination Unit', as well as a Visa Section boasting six second secretaries. Was it the pleasures of the Soho massage parlours, the old Australian enquired sweetly, which lured the Thais to Britain in such numbers that six second secretaries were needed to handle their visa applications? Strange, too, he mused, that since their departure, and the closure of that wing, long queues of aspirant travellers had not formed outside the Embassy. Gradually - he wrote at ease, but never carelessly - a surprising picture unfolded before his readers. He called British intelligence 'the Circus'. He said the name derived from the address of that organisation's secret headquarters, which overlooked a famous intersection of London streets. The Circus had not merely pulled out of High Haven, he said, but out

of Bangkok, Singapore, Saigon, Tokyo, Manila, and Djakarta as well. And Seoul. Even solitary Taiwan was not immune, where an unsung British Resident was discovered to have shed three clerk-drivers and two secretarial assistants only a week before the article went to press.

'A hoods' Dunkirk,' Craw called it, 'in which Charter DC8s replaced the Kentish fishing fleets.'

What had prompted such an exodus? Craw offered several nimble theories. Were we witnessing yet one more cut in British government spending? The writer was sceptical. In times of travail, Britain's tendency was to rely more, not less, on spies. Her entire empire history urged her to do so. The thinner her trade routes, the more elaborate her clandestine efforts to protect them. The more feeble her colonial grip, the more desperate her subversion of those who sought to loosen it. No: Britain might be on the

headline, but the spies would be the last of her luxuries to go. Craw set up other possibilities and knocked them down. A gesture of détente toward Mainland China? he suggested, echoing the cowboy's point. Certainly Britain would do anything under the sun to keep Hong Kong clear of Mao's anti-colonial zeal - short of giving up her spies. Thus old Craw arrived at the theory he liked best:

'Right across the Far Eastern chequerboard,' he wrote, 'the Circus is performing what is known in the spy-trade as a duck-dive.'

But why?

The writer now quoted his 'senior American prebends of the intelligence church militant in Asia'. American intelligence agents generally, he said, and not just in Asia, were 'hopping mad about lax security in the British organisations'. They were hopping highest about the recent

discovery of a top Russian spy - he threw in the correct tradename 'mole' - inside the Circus's London headquarters: a British traitor, whom they declined to name, but who in the words of the senior prebends had 'compromised every Anglo-American clandestine operation worth a dime for the last twenty years'. Where was the mole now? the writer had asked his sources. To which, with undiminished spleen, they had replied: 'Dead. In Russia. And hopefully both.'

Craw had never wanted for a wrap-up, but this one, to Luke's fond eye, had a real sense of ceremony about it. It was almost an assertion of life itself, if only of the secret life.

'Is Kim the boy spy vanished for good, then, from the legends of the East?' he asked. 'Shall the English pundit' never again stain his skin, slip into native costume and silently take his place beside the village fires? Do not fear,' he insisted.

'The British will be back! The time-honoured sport of spot-the-spook will be with us once again! The spy is not dead: he sleepeth.'

The piece appeared. In the Club, it was fleetingly admired, envied, forgotten. A local English-language paper with strong American connections reprinted it in full, with the result that the mayfly after all enjoyed another day of life. The old boy's charity benefit, they said: a doffing of the cap before he passes from the stage. Then the overseas network of the BBC ran it, and finally the Colony's own torpid network ran a version of the BBC's version, and for a full day there was a debate about whether Big Moo had decided to take the muzzle off the local news services. Yet even with this protracted billing, nobody, not Luke, not even the dwarf, saw fit to wonder how the devil the old man had known the back way into High Haven.

Which merely proved, if proof were ever needed, that journalists are no quicker than anybody else at spotting what goes on under their noses. It was a typhoon Saturday after all.

Within the Circus itself, as Craw had correctly called the seat of British intelligence, reactions to Craw's piece varied according to how much was known by those who were doing the reacting. In Housekeeping Section, for instance, which was responsible for such tatters of cover as the Circus could gather to itself these days, the old boy released a wave of pent-up fury which can only be understood by those who have tasted the atmosphere of a secret department under heavy siege. Even otherwise tolerant spirits became savagely retributive. Treachery! Breach of contract! Block his pension! Put him on the watch list! Prosecution the moment he returns to

England! Down the market a little, those less rabid about their security took a kindlier view, though it was still uninformed. Well, well, they said a little ruefully, that was the way of it: name us a joe who didn't blow his top now and then, and specially one who'd been left in ignorance for as long as poor old Craw had. And after all, he'd disclosed nothing that wasn't generally available, now had he? Really those housekeeper people should show a little moderation. Look how they went for poor Molly Meakin the other night, sister to Mike and hardly out of ribbons, just because she left a bit of blank stationery in her waste basket!

Only those at the inmost point saw things differently. To them, old Craw's article was a discreet masterpiece of disinformation: George Smiley at his best, they said. Clearly, the story had to come out, and all were agreed that censorship at any time was objectionable: Much

better, therefore, to let it come out in the manner of our choosing. The right timing, the right amount, the right tone: a lifetime's experience, they agreed, in every brushstroke. But that was not a view which passed outside their set.

Back in Hong Kong - clearly, said the Shanghai Bowlers, like the dying; the old boy had had a prophetic instinct of this - Craw's High Haven story turned out to be his swansong. A month after it appeared he had retired, not from the Colony but from his trade as a scribbler and from the Island too. Renting a cottage in the New Territories, he announced that he proposed to expire under a slanteye heaven. For the Bowlers he might as well have chosen Alaska. It was just too damn far, they said, to drive back when you were drunk. There was a rumour - untrue, since Craw's appetites did not run in that direction -

that he had got himself a pretty Chinese boy as a companion. That was the dwarf's work: he did not like to be scooped by old men. Only Luke refused to put him out of mind. Luke drove out to see him one mid-morning after nightshift. For the hell of it, and because the old buzzard meant a lot to him. Craw was happy as a sandboy, he reported: quite his former vile self, but a bit dazed to be bearded by Luke without warning. He had a friend with him, not a Chinese boy, but a visiting fireman whom he introduced as George: a podgy, ill-sighted little body in very round spectacles who had apparently dropped in unexpectedly. Aside, Craw explained to Luke that this George was a backroom boy on a British newspaper syndicate he used to work for in the dark ages.

'Handles the geriatric side, your Grace. Taking a swing through Asia.'

Whoever he was, it was clear that Craw stood in

awe of the podgy man, for he even called him 'your Holiness'. Luke had felt he was intruding and left without getting drunk.

So there it was. The singer's moonlight flit, old Craw's near death and resurrection; his swansong in defiance of so much hidden censorship; Luke's restless preoccupation with the secret world; the Circus's inspired exploitation of a necessary evil. Nothing planned but, as life would have it, a curtain-raiser to much that happened later. A typhoon Saturday; a ripple on the plunging, fetid, sterile, swarming pool which is Hong Kong; a bored chorus, still without a hero. And, curiously, a few months afterwards, it fell once more to Luke, in his role of Shakespearean messenger, to announce the hero's coming. The news came over the house wire while he was on stand-by and he published it to a bored audience with his

customary fervour:

'Folks! Give ear! I have news! Jerry Westerby's back on the beat, men! Heading out East again, hear me, stringing for that same damn comic!'

'His lordship!' the dwarf cried at once in mock ecstasy. 'A dash of blue blood, I say, to raise the vulgar tone! Oorah for quality, I say.' With a profane oath, he threw a napkin at the wine rack. 'Jesus,' he said, and emptied Luke's glass.

Chapter 2 - The Great Call

On the afternoon the telegram arrived, Jerry Westerby was hacking at his typewriter on the shaded side of the balcony of his rundown farmhouse, the sack of old books dumped at his feet. The envelope was brought by the black-clad person of the postmistress, a craggy and ferocious

peasant who with the ebbing of traditional forces had become the headman of the ragtag Tuscan hamlet. She was a wily creature but today the drama of the occasion had the better of her, and despite the heat she fairly scampered up the arid track. In her ledger the historic moment of delivery was later put at six past five, which was a lie but gave it force. The real time was five exactly. Indoors Westerby's scrawny girl, whom the village called the orphan, was hammering at a stubborn piece of goat's meat, vehemently, the way she attacked everything. The greedy eye of the postmistress spotted her, at the open window and from a good way off: elbows stuck out all ways and her top teeth jammed on to her lower lip: scowling, no doubt, as usual.

'Whore,' thought the postmistress passionately, 'now you have what you have been waiting for!'

The radio was blaring Verdi: the orphan would

hear only classical music, as the whole village had learned from the scene she had made at the tavern the evening when the blacksmith tried to choose rock music on the juke box. She had thrown a pitcher at him. So what with the Verdi, and the typewriter and the goat, said the postmistress, the row was so deafening that even an Italian would have heard it.

Jerry sat like a locust on the wood floor, she recalled - maybe he had one cushion - and he was using the booksack as a footstool. He sat splay-footed, typing between his knees. He had bits of flyblown manuscript spread round him, which were weighted with stones against the red-hot breezes which plagued his scalded hilltop, and a wicker flask of the local red at his elbow, no doubt for, the moments, known even to the greatest artists, when natural inspiration failed him. He typed the eagle's way, she told them later amid admiring laughter: much circling before he

swooped. And he wore what he always wore, whether he was loafing fruitlessly around his bit of paddock, tilling the dozen useless olive trees which the rogue Franco had palmed off on him, or paddling down to the village with the orphan to shop, or sitting in the tavern over a sharp one before embarking on the long climb home: buckskin boots which the orphan never brushed, and were consequently worn shiny at the toe, ankle socks which she never washed, a filthy shirt, once white, and grey shorts that looked as though they had been frayed by hostile dogs, and which an honest woman would long ago have mended. And he greeted her with that familiar burry rush of words, at once bashful and enthusiastic, which she did not understand in detail, but only generally, like a news broadcast, and could copy, through the black gaps of her decrepit teeth, with surprising flashes of fidelity. 'Mama Stefano, gosh, super, must be boiling.

Here, sport, wet your whistle,' he exclaimed, while he slapped down the brick steps with a glass of wine for her, grinning like a schoolboy, which was his nickname in the village: the schoolboy, a telegram for the schoolboy, urgent from London! In nine months no more than a wad of paperback books and the weekly scrawl from his child, and now out of a blue sky this monument of a telegram, short like a demand, but fifty words prepaid for the reply! Imagine, fifty, the cost alone! Only natural that as many as possible should have tried their hand at reading it.

They had choked at first over honourable: 'The honourable Gerald Westerby.' Why? The baker, who had been a prisoner-of-war in Birmingham, produced a battered dictionary: having honour, title of courtesy given to the son of nobleman. Of course. Signora Sanders, who lived across the valley had already declared the schoolboy to be of noble blood. The second son of a press baron,

she had said, Lord Westerby a newspaper proprietor, dead. First the paper had died, then its owner - thus Signora Sanders, a wit, they had passed the joke round. Next regret, which was easy. So was advise. The postmistress was gratified to discover, against all expectation, how much good Latin the English had assimilated despite their decadence. The word guardian came harder for it led to protector, thence inevitably to unsavoury jokes among the menfolk, which the postmistress stamped on angrily. Till at last, step by step, the code was broken and the story out. The schoolboy had a guardian, meaning a substitute father. This guardian lay dangerously ill in hospital, demanding to see the schoolboy before he died. He wanted nobody else. Only honourable Westerby would do. Quickly they filled in the rest of the picture for themselves: the sobbing family gathered at the bedside, the wife prominent and inconsolable, refined priests

administering the last sacraments, valuables being locked away, and all over the house, in corridors, back kitchens, the same whispered word: Westerby - where is honourable Westerby?

Lastly the telegram's signatories remained to be interpreted. There were three and they called themselves solicitors, a word which triggered one more swoop of dirty innuendo before notary was arrived at, and faces abruptly hardened. Holy Maria. If three notaries were involved, then so were large sums of money. And if all three had insisted upon signing, and prepaid that fifty word reply to boot, then not just large but mountainous sums! Acres! Wagon loads! No wonder the orphan had clung to him so, the whore! Suddenly everyone was clamouring to make the hill climb. Guido's Lambretta would take him as far as the water tank, Mario could run like a fox, Manuela the chandler's girl had a tender eye, the shadow of bereavement sat well on her. Repulsing all

volunteers - and handing Mario a sharp cuff for the presumption - the postmistress locked the till and left her idiot son to mind the shop, though it meant twenty sweltering minutes and - if that cursed furnace of a wind was blowing up there - a mouthful of red dust for her toil.

They had not made enough of Jerry at first. She regretted this now, as she laboured through the olive groves, but the error had its reasons. First, he had arrived in winter when the cheap buyers come. He arrived alone, but wearing the furtive look of someone who has recently dumped a lot of human cargo, such as children, wives, mothers: the postmistress had known men in her time, and she had seen that wounded smile too often not to recognise it in Jerry: 'I am married but free,' it said, and neither claim was true. Second, the scented English major brought him, a known pig who ran a property agency for exploiting peasants: yet another reason to spurn the

schoolboy. The scented major showed him several desirable farmhouses, including one in which the postmistress herself had an interest - also, by coincidence, the finest - but the schoolboy settled instead for the pederast Franco's hovel stuck on this forsaken hilltop she was now ascending: the devil's hill, they called it; the devil came up here when hell became too cool for him. Slick Franco of all people, who watered his milk and his wine and spent his Sundays simpering with popinjays in the town square! The inflated price was half a million lire of which the scented major tried to steal a third, merely because there was a contract.

'And everyone knows why the major favoured slick Franco,' she hissed through her frothing teeth, and her pack of supporters made knowing noises 'tch-tch' at each rather, till she angrily ordered them to shut up.

Also, as a shrewd woman, she distrusted something in Jerry's make-up. A hardness buried in the lavishness. She had seen it with Englishmen before, but the schoolboy was in a class by himself, and she distrusted him; she held him dangerous through his restless charm. Today, of course, one could put down those early failings to the eccentricity of a noble English writer, but at the time, the postmistress had shown him no such indulgence. 'Wait till the summer,' she had warned her customers in a snarl, soon after his first shambling visit to her shop - pasta, bread, flykiller. 'In the summer he'll find out what he's bought, the cretin.' In the summer, slick Franco's mice would storm the bedroom, Franco's fleas would devour him alive, and Franco's pederastic hornets would chase him round the garden and the devil's red-hot wind would burn his parts to a frazzle. The water would run out, he would be forced to defecate in the fields like an animal.

And when winter came round again the scented pig major could sell the house to another fool, at a loss to everyone but himself.

As to celebrity, in those first weeks the schoolboy showed not a shred of it. He never bargained, he had never heard of discounts, there was not even pleasure in robbing him. And when, in the shop, she drove him beyond his few miserable phrases of kitchen Italian, he did not raise his voice and bawl at her like the real English but shrugged happily and helped himself to whatever he wanted. A writer, they said: well, who was not? Very well, he bought quires of foolscap from her. She ordered more, he bought them. Bravo. He possessed books: a mildewed lot, by the look of them, which he carried in a grey jute sack like a poacher's and before the orphan came they would see him striding off into the middle of nowhere, the book-sack slung over his shoulder, for a reading session. Guido had happened on him in

the Contessa's forest, perched on a log like a toad and leafing through them one after another, as if they were all one book and he had lost his place. He also possessed a typewriter of which the filthy cover was a patchwork of worn out luggage labels: bravo again. Just as any longhair who buys a paintpot calls himself an artist: that sort of writer. In the spring the orphan came and the postmistress hated her too.

A red-head, which was halfway to whoredom for a start. Not enough breast to nurse a rabbit, and worst of all a fierce eye for arithmetic. They said he found her in the town: whore again. From the first day, she had not let him out of her sight. Clung to him like a child. Ate with him, and sulked; drank with him, and sulked; shopped with him, picking up the language like a thief, till they became a minor local sight together, the English giant and his sulking wraith whore, trailing down the hill with their rush basket, the schoolboy in

his tattered shorts grinning at everyone, the scowling orphan in her whore's sackcloth with nothing underneath, so that though she was plain as a scorpion the men stared after her to see her hard haunches rock through the fabric. She walked with all her fingers locked around his arm and her cheek against his shoulder, and she only let go of him to pay out meanly from the purse she now controlled. When they met a familiar face, he greeted it for both of them, flapping his vast free arm like a Fascist. And God help the man who, on the rare occasion when she went alone, ventured a fresh word or a wolf call: she would turn and spit like a gutter-cat, and her eyes burned like the devil's.

'And now we know why!' cried the postmistress, very loud, as, still climbing, she mounted a false crest. 'The orphan is after his inheritance. Why else would a whore be loyal?'

It was the visit of Signora Sanders to her shop which caused Mama Stefano's dramatic reappraisal of the schoolboy's worth, and of the orphan's motive. The Sanders was rich and bred horses further up the valley, where she lived with a lady friend known as the man-child who wore close-cut hair and chain belts. Their horses won prizes everywhere. The Sanders was sharp and intelligent and frugal in a way Italians liked, and she knew whomever was worth knowing of the few moth-eaten English scattered over the hills. She called ostensibly to buy a ham, a month ago it must have been, but her real quest was for the schoolboy. Was it true? she asked: 'Signor Gerald Westerby, and living here in the village? A large man, pepper and salt hair, athletic, full of energy, an aristocrat, shy?' Her father the general had known the family in England, she said; they had

been neighbours in the country for a spell, the schoolboy's father and her own. The Sanders was considering paying him a visit: what were the schoolboy's circumstances? The postmistress muttered something about the orphan, but the Sanders was unperturbed:

'Oh the Westerbys are always changing their women,' she said with a laugh, and turned toward the door.

Dumbfounded, the postmistress detained her, then showered her with questions.

But who was he? What had he done with his youth? A journalist, said the Sanders, and gave what she knew of the family background; the father a flamboyant figure, fair-haired like the son, kept racehorses, she had met him again not long before his death and he was still a man. Like the son he was never at peace: women and houses, changing them all the time; always

roaring at someone, if not at his son then at someone across the street. The postmistress pressed harder. But in his own right: was the schoolboy distinguished in his own right? Well, he had certainly worked for some distinguished newspapers, put it that way, said the Sanders, her smile mysteriously broadening.

'It is not the English habit, as a rule, to accord distinction to journalists,' she explained, in her classic, Roman way of talking.

But the postmistress needed more, far more. His writing, his book, what was all that about? So long! So much thrown away! Basketsful, the rubbish carter had told her - for no one in his right mind would light a fire up there in summertime. Beth Sanders understood the intensity of isolated people, and knew that in barren places their intelligence must fix on tiny matters. So she tried, she really tried to oblige.

Well, he certainly had travelled incessantly, she said, coming back to the counter and putting down her parcel. Today of were travellers, of course, breakfast in London, lunch in Rome, dinner in Delhi, but Signor Westerby had been exceptional even by that standard. So perhaps it was a travel book, she ventured.

But why had he travelled? the postmistress insisted, for whom no journey was without a goal: why?

For the wars, the Sanders replied patiently: for wars, pestilence and famine. 'What else had a journalist to do these days, after all, but report life's miseries?' she asked.

The postmistress shook her head wisely, all her senses boxed upon the revelation: the son of a blond equestrian lord who bellowed, a mad traveller, a writer in distinguished newspapers! And was there a particular theatre? she asked - a

corner of God's earth - in which he was a specialist? He was mostly in the East, the Sanders thought, after a moment's reflection. He had been everywhere, but there is a kind of Englishman for whom only the East is home. No doubt that was why he had come to Italy. Some men go dull without the sun.

And some women, too, the postmistress shrieked, and they had a good laugh.

Ah the East, said the postmistress, with a tragic slanting of the head - war upon war, why didn't the Pope stop it? As Mama Stefano ran on this way, the Sanders seemed to remember something. She smiled slightly at first, and her smile grew. An exile's smile, the postmistress reflected, watching her: she is like a sailor remembering the sea.

'He used to drag a sackful of books around,' she said. 'We used to say he stole them from the big

houses.'

'He carries it now!' the postmistress cried, and told how Guido had stumbled on him in the Contessa's forest, the schoolboy reading on the log..

'He had notions of becoming a novelist, I believe,' the Sanders continued, in the same vein of private reminiscence: 'I remember his father telling us. He was frightfully angry. Roared all over the house.'

'The schoolboy? The schoolboy was angry?'
Mama Stefano exclaimed, now quite incredulous.

'No, no. The father.' The Sanders laughed aloud. In the English social scale, she explained, novelists- rated even worse than journalists. 'Does he also paint still?'

'Paint? He is a painter?'

He tried, said the Sanders, but the father forbade that also. Painters were the lowest of all creatures, she said, amid fresh laughter: only the successful ones were remotely tolerable.

Soon after this multiple bombshell the blacksmith - the same blacksmith who had been the target of the orphan's pitcher - reported having seen Jerry and the girl at the Sanders' stud, twice in one week, then three times, also eating there. And that the schoolboy had shown a great talent for horses, lunging and walking them with natural understanding, even the wildest. The orphan took no part, said the blacksmith. She sat in the shade with the man-child either reading from the book-sack or watching him with her jealous, unblinking eyes; waiting, as they all now knew, for the guardian to die. And today the telegram!

Jerry had seen Mama Stefano from a long way off. He had that instinct, there was a part of him that never ceased to watch: a black figure hobbling inexorably up the dust-path like a lame beetle in and out of the ruled shadows of the cedars, up the dry watercourse of slick Franco's olive groves, into their own bit of Italy as he called it, all two hundred square metres of it, but big enough to hit a tethered tennis-ball round a pole on cool evenings when they felt athletic. He had seen very early the blue envelope she was waving, and he had even heard the sound of her mewling carrying crookedly over the other sounds of the valley: the Lambrettas and the bandsaws. And his first gesture, without stopping his typing, was to steal a glance at the house to make sure the girl had closed the kitchen window to keep out the heat and the insects. Then, just as the postmistress later described, he went quickly down the steps to her, wine glass in hand, in order

to head her off before she came too near.

He read the telegram slowly, once, bending over it to get the writing into shadow, and his face as Mama Stefano watched it became gaunt, and private, and an extra huskiness entered his voice as he laid one huge, cushioned hand on her arm.

'La sera,' he managed, as he guided her back along the path. He would send his reply this evening, he meant. 'Molto grazie, Mama. Super. Thanks very much. Terrific.'

As they parted she was still chattering wildly, offering him every service under the sun, taxis, porters, phone calls to the airport, and Jerry was vaguely patting the pockets of his shorts for small or large change: he had momentarily forgotten, apparently, that the girl looked after the money.

The schoolboy had received the news with bearing, the postmistress reported to the village.

Graciously, to the point of escorting her part of the way back; bravely, so that only a woman of the world - and one who knew the English - would have read the aching grief beneath; distractedly, so that he had neglected to tip her. Or was he already acquiring the extreme parsimony of the very rich?

But how did the orphan behave? they asked. Did she not sob and cry to the Virgin, pretending to share his distress?

'He has yet to tell her,' the postmistress whispered, recalling wistfully her one short glimpse of her, sideview, hammering at the meat: 'He has yet to consider her position.'

The village settled, waiting for the evening, and Jerry sat in the hornet field, gazing at the sea and winding the book-bag round and round, till it reached its limit, and unwound itself.

First there was the valley, and above it stood the five hills in a half ring, and above the hills ran the sea which at that time of day was no more than a flat brown stain in the sky. The hornet field where he sat was a long terrace shored by stones, with a ruined barn at one corner which had given them shelter to picnic and sunbathe unobserved until the hornets nested in the wall. She had seen them when she was hanging out washing, and run in to Jerry to tell him; and Jerry had unthinkingly grabbed a bucket of mortar from slick Franco's place and filled in all their entrances. Then called her down so that she could admire his handiwork: my man, how he protects - me. In his memory he saw her exactly: shivering at his side, arms huddled across her body, staring at the new cement and listening to the crazed hornets inside and whispering, 'Jesus, Jesus,' too frightened to

budge.

Maybe she'll wait for me, he thought.

He remembered the day he met her. He told himself that story often, because good luck was rare in Jerry's life, where women were concerned, and when it happened he liked to roll it around the tongue, as he would say. A Thursday. He'd taken his usual lift to town, in order to do a spot of shopping, or maybe to see a fresh set of faces and get away from the novel for a while; or maybe just to bolt from the screaming monotony of that empty landscape, which more often was like a prison to him, and a solitary one at that; or conceivably he might just hook himself a woman, which occasionally he brought off by hanging round the bar of the tourist hotel. So he was sitting reading in the trattoria in the town square - a carafe, plate of ham, olives - and suddenly he became aware of this skinny, rangy kid, red-head,

sullen face and a brown dress like a monk's habit and a shoulder bag made out of carpet stuff.

'Looks naked without a guitar,' he'd thought.

Vaguely, she reminded him of his daughter Cat, short for Catherine, but only vaguely because he hadn't seen Cat for ten years, which was when his first marriage fell in. Quite why he hadn't seen her, he could even now not precisely say. In the first shock of separation, a confused sense of chivalry told him Cat did better to forget him.

'Best if she writes me off: Put her heart where her home is.' When her mother remarried, the case for self-denial seemed all the stronger. But sometimes he missed her very badly, and most likely that was why, having caught his interest, the girl held it. Did Cat go round like that, alone and spiked with tiredness? Had Cat got her freckles still, and a jaw like a pebble? Later, the girl told him she'd jumped the wall. She'd got

herself a governess job with some rich family in Florence. Mother was too busy with the lovers to worry about the kids, but the husband had lots of time for the governess. She'd grabbed what cash she could find and bolted and here she was: no luggage, the police alerted, and using her last chewed banknote to buy herself one square meal before perdition.

There was not a lot of talent in the square that day - there never was - and by the time she sat down, that kid had got just about every able-bodied fellow in town giving her the treatment, from the waiters upward, purring 'beautiful missus' and much rougher stuff besides, of which Jerry missed the precise drift, but it had them all laughing at her expense. Then one of them tried to tweak her breast, at which Jerry got up and went over to her table. He was no great hero, quite the reverse in his secret view, but a lot of things were going around in his mind, and it

might just as well have been Cat who was getting shoved into a corner. So yes: anger. He therefore clapped one hand on the shoulder of the small waiter who had made the dive for her, and one hand on the shoulder of the big one who had applauded such bravado, and he explained to them, in bad Italian, but in a fairly reasonable way, that they really must stop being pests, and let the beautiful missus eat her meal in peace. Otherwise he would break their greasy little necks. The atmosphere wasn't too good after that, and the little one seemed actually to be squaring for a fight, for his hand kept travelling toward a back pocket, and hitching at his jacket, till a final look at Jerry changed his mind for him. Jerry dumped some money on the table, picked up her bag for her, went back to collect his book-sack, and led her by the arm, all but lifting her off the ground, across the square to the Apollo, 'Are you English?' she asked on the way.

'Pips, core, the lot,' Jerry snorted furiously, which was the first time he saw her smile: It was a smile definitely worth working for: her bony little face lit up like a urchin's through the grime.

So, simmered down a bit, Jerry fed her, and with the advent of calm he began spinning the tale a bit, because after all those weeks without a focus it was natural he should make an effort to amuse. He explained that he was a newshound out to grass and now writing a novel, that it was his first shot, that he was scratching a long-standing itch, and that he had a dwindling pile of cash from a comic that had paid him redundancy - which was a giggle, he said, because he had been redundant all his life.

'Kind of golden handshake,' he said. He had put a bit down for the house, loafed a bit, and now there was precious little gold left over. That was the second time she smiled. Encouraged, he

touched on the solitary nature of the creative life: 'But, Christ, you wouldn't believe the sweat of really, well really getting it all to come out, sort of thing...'

'Wives?' she asked, interrupting him. For a moment, he had assumed she was tuning to the novel. Then he saw her waiting, suspicious eyes, so he replied cautiously: 'None active,' as if wives were volcanoes, which in Jerry's world they had been. After lunch, as they drifted, somewhat plastered, across the empty square, with the sun pelting straight down on them, she made her one declaration of intent.

'Everything I own is in this bag, got it?' she asked. It was the shoulder bag, made out of carpet stuff: 'That's the way I'm going to keep it. So just don't anybody give me anything I can't carry. Got it?'

When they reached his bus stop she hung around, and when the bus came she climbed aboard after

him and let Jerry buy her a ticket, and when she got out at the village she climbed the hill with him, Jerry with his book-sack, the girl with her shoulder bag, and that's how it was. Three nights and most of the days she slept and on the fourth night she came to him. He was so unprepared for her that he had actually left his bedroom door locked: he had a bit of a thing about doors and windows, specially at night. So that she had to hammer on the door and shout, 'I want to come into your bloody cot for Christ's sake' before he opened up.

'Just never lie to me,' she warned, scrambling into his bed as if they were sharing a dormitory feast. 'No words, no lies. Got it?'

As a lover, she was like a butterfly, he remembered: could have been Chinese. Weightless, never still, so unprotected he despaired of her. When the fireflies came out, the

two of them knelt on the window-seat and watched them, and Jerry thought about the East. The cicadas shrieked and the frogs burped, and the lights of the fireflies ducked and parried round a central pool of blackness, and they would kneel there naked for an hour or more, watching and listening, while the hot moon drooped into the hill-crests. They never spoke on those occasions, nor reached any conclusions that he was aware of. But he gave up locking his door.

The music and the hammering had stopped, but a din of church bells had started, he supposed for evensong. The valley was never quiet, but the bells sounded heavier, because of the dew. He sauntered over to the swingball, teasing the rope away from the metal pillar, then with his old buckskin boot kicked at the grass around the base, remembering her lithe little body flying

from shot to shot and the monk's habit billowing.

'Guardian is the big one,' they had said to him.
'Guardian means the road back,' they had said.
For a moment longer Jerry hesitated, gazing downward again into the blue plain where the very road, not figurative at all, led shimmering and straight as a canal toward the city and the airport.

Jerry was not what he would have called a thinking man. A childhood spent listening to his father's bellowing had taught him early the value of big ideas, and big words as well. Perhaps that was what had joined him to the girl in the first place, he thought. That's what she was on about: 'Don't give me anything I can't carry.'

Maybe. Maybe not. She'll find someone else. They always do.

It's time, he thought. Money gone, novel stillborn,

girl too young: come on. It's time.

Time for what?

Time! Time she found herself a young bull instead of wearing out an old one. Time to let the wanderlust stir. Strike camp. Wake the camels. On your way. Lord knows, Jerry had done it before once or twice. Pitch the old tent, stay a little, move on; sorry, sport.

It's an order, he told himself. Ours not to reason. Whistle goes, the lads rally. End of argument. Guardian.

Rum how he'd had a feeling it was coming, all the same, he thought, still staring into the blurred plain. No great presentiment, any of that tripe: simply, yes, a sense of time. It was due. A sense of season. In place of a gay upsurge of activity, however, a sluggishness seized hold of his body. He suddenly felt too tired, too fat, too sleepy ever

to move again. He could have lain down just here, where he stood. He could have slept on the harsh grass till she woke him or the darkness came.

Tripe, he told himself. Sheer tripe. Taking the telegram from his pocket, he strode vigorously into the house, calling her name:

'Hey, sport! Old thing! Where are you hiding? Spot of bad news.' He handed it to her.

'Doomsville,' he said, and went to the window rather than watch her read it.

He waited till he heard the flutter of the paper landing on the table. Then he turned round because there was no other way: nothing else for it. She hadn't said anything but she had wedged her hands under her armpits and sometimes her body-talk was deafening. He saw how the fingers wavered blindly about, trying to lock on to something.

'Why not shove off to Beth's place for a bit?' he suggested. 'She'll have you like a shot, old Beth. Think the world of you. Have you long as you like, Beth would.'

She kept her arms folded till he went down the hill to send his telegram. By the time he came back, she had got his suit out, the blue one they had always laughed about - his prison gear, she called it - but she was trembling and her face had turned white and ill, the way it went when he dealt with the hornets. When he tried to kiss her, she was cold as marble, so he let her be. At night they slept together and it was worse than being alone.

Mama Stefano announced the news at lunchtime, breathlessly. The honourable schoolboy had left, she said. He wore his suit. He carried a grip, his

typewriter and the book-sack. Franco had taken him to the airport in the van. The orphan had gone with them but only as far as the sliproad to the autostrada. When she got out she didn't say goodbye: just sat beside the road like the trash she was. For a while, after they dumped her, the schoolboy had remained very quiet and inward. He scarcely noticed Franco's ingenious and pointed questions, and he pulled at his tawny forelock a lot - the Sanders had called it pepper and salt. At the airport, with an hour to kill before the plane left, they had a flask together, also a game of dominoes, but when Franco tried to rob him for the fare, the schoolboy showed an unusual harshness, haggling at last like the true rich.

Franco had told her, she said: her bosom friend. Franco, maligned as a pederast. Had she not always defended him, Franco the elegant, Franco, the father of her idiot son? They had had their

differences - who had not? - but let them only name for her, if they could, in the whole valley, a more upright, diligent, graceful, better dressed man than Franco, her friend and lover!

The schoolboy had gone back for his inheritance, she said.

Chapter 3 - Mr George Smiley's Horse

Only George Smiley, said Roddy Martindale, a fleshy Foreign Office wit, could have got himself appointed captain of a wrecked ship. Only Smiley, he added, could have compounded the pains of that appointment by choosing the same moment to abandon his beautiful, if occasionally errant, wife.

At first or even second glance George Smiley was ill-suited to either part, as Martindale was quick to note. He was tubby and in small ways hopelessly unassertive. A natural shyness made him from time to time pompous, and to men of Martindale's flamboyance his unobtrusiveness acted as a standing reproach. He was also myopic, and to see him in those first days after the holocaust, in his round spectacles and his civil servant weeds, attended by his slender, tight-mouthed cupbearer Peter Guillam, discreetly padding the marshier by-paths of the Whitehall jungle; or stooped over a heap of papers at any hour of day or night in his scruffy throne-room on the fifth floor of the Edwardian mausoleum in Cambridge Circus which he now commanded, you would think it was he, and not the dead Haydon, the Russian spy, who deserved the tradename 'mole'. After such long hours of work in that cavernous and half-deserted building, the

bags beneath his eyes turned to bruises, he smiled seldom, though he was by no means humourless, and there were times when the mere exertion of rising from his chair seemed to leave him winded. Reaching the upright position, he would pause, mouth slightly open, and give a little, fricative 'uh' before moving off: Another mannerism had him polishing his spectacles distractedly on the fat end of his tie, which left his face so disconcertingly naked that one very senior secretary - in the jargon, these ladies were known as 'mothers' - was on more than one occasion assailed by a barely containable urge, of which psychiatrists would have made all sorts of heavy weather, to start forward and shelter him from the impossible task he seemed determined to perform.

'George Smiley isn't just cleaning the stable,' the same Roddy Martindale remarked, from his luncheon table at the Garrick. 'He's carrying his

horse up the hill as well. Haw haw.'

Other rumours, favoured mainly by departments which had entered bids for the charter of the foundered service, were less respectful of his travail.

'George is living on his reputation,' they said, after a few months of this. 'Catching Bill Haydon was a fluke.'

Anyway, they said, it had been an American tip-off, not George's coup at all: the Cousins should have had the credit, but they had waived it diplomatically. No, no, said others, it was the Dutch. The Dutch had broken Moscow Centre's code and passed the take through liaison: ask Roddy Martindale - Martindale, of course, being a professional trafficker in Circus misinformation. And so, back and forth, while Smiley, seemingly oblivious, kept his counsel and dismissed his wife.

They could hardly believe it.

They were stunned.

Martindale, who had never loved a woman in his life, was particularly affronted. He made a positive thing of it at the Garrick.

'The gall! Him a complete nobody and her half a Sawley! Pavlovian, that's what I call it. Sheer Pavlovian cruelty. After years of putting up with her perfectly healthy peccadilloes - driving her to them, you mark my words - what does the little man do? Turns round and with quite Napoleonic brutality kicks her in the teeth! It's a scandal. I shall tell everyone it's a scandal. I'm a tolerant man in my way, not unworldly I think, but Smiley has gone too far. Oh yes.'

For once, as occasionally occurred, Martindale had the picture straight. The evidence was there for all to read. With Haydon dead and the past

buried, the Smileys had made up their differences and together, with some small ceremony, the reunited couple had moved back into their little Chelsea house in Bywater Street. They had even made a stab at being in society. They had gone out, they had entertained in the style befitting George's new appointment; the Cousins, the odd Parliamentary Minister, a variety of Whitehall barons all dined and went home full; they had even for a few weeks made a modestly exotic couple around the higher bureaucratic circuit. Till overnight, to his wife's unmistakable discomfort, George Smiley had removed himself from her sight, and set up camp in the meagre attics behind his throne-room in the Circus. Soon the gloom of the place seemed to work itself into the fabric of his face, like dust into the complexion of a prisoner. While in Chelsea, Ann Smiley pined, taking very hardly to her unaccustomed role of wife abandoned.

Dedication, said the knowing. Monkish abstinence. George is a saint. And at his age.

Balls, the Martindale faction retorted. Dedication to what? What was there left, in that dreary red-brick monster, that could possibly command such an act of self-immolation? What was there anywhere, in beastly Whitehall or, Lord help us, in beastly England, that could command it any more?

Work, said the knowing.

But what work? came the falsetto protests of these self-appointed Circus-watchers, handing round, like Gorgons, their little scraps of sight and hearing. What did he do up there, shorn of three-quarters of his staff, all but a few old biddies to brew his tea, his networks blown to smithereens? His foreign residencies, his reptile fund frozen solid by the Treasury - they meant his operational accounts - and not a friend in

Whitehall or Washington to call his own? Unless you counted that loping prig Lacon at the Cabinet Office to be his friend, always so determined to go down the line for him at every conceivable opportunity. And naturally Lacon would put up a fight for him: what else had he? The Circus was Lacon's power base. Without it, he was - well, what he was already, a capon. Naturally Lacon would sound the battle cry.

'It's a scandal,' Martindale announced huffily, as he cropped his smoked eel and steak-and-kidney and the club's own claret, up another twenty pence a crack. 'I shall tell everybody.'

Between the villagers of Whitehall and the villagers of Tuscany, there was sometimes surprisingly little to choose.

Time did not kill the rumours. To the contrary

they multiplied, taking colour from his isolation and calling it obsession.

It was remembered that Bill Haydon had not merely been George Smiley's colleague, but Ann's cousin and something more besides. Smiley's fury against him, they said, had not stopped at Haydon's death: he was positively dancing on Bill's grave. For example, George had personally supervised the clearing of Haydon's fabled pepper-pot room overlooking the Charing Cross Road, and the destruction of every last sign of him, from his indifferent oil-paintings by his own hand to the leftover oddments in the drawers of his desk; even the desk itself, which he had ordered sawn up, and burned. And when that was done, they maintained, he had called in Circus workmen to tear down the partition walls. Oh yes, said Martindale.

Or, for another example, and frankly a most

unnerving one, take the photograph which hung on the wall of Smiley's dingy, throne-room, a passport photograph by the look of it, but blown up far beyond its natural size, so that it had a grainy and some said spectral look. One of the Treasury boys spotted it during an ad-hoc conference about scrapping the operational bank accounts.

'Is that Control's portrait by the by?' he had asked of Peter Guillam, purely as a bit of social chit chat. No sinister intent behind the question. Well, surely one was allowed to ask? Control, other names still unknown, was the legend of the place. He had been Smiley's guide and mentor for all of thirty years. Smiley had actually buried him, they said: for the very secret, like the very rich, have a tendency to die unmourned.

'No, it bloody well isn't Control,' Guillam the cupbearer had retorted, in that off-hand,

supercilious way of his. 'It's Karla.'

And who was Karla when he was at home?

Karla, my dear, was the workname of the Soviet case officer who had recruited Bill Haydon in the first place, and had the running of him thereafter.

'A different sort of legend entirely, to say the least,' said Martindale, all aquiver. 'It seems we've a real vendetta on our hands. How puerile can you get, I wonder?'

Even Lacon was a mite bothered by that picture.

'Now seriously, why do you hang him there, George?' he demanded, in his bold, head-prefect's voice, dropping in on Smiley one evening on his way home from the Cabinet Office. 'What does he mean to you, I wonder? Have you thought about that one? It isn't a little macabre, you don't think? The victorious enemy? I'd have thought he would get you down, gloating over you all up

there?'

'Well, Bill's dead,' said Smiley, in that elliptical way he had sometimes of giving a clue to an argument, rather than the argument itself.

'And Karla's alive, you mean?' Lacon prompted. 'And you'd rather have a live enemy than a dead one? Is that what you mean?'

But questions of George Smiley at a certain point had a habit of passing him by; even, said his colleagues, of appearing to be in bad taste.

An incident which provided more substantial fare around the Whitehall bazaars concerned the 'ferrets', or electronic sweepers. A worse case of favouritism could not be remembered anywhere. My God those hoods had a nerve sometimes! Martindale, who had been waiting a year to have

his room done, sent a complaint to his Under-Secretary. By hand. To be opened personally by. So did his Brother-in-Christ at Defence and so, nearly, did Hammer of Treasury, but Hammer either forgot to post his, or thought better of it at the last moment. It wasn't just a question of priorities, not at all. Not even of principle. Money was involved. Public money. Treasury had already had half the Circus rewired on George's insistence. His paranoia about eavesdropping knew no limits, apparently. Add to that, the ferrets were short-staffed, there had been industrial disputes about unsocial hours - oh, any number of angles! Dynamite, the whole subject.

Yet what had happened in the event? Martinale had the details at his manicured fingertips. George went to Lacon on a Thursday - the day of the freak heatwave, you remember, when everyone practically expired, even at the Garrick - and by the Saturday - a Saturday, - imagine the

overtime! - the brutes were swarming over the Circus, enraging the neighbours with their din, and tearing the place apart. A more gross case of blind preference had not been met with since - since, well, they allowed Smiley to have back that mangy old Russian researcher of his, Sachs, Connie Sachs, the don woman from Oxford, against all reason, calling her a mother when she wasn't.

Discreetly, or as discreetly as he could manage, Martindale went to quite some lengths to find out whether the ferrets had actually discovered anything, but met a blank wall. In the secret world, information is money, and by that standard at least, though he might not know it, Roddy Martindale was a pauper, for the inside to this inside-story was known only to the smallest few. It was true that Smiley called on Lacon in his panelled room overlooking St James's Park on the Thursday: and that the day was uncommonly hot

for autumn. Rich shafts of sunlight poured on to the representational carpet, and the dust-specks played in them like tiny tropical fish. Lacon had even removed his jacket, though of course not his tie.

'Connie Sachs has been doing some arithmetic on Karla's handwriting in analogous cases,' Smiley announced.

'Handwriting?' Lacon echoed, as if handwriting were against the regulations.

'Tradecraft. Karla's habits of technique. It seems that where it was operable, he ran moles and sound-thieves in tandem.'

'Once more now in English, George, do you mind?'

Where circumstances allowed, said Smiley, Karla had liked to back up his agent operations with microphones. Though Smiley was satisfied that

nothing had been said within the building which could compromise any 'present plans' as he called them, the implications were unsettling.

Lacon was getting to know Smiley's handwriting too.

'Any collateral for that rather academic theory?' he enquired, examining Smiley's expressionless features over the top of his pencil, which he held between his two index fingers, like a rule.

'We've been making an inventory of our own audio stores,' Smiley confessed with a puckering of his brow. 'There's a quantity of house equipment missing. A lot seems to have disappeared during the alterations of sixty-six.' Lacon waited, dragging it out of him. 'Haydon was on the building committee responsible for having the work carried out,' Smiley ended, as a final sop. 'He was the driving force, in fact. It's just - well, if the Cousins ever got to hear of it, I

think it would be the last straw.'

Lacon was no fool, and the Cousins' wrath just when everyone was trying to smooth their feathers was a thing to be avoided at any cost. If he had had his way, he would have ordered the ferrets out the same day. Saturday was a compromise and without consulting anybody he despatched the entire team, all twelve of them, in two grey vans painted 'Pest Control'. It was true that they tore the place apart, hence the silly rumours about the destruction of the pepper-pot room. They were angry because it was the weekend, and perhaps therefore needlessly violent: the tax paid on overtime was frightful. But their mood changed fast enough when they bagged eight radio microphones in the first sweep, every one of them Circus standard-issue from audio stores. Haydon's distribution of them was classic, as Lacon agreed when he called to make his own inspection. One in a drawer of a

disused desk, as if innocently left there and forgotten about, except that the desk happened to be in the coding room. One collecting dust on top of an old steel cupboard in the fifth-floor conference room - or, in the jargon, rumpus room. And one, with typical Haydon flair, wedged behind the cistern in the senior officers' lavatory next door. A second sweep, to include load-bearing walls, threw up three more embedded in the fabric during the building work. Probes, with plastic snorkel-straws to pipe the sound back to them. The ferrets laid them out like a game-line. Extinct, of course, as all the devices were, but put there by Haydon nevertheless, and tuned to frequencies the Circus did not use.

'Maintained at Treasury cost, too, I declare,' said Lacon, with the driest of smiles, fondling the leads which had once connected the probe microphones with the mains power supply. 'Or used to be, till George rewired the place. I must

be sure to tell Brother Hammer. He'll be thrilled.'

Hammer, a Welshman, being Lacon's most persistent enemy.

On Lacon's advice Smiley now staged a modest piece of theatre. He ordered the ferrets to reactivate the radio microphones in the conference room and to modify the receiver on one of the Circus's few remaining surveillance cars. Then he invited three of the least bending Whitehall desk jockeys, including the Welsh Hammer, to drive in a half-mile radius round the building, while they listened to a pre-scripted discussion between two of Smiley's shadowy helpers sitting in the rumpus room. Word for word. Not a syllable out of place.

After which, Smiley himself swore them to absolute secrecy, and for good measure made them sign a declaration, drafted by the housekeepers expressly to inspire awe. Peter

Guillam reckoned it would keep them quiet for about a month.

'Or less if it rains,' he added sourly.

Yet if Martindale and his colleagues in the Whitehall outfield lived in a state of primeval innocence about the reality of Smiley's world, those closer to the throne felt equally removed from him. The circles around him grew smaller as they grew nearer, and precious few in the early days reached the centre. Entering the brown and dismal doorway of the Circus, with its temporary barriers manned by watchful janitors, Smiley shed none of his habitual privacy. For nights and days at a time, the door to his tiny office suite stayed closed and his only company was Peter Guillam, and a hovering dark-eyed factotum named Fawn, who had shared with Guillam the

job of babysitting Smiley during the smoking-out of Haydon. Sometimes Smiley disappeared by the back door with no more than a nod, taking Fawn, a sleek, diminutive creature, with him and leaving Guillam to field the phone calls and get hold of him in emergency. The mothers likened his behaviour to the last days of Control, who had died in harness, thanks to Haydon, of a broken heart. By the organic processes of a closed society, a new word was added to the jargon. The unmasking of Haydon now became the fall and Circus history was divided into before the fall and after it. To Smiley's coming and goings, the physical fall of the building itself, three-quarters empty and, since the visit of the ferrets, in a wrecked condition, lent a sombre sense of ruin which at low moments became symbolic to those who had to live with it. What the ferrets destroy they do not put together: and the same, they felt perhaps, was true of Karla, whose dusty features,

nailed there by their elusive chief, continued to watch over them from the shadows of his Spartan throne-room.

The little they did know was appalling. Such humdrum matters as personnel, for example, took on a horrific dimension. Smiley had blown staff to dismiss, and blown residencies to dismantle; poor Tufty Thesinger's in Hong Kong for one, though being pretty far removed from the anti-Soviet scene, Hong Kong was one of the last to go. Round Whitehall, a terrain which like Smiley they deeply distrusted, they heard of him engaged in bizarre and rather terrible arguments over terms of severance and resettlement. There were cases, it seemed - poor Tufty Thesinger in Hong Kong once more supplied the readiest example - where Bill Haydon had deliberately encouraged the over-promotion of burnt-out officers who could be counted on not to mount private initiatives. Should they be paid off at their natural

value, or at the inflated one which Haydon had mischievously set on them? There were others where Haydon for his own preservation had concocted reasons for dismissal. Should they receive full pension? Had they a claim to reinstatement? Perplexed young Ministers, new to power since the elections, made brave and contradictory rulings. In consequence a sad stream of deluded Circus field officers, both men and women, passed through Smiley's hands, and the housekeepers were ordered to make sure that for reasons of security and perhaps aesthetics, none of these returnees from foreign residencies should set foot inside the main building. Nor would Smiley tolerate any contact between the damned and the reprieved. Accordingly, with grudging Treasury support from the Welsh Hammer, the housekeepers opened a temporary reception point in a rented house in Bloomsbury, under cover of a language school (Regret No

Callers Without Appointment) and manned it with a quartet of pay-and-personnel officers. This body became inevitably the Bloomsbury Group, and it was known that sometimes for a spare hour or so Smiley made a point of slipping down there and, rather in the manner of a hospital visitor, offering his condolences to faces frequently unknown to him. At other times, depending on his mood, he would remain entirely silent, preferring to perch unexplained and Buddha-like in a corner of the dusty interviewing room.

What drove him? What was he looking for? If anger was the root, then it was an anger common to them all in those days. They could be sitting together in the raftered rumpus room after a long day's work, joking and gossiping; but if someone should let slip the names of Karla or his mole Haydon, a silence of angels would descend on them, and not even cunning old Connie Sachs, the Moscow-gazer, could break the spell.

Even more affecting in the eyes of his subordinates were Smiley's efforts to save something of the agent networks from the wreck. Within a day of Haydon's arrest, all nine of the Circus's Soviet and East European networks had gone cold. Radio links stopped dead, courier lines dried up and there was every reason to say that, if there had been any genuinely Circus-owned agents left among them, they had been rolled up overnight. But Smiley fiercely opposed that easy view, just as he refused to accept that Karla and Moscow Centre between them were invincibly efficient, or tidy, or logical. He pestered Lacon, he pestered the Cousins in their vast annexes in Grosvenor Square, he insisted that agent radio frequencies continue to be monitored, and despite bitter protest by the Foreign Office - Roddy Martindale as ever to the fore - he had open-language messages put out by the overseas services of the BBC ordering any live agent who

should happen to hear them and know the codeword, to abandon ship immediately. And, little by little, to their amazement, came tiny flutterings of life, like garbled messages from another planet.

First, the Cousins, in the person of their suspiciously bluff local station chief Martello, reported from Grosvenor Square that an American escape line was passing two British agents, a man and a woman, to the old holiday resort of Sochi on the Black Sea, where a small boat was being fitted in readiness for what Martello's quiet men insisted on calling an 'exfiltration assignment'. By his description, he was referring to the Churayevs, linchpins of the Contemplate network which had covered Georgia and the Ukraine. Without waiting for Treasury sanction, Smiley resurrected from retirement one Roy Bland, a burly ex-Marxist dialectician and sometime field agent, who had been the network's

case officer. To Bland, who had come down heavily in the fall, he entrusted the two Russian leash-dogs de Silsky and Kaspar, also in mothballs, also former Haydon protégés, to make up a standby reception party. They were still sitting in their RAF transport plane when word came through that the couple had been shot dead as they were leaving harbour. The exfiltration assignment had fallen through, said the Cousins. In sympathy, Martello personally telephoned Smiley with the news. He was a kindly man, by his own lights, and, like Smiley, old school. It was night-time, and raining furiously.

'Now don't go taking this too hardly, George,' he warned in his avuncular way. 'Hear me? There's fieldmen and there's deskmen and it's up to you and me to see that the distinction is preserved. Otherwise we all go crazy. Can't go down the line for every one of them. That's generalship. So you just remember that.'

Peter Guillam, who was at Smiley's shoulder when he took the call, swore later that Smiley showed no particular reaction: and Guillam knew him well. Nevertheless, ten minutes later, unobserved by anybody, he was gone, and his voluminous mackintosh was missing from its peg. He returned after dawn, drenched to the skin, still carrying the mackintosh over his arm. Having changed, he returned to his desk, but when Guillam, unbidden, tiptoed in to him with tea, he found his master, to his embarrassment, sitting rigidly before an old volume of German poetry, fists clenched either side of it, while he silently wept.

Bland, Kaspar and de Silsky begged for reinstatement. They pointed to little Toby Esterhase, the Hungarian, who had somehow gained readmittance, and demanded the same treatment, in vain. They were stood down and not

spoken of again. To injustice belongs injustice. Though tarnished, they might have been useful, but Smiley would not hear their names; not then; not later; not ever. Of the immediate post-fall period, that was the lowest point. There were those who seriously believed - inside the Circus as well as out - that they had heard the last beat of the secret English heart.

A few days after this catastrophe, as it happened, luck handed Smiley a small consolation. In Warsaw in broad daylight a Circus head agent on the run picked up the BBC signal and walked straight into the British Embassy. Thanks to ferocious lobbying by Lacon and Smiley between them he was flown home to London the same night disguised as a diplomatic courier, Martindale notwithstanding. Mistrusting his cover story Smiley turned the man over to the Circus inquisitors who, deprived of other meat, nearly killed him but afterwards declared him

clean. He was resettled in Australia.

Next, still at the very genesis of his rule, Smiley was compelled to pass judgement on the Circus's blown domestic out-stations. His instinct was to shed everything: the safe houses, now totally unsafe; the Sarratt Nursery, where traditionally the briefing and training of agents and new entrants was conducted: the experimental audio laboratories in Harlow; the stinks-and-bangs school in Argyll; the water school in the Helford Estuary, where passé sailors practised the black arts of small-boat seacraft like the ritual of some lost religion; and the longarm radio transmission base at Canterbury. He would even have done away with the wranglers' headquarters in Bath where the codebreaking went on.

'Scrap the lot,' he told Lacon, calling on him in his rooms.

'And then what?' Lacon enquired, puzzled by his

vehemence, which since the Sochi failure was more marked in him.

'Start again.'

'I see,' said Lacon, which meant, of course, that he didn't. Lacon had sheets of Treasury figures before him, and was studying them while he spoke.

'The Sarratt Nursery, for some reason which I fail to understand, is carried on the military budget,' he observed reflectively. 'Not on your reptile fund at all. The Foreign Office pays for Harlow - and I'm sure has long forgotten the fact - Argyll is under the wing of the Ministry of Defence, who most certainly won't know of its existence, the Post Office has Canterbury and the Navy has Helford. Bath, I'm pleased to say, is also supported from Foreign Office funds, over the particular signature of Martindale, appended six years ago and similarly faded from official

memory. So they don't eat a thing. Do they?'

'They're dead wood,' Smiley insisted. ' And while they exist we shall never replace them. Sarratt went to the devil long ago, Helford is moribund, Argyll is farcical. As to the wranglers, for the last five years they've been working practically full time for Karla.'

'By Karla you mean Moscow Centre?'

'I mean the department responsible for Haydon and half a dozen -'

'I know what you mean. But I think it safer to stay with institutions if you don't mind. In that way we are spared the embarrassment of personalities. After all, that's what institutions are for, isn't it?' Lacon tapped his pencil rhythmically on his desk. Finally he looked up, and considered Smiley quizzically. 'Well, well, you are the root-and-bough man these days, George. I dread to

think what would happen if you were ever to wield your axe round my side of the garden. Those outstations are gilt-edged stock. Do away with them now and you'll never get them back. Later, if you like, when you're on the road, you can cash them in and buy yourself something better. You mustn't sell when the market's low, you know. You must wait till you can take a profit.'

Reluctantly, Smiley bowed to his advice.

As if all these headaches were not enough, there came one bleak Monday morning when a Treasury audit pointed up serious discrepancies in the conduct of the Circus reptile fund over the period of five years before it was frozen by the fall. Smiley was forced to hold a kangaroo court, at which an elderly clerk in Finance Section, hauled from retirement, broke down and confessed to a shameful passion for a girl in

Registry who had led him by the nose. In a ghastly fit of remorse, the old man went home and hanged himself. Against all Guillam's advice Smiley insisted on attending the funeral.

Yet it is a matter of record that from these quite dismal beginnings, and indeed from his very first weeks in office, George Smiley went over to the attack.

The base from which this attack was launched was in the first instance philosophical, in the second theoretical, and only in the last instance, thanks to the dramatic appearance of the egregious gambler Sam Collins, human.

The philosophy was simple. The task of an intelligence service, Smiley announced firmly, was not to play chase games but to deliver intelligence to its customers. If it failed to do this,

those customers would resort to other, less scrupulous sellers or, worse, indulge in amateurish self-help. And the service itself would wither. Not to be seen in the Whitehall markets was not to be desired, he went on. Worse: unless the Circus produced, it would also have no wares to barter with the Cousins, nor with other sister services with whom reciprocal deals were traditional. Not to produce was not to trade, and not to trade was to die.

Amen, they said.

His theory - he called it his premise - on how intelligence could be produced with no resources, was the subject of an informal meeting held in the rumpus room not two months after his accession, between himself and the tiny inner circle which made up, to a point, his team of confidants. They were in all five: Smiley himself; Peter Guillam, his cupbearer; big, flowing Connie Sachs, the

Moscow-gazer; Fawn, the dark-eyed factotum, who wore black gym-shoes and manned the Russian-style copper samovar and gave out biscuits; and lastly Doc di Salis, known as the Mad Jesuit, the Circus's head China watcher. When God had finished making Connie Sachs, said the wags, He needed a rest, so He ran up Doc de Salis from the remnants. The Doc was a patchy, grubby little creature, more like Connie's monkey than her counterpart, and his features, it was true, from the spiky silver hair that strayed over his grimy collar, to the moist misshapen fingertips which picked like chicken beaks at everything around them, had an unquestionably ill-begotten look. If Beardsley had drawn him, he would have had him chained and hirsute, peeping round the corner of her enormous caftan. Yet di Salis was a notable orientalist, a scholar, and something of a hero too, for he had spent a part of the war in China, recruiting for God and the

Circus, and another part in Changi jail, for the pleasure of the Japanese. That was the team: the Group of Five. In time it expanded, but to start with these five alone made up the famous cadre, and afterwards, to have been one of them, said di Salis, was 'like holding a Communist Party card with a single-figure membership number'.

First, Smiley reviewed the wreck, and that took some while, in the way that sacking a city takes some while, or liquidating great numbers of people. He simply drove through every back alley the Circus possessed, demonstrating quite ruthlessly how, by what method, and often exactly when Haydon had laid bare its secrets to his Soviet masters. He had of course the advantage of his own interrogation of Haydon, and of the original researches which had led him to Haydon's discovery. He knew the track. Nevertheless, his peroration was a minor tour de force of destructive analysis.

'So no illusions,' he ended tersely. 'This service will never be the same again. It may be better, but it will be different.'

Amen again, they said, and took a doleful break to stretch their legs.

It was odd, Guillam recalled later, how the important scenes of those early months seemed all to play at night. The rumpus room was long and raftered, with high dormer windows which gave on to nothing but orange night sky and a coppice of rusted radio aerials, war relics which no one had seen fit to remove.

The premise, said Smiley when they had resettled, was that Haydon had done nothing against the Circus that was not directed, and that the direction came from one man personally: Karla.

His premise was, that in briefing Haydon, Karla

was exposing the gaps in Moscow Centre's knowledge; that in ordering Haydon to suppress certain intelligence which came the Circus's way, in ordering him to downgrade or distort it, to deride it, or even to deny it circulation altogether, Karla was indicating the secrets he did not want revealed.

'So we can take the backbearings, can't we, darling?' murmured Connie Sachs, whose speed of uptake put her as usual a good length ahead of the rest of the field.

'That's right, Con. That's exactly what we can do,' said Smiley gravely. 'We can take the backbearings.' He resumed his lecture, leaving Guillam for one more mystified than before.

By minutely charting Haydon's path of destruction - his pugmarks as he called them - by exhaustively recording his selection of files; by reassembling, after aching weeks of research if

necessary, the intelligence culled in good faith by Circus outstations, and balancing it, in every detail, against the intelligence distributed by Haydon to the Circus's customers in the Whitehall market place, it would be possible to take backbearings - as Connie so rightly called them - and establish Haydon's, and therefore Karla's, point of departure, said Smiley.

Once a correct backbearing had been taken, surprising doors of opportunity would open, and the Circus, against all outward likelihood, would be in a position to go over to the initiative - or, as Smiley put it - 'to act, and not merely to react.'

The premise, to use Connie Sachs's joyous description later, meant: 'Looking for another bloody Tutankhamun, with George Smiley holding the light and us poor Charlies doing the digging.'

At that time, of course, Jerry Westerby was not

even a twinkle in their operational eye.

They went into battle next day, huge Connie to one corner, the crabbed little di Salis to his. As di Salis said, in a nasal, deprecating tone, which had a savage force: 'At least we do finally know why we're here.' Their families of pasty burrowers carved the archive in two. To Connie and 'my Bolshies' as she called them, went Russia and the Satellites. To di Salis and his 'yellow perils', China and the Third World. What fell between - source reports on the nation's theoretical Allies, for instance - was consigned to a special wait-bin for later evaluation. They worked, like Smiley himself, impossible hours. The canteen complained, the janitors threatened to walk out, but gradually the sheer energy of the burrowers infected even the ancillary staff and they shut up. A bantering rivalry developed. Under Connie's

influence, backroom boys and girls who till now had scarcely been seen to smile, learned suddenly to chaff each other in the language of their great familiars in the world outside the Circus. Czarist imperialist running dogs drank tasteless coffee with divisive, deviationist chauvinist Stalinists and were proud of it. But the most impressive blossoming was unquestionably in di Salis, who interrupted his nocturnal labours with short but vigorous spells at the ping-pong table, where he would challenge all comers, leaping about like a lepidopterist after rare specimens. Soon the first fruits appeared, and gave them fresh impetus. Within a month, three reports had been nervously distributed, under extreme limitation, and even found favour with the sceptical Cousins. A month later a hardbound summary wordily entitled Interim report on lacunae in Soviet intelligence regarding Nato sea to air strike capacity, earned grudging applause from Martello's parent factory

in Langley, Virginia, and an exuberant phone call from Martello himself.

'George, I told those guys!' he yelled, so loud that the telephone line seemed an unnecessary extravagance, 'I told them: The Circus will deliver. Did they believe me. Did they hell!'

Meanwhile, sometimes with Guillam for company, sometimes with silent Fawn to babysit, Smiley himself conducted his own dark peregrinations and marched till he was half dead with tiredness. And still without reward, kept marching. By day, and often by night as well, he trailed the home counties and points beyond, questioning past officers of the Circus and former agents out to grass. In Chiswick, perched meekly in the office of a cut-price travel agent and talking in murmurs to a former Polish colonel of cavalry resettled as a clerk there; he thought he had glimpsed it; but like a mirage, the promise

dissolved as he advanced on it. In a secondhand radio shop in Sevenoaks a Sudeten Czech held out the same hope to him, but when he and Guillam hurried back to confirm the story from Circus records, they found the actors dead and no one left to lead him further. At a private stud in Newmarket, to Fawn's near-violent fury, he suffered insult at the hand of a tweedy and opinionated Scot, a protégé of Smiley's predecessor Alleline, all in the same elusive cause. Back home, he called for the papers, only once more to see the light go out.

For this was the last and unspoken conviction of the premise which Smiley had outlined in the rumpus room: that the snare with which Haydon had trapped himself was not unique. That in the end-analysis, it was not Haydon's paperwork which had caused his downfall, not his meddling with reports, nor his 'losing' of inconvenient records. It was Haydon's panic. It was Haydon's

spontaneous intervention in a field operation, where the threat to himself, or perhaps to another Karla agent, was suddenly so grave that his one hope was to suppress it despite the risk. This was the trick which Smiley longed to find repeated. And this was the question which, never directly, but by inference, Smiley and his helpers in the Bloomsbury reception centre canvassed:

'Can you remember any incident during your service in the field when in your opinion you were unreasonably restrained from following an operational lead?'

And it was dapper Sam Collins, in his dinner jacket, with his brown cigarette and his trim moustache and his Mississippi dandy's smile, summoned for a quiet chat one day, who breezed in to say: 'Come to think of it, yes, old boy, I can.'

But behind this question again, and Sam's crucial answer, stalked the formidable person of Miss

Connie Sachs and her pursuit for Russian gold.

And behind Connie again, as ever, the permanently misted photograph of Karla.

'Connie's got one, Peter,' she whispered to Guillam over the internal telephone late one night. 'She's got one, sure as boots.'

It was not her first find by any means, not her tenth, but her devious instinct told her straight away it was 'the genuine article, darling, mark old Connie's words'. So Guillam told Smiley and Smiley locked up his files and cleared his desk and said: ' All right, let her in.'

Connie was a huge, crippled, cunning woman, a don's daughter, a don's sister, herself some sort of academic, and known to the older hands as Mother Russia. The folklore said Control had

recruited her over a rubber of bridge while she was still a debutante, on the night Neville Chamberlain promised 'peace in our time'. When Haydon came to power in the slipstream of his protector Alleline, one of his first and most prudent moves was to have Connie put out to grass. For Connie knew more about the byways of Moscow Centre than most of the wretched brutes, as she called them, who toiled there, and Karla's private army of moles and recruiters had always been her very special joy. Not a Soviet defector, in the old days, but his debriefing report had passed through Mother Russia's arthritic fingers; not a coat-trailer who had manoeuvred himself alongside an identified Karla talent-spotter, but Connie greedily rehearsed him in every detail of the quarry's choreography; not a scrap of hearsay over nearly forty years on the beat which had not been assumed into her pain-racked body, and lodged there among the junk of

her compendious memory, to be turned up the moment she rummaged for it. Connie's mind, said Control once, in a kind of despair, was like the back of one enormous envelope. Dismissed, she went back to Oxford and the devil. At the time Smiley reclaimed her, her only recreation was The Times crossword and she was running at a comfortable two bottles a day. But that night, that modestly historic night, as she hauled her great frame along the fifth floor corridor toward George Smiley's inner room, she sported a clean grey caftan, she had daubed a pair of rosy lips not far from her own, and she had taken nothing stronger than a vile peppermint cordial all day long - of which the reek lingered in her wake - and a sense of occasion, they all decided afterwards, was stamped on her from the first. She carried a heavy plastic shopping bag, for she would countenance no leather. In her lair on a lower floor, her mongrel dog, christened Trot,

and recruited on a wave of remorse for its late predecessor, whimpered disconsolately from beneath her desk, to the lively fury of her roommate di Salis, who would often privately lash at the beast with his foot; or in more jovial moments content himself with reciting to Connie the many tasty ways in which the Chinese prepared their dogs for the pot. Outside the Edwardian dormers, as she passed them one by one, a racing late-summer rain was falling, ending a long drought, and she saw it - she told them all later - as symbolic, if not Biblical. The drops rattled like pellets on the slate roof, flattening the dead leaves which had settled there. In the anteroom the mothers continued stonily with their business, accustomed to Connie's pilgrimages, and not liking them the better for it.

'Darlings,' Connie murmured, waving her bloated hand to them like royalty. 'So loyal. So very loyal.'

There was one step downward into the throne-room the uninitiated tended to stumble on it despite the faded warning notice - and Connie with her arthritis negotiated it as if it were a ladder while Guillam held her arm. Smiley watched her, plump hands linked on his desk, as she began solemnly unpacking her offerings from the carrier: not eye of newt, nor the finger of a birth-strangled babe - Guillam speaking once more - but files, a string of them, flagged and annotated, the booty of yet another of her impassioned skirmishes through the Moscow Centre archive, which until her return from the dead a few months before had, thanks to Haydon, lain mouldering for all of three long years. As she pulled them out, and smoothed the notes which she had pinned on them like markers in her paperchase, she smiled that brimming smile of hers - Guillam again, for curiosity had obliged him to down tools and come and watch - and she

was muttering 'there you little devil' and 'now where did you get to, you wretch?' not to Smiley or Guillam, of course, but to the documents themselves, for Connie had the affectation of assuming everything was alive and potentially recalcitrant, whether it was Trot her dog or a chair that obstructed her passage, or Moscow Centre, or finally Karla himself.

'A guided tour, darlings,' she announced, 'that's what Connie's been having. Super fun. Reminded me of Easter, when Mother hid painted eggs round the house and sent us gals off hunting for them.'

For perhaps three hours after that, interspersed with coffee and sandwiches and other unwanted treats which dark Fawn insisted on bringing to them, Guillam struggled to follow the twists and impulses of Connie's extraordinary journey, to which her subsequent research had by now

supplied the solid basis. She dealt Smiley papers as if they were playing cards, shoving them down and snatching them back with her crumpled hands almost before he had had a chance to read them. Over it all she was keeping up what Guillam called 'her fifth-rate conjurer's patter', the abracadabra of the obsessive burrower's trade. At the heart of her discovery, so far as Guillam could make out, lay what Connie called a Moscow Centre goldseam; a Soviet laundering operation to move clandestine funds into open-air channels. The charting of it was not complete. Israeli liaison had supplied one section, the Cousins another, Steve Mackelvore, head resident in Paris, now dead, a third. From Paris the trail turned East, by way of the Banque de l'Indochine. At this point also, the papers had been put up to Haydon's London Station, as the operational directorate was called, together with a recommendation from the Circus's depleted

Soviet Research Section that the case be thrown open to full-scale enquiry in the field: London Station killed the suggestion stone dead.

'Potentially prejudicial to a highly delicate source,' wrote one of Haydon's minions, and that was that.

'File and forget,' Smiley muttered, distractedly turning pages. 'File and forget. We always have good reasons for doing nothing.'

Outside, the world was fast asleep.

'Exactly, dear,' said Connie very softly, as if she were afraid to wake him.

Files and folders were by then strewn all over the throne-room. The scene looked a lot more like a disaster than a triumph. For an hour longer, Guillam and Connie gazed silently into space or at Karla's photograph while Smiley conscientiously retraced her steps, his anxious

face stooped to the reading lamp, its pudgy lines accentuated by the beam, his hands skipping over the papers, and occasionally lifting to his mouth so that he could lick his thumb. Once or twice he started to glance at her, or open his mouth to speak, but Connie had the answer ready before he put his question. In her mind, she was walking beside him along the path. When he had finished, he sat back, and took off his spectacles and polished them, not on the fat end of the tie for once, but on a new silk handkerchief in the top pocket of his black jacket, for he had spent most of the day cloistered with the Cousins on another fence-mending mission. While he did this, Connie beamed at Guillam and mouthed 'isn't he a love?' - a favourite dictum when she was talking of her Chief, which drove Guillam nearly mad with rage.

Smiley's next utterance had the ring of mild objection.

'All the same, Con, a formal search request did go out from London Station to our residency in Vientiane.

'Happened before Bill had time to get his hoof on it,' she replied.

Not seeming to hear, Smiley picked up an open file and held it to her across the desk.

'And Vientiane did send a lengthy reply. It's all marked up in the index. We don't seem to have that. Where is it?'

Connie had not bothered to receive the offered file.

'In the shredder, darling,' she said, and beamed contentedly at Guillam.

The morning had come. Guillam strolled round switching out the lights. The same afternoon, he dropped in at the quiet West End gaming club

where, in the permanent night-time of his elected trade, Sam Collins endured the rigours of retirement. Expecting to find him overseeing his usual afternoon game of chemin-de-fer, Guillam was surprised at being shown to a sumptuous room marked 'management'. Sam was roosting behind a fine desk, smiling prosperously through the smoke of his habitual brown cigarette.

'What the hell have you done, Sam?' Guillam demanded in a stage whisper, affecting to look round nervously. 'Taken over the Mafia? Jesus!'

'Oh that wasn't necessary,' said Sam with the same raffish smile. Slipping a mackintosh over his dinner jacket, he led Guillam down a passage and through a fire door into the street, where the two men hopped into the back of Guillam's waiting cab, while Guillam still secretly marvelled at Sam's newfound eminence.

Fieldmen have different ways of showing no emotion and Sam's was to smile, smoke slower, and fill his eyes with a dark glow of particular indulgence, fixing them intently on his partner in discussion. Sam was an Asian hand, old Circus, with a lot of time behind him in the field: five years in Borneo, six in Burma, five more in Northern Thailand and latterly three in the Laotian capital of Vientiane, all under natural cover as a general trader. The Thais had sweated him twice but let him go, he'd had to leave Sarawak in his socks. When he was in the mood, he had stories to tell about his journeying among the northern hill tribes of Burma and the Shans, but he was seldom in the mood. Sam was a Haydon casualty. There had been a moment, five years back, when Sam's lazy brilliance had made him a serious contender for promotion to the fifth floor - even, said some, to the post of Chief itself,

had not Haydon put his weight behind the preposterous Percy Alleline. So, in place of power, Sam was left to moulder in the field until Haydon contrived to recall him, and have him sacked for a trumped-up misdemeanour.

'Sam! How good of you! Take a pew,' said Smiley, all conviviality for once. 'Will you drink? Where are you in your day? Perhaps we should be offering you breakfast?'

At Cambridge, Sam had taken a dazzling First, thus confounding his tutors, who till then had dismissed him as a near idiot. He had done it, the dons afterwards told each other consolingly, entirely on memory. The more worldly tongues told a different tale, however. According to them, Sam had trailed a love affair with a plain girl at the Examination Schools, and obtained from her, among other favours, a preview of the papers.

Chapter 4 - The Castle

Wakes

Now at first Smiley tested the water with Sam - and Sam, who liked a poker hand himself, tested the water with Smiley. Some fieldmen, and particularly the clever ones, take a perverse pride in not knowing the whole picture. Their art consists in the deft handling of loose ends, and stops there stubbornly. Sam was, inclined that way. Having raked a little in his dossier, Smiley tried him out on several old cases which had no sinister look at all, but which gave a clue to Sam's present disposition and confirmed his ability to remember accurately. He received Sam alone because with other people present it would have been a different game: either more or less intense, but different. Later, when the story was out in the open and only follow-up questions remained, he

did summon Connie and Doc di Salis from the nether regions, and let Guillam sit in too. But that was later, and for the time being Smiley plumbed Sam's mind alone, concealing from him entirely the fact that all casepapers had been destroyed, and that since Mackelvore was dead, Sam was at present the only witness to certain key events.

'Now Sam, do you remember at all,' Smiley asked, when he finally judged the moment right, 'a request that came in to you in Vientiane once, from here in London, concerning certain money drafts from Paris? Just a standard request it would have been, asking for unattributable field enquiries, please, to confirm or deny - that sort of thing. Ring a bell by any chance?'

He had a sheet of notes before him, so that this was just one more question in a slow stream. As he spoke, he was actually marking something with his pencil, not looking at Sam at all. But in

the same way that we hear better with our eyes closed, Smiley did sense Sam's attention harden: which is to say, Sam stretched out his legs a little, and crossed them and slowed his gestures almost to a halt.

'Monthly transfers to the Banque de l'Indochine,' said Sam, after a suitable pause. 'Hefty ones. Paid out of a Canadian overseas account with their Paris affiliate.' He gave the number of the account. 'Payment made on the last Friday of every month. Start date January seventy-three or thereabouts. It rings a bell, sure.'

Smiley detected immediately that Sam was settling to a long game. His memory was clear but his information meagre: more like an opening bid than a frank reply.

Still stooped over the papers, Smiley said: 'Now can we just wander over the course here a little, Sam. There's some discrepancy on the filing side,

and I'd like to get your part of the record straight.'

'Sure,' said Sam again and drew comfortably on his brown cigarette. He was watching Smiley's hands, and occasionally, with studied idleness, his eyes - though never for too long. Whereas Smiley, for his part, fought only to keep his mind open to the devious options of a fieldman's life. Sam might easily be defending something quite irrelevant. He had fiddled a little bit on his expenses, for example, and was afraid he'd been caught out. He had fabricated his report rather than go out and risk his neck: Sam was of an age, after all, where a fieldman looks first to his own skin. Or it was the opposite situation: Sam had ranged a little wider in his enquiries than Head Office had sanctioned. Hard pressed, he had gone to the pedlars rather than file a nil return. He had fixed himself a side-deal with the local Cousins. Or the local security services had blackmailed him - in Sarratt jargon, the angels had put a burn

on him - and he had played the case both ways in order to survive and smile and keep his Circus pension. To read Sam's moves, Smiley knew that he must stay alert to these and countless other options. A desk is a dangerous place from which to watch the world.

So, as Smiley proposed, they wandered. London's request for field enquiries, said Sam, reached him in standard form, much as Smiley had described. It was shown to him by old Mac who, until his Paris posting, was the Circus's linkman in the Vientiane Embassy. An evening session at their safe house. Routine, though the Russian aspect stuck out from the start, and Sam actually remembered saying to Mac that early: 'London must think it's Moscow Centre reptile money,' because he had spotted the cryptonym of the Circus's Soviet Research Section mixed in with the prelims on the signal. (Smiley noted that Mac had no business showing Sam the signal.) Sam

also remembered Mac's reply to his observation: 'They should never have given old Connie Sachs the shove,' he had said. Sam had agreed wholeheartedly.

As it happened, said Sam, the request was pretty easy to meet. Sam already had a contact at the Indochine, a good one, call him Johnny.

'Filed here, Sam?' Smiley enquired politely.

Sam avoided answering that question directly and Smiley respected his reluctance. The fieldman who files all his contacts with Head Office, or even clears them, was not yet born. As illusionists cling to their mystique, so fieldmen for different reasons are congenitally secretive about their sources.

Johnny was reliable, said Sam emphatically. He had an excellent track record on several arms-dealing and narcotics cases, and Sam would

swear by him anywhere.

'Oh, you handled those things too, did you, Sam?' Smiley asked respectfully.

So Sam had moonlighted for the local narcotics bureau on the side, Smiley noted. A lot of fieldmen did that, some even with Head Office consent: in their world, they likened it to selling off industrial waste. It was a perk. Nothing dramatic, therefore, but Smiley stored away the information all the same.

'Johnny was okay,' Sam repeated, with a warning in his voice.

'I'm sure he was,' said Smiley with the same courtesy.

Sam continued with his story. He had called on Johnny at the Indochine and sold him a cock-and-bull cover to keep him quiet, and a few days later, Johnny, who was just a humble counter-clerk,

had checked the ledgers and unearthed the docketts and Sam had the first leg of the connection cut and dried. The routine went this way, said Sam:

'On the last Friday of each month a telexed money order arrived from Paris to the credit of a Monsieur Delassus presently staying at the Hotel Condor, Vientiane, payable on production of passport, number quoted.' Once again, Sam effortlessly recited the figures. 'The bank sent out the advice, Delassus called first thing on the Monday, drew the money in cash, stuffed it in a briefcase and walked out with it. End of connection,' said Sam.

'How much?'

'Started small and grew fast. Then went on growing, then grew a little more.'

'Ending where?'

'Twenty-five thousand US in big ones.' said Sam without a flicker.

Smiley's eyebrows lifted slightly. 'A month?' he said, in humorous surprise.

'The big table,' Sam agreed and lapsed into a leisurely silence. There is a particular intensity about clever men whose brains are under-used, and sometimes there is no way they can control their emanations. In that sense, they are a great deal more at risk, under the bright lights, than their more stupid colleagues. 'You checking me against the record, old boy?' Sam asked.

'I'm not checking you against anything, Sam. You know how it is at times like this. Clutching at straws, listening to the wind.'

'Sure,' said Sam sympathetically and, when they had exchanged further glances of mutual confidence, once more resumed his narrative.

So Sam checked at the Hotel Condor, he said. The porter there was a stock sub-source to the trade, everybody owned him. No Delassus staying there, but the front desk cheerfully admitted to receiving a little something for providing him with an accommodation address. The very next Monday - which happened to follow the last Friday of the month, said Sam - with the help of his contact Johnny, Sam duly hung around the bank 'cashing travellers' cheques and whatnot', and had a grandstand view of the said Monsieur Delassus marching in, handing over his French passport, counting the money into a briefcase and retreating with it to a waiting taxi.

Taxis, Sam explained, were rare beasts in Vientiane. Anyone who was anyone had a car and a driver, so the presumption was that Delassus didn't want to be anyone.

'So far so good,' Sam concluded, watching with

interest while Smiley wrote.

'So far so very good,' Smiley corrected him. Like his predecessor Control, Smiley never used pads: just single sheets of paper, one at a time, and a glass top to press on, which Fawn polished twice a day.

'Do I fit the record or do I deviate?' asked Sam.

'I'd say you were right on course, Sam,' Smiley said. 'It's the detail I'm enjoying. You know how it is with records.'

The same evening, Sam said, hugger-mugger with his linkman Mac once more, he took a long cool look at the rogues' gallery of local Russians, and was able to identify the unlovely features of a Second Secretary (Commercial) at the Soviet Embassy, Vientiane, mid-fifties, military bearing, no previous convictions, full names given but unpronounceable and known therefore around the

diplomatic bazaars as 'Commercial Boris'.

But Sam, of course, had the unpronounceable names ready in his head and spelt them out for Smiley slowly enough for him to write them down in block capitals.

'Got it?' he enquired helpfully.

'Thank you, yes.'

'Somebody left the card index on a bus, have they, old boy?' Sam asked.

'That's right,' Smiley agreed, with a laugh.

When the crucial Monday came round again a month later, Sam went on, he decided he would tread wary. So instead of gum-shoeing after Commercial Boris himself he stayed home and briefed a couple of locally based leash-dogs who specialised in pavement work.

'A lace curtain job,' said Sam. 'No shaking the

tree, no branch lines, no nothing, Laotian boys.'

'Our own?'

'Three years at the mast,' said Sam. 'And good,' added the fieldman in him, for whom all his geese are swans.

The said leashdogs watched the briefcase on its next journey. The taxi, a different one from the month before, took Boris on a tour of the town and after half an hour dropped him back near the main square, not far from the Indochine.

Commercial Boris walked a short distance, ducked into a second bank, a local one, and paid the entire sum straight across the counter to the credit of another account.

'So tra-la,' said Sam, and lit a fresh cigarette, not bothering to conceal his amused bewilderment that Smiley was rehearsing verbally a case so fully documented.

'Tra-la indeed,' Smiley murmured, writing hard.

After that, said Sam, they were home and dry. Sam lay low for a couple of weeks to let the dust settle, then put in his girl assistant to deliver the final blow.

'Name?'

Sam gave it. A home-based senior girl, Sarratt-trained, sharing his commercial cover. This senior girl waited ahead of Boris in the local bank, let him complete his paying-in forms, then raised a small scene.

'How did she do that, Sam?' Smiley enquired.

'Demanded to be served first,' said Sam with a grin. 'Brother Boris being a male chauvinist pig, thought he had equal rights and objected. Words passed.'

The paying-in slip lay on the counter, said Sam,

and while the senior girl did her number she read it upside down: twenty-five thousand American dollars to the credit of the overseas account of a mickey-mouse aviation company called Indocharter Vientiane, SA: 'Assets, a handful of clapped-out DC3s, a tin hut, a stack of fancy letter paper, one dumb blonde for the front office and wildcat Mexican pilot known round town as Tiny Ricardo on account of his considerable height,' said Sam. He added: 'And the usual anonymous bunch of diligent Chinese in the back room, of course.'

Smiley's ears were so sharp at that moment that he could have heard a leaf fall; but what he heard, metaphorically, was the sound of barriers being erected, and he knew at once, from the cadence, from the tightening of the voice, from the tiny facial and physical things which made up an exaggerated show of throwaway, that he was closing on the heart of Sam's defences.

So in his mind he put in a marker, deciding to remain with the mickey-mouse aviation company for a while.

'Ah,' he said lightly, 'you mean you knew the firm already?'

Sam tossed out a small card. 'Vientiane's not exactly your giant metropolis, old boy.'

'But you knew of it? That's the point.'

'Everybody in town knew Tiny Ricardo,' said Sam, grinning more broadly than ever, and Smiley knew at once that Sam was throwing sand in his eyes. But he played Sam along all the same.

'So tell me about Ricardo,' he suggested.

'One of the ex-Air America clowns. Vientiane was stiff with them. Fought the secret war in Laos.'

'And lost it,' Smiley said, writing again.

'Single-handed,' Sam agreed, watching Smiley put aside one sheet and take another from his drawer. 'Ricardo was local legend. Flew with Captain Rocky and that crowd. Credited with a couple of joyrides into Yunnan province for the Cousins. When the war ended he kicked around a bit then took up with the Chinese. We used to call those outfits Air Opium. By the time Bill hauled me home they were a flourishing industry.'

Still Smiley let Sam run. As long as Sam thought he was leading Smiley from the scent, he would talk the hindlegs off a donkey; whereas if Sam thought Smiley was getting too close, he would put up the shutters at once.

'Fine,' he said amiably, therefore, after yet more careful writing. 'Now let's go back to what Sam did next, may we? We have the money, we know whom it's paid to, we know who handles it.'

What's your next move, Sam?'

Well, if Sam remembered rightly he took stock for a day or two. There were angles, Sam explained, gathering confidence: there were little things that caught the eye. First, you might say, there was the Strange Case of Commercial Boris. Boris, as Sam had indicated, was held to be a bona fide Russian diplomat, if such a thing existed: no known connection with any other firm. Yet he rode around alone, had sole signing rights over a pot of money, and in Sam's limited experience, either one of these things spelt hood on one hand.

'Not just hood, a blasted supremo. A red-toothed four-square paymaster, colonel or upwards, right?'

'What other angles, Sam?' Smiley asked, keeping Sam on the same long rein; still making no effort to go for what Sam regarded as the centre of

things.

'The money wasn't mainstream,' said Sam. 'It was oddball. Mac said so. I said so. We all said so.'

Smiley's head lifted even more slowly than before.

'Why?' he asked, looking very straight at Sam.

'The above-the-line Soviet residency in Vientiane ran three bank accounts round town. The Cousins had all three wired. They've had them wired for years. They knew every cent the residency drew and even, from the account number, whether it was for intelligence gathering or subversion. The residency had its own money-carriers, and a triple-signature system for any drawing over a thousand bucks. Christ, George, I mean it's all in the record, you know!'

'Sam, I want you to pretend that record doesn't exist,' said Smiley gravely, still writing. 'All will

be revealed to you in due season. Till then, bear with us.'

'Whatever you say,' said Sam, breathing much more easily, Smiley noticed: he seemed to feel he was on firmer ground.

It was at this point that Smiley proposed they get old Connie to come and lend an ear, and perhaps Doc di Salis too, since South East Asia was, after all, Doc's patch. Tactically, he was content to bide his time with Sam's little secret; and strategically, the force of Sam's story was already of burning interest. So Guillam was sent to whip them in while Smiley called a break and the two men stretched their legs.

'How's trade?' Sam asked politely.

'Well, a little depressed.' Smiley admitted. 'Miss it?'

'That's Karla is it?' said Sam, studying the

photograph.

Smiley's tone became at once donnish and vague.

'Who? Ah yes, yes it is. Not much of a likeness I'm afraid, but the best we can do as yet.'

They might have been admiring an early water colour.

'You've got some personal thing about him, haven't you?' said Sam ruminatively.

At this point Connie, di Salis and Guillam filed in, led by Guillam, with little Fawn needlessly holding open the door.

With the enigma temporarily set aside, therefore, the meeting became something of a war party: the hunt was up. First Smiley recapitulated for Sam, incidentally making it clear in the process that

they were pretending there were no records - which was a veiled warning to the newcomers. Then Sam took up the tale where he had left off: about the angles, the little things that caught the eye; though really, he insisted, there was not a lot more to say. Once the trail led to Indocharter, Vientiane SA, it stopped dead.

'Indocharter was an overseas Chinese company,' said Sam with a glance at Doc di Salis. 'Mainly Swatownese.'

At the name 'Swatownese' di Salis gave a cry, part laughter. part lament. 'Oh they're the very worst,' he declared - meaning, the most difficult to crack.

'It was an overseas Chinese outfit,' Sam repeated for the rest of them, 'and the loony bins of South East Asia are jam-packed with honest fieldmen who have tried to unravel the life-style of hot money once it entered the maw of the overseas

Chinese.' Particularly, he added, of the Swatownese or Chiu Chow, who were a people apart, and controlled the rice monopolies in Thailand, Laos, and several other spots as well. Of which league, said Sam, Indocharter, Vientiane SA, was classic. His trade cover had evidently allowed him to investigate it in some depth.

'First, the société anonyme was registered in Paris,' he said. 'Second; the société, on reliable information, was the property of a discreetly diversified overseas Shanghainese trading company based on Manila, which was itself owned by a Chiu Chow company registered in Bangkok, which in turn paid its dues to a totally amorphous outfit in Hong Kong called China Airsea, quoted on the local Stock Exchange, which owned everything from junk-fleets to cement factories to racehorses to restaurants. China Airsea was by Hong Kong standards a blue

chip trading house, long-established and in good standing,' said Sam, 'and probably the only connection between Indocharter and China Airsea was that somebody's fifth elder brother had an aunt who was at school with one of the shareholders and owed him a favour.'

Di Salis gave another swift, approving nod, and linking his awkward hands, thrust them over one crooked knee and drew it to his chin.

Smiley had closed his eyes and seemed to have dozed off. But in reality he was hearing precisely what he had expected to hear: when it came to the full staffing of the firm of Indocharter, Sam Collins trod very lightly round a certain personality.

'But I think you mentioned there were also two non-Chinese in the firm, Sam,' Smiley reminded him. 'A dumb blonde, you said, and a pilot, Ricardo.'

Sam lightly brushed the objection aside.

'Ricardo was a madcap March hare,' he said. 'The Chinese wouldn't have trusted him with the stamp money. The real work was all done in the back room. If cash came in, that's where it was handled, that's where it was lost. Whether it was Russian cash, opium cash or whatever.'

Di Salis, pulling frantically at one ear-lobe, was prompt to agree: 'Reappearing at will in Vancouver, Amsterdam or Hong Kong or wherever it suited somebody's very Chinese purpose,' he declared, and writhed in pleasure at his own perception.

Once again, thought Smiley, Sam had got himself off the hook. 'Well, well,' he said. 'And how did it go from there, Sam, in your authorised version?'

'London scrubbed the case.'

From the dead silence, Sam must have realised in a second that he had touched a considerable nerve. His sign language indicated as much: for he did not peer round at their faces, or register any curiosity at all. Instead, out of a sort of theatrical modesty, he studied his shiny evening shoes and his elegant dress socks, and drew thoughtfully on his brown cigarette.

'When did they do that then, Sam?' asked Smiley.

Sam gave the date.

'Go back a little. Still forgetting the record, right? How much did London know of your enquiries as you went along? Tell us that. Did you send progress reports from day to day? Did Mac?'

If the mothers next door had set a bomb off, said Guillam afterwards, nobody would have taken his eyes off Sam.

Well, said Sam easily, as if humouring Smiley's

whim, he was an old dog. His principle in the field had always been to do it first and apologise afterwards. Mac's too. Operate the other way round and soon you have London refusing to let you cross the street without changing your nappies first, said Sam.

'So?' said Smiley patiently.

So the first word they sent to London on the case was, you might say, their last. Mac acknowledged the enquiry, reported the sum of Sam's findings and asked for instructions.

'And London? What did London do, Sam?'

'Sent Mac a top priority shriek pulling us both off the case and ordering him to cable back immediately confirming I had understood and obeyed the order. For good measure they threw in a rocket telling us not to fly solo again.'

Guillam was doodling on the sheet of paper

before him: a flower, then petals, then rain falling on the flower. Connie was beaming at Sam as if it were his wedding day, and her baby eyes were brimming tears of excitement. Di Salis, as usual, was jiggling and fiddling like an old engine, but his gaze also, as much as he could fix it anywhere, was upon Sam.

'You must have been rather cross,' said Smiley.

'Not really.'

'Didn't you have any wish to see the case through? You'd made a considerable strike.'

'I was irked, sure.'

'But you went along with London's instructions?'

'I'm a soldier, George. We all are in the field.'

'Very laudable,' said Smiley, considering Sam once more, how he lounged smooth and charming in his dinner jacket.

'Orders is orders,' said Sam, with a smile.

'Indeed. And when you eventually got back to London, I wonder,' Smiley went on, in a controlled, speculative way, 'and you had your welcome-home-well-done session with Bill, did you happen to mention the matter, casually, at all, to Bill?'

'Asked him what the hell he thought he was up to,' Sam agreed, just as leisurely.

'And what did Bill have to answer there, Sam?'

'Blamed the Cousins. Said they had got in on the act ahead of us. Said it was their case and their parish.'

'Had you any reason to believe that?'

'Sure. Ricardo.'

'You guessed he was the Cousins' man?'

'He'd flown for them. He was on their books already. He was a natural. All they had to do was keep him in play.'

'I thought we were agreed that a man like Ricardo would have no access to the real operations of the Company?'

'Wouldn't stop them using him. Not the cousins. Still be their case, even if Ricardo was a bummer. The hands-off pact would apply either way.'

'Let's go back to the moment when London pulled you off the case. You received the order, Drop everything. You obeyed. But it was some while yet before you returned to London, wasn't it? Was there an aftermath of any kind?'

'Don't quite follow you, old boy.'

Once again, at the back of his mind, Smiley made a scrupulous record of Sam's evasion.

'For example your friendly contact at the Banque de l'Indochine. Johnny. You kept up with him, of course?'

'Sure,' said Sam.

'And did Johnny happen to mention to you, as a matter of history, what happened to the goldseam after you'd received your hands-off telegram? Did it continue to come in month by month, just as it had before?'

'Stopped dead. Paris turned the tap off. No Indocharter, no nothing.'

'And Commercial Boris, of no previous convictions? Does he live happily ever after?'

'Went home.'

'Was he due to?'

'Done three years.'

'They usually do more.'

'Specially the hoods,' Sam agreed, smiling.

'And Ricardo, the mad-cap Mexican flyer whom you suspect of being the Cousins' agent: what became of him?'

'Died,' said Sam, eyes on Smiley all the while. 'Crashed up on the Thai border. The boys put it down to an overload of heroin.'

Pressed, Sam had that date, too.

'Was there moaning at the bar about that, so to speak?'

'Not much. General feeling seemed to be that Vientiane would be a safer place without Ricardo emptying his pistol through the ceiling of the White Rose or Madame Lulu's.'

'Where was that feeling expressed, Sam?'

'Oh, at Maurice's place.'

'Maurice?'

'Constellation Hotel. Maurice is the proprietor.'

'I see. Thank you.'

Here there was a definite gap, but Smiley seemed disinclined to fill it. Watched by Sam and his three assistants and Fawn the factotum, Smiley plucked at his spectacles, tilted them, straightened them and returned his hands to the glass top desk. Then he took Sam all the way through the story again, rechecked dates and names and places, very laboriously in the way of trained interrogators the world over, listening by long habit for the tiny flaws and the chance discrepancies and the omissions and the changes of emphasis, and apparently not finding any. And Sam, in his sense of false security, let it all happen, watching with the same blank smile with

which he watched cards slip across the baize, or the roulette wheel tease the white ball from one bay to another.

'Sam, I wonder whether you could possibly manage to stay the night with us?' Smiley said, when they were once more just the two of them. 'Fawn will do you a bed and so on. Do you think you could swing that with your club?'

'My dear fellow,' said Sam generously.

Then Smiley did a rather unnerving thing. Having handed Sam a bunch of magazines, he phoned for Sam's personal dossier, all volumes, and with Sam sitting there before him he read them in silence from cover to cover.

'I see you're a ladies' man,' he remarked at last, as the dusk gathered at the window.

'Here and there,' Sam agreed, still smiling. 'Here and there.' But the nervousness was quite

apparent in his voice.

When night came, Smiley sent the mothers home and issued orders through Housekeeping Section to have archives cleared of all burrowers by eight at the latest. He gave no reason. He let them think what they wanted. Sam should lie up in the rumpus room to be on call, and Fawn should keep him company and not let him stray. Fawn took this instruction literally. Even when the hours dragged out and Sam appeared to doze, Fawn stayed folded like a cat across the threshold, but with his eyes always open.

Then the four of them cloistered themselves in Registry - Connie, di Salis, Smiley and Guillam - and began the long, cautious paperchase. They looked first for the operational casepapers which properly should have been housed in the South

East Asian cut, under the dates Sam had given them. There was no card in the index and there were no casepapers either, but this was not yet significant. Haydon's London Station had been in the habit of waylaying operational files and confining them to its own restricted archive. So they plodded across the basement, feet clapping on the brown linoleum tiles, till they came to a barred alcove like an antechapel where the remains of what was formerly London Station's archive were laid to rest. Once again they found no card, and no papers.

'Look for the telegrams,' Smiley ordered, so they checked the signals ledgers, both incoming and outgoing, and for a moment Guillam at least was ready to suspect Sam of lying, till Connie pointed out that the relevant traffic sheets had been typed with a different typewriter: a machine, as it later turned out, which had not been acquired by housekeepers till six months after the date on the

paper.

'Look for floats,' Smiley ordered.

Circus floats were duplicated copies of main serials which Registry ran off when casepapers threatened to be in constant action. They were banked in loose-leaf folders like back-numbers of magazines and indexed every six weeks. After much delving Connie Sachs unearthed the South East Asian folder covering the six-week period immediately following Collins's trace request. It contained no reference to a suspected Soviet goldseam and none to Indocharter, Vientiane SA.

'Try the PFs,' said Smiley, with a rare use of initials, which he otherwise detested. So they trailed to another corner of Registry and sorted through drawers of cards, looking first for personal files on Commercial Boris, then for Ricardo, then under aliases for Tiny, believed dead, whom Sam had apparently mentioned in his

original ill-fated report to London Station. Now and then Guillam was sent upstairs to ask Sam some small point, and found him reading Field and sipping a large Scotch, watched unflinchingly by Fawn, who occasionally varied his routine - Guillam learned later - with press-ups, first on two knuckles of each hand, then on his fingertips. In the case of Ricardo they mapped out phonetic variations and ran them across the index also.

'Where are the organisations filed?' Smiley asked.

But of the société anonyme known as Indocharter, Vientiane, the organisations index contained no card either.

'Look up the liaison material.'

Dealings with the Cousins in Haydon's day were handled entirely through the London Station Liaison Secretariat, of which he himself for obvious reasons had personal command and

which held its own file copies of all inter-service correspondence. Returning to the antechapel, they once more drew a blank. To Peter Guillam the night was taking on surreal dimensions. Smiley had become all but wordless. His plump face turned to rock. Connie, in her excitement, had forgotten her arthritic aches and pains and was hopping around the shelves like a teenager at the ball. Not by any means a born paper man Guillam scrambled after her pretending to keep up with the pack, and secretly grateful for his trips up to Sam.

'We've got him, George, darling,' Connie kept saying under her breath. 'Sure as boots we've got the beastly toad.'

Doc di Salis had danced away in search of Indocharter's Chinese directors - Sam, astonishingly, had the names of two still in his head - and was wrestling with these first in

Chinese, then in Roman script, and finally in Chinese commercial code. Smiley sat in a chair reading the files on his knee like a man in a train, doughtily ignoring the passengers. Sometimes he lifted his head, but the sounds he heard were not from inside the room. Connie, on her own initiative, had launched a search for cross-references to files with which the casepapers should theoretically have been linked. There were subject files on mercenaries, and on freelance aviators. There were method files on Centre's techniques for laundering agent payments, and even a treatise, which she herself had written long ago, on the subject of below-the-line paymasters responsible for Karla's illegal networks functioning unbeknown to the mainstream residencies. Commercial Boris's unpronounceable last names had not been added to the appendix. There were background files on the Banque de l'Indochine and its links with the Moscow

Narodny Bank, and statistical files on the growing scale of Centre's activities in South East Asia, and study files on the Vientiane residency itself. But the negatives only multiplied, and as they multiplied they proved the affirmative.

Nowhere in their whole pursuit of Haydon had they come upon such a systematic and wholesale brushing-over of the traces. It was the backbearing of all time.

And it led inexorably east.

Only one clue that night pointed to the culprit. They came on it somewhere between dawn and morning while Guillam was dozing on his feet. Connie sniffed it out, Smiley laid it silently on the table, and three of them peered at it together under the reading light as if it were the clue to buried treasure: a clip of destruction certificates, a dozen in all, with the authorising cryptonym scribbled in black felt-tip along the middle line,

giving a pleasing effect of charcoal. The condemned files related to 'top secret correspondence with H/Annexe' - that was to say, with the Cousins' Head of Station, then as now Smiley's Brother-in-Christ Martello. The reason for destruction was the same as that which Haydon had given to Sam Collins for abandoning the field enquiries in Vientiane: 'Risk of compromising delicate American operation.' The signature consigning the files to the incinerator was in Haydon's workname.

Returning upstairs. Smiley invited Sam once more to his room. Sam had removed his bow tie, and the stubble of his jaw against his open-necked white shirt made him a lot less smooth.

First, Smiley sent Fawn out for coffee. He let it arrive and he waited till Fawn had flitted away again before pouring two cups, black for both of them, sugar for Sam, a saccharine for Smiley on

account of his weight problem. Then he settled in a soft chair at Sam's side rather than have a desk between them, in order to affiliate himself to Sam.

'Sam, I think I ought to hear a little about the girl,' he said, very softly, as if he were breaking sad news. 'Was it chivalry that made you miss her out?'

Sam seemed rather amused. 'Lost the files have you, old boy?' he enquired, with the same men's room intimacy.

Sometimes, in order to obtain a confidence, it is necessary to impart one.

'Bill lost them,' Smiley replied gently.

Elaborately, Sam lapsed into deep thought. Curling one card-player's hand he surveyed his fingertips, lamenting their grimy state.

'That club of mine practically runs itself these days', he reflected. 'I'm getting bored with it to be frank. Money, money. Time I had a change, made something of myself.'

Smiley understood, but he had to be firm.

'I've no resources, Sam. I can hardly feed the mouths I've hired already.'

Sam sipped his black coffee ruminatively, smiling through the steam.

'Who is she, Sam? What's it all about? No one minds how bad it is. It's water under the bridge, I promise you.'

Standing, Sam sank his hands in his pockets, shook his head, and rather as Jerry Westerby might have done, began meandering round the room, peering at the odd gloomy things that hung on the wall: group war photographs of dons in uniform; a framed and handwritten letter from a

dead prime minister; Karla's portrait again, which this time he studied from very close, on and on.

'Never throw your chips away,' he remarked, so close to Karla that his breath dulled the glass.

'That's what my old mother used to tell me. Never make a present of your assets. We get very few in life. Got to dole them out sparingly. Not as if there isn't a game going, is it?' he enquired. With his sleeve he wiped the glass clean. 'Very hungry mood prevails in this house of yours. Felt it the moment I walked in. The big table, I said to myself. Baby will eat tonight.'

Arriving at Smiley's desk, he sat himself in the chair as if testing it for comfort. The chair swivelled as well as rocked. Sam tried both movements. 'I need a search request,' he said.

'Top right,' said Smiley, and watched while Sam opened the drawer, pulled out a yellow flimsy and laid it on the glass to write.

For a couple of minutes, Sam composed in silence, pausing occasionally for artistic consideration, then writing again.

'Call me if she shows up,' he said and, with a facetious wave to Karla, made his exit.

When he had gone, Smiley took the form from the desk, sent for Guillam and handed it to him without a word. On the staircase Guillam paused to read the text.

'Worthington, Elizabeth alias Lizzie, alias Ricardo, Lizzie.' That was the top line. Then the details: 'Age about twenty-seven. Nationality British. Status, married, details of husband unknown, maiden name also unknown. 1972-3 common-law wife of Ricardo, Tiny, now dead. Last known place of residence Vientiane, Laos. Last known occupation: typist-receptionist with Indocharter Vientiane SA. Previous occupations:

nightclub hostess, whisky saleswoman, high-class tart.'

Performing its usual dismal rôle these days Registry took about three minutes to regret 'no trace repeat no trace of subject'. Beyond this, the Queen Bee took issue with the term 'high-class'. She insisted that 'superior' was the proper way to describe that kind of tart.

Curiously enough, Smiley was not deterred by Sam's reticence. He seemed happy to accept it as part and parcel of the trade. Instead, he requested copies of all source reports which Sam had originated from Vientiane or elsewhere over the last ten years odd, and which had escaped Haydon's clever knife. And thereafter, in leisure hours, such as they were, he browsed through these, and allowed his questing imagination to form pictures of Sam's own murky world.

At this hanging moment in the affair, Smiley showed a quite lovely sense of tact, as all later agreed. A lesser man might have stormed round to the Cousins and asked as a matter of the highest urgency that Martello look out the American end of the destroyed correspondence and grant him a sight of it, but Smiley wanted nothing stirred, nothing signalled. So instead he chose his humblest emissary. Molly Meakin was a prim, pretty graduate, a little blue-stocking perhaps, a little inward, but already with a modest name as a capable desk officer, and Old Circus by virtue of both her brother and her father. At the time of the fall she was still a probationer, cutting her milk teeth in Registry. After it she was kept on as skeleton staff and promoted, if that is the word, to Vetting Section, whence no man, let alone woman, says the folklore, returns alive. But Molly possessed, perhaps by heredity, what the

trade calls a natural eye. While those around her were still exchanging anecdotes about exactly where they were and what they were wearing when the news of Haydon's arrest was broken to them, Molly was setting up an unobtrusive and unofficial channel to her opposite number at the Annexe in Grosvenor Square, which by-passed the laborious procedures laid down by the Cousins since the fall. Her greatest ally was routine. Molly's visiting day was a Friday. Every Friday she drank coffee with Ed, who manned the computer; and talked classical music with Marge, who doubled for Ed; and sometimes she stayed for old-tyme dancing or a game of shuffleboard or ten-pin bowling at the Twilight Club in the Annexe basement. Friday was also the day, quite incidentally, when she took along her little shopping-list of trace requests. Even if she had none outstanding, Molly was careful to invent some in order to keep the channel open, and on

this particular Friday, at Smiley's behest, Molly Meakin included the name of Tiny Ricardo in her selection.

'But I don't want him sticking out in any way, Molly,' said Smiley anxiously.

'Of course not,' said Molly.

For smoke, as she called it, Molly chose a dozen other Rs and when she came to Ricardo she wrote down 'Richards query Rickard query Ricardo, profession teacher query aviation instructor,' so that the real Ricardo would only be thrown up as a possible identification. Nationality Mexican query Arab, she added: and she threw in the extra information that he might anyway be dead.

It was once more late in the evening before Molly returned to the Circus. Guillam was exhausted. Forty is a difficult age at which to stay awake, he decided. At twenty or at sixty the body knows

what it's about, but forty is an adolescence where one sleeps to grow up or to stay young. Molly was twenty-three. She came straight to Smiley's room, sat down primly with her knees pressed tight together, and began unpacking her handbag, watched intently by Connie Sachs, and even more intently by Peter Guillam, though for different reasons. She was sorry she'd been so long, she said severely, but Ed had insisted on taking her to a re-run of True Grit, a great favourite in the Twilight Club, and afterwards she had had to fight him off, but hadn't wished to give offence, least of all tonight. She handed Smiley an envelope and he opened it, and drew out a long buff computer card. So did she fight him off or not? Guillam wanted to know.

'How did it play?' was Smiley's first question.

'Quite straightforward,' she replied.

'What an extraordinary-looking script,' Smiley

exclaimed next. But as he went on reading his expression changed slowly to a rare and wolfish grin.

Connie was less restrained. By the time she had passed the card to Guillam, she was laughing outright.

'Oh Bill! Oh you wicked lovely man! Talk about pointing everybody in the wrong direction! Oh the devil!'

In order to silence the Cousins, Haydon had reversed his original lie. Deciphered, the lengthy computer printout told the following enchanting story.

Anxious lest the Cousins might have been duplicating the Circus's enquiries into the firm of Indocharter, Bill Haydon, in his capacity as Head of London Station, had sent to the Annexe a pro-forma hands-off notice, under the standing

bilateral agreement between the services. This advised the Americans that Indocharter, Vientiane SA was presently under scrutiny by London and that the Circus had an agent in place. Accordingly, the Americans consented to drop any interest they might have in the case in exchange for a share of the eventual take. As an aid to the British operation, the Cousins did however mention that their link with the pilot Tiny Ricardo was extinct.

In short, as neat an example of playing both ends against the middle as anybody had met with.

'Thank you, Molly,' said Smiley politely, when everyone had had a chance to marvel. 'Thank you very much indeed.'

'Not at all,' said Molly, prim as a nursemaid. 'And Ricardo is definitely dead, Mr Smiley,' she ended, and she quoted the same date of death which Sam Collins had already supplied. With that, she

snapped together the clasp of her handbag, pulled her skirt over her admirable knees, and walked delicately from the room, well observed once more by Peter Guillam.

A different pace, a different mood entirely, now overtook the Circus. The frantic search for a trail, any trail, was over. They could march to a purpose, rather than gallop in all directions. The amiable distinction between the two families largely fell away: the bolshies and the yellow perils became a single unit under the joint direction of Connie and the Doc, even if they kept their separate skills. Joy after that, for the burrowers, came in bits, like waterholes on a long and dusty trek, and sometimes they all but fell at the wayside. Connie took no more than a week to identify the Soviet paymaster in Vientiane who had supervised the transfer of funds to

Indocharter, Vientiane SA - the Commercial Boris. He was the former soldier Zimin, a longstanding graduate of Karla's private training school outside Moscow. Under the previous alias of Smirnov, this Zimin was on record as having played paymaster to an East German apparat in Switzerland six years ago. Using the name Kursky, he had surfaced before that in Vienna. As a secondary skill he offered sound-stealing and entrapment, and some said he was the same Zimin who had sprung the successful honey-trap in West Berlin against a certain French senator who later sold half his country's secrets down the river. He had left Vientiane exactly a month after Sam's report had hit London.

After that small triumph, Connie set herself the apparently impossible task of defining what arrangements Karla, or his paymaster Zimin, might have made to replace the interrupted goldseam. Her touchstones were several. First,

the known conservatism of enormous intelligence establishments, and their attachment to proven trade-routes. Second, Centre's presumed need, since large payments were involved, to replace the old system with a new one, fast. Third, Karla's complacency, both before the fall, when he had the Circus tethered, and since the fall, when it lay gasping and toothless at his feet. Lastly, quite simply, she relied upon her own encyclopaedic grasp of the subject. Gathering together the heaps of unprocessed raw material which had lain deliberately neglected during the years of her exile, Connie's team made huge arcs through the files, revised, conferred, drew charts: and diagrams, pursued the individual handwriting of known operators, had migraines, argued, played ping-pong, and occasionally, with agonising caution, and Smiley's express consent, undertook timid investigations in the field. A friendly contact in the City was persuaded to visit

an old acquaintance who specialised in off-shore Hong Kong companies. A Cheapside currency broker opened his books to Toby Esterhase, the sharp-eyed Hungarian survivor who was all that remained of the Circus's once glorious travelling army of couriers and pavement artists. So it went on, at a snail's pace: but at least the snail knew where it wanted to go. Doc di Salis, in his distant way, took the overseas Chinese path, working his passage through the arcane connections of Indocharter, Vientiane SA, and its elusive echelons of parent companies. His helpers were as uncommon as himself, either language students or elderly recycled China hands. With time they acquired a collective pallor, like inmates of the same dank seminary.

Meanwhile, Smiley himself advanced no less cautiously, if anything down yet more devious avenues, and through a greater number of doors.

Once more he sank from view. It was a time of waiting and he spent it in attending to the hundred other things that needed his urgent attention. His brief burst of teamwork over, he withdrew to the inner regions of his solitary world. Whitehall saw him; so did Bloomsbury still; so did the Cousins. At other times the throne-room door stayed closed for days at a time, and only dark Fawn the factotum was permitted to flit in and out in his gym-shoes, bearing steaming cups of coffee, plates of biscuits and occasional written memoranda, to or from his master. Smiley had always loathed the telephone, and now he would take no calls whatever, unless in Guillam's view they concerned matters of great urgency, and none did. The only instrument Smiley could not switch off controlled the direct line from Guillam's desk, but when he was in one of his moods he went so far as to put a teacosy over it in an effort to quell the ring. The invariable

procedure was for Guillam to say that Smiley was out, or in conference, and would return the call in an hour's time. He then wrote out a message, handed it to Fawn, and eventually, with the initiative on his side, Smiley would ring back. He conferred with Connie, sometimes with di Salis, sometimes with both, but Guillam was not required. The Karla file was transferred from Connie's Research Section to Smiley's personal safe for good; all seven volumes. Guillam signed for them and took them in to him, and when Smiley lifted his eyes from the desk and saw them, the quiet of recognition came over him, and he reached forward as if to receive an old friend. The door closed again, and more days passed.

'Any word?' Smiley would ask occasionally of Guillam. He meant: 'Has Connie rung?'

The Hong Kong residency was evacuated around this time, and too late Smiley was advised of the

housekeepers' elephantine efforts at repressing the High Haven story. He at once drew Craw's dossier, and again called Connie in for consultation. A few days later Craw himself appeared in London for a forty-eight-hour visit. Guillam had heard him lecture at Sarratt and detested him. A couple of weeks afterwards, the old man's celebrated article finally saw the light of day. Smiley read it intently, then passed it to Guillam, and for once he actually offered an explanation for his action: Karla would know very well what the Circus was up to, he said. Backbearings were a time-honoured pastime. However, Karla would not be human if he didn't sleep after such a big kill.

'I want him to hear from everyone just how dead we are,' Smiley explained.

Soon this broken-wing technique was extended to other spheres, and one of Guillam's more

entertaining tasks was to make sure that Roddy Martindale was well supplied with woeful stories about the Circus's disarray.

And still the burrowers toiled. They called it afterwards the phoney peace. They had the map, Connie said later, and they had the directions, but there were still mountains to be moved in spoonfuls. Waiting, Guillam took Molly Meakin to long and costly dinners but they ended inconclusively. He played squash with her and admired her eye, he swam with her and admired her body, but she warded off closer contact with a mysterious and private smile, turning her head away and downward while she went on holding him.

Under the continued pressure of idleness Fawn the factotum took to acting strangely. When

Smiley disappeared and left him behind, he literally pined for his master's return. Catching him by surprise in his little den one evening, Guillam was shocked to find him in a near foetal crouch, winding a handkerchief round and round his thumb like a ligature, in order to hurt himself.

'For God's sake, it's nothing personal, man!' Guillam cried. 'George doesn't need you for once, that's all. Take a few days' leave or something. Cool off.'

But Fawn referred to Smiley as the Chief, and looked askance at those who called him George.

It was toward the end of this barren phase that a new and wonderful gadget appeared on the fifth floor. It was brought in suitcases by two crew cut technicians and installed over three days: a green telephone destined, despite his prejudices, for Smiley's desk and connecting him directly with the Annexe. It was routed by way of Guillam's

room, and linked to all manner of anonymous grey boxes which hummed without warning. Its presence only deepened the general mood of nervousness: what use was a machine, they asked each other, if they had nothing to put into it?

But they had something.

Suddenly the word was out. What Connie had found she wasn't saying, but news of the discovery ran like wildfire through the building: 'Connie's home! The burrowers are home! They've found the new goldseam! They've traced it all the way through!'

Through what? To whom? Where did it end? Connie and di Salis still kept mum. For a day and a night they trailed in and out of the throne-room laden with files, no doubt once more in order to show Smiley their workings.

Then Smiley disappeared for three days and

Guillam only learned much later that 'in order to screw down every bolt' as he called it, he had visited both Hamburg and Amsterdam for discussions with certain eminent bankers of his acquaintance. These gentlemen spent a great while explaining to him that the war was over and they could not possibly offend against their code of ethics, and then they gave him the information he so badly needed: though it was only the final confirmation of all that the burrowers had deduced. Smiley returned, but Peter Guillam still remained shut out, and he might well have continued in this private limbo indefinitely, had it not been for dinner at the Lacons.

Guillam's inclusion was pure chance. So was the dinner. Smiley had asked Lacon for an afternoon appointment at the Cabinet Office, and spent several hours in cahoots with Connie and di Salis preparing for it. At the last moment Lacon was summoned by his parliamentary masters, and

proposed pot-luck at his ugly mansion at Ascot instead. Smiley detested driving and there was no duty car. In the end, Guillam offered to chauffeur him in his draughty old Porsche, having first put a rug over him which he was keeping in case Molly Meakin consented to a picnic. On the drive, Smiley attempted small-talk, which came hard to him, but he was nervous. They arrived in rain and there was muddle on the doorstep about what to do with the unexpected underling. Smiley insisted that Guillam would make his own way and return at ten-thirty: the Lacons that he must stay, there was simply masses of food.

'It's up to you,' said Guillam to Smiley.

'Oh, of course. No I mean really, if it's all right with the Lacons, naturally,' said Smiley huffily and in they went.

So a fourth place was laid, and the overcooked steak was cut into bits till it looked like dry stew,

and a daughter was despatched on her bicycle with a pound to fetch a second bottle of wine from the pub up the road. Mrs Lacon was doe-like and fair and blushing, a child bride who had become a child mother. The table was too long for four. She set Smiley and her husband one end and Guillam next to her. Having asked him whether he liked madrigals, she embarked on an endless account of a concert at her daughter's private school. She said it was absolutely ruined by the rich foreigners they were taking in to balance the books. Half of them couldn't sing in a Western way at all:

'I mean who wants one's child brought up with a lot of Persians when they all have six wives apiece?' she said. Stringing her along, Guillam strove to catch the dialogue at the other end of the table. Lacon seemed to be bowling and batting at once.

'First, you petition me,' he boomed. 'You are doing that now, very properly. At this stage, you should give no more than a preliminary outline. Traditionally Ministers like nothing that cannot be written on a postcard. Preferably a picture postcard,' he said, and took a prim sip at the vile red wine.

Mrs Lacon, whose intolerance had a beatific innocence about it, began complaining about Jews.

'I mean they don't even eat the same food as we do,' she said. 'Penny says they get special herring things for lunch.'

Guillam again lost the thread till Lacon raised his voice in warning.

'Try to keep Karla out of this, George. I've asked you before. Learn to say Moscow instead, will you? They don't like personalities - however

dispassionate your hatred of him. Nor do I.'

'Moscow then,' Smiley said.

'It's not that one dislikes them,' Mrs Lacon said.
'They're just different.'

Lacon picked up some earlier point. 'When you say a large sum, how large is large?'

'We are not yet in a position to say,' Smiley replied.

'Good. More enticing. Have you no panic factor?'

Smiley didn't follow that question any better than Guillam.

'What alarms you most about your discovery, George? What do you fear for, here, in your role of watchdog?'

'The security of a British Crown Colony?' Smiley suggested, after some thought.

'They're talking about Hong Kong,' Mrs Lacon explained to Guillam. 'My uncle was Political Secretary. On Daddy's side,' she added.

'Mummy's brothers never did anything brainy at all.'

She said Hong Kong was nice but smelly.

Lacon had become a little pink and erratic.

'Colony my God, hear that, Val?' he called down the table, taking time off to educate her. 'Richer than we are by half, I should think and, from where I sit, enviably more secure as well. A full twenty years their Treaty has to run, even if the Chinese enforce it. At this rate, they should see us out in comfort!'

'Oliver thinks we're doomed,' Mrs Lacon explained to Guillam excitedly, as if she were admitting him to a family secret, and shot her husband an angelic smile.

Lacon resumed his former confiding tone, but he continued to blurt and Guillam guessed he was showing off to his squaw.

'You would also make the point to me, wouldn't you as background to the postcard as it were - that a major Soviet intelligence presence in Hong Kong would be - appalling embarrassment to the Colonial government in her relations with Peking?'

'Before I went as far as that -'

'On whose magnanimity,' Lacon pursued, 'she depends from hour to hour for her survival, correct?'

'It's because of these very implications -' Smiley said.

'Oh Penny, you're naked!' Mrs Lacon cried indulgently.

Providing Guillam with a glorious respite, she bounded off to calm an unruly small daughter who had appeared at the doorway. Lacon meanwhile had filled his lungs for an aria.

'We are therefore not only protecting Hong Kong from the Russians - which is bad enough, I grant you, but perhaps not quite bad enough for some of our higher-minded Ministers - we are protecting her from the wrath of Peking, which is universally held to be awful, right Guillam? However -' said Lacon, and to emphasise the volte face went so far as to arrest Smiley's arm with his long hand so that he had to put down his glass - 'however,' he warned, as his erratic voice swooped and rose again, 'whether our masters will swallow all that is quite another matter altogether.'

'I would not consider asking them to until I had obtained corroboration of our data,' Smiley said

sharply.

'Ah, but you can't, can you?' Lacon objected, changing hats. 'You can't go beyond domestic research. You haven't the charter.'

'Without a reconnaissance of the information -'

'Ah, but what does that mean, George?'

'Putting in an agent.'

Lacon lifted his eyebrows and turned away his head, reminding Guillam irresistibly of Molly Meakin.

'Method is not my affair, nor are the details. Clearly you can do nothing to embarrass since you have no money and no resources.' He poured more wine, spilling some. 'Val!' he yelled. 'Cloth!'

'I do have some money.'

'But not for that purpose.' The wine had stained

the tablecloth. Guillam poured salt on it while Lacon lifted the cloth and shoved his napkin ring under it to spare the polish.

A long silence followed, broken by the slow pat of wine falling on the parquet floor. Finally Lacon said: 'It is entirely up to you to define what is chargeable under your mandate.'

'May I have that in writing?'

'No, sir.'

'May I have your authority to take what steps are needed to corroborate the information?'

'No, sir.'

'But you won't block me?'

'Since I know nothing of method, and am not required to, it is hardly my province to dictate to you.'

'But since I make a formal approach -' Smiley began.

'Val, do bring a cloth! Once you make a formal approach I shall wash my hands of you entirely. It is the Intelligence Steering Group, not myself, who determines your scope of action. You will make your pitch. They will hear you out. From then on it's between you and them. I am just the midwife. Val, bring a cloth, it's everywhere!'

'Oh, it's my head on the block, not yours,' said Smiley, almost to himself. 'You're impartial. I know all about that.'

'Oliver's not impartial,' said Mrs Lacon gaily as she returned with the girl over her shoulder, brushed and wearing a nightdress. 'He's terrifically in favour of you, aren't you, Olly?' She handed Lacon a cloth and he began mopping. 'He's become a real hawk these days. Better than the Americans. Now say good night to everyone,

Penny, come on.' She was offering the child to each of them in turn. 'Mr Smiley first... Mr Guillam, now Daddy... How's Ann, George, not off to the country again, I hope?'

'Oh very bonny, thank you.'

'Well, make Oliver give you what you want. He's getting terribly pompous, aren't you, Olly?'

She danced off, chanting her own rituals to the child.

'Hitty-pitty without the wall... hitty-pitty within the wall... and bumps goes Pottifer!'

Lacon proudly watched her go.

'Now, win you bring the Americans into it, George?' he demanded airily. 'That's a great catchpenny, you know. Wheel in the Cousins and you'd carry the committee without a shot fired. Foreign Office would eat out of your hand.'

'I would prefer to stay my hand on that.'

The green telephone, thought Guillam, might never have existed.

Lacon ruminated, twiddling his glass.

'Pity,' he pronounced finally. 'Pity. No Cousins, no panic factor...' He gazed at the dumpy, unimpressive figure before him. Smiley sat, hands linked, eyes closed, seemingly half asleep. 'And no credibility either,' Lacon went on, apparently as a direct comment upon Smiley's appearance. 'Defence won't lift a finger for you, I'll tell you that for a start. Nor will the Home Office. The Treasury's a toss-up, and the Foreign Office - depends who they send to the meeting and what they had for breakfast.' Again he reflected. 'George.'

'Yes?'

'Let me send you an advocate. Somebody who

can ride point for you, draft your submission, carry it to the barricades.'

'Oh I think I can manage, thank you!'

'Make him rest more,' Lacon advised Guillam in a deafening whisper as they walked to the car. 'And try and get him to drop those black jackets and stuff. They went out with bustles. Goodbye, George! Ring me tomorrow if you change your mind and want help. Now drive carefully, Guillam. Remember you've been drinking.'

As they passed through the gates Guillam said something very rude indeed but Smiley was too deep inside the rug to hear.

'So it's Hong Kong then?' Guillam said, as they drove.

No answer, but no denial either.

'And who's the lucky fieldman?' Guillam asked, a

little later, with no real hope of getting an answer. 'Or is that all part of foxing around with the Cousins?'

'We're not foxing around with them at all,' Smiley retorted, stung for once. 'If we cut them in, they'll swamp us. If we don't, we've no resources. It's simply a matter of balance.'

Smiley dived back into the rug.

But the very next day, lo and behold, they were ready.

At ten, Smiley convened an operational directorate. Smiley talked, Connie talked, di Salis fidgeted and scratched himself like a verminous court tutor in a Restoration comedy, till it was his own turn to speak out, in his cracked, clever voice. The same evening still, Smiley sent his telegram to Italy: a real one, not just a signal, codeword Guardian, copy to the fast growing file.

Smiley wrote it out, Guillam gave it to Fawn, who whisked it off triumphantly to the all-night post office at Charing Cross. From the air of ceremony with which Fawn departed, one might have supposed that the little buff form was the highest point so far of his sheltered life. This was not so. Before the fall, Fawn had worked under Guillam as a scalp-hunter based in Brixton. By actual trade, though, he was a silent killer.

Chapter 5 - A Walk in the Park

Throughout that whole sunny week Jerry Westerby's leave-taking had a bustling, festive air which never once let up. If London was holding its summer late, then so, one might have thought, was Jerry. Stepmothers; vaccinations, travel touts,

literary agents and Fleet Street editors; Jerry, though he loathed London like the pest, took them all in his cheery pounding stride. He even had a London persona to go with the buckskin boots: his suit, not Savile Row exactly, but a suit undeniably. His prison gear, as the orphan called it, was a washable, blue-faded affair, the creation of a twenty-four-hour tailor named 'Pontschak Happy House of Bangkok', who guaranteed it unwrinkable in radiant silk letters on the tag. In the mild midday breezes it billowed as weightlessly as a frock on Brighton pier. His silk shirt from the same source had a yellowed, locker-room look recalling Wimbledon or Henley. His tan, though Tuscan, was as English as the famous cricketing tie which flew from him like a patriotic flag. Only his expression, to the very discerning, had that certain watchfulness, which also Mama Stefano the postmistress had noticed, and which the instinct describes as 'professional', and leaves

at that. Sometimes, if he anticipated waiting, he carted the book-sack with him, which gave him a bumpkin air: Dick Whittington had come to town.

He was based, if anywhere, in Thurloe Square where he lodged with his stepmother, the third Lady Westerby, in a tiny frilly flat crammed with huge antiques salvaged from abandoned houses. She was a painted, hen-like woman, snappish as old beauties sometimes are, and would often curse him for real or imagined crimes, such as smoking her last cigarette, or bringing in mud from his caged rambles in the park. Jerry took it all in good part. Sometimes, returning as late as three or four in the morning but still not sleepy, he would hammer on her door to wake her, though most often she was awake already; and when she had put on her make-up, he set her on his bed in her frou-frou dressing gown with a king-sized crème de menthe frappée in her little claw, while Jerry himself sprawled over the

whole floor-space, among a magic mountain of junk, getting on with what he called his packing. The mountain was made of everything that was useless: old press cuttings, heaps of yellowed newspapers, legal deeds tied in green ribbon, and even a pair of custom-made riding boots, tree'd, but green with mildew. In theory Jerry was deciding what he would need of all this for his journey, but he seldom got much further than a keepsake of some kind, which set the two of them on a chain of memories. One night for example he unearthed an album of his earliest stories.

'Hey Pet, here's a good one! Westerby really rips the mask off this one! Make your heart beat faster does it, sport? Get the old blood stirring?'

'You should have gone into your uncle's business,' she retorted, turning the pages with great satisfaction. The uncle in question was a gravel king, whom Pet used freely to emphasise

old Sambo's improvidence.

Another time they found a copy of the old man's will from years back - 'I, Samuel, also known as Sambo, Westerby' - jammed in with a bunch of bills and solicitors' correspondence addressed to Jerry in his function as executor, all stained with whisky, or quinine, and beginning 'We regret'.

'Bit of a turn-up, that one,' Jerry muttered uncomfortably, when it was too late to re-bury the envelope to the mountain. 'Reckon we could bung it down the old what-not, don't you, sport?'

Her boot-button eyes glowed furiously.

'Aloud,' she ordered, in a booming, theatrical voice, and in no time they were wandering together through the insoluble complexities of trusts that endowed grandchildren, educated nephews and nieces, the income to this wife for her lifetime, the capital to so-and-so on death or

marriage; codicils to reward favours, others to punish slights.

'Hey, know who that was? Dread cousin Alfred, the one who went to jug! Jesus, why'd he want to leave him money? Blow it in one night!'

And codicils to take care of the racehorses, who might otherwise come under the axe: 'My horse Rosalie in Maison Laffitte, together with two thousand pounds a year for stabling... my horse Intruder presently under training in Dublin, to my son Gerald for their respective lifetimes, on the understanding he will support them to their natural deaths...'

Old Sambo, like Jerry, dearly loved a horse.

Also for Jerry: stock. Only for Jerry: the company's stock in millions. A mantle, power, responsibility; a whole grand world to inherit and romp around in... a world offered, promised even,

then withheld: 'My son to manage all the newspapers of the group according to the style and codes of practice established in my lifetime.' Even a bastard was owned to: a sum of twenty thousands, free of duty payable to Miss Mary Something of the Green, Chobham, the mother of my acknowledged son Adam. The only trouble was: the cupboard was bare. The figures on the account sheet wasted steadily away from the day the great man's empire tottered into liquidation. Then changed to red and grew again into long blood-sucking insects swelling by a nought a year.

'Ah well, Pet,' said Jerry, in the unearthly silence of early dawn, as he tossed the envelope' back on the magic mountain. 'Shot of him now, aren't you, sport?' Rolling on to his side, he grabbed the pile of faded newspapers last editions of his father's brainchildren - and, as only old pressmen can, fumbled his way through all of them at once.

Can't go chasing the dolly birds where he is, can he, Pet?' - a huge rustle of paper - 'Wouldn't put it past him, mind. Wouldn't be for want of trying, I daresay.' And in a quieter voice, as he turned back to glance at the little doll on the edge of his bed, her feet barely reaching the carpet: 'You were always his tai-tai, sport, his number one. Always up stuck for you. Told me. Most beautiful girl in the world, Pet is. Told me. Very words. Bellowed it at me across Fleet Street once. Best wife I ever had. '

'Damn devil,' said his stepmother in a soft, sudden rush of pure North Country dialect, as the creases collected like a surgeon's pins round the red seam of her lips. 'Rotten devil, I hate every inch of him.' And for a while they stayed that way, neither of them speaking, Jerry lying pottering with his junk and yanking at his forelock, she sitting, joined in some kind of love for Jerry's father.

'You should have sold ballast for your Uncle Paul,' she sighed, with the insight of a much deceived woman.

On their last night Jerry took her out to dinner, and afterwards, back in Thurloe Square, she served him coffee in what was left of her Sèvres service. The gesture led to disaster. Wedging his broad forefinger unthinkingly into the handle of his cup, Jerry broke it off with a faint putt which mercifully escaped her notice. By dexterous palming, he contrived to conceal the damage from her until he was able to gain the kitchen and make a swap. God's wrath is inescapable, alas. When Jerry's plane staged in Tashkent - he had wangled himself a concession on the trans-Siberian route - he found to his surprise that the Russian authorities had opened a bar at one end of the waiting room: in Jerry's view amazing evidence of the country's liberalisation. Groping

in his jacket pocket for hard currency to pay for a large vodka, he came instead on the pretty little porcelain question-mark with its snapped-off edges. He forswore the vodka.

In business matters he was equally amenable, equally compliant. His literary agent was an old cricketing acquaintance, a snob of uncertain origins called Mencken, known as Ming, one of those natural fools for whom English society and the publishing world in particular are ever ready to make a comfortable space. Mencken was bluff and gusty and sported a grizzled beard, perhaps in order to suggest he wrote the books he hawked. They lunched in Jerry's club, a grand, grubby place which owed its survival to amalgamation with humbler clubs, and repeated appeals through the post. Huddled in the half-empty dining room, under the marble eyes of empire builders, they

lamented Lancashire's lack of fast bowlers. Jerry wished Kent would 'hit the damn ball, Ming, not peck at it'. Middlesex, they agreed, had some good young ones coming on: but 'Lord help us, look at the way they pick 'em,' said Ming, shaking his head and cutting his food all at once.

'Pity you ran out of steam,' Ming bawled, to Jerry and anyone else who cared to listen. 'Nobody's brought off the eastern novel recently, my view. Greene managed it, if you can take Greene, which I can't, too much popery. Malraux if you like philosophy, which I don't. Maugham you can have, and before that it's back to Conrad. Cheers. Mind my saying something?' Jerry filled Ming's glass. 'Go easy on the Hemingway stuff. All that grace under pressure, love with your balls shot off. They don't like it, my view. It's been said.'

Jerry saw Ming to his cab.

'Mind my saying something?' Mencken repeated.

'Longer sentences. Moment you journalist chappies turn your hand to novels, you write too short. Short paragraphs, short sentences, short chapters. You see the stuff in column inches, 'stead of across the page. Hemingway was just the same. Always trying to write novels on the back of a matchbox. Spread yourself, my view.'

'Cheerio, Ming. Thanks.'

'Cheerio, Westerby. Remember me to your old father, mind. Must be getting on now, I suppose. Still it comes to us all.'

Even with Stubbs, Jerry near enough preserved the same sunny temper; though Stubbs, as Connie Sachs would have said, was a known toad.

Pressmen, like other travelling people, make the same mess everywhere and Stubbs, as the group's managing editor, was no exception. His desk was littered with tea-stained proofs and ink-stained

cups and the remains of a ham sandwich that had died of old age. Stubbs himself sat scowling at Jerry from the middle of it all as if Jerry had come to take it away from him.

'Stubbsie. Pride of the profession,' Jerry murmured, shoving open the door, and leaned against the wall with his hands behind him, as if to keep them in check.

Stubbs bit something hard and nasty on the tip of his tongue before returning to the file he was studying at the top of the muck on his desk. Stubbs made all the weary jokes about editors come true. He was a resentful man with heavy grey jowls and heavy eyelids that looked as though they had been rubbed with soot. He would stay with the Daily until the ulcers got him, and then they would send him to the Sunday. Another year, he would be farmed out to the women's magazines to take orders from children till he had

served his time. Meanwhile he was devious, and listened to incoming phone calls from correspondents without telling them he was on the line.

'Saigon,' Stubbs growled, and with a chewed ballpoint marked something in a margin. His London accent was complicated by a half-hearted twang left over from the days when Canadian was the Fleet Street sound. 'Christmas three years back. Ring a bell?'

'What bell's that, old boy?' Jerry asked, still pressed against the wall.

'A festive bell,' said Stubbs, with a hangman's smile. 'Fellowship and good cheer in the bureau, when the group was fool enough to maintain one out there. A Christmas party. You gave it.' He read from a file. 'To Christmas luncheon, Hotel Continental, Saigon. Then you list the guests, just the way we ask you to. Stringers, photographers,

drivers, secretaries, messenger boys, hell do I know? Cool seventy pounds changed hands in the interest of public relations and festive cheer. Recall that?' He went straight on. 'Among the guests you have Smoothie Stallwood entered. He was there, was he? Stallwood? His usual act? Oiling up the ugliest girls, saying the right things?'

Waiting, Stubbs nibbled again at whatever it was he had on the tip of his tongue. But Jerry propped up the wall, ready to wait all day.

'We're a left-wing group,' said Stubbs, launching on a favourite dictum. 'That means we disapprove of fox-hunting and rely for our survival on the generosity of one illiterate millionaire. Records say Stallwood ate his Christmas lunch in Phnom Penh, lashing out hospitality on dignitaries of the Cambodian government, God help him. I've spoken to Stallwood, and he seems to think that's

where he was. Phnom Penh.'

Jerry slouched over to the window and settled his rump against an old black radiator. Outside, not six feet from him, a grimy clock hung over the busy pavement, a present to Fleet Street from the founder. It was mid-morning but the hands were stuck at five to six. In a doorway across the street, two men stood reading a newspaper. They wore hats, and the newspaper obscured their faces, and Jerry reflected how lovely life would be if watchers only looked like that in reality.

'Everybody screws this comic, Stubbsie,' he said thoughtfully after another longish silence. 'You included. You're talking about three bloody years ago. Stuff it, sport. That's my advice. Pop it up the old back passage. Best place for that one.'

'It's not a comic, it's a rag. Comic's a colour supplement.'

'Comic to me, sport. Always was, always will be.'

'Welcome,' Stubbs intoned with a sigh. 'Welcome to the Chairman's choice.' He took up a printed, form of contract. 'Name: Westerby, Clive Gerald,' he declaimed, pretending to read from it.

'Profession: aristocrat. Welcome to the son of old Sambo.' He tossed the contract on the desk. 'You take the both. The Sunday and the Daily. Seven day coverage, wars to tit-shows. No tenure or pension, expenses at the meanest possible level. Laundry in the field only and that doesn't mean the whole week's wash. You get a cable card but don't use it. Just air-freight your story and telex the number of the waybill and we'll put it on the spike for you when it arrives. Further payment by results. The BBC is also graciously pleased to take voice interviews from you at the usual derisory rates. Chairman says it's good, for prestige, whatever the hell that means. For syndication -'

'Allelujah,' said Jerry in a long outward breath.

Ambling to the desk, he took up the chewed ballpoint, still wet from Stubbs's lick, and without a glance at its owner, or the wording of the contract, scrawled his signature in a slow zigzag along the bottom of the last page, grinning lavishly. At the same moment, as if summoned to interrupt this hallowed event, a girl in jeans unceremoniously kicked open the door and dumped a fresh sheaf of galleys on the desk. The phones rang - perhaps they had been ringing for some while - the girl departed, balancing absurdly on her enormous platform heels; an unfamiliar head poked round the door and yelled 'old man's prayer meeting, Stubbsie'; an underling appeared, and moments later Jerry was being marched down the chicken run: administration, foreign desk, editorial, pay, diary, sports, travel, the ghastly women's magazines. His guide was a

twenty-year-old bearded graduate and Jerry called him 'Cedric' all the way through the ritual. On the pavement he paused, rocking slightly, heel to toe and back, as if he were drunk, or punchdrunk.

'Super,' he muttered, loud enough for a couple of girls to turn and stare at him as they passed. 'Excellent. Marvellous. Splendid. Perfect.' With that, he dived into the nearest watering-hole, where a bunch of old hands were propping up the bar, mainly the industrial and political caucus, boasting about how they nearly had a page-five lead.

'Westerby! It's the Earl himself! It's the suit! The same suit! And the Early-bird's inside it, for Christ's sake!'

Jerry stayed till 'time' was called. He drank frugally, nevertheless, for he liked to keep a clear head for his walks in the park with George

Smiley.

To every closed society there is an inside and an outside, and Jerry was on the outside. To walk in the park with George Smiley, in those days, or - free of the professional jargon, to make a clandestine rendezvous with him; or as Jerry himself might have expressed it, if he ever, which God forbid, put a name to the larger issues of his destiny, 'to take a dive into his other, better life' - required him to saunter from a given point of departure, usually some rather under-populated area like the recently extinguished Covent Garden, and arrive still on foot at a given destination at a little before six, by which time, he assumed, the Circus's depleted team of pavement-artists had taken a look at his back and declared it clean. On the first evening his destination was the embankment side of Charing Cross underground

station, as it was still called that year, a busy, scrappy spot where something awkward always seems to be happening to the traffic. On the last evening it was a multiple bus stop on the southern pavement of Piccadilly where it borders Green Park. There were, in all, four occasions, two in London and two at the Nursery. The Sarratt stuff was operational - the obligatory re-bore in tradecraft, to which all fieldmen must periodically submit - and included much to be memorised, such as phone numbers, word codes and contact procedures; such as open-code phrases for insertion into plain language telex messages to the comic; such as fallbacks and emergency action in certain, it was hoped, remote contingencies. Like many sportsmen Jerry had a clear, easy memory for facts and when the inquisitors tested him they were pleased. Also they rehearsed him in the strong-arm stuff, with the result that his back bled from hitting the worn

matting once too often.

The sessions in London consisted of one very simple briefing and one very short farewell.

The pickups were variously contrived. At Green Park, by way of a recognition signal, he carried a Fortnum Mason carrier-bag and managed, however long the bus queue became, by a series of grins and shuffles, to remain neatly at the back of it. Hovering at the embankment, on the other hand, he clutched an out-of-date copy of Time magazine, bearing by coincidence the nourished features of Chairman Mao on the cover, of which the red lettering and border on a white field stood out strongly in the slanting sunlight. Big Ben struck six and Jerry counted the chimes, but the ethic of such meetings requires they do not happen on the hour nor on the quarter, but in the vaguer spaces in-between, which are held to be less conspicuous. Six o'clock was the autumn

witching hour, when the smells of every wet and leaf-blown country cricket field in England were wafted up-river with the damp shreds of dusk, and Jerry passed the time in a pleasurable half-trance, scenting them thoughtlessly and keeping his left eye, for some reason, wedged tight shut. The van, when it lumbered up to him, was a battered green Bedford with a ladder on the roof and 'Harris Builder' painted out, but still legible on the side: an old surveillance-horse put out to grass, with steel flaps over the windows. Seeing it pull up, Jerry started forward at the same moment as the driver, a sour boy with a hare lip, shoved his spiky head through the open window.

'Where's Wilf then?' the boy demanded rudely. 'They said you got Wilf with you.'

'You'll have to make do with me,' Jerry retorted with spirit. 'Wilf's on a job.' And opening the back door he clambered straight in and slammed

it; for the passenger seat in the front cab was deliberately crammed with lengths of plywood so that there was no room for him to sit there.

That was the only conversation they had, ever.

In the old days, when the Circus had a natural non-commissioned class, Jerry would have counted on some amiable small talk. No longer. When he went to Sarratt, the procedure was little different except that they bounced along for fifteen miles or so, and if he was lucky, the boy remembered to throw in a cushion to prevent the total rupture of Jerry's backside. The driver's cab was blocked off from the belly of the van where Jerry crouched, and all he had to look through, as he slid up and down the wooden bench and clutched the grab handles, were the cracks at the edges of the steel window screens, which gave at best a perforated view of the world outside, though Jerry was quick enough to read the

landmarks.

On the Sarratt run he passed depressing segments of out-of-date factories resembling poorly whitewashed cinemas in the twenties, and a brick road-house with 'wedding receptions catered for' in red neon. But his feelings were at their most intense on the first evening, and on the last, when he visited the Circus. On the first evening, as he approached the fabled and familiar turrets - the moment never failed him - a sort of muddled saintliness came over him: 'This is what service is all about.' A smear of red brick was followed by the blackened stems of plane trees, a salad of coloured lights came up, a gateway flung past him and the van thudded to a stop. The van doors were slammed open from outside, at the same time as he heard the gates close and a male, sergeant-major voice shout: 'Come on, man, move it for Christ's sake,' and that was Guillam, having a bit of fun.

'Hullo, Peter boy, how's trade? Jesus, it's cold!'

Not bothering to reply, Peter Guillam slapped Jerry on the shoulder briskly, as if starting him on a race, closed the door fast, locked it top and bottom, pocketed the keys and led him off at a trot down a corridor which the ferrets must have ripped apart in fury. Plaster was hacked away in clumps, exposing the lath beneath; doors had been torn from their hinges; joists and lintels were dangling; dust sheets, ladders, rubble lay everywhere.

'Had the Irish in, have you?' Jerry yelled. 'Or just an all-ranks dance?'

His questions were lost in the clatter. The two men climbed fast and competitively, Guillam bounding ahead and Jerry on his heels, laughing breathlessly, their feet thundering and scraping on the bare wood steps. A door delayed them and

Jerry waited while Guillam fiddled with other side while he reset them.

'Welcome aboard,' said Guillam more quietly.

They had reached the fifth floor. They trod quietly now, no more romping, English subalterns called to order. The corridor turned left, then right again, then rose by a few narrow steps. A cracked fisheye mirror, steps again, two up, three down, till they came to a janitors desk, unmanned. To their left lay the rumpus room, empty, with smoking chairs pulled into a rough ring and a good fire burning in the grate. Thus to a long, brown-carpeted room marked 'Secretariat' but in fact the anteroom, where three mothers in pearls and twinsets quietly typed by the glow of reading lamps. At the far end of this room, one more door, shut, unpainted and very grubby round the handle. No fingerplate, no escutcheon for the lock. Just the screwholes, he noticed, and the halo

where one had been. Pushing it open without knocking, Guillam shoved his head through the gap and announced something quietly into the room. Then backed away and quickly ushered Jerry past him: Jerry Westerby, into the presence.

'Gosh, super, George, hullo.'

'And don't ask him about his wife,' Guillam warned in a fast, soft murmur that hummed in Jerry's ear for a good spell afterwards.

Father and son? That kind of relationship? Brawn to brain? More exact, perhaps, would be a son to his adopted father, which in the trade is to be held the strongest tie of all.

'Sport,' Jerry muttered, and gave a husky laugh.

English friends have no real way of greeting each other, least of all across a glum civil service office with nothing more lovely to inspire them than a deal desk. For a fraction of a second Jerry

laid his cricketer's fist alongside Smiley's soft hesitant palm, then lumbered after him at a distance to the fireside, where two armchairs awaited them: old leather, cracked, and much sat in. Once again, in this erratic season, a fire burned in the Victorian grate, but very small by comparison with the fire in the rumpus room.

'And how was Lucca?' Smiley enquired, filling two glasses from a decanter.

'Lucca was great.'

'Oh dear. Then I expect it was a wrench to leave.'

'Gosh, no. Super. Cheers.'

'Cheers.'

They sat down.

'Now why super, Jerry?' Smiley enquired, as if super were not a word he was familiar with. There were no papers on the desk and the room

was bare, more like a spare room than his own.

'I thought I was done for,' Jerry explained. 'On the shelf for good. Telegram took the wind right out of my sails. I thought, well, Bill's blown me sky high. Blew everyone else, so why not me?'

'Yes,' Smiley agreed, as if sharing Jerry's doubts, and peered at him a moment in frank speculation.

'Yes, yes, quite. However, on balance it seems he never got around to blowing the Occasionals.

We've traced him to pretty well every other corner of the archive, but the Occasionals were filed under friendly contacts in the Territorials' cut, in a separate archive altogether, one to which he had no natural access. It's not that he didn't think you important enough,' he added hastily, 'it's simply that other claims on him took priority.'

'I can live with it,' said Jerry with a grin.

'I'm glad,' said Smiley, missing the joke. Rising

he refilled their glasses, then went to the fire and, taking up a brass poker, began stabbing thoughtfully at the coals. 'Lucca. Yes. Ann and I went there. Oh, eleven, twelve years ago it must have been. It rained.' He gave a little laugh. In a cramped bay at the further end of the room, Jerry glimpsed a narrow, bony-looking camp bed with a row of telephones at the head. 'We visited the bagno, I remember,' Smiley went on. 'It was the fashionable cure. Lord alone knows what we were curing.' He attacked the fire again and this time the flames flew alive, daubing the rounded contours of his face with strokes of orange, and making gold pools of his thick spectacles. 'Did you know the poet Heine had a great adventure there? A romance? I rather think it must be why we went, come to think of it. We thought some of it would rub off.'

Jerry grunted something, not too certain, at that moment, who Heine was.

'He went to the bagno, he took the waters, and while doing so he met a lady whose name alone so impressed him that he made his wife use it from then on.' The flames held him for a moment longer. 'And you had an adventure there too, didn't you?'

'Just a flutter. Nothing to write home about.'

Beth Sanders, Jerry thought automatically, as his world rocked, then righted itself. A natural, Beth was. Father a retired General, High Sheriff of the County. Old Beth must have an aunt in every secret office in Whitehall.

Stooping again, Smiley propped the poker in a corner, laboriously, as if he were laying a wreath. 'We're not necessarily in competition with affection. We simply like to know where it lies.' Jerry said nothing. Over his shoulder, Smiley glanced at Jerry, and Jerry pulled a grin to please

him. 'The name of Heine's lady-love, I may tell you, was Irwin Mathilde,' Smiley resumed and Jerry's grin became an awkward laugh. 'Yes, well it does sound better in German, I confess. And the novel, how will that fare? I'd hate to think we'd scared away your muse. I don't think I'd forgive myself, I'm sure.'

'No problem,' said Jerry.

'Finished?'

'Well, you know.'

For a moment there was no sound but the mothers' typing and the rumble of traffic from the street below.

'Then we shall make it up to you when this is over,' Smiley said, 'I insist. How did the Stubbs scene play?'

'No problem,' said Jerry again.

'Nothing more we need do for you to smooth your path?'

'Don't think so.'

From beyond the anteroom they heard the shuffle of footsteps all in one direction. It's a war party, Jerry thought, a gathering of the clans:

'And you're game and so on?' Smiley asked.

'You're, well, prepared? You have the will?'

'No problem.' Why can't I say something different? he asked himself. Bloody needle's stuck.

'A lot of people haven't these days. The will. Specially in England. A lot of people see doubt as legitimate philosophical posture. They think of themselves in the middle, whereas of course really, they're nowhere. No battle was ever won by spectators, was it? We understand that in this service. We're lucky. Our present war began in

1917, with the Bolshevik Revolution. It hasn't changed yet.'

Smiley had taken up a new position, across the room from him, not far from the bed. Behind him, an old and grainy photograph glittered in the new firelight. Jerry had noticed it as he came in. Now, in the strain of the moment, he felt himself to be the object of a double scrutiny: by Smiley, and by the blurred eyes of the portrait dancing in the firelight behind the glass. The sounds of preparation multiplied. They heard voices and snatches of laughter, the squeak of chairs.

'I read somewhere,' Smiley said, 'an historian, I suppose he was - an American, anyway - he wrote of generations that are born into debtors' prisons and spend their lives buying their way to freedom. I think ours is such a generation. Don't you? I still feel strongly that I owe. Don't you? I've always been grateful to this service, that it

gave me a chance to pay. Is that how you feel? I don't think we should be afraid of... devoting ourselves. Is that old-fashioned of me?'

Jerry's face clamped tight shut. He always forgot this part of Smiley when he was away from him, and remembered it too late when he was with him. There was a bit of the failed priest in old George, and the older he grew, the more prominent it became. He seemed to assume that the whole blasted western world shared his worries and had to be talked round to a proper way of thinking.

'In that sense, I think we may legitimately congratulate ourselves on being a trifle old-fashioned -'

Jerry had had enough.

'Sport,' he expostulated, with a clumsy laugh, as the colour rose to his face. 'For Heaven's sake.

You point me and I'll march. Okay? You're the owl, not me. Tell me the shots, I'll play them. World's chock-a-block with milk-and-water intellectuals armed with fifteen conflicting arguments against blowing their blasted noses. We don't need another. Okay? I mean, Christ.'

A sharp knock at the door announced the reappearance of Guillam.

'Peace pipes all lit, Chief.'

To his surprise, over the clatter of this interruption, Jerry thought he caught the term 'ladies' man', but whether it was a reference to himself or the poet Heine he could not say, nor did he particularly care. Smiley hesitated, frowned, then seemed to wake again to his surroundings. He glanced at Guillam, then once more at Jerry, then his eyes settled on that middle distance which is the special preserve of English academics.

'Well, then, yes, let's start winding the clock,' he said in a withdrawn voice.

As they trooped out, Jerry paused to admire the photograph on the wall, hands in pockets, grinning at it, hoping Guillam would hang back too, which he did.

'Looks as though he's swallowed his last sixpence,' said Jerry. 'Who is he?'

'Karla,' said Guillam. 'Recruited Bill Haydon. Russian hood.'

'Sounds more like a girl's name. How you keeping?'

'It's the codename of his first network. There's a school of thought that says it's also the name of his one love.'

'Bully for him,' said Jerry carelessly and, still grinning, drifted beside him toward the rumpus

room. Perhaps deliberately, Smiley had gone ahead, out of earshot of their conversation. 'Still with that loony girl, the flute-player, are you?' Jerry asked.

'She got less loony,' said Guillam. They took a few more paces.

'Bolted?' Jerry enquired sympathetically.

'Something like that.'

'And he's all right, is he?' Jerry asked dead casually, nodding at the solitary figure ahead of them. 'Eating well, good coat, all that stuff?'

'Never been better. Why?'

'Just asked,' said Jerry, very pleased.

From the airport Jerry rang his daughter, Cat, a

thing he rarely did, but this time he had to. He knew it was a mistake before he put the money in, but he still persisted, and not even the terribly familiar voice of the early wife could put him off.

'Gosh, hullo! It's me actually. Super. Listen: how's Phillie?'

Phillie was her husband,, a civil servant nearly eligible for a pension, though younger than Jerry by about thirty muddled lives.

'Perfectly well, thank you,' she retorted in the frosty tone with which old wives defend new mates. 'Is that why you rang?'

'Well I did just think I might chat up old Cat, actually. Going out East for a bit, back in harness,' he said. He felt he should apologise. 'It's just the comic needs a hack out there,' he said, and heard a clatter as the receiver hit the hall chest. Oak, he remembered. Barley-twist legs.

Another of old Sambo's leftovers.

'Daddy?'

'Hi!' he yelled as if the line were bad, as if she had taken him by surprise. 'Cat? Hullo, hey listen, sport, did you get my postcards and stuff?' He knew she had. She had thanked him regularly in her weekly letters.

Hearing nothing but 'Daddy' repeated in a questioning voice, Jerry asked jovially: 'You do still collect stamps, don't you? Only I'm going that way, you see. East.'

Planes were called, others landed, whole worlds were changing places but Jerry Westerby, speaking to his daughter, was motionless in the procession.

'You used to be a demon for stamps,' he reminded her.

'I'm seventeen.'

'Sure, sure, what do you collect now? Don't tell me. Boys!' With the brightest humour he kept it going while he danced from one buckskin boot to the other, making his own jokes and supplying his own laughter. 'Listen, I'm sending you some money. Blatt and Rodney are fixing it, sort of birthday and Christmas put together, better talk to Mummy before spending it. Or maybe Phillie, what? He's a sound sort of bloke, isn't he? Turn Phillie loose on it, kind of thing he likes to get his teeth into.' He opened the kiosk door to raise an artificial flurry. 'Fraid they're calling my flight there, Cat,' he bawled over the clatter. 'Look, mind how you go, d'you hear? Watch yourself. Don't give yourself too easy. Know what I mean?'

He queued for the bar a while but at the last moment the old eastern hand in him woke up and he moved across to the cafeteria. It might be

some while before he got his next glass of fresh cow's milk. Standing in the queue, Jerry had a sensation of being watched. No trick to that: at an airport everyone watches everyone, so what the hell? He thought of the orphan and wished he'd had time to get himself a girl before he left, if only to take away the bad memory of their necessary parting.

Smiley walked, one round little man in a raincoat. Social journalists with more class than Jerry, shrewdly observing his progress through the purlieus of the Charing Cross Road, would have recognised the type at once: the mackintosh brigade personified, cannonfodder of the mixed sauna parlours and the naughty bookshops. These long tramps had become a habit for him. With his new-found energy he could cover half the length of London and not notice it. From Cambridge

Circus, now that he knew the byways, he could take any of twenty routes and never cross the same path twice. Having selected a beginning, he would let luck and instinct guide him while his other mind plundered the remoter regions of his soul. But this evening his journey had a pull to it, drawing him south and- westward, and Smiley yielded. The air was damp and cold, hung with a harsh fog that had never seen the sun. Walking, he took his own island with him, and it was crammed with images, not people. Like an extra mantle the white walls encased him in his thoughts. In a doorway, two murderers in leather coats were whispering; under a streetlamp a dark-haired boy angrily clutched a violin case. Outside a theatre, a waiting crowd burned in the blaze of lights from the awning overhead, and the fog curled round them like fire smoke. Never had Smiley gone into battle knowing so little and expecting so much. He felt lured, and he felt

pursued. Yet when he tired, and drew back for a moment, and considered the logic of what he was about, it almost eluded him. He glanced back and saw the jaws of failure waiting for him. He peered forward and through his moist spectacles saw the phantoms of great hopes dancing in the mist. He blinked around him and knew there was nothing for him where he stood. Yet he advanced without the ultimate conviction. It was no answer to rehearse the steps that had brought him to this point - the Russian goldseam, the imprint of Karla's private army, the thoroughness of Haydon's efforts to extinguish knowledge of them. Beyond the limits of these external reasons, Smiley perceived in himself the existence of a darker motive, infinitely more obscure, one which his rational mind continued to reject. He called it Karla, and it was true that somewhere in him, like a left-over legend, there burned the embers of hatred toward the man who had set out to destroy

the temples of his private faith, whatever remained of them: the service that he loved, his friends, his country, his concept of a reasonable balance in human affairs. It was true also that a lifetime or two ago, in a sweltering Indian jail, the two men had actually faced each other, Smiley and Karla, across an iron table: though Smiley had no reason at the time to know he was in the presence of his destiny. Karla's head was on the block in Moscow; Smiley had tried to woo him to the West, and Karla had kept silent, preferring death or worse to an easy defection. And it was true that now and then the memory of that encounter of Karla's unshaven face and watchful, inward eyes, came at him like an accusing spectre out of the murk of his little room, while he slept fitfully on his bunk.

But hatred was really not an emotion which he could sustain for any length of time, unless it was the obverse side of love.

He was approaching the King's Road in Chelsea. The fog was heavier because of the closeness of the river. Above him the globes of streetlights hung like Chinese lanterns in the bare branches of the trees. The traffic was sparse and cautious. Crossing the road he followed the pavement till he came to Bywater Street and turned into it, a cul-de-sac of neat flat-fronted terrace cottages. He trod discreetly now, keeping to the western side and the shadow of the parked cars. It was the cocktail hour, and in other windows he saw talking heads and shrieking, silent mouths. Some he recognised, some she even had names for: Felix the cat, Lady Macbeth, the Puffer. He drew level with his own house. For their return, she had had the shutters painted blue and they were blue still. The curtains were open because she hated to be enclosed. She sat alone at her escritoire, and she might have composed the scene for him deliberately: the beautiful and

conscientious wife, ending her day, attends to matters of administration. She was listening to music and he caught the echo of it carried on the fog. Sibelius. He wasn't good at music, but he knew all her records and he had several times praised the Sibelius out of politeness. He couldn't see the gramophone but he knew it lay on the floor, where it had lain for Bill Haydon when she was trailing her affair with him. He wondered whether the German dictionary lay beside it, and her anthology of German poetry. Several times, over the last decade or two, usually during reconciliations, she had made a show of learning German so that Smiley would be able to read aloud to her.

As he watched, she got up, crossed the room, paused in front of the pretty gilt mirror to adjust her hair. The notes she wrote to herself were jammed into the frame. What was it this time? he wondered. Blast garage. Cancel lunch Madeleine.

Destroy butcher. Sometimes, when things were tense, she had sent him messages that way: force George to smile, apologise insincerely for lapse. In very bad times, she wrote whole letters to him, and posted them there for his collection.

To his surprise she had put out the light. He heard the bolts slide on the front door. Drop the chain, he thought automatically. Double lock the Banhams. How many times do I have to tell you bolts are as weak as the screws that hold them in place? Odd all the same: he had somehow supposed she would leave the bolts open in case he might return. Then the bedroom light went on, and he saw her body framed in silhouette in the window as, angel-like, she stretched her arms to the curtains. She drew them almost to her, stopped, and momentarily he feared she had seen him, till he remembered her short-sightedness and her refusal to wear glasses. She's going out, he thought. She's going to doll herself up. He saw

her head half turn as if she had been addressed. He saw her lips move, and break into a puckish smile as her arms lifted again, this time to the back of her neck, and she began to unfasten the top button of her housecoat. In the same moment, the gap between the curtains was abruptly closed by other, impatient hands.

Oh no, thought Smiley hopelessly. Please! Wait till I've gone!

For a minute, perhaps longer, standing on the pavement, he stared in disbelief at the blacked-out window, till anger, shame and finally self-disgust broke in him together like a physical anguish and he turned and hurried blindly back toward the King's Road. Who was it this time? Another beardless ballet dancer, performing some narcissistic ritual? Her vile cousin Miles, the career politician? Or a one-night Adonis spirited from the nearby pub?

When the outside telephone rang Peter Guillam was sitting alone in the rumpus room a little drunk, languishing equally for Molly Meakin's body and George Smiley's return. He lifted the receiver at once and heard Fawn, out of breath and furious.

'I've lost him!' he shouted. 'He's bilked me!'

'Then you're a bloody idiot,' Guillam retorted with satisfaction.

'Idiot nothing! He heads for home, right? Our usual ritual. I'm waiting for him, I stand off, he's coming back to the main road, looks at me. Like I'm dirt. Just dirt. Next thing I know I'm on my own. How does he do it? Where does he go? I'm his friend aren't I? Who the hell does he think he is? Fat little runt, I'll kill him!'

Guillam was still laughing as he rang off.

Chapter 6 - The Burning of Frost

In Hong Kong it was Saturday again but the typhoons were forgotten and the day burned hot and clear and breathless. In the Hong Kong club a serenely Christian clock struck eleven and the chimes tinkled in the panelled quiet like spoons dropped on a distant kitchen floor. The better chairs were already taken by readers of last Thursday's Telegraph, which gave a quite dismal picture of the moral and economic miseries of their homeland.

'Pound's in the soup again,' a crusted voice growled through a pipe. 'Electricians out. Railways out. Pilots out.'

'Who's in? More the question,' said another, just as crusted.

'If I was the Kremlin I'd say we were doing a first-class job,' said the first speaker, barking out the final word to give it a military indignation, and with a sigh ordered up a couple of dry martinis. Neither man was above twenty-five years old, but being an exiled patriot in search of a quick fortune can age you pretty fast.

The Foreign Correspondents' Club was having one of its churchy days when burghers far outnumbered newsmen. Without old Craw to hold them together, the Shanghai Bowlers had dispersed and several had left the Colony altogether. The photographers had been lured to Phnom Penh by the promise of some great new fighting now the wet season was ended. The cowboy was in Bangkok for an expected revival of student riots, Luke was at the bureau and his

boss the dwarf was slouched grumpily at the bar surrounded by sonorous British suburbanites in dark trousers and white shirts discussing the eleven hundred gearbox.

'But cold this time. Hear that? Muchee coldee and bring it chop chop!'

Even the Rocker was muted. He was attended this morning by his wife, a former Bible School teacher from Borneo, a dried-out shrew in bobbed hair and ankle socks who could spot a sin before it was committed.

And a couple of miles eastward on Cloudview road, a thirty-cent ride on the one-price city bus, in what is said to be the most populated corner of our planet, on North Point, just where the city swells toward the Peak, on the sixteenth floor of a highrise block called 7A, Jerry Westerby was lying on a mattress after a short but dreamless sleep, singing his own words to the tune of

'Miami Sunrise' and watching a beautiful girl undress. The mattress was seven feet long, intended to be used the other way on by an entire Chinese family, and for about the first time in his life his feet didn't hang over the end. It was longer than Pet's cot by a mile, longer even than the bed in Tuscany, though in Tuscany it hadn't mattered because he had a real girl to curl round and with a girl you don't lie so straight. Whereas the girl he was watching was framed in a window opposite his own, ten yards or miles out of reach, and on every one of the nine mornings he had woken here, she had stripped and washed herself this way, to his considerable enthusiasm, even applause. When he was lucky he followed the whole ceremony, from the moment when she tipped her head sideways to let her black hair fall to her waist, until she chastely wound a sheet about her and rejoined her ten-strong family in the next room where they all lived. He knew the

family intimately. Their washing habits, their tastes in music, cooking and love-making, their celebrations, their flaring, dangerous rows. The only thing he wasn't sure of was whether she was two girls or one.

She vanished, but he kept on singing. He felt eager, which was how it took him every time, whether he was about to gumshoe down a back alley in Prague to swap little packages with a terror-stricken joe in a doorway or - his finest hour, and for an Occasional unprecedented - row three miles in a blackened dinghy to scrape a radio operator off a Caspian beach. As the clamps tightened, Jerry discovered the same surprising mastery of himself, the same jollity and the same alertness. And the same barking funk, not necessarily a contradiction. It's today, he thought. The kissing's over.

There were three tiny rooms and they were

parquet floored all through. That was the first thing he noticed every morning because there was no furniture anywhere, except the mattress and the kitchen chair and the table where his typewriter sat, the one dinner plate, which did duty as an ashtray, and the girlie calendar, vintage 1960, of a red-head whose charms had long since lost their bloom. He knew the type exactly: green eyes, a temper, and a skin so sensitive it looked like a battlefield every time you laid a finger on it. Add one telephone, one ancient record player for seventy-eights only and two very real opium pipes suspended from business-like nails on the wall, and he had a complete inventory of the wealth and interests of Deathwish the Hun, now in Cambodia, from whom Jerry had rented the apartment. And the booksack, his own, beside the mattress.

The gramophone had run down. He climbed happily to his feet, tightening the makeshift

sarong around his stomach. As he did so, the telephone began ringing, so he sat again and, grabbing the flex, dragged the instrument toward him across the floor. It was Luke as usual, wanting to play.

'Sorry, sport. Doing a story. Try solo whist.'

Dialling the speaking clock, Jerry heard a Chinese squawk, then an English squawk and set his watch by the second. Then he went to the gramophone and put on 'Miami Sunrise' again, loud as it would go. It was his only record, but it drowned the gurgle of the useless airconditioner. Still humming, he pulled open the one wardrobe, and from an old leather grip on the floor picked out his father's yellowed tennis racket vintage nineteen thirty odd, with S.W. in marking ink on the pommel. Unscrewing the handle he fished from the recess four lozenges of subminiature film, a worm of grey wadding, and a battered

subminiature camera with measuring chain, which the conservative in him preferred to the flashier models which the Sarratt smudges had tried to press on him. Loading a cassette into the camera, he set the film speed and took three sample light-readings of the red-head's bosom before slopping to the kitchen in his sandals, where he lowered himself devoutly to his knees before the fridge and loosened the Free Forrester's tie which held the door in place. With a wild tearing noise, he passed his right thumbnail down the rotted rubber strips, took out three eggs and re-tied the tie. Waiting for them to boil, he lounged at the window, elbows on the sill, peering fondly through the burglar wire at his beloved rooftops which descended like giant stepping stones to the sea's edge.

The rooftops were a civilisation for themselves, a breath-taking theatre of survival against the raging of the city. Within their barbed-wire

compounds, sweatshops turned out anoraks, religious services were held, mah-jong was played, and fortune tellers burned joss and consulted huge brown volumes. Ahead of him lay a formal garden made of smuggled earth. Below, three old women fattened Chow puppies for the pot. There were schools for dancing, reading, ballet, recreation and combat, there were schools in culture and the wonders of Mao, and this morning, while Jerry's eggs boiled, an old man completed his long rigmarole of callisthenics before opening the tiny folding chair where he performed his daily reading of the great man's Thoughts. The wealthier poor, if they had no roof, built themselves giddy crow's nests, two foot by eight, on home-made cantilevers driven into their drawing room floors. Deathwish maintained there were suicides all the time. That was what grabbed him about the place, he said. When he wasn't fornicating, he liked to hang out

of the window with his Nikon, hoping to catch one, but he never did. Down to the right lay the graveyard, which Deathwish said was bad luck and knocked a few dollars off the rent.

While he was eating, the phone rang again.

'What story?' said Luke.

'Wanchai whores have hijacked Big Moo,' Jerry said. 'Taken him to Stonecutters Island and are holding him to ransom.'

Other than Luke, it tended to be Deathwish's women who called, but they didn't want Jerry instead. The shower had no curtain so Jerry had to squat in a tiled corner, like a boxer, in order not to flood the bathroom. Returning to the bedroom, he put on his suit, grabbed a bread knife, and counted twelve wood blocks from the corner of the room. With the knife blade he dug up the thirteenth. In a hollowed recess cut into the

tar-like undersurface lay one plastic bag containing a roll of American dollar bills of large and small denominations; one escape passport, driving licence and air travel card in the name of Worrell, contractor; and one small-arm, which, in defiance of every Circus regulation under the sun, Jerry had procured from Deathwish, who did not care to take it on his travels. From this treasure chest he extracted five one-hundred dollar bills and, leaving the rest untouched, replaced the wood block. He dropped the camera and two spare cassettes into his pockets then stepped on to the tiny landing, whistling. His front door was guarded by a white-painted grille which would have delayed a decent burglar for ninety seconds. Jerry had picked the lock when he had nothing better to do, and that was how long it took him. He pressed the button for the lift, and it arrived full of Chinese who all got out. It happened every time. Jerry was just too big for them, too ugly and

too foreign.

From scenes like these, thought Jerry, with willed cheerfulness, as he plunged into the pitch darkness of the city-bound bus, Saint George's children go forth to save the empire.

'Time spent in preparation is never time wasted' runs the Nursery's laborious maxim on counter-surveillance.

Sometimes Jerry became Sarratt man and nothing else. By the ordinary logic of things he could have gone to his destination directly: he had every right. By the ordinary logic of things there was no reason on earth, particularly after their revelries of last night, why Jerry should not have taken a cab to the front door, barged gaily in, bearded his new-found bosom friend and be done with it. But this was not the ordinary logic of things, and in the Sarratt folklore, Jerry was approaching the operational moment of truth: the

moment when the back door closed on him with a bang, after which there was no way out but forward. The moment when every one of his twenty years of tradecraft rose in him and shouted 'caution'. If he was walking into a trap, this was where the trap was sprung. Even if they knew his route in advance, still the static posts would be staked out ahead of him, in cars and behind windows, and the surveillance teams locked on to him in case of fumble or branch lines. If there was ever a last opportunity to test the water before he jumped, it was now. Last night, around the haunts, he could have been watched by a hundred local angels and still not have known for certain he was their quarry. But here he could weave and count the shadows: here, in theory at least, he had a chance to know.

He glanced at his watch. Exactly twenty minutes to go and even at Chinese rather than European pace he needed seven. So he sauntered, but never

idly. In other countries, in almost any place in the world outside Hong Kong, he would have given himself far longer. Behind the Curtain, Sarratt lore said, half a day, preferably more. He'd have posted himself a letter, just so that he could walk halfway down the street, stop dead at the postbox and double back, checking the feet that faltered, and the faces that ducked away; looking for the classic formations, a two this side, a three across the road, a front tail who floats ahead of you.

But paradoxically, though this morning he zealously went through the steps, another side of him knew he was wasting his time: knew that in the East a roundeye could live all his life in the same block and never have the smallest notion of the secret tic-tac on his doorstep. At every corner of each teeming street he entered, men waited, lounged and watched, strenuously employed in doing nothing. The beggar who suddenly stretched his arms and yawned, the crippled shoe-

shine boy who dived for his escaping feet, and having missed them drove the backs of his brushes together in a whip crack, the old hag selling bi-racial pornography who cupped her hand and shrieked one word into the bamboo scaffolding above her: though in his mind Jerry recorded them, they were as obscure to him today as they had been when he first came east - twenty? Lord help us, twenty-five years ago. Pimps? Numbers boys? Dope peddlars pushing the coloured twists of candy paper - 'yellow two dollar. blue five dollar? You chase dragon. like quickshot?' Or were they ordering up a bowl of rice from the food stalls across the way? In the East, sport, survival is knowing you don't know. He was using the reflection in the marble cladding of the shops: shelves of amber, shelves of jade, credit card signs, electrical gadgets and pyramids of black luggage which nobody ever seemed to carry. At Cartier's a beautiful girl was

laying pearls on a velvet tray, putting them to bed for the day. Sensing his presence she lifted her eyes to him; and in Jerry, despite his preoccupation, the old Adam briefly stirred. But one glance at his shambling grin and his scruffy suit and his buckskin boots told her all she needed to know: Jerry Westerby was not a potential customer. There was news of fresh battles, Jerry noticed, passing a news-stand. The Chinese-language press carried frontpage photographs of decimated children, screaming mothers and troops in American-style helmets. Whether Vietnam, or Cambodia, or Korea, or the Philippines, Jerry couldn't tell. The red characters of the headline had the effect of splashed blood. Maybe Deathwish was in luck.

Thirsty from last night's booze, Jerry cut through the Mandarin and plunged into the twilight of the Captain's Bar, but he only drank water in the Gents. Back in the lobby he bought a copy of

Time but didn't like the way the plain-clothes crushers looked at him, and left. Joining the crowds again, he sauntered toward the post office, built 1911 and since pulled down, but in those days a rare and hideous antique made beautiful by the clumsy concrete of the buildings around it. Then he doubled through the arches into Pedder Street, passing under a green corrugated bridge where mailbags trailed like turkeys on the gibbet. Doubling yet again, he crossed to the Connaught Centre, using the footbridge to thin out the field.

In the glittering steel lobby a peasant woman was scrubbing out the teeth of a stationary escalator with a wire brush, and on the promenade a group of Chinese students gazed in respectful silence at Henry Moore's Oval with Points. Looking back, Jerry glimpsed the brown dome of the old law courts dwarfed by the Hilton's beehive walls: Regina versus Westerby, he thought, 'and the

prisoner is charged with blackmail, corruption, pretended affection and a few others we shall dream up before the day is out'. The harbour was alive with shipping, most of it small. Beyond it, the New Territories, pocked with excavation, shoved vainly against muddy clouds of smog. At their feet, new godowns, and factory chimneys belching brown smoke.

Retracing his steps he passed the big Scottish business houses, Jardines, Swire, and noticed that their doors were barred. Must be a holiday. he thought. Ours or theirs? In Statue Square, a leisurely carnival was taking place with fountains, beach umbrellas, Coca-Cola sellers, and about half a million Chinese who stood in groups or shuffled past him like a barefoot army, darting glances at his size. Loudspeakers, building drills, wailing music. He crossed Jackson Road and the noise level fell a little. Ahead of him, on a patch of perfect English lawn,

fifteen white-clad figures lounged. The all-day cricket match had just begun. At the receiving end, a lank, disdainful figure in an outdated cap was fiddling with his batting gloves. Pausing, Jerry watched, grinning in fond familiarity. The bowler bowled. Medium-pace, bit of inswing, dead wicket. The batsman played a gracious stroke, missed and took a leg-bye in slow motion. Jerry foresaw a long dull innings to no applause. He wondered who was playing whom, and decided it was the usual Peak mafia playing itself. On the leg boundary, across the road, rose the Bank of China, a vast and fluted cenotaph festooned with crimson slogans loving Mao. At its base, granite lions looked on sightlessly while flocks of white-shirted Chinese photographed each other against their flanks.

But the bank which Jerry had his eye on stood directly behind the bowler's arm. A Union Jack was posted at its pinnacle, an armoured van more

confidently at its base. The doors stood open and their burnished surfaces glittered like fool's gold. While Jerry continued his shambling arc toward it, a gang of helmeted guards, escorted by tall Indians with elephant guns emerged suddenly from the interior blackness and nursed three black money boxes down the wide steps as if they held the Host itself. The armoured van drove away and for a sickening moment Jerry had visions of the bank's doors closing after it.

Not logical visions. Not nervous visions either. Merely that for a moment Jerry expected fumble with the same trained pessimism with which a gardener foresees drought or an athlete a foolish sprain on the eve of a great match; or a fieldman with twenty years on the clock foresees just one more unpredictable frustration. But the doors stayed open, and Jerry veered away to the left. Give the guards time to relax, he thought. Shepherding the money will have made them

nervous. They'll see too sharply, they'll remember things.

Turning, he began a slow, dreamy stroll toward the Hong Kong Club: Wedgwood porticoes, striped blinds and a smell of stale English food at the doorway. Cover is not a lie, they tell you. Cover is what you believe. Cover is who you are. On Saturday morning Mr Gerald Westby, the not very distinguished journalist, heads for a favourite watering-hole... On the Club steps Jerry paused, patted his pockets, then turned full circle and struck out purposefully for his destination, making two long sides of the square, as he watched for the last time for the slurring feet and turned-down glances. Mr Gerald Westerby, discovering he is short of weekend cash, decides on a quick visit to the bank. Elephant guns slung carelessly at their shoulders, the Indian guards studied him without interest.

Except, Mr Gerald Westerby doesn't!

Cursing himself for being a damned fool, Jerry remembered that the time was after twelve o'clock, and that at twelve sharp the banking halls were closed. After twelve, it was upstairs only, and that was the way he had planned it.

Relax, he thought. You're thinking too much. Don't think: do. In the beginning was the deed. Who had said that to him once? Old George, for God's sake, quoting Goethe. Coming from him of all people!

As he began the run-in, a wave of dismay hit him, and he knew it was fear. He was hungry. He was tired. Why had George left him alone like this? Why did he have to do everything for himself? Before the fall, they'd have posted babysitters ahead of him - even someone inside the bank - just to watch for rain. They'd have had a reception team to skim the take almost before he left the

building, and an escape car in case he had to slip away in his socks. And in London - he thought sweetly, talking himself down - they'd have had dear old Bill Haydon - wouldn't they? - passing it all to the Russians, bless him. Thinking this, Jerry willed upon himself an extraordinary hallucination, quick as the flash of a camera, and as slow to fade. God had answered his prayers, he thought. The old days were here again after all, and the street was alive with a grand slam supporting cast. Behind him a blue Peugeot had pulled up and two bullish roundeyes sat in it studying a Happy Valley racecard. Radio aerial, the works. From his left, American matrons sauntered by, laden with cameras and guidebooks, and a positive obligation to observe. And from the bank itself, as he advanced swiftly on its portals, a couple of solemn money-men emerged, wearing just that grim stare watchers sometimes use in order to discourage an

enquiring eye.

Senility, Jerry told himself. You're over the hill; sport, no question. Dotage and funk have brought you to your knees. He bounded up the steps, jaunty as a cock-robin on a hot spring day.

The lobby was as big as a railway station, the canned music as martial. The banking area was barred and he saw no one lurking, not even a phantom stand-off man. The lift was a gold cage with a spittoon filled with sand for cigarettes, but by the ninth floor the largeness of downstairs had all gone. Space was money. A narrow cream corridor led to an empty reception desk. Jerry strolled easily, marking the emergency exit and the service lift which the bearleaders had already charted for him in case he had to do a duck dive. Queer how they knew so much, he thought, with

so few resources; must have dug out an architect's drawing from somewhere. On the counter, one teak sign reading Trustee Department Enquiries. Beside it, one grimy paperback on fortune-telling by the stars, open and much annotated. But no receptionist because Saturdays are different. On Saturdays you get the best ride, they had said. He looked cheerfully round, nothing on his conscience. A second corridor ran the width of the building, office doors to the left, soggy vinyl-covered partitions to the right. From behind the partitions came the slow pat of an electric typewriter as someone typed a legal document, and the slow Saturday sing-song of Chinese secretaries without a lot to do except wait for lunch and the free afternoon. There were four glazed doors with penny-sized eyeholes for looking in or out. Jerry ambled down the corridor, glancing through each as if glancing were his recreation, hands in pockets, a slightly daft smile

aloft. The fourth on the left, they had said, one door, one window. A clerk walked past him, then a secretary on dinky, clicking heels, but Jerry, though scruffy, was European and wore a suit and neither challenged him.

'Morning, gang,' he muttered, and they wished him 'Good day, sir,' in return.

There were iron bars at the end of the corridor and iron bars over the windows. A blue night-light was fixed to the ceiling, he supposed for security but he didn't know: fire, space protection, he didn't know, the bearleaders hadn't mentioned it, and stinks and bangs were not his thing. The first room was an office, unoccupied except for a few dusty sports trophies on the window-sill and an embroidered coat of arms of the bank athletics club on the pegboard wall. He passed a pile of apple boxes marked 'Trustee'. They seemed to be full of deeds and wills. The cheese-paring

tradition of the old China trading houses died hard, apparently. A notice on the wall read 'Private' and another 'By Appointment Only'.

The second door gave on to a corridor and a small archive which was likewise empty. The third was a 'Directors Only' lavatory, the fourth had a staff noticeboard mounted directly beside it and a red light bulb mounted on the jamb and an important nameplate in Letraset saying 'J. Frost, Deputy Chief Trustee, Appointments Only, do NOT enter when light is ON'. But the light was not ON, and the penny-sized eyehole showed one man at his desk alone, and the only company he had was a heap of files, and scrolls of costly paper bound in green silk on the English legal pattern, and two closed-circuit television sets for the stock exchange prices, dead, and the harbour view, mandatory to the higher executive image, sliced into pencil-grey lines by mandatory Venetian blinds. One shiny, podgy, prosperous little man in

a sporty linen suit of Robin Hood green, working far too conscientiously for a Saturday. Moisture on his brow; black crescents beneath his arms, and - to Jerry's informed eye - the leaden immobility of a man recovering very slowly from debauch.

A corner room, thought Jerry. One door only, this one. One shove and you're away. He took a last glance up and down the empty corridor. Jerry Westerby on stage, he thought. If you can't talk, dance. The door gave immediately. He stepped gaily inside wearing his best shy smile.

'Gosh, Frostie, hullo, super. Am I early or late? Sport I say - most extraordinary thing back there. In the corridor - nearly fell over them - lot of apple boxes full of legal bumph. Who's Frostie's client? I asked myself. Cox's Orange Pippins? Or Beauty of Bath? Beauty of Bath, knowing you. Thought it was rather a giggle, after last night's

high jinks round the parlours.'

All of which, feeble though it might have sounded to the astonished Frost, got him into the room with the door closed, fast, while his broad back masked the only eyehole and his soul sent prayers of gratitude to Sarratt for a soft landing, and prayers of preservation to his Maker.

A moment of theatricality followed Jerry's entry. Frost lifted his head slowly, keeping his eyes half shut, as if the light were hurting them, which it probably was. Spotting Jerry, he winced and looked away, then looked at him again to confirm that he was flesh. Then he wiped his brow with his handkerchief.

'Christ,' he said. 'It's his nibs. What the hell are you doing here, you disgusting aristocrat?'

To which Jerry, still at the door, responded with another large grin, and a lifting of one hand in a Red Indian salute, while he marked down the worry points precisely: the two telephones, the grey box for inter-office speaking and the wardrobe safe with a keyhole but no combination lock.

'How did they let you in? I suppose you flashed your Honourable at them. What do you mean by it, barging in here?' Not half as displeased as his words suggested, Frost had left his desk and was waddling down the room. 'This isn't a cathouse you know. This is a respectable bank. More or less.'

Arriving at Jerry's considerable bulk, he stuck his hands on his hips and gazed at him, shaking his head in wonder. Then he patted Jerry's arm, then prodded him in the stomach, amid more shaking of the head.

'You alcoholic, dissolute, lecherous, libidinous...'

'Newshound,' Jerry prompted.

Frost was not above forty but nature had already printed on him the crueller marks of littleness, such as a floorwalker's fussiness about the cuffs and fingers, and a moistening of his lips and pursing of them all at once. What redeemed him was a transparent sense of fun, which leapt to his damp cheeks like sunlight.

'Here,' said Jerry. 'Poison yourself,' and offered him a cigarette.

'Christ,' said Frost again, and with a key from his chain opened an old-fashioned walnut cupboard, full of mirror and rows of cocktail sticks with artificial cherries, and trick tankards with pin-ups and pink elephants.

'Bloody Mary do you?'

'Bloody Mary would slip down grateful, sport,' Jerry assured him.

On the keychain, one brass Chubb key. The safe was also Chubb, a fine one, with a battered gold medallion fading into the old green paint.

'I'll say one thing for you blueblooded rakes,' Frost called while he poured and shook the ingredients like a chemist. 'You do know the haunts. Drop you blindfold in the middle of Salisbury Plain, I reckon you'd find a cathouse in thirty seconds flat. My virgin sensitive nature took yet another grave jolt last night. Rocked to its frail little bearings, it was - say when! - I'll take a few addresses off you sometime, when I'm healed. If I ever am, which I doubt.'

Sauntering over to Frost's desk, Jerry riffled idly through his correspondence, then began playing with the switches of the speaking box, patting them up and down one by one with his enormous

index finger, but getting no answers. A separate button was marked 'engaged'. Pressing it, Jerry saw a rose gleam in the eyehole as the caution-light went on in the corridor.

'As to those girls,' Frost was saying, his back still turned to Jerry while he rattled the sauce bottle. 'Wicked they were. Shocking.' Laughing delightedly, Frost advanced across the room, holding the glasses wide. 'What were their names? Oh dear, oh dear!'

'Seven and twenty-four,' said Jerry distractedly. He was stooping as he spoke, looking for the alarm button he knew would be somewhere on the desk.

'Seven and twenty-four!' Frost repeated, rapturously. 'What poetry! What a memory!'

At knee level, Jerry had found a grey box screwed to the drawer-pillar. The key was

vertical, at the off position. He pulled it out and dropped it into his pocket.

'I said what a wonderful memory,' Frost repeated, rather puzzled.

'You know newshounds, sport,' said Jerry, straightening. 'Worse than wives, us newshounds are, when it comes to memories.'

'Here. Come off there. That's holy ground.'

Picking up Frost's large desk diary, Jerry was studying it for the day's engagements.

'Jesus,' he said. 'It's all go, isn't it? Who's N, sport? N, eight to twelve? Not your mother-in-law is she?'

Ducking his mouth to the glass Frost drank greedily, swallowed, then made a farce of choking, writhing and recovering. 'Keep her out of this, do you mind? You nearly gave me a heart

attack. Bung-ho.'

'N for nuts? N for Napoleon? Who's N?'

'Natalie. My secretary. Very nice. Legs go right up to its bottom, so they tell me. Never been there myself, so I don't know. My one rule. Remind me to break it sometime. Bung-ho,' he said again.

'She in?'

'I think I heard her dulcet tread, yes. Want me to give her a buzz? I'm told she puts on a very nice turn for the upper classes.'

'No thanks,' said Jerry, and setting down the diary, looked at Frost four square, man to man, though the fight was uneven, for Jerry was a whole head taller than Frost, and a lot broader.

'Incredible,' Frost declared reverently, still beaming at Jerry. 'Incredible, that's what it was.' His manner was devoted, even possessive.

'Incredible girls, incredible company. I mean why should a bloke like me bother with a bloke like you? A mere Honourable at that? Dukes are my level. Dukes and tarts. Let's do it again tonight. Come on.'

Jerry laughed.

'I mean it. Scout's honour. Let's die of it before we're too old. on me this time, the whole treat.' In the corridor, heavy footsteps sounded, coming nearer. 'Know what I'm going to do? Try me. I'm going to go back to the Meteor with you, and I'm going to call Madame Whoosit, and I'm going to insist on a - what's eating you?' he said, catching Jerry's expression.

The footsteps slowed, then stopped. A black shadow filled the eyehole and stayed.

'Who is he?' said Jerry quietly.

'Milky.'

'Who's Milky?'

'Milky Way, my boss.' said Frost, as the footsteps moved away, and closing his eyes, crossed himself devoutly. 'Going home to his very lovely lady wife, the distinguished Mrs Way alias Moby Dick. Six foot eight and a cavalry moustache. Not him. Her.' Frost giggled.

'Why didn't he come in?'

'Thought I had a client, I suppose,' said Frost carelessly, again puzzled by Jerry's watchfulness, and by his quiet. 'Apart from the fact that Moby Dick would kick him to death if she caught him with the smell of alcohol on his evil lips at this hour of the day. Cheer up, you've got me to look after you. Have the other half. You look a bit pious today. Gives me the creeps.'

When you get in there, go. the bearleaders had said. Don't feel his bones too long. don't let him

get comfy with you.

'Hey Frostie,' Jerry called, when the footsteps had quite faded. 'How's the missus?' Frost had his hand out for Jerry's glass. 'Your missus. How's she doing?'

'Still ailing nicely, thank you,' said Frost uncomfortably.

'Ring the hospital did you?'

'This morning? You're crazy. I wasn't coherent till eleven o'clock. If then. She'd have smelt my breath.'

'When are you next visiting?'

'Look. Shut up. Shut up about her. Do you mind?'

With Frost watching him, Jerry drifted to the safe. He tried the big handle but it was locked. On the top, covered in dust, lay a heavy riot stick. Taking it in both hands he played a couple of distracted

cricket shots, and put it back, while Frost's puzzled stare followed him alertly.

'I want to open an account, Frostie,' said Jerry, still at the safe.

'You?'

'Me.'

'From all you told me last night you haven't the resources to open a bloody piggy bank. Not unless your distinguished dad kept a bit in the mattress, which I somehow doubt.' Frost's world was slipping fast but he tried desperately to hold on to it. 'Look, get yourself a bloody drink and stop playing Boris Karloff on a wet Wednesday, will you? Let's go to the gee-gees. Happy Valley, here we come. I'll buy you lunch.'

'I didn't mean we'd open my account exactly, sport. I meant someone else's,' Jerry explained.

In a slow, sad comedy, the fun drained out of Frost's little face, and he muttered 'Oh no, oh Jerry,' under his breath, as if he were witnessing an accident in which Jerry, not Frost, were the victim. For the second time, footsteps approached down the corridor. A girl's, short and quick. Then a sharp knock. Then silence.

'Natalie?' said Jerry quietly. Frost nodded. 'If I was a client, would you introduce me?' Frost shook his head. 'Let her in.'

Frost's tongue, like a scared pink snake, peeked out from between his lips, looked quickly round, then vanished.

'Come!' he called, in a hoarse voice, and a tall Chinese girl with thick glasses collected some letters from his out-tray.

'Enjoy your weekend, Mr Frost,' she said.

'See you Monday,' said Frost.

The door closed again.

Coming across the room, Jerry put an arm around Frost's shoulders and guided him, unresisting, quickly to the window.

'A trust account, Frostie. Lodged in your incorruptible hands. Sharpish.'

In the square, the carnival continued. On the cricket field, somebody was out. The lank batsman in the outmoded cap had dropped into a crouch and was patiently repairing the pitch. The fieldsmen lay about and chatted.

'You set me up,' said Frost simply, trying to get used to the notion. 'I thought I had a friend at last and now you want to screw me. And you a lord.'

'Shouldn't mingle with newshounds, Frostie. Rough bunch. No sporting instinct. Shouldn't have shot your mouth off. Where do you keep the

records?'

'Friends do shoot their mouths off,' Frost protested. 'That's what friends are for! To tell each other!'

'Then tell me.'

Frost shook his head. 'I'm a Christian,' he said stupidly. 'I go every Sunday, I never miss. I'm afraid it's quite out of the question. I'd rather lose my place in society than commit a breach of confidence. It's known of me, right? No go. Sorry about that.'

Jerry edged closer along the sill, till their arms were all but touching. The big window-pane was trembling from the traffic. The Venetian blinds were red with building smuts. Frost's face worked pitifully as he wrestled with the news of his bereavement.

'Here's the deal, sport,' said Jerry, very quietly.

'Listen carefully. Right? It's a stick and carrot job. If you don't play, the comic will blow the whistle on you. Front page mugshot, banner headlines, continued back page, col six, the works. Would you buy a second-hand trust account from this man? Hong Kong the cess-pit of corruption and Frostie the slavering monster. That line. We'd tell them how you play roundeye musical beds at the young bankers' club, just the way you told it to me, and how till recently you maintained a wicked love-nest over on Kowloonside, only it went sour on you because she wanted more bread. Before they did all that, of course, they'd check the story out with your Chairman and maybe with your missus too, if she's well enough.'

A rainstorm of sweat had broken on Frost's face without warning. One moment his sallow features had shown an oily moistness and that was all. The next they were drenched and the sweat was

running unchecked off his plump chin and falling on his Robin Hood suit.

'It's the booze,' he said stupidly, trying to staunch it with his handkerchief. 'I always get this when I drink. Bloody climate, I shouldn't be exposed to it. No one should. Rotting out here. I hate it.'

'That's the bad news,' Jerry continued. They were still at the window, side by side, like two men loving the view. 'The good news is five hundred US into your hot little hand, compliments of Grub Street, no one any the wiser, and Frostie for Chairman. So why not sit back and enjoy it? See what I mean?'

'And may I enquire,' Frost said at last, with a disastrous shot at sarcasm, 'to what end or purpose you wish to peruse this file in the first place?'

'Crime and corruption, sport. The Hong Kong

connection. Grub Street names the guilty men. Account number four four two. Do you keep it here?' Jerry asked, indicating the safe.

Frost made a 'No' with his lips, but no sound came out.

'Both the fours, then the two. Where is it?'

'Look,' Frost muttered. His face was a hopeless mess of fear and disappointment. 'Do me a favour, will you? Keep me out of it. Bribe one of my Chinese clerks, okay? That's the proper way. I mean I've got a position here.'

'You know the saying, Frostie. In Hong Kong even the daisies talk. I want you. You're here, and you're better qualified. Is it in the strong room?'

You have to keep it moving, they said, you have to raise the threshold all the time. Lose the initiative once and you lose it for ever.

As Frost dithered. Jerry affected to run out of patience. With one very large hand, he seized hold of Frost's shoulder and spun him round, and backed him till his little shoulders were flat against the safe.

'Is it in the strong room?'

'How should I know?'

'I'll tell you how,' Jerry promised, and nodded hard at Frost so that his forelock flopped up and down. 'I'll tell you, sport,' he repeated, tapping Frost's shoulder lightly with his free hand.

'Because otherwise, you're forty and on the road, with a sick wife, and bambinos to feed, and school fees, and the whole catastrophe. It's one thing or t'other, and the moment's now. Not five minutes on but now. I don't care how you do it but make it sound normal and keep Natalie out of it.'

Jerry guided him back into the middle of the room, where his desk stood, and the telephone. There are parts in life which are impossible to play with dignity. Frost's that day was one. Lifting the receiver, he dialled a single digit.

'Natalie? Oh, you haven't gone. Listen, I'll be staying on for an hour yet, I've just had a client on the phone. Tell Syd to leave the strong room on the key. I'll close up when I go, right?'

He slumped into his chair.

'Straighten your hair,' said Jerry, and returned to the window while they waited.

'Crime and corruption, my arse,' Frost muttered. 'All right, suppose he cuts a few corners. Name me a Chinese who doesn't. Name a Brit who doesn't. Do you think that brings the Island to its feet?'

'Chinese, is he?' said Jerry, very sharply.

Coming back to the desk, Jerry himself dialled Natalie's number. No answer. Lifting Frost gently to his feet, Jerry led him to the door.

'Now don't go locking up,' he warned. 'We'll need to put it back before you leave.'

Frost had returned. He sat glumly at the desk, three folders before him on the blotter. Jerry poured him a vodka. Standing at his shoulder while Frost drank it, Jerry explained how a collaboration of this sort worked. Frostie wouldn't feel a thing, he said. All he had to do was leave everything where it lay, then step into the corridor, closing the door carefully after him. Beside the door was a staff noticeboard: Frostie had no doubt observed it often. Frostie should place himself before this noticeboard and read the

notices diligently, all of them, until he heard Jerry give two knocks from within, when he could return. While reading he should take care to keep his body at such an angle as to obscure the peephole, so that Jerry would know he was still there, and passers-by would not be able to see in. Frost could also console himself with the thought that he had betrayed no confidences, Jerry explained. The worst that Higher Authority could ever say - or the client, for that matter - was that by abandoning his room when Jerry was inside it, he had committed a technical breach of the bank's security regulations.

'How many papers are there in the folders?'

'How should I know?' asked Frost, slightly emboldened by his unexpected innocence.

'Count 'em, will you, sport? Attaboy.'

There were fifty exactly, which was a great deal

more than Jerry had bargained for. There remained the fallback against the eventuality that Jerry, despite these precautions, might be disturbed.

'I'll need application forms,' he said.

'What bloody application forms? I don't keep forms,' Frost retorted. 'I've got girls who bring me forms. No, I haven't. They've gone home.'

'To open my trust account with your distinguished house, Frostie. Spread here on the table, with your hospitality goldplated fountain pen - win you? You're taking a break while I fill them in. And that's the first instalment,' he said. Drawing a little wad of American dollar bills from his hip pocket, he tossed it on the table with a pleasing slap. Frost eyed the money but did not pick it up.

Alone, Jerry worked fast. He disentangled the

papers from the clasp and laid them out in pairs, photographing them two pages to a shot, keeping his big elbows close to his body for stillness, and his big feet slightly apart for balance, like a slip-catch at cricket, and the measuring chain just brushing the papers for distance. When he was not satisfied he repeated a shot. Sometimes he bracketed the exposure. Often he turned his head and glanced at the circle of Robin Hood green in the eyehole to make sure Frost was at his post and not, even now, calling in the armoured guards. Once, Frost grew impatient and tapped on the glass and Jerry growled at him to shut up. Occasionally he heard footsteps approach and when that happened he left everything on the table with the money and the application forms, put the camera in his pocket and ambled to the window to gaze at the harbour and yank at his hair, like a man contemplating the great decisions of his life. And once, which is a fiddly game

when you have big fingers and you're under stress, he changed the cassette, wishing the old camera's action a shade more quiet. By the time he called Frost back, the folders were once more on his desk, the money was beside the folders, and Jerry was feeling cold and just a little murderous.

'You're a bloody fool,' Frost announced, feeding the five hundred dollars into the buttondown pocket of his tunic.

'Sure,' he said. He was looking round, brushing over his traces.

'You're out of your dirty little mind,' Frost told him. His expression was oddly resolute. 'You think you can bust a man like him? You might as well try and take Fort Knox with a jemmy and a box of firecrackers as take the lid off that crowd.'

'Mister Big himself. I like that.'

'No you won't, you'll hate it.'

'Know him, do you?'

'We're like ham and eggs,' said Frost sourly. 'I'm in and out of his place every day. You know my passion for the high and mighty.'

'Who opened his account for him?'

'My predecessor.'

'Been here, has he?'

'Not in my day.'

'Ever seen him?'

'Canidrome in Macao.'

'The where?'

'Macao dog races. Losing his shirt. Mixing with the common crowd. I was with my little Chinese bird, the one before last. She pointed him out to

me. Him? I said. Him? Oh yes, well he's a client of mine. Very impressed she was.' A flicker of his former self appeared in Frost's subdued features. 'I'll tell you one thing: he wasn't doing badly for himself. Very nice blonde party he had with him. Roundeye. Film star by the look of her. Swedish. Lot of conscientious work on the casting couch. Here -'

Frost managed a ghostly smile.

'Hurry, sport. What is it?'

'Let's make it up. Come on. We'll go on the town. Blow my five hundred bucks. You're not really like that, are you? It's just something you do for your living.

Groping in his pocket, Jerry dug out the alarm key and dropped it into Frost's passive hand.

'You'll need this,' he said.

On the great steps as he left stood a slender, well-dressed young man in low-cut American slacks. He was reading a serious-looking book in the hard back edition, Jerry couldn't see what. He had not got very far into it, but he was reading it intently, like somebody determined upon improving his mind.

Sarratt man once more, the rest blanked out.

Heeltap, said the bearleaders. Never go there straight. If you can't cache the take, you must at least queer the scent. He took taxis, but always to somewhere specific. To the Queen's Pier, where he watched the out-island ferries loading, and the brown junks skimming between the liners. To Aberdeen, where he meandered with the sightseers gawping at the boat people and the floating restaurants. To Stanley Village, and

along the public beach, where pale-bodied Chinese bathers, a little stooped as if the city were still weighing on their shoulders, chastely paddled with their children. Chinese never swim after the moon festival, he reminded himself automatically, but he couldn't remember off-hand when the moon festival was. He had thought of dropping the camera at the hat-check room at the Hilton Hotel. He had thought of night safes, and posting a parcel to himself; of special messengers under journalistic cover. None worked for him - more particularly none worked for the bearleaders. It's a solo, they had said; it's a do-it-yourself or nothing. So he bought something to carry: a plastic shopping bag and a couple of cotton shirts to flesh it out. When you're hot, said the doctrine, make sure you have a distraction. Even the oldest watchers fall for it. And if they flush you and you drop it, who knows? You may even hold off the dogs long enough to get out in

your socks. He kept clear of people all the same. He had a living terror of the chance pickpocket. In the hire garage on Kowloonside, they had the car ready for him. He felt calm - he was coming down - but his vigilance never relaxed. He felt victorious and the rest of what he felt was of no account. Some jobs are grubby.

Driving, he watched particularly for Hondas, which in Hong Kong are the poor-bloody-infantry of the watching trade. Before leaving Kowloon he made a couple of passes through sidestreets. Nothing. At Junction Road he joined the picnic convoy and continued toward Clear Water Bay for another hour, grateful for the really bad traffic, for there is nothing harder than unobtrusively ringing the changes between a trio of Hondas caught in a fifteen-mile snarl-up. The rest was watching mirrors, driving, getting there, flying solo. The afternoon heat stayed fierce. He had the airconditioning full on but couldn't feel it.

He passed acres of potted plants, Seiko signs, then quilts of paddies and plots of young trees growing for the new-year market. He came to a narrow sand lane to his left and turned sharply into it, watching his mirror. He pulled up, parked for a while with the rear lid up, pretending to let the engine cool. A pea-green Mercedes slid past him, smoked windows, one driver, one passenger up. It had been behind him for some while. But it stuck to the main road. He crossed the road to the café, dialled a number, let the phone ring four times and rang off. He dialled the number again; it rang six times and as the receiver was lifted he rang off again. He drove on, lumbering through remnants of fishing villages to a lakeside where the rushes were threaded far out into the water, and doubled by their own straight reflection. Bullfrogs bellowed and light pleasure yachts switched in and out of the heat haze. The sky was dead white and reached right into the water. He

got out. As he did so, an old Citroen van hobbled down the road, several Chinese aboard: Coca-Cola hats, fishing tackle, kids; but two men, no women, and the men ignored him. He made for a row of clapboard balcony-houses, very rundown and fronted with concrete lattice walls like houses on an English sea-front, but the paint on them paler because of the sun. Their names were done in heavy poker work on bits of ship's timber: Driftwood, Susy May, Dun-romin. There was a Marina at the end of the track but it was closed down and the yachts now harboured somewhere else. Approaching the houses, Jerry glanced casually at the upper windows. In the second from the left stood a lurid vase of dried flowers, their stems wrapped in silver paper. All clear, it said. Come in. Pushing open the little gate, he pressed the bell. The Citroen had stopped at the lakeside. He heard the doors slam at the same time as he heard the misused electronics over the

entryphone loudspeaker.

'What bastard's that?' a gravel voice demanded, its rich Australian tones thundering through the atmospherics, but the catch on the door was already buzzing and when he shoved it he saw the gross figure of old Craw in his kimono planted at the top of the staircase, hugely pleased, calling him 'Monsignor' and 'you thieving pommie dog', and exhorting him to haul his ugly upper-class backside up here and put a bloody drink under his belt.

The house reeked of burning joss. From the shadows of a ground floor doorway a toothless amah grinned at him, the same strange little creature whom Luke had questioned while Craw was absent in London. The drawing room was on the first floor, the grimy panelling strewn with

curling photographs of Craw's old pals, journalists he'd worked with for all of fifty years of crazy oriental history. At the centre stood a table with a battered Remington where Craw was supposed to be composing his life's memoirs. The rest of the room was sparse. Craw, like Jerry, had kids and wives left over from half a dozen existences, and after meeting life's immediate needs there wasn't much money for furniture.

The bathroom had no window.

Beside the handbasin, a developing tank and brown bottles of fixer and developer. Also a small editor with a ground-glass screen for reading negatives. Craw switched off the light and for numberless years in space laboured in the total darkness, grunting and cursing and appealing to the Pope. Beside him Jerry sweated and tried to chart the old man's actions by his swearing. Now, he guessed, Craw was feeding

the narrow ribbon from the cassette on to the spool. Jerry imagined him holding it too lightly for fear of marking the emulsion. In a moment he'll be doubting whether he's holding it at all, thought Jerry. He'll be having to will his fingertips into continuing the movement. He felt sick. In the darkness old Craw's cursing grew much louder, but not loud enough to drown the scream of water-birds from the lake. He's deft, thought Jerry, reassured. He can do it in his sleep. He heard the grinding of bakelite as Craw screwed down the lid, and a muttered 'Go to bed you little heathen bastard'. Then the strangely dry rattle as he cautiously shook the airbubbles out of the developer. Then the safety light went on with a snap as loud as a pistol shot, and there was old Craw himself once more, red as a parrot from the glow, stooped over the sealed tank, quickly pouring in the hypo, then confidently overturning the tank and setting it right again while he

watched the old kitchen timer stammer through the seconds.

Half stifled with nerves and heat, Jerry returned alone to the drawing room, poured himself a beer and slumped into a cane chair, looking nowhere while he listened to the steady running of the tap. From the window came the bubbling of Chinese voices. At the lake's edge the two fishermen had set up their tackle. The children were watching them, sitting in the dust. From the bathroom came the scratching of the lid again, and Jerry leapt to his feet, but Craw must have heard him, for he growled 'wait' and closed the door.

Airline pilots, journalists, spies, the Sarratt doctrine warned. It's the same drag. Bloody inertia interspersed with bouts of bloody frenzy.

He's taking first look, thought Jerry: in case it's fumble. In the pecking order, it was Craw, not Jerry, who had to make his peace with London.

Craw, who in the worst contingency, would order him to take a second bite of Frost.

'What are you doing in there, for Christ's sake?' Jerry yelled. 'What goes on?'

Perhaps he's having a pee, he thought absurdly.

Slowly the door opened. Craw's gravity was awesome.

'They haven't come out,' said Jerry.

He had the feeling of not reaching Craw at all. He was going to repeat himself in fact, loudly. He was going to dance about and make a damn scene. So that Craw's answer, when it finally came, came just in time.

'To the contrary, my son.' The old boy took a step forward and Jerry could see the films now, hanging behind him like black wet worms from Craw's little clothes line, pink pegs holding them

in place. 'To the contrary, sir,' he said, 'every frame is a bold and disturbing masterpiece.'

Chapter 7 - More About Horses

In the Circus the first scraps of news on Jerry's progress arrived in the early morning, in a deadly quiet, and thereafter set the weekend upside down. Knowing what to expect Guillam had taken himself to bed at ten and slumbered fitfully between bouts of anxiety for Jerry, and frankly lustful visions of Molly Meakin with and without her sedate swimming suit. Jerry was due to present himself to Frost just after four a.m. London time and by three-thirty Guillam was clattering in his old Porsche through the foggy streets toward Cambridge Circus. It could have

been dawn or dusk. He arrived at the rumpus room to find Connie completing The Times crossword and Doc di Salis reading the meditations of Thomas Traherne, plucking his ear and jiggling his foot at the same time, like a one-man percussion band. Restless as ever, Fawn flitted between them, dusting and tidying, a headwaiter impatient for the next sitting. Now and then he sucked his teeth and let out a breathy 'tah' in barely controlled frustration. A pall of tobacco smoke hung like a raincloud across the room and there was the usual stink of rank tea from the samovar. Smiley's door was closed and Guillam saw no cause to disturb him. He opened a copy of Country Life. Like waiting at the bloody dentist, he thought, and sat staring mindlessly at photographs of great houses till Connie softly put down her crossword, sat bolt upright and said 'Listen'. Then he heard a quick snarl from the Cousins' green telephone before

Smiley picked it up. Through the open doorway to his own room Guillam glanced at the row of electronic boxes. On one, a green caution light burned for as long as the conversation lasted. Then the pax rang in the rumpus room - pax being jargon for internal phone - and this time Guillam reached it before Fawn.

'He's entered the bank,' Smiley announced cryptically over the pax.

Guillam relayed the message to the gathering. 'He's gone into the bank,' he said, but he might have been talking to the dead. Nobody gave the slightest sign of hearing.

By five Jerry had come out of the bank. Nervously contemplating the options, Guillam felt physically sick. Burning was a dangerous game and like most pros Guillam hated it, though not for reasons of scruple. First there was the quarry or, worse, the local security angels.

Second there was the burn itself, and not everybody responded logically to blackmail. You got heroes, you got liars, you got hysterical virgins who put their heads back and screamed blue murder even when they were enjoying it. But the real danger came now, when the burn was over and Jerry had to turn his back on the smoking bomb and run. Which way would Frost jump? Would he telephone the police? His mother? His boss? His wife? 'Darling, I'll confess all, save me and we'll turn over a new leaf.' Guillam did not even rule out the ghastly possibility that Frost might go directly to his client: 'Sir, I have come to purge myself of a gross breach of bank confidence.'

In the fusty eeriness of early morning, Guillam shuddered, and fixed his mind resolutely on Molly.

On the next occasion the green phone sounded,

Guillam didn't hear it. George must have been sitting right over the thing. Suddenly the pinlight in Guillam's room was glowing and it continued glowing for fifteen minutes. It went out and they waited, an eyes fixed on Smiley's door, wining him from his seclusion. Fawn was frozen in mid-movement, holding a plate of brown marmalade sandwiches which nobody would ever eat. Then the handle tipped and Smiley appeared with a common-or-garden search request form in his hand, already completed in his own neat script and flagged 'stripe' which meant 'urgent for Chief' and was the top priority. He gave it to Guillam and asked him to take it straight to the Queen Bee in Registry and stand over her while she looked up the name. Receiving it, Guillam recalled an earlier moment when he had been presented with a similar form, made out in the name of Worthington, Elizabeth alias Lizzie, and ending 'high-class tart'. And as he departed, he heard

Smiley quietly inviting Connie and di Salis to accompany him to the throne-room, while Fawn was packed off to the unclassified library in search of the current edition of Who's Who in Hong Kong.

The Queen Bee had been specially summoned for the dawn shift, and when Guillam walked in on her, her lair looked like a tableau of 'The Night London Burned', complete with an iron bunk and a small primus stove, though there was a coffee machine in the corridor. All she needs is a boiler suit and a portrait of Winston Churchill, he thought. The details on the trace read 'Ko forename Drake other names unknown, date of birth 1925 Shanghai, present address Seven Gates, Headland Road, Hong Kong, occupation Chairman and Managing Director of China Airsea Ltd, Hong Kong'. The Queen Bee launched herself, on an impressive paper chase but all she finally came up with was the

information that Ko had been appointed to the Order of the British Empire under the Hong Kong list in 1966 for 'social and charitable service to the Colony', and that the Circus had responded 'nothing recorded against', to a vetting enquiry from the Governor's office before the award was passed up for approval. Hurrying upstairs with his glad intelligence, Guillam was awake enough to remember that China Airsea Ltd, Hong Kong, had been described by Sam Collins as the ultimate owner of that mickey-mouse airline in Vientiane which had been the beneficiary of Commercial Boris's bounty. This struck Guillam as a most orderly connection. Pleased with himself, he returned to the throne-room to be greeted by dead silence. Strewn over the floor lay not just the current edition of Who's Who but several back-numbers as well: Fawn, as usual, had overreached himself. Smiley sat at his desk and he was staring at a sheet of notes in his own

handwriting. Connie and di Salis were staring at Smiley, but Fawn was absent again, presumably on another errand. Guillam handed Smiley the trace form with the Queen Bee's findings written along the middle in her best Kensington copperplate. At the same moment the green phone crackled again. Lifting the receiver Smiley began jotting on the sheet before him.

'Yes. Thanks, I have that. Go on, please. Yes, I have that also.' And so on for ten minutes, till he said: 'Good. Till this evening then,' and rang off.

Outside in the street, an Irish milkman was enthusiastically proclaiming that he never would be the wild rover no more.

'Westerby's landed the complete file,' Smiley said finally - though like everyone else he referred to him by his cryptonym. 'All the figures.' He nodded as if agreeing with himself, still studying the paper. 'The film won't be here till tonight but

the shape is already clear. Everything that was originally paid through Vientiane has found its way to the account in Hong Kong. Right from the very beginning Hong Kong was the final destination of the goldseam. All of it. Down to the last cent. No deductions, not even for bank commission. It was at first a humble figure, then rose steeply, why we may only guess. All as Collins described. Till it stopped at twenty-five thousand a month and stayed there. When the Vientiane arrangement ended, Centre didn't miss a single month. They switched to the alternative route immediately. You're right, Con. Karla never does anything without a fallback.'

'He's a professional, darling,' Connie Sachs murmured. 'Like you.'

'Not like me.' He continued studying his own jottings. 'It's a lockaway account,' he declared in the same matter-of-fact tone. 'Only one name is

given and that's the founder of the trust. Ko. Beneficiary unknown, they say. Perhaps we shall see why tonight. Not a penny has been drawn,' he said, singling out Connie Sachs. He repeated that: 'Since the payments started over two years ago, not a single penny has been drawn from the account. The balance stands in the order of half a million American dollars. With compound interest it's naturally rising fast.'

To Guillam, this last piece of intelligence was daylight madness. What the hell was the point to half a million dollar goldseam if the money was not even used when it reached the other end? To Connie Sachs and di Salis, on the other hand, it was patently of enormous significance. A crocodile smile spread slowly across Connie's face and her baby eyes fixed on Smiley in silent ecstasy.

'Oh George,' she breathed at last, as the revelation

gathered in her. 'Darling. Lockaway! Well, that's quite a different kettle of fish. Well of course it had to be, didn't it! It had all the signs. From the very first day. And if fat, stupid Connie hadn't been so blinkered and old and doddery and idle, she'd have read them off long ago! You leave me alone, Peter Guillam, you lecherous young toad.' She was pulling herself to her feet, her crippled hands clamped over the chair arms. 'But who can be worth so much? Would it be a network? No, no, they'd never do it for a network. No precedent. Not a wholesale thing, that's unheard of. So who can it be? Whatever can he deliver that would be worth so much?' She was hobbling toward the door, tugging the shawl over her shoulders, slipping already from their world to her own. 'Karla doesn't pay money out like that.' They heard her mutterings follow her. She passed the mothers' lane of covered typewriters, muffled sentinels in the gloom. 'Karla's such a mean prig

he thinks his agents should work for him for nothing! Course he does. Pennies, that's what he pays them. Pocket money. Inflation is all very well, but half a million dollars for one little mole. I never heard such a thing!

In his quirkish way di Salis was no less impressed than Connie. He sat with the top part of his crabbed, uneven body tilted forward, and he was stirring feverishly in the bowl of his pipe with a silver knife as if it were a cookpot which had caught on the flame. His silver hair stood wry as a cockscomb over the dandruffed collar of his crumpled black jacket.

'Well, well, no wonder Karla wanted the bodies buried,' he blurted suddenly, as if the words had been jerked out of him. 'No wonder. Karla's a China hand too, you know. It is attested. I have it from Connie.' He clambered to his feet, holding too many things in his little hands: pipe, tobacco

tin, his penknife and his Thomas Traherne. 'Not sophisticated naturally. Well one doesn't expect that. Karla's no scholar, he's a soldier. But not blind either, not by a long chalk, she tells me. Ko.' He repeated the name at several different levels. 'Ko. Ko. I must see the character. It depends entirely on the characters. Height... Tree even, yes, I can see tree... or can I?... oh and several other concepts. Drake is mission school of course. Shanghainese mission boy: Well, well. Shanghai was where it all started you know. First Party cell ever was in Shanghai. Why did I say that? Drake Ko. Wonder what his real names are. We shall find that all out very shortly no doubt. Yes, good. Well I think I might go back to my reading too. Smiley, do you think I might have a coal-scuttle in my room? Without the heating on, one simply freezes up. I've asked the housekeepers a dozen times and had nothing but impertinence for my pains. Anno domini I'm

afraid, but the winter is almost upon us I suppose. You'll show us the raw material as soon as it arrives, I trust? One doesn't like to work too long on potted versions. I shall make a curriculum vitae. That will be my first thing. Ko. Ah, thank you, Guillam.'

He had dropped his Thomas Traherne. Accepting it he dropped his tobacco tin, so Guillam picked up that as well. 'Drake Ko. Shanghainese doesn't mean a thing of course. Shanghai was the real melting pot. Chiu Chow's the answer, judging by what we know. Still, mustn't jump the gun. Baptist. Well, the Chiu Chow Christians mostly are, aren't they? Swatownese: where did we have that? Yes, the intermediate company in Bangkok. Well, that figures well enough. Or Hakka. They're not mutually exclusive, not by any means.' He stalked after Connie into the corridor, leaving Guillam alone with Smiley, who rose and, going to an armchair, slumped into it staring sightlessly

at the fire.

'Odd,' he remarked finally. 'One has no sense of shock. Why is that, Peter? You know me. Why is it?'

Guillam had the wisdom to keep quiet.

'A big fish. In Karla's pay. Lockaway accounts, the threat of Russian spies at the very centre of the Colony's life. So why no sense of shock?'

The green telephone was barking again. This time Guillam took the call. As he did so, he was surprised to see a fresh folder of Sam Collins's Far Eastern reports lying open on the desk.

That was the weekend. Connie and di Salis sank without trace; Smiley set to work preparing his submission; Guillam smoothed feathers, called in

the mothers and arranged for typing in shifts. On the Monday, carefully briefed by Smiley, he telephoned Lacon's private secretary. He did it very well. 'No drumbeats,' Smiley had warned. 'Keep it very idle.' And Guillam did just that. There had been talk over dinner the other evening - he said - of convening the Intelligence Steering Group to consider certain prima facie evidence:

'The case has firmed up a little, so perhaps it would be sensible to fix a date. Give us the batting order and we'll circulate the document in advance.'

'A batting order? Firmed up? Where ever do you people learn your English?'

Lacon's private secretary was a fat voice called Pym. Guillam had never met him, but he loathed him quite unreasonably.

'I can only tell him,' Pym warned. 'I can tell him

and I can see what he says and I can ring you back. His card is very heavily marked this month.'

'It's just one little waltz if he can manage it,' said Guillam and rang off in a fury.

You bloody well wait and see what hits you, he thought.

When London is having its baby, the folklore says, the fieldman can only pace the waiting room. Airline pilots, newshounds, spies: Jerry was back with the bloody inertia.

'We're in mothballs,' Craw announced. 'The word is well done and hold your water.'

They talked every two days at least, limbo calls between two third-party telephones, usually one

hotel lobby to another. They disguised their language with a mix of Sarratt wordcode and journalistic mumbo-jumbo.

'Your story is being checked out on high,' Craw said. 'When our editors have wisdom, they will impart it in due season. Meanwhile, slap your hand over it and keep it there. That's an order.'

Jerry had no idea how Craw talked to London and he didn't care as long as it was safe. He assumed some co-opted official from the huge, untouchable, above-the-line intelligence fraternity was playing linkman: but he didn't care.

'Your job is to put in mileage for the comic and tuck some spare copy under your belt which you can wave at Brother Stubbs when the next crisis comes,' Craw said to him. 'Nothing else, hear me?'

Drawing on his jaunts with Frost, Jerry bashed

out a piece on the effect of the American military pullout on the nightlife of Wanchai: 'What's happened to Susie Wong since war-weary GIs with bulging wallets have ceased to flock in for rest and recreation?' He fabricated - or, as journalists prefer it, hyped - a 'dawn interview' with a disconsolate and fictitious bar-girl who was reduced to accepting Japanese customers, air-freighted his piece and got Luke's bureau to telex the number of the waybill, all as Stubbs had ordered. Jerry was by no means a bad reporter, but just as pressure brought out the best in him, sloth brought out the worst. Astonished by Stubbs's prompt and even gracious acceptance - a 'herogram' Luke called it, phoning through the text from the bureau - he cast around for other heights to scale. A couple of sensational corruption trials were attracting good houses, starring the usual crop of misunderstood policemen, but after taking a look at them, Jerry

concluded they hadn't the scale to travel. England had her own these days. A 'please-matcher' ordered him to chase a story floated by a rival comic about the alleged pregnancy of Miss Hong Kong but a libel suit got there ahead of him. He attended an arid government press briefing by Shallow Throat, himself a humourless reject from a Northern Irish daily, idled away a morning researching successful stories from the past that might stand re-heating; and on the strength of rumour about army economy cuts, spent an afternoon being trailed round the Gurkha garrison by a public relations major who looked about eighteen. And no the major didn't know, thank you, in reply to Jerry's cheerful enquiry, what his men would do for sex when their families were sent home to Nepal. They would be visiting their villages about once every three years, he thought; and he seemed to think that was quite enough for anyone. Stretching the facts till they read as if the

Gurkhas were already a community of military grass widowers, 'Cold Showers in a Hot Climate for Britain's Mercenaries', Jerry triumphantly landed himself an inside lead. He banked a couple more stories for a rainy day, lounged away the evenings at the Club and inwardly gnawed his head off while he waited for the Circus to produce its baby.

'For Christ's sake,' he protested to Craw. 'The bloody man's practically public property.'

'All the same,' said Craw firmly.

So Jerry said 'Yes, sir,' and a couple of days later, out of sheer boredom, began his own entirely informal investigation into the life and loves of Mr Drake Ko, OBE, Steward of the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club, millionaire and citizen above suspicion. Nothing dramatic; nothing, in Jerry's book; disobedient; for there is not a field man born who does not at one time or another stray

across the borders of his brief. He began tentatively, like journeys to a forbidden biscuit box. As it happened, he had been considering proposing to Stubbs a three-part series on the Hong Kong super-rich. Browsing in the reference shelves of the Foreign Correspondents' Club before lunch one day, he unconsciously took a leaf from Smiley's book and turned up Ko, Drake, in the current edition of Who's Who in Hong Kong: married, one son, died 1968; sometime law student of Gray's Inn, London, but not a successful one, apparently, for there was no record of his having been called to the Bar. Then a rundown of his twenty-odd directorships. Hobbies: horseracing, cruising and jade. Well, whose aren't? Then the charities he supported, including a Baptist church, a Chiu Chow Spirit Temple and the Drake Ko Free Hospital for Children. Backed all the possibilities, Jerry reflected with amusement. The photograph

showed the usual soft-eyed, twenty-year-old beautiful soul, rich in merit as well as goods, and was otherwise unrecognisable. The dead son's name was Nelson. Jerry noticed: Drake and Nelson, British admirals. He couldn't get it out of his mind that the father should be named after the first British sailor to enter the China Seas, and the son after the hero of Trafalgar.

Jerry had a lot less difficulty than Peter Guillam in making the connection between China Airsea in Hong Kong and Indocharter SA in Vientiane, and he was amused to read in the China Airsea company prospectus that its business was described as a 'wide spread of trading and transportation activities in the South East Asian theatre' - including rice, fish, electrical goods, teak, real estate and shipping.

Devilling at Luke's bureau, he took a bolder step: the sheerest accident shoved the name of Drake

Ko under his nose. True, he had looked up Ko in the card index. Just as he had looked up a dozen or twenty other wealthy Chinese in the Colony; just as he had asked the Chinese clerk, in perfectly good faith who she thought were the most exotic Chinese millionaires for his purpose. And while Drake might not have been one of the absolute front runners, it took very little to draw the name from her, and consequently the papers. Indeed, as he had already protested to Craw, there was something flattening, not to say dream-like, about pursuing by hole-and-corner methods a man so publicly evident. Soviet intelligence agents, in Jerry's limited experience of the breed, normally came in more modest versions. Ko seemed king-sized by comparison.

Reminds me of old Sambo, Jerry thought. It was the first time this intimation struck him.

The most detailed offering appeared in a glossy

periodical called Golden Orient, now out of print. In one of its last editions, an eight-page illustrated feature titled 'The Red Knights of Nanyang' concerned itself with the growing number of overseas Chinese with profitable trade relations with Red China, commonly known as fat-cats. Nanyang, as Jerry knew, meant the realms south of China; and implied to the Chinese a kind of Eldorado of peace and wealth. To each chosen personality the feature devoted a page and a photograph, generally shot against a background of his possessions. The hero of the Hong Kong interview - there were pieces from Bangkok, Manila, and Singapore as well - was that 'much-loved sporting personality and Jockey Club Steward', Mr Drake Ko, President, Chairman, Managing Director and chief shareholder of China Airsea Ltd, and he was shown with his horse Lucky Nelson at the end of a successful season in Happy Valley. The horse's name

momentarily arrested Jerry's Western eye. He found it macabre that a father should christen a horse after his dead son.

The accompanying photograph revealed rather more than the spineless mugshot in Who's Who. Ko looked jolly, even exuberant, and he appeared, despite his hat, to be hairless. The hat was at this stage the most interesting thing about Ko, for it was one which no Chinese, in Jerry's limited experience, had ever been seen to wear. It was a beret, worn sloping, and putting Ko somewhere between a British soldier and a French onion seller. But above all, it had for a Chinese the rarest quality of all: self mockery. He was apparently tall, he was wearing a Burberry, and his long hands stuck out of the sleeves like twigs. He seemed genuinely to like the horse, and one arm rested easily on its back. Asked why he still ran a junk fleet when these were commonly held to be unprofitable, he replied: 'My people are

Hakka from Chiu Chow. We breathed the water, farmed the water, slept on the water. Boats are my element.' He was fond also of describing his journey from Shanghai to Hong Kong in 1951. At that time the border was still open and there were no effective restrictions on immigration.

Nevertheless, Ko chose to make the trip by fishing junk, pirates, blockades and bad weather notwithstanding: which was held at the very least to be eccentric.

'I'm a very lazy fellow,' he was reported as saying. 'If the wind will blow me for nothing, why should I walk? Now I've got a sixty-foot cruiser but I still love the sea.'

Famous for his sense of humour, said the article.

A good agent must have entertainment value, say the Sarratt bearleaders: that was something Moscow Centre also understood.

There being no one watching, Jerry ambled over to the card index and a few minutes later had taken possession of a thick folder of presscuttings, the bulk of which concerned a share scandal in 1965, in which Ko and a group of Swatownese had played a shady part. The Stock Exchange enquiry, not surprisingly, proved inconclusive and was shelved. The following year Ko got his OBE. 'If you buy people,' old Sambo used to say, 'buy them thoroughly.'

In Luke's bureau they kept a bunch of Chinese researchers, among them a convivial Cantonese named Jimmy who often appeared at the Club and was paid at Chinese rates to be the oracle on Chinese matters. Jimmy said the Swatownese were a people apart, 'like Scots or Jews', hardy, clannish and notoriously thrifty, who lived near the sea so that they could run for it when they were persecuted or starving or in debt. He said their women were sought after, being beautiful,

diligent, frugal and lecherous.

'Writing yourself another novel, your lordship?' the dwarf asked endearingly, coming out of his office to find out what Jerry was up to. Jerry had wanted to ask why a Swatownese should have been brought up in Shanghai, but he thought it wiser to bend course toward a less delicate topic.

Next day, Jerry borrowed Luke's battered car. Armed with a standard-size thirty-five millimetre camera he drove to Headland Road, a millionaire's ghetto between Repulse Bay and Stanley, where he made a show of rubbernecking at the outside of the villas there, as many idle tourists do. His cover story was still that feature for Stubbs on the Hong Kong super-rich: even now, even to himself, he would scarcely have admitted to going there on account of Drake Ko.

'He's raising Cain in Taipei,' Craw had told him casually in one of their limbo calls. 'Won't be

back till Thursday.' Once again, Jerry accepted without question Craw's lines of communication.

He did not photograph the house called Seven Gates, but he took several long, stupid gazes at it. He saw a low, pantiled villa set well back from the road, with a big verandah on the seaward side and a pergola of white-painted pillars cut against the blue horizon. Craw had told him that Drake must have chosen the name because of Shanghai, whose old city walls were pierced with seven gates: 'Sentiment, my son. Never underrate the power of sentiment upon a slanteye, and never count on it either. Amen.' He saw lawns, including to his amusement a croquet lawn. He saw a fine collection of azaleas and hibiscus. He saw a model junk about ten feet long set on a concrete sea, and he saw a garden bar, round like a bandstand, with a blue and white striped awning over it, and a ring of empty white chairs presided over by a boy in a white coat and trousers and

white shoes. The Ko's were evidently expecting company. He saw other houseboys washing a tobacco-coloured Rolls-Royce Phantom saloon. The long garage was open, and he recorded a Chrysler station-wagon of some kind, and a Mercedes, black, with the licence plates removed, presumably as part of some repair. But he was meticulous about giving equal attention to the other houses in Headland Road and photographed three of them.

Continuing to Deep Water Bay he stood on the shore gazing at the small armada of stockbroker junks and launches which bobbed at anchor on the choppy sea, but was not able to pick out Admiral Nelson, Ko's celebrated ocean-going cruiser - the ubiquity of the name Nelson was becoming positively oppressive. About to give up, he heard a cry from below him, and walking down a rickety wooden causeway found an old woman in a sampan grinning up at him and

pointing to herself with a yellow chicken's leg she had been sucking with her toothless gums. Clambering aboard he indicated the boats and she took him on a tour of them, laughing and chanting while she sculled, and keeping the chicken leg in her mouth. Admiral Nelson was sleek and low-lined. Three more boys in white ducks were diligently scouring the decks. Jerry tried to calculate Ko's monthly housekeeping bill, just for staff alone.

On the drive back, he paused to examine the Drake Ko Free Hospital for Children and established, for what it was worth, that that too was in excellent repair. Next morning early, Jerry placed himself in the lobby of a chintzy highrise office building in Central, and read the brass plates of the business companies housed there. China Airsea and its affiliates occupied the top three floors, but somewhat predictably there was no mention of Indocharter, Vientiane SA, the

former recipient of twenty-five thousand US dollars on the last Friday of every month.

The cuttings folder in Luke's bureau had contained a cross-reference to US Consulate archives. Jerry called there next day, ostensibly to check out his story on the American troops in Wanchai. Under the eye of an unreasonably pretty girl, Jerry drifted, picked at a few things, then settled on some of the oldest stuff they had, which dated from the very early Fifties when Truman had put a trade embargo on China and North Korea. The Hong Kong Consulate had been ordered to report infringements, and this was the record of what they had unearthed. The favourite commodity, next to medicines and electrical goods, was oil, and 'the United States Agencies', as they were styled, had 'gone for it in a big way, setting traps, putting out gun boats, interrogating defectors and prisoners, and finally placing huge dossiers before Congressional and

Senate Sub-Committees.

The year in question was 1951, two years after the Communist takeover in China and the year Ko sailed to Hong Kong from Shanghai without a cent to his name. The operation to which the bureau's reference directed him was Shanghainese, and to begin with, that was the only connection it had with Ko. Many Shanghainese immigrants in those days lived in a crowded, insanitary hotel on the Des Voeux Road. The introduction said that they were like one enormous family, welded together by shared suffering and squalor. Some had escaped together from the Japanese before escaping from the Communists.

'After enduring so much at Communist hands,' one culprit told his interrogators, 'the least we could do was make a little money out of them.'

Another was more aggressive. 'The Hong Kong

fat-cats are making millions out of this war. Who sells the Reds their electronic equipment, their penicillin, their rice?'

In fifty-one there were two methods open to them, said the report. One was to bribe the frontier guards and truck the oil across the New Territories and over the border. The other was taking it by ship, which meant bribing the harbour authorities.

An informant again: 'Us Hakka know the sea. We find boat, three hundred tons, we rent. We fill with drums of oil, make false manifest and false destination. We reach international waters, run like hell for Amoy. Reds call us brother, profit one hundred per cent. After a few runs we buy boat.'

'Where did the original money come from?' the interrogator demanded.

'Ritz Ballroom,' was the disconcerting answer. The Ritz was a high-class pick-up spot right down the King's Road on the waterfront, said a footnote. Most of the girls were Shanghainese. The same footnote named members of the gang. Drake Ko was one.

'Drake Ko was very tough boy,' said a witness's statement given in fine print in the appendix. 'You don't tell no fairy story to Drake Ko. He don't like politician people one piece. Chiang Kai-shek. Mao. He say they all one person. He say he big supporter of Chiang Mao-shek. One day Mr Ko lead our gang.'

As to organised crime, the investigation turned up nothing. It was a matter of history that Shanghai, by the time it fell to Mao in forty-nine, had emptied three quarters of its underworld into Hong Kong; that the Red Gang and the Green Gang had fought enough battles over the Hong

Kong protection rackets to make Chicago in the twenties look like child's play. But not a witness could be found who admitted to knowing anything about Triads or any other criminal outfit.

Not surprisingly, by the time Saturday came round and Jerry was on his way to Happy Valley races, he possessed quite a detailed portrait of his quarry.

The taxi charged double because it was the races and Jerry paid because he knew it was the form. He had told Craw he was going and Craw had not objected. He had brought Luke along for the ride, knowing that sometimes two are less conspicuous than one. He was nervous of bumping into Frost, because roundeye Hong Kong is a very small city indeed. At the main entrance he telephoned the

management to raise some influence, and in due course a Captain Grant appeared, a young official to whom Jerry explained that this was work: he was writing the place up for the comic. Grant was a witty, elegant man who smoked Turkish cigarettes through a holder, and everything Jerry said seemed to amuse him in a fond, if rather remote way.

'You're the son, then,' he said finally.

'Did you know him?' said Jerry, grinning.

'Only of him,' Captain Grant replied, but he seemed to like what he had heard.

He gave them badges, and offered them drinks later. The second race was just over. While they talked, they heard the roar of the crowd set-to and rise and die like an avalanche. Waiting for the lift Jerry checked the noticeboard to see who had taken the private boxes. The hardy annuals were

the Peak mafia: The Bank - as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank liked to call itself - Jardine Matheson, the Governor, the Commander, British Forces. Mr Drake Ko, OBE, though a Steward of the Club, was not among them.

'Westerby! Good God, man, who the hell ever let you in here? Listen, is it true your dad went bust before he died?'

Jerry hesitated, grinning, then belatedly drew the card from his memory: Clive Somebody, pigs-in-clover solicitor, house in Repulse Bay, overpowering Scot, all false affability and an open reputation for crookedness. Jerry had used him for background in a Macao-based gold swindle and concluded that Clive had had a slice of the cake.

'Gosh, Clive, super, marvellous.'

They exchanged banalities, still waiting for the

lift. 'Here. Give us your card. Come on! I'll make your fortune yet.' Porton, thought Jerry: Clive Porton. Tearing the racecard from Jerry's hand, Porton licked his big thumb, turned to a centre page and ringed a horse's name in ballpoint.

'Number seven in the third, you can't go wrong,' he breathed. 'Put your shirt on it, okay? Not every day I give away money, I'll tell you.'

'What did the slob sell you?' Luke enquired, when they were clear of him.

'Thing called Open Space.'

Their ways divided. Luke went off to place bets and wangle his way into the American Club upstairs. Jerry on an impulse took a hundred dollars' worth of Lucky Nelson and set a hasty course for the Hong Kong Club's luncheon room. 'If I lose,' he thought drily, 'I'll chalk it up to George.' The double doors were open and he walked straight in. The atmosphere was of dowdy

wealth: a Surrey golf club on a wet weekend, except that those brave enough to risk the pickpockets wore real jewels. A group of wives sat apart, like expensive unused equipment, scowling at the closed-circuit television and moaning about servants and muggings. There was a smell of cigar smoke and sweat and departed food. Seeing him shamble in - the awful suit, the buckskin boots, 'Press' written all over him - their scowls darkened. The trouble with being exclusive in Hong Kong, their faces said, was that not enough people are thrown out. A school of serious drinkers had gathered at the bar, mainly carpet-baggers from the London merchant banks with beer-bellies and fat necks before their time. With them, the Jardine Matheson second eleven, not yet grand enough for the firm's private box: groomed, unlovable innocents for whom Heaven was money and promotion. Apprehensively, he glanced round for Frostie, but either the gee-gees

hadn't drawn him today, or he was with some other crowd. With one grin and one vague flap of the hand for all of them, Jerry winkled out the under-manager, saluted him like a lost friend, talked airily of Captain Grant, slipped him twenty bucks for himself, signed up for the day in defiance of every regulation, and stepped gratefully on to the balcony with still eighteen minutes before the off: sun, the stink of dung, the feral rumble of a Chinese crowd, and Jerry's own quickening heartbeat that whispered 'horses'.

For a moment, Jerry hung there, grinning, taking in the view, because every time he saw it was the first time.

The grass at Happy Valley racecourse must be the most valuable crop on earth. There was very little of it. A narrow ring ran round the edge of what

looked like a London borough recreation ground which sun and feet have beaten into dirt. Eight scuffed football pitches, one rugger pitch, one hockey; gave an air of municipal neglect. But the thin green ribbon which surrounded this dingy package in that year alone was like to attract a cool hundred million sterling through legal betting, and the same amount again in the shade. The place was less a valley than a firebowl: glistening white stadium one side, brown hills the other, while ahead of Jerry and to his left lurked the other Hong Kong: a cardhouse Manhattan of grey sky-scraper slums crammed so tight they seemed to lean on one another in the heat. From each tiny balcony a bamboo pole stuck out like a pin put in to brace the structure. From each pole hung innumerable flags of black laundry. as if something huge had brushed against the building. leaving these tatters in its wake. It was from places like these, for all but the tiniest few that

day, that Happy Valley offered the gambler's dream of instantaneous salvation.

Away to the right of Jerry shone newer, grander buildings. There, he remembered, the illegal bookies pitched their offices and by a dozen arcane methods - tic-tac, walkie-talkie, flashing lights - Sarratt would have been entranced by them - kept up their dialogue with legmen round the course. Higher again ran the spines of shaven hilltop slashed by quarries and littered with the ironmongery of electronic eavesdropping. Jerry had heard somewhere that the saucers had been put there for the Cousins, so that they could track the sponsored over-flights of Taiwanese U2s. Above the hills, dumplings of white cloud which no weather ever seemed to clear away. And above the cloud, that day, the bleached China sky aching in the sun, and one hawk slowly wheeling. All this, Jerry took in at a single, grateful draught.

For the crowd it was the aimless time. The focus of attention, if anywhere, was the four fat Chinese women in fringed Hakka hats and black pyjama suits who were marching down the track with rakes, prinking the precious grass where the galloping hoofs had mussed it. They moved with the dignity of total indifference: it was as if the whole of Chinese peasantry were depicted in their gestures. For a second, in the way crowds have, a tremor of collective affinity reached out to them, and was forgotten.

The betting put Clive Porton's Open Space third favourite. Drake Ko's Lucky Nelson was in with the field at forty to one, which meant nowhere. Edging his way past a bunch of festive Australians. Jerry reached the corner of the balcony and, craning, peered over the tiers of heads to the owners' box, cut off from the common people by a green iron gate and a security guard. Shading his eyes and wishing he

had brought binoculars, he made out one fat, hard-looking man in a suit and dark glasses, accompanied by a young and very pretty girl. He looked half Chinese, half Latin, and Jerry put him down as Filipino. The girl was the best that money could buy.

Must be with his horse, thought Jerry, recalling old Sambo. Most likely in the paddock, briefing his trainer and the jockey.

Striding back through the luncheon room to the main lobby, he dropped into a wide back-stairway for two floors and crossed a hall to the viewing gallery, which was filled with a vast and thoughtful Chinese crowd, all men, staring downward in devotional silence into a covered sandpit filled with noisy sparrows and three horses, each led by his permanent male groom, the mafoo. The mafoos held their charges miserably, as if sick with nerves. The elegant

Captain Grant was looking on, so was an old White Russian trainer called Sacha whom Jerry loved. Sacha sat on a tiny folding chair, leaning slightly forward as if he were fishing. Sacha had trained Mongolian ponies in the treaty days of Shanghai, and Jerry could listen to him all night: how Shanghai had had three racecourses, British, International and Chinese; how the British merchant princes kept sixty, even a hundred horses apiece and sailed them up and down the coast, competing like madmen with each other from port to port. Sacha was a gentle, philosophical fellow with faraway blue eyes and an all-in wrestler's jaw. He was also the trainer of Lucky Nelson. He sat alone, watching what Jerry took to be a doorway out of his own line of sight.

A sudden hubbub from the stands caused Jerry to turn sharply toward the sunlight. A roar sounded, then one high, strangled shriek as the crowd on one tier-swayed and an axehead of grey and black

uniforms tore into it. An instant later and a swarm of police was dragging some wretched pickpocket, bleeding and coughing, into the tunnel stairway for a voluntary statement.

Dazzled, Jerry returned his gaze to the interior darkness of the sandpaddock, and took a moment to focus on the fogged outline of Mr Drake Ko.

The identification was nowhere near immediate. The first person Jerry noticed was not Ko at all, but the young Chinese jockey standing at old Sacha's side, tall boy, thin as wire where his silks were nipped into his breeches. He was slapping his whip against his boot as if he had seen the gesture in an English sporting print, and he was wearing Ko's colours ('sky blue and sea-grey quartered' said the article in Golden Orient) and like Sacha he was staring at something out of Jerry's sight. Next, from under the platform where Jerry stood, came a bay griffin, led by a giggly fat mafoo in filthy grey overalls. His number was

hidden by a rug, but Jerry knew the horse already from its photograph, and he knew it even better now: he knew it really well, in fact. There are some horses that are simply superior to their class; and Lucky Nelson to Jerry's eye was one. Bit of quality, he thought, nice long rein, a bold eye. None of your jail-bait chestnut with a light mane and tail that take the women's vote in every race: given the local form, which is heavily restricted by the climate, Lucky Nelson was as sound as anything he'd seen here. Jerry was sure of it. For one bad moment he was anxious about the horse's condition: sweating, too much gloss on the flanks and quarters. Then he looked again at the bold eye, and the slightly unnatural sweatlines, and his heart rose again: cunning devil's had him hosed down to make him look poorly, he thought, in joyous memory of old Sambo.

It was only at that late point, therefore, that Jerry

moved his eye from the horse to its owner.

Mr Drake Ko, OBE, the recipient to date of a cool half million of Moscow Centre's American dollars, the avowed supporter of Chiang Mao-shek, stood apart from everyone, in the shadow of a white concrete pillar ten feet in diameter: an ugly but inoffensive figure at first glance, tall, with a stoop that should have been occupational: a dentist, or a cobbler. He was dressed in an English way, in baggy grey flannels and a black double-breasted blazer too long in the waist, so that it emphasised the disjointedness of his legs and gave a crumpled look to his spare body. His face and neck were as polished as old leather and as hairless, and the many creases looked sharp as ironed pleats. His complexion was darker than Jerry had expected: he would almost have suspected Arab or Indian blood. He wore the same unsuitable hat of the photograph, a dark blue beret, and his ears stuck out from under it

like pastry roses. His very narrow eyes were stretched still finer by its pressure. Brown Italian shoes, white shirt, open neck. No props, not even binoculars: but a marvellous half-million-dollar smile, ear to ear, partly gold, that seemed to relish everyone's good fortune as well as his own.

Except there was a hint - some men have it, it is like a tension: headwaiters, doormen, journalists can spot it at a glance; old Sambo almost had it - there was a hint of resources instantly available. If things were needed, hidden people would bring them at the double.

The picture sprang to life. Over the loudspeaker the clerk of the course ordered the jockeys to mount. The giggly mafoo pulled off the rug, and Jerry to his pleasure noticed that Ko had had the bay's coat back-brushed to emphasise his supposedly poor condition. The thin jockey made the long, awkward journey to the saddle, and with

nervous friendliness called down to Ko on the other side of him. Ko, already moving away, swung round and snapped something back, one inaudible syllable, without looking where he spoke or who picked it up. A rebuke? An encouragement? An order to a servant? The smile had lost none of its exuberance, but the voice was hard as a whip crack. Horse and rider took their leave. Ko took his, Jerry raced back up the stairs, through the lunch room to the balcony, waded to the corner, and looked down.

By then, Ko was no longer alone, but married.

Whether they arrived together on the stand, whether she followed him at a moment's distance, Jerry was never sure. She was so small. He spotted a glitter of black silk and a movement round it as men deferred - the stand was filling up - but at first he looked too high and missed her. Her head was at the level of their chests. He

picked her up again at Ko's side, a tiny, immaculate Chinese wife, sovereign, elderly, pale, so groomed you could never imagine she had been any other age or worn any clothes but these Paris-tailored black silks, frogged and brocaded like a hussar's. Wife's a handful, Craw had said, extemporising as they sat bemused in front of the tiny projector. Pinches from the big stores. Ko's people have to get in ahead of her and promise to pay for whatever she nicks.

The article in Golden Orient referred to her as 'an early business partner'. Reading between the lines, Jerry guessed she'd been one of the girls at the Ritz Ballroom.

The crowd's roar had gathered throat.

'Did you do him, Westerby? Did you do him, man?' Scottish Clive Porton was bearing down on him, sweating heavily from drink. 'Open Space, for God's sake! Even at those odds you'll make a

dollar or two! Go on man, it's a cert!

The 'off' spared him a reply. The roar choked, lifted and swelled. All round him a pitter-patter of names and numbers fluttered in the stands, the horses sprang from their traps, drawn forward by the din. The lazy first furlong had begun. Wait: frenzy will follow the inertia. In the dawn light when they train, Jerry remembered, their hoofs are muffled in order to spare the residents their slumbers. Sometimes in the old days, drying out between war stories, Jerry would get up early and come down here just to watch them, and if he was lucky, and found an influential friend, go back with them to the airconditioned, multi-storey stables where they lived, to watch the grooming and the cosseting. Whereas by day the howl of traffic drowned their thunder entirely and the glittering cluster that advanced so slowly made no sound at all, but floated on the thin emerald river.

'Open Space all the way,' Clive Porton announced uncertainly, as he watched through his glasses. 'The favourite's done it. Splendid. Well done, Open Space, well done, lad.' They began the long turn before the final straight. 'Come on Open Space, stretch for it man, ride! Use your whip, you cretin!' Porton screamed, for by now it was clear even to the naked eye that the sky blue and sea-grey colours of Lucky Nelson were heading for the front, and that his competitors were courteously making way for him. A second horse put up a show of challenging, then flagged, but Open Space was already three lengths behind while his jockey worked furiously with his whip on the air around his mount's quarters.

'Objection!' Porton was shouting. 'Where's the stewards for God's sake? That horse was pulled! I never saw a horse so pulled in my life!'

As Lucky Nelson loped gracefully past the post,

Jerry quickly turned his gaze to the right again, and down. Ko appeared unmoved. It was not oriental inscrutability: Jerry had never subscribed to that myth. Certainly it was not indifference. It was merely that he was observing the satisfactory unfolding of a ceremony: Mr Drake Ko watches a march-past of his troops. His little mad wife stood poker-backed beside him as if, after all the struggles of her life, they were finally playing her anthem. For a second Jerry was reminded of old Pet in her prime. Just the way Pet looked, thought Jerry, when Sambo's pride came in a good eighteenth. Just the way she stood, and coped with failure.

The presentation was a moment for dreams.

While the scene lacked a cake-stall, the sunshine was certainly far beyond the expectation of the

most sanguine organiser of an English village fête; and the silver cups were a great deal more lavish than the scratched little beaker presented by the squire for excellence in the three-legged race. The sixty uniformed policemen were also perhaps a trifle ostentatious. But the gracious lady in a nineteen-thirties turban who presided over the long white table was as mawkish and arrogant as the most exacting patriot would have wished. She knew the form exactly. The Chairman of the Stewards handed her the cup and she quickly held it away from her as if it were too hot for her hands. Drake Ko and his wife, both grinning hugely, Ko still in his beret, emerged from a cluster of delighted supporters and grabbed the cup, but they tripped so fast and merrily back and forth across the roped-off patch of grass that the photographer was caught unprepared and had to ask the actors to re-stage the moment of consummation. This annoyed the gracious lady

quite a lot, and Jerry caught the words 'bloody bore' drawled out over the chatter of the onlookers. The cup was finally Ko's, the gracious lady took sullen delivery of six hundred dollars' worth of gardenias, East and West returned gratefully to their separate cantonments.

'Do him?' Captain Grant enquired amiably. They were sauntering back toward the stands.

'Well yes, actually,' Jerry confessed with a grin. 'Bit of a turn-up, wasn't it!'

'Oh, it was Drake's race, all right,' said Grant drily. They walked a little. 'Clever of you to spot it. More than we did. Do you want to talk to him?'

'Talk to who?'

'Ko. While he's flushed with victory. Perhaps you'll get something out of him for once,' said Grant with that fond smile. 'Come, I'll introduce you.'

Jerry did not falter. As a reporter he had every reason to say 'yes'. As a spy - well, sometimes they say at Sarratt that nothing is insecure but thinking makes it so. They sauntered back to the group. The Ko party had formed a rough circle round the cup and the laughter was very loud. At the centre, closest to Ko, stood the fat Filipino with his beautiful girl, and Ko was clowning with the girl, kissing her on both cheeks, then kissing her again, while everyone laughed except Ko's wife, who withdrew deliberately to the edge and began talking to a Chinese woman her own age.

'That's Arpego,' said Grant in Jerry's ear and indicated the fat Filipino. 'He owns Manila and most of the out-islands.'

Arpego's paunch sat forward over his belt like a rock stuffed inside his shirt.

Grant did not make straight for Ko, but singled

out a burly bland-faced Chinese of forty in an electric blue suit, who seemed to be some kind of aide. Jerry stood off, waiting. The plump Chinese came over to him, Grant at his side.

'This is Mr Tiu,' said Grant quietly. 'Mr Tiu, meet Mr Westerby, son of the famous one.'

'You wanna talk to Mr Ko, Mr Wessby?'

'If it's convenient.'

'Sure it's convenient,' said Tiu euphorically. His chubby hands floated restlessly in front of his stomach; He wore a gold watch on his right wrist. His fingers were curled, as if to scoop water. He was sleek and shiny and he could have been thirty or sixty. 'Mr Ko win a horse-race, everything's convenient. I bring him over. Stay here. What's your father's name?'

'Samuel,' said Jerry.

'Lord Samuel,' said Grant firmly, and inaccurately.

'Who is he?' Jerry asked aside, as plump Tiu returned to the noisy Chinese group.

'Ko's majordomo. Manager, chief bag carrier, bottle washer, fixer. Been with him since the start. They ran away from the Japanese together in the war.'

And his chief crusher too, Jerry thought, watching Tiu waddling back with his master.

Grant began again with the introductions.

'Sir,' he said, 'this is Westerby, whose famous father, the Lord, had a lot of very slow horses. He also bought several race-courses for the bookmakers.'

'What paper?' said Ko. His voice was harsh and powerful and deep, yet to Jerry's surprise he

could have sworn he caught a trace of an English North Country accent, reminiscent of old Pet's.

Jerry told him.

'That the paper with the girls!' Ko yelled gaily. 'I used to read that paper when I was in London, during my residence there for the purpose of legal study at the famous Gray's Inn of Court. Do you know why I read your paper, Mr Westerby? It is my sound opinion that the more papers which are printing pretty girls in preference to politics today, the more chance we get of a damn sight better world, Mr Westerby,' Ko declared, in a vigorous mixture of misused idiom and boardroom English. 'Kindly tell that to your paper from me, Mr Westerby. I give it to you as free advice.'

With a laugh, Jerry opened his notebook.

'I backed your horse, Mr Ko. How does it feel to

win?'

'Better than losing, I think.'

'Doesn't wear off?'

'I like it better every time.'

'Does the same go for business?'

'Naturally.'

'Can I speak to Mrs Ko?'

'She's busy.'

Jotting, Jerry was disconcerted by a familiar smell. It was of a musky, very pungent French soap, a blend of almonds and rosewater favoured by an early wife: but also, apparently, by the shiny Tiu for his greater allure. 'What's your formula for winning, Mr Ko?'

'Hard work. No politics. Plenty sleep.'

'Are you a lot richer than you were ten minutes ago?'

'I was pretty rich ten minutes ago. You may tell your paper also I am a great admirer of the British way of life.'

'Even though we don't work hard? And make a lot of politics?'

'Just tell them,' Ko said, straight at him, and that was an order.

'What makes you so lucky, Mr Ko?'

Ko appeared not to hear this question, except that his smile slowly vanished. He was staring straight at Jerry, measuring him through his very narrow eyes, and his face had hardened remarkably.

'What makes you so lucky, sir?' Jerry repeated.

There was a long silence.

'No comment,' Ko said, still into Jerry's face.

The temptation to press the question had become irresistible. 'Play fair, Mr Ko,' Jerry urged, grinning largely. 'The world's full of people who dream of being as rich as you are. Give them a clue, won't you? What makes you so lucky?'

'Mind your own damn business,' Ko told him, and without the smallest ceremony turned his back on him and walked away. At the same moment, Tiu took a leisurely half pace forward, arresting Jerry's line of advance, with one soft hand on his upper arm.

'You going to win next time round, Mr Ko?' Jerry called over Tiu's shoulder at his departing back.

'You better ask the horse, Mr Wessby,' Tiu suggested with a chubby smile, hand still on Jerry's arm.

He might as well have done so, for Ko had

already rejoined his friend Mr Arpego, the Filipino, and they were laughing and talking just as before. Drake Ko was very tough boy, Jerry remembered. You don't tell no fairy story to Drake Ko. Tiu doesn't do so badly either, he thought.

As they walked back toward the grandstand, Grant was laughing quietly to himself.

'Last time Ko won he wouldn't even lead the horse into the paddock after the race,' he recalled. 'Waved it away. Didn't want it.'

'Why the hell not?'

'Hadn't expected it to win, that's why. Hadn't told his Chiu Chow friends. Bad face. Maybe he felt the same when you asked him about his luck.'

'How did he get to be a Steward?'

'Oh, had Tiu buy the votes for him, no doubt. The

usual thing. Cheers. Don't forget your winnings.'

Then it happened: Ace Westerby's unforeseen scoop. The last race was over, Jerry was four thousand dollars to the good and Luke had disappeared. Jerry tried the American Club, Club Lusitano and a couple of others, but either they hadn't seen him or they'd thrown him out. From the enclosure there was only one gate, so Jerry joined the march. The traffic was chaotic. Rolls-Royces and Mercedes vied for kerb space and the crowds were shoving from behind. Deciding not to join the fight for taxis, Jerry started along the narrow pavement and saw to his surprise Drake Ko, alone, emerging from a gateway across the road, and for the first time since Jerry had set eyes on him he was not smiling. Reaching the roadside, he seemed undecided whether to cross, then settled for where he was, gazing at the oncoming traffic. He's waiting for the Rolls-Royce Phantom, thought Jerry, remembering the fleet in

the garage at Headland Road. Or the Merc, or the Chrysler. Suddenly Jerry saw him whip off the beret and clowning, hold it into the road, as if to draw rifle fire. The wrinkles flew up around his eyes and jaw, his gold teeth glittered in welcome and instead of a Rolls-Royce, or a Merc, or a Chrysler, a long red Jaguar E-type with a soft top folded back screeched to a stop beside him, oblivious of the other cars. Jerry couldn't have missed it if he'd wanted to. The noise of the tyres alone turned every head along the pavement. His eye read the number, his mind recorded it. Ko climbed aboard with all the excitement of someone who might never have ridden in an open car before, and he was already talking and laughing before they pulled away. But not before Jerry had seen the driver, her fluttering blue headscarf, dark glasses, long blonde hair, and enough of her body, as she leaned across Drake to lock his door, to know that she was a hell of a lot

of woman. Drake's hand was resting on her bare back, fingers splayed, his spare hand was waving about while he no doubt gave her a blow-by-blow account of his victory, and as they set off together he planted a very un-Chinese kiss on her cheek, and then, for good measure, two more: but all, somehow, with a great deal more sincerity than he had brought to the business of kissing Mr Arpego's escort.

On the other side of the road stood the gateway Ko had just come out of, and the iron gate was still open. His mind spinning, Jerry dodged the traffic and walked through. He was in the old Colonial Cemetery, a lush place, scented with flowers and shaded by heavy overhanging trees. Jerry had never been here and he was shocked to enter such seclusion. It was built up an opposing slope round an old chapel that was gently falling into disuse. Its cracking walls glinted in the speckled evening light. Beside it, from a

chickenwire kennel, an emaciated Alsatian dog howled at him in fury.

Jerry peered round, not knowing why he was here or what he was looking for. The graves were of all ages and races and sects. There were White Russian graves and their orthodox headstones were dark and scrolled with Czarist grandeur. Jerry imagined heavy snow on them and their shape still coming through. Another stone described a restless sojourn of a Russian princess and Jerry paused to read it: Tallin to Peking, with dates, Peking to Shanghai, dates again, to Hong Kong in forty-nine, to die. 'And estates in Sverdlovsk', the inscription ended defiantly. Was Shanghai the connection?

He rejoined the living: three old men in blue pyjama suits sat on a shaded bench, not talking. They had hung their cage-birds in the branches overhead, close enough to hear one another's song

above the noise of traffic and cicadas. Two gravediggers in steel helmets were filling a new grave. No mourners watched. Still not knowing what he wanted, he reached the chapel steps. He peered through the door. Inside was pitch dark after the sunlight. An old woman glared at him. He drew back. The Alsatian dog howled at him still louder. It was very young. A sign said 'Verger' and he followed it. The shriek of the cicadas was deafening, even drowning the dog's barking. The scent of flowers was steamy and a little rotten. An idea had struck him, almost an intimation. He was determined to pursue it.

The verger was a kindly distant man and spoke no English. The ledgers were very old, the entries resembled ancient bank accounts. Jerry sat at a desk slowly turning the heavy pages, reading the names, the dates of birth, death, and burial; lastly the map reference: the zone, and the number. Having found what he was looking for, he

stepped into the air again, and made his way along a different path, through a cloud of butterflies, up the hill toward the cliff-side. A bunch of schoolgirls watched him from a footbridge, giggling. He took off his jacket and trailed it over his shoulder. He passed between high shrubs and entered a slanted coppice of yellow grass where the headstones were very small, the mounds only a foot or two long. Jerry sidled past them, reading the numbers, till he found himself in front of a low iron gate marked seven two eight. The gate was part of a rectangular perimeter, and as Jerry lifted his eyes he found himself looking at the statue of a small boy in Victorian knickerbockers and an Eton jacket, life size, with tousled stone curls and rosebud stone lips, reading or singing from an open stone book while real butterflies dived giddily round his head. He was an entirely English child, and the inscription read Nelson Ko

in loving memory. A lot of dates followed, and it took Jerry a second to understand their meaning: ten successive years with none left out and the last 1968. Then he realised they were the ten years the boy had lived, each one to be relished. On the bottom step of the plinth lay a large bunch of orchids, still in their paper.

Ko was thanking Nelson for his win. Now at least Jerry understood why he did not care to be invaded with questions about his luck.

There is a kind of fatigue, sometimes, which only field men know: a temptation to gentleness which can be the kiss of death. Jerry lingered a moment longer, staring at the orchids and the stone boy, and setting them, in his mind, beside everything he had seen and learned of Ko till now. And he had an overwhelming feeling - only for a moment, but dangerous at any time - of completeness, as if he had met a family, only to

discover it was his own. He had a feeling of arrival.

Here was a man, housed this way, married that way, striving and playing in ways Jerry effortlessly understood. A man of no particular persuasion, yet Jerry saw him in that moment more clearly than he had ever seen himself. A Chiu Chow poor-boy who becomes a Jockey Club Steward with an OBE, and hoses down his horse before a race. A Hakka water-gypsy who gives his child a Baptist burial and an English effigy. A capitalist who hates politics. A failed lawyer, a gangboss, a builder of hospitals who runs an opium airline, a supporter of spirit temples who plays croquet and rides about in a Rolls-Royce. An American bar in his Chinese garden, and Russian gold in his trust account. Such complex and conflicting insights did not, at that moment, alarm Jerry in the least; they presaged no foreboding or paradox. Rather, he

saw them welded by Ko's own harsh endeavour into a single but many-sided man not too unlike old Sambo. Stronger still - for the few seconds that it lasted - he had an irresistible feeling of being in good company, a thing he had always liked. He returned to the gate in a mood of calm munificence, as if he, not Ko, had won the race. It was not till he reached the road that reality returned him to his senses. The traffic had cleared and he found a taxi straight away. They had driven a hundred yards when he saw Luke performing lonely pirouettes along the kerb. Jerry coaxed him aboard and dumped him outside the Foreign Correspondents' Club. From the Furama Hotel he rang Craw's home number, let it ring twice, rang it again and heard Craw's voice demanding 'Who the bloody hell is that?' He asked for a Mr Savage, received a foul rebuke and the information that he was ringing the wrong number, allowed Craw half an hour to get to

another phone, then walked over to the Hilton to field the return call.

Our friend had surfaced in person, Jerry told him. Been put on public view on account of a big win. When it was over a very nice blonde party gave him a lift in her sports car. Jerry recited the licence number. They were definitely friends, he said. Very demonstrative and un-Chinese. At least friends, he would say.

'Roundeye?'

'Of course she was bloody well roundeye! Who the hell ever heard of a -'

'Jesus,' said Craw softly, and rang off before Jerry even had a chance to tell him about little Nelson's shrine.

Chapter 8 - The Barons Confer

The waiting room of the pretty Foreign Office conference house in Carlton Gardens was slowly filling up. People in twos and threes, ignoring each other, like mourners for a funeral. A printed notice hung on the wall saying 'Warning, no confidential matter to be discussed'. Smiley and Guillam perched disconsolately beneath it, on a bench of salmon velvet. The room was oval, the style Ministry of Works rococo. Across the painted ceiling, Bacchus pursued nymphs who were a lot more willing to be caught than Molly Meakin. Empty firebuckets stood against the wall and two government messengers guarded the door to the interior. Outside the curved sash windows, autumn sunlight filled the park, making each leaf crisp against the next. Saul Enderby strode in, leading the Foreign Office contingent.

Guillam knew him only by name. He was a former Ambassador to Indonesia, now chief pundit on South East Asian affairs, and said to be a great supporter of the American hard line. In tow, one obedient Parliamentary Under-Secretary, a trade union appointment, and one flowery, overdressed figure who advanced on Smiley on tiptoe, hands held horizontal, as if he had caught him napping.

'Can it be?' he whispered exuberantly. 'Is it? It is! George Smiley, all in your feathers. My dear, you've lost simply pounds. Who's your nice boy? Don't tell me. Peter Guillam. I've heard all about him. Quite unspoilt by failure, I'm told.'

'Oh no!' Smiley cried involuntarily. 'Oh Lord. Roddy.'

'What do you mean? Oh no. Oh Lord, Roddy, ' Martindale demanded, wholly undeterred in the same vibrant murmur. ' Oh yes is what you mean!

Yes, Roddy. Divine to see you, Roddy! Listen. Before the riff-raff come. How is the exquisite Ann? For my very own ears. Can I make a dinner for the two of you? You shall choose the guests. How's that? And yes I am on the list, if that's what's going through your rat-like little mind, young Peter Guillam, I've been translated, I'm a goodie, our new masters adore me. So they should, the fuss I've made of them.'

The interior doors opened with a bang. One of the messengers shouted 'Gentlemen!' and those who knew the form stood back to let the women file ahead. There were two. The men followed and Guillam brought up the tail. For a few yards it might have been the Circus: a makeshift bottleneck at which each face was checked by janitors, then a makeshift corridor leading to what resembled a builders' cabin parked at the centre of a gutted stairwell: except that it had no windows and was suspended from wires and held tight by

guy-ropes. Guillam had lost sight of Smiley entirely, and as he climbed the hardboard steps and entered the safe room he saw only shadows hovering under a blue nightlight.

'Do do something, somebody,' Enderby growled in the tones of a bored diner complaining about the service. 'Lights, for God's sake. Bloody little men.'

The door slammed behind Guillam's back, a key turned in the lock, an electronic hum did the scale and whined out of earshot, three striplights stammered to life, drenching everyone in their sickly pallor.

'Hoorah,' said Enderby, and sat down. Later, Guillam wondered how he had been so sure it was Enderby calling in the darkness, but there are voices you can hear before they speak.

The conference table was covered in a ripped

green baize like a billiards table in a youth club. The Foreign Office sat one end, the Colonial Office at the other. The separation was visceral rather than legal. For six years the two departments had been formally married under the grandiose awnings of the Diplomatic Service, but no one in his right mind took the union seriously. Guillam and Smiley sat at the centre, shoulder to shoulder, each with empty chairs to the other side of him. Examining the cast, Guillam was absurdly aware of costume. The Foreign Office had come sharply dressed in charcoal suits and the secret plumage of privilege: both Enderby and Martindale wore Old Etonian ties. The Colonialists had the homeweave look of country people come to town, and the best they could offer in the way of ties was one Royal Artilleryman: honest Wilbraham, their leader, a fit lean school-masterly figure with crimson veins on his weatherbeaten cheeks. A tranquil woman

in church-organ brown supported him, and to the other side a freshly-minted boy with freckles and a shock of ginger hair. The rest of the committee sat across from Smiley and Guillam, and had the air of seconds in a duel they disapproved of and they had come in twos for protection: dark Pretorius of the Security Service with one nameless woman bag-carrier; two pale warriors from Defence; two Treasury bankers, one of them Welsh Hammer. Oliver Lacon was alone and had set himself apart from everyone, for all the world the person least engaged. Before each pair of hands lay Smiley's submission in a pink and red folder marked 'Top Secret Withhold', like a souvenir programme. The 'withhold' meant keep it away from the Cousins. Smiley had drafted it, the mothers had typed it, Guillam himself had watched the eighteen pages come off the duplicators and supervised the hand-stitching of the twenty-four copies. Now their handiwork lay

tossed around this large table, among the water glasses and the ashtrays. Lifting a copy six inches above the table, Enderby let it fall with a slap.

'All read it?' he asked. All had.

'Then let's go,' said Enderby and peered round the table with bloodshot, arrogant eyes. 'Who'll start the bowling? Oliver? You got us here. You shoot first.'

It crossed Guillam's mind that Martindale, the great scourge of the Circus and its works, was curiously subdued. His eyes were turned dutifully to Enderby, and his mouth sagged unhappily.

Lacon meanwhile was setting out his defences.

'Let me say first that I'm as much taken by surprise in this as anyone else,' he said. 'This is a real body-blow, George. It would have been helpful to have had a little preparation. It's a little uncomfortable for me, I have to tell you, to be the

link to a service which has rather cut its links of late.'

Wilbraham said 'hear, hear'. Smiley preserved a Mandarin silence. Pretorius of the competition frowned in agreement.

'It also comes at an awkward time,' Lacon added portentously. 'I mean the thesis, your thesis alone, is - well, momentous. A lot to swallow. A lot to face up to, George.'

Having thus secured his back way out, Lacon made a show of pretending there might not be a bomb under the bed at all.

'Let me try to summarise the summary. May I do that? In bald terms, George. A prominent Hong Kong Chinese citizen is under suspicion of being a Russian spy. That's the nub?'

'He is known to receive very large Russian subventions,' Smiley corrected him, but talking to

his hands.

'From a secret fund devoted to financing penetration agents?'

'Yes.'

'Solely for financing them? Or does this fund have other uses?'

'To the best of our knowledge it has no other use at all,' said Smiley in the same lapidary tone as before.

'Such as - propaganda - the informal promotion of trade - kickbacks, that kind of thing? No?'

'To the best of our knowledge: no,' Smiley repeated.

'Ah, but how good's their knowledge?'

Wilbraham called from below the salt. 'Hasn't been too good in the past, has it?'

'You see what I'm getting at?' Lacon asked.

'We would want far more corroboration,' the Colonial lady in church brown said with a heartening smile.

'So would we,' Smiley agreed mildly. One or two heads lifted in surprise. 'It is in order to obtain corroboration that we are asking for rights and permissions.'

Lacon resumed the initiative.

'Accept your thesis for a moment. A secret intelligence fund, all much as you say.'

Smiley gave a remote nod.

'Is there any suggestion that he subverts the Colony?'

'No.'

Lacon glanced at his notes. It occurred to Guillam

that he had done a lot of homework.

'He is not, for example, preaching the withdrawal of their sterling reserves from London? Which would put us a further nine hundred million pounds in the red?'

'To my knowledge: no.'

'He is not telling us to get off the Island. He is not whipping up riots or urging amalgamation with the Mainland, or waving the wretched treaty in our faces?'

'Not that we know.'

'He's not a leveller. He's not demanding effective trade unions, or a free vote, or a minimum wage, or compulsory education, or racial equality, or a separate parliament for the Chinese instead of their tame assemblies, whatever they're called?'

'Legco and Exco,' Wilbraham snapped. 'And

they're not tame.'

'No, he isn't, said Smiley.

'Then what is he doing?' Wilbraham interrupted excitedly. 'Nothing. That's the answer. They've got it all wrong. It's a goose-chase.'

'For what it's worth,' Lacon proceeded, as if he hadn't heard, 'he probably does as much to enrich the Colony as any other wealthy and respected Chinese businessman. Or as little. He dines with the Governor, but he is not known to rifle the contents of his safe, I assume. In fact, to all outward purposes, he is something of a Hong Kong prototype: Steward of the Jockey Club, supports the charities, pillar of the integrated society, successful, benevolent, has the wealth of Croesus and the commercial morality of the whorehouse.'

'I say, that's a bit hard!' Wilbraham objected.

'Steady on, Oliver. Remember the new housing estates.'

Again Lacon ignored him:

'Short of the Victoria Cross, a war disability pension and a baronetcy, therefore, it is hard to see how he could be a less suitable subject for harassment by a British service, or recruitment by a Russian one.'

'In my world we call that good cover,' said Smiley.

'Touché, Oliver,' said Enderby with satisfaction.

'Oh everything's cover these days,' said Wilbraham mournfully, but it didn't get Lacon off the hook.

Round one to Smiley, thought Guillam in delight, recalling the dreadful Ascot dinner: Hitty-pitty within the wall, and bumps goes Pottifer, he

chanted inwardly, with due acknowledgment to his hostess.

'Hammer?' said Enderby, and the Treasury had a brief fling in which Smiley was hauled over the coals for his financial accounts, but no one except the Treasury seemed to find Smiley's transgression relevant.

'This is not the purpose for which you were granted a secret float,' Hammer kept insisting in Welsh outrage. 'That was post mortem funds only -'

'Fine, fine, so Georgie's been a naughty boy,' Enderby interrupted in the end, closing him down. 'Has he thrown his money down the drain or has he made a cheap killing? That's the question. Chris, time the Empire had its shout.'

Thus bidden, Colonial Wilbraham formally took the floor, backed by his lady in church brown and his red-haired assistant, whose young face was already set bravely in protection of his headmaster.

Wilbraham was one of those men who are unconscious of how much time they take to think. 'Yes,' he began after an age. 'Yes. Yes, well I'd like to stay with the money, if I may, much as Lacon did, to begin with.' It was already clear that he regarded the submission as an assault upon his territory. 'Since the money is all we've got to go on,' he remarked pointedly; turning back a page in his folder. 'Yes.' And there followed another interminable hiatus. 'You say here the money first of all came from Paris through Vientiane.' Pause. 'Then the Russians switched systems, so to speak, and it was paid through a different channel altogether. A Hamburg-Vienna-Hong Kong tie-up. Endless complexities, subterfuges, all that -

we'll take your word for it - right? Same amount, different hat, so to speak. Right. Now why d'you think they did that, so to speak?

So to speak, recorded Guillam, who was very susceptible to verbal tics.

'It is sensible practice to vary the routine from time to time,' Smiley replied, repeating the explanation he had already offered in the submission.

'Tradecraft, Chris,' Enderby put in, who liked his bit of jargon, and Martindale, still piano, shot him a glance of admiration.

Again Wilbraham slowly wound himself up.

'We've got to be guided by what Ko does,' Wilbraham declared, with puzzled fervour, and rattled his knuckles on the baize table. 'Not by what he gets. That's my argument. After all, I mean dash it, it's not Ko's own money is it?'

Legally it's nothing to do with him.' The point caused a moment's puzzled silence. 'Page two, top. Money's all in trust.' A general shuffle as everyone but Smiley and Guillam reached for their folders. 'I mean, not only is none of it being spent, which in itself is jolly odd - I'll come to that in a bit - it's not Ko's money. It's in trust, and when the claimant comes along, whoever he or she is, it will be the claimant's money. Till then it's the trust's money. So to speak. So, I mean, what's Ko done wrong? Opened a trust? No law against that. Done every day. Specially in Hong Kong. The beneficiary of the trust - oh, well, he could be anywhere! In Moscow, or Timbuctoo or... ' He didn't seem to be able to think of a third place, so he dried up, to the discomfort of his ginger-headed assistant, who scowled straight at Guillam as if to challenge him. 'Point is: what's against Ko?'

Enderby was holding a matchstick to his mouth,

and rolling it between his front teeth. Conscious, perhaps, that his adversary had made a good point badly - whereas his own speciality tended to be the reverse - he took it out and contemplated the wet end.

'Hell's all this balls about thumbprints, George?' he asked, perhaps in an effort to deflate Wilbraham's success. 'Like something out of Phillips Oppenheim.'

Belgravia Cockney, thought Guillam: the last stage of linguistic collapse.

Smiley's answers contained about as much emotion as a speaking clock.

'The use of thumbprints is old banking practice along the China coast. It dates from the days of widespread illiteracy. Many overseas Chinese prefer to use British banks rather than their own, and the structure of this account is by no means

extraordinary. The beneficiary is not named, but identifies himself by a visual means, such as the torn half of a banknote, or in this case his left thumbprint on the assumption that it is less worn by labour than the right. The bank is unlikely to raise an eyebrow provided that whoever founded the trust has indemnified the trustees against charges of accidental or wrongful payment.'

'Thank you,' said Enderby, and did more delving with the matchstick. 'Could be Ko's own thumbprint I suppose,' he suggested. 'Nothing to stop him doing that, is there? Then it would be his money all right. If he's trustee and beneficiary all at once, of course it's his own damn money.' To Guillam, the issue had already taken a quite ludicrous wrong turning.

'That's pure supposition,' Wilbraham said after the usual two-minute silence; 'Suppose Ko's doing a favour for a chum. Just suppose that for a

moment. And this chum's on a fiddle, so to speak, or doing business with the Russians at several removes. Your Chinese loves a conspiracy. Get up to all the tricks, even the nicest of 'em. Ko's no different, I'll be bound.'

Speaking for the first time, the red-haired boy ventured direct support.

'The submission rests on a fallacy,' he declared bluntly, speaking at this stage more to Guillam than to Smiley. Sixth-form puritan, thought Guillam: thinks sex weakens you and spying is immoral. 'You say Ko is on the Russian payroll. We say that's not demonstrated. We say the trust may contain Russian money, but that Ko and the trust are separate entities.' In his indignation he went on too long. 'You're talking about guilt. Whereas we say Ko's done nothing wrong under Hong Kong law and should enjoy the due rights of a Colonial subject.'

Several voices pounced at once. Lacon's won. 'No one is talking about guilt,' he retorted. 'Guilt doesn't enter into it in the least degree. We're talking about security. Solely. Security, and the desirability or otherwise of investigating an apparent threat.'

Welsh Hammer's Treasury colleague was a bleak Scot, as it turned out, with a style as bald as the sixth-former's. 'Nobody's sizing up to infringe Ko's Colonial rights either,' he snapped. 'He hasn't any. There's nothing in Hong Kong law whatever which says the Governor cannot steam open Mr Ko's mail, tap Mr Ko's telephone, suborn his maid or bug his house to kingdom come. Nothing whatever. There are a few other things the Governor can do too, if he feels like it.'

'Also speculative,' said Enderby, with a glance to Smiley. 'Circus has no local facilities for those high-jinks and anyway in the circumstances

they'd be insecure.'

'They would be scandalous,' said the red-haired boy unwisely, and Enderby's gourmet eye, yellowed by a lifetime's luncheons, lifted to him, and marked him down for future treatment.

So that was the second, inconclusive skirmish. They hacked about in this way till coffee break, no victor and no corpses; Round two a draw, Guillam decided. He wondered despondently how many rounds there would be.

'What's it all about?' he asked Smiley under the buzz. 'They won't make it go away by talking.'

'They have to reduce it to their own size,' Smiley explained uncritically. Beyond that, he seemed bent on oriental self-effacement, and no prodding from Guillam was going to shake him out of it. Enderby demanded fresh ashtrays. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary said they should

try to make progress.

'Think what it's costing the taxpayer, just having us sit here,' he urged proudly. Lunch was still two hours away.

Opening round three, Enderby moved the ticklish issue of whether to advise the Hong Kong Government of the intelligence regarding Ko. This was impish of him, in Guillam's view, since the position of the shadow Colonial Office (as Enderby referred to his homespun confrères) was still that there was no crisis, and consequently nothing for anyone to be advised of. But honest Wilbraham, failing to see the trap, walked into it and said:

'Of course we should advise Hong Kong! They're self-administering. We've no alternative.'

'Oliver?' said Enderby with the calm of a man who holds good cards. Lacon glanced up, clearly irritated at being drawn into the open. 'Oliver?' Enderby repeated. 'I'm tempted to reply that it's Smiley's case and Wilbraham's Colony and we should let them fight it out,' he said, remaining firmly on the fence.

Which left Smiley: 'Oh well, if it were the Governor and nobody else I could hardly object,' he said. 'That is, if you feel it's not too much for him,' he added dubiously, and Guillam saw the red-head stoke himself up again.

'Why the dickens should it be too much for the Governor?' Colonial Wilbraham demanded, genuinely perplexed. 'Experienced administrator, shrewd negotiator. Find his way through anything. Why's it too much?'

This time, it was Smiley who made the pause. 'He would have to encode and decode his own

telegrams of course,' he mused, as if he were even now working his way obliviously through all the implications. 'We couldn't have him cutting his staff in on the secret, naturally. That's asking too much of anyone. Personal code books - well we can fix him up with those, no doubt. Brush up his coding if he needs it. There is also the problem, I suppose, of the Governor being forced into the position of agent provocateur if he continues to receive Ko socially - which he obviously must. We can't frighten the game at this stage. Would he mind that? Perhaps not. Some people take to it quite naturally.' He glanced at Enderby.

Wilbraham was already expostulating. 'But good heavens, man - if Ko's a Russian spy, which we say he isn't anyway - if the Governor has him to dinner, and perfectly naturally, in confidence, commits some minor indiscretion - well, it's damned unfair. It could ruin the man's career. Let alone what it could do to the Colony! He must be

told!'

Smiley looked sleepier than ever.

'Well of course if he's given to being indiscreet,' he murmured meekly, 'I suppose one might argue that he's not a suitable person to be informed anyway.'

In the icy silence Enderby once more languidly took the matchstick from his mouth.

'Bloody odd it would be, wouldn't it, Chris,' he called cheerfully down the table to Wilbraham, 'if Peking woke up one morning to the glad news that the Governor of Hong Kong. Queen's representative and what have you, head of the troops and so forth, made a point of entertaining Moscow's ace spy at his dinner table once a month. And gave him a medal for his trouble. What's he got so far? Not a K is it?'

'An OBE,' said somebody sotto voce.

'Poor chap. Still, he's on his way, I suppose, He'll work his way up, same as we all do.'

Enderby, as it happened, had his knighthood already, whereas Wilbraham was stuck in the bulge, owing to the growing shortage of colonies.

'There is no case,' said Wilbraham stoutly, and laid a hairy hand flat over the lurid folder before him.

A free-for-all followed, to Guillam's ear an intermezzo, in which by tacit understanding the minor parts were allowed to chime in with irrelevant questions in order to get themselves a mention in the minutes. The Welsh Hammer wished to establish here and now what would happen to Moscow Centre's half million dollars of reptile money if by any chance they fell into

British hands. There could be no question of their simply being recycled through the Circus, he warned. Treasury would have sole rights. Was that clear?

It was clear, Smiley said.

Guillam began to discern a gulf. There were those who assumed, even if reluctantly, that the investigation was a fait accompli; and those who continued to fight a rearguard action against its taking place. Hammer, he noticed to his surprise, seemed reconciled to an investigation.

A string of questions on 'legal' and 'illegal' residencies, though wearisome, served to entrench the fear of a red peril. Luff, the parliamentarian, wanted the difference spelt out to him. Smiley patiently obliged. A 'legal' or 'above-the-line' resident, he said, was an intelligence officer living under official or semi-official protection. Since the Hong Kong

Government, out of deference to Peking's sensitivities about Russia, had seen fit to banish all forms of Soviet representation from the Colony- embassy, consular, Tass, Radio Moscow, Novosti, Aeroflot, Intourist and the other flags of convenience which legals traditionally sailed under... then by definition it followed that any Soviet activity on the Colony had to be carried out by an illegal or below-the-line apparatus.

It was this presumption which had directed the efforts of the Circus's researchers toward discovering the replacement money-route, he said, avoiding the jargon 'goldseam'.

'Ah well, then, we've forced the Russians into it,' said Luff with satisfaction. 'We've only ourselves to thank. We victimise the Russians, they bite back. Well, who's surprised by that? It's the last government's hash we're settling. Not ours at all. Go in for Russian-baiting, you get what you

deserve, Natural. We're just reaping the whirlwind as usual.'

'What have the Russians got up to in Hong Kong before this?' asked a clever backroom-boy from the Home Office.

The Colonialists at once sprang to life. Wilbraham began feverishly leafing through a folder, but seeing his red-headed assistant straining at the leash he muttered: 'You'll do that one then, John, will you? Good,' and sat back looking ferocious. The brown-clad lady smiled wistfully at the torn baize cloth, as if she remembered it when it was whole. The sixth-former made his second disastrous sally:

'We consider the precedents here very enlightening indeed,' he began aggressively. 'Moscow Centre's previous attempts to gain a toehold on the Colony have been one and all, without exception, abortive and completely low

grade.' He reeled off a bunch of boring instances.

Five years ago, he said, a bogus Russian Orthodox archimandrite flew in from Paris in an effort to make links with remnants of the White Russian community:

'This gentleman tried to press-gang an elderly restaurateur into Moscow Centre's service and was promptly arrested. More recently, we have had cases of ship's crew coming ashore from Russian freighters which have put in to Hong Kong for repair. They have made ham-fisted attempts to suborn longshoremen and dock workers whom they consider to be leftist oriented. They have been arrested, questioned, made complete fools of by the press, and duly confined to their ship for the rest of its stay.' He gave other equally milk-and-water examples and everyone grew sleepy, waiting for the last lap: 'Our policy has been exactly the same each time.

As soon as they're caught, right away, culprits are put on public show. Press photographs? As many as you like, gentlemen. Television? Set up your cameras; Result? Peking hands us a nice pat on the back for containing Soviet imperialist expansionism.' Thoroughly over-excited, he found the nerve to address himself directly to Smiley. 'So you see, as to your networks of illegals, to be frank, we discount them. Legal, illegal, above-the-line, below it: our view is, the Circus is doing a bit of special pleading in order to get its nose back under the wire!'

Opening his mouth to deliver a suitable rebuke, Guillam felt a restraining touch on his elbow and closed it again. There was a long silence, in which Wilbraham looked more embarrassed than anybody.

'Sounds more like smoke to me, Chris,' said Enderby drily.

'What's he driving at?' Wilbraham demanded nervously.

'Just answering the point your bully-boy made for you, Chris. Smoke. Deception. Russians are waving their sabres where you can watch 'em, and while your heads are all turned the wrong way, they get on with the dirty work t'other side of the Island. To wit, Brother Ko. Right, George?'

'Well, that is our view, yes,' Smiley conceded. 'And I suppose I should remind you - it's in the submission actually - that Haydon himself was always very keen to argue that the Russians had nothing going in Hong Kong.'

'Lunch,' Martindale announced without much optimism. They ate it upstairs, glumly, off plastic catering trays delivered by van. The partitions were too low, and Guillam's custard flowed into his meat.

Thus refreshed, Smiley availed himself of the after-luncheon torpor to raise what Lacon had called the panic factor. More accurately he sought to entrench in the meeting a sense of logic behind a Soviet presence in Hong Kong, even if, as he put it, Ko did not supply the example:

How Hong Kong, as Mainland China's largest port, handled forty per cent of her foreign trade.

How an estimated one out of every five Hong Kong residents travelled legally in and out of China every year: though many-time travellers doubtless raised the average. How Red China maintained, in Hong Kong, sub rosa, but with the full connivance of the authorities, teams of first-class negotiators, economists and technicians to watch over Peking's interest in trade, shipping and development; and how every man jack of

them constituted a natural intelligence target for 'enticement, or other forms of secret persuasion', as he put it.

How Hong Kong's fishing and junk fleets enjoyed dual registration in Hong Kong and along the China coast, and passed freely in and out of China waters -

Interrupting, Enderby drawled a supporting question: 'And Ko owns a junk fleet. Didn't you say he's one of the last of the brave?'

'Yes, yes he does.'

'But he doesn't visit the Mainland himself?'

'No, never. His assistant goes, but not Ko, we gather.'

'Assistant?'

'He has a manager body named Tiu. They've been together for twenty years. Longer. They share the

same background, Hakka, Shanghai and so forth. Tiu's his front man on several companies.'

'And Tiu goes to the Mainland regularly?'

'Once a year at least.'

'All over?'

'Canton, Peking, Shanghai are on record. But the record is not necessarily complete.'

'But Ko stays home. Queer.'

There being no further questions or comments on that score, Smiley resumed his Cook's tour of the charms of Hong Kong as a spy base. Hong Kong was unique, he stated simply. Nowhere on earth offered a tenth of the facilities for getting a toehold on China.

'Facilities!' Wilbraham echoed. 'Temptations more like.'

Smiley shrugged. 'If you like, temptations,' he agreed. 'The Soviet service is not famous for resisting them.' And amid some knowing laughter, he went on to recount what was known of Centre's attempts till now against the China target as a whole: a joint précis by Connie and di Salis. He described Centre's efforts to attack from the north, by means of the wholesale recruitment and infiltration of her own ethnic Chinese.

Abortive, he said. He described a huge network of listening posts all along the four-and-a-half-thousand-mile Sino-Soviet land border: unproductive, he said, since the yield was military whereas the threat was political. He recounted the rumours of Soviet approaches to Taiwan, proposing common cause against the China threat through joint operations and profit-sharing: rejected; he said, and probably designed for mischief, to annoy Peking, rather than to be taken at face value. He gave instances of the

Russian use of talent-spothers among overseas Chinese communities in London, Amsterdam, Vancouver, and San Francisco; and touched on Centre's veiled proposals to the Cousins some years ago for the establishment of an 'intelligence pool' available to China's common enemies. Fruitless, he said. The Cousins wouldn't play. Lastly he referred to Centre's long history of savage burning and bribery operations against Peking officials in overseas posts: product indeterminate, he said.

When he had done all this, he sat back, and restated the thesis which was causing all the trouble.

'Sooner or later,' he repeated, 'Moscow Centre has to come to Hong Kong.'

Which brought them to Ko once more, and to

Roddy Martindale, who, under Enderby's eagle eye, made the next real passage of arms.

'Well what do you think the money's for, George? I mean we've heard all the things it isn't for, and we've heard it's not being spent. But we're no fowarder, are we, bless us? We don't seem to know anything. It's the same old question: how's the money being earned, how's it being spent, what should we do?'

'That's three questions,' said Enderby cruelly under his breath.

'It is because we don't know,' said Smiley woodenly, 'that we are asking permission to find out.'

Someone from the Treasury benches said: 'Is half a million a lot?'

'In my experience unprecedented,' said Smiley.

'Moscow Centre' - dutifully he avoided Karla - 'detests having to buy loyalty at any time. For them to buy it on this scale is unheard of.'

'But whose loyalty are they buying?' someone complained.

Martindale the gladiator, back to the charge: 'You're selling us short, George. I know you are. You have an inkling, of course you have. Now cut us in on it. Don't be so coy.'

'Yes, can't you kick a few ideas around for us?' said Lacon, equally plaintively.

'Surely you can go down the line a little,' Hammer pleaded.

Even under this three-pronged attack Smiley still did not waver. The panic factor was finally paying off. Smiley himself had triggered it. Like scared patients they were appealing to him for a diagnosis. And Smiley was declining to provide

one, on the grounds that he lacked the data.

'Really, I cannot do more than give you the facts as they stand. For me to speculate aloud at this stage would not be useful.'

For the first time since the meeting had begun, the Colonial lady in brown opened her mouth and asked a question. Her voice was melodious and intelligent.

'On the matter of precedents, then, Mr Smiley?' - Smiley ducked his head in a quaint little bow - 'Are there precedents for secret Russian moneys being paid to a stake-holder? In other theatres, for instance?'

Smiley did not immediately answer. Seated only a few inches from him, Guillam swore he sensed a sudden tension, like a surge of energy, passing through his neighbour. But when he glanced at the impassive profile, he saw only a deepening somnolence in his master, and a slight lowering

of the weary eyelids.

'There have been a few cases of what we call alimony,' he conceded finally.

'Alimony, Mr Smiley?' the Colonial lady echoed, while her red-haired companion scowled more terribly, as if divorce were something else he disapproved of.

Smiley picked his way with extreme care.

'Clearly there are agents, working in hostile countries - hostile from the Soviet point of view - who for reasons of cover cannot enjoy their pay while they are in the field.' The brown-clad lady delicately nodded her understanding. 'The normal practice in such cases is to bank the money in Moscow and make it available to the agent when he is free to spend it. Or to his dependants if -'

'If he gets the chop,' said Martindale with relish.

'But Hong Kong is not Moscow,' the Colonial

lady reminded him with a smile.

Smiley had all but come to a halt. 'In rare cases where the incentive is money, and the agent perhaps has no stomach for eventual resettlement in Russia, Moscow Centre has been known, under duress, to make a comparable arrangement in, say, Switzerland.'

'But not in Hong Kong?' she persisted.

'No. Not. And it is unimaginable, on past showing, that Moscow would contemplate parting with alimony on such a scale. For one thing, it would be an inducement to the agent to retire from the field.'

There was laughter, but when it died, the brown-clad lady had her next question ready.

'But the payments began modestly,' she persisted pleasantly. 'The inducement is only of relatively recent date?'

'Correct,' said Smiley.

Too damn correct, thought Guillam, starting to get alarmed.

'Mr Smiley, if the dividend were of sufficient value to them, do you think the Russians would be prepared to swallow their objections and pay such a price? After all, in absolute terms the money is entirely trivial beside the value of a great intelligence advantage.'

Smiley had simply stopped. He made no particular gesture. He remained courteous, he even managed a small smile, but he was plainly finished with conjecture. It took Enderby, with his blasé drawl, to blow the question away.

'Look, children, we'll be doing the theoreticals all day if we're not careful,' he cried, looking at his watch. 'Chris, do we wheel the Americans in here? If we're not telling the Governor, where do

we stand on telling the gallant allies?'

George saved by the bell, thought Guillam.

At the mention of the Cousins, Colonial Wilbraham came in like an angry bull. Guillam guessed he had sensed the issue looming, and determined to kill it immediately it showed its head.

'Vetoed, I'm afraid,' he snapped, without any of his customary delay. 'Absolutely. Whole host of grounds. Demarcation for one. Hong Kong's our patch. Americans have no fishing rights there. None. Ko's a British subject, for another, and entitled to some protection from us. I suppose that's old fashioned. Don't care too much, to be frank. Americans would go clean overboard. Seen it before. God knows where it would end. Three: small point of protocol.' He meant this ironically. He was appealing to the instincts of an ex-ambassador, trying to rouse his sympathy. 'Just a

small point, Enderby. Telling the Americans and not telling the Governor - if I was the Governor, put in that position, I'd turn in my badge. That's all I can say. You would too. Know you would. You do, I do.'

'Assuming you found out,' Enderby corrected him.

'Don't worry. I'd find out. I'd have 'em ten deep crawling over his house with microphones for a start. One or two places in Africa where we let them in. Disaster. Total.' Plonking his forearms on the table, one over the other, he stared at them furiously.

A vehement chugging as if from an outboard motor announced a fault in one of the electronic bafflers. It choked, recovered and zoomed out of hearing again.

'Be a brave man who diddled you on that one,

Chris,' Enderby murmured with a long admiring smile, into the strained silence.

'Endorsed,' Lacon blurted out of the blue.

They know, thought Guillam simply. George has squared them. They know he's done a deal with Marteno and they know he won't say so because he's determined to lie dead. But Guillam saw nothing clearly that day. While the Treasury and Defence factions cautiously concurred on what seemed to be a straight issue - 'keep the Americans out of it' - Smiley himself appeared mysteriously unwilling to toe the line.

'But there does remain the headache of what to do with the raw intelligence,' he said. 'Should you decide that my service may not proceed, I mean,' he added doubtfully, to the general confusion.

Guillam was relieved to find Enderby equally bewildered:

'Hell's that mean?' he demanded; running with the hounds for a moment.

'Ko has financial interests all over South East Asia,' Smiley reminded them, 'Page one of my submission.' Business; clatter of papers. 'We have information, for example, that he controls through intermediaries and strawmen such oddities as a string of Saigon nightclubs, a Vientiane-based aviation company, a piece of a tanker fleet in Thailand... several of these enterprises could well be seen to have political overtones which are far within the American sphere of influence. I would have to have your written instruction, naturally, if I were to ignore our side of the existing bi-lateral agreements.'

'Keep talking,' Enderby ordered, and pulled a fresh match from the box in front of him.

'Oh, I think my point is made, thank you,' said Smiley politely. 'Really it's a very simple one.'

Assuming we don't proceed, which Lacon tells me is the balance of probability today, what am I to do? Throw the intelligence on the scrap-heap? Or pass it to our allies under the existing barter arrangements?'

'Allies,' Wilbraham exclaimed bitterly. 'Allies? You're putting a pistol at our heads, man!'

Smiley's iron reply was all the more startling for the passivity which had preceded it.

'I have a standing instruction from this committee to repair our American liaison. It is written into my charter, by yourselves, that I am to do everything possible to nurture the special relationship and revive the spirit of mutual confidence which existed before - Haydon. To get us back to the top table, you said...' He was looking directly at Enderby.

'Top table,' someone echoed - a quite new voice.

'Sacrificial altar if you ask me. We already burned the Middle East and half Africa on it. All for the special relationship.' But Smiley seemed not to hear. He had relapsed once, more into his posture of mournful reluctance. Sometimes, his sad face said, the burdens of his office were simply too much for him to bear.

A fresh bout of post-luncheon sulkiness set in. Someone complained of the tobacco smoke. A messenger was summoned.

'Devil's happened to the extractors?' Enderby demanded crossly. 'We're stifling.'

'It's the parts,' the messenger said. 'We put in for them months ago, sir. Before Christmas it was, sir, nearly a year come to think of it. Still you can't blame delay, can you, sir?'

'Christ,' said Enderby.

Tea was sent for. It came in paper cups which

leaked on to the baize. Guillam gave his thoughts to Molly Meakin's peerless figure.

It was almost four o'clock when Lacon rode disdainfully in front of the armies and invited Smiley to state 'just exactly what it is you're asking for in practical terms, George. Let's have it all on the table and try to hack out an answer.'

Enthusiasm would have been fatal. Smiley seemed to understand that.

'One, we need rights and permissions to operate in the South East Asian theatre - deniably. So that the Governor can wash his hands of us' - a glance at the Parliamentary Under-Secretary - 'and so can our own masters here. Two, to conduct certain domestic enquiries.'

Heads shot up. The Home Office at once grew fidgety. Why? Who? How? What enquiries? If it's domestic it should go to the competition.

Pretorius of the Security Service was already in a ferment.

'Ko read law in London,' Smiley insisted. 'He has connections here, social and business. We should naturally have to investigate them.' He glanced at Pretorius. 'We would show the competition all our findings,' he promised. He resumed his bid.

'As regards money, my submission contains a full breakdown of what we need at once, as well as supplementary estimates for various contingencies. Finally we are asking permission, at local as well as Whitehall level, to reopen our Hong Kong residency as a forward base for the operation.'

A stunned silence greeted this last item, to which Guillam's own amazement contributed. Nowhere, in any of the preparatory discussions at the Circus, or with Lacon, had anybody, not even Smiley himself, to Guillam's knowledge, raised

the slightest question of reopening High Haven or establishing its successor. A fresh clamour started.

'Failing that,' he ended, overriding the protests, 'if we cannot have our residency, we request, at the very least, blindeye approval to run our own below-the-line agents on the Colony. No local awareness, but approval and protection by London. Any existing sources to be retrospectively legitimised. In writing,' he ended, with a hard glance at Lacon, and stood up.

Glumly, Guillam and Smiley sat themselves once more in the waiting room on the same salmon bench where they had begun, side by side, like passengers travelling in the same direction.

'Why?' Guillam muttered once, but asking questions of George Smiley was not merely in bad taste that day: it was a pastime expressly forbidden by the cautionary notice which hung

above them on the wall.

Of all the damn-fool ways of overplaying one's hand, thought Guillam dismally. You've thrown it, he thought. Poor old sod: finally past it. The one operation which could put us back in the game. Greed, that's what it was. The greed of an old spy in a hurry. I'll stick with him, thought Guillam. I'll go down with the ship. We'll open a chicken farm together. Molly can keep the accounts and Ann can have bucolic tangles with the labourers.

'How do you feel?' he asked.

'It's not a matter of feeling,' Smiley replied.

Thanks very much, thought Guillam.

The minutes turned to twenty. Smiley had not stirred. His chin had fallen on to his chest, his eyes had closed, he might have been at prayer.

'Perhaps you should take an evening off,' said Guillam.

Smiley only frowned.

A messenger appeared, inviting them to return. Lacon was now at the head of the table, and his manner was prefectorial. Enderby sat two away from him, conversing in murmurs with the Welsh Hammer. Pretorius glowered like a storm cloud, and his nameless lady pursed her lips in an unconscious kiss of disapproval. Lacon rustled his notes for silence and like a teasing judge began reading off the committee's detailed findings before he delivered the verdict. The Treasury had entered a serious protest, on the record, regarding the misuse of Smiley's management account. Smiley should also bear in mind that any requirement for domestic rights and permissions should be cleared with the Security Service in advance and not 'sprung on

them like a rabbit out of a hat in the middle of a full-dress meeting of the committee'. There could be no earthly question of reopening the Hong Kong residency. Simply on the issue of time alone, such a step was impossible. It was really a quite shameful proposal, he implied. Principle was involved, consultation would have to be at the highest level, and since Smiley had already moved specifically against advising the Governor of his findings - Lacon's doff of the cap to Wilbraham here - it was going to be very hard to make a case for re-establishing a residency in the foreseeable future, particularly bearing in mind the unhappy publicity attaching to the evacuation of High Haven.

'I must accept that view with great reluctance,' said Smiley gravely.

Oh for God's sake, thought Guillam: let's at least go down fighting!

'Accept it how you like,' said Enderby - and Guillam could have sworn he saw in the eyes of both Enderby and the Welsh Hammer a gleam of victory.

Bastards, he thought simply. No free chickens for you. In his mind he was taking leave of the whole pack of them.

'Everything else,' said Lacon, putting down a sheet of paper and taking up another; 'with certain limiting conditions and safeguards regarding desirability, money and the duration of the licence, is granted.'

The park was empty. The lesser commuters had left the field to the professionals. A few lovers lay on the damp grass like soldiers after the battle. A few flamingos dozed. At Guillam's side, as he sauntered euphorically in Smiley's wake, Roddy

Martindale was singing Smiley's praises: 'I think George is simply marvellous. Indestructible. And grip. I adore grip. Grip is my favourite human quality. George has it in spades. One takes quite a different view of these things when one's translated. One grows to the scale of them, I admit. Your father was an Arabist, I recall?'

'Yes,' said Guillam, his mind yet again on Molly, wondering whether dinner was still possible.

'And frightfully Almanach de Gotha. Now was he an A.D. man or a B.C. man?'

About to give a thoroughly obscene reply, Guillam realised just in time that Martindale was enquiring after nothing more harmful than his father's scholarly preferences.

'Oh B.C.! - B.C. All the way,' he said. 'He'd have gone back to Eden if he could have done.'

'Come to dinner.'

'Thanks.'

'We'll fix a date. Who's fun for a change? Who do you like?'

Ahead of them, floating on the dewy air, they heard the drawling voice of Enderby applauding Smiley's victory.

Nice little meeting. Lot achieved. Nothing given away. Nicely played hand. Land this one and you can just about build an extension, I should think. And the Cousins will play ball, will they?' he bellowed as if they were still inside the safe room. 'You've tested the water there? They'll carry your bags for you and not hog the match? Bit of a cliffhanger that one, I'd have thought, but I suppose you're up to it. You tell Martello to wear his crêpe soles, if he's got any, or we'll be in deep trouble with the Colonials in no time. Pity

about old Wilbraham. He'd have run India rather well.'

Beyond them again, almost out of sight among the trees, the little Welsh Hammer was making energetic gestures to Lacon, who was stooping to catch his words.

Nice little conspiracy too, thought Guillam. He glanced back and was surprised to see Fawn the babysitter hurrying after them. He seemed at first a long way off. Shreds of mist obscured his legs entirely. Only the top of him reached above the sea. Then suddenly he was much closer, and Guillam heard his familiar plaintive bray calling 'Sir, sir,' trying to catch Smiley's attention. Quickly placing Martindale out of earshot, Guillam strode up to him.

'What the devil's the matter? Why are you bleating like that?'

'They've found a girl! Miss Sachs, sir, she sent me to tell him specially.' His eyes shone bright and slightly crazy. 'Tell the Chief they've found the girl. Her very words, personal for Chief.'

'Do you mean she sent you here?'

'Personal for Chief immediate,' Fawn replied evasively.

'I said: did she send you here?' Guillam was seething. 'Answer, no, sir, she did not. You bloody little drama queen, racing round London in your plimsolls! You're out of your mind.' Snatching the crumpled note from Fawn's hand, he read it cursorily. 'It's not even the same name. Hysterical bloody nonsense. You go straight back to your hutch, do you hear? The Chief will give the matter his attention when he returns. Don't you dare stir things up like that again.'

'Whoever was he?' Martindale enquired, quite

breathless with excitement, as Guillam returned. 'What a darling little creature! Are all spies as pretty as that? How positively Venetian. I shall volunteer at once.'

The same night a ragged conference was held in the rumpus room, and the quality was not improved by the euphoria - in Connie's case alcoholic - brought on by Smiley's triumph at the steering conference. After constraints and tensions of the last months Connie charged in all directions. The girl! The girl was the clue! Connie had shed all her intellectual bonds. Send Toby Esterhase to Hong Kong, house her, photograph her, trace her, search her room! Get Sam Collins in, now! Di Salis fidgeted, simpered, puffed at his pipe and jiggled his feet, but for that evening he was entirely under Connie's spell. He even spoke once of 'a natural line to the heart of

things' meaning, yet again, the mystery girl. No wonder little Fawn had been infected by their zeal. Guillam felt almost apologetic for his outburst in the park. Indeed, without Smiley and Guillam to put the dampers on, an act of collective folly could very easily have taken place that night and God knows where it might not have led. The secret world has plenty of precedents of sane people breaking out that way, but this was the first time Guillam had seen the disease in action.

So it was ten o'clock or more before a brief could be drafted for old Craw, and half past before Guillam blearily bumped into Molly Meakin on his way to the lift. In consequence of this happy coincidence - or had Molly planned it? he never knew - a beacon was lit in Peter Guillam's life which burned fiercely from then on. With her customary acquiescence, Molly consented to be driven home, though she lived in High gate, miles

out of his way, and when they reached her doorstep she as usual invited him in for a quick coffee. Anticipating the familiar frustrations - 'no-Peter-please-Peter-dear-I'm sorry' - Guillam was on the brink of declining, when something in her eye - a certain calm resolution as it seemed to him - caused him to change his mind. Once inside her flat, she closed the door and put it on the chain. Then she led him demurely to her bedroom, where she astonished him with a joyous and refined carnality.

Chapter 9 - Craw's Little Ship

In Hong Kong it was forty-eight hours later and a Sunday evening. In the alley Craw walked carefully. Dusk had come early with the fog, but

the houses were jammed too close to let it in, so it hung a few floors higher, with the washing and the cables, spitting hot polluted raindrops which raised smells of orange in the food stalls and ticked on the brim of Craw's straw hat. He was in China here, at sea level, the China he loved most, and China was waking for the festival of night: singing, honking, wailing, beating gongs, bargaining, cooking, playing tinny tunes through twenty different instruments: or watching motionless from doorways how delicately the fancy-looking Foreign Devil picked his way among them. Craw loved it all, but most tenderly he loved his little ships, as the Chinese called their secret whisperers, and of these Miss Phoebe Wayfarer, whom he was on his way to visit, was a classic, if modest, example.

He breathed in, savouring the familiar pleasures. The East had never failed him. 'We colonise them, your Graces, we corrupt them, we exploit

them, we bomb them, sack their cities, ignore their culture and confound them with the infinite variety of our religious sects. We are hideous not only in their sight, Monsignors, but in their nostrils as well - the stink of the roundeye is abhorrent to them and we're too thick even to know it. Yet when we have done our worst, and more than our worst, my sons, we have barely scratched the surface of the Asian smile.'

Other roundeyes might not have come here so willingly alone. The Peak mafia would not have known it existed. The embattled British wives in their government housing ghettos in Happy Valley would have found here everything they hated most about their billet. It was not a bad part of town, but it was not Europe either: the Europe of Central and Pedder Street half a mile away, of electric doors that sighed for you as they admitted you to the airconditioning. Other roundeyes, in their apprehension, might have cast inadvertent

glares, and that was dangerous. In Shanghai, Craw had known more than one man die of an accidental bad look. Whereas Craw's look was at all times kindly, he deferred, he was modest in his manner, and when he stopped to make a purchase, he offered respectful greetings to the stallholder in bad but robust Cantonese. And he paid without carping at the surcharge befitting his inferior race.

He bought orchids and lamb's liver. He bought them every Sunday, distributing his custom fairly between rival stalls and - when his Cantonese ran out - lapsing into his own ornate version of English.

He pressed the bell. Phoebe, like old Craw himself, had an entryphone. Head Office had decreed they should be standard issue. She had twisted a piece of heather into her mail box for good joss, and this was the safety signal.

'Hi,' a girl's voice said, over the speaker. It could have been American or it could have been Cantonese, offering an interrogative 'Yes?'

'Larry calls me Pete,' Craw said.

'Come on up, I have Larry with me at this moment.'

The staircase was pitch dark and stank of vomit and Craw's heels clanked like tin on the stone treads. He pressed the time switch but no light went on so he had to grope his way for three floors. There had been a move to find her somewhere better but it had died with Thesinger's departure and now there was no hope and, in a way, no Phoebe either.

'Bill,' she murmured, closing the door after him, and kissed him on both mottled cheeks, the way pretty girls may kiss kind uncles, though she was not pretty. Craw gave her the orchids. His manner

was gentle and solicitous.

'My dear,' he said. 'My dear.'

She was trembling. There was a bedsitting room with a cooker and a handbasin, there was a separate lavatory with a shower. That was all. He walked past her to the basin, unwrapped the liver and gave it to the cat.

'Oh you spoil her, Bill,' said Phoebe, smiling at the flowers. He had laid a brown envelope on the bed but neither of them mentioned it.

'How's William?' she said, playing with the sound of his name.

Craw had hung his hat and stick on the door and was pouring Scotch: neat for Phoebe, soda for himself.

'How's Pheeb? That's more to the point. How's it been out there, the cold long week? Eh Pheeb?'

She had ruffled the bed and laid a frilly nightdress on the floor because so far as the block was concerned Phoebe was the half-kwailo bastard who whored with the fat foreign devil. Over the crushed pillows hung her picture of Swiss Alps, the picture every Chinese girl seemed to have, and on the bedside locker the photograph of her English father, the only picture she had ever seen of him: a clerk from Dorking in Surrey, just after his arrival on the Island, rounded collars, moustache, and staring, slightly crazy eyes. Craw sometimes wondered whether it was taken after he was shot.

'It's all right now,' said Phoebe. 'It's fine now, Bill.'

She stood at his shoulder, filling the vase, and her hands were shaking badly, which they usually did on Sundays. She wore a grey tunic dress in honour of Peking, and the gold necklace given to

her to commemorate her first decade of service to the Circus. In a ridiculous spurt of gallantry, Head Office had decided to have it made at Asprey's, then sent out by bag, with a personal letter to her signed by Percy Alleline, George Smiley's luckless predecessor, which she had been allowed to look at but not keep. Having filled the vase, she tried to carry it to the table but it slopped, so Craw took it.

'Hey now, take it easy, won't you?'

She stood for a moment, still smiling at him, then with a long slow sob of reaction slumped into a chair. Sometimes she wept, sometimes she sneezed, or was very loud and laughed too much, but always she saved the moment for his arrival, however it took her.

'Bill, I get so frightened sometimes.'

'I know, dear, I know.' He sat at her side, holding

her hand.

'That new boy in features. He stares at me, Bill, he watches everything I do. I'm sure he works for someone. Bill, who does he work for?'

'Maybe he's a little amorous,' said Craw, in his softest tone, as he rhythmically patted her shoulder. 'You're an attractive woman, Phoebe. Don't you forget that, my dear. You can exert an influence without knowing it.' He affected a paternal sternness. 'Now have you been flirting with him? There's another thing. A woman like you can flirt without being conscious of the fact. A man of the world can spot these things, Phoebe. He can tell.'

Last week it was the janitor downstairs. She said he was writing down the hours she came and went. The week before, it was a car she kept seeing, an Opel, always the same one, green. The trick was to calm her fears without discouraging

her vigilance: because one day - as Crow never allowed himself to forget - one day, she was going to be right. Producing a bunch of handwritten notes from the bedside, she began her own debriefing, but so suddenly that Crow was overrun. She had a pale, large face which missed being beautiful in either race. Her trunk was long, her legs were short, and her hands Saxon, ugly and strong. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she looked suddenly matronly. She had put on thick spectacles to read. Canton was sending a student commissar to address Tuesday's cadre, she said, so the Thursday meeting was closed and Ellen Tuo had once more lost her chance to be secretary for an evening -

'Hey, steady down now,' Crow cried, laughing. 'Where's the fire, for God's sake!'

Opening a notebook on his knee, he tried to catch up with her. But Phoebe would not be checked,

not even by Bill Craw, though she had been told he was in fact a colonel, even higher. She wanted it behind her, the whole confession. One of her routine targets was a leftist intellectual group of university students and Communist journalists which had somewhat superficially accepted her. She had reported on it weekly without much progress. Now, for some reason, the group had flared into activity. Billy Chan had been called to Kuala Lumpur for a special conference, she said, and Johnny and Belinda Fong were being asked to find a safe store for a printing press. The evening was approaching fast. While she ran on, Craw discreetly rose and put on the lamp so that the electric light would not shock her once the day faded altogether. There was talk of joining up with the Fukienese in North Point, she said, but the academic comrades were opposed as usual. 'They're opposed to everything,' said Phoebe savagely, 'the snobs. And anyway that stupid

bitch Belinda is months behind on her dues and we may quite well chuck her out of the Party unless she stops gambling.'

'And quite right too, my dear,' said Craw sedately.

'Johnny Fong says Belinda's pregnant and it isn't his. Well I hope she is. It will shut her up...' said Phoebe, and Craw thought: we had that trouble a couple of times with you if I remember rightly, and it didn't shut you up, did it?

Craw wrote obediently, knowing that neither London nor anyone else would ever read a word of it. In the days of its wealth the Circus had penetrated dozens of such groups, hoping in time to break into what was idiotically referred to as the Peking-Hong Kong shuttle and so get a foot in the Mainland. The ploy had withered and the Circus had no brief to act as watchdog for the Colony's security, a role which Special Branch jealously guarded for itself. But little ships, as

Craw knew very well, cannot change course as easily as the winds that drive them. Craw played her along, pitching in with the follow-up questions, checking sources and subsources. Was it hearsay, Pheeb? Well, where did Billy Lee get that one from, Pheeb? Was it possible Billy Lee was needling the story a bit - for face, Pheeb, giving it the old needle? He used the journalistic term because, like Jerry and Craw himself, Phoebe was in her other profession a journalist, a freelance gossip writer feeding Hong Kong's English-language press with titbits about lifestyles of the local Chinese aristocracy.

Listening, waiting, vamping as the actors call it, Craw told himself her story, just as he had told it on the refresher course at Sarratt five years ago, when he was back there getting a rebore in the black arts. The triumph of the fortnight, they had told him afterwards. They had made it a plenary session in anticipation. Even the directing staff

had come to hear him. Those who were off duty had asked for a special van to bring them in early from their Watford housing estate. Just to hear old Craw, the eastern hand, sitting under the antlers in the converted library, sum up a lifetime in the Game. Agents who recruit themselves, ran the title. There was a lectern on the podium but he didn't use it. Instead, he sat on a plain chair, with his jacket off and his belly hanging out and his knees apart and shadows of sweat darkening his shirt, and he told it to them the way he would have told it to the Shanghai Bowlers, on a typhoon Saturday in Hong Kong, if only circumstance had allowed.

Agents who recruit themselves, your Graces.

No one knew the job better, they told him - and he believed them. If the East was Craw's home, the little ships were his family, and he lavished on them all the fondness for which the overt world

had somehow never given him an outlet. He raised and trained them with a love that would have done credit to a father; and it was the hardest moment in an old man's life when Tufty Thesinger did his moonlight flit and left Craw unwarned, temporarily without a purpose or a life-line.

Some people are agents from birth, Monsignors - he told them - appointed to the work by the period of history, the place, and their own natural dispositions. In their cases, it was simply a question of who got to them first, your Eminences:

'Whether it's us; whether it's the opposition; or whether it's the bloody missionaries.'

Laughter.

Then the case histories with names and places changed, and among them none other than

codename Susan, a little ship of the female gender, Monsignors, South East Asian theatre, born in the year of turmoil 1941, of mixed blood. He was referring to Phoebe Wayfarer.

'Father a penniless clerk from Dorking, your Graces. Came East to join one of the Scottish houses that plundered the coast six days a week and prayed to Calvin on the seventh. Too broke to get himself a European wife, lads, so he takes a forbidden Chinese girl and sets her up for a few pence, and codename Susan is the result. Same year the Japanese appear on the scene. Call it Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaya, the story's the same, Monsignors. They appear overnight. To stay. In the chaos, codename Susan's father does a very noble thing: To hell with caution, your Eminences, he says. This is the time for good men and true to stand up and be counted. So he marries the lady, your Graces, a course of action I would not normally counsel, but he does, and

when he's married her he christens his daughter codename Susan and joins the Volunteers, which was a fine body of heroic fools who formed a local home guard against the Nipponese hordes. The next day, not being a natural man-at-arms, your Graces, he gets his arse shot off by the Japanese invader and promptly expires. Amen. May the clerk from Dorking rest in peace, your Graces.'

As old Craw crosses himself, gusts of laughter sweep the room. Craw does not laugh with them, but plays the straight man. There are fresh faces in the front two rows, uncut, unlined, television faces; Craw guesses they are new entrants whipped in to hear The Great One. Their presence sharpens his performance. Henceforth he has a special eye for the front rows.

'Codename Susan is still in rompers when her good father meets his quietus, lads, but all her life

she's going to remember: when the chips are down, the British stand by their commitments. Every year that passes, she's going to love that dead hero a little more. After the war, her father's old trading house remembers her for a year or two, then conveniently forgets her. Never mind. At fifteen, she's ill from having to keep her sick mother and work the ballrooms to finance her own schooling. Never mind. A welfare worker takes up with her, fortunately a member of our distinguished brethren, your Reverends; and he guides her in our direction. Craw mops his brow. 'Codename Susan's rise to wealth and godliness has begun, your Graces,' he declares. 'Under journalist cover we bring her into play, give her Chinese newspapers to translate, send her on little errands, involve her, complete her education and train her in nightwork. A little money, a little patronage, a little love, a little patience and it's not too long before our Susan has seven legal

trips to Mainland China to her credit, including some very windy tradecraft. Skilfully performed, your Graces. She has played courier, and made one crash approach to an uncle in Peking, which paid off. All this, lads, despite the fact she's half a kwailo and not naturally trusted by the Chinese.

'And who did she think the Circus was, all that time?' Craw bellowed at his enthralled audience - 'who did she think we were, lads?' The old magician drops his voice, and lifts a fat forefinger. 'Her father,' he says, in the silence. 'We're that dead clerk from Dorking. Saint George, that's who we are. Cleansing the overseas Chinese communities of harmful elements, whatever the hell they are. Breaking the Triads and the rice cartels and the opium gangs and the child prostitution. She even saw us, when she had to, as the secret ally of Peking, because we, the Circus, had the interest of all good Chinese at heart.' Craw ran a ferocious eye over the rows of

child faces longing to be stern,

'Do I see someone smiling, your Graces?' he demanded, in a voice of thunder. He didn't.

'Mind you, Squires,' Craw ended, 'there's a part of her knew damn well it was all baloney. That's where you come in. That's where your fieldman is ever at the ready. Oh yes! We're keepers of the faith, lads. When it shakes, we stiffen it. When it falls, we've got our arms out to catch it.' He had reached his zenith. In counterpoint, he let his voice fall to a mellow murmur. 'Be the faith ever so crackpot, your Graces, never despise it. We've precious little else to offer them these days. Amen.'

All his life, in his unashamedly emotional way, old Craw would remember the applause.

Her debriefing finished, Phoebe hunched forward, her forearms on her knees, the knuckles of her big hands backed loosely against each other like tired lovers. Craw rose solemnly, took her notes from the table and burnt them at the gas ring.

'Bravo, my dear,' he said quietly. 'A sterling week if I may say so. Anything else?'

She shook her head.

'I mean, to burn,' he said.

She shook her head again.

Craw studied her. 'Pheeb, my dear,' he declared at last, as if he had reached a momentous decision. 'Get off your hunkers. It's rime I took you out to dinner.' She looked round at him, confused. The drink had raced to her head, as it always did. 'An amiable dinner between fellow scribblers, once in a while, is not inconsistent with cover, I venture

to suggest. How about it?'

She made him look at the wall while she put on a pretty frock. She used to have a humming bird but it died. He bought her another but it died too so they agreed the flat was bad luck for humming birds and gave up on them.

'One day I'll take you skiing,' he said, as she locked the front door behind them. It was a joke between them, to do with her snow scene over the bed.

'Only for one day?' she replied. Which was also a joke, part of the same habitual repartee.

In that year of turmoil, as Craw would say, it was still clever to eat in a sampan on Causeway Bay. The smart set had not discovered it, the food was cheap and unlike food elsewhere. Craw took a gamble and by the time they reached the waterfront the fog had lifted and the night sky

was clear. He chose the sampan furthest out to sea, deep in among a cluster of small junks. The cook squatted at the charcoal brazier and his wife served, the hulls of the junks loomed over them, blotting out the stars, and the boat children scampered like crabs from one deck to another while their parents chanted slow funny catechisms across the black water. Craw and Phoebe crouched on wood stools under the furled canopy, two foot above the sea, eating mullet by lamplight. Beyond the typhoon shelters ships slid past them, lighted buildings on the march, and the junks hobbled in their wakes. Inland, the Island whined and clanged and throbbed, and the huge slums twinkled like jewel-boxes opened by the deceptive beauty of the night. Presiding over them, glimpsed between the dipping fingers of the masts, sat the black Peak, Victoria, her sodden face shrouded with moonlit skeins: the goddess, the freedom, the lure of all that wild

striving in the valley.

They talked the arts. Phoebe was doing what Craw thought of as her cultural number. It was very boring. One day, she said drowsily, she would direct a film, perhaps two, on the true, the real China. Recently she had seen an historical romance made by Run Run Shaw, all about the palace intrigues. She considered it excellent but a little too - well - heroic. Theatre, now. Had Craw heard the good news that the Cambridge Players might be bringing a new revue to the Colony in December? At present it was only a rumour, but she hoped it would be confirmed next week.

'That should be fun, Pheeb,' said Craw heartily.

'It will not be fun at all,' Phoebe retorted sternly.

'The Players specialise in biting social satire.'

In the darkness Craw smiled and poured Phoebe more beer. You can always learn, he told himself:

Monsignors. you can always learn.

Till, with no prompting that she could have been aware of, Phoebe began talking about her Chinese millionaires, which was what Craw had been waiting for all evening. In Phoebe's world, the Hong Kong rich were royalty. Their foibles and excesses were handed round as freely as in other places the lives of actresses or footballers. Phoebe knew them by heart.

'So who's pig of the week this time, Pheeb?' Craw asked genially.

Phoebe was unsure. 'Whom shall we elect?' she said, affecting coquettish indecision. There was the pig PK of course, his sixty-eighth birthday on Tuesday, a third wife half his age and how does PK celebrate? Out on the town with a twenty-year-old slut.

Disgusting, Craw agreed. 'PK,' he repeated. 'PK

was the fellow with the gateposts, wasn't he?'

One hundred thousand Hong Kong, said Phoebe. Dragons nine foot high, cast in fibreglass and perspex so that they lit up from inside. Or it might be the pig YY she reflected judiciously, changing her mind. YY was certainly a candidate. YY had married one month ago exactly, that nice daughter of JJ Haw, of Haw and Chan, the tanker kings, a thousand lobsters at the wedding. Night before last, he turned up at a reception with a brand new mistress, bought with his wife's money, a nobody except that he had dressed her at Saint-Laurent and decked her out in a four-string choker of Mikimoto pearls, hired of course, not given. Despite herself, Phoebe's voice faltered and softened.

'Bill,' she breathed, 'that kid looked completely fantastic beside the old frog, you should have seen.'

Or maybe Harold Tan, she pondered dreamily. Harold had been specially nasty. Harold had flown his kids home from their Swiss finishing schools for the festival, first-class return from Geneva. At four in the morning they were all cavorting naked round the pool, the kids and their friends, drunk, pouring champagne into the water while Harold tried to photograph the action.

Craw waited, in his mind holding the door wide open for her, but still she wouldn't pass through, and Craw was far too old a dog to push her. Chiu Chow were best, he said archly. 'Chiu Chow wouldn't get up to all that nonsense. Eh Pheeb? Very long pockets the Chiu Chow have, and very short arms,' he advised her. 'Make a Scotsman blush, your Chiu Chow would, eh Pheeb?'

Phoebe had no place for irony. 'Do not believe it,' she retorted demurely. 'Many Chiu Chow are both generous and high-minded.'

He was willing the man on her, like a conjurer willing a card, but still she hesitated, walked round it, reached for the alternatives. She mentioned this one, that one, lost the thread, wanted more beer, and when he had all but given up she remarked, quite dreamily:

'And as for Drake Ko, he is a complete lamb. Against Drake Ko, no bad words at all please.'

Now it was Craw's turn to walk away. What did Phoebe think of old Andrew Kwok's divorce, he asked. Christ, that must have been a costly one! They say she would have given him the push long ago, but she wanted to wait till he'd made his pile and was really worth divorcing. Any truth in that one, Pheeb? And so on, three, five names, before he allowed himself to take the bait.

'Have you ever heard of old Drake Ko keeping a roundeye mistress at any time? They were talking about it in the Hong Kong Club only the other

day. Blonde party, said to be quite a dish.'

Phoebe liked to think of Craw in the Hong Kong Club. It satisfied her colonial yearnings.

'Oh everyone has heard,' she said wearily, as if Craw as usual were light years behind the hunt. 'There was a time when all the boys had them - didn't you know? PK had two, of course. Harold Tan had one, till Eustace Chow stole her, and Charlie Wu tried to take his to dinner at the Governor's but his tai-tai wouldn't let the chauffeur pick her up.'

'Where'd they get them from for Christ sakes?' Craw asked with a laugh. 'Lane Crawford?'

'From the airlines, where do you think?' Phoebe retorted with heavy disapproval. 'Air-hostesses moonlighting on their stop-overs, five hundred US a night for a white-woman whore. And including the English lines, don't deceive

yourself, the English were the worst by far. Then Harold Tan liked his so much he made an arrangement with her, and the next thing they were all moving into flats and walking round the stores like duchesses any time they came to Hong Kong for four days, enough to make you sick. Mind you, Liese is a different kettle of fish entirely. Liese has class. She is extremely aristocratic, her parents own fabulous estates in the South of France and also an out-island in the Bahamas and it is purely for reasons of moral independence that she refuses to accept their wealth. You only have to look at her bone structure.

'Liese,' Craw repeated. 'Liese? Kraut, eh? Don't hold with Krauts. No racial prejudices but don't care for Krauts, I'm afraid. Now what's a nice Chiu Chow boy like Drake doing with a hateful Hun for a concubine, I ask myself. Still, you should know Pheeb, you're the expert, it's your

bailiwick, my dear, who am I to criticise?'

They had moved to the back of the sampan and were lying in the cushions side by side.

'Don't be utterly ridiculous,' Phoebe snapped.

'Liese is an aristocratic English girl.'

'Tra la la,' said Craw and for a while gazed at the stars.

'She has a most positive and refining influence on him.'

'Who does?' said Craw, as if he had lost the thread.

Phoebe spoke through gritted teeth. 'Liese has a refining influence on Drake Ko. Bill, listen. Are you asleep? Bill, I think you should take me home. Take me home, please.'

Craw gave a low sigh. These lovers' tiffs between them were six-monthly events at least, and had a

cleansing effect on their relationship.

'My dear. Phoebe. Give ear to me, will you? For one moment, right? No English girl, highborn, fine-boned or knock-kneed, can possibly be named Liese unless there is a Kraut at work somewhere. That's for openers. What's her other name?'

'Worth.'

'Worth what? All right, that was a joke. Forget it. Elizabeth, that's what she is. Contracted to Lizzie. Or Liza. Liza of Lambeth. You mis-heard. There's blood for you if you like: Miss Elizabeth Worth. I could see the bone structure there all right. Not Liese, dear. Lizzie.'

Phoebe became openly furious.

'Don't you tell me how to pronounce anything!' she flung at him. 'Her name is Liese pronounced Leesa and written L-I-E-S-E because I asked her

and I wrote it down and I have printed that name in - oh Bill.' Her forehead fell on his shoulder. 'Oh Bill. Take me home.'

She began weeping. Craw cuddled her against him, gently patting her shoulder.

'Ah now cheer up, my dear, the fault was mine, not yours. I should have known that she was a friend of yours. A fine society woman like Liese, a woman of beauty and fortune, locked in romantic attachment to one of the Island's new nobility: how could a diligent newshound like Phoebe fail to befriend her? I was blind. Forgive me.' He allowed a decent interval. 'What happened?' he asked indulgently. 'You interviewed her, did you?'

For the second time that night, Phoebe dried her eyes with Craw's handkerchief.

'She begged me. She's not my friend. She is far

too grand to be my friend. How could she be? She begged me not to print her name. She is here incognito. Her life depends upon it. If her parents know she is here, they will send for her at once. They are fantastically influential. They have private planes, everything. The minute they know she is living with a Chinese man, they would bring fantastic pressure to bear just to get her back. Phoebe, she said. Of all people in Hong Kong, you will understand best what it means to live under the shadow of intolerance. She appealed to me. I promised.'

'Quite right,' said Craw stoutly. 'Don't you ever break that promise, Pheeb. A promise is a bond.' He gave an admiring sigh. 'Life's byways, I always maintain, are even stranger than life's highways. If you put that in your paper, your editor would say you were soft in the head, I dare say. And yet it's true. A shining wonderful example of human integrity for its own sake.' Her

eyes had closed, so he gave her a jolt in order to keep them open. 'Now where does a match like that have its genesis, I ask myself. What star, what happy chance, could bring together two such needful souls? In Hong Kong too, for God's sake.'

'It was fate. She was not even living here. She had withdrawn from the world altogether after an unhappy love affair and she had decided to spend the rest of her life making exquisite jewellery in order to give the world something beautiful among all its suffering. She flew in for a day or two, just to buy some gold, and quite by chance, at one of Sally Cale's fabulous receptions, she met Drake Ko and that was that.'

'And thereafter the course of true love ran sweet, eh?'

'Certainly not. She met him. She loved him. But she was determined not to get embroiled, and

returned home.'

'Home?' Craw echoed, mystified. 'Where's home for a woman of her integrity?'

Phoebe laughed. 'Not to the South of France, silly. To Vientiane. To a city no one ever visits. A city without high life, or any of the luxuries to which she was accustomed from birth. That was her chosen place. Her island. She had friends there, she was interested in Buddhism and art and antiquity.'

'And where does she hang out now? Still in some humble croft, is she, clinging to her notions of abstinence? Or has Brother Ko converted her to less frugal paths?'

'Don't be sarcastic. Drake has given her a most beautiful apartment, naturally.'

That was Craw's limit: he knew it at once. He covered the card with others, he told her stories

about old Shanghai. But he didn't take another step toward the elusive Liese Worth, though Phoebe might have saved him a lot of legwork.

'Behind every painter,' he liked to say, 'and behind every fieldman, lads, there should be a colleague standing with a mallet, ready to hit him over the head when he has gone far enough.'

In the taxi home she was calm again but shivering. He saw her right to the door in style. He had forgiven her entirely. On the doorstep he made to kiss her, but she held him back from her.

'Bill. Am I really any use? Tell me. When I'm no use, you must throw me out, I insist. Tonight was nothing. You are sweet, you pretend, I try. But it was still nothing. If there is other work for me I will take it. Otherwise, you must throw me aside. Ruthlessly.'

'There'll be other nights,' he assured her, and only

then did she let him kiss her.

'Thank you, Bill,' she said.

'So there you are, your Graces,' Craw reflected happily, as he took the taxi on to the Hilton.

'Codename Susan toiled and span and she was worth a little less each day, because agents are only ever as good as the target they're pointed at, and that's the truth of them. And the one time she gave us gold, pure gold, Monsignors' - in his mind's eye, he held up that same fat forefinger, one message for the uncut boys spellbound in the forward rows - 'the one time, she didn't even know she'd done it - and she never could!'

The best jokes in Hong Kong, Craw had once written, are seldom laughed at because they are too serious. That year there was the Tudor pub in the unfinished highrise building, for instance,

where genuine, sour-faced English wenches in period décolleté served genuine English beer at twenty degrees below its English temperature, while outside in the lobby, sweating coolies in yellow helmets toiled round the clock to finish off the elevators. Or you could visit the Italian taverna where a cast-iron spiral staircase pointed to Juliet's balcony but ended instead in a blank plaster ceiling; or the Scottish inn with kilted Chinese Scots who occasionally rioted in the heat, or when the fares rose on the Star Ferry. Craw had even attended an opium den with airconditioning and Muzak churning out Greensleeves. But the most bizarre, the most contrary for Craw's money, was this rooftop bar overlooking the harbour, with its four-piece Chinese band playing Noel Coward, and its straight-faced Chinese barmen in periwigs and frock coats looming out of the darkness and enquiring in good Americanese, 'what was his

drinking pleasure?'

'A beer,' Craw's guest growled, helping himself to a handful of salted almonds. 'But cold. Hear that? Muchee coldee. And bring it chop chop.'

'Life smiles upon your Eminence?' Craw enquired.

'Drop all that, d'you mind? Gets on my wick.'

The Superintendent's embattled face had one expression only and that was of a bottomless cynicism. If man had a choice between good and evil, his baleful scowl said, he chose evil any time: and the world was cut down the middle, between those who knew this, and accepted it, and those long-haired pansies in Whitehall who believed in Father Christmas.

'Found her file yet?'

'No.'

'She calls herself Worth. She's had her syllables removed.'

'I know what she bloody calls herself. She can call herself bloody Mata Hari for all I care. There's still no file on her.'

'But there was?'

'Right cobber, there was,' the Rocker simpered furiously, mimicking Craw's accent. 'There was, and now there isn't. Do I make myself clear or shall I write it in invisible ink on a carrier pigeon's arse for you, you heathen bloody Aussie?'

Craw sat quiet a while, sipping his drink in steady, repetitive movements.

'Would Ko have done that?'

'Done what?' The Rocker was being wilfully obtuse.

'Had her file nicked?'

'Could have done.'

'The missing-record malady appears to be spreading,' Craw commented after further pause for refreshment. 'London sneezes and Hong Kong catches the cold. My professional sympathies, Monsignor. My fraternal commiserations.' He lowered his voice to a toneless murmur. 'Tell me, is the name Sally Cale music to your Grace's ear?'

'Never heard of her.'

'What's her racket?'

'Chichi Antiquities Limited, Kowloonside. Pillaged art treasures, quality fakes, images of the Lord Buddha.'

'Where from?'

'Real stuff comes from Burma, way of Vientiane.'

Fakes are home produce. Sixty-year-old dyke,' he added sourly, addressing himself cautiously to another beer. 'Keeps Alsatians and chimpanzees. Just up your street.'

'Any form?'

'You're joking.'

'I am advised that it was Cale who introduced the girl to Ko.'

'So what? Cale pimps the roundeye lay. The Chows like her for it and so do I. I asked her to fix me up once. Said she hadn't got anything small enough, cheeky sow.'

'Our frail beauty was here allegedly on a gold-buying kick. Does that figure?'

The Rocker looked at Craw with fresh loathing and Craw looked at the Rocker, and it was a collision of two immovable objects.

'Course it bloody figures,' said the Rocker contemptuously. 'Cale had the corner in bent gold from Macao, didn't she?'

'So where did Ko fit in the bed?'

'Ah, come off it, don't pussyfoot around. Cale was the front man. It was Ko's racket all along. That fat bulldog of his went in as partner with her.'

'Tiu?'

The Rocker had lapsed once more into beery melancholy, but Craw would not be deflected, and put his mottled head very close to the Rocker's battered ear.

'My Uncle George will be highly appreciative of all available intelligence on the said Cale. Right? He will reward merit richly. He is particularly interested in her as of the fatal moment when she introduced my little lady to her Chow protector, and up to the present day. Names, dates, track

record, whatever you've got in the fridge. Hear me?'

'Well you tell your Uncle George he'll get me five bloody years in Stanley jail.'

'And you won't want for company there either, will you, Squire?' said Craw pointedly.

This was an unkind reference to recent sad events in the Rocker's world. Two of his senior colleagues had been sent down for several years apiece, and there were others dolefully waiting to join them.

'Corruption,' the Rocker muttered in fury. 'They'll be discovering bloody steam next. Bloody Boy Scouts, they make me retch.'

Craw had heard it all before, but he heard it again now, for he had the golden gift of listening, which at Sarratt they prize far higher than communication.

'Thirty thousand bloody Europeans and four million bloody slanteyes, a different bloody morality, some of the best-organised bloody crime syndicates in the bloody world. What do they expect me to do? We can't stop crime, so how do we control it? We dig out the big boys and we do a deal with them, of course we do: Right, boys. No casual crime, no territorial infringements, everything clean and decent and my daughter can walk down the street any time of day or night. I want plenty of arrests to keep the judges happy and earn me my pathetic pension, and God help anybody who breaks the rules or is disrespectful to authority. All right they pay a little squeeze. Name me one person on this whole benighted Island who doesn't pay a little squeeze along the line. If there's people paying it, there's people getting it. Stands to reason. And if there's people getting it... Besides,' said the Rocker, suddenly bored with his own theme, 'your Uncle

George knows it all already.'

Craw's lion's head lifted slowly, until his dreadful eye was fixed squarely on the Rocker's averted face.

'George knows what, may I enquire?'

'Sally bloody Cale. We turned her inside out for you people years ago. Planning to subvert the bloody pound sterling or some damn thing. Bullion dumping on the Zurich gold markets, I ask you. Load of old cobblers as usual, if you want my view.'

It was another half-hour before the old Australian climbed wearily to his feet, wishing the Rocker long life and felicity.

'And you keep your arse to the sunset,' the Rocker growled.

Craw did not go home that night. He had friends, a Yale lawyer and his wife, who owned one of Hong Kong's two hundred odd private houses, an elderly rambling place on Pollock's Path high up on the Peak, and they had given him a key. A consular car was parked in the driveway, but Craw's friends were known for their addiction to the diplomatic whirl. Entering his room Craw seemed not at all surprised to find a respectful young American seated in the wicker armchair reading a heavy novel: a blond, trim boy in a neat diplomatic-looking suit. Craw did not greet this person, or remark his presence in any way, but instead placed himself at the glass-topped writing desk and, on a single sheet of paper, in the best tradition of his Papal mentor Smiley, began blocking out a message in capital letters, personal for His Holiness, heretical hands keep off. Afterwards, on another sheet, he set out the key

to match it. When he had finished, he handed both to the boy, who with great deference put them in his pocket and departed swiftly without a word. Left alone, Craw waited till he heard the growl of the limousine before opening and reading the signal which the boy had left for him. Then he burned it and washed the ash down the sink before stretching himself gratefully on the bed.

A Gideon's day, but I can surprise them yet, he thought. He was tired. Christ, he was tired. He saw the serried faces of the Sarratt children. But we progress, your Graces. Inexorably we progress. Albeit at the blind man's speed, as we tap-tap along in the dark. Time I smoked a little opium, he thought. Time I had a nice little girl to cheer me up. Christ, he was tired.

Smiley was equally tired, perhaps, but the text of Craw's message, when he received it an hour

later, quickened him remarkably: the more so since the file on Miss Cale, Sally, last known address Hong Kong, art faker, illicit bullion dealer and occasional heroin trafficker, was for once alive and well and intact in the Circus archives. Not only that. The cryptonym of Sam Collins, in his capacity as the Circus's below-the-line resident in Vientiane, was blazoned all over it like the bunting of a long-awaited victory.

Chapter 10 - Tea and Sympathy

It has been laid at Smiley's door more than once since the curtain was rung down on the Dolphin case that now was the moment when George should have gone back to Sam Collins and hit him hard and straight just where it hurt. George

could have cut a lot of corners that way, say the knowing; he could have saved vital time.

They are talking simplistic nonsense.

In the first place, time was of no account. The Russian goldseam, and the operation it financed, whatever that was, had been running for years, and undisturbed would presumably run for many more. The only people who were demanding action were the Whitehall barons, the Circus itself, and indirectly Jerry Westerby, who had to eat his head off with boredom for a couple more weeks while Smiley meticulously prepared his next move. Also, Christmas was approaching, which makes everyone impatient. Ko, and whatever operation he was controlling, showed no sign of development. 'Ko and his Russian money stood like a mountain before us,' Smiley wrote later, in his departing paper on Dolphin. 'We could visit the case whenever we wished, but

we could not move it. The problem was going to be, not how to stir ourselves, but how to stir Ko to the point where we could read him.'

The lesson is clear: long before anyone else, except perhaps Connie Sachs, Smiley already saw the girl as a potential lever and, as such, the most important single character in the cast - far more important, for instance, than Jerry Westerby, who was at any time replaceable. This was just one of many good reasons why Smiley made it his business to get as close to her as security considerations allowed. Another was that the whole nature of the link between Sam Collins and the girl still floated in uncertainty. It's so easy now to turn round and say 'obvious' but at that time the issue was anything but cut and dried. The Cale file gave an indication. Smiley's intuitive feeling for Sam's footwork helped fill in some blanks; hasty backbearings by Registry produced clues and the usual batch of analogous

cases; the anthology of Sam's field reports was illuminating. The fact remains that the longer Smiley held Sam off, the closer he came to an independent understanding of the relationships between the girl and Ko, and between the girl and Sam: and the stronger his bargaining power when he and Sam next sat down together.

And who on earth could honestly say how Sam would have reacted under pressure? The inquisitors have had their successes, true, but also failures. Sam was a very hard nut.

One more consideration also weighed with Smiley, though in his paper he is too gentlemanly to mention it. A lot of ghosts walked in those post-fall days, and one of them was a fear that, buried somewhere in the Circus, lay Bill Haydon's chosen successor: that Bill had brought him on, recruited and educated him against the very day when he himself, one way or another, would fade

from the scene. Sam was originally a Haydon nominee. His later victimisation by Haydon could easily have been a put-up job. Who was to say, in that very jumpy atmosphere, that Sam Collins, manoeuvring for readmission, was not the heir elect to Haydon's treachery?

For all these reasons George Smiley put on his raincoat and got himself out on the street.

Willingly, no doubt for at heart, he was still a case man. Even his detractors gave him that.

In the district of old Barnsbury, in the London borough of Islington, on the day that Smiley finally made his discreet appearance there, the rain was taking a mid-morning pause. On the slate rooftops of Victorian cottages, the dripping chimney pots huddled like bedraggled birds among the television aerials. Behind them, held

up by scaffolding, rose the outline of a public housing estate abandoned for want of funds.

'Mr-?'

'Standfast,' Smiley replied politely, from beneath his umbrella.

Honourable men recognise each other instinctively. Mr Peter Worthington had only to open his front door and run his eye over the plump, rainsoaked figure on the step - the black official briefcase, with EIIR embossed on the bulging plastic flap, the diffident and slightly shabby air for an expression of friendly welcome to brighten his kindly face.

'That's it. Jolly decent of you to come. Foreign Office is in Downing Street these days, isn't it? What did you do? Tube from Charing Cross, I suppose? Come on in, have a cuppa.'

He was a public-school man who had gone into

state education because it was more rewarding. His voice was moderate and consoling and loyal. Even his clothes, Smiley noticed, following him down the slim corridor, had a sort of faithfulness. Peter Worthington might be only thirty-four years old, but his heavy tweed suit would stay in fashion - or out of it - for as long as its owner needed. There was no garden. The study backed straight on to a concrete playground. A stout grille protected the window, and the playground was divided in two by a high wire fence. Beyond it stood the school itself, a scrolled Edwardian building not unlike the Circus, except that it was possible to see in. On the ground floor, Smiley noticed children's paintings hanging on the walls. Higher up, test-tubes in wooden racks. It was playtime and, in their own half, girls in gym slips were racing after a handball. But on the other side of the wire the boys stood in silent groups, like pickets at a factory gate, blacks and whites

separate. The study was knee deep in exercise books. A pictorial guide to the kings and queens of England hung on the chimney breast. Dark clouds filled the sky and made the school look rusty.

'Hope you don't mind the noise,' Peter Worthington called from the kitchen. 'I don't hear it any more, I'm afraid. Sugar?'

'No, no. No sugar, thank you,' said Smiley with a confessive grin.

'Watching the calories?'

'Well, a little, a little.' Smiley was acting himself, but more so, as they say at Sarratt. A mite homelier, a mite more careworn: the gentle, decent civil servant who had reached his ceiling by the age of forty, and stayed there ever since.

'There's lemon if you want it!' Peter Worthington called from the kitchen, clattering dishes

inexpertly.

'Oh, no thank you! Just the milk.'

On the threadbare study floor lay evidence of yet another, smaller child: bricks, and a scribbling book with Ds and As scrawled endlessly. From the lamp hung a Christmas star in cardboard. On the drab walls, Magi and sleds and cotton wool. Peter Worthington returned carrying a tea tray. He was big and rugged, with wiry brown hair going early to grey. After all the clattering, the cups were still not very clean.

'Clever of you to choose my free period,' he said, with a nod at the exercise books. 'If you can call it free, with that lot to correct.'

'I do think you people are very underrated,' Smiley said, mildly shaking his head. 'I have friends in the profession myself. They sit up half the night, just correcting the work, so they assure

me and I've no reason to doubt them.'

'They're the conscientious ones.'

'I trust I may include you in that category.'

Peter Worthington grinned, suddenly very pleased. 'Afraid so. If a thing's worth doing it's worth doing well,' he said, helping Smiley out of his raincoat.

'I could wish that view were a little more widely held, to be frank.'

'You should have been a teacher yourself,' said Peter Worthington and they both laughed.

'What do you do with your little boy?' said Smiley, sitting down.

'Ian? Oh he goes to his Gran's. My side, not hers,' he added, as he poured. He handed Smiley a cup, 'You married?' he asked.

'Yes, yes I am, and very happily so too, if I may say so.'

'Kids?'

Smiley shook his head, allowing himself a small frown of disappointment. 'Alas,' he said.

'That's where it hurts,' said Peter Worthington, entirely reasonably.

'I'm sure it does,' said Smiley. 'Still, we'd have liked the experience. You feel it more, at our age.'

'You said on the phone there was some news of Elizabeth,' said Peter Worthington. 'I'd be awfully grateful to hear it, I must say.'

'Well nothing to be excited about,' said Smiley cautiously.

'But hopeful. One must have hope.'

Smiley stooped to the official black plastic

briefcase and unlocked the cheap clasp.

'Well now, I wonder whether you'll oblige me,' he said. 'It's not that I'm holding back on you, but we do like to be sure. I'm a belt and braces man myself and I don't mind admitting it. We do exactly the same with our foreign deceases. We never commit ourselves until we're absolutely sure. Forenames, surname, full address, date of birth if we can get it, we go to no end of trouble. Just to be safe. Not cause, of course, we don't do cause, that's up to the local authorities.'

'Shoot ahead,' said Peter Worthington heartily. Noticing the exaggeration in his tone, Smiley glanced up, but Peter Worthington's honest face was turned away and he seemed to be studying a pile of old music stands heaped in a corner.

Licking his thumb, Smiley laboriously opened a file on his lap and turned some pages. It was the Foreign Office file, marked 'Missing Person', and

obtained by Lacon on a pretext to Enderby.

'Would it be asking too much if I went through the details with you from the beginning? Only the salient ones naturally, and only what you wish to tell me, I don't have to say that, do I? My headache is, you see, I'm actually not the normal person for this work. My colleague Wendover, whom you met, is sick, I'm afraid - and, well, we don't always like to put everything on paper do we? He's an admirable fellow but when it comes to report writing I do find him a little terse. Not sloppy, far from it, but sometimes a little wanting on the human picture side.'

'I've always been absolutely frank. Always,' said Peter Worthington rather impatiently to the music stands. 'I believe in that.'

'And for our part, I can assure you, we at the Office do respect a confidence.'

A sudden lull descended. It had not occurred to

Smiley, till this moment, that the scream of children could be soothing; yet as it stopped, and the playground emptied, he had a sense of dislocation which took him a moment to get over.

'Break's over,' said Peter Worthington with a smile.

'I'm sorry?'

'Break. Milk and buns. What you pay your taxes for.'

'Now first of all there is no question here, according to my colleague Wendover's notes - nothing against him, I hasten to say - that Mrs Worthington left under any kind of constraint... Just a minute. Let me explain what I mean by that. Please. She left voluntarily. She left alone. She was not unduly prevailed upon, lured, or in any wise the victim of unnatural pressure. Pressure for instance which, let us say, might in

due course be the subject of a legal court action by yourself or others against a third party not so far named?'

Longwindedness, as Smiley knew, creates in those who must put up with it an almost unbearable urge to speak. If they do not interrupt directly, they at least counter with pent-up energy: and as a schoolmaster, Peter Worthington was not by any means a natural listener.

'She left alone, absolutely alone, and my entire position is, was, and always has been, that she was free to do so. If she had not left alone, if there had been others involved, men, God knows we're all human, it would have made no difference. Does that satisfy your question? Children have a right to both parents,' he ended, stating a maxim.

Smiley was writing diligently but very slowly. Peter Worthington drummed his fingers on his

knee, then cracked them, one after another, in quick impatient salvo.

'Now in the interim, Mr Worthington, can you please tell me whether a custody order has been applied for in respect of -'

'We always knew she'd wander. That was understood. I was her anchor. She called me my anchor , Either that or schoolmaster . I didn't mind. It wasn't badly meant. It was just, she couldn't bear to say Peter. She loved me as a concept. Not as a figure perhaps, a body, a mind, a person, not even as a partner. As a concept, a necessary adjunct to her personal, human completeness. She had an urge to please, I understand that. It was part of her insecurity, she longed to be admired. If she paid a compliment, it was because she wished for one in return.'

'I see,' said Smiley, and wrote again, as if physically subscribing to this view.

'I mean nobody could have a girl like Elizabeth as a wife and expect to have her all to himself. It wasn't natural. I've come to terms with that now. Even little Ian had to call her Elizabeth. Again I understand. She couldn't bear the chains of Mummy . Child running after her calling Mummy . Too much for her. That's all right, I understand that too. I can imagine it might be hard for you, as a childless man, to understand how a woman of any stamp, a mother, well cared for and loved and looked after, not even having to earn, can literally walk out on her own son and not even send him a postcard from that day to this. Probably that worries, even disgusts you. Well, I take a different view, I'm afraid. At the time, I grant you: yes, it was hard.' He glanced toward the wired playground. He spoke quietly with no hint at all of self-pity. He might have been talking to a pupil. 'We try to teach people freedom here. Freedom within citizenship. Let them develop

their individuality. How could I tell her who she was? I wanted to be there, that's all. To be Elizabeth's friend. Her longstop: that was another of her words for me. My longstop . The point is, she didn't need to go. She could have done it all here. At my side. Women need a prop, you know. Without one -'

'And you still have not received any direct word of her?' Smiley enquired meekly. 'Not a letter, not even that postcard to Ian, nothing?'

'Not a sausage.'

Smiley wrote. 'Mr Worthington, to your knowledge, has your wife ever used another name?' For some reason the question threatened to annoy Peter Worthington quite considerably. He flared, as if he were responding to impertinence in class, and his finger shot up to command silence. But Smiley hurried on. 'Her maiden name, for instance? Perhaps an

abbreviation of her married one, which in a non-English speaking country could create difficulties with the natives -'

'Never. Never, never. You have to understand basic human behavioural psychology. She was a text-book case. She couldn't wait to get rid of her father's name. One very good reason why she married me was to have a new father and a new name. Once she'd got it, why should she give it up? It was the same with her romancing, her wild, wild story telling. She was trying to escape from her environment. Having done so, having succeeded, having found me, and the stability which I represent, she naturally no longer needed to be someone else. She was someone else. She was fulfilled. So why go?'

Again Smiley took his time. He looked at Peter Worthington as if in uncertainty, he looked at his file, he turned to the last entry, tipped his

spectacles and read it, obviously not by any means for the first time.

'Mr Worthington. if our information is correct, and we have good reason to believe it is - I'd say our estimate was a conservative eighty per cent sure, I'd go that far - your wife is at present using the surname Worth. And she is using a forename with a German spelling, curiously enough, L-I-E-S-E. Pronounced not Liza, I am told, but Leesa. I wondered whether you were in a position to confirm or deny this suggestion, also the suggestion that she is actively connected with a Far Eastern jewellery business with ramifications extending to Hong Kong and other major centres. She appears to be living in a style of affluence and good social appearance, moving in quite high circles.'

Peter Worthington absorbed very little of this, apparently. He had taken a position on the floor,

but seemed unable to lower his knees. Cracking his fingers once more, he glared impatiently at the music stands crowded like skeletons into the corner of the room, and was already trying to speak before Smiley had ended.

'Look. This is what I want. That whoever approaches her should make the right kind of point. I don't want any passionate appeals, no appeals to conscience. All that's out. Just a straight statement of what's offered, and she's welcome. That's all.'

Smiley took refuge in the file.

'Well before we come to that, if we could just continue going through the facts, Mr Worthington -'

'There aren't facts,' said Peter Worthington, thoroughly irritated again. 'There are just two people. Well, three with Ian. There aren't facts in

a thing like this. Not in any marriage. That's what life teaches us. Relationships are entirely subjective. I'm sitting on the floor. That's a fact. You're writing. That's a fact. Her mother was behind it. That's a fact. Follow me? Her father is a raving criminal lunatic. That's a fact. Elizabeth is not the daughter of the Queen of Sheba or the natural grandchild of Lloyd George. Whatever she may say. She has not got a degree in Sanskrit, which she chose to tell the headmistress who still believes it to this day. When are we going to see your charming Oriental wife again? She knows no more about jewellery than I do. That's a fact.'

'Dates and places,' Smiley murmured to the file. 'If I could just check those for a start.'

'Absolutely,' said Peter Worthington handsomely, and from a green tin tea-pot refilled Smiley's cup. Blackboard chalk was worked into his large fingertips. It was like the grey in his hair.

'It was really the mother that messed her up, I'm afraid, though,' he went on, in the same entirely reasonable tone. 'All that urgency about putting her on the stage, then ballet, then trying to get her into television. Her mother just wanted Elizabeth to be admired. As a substitute for herself, of course. It's perfectly natural, psychologically. Read Berne. Read anyone. That's just her way of defining her individuality. Through her daughter. One must respect that those things happen. I understand all that, now. She's okay, I'm okay, the world's okay, Ian's okay, then suddenly she's off.'

'Do you happen to know whether she communicates with her mother, incidentally?'

Peter Worthington shook his head.

'Absolutely not, I'm afraid. She'd seen through her entirely by the time she left. Broken with her completely. The one hurdle I can safely say I

helped her over. My one contribution to her happiness -'

'I don't think we have her mother's address here,' said Smiley, leafing doggedly through the pages of the file. 'You don't -'

Peter Worthington gave it to him rather loud, at dictation speed.

'And now the dates and places,' Smiley repeated. 'Please.'

She had left him two years ago. Peter Worthington repeated not just the date but the hour. There had been no scene - Peter Worthington didn't hold with scenes - Elizabeth had had too many with her mother - they'd had a happy evening, as a matter of fact, particularly happy. For a diversion he'd taken her to the kebab house.

'Perhaps you spotted it as you came down the

road? The Knossos, it's called, next door to the Express Dairy?'

They'd had wine and a real blow-out, and Andrew Wiltshire, the new English master, had come along to make a three. Elizabeth had introduced this Andrew to Yoga only a few weeks before. They had gone to classes together at the Sobell Centre and become great buddies.

'She was really into Yoga,' he said with an approving nod of the grizzled head. 'It was a real interest for her. Andrew was just the sort of chap to bring her out. Extrovert, unreflective, physical... perfect for her,' he said determinedly.

The three of them had returned to the house at ten, because of the babysitter, he said: himself, Andrew and Elizabeth. He'd made coffee, they'd listened to music, and around eleven Elizabeth gave them both a kiss and said she was going over to her mother's to see how she was.

'I had understood she had broken with her mother,' Smiley objected mildly, but Peter Worthington chose not to hear.

'Of course, kisses mean nothing with her,' Peter Worthington explained, as a matter of information. 'She kisses everybody, the pupils, her girlfriends - she'd kiss the dustman, anyone. She's very outgoing. Once again, she can't leave anyone alone. I mean every relationship has to be a conquest. With her child, the waiter at the restaurant... then when she's won them, they bore her. Naturally. She went upstairs, looked at Ian and I've no doubt used the moment to collect her passport and the housekeeping money from the bedroom. She left a note saying sorry and I haven't seen her since. Nor's Ian,' said Peter Worthington.

'Er, has Andrew heard from her?' Smiley enquired, with another tilt of his spectacles.

'Why should he have done?'

'You said they were friends, Mr Worthington. Sometimes third parties become intermediaries in these affairs.'

On the word affair, he looked up and found himself staring directly into Peter Worthington's honest, abject eyes: and for a moment the two masks slipped simultaneously. Was Smiley observing? Or was he being observed? Perhaps it was only his embattled imagination or did he sense, in himself and in this weak boy across the room, the stirring of an embarrassed kinship?

'There should be a league for deceived husbands who feel sorry for themselves. You've all got the same boring, awful charity!' Ann had once flung at him. You never knew your Elizabeth, Smiley thought, still staring at Peter Worthington: and I never knew my Ann.

'That's all I can remember really,' said Peter Worthington. 'After that, it's a blank.'

'Yes,' said Smiley, inadvertently taking refuge in Worthington's repeated assertion. 'Yes, I understand.'

He rose to leave. A little boy was standing in the doorway. He had a shrouded, hostile stare. A placid heavy woman stood behind him, holding him by both wrists above his head, so that he seemed to swing from her, though really he was standing by himself.

'Look, there's Daddy,' said the woman, gazing at Worthington with brown, attaching eyes.

'Jenny, hi. This is Mr Standfast from the Foreign Office.'

'How do you do?' said Smiley politely and after a few minutes' meaningless chatter, and a promise of further information in due course, should any

become available, quietly took his leave.

'Oh and happy Christmas,' Peter Worthington called from the steps.

'Ah yes. Yes indeed. And to you too. To all of you. Happy indeed, and many more of them.'

In the transport café they put in sugar unless you asked them not to, and each time the Indian woman made a cup, the tiny kitchen filled with steam. In twos and threes, not talking, men ate breakfast, lunch or supper, depending on the point they had reached in their separate days. Here also Christmas was approaching. Six greasy coloured glass balls dangled over the counter for festive cheer, and a net stocking appealed for help for spastic kids. Smiley stared at an evening paper, not reading it. In a corner not twelve feet

from him little Fawn had taken up the babysitter's classic position. His dark eyes smiled agreeably on the diners and on the doorway. He lifted his cup with his left hand, while his right idled close to his chest. Did Karla sit like this? Smiley wondered. Did Karla take refuge among the unsuspecting? Control had. Control had made a whole second, third or fourth life for himself in a two-roomed upstairs flat, beside the Western bypass, under the plain name of Matthews, not filed with housekeepers as an alias. Well, 'whole' life was an exaggeration. But he had kept clothes there, and a woman, Mrs Matthews herself, even a cat. And taken golf lessons at an artisans' club on Thursday mornings early, while from his desk in the Circus he poured scorn on the great unwashed, and on golf, and on love, and on any other piffling human pursuit which secretly might tempt him. He had even rented a garden allotment, Smiley remembered, down by a

railway siding. Mrs Matthews had insisted on driving Smiley to see it in her groomed Morris car on the day he broke the sad news to her. It was as big a mess as anyone else's allotment: standard roses, winter vegetables they hadn't used, a toolshed crammed with hosepipes and seedboxes.

Mrs Matthews was a widow, pliant but capable.

'All I want to know,' she had said, having read the figure on the cheque. 'All I want to be sure of, Mr Standfast: is he really dead, or has he gone back to his wife?'

'He is really dead,' Smiley assured her, and she believed him gratefully. He forbore from adding that Control's wife had gone to her grave eleven years ago, still believing her husband was something in the Coal Board.

Did Karla have to scheme in committees? Fight

cabals, deceive the stupid, flatter the clever, look in distorting mirrors of the Peter Worthington variety, all in order to do the job?

He glanced at his watch, then at Fawn. The coinbox stood next to the lavatory. But when Smiley asked the proprietor for change, he refused it on the grounds that he was too busy.

'Hand it over, you awkward bastard!' shouted a long-distance driver all in leather. The proprietor briskly obliged.

'How did it go?' Guillam asked, taking the call on the direct line.

'Good background,' Smiley replied.

'Hooray,' said Guillam.

Another of the charges later levelled against Smiley was that he wasted time on menial matters, instead of delegating them to his

subordinates.

There are blocks of flats near the Town and Country Golf Course on the northern fringes of London that are like the superstructure of permanently sinking ships. They lie at the end of long lawns where the flowers are never quite in flower, the husbands man the lifeboats all in a flurry at about eight-thirty in the morning and the women and children spend the day keeping afloat until their menfolk return too tired to sail anywhere. These buildings were built in the thirties and have stayed a grubby white ever since. Their oblong, steelframed windows look on to the lush billows of the links, where weekday women in eyeshades wander like lost souls. One such block is called Arcady Mansions, and the Pellings lived in number seven, with a cramped view of the ninth green which vanished when the

beeches were in leaf. When Smiley rang the bell he heard nothing except the thin electric tinkle: no footsteps, no dog, no music. The door opened and a man's cracked voice said 'Yes?' from the darkness, but it belonged to a woman. She was tall and stooping. A cigarette hung from her hand.

'My name is Oates,' Smiley said, offering a big green card encased in cellophane. To a different cover belongs a different name.

'Oh it's you is it? Come in. Dine, see the show. You sounded younger on the telephone,' she boomed in a curdled voice striving for refinement. 'He's in here. He thinks you're a spy,' she said, squinting at the green card. 'You're not, are you?'

'No,' said Smiley. 'I'm afraid not. Just a snooper.'

The flat was all corridors. She led the way, leaving a vapour trail of gin. One leg slurred as

she walked, and her right arm was stiff. Smiley guessed she had had a stroke. She dressed as if nobody had ever admired her height or sex. And as if she didn't care. She wore flat shoes and a mannish pullover with a belt that made her shoulders broad.

'He says he's never heard of you. He says he's looked you up in the telephone directory and you don't exist.'

'We like to be discreet,' Smiley said.

She pushed open a door. 'He exists,' she reported loudly, ahead of her into the room. 'And he's not a spy, he's a snooper.'

In a far chair, a man was reading the Daily Telegraph, holding it in front of his face so that Smiley only saw the bald head, and the dressing gown, and the short crossed legs ending in leather bedroom slippers; but somehow he knew at once

that Mr Felling was the kind of small man who would only ever marry tall women. The room carried everything he could need in order to survive alone. His television, his bed, his gas fire, a table to eat at and an easel for painting by numbers. On the wall hung an over-coloured portrait photograph of a very beautiful girl with an inscription scribbled diagonally across one corner, in the way that film stars wish love to the unglamorous. Smiley recognised it as Elizabeth Worthington. He had seen a lot of photographs already.

'Mr Oates, meet Nunc,' she said, and all but curtsied.

The Daily Telegraph came down with the slowness of a garrison flag, revealing an aggressive, glittering little face with thick brows and managerial spectacles.

'Yes. Well just who are you precisely?' said Mr

Felling. 'Are you Secret Service or aren't you? Don't shilly shally, out with it and be done. I don't hold with snooping you see. What's that?' he demanded.

'His card,' said Mrs Felling, offering it. 'Green in hue.'

'Oh, we're exchanging notes are we? I need a card too, then, Cess, don't I? Better get some printed, my dear. Slip down to Smith's, will you?'

'Do you like tea?' Mrs Pelling asked, peering down at Smiley with her head on one side.

'What are you giving him tea for?' Mr Pelling demanded, watching her plug in the kettle. 'He doesn't need tea. He's not a guest. He's not even Intelligence. I didn't ask him. Stay the week,' he said to Smiley. 'Move in if you like. Have her bed. Bullion Universal Security Advisers, my Aunt Fanny.'

'He wants to talk about Lizzie, darling,' said Mrs Pelling, setting a tray for her husband. 'Now be a father for a change.'

'Fat lot of good her bed would do you, mind,' said Mr Pelling, taking up his Telegraph again.

'For those kind words,' said Mrs Pelling and gave a laugh. It consisted of two notes, like a birdcall, and was not meant to be funny. A disjointed silence followed.

Mrs Pelling handed Smiley a cup of tea.

Accepting it, he addressed himself to the back of Mr Pelling's newspaper. 'Sir, your daughter Elizabeth is being considered for an important appointment with a major overseas corporation. My organisation has been asked in confidence - as a normal but very necessary formality these days - to approach friends and relations in this country and obtain character references.'

'That's us, dear,' Mrs Pelling explained, in case her husband hadn't understood.

The newspaper came down with a snap.

'Are you suggesting my daughter is of bad character? Is that what you're sitting here, drinking my tea, suggesting?'

'No, sir,' said Smiley.

'No, sir,' said Mrs Pelling, unhelpfully.

A long silence followed, which Smiley was at no great pains to end.

'Mr Pelling,' he said finally, in a firm and patient voice. 'I understand that you spent many years in the Post Office, and rose to a high position.'

'Many, many years,' Mrs Pelling agreed.

'I worked,' said Mr Pelling from behind his newspaper once more. 'There's too much talk in

the world. Not enough work done.'

'Did you employ criminals in your department?'

The newspaper rattled, then held still.

'Or Communists?' said Smiley, equally gently.

'If we did we damn soon got rid of them,' said Mr Pelling, and this time the newspaper stayed down.

Mrs Pelling snapped her fingers. 'Like that,' she said.

'Mr Pelling,' Smiley continued, in the same bedside manner, 'the position for which your daughter is being considered is with one of the major eastern companies. She will be specialising in air transport and her work will give her advance knowledge of large gold shipments to and from this country, as well as the movement of diplomatic couriers and classified mails. It carries an extremely high remuneration. I don't think it

unreasonable - and I don't think you do - that your daughter should be subject to the same procedures as any other candidate for such a responsible - and desirable - post.'

'Who employs you?' said Mr Pelling. 'That's what I'm getting at. Who says you're responsible?'

'Nunc,' Mrs Pelling pleaded. 'Who says anyone is?'

'Don't Nunc me! Give him some more tea. You're hostess, aren't you? Well act like one. It's high time Lizzie was rewarded and I'm frankly displeased that it hasn't occurred before now, seeing what they owe her.'

Mr Pelling resumed his reading of Smiley's impressive green card. 'Correspondents in Asia, USA and Middle East. Pen friends I suppose they are. Head Office in South Molton Street. Any enquiries telephone bla bla bla. Who do I get

then? Your partner in crime, I suppose.'

'If it's South Molton Street he must be all right,' said Mrs Pelling.

'Authority without responsibility,' Mr Pelling said, dialling the number. He spoke as if someone were holding his nostrils. 'I don't hold with it I'm afraid.'

'With responsibility,' Smiley corrected him. 'We, as a company, are pledged to indemnify our customers against any dishonesty on the part of staff we recommend. We are insured accordingly.'

The number rang five times before the Circus switchboard answered it, and Smiley hoped to God there wasn't going to be a muddle.

'Give me the Managing Director,' Mr Pelling ordered. 'I don't care if he's in conference! Has he got a name? Well what is it? Well you tell Mr

Andrew Forbes-Lisle that Mr Humphrey Pelling desires a personal word with him. Now.' Long wait. Well done thought Smiley. Nice touch. 'Pelling here. I've a man calling himself Oates sitting in front of me. Short, fat and worried. What do you want me to do with him?'

In the background, Smiley heard Peter Guillam's resonant, officer-like tones all but ordering Pelling to stand up when he addressed him. Mollified, Mr Pelling rang off.

'Does Lizzie know you're talking to us?' he asked.

'She'd laugh her head off if she did,' said his wife.

'She may not even know she is being considered for the post,' said Smiley. 'More and more, the tendency these days is to make the approach after clearance has been obtained.'

'It's for Lizzie, Nunc,' Mrs Pelling reminded him.

'You know you love her although we haven't

heard of her for a year.'

'You don't write to her at all?' Smiley asked, sympathetically.

'She doesn't want it,' said Mrs Pelling with a glance at her husband.

The tiniest grunt escaped Smiley's lips. It could have been regret, but it was actually relief.

'Give him more tea,' her husband ordered. 'He's wolfed that lot already.'

He stared quizzically at Smiley yet again. 'I'm still not sure he's not Secret Service, even now,' he said. 'He may not be glamour, but that could be deliberate.'

Smiley had brought forms. The Circus printer had run them up last night, on buff paper - which was fortunate, for in Mr Pelling's world, it turned out, forms were the legitimisation of everything, and

buff was the respectable colour. So the men worked together like two friends solving a crossword, Smiley perched at his side and Mr Pelling doing the pencil work, while his wife sat smoking and staring through the grey net curtains, turning her wedding ring round and round. They did date and place of birth - 'Up the road at the Alexandra Nursing Home. Pulled it down, now, haven't they, Cess? Turned it into one of those ice-cream blocks.' They did education, and Mr Pelling gave his views on that subject.

'I never let one school have her too long, did I, Cess? Keep her mind alert. Don't let it get into a rut. A change is worth a holiday, I said. Didn't I, Cess?'

'He's read books on education,' said Mrs Pelling.

'We married late,' he said, as if explaining her presence.

'We wanted her on the stage,' she said. 'He wanted to be her manager, among other things.'

He gave other dates. There was a drama school and there was a secretarial course.

'Grooming,' Mr Pelling said. 'Preparation, not education, that's what I believe in. Throw a bit of everything at her. Make her worldly. Give her deportment.'

'Oh, she's got the deportment,' Mrs Pelling agreed, and with the click of her throat blew out a lot of cigarette smoke. 'And the worldliness.'

'But she never finished secretarial college?' Smiley asked, pointing to the panel. 'Or the drama.'

'Didn't need to,' said Mr Pelling.

They came to previous employers. Mr Pelling listed half a dozen in the London area, all within

eighteen months of one another.

'All bores,' said Mrs Pelling pleasantly.

'She was looking around,' said her husband airily.

'She was taking the pulse before committing herself. I made her, didn't I, Cess? They all wanted her but I wouldn't fall for it.' He flung out an arm at her. 'And don't say it didn't payoff in the end!' he yelled. 'Even if we aren't allowed to talk about it!'

'She liked the ballet best,' said Mrs Pelling.

'Teaching the children. She adores children. Adores them.'

This annoyed Mr Pelling very much. 'She's making a career, Cess.' he shouted, slamming the form on his knee. 'God Almighty, you cretinous woman, do you want her to go back to him?'

'Now what was she doing in the Middle East exactly?' Smiley asked.

'Taking courses. Business schools. Learning Arabic,' said Mr Pelling, acquiring a sudden largeness of view. To Smiley's surprise he even stood, and gesticulating imperiously, roamed the room. 'What got her there in the first place. I don't mind telling you, was an unfortunate marriage.'

'Jesus,' said Mrs Pelling.

Upright, he had a prehensile sturdiness which made him formidable. 'But we got her back. Oh yes. Her room's always ready when she wants it. Next door to mine. She can find me any time. Oh yes. We helped her over that hurdle, didn't we, Cess? Then one day I said to her -'

'She came with a darling English teacher with curly hair,' his wife interrupted. 'Andrew.'

'Scottish,' Mr Pelling corrected her automatically.

'Andrew was a nice boy but no match for Nunc,

was he, darling?'

'He wasn't enough for her. All that Yogi-bear stuff. Swinging by your tail is what I call it. Then one day I said to her: Lizzie: Arabs. That's where your future is. ' He clicked his fingers, pointing at an imaginary daughter. ' Oil. Money. Power. Away you go. Pack. Get your ticket. Off '

'A nightclub paid her fare,' said Mrs Pelling. 'It took her for one hell of a ride too.'

'It did no such thing!' Mr Pelling retorted, hunching his broad shoulders to yell at her, but Mrs Pelling continued as if he weren't there.

'She answered this advertisement, you see. Some woman in Bradford with a soft line of talk. A bawd. Hostesses needed, but not what you'd think, she said. They paid her air fare and the moment she landed in Bahrein they made her sign a contract giving over all her salary for the rent of

her flat. From then on they'd got her, hadn't they? There was nowhere she could go, was there? The Embassy couldn't help her, no one could. She's beautiful, you see.'

'You stupid bloody hag. We're talking about a career! Don't you love her? Your own daughter? You unnatural mother! My God!'

'She's got her career,' said Mrs Pelling complacently. 'The best in the world.'

In desperation Mr Pelling turned to Smiley. 'Put down reception work and picking up the language and put down -'

'Perhaps you could tell me,' Smiley mildly interjected, as he licked his thumb and turned the page' - this might be the way to do it - of any experience she has had in the transportation industry.'

'And put down' - Mr Pelling clenched his fists and

stared first at his wife, then at Smiley, and he seemed in two minds as to whether to go on or not - 'Put down working for the British Secret Service in a high capacity . Undercover. Go on! Put it down! There. It's out now.' He swung back at his wife. 'He's in security, he said so. He's got a right to know and she's got a right to have it known of her. No daughter of mine's going to be an unsung heroine. Or unpaid! She'll get the George Medal before she's done, you mark my words!'

'Oh balls,' said Mrs Pelling wearily. 'That was just one of her stories. You know that.'

'Could we possibly take things one by one?' Smiley asked, in a tone of gentle forbearance. 'We were talking, I think, of experience in the transportation industry.'

Sage-like, Mr Pelling put his thumb and forefinger to his chin.

'Her first commercial experience,' he began ruminatively. 'Running her own show entirely, you understand - when everything came together, and jelled, and really began to payoff - apart from the Intelligence side I'm referring to employing staff and handling large quantities of cash and exercising the responsibility she's capable of - came in how do you pronounce it?'

'Vi-ent-iane,' his wife droned, with perfect Anglicisation.

'Capital of La-os,' said Mr Pelling, pronouncing the word to rhyme with chaos.

'And what was the name of the firm, please?' Smiley enquired, pencil poised over the appropriate panel.

'A distilling company,' said Mr Pelling grandly. 'My daughter Elizabeth owned and managed one of the major distilling concessions in that war-

torn country.'

'And the name?'

'She was selling kegs of unbranded whisky to American layabouts,' said Mrs Pelling, to the window. 'On commission, twenty per cent. They bought their kegs and left them to mature in Scotland as an investment to be sold off later.'

'They, in this case, being... ?' Smiley asked.

'Then her lover went and filched the money,' Mrs Pelling said. 'It was a racket. Rather a good one.'

'Sheer unadulterated balderdash!' Mr Pelling shouted. 'The woman's insane. Disregard her.'

'And what was her address at that time, please?' Smiley asked.

'Put down representative ,' said Mr Pelling, shaking his head as if things were quite out of hand. 'Distiller's representative and secret agent.'

'She was living with a pilot,' said Mrs Pelling. 'Tiny, she called him. If it hadn't been for Tiny, she'd have starved. He was gorgeous but the war had turned him inside out. Well, of course it would! Same with our boys, wasn't it? Missions night after night, day after day.' Putting back her head, she screamed very loud: 'Scramble!'

'She's mad,' Mr Felling explained.

'Nervous wrecks at eighteen, half of them. But they stuck it. They loved Churchill, you see. They loved his guts.'

'Blind mad,' Mr Felling repeated. 'Barking. Mad as a newt.'

'I'm sorry,' said Smiley, writing busily. 'Tiny who? The pilot? What was his name?'

'Ricardo. Tiny Ricardo. A lamb. He died you know.' she said, straight at her husband. 'Lizzie

was heartbroken, wasn't she, Nunc? Still, it was probably the best way.'

'She wasn't living with anyone, you anthropoid ape! It was a put-up, the whole thing. She was working for the British Secret Service!'

'Oh my Christ,' said Mrs Felling hopelessly.

'Not your Christ. My Mellon. Take that down, Oates. Let me see you write it down. Mellon. The name of her commanding officer in the British Secret Service was M-E-L-L-O-N. Like the fruit but twice as many l's. Mellon. Pretending to be a plain simple trader. And making quite a decent thing of it. Naturally, an intelligent man, he would. But underneath' - Mr Felling drove a fist into his open palm making an astonishingly loud noise - 'but underneath the bland and affable exterior of a British businessman, this same Mellon, two l's, was fighting a secret and lonely war against Her Majesty's enemies and my Lizzie

was helping him do it. Drug dealers, Chinese, homosexuals, every single foreign element sworn to the subversion of our island nation, my gallant daughter Lizzie and her friend Colonel Mellon between them fought to check their insidious progress! And that's the honest truth.'

'Now ask me where she gets it from,' said Mrs Felling, and leaving the door open, trailed away down the corridor grumbling to herself. Glancing after her, Smiley saw her pause and seem to tilt her head, beckoning to him from the gloom. They heard a distant door slam shut.

'It's true,' said Felling stoutly, but more quietly. 'She did, she did, she did. My daughter was a senior and respected operative of our British Intelligence.'

Smiley did not reply at first, he was too intent on writing. So for a while there was no sound but the slow scratch of his pen on paper, and the rustle as

he turned the page.

'Good. Well then, I'll just take those details too, if I may. In confidence naturally. We come across quite a lot of it in our work, I don't mind telling you.'

'Right,' said Mr Pelling, and sitting himself vigorously on a plastic-covered dumpty, he pulled a single sheet of paper from his wallet and thrust it into Smiley's hand. It was a letter, handwritten, one and a half sides long. The script was at once grandiose and childish, with high, curled I's for the first person, while the other characters appeared more cautiously. It began 'My dearest darling Pops' and it ended 'Your One True Daughter Elizabeth', and the message between, the bulk of which Smiley committed to his memory, ran like this: 'I have arrived in Vientiane which is a flat town, a bit French and wild but don't worry, I have important news for you which

I have to impart immediately. It is possible you may not hear from me for a bit but don't worry even if you hear bad things. I'm all right and cared for and doing it for a Good Cause you would be proud of. As soon as I arrived I contacted the British Trade Consul Mister Mackervoor a British and he sent me for a job to Mellon. I'm not allowed to tell you so you'll have to trust me but Mellon is his name and he's a well-off English trader here but that's only half the story. Mellon is Dispatching me on a mission to Hong Kong and I'm to investigate Bullion and Drugs, pretending otherwise, and he's got men everywhere to look after me and his real name isn't Mellon. Mackervoor is in on it only secretly. If anything happens to me it will be worth it anyway because you and I know the Country matters and what's one life among so many in Asia where life counts for naught anyway? This is good Work, Dad, the kind we dreamed of you

and me and specially you when you were in the war fighting for your family and loved ones. Pray for me and look after Mum. I will always love you even in prison.'

Smiley handed back the letter. 'There's no date,' he objected flatly. 'Can you give me the date, Mr Pelling? Even approximately?'

Pelling gave it not approximately but exactly. Not for nothing had he spent his working life handling the Royal Mails.

'She's never written to me since,' said Mr Pelling proudly, folding the letter back into his wallet.

'Not a word, not a peep have I had out of her from that day to this. Totally unnecessary. We're one. It was said, I never alluded to it, neither did she. She'd tipped me the wink. I knew. She knew I knew. You'll never get finer understanding between daughter and father than that. Everything that followed: Ricardo, whatever his name was,

alive, dead, who cares? Some Chinaman she's on about, forget him. Men friends, girl friends, business, disregard everything you hear. It's cover, the lot. They own her, they control her completely. She works for Mellon and she loves her father. Finish.'

'You've been very kind,' said Smiley, packing together his papers. 'Please don't worry, I'll see myself out.'

'See yourself how you like,' Mr Pelling said with a flash of his old wit.

As Smiley closed the door, he had resumed his armchair, and was ostentatiously looking for his place in the Daily Telegraph.

In the dark corridor the smell of drink was stronger. Smiley had counted nine paces before

the door slammed, so it must have been the last door on the left, and the furthest from Mr Pelling. It might have been the lavatory, except the lavatory was marked with a sign saying 'Buckingham Palace Rear Entrance'. He called her name very softly and heard her yell 'Get out.' He stepped inside and found himself in her bedroom, and Mrs Pelling sprawled on the bed with a glass in her hand, riffling through a heap of picture postcards. The room itself, like her husband's, was fitted up for a separate existence, with a cooker and a sink and a pile of unwashed plates. Round the walls were snapshots of a tall and very pretty girl, some with boy friends, some alone, mainly against oriental backgrounds. The smell was of gin and cat.

'He won't leave her alone,' Mrs Pelling said. 'Nunc won't. Never could. He tried but he never could. She's beautiful, you see,' she explained for the second time, and rolled on to her back while

she held a postcard above her head to read it.

'Will he come in here?'

'Not if you dragged him, darling.'

Smiley closed the door, sat in a chair, and once more took out his notebook.

'She's got a dear sweet Chinaman,' she said, still gazing at the postcard upside down. 'She went to him to save Ricardo and then she fell in love with him. He's a real father to her, the first she ever had. It's all come out right after all. All the bad things. They're over. He calls her Liese,' she said. 'He thinks it's prettier for her. Funny really. We don't like Germans. We're patriotic. And now he's fiddling her a lovely job, isn't he?'

'I understand she prefers the name Worth, rather than Worthington. Is there a reason for that, that you know of?'

'Cutting that boring schoolmaster down to size I should think.'

'When you say she did it to save Ricardo, you mean of course that -'

Mrs Pelling let out a stage groan of pain.

'Oh you men. When? Who? Why? How? In the bushes, dear. In a telephone box, dear. She bought Ricardo his life, darling, with the only currency she has. She did him proud then left him. What the hell, he was a slug.' She took up another postcard, and studied the picture of palm trees and an empty beach. 'My little Lizzie went behind the hedge with half of Asia before she found her Drake. But she found him.' As if hearing a noise, she sat up sharply and stared at Smiley most intently while she straightened her hair. 'I think you'd better go, dear,' she said, in the same low voice, while she turned herself toward the mirror. 'You give me the galloping creeps to

be honest. I can't do with trustworthy faces round me. Sorry darling, know what I mean?'

At the Circus, Smiley took a couple of minutes to confirm what he already knew. Mellon, with two l's exactly as Mr Pelling had insisted, was the registered workname and alias of Sam Collins.

Chapter 11 - Shanghai Express

In the scheme of things as they are now conveniently remembered, there is at this point a deceptive condensation of events. Somewhere around here in Jerry's life Christmas came and went in a succession of aimless drinking sessions at the Foreign Correspondents' Club, and a series of last-minute parcels to Cat clumsily wrapped in holly paper at all hours of the night. A revised

trace request on Ricardo was submitted formally to the Cousins, and Smiley personally took it to the Annexe in order to explain himself more fully to Martello. But the request got snarled up in the Christmas rush - not to mention the impending collapse of Vietnam and Cambodia - and didn't complete its round of the American departments till well into the New Year, as the dates in the Dolphin file show. Indeed, the crucial meeting with Martello and his friends on the Drug Enforcement side did not take place till early February. The wear of this prolonged delay on Jerry's nerves was appreciated intellectually within the Circus, but not, in the continued mood of crisis, felt or acted on. For that, one may again blame Smiley, depending where one stands, but it is very hard to see what more he could have done, short of calling Jerry home: particularly since Craw continued to report in glowing terms on his general disposition. The fifth floor was working

flat out at the time and Christmas was hardly noticed apart from a rather battered sherry party at midday on the twenty-fifth, and a break later while Connie and the mothers played the Queen's speech very loud in order to shame heretics like Guillam and Molly Meakin, who found it hilarious and did bad imitations of it in the corridors.

The formal induction of Sam Collins to the Circus's meagre ranks took place on a really freezing day in mid-January and it had a light side and a dark side. The light side was his arrest. He arrived at ten exactly, on a Monday morning, not in a dinner jacket, but in a dapper grey overcoat with a rose in the buttonhole, looking miraculously youthful in the cold. But Smiley and Guillam were out, cloistered with the Cousins, and neither the janitors nor housekeepers had any brief to admit him, so they locked him in a basement for three hours where he shivered and

fumed till Smiley returned to verify the appointment. There was more comedy about his room. Smiley had put him on the fourth floor next to Connie and di Salis, but Sam wouldn't wear that and wanted the fifth. He considered it more suitable to his acting rank of co-ordinator. The poor janitors humped furniture up and down stairs like coolies.

The dark side was harder to describe, though several tried. Connie said Sam was frigid, a disturbing choice of adjective. To Guillam he was hungry, to the mothers shifty, and to the burrowers too smooth by half. The strangest thing, to those who did not know the background, was his self-sufficiency. He drew no files, he made no bids for this or that responsibility, he scarcely used the telephone, except to place racing bets or oversee the running of his club. But his smile went with him everywhere. The typists declared that he slept in it, and hand-washed it at

weekends. Smiley's interviews with him took place behind closed doors, and bit by bit the product of them was communicated to the team.

Yes, the girl had fetched up in Vientiane with a couple of hippies who had overrun the Katmandu trail. Yes. when they dumped her she had asked Mackelvore to find her a job. And yes, Mackelvore had passed her on to Sam, thinking that on looks alone she must be exploitable: all, reading between the lines, much as the girl had described in her letter home. Sam had had a couple of low grade drug ploys mouldering on his books at the time and was otherwise, thanks to Haydon, becalmed, so he thought he might as well put her alongside the flying boys and see what came up. He didn't tell London because London at that point was killing everything. He just went ahead with her on trial and paid her out of his management fund. What came up was Ricardo. He also let her follow an old lead to the

bullion racket in Hong Kong, but that was all before he realised she was a total disaster. It was a positive relief to Sam, he said, when Ricardo took her off his hands and got her a job with Indocharter.

'So what else does he know?' Guillam demanded indignantly. 'That's not much of a ticket, is it, for screwing up the pecking order, horning in on our meetings.'

'He knows her,' said Smiley patiently, and resumed his study of Jerry Westerby's file, which of late had become his principal reading. 'We are not above a little blackmail ourselves from time to time,' he added with maddening tolerance, 'and it is perfectly reasonable that we should have to submit to it occasionally.' Whereas Connie, with unwonted coarseness, startled everyone by quoting - apparently - President Johnson on the subject of J. Edgar Hoover: 'George would rather

have Sam Collins inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in,' she declared, and gave a schoolgirl giggle at her own audacity.

And most particularly, it was not till mid-January, in the course of his continued excursions into the minutiae of the Ko background, that Doc di Salis unveiled his amazing discovery of the survival of a certain Mr Hibbert, a China missionary in the Baptist interest, whom Ko had mentioned as a referee when he applied to read law in London.

All much more spread out, therefore, than the contemporary memory conveniently allows: and the strain on Jerry accordingly all the greater.

'There's the possibility of a knighthood,' Connie Sachs said. They had said it already on the telephone.

It was a very sober scene. Connie had bobbed her hair. She wore a dark brown hat and a dark brown suit, and she carried a dark brown handbag to contain the radio microphone. Outside in the little drive, in a blue cab with the engine and the heater on, Toby Esterhase the Hungarian pavement artist, wearing a peaked cap, pretended to doze while he received and recorded the conversation on the instruments beneath his seat. Connie's extravagant shape had acquired a prim discipline. She held a Stationery Office notebook handy, and a Stationery Office ballpoint pen between her arthritic fingers. As to the remote di Salis, the art had been to modernise him a little. Under protest, he wore one of Guillam's striped shirts, with a dark tie to match. The result, somewhat surprisingly, was quite convincing.

'It's extremely confidential,' Connie said to Mr Hibbert, speaking loud and clear. She had said that on the telephone as well.

'Enormously,' di Salis muttered in confirmation, and flung his arms about till one elbow settled awkwardly on his knobbly knee, and a crabbed hand enclosed his chin, then scratched it.

The Governor had recommended one, she said, and now it was up to the Board to decide whether or not they would pass the recommendation on to the Palace. And on the word Palace she cast a restrained glance at di Salis, who at once smiled brightly but modestly, like a celebrity at a chat show. His strands of grey hair were slicked down with cream, and looked (said Connie later) as though they had been basted for the oven.

'So you will understand,' said Connie, in the precise accents of a female newsreader, 'that in order to protect our noblest institutions against embarrassment, a very thorough enquiry has to be made.'

'The Palace,' Mr Hibbert echoed, with a wink in di Salis's direction. 'Well I'm blowed. The Palace, hear that, Doris?' He was very old. The record said eighty-one, but his features had reached the age where they were once more unweathered. He wore a clerical dog-collar and a tan cardigan with leather patches on the elbows and a shawl around his shoulders. The background of the grey sea made a halo round his white hair. 'Sir Drake Ko,' he said. 'That's one thing I'd not thought of, I will say.' His North Country accent was so pure that, like his snowy hair, it could have been put on. 'Sir Drake,' he repeated. 'Well I'm blowed. Eh, Doris?'

A daughter sat with them, thirty to forty-odd, blonde, and she wore a yellow frock and powder but no lipstick. Since girlhood, nothing seemed to have happened to her face, beyond a steady fading of its hopes. When she spoke she blushed, but she rarely spoke. She had made pastries, and sandwiches as thin as handkerchiefs, and seed-

cake on a doily. To strain the tea she used a piece of muslin with beads to weight it stitched round the border. From the ceiling hung a pronged parchment lampshade made in the shape of a star. An upright piano stood along one wall with the score of 'Lead Kindly Light' open on its stand. A sampler of Kipling's If hung over the empty fire grate, and the velvet curtains on either side of the sea window were so heavy they might have been there to screen off an unused part of life. There were no books, there was not even a Bible. There was a very big colour television set and there was a long line of Christmas cards hung laterally over string; wings downward, like shot birds halfway to hitting the ground. There was nothing to recall the China coast, unless it was the shadow of the winter sea. It was a day of no weather and no wind. In the garden, cacti and shrubs waited dully in the cold. Walkers went quickly on the promenade.

They would like to take notes, Connie added: for it is Circus folklore that when the sound is being stolen, notes should be taken, both as fallback and for cover.

'Oh, you write away,' Mr Hibbert said encouragingly. 'We're not all elephants, are we, Doris? Doris is, mind, wonderful her memory is, good as her mother's.'

'So what we'd like to do first,' said Connie - careful all the same to match the old man's pace - 'if we may, is what we do with all character witnesses, as we call them, we'd like to establish exactly how long you've known Mr Ko, and the circumstances of your relationship with him.'

Describe your access to Dolphin, she was saying, in a somewhat different language.

Talking of others, old men talk about themselves, studying their image in vanished mirrors.

'I was born to the calling,' Mr Hibbert said. 'My grandfather, he was called. My father, he had, oh a big parish in Macclesfield. My uncle died when he was twelve, but he still took the Pledge, didn't he, Doris? I was in missionary training-school at twenty. By twenty-four I'd set sail for Shanghai to join the Lord's Life Mission. The Empire Queen she was called. We'd more waiters than passengers the way I remember it. Oh dear.'

He aimed to spend a few years in Shanghai teaching and learning the language, he said, and then with luck transfer to the China Inland Mission and move to the interior.

'I'd have liked that. I'd have liked the challenge. I've always liked the Chinese. The Lord's Life wasn't posh, but it did a job. Now those Roman schools, well they were more like your

monasteries, and with all that entails,' said Mr Hibbert.

Di Salis, the sometime Jesuit, gave a dim smile.

'Now we'd got our kids in from the streets,' he said. 'Shanghai was a rare old hotchpotch, I can tell you. We'd everything and everyone. Gangs, corruption, prostitution galore, we'd politics, money and greed and misery. All human life was there, wasn't it, Doris? She wouldn't remember, really. We went back after the war, didn't we, but they soon chucked us out again. She wasn't above eleven, even then, were you? There weren't the places left after that, well not like Shanghai, so we came back here. But we like it, don't we, Doris?' said Mr Hibbert, very conscious of speaking for both of them. 'We like the air. That's what we like.'

'Very much,' said Doris, and cleared her throat with a cough into her large fist.

'So we'd fill up with whatever we could get, that's what it came to,' he resumed. 'We had old Miss Fong. Remember Daisy Fong, Doris? Course you do - Daisy and her bell? Well she wouldn't really. My, how the time goes, though. A Pied Piper, that's what Daisy was, except it was a bell, and her not a man, and she was doing God's work even if she did fall later. Best convert I ever had, till the Japs came. She'd go down the streets, Daisy would, ringing the daylights out of that bell. Sometimes old Charlie Wan would go along with her, sometimes I'd go, we'd choose the docks or the nightclub areas - behind the Bund maybe - Blood Alley we called that street, remember, Doris? - she wouldn't really - and old Daisy would ring her bell, ring, ring!' He burst out laughing at the memory: he saw her before him quite clearly, for his hand was unconsciously making the vigorous movements of the bell. Di Salis and Connie politely joined in his laughter,

but Doris only frowned. 'Rue de Jaffe, that was the worst spot. In the French concession not surprisingly, where the houses of sin were. Well they were everywhere really, Shanghai was jam-packed with them. Sin City they called it. And they were right. Then a few kids gathered and she'd ask them: 'Any of you lost your mothers?' And you'd get a couple. Not all at once, here one, there one. Some would try it on, like, for the rice supper, then get sent home with a cuff. But we'd always find a few real ones, didn't we, Doris, and bit by bit we had a school going, forty-four we had by the end, didn't we? Some boarders, not all. Bible Class, the three R's, a bit of geography and history. That's all we could manage.'

Restraining his impatience, di Salis had fixed his gaze on the grey sea and kept it there. But Connie had arranged her face in a steady smile of admiration, and her eyes never left the old man's face.

'That's how Daisy found the Ko's,' he went on, oblivious of his erratic sequence. 'Down in the docks, didn't she, Doris, looking for their mother. They'd come up from Swatow, the two of them. When was that? Nineteen thirty-six I suppose. Young Drake was ten or eleven, and his brother Nelson was eight, thin as wire they were; hadn't had a square meal for weeks. They became rice Christians overnight, I can tell you! Mind you, they hadn't names in those days, not English naturally. They were boat people, Chiu Chow. We never really found out about the mother, did we, Doris? Killed by the guns, they said. Killed by the guns. Could have been Japanese guns, could have been Kuomintang. We never got to the bottom of it, why should we? The Lord had her and that was that. Might as well stop all the questions and get on with it. Little Nelson had his arm all messed. Shocking really. Broken bone sticking through his sleeve, I suppose the guns

did that as well. Drake, he was holding Nelson's good hand, and he wouldn't let it go for love nor money at first, not even for the lad to eat. We used to say they'd one good hand between them, remember, Doris? Drake would sit there at table clutching on to him, shovelling rice into him for all he was worth. We had the doctor in: he couldn't separate them. We just had to put up with it. You'll be Drake, I said. And you'll be Nelson, because you're both brave sailors, how's that? It was your mother's idea, wasn't it, Doris? She'd always wanted boys.'

Doris looked at her father, started to say something, and changed her mind.

'They used to stroke her hair,' the old man said, in a slightly mystified voice. 'Stroke your mother's hair and ring old Daisy's bell, that's what they liked. They'd never seen blonde hair before. Here, Doris, how about a drop more saw? Mine's run

cold so I'm sure theirs has. Saw's Shanghainese for tea,' he explained. 'In Canton they call it cha. We've kept some of the old words, I don't know why.'

With an exasperated hiss, Doris bounded from the room, and Connie seized the opportunity to speak.

'Now, Mr Hibbert, we have no note of a brother till now,' she said, in a slightly reproachful tone. 'He was younger, you say. Two years younger? Three?'

'No note of Nelson?' The old man was amazed. 'Why, he loved him! Drake's whole life, Nelson was. Do anything for him. No note of Nelson, Doris?'

But Doris was in the kitchen, fetching saw.

Referring to her notes, Connie gave a strict smile.

'I'm afraid it's we who are to blame, Mr Hibbert, I see here that Government House has left a blank against brothers and sisters. There'll be one or two red faces in Hong Kong quite shortly, I can tell you. You don't happen to remember Nelson's date of birth, I suppose? Just to shortcut things?'

'No, my goodness! Daisy Fong would remember of course, but she's long gone. Gave them all birthdays, Daisy did, even when they didn't know them themselves.'

Di Salis hauled on his ear lobe, pulling his head down. 'Or his Chinese forenames?' he blurted in his high voice. 'They might be useful, if one's checking?'

Mr Hibbert was shaking his head. 'No note of Nelson! Bless my soul! You can't really think of Drake, not without little Nelson at his side. Went together like bread and cheese, we used to say. Being orphans, naturally.'

From the hall, they heard a telephone ringing and, to the secret surprise of both Connie and di Salis, a distinct 'Oh hell' from Doris in the kitchen as she dashed to answer it. They heard clippings of angry conversation against the mounting whimper of a tea-kettle. 'Well, why isn't it? Well if it's the bloody brakes, why say it's the clutch? No, we don't want a new car. We want the old one repaired for God's sake.' With a loud 'Christ' she rang off, and returned to the kitchen and the screaming kettle.

'Nelson's Chinese forenames,' Connie prompted gently, through her smile, but the old man shook his head.

'You'd have to ask old Daisy that,' he said. 'And she's long in Heaven, bless her.' Di Salis seemed about to contest the old man's claim to ignorance, but Connie shut him up with a look. Let him run, she was urging. Force him and we'll lose the

whole match.

The old man's chair was on a swivel.

Unconsciously, he had worked his way clockwise, and now he was talking to the sea.

'They were like chalk and cheese,' Mr Hibbert said. 'I never saw two brothers so different, nor so faithful, and that's a fact.'

'Different in what way?' Connie asked invitingly.

'Little Nelson now, he was frightened of the cockroaches. That was the first thing. We didn't have your modern sanitation, naturally. We'd to send them down to the hut and, oh dear, those cockroaches, they flew about that hut like bullets! Nelson wouldn't go near the place. His arm was mending well enough, he was eating like a fighting cock, but that lad would hold himself in for days on end rather than go inside the hut. Your mother promised him the moon if he'd go.'

Daisy Fong took a stick to him and I can see his eyes still, he'd look at you sometimes and clench his one good fist and you'd think he'd turn you to stone, that Nelson was a rebel from the day he was born. Then one day we looked out of the window and there they were. Drake with his arm round little Nelson's shoulder, leading him down the path to keep him company while he did his business. Notice how they walk different, the boat children?' he asked brightly, as if he saw them now. 'Bow-legged from the cramp.'

The door was barged open and Doris came in with a tray of fresh tea, making a clatter as she set it down. 'Singing was just the same,' he said and fell silent again, gazing at the sea.

'Singing hymns?' Connie prompted brightly, glancing at the polished piano with its empty candleholders.

'Drake, he'd belt anything out as long as your

mother was at the piano. Carols. There is a green hill . Cut his own throat for your mother, Drake would. But young Nelson, I never heard him sing one note.'

'You heard him later all right,' Doris reminded him harshly, but he preferred not to notice her.

'You'd take his lunch away, his supper, but he'd not even say his Amens. He'd a real quarrel with God from the start.' He laughed with sudden freshness. 'Well those are your real believers, I always say. The others are just polite. There's no true conversion, not without a quarrel.'

'Damn garage,' Doris muttered, still fuming after her telephone can, as she hacked at the seed-cake.

'Here! Is your driver all right?' Mr Hibbert cried. 'Shall Doris take out to him? He must be freezing to death out there! Bring him in, go on!' But before either of them could answer, Mr Hibbert

had started talking about his war. Not Drake's war, nor Nelson's, but his own, in unjoined scraps of graphic memory. 'Funny thing was, there was a lot who thought the Japs were just the ticket. Teach those upstart Chinese Nationalists where to get off. Let alone the Communists, of course. Oh, it took quite a while for the scales to fall, I can tell you. Even after the bombardments started. European shops closed, Taipans evacuated their families, Country Club became a hospital. But there were still the ones who said don't worry . Then one day, bang, they'd locked us up, hadn't they, Doris. And killed your mother into the bargain. She'd not the stamina, had she, not after her tuberculosis. Still, those Ko brothers were better off than most, for all that.'

'Oh. Why was that?' Connie enquired, all interest.

'They'd the knowledge of Jesus to guide and comfort them, hadn't they?'

'Of course,' said Connie.

'Naturally,' di Salis chimed, linking his fingers and hauling at them. 'Indeed they had,' he said unctuously.

So with the Japs, as he called them, the mission closed and Daisy Fong with her handbell led the children to join the stream of refugees, who by cart, bus or train, but mostly on foot, were taking the trail to Shangjao and finally to Chungking where Chiang's Nationalists had set up their temporary capital.

'He can't go on too long,' Doris warned at one point, in an aside to Connie. 'He gets gaga.'

'Oh yes I can, dear,' Mr Hibbert corrected her with a fond smile. 'I've had my share of life now. I can do what I like.'

They drank the tea and talked about the garden, which had been a problem ever since they settled here.

'They tell us, get the ones with silver leaves, they stand the salt. I don't know, do we, Doris? They don't seem to take, do they?'

With his wife's death, Mr Hibbert somehow said, his own life had ended too: he was marking time until he joined her. He had had a living in the north of England for a while. After that he'd done a bit of work in London, propagating the Bible.

'Then we came south, didn't we, Doris? I don't know why.'

'For the air,' she said.

'There'll be a party, will there, at the Palace?' Mr Hibbert asked. 'I suppose Drake might even put us down for invites. Think of that, Doris. You'd

like that. A Royal Garden Party. Hats.'

'But you did return to Shanghai,' Connie reminded him eventually, shuffling her notes to call him back. 'The Japanese were defeated, Shanghai was reopened and back you went. Without your wife, of course, but you returned all the same.'

'Oh ay, we went.'

'So you saw the Ko's again. You all met up and you had a marvellous old natter, I'm sure. Is that what happened, Mr Hibbert?'

For a moment it seemed he hadn't taken in the question, but suddenly with a delayed action he laughed. 'By Jove and weren't they real little men by then, too. Fly as fly they were! And after the girls, saving your presence, Doris. I always say Drake would have married you, dear, if you'd given him any hope.'

'Oh honestly, Dad,' Doris muttered and scowled at the floor.

'And Nelson, oh my he was the firebrand!' He drank his tea with the spoon, carefully, as if he were feeding a bird. 'Where Missie? His first question that was, Drake's. He wanted your mother. Where Missie? He'd forgotten all his English, so'd Nelson. I'd to give them lessons later. So I told him. He'd seen enough of death by then, that was for sure. Wasn't as if he didn't believe in it. Missie dead, I said. Nothing else to say. She's dead, Drake, and she's with God. I never saw him weep before or since, but he wept then and I loved him for it. I lose two mothers, he says to me. Mother dead, now Missie dead. We prayed for her, what else can you do? Little Nelson now, he didn't cry or pray. Not him. He never took to her the way Drake did. Nothing personal. She was enemy. We all were.'

'We being who precisely, Mr Hibbert?' di Salis asked coaxingly.

'Europeans, capitalists, missionaries: all of us carpetbaggers who were there for their souls, or their labour, or their silver. All of us,' Mr Hibbert repeated, without the least hint of rancour.

'Exploiters. That's how he saw us. Right, in a way, too.' The conversation hung awkwardly for a moment till Connie carefully retrieved it.

'So anyway, you reopened the mission, and you stayed till the Communist takeover of forty-nine, I assume, and for those four years at least you were able to keep a fatherly eye on Drake and Nelson. Is that how it went, Mr Hibbert?' she asked, pen poised.

'Oh, we hung the lamp on the door again, yes. In forty-five, we were jubilant, same as anyone else. The fighting had stopped, the Japs were beaten, the refugees could come home. Hugging in the

street, there was, the usual. We'd money, reparation I suppose, a grant. Daisy Fong came back, but not for long. For the first year or two the surface held, but not really, even then. We were there as long as Chiang Kai-shek could govern - well, he was never much of a one for that, was he? By forty-seven we'd the Communism out on the streets - and by forty-nine it was there to stay. International Settlement long gone, of course, concessions too, and a good thing. The rest went slowly. You got the blind ones, as usual, who said the old Shanghai would go on for ever, same as you did with the Japs. Shanghai had corrupted the Manchus, they said; the warlords, the Kuomintang, the Japanese, the British. Now she'd corrupt the Communists. They were wrong of course. Doris and me - well, we didn't believe in corruption, did we, not as a solution to China's problems, nor did your mother. So we came home.'

'And the Ko's?' Connie reminded him, while Doris noisily hauled some knitting out of a brown paper bag.

The old man hesitated, and this time it was not senility, perhaps, which slowed his narrative, but doubt. 'Well, yes,' he conceded, after an awkward gap. 'Yes, rare adventures those two had, I can tell you.'

'Adventures,' Doris echoed angrily, as she clicked her knitting needles. 'Rampages more like.'

The light was clinging to the sea, but inside the room it was dying and the gas fire pattered like a distant motor.

Several times, escaping from Shanghai, Drake and Nelson were separated, the old man said. When they couldn't find each other they ate their hearts out till they did. Nelson, the young one, he got all the way to Chungking without a scratch,

surviving starvation, exhaustion and hellish air bombardments which killed thousands of civilians. But Drake, being older, was drafted into Chiang's army, though Chiang did nothing but run away, hoping that the Communists and the Japanese would kill each other.

'Charged all over the shop, Drake did, trying to find the front and worrying himself to death about Nelson. And of course Nelson, well, he was twiddling his thumbs in Chungking wasn't he, boning up on his ideological reading. They'd even the New China Daily there, he told me afterwards, and published with Chiang's agreement. Fancy that! There was a few others of his mind around, and in Chungking they got their heads together rebuilding the world for when the war ended, and one day, thank God, it did.'

In nineteen forty-five, said Mr Hibbert simply, their separation was ended by a miracle: 'One

chance in thousands, it was, millions. That road back littered with streams of lorries, carts, troops, guns, all pouring toward the coast, and there was Drake running up and down like a madman: Have you seen my brother? '

The drama of the instant suddenly touched the preacher in him, and his voice lifted.

'And one little dirty fellow put his arm on Drake's elbow. Here. You. Ko. Like he's asking for a light. Your brother's two trucks back, talking the hindlegs off a bunch of Hakka Communists. Next thing, they're in each other's arms and Drake won't let Nelson out of his sight till they're back in Shanghai and then not!'

'So they came to see you,' Connie suggested cosily.

'When Drake got back to Shanghai, he'd one thing in his mind and one only. Brother Nelson should

have a formal education. Nothing else on God's good earth mattered to Drake except Nelson's schooling. Nothing. Nelson must go to school.' The old man's hand thudded on the chair arm. 'One of the brothers at least would make the grade. Oh, he was adamant, Drake was! And he did it,' said the old man. 'Drake swung it. He would. He was a real fixer by then. Drake was nineteen years of age, odd, when he came back from the war. Nelson was going on seventeen, and worked night and day too - on his studies, of course. Same as Drake did, but Drake worked with his body.'

'He was a crook,' Doris said under her breath. 'He joined a gang and stole. When he wasn't pawing me.'

Whether Mr Hibbert heard her, or whether he was simply answering a standard objection in her was not clear.

'Now Doris, you must see those Triads in perspective,' he corrected her. 'Shanghai was a city state. It was run by a bunch of merchant princes, robber barons and worse. There were no unions, no law and order, life was cheap and hard and I doubt Hong Kong's that different today once you scratch the surface. Some of those so-called English gentlemen would have made your Lancashire mill-owner into a shining example of Christian charity by comparison.' The mild rebuke administered, he returned to Connie and his narrative. Connie was familiar to him: the archetypal lady in the front pew: big, attentive, in a hat, listening indulgently to the old man's every word.

'They'd come round to tea, see, five o'clock, the brothers. I'd to have everything ready, the food on the table, lemonade they liked, called it soda. Drake came in from the docks, Nelson from his books, and they'd eat not hardly talking, then

back to work, wouldn't they, Doris? They'd dug out some legendary hero, the scholar Che Yin. Che Yin was so poor he'd had to teach himself to read and write by the light of the fireflies. They'd go on about how Nelson was to emulate him. Come on Che Yin, I'd say, have another bun to keep your strength up. They'd laugh a bit and away they'd go again. Bye bye, Che Yin, off you go. Now and then when his mouth wasn't too full, Nelson would have a go at me on the politics. My, he'd some ideas! Nothing we could have taught him, I can tell you, we didn't know enough. Money the root of all evil, well I'd never deny that! I'd been preaching it myself for years! Brotherly love, comradeship, religion the opiate of the masses, well I couldn't go along with that, but clericalism, high church baloney, popery, idolatry - well, he wasn't too far wrong there either, the way I saw it. He'd a few bad words against us British too, not but what we deserved

them, I dare say.'

'Didn't stop him eating your food, did it?' Doris said in another low-toned aside. 'Or renouncing his religious background. Or smashing the mission to pieces.'

But the old man only smiled patiently. 'Doris, my dear, I have told you before and I'll tell you again. The Lord reveals himself in many ways. So long as good men are prepared to go out and seek for truth and justice and brotherly love, He'll not be kept waiting too long outside the door.'

Colouring, Doris dug away at her knitting.

'She's right of course. Nelson did smash up the mission. Renounced his religion too.' A cloud of grief threatened his old face for a moment, till laughter suddenly triumphed. 'And my billy-oh didn't Drake make him smart for it! Didn't he give him a dressing down though! Oh dear, oh dear!

Politics, says Drake. You can't eat them, you can't sell them and saving Doris's presence you can't sleep with them! All you can do with them is smash temples and kill the innocent! I've never seen him so angry. And gave Nelson a hiding, he did! Drake had learned a thing or two down in the docks, I can tell you!

'And you must,' di Salis hissed, snakelike in the gloom. 'You must tell us everything. It's your duty.'

'A student procession,' Mr Hibbert resumed. 'Torchlight, after the curfew, group of Communists out on the streets for a shindy. Early forty-nine, spring it would have been I suppose, things were just beginning to hot up.' In contrast to his earlier ramblings, Mr Hibbert's narrative style had become unexpectedly concise. 'We were

sitting by the fire, weren't we, Doris? Fourteen, Doris was, or was it fifteen? We used to love a fire, even when there wasn't the need, took us home to Macclesfield. And we hear this clattering and chanting outside. Cymbals, whistles, gongs, bells, drums, oh, a shocking din. I'd a notion something like this might have been happening. Little Nelson, he was forever warning me in his English lessons. You go home, Mr Hibbert. You're a good man, he used to say, bless him. You're a good man but when the floodgates burst, the water will cover the good and the bad alike. He'd a lovely turn of phrase, Nelson, when he wanted. It went with his faith. Not invented. Felt. Daisy, I said - Daisy Fong, that was, she was sitting with us, her as rang the bell - Daisy, you and Doris go to the back courtyard, I think we're about to have company. Next thing I knew, smash, someone had tossed a stone through the window. We heard voices, of course, shouting,

and I picked out young Nelson even then, just from his voice. He'd the Chiu Chow and the Shanghainese, of course, but he was using Shanghainese to the lads, naturally. Condemn the imperialist running dogs! he's yelling. Down with the religious hyenas! Oh, the slogans they dream up! They sound all right in Chinese but shove'em into English and they're rubbish. Then the door goes and in they come.'

'They smashed the cross,' said Doris, pausing to glare at her pattern.

It was Hibbert this time, not his daughter, who startled his audience with his earthiness.

'They smashed a damn sight more than that, Doris!' Mr Hibbert rejoined cheerfully. 'They smashed the lot. Pews, the Table, the piano, chairs, lamps, hymn books, Bibles. Oh, they'd a real old go. I can tell you. Proper little pigs, they were. Go on, I says. Help yourselves. What man

hath put together will perish, but you'll not destroy God's word, not if you chop the whole place up for matchwood. Nelson, he wouldn't look at me, poor lad. I could have wept for him. When they'd gone, I looked round and I saw old Daisy Fong standing there in the doorway and Doris behind her. She'd been watching, had Daisy. Enjoying it. I could see it in her eyes. She was one of them, at heart. Happy. Daisy, I said. Pack your things and go. In this life you can give yourself or withhold yourself as you please, my dear. But never lend yourself. That way, you're worse than a spy. '

While Connie beamed her agreement, di Salis gave a squeaky, offended wheeze. But the old man was really enjoying himself.

'Well, so we sat down, me and Doris here, and we'd a bit of a cry together, I don't mind admitting, hadn't we, Doris? I'm not ashamed of

tears, never have been. We missed your mother sorely. Knelt down, had a pray. Then we started clearing up. Difficult to know where to begin. Then in comes Drake!' He shook his head in wonder. ' Good evening, Mr Hibbert, he says, in that deep voice of his, plus a bit of my North Country that always made us laugh. And behind him, there's little Nelson standing with a brush and pan in his hand. He'd still that crooked arm, I suppose he has now, smashed in the bombs when he was little, but it didn't stop him brushing. I can tell you. That's when Drake went for him, oh cursing him like a navy! I'd never heard him like it. Well, he was a navy wasn't he, in a manner of speaking?' He smiled serenely at his daughter. 'Lucky he spoke the Chiu Chow, eh, Doris? I only understand the half of it myself, not that, but my hat! F-ing and blinding like I don't know what.'

He paused, and closed his eyes a moment, either in prayer or tiredness.

'It wasn't Nelson's fault, of course. Well we knew that already. He was a leader. Face was involved. They'd started marching, nowhere much in mind. then somebody calls to him: Hey! Mission boy! Show us where your loyalties are now! So he did. He had to. Didn't stop Drake lamming into him, all the same. They cleaned up, we went to bed, and the two lads slept on the chapel floor in case the mob came back. Came down in the morning, there were the hymn books all piled up neatly, those that had survived, same with the Bibles. They'd fixed a cross up, fashioned it themselves. Even patched up the piano, though not to tune it, naturally.'

Winding himself into a fresh knot, di Salis put a question. Like Connie, he had a notebook open, but he had not yet written anything in it.

'What was Nelson's discipline at this time?' he demanded, in his nasal indignant way, and held

his pen ready to write.

Mr Hibbert gave a puzzled frown.

'Why, the Communist Party, naturally.'

As Doris whispered 'Oh Daddy' into her knitting, Connie hastily translated.

'What was Nelson studying, Mr Hibbert, and where?'

'Ah discipline. That kind of discipline!' Mr Hibbert resumed his plainer style.

He knew the answer exactly. What else had he and Nelson to talk about in their English lessons - apart from the Communist gospel, he asked - but Nelson's own ambitions? Nelson's passion was engineering. Nelson believed that technology, not Bibles, would lead China out of feudalism.

'Shipbuilding, roads, railways, factories: that was Nelson. The Angel Gabriel with a slide-rule and a white collar and a degree. That's who he was, in his mind.'

Mr Hibbert did not stay in Shanghai long enough to see Nelson achieve this happy state, he said, because Nelson did not graduate till fifty-one -

Di Salis's pen scratched wildly on the notebook.

'- but Drake, who'd scraped and scrounged for him those six years,' said Mr Hibbert - over Doris's renewed references to the Triads - 'Drake stuck it out, and he had his reward, same as Nelson did. He saw that vital piece of paper go into Nelson's hand, and he knew his job was done and he could get out, just like he'd always planned.'

Di Salis in his excitement was growing positively avid. His ugly face had sprung fresh patches of

colour and he was fidgeting desperately on his chair.

'And after graduating - what then?' he said urgently. 'What did he do? What became of him? Go on, please. Please go on.'

Amused by such enthusiasm, Mr Hibbert smiled. Well, according to Drake, he said, Nelson had first joined the shipyards as a draughtsman, working on blueprints and building projects, and learning like mad whatever he could from the Russian technicians who'd poured in since Mao's victory. Then in fifty-three, if Mr Hibbert's memory served him correctly, Nelson was privileged to be chosen for further training at the Leningrad University in Russia, and he stayed on there till, well, late fifties anyway.

'Oh, he was like a dog with two tails, Drake was, by the sound of him!' Mr Hibbert could not have looked more proud if it had been his own son he

was talking of.

Di Salis leaned suddenly forward, even presuming, despite cautionary glances from Connie, to jab his pen in the old man's direction. 'So after Leningrad: what did they do with him then?'

'Why, he came back to Shanghai, naturally,' said Mr Hibbert with a laugh. 'And promoted, he was, after the learning he'd acquired, and the standing: a shipbuilder, Russian taught, a technologist, an administrator! Oh, he loved those Russians! Specially after Korea. They'd machines, power, ideas, philosophy. His promised land, Russia was. He looked up to them like -' His voice, and his zeal, both died. 'Oh dear,' he muttered, and stopped, unsure of himself for the second time since they had listened to him. 'But that couldn't last for ever could it? Admiring Russia: how long was that fashionable in Mao's new wonderland?'

Doris dear, get me a shawl.'

'You're wearing it,' Doris said.

Tactlessly, stridently, di Salis still bore in on him. He nothing now except the answers: not even for the notebook open on his lap.

'He returned,' he piped. 'Very well. He rose in the hierarchy. He was Russian trained, Russia oriented. Very well. What comes next?'

Mr Hibbert looked at di Salis for a long time. There was no guile in his face, and none in his gaze. He looked at him as a clever child might, without the hindrance of sophistication. And it was suddenly clear that Mr Hibbert didn't trust di Salis any more and, indeed, that he didn't like him.

'He's dead, young man,' Mr Hibbert said finally, and swivelling his chair, stared at the sea view. In the room it was already half dark, and most of the

light came from the gas fire. The grey beach was empty. On the wicket gate a single seagull perched black and vast against the last strands of evening sky.

'You said he still had his crooked arm,' di Salis snapped straight back. 'You said you supposed he still had. You said it about now! I heard it in your voice!'

'Well now, I think we have taxed Mr Hibbert quite enough,' said Connie brightly and, with a sharp glance at di Salis, stooped for her bag. But di Salis would have none of it.

'I don't believe him!' he cried in his shrill voice. 'How? When did Nelson die? Give us the dates!'

But the old man only drew his shawl more closely round him, and kept his eyes to the sea.

'We were in Durham,' Doris said, still looking at her knitting, though there was not the light to knit by. 'Drake drove up and saw us in his big chauffeur-driven car. He took his henchman with him, the one he calls Tiu. They were fellow crooks together in Shanghai. Wanted to show off. Brought me a platinum cigarette lighter, and a thousand pounds in cash for Dad's church and flashed his OBE at us in its case, took me into a corner and asked me to come to Hong Kong and be his mistress, right under Dad's nose. Bloody sauce! He wanted Dad's signature on something. A guarantee. Said he was going to read law at Gray's Inn. At his age, I ask you! Forty-two! Talk about mature student! He wasn't, of course. It was all just face and talk as usual. Dad said to him: How's Nelson? and -'

'Just one minute, please,' Di Salis had made yet another ill-judged interruption. 'The date? When did all this happen, please? I must have dates!'

'Sixty-seven. Dad was almost retired, weren't you, Dad?'

The old man did not stir.

'All right, sixty-seven. What month? Be precise, please!'

He all but said 'be precise, woman', and he was making Connie seriously anxious. But when she again tried to restrain him, he ignored her.

'April,' Doris said after some thought. 'We'd just had Dad's birthday. That's why he brought the thousand quid for the church. He knew Dad wouldn't take it for himself because Dad didn't like the way Drake made his money.'

'All right. Good. Well done. April. So Nelson died pre-April sixty-seven. What details did Drake supply of the circumstances? Do you remember that?'

'None. No details. I told you. Dad asked, and he just said dead as if Nelson was a dog. So much for brotherly love. Dad didn't know where to look. It nearly broke his heart and there was Drake not giving a hoot. I have no brother. Nelson is dead. And Dad still praying for Nelson, weren't you, Dad?'

This time the old man spoke. With the dusk, his voice had grown considerably in force.

'I prayed for Nelson and I pray for him still,' he said bluntly. 'When he was alive I prayed that one way or another he would do God's work in the world. I believed he had it in him to do great things. Drake, he'd manage anywhere. He's tough. But the light of the door at the Lord's Life Mission would not have burned in vain, I used to think, if Nelson Ko succeeded in helping to lay the foundation of a just society in China. Nelson might call it Communism. Call it what he likes.'

But for three long years your mother and I gave him our Christian love, and I won't have it said, Doris, not by you or anyone, that the light of God's love can be put out forever. Not by politics, not by the sword.' He drew a long breath, 'And now he's dead, I pray for his soul, same as I do for your mother's,' he said, sounding strangely less convinced. 'If that's popery, I don't care.'

Connie had actually risen to go. She knew the limits, she had the eye, and she was scared of the way di Salis was hammering on. But di Salis on the scent knew no limits at all.

'So it was a violent death, was it? Politics and the sword, you said. Which politics? Did Drake tell you that? Actual killings were relatively rare, you know. I think you're holding out on us!'

Di Salis also was standing, but at Mr Hibbert's side, and he was yapping these questions downward at the old man's white head as if he

were acting in a Sarratt playlet on interrogation.

'You've been so very kind,' said Connie gushingly to Doris. 'Really we've all we could possibly need and more. I'm sure it will all go through with the knighthood,' she said, in a voice pregnant with message for di Salis. 'Now away we go and thank you both enormously.'

But this time it was the old man himself who frustrated her.

'And the year after, he lost his other Nelson too, God help him, his little boy,' he said. 'He'll be a lonely man, will Drake. That was his last letter to us, wasn't it, Doris? Pray for my little Nelson, Mr Hibbert, he wrote. And we did. Wanted me to fly over and conduct the funeral. I couldn't do it, I don't know why. I never much held with money spent on funerals, to be honest.'

At this, di Salis literally pounced: and with a truly

terrible glee. He stooped right over the old man, and he was so animated that he grabbed a fistful of shawl in his feverish little hand.

'Ah! Ah now! But did he ever ask you to pray for Nelson senior? Answer me that.'

'No,' the old man said simply. 'No, he didn't.'

'Why not? Unless he wasn't really dead, of course! There are more ways than one of dying in China, aren't there, and not all of them are fatal! Disgraced: is that a better expression?'

His squeaky words flew about the fire-lit room like ugly spirits.

'They're to go, Doris,' the old man said calmly to the sea. 'See that driver right, won't you, dear? I'm sure we should have taken out to him, but never mind.'

They stood in the hall, making their goodbyes.

The old man had stayed in his chair and Doris had closed the door on him. Sometimes, Connie's sixth sense was frightening.

'The name Liese doesn't mean anything to you, does it, Miss Hibbert?' she asked, buckling her enormous plastic coat. 'We have a reference to a Liese in Mr Ko's life.'

Doris's unpainted face made an angry scowl.

'That's Mum's name,' she said. 'She was German Lutheran. The swine stole that too, did he?'

With Toby Esterhase at the wheel, Connie Sachs and Doc di Salis hurried home to George with their amazing news. At first, on the way, they squabbled about di Salis's lack of restraint. Toby Esterhase particularly was shocked, and Connie seriously feared the old man might write to Ko. But soon the import of their discovery overwhelmed their apprehensions, and they

arrived triumphant at the gates of their secret city.

Safely inside the walls, it was now di Salis's hour of glory. Summoning his family of yellow perils once more, he set in motion a whole variety of enquiries, which sent them scurrying all over London on one false pretext or another, and to Cambridge too. At heart di Salis was a loner. No one knew him, except Connie perhaps and, if Connie didn't care for him, then no one liked him either. Socially he was discordant and frequently absurd. But neither did anyone doubt his hunter's will.

He scoured old records of the Shanghai University of Communications, in Chinese the Chiao Tung - which had a reputation for student Communist militancy after the thirty-nine forty-five war - and concentrated his interest upon the

Department of Marine Studies, which included both administration and ship-building in its curriculum. He drew lists of Party cadre members of both before and after forty-nine, and pored over the scant details of those entrusted with the takeover of big enterprises where technological knowhow was required: in particular the Kiangnan shipyard, a massive affair from which the Kuomintang elements had repeatedly to be purged. Having drawn up lists of several thousand names, he opened files on all those who were known to have continued their studies at Leningrad University and afterwards reappeared at the shipyard in improved positions. A course of shipbuilding at Leningrad took three years. By di Salis's computation, Nelson should have been there from fifty-three to fifty-six and afterwards formally assigned to the Shanghai municipal department in charge of marine engineering, which would then have returned him to

Kiangnan. Accepting that Nelson possessed not only Chinese forenames which were still unknown, but quite possibly had chosen a new surname for himself into the bargain, di Salis warned his helpers that Nelson's biography might be split into two parts, each under a different name. They should watch for dovetailing. He cadged lists of graduates and lists of enrolled students both at Chiao Tung and at Leningrad and set them side by side. China-watchers are a fraternity apart, and their common interests transcend protocol and national differences. Di Salis had connections not only in Cambridge, and in every Oriental archive, but in Rome, Tokyo and Munich as well. He wrote to all of them, concealing his goal in a welter of other questions. Even the Cousins, it turned out later, had unwittingly opened their files to him. He made other enquiries even more arcane. He despatched burrowers to the Baptists, to delve among records

of old pupils at the Mission Schools, on the off-chance that Nelson's Chinese names had, after all, been taken down and filed. He tracked down any chance records of the deaths of mid-ranking Shanghai officials in the shipping industry.

That was the first leg of his labours. The second began with what Connie called the Great Beastly Cultural Revolution of the mid-Sixties and the names of such Shanghainese officials who, in consequence of criminal pro-Russian leanings, had been officially purged, humiliated, or sent to a May 7th school to rediscover the virtues of peasant labour. He also consulted lists of those sent to labour reform camps, but with no great success. He looked for any references, among the Red Guards' harangues, to the wicked influence of a Baptist upbringing upon this or that disgraced official, and he played complicated games with the name of KO. It was at the back of his mind that, in changing his name, Nelson

might have hit upon a different character which retained an internal kinship with the original - either homophonic or symphonetic. But when he tried to explain this to Connie, he lost her.

Connie Sachs was pursuing a different line entirely. Her interest centred on the activities of known Karla-trained talent-spotters working among overseas students at the University of Leningrad in the fifties; and on rumours, never proven, that Karla, as a young Comintern agent, had been lent to the Shanghai Communist underground after the war, to help them rebuild their secret apparatus.

It was in the middle of all this fresh burrowing that a small bombshell was delivered from Grosvenor Square. Mr Hibbert's intelligence was still fresh from the presses, in fact, and the researchers of both families were still frantically at work, when Peter Guillam walked in on Smiley

with an urgent message. He was as usual deep in his own reading, and as Guillam entered he slipped a file into a drawer and closed it.

'It's the Cousins,' Guillam said gently. 'About Brother Ricardo, your favourite pilot. They want to meet with you at the Annexe as soon as possible. I'm to ring back by yesterday.'

'They want what?'

'To meet you. But they use the preposition.'

'Do they? Do they really? Good Lord. I suppose it's the German influence. Or it is old English? Meet with. Well I must say.' And he lumbered off to his bathroom to shave.

Returning to his own room, Guillam found Sam Collins sitting in the soft chair, smoking one of his beastly brown cigarettes and smiling his washable smile.

'Something up?' Sam asked, very leisurely.

'Get the hell out of here,' Guillam snapped.

Sam was in general nosing around a lot too much for Guillam's liking, but that day he had a firm reason for distrusting him. Calling on Lacon at the Cabinet Office to deliver the Circus's monthly imprest account for his inspection, he had been astonished to see Sam emerging from his private office, joking easily with Lacon and Saul Enderby of the Foreign Office.

Chapter 12 - The Resurrection of Ricardo

Before the fall, studiously informal meetings of intelligence partners to the special relationship were held as often as monthly and followed by

what Smiley's predecessor Alleline had liked to call 'a jar'. If it was the American turn to play host, then Alleline and his cohorts, among them the popular Bill Haydon, would be shepherded to a vast rooftop bar, known within the Circus as the planetarium, to be regaled with dry martinis and a view of West London they could not otherwise have afforded. If it was the British turn, then a trestle table was set up in the rumpus room, and a darned damask tablecloth spread over it, and the American delegates were invited to pay homage to the last bastion of clubland spying, and incidentally the birthplace of their own service, while they sipped South African sherry disguised by cut-glass decanters on the grounds that they wouldn't know the difference. For the discussions, there was no agenda and by tradition no notes were taken. Old friends had no need of such devices, particularly since hidden microphones stayed sober and did the job better.

Since the fall, these niceties had for a while stopped dead. Under orders from Martello's headquarters at Langley, Virginia, the 'British liaison', as they knew the Circus, was placed on the arm's-length list, equating it with Yugoslavia and the Lebanon, and for a while the two services in effect passed each other on opposite pavements, scarcely lifting their eyes. They were like an estranged couple in the middle of divorce proceedings. But by the time that grey winter's morning had come along when Smiley and Guillam, in some haste, presented themselves at the front doors of the Legal Advisor's Annexe in Grosvenor Square, a marked thaw was already discernible everywhere, even in the rigid faces of the two Marines who frisked them.

The doors, incidentally, were double, with black grilles over black iron, and gilded feathers on the grilles. The cost of them alone would have kept the entire Circus ticking over for a couple more

days at least. Once inside them, they had the sensation of coming from a hamlet to a metropolis.

Martello's room was very large. There were no windows and it could have been midnight. Above an empty desk an American flag, unfurled as if by a breeze, occupied half the end wall. At the centre of the floor a ring of airline chairs was clustered round a rosewood table, and in one of these sat Martello himself, a burly, cheerful-looking Yale man in a country suit which seemed always out of season. Two quiet men flanked him each as sallow and sincere as the other.

'George, this is good of you,' said Martello heartily, in his warm, confiding voice, as he came quickly forward to receive them. 'I don't need to tell you. I know how busy you are. I know. Sol.' He turned to two strangers sitting across the room, so far unnoticed, the one young like

Martello's quiet men, if less smooth; the other, squat and tough and much older, with a slashed complexion and a crew cut; a veteran of something. 'Sol,' Martello repeated. 'I want you to meet one of the true legends of our profession, Sol: Mr George Smiley. George, this is Sol Eckland, who's high in our fine Drug Enforcement Administration, formerly the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, now rechristened, right Sol? Sol, say hullo to Pete Guillam.'

The elder of the two men put out a hand and Smiley and Guillam each shook it, and it felt like dried bark.

'Sure,' said Martello, looking on with the satisfaction of a matchmaker. 'George, ah, remember Ed Ristow, also in narcotics, George? Paid a courtesy call on you over there a few months back? Well, Sol has taken over from

Ristow. He has the South East Asian sphere. Cy here is with him.'

Nobody remembers names like the Americans, thought Guillam.

Cy was the young one of the two. He had sideburns and a gold watch and he looked like a Mormon missionary: devout, but defensive. He smiled as if smiling had been part of his course, and Guillam smiled in return.

'What happened to Ristow?' Smiley asked, as they sat down.

'Coronary,' growled Sol the veteran, in a voice as dry as his hand. His hair was like wire wool crimped into small trenches. When he scratched it, which he did a lot, it rasped.

'I'm sorry,' said Smiley.

'Could be permanent,' said Sol, not looking at

him, and drew on his cigarette.

Here, for the first time, it passed through Guillam's mind that something fairly momentous was in the air. He caught a hint of real tension between the two American camps. Unheralded replacements, in Guillam's experience of the American scene, were seldom caused by anything as banal as illness. He went so far as to wonder in what way Sol's predecessor might have blotted his copybook.

'Enforcement, ah, naturally has a strong interest in our little joint venture, ah, George,' Martello said, and with this unpromising fanfare, the Ricardo connection was indirectly announced, though Guillam detected there was still a mysterious urge, on the American side, to pretend their meeting was about something different - as witness Martello's vacuous opening comments:

'George, our people in Langley like to work very

closely indeed with their good friends in narcotics,' he declared, with all the warmth of a diplomatic note verbale.

'Cuts both ways,' Sol the veteran growled in confirmation and expelled more cigarette smoke while he scratched his iron-grey hair. He seemed to Guillam at root a shy man, not comfortable here at all. Cy his young sidekick was a lot more at ease:

'It's parameters, Mr Smiley, sir. On a deal like this, you get some areas, they overlap entirely.' Cy's voice was a little too high for his size.

'Cy and Sol have hunted with us before, George,' Martello said, offering yet further reassurance.

'Cy and Sol are family, take my word for it. Langley cuts Enforcement in, Enforcement cuts Langley in. That's the way it goes. Right, Sol?'

'Right,' said Sol.

If they don't go to bed together soon, thought Guillam, they just may claw each other's eyes out instead. He glanced at Smiley and saw that he too was conscious of the strained atmosphere. He sat like his own effigy, a hand on each knee, eyes almost closed as usual, and he seemed to be willing himself into invisibility while the explanation was acted out for him.

'Maybe we should all just get ourselves up to date on the latest details, first,' Martello now suggested, as if he were inviting everyone to wash.

First before what? Guillam wondered.

One of the quiet men used the workname Murphy. Murphy was so fair he was nearly albino. Taking a folder from the rosewood table Murphy began reading from it aloud with great respect in his voice. He held each page singly between his clean fingers.

'Sir, Monday subject flew to Bangkok with Cathay Pacific Airlines, flight details given, and was picked up at the airport by Tan Lee, our reference given, in his personal limousine. They proceeded directly to the Airsea permanent suite at the Hotel Erawan.' He glanced at Sol. 'Tan is managing director of Asian Rice and General, sir, that's Airsea's Bangkok subsidiary, file references appended. They spent three hours in the suite and -'

'Ah, Murphy,' said Martello, interrupting.

'Sir?'

'All that reference given , reference appended . Leave that out, will you? We all know we have files on these guys. Right?'

'Right, sir.'

'Ko alone?' Sol demanded.

'Sir, Ko took his manager Tiu along with him. Tiu goes with him most everywhere.'

Here chancing to look at Smiley again, Guillam intercepted an enquiring glance from him directed at Martello. Guillam had a notion he was thinking of the girl - had she gone too? - but Martello's indulgent smile didn't waver, and after a moment Smiley seemed to accept this, and resumed his attentive pose.

Sol meanwhile had turned to his assistant and the two of them had a brief private exchange:

'Why the hell doesn't somebody bug the damn hotel suite, Cy? What's holding everyone up?'

'We already suggested that to Bangkok, Sol, but they've got problems with the party walls, they got no proper cavities or something.'

'Those Bangkok clowns are drowsy with too much ass. That the same Tan we tried to nail last

year for heroin?'

'Now, that was Tan Ha, Sol. This one's Tan Lee. They have a great lot of Tans out there. Tan Lee's just a front man. He plays link to Fatty Hong in Chiang Mai. It's Hong who has the connections to the growers and the big brokers.'

'Somebody ought to go out and shoot that bastard,' Sol said. Which bastard wasn't quite clear.

Martello nodded at pale Murphy to go on.

'Sir, the three men then drove down to Bangkok port - that's Ko and Tan Lee and Tiu, sir - and they looked at twenty or thirty small coasters tied up along the bank. Then they drove back to Bangkok airport and subject flew to Manila, Philippines, for a cement conference at the Hotel Eden and Bali.'

'Tiu didn't go to Manila?' Martello asked, buying

time.

'No, sir. Flew home,' Murphy replied, and once more Smiley glanced at Martello.

'Cement my ass,' Sol exclaimed. 'Those the boats that do the run up to Hong Kong, Murphy?'

'Yes, sir.'

'We know those boats,' expostulated Sol. 'We been going for these boats for years. Right, Cy?'

'Right.'

Sol had rounded on Martello, as if he were personally to blame. 'They leave harbour clean. They don't take the stuff aboard till they're at sea. Nobody knows which boat will carry, not even the captain of the selected vessel, until the launch pulls alongside, gives them the dope. When they hit Hong Kong waters, they drop the dope overboard with markers and the junks scoop it in.'

He spoke slowly, as if speaking hurt him, forcing each word out hoarsely. 'We been screaming at the Brits for years to shake those junks out, but the bastards are all on the take.'

'That's all we have, sir,' said Murphy, and put down his report.

They were back to the awkward pauses. A pretty girl, armed with a tray of coffee and biscuits, provided a temporary reprieve, but when she left the silence was worse.

'Why don't you just tell him?' Sol snapped finally. 'Otherwise maybe I will.'

Which was when, as Martello would have said, they finally got down to the nitty-gritty.

Martello's manner became both grave and confiding: a family solicitor reading a will to the heirs. 'George, ah, at our request Enforcement here took a kind of a second look at the background and the record of the missing pilot Ricardo, and as we half surmised, they've dug up a fair quantity of material which till now has not come to light as it should have done, owing to various factors. There's no profit, in my view, to pointing the finger at anyone and besides Ed Ristow is a sick man. Let's just agree that, however it happened, the Ricardo thing fell into a small gap between Enforcement and ourselves. That gap has since closed and we'd like to rectify the information for you.'

'Thank you, Marty,' said Smiley patiently.

'Seems Ricardo's alive after all,' Sol declared.

'Seems like it's a prime snafu.'

'A what?' Smiley asked sharply, perhaps before the full significance of Sol's statement had sunk in.

Martello was quick to translate. 'Error, George. Human error. Happens to all of us. Snafu. Even you, okay?'

Guillam was studying Cy's shoes, which had a rubbery gloss and thick welts. Smiley's eyes had lifted to the side wall, where the benevolent features of President Nixon gazed down encouragingly on the triangular union. Nixon had resigned a good six months ago, but Martello seemed rather touchingly determined to tend his lamp. Murphy and his mute companion sat still as confirmands in the presence of the bishop. Only Sol was for ever on the move, alternately scratching at his crimped scalp or sucking on his cigarette like an athletic version of di Salis. He never smiles, thought Guillam extraneously: he's

forgotten how.

Martello continued. 'Ricardo's death is formally recorded in our files as on or round August twenty-one, George, correct?'

'Correct,' said Smiley.

Martello drew a breath and tilted his head the other way as he read his notes. 'However, on September, ah, two couple of weeks after his death, right? - it, ah, seems Ricardo made personal contact with one of the narcotics bureaux in the Asian theatre, then known as BNDD but primarily the same house, okay? Sol would, ah, prefer not to mention which bureau, and I respect that.' The mannerism ah, Guillam decided, was Martello's way of keeping talking while he thought. 'Ricardo offered the bureau his services on a sell-and-tell basis regarding an, ah, opium mission he claimed to have received to fly right over the border into, ah, Red China.'

A cold hand seemed to seize hold of Guillam's stomach at this moment and stay there. His sense of occasion was all the greater following the slow lead-in through so much unrelated detail. He told Molly afterwards that it was as if 'all the threads of the case had suddenly wound themselves together in a single skein' for him. But that was hindsight and he was boasting a little.

Nevertheless the shock - after all the tiptoeing and the speculation and the paperchases - the plain shock of being almost physically projected into the Chinese Mainland: that certainly was real, and required no exaggeration.

Martello was doing his worthy solicitor act again.

'George, I have to fill you in on, ah, a little more of the family background here. During the Laos thing, the Company used a few of the northern

hilltribes for combat purposes, maybe you knew that. Right up there in Burma, know those parts, the Shans? Volunteers, follow me? Lot of those tribes were one-crop communities, ah, opium communities, and in the interests of the war there, the Company had to, ah, well turn a blind eye to what we couldn't change, follow me? These good people have to live and many knew no better and saw nothing wrong in, ah, growing that crop. Follow me?'

'Jesus Christ,' said Sol under his breath. 'Hear that, Cy?'

'I heard, Sol.'

Smiley said he followed.

'This policy, conducted, ah, by the Company, caused a very brief and very temporary rift between the Company on the one side and the, ah, Enforcement people here, formerly the

Bureau of Narcotics. Because, well, while Sol's boys were out to, well, ah, suppress the abuse of drugs, and quite rightly, and, ah, ride down the shipments, which is their job, George, and their duty, it was in the Company's best interest - in the best interest of the war, that is - at this point in time, you follow, George to, well, ah, turn a blind eye.'

'Company played godfather to the hilltribes,' Sol growled. 'Menfolk were all out fighting the war, Company people flew up to the villages, pushed their poppy crops, screwed their women and flew their dope.'

Martello was not so easily thrown. 'Well we think that's overstating things a little, Sol, but the, ah, rift was there and that's the point as far as our friend George is concerned. Ricardo, well he's a tough cookie. He flew a lot of missions for the Company in Laos, and when the war ended, the

Company resettled him and kissed him off and pulled up the ladder. Nobody messes around with those boys when there's no war for them any more. So, ah, maybe at that, the, ah, gamekeeper Ricardo turned into the, ah, poacher Ricardo, if you follow me -'

'Well not absolutely,' Smiley confessed mildly.

Sol had no such scruples about unpalatable truths. 'Long as the war was on, Ricardo carried dope for the Company to keep the home fires burning up in the hill villages. War ended, he carried it for himself. He had the connects and he knew where the bodies were buried. He went independent, that's all.'

'Thank you,' said Smiley, and Sol went back to scratching his crew cut.

For the second time, Martello backed toward the story of Ricardo's embarrassing resurrection.

They must have done a deal between them, thought Guillam. Martello does the talking. 'Smiley's our contact,' Martello would have said. 'We play him our way.'

On the second of September seventy-three, said, Martello, an un-named narcotics agent in the South East Asian theatre, as he insisted on describing him, 'a young man quite new to the field, George', received a nocturnal telephone call at his home from a self-styled Captain Tiny Ricardo, hitherto believed dead, formerly a Laos mercenary with Captain Rocky. Ricardo offered a sizeable quantity of raw opium at standard buy-in rates. In addition to the opium, however, he was offering hot information at what he called a bargain-basement price for a quick sale. That is to say fifty thousand US dollars in small notes, and a West German passport for a one-time journey out. The un-named narcotics agent met Ricardo later that night at a parking lot and they quickly

agreed on the sale of the opium.

'You mean he bought it?' Smiley asked, most surprised.

'Sol tells me there is a, ah, fixed tariff for such deals, right Sol? - known to everyone in the game, George, and, ah, based upon a percentage of the street value of the haul, right?' Sol growled an affirmative. 'The, ah, un-named agent had a standing authority to buy-in at that tariff and he exercised it. No problem. The agent also, ah, expressed himself willing, subject to higher consent, to supply Ricardo with quick-expiry documentation, George' - he meant, it turned out later, a West German passport with only a few days to run - 'in the event, George - an event not yet realised, you follow me - that Ricardo's information prove to be of reasonable value, since policy is to encourage informants at all costs. But be made it clear the agent - that the whole deal -

the passport and the payment for the information - was subject to ratification and authority - of Sol's people back at headquarters. So he bought the opium, but he held on the information. Right, Sol?'

'On the button,' Sol growled.

'Sol, ah, maybe you should handle this part,' Martello said.

When Sol spoke, he kept the rest of himself still for once. Just his mouth moved.

'Our agent asked Ricardo for a teaser so's the information could be evaluated back home. What we call taking it to first base. Ricardo comes up with the story he's been ordered to fly the dope over the border into Red China and bring back an unspecified load in payment. That's what he said. His teaser. He said he knew who was behind the deal, he said he knew the Mister Big of all the

Mister Bigs, they all do. He said he knew all the story, but so do they all, once more. He said he embarked on his journey for the Mainland, chickened out and hedgehopped home over Laos ducking the radar screens. That's all he said. He didn't say where he set out from. He said he owed a favour to the people who sent him, and if they ever found him they'd kick his teeth right up his throat. That's what's in the protocol, word for word. His teeth up his throat. So he was in a hurry, hence the favourable price of fifty grand. He didn't say who the people were, he did not produce one scrap of positive collateral apart from the opium, but he said he had the plane still, hidden, a Beechcraft, and he offered to show this plane to our agent at the next occasion of their meeting, subject to there being serious interest back at headquarters. That's all we have,' said Sol, and devoted himself to his cigarette. 'Opium was a couple of hundred kilos. Good stuff.'

Martello deftly took back the ball:

'So the un-named narcotics agent filed his story, George. And he did what we'd all do. He took down the teaser and he sent it back to headquarters and he told Ricardo to lie low till he heard back from his people. See you in ten days, maybe fourteen. Here's your opium-money, but for information-money you have to wait a little. There's regulations. Follow me?'

Smiley nodded sympathetically, and Martello nodded back at him while he went on talking.

'So here it is. Here's where you get your human error, right? It could be worse but not much. In our game there's two views of history: conspiracy and fuck-up. Here's where we get the fuck-up, no question at all. Sol's predecessor, Ed, now ill, evaluated the material and on the evidence - now you met him, George, Ed Ristow, a good sound guy - and on the evidence available to him, Ed

decided, understandably but wrongly, not to proceed. Ricardo wanted fifty grand. Well, for a major haul I understand that's chickenfeed. But Ricardo, he wanted payment on the nail. A one-time, and out. And Ed - well Ed had responsibilities, and a lot of family trouble, and Ed just didn't see his way to investing that sum of public American money in a character like Ricardo, when no haul is guaranteed, who has all the passes, knows all the fast steps, and is maybe squaring up to take that field agent of Ed's, who is only a young guy, for one hell of a journey. So Ed killed it. No further action. File and forget. All squared away. Buy the opium, but not the rest.'

Maybe it was a real coronary after all, Guillam reflected, marvelling. But with another part of him he knew it could have happened to himself and even had: the pedlar who has the big one, and you let it through your fingers.

Rather than waste time in recrimination, Smiley had quietly moved ahead to the remaining possibilities.

'Where is Ricardo now, Marty?' he asked.

'Not known.'

His next question was much longer in coming, and was scarcely a question so much as a piece of thinking aloud.

'To bring back an unspecified load in payment,' he repeated. 'Are there any theories as to what type of load that might have been?'

'We guessed gold. We don't have second vision, any more than you do,' Sol said harshly.

Here Smiley simply ceased to take part in the proceedings for a while. His face set, his expression became anxious and, to anyone who knew him, inward, and suddenly it was up to

Guillam to keep the ball rolling. To do this, like Smiley, he addressed Martello.

'Ricardo did not give any hint of where he was to deliver his return load?'

'I told you. Pete. That's all we have.'

Smiley was still non-combatant. He sat staring mournfully at his folded hands. Guillam hunted for another question:

'And no hint of the anticipated weight of the return load, either?' he asked.

'Jesus Christ,' said Sol, and, misreading Smiley's attitude, slowly shook his head in wonder at the kind of deadbeat company he was obliged to keep.

'But you are satisfied it was Ricardo who approached your agent?' Guillam asked, still in there, throwing punches.

'One hundred per cent,' said Sol.

'Sol,' Martello suggested, leaning across to him.

'Sol, why don't you just give George a blind copy of that original field report? That way he has everything we have.'

Sol hesitated, glanced at his sidekick, shrugged, and finally with some reluctance drew a flimsy sheet of India paper from a folder on the table beside him, from which he solemnly tore off the signature.

'Off the record,' he growled, and at this point Smiley abruptly revived, and, receiving the report from Sol's hand, studied both sides intently for a while in silence.

'And, where, please, is the un-named narcotics agent who wrote this document,' he enquired finally, looking first at Martello, then at Sol.

Sol scraped his scalp. Cy began shaking his head

in disapproval. Whereas Martello's two quiet men showed no curiosity whatever. Pale Murphy continued reading among his notes, and his colleague gazed blankly at the ex-President.

'Shacked up in a hippy commune north of Katmandu,' Sol growled, through a gush of cigarette smoke. 'Bastard joined the opposition.'

Martello's bright endpiece was wonderfully irrelevant: 'So, ah, that's the reason, George, why our computer has Ricardo dead and buried, George, when the overall record - on reconsideration by our Enforcement friends - gives no grounds for that, ah, assumption.'

So far it had seemed to Guillam that the boot was all on Martello's foot. Sol's boys had made fools of themselves, he was saying, but the Cousins

were nothing if not magnanimous and they were willing to kiss and make up. In the post-coital calm which followed Martello's revelations, this false impression prevailed a little longer.

'So, ah, George, I would say that henceforward, we may count - you, we, Sol here - on the fullest co-operation of all our agencies. I would say there was a very positive side to this. Right, George? Constructive.'

But Smiley in his renewed distraction only lifted his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

'Something on your mind, George?' Martello asked. 'I said, is there something on your mind?'

'Oh. Thank you. Beechcraft,' Smiley said. 'Is that a single-engined plane?'

'Jesus.' said Sol under his breath.

'Twin, George, twin,' said Martello. 'Kind of

executive runabout kind of thing.'

'And the weight of the opium load was four hundred kilos, the report says.'

'Just short of half of one ton, George,' said Martello at his most solicitous. 'A metric ton,' he added doubtfully, to Smiley's shadowed face. 'Not your English ton, George, naturally. Metric.'

'And it would be carried where - the opium. I mean?'

'Cabin,' said Sol. 'Most likely unscrewed the spare seats. Beechcrafts come different shapes. We don't know which this was because we never got to see it.'

Smiley peered once more at the flimsy which he still clutched in his pudgy hand. 'Yes,' he muttered. 'Yes, I suppose they would have done.' And with a gold lead pencil he wrote a small hieroglyphic in the margin before relapsing into

his private reverie.

'Well,' said Martello brightly. 'Guess us worker-bees had better get back to our hives and see where that gets us, right, Pete?'

Guillam was halfway to his feet as Sol spoke. Sol had the rare and rather terrible gift of natural rudeness. Nothing had changed in him. He was in no way out of control. This was the way he talked, this was the way he did business, and other ways patently bored him:

'Jesus Christ, Martello, what kind of game are we playing round here? This is the big one, right? We have put our finger on maybe the most important single narcotics target in the entire South East Asian scene. Okay, so there's liaison. The Company has finally gone to bed with Enforcement because she had to buy us off on the hilltribe thing. Don't think that makes me horny. Okay, so we have a hands-off deal with the Brits

on Hong Kong. But Thailand's ours, so's the Philippines, so's Taiwan, so's the whole damn theatre, so's the war, and the Brits are on their ass. Four months ago the Brits came in and made their pitch. Great. so we roll it to the Brits. What they been doing all the time? Rubbing soap into their pretty faces. So when do they get to shave, for God's sakes? We got money riding on this. We got a whole apparatus standing by, ready to shake out Ko's connections across the hemisphere. We been looking years for a guy like this. And we can nail him. We have enough legislation - boy do we have legislation! - to pin a ten-to-thirty on him and then some! We got drugs on him, we got arms, we got embargoed goods, we got the biggest damn load of Red gold we ever saw Moscow hand to one man in our lives, and we got the first proof ever, if this guy Ricardo is telling a correct story, of a Moscow-subsidised drug-subversion programme which is ready and willing

to carry the battle into Red China in the hopes of doing the same for them as they're already doing for us.'

The outburst had woken Smiley like a douche of water. He was sitting forward on the edge of his chair, the narcotics agent's report crumpled in his hand, and he was staring appalled, first at Sol, finally at Martello.

'Marty,' he muttered. 'Oh my Lord. No.'

Guillam showed greater presence of mind. At least he threw in an objection:

'You'd have to spread half a ton awfully thin, wouldn't you, Sol, to hook eight hundred million Chinese?'

But Sol had no use for humour, or objections either, least of all from some pretty-faced Brit.

'And do we go for his jugular?' he demanded,

keeping straight on course. 'Do we hell. We pussyfoot. We stand on the sidelines. Play it delicate. It's a British ball game. Their territory, their joe, their party. So we weave, we dance around. We float like a butterfly and sting like one. Jesus, if we'd been handling this thing, we'd have had that bastard trussed over a barrel months ago.' Slapping the table with his palm, he used the rhetorical trick of repeating his point in different language. 'For the first time ever we have gotten ourselves a sabre-toothed Soviet Communist corrupter in our sights, pushing dope and screwing up the area and taking Russian money and we can prove it!' It was all addressed to Martello. Smiley and Guillam might not have been there at all. 'And you just remember another thing,' he advised Martello in conclusion. 'We got big people wanting mileage out of this. Impatient people. Influential. People very angry with the dubious part your Company has indirectly played

in the supply and merchandising of narcotics to our boys in Vietnam, which is why you cut us in on this in the first place. So maybe you better tell some of those limousine liberals back in Langley Virginia it's time for them to shit or get off the pot. Pot in both senses,' he ended in a humourless pun.

Smiley had turned so pale that Guillam was genuinely afraid for him. He wondered whether he had had a heart attack, or was going to faint. From where Guillam sat, his cheeks and complexion were suddenly an old man's and his eyes, as he too addressed Martello only, had an old man's fire:

'However, there is an agreement. And so long as it stands, I trust that you will stick to it. We have your general declaration that you will abstain from operations in British areas unless our permission has been granted. We have your

particular promise that you will leave to us the entire development of this case, outside surveillance and communication, regardless of where the development leads. That was the contract. A complete hands-off in exchange for a complete sight of the product. I take that to mean this: no action by Langley and no action by any other American agency. I take that to be your absolute word. And I take your word to be still good, and I regard that understanding as irreducible.'

'Tell him,' said Sol, and walked out, followed by Cy, his sallow Mormon sidekick. At the door he turned, and jabbed a finger in Smiley's direction.

'You ride our wagon, we tell you where to get off and where to stay topsides,' he said.

The Mormon nodded: 'Sure do,' he said and smiled at Guillam as if in invitation. On Martello's nod, Murphy and his fellow quiet man

followed them out of the room.

Martello was pouring drinks. In his office, the walls were also rosewood - a fake laminate, Guillam noticed, not the real thing - and when Martello pulled a handle he revealed an ice machine that vomited a steady flow of pellets in the shape of rugby balls. He poured three whiskies without asking the others what they wanted. Smiley looked all in. His plump hands were still cupped over the ends of his airline chair, but he was leaning back like a spent boxer between rounds, staring at the ceiling, which was perforated by twinkling lights. Martello set the glasses on the table.

'Thank you, sir,' Guillam said. Martello liked a 'sir'.

'You bet,' said Martello.

'Who else have your headquarters told?' Smiley said, to the stars. 'The Revenue Service? The Customs Service? The Mayor of Chicago? Their twelve best friends? Do you realise that not even my masters know we are in collaboration with you? God in heaven.'

'Ah, come on now, George. We have politics, same as you. We have promises to keep. Mouths to buy. Enforcement's out for our blood. That dope story's gotten a lot of airtime on the Hill. Senators, the House Subcommittees, the whole garbage. Kid comes back from the war a screaming junkie, first thing his Pa does is write to his Congressman. Company doesn't care for all those bad rumours. It likes to have its friends on its own side. That's showbiz, George.'

'Could I please just know what the deal is?' Smiley asked. 'Could I have it in plain words, at least?'

'Oh now, there's no deal, George. Langley can't deal with what she doesn't own, and this is your case, your property, your... We fish for him - you do, with a little help from us maybe - we do our best and then if, ah, we don't come up with anything, why, Enforcement will get in on the act a little and, on a very friendly and controllable basis, try their skill.'

'At which point it's open season,' Smiley said.
'My goodness, what a way to run a case.'

When it came to pacification, Martello was a very old hand indeed:

'George. George. Suppose they nail Ko. Suppose they fall on him out of the trees next time he leaves the Colony. If Ko's going to languish in Sing-Sing on a ten-to-thirty rap, why, we can pick him clean at will. Is that so very terrible suddenly?'

Yes it bloody well is, thought Guillam. Till it suddenly dawned on him, with a quite malignant glee, that Martello himself was not witting on the subject of Brother Nelson, and that George had kept his best card to his chest.

Smiley was still sitting forward. The ice in his whisky had put a damp frost round the outside of the glass, and for a time he stared at it, watching the tears slide on to the rosewood table.

'So how long have we got on our own?' Smiley asked. 'What's our head start before the narcotics people come barging in?'

'It's not rigid, George. It's not like that! It's parameters, like Cy said.'

'Three months?'

'That's generous, a little generous.'

'Less than three months?'

'Three months, inside of three months, ten to twelve weeks - in that area, George. It's fluid. It's between friends. Three months outside. I would say.'

Smiley breathed out in a long slow sigh.

'Yesterday we had all the time in the world.'

Martello dropped the veil an inch or two. 'Sol is not that conscious, George,' he said, careful to use Circus jargon rather than his own. 'Ah, Sol has blank areas,' he said, half by way of admission. 'We don't just throw him the whole carcass, know what I mean?'

Martello paused, then said, 'Sol goes to first echelon. No further. Believe me.'

'And what does first echelon mean?'

'He knows Ko is in funds from Moscow. Knows he pushes opium. That's all.'

'Does he know of the girl?'

'Now she's a case in point, George. The girl. That girl went with him on the trip to Bangkok.

Remember Murphy describing the Bangkok trip? She stayed in the hotel suite with him. She flew on with him to Manila. I saw you read me there. I caught your eye. But we had Murphy delete that section of the report. Just for Sol's benefit.' Very slightly, Smiley seemed to revive. 'Deal stands, George,' Martello assured him munificently.

'Nothing's added, nothing's subtracted. You play the fish, we'll help you eat it. Any help along the way, you just have to pick up that green line and holler.' He went so far as to lay a consoling hand on Smiley's shoulder, but sensing that he disliked the gesture, abandoned it rather quickly.

'However, if you ever do want to pass us the oars,

why, we would merely reverse that arrangement and -'

'Steal our thunder and get yourselves thrown off the Colony into the bargain,' said Smiley, completing the sentence for him. 'I want one more thing made clear. I want it written down. I want it to be the subject of an exchange of letters between us.'

'Your party, you choose the games,' said Martello expansively.

'My service will play the fish,' Smiley insisted, in the same direct tone. 'We will also land it, if that is the angling expression. I'm not a sportsman, I'm afraid.'

'Land it, beach it, hook it, sure.'

Martello's good will, to Guillam's suspicious eye, was tiring a little at the edges.

'I insist on it being our operation. Our man. I insist on first rights. To have him and to hold him, until we see fit to pass him on.'

'No problem, George, no problem at all. You take him aboard, he's yours. Soon as you want to share him, call us. It's as simple as that.'

'I'll send round a written confirmation in the morning.'

'Oh don't bother to do that, George. We have people. We'll have them collect it for you.'

'I'll send it round,' said Smiley.

Martello stood up. 'George, you just got yourself a deal.'

'I had a deal already,' Smiley said. 'Langley broke it.'

They shook hands.

The case history has no other moment like this. In the trade it goes under various smart phrases. 'The day George reversed the controls' is one - though it took him a good week, and brought Martello's deadline that much nearer. But to Guillam the process had something far more stately about it, far more beautiful than a mere technical retooling. As his understanding of Smiley's intention slowly grew, as he looked on fascinated while Smiley laid down each meticulous line, summoned this or that collaborator, put out a hook here, and took in a cleat there, Guillam had the sensation of watching the turn-round of some large ocean-going vessel as it is coaxed and nosed and gentled into facing back along its own course.

Which entailed - yes - turning the entire case upside down, or reversing the controls.

They arrived back at the Circus without a word spoken. Smiley took the last flight of stairs slowly enough to revive Guillam's fears for his health, so that as soon as he was able he rang the Circus doctor and gave him a rundown of the symptoms as he saw them, only to be told that Smiley had been round to see him a couple of days ago on an unrelated matter and showed every sign of being indestructible. The throne-room door closed, and Fawn the babysitter once more had his beloved chief to himself. Smiley's needs, where they filtered through, had the smack of alchemy. Beechcraft aeroplanes: he wished for plans and catalogues, and also - provided they could be obtained unattributably - any details of owners, sales and purchases in the South East Asian region. Toby Esterhase duly disappeared into the murky thickets of the aircraft-sales industry, and soon afterwards Fawn handed to Molly Meakin a daunting heap of back-numbers

of a journal called Transport World with handwritten instructions from Smiley in the traditional green ink of his office to mark down any advertisements for Beechcraft planes which might have caught the eye of a potential buyer during the six-month period before the pilot Ricardo's abortive opium mission into Red China.

Again on Smiley's written orders, Guillam discreetly visited several of di Salis's burrowers and, without the knowledge of their temperamental superior, established that they were still far from putting the finger on Nelson Ko. One old fellow went so far as to suggest that Drake Ko had spoken no less than the truth in his last meeting with old Hibbert, and that Brother Nelson was dead indeed. But when Guillam took this news to Smiley he shook his head impatiently, and handed him a signal for transmission to Craw, telling him to obtain from his local police source, preferably on a pretext, all

recorded details of the travel movements of Ko's manager Tiu in and out of Mainland China.

Craw's long answer was on Smiley's desk forty-eight hours later, and it appeared to give him a rare moment of pleasure. He ordered out the duty driver, and had himself taken to Hampstead, where he walked alone over the Heath for an hour, through sunlit frost, and according to Fawn stood gawping at the ruddy squirrels before returning to the throne-room.

'But don't you see?' he protested to Guillam, in an equally rare fit of excitement that evening - 'Don't you understand, Peter?' - shoving Craw's dates under his nose, actually stubbing his finger on one entry - 'Tiu went to Shanghai six weeks before Ricardo's mission. How long did he stay there? Forty-eight hours. Oh you are a dunce!'

'I'm nothing of the kind,' Guillam retorted. 'I just don't happen to have a direct line to God, that's

all.'

In the cellars, cloistered with Millie McCraig the head listener, Smiley replayed old Hibbert's monologues, scowling occasionally - said Millie - at di Salis's clumsy bullying. Otherwise, he read and prowled, and talked to Sam Collins in short, intensive bursts. These encounters, Guillam noticed, cost Smiley a lot of spirit, and his bouts of ill-temper - which Lord knows were few enough for a man with Smiley's burdens - always occurred after Sam's departure. And even when they had blown over, he looked more strained and lonely than ever, till he had taken one of his long night walks.

Then on about the fourth day, which in Guillam's life was a crisis day for some reason - probably the argument with Treasury, who resented paying Craw a bonus - Toby Esterhase somehow slipped through the net of both Fawn and Guillam, and

gained the throne-room undetected, where he presented Smiley with a bunch of Xeroxed contracts of sale for one brand new four-seater Beechcraft to the Bangkok firm of Aerosuis and Co, registered in Zurich, details pending. Smiley was particularly jubilant about the fact that there were four seats. The two at the rear were removable, but the pilot's and co-pilot's were fixed. As to the actual sale of the plane, it had been completed on the twentieth of July: a scant month, therefore, before the crazy Ricardo set off to infringe Red China's airspace, and then changed his mind.

'Even Peter can make that connection,' Smiley declared, with heavy skittishness. 'Sequence, Peter, sequence, come on!'

'The plane was sold two weeks after Tiu returned from Shanghai,' Guillam replied, reluctantly.

'And so?' Smiley demanded. 'And so? What do

we look at next?'

'We ask ourselves who owns the firm of Aerosuis,' Guillam snapped, really quite irritated.

'Precisely. Thank you,' said Smiley in mock relief. 'You restore my faith in you, Peter. Now then. Whom do we discover at the helm of Aerosuis, do you think? The Bangkok representative, no less.'

Guillam glanced at the notes on Smiley's desk, but Smiley was too quick and clapped his hands over them.

'Tiu,' Guillam said, actually blushing.

'Hoorah. Yes. Tiu. Well done.'

But by the time Smiley sent again for Sam Collins that evening, the shadows had returned to his pendulous face.

Still the lines were thrown out. After his success in the aircraft industry, Toby Esterhase was reassigned to the liquor trade and flew to the Western Isles of Scotland, under the guise of a Value Added Tax inspector, where he spent three days making a spot check of the books of a house of whisky distillers who specialised in the forward selling of unmatured kegs. He returned - to quote Connie -leering like a successful bigamist.

The multiple climax of all this activity was an extremely long signal to Craw, drafted after a full-dress meeting of the operational directorate - the Golden Oldies, to quote Connie yet again, with Sam Collins added. The meeting followed an extended ways and means session with the Cousins, at which Smiley refrained from all mention of the elusive Nelson Ko, but requested

certain additional facilities of surveillance and communication in the field. To his collaborators, Smiley explained his plans this way. Till now the operation had been limited to obtaining intelligence about Ko and the ramifications of the Soviet goldseam. Much care had been taken to prevent Ko from becoming aware of the Circus's interest in him.

He then summarised the intelligence they had so far collected: Nelson, Ricardo, Tiu, the Beechcraft, the dates, the inferences, the Swiss-registered aviation company which as it now turned out possessed no premises and no other aircraft. He would prefer, he said, to wait for the positive identification of Nelson, but every operation was a compromise and time, partly thanks to the Cousins, was running out.

He made no mention at all of the girl, and he never once looked at Sam Collins while he

delivered his address.

Then he came to what he modestly called the next phase.

'Our problem is to break the stalemate. There are operations which run better for not being resolved. There are others which are worthless until they are resolved and the Dolphin case is one of these.' He gave a studious frown, and blinked, then whipped off his spectacles and to the secret delight of everyone, unconsciously subscribed to his own legend by polishing them on the fat end of his tie. 'I propose to do this by turning our tactic inside out. In other words, by declaring to Ko our interest in his affairs.'

It was Connie, as ever, who put an end to the suitably dreadful silence. Her smile was also the fastest - and the most knowing.

'He's smoking him out,' she whispered to them all

in ecstasy. 'Same as he did with Bill, the clever hound! Lighting a fire on his doorstep, aren't you, darling, and seeing which way he runs. Oh George, you lovely, lovely man, the best of all my boys, I do declare!'

Smiley's signal to Craw used a different metaphor to describe the plan, one which fieldmen favour. He referred to shaking Ko's tree, and it was clear from the remainder of the text that, despite the considerable dangers, he proposed to use the broad back of Jerry Westerby to do it.

As a footnote to all this, a couple of days later Sam Collins vanished. Everyone was very pleased. He ceased to come in and Smiley did not refer to him. His room, when Guillam sneaked in covertly to look it over, contained nothing personal to Sam at all except a couple of

unbroken packs of playing cards and some garish book matches advertising a West End nightclub. When he sounded out the housekeepers, they were for once unusually forthcoming. His price was a kiss-off gratuity, they said, and a promise to have his pension rights reconsidered. He had not really had much to sell at all. A flash in the pan, they said, never to reappear. Good riddance.

All the same, Guillam could not rid himself of a certain unease about Sam, which he often conveyed to Molly Meakin over the next few weeks. It was not just about bumping into him at Lacon's office. He was bothered about the business of Smiley's exchange of letters with Martello confirming their verbal understanding. Rather than have the Cousins collect it, with the consequent parade of a limousine and even a motor-cycle outrider in Cambridge Circus, Smiley had ordered Guillam to run it round to Grosvenor Square himself with Fawn babysitting.

But Guillam was snowed under with work, as it happened, and Sam as usual was spare. So when Sam volunteered to take it for him, Guillam let him, and wished to God he never had. He wished it still, devoutly.

Because instead of handing George's letter to Murphy or his faceless running-mate, said Fawn, Sam had insisted on going in to Martello personally. And had spent more than an hour with him alone.