

# THE MURDER AT CASTLE DEEPING



Captain  
**W.E. JOHNS**

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THE MURDER  
AT CASTLE DEEPING

*A "Steeley" Story*

BY

W. E. JOHNS

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Being the further adventures of “Steeley” Delaroy, gentleman adventurer, sometime air-smuggler, more recently unofficial police agent.

Told by his war-time comrade, and partner in his adventures, Captain Eric “Tubby” Wilde.

# CHAPTER I

## THE ARGUMENT

“YOU can’t deny that crime is far more rampant in America than it is in this country.”

It was Wayne who spoke, one-time officer in the Royal Flying Corps, now Detective-Inspector Wayne, C.I.D., Scotland Yard; and the man to whom he was speaking was Captain Deeley Montford Delaroy, D.S.O., D.F.C., late of No. 60 Squadron, R.F.C., airman adventurer, known to his limited circle of friends as “Steeley.”

There were four of us at the table, and it was quite an impromptu party. Steeley was over from America on one of his periodical visits; his wife was still in New Zealand nursing her injured sister, and as she was likely to remain there for some time Steeley’s stay on this occasion promised to be a protracted one. It was a dull November evening, so for the sake of something to do we had rung up our old comrade-cum-enemy, Wayne, and asked him to join us in a bite of dinner. Apparently Wayne had let word drop to Colonel Raymond, Assistant Commissioner of Police, that Steeley was in England, with the result that he had rung up and asked if he might come along. (I had suspected for a long time that Steeley’s complex character intrigued him.) Anyway, that, briefly, is how we came to be doing the heavy at the Savoy Grill. Brian Ballantyne, Steeley’s protégé who has figured in previous adventures, now a full-blown reporter, was in Spain, covering the civil war for his paper, so, as I have already remarked, there were just the four of us.

The conversation, which had turned inevitably to crime, had resolved itself into a verbal duel between Wayne and Steeley on a comparison between British and American police methods. At first Steeley was, I think, only pulling Wayne’s leg, but as the discussion progressed, he warmed up to his subject. Wayne was doing his best in the argument, but, as usual, his bludgeoning tactics, as heavy and solid as the man himself, were no match for the darting, rapier-point of Steeley’s wit, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes accusing, sometimes challenging, but always effective.

At Wayne's assumptive and rather provocative statement he stopped tapping the fresh cigarette he had taken from his case and regarded the policeman from under raised eyebrows. "I most certainly do deny it," he said quietly. "Just as much crime goes on in England as America; the technique is different, that's all, due partly to psychological factors and partly to the fact that the law is administered in an entirely different manner."

"I can't see that psychology has anything to do with it," disputed Wayne, regarding his antagonist with his usual expression of disfavour. "You'll never make me believe that as much crime goes on in London as in New York."

Steeley half lifted one shoulder, Parisian fashion; the gesture was not affected, it came to him naturally. "My dear Wayne, whether you believe it or not, you can take it from me that from petty larceny at one end of the scale, to murder at the other, there is nothing to choose between the two cities, although a false impression may have been created by the fact that half the crime that goes on over here is not recognised as such. Look at it this way. In the States, if a man has reason to kill another, he bumps him off just where it happens to be most convenient, using the most deadly weapon he can lay hands on. As you probably know, the sub-machine-gun is in vogue at the moment, and there is no finesse about a burst from a machine-gun at close range. When the police look at the body of the victim they know for certain that murder has been committed. In other words, American crooks scorn to adopt British methods of evasion. Why? I'll tell you. They know an easier way out. They face the issue brazenly, trusting to an astute lawyer to get them off—possibly with the aid of a corruptible prosecuting attorney. Oh yes, these tales of collusion and corruption that you hear about, and see depicted on the screen, are true enough. But wait a minute, for another point arises here. There is also a question of evidence. Witnesses must be found. Who do you suppose is going to give evidence against a criminal while the accused man's friends and confederates stand round the corner promising sudden death to the so-called squealer? And they mean it, make no mistake about that, and therein lies the power of their threats. The American gangster is fond of bragging about the code of honour which keeps his lips sealed. Pah! Don't believe it. He remains dumb for the simple reason that it would be virtual suicide to speak. Over here a man can give evidence, or turn king's evidence, with impunity. The man in the dock may vow vengeance, but that vengeance is not, in fact, carried out. The police see to that. In short, it all boils down to this. In the States, the law-breaker gambles on the maladministration of justice, with the result that more cases

come into the courts; naturally, they get more publicity, and an impression is created of utter lawlessness. Over here the reverse is the case. The law, once its wheels start grinding, is as merciless as death. Criminals—both professional and amateur—know it, and they act accordingly. Once a crime is committed, and is recognised as a crime, nothing can prevent the police machine from operating, and once started it never stops until it has got its man. And thereafter it is as merciless as an octopus. Your crook knows that there will be no loophole in the court for him to slide through; no chance of breaking down the fabric of the law. Very well. What, therefore, do your criminals do? They concentrate absolutely on preventing a crime—particularly murder—from becoming known; they go to untold trouble to prevent it from being recognised as such. Murder is made to look like death from natural causes, or, possibly, an accident.”

Wayne guffawed. “Don’t you believe it,” he declared vehemently.

“And don’t you deceive yourself,” parried Steeley promptly. “You think there are some clever crimes on record at the Yard, but don’t lose sight of the fact that in each case the criminal made at least one mistake, and that mistake was enough to send him to the gallows. You call those the *almost* perfect crimes. What about the perfect ones? Those that have *no* flaw. Can you suppose that there are none? My dear Wayne, only the names of the bunglers go on your records. The real artists are never suspected, because there is nothing to suspect them of. In other words, their crimes pass unobserved. In the case of murder the victim either dies in his bed from a perfectly natural and explainable cause, or succumbs to an obvious accident, either of which at once removes the greatest obstacle to successful homicide, which is the disposal of the body. As you are fully aware, a human body is almost indestructible by methods available to the ordinary citizen. However it may be disposed of—and many ingenious methods have been applied—it has a peculiar habit of coming to light again, whether it be whole, or in several pieces. It was this that gave rise to the old saying ‘murder will out.’ Clearly then, the ideal thing is to get a death certificate, after which the body can be buried in the normal way. It is, of course, impossible to estimate the number of murderers who have got away with this; our attention is only called to one when he makes a blunder, or has an extraordinary piece of bad luck, as was the case with Smith, the Brides in the Bath expert. He had evolved a procedure for murdering unwanted wives which events showed was nearly foolproof. It was, in fact, foolproof, as far as the police and the medical profession were concerned.”

“But we got him in the end.”

“Who got him?”

“We did—the police.”

Steeley shook his head. “Rubbish! Don’t flatter yourself, my dear fellow. You may have made the arrest, but you were put on the trail by what was little more than a fluke, the agents being an old newspaper and an observant woman. But for a woman spotting a similarity between two ‘accidental’ deaths, Smith might have gone on murdering women for their pitiful savings, or a few hundred pounds of insurance money, for years and years. Could you swear that there are no Smiths stalking the streets of London, Birmingham or Manchester this very night, looking for their wretched victims? No Mahons, dissecting their miserable dupes in lonely bungalows? My dear Wayne, go and look round your night-clubs, half of which are nothing less than vice-dives; or, for that matter, go and look round the lounges of your smart hotels, and tell me if ever before in the history of the world there have been so many prizes open to exploitation by the unscrupulous—the dope-sellers, the blackmailers, the grafters, and the rest of the pretty craftsmen who fatten on the self-indulgent weaknesses our so-called civilization has produced, and the licence it demands. Look at the old woman over there near the door, dining with the sallow-faced youth. There is twenty thousand pounds’ worth of jewellery on her neck and fingers. What is *he* after, do you suppose? Her love? Fiddlesticks! And take the elderly couple sitting a few tables to their right—husband and wife by the look of it. That sour-faced vixen has been giving her consort hell ever since they came in. He doesn’t get a chance to speak. Mark the look he gives her every time she cuts him off. See him moisten his lips and set his jaw; notice how his nostrils quiver. Other people are looking at them. She’s making a fool of him in public, and that is something no man will stand for ever. Does he hate her? You bet he does. He’d put a dose of prussic acid in her wine—if he dare. One day the thought will occur to him how pleasant life might be without her. Freedom is what he yearns for, and one day he may make a bid to get it. That man is a potential murderer. Now glance along at the wall table—the heavily-built man with the young girl in blue. There’s a pretty girl for you, if you like. But look at the man. He’s three times her age. What does *he* want, do you suppose? Guess once, and you’ll be right. His body is as gross as his face, I’ll warrant. Look at his white, flabby jowls, and thick, sensuous lips. Watch the expression in his eyes as they run over her. The fellow is positively obscene. Somebody ought to warn that girl what she’s heading for.”

“It is evident that she doesn’t find him revolting or she wouldn’t be here with him,” I protested.

“She hasn’t seen through the mask yet,” replied Steeley softly. “She’s flattered that he has brought her here. Look at her clothes; she doesn’t belong to this class; probably it’s the first time she has been here, and she’s getting a kick out of it. Well, if I know anything about men she’s got another kick coming, one that won’t be so pleasant.”

“According to your way of thinking, half society is made up of criminals, eh?” suggested Wayne sarcastically.

“No, but I think there are far more people ready to commit a crime, if the reward justifies it, than you suppose,” returned Steeley coolly.

“That’s when we step in and pick ’em up,” declared Wayne.

Steeley shook his head. “Not all of them. I should say you are doing well if you get half of them. I’ll warrant, if the truth were known, never a week goes by without a carefully planned and camouflaged murder sliding past unobserved, perhaps right under your nose.”

Colonel Raymond said nothing, but he smiled curiously as he fingered his liqueur glass. Wayne frowned belligerently as he chewed the end of a matchstick. “Perhaps you wouldn’t mind being a little more specific,” he sneered. “It’s all very well to sit there criticising me and my department, but what about getting down to some facts? Maybe they won’t be so easy to produce. Can you point to any recent fatal accident and say ‘that person may have been murdered’?”

Steeley stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray. “Why make the matter personal?” he protested quietly. “I wasn’t criticising *you*. I was thinking of the Force in which you are an individual unit.”

“What’s wrong with the police?”

Steeley regarded the detective dispassionately. “Don’t be so infernally aggressive,” he murmured. “In organization, direction, and general efficiency, the British police force is undoubtedly the best in the world, but it has its weaknesses—or, perhaps it would be better to say, limitations. Not in its personnel, mark you, but in its methods.”

“You could say that about any police force,” put in Colonel Raymond.

“Of course you could,” acknowledged Steeley instantly. “For instance, in my opinion—and you must admit that I have good reasons for knowing something about these things—the German police force is too ponderous, much too ponderous for one hundred per cent efficiency. It can only operate as one colossal machine; if one component breaks, a breakdown can occur which gives the criminal an opportunity to slip through the gears. But there, the Teutonic mind runs on the lines of mass effort; we saw that during the War. France is inclined to go too far the other way. She puts a major murder

investigation into the hands of one man, and lets him get on with it. We operate somewhere about the middle of the two methods, and such a compromise has much to recommend it, but that is not to say that it is the ideal system. We don't make mass arrests and then try to eliminate the innocent, as they do in Germany, but the man who is put in charge of a case more often than not calls in the entire resources of the State to help him—including the Press. He becomes a general commanding an army rather than an individualist.”

Colonel Raymond glanced up. “What would you say is the ideal system?”

Steeley smiled. “As you know, my experience has been gained on both sides of the law,” he said reflectively. “And my conception of the ideal system is not so much a compromise between the French and German methods as a combination of them both.”

“Just how do you mean?”

Steeley leaned forward, his long white fingers toying with an empty matchbox. “Put it this way,” he said thoughtfully. “Maintain your general organization as it is to-day, but into it introduce the French individual method. That is to say, in every major investigation, in addition to the whole police force acting as a team, you would have an expert working solo. Nobody knows him. Nobody knows he is on the job. Yet he is there, unhampered by the regulations, officialdom and precedent that so often retards the work of people like Wayne, besides gradually destroying their personality. In other words, I am thinking on Secret Service lines. One of the weaknesses of the police force as it exists at present lies in the fact that it finds it almost impossible to move without the Press, and therefore the criminal, being aware of it. Neither the Press, the public, nor the criminal would know anything about the super-spy worming his way into the heart of things. Ultimately, of course, the existence of this unseen influence might be suspected. All right, so much the better. It would all act as a deterrent to the potential law-breaker, and seriously affect his morale. You can take it from me as one who has broken the law that it is far more difficult—not to say unnerving—to contend with something you cannot see, but only suspect is there, than with a hundred uniformed constables. So our freelance agent should remain a sort of mystery man. Like his prototype in the Intelligence Service he can take no credit for anything he does. When he has gathered enough evidence for the police to make an arrest he hands the case over to them and disappears again into obscurity, unknown, unseen.”

Wayne raised an accusing finger. “You've been reading Edgar Wallace,” he declared. “But come on; you can't gloss over my question like that.”

“Question?”

“Yes. I asked you if you could name a specific instance . . . the sort of case that the super-sleuth might start on. Can you think of one?”

“I can think of half a dozen,” answered Steeley promptly, somewhat, I fancy, to Wayne’s surprise.

“Let’s have one, then,” invited Wayne brusquely.

“Very well. Take the case of Linton Hales.”

For a moment Wayne looked perplexed, as he ran through the files of his memory. “Ah, you mean that young chap—American wasn’t he?—who was drowned the other day at some castle or other down in Hampshire?”

“That’s right.”

“But the coroner dealt with the inquest in an hour. If I remember rightly he returned a verdict of accidental death, and he was right.”

“How do you know he was right?” asked Steeley quickly.

Wayne hesitated. “Damn it, man, I’m not a fool. I read the evidence.”

“Evidence? Was there any worth the name? Let us, briefly, run over the facts, such as are known. Linton Hales, a Harvard graduate inheriting a fortune, comes to England on a sight seeing tour. Historically—or romantically—minded, he falls under the spell of our ancient monuments—as many Americans have done before him—and decides to acquire a castle of his own. He gets particulars of one through an agent in London and goes down to the country to inspect it. He fails to return, whereupon his hotel manager informs the police of his disappearance. A quick search discovers his dead body in his car, at the bottom of the castle moat, into which, presumably, he had carelessly driven. That’s all. Verdict . . . accidental death.”

“Well, what else would you call it?”

Steeley shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve hardly thought about it.”

“Have you any reason to suppose that the verdict was a bad one?”

“Not necessarily bad; a trifle, shall we say, haphazard? Frankly, I think the coroner took too much for granted, and the police were too careless, or too lazy, to bother about it.”

“You must have a strong reason for thinking that.”

“I have. Do you know anything about Hales?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Wayne glared. “Why should I?”

“I think there is every reason why you should have made it your business to find out something about him.”

“Do *you* know anything about him?”

“A little, but that’s because I’ve been quite a lot in America. Which, in turn, was the reason why I read the case through in the *Times* the other day when Hales’ name caught my eye. It is doubtful if I should have bothered in the ordinary way, but I was in the train on my way to London, having just landed from the Queen Mary, and I had nothing else to do.”

“And it was because you were dissatisfied in your mind about the coroner’s verdict that you criticised our police methods to-night?” put in the Colonel shrewdly.

“I hadn’t really thought about it in that way, but . . . perhaps you’re right.”

“What do you know about Hales?”

“I know, for one thing, that he was an exponent at aquatic sports. He carried off a large number of inter-collegiate prizes. Didn’t you know that?”

“Er—no.”

“Surely the coroner should have known? I mean . . . after all . . . it was rather odd that he should be drowned, wasn’t it?”

“He was trapped inside a saloon car, don’t forget.”

“Trapped? Do you mean to tell me that an expert swimmer like Hales couldn’t open a door, or a window, and get out, even if the car was under water, and even if it did fall into the moat, as the coroner so readily assumed? I should say that he could have got out had he driven his car into the Thames at London Bridge. Then again, nothing was said at the inquest about what was, perhaps, the most astonishing thing of all. How did Hales come to drive into the moat in the first place? To read the coroner’s summing-up one might imagine that it was quite a normal thing to do—that people in this country go about driving into moats. Why should Hales drive his car off a gravel drive into a moat in broad daylight?”

“How do you know it was daylight?”

“I don’t. I only assume it because I am unable to think of a satisfactory reason why Hales should hang about a place like Castle Deeping after dark. Surely he could have seen all he needed to see in daylight. What point was there in remaining there in the dark, particularly as he had a long drive back to Town in front of him.”

“All right. Let us say the accident happened in daylight. The answer seems to be that he was a bad driver, or a careless one.”

Steeley stared. "Hales was one of the finest amateur exhibition drivers in the States. Motoring was his hobby, possibly because his wealth was derived from the motor industry. Don't tell me you didn't know that."

Colonel Raymond glanced at Wayne. They both looked rather uncomfortable.

Steeley tried to help them out of their embarrassment. "Well, there you are," he said simply. "You asked for a case and I've given you one, also my reasons for selecting it. It was only a fluke that I happened to know something about Hales' accomplishments in the States, but that does not alter the fundamental facts. In the past it has often been just such a remote chance that has shown a murderer the way to the gallows. I maintain that these things should not be left to chance. It should be the job of a special investigator to collect every relevant fact and lay the whole thing before those who are best qualified to judge them. Frankly, Raymond, knowing what you know now, you are not quite so sure about this assumed accident as you were, are you?"

"I feel that—well, it may have been dealt with rather cursorily."

"Yet before I raised the point it had not occurred to you to doubt the coroner's decision?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"Precisely! Neither had anyone else, I imagine. Hence my contention that these things are treated all too casually."

"Ah well; it's all over and done with now," announced Wayne, finishing his coffee. I fancy he was anxious to change the subject.

"Just a moment; I'm not so sure that it is," murmured Colonel Raymond in an odd tone of voice. "Look here," he said. "We've done a lot of theorising to-night; how about putting some of your theories in practice, and seeing how they work out?"

"You mean—this Hales affair?"

"Yes, or any other you care to investigate."

Steeley looked interested. "Certainly," he agreed. "I think it would be rather an intriguing experiment. But how should I fit in with you? I mean, what will be my official—or unofficial—position at the Yard?"

"You'd have to come on our establishment, of course. I could put you in under the title of special investigator."

"With all expenses paid?"

"Of course, and a salary to be decided later if results justify the continuation of the appointment."

A smile spread slowly over Steeley's face. "It sounds as if it might be rather good fun," he observed. "I'll take it on—that is, if Tubby will cut in to keep me company. I'd have to have an assistant, anyway, to do the dirty work; all detectives do," he asserted, his smile growing broader.

"Oh hell! Leave me out," I protested.

Steeley shook his finger under my nose. "Why, you damned old hypocrite," he admonished me. "You'd have been sick to death if I hadn't put you in. Besides, assuming that you still have an aeroplane I shall want you to fly me down to the country to-morrow, to give this castle the once-over." He beckoned to the wine waiter. "I think the occasion warrants another liqueur," he murmured softly.

## CHAPTER II

### SPECIAL INVESTIGATOR NUMBER ONE

THAT is how Steeley Delaroy became Special Investigator Number One at Scotland Yard, with me as his assistant; and I must confess that even on the following morning as we motored down to Brooklands where I kept my machine, I was still in a bit of a daze with the suddenness of the business. Colonel Raymond was serious enough, though, when we saw him just after ten o'clock to fix up the details of our commissions; the matter was not referred to, but there was no doubt in my mind that it was the leading part we had played in the Cortusoides affair which induced him to contemplate such an irregular arrangement, and gave him enough confidence in us to proceed with it. I couldn't quite fathom Wayne's attitude. I suspected that in his heart of hearts he regarded our success in breaking up Count Cortusoides' organization<sup>[1]</sup> as an almighty fluke, but it might be doing him an injustice to suggest that he was pleased with the new arrangement, in that failure on our part would confirm his suspicions. However, that was for the future to decide.

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[1] See *Murder by Air*, by the same author. (Latimer House Ltd. 6/-)

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To return to the present: two o'clock the following day saw us in the air on the way to Castle Deeping, the scene of Linton Hales' fatal accident—or, shall we say, adventure? We knew very little more about the case than when the subject had first been raised; which is to say that we only knew what had been reported in the newspapers. They knew no more at Scotland Yard. In fact, there appeared to be nothing more to learn, at least, from official sources. Hales' body had been shipped back to America and his car had been parked in a Southampton garage pending the executor's instructions. Steeley had stated his intention of examining it, but thought it would be a good thing if we first looked at the scene of the tragedy. I had bought a large-scale map of the district at Stanword's, on the way down to

Brooklands, after we had had a word with the agent who had provided Hales with the “notice to view” that was to prove a death warrant.

Castle Deeping appeared on the map as a building of some importance, as indeed it was; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, had been. Yet for a stronghold so ancient—it dated back to the twelfth century—its history was rather disappointing. No event of any great moment had happened there; there was no record of it being haunted; it had even escaped vandalism during the Civil Wars. The last of the D’Alleynes, the old Norman family that had owned the place nearly six hundred years, had died more than fifty years ago, since when the place had been allowed to fall into disrepair. The London agent only administered the estate for a French bank that held the place in trust for some distant branch of the family; a caretaker had looked after it for some time, but on his death, some eight or nine years previously, occupation had lapsed on account of the lack of funds.

There were, it appeared, three lodges, also empty, the nearest being on a secondary road near an inn, nearly a mile from the castle. A little of the two thousand acres that comprised the estate had been let to outlying farmers for grazing purposes, but for the most part it was wild moorland, the soil being too light for profitable agriculture. Being miles from anywhere it was not even any use for building, so what with one thing and another, the whole place, castle, grounds, and estate, had gone to rack and ruin. So much we were able to learn from the agent, a surly, impoverished-looking, little old man who ran what appeared to be a fast-expiring business in Wigmore Street. Anyway, considering that we posed as potential buyers for the purpose of making the enquiries, he did nothing to help sell the property. Still, he admitted that he hadn’t seen the place for ten years, so he may have lost interest in it. If so, who shall blame him?

Considering the time of the year the weather had not been bad when we left Brooklands, but it grew steadily worse as we travelled west until, by the time we were over Winchester, we were down to five hundred feet, with a driving drizzle blotting out the ground much too frequently for my liking.

“We shall have to start Bradshawing<sup>[2]</sup> presently if this goes on,” I told Steeley bitterly, as I tried to see through the half-obscurd windscreen.

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[2] An airman’s expression for following railway lines.

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“Bradshawing won’t get us to Castle Deeping,” he answered nonchalantly.

“Why not?”

“Look at the map; there isn’t a railway within ten miles of it.”

“Of course not; I’d forgotten that,” I admitted.

Nor was there an aerodrome anywhere near, not that that worried me; it would be a strange thing, I thought, not unreasonably, if I couldn’t find a place to get down in an area of two thousand acres.

It was nearly three o’clock when I picked up our objective, and a more miserable, deserted spot I never saw in my life. That was apparent even from the air. There was too much timber about for me to get down close to the castle itself, but cruising around I soon found a fairly good spot, about a mile away, which, as rain was now splashing against my windscreen, was quite far enough.

“We ought to have come down in the car,” I told Steeley, as I circled round making sure there were no obstructions.

“Why spend two hours on a journey when it can be done in one?” he protested. “Don’t blame me for the weather; I didn’t know it was going to turn out like this; after all, the report was ‘mainly fair.’”

“I suppose it was my own fault,” I grumbled. “I’ve been caught out so many times on weather reports that I shall soon begin to think this is what is meant by ‘mainly fair.’”

As I spoke I throttled back and glided down to what seemed to be a nice flat patch of turf. As a matter of fact, generally speaking, it was, but one of the drawbacks about emergency landings is that you cannot see rabbit holes until it is too late. Fortunately, I didn’t hit this one until the machine had nearly finished its run; I was, in fact, congratulating myself on a neat landing when *bang!* one wheel went down; the machine stopped dead and tipped upon its nose, throwing us both against the instrument board. There was a nasty jar as clods and splinters whirled through the air. For a fleeting instant I thought we were going right over, but a gust of wind saved us and we flopped back gently on to even keel.

I jumped out and ran round to the nose. “Damn it,” I swore, glaring at the splintered propeller. “I hope Raymond will buy me a new prop.”

Steeley joined me. For a moment or two he said nothing, but there was a ruminating look in his eyes. “It’s going to be a bit awkward, isn’t it?” he said at last. “Looks as if we’ve a nice long walk in front of us.”

“It isn’t more than a mile to the Castle.”

“I wasn’t thinking of the Castle. I was thinking that we should have to walk to the nearest village five miles away. Whether we get a car back from

there, or whether we stay there the night and 'phone up for a new prop in the morning, makes no difference; we've got to get to Brimswade, so if we want to look at the castle and get to the village before dark, we'd better start."

He was, of course, quite right. There was nothing else for it. We had chosen just about the worst place in the country for a breakdown. However, I went back to the cockpit, put the map in my pocket, and was about to fasten the door when I spotted the little electric torch I always carry for looking into the engine. Thinking it might be useful if we were late getting to the village I slipped it into my pocket, and followed Steeley who was already walking slowly across the soaking turf in the direction of the Castle.

We had both brought our mackintoshes, but even so we were pretty damp by the time we reached our destination, and from a distance of thirty or forty yards regarded the once noble pile of Castle Deeping. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a more dreary spectacle. It would have been depressing at any time, but in the wan light of the November afternoon, through cold, driving rain, with dead leaves drifting diagonally downwards from the treetops, and lying in black mats on the moss-grown drive, it was appalling in its utter desolation, and I looked at it with mixed feelings of sympathy and repugnance.

From out of what appeared to be a stagnant sheet of water, too small to be called a lake, too large to be called a pool, rose the great mass of stone that was the Castle, colourless—unless one can call pallid grey a colour—sombre, silent, forbidding . . . and something else. What was it? Dead. Yes, that was it. The whole place looked dead. At either end rose castellated turrets, between which the flat stone face of the walls was relieved only by tall, narrow windows, now black in the half-light. The walls towered straight up out of the water, with evil-looking moss and lichen staining the first few feet.

"What a dreadful place to live in," I whispered.

"What a dreadful place to die in," returned Steeley significantly, looking at the moat, and I knew that he was thinking of poor Hales. "That's where he must have gone over," he added, pointing to a curve in the drive where it skirted the sullen water. "I still don't see how he could get off the road," he concluded reflectively.

For a little while we remained, staring moodily at the scene of the tragedy. The moat, I saw, was fed by a brook which ran under the drive, and was dammed at the far end by black, weed-covered floodgates, near which was moored a dilapidated punt. Everywhere the low stone wall that held the water in place rose nearly three feet above its level.

“He would have found it difficult to get out of the moat even if he had managed to get out of the car,” I observed as we walked nearer. “I don’t think a swimmer could hope to climb out of there unless he found a foothold, or handhold, to pull himself up.”

Steeley stopped at the very edge of the moat, at its nearest point to the drive. With his hands thrust deep into his mackintosh pockets, he stared at the water, then at the wall, and finally at the drive. Long ribbons of waterweed and a trampled area of mud marked the spot where the police, with a breakdown tender, had raised the car with its dead occupant.

“What do you hope to find?” I asked at last.

“I don’t know,” answered Steeley simply. “I just wanted to see with my own eyes—as the saying is—how any driver, provided he was sober, coming from the direction of the house, could go so far off his track as to get into the moat.”

“How do you know he was coming from the direction of the house?”

“Because he had made some rough notes in his notebook about the interior of the castle. He could only have done that had he been inside. It is obvious, therefore, that he went in on the return journey,” replied Steeley. “But I’ve seen all there is to see here, I think. I can carry the picture in my mind. It’s quite different to looking at a map. I——What’s the matter?”

I turned my eyes to his, feeling slightly embarrassed, almost ashamed of myself. For a moment I did not answer.

“Come on,” he insisted. “You’ve turned quite pale.”

“All right,” I said, awkwardly. “If you want to know the truth, I thought I saw something move in one of the windows in the far turret.”

“Something . . . ?”

“Well—a face. It sort of—gave me a bit of a shock, not expecting anything of the sort.”

“Are you sure?” Steeley’s voice was low but tense.

“No, I’m not,” I was forced to admit. “I was just looking at the place with no particular thought in my mind, when a movement in one of the windows attracted my attention; but before I could really focus my eyes on the spot, the face, or whatever it was, had gone. It may have been just the light shining on a loose pane of glass; it would have the same effect. I’m not even sure now which window it was.”

“I see,” murmured Steeley, and he began walking towards the house.

“Where are you going?” I asked sharply.

“We may as well have a look inside, now we’re here,” he answered in an off-hand manner.

“Yes, I suppose we may,” I agreed. But I don’t know what it was, and it may sound childish, but I would rather have been kicked than go into that dreadful-looking mausoleum. Naturally, I did not say so, nor would I have admitted an apprehension so groundless. Possibly it was the association of poor Hales that affected me; I don’t know.

Steeley kept his eyes on the ground all the way to the imposing portal—one could hardly call it a doorway—over which hung an enormous lamp or lantern, a massive affair of wrought-iron in which an electric bulb looked absurdly inadequate and out of place. He eyed it meditatively before taking the key with which the agent had provided us from his pocket, and advancing towards the iron-studded oak door.

A thought struck me. “I wonder what happened to the key Hales had?” I asked, really for the sake of saying something.

“This is it; it was in his pocket,” replied Steeley quietly, as the heavy lock turned easily and he pushed the door open.

“How do you know that?” I asked wonderingly, for the agent had said nothing about it.

“It has a number seven scratched faintly on the handle; as it was the exhibit number seven at the inquest I assume that the police put it on. They must have returned it to the agent afterwards,” was quiet reply.

“Fancy you noticing a thing like that,” I said.

“If we can’t notice obvious things like that, we might as well resign right away,” observed Steeley evenly.

We stepped inside, and I must admit that after the conditions outside it was a relief to be under cover. Shaking the water from my cap I unfastened the collar of my mackintosh and looked around with interest, yet with a slight feeling of disappointment. I don’t know what I expected to see, but apart from its vast size there was nothing remarkable about the hall in which we found ourselves. As was the case outside, everything was of stone, a sort of grey sandstone, without relief of any sort. A majestic flight of stairs swept upwards at the far end, but the banisters, if ever there had been any, had been taken away, which gave them an unfinished appearance.

I watched Steeley as his eyes surveyed the place from floor to ceiling. “Nothing much here,” he said at last, turning towards a heavy oak door on our right, and a moment later we stood in what must once have been the banqueting hall. It was an enormous room, lofty, with a lot of exposed timber overhead, and the usual minstrels’ gallery at the far end. A faint,

peculiar, almost aromatic aroma, hung in the still air. Steeley evidently noticed it, too, for I saw him sniff, with an odd expression on his face.

“Does that smell remind you of anything?” he asked.

“Yes—and no,” I replied slowly, searching my memory. What I meant to imply was, that it did remind me of something, but for the life of me I could not think what it was. “Yes, I’ve got it!” I cried suddenly. “It smells like the inside of a French church.”

He nodded and made his way slowly to the great open fireplace, where he examined the embossed fire-back with interest, leaning forward with his right hand resting against it to see better. Suddenly he drew himself upright. “Come on,” he said, “we must hurry, or it will be dark before we get to the village. We’ll just have a quick glance upstairs.”

We went back into the hall and from thence up the broad stairway, our quiet footsteps echoing eerily in the deathly silence. Curiously, it seemed to get colder as we ascended, and the feeling of nervousness that I had experienced earlier returned with renewed force. In the ordinary way there is nothing more natural, or homely, than a furnished house, but on the other hand, there is nothing more depressing than an empty one. The one is a human being, warm, alive; the other a skeleton, cold, dead.

A sudden shiver ran through me as I stood on the first landing and stared down the silent, twilight corridors, and it was at that moment for the first time that a feeling came upon me that we were not alone in the building. I don’t know why. I am not psychic, and there was nothing to confirm my suspicion, but—well, I just felt that there was someone, somewhere, watching us. Steeley was looking up the next flight of stairs.

“I wouldn’t go up there,” I said quickly, in a low voice.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I just wouldn’t, that’s all,” I answered lamely.

He threw me an odd glance. “Perhaps you’re right,” he said quietly. “In any case, it would take a week to go all over this place.” Then, raising his voice, he added, “No, I don’t think it would suit us.”

For a few seconds, as I followed him automatically along a stone-flagged corridor, I tried to grasp his meaning. “What did you mean by that?” I asked, as I overtook him.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” he answered softly.

“Good God!” I breathed. “You felt like that, too, did you?”

“Felt like what?”

“Well—a sort of presence.”

“No, I didn’t feel anything,” he returned lightly. “But let’s be getting along. I expect we can get back to the hall this way.” He turned down a narrow flight of winding stairs that had appeared at the end of the corridor, and a moment or two later we found ourselves in a barrack of a place that was evidently the kitchen.

He stopped just inside, his eyes darting this way and that. They came to rest on the floor, not far away, close to a heavily-built, moorish-shaped door, with a large, round, iron handle. “Ah!” he breathed. “At last.”

“What is it?” I asked sharply.

“I’ve no idea,” he replied, in that exasperating quiet manner from which he seldom permits himself to depart.

“Then why talk as if you’d found something you expected to find?”

He put his hand on my shoulder. “Sorry, old lad,” he said gently. “I’m afraid I behave rather selfishly, but I find it rather difficult to talk when I’m thinking. Tell me, haven’t you noticed anything odd about this place?”

“No, I can’t say that I have,” I was forced to admit. “Have you?”

“Yes, several things.”

“Tell me one of them,” I invited. “The one that apparently has something to do with that.” I pointed to a small white strip, a mere speck, on the floor, which seemed to be the object that had attracted his attention as we entered the room. “Is there anything remarkable about it?”

“Only in the fact that it is there.”

“Yet you don’t know what it is?”

“No.”

“For God’s sake stop talking in riddles.”

“Very well,” he said patiently. “Hasn’t it occurred to you as extraordinary that in a place like this, a building that has been empty for years, there is not a single piece of rubbish, debris—call it what you will—lying about it? Surely one might have expected to find something, even if it were only a piece of mortar, a scrap of paper, a matchstick, an occasional pile of dust . . . anything, so long as there was *something*. In the entrance hall, in the dining-room, in the corridors, there was nothing; absolutely nothing; not even a layer of dust.”

“You mean . . . ?”

“The only conclusion one can draw is that it has been swept out, recently, and very thoroughly. In which case the obvious question that arises is, why? That white object, whatever it may be, is the first piece of detritus that I’ve seen since we came into the building; hence my exclamation. Let

us see what it is.” Four swift paces and he was on his knees, carefully levering up the object with the point of a pencil from the narrow space between two of the stone flags into which it had fallen. He picked it up and, rising, laid it on the palm of his hand. It was a half-smoked cigarette, and from its condition it could not have been more than a day or two old. It bore no brand name, however.

“Hales must have come this way,” I suggested quickly.

Steeley looked at me and raised his eyebrows. Then he looked back at the cigarette and pointed to a tiny red stain at the unburnt end. “From what I know of Hales I should say he was hardly the sort of fellow to use lipstick,” he said softly. For a few moments he stood in a tense attitude, listening. Then, swiftly, he put the cigarette stub in his case, walked over to the narrow door and turned the handle. He stepped back sharply as it swung open. “Queer,” he said, as if he were talking to himself.

“Why queer?” I asked.

“Because I expected it to be locked,” he answered simply, taking a pace forward and peering into the darkness. A flight of narrow stone steps led downwards.

“Here, take this,” I said, offering him my torch.

He look it and directed the slim shaft of light down the steps. It was not powerful enough to reach very far, however, so with the quick, almost nervous manner he has when particularly intent on anything, he started off down the steps.

I followed, and was at once conscious of an icy chill, as dank as the inside of a tomb. Just in front of me the slender beam of light was probing the darkness. A presentiment of danger swept through me, and I stopped, loath to go on, not liking to go back.

Steeley spoke. “Go back and keep guard at the top,” he said.

I turned, and was just in time to see the door close. There was a sharp click.

“What’s that?” Steeley’s voice was as brittle as ice.

I moistened my lips. “The door,” I said. “A draught must have blown it shut.”

He went past me like a flash, and I could see him feeling for a handle on the inside of the door. There was none. He put his shoulder to it, but he might have pushed against a mountain for all the effect it had. In the hard-cut shadows cast by the beam I saw him straighten himself. Slowly, he came back to where I stood. “Tubby, old man, I’m afraid we’re in a mess,” he said

evenly. “It was my fault. I should have known better. I perceived the danger just a moment too late. The door being open should have warned me.”

I experienced a sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach. “You mean . . . it wasn’t an accident? We’re——”

“Trapped,” he concluded, saying the word for me. “We’re old enough, I think, not to call a spade by any other name.”

## CHAPTER III

### PRISONERS

I ENDEAVOURED to behave normally. "Well, and what now?" I asked.

"We've got to find another way out. Nothing but a charge of dynamite would shift that door."

"You're sure it wasn't an accident? I mean—the wind——?"

"No. No more an accident than Hales' death."

"You think there is someone here?"

"I am sure of it."

"Why?"

"Let us not discuss reasons for the moment. We must see about getting out. I have a feeling that it isn't going to be easy. Thank God we've got a torch, anyway."

As he spoke he led the way to the bottom of the steps and then stood undecided, for on all sides the cellars extended like the cloisters of a monastery. The beam came to rest on several long wooden wine-bins, but they were, of course, empty.

"It looks as if we're in the wine-cellar," I observed.

"Yes, but I suspect the place we're in was not built primarily for that purpose," he replied slowly.

"You mean——"

"We're in the dungeons. Those iron rings in the wall were not put there to support cases of wine. I fancy this is where the torturers did their dirty work in the good old days. Hark!"

From somewhere not far away came the soft lap of water.

"What the devil's that?" I asked, my voice taking on a hard note.

"Let's go and look," replied Steeley quietly.

I followed him as he led the way to a wall, which, judging from the size of the stones, formed the foundations of the castle. Turning to the right we made our way along it. Disgusting growths of fungus and green slime, centuries old, thrived on it, with here and there a trickle of water that oozed

between the stones. We turned a corner and a wan light appeared ahead; it was feeble enough in all conscience, but in the Stygian darkness it was as heartening as sunshine. Another minute and we stood under a small, square, iron-barred window, set in the very top of the wall, over the edge of which water was flowing in a fair stream.

Steeley flicked out the torch and put it in his pocket. "Give me a back up," he said tersely.

I complied, and for the best part of a minute he clung to the iron bars.

"All right," he said at last.

I stood aside and he dropped back with a splash into the ever spreading pool that was beginning to form on the floor.

"Well?" I asked breathlessly.

He looked me straight in the eyes. "Not so good," he said harshly. "We're below the level of the moat, and the water is rising. As you see, it is up to the grille already. It looks as if someone has closed the floodgates."

My heart seemed to freeze. "In other words, the cellar is being flooded?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Good God! We'd better do something about it."

"Yes, we had better do something about it," he echoed. "You don't happen to have a file on you, I suppose?"

"I haven't. I'm not in the habit of carrying a file about with me. I've got a penknife."

"I'm afraid that isn't much good. We'd better have a look round."

It was dark by the time we had explored our prison. It may have taken an hour; perhaps two; it is hard to judge time in such circumstances. We found nothing; nothing, that is, that offered any hope of salvation. We found one thing which I wish we could have overlooked. It was the dead body of a man, worm-eaten, in the last stages of decomposition, a tramp judging by his clothes. He must have been dead two years or more. How he had died I preferred not to think. We returned to the grille, splashing through water that was now nearly a foot deep. It was still coming in, faster than ever.

"I'm afraid this is going to be a nasty show," muttered Steeley, staring up at the grille. "In a book, of course, there would be a secret tunnel, or something of the sort, but I hold out no such hopes here. I should say there are only two entrances, or exits, to this place; one is the door through which we came, and which we can rule out unless someone opens it from the outside, and the other is this grating. Let's have another look at it."

I gave him a back up and supported him until my strength gave out.

“It wouldn’t be invulnerable if we had a tool of any sort,” he said, as he dropped down again. “The aperture is wide enough to get through if it wasn’t for the grille. There are four bars of half-inch iron welded on to a sort of framework which fits over the outside of the hole. I can’t see, but as far as I can make out with my hands, the frame is fixed to the stone outside by four nails, one at each corner. We could never shift it with our hands, but . . . wait a minute! I’ve got an idea. Come on.”

With me splashing behind him he almost ran to the foot of the steps, where the wine-bins were stacked against the wall. They were about eight feet long by two feet six inches high and eighteen inches deep. There were six altogether, in three tiers of two. A swift examination revealed that they were not fixed in any way, but rested one on top of the other.

“Grab the other end,” muttered Steeley, taking a firm grip at his end of the nearest one.

It was heavy, but not unduly so, and five minutes saw it in place under the grille, about a yard from the wall. I saw what he had in mind, and in about twenty minutes we had a platform six feet high opposite our only avenue of escape. Four of the bins had gone to make it. We returned to the two that remained.

“What are you aiming to do?” I asked, anxiously.

Steeley rolled one of the bins face downwards and pointed to the planks that formed the back. “We’ve got to get these off,” he replied crisply. “There are six of them, and it’s half-inch timber by the look of it. There are six more on the other bin. A dozen of them laid flat, and strapped together with strips of mackintosh, should make a fairly heavy battering ram.”

“By God!” I cried. “You’re right. Come on.”

Fortunately the bins were old, and, like all old woodwork, had rotted first at the nail-holes. We kicked them to pieces, soaking ourselves in the process, for the water was now nearly two feet deep. However, with a burst of frantic energy we tore the planks apart and dragged them to our improvised platform, where, with my penknife, I started cutting our mackintoshes into strips. Luckily they were of strong rubberised cloth, and not the flimsy stuff that so many mackintoshes are now made of. As I threw him the strips, Steeley, on his knees, lashed the planks together, putting a strip every few inches, for we had plenty of material.

By the time the job was done I could see that it was going to be a race against time, for the water was halfway up the wall and fairly pouring through the hole. Moreover, the battery in my torch was running out, and was now giving little more than a reddish glow.

“Okay,” said Steeley at last, rising to his feet as far as he was able, for the cellar being only about ten feet high, not more than four feet of space was left between the top of our platform and the ceiling. Consequently, we both had to adopt what might be best described as a crouching position. Being shorter than he was, it was not so bad for me as it was for him. However, we got to our feet, staggering under the weight of the apparatus which was a good deal heavier than I expected it would be.

“Now,” said Steeley crisply. “The idea is to get a swing on it. When I start counting, at the word ‘three’ put all your weight behind the blow and aim at the middle of the opening. All set? Off we go.”

As we began to swing our battering ram a feeling came over me that I was dreaming. The thing was too utterly fantastic to be true. “One,” came Steeley’s voice. “Two . . . THREE!”

There was a crash as the ram struck the grid with a shock that nearly dislocated my shoulders. Our aim was not quite true and we did not hit it in the middle as was the intention; instead, the blunt end of the timber struck the grid at the top right-hand corner; and it may have been better so, for the force of the blow, instead of being distributed over the four nails, was concentrated on one, and the result was definitely encouraging, for in the feeble light of the torch I could see that we had pushed it back a good half inch.

“Fine!” declared Steeley tersely. “We shall do it if the ram holds together.” He glanced down at the water, now nearly level with the top of the platform. “Come on. Let’s try it again. Steady does it.”

Once more we raised the crude ram and hurled the blunt end against the grid. I distinctly heard it give, but something seemed to go wrong, and for a moment I could not make out what it was. Then leaning forward, not without some risk of falling into the water, I saw. “It’s jammed,” I muttered, trying to keep the dismay I felt out of my voice. “One of the bars has got jammed down between two of the planks.”

“All right, take it quietly,” came the steady answer. “Pull like hell when I give the word.”

We pulled, and pulled again, but it was in vain. The fact that the water was now splashing about our knees did not make things any easier, for the buoyancy of the bins on which we were standing caused them to rock about. Only our weight kept them in place. Worst of all, the torch was almost finished. I felt in my pocket and took out a box of matches, but they were soaking wet. “Have you got any matches?” I asked.

“Yes, but they’re as wet as yours,” was the disconcerting answer. “Lend me your knife—buck up.”

In my haste I nearly dropped it, and my mouth went dry under the shock. However, I managed to pass it over.

Steeley opened the larger of the two blades and took it between his teeth. Then, before I could imagine what he was going to do, he had straddled the ram and worked his way along it to the grating. The light went out, but I could hear him sawing at the mackintosh strips. When they parted they went so suddenly that I was nearly shot into the water. Steeley did, in fact, fall in, but he found the tottering platform, and with a great noise of splashing dragged himself on to it. I hung on to the ram, which was now free, like grim death.

Steeley got back into his old position. “Turn the planks the other way, they will strike broadside on, then,” he muttered. “We’ve no time to lose, but whatever happens don’t panic. All right; let’s hit her another crack.”

“I can’t see the hole,” I cried, fighting hard to keep my head, for the water was above my waist and I was finding it difficult to remain on my feet.

“The star! Aim at that star. Look, you can just see it,” he answered.

Staring up to where I knew the aperture to be I could just make out one solitary star twinkling fitfully. “Right!” I said.

Came Steeley’s voice like a boxing referee when one man is on the ground. “One . . . two . . . THREE!”

The ram crashed against the grid and I felt it give, but whether we had knocked it out or not I could not tell. All I knew was that the ram had slipped through my fingers and fallen into the water. I groped wildly for it in the darkness but could not find it.

“I’ve got it,” came Steeley’s voice from somewhere ahead of me. Simultaneously, the star was blotted out and I was swept off my feet by the water. Instinctively I began to swim, almost wishing that I could not swim, for it seemed that it would only prolong the agony.

“Tubby, where are you?” I heard Steeley’s voice as from a distance, in a nightmare of darkness and water.

“Here!” I choked desperately.

“Come this way. I’m through.”

At the last two words my heart gave a lurch, and I struck out in the direction of his voice, and a moment later felt my head bump against his. His hands gripped me under the arms, and at the same time I was drawn

forward. An instant later my head was in the fresh air, but I was by no means through. My bulk was against me, and with a wave of horror I realised that I was stuck. To make matters worse, my arms were jammed against my sides, and I was powerless to help myself. By the grace of God, Steeley, who I could just see swimming in front of me, guessed my difficulty. Without his help I should never have got through. He grabbed me round the neck, and putting his feet against the wall, kicked out with all his strength. To my unutterable relief I slid through, clear, and my first thought was one of intense thankfulness that I could at least drown in the open.

“Here, catch hold,” said Steeley, and I saw that he was hanging on to the ram, which had evidently gone right through, or been dragged through by him.

Panting like a stranded fish, I flung an arm over it and rested. And as I rested, possibly because the immediate danger had passed, I became aware for the first time of the cold. “For God’s sake let’s get out,” I gasped through chattering teeth.

“As soon as you’ve got your breath back,” replied Steeley, easily.

I remembered the encircling wall of the moat. “All right, I’m ready,” I said. “Where shall we make for?”

“I don’t think we can get up the wall of the moat,” he answered. “We might manage to climb up the floodgates, but they are a long way away and I doubt if we can reach them. There is a down-spout from the roof a little farther along and it passes near a window; I noticed it as we stood in the drive. Let’s try it first. If we can’t get in the window it will have to be the floodgates.”

Personally, I would rather have gone anywhere than back into that dreadful building, but in such cases as this I was always prepared to let Steeley take the lead.

By keeping one hand on the timber, which was buoyant enough to support us, and pulling ourselves along the wall, we made good progress, and two or three minutes saw us under the down-spout of which he had spoken, a well-fitted iron pipe which had evidently been put there in Victorian days while the D’Alleynes were still in occupation. No light came, of course, from the window near to which it passed, and which was not more than three feet above the water; not that I expected to see a light; but I mention this in view of what happened a few moments later. It struck me as odd that a window should be so low down, but this apparently curious feature was also explained later.

“Hold the planks as tightly as you can against the wall,” ordered Steeley.

I obeyed, and felt them go down under his weight, but he obtained sufficient purchase to enable him to grasp the pipe and pull himself up until he was standing on the bend, the part which I think is called an elbow-piece, at the bottom, from which position he was easily able to reach the window. For what seemed an interminable time he fumbled with it. At last I could stand it no longer. "Hurry up," I said impatiently.

"Just a minute," he replied coolly, and a few seconds later I saw him draw himself up and disappear from sight. He seemed to glide up the wall like a gigantic newt. As he did so, to my utter astonishment—not to say consternation—there was a flash of soft yellow light from the same spot. There could be no possibility of mistake, for it illuminated a section of the moat as the intermittent beam of a lighthouse lights up the sea. A moment's delay and his head and shoulders reappeared, gargoyle fashion.

"Catch hold of this and hang on," he ordered, lowering a thick, dark object down to me. I grabbed it thankfully, for I was pretty well spent. It felt like a blanket, only softer.

"Try and get your feet on the bend at the bottom," he went on quietly. "If you can manage that I can help you."

This I succeeded in doing, but only after a desperate struggle. Then, leaning down, he got his hands under my armpits and the rest was comparatively easy. A final struggle, in which I was vaguely aware of something soft half-enveloping me, and I slid head downwards into the room in which Steeley was standing. Weakly, I staggered to my feet and looked about me. This is what I saw.

The room, quite a small oak-panelled chamber, was softly illuminated by light that was coming round the sides of a heavy curtain that hung in folds from the ceiling to the floor, and concealed whatever lay beyond it. It appeared to be made of thick black velvet. Another curtain of the same material hung over and overlapped the window through which we had entered, and the flash of light I had seen was explained. It had occurred as Steeley had pulled it aside in order to get in. A pile carpet, also black, or some dark colour, completely covered the floor. The only other thing in this sombre room—or that part of it in which we stood, for from where we were it was impossible to see beyond the curtain—was a great heap of what seemed to be spare curtains, black like the others, loosely rolled and stacked horizontally against the end wall. That was all. The only other circumstance worth mentioning was the fact that the room was warm; beautifully warm; in my half-frozen state it was like stepping out of a refrigerator into a hot-house.

I looked at Steeley and opened my mouth to express my surprise, but before I could speak he had placed a finger over his lips, and at the same time made a grimace which meant clearly that silence was imperative.

I pointed to the curtain and raised my eyebrows.

He shook his head in a manner which signified that he knew no more than I did, so with one accord we tiptoed over to it and peeped through the narrow opening between the end of it and the wall, he on one side and me on the other.

As long as I live I shall never forget my sensations as I stared into what might best be called the other half of the room. I was prepared for almost anything except what was actually there.

The light came from a small hanging lamp which hung over the only other article of furniture in the room. This was a bed, quite a cheap, ordinary iron bedstead; but it was the object that lay on it which froze me into a condition of hypnotised immovability. It was the body of a girl. She was lying on her back with her hands stretched straight down at her sides; her eyes, half-open, showing the whites only, were staring up at the ceiling. Her face was a ghastly greyish tint, with the waxen shine and rigid setness that comes with death. In horrible contrast to her ashen face, her lips, slightly parted, were still scarlet, like an open wound, but it was obvious that this colouring was artificial.

The sudden appearance of Steeley standing beside the bed restored me to something approaching normal, and moving the curtain aside I joined him. His face was grim.

“Dead?” I whispered.

He knelt down and laid his ear on her breast. For what must have been nearly a minute he remained thus; then he rose to his feet and caught my eye. “No,” he said softly. “Doped.”

Then came the next stunning shock. As I stared down compassionately at the unfortunate girl’s face it struck me suddenly that the features were vaguely familiar. I looked closer.

“Recognise her?” whispered Steeley.

I did. It was the girl in blue whom we had seen dining at the Savoy.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ESCAPE

How long we stood there staring I do not know; it seemed a long time, but it may not have been more than a few seconds. "God Almighty! What sort of a place is this?" I muttered at last. "Let's get her out."

Steeley threw me a queer smile. "How?"

I looked around, and for the first time noticed that there was no door. Hard though it was to believe, we were in a room without a door. And it was while I stood pondering on this new phenomenon that I heard a sound that sent the blood racing through my veins. Footsteps were approaching; soft, stealthy footsteps; and it was obvious that more than one pair of feet were making them.

Steeley grabbed me by the arm and dragged me back beyond the curtain. For a moment only he paused to stop it swinging before pointing to the pile of stuff lying against the wall. "Underneath!" he hissed.

With more haste than dignity I seized a roll of the material, wound it round me like a shroud and wormed my way into the back of the heap, near the wall. I could feel Steeley doing the same. Hardly had we settled ourselves when there was a scraping like that made by a sliding door, and simultaneously a distant sound was borne to my ears, a sound so utterly fantastic that the feeling of unreality which I had previously experienced recurred with intensified force. It was music; soft, throbbing, barbaric music. An instant later it was drowned by the swish of the curtain as it was drawn aside, and a voice spoke.

"I'm getting a bit tired of putting these curtains up and down; why doesn't he leave 'em up? Here you are; catch hold."

As the words were spoken I felt the weight of material on me being lightened, and I realised that the speaker was picking up the rolls nearest to him.

Discovery seemed imminent, and in my alarm I think I should have sprung to my feet had not the firm pressure of Steeley's hand restrained me.

“I wonder why he didn’t call the show off, with those two snoopers prowling about,” came another voice. “What was their game, I wonder?”

“Well, whatever it was they’ve finished playing at it this time,” returned the first speaker, with grim humour, obviously at our expense.

There was a moment’s silence.

“Nice, isn’t she?” came the other voice, evidently referring to the girl. “They say he gets five hundred quid for every one he picks up. Seems to me like money for old rope.”

“If you’ve got any sense you’ll get on with your job, and not start getting ideas,” advised the man who had first spoken. “Come on.”

There was another lightening of the weight and then, to my unspeakable relief, the sound of retreating footsteps. The hidden door closed and silence fell.

Steeley was out in a flash and I was not far behind him. The girl still lay on the bed, there was still no sign of a door, but the curtain had not been redrawn, which suggested that the men were coming back to fetch the rest of those under which we had taken cover.

“We were lucky there was a rug on the floor to soak up the water we must have brought in,” muttered Steeley. “I’m afraid we shall have to leave that unfortunate girl.”

“Must we?”

“We can’t take her with us, that’s certain.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’ve got to go out the way we came in. Even if we could find the secret panel through which those fellows entered before they come back, which is improbable, we should be heading straight for trouble to try and get out that way. The window is our best chance and the sooner we get out, the better.”

I walked over to it, drew the curtain and looked down. To my surprise I saw that the water was much lower than when we had entered, and I was still wondering how this could be when Steeley, who had joined me, offered the obvious explanation.

“The floodgates have been raised,” he said. “Having flooded the cellars, and the flood having served its purpose—as they think—they are now lowering the water again by letting it out through the only effluent. Hark, you can hear it rushing through. Good! It should create a current in that direction, which is the way we shall have to go. Go ahead; don’t wait for me.”

That swim through the black, evil-smelling water of the moat, in the silent darkness, was something that will live in my memory for ever. The cold was appalling. Fortunately, the weather had been mild, or I could never have done it. Steeley was right about the current. The volume of water now pouring through the gates created a strong flow in that direction. The rain had stopped and it was very dark, but not pitch dark, the clouds being broken in places exposing a few feeble stars that gave a doubtful visibility up to about twenty yards. Not that I needed any light to find the floodgates as I approached them; the noise was sufficient. I saw them loom up in front of me and I was carried swiftly towards them. There was a nasty rush at the finish, and for one moment I had a horrible fear that the undertow would pull me down, but I managed to grab a chain with my numbed hands and exerting all my strength dragged myself up just as Steeley came swirling alongside pushing a long object in front of him. It was the ram which he had either found floating near the window or collected on his way across. He gave it a shove and it went crashing down into the pool, or whatever lay on the far side of the gates.

“We’re well out of that,” I muttered fervently, as he joined me on the bank. “If special investigation means much of this sort of thing, you’ll soon be looking for a new assistant.”

It is strange, but I’ve noticed it many times, that as soon as a danger is passed, far from being fear-inspiring, one can almost joke about it. Maybe it is simply nervous reaction.

Skirting the moat we reached the drive, and as soon as our feet were on it Steeley broke into a run. “It will be pneumonia next if we don’t keep our blood moving,” he opined, and I did not dispute it.

“Aren’t we taking a chance, running down the road like this?” I asked. “Isn’t there a chance that we might meet somebody?”

“I don’t think so. Whoever the people are in the Castle, and however they get there, they don’t use this drive—unless they walk, which hardly seems likely. I looked at the moss when we were standing on it this afternoon; there isn’t a mark of any sort on it.”

Ten minutes’ sharp trot and, rounding the end of some rising ground, what appeared to be an absolute blaze of lights appeared ahead. We soon saw that they were coming from the other side of the road into which the drive emerged, and came from a roadhouse, or tavern. Nearer, on our own side of the road, loomed one of the empty lodges, and two massive wrought-iron gates, hung on pillars, with the usual decorative balls at the top.

“Thank goodness that’s over,” said Steeley with considerable satisfaction, as we crawled through the hedge on to the road and made for the tavern. “I think a stiff brandy won’t do us any harm. I hope these people are on the phone; the sooner Wayne comes down and has a look at this, the better.”

“The Gamekeeper’s Arms,” I read aloud from the sign that stood just within the radius of light, and, frankly, I was never more pleased to arrive at a hostelry in my life. The place appeared to be rather more than an ordinary country public-house. It was a big, rambling building, half-timbered, and must have been pretty well as old as the Castle. There was the usual open area in front, and behind it, along the side wall, a sort of drive-in which disappeared round the back, into what looked like a walled garden. Warm, yellow light poured from the windows, not only from the saloon but from the other rooms as well, and held a promise of good fare and a warm fire.

We opened the door and walked in, and the promise was instantly fulfilled. A magnificent log fire blazed in a great open hearth, and a welcome wave of heat came to meet us.

There were only three people in the room, two neatly-dressed, middle-aged, rather surly-looking men who looked as though they might be commercial travellers, and the barman, a sallow little chap in a white jacket, more the sort of waiter you would expect to find shaking cocktails in a West End night club rather than in a country pub. However, we paid little attention to these things as we lined up at the bar and called for two brandies.

The barman looked at us curiously, as well he might, for not until we were under the high candle-power lights of the overhead chandelier did I realise what a state we were in. Our clothes hung on us like old rags. Our hair, for we were hatless, was plastered down on our heads and our shoes were well spattered with mud.

“Had an accident, gentlemen?” inquired the bartender suavely as he reached for the brandy bottle.

In a mirror at the back of the bar, which bore an advertisement for a brand of beer, I saw the other two customers having a good look at us, too.

“We ran out of petrol down the road and had to walk,” explained Steeley casually. “What with the rain and the water dripping off the trees we got pretty wet. By the way, are you on the telephone? If so, I’d like to put a call through right away.”

“Want the garage?”

“Yes, but I must put a call through to London first. I’ll ring up the garage afterwards, and get them to send a car along with some petrol.”

“Maybe the Boss can fix you up,” returned the man behind the bar as he measured out our drinks. “The phone is in the parlour.”

We soon finished our drinks, and put the glasses back on the bar just as a private door behind it opened and a man entered.

The barman threw him a quick glance. “Here’s the Boss now,” he said.

I looked at him, and something inside me went down like a lift.

It was the man who had been with the girl in blue, at the Savoy.

## CHAPTER V

### ALL CHANGE

I FELT . . . well, I don't know how I felt; but whatever Steeley's reaction was he didn't turn a hair. He glanced at the barman. "Two bottles of beer," he ordered casually. Then he turned to mine host, who was regarding him with an expressionless face. "Good evening," he said cheerfully.

The Boss nodded, but I noticed that he was not looking at us. He was looking past us, and when, an instant later, the two men who had been sitting down got up and joined us at the bar, one on each side, I knew that in some way he had called them over, and that they were not the quiet, inoffensive customers they appeared to be.

My greatest desire at that moment was to rush out of the place and seek safety in flight, but I had to wait for Steeley's lead. What would he do? That we were in danger, I felt sure. Had the "Boss" seen us when we were prowling about the Castle? Had our escape been discovered and he warned of it? These were a few of the whirlwind thoughts that rushed through my brain as we continued to lean against the bar as though we were habitués. In the mirror in front of us I watched the men on either side. They were leaning on the bar, too, just as casually as we were. I saw a big car turn in the drive. For no apparent reason it dimmed its lights twice in quick succession before disappearing somewhere round the back; evidently there was a park there. But no one joined us in the bar. Presently another car drew in; it dimmed its lights in the same way, and I knew that it could not be a coincidence. It was a signal.

Steeley had poured out his beer, but I noticed that he left his hand resting on the bar, near the bottle.

"You look wet," said the Boss, in a cold, dispassionate sort of voice that sent a shiver running down my spine. Steeley had been right in his first judgment of him. A man with a voice like that was, I felt, capable of anything.

Steeley laughed shortly. "Not so wet as a couple of fellows who went round the back as we came in. They looked like tramps who had been sleeping in a ditch."

I saw the Boss's eyelids flicker. "Tramps, eh?" he said slowly. "How long ago?"

"About five minutes."

"Which way did they come, did you notice?"

Steeley looked at me as if he was not quite sure. "To tell the truth, I wasn't paying much attention, but I thought they came through the gates opposite. Did you notice?"

I filled up my glass. "I thought they came out of the house—the lodge, or whatever it is," I answered carelessly. In the mirror I saw the men on either side of us stroll away. They went out of the front door.

"Had a breakdown?"

I glanced at the Boss's face. It was expressionless, but I felt that Steeley had deceived him, or partly deceived him, or he wouldn't have allowed the two men to go. In any case, there was a doubt in his mind, which suggested that he himself had not seen us in the Castle; or that if he had, then it had been too dark for him to see enough of us to recognise us again.

Steeley looked up. "Ran out of petrol. Damn silly thing to do. But there, I suppose everyone does it once in a lifetime. We had to leave the car about a mile down the road," he explained with just a suspicion of weariness and disgust in his tone of voice.

"Most people take overcoats or mackintoshes with them at this time of the year," observed the Boss evenly.

"We had ours, but like a couple of fools we left them in the car," returned Steeley without hesitation. "It wasn't raining when we started and we didn't think we should have so far to come. How far away is the nearest garage?"

"Brimswade—about four miles."

"As far as that? You don't happen to have a spare tin of petrol, by any chance?"

The Boss paused for a moment before he replied. "Yes," he said slowly, "I can let you have some petrol. But there's no need for you to walk all the way back to the car. Let me send my man for it. You stay here in the warm."

Warm was the right word. It was getting too warm for my liking.

"That's a good idea," declared Steeley, in the most matter-of-fact way. "He'll find it pulled right on the grass border. I left the side-lights on."

I took another sip of beer. This was all very well, I thought, but how long could it go on? All these lies must sooner or later land us up against a brick wall. Another car turned in and disappeared round the back after flicking its

lights, but I took good care not to appear to notice it. Then, almost immediately behind it, came the last thing I expected to see, although there was nothing remarkable about it. It was a bus, or, rather, a motor-coach, the sort of conveyance that is now in general use all over the country for road transport service. It stopped right outside, which, following the usual custom of these vehicles in using hotels and public-houses for convenient stopping places, was evidently one of its regular halts. In fact, I am sure it was, for I heard the conductor sing out "Gamekeeper's Arms". I noticed that there were seven or eight people in the bus; as one would expect, they were all looking towards the hotel, there being nothing else to look at, and the conductor was already reaching for the bell to signal the driver to go on when I had an inspiration, for it seemed to me that the bus offered an opportunity for getting away which might not occur again. "Hi! Here's a bus," I shouted, and before anyone could move I had dashed to the door and flung it open. "Just a minute!" I shouted to the conductor.

For a second I was a target for all eyes, both inside and outside the hotel. The Boss was round the bar in a flash, and the two men who had gone to look for Steeley's imaginary tramps reappeared like magic. Even the bartender was there, eyeing me malevolently, his right hand thrust significantly into his pocket. But all the people in the bus were looking, too, and therein lay the strength of my plan. Whatever the Boss suspected, and whatever steps he was prepared to take to prevent our departure until he was satisfied with our *bona fides*, he could not very well put them into execution under the eyes of seven or eight witnesses.

"Just coming, conductor," I called again. Then, turning to Steeley, "Have you settled up?" I asked.

It was a funny moment. The tension in the air was electric, as when one is waiting for an explosion.

Steeley's voice, nonchalant as ever, savoured of anti-climax.

He was brilliant. He hadn't moved from his position at the bar. "What's all the hurry?" he asked in a disappointed voice. All the same, he called for the score.

"Three-and-six," said the barman, almost automatically.

Steeley counted out some change and joined me at the door. "Why not wait here?" he suggested.

"I'm wet and I want to get back," I replied irritably.

"All right, I suppose I might as well come with you," was his decision, in rather disgruntled tones. "Good night, Boss. Thanks for offering to fetch the car. I'll come back and have a drink with you another day."

I was already on my way to the bus when he overtook me.

“Come on, if you’re coming,” called the conductor rudely. “We can’t stay here all night.”

Under the scowls of the passengers, who evidently resented the delay as much as the conductor, we boarded the bus. The door slammed. The bell rang. The gears clashed and the vehicle glided forward. Out of the corners of my eyes I took a last look at the hotel. The Boss and his three assistants were still standing as we had left them.

Steeley touched me on the arm. “Tubby, I’ll hand it to you for that effort,” he said quietly. “You’ll never pull off anything smarter as long as you live. We were in a bad jam, make no mistake about that. I saw the bus, and I was still wondering how to use it when you did the trick. Good work.”

“It’s about time I pulled my weight,” I replied shortly.

“My word! We certainly stepped straight out of the frying pan into the fire. We were on such thin ice that I dared hardly breathe. But it might have been worse. It would have been a funny position, wouldn’t it, if that dago barman had taken me through to the phone, and I had put a call through to Wayne asking him to rush a squad down; yet but for the Boss arriving when he did that is what would have happened.”

“Funny? It would have been anything but funny,” I murmured coldly.

“Yes, maybe you’re right,” smiled Steeley. “It was a queer situation as it was, if it comes to that, and as I read it there was only one thing that saved us. They weren’t sure about us. They must have known that two strangers had been caught prowling about the Castle, but, if they had been told that, they would also have been notified that the two nose parkers had been quietly and efficiently disposed of. When we walked in they didn’t know what to think. But one thing is certain; had they been sure that we were the same two they would never have let us go, bus or no bus. As it was, they didn’t want to take an unnecessary risk by bumping off two people who might turn out to be perfectly innocent strangers. Meanwhile, before they could make up their minds, or get into touch with the Castle, the bus came in.”

“You think that pub is in touch with the Castle?”

“I’m quite sure of it, for several reasons. In the first place——”

“Fares, please.” The conductor was standing beside us, fingering his tickets.

Steeley looked up. “Where do you go?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“What is the next town?”

“Brimswade.”

“But that’s only a village.”

“It’s the end of our run. We stop there for an hour and then go back to Southampton.”

“Then it will have to be Brimswade,” declared Steeley. “Two singles.”

“One-and-six.”

Steeley paid. The conductor handed him the tickets and then hurried back to the rear of the bus as it slowed down for the next stop. Glancing through the window, in the glow of the lamps, I saw two men step forward out of the shadows. They jumped aboard. The conductor rang his bell. The bus shot forward again and the two new passengers sat down in the seat next behind the one in which we were sitting. “Pretty work,” whispered Steeley in my ear, but I was inarticulate, for the two men were the same two whom we had last seen in the Gamekeeper’s Arms.

For a moment I was dumbfounded. Then I remembered seeing a big car overtake us two or three minutes before, and the apparent miracle was explained. Even now I saw the car coming back. It passed us slowly and I saw the driver clearly. It was the Boss. That removed any possible question of doubt as to why the two men were on the bus. One of the worst things about the whole situation was that they were sitting so close to us that it was impossible for us to speak without being overheard, but what perhaps was worse than that was the fact that they could see us and we could not see them—at least, not without completely turning round, a procedure which, besides being difficult in the narrow seat, would have been embarrassing.

Steeley did, however, turn round. “I wonder if either of you gentlemen could oblige me with a cigarette,” he said coolly. “My case is empty and, as you may have noticed, I dashed out for the bus in such a hurry that I forgot to get any. If I may trespass on your generosity I think my friend would like one, too.”

I turned round at that, forcing what I hoped was a friendly smile.

One man’s face was expressionless, but a ghost of a smile flitted across the face of the other as he took out a familiar yellow packet. “With pleasure,” he said evenly.

Steeley took two cigarettes and gave me one. “Can you give me a light?” he asked cheerfully.

Without a word the other fellow felt in his pocket and took out a box of matches.

We got our cigarettes going, but Steeley hadn't finished. "Do you happen to have the time on you?" he enquired.

The other looked at his watch. "Twenty to ten," he said shortly.

"Thanks." Steeley turned back in his seat and puffed his cigarette contentedly.

At the next stop three of the seven other passengers got out. At the next, two more got out, leaving only a yokel and an old woman with a big basket of shopping. The driver's eyes were fixed on the road ahead, and a glance behind revealed the conductor, tired out after his day's work, sitting in the rear seat with his eyes shut. The bus cruised along, with an occasional rabbit hopping across the road in the glare of the headlights. Presently the yokel got up and walked to the back of the bus. Approaching a cottage by the roadside he rang the bell. The bus stopped. He got out. The bus went on. Only the old woman remained. And all the time the one thought in my head was, would our sinister escort dare to do anything while anyone was in the bus. I didn't like the idea of them sitting behind us. Nor, apparently, did Steeley, for suddenly he stood up.

"Damn draughty bus, this," he muttered irritably. "I'm going further back." With that he got up and calmly seated himself behind the two men. I joined him. It was the back seat, so we could not get any farther away from them, but our respective positions were now reversed. A definite improvement, I thought, but what would happen when we got to Brimswade? It would depend, no doubt, on conditions in the village. I had no idea of the size of the place, so it was impossible to say what these conditions would be, but knowing something of Hampshire villages I was not so optimistic as to hope for a well-lighted hive of activity. Clearly, whatever happened, it would not do to be left alone with the two gentlemen who were obviously waiting for us to get out.

We were not kept long in suspense. Five minutes later the bus ran into Brimswade. It was darker and more deserted even than I feared, but true to tradition the bus slowed down and finally stopped outside the only building in which there was any sign of life. It was the village pub.

"All change," called the conductor, wearily, with his fingers on the electric light switch.

## CHAPTER VI

### CLOSING TIME

THE old woman, who was sitting at the front end of the bus, got up and stooped to collect her shopping basket. The two men got up, but hesitated, clearly waiting for us to go first, as we were nearest the door. I, being on the outside, got up, and as I could think of no reasonable excuse for delay, prepared to alight. There was nothing else I could do. But Steeley thought of something. Three quick strides and he was at the front of the bus picking up the old woman's basket. This gave me an opening, for, being with him, I stood aside to wait, although there was no real reason why I should. Normally, I should have waited outside. Our two followers, somewhat taken aback by all this manœuvring, also hung back, making a business of buttoning up their coats. The driver switched off the headlights and, jumping down, stood by the bonnet, lighting a cigarette.

“Come along, please, come along,” cried the conductor irritably, his patience exhausted—as well it might be.

But still the two men hung back. “After you, gentlemen,” called Steeley brightly, and they had no choice but to accept.

The conductor gave me a dirty look. “Come on, come on,” he muttered. “I don't want to stand here half the night.”

Somewhat abashed I had to dismount, but I turned to help the old woman down the step. What she thought of all this gallantry, God alone knows, but she must have thought she was back in the days of knight errantry. Anyway, I helped her down the step, and, with her still on my arm, turned towards the pub. (One couldn't call it an hotel.) The two men were just turning to wait for us. Precisely at that moment something swished past my ear and there was a crash of glass followed by a tinkling of broken pieces. I released the old woman's arm with alacrity, thinking that the long expected attack had been launched, but before I could do anything the door of the pub had been flung open and an irate landlord, with three or four customers behind him, ran out.

“What's the game?” he cried wrathfully.

It needed no acting on my part to look bewildered.

“Who smashed my window?” demanded the landlord.

“I didn’t,” I declared.

“What window?” asked Steeley foolishly.

“Someone threw a spud through my window,” grated the landlord, becoming really angry.

“Well, I haven’t got any spuds, and if I had I couldn’t think of any reason why I should throw one through your window,” answered Steeley. “Particularly as I was just coming in for a drink,” he added.

The driver and conductor stood grinning, but their grins disappeared like magic when the landlord levelled an accusing finger at them. “Which of you two threw a spud through my window?” he demanded. “I’ll report you,” he promised vindictively, the threat producing vehement denials from the indignant busmen.

“Did you throw it, Mrs. Spragg?”

“No, that I didn’t,” asserted the old woman with such emphasis that it was at once obvious that she was speaking the truth.

“Then it must have been one of you two,” announced the landlord, whirling on our escort.

“Don’t be a fool,” answered one, curtly. “We were just coming in for a drink. What the hell should we be doing, throwing potatoes about at this time of night?”

This was a question for which the bemused publican could evidently find no answer, for he merely stood glaring at one and another of us speechlessly.

The ridiculous situation was ended—as it had been begun, I suspected—by Steeley. “Oh, come on,” he said. “What’s a window, anyway? It will soon be closing time. I’ll pay for it, if that’s all that matters. Drinks are on me.” With that he walked past the landlord into the tap-room, followed by everybody except the old woman who disappeared into the night.

The room in which we found ourselves was quite small, but it was warm and exuded the usual beery smell. There was a bar at the far side. A few dying embers glowed in the fireplace. Two or three small tables stood about, with chairs round them, while benches lined the walls, which were decorated by the usual pictures of impossible racehorses jumping over impossible hedges. Over the fireplace hung a well-pitted dart-board, bristling with darts.

“Aha,” cried Steeley loudly, as his eyes fell on it. “When I was a lad I used to be able to throw a useful dart.” He pulled out the darts as if he was going to play, but instead, he changed his mind and walked up to the bar. “Two whiskies and sodas,” he ordered. “Have a drink yourself, landlord,” he added, balancing one of the darts between the finger and thumb of his right hand while he tested the point with the other. “Nice little things aren’t they?” he murmured, passing one over to me. “I’ve often thought that if one caught you in the eye, or in the throat, it would make a nasty mess.”

“It would,” I agreed. “It would probably kill a man if it was thrown hard enough; in fact, in a rough house, it would be harder to think of a handier weapon.” As I spoke I looked straight at the two men who were sitting at one of the tables regarding us coldly.

One of the customers, a farmer, judging by his clothes, glanced at the clock and got up. “Good night, George,” he called, and went out. Two more men nodded and followed him. I, too, looked at the clock. It was nearly five minutes to ten.

“What time do you close in this part of the world?” I asked the landlord.  
“Ten o’clock.”

So we had five minutes to make up our minds what we were going to do. Another minute passed, and the two busmen finished the beer they were drinking and departed, leaving four others in the room, not counting the landlord, ourselves, and our escort.

The minutes ticked by. We had two more whiskies. Our persistent followers called for two more beers.

“Drink up, gentlemen, please,” warned the landlord.

Steeley looked at me, smiled faintly, and walked towards the door. Instantly one of the two men got up and followed him, whereupon he turned round and walked back to the bar. “Another whisky, please,” he said, pushing his glass forward.

“Sorry, no more,” replied the landlord, shaking his head. Then, raising his voice, “Time, gentlemen, please.”

Something made me glance through the window. Cycling slowly past, the light shining on his black waterproof cape, was a policeman, evidently the village constable; but before I could act he was out of sight. The landlord must have seen him, too, for his manner became peremptory. “Come along, gentlemen, *please*,” he called loudly.

Everyone got up. The four original customers walked towards the door. Well, here we go, I thought, and looked at Steeley for a lead—and got it. He flickered an eyelid. Then he dropped his glass with a crash on the brick

floor, and clutched at the bar, swaying. His eyes closed and a groan of agony broke from his lips.

“Catch him,” I cried, and got him by the shoulders just as he slid gracefully to the floor.

The result was, of course, a minor uproar. The landlord knocked up the flap of his bar and dashed round; the clientele, who were on their way out, hurried back. I dropped on my knees beside Steeley, loosening his collar. “Stand clear,” I said loudly. “Give him air. It’s heart disease. He’s always getting these attacks. Give me some brandy.”

The landlord, a good example of the law-abiding citizen, shook his head. He glanced at the clock and then through the window. “I daren’t,” he said. “It’s after time.”

“But my friend’s ill,” I protested.

“I can’t help that. I ain’t going to lose my licence. Constable Clayton’s hanging about outside. It’s turned five-past.”

“If he dies his blood will be on your head,” I declared.

“Oh dear—oh dear—oh dear,” cried the landlord’s wife, running in from the back room. “Whatever’s all this?”

“My friend’s got a heart attack,” I told her. “Brandy is the only thing that will save him. Here, I’ll tell you what we can do,” I went on quickly, looking at the landlord. “Let’s take him through into your sitting-room for a minute or two. These attacks only last for about a quarter of an hour. You can’t *sell* him brandy, but in your own home you could *give* him some.”

For a moment the wretched fellow hesitated. From his manner one would have thought that the world’s greatest tragedy was being enacted on his premises. “If he dies, there’ll be an inquest, and goodness knows what else; they’ll probably say he was drunk, and drinking after hours,” I went on bitterly.

“But suppose Clayton comes in?” wailed the landlord.

“He won’t know anything about it if you’ll get all these people outside, and close the door and put the lights out. If he comes past and sees this crowd in here he *will* wonder what’s going on.”

That did it. “Outside, everybody, please. Hurry up,” cried mine host, waving his arms towards the door as if he was driving a flock of sheep.

Within a minute the place was empty and I heard him shoot the bolts. “Let’s get him through into the sitting-room, then you can put the lights out in here,” I suggested quickly, without giving the landlord time to think. He offered no objection, so picking Steeley up by the head and feet we half

carried, half dragged him into the back parlour while the landlord's wife put the lights out in the bar.

"Now," I said, with a deep drawn breath of relief, "where's your telephone?"

"Telephone? I ain't got no telephone," replied the landlord, wonderingly.

This was a bit of a facer, and I had to think swiftly. "How far away is the nearest doctor," I asked. A doctor would certainly be on the telephone.

"Doctor Norton lives just down the street," answered the landlord, heavily. I think things were going a little too fast for him.

"Run and fetch him—quickly," I ordered, "I'm afraid my friend's in a bad way."

The thought of death on his premises was enough for the landlord, and he disappeared through the back door with alacrity. I locked it behind him, and noticed that a serviceable curtain covered the window.

"What did you lock that door for?" asked the landlord's wife, eyeing me suspiciously.

"In case the police came along; we must keep them out of it if we can," I told her confidentially.

Five minutes later and the handle of the door was rattled on the outside. "Who's there?" I called.

"Me and the doctor." It was the landlord's voice.

I opened the door and let them in, locking it again behind me. The doctor, a typical country practitioner, went quickly over to the "patient."

"Just a minute, Doctor," I said. Then I looked down at Steeley. "I think it's about time you got up and explained the situation," I said quietly.

With three incredulous pairs of eyes on him Steeley rose to his feet. "Doctor," he said, "and you, landlord; I owe you both an explanation. Please don't speak until I have finished. Doctor, my friend told the landlord to fetch you because it was a matter of life or death. It was. We are officers of the Special Criminal Investigation branch of Scotland Yard, and we're here on business; and however improbable that may seem to you, you will soon be able to confirm it. I need your help, badly—and yours, landlord. Lend it to me and you will do the State a service; withhold it, and the consequences may be serious."

The doctor broke in. "You will pardon me, I'm sure, if I appear sceptical. Have you any documentary or other evidence to support this—er—rather unusual claim?"

“None,” replied Steeley frankly, “but you have a telephone and a call to London will remove the quite natural doubts from your mind. But first of all I want you to understand the position. Waiting outside are two men. They look quite ordinary people. As a matter of fact, they are murderers, and they are waiting for an opportunity to kill us, the reason being that we know too much about them.” Steeley turned to the landlord. “Those are the two men who followed us into your house to-night. They were with us on the bus, and I was compelled to throw a potato, which I took from the old woman’s basket, through your window, to bring you and your customers outside in order that we might get into the bar unmolested. The two men followed us in, knowing that we should have to go out when you called time. I feigned illness to avoid going out, and with your permission I propose to remain here until I can call assistance.” Steeley turned back to the doctor. “And that is where I need your help.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing very difficult. I want you to go to the front door. The landlord will go with you. On the steps, in a loud voice for the benefit of listeners, you will make an observation to the effect that I must be kept in bed, and that you will look in again in the morning. You will then go home and ring up Scotland Yard. Ask for Detective-Inspector Wayne. Remember the name—Wayne. If he has gone home, which is more than likely, ask the operator at the Yard to put you through to his house. He has a private line. Tell him you are speaking for X One and X Two. He’ll understand. Explain our position to him. Tell him to come here with all possible speed, bringing at least twenty men, but he should stop the cars outside the village in order to pick up the two men outside before they can get away and give an alarm in a quarter that I wish to remain undisturbed. We shall remain here. Have I made myself clear?”

“Perfectly.”

“Good! Will you do this?”

“Certainly, but it seems an extraordinary business to me——”

“Of course it does, but I must ask you to believe that the situation is desperate. If you will think the matter over you must realise that we ourselves should not go to all this trouble without a very good reason.”

“Yes, that’s true,” admitted the doctor.

“All right; that’s all.” Steeley held out his hand. “Thank you, Doctor.”

The doctor, still looking as if he was not quite sure whether he was awake or dreaming, shook hands, picked up his bag, and turned towards the

door that led into the bar. A moment later we heard the landlord letting him out.

“Are all the doors and windows fastened?” Steeley asked the landlord, when he returned.

“Yes, but look here; I don’t want murder done on my property.”

“Neither do we, you may be sure,” replied Steeley dryly. “Don’t worry. The police should be here inside two hours and a half. If you’ve got a spare room, let us have it. We’ll make ourselves comfortable. If it’s possible, I should like a fire so that we can be drying our clothes; we’re wet through. Then you can go to bed and forget all about us.”

From his expression it was clear that the landlord was not very pleased at this suggestion. “Why not let me go and fetch Clayton, the policeman?” he suggested.

“Because, in the first place, he couldn’t do any good if he came, and secondly, it would alarm the two fellows outside, and I don’t want them alarmed.”

“All right,” agreed the landlord doubtfully.

Steeley tapped him on the arm and pointed to the brass handle on the inside of the door. It was turning, very slowly. “You see,” he whispered. “You don’t happen to have a gun, I suppose?”

“No.”

“Never mind. Let’s go upstairs.”

Candles, kindling, and a bucket of coal were produced. The parlour light was put out and we all went quietly up the stairs. The landlord showed us into a clean little bedroom, and put the firing materials into the grate. “I think you’ll be all right here,” he said nervously, drawing the blind.

“Right as rain,” declared Steeley.

The landlord went out and closed the door behind him, and an instant later we heard the key grate in the door of his own room. I turned the key in the rather flimsy lock of our own door, and then sat down on the bed. “We are having a lovely time, aren’t we?” I observed moodily.

“It might be worse. How about getting the fire alight?” was Steeley’s casual reply.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE RAID

WE soon had a bright little fire burning, with our clothes steaming in front of it, lying on the fender and hanging over the backs of the two bedroom chairs. Swathed in blankets from the bed we crouched on either side of it, prepared to wait for the arrival of reinforcements. It was the first opportunity we had had to discuss the affair since our misadventure in the cellars.

“What’s going on at the Castle, do you suppose?” I asked, although by this time I had a pretty good idea.

“I’m not sure, but I should say it is one of two things—perhaps both,” replied Steeley. “It’s big business, and when the crime business is run on a big, well-organised scale, you can be certain that one of two or three rackets are involved. In this case its dope or women. Castle Deeping is being used either as a headquarters for white slave traffic—it’s near Southampton, remember, from whence girls can be shipped abroad—or else it’s being run as a super vice-club. As I say, it may be both. I think it is. Queer things have been going on in that old dining hall. More funny business goes on in London than most people suppose, but the police have been making it rather hot lately, so the people who make money out of this sort of thing may have shifted to the country.”

“Did you realise that before we found that girl?”

“Of course. The first thing that told me something was going on was the electric light over the front door. Obviously, there was no electricity there when the people who owned the place went away, and nobody has lived there since. Who, then, put the light there, and for what purpose? Where does the power come from? Had electric power been available at the Castle, surely the agent would have told us, because electric light is a big advantage in a house. I should say the power comes from the Gamekeeper’s Arms. We know for certain that the two places are connected. There would be no difficulty in running a cable from the Gamekeeper’s Arms to the Castle. As I see it, the Gamekeeper’s Arms is a sort of clearing house; storehouse. From there, booze, and whatever else is required for the orgies at the Castle, is carried across. Obviously, it wouldn’t be possible to have stuff delivered at

the Castle without attracting attention. The next thing was, did you notice how easily the key turned in the lock? Clearly, it was being used regularly. Then again, the hall was warm. Iron firebacks were invented partly to store heat. That one in the fireplace which you saw me examine was not exactly warm, but it wasn't cold. I should say there was a fire in that grate last night. Next, the place was too clean, which leads me to think that whatever goes on is cleared away before daylight. The doped girl and the music amply confirmed my suspicion. Did you notice the smell? You said it reminded you of a French church. That was incense, which may help you to understand the sort of thing that goes on. There's something going on to-night. Did you spot the cars going round the back of the Gamekeeper's Arms?"

I nodded. "But how do these people get up to the Castle if, as you say, the drive is not used?"

"The only thing I can think of is a subterranean passage. Nearly all these old places have one, so it wouldn't be remarkable. I should say that the merry-makers go to the Gamekeeper's Arms, park their cars at the back, and then go underground to the Castle. Where else did the people go who got out of the cars we saw? They didn't come into the hotel. They went to the Castle. The curtains we saw are, of course, for hanging over the windows to prevent any lights showing while the party is in progress. Hales was murdered, and the reason isn't hard to find. He arrived unexpectedly and saw too much, and he was promptly bumped off before he could speak. We did very much the same thing and nearly shared his fate. Which reminds me: where are our two friends, I wonder?"

"Why did the Boss change his mind and send them after us?"

"Either because he felt uneasy and decided to have us watched, or, what is more likely, he got in touch with the Castle by telephone and discovered that the two interlopers had escaped and that we answered to their description. Naturally, he doesn't know that we are anything to do with the police or he would be more careful."

"Is it worth having a peep out of the window?" I suggested.

"No," was the firm reply. "It would be better not to show ourselves, in case they are watching. We couldn't do anything. Our game is to sit tight until Wayne arrives. I don't think the doctor will let us down."

I turned the fast-drying clothes and for a time lay down on the bed. As Steeley had said, we could only wait. "What's the time, do you suppose?" I asked, after a long interval.

"About half-past eleven. I heard the church clock strike eleven."

"Then Wayne should be here in about an hour."

“Yes, I reckon he should be here about half-past twelve if he started at once. With no traffic on the road this time of night he might even get here earlier.”

There was another long silence. My vest, shirt and pants were dry, so I put them on. Steeley did the same. “We were fools not to bring some cigarettes with us,” I remarked.

“Yes, pity we forgot that. I could do with a cigarette,” agreed Steeley.

The church clock tolled midnight, a rather sinister sound in the deathly silence.

“I’ve a good mind to go down and fetch some cigarettes,” I resumed, presently, for once I had thought of a smoke the desire persisted. “I think it’s safe enough. They wouldn’t dare to break in.”

Steeley shrugged his shoulders. “No, I shouldn’t think so,” he agreed, “but I don’t think it would be wise to start wandering about with a light, or even striking matches.”

“I believe I could find them without a light,” I told him. “There is a whole row of different sorts lined up behind the bar. They’re loose, not even in a glass case.”

“All right, but don’t make a noise or you’ll put the wind up the landlord.”

I felt my trousers. They were not quite dry, but they were warm, so I put them on. Then, very quietly, I went over to the door. As gently as possible I turned the key, opened the door an inch or two, and listened. Absolute silence reigned.

“Be careful how you go,” warned Steeley, who was also putting on his trousers.

I nodded, crept out on to the landing and closed the door silently behind me. The stairs did not go straight down; they swung round in a curve, but from where I stood, by looking over the banister rail, I could look down into a sort of well that was really a small square hall, now vaguely illuminated by ghastly beams of moonlight which fell aslant the floor diagonally from the leaded panes of a lattice window. My first thought on observing the moonlight was that the weather outside must have improved, but as I looked and listened, that unaccountable feeling of nervousness that sometimes comes over one in the dark—a remaining spark of primitive instinct, I suppose—caught me in its grip, and I regretted my somewhat bold decision. However, I would not go back now that I had started, so forcing my body to obey my will I crept stealthily down the stairs.

I reached the hall without mishap, and, without making a sound, I paused again to listen. Silence. Indeed, the silence was such that I could hear the rather nervous beating of my heart. I could see the door that led into the bar, so taking care to keep out of the moonlight I made my way cautiously towards it. With infinite patience I lifted the latch and gently, very gently, pushed it open. However, careful though I was, it gave a little protesting squeak. At the same instant—or so it seemed—there was a sound inside the bar. When I say sound I do not mean a noise. There was nothing definite about it. It was the merest *swish*, so slight that in the ordinary way one would not notice it. But when one's nerves are keyed up, every sound, however remote, is exaggerated.

As I stood rooted to the floor, the door, which I had released, swung slowly open, revealing the interior of a room, a dim place of vague shadows with wan moonbeams filtering through the glass fanlight over the front entrance. One or two red embers still glowed on the hearth, but they did nothing to dispel the sinister atmosphere of menace which, for no real reason, seemed to hang over the place. Nothing moved.

I was about to take a step forward when a cold draught blew lightly on my face. It was only momentary, but it was very real. Standing quite still, my eyes flashed round the windows, or rather, the curtains that covered them, seeking the cause. And as I stared, with my heart slowly increasing its *tempo*, I saw one of the curtains flutter, and knew that the window behind it was open. Bracing my tingling nerves I reached for the handle of the door and pulled it towards me. Very gently I closed it, but in spite of my effort to prevent it, the latch made a slight noise as it slipped into place. Instantly the sound was echoed inside the room I had just left.

Swiftly, but with many furtive glances over my shoulder, I made my way back upstairs. Steeley looked up as I entered.

“What’s wrong?” he asked sharply, after one look at my face.

“They’re inside,” I answered tensely.

“Lock the door!”

I did so, and in a few words, spoken in an undertone, told him of my discovery. “What the devil can we do?” I concluded.

“I don’t see that we can do anything, except sit tight and pray that the doctor hasn’t let us down, and that Wayne’s car hasn’t gone into a ditch,” he replied softly. “It would be asking for trouble to go downstairs, and it would be even more dangerous to try getting out of this window—*ssh!*”

He broke off, laid a finger on his lips and pointed to the door handle. It was slowly turning. Then came a faint creak as if pressure had been applied

to the door.

Two swift strides and Steeley had blown out the candle. Two more and he was at the window, a corner of the curtain drawn aside, peering down. He was back in a moment. "No use," he breathed. "The other one is waiting down below. Awkward, isn't it? The fellow outside our door will burst it open presently. One good kick would be enough," he added, looking at the cheap, flimsy lock.

"What about the landlord?" I suggested.

"He'll be far too scared to do anything. Hark!"

From the distance came the sound of a high-powered car, rapidly approaching; but while some distance away the noise faded to a mere purr and then died away altogether. "That may be Wayne, and it may not," whispered Steeley.

More pressure was applied to the door. The creaking became positively alarming. It sounded as if the door must burst open at any moment. It was obvious that an instrument, a lever of some sort, was being used. Steeley went over to it and rattled the handle. Instantly the creaking stopped. But presently it began again. Steeley shook his head; then he took a handful of darts from his pocket and took up a strategic position beside the door. "Watch the window and see if there is any sign of Wayne; if there is, let me know," he ordered.

I went over to the window, and moving the curtain aside, enough to enable me to see out, was just in time to see a pretty little drama. Our second enemy was standing on the pavement, disdainingly confident that he had nothing to fear. But he was no longer alone. Down the path came two men, walking briskly. Were they or were they not? I held my breath. The man below stood aside to let them pass, but when they were level with him they stopped. "Got the time on you?" said one.

Our man took his watch from his pocket and looked at it. Instantly he was seized by both arms. "Stand still and don't make a noise," came Wayne's voice grimly. "Where's your mate?"

I opened the window and put my head out. "Wayne!" I hissed.

He looked up and saw me.

"Buck up. The other one's outside our door, breaking in. The tap-room window is open," I told him tersely. Then I turned to Steeley. "Wayne's here," I breathed. "He's got the other fellow."

"Go back to the window and get ready to drop," whispered Steeley, watching the straining door.

When I got back to the window a ladder had been erected and Wayne was coming up it with another man behind him. He threw a leg over the sill and squeezed inside, as did the man who was with him. "You're just about in time," I muttered, as the door groaned under the tremendous leverage that was being exerted against it.

However dense Wayne could be on occasion he was at home on a job of this sort. He even permitted himself to grin as he drew a heavy service revolver from his pocket and took up a position facing the door.

Crash! The door burst, and a man leapt inside the room, crouching.

Instantly two beams of light had fastened on him, dazzling him, so that he stood blinking. "Stick 'em up," said Wayne crisply. "Don't let's have any nonsense."

The man staggered as he looked at the four of us in turn. Then, as I lit the candle, he stared at Wayne incredulously. "Strewth! How the hell did you get here?" he gasped.

Wayne smiled pleasantly, as one who meets an old friend. "Well, if it isn't Benny from Bow. I wondered what you'd been doing with yourself lately. Anything you say—you know the rest?"

"No, blast you."

"Now, now. Carrying a gun, too."

The crestfallen man tossed his automatic on the bed. "I might have known there was a bleeding catch in it," he muttered bitterly, turning a baleful eye on Steeley.

"All right, that's enough." Wayne nodded to his subordinate. "Take him down, Thompson."

The man stepped forward to obey. Simultaneously a door on the landing was thrown open and the landlord stood on the threshold, holding a lighted candle in his hand.

There is no doubt that our attention was distracted by his appearance, and it gave Benny from Bow an opportunity which he was not slow to seize. With a cat-like leap he was through the door and on the landing; another, and he had knocked the luckless publican flying and had disappeared in his room, slamming the door behind him.

Thereafter things happened with a speed that left my startled wits far behind. From the room in which Benny had vanished came a woman's shrill scream of fear, the end of it drowned in a terrific crash of breaking glass. This in turn was followed by another crash which sounded as if half the roof had fallen into the back yard. After this there was a brief interval, so

guessing that Benny had jumped through the window on to an outhouse, I did not follow Steeley and Wayne, who had dashed into the landlord's room on the trail of the fugitive, but ran back to the window overlooking the street.

With one foot on the ladder I saw that quite a little cavalcade had appeared below. There were no less than three cars, a van, and a uniformed policeman on a motor-cycle; apparently he was sitting astride the saddle with his feet resting on the ground. Assuming that he had not heard the pandemonium, I shouted "Look out", but I was a split second too late. As was only natural, my warning caused him to look up, but before he could say or do anything a figure had dashed out of the side passage and the policeman and his motor-cycle were in a heap on the ground. For a few seconds the spot became a confused blur; then it broke into two parts; the motor-cycle with the man astride it, and the policeman, who was scrambling to his feet. He made a wild grab at his machine, but the rider swerved. The engine raced, and away went Benny from Bow—for I had no doubt as to who the rider was—down the road like a bat out of hell, as the saying is.

I slid down the ladder and arrived at the bottom as Wayne, cursing luridly, and Steeley dashed out of the passage from which Benny had emerged a few moments before. A dozen or more men appeared now it was too late, some out of the house, others out of the cars.

"Where's he gone?" snapped Wayne.

I pointed down the road. "He's on one of your motorbikes."

"Come on!" Wayne, with unsuspecting agility, jumped into the leading car. "Come on, everybody!" he yelled. Steeley jumped in beside him and I fell in a heap at the back as the car shot forward, with the door still open. Looking back I saw the other cars tearing along behind us.

I'm quite sure that for the next few minutes we were in greater danger than ever we had been in the tavern. Wayne drove like a madman, spurred on by Steeley, who told him that the Gamekeeper's Arms was our objective, but that if the fugitive got there first we should probably find the birds flown.

"What the hell's it all about, anyway?" asked Wayne, shortly.

As briefly as possible, Steeley told him. He also gave him a very brief account of our adventures, and what we might expect to find.

But while we were still a quarter of a mile away from the tavern a new and unlooked-for factor necessitated a swift alteration of plan. A crimson glow, streaked with orange, could be seen between trees, and I think we all

knew what had happened before we swung round the last corner. The Gamekeeper's Arms was in flames.

Wayne cursed. "We're too late. He's fired the place."

"We may be in time yet," returned Steeley quickly. "If Benny, or whoever struck the match, has bolted up the tunnel, as seems likely, the fire may prevent us from following, but it also cuts off the retreat of the people in the Castle. If we can get to the bridge over the moat, just outside the Castle, we've got the lot of them trapped. Here we are; here's the drive." Wayne halted only long enough to detail half a dozen men to stand guard round the now blazing tavern. The iron gates at the entrance to the drive were, of course, locked, but with an uprooted wayside sign we burst them open, and continued our wild journey up the moss-grown roadway. A couple of hundred yards short of the Castle Steeley laid his hand on Wayne's arm. "Steady," he said. "Don't go too close. We don't want them to hear us."

Wayne stopped the car a little distance short of the Castle, and the others halted behind it. "Which is our best way in?" he demanded tersely.

"I'll show you," answered Steeley briskly. "Send your men round to the front door, but tell them to keep quiet until we're inside. Two or three should remain on the gates. Let Thompson come with us. I should like to borrow a gun, if it's possible; I don't know, but there may be a rough house."

Wayne soon made the necessary dispositions, and borrowed weapons for us from two of the officers who were to guard the bridge. Then, as I half expected he would, Steeley led the way to the place near the floodgates where the punt was moored. He snapped the rotten painter with a single tug, and picking up the pole, ferried us all—that is, myself, Wayne and Thompson—to the window through which we had so recently escaped. "No noise," he breathed as he swarmed up the pipe.

Beams of soft light shone on the turgid water as he moved the curtain aside. "All clear," he said quietly, and within three minutes we were inside. Instinctively my eyes flashed to the bed, but the girl was no longer there. I noticed that all the curtains had disappeared and, what was more important, the secret door through which the girl had evidently been carried had been left open.

Wayne pushed his way to the front. "This is my job," he said bluntly, and Steeley did not demur.

In single file we followed Wayne into a long narrow corridor down which floated the sound of many voices, singing, or rather, intoning, what seemed to be a sort of chant. "What the hell?" grunted Wayne, throwing a glance over his shoulder at Steeley.

“Go ahead, you’ll see,” was the quietly spoken reply.

We passed several doors in the corridor. Wayne opened each one as we came to it, but the small rooms to which they gave access, were all empty, although they were well furnished. In some I noticed dress-clothes, both men’s and women’s, hanging over the backs of chairs or lying on the beds. However, we went on, and then made the disconcerting discovery that the corridor ended in a cul-de-sac.

What we should have done I do not know, but at that precise moment a panel slid aside, and two men, presumably the same two whom we had heard talking earlier in the evening, stood before us. Between them they carried a stretcher, but there was nobody on it. Their astonishment at seeing us was such that neither attempted to fight or escape. With unbelieving eyes and sagging jaws they just stood and stared. Wayne thrust the muzzle of his revolver forward. “No nonsense,” he said grimly. “We’re police officers; keep quiet, or it will be the worse for you. Put the bracelets on ’em, Thompson.”

Leaving the prisoners still staring we passed on until we came to a short flight of stairs. The door at the top was ajar, no doubt having been left open by the men who were now our prisoners, and it was clear from the volume of noise that came from the room above that we had reached our objective.

Making no more noise than a cat Wayne crept to the top. Very gently he pushed the door open and stepped inside. We followed, and, speaking for myself, I was never more bewildered in my life.

In front of a raised platform, or dais, some twenty to thirty people were kneeling, chanting in a minor key what appeared to be responses to a voice that came from the platform, which was furnished after the fashion of an altar; but it was all so gloomy that it was not easy to see just what the thing was. In fact, the only illumination was a diffused red glow that came from two tall receptacles, or standards—I can think of no other word to describe them—from which arose curling wreaths of vapour, which I assumed to be the source of a heavy, sickly perfume that filled the air. Indeed, this was so potent that its effect was almost like that of a drug. The worshippers, for that is what they seemed to be, were a strange collection of people; the woman nearest to me, an amazing looking creature with a rapt expression on her face, wore only several strings of beads. She had unfastened her hair, which was long, and hung nearly to the ground.

How long I should have stood staring at this eerie spectacle I do not know, for either the perfume or the whole atmosphere had a dulling effect on the senses, but suddenly an interruption occurred which not only ended the

ceremony, but threw everything into confusion. A door on the far side of the hall was thrown open violently, and Benny, the man who had escaped in Brimswade, ran in. “Look out!” he cried. “The cops!” Instantly pandemonium reigned. A woman screamed hysterically. Thompson’s torch cut a wedge of white light through the gloom.

Wayne, after a crisp “Stand still, everybody” made a dash for the altar, but before he could reach it a curtain was torn aside, and the Boss, clad in a long crimson robe, appeared. His face was working convulsively. “What do you mean by coming here like this?” he cried furiously.

“Shut up,” barked Wayne above the uproar, and his order produced some effect. “I want a word with you,” he went on curtly, addressing the Boss. And then—and here I think he made a mistake, although perhaps it is not for me to say so—he added, “You may be able to tell me how Mr. Linton Hales \_\_\_\_\_”

He got no further. I was close enough to see the Boss start before he began to back away.

“Stand still,” snapped Wayne, but the Boss took no notice. He moved like lightning. For an instant he groped under his robe; and then his hand flashed out holding an automatic. Wayne threw up his own weapon, but before he could pull the trigger the Boss had fired—with the pistol pointing at his own head. There was a shattering report. In the deathly silence that followed he swayed for a moment, and then crashed heavily to the ground. The pistol flew from his hand and skidded across the stone-flagged floor.

This was a signal for the uproar to break out again with increased violence. Women screamed. Some fainted. A big man with the staring eyes of a fanatic, and a short curly beard, clad in a sort of white loin-cloth, pushed his way to the front and adopted a threatening attitude. Wayne’s lips curled as he thrust him aside and put the revolver back in his pocket. “That’s that,” he muttered savagely. “Thompson, go and open the front door and let the others in to take care of this herd. I’ll look after these two,” he added, indicating the handcuffed prisoners. “What the devil’s all this about, anyway?” he asked us wonderingly.

“Devil is the right word,” replied Steeley quietly. “It looks as if we interrupted the Black Mass.”

“*Black Mass?* What the hell’s that? Never heard of it.”

“Few people have; it’s a thing best left alone,” Steeley told him. “It was started back in the Middle Ages, nobody quite knows how, although it was put down to renegade monks. The ritual is devil worship—the inverse of ordinary religion—but actually, boiled down, it is nothing more or less than

an excuse for debauchery. The Boss must have had a nice profitable little business here.”

Wayne nodded. “Wonder how long it’s been going on?” he muttered.

“It might have gone on for a long time but for Linton Hales arriving at an inopportune moment,” answered Steeley.

“Yes, you’re right there; you’ve made a good start,” conceded Wayne. “I’m bound to admit that in an out of the way place like this we might have been a long time tumbling to it.” He turned to his subordinates who were now pouring into the hall. “Get these people into their clothes, some of you, and then get ’em into the van. We won’t stop for names now. Perkins—Lea, pick up that fellow in the red cloak; you’d better take him to Brimswade and get a death certificate from the doctor. Tell him I’ll be along presently. Then get the body to the mortuary.” As he spoke Wayne pushed his way through the still milling crowd of muttering men and sobbing women to the place where the Boss had fallen. Suddenly he stopped, and then ran forward. For a moment he bent down; then he whirled round. “Close all the doors,” he shouted. Then, to Steeley, furiously, “He’s done us.”

I could hardly believe my eyes as I stared at the floor and saw what Wayne had seen. The red cloak still lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. But it was empty.

“Pretty neat,” said Steeley softly, in my ear. In spite of what must have been a mortifying discovery he could still admire a smart move.

“We’ll get him,” snarled Wayne, herding the crowd into a corner and running his eyes swiftly over them, hoping apparently to see the missing man.

“I should say it’s a hundred to one that he’s got away,” observed Steeley bitterly. “God knows what sort of a rabbit-warren there is underneath this place.”

We stood aside and smoked a cigarette while the worshippers, a dissolute-looking lot, were made to dress, after which they were escorted to the waiting van. Benny, I noticed, was not among them, so presumably he had got away after giving the alarm.

Wayne, looking not a little disgruntled, joined us. “Well, that’s cleaned the place up a bit,” he said moodily. “We’ve found the girl. She’s doped all right, but otherwise I don’t think she’s taken much harm. She’ll be all right in the morning, and then I’ll have a word with her. What are you fellows going to do?”

“If there’s nothing more we can do here, and there doesn’t appear to be anything, we may as well get back to Town,” returned Steeley. “We shall

have to come back to-morrow to collect the aircraft; we shall probably have a look round at the same time. It depends on whether you manage to find the Boss. It would be a pity if he got away, after all.”

Wayne nodded. “It would,” he said slowly; “but I don’t think you’d need worry about that. We’ll get him. Meanwhile, if you want to get to London there’s a car just going. I shall have to stay on here for a bit, but I’ll see you at the Yard in the morning and let you know the latest news.”

Five minutes later we were on our way back to Town.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PLAN

UTTERLY worn out, I seemed hardly to have dropped off to sleep when I was awakened by Steeley nudging me in the ribs. He was already up and fully dressed. "Get a move on," he said. "Raymond has been on the phone. He wants to see us—says it's urgent, so we had better get along right away."

I looked at clock. It was still only nine-thirty. "My God! Is there no rest at all on this job?" I complained bitterly, as I dragged myself out of bed and staggered through to the bathroom. However, in half an hour I was ready, and, feeling somewhat better after coffee and a cigarette, joined Steeley in the taxi he had already called. We found Colonel Raymond in a good humour.

"Your first effort is bearing unexpected fruit," he told us cheerfully.

"Have you got the Boss yet?" inquired Steeley. In the cold light of morning I could see that he was feeling peeved that after all our trouble the murderer of Linton Hales had managed to slip through our fingers when we had him virtually in our grasp. Without him, the case would have to be regarded as a failure—at least, so Steeley had declared on the way down, although Colonel Raymond soon made it clear that he thought otherwise.

"No, but I can tell you something about him," was his reply to Steeley's question.

"What is it?"

"From finger-prints found on his pistol it appears that he is an old client of ours, although until the other day we had never had the pleasure of seeing him in the flesh. His name, either real or adopted, is Paul Durant. Hitherto he has been a rather mysterious figure looming darkly in the background of what is popularly known as the Underworld; indeed, so elusive has this gentleman been that once or twice I have doubted his existence, so your action in bringing him into the daylight is likely to assume a more important aspect than the unmasking of the murderer of Linton Hales."

"You mean you've hooked up the finger-prints with another case?"

“With two cases.” With a pair of tweezers Colonel Raymond picked up a piece of pasteboard that was lying on his desk. “We found this in the pocket of one Bert Loder, an old lag we hauled in a little while ago for passing spurious banknotes at race meetings. It carried half a thumb-print, which I will show you in a moment. As you probably realise, finger-prints are not much use unless you can identify the owner of them. When we arrested Loder we had no record in our archives of the man who had left his thumb-print on this piece of card, which, incidentally, appears to be no more than a corner torn off a menu, so, naturally, we did not regard it as being of any particular importance. But when, last week, we caught Charlie Timms, whose regular graft is picking pockets, with phoney notes in his possession, and two of these same notes bore the same mysterious thumb-print, it gave us reason to think. At first, Timms claimed that he had hooked the notes out of the pocket of what he called a ‘toff in the City’, but under rather severe pressure, and the promise of a long stretch unless he thought of some means of reviving his memory, he broke down, and told us that he had been employed to cash the notes at tobacconists’ by a man who worked for a fellow named Paul Durant. He couldn’t—or wouldn’t—tell us how he had learned the name, but it was evident from his nervousness that Durant was a man to be feared. Well, there it is; the thumb-print on the pistol proves conclusively that Durant is the man we are after; the man we saw dining at the Savoy, the man who was running the racket at Castle Deeping and was smart enough to get away in last night’s raid. The most important thing that emerges from all this, the thing that concerns us most, is the indisputable fact that he is engaged in traffic other than what we know was going on at Castle Deeping. That means that he is going to be hard to find; but it also means that we have got to find him.”

Steeley stroked his chin. “Yes,” he said slowly.

“I’m afraid it’s going to be difficult to know just where to start,” confessed the Assistant Commissioner thoughtfully.

“I can think of only one place,” Steeley told him. “We’ve got to start where Loder and Timms started.”

Colonel Raymond raised his eyebrows. “Where’s that?”

“I’ve no idea,” replied Steeley simply; “but that place should be easier to find than Durant’s hide-out. Loder and Timms were both professional crooks; the chances are that they were both enlisted at the same place, and in the same way, and their records might give us a line on that. It might be a good thing to pick up any other professionals who happen to be at large to see what *they* are carrying in their pockets. If two were in the game the

chances are that there are others in it, too. How long have Loder and Timms been out of gaol?"

"Not long, I think. Just a minute, I've got their dockets here." Colonel Raymond hunted through the pile of manilla jackets lying on his desk, and picked out two of them. "Here we are," he said.

"Why, they've been out less than a month, both of them," cried Steeley, who had walked round the Colonel's desk and was looking over his shoulder. "Both out of the same gaol, too. Pentonville. Has any one else—any regular, I mean—been released during the past month?"

"I can soon find out." Colonel Raymond pressed a bell. "Get me a list of prisoners discharged from Pentonville during the last four or five weeks," he told the sergeant who answered the bell.

The officer was back inside ten minutes. "Seven, sir," he said. "Six were first offenders, in for less than twenty-one days."

"Who was the other?"

"Peter Grimes, sir. He had done eighteen months for house-breaking."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"He's back home with his wife, in Kennington."

"What's he been doing since he came out?"

"Going straight—as far as we know."

"Has he got a job?"

"No, sir."

"How's he living?"

"He's putting in a lot of time at the dogs, at Catford Stadium."

"Where's he getting the money from?"

"We don't know that, sir."

Steeley smiled. "It would be interesting to see the colour of his money," he murmured.

"I'll have him picked up right away," declared the Colonel.

"That's the last thing I'd do," Steeley told him bluntly. "I'm not so interested in his money, even if it is phoney, as where he is getting it from. He is likely to be more use to us at large than in gaol."

"What do you want me to do, then?"

Steeley did not answer at once. I could see him thinking, almost feel his agile brain working. "Do nothing about Grimes for the moment," he said, "beyond keeping an eye on him so that we can pick him up if we want to. I've a better plan I'd like to try out. The first thing I'd like you to do is to let

it be known to the evening papers that Edward Brown and Thomas Smith, the ringleaders of the motor-car stealing gang which you rounded up two years ago, are being discharged from Pentonville to-morrow morning, sentences expired. The news editors will make a paragraph of it.”

The Colonel stared. “I can’t remember any such gang,” he muttered with a puzzled frown.

“There wasn’t one,” Steeley told him frankly. “But no one will know that. Public memory is short; they’ll swallow it.”

“And these men—Brown and Smith?”

“I’m Brown and Tubby is Smith.”

“Good God! What’s the idea?”

“That’s all. At ten o’clock to-morrow morning Brown and Smith will emerge from Pentonville gaol, once more free men.”

“And then?”

“That’s as far as I’ve got. I’m hoping, of course, to save myself the trouble of hunting for Paul Durant; if I’m on the right track, and I think I may be, his minions will come looking for us.”

Colonel Raymond shook his head doubtfully. “It’s an idea,” he said, “but I don’t like it.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“In what way?”

“You may succeed beyond your reckoning. Supposing you come face to face with Durant?”

“Dash it, that’s what I’m hoping.”

“With one murder on his hands he’s hardly likely to hesitate about another—two more, in fact. He owes you something for the Castle Deeping affair, don’t forget.”

“That’s a risk we shall have to take. It’s bad policy to anticipate trouble. Suppose we try it out and see what happens?”

“All right; it’s your own funeral,” agreed the Colonel dubiously, reaching for the telephone. “I’ll speak to the Governor of Pentonville now. What time shall I tell him to expect you?”

“We’d better go along to-night, I think, after dinner.”

The Colonel nodded. “All right,” he said, “I’ll fix it up.”

## CHAPTER IX

### THE RECRUITS

At ten o'clock precisely the next morning I followed Steeley through the gloomy portal of Pentonville gaol, solemnly trying not to look conscious of my new, ready-made suit. We shook hands with the chaplain who escorted us off the premises and then marched briskly down the road. I imagine that we were the first "prisoners" to leave one of His Majesty's prisons carrying automatics; but after the business at Castle Deeping I had refused to go on without one.

There were two or three cars about, but we paid no more attention to them than their occupants did to us. Steeley, ever thorough, stopped at the first tobacconist's we came to and bought a packet of cheap cigarettes; he stood in the doorway while he offered me one, lighted his own, and stood puffing it for a moment with the satisfaction one would expect after long abstinence.

"Don't look," he said quietly. "I believe there is a car interested in us. If it stops, leave the talking to me. Come on, let's stroll along."

We had not taken more than a dozen paces when I became aware of a car slowing down beside the kerb in line with us, and it was only with difficulty that I refrained from turning my head.

"Hey, you fellers! Want a lift?" called a voice.

At that we stopped, of course, and turned towards the car, which was a four-seater saloon. There were two men in it. One, the driver, was a tired-looking fellow of middle age, dressed in dark blue chauffeur's uniform. The other was a sleek, round-faced, well-groomed young man, with a dark moustache. He wore a bowler on his head and held a cigar firmly between strong white teeth.

"Are you talking to us?" inquired Steeley rather off-handedly.

"Yes, we seem to be going in your direction, so I thought you might do with a lift."

"Where are you going?"

"City."

“Fine! We’re going that way.”

Our charitable friend reached out and opened the rear door. “Nice morning,” he said brightly.

I glanced at the sky. As a matter of detail, he was quite right, although up to then I had not noticed the weather. We got into the back seat; the door slammed, and away we went. “What’s the next move going to be?” I thought, for I felt certain that Steeley’s plan had succeeded, and that the offer of a free ride was only an excuse to get in touch with us.

“Nice car you’ve got,” said Steeley easily, settling himself back. “What is it?”

The other passenger looked round while a smile spread slowly over his face. “As a matter of fact, I don’t know,” he said coolly. “Throw those gaspers away and have a cigar.” He took two cigars from his waistcoat pocket and offered them to us.

“Do you mean to say you don’t know the make of your own car?”

“I haven’t had it very long,” was the ready reply.

“That’s all the more reason why you should know the make of it.”

The wink which the man in the front seat gave us was significant. “To tell you the truth, I’ve only borrowed it, and I hadn’t time to look at the name-plate,” he said confidentially.

Steeley’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t mean that you hadn’t time to ask the owner’s permission, do you?”

The other grinned. “That’s what I mean,” he said blandly.

Steeley sat up abruptly. “Here, wait a minute, wait a minute,” he said curtly. “Just stop and let me get out, will you? What do you think I am?”

“Well, I saw where you came from,” admitted our new acquaintance, with surprising frankness.

Steeley’s manner became hostile. “So you did, eh? Well I’ve had about as much of that as I want for a bit. What the hell’s the idea, anyway; this a police frameup?”

“Bah! Sit still, big boy,” sneered the other. “You’re amongst friends.”

“I like to choose my own friends,” Steeley told him shortly.

“So do I,” grinned the face under the bowler, quite unabashed. “I saw a notice in last night’s paper to say that you were coming out, and I had a fancy to know you. Meet Jimmy West—the wizard at the wheel. My name’s Lewis; Lew for short. Ever heard of me?”

“Never.”

“What! Did nobody inside tell you about me, President of the Time Servers’ Benevolent Association?” The fellow roared with laughter at his own joke.

“The only word in that line that interests me is benevolent,” Steeley told him evenly. “When does the benevolence start?”

“Right here.”

To my astonishment the fellow fished out a handful of notes and passed them over. “They’re all yours,” he said casually. “Don’t bother to count them.”

“Thanks.” With a peculiar smile Steeley took the proffered notes and put them in his breast pocket. “And now,” he continued, “never having had something for nothing, maybe you’ll loosen up a bit and tell me what you expect for ’em.”

“Nothing; absolutely nix,” returned Lew promptly. “And if you don’t believe that I’ll stop the car and you can step out right now—but if you do you’ll be losing the biggest chance you ever had in your life of picking up an easy packet of dibs.”

“Go ahead, I’m listening.”

Lew waved his hand. “Not now,” he said reprovingly. “Let’s wait until we get home; I can talk better over a glass of something.”

“Suits me,” agreed Steeley. “But let’s get this clear at the start: I’m not tying myself to anybody or anything until I’ve heard what it is.”

“Of course not. By the way, which of you is Smith?”

“I am,” Steeley told him.

“Nice easy name to remember.”

“I know, that’s why I chose it,” answered Steeley coolly. “Where are we making for?”

“You’ll see.” We crawled through the traffic until we came to Vauxhall Bridge Road, and then, after going some distance down a narrow side street, with tall, dilapidated houses, or workshops, on either side, we stopped in front of two high wooden doors, or, rather, a pair of double doors. Lew jumped out, unlocked them, and we drove through into what seemed to be a builder’s yard—or perhaps it would give a clearer impression of the place to say, what had once been a builder’s yard, for although a lot of junk was lying about, it looked as if it had remained undisturbed for years. Lew followed us through and locked the gates behind us while I cast a furtive eye over our surroundings, which were decidedly insalubrious. On three sides of the sunless yard rose high, poverty-stricken dwellings, houses or tenements,

I knew not which. Few of the mean little windows could boast a curtain; those that could would have been better off without them, for they were filthy. From the sullen brick walls, grey-black from generations of smoke-laden fogs, protruded pipes of many sizes, set at all angles; stove-pipes, rain-water spouting, and goodness knows what else. The dull hoot of a ship's siren rose above the confused murmur of distant traffic, so I knew that the river could not be far away. So much I observed while West, the driver, was putting the car into a large shed, in the background of which I could just discern the vague forms of others.

"Here we are," said Lew, leading the way to the only door adjacent to the yard. "Step in," he invited.

I must confess that I was not enamoured of the prospect, so I may have been guilty of momentary hesitation. "What's the matter? Ain't it good enough?" grinned Lew.

We went in. As the door closed behind us, an elderly, shabbily-dressed old man with a grey beard and large spectacles came to meet us.

"Where have you been?" he asked irritably. "I thought——"

"All right, that'll do," broke in Lew, harshly.

"Who are they?" The old man nodded towards us suspiciously.

"They're O.K., dad; you can take it from me," our escort told him casually.

"Dad", the old man, looked anything but reassured. "Well, I think I'll be getting along," he said.

"Right you are; see you to-morrow," nodded Lew, as the old man took a greasy felt hat from a peg and departed.

"I'm afraid the old boy's losing his nerve," murmured Lew. "Getting too old, I expect. Come on up and have a drink," he continued, leading the way upstairs.

We went up two flights and followed him into a dingy sitting-room. West came with us. "What'll you have, beer or whisky?" he asked, producing bottles and glasses from a cupboard.

We decided on whisky, and after "cheerios" had been exchanged, Steeley set his glass down on the table. "How about getting down to business?" he said. "I've got to make some money, somehow."

Lew grinned. "How the hell much *do* you want?" he said, taking a fat wad of one-pound notes out of his pocket. Casually, he peeled off several, handed them to Steeley, and then treated me in the same way.

“Thanks,” I said, putting the notes into my pocket. “I’ll let you have it back sometime.”

Lew waved his hand. “Forget it.”

“Wait a minute, Lew,” muttered Steeley. “Before we go any further, let me tell you this. I’m not doing any more smash-and-grab——”

“Hell’s bells! Who’s asking you to?” cried Lew indignantly. “That game’s played out. I’ve a better proposition than that. I’m in the printing trade now.”

I smiled inwardly, for I had a pretty good idea of the sort of work he was turning out. “That sounds safer,” I admitted.

“It is,” he agreed. “You fall in line with us and we can do you a bit of good—and, naturally, ourselves a bit of good at the same time. It isn’t everyone we can trust, but we know you’re all right.” An observation which, considering where we had come from, or where we were supposed to have come from, made it difficult for me to suppress a smile. But that, of course, was what he meant; the fact that we’d been in gaol was our best recommendation.

West glanced at his wrist-watch. “What about a bit of grub before we get down to details?” he suggested.

“O.K. by me,” agreed Lew, and we all went down to the kitchen, which was in an appalling state, with piles of dirty crocks about. “The works are in the basement,” he told us confidentially, as from a cupboard he took a cold chicken, ham, bread, and some bottles of beer. And I must confess that I enjoyed my lunch, for I was feeling hungry.

“Feel better?” asked Lew when we had finished, passing round a packet of cigarettes.

“Much better,” I told him.

“Well, if that’s that, let’s go upstairs and talk.”

We went back upstairs to the sitting-room, where Lew put a match to the fire that had already been laid, and we drew up our chairs to the blaze. “Now,” said Lew seriously, “let’s get down to business.”

“You were going to tell us about some printing,” Steeley reminded him.

“That’s right.”

“What do you print?”

Lew gave us one of his ready smiles. “I don’t actually do the printing,” he confessed. “Dad—the old boy you saw downstairs—attends to that; we sell what he prints. But the plant doesn’t belong to us, you understand. The Boss may want to see you, or he may not. I don’t know yet. Meanwhile, take

a look at this.” As he spoke, Lew took the roll of notes from his pocket, selected two and passed one to each of us. He turned to West. “Light the gas, Jimmy, so’s they can see; it’s damn nearly dark.”

West got up and lit the incandescent gas, but in the meanwhile I had taken my note over to the window in order to see it more clearly, for the short November day was already drawing in, and, as Lew had rightly observed, it was nearly dark. A movement in the courtyard caught my eye; or, at any rate, something made me look down; and what I saw set my pulses racing. Another car had pulled into the yard. The man who had driven it in was just locking the double doors. As I watched him he put the key in his pocket and walked briskly towards the door by which we had entered the house. There was no mistaking his alert Cockney face. It was Benny from Bow.

I’ll not deny that for a few seconds my brain went all gaga, for nothing was more certain than that if Benny came in and found us there—well, anything might happen. I couldn’t think what to do for the best, and, of course, I had no means of warning Steeley.

Curiously enough, it was Lew who helped me out of my dilemma. Not having Steeley’s facial control I can only assume that my expression must have revealed something of what was passing in my mind. “What the hell’s the matter with you?” he said, in a queer sort of voice.

I took the plunge. “That’s Benny just coming in,” I muttered, not daring to look at Steeley.

“What of it? He’s one of us. You know him, then?”

“Yes, I know the skunk,” I snarled. “Lend me a gun, one of you.” Obviously, it wouldn’t do to let our associates know that we had come out of Pentonville armed with automatics.

“What do you think you’re going to do?” snapped Lew. His mouth set at an ugly angle, revealing for the first time his true character.

“I’ll show you.”

“No you — well won’t,” was the crisp reply, accompanied by such a stream of profanity that I winced.

“Listen, Lew,” I said quickly, “I don’t want to make trouble, but Benny thinks he’s got something against me, and if he comes in here and sees me there’s likely to be a mess. Let us get out of the way until he’s gone,” I finished swiftly, for I could hear Benny coming up the stairs.

“You can’t get out without meeting him,” said Lew, looking worried.

“Then put us in another room, and for God’s sake don’t let him know we’re here. I’ll tell you what it’s all about after he’s gone, if you like. I didn’t know Benny was in the game or I wouldn’t have come here.”

Cursing under his breath Lew sprang to a small door at the far side of the room. “Get inside there, then,” he hissed, “both of you.”

We found ourselves on a narrow flight of stairs. “Phew!” I breathed, as the door closed behind us just as the one on the far side of the room opened.

Benny’s voice reached us; we could hear as clearly as if we were in the room. “Did you get ’em?” he asked, without preamble.

“Of course we did,” replied Lew.

“Where are they?”

“Gone home to see their missus’s.”

“What the hell did you let ’em go for?”

“They’re coming back. There was nothing doing until they’d been home.”

“I see,” went on Benny, after a moment’s silence. “But I wouldn’t let the Boss know about that. He wants to see ’em.”

“What time?”

“Six o’clock.”

“Where?”

“Jug and Bottle.”

“O.K.”

“What are they like?”

“Right as rain.”

“You ain’t told ’em too much?”

“Ain’t told them anything.”

“All right, then; six o’clock sharp.”

“O.K.”

I heard the other door open and shut.

A minute later our own door was thrown open and we went back into the room. “You’d better get things straightened out with Benny,” declared Lew, curtly. “If the Boss hears of any private argument between you he’s apt to take a hand in it.”

I nodded. “All right.”

“The Boss wants to see you at six o’clock.”

“So we heard. What time shall we come back—about five?”

“Come back! Where do you think you’re going?”

“Oh, just to take a look round the town; it’s some time since we saw it, don’t forget.”

“Not on your life. You go and have a couple of drinks and you’ll be blotto. I ain’t taking no chances. After you’ve seen the Boss you can do what you like, but you ain’t leaving here ’til we go.”

I left it to Steeley to reply. “That suits me,” he said simply. “Give me another gasper, Lew, will you?”

## CHAPTER X

### THE BOSS

THAT was that, and I may as well admit that my opinion of the situation was that things were not looking too good. Admittedly Steeley's plan had done all that could have been hoped for it, but as Colonel Raymond had prophesied, it looked like going too far, and the immediate future was full of doubts and difficulties—or so it seemed to me. This business of going to see the Boss, for instance, had a distinct likeness to jumping into a lion pit from which it might be difficult to get out with a whole skin; yet it was not easy to see how we could back out now without forcing trouble which would, even if we were successful in getting away, undo all the good we had done. Every hour now, up to the time we saw the Boss, was bound to lead us deeper into the mire, and I found myself wishing that Raymond had insisted on a squad of plain clothes men keeping an eye on us. I could only do what I always did in such situations—leave it to Steeley.

He did not waste his time. An expert in the art of camouflaged interrogation, he chatted away with Lew as though he had known him all his life, with the result that this particular branch of Durant's operations—although his name was never mentioned—was soon more or less exposed. There was nothing particularly remarkable about it, the utterance of spurious notes being the racket.

The actual production of false notes involves little trouble or risk; the weak link in this particular form of crime is the operation of passing dud notes on to the public, in order to get real money in exchange. Durant, in the background, was fairly safe. Lewis's job was riskier. He was a sort of liaison man between Durant's headquarters—wherever that might be—and the people whose job it was, by any means they could think of, to get good money for the bad. They took the biggest risks, for, provided they did not squeal when they were caught, the men behind them were comparatively safe.

At half-past five Lew got up. "We better be getting along," he said.

I would have given anything for two minutes' private conversation with Steeley, but it was out of the question. "Good enough," he said. "I'm ready

when you are.”

From that I gathered that he intended going through with the business, and my only crumb of comfort was the automatic in my pocket.

It was, of course, quite dark by this time. We made our way down to the yard, waited while Lew got the car out—for West, apparently, was not coming with us—and without delay set off for our unknown destination. As I expected, we headed east, a district few West Enders know much about; I am no exception, and before many minutes had passed I hadn't the vaguest notion of where we were. Through mean, dismal streets we threaded our way, sometimes crossing the tramlines of a broad thoroughfare, sometimes crawling between double rows of street stalls, lurid in the glow of naphtha flares. A dirty yellow fog was beginning to form; it did nothing to brighten the scene, and appeared to be getting worse. Aldgate East was the last name I saw at a street corner, but what with the fog outside and the steam on the windows of the car, it was soon impossible to see anything. Some little time later, after passing through some particularly narrow, badly-lighted streets, the car crept to a standstill in front of a rather squalid public-house. I looked for its name, but the fog was now so thick that it was impossible to see anything but the lighted windows.

“Here we are,” said Lew, getting out and opening the door, and then leading the way through the jug and bottle department into a saloon heavy with the reek of stale shag. Several men were leaning against the bar, talking to a slatternly-looking female who was serving them. They all looked round quickly—one might almost say guiltily—as we entered. However, after a nod to the woman, Lew carried on to another door at the far side of the room marked “Private”. A few yards along a corridor we came to yet another door. This he unlocked with a Yale key, invited us to enter, and closed it again behind us, a proceeding that I regarded with disfavour since it cut off our retreat. However, Steeley said nothing, so I remained silent.

We now found ourselves, somewhat surprisingly, in a long, barn-like room, floored with bare boards. A heap of rope lay against a wall, which was decorated with a row of pegs from which hung several pairs of boxing gloves, suggesting that the place was used either as a recreation room or as a boxing establishment. The latter supposition was borne out when, an instant later, as if he was aware of our entrance, a side door opened and the most dreadful figure of a man I have ever seen in my life came to meet us. “Pugilist” was stamped all over him, from his canvas shoes, dirty white sweater and distorted features. He looked like a heavyweight gone to seed. Never have I seen such a nasty looking piece of work. His nose was flat on his face, like a negro's; indeed, his whole face seemed to be flat. One

eyebrow was lower than the other, and the blow that had brought this about had evidently damaged the eye, for it was half closed in a sort of permanent leer. His ears were all shapes, the lobes being swollen to enormous proportions. Added to these impediments to physical beauty his hair was cropped like that of a German soldier. His thin lips parted when he saw Lew, revealing gaps in his teeth that made him look more like a wild beast than a human being. With his great arms hanging limply at his sides he came to meet us with the swaggering gait of the professional bruiser.

“How do, Lew?” he said, in a throaty whisper, as though he had lost his voice, and from where I stood I could smell his beer-laden breath.

“How do, Tiger?” greeted Lew, and at the name I stared anew, for I recalled that the ferocious nickname had once been, many years ago, a newspaper headline. “Meet Ted Brown and Tom Smith,” went on Lew.

Tiger held out a hand like a leg of mutton, and I winced at his grip. “Come through,” he invited, and we followed him into a small dressing-room, pungent with perspiration, papered with newspaper cuttings of boxers in crouching positions. “Sit down, boys; I’ll let the Boss know you’re here,” he went on, in his dreadful husky voice, and with a nod disappeared behind a curtain.

“The Tiger is your doorkeeper, eh?” suggested Steeley.

Lew grinned. “Yes, and I don’t think anyone will get past *him*. I only saw one fellow try it, and he was trying to get out, not in; when Tiger had finished with him he looked like a heap of cat’s meat.” Lew laughed aloud, as if he found pleasure in the recollection of the event, and more than ever was I thankful for the little heavy object in my pocket.

Before we could say any more the curtain was pulled aside and Tiger reappeared. “Come on, you two,” he said indicating Steeley and myself. “You’d better wait here, Lew.”

Steeley got up and walked towards the curtain. I moistened my lips and followed, although I would much rather have gone the other way.

Up two flights of narrow stairs we went, and then came to a halt on a landing. Tiger tapped lightly on a door, opened it and invited us to go through.

Steeley threw me a peculiar smile before stepping across the threshold. I drew a deep breath and followed in his footsteps. My eyes flashed round the room. A man was sitting at a desk. But it was not Durant. My relief at this was something more than I can describe, and I prepared to take a fresh interest in the proceedings.

There was nothing particularly outstanding about the man who welcomed us, unless it was the fact that he was a type one would hardly expect to see in such a place. He was well dressed, rather stout, but with a keen, thoughtful face and a well trimmed toothbrush moustache that gave him a military touch. Indeed, he might have been a retired senior officer, yet . . . yet there was something in his expression that did not quite fit. There was an unnatural hardness, a sinister grimness . . . a relentlessness . . . something, difficult to describe, but whatever it was in his character that moulded that particular expression, it was something not very nice. However, he nodded affably enough. "Good evening; pleased to meet you," he said in a quiet, well-dressed voice. "Looking for a job, eh?"

"Provided there is some money hanging to it," answered Steeley coolly.

The other smiled. "I don't expect people to work for nothing," he said. I noticed that he did not invite us to sit down.

Now during this brief exchange of greetings my eyes had not been idle. The room was a large one, and well furnished in the manner of an office, beyond which there was nothing about it worthy of description. The door through which we had entered remained ajar, and through the narrow opening I could see Tiger's white sweater as he leaned against the wall waiting for us to come out. There was another door on the far side of the room, but it was shut, and the one window was heavily curtained. Something, perhaps instinct, made me look again at the closed door. Steeley was looking at the man behind the desk, so he did not see what I saw. Very slowly, and quietly, the door was opened by someone on the other side, but not more than an inch or so. I watched it with bated breath, fully expecting it to be opened wide at any moment in order to permit someone to enter; but no, it remained precisely as it was, as if whoever was on the other side was content to listen.

My original apprehensions returned with renewed force. What made matters worse was the fact that Steeley was unaware of what was going on, and I had, of course, no means of telling him. Which was all very disturbing, to say the least of it. Was Durant in the next room? If so, how long would it be before he recognised our voices or inspected us through the narrow opening? These were questions I asked myself, knowing that it was impossible to answer them. However, I did the only thing I could, which was to pretend to take an intelligent interest in the conversation, at the same time keeping a surreptitious eye on the door.

The man behind the desk was now blatantly discussing the easiest and safest methods of passing forged notes. The proposition was that he should issue these to us in quantities that we thought we could dispose of. After the

first issue we should be expected to purchase fresh supplies at twenty-five per cent. less than their face value. Thus, we should make a profit of twenty-five pounds on every hundred changed, and we should, he assured us, have no difficulty in making a hundred pounds a week each. We were at liberty to adopt any means we liked of passing the forged notes, but the safest way, he explained, was to make small purchases at suburban shops, tendering a dud note in order to collect the change. Another method he advised us to consider was betting at horse races, where in the rush and bustle notes were seldom subject to examination—not that the forgeries would be apparent, in any case, for no one but an expert could detect them. Having examined one of the notes, I knew that this was true enough. “Well, what do you think of it?” was the question he finally put to us.

“It sounds like money for old rope,” declared Steeley.

“And me,” I agreed.

“Good! Then you can start right away,” decided our benefactor. “When you need more money you will not come here—understand that? Go and see Lew. He will bring you here. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly,” we agreed, as he handed us each a neat packet of notes which we put into our pockets.

“All right, that’s all,” was our curt dismissal.

At that moment I thought we were going to get away with it. We had already turned towards the door, in fact, we were half way towards it, when a door slammed not far away and a voice spoke. Only too well did I know to whom it belonged. Durant had just come in, and he was in the next room. We reached the door. I dared not look round, but I heard the handle of the far door rattle as if it was being opened. As we stepped into the corridor, I heard Durant speak again, this time to the man we had just left.

I’m not going to say that I ran down the stairs. I tried not to hurry unduly, but I certainly wasted no time. My heart was thumping almost painfully for we had escaped disaster by a split second, and even now were not out of the wood.

We reached the dressing-room where Lew was still waiting for us. “Have a glass of beer?” suggested Tiger.

“No, thanks,” I said quickly. “Not for me, anyway. I want to get along.”

“What’s all the hurry?” asked Lew, raising his eyebrows.

“You seem to forget that I haven’t seen my missus, yet,” I told him bluntly. “She’ll be wondering what’s happened to me. I don’t want her to start making inquiries. We’ll have one with Tiger another day.”

“All right,” agreed Lew, and we continued our progress towards the exit.

We were just about half way across the boxing booth—or whatever it was—when my worst fears were realised. A voice shouted from the top of the stairs; it was the voice of the man we had just left. “Hi! Just a minute,” he called, presumably to Tiger, judging by his next words. “Don’t let those two fellows go; bring them back up here, the Boss wants a word with them.”

Tiger stopped dead. “I expect that’s the Boss just come in,” he said. “Come on, let’s go back.”

We all stopped. I looked at Steeley with revolt in my eyes, for I had no intention of going back. What would have happened it is impossible to say, but at that moment there came a frantic drumming on the door which led to the corridor that gave access to the tap-room.

Lew reached it in three swift strides, unlocked it and threw it open. A little rat of a fellow, clearly in a state of panic, almost fell inside. “There’s a cop,” he gasped.

Lew turned pale. “Where?”

“In the bar. There’s two of ’em. They’ve been looking at the car for some time. I saw ’em take the number of the engine and then look in a notebook. Now one’s in the bar, asking who the car belongs to.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s still in the bar.”

“What did you say?”

“I said it belonged to a gent wot I thought must have gone through to the back. I said I’d go and find ’im.”

“What’s the other one doing?”

“He’s outside, standing beside the car.”

“Blast it!” Lew looked from one to the other of us. “What had I better do?” he asked Tiger.

“Anything wrong with the car?”

“Er——” Lew stammered.

“Well?”

“It ain’t mine.”

“You ain’t been fool enough to bring a pinched car here, have you?”

“Er—yes.”

“You fool!” snarled Tiger, letting out a stream of blasphemy.

The voice reached us again from the stairs. “Are those fellows coming?”

“You’d better go and tell the Boss what’s happened,” Tiger told Lew, grimly.

“Just a minute,” put in Steeley quietly. “There’s no sense in getting in a panic, and we don’t want to put Lew in bad with the Boss if we can get him out of the jam.” He turned to the rat-faced man who had brought the ill news. “You’re supposed to be looking for us, is that it?”

“Yes.”

“Have you got a back yard?”

“Yes.”

“Well, go and tell the cop who’s in the bar that the fellow who owns the car is in the yard, and he won’t come out.”

“Wot good’ll that do?”

“He’ll go to the yard to fetch him.”

“Wot about the one with the car?”

“Leave him to me.”

“For Gawd’s sake don’t start knocking coppers about here——”

“I’m not going to do any knocking about,” muttered Steeley, shortly. “You go and get that copper out into the yard.”

“Wot’ll I do with ’im when I’ve got ’im there?”

“Just look wet and say the fellow who owned the car must have got over the wall.” Steeley turned to me. “Come on,” he said, crisply. “Leave me to do the talking.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Lew, hoarsely. He was sweating with fright, or anxiety—probably both.

“I’m going to get the car away, of course.”

“And you just out of jug for pinching ’em? That’s a stolen car. They’ll send you down for a stretch if they catch you.”

“They won’t catch me,” Steeley told him confidently. “Tiger, you go and tell the Boss what’s happened. Tell him not to worry—I’m used to shifting cars in a hurry. Come on, Lew.”

Again we were only out of the room just in time, for heavy footsteps were hurrying down the stairs as we went through into the corridor, leaving Tiger to face the music.

We pushed our way through the crowded tap-room, now strangely quiet, and out on to the pavement. Neither the constable nor the publican were there, so presumably they had gone through into the yard. The other

policeman was standing in the fog by the bonnet of the car. He looked up as we appeared.

“They’re knocking hell out of your pal, in there,” Steeley told him, before he could speak.

The policeman did not even pause to think. Whipping out his truncheon he dashed into the room we had just left. Steeley opened the door of the car and slid into the driver’s seat. Lew and I tumbled into the back. The doors slammed. The self-starter whirred, and the car glided forward just as the two constables reappeared at the tap-room entrance. They made a dash at the car, but they were just too late. Steeley’s foot was on the accelerator, and we shot forward out of their reach. A police whistle shrieked through the night.

Steeley laughed. “Like old times,” he said gaily, running along with his inside wheels in the gutter, for the kerb was the only thing that could be seen through the fog in the dazzle of the headlights.

Lew gasped. “By God, that was neat,” he swore. “You’re a cool ’un,” he added, admiringly.

“Where the devil are we?” asked Steeley.

“Go easy; there’s a turning somewhere about here to the left,” answered Lew.

Steeley slowed down so as not to overshoot it. With my head out of the window I could hear footsteps running along the pavement not far behind us, so I knew that the police had not given up the chase. “Keep going,” I told Steeley, anxiously.

We came to a turning, nearly overshot it, but just managed to get round by running over the pavement. Almost at once a red light glowed eerily through the fog, and we turned left again rather than halt at the traffic lights. A few drops of rain spattered against the windscreen.

“Where are we making for, anyway?” asked Steeley.

“Anywhere; and the sooner we get rid of this car and take to our feet, the better,” answered Lew, shortly. “Half the cops in London will be on the look-out for us by this time. Here we are. Stop here—this will do. Leave the side-lights on; it’ll look as if the car belongs to somebody in the house.”

Steeley stopped the car. We all got out and stood for a moment on the pavement, undecided as to which direction to take.

“Do you know where we are?” Steeley asked Lew.

“No. I’m damned if I do,” he replied frankly. “This fog has got me all at sea.”

At that precise moment the fog lifted, suddenly, as it is so fond of doing in London when it does make up its mind to go. I saw that we were in a narrow alley, with dingy workmen's houses on either side. But that was not all. The place was a cul-de-sac. Ten yards farther on the road ended abruptly. Far away, it seemed, I could see a row of street lamps, and traffic moving along a broad thoroughfare, but between it and the place where we stood was a curious sort of void. Light rippled on water, and then I understood. It was the river. Had we gone another ten yards we should have dropped straight into it.

"Gawd blimey!" muttered Lew, aghast. "I didn't know we were here, and that's a fact." He turned suddenly and hurried to the top end of the lane, where it emerged into the street. He peeped round the corner, but bobbed back again instantly. "There's cops either way," he whispered, running his tongue over his lips. "We shall have to go back in here."

I was still trying to work out what he meant by "back in here" when he led the way through a door in the wall into a small paved yard, or area. Opposite was another door. Lew knocked on it, a peculiar double rap. It was opened immediately; a flood of yellow light poured out, framing the uncouth figure of the very last man I expected to see. It was Tiger. Only then did I understand. We were back at the Jug and Bottle, the beer-house we had left not many minutes before, and this was a side entrance.

There came the sound of heavy footsteps in the lane and Tiger laid a finger on his lips. "Quiet," he breathed, in his horrible husky voice. "The cops are about. You'd better come inside." Lew went through, and we followed him. I wanted to protest, but my head was whirling and I could think of nothing to say. The door closed behind us.

"Phew! Thank God for that," muttered Lew, sighing his relief.

I need hardly say that I did not agree with him, but I dared not voice my opinion.

## CHAPTER XI

### VISITING WITH THE MAJOR

“WHAT happened? How did you get back here?” asked Tiger.

Briefly, Lew told him.

“Where’s the car now?”

“We left it down the lane.”

“You’d have done better to have shoved it in the river. The cops may find it.”

“They’ll find us, if we try moving it now,” declared Lew grimly.

“Yes, maybe it’s best left alone,” agreed Tiger.

“Where’s the Boss? Is he still upstairs? He wanted to see these two fellows.”

“He’s gone. You can bet your life he wouldn’t stay here while the street is swarming with cops likely to come in at any minute.”

My nerves relaxed at this welcome bit of news, but the respite did not last long.

“Did you tell him what happened?” Lew asked Tiger.

“Of course I did. He said you was to go home and stay there till you heard from him; that was the message he told me to send to you, but now you’re back here it doesn’t matter. He may come back when things quieten down, so you’d better wait.”

We sat down. Tiger produced glasses and two bottles of beer. I drank mine mechanically wondering how the thing was going to end, and praying that Steeley might find some excuse for getting away. I, personally, could think of no sane reason for remaining in such a trap as the one we were in, if it was possible to find a way out.

“It looks as if we chose a bad time to make a start,” grumbled Steeley. “Trust me to get a dirty break. We only came out of jug this morning, and here we are, on the dodge already.”

“My missus will be making a round of the pubs by this time, looking for me,” I joined in, bitterly, hoping that Steeley would follow up with a

suggestion that we ought to depart. But no, he stuck to the trail.

“Where does the Boss go, when he’s at home?” he asked casually.

“You’d better ask him,” grinned Tiger, showing his fang-like teeth.

“What’s wrong with trying to get back to your place, Lew?” I ventured.

“What’s the sense in that? We shall only have to come back here again if the Boss comes back and wants to see you. No, I’m all for staying here and giving the cops a chance to get tired.”

Tiger shook his head, doubtfully. “I’m not sure as he will come back here,” he murmured. “If he had any sense he’d give the place the go-by for a bit.”

The publican came in. “The Major’s just come back,” he said.

“Who’s the Major?” asked Steeley.

“The fellow you saw upstairs,” returned Lew. “He’s the Boss’s right-hand man—handles everything for him.”

Apparently I was right in my military summing-up of the Major, but my thoughts in this direction were switched abruptly by the publican’s next remark. “He wants to see you, Lew,” he concluded.

Lew rose at once, and with a brief, “See you presently,” left the room. The publican went with him.

“I’ll go and get some more beer,” declared Tiger. “You fellers stay where you are,” he added, as he disappeared through the door.

Thankful for this unexpected opportunity to have a word, I turned to Steeley in a flash. “For the love of Mike let’s get out of this,” I whispered fiercely.

“Gently,” breathed Steeley, “there may be a dictaphone hidden about the room somewhere. We can’t go yet.”

“Why not?”

“We’ve got to find out where Durant is, otherwise we’ve been wasting our time.”

“We can clean up this bunch,” I argued.

Steeley shook his head. “That isn’t enough. I’m only interested in the big noise, and I’m going to stick around here until he comes back or until I know where he is. If you’d rather get out, though, I’ll try and find a way \_\_\_\_”

“You mean, so that I could fetch Wayne and put a cordon round the place \_\_\_\_?”

Steeley grimaced impatiently. "Not yet, I tell you. There will be plenty of time for that when we know where Durant is."

"Then in that case I may as well stay here, too," I decided.

Further conversation was cut short by the return of Tiger. Lew followed him in. "Come on, boys," he said cheerfully, "we're going for a short walk."

"Where to?" asked Steeley.

"I don't know, but we're going with the Major. I reckon he's taking you to see the Boss. In any case, it's been decided that we've all got to get out of here. Tiger, go and tell Harry that we shan't be using the pub for a bit; the Boss says he's to get the place cleaned up and make it look respectable in case the police decide to make a raid. This establishment is closed down for the time being as far as he is concerned, and I reckon he's wise."

"Am I going with you?" asked Tiger.

"We're all going. Slip along and give Harry that message."

Harry, presumably, was the publican. Tiger went out, but he was soon back, buttoning a jacket over his sweater. "O.K.," he said, "I've told him."

"Then we're all set," declared Lew. "Come on, the Major's waiting for us."

We had all turned towards the inner door when there was a sharp scuffle outside the other one—the one that led to the boxing saloon. It was flung open and a constable faced us.

It was the same fellow whom Steeley had enticed into the tap-room when we had got away in the car. His eyebrows went up as he looked at Steeley, Lew and me in turn. "Hello," he said sarcastically. "I didn't expect to find *you* here. How did you get back?"

"Any reason why we shouldn't come back?" asked Steeley coolly.

"You ought to know that better than me," sneered the policeman. "Come on, the lot of you. The Super's waiting to have a word with you."

It was a peculiar moment. I made no demur because, frankly, I was quite prepared to go and see the Superintendent. In fact, I was more than willing, for it offered a nice easy way out. Steeley, I could tell from his expression, was, for once, nonplussed. It was Tiger who settled the matter.

"Sure enough," he said easily, and strolled towards the officer. Somehow, I knew what he was going to do and, instinctively, nearly shouted a warning. The constable must have been a fool to let the bruiser get so close to him; the confidence these fellows have in the protection afforded by their uniform is amazing. It was obvious from his manner that the last thing the man in the doorway expected was resistance.

I don't think he knew what hit him. Tiger's fist flew up in a vicious upper-cut. It caught the wretched policeman flat on the solar plexus with a thud that made me wince. He crumpled like a wet sack. Tiger, the animal in him aroused, raised his foot.

"That'll do; none o' that," snapped Lew. "You've done enough damage already," he added, white-faced, as he stared down at the unconscious man.

"Pah! Let me tear his guts out," snarled Tiger.

"Yes, and then we'd all swing, you——" Lew broke off as the pugilist's eyes glinted.

"What's going on here?" We all whirled round. The Major stood at the foot of the stairs. "Who did that?" he asked crisply, pointing at the figure on the floor.

"I did," answered Tiger belligerently.

The Major chewed his moustache for a moment. "Well, it's done now," he said in a resigned tone.

"Hadn't I better finish him off?" suggested Tiger brutally.

"Why?"

"He's seen me."

"Possibly, but he hasn't seen me," replied the Major bitingly. "Come along, all of you. Let's get out of here."

He led the way upstairs while we filed along behind him. I don't know how many doors we went through, but there must have been at least a dozen, and I knew that we were getting a long way away from the pub. It seemed to me that we went through several houses, and I began to understand what a poor chance the police would have of finding a man in such a rabbit-warren. Finally, we found ourselves in a furnished house, drab and squalid. We went downstairs. The door at the bottom was closed, but from the other side of it came a buzz of conversation and the clatter of crockery. The Major opened the door; the unmistakable smell of frying fish poured into my nostrils, and a moment later we were in the dining-room of a fish-and-chip shop. Several people were sitting at marble-topped tables, but they paid little attention to us. Nor did the proprietor to whom the Major nodded. Straight through the shop we went and presently emerged in a well-lighted street. A tram clanged past. Against the kerb stood a taxi, the driver eating—or pretending to eat—fish out of a paper bag. But I knew by the way he put the bag away quickly when the Major appeared that he was part of the organisation. It did not surprise me, therefore, when the Major opened the door of the cab and invited us to enter. I couldn't catch what he said to the driver, but it was

certainly not an address. Apparently the driver knew where to go. He started his engine and away we went.

There were no dramatic details, such as drawing the blinds, but they might as well have been drawn for all the locality meant to me. It was a part of London that I had never seen before, but there, as I have said, I know little about the East End. Now that I was in it I was surprised to discover that there was so much of it. We must have been in that cab for more than an hour, but not once did I see a landmark that I could identify. At the end of half an hour or so the streets began to get wider, and the traffic thinned out, so I assumed that we were in the outskirts, or in a suburb, of the City. The driver increased his speed, and the purr of the engine told me something else. We were in no ordinary taxi. From the way we once sailed up a hill I knew that not less than the power of forty horses was under our bonnet. The street lamps became further apart, and the occasional shops we passed were closed. Soon we were racing through a country district with big houses and estates on one side or the other.

The further we went, the less I liked it. I had certainly not been prepared for such a long journey, but there was no getting out of it now. Still, I saw that Steeley had been right; except for the method he had arranged we should have stood a mighty poor chance of finding Durant's real home—for that, I imagined, was where we were going.

The end came rather suddenly. The driver sounded his horn three times and we swung into a drive, the gates of which were just opening. No doubt they closed again behind us. A quarter of a mile of drive and a big house, with no lights showing, loomed through the trees that lined the way. We did not stop outside the front door, but went round to the back, into a sort of walled courtyard with some old stables on one side. To enter this yard we had to pass through a pair of double doors, and I heard them close behind us with a bang. The car stopped. Not a word had been spoken during the entire ride. The back door opened, and a man—presumably the butler, judging by his manner—stood waiting for us. The Major went across to him, while we brought up the rear.

“You can say we've arrived,” he said.

The butler nodded. “Come in,” he said.

He showed us into a well-furnished apartment, rather like a doctor's waiting-room, in which a brisk fire was burning. A tray, with decanter and glasses, stood on the table.

“Whisky?” asked the Major, glancing up at us.

“Whisky for me,” I said. And I needed it, for, as we had entered the room I had seen a man cross the hall lower down. Luckily, he did not look our way. But I saw his face clearly enough. It was Benny from Bow.

## CHAPTER XII

### GAS

WE all sat down. There was a tension in the atmosphere that I did not like a bit; it was like waiting to have a tooth drawn, only worse. Presently the butler fellow came in and fetched the Major. In five minutes he was back, but he only came as far as the door, and my heart stood still as I hung on his words. But it was only Lew and Tiger he wanted. They went out, leaving Steeley and myself alone.

“If the Boss once claps eyes on us, we’re sunk,” I said in a tense undertone.

“Not necessarily,” replied Steeley calmly.

“We must have been crazy to come here,” I declared. “Once he knows who we are, and that we know who he is, you don’t suppose that he will be such a fool as to let us go, do you?”

Steeley shrugged his shoulders. “We had to find out where he was,” he protested. “This was the only way.”

“A fat lot of use the information will be to us, too, from what I can see of it,” I grumbled. “What about getting away while the going’s good?”

“And defeat our object? Not likely! Unexplained disappearance on our part would simply lead to another evacuation. Durant would smell a rat, and by the time we got Wayne here all we should find would be an empty house. No, Tubby old man, we’ve got to see this thing through.”

I sat back with a gesture of despair. It seemed like suicide to me, and I said so. “What are you going to do when you meet him face to face, as you will in a minute?” I demanded sarcastically. “Are you going to ask him to just come along with you?”

“It depends on what transpires.”

“He’ll realise that the whole thing is a frameup—I mean about our coming out of Pentonville.”

“There is just a chance that he may not want to see us, after all.”

“Why do you suppose he had us brought here?”

“I wish you wouldn’t ask such awkward questions.”

“Benny from Bow is here—just think that over.”

“The devil he is! How do you know that?”

“I saw him as we came in.”

“Well, so much the better. We want him, too.”

“He’ll probably feel that way about us when he sees us.”

“Try being optimistic for a change.”

“I can’t find anything to be optimistic about,” I retorted bitterly.

“Ssh! Someone’s coming.”

Came soft footsteps outside the door. The handle turned. My heart stood still. Who was it?

It was Benny from Bow. He had taken three paces into the room before he realised who we were. Then, never in my life have I seen such an expression of utter incredulity on the face of any human being.

Steeley spoke. His voice was low, but it had a ring of steel in it that carried conviction. “Benny,” he said, “come here. Wayne is outside with a score of men. One call from me and he’ll rush the place. Now, which would you prefer, a break, or five years? There’s a stretch waiting for you as it is. Make a noise and you’ll be in worse. It’s up to you.” Steeley, a master bluffer, excelled himself.

Benny hesitated for a moment, then he advanced, slowly, like a man sleep-walking. “How the . . . how did you get here?” he gasped. His face was ashen.

“Oh, we just walked in,” replied Steeley lightly.

“And are you the same two what have been with Lew all day?”

Steeley nodded. “Wayne has been around, too, waiting for my signal. He’d have got it at the boxing saloon had not a fool constable upset the applecart.”

“What are you waiting for now?”

“I’m looking for something I may not be able to find if I speak too soon. Now listen, Benny; we’ve nothing much against you; you play in with us and I’ll put in a word for you with Wayne. More than that I can’t promise, as you well know. Kick up a row, and the only difference will be that you’ll go down for a stretch. Now then, speak up. Where are the others? The Major, Tiger, and Lew, what are they doing?”

“The Boss is cursing them to all eternity about the affair at the pub, particularly Lew for coming along in a pinched car, and Tiger for swiping

the cop. How did you get in with Lew?"

"Lew? Why, he's in with us," returned Steeley cheerfully.

I thought Benny's eyes would jump out of his head. "The dirty, yellow, double-crossing——" he snarled.

"All right, that's enough of that," Steeley told him curtly. "Lew knows which side his bread is buttered. You will, too, if you've got any sense. It's a hanging job, don't forget."

"Hanging!" I could see Benny's hands trembling. It's queer how these crooks are terrified of the rope.

"That's what I said," murmured Steeley.

"Who . . . ?"

"Linton Hales."

"Do the—cops—know about that?"

"You bet your life they do. What do you think they're after? But let's get this settled. Are you going to play in with us, or shall I whistle for Wayne?"

Benny moistened his lips. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to go back upstairs, or wherever the Boss is, and tell him that you've seen us. Tell him you know us of old, and you're not going to work with us. I've already told Lew that we know you, so that won't surprise *him*. You can tell the Boss that we won't work with you, either, and that being so, we've gone."

"*Are you going?*"

"No."

"What are you going to do?"

"You're going to hide us somewhere. Then, when the others have gone, you'll give us the tip and we shall come out."

"What's the idea of letting the others go?"

"We can't let Lew down. They'll all be watched as they leave, but if they're all picked up together the Tiger will know about Lew being on the wrong side, and Lew doesn't want that to happen."

"No, I'll bet he don't," muttered Benny grimly.

"Well, let them get out. How many other people are there in the house?"

"Only one."

"That butler fellow we saw?"

"That's right; he looks after the place here."

“So that when the others have gone there will only be you, Durant, and the butler? Is that right?”

Benny’s jaw fell open at the mention of Durant’s name. “That’s right,” he muttered, recovering himself. “What are you going to do then?”

“You can leave that to me.”

Benny wiped the perspiration off his forehead with his sleeve. “O.K.,” he said hoarsely. “But you’d better buck up. The others will be down any minute.”

“Where can we hide?”

“Anywhere. There’s only two or three rooms furnished in the whole house. The rest are empty. No one ever goes in ’em. You might as well wait in there.” Benny pointed to a door near the window.

“What’s in there?”

“They call it the breakfast-room. There’s a big cupboard in there you can hide in if you like.”

“That’ll suit us,” nodded Steeley.

“The Boss’ll think it’s damn funny about you going.”

“No, he won’t—anyway, not if Lew plays his cards properly. He’ll take his cue. He will act as though you and me hated the sight of each other. That’s what I told him, and that’s the line I told him to take.”

“All right. If there’s a jam you’ll have to get me out of it.”

Steeley smiled reprovingly. “Of course. We don’t let our friends down.”

“No, I know you don’t.” Benny spoke the words slowly, as though he was doubtful about it. There came the sound of footsteps upstairs, and he started apprehensively. “Get a move on!” he said tersely. “Here they come.”

I followed Steeley over to the door which Benny had indicated. “Take it quietly and everything will be all right,” was the last bit of advice he gave the crook as we went through.

The room in which we found ourselves was, of course, in darkness, but enough starlight came in through the uncurtained windows to make it just possible to discern our surroundings. As we expected, in view of what Benny had said, there was no furniture. Steeley walked across to a large built-in cupboard. A key was in the door. He unlocked it. We stepped inside and pulled the door shut behind us.

Hardly were we inside than the sound of voices reached us from the room we had just left. We could not quite catch the words, but Benny seemed to be expostulating about something—probably explaining the

reason for our disappearance. Then a door banged and the voices ended abruptly.

“Good! They’ve gone upstairs,” murmured Steeley. “I think we’re sitting fairly pretty now.”

“Do you think Benny was really taken in?”

“I think he must have been, or he would have raised an alarm.”

“You’re taking a big chance, trusting him.”

“Trusting him! Why, I wouldn’t trust him a yard. But I had to do something, and I took the only line I could think of on the spur of the moment. You must admit that there wasn’t much choice, considering what little time we had for consideration. Anyway, I think we’re better off than we were. As soon as Benny comes back and tells us that the others have gone, we’ll act. We shall only have Durant to deal with, and that shouldn’t be difficult. The butler fellow won’t amount to much, I imagine.”

After that we fell silent. A deathly hush had settled on the house. Some twenty minutes or an half hour later a telephone rang somewhere upstairs. That was the only sound we heard. An hour passed. It seemed like eternity, as time always does when nerves are screwed up and there is nothing to distract one. Two hours went by—or what I judged to be two hours. Absolute silence still reigned.

“Something’s gone wrong,” I told Steeley quietly.

He did not answer, but opening the door of the cupboard he stepped down into the room. I went with him. We sat on the window-sill for a time, listening, but we might have been alone in the house for all we heard. A rat scurried across the floor, and at the slight noise my hand flashed to my pocket, which showed the state of my nerves. “If you ask me, I should say that they’ve all cleared out,” I told Steeley sotto voce.

“I’m afraid you may be right,” he answered moodily.

“Well, I’ve had about enough of standing here doing nothing,” I declared. “How about having a scout round?”

“Yes, I suppose we may as well.”

Steeley took his automatic from his pocket and I did the same. “This is going to be tricky work,” he said. “We don’t want to anticipate Benny, if it happens that he is still in the house; and we don’t want to run into a trap. Keep your ears and eyes open.”

We tiptoed across to the door, and with infinite patience Steeley opened it noiselessly. The waiting-room—that is, the room into which we had first been shown—was exactly as we had left it, except, of course, that Benny

was no longer there. The electric light was still on, and the whisky glasses remained on the table. A glance round, and we crossed over to the far door, which, again, Steeley opened with burglar-like stealth. The light was on in the hall, but the house was as quiet as a tomb. After listening for a moment or two Steeley went back into the waiting-room and began taking off his shoes. He told me to do the same.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Upstairs.”

Upstairs we went. Steeley was calm enough, as he always was. But in spite of my efforts to keep it under control, my heart was thumping like a pile driver. Creeping about in a big empty house at any time is bad enough, even in daylight, but in the dead of night, with momentary expectation of a trap, the atmosphere was—well, tense, to say the least of it.

We reached the landing at the top of the stairs and again we paused to listen. Dead silence, except for the distant ticking of a clock. On such queer lines does one’s mind run in certain circumstances that the tick reminded me of our squadron undertaker, in the old days, in France, knocking nails into a home-made coffin. When the clock struck the hour, as it did a minute or two later, my face went stiff and I had to wipe the perspiration off it. The time was eleven o’clock.

From the landing on which we stood two ways were open to us. On our right, a lighted corridor ran the full length of the house, with doors, presumably bedroom doors, on either side. Straight ahead a flight of stairs curved upwards to the next floor, which was in darkness. Steeley decided on the corridor.

Before starting to explore he came over to me, and put his lips near my ear. “I’m afraid they’ve gone,” he breathed, “otherwise we could not fail to hear them talking from here.”

“Then Benny let us down.”

He nodded, and crept towards the first door, which was on the left hand side of the corridor.

He must have spent five minutes opening that door, and all the time my nerves were racing like a supercharged engine. Very, very slowly, he released the handle, and pushed the door open an inch or so. From the slit that appeared we could see that the room was in darkness, so, a pistol at the ready, he pushed the door wide open. The room was empty. It was not even furnished. This we could see from the light in the corridor. We passed on to the next room, with a similar result. And the next. Right down the left hand side of the corridor we went, but the result was always the same. And the

ordeal was always the same, too, and by the time we got to the end my nerves were in such a state that I could have screamed. But Steeley just went on, as cold and dispassionate as though the house had been his own. We started to come back along the other side of the corridor. It was characteristic of Steeley that he did not hurry, did not get impatient; he treated each succeeding door with the same thoroughness as he had the first one.

“If we don’t move a bit faster than this, we shall be here when it gets daylight,” I whispered, for I had had about enough.

Steeley threw me one of his enigmatical smiles.

At last we stood outside the end door, but this time the sequence of events was not quite the same, for as the crack between door and door-post appeared, a yellow gleam told us that the room was lighted. Steeley placed his eye to the slit and remained thus for a full minute, while I gripped my gun under the strain of waiting.

Suddenly, I saw his expression alter. A look of horror swept over it. His lips came together in a hard line.

Simultaneously he pushed the door wide open and took a pace inside. I saw his eyes flash round the room before they came to rest again on the object he had first seen. It appeared to be something on the floor.

Unable to restrain my curiosity I moved forward into the room. One glance was enough, quite enough to tell me what had happened. Steeley’s plan had gone off at half cock; there was no doubt about that; and poor Lew, for whom I had developed quite a liking, was the sufferer.

He lay spread-eagled on the hearthrug, a shocking mess. His own words came back to me, when he had been describing what had happened to the man who had tried to escape from the rooms above the boxing saloon, and had encountered Tiger. A sample of Tiger’s work was now before us. Nobody but an animal or a savage could have treated a human being in such a way. Poor devil! His clothes were in ribbons. His face was—well, it was no longer a face. Blood was all over the floor, even on the furniture, which had been knocked right and left. We did not stop to examine the room, beyond making sure that no one was in it besides Lew; a glance showed us that it was comfortably, almost lavishly, furnished. Then, a few quick strides took us to the side of the stricken man. I thought he was dead, but Steeley laid a hand on his heart and declared that he was still alive. “Can you see any brandy or whisky about,” he muttered through set teeth. “Poor devil, I brought this on him.”

A tantalus stood on a massive sideboard. Putting my automatic on the table with trembling hands I poured a stiff shot of brandy and hurried back to where Steeley was still kneeling beside the unconscious man. As I did so, it seemed to me that my strung-up nerves had at last given out; at least, that is what I thought, for tears began running down my face. I handed the glass to Steeley, and he got some of the spirit through Lew's broken teeth.

"I'm afraid he's in a bad way," he muttered. "Really, we ought to get him to hospital before we do anything else. I don't think there are any bones broken, but he's had a lot of skin knocked off him and he's lost a good deal of blood."

As Steeley spoke he looked up at me. I was mopping my streaming eyes with my handkerchief. They were so bad that I could only see him through a sort of mist, but to my amazement I saw that his eyes were behaving in the same way.

It was when my eyelids packed up that I understood. That Steeley did not grasp what was happening—what had, in fact, happened—was due no doubt to the fact that in France, when I was in the infantry, I had been through more than one gas attack, whereas he had not. So with a sudden shock of horror and understanding I realised that we were being gassed with lachrymatory gas, more often known as tear-gas.

Only those, although there must be many thousands who suffered from this form of barbarism during the War, know the paralysing effect of tear-gas. Its effect is almost instantaneous, and the fact that it passes off just as quickly after the attack is over, without leaving any after-effects, does not make it any the less terrifying. It does not merely cause the tear glands to open, releasing their contents; it puts out of action the muscles surrounding the eyes. The lids fall, and it is utterly beyond the strength of the victim to raise them again. The result is that one is temporarily blind, as blind as if the eyes had been torn out of their sockets. This, then, was what had happened to us now. My horror quickly found expression.

"My God, Steeley," I cried in a strangled voice. "We are being gassed!"

As I spoke I sprang to my feet. With one supreme effort I forced open my drooping eyelids. Through a blinding haze of tears I saw three figures standing just inside the door, smiling. Over their eyes they wore huge, terrifying goggles, but that did not prevent me from recognising them. Durant, Tiger and Benny had been in the house all the time. So much I saw. Then my sight went altogether.

## CHAPTER XIII

### PRISONERS AGAIN

It was a ghastly moment. Hitherto, in all the adventures I had shared with Steeley, in whatever peril we may have been, we had always been granted the blessed sense of sight. Until one loses this one does not know what one has lost. A dozen adjectives would only half fit the case; helpless—hopeless, are two of them. These words are often used lightly. Not until one is struck blind on the instant does one realise fully what they mean, and then one searches in vain for other words to express one's feelings.

Utterly impotent, I could only stand still with my hands over my useless eyes, waiting for I knew not what. Somewhere near at hand was Steeley, but the confidence I usually gathered from his presence now deserted me, for I knew that he must be as helpless as I was. I dare not move, much less fight. Our condition was, in fact, virtually that of unconsciousness; it was worse, for we still had the power to think, and realised fully the horror of the situation.

Durant was the first to speak. "Well, well," he said mockingly, in a tone that expressed his satisfaction.

"All right, don't gloat," returned Steeley, coldly. "The police are outside. It will be our turn to crow, whether we are here or not, when you feel the hemp tightening round your neck."

I heard the sound of a blow as Durant struck him across the face. "We'll see about that," was the snarled reply. "Go ahead, boys, there's no need to waste time."

Hands seized me by the shoulders and I was forced roughly into a chair. Cords were put round my arms and legs. It was no use struggling. I only protested once, and that was when the cords were pulled what seemed to me unnecessarily tight, but all I got for my imprudence in calling attention to this was a smack across the face and the ropes pulled tighter. I could hear Steeley being treated in the same way.

The business of tying us up did not take long, and by the time it was finished I was as helpless as a trussed chicken. Whatever was to follow, I

should, I knew, be unable to help myself.

Tiger spoke, in his sinister husky voice. "They look like a couple of turkeys at Christmas, don't they?" he sneered.

"Let's hope they eat tender when they're cooked," returned Benny, brightly, and there was a general laugh.

At the time I did not attach any particular significance to this remark, although I remembered it afterwards. At the moment I was nearly berserk with fury at the way the cunning little crook had tricked us. Given one more chance I would make him regret it, was my mental vow.

"Well, you two clever guys, I hope you'll have a cheerful evening; and I hope it keeps warm for you." It was Durant who spoke; his voice came from a little distance away, as if he was standing at the door. "Get the bags out, boys; we'll be getting along," he added.

"Make the most of your time, I haven't finished with you yet," answered Steeley quietly.

"No? Well, I've finished with you." Durant laughed at his own joke, and a moment later the door slammed.

I could hear his footsteps going down the stairs. A little while afterwards I heard the distant rattle of a key in a lock. After that there was silence.

"Are you there, Steeley?" I said.

"Yes, but that's about all."

"No hope of your getting free?"

"None whatever, so far as I have been able to discover up to the present. I'm in one of the armchairs, and it's as heavy as an anchor."

There was a short silence. "We shall have to do something about this," I said at last, rather fatuously, I fear.

"I agree, but it's difficult to know *what*, isn't it?" replied Steeley.

"There's no chance of anyone coming in and finding us, you think?"

"Not the slightest. If Durant has gone for good, and I imagine that he has, we might be here for a year before we are discovered."

My heart went stone cold. "Good God!" I muttered. Then I had an idea, not a very bright one, but still, it was better than nothing. "What about the telephone?" I suggested. "There's one here somewhere. We heard it ring when we were downstairs. If one of us could get to it we might knock the receiver off and call for help."

"If you can move, then try it, by all means, but I am absolutely fixed. The telephone is on the desk straight in front of you; I noticed it as I came in."

Now I was in one of the smaller chairs, which meant that I could just alter the balance of my body, but it was clear that if I overdid it I should topple over. Still, I didn't mind that if after I was down I could make some progress across the floor. Whether I should be able to get up again when I got to the desk was another matter. I doubted it very much, but one could only try. In any case, it was better to do something, however hopeless it might be, than sit still doing absolutely nothing. This decided, I shifted my weight, and over I went with a crash. I caught my head a fearful crack on the floor but, fortunately, it did not knock me out.

"What the devil's that?" called Steeley sharply.

"It's all right; it's only me," I told him weakly. "I'm on the floor. I'm going to try and get across to the desk; I think I know where it is."

"Good for you, Tubby," replied Steeley approvingly.

Then began a journey which I shall not forget in a hurry. By pressing my heels against the floor I could advance the lower part of my body—and, naturally, the legs of the chair—about an inch at a time. The top half of me did not, of course, move, but by pressing the tips of my fingers, which were free, against the carpet, I found that I could make a little progress. Thus, by alternately moving my heels and my fingers I could make some sort of movement, after the manner of a snail with its shell on its back. My rate of travel was about that of a snail, too. However, I stuck to it, although it was disconcerting not to know how much ground I had covered.

The clock outside struck twelve, and I was still hard at it, but a minute or two later my ankles came into contact with what I knew from the carving must be the legs of the desk. The next thing, therefore, was to get up. But, alas, it did not take me many seconds to realise that this was a physical impossibility. Still, I would not give up, and I tried to get hold of a piece of the ornate carving with my teeth, either to pull myself up, or, failing that, throw the whole desk over, and the instrument with it.

It was while I was attempting to do this that my face came into contact with what I thought at first was a piece of loose string. As I caught it between my teeth, and felt it with my lips, a great wave of hope swept through me, for there was no mistaking the twisted strands. It was the telephone flex. Gradually, I began working my teeth along it, pulling the heavy instrument towards me. I could hear it moving slowly on the desk above, but it was tiring work.

When at last it fell it caught me unaware, and landed on my head with a crash that sent up a constellation of stars. In the shock, I did not realise for a moment what it was, but thought that Tiger must have returned and, seeing

what I was at, struck me. However, I soon discovered my mistake, but at the same time a horrid doubt flashed across my mind, for I had not heard the usual *ting* that a live telephone makes when the receiver is removed from the stand. In this case, the receiver had, of course, fallen off.

After a good deal of trouble I found the instrument, and worked myself into a position so that my face was near the mouthpiece. "Hello!" I shouted.

There was no reply.

"Hello!" I shouted again, more loudly, trying to fight off the fears that now returned with force.

There was no reply.

"Can't you get them?" asked Steeley.

I did not answer, for I was pulling on the flex again, not towards the instrument, but away from it. The flex came easily, too easily, and presently, when I came to the end, I knew the answer to my question. The lead had been cut.

The shock of this discovery following on my hopes, and all the trouble I had been to, threw me into such a state of hopeless despair that I have never before experienced. I was ready to give up.

"What is it?" asked Steeley tensely, evidently sensing that something was wrong.

"They cut the phone cable before they went," I answered wretchedly.

"Bad luck," returned Steeley. "We shall have to try something else."

But I was not thinking of trying anything else. I was thinking of something entirely different—if the turmoil that suddenly raced through my brain could be called thought. For a moment my horror was such that I could not speak. It was my nostrils, this time, that conveyed the information. I could smell burning. I sniffed again, but there was no mistake. Indeed, a waft of smoke only confirmed my suspicions.

"Steeley!" I cried hoarsely. "They've fired the house!"

Steeley did not reply for a moment. Then, "I'm sorry about this, old lad," he said quietly. "You were right and I was wrong. We should not have come here, but it's rather late now for regrets. Don't worry, the smoke will put us out of action long before the fire gets here."

It was at this dramatic moment that a new element manifested itself in the affair. This time it was my ears that conveyed the information. There was a feeble groan, not far away. It was Lew. Curiously enough I had forgotten all about him. In fact, he had passed completely out of my mind since the

gas attack. No sound I have ever heard pleased me so much as that miserable groan.

“Lew!” I cried distractedly. “Lew!”

Another weak groan was the only answer. In my mental anguish I endeavoured to turn my head in the direction of the sound, and tried to force my eyes open. To my astonishment and joy I partly succeeded, but it was only for an instant. Still, the moment of sight told me that the volume of gas was diminishing, either because it had been turned off, or, what is more likely, the cylinder containing the gas had become exhausted.

“Steeley!” I yelled. “The gas is going! In another minute or two we shall be able to see. For God’s sake try and get Lew on his feet.”

“I can’t do anything,” he answered wildly—the only time I have heard him on the verge of excitement. “Can you get to him? Try and get across.”

But to get all the way across the floor to where Lew was lying would, I knew from experience, take at least an hour, so it was no use starting. “Lew!” I cried hysterically. “Lew! The house is on fire! Pull yourself together, man.”

“Wa . . . as tha . . . at?” The words were feeble in the extreme, but they told me that he was at least coming round, and the knowledge spurred me to a frenzy.

“Lew! Can you hear me?” I yelled.

“What—you—say?”

“The house is on fire! You’ll be burnt alive! We shall all be burnt. Get up on your feet.”

“Who’s—done—what?”

I nearly choked in my effort to keep myself under control. Then I had what I think was a brainwave. “Look out!” I shouted. “Tiger’s coming! *Tiger!*”

I heard Lew muttering as he moved. “What’s going on?” he said, in a voice that sounded much more normal.

“The house is on fire,” snapped Steeley.

“What’s wrong with my eyes?”

“Never mind your eyes,” answered Steeley crisply. “Get up and cut us free, then we can get you out.”

By this time I was able to see; not clearly, and I could only keep my eyes open for a few seconds at a time, but that made all the difference in the world. I could just make out Lew sitting up holding his battered head in his hands.

“Where’s Tiger?” he suddenly burst out in a voice vibrant with passion, as if he had just remembered what had happened to him.

“He’s gone!” I cried. “He soaked you and left you here, then he set the house on fire. We tried to get to you, but they tied us up.”

Lew rose unsteadily to his feet and stood swaying. For a horrible moment I thought he was going to fall again; it wouldn’t have surprised me, for his face was in a dreadful state.

“Jump to it, Lew,” I pleaded desperately. “Hark at the crackling! The house is on fire, I tell you. Pull yourself together and cut us free, then we’ll get you out.”

He took his bloodstained hands from his face and stared at us wonderingly, as if he had only just seen us.

“Who the hell did this?” he snarled.

“Tiger.”

“Ah, that’s right. I remember. He said I blew the gaff to the cops, the lying swine. He said Benny had told him.”

“That’s it. They said we were in with the cops, too, the fools,” put in Steeley. “Let’s get out of this, and I’ll show you what I’ll do to Tiger.”

“You mean—you’ll get him?”

“You bet your sweet life I will,” grated Steeley, and I must say that he sounded as though he meant it. I expect he did. So did I, if it comes to that.

Smoke was now pouring in under the door, and it was obvious that we hadn’t much time left. “Come on, Lew, get busy,” cried Steeley. “I’ll get Tiger, if I swing for it.”

“We’ll get him together,” muttered Lew, as he staggered across the floor towards us.

“Have you got a knife?” Steeley asked him.

“A little ’un.”

“Then see what you can do with it, but for God’s sake buck up.”

Lew reached me first and started sawing away at my bonds with a ridiculous little penknife. How I controlled myself I do not know, but he was still in a sort of daze, and impatience on my part only made him worse. Twice he dropped the penknife. The second time it fell inside my jacket and I thought he would never get it out, but at last he found it and managed to get through the rope that bound my right arm. With shaking fingers he unwound it. As soon as the arm was free I snatched the knife out of his hand and sawed like a maniac at the others. My left arm free, I soon had my legs clear, and my exultation as I stood up is beyond description. The returning

circulation in my limbs was agonising, but I did not mind that. Keeping a grip on myself I cut Steeley's bonds one after the other until he was able to kick the ropes off.

"That's fine," he said coolly, "let's get out."

This was easier said than done. I ran across to the door and flung it open, only to stagger back before the choking cloud of smoke that rolled in. Steeley slammed it shut again and dashed across to the window. It was an ordinary casement so he had no difficulty in opening it.

The next few minutes were worse than a bad dream.

"We can't get down this way," declared Steeley, staring into the darkness. "There's a lean-to greenhouse underneath us; we shall cut ourselves to pieces if we jump into that."

Gasping and choking we returned to the door and fought our way into the corridor. Flames were leaping up the stairs, showing that the house had been fired on the ground floor. We tore along the corridor, with poor Lew, whose nerves had evidently suffered as well as his face, imploring us not to leave him behind.

"We shan't leave you, Lew," Steeley told him cheerfully.

In the room at the far end of the corridor the smoke was not so bad. I flung up the window and looked down. It was about twenty feet to the ground which, at that point, seemed to be an overgrown lawn.

"I daren't drop all that way," cried Lew piteously.

"Down you go, Tubby," snapped Steeley. "Stand by to catch him."

I got out on to the window-sill, took Steeley's hands, and lowered myself to the full extent of his arms. In this way I had not more than some twelve feet to drop. "Let go!" I called, and a split second later hit the ground with a jar that knocked the breath out of my body. I'm afraid I am getting a bit old for that sort of thing.

Steeley grabbed Lew and forced him through the window. I could not quite reach his legs, and when Steeley released him he came down on me like a sack of coal.

Steeley, supple as a cat, merely dropped. "Come on," he said, "let's go. We don't want to be found here."

We held Lew's arms on either side and dragged him into a shrubbery. We were only just in time, for people were running up the drive, and I could see from the glare of headlights that cars were stopping on the main road. Pushing our way through the bushes, an uncomfortable business in our stockinged feet, we came to the edge of a field, and across this we made our

way to the road. Steeley halted on the field side of the hedge. "Wait here," he said.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get a car."

"Where from?"

"I'll wager there are a dozen up the road. The crowd will be at the fire," returned Steeley tersely.

With that he was gone, but in less than ten minutes he was back. I was glad to see him, for cars were tearing up the road towards the conflagration and I could hear the clanging of a fire-engine bell. At this rate the road would soon be choked altogether.

Steeley pushed his way through the hedge from the road. "I've got a car," he announced. "Come on, Lew, old man. You're coming with us."

"Thanks, fellers," answered Lew weakly. "Fancy that skunk Benny saying you were a couple of cops."

"Is that what he said?" inquired Steeley, as we got the injured man through the hedge.

"He did, the lying scab."

"As a matter of fact, Lew," said Steeley quietly, as he slipped the car into gear, "he was quite right. That's just what we are."

## CHAPTER XIV

### ON THE TRAIL

I COULDN'T see Lew's face, but I felt him stiffen. "*What!*" he exclaimed incredulously.

"We're cops," repeated Steeley, soberly.

Poor Lew seemed to find difficulty in assimilating this piece of information. "Gawd almighty!" he got out at last. "Where are you taking me—to the station?"

Steeley laughed shortly. "Not on your life! We're not *those* sort of cops," he said cheerfully.

"Then what sort are you?"

"You'll see."

"Garn. You're kidding. Why, you only came out of quod this morning, I saw you come through the gates with my own eyes."

"True enough, Lew. But then, we only went in so that you could pick us up when we came out."

"Ah, I reckon you'd got wind of the phoney money racket, eh?"

"No, we were after bigger game than that."

"You mean——"

"Durant."

"What's he done to you?"

"Plenty, but it isn't so much what he's done to me as what he did to someone else—a fellow by the name of Hales."

"I didn't have no hand in that."

"I know you didn't."

"Durant did it himself."

"That's what I thought."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Home."

"Whose home?"

“Mine.”

“What’s the idea?”

“We must get your face mended.”

“What are you worrying about me for?”

“Because I like you.”

“Then you’re not going to pop me in?”

“No fear. Don’t you worry about that. Besides, we’ve got a job to do. Tiger bashed you; he bashed me, too, but not so badly, and I don’t let anyone get away with that.”

“You really mean—you’re going to get him?”

“That’s just what I do mean. I’m going to beat hell out of that skunk.”

“Attaboy!” cried Lew. “I’m with you.”

Then, for the first time, I began to see what Steeley was driving at.

“The only thing is, I’m afraid we shall have a job to find him,” he murmured softly.

“Not likely. I know where he’ll be. He’ll be with the rest of ’em, on the boat.”

Steeley nudged me with his elbow. “You mean, he’ll have gone with Durant?”

“Of course he will; he’s Durant’s bodyguard.”

“The devil he is! Well, that won’t save him. Has he gone—far away?”

“A tidy way.”

“You mean—too far for us to get to him?”

“No, not now we’ve got a car.”

“How long would it take us to get to the boat?”

“About an hour, I guess.”

“As long as that? Ah well, maybe we’d better let him go, and see about getting your face fixed up.”

Lew snorted. “Face nothing. I shan’t sleep till I’ve given that murdering swine what he’s given me. I’m as right as rain now.”

“Sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. I’ve said so, ain’t I? I’m going to get even with that devil if it takes me the rest of my life, so the sooner the better.”

“Well, I’m game to go after him if you are.”

“That’s good enough for me. I’ll bash the swine before he knows I’m there. There are four of ’em don’t forget, though,” added Lew doubtfully.

“The Major and Benny’ll be with ’em. They’ll all be on the boat—bound to be.”

“Boat?”

“That’s it. Didn’t you know Durant had a boat?”

“Of course, you mean the one down at——?”

“I mean the one at Gravesend.”

“That’s the one. O.K., then, let’s go to Gravesend.”

“What about this pinched car?”

“We shall have to take a chance on that—not that there’s much chance about it. It’ll take the fellow who owns it an hour to find out that he’s lost it, judging from the number of cars rolling up when we left. He’ll think he made a mistake in the place where he left it. Where are we now, by the way?”

“This is Dulwich we’re coming to.”

“All right. I think I can find my way to Gravesend, but you’d better tip me off if I go wrong.”

“O.K.,” agreed Lew.

And that was that. Steeley the indefatigable was once more on the trail, and I knew it was useless to remonstrate. I, personally, had had enough for one night. More than enough. Food and sleep were what I wanted, as much as Lew wanted Tiger. Could I have had my way, I’m afraid I should have gone home, and let Durant and his minions go to the devil. But Steeley was driving, not me.

We only stopped once, and that was at an all-night petrol station, to refuel. While the sleepy-eyed attendant was filling the tank I saw Steeley go into a telephone booth. Lew saw him, too, for he was sitting up mopping his face with a handkerchief from the can of water he had demanded.

“Who have you been telephoning to?” he asked suspiciously when Steeley returned.

“The missus,” returned Steeley glibly. “I had to let her know that I shouldn’t be home.”

“Women are a blasted nuisance,” growled Lew, and let it go at that.

On we sped through the quiet deserted streets. The journey seemed interminable, and more than once I caught myself dozing. Steeley, I think, could go without sleep for a week, if necessary. With his foot on the accelerator and his eyes fixed on the road ahead, he tore on, tirelessly, holding the wheel in his long, white, sensitive fingers, with the easy confidence of long experience.

In the end I did go to sleep, but I was awakened by Lew talking. He was giving instructions to Steeley. "Next turning to the left," he said.

The river came into sight. The houses thinned out, and presently we were cruising down a tortuous lane towards the wide expanse of water.

"He's there all right," muttered Lew, staring up the river through a side window. "Look, the lights are alight."

There were several craft of one sort and another at moorings, but as there was only one showing lights it told us all we needed to know.

"They've moved it a bit further out into the stream," went on Lew, rather nervously, I thought. "It used to be nearer the bank."

As a matter of fact, the boat, a large motor cruiser, was big enough to be called a yacht, Dutch-built, judging by the way the rudder came up out of the water. It was a good hundred yards from the bank, and I began wondering what Steeley proposed to do about it. The idea of trying to take the boat by storm made no appeal to me at all. I'm no pirate. I had another good look at her. She was carrying riding lights, and yellow beams from her portholes played on the turgid water. I could see a dinghy moored under her stern; it was trailing aft in the ebbing tide, the yacht being moored, as far as I could make out, only by the bows.

Steeley had already switched off his lights, and he now brought the car to a standstill with his near side wheels almost in the ditch. In front of us loomed a great rectangular mass.

"What's that place?" Steeley asked Lew.

"Shipyard," was the laconic reply.

"Does anyone live in it?"

"I don't think so; it's just a place where they do repairs."

Steeley looked back at the yacht, biting his underlip thoughtfully. "What size crew does Durant carry?" he asked.

"I dunno."

"Have you never been on board?"

"No."

"Hm." Steeley turned to me. "I wasn't expecting anything quite so large," he confessed. "There might easily be seven or eight people on the yacht in addition to those whom we think have gone aboard."

"Yes, that's true," muttered Lew, nervously. It was becoming increasingly clear from his manner that now he was faced with reality both his courage and enthusiasm for revenge were failing.

"Let's walk along a bit and have a closer view," suggested Steeley.

“We don’t want to run into Tiger; there’s no telling where he might be,” put in Lew quickly.

Steeley glanced at him, then at me. “Look here, I’ll tell you what,” he said. “We ought not to leave the car unattended in case anyone comes along, and, thinking there is something funny about it, goes and fetches the police.”

“That’s right enough,” declared Lew.

“Well, how would it be if you sat tight here, in the car, while we go along and have a look round? After all, it’s no use biting off more than we can chew.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” admitted Lew. His relief was very apparent.

“All right, then. We’ll go and have a scout round. Keep as quiet as you can. We shan’t be long.”

“O.K.”

I followed Steeley down the lane towards the building. A few stars here and there gave a wan light that just enabled us to see where we were going, but the sky was patchy, three-quarters covered by masses of cumulus cloud, or fog, rolling up from the west.

“We shall be better off without Lew,” muttered Steeley, as soon as we were out of earshot. “He’s still suffering from shock, which isn’t to be wondered at, and the sight of Tiger, or the mere sound of his voice would knock him to pieces. In any case, with his face in the state it is in he isn’t fit for a rough house, and that is what things might come to before the night is over.”

“You’re not thinking of boarding that yacht, I hope.”

“Not unless it becomes absolutely necessary.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “What are you going to do, then?”

“Wait here until Wayne joins us.”

“*Wayne!*”

“Yes.”

“But how the devil does Wayne know where we are?”

“I rang up the Yard from that garage we stopped at and asked the Duty Officer to tell him to get in touch with us, to follow us as quickly as he could manage.”

“But you didn’t know where we were going.”

“I knew we were on the way to a boat on the river near Gravesend. That was a pretty good guide, anyway.”

“But he’ll never find this lane.”

“To be quite frank, I don’t think he will,” confessed Steeley.

“What’s the best thing to do, then?”

“I think the safest plan would be to do nothing until we make contact with Wayne. If necessary one of us will have to go and find him while the other watches the boat.”

“What about Lew? Won’t he get in a panic when we start talking about bringing in the police?”

“I don’t care much what he does now as long as he doesn’t make a scene, which might alarm the people on the boat. Somehow I don’t think he will. He was still half dazed when I induced him to bring us here. His condition, and his hatred of Tiger, made him spill the beans. I played on that, as you may have noticed, without giving him much time to work out just who or what we are. He doesn’t know yet, although no doubt by this time he’s wondering what it’s all about. When we started his one idea was to get at Tiger as quickly as possible, but now he’s had time to calm down somewhat, and is faced with cold hard facts, he’s not so keen as he was. If his fear of Tiger or the police gets the upper hand of his resentment he may take it into his head to bolt, but, as I say, I don’t think it matters much if he does, because we’ve drawn as much out of him as he is able to tell us.”

While Steeley had been talking we had been making our way quietly towards the river, and we could not have been more than twenty yards away from it when a voice, a strange voice, coming unexpectedly out of the darkness somewhere ahead, brought us to an abrupt halt.

“Come on, you fellows; where the hell have you been all this time? The Boss is aboard and he’s waiting to get away.”

“Sorry, old man,” replied Steeley without hesitation. “I’m afraid you’ve made a mistake. I happened to be passing along the road so I thought I’d slip down and make sure that my boat is still all right. She’s the cutter—over there.” Steeley waved his arm vaguely in the direction of the river.

“Sorry. I was expecting a couple of lads along,” came the voice.

Peering into the darkness I could just make out a short landing-stage; a small tender, with a man sitting in the stern, was moored alongside.

Steeley turned to me. “By God! If Durant is thinking of slipping his cable we shall have to do something about it, and quickly,” he whispered.

We walked nearer, Steeley pattering on in a normal voice about the sailing qualities of his imaginary cutter, until we could see the man clearly.

He wore a long oilskin coat with the collar turned up, but I could see enough of his face to perceive that he was a stranger.

“That’s a nice craft of yours; I’ve often looked at her in passing—that is, unless I’m making a mistake,” Steeley told the man calmly. “That’s her, with the lights on, isn’t it?”

“Aye, that’s her,” answered the boatman gruffly. It was clear from his manner that having seen his error he was in no mood for conversation.

“It must be an expensive pastime, running a boat that size,” observed Steeley, coolly. “How many hands does it take to handle her?”

“More than you could pay, I guess,” was the churlish reply.

We were standing on the landing-stage now. Steeley took out a cigarette and tapped it on the back of his hand. “Have you got a match on you?” he asked. “We haven’t one left between us.”

The man stood up to unbutton his oilskins in order to get to his inside pocket. Steeley took a pace nearer. His fist flew out in a lightning short arm jab. It landed in the pit of the fellow’s stomach. The cry that rose to his lips ended abruptly in a sob as his breath hissed between his teeth. He folded up like a penknife. Steeley was on him in a flash, winding the loose part of the heavy oilskin coat round the man’s face. “Quick, Tubby,” he snapped, “get hold of his feet.”

We dragged the wretched fellow from his boat. Steeley got an arm round his neck in a vice-like grip while I grabbed his feet.

“Where are you going to take him?” I asked.

“Back to the car.”

Our victim was just beginning to get his breath back by the time we reached it. I could feel something heavy in his pocket, so I put my hand in to see what it was. It was an automatic. I quickly transferred it to my own.

Lew saw us coming, and as we joined him he eyed us aghast. “Blimey!” he muttered. “Have you——?”

“He’s all right,” interrupted Steeley. “You’ve got to get him out of the way. Tiger’s down there; we’re going back to pulp him.”

With his own belt we strapped the boatman’s arms to his sides, and with our knotted handkerchiefs we tied his ankles together. This done, we bundled him into the back of the car and closed the door.

“In you get, Lew,” ordered Steeley sharply.

“What do you want me to do?” questioned Lew nervously.

“Drive.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

“But——”

“Don’t argue. Every minute we waste will make our job harder. We’ve got to get Tiger. Drive down the road about a mile and then heave this fellow out. When you’ve got rid of him come back here.”

Poor Lew! He was quite bewildered, but his protests failed under Steeley’s powerful personality. We pushed him into the driver’s seat. Automatically he started the engine. Not without difficulty he got the car round and away he went up the lane.

Steeley watched him go. “So far, so good,” he muttered. “I couldn’t think of any other way to get it.”

“To get what?”

“The boat, of course.”

“What the devil do you think you’re going to do now?”

“I’m going over to the yacht—what else did you suppose?”

“You’re crazy.”

“Crazy or not, I’m going. You heard what that fellow said. Durant is pulling out. If once he reaches the sea, God knows where he’ll end up—France, most likely. We should have a thundering small chance of ever getting our hands on him then.”

“You’ve definitely made up your mind to board the yacht?”

“Unless you can think of any other way of stopping it.”

I was silent, for the simple reason that I could think of no other way of preventing the yacht’s departure.

“Hark!” Steeley swung round.

Voices were coming down the lane.

“Here come the fellows the boatman was waiting for,” declared Steeley. “Come on, we shall have to make it snappy now.”

We ran back to the tender. It was quite a small craft, fitted with an outboard motor which, as I expected, Steeley made no attempt to start. He dropped on to the middle seat and picked up the oars. “Cast off,” he ordered.

I untied the painter and found a seat forward as the boat glided out over the rippling water into the darkness.

Had the lights of Durant’s yacht not been on I doubt if we should have found it, but as it was it glowed like a beacon and there was no chance of our losing it. Steeley did not head straight towards it from the landing-stage,

but took a course down the river evidently with the idea of approaching it from the stern. In the silence a faint throbbing became audible.

“The engines are running already,” muttered Steeley. “That means that she may haul her anchor up any moment. I expect Durant is only waiting for the last members of his crew. That’s them, shouting now.”

A hail floated across the water. It sounded like “*Celtic* ahoy!”

There was an answering hail from the yacht.

“Send us a boat,” came from the landing-stage.

“The boat’s there, waiting,” was the reply.

“No, it ain’t.”

“Yes, it is, I tell you.”

“Don’t worry, they can’t see us against the dark background of the bank,” whispered Steeley.

“It ain’t here now.”

“Stand by,” shouted someone on the yacht, after a few moment’s silence. “We’re sending for you.” This was soon followed by a splash of oars.

“That’s someone in the dinghy going to the landing-stage,” breathed Steeley as he turned the nose of the tender towards the middle of the river and then began the harder pull upstream towards our objective. The lights loomed nearer.

“It might be as well if you told me just what you are going to do,” I suggested.

“I don’t know myself yet,” was the disconcerting reply.

“It all sounds absolutely suicidal to me,” I declared bitterly.

“We’ll have a look at things first,” promised Steeley, casually.

A few more strokes and we were in the dark shadow under the yacht’s stern. I grabbed her rudder and held on. Simultaneously there came the unmistakable grinding of a winch and the rattle of the anchor chain, and the yacht began to move forward as she hauled in on her anchor. I nearly went overboard.

“Hang on!” hissed Steeley, as he hastily shipped his oars. “For God’s sake don’t let go.”

I clung to the rudder like grim death. Steeley was coming forward to help me when I heard him gasp. “Hell’s bells,” he muttered. “Look what’s coming. Hang on.”

I looked up. Coming down the stream, going out on the tide, was a steamer. It was a big, deep-sea tramp, and in the gloom it looked like a

floating castle.

It had one good effect. It must have held up the return of the dinghy from the landing-stage. But that was nothing to what it did to us—or rather, what its backwash did. I was prepared for something pretty bad, but nothing so bad as we got. When the first wave hit us I had managed to pull the tender a little forward of the rudder, so we were caught between the wash of the steamer and the side of the yacht. The wave picked us up like a piece of cork and crashed us against the metal stern.

“Another one like that and we’re sunk,” I choked.

The next one was worse. It flung us broadside on against the sharp end of the rudder itself, and the frail timbers of the tender cracked like an eggshell. We had already shipped a lot of water as a result of the first wave, now more poured in.

“We’re sinking,” I gasped.

“Jump for it!”

I sprang into the bows and made a wild leap at the yacht’s stern. My fingers closed on the edge of the deck. Then, more by sheer desperation than skill, I managed to pull myself up, and crept, panting, behind a hatch, where, presently, Steeley joined me.

“What happened to the boat?” I asked.

“It’s sunk.”

“Damn good! Now what are we going to do?” I demanded.

“It looks as if we shall have to take over the one we’re on,” replied Steeley. I believe he was smiling.

“Go ahead,” I invited, sarcastically. “Help yourself.”

“The most valuable of all military tactics is surprise,” was the dispassionate response. “Let us now endeavour to employ it to advantage. You’ve got a gun, haven’t you?”

I nodded.

“Good! That’s the anchor coming up now, which suits us admirably. As soon as the engine gets going properly, we’ll rush the wheel-house and stick the yacht’s nose into the mud of the bank before anyone knows what’s happening.”

A minute or two later the throb of the engine increased in volume as the anchor came up and the throttle was opened to keep the yacht’s head into the stream while the men in the dinghy, whom we could now hear coming, got aboard.

“The dinghy’s nearly here,” I whispered. “There’s at least three men in her, don’t forget.”

“So I notice. I think we must try and stop them getting aboard. Are you ready?”

I took a firm grip of my automatic. “Lead on,” I said.

## CHAPTER XV

### DEAD AS MUTTON

AFTER that things happened. And they happened quickly. Perhaps it was as well, for it gave me no time to think.

The business began with Steeley standing up and walking towards the wheel-house, which was just forward of amidships. There was no question of stalking the one fellow who was in it, for the very good reason that there was nothing behind which one could take cover. A group of four or five men could be seen near the bows, waiting for the approaching dinghy, and I recognised Tiger's huge frame among them.

Steeley made no bones about the man at the wheel. He walked up behind him and brought his automatic down on the side of his head. Without even seeing the blow struck the man went down like a jacket falling off a peg.

"Stand by for squalls," murmured Steeley as he grabbed the wheel. "Hold them off when they try to rush us, but don't use your gun unless you're compelled to." As he spoke he spun the wheel hard over.

The yacht did not answer immediately, but once her nose started to come round, and the stream, reinforced by the tide, caught it, she started to turn almost on her own axis.

"Hey, George, what the hell are you doing up there?" yelled one of the group.

There were cries also from the dinghy which was now almost under our bows and looked like being cut in halves. I could see the oarsman rowing for dear life, with his head half turned to watch death bearing down on him.

There came another cry from below and the sound of footsteps coming up the companion. Durant's head popped out like a jack-in-the-box. He saw us at once, but for a moment his brain refused to accept the truth. His eyes stared, while his lower jaw sagged foolishly.

"You stay where you are," I told him harshly, covering him with my automatic.

He bobbed down and disappeared from sight as if someone had snatched his feet from under him, but he did not remain silent. Indeed, he set up a

devil's own hullabaloo. "Tiger! Tiger!" he yelled. "Get these fellows!" And the whole crowd in the bows came rushing towards the wheel-house, Tiger cursing like a maniac.

By this time we were half way to the shore. I saw that we had missed the dinghy, which was bucking like a wild horse in the swirl we had made. The rower had lost one of his oars, which did not help matters for him. Still bobbing, the little boat disappeared behind us. I snatched a glance at the head of the companion way. A hand was just coming over the edge; the light from the binnacle glinted on something bright. It was no time for words so I took quick aim and fired. A long splinter flew up in the planking and the hand disappeared. At the same moment a shot bored through the glass windscreen of the wheel-house and whizzed past my face, close enough to make me duck.

"Take care, Tubby," called Steeley warningly. Holding the wheel in his left hand he smashed the side window of the structure and fired at somebody I could not see. Tiger charged. He was at least brave. I shot him. I had no scruples about aiming at his legs, or anything like that. I had seen his handiwork on Lew, and I knew that once he got his great paws on me I was finished. He went down like a tree, the iron pin he was carrying in his hand crashing across the deck. Another shot whistled past me, and I saw Benny duck behind a ventilator. It was he who was shooting. The fool must have thought that ventilators were made of solid steel. I aimed at the bottom of the one behind which he was crouching, and let drive. He rolled out, twitching, into the scuppers.

Durant scrambled out through the cabin light, but he had disappeared before I could fire. I whirled round as there came a rush of footsteps in front of the wheel-house. The Major appeared, flame jumping from the muzzle of his gun, but he was in too much of a hurry and his shooting was wild, although one shot went through the fleshy part of my leg. In the heat of the affair I hardly noticed it, though. Shots now smashed through the wheel-house from other directions, and realising that the attack was coming from all sides, I had to get down on the floor. That is to say, I was just about to get down when the yacht struck. It seemed to come up under me like a lift, and then went over on its side. I lost my balance and fell. Steeley fell, too, but he clung to the wheel and was soon up again. "Durant," he snapped. "Plug him if he tries to jump for it."

His voice was drowned in others, and amongst them I heard one that I recognised. It was Wayne's bull-like bellow, and an instant later I saw him running towards us from the stern.

Durant must have seen him, too, for he darted from some hiding place and leapt on to the low bulwark where, balancing himself by holding on to the standing gear with his left hand he took deliberate aim at Wayne. I fired from the hip. For a short second he sagged, still hanging on to the wire. Then he went over backwards into the river, or mud; I didn't know which it was at the time.

"Hi! Wayne! Here we are!" I shouted.

Benny, groaning, rather surprisingly picked himself up and made a dash for the rail, but before he could get clear he had been seized by two uniformed figures, and went down again in a heap, struggling and cursing. Tiger still lay where he had fallen. He was stone dead, although I did not know that until afterwards. More policemen appeared. "Durant's in the river!" I shouted. "Watch out, there's another one somewhere." I was thinking of the Major, and they were still looking for him when Wayne joined us.

"You seem to have made a pretty good mess," he growled.

"Couldn't be helped, Wayne; we had a tough handful to deal with," replied Steeley, mopping blood from a cut in his face with his handkerchief. "You seem to have timed your arrival very nicely. How did you manage it?"

"I came down the river."

That, of course, explained it.

"I see," said Steeley. "I didn't think of that."

"When I got your message, and I heard you were making for a boat, I reckoned I should make faster time by getting the river police to bring me along, and at the same time be in a better position to help."

"Full marks, Wayne. That was smart work," Steeley told him with genuine approval, and I saw old Wayne grin like a delighted schoolboy.

"You don't know what we can do once we get started," he declared. "Hello, what's all this?"

Over the side of the boat came two constables, dragging something between them. We went down to them.

"Which of 'em is this?" asked Wayne, looking down at the water-soaked figure that the policemen had lain on the deck.

"Durant," answered Steeley.

"Well, I don't think the country will be put to the expense of a trial on *his* account," observed Wayne, grimly.

"Dead as mutton," declared one of the constables. "Drowned, I reckon. We found him on the edge of the mud."

“All right, get the place cleaned up,” Wayne told his men.

“What about the Major?” I asked.

“Major? Who’s he?”

I explained.

A quick reckoning revealed that the Major was not among the prisoners or casualties. (He must have got away, unless he was drowned, for no trace of him was found, either then or later.) As we walked round the battlefield Steeley told Wayne the whole story.

“Strewth!” muttered the detective when he had finished. “I should think you’re ready for a spot of shut-eye.”

“Speaking for myself, I certainly am,” I agreed with some emphasis.

\* \* \* \* \*

That’s about all there is to tell. We went back up the river with Wayne, disembarking with him at the deadly hour of three in the morning at the river police station near Westminster Bridge, outside Scotland Yard. I was asleep by the time we got there.

Little was said in the newspapers of the affair, this being due, no doubt, to the fact that the principal character, Durant, was dead, and the Spanish Civil War was occupying the headlines. A few inches of space was given to Tiger, possibly because he had been famous before drink dragged him into the gutter. Benny recovered and went down for a stretch. Poor Lew, who (as he admitted to me) had fled in the car when the shooting started on Durant’s yacht, was afterwards picked up by a police patrol, but got off with nothing worse than a severe fright. In view of the circumstances we persuaded him to turn King’s Evidence, and it was on his evidence that Benny was sent to gaol.

He is now doing quite well running a street coffee stall, which Steeley helped him to finance. Whether he will manage to keep on the rails or not is a question which only the future will reveal. I hope he does.

Of the Major, as I have said, nothing more was heard, and the fellows who were in the dinghy got clean away. Somehow they must have managed to reach the bank, and as the police had nothing by which to identify them, they are still at large, and are likely to be unless they are caught at some other form of crime.

Colonel Raymond congratulated Steeley and myself for what we had done, and I must admit that he did it so nicely that the risks we had taken seemed to be worth while, after all.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Murder at Castle Deeping* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]