



The Human Factor

*'I only know that he who forms a tie is lost. The germ of corruption
has entered into his soul.'*

Joseph Conrad

PART ONE

Castle, ever since he had joined the firm as a young recruit more than thirty years ago, had taken his lunch in a public house behind St James's Street, not far from the office. If he had been asked why he lunched there, he would have referred to the excellent quality of the sausages; he might have preferred a different bitter from Watney's, but the quality of the sausages outweighed that. He was always prepared to account for his actions, even the most innocent, and he was always strictly on time.

So by the stroke of one he was ready to leave. Arthur Davis, his assistant, with whom he shared a room, departed for lunch punctually at twelve and returned, but often only in theory, one hour later. It was understood that, in case of an urgent telegram, Davis or himself must always be there to receive the decoding, but they both knew well that in the particular sub-division of their department nothing was ever really urgent. The difference in time between England and the various parts of Eastern and Southern Africa, with which the two of them were concerned, was usually large enough—even when in the case of Johannesburg it was little more than an hour for no one outside the department to worry about the delay in the delivery of a message: the fate of the world, Davis used to declare, would never be decided on their continent, however many embassies China or Russia might open from Addis Ababa to Conakry or however many Cubans landed. Castle wrote a memorandum for Davis: 'If Zaire replies to No. 172 send copies to Treasury and FO.' He looked at his watch. Davis was ten minutes late.

Castle began to pack his briefcase—he put in a note of what he had to buy for his wife at the cheese shop in Jermyn Street and of a present for his son to whom he had been disagreeable that morning (two packets of Maltesers), and a book, *Clarissa Harlowe*, in which he had never read further than Chapter LXXIX of the first volume. Directly he heard a lift door close and Davis's step in the passage he left his room. His lunchtime with the sausages had been cut by eleven minutes. Unlike Davis he always punctually returned. It was one of the virtues of age.

Arthur Davis in the staid office was conspicuous by his eccentricities. He could be seen now, approaching from the other end of the long white corridor, dressed as if he had just come from a rather horsy country week-end, or perhaps from the public enclosure of a racecourse. He wore a tweed sport jacket of a greenish over-all colour, and he displayed a scarlet spotted handkerchief in the breast pocket: he might have been attached in some way to a tote. But he was like an actor who has been miscast: when he tried to live up to the costume, he usually fumbled the part. If he looked in London as though he had arrived from the country, in the country when he visited Castle he was unmistakably a tourist from the city.

'Sharp on time as usual,' Davis said with his habitual guilty grin.

'My watch is always a little fast,' Castle said, apologising for the criticism which he had not expressed. 'An anxiety complex, I suppose.'

'Smuggling out top secrets as usual?' Davis asked, making a playful pretence at seizing Castle's briefcase. His breath had a sweet smell: he was addicted to port.

'Oh, I've left all those behind for you to sell. You'll get a better price from your shady contacts.'

'Kind of you, I'm sure.'

'And then you're a bachelor. You need more money than a married man. I halve the cost of living

'Ah, but those awful leftovers,' Davis said, 'the joint remade into shepherd's pie, the dubious meatball. Is it worth it? A married man can't even afford a good port.' He went into the room they

shared and rang for Cynthia. Davis had been trying to make Cynthia for two years now, but the daughter of a major-general was after bigger game. All the same Davis continued to hope; it was always safer, he explained, to have an affair inside the department—it couldn't be regarded as a security risk, but Castle knew how deeply attached to Cynthia Davis really was. He had the keen desire for monogamy and the defensive humour of a lonely man. Once Castle had visited him in a flat, which he shared with two men from the Department of the Environment, over an antique shop not far from Claridge's—very central and W.I.

'You ought to come in a bit nearer,' Davis had advised Castle in the overcrowded sitting-room where magazines of different tastes—the New Statesman, Penthouse and Nature—littered the sofa, and where the used glasses from someone else's party had been pushed into corners for the daily woman to find.

'You know very well what they pay us,' Castle said, 'and I'm married.'

'A grave error of judgement.'

'Not for me,' Castle said, 'I like my wife.'

'And of course there's the little bastard,' Davis went on. 'I couldn't afford children and port as well.'

'I happen to like the little bastard too.'

Castle was on the point of descending the four stone steps into Piccadilly when the porter said to him, 'Brigadier Tomlinson wants to see you, sir.'

'Brigadier Tomlinson?'

'Yes. In room A.3.'

Castle had only met Brigadier Tomlinson once, many years before, more years than he cared to count, on the day that he was appointed—the day he put his name to the Official Secrets Act, when the brigadier was a very junior officer, if he had been an officer at all. All he could remember of him was a small black moustache hovering like an unidentified flying object over a field of blotting paper, which was entirely white and blank, perhaps for security reasons. The stain of his signature after he had signed the Act became the only flaw on its surface, and that leaf was almost certainly torn up and sent to the incinerator. The Dreyfus case had exposed the perils of a wastepaper basket nearly a century ago.

'Down the corridor on the left, sir,' the porter reminded him when he was about to take the wrong route.

'Come in, come in, Castle,' Brigadier Tomlinson called. His moustache was now as white as the blotting paper, and with the years he had grown a small pot-belly under a double-breasted waistcoat—only his dubious rank remained constant. Nobody knew to what regiment he had formerly belonged, if such a regiment indeed existed, for all military titles in this building were a little suspect. Ranks might just be part of the universal cover. He said, 'I don't think you know Colonel Daintry.'

'No. I don't think... How do you do?'

Daintry, in spite of his neat dark suit and his hatchet face, gave a more genuine out-of-doors impression than Davis ever did. If Davis at his first appearance looked as though he would be at home in a bookmakers' compound, Daintry was unmistakably at home in the expensive enclosure or on a grouse moor. Castle enjoyed making lightning sketches of his colleagues: there were times when he even put them on to paper.

'I think I knew a cousin of yours at Corpus,' Daintry said. He spoke agreeably, but he looked a little impatient; he probably had to catch a train north at King's Cross.

'Colonel Daintry,' Brigadier Tomlinson explained, 'is our new broom,' and Castle noticed the way Daintry winced at the description. 'He has taken over security from Meredith. But I'm not sure you ever met Meredith.'

'I suppose you mean my cousin Roger,' Castle said to Daintry. I haven't seen him for years. He got a first in Greats. I believe he's in the Treasury now.'

'I've been describing the set-up here to Colonel Daintry,' Brigadier Tomlinson prattled on, keeping strictly to his own wavelength.

'I took Law myself. A poor second,' Daintry said. 'You read History, I think?'

'Yes. A very poor third.'

'At the House?'

'Yes.'

'I've explained to Colonel Daintry,' Tomlinson said, 'that only you and Davis deal with the Top Secret cables as far as Section 6A is concerned.'

'If you can call anything Top Secret in our section. Of course, Watson sees them too.'

'Davis—he's a Reading University man, isn't he?' Daintry asked with what might have been a slight touch of disdain.

'I see you've been doing your homework.'

'As a matter of fact I've just been having a talk with Davis himself.'

'So that's why he was ten minutes too long over his lunch.'

Daintry's smile resembled the painful reopening of a wound. He had very red lips, and they parted at the corners with difficulty. He said, 'I talked to Davis about you, so now I'm talking to you about Davis. An open check. You must forgive the new broom. I have to learn the ropes,' he added, getting confused among the metaphors. 'One has to keep to the drill—in spite of the confidence we have in both of you, of course. By the way, did he warn you?'

'No. But why believe me? We may be in collusion.'

The wound opened again a very little way and closed tight.

'I gather that politically he's a hit on the left. Is that so?'

'He's a member of the Labour Party. I expect he told you himself.'

'Nothing wrong in that, of course,' Daintry said. 'And you...?'

'I have no politics. I expect Davis told you that too.'

'But you sometimes vote, I suppose?'

'I don't think I've voted once since the war. The issues nowadays so often seem well, a bit parish pump.'

'An interesting point of view,' Daintry said with disapproval. Castle could see that telling the truth this time had been an error of judgement, yet, except on really important occasions, he always preferred the truth. The truth can be double-checked. Daintry looked at his watch. I won't keep you long. I have a train to catch at King's Cross.'

'A shooting week-end?'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'Intuition,' Castle said, 'and again he regretted his reply. It was always safer to be inconspicuous.'

There were times, which grew more frequent with every year, when he daydreamed of complete conformity, as a different character might have dreamt of making a dramatic century at Lord's.

'I suppose you noticed my gun-case by the door?'

'Yes,' Castle said, 'who hadn't seen it until then, 'that was the clue.' He was glad to see that Daintry looked reassured.

Daintry explained, 'There's nothing personal in all this, you know. Purely a routine check. There are so many rules that sometimes some of them get neglected. It's human nature. The regulation, for example, about not taking work out of the office...'

He looked significantly at Castle's briefcase. An officer and a gentleman would open it at once for inspection with an easy joke, but Castle was not an officer, nor had he ever classified himself as a gentleman. He wanted to see how far below the table the new broom was liable to sweep. He said, 'I'm not going home. I'm only going out to lunch.'

'You won't mind, will you...?' Daintry held out his hand for the briefcase. 'I asked the same of Davis,' he said.

'Davis wasn't carrying a briefcase,' Castle said, 'when I saw him.'

Daintry flushed at his mistake. He would have felt a similar shame, Castle felt sure, if he had shown a beater. 'Oh, it must have been that other chap,' Daintry said. 'I've forgotten his name.'

'Watson?' the brigadier suggested.

'Yes, Watson.'

'So you've even been checking our chief?'

'It's all part of the drill.' Daintry said.

Castle opened his briefcase. He took out a copy of the Berkhamsted Gazette.

'What's this?' Daintry asked.

'My local paper. I was going to read it over lunch.'

'Oh yes, of course. I'd forgotten. You live quite a long way out. Don't you find it a bit inconvenient?'

'Less than an hour by train. I need a house and a garden. I have a child, you see—and a dog. You can't keep either of them in a flat. Not with comfort.'

'I notice you are reading Clarissa Harlowe? Like it?'

'Yes, so far. But there are four more volumes.'

'What's this?'

'A list of things to remember.'

'To remember?'

'My shopping list,' Castle explained. He had written under the printed address of his house, 129 King's Road, 'Two Maltesers. Half pound Earl Grey. Cheese—Wensleydale?? or Double Gloucester? Yardley Pre-Shave Lotion.'

'What on earth are Maltesers?'

'A sort of chocolate. You should try them. They're delicious. In my opinion better than Kit Kats.'

Daintry said, 'Do you think they would do for my hostess? I'd like to bring her something a little out of the ordinary.' He looked at his watch. 'Perhaps I could send the porter—there's just time. When

do you buy them?'

'He can get them at an ABC in the Strand.'

'ABC?' Daintry asked.

'Aerated Bread Company.'

'Aerated bread... what on earth...? Oh well, there isn't time to go into that. Are you sure those—teasers would do?'

'Of course, tastes differ.'

'Fortnum's is only a step away.'

'You can't get them there. They are very inexpensive.' I don't want to seem niggardly.'

'Then go for quantity. Tell him to get three pounds of them.'

'What is the name again? Perhaps you would tell the porter as you go out.'

'Is my check over then? Am I clear?'

'Oh yes. Yes. I told you it was purely formal, Castle.'

'Good shooting.'

'Thanks a lot.'

Castle gave the porter the message. 'Three pounds did 'e say?'

'Yes.'

'Three pounds of Maltesers!'

'Yes.'

'Can I take a pantechnicon?'

The porter summoned the assistant porter who was reading a girlie magazine. He said, 'Three pounds of Maltesers for Colonel Daintry.'

'That would be a hundred and twenty packets or thereabouts,' the man said after a little calculation.

'No, no,' Castle said, 'it's not as bad as that. The weight, I think, is what he means.'

He left them making their calculations. He was fifteen minutes late at the pub and his usual corner was occupied. He ate and drank quickly and calculated that he had made up three minutes. Then he bought the Yardley's at the chemist in St James's Arcade, the Earl Grey at Jackson's, a Double Gloucester there too to save time, although he usually went to the cheese shop in Jermyn Street, but the Maltesers, which he had intended to buy at the ABC, had run out by the time he got there—the assistant told him there had been an unexpected demand, and he had to buy Kit Kats instead. He was only three minutes late when he rejoined Davis.

'You never told me they were having a check,' he said. 'I was sworn to secrecy. Did they catch you with anything?'

'Not exactly.'

'He did with me. Asked what I had in my macintosh pocket. I'd got that report from 59800. I wanted to read it again over my lunch.'

'What did he say?'

'Oh, he let me go with a warning. He said rules were made to be kept. To think that fellow Blake (whatever did he want to escape for?) got forty years freedom from income tax, intellectual strain and

responsibility, and it's we who suffer for it now.'

'Colonel Daintry wasn't very difficult,' Castle said. 'He knew a cousin of mine at Corpus. That sort of thing makes a difference.'

Castle was usually able to catch the six thirty-five train from Euston. This brought him to Berkhamsted punctually at seven twelve. His bicycle waited for him at the station—he had known the ticket collector for many years and he always left it in his care. Then he rode the longer way home, for the sake of exercise across the canal bridge, past the Tudor school, into the High Street, past the grey flint parish church which contained the helmet of a crusader, then up the slope of the Chilterns towards his small semi-detached house in King's Road. He always arrived there, if he had not telephoned a warning from London, by half-past seven. There was just time to say goodnight to the boy and have a whisky or two before dinner at eight.

In a bizarre profession anything which belongs to an everyday routine gains great value—perhaps that was one reason why, when he came back from South Africa, he chose to return to his birthplace: to the canal under the weeping willows, to the school and the ruins of a once-famous castle which had withstood a siege by Prince John of France and of which, so the story went, Chaucer had been a Clerk of Works and who knows?—perhaps an ancestral Castle one of the artisans. It consisted now of only a few grass mounds and some yards of flint wall, facing the canal and the railway line. Beyond was a long road leading away from the town bordered with hawthorn hedges and Spanish chestnut trees until one reached at last the freedom of the Common. Years ago the inhabitants of the town fought for their right to graze cattle upon the Common, but in the twentieth century it was doubtful whether any animal but a rabbit or a goat could have found provender among the ferns, the gorse and the bracken.

When Castle was a child there still remained on the Common the remnants of old trenches dug in the heavy red clay during the first German war by members of the Inns of Court OTC, young lawyers who practised there before they went to die in Belgium or France as members of more orthodox units. It was unsafe to wander there without proper knowledge, since the old trenches had been dug several feet deep, modelled on the original trenches of the Old Contemptibles around Ypres, and a stranger risked a sudden fall and a broken leg. Children who had grown up with the knowledge of their whereabouts wandered freely, until the memory began to fade. Castle for some reason had always remembered, and sometimes on his days off from the office he took Sam by the hand and introduced him to the forgotten hiding-places and the multiple dangers of the Common. How many guerrilla campaigns he had fought there as a child against overwhelming odds. Well, the days of the guerrilla had returned, day-dreams had become realities. Living thus with the long familiar he felt the security that an old lag feels when he goes back to the prison he knows.

Castle pushed his bicycle up King's Road. He had bought his house with the help of a building society after his return to England. He could easily have saved money by paying cash, but he had no wish to appear different from the schoolmasters on either side—on the salary they earned there was no possibility of saving. For the same reason he kept the rather gaudy stained glass of the Laughing Cavalier over the front door. He disliked it; he associated it with dentistry—so often stained glass in provincial towns hides the agony of the chair from outsiders but again because his neighbours bore with theirs, he preferred to leave it alone. The schoolmasters in King's Road were strong upholders of the aesthetic principles of North Oxford, where many of them had taken tea with their tutors, and the same, too, in the Banbury Road, his bicycle would have fitted well, in the hall, under the staircase.

He opened his door with a Yale key. He had once thought of buying a mortice lock or something very special chosen in St James's Street from Chubb's, but he restrained himself his neighbours were content with Yale, and there had been no burglary nearer than Boxmoor in the last three years to justify him. The hall was empty; so seemed the sitting-room, which he could see through the open

door: there was not a sound from the kitchen. He noticed at once that the whisky bottle was not standing ready by the syphon on the sideboard. The habit of years had been broken and Castle felt anxiety like the prick of an insect. He called, 'Sarah ', but there was no reply. He stood just inside the hall door, beside the umbrella stand, taking in with rapid glances the familiar scene, with the one essential missing the whisky bottle and he held his breath. He had always, since they came, felt certain that one day a doom would catch up with them, and he knew that when that happened he must not be betrayed by panic: he must leave quickly, without an attempt to pick up any broken piece of their life together. 'Those that are in Judea must take refuge in the mountains...' He thought for some reason of his cousin at the Treasury, as though he were an amulet, which could protect him, a lucky rabbit's foot and then he was able to breathe again with relief, hearing voices on the floor above and the footsteps of Sarah as she came down the stairs.

'Darling, I didn't hear you. I was talking to Doctor Barker.'

Doctor Barker followed her—a middle-aged man with a flaming strawberry mark on his left cheek, dressed in dusty grey, with two fountain-pens in his breast pocket; or perhaps one of them was a pocket torch for peering into throats.

'Is anything wrong?'

'Sam's got measles, darling.'

'He'll do all right,' Doctor Barker said. 'Just keep him quiet. Not too much light.'

'Will you have a whisky, Doctor?'

'No, thank you. I have still two more visits to make and I'm late for dinner as it is.'

'Where could he have caught it?'

'Oh, there's quite an epidemic. You needn't worry. It's only a light attack.'

When the doctor had gone Castle kissed his wife. He ran his hand over her black resistant hair; he touched her high cheekbones. He felt the black contours of her face as a man might who has picked out one piece of achieved sculpture from all the hack carvings littering the steps of an hotel for white tourists; he was reassuring himself that what he valued most in life was still safe. By the end of a day he always felt as though he had been gone for years leaving her defenceless. Yet no one here minded her African blood. There was no law here to menace their life together. They were secure—or as secure as they would ever be.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

'I was worried. Everything seemed at sixes and sevens tonight when I came in. You weren't here. Not even the whisky...'

'What a creature of habit you are.'

He began to unpack his briefcase while she prepared the whisky. 'Is there really nothing to worry about?' Castle asked. 'I never like the way doctors speak, especially when they are reassuring.'

'Nothing.'

'Can I go and see him?'

'He's asleep now. Better not wake him. I gave him an aspirin.'

He put Volume One of Clarissa Harlome back in the bookcase.

'Finished it?'

'No, I doubt whether I ever shall now. Life's a bit too short.'

'But I thought you always liked long books.'

'Perhaps I'll have a go at War and Peace before it's too late.'

'We haven't got it.'

'I'm going to buy a copy tomorrow.'

She had carefully measured out a quadruple whisky by English pub standards, and now she brought it to him and closed the glass in his hand, as though it were a message no one else must read. Indeed, the degree of his drinking was known only to them: he usually drank nothing stronger than beer when he was with a colleague or even with a stranger in a bar. Any touch of alcoholism might always be regarded in his profession with suspicion. Only Davis had the indifference to knock the drinks back with a fine abandon, not caring who saw him, but then he had the audacity which comes from a sense of complete innocence. Castle had lost both audacity and innocence for ever in South Africa while he was waiting for the blow to fall.

'You don't mind, do you,' Sarah asked, 'if it's a cold meal tonight? I was busy with Sam all evening.'

'Of course not.'

He put his arm round her. The depth of their love was as secret as the quadruple measure of whisky. To speak of it to others would invite danger. Love was a total risk. Literature had always so proclaimed it. Tristan, Anna Karenina, even the lust of Lovelace—he had glanced at the last volume Clarissa. 'I like my wife' was the most he had ever said even to Davis.

'I wonder what I would do without you,' Castle said.

'Much the same as you are doing now. Two doubles before dinner at eight.'

'When I arrived and you weren't here with the whisky, I was scared.'

'Scared of what?'

'Of being left alone. Poor Davis,' he added, 'going home to nothing.'

'Perhaps he has a lot more fun.'

'This is my fun,' he said. 'A sense of security.'

'Is life outside as dangerous as all that?' She sipped from his glass and touched his mouth with lips which were wet with J. & B. He always bought J. & B. because of its colour a large whisky and soda looked no stronger than a weak one of another brand.

The telephone rang from the table by the sofa. He lifted the receiver and said 'Hello,' but no one replied. 'Hello.' He silently counted four, then put the receiver down when he heard the connection break.

'Nobody?'

'I expect it was a wrong number.'

'It's happened three times this month. Always when you are late at the office. You don't think it could be a burglar checking up to see if we are at home?'

'There's nothing worth a burglary here.'

'One reads such horrible stories, darling—men with stockings over their faces. I hate the time after sunset before you come home.'

'That's why I bought you Buller. Where is Buller?'

'He's in the garden eating grass. Something has upset him. Anyway, you know what he's like with

strangers. He fawns on them.'

'He might object to a stocking mask all the same.'

'He would think it was put on to please him. You remember at Christmas... with the paper hats...'

'I'd always thought before we got him that boxers were fierce dogs.'

'They are—with cats.'

The door creaked and Castle turned quickly: the square black muzzle of Buller pushed the door fully open, and then he launched his body like a sack of potatoes at Castle's flies. Castle fended him off. 'Down, Buller, down.' A long ribbon of spittle descended Castle's trouser leg. He said, 'If that's fawning, any burglar would run a mile.' Buller began to bark spasmodically and wriggle his haunches like a dog with worms, moving backwards towards the door.

'Be quiet, Buller.'

'He only wants a walk.'

'At this hour? I thought you said he was ill.'

'He seems to have eaten enough grass.'

'Be quiet, Buller, damn you. No walk.'

Buller slumped heavily down and dribbled onto the parquet to comfort himself.

'The meter man was scared of him this morning, but Buller only meant to be friendly.'

'But the meter man knows him.'

'This one was new.'

'New. Why?'

'Oh, our usual man has got the flu.'

'You asked to see his card?'

'Of course. Darling, are you getting scared of burglars now? Stop it, Buller. Stop.' Buller was licking his private parts with the gusto of an alderman drinking soup.

Castle stepped over him and went into the hall. He examined the meter carefully, but there seemed nothing unusual about it, and he returned.

'You are worried about something?'

'It's nothing really. Something happened at the office. A new security man throwing his weight about. It irritated me I've been more than thirty years in the firm, and I ought to be trusted by this time. They'll be searching our pockets next when we leave for lunch. He did look in my briefcase.'

'Be fair, darling. It's not their fault. It's the fault of the job.'

'It's too late to change that now.'

'Nothing's ever too late,' she said, 'and he wished he could believe her. She kissed him again as she went past him to the kitchen to fetch the cold meat.'

When they were sitting down and he had taken another whisky, she said, 'Joking apart, you are drinking too much.'

'Only at home. No one sees me but you.'

'I didn't mean for the job. I meant for your health. I don't care a damn about the job.'

'No?'

'A department of the Foreign Office. Everyone knows what that means, but you have to go around with your mouth shut like a criminal. If you told me—me, your wife what you'd done today, they'd sack you. I wish they would sack you. What have you done today?'

'I've gossiped with Davis, I've made notes on a few cards, I sent off one telegram—oh, and I've been interviewed by that new security officer. He knew my cousin when he was at Corpus.'

'Which cousin?'

'Roger.'

'That snob in the Treasury?'

'Yes.'

On the way to bed, he said, 'Could I look in on Sam?'

'Of course. But he'll be fast asleep by now.'

Buller followed them and laid a bit of spittle like a bonbon on the bedclothes.

'Oh, Buller.'

He wagged what remained of his tail as though he had been praised. For a boxer he was not intelligent. He had cost a lot of money and perhaps his pedigree was a little too perfect.

The boy lay asleep diagonally in his teak bunk with his head on a box of lead soldiers instead of pillow. One black foot hung out of the blankets altogether and an officer of the Tank Corps was wedged between his toes. Castle watched Sarah rearrange him, picking out the officer and digging out a parachutist from under a thigh. She handled his body with the carelessness of an expert, and the child slept solidly on.

'He looks very hot and dry,' Castle said.

'So would you if you had a temperature of 103: He looked more African than his mother, and the memory of a famine photograph came to Castle's mind—a small corpse spread-eagled on desert sand watched by a vulture.

'Surely that's very high.'

'Not for a child.'

He was always amazed by her confidence: she could make a new dish without referring to any cookery book, and nothing ever came to pieces in her hands. Now she rolled the boy roughly on his side and firmly tucked him in, without making an eyelid stir.

'He's a good sleeper.'

'Except for nightmares.'

'Has he had another?'

'Always the same one. We both of us go off by train and he's left alone. On the platform someone—he doesn't know who grips his arm. It's nothing to worry about. He's at the age for nightmares. I read somewhere that they come when school begins to threaten. I wish he hadn't got to go to prep school. He may have trouble. Sometimes I almost wish you had apartheid here too.'

'He's a good runner. In England there's no trouble if you are good at any sort of games.'

In bed that night she woke from her first sleep and said, 'as though the thought had occurred to her in a dream, 'It's strange, isn't it, your being so fond of Sam.'

'Of course I am. Why not? I thought you were asleep.'

'There's no "of course" about it. A little bastard.'

'That's what Davis always calls him.'

'Davis? He doesn't know?' she asked with fear. 'Surely he doesn't know?'

'No, don't worry. It's the word he uses for any child.'

'I'm glad his father's six feet underground,' she said.

'Yes. So am I, poor devil. He might have married you in the end.'

'No. I was in love with you all the time. Even when I started Sam I was in love with you. He's more your child than his. I tried to think of you when he made love. He was a tepid sort of fish. At the University they called him an Uncle Tom. Sam won't be tepid, will he? Hot or cold, but not tepid.'

'Why are we talking about all that ancient history?'

'Because Sam's ill. And because you are worried. When I don't feel secure I remember what it felt like when I knew I had to tell you about him. That first night across the border in Lourenco Marques. The Hotel Polana. I thought, "He'll put on his clothes again and go away for ever." But you didn't. You stayed. And we made love in spite of Sam inside.'

They lay quietly together, all these years later, only a shoulder touching a shoulder. He wondered whether this was how the happiness of old age, which he had sometimes seen on a stranger's face, might come about, but he would be dead long before she reached old age. Old age was something they would never be able to share.

'Aren't you ever sad,' she asked, 'that we haven't made a child?'

'Sam's enough of a responsibility.'

'I'm not joking. Wouldn't you have liked a child of ours?'

This time he knew that the question was one of those which couldn't be evaded.

'No,' he said.

'Why not?'

'You want to look under stones too much, Sarah. I love Sam because he's yours. Because he's not mine. Because I don't have to see anything of myself there when I look at him. I see only something of you. I don't want to go on and on for ever. I want the buck to stop here.'

'A good morning's sport,' Colonel Daintry remarked half-heartedly to Lady Hargreaves as he stamped the mud off his boots before entering the house. 'The birds were going over well.' His fellow guests piled out of cars behind him, with the forced joviality of a football team trying to show their keen sporting enjoyment and not how cold and muddy they really felt.

'Drinks are waiting,' Lady Hargreaves said. 'Help yourselves. Lunch in ten minutes.'

Another car was climbing the hill through the park, a long way off. Somebody bellowed with laughter in the cold wet air, and someone cried, 'Here's Buffy at last. In time for lunch, of course.'

'And your famous steak-and-kidney pudding?' Daintry asked. 'I've heard so much about it.'

'My pie, you mean. Did you really have a good morning, Colonel?' Her voice had a faint American accent—the more agreeable for being faint, like the tang of an expensive perfume.

'Not many pheasants,' Daintry said, 'but otherwise very fine.'

'Harry,' she called over his shoulder, 'Dicky' and then 'Where's Dodo? Is he lost?' Nobody called Daintry by his first name because nobody knew it. With a sense of loneliness he watched the graceful elongated figure of his hostess limp down the stone steps to greet 'Harry' with a kiss on both cheeks. Daintry went on alone into the dining-room where the drinks stood waiting on the buffet.

A little stout rosy man in tweeds whom he thought he had seen somewhere before was mixing himself a dry martini. He wore silver-rimmed spectacles which glinted in the sunlight. 'Add one for me,' Daintry said, 'if you are making them really dry.'

'Ten to one,' the little man said. 'A whiff of the cork, eh? Always use a scent spray myself. You are Daintry, aren't you? You've forgotten me. I'm Percival. I took your blood pressure once.'

'Oh yes. Doctor Percival. We're in the same firm more or less, aren't we?'

'That's right. C wanted us to get together quietly—no need for all that nonsense with scramblers here. I can never make mine work, can you? The trouble is, though, that I don't shoot. I only fish. This your first time here?'

'Yes. When did you arrive?'

'A bit early. Around midday. I'm a Jaguar fiend. Can't go at less than a hundred.'

Daintry looked at the table. A bottle of beer stood by every place. He didn't like beer, but for some reason beer seemed always to be regarded as suitable for a shoot. Perhaps it went with the boyishness of the occasion like ginger beer at Lord's. Daintry was not boyish. A shoot to him was an exercise of strict competitive skill—he had once been runner-up for the King's Cup. Now down the centre of the table stood small silver sweet bowls which he saw contained his Maltesers. He had been a little embarrassed the night before when he had presented almost a crate of them to Lady Hargreaves; she obviously hadn't an idea what they were or what to do with them. He felt that he had been deliberately fooled by that man Castle. He was glad to see they looked more sophisticated in silver bowls than they had done in plastic bags.

'Do you like beer?' he asked Percival.

'I like anything alcoholic,' Percival said, 'except Fernet-Branca,' and then the boys burst boisterously in Buffy and Dodo, Harry and Dicky and all; the silver and the glasses vibrated with joviality. Daintry was glad Percival was there, for nobody seemed to know Percival's first name either.

Unfortunately he was separated from him at table. Percival had quickly finished his first bottle of

beer and begun on a second. Daintry felt betrayed, for Percival seemed to be getting on with his neighbours as easily as if they had been members of the old firm too. He had begun to tell a fishing story which had made the man called Dicky laugh. Daintry was sitting between the fellow he took to be Buffy and a lean elderly man with a lawyer's face. He had introduced himself, and his surname was familiar. He was either the Attorney-General or the Solicitor-General, but Daintry couldn't remember which; his uncertainty inhibited conversation.

Buffy said suddenly, 'My God, if those are not Maltesers!'

'You know Maltesers?' Daintry asked.

'Haven't tasted one for donkey's years. Always bought them at the movies when I was a kid. Tasted wonderful. There's no movie house around here surely?'

'As a matter of fact I brought them from London.'

'You go to the movies? Haven't been to one in ten years. So they still sell Maltesers?'

'You can buy them in shops too.'

'I never knew that. Where did you find them?'

'In an ABC.'

'ABC?'

Daintry repeated dubiously what Castle had said, 'Aerated Bread Company.'

'Extraordinary! What's aerated bread?'

'I don't know,' Daintry said.

'The things they do invent nowadays. I wouldn't be surprised, would you, if their loaves were made by computers?' He leant forward and took a Malteser and crackled it at his ear like a cigar.

Lady Hargreaves called down the table, 'Buffy! Not before the steak-and-kidney pie.'

'Sorry, my dear. Couldn't resist. Haven't tasted one since I was a kid.' He said to Daintry, 'Extraordinary things computers. I paid 'em a fiver once to find me a wife.'

'You aren't married?' Daintry asked, looking at the gold ring Buffy wore.

'No. Always keep that on for protection. Wasn't really serious, you know. Like to try out new gadgets. Filled up a form as long as your arm. Qualifications, interests, profession, what have you.' He took another Malteser. 'Sweet tooth,' he said. 'Always had it.'

'And did you get any applicants?'

'They sent me along a girl. Girl! Thirty-five if a day. I had to give her tea. Haven't had tea since my mum died. I said, "My dear, do you mind if we make it a whisky? I know the waiter here. He'll slip us one!" She said she didn't drink. Didn't drink!'

'The computer had slipped up?'

'She had a degree in Economics at London University. And big spectacles. Flat-chested. She said she was a good cook. I said I always took my meals at White's.'

'Did you ever see her again?'

'Not to speak to, but once she waved to me from a bus as I was coming down the club steps. Embarrassing! Because I was with Dicky at the time. That's what happened when they let buses go up St James's Street. No one was safe.'

After the steak-and-kidney pie came a treacle tart and a big Stilton cheese and Sir John Hargreaves circulated the port. There was a faint feeling of unrest at the table as though the holidays

had been going on too long. People began to glance through the windows at the grey sky: in a few hours the light would fail. They drank their port rapidly as if with a sense of guilt—they were not really there for idle pleasure—except Percival who wasn't concerned. He was telling another fishing story and had four empty bottles of beer beside him.

The Solicitor-General—or was it the Attorney General?—said heavily, 'We ought to be moving. The sun's going down.' He certainly was not here for enjoyment, only for execution, and Daintry sympathised with his anxiety. Hargreaves really ought to make a move, but Hargreaves was almost asleep. After years in the Colonial Service—he had once been a young District Commissioner on what was then the Gold Coast he had acquired the knack of snatching his siesta in the most unfavourable circumstances, even surrounded by quarrelling chiefs, who used to make more noise than Buffy.

'John,' Lady Hargreaves called down the table, 'wake up.'

He opened blue serene unshockable eyes and said, 'A cat-nap.' It was said that as a young man somewhere in Ashanti he had inadvertently eaten human flesh, but his digestion had not been impaired. According to the story he had told the Governor, I couldn't really complain, sir. They were doing me a great honour by inviting me to take pot luck.'

'Well, Daintry,' he said, 'I suppose it's time we got on with the massacre.'

He unrolled himself from the table and yawned. 'Your steak-and-kidney pie, dear, is too good.'

Daintry watched him with envy. He envied him in the first place for his position. He was one of the very few men outside the services ever to have been appointed C. No one in the firm knew why he had been chosen all kinds of recondite influences had been surmised, for his only experience of intelligence had been gained in Africa during the war. Daintry also envied him his wife; she was so rich, so decorative, so impeccably American. An American marriage, it seemed, could not be classified as a foreign marriage: to marry a foreigner special permission had to be obtained and it was often refused, but to marry an American was perhaps to confirm the special relationship. He wondered all the same whether Lady Hargreaves had been positively vetted by MI5 and been passed by the FBI.

'Tonight,' Hargreaves said, 'we'll have a chat, Daintry, won't we? You and I and Percival. When this crowd has gone home.'

Sir John Hargreaves limped round, handing out cigars, pouring out whiskies, poking the fire. 'I don't enjoy shooting much myself,' he said. 'Never used to shoot in Africa, except with a camera, but my wife likes all the old English customs. If you have land, she says, you must have birds. I'm afraid there weren't enough pheasants, Daintry.'

'I had a very good day,' Daintry said, 'all in all.'

'I wish you ran to a trout stream,' Doctor Percival said.

'Oh yes, fishing's your game, isn't it? Well, you might say we've got a bit of fishing on hand now. He cracked a log with his poker. 'Useless,' he said, 'but I love to see the sparks fly. There seems to be a leak somewhere in Section 6.'

Percival said, 'At home or in the field?'

'I'm not sure, but I have a nasty feeling that it's here at home. In one of the African sections-6A.'

'I've just finished going through Section 6,' Daintry said. 'Only a routine run through. So as to get to know people.'

'Yes, so they told me. That's why I asked you to come here. Enjoyed having you for the shoot too, of course. Did anything strike you?'

'Security's got a hit slack. But that's true of all other sections too. I made a rough check for example of what people take out in their briefcases at lunchtime. Nothing serious, but I was surprised at the number of briefcases... It's a warning, that's all, of course. But a warning might scare a nervous man. We can't very well ask them to strip.'

'They do that in the diamond fields, but I agree that in the West End stripping would seem a bit unusual.'

'Anyone really out of order?' Percival asked.

'Not seriously. Davis in 6A was carrying a report— said he wanted to read it over lunch. I warned him, of course, and made him leave it behind with Brigadier Tomlinson. I've gone through all the traces too. Vetting has been done very efficiently since the Blake case broke, but we still have a few men who were with us in the bad old days. Some of them even go back as far as Burgess and Maclean. We could start tracing them all over again, but it's difficult to pick up a cold scent.'

'It's possible, of course, just possible,' C said, 'that the leak came from abroad and that the evidence has been planted here. They would like to disrupt us, damage morale and hurt us with the Americans. The knowledge that there was a leak, if it became public, could be more damaging than the leak itself.'

'That's what I was thinking,' Percival said. 'Questions in Parliament. All the old names thrown up— Vassal, the Portland affair, Philby. But if they're after publicity, there's little we can do.'

'I suppose a Royal Commission would be appointed to shut the stable door,' Hargreaves said. 'But let's assume for a moment that they are really after information and not scandal. Section 6 seems a most unlikely department for that. There are no atomic secrets in Africa: guerrillas, tribal wars, mercenaries, petty dictators, crop failures, building scandals, gold beds, nothing very secret there. That's why I wonder whether the motive may be simply scandal, to prove they have penetrated the British Secret Service yet again.'

'Is it an important leak, C?' Percival asked.

'Call it a very small drip, mainly economic, but the interesting thing is that apart from economic it concerns the Chinese. Isn't it possible—the Russians are such novices in Africa—that they want to make use of our service for information on the Chinese?'

'There's precious little they can learn from us,' Percival said.

'But you know what it's always like at everybody's Centre. One thing no one can ever stand there is a blank white card.'

'Why don't we send them carbon copies, with our compliments, of what we send the Americans? There's supposed to be a detente, isn't there? Save everyone a lot of trouble.' Percival took a little tub from his pocket and sprayed his glasses, then wiped them with a clean white handkerchief.

'Help yourself to the whisky,' C said. 'I'm too stiff to move after that bloody shoot. Any ideas, Daintry?'

'Most of the people in Section 6 are post-Blake. If their traces are unreliable then no one is safe.'

'All the same, the source seems to be Section 6—and probably 6A. Either at home or abroad.'

'The head of Section 6, Watson, is a relative newcomer,' Daintry said. 'He was very thoroughly vetted. Then there's Castle he's been with us a very long time, we brought him back from Pretoria seven years ago because they needed him in 6A, and there were personal reasons too—trouble about the girl he wanted to marry. Of course, he belongs to the slack vetting days, but I'd say he was clear. Dullish man, first-class, of course, with files—it's generally the brilliant and ambitious who are dangerous. Castle is safely married, second time, his first wife's dead. There's one child, a house on mortgage in Metroland. Life insurance payments up to date. No high living. He doesn't even run to a car. I believe he bicycles every day to the station. A third class in history at the House. Careful and scrupulous. Roger Castle in the Treasury is his cousin.'

'You think he's quite clear then?'

'He has his eccentricities, but I wouldn't say dangerous ones. For instance he suggested I bring those Maltesers to Lady Hargreaves.'

'Maltesers?'

'It's a long story. I won't bother you with it now. And then there's Davis. I don't know that I'm quite so happy about Davis, in spite of the positive vetting.'

'Pour me out another whisky, would you, Percival, there's a good chap. Every year I say it's my last shoot.'

'But those steak-and-kidney pies of your wife's are wonderful. I wouldn't miss them,' Percival said.

'I daresay we could find another excuse for them.'

'You could try putting trout in that stream...'

Daintry again experienced a twitch of envy; once more he felt left out. He had no life in common with his companions in the world outside the borders of security. Even as a gun he felt professional. Percival was said to collect pictures, and C? A whole social existence had been opened up for him by his rich American wife. The steak-and-kidney pie was all that Daintry was permitted to share with them outside office hours—for the first and perhaps the last time.

'Tell me more about Davis,' C said.

'Reading University. Mathematics and physics. Did some of his military service at Aldermaston. Never supported anyway openly the marchers. Labour Party, of course.'

'Like forty-five per cent of the population,' C said.

'Yes, yes, of course, but all the same... He's a bachelor. Lives alone. Spends fairly freely. Fond of vintage port. Bets on the tote. That's a classic way, of course, of explaining why you can afford...'

'What does he afford? Besides port.'

'Well, he has a Jaguar.'

'So have I,' Percival said. 'I suppose we mustn't ask you how the leak was discovered?'

'I wouldn't have brought you here if I couldn't tell you that. Watson knows, but no one else in Section 6. The source of information is an unusual one—a Soviet defector who remains in place.'

'Could the leak come from Section 6 abroad?' Daintry asked.

'It could, but I doubt it. It's true that one report they had seemed to come direct from Lourenco Marques. It was word for word as 69300 wrote it. Almost like a photostat of the actual report, so one might have thought that the leak was there if it weren't for a few corrections and deletions. Inaccuracies which could only have been spotted here by comparing the report with the files.'

'A secretary?' Percival suggested.

'Daintry began his check with those, didn't you? They are more heavily vetted than anyone. That leaves us Watson, Castle and Davis.'

'A thing that worries me,' Daintry said, 'is that Davis was the one who was taking a report out of the office. One from Pretoria. No apparent importance, but it did have a Chinese angle. He said he wanted to reread it over lunch. He and Castle had got to discuss it later with Watson. I checked the truth of that with Watson.'

'What do you suggest we do?' C asked.

'We could put down a maximum security check with the help of 5 and Special Branch. On everyone in Section 6. Letters, telephone calls, bug flats, watch movements.'

'If things were as simple as that, Daintry, I wouldn't have bothered you to come up here. This is only a second-class shoot, and I knew the pheasants would disappoint you.'

Hargreaves lifted his bad leg with both hands and eased it towards the fire. 'Suppose we did prove Davis to be the culprit—or Castle or Watson. What should we do then?'

'Surely that would be up to the courts,' Daintry said.

'Headlines in the papers. Another trial in camera. No one outside would know how small and unimportant the leaks were. Whoever he is he won't rate forty years like Blake. Perhaps he'll serve ten if the prison's secure.'

'That's not our concern surely.'

'No, Daintry, but I don't enjoy the thought of that trial one little bit. What co-operation can we expect from the Americans afterwards? And then there's our source. I told you, he's still in place. We don't want to blow him as long as he proves useful.'

'In a way,' Percival said, 'it would be better to close our eyes like a complaisant husband. Draft whoever it is to some innocuous department. Forget things.'

'And abet a crime?' Daintry protested.

'Oh, crime,' Percival said and smiled at C like a fellow conspirator. 'We are all committing crime somewhere, aren't we? It's our job.'

'The trouble is,' C said, 'that the situation is a bit like a rocky marriage. In a marriage, if the love

begins to be bored by the complaisant husband, he can always provoke a scandal. He holds the strong suit. He can choose his own time. I don't want any scandal provoked.'

Daintry hated flippancy. Flippancy was like a secret code of which he didn't possess the book. He had the right to read cables and reports marked Top Secret, but flippancy like this was so secret that he hadn't a clue to its understanding. He said, 'Personally I would resign rather than cover up.' He put down his glass of whisky so hard that he chipped the crystal. Lady Hargreaves again, he thought. She must have insisted on crystal. He said, 'I'm sorry.'

'Of course you are right, Daintry,' Hargreaves said. 'Never mind the glass. Please don't think I've brought you all the way up here to persuade you to let things drop, if we have sufficient proof... But a trial isn't necessarily the right answer. The Russians don't usually bring things to a trial with their own people. The trial of Penkovsky gave all of us a great boost in morale, they even exaggerated his importance, just as the CIA did. I still wonder why they held it. I wish I were a chess player. Do you play chess, Daintry?'

'No, bridge is my game.'

'The Russians don't play bridge, or so I understand.' Is that important'

'We are playing games, Daintry, games, all of us. It's important not to take a game too seriously or we may lose it. We have to keep flexible, but it's important, naturally, to play the same game.'

'I'm sorry, sir,' Daintry said, 'I don't understand what you are talking about.'

He was aware that he had drunk too much whisky, and he was aware that C and Percival were deliberately looking away from each other they didn't want to humiliate him. They had heads of stone, he thought, stone.

'Shall we just have one more whisky,' C said, 'or perhaps not. It's been a long wet day. Percival... Daintry said, 'I'd like another.'

Percival poured out the drinks. Daintry said, 'I'm sorry to be difficult, but I'd like to get things a little clearer before bed, or I won't sleep.'

'It's really very simple,' C said. 'Put on your maximum security check if you like. It may flush the bird without more trouble. He'll soon realise what's going on if he's guilty, that is. You might think up some kind of test—the old marked fiver technique seldom fails. When we are quite certain he's our man, then it seems to me we will just have to eliminate him. No trial, no publicity. If we can get information about his contacts first, so much the better, but we mustn't risk a public flight and then a press conference in Moscow. An arrest too is out of the question. Granted that he's in Section 6, there's no information he can possibly give which would do as much harm as the scandal of a court case.'

'Elimination?'

'You mean...'

'I know that elimination is rather a new thing for us. More in the KGB line or the CIA's. That's why I wanted Percival here to meet you. We may need the help of his science boys. Nothing spectacular. Doctor's certificate. No inquest if it can be avoided. A suicide's only too easy, but then a suicide always means an inquest, and that might lead to a question in the House. Everyone knows now what a "department of the Foreign Office" means. "Was any question of security involved?" You know the kind of thing some back-bencher is sure to ask. And no one ever believes the official answer. Certainly not the Americans.'

'Yes,' Percival said, 'I quite understand. 'He should die quietly, peacefully, without pain too, poor chap. Pain sometimes shows on the face, and there may be relatives to consider. A natural death...'

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