

The Avengers #5

The Afrit Affair

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Chapter One

“Crises,” John Steed said, pouring tea into Emma Peel’s cup, “aren’t what they used to be. The old spirit of brinkmanship seems to be waning. Consider the current Peace Conference, for example. After convening at the urgent demand of the Afro-Asian powers, all of whom insisted that the alternative was instant Armageddon, there hasn’t been a really spirited threat of war by a third-rate member in over twenty-four hours.”

“And the Americans haven’t proposed a single massive aid program to embarrass the Russians,” Emma agreed.

“And as for the Russians—they haven’t even demanded veto powers.”

“What about the British position?”

“The single note of stability,” Steed said. “We’ve continued to break for tea at four o’clock, as usual.”

“It’s almost enough to shake one’s sense of security,” Emma agreed, raising her cup to Steed. She was looking quite charming in a sky-blue knitted creation with interesting interstices, Steed noted with approval. He was about to say so when a heavy rumble intruded on the conversation. It grew louder, rattling the teapot on its tray. The building seemed to tremble to its foundations as a vast, dark shadow flitted across the glass wall of Emma’s Hampstead penthouse. Steed looked at his watch.

“Right on time,” he said. Emma’s raised eyebrows asked the question.

“Project Fastslap,” Steed elucidated. “Our newest deterrent, just laid on today. From now on there’ll be aircraft aloft at all times, loaded with

nuclear warheads, each with a specific destination behind the Iron Curtain. And unless recall orders are received on schedule, off they go to deliver the goods.”

“I remember,” Emma nodded. “I suppose we should all feel quite snug, knowing the sky is full of them.”

“Not just our bit of sky,” Steed pointed out, sampling a crumpet. “The Russians have one labeled ‘London’ circling somewhere behind the Urals at this very moment.”

“Umm.” Emma nodded confirmation. “I understand the Lord Mayoress is heading up a committee to send warm mufflers and marmalade to the Soviet crew. They’ve made them honorary Londoners, considering their interest in the city.”

“Let us hope the recall orders continue to go out on schedule,” Steed said. “I’d dislike being vaporized as the result of a mere clerical error.”

The telephone rang. Emma Peel reached for it, tossing her head to swing back her long auburn hair. “For you, Steed.”

As he listened, Steed’s right eyebrow went up in a pained expression.

“Really, sir,” he said mildly, “I’m more the active type: nipping about looking into nasty little details no one else wants to tackle——” He subsided, murmured assent, and looked at his watch, an impressively antique model on a fine gold chain.

“Your new assignment?” Emma asked, smiling innocently. “Interesting, I hope?”

“It appears I’ve been selected to play nursemaid to that confounded gaggle of diplomats,” Steed said. “It seems there have been a number of rather curious happenings at the hotel where the conference is being held. I’m to hover about in the wings and watch for suspicious characters.”

“Not bad,” Emma said admiringly. “The New Empire is supposed to be the finest hotel in the world. There’s even hot and cold running beer laid on, I’m told.”

“And not even a gnat could penetrate the security cordon around, under and over the building.” Steed sighed as he sat down.

“Possibly they expect an ectoplasm to materialize, wielding a six-shooter.”

Emma put a kippered herring on Steed’s plate. “Perhaps it’s their way of putting you out to pasture,” she said kindly. “After aU, you deserve a rest.”

“You speak as though I were middle-aged, instead of only forty-five,” Steed said loftily, attacking the fish with knife and fork. He frowned at his

plate, picked a folded scrap of paper from the interior of the *piece de resistance*. Unfolded, it read:

I WILL STRIKE WHEN AND WHERE I DESIRE,
AND IN MY WAKE WILL REIGN CONFUSION.

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?

SINCERELY: THE AFRIT

Steed frowned thoughtfully. “Well, well,” he said. “The Afrit: that’s some sort of Arabic spook, I believe. This has all the earmarks of a challenge.” He looked at Emma, briskly tucking the paper into his waistcoat pocket. “But that’s of no interest to you, of course, Mrs. Peel. You’re going on holiday.”

“Exactly,” Emma agreed. “And before you ask—the menu for tea came from a delightful little Syrian delicatessen on the corner, specializing in Iranian and Tibetan food.”

“This came from Tibet?” Steed eyed the impaled fish.

“No, from Ghana. But it’s time for you to be off now, Steed; the general will be expecting you. And I have a vital appointment with my hairdresser.”

“I wouldn’t think of keeping you,” Steed said smoothly. He checked the angle of his bowler in the hall mirror, hooked his umbrella over his arm.

“Good luck,” Emma said. “Be sure and let me know how it turns out.”

“Um,” Steed said, adjusting the carnation in his buttonhole.

“You can always reach me at the usual number—if you really find it necessary.”

“I daresay I can handle the Afrit alone, Mrs. Peel,” Steed said carelessly.

“I sincerely hope so.” Emma was smiling sweetly as the door closed.

Chapter Two

The Garden of Allah Fine Imported Delicacies Emporium was a narrow-fronted establishment filled with dim amber light and the mingled odors of exotic spices, hashish and frying sausage. A tall, lean, hawk-faced man appeared from behind a beaded curtain, plying a toothpick on a right upper molar. He inclined his head graciously as he approached Steed.

“Good morning, sir, peace be with you,” he said in a shrill voice. “Something for your elevenses? What say to a nice tortilla, with enchil-

adas and a taco on the side?”

“Mexican food?” Steed said, surprised. “In the morning?”

“Even the Mexicans eat breakfast,” the proprietor pointed out with a smile featuring a gold incisor which winked in the gloom. “But as it happens, these items were compounded in Cambodia.”

“Actually, I was more interested in seafood,” Steed said.

“Ah, the fame of our pickled octopus delight has reached you!” A long arm snaked out for a gallon jar filled with what looked like pathology specimens floating in murky fluid.

“Red Chinese?” Steed inquired, fending the offering off with his umbrella.

“Urundian.” The shopkeeper put the jar aside hastily and snatched a flat tin from the shelf. “Burmese ka-swe,” he asked hopefully, “from Albania? Or what about a nice Pakistani snail curry, fresh from the factory in Laos? Or——”

“What about Ghanian produce?” Steed cut into the spiel.

The Syrian’s expression congealed into a look of opac-ity.

“I regret—nothing from Ghana, sahib.”

“Not even kippered herring?”

“The sahib jests.”

“Strange,” Steed said. “A friend of mine bought some here only this morning.”

“A friend . . . ?” The man frowned as if in deep thought.

“A lady. Not the sort of lady one would forget. On the whole it would be simpler all around if you remembered.”

“Oh, *that* kippered herring . . .” The long face nodded, registering sudden comprehension.

“Yes. Tell me, who handled the kippers before they were sold?”

“Only myself, four stock boys, half a dozen customers, their wives and dependents, and possibly the charwoman. Why?” The man looked concerned “Was it not satisfactory?”

“A trifle chewy, perhaps,” Steed said. “Tell me, are your fingerprints on file with the police?”

“Fingerprints?” The man stared at his hands as if just discovering them.

“Never mind,” Steed said casually, pocketing the tin of snails. “I’ll just lift them from this.” He dropped a ten shilling note on the counter, tipped his hat and turned away. There was a sound behind him. Steed stepped suddenly aside as the shopkeeper hurtled past him, hooked his foot in the

crook of Steed's umbrella, dived to the floor, and struck face-first with a terrible crash.

Steed turned the inert form over. The ivory-inlaid handle of a Bugandian ceremonial marrow pick protruded from the center of the Syrian's vest.

"Clumsy," Steed murmured, frowning.

Outside, the constable on the beat touched a finger to his helmet in greeting.

"A word of warning, Major," he said, casting a glance toward the gloomy shop from which Steed had just emerged. "I'd be careful if I were you. A bloke I know got a terrible case of heartburn from something he picked up in there."

"That's a coincidence, Watson," Steed remarked. "The same thing happened to the proprietor."

He climbed into the seat of the '29 Bentley parked at the curb and headed toward the towering pile of the New Empire Hotel.

Chapter Three

The view from the one hundred and fiftieth floor observation lounge of the New Empire, John Steed reflected, gazing idly at it, rivaled the aspect from the twenty-thousand-foot level of Annapurna. He tasted the room-temperature beer Freddy the barman had just drawn from the famous running-beer tap, nodded approvingly. The spire of the Pan American Tower poking up through the soup wasn't all that unlike the Nanda Devi, with the tip of the antenna atop New Scotland Yard representing a scaled-down Kan-chenjunga. The element of lofty solitude, however, was lacking. From the dim blue screen of the ceiling-mounted telly, the droning voice of Sir Montague Merlin perorated, relayed from the vast conference hall ninety-one stories below.

"What say I flick over to Music One?" Freddy murmured conspiratorily, breathing on the glass he was polishing. "Can't say I'm much the wiser for listening to these broody delegates."

Steed tuned his ear to the speaker. ". . . if, as I say, on the other hand, we, that is to say those of us—and I do not, mind you, exclude—not knowingly—any kindred soul who may, whatever our superficial differences, take a position consonant with the principles enunciated so brilliantly by my esteemed colleague, whose least restrained detractor could

not, whatever his political coloring——”

At Steed's expression Freddy thumbed the button which replaced the gaunt visage of Sir Montague with a blast of sound and a high-angle shot of Pete Townshend breaking up a double-necked Gibson.

“Monty seems to be talking even worse rot than usual,” Steed admitted over the din of exploding amplifiers. “Still, from a few days of this sort of thing will emerge a new milestone in the progress of peace, Freddy.”

“I don't know, Major,” Freddy wagged his head doubtfully. “Sir Montague didn't half tuck into the Yanks this morning, and they replied in kind.” He frowned. “At least, I think they did.” Freddy lowered his voice. “What's it mean when you call a bloke a fruit salad, Major?”

“Just keep talking, Freddy,” Steed said levelly. His eyes were fixed on the curved glass mirror backing the bar. In it, he watched a man emerging from the sliding glass doors of the see-through lift. The newcomer paused, looked furtively left and right, then shot a glance at Steed. The image, distorted by the curved glass, was that of a huge-headed gnome with immense ears, a shrunken chesty atrophied legs dwindling away to tiny feet encased in brown and white shoes.

“Ah . . . and so I says to his Lordship, ah, your Lordship, says I . . . ” Freddy improvised loudly.

The ogre in the mirror was advancing across the room, swelling as he came. Steed put the glass casually on the bar, freeing his right hand for action.

The apparition halted directly behind him, belatedly glanced up. Their eyes met in the mirror. For a moment the stranger stared blankly. Then he made a convulsive movement toward his right hip. Steed whirled, and pressed the stiletto-sharp tip of his umbrella firmly against the man's belt buckle.

“I shouldn't do it if I were you,” he said pleasantly.

“Why not?” the man barked. “American Express credit cards are good anywhere on the face of the globe!”

Steed was blinking wonderingly at the man's bulging forehead, large bat ears, pointed chin, narrow shoulders, short legs, and tiny feet encased in explosive white and tan shoes. The buckle the gun rested against was a large silver one, retaining a broad tooled-leather belt supporting wide, razor-creased slacks the color of muddy water. A “V” of green gabardine with pink embroidered flowers showed between the lapels of an Italian silk jacket, cut in racetrack style.

“Bring it out nicely now, if you don’t mind,” Steed said, somewhat unnerved by the spectacle.

The gnome pulled forth a fat wallet, opened it, and ac-cordioned out a three-foot festoon of plastic-encased cards.

“The one in the middle,” he said snappishly. “Between the Diner’s Club and Carte Blanche.”

“Remarkable, Mr., ah, Blenkiron,” Steed acknowledged, his eyes lingering on a black-edged card as he lowered his weapon. “I say, can one actually be buried on credit?”

“Only when you’re dead,” the new arrival corrected, gathering in his credentials. He hitched himself to the stool beside Steed, shot him a sharp sideways look.

“New in town?” he demanded. His voice had a yapping quality, like a Pekingese complaining of an economy brand of breast of chicken.

“Yes and no,” Steed smiled noncommittally. “Yourself?”

“Been here a week. Don’t like it.” The man poked a finger at Freddy. “A Coke, with ice. Lots of ice.” He turned back to Steed and a revolver had grown out of his hand.

“Very neat.” Steed nodded approvingly, as Freddy goggled. “I wonder if you could pull your trigger before I pull mine . . . “

Blenkiron’s eyes dropped to Steed’s hand, half-concealed under the edge of the bar; instantly, Steed’s finger shot out to block the revolver’s muzzle; he leaned against it as he brought his empty hand up, picked up the brandy glass, and took a swallow, his eyes on the other’s.

“Fire and your gun explodes,” he said pleasantly. “Your move.”

“Just who are you, mister?” the bulgy-headed man asked in a tone of mild curiosity.

“Forgive me, Mr. Blenkiron. I’m Steed. Would you mind telling me what brings you and your credit cards here to London—specifically, to the observation deck of the New Empire?”

Blenkiron pushed out wide monkey lips. His pale reddish hair looked damp across his domed forehead.

“Hmmm,” he said thoughtfully. “You know, Mr. Steed, I’ve got an idea”—his free hand went carefully to his pocket as he spoke—“it might have been the same thing that brought you.” He produced a folded slip of damp-looking blue paper, laid it on the edge of the bar.

“Open it,” Steed suggested. Blenkiron complied. Steed lifted it with his free hand, brought it around before his eyes:

THE AFRIT STRIKES WHEN AND WHERE HE WILL. TRY

AND STOP HIM!

Steed nodded. "Where'd you get it?"

Blenkiron frowned darkly. "It squeezed out of my toothpaste tube this morning when I went to brush my teeth."

"Mine was rolled up inside a kipper," Steed said, and removed his finger from the gun, which Blenkiron pocketed. "I take it you're with CIA?"

"Nope. My agency is so secret it doesn't have an initial. Let's just say I'm a tourist with an interest in keeping the U.S. delegation alive."

"Always a pleasure to meet a colleague," Steed said. "But you haven't quite answered my question, you know."

Blenkiron nodded. "Everybody in the building has been OK'ed by two sets of security boys. The ground floor's roped off so a rumor couldn't get through. That leaves just one way for a hit man to get in."

"Mmmm. The fact that it's over a thousand feet above ground level seems to present some difficulty."

"Still—here you are, Mr. Steed."

"An excellent point. Shall we have a look outside?"

The two men rose and crossed to the exit panel which obligingly slid back to admit a stiff blast of damp March wind. They stepped out on the open-air terrace circling the glass-walled lounge. On a platform above, two helicopters were tied down.

"The way I see it," Blenkiron said in a confidential tone, "the only possible caper is a human fly act—right up the wall."

"You take the left," Steed suggested. "I'll do the right."

"Check." Blenkiron prowled off, staring around suspiciously at the unadorned expanse of bare deck as he went. Steed strolled to the edge and leaned on the chrome-plated rail, scanning the sheer, blank surface dropping away below, uninterrupted by windows or any other opening. If any mischief were planned, it would have to be from some other direction than that. Which left . . . He looked up at the low bank of cloud hanging mere yards, it seemed, above the helipad.

"They won't come from that direction," Blenkiron said, completing his round. "The air taxi service has been called off for the duration of the conference."

"Hmmm," Steed said thoughtfully. "Suppose someone chose to ignore the injunction?"

"Radar would spot them lickety-split," Blenkiron said positively. "And besides, we'd hear the chopper coming."

"You're probably right," Steed murmured. "Still . . ." He climbed the companionway to the helicopter deck, looked the parked machines over, while Blenkiron watched skeptically, unwrapping a stick of Spearmint.

"Steed, you're spinning your wheels," he stated, tossing the gum wrapper aside to be whirled away by the wind. "While you're up here gumshoeing around, some clown may be down there spiking the punch with arsenic."

Steed was looking past the American with an intent expression. "Curious," he said. Blenkiron followed his gaze. The gum wrapper, folded double, hung fixed in the air twenty feet overhead, fluttering like a tiny pennant in the gale.

"Hey!" Blenkiron said.

"Quite," Steed agreed.

"It can't——" Blenkiron started.

"Certainly not," Steed concurred.

"Then—that means——"

"Exactly." As one, Steed and Blenkiron started forward, waving their arms as if warding off insects, dissipating vapors, or performing incantations. Steed was the one who found it: a single wire-thin translucent strand, almost invisible, attached to a mooring ring at the edge of the pad, running up and away toward the sky, lost from sight within feet.

"Looks like one of the new monofilament lines," Blenkiron said, running a finger along it. "Under a whale of a stress, too. Wonder what's holding it up?"

"About .5 millimeter gauge," Steed said. "Tensile strength, about a quarter of a ton."

"Maybe we could reel it in."

"Not without special equipment."

Suddenly Blenkiron grabbed Steed's arm in a grip like a vise. "Hey, Steed!" he hissed. "It's moving! Vibrating!"

"Quite," Steed agreed. "I say, you wouldn't like to let go my arm, would you?"

"Sorry," Blenkiron said. "I worked my way through Utah State helping out in the sheet-metal shop. Nothing like a set of tin snips to build up a man's grip."

"Think nothing of it. I daresay the circulation will resume any minute now."

"Get ready," Blenkiron said. "Something's coming into sight through the cloud layer! Come on, let's get out of sight!"

“A man, I suppose,” Steed said carelessly, as they stepped into the shadow of a copter.

“Yep—and look at him come! Boy, that guy can climb like an orangutan.”

Steed studied the tiny figure descending from the clouds. “I daresay he’s using a fine trolley. Little device which grips the line between rollers and runs along it.”

“Uh-huh. Get set, Steed. At this rate he’ll be here in two shakes.”

There was a faint whirring sound as the newcomer approached, swooping down the line. His feet thudded against the roof less than ten feet from where Steed and Blenkiron crouched. He was dressed in tight black; a leather cap like an old-time aviator’s was strapped under his chin. He turned quickly as the reception committee stepped out; a pair of large brown eyes stared into Steed’s.

“Hold it right there, Jack!” Blenkiron barked, and advanced, whipping a jingling set of handcuffs from under his coattail. With a deft movement he snapped one bracelet about the newcomer’s wrist. At once, the man belted him on the side of the head and leaped for the line. Steed lunged, hooked a finger in the knapsack on the intruder’s back; it fell free as the man shrugged out of his harness, sprang for the fine trolley, and shot swiftly upward.

“Hey!” Blenkiron yelled, staggering to his feet. “Those cuffs are U.S. property!” He whipped out his revolver and fired an ineffective round after the leather-capped figure, which dwindled away and disappeared back into the fog.

“Bit of bad luck for him, our being here just at this moment,” Steed said. “Let’s see what we’ve netted.” He began unbuckling the knapsack.

“We’ve got to get a winch up here,” Blenkiron barked. “We’ll haul that fellow back down and have a little talk with him.”

“No use, I’m afraid,” Steed said. “I suspect the line will go slack any moment now . . .” As he spoke, the line sagged; coil after coil of the hair-fine stuff came hissing softly down, heaping itself on the roof. Steed looked at his watch, continued opening the captured cargo pack. He pulled out a small packet.

“Sneezing powder,” he read.

“Disappearing ink,” Blenkiron announced, scanning the label on a bottle.

“Itching powder,” Steed called out.

“Rubber hot dogs,” Blenkiron spelled out. “Say, Steed, did you ever

_____”
“Never,” Steed said. “Plastic ink blots.”

“Dribble glass.”

“The May ‘42 issue of *Batman Comics*.”

The bag yielded another dozen items comparable to the first, nothing more.

“That’s all?” Blenkiron said, sounding disgusted. “No bombs, no guns, not even a knife? Not even any poison?”

“So it appears.”

“Hey, Steed, what goes on here?”

“I’m beginning to wonder.”

Chapter Four

As Steed and Blenkiron left the elevator at the twentieth floor, they heard a sound like the roar of surf in the distance. Something soft and white and oddly shaped came drifting along the corridor toward them, lightly as a feather. Steed plucked it out of the air.

“Say,” Blenkiron commented, “that’s a letter Q. What do you figure it means?”

Another airy letter came floating along, and others behind it, tumbling along like soap bubbles, large, medium and small, thicker and thicker until the air was filled with them.

“Where are they coming from?” Blenkiron demanded, batting at the clustering alphabets.

“I don’t know,” Steed said. “They seem to be coming from this direction . . .” They ploughed through, turned a corner, encountered an excited delegate scrambling toward them, flailing wildly with both arms.

“I’m goink home!” he bleated. “Is nozzing but words, words, words! And now letters, letters, letters!” More excited figures appeared through the obscuring cloud of characters. Steed and his companion reached the open doors of the conference hall and looked in at a scene of wild confusion. Letters, some six feet high, were heaped and piled almost to the ceiling. More letters were pouring from the door, bounding this way and that as yelling delegates attempted to fight their way through the press. The floor was covered with letters, trampled flat. A small M drifted up to Steed. He examined it. It appeared to be composed of a fine, rubbery foam, gas-filled. It collapsed under his fingers to a tiny shred of plastic.

“Steed, is this somebody’s idea of a joke?” Blenkiron demanded, fending off a three-foot W.

“Quite possibly,” Steed said. He made his way to the ventilator grill, watched as a half-inch S popped through, swelled to the six-inch size, and was swirled away to join its fellows. A tiny X followed, a pair of E’s, and a lone J, barely an inch tall.

“Steed,” a voice called. “Over here!”

He pushed through to the side of a harassed-looking Foreign Office man.

“Good job you’re here,” the functionary said, mopping at his forehead with a monogrammed hanky. “We’ll need every man. One of our chaps has just turned up an infernal machine in the VIP loo.”

Chapter Five

A dense crowd surrounded the deep-carpeted entrance to the luxurious comfort station allocated to delegates above the rank of Counselor of Embassy, GS-15, and buck general.

“Better clear this lot out of here,” someone was growling. “Before the blasted thing goes off and plasters the ceiling with the white hopes of international cooperation.”

A lean, sour-faced man gave Steed a hostile look as he came up, while half a dozen ruddy-faced bobbies set to work with cries of “ ‘Ere, now, move along there,” and “You, too, sir, ‘op it!”

“What seems to be the difficulty, Fletcher?” Steed inquired affably.

“Have a look for yourself,” the M.I.5 man grunted.

“After you,” Steed suggested. Fletcher growled, but led the way along a short, mysteriously lit passage, turned two abrupt corners, pushed through a vaultlike door into a vast tiled and chrome-bedecked chamber.

“Number one stall.” Fletcher threw open the door and indicated a massive porcelain installation. “In the tank.”

A loud ticking was clearly audible. Steed removed the tank lid gingerly, looked within. He smiled faintly, lifted out a scrolled and fretted box of dark wood, bearing on one side a dial, complete with Gothic numerals.

“Looks like a blasted cuckoo clock!” Fletcher barked.

There was a sharp *click!* and Fletcher started violently. A small door opened above the dial, and a carved bird bobbed out on the end of a

spring-loaded arm, and proceeded to announce the time with a series of shrill cries.

“Ten minutes slow,” Steed commented. He handed the dripping mechanism to Fletcher and removed the bit of paper impaled on the carved beak.

YOUR FACE WILL BE FLUSHED, the message said simply, WHEN TIME RUNS OUT.

Five minutes later in the temporary M.I.5 command post Fletcher had set up in a three-room suite for the duration of the conference, Blenkiron came up to Steed, mopping at his Shakespearean forehead with an eighteen-inch-square red bandanna.

“I checked out the letters,” he said. “The frequency count matches Mickey Spillane, except for not enough I’s.”

“Ha!” Fletcher said, and he jotted a note on a pad.

The telephone rang. A pretty female clerk answered, covered the mouthpiece. “For you, Major.”

“Major Steed,” a thick voice purred, “my congratulations to you for your alertness. A pity your prey slipped away after all.”

“Fletcher,” Steed said softly, glancing at his watch, his hand over the receiver. “Get on another line and trace this. Also, I want the wind velocity and direction.”

“No need to squander your energies and those of your estimable police in feckless tactics,” the oily voice continued. “They will find nothing of interest, I assure you.”

“Look here,” Steed stalled, “are you this Afrit chap who’s been uttering various threats against the conferees?”

“My dear Steed, a threat implies an element of uncertainty. Here, there is none. What I say, I will do.” There was a click and the hollow hum of a dead line.

“Who has access to the telephone switchboard, Fletcher?” Steed inquired.

“Nobody, not even the regular hotel operator. We’ve laid on special staff, all diplomatic personnel from the attending nations.”

“Who mops up the VIP facilities?”

“Same thing—the different missions take it in rotation.”

“Who had it last night?”

“The Laotians.”

“And who’s at the switchboard?”

“The Ugandans. Forget it, Steed, there’s no lead there. Rest assured

I've checked the obvious."

"We can always depend on that from you, can't we, Fletcher?" Steed said urbanely. A clerk arrived with the figures Steed had requested. He went to the wall map of the city and, with calipers and a rule, made a small circle some fifteen miles west of the hotel.

"Better send a few men to comb the West Ruislip area," he said. "That's where the last call seems to have originated, judging by the time between calls and the easterly wind."

"What's that?" Fletcher barked.

"Assuming they employed a balloon, of course. Radar-negative and soundless."

Fletcher grunted and began barking orders into the telephone.

A policeman rapped and came in, clearing his throat.

"The sergeant thought you gentlemen might like to know," he said, "our lot's turned up something in the gents' bar."

"Well, what is it, Constable?" Fletcher said irritably.

"I can't say for sure, sir," the man said, frowning. "But it appears—appears, mind you, sir—to be the footprints of a man."

"Well, what's remarkable in that?"

"The prints of a barefooted man, that is to say, sir."

"Get on with it, Constable! What makes even a barefooted man's footprints sufficiently noteworthy to warrant bursting in on me in this fashion?"

"Well—as to that, sir—Sergeant said he thought you'd want to know"—the constable retreated at Fletcher's look—"seeing as they was each one over twenty-one inches in length, sir, and marked out in a type of mud found only in the lower Amazon basin!"

Chapter Six

"Well, I suppose you already have a theory, Steed," Fletcher said ill-temperedly, staring down at the vast mud-brown print, one of a series spaced at six-foot intervals across the waxed dark-oak parquetry. The mud was powdery dry. There were a few breaks in the pattern where other feet had scuffed out the monster tracks. The portable lights brought in by Fletcher showed all this starkly.

"No telling how long they've been here, of course," a police detective-sergeant said reflectively. "The bar's been closed for over two weeks, I

understand—spot of bother with the drains—and of course in the usual dim lighting, they might have passed unnoticed for a time.”

“Skip over the obvious,” Fletcher snapped. “The question is, what the devil sort of creature could have made prints such as these?”

“To return to the obvious,” Steed said with a lift of the eyebrow, “a man.”

“You expect me to believe in a twelve-foot, thousand-pound, bare-footed man?” Fletcher exploded.

“Not at all, my dear fellow,” Steed soothed. “Just the usual sort of man, wearing a set of costume party feet—or perhaps merely wielding a paintbrush dipped in imported mud.”

“Hrmmphf,” Fletcher muttered. He followed the trail across to a discreet side door. “Here—what’s this?” He stooped, came up with a lopsided gold coin which he passed to Steed, who glanced at it.

“I should say it’s an octadrachm, of Egypt, third century. b.c., of course.”

“Third century b.c.?” Fletcher snarled.

“Don’t let it upset you, Fletcher,” Steed said offhandedly. “You can trot off to M.I.5 with it and let the lab chaps have a field day. Do them good, I daresay.”

“Indeed? And what do you expect them to discover?”

“That the coin fits in very nicely with the footprints.” Steed sounded surprised: “Surely you see that?”

“What are you getting at, Steed?”

“That’s easy,” Blenkiron stated. “The footprints are a red herring. So is the coin.”

“Bah!” Fletcher barked, staring about him angrily. “Some jokester’s idea of humor, is it? I’ll humor him when I catch him—and catch him I will—in spite of his bogus clues!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Steed demurred.

“Hah! You don’t think M.I.5 can deal with this? Well let me tell you, Steed——”

“That’s not quite what I was getting at,” Steed interjected.

“What then?”

“What he means is these clues are clues, even if they’re phoney,” Blenkiron amplified.

“After all, those India-rubber feet came from somewhere, eh, Fletcher? And the coin as well.” Steed flipped the latter into his pocket. “Mr. Blenkiron and I will just nip around to a few specialty shops and see

what we can turn up.”

“Rubber feet,” Fletcher was muttering as they left the room. “Egyptian money. Human flies. Cuckoo clocks”

They made their way through a lounge crowded with angrily disputing advocates of world unity. Outside, a cordon of sharp-eyed police waved them through to the car park. Blenkiron eyed the massive Bentley dubiously as Steed strode purposefully toward it.

“Say, Steed, why don’t we take my car? It’s a Volkswagen, one hundred percent American.”

“Wouldn’t think of putting you out, Blenkiron,” Steed said airily. “Just mind the finish as you get in, eh? The buckles on that Aquascutum can leave a nasty scratch.”

“Crimementalies, Steed, they’ll see us coming a mile away in this heap.”

“Let them know we’re not dozing on the job,” Steed reassured his companion over the groaning of the starter. The massive six-cylinder caught with a muted blatt, settled down to a steady murmur. They swept out the exit and into the Embankment traffic like men enthroned.

The proprietor of the third shop they entered nodded proudly at Steed’s inquiry, a pleasant change from the indignant looks netted in the previous two establishments they had tried.

“Finest India-rubber feet in the city,” the man stated, turning to lift a large and colorfully decorated carton down from the shelf behind him. “You’ll be wanting the plain, I expect.” He whipped off the lid to reveal a pair of immense bare feet, knobby-ankled, hammer-toed, a lifelike pinkish tan, looking remarkably like living members rudely amputated.

“They come in brown as well, for our colored Commonwealth friends,” he pointed out. “And it’s my understanding the maker’s laying on a line of saffron-tinted feet to capture the Asiatic trade.”

“Most enterprising, I’m sure,” Steed murmured, lifting the feet to look at the sole. *Made in Hong Kong*. “I wonder if you have anything larger; say in a twenty-two-inch model?”

“These are just your size, Guv,” the entrepreneur expostulated. “If you’d care to slip into one——”

“They’re not for me, actually,” Steed pointed out. “As a matter of fact, I was wondering if you’d sold a pair recently.”

“Twenty-two-inch size?” The man frowned resentfully. “Can’t say I remember.”

“Look, buddy,” Blenkiron started——

“Ah—you’d earn the gratitude of Her Majesty’s Government if you could manage to recall the matter,” Steed put in smoothly.

“You a copper?”

“Not exactly,” Steed said, and smiled a meaningful smile.

“Wednesday last,” the shopkeeper said sullenly. “The only pair of twenty-two-inch I had in stock.”

“Rather an unusual size, wouldn’t you say?” Steed inquired casually.

“Special order.”

“Oh?”

“Not for the party that bought them,” the man conceded grudgingly. “Uncollected.”

“Who placed the order?”

“King Farouk, just before he went out of business. Never paid up, either.”

“What did he look like—the chap who bought them?”

“Well, as to that—an ordinary-looking bloke, I’d say. Darkish eyes—or possibly blue. Medium height. Wore a hat. Didn’t say much. Might have had a foreign accent. Dark overcoat—I think.”

“Nothing else? No distinguishing marks? Facial hair, mannerisms?”

“Well—now that I recall, he did walk with a bit of a limp in the right leg.”

“Umm. That’s helpful. Anything else?”

“Oh yes. And a gold ring in his right ear—or was it his left ear?”

“Hey, Clyde,” Blenkinsop said sternly, “are you kidding?”

“Am I responsible for who buys rubber feet?” the man came back sharply. “I’m telling you what I saw. Make what you like of it!”

“Tell me—did he seem to expect you to have them on hand—the twenty-two-inch feet?”

The shopkeeper rubbed his chin and looked thoughtful.

“Now that you mention it,” he said, “I reckon he did, at that. I wonder how . . . ?”

After a few more questions, Steed tipped his bowler.

“You’ve been very helpful,” he said. “Mind if we take a look in the back?”

“Go ahead,” the man said, waving a hand at the curtained door at the rear. “If you turn up a case of shrunken heads—genuine human hair—let me know. Misplaced ‘em a year ago and I’ve got a rush call from the Ghanaian Legation for a dozen, assorted.”

“Never mind,” Steed said. “Good day.”

Back on the street, Blenkiron wagged his oddly shaped head dubiously.

“I don’t know, Steed,” he muttered. “This isn’t the way we do it back in the States. I’d have that guy in the back room under the lights right now, singing like a canary.”

“No need for all that,” Steed said as they pulled away from the curb. “What we’re after is the pattern. These bits and pieces—feet, clocks, and so on—are designed to divert us from something. Of course, the plotters merely reveal themselves with each additional attempt at misdirection.”

“How do you figure that?”

“The original intended recipient of the feet was King Farouk, the former ruler of Egypt—from whence the coin also comes.”

“So?”

“The purchaser knew of the existence of the feet. I don’t think he expected us to learn of their origin. As for the coin—I think that was another blunder.”

“Then why did he plant it?”

“He didn’t. It fell from his pocket when he bent over to remove the feet. If he’d meant us to find it, he wouldn’t have hidden it in a dark corner. If Fletcher hadn’t brought the floodlights in, it would have been passed unnoticed.”

“Steed—you’re guessing.”

“Of course.”

“Well—where to now?”

“A friend of mine with an interest in old gold.”

Chapter Seven

“I’ll tell you the absolute truth, Major,” the small man with the bald head said sadly, removing the magnifying glass from his eye. “Such a coin you could buy in a hundred places, right here in the city.”

“Tell me about this one, Dave.”

“Well, what could I say? It’s circulated—but not lately. From the condition, I’d say it’s been in somebody’s pocket, in contact with other coins. Maybe a lucky piece. I could give you two guineas, not a penny more.”

“Actually, it’s not for sale,” Steed said. “Tell me, who do you suppose would consider this piece an auspicious talisman?”

The small man spread his hands expressively. “Anybody could maybe

think a coin so old, it should be lucky. Who knows? Three guineas, Major, and only because you're a regular customer."

"Oh, I suppose I'll just hang on to it, Dave. Was Farouk much of a collector, do you know?"

"From comic books, yes, coins no."

"Did you say comic books?" Blenkiron looked at Steed meaningfully.

"Four guineas," Dave looked at the ceiling. "That my old father should hear me make such an offer."

"Dave," Steed said gently, "what did he look like?"

"What look? Who?" Dave looked around the room as if expecting an answer from unseen bystanders.

"The man who wanted to buy an octadrachma of this minting—stamped with the flawed die."

Dave sighed. "Next, the names of my wholesalers he'll want," he said to a point in the air over Steed's left ear. Steed tossed up the coin, caught it. "It's worth three pounds ten, top figure, Dave," he said with a smile. "As you well know. Ergo . . . you have a buyer waiting."

"A lame man," the dealer said resignedly. "His name he didn't mention."

"With a gold ring in his ear," Blenkiron put in.

"Who could know?" Dave raised his shoulders. "His hair came down to here." He indicated the point of his jaw. "Such a head of hair, he should be a *musiker*."

Steed looked thoughtful. "A wig, perhaps, Dave?"

Dave looked surprised. "It could be—but why such a wig?"

"Would a hat have covered up this hair?" Blenkiron asked.

"With a bushel basket you couldn't cover up this hair!"

"Know any wig-makers, Dave? Discreet wig-makers—with a knowledge of this and that?"

Dave wagged his head from side to side and said, "Ummmm." He rose and went into a back room.

"Look here, Steed," Blenkiron said worriedly, "we're running out of time." He took a quick look at his wrist-watch. "It's after three p.m. We're wasting time on a bunch of fake leads! Our pal the Afrit is probably up to something back in the hotel right now!"

"Quite right," Steed said affably. "Why don't you toddle back and see if you can't give Fletcher a leg up?"

"And where'll you be?"

"Checking on the hair-goods manufacturers."

“Steed, this is a wild-goose chase!”

“Possibly. But a fake lead seems preferable to no lead at all.”

Dave returned, handed Steed a slip of paper. “Don’t mention my name.”

“Good of you, Dave. Sorry about the coin.”

Dave held up a hand as Steed reached for his wallet. “Please—I’m a merchant, not a sponger.”

“Of course.”

“The only trouble with you, Major,” the dealer said sorrowfully as the bell over the door twinkled, “you were born in the wrong religion.”

Five minutes later, Steed eased the Bentley to a halt before a faded sign celebrating the products of the Ching Poo Wiggery. As they stepped up on the curb, Steed looked up, caught Blenkiron’s arm, hauled him aside. With a shattering *clang!* something massive buried itself in the pavement a foot away.

“That’s an anvil!” Blenkiron blurted. Spitting powdered concrete, he yanked out his revolver and craned his neck upward. Steed was already headed for the narrow opening beyond which a flight of stairs was visible. He leaped up four steps at a time, reached a landing, faced a door on the right. He stepped back and delivered a sharp kick to the knob; the door banged open. Startled diners looked up from lamp-lit tables as Steed stepped through into an odor of fried rice and soy sauce. A small Oriental gentleman with narrow pink-tinted glasses ducked his head and eyed the ruined door over his lenses.

“Why you break a door down?” he inquired. “Prenty taber reft.”

“Did anyone here, er, pitch an anvil out the window?” Steed asked with a placating smile.

“Nobody here have anvir.” The host shook his head in emphatic negation, offering a menu. “You want have sweet and sour?”

Steed strode to the window, noted the massive sash, cemented solidly to its frame by a coating of lumpy jade-green paint.

“What’s upstairs?” he asked the restaurateur who had trailed him, craning for a look.

“Apartment. Prenty ferrow rive upstairs, come and go arr time, pound big feet on stair, no good for chop suey pidgin, you bet. How about a nice egg rorr?”

Steed pressed a ten-bob note into the narrow hand, resumed his ascent. This time he tried the knob. The door opened on a darkened room. Heavy, overly ornate furniture was visible only by the light filtering

in around the thick drapes covering the window. Steed crossed silently to them, pulled them aside. The window stood open. There were deep scratches on the sill. He looked out, saw the anvil lying directly below, surrounded now by a curious crowd, including a uniformed policeman who spotted him and instantly pointed a finger.

“You, there! Come down! I’ll have to ask you a few questions——”

Steed withdrew his head, ducked out on the landing, took the next flight at top speed. It ended at a metal-clad door, locked. Steed tucked his umbrella under his arm and whipped out a flat leather case, extracted a slim lock pick. As feet pounded below, he tickled the mechanism, felt a rewarding *snick!* The door swung back, and Steed emerged onto a flat roof—and was facing two men. He had time only to note that they were swarthy, bearded, and wore badly cut suits, before the length of pipe one of them had been holding poised overhead swung down in a vicious arc toward his head. But even as the glancing blow fell, Steed had thrown himself sideways, bringing his umbrella out and around. The knobbed handle caught one of the men solidly on the side of the head, knocking him flat. The other, the pipe wielder, whirled, dived behind a parapet and was gone.

Keeping an eye on the groaning man, Steed recovered his bowler, hooked his umbrella over his arm.

“Now, then,” he said smoothly, “what’s this all about?”

The man sat up. “Too late, Steed saw that he was holding something in his fingers. Before Steed could strike his hand aside, the man had swallowed it. He grimaced, gave Steed a despairing look, and fell over sideways.

Frowning, Steed went to the edge of the roof, risked another look. The crowd was dispersing. Blenkinson was nowhere to be seen. Steed unlocked the stairhead door, against which fists were pounding now. A large, red-faced police constable burst through, saw the fallen man, went to him.

“Not dead, I think,” Steed said behind him. The policeman uttered a sharp cry and whirled, startled.

“Why . . . it’s Major Steed,” he said. “You fair give me a turn, sir.”

The supine man groaned and opened his eyes. He looked around vacantly.

“Right,” the constable said, whipping out a pad and a ballpoint pen which he licked. “Anything you say will be used against you. Now then: your name, sir?”

“You must danifars on my tanscript,” the man said blurrily. “I replone to the blunt of your cronolop.”

“How’s that?”

“Morploon,” the man said. “Udderbopperly.”

“Foreigner,” the constable announced, making a note. Steed left the matter in the man’s hands, descended to the street. He looked around for Blenkiron, but the American had vanished. As Steed slid into the seat of the Bentley, he felt something in his side pocket. Taking it out, he saw that it was a small pastry—a Chinese fortune cookie, to be precise. He opened it and extracted a small roll of rice paper.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER, the message read.

“Yes,” Steed murmured. “I daresay.” He drove directly to the New Empire, parked and went in.

“Has Mr. Blenkiron returned?” he asked the chief of the security detail.

“Haven’t seen him.”

Steed nodded thoughtfully. He crossed the lobby, filled with delegates engaged in the usual heated dispute, stepped into a telephone booth and dialed a number.

“Mrs. Peel,” he said, “sorry to break in on your holiday, but it might be a good idea if you’d drop round to the New Empire after all. I’m not absolutely sure, mind you, but I *think* we’re needed.”

Chapter Eight

Heads turned as Emma Peel entered the wide lounge, striking in a white patent-leather mini-suit with chrome-plated lapels which set off her shoulder-length auburn hair to brilliant advantage. Steed met her with a glass in each hand, led her aside into a sheltered alcove.

“Why didn’t you say it was a bottle of champagne you needed help with?” she inquired, accepting one of the glasses. “I’d have come sooner.”

“Actually, it’s a little more than that,” Steed said, nodding in salute as he lifted his glass. “There’s the matter of a set of oversized footprints, a gold coin—late Egyptian—Blenkiron’s disappearance and then, of course, the fortune cookie.”

“Really? It was naughty of you to begin before me, Steed. I’ll never catch up with that head start, even if I gulp the stuff like water.”

“I’m omitting any mention of the alphabet or the falling anvil,” Steed

said with dignity. “Or the note which Mr. Blenkiron extracted from his Ipana.”

“And it’s not even sundown,” Emma reproached.

Steed related the events of the last few hours.

“Not that any of this is of any direct significance—except possibly the coin,” he concluded. “I mention it only to show you the scope of the opposition’s ingenuity.”

“In what are we being opposed?” Emma glanced around the room at the small knots of arm-waving delegates, their kindly faces contorted in rage. “My, isn’t it wonderful to observe international cooperation at work at close range, so to speak?”

“The Afrit has threatened to do as he likes,” Steed explained. “It won’t look at all well if he continues to succeed.”

“Then we mustn’t let him, must we?” Emma smiled enchantingly. “By the way, how did he insinuate all these playful items into the hotel?”

Steed surveyed the room, crowded with gesticulating, disputatious, angry-faced men in the costumes of half a hundred nations. “Good question,” he observed. “It could be via the Egyptians; after all, it was King Farouk’s rubber feet that were employed in tracking up the bar. On the other hand, the cuckoo clock was of Japanese manufacture. The bomb was made in Taiwan. The adulterated kipper came from Ghana, and the monofilament line proved, on analysis, to be of a type turned out in vast quantities in Nepal.”

Emma’s eyes were resting thoughtfully on a hulking, tight-suited man with a blunt-featured face who stood on the sidelines with a glass in his hand, silently attended by a pair of smaller versions of the same basic pattern.

“You seem to have mentioned everyone except the Russians,” she pointed out. “I wonder if that’s significant?”

“Probably not,” Steed said, following her glance. “However, Comrade Bolshevik *does* seem more than usually thoughtful this evening.”

“Possibly he’s envisioning the next big breakthrough in brainwash techniques,” Emma conjectured.

“It might be as well to learn more about our Russian guests,” Steed murmured.

“The Russian Embassy maintains a permanent suite on the sixty-fifth floor,” Emma pointed out.

“You realize, of course, this doesn’t seem to have much connection with falling anvils or fortune cookies,” Steed said.

“Or even with Beatle wigs and stuffed kippers,” Emma agreed. “Still, I’ve always wanted to have a look at the place.”

Steed put his glass on a convenient mantel and held the door for her.

“Thank you, Mr. Steed,” she murmured, passing through.

“Don’t mention it, Mrs. Peel,” he replied, closing it behind them.

Chapter Nine

“Have you ever seen such perfectly abominable lampshades?” Emma demanded, eyeing the gold-fringed purple and brown parchment and wire construction shedding a liver-colored light on dark wallpaper, tasseled tapestries, rugs, bronze pots, and the vast, reptilian bulks of overstuffed chairs done in red, blue, and green velours.

Steed *tsked*, looking sadly at the contents of the bar, which was covered with Mongolian carving and ivory inlay work.

“Vodka, slivovitz, and Pepsi-Cola,” he said. “Ghastly.”

“What’s this?” Emma poked a shapely finger into the burgundy-colored ottoman decorated with black and yellow curlicues which had emitted a metallic rattle when she sat on it. She upended the heavy piece, reached under and brought out a palmful of small springs and gears of assorted sizes.

“Looks like part of an alarm clock,” Steed said. “I turned *this* up behind the Angostura bottle.” He showed a large false nose, with spectacles attached. An additional five minutes’ search produced a map of Disneyland, heavily annotated with black X marks, and a water pistol, fully loaded.

“Not much to go on,” Steed commented, sending a stream of water across the room to irrigate a drooping rubber plant.

Emma Peel opened a wall cabinet. From its dark interior, a pair of glassy eyes stared directly into hers. Then the dead man fell stiffly forward, slammed the rug like a log. Against the pale skin of the bald head, a raw wound showed black where the left ear had been severed.

“Well, what a relief,” Emma said. “I’d begun to fear we were wasting our time.”

Steed knelt by the body. “Medium size, medium coloring. Can’t say about the foreign accent. The missing ear *might* have had a ring in it. As for the limp . . .” He pulled up the right trouser leg. There was a puckered scar just above the kneecap.

“You knew him?” Emma wanted to know.

“This would *seem* to be the fellow who muddied up the floor of the gents’ bar.” Steed studied the scar closely. There was a larger scar on the side of the same leg.

“An old flesh wound,” he muttered. “No bone damage.”

Steed had removed the man’s watch and was examining the underside of the corpse’s wrist. He showed Emma the almost invisible pattern of bluish dots tattooed there.

“Seems he was a reasonably high-ranking member of Russian military intelligence,” he said frowning. “It’s not like them to liquidate a chap and stuff him in among the bric-a-brac . . . “

There was a sudden rattle of a key in the door. Steed flattened himself against the wall on the hinge side, while Emma took the other. The door swung in. A large man with bluish jowls halted on the threshold, staring at the body lying before him. Emma took a quick step and rammed stiff fingers into the Russian’s ribs. He *oofed* and lunged for her, tripped over her foot, and struck the floor unconscious, rendered so by a deft chop to the back of the neck as he fell past her. Steed emerged and nodded approvingly.

“Did he see you, do you suppose?” he inquired. “Or can we let him live?”

“Let’s give him the benefit of the doubt.”

The telephone rang. It was a brass and ivory affair with a tall stand and a bell-shaped mouthpiece. Its ring had an ominous tone.

Steed stepped to it and picked it up. “*Da?*” he grunted. His eyebrow went up as he listened to the excited voice at the other end.

“Well?” Emma said as he hung up.

“My command of Russian’s not all that good,” he said. “But I believe he said they’ve turned up a bomb in the basement.”

Chapter Ten

“That’s right, another one,” Fletcher said disgustedly, five minutes later. “How did you find out?”

“Can’t reveal my sources, old man,” Steed countered. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“My men just turned it up, while searching for the source of the alphabet soup.” Fletcher eyed Steed suspiciously. “See here, if this is one

of your infinitely complex moves, designed to pinch the credit——”

“There’ll be little enough credit for any of us if the thing goes pop,” Steed pointed out. “But I assure you M.I.5 shall have whatever glory accrues.”

“Very well, I suppose I’d better give the alarm and start evacuating the premises.”

“Don’t be a silly ass,” Emma said, smiling charmingly. “That’s just what they’d like—bomb or no bomb. What becomes of all your vaunted security arrangements if all these distinguished gentlemen go pouring out into the streets in a panic?”

“Well——”

“Let’s keep it to ourselves for the time being,” Steed said. “Much better if we quietly turn it up and dispose of it, and no one the wiser.”

“Well, let’s get on with it.” Fletcher motioned to a pair of uniformed constables who were anxiously watching an altercation between two gray-haired diplomatic types, one old-school tie, the other Ivy League. They took the service elevator down, stepped out into echoing gloom with the characteristic damp odor of underground chambers of all ages. Fletcher dispatched the two men to scout the premises, and prowled off toward the sound of heavy machinery, probably the air-conditioning compressors. Passing a heavy door, Steed paused to open it, looked around approvingly at ranked shelves of cobwebby bottles.

“Have you your corkscrew with you, Mrs. Peel?”

“Sorry. I left it in my other reticule.”

“Pity.”

There was a shout from the distance. Steed grabbed up a bottle and followed Emma Peel at a run. Fletcher was struggling with a man in the doorway to the equipment room. A second man was sprinting off down the passage. Fletcher’s antagonist floored him with a punch, whirled and raced toward the far end of the corridor. A burly policeman stepped out with arms spread. The man lowered his head and took the constable amidships, leaped over him as he fell, and dashed on. The second policeman dashed from a side passage and launched himself in a flying tackle, missed, crashed headfirst into the concrete wall. Steed put on a sprint, closed the gap, reached out with his umbrella and hooked the man’s collar. An instant later he found himself staring at the empty coat as the man cut down a branching passage in his shirt sleeves.

Then Emma Peel was sliding out behind the fugitive, bringing a swift hand up, and down——

The man had turned, quick as a cat, had seized her outstretched arm—and was doing a neat back-flip, propelled by his own powerful legs, in response to the irresistible pressure applied by Emma’s grip on his wrist. He hit flat on his back—and bounced to his feet. To one foot, more accurately. The other was flicking out in a deadly kick at Emma Peel’s chin. She leaned back, accepted the leg, lifted it, at the same time sweeping his other leg aside with a swing of her foot. The man landed on the back of his skull with a sound like a gourd striking a washtub.

“Slowing up, Mrs. Peel?” Steed asked with a raise of the eyebrow as he prodded the man with his umbrella. “For a moment I was almost prompted to interfere.”

Fletcher appeared at the end of the passage, staggering. “Back here!” he cried in a cracked voice. “Hurry up!” He disappeared through a door.

Steed and Emma arrived in a rush, to find Fletcher staring into an open access panel set in the immense plenum above the condenser unit. The man he had left to guard the find lay on the floor unconscious.

“It’s in here!” the M.I.5 man yelled. “It’s set to go off in twenty-seven minutes! I heard them talking!”

Steed had stepped to the corner of the room to fetch a stepladder. A wild-haired man appeared in the door, a large wrench in his hand. As he started forward, Steed stepped up and laid the Bordeaux bottle solidly across the top of his skull.

“I wondered where the other chap had got to,” Steed said regretfully, tossing aside the shattered neck of the bottle. A policeman staggered in, helmetless, saw the fallen man and the spreading puddle of wine.

“Blimey!” he said. “Won’t get much out of that one! ‘E’s ‘ad ‘is blooming brains beat out!”

“See to the chap in the passage, Constable,” Steed said. He parked his umbrella, laid aside his bowler, and put the ladder in place. Inside the dusty opening of the duct, a grim gray mechanism hung suspended by piano wire.

While wind whistled in their faces, Steed and Fletcher detached it, lifted it out.

“Nuclear, I’d say,” Fletcher panted. “One of the new tactical jobs, clear this block off with one bang.”

“Twenty-three minutes to go,” Emma said crisply. “Do either of you gentlemen understand how to defuse it?”

Steed shook his head over the array of external controls.

“No, but possibly this fellow can help us,” Steed said, referring to the

unconscious man. "See if you can bring him round."

Emma lifted the man's eyelid. "He's out for a count or two," she said.

"Right," Steed said, resuming his hat and umbrella. "Fletcher, have your lads take this thing up to the mews entrance. Bring this fellow along. And mum's the word."

Fletcher grumbled assent. Steed and Emma Peel rode the lift up to the ground floor. As they stepped off in the lobby, a dapper man with a pepper-and-salt moustache handed Steed a long brown envelope with printing in place of a stamp.

"Major Steed? Inland Revenue would like a word with you——"

"Some other time," Steed said politely, dropping the letter in a convenient dustbin.

"Here, you can't——" the tax man started, loping alongside.

"Ah, but I must, my dear fellow," Steed contradicted. He gave the revolving doors a spin, waved Emma ahead, stepped quickly through, then paused to ram the tip of his umbrella into the track carrying the lower edge of the spinning door. There was a dull thud, and the tax collector's face spread for an instant across the abruptly halted glass like a child's nose against a window. Then he rebounded in a heap.

"Pesky fellows," Steed said. "Difficult to imagine them as working for the same side." The security guard waved the two past with a cheery smile. As they headed across the parking lot toward Steed's car, a dusty taxi rolled in front of them and halted, blocking the path.

"For once, you can be useful, Benson!" Steed called, giving Mrs. Peel a hand in. "Swing round to the back for a moment, if you please."

"Anything to suit you, Mr. S.," the driver said airily. He clashed gears, pulled the top-heavy vehicle around to the small door where two perspiring policemen waited, supporting a sagging figure between them.

"In you go," one said, heaving the semiconscious man into the seat. The other lifted the gray machine up to the baggage platform beside the driver. They gave finger-to-helmet salutes as the taxi gunned away.

"I don't want to alarm you, Benson," Steed said, "but I suggest you make for open country with all possible speed."

Benson chuckled. "Now, Mr. S., you know better than that, sir. When His Nibs wants rapid action, rapid action is what he wants."

"Blast His Nibs!" Steed suggested. "He'll have to wait this time! The mechanism you're sitting on certainly won't!"

"As to that, I'd like to oblige, Mr. S.," Benson said placatingly. "But you know what His Nibs is like when he's kept waiting."

"It's quite all right, Benson. I'll take full responsibility. Just——"

"Ah, here we are now," Benson said soothingly, rounding a corner on two wheels and braking to a neck-wrenching stop before a forbidding pile of age-blackened limestone. "First floor, third office back. Won't take a minute, Mr. S., to keep an old man happy."

"You'd better go," Emma said sweetly. "You have all of nineteen minutes left."

"You can turn the time to good account, Mrs. Peel, by getting our passenger awake!"

Steed strode across the cracked pavement, bounded up the steps, pushed through a massive oak and glass door. Rubber-carpeted steps led up. He ran up them, went along to the third floor, rapped and went in. An iron-gray man with a command-and-staff look sat behind a desk.

"Ah, there you are, Steed. What kept you? Never mind. How are things at the conference?"

"Curious you should ask, sir," Steed said, holding his urbanity nicely in place. "It happens that——"

"Mustn't try to run too many hares at once, eh?" His Nibs fixed a reproving eye on Steed. "I shouldn't be surprised if some crafty wallah weren't deliberately muddying the waters. Can't have our top men off scurrying all over the landscape, leaving the primary theater of operations in the hands of another agency, eh?"

"Certainly not, sir. But at this moment——"

"By the way, what's become of the American, Blenkiron? Seems his chiefs a bit worried about him. Last seen in your company and all that."

"Yes, the matter would bear looking into. But——"

"Now, what I wish you'd do, Steed," the retired major-general steepled well-groomed though gnarly fingers. "Have a look about right there in the New Empire itself. No telling what you might turn up."

"A capital idea, sir," Steed said, edging toward the door. "Anything else?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Thought you might like to have a look at this." The general passed a small square of folded and oil-spotted pink paper across the desk.

FOOLED YOU AGAIN "Found it in the stuffed olive in my pre-lunch martini. What do you say to that?"

"I prefer an onion myself," Steed said abstractedly. "Really, sir, I hate to rush off, but——"

"Don't linger, Steed," His Nibs said, waving him toward the door. "I

rather thought this would fetch you round. Good luck—and don't let's lose points by letting any more comic valentines slip past us, eh?"

"I wouldn't think of it." Steed dashed back to the waiting taxi. The unconscious man still snored in the corner.

"Benson, suppose you show what a London cab can do under pressure," Steed called as the car started off with a great clacking of valves, barely missing a Mini Van as it pulled out.

At the next corner, Steed saw a movement from the corner of his eye.

"Jump the light, Benson!" he snapped. The driver obligingly gunned past the eager snout of a gray Jaguar crowding the green, followed by the sounds of irate horns. The car Steed had seen was still at their heels, snarling angrily in their wake.

"Take the next corner without braking!" Steed commanded. The tires screeched alarmingly. A red Sprite took to the curb to avoid being sideswiped. Benson, getting into the spirit of the thing, raced along the narrow street, the engine sound racketing between the mud-colored fagades of the row houses. He swung left into Queensway, wove through heavy traffic, barely missing a spry elderly woman chatting with a U.S. airman on the run, took a hard right into Notting Hill Gate, gathering speed.

"He's sticking like a leech," Emma Peel said, glancing out the rear window. "He looks as though he means to ram us."

"Mr. S.," Benson said reproachfully, eyeing Steed in the mirror, "you didn't tell me it was to be *that* sort of trip." He settled down to serious driving, while Emma Peel slapped the comatose passenger's face, left, right, left, right.

"You'd better twiddle some of those knobs, Steed," she said. "I don't think he's going to come around in time. Only nine minutes left."

"I'll save that as a last resort, Mrs. Peel. Keep trying."

Benson put the taxi through a roundabout, making racing changes like an overcoated and muffled Sterling Moss. The Morris Minor cut under the snorting prow of a double-decker bus, gaining ten feet, running abreast of their rear wheels now. They saw the driver hunched over the wheel, grim-faced, white-knuckled.

"They're fanatical enough," Emma said, bouncing the dozing man's head back and forth. "Fancy working so hard to blow yourself up."

In the clear now, the small car was pulling inexorably ahead. Benson maneuvered, trying unsuccessfully to scrape the pursuer off against the side of a Guinness truck, which swerved aside, a lamppost, which the small

car darted past on the wrong side, and a goods van, which turned in a drive in the nick of time. With a glare of triumph, the Minor shot ahead, cut in sharply, and braked. Benson locked wheels, slid, came to a halt resting sideways in the center of Western Avenue, two inches from the midget car blocking the road. The driver of the latter bounded from his seat, charged back shaking a fist, skidded to a stop with the tip of Steed's umbrella prodding his Adam's apple.

"Know anything about disarming bombs?" Steed asked coolly.

"What's this? What's this?" the man, a small, plump, pink-faced clerical type in a trilby hat and baggy tweeds yelled. "Put up that brolly and fight like a man!"

"Good grief, Mr. S.," Benson said, "this gentleman's just an average, law-abiding British motorist!"

"Of course I am, you wild man!" the little man yelled, swinging a pair of choppy punches which fell three feet short of Steed's jaw. "What do you mean, cutting me off at the roundabout?"

"We'll explain later," Steed said. "For the moment, suffice it to say we're on the Queen's business."

"Well, in that case . . ." The small man subsided, blinking.

"Steed!" Emma Peel called from the taxi over the rising chorus of horns protesting the blockage which had now exceeded the acceptable thirty seconds permissible for adjusting legitimate grievances. "He's showing signs of life—"

With a bound, the possum-playing captive leaped from the cab and sprinted for a side street. Benson yelled and dashed in pursuit.

"I'm commandeering your car!" Steed said quickly to the motorist. "Down there!" He pointed to a factory driveway paralleling the side street. The Minor backed, came sharply about, shot into the indicated way, which ended at the rear under a high hedge. Steed jumped out, forced his way between close-packed branches, and was in a narrow cindered path. Feet pounded. The culprit skidded into view around a corner, pelted toward Steed, saw him, attempted to change direction, and tripped over a rank of dustbins. When Steed reached him, the man was gulping a pill he had groped from his pocket. As Benson came charging up, the fugitive's eyes rolled up; he gave a choked cry and fell back, making incomprehensible sounds.

"Poisoned himself, eh?" Benson shook his head dolefully. "Bad bit of luck, Mr. S."

"Possibly worse than you think," Steed said. "It seems I'll have to try

those knobs after all.”

Emma was standing beside the taxi, waving at the cars now picking a route past the stalled machines.

“What’s the time?” Steed snapped the question as he came up. Emma looked at her broad-banded magenta-faced watch.

“Zero plus ten seconds,” she said casually. “But it’s all right. I fixed it with a hair clip.”

Chapter Eleven

John Steed and Emma Peel sat at a secluded corner table at the Elephant and Castle, over pewter mugs of mild and bitter.

“Let’s take stock,” Emma was saying. “You were sent along to the congress to keep an eye on the delegates. You cleverly decided that the observation deck was the vulnerable point, posted yourself there at a convenient bar, and met a Mr. Blenkiron, your American opposite number. A mysterious gentleman in a leather cap pays you a visit but doesn’t stop to chat. Then a cuckoo clock is discovered in the lounge. Thereafter, footprints and a gold coin turn up in an unexpected place. Checking up, you discover the coin was used as a lucky piece by a lame man with a wig. Before you can investigate the latter, an anvil scores a near miss, two strange men attack you, Mr. Blenkiron disappears, and you rightfully conclude you may need my help.”

“Succinctly put, Mrs. Peel.” Steed lifted the tankard to her and downed half its contents. “I think that covers everything except the one-eared corpse and the little fusion mechanism we removed from the cellar.”

“Air Ministry property.”

“Bad headlines, that. I daresay Fletcher will come up with the full story on it as soon as he gets through to Grosvenor Square.”

Steed was pursing his lips thoughtfully. “I think we were meant to find the bomb,” he said. “That telephone call I intercepted in Koslov’s flat: ostensibly, it was an informant tipping off our Russian friends to get out before the blast—but what if it was made by someone who knew we were there . . . ?”

“Come to think of it, Koslov was a bit obvious, calling himself to our attention,” Emma agreed. “And the bomb was suspiciously easy to find—and disarm.”

“It’s quite clear—someone is keeping us busy for a reason.” Steed

nodded. “Something’s afoot, obviously. But what?”

“Perhaps we’re meant to think this way—to discount the messages, assume they’re just a smokescreen for something else, and relax our vigilance, whereupon the Afrit strikes as warned.”

“No, Mrs. Peel—there’s a mad sort of pattern here. I can sense it, even though I confess I can’t state precisely what it is. Before returning to the hotel, I’d like to gather a bit more data.”

“Which brings us back to hair goods, I assume?”

“Quite correct. Now that darkness is upon us, the time has come to have a look round the Ching Poo Wiggery.”

“Being sure to look both ways for falling anvils before entering.”

Outside the pub, Steed fitted himself into the passenger’s seat of Emma’s racy Lotus Elan, leaned back looking bored as she hurled the small car through the London night traffic. They parked a street away from the wig-maker’s shop, covered the remaining distance on foot. At the corner, Steed touched Emma’s arm.

“I think the circuitous approach is indicated,” he said softly, and led the way past a window with black hangings and an ominous sign reading REMOVALS FROM ASYLUMS AND HOSPITALS. The door opened to modest persuasion with a length of bent wire. Inside they passed between rows of elongated boxes resting on trestles bearing placarded prices comparable to those of automobiles. They found a narrow stair, went up four stories, and emerged on a railed catwalk edging a steeply gabled tile roof.

Five minutes later, after a silent approach and a heart-stopping leap across a ten-foot abyss between buildings, they stood at the spot where Steed had been assaulted with an iron bar earlier in the day. The stairhead door opened easily. They went down into darkness, accompanied by a slight creaking of the wooden stairs. A cat leaped away before them with a yowl. A dense odor of chow mein filled the air.

At the ground floor vestibule, Steed looked in through a dingy glass door at a dark room filled with plaster human heads, all elaborately bearded, moustached, bobbed, marcelled, mutton-chopped, sideburned and/or crew-cut.

“It reminds me of Madame Tussaud’s,” Emma whispered. “Some of the gloomier settings.”

Steed teased the lock open, reached up to still the bell dangling over the door as they slipped inside.

“I meant to ask,” Emma said softly. “Just what is it we’re looking for?”

"This falls into the category of pure research," Steed said, pausing before a head adorned with a neat Vandyke. "I wonder who'd wear that?"

"It might look rather good on you," Emma said. She plucked the whiskers from the dummy and fitted them carefully to Steed's chin.

"Not bad!" she said admiringly. "You know, Steed, I might have been quite taken by you if you'd only had a beard."

Steed surveyed himself in a tarnished mirror hanging at an angle on the wall. He adjusted his bowler at a jauntier angle and checked both profiles.

"I'm afraid it won't do," he said. "I look altogether too dashing."

"How would you like me as a blonde?" Emma asked, fitting a silver pageboy over her own red-brown tresses.

"My dear Mrs. Peel, it makes you look like a glamorous spy." He looked inside the beard. *Made in Zululand*, the lettering read.

"Mine's from Baluchistan."

A quarter of an hour's search of the premises turned up nothing which appeared to shed a light on the situation.

"Our difficulty is," Emma said, "we don't know who the enemy *is*. If we knew that, we might be able to deduce their motives."

"And if we knew their motives we might be able to anticipate their next move."

"Yes—that's the bothersome bit. Where will they strike next?"

"Very simpur, sir and madame," a thin voice said from the entry. "You come to right prace, OK. Pran work out just rike on TV."

"Oh, it's you," Steed said as the small Chinese restaurateur advanced, holding a revolver aimed steadily at Emma Peel. "Excellent. I was afraid we'd missed you."

"No such ruck." The Oriental smiled in a way not conducive to optimism. "This meeting pranned rong time ago. You farr for scheme rike big dumb-berr."

Emma laughed merrily. "Then—all the while we were maneuvering *you* here, *you* were maneuvering *us* here!"

"Rafter highry inappropriate, madame," the small man said sharply. "What you mean, you maneuver me here?"

"Good lord, Mr. Ching—you didn't imagine we just stumbled in here, as it were?" Steed looked amused.

"We were getting a trifle tired of wading through clues," Emma said.

"So we decided to flush you out," Steed said.

"And we did," Emma said.

“Quite,” Steed said, and dived sideways as Emma, with a sweep of her hand, snatched a set of long curls from the nearest stand and whipped them in a stinging arc across Mr. Ching’s face. The gun went off with a flash and a boom, and glass tinkled in the background. Ching yelped sharply as Emma took him by the neck and wrist and upended him. Steed stepped in and rapped the unfortunate man over the skull as he attempted to crawl away.

“I wonder,” Steed said, “if he was telling the truth . . . “

“I’m sure he was being just as accurate as we were,” Emma said, tucking back a stray lock and bending over the man. “Look here, Steed! He’s wearing a mask!” She peeled away the Chinese face. Under it was another Chinese face.

Feet pounded outside and the door rattled. Steed went over and let in a uniformed policeman.

“It’s you again, Major,” the constable puffed.

“An acute observation,” Steed congratulated the man. “If you’ll collect the gentleman on the floor, we can be off for a question-and-answer session.”

Mr. Ching groaned as the bulky constable assisted him through the door.

“Mind the hole now,” the officer cautioned, steering his prisoner around the pit made by the falling anvil earlier in the day. Suddenly, the prisoner, with a violent wrench, tore free of his captor’s grasp, whirled to run.

With a rush and thunderous smash, a second anvil struck the concrete, first passing through the space occupied by the Oriental.

“Crikey!” the constable said, observing the result.

“Do you suppose,” Emma Peel wondered aloud, looking up toward the darkness above, “they did that intentionally?”

Steed pulled her back inside. “We’ll use another door,” he said. “Just in case they haven’t run out of anvils.”

Chapter Twelve

They were back at the New Empire, having a quiet drink in the bar, the stillness broken only by the excited shouts of the negotiators crowding the room.

“We seem to be suffering a high mortality rate among the suspects,”

Emma said. "It was too bad about Mr. Ching. I rather wanted to have a word with him about the proper seasoning of egg-flower soup."

A benign-looking old gentleman in a turban looked around at that moment, caught Emma's eye. He approached the table, executed a deep bow, smiled, showing a neat set of stainless steel false teeth. He was small, elderly, white-bearded, his bony frame draped in richly brocaded robes.

"Peace be with you, my daughter," he whispered in a feathery-soft voice. "And with you, sir." He included Steed in his salutation.

Steed made introductions. The oldster identified himself as Hamid al Hamid ben Hamid.

"*Professor* Hamid?" Emma inquired. "Heavens, I was just reading about you in the *Times Sunday Supplement*. Your work sounded quite fascinating, unraveling the human brain and all that."

The professor looked disconcerted. "I fear the drama of my small experiments was exaggerated. There's nothing so very exciting, really, about map-making—even when it's the interior of the skull that's being charted."

"The way you made those cuddly little bunnies snap at your fingers," Emma shuddered in a flattering feminine way. "And making the cat eat lettuce and carrots."

"Mere music-hall stunts," the old fellow said, smiling deprecatingly. "I spoke sharply to my assistant, I'm afraid, for doing tricks for the cameramen. The real importance of the research is in the new insights into the workings of our so-called higher faculties. If man can learn to stimulate, for example, the conscience . . . ah, then the results might be worthy of reportage."

"But think of the effect on diplomacy as we know it," Steed said.

"Ah, now we drift into the realm of metaphysics. What indeed, young man?"

"Is it true you can run wires into a person's brain and tap his memory, so to speak?" Emma asked. "Cause him to re-experience past events recorded there?"

"That is quite elementary. Merely a matter of stimulating a specific set of brain cells. Each area of the brain, of course, controls a different function. Vision, hearing, pain, pleasure—each rises from its own site. By feeding in impulses from outside, rather than through the normal sensory channels, one can secure the appropriate reaction."

"Good heavens!" Emma said, looking thoughtful. "Then it would be possible to hook a circuit into, say, your recollections of your twelfth

birthday party, and relive it whenever the button was pushed! How lovely!”

“It’s not quite so simple as that,” the professor reproved benignly. “But, who knows? Someday——” The scientist’s further predictions were interrupted by the arrival of a large olive-faced man in a tight tuxedo who took the old gentleman’s reed-thin arm, and bent to hiss words in his ear, meanwhile eyeing Steed with hostility.

“I . . . I fear I must be going . . . “ Professor Hamid quavered as his acquaintance virtually propelled him away. Steed’s and Emma’s looks met.

“It appears the Turks have an interest in the professor,” Steed said.

“So has someone else,” Emma said, exhibiting a long black hair. “I found it on his shoulder.”

“A lady?” Steed said doubtfully.

“Possibly.” Their looks met. By common consent they rose and followed the dark man and his captive as they left the bar.

Chapter Thirteen

Ten miles west of Ruislip, the Bentley bearing Steed and Emma Peel ploughed through the night following the taillights ahead. The exhaust pattered softly; the wind whistled about their ears. Steed slowed, switched off his headlamps, coasting down a long hill. The car ahead swung left into a side road, went a few hundred yards, turned left again and stopped. Steed rolled past the turnoff, pulled into the side yard of a disused cottage and halted in the dense shadow of a clump of leafless trees. Silently, he and Emma dismounted, started back along toward the side road.

It was a fifteen-minute walk along the edge of a ham-mocky field paralleling the road to the point where a high brick wall interfered with further progress. Ten more minutes were required to find a close-growing tree, climb up and drop to the ground on the inside, and make a cautious approach to the house looming high and dark at the crest of a rise.

There were lights on in several windows, one on the ground floor. They came up to it obliquely, flattened themselves against the wall as a tall, silent-moving figure appeared at the rear corner of the house. The yellow gleam of an electric torch speared out, flicked nervously over weed-grown sod, probed dark clumps of brittle shrubbery. The light switched off and the man went away.

Steed slid to the window and by standing on tiptoe, managed a look

inside. Two men sat at a table, playing cards. One was squat, flat-nosed, scar-faced, with a shaven skull. The other was the man Steed had glimpsed on the rooftop—the one who had tried to brain him with a pipe.

“Right,” Steed murmured. “I was hoping I’d see you again.” He went along to the next window, used a small but efficient tool to cut silently through the hinge pins securing the sash, swung the rusted casement out. He helped Emma in, then climbed through into a small study with an odor of musty papers and mildew. In the hall, the sound of voices came faintly from next door. Steed put an ear to the panel.

“. . . the portfolio of finance,” a brassy voice with an exotic accent was saying in an expansive way. “I’ve always dreamed of handling large amounts of money.”

“Fat chance,” a gloomy voice answered. “He looks as eef you could blow heem out with one puff, but deed you see what he deed to poor Rat-head when he peenched a tanner from the betelnut fund?”

“Did he really do it himself—with a can opener?” The brassy voice was less brassy now.

“Umm. And feenished up with a set of peenking shears. A memorable lesson. I for one weel be content with a mere title and modest estates; say all of Devon and some choice beets of New Jersey.”

“Modest enough,” Emma murmured. They went on along the corridor. It took them ten minutes to scout the ground floor, finding nothing worthy of comment other than a hundred or so gallon jugs of what appeared to be distilled water, a number of empty pizza tins, and a large tank labeled with the letter H.

The cellar was no more rewarding. There was a heap of rope snippets, a pot of odoriferous glue, and several empty five-gallon buckets reeking of varnish. In a roomy chamber on the first floor they discovered a sewing machine and quantities of gossamer white nylon.

“Someone running up a bridal gown?” Steed wondered. The other rooms on the floor were ordinary bedrooms, mostly dusty and neglected, but two had been cleaned and showed signs of recent occupancy.

Back in the hall, they listened. Steed wasn’t certain, but there seemed to be faint noises from up above.

“You wait here,” Steed said. “I’ll have a look.” He ascended cautiously, found himself in a duplicate of the floor below. The bedrooms, however, contained laboratory equipment in place of beds. He moved among the alembics and retorts glittering faintly in the gloom. It was a complicated setup, but crude, hastily arranged.

“A rather complex process, perhaps experimental, running in glass,” Steed told himself. “Pity I’m not a chemist.” He sniffed a beaker, detected a faint aroma of gin.

At the end of the hall, light glowed under a door. Steed went to one knee and peered through the keyhole. The room was lined with small cages containing cats, dogs, mice, chickens, and guinea pigs.

There was a sound from the stairway behind him. Steed stepped quickly inside the menagerie room and closed the door. A small dog in the nearest cage wagged its tail offhandedly. A large rooster in the next cage fixed a beady eye on him.

“Ruff,” said the dog. “Arr—ar—ar,” the rooster said. Or, Steed paused and looked back, was it the other way around . . . ?

But there was no time to investigate. Feet were clumping outside the door; voices sounded, one angry, the other pleading. Steed flattened himself against the wall in a shadowy corner and waited. But the feet failed to pass.

The door opened and two men walked in. One was a tall, wide, sallow-skinned man with big hands and muscle-roped arms. The other was Professor Hamid. They walked past the first row of cages, passed from sight.

“What’s happened to the rats?” a voice thick with fury snarled suddenly. “They’re sick!”

“W-what with all the excitement, I may . . . I may have forgotten to feed them,” a frightened voice replied.

“Blundering idiot!” There was the sound of a blow and a squeak of pain, more blows, whimpers. “I should kill you now!” the fierce voice grated. “You may have endangered the Plan!”

“No—please—it won’t happen again!” a broken voice gasped.

An animal-like growl, a splat of a fist against quivering flesh. Scuffling sounds, and then—

“No you don’t!” A ghastly *thunk* of steel impacting on human anatomy. A crash like a falling safe. Silence.

Steed emerged, went quickly along to an aisle which afforded a clear view along the row of cages. Professor Hamid stood panting, his clothes disheveled, a two-foot locking bar in his hands. The brown-faced giant lay at his feet, blood seeping from a crease on his skull.

The small man looked up in startlement, and backed away, lifting the bar.

“You remember me, Professor,” Steed said. “When I heard you’d left

the party, Mrs. Peel and I wondered if perhaps you hadn't been kidnaped."

"M-Mrs. Peel?" The Professor's voice was a breathless squeak. Sweat glistened on his face, now beginning to relax from its expression of cornered ferocity. His false teeth glinted in the gloom.

"The lady with the twelfth birthday," Steed amplified.

The little man lowered the bloodstained bar and managed a smile.

"Ah, yes. A charming creature."

"Rum sort of place," Steed said casually. "Seems to be a dress factory."

Hamid came toward Steed, limping slightly. He noticed Steed noticing, gave a deprecating smile, nodding toward the fallen man. "He had rather large boots," he explained.

"A rather uneven match," Steed commented, eyeing the casualty.

The Professor shuddered. "I abhor violence—but he did give provocation."

"I'd like to have a look around," Steed said. "Any points of particular interest you could suggest looking into?"

"Mmmm." The Professor looked worried. "There *is* a room on the ground floor . . ."

"Lead on, Professor."

They left the animal room, paused at the head of the stairs, listening. Muted voices sounded below.

"Perhaps we should pause and think this over," the Professor suggested, holding Steed's eye. "Don't you think it would be wise to let well enough alone, and simply depart in haste?"

"Doubtless good counsel," Steed said. "Still——"

He whirled at a faint sound behind him. A swarthy, bearded face loomed up from the stairwell; a hairy hand came up, holding a gun. Steed kicked out, jumped aside and the gun boomed. There was a *swish!* close to his ear and a steel bar, wielded by the Professor, crashed down on the head of the intruder. The victim went backward down the steps, smashed through the rail and plunged out of sight. There was a longish pause, then a thunderous crash three stories below.

"Nicely placed, Professor," Steed said, scooping up the dropped gun. "Shall we go on?"

They went quickly but silently down the stairs. At the far end of a long passage, Professor Hamid stopped, tried a door.

"Locked," he said. "What a pity we don't have a key."

Steed tried the knob. It turned. He threw the door suddenly open and

reached in to flick on the light. A large man stood blinking like a blinded owl, the gun in his hand pointing at nothing. Steed rapped him sharply on the head with his umbrella, caught the gun as it fell from the man's hand as he collapsed.

"Wrong room," Steed said. "Any other ideas, Professor?"

"Perhaps it's the room below this one." The Professor was looking at the fallen man with a shocked expression.

"Curious no one seems bent on investigating the sounds of violence," Steed said.

"They're afraid," the Professor said. "They know interference in what goes on here is not tolerated." His eyes glistened with a fearful expression.

On the floor below, Steed listened outside the door, then took out his lock pick and went to work. Two minutes later he was rewarded with a soft click. At the same moment, the Professor grabbed his arm.

"Quickly!" he hissed. "They're coming!" He thrust past Steed, threw open the door and stepped through—

He dived forward as if propelled by a rocket, landed on his head and lay still.

"Mrs. Peel," Steed whispered as he stepped swiftly inside and closed the door. "I'd know your technique anywhere."

Chapter Fourteen

"Really," Emma said, "you could have warned me it was you."

"The problem," Steed said, nibbling his chin, "is now somewhat complicated by the necessity for carrying the Professor." He lifted the limp body, eased the door open—and was thrust backward by a double-barreled shotgun in the hands of a fat man with liver-colored lips who bellied into the room, swinging to cover both him and Mrs. Peel. His olive-pit eyes flicked to the limp form of Professor Hamid; they goggled.

"Hey!" he said. "Put him down!"

"Certainly," Steed said. "Anything to oblige——" and tossed the Professor at the gunman, who staggered back under the impact, dropping the gun. Steed hooked his ankle with his umbrella. Emma clipped him on the jaw as he toppled past her.

A gun boomed, lighting the room.

"The next one weel be een the heart," an unfriendly voice said from beyond the open door. "Come out queekly weeth the hands up."

Emma and Steed exchanged glances.

“I suppose we’d better humor him,” Steed said.

“Whatever you say,” Emma agreed.

In the hall, one man covered them with a bulky .45 automatic while two others cautiously patted their pockets. They took Steed’s gun but left him his umbrella.

“Geet going,” the gun handler ordered. They went along toward the stairs. At the top, Emma put a casual hand on the newel post, pivoted sharply, leaped over the banister and brought her foot around in an arc that connected with the gunman’s jaw. He bounced sideways and the gun spat into the plaster ceiling. Steed grappled the man next in line, spun him, propelled him against the wall to rebound and go flat, as Emma leaped astride the banister and swooped downward. The third man had hauled out a gun, sprang to aim down the stair. Steed planted a foot in his seat, sent him off in a flying leap, as arms wrapped around him from behind. He tramped down hard on an arch, clasped hands with himself, and rammed first one elbow and then the other hard into a stomach. The grip relaxed. He started for the steps and a shower of stars exploded in his head.

The next few moments were hazy. There were voices, hands that pulled at him, shots. Then he was lying on his back, and little men were driving nails into his skull. No, he corrected, just one nail—a big one, right between the eyes. He opened them anyway and looked around. He was in a large room under slanting eaves, with a wide skylight in the center of the ceiling, under which a large wicker basket rested. Above, a framework supported a canopy of white cloth. Steed moved to sit up and a brassy voice said, “Don’t make a move.”

Steed looked in the direction of the voice. A squat man with scars across his shaved skull leaned against the wall, pointing the .45 at him.

“I’ve heard of building a cabin cruiser in the basement,” Steed said, “but a balloon in the attic . . .”

The man grinned an unpleasant grin. A second man walked over to the wall, threw a lever. With a click and a hum and a rumble, the skylight opened, folding back like barn doors to reveal the night sky. The man turned a valve and a loud hissing sound started up. The cloth stirred, beginning to swell.

“A novel route of escape,” Steed commented. He sniffed. “Is that smoke, do you suppose?” he inquired conversationally.

“Don’t try anytheeng so childeesh,” the squat man said. “You theenk

we are cheeldren, to be taken een by thees transparent treeck?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Steed said. “That smoke curling up the stairwell doesn’t look at all that transparent.”

With an impolite exclamation, the gun holder whirled, then shouted to the men working around the swelling gasbag. They dropped their tools, started for the stairs. As they reached them, two other men came charging up, bearing the limp body of the Professor.

“Where ees the gorf?” the squat man yelled. “Deedn’t you geet her?”

“No, we deedn’t,” one man replied, breathing hard. The squat man swore, shot him in the stomach. He stumbled backward, allowing Professor Hamid’s head to slam the floor with a dull *thunk*. The other man dropped the Professor’s feet and turned to flee. The squat man shot him in the back. As he did so, Steed came to his feet, took a flying leap, tackling the man, and rode him like a sled down the stairs. At the bottom, he rolled clear as shots from above sent splinters flying from the floor beside him. Dense smoke was boiling up from below. A man came plunging from the cloud, saw Steed, yelled, and dived back in. Steed covered his face with a handkerchief. Red flames leaped and danced in the murk. Emma Peel appeared from the smoke, aimed a swing at Steed, checked it just in time.

“I think I overdid it,” she gasped. “Something down there burns like crazy.”

“This way.” Steed caught her hand and they ran for the attic stairs, barely visible in the swirling smoke. At the top, Steed went flat, risked a look. Three men were struggling with the gasbag, now billowing up through the open hatch. One leaped aboard, while the two others scrambled for the inert body of the Professor. They lifted him, bore him to the wicker gondola.

Steed leaped up, dashed forward in time to take a rope end across the jaw as one of the men cut the mooring line. With a musical *pong!* the other rope broke; instantly, the basket leaped upward, the Professor’s body draped over the side, one man halfway in; it scraped the side of the opening, almost capsized, then was gone into the black sky.

“So much for dramatic rescues,” Steed said, rubbing his rope burn. “Let’s hope we have better luck with our own survival.”

“The window!” Emma called over the roaring of flames.

Steed used an odd length of lumber to smash the glass from the frame. He climbed out on the narrow strip of shingled gable below, lent a hand to Emma. Together, they went along the downspout. Steed slid down

first. Halfway to the ground, the galvanized piping collapsed and he fell the rest of the way.

When he staggered to his feet, Emma was bending over him.

“Are you all right?” she inquired solicitously.

“Perfectly,” he said blurrily, surveying the remains of the gutter system strewn on the grass around him. “How did you, ah . . .”

“Oh, I came down the fire escape,” she said sweetly. “But I must say, your route was more dramatic.” A shower of sparks fell around them. The grass was smoldering.

“Let’s get out of here,” Steed suggested. They withdrew to a distance of a hundred yards, watched as the roof fell in, followed by the collapse of the walls.

“Did anyone get out?” Steed asked.

“Only the ones in the balloon. Three of them, and they’ve got the Professor.”

“Ah, yes, the balloon.” Steed scanned the sky. “Look there,” he said. As he pointed, a sagging gasbag drifted across above them, outlined by the moon.

“They’re underinlated,” Steed said. “Can’t gain altitude. And there’s very little wind. With a little luck ..

“Let’s go,” Emma said. Hand in hand, they raced for Steed’s car.

Fortunately, the light breeze was blowing in the same direction. As they sprang into the Bentley, the balloon was directly overhead, at an altitude of a hundred feet. Steed started up, backed, churned off down the road. He took the first left, raced along paralleling the course of the lighter-than-air craft, which was now gaining speed and altitude, several hundred yards to the south.

“We’re losing it,” Emma called. “Shall I . . . ?”

“I think you’d better.” Steed handed over the pistol he had collected while groping through the smoke. Emma knelt on the seat, took careful aim—as careful as was possible in the swaying car racing flat out along the curving country road—and fired, a vivid flashing and sharp *Ker-pow! Ker-pow! Ker-pow!* They sped onward, Steed watching the road, Emma gazing at the fleeing balloon.

“I think—yes, I’m sure! It’s dropping lower! I must have hit it!”

Tall trees loomed ahead. The balloon swept toward them. The gondola, swinging in a wide arc, crashed through branches, sending leaves flying, skipped, then smashed in among a dense tangle of boughs. The bag wobbled, tugged, settled. With a rending and breaking of wood, punctu-

ated by explosive *bangs*! the basket dropped a few feet, lodged half on its side, ten feet from the ground.

Steed pulled the big car in under the wreck. All was silent above. Then there was a stirring, a faint groan. A small, inoffensive-looking face appeared over the edge of the basket.

“Professor, you’re looking chipper,” Emma sang out. “No bones broken?”

“N-none, I think,” the old fellow quavered.

“How about the other passengers?” Steed inquired, holding the gun ready.

“They—don’t seem to be moving,” Professor Hamid’s voice was very small. Steed passed the gun to Emma, clambered up. The three men were lying in sprawled positions against the wicker. Each had a neat bullet hole between the eyes.

“I must say, Mrs. Peel, you’re a remarkable shot,” Steed called. “Professor, shall we be going?”

“Maybe I’d . . . I’d better just . . . just make myself scarce,” the little man fluttered his hands. “I wouldn’t like to think I was causing you any trouble.”

“Nonsense, Professor, come along.” Steed assisted the old gentleman down to a seat in the car.

“I . . . can’t tell you how I feel about all you’ve done,” the old scientist said weakly. “All this trouble, just for insignificant little old me?”

“All for you,” Steed said. “Now I think we’d better get back to town and bring ourselves up to date.”

Chapter Fifteen

Steed let all six cylinders out to their utmost on the drive back toward the city lights. It was less than half an hour before he swung the vast, snorting machine into the Strand, half a block from the side entrance to the New Empire. A light beamed suddenly; a hoarse voice shouted. Steed floorboarded the accelerator.

As he did, there was a snarl of engines; two dark cars shot out from concealment, closing in on the Bentley. Professor Hamid gave a sharp cry and grabbed for the big oak steering wheel. Dunlops squealed as the heavy car swerved, slammed up over the curb, missing the granite wall of the Midlands Bank by inches. Fighting the wheel, Steed wrenched the car

back onto the pavement, shot between the glaring headlights of two more cars blocking the street, and with a thunderous crash slammed full into a barrier of timber trestles. The Bentley skidded another fifty feet before it came to a shuddering halt. A red spotlight struck Steed in the face as men closed in, on the run.

“Why, it’s Major Steed,” a surprised voice said. “And Mrs. Peel,” another cried.

“We’d a report you were dead,” someone amplified. “Must have been an error somewhere along the line.”

“What’s all this in aid of?” Steed inquired, as two men helped the Professor down.

“Mr. Fletcher’s idea, sir. He hoped to nab the humorist who defaced the blotter in the reading room.”

Steed took Emma’s hand and assisted her down. They crossed the street to the hotel. Fletcher appeared.

“Well, Steed”—he looked him over sourly—“I see you encountered my roadblock.”

“You might put it that way.” Steed fingered his aching skull.

“A great deal’s been happening while you were out taking the air,” Fletcher went on. “We’ve turned up a number of clues which I expect shall bring the whole matter out into the open at any moment. I’m having my lab men check them over now. By the way, West Ruislip was a blank, as I expected. Balloons indeed! No, as I see it, they used some sort of breeches buoy arrangement. I haven’t worked out all the details yet.”

“Good to hear you’ve been keeping busy,” Steed said.

“I’ve put the Canadian delegate under arrest,” Fletcher went on. “Caught him prowling the corridor. Said he was checking on the location of the fire escapes, just in case, but I’ve had too many years on the job to fall for that one. I confess I was confused for a moment when they reported the gorilla in the main lounge, but we dealt with that in short order, once we assured ourselves it wasn’t a man in costume, though the manager did howl a bit about tying up the freight elevator between floors ____”

“Excuse me,” Steed said, “but——”

“As for the hornets released in the dining room, it was just someone’s idea of a joke,” Fletcher bored on. “A good shot of bug spray took care of the matter. Pity about spoiling all that soup, but you can’t have everything.”

“Fletcher,” Steed said loudly, “where is Professor Hamid?”

“Hamid? Hamid? Oh, you mean the little wog you had with you. I believe some friends of his took him in hand. They drove off in a black Rolls. Why?”

“Did you get the number?”

“No, why should I have?”

“It probably wouldn’t have helped,” Steed said with a sad smile.

“What’s the matter with him?” Fletcher inquired of an aide. “Can’t stand to see the other fellow making progress on a case, I suppose.”

“It’s not that,” Emma Peel’s voice spoke up. Except for a rather attractive smudge on her cheek, she was unmarked by the evening’s activity. “It’s just that Professor Hamid is the ringleader of all this nonsense, and you’ve let him get away.”

Chapter Sixteen

“I don’t believe you!” Fletcher was snorting for the twenty-fifth time. “Professor Hamid? The poor fellow couldn’t fight his way out of a swarm of butterflies!”

“You should have heard the drubbing he gave an erring henchman with a length of pipe,” Steed said. “I heard a report that he worked another chap over with a can opener, but that’s merely hearsay, I confess.” He sighed and kicked the flat tire under the crumpled right front wing of the Bentley. “Look at that radiator shell. It will take Jack Brabham a week to put her back in showroom condition. I’ll have the bill sent directly to M.I.5, of course.”

“What put you on to Hamid?” Fletcher demanded. “Why would he want to disrupt the Peace Conference?”

“He doesn’t, of course. Or rather, he’s indifferent as to that detail.”

“Then—who does?”

“No one,” Emma said. “That’s the whole point.” She smiled at Fletcher as if she had now made everything quite clear.

“Are you daft?” the M.I.5 man yelled. “One minute you say Hamid is the man we want, and the next——”

“Now, now. What you need is a drop of brandy,” Steed soothed. “Let’s go inside and sit down quietly somewhere and discuss the matter like gentlemen.”

“And ladies,” Emma amended.

At a comfortable booth in the Imperial Saloon Bar, just off the main

lounge where the usual heated dispute was under way, Steed waited until glasses had been placed and filled, then leaned back and said expansively:

“Well now, Fletcher, about this matter of a superabundance of clues—surely it’s obvious to you now that they were intended merely to divert attention from the main issue?”

“Who planted them?” Fletcher asked bluntly. “Found one in a kipper, didn’t you? Who put it there? How did he know you’d be slicing into that kipper just at that time? And that chap Blenkiron: I understand he had a similar note stuffed up his dentifrice tube.”

“They were watching my apartment,” Emma said. “They also tapped my telephone line. They heard me invite Steed up for tea and promptly stuffed the kipper; possibly while I waited in the shop.”

“But Blenkiron never left the hotel!” Fletcher said triumphantly.

“Why should he? He hates London. And the message sender could easily slip into his room while he was out.”

“Who? No one can enter the hotel without my say-so!”

“The same one who planted the clock in the washroom,” Steed said. “And the bomb, and the footprints.”

“Which leaves us just where we were! No one could have slipped through my cordon! It’s impossible!”

“No one did. They were already inside,” Steed pointed out.

“Bah! There was no one in the hotel but the staff—all thoroughly checked out for three generations, clean bills of health all round—and the delegates themselves.” Fletcher broke off as Emma nodded encouragingly.

“But—they’re all diplomatic members of embassy staffs!”

“So? My dear Fletcher, are you under the impression that diplomats are above that sort of thing?”

“But—which one?” Fletcher slammed his fist to the table. “I’ll find him, and I’ll——”

“All of them,” Steed said.

“——have him deported by garbage scow before cockcrow . . .” Fletcher paused. “What did you say?”

“Oh, not all of them, perhaps,” Emma said. “But quite a number, I should imagine.”

“You mean—it’s an international plot to sabotage the meetings?”

“Please, Fletcher, don’t be a complete ass. I’ve already told you that aspect is unimportant.”

“Then what’s it all about?” the M.I.5 man snarled.

“Well, that’s the part that’s puzzling me just a little,” Steed confessed.

“I’ve been wondering,” Emma said. “Why the rather unlikely choice of misdirections? Turning up a cuckoo clock might have had the effect of making the whole thing seem just a joke. And those silly footprints . . . “

Steed looked at her thoughtfully. “Ah yes, the footprints,” he murmured. “They formed a distinct trail, leading nowhere . . . “

“I wonder,” Emma said, looking speculative, “what they were leading *away* from?”

“An excellent question,” Steed said. He pushed back his chair and rose.

“Where are you off to?” Fletcher demanded as Emma stood.

“To the gents’ bar,” Steed said. “To have a look round for what we might have missed the first time.”

Chapter Seventeen

“Clever,” Emma said. “They made a clear trail, leading nowhere—except away from where the mischief had been done.”

“But—what’s it for?” the puzzled detective inspector asked, staring at the plug Steed had removed from the polished mahogany base of the back bar.

Steed was peering inside the opening thus revealed.

“Right,” he said. “They’ve patched into the copper pipes that lead the ale supply up from the main tanks in the cellar. Let me have your light, Constable.”

A uniformed policeman offered his torch; Steed shone it in the opening.

“There’s a container fitted here,” he said. “About a pint capacity, I’d say. Have one of your men with pipefit-ting experience disassemble that, will you, Inspector? And be careful not to spill the contents. Now let’s have another, closer look in the VIP lounge.”

Chapter Eighteen

It was attached to the supply pipe, under a patch of loose tiles which had been recemented but had not yet set.

“The quart size, I’d estimate, sir,” the inspector said, studying the metal canister. “Hopkins will have it out of there in no time.”

“This is insane,” Fletcher snapped. “If whoever planted these things

wanted them hidden, why did he call attention to them by strewing footprints and cuckoo clocks about the premises.”

“But he didn’t,” Emma pointed out. “Didn’t call attention to them, I mean. We were so taken up with what we found, and with trying to find a meaning in it that we quite failed to look further.”

“The trickster was working hastily, I imagine,” Steed said. “He knew he’d leave traces, so he left something for us to find, hoping we’d be satisfied. And we were.”

“What about the bomb in the air duct, eh?” Fletcher demanded. “That was genuine enough!”

“Hmmm. An interesting point,” Steed said. “By the way, did you ever discover the source of the torrent of A’s, B’s and C’s?”

“Well, no, but——”

A messenger came hurrying up, handed over a sealed envelope to Fletcher, who, glad of an interruption, opened it, read it, snorted, and stuffed it in his pocket.

“Aren’t you going to share?” Emma asked.

“M.I.5 business,” Fletcher said.

“Don’t be tedious, Fletcher,” Steed urged. “What else does it say, other than that the containers were filled with a tasteless, colorless, odorless liquid with a valve arrangement so designed as to feed a trickle of the stuff into the beer and water lines?”

Fletcher frowned darkly, thrust the paper at Steed, who glanced at it and nodded.

“D-lysergic acid deoxydiethylamide tartrate,” he mused. “Sounds familiar, somehow.”

“Isn’t that LSD?” Emma asked in surprise.

“Almost. Concentration, one part per million. Rather a stiff dosage of hallucinogen.”

“Hallucinogen?” Fletcher barked. “Are you trying to tell me we’re imagining all this?”

“You might be imagining me,” Steed said. “And I might be imagining you, though I can’t imagine why. We might both be imagining Mrs. Peel, for more obvious reasons. But the canisters, alas, are real.” He tucked the paper back in Fletcher’s hand. “Come along. We still have one or two things to find.”

Chapter Nineteen

The apparatus mounted in the air duct a foot above where the bomb had been wired was a curiously shaped pump, with a self-contained power pack and a number of knobs, dials, and levers. A hose led to a large feed bottle of viscous white fluid which, on closer examination, proved to consist of a mass of soft, embryonic letters, packed together in a volatile liquid like overcooked noodles in alphabet soup.

“Remarkable,” Steed said. “Apparently they expand after a few minutes’ contact with the air.” He studied the controls. “You can control the size, rate of production, everything. Good job this hasn’t fallen into the hands of the advert agencies. The air would be full of three-dimensional exhortations to commerce.”

Fletcher ran his fingers through his rapidly thinning hair. “Why?” he yelped. “Why all this carnival-cum-mad-house? Why not a simple, honest attack with mustard gas, for example? Or a hearty infusion of cyanide into the whiskey supply? Something a man can get his teeth into?”

“I suspect that somehow it’s intended as a hint,” Steed said. “Perhaps at a subconscious level. Our friend the Afrit is secretly concerned that his cleverness will never be appreciated, and thus he’s strewing clues about in the hope of being admired.”

“I’ll oblige him,” Fletcher promised darkly. “With a hundred years in solitary he’ll have ample time to admire himself!”

“First,” Emma reminded him, “you’ll have to catch him.”

Back upstairs, cosily ensconced in a corner table in the dim-lit blue-and-gold dining room, even at this hour occupied by a few tables of argumentative delegates, Steed smiled pleasantly at Emma, who looked as fresh and unruffled now in a suit of tangerine-colored Thai silk as though she had never in her life been hit on the head, shot at, or involved in a car crash.

“The whole thing’s a fraud,” Fletcher stated grumpily, waving the waiter away irritably. “Someone’s having a laugh at the expense of Security. We’ve been taken in.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Steed said comfortably. “We’ve dealt with two bomb alarms today, collared assorted hired bashers, turned up the odd corpse, unmasked the mild-mannered Professor——”

“Rubbish! The man was an innocent kidnap victim!” Fletcher snorted. “I’ve reached the conclusion the case is closed. If Professor Whatever-his-

name-is did have a hand in this, he's had his warning—and of course I can't touch him in any event. No more than I can any of these other troublemakers." He glowered at a pair of diplomats shaking their fists under each other's noses at the next table.

"Leaving poor Mr. Blenkiron's disappearance to clear itself up in time, eh?"

"Probably became homesick. You know he didn't care for London. Disliked the weather. Can't think why. Probably an eccentric."

"Well, that's a great relief," Steed said. "Perhaps we can all get a little sleep tonight after all."

Fletcher looked suspiciously from him to Mrs. Peel. "You don't look as though you were drooping with fatigue," he said. "I suppose you have some hare-brained scheme up your sleeves?"

"Actually, Mrs. Peel and I were thinking of a drive. Weren't we, Mrs. Peel?"

"Were we? I mean, we were."

"Just as soon as we've had our soup," Steed amplified.

"I'm warning you," Fletcher snapped. "These are diplomatic personnel you're dealing with. You do anything to bring the Foreign Office down on my department, and I'll be the first witness to appear against you!"

"Quite right," Steed said. "If you're not eating, would you excuse us? I dislike the vulture-at-the-feast feeling."

"You've been warned," Fletcher barked. "Watch your step, Steed! And as for you, Mrs. Peel: don't be led astray by bad counsel."

"I don't intend to, Mr. Fletcher," she said warmly. "But thank you, anyway."

Fletcher stalked away. Emma and Steed grinned at each other and dipped into their steaming bowls.

Chapter Twenty

A few minutes later, cruising along beside the Thames in Emma's white Lotus and admiring the glow of streetlamps through the damp miasma off the river, Steed uttered a satisfied sigh. "Can't understand a chap like Blenkiron," he said. "Fancy not thrilling to the magic of the London night."

"Is that why we're riding around in the chill night air?" Emma inquired. "To demonstrate our affection for the place?"

“Exactly.” Steed drew a deep breath. “Bracing, isn’t it?” His tone was most complacent. He hummed a little tune.

“Steed,” Emma said in a deceptively mild tone, “it wouldn’t be that you’re setting out to draw the enemy’s fire?”

“Why, Mrs. Peel, would I place a lady in such a position of danger?” Steed looked hurt.

“I assume the question is rhetorical.”

Steed sighed, less happily this time. “It was just an idle thought. Pull up at the next zebra crossing, if you don’t mind, Mrs. Peel, and I’ll get out and carry on alone. After all, you *are* on holiday.”

“I *was* on holiday,” Emma corrected.

“I suppose we *could* go hover back of the potted palms for the rest of the night,” Steed said doubtfully.

Emma laughed. “But better still—we could counterattack, eh?”

“Not,” Steed said, “unless we can make contact with the enemy.”

“And so we drive around and catch our deaths or something worse.”

Half an hour later they were still unmolested.

“I could go stand in a lighted phone booth,” Emma suggested. “Just in case they haven’t recognized me.”

“Well—it might speed matters up.”

Steed waited in the car while Emma pantomimed a call from a booth on a secluded corner. No sedans roared into view firing bursts from a Thompson gun. No helicopters swooped with dangling nets. No anvils fell.

“It’s no use,” Emma said, sliding back behind the wheel. “I’m afraid they’ve run for cover, Steed.”

“They can’t afford to,” Steed said. “They don’t know how much we know.”

“How little we know, don’t you mean?” Emma shivered. “Lurking behind the palms begins to sound more attractive. At least our feet will be warm and maybe something will occur to us, or to them.”

Emma pulled the car in beside Steed’s battered Bentley, from which he averted his eyes, noticing as he did a large, square-cut sedan with curtained windows and a CD plate.

“A black Rolls,” he said. “Fletcher said Professor Hamid drove off in a black Rolls.”

“How observant you are, Major Steed,” a guttural voice said almost in his ear. He caught a glint of light on the barrel of a gun pointing at his head.

“No—don’t turn around!”

There was a sound of scuffling behind Steed, a grunt, muttered curses. The door on the far side of the big car opened, there were sounds of more scuffling, and a yelp. The door slammed.

“Good-bye, Mr. Steed,” the voice said and a third anvil struck him square on the back of the skull.

Or no, not exactly an anvil, Steed decided, staggering to his feet an unknown number of minutes later. The skull, while definitely tender, was still there. The big sedan was gone, however. And so was Emma Peel.

Steed smiled, gently fingering his aching head. “Capital,” he said softly. “I knew sooner or later they’d blunder.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The Lotus started up at a touch of a button. Steed grimaced as he swung the light car out of the lot. He missed the feeling of bulk and solidity the Bentley afforded. He couldn’t understand why a young woman of Emma Peel’s discernment would choose such a machine, when she might as easily have had a Bentley—or at least a ‘37 Mercedes-Benz 540-K say, if one really insisted on racier lines. Still, the little thing did go, Steed had to concede as it leaped ahead at the touch of the throttle. On the dash—mere padded leather in place of the polished Circassian walnut of the Bentley—the oil and water pressures registered normal, the tachometer hovered at 2400 rpm., the speedometer indicated 90 kilometers (not bad for the middle of the city) and the green light at the lower left-hand corner blinked a reassuring signal. It was tuned to a transmitter set in a button on Emma Peel’s jacket, and it indicated that at the present moment she was half a mile ahead, headed due west.

At a distance of a hundred yards behind the Rolls, Steed dimmed his headlights, throttled back and held his interval. They raced across the city, encountering only light traffic at this hour, following a devious course. After a brisk twenty-minute run, the big car swung into a drive which slanted sharply down. From a block away, Steed watched a steel garage door slide up. The Rolls moved ahead. The door closed behind it.

“Well,” Steed murmured to himself, “here we are in West Ruislip after all.”

The building above the garage was a four-story edifice of age-blackened stone; the windows fining its grim facade were shuttered and

dark. The door was a forbidding rectangle of ancient oak, under faded lettering reading INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF OMNILINGUA.

Steed crossed the street and mounted the worn granite steps. There was a keyhole large enough to thrust a finger into. Steed listened, sniffed, then set to work with his extra-sturdy number-nine lock pick. Half a minute later, with a loud squealing of rusted hinges, the big door swung in.

Inside, Steed advanced cautiously across a once-handsome floor of warped and stained hardwood. Dusty posters tacked to the splotched plaster walls displayed bleak representations of starving Indians and large-eyed Balkan tots, over slogans like OBT GULWUX RWIMN IK and ESTU DOL MZECH FURLB.

A high, formerly white door opened onto a smaller room, filled with much-used folding chairs, arranged in rows before a sagging dais of unpainted lumber with a streamer announcing: UGFU NORCSULP GROSFIP. There was a scattering of cigarette packages and candy wrappers on the floor.

Steed crossed this room, went through another door, found himself in a hall, narrow, dark, smelling of Mediterranean cookery of the less expensive variety.

“Eenie, meenie, miney, moe,” he said, and turned to the left. The passage ended in a door. At close range, Steed saw dim light shining under it. He put his ear to it, heard nothing. This, he calculated, reviewing the layout of the rooms he had passed through, should coincide with the location of the underground garage. Deftly, he picked the lock, eased past the door and descended a flight of steep wooden steps into a large brick-walled room. The Rolls Royce was parked just inside the steel door, heat radiating from its engine. Steed wiped a finger through the dust on the wing and said *tsk*.

There were two doors set in the brick walls. Steed went to the nearest. It opened easily onto a storeroom stacked with dusty bundles of leaflets. Steed picked one up.

Learn The Language Of The Future Now! it exhorted in green print on salmon-pink paper.

Steed tried the other door. It was not locked, but it was barred from the other side. Lock picks were useless here. As Steed reached this conclusion, there was a sound from the direction of the stairs. The door swung gently shut, and Steed heard the lock click, a bolt slide home. The wind?

What wind? He tried it. Locked—and bolted. He was trapped. Steed sighed, settled himself comfortably in the rear seat of the Rolls and prepared to wait for something to happen.

Chapter Twenty-Two

He awoke with the feeling that hours had passed. Somewhere, mice scuttled. Near at hand, metal creaked. A section of wall was moving, swinging back like a brick door. A furtive-looking man came through it, looked nervously around, went to the barred door. He reached up high, fingered a brick above the lintel. There were soft mechanical sounds. The man pushed the door open and went through.

Steed waited five minutes before following. The door opened into a damp-walled passage lit by widely spaced ceiling bulbs. He went along it toward another door at the far end, paused to listen to the silence.

The door was standing ajar. Steed gave it a gentle push with one finger. As it swung open, an alarm bell clanged raucously, near at hand. Brilliant lights sprang up, giving Steed a view of a long room, white-tiled, windowless, with a large drain in the center of the floor. At first glance, he thought it was a gym; a second glance disclosed that the nature of the apparatus ranged along the walls was not directed toward physical fitness. Quite the contrary.

Cages, racks, arrangements of rods and levers, of blades and screws and punches and gouges. Iron boots, braziers, a full range of thumb-screws, devices for torsion and for compression, machines which crushed and machines which shredded. And all designed, quite obviously, to accommodate the human frame.

“Hello, Steed,” a cheery voice said. “I suppose it’s too late to warn you, but we seem to have been led down the garden path.” It took Steed a moment to locate the source of the words. Then he discerned Emma Peel, hanging head down from the ceiling at the far end of the room like an extremely Mod chandelier, her hands shackled behind her with what looked like Blenkiron’s lost handcuffs, her auburn hair streaming down below her. Nearby, an apelike man crowded into a cage no more than three feet on a side, peered out between his knees at Steed.

“Well,” the prisoner said. “You finally got here. Welcome to the club. I saved you a chair.” He jerked a thumb at an electrified stool with iron clamps for the feet

“Oh, it’s you, is it, Blenkiron? I thought you were back in Omaha by now. Or is it Salt Lake City?” Steed started to move and checked at a familiar voice behind him:

“Go right in, Major,” it said. “How nice to see you. We have a number of matters to discuss; I hope you are in no great hurry.”

Steed turned slowly, so as not to encourage any impulsive shooting. Professor Hamid stood there, smiling his steely smile, holding a small chrome-plated Beretta in his veined hand.

“Well, Professor, I rather hoped we’d find you in,” Steed said briskly. “As I recall, our last conversation was broken off rather abruptly.”

“I was sorry to rush off,” the old man said apologetically. “But there were a number of last-minute details I had to see to.” He motioned with the gun. “Step inside, if you don’t mind, Major. Cozier there, don’t you think? And we can all be together.”

Steed strolled down the length of the room, aware of the deadly little man close behind him, of the agonies being silently endured by Emma Peel and the American agent.

“Far enough,” Professor Hamid said gently as they neared the spot where Emma dangled. There was a small table here, two easy chairs drawn up to it, a teapot and cups in place.

“Do be seated,” Steed’s host urged. “One lump or two?”

“No sugar, thank you,” Steed said calmly, avoiding Blenkiron’s blood-shot eye. One of the American’s arms dangled between the bars. The other was wedged somewhere under and behind him.

“I’ll have several lumps myself,” Hamid said. “I think I deserve them, it’s been such a trying day—and night.” He sipped his tea and cast a glance at the caged captive. “Clever, eh? The cage contracts at the rate of one inch per hour. In another few hours its capacity will reach zero. And where will the meddlesome Mr. Blenkiron be then?” He chuckled and sipped his tea.

“Come now, Major, do join me. There’s no reason we shouldn’t make ourselves comfortable and discuss matters like gentlemen.”

“None at all,” Steed agreed. “Have you a drop of brandy about the place?”

“In my religion we use no alcohol,” Hamid said coolly. He winked. “Fortunately I do not take my religion too seriously.” He reached under the table and did something. A man appeared at the door. Hamid barked a command in a curious tongue consisting largely of glottal clicks.

“Was that Omnilingua you were speaking?” Steed inquired affably,

not looking at Emma's face where she hung ten feet away, slowly rotating.

"Omnilingua was an earlier hobby," Hamid said placidly. "The first and only truly democratic and unbiased world language. It is made up of elements of over two hundred little-known dialects, spoken by over half the world's population."

"And thus equally incomprehensible to all." Steed nodded. "Nothing could be fairer than that."

Hamid glowered, a startling effect of ferocity superimposed on fragility. "It was ruthlessly suppressed through lack of support by the colonialist-imperialist-socialist powers! It was that which led me to decide on my present course—that, and other things." He smiled a secret smile.

"Quite right," Steed said as the servant reappeared and poured dark amber liquor into a snifter glass. "By the way, just what is your present course, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Not at all, my dear Major." Hamid beamed. "As I was remarking to Mrs. Peel, just before your arrival: what better circumstances in which to confide one's dreams and aspirations, eh?" He chuckled expansively, waving an arm. "Needless to say, my retainers are utterly obedient to my commands. Would you like to see a demonstration? Ali!" He turned to the servant. "Knife!"

The man's hand made a swift motion and a foot-long blade was in his fist. Hamid's eyes went to Steed, on to Blenkiron, then to Mrs. Peel.

"That slim white throat is something of a temptation," he mused, then barked at Ali as the man started forward. "One must be careful of what one says," he said in a confidential tone. "These fellows of mine are completely lit-eral-minded. They do precisely what I command, nothing more, nothing less. For example, would you like to see Ah cut off his own hand?" Hamid watched Steed interestedly.

"Not really," Steed said, looking bored. Ali stood impassively by, looking ready to cut a throat or dismember himself with equal indifference.

"You're right," Hamid said. "Why waste a useful tool on mere exhibitionism, eh?" He dismissed the man, who put the knife away and left silently, seemingly unmoved by the discussion.

"I take it you've tinkered about with his brains?" Steed said. "Rewired him, so to speak?"

"How perceptve, Major. Which brings me to my plans for you. You'll be ever so much more docile, once I've applied taps to your pain and pleasure centers. I'll need men like you, you know . . ."

As the old man talked, Steed was thinking furiously. Blenkiron would be of little help even released from his cage, after an unknown number of hours of confinement with his spine bent into a pretzel shape. And Emma Peel had been trussed up and hanging head-down now for an unspecified period. Even using the special techniques she had learned from the Yoga instructor she had studied with for some months last year, she would be bound to lose consciousness soon. And that, Steed reflected, would make matters doubly awkward . . .

“ . . . but I’m boring you, Major Steed,” Hamid said suddenly. “Your thoughts are wandering.” He chuckled contentedly and took another sip of his tea.

“But I think I can revive your interest. You were inquiring as to my present undertaking? Very simple: domination of the world.” He smiled more widely than ever.

Steed nodded, sniffing his glass. “Not very original, Professor,” he said mildly. “But no doubt a challenging hobby all the same.”

Professor Hamid’s smile thinned. “It’s true similar objectives have been entertained by smaller minds in the past, but not until now has a really first-rate intellect been engaged in the modest problems involved.”

“I was just wondering,” Steed said, “aren’t the present world powers likely to resent your taking over? I mean after all, they have a certain vested interest in things as they are.”

“Their interests must yield to their successor,” the old gentleman said in a tone of reasonableness. “Egypt yielded to Rome, Spain to Britain; so it is with all power structures. I represent merely the next stage in world history. You see, I am no egotist. I accept the truth that all human institutions are mortal. Doubtless in a thousand or so years some new conqueror will topple my dynasty as well. But by that time, such matters will no longer be of interest to you and me, Major Steed.” Hamid used his chuckle again. “In fact, long before that you will have ceased to follow events.”

“But not you?” Steed raised his eyebrows.

Hamid shook his head, not in negation but with a weary smile, as of one going again over a familiar argument.

“Science, my dear Major, is capable of wonders still undreamed of. Undreamed of by the common man, that is to say. And what is being done by the present masters of the planet to realize these dreams? Nothing. Have we a cure for cancer? No. Or even for the common cold? But intercontinental ballistic missiles—those we have in great number. As well as

anti-missiles and anti-anti-missiles, and probably anti-anti-anti-missiles, and——”

“I know,” Steed said. “Anti-anti-anti-anti-missile missiles.”

“Precisely. Now, I have no objection to missiles; they were rather useful propoganda in their day, effectively delaying war. But consider for a moment what *might* have been achieved with the funds and skills squandered on their development. The elimination of disease is only a beginning.’ Increased longevity follows—and beyond that—who knows? Immortality? The stars? Time travel?”

“And you propose to bring this all about? I must say it sounds rather fascinating.”

“All that is necessary is to release the powers of science from the thralldom of war preparation. To achieve this, quite obviously a single world government is required. I propose to supply that need.”

“And how will you begin?”

“I’ve already begun.” Hamid looked complacent.

“You’re referring to the rubber feet and the corpse with the missing ear and the rest of it?”

Hamid gave a pleased laugh. “You must forgive me my little jokes. Making all these preparations for taking over the world has been a tedious business. An occasional chuckle does one so much good, don’t you agree, Mrs. Peel?” he inquired suddenly, swinging to smile expectantly at her inverted face.

“Indeed I do, Professor,” she replied coolly. “And you have no idea how ridiculous you look when viewed from this position.”

Hamid glowered momentarily, then forced a bland expression back on his face.

“But again I am diverted from my subject by mere social amenities. I was saying . . . oh yes: about assuming control.” Hamid rubbed his hands together. “The first problem, of course, is the elimination of the so-called major powers—meaning simply those nations which have historically devoted themselves to the manufacture of engines of war to oppress others less belligerendy inclined.” He looked at Steed with pleased expectation.

“In other words . . . ?” Steed prompted.

“I have made arrangements to insure the collapse of the giants—and when the smoke clears, who will remain?” Hamid beamed. “The so-called underdeveloped nations of the world, who else?”

“Who else indeed?” Steed murmured. “But how will that advance the

cause of Omnilingua, Professor?”

Hamid registered mild reproof. “I should think that would be apparent, Major. I will assume leadership of the surviving peoples of the world and initiate the new era of enlightenment. It’s a great personal sacrifice, of course, but one which I am prepared to make in the interest of lofty principle.”

“I see. And how do you propose to achieve this office? Elections? A military coup? Divine right?”

“Ah, Major”—the old man waggled a finger—“that would be telling. Suffice it to say”—he smirked as if his Venus fly-trap had just been awarded a blue ribbon at the fair—“I have reason to believe no voice will be raised against me.”

“Which leaves just the minor detail of eliminating the major powers.”

“Exactly.” Hamid beamed as if all questions had been satisfactorily dealt with.

“I don’t suppose . . . ?”

“Now, now, Major. Don’t pry.” Hamid looked severe. While he was doing that, Steed grasped the edge of the table and heaved it suddenly into the little man’s lap. Hamid leaped backward, as agile as a monkey. Steed’s rush carried him past Emma’s suspended form; their hands brushed. In the next instant, two tall, mightily muscled coffee-faced men leaped into the room in response to the Professor’s shout. Steed sent a chair skittering into the path of one, but the attacker leaped it, his grab just missing Steed as he lunged with his umbrella, tripping a lever on a stainless steel bone-breaking press which promptly flopped open in time to catch the second man a terrific clout on the side of the head. Hamid yelled, the first man whirled to make another lunge at Steed, who ducked, causing the immense fist to smack solidly against the open mouth of his master. Hamid did a back-flip, fetched up against an iron maiden painted to resemble Sophia Loren. Steed just had time to note with satisfaction that the Professor was no longer smiling; then a net dropped from above him and bore him down in its tangles.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The apparatus into which Steed found himself strapped was a variation on the old steel caterpillar so favored by medieval religious counselors. The new, improved model was power-driven, however, and equipped with

padded arm and leg clamps, to insure that the victim could be tortured in complete comfort.

“It’s these little touches that mark the civilized man, don’t you agree, Major?” Professor Hamid asked as affably as he was able while holding a handkerchief to his damaged face. He was seated again in his easy chair beside Steed’s now empty one. At the side of the room, the author of the old gentleman’s bleeding nose and split hp was obediently adjusting a spike boot on his own foot.

“You’ll forgive my laughter, Professor,” Steed said, managing a wan smile in spite of the numerous blunt metal pegs now grinding into his spine. “But I’m afraid you’ve spoiled the whole effect with that last touch about starting World War III. Granted it’s a laudable goal—but quite unattainable, of course. Up till then I’d found your story delightfully imaginative.”

Hamid’s mouth twisted. “You imagine you can goad me into revealing my plans?” His wrinkled face broke into a smile. “And so you can—all in good time. We have . . . “ his eyes strayed to the wall clock—”several minutes remaining. How better to spend the interval than with you and your friends attempting to guess the answer, and my tightening up the adjustments on the, ah, massage device each time you miss?”

“No, thank you, Professor.” Steed performed a creditable yawn. “I’m tired of the game. The gentlemen of the police will be along any moment now to gather you in. I’ll just catch a few winks while waiting.”

Hamid laughed. “I know you, Major! You work alone—you and this lovely lady I have been forced to keep hanging about while we had our chat.”

“Ever wondered,” Steed asked casually, “how I followed you here?”

“By following the signal emitted by the transmitter set in the button in Mrs. Peel’s very attractive jacket, of course,” Hamid said easily.

“Oh, you knew about that——” Steed broke off at the look of sly pleasure on the Professor’s face. “Dear me, while I thought I was baiting you in with the person of Mrs. Peel, you were actually allowing me to supply her to you to use as bait to gather *me* in. My, how complex matters are getting to be.”

“When you failed to come along in search of Mr. Blenkiron, you left me no choice,” the Professor said reasonably.

“But you were about to tell me how you intend to unseat the major powers, remember, Professor?”

“Ah, ah, naughty!” The old gentleman wagged a finger reproachfully.

“Not for a while yet. I shall allow you then to see with your own eyes the results of true genius at work, before—well, let’s not dwell on what comes then.”

“I confess I *am* rather curious as to the reasons for your arranging to trickle tranquilizers into the beer pipes back at the New Empire,” Steed commented offhandedly.

Professor Hamid looked startled; then he smoothed his features. “So—you turned that up, did you? That was rather clever of you, Major. Still, it was merely a back-up system, not essential to the main purpose. And finding it kept you out of mischief for a time, eh?”

“That, and the others,” Steed agreed. “It seems to me you made a mistake there, Professor. If you hadn’t been so devilish clever with your bogus clues, we might not have discovered the canisters at all.”

“And if you hadn’t been so devilish busy dithering over my bogus clues, you might conceivably have interfered with the main effort.” Hamid sounded self-satisfied.

“We still might,” Steed said. “You did leave a number of paths open to exploration, you know. Your time is running out, Professor. Why not be a reasonable chap and surrender to me now——”

Hamid smiled. “It’s *your* time which is running out, my dear Major.” He pointed to the large red second hand on the clock. “Fifty-five seconds until phase one will be activated. Fifty. Forty-five. Oh, you’ll be amazed, Major—for the few minutes you’ll have during which you will be able to feel amazement. Forty seconds. Yes, even as we’ve relaxed here, chatting, the scheme has gone forward. True, by now Fletcher and his intrepid band of snoops and keyhole peepers may have awakened to at least some of the facts. But they’ll not tell anyone of what they suspect! That I guarantee! Thirty seconds!” Hamid snickered, poked a button in the arm of the chair. A TV screen flickered and fit up, showing a view of Piccadilly under a light drizzle, complete with the mutter of engines, the bleat of klaxons.

“Closed circuit,” the Professor explained. “Twenty seconds. Get ready. Mrs. Peel, do you have an adequate view? Excellent.” The Professor sighed happily. “Ten seconds. Nine. Eight . . . “

“If that’s the target for some sort of bomb,” Steed said, “it was a poor choice. The air base at High Greenham would have seemed a more likely spot.”

Hamid whirled, his mouth open. “What do you——” he started, and broke off, goggling past Steed. He leaped from his chair with a yell that

was cut off as a pair of handcuffs hissed past Steed's head and struck him square in his bruised mouth, knocking him down. Steed twisted his neck. Emma Peel, her hands free, was swinging her body upward to attack the ropes around her ankles.

"Ah, there you are," Steed said. "I was beginning to think you'd dropped the pick."

"I almost did," Emma said, holding onto the supporting rope with one hand and working at the knots with the other. Hamid was scrambling to his feet. He shouted orders to the man seated at the side of the room, who appeared fully absorbed in his work, sweating heavily as he applied pressure to the adjusting screw on the side of the boot. But the Professor's words, distorted by his injured mouth, were incoherent. The man ignored him, ignored Emma, struggling to free herself.

"Sto' he', you i'iot!" Hamid was dancing with rage and the pain of his battered lips. With a yell of frustration, he leaped at Emma Peel, seized her streaming hair, dragged her head back, bared his steel teeth which, Steed saw with horror, were razor sharp—and lunged for her throat. At the last possible instant, she twisted aside, slamming a side-of-hand blow at the old man, which sent him reeling back toward Blenkiron's cage. He caught himself, paused before charging in for the kill—and the American's hand, straining at the end of its long arm, seized him by the collar and dragged him back.

Hamid twisted his head back over his shoulder; snarling like a rabid dog, he clashed his steel teeth a fraction of an inch from Blenkiron's wrist. Blenkiron took a half twist in the collar; Hamid clawed at his fingers, snapped again, missed again, seized the entrapping arm with both hands, swung his feet clear of the floor; Blenkiron's arm sagged. The teeth clanged again, and this time a thin line of blood flowed from the American's naked wrist.

Hamid sagged for a moment, gathering strength for the final effort. Emma raked loose a final coil of rope, swung her legs down, and stood, swaying dizzily. She caught herself, lunged for Hamid as he bared his knife-edge teeth.

Her blow caught him on the side of the head; his teeth clicked on air. Blenkiron's grip relaxed, and the Professor slumped to the floor.

Emma jumped to Steed's side, threw the unlocking lever. With a groan, he sat up and swung his legs to the floor.

"I'll never complain of airline seats again," he muttered.

Together, they released Blenkiron, hauled him from his cage. He

scrambled, got his feet under him, looking up from a crouch like Quasimodo riding the bells.

“Thanks, sister——” he broke off and stared at Emma. Steed followed the direction of Emma’s gaze.

On the TV screen, a scene of utter chaos reigned. A double-decker bus bearing the legend GUINNESS MAKES YOU STRONG was wedged crossways in the street. A second bus, apparently attempting to bypass it, was tilting perilously, one set of wheels on the curb. A policeman was jumping up and down, waving his truncheon, while both bus drivers, a pair of irate conductors, and a gaggle of passengers leaned from the windows, seemingly all shouting at once. Other vehicles were packed in a solid, unmoving mass around the two stalled behemoths. Doors were popping open and drivers leaping out to join what was rapidly becoming an unruly mob. The sound of their mingled cries rose like a raucous surf roar.

“Do you suppose the Professor’s mad scheme was to tie up midmorning traffic?” Emma asked, wonderingly.

“It’s diabolical enough, but hardly calculated to send the ICBM’s screaming over the pole.”

She sank into a chair, picked up the brandy bottle from the small serving table, and took a small nip from the neck.

“Ratisfran,” she said. “Avnilt wadershink urdfob.”

“I didn’t know you were a student of Omnilingua,” Steed commented. “I assume you were offering me a drink.” He took the bottle and downed an ounce or two, offered it to Blenkiron.

The American shook his head painfully. “Never touch the stuff.”

“But we mustn’t forget the Professor,” Steed said. “After all, it was his private stock.” He lifted the ferocious old man’s head, pried out the murderous teeth, and dribbled a few drops between his puckered lips. The patient choked and snorted, fluttering his eyelids.

“Right; now let’s be on our way,” Steed said. “Mrs. Peel, I suggest you check the clothing of our fallen friend for weapons. We may need them.”

Emma was eyeing him with a curious expression. “Twang el ghe bruph elg nho redvacku omstalg?” she inquired in a tone of mild puzzlement.

“Remarkable,” Steed said, unaware that he too was talking gibberish. “I can readily see why it never caught on. But now I rather think we’d better get cracking before someone pokes his head in to see what’s keeping the Professor.” Steed was busy clamping the old man’s wrists with the cuffs which Emma had opened with the pick Steed had passed to her.

“Mnulckip dzurliki,” Hamid muttered dazedly. “Rom-gurp vilnip.”

“Quite,” Steed continued blithely. “You and Mrs. Peel can have long chats——”

“Whanksport raspihan!” Emma said urgently. “Ulvers-nout degreep ik ilmid.”

“Mrs. Peel,” Steed asked, frowning, “are you all right?”

Blenkiron muttered something, staring from one to the other.

“Rud Roon,” Emma said. “Um gor ank fieeg?”

Steed raised an eyebrow at her, glanced at Blenkiron. “Can you understand what she’s saying?”

Blenkiron gabbled something, frowning darkly.

“Fascinating,” Steed said. Then: “One!” he said aloud, noting as he did how his hps and tongue moved. “Two.” His lips closed in the middle of the word. “Three.” The sound was made by pressing the lower hp against the teeth.

Steed signaled the others to stand by. On a table at the side of the room he found a pencil and paper.

We’ve been administered something which affects the speech centers, he wrote. *Probably in the brandy.*

Emma read, gave him a startled glance and scribbled an answer: *Then that means . . .* She broke off, staring wide-eyed at the television screen. Steed knew all too well what she was thinking. If Hamid and his co-conspirators had somehow administered the same drug to everyone in the city . . . But how . . . ?

“Good Lord!” he said aloud, noting as he did that his mouth seemed to be shaping something like “Mum hoop.”

“The balloons . . . and those bottles and jugs in the house!” He had a sudden vivid image of a flock of gasbags, afloat, silent in the fog. “They needn’t even be manned,” he muttered. “They’re radar-neutral; nothing but wicker and silk. They’d never be seen until it was far too late . . .”

Emma caught Steed’s arm and said something urgently, pointing at the Professor.

“It’s no use asking him,” Steed said. “He drank from the same bottle.” He took the paper and pencil, jotted a message:

We must inform M.I.5 and the Defense Ministry at once. Also the PM and anyone else you can think of including the U.S. President.

Emma and Blenkiron nodded. Steed led the way toward the door while Emma assisted Blenkiron to hobble after him. “Mrulspat from gilnuk,” Emma was murmuring to herself, meaning, Steed assumed, “It

will be interesting to see how we get past the armed goons the good Professor has stationed all through the building.” She paused and looked questioningly at Steed.

“Nothing for it but to take the plunge,” he mumbled, and flung the door open. A large man with a scarred face stood towering in the gloom, arms folded, a set of brass knuckles glinting on a fist which gripped a stout club. There was a knife thrust in his belt and a heavy revolver at his hip. Half a dozen similarly attired attendants were spaced along the passage beyond him, all wearing zombielike expressions. As Steed paused, there was a yell from behind him. Professor Hamid dashed forward, shrieking commands: “Nris bumgrit! Roo foon gambas-tum! Ilre muspahatch!”

The large man’s mouth opened half an inch. He stared blankly at his master as Steed brushed him away and turned to Emma with a slight bow. “Mrs. Peel, shall we go?” he gabbled in courtly fashion.

“Um ik buhawney, ukpoo fleen.” She smiled equally graciously. Each of them took one of Blenkiron’s arms and they strolled away between the ranked ogres, while the Professor screeched frantically behind them.

They had almost reached the far end when Steed looked back. “Oh-oh, he’s writing something!” They jumped through the door, slammed and barred it. Almost at once, heavy fists were hammering on it. A gun boomed, and bits flew from the lock.

“Into the Rolls!” Steed snapped (although it came from his lips rather differently), and opened the right side door, assisted Emma and Blenkiron in. He dashed round the car, jumped into the driver’s seat, started up. As the barred door bulged under the attack, he gunned the heavy car back, bracing for a shock. But instead the metal door shot upward, triggered automatically, allowing them to hurtle under it, up the steep drive, and out into the street. Brakes squealed. A Morris Minor almost stood on its nose, coming to a stop six inches from the gleaming bonnet of the big car. Its door flew open and a small, plump-faced clerical type in a trilby hat and baggy tweeds sprang out, shaking his fist and shouting meaningless words.

“You too, eh?” Steed murmured to himself. He lifted his bowler in salute and gunned away down the narrow street.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The next few minutes’ drive was of the kind usually only encountered

in nightmares and Mexico City. Sober British motorists, driven half mad by the incomprehensible remarks hurled at them by their fellows in place of the usual cheery insults, instructions, and suggestions, turned to more direct measures. Affronted Jaguars crunched belligerently against offending Austin-Healeys. Indignant Sprites collided defiantly with MGs. Proud Humbers failed to yield to lesser cars. Amid the clang of crumpling metal and the tinkle of breaking glass, spirited Morgans hurled themselves at lumbering vans while stout-hearted Triumph Renowns shattered themselves against die steel barricades of interloping Buicks, Dodges, and Mercurys. Half a dozen blocks from the New Empire, the Rolls came to a final halt, wedged solidly among the battered hulks of a thousand smashed autos.

Steed tried the doors, found them blocked solidly by the adjacent wrecks. He lowered the windows and was looking into the musty interior of a prewar Austin. The irate owner, glad of an opportunity to vent his frustrated emotions on something softer than a radiator grille, attempted to skull Steed with a spanner, but missed his swing in the confined space and smashed his own thumb. Steed tumbled him, shouting, into the back seat and crawled through, then lent Emma a hand. Blenkiron, somewhat recovered now, followed. Three cars later, they emerged in a convertible; thereafter they continued in the open air, stepping from bonnet to bonnet to the accompaniment of shrill cries from behind cracked windscreens, and the hollow crunch of collapsing metal from the cheaper models.

The front of the New Empire was a scene of riot. Purple-faced security men scuffled with wild-eyed delegates of hundred hues. Frantic managerial personnel leaped and danced, shouting gibberish, in an attempt to restrain lesser ranks from deserting posts in lift and kitchen. Blank-eyed spectators of the inarticulate variety gaped, thrusting for a better view, while portly dignitaries of various schools alternately shouted for service and laid about them with umbrellas, portfolios, and rolled copies of *The Times*. Steed and Emma helped Blenkiron through, assisted by the tip of the former's tightly rolled umbrella and an occasional *yarwara* or *atewaza* stroke by the latter. There was a brief engagement fought at the revolving door, but by taking advantage of the inability of the opposing policemen to push in unison, Steed succeeded in forcing an entry. Inside, Fletcher's bony face loomed from the crowd.

"Hlimp!" he yowled. "Ek umboog! Janimayo!"

Steed caught his sleeve, dragged him aside, got out pencil and paper.

We've been drugged, he wrote.

Fletcher grabbed the paper.

Everyone has gone insane except me! he scribbled.

Steed replied: *Speech centers affected. Must get word to PM, etc.*

Fletcher read the paper and gnawed his cheek, rolling his eyes. In the background a radio blared nonsense.

“The first thing is to get clear of this din,” Steed thought. Holding Emma’s hand and urging Fletcher along by the elbow, with Blenkiron trailing, he pushed through to the lift. In silence they rode up to the Security Officer’s suite on the twenty-third floor. Fletcher ignored the excited squeakings, bleatings, and babblings of the half dozen clerical personnel still on duty there, went across to the blue-line telephone and dialed a number. He listened, winced, hung up without speaking, dialed another number. By the third call, the wince had developed into a full-fledged cringe.

Steed meanwhile had seated himself at a typewriter. While Emma looked over his shoulder, he typed somewhat haltingly in a journalistic two-finger style:

There’ll be motorists in severe distress in a matter of hours; not everyone will be fortunate enough to be parked near an exit. He paused to consider his next words. Fletcher came over and peered at the paper. Emma took over the keyboard:

Now that we know what’s happened, she wrote, surely an antidote can be found soon; meantime, it will occur to someone at BBC to flash a printed notice on the screen.

Morse code! Fletcher hammered out hurriedly, and sprang for the telephone. After dialing, instead of speaking, he cleared his throat and launched into a rapid series of dah-dits. He listened to the reply, beaming like a happy cadaver, dit-dah-ditted again, then rang off.

Emma switched on the telly. The screen flickered blankly, then lit up with a lettered announcement:

DUE TO TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES, REGULARLY SCHEDULED CONVERSATIONS WILL NOT BE HEARD AT THIS HOUR. INSTEAD, A PROGRAM OF NONSENSE WILL BE SUBSTITUTED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

Ha! They’re carrying this popularization scheme too far! Fletcher scribbled in ragged longhand across the back of an envelope.

I URGE THE PEOPLE IN THESE ISLANDS TO REMAIN CALM, the screen now spelled out. I HAVE, BE ASSURED, BEEN CLOSETED WITH THE CABINET FOR THE PAST HALF HOUR

PURSUING VARIOUS ALTERNATIVE PROPOSALS FOR THE PROSECUTION OF CORRECTIVE MEASURES TO ENSURE A PROMPT RESUMPTION OF NORMAL CONDITIONS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, AND I FEEL I MAY SAY WITHOUT FEAR OF CONTRADICTION—OF SUCCESSFUL CONTRADICTION, THAT IS TO SAY—THAT AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF GENERAL INTEREST WILL BE MADE WITHIN A SHORT TIME.

“It’s reached the PM, I see,” Steed thought. He looked out the window. Far below, stalled automobiles blocked the streets as far as the eye could see. But already wreckers were at work on the fringes, while policemen held up large placards with printed instructions such as MOVE ALONG and GO TO YOUR HOMES.

Emma came and stood beside him. *Poor Professor Hamid*, she wrote on a steno pad, *in a few hours this silly business will be straightened out and his grand schemes will have to come to naught, after all his effort.*

Save your sympathy, Steed started, but broke off as a low rumble sounded beyond the glass. He scanned the skies, made out the tiny silvery shape of an airplane droning across the city at high altitude from the west. “Right on schedule,” he thought. “At least Fastslap hasn’t been affected by —” He stopped, struck by a sudden, dawning realization. He whirled and Emma was staring at him wide-eyed.

“Dear me,” Steed thought. “It seems we underestimated the Professor after all. That fellow’s headed straight for Moscow with a load of H-bombs—and I’ll wager a dozen of Tokay there’s not a man in Britain who can pronounce the recall signal!”

Chapter Twenty-Five

It seemed to Steed that he stood for an eternity with his brain whirling, while Emma, Blenkiron, and Fletcher stared in horror after the swiftly vanishing bomber. With an effort, he turned to Fletcher, scribbled a note:

Call the Air Ministry, tell them to use Morse code.

They waited tensely while Fletcher tapped the phone with a ballpoint pen. Two minutes later the reply came back.

Roger, good thinking.

Steed paced the room until a second message came in:

All aircraft recalled with the exception Moscow flight. Unfortunately appears no crew member aboard with knowledge of code.

What does Moscow say to that? Steed wrote. Fletcher queried. There was a long wait. Somewhere a clock ticked. A female typist wept into her hanky.

If Moscow goes, London and Paris go too, the reply came at last.

“Like that, eh?” Steed mumbled. “Right, then, Mrs. Peel. It seems that now we’re *really* needed!”

Emma was looking at him with an expression of intense concentration. She caught up her pad and pencil. *Mr. Blenkiron drank no brandy, I believe?* she wrote.

Steed nodded, thinking, “Which means he can still speak English—of a sort.”

Emma wrote a note to Fletcher, who read it, hurried from the room, came back with a dictating machine. He plugged it in, started the spools turning. A Civil Service type voice began droning out gibberish with an Oxford drawl. All eyes turned to Blenkiron. He listened intently, frowned, then nodded, somewhat doubtfully, it seemed to Steed.

“Good, that means he’s unaffected,” Steed announced. He jotted a note to Fletcher:

Get Bomber Command on the line. Have them patch Blenkiron through to the aircraft.

Your proposal unthinkable, the reply came, after a wait. *Mr. Blenkiron is not a British subject and is not cleared for access to top secret information.*

“Clear thinking,” Steed remarked (to himself). “The world may end in nuclear holocaust, but proper procedures will have been followed throughout.” He dashed off another note:

Tell the bloody idiot at the other end that if the signal isn’t given by someone, even an unclassified alien, within the next few minutes, there’ll be no further need for security regulations or for the imbeciles who enforce them.

Fletcher looked shocked and rattled out the message. More minutes passed like stepped-on beetles. Then the phone clacked into life.

On reconsideration, your request approved. Then, after a suitably impressive pause, it transmitted the code word.

“Take over, Blenkiron,” Steed urged the litde man to the instrument. He read the final message, nodded. There was the sound of a voice from the other end, crackling over the drumming of engines. Blenkiron held the receiver from his ear, waiting for a pause in the excited speech. When it came, he quickly said a single word which sounded to Steed like “stug

hinch.”

The voice yammered again. Blenkiron repeated his word. He said it again, louder. He shouted it. Then he shrugged, put the phone down, and wrote: *Those birds are talking the same kind of junk as the rest of you.*

“That means,” Steed thought with a chill sensation around the heart, “that they got a whiff of nonsense gas too. Blenkiron gave them the recall signal, but they can’t understand it.”

The others understood the fatal implications of Blenki-ron’s failure as well as Steed. They stood staring at each other with expressions of horror. All but Emma Peel. She was nibbling her lower lip and glancing at her wristwatch.

What is the aircraft’s position now? she typed out swiftly, using, Steed noted with envy, all ten fingers.

Fletcher checked, reported back: *Orbiting Lympne, preparatory to taking up Moscow approach course at 1139 hrs. GMT.*

Emma nodded.

Is the machine removed from the ductwork still on hand? she wrote.

In the strong room, Fletcher replied. *Why?*

Emma snatched the paper and wrote: *Never mind why. Get it and take it to the roof, soonest!* To Steed she dashed off: *Where’s that tub of plastic glop? The one the bubbles are made of?*

In the freight staging room, level 120.

Emma nodded, jerked a thumb over her shoulder, and headed for the door at a run. Steed followed. His watch said 10:52 a.m. Forty-seven minutes to the point of no return.

Chapter Twenty-Six

In the lift, Emma pushed the button savagely. In silence they rocketed upward, braked to a halt, stepped out into the bleak little chamber occupying the topmost level of the lofty structure. The tub of plastic foam, oozing fluffy gobs like Harpo Marx curls, rested near the door marked HELIPAD ACCESS—AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. Emma opened a wall locker, tossed an orange-dyed flight suit at Steed, pulled one on herself, added a crash helmet. Together they hefted the tub, went through the door, up a flight of steel steps and out into the brisk, wintry gale and a vast view of gray clouds above and below. The two small helicopters were still moored on the helipad. There were no attendants in

sight.

They loaded their cargo into the nearer of the two machines. As they finished, Fletcher arrived with a second man carrying the atomizer. Steed helped them lift it aboard, then stepped in and closed the hatch, while Emma checked gauges. She pressed the lever that started the rotors turning; the engine caught with a blatter and a belch of black smoke, then settled down to a steady roar. Without waiting to warm up, Emma hauled back on the control column and lifted off into the lead-colored sky. Looking back, Steed caught a last glimpse of Fletcher's upturned, wondering face.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Squall winds buffeted the light craft, sluggish with its heavy load. Navigating by instruments, Emma ascended to three thousand feet, which placed the copter between cloud layers, then took up a heading of 120° and adjusted power for full revs. Steed, meanwhile, twiddled the radio, brought in an authoritative voice loud and clear: "Up hrub naspovits!" it barked. "Up hrub, sost up noplots! Sost up noplots! Up hrub, ikwam!"

"Roger, High Greenham," Steed muttered, deducing the source of the transmission from the frequency—one allocated to Fastslap operations. "Sorry we don't speak the same language, but then we never did, did we?"

Below, the peaceful Middlesex landscape showed for a moment through a rent in the overcast. A beam of pale sun gleamed down through a hole above. On the rare occasions that holes in various layers momentarily coincided, Steed reflected that the British countryside had its summer.

The copter rocked in the wind. The rotors beat the air steadily. Steed wrestled the projecting apparatus into position between his knees, and after studying the controls, set the nozzle for maximum dispersion, the pressure regulator for full capacity. He cleared the ends of the feed lines and connected them up. As he finished, there was a growing roar that drowned the buzz of the copter's engines. A jet fighter plane flashed into view, climbing vertically out of the clouds below. It did a snap roll as it passed the heli; Steed caught a glimpse of a white-hel-meted face staring out through the canopy.

Seconds later, another jet roared out of the clouds, banked vertically, executed a wide circle about the heli, which rocked and bounced in the

turbulence. Emma steered grimly, not even looking at the interlopers as they settled down, one above and one below, circling to keep pace with the slower craft.

The clock on the instrument panel now read 1102.

“Thirty-seven minutes,” Steed mumbled unintelligibly. “Will we make it?”

“Ip muplum,” Emma said grimly, pointing to the radar-scope. She tapped a blip at the edge of the eight-inch screen. “Wob dip,” she said. Then she scribbled on her knee pad: *The bomber is orbiting at sixteen thousand feet. I’ll have to try to get upstairs now.*

“Roger, Mrs. Peel,” Steed said to her uncomprehending ears. There was a change in the sound of the chopping blades. The clouds above approached while those below receded. In two minutes they were surrounded by streamers of cloud. The jets closed in to a quarter-mile distance, as if worried by the sudden climb. Then the clouds closed about them like gray chowder. The jets could no longer see them, Steed knew. But their radar still had them in view, and their heat-seeking missiles could seek them out unerringly even through cream of asparagus. He crossed his fingers and smiled reassuringly at Emma.

As they broke through the top, the fighters were there ahead of them. One came rushing silently at them, swooped past no more than fifty feet above. The shock wave hit like an exploding wall of water that spun the heli, flipped it half around, tossed it away. As Emma righted the craft, the second jet made a pass from the opposite side; again they skittered like a shuttlecock in the backwash.

They want us to descend, Steed wrote. Emma read and shook her head. Steed patted her shoulder. The heli was still climbing, but slowly. Emma pointed to the altimeter. It showed seven thousand feet. *We’ll have to lighten ship,* she wrote. She pulled off a shoe and tossed it overboard.

Steed looked around the cabin, opened the small sliding panel beside him, and tossed out the chart book, half a dozen pens, a thermos bottle, a spare set of seat cushions. Emma followed with another shoe and a pair of nylons. Steed removed his shoes and put them out, following with his helmet, a packet of emergency rations, and the first-aid kit. Then, getting into the spirit of the thing, he wrenched the radio loose and tumbled it out. The altimeter needle began an upward creep. Steed was just in the act of tossing the fire extinguisher out when, with a roar like an Underground train, one of the jets shot past dead ahead, rolled, banked and came shooting back, aimed dead for the fragile heli. Steed was looking directly

into the air intake when a sheer stocking which had been fluttering leisurely downward was sucked into that rapacious maw. An instant later, the fighter bucked, bulged, emitted smoke all along its length. The canopy whipped off and away. The pilot, strapped to his seat, ejected, firing up in a high trajectory past the heli as the aircraft streaked past below, continued onward for a hundred yards, and exploded with a blinding flash.

The wind whipped the smoke away. A few small pieces rattled down, clattering off the rotors. A parachute opened nearby. The pilot shook his fist as he floated down past them.

But Steed's attention was caught by something else; a streak of white smoke, elongating ahead. One of the fighter plane's missiles, ignited by the blast and blown clear, was shooting across the sky in a great arc, turning to head back toward the nearest heat source—which, Steed realized with a curious sensation of unreality, was the engine of the heli. He tapped Emma's arm, pointed. She nodded, gave Steed a brave smile, closed her eyes and put her fingers in her ears.

"Good idea," Steed mumbled, and followed suit. Then curiosity reasserted itself. He opened one eye, saw the red-painted warhead rushing at him from less than a mile away.

And saw the surviving fighter plane slanting upward toward them from the clouds, angling to align itself with its victim, closing the gap for the kill. The runaway missile veered, with the swiftness of thought flashed across the gap, overtook and merged with the jet. Steed winced in readiness for the blast, but none came. It appeared the firing mechanism had been put out of action by the same accident that had sent it on its way. But a dud bomb up the tailpipe is a sufficient problem for even the keenest pilot. The plane veered, wobbled, and fell away on one wingtip. Far below, a second parachute blossomed, sank into the clouds. Steed tapped Emma Peel on the shoulder, made a V for victory sign.

"Three more and you're an ace," is what he tried to say.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

There were five minutes left before the bomber's flight plan required it to break off its circling flight and take up its course for Moscow. The copter was at fifteen thousand feet now, its engines laboring in the thin air. Their position, Steed estimated, was within ten miles of the rendezvous point. Both he and Emma Peel scanned the sky, searching for the

swift silver shape of the big ship.

And there—a glint of light far above! Emma put the copter in a tight turn toward the slowly circling bomber. At the same time, Steed thrust the snout of the foam generator out through the hatch and pressed the appropriate levers. The apparatus coughed, bucked, then spouted a flood of gleaming white foam out into the thin blue air.

Steed looked back. The gob of foam had spread out, swelling, expanding, writhing into the shape impressed on it in the factory, until a vast A hung in the sky. While Emma held course steadily, Steed changed settings, fired again. A second letter took shape, and a third, and a fourth and a fifth. Steed paused to rub some circulation back into his frozen fingers, then resumed work. Another letter, another, and another, while the great ship droned across half a mile above. He added a final L. With a glutinous *schlokkkk!* the hose emitted a string of commas, exclamation points, and the odd quotation mark and fell still.

“The alignment could be improved, I suppose,” Steed mumbled proudly. “But the message should be clear enough!”

Dazzling and distinct against the gray backdrop, the fifty-foot letters sparkled as if lit with an inner light, spelling out the recall signal: APRIL FOOL. Silent and tense, Emma and Steed watched the bomber. One minute to go. Would the great ship break off and head west, for its home base—or east, toward the end of the world . . . ?

Emma clutched Steed’s arm. The sound of the big plane’s engine had changed. Black smoke boiled from its wing-mounted power plants as it shifted to cruise speed. The circular course straightened out, became a straight line. In a matter of seconds, the bomber had disappeared—into the wan glow of the morning sun.

“We did it!” Steed mumbled with a sigh of relief.

“Erm gob hp!” Emma agreed with a radiant smile.

“Right,” Steed mumbled, brisk again. “Now let’s get back to London and see what can be done about putting our conversational abilities to rights. Some rather extraordinary explanations are due to be made, and I for one don’t want to miss a word of them.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Once again, Steed and Emma Peel were in the latter’s apartment, having a drink before dinner.

“I still feel a bit sorry for the Professor, in spite of those steel teeth,” Emma said. “He certainly made the most of what he had—and it almost worked.”

“I can imagine him, frustrated in his work with Omni-lingua,” Steed said, “turning instead to brain-mapping. Then the discovery of the remarkable properties of D-lys-ergic acid deoxydiethylamide tartrate.”

“The announcement of Fastslap must have come out at about the same time. He saw how he might make use of what otherwise would have been no more than a laboratory curiosity. And all the rest was a mere sideshow to divert us from the main event. Rather clever, really. What do you suppose will happen to him now?”

“Perhaps he’ll be offered a post writing government regulations,” Steed suggested. “His qualifications in the production of the incomprehensible are obvious.”

“I suppose the fact that a .01 percent concentration of alcohol in the blood cancels the effect of the drug renders it useless as a weapon,” Emma said, almost regretfully.

“In its present form—but our chemistry boys may come up with a whiskey-proof variant at any time. Meanwhile, we must maintain our immunity.” Steed lifted his brandy glass in salute.

The music issuing from the TV screen had ceased, and a voice had taken its place:

“ . . . in reference to the events which have, in the preceding hours, rendered—or have tended to render, to the extent commensurate with the British character—the normal institutions and agencies of government less than totally effective, it is with pleasure that I take this opportunity to reaffirm——”

“Good heavens!” Emma almost dropped her glass. “It’s started again!”

Steed listened judiciously. “No,” he decided. “It’s just the PM, making one of his speeches.”

“Oh,” Emma said, relieved. She sighed. “If the Professor could only develop something that would make politicians talk sense, he could take over anytime—and I might even help him.” She poured again. She and Steed touched glasses, as the sound of the Fastslap flight swelled overhead, drowning out the voice from the screen.

The End