

# The Avengers #6

## The Drowned Queen

Keith Laumer

### Chapter One

There was a sense of alien hostility about the wide, featureless glass-slab door, as though beyond it lay mysteries mere man was never meant to fathom.

“Nonsense,” John Steed said firmly to himself, peering into the polished surface which mirrored his flawlessly cut lounging suit, his gray silk cravat secured by a pearl of flawless ancestry, his nervous expression. Squaring his jaw, Steed made a microscopic adjustment to the angle of his dove-gray bowler and pushed through into the hushed interior of the Boutique Madeleine.

A lean bird of prey with jeweled claws and a varnished coiffure descended on him, trailing a cloud of ten-guinea scent and uttering shrill clucking noises. Steed retreated a pace or two, extending his rolled umbrella like an epee toward the powdered, painted, and corseted apparition. Thus fended off, the latter rearranged her wrinkles to expose a set of gleaming white dentures.

“ . . . something in a naughty little cabana set, perhaps, sir? I’ve only just received a shipment of mink and ermine bikinis, most fetching. Or possibly you had something more intimate in mind. Our topless bottomless pajamas might be just the thing . . . ”

“I’m, ah, looking for a young lady,” Steed interjected into the sales pitch. “Auburn hair, trim figure, quite a lovely face, melodious voice, elegant manner in a swinging sort of way. Middle twenties.”

"I'm frightfully sorry," the saleswoman said in a subzero voice. "One must bring one's own playthings. We merely supply the wrappings."

"Tara King is hardly a plaything," Steed corrected. "She happens to be . . ."

"I wouldn't say any more if I were you, Steed," a melodious voice interrupted from behind a screen. "You might give Madame Madeleine the wrong impression."

"Ah, there you are," Steed stepped past the proprietress and caught a charming glimpse of lacy feminine undies before Tara swirled the curtain about her. "I've been in half the shops on Carnaby Street looking for you, a harrowing experience I must say. No wonder tracking Bengal tigers in their native haunts doesn't faze you."

"I assume," Tara said sweetly, "that there's some perfectly fascinating explanation for your bursting into a lady's boudoir?"

"Of course," Steed said. "I'm afraid you'll have to come along at once. Time and tide wait for no man, you know."

"That remark must be fraught with significance," Tara said. "Still, it's hardly reason enough for me to dash into the street in my unmentionables."

"Sorry," Steed backed out of the cubicle, avoiding the owner's glare. "But we're sailing in three hours on the *Atlantic Queen*. I wasn't joking about the tide."

"The *Atlantic Queen*?" Tara sounded excited. "Steed, what a marvelous surprise! How did you ever manage to wangle a holiday for us? And on the *Queen*! I thought you had to be a Prime Minister or a telly star to get aboard her!"

Steed cleared his throat, leaned close to the screen. "It's not exactly what one might call a holiday," he said in a low tone. "That is, it's not to be entirely a pleasure trip. What I mean to say is—we'll be working. Special security duty. Purely routine, the general assured me."

"Oh. I might have known. Still . . ." her tone regained some of its sprightliness. "Just to be a passenger on the world's first submarine luxury liner on her maiden voyage is something to tell one's grandchildren."

"Ah . . . we're not precisely passengers, technically speaking. Actually, we'll be operating under cover, posing as staff."

"Better and better. Where will I be posted? In the bilge, trimming the eyes off potatoes?"

"His Nibs didn't say. But don't worry, I'm sure our duties will be purely ceremonial."

“Your confidence in the general is touching. Still, in any case it should be rather a lark.”

“Quite. So if you’ll get a move on—”

“Don’t be silly,” Tara said. “You wouldn’t want me to come without adequate working clothes, would you? Now, Madame Mad, I think I’ll have the chemise—the sky-blue—and the gold sheath—and the playsuit—the fish-scale green one. And one of those chinchilla two-piecers . . .”

Steed wandered back to the plate-glass front, stared uncomfortably out past the scarecrow mannikins draped in vividly colored impracticalities embellished with glass jewelry. Across the street, his stately ‘29 Bentley waited at the kerb, looking curiously antiquated against the frothy backdrop of a window lettered in gold script *Modes Pari-sienne*. A fattish man in dark glasses and a shabby coat and mismatched trousers was working his way slowly along the walk toward the car, tapping his way with a heavy white cane. Steed winced as the blind man thumped the rubber tip against the vintage vehicle’s wing. Apparently confused by the unfamiliar contour, the man recoiled, dropping the stick. He fingered the air for a moment, then stooped out of sight behind the car, still groping.

Steed pushed through the door, quickly crossed the street upwind of the man. The latter was just rising, gripping the recovered cane. He dusted his knees, clanged the cane against the Bentley’s running-board, set off at a brisk walk. Steed came up behind him in a few silent strides, took a five pound note from his pocket, and let the wind pluck it from his fingers. The bill fluttered past the hurrying man—who instantly lengthened his stride, and unerringly pinned the currency down with his cane.

As the blind man paused, swiveling his head about for all the world like one looking to see if one has been observed, Steed eased up on his off-side and gripped his left arm above the elbow.

“Let me give you a hand crossing,” he said cheerfully. “Traffic’s a bit sticky today.”

The man hung back, pivoting on his cane as Steed urged him forward.

“Er, ah, that’s kind of you, guv, but I’ve changed me mind,” he said. “I’ll just nip back and feed the birds in the park for a bit, poor creatures.”

“You must have lost your bearings,” Steed said. “There’s no park nearby.”

“There’s nuffing in it, Guv, I’m a bloke who don’t mind walking a few miles if it will bring happiness to the hearts of our fewered friends.” He tugged at Steed’s restraining grip.

"In that case, I'll just give you a lift," Steed insisted. "Come along, my Bentley's parked just over here."

"Not ruddy likely!" The man jerked free, stooped for the bill and struck Steed's knee a sharp blow with his face. He staggered back, brushed the smashed glass from his face. With a snarl, he swung his fist in a haymaker, missed as Steed leaned back, then whirled to run. Steed flipped up his umbrella, caught it by the tip, extended the crook in time to hook the fugitive's ankle. He struck the pavement face first with a nasty crunch.

"Steed!" Tara King's voice sounded behind him. "You started without me!" She looked with a dismayed expression at the plump man groaning at her feet, his shattered shades lying nearby. "A blind man? Steed, that's hardly cricket."

"Poor chap must have tripped," he said blandly. A dragonlike dowager gave Steed a glacial look as he hauled the man to his feet. "The idea of a ride in the Bentley seemed to alarm him."

At the words, the man suddenly tore free and plunged into the nearest alley-mouth.

"Let him go," Steed said. "Doubtless just a hireling. Let's go see what he planted on the car."

A quick examination disclosed a plastic bomb tucked up under the transmission housing, linked by a wire to the starter cable.

"First touch of the button and she'd have gone," Steed commented. "Curious. I wonder what he has against vintage autos?"

"Maybe it was the driver he was after."

"Nonsense. Who would want to kill an inoffensive chap like me?"

"I don't suppose it has anything to do with the trip we're planning?"

"Impossible. This isn't to be one of *those* jobs." Steed looked thoughtful. "Or do you suppose His Nibs was pulling my leg?"

Tara smiled soothingly. "Come along, Steed. It's a two hour drive to Southampton. You can spend the whole time meditating on perfidy in high places."

"I've a good mind to tell him we're not going," Steed said as he started up with a roar and pulled the heavy machine away from the kerb. "We could spend the weekend at Bexhill-on-Sea. I understand there's quite an adequate little hotel there with an outstanding cellar."

"What sort of story would *that* be for your grandchildren?" Tara inquired severely.

"One or two more bogus blind men, and the little beggars will be wanting a granddad."

“Never fear. An old gypsy told me you weren’t destined to die on land.”

“Very encouraging. I don’t suppose you asked about my chances at sea?”

“The *Queen* won’t be precisely *at sea*,” Tara reminded him. “She cruises at two hundred feet under the surface.”

“A technicality,” Steed said. “Still, I suppose if I didn’t go I’d always wonder how it would have turned out.”

“Of course,” Tara agreed. “Much better to be on the spot and see everything at first hand.”

“I’d as soon view disaster from a distance.” Steed gave Tara an encouraging smile. “Not that there’ll be any disasters, of course. The *Queen* is the finest ship ever launched. She’ll make the crossing to New York in three days; and a typhoon on the surface wouldn’t even jiggle a teacup aboard her.”

“Three thousand lucky passengers will have a gala cruise, and British maritime supremacy will stand triumphantly demonstrated,” Tara agreed brightly.

“Unless she sinks,” Steed said gloomily.

“Quite,” Tara smiled as the brisk breeze tousled her hair. “Unless she sinks.”

## Chapter Two

At Southampton, a special pier had been constructed to accommodate the world’s newest and most advanced luxury liner. At his first glimpse of the mighty vessel, Steed paused to give an appreciative whistle. Long and low she lay in the water, dazzling white in the autumn sun, aglitter with polished fittings and fluttering pennants. Her upperworks were low, streamlined; the contours of her hull rounded and slim. There was a gala air about the scene: Crewmen in immaculate whites moved about on deck; on the pier, a gay crowd chattered, waved, exchanged embraces and warming draughts from hip flasks.

“Most impressive,” Steed murmured. “She looks like a cross between the *Lusitania* and a Polaris sub, with overtones of the odd rocket ship.”

“She’s vast,” Tara said. “She must be twice the size of any other ship afloat!”

“Actually, her tonnage is just over one hundred and twenty thousand,”

a brisk voice said beside them. “Her length is twelve hundred and two feet, and her beam one hundred and twenty. Her top speed on the surface is only forty-five knots, but submerged she can clip off a steady sixty-five, rain or shine, ha-ha.”

Steed turned to survey a short, youngish man in blinding whites, with gold-incrusted shoulder boards. “Compared with the *Atlantic Queen*,” their informant continued, “the *Elizabeth II* is a mere rowboat of 84,000 tons.”

“Very impressive,” Steed said, noting the loops of gold braid encircling the man’s cuff. “I say, are you the captain?”

The small man drew himself up. “I,” he stated firmly, “am Mr. Glimp, Assistant Purser. Acting Assistant Purser, I should say. Actually, Deputy Acting Assistant Purser, during the indisposition of the Acting Assistant Purser.”

“Is he ill?” Steed inquired courteously.

“No, he’s trapped in the J deck lavatory,” Glimp said shortly. “Spot of bother with the locks.”

“I see. And what about the assistant purser?”

“Last seen signing autographs in the C deck saloon bar, surrounded by a veritable horde of screaming admirers.”

“Remarkable. And the purser himself?”

The DAAP gave Steed a shocked look. “Closeted with the Prime Minister, I shouldn’t wonder, getting his last-minute briefing.”

“I suppose there’s no point in asking about the captain and first officer?”

“Meditating in their quarters, I should guess,” the small man said in a hushed voice. “In an hour theirs shall be the responsibility for taking to sea the largest ship ever constructed on this planet. Indeed, the largest movable artifact ever assembled under the sun. Her engines harness the power of a thousand Niagaras. Her passenger list includes the most brilliant names on the roster of Empire—and her cargo is nothing less than British prestige itself!”

“Plus the odd nonentity such as ourselves,” Steed put in modestly. “Could you suggest how we might go about getting aboard?”

The official looked them up and down. “You *are* manifested?” he said doubtfully, drawing a sheaf of papers from an inside pocket.

“Of course. Mr. Steed—and Miss Tara King.”

“Steed. Steed. Ah, yes. Here you are. J. Steed?” He gave him a surprised look. “You should have said you were ship’s complement. You’ll

be on D deck, port side, next to the heat exchangers.”

“You did say . . . heat exchangers?”

“Of course. You didn’t imagine a ballroom dancing instructor rated first class accommodations, I trust. And you, miss. King. King. Ah, here we are. Physiotherapist. Right, you’ll be accommodated in the staff quarters on E deck, aft, between the Hungarian string ensemble and the Hot Fudge Sundaes.”

“The hot fudge whats?” Tara inquired.

“A vocal group. But never fear, they’re under strict instructions not to practice in their cabins between the hours of four and six A.M.”

“I see. The trick is to crowd eight hours’ sleep into the respite, eh?”

“By no means. I doubt if you’ll catch a wink during the crossing. But after all, it’s only seventy-two hours.”

“Steed,” Tara said sweetly, “it’s just occurred to me that if we hurry we might reach Bexhill-on-Sea in time for tea.”

“Nonsense, Tara,” Steed said airily. “It will do you a world of good to re-establish contact with contemporary music. As for me . . .” he eyed the Deputy Acting Assistant Purser expectantly. “I assume the passenger list includes a number of personable young heiresses whose fox-trot needs brushing up?”

“It’s been my observation in the past that that type usually have their own instructors available. The two-hundred-pounds, over-sixty lot is your department. Shall we go aboard now?”

Tara and Steed exchanged glances. “Why don’t we ever get the easy ones?” he inquired.

“Like penetrating the NKVD,” Tara suggested.

“Do you suppose someone doesn’t like us?”

“Either that—or they trust us.”

“In that case, I suppose we have no choice.”

“I suppose not.”

“After you, Miss King.”

“Thank you, Steed.”

## Chapter Three

The cabin to which the DAAP led Steed, after dropping Tara King in a brightly lit corridor filled with loud sounds and lounging mod types, was an austere cell eight feet on a side, equipped with dun-colored walls, a

dun-colored rug, a desk, a chair, and a double-deck bunk on the lower half of which a dun-colored man reclined, smoking a large cigar. Steed observed this through a pall of pungent smoke emanating from the equally dun-colored stogie.

“You must be the dancing-master chap,” the brown man stated in a Calcutta accent and a tone which lacked enthusiasm. “Well, I’m Balani, and we may as well get things straight at the outset. I’m an easy fellow to get along with, so long as there’s no liquor in the room, no loud noises, no women, and above all—no snoring.”

“What about a spot of breathing?” Steed inquired pleasantly. “I say, would you mind if I opened the window?”

“What window? We’re forty feet from the outer hull—and there’s nothing on the other side of that but green water.” The Indian puffed furiously, rolling his eyes.

“Of course, how unobservant of me,” Steed said comfortably. “Do you mind if I turn on the fan?”

“I can’t abide the noise,” Balani said flatly. He waved his cheroot, distributing ash on the rug. “Mind you don’t bring food into the room! Makes ants. Can’t stand insects!”

Steed opened the narrow closet door; garments bulged out. A scuffed Gladstone bag toppled at his feet.

“Here, don’t go mucking about with my things,” Balani barked. “No respect for the rights of others!”

“Thoughtless of me,” Steed murmured. “By the way, do you mind if I let Rollo out for a romp?” He patted his suitcase.

“What’s that?” The dark-faced man frowned ferociously, his gold teeth gleaming in the smog. “What’s Rollo?”

“My boa constrictor. Part of my act. Friendly chap. If you waken and find him curled up with you, pay no attention. He’s just seeking warmth and companionship. He won’t crush you unless you move suddenly.” Steed began undoing the luggage straps.

“Boa constrictor? Romp? Companionship?” Balani was out of the bunk and flat against the door in a trice. His pot belly quivered under the taut flannel of his long-handled underwear. “Leave that strap be!” he yelled in a voice gone suddenly shrill.

“Poor Rollo’s been penned up so long he’s likely to be a bit excited at first,” Steed said, continuing to worry the strap. “But if you’ll simply ignore him, he’ll soon calm down and begin to think about his dinner.”

“You . . . you’re insane! A boa constrictor—aboard ship? I’ll report it



to the steward! I'll report it to the purser! I'll report it to the captain!"

"You dislike animals?" Steed raised an eyebrow. "That's hardly British, old man."

"I'm not British! I'm an Indian born and bred, and I detest all animals, including pet reptiles!" Balani scabbled at the latch, fighting to open the door while pressed against it.

"If I were you I'd do up the flap before faring forth," Steed called after him, but Balani was already gone. Steed sighed and switched on the ventilator, then opened his bag, tossing an armful of Balani's garments under the bed to make room in the closet for his own.

He had almost finished when a sound caught his ear: A low buzzing, emanating from a pot of plastic petunias, He leaned close, heard a faint, crackly voice:

" . . . means there are two aboard. I don't like it!"

A pause followed. Then the same voice hissed: "*Find out! See to it at once! There's no place in this operation for unexplained coincidences, no matter how trivial!*"

Another pause. It seemed, Steed reflected, that he was hearing one side of a telephone conversation.

"*Look out for the woman,*" the whispery voice continued. "*I've heard that she's the really dangerous one.*"

Another pause. Then: "*Good. No traces, remember. It will be just another mystery of the sea.*"

There was a longish pause. Steed wished the reception were clearer.

"*No! We must not be seen together—until after,*" the soft voice declared. A *click!* followed, then silence. Steed stood for a moment rubbing his chin with his finger. A stealthy tap sounded at the door.

"Balani?" a voice whispered.

Steed rose and moved close to the door, listening. There was a soft rustling sound. The knob turned, the door swung inward and a mop of platinum blond hair appeared in the opening, over a piquant feminine face. A pair of china-blue eyes widened at the sight of Steed.

"Oh! I thought . . . I mean . . . where's Mr. Balani?"

"He stepped out."

The girl darted a swift look around the cramped cabin. "Out where?"

"He didn't say. Left in a bit of a hurry. He was muttering something about snakes as he left."

"Snakes? Poor Balani." The girl nibbled her lip. "I was afraid he wouldn't be able to go through with it."

Steed gave his caller an inquiring look.

“He signed on because he thought it would be good publicity for his act. He’s a magician, you know. Frightfully clever. But he’s also an agoraphobe, a claustrophobe, a hydrophobe, and a phobophobe.”

“Phobophobe?”

“Fear of being afraid. Mr. Balani was a very nervous man. He had the idea he could balance one phobia against another and manage somehow, but I suspected all along it was hopeless.” The girl sighed. “I suppose this means I’m out of a job, too.” She caught Steed’s look. “I was to be his assistant,” she explained.

“Do you like ballroom dancing?” Steed inquired.

“I’m afraid I’m not in the mood,” the girl said tartly. “Besides, there’s no music.”

“I need a female assistant,” Steed explained. “I was never at my best dancing with men.”

“Why, Mr. Steed!” the girl eyed him speculatively, “But you don’t even know how good I am . . . ”

“I’m sure you’re more than adequate,” Steed said gallantly. “By the way, how did you know my name?”

“I saw it on your passport,” the girl smiled and nodded toward the document lying on the table.

“Yes. I’m sure you’re very competent, Miss . . . ?”

“Goldspangle. Valerie Goldspangle.”

“We should be casting off at any moment, Miss Goldspangle. Why don’t we go up on deck and wave farewell to British shores?”

Her eyes flickered at his. “Well—I suppose I’m in no position to hesitate.”

“That,” Steed said with a smile, “might be fatal.”

The girl smiled rather tautly. “Everything is, eventually,” she said. “But that’s no reason not to live now, eh, Mr. Steed?”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself, Miss Goldspangle.”

# Chapter Four

They found the rail crowded with garlanded and confettied passengers, shouting and waving frantically at the throng on the pier below. A band played “Rule Britannia” deafeningly over the public-address system; the ship’s whistle emitted a mournful blast; a shrill cry went up. Steed felt the ship stir under him.

“We’re off,” he said, as the pier slid away, the festooned strands of colored tape breaking one by one until only a single red one held; then it parted, its end subsiding to trail in the swirling water among the bobbing orange peels and whisky bottles.

“It’s rather sad, isn’t it?” the girl shouted in Steed’s ear. A tear ran down her nose and dripped on her pink lapel. Steed offered her a handkerchief. In a matter of moments, it seemed, the shore was a distant line of dingy buildings seen through haze; then it was gone, and there were only the gently heaving green swells, froth-laced, the swooping gulls, and the garbage. The wind was suddenly cooler, and damp.

“Let’s go inside,” Valerie suggested, a moment before an amplified voice announced that the decks were to be cleared at once in readiness for submersion in half an hour.

“They’re wasting no time,” Steed commented. He caught sight of the plump Deputy Acting Assistant Purser hurrying along the deck, looking vastly important.

“You there, Steed,” the official called. “All hands below decks at once! You too, Miss King.” He halted and blinked at the girl. “Your hair’s not red,” he said accusingly.

“An acute observation,” Steed said in a congratulatory tone. “I wonder if you could suggest a suitable vantage point from which to view the dive.”

“The main observation lounge is the usual spot. But I’d have taken my oath Miss King had red hair. Oh, not that awful red, mind you, nor the pinky red, but just a nice shade. Auburn, you might say.”

“Won’t everybody be crowding in there?” Valerie asked. “I mean, isn’t there a little more, well, secluded place?”

“You might consider the auxiliary refuse disposal room. Remarkable. And the eyes. I’d have wagered a packet they were a lovely warm brown.”

“You’re very observant,” Steed said.

“Well, I don’t miss much,” the DAAP said proudly. “Though these instant hair rinses and tinted contact lenses would be enough to confuse

an ordinary man.”

“Which way to the auxiliary refuse disposal room?”

The DAAP looked startled. “Who told you about that?” he demanded in a low tone. “Best spot on the ship for observing the dive. But don’t spread it about, they’ll all be stampeding in.” He proceeded to give detailed directions, turned to hurry away.

“If you should see Miss King, ask her to join us, eh?” Steed called after him.

“Who’s this Miss King?” the girl demanded.

“The physiotherapist,” Steed said. “Extremely powerful hands.”

The refuse disposal room was a long, rather narrow room lined with dust bins on three sides. The fourth wall, long and gently curving, was of glass; beyond it the surface of the sea was visible, boiling swiftly past.

“We’re looking right out through the hull!” Miss Goldspangle exclaimed. “Good heavens, what if the glass cracked?”

“Oh, there’d be no danger,” a thin, elderly man in a plain white uniform spoke up from a corner where he perched on a stool, almost hidden behind a rank of racked brooms. “An automatic watertight partition would seal the door. This compartment would be flooded, of course, but the ship would be perfectly safe.”

“Very encouraging, I’m sure,” Miss Goldspangle said, clinging tightly to Steed’s arm. The water was visibly rising outside the glass. White foam dashed and swirled; a surge of solid green water half-covered the window momentarily. A school of small fish were visible, swimming just under the surface, falling back as the ship raced ahead.

“Steady as she goes,” the old fellow murmured softly as if to himself. “Rate of descent ten feet per minute . . .”

“Eeek!” Miss Goldspangle yelped, burying her face in Steed’s shoulder. “We’re sinking!”

The water was boiling about the top of the glass now, bubbling furiously. The light paled as the last strip of sky disappeared, pushed upward by the murky sea. Now the glass wall showed an unbroken vista of water. Steed patted the girl comfortingly on the shoulder, at the same time following the progress of her left hand as it deftly dipped inside his jacket, moved on to his waistcoat, then tried his side pockets. Meanwhile, Steed had opened the handbag dangling from her right hand, noted the name “Sonja Grute” lettered on a commercial pilot’s license, and lifted a nickle-plated automatic pistol from its fitted pocket.

“There, there, Miss Goldspangle, it’s all right,” he soothed, removing

the clip from the butt of the gun and replacing the weapon. She sniffled, extracted his notecase from his coat and slipped it inside her décolletage. Or almost did. Steed moved at that moment, just sufficiently to cause the pilfered item to drop to the floor between them.

“Dear me, how careless,” he said, disengaging himself from her clutch and stooping to recover his property. “Of me, I mean,” he amplified with a comfortable smile, as the girl blinked at him with a shocked expression. Suddenly her gaze focussed beyond him; she sniffed. “Look!” she yelped sharply, pointing.

Steed turned. A long, sleek, gray-black shape had appeared beyond the glass, was pacing the ship with effortless strokes of its flukes. It drew closer, almost bumping its bottle-nose against the glass, then curveted away. There were other shapes beyond it, above it, below—a whole school of them.

“Dolphins!” Steed exclaimed. “Nothing to be alarmed about, Miss Goldspangle.”

“Wha—what are they? They look like sharks! What if they ram the glass . . . !”

“They’re nothing like sharks,” Steed soothed. “Actually, they’re mammals, quite harmless, even friendly. There are stories of their nudging shipwrecked sailors back to shore. They’ve never been known to attack man, but they can tear a killer whale to pieces in jig time.”

“They’re frightening,” Miss Goldspangle whispered, edging in close to Steed again.

“Fascinating creatures, the dolphins,” the old man whispered from his corner. He climbed painfully to his feet, almost doddered over to the glass, stood gazing wistfully out at the playful cetaceans. “Some scientists believe that their intelligence is equal to or greater than our own,” he said. “Their cranial capacity is larger than man’s. The great difficulty is in communication, though it has been determined that they employ a language of sorts, composed of whistles and grunts.”

“It makes me shudder,” the girl said, shuddering her way closer to Steed, “to think of those slimy things, waiting underwater, thinking their thoughts—about us, perhaps.”

“Slimy? Hardly,” the old man said reprovingly. “They’re warm-blooded creatures, and far cleaner than man.” He made clucking sounds and pressed his nose against the glass. “Would you like to feed them a tidbit?” He asked Steed. “There’s a refuse ejector just here. On the trial cruises I often slipped down and tossed them a morsel. They’re very fond

of stale bread.”

“Shall we, Miss Goldspangle?” Steed asked, urging her along to the metal plate set in the wall. The old fellow pushed a button; there was a brief gurgling sound; then the panel opened, revealing a damp, metal-lined cubical a foot on a side.

“I brought along a few loaves,” the old fellow said, almost apologetically, producing a large brown paper bag.

A pair of dolphins had swum close, watching with every indication of alert interest as the bread was placed in the hopper. The panel snicked shut; there was a muffled bubbling sound; the big swimmers darted in as the loaves swirled away; they swallowed them in one gulp, and circled back, ogling the watchers through the glass, their mouths curved in vast, foolish smiles, like schoolboys taking a dare.

“They’re clowns,” the old fellow said. “Not a care in the world, lucky beggars. I sometimes wish I were a dolphin, instead of . . .” he sighed.

Miss Goldspangle patted the old fellow on the shoulder. “There now, dad, I’m sure you’re much better off on this side of the glass, even as a dustman—” She caught herself. “But I don’t suppose it’s called a dustman aboard ship, is it? What are you called?”

The old man sighed as he turned to the door. “The captain,” he said. “Good day, miss. And you, sir. I trust you won’t mention my little hide-away to anyone? I thought only the Deputy Acting Assistant Purser and I knew of it.”

“Well!” Miss Goldspangle sniffed as the door closed. “How was I to know?”

“Never mind,” Steed consoled her. “He’s probably not the only one aboard who looks like something other than what he is.”

“What’s that suppose to mean?” the girl inquired, stiffening slightly.

“Oh, nothing,” Steed said airily. “Shall we go up to tea?”

## Chapter Five

The dining room was a vast, gilt-ceilinged room with rose-damask walls, a deep pile carpet, muted lighting, with soft music emanating from an unseen source, and acres of white-linened tables set with sparkling porcelain and crystal and polished silver, accented by extravagant floral arrangements.

“Very elaborate,” Steed commented, steering the way to a secluded

table near the wall. "I'm normally suspicious of overly decorated restaurants, but possibly this one will be an exception."

"It's smashing," the girl breathed. "Like an opera house with tables."

"Let's hope the chef knows his role," Steed said, opening a vast red plush menu. "And that the food is neither tragic nor comic."

Miss Goldspangle touched Steed's arm. "Who's this?" A shy-looking middle-aged man in a dowdy tan suit was making his way toward their table, ignoring the empty ones he passed.

"Do you mind if I join you?" he asked in a breathless voice, and pulled out a chair without waiting for a reply. There were beads of perspiration on his forehead. His rimless glasses were slightly fogged; he produced a large and not too clean handkerchief, began polishing the lenses vigorously, at the same time, Steed noted, angling them to catch reflections from behind him.

"Delighted to have you," Steed said. "I'm Steed. This is Miss Goldspangle."

"Funfinger," the man said. "Thanks for your hospitality. I hate taking tea alone."

"Quite understandable. Are you enjoying the ship, Mr. Funfinger?"

Mr. Funfinger seemed to shudder slightly. "I detest ships," he whispered. "I detest travel in any form, but most particularly travel in ships."

"Pity," Steed murmured. "Then why are you here?"

"Duty," Mr. Funfinger sighed. "I'm a—" he paused and glanced both ways. "—a newspaper man. But it wouldn't do if it were generally known. People would clam up, as we say in the scribbling game."

"Are you finding anything interesting to write about?" Miss Goldspangle inquired in an idle tone.

"Am I!" Mr. Funfinger wiped his forehead. "Too right, love. You'd be amazed at what goes on aboard a vessel like this—and not an hour at sea yet."

"Such as?"

Mr. Funfinger clucked and wagged a finger. "You'll have to wait and read it in *The Times*," he said waggishly.

Miss Goldspangle sniffed. She leaned back in her chair and busied herself with her compact. Mr. Funfinger glanced about him again. "D'ye like card tricks?" he asked suddenly.

"Actually, I—" Steed began, but Funfinger was already slipping a deck of dog-eared cards from his coat pocket.

"You'll appreciate this one," he said urgently. He shuffled the pasteboards swiftly, dealt out a hand to Steed. "Go on," he said. "Pick 'em up."

Steed gathered the cards together.

"Don't let anyone see them," Funfinger cautioned.

Steed spread the cards out and glanced at them. There were four aces and a black card. Words were written in ink across the latter:

HAVE MADE TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

MEET ME HALF AN HOUR AFTER DARK ON

LIFEBOAT DECK. COME ALONE.

"Very clever," Steed said aimably, folding the cards and tossing them on the table where Funfinger gathered them in. "Know any others?"

"A few. But that's enough for now, don't you agree?"

"Quite enough."

"I don't think I'll bother with tea after all," the reporter said, rising. "I believe I'll just toddle along and catch a few winks."

"Capital notion," Steed said.

"Good-by," Miss Goldspangle said. I'll be looking forward to that item about you in *The Times*."

"Not *about* me," corrected Funfinger. "*By* me."

"Of course."

"Interesting chap," Steed said, watching the reporter hurry away.

"You think so?" Valerie said off-handedly.

"Um," Steed nodded. "He does card tricks."

"Do you know any tricks, Mr. Steed?"

"One or two, perhaps."

"You'll have to show them to me sometime."

"Perhaps I will." Their eyes met. Steed smiled. Miss Goldspangle smiled. The waiter arrived and took their order.

## Chapter Six

It was still three hours before sunset when Steed left Miss Goldspangle at her room on E deck. For a while he wandered about the ship apparently idly, inspecting lounges, dining rooms, miles of corridor, billiard rooms, the gymnasium, three swimming pools, half a dozen bars, a parade of shops on A deck, the library, the underwater entry hatches forward for use in emergency only, the nursery, three chapels, two cinemas, and a dog pound. A friendly steward conducted him through crew quarters; the



engineering officer, Mr. Tooch, a mournful-looking man with a long chin, showed him the massively shielded engine rooms, filled with polished copper piping and impressively large and complicated valves, and lined with dial-covered walls manned by alert seamen.

“Actually, the nuclear reactors are used only to generate heat,” the officer explained. “The heat in turn feeds the steam turbines, which generates electricity to drive the screws.”

“Seems rather a roundabout method,” Steed commented.

“True. Nuclear power is still in its primitive stage. I foresee a time when power will be bled directly from the pile to turn the shaft—but that day is still far off, I’m afraid. Meantime, we do the best we can with the installations at our command, clumsy and temperamental though they are.”

“Temperamental?”

Tooch nodded glumly. “What we have here, in essence, is an explosive situation rather tentatively restrained from detonating by a feeble set of controls.” He waved a hand at the dials, each with its quivering needle. “So long as everything runs smoothly, well and good; but if any one of a number of things went wrong—well, I prefer not to contemplate the consequences of a ten-megaton underwater blast.”

“Are you saying this ship is unsafe?”

“Unsafe? What isn’t unsafe?” the officer inquired, waved his arms. “Ashore, one can be run down by a bus, kicked by a horse, swallowed up in an earthquake. I suppose it’s no worse here.”

“Feeling as you do, I’m surprised you signed in,” Steed said.

“I had little enough choice. It was that or the beach. And after all, someone had to go.”

“Why you?”

“We drew lots. I was the unlucky one.”

“Surprising. I’d have thought every seaman in Britain would have jumped at the chance.”

“They jumped—in the other direction.”

“I take it you have no confidence in the theory of undersea transport.”

“A floating coffin, that’s what it is—and it’s not even floating, properly speaking. She has a hundred-ton negative buoyancy. She’s held at the proper level by the pressure of the water on her altitude vanes, plus a set of stabilizing water jets. It’s all based on theories of high-speed turbulence and positive-feedback flow controls. Or so the specs say.”

“In other words, if the engines stopped, we’d sink.”

“Like a stone.” The engineer seemed suddenly to become aware of what he was saying. “But look here,” he went on in a tone of forced heartiness. “I’ve no business upsetting you with this sort of talk. Just forget I mentioned it, and enjoy the trip. And, ah, I hope you’ll say nothing of this to anyone. It’d mean the sack for me for sure, if old Wimperton got wind of it.”

“If we sink, they can’t fire you,” Steed pointed out cheerfully as they retraced their steps toward the passenger area.

“True,” the officer acknowledged. “I’ll try to let that thought console me during the still watches of the night—not that one can tell night from day, down here.”

“That’s the spirit,” Steed said. “Chin up, cheerio, carry on.”

“It’s done me a world of good, talking to you,” the officer said. “I hope nothing I’ve said will in any way detract from your enjoyment of the cruise.”

“Not at all,” Steed reassured him. “Nothing like getting one’s teeth into a set of good solid statistics to round out the picture.”

“Glad to have been of help, sir.”

“But don’t forget to watch those dials.”

“Good lord! I’d put them out of my mind completely! Keep your fingers crossed!” Tooch dashed away and Steed stepped out onto the promenade deck. It was wide, teak-planked, verandalike, with portholes at regular intervals, through which the surrounding oceanic depths could be viewed by somnolent passengers in deck chairs. Few of the latter were about at the moment. The light had faded to a deep purple, lit by eerily shining flecks of phosphorescence. Though the space was sealed tight, heated to a comfortable seventy degrees, and permeated by canned music like the rest of the ship, it managed to retain the raw, damp atmosphere typical of promenade decks, as if brisk North Atlantic gales swept freely here, bearing flying spume and sleet. Steed shivered and turned up his jacket collar. The ceiling lights went on just then, shedding a yellowish glow which added to the bleakness. He turned aft, strolled past rows of empty canvas chaise longues below windows on the other side of which lights gleamed in cosy lounges, past stenciled notices warning of the consequences of smoking aft of the red line, past wooden lockers full of life preservers, stacked shuffleboard cues and deck tennis gear. Near the stern, a railed companionway led up. Steed checked his watch; six-fifteen. Above, the sun had set. The hour for the rendezvous was at hand. He climbed the steel steps, awkwardly narrow and steep in deference to tradi-

tion, emerged in a dim-lit, low-ceilinged space crowded with tarpaulin-covered shapes suspended rigidly in paint-clogged davits. *LIFEBOAT DECK*, a neat sign announced superfluously. *NO ADMITTANCE*, warned a second sign below the first.

Steed looked about carefully, saw nothing other than steel decking, steel bulkheads, and shrouded boats. He moved off silently along the narrow aisle left between the latter and the featureless wall. There was no sound but the deep thrumming of the great engines far below, the all-encompassing hiss of water streaming past the driving hull. The lifeboats looked sturdy enough, Steed reflected, each with its own shiny brass propellor and humped deckhouse under the canvas, each painted in gleaming white, marked with a crisply stenciled number. But how would one go about launching them a few hundred feet under water?

Steed halted suddenly, his eye caught by a boat different from the others, resting on greased rails in a small individual bay. He looked it over, noting the smooth curve of the hull, the pivoted guidance vanes at the stern. A door hung in oiled grooves, capable of sliding down and sealing off the small compartment. A similar panel was set in the outer hull itself.

"Well," Steed murmured to himself. "It seems we're fitted with at least one submarine lifeboat . . ." His thoughts were interrupted by a faint creaking sound from the shadowy space between boats ahead. A footstep? But steel decking didn't creak; not with the sound of an unoiled hinge . . . or of someone shifting in a wicker chair. The sound came again, a leisurely *creeeackkk* . . . a pause . . . *creeeackkk* . . .

Steed emerged from beside the airlock. The stern of a lifeboat loomed to his right. He stepped into the space between it and its neighbor, moved along its curved side to the prow, ducked under and was looking back along the adjacent space. For a moment, in the dim light, he thought that a man was standing there, turning slowly to face him. Then he saw his error. It *was* a man—Mr. Funfinger, to be precise—but his toes were not quite touching the floor. His head was cocked at an angle, as if he were alertly listening; but the taut length of hemp rope, bright and new, which extended upward from behind his right ear to a steel eyebolt in the ceiling made it quite clear that the reporter had overheard his last indiscretion.

"Too bad, Mr. Funfinger," Steed murmured to himself. "You were a whiz at card tricks." He eased forward and swiftly checked the pockets of the baggy brown suit, turned up an empty wallet, a deck of cards, a matchbook from the Club Charlotte in Brighton, and a half-filled-out football

pools card.

“It’s just as well you didn’t finish,” he said softly, studying the latter. “You were badly off on form.” He almost missed the playing card tucked into the corpse’s breast pocket. The back bore a design of a skull wearing a monocle and a top hat; on the face, numbers were scribbled in red ink. Steed took it along to the light, read: 30-18-25 W, 46-40-20 N.

“Cryptic to say the least,” he reflected—and ducked as a muffled cough sounded, accompanied by a flash and the scream of a bullet ricocheting from the steel bulkhead at his back.

## Chapter Seven

Steed dropped flat, rolled under the lifeboat, not away from but toward the source of the shot. Under the ranked keels, he glimpsed a pair of feet moving quickly forward, beyond the next boat in line. Steed rose swiftly to his feet, took two steps, and flattened himself against the side of the boat. A moment later a gun—a short-barreled Austrian Steyr .635 fitted with a home-made silencer—gripped in a small, white-gloved fist poked into view. Steed eased forward, brought his umbrella briskly down on the wrist. There was a yelp, and the gun clattered to the deck, skidding away a few feet. Steed jumped for it, brought it up and whirled, but its owner had already darted from view. Steed gave chase, caught a glimpse of feet just disappearing up a steel ladder bearing the words *FIRE CONTROL—NO PASSAGE*. As he started up, a hatch clanged down above. He tested it, found it clamped tight. Feet were pounding above, no doubt attracted by the shot. Steed turned and sprinted for the ladder by which he had climbed to the boat deck, went down it in two jumps, and was leaning on the decorative rail gazing absorbedly out through a quartz window at the blackness beyond when the captain and a pair of white-uniformed officers pelted past and sprang up the steps. One of the latter turned back and called:

“I say, sir—did you see a man with a gun?”

“I’m afraid not,” Steed replied cheerfully. “But I spotted a champion white-nosed snook, the rare one with the paired ventral fins.”

The man gave him a blank look and scuttled out of sight.

“Steed, you *are* a liar,” a cool feminine voice said. Steed turned to see Tara King, looking exceedingly attractive in a starched white uniform, surveying him from the doorway through which she had just come.

“About the snook, you mean,” he said calmly.

“About the gunman.”

“Gunman?” he raised his eyebrows. “Oh, I see what you mean. Not at all, my dear Tara. There was no gunman. It was a woman. Come along and I’ll tell you all about it.”

## Chapter Eight

Neptune’s Bar was an extravagantly decorated half-acre filled with tiny tables and loud music. Ensnared in a secluded booth under a festoon of counterfeit fish nets and papier-mache tridents, Steed and Tara, the latter now in a sleek black velvet miniformal, sat sipping unlikely concoctions from tall, frosted glasses.

“Beastly stuff,” Steed said. “But it gives us an excuse to put our heads together without appearing conspiratorial.”

“If you had an ounce of romance in you, it wouldn’t occur to you to need an excuse,” Tara said tartly. “Fortunately, you haven’t.”

“Of course not,” Steed said composedly. “I’d never dream of commenting that you look perfectly stunning in that ensemble, that your bare shoulders alone are enough to drive a man mad, that your particular combination of coolness and latent fire makes you the most attractive woman within a thousand miles. After all, we’re on duty.”

“Steed—do you really think so?” Tara said in a pleased tone.

“I’m absolutely certain,” Steed said. “If I hadn’t been before, the sight of poor Mr. Funfinger would have convinced me.”

“I meant . . . I mean, I didn’t mean . . .” Tara pressed her hips together. “Steed, I do believe you’re pulling my leg.”

“A pleasure, I’m sure,” Steed said blandly. “But back to our dangling reporter: he asked me to meet him on the boat deck, but he failed to say why.”

“Whatever the reason, it was enough to get him killed. And nearly you as well.”

Steed raised his eyebrows, “Surely that was a mere afterthought.”

“They wanted both of you, I imagine. Your mysterious female *did* shoot at you. Pity you didn’t get a look at her face—if you’re sure it *was* a woman.”

“I’m fairly sure.”

“Do you think you’d recognize her if you should see her again?”

“Perhaps.”

“You could ask the ship’s surgeon who reported to have a wrist looked at.”

“He wouldn’t say. Professional confidence, you know.”

Tara sighed. “If it weren’t for this silly business of working undercover, you could report the whole thing to the captain and have a show-down inspection of wrists. That broolly of yours must have left a nasty bruise.”

“My dear Miss King, it would take all the glamour out of the affair to go blundering about open and above-board. And it might just incidentally tip off the killer as to how much we know.”

“How much we don’t know, you mean. So far you’ve uncovered a hidden microphone with an unknown voice at the other end, a seductive pickpocket, and a newshawk whose news we’ll never hear. And I must say I haven’t done much better.”

“Just what *have* you turned up among the steam tables?”

“Steam tables are the province of the chef. My work is with steam cabinets. Also cold packs, mineral baths, and electronic massage machines. And of course the sauna, infra-red rooms, ultra violet lamps, and inhalation chamber.”

“Properly used, I should think that array would enable you to extract a confession from almost anyone.”

“Actually, I spent most of the afternoon listening to overweight matrons complaining about the servant problem, their husbands, and the diseases of lap dogs,” Tara said. “However, I did happen to discover a chink in the wall separating the ladies’ side from the gentlemen’s section.”

“I trust you stuffed it up with towels at once.”

“It’s not that sort of chink. Just a narrow gap where some steam pipes cross over. Sound seems to carry along the pipes quite well.”

“What sort of sounds?”

“Voices. Hushed voices, exchanging stock-market tips,” Tara took a sip of her drink. “And other things.”

“I’m not going to coax you,” Steed said. “Just tell it in your own way.”

“There was one chap with a heavy German accent,” Tara went on imperturbably. “He spoke as though he were engaged in a scheme to restore the Kaiser. It seems His Imperial Majesty is alive and well in a place called Chicken Walk, Montana.”

“Fascinating,” Steed said. “Anything else?”

“There were also some African statesmen. It appears from their

remarks that there's a plan afoot to divide each of their countries into two independent and hostile nations, thereby ensuring control of the UN, and incidentally doubling their foreign aid allotments."

"It ought to work," Steed conceded.

"Then there were a group of Southeast Asians. They were playing some sort of game with joss sticks, I gathered."

"High stakes?"

"Generals' stars. They seem to be valuable status symbols out there. All you have to do is pin a few on your shirt, and all the American brass starts saluting and calling you 'sir'."

"Sounds rather jolly. I'd like to try it myself."

"Don't be silly. You'd be jailed at once. That game is only for local banditti."

"I suppose so. But on the other hand, no native generalissimo would dare carry a broolly."

"Not rolled, at least. But the really interesting part was what the fat man said," Tara said musingly.

"Tara—you didn't actually peep?"

"He had a fat voice," Emma explained. "He also has a great deal of money, I gather. He was attempting to bet a million pounds that the *Atlantic Queen* won't dock in New York on Friday as scheduled."

"Oh? When does he expect her to arrive?"

"Never. His bet was that she'd be at the bottom of the sea inside twenty-four hours."

"Interesting. And the other fellow didn't agree?"

"No. He insisted it would be more like twelve."

"What else did they say?"

"I don't know. Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump came up just then and insisted on a brisk rub-down with huck towels. She was quite nasty about it, as a matter of fact. I wanted to smack her in the eye, but I restrained myself."

"I don't suppose you've seen your fat man since?"

"Not yet. But we're not scheduled to sink for hours and hours yet. I'm keeping my eyes open, and—" Tara broke off, looking over Steed's shoulder. "Was it the right wrist or the left?" she asked softly.

Steed followed her glance. A slim, white-haired woman had just entered the room, stood peering near-sightedly through the cigaret haze. She carried a massive handbag in her left hand. Her right arm was bandaged to the elbow and carried in a sling.

Steed sighed. "The left," he said.

"In that case—look over there." Tara nodded to her left. A young woman in a severe black dress and heavy-rimmed glasses was just rising from her stool at the bar. Her left wrist was heavily bandaged. Steed studied her feet as she made her way across the room.

"She was wearing sensible shoes on the boat deck," he said. "But the ankles have a familiar look—I think. I only glimpsed them for a moment, you know."

The girl raised her bandaged hand toward her hair, then lowered it and used the right. At that moment, her eyes met Steed's. She looked quickly away, changed course toward a side exit, hurrying her pace. Steed pushed back his glass and rose, took two steps in pursuit, and found his way blocked by a tall, cadaverous figure in blue evening dress uniform, who had just stepped through the door beside the booth.

"Good lord, Mr. Steed," the engineering officer said. "You quite startled me, leaping up in that fashion. Is anything wrong?" He grabbed Steed's arm. "You haven't heard anything? Any unusual noises?"

"There *was* a sort of grating sound a while back," Steed said. "But it was just me, grinding my teeth in frustration." He looked past the engineer toward the girl, just disappearing through the door. "Do you know her?" he asked as the officer followed his look.

"Hmmm? Oh yes, that's Miss Doltshev. A code clerk in the Polish diplomatic service, I understand. Curious little creature. The ship security officer assures me she wears a shoulder holster under that bolero jacket."

"In that case," Steed began—

"One can't help feeling a bit sorry for her, though," Tooch went on. "Lost her pet this afternoon. I understand it escaped from the baggage deck and into the ventilating system. She made a noble try at saving it—almost made it, too, before she slipped and sprained her wrist."

"Oh. You, ah, saw this accident?"

"Oh, yes indeed. I was the one who pulled her back through the air intake duct. She'd have fallen right into the fans and been chopped to bits."

"When did this happen, Mr. Tooch?"

"Just after we submerged."

"You're certain the wrist was injured?"

Tooch nodded. "I was there when the ship's surgeon taped it up. She was quite upset about it. Said it would interfere with her cryptography no end."



“Um.” Steed resumed his seat. “Won’t you join us? Miss King was just telling me of some unusual noises she heard this afternoon.”

“Probably nothing to be alarmed at,” the engineer said, looking anxious. “There’s a storm raging on the surface, you know. Regular typhoon. It’s to be expected we’ll hear a few groans from the seams, even at this depth.”

“I love storms at sea,” Tara said, her eyes shining. “Pity we can’t surface and watch the wild waves roll.”

The engineer shuddered. “This vessel is not designed for surface operation during rough weather,” he said in the tone of one reproving a naughty suggestion. “We’re far better off safely down here—providing, of course, that nothing goes wrong. Speaking of which, I’d better be getting back to the engine room. There’s no telling what may be taking place in my absence.”

“Before you go,” Steed said, “what sort of pet was it Miss Doltshev lost?”

“A boa constrictor,” the engineer said, and hurried away.

## Chapter Nine

Half an hour later, Steed and Tara were in the B deck viewing gallery, gazing out through the thick glass. In the glow of the powerful spotlights which dazzled out through the green water, fading into obscurity at fifty feet, a pair of dolphins were visible, effortlessly keeping pace with the swift ship.

“Don’t they ever rest?” Tara inquired. “Or do they follow us in relays?”

“I’m not absolutely certain,” Steed said. “But I have a hunch that big fellow is the same one I saw earlier today. There’s a small scar on his fluke I believe I recognize.”

“They must be incredibly powerful,” Tara murmured. “Imagine swimming at top speed for all those hours—and they’re not even breathing hard.”

“They have to surface to breathe,” Steed pointed out. “They’re able to stay submerged for half an hour at a time.”

“It must be marvelous to be a dolphin,” Tara said. “They’re so strong and so beautiful. They have the kind of freedom that we can only talk about.”

“Still, it must get a bit dull. I suppose nothing much ever happens down in the depths of the sea.”

Footsteps sounded behind them, accompanied by an odor of burning butadiene.

“Ha! There you are!” a voice barked. “I suppose you think you’re a most amusing fellow! Well, let me tell you I wasn’t fooled for a moment by you and your wild talk!”

“Ah, Mr. Balani,” Steed greeted his erstwhile roommate. “Miss King, may I present Mr. Balani? Mr. Balani, Miss King. Mr. Balani dislikes noise, insects, liquor, and, er, animals.”

“Pah! Animals indeed! A fig for your animals! It merely happened that it was the hour for my constitutional! That was the reason that I left rather hurriedly. I take no stock in pet boa constrictors named Rollo!”

“Oh, do you know Miss Doltshev?” Tara inquired innocently. Balani jumped as though stabbed by a hatpin.

“Doltshev? Doltshev?” He yipped. “No, I know of no Doltshev! What do you mean by that remark?”

“It’s part of a free-association test Miss King likes to spring on people,” Steed explained. “Just say the first thing that pops into your mind.”

“Idiots!” Balani yelled. “Imbeciles!”

“Boa constrictor,” Tara said quickly.

“Tax collector,” Balani said promptly.

“Million-pound bet,” Tara said.

“Psychiatrist!”

“Broken wrist.”

“Pickpocket!”

“Twenty-four hours.”

“Escape hatch!”

“Boat deck.”

“Suicide!”

“Plastic bomb,” Steed put in.

“Bent—” Balani said, and checked himself in mid-word, jerked his cigar from his mouth. “You have bent minds, I was about to say,” he blurted. “What cheek! Do you always go about subjecting innocent persons to mind-washing techniques? I shall report you to the authorities at once!” The Indian looked wildly about for an ashtray; his eye fell on the refuse-ejection panel beside him. He jabbed the button; the door flopped open. He tossed in the cigar butt and slammed it shut just as Steed

jumped to catch his hand.

“Oh, dear,” Tara said as the butt swirled back past the window, to be snapped up by the big dolphin. A startled look appeared on the creature’s comic face. The mouth opened and shreds of tobacco were violently ejected. The dolphin turned to shoot a betrayed look through the quartz before turning back and sinking out of sight.

“Ha!” Balani exclaimed. “Serves the gluttonous creature right!” He stamped to the door. “And while you’re free-associating, Mr. Steed—I suggest you meditate on the relationship between meddling and murder!”

## Chapter Ten

“So far,” Steed said at dinner, “we’ve made remarkable progress. In the space of less than ten hours we’ve traveled over six hundred miles, and are farther from understanding than ever before.”

“I think the sea air must be telling on you, Steed,” Tara said solicitously. “You’re not your usual buoyant self, all full of unfounded confidence and ingenious proposals.”

“My buoyancy is of little use two hundred feet below sea level,” Steed commented. “As for ingenious solutions, I don’t even know what the questions are at this point.”

“Of course not. We’re just feeling our way into the situation. In a few more hours a pattern will begin to emerge. It always does.”

“That’s on land,” Steed said. “I mean, if you’re shot and killed in London, there you are. But if you go down at sea—where on earth are you?”

“A mere technicality,” Tara said firmly. “We were sent along to keep an eye on suspicious characters who might feel impelled to damage British prestige by interfering with the ship. There seems to be an adequate supply of suspicious characters, so that part’s all right. The rest is mere detail.”

“Of course, you’re right, as always,” Steed patted her hand. “I suppose it’s just the feeling of being penned up under two hundred feet of water in a ship that’s due to sink in either nine or twenty-one hours, with a number of people who seem eager to attend my funeral . . .”

“Steed,” Tara said. “Do you suppose you could be, well, getting on? Perhaps the work is simply too much for you, at your age.”

“Good lord, I’m barely forty-five!” Steed said indignantly. “Just well

into my prime!”

The waiter appeared to clear away. The orchestra was beginning to tune up on the band stand.

“Well, at any rate you haven’t lost your masculine appeal,” Tara said in a low voice. “I think you’re about to be spoken to by a lady.”

Steed looked around. Miss Goldspangle was threading her way toward the table, looking voluptuous in a low-cut, white-sequined gown with wrist-length sleeves.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” she breathed, hardly glancing at Tara as she slid into a chair. “Have you heard the news?”

“You mean about the sea serpent?” Steed asked.

“What sea serpent?” Miss Goldspangle was open-mouthed.

“Then it’s not that. Therefore it must be something else.”

“I meant about the contest, silly.” Miss Goldspangle raised her voice over the opening strains of “Hot Peppers.”

“The pie-eating contest? Yes of course. But as a past British Open Champion, I disqualified myself. By the way, this is Miss King. Miss King, Miss Goldspangle. Miss Goldspangle was a magician’s assistant before becoming a dancing instructress.”

“How do you do, I’m sure,” Miss Goldspangle said, flicking a swift, assessing eye over Tara. She paused and gave her a second, more searching examination. She reached up and tucked back an imaginary stray lock. “Well,” she said. “I suppose *you* know all about the contest, Miss Jones?”

“Close,” Tara said with a smile. “Try again.”

“Miss Brown, I mean.”

“King,” Steed said hastily. “Fine old name, very regal and all that. Would you care for a drink, Miss Goldspangle?”

“It’s tonight, you know. It’s supposed to be a secret, but I have word from a reliable source that the winner will be offered a film contract.”

“For pie eating?” Steed said wonderingly. “I should think there’d be precious few roles for a specialty of that sort.”

“It’s a beauty contest,” Miss Goldspangle said. “Lucky for me, I brought my minikini along. They talk a lot about poise and elocution, but it’s tasty—I mean tasteful exposure that wows those old goats they always have for judges.”

“Really?” Tara said. “Unfortunately, I left my swimsuit at home. I’ll just have to appear without it, I suppose.”

“Hey, no fair!” Miss Goldspangle exclaimed.

“She means she’ll wear a dress, I daresay,” Steed explained as the waiter arrived with a tray of drinks. Steed took two of the Martinis, offered them to Miss Goldspangle.

“Just pass the other along to Miss King,” he said, as the girl took one with her right hand. She put the glass down, took another and passed it, her left hand resting in her lap the while. Steed and Tara exchanged a glance.

“As a former magician’s assistant, I imagine you know heaps of card tricks,” Tara said brightly. Miss Goldspangle looked at her sharply.

“A few,” she said guardedly.

“Capital,” Steed said. He took from his pocket the deck of cards he had found on the unfortunate Funfinger. “Do one for us, won’t you?”

Miss Goldspangle stared at the grinning Death’s head on the pasteboards. She reached hesitantly for the deck with her right hand. She tapped the cards on the table, then, suddenly brisk, she proceeded to expertly riffle them and deal out five cards—one handed. Steed picked them up.

“Five aces,” he said. “If you count the joker.”

“Always count the joker,” Miss Goldspangle said coolly. She tossed the deck down; the cards fanned out in perfect order.

Steed gathered them up, shuffled swiftly and spread them.

“Pick a card,” he said.

The girl took one.

“Take another,” Steed said. As Miss Goldspangle reached with her right hand, Steed said: “One in each hand, if you don’t mind.”

Miss Goldspangle paused, her eyes on his. They seemed suddenly opaque. Her mouth opened—

“Ooooo, there you are, you elusive man!” A high, thin voice squealed behind Steed. He looked up into a wide, sagging female face, rouged, false-eyelashed, depilated, lipsticked and jeweled, under a mummified coiffure of Brillo-like hair, stiff with shellac and plastic stardust. Three strands of fat white pearls subtended the bulge of extra chins.

“I’ve been searching high and low for you, you scamp!” the apparition continued in the same shrill yelp. A sharp yap echoed the tone. The ill-tempered visage of a small tangle-haired dog glared red-eyed from the shadow of its owner’s massive bosom.

“Why, Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump,” Tara said sweetly. “I didn’t know you were a chum of the major’s!”

The plump matron totally ignored Tara. “We haven’t met,” she

gushed, wagging a sausage-like finger under Steed's nose, "but I know you by reputation, you wicked man!" The pudgy be-ringed hand on Steed's arm clamped tighter as she tugged at him. "Now come along and show me all the latest dance crazes! I'm wild to do the Molassi!" She thrust the dog at Tara without looking at her.

"Don't you mean the Somali?" Steed inquired, rising unwillingly, hauled by the inexorable weight of two hundred and sixty-seven pounds of determined widow.

"Whatever they call it—just sweep me into your arms!" Steed caught a last glimpse of Miss Goldspangle's ironic smile as Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump applied a bear hug and wrenched him into a dizzying spin. For so large a woman, she was amazingly agile. Steed fought gamely to keep his feet under him as she whirled them through the other dancers like a cannonball caroming across a battlefield.

"May I suggest a more tentative approach to the subtleties of the dance?" Steed managed to choke out the words in spite of the enveloping cloud of scent clogging his lungs. "Suppose we begin by chalking a few lines on the floor—or better still, a day or two of library research on the background . . ."

Something was working its way up from behind the orchid corsage of Steed's fair companion. It was a white card—a playing card, to be exact. And there were words written on it—in the late Mr. Funfinger's scrawled hand.

"You dance divinely, you brute," Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump squealed. Looking around, Steed saw the dark alcove toward which the powerful female was guiding him.

"If you don't mind," he murmured, "it's my turn to lead . . ." With a deft bit of footwork, he whirled his domineering partner suddenly, steering her past the velvet hangings. As an expression of surprised displeasure appeared on Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump's face, Steed felt a sharp sting on the back of his neck.

"What are you doing?" the massive matron gasped. "I have to—"

"I just remembered this dance was promised . . ." Steed wanted to say more, but it was suddenly too difficult to talk, even to think. His voice trailed off. Round and round they whirled. The pressure was crushing him, the fumes stifling. The room was growing dark, except for some fireworks someone had loosed off. The air was full of chandeliers, spinning dizzily. One of them came arcing down and struck Steed a tremendous blow on the head, and then all the lights went out.

# Chapter Eleven

Heavenly voices were raised in celestial song. On second thought, it wasn't precisely a song; more of an argument. And the voices were becoming more strident by the moment.

“. . . don't give a rap, doctor, if you have a diploma from the Atomic Energy Commission! Do as I say!" The words were spoken in the unmistakably vibrant tones of Tara King.

"Bravo," Steed croaked, and opened his eyes. Past the stabbing light, he made out a dim, mustached face floating in a grayish soup. The soup drained away, leaving the dull white walls and ceiling of a room. Tara's face appeared beside the mustached one.

"There you are, Steed. About time. On your feet, now! Fancy your fainting on the dance floor—and you a professional."

"Silly of me," Steed said, and was startled at the weakness of his own voice. "I suppose I was simply overwhelmed by the excitement of it all."

"I had no idea Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump's type appealed to you so powerfully," Tara said solicitously, tugging him upright. "And to think that all this time you've never mentioned your secret passion for the ample figure."

"I hated to make you feel inadequate," Steed replied, forcing a little life into his voice. "After all, you can't help being emaciated." He got his feet on the floor and waited for the nauseous sensation to subside.

"This man is in serious condition," the doctor chirped. "I won't be responsible if he's moved."

"Indeed you won't," Tara said in a tone of warm congratulation. "Do you suppose you could stand, Steed?"

"Certainly," he said. "Nothing to it." He half rose and immediately pitched forward. Tara and the doctor caught him. His legs felt like overdone *pasta*.

"Here—you must lie down!" the doctor insisted, tugging him backward.

"On your feet, there's a good little soldier," Tara said, hauling him upright.

"You're insane!" the doctor blurted. "A heart attack at his age is not to be trifled with!"

"Don't be silly," Tara dismissed the warning. "Steed's just entering his prime, aren't you, Steed?"

“He’s likely to leave it heels-first!”

“Not until he’s ready, eh, Steed? Here we go.”

With Tara’s help, he managed a few tottering steps to the door, the doctor’s voice trailing them indignantly. In the corridor, Steed leaned against the wall and fought down the rising darkness that threatened to envelop him.

“What happened?” he whispered.

“Doctor Swintle says you had a heart attack,” Tara said briskly. “Come on, just a few more feet to the lift.”

“In that case—perhaps I’d better take his advice.”

“Dr. Swintle is wrong,” Tara said.

“How do you know?”

“Because you were poisoned,” Tara said.

“Really? By whom, may I ask?”

“You were with Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump at the time.”

Steed pushed away from the wall and sucked air into his lungs.

“There must have been a dart gun concealed in her décolletage,” Tara went on. “I caught a whiff of the stuff as soon as I reached you. A new synthetic heart paralyzant called Niviprine. I saw it demonstrated in the tech lab last week. It smells like overripe gardenias, but it’s lethal in very modest dosage—and it leaves no traces, of course. I removed the dart before anyone saw it.”

“What’s the antidote?”

“A dozen or so brisk turns about the promenade deck. That will at least give the illusion of fresh air.”

“Where’s Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump now?” Steed asked, wobbling to the lift with Tara’s help.

“In her cabin, I presume. She left rather hurriedly. Seemed upset.”

“I’ll want an interview with her—as soon as I can stand unassisted,” Steed said. “I think she can tell us something about poor Funfinger. She had one of his cards.”

Half a minute later they were on the enclosed gallery which substituted on the giant submarine for a wind-swept open deck. After the first circuit, Steed was able to walk alone. Five more rounds and he was nearly his old self, except for a dull headache and a taste in his mouth as though mice had been nesting there.

“Right,” he said briskly, at the end of the tenth lap. “I think it’s time now to call on Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump, eh?” He noticed a pair of scratches on the back of Tara’s hand. “What happened?”



"Fifi and I didn't get on. The little wretch tried to bite me."

"I hope you didn't bite back."

"The cabin is on F deck forward," Tara said loftily.

They made their way there through the soft-lit, deep-carpeted corridors. Steed rapped at the chaste bleached teak door. There was no response.

"Shall we just have a look?" Steed suggested.

"Let's."

Steed did things with a short length of bent wire. The lock snicked. He pushed the door back and almost tripped over something small and limp lying just inside the door. Tara gasped as the light from the corridor shone on the rumpled body of the ill-tempered Pekingese.

"Neck's broken," Steed said after a moment's examination. "He's bitten his last ankle."

"At least we won't have the problem of informing his mistress," Tara said in a rather strained voice. "Look " She directed the beam of a pencil flash-light across the room to the bed. The bulky figure of Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump was sprawled there, her eyes wide open, the purple bruises on her bloated neck plainly visible in the gloom. As they stared at the corpse, the telephone rang. Steed picked it up.

"*Hello?*" a cautious voice whispered—a voice Steed had heard before, via the bug installed in his room.

"Who's this?" he asked. There was a sharp gasp by way of reply. Then the line went dead.

Steed sighed as he hung up. "I'm afraid we'll have to report this. It will mean attracting attention to ourselves, and it will call for some rather embarrassing explanations. But I think even the general would agree that two murders lift the affair out of the routine category."

Tara looked thoughtful. "No need for both of us to come forward," she said. "You report the killing. Just mention your infatuation for the lady; that will explain your impetuosity in bursting in uninvited. I'll carry on undercover "

"Mmm. Might be a good idea at that. Very well, Miss King: you disappear quietly into the distance whilst I inform the captain that I've lost a promising pupil."

## Chapter Twelve

As Steed entered the corridor leading forward to officers' country, a dark figure slipped from concealment fifty feet ahead of him, darted along the passage and paused cautiously at a cross-passage. Steed ducked into a doorway and watched the other's stealthy advance. The skulker was of medium size, dressed in a dark suit; other than that, Steed could tell nothing about him. He reached the door to the captain's quarters, looked both ways, then opened the door swiftly and stepped inside.

Silence ensued. Steed advanced to a position only a few yards from the door, from which he could detect faint sounds, as of someone sliding drawers out and, after an interval long enough for a quick riffling, back in again.

Footsteps sounded. The captain appeared, coming briskly along the passage, whistling tunelessly, almost silently. He glanced at his wristwatch as he pushed through his cabin door. Half a second later, before Steed could make a move, there was a dull *thud!* like a sockful of sand hitting a mattress. Steed stepped out quickly, but before he had taken a step, the intruder burst from the room and dashed off in the opposite direction. Steed leaped after him, but passing the open door saw Captain Wimperton lying on the floor, out cold. As he hesitated, the attacker disappeared round a bend.

Steed stepped into the room and checked the fallen man's pulse. It was strong enough, but the victim's breathing was ragged. He thumbed back an eyelid; the dilated pupil indicated concussion, possible skull fracture. Steed picked up the telephone, asked for the ship's surgeon, then lit up a cigaret and blew smoke rings, frowning thoughtfully. The last glimpse of the bludgeoner as he darted around the corner had given the impression of a very young man, with a delicate jawline . . .

Or could it have been a woman . . . ?

Feet clattered outside; the surgeon appeared; the first officer, a large, round-faced man, was behind him; he shot a look at the fallen captain, then glared at Steed.

"Who did this?" he piped, in a surprising high voice.

"I don't know, actually," Steed said.

"You told Dr. Swindle you saw it happen!"

"Not precisely." Steed explained. "So I'm not even sure it was a man," he concluded.

“What did she hit him with?”

“I’m not sure it was a woman, mind you,” Steed admonished. “I expect she—or he—hit him with a cosh ”

“How is he?” the mate stared at his fallen chief.

“They did a thorough job of it I’m afraid, Mr. Hoskins,” the doctor said gloomily. “He’ll be out of it for a bit, I can tell you that much.”

“I’ll get the swine who did it,” Hoskins barked. “I’ll turn this ship upside-down—”

“While you’re about it,” Steed put in, “look for a strangler, too.”

“What do you need a strangler for?” demanded Hoskins suspiciously.

“I don’t actually need one,” Steed interrupted. “The job’s already been done.”

“What job?”

“Come along,” Steed said. “I’ll show you.”

## Chapter Thirteen

“Tragic,” Hoskins muttered, staring morosely at the obese corpse of Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump, swathed in its voluminous Dior original, now rumpled and torn. “Apparently she put up a vigorous struggle, poor creature. Who would want to harm anyone so useless? That is to say, so harm—And they didn’t even bother to remove her necklace. The motive couldn’t have been robbery.”

“Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump made a number of enemies aboard,” the Deputy Acting Assistant Purser said quickly. “She wasn’t the most, er, diplomatic of persons. Had a nasty habit of jostling in queues and hogging the crispy bits of the saddle of lamb. I’ve felt the rough side of her tongue myself more than once.”

“But surely that’s not a good reason for murder?” the doctor expostulated.

“Nothing is a good reason for murder,” the mate reproved sternly. “Still, murder has been committed. The problem now is to discover who did it—and stop her before she strikes again.”

“Do you suppose there’s some connection between this shocking deed and the attack on the captain—or the death of poor Mr. Funfinger?” The DAAP stared anxiously at his superior.

“I find it easier to postulate one psychopathic murderer aboard than two,” the surgeon said.

The DAAP shook his head dolefully. "It's difficult to believe: The captain struck down, a reporter hanged on the boat deck, now this. It's all very unsettling."

"Quite," Hoskins agreed. "Still, the facts exist and we must deal with them. I'll call in the security people and let them see: what they can turn up in the way of clues. Glimp, go circulate among the passengers and see what you can turn up."

Steed left half a dozen ship's security men busily sifting dust and peering through magnifying glasses in the best Sherlock Holmes style, and made his way back to the ballroom. The crowd there had thinned. The orchestra was playing a plaintive Viennese waltz in a half-hearted way. Miss Goldspangle sat at a table near the bar, in animated conversation with a very fat man who patted her hand as he talked. Steed took a stool at the far end of the mahogany, watched the fat man's hand progress up Miss Goldspangle's arm. He was alert for the surreptitious passing of a message, but detected nothing. The plump hand worked its way back down past Miss Goldspangle's elbow. It poised there, patting in place, then leaped lightly to her thigh. At once, her spiked-toed slipper snapped out as though her knee had been tapped with a rubber hammer, to impact just above the fat man's ankle with an audible crunch. Steed winced in sympathy.

"The message has been delivered," he advised himself.

Glimp, the DAAP, appeared at the far side of the room. He sauntered across to the bar at the opposite end from Steed's position, ordered a mild and bitter, took a swallow or two, and sat staring glumly at the mermaids etched on the big mirror facing him. Behind him, Miss Goldspangle sat alone now, powdering her nose. The fat man was headed for the door, limping heavily and muttering to himself. Glimp eyed the girl in the mirror for a minute or two; then rose and strolled over to her table.

Steed's attention was distracted for a few moments as the barman inquired as to his thirst and took instructions for the proper preparation of a chutney and soda. When he looked back, the DAAP was seated in the fat man's chair, leaning toward the girl, listening with a scowl of concentration as she spoke, accompanying herself with emphatic gestures.

"Really?" The Deputy Acting Assistant Purser's voice was a breathless squeak.

Miss Goldspangle nodded solemnly.

"In that case . . ." The DAAP lowered his voice, looking around. He rose, as did Miss Goldspangle. Together they hurried from the room.

Steed dropped a half crown on the bar and followed.

From a point of vantage twenty feet from the open door of the ship's administrative office, Steed watched the pair rap and enter. He heard the mutter of voices, an excited exclamation in Hoskins' distinctive squeak, followed by what sounded like rapid-fire questions and answers—all, unfortunately just below comprehensibility level. Then there was the scrape of a chair, a click, and the bark of crisp demands.

Three minutes passed in silence; then there was the tramp of disciplined feet at the far end of the passage. A squad of uniformed men appeared, advancing in strict military formation. At the command of the four-striper in the lead, they halted with a double stamp of their feet, right-faced and came to parade rest. They wore steel helmets, Steed noted, and holstered side-arms, and carried stout clubs, handcuffs, and tear-gas grenades.

Hoskins emerged from the office, Glimp behind him, wide-eyed. Miss Goldspangle was beside him, looking satisfied.

"Staff quarters, E deck aft," the acting captain snapped. He set off in the lead, the riot squad at his heels, Glimp and Miss Goldspangle bringing up the rear. Steed backed away, descended quickly to the deck below, hurried aft, rode the lift down to E deck, stepped out into a dim-lit corridor filled with the blare of brassy music. A trio of untrimmed youths crowded the passage; they smiled cheerfully at him around their mouth-pieces and over their guitars as he made his way past them. Hoskins stepped from the freight elevator along the passage, his troops behind him, and advanced toward Steed's position. The latter gave the mate a cheery wave.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said affably over the shrill of amplifier feedback.

"That's another of them!" Miss Goldspangle yelled sharply. "He's in it too, I don't doubt!"

"What are you doing here, Steed?" Hoskins demanded sternly, waving his squad to a halt.

"Just stepped down for a breath of stale air," Steed said breezily. "I see you and your bodyguard had the same idea."

"He was in the bar," Miss Goldspangle said. "I saw him skulking behind the potted begonias."

"First I find you in the captain's quarters," Hoskins piped. "Before that, you were on E deck forward, discovering an, ah, accident. Then, after a brief visit, presumably to the bar, I find you here, at the scene of

further, er, activity.”

“Actually, I dropped down to indulge my secret admiration for music in the modern manner. I’m a secret fan of the Hot Fudge Sundaes. But I must confess I’m surprised to discover you share my weakness.”

“Nonsense!” Hoskins barked, casting a jaundiced glance at the musicians, who played on with unabated vigor, ignoring the shouted conversation. “I’m a Bach fugue man myself.”

“You’re not grooving behind rock and roll?” Steed inquired wonderingly. “In that case—but I mustn’t pry, must I?”

“No you must not. But you may as well know—” He leaned close to speak in Steed’s ear: “I’m here to arrest the maniac who attacked the captain and did in Mrs. You-know-who.”

“Fast work, Mr. Hoskins. But are you quite sure—”

“There seems little doubt. The person was known to have quarreled with the deceased. The victim was strangled; the suspect is known to have powerful hands. And there’s the detail of the dog.”

“The dog?”

“It once bit the suspect. But never mind that. You’d best be getting back to the ballroom before I have a deputation of old maids on my neck complaining of your absence.”

“Don’t let him go!” Miss Goldspangle shrieked. “Arrest him!”

“Nonsense, the man’s a dancing master, nothing more.”

“By the way, who is the culprit?” Steed inquired as the squad moved on.

“The staff physiotherapist,” Hoskins said. “A young woman known as Miss King.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Steed loitered in the passage until the squad reappeared from the room, formed up in a hollow square surrounding their prisoner.

“. . . flattered to be arrested by an entire detachment of stalwart young men,” Tara was saying pleasantly to the noncom in charge as she passed Steed without a glance. “And so handsome, too.”

“Ah,” Steed said, falling in beside Hoskins. “Are you sure there isn’t some mistake? She looks so, er, innocent.”

“Ha!” Miss Goldspangle exclaimed. “He’s trying to pretend he doesn’t even know her! They happen to be very well acquainted!”

"That's right," Glimp agreed, frowning. "They boarded ship together."

"This subject is a friend of yours?" Hoskins demanded. "You object to my arresting her?"

The squad had halted. All eyes were on Steed, except Tara. She patted back a yawn and looked idly into space.

"No objection," Steed said comfortably. "So long as you don't intend to make her walk the plank," he added.

"You'd object to that, would you?" Hoskins barked. "Why?—If she means nothing to you?"

"It's just that it would be such a waste of, ah, . . . " His eyes lingered on Tara's slim figure, her piquant face, her glistening long hair. " . . . of manpower," he finished.

"I'll take that thought under consideration," Hoskins said. "In the meantime, Mr. Steed—be careful. I've got my eye on you!"

"May I, er, visit the prisoner?" Steed called after the departing group.

"No!" the captain snapped. "Make one move in her direction and I'll clap you into irons before you can say 'habeas corpus!'"

Frowning, Steed made his way back toward A deck. Halfway there, he recognized the tall, stooping figure of Tooch, the chief engineer, hurrying along the corridor.

" . . . suicide," the officer was muttering. "Out of the question! They have no right, no right at all . . . !"

"More trouble, Mr. Tooch?"

"Trouble? Trouble? Catastrophe would be more like it! Still, the captain is surely too sensible an officer to accede to their fantastic request!"

"What are you talking about?"

Tooch pointed to the ceiling. "There's a storm up there, Mr. Steed! A raging tempest of force eight at least! Seas thirty feet high, winds gusting to one hundred knots! Severe icing conditions! Hailstones the size of golf balls!"

"Still—we're quite cosy here, two hundred feet below the surface," Steed pointed out.

"So we are—but will we stay here?"

"I don't imagine we'll surface in this weather, in view of what you've told me about the likely effect on the ship."

"Not even to rescue a dozen sailors trapped on a foundering freighter?" Tooch asked anxiously.

“Well, in a case like that we might,” Steed said soothingly. “But why fret over imaginary situations?”

“There’s nothing imaginary about the *Any a Kejevnikov!* She’s a Polish tramp, seven thousand tons, down by the stern and taking on water! There are twelve men aboard, including a radio operator who’s filling the air waves with heart-rending pleas for assistance. She’s precisely one mile from our present position—and two hundred feet up! Still, as I said, Captain Wimperton can be trusted not to act rashly.”

“Umnn,” Steed said noncommittally. “Suppose someone else were in command—the first mate, for instance?”

“Hoskins? That featherhead? He might be capable of anything! He was taken on at the last moment, due to political pressure. I wouldn’t put anything past him.”

“Now hear this!” a voice broke from the ship’s public-address system. “All hands to duty stations! Prepare for surfacing.”

## Chapter Fifteen

“It’s madness,” Tooch babbled. “Captain Wimperton would never have attempted anything so insane. It’s criminal irresponsibility! He’s risking the lives of three thousand cash customers for the sake of twelve enemy aliens!”

“Still, it would seem a bit heartless to just sail on and let the poor devils drown.”

“They had no business to be here, two hundred miles off the regular ship lanes! If they were where they ought to be, there’d be any number of conventional ships about to lend a hand. But no: it’s as though they’d gone to great pains to strand themselves precisely in our path!” Tooch staggered as the ship wallowed heavily.

“We’re feeling the surface waves now,” he gasped. “And it’ll get worse—much worse!”

“I suppose it’s quite dark up above now?”

“Too right. It’s close to midnight. As if we didn’t have enough problems, we’ll be working in pitch darkness!”

The ship rose under their feet, leaning to the right. It sank back, surging to the left. Loud creaking noises were audible.

“She’ll break up,” Tooch gasped. “She can’t take this sort of stress!”

Steed eyed the engineer obliquely. “You don’t, by any chance, happen



to know something the rest of us don't, do you, Mr. Tooch?"

Tooch did not answer.

The bulkhead vibrated like a gong, as a giant wave smashed against the side of the ship.

"We're on the surface!" Tooch yelled. "She can't stand up to this kind of pounding. I've got to tell them . . ." He started off at a wobbly run, and Steed followed.

In the passage, white-and green-faced passengers plucked at Tooch's uniform as he passed, all shouting questions at once. Steed caught a glimpse of Balani's dark face and wild eyes as the Indian waved his cigar, haranguing those around him.

" . . . in a body to the bridge, and demand . . ." Steed caught a fragment of his speech, before a sudden lurch sent the magician staggering out of sight among his audience. Tooch led the way up a companionway, along the passage at a run, plunged through a door into the crowded room from which the vessel's operation was directed. A large closed-circuit TV screen occupied one wall, with smaller screens affording views aft and to the sides. The main screen showed a wild melee of churning waters and blown spume, intermittently dissolving into a watery blur as a wave broke over the camera's eye. Hoskins perched before the display, snapping commands into a hp mike. A pair of harassed-looking officers whom Steed had not met flanked the captain, while anxious log-room yeomen hovered in the background, ready for instant obedience to orders.

"You've got to submerge!" Tooch yelled into the uproar of wind and waves faithfully reproduced by the audio circuitry linked to the screens. "She'll break her back! The engines will tear loose from their mountings! We'll sink like stone!"

"Where the devil *is* the infernal derelict!" The man behind Hoskins demanded. "We're dead-on the fix they gave us!"

"They've already gone down!" Tooch gobbled. "Too bad. Now we can submerge—"

"Communications reports their signal still coming in loud and clear," the second officer, a small, bow-legged man with a bald head stated flatly. "Why don't the beggars acknowledge our calls?"

"Tell them to fire a flare!" Hoskins snapped.

"If we don't pick them out in the next two minutes, I'll have to take her down!"

"Are you sure we're on position?" someone asked querulously. "Maybe that was supposed to be forty-six forty north, thirty-eight west, instead

of the other way around.”

Steed pushed past Toooh, who was dancing from one foot to the other and uttering sharp cries.

“Did you say thirty-eighteen and forty-six forty?” he asked the second officer.

“Um.” The man nodded in affirmation, then suddenly frowned a fierce frown.

“Clear the bloody civilians off the bridge!” he bellowed. His eye fell on the engineer. “And Toooh—get back to your engines!”

“Thirty degrees, eighteen minutes, twenty five seconds west, forty six degrees, forty minutes, twenty seconds north?” Steed persisted over the howl of the gale, as a particularly vigorous comber boomed against the hull and set the deck vibrating like Big Ben. Hoskins fixed a rage-reddened eye on Steed.

“Patchweld!” He gestured imperiously to a husky seaman. “Pitch this dancing master in the brig until further notice!”

“Mr. Hoskins, I fear you’ve fallen into a trap,” Steed said, side-stepping the sailor as he reached with simian arms. “I think you’ll find there are no distressed seamen here after all—”

Patchweld recovered his balance, whirled, hopped on one foot, and dived. His arms encircled the spot where Steed had stood an instant before, as the latter sidestepped, palmed the big man’s back to assist his headlong charge. The sailor hurtled into the steel wall skull-first, rebounded, and fell flat on his back. The second mate, leaping to join the fray, tripped over his subordinate and crashed into the chart table, sending papers and compasses flying. Hoskins uttered a yelp and sprang from his perch. As three crewmen seized him at once, Steed’s eyes fell on the small screen which showed the view on the giant liner’s port side. A churning wake of vivid white was streaking straight for the *Atlantic Queen’s* unprotected hull.

“Better have a look off the port bow, skipper,” Steed said as well as he was able past the stranglehold someone had clamped on him. “Someone seems to have launched a torpedo at us.”

“I’ll see you hang for this!” Hoskins was yelling, shaking his fist under Steed’s nose. “Interfering with the operation of my ship in a moment of crisis—”

“The crisis will arrive in about fifteen seconds, I should guess,” Steed croaked. “Don’t you think you should at least get a look at what’s going to sink the ship?”

“Sink the ship . . . ?” Something in Steed’s tone penetrated Hoskin’s consciousness. He whirled, stared at the main screen, started to turn away, did a swift double-take—

“Crash dive!” he yelled, and leaped for the master panel. Steed was forgotten as a strident alarm bell screamed, men jumped for their posts, slamming levers home, barking commands into speaking tubes. The ship shuddered, shook, rumbled; the deck slanted sharply underfoot as the huge vessel reacted almost instantaneously to the powerful emergency diving jets. Steed saw the torpedo swelling on the screen, leaping across the last few yards of water before the sea closed over the TV eye. Another second passed, a second, a third, as the great ship angled swifdly downward, her hull groaning to the strain—

The sound was like the bursting of a vast paper bag. The steel deck-plates jumped; dust puffed from every seam. An immense, metallic *clang!* filled the universe. The ship sprang sideways, twisting like a five thing, mortally wounded.

“Damage control!” Hoskins bleated, clawing his way back to the seat from which he had been thrown. His braided cap was missing, and there was a trickle of blood down the side of his jaw.

“Underwater blast off the port bow!” an excited voice came back.

“A near miss,” someone gasped. “Not a direct hit!”

“Engine room to bridge!” a hoarse voice shouted. “All hell’s burst loose down here! We’ve lost power on numbers three and seven!”

Tooch gave a screech and departed at a run. Hoskins and the second mate rattled off orders into separate microphones. Able Seaman Patchweld stumbled to his feet, saw Steed edging toward the door and lurched to the attack.

“Grab that man!” Hoskins yelled. “Shoot him if he tries to resist. If there’s anything I can’t abide, it’s a sneaking . skulking saboteur!”

An eager crewman produced a large revolver. Its muzzle looked immense, an inch from Steed’s eye.

“Ah—he *did* warn us about the torpedo,” the second mate said doubtfully.

“And if there’s anything worse than a sneaking, skulking saboteur,” Hoskins countered, “it’s a *cowardly*, sneaking, skulking saboteur!” He bared his teeth in Steed’s face. “So you lost your nerve at the last moment, eh? It would have been better for you if we’d gone direct to the bottom, you blackguard!”

“Actually,” Steed said, “I just came along to complain of a touch of

tanin in the Chambertin ‘53—”

“Then how is it you knew the precise location at which this dastardly ambush was to take place?” Hoskins snarled, his features set in a ferocious scowl.

“Funfinger told me.”

“Funfinger, is it? Pity we can’t ask him! I suppose he passed this information along to you before he died, eh?”

“Well . . . no, not exactly—”

“Oh, he communicated from beyond the morgue, eh? Bah! Take him away!”

At that moment the second mate gave a sharp exclamation.

“She won’t answer her controls! We’ve just passed thirty-three fathoms and are still descending at max rate!”

“Navigation!” Hoskins shouted into his command microphone. “What are you doing down there? Why haven’t we leveled off at cruising depths?”

“Sir—I’m trying!” a strained voice came back. “Her forward trim vanes appear to be inoperable!”

“Engine room! Report!”

“I was about to inform you,” Tooch’s doleful voice replied, “—we’ve lost our ballast pumps, as well as our trim jets! As you know, the ship has negative buoyancy—”

“I’m aware of the dynamics of this vessel! What’s the trouble with the pumps?”

“They don’t work, that’s all! It’s just as I warned: we’re sinking, and —”

“Mr. Featherstonehaugh, our present depth!” Hoskins cut into the engineer’s lament to call over his shoulder.

“Fifty-five fathoms and descending fast,” the second mate came back promptly.

“How much of this will her hull take?” Someone muttered the question.

“We’ll know soon,” the second mate snapped.

In a silence broken only by the groan of straining seams, the distant shouts of excited passengers, and the hum of the air conditioning, the group stood as if frozen, while the ship sank downward through the black waters.

“One hundred fathoms.” The second mate gave the reading in an expressionless tone. Somewhere, a fresh outburst of shouting sounded,

accompanied by rumblings and the unmistakable gurgling of water.

“One hundred and twenty.”

Seams creaked. Steed, still gripped by six hands, could almost feel the titanic pressure crushing in on the mighty ship’s steel hull. Would it hold? In his mind was the picture of Tara King, trapped in a cell somewhere far below, with the icy water pouring in . . .

The hands on Steed’s arms had slackened as all eyes watched the screens, which now showed nothing but inky blackness. He gave a sudden lunge, and was free. A.B. Patchweld made a grab for him; Steed’s fist connected with the sailor’s beefy features with a meaty crunch. He leaped over the fallen foe, evaded a grab by the second mate and was in the clear and running.

## Chapter Sixteen

“Well, fancy seeing you here, as the blind man said to the deaf-mute,” Tara said affably as Steed stepped through the heavy door which he had unlocked hastily with the aid of a bit of wire. “What’s going on in the outside world? I was beginning to think I was going to miss all the fun.”

“Now, Tara, you know I wouldn’t allow that,” Steed said, breathing hard from his run. “As to what’s going on, it’s quite simple: we’re sinking.”

“That’s natural enough, in a submarine,” Tara pointed out. “But I don’t suppose you mean that kind of sinking.”

“Precisely,” Steed confirmed. “Our pumps are out of commission. We can descend quite nicely—until the hull collapses. But we can’t go up.”

“Is it just the ordinary sort of disaster, or has someone helped things along with a spot of sabotage?” Tara inquired interestedly.

“Enemy action,” Steed corrected. “We were decoyed to the surface by a distress call, whereupon our presumed rescues lobbed a tin fish at us. We dived under it, but its proximity fuse detonated it close enough to knock out our pumps.”

Tara raised her eyebrows. “Beset from within and without, eh? That means there are either two separate sets of villains in the piece, or that we have a suicide squad aboard, prepared to go down with their handiwork.”

“At least two,” Steed agreed. “Judging from Mrs.

Thwaite-Funderpump’s sudden demise, there’s more than one faction aboard, competing for the honor of sending the pride of Britain’s

merchant fleet to the bottom. The captain is still unconscious, leaving the ship under the command of the mate, who seems confused. And by the way, I'm officially under arrest. Other than that, all is well."

"Any idea yet who bashed the captain?"

"No—but whoever it was, it seems he preferred Hoskins' presence on the bridge to Wimperton's."

"You mean Hoskins is in on it?"

"It looks that way."

"Who else?"

Steed rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I had thought Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump was the villainess of the piece, until she died so abruptly. Now I'm not sure. I've been wondering about that sting in the neck: I can't quite see how the lady could have managed it, considering the bearhug she had on me at the time."

"Then—the dart that struck you might have been intended for her . . . ?"

"Umm. And the assassin, having missed, finished up the job by hand."

"Then who does that leave—aside from your chum, Miss Goldspangle?"

"I'm not all that sure of Mr. Balani. But there's no real evidence."

"Still, I'm sure you didn't drop in just to tell me we're beaten."

"Not yet. But we need more information. His Nibs was damnably stingy with his briefing. I think we must try to speak with the captain. He may have gotten a glimpse of the person who attacked him."

"I suppose it's worth a try."

"Cautiously, now," Steed said as he opened the door and peered out. "Hoskins has given his lads orders to shoot on sight."

As they made their way through the empty corridors of the stricken ship—corridors which moved uneasily underfoot as the vessel sank slowly but inexorably toward the black ooze of the bottom, half a mile down—a nervous voice crackled over the public-address system, advising all passengers to be calm, and to remain in their staterooms until the emergency had passed; an event, the speaker implied unconvincingly, which was probably only moments away.

"One way or the other," Tara murmured agreement "How much depth can the hull actually take, Steed?"

"There seem to be a variety of opinions on the point," Steed said. "But even the optimists don't imagine she'll stand half a mile."

"And how long will it take us to sink that far?"

“Perhaps an hour, more or less.”

“There’s nothing like a note of uncertainty to lend spice to the situation,” Tara commented.

They reached the sick bay without incident. A lone nurse was on duty, a bony woman with a face like a Derby winner. She jumped as they entered, opening her mouth to cite regulations.

“Please,” Steed said, raising a hand. “Don’t. My nerves couldn’t stand it.”

“No visitors!” the woman said sternly.

“We’re on rather pressing business,” Steed explained “It has to do with the fact that we’re sinking.” He paused “You *did* know we were sinking, I suppose?”

The nurse nodded briskly. “That’s none of my affair,” she stated flatly. “The patient’s welfare *is*.”

“A commendable attitude,” Steed said. “But the welfare of the patient may depend on my having a word with him.”

“Doctor’s orders were—”

“We may have to ignore those orders,” Steed cut in. “Is the captain conscious?”

“That’s none of your concern!”

“If we don’t succeed in talking to him,” Tara put in, “he may never speak again, to anyone. Whoever attacked him won’t be content with a mere concussion, I’m afraid.”

“What do you mean? Are you suggesting that anyone—that anyone would dare . . . ?”

“They’re likely to arrive at any moment to finish what they started,” Steed said regretfully. “Pity we can’t have learned who they were before it was too late.”

“Who are you?” the nurse asked. “You’re not one of *them*?”

“Certainly not,” Steed said reassuringly. “I’m one of *us*.”

“Well . . . so long as it’s in a good cause . . .”

“Oh, the very best,” Steed said. “Our side against theirs, what?”

Steed and Tara followed the woman behind a screen. Wimperton lay on his back, his head swathed in bandages. His eyes fluttered open, moved to rest on Steed.

“What happened?” he whispered. “Where am I?”

“You’re in sick bay, sir,” Steed said soothingly. “You had an accident, but you’ll soon be right as rain. How are you feeling?”

“My head hurts. Wha . . . what sort of accident?”

“You were hit on the head. Have you any idea who did it?”

“Hit on the head? Then that means . . . “ the victim’s voice trailed off.

“Yes?” Steed prompted.

Wimperton’s eyelids fluttered. His eyes fixed vaguely on Steed. “What happened?” he whispered. “Where am I?”

“Has he said anything more than that?” Steed inquired of the nurse.

“No, nothing.”

At that moment a tremendous shock sent them all to the floor amid the crash of breaking glass.

## Chapter Seventeen

“I thought,” Tara said, rising unsteadily, “you said we wouldn’t reach bottom for an hour.”

“I did.” Steed rose and assisted the dazed nurse to her feet. The deck was canted at an uneasy angle. Distant voices yammered alarm. Somewhere a bell was ringing. “We seem to have come to rest prematurely, luckily for us.”

“I hope the hull is holding.”

“It is,” Steed said. “Otherwise, we’d already be dead. At this depth, the slightest rupture would be fatal. The incoming water would form a jet capable of shearing away steel like papier-mache. The air inside the vessel would be compressed, of course, generating enough heat in a few seconds to incinerate everyone aboard, after which the bulkheads would melt.”

“Fascinating,” Tara said. “I notice we’re still moving a bit; swaying, so to speak.”

The deck was now at an angle of fifteen degrees, still tilting slowly.

“My guess is we lodged on a submerged ridge,” Steed said. “And I suspect that if we tilt much further, we’ll slide off.”

“I’ll bet my car against your Bentley we stick,” Tara said.

“This is outrageous,” the nurse snapped, struggling uphill to the captain’s bedside to hold him in place. “I shall report the entire incident to the captain . . . as soon as he’s well, that is.”

“Do,” Steed urged. “Meanwhile, breathe carefully. We seem to be approaching the moment of crisis.”

They waited in utter silence as the motion slowed until it was barely perceptible.

“I wish it would make up its mind,” Tara said, her voice loud in the



stillness.

For an agonizing moment, the ship teetered as if undecided whether to stop where it was or to slip off for the long plunge to the ocean floor. Then, almost reluctantly, the deck began to settle back toward the horizontal.

“That,” Tara sighed, “was the most exciting sea-saw ride of my life. It seems our luck’s turned at last.”

“It remains to be seen how lucky we are,” Steed countered. “If Toooh doesn’t get the pumps going, we might have been better advised to have gone straight to the bottom and avoid all this tiresome waiting. Still,” he added with an effort at optimism, “there *is* the consolation that things couldn’t very well get worse—”

His remark was interrupted by a deafening report and the *spang!* of a bullet which kicked stinging paint chips into his face.

“You were saying?” Tara inquired from a position flat on the floor as a second shot whined off the wall.

“Never mind,” Steed said, likewise from a prone stance. “I should have learned long ago not to make rash statements about the future.”

A third shot racketed in the enclosed space. The firing, Steed saw, was coming from the outer corridor.

“As soon as they realize we’re unarmed, it will be all over,” Tara said. “Unless they get us with a ricochet first.”

“Nurse—is there another way out?” Steed asked the woman, who still clung to her post by the bed.

“No, there’s only the one door.”

“In that case, I don’t suppose you keep a bit of ether on hand?”

“Ether? What do you want with ether?”

“Oh, it may come in handy. Do you mind if we discuss all that later? Time is of the essence just now, it seems.” A fourth bullet punctuated his last remark, ricocheting off three walls before falling to the floor, spent.

“There’s some in the cabinet, in a can with a blue label, on the top shelf.”

“Good show,” Steed said. “Might I borrow your key?”

It was the work of a few moments to find the anaesthetic, decant a quart of the volatile stuff into a brown bottle, cork it tightly, wrap a length of gauze bandage around the neck after soaking it in mineral oil. Holding the improvised Molotov cocktail carefully, Steed moved up to a position near the door, through which the bullets continued to fly. He motioned Tara and the nurse down, waited for another shot, then uttered a heart-

rendering yelp.

“OK, move in!” a hoarse voice barked from outside. At once, Steed struck a match, lit off the wick, and hurled the flaming bottle through the door. The flash and *boom!* was like a cannon fired at close range. Instantly, Steed and Tara were on their feet, plunging forward through the choking fumes. A man blundered out of the fog; Tara felled him with a deft jab of the knuckles to the short ribs. A second man made a grab at Steed, received a neatly placed kick just below the knee in return; he yelled and grappled with a shadowy figure who loomed from the murk. Steed caught Tara’s hand and together they ran for it as the sounds of hand-to-hand combat emanated from the smoke cloud behind them.

“If they’ll occupy a few moments sorting themselves out,” Steed panted as they rounded a corner at full bore, “we may make it . . .”

“Splendid,” Tara gasped, coming up fast on the outside as shots rang behind them. “Where are we going?”

“Any suggestions?”

“None.”

“In that case, just keep running. We’ll think of something.”

## Chapter Eighteen

They took refuge in the auxiliary disposal room, winded by a quarter of an hour of dodging, ducking, and detouring through the deserted corridors, to the accompaniment of the irate voice of Acting Captain Hoskins, PA-system amplified, urging all personnel to sally forth to assist in the apprehension of the two maniacs loose in the sunken ship.

“Good job the passengers took the earlier advice to heart,” Tara gasped. “No vigilantes seem eager to come forward.”

“We’ll be secure enough here for a while, I imagine,” Steed said. “Unless the DAAP remembers that we know about the captain’s favorite hideaway.”

“That’s all very well,” Tara said. “But skulking here won’t do any good. Hoskins is bound to find us. We need a plan of action.”

“Do go on,” Steed urged. “You were just coming to the part I most wanted to hear.”

“Blast it, Steed, I don’t have any more idea what to do next than you,” Tara said tartly. “What *can* we do? We’re trapped aboard this hulk just like everyone else—and our friend Hoskins holds all the aces.”

“Shall we give ourselves up?” Steed inquired innocently.

“Not likely!” Tara declared with vehemence.

“Spoken with spirit,” Steed commended. “But where do we go from here? The ship is in the hands of a maniacal first mate who seems determined to kill us before we can drown or suffocate, the entire crew is roaming the corridors with orders to shoot on sight, and as if that weren’t enough, there’s the odd free-lance assassin also hunting our scalps. I mention this not in a spirit of defeatism, but merely to outline the perimeters within which we have to operate.”

“You needn’t sound so complacent,” Tara said sharply. “This is one scrape we’re not likely to emerge from without getting our hair mussed.”

“Ummm,” Steed agreed. In the silence their eyes met.

“Steed, I’m scared,” Tara said.

“Nonsense,” Steed replied, taking her hand and patting it comfortingly. “It’s not as bad as all that . . . ”

She shook her head impatiently. “It’s too late now for sugar-coating. Damn! And we were having such a good time . . . ” She bit her lip. Unaccountably, Steed found his arms around her, her slender body pressed close to him, her head against his lapel.

“Cheer up, there’s a good girl,” he said softly. “I’m sure something will pop up at any moment . . . ” He felt her stiffen. She was looking over his shoulder, toward the viewports behind him.

“Steed,” she said in a steady voice. “Just look where I’m looking and tell me I’m having a harmless little hallucination, will you? Do it quickly, before I scream.”

Steed turned. Beyond the thick quartz panel, a vague shape, dimly visible in the greenish glow of the searchlights, was swimming vigorously past. Steed blinked, but the apparition was still there, and behind it a second, and a third.

“Good lord,” Steed said. “A whole school of . . . of . . . ”

“Go ahead and say it,” Tara said, in a voice that was near cracking. “They’re green, and covered with scales, and they’re swimming a thousand feet below the surface with no scuba gear, but they’re men!”

## Chapter Nineteen

They watched in awed silence as spates and shoals of mermen, slightly obscured by the clouds of murky black ooze stirred up by their passing,

paddled swiftly past, streaming toward the bow of the sunken ship. Beyond them, Steed could dimly discern the undulating contours of the sea mount on which the ship had come to rest, its shape that of a flat-topped, mesa-like plateau rising sheer from the depths.

“Steed, what are they?” Tara breathed. Before Steed could frame a reply, a heavy clang echoed through the walls and deck.

“What was that?” a faint voice shouted from beyond the door.

“Dunno,” another answered, closer. “Sounds as if it’s coming from the outside . . .”

There was another metallic clatter; Steed felt a faint tremor rim through the deck. Something heavy had undoubtedly crashed against the great ship’s hull.

“I don’t like it,” the man in the corridor said. “It’s coming from forward. Let’s have a look.” Feet sounded, moving quickly away.

“The crew don’t seem to be any wiser than we are,” Steed said, as the thuds and vibrations continued. “Sounds as though someone were taking a sledge to her hull.”

“Do you suppose the fishermen are trying to batter their way in?”

“Waste of time,” Steed said. “Nothing short of dynamite would open a hole through those hull plates.”

“What makes you think they don’t have any?”

Steed looked sharply at Tara. “They won’t need it,” he said in realization. “All that’s necessary is to undo the emergency access hatch forward.”

“That would have to be done from the inside!”

“Which confirms our theorizing: someone aboard is working with them.”

“It’s all falling into place,” Tara said bitterly. “The attack on the captain to get him out of the way, surfacing just when we did, the crash dive at this particular point, now a reception committee—and a reception committee for the reception committee.”

“Attention!” Hoskins’ voice rasped from the wall-mounted speaker. “All passengers remain in their quarters! The ship is, ah, that is to say, we are about to receive, er, ah, it appears that certain, um, personnel will be coming aboard—” he broke off. “Everyone clear out of sight and stay there!” he finished in a rush and switched off.

“They’re pirates!” Tara whispered. “I’ll bet you a bottle of Mumm’s that’s what they are! We’ve been hijacked in mid-ocean!”

“Fantastic though it seems, you may be right,” Steed said.

“What’s so fantastic about my being right?” Tara raised a delicately

arched eyebrow.

“Fantastic that such an operation could have been planned and carried out, I meant to say, Miss King,” Steed corrected.

“Steed, we’ve got to get a message out somehow! There’s more to this than mere casual banditry!”

“Yes—whoever is behind it must have access to some highly advanced equipment—” Steed broke off.

“What is it, Steed? You look as if you’d just remembered you’d left the gas ring on under the tea.”

“Come along, my dear,” Steed said in a new tone. “The situation is desperate enough to call for desperate measures—and I’ve just thought of one that qualifies perfectly.”

## Chapter Twenty

Ten minutes later, Steed and Tara, so far undetected in their stealthy progress toward their destination, found their way blocked by a party of sailors in the passage ahead, nervously fingering weapons while trying to look over both shoulders at once.

“That’s as far as we go in this direction,” Tara said. “Any other ideas?”

Steed smiled cheerfully. “As it happens, there *is* another route to where we’re going—if I can find the entry. It should be somewhere in the vicinity of the card room, off to our right.”

It took ten minutes’ search to locate the inconspicuous plate set in the deck, bearing a plate reading *FIRE CONTROL—NO PASSAGE*. Steed looked in vain for a handhold by which to lift it.

“Hurry,” Tara whispered. “Someone’s coming.”

Steed broke a fingernail attempting to get a grip on the featureless plate. The tread of feet came closer.

“Press on,” Tara said. “I’ll try to distract them.”

“Tara! Wait!” But she had already slipped back along the corridor to the intersection. For an instant, Steed hesitated: chivalry dictated that he leap to her side, but that would merely result in both of them being taken. Whereas if he could find that latch . . .

He scanned the bare metal rectangle again, saw not even a pinhole. Behind him, there was a sudden exclamation.

Feet pounded. Steed glanced up in time to see Tara catch a charging sailor by an outstretched arm and flip him neatly over her hip to land in

the angle of wall and floor like a crashed airplane.

“Poor fellow,” he muttered. “Someone should have warned him not to offer her a temptation like that.” He ran his hands over the hatch, then examined the walls nearby, unadorned except for a glass-fronted fire alarm box. On impulse, he seized the dangling metal hammer and smashed the glass as thuds and yelps nearby indicated the progress of Tara’s diversion. An alarm bell clanged nearby; the hatch popped open like the lid of a jack-in-the box, as white foam jetted from orifices in the ceiling.

“My dear,” Steed called over the clang of the bell, “if you could spare a moment . . .” A foam-covered figure separated itself from the melee and staggered toward him.

“Tara?” Steed inquired uncertainly. The figure swung a wild blow which Steed leaned away from, at the same time extending a foot. The attacker dived head-first through the open hatch. Steed shuddered at the impact below. A second suds-shrouded figure was coming toward him, this one somewhat slenderer, in spite of an ample covering of white fluff.

“Now I know how a lemon meringue pie feels,” Tara gasped. Steed gestured her down the narrow ladder, followed quickly. He caught her hand. “Come on, this way.”

They ran aft past the tarpaulin-covered lifeboats, pulled up before the specially equipped bay in which the oddly shaped lifeboat rested on its greased rails.

“In you go,” Steed said, feeling over the smooth upper curve for the canopy release. He found it, gave Tara a leg up the curved side. He slid in beside her, settled himself in the padded bucket seat, punched the *CANOPY SEAL* button. With a whine, the curved plastic bubble closed over them.

“Steed—what in the world . . .” Tara’s eye was caught by a metal plate set in the elaborate instrument panel: *Lifeboat, Mark 6, Submarine*, the incised letters spelled out.

“Just the thing for underwater getaways,” Steed said proudly. “Now, if I can just sort out the controls . . .”

“Has this thing been tested?” Tara demanded. Her slim finger pointed to a red tab below the data plate: *EXPERIMENTAL* it stated bluntly.

“Why, of course,” Steed said confidently. “You don’t suppose they’d put an untested lifeboat aboard, do you?” He peered at a tag dangling from the tiller. “Ah, here we are: ‘This vehicle tested at the Royal Naval Experimental Station, Plymouth, and certified seaworthy to 200 feet depth.’”

“That’s all very well,” Tara said. “But what happens below 200 feet?”

There was a sudden clatter against the lifeboat’s hull. Steed and Tara looked up to see a sudsy face peering in at them through the perspex.

“We’ll know in a moment,” Steed said, and slammed down a lever lettered *AUTO LAUNCH SEQUENCE*. At once, a shrill whining noise started up. The face disappeared. Darkness fell, followed by a dull boom. Lights appeared on the controls panel.

*INNER HATCH SEALED*, a red legend stated. A new sound started up, a solid chugging. Steed’s ears popped.

*PRESSURE EQUALIZED*, a green panel announced. More sounds, and abruptly surf was swirling up about the hatch. A pair of bow-mounted lights winked on, shining out through solid sea-water to reflect from the curved inner surface of the hull, which slid smoothly up on a vista of bottomless murk.

*OUTER HATCH OPEN*, yellow letters advised unnecessarily.

“There’s nothing but ocean out here,” Tara said breathlessly. “Steed, perhaps we’d better talk this over—”

Her words were interrupted by a surge which pressed them back in their seats. For a moment, the open hatch framed them; then they were through, coasting silently through the black water. With a sharp hum, the boat’s power unit started up. Steed grasped the wheel as the tiny submarine leaped smoothly forward, crossed over the edge of the submerged plateau, and headed outward over the deep oceanic abyss.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“Do you have your learner’s plate?” Tara asked between clenched teeth as the lifeboat responded to Steed’s efforts with a series of wobbly changes of directions of the sort calculated to separate the sailors from the landlubbers.

“Be calm, my dear,” Steed said somewhat tensely, “there’s really nothing to it—”

“Look out!” Steed swerved violently as a long, gray torpedo shape appeared from the murk and shot past them mere inches away.

“Only a dolphin,” Steed said. “Just curious, I imagine.”

“Probably wondering why we chose this rather curious form of suicide,” Tara said. “I don’t blame him. I’m wondering myself.”

“So far the hull seems to be taking it quite nicely,” Steed pointed out.

"That's encouraging," Tara said. "Do you suppose you'll figure out how to go up before we discover the collapse point?"

"I'm sure it's quite simple, once one gets the hang of it," Steed said, trying one of a pair of levers marked *DEPL* and *RETR*. There was a dull thump and a pair of saw-toothed blades extended from the bows, curving backward along the chines.

"For cutting one's way clear of seaweed or other obstructions, I suppose," he suggested, retracting them. Another lever caused a jet of opaque yellow fluid to boil forth from an orifice at the bow.

"Dye marker," Steed guessed. His finger poised over an important looking knob labeled *SP GN*.

"Maybe you'd better not push any more buttons until we've had time to browse through the instructions book," Tara suggested. "The next one might be the emergency exit, or possibly the scuttle valves."

"There might be an owner's manual tucked away in the glove box," Steed said. "Dig around a bit and see what you can turn up."

Tara found a small locker between the contoured seats. It contained a stack of blank Admiralty forms and a chewed pencil stub. A compartment on the left side yielded a packet of emergency rations and a small paper-backed book titled *Tying Flies for Fun and Profit*.

"Well, at least we'll have something to do to while away the time while stranded on the bottom," Tara offered, leafing through. "That is, we would if we had a stock of feathers, catgut, and the odd length of plastic gimp."

"Nonsense," Steed said. "Who's going to get stuck? Why, a child could control this boat," As he spoke, the tiny machine slowly rolled over on its back.

"Pity we don't have a child on board to show us the ropes," Tara said as a panel flopped open, dumping a set of voluminous plastic overalls before her face.

"No occasion for sarcasm, my dear," Steed said loftily as the boat reluctantly continued its roll back to a normal position. Tara was examining the curious garment which now lay heaped in her lap.

"It looks like a combination diving suit and foundation garment, in a matronly size," she mused. "Complete with spaceman's helmet."

"And breathing gear," Steed noted from the corner of his eye. "Probably some sort of improved model diving suit."

"Warning: this suit unsafe below five hundred feet,"

Tara read aloud. "Lovely. If we ever get up that high, it may come in



handy.”

“Perish the thought,” Steed said. “I’ll take my chances inside, thank you.”

The lifeboat was now coming around to complete a wide curve; the headlights gleamed dully on a blank wall of ribbed rock dead ahead. Far above, lights glittered. Tara leaned forward, craning her neck.

“We’ve lost a hundred feet or so of altitude. I suppose the lights are the *Queen*. Unless you find the *VP* button rather soon, we’re going to be the first submarine ever to fly into the side of a mountain.”

“I seem to be out of buttons to push,” Steed pointed out.

“Try pulling back on the wheel!”

“Ah!” the lifeboat’s nose promptly came up. The little craft climbed steadily, topped the submerged cliff with inches to spare. Ahead, a great mass of lights spread before them like a skyscraper on edge.

“An impressive spectacle,” Steed said as the sub glided toward them.

“Like a city on the bottom of the sea.”

“Is that the *Queen*?” Tara asked uncertainly.

“Of course,” Steed said.

“Then what’s *that*?” Tara pointed with her thumb over her left shoulder. A vast array of lights shone dimly through the cloudy water.

“It, er, looks like a sunken luxury liner,” Steed said.

“Steed, you don’t suppose there are *two* sunken liners in this vicinity?”

“It seems unlikely.”

“In that case, one of them must be . . .”

“Yes,” Steed said. “A city. On the bottom of the sea.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“Our first responsibility,” Steed said, “is to report the seizure of the *Atlantic Queen*.”

“Of course. But as long as we’re here, why not have a look at Atlantis?”

“Don’t romanticize,” Steed admonished. “It’s not the fabled land of mystery; it’s just an ordinary sort of, er, undersea city, no doubt.”

“Still, it won’t hurt to look.”

“Steed! That dolphin!” Tara pointed as a streamlined shape loomed through the fog. “Is that a harness on it?”

“So it appears,” Steed said as the big creature swam slowly past,

looking them over. At close range, a system of straps supporting a flat pack snugged against its underside was unmistakable.

“I suppose the mermen use them for draft animals,” Tara suggested breathlessly. “And look—there are the owners, now!”

Three green-scaled men were visible, a hundred feet from the lifeboat; they hovered in the water, paddling gently to hold position, watching the boat cruise past.

“I think we’d best head for the surface at once,”

“Steed said as another group of the mermen hove into view ahead. “We have enough improbabilities for one report.”

“What are they doing?” Tara asked sharply. “They seem to be spread out in a line all across our route; and there are some more of them above . . .”

“Just curious, I imagine,” Steed started. “Still, it wouldn’t hurt to give them a wide miss . . .” He angled the boat sharply upward, at the same time increasing the speed. The line of men swept closer—

“Steed—look out! It’s a net!”

Instantly, he wrenched the wheel hard apart, slammed it forward. The boat responded swiftly, heeling over and putting her nose down. The black ooze of the bottom rushed up at them. Steed leveled out, aimed for what appeared to be a gap between two clumps of mermen, too late saw the steel mesh curtain that blocked their way. He jabbed the *DEPL* button; the saw-tooth vanes sprang out in working position. With a rending and screeching of metal, they ripped into the braided steel strands that now closed around the boat; the small vessel bucked and veered, surged forward a few more yards, swerved sideways. Her engines whined louder as Steed poured full power to them. With a surge, the boat tore through, broken cables raking the hull, leaped ahead—

There was a scream of tortured metal, an anguished howl from the engines. The lifeboat wallowed, lost headway. An odor of burning insulation and hot metal filled the cockpit.

“They’ve fouled our propellers,” Steed snapped as he cut power. The lights died. In silence, the boat coasted forward. A swimmer appeared, leering down at Tara. She leaned forward and threw a lever. The merman disappeared in the vast swirl of ochre dye that spurted forth. There was a scraping sound as a trailing cable dragged bottom—a sound which ceased suddenly.

“Maybe we’ve cleared ourselves,” Tara said. Steed tried the engines, was rewarded with a grinding sound and a flash of warning lights on the

panel.

“We’re still moving,” Steed said.

“Then why can’t we hear the cable dragging?”

The nose of the unpowered boat was drooping. Through the thinning cloud of dye, only an unbroken vista of bottomless black showed ahead.

“Because,” Steed said, “we’ve gone over the edge.”

“Which means we’re headed for the bottom, half a mile down,” Tara said tightly.

“Unless a miracle saves us,” Steed agreed, as they sank down, down, at-an ever-increasing rate.

With a sharp grating sound, the forward motion was abruptly arrested. The prow of the boat continued to sag until the vessel hung almost vertically.

“The trailing gear seems to have fouled on something,” Steed said hopefully. “Let’s hope it holds.”

In the tense silence, they waited. A minute ticked past. Steed let out the breath he had been holding.

“It appears we’re safe for the moment,” he said.

“If dangling over a cliff a thousand feet under water, surrounded by hostile mermen is safe,” Tara said, “what would you call dangerous?”

Steed sighed. “Pass that untested diving suit over,” he said, “and I’ll demonstrate.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

“There’s no use arguing the matter,” Steed said, doing up the last zipper which enclosed him in the ribbed, waterproof suit. “It’s a stroke of luck that we dropped over the edge, we seem to be temporarily out of sight of our friends with the nets; we can’t just sit here and wait for them to find us. It shouldn’t take a minute to clear the screws. Then we’ll be on our way.”

“I should be the one to go,” Tara said.

“Nonsense, this ensemble doesn’t suit your figure at all.”

“But you’re the one who knows how to operate the boat—and if you don’t come back . . . ”

“There, there,” Steed patted her hand with a reinforced gauntlet. “Just push a few buttons at random. You’ll soon catch on to it. Now help me with the helmet.”

“Besides, I don’t like the idea of being left alone in this waterlogged coffin,” Tara said as she fitted the transparent dome over Steed’s head. There was barely room in the crowded compartment to maneuver.

“Just tie a few flies,” Steed said. “I’ll be back in no time.” He crawled from his seat, began working his way feet-first into the narrow water-lock through which he would exit from the boat.

“Steed,” Tara said as his shoulders passed from view, “be careful.”

“Nothing to it,” Steed replied jauntily. “I’ll rap on the hull from time to time to let you know I’m all right.”

“I’ll rap back,” Tara said. “To let *you* know *I’m* all right.”

“Splendid. When I want to come back in, I’ll rap one short and two long, just so you’ll know it’s me.”

“Who else would it be?”

“Suppose we just let that line of speculation lie, eh?” As Steed closed the circular inner lock, his last view was of Tara’s worried features—and on her smooth cheek . . . a tear?

“Ridiculous,” Steed told himself. “Probably just a little condensation moisture.” He felt for the suit controls, heard the hiss of compressed air, felt the pressure grip his body as the suit inflated to ironlike rigidity. He tested the joints as well as he was able in the confined space. Everything appeared to be in order. The dials set in the bottom portion of the helmet just below his nose indicated correct internal pressure, tight seals, adequate air. The small green light glowing on the bulkhead marked the position of the outer lock control. Steed worked an arm forward, touched the button and an instant later was tumbling head-over-heels through inky blackness.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

When he managed to right himself, he was fifty feet from the boat, which was visible only by the dim glow of the instrument panel shining out through the canopy. He struck out strongly, came up alongside. Tara waved to him. She looks worried, poor thing, Steed thought as he waved back awkwardly, his movements hampered by the tons of pressure inside the network of air tubes which supported the suit, restraining the weight of a quarter mile of seawater. He paddled upward toward the stern, paused in dismay at the sight of the impacted snarl of propellor-chewed cable wrapped around the shafts. The job was going to be somewhat more time

consuming than he had hoped. He unlimbered the miniature hack-saw dangling by a line from his wrist and set to work. The suit air indicator showed half an hour's oxygen. It would be interesting to see if half an hour would do the job . . . .

Twenty-five minutes later, with half a dozen tough filaments cut through and one to go, Steed began to hope. He drew a deep breath to attack the final strand—and found his lungs straining against vacuum. A glance at the dial told the story: his air was gone. Still, if he moved fast, there was still time to regain the lock. But that would mean leaving the propellers fouled and useless. Whereas, if he used his remaining seconds to cut as far through the remaining cable as possible . . . .

His arm felt like lead. Already, a lightness filled his head. His lungs ached, working to draw air where there was no air to draw. But the saw was biting into the steel with each stroke. With failing vision, Steed watched the bright filings swirl away. Now he was halfway through. Poor Tara; she'd be frightfully annoyed with him if he didn't come back. Only a little farther to go . . . .

With a feeble stir of panic, Steed came to himself. He was drifting ten feet from the boat. The saw was gone. The fire that burned in his chest was suffocating him. As the blackness closed in, he had a fleeting sense of angel hands taking him in tow, of cherubic choirs raised in songs of joy and thanksgiving. Then he was whirling away into a star-filled night.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

There was a cold draft blowing down his neck. Steed raised a hand to pull the covers up to his chin, and heard a voice say, "Ha! He's coming around."

The voice seemed vaguely familiar, he thought idly, snuggling back down into a cosy dream about—what was it? Oh, yes: angel hands. That was the sort of dream to have, not like the other one, the silly business about the sunken ship and the boa constrictor and the hanged man and the lifeboat, and the voice he had heard just now . . . .

Curious. How could he be hearing the voice of someone who existed only in a nightmare? Probably a mistake. On the other hand, whose voice could it be? A number of his friends and acquaintances might have the bloody cheek to invade a man's apartment and talk while he was trying to catch up on some much needed slumber, but none of them had thick

Calcutta accents.

“Give him another whiff of oxygen,” another voice said. Again the cold blast jetted in Steed’s face. His eyes popped open. He was staring directly into the greenish-brown face of Balani the magician.

“Clever,” he said, with surprise hearing his voice emerge as a thin chirp. “Now disappear again.” He closed his eyes.

“Wake up, Mr. Steed,” the voice said sharply. “We have matters to discuss.”

Steed opened one eye. Balani was still there. There was another man behind him, a broad, pale, bloated man with an egg-bald skull, round as a cannonball, set directly on plump shoulders without benefit of a visible neck. The man’s eyes, resembling a pair of close-set black collar-buttons, stared unwinkingly at Steed through thick smoky-pink lenses.

“If you can’t disappear,” Steed murmured reasonably, “you might at least turn into a couple of houris.”

“It is not quite so easy as that, Steed,” the fat man said. His voice fitted his physique; it was like the sound made by pouring treacle into a tub. “I fear that you must give us the pleasure of a short conversation with you, before you are allowed to drift away forever.”

“Drift away . . . ?” Steed was coming fully awake now. He sat up, watched the walls sail past dizzily. “I seem to remember something of the sort . . .”

“One of my lads happened on you, drifting unconscious in the water,” the oily voice explained patiently. “He brought you in, thinking you might be of some possible use, if you happened to survive. And *voila!* you have survived. You may now begin to repay his efforts by answering a few simple questions. To begin with, why did you leave the ingenious little boat with which you so cleverly abandoned the liner?”

Steed opened his mouth to correct a number of false impressions, but caught himself in time. It was apparent that the fat man was unaware of the fouled propellers, which in turn implied his ignorance of the present whereabouts of the boat. For a moment, thinking of Tara trapped in the frail vessel, Steed considered telling them where to look for it; but a moment’s reflection suggested the reaction such a rescue would elicit from the beneficiary.

“I, ah, was taken by a fit of claustrophobia,” Steed said.

“Ah, claustrophobia,” Balani said, rolling his eyes.

“Aggravated by a hint of agoraphobia,” Steed added. “Pinned up inside that sardine can, you know, but with all that empty space outside,

pressing in—”

“Enough!” Balani yelled. “I understand all too well!” He whipped out a vast dun-colored hanky and mopped his shining forehead.

“You expect me to believe you abandoned the relative safety of the boat for such reasons as these?” The fat man pursued the question relentlessly.

“Those—plus the fact that she sprang a leak,” Steed improvised. “Wouldn’t answer her controls. She was sinking like a stone. Probably at the bottom by now—what’s left of her. I imagine the hull cracked like an egg long before she got that far.”

“Like an egg,” Balani echoed as if fascinated by the analogy.

“So, having abandoned your comrades to their fates, you ended by deserting Miss King as well. So much for the vaunted British courage in the face of odds.”

“Well there you are,” Steed sighed. “I’m a coward, more’s the pity. I fought against it, but it was no use. In the end I showed the white feather. You won’t tell, will you?”

“You showed excellent sense,” the fat man said coldly. “I suggest you continue in the same vein. I require information as to any possible assistance the *Atlantic Queen* might be expecting. Numbers, armaments, special equipment, time of arrival, and so on. You may begin now.” A glint of reflected light flashed ominously from his glasses.

“Actually, we weren’t able to get off any wireless messages before we went down,” Steed said apologetically. It would be extremely unwise at this point, he realized, to make any false statements the veracity of which might be subjected to correction.

“I am well aware of that,” the fat man snapped harshly. “I refer to any special instructions issued prior to sailing, or to possible special modes of communication known to your intelligence apparatus.”

“Nothing of that sort, I’m afraid,” Steed said. “In point of fact, we didn’t expect to encounter any hazards at sea, so it seemed redundant to go to any special bother.”

“Then why were you and the female spy, Miss King, placed aboard the vessel?”

“We were after the lot that defaced the blotters at the Christian Science Reading Room,” Steed conceded. “We’d a tip they might be aboard. We certainly expected nothing of the scope of your undertaking.”

“Naturally not.” The obese interrogator pursed pink lips in a complacent smile. “The so-called world leaders are blind, stupid pigs, one and all.

What could they know of true genius at work beneath the waves?"

"You've certainly outfoxed the lot of them," Steed said admiringly. "Your entire operation has been carried out with admirable precision."

"You really think so?" the place where the fat man's eyebrows would have been if he had had eyebrows lifted patronizingly. "But this is only the beginning. Snaring the liner was a mere bagatelle compared with what I've laid on next."

"Astounding," Steed said in tones of wonder. "Tell me, do you actually have a building here on the sea bottom, or did my eyes deceive me?"

"A building? Poof! I have an entire city of a hundred thousand, complete with power supply, unlimited food resources, and an arsenal capable of—"

"One moment, please!" Balani cut into the conversation. "Who is doing the interrogating here, Herr Voom—you or the Englishman?"

"Silence!" the fat man boomed. "You dare to imply that this prisoner is making a babbling idiot of me, here in my own personal interrogation chamber, fitted with all the latest equipment for extracting data from the unwilling?"

"Exactly!" Balani bellowed back.

Herr Voom flicked a tiny, bright eye at Steed. "The subject's craven pusillanimity has been amply demonstrated," he grated. "He wouldn't dare."

"Quite right, Herr Voom," Steed said ingratiatingly. "My sole concern is a whole skin."

"Exactly. And besides," the obese man added in a hurt tone, "I never get an opportunity to boast to anyone about my achievements."

"Except to me!" Balani snapped. "I've listened to your bragging until it's welling out of my ears!"

"You!" Herr Voom pushed out his hips, expressing hearty contempt. "You have the sensitivity of a wart hog, you . . . you . . . vegetarian! What do you know of greatness? Genius requires a certain measure of recognition, or it withers on the vine! Describing my plans to Herr Steed will have a distinctly therapeutic effect on me. As a qualified psychiatrist, brain surgeon, and pow-wow doctor, I prescribe this catharsis for myself!"

"Pow-wow doctor?" Balani queried.

"I am a diplomate of the Philip W. Pratt College of Orgone Energy Science at Enid, Oklahoma," Herr Voom stated proudly.

"Who is this Philip W. Pratt?" Balani demanded in a tone of rising hysteria.



“You reveal your ignorance,” Voom said loftily. “Herr Pratt is well known to students of culture as the father of the rubber crutch tip. Now leave us, Balani!”

“Herr Voom, you may be a genius as you say, but you are also a cretin! Have you never read a spy novel? The master criminal invariably captures the bumbling hero and then, instead of murdering him at once as any practical man would do, he immediately tells him all his plans in the minutest detail, after which the prisoner escapes!”

“Of course they must tell! This confirms my diagnosis! Now get out at once! I am not to be disturbed for any reason!”

“Bah!” Balani tossed the gun aside and stamped from the room. There was a complicated clatter as various locks snicked. Herr Voom settled himself comfortably in his chair and rubbed his hands together.

“Now, Herr Steed,” he said. “Where were we?”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“It’s been a fascinating half hour,” Steed said thirty minutes later. “There’s just one point still to be cleared up. After you’ve succeeded in converting the *Queen* to a privateer, have quietly captured a fleet of Polaris subs, and have issued your ultimatums to the world’s capitals while resting secure from attack here in your underwater stronghold—after, in short, you have captured the world—what do you intend doing with it?”

“Tsk. You engineers,” Voom said scathingly. “Do you ask Beethoven what he intends doing with a sonata? Do you inquire of Phidias the utility of his bit of chipped stone? I am an artist, sir! I work for the glory of the achievement, not for petty utilitarian motives!”

“Herr Voom, that’s the first reasonable rationalization for world conquest I’ve ever heard,” Steed said in frank admiration. “Pity my commitments won’t allow me to permit it,” he added.

“What? What’s that? Won’t permit? You?” Voom goggled. “It is to laugh!” He blurted. “I have but to stretch out a finger—”

“Don’t laugh too hard,” Steed cautioned. “It might cause me accidentally to twitch the muscle which will fire a poisoned dart directly into your left eyeball.”

Voom tensed in his chair, his pale face quivering. “My eyeball?” He swallowed. “You’re lying! You were searched!”

“It’s rather a clever installation,” Steed said blandly. “Of my own

devising, you know. The impeller is surgically implanted, contains a hundred rounds, and is deadly accurate, as well as being quite indefectible by ordinary means. It was specially designed with you in mind ”

“Me? What do you know of me?”

Steed laughed easily. “Come, my dear Herr Voom. Do you imagine that a man of your talents could go undetected very long? Why do you think I allowed myself to be brought here, except to gather you in?”

“Then you’ve known all along? You merely pretended to blunder into the trap? Duped me by appearing to be deceived? While all along . . . ?”

“Herr Voom, surely you didn’t believe British Intelligence would be taken in so easily?” Steed smiled condescendingly. “We’d all have had to have been utter bumbling incompetent not to have taken more precautions,” he pointed out.

Voom made a tentative move toward the button in the wall behind him.

“I wouldn’t,” Steed said quickly. “Remember that eyeball.” Voom yelped and drew back his hand. Sweat popped out on his forehead. “You are a fiend!” he gobbled. “A threat to any other part of my body, and I would have laughed you to scorn! How did you know of the special sensitivity of my eyes?”

“Oh, word gets around,” Steed said casually.

“It’s Balani!” Voom choked. “He’s the traitor!” His fat fingers made clutching motions. “Herr Steed, allow me the pleasure of throttling the vile creature!”

“Sorry, the Geneva Convention forbids that sort of thing.”

“What about shooting poison darts in people’s eyes?” Voom said quickly. “I’ll wager the Swiss wouldn’t approve that, eh?”

“Nothing in the Articles about it,” Steed said. He rose, testing his legs. They seemed a bit wobbly at the knees, but otherwise normal. “Come along, Herr Voom,” he said. “Remember my weapon is aimed straight at your pupil. I shudder to contemplate what sort of havoc those glass splinters would wreak.”

Voom rose, his jelly-like body quivering. “Surgically implanted,” he bubbled. “Where?”

“You’ll never guess,” Steed said. “But as long as my eyes are on you, you’re covered.”

“Your eyes! You mean . . . you let them remove . . . you substituted . . . ?”

“You’re a shrewd guesser, Herr Voom. But the sacrifice was worth it.”

Herr Voom uttered a blubbery whimper, a sound not unlike stale air escaping from a deflated balloon, an impression reinforced by the sudden slumping of his plump body.

“A man who would submit to that,” he bleated, “would stop at nothing!”

“How true,” Steed agreed affably. “Now, Herr Voom, I suppose you have a private exit. If you’ll lead the way—being careful not to try any tricks. All it takes is a wink of the eye, remember.”

“How could I forget?” Voom’s voice was a squeak. He moved sideways, scrupulously holding contact with Steed’s threatening gaze. He pushed the door open, sidled out into a damp-smelling circular corridor. Face-to-face, Steed and his captive moved along to a vault-like chamber at the far end, around the walls of which green-scaled suits dangled from pegs.

“Ah, the mystery of the mermen explained,” Steed said, noting the close-fitting clear plastic faceplates. “I hope there’s one in your size, Herr Voom.”

“No, none.” Voom stated promptly.

“Pity. I doubt if you’ll survive without it. Still, that’s the chance one takes when playing for high stakes, eh?”

“Well, there might be just one,” Voom conceded, lifting a voluminous garment from the wall.

“I’ll dress first,” Steed said. “Then you.” . Covering Voom with his eyes, he pulled on a suit. Before closing the faceplate, he lifted an efficient-looking spear gun from a rack, aimed it carelessly at the fat man. “Your turn. Hurry it up, or we’ll be late for tea.”

At Steed’s direction, Voom operated the valves that flooded the pressure chamber, then cycled the outer lock. Together, they swam out into the darkness of the deep sea.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Voom, Steed observed, swimming a few yards behind the man, resembled an underwater Goodyear blimp—or possibly a beardless green Santa Claus. They paused a moment for Steed to get his bearings, a difficult task in a semi-opaque gloom, relieved only by the anonymous pattern of lights spaced over moss-covered facades of the low buildings; then Steed gestured in a direction he hoped would bring them to the spot

where the lifeboat had gone over the edge. They had covered half the distance when a dark shape appeared from the darkness ahead, ten feet long, streamlined, high finned. Steed grinned, stretched out a hand as the monster swung close. The snout almost touched his fingertips, the vertical tail moving gently.

Vertical tail? Steed repeated. Snout? But dolphins had horizontal tails—and bottle-shaped noses—

“Shark!” Voom’s voice screeched in Steed’s earphones. At the sound, carried clearly through the water, the big fish gave a flick of the tail which knocked the spear gun spinning from Steed’s hand and disappeared in the darkness. Steed made a vain grab after the weapon—and encountered Voom’s arm, like a steel-cased sausage. The fat man’s gauntleted hands closed on Steed’s throat. The bloated face was pushed close to his own, the features contorted in a combination of fury and triumph.

“I knew you’d enjoy meeting my little pet, Belukizar,” his voice crackled in Steed’s ears. “I’ve made a point of feeding him regularly. He prefers live food, but in this case I reserve for myself the pleasure of executing you!”

Steed fought gamely, but the hands at his throat were like iron clamps. Already weakened by his earlier near-asphyxiation, he felt the thud of blood in his temples, as pain lanced through his throat. Through a red haze, he saw the vast dark form come sailing toward him from behind Voom, the wide mouth curved in an anticipatory grin—

Voom yelled as his grasp was torn from Steed’s throat.

“Belukizar!” Steed heard the furious scream. “You fool! You criminal —”

“That’s not your pet,” Steed managed to gasp as the big creature turned and made a second pass, prodding the fat man’s struggling body. “That’s a dolphin.” He focussed his eyes, saw a small scar on the dorsal fin. “A pal of mine, in fact.”

“Belukizar!” Voom screamed—and as if in reply, the shark shot into view, tooth-studded mouth agape—aimed straight for Steed. He had time to give one desperate stroke—then a sleek body brushed him so close as to send him tumbling. There was a moment of confused sound and movement, of Voom’s voice yelling in his ears, of the turbulence of great bodies in violent motion. Then through a break in the upchurned mud-cloud, Steed saw the dolphin ram the shark amidships, saw the latter snap vainly at the elusive cetacean as it darted past. Voom’s grotesque shape appeared, paddling frantically toward his pet.

“Fight!” he shrieked. “Fight, you miserable coward!” He caught the predator by its upthrust fin, struck it a violent blow on its tender nose, then launched himself toward Steed. And as he did, the shark whirled, swift as a pouncing cat. Voom’s hands almost touched Steed . . .

Almost. Steed was looking into the round face as the expression of fury changed on the instant to one of utter astonishment. Voom’s mouth opened, but only a faint squeal came out. His arms went slack; he drifted, a cloud of smoky red rising around him as the shark backed away, a booted foot protruding from the corner of its mouth.

In horrified fascination, Steed watched as the fish gulped down the bite, turned, fixed its small eye on him, gave a flick of the tail . . .

And snapped almost double as the dolphin, hurtling through the murk, smashed against the big fish like a battering ram. Steed heard the ghastly crunch as the shark’s cartilaginous backbone shattered. Flopping and writhing, the stricken killer sank out of sight, while the dolphin cruised around Steed, an anxious expression in its eyes.

“Thanks, old fellow,” Steed breathed. “There’ll be an extra loaf of bread for you this evening, you can count on it.”

Painfully, the big mammal swimming at his side, Steed groped his way to the edge of the sea mount, paddled along it until he spied the trailing netting, snarled on a rocky outcropping. Below, he could faintly discern the pale glow coming from the cockpit of the lifeboat. He rested for a moment, aware of a high, singing sound in his head and a rising whirl of tiny red lights behind his eyes.

“Only a few strokes more,” he told himself. With vast effort, he launched himself over the edge, stroked awkwardly downward. Now he could see Tara’s face beyond the curve of the canopy. He waved feebly, saw her expression of tense anxiety change to a smile of relief—and then to a round-eyed look of sudden alarm. She pointed, her hps moving soundlessly.

“It’s all right,” Steed mumbled. “He’s a friend. Saved my life . . . “ But as Tara made frantic gestures, he turned—and was looking into the leering face of Balani.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

“So, Mr. Smarty Englishman Steed, you have eliminated the mad Herr Voom, leaving the way clear for me,” the Indian spoke almost gaily. “And

you were even thoughtful enough to supply the weapon.” He raised the spear gun Steed had lost, aimed it at his victim’s chest.

“I confess I have had no experience of such weapons,” he said, “but at this range I can hardly miss, eh?”

As he pressed the trigger, Steed hurled himself aside. The bolt clanged harmlessly off the side of the boat behind him.

“Ah, well, one for practice,” Balani said, working the lever that jacked a new projectile in place. He fired from the hip this time—and missed by inches, though Steed had had no time to duck.

“Tsk,” Mr. Balani smiled a gold-toothed smile, apparently enjoying himself. The thought occurred to Steed that he was firing wildly by intention, toying with his prey . . .

“Third time’s the charm,” Mr. Balani said, raising the gun. There was a sharp *grunk!*, and a bright steel shaft was standing in the Indian’s chest as though it had grown there. The gun fell from his nerveless fingers, which now curled almost lovingly about the impaling quarrel. Balani’s mouth sagged open; his eyes fluttered and closed. He gave a final twitch and drifted, still, in the dark water.

Steed turned, and his eyes met Tara’s. She was looking quite smug now, he thought. She pointed to a button on the panel—the one marked *SP GN*.

“So that’s what it was for,” Steed muttered hazily. He watched for a moment as Balani’s body began its long, slow fall toward the primeval ooze far below.

It took Steed five agonizingly long minutes to re-enter the escape hatch, cycle the water out, depressurize and crawl through, dripping, into the cramped boat, assisted by Tara.

“Where in the world did you acquire this fantastic set of scales?” She inquired, offering him a hot cup of coffee, drawn from an inconspicuous tap she had discovered during his absence. “I almost tested the *SP GN* button on *you* when you came groping toward the boat.”

Steed gave her a brief account of his meeting with Herr Voom. “Like most egomaniacs, he seemed to have a passion for privacy,” he finished. “His men don’t yet know he stepped out to feed Belukizar, I imagine, so we have a few minutes’ grace. If we can re-enter the ship and reach Captain Wimperton before Hoskins and his cronies get their hands on us, we may still bring it off.”

“If the boat goes,” Tara said. “Feel ready to give her a try?”

“Never better,” Steed finished the coffee with a gulp and punched the

*START* button. For a heart-stopping moment, grinding noises came from the gearbox: then, with a cough, the engines hummed sweetly. The boat lurched free, began to right itself.

“Keep your fingers crossed,” Steed said, and cautiously touched the controls. The boat responded with a surge of power. He steered away from the cliff-face, then angled upward and drove for the lights of the ship, glowing cheerfully a few hundred yards away. The hatch through which they had departed stood open, just as they had left it. Steed settled the boat into its cradle and cut the power. At once, the outer door slid shut, sealing them in. The water drained away; the hatch popped up.

“Safe at last,” Tara said, climbing down as the inner door slid up on the lighted boat deck.-

“Not quite yet,” a harsh female voice said. Miss Goldspangle stood facing them, a heavy and highly efficient-looking automatic pistol in each hand, one aimed at each of them.

“Don’t think I can’t use them,” she grated. “In addition to card tricks, I once did a sharpshooting act on the carnival circuit. I haven’t lost my touch.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Don’t let’s act in haste, Miss Goldspangle,” Steed said. “Or may I call you Valerie, in view of all we’ve been through together?”

“You needn’t bother to call me at all, you wretch,” she snapped, motioning her catch ahead of her. “We’re going to pay a call on Mr. Hoskins. He’ll do the talking. I hope he shoots you out of hand.”

“What’s a nice girl like you doing associating with scoundrels like Hoskins?” Steed inquired in a fatherly tone.

“I might as logically ask what a . . . a charming man like you is doing associating with whoever it is *you* associate with,” she retorted.

“Please,” Tara put in, “could you just shoot us or whatever it is you have in mind, and spare the sentiment?”

“Why, I do believe you’re jealous,” Steed said in a tone of pleased astonishment, as they passed through a door and out into the dim-lit corridor. Ahead, a door which was standing open half an inch stirred, swinging slowly outward as Steed and Tara passed it.

“Stop there!” Miss Goldspangle snapped. “Stand where you are! You behind the door, come out with your hands up!”

The door continued to swing outward. Something heavy, rounded, dully glistening, slid out through the opening, like a section of oversized fire hose covered with large black and brown scales. A second loop appeared, this one terminating in a blunt-snouted head, which opened in a mouth big enough to swallow a small dog. A forked tongue darted out.

“A snake!” Miss Goldspangle screamed. In a single bound, she hurled herself at Steed, wrapped her arms around his neck, apparently attempting to sit in his lap, screeching all the while. As he staggered back under the impact, Tara jumped past him, directed a smart kick at the boa constrictor’s head, then crowded it back behind the door, snicking the latch. She stooped and came up with one of the guns the other girl had dropped.

“If you’re *quite* through,” she said as Steed disengaged himself from Miss Goldspangle’s clutch, “we still have one or two small jobs to clear up before we can turn our attention to romance.”

“My dear Tara,” Steed said, moving Miss Goldspangle gently aside and straightening his tie. “You *are* jealous.”

“Nonsense. I dislike interfering in your personal life, but we *will* have to dispose of her, you know.”

“Why don’t we just tie her up instead?” Steed suggested.

“Going soft in your old age, Steed?”

He smiled blandly. “I’ve never felt younger,” he said happily. “Ladies, shall we just step into the lounge? I’m sure we’ll find a bit of twine there.” He offered an arm to each. “There’s no reason not to be civil, is there?” He asked in a reasonable tone as he caught Tara’s expression.

“Certainly not,” Miss Goldspangle said, giving Tara a cold look as she accepted the proffered member.

“Old world gallantry turns me utterly off,” Tara said coldly, “As for you, Miss Goldspangle—just in case you suddenly remember you once did jujitsu demonstrations at the Palladium, I have a gun trained on your spine.”

“She *is* jealous,” Steed said, leading the way. In the lounge, he pulled down a length of elegant gold-tasseled rope decorating the velvet drapes, and used it to lash Miss Goldspangle securely to a chair. As he finished, a sudden thought struck him.

“Tara,” he said. “Do I recall correctly that Miss Goldspangle was holding a gun in each hand when we first encountered her just now?”

“Certainly. Why?”

“That being the case, she’s not the one who killed Mr. Funfinger.” He



turned back her cuff and glanced at her wrist. "Not a mark on it," he said.

"But—she has to be the one," Tara said. "Otherwise, the killer is still on the loose—"

"Of course I didn't kill Freddy Funfinger," Miss Goldspangle spoke up indignantly. "What do you think I am?"

"I *thought* you were a member of the gang who hijacked the ship," Steed said. "Now I'm not sure . . ."

"I happen to be a member of M.I.5," the girl said wonderingly. "But—I thought *you* were members of the gang!"

"Us? My dear girl, we all seem to have been somewhat wide of the mark. You see, Miss King and I are—"

"I know what you are," a shrill voice said behind them. "Just put 'em up and keep 'em up, or you'll be as fine a pair of corpses as ever dangled from a gibbet for piracy on the high seas!"

"What, again?" Steed murmured, turning to look into the barrel of a gun held in the capacious fist of Acting Captain Hoskins.

## Chapter Thirty

"Don't waste your breath," Hoskins rapped as Steed tried for the third time to speak. "I've got enough on you to warrant summary execution five times over! That fish suit alone you're wearing would be evidence enough!"

"You're making a mistake!" Steed raised his voice firmly. "Miss King and I are on the side of law and order! Actually we're special British agents —"

"Poppycock!" Hoskins roared.

"I . . . I think they may be telling the truth," Miss Goldspangle said almost timidly.

"What, you too?" Hoskins piped. "Good job you're tied up! A man can't trust anyone anymore!"

"Look here, Hoskins—"

"*Captain* Hoskins—to you!"

"Very well, Captain Hoskins—it's essential we clear up this little misunderstanding quickly. The killer who did in Funfinger and Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump is still at large—"

"Not any more," Hoskins said grimly. "And at the first move, I'll shoot."

"We must join forces at once, and stop the murderer before he strikes again," Steed persisted. "His last victim was the captain. You, my dear Hoskins, are the next likely object for his attentions!"

"Eh? You know very well you were the dastard who struck the captain down!"

"Then why did I call the surgeon, and stand by until he arrived?"

"To allay suspicion."

"Suspicion which would never have alighted on me if I hadn't done so."

"That's enough," Hoskins burst out. "I've made up my mind! At the cost of five crew killed and ten wounded. I've thrown your bloody fish-men back off my ship! I'll not stop at shooting you to insure her safety!"

"Wait! Look here, Hoskins—Captain Hoskins—what about a spot of fair play, eh? Give us a chance, at least, to prove our innocence! Ask the captain who attacked him! He may have seen him!"

"The captain is unconscious!"

"Maybe he'll come out of it! The least you could do is give it a try."

"Well . . ." Hoskins looked doubtful. "I shouldn't like to kill an innocent man . . ."

"And an innocent woman," Steed reminded him. Tara smiled a beguiling smile at the confused seaman.

"Very well. Come along. There's a phone in the corridor. But no tricks, mind you!"

Steed and Tara preceded the officer into the passage. They stood by while he barked into the phone, waited, then said: "Ah, it's you, is it, sir?" He shot a significant look at Steed. "Look here, frightfully sorry to trouble you, sir, but there's been a spot of bother. A chap named Steed insists I ask you whether you happened to notice who it was that fetched the clonger across your skull . . ." There was a pause. Steed edged closer, straining to hear.

"*Oh, he does, does he?*" a whispery voice came from the receiver. "*Just tell him to stand by, Mr. Hoskins. I'll be along in a matter of seconds . . .*"

"Good lord!" Steed blurted as the mate hung up and turned to face him. "Mr. Hoskins, I know you're going to find this difficult to believe, in fact I find it rather difficult to say—"

"Silence!" Hoskins yelled, clapping one hand over his ear, while jabbing the pistol at Steed with the other. "You'd talk the horns off a brass goat! One more word and it's summary justice for you on the spot!"

"Oh, well, I probably couldn't have convinced you anyway," Steed said

wearily.

“What was that all about?” Tara whispered as Steed leaned resignedly against the wall and folded his arms.

“Nothing much,” Steed murmured. “Just that I heard the captain’s voice over the phone and recognized it. He’s the mystery voice I overheard in my room via the bug planted in the flower pot.”

“You mean—Captain Wimperton . . . ?”

“—is the villain of the piece,” Steed finished for her. “And he’ll be along in a couple of seconds to demonstrate to all of us the penalty for not realizing it sooner.”

“What’s that?” Hoskins barked. “Are you saying Captain Wimperton sold out his ship?”

“I was just having a word with Miss King,” Steed said coolly. “Nothing to excite yourself about, Mr. Hoskins.”

“It’s impossible!” Hoskins paused blinking. “But if it *weren’t* impossible,” he added under his breath, “it would explain a lot of things . . .”

“Who else could have known of my and Miss King’s identities?” Steed inquired negligently. “Who else could have planted a microphone in my room, arranged to kill Funfinger—who no doubt had discovered his secret—and then to implicate Miss King? Who else—”

“Who else could have taken us off the regular shipping lanes to bring us direct to the spot where they were laying for us?” Hoskins broke in. “Mr. Steed, you’ve convinced me that at best, the captain has a number of questions to answer! When he gets here, I’ll—”

Hoskins’ words were interrupted by a shot that boomed in the narrow passage. The mate clutched his chest, staggered back, and fell heavily on the floor. Captain Wimper-ton, his head looking oversized in its swathe of bandages, advanced, gun in hand.

“Clever of you to have deduced so much from a few words on the telephone,” he said in his most benign tone. “But it won’t do you any good now, Steed. You were too late, much too late.”

“To be sure,” Steed agreed. “And you were too clever, Captain. But if you don’t mind my asking—why? As commander of the *Queen* you had everything a sailor could want—”

“Except firepower!” Wimperton grated. “For forty years I’ve been running these cattle boats across the ocean, loaded to the gun’ls with overfed plutocrats and their obnoxious wives and insufferable pets, and I’m sick of it! I intend to see action before I die! Picture it! The name of

Wimperton will go down beside Kidd and Morgan as one of the greatest pirates the world has ever known!”

As Wimperton talked, Tara had edged sideways toward the closed door a few feet distant. She reached it, turned the knob gently.

“Here, what are you doing?” Wimperton barked, noting the movement from the corner of his eye as she stepped back.

“I just thought I might nip into the powder room,” Tara explained with a charming smile, moving back to Steed’s side. The captain swiveled to follow, which placed his back to the door, now standing open an inch or two.

“There’s no powder room here,” Wimperton snapped. “In any event, wait half a minute and I’ll save you the trouble.” He gestured savagely with the gun. “Into the auxiliary refuse disposal room with you, step lively, now!”

“Captain, you don’t mean you’d harm a lady?” Tara fluttered her eyelashes.

“Ask Mrs. Thwaite-Funderpump,” Wimperton said shortly. “Get moving!”

“Really, Captain,” Steed demurred. “We’ll never fit into the disposal chute.”

“You will if I cut you into small enough pieces,” Wimperton snapped.

On the floor, Hoskins stirred, groaning as they stepped over him.

“What, not dead yet?” Wimperton snorted. “Careless of me.” He took aim at the injured man’s head . . .

“Oh, Captain,” Tara said. “Would you believe there’s a boa constrictor behind you?”

Wimperton paused in his trigger squeeze to glance at her. “No,” he snapped. He drew a new bead, and paused again, cocking his head.

“What’s that sound?” he demanded. “It sounds like a sackful of rocks being dragged across the floor.”

“Try again,” Steed suggested.

“You’re trying to make me turn my back to you, to look, but I won’t do it,” Wimperton said tartly. “I’m too old a telly viewer for *that*, thank you. Let me see, a leather bag full of something or other?”

“What kind of leather?”

“Alligator?” Wimperton asked nervously.

“Close,” Steed encouraged.

“It wouldn’t be . . . just the deck creaking underfoot?”

“You’re getting cold again,” Steed said, wagging a finger.

“In that case,” Wimperton said. That was as far as he got. A great coil of glistening snake slithered around his waist; another encircled his chest, pinning his arms, as more and more loops twined about his thighs, his shins. Wimperton screamed, fired a round into the deck as the pistol fell and went down, swathed from ankle to chin.

“I . . . I knew all along . . . it wasn’t the deck creaking,” he whispered in a severely strained voice. Steed averted his eyes from the purpling face. Tara was leaning against the wall, looking pale.

“I’ve been tied to a stake by cannibals in the Congo,” she said. “I’ve faced a charging rhino with a jammed round in the chamber. I’ve even driven in rush hour traffic through Piccadilly. But nothing will ever equal the sensation of standing perfectly still while *that* crawled over my foot.” Steed had to step fast to catch her as she fell.

## Chapter Thirty-One

“You were quite right about needing a holiday,” Steed said, clinking champagne glasses with Tara as they sat together at a choice table in the dining room of the great ship, under way again as a result of six hours’ intensive labor by Mr. Tooch and the black gang.

“Fancy your fainting just at the sight of a harmless pet.”

“Poor Shredni Vashtar,” Miss Doltshev cooed, offering a tidbit to the ophidian coiled under the table. “You wouldn’t hort fly, poor darlink.”

“What about Wimperton? He looked a squeezed toothpaste tube,” Tara demurred.

“Was exception,” the boa’s owner explained. “Shredni Vashtar remamber when captain try to put down in-sanerator chute. Sorve him right, the bom.”

“There’s just one point that hasn’t been cleared up,” Steed said. “Who laid Wimperton low at the psychological moment, thus upsetting Herr Voom’s timetable and introducing the fatal unexpected factor?”

“Was me,” Miss Doltshev said, shrugging. “Revenge far porge of Shredni Vashtar.”

“Then we’re doubly indebted to a boa, and a Communist boa, at that.”

“Won’t His Nibs the general be pleased when he learns we didn’t go down with all hands, after all,” Tara said.

“On the other hand, he’s likely to be somewhat chagrined when he learns that the ear into which he was pouring assurance before embarka-

tion was already in the pay of the nefarious Herr Voom.”

“That *was* a bit of a slip,” Tara agreed. “Still, he can share in the glory of dropping depth charges on Voom’s undersea HQ—or whatever they do with captured enemy territory.”

“It will probably qualify for foreign aid,” Steed said. “In a year it will be pounding a desk in the UN and demanding equal TV time.”

Miss Goldspangle appeared at Steed’s elbow, looking stunning in a low-cut silver lame miniformal.

“There you are, Johnny,” she cooed. “I’m here for my dancing lesson.”

“Gat lost, darlink,” Miss Doltshev said, “before I lat Shredni Vashtar give you waltzing lassons.”

“Well, I do declare!” Miss Goldspangle said, and allowed herself to be led away by the DAAP, who had appeared at that moment wearing dress blues and an eager expression.

“So moch for capitalist hossy,” Miss Doltshev said briskly. “Now, Comrade Steed—you may give me lason in latest decadent imperialist dence craze.”

“Ake-may one-hay oove-may in er-hay irection-day,” Tara said sweetly, “and I’ll eak-bray er-hay arm-ay in ix-say aces-play.”

“What about Shredni Vashtar?” Steed queried.

“Him too,” Tara said.

“Sorry, Tania,” Steed addressed the Polish girl. M’m afraid if we danced you’d end up with something broken.”

“Ha! In that case, I go have snort with Comrade Toooh. Onlass I miss my gass, is ripe for conversion to socialist viewpoint.” She departed haughtily, followed by her elongated pet.

“Well, another few hours and we’ll be in New York,” Steed said. “What would you like to do first? Visit the UN, or possibly drop by the British Consulate General for a briefing?”

“I want to see Broadway,” Tara said emphatically. “Afterwards, we’ll visit a good restaurant, like Toots Shor’s or “21.” Then we’ll climb the Empire State Building, have a look at the Brooklyn Bridge, and if possible, go to a ball game. Baseball, that is.”

“My dear Tara,” Steed said in tones of pleased surprise. “I really do believe that somewhere under that imperturbable exterior, there’s a living, breathing woman.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me,” Tara said loftily.

“But I’d like to learn,” Steed said.

“Keep trying,” Tara gave him what might have been the ghost of a

wink. “You just may make it yet.”

The End