

The Avengers #7

The Gold Bomb

Keith Laumer

Chapter 1

“I came as quickly as I could, Major,” Tara King said breathlessly as she ran up the steep steps of the great, grim building. “Do you have any idea what it’s about?”

“Gold,” Steed said, admiring her pert, open-air good looks, her cheeks still rosy from her brisk walk in the morning air.

“Gold?” she said as she stepped past him into the warm hall of New Scotland Yard. “I thought all that sort of thing was fixed when we devalued.” Their footsteps echoed in the drafty corridor. Somewhere, someone was pounding monotonously on sheet metal, a sound like stage thunder.

“It’s not the kind of gold they keep lying about in the Bank of England,” Steed said. “Quite the contrary. It’s illegal gold, smuggled gold.”

“You mean pieces of eight and louis d’or? How thrilling!”

“Not quite so dramatic as all that, I gather,” Steed said, opening a door and ushering her into a gloomy, high-ceilinged office. “But quite dramatic enough to cause the General to interrupt my two weeks’ holiday in Cannes before I’d got my Gladstone well packed.” His voice came through loud and clear as the pounding stopped abruptly.

“And I was just off for Switzerland to catch the last of the skiing,” Tara sighed.

“Ah, there you are.” A hawk-faced, iron-grey man stepped through

from an inner office. He waved them to seats, settled himself behind a wide desk.

“I heard that remark, Steed,” he said. “Do I detect a note of annoyance?”

“More than a note, I should say, sir,” Steed replied pleasantly.

“At that, I’m fortunate to hear anything at all, what with this confounded battering going on all about the place.”

“Haven’t they got that central heating in yet, sir?”

“What do you expect? This is a government job, my boy, they’ve only been at it for two months.” He cleared his throat. “Know anything about gold, Steed?” he asked abruptly.

“Not much, sir. Copper’s more my style.”

The General winced as the pounding resumed on the other side of what must have been a thin partition.

“Have a look at this.” The General pushed a small metal box across the table toward him, used a pencil to lift the heavy lid. A chunk of dull yellow metal lay inside, flat-sided, scored with ridges as from a saw.

“That’s the stuff, eh?” Steed said. “Crude looking, isn’t it—like a cheap grade of brass.”

“It’s crude enough. That bit would fetch over three hundred pounds in the black market.”

“M-m-m. Interesting, sir—but isn’t smuggling a bit out of our usual line?”

“Did you notice the container the specimen is in?” the General asked.

Steed nodded. “Lead. And no lock. Seems a curious choice of containers.”

The General looked at him sternly. “Wait till you’ve heard the rest. The gold is not only illegal. It’s slightly, but unmistakably radioactive.”

“Radioactive gold?” Tara looked puzzled. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard of that, sir.”

“Neither have the unfortunate dupes who’ve been buying it. It’s been going mostly to small gold and silver workers, most of whom have merely locked it in their safes and left it there, fortunately. But a few have fabricated it into jewelry. Some of the jewelry has been sold—and worn.” The General looked grim. “Can you imagine the effect of a radioactive ring worn on a finger? Or a radioactive necklace?”

“A nasty bit of business,” Steed agreed. “But what puts it in our province?”

“Nothing, perhaps,” the General said. “Still, I’m curious. I want to

know where this stuff is coming from—and quickly, before half the brides in Britain lose the third finger of their left hand—or worse. And remember: subtlety is to be the keynote. If it's nothing, I don't want to be answering questions about the habits of wild geese."

"Very well, sir," Steed said. "Any suggestions as to where to begin?"

"Here's a list of locations where the stuff has turned up." The General handed over a typed sheet. "No two of them supply the same description of the sellers, you'll notice. And by the way," he added as Steed and Tara turned to the door. "If you find any of the stuff, don't put it in your pocket. It will kill a man more slowly than a lead bullet, but just as surely."

Chapter 2

"Where do you suppose we ought to start?" Tara asked as Steed backed the vast '29 Bentley from the narrow space and steered it out through the gates into Parliament Street. It was a bright spring morning; even Downing Street when they turned into it, and the vast, looming Ministry Buildings, had an almost cheery look.

"I suppose we may as well make the rounds of the goldsmiths," Steed said. "There can't be more than a few thousand of them in the City of London. Shouldn't take more than twelve years to canvass the lot."

"The walking will be good for you," Tara said. With her brown hair glowing under the magenta headscarf tied under her chin she looked the picture of vitality. "And who knows? We might even find something."

They slowed at a traffic pile-up at a lantern-hung barricade blocking half of Whitehall opposite the Cenotaph. The group of workmen in coats and ties who had been pecking delicately at a patch of pavement had paused for tea. They stood chatting, watching the passers-by, holding their saucers under their chins as they sipped.

"That's the good life," Steed said. "That bit of street will keep half a dozen Works Ministry chaps busy—I use the word loosely—for all of a month. They'll do their carefully metered stint each day under the watchful eye of the trade union, knowing that tomorrow will be the same. No uncertainty for them, no haring off about the city in search of jewelry that glows in the dark."

"I think it would be a mistake to take a direct approach," Tara said. "I mean, if we just barge in and ask if anyone's been in flogging the odd slab of solid gold, possibly showing the marks of a hack-saw, they'll just close

up tight.”

“Take this stretch, for example,” Steed said. “They had it blocked off for a month preparatory to digging it up, just to accustom the motorist to the idea, I suppose. Last month, they began laying paving stones aside and turning a few clods. This time next month they’ll have uncovered the leaking drain or whatever the job’s in aid of.”

“Possibly our best bet would be to pretend to be interested in purchasing a bit of jewelry. A wedding ring, say.”

“I expect in two weeks they’ll have the pipe patched, and then will begin the intricate business of putting the soil back where it was,” Steed said. “Curious that it seems to take so much longer to close the pit than to make it. But there’s another week closer to retirement.”

“I wonder if it might look a little suspicious, the two of us posing as young lovers,” Tara said. “I say, Major Steed—do you suppose you’re too old for it?”

“Too old for what?” Steed tore his envious gaze away from the group in the street.

“To be my fiancee.”

“My dear Tara,” Steed said with a surprised smile. “Isn’t this rather sudden?”

“Yes—but with as much ground as we have to cover, we must move quickly.”

“I suppose there’s something in that. But I suggest we look for the hot gold first.”

“Of course! What else?”

“Well—it seems a rather curious way to begin an engagement.”

“Oh, we’ll start with the ring, naturally.”

“I believe it’s customary—”

“We’ll ask to see everything he has in stock. Nothing will be suitable, of course. So then we’ll ask if he can make up a special design—in gold. That will give us the opening to make inquiries.”

“Oh, so that’s it. What a disappointment. I confess my fancies were running along less businesslike lines.”

“Major Steed!” Tara turned to gaze at him with wide blue eyes. “How could anything distract your attention from business at a time like this?”

“It’s especially at times like this that my thoughts have a tendency to turn to jollier things.”

“Major—you’re fooling me.”

“I sincerely hope so,” Steed said. “And do call me Steed. Major seems

so formal.”

“You look much younger when you smile.”

“Of course I look younger,” Steed said, raising an eyebrow. “I *am* younger.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean—”

“Never mind,” he said as the stalled traffic edged forward. “Here we go. As you pointed out, we have work to do—and no union rules about time and a half for overtime.”

Chapter 3

It was late afternoon when Steed and Tara King left the twenty-seventh bijouterie they had visited that day.

“It’s rather discouraging,” Tara sighed. “They all want to show us the latest in luminous plastics from Hong Kong. What’s become of the tradition of British craftsmanship?”

“Now, now, chin up and all that, my dear. Leg work is always tedious, but at least we’ve succeeded in passing ourselves off as a happy engaged pair without arousing suspicion.”

“I haven’t seen a single thing all day I’d be caught dead wearing. Did you notice that ghastly solitaire that last chap showed me? Frightful taste. Like a glass stopper for a brandy decanter.”

“Crude ostentation,” Steed agreed. “In view of the price tag, it’s lucky we aren’t really thinking of buying.”

“Oh.” Tara blinked. “I’d forgotten that. Damn! And I was having such fun!”

“I thought you hated it.”

“Don’t be silly.” She tugged at Steed’s arm. “Here’s another shop. Let’s see what he has to offer.”

A small, bald, round-shouldered man with unusually large ears emerged from a curtained alcove at the rear of the shop as the bell tinkled. He extracted a loupe from his eye and peered at his callers like a benign elf.

“We’d like to see something in a gold betrothal band,” Tara said.

“You mean a finger?” the old man came back, and rubbed his hands together with a sound like sandpaper blocks. “Can’t say I blame you, Squire,” he winked at Steed, looking Tara up and down. “Hold him to it, ducks,” he added in an undertone to her.

“Something a bit on the unusual side,” Steed specified. “Massive, you know, but feminine—”

“Like Queen Victoria?” the old fellow folded his mouth in a toothless grin like Popeye the Sailor and snapped a red, white, and blue suspender with a sharp report.

“Not quite so massive as all that,” Tara said. “And more feminine. But not fussy, of course.”

“Aha, fussy she was, love. Didn’t half give old Bertie the works, poor bloke. Used to select his ties, she did, to say nothing of his cigars, socks, and motorcars.”

“Pure gold, of course,” Steed steered the conversation back to the subject. “Twenty-four karat will do.”

“Begging your pardon, Squire, but if I was to give you a ring made o’ twenty-four karat gold, your little bride’d be back in an hour to give me a tongue-lashing, and rightly too. Soft as butter, twenty-four is. What you want is fifteen, soft enough to work but hard enough to hold its shape and wear at least as long as the blessed union of man and wife.”

“Really? Fascinating. I don’t suppose you have a bit of the pure stuff about the place?”

The shopkeeper pursed his lips. “I might be able to lay me hands on a bit—” he broke off as a sharp hiss sounded from the back room. “That’ll be me, ah, assistant,” he uttered. “Gets a bit above himself at times. Don’t go ‘way, now.” He disappeared between the curtains.

“Steed—maybe we’re in luck!” Tara whispered.

“Possibly,” Steed murmured. “Did you notice the old fellow’s fingers? Strong and yet delicate, typical craftsman’s fingers.”

“And there was gold dust on his weskit.”

“Egg,” Steed corrected. “The dust is very carefully collected. Valuable, you know, not like sawdust.”

“Of course, how silly of me. Steed, wouldn’t it be lovely if we were really shopping for something? Look at all the exquisite things he has in the shelves. That silver tray! And the tea set! And just look at those gorgeous candlesticks—”

The curtain twitched aside and a large, wide man with a broad, dark, blue-stubbled face and unkempt black hair appeared. An empty sleeve was pinned to his shirt. He looked at Steed and Tara, peered past them, squinting through the dusty window at the pedestrians passing in the twilight.

“You’ll ‘ave to excuse me mate,” he said in a voice that was a low

rumble, like an underground train. "Got hisself overexcited, 'e did. Had to lay down for a bit." He advanced behind the glassed counter, emerged through the gap at the end, stood hulking between his customers and the door. "Now, what was it you was asking questions about?"

"A gold ring," Steed said blandly, flipping up his rolled umbrella to point at a broad wedding band lying on a scrap of dusty black velvet. "That sort of thing."

"Out o' stock," the one-armed man said.

"What about making one up?"

The big man shook his head slowly, left, right. "We don't muck about wif none o' that."

"Then why did the old fellow have gold dust on his weskit?" Steed asked quickly. The big man took a step back as if he had been hit in the stomach with a wet towel.

"Brass," he said. "Brass fillings, it was. Fixing a lock, 'e was. Great hand for repairing things, 'Enry is."

"Oh? Interesting. Mind if we have another word with Henry? He was giving us some inside information that promised some fascinating revelations—"

"Henry ain't doing no more talking for a while. Got a headache, 'e 'as."

"Oh. He seemed to be feeling fine a moment ago."

"It comes on him sudden-like."

"Suppose we just have a look behind the curtain," Steed said, and started toward the rear of the shop. The big man took a quick step after him, but as his hand reached for Steed's shoulder Tara made a small, swift movement. The big man's move turned into a grab at his shin. As he bent over, Steed turned and brought a knee up sharply under the unshaven chin. The victim's teeth met with a castanetlike *click*. He went over on his face, still clutching the charley horse in his calf engendered by the toe of Tara's shoe. Steed knelt and thumbed his eyelid back.

"He'll be all right for half an hour or so, I should think. Let's see what it was he was so anxious to keep private."

They stepped past the curtain, looked about in the dimness of the cluttered room. Tara gasped sharply.

"Steed! There! Behind the wardrobe!"

A pair of feet in worn shoes projected from behind the heavy piece.

"It's Henry," Steed said, easing the old man out from his place of hurried concealment. As he did, the goldsmith's eyes fluttered open.

“I’ve ‘eard of being struck by a fancy,” he said with a weak smile. “That one near caved me skull in, feels as if.”

“It wasn’t a fancy that bashed you, Henry,” Steed said. “Unless your one-armed friend with the five o’clock shadow bears that unlikely sobriquet.”

“Wot, Ted?” Henry sat up, wincing. “ ‘It me, did ‘e? The surly great brute! Never did much like ‘aving ‘im about. But he came in useful for lifting the ‘eavy cases, one-armed as ‘e was, I’ll say that for ‘im.”

“Heavy cases, Henry? Tell me about them.”

Henry looked Steed over doubtfully. “Some kind o’ copper, are you?” He touched his head and winced again. “But seein’ as the lady’s with you, I can’t rightly refuse to answer a civil question, now can I?” With each of his rescuers lending a hand, he tottered to his feet.

“Over ‘ere,” he said, and led the way to a dark corner where three small, massively reinforced wooden boxes were stacked.

“That’s the lot,” he said.

“What’s in them, Henry?”

The goldsmith picked up a short pry-bar, went to work on the top case, levered up the lid to expose a layer of excelsior. Steed peeled that back, then a thick sheet of brown kraft paper. He whistled at the dull gleam of yellow thus revealed. Tara made a soft squealing sound.

“Gold ingots, Henry?” Steed inquired.

“Right, Squire—the outside of ‘em, anyways. About as thick as the gold leaf on a half-crown Bible. Inside it’s lead.”

“You mean to say you’re operating a gold brick factory, Henry?” Tara said in a shocked tone. “Why, I’m surprised at you!”

“Not my idea, Miss,” Henry said ruefully, not meeting her eye. “I was against it from the start, I was. But seeing the way trade’s fallen off, it was branch out or go under.”

“You make them here?” Steed inquired.

Henry nodded guiltily. “Ted showed up one day and explained the idea to me. Sounded simple enough, and he said he had a ready market waiting—”

“You’ve just known Ted a short time?”

“About a fortnight is all. Had a recommendation from a pal in Harrow —”

“Why did he come to you?”

“They needed somebody ‘oo knew what he was about. Plating gold onto lead’s no game for amateurs. I fancy I did a right job of it, too.”

Henry lifted one of the bricks, straining with both hands to pry it from the box. “Look at that, eh? Not a flaw on it. A lovely bit o’ work.”

Steed took the massive block of metal. It was astonishingly heavy. Its surface was smooth, dully glossy, a garish yellow in color.

“Curious how vulgar pure gold looks,” he said. “Tell me, Henry, where do you get the gold you use for plating purposes?”

“Don’t use metallic gold, guv,” Henry said. “Gold salts, it is, dissolved in a bath of the correct pH, along with a bit o’ this and that to make it plate out smooth and bright.”

Steed had wandered over to a black-topped work table with a small vice, an electric crucible, a grinding wheel, a scatter of jewelers’ tools and bits of metal. He switched on the gooseneck lamp there, poked at a curl of metal. Beside him, Henry leaned forward suddenly.

“‘Ere, wot’s this?” He picked up a crumb of yellow metal, bit down on it, stared in surprise at the resultant tiny disc resting on the tip of his finger.

“Now wot do yer suppose Ted was about, mucking with gold? ‘E’s no metal worker, I can tell you that. Stacking cargo’s ‘is speed. Getting a bit above himself, Ted is!” Henry looked suddenly at Steed. “Say, where *is* Ted?”

“He’s lying down,” Steed said. “You say he was the one who was working here?”

“It wasn’t me, y’er worship, that’s all I know! Look at that! Bits o’ gold lying about like fish and chips! You work gold over a collecting cloth, save every grain—”

“What do you suppose he was up to?”

“As to that, I can’t say.” Henry scratched at his bald scalp. “Might be ‘e’s got ideas of learning the craft so as to get along without me. But—”

“Henry, what do you do with the gold bricks, once they’re ready?”

Henry looked sheepish. “I can’t say, guv. I’m not in the sales end, like. And there’s no law against plating lead with gold, eh? For all I know, they sell ‘em as souvenirs, you know, ‘Buy a Genuine Gold Brick as Purveyed By Confidence Tricksters of the Past,’ that sort of pitch—”

“I mean where do they go from here?”

“I make ‘em, Ted packs ‘em in cases and loads the cases on the lorry. Where they go after that . . .” Henry spread his hands.

“What about the lorry?” Tara asked.

“Different ones, luv,” Henry said apologetically. “Last time it was a Morris van, prewar I’d guess. Didn’t ‘alf sag when the load was aboard.”

“Where was it going?”

“Don’t know, Miss.”

“Did you see the driver?”

“Ugly looking little bloke, face looked as if it’s been sat on. Didn’t say much.”

“Henry,” Steed caught the little man’s eye. “Why do you suppose Ted coshed you?”

Henry shook his head. “I never even seen the sod. I stepped in ‘ere, started over that way . . . “ he paused. It’s coming back to me,” he said, nodding. “That’s right, I saw the safe was open—and just then—boom! The lights went out!”

Steed went to the small green-painted safe perched on a small table. Inside lay two irregularly shaped scraps of metal, looking like chunks of milk chocolate sprayed with brass paint.

“Blimey!” Henry breathed. “Now where do you suppose that came from?”

“Who did you buy it from, Henry?” Steed asked, catching the other’s eye.

Henry looked uncomfortable. “‘Ave a heart, Y’er Grace,” he said in a wheedling tone. “Wot with competition wot it is today, and enough regulations to truss a goose with, a man’s got to look sharp to make a few bob for a honest day’s work. A man ‘as to ‘ave a few trade secrets.”

“I have no intention of raising the question of illegal purchases of smuggled gold,” Steed said easily. “But it happens I’m interested in the source of this particular bit of gold.”

Henry looked at the irregular lump of metal. “That bit o’ gold? Gold’s gold, Squire, if you see wot I mean . . . “

“Henry, do you always buy gold in this condition? Odd-shaped bits that look as though they were sawed out of a two-inch slab of the stuff, like someone slicing up fudge?”

“Well . . . no, now that yer mention it—”

“Is this the first lot you’ve gotten that looked like this?”

Henry nodded.

“When did you buy it, Henry?”

“A few days back. Monday, I suppose—”

“How long has your gold brick factory been in operation?”

Henry moved uncomfortably. “About ten days,” he muttered.

“I see.” Steed looked thoughtful. “Henry, what if I told you that the national interest may be involved here?”

Henry squared his shoulders. "I'm as patriotic as the next bloke, Squire! Just ask me mates what served with me at the Marne. Corporal, I was, and 'ell on 'Uns!"

"Henry, I want you to tell me all you know about where this gold came from."

"You mean—it's got to do with the balance of payments and the stability of the pound?"

"You might say that."

"In that case, naturally I'll talk. But—"

There was a soft *chuff!* from behind Steed, an *oof!* from Henry. As the old man staggered, Steed whirled, dived toward the parted curtains through which the face of the man called Ted glared. The silenced gun barked again, the slug ripped through Steed's jacket-sleeve as he slammed against the big man's legs. The next instant a bright display of stars filled the room. Steed was dimly aware of the sound of receding footsteps, a sharp cry, a dull thud behind him. He got to his feet; Ted was gone. He groped back through the curtain. Tara was kneeling beside the aged goldsmith, who lay on his back in a widening dark stain.

"Steed! He's shot!"

Henry's mouth was moving; his eyes opened, fixed on the girl's face.

"The . . . " His words were too faint to make out. Steed leaned closer. Tara was making small distressed sounds.

"The . . . walker . . . " the old man whispered. "Look for . . . the walker . . . " He slumped back, still looking into Tara's eyes. A faint smile twitched his toothless mouth.

"Never thought . . . me last sight on earth . . . would be such a pretty one . . . " he whispered. His face went slack. His dead eyes looked past the girl now, into infinite distances.

"The walker," Steed said. "Was that what he said?"

"I don't know!" Tara exclaimed. "What does that matter? He was such a sweet old man—and now he's dead—and it's our fault!"

Steed nodded tautly. "True enough," he said. "Now it's up to us to ensure that he didn't die for nothing."

Chapter 4

"The laboratory report," the General said solemnly, "confirms that the specimen is gold, .999 fine—and faintly radioactive. As to the unfortunate

goldsmith's dying words, I've not been able to turn up anything on a known criminal operating under the alias of The Walker. Are you quite sure that was what he said?"

Steed nodded. "Fairly sure, sir. Do you agree, Tara?"

"I really can't say," she sighed. "Poor Henry. Wasn't it a lovely compliment he paid me—and with his dying breath."

"No doubt a well-deserved tribute to your undoubted charms, Miss King," the General said. "But at the moment we're more concerned with identifying this mysterious Walker chap.

"How do you know it's a chap, sir? It might be a woman—or even a horse, or—"

"I should prefer to cling as long as possible to the hypothesis that The Walker is a man," the General said testily, "inasmuch as our dossiers on horses are extremely limited."

"We do have one other lead, of course," Tara said. "If we can find him: that awful Ted person who shot poor Henry and gave Steed such a dreadful bump on the head."

"He wasn't quite such a simple ruffian as he appeared, it seems," the General said. "Our technical chaps say the shop is absolutely clean insofar as fingerprints are concerned. They did turn up a few coarse black hairs, but those turned out to belong to a Newfoundland dog."

"Odd. No signs of a dog when we were there," Steed commented.

"As for your precious Ted, we've nothing on a man fitting the description. You're quite certain he had just the one arm?"

"Either that, or the other was strapped up under his coat like Lon Chaney," Steed said. "I've heard of a chap wearing an artificial arm, but never of anyone pretending to be an amputee."

"We can't let him go scot-free!" Tara said in a determined voice, sitting straight up in her chair. "Steed, you and I would recognize him quickly enough; why don't we just have a look about for him?"

"I doubt if he's loitering in the vicinity where he was last seen," Steed pointed out.

"No—but didn't Henry say he came from Harrow?"

"He mentioned Harrow. Still, it seems unlikely he'd show his face there, either."

"He doesn't know Henry mentioned it."

"Hmmpfh," the General said. "Silly notion. But it might not hurt to give it a try. Sometimes feminine intuition succeeds where more objective methods fail."

"It's not feminine intuition, sir," Tara said. "I just want to see that big bully put away where he belongs!"

"And we'd also like to ask him a few questions about the gold brick industry," the General reminded her.

"Umm," Tara said. "That too. And I think we ought to go at once, before he has time to pack it in and move on."

She and Steed left the office over a fishmonger's, temporarily employed by their chief, who had a habit of wearing scruffy tweeds and setting up shop in a different location every fortnight, presumably to confuse the opposition. They drove west across the twilight city, took a narrow private road that emerged near the top of a rise of ground affording a magnificent view between the houses of the suburbs spreading below.

"What do you have in mind, Miss King?" Steed inquired as they parked the big car under an oak shading a hideous red-brick-fronted boarding house where an elderly gentleman was watering a bed of geraniums. "Just a casual stroll about, or something more complex and strenuous, such as going over the roofs?"

"Why don't we pretend we're looking for an apartment to let? That way we can poke and pry and ask questions all we like without arousing suspicion."

"You mean for example: 'I beg your pardon, madame, but are there any large, unshaven chaps with one arm in the habit of hanging about the place?' Or possibly, 'Excuse me, sir, but is there a convenient source of radioactive gold handy to the premises?'"

"I think we can manage to be more subtle than that." Tara turned to the householder who was staring fixedly at the massive green automobile.

"Lovely blossoms," she said. "I'm fond of gardening too. We're thinking of taking a flat nearby, and I wonder if one might be able to find a handyman? Someone of robust physique, not that a slight disability would be objectional: say a missing arm, for example . . . ?"

The man looked from Tara to Steed.

"You can't pull my leg," he said. "I know you, you're some of those candid camera people, confess now! A one-armed gardener! I say, Milli-cent." He raised his voice on the last words, dropped the hose and stepped to the front door. "Do come along! We're to be on the telly!"

"Er . . . thank you very much, we must be going now," Steed said hastily, assisting Tara back into the seat of the Bentley. As they roared away from the kerb, heads were popping from every window along the

way.

“I wonder what I did wrong?” Tara said in a dismayed tone, looking back at the crowd which half-filled the street.

“Possibly you were just a trifle *too* subtle,” Steed suggested. “Suppose we refresh ourselves and try again.” He followed the winding street a few hundred yards farther, pulled in before the King’s Head, an antique pub perched on the edge of a cliff. Inside, they procured brandies, which they carried through the low-beamed rooms and out into the garden behind. Treetops showed beyond the low wall that edged it.

“This isn’t exactly the way I envisioned setting out to look for our man,” Tara said as they seated themselves at a table beside a fragrant bed of roses. “But I must confess it’s rather pleasant.”

“Suppose we do a bit of analytical work before we go further,” Steed suggested. “Let’s think back for a moment. Just what was it poor Henry said? ‘A pal of mine in Harrow.’ Perhaps it’s just the pal who lives here and not our Ted at all.”

“On the other hand, it doesn’t matter, so long as we find the pal. Wouldn’t it be a logical guess that he was in the same trade as poor Henry?”

“Perhaps.”

“And how many goldsmiths are there in Harrow?”

“Not many, I imagine.”

“*Ergo*—we find the local one and just ask him, straight out.”

“I suppose it’s better than no scheme at all,” Steed conceded.

“Discouraged so soon, Steed? And I’ve always heard you were one of the most resourceful agents in the service.”

“Have you really? Good to know one’s appreciated. As for my discouragement, I’d prefer to think of it as professional pessimism. If one expects little, one can’t be too disappointed.”

“Hurry and finish your brandy. I’m eager to get started, now that we have a plan of action.”

“Don’t get up,” Steed said softly, smiling cheerfully as if at a telling witticism. “Just keep looking into your glass and chattering away as if nothing had happened.”

“Nothing *has* happened,” Tara said, but she lowered her voice to match Steed’s. “Has it?”

“Not yet,” Steed said. “But it will, any moment now—”

His words were cut off by a tinkle of breaking glass, a scrape of feet, raised voices.

“Time to go,” Steed said. He rose swiftly, caught the girl’s hand, and led her quickly away from the scene of the disturbance toward the brick parapet.

“Over you go,” he said.

“Down there?” Tara leaned over the wall, stared down with dismay into the tangle of wild-growing berry bushes and snarled brush. “Think of my hose!”

“A pleasant thought, especially if you include what’s in them. But don’t let’s delay, eh?” He grasped her elbow and gave her a firm assist and vaulted after her, dropped ten feet, and came to rest in a bramble thicket.

Chapter 5

A glance back up showed a tall figure leaning over the wall, silhouetted against the luminous evening sky.

“Steed—isn’t that—it looks like the one-armed man! How did you know . . . ?”

“That’s our Ted, I don’t doubt,” Steed murmured. “I happened to glance up just in time to see a chap preparing to trip up the barmaid. There could be only one reason for such behavior: to create a diversion. A diversion in turn suggested that there was something from which attention was to be diverted. At that point I developed an acute self-consciousness.”

The man above was moving quickly along the wall, staring down into the dense foliage.

“He doesn’t seem much alarmed at our sudden departure,” Steed said. “I suspect he’s counting on reserve forces, presumably stationed at our rear.”

“We can’t just stay here. Steed, I say—should I pot him?”

“What—and lose our only lead? Come along, my dear. We’ll fool them by traversing a few hundred yards and reemerging at the top.” Moving with infinite care, Steed edged sideways along the steep slope, Tara close behind.

“What if they’ve thought of that?” she whispered.

“Then I imagine there’ll be a certain amount of unpleasantness.”

It took them fifteen minutes of cautious work to gain a point directly below a dense overhang of branches. By then the darkness had become complete, relieved only slightly by a mist-shrouded moon.

“As good a spot as any,” Steed whispered in Tara’s ear. “Up we go, softly, now.”

“Steed, are you sure we aren’t just making dreadful noddies of ourselves? The more I think of it, the more it seems that might have just been the landlord back there, peering after us and wondering what possessed a couple of his patrons to suddenly nip over the wall.”

“If so, he’ll doubtless assume we were thwarted sweethearts taking a lovers’ leap, and return to his taps. If not—well, I think we’d better continue to keep our heads down, just in case.”

Cautiously, they crept up the steep slope, using the gnarly stems of wild-growing shrubbery as hand-and footholds. At the top, a crumbling stone wall barred the way. Steed placed his bowler on the tip of his umbrella, poked it up above the wall. Nothing happened.

“Better get your gun ready, just in case you have to avenge me,” he whispered. He rose silently, studied the dense thicket crowding the cliff edge, then pulled himself up and over.

Utter silence reigned.

“Come on,” he called softly, and lent Tara a hand. They pushed on a few feet, emerged into more open ground studded with flaking stones set more or less upright in nests of untrimmed weeds.

“A cemetery,” Tara whispered. “How jolly.”

A stick cracked faintly, somewhere ahead. They froze.

“Right, someone’s here ahead of us,” Steed breathed the words in the girl’s ear. “Shouldn’t wonder if it isn’t Ted. We’ll split up, give him two hares to run. I’ll make just enough noise so that he doesn’t lose me. You come along behind. After I shake him off, we’ll follow him home.”

“Suppose he uses that silenced automatic of his?”

“I don’t think so. He’ll want to have a little talk first, find out just how much we know.”

“Steed—be careful.”

“Always, my dear.” He gave her a cheery smile and moved off among the tombstones.

He advanced twenty feet, paused to listen. There was a faint sound resembling a soft footfall on grass, perhaps thirty yards distant and well off to the right. He pressed on, taking care not to get too far ahead. Nearing the massive dark pile of the old chapel and the more open ground there, he stopped short as the crunch of feet on gravel sounded nearby. He went flat against the ivy-covered wall; the dim beam of an electric torch flickered across a headstone a few yards ahead, searched erratically across

the weeds, and stopped on his feet.

“Goodness me, I sensed I was not alone,” a ratchety voice said. The light switched off and an elderly gentleman in baggy golfing tweeds and stout shoes doddered forward along the path, dimly visible by moonlight. “Lovely evening for it,” he said. “Have you found any good ones?”

“Good, er, whats?” Steed inquired, sauntering forth from his inadequate shelter as nonchalantly as possible under the circumstances.

“Oh, I’d assumed you were an epitaph fancier, like myself. Some awfully jolly sentiments to be found in the older graveyards, you know. I came upon a capital one at Little Tippling on the Sligh some weeks back. How did it go? Ah, yes: ‘Alas, poor Henrietta’s dead, her brains were solid gingerbread, when the Day of Judgment comes, God will find a dozen crumbs.’ Delightful, isn’t it?”

“Charming,” Steed agreed, listening for the tread coming up behind him. “Actually, I’m an obituary man myself. Fresher material, you know. By the by, I seem to have lost my way. Can you direct me to the North Harrow Tube station? I was assured it was about here somewhere.”

“Oh, dear me, you’ve come too far,” the old fellow said. “Do you know some of the graves here date back almost three hundred years? A vintage period for funerary doggerel. I recall a capital example from Wormwell Abbey: ‘Here our brother lies in peace, burned to death by boiling grease, if he’d stayed nor tapped the tun, then the roast were not so done.’ A moving sentiment indeed.”

“Deeply so,” Steed murmured. “But now I really must be dashing on. It’s a meeting of the West Acton Chapter of the Empire League for Preservation of the Bengali Sugar-beet Weevil, and I’m to say a few words on pest conservation in general—”

“But my favorite,” the old fellow rambled on, unheeding, “strikes a more decorous note. ‘The poor dog, in life the firmest friend, the first to welcome, foremost to defend.’ Now there’s a line, sir, calculated to stir the heart of any true Englishman.”

“Indeed so,” Steed gained a few yards; his new acquaintance turned to follow him. As he did, his hand struck the cross-arm of a cruciform stone, causing him to drop the light, which went out. As the old gentleman stooped to retrieve it, Steed started on.

“Don’t hurry off,” the oldster called after him. “I have several more superb examples I’m sure you’d enjoy immensely—”

“Sorry, sir, the weevils can’t wait,” Steed tipped his bowler and fled.

Fifty yards farther on, he ducked off the path, circled behind a large

tree, and listened for sounds of pursuit. The silence was unbroken but for the leisurely crunch of the old collector's feet. In the darkness, his feeble light flickered over the tombstones. Nothing else moved. Skirting wide of the path, Steed made his way cautiously back up the low hill he had descended. Keeping to the shelter of the un-trimmed trees, he reached the wall at the back, found the spot where he and Tara had climbed over. He called her name softly. There was no response. He started off along the trail he had taken ten minutes earlier. Fifty feet from the starting point, he noticed something lying on the ground ahead—a patch of a distinctive magenta color. In the cold light of the moon he recognized it as the scarf Tara had been wearing. As he bent to retrieve it, there was a soft *whuff* and a bullet clipped leaves from a bush just over his head.

Chapter 6

Still bent over, Steed dived face-first into the deep shadows ahead. His groping hand found a grapefruit-sized stone. He tossed it away downslope, listened as it thumped and rustled its way down among the thickets. Quick footsteps sounded, hurrying after it. He rose and followed, catching glimpses of a tall figure with hunched shoulders fighting its way through the underbrush ahead. A stray gleam of moonlight showed him that it was Ted, making heavy going of it with his lone arm. At the foot of the slope, the big man halted, looked all about, then with a muttered curse set off for the gate. Steed cut across a stretch of more-or-less tended lawn, with the help of a spreading yew scaled the wall and waited in the shadows beside the street that ran below the old churchyard, a position that afforded him a view of the gate, a hundred feet away. Seconds later, Ted emerged, looked both ways, then, tucking his hand deep in his coat pocket, set off at a brisk shamble along the misty, curving street, away from Steed.

There was a lighted telephone booth in the next block. The one-armed man entered it, dropped coins, dialed. His face shone death-grey in the glow of the sodium vapor lamps as he looked back up the street; but Steed was safe in the shadows of a flowering lavender which overflowed a cottage wall.

Abruptly Ted put down the receiver, fumbled out a pencil, looked about for paper, then scribbled on the wall. He picked up the telephone again, said a final word and hung up. He stared for a moment at what he

had written on the wall, then left the booth, striding off down the hill like a man with unpleasant business to get over with. Steed waited until he had rounded the curve, then went quickly to the booth. One glance at the wall was enough: penciled numbers, names, Anglo-Saxon expressions crowded every inch of space, relieved only by the occasional rude biological diagram. Steed swiftly dropped his four coppers and dialed.

“Steed here,” he said to the girl who answered. “See that someone’s dispatched at once to this telephone—” he gave her the location. “Have them photograph and transcribe every line in the place, then run everything through a fine sieve. Somewhere in this there’s something we want. Meantime, they’ve got Miss King. See that His Nibs gets this at once, there’s a good girl.” He hung up and hurried ahead. When he reached the turn, Ted had disappeared.

Chapter 7

Half an hour of seemingly casual strolling in the vicinity, which netted Steed nothing but an increasing thirst, brought him to a parade of shops, closed and shuttered. The sight of them reminded him of Tara’s idea, the one she had been propounding just before they went over the wall. It might be worth a try . . .

The first shop in line featured a dusty window crammed with defunct furnishings in the Liverpool Elegant style, all twisty legs and peeling gilt. A sign posted beside the display read EXPERT FURNITURE REPAIRS. Steed heaved a sigh at this additional evidence of the decline of British craftsmanship and went on past a sweet shop, a cheerier sight with its vast jars of lemon drops, cinnamon twists, and sugared horehounds secure behind a steel grille. There was a fruiterer’s next, dark and shuttered, then a tobacconist’s, a dry-cleaning establishment leaking an odor of scorched synthetics, a florist’s heavily barred, a second sweet shop, a leathery-smelling bootery, and at the end of the line, dark and deserted-looking, a jeweler’s. Steed looked in through the steel grating covering the window at a depressing array of imitation gems set in base metal, flanked by transistor radios, dusty kitchen appliances, a few half-hearted placards unconvincingly announcing breath-taking bargains available on the hire-purchase scheme, a rack of freakishly shaped eyeglasses decorated with sequins. Nothing that even purported to be gold was in sight.

Steed stepped back and scanned the dark windows above. They had the forlorn, deserted look of an abandoned funeral parlor. He went to the corner of the building, looked back along the narrow airspace between it and the two-story row house adjoining. The faint glow of light came from the far end, dimly illuminating a litter of rubble and sickly weeds. As he was about to turn away, the light went off.

Steed stood absolutely still, listening. Was there a tiny rustling from the dark alley-way—or was it his overwrought imagination? A car came along the street, drowning all other sound. As its headlights swept across the paving, he stepped back into the gap between buildings, barely wide enough to admit him. The car slowed, stopped at the kerb less than ten feet from him. Leaving the engine idling, the driver opened the door; his footsteps advanced around the car, rasped on the sidewalk. A soft rap sounded. Faint footsteps thumped inside the closed shop; then the click of the latch sounded.

“‘Bout time,” a gruff voice muttered. “Wot kept yer?”

“I took the long way round to throw off pursuit,” an impatient voice responded. “Come along and give me a hand.”

“Wot, right in plain blooming sight?”

“Certainly not, you fool! Ride round back with me.”

“Whyncher come to the rear to begin with?”

“And wade through your silly trip-wires and blow a leg off? Not likely, thank you.”

Steed eased one eye cautiously past the bricks. At moments like these, he reflected, one envied the crab his extensible oculars. The driver was a small, dapper individual in a dark suit; the other man was the one-armed killer, Ted. The car pulled away without lights, turned right at the next corner. Steed turned and started through the narrow passage, squeezing his way past rusted pipes clamped to the exterior in convenient position for repair after the inevitable freeze-up. He had once pointed out to an acquaintance in the plumbing line that were the pipes to be placed inside the walls as in other, less advanced nations, freezing would be much less likely, but the argument had fallen on deaf ears. Winter, he reflected, continued to catch the British by surprise.

The lights of the car flicked on at the far end of the ten-foot-wide mews running behind the row of shops. The vehicle rolled slowly past, halted a few feet beyond his hiding place. Ted’s hulking figure climbed out; he yanked open the back door, reached in and roughly dragged out a long, inert bundle. There was just enough light for Steed to make out the

pleasing contours of a pair of badly snagged nylons projecting from beneath a blanket which muffled the rest of a feminine shape. The other man came around the car, gripped the unconscious body below the arms. Together they started toward the rear door of the shop.

“Mind the wires, now!” Ted hissed. He stepped high over an invisible obstruction, coached the other man across it. They mounted the steep steps, paused while Ted dug out a key and used it. The door swung open on a dark hallway. As they passed through, Steed stepped out, advanced swiftly, flat against the wall. He caught a glint of light from the wire stretched across the doorway in time to step over it and insert the tip of his umbrella in the jamb just as the door swung to. It thudded solidly, but failed to catch, held open a fraction of an inch by the obstruction. Steed waited half a minute, then eased the door open, wishing again for a conveniently stalked eye; thrusting one’s head into the enemy’s lair produced an unpleasantly vulnerable sensation.

The narrow hall and the steep stair above were empty, unless one considered the dank odor of yesterday’s brussels sprouts filling the available space. A line of light gleamed under a door at the top. Voices came from there. Steed ascended silently, posted himself just outside the room.

“ . . . idea of bringing the bird ‘ere’s a piece o’ broody nonsense,” Ted was saying. “Croak ‘er and ‘ave done wif it, I say.”

“I don’t think The Walker would like that, Ted,” the other voice said coldly. “Right now, fetch us a bit o’ cold water and we’ll see what she’s got to say for herself.”

“Fetch it yourself.”

Footsteps; the splatter of running water. Returning steps; a moist *slosh!* followed by gasps and splutters, and a sharp report as of an open palm impacting against an unshaven cheek. Steed nodded approvingly.

“Why, you little—”

“That’ll do, Ted!”

“ ‘T me, she did!”

“Served you right, too, you monster!” Tara’s voice spoke up spiritedly. “You’re lucky I didn’t get my fingernails into your eyes!”

Steed shook his head ruefully.

“All right, start talking,” Ted growled. “What was you and your boyfriend poking about after?”

“Inasmuch as I have no ‘boyfriend’ as you so quaintly put it, I can’t imagine what you mean, you ruffian, and if I did—” Tara’s voice broke off in a gasp.

“Keep your hands off her!” The small man snapped. “You know what happens when you handle anything delicate!”

“I’ll snap ‘er neck like a clay pipestem!”

“Certainly you will—if I let you! And if you do, where do you suppose you’ll end?”

“I’m not afraid of the broody Walker, or the broody cops either!”

“Or *it*? Have some sense, Ted . . . “ Heavy panting. “And as for you, Miss: don’t kick him again, do you mind? I may not be able to restrain him next time.”

“I’ll give yer one more chance,” Ted ground out the words like pulverized boulders. “What was you looking for at the shop, you and the old man?”

“Old man? You mean my fiance? Why, he’s not old; barely middle-aged, and frightfully well-preserved.”

Steed frowned.

“Fie-ants? Not broody likely. A bit of stuff like you, and that stuffed kipper wif ‘is bowler ‘at and rolled broolly? Tell me anower!”

“I’ve told you we were in the shop inquiring after rings—”

“Gold rings, eh?”

“I believe it’s customary.”

“And wot about ‘itting me on the knob wif a lengf o’ lead pipe when I wasn’t looking: call that customary too, do yer? And the questions you was asking ‘Enry—”

“You were about to attack poor John. He’s not strong, you know. You ought to be ashamed, a big, muscular chap like you, picking on an older man. Of course I tripped you. It wasn’t my fault you fell and hit your head!”

“I say, Ted, is it possible you’ve leaped to erroneous conclusions—”

“And I guess it’s just what yer might call a bit o’ bad luck, you and ‘im showing up ‘ere in ‘Arrow, hot on my ‘eels!”

“We were inquiring after flats to let,” Tara said primly. “One does require a flat, you know, when one is about to set up housekeeping!”

“And the way you ‘opped over the wall the minute my mates raised a bit o’ clatter, back at the King’s ‘Ead—”

“John *is* a trifle jumpy, I suppose,” Tara said in the tone of one confiding secrets.

“And the tricky business in the graveyard, ‘im one way and you anover—”

“Oh, dear me, it was just poor John’s idea of a lark. Sort of hide-and-

seek among the tombstones, you know. He felt it lent a spice to the wooing.”

“Look here, Ted, it seems to me you’ve blundered. This is obviously a perfectly ordinary, decent young girl, totally innocent of any interest in our, ah, work.”

“Yer mean—yer want to let ‘er go?” Ted demanded.

“Oh dear me, no. Can’t have that. We’ll have to kill her and bury the body under the cellar floor. Would you mind walking down, my dear? Save all the bother of carrying you, er, afterwards.”

“I warn you,” Tara said coolly, “John will be furious. It’s not as though at his age he could easily find another fiancée—”

Tara’s speech ended in mid-word, punctuated by a solid *zokk!* suggesting a kneecap collapsing under a sharp impact. Ted’s bellow of pain almost drowned a shrill yell from the other man. The door banged open and Tara came through it at a dead run, the small man who had driven the car limping in hot pursuit. Steed caught the girl’s arm, whirled her out of her pursuer’s path at the same moment that he thrust out his umbrella at ankle height. The running man hooked a foot in it, executed a flying dive that took him halfway down the flight before the first bounce. An instant later his hurtling body slammed against the door, burst it from its hinges and shot out into the night, which immediately exploded with the flash and roar characteristic of a twelve-gauge shotgun. Even as the echoes boomed, Ted staggered onto the landing, just in time for Steed to plant a foot in his seat and help him on his way. Yelling, the big man plunged down the flight six steps at a time, miraculously keeping his feet, to disappear through the doorless opening below, an event followed a split second later by a resounding *smash!* reminiscent of a Volkswagen colliding with a beer truck.

“Nothing like leaving a car parked conveniently for a quick getaway,” Steed remarked. “Are you all right, my dear?”

“Steed! Good job you’re here,” Tara said indignantly. “Now I can tell you what I think of your using me for bait back in that clammy old churchyard!”

“My dear Tara, would I risk losing my last chance at a wife in that careless fashion?” Steed replied with a lifted eyebrow.

“You were eavesdropping!” Tara charged. “Anyway, I only said that to confuse the opposition. And don’t try to change the subject! I think the least you could have done was warn me!”

“I dislike disillusioning you, my dear, but actually—”

“As soon as you start saying ‘actually,’ I know you’re lying,” Tara said, beginning to sniffle. “Haven’t I done my best? Haven’t I stuck with you through thick and thin? Didn’t I kick that awful Ted person in the leg just to save you from being broken into little pieces—”

“I daresay I could have handled the situation alone,” Steed started. “But of course you were a great help,” he added as a tear trickled down Tara’s face. “And really, I didn’t mean to use you as bait, it just worked out that way. That is to say, all’s well that ends well, eh—?” He broke off at the sound of a car door opening. It slammed as they raced downward; as they reached the door below, the machine gunned away erratically down the alley. Steed caught a glimpse of Ted’s shaggy head crouched over the wheel as the speeding vehicle rounded in to the street, scraped the kerb, and sped out of sight.

“Did you see the size of that dent in the side?” Tara breathed. “His insurance company will never believe he pranged it with his head.”

“Pity he got away,” Steed said. “He might have told us a few things. Still, I have the registration: DHJ 935.”

“And I have his wallet, passport, address book, and grocery list,” Tara said coolly. “We should be able to dig something useful out of all that.”

“Very good,” Steed patted her arm. “Found them lying on the dresser, did you?”

“I took them out of his inside pocket,” Tara said calmly. “Why else do you suppose I kept goading him into getting close enough to work on?”

Chapter 8

Fletcher, the M.I.5 man, looked sourly at Steed and Tara.

“Rubbish,” he said, tossing the papers on the table. “The wallet contained nothing but a well-worn ten-bob note, some rather saucy photographs, and a membership card in the National Geographic Society. The passport was issued nine years ago to an elderly minister, since deceased. It had been used once, for a twenty-guinea tour to Monte Carlo. The address book yielded up the names of a few dozen assorted book-makers, fences, smuggler’s reps, bashers, and used-car dealers. They’re being rounded up, but I don’t expect much from that lot. As for the alleged grocery list, mmm. Perhaps. There may be something in it. My crypto chaps are checking on the possible significance of entries such as ‘crunchy peanut butter,’ ‘pickled watermelon rind,’ and ‘chocol-

ate-covered apricots.’ “

“Capital,” Steed said. “I know we can count on you to let us know the outcome, Inspector. Any luck on identifying the chap who intercepted the shotgun blast?”

“A minor civil servant named Crimp, Works Ministry, no police record. Look here, Steed, are you quite sure the fellow wasn’t merely an innocent bystander?”

“*He* was the one who was going to bury me in the cellar,” Tara said.

“What about the cellar?” Steed inquired. “Dig up anything interesting down there?”

Fletcher frowned. “That’s M.I.5 business,” he said shortly.

“Surely you can tell *us*,” Tara said in a wheedling tone. “After all, we *did* tell you where to dig.”

“Well—I suppose it will do no harm to tell you that we found half a dozen bodies buried under the floor, in various stages of decomposition.”

“Yes? Do go on, Fletcher. I sense that there’s more.”

“All of them have been identified as small-scale crooks, formerly operating in the London area. Small loss.”

“A callous attitude,” Steed said reprovingly. “They may have been the sole support of aged parents. Or some of them might have been putting out birdseed regularly. What will befall their feathered friends when winter comes? They may have been kind to animals . . . “

Fletcher looked up sharply. “Yes? Go on.”

“Nothing.” Steed smiled casually. “You were just telling us about the bodies found in the cellar.”

“They may have been kind to animals,” Fletcher said grimly. “But animals weren’t kind to them. All six had been savaged by some sort of beast, possibly a large dog. Throats torn out, you know.”

“Odd. Not the usual manner of gangland executions,” Steed reflected.

“Any other signs of a dog about the place?” Tara inquired.

Fletcher nodded reluctantly. “A few dog hairs, a broken leash in the dustbin, the odd bone, well gnawed.”

“Not human, I trust?” Steed murmured. “Tell me, did the hairs belong to a Newfoundland dog, by any chance?”

“That’s right.” Fletcher scowled. “How did you guess?”

“Any action being taken?”

“There are over a thousand known Newfoundland dogs licensed in the London area,” Fletcher snapped. “We can’t very well arrest all their owners on suspicion, particularly when it’s very likely that this particular

dog is unregistered.”

“And you haven’t turned up the car?” Tara asked.

“It would have helped considerably if the number you handed me weren’t registered in the name of the Bishop of Chester.” Fletcher said scathingly.

“What about our friend Ted? Still no leads?”

Fletcher shook his head. “Look here, isn’t it about time you told me what all this was in aid of? Who was the blasted one-armed Gypsy you described? What were you doing in the wilds of Harrow after closing hours?”

“Just catching a breath of suburban air,” Steed soothed. “I suppose we may as well be going now, if that’s all you can tell us.”

Fletcher glowered as Steed rose and drew out Tara’s chair.

“There is one other small item,” the M.I.5 man said grudgingly. “I had the lab men go carefully over that patch of telephone booth where you indicated your man had scribbled something. The telephone numbers were those of lonely females, it seems. But microscopic examination indicated that one item had been written over the others.” He fished a scrap of paper from his waistcoat pocket and handed it over. “There it is—for whatever you can make of it.”

Steed studied the paper. It was a photostat of a sample of loosely scrawled penmanship, much enlarged. The letters seemed to read: *Id cl. Die.*

“Rather cryptic,” Steed commented. “Latin, perhaps?”

“Oh, good! I love puzzles,” Tara said, reading over his shoulder. “This one sounds rather Freudian,” she added. “Could it be a suicide note?”

—“That doesn’t sound like our Ted,” Steed said. “Perhaps as the situation develops it will become clearer.” He pocketed the note.

Outside the dingy building where M.I.5 maintained its field office, Steed paused beside the Bentley, waiting patiently before a NO PARKING sign.

“Our friends inside seem to have eliminated all our leads, Tara,” he said thoughtfully. “But Fletcher may have given us something in return . . .”

“Oh, good,” Tara said brightly. “I was afraid I’d have to go home and to bed now, and it’s only half-past one in the morning.”

“You remember what Fletcher said—about our one-armed Gypsy?”

“Well? You can’t blame him for being anxious.”

“The point is—he called Ted a Gypsy. Now that I think of it, he

didn't look unlike one: swarthy skin, black hair and eyes, pronounced features."

"Umm. I suppose he could be. So?"

"Tracing all the one-armed men in London would be a vast undertaking, admittedly. But tracing all the one-armed Gypsies shouldn't be nearly so difficult."

"Oh, I see, sort of 'better light on this corner' kind of thing—"

"Tarry a moment, my love," Steed said, and gave his tightly rolled umbrella a whirl to end up pointed at her like a gun. "There happens to be a small caravan camped at the lay-by just this side of Northolt. I noticed it as we passed earlier this evening. It wouldn't take long just to nip over and ask a few questions, eh?"

"I seem to recall hearing Gypsies don't particularly like answering questions asked by nosy strangers, particularly in the middle of the night."

"Nonsense, my dear Tara. Gypsies don't really come awake until the sun has set. And in any event, it's a lovely evening for a drive . . . "

Chapter 9

In spite of the hour, traffic was heavy on Western Avenue. At the roundabout where the Oxford Road intersected, a police car was parked on the verge, keeping an eye on the unsung Sterling Mosses clashing their gear boxes through racing changes as they jockeyed for position on the rail. Steed drew the Bentley up behind the smaller car and gave it a blast of the klaxon. Both front doors popped open and a pair of large policemen emerged and came back.

"Not sleeping on the job, were you, George?" Steed addressed the larger of the two. "Sorry about the hoot on the hooter, but I'm trying to remain inconspicuous, you know."

"Oh, it's you, Major. Inconspicuous, is it—in that museum exhibit?"

"Exactly. If I attempted to skulk, *that* might attract attention, if you know what I mean."

"What he really means is, he didn't feel like climbing all the way down to the ground," Tara interjected.

"George, this is Miss King, who's working with me on this job."

"Pleasure, Miss. Job, he says. And I have to make do with Charlie, here."

"Hullo, Charlie," Tara gave the younger cop a cheering smile.

“What brings you out in the damp night air, Major, if I may make so bold?” George inquired. He leaned closer. “Not anything to do with the Ban-the-Bomber’s march on South Ruislip scheduled for dawn, I suppose?”

“Oh, are they at it again? No, George, it’s not that. What can you tell me about the Gypsies camped up the way?”

“A perfectly normal lot,” George said. “Arrived three nights ago. Took down the fence at once to build fires with on the grass. Hung out a collection of odds and ends from the ragbag on the railings; very colorful. Heaped up enough garbage in twenty-four hours to supply an ordinary village for a month. Remarkable, really. They brought in a pair of old auto bodies which they’ve been dismantling all day with the aid of hammers. Can’t say they aren’t industrious.”

“Just let me catch one of them polka-dot-and-gold-earring villains looking crossways at a stray chicken,” Charlie growled, “and I’ll lay the lot by the heels.”

“Now, Charlie, why not look on the bright side?” George said complacently. “The supply of old newspapers alone the wind has been spreading from there is enough to keep the town in reading matter for a fortnight.”

“Noticed anything at all peculiar about them? Any unusual activities, comings and goings, parcels passing in and out, that sort of thing?”

George shook his head. “No, nothing like that.”

“Think they might be moving into the transport of stolen property end, Major?” Charlie said. “Wouldn’t put it past ‘em.”

“Haven’t seen anything of a one-armed chap, have you?” Steed persisted. “Big fellow, six-two, two-twenty, bushy black hair, last seen wearing black trousers, a horizontally striped red and white polo shirt, and a Navy issue peajacket, well worn, with gravy stains.”

“No, haven’t seen him. What is he, an escapee from a fancy dress ball?”

“An escapee, yes, but not from a social event. He not only killed a man and dented my skull—he laid violent hands on Miss King.”

“Why, the dirty scoundrel!” Charlie exclaimed. “What are we waiting for? Let’s get him!”

“That’s the spirit, Charlie—except that we don’t know where he is. I’m hoping they . . .” Steed nodded toward the Gypsy campfires “. . . can tell me.”

George straightened and squared his shoulders. “Maybe ine and

Charlie had best come along, Major.”

“No, thank you, that won’t be necessary. Just keep an eye in that direction; if we aren’t back in an hour, you’d better come along and see what’s keeping us.”

Chapter 10

Dark eyes followed Steed’s every move as he swung the Bentley grandly into the lay-by, and coasted to a stop just behind a sagging ex-delivery van coated with clotted pink and pale green paint and adorned with curtains at the windows. He switched off the lights and smiled across at Tara, ignoring the swiftly and silently gathering crowd.

“Shall we stretch our legs?”

“Yes, why don’t we just?”

He descended, patted the car affectionately on the bonnet as he rounded it, nodded to a portly, mustached woman gazing round-eyed at him, and assisted Tara down.

“Lovely evening,” she said.

“Quite,” he agreed.

“Quite a nice moon.”

“Mmmm.”

They smiled graciously at the large, bow-legged man in headscarf and undersized plaid jacket who waddled out from between two wagons ahead. He executed a courtly bow.

“Sir and madam, you got junk to sell, you have come to the right place,” he said, casting a covetous glance at the massive green machine. His accent was something midway between Serbo-Croatian and Basque, Steed decided. “I make you top offer . . . “ the Gypsy lowered his voice “ . . . and no question asked.” He winked an elaborate wink.

“Awfully good of you,” Steed said with a scarcely noticeable lift of the eyebrow, “but actually I don’t think I’d care to sell just at this time—”

“Ah, I see you are gentleman who appreciates pleasures of bargaining.” Before Steed could reply, the Gypsy chieftain turned and bellowed; an instant later, three well-patched camp stools were rushed forward by as many small boys with flashing eyes and impudent grins. A shapely young woman with long oil-black tresses flowing down over a colorful shawl glided forth barefooted, carrying a battered silver tray with three mismatched cutglass goblets and a large, unlabeled green bottle.

“Take seat, sir and madam,” the Gypsy said with a grandiose wave of his hand. “We haggle. How about twenty quid for starter?”

“Actually I couldn’t think of selling her,” Steed said. “A flaw in the wiring, you know. Anyone who touches her—” he was interrupted by a sharp yelp from behind him, and turned to see a slim youth rising from behind the Bentley, sucking his fingers.

“. . . gets a severe jolt,” Steed finished.

The Gypsy grinned widely, snapped a command at the boy, who departed between the wagons. “We fix. You sit, we drink. Maria!” He snapped his fingers and the girl with the tray put it on a low table conveniently placed. She shot a warm smile at Steed, tweaked the chief-tain’s ear, and whisked out of sight. Tara had already seated herself. Steed sat down gingerly; the faded canvas held, with a bit of creaking. The chief poured with a flourish, lifted his glass.

“We drink to deal,” he announced.

“I really don’t—” Steed began.

“OK, we drink to lady’s eyes,” the host stated firmly, and drained his glass. Steed took a sip, nodded, and took a heartier swallow.

“Mmmm,” Tara said. “It’s yummy.”

“It’s not Chateau d’Yquem, 1955?” Steed said.

“Romany country, no special year,” the Gypsy said. “Tastes good because is no tax paid.”

A massive, wrinkled woman had come forward, hovering behind the hostly chair.

“How’d you like your fortune told, dearie?” she said in a gravelly voice, looking from Tara to Steed.

“No, thank you, I—”

“Oh, I’d like that!” Tara cut him off. “How do you do it, with palms, or tea leaves?”

“Nothing like that, love,” the woman said. “I got the latest model electronic crystal ball. A surefire forecast every time.”

A tall man in a scarlet silk shirt open to expose a hairy chest wandered from the shadows, tucked a violin under his chin, and drew a soulful strain from the instrument. The old woman had produced a plastic sphere from her capacious bodice; she seated herself cross-legged on the ground. Someone placed a low stand before her. She put the ball on it, leaned forward to peer into its murky depths. A long electric cord trailed from the sphere away into the shadows.

“I say,” Steed started. “This is awfully good of you, but—”

“Don’t talk, Dad,” the fortune teller said absently. “It louses up the spirit contacts something awful.”

“Mama Dolores is very big in world of spirits,” the chief said in a stage whisper. “But got to have concentration.”

“I see something,” Mama Dolores intoned. “By golly, it’s a big one!”

“What?” Tara leaned forward, trying to get a look into the polystyrene sphere.

“Shhh! Holy Moses, look at him go!”

“Oohh,” Tara said. “Who is it, the man I’m to marry? Is he handsome? Does he have—”

“Gold,” the woman said. “And plenty of it!”

Tara gasped. Steed raised both eyebrows.

“Honey, do you know a fellow with a face like a stale waffle?” the seeress asked without raising her eyes from the ball.

“No . . .” Tara said expectantly.

“A little fellow? Bald-headed?”

“No—but I know someone *almost* like that. Except that he’s large and has lots of hair and just one arm.”

Total silence fell. Mama Dolores froze, staring into the spirit world. The violin player paused, bow in hand. The chieftain rolled his eyes sideways without moving his head, to study Tara’s innocent expression.

“Remarkable,” Steed said casually. “Do you see anything else, Mama Dolores?”

“Not a thing,” she said hoarsely, and whipped the sphere out of sight and rose. “The spirits are out to lunch.”

“Don’t hurry away,” Steed urged. “I was wondering if you, er, saw any indications of what the stock market will do in the next few days.”

“I just remembered: I’ve got to go water my pot crop.” She whirled and waddled swiftly away.

“Pity she couldn’t tell us more,” Steed said. “It might have been worth a considerable sum.”

“Stock market tricky business,” the chieftain said in a flat tone. “Too bad you don’t sell old car. Maybe you have better luck in city after all.” He stood.

“Oh, did I say something wrong?” Tara asked in a distressed tone, rising. “Just as we were getting to the good part—I think.”

The violinist tossed his violin aside and came around to stand in Steed’s way, brushing Tara rudely aside.

“Don’t hurry away, gramps,” he said. He made a fast motion and a

long-bladed knife leaped from his yellow cummerbund into his hand. He turned it to reflect the firelight into Steed's eyes. "Before you go, there's a couple of old Romany customs we want to show you."

"Cosimo—" the chieftain started. The younger Gypsy whirled on him, jabbed the knife tip against his neckerchief just over the Adam's apple.

"Go see to the horses, Uncle," he hissed.

"We got no horses," the older man said, leaning away from the knife, which followed.

"Then go check where the horses would be if we had any horses."

The chieftain said something in the Romany tongue which the youth cut off with a snarled reply. The chief backed a step, turned and disappeared between the wagons. The knife wielder turned to face Steed, who was watching him, idly swinging his broolly.

"You were saying something about customs," he prompted.

"The custom is—we cut the gullets out of nosy blokes who come poking about." The youth motioned and two other men came forward.

"Oh, really?" Steed said interestedly, looking from one to another of the armed trio. "How many of you does it take per customer?"

"One's enough," the youth snarled. Tara had moved behind Steed. Now she stepped clear, to stand on his left, half a pace behind him, her back to the front wing of the Bentley.

"I notice all your chaps have knives," Steed said conversationally. "I seem to have forgotten mine—" With a sudden swift flick of the wrist, he brought the umbrella up and sent the knife spinning from the Gypsy's hand in a twinkling arc. He switched the broolly to his left hand, and plucked the blade from the air. "—but never mind. I'll make do with this one." He took a step toward the youth before him, who backed swiftly. The other two men jumped forward, halted abruptly as Steed included them in his gaze.

"Rather dull, so far," he said. "What happens next?"

The disarmed man pivoted suddenly and shot out his foot in a snap-kick to Steed's wrist. The latter leaned aside, reached far forward and laid the loaded tip of the umbrella against the attacker's skull. As the victim toppled, the man on Steed's right lunged—to meet his comrade's inert body in mid-collapse, and rebound, staring blankly at his empty hand, then at the knife projecting from the other's side as he crumpled at his feet. Steed had spun to face the third man, was just in time to watch the fellow's eyes go glassy as he fell forward to slam the ground and lie still. Behind him, Tara replaced her shoe and dusted her hands. A sigh went up

from the watching women and children.

“Most colorful,” Steed said, and tipped his bowler to the audience. “And now we really must be rushing off . . .”

The line of spectators burst apart as the chieftain charged through, a two-foot bowie knife in his massive fist. He skidded to a halt before Steed, stared open-mouthed at the two prone men and the third, who still stood frozen to the spot. He drew himself up, thrust out his chest.

“I make apology for these.” He jerked his head toward the attackers. “You know how is younger generation. No respect!” His nostrils flared with emotion.

“No harm done,” Steed said. “Except for poor Cosimo, of course. But he seems to be breathing.”

“Take him away!” the chief yelled. “And you—” He pointed a finger at the one whose knife had done the damage, “You pull latrine detail for month!” He turned back to Steed. “Too bad you finish off spivs before I fetch Krasnyik . . .” He hefted the huge knife and tucked it in his sash. “Now, I must erase shame brought on Romany folk by young barbarians. You come snooping, OK. I volunteer nothing—but you ask question, I tell you what I know.” He looked at Tara. “You ask about one-armed man, big, black hair? OK, ask me.” He folded his arms and waited.

“You know a man like that?” Tara asked.

“I do.”

“Is his name . . . Ted?”

“His name Hastelanno Marvovitz Paul Gregorious Ramjee.”

“Oh.”

“But nickname Ted,” the Gypsy added in a lower tone.

“Can you tell us where to find him?” Steed asked.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“He comes here sometimes?”

“Correct.”

“When did you see him last?”

“Maybe two, three days.”

“Do you happen to know where he goes, what he does when he’s not here?”

“Import-export.”

“I see. Just what does he import?”

“Junk.”

“Junk?”

“Junk.”

“Just what sort of junk?”

“Scrap metal.”

“Any particular sort of scrap metal?”

“Small piece. Some light, aluminum, maybe. Some heavy. Maybe lead.”

“Lots of heavy ones lately?”

“All heavy ones lately.”

“Where does the stuff come from?”

The chief nodded across the road, where the lights of the aerodrome gleamed through a light mist. “There. Other places like that.”

“They arrive via air?”

“Sure. Gypsies keep up with times.”

“And where do the shipments go from here?”

“Don’t know.”

“What fun!” Tara said. “Just like Twenty Questions. May I ask one?”

“Got six questions to go,” the chief advised her.

“Have you ever heard of a man called The Walker?” Tara asked.

“No. Fifteen.”

“Does Ted own a Newfoundland dog?”

“No. Sixteen.”

“Does this mean anything to you?” Steed showed the card with the cryptic message cribbed from the phone booth. The Gypsy turned it upside down, frowned, handed it back.

“I’m not scholar,” he said.

Steed read it aloud. The other shook his head. “Seventeen.”

“How long has Ted been in the, er, import-export line?” Tara asked.

“Three month. Eighteen.”

“Has he said anything to indicate whether he’s about to wind up the business any time soon?”

The Gypsy nodded. “One more shipment delivered; then retire. That’s nineteen question.”

“All right, last query,” Steed said. “When do you expect him to come here again?”

As the Gypsy opened his mouth to answer, there was a soft cough from the shadows. The chief took a short step forward and stood, mouth open, a surprised look on his face. He leaned confidentially toward Steed

—
“Oh!” Tara cried. “Steed! He’s—” Her voice broke off as the man toppled against Steed, who lowered the limp body to the ground. By the

light of the fire, a black-red stain grew in the center of his back.

“That answers that one,” a deep, growling voice said, and Ted stepped forward, the silenced automatic in his hand pointed between Steed’s eyes. “Too bad. Twenty and out.”

Chapter 11

“Well, Ted, fancy seeing you here,” Steed said. “How’s your head feeling? Nasty ding it put in the side of poor Crimp’s Minor.”

“Never mind my ‘ead,” Ted snarled. “You—Salazar! Mario!” He rattled off rapid instructions in the Romany tongue. Two men came hesitantly forward, ropes in hand.

“Toss that broody broolly aside, you,” Ted ordered. Steed flipped it away. “Hand the bowler ‘at to Mario! And peel outer that coat, lively now!”

The men closed in; they searched them, took Tara’s purse, then yanked their hands behind them and began trussing them.

“Take the bird’s jacket,” Ted ordered. “And no squeaks outer you, or it’ll be your last!” he added as she drew breath to scream.

“Calmly, my dear,” Steed said. “Teddie doesn’t mean to shoot us—not just yet. There are a few things he’d like to find out first.”

“Too right,” Ted muttered. “I’m looking forward to a chat wif you, mate.”

Ted barked at Mario and Salazar again. The former, a small, slim lad, reluctantly donned Tara’s jacket, buttoned it, and stuffed a pair of Gypsy bandannas inside. The other man—a heavy-set fellow of middle age—had pulled on Steed’s coat and placed the bowler at a jaunty angle on his untrimmed grey locks.

“Get the ruddy bumbershoot,” Ted ordered roughly, as the costumed pair started toward the Bentley. “Ditch the old wreck in the river at the first likely spot you see. And mind the coppers don’t catch you speeding.”

“Really,” Steed started, watching with dismay as the impostors climbed into the leather seats. “No need to vent your spite on a helpless piece of machinery—”

“Wot yer expect me to do, leave it standing about ‘ere for the ruddy blueboys to come nosing about? Not ruddy likely.” Ted gave more orders; rough hands hustled Steed and Tara forward, up the rear steps into the pink and green caravan. Steed caught a glimpse of heaped rubbish among

the derelict odds and ends of furniture and packing cases before the door slammed shut behind them.

“Steed! What in the world will we do?” Tara whispered. “That monster means to kill us as soon as he’s pumped us dry!”

“Right again,” Ted’s voice spoke from outside the barred window. He glared in at his prisoners with a baleful grin. “And I know just the place for it. Better enjoy each other’s company while you can. It’ll be the last you ever have on this broody planet!” He slammed down a shutter over the window and departed shouting to his men, leaving them in utter darkness.

Steed felt Tara shudder as she huddled against him. “We were fools to come here alone,” she said in a tiny voice. “We should have known something like this would happen.”

“Indeed we did,” Steed said in tones of satisfaction. “After all our trouble I’d have been quite disappointed if it hadn’t.”

Tara stumbled against him as the engine backed and roared and the vehicle started forward with a lurch.

“You mean—you *intended* for us to be kidnaped by that murderer?”

Steed smiled comfortingly at her in the fudgy gloom. “How else could we have prevailed on him to take us along to his secret hidey-hole? Now, let’s settle down and enjoy the ride.”

Chapter 12

“Actually, it’s an ideal arrangement,” Steed said, with his face close to Tara’s ear to be heard over the noise of the speeding van.

“Far from it,” Tara retorted sharply. “Personally, I find the accommodations far from ideal!”

“For the gold smugglers, I mean,” Steed clarified. “The itinerant habits of Gypsies are well known. They frequently camp near airfields, quite conveniently for the unobtrusive transport of contraband.”

“That’s all very well,” Tara said. “But what good will knowing that do if we’re dead?”

“None,” Steed conceded. “We must therefore make every effort to remain alive.”

“I wonder where he’s taking us?”

“So far, we’re still heading west on the Oxford Road,” Steed said. A sudden turn sent him cannoning against Tara.

From the jouncing and bumping, it was clear they had left the paved road and were following one of the network of picturesque lanes that crisscrossed the Middlesex countryside. Tara uttered a squeal as a particularly violent bump threw her back against Steed; the impact sent him reeling against the wall. There was a sound of splintering wood.

“Steed! Are you all right?” Tara gasped.

“I think so—unless that was my spine collapsing . . . “ He groped behind him with his bound hands, felt a loose slat dangling from what seemed to be a once-stout cabinet. Pulling it away, he managed to insert his fingers, felt over a clutter of small objects crammed on the shelves inside.

“What is it, Steed?” Tara asked breathlessly.

“A locker filled with this and that. Possibly I can find something that will be of use . . . “ He poked and prodded, teased forth a worn tennis shoe, a broken flowerpot, a bent spoon.

“No knife?” Tara inquired hopefully.

“Not even a fork.” A rusty fountain pen was the next find, followed by an empty picture frame, small size (no glass), a book end, a peeling rubber stamp, and an amazing number of bottle caps.

“Why couldn’t the bottles have been there too?” Tara asked plaintively. “Anything at all to cut these awful ropes. I’ve no circulation at all left in my hands!”

“Ah,” Steed said.

“A knife?” Tara gasped.

“No, a toothbrush.”

“Steed! I thought you’d found something!”

“Where there’s a toothbrush, there may well be other things,” Steed pointed out.

The van slowed suddenly, made a sharp turn to the left; the engine groaned as the driver shifted down, laboring up a steep slope.

“Steed! Hurry! I have a feeling we’re almost there!”

“An empty toothpaste tube,” Steed announced.

The van had reached the top of its climb and was moving slowly along over bumpy ground. Steed fumbled in the darkness behind him, brought forth a worn shaving brush. “I’m getting warm,” he murmured encouragingly as the caravan lurched to a stop. At that moment, he touched the cold hardness of metal. The object eluded his grasp, sliding away. The engine idled down and stopped. In the sudden silence, the clump of feet was audible outside. Steed thrust hard against the broken door, tickled the

elusive prize. Outside, muffled voices sounded. Steed closed two fingertips on the object, scissors-fashion, and drew it toward him. A moment later it was in his hands.

"It's a razor," he said. "Unfortunately of Mr. Gillette's patent. I was hoping for the old-fashioned variety."

"Is there a blade in it?" Tara whispered as hands fumbled at the rear door.

"I'll have to try to disassemble it," Steed said. Holding the head in one hand, he twisted hard on the handle. It failed to budge.

"Rusted," he whispered. He tried again. This time it turned. A moment later, the head assembly lay in his hand.

"It's stuck tight with dried lather," he reported. "Have to pry it apart . . ."

The door swung open, admitting a chill draft and the uncertain flicker of a flashlight. The beam played over Tara's rumpled figure, switched to Steed.

"Coo, Ted, why'd yer bring this lot 'ere?" a thin, ratty voice whined.

There was a dull impact and the light went away abruptly. "Don't ask questions," Ted's heavy voice growled. "Just get 'em inside like I said, and be quick about it!"

"Keep them busy," Steed whispered as the small man reappeared, rubbing his jaw. He reached in, gripped Tara's ankle, dodged a kick, dragged her toward the door. Steed got a fingernail under the plate capping the blade and levered hard. The fingernail broke.

"Come out o' that, you!" Ted's voice growled. Hands like iron clamps closed on Steed's ankle and yanked him from his feet, knocking the razor from his hands. Ted's thick features leered at him from the doorway. With a sudden twist, Steed freed his legs, doubled them, and kicked the big man squarely in the mouth. As the kidnaper staggered back with a hoarse yell, Steed groped over the peeling linoleum floor—and came up with the blade, knocked free by the jar of falling. There was just time to tuck it securely under the tightly tied ropes on his wrist before Ted, blood running from his nose, caught his feet again, and with a heave and a bellow, pitched him out on the ground. Steed saw the heavy foot swinging toward him, half-twisted away, took the blow on his hip. A second kick drove the wind from his lungs. The third was a remote earthquake, happening to someone else . . .

" . . . bring 'em 'ere, if you was going to kick 'im to death!" a shrill voice was shouting somewhere, far away.

“All right, all right, ‘e’s not dead. I’m saving ‘is ‘ead fer later,” Ted panted. “Drag ‘em inside, and don’t bower bein’ delicate about it!”

Steed felt himself lifted, draped over a bony shoulder; the jogging ride that followed was not one of his pleasanter ones, he reflected hazily; pain stabbed his ribs with every step.

“Over there!” Ted’s voice barked. An instant later, the floor came up and dealt Steed a dizzying blow. He sat up, his nostrils filled with finely divided dust and an odor of poultry. The sneeze that followed helped to clear his head.

The place in which he found himself appeared to be an unused barn, lofty, drafty, with a dirt floor and a heap of moldy hay at the far end. Tara stood a few feet away, her hands cinched up in the small of her back, facing Ted defiantly.

“Right, ‘oo’s first?” the Gypsy demanded, looking from the girl to Steed. “ ‘Ow about you, guv? Want me to make the girlfriend squeak a bit, just to jog yer tongue?” He gave Tara’s bound arms a twist. She went to her toes and gasped. Steed winced in anticipation.

“I say, Ted, if I were you—” he started; but the toe of Tara’s shoe had already swung in a short, accurate arc to connect with the big man’s shin. He yelled and swung a back-handed blow that would have shattered the girl’s jaw had it landed. But she skipped nimbly back, kicked over a pitchfork that entangled itself with Ted’s legs as he lunged after her. Roaring, he caught up the implement, stabbed out viciously, barely missed as Tara sprang aside.

“Clumsy!” she called. “You can’t catch me—” Her taunt was interrupted by the small, wiry man who leaped behind her and seized her by the arms. Ted threw the pitchfork aside and advanced to thrust his face into hers.

“Just you wait,” he growled, and stepped back hastily as he remembered what had happened last time he got too close.

“I’m quite content to wait,” Tara said in a saucy tone. Her brown hair was tousled, making her look more attractive than ever, Steed thought, as he worried the razor blade from under the rope. It was awkward, holding it between thumb and forefinger and attempting to saw at the tough rope around his wrist. The blade was rusted and dull; he could manage only short, feeble strokes. At this rate, it would take far, far too long . . .

“Maybe yer won’t ‘ave long to wait at that,” Ted said. “You seem to be pretty soft on old bowler-and-brolly, ‘ere. ‘Ow’d yer like to watch whilst I take a bit o’ the starch out of ‘is upper hp?”

“Do what you like,” Tara said with a toss of her head. “The old lecher is always pawing me about. Can’t stand him. Seems to think just because he’s got money it gives him all sorts of privileges.”

“Changing yer tune, eh?” Ted frowned ferociously. “You wouldn’t be trying to lead me up the garden path, now would yer?”

Tara looked at him assessingly. “Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “After all, you *are* much younger—and I must say I admire a man with a good physique.”

“Uh?” Ted grunted. The small man stood behind him now, gaping.

“Wouldn’t you like to kiss me, Teddie?” Tara smiled co-quettishly. As Ted took an uncertain step toward her, she stepped back. “But first, send that awful little man away,” she whispered.

“Oh, so that’s the scheme, is it?” Ted barked. “Divide and conquer, eh? ‘Ow dumb you fink I am, eh?”

“You mean you think you can’t deal with me alone—even with my hands tied?” she inquired with a lift of one beautifully arched eyebrow.

“I’ll deal wif yer, right enough; ‘ave no fear.” Ted turned to his accomplice. “‘Op it, Lester,” he ordered. “Take a walk.” The small man gave him a resentful look and departed, muttering. Ted looked across at Steed. “I’ll just give the old fellow a kick in the ‘ead to quiet ‘im—”

“Oh, no!” Tara said quickly. Ted scowled.

“It will serve him right to see you kissing me,” she suggested. “Maybe he’ll get some idea how it’s done.”

Ted leered, wiped the back of his hand across his wide mouth, and advanced on Tara.

“On—on second thought, perhaps we ought to wait until later,” she quavered, taking a step back.

“Wot for?” Ted demanded.

“Hadn’t I better give you the information first?” she asked.

“Plenty o’ time for that ducks.”

“But . . . won’t they be angry?”

“‘Oo, the old buzzard and ‘is shadow? ‘Oo cares!”

“But . . . “

Ted halted and stared at her with dawning suspicion. “Say,” he demanded. “‘Oo told you about ‘im?”

“About whom, Teddie darling?” Tara asked in a tone of bright interest.

“You know ‘oo. ‘Im!”

“Why, you did, Teddie. Just a moment ago. You said you didn’t care if

he got angry because you were kissing me instead of finding out about us, as he ordered you to do.”

“Nobody gives young Ted orders,” Ted stated, pointing to his chest with a black-nailed thumb. “But as it ‘appens,” he added in a lower tone, “I’m curious meself, now that you mention it.” He frowned, “ ‘Ow much *do* yer know?”

“Well . . . suppose I begin with the moment I first saw you, there in the goldsmith’s shop. You looked so masterful, with your fist clenched and your lip thrust out. And I couldn’t help thinking, ‘I wonder what he’s like when he smiles . . . ?’”

“Funny,” Ted said. “You might not believe this, but I ‘ad an idea you didn’t much like the look o’ me. Maybe it was the way you sort of leaped backward and screamed.”

“I was just overcome with all that aggressive masculinity,” Tara explained confidentially. “And you know, Teddie, I *still* haven’t seen you smile.”

“Smiling don’t come easy to me,” Ted grunted apologetically.

“You can do it. Won’t you try—just for me?” Tara smiled encouragingly. Ted glowered, then cleared his throat.

“Promise not to laugh,” he warned. He twitched his right cheek tentatively, then his left. He lifted his upper lip to show a row of square teeth with gaps between them.

“Oh, splendid, Teddie,” Tara enthused. “Just a little bigger?”

Ted bared both rows of teeth, squinting his eyes with the effort.

“Charming, Teddie!” Tara cried.

“Glad yer fink so,” he said in a strained voice; holding the grimace in place, he advanced toward the girl, arms outstretched. “Now ‘ow’s about that kiss—”

“But Teddie—I haven’t finished telling you about us!”

“I’ll settle for action,” Ted stated.

“But first I have to be sure you love me!” Tara yelled, backing rapidly.

Ted halted abruptly. “ ‘Arf a mo,” he said, holding up his hand, palm outward and making pushing motions. “Next yer’ll be talking about ‘oly matrimony. Typical bird! All you lot are alike, want to tie a man down for life, you do!”

“But . . . but at least tell me you’re a teentsy bit fond of me!”

“I’m a teentsy bit fond of yer,” Ted said sullenly, and lunged. Tara, backing, collided with a wooden post and rebounded into the Gypsy’s embrace.

“Wha . . . what did you think the first moment you laid eyes on me?” Tara squeaked, ducking aside from his puckered lips.

“Let’s see,” Ted said, pausing to stare into space. “I fink me first fought was: ‘coo—’ “

His words were interrupted by a sound as of a mallet hitting a gourd. He frowned, shook his head. Behind him, Steed cast a surprised look at the chair leg in his hand, raised it, and dealt the big man a second hearty blow behind the ear. Ted sighed; his arm fell away from Tara as his legs wobbled and folded. He went down like a two-hundred-and-twenty-pound sack of new potatoes.

“Steed, you brute!” Tara wailed. “Couldn’t you have waited another ten seconds? Now I’ll never know what he was going to say!”

Chapter 13

“Well, Teddie,” Steed said in a friendly tone to the big man who sat slumped against the post to which he was bound. “Since you won’t talk to me, suppose I tell you a few things.”

Ted lifted his head painfully to stare at him with dull eyes.

“You’re in the export-import business,” Steed stated. “A branch of the profession known to some as smuggling, but which is in fact no more than a battle of wits and daring between the intrepid entrepreneur and the police and Customs men.”

Ted grunted.

“Your particular specialty in recent months has been scrap metal. Not just any scrap metal, though. You happen to have found a market for a particular class of scrap.”

“Know a lot, don’t yer?” Ted muttered.

“Now, you’ve also been fortunate enough to establish an understanding with a wholesaler who just happens to be able to supply the sort of item you want. The stuff arrives at the various airports, it’s handed over the fence to you, and you make delivery. Right?”

“ ‘Ow’d yer get so smart?” Ted inquired.

“A few months ago, there was a change in the routine,” Steed went on coolly. “You were handed a new kind of package, small, but extremely heavy: then, sometime after the first such delivery, you were called on for a different sort of task—disposal of wastes, I suppose they called it. I imagine you were told to bury the packages deeply, in isolated spots along

the caravan routes.”

Ted stiffened, then slumped again. He pretended to yawn. “So what,” he growled. “Any law against it?”

“But you were curious, Ted. The ‘rubbish’ seemed as heavy as the original packages. So you took a look—against specific instructions, I feel sure.”

“Can’t ‘ang a man for that,” Ted grunted.

“I imagine you were quite surprised at what you found inside the lead sheathing. At first it looked like an ordinary brick, though heavy. But when you scratched it, the paint flaked away—and exposed what looked like gold. Of course it couldn’t have been: who’d throw gold away? But it gave you an idea: if it looked like a gold brick to you, why not to someone else? Even in the black market, it ought to fetch a pretty penny. Then an even better idea occurred: why sell the pure thing? Why not stretch the supply by plating lead bricks and flogging them instead? The customers would hardly be in a position to complain. So—you took die imitation gold along to a shop—Henry’s place, where we first met—and arranged for it’s use in the manufacture of gold bricks, always a brisk seller among those eager for rapid profit.”

“Tell me anower,” Ted said sullenly.

“Of course Henry suspected nothing. He assumed the gold was genuine and proceeded to cast lead bricks and plate them as directed.”

“So what?”

“Henry was a stickler for legality. He refused to have anything to do with fencing the stuff, or making jewelry of it and passing it off as genuine. But simply plating metal blocks for a customer was another matter.”

“Cautious, ‘e was,” Ted grunted. “But not cautious enough.”

“Yes, poor Henry was a gullible sort, eh, Ted? Or so it seemed . . . “

“Wot’s that supposed ter mean?”

“Didn’t it occur to you, Ted, that Henry, being a goldsmith—a man who had worked in precious metals all his life—would recognize real gold when he saw it?”

“‘E might have done—if ‘e’d ‘ad the chance.”

Steed smiled sadly. “I’m afraid you’re the gullible one, Ted,” he said. “The bogus gold that you so trustingly passed along was quite genuine, solid twenty-four karat.”

“Haw!” Ted managed a crooked leer which ended in a wince. “You’re off yer turnip,” he said. “‘Qo’d ever ‘and over real gold in bushel lots to

be buried?”

“How did you lose your arm, Ted?” Steed asked abruptly.

“I got tired o’ looking at it and pinched it off, why?”

“How long ago? About six months? Just after the heavy shipments began coming through?”

“ ‘Oo told yer that?”

“Must have been a painful business, Ted. At first there was just a tingling and itching sensation, like a heavy sunburn. Then the deeper ache, followed by discoloration, swelling. I suppose it was rather far along before you went to a surgeon; there *are* a few about who ask no questions—and answer none.”

Ted was staring, open mouthed. “ ‘Owd *you* know that?”

“You were burned by gamma radiation, Ted—rays of invisible light, rays which are very damaging to living tissues. Even a short exposure to such ray would inflict serious radiation burns.”

“Wotcher mean?” Ted croaked.

“I mean the gold was hot, Ted. I imagine you held a lump of it in your hand, probably for quite some time, admiring it. Now gold isn’t naturally radioactive. It had to be exposed to a primary source in order to emit the kind of secondary radiation that burned you. On the other hand, another heavy metal, uranium—U-235—is highly radioactive.”

“Uranium? Never ‘eard of it.”

“No, you wouldn’t have known about that part. But I suspect that those heavy parcels you delivered consisted each of small nuggets of U-235, encased in a solid gold shielding.”

“Steed!” Tara interrupted. “What in the world are you talking about? How did you know how Ted lost his arm? And why in the world would anyone go to the trouble of smuggling U-235?”

“There’s only one reason that I can think of,” Steed said.

“You don’t mean . . . ?”

“I mean,” Steed said, “that someone has gone to a great deal of trouble to assemble the materials for a nuclear bomb.”

Chapter 14

“The rotters!” Ted’s voice was a hoarse whisper. “They ‘anded me a fmg like that and never give me a blooming ‘int!”

“Looks that way, Ted. Now don’t you want to tell me all about them?”

Ted made a strangled sound; he was sweating heavily now. “So they played me for a dummy. All right. What’s done’s done. I’m not splitting on ‘em. I’ll deal wif them in me own way when the time comes.”

“Aren’t you just the least little bit curious about the end product of all this effort, Ted?” Steed asked. “After all, setting off a nuclear explosion isn’t like lighting a few sticks of dynamite to loosen a safe door.”

“Wot’s that to me?” Ted grunted. “I got me pay—and not birdseed, eiver.”

“You still don’t see the full picture, Ted. Even a modest nuclear blast—and they’ve learned to make much bigger and better ones since the halcyon days of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—could wipe the City of London off the map.”

“Suits me,” Ted said. “I never cared much for the place anyhow. I guess I can live wiffout it.”

“Not if you’re in the middle of it when it goes up, Ted.”

Ted sat very still. His eyes opened wide, then squinted down to glittering slits.

“Wotcher talking about?” he said in a strangled voice. “Yer fink I’d be fool enough to ‘ang about after this?”

“If I hadn’t come along and told you about the bomb, where would you have spent the next week or two, Ted?”

“Around and about,” Ted muttered.

“You’d have been right on top of the bomb when it detonated, Ted. Your chums in the export-import game didn’t think to mention it to you, did they?”

“Why, the sneaking, dirty—” Ted choked back his outburst. His expression changed to one of dawning comprehension. “Look ‘ere, guv—you wouldn’t keep me ‘ang-ing about the place wif *that* ticking away somewhere . . . ?”

“I expect you’ll be in a cell, Ted,” Steed said sadly. “Quite close to ground zero.”

“You can’t do that! I’m a British subject, I’ve got me rights!”

“Ted!” Tara spoke sharply. The big man looked at her, breathing hard, his eyes wild.

“You’re a strong man and a brave man. We know that. And you’re loyal to your friends, even after all the harm, they’ve done you. You’ve made some mistakes—but now you have a chance to undo some of the mischief. Tell us what we want to know. Tell *me*.”

“Why should I?” Ted said brokenly. “You . . . you was lying to me.

Yer never cared for me.”

“I care enough not to want to see you broiled alive along with fifteen million other people!”

Ted looked long at her. Then he nodded stiffly. “All right,” he sighed. “I’ll talk.” He licked his lips. “And I better talk fast. I was paid off this evening. ‘E’s got it all, now. Today’s shipment was the last o’ the lot.”

Chapter 15

“Now let’s just see if I’ve got this straight,” Steed said. “You were approached about a year ago by someone who wanted your help in bringing small shipments unobtrusively into the country without troubling Her Majesty’s Customs and Excise. You delivered these parcels to various individuals scattered about the South of England, never twice to the same man or the same place, the final one this morning.”

“You’ve got the idea, guv,” Ted said, nodding. “Now let’s get cracking, wot say?”

“The presumption is that the receivers then transported the shipments to the final destination—”

“Not them,” Ted broke in. “Too crafty for that, ‘e is. Their orders was to tuck the stuff in an ‘iding place they’d been told about—always a different one. That way ‘e ‘ad the chance to ‘and about and size up the look o’ fings before he collected ‘is goods.”

“How do you know that?”

“I arst a couple of ‘em. They didn’t give away much, but I learned that much.” Ted rubbed his knuckles reminiscently against his lapel.

“What an evil image it conjures up,” Tara said. “All those bits and pieces, creeping by stages across the country, to come together at the final assembly point, like Frankenstein’s monster . . .”

“Ted, we’ve got to know where that final assembly point is,” Steed said urgently.

“‘Ow do I know?” Ted blurted. “‘Oo ever tells me anyfing?”

“You must have some idea, Ted. The intermediate staging points are scattered all over Middlesex. Didn’t you ever get a hint as to where your cargoes were destined in the end?”

“‘E never said—” Ted started, and broke off.

“Who never said?” Steed asked gently.

“Nobody.”

"I think you'd better try to remember, Ted. There can't be much time left."

"Never mind. I've 'ad it. I'll say no more."

"Ted," Tara said reproachfully. "You're not *afraid* to teU me?"

"Too right," the big man said promptly. "And if you'd seen what I seen—"

"Ted," Steed said, "who is The Walker?"

Ted lunged against the ropes. "I don't know miffing!" he yelled.

"What does he look like, Ted?"

"I don't remember! Leave me be, I can't 'elp yer!" His voice rose to a screech.

"Ted, somewhere, just a few miles from here, in some obscure loft or cellar, there's a machine, quite massive, quite intricate. Someone with a twisted mind has built it—with your help. At this moment he may be making his way toward its hiding place with the last consignment of U-235. I picture him, completing his final adjustments, arming it, setting the timing device. Probably he'll be smiling quite happily as he boards a plane for Paris or Warsaw or Lima or wherever he'll be heading, to await the news that London no longer exists. That *you* no longer exist, or Miss King, or the fifteen million people who'll be consumed in the blast. Are you willing to give him that triumph, Ted? Don't you want to fight back?"

Ted's face was twisted into a black grimace of fear mingled with rage.

"Anyway, the damage has already been done. You've already told us too much to suit The Walker. Your only chance now is to help us catch him."

"You—you'll look out for me, after? You won't let 'im get his 'ands on me?"

"You have my word on it."

"Yours too?" Ted gazed in anguish at Tara.

"Mine too," she agreed and smiled encouragingly.

"'E's a little old man," Ted whispered. "Wrinkled up like a prune. Eyes like they was chipped out of ice. Got a voice like a blooming parson, but what 'e says would freeze yer blood."

"An Englishman? How tall? What age? What color eyes? Any peculiar mannerisms?"

"'E don't talk like any broody foreigner. 'Is 'ead comes up to me shoulder. Blue eyes. Might be a 'undred and ten, fer all I know. And 'es got a way of ripping the throat out of anyone 'oo crosses 'im."

"That's not much to go on," Tara said. "There must be thousands of

ill-tempered octogenarians about.”

“Not like this one,” Ted muttered. “ ‘Im and ‘is dog.”

“Dog?” Steed and Tara echoed together.

“That’s what ‘e calls it. More like a ruddy cross between a wolf and a horse, I’d say.”

“Is the animal vicious?”

Ted shuddered. “I’ve buried some of ‘is work,” he croaked. “Vicious ain’t in it.”

“Ted,” Tara said. “Is this a large, shaggy dog? Black?”

Ted glared wildly. “Big as a Shetland pony, and teeth like a shredding machine!”

Steed fished a small card from his pocket, showed it to Ted. “Before we rush off to save the world,” he said, “would you mind telling me what this means?”

Ted blinked at the lettering. “Where’d yer get that?” he muttered.

“We have our sources.”

“Well, I don’t know what that cost yer, but you was cheated. It means ‘Ideel Dye Works.’ It’s a message to *him* to pick up ‘is ruddy dry-cleaning!”

There was a sound from the barn door. Steed whirled quickly to see Ted’s jug-eared accomplice step into sight. He was not alone. Two large policemen grasped his arms.

“Ah, there you are, Major,” George said. “Led us a bit of a chase, you did.”

“Are you all right, Miss?” Charlie inquired, blinking at Tara’s disheveled appearance.

“Quite, thank you, Charlie,” she replied with a slightly strained smile. “At least for the moment.”

“If you’ve got a car handy, we’d best get back to town at the double-quick,” Steed said. “While there’s still a town to get back to.”

Chapter 16

“A man-eating dog?” the General frowned darkly from Steed to Tara King. “Gypsies trundling about the countryside transporting nuclear bombs in solid-gold packing cases? Am I to take all this seriously?”

“I sincerely hope so, sir,” Steed said. “As well as I can reconstruct the timetable from what Ted’s told us, the bomb casing and attendant appar-

atus were brought in in small pieces over the past year. The U-235 itself started arriving six months ago, and the last shipment was delivered this morning. From that I deduce that the device is awaiting only the arrival of the last of the fissionable metal at the assembly point to be complete.”

“What makes you think it isn’t already in the consignee’s hands?”

“We’re still here,” Steed said succinctly. “How much longer we’ll be here is problematical.”

“Let me get one of my technical boffins up here,” the General said, and pressed a button on the desk. “Tell Fotheringay I want him,” he growled into the intercom. He turned back to Steed and Tara. “Good man, Fotheringay. Understands all about neutrons and beta particles and that sort of thing. I’ll try the idea on him and see how he reacts.”

“There’s no time to be lost, sir,” Tara said anxiously. “The Walker may be boarding a plane at this moment, leaving his handiwork ticking behind him!”

“It’ll have to tick on for a few minutes more,” the General said testily. “Can you imagine what a laughingstock I’d be in Downing Street if I set all the wheels in motion, then discovered you two had got a touch of the sun?”

There was a tap at the door and a thin, feather-haired man with a bird-bright eyes poked his head in.

“Fotheringay,” the General said, waving the man in, “what would you say if I told you I had reason to believe that an atomic bomb has been secretly assembled in Great Britain?”

“Why, good show, sir! It’s about time we stopped riding the Americans’ coattails and built a good British Bomb of our own!”

“I am not referring to a decent, honest, above-board secret bomb, the property of Her Majesty’s government, Fotheringay, but to an illegal weapon smuggled into the country piecemeal by unprincipled criminal elements! Now, what is the minimum component size into which such a device could be broken down for transport?”

“Hmmm. As to that, I’d say there’s no need to have any one item weighing more than a few pounds. One could slip them in at various points, one at a time. I should think the chief problem would be in bringing the various bits and pieces together after they were inside the country, without arousing suspicion. Probably the best method would be to employ a variety of couriers, quite ignorant of the true nature of the job. That way, if one were apprehended he’d be able to disclose nothing of value, and no serious damage would be done to the overall effort. If

they managed that, it ought to be clear sailing.” Fotheringay nodded cheerfully, rubbing his hands together. “I see no real obstacle to a successful operation, sir, in theory.”

“Don’t look so infernally cheerful about it, man!” the General barked. “It’s we who would be blown to smithereens!”

“Sorry, sir. There *is* one problem that might prove awkward,” Fotheringay added. “About fifty pounds of U-235 would be required. In view of the rather elaborate electronic safeguards we maintain, there might be a spot of bother about slipping the nuclear material across the border.”

“There are methods of thwarting the Geiger counter,” the General grunted. “A couple of inches of lead, say—or possibly gold . . . “

“Gold, sir?” Fotheringay nodded. “Oh, yes. Clever idea, sir. Tuck a bit of U-235 away inside a billet of gold bullion and you’d never hear a peep out of it.”

“Can you think of any reason, Fotheringay, why one would use gold for the purpose in place of lead?”

“Mmmm. Well, whoever they are, cost is no object, of course. The investment in the bomb would amount to millions of pounds, so what’s the odd hundredweight of gold, eh? And whoever this hypothetical smuggler might be, he’d require considerable funds to carry on his work here. What more convenient way to kill two birds with one stone than by combining the smuggling of African gold, for example, with that of the components?”

“Wouldn’t the gold become radioactive?”

“Oh, yes, with a very short half-life, however. But if I were about it, I’d use a multilayered container. If it were impossible to put the inner layer of, er, hot gold aside until it ceased radiating, I should simply dispose of it by burying.”

“You make it sound as though it were the simplest thing in the world to bring an A-bomb into this country!”

“Why an A-bomb, sir? While we’re theorizing, why not an H-bomb—a hydrogen fusion device? Much more potent, and not all that much more complicated.”

“Most perceptive, Fotheringay,” the General said sourly. “Anything else?”

“Only that if I were this theoretical bomb-builder, I shouldn’t hang about long after receiving the last of my U-235. It deteriorates quite rapidly, you know, to the detriment of any organism in the vicinity. I should think we could expect the device to be triggered as soon as possible

after the last bit of fissionable material entered the country.”

“And what would be the effect of such a bomb, if it were detonated in the City of London, for example?”

“A hundred-megaton device would leave nothing of the city but a radioactive crater some two miles in diameter with a depth of about a quarter of a mile, into which the Thames would pour, creating a boiling circular lake surrounded by a five-mile ring of fused glass. As to the concomitant shock waves, fires storms, flash-blindness, radiation burns, concussion, blast damage, and fallout—well, I’ll leave all that to your imagination, sir. I suppose with luck the odd shepherd in the highlands of Scotland might survive, depending on the prevailing winds.”

“That’s a cheering thought. And it’s your considered professional opinion that the whole scheme seems quite reasonable—from a technical viewpoint?”

“Oh, definitely, sir. I say, thanks frightfully for letting me in on such a jolly little intellectual puzzle.” He paused. “It *is* just a jolly little intellectual puzzle, isn’t it, sir?”

The General cleared his throat. “As a matter of fact,” he said, “they may very well have put one over on us.”

Fotheringay swallowed. “Ah, well, sir, it isn’t the first time,” he said with a weak smile.

“No use dwelling on the past,” the General said sharply. “The recent past, that is. The distant past, yes, or even the intermediate past. But the recent past—I’d as soon pretend that none of it had happened. But where were we? Oh, yes. Right, then.” He drew a deep breath, like a man about to dive into icy waters, and with a decisive stab, depressed the intercom button.

“Get the Home Secretary on the line,” he said. “In person.” His cold eyes speared Steed and Tara. “You two are relieved on duty for the present. Go home and get some sleep. And if you’re wrong about all this,” he added *sotto voce*, “don’t bother turning in your resignations. Just flee the country.”

Chapter 17

“The idea!” Tara said indignantly as they drove through the early morning streets. “Now that His Nibs has called in the Army, the RAF, the CID, Scotland Yard, M.I.5, Naval Intelligence, and Interpol, it seems

we're not needed! Go home and sleep, indeed! Who could possibly sleep knowing that bomb is ticking away somewhere?"

"You're not satisfied at having brought, home a juicy bone and had your head patted?" Steed inquired.

"It's not fair," Tara said. "After all, it *is* our bomb. And not only that," she added. "I have an awful feeling they're going about it all the wrong way."

"So you informed the General, as I recall."

"Look here, Steed: in a few minutes thousands of men will be rushing about the city like a volunteer fire brigade, rummaging through lofts for something that looks like a nuclear bomb—and their security regulations are so tight that they aren't even allowed to know what one looks like. I suppose if they find it, they'll be forbidden to look at it!"

"So you don't think they'll turn it up?"

"No—not in time. It's doubtless shielded from radiation counters, as well as from prying eyes. There are a million places in the city and surrounding countryside where it could be hidden."

"Then you feel it's hopeless; we should begin evacuating the population—"

"Evacuate fifteen million people? Almost one sixth of the British population? Evacuate them where? What would they use for transport, how would they be fed? No, the bomb *must* be found!" Her blue eyes shone with earnestness.

"And how would you go about it—if we hadn't been ordered off the job, that is?"

"First, I'd find The Walker." Tara said in a no-nonsense tone.

"Why do you expect that would be any easier than turning up his little plaything?"

"Well, surely there can't be that many old men with Newfoundland dogs."

"Somehow I doubt he'll be walking his pet just now."

"Look here, Steed—just what *do* we know about him? Aside from the fact that he's an elderly man?"

"That's about all."

"Now, Steed. You're not trying! We know he likes dogs, for a starter. And—Steed: I wonder why he's called The Walker . . . ?"

"Who knows? Perhaps because he enjoys walking—"

"Exactly! That's another item to add to our file!"

"Walking is a popular recreation with a large segment of the British

public,” Steed pointed out.

“And he probably dresses accordingly,” Tara went on! excitedly. “No worsted lounging suits for him: tweed plus fours, woolen stockings, stout shoes, possibly a jersey, and a stalking cap to top it off.”

“Good Lord!” Steed said, and had to swerve suddenly to miss a late reveler reeling across Whitehall toward the Horseguards.

“What is it?”

“Tweeds and stout shoes, you said. Blue eyes, Ted said? I’m almost sure of it. And the voice—”

“Steed! What are you raving about?”

“I’ve seen a man like that; in the cemetery at Harrow, last night!”

“Why on Earth didn’t you say so?”

Steed shook his head. “*Could* he have been The Walker?”

He seemed such a harmless old chap ..

“What on earth was he doing there?”

“Collecting epitaphs—” Steed broke off. “One of them,” he said slowly, “had to do with a dog . . . “

“A dog! Steed, it’s all fitting together!”

“How did it go: ‘The dog, in life the firmest friend,’ something like that.”

“The first to welcome,” Tara said quickly, “the foremost to defend?”

“That’s it! But how . . . ?”

“It’s quite well known,” Tara said in tones of triumph. “It’s an inscription from the tomb of . . . a Newfoundland dog.”

Chapter 18

“All right, we know what he looks like. Now all we need to do is deduce where to find him.” Steed frowned thoughtfully. “So here we have our Mad Bomber prowling about the back roads in a dark van, watching until the coast is clear, then nipping into the hedgerow just long enough to gather in his trophy. Thence to the workshop, a few last-minute adjustments and off to South America, filled with the satisfaction of a job well done.”

“But surely all those police His Nibs has out beating the brush will question anyone driving around the lanes in a suspicious looking van,” Tara said. “I see him in something less conspicuous; a little red Minicar, perhaps.”

Steed shook his head. “The picture doesn’t quite come into focus,” he said. “Our Bomb-building old gentleman is not one to leave anything to chance, to take any unnecessary risks. After the effort expended in spiriting the goods into the country, it doesn’t make sense that he’d come out into the open just at the end. A fouled sparking plug or a bit of flotsam in the petrol line, and the game is up.”

“Steed! We’re a pair of prize idiots! Why are we talking about vans and Minicars? He’s known as The Walker, isn’t he?”

Steed shot her a look as he swung round Trafalgar Square, silent except for the fluttering pigeons, and into Haymarket. “Good thinking, Tara—except that even a moderately well-shielded nugget of U-235—a package the size of a brick, say—will weigh upwards of thirty pounds.

Not the sort of thing our elderly plotter could tuck under his arm and stroll half across the county with.”

“The dog!” Tara cried. “Of course! I couldn’t quite picture the kind of maniac who’d blow up London, dogs and all, as caring all that much about a pet. But if the dog carried the luggage—”

“In a little harness slung about his neck, like a St. Bernard bringing brandy to a distressed mountain climber!” Steed finished.

“That’s it! Steed! We’ve got him!”

“Not quite,” Steed corrected. “There’s still the little problem of finding him.”

“Ted handed over the last of the uranium last evening,” Tara said intently. “Assuming the man he handed it to took it at once to the appointed hiding place—no doubt well away from the delivery point—it would have been ready and waiting for pick-up by eight p.m., say. Then allow an hour or two for The Walker to assure himself that no one’s looking.”

“That brings us to about the time I saw him in Harrow. That explains what he was doing among the gravestones, I suppose.”

Tara nodded. “As soon as you’d gone, he collected his prize and set off afoot, just another kindly old gentleman out for his constitutional, his faithful dog at his heels—”

“Or possibly not at his heels,” Steed said. “The dog may be trained to return home on his own, with his owner taking another route.”

“Chancy,” Tara nodded. “But possible. So we’re looking for a little old man with or without a dog, or a dog alone with a packet slung on his back.”

“The bomb wouldn’t be anywhere nearby the cache,” Steed conjec-

tured. "So he had a stiff hike ahead of him. Several hours' walk, at least."

"Steed—I don't like the timing. It's all very well for our nice old gentleman to be out taking the air before dinner—but at midnight?"

Steed nodded. "He'd have to wait until daylight, at least; that's about an hour from now. Then give him the better part of the day to get to his destination—"

"Or for the dog to make the trip."

"Which means he'll be in the open for the next eight hours or so. If he started from Harrow—"

"We can't be sure of that. He could have been on the other side of London an hour later."

"True, he could be anywhere by now. Which narrows the field down to the whole of Middlesex."

"Not really. Old gentlemen out for an innocent stroll don't choose a route through Soho or Piccadilly Circus. And his object is to blend with the landscape, to look as ordinary as possible. That means that once he's picked up the bundle he'll skirt the city and keep to the countryside, even though it means going the long way round."

Steed nodded. "I suppose the thing to do now is ring up the General and place our deductions in his hands?" He looked sideways at Tara.

"And have platoons of police cars rumbling up and down the lanes, alarming our man and sending him to a hidey-hole until the search is called off? Steed, you must be joking. Besides, you're the only one who'd recognize him."

"I could visit the rogues' gallery and try to pick him out," Steed said in a reasonable tone. "Not that I think he'd have been so careless as to have his picture there. Of course, it would take up the better part of the day—"

"Don't talk rot, Steed. We've got to find him ourselves!"

"Aren't you forgetting that we've been ordered off duty in no uncertain terms?"

Tara pursed her lips, then she smiled disarmingly. "Of course. We mustn't disobey orders, must we? In fact, what we really need is a complete change of pace. I think possibly a day of cycling in the open air would do us a world of good. Surely the General couldn't object to that."

"Good girl," Steed said. "I'm glad to see you're being sensible about things. Just hand me the Ordnance Survey map from the glove box, will you, and we'll plan our route."

Chapter 19

“We couldn’t have picked a lovelier day,” Tara said over her shoulder as she stepped down from the Green Line coach and tugged her bike off the platform.

“If it’s to be our last, it’s just as well we won’t be spending it indoors,” Steed conceded, stepping back as the bus pulled away in a cloud of exhaust fumes. He was dressed in grey flannels, black turtleneck, and leather jacket. Tara looked strikingly fit in emerald green Bogners and a bold-patterned Norwegian sweater. Steed cast a longing glance toward the closed doors of the bar at the Wheatsheaf.

“I’m thirsty already,” he said, mounting his cycle. “And it’s not yet eight o’clock!”

“I daresay you’ll be a good deal thirstier before the day is over,” Tara called over her shoulder as she started off through the wicket-gate and bore sharp left toward the cascade. It was a bright morning, still with a hint of mist, but clearing rapidly. They pedaled briskly uphill along a grassy track, bearing right toward the artificial lake known as Virginia Water. Beside the lake it was easier going. Steed pulled up alongside the girl, puffing a bit from the climb.

“What, winded already,” she called gaily. “Look there, Steed! The Classical Ruins, genuine imported!”

“I’ll be a classical ruin myself if you don’t moderate the pace,” Steed replied. “I’ve almost come off this contraption twice in the last half-minute.”

“You’ll be fine,” Tara said, “as soon as you get into your stride.”

They bowled along for a mile or so, then struck half-right through the trees to the drive coming in from Blacknest Gate. The lake had dwindled away into a mere brook as they entered the wooded estate of Buckhurst Park.

“No one about at all,” Steed said as they passed an ornamental iron gate. “I’m beginning to wonder just what it was about this scheme that seemed so brilliant an hour or two ago.”

“Be patient, Steed,” Tara said cheerfully. “You can’t expect results in the first five minutes, you know.”

“Our chances of encountering a lone man in a few hundred square miles of country are astronomically small,” Steed said as they crossed Duke’s Lane and emerged into the open park. “I never realized until this

moment just how vast England actually is.”

“We know he can’t be far away. And we’re covering ground much faster than he could possibly do on foot.”

“He’s probably loafing along in his Rolls at this moment, planning his next prank,” Steed conjectured. “I wonder: after vaporizing London, what does one do for an encore?”

“We’ll find him,” Tara said. “We’ve got to find him.”

Forty-five minutes later, having traversed the length of Queen Anne’s Ride and the Long Walk, they rolled through the streets of Windsor, just beginning to bustle with the day’s activity.

“Lovely old town,” Tara said, gazing about at the seventeenth century houses, the old churches, the Wren town hall.

“It has its attractive points,” Steed agreed as they approached the Three Tuns, “What would you say to a spot of breakfast?”

“No time,” Tara said. “I thought we’d just make do with a sandwich at noon.”

“What if *he’s* inside somewhere having his morning kipper?”

“We’ll have to take the chance. I don’t think he’ll linger in the towns. Not with what he’s carrying.”

At Eton, they scanned the throngs without result as they pulled up to the bus stop.

“Well, as you pointed out, we had no reason to expect immediate success,” Steed said as he climbed down and hobbled to a convenient bench.

“That’s right. After all, this was just our first cast. We have miles and miles still to search. We can cover a great deal of territory before dark.”

“From your tone, I gather you regard that as a cheering thought.”

“Cheerier than sitting at home waiting for the sky to light up.”

They transferred to a Green Line 711, rode it to Beaconsfield; back on their bicycles, then left the town by the Slough Road, turned off into Hedgerly Lane and followed it for a mile. The only passers-by were a few country folk who stared at them stolidly as they wheeled past. Bumping along over a grass path that crossed a field to Hillmott’s Wood, Steed ran into an unexpected depression and went seat over saddlebags into the hedge. Tara laughed gaily as he extricated himself.

“Bullets, knives, even atomic bombs, yes, line of duty,” Steed said as he remounted. “But how will it look in my record if I fall victim to a wood-chuck? Or was that a gopher hole?”

They carried the bikes over a stile, followed a drive past a gravel pit,

crossed another stile, another field, another stile. The sun was high now, in a cloudless blue sky.

“What is this, an obstacle race?” Steed inquired as he dragged the lightweight machine over the latest obstruction. “And to think there are those who do it for amusement.”

They crossed two more stiles before arriving at Edgerly, where Tara admired the old church and Steed admired the White Horse pub next door. They pressed on through Footpath Wood, then took the Egypt Path to Burnham Beeches.

“Pity we don’t have time to admire the trees,” Tara said. “They’re lovely at this time of year.”

“So far,” Steed said, “we’ve propelled these torture devices the best part of twelve miles, and have yet to see a man over thirty-five or a dog larger than a spaniel.”

They passed through Egypt, a poor place, Steed thought, without even a pub. They followed Duke’s Drive past a stand of ancient beeches, then turned into Halse Drive, flanked with rhododendron, and went along it to Park Lane. They passed through a small woods of young birches, coasted down a hill, clambered over yet another stile, and followed a cart track into Littlewood Common.

“I say,” Steed said, looking around at the cluster of houses. “Not a bad little place; two pubs. Which do you fancy, the New Inn, or the Jolly Woodman, across the way?”

“Later, Steed.”

After five more minutes of steady pedaling along a variety of rutted lanes, paths, and cart tracks, they regained the Beaconsfield Road.

“I had no idea the countryside was so deserted,” Steed said. “One gets the eerie feeling that everyone’s been carried off by the plague. I wonder if plans are under way to convert the area into an artillery range, firing to commence in half an hour?”

“Lucky thing it’s not crowded,” Tara said. “It will make our man all that much easier to see.”

“I’ve been meaning to speak to you, Miss King,” Steed said, “about this annoying habit of yours of looking on the bright side. It can be carried too far.”

“Tell you what,” Tara said. “If we don’t find the man we’re looking for, I’ll never do it again.”

Steed blinked at her. “Yes, there *is* that,” he said. “Shall we pedal a little faster?”

Chapter 20

It was midday when they stopped at the Milton's Head at Chalfont St. Giles, where Steed drained at one draught a pint of bitter which he obtained by the judicious use of sign language out of deference to the dryness of his throat. Afterwards he asked the landlord for permission to use the telephone behind the bar. Tara, still chipper and rose-cheeked, her brown hair tousled by the wind, looked up questioningly as he returned to the table.

"Well?"

He managed a weak smile. "Nothing." He sat down gingerly. "As for us, our tally so far consists of a collection of blisters, acquired in the process of seeing Rickmansworth, Loudwater, Sarratt Church End, Latimer, Chenies, Chorleywood, and Little Chalfont, and a variety of incredibly bad roads between, among, and around them. But no old man, no Newfoundland dog, and no evidence of either."

"We haven't lost yet," Tara said with a smile. "And we've still half a day ahead."

"Ah, yes. After our modest repast, we'll press on to Jor-dans, Seer Green, Hodgemore Wood, and Amersham, then on to the rich farmlands of the Chilterns, not forgetting the beeches of Common Wood and West Wood."

"I think you're being quite nasty," Tara said. "I know our chances aren't all that good—but at least we're doing something."

Steed patted her hand. "Sorry. It's the confounded frustration, of course; knowing the fellow may be within a mile of us at this moment—and we're helpless to lay our hands on him."

"Not completely helpless. We'll keep our eyes open; if he pops up, we'll be ready."

"Of course. You're right. Good girl."

They finished the meal in a thoughtful silence.

Chapter 21

The sun was dropping toward Coombe Hill as Steed and Tara pedaled wearily along the London-Aylesbury Road toward the town visible through the trees ahead. Far away, a dog barked. A cow mooed. From a

cottage, an odor of hot soup wafted on the early evening breeze.

“Steed,” Tara said, “what will it be like—afterward?”

“Well, first a good dinner,” Steed said with forced heartiness. “Then a hot bath and a good night’s sleep—”

“Don’t be dense! You know what I mean. Will the blast reach this far? All these lovely hills, the quiet villages—will they all go too—along with the city?”

“You’re talking as if we’d lost,” Steed said. “And you’re the one who’s kept our spirits up all day. This is no time to be downhearted. We may see him at any moment—”

Tara halted suddenly, almost causing Steed to run into her.

“It was a hopeless idea from the beginning!” she wailed. “We’ll never find him! No one will! He’s won, Steed! It’s all going to disappear in vast mushroom clouds: the Houses of Parliament, and the Tower of London, and Buckingham Palace and Regent’s Park, and the bridges and the streets and the shops and the places we used to go to dine and to dance, and Petticoat Lane and the coffee shops and the Ealing Jazz Club, and Simpson’s in the Strand and the Albert Hall and Wimbledon and White City and Drury Lane, and, and . . .” she broke off with a sob as Steed put an arm around her shoulders.

“Nonsense, Tara,” he soothed. “You’ve put in a long day, and you’re tired, poor girl. Even if we don’t spot our man, the others are sure to. The General’s got the matter in hand, no doubt. I’ll just ring him up when we reach the village and—”

“It’s no use,” Tara sniffled. “There are too many places for a bomb to be hidden; by now he’s reached it, tucked in the last bit of uranium, set the timer, and is well away—while we wander about the hills like a pair of noddies, utterly helpless to do anything about it!”

“We’ve done our best,” Steed said. “And—” he broke off, listening. A soft chugging sound came from just around the next curve.

“We’d better clear out of the road,” he said, urging Tara along to the verge. “We’re difficult to see in this light. It wouldn’t do to be run down, before—”

“Before we can be blown up?”

“Odd,” Steed said. “He doesn’t seem to be getting any closer . . .” He leaned his bike against a tree, went forward quietly along the grass. A small van, painted a dull dark grey, and without identifying markings, was parked beside the road. The door on the driver’s side was open; but the driver was not in sight.

“Steed!” Tara whispered beside him. “Look there . . . !” As she pointed, a stealthy figure separated itself from the deep shadow of the hedgerow across the road, creeping forward soundlessly in a half-crouch. He paused, looked all about, failed to see Steed and Tara sheltered behind the foliage, started on.

“Steed—could it be . . . ?” Tara whispered.

“Whoever he is he doesn’t appear to want his presence known,” Steed murmured. “Let’s have a closer look.”

They moved forward, keeping to the shelter of the trees. The man ahead disappeared through a gap in the hedge. They crossed the road, advanced to the point where they had seen him last. Steed eased carefully through the opening in time to see their quarry step behind a tree.

“Do you think he saw us?” Tara breathed.

“Don’t know. Come on.” They backed from the hedge, went on along the road to a point opposite that where the van driver had ducked from sight. Cautiously, Steed parted the dense branches of the hedge. Dimly visible in the failing light, the man they followed was creeping forward among the trees, his head swiveling from side to side as he went.

“I can’t tell if he’s old or young,” Tara said, “but he’s wearing hiking boots and a shooting coat.”

“He’s about the right size,” Steed whispered.

“And he’s looking for something.”

“You swing wide, that way,” Steed pointed. “I’ll take him from the rear. It would help if you’d make a small sound at the psychologically correct moment.”

“Steed, this isn’t going to be like last time? One trip with a potato sack over my head is enough, thank you.”

“Nothing like that, my dear Tara. Give me about half a minute, then step on a twig.”

She moved away soundlessly, disappeared in the gloom. Steed slipped through the hedge to the shelter of a tree, working his way up behind the unsuspecting man. He was ten feet from him when a stick popped sharply somewhere ahead. The small man’s head came up alertly. He had taken two quick steps toward the source of the sound when Steed’s flying tackle brought him to earth with a crash. A small dog shot into view, yapping with alarm, and fled away into the underbrush. Tara appeared, a stout club in her hand.

“Shall I give him a rap?” she inquired as the man struggled in Steed’s grasp.

“Help!” the captive shouted. “Murder! Assault! Police!”

“Police?” Tara repeated uncertainly.

“There’s never a policeman about when you want one,” the small man panted, aiming a kick which barely missed Steed’s knee. “Just wait until I get a hand loose, you bruiser . . . !”

Steed rose, hauling the man to his feet, dragged him from under the trees into the failing twilight. A round, angry face topped by a shock of unruly red hair stared up at him. Tara reached out and tugged at a lock. It seemed firmly attached to the scalp.

“If it’s cash you’re after, it’s precious little you’ll get out of me,” the man panted.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Steed said, “who are you, and what were you doing creeping about in the underbrush?”

“I’m the dogcatcher,” the man replied defiantly. “And I’d have caught one, too, if you hadn’t come along when you did!”

Chapter 22

“We’re terribly sorry, Mr. Crudge,” Tara said with a charming smile as she handed him back the cloth cap which had gone flying during the tussle. “It’s all a case of mistaken identity. We thought you were a, er, friend of ours.”

“Don’t know what the country’s coming to,” Crudge said, dusting himself off. He gave Steed a disapproving look. “It’s bad enough, a chap your age rampaging about leaping on people, but to bring your young daughter along . . .” He shook his head despairingly.

“Yes, well, Dad’s a good sort, actually,” Tara said quickly. “It’s just when he’s had a few too many that he gets playful.”

“Good job I’m a broadminded chap,” the dogcatcher said. “I’ve a good mind to lodge a complaint in any case . . .”

“Oh, Mr. Crudge,” Tara cooed. “You wouldn’t do a thing like that, would you? Think of Daddy’s reputation.”

“What about *my* reputation?” Crudge said as he scrambled through the hedge, Tara and Steed trailing. “The Council employs me to catch stray dogs. I don’t mind telling you I’m having to work nights to make up my quota. Thanks to you, I’ve one to go yet before I can relax for the evening with pipe and slippers.”

“We’re frightfully sorry, Crudge,” Steed said. “May I offer a small

token of esteem?” He handed the man a five-pound note. “With your zeal, I’m sure you’ll succeed in meeting your quota in record time.”

“Well, that’s very handsome of you, sir,” the dogcatcher said grudgingly. They were beside the van now.

“I wonder,” Steed said, “How it happens your vehicle is unmarked?”

“She’s in primer, just being repainted. Why?”

“Just curious,” Steed said. “For a moment there, it looked as if—but never mind. You have dogs to catch, Mr. Crudge, we won’t detain you.”

As Steed and Tara turned away, there was a soft whine from inside the van. They paused. Tara glanced in through the small wire-meshed opening in the rear door. A pair of large, soulful eyes gazed out at her. She caught Steed’s arm.

“We may not have found our little old man,” she said in a tense whisper. “But here’s our Newfoundland dog . . .”

Chapter 23

“Oh, Mr. Crudge,” Tara called. “Where did you find this one?”

“That fellow?” Crudge came back along the side of the van. “Gathered him in just about half an hour ago, in the village. Splendid chap. Wonder anybody’d let him wander loose. Must be quite a valuable animal.”

“Where in the village, Mr. Crudge?”

“Ummm. In the high street. Loitering, he was, like a chap waiting for his wife.”

“Did he give any trouble when you captured him?”

“This fellow? Not at all. Gentle as a lamb, he is. Don’t see too many of his kind about. Vast, isn’t he?”

“May we look at him more closely?”

“Oh, dog-lovers, eh? Well, I suppose it will do no harm. Just for a moment, mind you.” Crudge unlocked the door. The big dog smiled happily as Steed tentatively patted his head.

“Look,” Tara said, in Steed’s ear, her voice vibrant with excitement. She indicated the dog’s shoulder. “Strap-marks, clear as day!”

“He’s been wearing some sort of harness,” Steed confirmed.

Tara turned to Crudge, standing morosely by.

“Would you mind showing us where you found him?” She smiled, but there was tension in her voice.

“You know the tyke?”

“No—but we may know his master.”

Crudge shook his head wearily. “In for a penny, in for a pound,” he said. “Come along. I’m heading back that way in any case.”

Steed and Tara mounted their bikes, followed the van up the hill and along the narrow, potholed street of the quaint old town. Their guide made two turns, pulled to a stop before the lighted windows of a row of shops housed in an ancient half-timbered house.

“Right here, he was,” Crudge announced. “Anything else you’d like to know before I get on with the job?”

“Mr. Crudge—have you seen any other Newfoundland dog recently?” Tara asked.

“Don’t see one a year, and those are on leash.”

“I see. Well, thanks very much, Crudge. You’ve been very helpful,” Steed said. “There’s just one more thing. I want you to take this dog directly to New Scotland Yard. Explain the circumstances under which you met him. Omit nothing. I can’t overemphasize the importance of this. Sorry I can’t tell you more, but time is of the essence, you understand.” He smiled winningly.

Crudge stared at him. “Right, sir,” he said. “Sure thing. Whatever you say.”

“Steed,” Tara said. “Shouldn’t we telephone His Nibs—”

“No time to look for a phone. *He* may arrive at any moment. Off with you, Crudge. Remember—we’re counting on you.” Steed said, as he turned to scan the street.

“Oh, Miss,” Crudge crooked a finger at Tara. “It’s none of my concern, properly speaking,” he said in a low tone. “But if it was me, I’d say your father was in great need of psychiatric attention. And while you’re about it, you might just have *your* knee-jerks looked at as well,” he called as he gunned away down the street with a clatter of burned valves.

Chapter 24

Steed and Tara King stood in the center of the street, looking about at the shops that lined it, their steep roofs silhouetted against the twilight sky.

“Is it possible?” Tara said. “*Was* that The Walker’s dog—and was he waiting here for his master?”

“It seems an unlikely spot,” Steed said. “Under a bridge or behind a hoarding would have seemed more appropriate.”

“On the other hand, it’s typical of his technique. His whole effort has been carried on right under people’s noses. That’s the secret of his success.”

“We can’t just stand here,” Steed said. “We’ve got to get out of sight . . .” His eye, roving along the shop fronts, had halted on a small establishment with a purple and pink front. Large letters with pseudo-Gothic curlicues across the front spelled out: YE IDEAL CLEANERS AND DYERS.

“Tara,” he said softly. “That message Ted told us of passing on, along with his last consignment, didn’t he say it was something to do with dry cleaning?”

“Of course! Ideal Dyers. That’s it!”

“Come on.” They went across to the shop, pushed through the glassed door into the choking odors of chemicals and hot iron. They waited while an elderly woman in sensible shoes and a blanketlike skirt lodged a complaint about the manner in which her voluminous furs had been done up; when she had departed, burdened under her property, Steed lifted his cap to the round-faced little woman behind the counter.

“We’re closed,” the latter said before he could speak. “Would have been closed half an hour ago, except for the old fussbudget and her bearskin rug. You’d think a body never deserved a moment’s rest, the way some people carry on!”

“Yes, pity,” Steed murmured. “Tell me, have you seen anything of an old fellow in tweeds and hiking shoes, bald, blue eyes, round-shouldered, mild-mannered except when aroused, talks like a vicar?”

“Of course. Dozens of ‘em, every day,” the proprietress snapped. “That’s all I have to do, you know, stand about taking notes of bird-watchers or whatever your friend is. I can’t think what times is coming to when a body’s got to stand about nattering after a long day on the steam-iron—”

“This would have been just in the last few minutes,” Steed said. “I dislike troubling you, but it’s rather urgent.”

“I’ve seen nobody for half an hour, only old Mrs. Walker. A proper pest she is, too—”

“Did you say—Mrs. Walker?” Without waiting for an answer, Steed whirled and in two steps was on the pavement, Tara close behind him. The old lady was just disappearing around the corner, pedaling sedately, the bulky fur strapped to the carrier behind the seat.

“Come on!” Steed and Tara leaped astride their wheels at a dead run;

pedaling furiously they rounded the corner, to see their quarry widening the gap, pumping hard on a slight downgrade.

"It's him, Steed," Tara called. "What idiots we were not to think of a disguise!"

"And he saw my face," Steed replied. "Unless we catch him, the game's up!"

They sped past the bus stop where a little knot of people were gaping after the madly pedaling old lady. The crowd swiveled to stare at the two pursuers, now holding their own in the straightaway.

"Two bob on the mother-in-law," a hearty chap in a checkered suit called after them.

"Give her one for me, mate," another rail bird cried.

"Faster," Tara cried. "He's gaining again!"

Two hundred yards in the lead, the fleeing culprit veered suddenly left down a chalky track through a thicket. Following, Steed was forced to slow momentarily as the dimly seen path forked.

"To the right—up the incline!" Tara called. "There he goes!"

In hot pursuit, they swept up the slope of Bacombe Hill. The chase led straight ahead, over turf, through gorse, with a splendid view of dusk over the plain of Aylesbury spread out below. On a wide grassy slope, the path almost disappeared; in the gloom Steed was barely able to discern the cyclist ahead as she—or he—cut through a thicket on a stony path which led through a gate and on up to the crest of the rise.

Just past the Boer War Monument, the quarry made a sudden sharp turn to the left and shot down a steep grass path. Tara and Steed swerved close behind. At a path bordering a golf links, Steed nearly lost control of the hurtling machine, but righted himself and pressed on. The cyclist ahead had taken a right turn; Steed narrowly missed the National Trust sign at the corner, caught a glimpse of the fugitive just wheeling left into a paved road.

"If he's got a car waiting, we're sunk," he called. But when they reached the road, the other bicycle was still in sight ahead, its owner head down and pumping hard.

"We're only half a mile from the P.M.'s residence," Tara gasped, pulled even with Steed. "Pity we can't let him know what's going on."

"Perhaps you'd better turn back and give the alarm," Steed said between breaths.

"I'm staying with you! They'd think I was insane if I said we were chasing an old lady on a bicycle!"

"They may be right. After all, I didn't actually see her face . . ."

"Don't think negatively, Steed," Tara cried. "Save all your strength for pedaling!"

"Who'd have thought the old devil had such staying power?"

"He keeps in trim, remember? There's a hint in that for us: it's five miles a day, for us, rain or shine, from now on!"

Now they were racing along a tree-shaded track, pitch black under a sky from which the last of the light was fading rapidly.

"Steed, we'll never catch him in the dark!"

"I think we're gaining!"

Now the route bore left, leading uphill again, away from the dark fringe of a wood, emerging at last in a narrow lane which deteriorated rapidly into a rough, grassy track.

"He's heading for Little Hampden Common," Steed said. "Bad going, through the scrub!"

They charged forward with renewed effort, blundering through the gorse at breakneck speed. But after five minutes, Steed signaled a halt. Tara jumped from her cycle beside him, breathing hard.

"Listen!" They cocked their heads, heard faint sounds, far ahead.

"He's making for the Manor House!"

"Unlikely; it's a girls' school now, you know."

"There's nothing else in that direction. Steed! We have to make the assumption. Maybe we can catch him, if we cut right across the park!"

"Let's go!"

Five minutes later, they rolled up the long drive and coasted to a halt before the imposing entrance to the vast old house. There were lights on in the windows, and the wide front doors stood open. Half a dozen girls in school uniform were seated on the steps; the strains of THE WHO SELL OUT emanating from a transistor radio drifted on the evening air. There were no signs of an elderly cyclist, male or female.

"Good evening, young ladies," Steed said, and paused to catch his breath.

"Good evening, sir," several young voices said in chorus.

"Hi!" a tall girl with long sand-colored hair and a snub nose said. The shorter, dark-haired girl beside her turned the radio down.

"Gee, that's a tough looking bike," she said. "Can I ride it?"

"You better not, Joanie," the light-haired girl said. "Remember what happened last time you tried out somebody's bike?"

"It wasn't *my* fault that darned old sign was there."

“Quite right,” Steed said. “I nearly came to grief myself a bit ago. Ah, by the way, have you young ladies seen anything of another cyclist in the last few minutes? An elderly lady, boundlesome tweeds, a bearskin rug strapped to her bike?”

“Uh-uh,” the dark-haired girl called Joanie said.

“Me neither,” the light-haired girl said.

“Tinny, if that’s all the grammar you’ve learned this year, Pop’s going to flip his wig when he hears you!”

“What should I say, ‘I either?’”

“Nor have I,” offered one of the other girls in a prim tone.

“It’s useless,” Tinny said. “I’ll never learn to talk like that. I’m afraid Pop wasted his money.”

“It’s vital we find this, er. old lady,” Tara said, pushing her bicycle forward. “He, I mean she, came this way—we’re sure of that.”

“She must have turned off,” Tinny said. “We’ve been sitting here digging the sunset and nothing bigger than a few gnats have gone by.”

“I wonder—are there any elderly female staff here who own cycles?”

“I’ll say,” Joanie said with feeling. “They’re all elderly, even the ones that are in their twenties.”

“Matron has a bike,” one of the other girls said timidly.

“Could you describe Matron?”

“Well, let’s see,” Tinny said thoughtfully. “Do alligators’ teeth fall out when they get to be over a hundred?”

“Not an alligator. Alligators smile,” Joanie said. “More of an elk. Her build, I mean.”

“She doesn’t have actual antlers,” one of the other girls protested.

“The lady we have in mind is quite small, round-shouldered, with piercing blue eyes, a melodious voice, and a temper.”

Half a dozen young heads shook in unison. “All ours are big and leathery, like retired lady wrestlers,” Joanie said.

“She’s a dog fancier,” Tara said with waning hope in her voice. “She owns a big Newfoundland.”

“What’s that?”

“A large black dog, shaggy, big eyes, quite gentle—at least at times.”

Tinny shook her head.

There was a chorus of “no’s.”

“But we saw a dog like that, didn’t we. Tinny?” Joanie said as Tara turned away, drooping.

“Oh?” Steed said into the silence.

Joanie nodded. "With the funny old man." she said. "You remember, Tinny."

"Funny old man?" Steed spoke carefully, as one fearful of shattering something delicate. "Could you describe him?"

"He had on baggy golf pants," Tinny said. "And Argyle socks. And those big thick shoes like mountain climbers wear."

"And a tweed jacket with big thick curly lapels, and a wooly scarf," Joanie added.

"He looked kind of like a plucked chicken," Tinny amplified.

"Blue eyes?" Tara whispered the question.

"Uh-huh. I think so."

"But no bicycle?"

"Uh-uh."

"Where did you see him?"

"In London, last week."

"He was off his rocker."

"Still, it *might* have been rather a lark," one of the other girls said. "Even if it wasn't Rag Day."

"Where in London?"

"Joanie, what's the name of that street with all the ugly old buildings?"

"Whitehall."

"That's it. Right by the old tomb thing."

"Where they're digging up the street," Joanie clarified.

"He wanted us to find some cops and tell them the workmen were students, digging up the street for a joke," Tinny said.

"And he wanted the rest of us to tell the workmen that some students dressed as policemen were going to come along and tell them to clear out," another girl added eagerly.

"It *would* have been rather exciting," another voice chimed in.

"Girls, listen carefully," Steed said in a voice tense with urgency. "I want one of you to go to the headmistress at once and tell her that a fugitive from justice has taken refuge on the school grounds. I'll need a telephone to notify the authorities of what you've told us—and—" He broke off as a car engine started up somewhere nearby. With a hiss of thrown gravel, a grey Jaguar shot out from the shelter of the building, curved off along the drive, gaining speed. As it passed, Steed caught a glimpse of a feathery white head crouched over the wheel.

"It's him!" Tara cried.

"Someone's stolen Mrs. Howard's car," Joanie cried, jumping up.

“Boy, look at him go!”

“That’s what she gets for leaving the keys in it,” Tinny added.

“Is there anyone else who leaves their keys in their car?” Steed inquired swiftly.

“Sure. Fraulein Uberunter. It’s a Mercedes—over there.”

“Make my excuses to Miss U,” Steed called, and set off at a run in the direction indicated, Tara half a pace behind. He wrenched the door open and jumped in behind the wheel; Tara slid in beside him. He looked back as the rear doors slammed. Tinny and Joanie grinned happily at him from the back seat.

“You can’t go,” he said emphatically. “This man’s a killer! There may be shooting, a wreck, anything—”

“Wow!” Joanie said contentedly. “Tinny, I told you something would happen after a while around this mausoleum, if we just waited long enough.”

“Better get going, Mister,” Tinny said. “He’ll be out of sight in a second!”

With a muttered appeal to a Higher Power, Steed slammed the car in gear and gunned off wildly after the fleeing car.

Chapter 25

At breakneck speed, Steed sent the Mercedes hurtling along the narrow, winding Great Missenden Road, flashing through the village to round with a squeal of tires into the highway leading to London. The Jaguar held a solid quarter-mile lead.

“Steed, what in the world does it mean?” Tara said. “If it *was* The Walker the girls saw in London, why on earth would he be wasting time with practical jokes?”

“Just a preliminary to the big joke scheduled for later in the day,” Steed guessed. “Perhaps he merely wanted to see a few brickbats fly. After all, a man who would wipe London off the map out of hand might be expected to have a few eccentricities in addition to collecting epitaphs.”

“Steed, can’t you go any faster?” Tara wailed as the taillights dwindled slowly but steadily ahead.

“She’s flat out,” Steed said.

“We’re losing him! Steed, what can we do?”

“Only one thing to do,” Steed said grimly. “We’ll have to stop and

telephone the alarm ahead. Perhaps they can intercept him.”

“I hate to give up while there’s a chance,” Tara cried. “Maybe he’ll have a blowout or something.”

“If I could close the gap a bit, you might be able to put a bullet into him—or at least his petrol tank.”

“This is one occasion on which I could find it in my heart to regret the superiority of British built motorcars,” Tara said. “We’re losing ground steadily.”

“There’s a village ahead,” Steed said as lights glowed through the trees. “I’m going to stop long enough for you to jump out. Find the nearest telephone and alert everyone, up to and including the Girl Guides.”

“I suppose we haven’t any choice . . .” Tara broke off as the car ahead wobbled suddenly in the road, swinging wildly from side to side. It spun end to end, struck a low stone wall and bounced off, spun again, lost a wheel, shot across the road and plunged through a dense hedge and out of sight. The wheel bounded after the car, hit the trunk of a tree, and rebounded—straight toward the car bearing Steed and Tara. Steed braked hard, yelled “Duck!”; an instant later, with an explosive impact, the heavy wheel smashed through the windshield, lodged there, sending a shower of glass shards through the car. With a squeal of tires, the Mercedes skidded sideways, crashed through an obstruction, snap-rolled onto its back, then its side, and came to rest with a crash, on its wheels. Inside, nobody moved.

Chapter 26

Steed regained consciousness lying on his back with a light shining in his eyes.

“This one’s all right too, Constable,” someone said. “Ruddy miracle the way Providence looks out for ruddy fools.”

Steed struggled to a sitting position. There was a loud humming noise in his ears, and little ringed planets like miniature Saturns were circling his head dizzily; but he had no time now to waste on such trifles.

“Other car,” he said groggily. “Get old man driving it.”

“What other car?”

Steed raised himself to all fours. A few yards away, Tara was sitting up, encouraged by the arm of a powerful-looking young fellow in a barman’s

apron. Joanie and Tinny were standing by the battered Mercedes, shaking their heads.

“Ma Howard isn’t going to like this,” Tinny was saying.

“There was a car just ahead of me,” Steed said. “He went off the road; that’s his wheel jammed in my windscreen—” he broke off. The Mercedes’ shattered windshield frame was innocent of any obstruction.

“Must have gotten knocked free in the crash,” he said blurrily. “But surely you must have seen—”

“I saw enough to charge you with drunk in charge of a vehicle,” the constable said flatly. “Shame on you. You might have killed these three lovely daughters of yours with your folly. Now, your name, sir?”

“Constable, listen to me!” Steed tried to rise, fell over on his head.

“Drunk as a Lord,” someone said admiringly.

“Tara,” Steed called. “Tell this chap what happened!”

Tara turned to face him, looking dazed. She put a hand to her forehead. “I . . . I don’t remember,” she said. “The last thing I recall, we were in the pub—the Milton’s Head—”

The constable licked his pencil point. “Now, name, sir?”

“Joanie! Tinny! Tell them about the car!”

“Well,” Joanie said hesitantly. “When they first came riding up on their bikes—”

“Bicycles? Suppose we limit this to the subject of autos, young lady.”

“Oh. Well, when they decided to take Fraulein Uberunter’s car, we wanted to come along—”

“You mean this is not your father’s property?”

“Our father’s in America.”

“Then who—” The policeman looked in puzzlement from the girls to Steed.

“We don’t know his name,” Tinny said. “We just came for the ride.”

“He said there’d probably be a wreck, and maybe some shooting, and we didn’t want to miss anything,” Joanie added.

“Oh, he did, did he—”

“Constable, somewhere nearby there’s another car, a Jaguar, minus a wheel!” Steed cut in. “The driver is a desperate criminal! It’s vital that he be apprehended before he gets clear!”

“I’ll get to the bottom of this yet,” the constable said in tones of stern determination. “Right now let’s start at the beginning—”

“At least send someone to have a look about!” Steed insisted. “It can’t have gone far on three wheels!”

“Very well, Jerry, we’ll humor the gentleman.” The policeman jerked his head at the young man who had helped Tara to her feet. “Now, sir, for the third time, your name—and if you don’t give it, I’ll be forced to lodge an additional complaint of obstructing an officer of the law in performance of his duty.”

“Thingwelter,” Steed said. “Phineas Y. Thingwelter. I travel in ladies’ underwear. I must insist that you take me to a telephone at once—”

“All in good time, sir. I’ve sent for a doctor, best have him look at you before you go to moving about. May be something broken, a small wonder, at the clip you were going. Heard you all the way from the village, I did.”

“Then you must have heard *him*, too!” Steed struggled to his feet. “Think, man! Was it one crash you heard, or two?”

“It was . . .” the policeman hesitated, frowning. “Well, now that you mention it, there was a sort of double *skree* of tires, then a kind of double crash. But,” he finished briskly, “since there’s only just the one wrecked vehicle to hand, I suppose that settles it, eh, sir?”

“I say, Constable Huggers, he was right, you know. There *is* another car over here. Isn’t half a mess, either!”

“Quickly, nab the driver!” Steed called, and started forward at a wobbly run.

“Funny thing,” Jerry called. “There’s nobody in it. Either it crashed in here on its own, or the driver’s gotten clean away.”

Chapter 27

“After all, sir, how was I to know?” Constable Huggers inquired in an aggrieved tone. “You must admit your account of matters sounded a bit on the odd side . . .”

“No matter, the damage is done,” Steed said. “It will take your men half an hour at least to check every car in the village to discover which one he’s stolen; by that time our man will have arrived at his destination. Now, if you’ll take me to a telephone, I’ll be most appreciative.”

Ten minutes later, in the police station, Huggers stared open-mouthed as Steed hung up the receiver.

“I say, sir,” he gulped. “All that about uranium and all—is it on the level?”

“Afraid so, but keep it under your hat. Wouldn’t do to arouse the

populace. Now, can you give me transport into the city? Not much I can do. but I ought to be there.”

“Don’t think you’re going off and leave *me*,” Tara said.

“You’d better lie down a while—”

“Rubbish. If I’m going to be blown up, it won’t be in bed!”

“I can borrow Jack Bottom’s car, I suppose,” the constable said. “Won’t take a minute, sir, I’ll just ring him up.”

“Can we go?” Joanie asked.

“Absolutely not,” Steed said. “You’re lucky to be alive—”

“What does it matter, if we’re going to be blown up anyway?” Tinny demanded.

“Oh, let them come, Steed,” Tara said. “Getting vaporized by a nuclear bomb is mild compared to what they’ll get from their Mrs. Howard if they go back now.”

“Have it your way.” Five minutes later, a battered Morris Minor pulled up before the door, a plump man in a jacket with leather elbows at the wheel. He beamed as introductions were made and his passengers squeezed inside.

“Where to, sir?” he inquired cheerily.

“New Scotland Yard,” Steed said glumly. “And try to get her up to forty if you can manage it. We don’t want to arrive too late for the main event.”

Chapter 28

It was a less than cheery ride through the suburbs and into’ the lights and traffic of the city, in spite of their volunteer chauffeur’s tireless jocularities. Turning into Whitehall, Steed noticed half a dozen uniformed policemen in the street ahead, grouped around the red-lit barricade lining the excavation, which looked no different than it had two days earlier.

“We’ll get out here.” Steed said. He offered Jack Bottom’ a five-pound note, which the man waved away.

“A pleasure, sir,” he said heartily. “And I hope your bomb or whatever all works out for the best.” He was whistling as he drove away. As they started past the dug-up patch of street, Tara paused, eyeing the piled bricks, many of which were scattered in careless fashion around the area.

“Steed,” she said.

“Urn?”

“Bricks.”

“So they are. Rather untidy, too. Shall we hurry along? I daresay His Nibs will want one last opportunity to reprimand us for disregarding orders before we’re all dispatched to Kingdom Come—”

“Don’t you see?” she clutched his arm. “That’s it!”

“That’s what? Tara, I think that blow on your head—”

“Steed—in what form was the uranium transported?”

“Inside a gold brick—”

“Exactly. A gold brick covered with paint to resemble an ordinary brick. And what better place to hide a brick than among bricks!”

Steed halted abruptly. “Tara, my girl, you may be onto something,” he said softly.

“And the Rag Day trick; that could have been intended to create a diversion which would allow him to nip in and plant the thing here, for quick recovery later!” Tara paused. “But on the other hand, he’d be taking a chance that someone might accidentally pick it up and move it . . . “

“Small chance,” Steed said. “The Ministry of Works chaps would never lift an overweight brick. It’s not in accordance with trade union practice.”

“But—wouldn’t they be curious if they discovered a brick that weighed ten times as much as the others?”

“Same answer.” Steed stepped over to the nearest policeman, standing at parade rest beside the scratched-up earth.

“May I ask why you’re guarding this spot?” he asked.

“Bit of a riot here today, Major,” the man said.

“How did it start?”

“I can’t rightly say as to that, sir.”

“I don’t suppose you saw anything of an old man in tweed bags, or a large black dog?”

“Curious you should ask, Major. A gentleman of that description was hit on the head by a thrown brick that caromed off me mate’s head. Took him to hospital meself.”

“Badly hurt?”

“Just a bump, sir. He was right as rain in half an hour. Bit upset, though; can’t say I blame him.”

“Did he have a parcel with him? A heavy parcel?”

“Nothing like that, sir. Empty-handed, he was.”

“He didn’t carry a brick away with him?”

“No, just the mark of one.”

“And the police have been on duty here ever since the disturbance?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“Steed,” Tara said excitedly. “That means he didn’t get it! It’s still here!”

“Sergeant, don’t let anyone near this spot, anyone at all until further notice!” Steed said. As he turned away, there was a shrill whistle from the far end of the street, followed by a murmur of voices that swelled quickly into full cry as a crowd of youths rounded the corner, coming on at a jog trot. At once, the policemen stepped forward, palms upraised, whistles to lips. But the shrill *skree* of their alarm, was lost in a rising tide of yells.

“Rough up our pals, will you!” someone yelled.

“Ruddy coppers!”

“Club down an innocent old man, will yer?”

“It’s the same lot that caused the trouble earlier on, sir!” the policeman called as he moved up to take his place in line.

“Steed—look there!” Tara pointed to a small, crouched figure scuttling along the far side of the mob. On his nearly bald scalp, a few white locks waved.

“It’s him! It looks as though he’s recruited a new set of volunteers!”

“You go round that side, I’ll try to head him off on the left!”

As Steed started round the end of the excavation at a ran, a thrown brick thumped to the pavement at his feet. A fat girl with a flushed face swung an oversized handbag at him; as he ducked, a skinny lad aimed a wild blow at his head. He dodged aside, and was in the thick of it. Fists pummeled him; hurtling bodies slammed into him. Bricks whistled past his head. Yells, shouts, screams filled the air like confetti. He made a few yards., craned for another glimpse of the old man, but he was lost in the swirling crowd. Tara was nowhere to be seen, nor were the girls, Joanie and Tinny. He stumbled over heaped bricks, scrambled to the top of the heap, only then saw lie man known as The Walker dancing futilely at the edge of the crowd, vainly seeking an opening through which to pass. Steed plunged again into the thick of the turmoil, forcing his way toward the old man. Several bruising minutes later he reached the spot, to find him nowhere in sight. He saw Tara, standing empty-handed at the far side of the street, scanning the crowd anxiously. Most of the lanterns had been smashed, and in the near total darkness, the struggling figures surged back and forth across the site. Then, through a momentary gap, Steed saw a large, dark shape—a furry shape, moving on all fours—making its way through the press. A way opened before the creature as it showed its

gleaming white fangs. Then three men pounced on Steed simultaneously. He landed a solid chop at the base of a neck, delivered an edge-of-hand blow to a solar plexus, just before the scene dissolved into a shower of fireworks that faded into utter blackness filled with the sound of roaring waters.

Chapter 29

“Wake up> Steed,” a soft voice was saying urgently. “Please wake up!”

With a vast effort, Steed forced his eyes open. Tara was looking anxiously down at him.

“Did you get him?” he groaned as she helped him sit up. He was sitting on a leather-covered couch, he saw, in a well-lit office. The General’s office, to be specific.

“I couldn’t get near him,” Tara said. “One second he was there, and the next he’d disappeared.”

“Perhaps we frustrated his effort to retrieve his uranium, at least,” Steed said, feeling his skull.

Tara shook her head sadly. “I’m afraid not. The technical people say their instruments turned up traces of radiation such as would have been leaked by a heavily shielded sample of U-235. They estimate that it was hidden in the brick pile, and removed just minutes ago.”

“So he got it after all—and got away clean?” Steed groaned. “How the devil could he have done it?”

“I don’t know—but he did”

“I saw his dog,” Steed said, suddenly remembering his last conscious thought. “Just before that crack on the head. At least I think I did . . .”

“We did, too,” a youthful voice spoke up. Steed turned to see Joanie looking anxiously at him. “Are you OK?” she asked.

“Right as rain,” Steed managed a smile. “So I didn’t dream that part . . .” He broke off, frowning. “But the dog had been gathered in by our friend Crudge,” he said. “How did he escape?”

“But he didn’t,” Tara said. “Curiously enough, Crudge brought the dog here, as you instructed him to. I suppose after thinking it over, he thought it best to take no chances. And His Nibs assured me the animal is still here, securely locked in a back room with a rather handsome soup-bone.”

“There can’t be *two* Newfoundland dogs running about in the

company of little old men in hiking shoes,” Steed stated.

“Oh, the one that was in the riot isn’t running around loose,” Tinny said. “At least, I don’t think so.”

“We knew you were interested in him, so we told the dogcatcher,” Joanie added.

“What dogcatcher?”

“The funny little guy with the red hair,” Tinny said.

“He must still have been hanging about after delivering the dog!” Tara said.

“He sure did cuss when he saw him,” Tinny said. “He said catching the same blankety-blank animal twice in one evening was asking too blankety-blank much of even the most public-spirited official. Only he didn’t say blankety-blank.”

“That sure was a funny-acting dog,” Joanie said. “He didn’t pay any attention to the riot; just ducked through the crowd and then back out again and headed off down the street.”

“Walking three-legged,” Tinny said.

“As if he had a package under his arm—I mean his front leg,” Joanie said.

“A package?” Steed and Tara said in unison.

“It was probably just an optical illusion,” Tinny said. “The light wasn’t very good.”

“Tell me, girls—was there anything else unusual about this dog?”

“Well, he walked kind of funny. But then, he was only using three legs.”

“Steed—the bearskin rug,” Tara gasped.

“The Walker—disguised as a dog,” Steed said.

“And with the uranium under his front leg—I mean his arm!”

“We’ve got to find Crudge!” Steed snapped. “It’s our last, lonely chance—”

“Someone calling me?” A small man with flaming red hair, an elaborately blackened eye, and a visible knot on his head was standing in the door, a massive policeman beside him.

“Crudge!” Tara said. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for my van,” he said. “You won’t believe this, but it was stolen by a dog.”

Chapter 30

“All right,” the General said, glaring stony-eyed across the desk at Steed, Tara, Crudge, the two schoolgirls, and a pair of dazed-looking M.I.5 men. “Let me get this straight: The Walker chap hid some uranium in a heap of bricks. He attempted to recover it earlier today, but was thwarted by a brick which accidentally knocked him unconscious. His timetable apparently called for him to go round and collect another bit of the stuff hidden at the school. He completed this, and returned to London to find his access to the bricks still blocked. He then gathered a mob of ne’er-do-wells and under cover of renewed disorder, dressed himself as a dog, lifted the U-235 from under our noses, allowed Mr. Crudge here to give him transport from the scene, then feigned sickness, and when Crudge came back to see to him, struck him on the head, tossed him out, went on his way, and by now is doubtless setting the timer on his bomb preparatory to fleeing the city!”

“That’s about it, sir.”

“That’s the most idiotic piece of rubbish I’ve ever listened to, Steed,” the General barked. “That blow on your skull must have affected your wits!”

“Perhaps, sir—but it’s the best I can do at the moment.”

“It makes no sense,” the General went on. “Why would the man have hidden the uranium here in Whitehall? There’s no more closely observed spot in the city of London!”

“Well, that’s done it,” one of the M.I.5 men said with sudden briskness. “I’ll just be off to give my section chief a piece of my mind before it’s too late—”

“Just a minute,” Steed said sharply. “We’re ally sitting, waiting for the ceiling to fall. But let’s think a bit. What you say is true, of course, General—this seems a rather exposed spot to be tucking uranium away—but it makes sense—if the bomb is hidden close by!”

“What’s that? Steed, you’re raving!”

“Remember our Walker’s liking for doing things under our noses. There’s also no spot which would offer a more tempting target to an insane mastermind than Whitehall—and none more prominently in view!”

“Meaning?”

“General, I’ll wager my Bentley against a bicycle that the bomb is

hidden within a hundred yards of where we're sitting at this moment! Probably in this very building!"

"Nonsense! Impossible! Where could such a thing possibly be hidden?"

"I don't know—but perhaps we can find out." Steed rose, looking about as though he expected to see the bomb ticking in a corner.

"You're raving, Steed! Everyone having access to this building has been thoroughly vetted by every security agency in Her Majesty's government!"

"Everyone? Even the cleaning staff, for example? The postman? What about the workmen—the ones who've been pounding on your wall for the past two months?"

"All cleared, every last one, of course. They've been issued special passes, which are inspected by the guards every time they leave and enter."

"No chance of a substitution?"

"The passes bear their photographs and fingerprints. No chance at all of an imposter getting by."

"Suppose," Tara said, "the pass were genuine?"

"I suppose that remark means something." His Nibs said ominously.

"I mean—suppose The Walker had applied for a job with the contractor, and subsequently passed his security check and was issued a pass. He could come and go as he liked, then, and no one would question him if his lunch pail seemed a trifle heavy. Or if he walked in with a hodload of bricks."

The General pushed out his lips and blinked.

"Suppose I just have a look at those photographs, sir?" Steed suggested gently.

Ten minutes later he selected a photo from the stack he had been offered and tossed it onto the desk.

"That's him," he said. "He was foreman of the mechanical equipment crew. Now let's just have a look inside the air-conditioner housing."

Chapter 31

"Well, Steed, and you as well, Miss King," the General was saying expansively, an hour later. "I can't actually commend you on the professionalism of your work in this case, but I must say that as much as we

found the thing in the end, I'm inclined to be lenient. After all, in your rather roundabout way, you did preserve the British nation from destruction."

"Good of you to say so, sir," Steed murmured. "But I won't feel the job is properly done until we've gathered in The Walker. Wily as he is, I have an unpleasant feeling he may be thumbing his nose at us at this moment, and planning another try. And next time we may not be so lucky."

"I suppose he had an aircraft waiting at a convenient point. Denham, possibly, or even Northolt. He was a chap who left little to chance. Pity to see such genius perverted to un-British ends."

Steed and Tara left then. They dined rather dispiritedly at a small restaurant just off the Strand; afterward, Steed dropped Tara at her apartment.

"I shall sleep round the clock," she said. She gave Steed a consoling look. "We didn't do *too* badly," she said. "At least we have a reasonable expectation of awakening."

"But not too early," Steed said. "About sunset tomorrow would be soon enough."

But it was barely dawn when his telephone rang.

"There you are, Steed," the General's voice blasted cheerfully in his ear. "Just rang you up to tell you that you may go back to sleep. The case is closed, all loose ends wound up."

"You've found him?"

"Urn."

"It's too early for cat-and-mouse, sir."

The General chuckled. "He was in the dogcatcher's van. And the van was in a ditch. Seems it struck a loose wheel someone had left lying in the road just below Great Missenden."

"Is he dead?"

"Hmmm. Not precisely. You see, he had two packets of U-235 with him. In the crash, the containers burst and the ingots fell out."

"He was unconscious?"

"Not at all; wide awake, as a matter of fact, but the doors were jammed, you see. He spent the night closed in the cab with a couple of pounds of the pure stuff. Pounded his fists bloody, but precious little good it did him."

Steed was silent for a moment. "I wondered what punishment might be suitable for a man who would plan what The Walker did," he said at

last. "I think he hit on it."

Steed hung up the telephone and sank back into dreamless slumber.

The End