

THE BROKERS OF DOOM

ANTHONY AIKMAN

PART ONE

The Waters of Destiny

We have stood on the shores of the plain
Where the waters of Destiny boom For death
was a difficult trade, And the sword was a
broker of doom*

James Elroy Flecker

The Tree House

Halfway up the cliff, overhung by the branches of an ancient sycamore, the thatched summer house sentinelled the bay. From the road it was hidden by a dense jungle of laurel. In front, tall black pines framed the view seawards and on either side chalk headlands plunged out of sight. From far below floated back the roar of breakers dragging on the shingle beach.

It was a spyglass view. On fine summer evenings when the westering sun held them in relief, the cliffs of France rose in a proud white line across the Channel. Billy Willis's guardian had built the treehouse. A hermit figure, he strode through the village, khaki shorts flapping round his knees, summer and winter alike. A man who had spent too long in the African 'bundu', so they said. Although he never strayed inside the church, he mowed the graveyard, and passers-by sometimes heard the soft dirges of African kraal songs drifting from the lean-to hut, where the mower was kept. Wagging tongues claimed that he was always drunk, and that he went there to escape the bitter tongue of his querulous housekeeper.

It was into this environment that Billy Willis had been abandoned after the unexpected deaths of his parents. His father had been killed in an accident during an army exercise crossing the glaciers of South Georgia. His mother never recovered from the shock and some months later,

under circumstances that were never wholly clear, scumbled and fell to her death over the cliffs near the house. The tragedy necessitated the calling out of the local cliff rescue team. After pausing at the Carriers Arms for a crate of Courage Ale, they arrived short on breath in the back of Bert Fagg's grocery van; the rear doors tied together with string. It was a detail Willis never forgot. He stood on the edge of the sloping field by the lighthouse, watching the hard core of the village cricket team tumble out, belching and cursing as they unrolled the long rope ladders. Hastily swallowing their beer, they contemplated with misgivings the treacherous drop below.

There were no helicopters in those days. Just Bert Fagg's little band of bravery, and P.C. Lubbock puffing red-faced up Bay Hill, pushing his black bicycle, wet to the knees from wading round the rocks.

While his guardian uncle divided his time between the treehouse and hacking the freedown astride an old black mare, Willis grew up under the hawk eye of Mrs. Griffiths, the housekeeper. A fiery little Welsh woman over-partial to V.P. sherry, she toured the local fetes and bazaars, telling fortunes and reading palms under the cover of a plastic wigwam that young Billy transported on the handlebars of his push-bike. Mrs. Griffiths operated under the title of 'Madame Zara', but was more simply referred to in the village as "that witch¹". During the summer months she and Billy were often to be seen touring the narrow downland lanes of East and West Langdon, Ringwould, Martin and Great Mongeham.

Apart from supplying the transport, it was also Billy's job to stand outside the tent and collect the sixpences, sharing them alternately - one for the fete and one for Madame Zara, whose ready ear for local gossip provided her with plenty of ammunition for her gypsy profession. At intervals from within the hot confines of her wigwam, Billy would hear her whisper, 'Don't let anyone in, ducky, I'm 'aving a fag, an' me veil's up!'

When Billy Willis went away to school he came under the influence of Boyet Rhodes, the son of his father's former commander. Boyet was only a year older than Willis, but in the ways of the world he was years his senior. Boyet adopted Billy as his willing accomplice in the usual chapter of boyhood escapades. When Colonel Rhodes retired from the Army, he also took a house at St. Margaret's Bay, so that the friendship between the two boys continued, termtime and holiday, thus rescuing Willis from some of the more macabre influences of Madame Zara, whose evening pursuits centred upon calling up the spirits of the dead. Instructing Billy to wipe the kitchen table, she assembled the letters of the alphabet in a circle round an upturned glass on which both of them lightly placed a fingertip,

'And who would you like tonight, dearie?' she would enquire.

'King Charles,' Billy invariably requested, eager to know at first hand how it felt to have one's head chopped off. It was hard to decide whether their fingers moved the glass or the eerie incantations of Madame Zara, aided by generous sips of V.P, sherry. King Charles was always too busy to speak to

them. Instead they plumped for Sherlock Holmes with whom they spelled out enthralling conversations.

All of this took place many years before. Since then, Rhodes's family had sold up and moved on to the West Country, while Willis's 'Bundu' guardian, following the family example, had finally loosened his tenuous grip on the world. Shortly after he had plunged over the white cliffs, the witch departed for her covens in the Welsh hills.

In the intervening years Billy Willis and Boyet Rhodes had travelled to some of the farthest places on earth in their various enterprises. It was during one of their engagements in the Philippines that, quite by chance, I had met Willis. And it was as a result of our ill-fated expedition to South America, that Willis, with no relatives to bequeath it to, had left the family house at St. Margaret's Bay in my charge.

I say bequeath, as my last glimpse of him had been during the Indian attack, when his canoe capsized in the middle of the moonlit Guapore river. Next second I was knocked unconscious by a heavy blow that had fractured my skull, and a year later still left me victim to frequent blackouts and dizzy spells.

On the other hand I was still alive, while in the absence of news to the contrary, Willis together with Rhodes, who had chanced to his rescue in the raft dugout, were both presumed to have perished- More tragic by far for me, was the loss of Ko Sam, Rhodes's pretty oriental stepdaughter, with whom I had fallen so utterly in love during our travels. A broken head

wasn't my only legacy from that disastrous trip - a broken heart might as well have been added to the list of injuries.

After my return to England, Willis's solicitor had invited me down to his office at 8 St. James Street, Dover. I had already made it quite clear that I had no wish to profit from Willis's untimely disappearance. However, we agreed that the house would be better occupied than empty, So until he saw how things eventually transpired, and in exchange for a nominal rent, the solicitor handed me the keys and directed me to the bus stop near Castle Street.

This was how T came to be at Sc. Margaret's Bay whilst winter gradually thawed into spring. Shrouded by leafy boughs the old summerhouse resolutely kept watch out to sea. On the beach there was an old dinghy belonging to Willis in which I sometimes went for a sail. Up at the house the gardener who was also the village odd-job man and gravedigger had been paid a retainer to keep an eye on things. Together we raked out some tatty nets, and hung them round the tennis court. No sooner had I got it marked out than a family of moles moved in.

When he wasn't studying the 'Racing Mirror', the gardener enjoyed chatting about Willis's guardian - for whom he still retained a soft spot. 'Mad old bugger, Jim/ he would tell me. 'Loved sailing. I helped him build his yacht, you know. Never wore a life jacket. Said if you was goin' to drown then the quicker you went the better. Man-overboard drill was a loaf of sliced bread in the stern/ He winked at me. "The idea was, you keeps tossing over the slices so that when you turns the

boat around you have something to follow back. “Unless the bleeding gulls gobble ’em up first,” I tells him. He was a proper card. No mistake. You’ve seen that old shot-gun. Once he peppered a courting couple by mistake. Saw something pale a-bouncin’ in the long grass. Thought it were a rabbit. He hid in the house for days. Finally came out disguised in a false red nose and moustache.’ He paused before adding in a confidential tone *Not long before he - as you might say - took leave of absence, we heaved an old ’fridge over the cliffs. “Bugger off to the immortals,” he says, dusting his hands. Then he looks at me. “Listen, I don’t want no graveyard burying. Pack me off to the bakehouse at Barham, and scatter the ashes down there on the rocks.” ’

A frequent visitor to the house was the Vicar, who had known Billy Willis since he was a lad. “Twisting my arm” he got me to agree to mow the churchyard.

My motives for accepting the chore were curiosity as much as duty. The graveyard was the genealogical chart of the village. Here, buried in cow parsley, I found several of Willis’s forebears, including a memorial stone to his father and mother. But, as Steptoe had predicted, there was no evidence of his guardian. Instead, one afternoon, I came on a small square stone lying among nettles, in a neglected corner. Clearing away mouldering leaves I uncovered the poignant inscription - “Unknown soul washed up on St. Margaret’s beach.”

I happened to mention this to Steptoe a couple of days later as he was digging a grave. He rested on his spade and gave

me an odd look. "That there Unknown Soul is Billy's uncle, supposed to be at any rate/

'You mean he didn't even want his name on his own stone?'

'It don't have his name on it because it weren't him/ He stepped back into the shallow grave. "Oh I knows young

Billy positively identified him, even if by then there weren't an awful lot left to identify. But answer me this, Jim. Why did his body, if it was his, take a week to wash ashore? If he jumped off the cliff, by rights he should have floated in on the next tide.⁵

I left him shovelling and went in search of the Vicar, whom I ran to earth in the Carriers Arms having a beer with members of the British Legion. He guided me discreetly into a corner. To my surprise he didn't deny the story at all

'Surely there was an inquest/ I persisted.

He squinted into his glass. 'Well now, naturally there was. And the coroner accepted Billy's word. After all, why shouldn't he? One body lost, one body found. And there again his clothes were piled on the cliff top/ He paused thoughtfully, and I took the opportunity to mention the stone plaque. He nodded. I decided whoever it had been, the body washed up on the shore deserved its own memorial. Not that the Parish Council agreed. Thought I'd gone off my rocker. Still do/ he chuckled.

That evening I went for a walk along the cliffs towards Kingsdown. Usually on a falling tide you could see the distant breakers marking the Goodwin Sands, but this summer

twilight, a damp mist wrapped the Channel. I climbed down the zig-zag path to the bay and sat outside the Green Man Inn with a pint of beer. The pub was deserted. There was nothing to distract my thoughts but the foghorn of the Goodwin lightship, and the waves lapping the shingle.

“Unknown soul washed up on St. Margaret’s beach”. Over and over the words repeated themselves in my head like some requiem chant. What had really taken place here all those years before, I wondered. Why, for instance should Willis insist that the body washed up was his uncle, if it wasn’t? Was there some conspiracy between them? A conspiracy that perhaps only the old and rotting summerhouse had witnessed? And if the body that had been so conveniently cremated wasn’t his guardian, what had become of him? Might he still be alive somewhere?

No answers came that evening, except for foghorn moaning through the summer mist, and from the tall cliff headland the seagulls’ mocking cry.

The Bamboo Pen

Some days later, I happened to come upon a bundle of Willis's diaries. It was like opening Pandora's box, for they provided me with a view through the looking-glass into his childhood.

Deciphering Willis's hastily scribbled entries, I was instantly transported back to summer mornings many years before, when that old leaky boat with its patched blue sails soared over the sparkling waves, The smudged pages sprang to life. Perhaps it was his choice of words: "beating up channel past Coney Barrow point, luffing, bailing" - there was always a lot of that - "tacking, gybing, reefing, beaching

I was struck by the fact that the entries invariably said "we\' I had no doubt that his companion was Boyet Rhodes, Setting the diaries down I could picture them sailing back in a dying evening breeze, towards the wooded dip in the line of cliffs that marked the bay; the cluster of white cottages at one end and the flint-walled pub - the Green Man - at the other. When they weren't sailing, they were setting out lobster pots, exploring caves, manning the old ruined gun emplacements that had guarded "Hell Fire Corner", as it came to be known during the war years. In the old A.R.P. room of the Cliffe Hotel, they spent hours poring over wartime photographs, locating tunnels, underground hospitals and railway tracks that had carried the shells to the great guns, marked down as Winnie, Pooh and Clem. At other times they were out in the valley making bivouacs, setting

rabbit snares and tobogganing down the “death run” behind the windmill.

That summer as I walked the dusty lanes between the popped corn fields, I saw it all through younger, and more eager eyes than mine. I even sat under the ash tree at the edge of Beere wood, where the two of them crouched with their shotguns, waiting for pigeons to flight in over the September stubble.

There was mention of another wood towards Kingsdown where they discovered, preserved in the bark of a sycamore tree, initials and a heart, carved with the date August 4th, 1917. In his diary Willis had noted down how like lines from Housman it seemed - a soldier and his sweetheart gazing across the evening sea before he went away to war.

Suddenly I was overwhelmed by my own loss. When moments like these brought Ko Sam so vividly to mind, I was haunted, as much by guilt as by sorrow. Despite the passing of time, I never ceased to brood over that needless tragedy. For it was while I lay unconscious and unable to stop her, that Ko Sam had gone back in a vain attempt to try' to find Rhodes and Willis, and vanished in the attempt. Try as I might to distance myself from the memory of her, all too often I imagined her beside me, remembering wistfully how she had once said, “I miss you, darling, even when you are here.” Then the dam burst and it all flooded back to me; her face, her body, her love-making, her magical presence,

Sometimes one inherits no more than bare floorboards, but to me the Dial House, set amid a bulwark of blue pines

overlooking the bay, was crowded with ghosts of the past. Coming in for his pint of midday ale, the gardener was happy to oblige with stories, but when I asked about the housekeeper his expression changed. 'Bloody witch, screwed him for every penny.⁵ He eyed me balefully. 'If you ask me chat's why he buggered off/

'If he didn't jump over the cliff, where did he go? There must surely have been letters - something/ I persisted.

He shrugged- "Jim, you won't find nothin' here/ he declared stubbornly. 'Not 'ere.'

There was something about the way he said it. The way he emphasised the "not here". I thought about it later. Was he trying to cell me I might find a clue somewhere else?

There is nothing like a good night's sleep for solving riddles. I awoke to one of those radiant summer mornings when the sea glittered in the sun and the chalk cliffs glared so brightly that it hurt the eyes. As it was low tide, I went for a long walk across the rocks. Later, I returned to the summerhouse and brewed up a pot of tea on the primus stove. At least now I knew what I had to do. Clearly if this eccentric Uncle was still alive, he had to be told of Willis's disappearance. He might know of some other relative to inherit the property. Easier said than done, of course, but luck was with me that bright morning. It would have taken months to work my way through the jumble of papers in the house and probably discover nothing. The summerhouse was another matter. Against the window stood a small plain writing desk. The bottom drawer was completely bare. It was not difficult to

guess that before Willis had set off on his travels he had cleared out the contents. I sat there staring round the walls wondering where he might have put them. I knew Willis. He didn't throw things away; like a jackdaw he stored, hid or buried them.

A moment later I was climbing down the rickety ladder from the verandah. Below, sheltered from the elements, the soft soil lay littered with old boxes, empty paint pots and pieces of tar paper. I pushed these aside and grabbing a piece of wood, started scraping. If I had expected a tin chest I was due for a disappointment. After half an hour all I came up with were some old jam jars and broken flower pots. It was only when I sat back, dusting my hands, that I picked up one of the jars and realised instantly that it was crammed full of papers.

Hurrying back up the ladder I emptied the contents onto the desk. There were three letters. All with the same unusual address and identical signature. Bob Wyllie. Not Willis, I had to admit reluctantly, but not so very far off either. The address at the top was "Number 0, Place du Kasbah, Tangier".

It was the first time I had seen an address quite like that. Number Nought? Surely there was something eccentric here that fitted. The date however was just as interesting, for it was less than two years old.

"I am writing with a bamboo pen," commenced the barely legible scrawl, "Thank you for your letter. I am eighty years young today and the weather is perfectly foul. Seneca is in

one of his black moods, He hates Tangier in the winter. I shall escape south to Marakesch after Christmas. By the way - an old friend of yours — at least he says he is - has been staying here. Charles Stanley. Some sort of artist. Calls himself Carlo Pittore - Charles the Painter. Has a studio in Rome. I think he has his eye on my Constable. I tell Fatima to count the silver. Nice chap though, for an American. Calls me the "Wily Bird", most amusing. If you come out, bring some geranium cuttings between two slices of bread. Then you can pretend to the Customs they're sandwiches. Also bring me some Hooker Green from Robinsons - Stanley seems to have swiped the lot."

I put the letters down, Elated as I was, I also experienced a strange sense of calm. There was no hurry. Another month and I would be a lot fitter. And then like the swallows I would set off south for Africa,

The House at Number Nought

The old man who opened the door of Number 0 that mild autumn afternoon sported the most preposterous red nose and the oddest moustache I have ever seen. 'So sorry.

. Wyllie's gone off to Zululand/ he announced in clipped nasal tones and started to close the door, I managed to jam my foot in the gap. 'I'm a friend of Billy/ I said.

Pale blue eyes stared back thoughtfully. T suppose you'd better come in/ he replied after a long pause, and I followed him under a colonnade into the sunny courtyard beyond. 'Say hallo to Seneca/ he instructed. 'He gets awfully sulky if he feels left out/

Apart from Wyllie's, there was only one other face, staring malevolently from the top of a marble column. Wyllie glanced towards it. 'Seneca, this is a friend of Billy's - at least he says he is. What's your name?' he called back.

'James/ I said, 'James ../

'Oh, that doesn't matter/ he interrupted, removing the false nose and moustache. 'Never remember names anyway. Forget my own sometimes. Kids in the Kasbah call me Marks and Spencer/

I grinned back. 'That's one up on Charlie. I've been called Charlie ever since I arrived/

‘Better have something to drink, I suppose/ He barked in Arabic and a voice barked back. A moment later an old woman wrapped in tatty veils came grumbling across the courtyard, placed a bottle of wine on a small table and left ‘Regards me as the village idiot. In need of care and attention. We've been barking away at each other for years. Here, have a glass of Chaud Solei 1. Terrible for the liver, but I like the name/

A breeze from the bay shook the dusty leaves of an immense fig tree that shaded the courtyard. ‘Sacred to pregnant women/ announced Wyllie.

I stared at my drink in alarm.

‘No. The figs/ he chuckled. ‘Old as the hills. Pepys wrote his “Tangier Papers” sitting where you are now under this very tree/

Through the thick Moorish walls could be heard the tramp of tourists passing through the Kasbah. Suddenly, an unmusical wailing piped up. I guessed it was the snake charmer I had passed earlier, dozing under the palm tree near the ramparts. Wyllie chuckled, ‘That’s one-eyed Hamid. He’s always late/

Mysterious clinking noises prompted Wyllie to creep across the courtyard to a green gate half obscured by hanging datura lilies. Pulling it open he revealed a group of youths squatting in the narrow alley. They looked up from their gambling in alarm. Wyllie barked at them and slammed the gate. ‘Damn fools,* he grinned. ‘They’re forever getting caught by the police and beaten. Either that or they’re

spying. Both probably. I tell 'em, if they must gamble, do it quietly. Drop a coin in Tangier and everyone knows about it/ He winked at me, adding, 'I usually totter up co the terrace for half an hour before tea. Care co join me?'

The terrace was half buried by overgrown climbers. A Chinese gong tinkled in the Bougainvillea. Geraniums flowered everywhere. I wondered if they were grown from the cuttings Willis had been instructed to bring. Overhead, chained together for support, creaked the massive boughs of the fig tree.

The Kasbah lay at our feet. Was it just coincidence or did this bird's-eye view remind Wyllie of the summerhouse at St. Margaret's Bay?

'It's a women's prison now,' he commented.

'What is?'

He pointed across the cobbled square to the Sultan's Palace. 'Only a few cranes left and they're all batty, like me.' He laughed. 'I tried to get in once, dressed up as an Arab washer-woman. Made it past the guards but I hadn't planned where to go afterwards/

With every word he uttered, I became more and more convinced he was Willis's uncle. 'Marvellous view, don't you think/ he enthused. 'I like a sea view/

I agreed. On our right, the square sloped up to the ramparts. On the lower side, beyond an ornamental gateway, the dazzling white city, capped by domes and tiled minarets,

dropped steeply down to Tangier bay. An hour earlier I had been making that punishing climb in reverse.

'So you're staying in the Petit Socco/ he said. 4How amusing. I usually stop there for a coffee on my way back from the Cafe de Paris. Do you know it? End of Boulevard Pasteur. Opposite Grand Hotel de Ville. All the old queens hang out there ogling the Arab boys. Took your chum Willis there once, he was quite shocked. Can't say I blame him. Jolly glad I live up here/ He leaned across confidentially. 'Tell you one thing/ He raised his eyebrows and I wondered what was about to be revealed. 'Don't drink the goat's milk/ He nodded at me circumspectly. 'There's a herd they milk in the streets. Willis caught hepatitis from it.'

'You are his uncle, aren't you?' I asked him, and he burst out laughing. 'Good Lord, no. Whatever gave you that idea?' Just then a gong sounded and the old Arab maid barked something from the courtyard.

'Schoolroom tea,' Wyllie announced, sprightly, leading the way down. 'Hope you like honey from the Rif mountains.'

We perched on high chairs each side of a narrow table. There was barely room to squeeze one's knees under it.

Wyllie poured from a silver teapot. 'Tell me about Billy/ he suggested amiably.

'He's dead?

'Oh, how sad. I quite liked him you know.' He spooned some honey and spread it thickly on his bread. I had hoped for

rather more reaction. He smiled vaguely across at me. 'Car accident, I daresay. They usually are.'

'No,' I replied. 'We were attacked by Indians up the Amazon, I don't know whether he was knifed to death, drowned, or eaten alive by piranhas.'

Wyllie tut-tutted in a deprecating way. 'Well these things do happen, I suppose.' He sighed politely. 'I say, would you care for some tea - jasmin-scented verbena? Excellent for the liver.'

I wondered if anything I said would surprise him. Somehow I doubted it.

'And what do you do,' he smiled, 'when you're not jaunting around South America?' But the smile faded a fraction when I explained that I had been a teacher. 'Never went to school myself,' he said stiffly. 'We had a tutor. I rather think he was in love with my brother. Used to write him dotty letters which none of us understood. Mother found 'em but she couldn't understand them either. When I was sixteen, my father announced it was high time I went to Paris to see a few paintings and things. My mother objected. "He's far too young. He'll go to the dogs." "If he's going to the dogs," insisted my pa, "then the sooner he goes the better."' 'Wyllie reached for the jam. 'Made this myself, in case you're worried about being poisoned. Which is the way Seneca had to go. Didn't you, you mischievous old rogue?' he barked into the courtyard. 'Or did you cut your veins in the bath?' He turned back to me. 'It was the fashionable way to take one's leave, you know.'

I would have given anything to know how he had taken his leave from the white cliffs of Dover, but I knew by now he would give nothing away. Instead he declared 'Seneca was a teacher, you know. Nero's tutor. Taught him everything. All his vices. Knew too much in the end. Didn't you, you old rogue?*' He winked at me. £So he had to go. That head was cast from his death mask. Not an entirely happy expression, is it ?'

We got down off our high chairs and returned to the courtyard. Glancing at the lengthening shadows Wyllie proceeded to wrap himself in an old brown burnoose. 'Show you round the rest of the house another day. Time I was off. Coming?'

In the narrow streets of the Kasbah, veiled ladies were frantically fanning charcoal braziers, little girls played hopscotch, small boys crouched inside the weaving shops, their fingers locked in cats' cradles of coloured threads. Outside the Sultan's Palace the guards watched the fading daylight with impatience.

'About time the Grand Vizier in Fez spots the new moon. Then we can all forget Ramadan for another year,' grunted Wyllie, crossing over to the ramparts. We joined the small knot of people staring across the straits to the distant mountains of Spain, On the rocks below, the fishermen pulled in their circular nets for the last time and hurried into town with their catches. On a strip of sand, boys practised final somersaults.

Under the solitary palm tree, Hamid the one-eyed snake charmer sat fondling his kif pipe, waiting for the harbour cannon to sound the end of the daytime fast.

"They all cheat,' remarked Wyllie, 'In the old days you had to wait until some blind old mullah held up a black thread and a white one side by side and couldn't tell the difference.' He chuckled. 'The holy ones still spit rather than swallow their saliva. The more they spit the holier they are - not quite like that in the Church of England.'

Just then the long-awaited cannon fired and a roar of approval rose from a hundred thousand thirsty throats throughout the city. Making our way through the narrow alleys of the Medina it was impossible to escape the mad stampede, as everyone rushed home. In the Petit Socco, soup sellers ladled out the thick ramadan soup into bowls clutched by ragged children, while the water sellers, shouldering their swollen goatskins, rang their brass bells and offered to slake the thirst of the world.

Trapped by the surging tide of people, mule drivers attempted to force a path for their laden beasts, crying baleuk - Give way, give way!' Outside the artisan shops, children released from hammering brass trays stretched their cramped muscles. Tiny girls heaved spilling pails of water. Dogs nosed the refuse. Wasps, gorged from tubs of sticky dates, rose drunkenly into the warm twilight.

Wyllie and I sat in the Petit Socco watching the world go by. Waiters, shoeshine boys, merchants in red tarpots all deferred to Wyllie - *La bas, la bas, signor/ they greeted and

he condescended with a barely perceptible nod. It was far too noisy to talk. No sooner had the crowds departed than they returned again, this time as revellers. Youths charged the streets beating drums and blowing horns.

Wyllie drained his mint tea, 'Moroccan whisky/ he chuckled, getting up and straightening his burnoose. 'Care to come up for a nightcap ?' he suggested.

I decided that supper would have to wait and followed the old man back into the labyrinth of crowded alleys.

Considering he must have been well into his eighties, he was very spry. No wonder Stanley referred to him as the Wily Bird. Could years of living in the treehouse have kept him fit, I wondered? At hole-in-the-wall shopfronts, merchants in tarpots played checkers by the hissing light of pressure lamps. Ha bas, signor, la bas/ they called out. Wyllie barked amiably back. The whitewashed walls were smudged with the blue imprint of hands. 'To keep away the evil eye,' Wyllie informed me over his shoulder. Grubby little boys with shaven heads whistled at us, and tiny girls, whose hair and fingers were stained red with henna, and whose eyes were ringed with kohl, nursed babies as big as themselves, smiling radiantly.

Finally we reached the gateway to the Kasbah. All of Tangier lay sparkling below, like a crescent jewel along the black curve of the sea.

In the sitting-room of Number Nought, a fire crackled cheerfully. Seneca had been brought inside. By the firelight

he looked grimmer than ever. 'He can't stand the cold you know/ explained Wyllie. 'Can you, you miserable old bugger? Gets bitter. That's the trouble with teachers/ he mused, handing me a glass of wine. 'They get bitter. Loss of creativity I suppose. Now my mother was an extraordinarily creative woman. Shot at Bisley, you know. Used to keep a rifle beside her bed and pot off crows through the open window. Terrified the servants. My parents spent their honeymoon shooting grizzly bears in the Rockies. Now they're an endangered species I suppose. Like me, And you, Seneca/ he called across. 'Not many of you left, are there, thank God.'

He began reminiscing. 'First came out to Safi. Portuguese enclave, as it was then, down the coast. Always wore highly-polished riding boots to stop the fleas getting a grip. No roads in those days. Cantered across the plains to Marakesch on horse-back. That's the way to see it. The Kutubia mosque rising above the palm trees and the snowcapped peaks behind.' He peered nostalgically into the fire. 'Spent most of my life in Africa. Here and there.¹

I left none the wiser as to his real identity. Outside Number Nought the Kasbah wore its nightly veil of mystery. The moon hung suspended in a pale aurora of light. Shrouded figures flitted by in the shadows, their slippered feet rustling on the cobbles. Below the ramparts the waves broke in a secretive murmur.

The Wily Bird

Although it was after ten o'clock when I arrived next morning, Wyllie was still having breakfast in bed. The bed was an immense four-poster. Propped up on pillows and wearing a nightcap he looked like some Ruritanian despot.

To call this "my lying-in-state",¹ he announced cheerily. 'What's the weather like? Shall we take Seneca for a picnic after church? Ask Fatima to make us something. Just bark at her, she'll understand.' From the bathroom boomed an ancient geyser. 'I'd better put it out of its misery, I suppose,' said Wyllie. 'Get the car out, will you?' he added as an afterthought.

To my surprise the maid did understand. She even showed me the garage. The vehicle, rather in keeping with its owner, was an ancient, fabric-covered, red Austin Seven. Fortunately inside was pinned a list of instructions. "Open gravity feed petrol tank. Prime carburettor. Adjust magneto lever. Crank vigorously."

Wyllie arrived clutching Seneca. Fatima carried the luncheon hamper, They barked goodbye at one another and we set off up the narrow lane beside the ramparts. Once through the Citadel gate, we sped down the steep causeway and into the Grant/ Socco* Above the market stalls the white crenellated tower of St. Andrews bravely flew the flag of Scotland. In a small hutch by the gate a crippled scribe reclined on spotless silk cushions.

cOur father confessor,' joked Wyllie. The bell tolled. Wyllie gamely struggled onto his knees. The caretaker's dog nosed up the aisle and when we came to the Lord's Prayer, Wyllie broke out with gusto, 'Our Father which are in Hendon, Hammersmith be thy name. Thy Willesden be done, Thy Kingston come ./ and concluded, 'For ever and ever, Crouch End/

An hour later we were on our way again, rumbling up the 'mountain' towards Cap Spar tel. Half way up, spaced between the expatriate villas stood rows of tiny tombs. 'It's the pet cemetery,' Wyllie explained. 'No chaplain at present, but I believe they are on the lookout for a nice old non-denominational cocker spaniel!'

At the roadside, boys held out pine nuts, brown mushrooms and sprays of narcissi. We reached Cap Spartcl, where the Atlantic swells boomed against the sandstone cliffs.

'Caves of Hercules down there/ shouted Wyllie. 'Very legendary spot, wouldn't you say, Seneca?'

Below the headland, men were spading sand into pony carts. It was easy to imagine die shoreline continuing undisturbed all the way down the coast of Africa.

We drove through a jungle of pines and eucalyptus. 'The Diplomatic Forest,' declared Wyllie. 'I used to hunt wild boar here you know/ And then we were out again. Brown hills tumbled above the sea. In the stony fields, camels stood improbably hitched to donkeys, ragged men scattered seed from the folds of their robes, white egrets strutted the

furrows aloof as holy men. Squat huts peeped behind palisades of prickly pear. Children ran out to wave. Goats scrambled among the thorny branches of the argan trees.

Beyond a glittering chessboard of salt pans, the Citadel of Asilah rose out of the mists.

After Asilah we climbed through red hills, covered with cork oak woods, before dropping into a green plain, where a river snaked in lazy loops to the sea. Above towered a massive spur. 'Up we go, hold tight,' cried Wyllie wrestling the Austin along a boulder-strewn track. Rounding a corner, an amphitheatre appeared below, while ahead a stark row of columns braced the skyline.

A wizened Arab picked himself up from the shade and hobbled towards us clutching his rags and mouthing inarticulate noises. Like a herald he raised a withered claw and presented, as his own kingdom, the ruined city beyond the ramparts.

"Lixus/ announced Wyllie. "Founded by Poseidon, die God of the Sea.'

As I stared at the broken pillars and the ruined buildings covering the hilltop, my thoughts immediately turned to Willis, for whom the old Gods — as we had learned to our cost in South America - held such a strange fascination. I noticed Wyllie staring curiously at me as if he guessed what was going through my head. I said "Willis believed Poseidon still exists.'

Wyllie nodded thoughtfully. "Why not indeed?'

We sat eating lunch above the amphitheatre and afterwards strolled down to where a workman was repairing the mosaic floor. Painstakingly he broke rocks into coloured chips and rubbed the restored patches down with brickdust and water. Wyllie barked something at him and he splashed water over the dusty centre of the mosaic. At once the pattern cleared to reveal a giant's face, with serpents in its hair, bold cruel lips and large watchful eyes. I didn't need Wyllie to tell me this was Poseidon, For a moment he stared at us from another world, another life. Then the water dried, the pattern faded, the veil descended.

The Arab workman smiled at us and Wyllie tossed him a coin. Even as we turned to go, I felt the eyes of the god haunting me. "Has Willis ever been here?" I asked as we climbed up back to the car.

He didn't answer me directly. "Peculiar thing about that accident of his, you know," he said, pausing in his stride. "I had a visit from another friend of his a short while ago. A painter called Stanley. Lives in Rome. Told me Billy had been staying with him only recently/ He grinned at me.

I nearly choked. 'Willis in Rome?' Wyllie strode on ahead, leaving me to wrestle with this revelation. The implications of it pounded my thoughts, for if Willis were really alive, then perhaps Rhodes might also have survived, and although I feared even to breathe her name, dare I hope that there might be some news of Ko Sam ?

By this time we had reached the car, and Wyllie was barking at the crippled watchman who was salaaming grotesquely.

Driving back to Tangier, Wyllie refused to be drawn further, despite my pestering him for information. Instead he addressed most of his comments to Seneca. Finally in frustration I remembered the treehouse letter still in my wallet and I showed it to him. But if I meant it as proof of my good intentions it worked no miracles. He merely smiled. 'So the summerhouse is still there is it? I remember Willis mentioned it.'

At the cliffs of Hercules Wyllie stopped the car. To the west the sun was dropping over the Atlantic. For a moment we sat bathed in its red glow. 'Like a good bloody sunset, don't you, Seneca?' said Wyllie, 'T daresay it reminds you of Rome burning?'

The sea changed from purple to gold. For a moment the dying sun rested on the horizon. Wyllie's voice changed. 'You know what lies out there, according to legend, that is. The Gardens of the Hesperides. The golden orchards of the sun/ He turned to Seneca. "You'd be happy there, wouldn't you, you old bastard?' he said consolingly. "You and your chum Poseidon, the murderous pair of you/

He didn't give me a chance to ask him anything more about Willis. When we reached Tangier he dropped me off in the Grand Socco and immediately drove up the steep slope towards the causeway.

That was the last time I saw him, as far as I can remember. I recall staggering up the flights of steps from the Socco, sick and dizzy, to seek refuge at Number 0, in the early hours of the following morning. No sooner had Fatima let me in

than I collapsed. Everything else remains a blur.

In the succeeding days, during an occasional respite of semi-consciousness, I became dimly aware of the four-poster bed I was lying in and the visits of the old maid, traipsing up with beakers of herbal tea. One time I discovered a note pinned to the bedpost, explaining that I had succumbed to hepatitis and must abstain from eggs, sex and alcohol. I had barely enough strength to grasp the meaning of the scrawled message before I flopped back on the pillows and sank wearily to sleep.

Lying day after day in such a condition, it was often difficult to distinguish dreams from reality. Even after all this time I cannot make up my mind what really happened. All I remember clearly is that one morning I stepped shakily down the stairs to find the house deserted, Seneca missing from his pillar and only old Fatima shuffling about the courtyard with a broom.

J

She came across and clutching my wrist with a bony grip. 'Parti,' she hissed anxiously, through her veil. 'Parti,' The urgency in her voice surprised me. 'Monsieur,' she whispered and I realised she was trying to pass me something, I glimpsed the outline of a letter as she drew it swiftly from the folds of her robes and thrust it crumpled into my hand. 'Parti, Monsieur, parti,' she seemed to plead.

I didn't have a chance to say anything, because at that very moment, a truck pulled up noisily outside and police burst in

from the Kasbah. Shouting rapidly in Arabic they hurried into the house. One of them came across to us. 'Who are you?' he demanded menacingly.

In halting French I replied, 'I have come to see Monsieur Wyllie.'

The old maid muttered something to him in Arabic and he regarded me sharply. 'C'est parti, C'est vrai?'

I shrugged non-committally. I think if he hadn't been quite so eager to join his colleagues, searching or looting, or whatever they were doing so noisily inside, he would have arrested me on the spot. As it was he merely ordered me to wait and hurried after the others. In the bewildering circumstances — and you must realise I had no idea what was J

going on - waiting to be interrogated hardly seemed the wisest thing to do. No one appeared to be guarding the gate and I was half way out before the maid caught hold of me.

she pleaded. It was only as I shook her off that I realised she was probably trying to tell me something. By then it was too late, I was already staggering across the square heading for the Medina gate* Each moment I expected to be summoned to halt. I didn't dare wait- 'Cap Spartel, I heard the old maid shriek hysterically.

'Cap Spar tel.' But by now I was scuttling down the steep steps into the safety of the crowded alleys below. I didn't stop until I reached the Soao where I paused for breath, ordered a mint tea and ripped open Wyllie's letter.

“Flown south to the sun,” it began harmlessly enough. “Like Icarus. Suggest you try Rome. Our ‘Carlo Pittore’ friend has a studio near Piazza Navona. If you want somewhere cheap to stay nearby, then rent a room around Via Coronari. You can’t miss it. It’s the street of the fake antique dealers. They’d French polish their own mothers-in-law for the chance of a quick sale. Wouldn’t they just, Seneca, you miserable old fraud? Sorry I can’t be more help. Give my regards to Billy, should you see him.” It was signed “Wily Bird”. Underneath was a scribbled P.S. “Seneca decided you passed the impostor test. If you come across D.C. be careful what he gives you to drink!”

That letter is the only completely verifiable fact in the whole misty drama. Although I certainly did not dream the police raid, or my mad dash in the taxi along the winding coast road to the Cliffs of Hercules once I finally realised what the maid had been shouting. Leaving a dirham for the tea, I hurried as fast as my shaky legs would take me, down the steep alleys, out through the lower Medina gate and onto the esplanade. A taxi waited under the palm trees opposite.

I suppose I would lay myself open to accusations of paranoia if I suggest the taxi was waiting for me, but he certainly showed no surprise when I shouted breathlessly ‘Cap Spartel, vitel’ None of the usual arguing or haggling. I slammed the door and we were climbing up through the twisting streets towards the ‘mountain*. Wherever I sat I didn’t seem able to avoid his scrutiny through the driving mirror. 4t7n ami,’ he demanded, ‘t/ntzzni,’ it sounded like.

Friend or enemy he might have been saying. God knows. I sank back dizzy and shaking, wondering what on earth we would find when we got there.

My sense of foreboding increasing as we approached the headland. The driver muttered something, Then, as we began the final ascent up to the cliff top I spotted the tiny red Austin perched high up, on a great slab of sandstone overhanging the sea.

The taxi driver stopped beside the road and with a sickening feeling in my stomach I walked over to the car. The Austin was as empty as I expected it to be.

Afonsirar/ A cluster of barefoot shepherd boys in ragged djellabaks were racing along the rocky edge of the cliff top towards us. The taxi driver came up and peered into the empty car.

‘Wyllie* I shouted, cupping my hands into a megaphone, ‘Wyllie!’

Far below incoming waves surged on the rocks, and southwards the long empty beach vanished into the haze. The ‘Wily Bird’ may have flown, but where to and why was a complete mystery. ‘Damn fool!’ I muttered impatiently, wondering what to do next.

"Monsieur,' piped the small boys, tugging at my coat for baksheesh.

Scanning the slopes below I saw at once the police car speeding up the dusty track from the direction of the Diplomatic Forest. The police had taken the short cut by way

of the airport road. One day I promised myself I'd understand all this. Just now my head was throbbing too much to worry about anything else except getting away as fast as I could. Explanations would have to wait. I got back hurriedly into the taxi. 'Tangier,' I told him, reaching for my wallet and trying not to look quite so anxiously in the direction of the approaching police car.

The driver grunted something, and gunned the taxi down the track back towards Cap Spar tel. Thank God he was no friend of the local gendarmerie.

I got off at the Grand Socco, collected my bags from my cheap pension, paid the bill and stepped down to the CTM bus terminal by the harbour, where I caught the next bus out to Tetuan.

Five weary hours later I stepped across the frontier into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta to wait for the evening ferryboat back across the Straits to Algeciras. When we finally drew away from the harbour, the blue mountains of the Rif stood out against the darkening sky. Gulls screamed like harridans in our wake, On the vanishing quayside a figure was standing all alone, watching us depart. A thin solitary figure, stooping slightly against the giant backcloth of Africa. A figure frozen within a dusty mosaic, waiting to come alive again.

If it is you, I thought. Then next time you can come to me.

The Fire-Eater

Any remaining doubts I had about Wyllies identity were resolved on my first morning in Rome. It took only so long to secure lodgings in via Coronari. There was but one lodging house in the entire street and it could hardly have been coincidental that the room I moved into had quite recently been vacated by none other than Billy Willis himself

Bjdrn told me this* Bjorn was the Norwegian artist who lived in the next room. He had a hacking cough and eked out an existence with porridge and cigarettes. He spent the morning painting in bed to keep warm, and every evening he would carry his paintings down to Piazza Navona, set up his display and hope for a sale.

The other permanent residents were Maria, a likable prostitute who spent her afternoons outside a tomb along the Appia Antica, and her evenings lounging under a lamppost on the Tor di Quinto, and Giacomo. Giacomo, Mangiafuoco - the fire-eater,

Giacomo occupied a tiny box with no outside window. Every evening he too toiled down Via Coronari. When I got to know him I sometimes helped carry his bottles of paraffin, while he shivered in his plastic raincoat, wearing only a fake leopard-skin loincloth underneath. In the raw December night our little procession made a marked contrast to the elegant fur-coated shoppers. 'You know,

James/ he said to me when he came to my room to borrow sugar, 'Every night of my life since I was a boy I eat fire. "Mangiafuoco" - fire-eater like in Pinocchio. You know why? Because when I was a boy there was nothing else to eat/ He said it too many times to sound funny any more.

In addition to the four of us, itinerants used to rent mattresses from the landlady on a nightly basis and lay snoring in the hall with their possessions tied to their feet. Once a week the police raided the house at midnight, to check up on identity papers.

The landlady of this dilapidated lodging house was an enormous woman, clothed entirely in black, named Spuria* She never went out. Bjorn decided that even if she squeezed through the door it would take a crane to get her down the slippery steps to street level. Like some prehistoric denizen hiding from the outside world, she prowled the dingy corridors of her decaying tenement.

Spuria controlled her affairs by voice alone. It was a voice that dominated the entire neighbourhood. No one dared defy it* Every shopkeeper for half a mile rushed to its command and when the errand boys arrived Spuria lowered a basket on a string for the deliveries*

Every morning Spuria thumped on my door and marched in bearing an antiquated metal hypodermic syringe that looked as though it had barely survived the siege of Sebastopol. Thrusting this in my direction she crouched over the end of the bed, hoisted her voluminous skirts and bellowed, 'Fai, professore, fai (get on with it!)' On the first morning Spuria

even had the courtesy to introduce us. Reaching back as far as she was able she patted her immense posterior and grunted, 'Professor?, I call this the afe!' Leaving me to assume that this was because of all those other unfortunate foreigners who had left their mark on those flaccid acres of flesh. In fact I remember peering vainly for the sign of a "Willis" pricked out, with a date or perhaps even a forwarding address.

I had more success with Bjorn. He had little to pass on about Willis, who had kept very much to himself during the time he had stayed there, but at least he could tell me something about Charles Stanley - the Carlo Pitcore of Wyllie's letters. I knew from conversations with Boyet Rhodes during our trip in South America, that over the years Stanley had exerted an uncanny influence on Willis.

Bjorn laughed sarcastically when I mentioned his name. 'We make good enemies. James, you must understand this Carlo Pittore, as he calls himself, is a very great artist. Far too important, he thinks, to sell his paintings in the piazza. Once he tell me, *'Bjorn, it is more important who you sell a painting to, than what you sell if for"/ Bjorn coughed. 'Very easy, James, when you have a lot of money.'

'Has he a lot of money?'

Bjorn shrugged. 'He has his studio in Via della Pace and a place somewhere in the country. He is American and Americans have monev.' J

'Or else he's got rich backers,' but Bjorn didn't know and wasn't interested. He lived for his own painting and within the small coterie of the Piazza Navona artists. Stanley patrolled outside the boundary of these reserves. According to Bjorn, Stanley wore a shabby raincoat belted round the middle, was never without a tie and always carried a sketch pad. 'Otherwise,' Bjorn chuckled, 'You might take him for a cheap salesman.' Personal details included a black beard, thick black hair and horn-rimmed spectacles. I also learned he was to be frequently seen in the company of one Francis Firman, who had decided to espouse the cause of Irish patriotism at a safe distance, by changing his name, speaking with a 'paddy' accent and clutching a copy of Yeats for good measure,

I had already spotted Firman several times. It was hard not to. He was so tall and thin that it was easy to imagine he had been pulled through a mangle, Added to this he was dressed entirely in black, moved like a robot and wore orange washing-up gloves over his tapering fingers. He stalked the piazza alone. No accompanying Carlo Pittore. In Via della Pace, Charles Stanley's studio, above the street market, remained shuttered up.

'When he is here,¹ Bjorn informed me, 'he hangs a palette out of his window.¹

'Have you ever been there?¹¹ asked him.

He nodded grimly* 'I remember the first time. It was also the last. He was standing by an easel over near the window, a paintbrush in one hand, a toothbrush in the other. When he

looked up he dipped the toothbrush in the turpentine by mistake!’ Bjorn chuckled ‘I can still hear his howls of dismay. It gave me a moment to look around. The studio was an amazing clutter of frames and canvasses, paints and powders/ Bjorn wrinkled his nose, ‘And there was this awful smell of boiled socks coming from a black pot bubbling on the stove. Stanley rinsed out his mouth and pointed to the table. “Help yourself to some matza, unless you’re worried about becoming Jewish”.’

‘I didn’t realise he was Jewish,’ I said. Bjorn shrugged. ‘Perhaps it matters to him. It certainly didn’t to me. I asked him what the smell was. “Rabbit-skin glue,” he replied. “Boil it up and mix it with lime. Bjorn, I’m surprised an artist of your calibre wouldn’t know that’s the traditional way to prime a canvas1’/

Bjorn glanced at me, ‘I ignored his sarcasm. I wanted to see what he was painting. To my surprise I recognised the face. It’s a girl who lives near here. Perhaps you’ve seen her. She is often on the back of a yellow motorbike. She is quite pretty. Except that our Carlo Pittore had given her the most unfortunate leer. “I’m having problems with the mouth,” he admitted. I suddenly realised that the portraits round the walls, many of them of Stanley, all had the same leer. “Tell me,” he said, wiping his hands on a filthy apron. “What do you care about the hunger in a man’s soul?” ’

Bjorn looked at me closely, ‘James, I had this temptation to be very rude. His superiority infuriated me. And coming from such a lousy painter too. “Oh, vafanculo1.” I said and made

for the door. “Bjorn”, he called after me, “I’d really like to paint your portrait. A typical snotty-nosed Norwegian.” His mocking laughter followed me down to the street.’

Bjorn lit a cigarette. He told me this while we were sheltering from the bitter cold in Bar Tre Scallini, Through the open doorway he kept watch on his paintings. Further down the piazza Giacomo Mangiafuoco had started his evening performance. He was not built quite like the superman he pretended to be, but in the light of his oily flares his gleaming shaven head gave him a compelling, oriental appearance. No one ever noticed the troubled eyes hidden by shadows. ‘They see what they want to see,’ commented Bjorn, staring gloomily into the dark. ‘A wild devil man branding his body with fire, breathing out billows of flame thirty feet into the air/

Giacomo always attracted a large crowd, but it melted mysteriously away the moment he came round with the hat, and he never managed to gain more than a very meagre collection. While Giacomo lit up the piazza with sudden bursts of flame, the artists waited hopefully beside their displays under the wrought-iron lamps. In the centre dominating everything rose the massive four-rivers statue: four giants each cradling their chosen river. Even on the coldest nights a large crowd of spectators descended on the piazza, but for all their elegance, the strolling tourists looked a bit ephemeral beside the gaunt stone supermen.

The evening performance in the piazza ended between 11 and midnight. Then the crowd went home and die dealers,

painters, pickpockets, whores and hustlers retired to the cheap wine cellars and the paper tablecloth trattorie around Via della Pace. Here they steamed out the cold, swallowing bowls of minestrone, and drinking cheap wine from the Alban hills. It was at one of these crowded tables that Giacomo told me his story.

*My father was killed by the Camorra - the Mafia of Naples. He was not big mafioso, not a big fish, just a timid man who was as frightened of my mother as the men for

whom he carried messages, and a frightened man ends up the gutter with his throat slit. My mother had no money to feed us all, so at ten years old I went out to work in a bar. Until one day the circus came. Ah, how magnificent it seemed/ He chuckled. 'A half-starved elephant covered with a few tawdry bangles, some pathetic clowns, a few threadbare ponies. But to me it was sheer magic. Every moment I could escape from the bar I ran off to watch the circus. They were people from another planet. And when they pulled down the tent, and moved off south, I went with them.'

'Were you happy?*

He shrugged off a smile. I suppose so. You see, James, when the masks came off the people were the same as everyone else. At first they tried to make me a clown and for a while every night I fell into buckets of whitewash. But I never quite managed to be funny and sad at the same time - which is the secret of every clown. So they tried to make me an acrobat, but I had no sense of - how do you say -?'

‘Balance,’ I suggested.

He nodded. ‘And I was scared of heights.’

‘So in the end you became a fire-eater?’

‘It is not difficult. Just so long as you don’t swallow!’ He grinned.

Two days later Giacomo had an accident. For some reason he had choked and the spray of billowing flame spilled back over his upturned face. I wasn’t there. Bjorn described what had happened. I heard him screaming. You couldn’t see his head for a bright ball of flame, but nobody in the crowd did a thing. They were loving it. James, you should have seen the goulsh excitement on their faces. Giacomo could tell. “You bastard,” he kept screaming.’

Bjorn was still shaken. I poured us both more wine. He went on. ‘He was rolling about on the ground lashing his head with his hands. I threw my coat over him. Then we took him to the Prozi/o Soccorso - The First Aid post, across the river/

There was one detail in his story that puzzled me. ‘You say he kept shouting “You bastard,” ’ I queried.

‘Listen,’ snapped Bjorn, ‘It wasn’t the crowd he was yelling at, it was that bastard, calmly sketching him as he was burning alive.’ He grabbed my wrist. ‘Your painter friend, Carlo Pittore!’

Conspiracy

When Bjorn left the wine shop to return to his paintings in the piazza, I made my way hurriedly to Via Della Pace, At this time of night the streets were deserted, but as I crossed Piazza Monseratto I had an uncanny feeling I was being followed. Beyond the tiny piazza, a narrow unlit alleyway led down to Della Pace. As I entered it I glanced round just in time to glimpse a shadow slipping behind the potted privet hedge outside Pino and Dino's Trattoria, At the same moment a figure ran out of a doorway nearby and mounted a large yellow motorbike, With the sound of gunfire, the bike reared up on its back wheel, skidded across the damp cobbles and hurtled straight at me down the alleyway, I forgot all about the person shadowing me, I barely had time to squeeze into a narrow doorway as bike and rider swept past.

To my surprise, the rider was no murderous villain. In a split second and allowing for the poor light I gained the impression of an impish, vaguely oriental grin, while an unexpectedly fresh voice called out cheerily, 'Oi Guv, breathe in/

Whether or not I breathed in, I certainly breathed out in relief when I reached the relative safety of Via Della Pace, grateful for not having been attacked, By now intuition told me that Stanley would not be at home, and a glance up at the black empty window confirmed this. In a grim mood, I

made my way slowly back to Spuria's lodging house.

Giacomo was not too badly burned. For a week he stayed in his boxroom with his hands and head bandaged. He shrugged off the accident, but Bjorn avoided telling him that another fire-eater had already arrived in the piazza, (How do I tell him? You haven't seen this new Mangiafuoco". He's real Tarzan. A real buff one C

But Giacomo found out. The day the bandages came off, he confided in me. 'There is a new fire-eater, I hear, James. Tell me, is he very good ?'

'Not as good as you.'

He smiled. 'James, thank you, but tell me the truth. Does he eat glasses and razor blades ?'

The previous evening I had gone out with Bjorn to inspect him. I nodded. 'Perhaps there is a trick,' I suggested hopefully. 'Perhaps they are not really made of glass/

'No trick,' he replied sternly. 'You must eat much bread. But I can only eat fire/ he concluded lamely.

In the piazza the build-up to Christmas went on apace. Stalls crowded the perimeter and Father Christmases stalked the entrances, eagerly snatching children to be photo-graphed at a price. Shepherds from the Abruzzi turned up in sheepskins and leggings, wailing their pipes, but there was still no sign of either Willis or Stanley.

One mystery at least was solved. The yellow motorbike belonged to a kid in the neighbourhood, who, though clearly

neither Italian nor English, expressed both languages with equal vernacular skill. At the time, after having slipped or scurried to safety on more than one occasion as he hurtled through the streets, he found no favour in my eyes. The only redeeming feature was the pretty elfin-eyed girl riding pillion. Putting two and two together I decided she was the girl in Carlo Pittore's portrait. She even gave me a sympathetic smile as I picked myself out of the gutter. For a brief instant something about her expression reminded me painfully of Ko Sam and at once memories I had been trying to keep at bay flooded back. 'Willis!' I prayed aloud, 'For pity's sake tell me what happened, you bastard!'

Next morning was fine and crisp. A sharp wind gusted round the street corners as I made my way through alleys festooned with billowing washing lines, to the piazza. I had no sooner purchased a copy of the "Daily American" than I became aware that I was being scrutinised. The man was dressed in a smart grey suit, black fedora hat and cane, with an overcoat thrown lightly over his shoulders. "Excuse me," he enquired politely, "You are an American?"

When I corrected him he nodded graciously. "Let me introduce myself. Count Ungaro at your service. May I enquire if you have ever visited the zoo, or the Protestant cemetery? Or the statue to Lord Byron at the top of the Via Veneto?"

I had to disappoint him on all three counts. He pursed his lips and drew his eyebrows together in concentration. 'Signor Inglese/ he exclaimed. If you are not too busy, you can do an

old man a great favour. I wish to interview the animals for their political opinions/

If anyone had spoken to me like that in London, now was the moment to make excuses and hastily depart. In Rome, one seemed to make more allowances for nutheads. 'About the Protestant cemetery?' I said to humour him, 'Who are we interviewing there?'

He threw open his hands, and shrugged in a typically Italian way. 'Oh, Keats, Shelley. I suppose you have seen Keats's death mask in the little museum by the Spanish Steps. And Shelley, well he drowned of course, poor soul. Washed up on the beach.'

There was something about the way he said it that made me study him more closely. 'I leave you my card,' he declared, flourishing it in front of me. 'Any morning you will find me at the Antico Caffè Greco/ He grinned cunningly, 'Where I listen in silence. Capisce, Signor James? Where I listen in silence/ He repeated the words slowly as if he were delivering some sort of veiled threat, pulled his overcoat closer about his shoulders and sauntered off across the Piazza.

Bemused by the various innuendos and curious how he could have known my name, I turned the card over, but it revealed nothing. The back was endorsed with 'Antico Caffè Greco' As an afterthought I scribbled down 'Where I listen in silence*' and to my astonishment the familiar letters Willis stared back. Of course it might have been just a coincidence but I didn't believe it. I tried fitting a false nose and moustache to Ungaro's face, but I came to no conclusion. However, if

Wyllie could disguise himself as an Arab washerwoman he would have no difficulty turning himself into an Italian Count.

I didn't tell Bjorn about my meeting with Ungaro. That evening he and I escorted Giacomo down to the piazza. The other fire-eater had already established himself in front of an expectant crowd. Giacomo didn't say a word. He set himself up behind the four-river giants, but despite the most strenuous efforts, he attracted pitifully few people compared with the crowd watching his rival,

'People are very fickle,'⁵ Bjorn exclaimed angrily. Giacomo shrugged it off, but it was clear he felt hurt.

I wanted to suggest he try another job/ Bjorn said later in my room, 'But what is there? The only thing he has ever done is eat fire. He'll never get a job in a bar or anywhere else with that head.* For Giacomo, though no beauty before, since his accident now looked truly horrific. The whole of his bald pate was pitted, blackened and scarred. "Perhaps in Cine Citta, in a movie,' Bjorn suggested as an afterthought.

'You mean he should go to Fellini, who likes freaks in his films/ I said sarcastically.

The next night the rivalry between the two fire-eaters in the piazza grew more bitter, and Giacomo came off worst. The 'rival' as he called him, in addition to chewing glass and razor blades, had started swallowing swords. Giacomo, gathering fewer and fewer admirers, could only eat his fire.

The following morning when I went to do my shopping in the market in Via Della Pace I was surprised to see Giacomo

coming out of the building that housed Stanley's studio. He grinned sheepishly when I spotted him. 'James, if you really want to know, he used to pay me to model for him. He still owes me some money. I go to see if he come back or leave a message. But there is nothing.' He didn't sound entirely convincing. 'James you see he like to paint boxers and clowns and ...'

'Fire-eaters,' I grinned.

Giacomo proudly nodded his great bull head. 'One day you will see portrait of the famous fire-eater Giacomo Mangiafuoco right there in the Museo di Belli ArtL' He chuckled. 'Who knows?' And then, glancing nervously up at Stanley's empty window he whispered, James, come, I must tell you something.' Clapping his arm demonstratively around my shoulder he guided me across the street to a wine shop and with his head bent down, continued in a low voice, James, I must warn you. There is conspiracy, big conspiracy. I don't know how big. I say same to Billy Willis, "Is dangerous for you here. Get out while you can", I tell him. Here is like a trap. The fly in the ointment. Zap! You really a friend of Billy's? Listen, he tell me to trust you. He tell me that if you come to go to He didn't finish, for as we entered the wine shop, I looked up to see the familiar cape, cane and black fedora of Count Ungaro, who smiled knowingly at us over his glass of marsala.

I wasn't there that same evening when the rival challenged Giacomo to a contest, but Bjorn told me all about it as in solemn despair we walked back from the hospital.

'When I arrived the two of them were already at it. If anything Giacomo was the more impressive. His fireballs cremated the entire piazza. Even the river gods seemed awed.'

Bjorn drew his overcoat tighter around him. 'Suddenly the rival snatched a wine glass and chewed it right down to the stem. You should have heard the crowd. They went wild.'

Bjorn turned his back against the wind to light a cigarette. 'By now the crowd had started a mocking chant* goading Giacomo on. And that Angel of Death, Stanley, was there gloating over his sketch pad. Suddenly Giacomo# picked up two of the rival's glasses and ate them one after the other, stem and all.'

The sky was paling over the Aventine Hill. I glanced at my watch. Six o'clock. We turned into Campo dei Fiori, to find the fish market coming alive and the traders warming themselves beside fires of burning boxes. In the centre of the piazza brooded the hooded statue of Savonarola. Bjorn# glanced up at the ravaged features. Two of a kind,' he# muttered angrily. 'Fanatics, dead by their own endeavours/ I only wanted to forget the last few hours and Giacomo troubled eyes seeking a reassurance I had been unable give.

We went into a bar and had a coffee with a dash of grappa. Bjorn started coughing and lit another cigarette Outside it was suddenly day.

The Palm or the Pack

I was in a murderous mood when I marched into that dingy apartment house in Della Pace later that same morning, and banged on Stanley's door. It didn't do me any good. He wasn't there and he wasn't hiding. I even got the old man who owned the place to open up the studio with his spare key. Apart from the amazing clutter of materials, there was no sign of life. I learned one thing though. Stanley had paid three months' rent in advance. I found that out by pretending I was interested in renting the place.

My next port of call was the Antico Caffè Greco in Via Condotti near the Spanish steps. Many streets had been decorated for Christmas, and there was a festive air to the City which contrasted sharply with my black mood. The pedestrian streets were jam-packed with shoppers, roast-chestnut sellers commandeered the pavements with their stoves, shepherds wailed tunelessly, gipsy girls demanded tips or rebuked one with a curse.

In Antico Caffè Greco, time appeared to have stood still since the turn of the century. Waiters in winged collars and black tailcoats stalked the ornately-decorated salons. Tupperware wouldn't have stood a chance here and I wasn't even sure my credentials would go unquestioned for long. I had already completed one tour without spotting Ungaro, when a discreet cough revealed him hiding behind his newspaper. T am spying,⁵ he whispered, putting his eye back to the hole he had poked in his 'Messagero', He seemed to be aiming it

at a pair of elegantly-dressed ladies taking coffee. Ungaro tut-tutted, "Perhaps they are Russian agents in disguise, Perhaps they come here to plan to poison their husbands. Perhaps, ah ... well/ He laid the paper down.

‘How is Seneca?’ I enquired as blandly as I was able.

‘Seneca knew too much/ he answered, without batting an eyelid. "You know he lived above the public baths. He couldn’t stand the cold/

‘Is that where he “listened in silence” ?’

He chuckled. ‘Hardly above the baths. They were noisy places. He complained he couldn’t hear to think. Well now, Signor Inglese, you have come to take up my offer? To help me in my quest ?’ He watched me with a sly grin. ‘You like to see Billy/

I was too taken aback to say anything.

He smiled indulgently, "Only be prepared for a surprise, he has changed rather these past few weeks.’ He stood up, beckoned the waiter and then sauntered straight out into the street.

‘Where are we going?’ I panted, as we stepped briskly up the Spanish Steps.

‘You will see,1 he replied primly. ‘You will see/

He didn’t volunteer any further information and we made our way across the Borghese Gardens until we reached the zoo. It was typical that Willis would choose to meet in just such a place.

Ungaro purchased the tickets and led me past pink flamingoes, polar bears plodding about like Druid priests at a winter solstice, and a bloated sea-lion, lovingly admired by a man selling fish to visitors.

A group of nuns outside the monkey house gazed devoutly, while the inmates, mindful of their audience, performed each act of gross indecency with slow and innocent deliberation.

In the next cage squatted a large red baboon fluffing up his fur into an enormous fuzz and delicately sampling whatever he raked to the surface. 'This is Billy/' announced Ungaro. * Billy the baboon.'

'Have you any more tricks up your sleeve to waste my time?' I suggested irritably.

He feigned surprise, 'I do not understand. Were you expecting someone else? Hey, Billy/' and fishing out another of his cards he wrote 'Grazie*' across the back and dangled it through the bars. The baboon ambled across, chattering his teeth at us, plucked the card and ate it,

Ungaro beamed, 'Bravo Billy/' He turned to me, 'Now then, first things first. Lord Byron, a sandwich at Doney's, a tram to the Pyramid, where is the Protestant cemetery, and finally tea with the Duchess/'

I was too fed up to argue.

We paid homage at Byron's statue, under the umbrella pines, long enough for Ungaro to read the stanza inscribed on the plinth. 'Rome, mother of my souk We orphans of the heart must turn to thee .. /

Ungaro sighed. £Ah Byron. He loved Italia. He travelled about with a matrimonial bed inside his stagecoach! How Italians applaud this English milord.

‘You read his Childe Harold?’ Ungaro persisted as we sat in the wintry sunshine in Via Veneto. ‘You should, you know. Very good guide to Italia. Come my friend. I think you are tired of culture. We go straight to the Duchess.’

We got off the tram in Viale Aventino, not far from the Pyramid, and walked to a street a few blocks away, where Ungaro directed me down the basement steps of an apartment house. A smell of cheap cooking pervaded the cramped corridor. Ungaro wrinkled his nostrils deprecatingly. In response to his persistent ringing, a voice cried ‘Coming, coming/ in theatrical English, and the door opened to reveal a dumpy woman with her hair drawn back in a bun and a large mole on her cheek. She greeted us with a greedy smile, her eyes flickering from Ungaro to me and back.

‘My dear Duchess/ declared Ungaro, taking off his gloves and pushing past her along rhe narrow hallway. ‘I have brought you a client.’

The ‘Duchess’ beamed. eGo into the salon, dear. Won’t be a minute. Must just switch off the stove/

The salon resembled a theatre dressing-room. Large signed photographs of chorus girls covered the walls. Two scrapbooks waited inspection on a table, the shelves were crammed with plays, and the furniture looked like a stage set.

Ungaro flicked his gloves at a threadbare armchair and lowered himself nervously onto the creaking springs. 'Signor Inglese, listen please. The Duchess was an actress on the stage of the Windmill Theatre in London before she married the Duke. Alas, the Duke is no longer with us, although the Duchess, being a renowned medium, remains in regular communication with him.' He was interrupted at this point by the reappearance of the lady in question, swathed in a long black silk evening gown that might well have seen service in an Oscar Wilde play. In fact she looked the epitome of Lady Bracknell. She even carried pince-nez in one hand. It was difficult to relate this commanding presence with the same little old lady who had opened the door to us.

'Count Ungaro,' she exclaimed theatrically, 'You have not even introduced me to the young man. My dear/ she said to me, 'please be seated. Now what is it I can do for you? Is it the palm or is it the pack ?'

'The pack/ Ungaro answered for me.

I looked around in alarm as the door pushed open, expecting Heaven knows what to come bounding in. But only an overfed emasculated tom cat toiled laboriously forwards across the carpet. 'Millicent/ commanded the Duchess. 'He is a friend. Behave yourself/ And then remembering why I was there she added with a coy professional smile, 'Oh, but I think the palm too. Just a quick glance. Show me, dear/ And she took first one and then the other and subjected both to her pince-nez scrutiny.

Peering dubiously at me over the top of her glasses, she announced, 'My dear, you don't appear to have a life line at all/

'Most inconsiderate/ chuckled Ungaro.

The Duchess frowned. She looked again, without the pince-nez. Relief entered her voice. 'Ah, all is well. For a moment, my dear, I was convinced you were a spectre from the other side/ She smiled graciously at me, and I smelled lavender and cheap scent. 'Ungaro, hand me the tarot pack. These my dear are the very same cards that Josephine used to read Napoleon's fortune, poor dear. They are most trustworthy/ She proceeded to shuffle and indicated I should cut. Laying the cards face down she glared at them with concentration. 'My dear, I see a W in your life. Someone beginning with W perhaps. Can you think of anyone?' Once more she scanned the cards, frowning with concentration. 'Do numbers mean anything to you, dear? A gambling man perhaps? No, I somehow think not. But I do see numbers. Definitely a number nought. Such a very basic number too, wouldn't you say? One can never argue with nought, can one, Millicent? - and you ought to know, dear. Something on the ground, one wonders. Life is a chart, dear, isn't it? An unexplored chart like the night sky. Getting our bearings from the stars, wouldn't you say so?' She leaned across. 'The cards never lie, my dear/ she hissed. At any moment I expected her to transform into a witch or a fairy godmother, but she brought me crashing back to reality when she unexpectedly

announced with careful deliberation, 'I need you for a tree, dear.'

I gaped at her.

She went on, 'We are performing the Gentle Giant at the Goldoni and we need a tree.'

'You want me to act a tree?' I said.

She tut-tutted impatiently, 'Don't be so stupid, dear. I want you to make a tree.'

'Wouldn't it be easier to buy a tree?' I asked her.

She glared over her pince-nez, 'And where can you buy a fairy tale tree?' she demanded. 'Now dear, I want you to go to the Goldoni theatre, Francis is there. Francis is my nephew - he is quite absurd, so don't listen to a word he says. Just go and build your tree. It's leaves we want dear, lots and lots of leaves. Paint them silver and green.' She issued a smile of dismissal, adding crisply, 'That'll be ten thousand lire, dear, for the consultation.'

I got back to Spurio's no wiser than when I had set out. In the hall I bumped into a large black man coming out of Giacomo's old room. His hair was trained in braids, his smile was infectious. 'Hiya,' he greeted, offering a hand as big as a boxing glove. 'I'm moving in. Name's Washington.' He winked. 'District of Columbia for short.' There was something vaguely familiar that I couldn't quite place. One thing was clear - Spurio had wasted no time getting a new lodger,

Next morning Bjorn knocked on my door. He looked terrible. His rasping cough was worse than ever. His eyes were deep set, his skin like parchment. I poured him a tumbler of cheap brandy and he swallowed it at a gulp. His eyes darted suspiciously around the room and he turned up the volume on the radio. James, I tell you something, but not here. Listen carefully. Go to Piazza Flaminia and take a blue bus out to Anguillara.¹

‘But that’s miles away,’ I protested. ‘Way ... ?’

He cut me short, ‘Please James. Is very urgent, I promise. There is a bus at 11.30. I go by train. In Anguillara ask for "il grottino*'. I meet you there. Okay? Make sure you are not followed!’ I was too surprised to do more than stare dumbly. Bjorn frowned, lowered the volume on the radio and raised his voice to announce cheerfully. James, I have good news. Yesterday they ask me to be one of the Father Christmases in the Piazza. I work with Aldo the photographer. He pay me. Also free meals. Good news, eh ?’

It was a filthy morning. The alleys were awash and freezing rain cascaded from the rooftops. Drenched from above and splashed from below, by the time I reached Piazza Flaminia I was too concerned with keeping what little was left of me dry to worry about any fairy-tale pursuers.

The bus followed the via Cassia through the raw suburbs of Tomba di Nerone and into open country. Outside the rain-splashed windows, olive trees dotted the grey hills.

Anguillara was a village on a headland overlooking Lake Bracciano, some thirty miles north of Rome. It was still raining and blowing hard when I got off the bus, and there was no shelter on the steep causeway leading to the village. Along the shore below, hooped eel nets were strung from tree to tree. A few fishing boats bobbed at their buoys. On this miserable morning the surrounding hills were lost in low cloud and the lake spread out grey and vast as an inland sea, Anguilla means eel, and beyond the gateway stood a fountain embossed with black metal eels. Beside it a stairway led down to wine caves cut into the side of the headland. One of these had been turned into an eating place of sorts. 'Fino e Cucina (wine and food) declared the sign. There was an open range at one side of the cave and a roaring primus stove attended by two large ladies. A few tables crowded together under the low cave roof. There was no one else apart from Bjorn, who was playing a game of chess by himself in the corner. He glanced up warily as I approached. 'Were you followed?' he asked, pouring me a tumbler of wine.

'No of course I wasn't/ A sudden gust of wind rattled the door. Damp, hungry and irritable I faced him across the table. 'Perhaps you'd explain why we have to come all this way to hear something you could tell me at any bar in Rome.'

I drank the wine and stared moodily at the chessboard. He appeared to have checkmated himself. One of the women came over and placed steaming bowls of *fagioli* before

us. Pasta and beans in broth, the peasants' staple diet. I felt immediately better.

Bjorn eyed me glumly. James, yesterday I go to the hospital to sign something for Giacomo. At the police office I am questioned. I tell you why. Giacomo was poisoned/

I gazed at him in astonishment. He nodded. 'Yes, I know he swallow glass, but that only kill him because first he swallow rat poison. Mixed in his food most likely. No taste. They explain there is some chemical that stops the blood coagulating and makes you bleed inside. So James, when the glass cut him he bleed to death. Haemorrhage everywhere. Very simple, no ?' He winced at the thought and refilled our glasses, I noticed his hand was trembling,

'What an awful mistake, I muttered, aghast, I was thinking how easily it might have happened to me. Spurio's lodging house was awash with rat poison.

'No mistake, no accident,' Bjorn confirmed.

'You can't surely be serious/ I began and then I remembered Giacomo's warning. I stared at him and he nodded. 'Giacomo was poisoned, James. It was murder/

I sat there clutching my glass, not knowing what to think. Bjorn lit another cigarette. 'And that is not all/ he said. 'You remember how when you volunteer to give blood and then admit you have had hepatitis in Tangier?' He gave me a grim smile. 'The doctor test your blood. Yesterday he give me the analysis. Your blood was okay. He say impossible you have

hepatitis. James, I think maybe if you were ill in Tangier,
perhaps someone try to poison you too/

“King” Freddy

I returned to Rome by bus leaving Bjorn to catch the train. By the time I got back, he had already left to start his job as Father Christmas. Having nothing better to do I set off for the Goldoni Theatre. I finally located it among a maze of alleys between Piazza Navona and the river, *Teatro Goldoni¹. There were no lights on* Pushing open a heavy door I stepped through into the empty auditorium* A solitary foot-light illuminated a domed ceiling crowded with flying cherubs. Back stage someone was hammering.

Stepping past the wings I was surprised to come face to face with the sinister spectre of the piazza. The Duchess's nephew turned out to be none other than Francis Firman. I noticed he still wore his orange washing-up gloves. Busily banging and stabbing at a cat's cradle of wires and bulbs, he gave me the benefit of a wild stare and redoubled his efforts, muttering to himself.

'I've come to make a tree,' I announced, adding 'Your aunt sent me.'

He peered round. 'Did she lose your bloody life-line then? I thought so* She lost mine years ago. It's scattered somewhere* Scattered like the blood of Ireland. Sweat and blood. Do you sweat, do you bleed, Mister fairy-tale tree-maker?'

I hesitated, feeling uncomfortably out of my depth*

At this he gave a peculiar whinnying cry. Tee Fi Fo Fum, I smell the blood of an English twerp. Did she tell you who I was? I am a Gentle Giant. The little children come and sit on my knee under my tree, understand ?' He raised his voice to a shout. T want the leaves to weep, understand, to weep!

'Blood, sweat and tears, guv/ cried a familiar chirpy voice from the auditorium. The motorbike boy appeared. 'Come on Francis, you mad bugger. Let the Guv make his tree.'

"Thank God you came,' I whispered as we tugged free a sheet of cracked hardboard and started sawing out a tree trunk.

It was hard to tell what race he belonged to; part English, part Oriental, I guessed. "My girl'll be here in a minute,' he announced cheerfully, "She's a dab hand at leaves. This is the third time we've made this bloomin' tree.' He grinned at me. 'They always put on the Gentle Giant at Christmas. But old Francis doesn't half get through trees. Don't you, you mad bugger?' he called out. There was no response and the boy winked at me. 'He wears those "Marigolds" on his hands so when he strangles his victims under the full moon, there ain't no tell-tale fingerprints! Right, Francis?' He raised a derogatory finger at the wings. 'Used to be the "dodger" outside the Piazza Reppublica Waxworks,' he whispered loudly. 'Never lost the twitch!'

A hammer whizzed past our heads. T was the Mechanical Man,' screamed Francis. 'The human robot. Haven't you heard of Pinocchio? You couldn't tell if I was human or not.' He gave vent to his fury on the switchboard and promptly plunged the stage in darkness.

In the auditorium a voice called up 'Sorry I'm late, Tam,' and I immediately recognised the pretty girl on the pillion, slim and elfin-eyed. It was obvious from the start how fond the two were of one another. With Jennie's help cutting up the leaves and pasting them over our rather ungainly branches the tree rapidly took shape, interrupted only when Francis fused the lights again.

I wanted to ask him about Stanley but now didn't seem J the opportunity. Instead, I quizzed the kids. They must surely have noticed every foreigner in the neighbourhood. But if they knew who I was talking about they didn't let on. Perhaps Bjorn was right about calling Stanley the Angel of Death. He only seemed to appear when someone went up in flames.

It was after ten o'clock before we walked back to eat at Buffeto's pizzana in Govern o Vecchii. The rain had cleared even the Father Christmases off the piazza, but we came upon them all sitting together in a row of red monks, their beards removed while they were eating spaghetti.

The boy shook his head as we watched them through the doorway. 4All these mad buggers, who think they're perfectly normal/

'There's a new one/ I said, and I told them about Washington.

The girl had already seen him. 'He was in the piazza blowing up hot water bottles like balloons. He's a real head banger/

When I got back to Spurio's it didn't take long to realise my room had been very thoroughly searched. It was the little things that were out of place. I had no sooner sat down to consider who could have done it when a voice purred "Hiya, man. What's happening?" an inch from my ear. I looked round in alarm to discover my huge rastafarian neighbour blocking the room. For someone his size he could move as quietly as a cat,

Washington crossed into the light. 'Thought T'd pay a visit, man/ he grinned, depositing a bottle of amber wine on the table and settling himself into the only other chair.

A warning was ringing in my head but it wasn't until we swopped first names that I recalled Wyllie's message. 'Call me D.C. man/ suggested Washington with a generous grin. 'I'm a Rastafarian dude on my ways to Ethiopia — home of us Rastas. I smokes the good ganga and I drinks ma own urine. Makes me big and strong. Here, have a drink/

Fortunately I had a bottle of wine already uncorked on the table. 'Have some of this/ I managed to suggest hastily; not wishing to offend him.

He sniffed the glass and chortled* 'Ain't piss but ain't bad neither/

I had no sooner stepped down into via Coronari next morning when the motorbike boy roared up.

'Oi, guv, Give you a coggie/ He took pity on my bewilderment* Jump on the back, mate. I ain't gonna hijack you/

'Where are we going?' I yelled, hardly daring to look as we skidded along the cobbled alleys.

'We got a meetin' with another guv'nor. Oi, watch out!' We swerved perilously around a horse-drawn carriage full of Japanese tourists, my driver giving them a zestful 'finger' before bouncing up a gutter, taking two one-way streets the wrong way on the pavement and coming out opposite the Ponte Sisto Bridge, I caught the briefest glimpse of the Tiber swirling ominously below, before we sliced straight through the traffic hurtling along the Lungo Tevere and came to rest in front of a church in Via Santa Dorothea. Tacked onto one side of the building stood a narrow apartment block. A stone stairway spiralled grimly skywards. At the third floor, a painting of a green frog stood propped up beside a solid wooden door.

'Name's Neil Ison/ the boy informed obligingly. 'Paints green frogs. Only frogs. You'll see/ He dropped his voice to a whisper, 'But I think the poor old bugger's dying. Says he's got stomach cancer, but if you ask me they've nobbled him/ He nodded grimly, leaving me to decide who 'they' might be.

'Come, come.' A thin man wrapped in a sort of green kimono opened the door. He frowned at the boy petulantly. 'Oh, it's you, Tam. You come for your painting, I suppose/ He turned to me. 'Now he knows I am dying he comes for his painting/ He led the way into a room dominated by a large bed. On the wall there was a portrait of the boy sitting

bored in a wicker chair. Expecting a frog I was a bit surprised. Konrad Neillson laughed - a painful high-pitched laugh. 'All

my frogs are sold/ he stated. He glared scornfully at the boy. 'He says they all go to French restaurants/ Tam, who was idly toying with a couple of stuffed frogs on a table, merely shrugged. Neillson sighed. 'The young are beautiful and arrogant and totally immoral, especially this one/ He indicated the boy. 'Ever since he is a film star. So take your picture/ he said melodramatically, "Leave me the bare walls to look at/

T don't want your picture/ said Tam. 'Didn't come here for that/ He indicated me, 'This geezer's a chum of Bill's/

At the mention of the name Konrad started visibly. I couldn't tell whether the expression that gripped his haggard features was excitement or fear. He clutched me imploringly. 'Is it true, is it true? You are a friend of Billy's?' I nodded. He paused before adding slowly, 'I ask you this question then. What is the name of Billy's Uncle's best friend?' He tapped a finger triumphantly on my wrist.

'Seneca/ I said without a moment's doubt. Konrad looked disappointed.

'Perhaps it is true then/ he agreed doubtfully.

'Course it's true/ the boy told him. "So cough up with the message. You have got a message, haven't you?'

For a fleeting moment a faint smile played cunningly around Konrad's emaciated face. 'I also have a secret. Perhaps the greatest secret in Rome, who knows? I take it to my grave with me. I let you find out for yourself if you can.' His head sagged and the lifeless hollow look returned to his eyes.

'So this message. Just six numbers. Look. I write them down. Now I tell you I am tired. So go. Come back for your picture when I am dead. Don't forget/ He turned to me. 4He has no memory you know. He was born when he came to Rome. Then he was very beautiful. Now it is all girls and motorbike. Phh/ he grumbled impatiently. 'So I am jealous. I am jealous of youth, of life too.' He looked at the portrait, 'I would take you with me if I could/

'Sad about the frogs/ said Tam as we hurried down the steps into the street. "Place used to be full of them. I suppose he had to sell up for medicines. Come on. Time we ate some grub. Take you to the cheapest trat in Rome. Hold on now.'

I scarcely needed this advice. We took off in front of a fountain facing the Ponte Sisto and came to rest up another alley. A couple of old lanterns framed a shabby door. 'Mario's restaurant/ informed my host. "Otherwise the local soup kitchen. Mario's the cross-eyed git in the dirty ice-cream jacket/

We sat at a table covered with a paper tablecloth. A little bald-headed man with a horrific cough was scraping unused salad into a large pot. 'That's tomorrow's minestrone/ Tam confided.

He poured himself a carafe of wine from a barrel beside a fish tank, shouted something incomprehensible at Mario and slopped some wine into my glass. 'Straight from the Tiber, Guv, if you're lucky/

'Why if you're lucky?'

He grinned, 'Well, the urinal is in the kitchen so you never know.'

"Sounds just the place to bring Washington/ I suggested.

Mario's was full of tramps, students, soldiers and our-selves, Long-dead sausages and pods of dusty peppers festooned the rafters, The postcards tacked to the walls were from customers who had eaten here and lived to tell the tale.

'Used to come in here for a wedgie with Bill and Konrad,' mused Tam nostalgically, 'Look, there's one of his frogs.' He pointed out a dusty monster lurking through a green gloom.

I noticed he had doodled the name 'Jennie' on the tablecloth and was embellishing it.

When the soup finally arrived Tam surveyed it with a discerning eye. It looked like the Old Curiosity Shop — every odd and end you could imagine, and plenty that you didn't wish to imagine, went into that soup. When I reached for grated Parmesan, Tam checked me. 'He mixes that with sawdust.⁵

'Where's that number then?' he declared a little later, as we pushed back our plates and tackled the steak - it was wafer thin, hard as leather and topped with a runny egg. God knows why it was described as Bismarck - probably because it was supposed to be indestructible*

Tam copied the numbers onto the tablecloth and considered them.

'Looks like a telephone number?' I suggested.

We tried out the number afterwards from a telephone in Piazza Santa Maria, at the corner bar guarded by the biggest bulldog I'd ever seen. The owner and the dog resembled one another. A bored lady with bright orange hair handed us telephone coins from the till* The number went on ringing for ever. 'He's not in/ the boy concluded,

We sat down with a coffee laced with sambuco. 'What did Konrad mean about you arriving here with no memory?' I asked* Tam looked rather bothered. 'I don't remember nothing/ he insisted, 'They say I was rescued off one of them refugee boats, after it was attacked by pirates. I was crazy for a long time, probably still am/ he added bashfully* 'Then in Rome this English couple sort of adopted me. They are writers* Bit old and square but very nice really. So I go to the St. George's English School. It's up on the Salaria*'

'And Jennie also goes there?'

He looked at me suspiciously.

'I heard you talking to her/ I explained. 'Once when she got off the bike.'

He looked relieved. 'Oh that's all right. See, she doesn't go for bikes much. Says I drive like a maniac* Probably do. I dunno why. Get this crazy feeling inside me sometimes. Just have to go fast, burn it out.' He glanced at me awkwardly, 'I suppose I really do sound crazy;'

I decided to let that pass, 'What was all that about starring in a film?' I asked him*

He looked a trifle embarrassed. 'Half of Rome was in on it, Guv. The Duchess, Francis, Konrad, Bill, Bjorn, Ungaro * ,/ 'Ungaro!' I exclaimed.

He looked uncomfortable. 'He was playing Pope, or maybe it was St. Peter* Couldn't really tell which. I only know that Freddy - the producer was pissed off because he couldn't get the real thing/

I couldn't believe it* 'He surely didn't mean to hire the Pope!' The boy was looking more downcast with every word he said. He muttered, 'He hired just about everyone else* All us kids were the killers - the revolutionaries* The rest - the Duchess, Konrad etcetera, they were the Gods.'

'Sounds like Nero looking on while Rome burned,' I suggested* The boy merely shrugged. 'Tell me,' I added, 'That was where you first met Willis, I mean, Bill ?'

Tam didn't seem to hear* In an aggrieved voice he went on, 'That piss artist Stanley - Carlo Pittore, was directing it as if he was Leonardo da Vinci, wiping out the world here and therewith a smudge of his paint brush/

'And how did he and Bill hit it off?'

He laughed scornfully. 'You must be joking. Quite honest, Guv, one minute they was laughing and next they was trying to kill each other. Fists, knives, we had some right old set-to's/

'And the film?'

He shook his head in disgust. 'Pitiful. It was run by this gook, Freddy, Frederick Goebells Romanov IL King Freddy we called him.'

I couldn't contain my amazement. 'Tell me more.'

He laughed. 'That's just what Bill said. See, Guv, this Freddy's an oil tycoon. He reckoned he was related to the Czar, but Stanley told us he was adopted. I suppose, if you're an orphan it lets you believe you're anyone you want to be.'

'Tell me how on earth you came to work for him/ I suggested hastily*

'Saw this ad, in the Daily American, didn't I? Spoke to this geezer on the blower and was given an address across the river. Via Francesco Borgatti. When I got there, there was three Rollers lined up outside. Quite offputting is three Rollers/ he reflected stoically. 'Anyway, just then this white poodle comes belting down the steps and trots off up the street, gobbling every dog dropping in sight. Gross, man, I tell you. Some dude leans over the balcony and spits, a fat geezer in a bath towel and stetson. He shouts "Crap!" and vanishes. The front door bursts open and half the world runs out chasing the poodle. I would have run too, I think in the opposite direction, if fatso hadn't shown up, clutching his sombrero. "I jest caint thenk properly without ma hait!" he exclaimed, eyeing me up and down. "I come for the acting job in the paper," I explained. And he gives me this chattering grin, bit like a chimpanzee. "Howdee," he says. "Come on up. I've jest got to ring the Los Angeles Pets' Hospital. Then we can talk." '

'The Los Angeles Pets' Hospital,' I repeated slowly.

The boy nodded. 'Yeah. See, he doesn't trust the local dog food. Not for Dudley - that's the dog. Gets it sent over in crates - air delivery. I think Dudley was more important than the crummy film.'

'And what was the film?'

He stared at the table. I could tell something was bothering him. 'It was about revolution,' he said cautiously. 'They called it "The Genesis Children." There were these kids of the Khmer Rouge who went about killing their own parents.' He shook his head in disgust, but I was astonished to see he was trembling. 'Pitiful,' he finally exclaimed with an effort.

I glanced at him cautiously. It was easy to see why he had been chosen. In a black smock and a red band round his head you could change his appearance instantly into one of those merciless young killers of the Pol Pot regime.

He lit a cigarette and puffed nervously at it. 'It was crazy,' he continued doggedly. 'There was this scene, I had to shoot my own mother. I don't know why it upset me so much but it did. And that Stanley was delighted. Smirking through his beard. The bastard made us re-take the shot thirteen times before he was satisfied.'

It wasn't until the following Saturday when we went riding out at Sacrafano - where Jennie and her sister stabled their horses - that Tam continued the story. He had driven me out along the Flaminia at his usual breakneck speed, in the early morning. Although the mountains were dusted with snow it

was a mild winter's day. The going was soft underfoot, the scrubby hillslopes speckled yellow with old vines and chestnut trees. Jennie's horse had lungworm and while she waited for the vet, we hired a pair of mounts and set off across country, Tam knew the tracks like the back of his hand. After an hour, we came to a village, a single line of houses with wine caves dug into a sandstone cliff. We tied up our horses at the only taverna and had a beer.

'I suppose you want to know about my family/ he asked with a directness that rather took me aback. 'The truth is I can't tell you, I don't know whether they were shot or killed or tried to escape, I suppose my Dad was an American G.I I seem to remember a big man but it's very blurred. I was out of my mind when I came to Rome. I read somewhere that if something awful happens you want to shut it out. So I didn't try to remember. And don't think I'm unhappy, 'cos I'm not. I miss Bill though. He didn't say a lot, but he understood. He'd been out East too, you know.' He smiled at me as we got up.

'I know,' I said.

After a fine canter back we walked the horses down through the woods to the stable, and I questioned him about what happened to the film company afterwards.

He looked at me oddly, 'One day they were here, the next they had vanished. Stanley too. We got back from Camerota - it's where we were shooting the film,' he explained. 'There's a river - the Mingardo that comes out of the hills. It's shallow and gravelly and there's lots of bamboo and we made it all pretty Cambodian. Anyway, Stanley shouts "It's a wrap," lor

the last time, we all cheer and next day we leave for Rome. Bill has his airline ticket for Los Angeles and is flying out with all the reels of film. Freddy didn't trust the Rome processing labs. So he sent Bill to keep an eye on things* Dulaney the bouncer went too. He'd worked in Hollywood before and knew the ropes. They were to stay at Freddy's house, open an editing studio, check on the film and report back, Bill told me all this before he left. Only he thought it was just an excuse to get him out of the way, with that gorilla Dulaney to watch him? He paused. "Sort of trusted me, did Bilk Told me a lot of things?"

I interrupted him. 'He never mentioned me, I suppose?' The boy shook his head and grinned, 'First I heard about you was from old Konrad?'

I gestured him to go on.

"Anyway, Bill must have been gone three weeks, when suddenly everyone here vanished. I drove out to the apartment on Francesco Borgatti after school one day, to find the place empty. The porter was trying to clear up the mess they left. He was mad as hell. They had just got up and quit. No messages, no forwarding address, nothing. ywaaw (what a pig heap)" he kept repeating?

"And what about Stanley?"

"That's what I thought. I drove straight home, and same story. The palette he used to hang out of the window when he was at home had vanished and so had he. The only difference was that he'd paid the/w/ronr three months' rent

in advance. Though whether he means to come back or not is anyone's guess?

I looked at him carefully. "He's been back, you know. Bjorn saw him?"

The boy nodded. 'There's nothing very strange in that. He's got this ruin out in the country?'

'Have you ever been there?'

He looked rather taken aback. "Why should I? But I happen to know where it is, Bill went out there once or twice. It's up at Montecelio* One of those hill towns on the

way to Tivoli* You turn off! the via Tiburtina when you start to sniff sulphur.'

Tam led the way into the paddocks and dismounted outside the stables. Jennie came up smiling. 'How's Sender?' asked Tam.

'The vet's given him an injection,' she replied. 'How was your ride?'

'Fine,' I said, sliding stiffly down.

After I got back to Rome I spent a long time trying to figure things out. Willis had come back alive from South America after all. Without trying to contact me he had gone directly to Rome, where he had been staying in the very same room I now occupied. He had collaborated with Stanley and this American film company to make a film about the Khmer Rouge revolution, using some Indo-chinese refugees as actors. A few weeks before I arrived he had been sent to the

States with the completed film. Shortly after that everyone at the Rome end had suddenly vanished. Was there a link between this and the police raid on Wyllie's house in Tangier and his disappearance. As I traced back the days, the more a connection seemed likely.

Something had clearly happened in Hollywood causing Willis to send a message out to Konrad, even to Giacomo, who knows? Perhaps to Wyllie also. Whatever it was it had been enough to send the entire film company into sudden exile. I paid Spurio to use her telephone and after she had unlocked the padlock with a key from the bunch around her waist, I tried Konrad's number again. There was no reply. It was very frustrating.

Carlo Pit tore

There was a pungent whiff of sulphur in the air as the bus turned off the Tiburtina and started its tortuous ascent up to Montccelio.

Framed by Olive trees a precipitous crag towered above the green plains of the cantpagna. A ruined castle capped the peak and a jumble of houses clutched a footing on the lower slopes. Directly behind soared the black mountains of the Abruzzi.

I didn't need to ask directions. No sooner had I stepped off the bus than a voice hailed me across the piazza. 'Hey slraniero (foreigner). What do you want? Looking for Carlo Pittore, the painter?' In a blood-spattered white apron the town butcher regarded me from his shop doorway. He pointed solemnly skywards with his cleaver. 'Su, JW! Up in Paradiso/

For a ghastly moment I mistook his meaning, then I spotted the cobbled stairway. Montecelio might have been a model for those paintings of the Tower of Babe! and I certainly wouldn't have wanted to be the postman. The worn stairways clawed their way up at a precipitous angle, until even the houses finally gave in and only ruins remained, inhabited by donkeys, goats, pigs and hens. I had the uneasy feeling I was entering the realm of Circe and at any minute I too might be similarly transformed. The crag loomed above and, propped up against its rock founda-

tions, leant a solitary two-storey hut. The lower part was a stable. Steps led up to the main door where, over the lintel, had been scratched the words 'Casa det Alte Speranze' (House of High Hopes). The door was open. Across the dim room, a bearded figure crouched before an enormous fresco covering the entire wall. I recognised the giant shape of Atlas, feet buried in a sea of carmine flames, hands reaching up tortuously as if to support the ceiling.

'Benevemiti' called out Stanley, not looking round. He finished what he had been writing beneath and moved back to regard it. Beneath the flames, lines of Dante cried out in large sloping letters - "My friends be not cast down by my vexation, for whatever plots these fiends may lay against us, we will go on."

The other walls were also daubed with seas of flames, although, instead of giants, there were children carrying rifles leaping out of the fiery waves. A sudden instinct made me turn around. On the space beside the door Giacomo Mangiafuoco, the fire-eater, was blowing out a vast balloon of flame.

'So you're the schoolmaster/ Stanley said, coming up beside me. He flopped into a chair. A bottle of dark wine surmounted the litter of sketches and paints smothering the table. He poured me a glass. 'You bloody British/ he said, mimicking the accent. Above his head an old pair of boots were pinned to the wall with the cryptic message underneath "Michelangelo went to bed with his boots on." In the corner by the door, a black pot bubbled on the raised hearth. The

smell was enough to rival a skunk. I hope you're not going to invite me to supper/ I said, but he didn't laugh. He watched me with his still eyes. There were a dozen questions I wanted to put to him. Why was Giacomo poisoned, Wily Bird's disappearance, the whereabouts of Willis? But much as I desperately needed him to provide the solution to these riddles, some strange intuition checked me. I suddenly found myself wondering if he was in the same dilemma, expecting me to supply answers to him. Like cat and mouse we watched one another over our glasses, each expecting the other to move first.

He swallowed his wine, got up and started packing his satchel. 'Let's get out of this damned house. Out into the Campagna,' He busied himself battening together a couple of frames, stretched canvas over them, grabbed a handful of supplies - wine, bread, onions, smoked ham, buffalo cheese, and with his easel over his shoulder we set off down through the village. Black-shawled widows sat in the patches of winter sunlight crocheting lace. A man on a donkey clattered past with a load of firewood. 'Carlo, Carlo,' they greeted him. 'Aren't they wonderful?' he cried back to me over his shoulder, 'like characters out of Cervantes.' When we reached the piazza the schoolchildren stopped playing football and ran after us calling. 'Carlo, Carlo Pittore disegna me, disegna me,' (paint me), while a couple of more sophisticated youths sitting outside the bar shouted, 'Hey Van Gogh.' Stanley clutched his hands over his ears and yelled back. 'No souvenirs yet, my friends/

'You should come here in May/ he said to me as we stepped along a track between the olive groves, 'In the spring when the larks are wheeling in the sky and the ditches full of croaking frogs, insects on the rampage, fireflies, and cicadas - you name it/

He pitched his easel in a field where, he claimed wild asparagus grew' knee high in April. I watched him paint. He worked fast. Bold thick strokes twisting into trees, splashes of grey for rocks, umber, agate and vermilion. The sky, too dark a blue, the landscape, too lonely. The crag jutted up between silver-grey olives. And then I had it. It was an ancient landscape he painted, a place where you expected to find Pan or Apollo. And yet it was modern too, that was the paradox. He completed the first painting in less than an hour and we sat on a log to eat lunch, neither of us saying very much. Even the food was primitive. Stanley sat there munching raw' onions and dry bread, rinsing it down with die rough wine.

I found it hard to believe that here was the man who had sketched Giacomo burning. Perhaps he was just putting on a performance for my benefit, I told myself. But if he was, it was mighty convincing.

In the mid afternoon, we walked back to the village, where he asked me to buy him an ice-cream. ' Banco di Carlo, chiuso (closed),' he joked to the barman, tugging out his empty' pockets. 'Bravo Carlo,' they shouted. I couldn't decide whether he was the town's official mascot or its hero. Perhaps they loved him for his gestures. He gestured more

than the Italians and that was saying something. His hands were never still for a moment. 4Hey Carlo/ they called after us, and he roared back cheerfully as we climbed up the steep stairways to the House of High Hopes.

‘Eating is the most sensual thing I know/ he remarked an hour later, once he had lit the fire and was busy preparing the meal. In the candlelight the room resembled an apothecary’s den. A cauldron simmered over the fire, the air was pungent with crushed garlic. From bunches of herbs he plucked basil, wild thyme and rosemary and set to work chopping up a chicken with a hatchet. Grunting with appreciation, he twisted a stubby thumb in his cheeks and smacked his sides. He instructed me to clear away the mortar used for grinding his paints. ‘Raphael ground his own paints, so do I/ he declared. And then he chuckled. ‘Once when Billy was up here, he mistook the carmine red for tomato puree and poisoned the spaghetti/ He glared at me, his face hot and sweaty in the candlelight. ‘It tasted like a Goya execution!’

So it was out. Billy had been here. Stanley knew at once * Jr what was passing through my mind, there was an alertness about him - an expectancy in his look, as if he assumed I would say something, but once again I had the sense to keep silent. After all, my only clue to Willis’s whereabouts were the numbers Konrad had given me. The chances were that Stanley knew of them, but if he didn’t, it would have been folly to have given him a clue.

He caught me completely off guard with his next demand. 'Did Ko Sam ever mention me?' he asked.

I nodded. In my mind's eye I could see her lying on the sand at the Laguna in Managua telling me her story. I had already learned that she was a refugee from Cambodia, NoWj she went on to explain how before the Khmer Rouge closed in around Phnom Penh she had been sent back to France to safety. After the country' fell to the rebels she lost all contact with her family. Later Charles Stanley had found her in Paris, but although he had claimed to be a friend of Rhodes, she had not been able to recall ever seeing him before. I looked across at him. "She said that you told her how you tried to help her mother escape on a refugee boat, but it was attacked by pirates.' I paused before adding, 'I knew that Boyet Rhodes was her step-father, but it was the first time I learned about the existence of her half-brother/

He stared at me. 'What did she sav about him?' But without allowing me time to reply, he added hastily, "Rhodes asked me to help get his family out of the city. It's hard to describe the confusion during those last few days before the Khmer Rouge marched in. The boy went missing. I got Rhodes's old lady on one of the refugee boats. Two days out at sea, we were attacked by pirates. Everyone on board was butchered.'

'Except you.'

He glared ar me. T managed to swim ashore to an island called Ko Samet.'

'Did you ever discover what happened to the boy?'

His eyes flickered uneasily. 4He was kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge along with all the other kids in the city. They did that, you see. They were like the Jesuits - 'Give me the boy and we'll give you back the man. Instead they changed them into killers.'

4How long ago was that?' I said,

'Four years,' he replied frowning angrily as if I had caught him out.

We ate supper in silence, clearing a space between his unfinished drawings, but afterwards the steady consumption of wine made him maudlin. 'You know the Whitney Gallery in NewT York?' he demanded suddenly, peering at me in the candlelight. 'On the second floor there is a blank canvas and across it is printed Everything is purged from this painting but Art. No ideas have entered this work!' ' He laughed harshly and staring around him cried out, 'One day I shall be up on those walls/

'Where?' I didn't know what he meant.

'No, you fool. Not these walls, the Prado, Guggenheim, Tate, Getty. One day,' he shouted, as if to dare destiny to defy him, and then his voice subsided. 'Shit,' he sighed softly. His eyes were drooping. I thought he had fallen asleep when he wearily raised his elbow on the table. For an unsettling moment I was convinced he was about to challenge me to a wrist wrestle. I heard him mutter something under his breath. 'Khmer, Khmer,' it sounded like and then the muttering ceased. The candlelight cast the shadow of his

hand against the white plaster wall, like a giant black claw. It reminded me of Lixus, when the crippled Arab guardian raised his withered arm in salute. The realm of Poseidon rising out of the mist.

Stanley saw me watching him. 'The Broker of Doom,' he whispered hoarsely. 'Is that what you're thinking?' He pinched some salt between his fingers and let it spill on the space between us. 'You know what this is?' He searched my face for a reaction.

I looked at him stupidly,

'If you share my salt I can do you no harm. Arabic hospitality, schoolmaster, code of the desert. Even among bandits you need have no fear of a knife in the night.' He paused thoughtfully. 'You know the Roman road through the mountains east of Rome - the Via Salaria - the salt road? God knows how many slaves were sacrificed making it. And what do we have in the end?' He dusted his fingers solemnly. 'It runs East you see, to meet the dawn - the new revolutionary beginning, the salt path to the sun. Does it really matter, schoolmaster, how many perish on the way?'¹

What with Stanley's snores from the other room and the donkey wheezing in the stable below, I couldn't get to sleep. When I did doze off, I was always chasing numbers - the numbers Willis had supposedly sent to Konrad. One moment they were a bank account, the next a lottery. Finally I could stand tossing and turning no longer and got up. Pulling on my jacket I quietly opened the door. Outside, the night was crisp and clear and the sky blazed with stars. I thought how the

Duchess would appreciate it. I could almost hear her exclaim, 'An astrologer's treat, my dear, wouldn't you say so?' Except that she was most likely snoring too, in her basement apartment with Millicent purring beside her. And then I suddenly had it! Something she had said worked the trick, although I expect I should give more credit to my subconscious, which generally managed to solve most of the stickier problems without my help. 'Getting our bearings from the stars/ the Duchess had declared in her Lady Bracknell tones. That was it. The numbers were bearings' It was so obvious I couldn't understand why I hadn't spotted it before. Willis was ex-military. He would be sure that I'd comprehend a map reference. Just as I turned to go inside, I became aware of a bulky shape tucked in the dark shadows of the ruins a few yards away. I had the unpleasant feeling that there was something lurking there, watching me. Resisting the urge to run back inside I tossed a stone and finally, plucking up courage, I approached the spot, only to find nothing. Either I was imagining things or whatever it was had slipped silently away.

Next morning Carlo Pittore was up and about before daybreak, thrusting wide the shutters and bellowing vigorously at the morning. I felt as if I had finally got to sleep five minutes earlier.

No sooner was he up than he was at work. Even before he had finished dressing, he was tying canvases together, sipping scalding tea, wiping his palette clean, grinding paints, stuffing his satchel full of onions and salami and setting off

for a day's work in the fields like any peasant labourer. I left at a more leisurely pace and caught the midday bus back to Rome.

I was greeted by an irate Spurio with the news that Bjorn had vanished without a word. He never came home, she grunted. I took her word for it. "Babbo Natale, Father Christmas/ she sneered contemptuously. It occurred to me that if all he had with him was his fancy dress outfit, he was going to appear pretty conspicuous once the season was over.

A Tower in Umbria

Lake Piediluco lay twelve miles west of the via Salaria. Hidden among wooded mountains the head of the lake was dominated by a ruined castle. From this vantage point we overlooked the plains of the Rieti.

'So much for latitude and longitude/ I remarked despondently as we climbed back down to the lakeside village. In Bar Pamfili we glumly supped brandy to keep pneumonia at bay. Jennie and Tam had driven up on the motorbike from Rome, while I had taken the train, changing at Terni to catch a single line affair that crawled steeply past the impressive waterfalls of Marmore and dropped me at the wayside halt at the end of the lake. Our mood was in striking contrast to our optimism of the evening before. For now, although none of us cared to admit it, it was clear that my idea about Konrad's numbers was hopelessly wrong. We had simply landed in the middle of nowhere and there was nothing for it but to start again. Unfortunately I had burned my boats as far as Spurio's lodging house was concerned. Late that night, after returning from Montecelio I had done a 'flit'. With Tam's help I managed to lower, first my duffel bag and then myself out of the window to the street below, confident for once that no one was following. Now in Piediluco with the rain sheeting down over the windswept lake we had to decide what to do next.

The old man who ran the place and seemed to be permanently drunk came lurching over to our table. He had

already described ever}' foreigner he could remember in the past ten years.

What about in the villages around?' Jennie asked desperately. He slowly nodded. 'Labro/ he suggested. 'The Marchesa marry a Belgian diplomat and now Labro is full of Belgians. He spat onto the sawdust floor.

*Nowhere else?' We had already been to Labro.

He shook his head. "Although I did hear there was a crazy old Inglese living somewhere above the Vai Nerina.'

We exchanged glances. It hardly seemed to fit Willis. The old man continued, "Somewhere near Ferentillo. Perhaps if you ask at the Mummia?' He chuckled, cMy cousin is the custodian. I tell him that one day he will turn into a mummy himself/

If it hadn't been for a break in the weather we would certainly never have left the bar. But for a moment, it had stopped raining and none of us wanted to remain there all day.

In typical Italian style, all three of us somehow fitted onto the motorbike and we set off. It was a journey I would prefer to forget. No sooner had we reached the top of the pass, than the clouds closed in' again, and the rain sleeted down. For a moment we had a glimpse of bleak forested mountains and then the road plunged steeply through pine woods and olive groves into the next valley. After a couple of miles the valley narrowed into a gorge. Two ruined castles high on the slopes kept watch over the small town of Ferentillo below. A

shepherd under a huge black umbrella directed us to the church, where the mummies were kept.

Outside the crypt a sign ominously declared "Today is my turn, tomorrow it will be yours? The custodian chuckled dryly and coughed. He was still coughing ten minutes later as we shivered our way outside. With Giacomo and Bjorn fresh in my mind, the row of preserved corpses, some tortured, some not, wasn't the jolliest of sights.

Women who had died in childbirth, Napoleonic soldiers with hangman's rope still embedded in their necks, bandits who in some farcical Punch and Judy manner had managed to stab each other instead of their victims* Now mummified, they might have been howling in laughter not agony. Stranger by far was a Chinese couple with exquisite teeth and eyes, perched upon rows and rows of skulls. But the wiliest joke of all was the death mask of Seneca staring malevolently from a corner,

The custodian stopped coughing long enough to admit that there was a crazy old Englishman living up in the mountains nearby. I didn't have to enquire any further. Our only decision was whether or not we should take Seneca with us. Out of spite I decided to leave him where he belonged, in the house of the dead*

The track up to the village was appalling, half of it was awash and the other half washed away. 'Hold on tight, Jen/ cried Tam, With my weight over the rear wheel it was a wonder we didn't do a somersault. We did everything else!

San Mamiliano was perched on the edge of the forest a couple of thousand feet up. Olive groves and vineyards fell away steeply below. The only way into the village was a narrow archway. Steps tunnelled their way beneath the houses. The air was steaming with dung and woodsmoke. Donkeys poked their heads out from cellars, and dogs lay curled up on the few dry patches. A man emerged from a *ozrafma* with two huge bottles of dark wine* He grinned and pointed down some more steps. At the bottom, beneath a dripping pergola of honeysuckle, a sign read Number Nought* 'You old bastard,' I thought* The Wily Bird had done it again.

The house was an odd place by any standards; honeycombed with stairs and blasted by freezing draughts. Mildewed plaster crumbled off the walls and immense cobwebs festooned the smoky rafters* 'Hardly the most comfortable of winter residences,⁵ I remarked as we let ourselves in. Wyllie's tower was built above a grotto

79 containing a clear cold pool. Ivy choked the narrow casements and in the gloom we clambered up to what Wyllie called his 'winter room'. An open fireplace filled the width of one wall and Persian carpets covered the cracked tiles. Objects from all over the world found their resting place here. Hideous Balinese masks, prayer wheels from Tibet, Chinese dragons, a bamboo Java doorknocker, a megapod egg from the Solomon Islands, wooden spears, blowpipes, daggers, rat-traps and hookahs.

Crossing to the other side of the tower, we came to where a summer room had been created; fish pools set into the floor, climbing plants creating a motley ceiling of green leaves. The windows rattled with each icy gust. But for the mist outside, the view over the valley would have been superb. The terrace above was perched in space like a Tibetan monastery.

Behind this, in the crow's nest of the tower, Wyllie reclined on silk cushions in a vast four-poster bed with a telescope beside him. He chuckled at our plight, as we crouched shivering, beside a roaring woodstove thawing out the cold.

'Drowned rats/ he chortled. I watched you come up from Ferentillo. Marvellous telescope. Used it to tell the time on the clock tower at Calais from the treehouse, y'know. Use it nowadays to check on the one at Ferentillo. See for yourself.'

Tam tried the telescope. 'You're right, Guv,' he uttered solemnly. 'You must have been watching us ever since we went into that Mummia.'

Wyllie beamed. 'How did you find Seneca, dear boy, as miserable as ever? He'll never forgive me for leaving him down there. We must go and collect him tomorrow. If Rondinella can make it. My donkey,' he explained.

I sat on the edge of the bed, dripping water, and stared at him. 'Where's Willis?' His expression hardened. 'Piano, piano.' he replied, 'Slowly, slowly, eh, as they say here. Never understood Italian at first. Lots of familiar words meaning opposite things. Camera means room and room

means rum. Asked for a 'Room' once, years ago and got handed a beaker of firewater* Nearly decided to chuck Italy on the spot* Instead I came here. They're all as mad as March hares. All the other villagers think they're bandits and gipsies* Makes it a safe refuge, what? A stranger couldn't get near without being spotted. Only forty-three inhabitants, plus a few goats* Makes me two per cent of the population, eh?'

'Colonello,' shrieked a commanding female voice from the bowels of the house, 'Cena e pronto!'

'Supper's ready/ declared Wyllie* 'That's Nazarena, by the way - village midwife and street cleaner* She landed up here after the war* Dumped off an American army truck along with two sackfuls of army boots* Her wedding dowry. All the bachelors for miles around wooed her for those boots!'

We made our way down a couple of flights of steps to the dining-room where Nazarena presided, cauldron of spaghetti at the ready. She beamed at us* 'Hallo boys,' she said in fractured English. 'You lika Italia, yes? You come back see me soon* Bringa me a nice a-present.'

'She claims she was a Red Cross nurse in the war,' Wyllie explained* 'But less kindly souls have suggested other professions.'

Nazarena effused over the fair hair of Jennie. cOh, Signorina, the bella, che biondina.'

She ladled the spaghetti, slopped tumblers of wine, and plumped herself down to watch us.

'Remember the first day I arrived here, after the war,' remarked Wyllie - 'Whole village dropped in to watch me eat. All forty-three of them* Bit more primitive then. Cooked over the open fire* One old boy used to help himself to whatever was in the cauldron. I soon put a stop to that. Brewed up a few old socks in it* He took one large mouthful and never came back!' Wyllie hooted merrily at his prank. I was more concerned with turning the conversation round to Willis. I began with Tangier.

'I think 1 was poisoned in Tangier/ I told him, but he merely shrugged.

'More than likely* On the other hand, I warned you about the goats. As for Ramadan soup - half the stray cats in the city go into that, plus a few sleeping beggars who don't wake up in time.'

Nazarena prodded me so violently I almost fell off the bench. 'You,' she declared, 'Eat, drink/ She winked and turned her attention to Wyllie. 'Colonello, he is friend of Billy?' The old boy nodded. 'Ah/ she said with a knowing look and putting a finger against her lips. 'Billy good boy. I know Billy since iwn&no/

'Good thing she didn't bring him into the world though/ joked Wyllie, 'Else he'd be as misshapen as half the poor infants of San Mam. I think she uses a pair of fire tongs to tug out the stubborn ones.'

Nazarena beamed unknowingly at all of us. 'Infermiera,' she declared, 'Nurse. Creo - Red Cross/' and pressed the sign on her ample bosom.

After supper we retired to the winter room where a huge fire blazed. A villager stooped before it unloading logs. 'Hercules/' announced Wyllie and the man laughed, baring his teeth. He looked as strong as an ox. 'Ercule!' he repeated, making a gesture of strength and chuckling some more. He peered at me closely, 'You Christian or protestant?'

'He says that to every stranger/' interrupted Wyllie.

'Son-of-a-beech!' cried Hercules to impress us.

'They learned their English off the Americans/' Wyllie added. He barked at the man in the local dialect and he shambled off. 'He'll probably ask you down to his house. He's got an old wind-up gramophone and some scratched records of Mussolini speeches. When he's fired with wine he gets out his black shirt and Fascist youth medals and roars away like il Duce himself.' j

From the kitchen we could hear Nazarena regaling the washing-up with religious arias.

'It's Mass tomorrow. Better go to it, otherwise Don Vincenzo will be hopping mad. The confessional is an old wardrobe.' He yawned, 'Well, Tin off to my bed. By the way if you see a ragged kid called Paolo, collar him. I'd better get a message to Billy. Tell him you're here/'

The Magician's Cave

I was woken up the next morning by the noise of a donkey being thrashed below the window* 'Per pietd, San Antonio1! cried an indignant Hercules, urging the bellowing beast ahead* I learned later that it was Rondinella setting off to bring Seneca back. As for ourselves, we obeyed the call co Mass and toiled up the steps to the church, where huge plaster saints beckoned with fingers missing. 'I wonder if they realise what improper gestures they are making?' whispered Wyllie as we took our places* Nazarena was already beating her breast outside the confessional crying, 'Mea culpa, mea culpa/ The men stood impassively at the back with arms folded. The women huddled along the benches. After Nazarena had finally clumped to her place, Don Vincenzo declared the proceedings open. These didn't take long, and we were soon outside again. The clouds had lifted and across the valley grey mountains lay wreathed in snow* A boy hovered nearby. He darted us a quick furtive glance. He was dressed only in rags and torn boots* At any other time of the year I guessed he went barefoot. The women gave him indignant stares*

'He lives in the woods,' explained Wyllie as the boy wolfed down a plate of reheated pasta, in the winter room, where Seneca had been installed by the fire* 'Rumour has it/ Wyllie continued, 'he's a uomo-lupo, wolf boy* Whenever the foxes raid the hen houses they say he did it, don't they.

Seneca? Hercules will tell you that years ago a big she-wolf was cornered and clubbed in the mountains and in her death throes she gave birth to a hairless baby cub; in the dusk it resembled a human baby. The hunters all ran off crossing themselves, yelling it was the work of the devil, convinced they had just killed a werewolf/

We glanced rather more cautiously at the boy, as in all innocence he licked his plate clean and smiled back at us, 'Billy/ said Wyllie. The boy chuckled, Wyllie pointed to me indicating by gestures he should guide me. The boy nodded. 'Billy's the only one who understands him/ Wyllie explained. 'The two of 'em get on like a house on fire. But it's no language you or I would understand/

Willis it seemed was holing up somewhere in the mountains. Wyllie wrote out a message asking him to come to the Mago's Cave the next day and the boy scampered off.

Tt is best you go on your own/ he said warningly. 'Billy is wary of everyone these days, and one can't really blame him/

Considering what had happened to Bjorn and Giacomo, I had to agree. Earlier Wyllie had questioned us closely about Spurio's and when we mentioned Washington, he smiled, 'Considering his diet, there's little chance of him being poisoned!'

Rather huffily I protested, T hope one day you take me into your confidence and explain precisely who everyone is/ But he shook his head.

'No, James, not yet. The less any of us knowT the better, isn't that so, Seneca,, you pompous old schoolteacher? You knew too much, and look what happened to you/

In the afternoon Tam and Jennie set off back to Rome, promising to return after Christmas — or sooner if anything transpired. I waved them off from the deserted piazza, and pulling up my coat collar against the cold, returned to the tower.

That afternoon I felt lonelier than in many a year. Seeing Jennie and the boy set off together had left me more than a little envious. I tried hard not to think of Ko Sam. And yet, and yet ... So I sat before the fire in the winter room, sipping hot wine, while Nazarena brewed some fearsome home-made soap over a fire in the courtyard outside. Pig's fat, ashes and soda were the chief ingredients. Wyllie told me how once a lizard had landed on it and promptly dissolved. 'I think it's her cure-all,' he said, 'but I wouldn't recommend using it/

Finally the stench got too strong and I went out for a walk. The rain had turned to snow. The houses of the village stood barred shut. Above the church, a track led off into the forest. Through the trees, snowy mountain peaks kept me company. Somewhere over there, I thought, Willis is waiting. Though now T was so close I was almost afraid to meet him for fear of what he might have to tell me about Ko Sam. Then suddenly a twig cracked and I experienced the uncanny feeling that eyes were watching me. I peered keenly this way

and that in the gloom, but only the woods crowded in on every side, quiet and mysterious.

4What is this Mago's Cave?' I enquired of Wyllie at supper.

He frowned, ^Magician's Cave, I suppose. Wizard's den.

Never been there m'self. Rather too steep a climb for the old pegs. But you know these names usually mean something. I expect there was some old hermit there long ago torturing himself with loneliness. What do you think, Seneca, you old sadist? How many hapless souls have you seen off the premises in agony, eh ? God knows you deserve another spell m the Mummia. It's the reformatory for you, my boy.'

It snowed all night, yet by morning the boy had returned. I discovered him curled up by the fire. There was no one about when we set off into the snow an hour later. A track edged down the valley through chestnut woods, crossed a stream by a wooden bridge and began climbing steeply into the mountains beyond. The boy spoke little. Sometimes he glanced round to see if I was alright and grinned encouragingly with his teeth, never his eyes. They remained watchful. Every now and then he stopped abruptly to listen and sniff the wind like a deer. I found myself peering nervously into the dense undergrowth. For a while we followed a track zig-zagging up the slopes of two mountains before branching off along the edge of a wooded ravine. Suddenly we came upon a tiny chapel, a single room with a stone altar decorated with long-dead summer flowers. Here we gnawed the panini of salami and sheep's cheese that Nazarena had prepared. An hour later, we finally emerged at

the head of a lonely pass, guarded by three ruined stone huts. Mountain peaks loomed overhead. Before us, a whole new valley fell away with more mountains beyond. The boy pointed, 'Mago/ he muttered. Following the direction of his arm I spotted a tiny black hole in the base of a cliff above the creeline. 'Good,' I nodded and the boy grunted approval. When we started climbing again we couldn't see the cave for the trees, but the boy knew the way, twisting unerringly this way and that through the steep undergrowth, while I slithered behind, clutching desperately at branches and tree roots'.

Finally we came up hard against the buttress of the cliff and picked our way cautiously through a mass of fallen rocks, until the entrance to the cavern loomed above us.

It was a strange place. Not so large as I had imagined. Looking back, a whole panorama spread below us. Inside, tucked among the rocks was a level platform. Here water dripped from the roof into a hollowed-out stone, and behind it crouched Willis.

He looked thin and haggard. His uncut hair hung raggedly over the collar of the old army greatcoat he was wearing. His grimy fingers poked through the torn cuffs. His face was strained and grey and his eyes hollow. Considering I hadn't seen him since that night on the Guapore river a year ago, some sort of greeting seemed in order, but he didn't respond. Not even a faint smile. 'It's a three-hour walk,⁵ he said, straightening up. 'If we're to get there before dark, we'd better leave at once.' He grunted

something at the boy who nodded.

Climbing round the rock buttress Willis led the way across a precipitous scree of loose rocks into a narrow wooded defile. After that it was a matter of following a long-abandoned mule path skirting the mountains, Willis paused only once, The path had just emerged from the trees onto a rocky knoll and he pointed ahead to where, several miles away, and above a sheer precipice, a few tumbledown roofs were dimly visible on the mountainside. 'Sensati,' he said gruffly, as if he were out of practice speaking to anyone in more than single syllables. Making an effort he added slowly, 'In a while we come to the waterfall, cross a precipice, then there's a steepish climb through the woods and we're there.¹

'What's there?' But he didn't answer. Perhaps it was best not to enquire. The immediate prospect was bad enough. Snow had started falling again and I failed to see even the faintest hairline of a path across the precipice. However, I knew better than to underestimate Willis as a guide. He had led me out of some tight spots before. We had been climbing steadily for an hour or more when above the sound of the wind we heard the steady roar of falling water. A cascade plunged over black cliffs and vanished into a crevasse. Beyond it, a path inched across the precipice, dodging rockfalls and landslips. On the far side, we clambered up through steep forests, no where a spring flowed out of the mountains and collected in a hollowed-out log. There were hoofprints massed around, which we followed back to the village - or rather the remains of it. A twisted jungle of stone

houses, all built onto each other. There was the skeleton of a long-dead horse in the empty well, dead nettles blocked the only alley, most of the roofs and floors had caved in, and two dun horses peered out at us from the dark cellars, as if they owned the place.

'They do,' admitted Willis. 'All the people left in 1964. There's a tiny schoolroom among the ruins - with benches and exercise books, 1964/s the last year entered. A shepherd comes up from La Ccse once in a blue moon. No one else, It's like Animal Farm. Napoleon is a great black bull, He lives in the ruined church in the woods. Comes snorting out all fire and brimstone if you get near/

It was the longest sentence he'd uttered since we met, and that rather relieved me. Whatever had happened to him, the old Willis, the one I had known in the Philippines and later in South America, was still there, if you scratched the surface.

He was evidently pleased to get back. 'Nice to be home,' he grunted as we climbed a rotting stairway to the only habitable room surviving. I wouldn't have exactly described it in such endearing terms. There were holes in the floor over a reeking cow cellar. Across the windows he had tacked plastic sheets and there was a heap of logs beside the fireplace. A rough wooden table made a backrest to an equally rough stool, Here I sat while Willis lit a lamp fashioned out of a dirty beer bottle, and the boy blew into the ashes until they sprouted flames.

When I had got my breath back, I noticed other details. A bed of loose straw' in the corner with another greatcoat flung

over it, a dented bucket, a couple of chipped plates and some rusty forks. Willis grinned. 'Everything provided for/ he declared. 'All mod cons. Amazing what people leave behind. Best of all, is the view. No one could ever find us .. / and then his voice tailed off as he stared out through the open doorway.

The boy had stopped blowing the fire and was watching, but I was far more concerned with my own preoccupation. 'Willis/ I demanded, 'Ko Sam, is she alive or isn't she?' He frowned. His own thoughts were clearly miles away. Then he stared at me sternly. 'Listen, James. Warm your feet and drink some wine. Then once we've had a bite to eat Til tell you what I know/ He picked up the empty bucket.

I opened my mouth to protest but Willis, closely followed by the boy, was already clumping down the remains of the stairs. Utterly exhausted, I dozed restlessly by the fire. The wine was quite undrinkable. It tasted as though it had been left behind when the village was abandoned. 1964 was clearly not a great year for 'plonk'! When they got back with the water Willis set about making supper. I had been the victim of his cooking on previous occasions and I didn't relish the 'treat' again. Fortunately he left the boy to do it. The table top was a squirrel's hoard of chestnuts, herbs, tree fungus and all sorts of unrecognisable odds and ends that went into the black cauldron over the fire. To my surprise the result tasted good.

'We live off the land,' grunted Willis, ladling spoonfuls into his mouth* 'Fortunately there are a lot of things still growing

here* A few olive trees, vines, wild onions and one or two fruit trees,'

'But couldn't you go down to *,, ' I began.

'Go anywhere and people will ask questions. What's a foreigner doing up in the mountains? Paolo's alright* They're used to him. But if he had money and started buying, then they'd get suspicious, Still he's damned good at trapping rabbits and stealing the odd chicken/

'And how long do you intend to stay here?'

Once again his eyes flickered suspiciously toward the doorway, although I couldn't imagine anyone lurking out there in this appalling weather* 'As long as is necessary ,' he muttered gruffly.

'Willis,' I said in exasperation, but I had to wait until he had swallowed the last boiled chestnut before he began to speak. Outside it was quite dark* Not a solitary light glimmered anywhere on the surrounding mountains, Icy blasts flapped the plastic windows and smoke belched down the chimney* The beer bottle lamp gave off a sooty flame.

Even before Willis began speaking I was back to that night a year before, the night of the moonlight attack on our raft near the mouth of the Yacuma river, when the Indians boarded us from their dugouts. I could picture Rhodes slashing this way and that with a machete, while Ko Sam and I stood back to back trying to defend ourselves. One memory alone dominated all others; rhe sight of Willis, swollen by some trick of moonlight into a giant, bearing aloft the terrible

mask of Itza. The Indians cringed and growled as he strode past. My last glimpse of him had been as he paddled out into midstream, chased by a dozen war canoes, while Boyet Rhodes took a flying leap into the raft dugout in a desperate rescue bid. "You both seemed to vanish in a flash of lightning,' I told him. "And I was knocked for six?"

He stared at me awkwardly. "I was under the spell of the mask, I suppose, I still don't know whether it was lost in the river, or if the Indians got it. I hope they did. After all they worshipped the bugger. All I can tell you is that Rhodes and I escaped in the dugout. That was during the storm. It seemed to go on for days. Then we had a never-ending traipse through the forest. There wasn't an awful lot of spare flesh left on us by the time we finally reached a settlement. But the funny thing is, the further away I got, the better I felt. Clearer in my mind. Whatever spell I had been under must have been pretty strong.' He frowned. "I'm sorry-, James, I can't help you about Ko Sam. I thought she stayed on the raft with you.'

The Genesis Children

Snow hissed down onto the embers of the fire, and the boy threw on more logs. I stared silently into the flames. It was some time before I could bring myself to say anything. 'What happened to Rhodes?'

'He left/

'Left!'

'Eventually we caught a jungle plane - a two-seater, out to Porto Velho on the Rio Madeira, bouncing from cloud to cloud with unending forests beneath. From there it was a three-day truck ride south to Cuaba. Except that it took a week. The rains had started and half the track was a quagmire/ He looked at me. It's a desolate place - all that burnt-out forest and abandoned farmsteads. God knows what's going to become of it all in the end/

Willis had started taking notice of things. As he had admitted earlier, the more miles between him and the river, the more in control of himself he became. Now, despite their ordeal, and although thin, wasted and feverish, he began to perk up. By the time they reached Cuaba, a bright new town, set in rolling hills, Willis was his old self again. The same could not be said for Rhodes, who was desperately anxious for news of Ko Sam. Now, without warning, Rhodes left him. Willis returned to their hotel room to find a note and some money. The message was simply, "See you in Jibla/" It was his way of saying goodbye/ Willis explained.

‘Whyjibla?’

He smiled, ‘He knew how much I liked rhe Yemen. Jibla is a tiny city in the mountains, all white minarets perched one on top of the other. If it hasn’t been destroyed by the war/ he added reluctantly.

‘Why do you think Rhodes left?’ I said.

He shrugged, ‘Probably thought I was okay to stand on my own feet. Perhaps he had other things to do, I don’t know/ He didn’t sound very convinced himself. ‘Per-haps ../ But he dismissed it.

‘Perhaps what?’ For a moment I clung to the faint hope that he had heard news of Ko Sam.

Willis pressed his head wearily into his hands. ‘Perhaps he wanted to see what would happen to me next/ He paused. ‘I suppose you know about Stanley? You know that it was he who persuaded me to get the Maya mask in the first place. I’ve known him for donkey’s years. He’s a - well, a collector if you like/

Collector, I thought was rather a good description. One that Bjorn would have appreciated. A collector of death and revolution and heaven knows what. ‘I’ve met him/ I said.

‘Ah/ Willis seemed relieved and then his expression darkened again as he continued his story.

It was outside Cuaba that the trouble started. Willis had decided to head on to Rio as fast as he could. The bus he caught was stopped at the usual police checks. But when it

was his turn to have his papers checked, the official started to give him a third-degree interrogation. His luggage - such as it was - was emptied out on the mud, and then he was body-searched.

'I should have thought you were used to that sort of thing/ I remarked, remembering how in Guatemala we had been lined up outside trucks on numerous occasions and searched at gun point.

He shook his head. 'I was sure that they were after the * Maya mask. They were certainly after something!'

Finally they let him go, but not before they had threatened him with everything from torture to the firing squad. Willis was still Turning when he reached Rio, where he found a room in the Hotel Victoria on Rua Catete.

Across the street was the Flamengo Park with its long sand beach. For a couple of days he enjoyed doing nothing* He ate hamburgers at 'Bob's1 in Largo Machado, strolled down to Borofugo Bay to see "Papillon1 at the movie house, and because it was Sunday he even caught a tram to the Anglican church and afterwards continued by bus to the Tropical Gardens. It was as he was walking back in the twilight, along Flamengo beach, he was attacked* A group of blacks were fishing off the rocks at the southern end of the bay. He never even heard them come up behind him. He felt the blow. No more* 'When I came to I had been robbed of every last penny* They had left my passport and also provided me with an airline ticket to Rome. Fortunately I had paid for my room

in advance and that included breakfast* When I flew in to Fiumicino airport, Stanley and his friends were waiting for me/

As he stared into the fire his words came slowly* 'They were convinced I possessed clairvoyant powers, that I could see into the future, foretell events, that sort of nonsense* Nothing I said would persuade them otherwise/ He went on, For a week they never stopped pestering me with their stupid questions. They were sure I was hiding something, so they watched every' move I made. I think they even spied on me going to the loo! In the end I was assigned to help with this film they were making, more to keep an eye on me than for any other reason/

Willis wasn't very keen to discuss the film. In his opinion it was just so much rubbish* However he corroborated Tam's statement that half the expatriates in Rome were in on the act. Ungaro was the Pope - a 'black pope'* 'Looked like a bloody vulture/ commented Willis. In the opening scene he places this advert secretly in the newspaper, "Wanted, children to act in a play before the Gods*" Something like that. It didn't look quite so crummy as it sounds,' Willis apologised*

For some reason I thought of Carlo Pittore in the piazza at Montecelio and the children running after him, crying "Disegna me, disegna mef 'Sounds a bit like the Pied Piper/ I remarked.

Willis snorted. "Except this Pied Piper was handing out rifles and the children were trained to be killers!' He did not

elaborate further. Instead he moved on to describe the location - an isolated stretch of coast between Palinuro and Camerota, chosen by Dulaney - King Freddy's aide-de-camp and trouble-shooter - chiefly for its sheer inaccessibility. Thousand-foot cliffs dropped into the sea, guarding a cove that could only be entered through a natural archway. Nearby the Mingardo river flowed out of the barren Calabrian mountains to enter the sea across a gravelly estuary surrounded by empty fields and woods. The trailers and caravans were coralled in a clearing on the river bank, sheltered by tall evergreen oaks, and a bulldozer was hired to excavate a track through a half-mile of scrub and rocks to the cove. The rails for a dolly track were stacked ready for use, and Charles Stanley - alias Carlo Pittore, arrived to take up residence in a shepherd's hut, out of which the sheep were evacuated but the fleas remained. It stood on a rocky headland, swamped by wild figs and olives and buried by flaming oleanders. Here, where the sea thundered below on the rocks, and ruined towers beckoned from adjacent headlands, Carlo set up his easel. He also directed the film. Each morning Dulaney arrived with one of the three "Rollers" and whisked Carlo off for the day's filming.

It was,' confessed Willis dryly, "a bit like being a political prisoner under house arrest. I was watched all the time.' The nearest railway station was ten miles away, and with the Rolls Royce ready to give chase, unless he was prepared to swim to Spain, escape would have been virtually impossible, Anyway, Willis rather enjoyed the frenzied activity of film-

making, and he was curious to get to the nub of their excessive interest in him.

‘I came to the conclusion/ he told me, ‘that they believed the Maya mask had conferred special powers on me. Powers I might not be aware of in myself’

I found that I was nodding thoughtfully, especially when he added, *1 had the feeling that the film was just a front, and behind it a sinister plot was taking shape. Something they were anxious I should not discover/ Willis looked at me. ‘Only my gut feeling, nothing more/ As for the film itself Willis explained how the title kept changing. First of all it had mythological overtones, but it finally settled to *The Genesis Children/ Once this was decided, King Freddy resumed his life on the telephone, running his empire and more specifically the Los Angeles Pets’ Hospital, ‘This was probably a good thing/ added Willis. It stopped him interfering. Dulaney commandeered local kids to act as young Khmer Rouge revolutionaries, with Tam selected by Stanley for a leading role/ He frowned. ‘There was this brutal scene, where Tam had to kill his own mother. To knife her and then shoot her. Stanley made them retake that shot thirteen times/

Just a play before the Gods/ I commented sarcastically, but Willis wasn’t listening.

‘He insisted on it being as realistically savage as possible. It seemed a pretty sick thing to make anyone do, but imagine the effect on a kid who was an actual Cambodian refugee and an orphan .-./ Willis breathed in deeply. Tam endured it

stoically but afterwards he vanished on his motorbike and not even Dulaney tried to catch up with him/

Tam had returned later that day depressed and exhausted and Willis joined him on the bike to go for a drink at Marina di Camerota, the fishing port along the coast. They often went there when they were 'allowed out'. They sat at Elicio's bar, above the harbour, in the twilight, while boys fished off the quayside below. They watched the swordfish boats come in "out of the ocean's eye seeking sanctuary" was how Tam put it.

Sometimes Stanlev-Carlo Pittore walked there over the headland, with his easel, and just as at Montecelio, the local children chased after him like the Pied Piper, calling 'Carlo, Carlo Pittore, disegna me, disegna me.'

'It was a strange way of life/ Willis commented. 'Winter was creeping down from the north - but here, summer seemed to go on forever. Fireflies darted through the balmy dusk, the sea was still warm to swim in.'

'Was there any story, apart from this revolutionary theme?1 I enquired, but Willis merely shrugged. For a start the script was always being changed. Then of course the shots were not taken in any logical order. What Stanley was undoubtedly attempting to re-create was the Khmer Rouge revolution in Cambodia, with the 'Gods' squabbling enthusiastically about it from their mountain peak home. Every night, mock thunder and lightning played on it and the narrator, the black Pope Ungaro, merely shrugged whimsically. "Family squabbles again."

I nodded, remembering all too clearly the thunder and lightning playing on the Guapore river the night of the Indian attack. The last time I saw Ko Sam.

Willis explained. 'Freddy's philosophy was that only through anarchy and destruction of the old, could a new order emerge. There was nothing very original in that, except that presumably it didn't apply to tycoons! I concentrated on building a mock Cambodian village, beside the Mingardo river. The local long-horned cows doubled well as water-buffalo, and the dry meadows resembled plundered rice fields/ He glanced at me, 'Everything was very realistic.'

'Finally, one day in late November it was all over. Dulaney shouted "It's a wrap!" and everyone headed back for Rome.' It was now that Willis was told he was going to Hollywood with the film reels. He didn't particularly want to go, "If anyone goes, then it should be Stanley," he had argued, but Stanley and Freddy simply exchanged meaningful glances. "I need Stanley here to plan the next

film," muttered Freddy, "What next film?" asked Willis. Freddy chattered his teeth into a secretive smile. "Well, Billy, ma first film is * Genesis'. Take a guess what ma next should be."

"I've no idea," said Willis suddenly realising the decision to send him to Hollywood was just an excuse to get him out of the way.

“Why Billy, it’s going to be called ‘Genocide’. Where’s Dudley gone, drat the dog? Hey, Charlie, just give me ma hat — I can’t think properly without ma hat.”

Genesis to Genocide, thought Willis, walking away clutching his airline ticket. One easy step for mankind.

Crossroads-of-the- World

The fire had died down, and the boy lay curled up on the straw in the corner. Outside the wind had risen and driven snow pelted the plastic window. Through the gap in the floor I could hear cattle moving uneasily. 'So you got to Hollywood?' I said.

Willis nodded. 'The City of Angels,' he replied with a grim smile. As the air-conditioned taxi-cab whisked them effortlessly from the airport, and the outline of the Hollywood hills rose through the bright sheen of smog, Dulaney enlarged on the virtues of the city. 'EBay,' he declared, 'is the greatest concentration of oddballs in the western hemisphere. There's an entire population of messiahs, necromancers, swamis, prophets, sooth-sayers and gurus, trying to con a living. I should know. Hell, I used to do it myself.'

Freddy's modest mansion was perched up on Mulholland Drive, high above Laurel Canyon, but first Dulaney had the cab take them to a used car lot on Wiltshire Boulevard - shaded by giant plastic palm trees (the real ones had been killed by smog). Here Dulaney paid for a second-hand Oldsmobile for Willis, and drove it straight to the studio at Crossroads-of-the-World.

Crossroads-of-the-World resembled a dwarfs paradise, tucked midway between Sunset and Hollywood Boulevard. Twenty years earlier, some tongue-in-cheek architect had

created this gnome village of little twisted houses, shaped like toadstools with funny doors and skew-whiff windows. 'Our studio/ Willis told me, 'was the Old Woman's shoe in the Nursery Rhyme. We occupied the toe. The heel had been taken over by Freddy's private attorney — nicknamed Jerry the Snake. In the foyer a cupboard labelled "law books" contained two frayed whips, some black masks and an encyclopaedia on Sadism. "Translated from the Japanese," smirked Jerry- proudly.

'The film had already arrived - cans and cans of it - piled up and processed. It took them sixteen hours to view it all.

'The Editor they had hired ordered half-a-dozen waste bins and settled down to work cranking away at his moviola. Holding aloft a pair of scissors, he announced drily, "Boys, films are made on the cutting-room floor." '

During those weeks in Hollywood Willis felt he was living in limbo. The house up on Mulholland had a bird's eye view of the city and every morning he drove his Oldsmobile into the busy lanes of traffic cruising down the Canyon, parked in the Crossroads car lot, helped himself to a coffee from Jerry the Snake's percolator, and sat in freezing air- conditioned darkness watching Charles Stanley's revolutionary Genesis crank its way, frame by frame, through the moviola.

In the afternoon he drove out to the pier at Santa Monica, or along the coast to Malibu, where the surfers waited for the inevitable wave, like gurus waiting for the sunrise. Back at Mulholland he freshened up with a dip in the pool, while Teeterman, the cook-cum-caretaker, finished feeding the

animals and got round to feeding him. The house was full of animals - monkeys, parrots, giant geckos and snakes, which coiled up in the most unexpected places. Teeterman was a tall willowy character who could change his rubbery face into anything or anyone he chose. He slept in an open coffin, between tanks of piranha fish in the cellar. Sometimes in the dead of night Willis would wake up to hear him

playing the organ — grim dirges that trickled up the stairs and along the corridors. "It was a bit too macabre to be bizarre," he admitted moodily.

It was during one of these eerie nocturnes that Willis awoke to find himself being burgled. Fortunately the intruders were only a pair of neighbourhood kids. When he switched on the light he recognised the startled faces of the same two boys who were forever hitching rides up and down the Canyon. If it hadn't been for the giant gecko spreadeagled grotesquely across the wall and a boa constrictor lounging on the carpet, that was the last he would ever have seen of them. However, they were momentarily stunned with fright and Willis was able to pounce from the bed and trap the pair of them in the shower, where another gecko lingered in the loo.

Clay and Stew were brothers. They lived just down the road in the direction of Griffin Park. Their Dad was a bail bondsman, a massive forbidding figure who in his spare time wrapped himself in a sarong and ran a health-food restaurant on Ventura Boulevard, selling carrot and avocado pear suppers to the clients, while he gorged a 16 oz. steak in the kitchen.

As it was not yet midnight Willis proposed they take a trip in the Oldsmobile. He knew from experience that often the best allies to make in a foreign country were kids. Willis felt the need of allies just then. Rather to his dismay, Stew, who admitted being just fourteen, elected to drive, while Clay, his younger brother, rolled joints in the back. By the time they had reached the all-night supermarket down the canyon, and Willis - obeying instructions - had purchased a six-pack of Schlich Milwaukee Ale, he had begun to feel it was he who was being taken over.

However, his gamble paid off. Clay and Stew became firm if somewhat unpredictable friends. At any hour of day or night the telephone rang and a youthful voice would demand 'Hey, what's happening?' to which Willis, reticent by nature, was baffled how to answer.

It was during this time, towards the end of Willis's second week in Hollywood, that he made his first discovery. While rearranging the shelves he came upon several dusty reels. Out of curiosity he ran one through the projector. It was grainy, over-exposed and out of focus. Willis got the impression that it had been taken hastily, perhaps secretly and from too far off. Completely unedited, the random sequences showed a church and some buildings with priests in white cassocks moving about. The camera kept zooming in on one particular person - a rather bulky individual, with a large ornate cross. The close-up shots were ruined by a thumb over the lens, so that only the cassock and part of the cross showed. The face was obliterated. There was a blurry

over-exposed view straight into the sun, panning some white hills and showing a deep lake or perhaps just a dark shadow. He couldn't tell for sure. It could even have been a desert shot. The rest of the film was blank. Willis replaced the can, locked up the studio and drove the Oldsmobile up the canyon, where he had arranged to meet the kids, plus their sister - a pretty young dancer of sixteen, called Alexandria.

In the twilight they sped north along the Pacific coast highway. Sheer black cliffs plunged past the road to the ocean thundering far below. They reached Big Sur after nightfall, had supper at 'Nepenthes', where the kids danced around a huge log fire and later slept rough on the beach. The next day they abandoned the car and hiked inland along the little Sur river, sleeping in a glade, surrounded by giant redwoods. For Willis it was the last fun he was to have for a long time. The day after they got back, he made his next discovery. It was one that dominated every move he had made since; it had the effect, rightly or wrongly, of making him ignore other signals that he would normally have given more credence to. The incident began at the house up on Mulholland Drive, when he opened a tin of pet food from Freddy's very own Los Angeles Pets' Hospital, with the intention of feeding the animals, only to discover a sealed packet inside. The tin he had chosen came from a carton about to be shipped back to Europe. When the packet revealed powder, Willis immediately thought of drugs, except the colour seemed wrong. It was, as he was considering how he might best dispose of the evidence, that he spilt some over the cat's milk bowl. Although he rinsed it out carefully,

later that same evening the cat started vomiting and by morning it was dead.

Willis carefully placed it in a plastic bag and drove to the nearest vet. Continuing to the Crossroads-of-the-World studio, he made his next discovery. It was in one of the other reels of old film. For a moment he thought it was a part of the Genesis Children film, for the sequences depicted kids dressed up like the Khmer Rouge - in black tunics and headscarves. The difference was that the army trucks J certainly weren't those they had hired from Rome, and the blasted village was not like the one they had built and destroyed beside the Mingardo river. He had no doubt these shots were the real thing. A group of kids of no more than nine or ten years old, a parody of soldiers, strutted around with rifles as tall as themselves. And then the full horror dawned on Willis. The children began killing. They set fire to the huts, they shoed out screaming girls, mothers with babies, old women, and they butchered them. Although hardened by his own experiences in the worst trouble spots of the globe, Willis was almost too sickened to watch, but watch he did, for the very fact that the film revealed a European he instantly recognised.

Some instinct caused me to exclaim "Charles Stanley?"

Willis nodded. "He was busily sketching a boy massacring a pregnant woman? Willis waited for my reaction but I merely shook my head, reserving my opinion until he completed the story.

"Later that same morning, I telephoned the vet only to be informed that the cat had died of an extremely virulent poison? Willis frowned. The vet wanted rather more particulars than he was prepared to give. Although he fluffed his way out, as he drove back to the house he was uncertain what to do next. Scribbling a brief note to Wyllie in Tangier, he made his first mistake. He entrusted the letter to Clay to post.

That evening Teeterman came up drunk from the cellar, called Willis a "limey coward" and attacked him. It was a clumsy, pointless attack that Willis did no more than fend off, but as the fight took place in the kitchen there was an awful mess; thrown garbage, the entire contents of the fridge, pots, pans. Willis decided that Teeterman had gone off his head. He didn't sleep in the house that night. Instead he drove up a fire trail and slept in the car. Next morning when he entered the studio Jerry the Snake ordered him into his office, where sat Teeterman, bandaged from head to foot as if a truck had hit him, and wearing dark glasses to disguise his bruised face. "First degree assault," declared Jerry, and on cue in marched two cops. At least to Willis they looked like cops, although whether they really were, he would never know.

'You got out?' I asked him.

He nodded. There was an alley behind the studio where they dumped garbage. A wire-mesh fence ran along it. Willis leapt out of the back door, ran down to the fence, dived under a hole at the far end and hared to the parking lot expecting

shots to come whistling past him any minute. As he raced towards his car he thought he had escaped. That was until he saw Dulaney waiting beside the Lincoln. "Let's go," he said. There wasn't much sense in arguing. He also had the advantage of a gun. Willis got into the Lincoln and they drove off up the Canyon, across into the San Fernando Valley and out towards Bakersfield and the Mohave Desert. Dulaney refused to tell Willis where they were going. Willis knew from Camerota that the only things Dulaney liked to talk about were food, stereophonic equipment and getting himself laid. He spent the next three hours exhausting these topics.

At least the drive gave Willis an opportunity to figure things out. He came to the assumption that it was his discovery of the poison pet food that had triggered events. Teeterman must have found out. Although Willis didn't yet grasp what his discovery meant, he decided that he had chanced on what they were up to. The frame-up fight and the fake cops were simply a scheme to persuade him to reveal all he knew. Presumably this job had now been left for Dulaney to complete,

'Pity you put such implicit faith in kids,' I remarked, thinking of the lad he'd given the letter to. But Willis shook his head. "Clay didn't let me down. He had the misfortune to hitch a lift with that gorilla, Dulaney. Dulaney proudly told me that he dumped him up a fire track. He didn't say in what condition, poor kid.'

I changed the subject. 'So now you were heading north?' In his mind he was back in the Lincoln speeding over the

Mohave desert, a dry eroded Biblical wasteland. The sort of place where if you turned round you might expect to be cast into a pillar of salt. There was now no doubt in Willis's mind that wherever Dulaney was taking him, he wouldn't be coming back.

It was only when the late sun cast the snow-capped peak of Mt, Whitney into relief over the western edge of the desert, that he realised they were heading straight for Death Valley.

As they began their tortuous descent through the gloom, the colours in the rocks seemed like the embers of some vast furnace. Reaching the bottom they passed tiny settlements - where in the headlamps he glimpsed signpost names proclaiming "Hell's Gate", "Furnace Creek", 'Dante's View', "Scott's Corner'. As he spoke, I pictured the Lincoln cruising along the floor of Death Valley, Dulaney nursing the wheel, gun in his lap, while Willis peered out at the lunar landscape. It got more eerie as they progressed, for they were heading to one of its strangest features - Zabriskie Point, an immense slide of white ash eroded into vertical runnels, sprawling down the entire side of the valley; pale and ghostly in the moonlight.

Dulaney stopped the car and ordered Willis out.

(Up,' Dulaney rapped, 'Scramble, baby," and fired at Willis's feet to show he meant it.

Bent double, Willis started climbing up the slippery scree, knowing that when he had climbed high enough, Dulaney meant to shake him off balance with pot shots, so that he

would crash to his death. Accidental death so far as the police would be concerned. At a hundred feet Dulaney commenced firing. Bullets whined over his head, spattering the shale on either side, but he continued to climb. Dulaney had no silencer on, and the sharp report echoed off the rock buttresses. 'God dammit, you limey bastard,' he yelled furiously from below. Willis didn't risk looking down. The noise of the car boot being slammed made him anticipate worse to come. He had gained another fifty feet when the first rifle crack sounded. The bullet whacked home right between his legs. For an awful dizzy second he teetered off balance, his feet starting to slip, his fingers scrabbling on hard ash. He dropped flat on his face, arms spreadeagled, and skidded downwards. 'Like bloody sandpaper,' he grinned ruefully, touching his face, 'Flayed me alive. My nose stopped me!' Willis possessed a large angular nose.

It was at this point that something Dulaney hadn't prepared for occurred. As Willis lay pressed to the scree, he could see headlamps crawling along the valley towards them. He heard Dulaney curse loudly, and the Lincoln took off.

'What did you do ? Try to get down ?'

He grinned sheepishly, 'No. Up. I figured if I went back Dulaney would hunt me down sooner or later. Death Valley is like a trap. I wasn't prepared to have him herd me through that blistered wilderness all next day until I collapsed from heat stroke. Either way would look like an accident, wouldn't it? So I went on climbing/ He helped us both to more bad wine. It wasn't exactly a picnic, but I remembered what an

old mountaineer once told Rhodes, when we started our very first climb on the Idwel Slabs in North Wales - the vertical is no different from the horizontal. Perhaps it sounds meaningless to you now, but I just kept repeating it. God knows what happened to that other car, but I had got to within a dozen feet of the top before Dulaney came back. Now he was aiming to kill I guess he had night sights on. His first bullet punched a hole an inch from my nose. I didn't dare wait for the second. I simply launched myself for the rim, thrust my arms over the top, prayed it wouldn't give way and heaved upwards. I tell you I was shaking like a rabbit as I lay on the top.'

"You lived to tell the tale.'

He looked at me oddly. 'Sometimes I wish I hadn't. Some tales are too awful to tell.'

That sounded just a bit overdramatic, 'Oh, come off it,' I said, 'At least you scotched whatever Freddy's gang were planning. According to Tam, one moment they were in Rome, the next they had scarpered. You certainly put a spoke in the works.¹

It wasn't that I was thinking of,' he said quietly.

£What then?'

'This link between the "Genesis" film we were making and the real shots taken years before in Cambodia/

I shrugged. 'What's so unusual in that?'

He stiffened. 'Stanley was sketching the scene he was later to rehearse thirteen times at Camerota. What I am less certain of, was whether there was anything identical about the boy who was doing the killing. Do I have to spell out who I think it was ?'

'You don't have to spell out anything,' I said curdy. 'Does Rhodes know?'

'No, of course not,' he snapped back. 'You hardly expect me to tell him, do you?' He rubbed his head wearily in his hands.

I said, 'Surely he'd understand that Tam had been brainwashed?'

His sigh sounded more like a groan. He muttered, 'The woman, James. For pity's sake, the woman he was stabbing/ I stared at him bewildered.

It was Tam's own mother. Don't you see? His own mother, Rhodes's wife?

I felt sick with horror *1 don't believe it. Surely Stanley tried to escape with her. Rhodes left her in his charge.'

Willis stared at me, his mouth hanging slackly open. 'We only have Stanley's word for that.'

We sat facing one another in silence. Outside the wind had died down. The cattle moved restlessly in the cellar below. I could think of absolutely nothing to say. So absorbed were we that at first neither of us noticed noises outside. A scraping sound of feet picking their way carefully through the darkness. In the corner, the boy stirred in his sleep and

suddenly sat upright. There was now no mistaking footsteps creeping towards us through the ruins. At this moment the wind hurled itself afresh down the chimney with such violence that the gust of smoke and ash blew out the lamp. In the darkness I heard the door creak open. Visions of Dulaney, gun in hand, came to mind. Stiff with fright I waited dumbly while Willis cursed and scratched at his matches. At his third strike, a flame flared, and in the unexpected glare the intruder seemed to tower over us. His face was as white as marble. Willis gasped. Standing there like a ghost risen from the dead was none other than Boyet Rhodes. God alone knows what must have been going through his mind. As he stood there I remembered the first time I ever saw him in the Surijong cave with bats wheeling about his head. On that occasion he had reminded me of a warrior king. Now in his rags, tiredness or despair etched on his features and snow flecking his stubbled cheeks, he more closely resembled King Lear.

He stared bleakly at both of us and made his way stiffly towards the fire. Willis slopped some wine into a chipped glass and thrust it at him, but he shook his head.

Both of us were overawed by the one question we dared not ask, but if Rhodes recognised this on our flushed faces he did not show it. Willis peered uneasily at the hole in the floor. I had no doubt Rhodes had been crouching down there listening.

Putting all that aside I summoned up the only question that mattered to me, but the words refused to come* I finally managed to croak, 'Ko Sam,'

To my amazement he replied, 'Ko Sam's fine/'

I gasped out loud, Rhodes gazed at me thoughtfully, 'She may even have a surprise for you when all this is over/'

Surprise veered unpredictably to resentment. 'Damn it, if you know where she is, tell me/'

His ice blue eyes studied me curiously* 'James, if I tell you, here and now, the chances are you'll go haring after her, putting more than just her life in danger. Rest assured she's safe and sound/ Then he added, 'As soon as we get this thing nailed down once and for all, you'll see her/ It was the first clue he had given, that he too was involved in the conspiracy, It was also the last - for the time being. He refused to be drawn further. Instead he squatted in front of the fire blowing at the embers.

For my part I was very confused. After so many months of silence, everything was suddenly happening in quick succession. Rhodes's sudden appearance and his news of Ko Sam still left me reeling. When I did start to collect my thoughts the first thing that occurred to me was that despite my initial shock, Rhodes's arrival on the scene might not have been as unexpected to Willis as he made out. Putting two and two together I remembered the furtive way in which he had kept glancing towards the open doorway while he was recounting his adventures. Perhaps when the boy, Paolo, had

led me to the Mago's cave it was Rhodes, not I, whom Willis had been expecting to find.

Anyway, the fact was, that by his own admission, Rhodes too was mixed up in this strange hotch-potch mystery, Although at what point he had become involved I could not as yet hazard a guess. He certainly didn't help any. When I quizzed him he merely shrugged noncommittally.

'Why are you shadowing us?' I persisted, but he shook his head.

'James/ he finally volunteered, I can't tell you any more about it at present than I've told you about Ko Sam/

'Then what the hell did you come here for?' I cried in exasperation.

He turned to me slowly, and his gaze searched my face. James/ he said, not unkindly. 'At least I've set your mind at rest about Ko Sam, and/ he paused, 'Billy has confirmed everything I wanted to know. Frankly I was in half a mind to slip away without either of you knowing I'd been here, It probably would have been safer for all of us if I had/

I looked at Willis but he was staring fixedly at the fire. Outside the storm gusted this way and that. Driven snow thrashed the plastic windows. It was past midnight, I took another swig at the wine and nearly gagged. In the cellar below the cattle were lowing. It occurred to me that it was Christmas Day.

'What do we do now?' I asked wearily.

"Wait/ replied Willis, 'wait/

PART TWO

The Brokers of Doom

I am not yet born; O hear me
Let not the man who is beast or who thinks
he is God

Come near me.

Let them not make me a stone and let them
not spill me Otherwise kill me.

Louis MacNeice.

The Mountain Hideout

We waited three months* They were the slowest, hungriest, coldest and dampest three months of my life. Willis tried to console me by suggesting that school hadn't been much different. Perhaps he was right at that, but at school I wasn't worrying about Ko Sam twenty-four hours each day. I'd have left at once had I known her whereabouts, but Rhodes - in his typically blunt manner - had offered no clues at all, and when he vanished into a blizzard on our second day, I had little alternative but to stay put.

For a while I hoped that Rhodes was still lurking nearby, waiting for us to make a move. If he was, we never spotted him. There was no shortage of tracks - but none that were human. Even wolves abounded. At night their mournful howls echoed through the bleak mountains.

Since Willis stubbornly refused to butcher any of the cattle who dwelt in the ruins, we relied on Paolo to find food for the pot. Sometimes he trapped hares and sometimes he pulled a black squirrel from its snug nest. But often for days on end we existed solely on boiled chestnuts and wild onions.

I found it hard to avoid sneaking away to the village in the valley. The temptations of a drink and a cigarette were irresistible, but Willis remained adamant. James, can't you get it into your thick head, we'd have the Carabinieri out after us in half an hour?' He frowned grimly. 'Anyway I

have no doubt that King Freddy has every bar in Umbria bribed to keep an eye open for us.'

So we waited.

Another time, I suggested that I should go back to San Mamiliano for news, but Willis still refused. "You can't just turn up looking like you've been living in a bush,' he lectured me* 'Even if they are a tight-lipped lot they're bound to wonder.' He chuckled* 'The other villages call them zingari-gipsies. Won't have anything to do with them. Until they put the road in, any outsiders who came up the mule path found themselves staring down the barrels of a shotgun.'

'How did your Uncle get accepted?' I asked him*

Willis smiled. 'Arrived disguised as a priest* Had the entire population genuflecting on the spot. When he bought the tower, he slipped in after midnight. Next morning the villagers found a cranky old Englishman in their midst and adopted him on the spot.'

Willis had a rather nice story' about those days. The Mayor of Ferentillo came up to meet this English 'Lord' and was taken aback when Wyllie in his faulty Italian declared he was 'retarded' instead of retired. 'That can't be true,' cried the Mayor but Wyllie was adamant* The result was that the first time he ventured into Ferentillo and enquired at Dora's bar if there were any other foreigners in the area, she led him outside, pointed up to San Mamiliano on the mountainside and told him, 'There's a crazy old Englishman who lives up

there*' Tapping her head, she added, knowingly, 'tao (nuts).
CompletamentopazzoJ

In the early days of our 'imprisonment' stories were all we had to while away the time. The weather stayed atrocious. Boxed in by snowdrifts, it was as much as we could do to struggle out to collect water*

Apart from worrying about Ko Sam I was also concerned in case anything should have happened to Tam* It was impossible to guess how Rhodes would react after overhearing Willis's story, although something he had once said gave me a little hope. 'This eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth nonsense/ he had declared, 'why, we'd have all been blind and toothless long ago/ Yet I wondered if he could still feel like that when the killer was his own son.

If I tackled Willis he brusquely evaded the question. 'You are a sanctimonious old bastard, James,' he said. 'Haven't you ever murdered anyone?'

I found myself gazing at him in some bewilderment. He glared back moodily. 'You're a literary type, aren't you? Isn't there a line "all men kill the thing they love"? How many times have you killed, James ?'

T haven't bayoneted my own mother,' I replied hotly.

Imperceptibly winter released its grip, and hints of spring softened the frosty landscape. My restlessness nearly drove me crazy. Finally, when I could endure the isolation no longer, Willis relented. He agreed that I could make a visit back to San Mamiliano - although, as he warned me, if it was

news I was after I might as well save myself the journey. Had there been any we would have already heard it, though by what precise means he omitted to explain.

I left with Paolo late in the afternoon, our movements shielded from any inquisitive watchers by the gathering dusk. It was an arduous climb over the surrounding mountains with hardly a pause for rest. I was grateful there was no full moon haunting the sky that night. There was something elemental about this wolf-boy that made me uneasy. The forces of nature flowed a little too freely in his veins. Sometimes for no reason he stopped, listened, and dipping his hands in the damp grass held them palms outwards to the sky. I had the shivery feeling that suddenly I would discover Pan facing me. But my fears were unfounded. We finally approached San Mamiliano an hour before dawn. On the church tower, the bells hung silhouetted against a paling sky. The village dogs yapped furiously, but we managed to slip in unobserved, only to discover that the 'Wily Bird' had gone, leaving a note pinned above the fireplace.

"I've left for the Land of the Pharaohs. A treat for Seneca, the bloodthirsty ghoul. Too damn cold for me here. Am staying at the Old Winter Palace in Luxor. Let the joints thaw out. Hasn't rained there in a thousand years. In case I want to pop in for 'matins' I shall visit the Temple of Karnak. Marvellous place, though Seneca prefers the tombs of the Kings. Well now, keep me posted. Can't promise anything. Better out of the way just now I think. Too wobbly on my pegs. Here's a name for you. Burt. Mad as a March hare. Bushy eyebrows.

Speaks pooh-language and Latin. May prove useful." At the bottom was scribbled "Pooh Ursa intelligentia — Burt insipiens et stultis es! Gaudete," It was unsigned.

I carried the letter back to Willis that same night. He chuckled at my concern. 'James, you're like an old retriever dog I used to have called Brumas. Carried in the post. So the old boy's hopped it. Can't say I blame him.'

'You bastard!' I exclaimed bitterly as I flopped down exhausted. 'You knew all along.'

Willis didn't deny this. He merely added, 'Well, you had your exercise, but I must say you don't look much better for it.'

I pointed out the reference to Burt. 'Never heard of him/ Willis assured me.

'Do you expect to hear from him?' I queried, but he just shrugged.

I hope not, if all he speaks is Latin. Mine's a bit rusty.

. Never got beyond amo, amas, amat.'

But it was Washington, not Fred, who sent the message. It wasn't in Latin either, unless, "Get your arses down here quick," is included in the modern primers.

Old Enough to Kill ...

It was only as we were about to leave that I decided that somehow I had to find Charles Stanley and question him about Tam. The boy wasn't any longer just some stray refugee. In all probability he was Ko Sam's half-brother and now that I knew Ko Sam was alive I had a special interest in finding out what had really happened in Cambodia all those years before.

Willis never gave me a chance to tell him. Now that the chase as he put it, was on again, he regarded my interest in Tam as no more than a morbid curiosity, and to avoid further arguments I kept silent.

I decided that as we were going to Rome anyway, if I didn't find Stanley in via della Pace, it would surely only take me a day to get up to his place at Montecelio. Unfortunately, given Willis's present excited mood, there was no way I could ask him for leave of absence. I would have to get away on my own.

I finally managed to give Willis the slip at Rome Termini station. Until then I had felt uncomfortably conspicuous in a faded cassock and broad-brimmed biretta. Damp and moths hadn't improved these clerical outfits that Paolo had acquired for us.

Willis, who was similarly attired, had hacked his hair short with a clasp knife. He must have shaved with it as well, for he looked as if he'd just returned from a pilgrimage to

Outer Mongolia, We spent the train journey clutching our rosaries and staring at our prayer books. But at Rome station luck took a helpful turn. The main concourse was full of priests. 'Cheap Easter trips/ growled Willis. That was the last thing I heard him say* Someone tapped him on the shoulder and I vanished below a sea of birettas, dodged the traffic hurtling outside, hared through the gallery to Piazza Indipendenza, narrowly missed getting bisected by a tram and then ran up the steps into the Australian Immigration Building. On the second floor a door was labelled Kangaroo Club. Td been there once before to play darts. It was a room painted a drab green with a dan board on the wall and two arge refrigerators crammed full of bottled beer. To my dismay a practice session was in full swing. 'Hey padre/ cried a voice, 'Got the wrong turning or can we offer you a drink?' I recognised the face from my previous visit. At the time he had impressed me by admitting he came from Southend, "Never been down-under in my life, mate. Got left over after the war. Married the missus — she's an 'Eyetic', changed me accent, love me cobbers, hate al! whingeing Pommie bastards and get pissed here just about every bleeding evening, thinking of the green, green grass of home. Cheers!" I managed to back out, dodged into the lavatory, tore off the priestly robes and crept down the stairs, nervously clutching a handful of brochures offering alluring opportunities for a newT life under the Southern Cross.

The 64 bus stopped close to Piazza Navona, but as hunger was my immediate concern I walked on through Campo de

Fiori to the Ponte Sisto Bridge and crossed the river to the Trastevere quarter.

I couldn't see much through Mario's steamy glass, but the moment I pushed open the door I spotted him. He was sitting on his own with his back towards me, doodling at the paper tablecloth. 'Hallo, Tam/ I said.

When he spun round I was taken aback by the look in his eyes. He didn't exactly snarl, but there was no friendly grin anymore. 'Hallo, guv/ he said, regarding me warily.

"How's Jennie then?1 I suggested. This at least brought a response. 'She's in hospital. She's got to have a valve in her heart.5

T can't believe it!' I exclaimed. 'At her age!'

He nodded miserably, "Suddenly got this irregular beat.

She's in Salvador Mundi for tests.'

Tm sorry/ I said.

He looked at me glumly, 'That's not half of it, guv. I've started remembering things. And they ain't very nice things.

Nightmares/ He blinked desperately. 'Sorry, guv/ he grunted wiping his eyes fiercely on his fist. And then he dumbfounded me by demanding 'It's true, isn't it?5

T don't know wrhat you're talking about,' I blurted out guiltily.

'Oh come off it, guv, Anyway/ he muttered, 'There's one person who will tell me. That bastard Stanley/

'Listen,' I said hastily cobbling together some sort of plan, 'If you're thinking of going after him, let me come along/

His suspicion increased. 'You do know something, don't you, guv?'

For a long moment I wavered. The temptation to tell him was undeniable, but instinct held me in check and I managed to mumble instead that Washington had sent a message.

The lad brightened. 'So that black dude is on the move again/ He added thoughtfully, 'He cleared out of Spurio's soon after Christmas. Claimed he was off to Ethiopia - land of the Rastas. Said he was going on a bicycle, the crazy coot/ Then he caught me off my guard by announcing, 'So where were you off to? You didn't just come to find me.' I was so startled I nearly blurted it out. I think he guessed anyway. There was a knowing look on his face. 'You were going to him, wasn't you?' Fortunately at that moment Mario arrived, his cross-eyes staring in every other direction but ours. We ate the peppery spaghetti carbonara in silence and washed it down with Mario's tawny wine, scooped straight out of Tiber. When we had finished I repeated my question. 'Will you take me with you?'

The boy watched me curiously. 'Guv, I don't get it. [f you've guessed where Stanley is, why don't you just slip down there? You must have got the price of the train fare/

'Listen, Tam - I'm as interested as you in finding out what happened, believe me. But there's more than just Stanley behind this/ I shut up. Fortunately he wasn't listening. There

was a far-away look in his eyes. He nodded slowly. 'When do you want to leave, guv? Let me get up to the hospital to say goodbye to Jennie. We can go in a couple of hours/

We took the old Roman road south to Terracina. I don't know if much of it is Roman any more, but a lot of it is straight, which was a good thing the way Tam was driving. At Terracina, we continued along the coast, past signs advertising buffalo cheese, until we reached Sperlonga. A few miles beyond, Tam's guardian rented a small holiday villa where we camped the night, before continuing south the next day.

It wasn't until we stopped at Cumae, that I began to realise why he had chosen this route. He had been here before. 'Stanley showed me the ruins,' he muttered, parking the bike and leading the way along a tunnel into the green gloom of a cavern.

'Here's where Aeneas visited the oracle on his way south,' he informed me, in a matter of fact way, that had me marvelling over the subtle influence Stanley exerted on others. 'Do you know about Palinurus?' he asked me over his shoulder, as we hurried back up the steep flagstones outside. 'He was Aeneas's pilot. Stanley says he abandoned ship and tried to swim ashore, but the Sicilians murdered him/ We passed through a grove of oak trees and came out on top of a bluff, capped by a ruined temple.

The Bay of Naples spread away far below. 'Stanley says he deserved to die. Because he wasn't loyal. Was he, guv?' he quietly asked.

Taken a little aback by the question, I said 'No, I suppose he wasn't.'

He spat on the ground, 'Stanley says that Gods expect sacrifices.' He glanced up daring me for my reaction. I found myself nodding grimly* It wasn't hard to guess what was passing through his mind. Abruptly he took my arm and pointed south. 'That's where we're going. Capo Palinurus.'

As we started to go back, he broke off a sprig of oak leaves and carelessly wound them into a wreath, like a victor's laurel. Had Stanley similarly crowned him during that earlier visit, I wondered? But as he stepped ahead of me down the Sacred Way, it wasn't a crown I saw on his head but the red scarf of the Khmer Rouge and a nine year old boy with a bayonet.

An hour later, we were making the quickest tour of Naples you could imagine. Even the barefoot urchins, hanging onto the back of the trams, applauded the way Tam chopped through the traffic. After that, it seemed no time before the Amalfi peninsula was behind us and we were speeding through Salerno. Only at Phaestum did we pause to catch our breath. Surveying the massive Grecian temples, the boy remarked 'Stanley insisted on stopping here to paint.'

'When was that?' I asked him, but he didn't reply. He kept squinting his eyes and frowning into space. I don't know and I didn't enquire what he was watching, but whatever it was, it was far removed from this tranquil scene.

Evening found us twisting and climbing along the narrow coast road south of Agropolo. Tiny villages clung to the cliffs, pine forests braced the mountainsides. Twenty miles to the south, highlighted by the setting sun, the crooked finger of Cape Palinurus beckoned across the evening sea.

That night, we slept on the beach near the mouth of the Mingardo river. It was quite deserted. Black cliffs blocked the way inland. Sandy coves webbed the overgrown headlands together, each one guarded by a crumbling tower.

Now that we had arrived, Tam seemed less decisive. As if at a loss for what to do next, he showed me the natural archway and the hidden bay behind, where they had made the film, busily pointing out this and that.

An amphitheatre of cliffs soared into the sky. High above crows flapped and cawed angrily down at us, but despite their haggling cries, a sense of stillness reigned. Even the sea made no more than a faint murmur on the shingle. It was easy to imagine standing here aeons before, while Ulysses' black galleys were taking on fresh water. I was instantly reminded of the coastline of Sumatra - tall jungled cliffs, empty and primeval. So it was here, I thought, that Freddy G. had planned his own creation - his own Garden of Eden, his Genesis Children. No sea goddess wreathed in shell garlands emerging from the chambers - but hordes of children in Khmer Rouge tunics waiting to be told to kill.

Yes, I thought, for Freddy G. the step from genesis to genocide was a small one indeed.

We drove into Marina di Camerota, seeking breakfast, petrol and information. Rounding the headland, the boy pointed across to where a stone hut, half buried by wild figs and oleanders, perched sullenly above the rocks. As we sat outside a bar overlooking Camerota's tiny harbour, it was here, I thought, like Jekyll and Hyde, where Charles Stanley became Carlo Pittore, I could picture him stripped to the waist, furiously painting under an old sun hat.

The chatter of children startled me from this reverie. They / had spotted Tam's distinctive yellow motorbike and recognised it from the previous year. Now they swarmed round us, asking questions. I gathered most of them had worked as extras. When Tam asked if they had seen Carlo recently, this produced an enthusiastic chorus.

'Carlo, Carlo Pittore, disegna mi, disegna mi,' they cried, prancing about. We might have been back in the piazza at Montecelio, with the children following Carlo like the Pied Piper. An older boy at a pin ball machine shouted, 'Van Gogh, Van Gogh,' or something like it. I could see Carlo clapping his hands to his ears and crying 'No souvenirs yet, my friends.'

When I told Tam, he smiled uneasily, 'He always said that.'

We drove back along the track, parked the bike under the olive trees and picked our way across the rocky headland. The sea shone placidly below. Under the scattered trees goats were grazing, The hut looked deserted. It occurred to both of us that he was probably out painting, but as we got closer there was something buzzing round the door.

T can't believe he's been here,' I said. 'Look, there's even a wasp nest.'

It was only when we got close, that we recognised it for what it really was. Pinned to the wooden door of the hut were the gory remains of a human ear!

I almost wished I had stayed with Willis. Was the car a threat or a trophy? Was it even Stanley's ear at all? The obvious person to suspect was Rhodes, but perhaps that was intended too. One thing was clear. Despite all our attempts at subterfuge, someone was keeping a close watch on our movements. Unless the surprise was not meant for us at all!

Inside the hut there was every sign that Stanley had recently been there. The bottle of spare kerosene for his lamp, the candle on the table and the opened book — Petronius's Satyricon. Even the half-eaten "frittata of melanzani and egg plant. Stanley had either left in a hurry or someone had created a very good effect. Although the stone hut was a mess of paints and canvases, it was an orderly chaos. There were certainly no signs of struggle.

The two of us made a search of the headland but we discovered nothing suspicious.

'He used to sleep out on the beach in fine weather/ Tam remembered. So we searched that too. In the late afternoon we motored into Camerota, left the bike at Elicio's bar and sneaked back over the headland in the twilight. I don't claim we stayed awake every minute of the night, but if anyone had come to the hut we would surely have heard them. Next

morning, the ear was still in place, covered with ants. But that was the only trail we could discover.

There was no information to be had in Camerota. Carlo Pittorci hadn't been seen for several days. In the afternoon, we set off back towards Naples, but, because I had neglected to change any money, we decided to camp above Pompeii, taking the gravel track that leads to the summit of Mount Vesuvius.

As we chewed the stale 'panini' we had bought earlier, staring out over the bay of Naples, Tam remarked, 'When Freddy came up here he said how he wished he'd been around to film the last days of Pompeii. Funny, isn't it, guv?' he mused. 'He always wants to film some destruction or other. Said he wished he had been there when Atlantis sank. Or when there was the plagues of Egypt.'

All this time I'd been assuming that I'd meet up with Willis again in Rome. I'd already prepared excuses for my absence, but instead we drew a total blank.

Although we whizzed round all the old haunts, there was no sign of him. Even Spurio's residence was shut up, with a 'For Sale' notice over the door. I tried the Goldoni theatre, but that too was closed. We even sneaked into the Antico Caffè Greco, but Count Ungaro was not there imbibing his morning aperitif. In Piazza Navona, the artists merely shrugged when we enquired. Stanley, they joked, was last seen painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but that was some time ago.

Tam put me up on the floor of his room in Piazza Montevecchio. His guardians were away. Jennie it seemed was to remain at the clinic while her condition stabilised. Only then would they decide whether to operate, but worried as Tam was about her, he was just as concerned to discover the truth about himself.

This put me in a dilemma. If I repeated what Willis had told me, and it turned out not to be true? The boy persisted. 'Listen, guv, you've got to tell me. Anything!'

In the end I simply ran out of excuses. 'There was some rubbish about you being kidnapped when you were a kid in the Khmer Rouge.'

He watched me for a long still moment*

'It's only a rumour,' I tried to assure him*

'What else did they say, guv?' he insisted quietly.

I tried to shrug it off* 'Listen, you were just kids with guns. No need to rake it all up now. After all you don't even remember it*'

'I remember it/ he said.

'No you don't/ I blurted out. 'It's all a lot of fantasy* They've muddled you up with someone else/

'It was my mother?'

The silence that followed was the longest silence I had ever experienced* Finally he said, 'I've always known. I just pretended I'd forgotten. I wanted to forget. I believed if I forgot long enough, it might work even.'

'You were nine years old/ I began but he shut me up.

'Old enough to kill/ he replied.

The Colonel

The SS Dana Sirena left Ancona on a Tuesday and took four days to reach Egypt* It was a Danish ship. When we pulled out of Hyraklion harbour the officers took a deep breath to see them through the unscrupulous chaos that lay ahead* I guessed none of them would breathe easily until they glimpsed the snowcapped mountains of Crete on the return journey. As for ourselves, we turned to Egypt because we had run out of anywhere else to go. Wyllie was there and I had a stubborn hunch he knew a lot more than he pretended.

It was not the sight of pyramids and palm trees that greeted us, in the first glow of dawn, as we approached Alexandria. Instead we glided between lines of waiting cargo ships and rusty hulks.

'Feel like taking the salute?'joked the American Colonel sitting in a wheelchair by the rail. 'Reminds me of D Day. Quite a party.'

The Colonel, together with John, his minder, had joined the boat at Hyraklion for the final hop. They were driving a clapped-out green VW estate car that had to be hauled up the ramp when we finally berthed. Leaving them to sort out their papers with the army of dockside officials, we accepted the offer of a pony cab and rattled off along the Grand Corniche, trying to escape being trapped in the tram lines. Sightless beggars assailed us with unmusical chants, children

chased after us in dirty striped pyjamas, pedlars thrust out shoelaces and hot potatoes. A man amputated at the waist was towed past on a little trolley. A leper delivered newspapers between his stubs.

We took refuge in the first cheap hotel we came upon. Later, as we dodged the hectic traffic in search of a good black market rate for our money, I wondered if we might not be just on another fool's errand. Expecting to find a clue to the whereabouts of Freddy seemed as remote as finding another forgotten Pharaoh in the desert.

The first coincidence came that evening when we bumped into the wheelchair Colonel, as his helper was struggling to get him up the stairs into the Hotel Metropole. Tam and I lent a hand. After a couple of near capsizes we wheeled him through into the open lift. 'Pretty rough ride,' commented the old man. A white-robed attendant smiled sweetly. 'No lift today/ The Colonel muttered 'Crap/ and jerked his carriage in the direction of the bar, while John the minder adjusted his dark glasses and went off glowering to find the manager.

'Get me a drink, will you, Tam?' demanded the Colonel, displaying a good memory for names. He also 'bummed' a cigarette on the pretext, 'John doesn't like me smoking.' The way he held it reminded me of Willis - another furtive smoker, although Willis had given it up a year ago.

'Well boys,' he grinned. 'So this is Egypt. Judging by the hassle wre've been through this morning, Rommel was welcome to it/ He swallowed his gin and ordered another. 'You English, Jimmy?' he asked. 'I like the English. Got to

know the Duke of Windsor at the Rackets Club in New York.
Used to drink brandy. Met him sometimes in the pool.
Couldn't for the life of me understand his accent/

'So you liked swimming/ I remarked conversationally.

The Colonel nodded. 'Once swam across the St. Lawrence Seaway. Family had a place up there. Put this nigger in a row boat with a bottle of gin, in case I needed refreshment. Made it though/ he muttered. 'And Monte Cassino. I was in the artillery* That was a hell hole.' He beamed at us. 'Happy days/

'So what are you doing out here?' enquired Tam.

The old man frowned. 'You really want to know? I've come to see what my damn fool son is up to* He's throwing his money away on some film or other/

Tam and I exchanged amazed glances. 'What's the film about?' we chorused simultaneously.

The Colonel took a final drag on his cigarette. 'Some thriller or other, "The curse of..." Hey John/he called out as his helper returned. 'What's that film of Freddy's called ?'

'Colonel, I've explained to you before not to talk about it/ He added rudely. 'He shoots his mouth off about something he doesn't understand. '

I've got it now/ cried the Colonel, jerking his braced leg.

' "The Curse of King Tut" /

'You've been smoking again, Colonel?' interrupted John. He turned to us. 'This guy has got no lungs, no liver and no

kidneys, Unless you want to kill him don't give him any cigarettes!5

The Colonel beamed at us. 'Happy days/ he said*

Before we left, we accepted an offer to travel with them to Cairo. Both of us were too delighted to consider we might have been set up.

The following morning found us driving south across the delta. Mud villages dotted the green landscape, but to the Colonel's dismay there were no Howard Johnsons to get an ice-cream or a hot dog. We ate lunch in a shed shared with three sheep, while the owner smiled at us over his hookah. A pot of chai (tea) stewed over a primus and rusty tins of sardines decorated the only shelf. When we came out, we found the Colonel drinking from a bucket of ditch water he had persuaded a passing peasant to tilt through the car window.

'Trying to kill yourself?*' yelled John* To us he added, 'You wouldn't guess he's a millionaire, would you?'

My first impression of Cairo was that everyone appeared to be wearing striped pyjamas. 'Perhaps they've escaped from jail/ joked the Colonel. Sailing up the Nile, white feluccas glided like swans asleep. Locked in a traffic jam we watched a troupe of policemen stride down to the riverside, undress and march in, stark naked. Finally, we reached the Zemalik island, where the Colonel had arranged to rent an apartment in a house near the Gazira Sporting Club* The house was owned by a fearsome Italian Contessa* The Colonel

immediately sent John out to find hot dogs and English language war magazines. With him safely out of sight he bribed Tam to buy some cigarettes and gin.

Later, as he settled down to drink, we tackled him about the film, but now he was more cautious* 'Can't tell you much. All I know is Freddy spent nearly a million dollars on the last one and they can't find a single distributor to take it. It's his money to waste, but I tell you this/ He lowered his voice. T had the FBI around asking a lot of damn fool questions. Used to know Hoover personally in the old days, so there was no trouble, but once they start snooping, you never know where it'll end up. Kept asking about Rome. I said "Hell with Rome, he's in Egypt." Thought I'd better see for myself. Always wanted to visit Egypt. You know why?'

I assumed he'd say the pyramids, instead he grinned, 'El Alamem first and then Shepheard's Hotel - even if they did knock the old one down.'

Once again we tried to get him back on the film, but it was hopeless. T love to drink/ he told Tam. 'It's always been my favourite hobby, apart from flat racing and gambling. My father used to breed racehorses. Rode my own thoroughbred at 12, in the county shows. Every summer, my father rented a house out at Saratoga, for the races. There was a croquet lawn. I was only 10 but father backed me 1000 dollars against a millionaire. Boy, was that guy sore when I beat him.' He swallowed a tumblerful of gin at a gulp. 'You boys know the Drake Hotel on 58th Street and Park? Used to lunch there every day on five martinis. The manager was a Russian

emigre called Serge Obelensky. He was one hell of a nice guy. During the war he became a parachutist at the age of 50* Had the three qualities I most admire in a man. He was courteous, he was generous and he was brave. I liked to box too/ he informed us. 'Hired a big darkie to spar with once a week when I was at Princeton/

Next morning Tam and I walked across to Tarhir Square and had a bacon and egg breakfast at Groppis. It seemed as good a place as any to plan our next move* Tam was a lot more cheerful. The night before he'd managed to place a call through to the Salvador Mundi Hospital in Rome and speak to Jennie. Not only was she a lot better, but they'd discovered that there was nothing wrong with her heart after all. Analysis had revealed traces of a poison which had caused the irregular beat and the violent palpitations*

'Guv!' exclaimed the boy. 'Is there nothing they won't stop at?'

Rightly or wrongly, by now we could hardly be blamed for wondering whether Freddy G. didn't have a hand in all our misfortunes.

Finding out about the Curse of King Tut proved easier than we expected. After spending a fruitless day out at the pyramids at Giza, we came back to find the Colonel chortling over the Cairo Daily News* Above the caption "American filming in Luxor" was a photograph of King Freddy wearing his familiar stetson hat. 'That's my damn fool boy/ exclaimed the Colonel. He swallowed half a pint of wine and sighed. 'Monte Cassino, Omaha beach, Nijmegen* Happy days. I was

on Patton's staff you know. He couldn't stand Montgomery. Too darned slow*' He peered mistily at Tam. 'Listen, boy, if you have any children, take my advice* You may want to be like them, but for God's sake don't try to make them like you,' Having delivered this rather ambiguous advice, he closed his eyes and snored*

Next morning we bought a ticket from Rameses station and caught the noon train south to Luxor. We got there at midnight and put up at a dingy hotel in the station square.

Next morning, while we were having breakfast, the town water cart sprayed us in an attempt to lay the dust. The mud street led straight to the river bank and the first foreigner we bumped into was the Wily Bird himself

man in a high collar and waistcoat was studying something in a wicker basket. As we approached, he drew out the biggest, blackest scorpion I have ever seen. 'And where in the dickens do you think you're going?' he enquired.

'Freddy/ said the boy. It was as effective as any password. We left the man peering into a box full of snakes.

Round the next bend the gorge opened into a rocky amphitheatre, buttressed by tall sandstone cliffs and ratholed with caves. 'Cut/ cried a voice and a confused murmur of sound broke out. The place was crowded with actors, technicians, cameras, light reflectors, lamps, cables and all the paraphernalia of filming. There were soldiers in puttees and red tarpots, Europeans in pith helmets,

Egyptians dressed up as servants or sheiks and a few huge black Nubian slaves.

'Action!' cried a voice and the khaki-clad soldiers hurried into position, as one of the veteran motor cars drove up. Out climbed two Europeans in linen suits. One of them I recognised as Wyllie. They strode past the line of soldiers and disappeared into a tomb. 'Cut!'

I was explaining to Tam who they were portraying in the film, when a big man in a stetson hat came over to us. Round his bulging middle was strapped a huge leather truss. When he grinned, his teeth chattered. 'Hi there, How y' all? Nice to see you, Tam. Thought you wouldn't make it/ He thrust out a hairy arm in my direction. 'You must be Jimmy. I've heard a lot about you. Make yourselves at home. Hear you met my daddy in Cairo. Can't think why he wants to come out here.'

'I think he came to see El Alamein/ I suggested.

He nodded thoughtfully, 'Is that so? I don't know anyone that name here.'

I started to say something but thought better of it.

Freddy adjusted his stetson. 'Folks, we're breaking for lunch. It's too darned hot. Come here, Dudley/

'Dudley's the dog/ whispered Tam.

To my amazement Freddy picked up a boulder that must have weighed half a ton and hurled it at the unfortunate beast. He noticed my astonished gaze. "No sweat, Jimmy,' he grinned, 'I can lift weights heavier than the world champion?

He led the way to his caravan - a gleaming aluminium tube with the air-conditioning as chill as winter,

We sat round a table set for a dozen or more people. The Wily Bird came in and took off his pith helmet. Several other actors joined us and Freddy made the introductions.

"Where's that big nigger, Washington? Crazy as a coot? he whispered to me. "Found him bicycling through, on his way to Ethiopia. A wild Rastafarian dude. Drinks his own urine?

Amid the general laughter, Washington walked in. His head was shaved and he was wearing a loin cloth. Inch for inch there wasn't much to choose between him and Freddy.

J

Freddy gave his chimpanzee grin and yelled "Eat!' Beside everyone's plate was a red vitamin pill. "Virility pill? shouted Freddy. "If you don't swallow them quick enough you get a stiff neck? Amid the obedient laughter and the obedient swallowing, the steaks arrived. They went on arriving. They were the thickest, tenderest, juiciest steaks I have ever tasted and I'd no sooner consumed one than there was another on my plate. "Really and truly? I said, "they melt in the mouth?

Freddy laughed. "Like those beautiful young girls I had last night!' After a gargantuan belch, he added, "Animalism is the highest form of aestheticism, eh Wyllie ?'

This philosophical tidbit was received with dutiful applause. King Freddy clearly expected his court to toe the line. When I foolishly asked if he wasn't ever afraid of making enemies, he

almost broke the table with his fist. The plates bounced.
"Son? he said, "to put out a contract costs me no more than it costs you to buy a pair of sneakers? Then he suddenly yelled with laughter until everyone else laughed with him.

"Jimmy? he added, with a greedy look in his eye, "I know you're a snooping bastard. So I've got a special treat for your dessert? J

Before I could say a word there was a giant black scorpion dangling over my plate, pincers nipping this way and that, while Freddy's hairy fingers gripped the sting* 'You know what happens when you surround one of these beauties with fire, Jimmy/ he whispered in my ear. 'They sting themselves to death. You got a sting in your tail, Jimmy!'

Everyone cheered, not the least me, when Freddy popped it back in the basket, 'Which of you faggots want ice cream?1 roared our host. All I wanted was to survive.

During the afternoon Washington studiously ignored me. The filming never let up. There were dolly shots and close-ups, long shots and medium shots, full face and over the shoulder. The cameraman trotted this way and that with his light meter, the slate was chalked up for the next frame, the reflectors were constantly adjusted and Freddy cruised around snapping shots on his Hasselblad. Finally the cameraman frowned at his lens shutter and announced, 'Hell, I'm wide open.' Freddy roared, 'It's a wrap!' And everyone toiled dutifully back down the valley to where a decrepit bus waited to ferry the Luxor crowd back to the river landing,

We were about to set off on our bone-shakers when Freddy called us back. 'Hey you boys. I want to show you something,' yelled Freddy, waving us across to the tomb. He pulled open the metal gate and led the way down* Inside we had only his flashlight to guide us.

A steep flight of steps dropped into the darkness. Rats scurried away before us. 'Goddamn rats/ he complained, flashing the torch around. We reached level ground and entered a large chamber littered with ancient-looking furniture, urns and suchlike. In the centre gleamed a golden sarcophagus.

'KingTut,' he announced.

On the sarcophagus lay a mummy with a gold mask covering its face. There was a strong smell of formaldehyde, hiding the sickly sweet odour of decay.

'What did he die of?' enquired Tam.

Freddy's laughter had a sinister ring to it* He avoided answering us directly, 'Ever thought how nature has a funny way of controlling things? Population gets too high and in comes famine or plague, Wipe-out!'

I could only muster a worried nod* For once he sounded uncannily sane*

'Disease,' he continued. 'No sooner have you cured one than the next takes its place. We cure one pox and up comes another, to nab us where we least expect it. Got it?'

Ts that the curse ?' asked Tam. 4 A plague ?'

Freddy grinned slyly. 'Ever heard the story about when they made the film Casablanca? How they didn't know what the ending was going to be until the day they shot it? So, who knows? Got any suggestions, Jimmy ?'

When I couldn't think of a reply he said to Tam. 'You want to take off the mask? Pretend you guys are the first explorers to find it?'

That wasn't difficult. Whoever had made these replicas had done a wonderfully convincing job. Tam leaned across, grasped the mask with both hands and lifted it up.

I don't know what we'd been expecting, but it certainly wasn't the grisly remains of Carlo Pittore with an ear missing, staring back.

At that moment, a dim shape hurled itself among us. Freddy roared like a wounded bud elephant. The torch flew from his grasp and shattered* In the darkness Tam and I crouched beside the sarcophagus, while bodies laboured around us smashing apart the fake relics. With our eyes growing accustomed to the darkness, a faint patch of light showed from the stairway and we made a dive for it, leaving the grunts and thumps to find their own victor*

Once outside the tomb, I was about to slam shut the metal grille when Washington staggered out*

'Split!' he hissed* 'Don't stick around here, man, else you'll end up in the cage. This King Tut crap is one fucking pretend artist.'

'But,' I protested, 'your message said get down here,'

He peered into the tomb. 'Boss is stirring* Here, give me that rock.' Picking up a boulder as big as a cement sack, he hurled it down the shaft and whispered angrily, 'Man, I never tells you get down this far* Rome was far enough. God knows where they are now. Venice someplace. Boyet, he's up there for sure. Something personal. Don't know what* Lines of communication all cut to shit, man. Don't know who co trust* Not even my own shadow* So don't say no word to no one. Understand?'

I was going to ask him about the face in the sarcophagus, when ominous noises sounded along the tunnel. Wash-ington hurled another rock.

'You god-damn cocksucking Arab bastards/ roared Freddy's entombed voice. 'I'll tear your bleeding genitals off one by one.'

'Split, you hear!' declared Washington, as he pushed the bolt across, and vanished into the darkness.

Freddy's furious roars pursued us down the track* Fortunately a full moon lit the way out of the gorge, but with the sound of the grille door rattling in our ears we medalled as if the horsemen of the Apocalypse were at our ieels. Twrenty minutes later the twin Colossi loomed ahead, over the sand. I was frightened sick that they would come alive and bar the way, but we passed safely beyond their realm and reached the banks of the river.

'No ferry tonight!' The boy who had rented us the bicycles screamed in high-pitched delight. Across the dark water the

lights of Luxor twinkled enticingly. 'Ferry tomorrow,' chanted the boy* 'You sleep here. Very cheap*'

'Guv,' said Tam* 'Guv, we've got to swim.1

'I can't swim that,' I protested volubly* 'And what about crocodiles?1 I gnashed my teeth and the bicycle boy shrieked with renewed laughter* He gnashed his teeth back* That settled it. 'I'd rather wait for Freddy,' I said.

'Guv,' hissed Tam, 'pretend to swim. We'll nick a boat somewhere. Come on.' As he tugged me into the shallows, our bicycle boy was gnashing his teeth and screeching hysterically. We drifted a hundred yards down stream before we touched bottom again.

Spluttering and gasping, we struggled through the shallows where there was a sailbarge pulled up. On the bank a dog started howling.

'We can't/ I objected, 'We'll never../ But Tam had loosed the mooring rope and was shouldering the boat into deeper water. With a final shove, it nudged free and we scrambled aboard.

Fortunately, the long bendy gaff was easy to haul up the mast. The night breeze filled the sail and we headed into midstream. I felt ashamed for doubting the boy.

'That's alright, guv/ he acknowledged generously. LI was more scared than you/

We reached the other shore opposite the Karnak temple and set off back to Luxor. When we finally staggered up the steps

of the Winter Palace I wasn't at all sure they would even let us in.

Wyllie was sitting out on the terrace. He raised his monocle and regarded our bedraggled appearance. 'Been having a picnic, have we? Not the best place for swimming I should think. Might catch bilharzia, or Leptospirosis-Weirs disease ...'

'Wyllie/ I said, 'that man's a maniac/

Wyllie appeared nonplussed. 'I dare say you're right. A raving nutter, but then I'm getting a bit ga-ga myself these days. As for Seneca, madness runs in his family, you know/

'We're leaving/ I told him. 'Tonight if we can/

The old man looked genuinely put out. 'Not staying for the film. I am sorry. Hoped to fix you both up with parts/

Tam and I exchanged glances. Should we tell him? Tam made a barely perceptible shake of the head. Rather hastily I blurted out, 'We're dashing up to see Abu Simnel. Then Tam's got to get back to Rome. To school/

Wyllie pursed his lips. 'School/ he muttered contemptuously. 'What good did school ever do anyone?' He fixed his eye on Tam. 'My boy, don't let them rob you of your soul. Never let anyone rob you of your soul/ We were half way across the hall before he called out again. "Almost forgot. Give this to Billy, when you see him,'

As he handed me the letter, I thought I detected a sly wink, but it wasn't until we managed to board the Cairo train just

as it was pulling out of the station, and rushed panting into our compartment, that I tugged the letter out of my pocket.

Across the envelope he had written in his atrocious scrawl, 'Billy Willis. Montins. Venice.'

The old bastard knew where we were going all the time.

The Breadmen

Montins restaurant stood tucked away up a narrow canal in the Zattere - that 4'melon slice" of Venice cut off by the Grand Canal.

Assuming the Causeway and the railway station would be watched, we had approached Venice by a little ferry that plied to and fro from Fusina, on the mainland, a green outpost yet to be overwhelmed by the oil refineries of Mestre and Marghera.

This particular 'vaporetto' chugged across the lagoon, past the outlying Guideca island, before crossing over to the Zattere itself. We could scarcely have entered Venice by a better route.

At this point the Zattere was barely a hundred yards wide. On the other side the Accademia Bridge crossed the Grand Canal. Here any number of people could have been on the look-out for us. The lady guarding the public lavatory, the ice-cream seller, the man behind the newspaper kiosk, or the clerk at the Vaporetto ticket office. Fortunately Tam, who had been here before, knew of a gondola that ferried passengers across the Grand Canal to the Rialto side of the City for only a couple of hundred lire. It left from a shaky pontoon near Piazza Margherita. We went into all this before approaching Montins. After Luxor, finding escape routes seemed the first thing to do.

At the same time that we were trying to familiarise

ourselves with the maze of alleys and canals, we were also looking for a room. Finally, we were directed to a 'Rend sign tacked onto a house on the San Trovaso canal, opposite a boatyard where gondolas were being repaired. Here, to our pleasant surprise, the landlady turned out to be English, a rather tweedy spinster who chain-smoked 'Nazionale' cigarettes and supplemented the meagre income she made from her paintings by teaching English, and taking in guests. The damp walls were covered with her work.

'To hang my best stuff at Montins,' she explained. 'Old Vincenzo considers himself a connoisseur ever since Peggy Guggenheim used to go there. In the old days, he would give you a month's credit on a painting. Not now though. It's gone up-market. Waiters wear silly tartan waistcoats. Old Vincenzo's still as good as gold, but his sons run Montins/

When I asked if she had been there recently she replied with a horsey chuckle, 'Can't afford to eat in restaurants these days, I'm afraid. If you join the Communist Party you can get a thirty per cent discount at Da Pio's, so they say/

'But not Montins,' I suggested lightly.

She laughed again. 'Should hardly think so. Wave a hammer and sickle there and you'll find yourself booted into the Grand Canal more than likely.' J

As it happened, Montins was closed anyway for its weekly day off. Instead, we sneaked back across the City until we eventually reached the Fondamenta Nuova - the wharf J

running around the northern perimeter of the City. Here we took a vaporetto across the lagoon to the islands, passing the Cemetery isle of San Michele on the way. On the way back from Burano, we were rewarded by the spires and domes of the City, splendidly silhouetted against the glowing evening sky. At least I was. Tam had fallen asleep.

It was dark before we reached St. Mark's, where at least we felt secure, among the milling crowds. Perhaps it was the banners flying outside the Cathedral or the orchestras playing under the long colonnades, but as we stepped into the square I had the feeling we were entering a grand auditorium. If anything dramatic was planned for Venice, it would surely take place here.

We didn't have long to wait. Next morning across the front page of the 'Gazettino' was a photograph of a body spreadeagled on the cobbles. It was literally being torn to pieces by thousands of pigeons. According to the report this lifesize 'breadman' had been baked in a special mould and carried into St. Mark's Square before dawn. By the time we got there it was a gruesome sight.

'Guv, it's like vultures!' exclaimed Tam, as we watched the corpse being plundered.

The Italian next to us laughed humourlessly. 'It is supposed to be art,' he explained sarcastically. 'Or perhaps it is for the benefit of those rich bastards, sipping their aperitifs at Florian's.' We glanced instinctively towards the immaculate waiters hovering with their silver trays.

'Who knows, perhaps tomorrow it will be a real corpse with real vultures, and we will all be applauding just the same!' The man moved off.

By coincidence, we caught up with him again as we got into the gondola to cross the canal. cSo you managed to tear yourself away, my friends. I tell you, when I first arrived, people were snapping off crusty fingers and toes to eat - human vultures,' And again he delivered his dry laugh. When we reached Santa Margherita he turned back to us. 'Come,' he insisted, 'we all need a drink. Come with me to Montins. We can sit in the garden.'

It was too early to eat. The waiters were still setting the tables, but our Triend' who seemed to know everyone, led us through to the garden, commandeered a table under the trees and poured wine for the three of us. 'Salute,' he said, 'Who knows, perhaps tomorrow there will be a hundred breadbodies, the day after, one thousand even.' He laughed. Tn Venice everything is possible.'

Later on, we sat near San Trovaso church, idly watching a funeral. The coffin was lifted onto the black boat-hearse that would take it across the lagoon to San Michele.

"They seem to have a lot of funerals in Venice/ commented Tam. He stepped over to the crowd of onlookers. When he came back he was frowning. 'They say he caught something from a rat. Lepto-somethin'-or-other. One of them nasty viruses.'

The Italian had been right about one thing. The next day there were a hundred bread corpses. It got so bad that you couldn't turn a corner without tripping over one of them. There was also something about their shape that seemed strangely familiar. With their arms upraised and their legs apart they might have been copied straight off the wall of Carlo Pittore's house at Montecelio.

Here was something I had obviously not been in a position to appreciate during that visit, but now that I thought about it, it couldn't have been clearer. The Fresco of Atlas was without doubt a caricature of King Freddy. Which suggested another possibility. Perhaps these effigies strewn all over Venice weren't breadmen at all, but some kind of warning.

'So perhaps it wasn't Stanley after all in the tomb/ concluded Tam doubtfully, when I told him.

'Perhaps Freddy only took his head/ I added sardonically,
'and the rest of him works here in the local bakehouse/

But if the breadmen were his handiwork, we never caught sight of their maker. Or of Willis for that matter. Riddles of breadmen and lopped-off ears and Egyptian curses were beginning to addle our brains. It didn't help any that evening when we decided to open Wyllie's letter, only to discover it wasn't a letter at all. Just the drawing of a rat.

The Ferryman

The following day the Gazette announced that seventeen more people had died from a virulent strain of Leptospirosis - an infection transmitted by rats, who excrete it in their urine. According to the report, the disease was usually contracted by taking contaminated food or water* But the germ could enter through the skin and the eyes as well as the mouth. People usually caught it from swimming in rivers in summer time, although fish markets, barges, slaughter-houses were also a source of it. After an incubation period of anything up to ten days there followed the sudden onset of high fever, and vomiting, nose-bleed, cramps, jaundice, muscular contraction, raging headache. Once these symptoms appeared there was little chance of cure. The question raised was why now, in the Spring, and why such a virulent strain, that was resistant to any treatment?

Miss Spender, our landlady, was full of theories, but the damp of Venice remained her standby argument. 'It seeps through the walls, dear. Rats on the roof, rats in the drains, stands to reason it spreads.' She pointed dramatically to the peeling plaster, as if it was already infested with the disease.

Sitting by the canal, watching the gondolas being repaired in the boatyard opposite, we tossed the subject back and forth but came to no conclusions. 'There's all the difference in the world between a few dozen cases of this rat virus and a

plague,' I insisted. 'And I don't suppose it would be called Genocide if the entire population of Venice was wiped out.'

The boy was unconvinced. 'Guv, perhaps it's a trial run. Perhaps he's just filming a few hundred people going berserk and pretending it's millions?

'Here they won't be going berserk. At least not in public. This is Europe. They'll be dying in their homes or the hospitals. For a film he needs people collapsing in the street, clutching themselves, twitching and vomiting in the gutter. Anyway he's down in Luxor.'

'Then why did old Wily Bird send a picture of a rat? Answer me that, guv?

By the end of our first week the death toll had risen dramatically to 123. The black hearses were chugging back and forth to San Michele cemetery with sickening regularity. It was almost a case of life aping art, first the bread corpses and then the real ones. But explaining why or how was a very different proposition. Willis might have been able to help but he remained as elusive as ever. Keeping watch' on Montins was turning out to be a thankless task. As for Rhodes, I hardly liked to mention him in front of Tam, in case he realised who I was talking about. Both of us were getting restless, and although he never mentioned it, I knew he keenly wanted to get back to his Jennie, who was now out of hospital and convalescing on the farm at Sacrafano. It was perfectly understandable. Had I known where Ko Sam was, I'd have left at once.

Then, when we least expected it, things started to happen, and it all began, rather surprisingly, at the English church.

St. George's Anglican Church faced onto a paved campo, beside the Grand Canal near the Old Customs House at the top end of the Zattere. Miss Spender was also the church organist and on the following Sunday she bullied us into going. When she told us the Vicar was the Reverend Vincent Stanley, for one amazed moment we expected old Carlo himself to emerge disguised in a cloak and cassock, but there was no doubt that the Vicar was a genuine

His 'Amens' were delivered with such *uid\$so jbro/ttnrfo* they sank to the bottom of the lagoon and exploded like depth charges.

Apart from a slight altercation between the Reverend and Miss Spender over the anthem for the psalm, the service proceeded with its usual slow decorum until the announcement of the Te Deum or 'Tedium' as I remember the old Wily Bird calling it in Tangier.

A voice behind us sighed wearily. 'Oh dear, time for Tedipoohs,' adding, 'PooA wrsa intelligentia, Burt insipiens et stultus es£.'

I glanced round in surprise to find a short pear-shaped man with a red face and thick wiry eyebrows. Grey eyes twinkled behind horn-rimmed spectacles, 'Gaudete,' he greeted with a smile.

After the service Burt declared it was time for 'drinki-poohs*', and led us to a back street *caffè* nearby, which on Sunday

mornings seemed to double as the Church vestry. When we arrived the Reverendo was holding forth with our Miss Spender.

At the bar, Burt ordered 'Ginsy-poohs*', and to my amazement the barman delivered them to our table, with a flourish. 'Prego signore, ginzipoo pronto Burt beamed, 'And a little anti-pasta-pooh to go with it perhaps?'

Tam raised his eyes at me and tapped his head.

'I'm not entirely potty-pooh,' declared Burt, munching olives and anchovies. 'I have some newsipoo from Rhodes-pooh/ He tugged out a notebook and frowned at the carefully-pencilled pages. 'Must just consult my4'dreary". Ah, here we are. No, no we're not. Yes, we are/

I began to feel dizzy. Finally he decided, 'Accademia Hotel at eightypoohs, Gosh that's tonight, I am glad I found you in time. Now I must be off to visit the Armenian Monastery. It's one of their Saint's days and we're all having a big wail together.*

We followed him back to the Campo where he departed humming "Three old ladies locked in a lavatory' It must have been for the benefit of our landlady, who was strolling behind, still arguing with the Vicar.

"What a ghastly little man,' Miss Spender exclaimed. In the circumstances it was hard not to agree.

If one mystery had started, at least another was solved. The Sunday "Gazette* announced that the source of the rat disease had been traced to infected wine barrels. It seemed

that diseased rats had gnawed the wooden stoppers of various casks, fallen in and drowned. In one cask, responsible for the deaths of half the victims, a dozen rat skeletons were discovered. I began to wonder whether Washington might be wise in his choice of beverage after all. Still the authorities were taking no chances, and continued to disinfect the alleys and canals until the entire City smelt of antiseptic.

There was another question that I had to fend off. Who was this Rhodes, Tam kept asking? When Washington had mentioned the name in Luxor it meant nothing to him, but now his curiosity was roused, I a friend of Willis,⁵ was all I allowed myself to admit, But what was going to happen when they met, Heaven only knew.

The Accademia must be one of the few family hotels left in Venice. In front there is a canal leading into the Grand Canal, at the back a rambling walled garden. There was nothing much in the garden, apart from gravel, grass, a few trees and some abandoned toys, the evening we sat there waiting for Rhodes to show up. Finally a waiter came out to tell us our gondola had arrived.

Outside, tied to the landing jetty, a rather shabby gondola rocked up and down in the darkness. The gondoliero was no sprightly fellow in a striped vest and straw hat. This was a big old brute who crouched and spat at the stern. When we asked him where we were going he simply muttered and laughed. He continued muttering and chuckling to himself as he paddled us slowly out across the Grand Canal and into one of the dank narrow sewers opposite.

Dark walls rose up sheer on either side. As he paddled us steadily through this eerie labyrinth, our had started singing in a low tuneless voice. Whenever we turned into another canal he uttered a cry of warning but we never met any other boats. It felt as if we were being ferried into the underworld by Charon himself. In fact, when he condescended to answer my brusque demand as to where we were going, he merely cackled, 'Paradiso, signore. Due biglietti (two tickets)

I don't remember precisely when I started listening to his singing. It came in snatches, tuneless and out of breath but there was something vaguely familiar about it that I couldn't place, for it sounded strangely like a hymn I knew. And then suddenly it dawned on me. It was a tune familiar to thousands of English schoolboys the world over, bellowed out joyfully on the last day of term. More significant by far was the fact that I had last heard it a year ago ringing encouragingly from our raft the night we were attacked on the Guapore river. But if I recognised the tune, so did the boy. A startled look spread over his face. He peered towards the back of the gondola and surprise changed to shock and fear, I watched his lips start to mouth the name 'Boyet', but no sound emerged.

Standing in the stern, our ferryman continued paddling, seemingly unaware of the impression he had created; a black hunchback shadow leaning forwards over his oar. When I started to blurt out, he shut me up with a crisp 'SiZfnzZo/ In this way we continued another half an hour or so until finally

we nudged along the narrowest canal yet. The overhanging buildings looked utterly deserted. Water lapped the weedy steps of a dark portico where Rhodes guided the boat to a decisive halt, whispered 'Wait,' and vanished.

He returned a few moments later shielding a torch. A pinprick of light was all we had to guide us through the open doorway and into the nobile' beyond. Water lapped the marbled paving and there was an unpleasant stink of decay. Our footsteps echoed through empty rooms. Apart from some huge wine barrels the house seemed abandoned, until, in the far corner of an adjacent room, Rhodes's flashlight picked out an iron cage. When we got up to it I realised there was a body slumped unconscious inside.

"Who is it?" I asked.

'Billy.'

'Oh, my God/ but as I moved forward he stopped me.

'Don't,' he insisted. 'There's a very good chance he may have this rat plague.' And then a noise alerted him. A scraping sound approaching from one of the other rooms, as if something heavy was being dragged across the marble floors.

I glanced back at the unconscious figure of Willis. 'For Christ's sake!' I whispered, 'We've got to get him out of here.' But as I started forward I felt a violent crack on the back of my skull and collapsed helplessly to the floor.

When I came to, we were back in the open gondola, myself, Rhodes and Tam. No one else. No Willis. A cold breeze stung my face and low waves slapped the boat sides. We had left

the City far behind and were moving steadily across the vast black lagoon. I rubbed my head ruefully.

‘You all right, Guv?’ enquired the boy. He sounded understandably nervous, but I felt too awful just then to have much spare sympathy.

‘Sorry, James,’ Rhodes called out from the stern, ‘I had to do it. If they had poxed him up and you touched him, it wouldn’t have done any of us much good.’

My head hurt too much to argue. Rhodes went on.

‘Whatever else they have in mind for him, they certainly don’t intend to dump him just yet. You can be reassured on that score. In another room I came upon a crate labelled Alexandria. It’s my guess they intend to ship him out in it, together with a consignment of the infected pet food from L.A. It would have hardly helped if they spotted us.’

I wasn’t able to think clearly. I was still condemning him as a callous bastard for leaving Willis behind when I remembered something he’d just said. ‘Shipping him where?’

‘Egypt, I assume. The Dana Sirena returns in a few days.’

‘But one man can’t start a plague,¹ I protested feebly. ‘Or can he? And why by sea? Why not by air?’

‘Too risky these days. When the Dana berths at Alex, they can slip anything out they want, provided they’ve bribed the right officials.¹

‘But if Willis already has the disease ...’ I gave up. Every word I spoke was a stab of pain.

Rhodes thrust forward on the long oar. 'The virus can take days to incubate. After that, all hell breaks loose. A few crates of contaminated pet food go a long way/

I squeezed my head in my hands for the little comfort it gave. So poor old Willis was doomed, turned into a carrier, as dangerous as any nuclear missile and aimed straight at one of the most congested cities in the world - Cairo.

It was too horrible by half. I could only believe someone like Mengele himself having a hand in it. Even in my numbed state I realised the cunning behind the plan. Sending Willis like an angel of death from Venice, would nicely lift any suspicions from the crew filming the Curse of King Tut.

I listened forlornly to the regular sound of Rhodes's paddling. 'If it's any help,¹ he added, 'had we been earlier, there might have been time to get him safely out, pretend he escaped.'

I nodded gloomily. I couldn't trust myself to say anything that wasn't condemnatory. Rhodes stopped paddling, and to my surprise the gondola grounded on a little beach. A ruined house stood among a tangle of trees. We had landed on one of the many abandoned islets that dot the lagoon.

'How do you feel, guv?¹ the boy enquired. I might have asked the same of him. For although Rhodes appeared to ignore him, I had no doubt both knew exactly who the other was.

'Bloody/ I said, stumbling behind him across some slippery rubble, to the house. Rhodes shone the torch through a broken doorway into the room beyond. 'Better have a look at that hard-hat of yours, James. May have to patch it up/

I sank onto the damp stone floor. 'Where's Ko Sam, Rhodes?'

'She's all right/

'Where is she?'

He stood undecided in the middle of the room, massaging his stiff muscles, and staring out through the doorway to the black lagoon beyond. And then he began to speak.

Ko Sam

Rhodes's story began in Cuaba, the year before. It was here he had parted company with Willis, but although he had left him a note and some money, Rhodes omitted to tell Willis the real reason for his sudden departure.

Ever since they had crawled out of the jungle, more dead than alive, Rhodes had been trying to find out what happened to Ko Sam. By the time they reached Cuaba he had decided to leave Willis and try to get back to Guajayamerin on the Guapore river, when one of those chance things happened to make all that unnecessary. Thumbing through a newspaper in Cuaba, the first he'd seen in an age, and trying to interpret the Portuguese, he came on a photograph of a German doctor missionary. The story line described how, while visiting the settlements on the Guapore river, her raft boat had been overwhelmed in the flood. She had been rescued by Indians and was now on her way to help in a social welfare programme at the Sao Pio X hospital in Ceres. What riveted Rhodes's attention was the face in the background. Although it was thin and pinched from starvation and fatigue, Rhodes had no difficulty in recognising Ko Sam.

Without a moment's hesitation he decided to travel across country to Ceres - which he discovered was not far from Brasilia - and to catch up later with Willis in Rio. On balance, Rhodes preferred Willis to arrive in Rio without him, for he

reckoned that if anyone was expecting to contact him there, they would be much more likely to do so if he were alone*

Rhodes knew it was equally important for Willis to believe he was on his own. That was what spurred him to write his 'cheerio'* note before catching the bus to Goiana, where he changed for Ceres, arriving there twenty-four hours later,

After all the time spent in the jungle, that drive out to Ceres acted like a tonic on his spirits. The green cultivated hills sparkled in the morning sunshine. As the dilapidated bus crawled from one village to the next, Rhodes felt he was back in Spain or Portugal, not South America* But when he stepped down by the river in Ceres and started walking up the shady side of this sleepy town, towards the hospital, his anxieties returned* He still had no idea what had happened to Ko Sam or even if he would find her there.

Shaded by giant mango trees, the Sao Pio X hospital stood on a hillside above the far end of the town, A queue of peasants waited patiently outside the clinic. As he made his enquiries, Rhodes was charmed by the friendly lack of officialdom. A girl took him through the kitchen garden to a bungalow where hammocks were slung below the shady verandah. In one of them a girl was rocking herself slowly backwards and forwards. Rhodes softly called out 'Sammy', and she stared round at him with a startled, almost frightened look on her face.

For a moment both of them were too overwhelmed to say anything. All of a sudden Rhodes felt desperately weary. For weeks past he had been buoyed up, first by the responsibility

of getting Willis and himself out of the jungle to safety, but also by a steadfast determination to find Ko Sam, and now, all in a rush it seemed, here she was*

They just stared at one another hardly daring to speak, and then the pent-up distress of all those past weeks burst and they fell into each other's arms, Ko Sam sobbing uncontrollably and Rhodes holding her closely.

Of what was actually said those first few minutes, Rhodes had no recollection, but it seemed to him that even as she held him, the drawn lines on her face softened, colour came back into her cheeks and the first faint sparkle returned to her eyes.

He turned to me, the cold outline of his face clearly visible in the moonlight. (I had no notion of what she had been through/ he explained. * In fact my first thought was that having put her in the family way you'd done the dishonourable thing and bugged off. But at that moment the German missionary appeared/ He paused. I'll let Ko Sam tell her own story to you when she wants to. Let me just say this. When their boat broke up in the storm her immediate concern was survival. Somehow they managed to claw a way across the flooded river on bits of debris, with tree trunks thundering past. It was afterwards, when she had time to think, that she became obsessed with guilt/

"Guilt!" I exclaimed.

Rhodes nodded thoughtfully. 'She felt she had abandoned you. You see, after the storm she became convinced that we

were both dead. Unfortunately, she also doubted she would ever see you again. All the time they struggled through the jungle, bitten to death by insects, feverish, starved, vomiting, it required the unflagging care of Freda, the missionary doctor, to stop her miscarrying/

"Miscarrying! I cried out, unable to restrain myself.

"She was pregnant/ Rhodes announced soberly. Then he chuckled 'Now you're the father of a bouncing baby, Jimmy junior!'

I was too overwhelmed to speak. A torrent of contradictory emotions besieged my thoughts. Foremost among them guilt and worry at her suffering alone. But there was also a selfish joy that I could not restrain, a joy that rose up inside me. I smiled at both of them in amazement, unable to hold back the tears of happiness.

"You're a Daddy, Guv/ said Tam. But in spite of his attempt to sound cheerful, he could not hide the strain he was under. Suddenly on becoming a father, I felt the fearful predicament both of them were in. Rhodes and Tam, father and son with one awful unresolved secret separating them.

Outside, the dark waters of the lagoon glittered in the moonlight. To break the silence I said, 'God only knows what sort of in-laws this makes us all/ None of us attempted to work that one out. Instead Rhodes quietly pursued his story.

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T stayed a week at Ceres* The hospital was unusual for Brazil - it was free. The doctors were actually dedicated. They even

tried to prevent sickness!’ He gave a dry chuckle, ‘And that was the damndest thing, because it cost nothing, the poor people didn’t believe in it. Instead they went to the quack clinic down the road, where they were told they needed their appendix out, given an anaesthetic, had a little nick made in the skin, nothing more, and charged all their savings/

T liked Ceres,’ he continued, ‘There’s a wide river running over the rapids. Fishermen seem to spend the day dragging boats up against the current. The only other occupation was flailing rice, sweeping it and turning it in the streets, in the midday sun, while the rich merchants - the middle men - sat on their fat arses in the shade, counting their greedy shekels/

‘Then you returned to Rio/ I interrupted.

He nodded, and taking up the story, described how he left Ko Sam in Ceres and continued on to Rio. He glanced at both of us. ‘By my calculations the day I reached Rio was the same day that Willis was kidnapped/

‘You can hardly blame yourself for that/

‘I don’t/ he said crisply. In fact it was probably for the best. Had I been there I might have been tempted to rescue him/

T doubt it, Rhodes/ I said whimsically, feeling my own sore head. Then I added, ‘If he’d already been nabbed, how the heck did you get on his trail ?’

I was forgetting that Rhodes knew Willis better than his own shadow. Rio may be one of the most dramatically sited cities in the world, but Rhodes knew that the glamorous

Copacabana suburb would hold little attraction for Willis. The streets of Urea, tucked under the lee of Sugar Loaf Rock, across the bay from Botafoga, seemed more likely, except they were too suburban and there were no cheap hotels* Finally Rhodes settled for Rua Catete, a block away from the Flamengo beach. It was a big enough street to be anonymous in. The metro ran under it, heading straight for the city centre and there were plenty of cheap food places in Largo Marchada - the Piazza Navona of the city, where by night the poets, acrobats, drunks and pickpockets emerged to perform their stunts. Rhodes knew instinctively that Willis's bolt hole would be nearby and he struck lucky with the third hotel he tried, the Victoria. It was clean, cheap, friendly, and the price of the room included breakfast. Rhodes could even visualise Willis's grin as he signed the register. And there it was, his old familiar scrawl. According to the Manager, Willis had paid every three days in advance. He had only paid the previous morning, but he still hadn't come back. The Manager was rather concerned, Rhodes was taken to his room and allowed to examine Willis's luggage. At this point he appeared to lose interest, shrugged off any responsibility and left as quickly as he could. The last thing he wanted was to be questioned by the police or spotted by any observers who might still be hanging around.

Rhodes checked into another hotel up a side street and took stock. He had recognised from the state of Willis's room that no one had broken in, or forced him out. He grinned wryly. 'I know Billy's handwriting. This time he had left no messages.'

Far away across the dark lagoon a pinprick of light flashed twice and vanished. Rhodes noticed it, but he didn't pause in his story. His first night in Rio, as he prowled the park behind Flamengo beach, he realised how perfect it was for a hit job.

Next morning he caught a bus from the city centre out along Avenida Rio de Janeiro. Here amid the spaghetti junction of underpasses and overpasses he found the Associated Press Office and waited outside until Bruce Hillman, a time-serving crony of his from way back, emerged. As with so many of Rhodes's old buddies, Bruce wasn't exactly overjoyed to see him. Even less when Rhodes told him what he wanted.

However, he agreed to meet later for a drink at the airport bar - the Santos Dumont airport, where flights took off every five minutes for Sao Paolo. Rhodes waited at the bar and then he waited outside. Bruce never showed, but as Rhodes walked back through the trees, past the Yacht Club, a figure shambled up to him.

'Hey man, you looking for something?'

Rhodes studied him keenly. The half-caste was wrapped up in a strange assortment of clothes. 'Bruce, baby. Bruce,' he whispered, giving Rhodes a strong whiff of stale booze in the process. He watched with a greedy smile while Rhodes handed him a five-dollar bill* 'Word on the street says your friend gone. Some mean old boys grabbed him down on the prata (beach) and bundled him away.'

'Where?'

The man shrugged and flapped his arms like a bird. 'Away, away,' and with that he loped off into the bushes* Putting two and two together, Rhodes immediately retraced his steps towards the city centre with the intention of making enquiries at each airline office. In fact he struck lucky at the first one, the KLM office at the bottom of Rio Branco* Willis's name was typed at the end of the passenger list for that very same afternoon's flight to Lisbon and Amsterdam. Rhodes walked to the next street intersection and telephoned Bruce Hillman from a call box. Hillman was more than indignant but Rhodes held his ground, told him what he wanted to know, and rang off. He knew that Hillman had previously worked a tour in Lisbon and intuition told him to concentrate there rather than Amsterdam* The hunch paid off, by next morning he knew that Willis, escorted by two men, had boarded a connecting flight for Rome. That was all he needed to know.

Rhodes returned to Ceres on the next bus and brought Ko Sam back with him to Rio. He was in no hurry. In fact he wanted to waste a few days. So they became tourists, taking the cog railway up to the giant cross on the top of Corcovado where the photographers cried, 'fotog-afo con Cristo complete.' They strolled through the tropical gardens, where Ko Sam so admired the giant Amazon lilies - big enough to stand on. No one would have guessed that she had fought for her life in that jungle just a short while ago. Finally, after a week they boarded a flight for Geneva. From here they travelled by coach to Innsbruck where they caught a train over the Brenner Pass to Bolzano, getting off at Klausen and catching a local bus up into the Vai Gardens,

It was evening when they arrived at Selva, The sun was shining on the mountain peaks, cowbells were tinkling and the alpine meadows were blue with autumn crocuses, Ko Sam was enchanted. Rhodes led the way to the house of a family of wood-carvers, the Musslers. Only the old man still carved in the cellar. His sons had built a hotel in the village. As a boy, Rhodes had spent many holidays here and Mussler was delighted to rent him the bottom floor of the chalet. It was here, after hiring a girl in the village to look after her, that Rhodes left Ko Sam to have her baby.

"Didn't she ever ask about me?' I enquired.

He nodded, 'Always, and I told her exactly what I told you in Sensati.'

"The only difference was that you didn't know I was safe and sound, or .., did you ?'

Rhodes didn't reply, leaving me to wonder who his man was back home in England. Steptoe, or the Vicar. It didn't really matter now, "So that brings us up to when?' I asked.

He didn't answer directly. 'You see, James, I had to go down to Rome quite a bit. I wanted to keep an eye on Billy. See what he was up to without his knowing. By now they had finished the film they were making at Camerota. I was quite taken by surprise when Billy suddenly skedaddled oft to Hollywood, but I was even more surprised when everyone else scarpered. One day they were there — King Freddy and all his merry men. Next day they had vanished.'

The boy nudged me, 'Like I told you, Guv/

I said to Rhodes, 'So it was you watching me that night from behind Pino and Dino's.'

He nodded. T was also keeping a look out for Charles Stanley. Trouble was, Ko Sam went into labour a month early and I had to get back north. We brought her to a clinic here in Venice. Then I got a frantic telephone call from that guy Washington, saying you'd all gone off on some treasure hunt in Umbria, followed by a cable saying the Wily Bird had unexpectedly taken up winter residence in his tower at San Mam. I came straight down to investigate and the rest you know.'

'And Ko Sam,' I said.

There followed an awkward pause before he admitted, 'She was fine when I left her. So was the baby.' Reluctantly he added, 'When I left you at Sensati I went straight back to Venice. Ko Sam had vanished/

'Oh my God!' I blurted out. 'And the baby?'

He ignored that. 'They tricked her into believing I had arranged it. You see, she was due to leave that day or the next. Outside, a hired ambulance was waiting to drive her back to Selva. Except it took her straight to Istanbul/

I was almost frantic.

'Calm down, Guv,' whispered the boy. 'She's all right.'

I could scarcely contain myself, as Rhodes explained how he set off in pursuit in the only car he could lay his hands on - a battered old 2CV. It was the maddest chase he had ever been

in and the most deadly. He didn't even stop to eat, all the way down through Yugoslavia. T had a kilo bag of sugar/ he told us. 'I kept going on that/ At Thessalonika he turned along the coast to Kavala, reached the border at Edirne and crossed the river bridge, where Turks in sandbagged positions guarded the far side. Once he had completed customs formalities, he raced straight on to Istanbul. 'Istanbul was like a Keystone Cops chase. There were a couple of big old Chevrolet taxis that tried to bounce

me off into the Bosphorus, I'd seen one of them tailing me since the border. Trouble is, all the cars in Istanbul are ancient Chewies, Oldsmobiles and Plymouths, all battered and listing to helh What with the horns blaring and everyone trying to swerve past everyone else, it's pure mayhem/ Rhodes in his very obvious old 2CV had difficulty shaking off his pursuers. He dodged down among the tumbledown streets of wooden houses behind the Blue Mosque, came out on the waterfront and managed to get into a fast lane of traffic that sped him over the Galata Bridge and up the steep cobbled lane on the far side. He abandoned the car near die old Crimean church and hurried on foot to the Hilton. Parked conspicuously outside, stood three Rolls Royces and a white ambulance van. News of his arrival had preceded him, for as he was deciding what to do next, the entire entourage came tumbling out of the hotel, bags, poodle and the biggest stetson hat Rhodes had ever seen.

'But no Ko Sam/ I said.

He agreed. 'That rather puzzled me until the ambulance whizzed off back towards Galata. Despite its flashing blue light, the traffic was so snarled up it could only go at a snail's pace and I managed to follow on a bicycle that I had commandeered.

'By now it was dark and raining. The ambulance crawled along the dingy streets down Galata Hill, until it drew up by some big green gates, with a policeman posted outside/ The reason for the police became obvious to Rhodes the moment the gates opened. Inside was the whores' quarter. A noisy and excited crowd milled about, staring through the display windows where bulging beauties, attired in only the barest essentials were idly polishing their nails or adjusting their make-up, while awaiting the next eager customer.

Through one such window Rhodes watched anxiously as Ko Sam clutching her baby was led down the back stairs and out to the waiting ambulance. Even he had to admire the cunning of keeping her in such a place, where no questions would be asked* Afterwards she explained that she thought it was to prevent her noticing the unsavoury visitors who gathered in Freddy's hotel suite at all hours. 'They looked like hired assassins in the movies/ she told him.

Getting back to that first night in Istanbul, fortunately for Rhodes, the Crimean church where he had parked the 2CV was just around the corner, so that he was able to catch up with Freddy's convoy as it headed out towards the suspension bridge over the Bosphorus and into Asia.

Without a map, Rhodes had no idea where they were going. Driving only on his sidelights, some way behind the convoy, he found the concentration nerve-racking, especially since he hadn't slept in three nights* Finally his eyes closed and he swayed off the road, coming to a lucky soft landing in a clump of tamarisk bushes. He didn't even bother to get out and survey the damage. He spread himself as best he could across the front seats and slept*

He was fortunate* The only damage sustained to the 2CV was a bent fender, As for catching up with the convoy next day, Rhodes soon realised that the road intersections were invariably close to villages, Wherever he stopped, he was immediately surrounded by an eager crowd of small boys* He only had to scratch the outline of three limousines in the dirt and hand out a few lire, to be pointed in the right direction* At dusk he reached Denizli. The Americans, it seemed, were camped up on the plateau above the town, by the hot springs. Slap bang in the middle of the ancient Roman city of Pamukalac,

Waiting until dark to drive up there, he discovered the Rolls Royces parked outside a small hotel - the only inhabited building for miles* Elsewhere ruins of forums and amphitheatres and temples spread away on each side* What interested Rhodes far more, however, was the sound of singing. It was a girl's voice and it came from a steaming pool, a hundred yards from the hotel* Not a soul was in sight and Rhodes cautiously crept through the undergrowth to the water, where Ko Sam was washing the baby and herself*

He had to restrain her whoops of joy at seeing him. Astonishment, delight and tears followed in quick succession, as Rhodes bundled her back to the car and set off in the direction of Bodrum and the Aegean coast.

'So where is she now?' I asked, adding, 'but didn't the others give chase?'

He shook his head. 'That was the strangest thing. I even began to wonder if they had used her as a decoy just to get me out of the way for a while. Don't worry, she hadn't been harmed. If she had, I wouldn't have let them get away.'

'Where is she now?' I repeated, but Rhodes clammed up. 'You'll see soon enough.'¹

I nodded dumbly. Although there were still many questions unanswered, now was not the time for them. The lights we had seen earlier flashed again, much nearer, and over the black water we could make out a rubber dinghy pulling towards us.

The Island of Olives

Blue Dawn was the name of the boat. Next morning, to my untutored gaze she possessed all the appeal of a brig straight out of the pages of Treasure Island. Patched brown sails bellied beneath the creaking spars. On the raised poop at the stern, Rhodes stood silently beside the wheel, while up front Tam sat astride the bowsprit staring out to sea.

Judging by the snores echoing out of the forward skylight, the skipper was 'kipping' down below. Last night there had been another crew, an Arab lad who lived in the forepeak among the spare sails and the anchor chain.

With the wind from astern, Blue Dawn surged ahead, catching a lift on the back of each passing wave. Grabbing the rail for safety I moved unsteadily to the bows. Tam turned and grinned. I noticed how the tension seemed to have left him. For the first time in weeks his eyes sparkled. Whatever had passed between him and Rhodes had worked wonders on him.

'Want a cuppa, guv?*' he said, and shot down the open hatch as nimbly as a monkey. I moved laboriously back to the stern.

Tm not made for this/ I told Rhodes.

'You'll get used to it soon enough, lad,' he grinned, never for an instant taking his eyes off the seas ahead. Tam clambered up with mugs of tea.

'Want to take a turn at the helm?' Rhodes asked him.

'Keep her steady on 150 or thereabouts.' He placed Tarn's hands on the wheel and sat down beside me, 'Well now, James/ he said, 'Do you want to know where we're going?' 'Egypt, I assume/ I said, 'but why the boat?'

He chuckled, "Only way I could think of getting out of Venice undetected* If this wind holds we should reach Corfu in four days, after that it's anyone's guess.'

In the event we made it in three, but that was because we had half a gale pushing us past the Tremiti islands* Under grey skies and breaking seas we saw the grim cliffs of the Gargano peninsula to the west and then, only open seas until we reached Fano Island in the early hours of the morning, a day later.

Rhodes was right about getting used to it. My hands were callused from handling ropes and my skin was salted down to an old kipper's. The Fano lighthouse beckoned us into Greek waters, and we spent the day scudding on, past the sandstone cliffs of Sidari and across the great bay of Ypsos, watching the old Venetian port of Kerkira growing out the haze* But we didn't stop. The wind carried us on south beyond Lefkimi point, where years before Rhodes and Willis and the Wily Bird had put into the shallow Lefkimi river for the night, in their leaky sloop. Now we left the white cliffs of Capo Bianca behind and watched the green smudge of Paxos growing on our right.

We passed the tip of Paxos in the late afternoon and hove to in a perfect bay with a stone jetty, a few houses nestled

under the olive trees and wooded hills behind. 'Why are we stopping?' I asked, and the others grinned. It was only as we lowered the dinghy that I spotted Ko Sam smiling on the quay*

'We're off again in the morning/ shouted Rhodes as I raced to meet her. 'Make the most of it/

For the rest of my life in this world and possibly the next one too, Longos will remain the loveliest spot on this earth* It was here that something I believed lost for ever was found again.

Peeping out between the gnarled olive trees, Ko Sam's white-washed cottage overlooked that tiny bay. The view reminded me of the treehouse in England, Beyond the headland blue seas spread away to the hazy mainland mountains rising above Parga. There was a walled garden beside the house with pomegranate, lemon and plum trees, A wild rose rambled above the door lintel and the shutters were all painted a deep subterranean green.

Inside, lost in a world of slumber, a chubby face lay pressed to its pillow, sucking a thumb. 'I called him James,' she said, with her arms around me and her chin tucked over my shoulder. 'It couldn't be any other name/

Later, as I lay staring across our little upstairs room, while the shadows lengthened, I recalled those never to be forgotten lines learned in childhood — "I remember, I remember, the house where I was born, the little window, where the sun came peeping in at morn . *." The words came easily, for I

was a child again, in a strange, wholly new world. Both of us children* Wide-eyed and staring out. Discovery is not only a word for explorers. It was our word too and we were lost and happy in it. When I think back, in the magical moment of our lovemaking, time stood completely still* It felt as if we were both falling out of the sky* The Greek word 'Agapo\ to love, like the cry of a wounded bird falling for ever and never hitting the ground; ripples in a stream widening and fading into stillness* A million years and more it seemed we lay there*

Afterwards, we swam in the clear green bay, while the moon rose over the black silhouetted hills, fireflies darted mysteriously and the sea swelled into a vast silver lake. A dog barked on one of the fishing caiques moored up to the quay- The fishermen, sipping ouzo at a table outside the only shop, greeted Ko Sam as we stepped back up to the house*

"Kairete^ they said, joy be with you.'

There was another surprise in store that evening* For in my delight at being reunited with Ko Sam and the thrill of seeing my son for the first time, I had entirely forgotten about Tam, who had discreetly remained on board Blue Dawn.

Knowing what I did, T could well understand his hesitation at meeting his sister, but later that evening there was a knock at the door. A boy stood outside beckoning. 'Ela, ela (Come, come)/ he insisted, and taking the baby with us we followed him down the stony path into the village.

On the quayside, tables had been set out and the entire village appeared to have been invited to the celebrations. For that was what it turned out to be. By the flares of the pressure lanterns I was delighted to see Tam and his father sitting together. As we approached, Rhodes waved for us to join them and everyone applauded.

I need not go into the details of that supper. Reunions and celebrations are the same the world over. There were tears as well as embraces, smiles for friends found mingled with sadness for those absent. What was very clear from the word go, was how much the entire village had taken Ko Sam to their hearts. In their eyes she was one of the 'boat people', their boat girl, which had a special significance in a community of fishermen. And possibly because we, her family, had also arrived by boat that made us doubly welcome. In fractured English they told us that we had come like the Argonauts, but not, they hoped, to steal away their Treasure'.

In that lay the crux of my dilemma, for having finally found her I was loath to let her go, loath to abandon her once again however briefly, for the uncertain dangers that might lie ahead. To Hell with that, I thought, duty and loyalty were words that belonged to Rhodes and the Boy Scout troop, of whose code he seemed the last defender. It was love I treasured now more than anything else and the sharing and the caring that were promised with it. Lose that again and anything else that we might or might not achieve would be hollow and meaningless. After these last few hours re-united

with Ko Sam, I knew just how empty my life had been during this past year. On the other hand, although I knew she would never say anything, could I face the unspoken criticism in her eyes during the years ahead, if I abandoned at this stage, Rhodes and Tam, the only family left to her in the world ?

There were many speeches, most of which I could not understand. Not that it really mattered. The smiles, the gestures and the applause were speeches in themselves. The tables were heaped with food; feta cheese and black olives, new bread, stuffed tomatoes, red mullets. Wine and ouzo flowed in abundance. In comparison to my inept stuttering - limited to 'farakalo' and 'Evkarislo' - when Rhodes stood up to speak he sounded rather impressive. To their undisguised delight, he spoke not the rather pompous 'Katharevousa' but 'demotiki' — the common tongue of the people and we could see that they loved him. Not for what he said, which was brief enough, but for what he was. It was the leader in him, the slight but firm smile, the ice-blue eyes that they admired. As he stood there in the lamplight, big as a bull, for them he became Byron and Theseus rolled into one. Or perhaps Ulysses sailing home over the wine-dark seas in his black ship.

Whether or not Ko Sam had any inkling of Tam's story, I hesitate to hazard a guess. One thing was clear. As they sat there she reached across and took his hand, and judging by the glow that lit up his face, that was reward greater than anything else he could have been given. I remembered the depths of his despair after we had returned to Rome from

the south, and I recalled too, Willis's admonition that mightn't I have committed in my own heart worse deeds than he was supposed to have done. Glancing up, I spotted Rhodes watching me. Was I imagining the barely perceptible shake of his head, the dismissing movement in his eyes? Did he know something we didn't? As if in confirmation he put his massive arms round the boy and Ko Sam and hugged them.

When the tables were pushed back, the balalaikas came out and with the music, the dancing. In a long line, the men of Longos swayed majestically back and forwards to the rhythm and the clapping. Ko Sam sat there gently rocking the baby, and then we quietly slipped away*

In the night I woke up. A donkey ee-awed in the hills and then a cockerel took up the cry. Too early by far, I thought wistfully as Ko Sam shifted against me, her arm nestling over my chest, her breath softly brushing my face. Go back to sleep, cockerel, I thought, and leave us in peace.

I didn't say goodbye. I knew I couldn't manage that without upsetting both of us* Instead, like a coward I slipped out of her light embrace* Deep in sleep, she momentarily protested before curling up quietly again. I took a long last look at her quiet face, kissed the baby softly on the forehead and left the house,

Dawn was glowing behind the mainland mountains, as I stepped down through the trees to the bay* Before I got there, I could hear the boat engine thudding into life, and the anchor chain rattling over the bow winch. A little while later,

as we glided out into the milky sea I dared not look back, terrified in case I should suddenly hear Ko Sam calling my name. Instead, as the olive-covered hills of Paxos slipped away behind us I busied myself stowing ropes and mopping the deck, It was only when I glanced up and saw tears glistening on Tam's cheek that I realised we both shared the same loss.

A mile to the south of Paxos, the windswept sister island of Anti-paxos guarded the southern approaches with its tortured limestone cliffs. A few hundred yards beyond it, a stack of rocks thrust out of the sea, like a builder's brick stack left over in the making of the world. Beyond that, the empty Mediterranean sea glowed all the way to the shores of Africa*

A line of Seferis kept repeating itself ominously in my head*
“Their oars mark the place where they fell by the shore.
No one remembers them. Justice.”

Brokers of Doom

According to Rhodes, Cairo was where we'd have to make it up as we went along. 'Making it up/ I thought wryly, as the tram shunted Tam and me in from Heliopolis, could as easily have referred to my Arabic. I had mastered one phrase only — "Col hena jil howa sowa - to blow with the wind.' Someone had said it to me the day before and I remembered it. I couldn't remember 'Hallo' or 'Goodbye', but I could say that.

'It's all very well for Rhodes to deliver his pep talk/ I declared grudgingly, as the crowded tram rattled and clanged into the city centre. All very well for him to announce that from now on we were taking the initiative and that the hunted were going to be the hunters. It would have had more impact if the troops he commanded didn't consist of just Tam and myself.

As we got off the tram in Rameses Square, the loudspeakers began crackling from the minarets and the noontime call to prayer wailed over the rooftops, drowning even the noise of the traffic.

'I expect Bill can hear that, Guv/ volunteered Tam hopefully. 'I suppose Allah must know where he is/ He sounded as weary as I felt. We bought a copy of the Cairo Daily to see if the advertisement that Rhodes had decided on had been put in the paper. Tucked between the lists of apartments for rent and the time of church services was the clear bold message, "Segada War Veterans Reunion. Date to be announced/'

Segada was the mountain village in the Northern Philippines where, two years earlier, Willis and I had tracked Rhodes down. To be honest, I'm still not sure whether it wasn't he who tracked us down, but ever since then, 'Segada' had become our clarion call.

'It's a big if,' I said morosely. 'Why should they even allow him a newspaper? Last wish of a doomed man?'

Tam frowned. 'Guv, if this goon Dulaney is holding him, chances are they get the paper. Nothing much else to read in English.'

'That's supposing he can read.' I didn't mean to dash his hopes unnecessarily. After a cold lemonade, we walked slowly through Tarhir Square to the river and stepped into the air-conditioned cool of the Hilton foyer. Considering we didn't even have a room, I felt a bit of a fool asking for messages. I was even more surprised to be handed one back. Inside the envelope was Rhodes's cryptic message. 'Gazira Sporting Club/

We never seemed to find a taxi with a meter that worked. 'Free ride, free ride,' beamed the drivers. Of course it never was. When we got out, the usual furious haggling ensued. By now I had adopted Rhodes's technique of writing down the cab number and saying the magic words 'Tourist Police/

We walked up the drive to the clubhouse. Tennis on one side, golf on the other. Through the fence the city urchins watched in bemusement, calling rather halfhear-

tedly, as if they knew they didn't belong. I wasn't entirely sure we did either. Nevertheless, we stepped inside to find Wyllie regarding us from the other side of the lounge, Seneca beside him.

'My dear boy, this is a delightful surprise/ he declared.

'Seneca is pleased, aren't you, you old misery? He's been down in the dumps ever since Luxor. Misses his pals I think/

'How did you know where we were?' I asked him.

He grinned impishly, "I didn't. In my day, one left messages at one's club, now one has to resort to American Express. I presume it was young Boyet Rhodes summoned you.'

I glanced cautiously around. 'Don't worry, my dear boy, the Americans wouldn't set foot in a place like this. Sniffs far too much of the Raj, don't you think? Our film crew are all holed up in an apartment block owned by an Italian contessa. Says she is. A real old dragon. Thinks she's the bees' knees. Even old Freddy Goebbels has to grovel. Rare treat to watch.'

'Why here, why not the Hilton?'

A crafty expression crossed his face. "Friend Freddy wasn't a Boy Scout of America for nothing, as he never ceases to tell us. If one's in the business of spreading curses, a good moated castle is what you need. I suppose an island in the Nile is the next best thing.' He stroked Seneca's head.

"What happened at Luxor?' I asked him.

He frowned thoughtfully. "As per the script. Freddy doesn't have a great deal of original thought under that stetson.

Yours truly, as the renowned Victorian Egyptologist, removed the mask of the mummy only to find to his horror, the living head of the Rat God.' He smiled at us, "All very frightening I'm sure on the big screen. Anyway, well and truly cursed, I stagger out of the tomb clutching my blinded eyes and from that point on we are treated to one of the famous plagues of Egypt - King Tut's parting present.'

"So what happens next?'

He peered around with his monocle. 'My dear boy, how do I know? I don't think we've got that far. But then with films one can never be sure. They might have shot the ending months ago.'

I was puzzled. "Aren't you in it?'

Wyllie tut-tutted and the boy broke in, 'Guv, he got the curse, didn't he? He's as dead as a dodo.'

The Wily Bird beamed. 'Together with my pith helmet I collapsed, vomiting into the Nile/ He glared at us with mock horror. 'But the curse carries on/

"That's what I was afraid of/ I said.

"As for the precise details/ went on Wyllie, "you'll have to speak with Washington. When I left he was taking his morning beverage. Keeps him big and keeps him strong, so he claims. Even Seneca has nothing to say about that. Not a ritual he'd ever heard of and he knows most of 'em, don't you, you old sadist?'

"And Willis ?'

The old boy looked worried. 'Poor old Billy. I daresay they've got him holed up somewhere. I heard that "The Crate" had been delivered/ He glanced at his watch and got up stiffly. 'Time for our outing on the river, I believe/ He smiled at Tam. "Don't mind carrying Seneca, do you, dear boy?'

We followed him through the grounds to the river, where a felucca was waiting at the water's edge. Rhodes and Washington were already on board. At least I assumed it was Rhodes. He was dressed in striped pyjamas and had shaved his head. Washington on the other hand simply looked bigger and blacker than ever.

We waited until the boatman had set sail and drifted into midstream before we got down to business. Washington confirmed that the entire film crew were shooting out at the pyramids of Giza. The day before, Freddy G had been out to some desert monastery with Dulaney and another of his guards. But the Rolls Royce had turned up in the evening as usual and Washington assumed it had been no more than a tourist trip. "Ain't nothin' out at that place 'cept these Copt dudes with their long beards and them fine crosses/ He fingered his own silver emblem — a Rastafarian Jesus riding a whale. Tf I ever get to Ethiopia/ he said wistfully, "Maybe I'll see more of 'em/

Rhodes steered the subject back to the present. He wanted to know if they could be up to anything at the pyramids but D.C. doubted it. "Them pyramids too public, man. Unless you think they plan to kidnap the sphinx/ Washington

consulted some notes scribbled on the back of an envelope. 'Accordin' to the script, there's this big scene of old King Tut being brought down to Cairo to be packed off to England. Goin' to shoot all that in old Cairo, which ain't changed nothin' in years. When the crowd sees the gold coffin unloaded, they all goes crazy. They knows them rumours how these Pharaoh dudes take the gravy train with 'em to the next world. So they tries to rob the coffin. And out comes the Rat God. He's the curse, man. And they all get blinded and mad and all that/

T still can't see where Willis comes into all this/ I said.

The boy gazed at me crestfallen. 'Oh come off it, guv. There'll be a bleeding riot. Remember the breadmen in Venice and them millions of peckin' birds? There'll be thousands of kids and beggars and everyone squabblin' and fightin' and snatchin5/ He slowed down his torrent of words. 'Guv, if that box is full of this rat plague, just imagine the result.'

'Yes, but/ I began, and then I gave up. That still didn't explain Willis. If Willis was the carrier then he could be dumped in any old gutter. Why risk lugging him around with them, like a time bomb that could go off at any moment?

That evening, we took a taxi out to old Cairo, to have a look at where the Curse of King Tut was scheduled to be filmed.

It made an impressive location. A miledong stretch of battlemented walls contained a morass of stinking slums, entered through a tall mediaeval gateway. Outside, a broad road led away to the desert. On the further side there was a

huge cemetery with tombs the size of small houses, so that at first glance it appeared like some silent suburb of the dead.

There was nothing silent or suburban about the living world inside the city gateway. The alleys were either rutted with iron-hard mud or knee deep in muck and refuse. Goats and hens and rats shared the spoils with hordes of half-naked urchins. Flies swarmed over everyone. Fleas jumped like sandhoppers. In filthy courtyards, cookfires smoked beside heaps of stinking ordure, Broken balconies sagged beneath laden washing lines. Small girls laboured past carrying spilling pails of murky drinking water* The alleys were a jostling throng of people and carts, Tented shanties stood tacked along the wall of a mosque* A dead donkey lay bloated where it had collapsed from the shafts of a cart.

"The cameraman went crazy, man, when he saw it/ said D.C. gravely*"Couldn't wait to start filming/

"Weils disease,5 said Rhodes sombrely, "That's what they used to call this rat plague. Imagine the result in these slums with everyone puking themselves to death. Won't be a pretty sight.'

'Unless you're Freddy G. It's just all Oscar winning footage to him*'

As we drove back, I voiced my own objections* T still find it hard to believe that anyone could let thousands of people die of plague just to shoot a realistic movie. He doesn't seem that sort of maniac,' I persisted* But nobody backed me up*

"Seneca wouldn't agree, would you you, mass murderer?
They say it was he who persuaded Nero to set fire to Rome.'

Washington added, "Mengele, Eichman, Pol Pot, all nice boys
who went to college?5

Only Rhodes was not entirely convinced* T suppose they
might want us to believe Billy was infected, just so we
wouldn't go near him ,*, ' He turned to D*C, 'You're certain
that there's nothing else they're up to?'

Washington shook his head. "Man, in their book it's all just
one fuckin' work of art.'

Finale

It was not a particularly unusual funeral procession by Egyptian standards. The coffin was draped with an expensive-looking rug and the mourners were all chanting.

A discerning eye, however, might have spotted certain irregularities. The striped pyjamas and assorted headgear looked convincing enough, but the fact that one of the mourners was chanting 'Col hena jit howa MM, might have been considered liturgically unorthodox. If so, it was an improvement on the Wily Bird who was busy repeating his bus conductor's version of the Lord's Prayer - Our Father which art in Hendon ., /

If it hadn't been so deadly serious, it could have been pure pantomime. For instance Rhodes's sudden decision to put Seneca's death mask inside the coffin, to add a realistic touch in case it was opened. And Wyllie dusting it down with talcum powder.

The rest of the 'body' consisted of a sterilised plastic bag to zip Willis into, surgical gloves and masks. Somewhere in the warren of alleys behind us was the van Rhodes had hired for our escape. What I failed to understand was what we were going to do once we'd rescued Willis, even supposing he was in the sarcophagus, I hated to have to admit it, but I just knew that he was dead as a dodo, with a rat mask over his face and a used boat ticket from Venice in his coat pocket. Considering the formidable opposition, T wasn't

entirely happy about my chances either. Fond as I was of Willis, or his memory, I was a lot more interested in getting back to Ko Sam and intact*

'Where's D.C*, guv?" I heard the boy whisper, adding a couple of 'Allahs¹ for good effect.

'If Allah doesn't know, we certainly don't/ panted old Wilv Bird*

A buzz of excitement greeted us from the crowded street as we edged out way in from behind the mosque. D.C. had done his riming well* Slap bang before us, the fake sarcophagus, glittering with 'gems' and 'gold', was being manhandled towards a vintage Rolls waiting just inside the old city gates. The cameras were strategically placed* A 'dolly' track had been laid down parallel to the procession, while Freddy G had commandeered the crummy verandah of a decrepit teahouse, and was busy directing operations with the aid of a loud hailer.

At a glance it was clear that things weren't going according to plan* The riot scripted in the film was rapidly getting out of control. Despite attempts by Freddy's camera crew to marshal the crowd, they seemed to have forgotten all about the film. There was no longer anything artificial about their excitement - a madness reminiscent of the whirling Dervishes seemed to have taken possession of the scene* With more people running to join in every moment, the slum population had suddenly been transformed into a frenzied mob, milling uncontrollably around the golden sarcophagus, screaming and chanting.

'Cut,' yelled Fred, but no one heard him* He tore off his stetson hat and demolished the rickety table beside him with a single blow. 'Cut! Goddammit!1

By now, everyone in the vicinity was abandoning their posts and joining in; beggars, shopkeepers, merchants, carriers, veiled housewives, even a venerable old mullah, with a white beard, did a lively dart out from the Mosque.

Above a sea of sweaty ecstatic faces, the gorgeous sarcophagus of King Tut bobbed this way and that, the bearers struggling vainly to keep control. There was about a hundred yards to go to the city gates. So far no one seemed to have noticed our own modest procession, but as we nudged our way forward, we became suddenly overwhelmed by the surging crowd.

At that moment the huge black figure of Washington appeared a few yards away, forcing a way through to us. His face was shiny with sweat and he was yelling himself hoarse, but above the pandemonium we couldn't hear a word.

The sarcophagus tipped perilously, and the crowd tried to snatch it. I saw Washington pointing and I could have sworn he mouthed 'Willis'. He could have been saying a dozen things. Then the crowd stampeded and he disappeared.

We vanished too, struggling under kicking legs and pushing bodies, as a tidal wave of looters surged over our heads. Trying hard to avoid being crushed underfoot, the thought occurred to me that if the cameras were still turning, then Freddy was going to have a celluloid masterpiece,

A great roar rose above the crowd; a roar of approval, A victorious chant that bore the sarcophagus away with it and left us stranded in the dust and filth.

Freddy G had abandoned his headquarters and was plunging forward, plucking people out of his way like peas. The dolly track lay uprooted on its side, the aluminium rails twisted, the cameras smashed in the dirt.

Rhodes picked himself up and started forwards, followed by Tam. I helped a very dazed Wyllie onto the coffin before limping unenthusiastically after the others. By now, the crowd had started fighting among themselves. Like a tug-of-war they swept first one way and then the other, dust rose in clouds, carts were upturned, lines of washing crashed down from overhead. Finally, just as I caught up with it, the mob sucked itself out through the gateway, and spilled into the road beyond.

All of a sudden the roar faded, and a shocked silence followed, in which a loud "Crap!" could be clearly heard.

There was the noise of struggling and car engines starting. The vintage Rolls had been abandoned, buckled by the stampede. I caught sight of two other limousines pulling away, and the silence gave way to another roar. A roar of a different kind. A roar of indignation turning to fury.

No one was struggling any more. I followed Tam through the onlookers until, in the middle of the roadway, we came on the sarcophagus with the lid pulled off. The rat mask had been removed, but instead of Willis, a dignified face peered

up, gagged and staring. While half the crowd looked on in curiosity, the others were rushing to set the man free. Reverently they lifted him out and untied him. Set gingerly on his feet, supported by several of his followers, he gazed wearily around. He was wearing a white cassock that reached to the ground, Hanging across his chest, half hidden by his beard, was an ornate iron cross. He said something and a large section of the crowd crossed themselves and chanted. The rest, looking embarrassed, backed away.

"What's going on?' I whispered. "Who is he?"

The shadow of Washington loomed up beside us. 'You don't know who that Holy is? Mister, that dude is the Pope, Pope of all the Copts, Pope Shenouda H.Hd

"H.H.?1 1 queried, still confused by the unexpected turn of events.

"His Holiness,' said Washington gravely. He strode forward towards the figure of the Pope and knelt on the ground. "D.C. says "Praise be, Pope",,' he declared.

T only hope he doesn't offer him a drink/ whispered Rhodes.

Post Mortem

Anyone anticipating dramatic headlines in the Cairo Daily News the following morning; - 'Attempt to kidnap Pope foiled/ or 'Christian uprising averted/ would have searched in vain.

No sooner had Pope Shenouda been helped out of his coffin, than blaring sirens announced the arrival of the police, who whisked him speedily away in a patrol car.

'With five or six million Christian Copts in Egypt there could have been quite an uprising/ declared Rhodes, as we sat on the verandah of the Gazira Sporting Club.

'Funny/ remarked Wyllic, 'how one can live in a country without realising it's like a powder keg - liable to explode any moment. I suppose if Shenouda was killed or kidnapped, then Egypt would go up in flames like the Lebanon. Yet one wonders who would profit by such a state of affairs. Which leads one to consider who Freddy's real paymasters were?'

'Whatever the case/ said Rhodes, 'I have no doubt he intended to film it, A fitting ending to the Curse of King Tut+ If not exactly genocide, then not far short/

'But where is Willis?" I insisted, not for the first time. In the general euphoria at foiling Freddy, he seemed to have been forgotten.

'Perhaps old Bill wasn't in the crate they shipped out, after all, Guv/ piped Tam. 'Perhaps that was there to put Shenouda in/

growled Washington. 'You gotta show respect for rhe Holv Dude.'

Postscript

So there it was* We were all quite wrong* As Rhodes wryly admitted, it served us right. We were so obsessed with our one pet theory, we never really looked for any other* We couldn't even claim to have foiled Freddy's real intentions, the crowd did that.

But there is something else I speculate over sometimes, when I go out for an evening stroll through the olive groves in Paxos* What if there was another plot? The conspiracy that Giacomo had hinted at before he was murdered* The selfsame plot that Bjorn and Konrad both knew about in Rome, but were too scared to admit. A plot that, unwittingly, Willis had discovered in Hollywood, but failed to recognise. Leaving them to assume he knew far more than he did and causing them to abandon hastily their carefully made plans, and settle for an easier, if less spectacular, alternative. After all, Freddy was a Texan* For him one Pope must be pretty much the same as another. If only Willis could remember precisely what was on that scrap of film he discovered in Hollywood, we might have been able to decide whether the monastery buildings were St. Bishoi in the Egyptian desert or Castel Gondolfo in the Alban Hills.

But it was easy to speculate on something we'd never know. For Freddy and his minions had vanished as completely as the Curse of King Tut in the sands of the desert.

As for Willis, we needn't have worried. He had never left

Venice. If the intention was to sink the iron cage in the canal, we had Burt to thank for saving him. Burt, for whom curiosity always got the upper hand, had trailed us from the Accademia that night. In his own words, when he saw us set off he did a 'boaty-poo'. But it was his timely arrival that scared off the intruders as they were dragging the iron cage across the room. Having rescued Willis, he exacted his own reward - revenge, Willis called it - by proceeding to drive him mad. Well-intentioned he certainly might be, but as Willis painfully confessed, a little of Burt went a very long way,

Before we left Cairo, we had a splendid dinner at the Hilton restaurant, overlooking the Nile, and it was on this occasion that Rhodes took me aside to resolve the other question he knew had been troubling me. "James/ he said, "Tam did not shoot his mother, I have always known that. Unfortunately, the poor kid was brainwashed into believing it. I know what you're thinking,' he added. "That film clip Billy came upon in Hollywood. Whether or not Tam was taking part in the atrocity, I don't know and I don't wish to know. He's blamed himself enough anyway. It was Stanley who much later engineered his escape, though whether that was just in order to be able to use him in the film I don't know'. Tam had a breakdown when he reached Rome and never even recognised him.'

I had an even more difficult question to put to Rhodes. "Why did you leave your wife in Stanley's care, knowing what a bastard he was ?'

Rhodes nodded grimly- 'I was too busy searching for Tam. And that was an impossible task. In the general pandemonium as the Khmer Rouge moved in, I had little option but to entrust her to Stanley. I can't really blame him that pirates attacked the refugee boat, nor for trying to save his own skin. Apparently he dived overboard and managed to swim to an island. I only condemn him for what he put Tam through later.'

I was going to ask him about the ear pinned on the door of the hut in Camerota, when something stopped me. I didn't want to know. In my mind's eye I would always see Charles Stanley, as Carlo Pittore, inarching out from Montecelio like the Pied Piper, burdened by paints and easel, with all the children running after him calling 'Carlo, Carlo Pittore, disegna mi, disegna mi³ disegna mi J

A few days later, Rhodes left for Venice, and Wvllie, Seneca and Tam caught a flight to Rome. Wyllie was going back to his tower in San Mamiliano, while Tam couldn't wait to be reunited with Jennie. Washington D.C. purchased an old upright bicycle from the bazaar and set off south on his pilgrimage to the land of the Rastafarians. I rejoined the Blue Dawn on its return trip north.

A week later at dawn, we put into Longos Bay and I slipped ashore. As I stepped up through the lemon trees to the house, I heard the baby crying, and then Ko Sam softly singing it back to sleep. A great weariness welled up inside me as I stood there, and then it drained away, leaving me

weak-kneed and trembling. The singing stopped. The door opened, and there she was.

We have been here ever since. A summer idyll. The summer of my life. I didn't want anything else but to be with Ko Sam, but sometimes in the night with her lying beside me, I felt a great longing welling up inside. Out of the past I could hear her saying James, I miss you even though you are here.' At moments such as these I vowed that if there is anything to be learned in this wide world, I would try never to take love for granted, but value each day as though there were no tomorrow.

Gradually though, the tomorrows joined together uninterruptedly. Little by little Summer ripened to Autumn. Nets were spread under the trees, where the women sat with their wicker baskets collecting the fat black fallen olives. Along the quayside, the barefoot fishermen squatted mending nets with their bobbins. Sometimes a caique came over from Porto Parga on the mainland, laden with tomatoes, or a small boat chugged up the coast from Anti-paxos with barrels oi heady black wine.

Once a day, the island bus clattered into Longos on its way up to Laka or back to Gaios, but we rarely travelled on it. We had all we wanted: bread and eggs and olive oil - serpentine green, rice and fish and peppers. If we went anywhere we walked. With the baby cradled snug in a shawl against Ko Sam's back, we climbed up through the olive groves to the bare limestone outcrops where the junipers grow. I often thought of how Rhodes and Willis came here with Wyllie in

their student days and how Willis believed the ancient gods still dwelled here, unrecognised.

Wisely perhaps, we preferred not to dwell on such things, but if they were here, I believe they blessed us. One God I did not forget - Poseidon - the God of the Sea. Sometimes we walked across the island to where the great cliffs of Hiros plunged into the booming seaswells far below. When the south wind blew and white horses lashed the horizon I pictured Poseidon urging his chariot westwards towards the Gardens of the Hesperides. Then I remembered the day - so long ago it now seemed - that Wyllie drove me out to Lixus where the old Arab sprinkled water on the mosaic, and for a moment it came alive; for a moment the veil lifted and like travellers sailing among unknown islands when the mist rises, we caught a glimpse of another life.

There were times, sitting by our fireside, while the winter gales tore at the olive trees and the sea roared like a maelstrom, when, with Ko Sam asleep in my arms, I would stare into the flames and think of some of our strange adventures. As for Willis, I knew that for a time he had stayed in Italy with Wyllie, but the old wanderlust had played its tricks on him and he had set out east. Eventually we received a letter from Rhodes posted in the Philippines that put my mind at rest. Willis it seemed had found his way back to the Yemen and it was there that Rhodes had visited him on his way east.

In San'aa,' he wrote, I borrowed a jeep and drove south over the Samara pass to Taiz. Willis had left a message saying

he was at Jibla. A dirt track winds through the hills to it, It's still best to get in before dark, before the rebels landmine the place.

'The rains had just finished and the hillsides were green and lush, Jibla is all white mosques, rising so steeply, you'd think they were built on air. You can't get a vehicle into the place. One leaves one's jeep by a hump-backed bridge and starts climbing. I felt like Marco Polo. The place cannot have changed in two thousand years, the men all wrapped up in headdresses and robes with daggers round their waists, the women in black like ravens. The alleys are a merchant's paradise. Everything is hauled up on the backs of mules. Through it all flows a strange little river, gouged into the rock, like Xanadu - "where Alph the sacred river ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea.'¹ Jibla felt like that, a haunting, dirty, ruinous, magical place. Behind their veils, girls watch you with melting eyes and at night prayers wail out from the minarets, haunting and lovely. It's hard to think there is still a civil war going on. Opposite the town on an adjacent slope stand the huts of the Southern Baptists' Hospital. Here I found Billy acting as a general factotum. When I got there he was lying underneath a jeep, black with oil and happy as a sandboy. His Arabic has improved a lot. He took me into the back streets of the town and we sat in a tiny chai-house, sipping nutmeggy tea. "Afasahr," the children cried after him as we stepped through the narrow "Are you all right here?" I asked him. He didn't reply. We were standing above the river, There was only the sound of rushing water, the prayer call from the

mosque, the cicadas in the trees and the sporadic burst of machine-gun fire. In a sudden moment of silence I heard a nightingale singing. He grinned at me. I didn't have to ask him a second time.'

At that point the letter ended, and I had better stop too, for tomorrow Jennie and Tam are arriving on the 'Kamelia' from Corfu, There's things to get prepared. I've acquired this old motorbike, but it needs a bit of tinkering. I want to have it ready when they arrive.

The biggest surprise we have Tor them is chai we've planned co fly east. All of us. We are due to meet Boyet Rhodes in Manila and take a boat back down through the islands to Bora cay. And then one day we'll do what I always promised myself, except I never wanted to do it alone. To set sail for the island of Palawan. In an old outrigger with patched sails. Setting off at sunset, when the island peaks beckon far oil over the South China Sea.

The baby is gurgling, and judging by the smell of cooking, Ko Sam is baking bread. And Tvc got that blasted motorbike to repair. So this really is the end of the story.