

THE KEY TO REBECCA

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'Our spy in Cairo is the greatest hero of them all.'

- Erwin Rommel, September 1942

(Quoted by Anthony Cave Brown: Bodyguard of Lies.)

Part One: Tobruk

- 1 -

The last camel collapsed at noon.

It was the five-year-old white bull he had bought in Murzuk, the youngest and strongest of the three beasts, and the least ill-tempered: he liked the animal as much as a man could like a camel, which is to say he hated it only a little.

They climbed the ~~windward~~^{leeward} side of a big dune, man and camel planting big clumsy feet deep in the inconstant sand, and at the top they stopped. They looked ahead, seeing nothing but another dune to climb, and after that a thousand more, and it was as if the camel despaired at the thought. ^{Its} ~~His~~ forelegs folded, then ^{its} ~~his~~ rear went down, and ^{it} ~~he~~ couched on the top of the dune like a monument, staring across the empty desert with the indifference of the dying.

The man hauled on its nose rope. Its head came forward and its neck stretched out, but it would not get up. The man went behind and kicked its hindquarters as hard as he could, three or four times. Finally he took out a razor-sharp curved Bedouin knife with a narrow point and stabbed the camel's rump. Blood flowed from the wound but the camel did not even look around.

The man understood what was happening. The very tissues of the animal's body, starved of nourishment, had simply stopped working like a machine that has run out of fuel. He had seen camels collapse like this on the outskirts of an oasis, surrounded by life-giving foliage which they ignored, lacking the energy to eat.

There were two more tricks he might have tried. One was to pour water into its nostrils until it began to drown; the other to light a fire under its hindquarters. He could not spare the water for one or the firewood for the other, and ~~anyway~~^{besides} neither method had a great chance of success.

It was time to stop, anyway. The sun was high and fierce. The long Saharan summer was beginning, and the midday temperature would reach 110 degrees in the shade.

Without unloading the camel, the man opened one of his bags and took out his tent. He looked around again, automatically: there was no shade or shelter in sight - one place was as bad as another. He pitched his tent beside the dying camel, there on the top of the dune.

He sat cross-legged in the open end of the tent to make his tea. He scraped level a small square of sand, arranged a few precious dry twigs in a pyramid, and lit the fire. When the kettle boiled he made the tea in the nomad fashion, pouring it from the pot into the cup, adding sugar, then returning it to the pot to infuse again, several times over. The resulting brew, very strong and rather treacly, was the most revivifying drink in the world.

He gnawed at some dates and watched the camel die while he waited for the sun to pass overhead. His tranquillity was practised. He had come a long way in this desert - almost 1500 miles - and now he was not far from his destination. He was afraid of the desert. All intelligent men were, even the nomads who lived all their lives here. But he never allowed that fear to take hold of him, to panic him, to use up his nervous energy. There were always catastrophes: mistakes in navigation that ~~kank~~ made you miss a well by a couple of miles; water-bottles that leaked or burst; apparently healthy camels that got sick a couple of days out. The only response was to say Inshallah: It is the will of God.

Eventually the sun began to dip toward the west. He looked at the camel's load, wondering how much of it he could carry. There were three ^{small} small European suitcases, two heavy and one light, all

important. There was a little bag of clothes, the sextant and the maps, the food and the water bottle. It was already too much: he would have to ~~ax~~ abandon the tent, the tea set, the cooking pot, the almanacs, and the saddle.

He made the three cases into a bundle and tied the clothes, the food and the sextant on top, strapping the whole lot together with a length of cloth. He could put his arms through the cloth straps and carry the load like a rucksack on his back. He slung the goatskin water bag around his neck and let it dangle in front.

It was a heavy load, but he was a strong man.

Holding his compass in his hand, he started walking.

There were two ways to travel in the sand. It was possible to follow the ridges of the dunes, keeping always to the windward side where the sand was hard-packed. This made the going easier, but the deceptive curves of the ridges could jeopardise the accuracy of the navigation. The alternative was to follow the compass wherever it led, floundering knee-deep in the soft sand on the lee sides. He chose the latter method, for he was navigating by dead-reckoning over the final miles, and a fractional error could take him a fatal few hundred yards astray.

He settled into a slow, long-strided walk. His mind emptied of hopes and fears and he concentrated on the compass and the sand. He managed to forget the pain of his ravaged body - his bowels were water and his skin a mass of sores - and put one foot in front of another automatically, without thought and therefore without effort.

The day cooled into evening. The water bottle became lighter around his neck as he consumed its contents. He refused to think about how much water was left: he was drinking six pints a day, he had calculated, and he knew there was not enough for another day. A flock of birds flew over his head, whistling noisily. He looked

up at them. They were like brown pigeons. He recognised them as Lichtenstein's sandgrouse, desert birds that flock to water every morning and evening. They were heading the same way as he was, which meant he was on the right track, but he knew they could fly fifty miles to water, so he could take little encouragement from them.

Clouds gathered on the horizon as the desert cooled. Behind him, the sun sank lower and turned into a big yellow balloon. A little later a white moon appeared in a purple sky.

He thought about stopping. Nobody could walk all night. But he had no tent, no blanket, no rice and no tea. And he must be close to the well: by his reckoning he should already be there.

He walked on. His calm was deserting him now. He had set his strength and his expertise against the ruthless desert, and it began to look as if the desert would win. He thought again of the camel he had left behind, and how it had sat on the dune, with the tranquillity of exhaustion, waiting for death. He would not wait for death, he thought: when it became inevitable he would rush to meet it. Not for him the hours of agony and encroaching insanity - that would be undignified. He had his knife.

When he smelled roast lamb he knew that it was an illusion. He breasted a dune and saw, close by, the red glow of the fire, the meat over it, and the small boy turning the spit. There were the tents around the fire, the hobbled camels grazing the scattered thorns, and the well-head beyond. He walked into the hallucination. The people in the dream looked up at him, startled. A tall man stood up and spoke. The traveller pulled at his howli, unwinding the cloth to reveal his face.

The tall man stepped forward, shocked, and said: 'My cousin!'

The traveller collapsed.

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When he awoke he thought for a moment that he was a boy again, and that his adult life had been a dream.

Someone was touching his shoulder and saying 'Wake up, Hussein,' in the tongue of the desert. Nobody had called him Hussein for twenty years. He realised he was wrapped in a blanket and lying on the cold sand, his head swathed in a howli. He opened his eyes to see the gorgeous sunrise like a straight rainbow against the flat black horizon. The icy morning wind blew into his face. In that instant he experienced again all the confusion and anxiety of his fifteenth year.

He had felt utterly lost, that first time he woke up in the desert. He had thought My father is dead, and then I have a new father. Snatches from the Surahs of the Koran had run through his head, mixed with bits of the Creed which his mother still taught him secretly, in German. He remembered the recent sharp pain of his adolescent circumcision, followed by the cheers and rifle-shots of the men as they congratulated him on at last becoming one of them, a true man. Then there had been the long train journey, wondering what his desert cousins would be like, and whether they would despise his pale body and his city ways. He had walked briskly out of the railway station and seen the two Arabs, sitting ~~in the~~ beside their camels in the dust of the station yard, wrapped in traditional robes which covered them from head to foot except for the slit in the howli which revealed only their dark, unreadable eyes. They had taken him to the well. It had been terrifying: nobody had spoken to him, except in gestures. In the evening he had realised that these people had no toilets, and he became desperately embarrassed. In the end he had been forced to ask. There was a moment of silence,

then they all burst out laughing. It transpired that they had thought he could not speak their language, which was why everyone had tried to communicate with him in signs; and that he had used a baby-word in asking about toilet arrangements, which made it funnier. Someone had explained to him about walking a little way beyond the circle of tents and squatting in the sand, and after that he had not been so frightened, for although these were hard men they were not unkind.

All these thoughts had run through his mind as he looked at his first desert sunrise, and they came back again twenty years later, as fresh and as painful as yesterday's bad memories, with the words 'Wake up, Hussein.'

He sat up abruptly, the old thoughts clearing rapidly like the morning ~~mirk~~ clouds. He had crossed the desert on a vitally important mission. He had found the well, and it had not been an hallucination: his cousins were here, as they always were at this time of the year. He suffered a sudden sharp panic as he thought of his precious baggage, but then he saw it, piled neatly at his feet.

Ishmael was squatting beside him. It had always been like this: throughout the whole of the year the two boys had spent together in the desert, Ishmael had never failed to wake first in the morning. Now he said: 'Many worries, cousin.'

Hussein nodded. 'There is a war.'

Ishmael proffered a tiny jewelled bowl containing water. Hussein dipped his fingers in the water and washed his eyes. Ishmael went away. Hussein stood up.

He walked over to the fire. One of the women, silent and subservient, gave him tea. He took it without thanking her and drank it quickly. He ate some cold boiled rice while the unhurried work of the encampment went on around him. It seemed that this branch of the

family was still wealthy: there were several servants, many children, and more than twenty camels. The ~~new~~ sheep nearby were only a part of the flock - the rest would be grazing a few miles away. There would be more camels, too. They wandered at night in search of foliage to eat, and although they were hobbled they sometimes went out of sight. The young boys would be rounding them up now, as he and Ishmael had done. The beasts had no names, but Ishmael had known each one individually, and its history. He would say: 'This is the bull my father gave to his brother Abdel in the year many women died, and the bull became lame so my father gave Abdel another and took this one back, and ~~as~~ it still limps, see?' Hussein had come to know camels well, but he had never quite adopted the nomad attitude to them: he had not, he remembered, lit a fire underneath his dying white yesterday. Ishmael would have.

Hussein finished his breakfast and went back to his baggage. The cases were not locked. He opened the top one, a small leather suitcase; and when he looked at the switches and dials of the compact radio neatly fitted into the rectangular case he had a sudden vivid memory like a movie: the bustling frantic city of Berlin; a tree-lined street called the Tirpitzufer; a four-storey sandstone building; a maze of hallways and staircases; an outer office with two secretaries; an inner office, sparsely furnished with a desk, a sofa, a filing cabinet and a small bed; on the wall a Japanese painting of a grinning demon and a signed photograph of Franco; and beyond the office, on a balcony overlooking the Landwehr Canal, a pair of dachshunds and a prematurely white-haired admiral who said: 'Rommel wants me to put an agent into Cairo.'

The case also contained a book, a novel in English. Idly, Hussein read the first line: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley

again.' A folded sheet of paper fell out from between the leaves of the book. Carefully, Hussein picked it up and put it back. He closed the book, replaced it in the case, and closed the case.

Ishmael was standing at his shoulder. He said: 'Do you fight in this war?'

'Yes.'

'One gang of Europeans fighting with another over who shall sit in Cairo - what does this matter to the sons of the desert?'

'My mother's people are in this war,' Hussein said.

'A man should follow his father.'

'And if he has two fathers?'

Ishmael shrugged. He understood dilemmas.

Hussein lifted the closed suitcase. 'Will you keep this for me?'

'Yes.' Ishmael took it. 'Who is winning this war?'

'My mother's people.'

The two cousins looked at one another. Hussein was surprised, and sorry, that they had so little to say to each other. Why could they not talk about all ~~the things~~ that each of them had done in the years since they had gone together on that pilgrimage to Mecca? Hussein thought over the things that he could tell: how he had invested his inheritance, his studies in Heidelberg and Paris, the wines he had drunk and the women he had known, the crucial meeting in Beirut in 1938, his great coups in Jerusalem and Crete ... None of it would mean anything to ~~Ishmael~~ his cousin - and Ishmael was probably thinking exactly the same thought.

Ishmael took the case to his tent. Hussein fetched a little water in a bowl. He opened another bag, and took out a small piece of soap, a brush, a mirror, and a razor.

He stuck the mirror in the sand, adjusted it, and began to unwind the howli from around his head.

The sight of his own face in the mirror shocked him.

His strong, normally clear forehead was covered with sores. His eyes were hooded with pain and lined in the corners. The dark beard grew matted and unkempt on his fine-boned cheeks, and the skin of his large hooked nose was red and split. He parted his blistered lips and saw that his fine, even teeth were filthy and stained.

He brushed the soap on ~~toxinixfaze~~ and began to shave.

Gradually his old face emerged. It was strong rather than handsome, and normally wore a faintly dissolute look; but now it was simply ravaged. He had brought a small phial of scented lotion across hundreds of miles of desert for this moment, but now he did not put it on because he knew it would sting unbearably. He gave it to a girl-child who had been watching him, and she ran away, delighted with her prize.

He ^{carried} ~~took~~ his bag into Ishmael's tent and shooed out the women. He took off his desert robes and donned a white English shirt, a striped tie, grey socks, and a brown checked suit. When he tried to put the shoes on he discovered his feet had swollen: it was agony to attempt to force them into the hard new leather. However, he could not wear his European suit with the improvised rubber-tyre sandals of the desert. In the end he slit the shoes with his curved knife and wore them loose.

He wanted more: a hot bath, a haircut, cool soothing cream for his sores, a silk shirt, a gold bracelet, a cold bottle of champagne and a warm soft woman. For those he would have to wait.

When he emerged from the tent the nomads looked at him as if he were a stranger. He picked up his hat and hefted the two remaining cases - one heavy, one light. Ishmael came to him carrying a goatskin

water bottle. The two cousins embraced.

Hussein took a wallet from the pocket of his jacket to check his papers. Looking at the identity card, he realised that once again he was John Wolff, 38, of Villa Les Oliviers, Garden City, Cairo, a businessman, race - European.

He put on his hat, picked up his cases, and set off in the cool of the ~~early~~ dawn to walk across the last few miles of desert to the town.

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The great and ancient caravan route, which Wolff had followed from oasis to oasis across the vast ~~and~~ empty desert, at last merged with an ordinary modern road. Rock and sand gave way to fields of cotton squared off with irrigation ditches. The peasants bent over their crops wore galabiya, simple ~~knee-length~~ shifts of striped cotton, instead of the cumbersome protective robes of the desert. ~~people~~ Surrounded by people and water, smelling the cool damp breeze off the nearby Nile, observing the increasing signs of urban civilisation, Wolff began to feel human again. Finally he heard the engine of a car, and he knew he was safe.

The vehicle was approaching him from the direction of Assyut, the town. It came around a bend and into sight, and he recognised it as a military jeep. As it came closer he saw the British Army uniforms of the men in it, and he realised he had left one danger behind only to face another.

Deliberately he made himself calm. I have every right to be here, he thought. I was born in Alexandria. I am Egyptian by nationality. I own a house in Cairo. My papers are all genuine. I am a wealthy man, a European, and a ~~useless~~ German spy in enemy country -

The jeep screeched to a halt in a cloud of dust. One of the

men jumped out. He had three cloth pips on each shoulder of his uniform shirt: a captain. He looked terribly young, and walked with a limp.

The captain said: 'Where the devil have you come from?'

Wolff put down his cases and jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. 'My car broke down on the desert road.'

The captain nodded, accepting the explanation instantly: it would never have occurred to him, or to anyone else, that a European might have walked here from Libya. He said: 'I'd better see your papers, please.'

Wolff handed them over. The captain examined them, then looked up. Wolff thought: There has been a leak from Berlin, and every officer in Egypt is looking for me; or they have changed the papers since last time I was here, and mine are out of date; or -

'You look about all in, Mr Wolff,' the captain said. 'How long have you been walking?'

Wolff realised that his ravaged appearance might get some useful sympathy from another European. 'Since yesterday afternoon,' he said with a weariness that was not entirely faked. 'I got a bit lost.'

'You've been out here all night?' The captain looked more closely at Wolff's face. 'Good Lord, I believe you have. You'd better have a lift with us.' He turned to the jeep. 'Corporal, take the gentleman's cases.'

Wolff opened his mouth to protest, then shut it again abruptly. A man who had been walking all night would be only too glad to have someone take his ^{luggage} ~~bags~~ luggage. To object would not only discredit his story, it would draw attention to the bags. As the corporal hefted them into the back of the jeep, Wolff realised with a sinking feeling that he had not even bothered to lock them. How could I be so stupid? he

thought. He knew the answer. He was still in tune with the desert, where you were lucky to see other people once a week, and the last thing they wanted to steal was a radio. His senses were ~~all~~ alert to all the wrong things: he was watching the movement of the sun, smelling the air for water, measuring the distances he was travelling, scanning the horizon as if searching for a lone tree in whose shade he could rest during the heat of the day. He had to forget all that now, and think instead of policemen and papers and locks and lies.

He resolved to take more care, and climbed into the jeep.

The captain got in beside him and said to the driver: 'Head back into town.'

Wolff decided to bolster his story. As the jeep turned around in the dusty road, he said: 'Have you got any water?'

'Of course.' The captain reached below his seat and pulled up a bottle. He unscrewed the cap and handed it to Wolff. Wolff drank deeply, swallowing at least a pint.

'Thanks,' he said, and handed it back.

'Quite a thirst you had. Not surprising. Oh, by the way - I'm Captain Newman.' He stuck out his hand.

Wolff shook it and looked more closely at the man. He was young - early twenties, at a guess - and fresh-faced, with a boyish forelock and a ready smile; but there was in his demeanour that weary maturity that comes early to fighting men. Wolff asked him: 'Seen any action?'

'Some.' Captain Newman touched his own knee. 'Did the leg at Cyrenaica, that's why they sent me to this one-horse town.' He grinned. 'I can't honestly say I'm panting to get back into the desert, but I'd like to be doing something a bit more positive than this. Where does your accent come from?'

The sudden question, unconnected with what had gone before,

took Wolff by surprise. It had surely been intended to, he thought: Captain Newman was a sharp-witted young man. Fortunately Wolff had a prepared answer. 'My parents were Boers who came from South Africa to Egypt. I grew up speaking Afrikaans and Arabic.' He hesitated, then added a dangerous half-truth. 'I was christened Hans Wolff. The name is Dutch, not German; but it seemed sensible to change Hans to John.'

Newman nodded sympathetically, but he continued his questioning. 'What brings you here?'

Wolff had prepared for that one, too. 'I have business interests in several towns in Upper Egypt.' He smiled. 'I like to pay them surprise visits.'

They were entering Assyut. By Egyptian standards it was a large town, with factories, hospitals, a Muslim university and some 60,000 inhabitants. Wolff was about to ask to be dropped at the railway station when Newman saved him from that error. 'You need a garage,' the captain said. 'We'll take you to Nasif's - he has a tow truck.'

Wolff forced himself to say: 'Thankyou.' He swallowed drily. He was still not thinking hard enough or fast enough. I wish I could shape up, he thought; it's the damn desert, it's slowed me down. He looked at his watch. He had time to go through a charade at the garage and still catch the daily train to Cairo. He considered what he would do. He would have to go into the place, for Newman would watch. Then the soldiers would drive away. Wolff would have to inquire about renting a car, or something, and then take his leave and walk to the station.

With luck, Nasif and Newman would never compare notes on the subject of John Wolff.

The jeep drove through the busy streets. The familiar sights of an Egyptian town pleased Wolff: the gay cotton clothes, the women carrying bundles on their heads, the officious policemen, the sharp characters in sunglasses, the tiny shops, the stalls, the battered cars and the overloaded asses.

The jeep stopped outside a small concrete hut with a large untidy yard. Newman said: 'I'll have to leave you here, I'm afraid - duty calls.'

Wolff shook his hand. 'You've been very kind.'

'Don't like to dump you ~~in~~ this way,' Newman continued. 'You've had a bad time.' He frowned, then his face cleared. 'Tell you what - I'll leave Corporal Cox to look after you.'

Wolff said: 'It's kind, but really - '

Newman was not listening. 'Get the man's bags, Cox, and look sharp. I want you to take care of him - and don't you leave anything to the wogs, understand?'

'Yes, sir!' said Cox.

Wolff groaned inwardly. Now there would be more delays while he got rid of the corporal. Captain Newman's kindness was becoming a nuisance - could that possibly be intentional?

Wolff and Cox got out, and the jeep pulled away. Wolff walked into Nasif's yard, and Cox followed, carrying the cases. Nasif was a smiling young man in clean overalls, vigorously polishing an old Chevrolet.

He spoke to them in English: 'You want to rent this beautiful automobile?'

Wolff replied in rapid Egyptian Arabic. 'My car has broken down. They say you have a tow truck.'

'Yes. We can leave right away. Where is the car?'

'On the desert road, forty or fifty miles out. It's a Ford.'

But we're not coming with you.' He took out his wallet and gave Nasif an English pound note. 'You'll find me at the Grand Hotel by the railway station when you return.'

Nasif took the money with alacrity. 'Very good! I leave immediately!'

Wolff nodded curtly and turned around. Walking out of the yard with Cox in tow, he considered the implications of his short conversation with Nasif. The garageman would go out into the desert with his tow truck and search the road for the car. Eventually he would return and go to the Grand Hotel to confess failure. He would learn that Wolff had left. He would consider he had been reasonably paid for his wasted day, but that would not stop him telling all and sundry the story of the disappearing Ford and its disappearing driver. The likelihood was that all this would get back to Captain Newman sooner or later. Newman might not know quite what to make of it all, but he would certainly feel that here was a mystery to be investigated.

Wolff's plan of slipping unobserved into Egypt had already failed.

He would just have to make the best of things. He looked at his watch. He still had enough time to catch the train. He would be able to get rid of Cox in the lobby of the hotel, then get something to eat and drink while he was waiting, if he was quick.

Cox was a short, dark man with some kind of British regional accent which Wolff could not identify. He looked not much younger than Wolff, and as he was still a corporal he was probably not too bright. Following Wolff across the Midan el-Mahatta, he said: 'You know this town, sir?'

'I've been here before,' Wolff replied.

They entered the Grand. With twenty-six rooms it was the larger of the town's two hotels. Wolff turned to Cox. 'Thankyou, Corporal - I think you could get back to work now.'

'No hurry, sir,' Cox said cheerfully. 'I'll carry your bags upstairs.'

'I'm sure they have porters here - '

'Wouldn't trust 'em, sir, if I were you.'

The situation was becoming more and more like a nightmare or a farce, in which well-intentioned people pushed him into increasingly senseless behaviour in consequence of one small lie. He wondered again whether this was entirely accidental, and it crossed his mind with terrifying absurdity that perhaps they knew everything and were simply toying with him.

He pushed the thought aside and spoke to Cox with as much grace as he could muster. 'Well, thankyou.'

He turned to the desk and asked for a room. He looked at his watch: he had fifteen minutes left. He filled in the form quickly, giving an invented address in Cairo - there was a good chance Captain Newman would forget the true address on the identity papers, and Wolff did not want to leave a reminder.

A Nubian porter led them upstairs to the room. Wolff tipped him off at the door. Cox put the cases down on the bed.

Wolff took out his wallet: perhaps Cox expected a tip too. 'Well, Corporal,' he began, 'you've been very helpful - '

'Let me unpack for you, sir,' Cox said. 'Captain said not to leave anything to the wogs.'

'No, thankyou,' Wolff said firmly. 'I want to lie down right now.'

'You go ahead and lie down,' Cox persisted generously. 'It won't take me - '

'Don't open that!'

Then Cox was lifting the lid of the case and Wolff was reaching inside his jacket and it was too late.

The little corporal stared at the neat stacks of English pound notes which filled the small case. He said: 'Jesus Christ, you're loaded!' He had probably never seen so much money in his life. He began to turn to Wolff, saying: 'What do you want with all that - '

Then he saw how close Wolff was to him, and flinched a little as the wicked curved Bedouin knife glinted briefly in Wolff's hand; and then the razor-sharp blade sliced deep into the soft flesh of Cox's throat, and his shout of fear came as a bloody gurgle and he died.

- 2 -

It was May, and the khamsin was blowing, a hot dusty wind from the south. Standing under the shower, William Vandam had the depressing thought that this would be the only time he would feel cool all day. He turned off the water and dried himself rapidly. His body was full of small aches. He had played cricket the day before, for the first time in years. General Staff Intelligence had got up a team to play the doctors from the Field Hospital - spies versus quacks, they had called it - and Vandam, fielding on the boundary, had been run ragged as the medics hit the Intelligence Department's bowling all over the park. Now he had to admit he was not in good shape. Gin had sapped his strength and cigarettes had shortened his wind, and he had too many worries to give the game the fierce concentration it merited.

He lit a cigarette, coughed, and started to shave. He always smoked while he was shaving - it was the only way he knew to relieve

the boredom of the inevitable daily task. Fifteen years ago he had sworn he would grow a beard as soon as he got out of the Army, but he was still in the Army.

He dressed in the everyday uniform: heavy sandals, socks, bush shirt, and the khaki shorts with the flaps that could be let down and buttoned below the knee for protection against mosquitoes. Nobody ever used the flaps, and the younger officers usually cut them off, they looked so ridiculous.

There was an empty gin bottle on the floor beside the bed. Vandam looked at it, feeling disgusted with himself: it was the first time he had taken the damn bottle to bed with him. He picked it up, replaced the cap, and threw the bottle in the waste basket. Then he went downstairs.

Gaafar was in the kitchen, making tea. The most senior of Vandam's three servants, he was an elderly Copt with a bald head and a shuffling walk. Vandam liked him because he had a good sense of humour - something rare, or at least rarely displayed, among Arab servants.

Vandam said: 'Is Billy up?'

'Yes, sir, he's coming down directly.'

Vandam nodded. A small pan of water was bubbling on the stove. Vandam put an egg in to boil and set the timer. He cut two slices from an English-type loaf and made toast. He buttered the toast and cut it into fingers, then he took the egg out of the water and decapitated it.

Billy came into the kitchen and said: 'Good morning, Dad.'

Vandam smiled at his ten-year-old son. 'Morning. Breakfast is ready.'

The boy began to eat. Vandam sat opposite him with a cup of tea, watching. Billy often looked tired in the mornings recently.

Once upon a time he had been infallibly daisy-fresh at breakfast. Was he sleeping badly? Or was his metabolism simply becoming more like an adult's? Perhaps it was just that he was staying awake late, reading detective stories under the sheet by the light of a torch.

People said Billy was like his father, but Vandam could not see the resemblance. However, he could see traces of Billy's mother: the grey eyes, the delicate skin, and the faintly supercilious expression which came over his face when someone crossed him.

Vandam always prepared his son's breakfast. The servants were perfectly capable of looking after the boy, of course, and most of the time they did; but Vandam liked to keep this little ritual for himself. Often it was the only time he was Billy all day. They did not talk much - Billy ate and Vandam smoked - but that did not matter: the important thing was that they were together for a while at the start of each day.

After breakfast Billy brushed his teeth while Gaafar started Vandam's car and brought it to the front of the house. Billy came back wearing his school cap, and Vandam put on his uniform cap. As they did every day, they saluted each other. Billy said: 'Right, sir - let's go and win the war.'

Then they went out.

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Major Vandam's office was at Grey Pillars, one of a group of buildings surrounded by barbed-wire fencing which made up GHQ Middle East. There was an incident report on his desk when he arrived. He sat down, lit a cigarette, and began to read.

The report came from Assyut, three hundred miles south, and at first Vandam could not see why it had been marked for Intelligence. A patrol had picked up a hitch-hiking European who had subsequently murdered a corporal with a knife. The body had been discovered last

night, almost as soon as the corporal's absence was noticed. However, by that time the killer was thought to have arrived in Cairo by train and melted into the city.

There was no indication of motive.

The Egyptian police force and the British Military Police would be investigating already in Assyut, and their colleagues in Cairo would, like Vandam, be learning the details this morning.

What reason was there for Intelligence to get involved?

Vandam frowned and thought again. A European is picked up in the desert. He says his car has broken down. He checks in to an hotel. He leaves a few minutes later and catches a train. His car is not found. The body of a soldier is discovered that night in the hotel room.

Why?

Vandam got on the phone and called Assyut. It took the Army camp switchboard a while to locate Captain Newman, but eventually they found him in the arsenal and got him to a phone.

Vandam said: 'This knife murder almost looks like a blown cover.'

'That occurred to me, sir,' said Newman. He sounded like a young man. 'That's why I marked the report for Intelligence.'

'Good thinking. Tell me, what was your impression of the man?'

'He was a big chap - '

'I've got your description here - six foot, twelve stone, dark hair and eyes - but that doesn't tell me what he was like.'

'I understand,' Newman said. 'Well, to be candid, at first I wasn't in the least suspicious of him. He looked all-in, which fitted with his story of having broken down on the desert road, but apart from that he seemed an upright citizen: a white man, decently dressed, quite well-spoken with an accent he said was Dutch, or rather Afrikaans. His papers were perfect - I'm still quite sure they were genuine.'

'But ... ?'

'He told me he was checking on his business interests in Upper Egypt.'

'Plausible enough.'

'Yes, but he didn't strike me as the kind of man to spend his life investing in a few shops and small factories and cotton farms. He was much more the assured cosmopolitan type - if he had money to invest it would probably be with a London stockbroker or a Swiss bank. He just wasn't a small-timer ... It's very vague, sir, but do you see what I mean?'

'Indeed.' Newman sounded a bright chap, Vandam thought. What was he doing stuck out in Assyut?

'And then it occurred to me that he had, as it were, just appeared in the desert, and I didn't really know where he might have come from ... so I told poor old Cox to stay with him, on the pretence of helping him, to make sure he didn't do a bunk before we had a chance to check his story. I should have arrested the man, of course, but quite honestly, sir, at the time I had only the most slender suspicion - '

'I don't think anyone's blaming you, Captain,' said Vandam. 'You did well to remember the name and address from the papers. John Wolff, Villa les Oliviers, Garden City, right?'

'Yes, sir.'

'All right, keep me in touch with any developments at your end, will you?'

'Yes, sir.'

Vandam hung up. Newman's suspicions chimed with his own instincts about the killing. He decided to speak to his immediate superior. He left his office, carrying the incident report.

General Staff Intelligence was run by a Brigadier with the title of Director of Military Intelligence. The DMI had two deputies: DDMI(0) - for Operational - and DDMI(I) - for Intelligence. The deputies were Colonels. Vandam's boss, Lieutenant-Colonel Bogge, came under the DDMI(I). Bogge was responsible for personnel security, and most of his time was spent administering the censorship apparatus. Vandam's concern was security leaks by soldiers. He could not eavesdrop on loose-tongued conversations in every club and bar in Cairo; so, rather than approach the problem from the angle of soldiers who might be talking too much, he instead took an interest in people who might be listening. Arab nationalists were his main targets, but it seemed possible that the mystery man from Assyut might be a different kind of threat.

Vandam's wartime career had so far been distinguished by one spectacular success and one great failure. Early in the war London had told him there was a big leak from Cairo. After three months of painstaking investigation he had discovered that a senior American diplomat was reporting to Washington in an insecure code. The code had been changed and leak stopped up. Later, in Crete, Vandam had been charged with ensuring that the Germans did not get the vital operational and topographical intelligence they needed for their invasion; and when the invasion came it was clear they had it all, and Vandam had utterly failed. His wife had been among the casualties of that failure.

Had he been a civilian, or even a peacetime soldier, he would have been proud of his triumph and reconciled to his defeat, and he would have said 'You win some, you lose some.' But in war an officer's mistakes killed people, and Vandam was unable to forgive himself.

He knocked on Lieutenant-Colonel Bogge's door and walked in.

Reggie Bogge was a short, square man in his fifties, with an immaculate uniform and brilliantined black hair. He sat behind a huge curved desk - bigger than the DMI's - going through his in-tray. Always willing to talk rather than work, he motioned Vandam to a chair. He picked up a bright red cricket ball and began to toss it from hand to hand. 'You played a good game yesterday,' he said.

'You didn't do badly yourself,' Vandam said. It was true: Bogge had been the only decent bowler on the Intelligence team, and his slow googlies had taken four wickets for forty-two runs. 'But are we winning the war?'

'More bloody bad news, I'm afraid.' The morning briefing had not yet taken place, but Bogge always heard the news by word-of-mouth beforehand. 'We expected Rommel to attack the Gazala Line head-on. Should have known better - fellow never fights fair and square. He went around our southern flank, took the 7th Armoured's headquarters and captured General Messervy.'

'What a shambles.'

'Fortunately he failed to get through to the coast, so the divisions on the Gazala line didn't get isolated. Still ... '

'Still, when are we going to stop him?'

'He won't get much farther. What have you got there?'

Vandam gave him the incident report. 'I propose to follow this one through myself.'

Bogge read the report and looked up, his face blank. 'I don't see the point.'

'It looks like a blown cover.'

'Uh?'

'There's no motive for the murder, so we have to speculate,' Vandam explained. 'Here's one possibility: the hitch-hiker was not what he said he was, and the corporal discovered that fact, and so

the hitch-hiker killed the corporal.'

'Not what he said he was - you mean he was a spy?' Bogge laughed. 'How d'you suppose he got to Assyut - by parachute? Or did he walk?'

That was the trouble with explaining things to Bogge, thought Vandam: he had to ridicule the idea, as an excuse for not thinking of it himself. 'It's not impossible for a small plane to sneak through. And it's not impossible to cross the desert, either.'

Bogge sailed the report through the air across the vast expanse of his desk. 'Not very likely, in my view,' he said. 'Don't waste any time on that one.'

'Very good, sir.' Vandam picked up the report from the floor, suppressing the familiar frustrated anger. Conversations with Bogge always turned into points-scoring contests, and the smart thing to do was not to play. 'I'll ask the police to keep us informed of their progress - copies of memos, and so on, just for the file.'

'Yes.' Bogge never minded making people send him copies of things for the file. 'Listen, how about arranging some cricket practice? I noticed they had nets and a catching boat there yesterday. I'd like to lick our team into shape and get some more matches going.'

'Good idea.'

'See if you can organise something, will you?'

'Yes, sir.' Vandam went out.

On the way back to his own office he wondered what was so wrong with the administration of the British Army that it could promote to Lieutenant-Colonel a man as empty-headed as Reggie Bogge. Vandam's father, who had been a corporal in the first war, had been fond of saying that British soldiers were 'lions led by donkeys'. Sometimes

Vandam thought it was still true.

A woman in a white ~~exam~~ hospital coat saluted him and he returned the salute absent-mindedly. The woman said: 'Major Vandam, isn't it?'

He stopped and looked at her. She had been a spectator at the cricket match, and now he remembered her name. 'Doctor Abuthnot.' She was a tall, cool woman of about his age. He recalled that she was a surgeon - highly unusual for a woman, even in wartime - and that she held the rank of captain.

She said: 'You worked hard yesterday.'

Vandam smiled. 'And I'm suffering for it today. I enjoyed it, though.'

'So did I.' She had a low, precise voice and a great deal of confidence. 'Shall we see you on Friday?'

'Where?'

'The reception at the Union.'

'Ah.' The Anglo-Egyptian Union, a hangout for bored Europeans, made occasional attempts to justify its name by holding a reception for Egyptian guests. 'I'd like that. What time?'

'Five o'clock, for tea.'

Vandam was professionally interested: it was an occasion at which Egyptians might pick up service gossip, and service gossip sometimes contained ~~useful~~ information useful to the enemy. 'I'll come.'

'Splendid. I'll see you there.' She turned away.

'I look forward to it,' Vandam said to her back. He watched her walk away. She was trim, elegant and self-possessed. She reminded him of his wife.

He entered his office. He had no intention of organising a cricket ~~■~~ practice, and he had no~~m~~ intention of forgetting about the

Assyut murder. Bogge could go to hell. Vandam would go to work.

First he spoke again to Captain Newman, and told him to make sure the description of John Wolff got the widest possible circulation.

He called the Egyptian police and confirmed that they would be checking the hotels and flophouses of Cairo today.

He contacted Field Security, a unit of the pre-war Canal Defence Force, and asked them to step up their spot checks on identity papers for a few days.

He told the British Paymaster-General to keep a special watch for forged currency.

Finally he detailed a sergeant on his staff to visit every radio shop in Lower Egypt - there were not many - and ask them to report any sales of parts and equipment which might be used to make or repair a transmitter.

Then he went to the Villa les Oliviers.

*

The house got its name from a small public garden across the street where a ~~xxxxxx~~ grove of olive trees was now in bloom, shedding little white petals like dust on to the dry, brown grass.

The house had a high wall broken by a heavy, carved wooden gate. Using the ornamentation of the gate for footholds, Vandam climbed over and dropped on the other side to find himself in a large courtyard. Around him the whitewashed walls were smeared and grubby, their windows blinded by closed, peeling shutters. He walked to the centre of the courtyard and looked at the stone fountain. A bright green lizard darted across the dry bowl.

The place had not been lived in for at least a year.

Vandam opened a shutter, broke a pane of glass, reached through to unfasten the window, and climbed over the sill into the house.

It did not look like the home of a European, he thought as he walked through the dark cool rooms. There were no hunting prints on the walls, no neat rows of bright-jacketed novels by Agatha Christie and Dennis Wheatley, no three-piece suite imported from Maples or Harrods. Instead the place was furnished with large ^h cushions and low tables, hand-woven rugs and hanging tapestries.

Upstairs he found a locked door. It took him three or four minutes to kick it open. Behind it there was a study.

He searched it carefully. The room was clean and tidy, with a few pieces of very luxurious furniture. On the inlaid desk were a telephone, a clean white blotter, an ivory-handled pen and a dry inkwell. He found books in several languages: Arabic poetry, nineteenth-century French novels, and the Bible in German. In a cupboard were company reports from Switzerland, German and the United States. A beautiful beatn-copper ^e coffee service gathered dust on a small table.

There were no personal documents.

There were no letters.

There was not a single photograph in the house.

Vandam sat in the soft leather chair behind the desk and looked around the room. It was a masculine room, the home of a cosmopolitan intellectual, a man who was on the one hand careful, precise and tidy and on the other hand sensitive and sensual.

Vandam was intrigued.

A European name, a totally Arabic house. A pamphlet about investing in business machines, a volume of erotic Arab verse. An antique coffee jug and a modern telephone. A wealth of information about a character, but not a single clue which might help one find the man.

The room had been carefully cleaned out.

There should have been bank statements, bills from tradesmen, a birth certificate and a will, letters from a lover and photographs of parents or children. The man had collected all those things and taken them away, leaving no trace of his identity, as if he knew that one day someone would come looking for him.

Vandam said aloud: 'John Wolff, who are you?'

He got up from the chair and left the study. He walked through the house and across the hot, dusty courtyard. He climbed back over the gate and dropped into the street.

Across the road a rumpled European sat in the shade of the olive trees with a case on the ground beside him, looking like a door-to-door salesman. Vandam wondered whether to explain that he had broken into the house on official business, then decided it was unnecessary: the uniform of a British officer was authority enough for just about anything in this town. He got into his car and drove away.

- 3 -

Full of anger and despair Wolff sat outside his home and watched the British officer drive away.

He remembered the house as it had been when he was a boy, full of talk and laughter and life. There by the great carved gate there had always been a guard, a black-skinned giant from the south, sitting on the ground, impervious to the heat. Each morning a holy man, old and almost blind, would recite a chapter from the Koran in the courtyard. In the cool of the arcade around the courtyard the men of the family would sit on low divans and smoke their hubble-bubbles while servant boys brought coffee in long-necked jugs. Another black guard stood at the door to the harem, behind which the women grew bored and fat. The days were long and warm,

the family was rich, and the children were indulged.

The British officer, with his shorts and his cap, his red face and his prying eyes and his characteristic careless arrogance, had broken in and violated Wolff's childhood.

Wolff had thought of this place all through his journey. In Jerusalem and Berlin and Athens, in the pain and exhaustion of the desert crossing, in the fear and haste of his flight from Assyut, the villa had represented a safe haven, a place to rest and get clean and whole again at the end of the voyage. He had looked forward to lying in the bath and sipping coffee in the courtyard and bringing women home to the great bed.

Now he would have to go away and stay away.

He had remained outside all morning, alternately walking the street and sitting under the olive trees, just in case Captain Newman should have remembered the address and sent somebody to search the house; and the worst had happened. It had been a mistake to show genuine papers. He could see that with hindsight. The trouble was, he mistrusted Abwehr forgeries. Meeting and working with other spies he had heard horror stories about crass and obvious errors in Abwehr documents: botched printing, inferior quality paper, even mis-spellings of common foreign words. In the spy school where he had been sent for his Wireless & Cipher course the current rumour had been that every policeman in England ~~was~~ knew that a certain series of numbers on a ration card identified the holder as a German spy.

Wolff had weighed the alternatives and picked what seemed the least risky. He had been wrong, and now he had no place to go.

He stood, picked up his cases, and began to walk.

His first thought was that he could check into Shephard's Hotel. Unfortunately, that would probably be the first thought of

the police, too: Shepheard's would be the first to get the description of the Assyt murderer. The other major hotels would not be far behind. That left the pensions. Whether they were warned depended on how thorough the police wanted to be. Since the British were involved, the police might feel obliged to be meticulous. Still, the managers of small guest-houses were often too busy to pay a lot of attention to nosey policemen.

He left the Garden City and headed downtown. The streets were even more busy and noisy than when he had left. There were countless uniforms - not just English but Australian, New Zealand, Polish, Yugoslav, Palestine, Indian and Greek. The slim, pert Egyptian girls ~~appeared~~ in their cotton frocks and heavy jewellery competed successfully with their red-faced, dispirited European counterparts. Among the older women it seemed to Wolff that fewer wore the traditional black robe and veil. The men still greeted one another in the same exuberant fashion, swinging their right arms outward before bringing their hands together with a loud clap, shaking hands for at least a minute or two while grasping the shoulder of the other with the left hand and talking excitedly. The beggars and pedlars were out in force, taking advantage of the influx of naive Europeans. With his cases Wolff looked like a new arrival, and he was besieged by cripples, women with fly-encrusted babies, shoeshine boys, and men selling everything from second-hand razor blades to giant fountain pens guaranteed to hold six months' supply of ink.

The traffic was worse. The slow, verminous trams were more crowded than ever, with passengers clinging precariously to the outside from a perch on the running board, crammed into the cab with the driver, and sitting cross-legged on the roof. The buses and taxis were no better: there seemed to be a shortage of auto parts, for so many of the cars had broken windows, ^{flat} ~~missing~~ tyres,

and ailing engines, and were lacking headlights or windscreen wipers. Wolff saw two taxis - an elderly Morris and an even older Packard - which had finally stopped running and were now being drawn by donkeys. The only decent cars were the monstrous American limousines of the wealthy pashas and the occasional pre-war English Austin. Mixing with the motor vehicles in deadly competition were the horse-drawn gharries, the mule carts of the peasants, and the livestock - camels, sheep and goats - which were banned from the city centre by the most unenforceable law on the Egyptian statute book.

And the noise - Wolff had forgotten the noise.

The trams rang bells continuously. In traffic jams all the cars hooted all the time, and when there was nothing to hoot at they hooted on general principles. Not to be outdone, the drivers of carts and camels yelled at the tops of their voices. Many shops and all cafes blared Arab music from radios turned to full volume. Street vendors called continually and pedestrians told them to go away. Dogs barked and circling kites screamed overhead. From time to time it would all be swamped by the roar of an airplane.

This is my town, Wolff thought: they can't catch me here.

There were a dozen or so well-known pensions catering for tourists of different nationalities: Swiss, Austrian, German, Danish and French. He thought of them and rejected them as too obvious. Finally he remembered a cheap lodging-house run by nuns at Bulaq, the port district. It catered mainly for the sailors who came down the Nile in steam tugs and feluccas laden with cotton, coal, paper and stone. Wolff could be sure he would not get robbed, infected or murdered, ~~there~~ and nobody would think to look for him there.

As he headed out of the hotel district the streets became a little less crowded, but not much. He could not see the river itself, but he occasionally glimpsed, through the huddled buildings, the high

triangular sail of a felucca.

The hostel was a large, decaying building which had once been the villa of some pasha. There was now a bronze cross over the arch of the ~~front~~ entrance. A black-robed nun was watering a tiny bed of flowers in front of the building. Through the arch Wolff saw a cool quiet hall. He had walked several miles today, with his heavy cases: he looked forward to a rest.

Two ~~Egypt~~ Egyptian policemen came out of the hostel.

Wolff took in the wide leather belts, the inevitable sunglasses, and the military haircuts in a swift glance. He turned his back on the men and spoke to the nun in the garden in French. 'Good day, Sister.'

She unbent from her watering and smiled at him. 'Good day.' She had a beautiful face. 'Do you want lodgings?'

'No lodgings. Just your blessing.'

The two policemen went past, arguing about a horse race.

'God bless you,' said the nun.

Wolff thanked her and walked on.

It was worse than he had imagined.

He doubled back, heading for the city centre again. He was beginning to feel as he had in the desert, as if he had been walking forever without getting anywhere.

Outside the German School a Field Security patrol was checking papers.

Wolff saw them from a distance and ducked into a side road.

He had to get off the streets.

He saw a taxi, a big old Ford with steam hissing out from under its bonnet. He hailed it and jumped in. He gave the driver an address and the car jerked away in third gear, apparently the only

gear that worked. On the way they stopped twice to top up the boiling radiator. ~~Each time the driver asked Wolff to stand guard outside the cab to prevent the street urchins stealing the tyres.~~

The taxi took him to Coptic Cairo, the ancient Christian ghetto.

He paid the driver and went down the steps to the entrance. He gave a few piastres to the old woman who held the great wooden key, and she let him in.

It was an island of darkness and quiet in the sea of Cairo. Wolff walked its narrow passages, hearing faintly the low chanting from the ancient churches. He passed the school and the synagogue and the cellar where Mary was supposed to have brought the baby Jesus. Finally he went into the smallest of the five churches.

The service was about to begin. Wolff put down his precious cases beside a pew. He bowed to the pictures of saints on the wall, then approached the altar, knelt, and kissed the hand of the priest. He returned to the pew and sat down.

The choir began to chant a passage of scripture in Arabic. Wolff settled into his seat. He would be safe here until darkness fell. Then he would try his last shot.

*

The Cha-Cha was a large open-air nightclub in a garden beside the river. It was packed, as usual. Wolff waited in the queue of British officers and their girls while the safragis set up extra tables on trestles in every spare inch of space. On the stage a comic was saying: 'Wait till Rommel gets to Shepheard's - that will hold him up.'

Wolff finally got a table and a bottle of champagne. The evening was warm and the stage lights made it worse. The audience was rowdy - they were thirsty, and only champagne was served, so they

quickly got drunk. They began to shout for the star of the show, Sonja Fahzi.

First they had to listen to an overweight Greek woman sing I'll See You In My Dreams and I Ain't Got Nobody (which made them laugh). Then Sonja was announced. However, she did not appear for a while. The audience became noisier and more impatient as the minutes ticked by. At last, when they seemed to be on the verge of rioting, there was a roll of drums, the stage lights went off, and ~~the~~ silence descended.

When the spotlight came on Sonja stood still in the centre of the stage with her arms stretched skyward. She wore diaphanous trousers and a sequinned halter, and her body was powdered white. The music began - drums and a pipe - and she started to move.

Wolff sipped champagne and watched, smiling. She was still the best.

She ^{jerked} ~~rattled~~ her hips, slowly, stamping one foot and then the other. Her arms began to tremble, then her shoulders ~~shook~~ moved and her breasts shook; and then her famous belly rolled hypnotically. The rhythm quickened. She closed her eyes. Each part of her body seemed to move independently of the rest. Wolff felt, as he always did, as every man in the audience did, that he was alone with her, that her display was just for him, and that this was not an act, not a piece of showbusiness wizardry, but her sensual writhings were compulsive, she did it because she had to, she was driven into a sexual frenzy by her own voluptuous body. The audience was tense, silent, perspiring, mesmerised. She went faster and faster, seeming to be transported. The music climaxed with a bang. In the instant of silence that followed Sonja uttered a short, sharp cry; then she fell backward, her legs folded beneath her, her knees apart, until her head touched the boards of the stage. She held the position

for a moment, then the lights went out. The audience rose to their feet with a roar of applause.

The lights came up, and she was gone.

Sonja never took encores.

Wolff got out of his seat. He gave a waiter a pound - three months' wages for most Egyptians - to lead him backstage. The waiter showed him the door to Sonja's dressing-room, then went away.

Wolff knocked on the door.

'Who is it?'

Wolff walked in.

She was sitting on a stool, wearing a silk robe, taking off her make-up. She saw him in her mirror and spun around to face him.

Wolff said: 'Hello, Sonja.'

She stared at him. After a long moment she said: 'You bastard.'

*

She had not changed.

She was a handsome woman. She had glossy black hair, long and thick; large, slightly protruding brown eyes with lush eyelashes; high cheekbones which saved her face from roundness and gave it shape; an arched nose, gracefully arrogant; and a full mouth with even white teeth. Her body was all smooth curves, but because she was a couple of inches taller than average she did not look plump.

Her eyes flashed with anger. 'What are you doing here? Where did you go? What happened to your face?'

Wolff put down his cases and sat on the divan. He looked up at her. She stood with her hands on her hips, her chin thrust forward, her breasts outlined in green silk. 'You're beautiful,' he said.

'Get out of here.'

'I need help,' he said. 'The British are after me. They're watching my house, and all the hotels have my description. I've got

nowhere to sleep. I want to move in with you.'

'Go to hell.'

'I want to tell you why I walked out on you.'

'After two years no excuse is good enough.'

'Give me a minute to explain. For the sake of ... all that.'

'I owe you nothing.' She glared at him a moment longer, then she opened the door. He thought she was going to throw him out, and for a ~~mom~~ minute she stood holding the door and looking at him; but then she put her head outside and yelled: 'Somebody get me a drink!' She came back inside and closed the door. 'A minute,' she said to him.

'Are you going to stand over me like a prison guard? I'm not dangerous.'

'Oh, yes you are,' she said, but she went back to her stool and resumed working on her face.

He hesitated. He had spent some hours that afternoon trying to dream up a story which would explain why he had left her without saying Goodbye and never contacted her since. Nothing less than the truth sounded convincing. Reluctant as he was to share his secret, he had to tell her, for he was desperate and she was his only hope.

He said: 'Do you remember I went to Beirut early in 1939?'

'No.'

'I brought back a jade bracelet for you.'

'I don't have it any more.'

'I went there to see a German army officer called Heinz. He asked me to work for Germany in the coming war. I agreed.'

Sonja turned from her mirror and faced him. She said nothing.

He went on: 'They told me to come back to Cairo and wait until I heard from them. Two years ago I heard. They wanted me to go to Berlin. I went. I did a training course, then I worked in the Balkans

and the Levant. I went back to Berlin in February for briefing on a new assignment. They sent me here - '

'What are you telling me?' she said incredulously. 'You're a spy?'

'Yes.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Look.' He picked up a suitcase and opened it. 'This is a radio, for sending messages to Rommel.' He closed it again and opened the other. 'This is my financing.'

She stared at the neat stacks of notes. 'My God!' she said. 'It's a fortune.'

There was a knock at the door. Wolff closed the case. A waiter came in with a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice. Seeing Wolff, he said: 'Shall I bring another glass?'

'No,' Sonja said impatiently. 'Go away.'

The waiter left. Wolff opened the ^{champagne,} ~~hatter~~ filled the glass, gave it to Sonja, then took a long drink from the bottle.

'Listen,' he said. 'Our army is winning in the desert. We can help them. They need to know about the British strength - numbers of men, which divisions, names of commanders, quality of ~~in~~ weapons and equipment, and - if possible - battle plans. We're here, in Cairo - we can find these things out. Then, when the Germans take over, we will be heroes.'

'We?'

'You can help me. And the first thing you can do is give me a place to live.' You hate the British, don't you? You want to see them thrown out?'

'I would do it for anyone but you,' she said. She drank her wine and refilled her glass.

Wolff took the glass from her and drank. 'Sonja. If I had

sent you a postcard from Berlin the British would have thrown you in jail. You must not be angry, now that you know the reasons why.' He lowered his voice. 'We can bring those old times back. We'll have good food and the best champagne, new clothes and beautiful parties and an American car. We - ' He paused. 'How is Fawzi?'

Sonja looked away. 'She left, the bitch.'

Wolff set down the glass, then he put both hands to Sonja's neck. She looked up at him, unmoving. With his thumbs under her chin he forced her to stand up. 'I'll find another Fawzi for us,' he said softly. His hands moved over the silk robe, descending her body, stroking her flanks. 'I'm the only one who understands what you need.' He lowered his mouth to hers, took her lip between his teeth, and bit until he tasted blood.

Sonja closed her eyes. 'I hate you,' she moaned.

*

In the cool of the evening Wolff walked along the towpath toward the houseboat. The sores had gone from his face and his bowels were back to normal. He wore a new white suit, and he carried two bags full of his favourite groceries.

The island suburb of Zamalek was quiet and peaceful. The calm, muddy Nile lapped gently against the houseboats lined along the riverside. The boats, all shapes and sizes, gaily painted and luxuriously fitted out, looked pretty in the late sunshine.

Sonja's was one of the largest. A gangplank led from the towpath to the top deck, which was open to the breeze but shaded from the sun by a green-and-white striped canopy. Wolff boarded the boat and went down the ladder to the interior. It was crowded with furniture: chairs and divans and tables and cabinets full of knick-knacks. There was a tiny kitchen in the prow. Floor-to-ceiling curtains of maroon velvet divided the space in two, closing

off the bedroom. Beyond the bedroom, in the stern, was a bathroom.

Sonja was sitting on a cushion painting her toenails. It was extraordinary how slowly she could look, Wolff thought. She wore a grubby cotton dress, her face looked drawn, and her hair was uncombed. In half an hour, when she left for the Cha-Cha, she would look like a dream.

Wolff put his bags on a table and began to take things out. 'French champagne ... English marmalade ... German sausage ... quail's eggs ... Scotch salmon ... '

Sonja looked up, astonished. 'Nobody can find things like that - there's a war on.'

Wolff smiled. 'There's a little Greek grocer in Qulali who remembers a good customer.'

She came across and dipped into a bag. 'Caviar!' She took the lid off the jar and began to eat caviar with her fingers. 'I haven't had caviar since ... '

'Since I went away,' Wolff finished. He put a bottle of champagne in the icebox. 'If you wait a few minutes you can have cold champagne with it.'

~~XX~~ 'I can't wait.'

'You never can.' He took an English-language newspaper out of one of the bags and began to look through it. It was a rotten paper, full of British press releases, its war news censored more heavily than the BBC broadcasts which everyone listened to, its local reporting even worse - ~~for~~ it was illegal to print speeches by the official Egyptian opposition politicians. 'Still nothing about me in here,' Wolff said.

'They're always late with the news,' Sonja said through a mouthful of caviar.

'It's not that. If they report the murder they need to say

what the motive was - or, if they don't, people will guess. The British don't want people to suspect that the Germans have spies in Egypt. It looks bad.'

She went into the bedroom to change. She called through the curtain: 'Does that mean they've stopped looking for you?'

'No. I saw Abdullah in the souk. He says the Egyptian police aren't really interested, but there's a Major Vandam who's keeping the pressure on.' Wolff put down the newspaper, frowning. He would have liked to know whether Vandam was the officer who had broken into the villa. He wished he had looked at that man more closely, but from across the street the officer's face, shaded by the peaked cap, had not been clearly visible.

Sonja said: 'How does Abdullah know?'

Wolff

'I don't know.' ~~Vandam~~ shrugged. 'He's a thief, he hears things.' He went to the icebox and took out the bottle. It was not really cold enough, but he was thirsty. He poured two glasses. Sonja came out, dressed.

A couple of minutes later there was a loud hooting from outside as Sonja's taxi arrived. She drained her glass and left. They did not say 'Hello' and 'Goodbye' to each other.

Wolff went to the cupboard where he kept the radio. He took out the English novel and the sheet of paper bearing the key to the code. He studied the key. Today was 28 May. He had to add 42 - the year - to 28. That meant he had to use page 70 of the novel to encode his message. May was the fifth month, so every fifth letter on the page was discounted.

He decided to send: HAVE ARRIVED. CHECKING IN. ACKNOWLEDGE. Beginning at the top of page 70 of the book, he looked along the line of print for the letter H. It was the tenth character. In his code it would therefore be represented by the tenth letter of the

alphabet, J. Next he needed an A. ~~The~~ In the book, the third letter after the H was an A. The A of HAVE would therefore be represented by the third letter of the alphabet, C.

This type of book code was a variation on the one-time-pad code, the only kind of ~~key~~ code which was unbreakable in theory and in practice. To decode the message, a listener had to have both the book and the key.

When he had encoded his message he looked at his watch. He was to transmit at midnight. He had a couple of hours before he needed to warm up the radio. He poured another glass of champagne and decided to finish the caviar. He found a spoon and picked up the pot. It was empty. Sonja had eaten it all.

*

In 1916 Captain Erwin Rommel was leading a mountain unit against the Rumanians on the Eastern Front at Siebenbuerger. During one advance Rommel, as company commander, ordered a platoon commander not to advance farther. A little later the junior officer saw a gap in the enemy position and, with his platoon, dashed ~~xxx~~ to take advantage of it. He was successful, and drove a small wedge into the Rumanian position. However he was then exposed, and called for support to consolidate his gain. Rommel refused to help. 'Why did the platoon fail to stay in its place as ordered?' he said. 'Should I commit my last reserves as requested by the platoon commander? No, little as I liked it, I could not help the platoon.'

Twenty-six years later ~~Field Marshal~~ ^{Colonel General} Rommel remembered those words with bitter irony. Like that platoon commander, Rommel had attacked without authority and scored brilliant victories; but his Fuehrer, like the young Captain Rommel, refused to give him support.

On 29 May 1942 Rommel snatched a hasty lunch in his armoured command vehicle at Rigel Ridge, while the hot khamsin blew dust into

his sandwiches and his cold bottled tea. This was a war of supplies. Once already Rommel had swept across the desert and come close to conquering the whole of North Africa; then, with his supply lines stretched 1500 miles, his diminishing army exhausted, and many of his famous panzer tanks immobilised for lack of spare parts, he had been forced to turn and flee back to the point from which he had started. The attacking Allies then suffered the same problem of stretched supply lines, and Rommel was able to regroup, counterattack, and once more tilt the seesaw the other way.

It affected both sides; but Rommel had the additional problem that his High Command were not interested in Africa, and they begrudged every niggardly shipload they sent.

It was Russia that interested Hitler. The might of the German war machine was employed in Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. Africa was a sideshow. Rommel thought they were blind. If only he could take Egypt, then from a strong base he could swing northward through the Middle East and attack Russia from the south. His armies and the Barbarossa forces could form a pincer which would snap shut on the Caucasus, where the oil was. Germany would then control the Mediterranean and England would be isolated from its empire.

He had told them so, and they ignored him. Each day he sent increasingly peremptory demands for supplies to Berlin, and they ignored those, too. When he suffered a reverse, they had no sympathy: Mussolini had said: 'Victory ^{finds a hundred} ~~brings a hundred~~ fathers, but defeat is an orphan.'

He was winning despite them.

The British had dug in on the Gazala Line, a fifty-mile string of fortified 'boxes' linked by minefields which ran from the coast at Gazala due south into the desert. Rommel's army was the weaker

in men, armour and supplies, and he knew it would be fatal for him to engage the enemy in a head-on slogging match. Instead he employed the unorthodox tactics which had already given him so many victories. Leaving a small force to attack the centre of the Gazala Line, he and his Afrika Korps had made a long-range moonlight dash to the south, turned a dog-leg around the far end of the Line, and attacked the Allies from the rear.

That had been on the morning of 27 May. Now, two days later, Rommel brooded on the gains and losses of the battle so far. As usual, his surprise appearance miles from where he was supposed to be had thrown the British forces into confusion, and they were now wasting their strength in piecemeal sallies. But the 15th Panzers had run out of gasoline - supplies again! - and the northward advance had ground to a halt.

The Afrika Korps had only 150 tanks left.

This was a critical battle. If he could break the Gazala Line, Rommel could reach Tobruk. Once the fortified port was taken the convoys from Europe - inadequate though they were - could come directly to the front line, ~~by-passing~~ cutting out the long journey across the desert. With a secure base and new supplies Rommel would be poised for the final dash to Cairo.

It would not be easy - the British would still be stronger - but Rommel was lucky. He had always been lucky in battle. He was continually in the front line - joking with the men, yelling orders, tearing around in his staff car giving encouragement - and yet, although he constantly exposed himself to enemy fire, he had not been wounded since September 1914.

If he could stay lucky just a little while longer ...

There was one new factor in the equation. Rommel's I(c) - Intelligence officer - had reported that morning that the spy Wolff

had arrived in Cairo and made contact. Rommel had last seen Wolff in Benghazi in January. The ~~spy~~^{man} had made a formidable journey, an incredible trans-Saharan marathon. Rommel had little faith in Intelligence, especially when it came from secret agents, but he had been impressed by Wolff. If he could get to Cairo, perhaps he could penetrate the Allied headquarters. There was nothing like having advance notice of the enemy's plans. The spy might even tip the balance in the desert war.

Or not. In all probability the war would continue to be a struggle between the Allies' superior strength and Rommel's tactical genius.

A runner approached the car with a report. The British 2nd Armoured Brigade was attacking, breaking out westward from the Knightsbridge Box. Rommel gave orders for the 21st Panzers and the refuelled 15th to counterattack with all force. He drank the rest of his cold tea, threw away the bottle, pulled his goggles down over his eyes, and ordered his driver to move out.

- 4 -

Elene looked at her face in the mirror and thought: I'm twenty-three, I must be losing my looks.

She leaned closer to the glass and examined herself carefully, searching for signs of deterioration. Her complexion was perfect. Her round brown eyes were as clear as a mountain pool. There were no wrinkles. It was a childish face, delicately modelled, with a look of waif-like innocence. She was like an art collector checking on his finest piece: she thought of ~~her~~^{the} face as hers, but not as her. She smiled, and the face in the mirror smiled back at her. It was a small, intimate smile, with a hint of mischief about it: she knew it ^{could}

could

make a man break out in a cold sweat.

She picked up the note and read it again.

Thursday

My dear Elene,

I'm afraid it is all over. My wife has found out. We have patched things up, but I've had to promise never to see you again. Of course you can stay in the flat, but I can't pay the rent any more. I'm so sorry it happened this way - but I suppose we both knew it could not last forever. Good luck -

Your,

Claud.

Just like that, she thought.

She tore up the note and its cheap sentiments. Claud was a fat, half-French and half-Greek businessman who owned three restaurants in Cairo and one in Alexandria. He was cultured and jolly and kind, but when it came to the crunch he cared nothing for Elene.

He was the third in two years.

It had started with Charles, the stockbroker, who had taken her out of the dancing troupe, set her up in the flat, and visited her every Tuesday night. She had thrown him out after he offered her to his brother as if she were a dish of sweetmeats. Then there had been Johnnie, the nicest of the three, who wanted to divorce his wife and marry Elene: she had refused. Now Claud was gone.

She had known from the start there was no future in it.

It was her fault as much as theirs that the affairs broke up. The ostensible reasons - Charles' brother, Johnnie's proposal, Claud's wife - were just excuses, or maybe catalysts. The real cause was always the same: Elene was unhappy.

She contemplated the prospect of another affair. She looked

into the mirror and then through it, her eyes unfocussing as she visualised her fourth lover. Perhaps he would be an Italian, with flashing eyes and glossy hair and perfectly manicured hands. She might meet him in the bar of the Metropolitan Hotel, where the reporters hung out. He would speak to her, then offer her a drink. She would smile at him, and he would be lost. They would make a date for dinner the next day. She would look stunning as she walked into the restaurant on his arm. All heads would turn, and he would feel proud. They would have more dates. He would give her presents. He would make a pass at her, then another: his third would be successful. She would enjoy making love with him - the intimacy, the touching, the endearments - and she would make him feel like a king. He would leave her at dawn, but he would be back that evening. They would stop going to restaurants together - 'too risky,' he would say - but he would spend more and more time at the flat, and he would begin to pay the rent and the bills. Elene would then have everything she wanted: a home, money, and affection. She would begin to wonder why she was so miserable. She would throw a tantrum if he arrived half an hour late. She would go into a black sulk if he so much as mentioned his wife. She would complain that he no longer gave her presents, but accept them nonchalantly when he did. The man would be irritated but he would be unable to leave her, for by this time he would be eager for her grudging kisses, greedy for her perfect body; and she would still make him feel like a king in bed. She would find his conversation boring; she would demand from him more passion than he was able to give; there would be rows. Finally the crisis would come: his wife would get suspicious, a child would fall ill, he would have to take a six-month business trip, he would run short of money. And Elene would be back where she was now: drifting, alone, disreputable - and a year older.

Her eyes focussed, and she saw again her face in the mirror. Her face was the cause of all this. It was because of her face that she led this pointless life. Had she been ugly, she would always have yearned for this life, and never discovered its hollowness. You led me astray, she thought; you deceived me, you pretended I was somebody else. You're not my face, you're a mask. You should stop trying to run my life.

I'm not a beautiful Cairo socialite, I'm a slum girl from Alexandria.

I'm not a woman of independent means, I'm the next thing to a whore.

I'm not Egyptian, I'm Jewish.

My name is not Elene. It's Abigail Asnani.

And I want to go home.

*

The young man behind the desk at the Jewish Agency in Cairo wore a yamulka. Apart from a wisp of beard, his cheeks were smooth. He asked for her name and address. Without thinking, she called herself Elene.

The young man seemed confused. She was used to this. Most men got flustered when she smiled at them. He said: 'Would you ... I mean, do you mind if I ask you why you want to go to Palestine?'

She could not explain her life to this boy. 'I'm Jewish. All my family are dead. I'm wasting my life.'

'What work would you do in Palestine?'

She had not thought of that. 'Anything.'

'It's mostly agricultural labour.'

'That's fine.'

He smiled gently. He was recovering his composure. 'I mean no offence, but you don't look like a farm hand.'

'If I didn't want to change my life, I wouldn't want to go to Palestine.'

'Yes.' He fiddled with his pen. 'What work do you do now?'

'I sing, and when I can't get singing I dance, and when I can't get dancing I wait at tables. I told you - I'm wasting my life. Why all the questions? Is Palestine accepting only college graduates now?'

'Nothing like that,' he said. 'But it's very tough to get in. The British have imposed a quota, and all the places are taken by refugees from the Nazis.'

'Why didn't you tell me that before?' she said angrily.

'Two reasons. One is that we can get people in illegally. The other ... the other takes a little longer to explain. Would you wait a minute? I must telephone someone.'

She was still angry with him for questioning her before he told her there were no places. 'I'm not sure there's any point in my waiting.'

'There is, I promise you. It's quite important. Just a minute or two.'

'Very well.'

He went into a back room to phone. Elene waited impatiently. The day was warming up, and the room was poorly ventilated. She felt a little foolish. She had come here impulsively, without thinking through the idea of emigration. Too many of her decisions were made like that. She could have guessed they would ask her questions; ~~like this~~; she could have prepared her answers. She could have come dressed in something a little less glamorous.

The young man came back. 'It's so warm,' he said. 'Shall we go across the street for a cold drink?'

So that was the game. She decided to put him down. 'No,' she

said. 'You're much too young for me.'

He was terribly embarrassed. 'Oh, please, don't misunderstand me. There's someone I want you to meet, that's all.'

She wondered whether to believe him. She had nothing to lose, she thought, and she was thirsty. 'All right.'

He held the door for her. They crossed the street, dodging the rickety carts and broken-down taxis, feeling the sudden blazing heat of the sun. They ducked under a striped awning and stepped into the cool of a cafe. The young man ordered lemon juice; Elene had gin-and-tonic.

She said: 'You can get people in illegally.'

'Sometimes.' He took half his drink in one gulp. 'One reason we do it, is if the person is being persecuted. That's why I asked you some questions.'

'I'm not being persecuted.'

'The other reason, is if people have done a lot for the cause, some way.'

'You mean I have to earn the right to go to Palestine?'

'Look, one day maybe all Jews will have the right to go there to live. But while there are quotas there have to be criteria.'

She was tempted to ask: Who do I have to sleep with? But she had misjudged him that way once already. All the same, she thought he wanted to use her somehow. She said: 'What do I have to do?'

He shook his head. 'I can't make a bargain with you. Egyptian Jews can't get into Palestine, except for special cases, and you're not a special case. That's all there is to it.'

'What are you trying to tell me, then?'

'You can't go to Palestine, but you can still fight for the cause.'

'What, exactly, did you have in mind?'

'The first thing we have to do is defeat the Nazis.'

She laughed. 'Well, I'll do my best!'

He ignored that. 'We don't like the British much, but any enemy of Germany's is a friend of ours, so at the moment - strictly on a temporary basis - we're working with British Intelligence. I think you could help them.'

'For God's sake! How?'

A shadow fell across the table, and the young man looked up. 'Ah!' he said. He looked back at Elene. 'I want you to meet my friend, Major William Vandam.'

*

He was a tall man, and broad: with those wide shoulders and mighty legs he might once have been an athlete, although now, Elene guessed, he was pushing forty and out of condition. He had a round, open face topped by wiry brown hair which looked as if it might curl if it were allowed to grow a little beyond the regulation length. He shook her hand, sat down, crossed his legs, lit a cigarette, and ordered gin. He wore a stern expression, as if he thought life was a very serious business and he did not want anybody to start fooling around.

Elene thought he was a typical tight-assed Englishman.

The young man from the Jewish Agency asked him: 'What's the news?'

'The Gazala Line is holding, but it's getting very fierce out there.'

Vandam's voice was a surprise. English officers usually spoke with the upper-class drawl which had come to symbolise arrogance for ordinary Egyptians. Vandam spoke precisely but softly, with rounded vowels and a slight burr on the r: Elene had a feeling this was the trace of a country accent, although she could not remember how she

knew.

She decided to ask him. 'Where do you come from, Major?'

'Dorset. Why do you ask?'

'I was wondering about your accent.'

'South-west of England. You're observant. I thought I had no accent.'

'Just a trace.'

He lit another cigarette. She watched his hands. They were long and slender, rather at odds with the rest of his body; the nails were well manicured and the skin was white except for the deep amber stains where he held his cigarette.

The young man took his leave. 'I'll let Major Vandam explain everything to you. I hope you will work with him - I believe it's very important.'

Vandam shook his hand and thanked him, and the young man went out.

Vandam said to Elene: 'Tell me about yourself.'

'No,' she said. 'You tell me about yourself.'

He hesitated. 'All right,' he said after a moment. 'Cairo is full of officers and men who know secrets. They know our strengths, our weaknesses, and our plans. The enemy wants to know those secrets. We can be sure that at any time the Germans have people in Cairo trying to get information. It's my job to stop them. Your turn.'

Suddenly she wanted to tell him the truth. 'I'm a lousy singer and a mediocre dancer, but sometimes I find a rich man to pay my bills.'

He said nothing, but he looked taken aback.

Elene said: 'Shocked?'

'Shouldn't I be?'

She looked away. She knew what he was thinking. Until now he

had treated her politely, as if she were a respectable woman, one of his own class. Now he realised he had been mistaken. His reaction was completely predictable, but all the same she felt bitter. She said: 'Isn't that what most women do, when they get married - find a man to pay the bills?'

'Yes,' he said gravely.

She looked at him. The imp of mischief seized her. 'I just turn them around a little faster than the average housewife.'

Vandam burst out laughing. Suddenly he looked a different man. He threw back his head, his arms and legs spread sideways, and all the tension went out of his body. When the laugh subsided he was relaxed, just briefly. They grinned at one another. The moment passed, and he crossed his legs again. There was a silence. Elene felt like a schoolgirl who has been giggling in class.

Vandam was serious again. 'My problem is information,' he said. 'Nobody tells an Englishman anything. That's where you come in. Because you're Egyptian, you hear the kind of gossip and street talk that never comes my way. And because you're Jewish, you'll pass it to me. I hope.'

'What kind of gossip?'

'I'm interested in anyone who's curious about the British Army.' He paused. He seemed to be wondering how much to tell her. 'In particular ... At the moment I'm looking for a man called John Wolff. He used to live in Cairo and he has recently returned. He may be looking for a place to live, and he probably has a lot of money. He is certainly making inquiries about British forces.'

Elene shrugged. 'After all that build-up I was expecting to be asked to do something much more dramatic.'

'Such as?'

'I don't know. Waltz with Rommel and pick his pockets.'

Vandam laughed again. Elene liked it when he laughed. He said: 'Well, mundane though it is, will you do it?'

'I don't know yet. What does the job pay?'

'Nothing, usually.'

'That's a little below what I was hoping for.'

'How much do you want?'

'You might be a gentleman and pay the rent of my flat.'

'How much?'

'Seventy-five a month.'

Vandam's eyebrows ^{rose} ~~went up~~. 'What have you got, a palace?'

'Prices have gone up. Haven't you heard? It's all these English officers desperate for accommodation.'

'Touche.' He frowned. 'I can arrange that, but I'll have to have information to justify it.'

Elene shrugged. 'Let's give it a try. How do I contact you?'

'Send me a message.' He took a pencil and a scrap of paper from his shirt pocket and began to write. 'I'll give you my address and phone number, at HQ and at home. As soon as I hear from you I'll come to your flat.'

'All right.' She wrote down her address, wondering what this starchy Englishman would think of her flat. It would probably frighten him to death. 'What if you're seen?'

'Will it matter?'

'I might be asked who you are.'

'Well, you'd better not tell the truth.'

She grinned. 'I'll say you're my lover.'

He looked away. 'Very well.'

'But you'd better act the part.' She kept a straight face. 'You must bring armfuls of flowers and boxes of chocolates.'

'I don't know ... '

mistresses

'Don't Englishmen give their/~~xxxxxx~~ flowers and chocolates?'

He looked at her unblinkingly. She noticed that he had grey eyes. 'I don't know,' he said levelly. 'I've never had a mistress.'

Elene thought: I stand corrected. She said: 'Then you've got a lot to learn.'

'I'm sure. Would you like another drink?'

And now I'm dismissed, she thought. You're so masterful, Major Vandam, I may take you in hand just to bring you down a peg. 'No, thanks. I must go.'

He stood up. 'I'll look forward to hearing from you.'

She shook his hand and walked away. Somehow she had the feeling that he was not watching her go.

*

Vandam changed into a civilian suit for the reception at the Anglo-Egyptian Union. He would never have gone to the Union while his wife was alive: she said it was 'plebby'. He told her to say 'plebian' so that she would not sound like a County snob: she said she was a County snob, and would he kindly stop showing off his classical education.

Vandam had loved her then and he did now.

Her father was a fairly wealthy man who became a diplomat because he had nothing better to do. He had not been pleased at the prospect of his daughter marrying a postman's son. He was not much mollified when he was told that Vandam had gone to a minor public school (on a scholarship) and London University, and was considered one of the most promising of his generation of junior Army officers. But the daughter was adamant in this as in all things, and in the end the father had accepted the match with good grace and given his daughter the generous dowry which enabled them to live on a scale much grander than the average Army family. Oddly enough, on the one

occasion when the fathers met they got on rather well. Sadly, the mothers hated each other and there were no more family gatherings.

None of it mattered much. For Vandam his graceful, dignified, beautiful wife was the epitome of womanhood, and he thought himself a lucky man.

The contrast with Elene could not have been more striking.

He drove to the Union. He considered his car an expensive vice. It was a ten-year-old Bentley coupe which went very fast and consumed vast quantities of gas. There was only one mechanic in Cairo who could service it properly, and he charged the earth. But Vandam took great pleasure in its shape, its responsiveness, and its smooth, restrained power.

The day was cooling when he parked at the Union. Passing the club house, he looked through a window and saw a billiards game in full swing. He resisted the temptation and walked on to the lawn.

He accepted a glass of African sherry and moved into the crowd, nodding and smiling, exchanging pleasantries with people he knew. There was tea for the teetotal Muslim guests, but not many had turned up. Vandam tasted the sherry and wondered whether the barman could be taught to make a martini.

He looked across the grass to the neighbouring Egyptian Officers Club, and wished he could eavesdrop on conversations there. Someone spoke his name, and he turned to see the woman surgeon. Once again he had to think before he could remember her name. 'Doctor Abuthnot.'

'We might be informal here,' she said. 'My name is Joan.'

'William. Is your husband here?'

'I'm not married.'

'Pardon me.' Now he saw her in a new light. She was single and he was a widower, and they had been seen talking together in public three times in a week: by now the English colony in Cairo

would have them practically engaged. 'How did you come to be a surgeon? It's not easy for a woman.'

'I fought tooth and nail,' she said. She was smiling, but Vandam detected an undertone of resentment. 'Even so, it took a war and a posting to Egypt to break down the barriers. You're a little unconventional yourself, I'm told.'

Vandam thought himself to be utterly conventional. 'How so?' he said with surprise.

'Bringing up your child yourself.'

'No choice. If I had wanted to send him back to England, I wouldn't have been able to - you can't get a passage unless you're disabled or a general.'

'But you didn't want to.'

'No.'

'That's what I mean.'

'He's my son,' Vandam said. 'I don't want anyone else to bring him up - nor does he.'

'I understand. It's just that some fathers would think it ... unmanly.'

He raised his eyebrows at her, and to his surprise she blushed. He said: 'You're right, I suppose. I'd never thought of it that way.'

'I'm ashamed of myself. I've been prying. Would you like another drink?'

Vandam looked into his glass. 'I think I shall have to go inside in search of a real drink.'

'I wish you luck.' She smiled and turned away.

Vandam walked across the lawn toward the club house. She was an attractive woman, courageous and intelligent, and she had made it clear she wanted to know him better. He thought: Why the

devil do I feel so indifferent to her? All these people are thinking how well matched we are - and they're right.

He went inside and spoke to the bartender. 'Gin. Ice. One olive. And a few drops of very dry vermouth.'

The martini when it came was quite good, and he had two more. He thought again of the woman Elene. There were a thousand like her in Cairo - Greek, Jewish, Syrian and Palestinian as well as Egyptian. They were dancers for just as long as it took to catch the eye of some wealthy roue. Most of them probably entertained fantasies of getting married and being taken back to a large house in Alexandria or Paris or Camberley, and they would be disappointed.

They all had delicate brown faces and feline bodies with slender legs and pert breasts, but Vandam was tempted to think that Elene stood out from the crowd. Her smile was devastating. The idea of her going to Palestine to work on a farm was, at first sight, ridiculous; but she had tried, and when that failed she agreed to work for Vandam. On the other hand, retailing street gossip was easy money, like being a kept woman. She was probably the same as all the rest.

The martinis were beginning to take effect, and he was afraid he might not be as polite as he should to the ladies when they came in, so he paid his bill and went out to the car.

He drove to HQ to get the latest news. It seemed the day had ended in a standoff after heavy casualties on both sides - rather more on the British side. There was rarely any good news, Vandam reflected. He went home.

Gaafar had prepared lamb and rice. Vandam had another drink with his dinner. Billy talked to him while he ate. Today's geography lesson had been about wheat farming in Canada. Vandam wished they would teach the boy something about the country in which he lived.

After Billy went to bed Vandam sat alone in the drawing-room, smoking, thinking about Joan Abuthnot and John Wolff and Erwin Rommel. In their different ways they all threatened him. As night fell outside, the room began to seem claustrophobic. Vandam filled his cigarette case and went out.

The city was as much alive now as at any time during the day. There were a lot of soldiers on the streets, some of them very drunk. These were hard men who had seen action in the desert, had suffered the sand and the heat and the bombing and the shelling, and they often found the wogs to be less grateful than they should be. When a shopkeeper gave short change or a restaurant owner overcharged or a barman refused to serve drunks, the soldiers would remember seeing their friends blown up in the defence of Egypt, and they would start fighting and break windows and smash the place up. Vandam understood why the Egyptians were ungrateful - they did not much care whether it was the British or the Germans who oppressed them - but still he had little sympathy for the Cairo shopkeepers, who were making a fortune out of the war.

He walked slowly, cigarette in hand, enjoying the cool night air, looking into the tiny open-fronted shops, refusing to buy a cotton shirt made-to-measure-while-you-wait, a leather handbag for the lady, or a second-hand copy of a magazine called Saucy Snips. He was amused by a street vendor who had filthy pictures in the left-hand side of his jacket and crucifixes in the right. He saw a bunch of soldiers collapse with laughter at the sight of two Egyptian policemen patrolling the street hand-in-hand.

He went into a bar. They had no gin and no beer, so he ordered zibib, the aniseed drink which turned cloudy with water. At ten o'clock the bar closed, by mutual consent of the Muslim Wafd government and the killjoy Provost Marshal. Vandam's vision was

a little blurred when he left the bar.

He headed for the Old City. Passing a sign saying OUT OF BOUNDS TO TROOPS he entered the Birka. In the narrow streets and alleys the women sat on steps and leaned from windows, smoking and waiting for customers, chatting to the military police. Some of them spoke to Vandam, offering their bodies in English, French and Italian. He turned into a little lane, crossed a deserted courtyard, and entered an unmarked open doorway.

He climbed the staircase and knocked at a door on the first floor. A middle-aged Egyptian woman opened it. He paid her five pounds and went in.

In a large, dimly-lit inner room, furnished with faded luxury, he sat on a cushion and unbuttoned his shirt collar. A young woman in baggy trousers passed him the nargileh. He took several deep lungfuls of hashish smoke. Soon a pleasant feeling of lethargy came over him. He leaned back on his elbows and looked around. In the shadows of the room there were four other men. Two were pashas - wealthy ~~Egypt~~ Arab landowners - sitting together on a divan and talking in low, desultory tones. A third, who seemed almost to ~~have been sent~~ have been sent to sleep by the hashish, looked English and was probably an officer like Vandam. The fourth sat in the corner talking to one of the girls. Vandam heard snatches of the conversation and gathered that the man wanted to take the girl home, and they were discussing a price. The man was vaguely familiar, but Vandam, drunk and now doped too, could not get his memory in gear to recall who he was.

One of the girls came over and took Vandam's hand. She led him into an alcove and drew the curtain. She took off her halter. She had small brown breasts. Vandam stroked her cheek. In the

candlelight her face ~~xxxxxxxx~~^d change constantly, seeming old, then very young, then predatory, then loving. At one point she looked like Joan Abuthnot. But finally, as he entered her, she looked like Elene.

- 5 -

The heat was off. John Wolff had not seen the British conducting a spot check on identity papers for a week. This Vandam character could not keep up the pressure indefinitely.

Having penetrated Cairo, Wolff now had to get the information Rommel wanted. He recalled his brief interview with Rommel in Benghazi. The Field-Marshal was a small, tireless man with the face of an aggressive peasant: a big nose, a downturned mouth, a cleft chin, a jagged scar on his left cheek, his hair cut so short that none showed beneath the rim of his cap. He had said: 'Numbers of troops, names of divisions, in the field and in reserve, state of training. Numbers of tanks, in the field and in reserve, state of repair. Supplies of ammunition, food and gasoline. Personalities and attitudes of commanding officers. Strategic and tactical intentions. They say you're the best, Wolff. They had better be right.'

It was easier said than done.

There was a certain amount of information Wolff could get just by walking around the city. He could observe the uniforms of the soldiers on leave and listen to their talk, and that told him which troops had been where and when they were going back. Sometimes a sergeant would mention statistics of dead and wounded, or the devastating effect of the Germans' use of anti-aircraft guns against tanks. He had heard an Army mechanic say that thirty-nine of the fifty ~~new~~ new tanks which arrived yesterday needed major repairs

before going into service. All this was useful information which could be sent to Berlin, where Intelligence analysts would put it together with other snippets in order to form a big picture. But it was not what Rommel wanted.

Somewhere inside British headquarters there were pieces of paper which said things like: 'After resting and refitting, Division A, with 100 tanks and full supplies, will leave Cairo tomorrow and join forces with Division B at the C Oasis in preparation for the counterattack west of D next Saturday at dawn.'

It was those pieces of paper that Wolff needed.

He had spent some time ~~sh~~hanging around British headquarters wondering how to get them.

For their headquarters the British had ^{taken over} ~~commandeered~~ a number of the large houses - most of them owned by pashas - in the Garden City suburb. (Wolff was grateful that Villa les Oliviers had escaped the net.) The commandeered villas were surrounded by barbed-wire fence. People in uniform were passed quickly through the gate, but civilians were stopped and questioned at length while the sentries made phone calls.

There were other headquarters in other buildings around the city - the Semiramis Hotel housed something called British Troops in Egypt, for example - but this was GHQ, the powerhouse. Several mornings running Wolff had observed the large staff cars arriving and had peeked through the windows to see the uniforms of brigadiers and generals. This was where the General Staff held ~~its~~ conferences, made ~~its~~ decisions, and issued ~~its~~ orders. This was where the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Claude Auchinleck, hung out.

The General Staff travelled by car, but their aides walked. Each morning the captains and majors arrived on foot, carrying their little briefcases. Toward noon - after the regular morning conference,

Wolff presumed - some of them left, still carrying their briefcases.

Each day Wolff followed one of the aides.

One went to the Semiramis. Two went to the barracks in the Kasr-el-Nil. A fourth went to an unmarked building in the Shari Suleiman Pasha.

Wolff wanted to get into those briefcases.

Today he would do a dry run.

He wore galabiya and a fez, and he stood thirty yards from the GHQ gate selling paper fans which broke after two minutes of use. Waiting under the blazing sun for the aides to come out, he thought about the night before, and a smile curled the ■ corners of his mouth beneath the newly-grown moustache. He had promised Sonja that he would find her another Fawzi. Last night he had gone to the Birka and picked out a girl at Madame Fahmy's establishment. She was not a Fawzi - that girl had been a real enthusiast - but she was a good temporary substitute. Wolff and Sonja had shared her in the way Sonja liked best. It had been a long night.

When the aides came out, he followed the pair that went to the barracks.

Before he had left the Garden City, Abdullah emerged from a cafe and fell into step beside him.

'Those two?' Abdullah said.

'Those two.'

Abdullah was a fat man with a steel tooth. He was one of the richest men in Cairo, but unlike most rich Arabs he did not ape the Europeans. He wore sandals, a dirty robe and a fez. His greasy hair curled around his ears and his fingernails were black. His wealth came not from land, like the pashas', or from trade, like the Greeks'. It came from crime.

Abdullah was a thief.

Wolff liked him. He was sly, deceitful, cruel, generous, and always laughing: for Wolff he embodied ~~all~~ the age-old vices and virtues of the Middle East. His army of children, grandchildren, nephews, nieces and second-cousins had been burgling houses and picking pockets in Cairo for ten years. He was also a hashish wholesaler, and he owned half the houses in the Birka, including Madame Fahmy's. He lived in a large crumbling house in the Old City. He had four wives.

They followed the two officers into the modern city centre. Abdullah said: 'Do you want one briefcase, or both?'

Wolff considered. One was a casual theft; two looked organised. 'One,' he said.

'Which?'

'It doesn't matter.'

Wolff had considered going to Abdullah for help after the discovery that the Villa les Oliviers ~~was~~ no longer safe. He had decided not to. Abdullah could certainly have hidden Wolff away somewhere - probably in a brothel - more or less indefinitely. But as soon as he had Wolff concealed, he would have opened negotiations to sell him to the British. Abdullah would trust his family one hundred percent and mistrust everyone outside his family with equal impartiality: he would try to cheat Wolff and he would expect Wolff to try to cheat him. All business was done on the basis of mutual suspicion. Wolff found this worked surprisingly well.

They came to a busy corner. The two officers crossed the road, dodging the traffic. Wolff was about to follow when Abdullah put a hand on his arm to stop him.

'We'll do it here,' Abdullah said.

Wolff looked around, observing the buildings, the pavement,

the road junction, the street vendors. He smiled slowly, and nodded. 'It's perfect,' he said.

*

They did it the next day.

Abdullah had indeed chosen the perfect spot for the snatch. It was where a busy side street joined a main road. On the corner was a cafe with tables outside, reducing the pavement to half its width. Outside the cafe, on the main street, was a bus stop. The idea of queueing for the bus had never really caught on in Cairo despite sixty years of British domination, so those waiting simply milled about on the already crowded pavement.

On the side street it was clearer, for although the cafe had tables out on that side too, there was no bus stop. Abdullah had observed this little shortcoming, and had put it right by detailing two acrobats to perform on the street there.

Wolff sat at the corner table, from where he could see both streets, and added up the things that could go wrong.

The officers might not go back to the barracks today.

They might go a different way.

They might not be carrying their briefcases.

The police might arrive too early and arrest everyone on the scene.

The boy might be grabbed by the officers and questioned.

Wolff might be grabbed by the officers and questioned.

Abdullah might decide he could earn his money with less trouble simply by contacting Major Vandam and telling him he could arrest John Wolff at the Cafe Nasif at twelve noon today.

Wolff was afraid of going to prison. He was more than afraid, he was terrified. The thought of it brought him out in a cold sweat under the noonday sun. He could live without good food and champagne

and women if he had the vast wild emptiness of the desert to console him. He could forgo the freedom of the desert to live in a crowded city if he had the urban luxuries to console him. But he could not lose both. He never told anyone of this: it was his secret nightmare. The idea of living in a tiny grey cell, among the scum of the earth (and all men), eating bad food, never seeing the blue sky or the endless Nile or the open plains ... panic touched him glancingly even while he contemplated it. He pushed it out of his mind. It was not going to happen.

At eleven-forty-five the large, grubby form of Abdullah waddled past the cafe. His expression was vacant but his small black eyes looked around sharply, checking his arrangements. He crossed the road and disappeared from view.

At five to twelve Wolff spotted two military caps among the massed heads in the distance.

He sat on the edge of his chair.

The officers came nearer. They were carrying their briefcases.

Across the street a parked car revved its idling engine.

A bus drew up to the stop, and Wolff thought: Abdullah can't possibly have arranged that: it's a piece of luck, a bonus.

The officers were five yards from Wolff.

The car across the street pulled out suddenly. It was a big black Packard with a powerful engine and soft American springing. It came across the road like a charging elephant, motor screaming in first gear, regardless of the main street traffic, heading for the side street, its horn blowing continuously. On the corner, a few feet from where Wolff sat, it ploughed into the front of an old Fiat taxi.

The two officers stood beside Wolff's table and stared at the crash.

The taxi driver, a young Arab in a Western shirt and a fez, leaped out of his car.

A young Greek in a mohair suit jumped out of the Packard.

The Arab said the Greek was the son of pig.

The Greek said the Arab was the back end of a diseased camel.

The Arab slapped the Greek's face and the Greek punched the Arab on the nose.

The people getting off the bus, and those who had been intending to get on it, came closer.

On the other side of the corner, the acrobat who was standing on his colleague's head turned to look at the fight, seemed to lose his balance, and fell into the crowd.

A small boy darted past Wolff's table. Wolff stood up, pointed at the boy, and shouted at the top of his voice: 'Stop, thief!'

The boy dashed off. Wolff and four people sitting near him ran after the boy. The boy ran between the two officers, who had not moved since the fight broke out under their noses. Wolff and his helpers cannoned into the officers, knocking both of them over. The boy ran past the fighting drivers. Several people were now shouting 'Stop, thief!' and most of them had no idea who the alleged thief was. Some of the newcomers thought it must be one of the drivers. The crowd from the bus stop, the crowd from the acrobats, and most of the people in the cafe surged forward and began to attack one or other of the drivers - Arabs assuming the Greek was the culprit and everyone else assuming it was the Arab. Several men with sticks - most people carried sticks - began to push into the crowd, beating on heads at random. Someone picked up a chair from the cafe and hurled it into the crowd. Fortunately it overshot and went through the windscreen of the Packard. However the waiters, the kitchen staff and the proprietor of the cafe now rushed out and began to attack everyone

who swayed, stumbled or sat on their furniture. Everyone yelled at everyone else in five languages. Passing cars ^{halted} ~~stopped~~ to watch the melee, the traffic backed up in three directions, and every stopped car sounded its horn. A dog ^{struggled} ~~got~~ free of its leash and started biting people's legs. Everyone got off the bus. The brawling crowd ~~got~~ became bigger by the second. Drivers who had stopped to watch the fun regretted it, for when the fight engulfed their cars they were unable to move away (because everyone else had stopped too) and they had to lock their doors and roll up their windows while men, women and children, Arabs and Greeks and Syrians and Jews and Australians and Scotsmen, jumped on their roofs and ^{fought} ~~fell~~ on their bonnets and fell on their running-boards and bled all over their paint jobs. Somebody fell through the window of the tailor's shop next to the cafe, and a frightened goat ran into the souvenir shop which flanked the cafe on the other side and began to knock down all the tables laden with china and pottery and glass. A baboon came from somewhere - it had probably been riding the goat in the commonest type of street entertainment - and ran across the heads in the crowd, nimble-footed, to disappear in the direction of Alexandria. A horse broke free of its harness and bolted along the street between the lines of cars. From a window above the cafe a woman emptied a bucket of dirty water into the melee. Nobody noticed.

At last the police arrived.

When people heard the whistles, the shoves and pushes and insults which had started their own individual fights suddenly seemed a lot less important. There was a scramble to get away before the arrests began. The crowd diminished rapidly. Wolff, who had fallen over early in the proceedings, picked himself up and strolled across the road to watch the denouement. By the time six people had been handcuffed there was no one left fighting except for an old woman in

black and a one-legged beggar. The cafe proprietor, the tailor, and the owner of the souvenir shop were wringing their hands and berating the police for not coming sooner while they mentally doubled and trebled the damage for insurance purposes.

The bus driver had broken his arm, but all the other injuries were cuts and bruises.

There was only one death: the goat had been bitten by the dog and consequently had to be destroyed.

When the police tried to move the two crashed cars, they discovered that during the fight the street urchins had jacked up the rear ends of both vehicles and stolen the tyres.

Every single light bulb in the bus had also disappeared.

And so had one British Army briefcase.

*

John Wolff was feeling pleased with himself as he walked briskly through the alleys of the Old City. A week ago the task of prising secrets out of GHQ had seemed ~~impossible~~ close to impossible. Now it looked as if he had pulled it off. The idea of getting Abdullah to orchestrate a street fight had been brilliant.

He wondered what would be in the briefcase.

Abdullah's house looked like all the other huddled slums. Its cracked and peeling facade was irregularly dotted with small misshapen windows. The entrance was a low doorless arch with a dark passage beyond. Wolff ducked under the arch, went along the passage, and climbed a stone spiral staircase. At the top he pushed through a curtain and entered Abdullah's living room.

The room was like its owner - dirty, comfortable and rich. Three small children and a puppy chased each other around the expensive sofas and inlaid tables. In an alcove by a window an old woman worked on a tapestry. Another woman was drifting out of the

room: there was no strict Muslim separation of the sexes here. In the middle of the floor Abdullah sat cross-legged on an embroidered cushion with a baby in his lap. He looked up at Wolff and smiled broadly. 'My friend, what a success we have had!'

Wolff sat on the floor opposite him. 'It was wonderful,' he said. 'You're a magician.'

'Such a riot! And the bus arriving at just the right moment - and the baboon running away ... '

Wolff looked ~~■~~ more closely at what Abdullah was doing. On the floor beside him was a pile of wallets, handbags, purses and watches. As he spoke he picked up a handsome tooled leather wallet. He took from it a wad of Egyptian banknotes, some postage stamps, and a tiny gold pencil, and put them somewhere under his robe. Then he put down the wallet, picked up a handbag, and began to rifle through that.

Wolff realised where they had come from. 'You old rogue,' he said. 'You had your boys in the crowd picking pockets.'

Abdullah grinned, showing his steel tooth. 'To go to all that trouble and then steal only one briefcase ... '

'But you have got the briefcase.'

'Of course.'

Wolff relaxed. Abdullah made no move to fetch the case. Wolff said: 'Why don't you give it to me?'

'Immediately,' Abdullah said. 'You were to pay me another fifty pounds on delivery.'

Wolff counted out the notes and they disappeared beneath the grubby robe. Abdullah leaned forward, reached under the cushion he was sitting on, and pulled out the briefcase.

Wolff took it from him and examined it. ^{The lock was broken.} 'You've opened it already,' he said.

The lock was broken.

Abdullah shrugged. He said: 'Maaleesh,' which meant both 'Sorry' and 'So what?'.

Wolff lifted the lid. The case contained a sheaf of ten or twelve sheets of paper closely typewritten in English. As he began to read someone put a tiny coffee cup beside him. He glanced up to see a beautiful young girl. He said to Abdullah: 'Your daughter?'

Abdullah grinned again. 'My wife.'

Wolff took another look at the girl. She seemed about fourteen years old. He turned his attention back to the papers.

He read the first, then with growing incredulity leafed through the rest.

He put them down. 'Dear God,' he said. He started to laugh.

He had stolen a complete set of barracks canteen menus for the month of June.

*

Vandam said to Colonel Bogge: 'I've issued a notice reminding officers that General Staff papers are not to be carried about the town other than in exceptional circumstances.'

Bogge was sitting behind his big curved desk, polishing the red cricket ball with his handkerchief. 'Good idea,' he said. 'Keep chaps on their toes.'

Vandam went on: 'One of my informants, the new girl I told you about - '

'The tart.'

'Yes. She heard a rumour that the riot was organised by a man called Abdullah.'

'Organised? For what purpose?'

'Theft. Apparently Abdullah is a kind of Egyptian Fagin.'

'I see.' Bogge looked dubious.

'A lot of stuff was stolen, but we have to consider the

possibility that the main object of the exercise was the briefcase.'

'A conspiracy!' Bogge said with a look of amused scepticism.

'But what would this Abdullah want with our canteen menus, eh?' He laughed.

'He wasn't to know what the briefcase contained. He may simply have assumed that they were secret papers.'

'I repeat the question: what would he want with secret papers?'

'He may have been put up to it.'

'By whom?'

'John Wolff.'

'Who?'

'The Assyut knife man.'

'Oh, now really, Major, I thought we had finished with all that.'

'The man is still at large,' Vandam persisted. 'It seems significant that soon after his arrival in Cairo, a General Staff officer is robbed of his briefcase.'

'Containing canteen menus.'

Vandam controlled his impatience. 'In Intelligence, we don't believe in coincidence, do we?'

'Don't lecture me, laddie. Even if you were right - and I'm sure you're not - what could we do about it, other than issue the notice you've sent out?'

'Well. I've interviewed ~~this~~ Abdullah. He denies all knowledge of John Wolff, and I think he's lying.'

'Why don't you tip off the Egyptian police about this Abdullah?'

'I did. They know all about him and they won't arrest him. Too many officers are living off his bribes. But we could pull him in and interrogate him.'

'On what grounds?'

'I don't know. Statutory rape, perhaps - one of his wives is no more than a child.'

'Don't be silly, Major - nobody has birth certificates in this country, we couldn't prove it.'

'We don't want to prove it, we just want a reason to hold him. Forget statutory rape, we can hold him on suspicion.'

Bogge shook his head. 'We haven't got the powers.'

'Field Security have, or even Military Police.'

Bogge smiled. 'If I went to Field Security with this story of an Arab Fagin stealing canteen menus I'd be laughed out of the office.'

'But - '

'We've discussed this long enough, Major.- too long, in fact.'

'For Christ's sake - '

Bogge raised his voice. 'I don't believe the riot was organised, I don't believe Abdullah intended to steal the briefcase, and I don't believe Wolff is a Nazi spy. Is that clear?'

'Look, all I want - '

'Is that clear?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Dismissed.'

Vandam went out.

- 6 -

I am a small boy. My father told me how old I am, but I forgot. I will ask him again next time he comes home. My father is a soldier. The place he goes to is called a Sudan. A Sudan is a long way away.

I go to school. I learn the Koran. The Koran is a holy book.

I also learn to read and write. Reading is easy, but it is difficult to write without making a mess. Sometimes I pick cotton or take the beasts to drink.

My mother and my grandmother look after me. My grandmother is a famous woman. Practically everyone in the whole world comes to see her when they are sick. She gives them medicines made of herbs.

She gives me treacle. I like it mixed with curdled milk. I lie on top of the oven in my kitchen and she tells me stories. My favourite story is the ballad of ~~AdhamxixShargawia~~ Zahran, the hero of Denshway. When she tells it, she always says that Denshway is nearby. She must be getting old and forgetting things, because Denshway is a long way away. I went there once with Abdel and it took us all morning to walk there.

Denshway is where the British were shooting pigeons when one of their bullets set fire to a barn. All the ~~far~~ men of the village came running to find out who had started the fire. One of the soldiers was frightened by the sight of all the strong men of the village running toward him, so he fired at them. There was a fight between the soldiers and the villagers. Nobody won the fight, but the soldier who had fired on the barn was killed. Soon more^s soldiers came and arrested all the men in the village.

The soldiers made a thing out of wood called a scaffold. I don't know what a scaffold is but it is used to hang people. I don't know what happens to people when they are hanged. Some of the villagers were hanged and the others were flogged. I know about flogging. It is the worst thing in the world, even worse than hang^ging, I should think.

Zahran was the first to be hanged, for he had fought the hardest against the soldiers. He walked to the scaffold with his head high,

proud that he had killed the man who set fire to the barn.

I wish I were Zahran.

I have never seen a British soldier, but I know that I hate them.

My name is Anwar el-Sadat, and I am going to be a hero.

*

Sadat had grown a moustache. It was a good idea. He was only twenty-two, and in his captain's uniform he ^{had} looked a bit ~~a~~ like a boy soldier. The moustache made him ^{seem} ~~look~~ older.

Kemel admired Sadat. At these little meetings he always talked and acted as if the handful of hotheads in the room really were going to throw the British out of Egypt any day now, and he made the others think the same. There was only one other man who could do this, and that was Abdel Nasser, who had been posted to the Sudan with his unit. Nasser and Sadat: there were times when even Kemel believed that one day one of them would be president of a free Egypt.

If Sadat had a fault, it was that he was too open and honest. Perhaps that was necessary for a leader. Sadat was always concerned to do ~~the~~ the right thing, whereas Kemel wanted to do the smart thing. That was why Kemel was useful.

Sadat had called this meeting to discuss a treaty with Rommel. Looking at it objectively, Kemel had to admit that the scene was ludicrous: a peasant boy just off the farm talking to half a dozen discontented subalterns about negotiations with the German Reich. And the things Sadat had done so far had not been conspicuously successful.

Last summer he had organised a revolution which had exploded like a damp firework. Until 1941 the Egyptian Army and the British Army had fought side by side in the Western Desert. Sadat and his

rebels were not alone in resenting this: the sheikh of al-Azhar had preached: 'We have nothing to do with that war.' When the Egyptian parliament, in a rare display of independence, adopted the policy: 'Save Egypt from the scourge of war,' the British ordered the Egyptians to lay down their weapons and withdraw. Sadat and many other officers refused to be disarmed, and the British were obliged to let them keep their guns. However the spark of rebellion had been kindled, and Sadat tried to exploit it. The withdrawing units were to assemble at the end of the Alexandria-Cairo road and march into the capital to overthrow the British.

Sadat and his unit arrived at the meeting point, but nobody else came. They washed their vehicles, sat down, waited a while, and then went on to their camp.

Six months later Sadat had suffered another let-down. The British had given an ultimatum to King Farouk: either he was to instruct his Premier to form a new, pro-British government, or he was to abdicate. Under pressure the King had summoned Mustafa el-Nahas Pasha and ordered him to form a new government. Young army officers marched to the palace to salute the king as a protest against the violation of Egyptian sovereignty. Once again, Sadat tried to push the rebellion farther. His plan was that all the nationalist officers would drive out to the palace and surround it, as a token of defence. Once again, Sadat was the only one who turned up.

None of this had damped his enthusiasm, Kemel thought. Now Sadat had heard a rumour that the Germans planned to give Egypt to the Italians, and he was furious. He wanted the Germans to liberate his country, not to give it new overlords. He wanted to propose a peace treaty between the Axis powers and the Free Officers Organisation of the Egyptian Army.

It was an Army organisation, although there were several pilots in it, and Kemel himself was a police officer. The pilots had the floor at the moment. Someone had said that they needed to prove to Rommel that they were both genuine and effective. The proposal now was that they should send, with their message, some useful military information. It had occurred to Kemel that they could be shot as spies if they did that, but no one had pointed it out, and he was not going to be the one. One of the pilots had offered to take aerial photographs of British positions.

'We can do it on a routine patrol, with an ordinary camera,' the man said.

'What about developing the photographs?' asked a lieutenant.

'Not necessary,' said the pilot. 'We can just send the film.'

'Just one film?'

'As many as we like. Baghdadi and Ibrahim will ~~xxxx~~ do it, and so will Izzat.'

'That's agreed, then,' said Sadat. 'We now have five points in our message.' He had been taking notes. 'One: We are honest Egyptians who have an organisation within the army. Two: Like you, we are fighting the British. Three: We are able to recruit a rebel army to fight on your side. Four: As an earnest of our good faith, we ~~xxxx~~ enclose aerial photographs of British positions in Egypt. Five: We will organise an uprising against the British in Cairo, if you in return will guarantee the independence and sovereignty of Egypt after the defeat of the British.' He looked up from his notes. 'Is everyone agreed?'

Everyone was agreed.

Kemel spoke for the first time. 'It's fine,' he said, 'but how are we going to get the message to Rommel?'

Sadat looked at him across the room. 'By plane,' he said.

*

Kemel lay underneath the car on the edge of the gravel plain. He was under the car because it was too hot inside. In one hand he held ^a ~~the~~ brown envelope containing the treaty, dictated in its final form by Sadat and signed by most of the leading Free Officers except for the absent Nasser. In his other hand he held a water bottle from which he took occasional sips.

A quarter of a mile away a small hill jutted out abruptly in the desert: this was the landmark.

He had been waiting an hour when he heard the distant drone of the planes. He crawled out from under the car and searched the sky. Two dots appeared in the east and rapidly grew to the shape of British Gladiators. Kemel thought to wave his handkerchief, then decided it would be silly: if they could not see the hill and the car, they would not be able to see his handkerchief.

They came down fast, like birds, one after the other, and bumped on the gravel. Both planes taxied over to where Kemel stood. Their propellers blew up small dust storms.

Kemel ran to the nearest. The pilot pushed his goggles up on to his cap, and Kemel recognised Imam. He pushed the envelope through the open window. Shouting over the sound of the engines, he said: 'Have you got the films?'

'Yes.'

Kemel ran to the second plane. 'I'm coming with you,' he yelled.

'Why?' the pilot shouted back.

'I want to make sure he gets there.'

Kemel climbed into the plane.

'How will you explain yourself when we get back to base?' the pilot asked.

'I won't go back to base. You can drop me off here.'

The pilot shrugged. The other plane turned and began to gather speed. As it took off, Kemel's plane turned and followed.

Kemel leaned forward to look at the pilot's face. It was Mohammed.

'You're going to be cold,' Mohammed said as they climbed.

Kemel thought he was joking.

It was the first time he had flown. He looked down. The desert, so featureless from ground level, was an endless mosaic of shapes and patterns: the geometric curves of the dunes, the patches of gravel, the dots of vegetation and the carved volcanic hills. The temperature in the little plane dropped steadily, and soon Kemel began to shiver in his thin cotton shirt.

After a while both planes turned due east, and Mohammed spoke into his radio. Kemel could not hear what was said. When the conversation appeared to be over he leaned forward and shouted to Mohammed: 'What was that about?'

'I told base that Imam had veered off course and was not replying to my calls.'

'What did they say?'

'Follow him.'

Kemel sat back. This little pantomime was necessary so that Mohammed, who was to return, would not fall under suspicion.

They flew over an army encampment. Kemel saw tanks, lorries, field guns and jeeps. A bunch of soldiers waved: they must be British, Kemel thought. Both planes climbed higher. Directly ahead they saw signs of battle: great clouds of dust, explosions, gunfire. They turned to pass to the south of the battlefield.

Kemel thought: We flew over a British base, then a battlefield - next we should come to a German base.

Ahead of him, Imam's plane lost height. Instead of following, Mohammed climbed a little more - Kemel had the feeling that the Gladiator was near its ceiling - and peeled off to the south. Looking out of the plane to the right, Kemel saw what the pilots had seen: a small camp with a clearly marked runway.

Kemel felt elated. They were behind German lines! The treaty was almost in Rommel's hands!

Sadat's luck had to change some time, he thought.

There was a distant ^{bang,} ~~explosion~~, and something exploded in the air close to Imam's plane. Imam waggled his wings and continued to descend. There was another explosion.

The Germans were firing at Imam.

Kemel yelled: 'What are they doing? Why are they firing?'

'Because it's a British plane,' Mohammed said.

Of course! Kemel had not thought of that. If they saw a Gladiator they would assume it was attacking. 'Can't he speak to them on the radio?'

'He must be trying. Maybe they aren't listening.'

Mohammed continued to circle. Kemel watched, horrified, as Imam's plane descended with ~~an~~ painful slowness toward the German base, amid a barrage of anti-aircraft fire.

Then there was a hit.

At first Kemel did not see it. There was an explosion, and afterward Imam's plane looked all right, until Kemel realised that a portion of its tail had been blown off. Then he noticed that it was going down much faster.

The ack-ack continued.

Kemel thought: ~~M~~ Oh, God, he's going to crash.

Somehow Imam managed to stay on course for the runway, but it seemed that he could not keep the nose of the plane high enough to descend ⁱⁿ the right attitude.

The Germans stopped firing, as if they had at last realised that the Gladiator was not attacking.

Kemel remembered that Sadat had gone to the glass market that morning and bought 10,000 bottles for making Molotov cocktails, and he had the incongruous thought: We've wasted our money.

Imam was almost down.

At the last minute^t the plane righted itself and landed on its wheels.

'He's made it!' Kemel shouted.

The plane bounced, then came down again. Its abbreviated tail dragged on the stony ground throwing off sparks.

It raced along the runway at high speed.

'Slow down!' Kemel yelled uselessly.

The plane shot off the end of the runway and hit the rocky sand beyond.

It slowed down very suddenly, like a boy on roller skates hitting the kerb. It swerved to one side and tilted. The tip of the port wing hit the ground and snapped like a dry biscuit. The nose of the plane dipped and ploughed into the sand. The rear lifted, incredibly slowly, and for a long moment Kemel thought the aircraft was going to stand on its head. Then it toppled sideways, the fuselage falling on the broken wing.

Kemel had stopped breathing.

The plane was flat on its back. Kemel saw a fire truck and an ambulance speed along the runway toward the crashed aircraft, followed by ten or fifteen running soldiers.

Then, like a blossom opening its petals, the belly of the plane

burst skywards in a riot of red and yellow flame. The blaze quickly engulfed the fuselage and raced out along the remaining wing.

The Germans stopped fifty or a hundred yards away from the wreck. The plane was already destroyed: there was not much they could do. The fire truck went a little closer and began to spray water over the flames, with little effect.

Mohammed pulled his aircraft out of its circle and set a course for home.

Kemel looked back, to try to catch a last glimpse of Imam's plane; but he could see nothing, for his eyes were full of tears.

- 7 -

Wolff was back at square one.

He knew where the secrets were but he could not get at them.

He might have stolen another briefcase the way he had taken the first, but that would begin to look, to the British, like a conspiracy. He might have thought of another way to steal a briefcase, but even that might lead to a security clampdown. Besides, one briefcase on one day was not enough for his needs: he had to have regular, unimpeded access to secret papers.

That was why he was shaving Sonja's pubic hair.

Her hair was black and coarse, and it grew very quickly. Because she shaved it regularly she was able to wear her translucent trousers without the usual heavy, sequinned G-string on top. The extra measure of physical freedom - and the persistent and accurate rumour that she had nothing on under the trousers - had helped to make her the leading belly-dancer of the day.

Wolff dipped the brush into the bowl and began to lather her.

She lay on the bed, her back propped up by a pile of pillows,

watching him suspiciously. She was not keen on Wolff's latest perversion. She thought she was not going to like it.

Wolff knew better.

He knew how her mind worked, and he knew her body better than she did, and he wanted something from her.

He stroked her with the soft shaving-brush and said: 'I've thought of another way to get into those briefcases.'

'What?'

He did not answer her immediately. He put down the brush and picked up the razor. He tested its sharp edge with his thumb, then looked at her. She was watching him with horrid fascination. He leaned closer, spread her legs a little more, put the razor to her skin, and drew it upward with a light, careful stroke.

He said: 'I'm going to befriend a British officer.'

She did not answer: she was only half-listening to him. He wiped the razor on a towel. With one finger of his left hand he touched the shaved patch, pulling down to stretch the skin, then he brought the razor close.

'Then I'll bring the officer here,' he said.

Sonja said: 'Oh, no.'

He touched her with the edge of the razor and gently scraped upward.

She began to breathe harder.

He wiped the razor and stroked again once, twice, three times.

'Somehow I'll get the officer to bring his briefcase.'

He put his finger on her most sensitive spot and shaved around it. She closed her eyes.

He poured hot water from a kettle into a bowl on the floor beside him. He dipped a flannel in the water and wrung it out.

'Then I'll go through the briefcase while the officer is in bed with you.'

He pressed the hot flannel against her shaved skin.

She gave a sharp cry like a cornered animal: 'Ahh, God!'

Wolff slipped out of his bathrobe and stood naked. He picked up a bottle of soothing skin oil, poured some into the palm of his right hand, and knelt on the bed beside Sonja. With his right hand he anointed her pubis.

'I won't,' she said as she began to writhe.

He added more oil, massaging it into all ~~the~~ the folds and crevices. With his left hand he held her by the throat, pinning her down. 'You will.'

His knowing ~~hands~~ fingers delved and squeezed, becoming less gentle.

She said: 'No.'

He said: 'Yes.'

She shook her head from side to side. Her body wriggled, helpless in the grip of intense pleasure. She said: 'Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh!'

Suddenly she relaxed, but Wolff would not let her stop. He continued to stroke her smooth, hairless skin while with his left hand he pinched her brown nipples. Unable to resist him, she began to move again.

She opened her eyes and saw that he, too, was aroused. She said: 'You bastard, stick it in me.'

He grinned. The sense of power was like a drug. He lay over her and hesitated, poised.

She said: 'Quickly!'

'Will you do it?'

'Quickly!'

He let his body touch hers, then paused again. 'Will you do it?'

'Yes! Please!'

'Aaah,' Wolff breathed, and lowered himself to her.

*

She tried to go back on it afterwards, of course.

'That kind of promise doesn't count,' she said.

Wolff came out of the bathroom wrapped in a big towel. He looked at her. She was lying on the bed, still naked, eating chocolates from a box - a gift from an admirer, no doubt. Wolff said: 'A promise is a promise.'

'You promised to find us another Fawzi.' She was sulking. She always did after sex.

'I brought that girl from Madame Fahmy's,' Wolff said.

'She wasn't another Fawzi. Fawzi didn't ask for ten pounds every time, and she didn't go home in the morning.'

'All right. I'm still looking.'

'You didn't promise to look, you promised to find.'

Wolff went into the ~~kitchen~~ and other room and got a bottle of champagne out of the icebox. He picked up two glasses and ~~went~~ ^{took them} back into the bedroom. 'Do you want some?'

'No,' she said. 'Yes.'

He poured and handed her a glass. She drank some and took another chocolate. Wolff said: 'To the unknown British officer who is about to get the nicest surprise of his life.'

'I won't go to bed with an Englishman,' Sonja said. 'They smell bad and they have skin like slugs and I hate them.'

'That's why you'll do it - because you hate them. Just think of it: while he's screwing you and thinking how lucky he is, I'll be reading his secret papers.'

Wolff began to dress. He put on a shirt which had been made for him in one of the tiny tailor's shops in the Old City - a British uniform shirt with captain's pips on the shoulders.

Sonja said: 'What are you wearing?'

'British officer's uniform. They don't talk to foreigners, you know.'

'You're going to pretend to be British?'

'South African, I think.'

'But what if you slip up?'

He looked at her. 'I'll probably be shot as a spy.'

She looked away.

Wolff said: 'If I find a likely one, I'll take him to the Cha-Cha.' He reached into his shirt and drew his knife from its underarm sheath. He went close to her and touched her shoulder with its point. 'If you let me down, I'll cut your lips off.'

She looked at his face. She did not speak, but there was fear in her eyes.

Wolff went out.

*

Shepherd's was crowded. It always was.

Wolff paid off his taxi, pushed through the pack of hawkers and dragomans outside, mounted the steps and went into the foyer. It was packed with people: Levantine merchants holding noisy business meetings, Europeans using the post office and the banks, Egyptian girls in their glad rags, and British officers - the hotel was out of bounds to Other Ranks. Wolff passed between two ~~very~~ larger-than-life bronze ladies holding lamps and entered the lounge. A small band played nondescript music while more crowds, mostly European now, called constantly for waiters. Negotiating the divans and marble-topped tables Wolff made his way through to

the long bar at the far end.

Here it was a little quieter. Women were banned, and serious drinking was the order of the day. It was here that a lonely officer would come.

Wolff sat at the bar. He was about to order champagne, then remembered his disguise and changed his order to whisky and water.

He had given careful thought to his clothes. The brown shoes were officer pattern and highly polished; the khaki socks were turned down at exactly the right place; the baggy brown shorts had a sharp crease; the bush shirt with captain's pips was worn outside the shorts, not tucked in; the flat cap was just slightly raked.

He was a little worried about his accent. He had his story ready to explain it - the line he had given Captain Newman about having been brought up in Dutch-speaking South Africa - but what if the officer he picked up was a South African? He could not ~~recognise~~ ^{distinguish} English accents well enough to recognise a South African.

He was more worried about his knowledge of the Army. He was looking for an officer from GHQ, so he would say that he himself was with BTE - British Troops in Egypt - which was a separate and independent outfit. Unfortunately he knew little else about it. He was uncertain what BTE did and how it was organised, and he could not quote the name of a single one of its officers. He imagined a conversation:

'How's old Buffy Jenkins?'

'Old Buffy? Don't see much of him in my department.'

'Don't see much of him? He runs the show! Are we talking about the same BTE?'

Then again:

'What about Simon Frobisher?'

'Oh, Simon's the same, you know.'

'Wait a minute - someone said he'd gone back home. Yes, I'm sure he has - how come you didn't know?'

Then the accusations, and the calling of the Military Police, and the fight, and finally the jail.

Wolff pushed the thought of jail out of his mind and ordered another whisky.

A perspiring colonel came in and stood at the bar next to Wolff's stool. He called to the barman: 'Ezma!' It meant 'Listen,' but all the British thought it meant 'Waiter.' The colonel looked at Wolff.

Wolff nodded and said: 'Sir.'

'Cap off in the bar, captain,' said the colonel. 'What are you thinking of?'

Wolff took off his cap, cursing silently. First mistake. The colonel ordered beer. Wolff looked away.

There were fifteen or twenty officers in the bar, but they all seemed to be in groups. Wolff wanted one on his own. He also wanted one from GHQ, preferably attached to the General Staff, and even more preferably one of the aides with the briefcases. He was prepared for a long wait. He would do Shepherd's for three or four evenings, then the Officers' Club, the Turf Club, the Metropolitan Hotel and the Gezira Sporting Club. If all that failed he would even do the Anglo-Egyptian Union. He hoped it would not take that long.

In fact it took him five more minutes.

He recognised the major as soon as he walked in. He was a small man, very thin, and about ten years older than Wolff. His cheeks had the broken veins of a hard drinker. He had bulbous blue eyes, and his thin sandy hair was plastered to his head.

He was one of the briefcase brigade.

He came to the bar, took off his cap, and said: 'Ezma! Scotch.'

No ice. Make it snappy.' He turned to Wolff. 'Bloody weather,' he said conversationally.

'Isn't it always, sir?' Wolff said.

'Bloody right. I'm Smith, GHQ.'

'How do you do, sir. I'm Slavenburg, BTE.'

'Jolly good. Get you another?'

Major Smith had been looking for company: it was Wolff's lucky day. Wolff said: 'Very kind of you, sir.'

'Ease up on the sirs. No bull in the bar, what?'

'Of course.' Second mistake.

'What'll it be?'

'Whisky and water, please.'

'Shouldn't take water with it if I were you. Comes straight out of the Nile, they say.'

Wolff smiled. 'I must be used to it.'

'What, no gippy tummy? You must be the only white man in Egypt who hasn't got it.'

~~'I must be used to it.~~ Born in Africa, been in Cairo ten years.' Wolff was slipping into Smith's mannered style of speech. It happened unconsciously. I should have been an actor, he thought.

Smith said: 'Africa, eh? I thought you had a bit of an accent.'

'Dutch mother, English father. We've got a ranch in South Africa.'

Smith looked solicitous. 'It's rough for your mother, with Jerry all over Holland.'

Wolff had not thought of that. 'She died when I was a boy,' he said.

'Bad show.' Smith emptied his glass.

'Same again?'

'Thanks.'

Wolff ordered more drinks. Smith offered him a mentholated cigarette: Wolff refused.

Smith complained about the poor food, the way bars kept running out of drinks, the rent of his flat and the rudeness of Egyptian waiters. Wolff wanted to explain that the food was poor because Smith insisted on English rather than Egyptian dishes, that drinks were scarce because of the European war, that rents were sky-high because of the thousands of foreigners like Smith who had invaded the city, and that the waiters were rude to him because he was too lazy or arrogant to learn a few phrases of courtesy in their language. Instead of explaining he bit his tongue and nodded sympathetically.

In the middle of this catalogue of discontent Wolff looked past Smith's shoulder and saw six military police enter the bar.

Smith noticed his change of expression and said: 'What's the matter - seen a ghost?' He looked around and saw the police.

There was an Army MP, a Navy MP in white leggings, an Australian, a New Zealander, a South African and a turbaned Gurkha.

Smith said: 'The usual nightly picquet - looking for drunken officers and German spies. What's the matter - you breaking bounds, or something?'

'No, no.' Wolff improvised hastily: 'The Navy man looks just like a chap I knew who got killed at Halfaya.' He continued to look at the picquet. They looked very businesslike with their steel hats and holstered pistols. Would they ask to see papers?

Smith had forgotten them. He was saying: 'And as for the servants ... Bloody people. I'm bloody sure my man's been watering the gin. I'll find him out, though. I've filled an empty gin bottle with zibib - you know, that stuff that turns cloudy when you add water? Wait till he tries to dilute that. He'll have to buy a whole new bottle of gin and pretend nothing happened. Haha! Cost him a

week's pay.'

The officer in charge of the picquet walked over to the Colonel who had told Wolff to take his hat off. 'Everything in order, sir?' the MP said.

'Nothing untoward,' the colonel said.

'What's the matter with you?' Smith said to Wolff. 'I say, you are entitled to those pips, aren't you?'

'Of course,' Wolff said. A drop of perspiration ran into his eye, and he wiped it away with a too-rapid gesture.

'No offence,' Smith said. 'But, you know, Shepheard's being off limits to Other Ranks, it's not unknown for junior officers to sew a few pips on their shirts just to get in here.'

Wolff pulled himself together. 'Look here, sir, if you'd care to check ... '

'No, no, no,' Smith said hastily.

'The resemblance was rather a shock.'

'Of course, I understand. Let's have another drink. Ezma!'

The MP who had spoken to the colonel was taking a long look around the room. His armband identified him as the Assistant Provost Marshal. He looked at Wolff. Wolff wondered whether the man remembered the description of the Assyut knife murderer. Surely not. Anyway, they would not be looking for a British officer answering the description. And Wolff had grown a moustache to confuse the issue. He forced himself to meet the MP's eyes then let his gaze drift casually away. He picked up his drink, sure the man was still staring at him.

Then there was a clatter of boots and the picquet went out.

Wolff raised his glass and said: 'Cheers.'

They drank. Smith said: 'You know this place. What's a chap to do in the evening, other than drink in Shepheard's bar?'

Wolff pretended to consider the question. 'Have you seen any belly-dancing?'

Smith gave a disgusted snort. 'Once. Some fat wog girl wiggling her hips.'

'Ah. Then you ought to see the real thing.'

'Should I?'

'Real belly-dancing is the most erotic sight you've ever seen.'

There was an odd light in Smith's eyes. 'Is that so?'

Wolff thought: Major Smith, you are just what I need. He said: 'Sonja is the best. You must try to see her act.'

Smith nodded. 'Perhaps I shall.'

'Matter of fact, I was toying with the idea of going on to the Cha-Cha Club myself. Care to join me?'

'Let's ~~h~~ have another drink first,' said Smith.

Watching Smith put away the liquor, Wolff reflected that the major was, on the surface, a highly corruptible man. He seemed bored, weak-willed, and alcoholic. Provided he was normally heterosexual, Sonja would be able to seduce him easily. (Damn, he thought, she had better do her stuff.) Then they would have to find out whether he had in his briefcase anything more useful than menus. Finally they would have to find a way to get the secrets out of him. There were too many maybes and too little time.

He could only go step by step, and the first ~~h~~step was to get Smith in his power.

They finished their drinks and set out ~~h~~for the Cha-Cha. They could not find a taxi, so they had to take a gharry, a horse-drawn open carriage. The driver mercilessly whipped his elderly horse.

Smith said: 'Chap's a bit rough on the beast.'

'Isn't he,' Wolff said, thinking: You should see what we do to camels.

The club was crowded and hot, again. Wolff had to bribe a

waiter to get a table at all.

Sonja's act began moments after they sat down. Smith watched Sonja while Wolff watched Smith. In minutes the Major was drooling.

Wolff said: 'Good, isn't she?'

'Fantastic,' Smith replied without looking around.

'Matter of fact, I know her slightly,' Wolff said. 'Shall I ask her to join us afterwards?'

This time Smith did look around. 'Good Lord!!' he said.
'Would you?'

*

The rhythm quickened. Sonja looked out across the crowded floor of the club. Hundreds of men feasted their eyes greedily on her magnificent body. She closed her eyes.

The movements came automatically: the sensations took over. In her imagination she still saw the sea of rapacious faces staring at her. She felt her breasts shake and her belly roll and her hips jerk, and it was as if someone else was doing it to her, as if all the hungry men in the audience were manipulating her body. She went faster and faster. There was no art in her dancing, not any more; she was doing it for herself. She did not even follow the music - it followed her. Waves of excitement pounded her. She rode the excitement, dancing, until she knew she was on the edge of ecstasy; knew she only had to jump and she would be flying. She hesitated on the brink. She spread her arms. The music climaxed with a bang. She uttered a cry of frustration and fell backwards, her legs folded beneath her, her thighs open to the audience, until her head hit the stage. Then the lights went out.

It was always like that.

In the storm of applause
/She got up and crossed the darkened stage to the wings. She walked quickly to her dressing room, head down, looking at no one.

She did not want their words or their smiles. They did not understand. Nobody knew how it was for her, nobody knew what she went through every night when she danced.

She took off her shoes, her filmy pantaloons, and her sequinned halter, and put on a silk robe. She sat in front of the mirror to ^{remove} ~~take off~~ her make-up. She always did this immediately, for the make-up was bad for the skin. She had to look after her body. Her face and throat were getting that fleshy look again, she observed. She would have to stop eating chocolates. She was already well past the age at which women began to get fat. Her age was another secret the audience must never discover. She was almost as old as her father had been when he died. Father ...

He had been a big, arrogant man whose achievements never lived up to his hopes. Sonja and her parents had slept together in a narrow hard bed in a Cairo tenement. She had never felt so safe and warm since those days. She would curl up against her father's broad back. She could remember the close familiar smell of him. Then, when she should have been asleep, there had been another smell, something that excited her unaccountably. Mother and father would begin to move in the darkness, lying side by side; and Sonja would move with them. A few times her mother realised what was happening. Then her father would beat her. After the third time they made her sleep on the floor. Then she could hear them but could not share the pleasure: it seemed so cruel. She blamed her mother. Her father was willing to share, she was sure; he had known all along what she had been doing. Lying on the floor, listening, she had tried to enjoy it at a distance, but it had not worked. Nothing had worked since then, until the arrival of John Wolff ...

She had never spoken to Wolff about that narrow bed in the

tenement, but somehow he understood. He had an instinct for the deep needs that people never acknowledged. He and the girl Fawzi had recreated the childhood scene for Sonja, and it had worked.

He did not do it out of kindness, she knew. He did these things so that he could use people. Now he wanted to use her to spy on the British. She would do almost anything to spite the British - anything but go to bed with them ...

There was a knock on the door of her dressing-room. She called: 'Come in.'

One of the waiters entered with a note. She nodded dismissal at the boy and ~~opened the~~ unfolded the sheet of paper. The message said simply: 'Table 41. John.'

She crumpled the paper and dropped it on the floor. So he had found one. That was quick. His instinct for weakness was working again.

She understood him because she was like him. She, too, used people - although less cleverly than he did. She even used him. He had style, taste, high-class friends, and money; and she wanted all those things.

It must be unusual, she thought, for two people to be so close and love each other so little.

He would cut her lips off.

She shuddered, stopped thinking about it, and began to dress. She put on a white gown with wide sleeves and a low neck. The neckline showed off her breasts while the skirt slimmed her hips. She stepped into white high-heeled sandals. She fastened a heavy gold bracelet around each wrist, and around her neck she hung a gold chain with a teardrop pendant which lay snugly in her cleavage. The Englishman would like that. They had the most coarse taste.

She took a last look at herself in the mirror and went out

into the club.

A zone of silence went with her across the floor. People fell silent as she approached and then began to talk about her when she had passed. She felt as if she were inviting mass rape. On stage it was different: she was separated from them by an invisible wall. Down here they could touch her, and they all wanted to. They never did, but the danger thrilled her.

She reached table 41 and both men stood up.

Wolff said: 'Sonja, allow me to introduce Major Smith.'

Sonja shook his hand. He was a thin, chinless man with a fair moustache and ugly, bony hands. He looked at her as if she were an extravagant dessert which had just been placed before him.

Smith said: 'Enchanted, absolutely.'

They sat down. Wolff poured champagne. Smith said: 'Your dancing was magnificent, my dear, just magnificent. Very ... artistic.'

'Thankyou.'

He reached across the table and patted her hand. 'You're very lovely.'

And you're an asshole, she thought. She caught a warning look from Wolff: he knew what was in her mind. 'You're very kind, Major,' she said.

Wolff was nervous, she could tell. He was not sure whether she would do what he wanted. She had not decided.

Wolff said to Smith: 'I knew Sonja's late father.'

It was a lie, and Sonja knew why he had said it. He wanted to remind her.

Her father had been a part-time thief. When there was work he worked; when there was none he stole. One day he had tried to snatch the handbag of a European woman in the Shari el-Koubri. The woman's

escort had made a grab for Sonja's father, and in the scuffle the woman had been knocked down, spraining her wrist. She was an important woman, and Sonja's father had been flogged for the offence. He had died during the flogging.

Of course, it was not supposed to kill him. He must have had a weak heart, or something. The British who administered the law did not care. The man had committed the crime, he had been given the due punishment, and the punishment had killed him: one wog less. Sonja, twelve years old, had been heartbroken. Since then she had hated the British with all her being.

Hitler had the right idea but the wrong target, she believed. It was not the Jews whose racial weakness infected the world - it was the British. The Jews in Egypt were more or less like everyone else: some rich, some poor, some good, some bad. But the British were uniformly arrogant, greedy and vicious. She laughed bitterly at the high-minded way in which the British tried to defend Poland from German oppression while they continued themselves to oppress Egypt.

Still, for whatever reasons, the Germans were fighting the British, and that was enough ^{to make} ~~for~~ Sonja pro-German.

She wanted Hitler to wipe Britain off the face of the earth.

She would do anything she could to help.

She would even seduce an Englishman.

She leaned forward. 'Major Smith,' she said, 'you're a very attractive man.'

Wolff relaxed visibly.

Smith was startled. His eyes seemed about to pop out of his head. 'Good Lord!' he said. 'Do you think so?'

'Yes, I do, Major.'

'I wish you would call me Sandy.'

Wolff stood up. 'I'm afraid I've got to leave you. Sonja, may I escort you home?'

Smith said: 'I think you can leave that to me, Captain.'

'Yes, sir.'

'That is, if Sonja ... '

Sonja batted her eyelids. 'Of course, Sandy.'

Wolff said: 'I hate to break up the party, but I've got an early start.'

'Quite all right,' Smith told him. 'You just run along.'

As Wolff left a waiter brought dinner. It was a European meal - steak and potatoes - and Sonja picked at it while Smith talked to her. He told her about his successes in the school cricket team. He seemed to have done nothing spectacular since then. He was very boring.

Sonja kept remembering the flogging.

He drank steadily through dinner. When they left he was weaving slightly. She gave him her arm, more for his benefit than hers. They walked to the houseboat in the cool night air. Smith looked up at the sky and said: 'Those stars ... so beautiful.' His speech was a little slurred.

They stopped at the houseboat. 'Looks pretty,' Smith said.

'It's very nice,' Sonja said. 'Would you like to see inside?'

'Rather.'

She led him over the gangplank, across the deck, and down the stairs.

He looked around, wide-eyed. 'I must say, it's very luxurious.'

'Would you like a drink?'

'Very much.'

Sonja hated the way he said 'very' all the time. He slurred the 'r' and pronounced it 'vey'. She said: 'Champagne, or something