

about having been brought up in Dutch-speaking South Africa - but what if the officer he picked up was a South African? Wolff could not 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.

Jail was the only thing that really frightened Wolff. He pushed the thought 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 politely and said: 'Sir.'

'Cap off in the bar, Captain,' said the colonel. 'What are you

thinking of?'

Wolff took off his cap, cursing himself silently for the error. The colonel ordered beer. Wolff looked away.

There were fifteen or twenty officers in the bar, but he recognised none of them. He was looking for any one of the eight aides who left GHQ each midday with their briefcases. He had memorised the face of each one, and would recognise them instantly. He had already been to the Metropolitan Hotel and the Turf Club without success, and after half an hour in Shepheard's he would try the Officers' Club, the Gezira Sporting Club, and even the Anglo-Egyptian Union. If he failed tonight he would try again tomorrow: sooner or later he was sure to bump into at least one of them.

Then everything would depend on his skill.

His scheme had a lot going for it. The uniform made him one of them, trustworthy and a comrade. Like most soldiers they were probably lonely and sex-starved in a foreign country. Sonja was undeniably a very desirable woman - to look at, anyway - and the English officer was not well armoured against the wiles of an Oriental seductress.

And anyway, if he was unlucky enough to pick an aide smart enough to resist temptation, he would have to drop the man and look for another.

He hoped it would not take that long.

In fact it took him five more minutes.

The major who walked in 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.

Every day he left GHQ at midday and walked to an unmarked building in the Shari Suleiman Pasha - carrying his briefcase.

Wolff's heart missed a beat.

The major came up to the bar, took off his cap, and said: 'Ezma!' Schotch. 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,' Wolff said. He knew that, since Smith went from GHQ to another building every day, the major could not really be at GHQ; and he wondered briefly why the man should lie about it. He put the thought aside for the moment and said: 'I'm Slavenburg, GTE.'

'Jolly good. Get you another?'

It was proving even easier than he had expected to get into conversation with an officer. 'Very kind of you, sir,' Wolff said.

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

'Of course.' Another error.

'What'll it be?'

'Whisky and water, please.'

GO TO P100

'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.'

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

'Born in Africa, been in Cairo ten years.' Wolff was slipping into Smith's abbreviated style of speech. I should have been an actor, he thought.

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

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

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

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

'Bad show.' Smith emptied his glass.

'Same again?' Wolff offered.

'Thanks.'

Wolff ordered more drinks. Smith offered him a 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 Arab waiters. Wolff itched 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 as if he sympathised.

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?'

There was an Army MP, a Navy MP in white leggings, an Australian, a New Zealander, a South African and a turbaned Gurkha. Wolff had a crazy urge to run for it. What would they ask him? What would he say?

Smith looked around, saw the MPs, and said: 'The usual nightly picquet - looking for drunken officers and German spies. This is an officers' bar, they won't disturb us. 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 ~~looked~~ stare at the picquet. They appeared 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 and pretend nothing happened. Haha! Serve him right.'

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

'Nothing untoward,' the colonel replied.

'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 intended,' Smith said. 'But, you know, Shephard's being off limits to Other Ranks, it's not unknown for subalterns 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 remembrance 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.

By an effort Wolff prevented himself from shaking with relief. He raised his glass in a determinedly steady hand and said: 'Cheers.'

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

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

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

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

'Should I?'

'Real belly-dancing is the most erotic thing 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 have another drink first,' said Smith.

Watching ~~the~~ Smith put away the liquor Wolff reflected that the major was, at least 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 step was to get Smith in his power.

They finished their drinks and set out for the Cha-Cha. They could not find a taxi, so they took 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.

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 artifice 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 swept 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 backward, 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 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, cold, excluded, listening, she had tried to enjoy it at a distance, but it had not worked. Nothing had worked since then, until the arrival of Alex 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 unfolded the sheet of paper. The message said simply: 'Table 41. Alex.'

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 one day he would take her to Berlin. It was one thing to be a star in Egypt, and quite another in Europe. She wanted to dance for the aristocratic old ~~generals~~ generals and the handsome young storm troopers; she wanted to seduce powerful men and beautiful white girls; she wanted to be queen of the cabaret in the most decadent city in the world. Wolff would be her passport. Yes, she was using him.

It must be unusual, she thought, for two people to be so close and yet to 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 quiet 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 inviolable wall. Down here they could touch her, and they all wanted to. They never did, but the danger thrilled her.

She reached table forty-one and both men stood up.

Wolff said: 'Sonja, my dear, you were magnificent, as always.'

She acknowledged the compliment with a nod.

'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 splendid, Mademoiselle, just splendid. Very ... artistic.'

'Thankyou.'

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

And you're a fool, 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. In ~~truth~~ truth she had not yet 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, and when there was none he stole. One day he had tried to snatch the handbag of a European woman in the Shari el-Koubt.

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 was 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 themselves continued to oppress Egypt.

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

She wanted Hitler to defeat, humiliate and ruin Britain.

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 say, I wish you'd 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 though 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 ... beautiful.' His speech was a little thick.

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

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

'Rahher.'

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

stronger?'

'A drop of whisky would be very nice.'

'Do sit down.'

She gave him his drink and sat close to him. He touched her shoulder, kissed her cheek, and roughly grabbed her breast. She shuddered. He took that as a sign of passion, and squeezed harder.

She pulled him down on top of her. He was very clumsy: his elbows and knees kept digging into her. He fumbled beneath the skirt of her dress.

She said: 'Oh, Sandy, you're so strong.'

She looked over his shoulder and saw Wolff's face. He was on deck, kneeling down and watching through the hatch, laughing soundlessly.

- 8 -

William Vandam was beginning to despair of ever finding Alex Wolff. The Assyut murder was almost three weeks in the past, and Vandam was no closer to his quarry. As time went by the trail got colder. He almost wished there would be another briefcase snatch, so that at least he would know what Wolff was up to.

He knew he was becoming a little obsessed with the man. He would wake up in the night, around three a.m. when the booze had worn off, and worry until daybreak. What bothered him was something to do with Wolff's style: the sideways manner in which he had slipped into Egypt, the suddenness of the murder of Corporal Cox, the ease with which Wolff had melted into the city. Vandam went over these things, again and again, all the time wondering why he found the case so fascinating.

He had made no real progress, but he had gathered some information, and the information had fed his obsession - fed it not as food feeds a man, making him satisfied, but as fuel feeds a fire, making it burn hotter.

The Villa les Oliviers was owned by someone called Achmed Rahmha. The Rahmhas were a wealthy Cairo family. Achmed had inherited the house from his father, Gamal Rahmha, a lawyer. One of Vandam's lieutenants had dug up the record of a marriage between Gamal Rahmha and one Eva Wolff, widow of Hans Wolff, both German nationals; and then adoption papers making Hans and Eva's son Alex the legal child of Gamal Rahmha ...

~~XX~~ Which made Achmed Rahmha a German, and explained how he got legitimate Egyptian papers in the name of Alex Wolff.

Also in the records was a will which gave Achmed, or Alex, the largest share of Gamal's fortune, plus the house.

Interviews with all surviving Rahmhas had produced nothing. Achmed had disappeared two years ago and had not been heard from since. The interviewer had come back with the impression that the adopted son of the family ~~was~~ was not much missed.

Vandam was convinced that when Achmed disappeared he had gone to Germany.

There was another branch of the Rahmha family, but they were nomads, and no one knew where they could be found. No doubt, Vandam thought, they had helped Wolff somehow with his re-entry into Egypt.

Vandam understood that now. Wolff could not have come into the country through Alexandria. Security was tight at the port: his entry would have been noted, he would have been investigated, and sooner or later the investigation would have revealed his German antecedents, whereupon he would have been interned. By coming from the south he had hoped to get in unobserved and resume his former status as a born-and-bred Egyptian. It had been a piece of luck for the British that Wolff had run into trouble in Assiut.

It seemed to Vandam that that was the last piece of luck they had had.

He sat in his office, smoking one cigarette after another, worrying about Wolff.

The man was no low-grade collector of gossip and rumour. He was not content, as other agents were, to send in reports based on the number of soldiers he saw in the street and shortage of motor spares. The briefcase theft proved he was after top-level stuff, and he was capable of devising ingenious ways of getting it. If he stayed at large long enough he would succeed sooner or later.

Vandam paced the room - from the coat-stand to the desk, around the desk for a look out of the window, around the other side of the desk, and back to the coat-stand.

The spy had his problems, too. He had to explain himself to inquisitive neighbours, conceal his radio somewhere, move about the city, and find informants. He could run out of money, his radio could break down, his informants could betray him, or someone could quite accidentally discover his secret. One way or another, traces of the spy had to appear.

The cleverer he was, the longer it would take.

Vandam was convinced that Abdullah, the thief, was involved with Wolff. After Bogge refused to have Abdullah arrested, Vandam had offered a large sum of money for Wolff's whereabouts. Abdullah still claimed to know nothing of anyone called Wolff, but the light of greed had flickered in his eyes.

Abdullah might not know where Wolff could be found - Wolff was surely careful enough to take that precaution with a notoriously dishonest man - but perhaps Abdullah could find out. Vandam had made it clear that the money was still on offer. Then again, once Abdullah had the information he might simply go to Wolff, tell him of Vandam's offer, and invite him to bid higher.

Vandam paced the room.

Something to do with style. Sneaking in; murder with a knife; melting away; and ... Something else went with all that. Something Vandam knew about, something he had read in a report or been told in a briefing. Wolff might almost have been a man Vandam had known, long ago, but could no longer bring to mind. Style.

The phone rang.

He picked it up. 'Major Vandam.'

'Oh, hello, this is Major Calder in the Paymaster's office.'

Vandam tensed. 'Yes?'

'You sent us a note, a couple of weeks ago, to look out for forged sterling. Well, we've found some.'

That was it - that was the trace. 'Good!' Vandam said.

'Rather a lot, actually,' the voice continued.

Vandam said: 'I need to see it as soon as possible.'

'It's on its way. I'm sending a chap round - he should be there soon.'

'Do you know who paid it in?'

'There's been more than one lot, actually, but we've got some names for you.'

'Marvellous. I'll ring you back when I've seen the notes. Did you say Calder?'

'Yes.' The man gave his phone number. 'We'll speak later, then.'

Vandam hung up. Forged sterling - it fitted: this could be the breakthrough. Sterling was no longer legal tender in Egypt. Officially Egypt was supposed to be a sovereign country. However, sterling could always be exchanged for Egyptian money at the office of the British Paymaster-General. Consequently people who did a lot of business with foreigners usually accepted pound notes in payment.

Vandam opened his door and shouted along the hall. 'Jakes!'

'Sir!' Jakes shouted back equally loudly.

'Bring me the file on forged banknotes.'

'Yes, sir!'

Vandam stepped to the next office and spoke to his secretary. 'I'm expecting a package from the Paymaster. Bring it in as soon as it comes, would you?'

'Yes, sir.'

Vandam went back into his office. Jakes appeared a moment later with a file. The most senior of Vandam's team, Jakes was an eager, reliable young man who would follow orders to the letter, as far as

they went, then use his initiative. He was even taller than Vandam, thin and black-haired, with a somewhat lugubrious look. He and Vandam were on terms of easy formality: Jakes was very scrupulous about his salutes and Sirs, yet they discussed their work as equals, and Jakes used bad language with great fluency. Jakes was very well-connected, and would almost certainly go farther in the Army than Vandam would.

Vandam switched on his desk light and said: 'Right, show me a picture of Nazi-style funny money.'

Jakes put down the file and flicked through it. He extracted a sheaf of glossy photographs and spread them on the desk. Each print showed the front and the back of a banknote, somewhat larger than actual size.

Jakes sorted them out. 'Pound notes, fivers, tenners and twenties.'

Black arrows on the photographs indicated the errors by which the forgeries might be identified.

The source of the information was counterfeit money taken from German spies captured in England. Jakes said: 'You'd think they'd know better than to give their spies funny money.'

Vandam replied without looking up from the pictures. 'Espionage is an expensive business, and most of the money is wasted. Why should they buy English currency in Switzerland when they can make it themselves? A spy has forged papers, he might as well have forged money. Also, it has a slightly damaging effect on the British economy if it gets into circulation. It's inflationary, like the government printing money to pay its debts.'

'Still, you'd think they would have cottoned on by now to the fact that we're catching the buggers.'

'Ah - but when we catch 'em, we make sure the Germans don't

know we've caught 'em.'

'All the same, I hope our spies aren't using counterfeit Reichmarks.'

'I shouldn't think so. We take Intelligence rather more seriously than they do, you know. I wish I could say the same about tank tactics.'

Vandam's secretary knocked and came in. He was a bespectacled twenty-year-old corporal. 'Package from the Paymaster, sir.'

'Good show!' Vandam said.

'If you'd sign the slip, sir.'

Vandam signed the receipt and tore open the envelope. It contained several hundreds of pound notes.

Jakes said: Bugger me!'

'They told me there were a lot,' Vandam said. 'Get a magnifying glass, Corporal, on the double.'

'Yes, sir.'

Vandam put a pound note from the envelope next to one of the photographs and looked for the identifying error.

He did not need the magnifying glass.

'Look, Jakes.'

Jakes looked.

The note bore the same error as the one in the photograph.

'That's it, sir,' said Jakes.

'Nazi money, made in Germany,' said Vandam. 'Now we're on his trail.'

*

Lieutenant-Colonel Reggie Bogge knew that Major Vandam was a smart lad, with the kind of low cunning one sometimes finds among the working class; but the Major was no match for the likes of Bogge.

That night Bogge played snooker with Brigadier Povey, the

Director of Military Intelligence, at the Gezira Sporting Club. The Brigadier was shrewd, and he did not like Bogge all that much, but Bogge thought he could handle him.

They played for a shilling a point, and the Brigadier broke.

While they played, Bogge said: 'Hope you don't mind talking shop in the Club, sir.'

'Not at all,' said the Brigadier.

'It's just that I don't seem to get a chance to leave m'desk in the day.'

'What's on your mind?' The Brigadier chalked his cue.

Bogge potted a red ball and lined up the pink. 'I'm pretty sure there's a fairly serious spy at work in Cairo.' He missed the pink.

The Brigadier bent over the table. 'Go on.'

Bogge regarded the Brigadier's broad back. A little delicacy was called for here. Of course the head of a department was responsible for that department's successes, for it was only well-run departments which had successes, as everyone knew; nevertheless it was necessary to be subtle about how one took the credit. He began: 'You remember a corporal was stabbed in Assyut a few weeks ago?'

'Vaguely.'

'I had a hunch about that, and I've been following it up ever since. Last week a General Staff aide had his briefcase pinched during a street brawl. Nothing very remarkable about that, of course, but I put two and two together.'

The Brigadier potted the white. 'Damn,' he said. 'Your shot.'

'I asked the Paymaster-General to look out for counterfeit English money. Lo and behold, he found some. I had my boys examine

it. Turns out to have been made in Germany.'

'Aha!'

Bogge potted a red, the blue, and another red, then he missed the pink again.'

'I think you've left me rather well off,' said the Brigadier, scrutinising the table through narrowed eyes. 'Any chance of tracing the cap through the money?'

'It's a possibility. We're working on that already.'

'Pass me that bridge, will you?'

'Certainly.'

The Brigadier laid the bridge on the ~~table~~ baize and lined up his shot.

Bogge said: 'It's been suggested that we might instruct the Paymaster to continue to accept the forgeries, in case he can bring in any new leads.' The suggestion had been Vandam's, and Bogge had turned it down. Vandam had argued - something that was becoming wearily familiar - and Bogge had had to slap him down. But it was an imponderable, and if things turned out badly Bogge wanted to be able to say he had consulted his superiors.

The Brigadier unbent from the table and considered. 'Rather depends how much money is involved, doesn't it?'

'Several hundred pounds so far.'

'It's a lot.'

'I feel it's not really necessary to continue to accept the counterfeits, sir.'

'Jolly good.' The Brigadier potted the last of the red balls and started on the colours.

Bogge marked the score. The Brigadier was ahead, but Bogge had got what he came for.

'Who've you got working on this spy thing?' the Brigadier asked.

'Well, I'm handling it myself basically - '

'Yes, but which of your majors are you using?'

'Vandam, actually.'

'Ah, Vandam. Not a bad chap.'

Bogge did not like the turn the conversation was taking. The Brigadier did not really understand how careful you had to be with the likes of Vandam: give them an inch and they would take the Empire. The Army would promote these people above their station. Bogge's nightmare was to find himself taking orders from a postman's son with a Dorset accent. He said: 'Vandam's got a bit of a soft spot for the wog, unfortunately; but as you say, he's good enough in a plodding sort of fashion.'

'Yes.' The Brigadier was enjoying a long break, potting the colours one after another. 'He went to the same school as I. Twenty years later, of course.'

Bogge smiled. 'He was a scholarship boy, though, wasn't he, sir?'

'Yes,' said the Brigadier. 'So was I.' He potted the black.

'You seem to have won, sir,' said Bogge.

*

The manager of the Cha-Cha Club said that more than half his customers settled their bills in sterling, he could not possibly identify who payed in which currency, and even if he could he did not know the names of more than a few regulars.

The chief cashier of Shepheard's Hotel said something similar.

So did two taxi-drivers, the proprietor of a soldier's bar, and the brothel-keeper Madame Fahmy.

Vandam was expecting much the same story from the next location on his list, a shop owned by one Mikis Arsitopoulos.

Aristopoulos had changed a large amount of sterling, most of it forged, and Vandam imagined his shop would be a business of

considerable size, but it was not so. Aristopoulos had a small grocery store. It smelled of spices and coffee but there was not much on the shelves. Aristopoulos himself was a short Greek of about twenty-five years with a wide, white-toothed smile. He wore a striped apron over his cotton trousers and white shirt.

He said: 'Good morning, sir. How can I help you?'

'You don't seem to have much to sell,' Vandam said.

Aristopoulos smiled. 'If you're looking for something particular, I may have it in the stock room. Have you shopped here before, sir?'

So that was the system: scarce delicacies in the back room for regular customers only. It meant he might know his clientele. Also, the amount of counterfeit money he had exchanged probably represented a large order, which he would remember.

Vandam said: 'I'm not here to buy. Two days ago you took one hundred and forty-seven pounds in English money to the British Paymaster-General and exchanged it for Egyptian currency.'

Aristopoulos frowned and looked troubled. 'Yes ... '

'One hundred and twenty-seven pounds of that was counterfeit - forged - no good.'

Aristopoulos smiled and spread his arms in a huge shrug. 'I am sorry for the Paymaster. I take the money from English, I give it back to English ... what can I do?'

'You can go to jail for passing counterfeit notes.'

Aristopoulos stopped smiling. 'Please. This is not justice. How could I know?'

'Was all that money paid to you by one person?'

'I don't know - '

'Think!' Vandam said sharply. 'Did anyone pay you one hundred and twenty-seven pounds?'

'Ah ... yes! Yes!' Suddenly Aristopoulos looked hurt.
'A very respectable customer. One hundred twenty-six pounds ten shillings.'

'His name?' Vandam held his breath.

'Mister Wolff - '

'Ahhh.'

'I am so shocked. Mr Wolff has been a good customer for many years, and no trouble with paying, never.'

'Listen,' Vandam said, 'did you deliver the groceries?'

'No.'

'Damn.'

'We offered to deliver, as usual, but this time Mr Wolff - '

'You usually deliver to Mr Wolff's home?'

'Yes, but this time - '

'What's the address?'

'Let me see. Villa les Oliviers, Garden City.'

Vandam banged his fist on the counter in frustration.
Aristopoulos looked a little frightened. Vandam said: 'You haven't delivered there recently, though.'

'Not since Mr Wolff came back. Sir, I am very sorry that this bad money had passed through my innocent hands. Perhaps something can be arranged ... ?'

'Perhaps,' Vandam said thoughtfully.

'Let us drink coffee together.'

Vandam nodded. Aristopoulos led him into the back room. The shelves here were well laden with bottles and tins, most of them imported. Vandam noticed Russian caviar, American canned ham, and English jam. Aristopoulos poured thick strong coffee into tiny cups. He was smiling again.

Aristopoulos said: 'These little problems can always be worked

out between friends.'

They drank coffee.

Aristopoulos said: 'Perhaps, as a gesture of friendship, I could offer you something from my store. I have a little stock of French wine - '

'No, no - '

'I can usually find some Scotch whisky when everyone else in Cairo has run out - '

'I'm not interested in that kind of arrangement,' Vandam said impatiently.

'Oh!' said Aristopoulos. He had become quite convinced that Vandam was seeking a bribe.

'I want to find Wolff,' Vandam continued. 'I need to know where he is living now. You said he was a regular customer?'

'Yes.'

'What sort of stuff does he buy?'

'Much champagne. Also some ~~caviar~~ coffee. Coffee, quite a lot. Foreign liquor. Pickled walnuts, garlic sausage, brandied apricots ... '

'Hm.' Vandam drank in this incidental information greedily. What kind of a spy spent his funds on imported delicacies? Answer: one who was not very serious. But Wolff was serious. It was a question of style. Vandam said: 'I was wondering how soon he is likely to come back.'

'As soon as he runs out of champagne.'

'All right.' When he does, I must find out where he lives.'

'But, sir, if he again refuses to allow me to deliver ... ?'

'That's what I've been thinking about. I'm going to give you an assistant.'

Aristopoulos did not like that idea. 'I want to help you, sir, but my business is private - '

'You've got no choice,' Vandam said. 'It's help me, or go to Jail.'

'But to have an English officer working here in my shop - '

'Oh, it won't be an English officer.' He would stick out like a sore thumb, Vandam thought, and probably scare Wolff away as well. Vandam smiled. 'I think I know the ideal person for the job.'

*

That evening after dinner Vandam went to Elene's apartment, carrying a huge bunch of flowers, feeling foolish.

She lived in a graceful, spacious old apartment house near the Place de l'Opera. A Nubian concierge directed Vandam to the third floor. He climbed the curving marble staircase which occupied the centre of the building and knocked on the door of 3A.

She was not expecting him, and it occurred to him suddenly that she might be entertaining a man friend.

He waited impatiently in the corridor, wondering what she would be like in her own home. This was the first time he had been here. Perhaps she was out. Surely she had plenty to do in the evenings -

The door opened.

She was wearing a yellow cotton dress with a full skirt, rather simple but almost thin enough to see through. The colour looked very pretty against her light brown skin. She gazed at him blankly for a moment, then recognised him and gave her impish smile.

She said: 'Well, hello!'

'Good evening.'

She stepped forward and kissed his cheek. 'Come in.'

He went inside and she closed the door.

'I wasn't expecting the kiss,' he said.

'All part of the act. Let me relieve you of your disguise.'

He gave her the flowers. He had the feeling he was being teased.

'Go in there while I put these in water,' she said.

He followed her pointing finger into the living-room, and looked around. The room was comfortable to the point of sensuality. It was decorated in pink and gold and furnished with deep soft seats and a table of pale oak. It was a corner room with windows on two sides, and now the evening sun shone in and made everything glow slightly. There was a thick rug of brown fur on the floor that looked like bearskin. Vandam bent down and touched it: it was genuine. He had a sudden, vivid picture of Elene lying on the rug, naked and writhing. He blinked and looked elsewhere. On the seat beside him was a book which she had, presumably, been reading when he knocked. He picked up the book and sat on the seat. It was warm from her body. The book was called Stamboul Train. It looked like cloak-and-dagger stuff. On the wall opposite him was a rather modern-looking painting of a society ball: all the ladies were in gorgeous formal gowns and all the men were naked. Vandam went and sat on the couch beneath the painting so that he would not have to look at it. He thought it peculiar.

She came in with the flowers in a vase, and the smell of wistaria filled the room. 'Would you like a drink?'

'Can you make martinis?'

'Yes. Smoke if you want to.'

'Thankyou.' She knew how to be hospitable, Vandam thought. He supposed she had to, given the way she earned her living. He took out his cigarettes. 'I was afraid you'd be out.'

'Not this evening.' There was an odd note in her voice when she said that, but Vandam could not figure it out. He watched her with the cocktail shaker. He had intended to conduct the meeting

on a businesslike level, but he was not able to, for it was she who was conducting it. He felt like a clandestine lover.

'Do you like this stuff?' He indicated the book.

'I've been reading thrillers lately.'

'Why?'

'To find out how a spy is supposed to behave.'

'I shouldn't think you - ' He saw her smiling, and realised he was being teased again. 'I never know whether you're serious.'

'Very rarely.' She handed him a drink and sat down at the opposite end of the couch. She looked at him over the rim of her glass. 'To espionage.'

He sipped his martini. It was perfect. So was she. The mellow sunshine burnished her skin. Her arms and legs looked smooth and soft. He thought she would be the same in bed as she was out of it: relaxed, amusing, and game for anything. Damn. She had had this effect on him last time, and he had gone on one of his rare binges and ended up in a wretched brothel.

'What are you thinking about?' she said.

'Espionage.'

She laughed: it seemed that somehow she knew he was lying.

'You must love it,' she said.

Vandam thought: How does she do this to me? She kept him always off-balance, with her teasing and her insight, her innocent face and her long brown limbs. He said: 'Catching spies can be very satisfying work, but I don't love it.'

'What happens to them when you've caught them?'

'They hang, usually.'

'Oh.'

He had managed to throw her off-balance for a change. She shivered. He said: 'Losers generally die in wartime.'

'Is that why you don't love it - because they hang?'

'No. I don't love it because I don't always catch them.'

'Are you proud of being so hard-hearted?'

'I don't think I'm hard-hearted. We're trying to kill more of them than they can kill of us.' He thought: How did I come to be defending myself?

She got up to ^{pour} ~~make~~ him another drink. He watched her walk across the room. She moved gracefully - like a cat, he thought; no, like a kitten. He looked at her back as she stooped to pick up the cocktail shaker, and he wondered what she was wearing beneath the yellow dress. He noticed her hands as she poured the drink: they were slender and strong. She did not give herself another martini.

He wondered what background she came from. He said: 'Are your parents alive?'

'No,' she said abruptly.

'I'm sorry,' he said. He knew she was lying.

'Why did you ask me that?'

'Idle curiosity. Please forgive me.'

She leaned over and touched his arm lightly, brushing his skin with her fingertips, a caress as gentle as a breeze. 'You apologise too much!' She looked away from him, as if hesitating; and then, seeming to yield to an impulse, she began to tell him of her background.

She had been the eldest of five children in a desperately poor family. Her parents were cultured and loving people - 'My father taught me English and my mother taught me to wear clean clothes,' she said - but the father, a tailor, was ultra-orthodox and had estranged himself from the rest of the Jewish community in Alexandria after a doctrinal dispute with the ritual slaughterer. When Elene was fifteen years old her father began to go blind. He

could no longer work as a tailor - but he would neither ask nor accept help from the 'backsliding' Alexandrian Jews. Elene went as a live-in maid to a British home and sent her wages to her family. From that point on, her story was one which had been repeated, Vandam knew, time and again over the last hundred years in the homes of the British ruling class: she fell in love with the son of the house, and he seduced her. She had been fortunate in that they had been found out before she became pregnant. The son was sent away to University and Elene was paid off. She was terrified to return home to tell her father she had been fired for fornication with a gentile. She lived on her payoff, continuing to send home the same amount of cash each week, until the money ran out. Then a lecherous businessman whom she had met at the house had set her up in a flat, and she was embarked upon her life's work. Soon afterwards her father had been told how she was living, and he made the family sit shiva for her.

'What is shiva?' Vandam ~~had~~ asked.

'The service for the dead.'

Since then she had not heard from them, except for a message from a friend to tell her that her mother had died.

Vandam said: 'Do you hate your father?'

She shrugged. 'I think it turned out rather well.' She spread her arms to indicate the ~~apstment~~ apartment.

'But are you happy?'

She looked at him. Twice she seemed about to speak and then said nothing. Finally she looked away. Vandam felt she was regretting the impulse that had made her tell him her life story. She changed the subject. 'What brings you here tonight, Major?'

Vandam collected his thoughts. He had been so interested in her - watching her hands and her eyes as she spoke of her past - that

he had forgotten for a while his purpose. 'I'm still looking for Alex Wolff,' he began. 'I haven't found him, but I've found his grocer.'

'How did you do that?'

He decided not to tell her. Better that nobody outside Intelligence should know that German spies were betrayed by their forged money. 'That's a long story,' he said. 'The important thing is, I want to put someone inside the shop in case he comes back.'

'Me.'

'That's what I had in mind.'

'Then, when he comes in, I hit him over the head with a bag of sugar and guard the unconscious body until you come along.'

Vandam laughed. 'I believe you would,' he said. 'I can just see you leaping over the counter.' He realised how much he was relaxing, and resolved to pull himself together before he made a fool of himself.

'Seriously, what do I have to do?' she said.

'Seriously, you have to discover where he lives.'

'How?'

'I'm not sure.' Vandam hesitated. 'I thought perhaps you might befriend him. You're a very attractive woman - I imagine it would be easy for you.'

'What do you mean by "befriend"?'

'That's up to you. Just as long as you get his address.'

'I see.' Suddenly her mood had changed, and there was bitterness in her voice. The switch astonished Vandam: she was too quick for him to follow her. Surely a woman like Elene would not be offended by this suggestion? She said: 'Why don't you just have one of your soldiers follow him home?'

'I may have to do that, if you fail to win his confidence.'

The trouble is, he might realise he was being followed and shake off the tail - then he would never go back to the grocer's, and we would have lost our advantage. But if you can persuade him, say, to invite you to his house for dinner, then we'll get the information we need without tipping our hand. Of course it might not work. Both alternatives are risky. But I prefer the subtle approach.'

'I understand that.'

Of course she understood, Vandam thought; the whole thing was as plain as day. What the devil was the matter with her? She was a strange woman: at one moment he was quite enchanted by her, and at the next he was infuriated. For the first time it crossed his mind that she might refuse to do what he was asking. Nervously he said: 'Will you help me?'

She got up and filled his glass again, and this time she took another drink herself. She was very tense, but it was clear she was not willing to tell him why. He always felt very annoyed with women in moods like this. It would be a damn nuisance if she refused to co-operate now.

At last she said: 'I suppose it's no worse than what I've been doing all my life.'

'That's what I thought,' said Vandam. *with relief.*

She gave him a very black look.

'You start tomorrow,' he said. He gave her a piece of paper with the address of the shop written on it. She took it without looking at it. 'The shop belongs to Mikis Aristopoulos,' he added.

'How long do you think this will take?' she said.

'I don't know.' He stood up. 'I'll get in touch with you, every few days, to make sure everything's alright - but you'll contact me as soon as he makes an appearance, won't you?'

'Yes.'

Vandam remembered something. 'By the way, the shopkeeper thinks we're after Wolff for forgery. Don't talk to him about espionage.'

'I won't.'

The change in her mood was permanent. They were no longer enjoying each other's company. Vandam said: 'I'll leave you to your thriller.'

She stood up. 'I'll see you out.'

They went to the door. As Vandam stepped out, the tenant of the neighbouring flat approached along the corridor. Vandam had been thinking of this moment, in the back of his mind, all evening, and now he did what he had been determined not to do. He took Elene's arm, bent his head, and kissed her mouth.

Her lips moved briefly in response. He pulled away. The neighbour passed by. Vandam looked at Elene. The neighbour unlocked his door, entered his flat, and closed the door behind him. Vandam released Elene's arm.

She said: 'You're a good actor.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Goodbye.' He turned away and strolled briskly down the corridor. He should have felt pleased with his evening's work, but instead he felt as if he had done something a little shameful. He heard the door of her ~~flat~~ apartment bang shut behind him.

*

Elene leaned her back against the closed door and cursed William Vandam.

He had come into her life, full of English courtesy, asking her to do a new kind of work and help win the war; and then he had told her she must go whoring again.

She had really believed he was going to change her life. No more rich businessmen, no more furtive affairs, no more dancing or waiting on tables. She had a worthwhile job, something she believed in, something that mattered. Now it turned out to be the same old game.

For seven years she had been living off her face and her body, and now she wanted to stop.

She went into the living-room to get a drink. His glass was there on the table, half empty. She put it to her lips. The drink was warm and bitter.

At first she had not liked Vandam: he had seemed a stiff, solemn, dull man. Then she had changed her mind about him. When had she first thought there might be another, different man beneath the rigid exterior? She remembered: it had been when he laughed. That laugh intrigued her. He had done it again tonight, when she said she would hit Wolff over the head with a bag of sugar. There was a rich vein of fun deep, deep inside him, and when it was tapped the laughter bubbled up and took over his whole personality for a moment. She suspected that he was a man with a big appetite for life - and appetite which he had firmly under control, too firmly. It made Elene want to get under his skin, to make him be himself. That was why she teased him, and tried to make him laugh again.

That was why she had kissed him, too.

She had been curiously happy to have him in her home, sitting on her couch, smoking and talking. She had even thought how nice it would be to take this strong, innocent man to bed and show him things he never dreamed of. Why did she like him? Perhaps it was that he treated her as a person, not as a girlie. She knew he would never pat her bottom and say: 'Don't you worry your pretty little head ... '

And he had spoiled it all. Why was she so bothered by this thing with Wolff? One more insincere act of seduction would do her no harm. Vandam had more or less said that. And in saying so, he had revealed that he regarded her as a whore. That was what had made her so mad. She wanted his esteem, and when he asked her to 'befriend' Wolff, she knew she was never going to get it, not really. Anyway the whole thing was foolish: the relationship between a woman such as she and an English officer was doomed to turn out like all Elene's relationships - manipulation on one side, dependence on the other, and respect nowhere. Vandam would always see her as a whore. For a while she had thought he might be different from all the rest, but she had been wrong.

And she thought: But why do I mind so much?

*

Vandam was sitting in darkness at his bedroom window in the middle of the night, smoking cigarettes and looking out at the moonlit Nile, when a memory from his childhood sprang, fully formed, into his mind.

He is eleven years old, sexually innocent, physically still a child. He is in the terraced grey brick house where he has always lived. The house has a bathroom, with water heated by the coal fire in the kitchen below: he has been told that this makes his family very fortunate, and he must not boast about it; indeed, when he goes to the new school, the posh school in Bournemouth, he must pretend that he thinks it is perfectly normal to have a bathroom and hot water coming out of the taps. The bathroom has a water-closet too. He is going there now to pee. His mother is in there, bathing his sister who is seven years old, but they won't mind him going in to pee, he has done it before, and the other toilet is a long cold walk down the garden. What he has forgotten

is that his cousin is also being bathed. She is eight years old. He walks into the bathroom. His sister is sitting in the bath. His cousin is standing, about to come out. His mother holds a towel. He looks at his cousin.

She is naked, of course. It is the first time he has seen any girl other than his sister naked. His cousin's body is slightly plump, and her skin is flushed with the heat of the water. She is quite the loveliest sight he has ever seen. He stands inside the bathroom doorway looking at her with undisguised interest and admiration.

He does not see the slap coming. His mother's large hand seems to come from nowhere. It hits his cheek with a loud clap. She is a good hitter, his mother, and this is one of her best efforts. It hurts like hell, but the shock is even worse than the pain. Worst of all is that the warm sentiment which had engulfed him has been shattered like a glass window.

'Get out!' his mother screams, and he leaves, hurt and humiliated.

Vandam remembered this as he sat alone watching the Egyptian night, and he thought, as he had thought at the time it happened: Now why did she do that?

- 9 -

In the early morning the tiled floor of the mosque was cold to Alex Wolff's bare feet. The handful of dawn worshippers was lost in the vastness of the pillared hall. There was a silence, a sense of peace, and a bleak grey light. A shaft of sunlight pierced one of the high narrow slits in the wall, and at that moment the muezzin began to cry:

'Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!'

Wolff turned to face Mecca.

He was wearing a long robe and a turban, and the shoes in his hand were simple Arab sandals. He was never quite sure why he did this. He was a True Believer only in theory. He had been circumcised according to Islamic doctrine, and he had completed the pilgrimage to Mecca; but he drank alcohol and ate pork, he never paid the zakat tax, he never observed the fast of Ramadan, and he did not pray every day, let alone five times a day. But every so often he felt the need to immerse himself, just for a few minutes, in the familiar, mechanical ritual of his stepfather's religion. Then, as he had done today, he would get up while it was still dark, and dress in traditional clothes, and walk through the cold quiet streets of the city to the mosque his father had attended, and perform the ceremonial ablutions in the forecourt, and enter in time for the first prayers of the new day.

He touched his ears with his hands, then clasped his hands in front of him, the left within the right. He bowed, then knelt down. Touching his forehead to the floor at appropriate moments, he recited the el-fathe:

'In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate. Praise be to God, the lord of the worlds, the merciful and compassionate, the Prince of the day of judgement; Thee we serve, and to Thee we

pray for help; lead us in the right way, the way of those to whom Thou hast shown mercy, upon whom no wrath resteth, and who go not astray.'

He looked over his right shoulder, then his left, to greet the two recording angels who wrote down his good and bad acts.

When he looked over his left shoulder, he saw Abdullah.

Without interrupting his prayer the thief smiled broadly, showing his steel tooth.

Wolff got up and went out. He stopped outside to put on his sandals, and Abdullah came waddling after him. They shook hands.

'You are a devout man, like myself,' Abdullah said. 'I knew you would come, sooner or later, to your father's mosque.'

'You've been looking for me?'

'Many people are looking for you.'

Together they walked away from the mosque. Abdullah said: 'Knowing you to be a True Believer, I could not betray you to the British, even for so large a sum of money; so I told Major Vandam that I knew nobody by the name of ~~John~~ Alex Wolff, or Achmed Rahmha.'

Wolff stopped abruptly. So they were still hunting him. He had started to feel safe - too soon. He took Abdullah by the arm and steered him into an Arab cafe. They sat down.

Wolff said: 'He knows my Arab name.'

'He knows all about you - except where to find you.'

Wolff felt worried, and at the same time intensely curious.

'What is this major like?' he asked.

Abdullah shrugged. 'An Englishman. No subtlety. No manners. Khaki shorts and a face the colour of a tomato.'

'You can do better than that.'

Abdullah nodded. 'This man is patient and determined. If I were you, I should be afraid of him.'

Suddenly Wolff was afraid.

He said: 'What has he been doing?'

'He has found out all about your family. He has talked to all your brothers. They said they knew nothing of you.'

The cafe proprietor brought each of them a dish of mashed fava beans and a flat loaf of coarse bread. Wolff broke his bread and dipped it into the beans. Flies began to gather around the bowls. Both men ignored them.

Abdullah spoke through a mouthful of food. 'Vandam is offering one hundred pounds for your address. Ha! As if we would betray one of our own for money.'

Wolff swallowed. 'Even if you knew my address.'

Abdullah shrugged. 'It would be a small thing to find out.'

'I know,' Wolff said. 'So I am going to tell you, as a sign of my faith in your friendship. I am living at Shephard's Hotel.'

Abdullah looked hurt. 'My friend, I know this is not true. It is the first place the British would look - '

'You misunderstand me.' Wolff smiled. 'I am not a guest there. I work in the kitchens, cleaning pots, and at the end of the day I lie down on the floor with a dozen or so others and sleep there.'

'So cunning!' Abdullah grinned: he was pleased with the idea and delighted to have the information. 'You hide under their very noses!'

'I know you will keep this secret,' Wolff said. 'And, as a sign of my gratitude for your friendship, I hope you will accept from me a gift of one hundred pounds.'

'But this is not necessary - '

'I insist.'

Abdullah sighed and gave in reluctantly. 'Very well.'

'I will have the money sent to your house.'

Abdullah wiped his empty bowl with the last of his bread.

'I must leave you now,' he said. 'Allow me to pay for your breakfast.'

'Thankyou.'

'Ah! But I have come with no money. A thousand pardons - '

'It's nothing,' Wolff said. 'Alallah - in God's care.'

Abdullah replied conventionally: 'Allah yisallimak - may God protect thee.' He wentt out.

Wolff called for coffee and thought about Abdullah. The theef would betray Wolff for a lot less than a hundred pounds, of course. What had stopped him so far was that he did not know Wolff's address. He was actively trying to discover it - that was why he had come to the mosque. Now he would attempt to check on the story about living in the kitchens of Shepheard's. This might not be easy, for of course no one would admit that staff slept on the kitchen floor - indeed Wolff was not at all sure it was true - but he had to reckon on Abdullah discovering the lie sooner or later. The story was no more than a delaying tactic; so was the bribe. However, when at last Abdullah found out that Wolff was living on Sonja's houseboat, he would probably come to Wolff for more money instead of going to Vandam.

The situation was under control - for the moment.

Wolff left a few millemes on the table and went out.

The city had come to life. The streets were already jammed with traffic, the pavements crowded with vendors and beggars, the air full of good and bad smells. Vandam made his way to the central post office to use a telephone. He called GHQ and asked for Major Smith.

'We have seventeen of them,' the operator told him. 'Have you got a first name?'

'Sandy.'

'That will be Major Alexander Smith. He's not here at the moment. May I take a message?'

Wolff had known the major would not be at GHQ - it was too early. 'The message is: Twelve noon today at Zamalek. Would you sign it: S. Have you got that?'

'Yes, but if I may have your full - '

Wolff hung up. He left the post office and headed for Zamalek.

Since Sonja had seduced Smith, the Major had sent her a dozen roses, a box of chocolates, a love letter and two hand-delivered messages asking for another date. Wolff had forbidden her to reply. By now Smith was wondering whether he would ever see her again. Wolff was quite sure that Sonja was the first beautiful woman Smith had ever slept with. After a couple of days of suspense Smith would be desperate to see her again, and would jump at any chance.

On the way home Wolff bought a newspaper, but it was full of the usual rubbish. When he got to the houseboat Sonja was still asleep. He threw the rolled-up newspaper at her to wake her. She groaned and turned over.

Wolff left her and went through the curtains back into the living-room. At the far end, in the prow of the boat, was a tiny open kitchen. It had one quite large cupboard for brooms and cleaning materials. Wolff opened the cupboard door. He could just about get inside if he bent his knees and ducked his head. The catch of the door could be worked only from the outside. He searched through the kitchen drawers and found a knife with a pliable blade. He thought he could probably work the catch from inside the cupboard

by sticking the knife through the crack of the door and easing it against the spring-loaded bolt. He got into the cupboard, closed the door, and tried it. It worked.

However, he could not see through the door jamb.

He took a nail and a flat iron and banged the nail through the thin wood of the door at eye level. He used a kitchen fork to enlarge the hole. He got inside the cupboard again and closed the door. He put his eye to the hole.

He saw the curtains part, and Sonja came into the living-room. She looked around, surprised that he was not there. She shrugged, then lifted her nightdress and scratched her belly. Wolff suppressed a laugh. She came across to the kitchen, picked up the kettle, and turned on the tap.

Wolff slipped the knife into the crack of the door and worked the catch. He opened the door, stepped out, and said: 'Good morning.'

Sonja screamed.

Wolff laughed.

She threw the kettle at him, and he dodged. He said: 'It's a good hiding-place, isn't it?'

'You terrified me, you bastard,' she said.

He picked up the kettle and handed it to her. 'Make the coffee,' he told her. He put the knife in the cupboard, closed the door, and went to sit down.

Sonja said: 'What do you need a hiding-place for?'

'To watch you and Major Smith. It's very funny - he looks like a passionate turtle.'

'When is he coming?'

'Twelve noon today.'

'Oh, no. Why so early in the morning?'

'Listen. If he's got anything worthwhile in that briefcase, then he certainly isn't allowed to go wandering around the city with it in his hand. He should take it straight to his office and lock it in the safe. We mustn't give him time to do that - the whole thing is useless unless he brings his case here. What we want is for him to come rushing here straight from GHQ. In fact, if he gets here late and without his briefcase, we're going to lock up and pretend you're out - then next time he'll know he has to get here fast.'

'You've got it all worked out, haven't you?'

Wolff laughed. 'You'd better start getting ready. I want you to look irresistible.'

'I'm always irresistible.' She went through to the bedroom.

He called after her: 'Wash your hair.' There was no reply.

He looked at his watch. Time was running out. He went around the houseboat hiding traces of his own occupation, putting away his shoes, his razor, his toothbrush and his fez. Sonja went up on deck in a robe to dry her hair in the sun. Wolff made the coffee and took her a cup. He drank his own, then washed his cup and put it away. He took out a bottle of champagne, put it in a bucket of ice, and placed it beside the bed with two glasses. He thought of changing the sheets, then decided to do it after Smith's visit, not before. Sonja came down from the deck. She dabbed perfume on her thighs and between her breasts. Wolff took a last look around. All was ready. He sat on a divan by a porthole to watch the towpath.

It was a few minutes after noon when Major Smith appeared. He was hurrying, as if afraid to be late. He wore his uniform shirt, khaki shorts, socks and sandals, but he had taken off his officer's cap. He was sweating in the midday sun.

He was carrying his briefcase.

Wolff grinned with satisfaction.

'Here he comes,' Wolff called. 'Are you ready?'

'No.'

She was trying to rattle him. She would be ready. He got into the cupboard, closed the door, and put his eye to the peephole.

He heard Smith's footsteps on the gangplank and then on the deck. The major called: 'Hello?'

Sonja did not reply.

Looking through the peephole, Wolff saw Smith come down the stairs into the interior of the boat.

'Is anybody there?'

Smith looked at the curtains which divided off the bedroom. His voice was full of the expectation of disappointment. 'Sonja?'

The curtains parted. Sonja stood there, her arms lifted to hold the curtains apart. She had put her hair up in a complex pyramid as she did for her act. She wore the baggy trousers of filmy gauze, but at this distance her body was visible through the material. From the waist up she was naked except for a jewelled collar around her neck. Her brown breasts were full and round. She had put lipstick on her nipples.

Wolff thought: Good girl!

Major Smith stared at her. He was quite bowled over. He said: 'Oh, dear. Oh, good Lord. Oh, my soul.'

Wolff tried not to laugh.

Smith dropped his briefcase and went to her. As he embraced her, she stepped back and closed the curtains behind his back.

Wolff opened the cupboard door and stepped out.

The briefcase lay on the floor just this side of the curtains. Wolff knelt down, hitching up his galabiya, and turned the case over. He tried the catches. The case was locked.

Wolff whispered: 'Lieber Gott.'

He looked around. He needed a pin, a paper clip, a sewing needle, something with which to pick the locks. Moving quietly, he went to the kitchen area and carefully pulled open a drawer. Meat skewer, too thick; bristle from a wire brush, too thin; vegetable knife, too broad ... In a little dish beside the sink he found one of Sonja's hair clips.

He went back to the case and poked the end of the clip into the keyhole of one of the locks. He twisted and turned it experimentally, encountered a kind of springy resistance, and pressed harder.

The clip broke.

Again Wolff cursed under his breath.

He glanced reflexively at his wristwatch. Last time Smith had screwed Sonja in about five minutes. I should have told her to make it last, Wolff thought.

He picked up the flexible knife he had been using to open the cupboard door from the inside. Gently, he slid it into one of the catches on the briefcase. When he pressed, the knife bent.

He could have broken the locks in a few seconds, but he did not want to, for then Smith would know that his case had been opened. Wolff was not afraid of Smith, but he wanted the major to remain oblivious of the real reason for the seduction: if there was valuable material in the case, Wolff wanted to open it regularly.

But if he could not open the case, Smith would always be useless.

What would happen if he broke the locks? Smith would finish with Sonja, put on his trousers, pick up his case, and realise it had been opened. He would accuse Sonja. The houseboat would be blown unless Wolff killed Smith. What would be the consequences of killing Smith? Another British soldier murdered, this time in Cairo.

There would be a terrific manhunt. Would they be able to connect the killing with Wolff? Had Smith told anyone about Sonja? Who had seen them together in the Cha-Cha Club? Would inquiries lead the British to the houseboat?

It would be risky - but the worst of it would be that Wolff would be without a source of information, back to square one.

Meanwhile the Germans were fighting a war out there in the desert, and they needed information.

Wolff stood silent in the middle of the living-room, racking his brains. He had thought of something, back there, which gave him his answer, and now it had slipped his mind. On the other side of the curtain, Smith was muttering and groaning. Wolff wondered if he had his trousers off yet -

His trousers off, that was it.

He would have the key to his briefcase in his pocket.

Wolff peeped between the curtains. Smith and Sonja lay on the bed. She was on her back, eyes closed. He lay beside her, propped up on one elbow, touching her. She was arching her back as if she was enjoying it. As Wolff watched, Smith rolled over, half lying on her, and put his face to her breasts.

Smith still had his shorts on.

Wolff put his head through the curtains and waved an arm, trying to attract Sonja's attention. He thought: Look at me, woman! Smith moved his head from one breast to the other. Sonja opened her eyes, glanced at the top of Smith's head, stroked his brilliantined hair, and caught Wolff's eye.

He mouthed: Take off his pants.

She frowned, not understanding.

Wolff stepped through the curtains and mimed removing trousers.

Sonja's face cleared as enlightenment dawned.

Wolff stepped back through the curtains and closed them silently, leaving only a tiny gap to look through.

He saw Sonja's hands go to Smith's shorts and begin to struggle with the buttons of the fly. Smith groaned. Sonja rolled her eyes upward, contemptuous of his credulous passion. Wolff thought: I hope she has the sense to throw the shorts this way.

After a minute Smith grew impatient with her fumbling, rolled over, sat up, and took them off himself. He dropped them over the end of the bed and turned back to Sonja.

The end of the bed was about five feet away from the curtain.

Wolff got down on the floor and lay flat on his belly. He parted the curtains with his hands and inched his way through, Indian fashion.

He heard Smith say: 'Oh, God, you're so beautiful.'

Wolff reached the shorts. With one hand he carefully turned the material over until he saw a pocket. He put his hand in the pocket and felt for a key.

The pocket was empty.

There was the sound of movement from the bed. Smith grunted. Sonja said: 'No, lie still.'

Wolff thought: Good girl.

He turned the shorts over until he found the other pocket. He felt in it. That, too, was empty.

There might be more pockets. Wolff grew reckless. He felt the garment, searching for hard lumps that might be metal. There were none. He picked up the shorts -

A bunch of keys lay beneath them.

Wolff breathed a silent sigh of relief.

The keys must have slipped out of the pocket when Smith dropped the shorts on the floor.

Wolff picked up the keys and the shorts and began to inch backward through the curtains.

Then he heard footsteps on deck.

Smith said: 'Good God, what's that!' in a high-pitched voice.

'Hush!' Sonja said. 'Only the postman. Tell me if you like this ... '

'Oh, yes.'

Wolff made it through the curtains and looked up. The postman was placing a letter on the top step of the stairs, by the hatch. To Wolff's horror the postman saw him and called out:

'Sabah el-kheir - good morning!'

Wolff put ~~his~~^g a finger to his lips for silence, then lay his cheek against his hand to mime sleep, then pointed to the bedroom.

'Your pardon!' the postman whispered.

Wolff waved him away.

There was no sound from the bedroom.

Had the postman's greeting made Smith suspicious? Probably not, Wolff decided: a postman might well call Good morning even if he could see no one, for the fact that the hatch was open indicated that someone was at home.

The lovemaking noises in the next room resumed, and Wolff breathed more easily.

He sorted through the keys, found the smallest, and tried it in the locks of the case.

It worked.

He opened the other catch and lifted the lid. Inside was a sheaf of papers in a stiff cardboard folder. Wolff thought: No more menus, please. He opened the folder and looked at the top sheet.

He read:

OPERATION ABERDEEN

1. Allied forces will mount a major counterattack at dawn on 5 June.

2. The attack will be two-pronged ...

Wolff looked up from the papers. 'My God,' he whispered. 'This is it!'

He listened. The noises from the bedroom were louder now. He could hear the springs of the bed, and he thought the boat itself was beginning to rock slightly. There was not much time.

The report in Smith's possession was detailed. Wolff was not sure exactly how the British chain of command worked, but presumably the battles were planned in detail by General Ritchie at desert headquarters then sent to GHQ in Cairo for approval by Auchinleck. Plans for the more important battles would be discussed at the morning conferences, which Smith obviously attended in some capacity. Wolff wondered again which department it was that was housed in the unmarked building in the Shari Suleiman Pasha to which Smith returned each afternoon; then he pushed the thought aside. He needed to make notes.

He hunted around for pencil and paper, thinking: I should have done this beforehand. He found a writing-pad and a red pencil in a drawer. He sat down by the briefcase and read on.

The main Allied forces were besieged in an area they called The Cauldron. The 5 June counterattack was intended to be a breakout. It would begin at 0250 with the bombardment, by four regiments of artillery, of the Aslagh Ridge, on Rommel's eastern flank. The artillery was to soften-up the opposition in readiness for the spearhead attack by the infantry of the 10th Indian Brigade. When the Indians had breached the line at Aslagh Ridge, the tanks

of the 22nd Armoured Brigade would rush through the gap and capture Sidi Muftah while the 9th Indian Brigade followed through and consolidated.

Meanwhile the 32nd Army Tank Brigade, with infantry support, would attack Rommel's northern flank at Sidra Ridge.

When he came to the end of the report Wolff realised he had been so absorbed that he had heard, but had not taken notice of, the sound of Major Smith reaching his climax. Now the bed creaked and a pair of feet hit the floor.

Wolff tensed.

Sonja said: 'Darling, pour some champagne.'

'Just a minute - '

'I want it now.'

'I feel a bit silly with me trousers off, m'dear.'

Wolff thought: Christ, he wants his trousers.

Sonja said: 'I like you undressed. Drink a glass with me before you put your clothes on.'

'Your wish is my command.'

Wolff relaxed. She may bitch about it, he thought, but she does what I want!

He looked quickly through the rest of the papers, determined that he would not be caught now: Smith was a wonderful find, and it would be a tragedy to kill the goose the first time it laid a golden egg. He noted that the attack would employ four hundred tanks, three hundred and thirty of them with the eastern prong ~~xx~~ and only seventy with the northern; that Generals Messervy and Briggs were to establish a combined headquarters; and that Auchinleck was demanding - a little peevishly, it seemed - thorough reconnaissance and close co-operation between infantry and tanks.

A cork popped loudly as he was writing. He licked his ~~finger~~

lips, thinking: I could use some of that. He wondered how quickly Smith could drink a glass of champagne. He decided to take no chances.

He put the papers back in the folder and the folder back in the case. He closed the lid and keyed the locks. He put the bunch of keys in a pocket of the shorts. He stood up and peeped through the curtain.

Smith was sitting up in bed in his army-issue underwear with a glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, looking pleased with himself. The cigarettes must have been in his shirt pocket: it would have been awkward if they had been in his pants.

At the moment Wolff was within Smith's field of view. He took his face away from the tiny gap between the curtains, and waited. He heard Sonja say: 'Pour me some more, please.' He looked through again. Smith took her glass and turned away to the bottle. His back was now to Wolff. Wolff pushed the shorts through the curtains and put them on the floor. Sonja saw him and raised her eyebrows in alarm. Wolff withdrew his arm. Smith handed Sonja the glass.

Wolff got into the cupboard, closed the door, and eased himself to the floor. He wondered how long he would have to wait before Smith left. He did not care: he was jubilant. He had struck gold.

It was half an hour before he saw, through the peephole, Smith come into the living-room, wearing his clothes again. By this time Wolff was feeling very cramped. Sonja followed Smith, saying: 'Must you go so soon?'

'I'm afraid so,' he said. 'It's a very awkward time for me, you see.' He hesitated. 'To be perfectly frank, I'm not actually supposed to carry this briefcase around with me. I had the very devil of a job to come here at noon. You see, I have to go from GHQ
~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

straight to my office. Well, I didn't do that today - I was desperately afraid I might miss you if I came late. I told my office I was lunching at GHQ, and told the chaps at GHQ I was lunching at my office. However, next time I'll go to my office, dump the briefcase, and come on here - if that's all right with you, my little poppet.'

Wolff thought: For God's sake, Sonja, say something!

She said: 'Oh, but Sandy, my housekeeper comes every afternoon to clean - we wouldn't be alone.'

Smith frowned. 'Damn. Well, we'll just have to meet in the evenings.'

'But I have to work - and after my act, I have to stay in the club and talk to the customers. And I couldn't sit at your table every night - people would ~~talk~~ gossip.'

The cupboard was very hot and stuffy. Wolff was perspiring heavily.

Smith said: 'Can't you tell your cleaner not to come?'

'But darling, I couldn't clean the place myself - I wouldn't know how.'

Wolff saw her smile, then she took Smith's hands and placed it between her legs. 'Oh, Sandy, say you'll come at noon.'

It was much more than Smith could withstand. 'Of course I will, my darling,' he said.

They kissed, and at last Smith left. Wolff listened to the footsteps crossing the deck and descending the gangplank, then he got out of the cupboard.

Sonja watched with malicious glee as he stretched his aching limbs. 'Sore?' she said with mock sympathy.

'It was worth it,' Wolff said. 'You were wonderful.'

'Did you get what you wanted?'

'Better than I could have dreamed.'

Wolff cut up bread and sausages for lunch while Sonja took a bath. After lunch he found the English novel and the key to the code, and drafted his signal to Rommel. Sonja went to the racetrack with a crowd of Egyptian friends: Wolff gave her fifty pounds to bet with.

In the evening she went to the Cha-Cha Club and Wolff sat at home drinking whisky and reading Arab poetry. As midnight approached, he set up the radio.

At exactly 2400 hours, he tapped out his call-sign, Sphinx. A few seconds later Rommel's desert listening post, or Horch Company, answered. Wolff sent a series of Vs to enable them to tune in exactly, then asked them what his signal strength was. In the middle of the sentence he made a mistake, and sent a series of Es - for Error - before beginning again. They told him his signal was maximum strength and made GA for Go Ahead. He made KA to indicated the beginning of his message; then, in code, he began: 'Operation Aberdeen ... '

At the end he added AR for Message Finished and K for Over. They replied with a series of Rs, which meant: 'Your message has been received and understood.'

Wolff packed away the radio, the code book and the key, then he poured himself another drink.

All in all, he thought he had done incredibly well.

- 10 -

The signal from the spy was only one of twenty or thirty reports on the desk of von Mellenthin, Rommel's Ic - intelligence officer - at seven o'clock on the morning of 4 June. There were several other reports from listening units: infantry had been heard talking to tanks au clair; field headquarters had issued instructions in low-grade codes which had been deciphered overnight; and there was other enemy radio traffic which, although indecipherable, nevertheless yielded hints about enemy intentions simply because of its location and frequency. As well as radio reconnaissance there were the reports from the Ics in the field, who got information from captured weapons, the uniforms of enemy dead, interrogation of prisoners, and simply from looking across the desert and seeing the people they were fighting. Then there was aerial reconnaissance, a situation report from an order-of-battle expert, and a summary - just about useless - of Berlin's current assessment of Allied intentions and strength.

Like all field intelligence officers, von Mellenthin despised spy reports. Based on diplomatic gossip, newspaper stories and sheer guesswork, they were wrong at least as often as they were right, which made them effectively useless.

Von Mellenthin had to admit that this one looked different.

The run-of-the-mill secret agent might report: '9th Indian Brigade have been told they will be involved in a major battle in the near future,' or: 'Allies planning a breakout from The Cauldron in early June,' or: 'Rumours that Auchinleck will be replaced as Commander-in-Chief.' But there was nothing indefinite about this report.

The spy, whose call-sign was Sphinx, began his message: 'Operation Aberdeen.' He gave the date of the attack, the brigades

involved and their specific roles, the places they would pound, and the tactical thinking of the planners.

Von Mellenthin was not convinced, but he was interested.

As the thermometer in his tent passed the one-hundred-degree mark he began his routine round of morning discussions. In person, by field telephone, and - rarely - by radio, he talked to the Divisional Ics, the Luftwaffe liaison officer for aerial reconnaissance, the Horch Company liaison man, and a few of the better Brigade Ics. To all of these men he mentioned the 9th and 10th Indian Brigades, the 22nd Armoured Brigade, and the 32nd Army Tank Brigade. He told them to look out for these brigades. He also told them to watch for battle preparations in the areas from which, according to the spy, the counterthrust would come. They would also observe the enemy's observers: if the spy were right, there would be increased aerial reconnaissance by the Allies of the positions they planned to attack, namely Aslagh Ridge, Sidra Ridge, and Sidi Muftah. There might be increased bombing of those positions, for the purpose of softening-up, although this was such a giveaway that most commanders would resist the temptation. There might be decreased bombing, as a bluff, and this too could be a sigg.

These conversations also enabled the field Ics to update their overnight reports. When they were finished von Mellenthin wrote his report for Rommel, and took it to the Command Vehicle. He discussed it with the Chief of Staff, who then presented it to Rommel.

The mornigg discussion was brief, for Rommel had made his major decisions and given his orders for the day during the previous evening. Besides, Rommel was not in a feflective mood in the mornings: he wanted action. He tore around the desert, going from

one front-line position to another in his staff car or his Storch aircraft, giving new orders, joking with the men, and taking charge of skirmishes - and yet, although he constantly exposed himself to enemy fire, he had not been wounded since 1914. Von Mellenthin went with him today, taking the opportunity to get his own picture of the front-line situation, and making his personal assessment of the Ics who were sending in his raw material: some were over-cautious, ommitting all unconfirmed data, and others exaggerated in order to get extra supplies and reinforcements for their units.

In the early evening, when at last the thermometer showed a fall, there were more reports and conversations. Von Mellenthin sifted the mass of detail for information relating to the counterattack predicted by Sphinx.

The Ariete Armoured - the Italian division occupying the Aslagh Ridge - reported increased enemy air activity. Von Mellenthin asked them whether this was bombing or reconnaissance, and they said reconnaissance: bombing had actually ceased.

The Luftwaffe reported activity in no-man's-land which might, or might not, have been an advance party making out an assembly point.

There was a garbled radio intercept in a low-grade cipher in which the something Indian Brigade requested urgent clarification of the morning's something (orders?) with particular reference to the timing of something artillery bombardment. In British tactics, von Mellenthin knew, artillery bombardment generally preceded an attack.

The evidence was building.

Von Mellenthin checked his card-index for the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and discovered that they had recently been sighted at

Rigel Ridge - a logical position from which to attack Sidra Ridge.

The task of an Ic was an impossible one: to forecast the enemy's moves on the basis of inadequate information. He looked at the signs, he used his intuition, and he gambled.

Von Mellenthin decided to gamble on Sphinx.

At 1830 hours he took his report to the Command Vehicle. Rommel was there with his Chief of Staff Colonel Bayerlein and Kesselring. They stood around a large camp table looking at the operations map. A Leutnant sat to one side ready to take notes.

Rommel had taken his cap off, and his large, balding head appeared too big for his small body. He looked tired and thin. He suffered recurring stomach trouble, von Mellenthin knew, and was often unable to eat for days. His normally pudgy face had lost flesh, and his ears seemed to stick out more than usual. But his slitted dark eyes were bright with enthusiasm and the hope of victory.

Von Mellenthin clicked his heels and formally handed over the report, then he explained his conclusions on the map. When he had done Kesselring said: 'And all this is based on the report of a spy, you say?'

'No, Field-Marshal,' von Mellenthin said firmly. 'There are confirming indications.'

'You can find confirming indications for anything,' Kesselring said.

Out of the corner of his eye von Mellenthin could see that Rommel was getting cross.

Kesselring said: 'We really can't plan battles on the basis of information from some grubby little secret agent in Cairo.'

Rommel said: 'I am inclined to believe this report.'

Von Mellenthin watched the two men. They were curiously balanced in terms of power - curiously, that was, for the army,

where hierarchies were normally so well defined. Kesselring was C-in-C South, and ~~xxxxField-Marshalxxx~~ outranked Rommel, but Rommel did not take orders from him, by some whim of Hitler's. Both men had ~~powerful~~ patrons in Berlin - Kesselring, the Luftwaffe man, was Goering's favourite, and Rommel produced such good publicity that Goebbels could be relied upon to support him. Kesselring was popular with the Italians, whereas Rommel always insulted them. Ultimately Kesselring was more powerful, for as a Field-Marshal he had direct access to Hitler, while Rommel had to go through Jodl; but this was a card Kesselring could not afford to play too often. So the two men quarreled; and although Rommel had the last word here in the desert, back in Europe, von Mellenthin knew - Kesselring was manoeuvring to get rid of him.

Rommel turned to the map. 'Let us be ready, then, for a two-pronged attack. Consider first the weaker, northern prong. Sidra Ridge is held by ^{the 21st Panzer Division} ~~panzers~~ with anti-tank guns. Here, in the path of the British advance, is a minefield. The panzers will lure the British into the minefield and destroy them with anti-tank fire. If the spy is right, and the British throw only seventy tanks into this assault, the 21st Panzer ~~Division~~ should deal with them quickly and be free for other action later in the day.'

He drew a thick forefinger down across the map. 'Now consider the second prong, the main assault, on our eastern flank. This is held by the Italian Army. The attack is to be led by an Indian brigade. Knowing those Indians, and knowing our Italians, I assume the attack will succeed. I therefore order a vigorous riposte.

21st 'One: The Italians will counterattack from the west. Two: The Panzers, having repelled the other prong of the attack at Sidra Ridge, will turn about and attack the Indians from the north.

Three: Tonight our engineers will clear a gap in the minefield at Bir el Harmat, so that the 15th Panzers can make a swing to the south, emerge through the gap, and attack the British forces from the rear.'

Von Mellenthin, listening and watching, nodded appreciation. It was a typical Rommel plan, involving rapid switching of forces to maximise their effect, an encircling movement, and the surprise appearance of a powerful division where it was least expected, in the enemy's rear. If it all worked, the attacking Allied brigades would be surrounded, cut off, and wiped out.

If it all worked.

If the spy was right.

Kesselring said to Rommel: 'I think you could be making a big mistake.'

'That's your privilege,' Rommel said calmly.

Von Mellenthin did not feel calm. If it worked out badly, Berlin would soon hear about Rommel's unjustified faith in poor intelligence; and von Mellenthin would be blamed for supplying that intelligence. Rommel's attitude to subordinates who let him down was savage.

Rommel looked at the note-taking Leutnant. 'Those, then, are my orders for tomorrow.' He glared defiantly at Kesselring.

Von Mellenthin put his hands in his pockets and crossed his fingers.

*

Von Mellenthin remembered that moment when, sixteen days later, he and Rommel watched the sun rise over Tobruk.

They stood together on the escarpment north-east of El Adem, waiting for the start of the battle. Rommel was wearing the goggles he had taken from the captured General O'Connor, the goggles which
~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

had become a kind of trademark of his. He was on top form: bright-eyed, lively and confident. You could almost hear his brain tick as he scanned the landscape and computed how the battle might go.

Von Mellenthin said: 'The spy was right.'

Rommel smiled. 'That's exactly what I was thinking.'

The Allied counterattack of 5 June had come precisely as forecast, and Rommel's defence had worked so well that it had turned into a counter-counterattack. Three of the four Allied brigades involved had been wiped out, and four regiments of artillery had been captured. Rommel had pressed his advantage remoresselessly. On 14 June the ^aGzala Line had been broken and today, 20 June, they were to besiege the vital coastal garrison of Tobruk.

Von Mellenthin shivered. It was astonishing how cold the desert could be at five o'clock in the morning.

He watched the sky.

At twenty minutes past five the attack began.

A sound like distant thunder swelled to a deafening roar as the Stukas approached. The first formation flew over, dived toward the British positions, and dropped their bombs. A great cloud of dust and smoke arose, and with that Rommel's entire artillery forces opened fire with a simultaneous ear-splitting crash. Another wave of Stukas came over, then another: there were hundreds of bombers.

Von Mellenthin said: 'Fantastic. Kesselring really did it.'

It was the wrong thing to say. Rommel snapped: 'No credit to Kesselring: today we are directing the planes ourselves.'

The Luftwaffe ~~was~~^{was} putting on a good show, even so, von Mellenthin thought; but he did not say it.

Tobruk was a concentric fortress. The garrison itself was

within a town, and the town was at the heart of a larger British-held area surrounded by a thirty-five-mile perimeter wire dotted with strongpoints. The Germans had to cross the wire, then penetrate the town, then take the garrison.

A cloud of orange smoke arose in the middle of the battlefield. Von Mellenthin said: 'That's a signal from the assault engineers, telling the artillery to lengthen their range.'

Rommel nodded. 'Good. We're making progress.'

Suddenly von Mellenthin was seized by optimism. There was booty in Tobruk: petrol, and dymanite, and tents, and lorries - already more than half Rommel's motorised transport consisted of captured British vehicles - and food. Von Mellenthin smiled and said: 'Fresh fish for dinner?'

Rommel understood his train of thought. 'Liver,' he said. 'Fried potatoes. Fresh bread.'

'A real bed, with a feather pillow.'

'In a house with stone walls to keep out the heat and the bugs.'

A runner arrived with a signal. Von Mellenthin took it and read it. He tried to keep the excitement out of his voice as he said: 'They've cut the wire at Strongpoint 69. Group Menny is attacking with the infantry of the Afrika Korps.'

'That's it,' said Rommel. 'We've opened a breach. Let's go.'

*

It was ten-thirty in the morning when Lieutenant-Colonel Reggie Bogge poked his head around the door of Vandam's office and said: 'Tobruk is under siege.'

It seemed pointless to work then. Vandam went on mechanically, reading reports from informants, considering the case of a lazy lieutenant who was due for promotion but did not deserve it, trying to think of a fresh approach to the Alex Wolff case; but everything

seemed hopelessly trivial. The news became more depressing as the day wore on. The Germans breached the perimeter wire; they bridged the anti-tank ditch; they crossed the inner minefield; they reached the strategic road junction known as King's Cross.

Vandam went home at seven to have supper with Billy. He could not tell the boy about Tobruk: the news was not to be released at present. As they ate their lamb chops, Billy said that his English teacher, a young man with a lung condition who could not get into the army, never stopped talking about how he would love to get out into the desert and have a bash at the Hun.

'I don't believe him, though,' Billy said. 'Do you?'

'I expect he means it,' Vandam said. 'He just feels guilty.'

Billy was at an argumentative age. 'Guilty? He can't feel guilty - it's not his fault.'

'Unconsciously he can.'

'What's the difference?'

I walked into that one, Vandam thought. He considered for a moment, then said: 'When you've done something wrong, and you know it's wrong, and you feel bad about it, and you know why you feel bad, that's conscious guilt. Mr Simkisson has done nothing wrong, but he still feels bad about it, and he doesn't know why he feels bad. That's unconscious guilt. It makes him feel better to talk about how much he wants to fight.'

'Oh,' said Billy.

Vandam did not know whether the boy had understood or not.

Billy went to bed with a new book. He said it was a 'tec', by which he meant a detective story. It was called Death on the Nile.

Vandam went back to GHQ. The news was still bad. The 21st Panzers had entered the town of Tobruk and fired from the quay on to several British ships which were trying, belatedly, to escape

to the open sea. A number of vessels had been sunk. Vandam thought of the men who made a ship, and the tons of precious steel that went into it, and the training of the sailors, and the welding of the crew into a team; and now the men were dead, the ship sunk, the effort wasted.

He spent the night in the officers' mess, waiting for news. He drank steadily and smoked so much that he gave himself a headache. Bulletins came down periodically from the Operations Room. During the night Ritchie, as Commander of the Eighth Army, decided to abandon the frontier and retreat to Mersa Matruh. It was said that when Auchinleck, the Commander-in-Chief, heard this news he stalked out of the room with a face as black as thunder.

Toward dawn Vandam found himself thinking about his parents. Some of the ports on the south coast of England had suffered as much as London from the bombing, but his parents were a little way inland, in a village in the Dorset countryside. His father was postmaster at a small sorting office. Vandam looked at his watch: it would be four in the morning in England now, the old man would be putting on his cycle clips, climbing on his bike, and riding to work in the dark. At sixty years of age he had the constitution of a teenage farmboy. Vandam's chapelgoing mother forbade smoking, drinking, and all kinds of dissolute behaviour, a term she used to encompass everything from darts matches to listening to the ~~radio~~ wireless. The regime seemed to suit her husband, but she herself was always ailing.

Eventually booze, fatigue and tedium sent Vandam into a doze. He dreamed he was in the garrison at Tobruk with Billy and Elene and his mother. He was running around closing all the windows. Outside, the Germans - who had turned into firemen - were leaning ladders against the wall and climbing up. Suddenly Vandam's mother

stopped counting her forged banknotes and opened a window, pointing at Elene and screaming: 'The Scarlet Woman!' Rommel came through the window in a fireman's helmet and turned a hose on Billy. The force of the jet pushed the boy over a parapet and he fell into the sea. Vandam knew he was to blame, but he could not figure out what he had done wrong. He began to weep bitterly. He woke up.

He was relieved to discover that he had not really been crying. The dream left him with an overwhelming sense of despair. He lit a cigarette. It tasted foul.

The sun rose. Vandam went around the mess turning out the lights, just for something to do. A breakfast cook came in with a pot of coffee. As Vandam was drinking his, a captain came down with another bulletin. He stood in the middle of the mess, waiting for silence.

He said: 'General Klopfer surrendered the garrison of Tobruk to Rommel at dawn today.'

Vandam left the mess and walked through the streets of the city toward his house by the Nile. He felt impotent and useless, sitting in Cairo catching spies while out there in the desert his country was losing the war. It crossed his mind that Alex Wolff might have had something to do with Rommel's latest series of victories; but he dismissed the thought as somewhat far-fetched. He felt so depressed that he wondered whether things could possibly get any worse, and he realised that, of course, they could.

When he got home he went to bed.

Part Two: Mersa Matruh

- 11 -

The Greek was a feeler.

Elenn did not like feelers. She did not mind straightforward lust - in fact, she was rather partial to it. What she objected to was furtive, guilty, unsolicited groping.

After two hours in the shop she had disliked Mikis Aristopoulos. After two weeks she was ready to strangle him.

The shop itself was fine. She liked the spicy smells and the rows of gaily coloured boxes and cans on the shelves in the back room. The work was easy and repetitive, but the time passed quickly enough. She amazed the customers by adding up their bills in her head very rapidly. From time to time she would buy some strange imprted delicacy and take it home to try: a jar of liver paste, a Hershey bar, a bottle of Bovril, a can of baked beans. And for her it was novel to do an ordinary, dull, eight-hours-a-day job.

But the boss was a pain. Every chance he got he would touch her arm, her shoulder, or her hip; each time he passed her, behind the counter or in the back boom, he would brush against her breasts or her bottom. At first she had thought it was accidental, because he did not look the type: he was in his twenties, quite good-looking, with a big smile that showed his white teeth. He must have taken her silence for acquiescence. She would have to tread on him a little.

She did not need this. Her emotions were too confused already. She both liked and loathed William Vandam, who talked to her as an equal then treated her like a whore; she was supposed to seduce Alex Wolff, whom she had never met; and she was being groped by Mikis Aristopoulos, for whom she felt nothing but scorn.

They all use me, she thought; it's the story of my life.

She wondered what Wolff would be like. It was easy for Vandam to tell her to befriend him, as if there were a button she could press which made her instantly irresistible. In reality a lot depended on the man. Some men liked her immediately. With others

it was hard work. Sometimes it was impossible. Half of her hoped it would be impossible with Wolff. The other half remembered that he was a spy for the Germans, and Rommel was coming closer ~~to~~ every day, and if the Nazis ever got to Cairo ...

Aristopoulos brought a box of pasta out from the back room. Elene looked at her watch: it was almost time to go home. Aristopoulos dropped the box and opened it. On his way back, as he squeezed past her, he put his hands under her arms and touched her breasts. She moved away. She heard someone come into the shop. She thought: I'll teach the Greek a lesson. As he went into the back room, she called after him loudly, in Arabic: 'If you touch me again I'll cut your cock off!'

There was a burst of laughter from the customer. She turned and looked at him. He was a European, but he must understand Arabic, she thought. She said: 'Good afternoon.'

He looked toward the back ~~room~~ and called out: 'What have you been doing, Aristopoulos, you young goat?'

Aristopoulos poked his head around the door. 'Good day, sir. This is my niece, Elene.' His face showed embarrassment and something else which Elene could not read. He ducked back into the storeroom.

'Niece!' said the customer, looking at Elene. 'A likely tale.'

He was a big man in his thirties with dark hair, dark skin and dark eyes. He had a large hooked nose which might have been typically Arab or typically European-aristocratic. His mouth was thin-lipped, and when he smiled he showed small even teeth - like a cat's, Elene thought. She knew the signs of wealth ~~when~~ and she saw them here: a silk shirt, a gold wristwatch, tailored cotton trousers with a crocodile belt, handmade shoes, and a faint

masculine cologne.

Elene said: 'How can I help you?'

He looked at her as if he were contemplating several possible answers, then he said: 'Let's start with some English marmalade.'

'Yes.' The marmalade was in the back room. She went there to get a jar.

'It's him!' Aristopoulos hissed.

'What are you talking about?' she asked in a normal voice. She was still mad at him.

'The bad money man - Mister Wolff - that's him!'

'Oh, God!' For a moment she had forgotten why she was here. Aristopoulos' panic infected her, and her mind went blank. 'What shall I say to him? What should I do?'

'I don't know - give him the marmalade - I don't know - '

'Yes, the marmalade, right ... ' She took a jar of Cooper's Oxford from a shelf and returned to the shop. She forced herself to smile brightly at Wolff as she put the jar down on the counter. 'What else?'

'Two pounds of the dark coffee, ground fine.'

He was watching her while she weighed the coffee and put it through the grinder. Suddenly she was afraid of him. He was not like ~~the~~ Charles, Johnnie and Claud, the men who had kept her. They had been soft, easygoing, guilty ^{and} pliable. Wolff seemed poised and confident: it would be hard to deceive him and impossible to thwart him, she guessed.

'Something else?'

'A tine of ham.'

She moved around the shop, finding what he wanted and putting the goods on the counter. His eyes followed her everywhere. She thought: I must talk to him, I can't keep saying 'Something else?',

I'm supposed to befriend him. 'Something else?' she said.

'A half-case of champagne.'

The cardboard box containing six full bottles was heavy. She dragged it out of the back room. 'I expect you'd like us to deliver this order,' she said. She tried to make it sound casual. She was slightly breathless with the effort of bending to drag the case, and she hoped this would cover her nervousness.

He seemed to look through her with his dark eyes. 'Deliver?' he said. 'No, thankyou.'

She looked at the heavy box. 'I hope you live nearby.'

'Close enough.'

'You must be very strong.'

'Strong enough.'

'We have a thoroughly reliable delivery man - '

'No delivery,' he said firmly.

She nodded. 'As you wish.' She had not really expected it to work, but she was disappointed all the same. 'Something else?'

'I think that's all.'

She began to add up the bill. Wolff said: 'Aristopoulos must be doing well, to employ an assistant.'

Elene said: 'Five pounds twelve and six, you would say that if you knew what he pays me, five pounds thirteen and six, six pounds ... '

'Don't you like the job?'

She gave him a direct look. 'I'd do anything to get out of here.'

'What did you have in mind?' He was very quick.

She shrugged, and went back to her addition. Eventually she said: 'Thirteen pounds ten shillings and fourpence'

'How did you know I'd pay in sterling?'

He was quick. She was ~~na~~ afraid she had given herself away. She felt herself begin to blush. She had an inspiration, and said: 'You're a British officer, ~~an~~ aren't you?'

He laughed loudly at that. He took out a roll of pound notes and gave her fourteen. She gave him his change in Egyptian coins. She was thinking: What else can I do? What else can I say? She began to pack his purchases into a brown-paper shopping bag.

She said: 'Are you having a party? I love parties.'

'What makes you ask?'

'The champagne.'

'Ah. Well, life is one long party.'

She thought: I've failed. He will go away now, and perhaps he won't come back for weeks, perhaps never; I've had him in my sights, I've talked to him, and now I have to let him walk away and disappear into the city.

She should have felt relieved, but instead she felt a sense of abject failure.

He lifted the case of champagne on to his left shoulder, and picked up the shopping bag with his right hand. 'Goodbye,' he said.

'Goodbye.'

He turned around at the door. 'Meet me at the Oasis Restaurant on Wednesday night at seven-thirty.'

'All right!' she said jubilantly. But he was gone.

*

It took them most of the morning to get to the Hill of Jesus. Jakes sat in the front next to the driver; Vandam and Baggge sat in the back. Vandam was exultant. An Australian company had taken the Hill in the night, and they had captured - almost intact - a German wireless listening post. It was the first good news Vandam had heard for months.

Jakes turned around and shouted over the noise of the engine. 'Apparently the Aussies charged in their socks, to surprise 'em,' he said. 'Most of the Italians were taken prisoner in their pyjamas.'

Vandam had heard the same story. 'The Germans weren't sleeping, though,' he said. 'It was quite a rough show.'

They took the main road to Alexandria, then the coast road to El Alamein, where they turned on to a barrel track - a route through the desert marked with barrels. Nearly all the traffic was going in the opposite direction, retreating. Nobody knew what was happening. They stopped at a supply dump to fill up with petrol, and Bogge had to pull rank on the officer in charge to get a chatty.

Their driver asked for directions to the Hill. 'Bottle track,' the officer said brusquely. The tracks, created by and for the army, were named Bottle, Boot, Moon and Star, the symbols for which were cut into the empty barrels and petrol cans along the routes. At night little lights were placed in the barrels to illuminate the symbols.

Bogge asked the officer: 'What's happening out here? Everything seems to be heading back east.'

'Nobody tells me anything,' said the officer.

They got a cup of tea and a bully-beef sandwich from the NAAFI truck. When they moved on they went through a recent battlefield, littered with wrecked and burned-out tanks, where a graveyard detail was desultorily collecting corpses. The barrels disappeared, but the driver picked them up again on the far side of the gravel plain.

They found the Hill at midday. There was a battle going on not far away; they could hear the guns and see clouds of dust rising to the west. Vandam realised he had not been this near the fighting

before. The overall impression was one of dirt, panic and confusion. They reported to the Command Vehicle and were directed to the captured German radio trucks.

Field intelligence men were already at work. Prisoners were being interrogated in a small tent, one at a time, while the others waited in the blazing sun. Enemy ordnance experts were examining weapons and vehicles, noting manufacturers' serial numbers. The Y Service was there looking for wavelengths and codes. It was the task of Bogge's little squad to investigate how much the Germans had been learning in advance about Allied movements.

They took a truck each. Like most people in Intelligence, Vandam had a smattering of German. He knew a couple of hundred words, most of them military terms, so that while he could not have told the difference between a love letter and a laundry list, he could read army orders and reports.

There was a lot of material to be examined: the captured post was a great prize for Intelligence. Most of the stuff would have to be boxed, transported to Cairo, and perused at length by a large team. Today's job was a preliminary overview.

Vandam's truck was a mess. The Germans had begun to destroy their papers when they realised the battle was lost. Boxes had been emptied and a small fire started, but the damage had been arrested quickly. There was blood on a cardboard folder: someone had died defending his secrets.

Vandam went to work. They would have tried to destroy the important papers first, so he began with the half-burned pile. There were many Allied radio signals, intercepted and in some cases decoded. Most of it was routine - most of everything was routine - but as he worked Vandam began to realise that German Intelligence's wireless interception was picking up an awful lot of useful

information. They were better than Vandam had imagined - and Allied wireless security was very bad.

At the bottom of the half-burned pile was a book, a novel in English. Vandam frowned. He opened the book and read the first line: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.' The book was called Rebecca, and it was by Daphne du Maurier. The title was vaguely familiar. Vandam thought his wife might have read it. It seemed to be about a young woman living in an English country house.

Vandam scratched his head. It was, to say the least, peculiar reading for the Afrika Korps.

And why was it in English?

It might have been taken from a captured English soldier, but Vandam thought that unlikely: in his experience soldiers read pornography, hard-boiled private eye stories, and the Bible. Somehow he could not imagine the Desert Rats getting interested in the problems of the mistress of Manderley.

No, the book was here for a purpose. What purpose? Vandam could think of only one possibility: it was the basis of a code.

A book code was a variation on the one-time-pad. A one-time-pad had letters and numbers randomly printed in five-character groups. Only two copies of each pad were made: one for the sender and one for the recipient of the signals. Each sheet of the pad was used for one message, then torn off and destroyed. Because each sheet was used only once the code could not be broken. A book code used the pages of a printed book in the same way, except that the sheets were not necessarily destroyed after use.

There was one big advantage which a book had over a pad. A pad was ~~quite~~ unmistakably for the purpose of encipherment, but a book looked quite innocent. In the battlefield this did not matter;

but it did matter to an agent behind enemy lines.

This might also explain why the book was in English. German soldiers signalling to one another would use a book in German, ~~if~~ they used a book at all, but a spy in British territory would need to carry a book in English.

Vandam examined the book more closely. The price had been written in pencil on the end-paper, then rubbed out with an eraser. That might mean the book had been bought second-hand. Vandam held it up to the light, trying to read the impression the pencil had made in the paper. He made out the number 50, followed by some letters. Was it eic? It might be erc, or esc. It was esc, he realised - fifty escudos. The book had been bought in Portugal. Portugal was neutral territory, with both German and British embassies, and it was a hive of low-level espionage.

As soon as he got back to Cairo he would send a message to the Secret Intelligence Service station in Lisbon. They could check the English-language bookshops in Portugal - there could not be very many - and try to find out where the book had been bought, and if possible by whom.

At least two copies would have been bought, and a bookseller might remember such a sale. The interesting question was, where was the other copy? Vandam was pretty sure it was in Cairo, and he thought he knew who was using it.

He decided he had better show his find to Lieutenant-Colonel Bogge. He picked up the book and stepped out of the truck.

Bogge was coming to find him.

Vandam stared at him. He was white-faced, and angry to the point of hysteria. He came stomping across the dusty sand, a sheet of paper in his hand.

Vandam thought: What the devil has got into him?

Bogge shouted: 'What do you do all day, anyway?'

Vandam said nothing. Bogge handed him the sheet of paper. Vandam looked at it.

It was a coded radio signal, with the decrypt written between the lines of code. It was timed at midnight on 3 June. The sender used the call-sign Sphinx. The message, after the usual preliminaries about signal strength, bore the heading OPERATION ABERDEEN.

Vandam was thunderstruck. Operation Aberdeen had taken place on 5 June, and the Germans had received a signal about it on 3 June.

Vandam said: 'Jesus Christ Almighty, this is a disaster.'

'Of course it's a bloody disaster!' Bogge yelled. 'It means Rommel is getting full details of our attacks before they bloody begin!'

Vandam read the rest of the signal. 'Full details' was right. The message named the brigades involved, the timing of various stages of the attack, and the overall strategy.

'No wonder Rommel's winning,' Vandam muttered.

'Don't make bloody jokes!' Bogge screamed.

Jakes appeared at Vandam's side, accompanied by a full Colonel from the Australian brigade that had taken the Hill, and said to Vandam: 'Excuse me, sir - '

Vandam said abruptly: 'Not now, Jakes.'

'Stay here, Jakes,' Bogge countermanded. 'This concerns you, too.'

Vandam handed the sheet of paper to Jakes. Vandam felt as if someone had struck him a physical blow. The information was so good that it had to have originated in GHQ.

Jakes said softly: 'Bloody hell.'

Bogge said: 'They must be getting this stuff from an English officer, you realise that, do you?'

'Yes,' Vandam said.

'What do you mean, yes? Your job is personnel security - this is your bloody responsibility!'

'I realise that, sir.'

'Do you also realise that a leak of this magnitude will have to be reported to the Commander-in-Chief?'

The Australian Colonel, who did not appreciate the scale of the catastrophe, was embarrassed to see an officer getting a public dressing-down. He said: 'Let's save the recriminations for later, Bogge. I doubt the thing is the fault of any one individual. Your first job is to discover the extent of the damage and make a preliminary report to your superiors.'

It was clear that Bogge was not through ranting yet; but he was outranked. He suppressed his wrath with a visible effort, and said: 'Right, get on with it, Vandam.' He stumped off, and the Colonel went away in the other direction.

Vandam sat down on the step of the truck. He lit a cigarette with a shaking hand. The news seemed worse as it sunk in. Not only had Alex Wolff penetrated Cairo and evaded Vandam's net, he had gained access to high-level secrets.

Vandam thought: Who is this man?

In just a few days he had selected his target, laid his groundwork, and then bribed, blackmailed or corrupted the target into treachery.

Who was the target - who was giving Wolff the information? Literally hundreds of people had the information: the generals, their aides, the secretaries who typed written messages, the men who encoded radio messages, the officers who carried verbal messages, all Intelligence staff, all inter-service liaison people ...

Somehow, Vandam assumed, Wolff had found one among those hundreds of people who was prepared to betray his country for money, or out of political conviction, or under pressure of blackmail. Of course it was possible that Wolff had nothing to do with it - but Vandam thought that unlikely, for a traitor needed a channel of communication with the enemy, and Wolff was such a channel, and it was hard to believe there might be two like Wolff in Cairo.

Jakes was standing beside Vandam, looking dazed. Vandam said: 'Not only is this information getting through, but Rommel is using it. If you recall the fighting on 5 June - '

'Yes, I do,' Jakes said. 'It was a massacre.'

And it was my ~~xxx~~ fault, Vandam thought. Bogge had been right about that: Vandam's job was to stop secrets getting out, and when secrets got out it was Vandam's responsibility.

One man could not win the war, but one man could lose it. Vandam did not want to be that man.

He stood up. 'All right, Jakes, you heard what Bogge said. Let's get on with it.'

Jakes snapped his fingers. 'I forgot what I came to tell you - you're wanted on the field telephone. It's GHQ. Apparently there's an Egyptian woman in your office, asking for you, refusing to leave. She says she has an urgent message and she won't take No for an answer.'

Vandam thought: Elene!

Maybe she had made contact with Wolff. She must have - why else would she be desperate to speak to Vandam? Vandam ran to the Command Vehicle, with Jakes hard on his heels.

The Major in charge of communications handed him the phone. 'Make it snappy, Vandam, we're using that thing.'

Vandam had swallowed enough abuse for one day. He snatched

the phone, thrust his face into the Major's face, and said loudly: 'I'll use it as long as I need it.' He turned his back on the major and spoke into the phone. 'Yes?'

'William?'

'Elene!' He wanted to tell her how good it was to hear her voice, but instead he said: 'What happened?'

'He came into the shop.'

'You saw him! Did you get his address?'

'No - but I've got a date with him.'

'Well done!' Vandam was full of savage delight - he would catch the bastard now. 'Where and when?'

'Tomorrow night, seven-thirty, at the Oasis Restaurant.'

Vandam picked up a pencil and a scrap of paper. 'Oasis Restaurant, seven-thirty,' he repeated. 'I'll be there.'

'Good.'

'Elene ... '

'Yes?'

'I can't tell you how grateful I am. Thankyou.'

'Until tomorrow.'

'Goodbye.' Vandam put down the phone.

Bogge was standing behind him, with the major in charge of communications. Bogge said: 'What the devil do you mean by using the field telephone to make dates with your bloody girlfriends?'

Vandam gave him a sunny smile. 'That wasn't a girlfriend, it was an informant,' he said. 'She's made contact with the spy. I expect to arrest him tomorrow night.'

- 12 -

Wolff watched Sonja eat. The liver was underdone, pink and soft, just as she liked it. She ate with relish, as usual. He thought how alike the two of them were. In their work they were competent, professional and highly successful. They both lived in the shadows of childhood shocks: her father's death, his mother's remarriage into an Arab family. Neither of them had ever come close to marrying, for they were too fond of themselves to love another person. What brought them together was not love, not even affection, but shared lusts. The most important thing in life, for both of them, was the indulgence of their appetites. They both knew that Wolff was taking a small but unnecessary risk ~~in~~ by eating in a restaurant, and they both felt the risk was worth it, for life would hardly be worth living without good food.

She finished her liver and the waiter brought an ice-cream dessert. She was always very hungry after performing at the Cha-Cha Club. It was not surprising: she used a great deal of energy in her act. But when, finally, she quit dancing, she would grow very fat. Wolff imagined her in twenty years' time: she would have three chins and a vast bosom, her hair would be brittle and greying, she would walk flat-footed and be breathless after climbing the stairs.

'What are you smiling at?' Sonja said.

'I was picturing you as an old woman, wearing a shapeless black dress and a veil.'

'I won't be like that. I shall be very rich, and live in a palace surrounded by naked young men and women eager to gratify my slightest
~~every~~ whim. What about you?'

Wolff smiled. 'I think I shall be Hitler's ambassador to Egypt, and wear an SS uniform to the mosque.'

'You'd have to take off your jackboots.'

'Shall I visit you in your palace?'

'Yes, please - wearing your uniform.'

'Would I have to take off my jackboots in your presence?'

'No. Everything else, but not the boots.'

Wolff laughed. Sonja was in a rare gay mood. He called the waiter and asked for coffee, brandy and the bill. He said to Sonja: 'There's some good news. I've been saving it. I think I've found another Fawzi.'

She was suddenly very still, looking at him intently. 'Who is she?' she said quietly.

'I went to the grocer's yesterday. Aristopoulos has his niece working with him.'

'A shop girl!'

'She's a real beauty. She has a lovely, innocent face and a slightly wicked smile.'

'How old?'

'Hard to say. Around twenty, I think. She has such a girlish body.'

Sonja licked her lips. 'And you think she will ... ?'

'I think so. She's dying to get away from Aristopoulos, and she practically threw herself at me.'

'When?'

'I'm taking her to dinner tomorrow night.'

'Will you bring her home?'

'Maybe. I have to feel her out. She's so perfect, I don't want to spoil everything by rushing her.'

'You mean you want to have her first.'

'If necessary.'

'Do you think she's a virgin?'

'It's possible.'

'If she is ... '

'Then I'll save her for you. You were so good with Major Smith, you deserve a treat.' Wolff sat back, studying Sonja. Her face was a mask of sexual greed as she anticipated the corruption of someone beautiful and innocent. Wolff sipped his brandy. A warm glow spread in his stomach. He felt good: full of food and wine, his mission going remarkably well, and a new sexual adventure in view.

The bill came, and he paid it with English pound notes.

*

It was a small restaurant, but a successful one. Ibrahim managed it and his brother did the cooking. They had learned the trade in a French hotel in Tunisia, their home; and when their father died they had sold the sheep and come to Cairo to seek their fortune. Ibrahim's philosophy was simple: they knew only French-Arab cuisine, so that was all they offered. They might, perhaps, have attracted more customers if the menu in the window had offered spaghetti bolognaise or roast beef and Yorkshire pudding; but those customers would not have returned, and anyhow Ibrahim had his pride.

The formula worked. They were making a good living, more money than their father had ever seen. The war had brought even more business. But wealth had not made Ibrahim careless.

Two days earlier he had taken coffee with a friend who was a cashier at the Metropolitan Hotel. The friend had told him how the British Paymaster-General had refused to exchange four of the English pound notes which had been passed in the hotel bar. The notes were counterfeit, according to the British. What was so unfair was that they had confiscated the money.

This was not going to happen to Ibrahim.

About half his customers were British, and many of them paid in sterling. Since he heard the news he had been checking carefully every pound note before putting it into the till. His friend from the Metropolitan had told him how to spot the forgeries.

It was typical of the British. They did not make a public announcement to ~~help~~ the businessmen of Cairo to avoid being cheated. They simply sat back and confiscated the dud notes. The businessmen of Cairo were used to this kind of treatment, and they stuck together. The grapevine worked well.

When Ibrahim received the counterfeit notes from the tall European who was dining with the famous belly-dancer, he was not sure what to do next. The notes were all crisp and new, and bore the identical fault. Ibrahim double-checked them against one of the good notes in his till: there was no doubt. Should he, perhaps, explain the matter quietly to the customer? The man ^{might} ~~would~~ take offence, or at least pretend to; and he would probably leave without paying. His bill was a heavy one - he had taken the most expensive dishes, plus imported wine - and Ibrahim did not want to risk such a loss.

He would call the police, he decided. They would prevent the customer running off, and might help persuade him to pay by cheque, or at least leave an IOU.

But which police? The Egyptian police would probably argue that it was not their responsibility, take an hour to get here, and then require a bribe. The customer was presumably an Englishman - why else would he have sterling? - and was probably an officer, and it was British money that had been counterfeited. Ibrahim decided he would call the military.

He went over to their table, carrying the brandy bottle. He gave them a smile. 'Monsieur, Madame, I hope you have enjoyed your meal.'

'It was excellent,' said the man. He talked like a British officer.

Ibrahim turned to the woman. 'It is an honour to serve the greatest dancer in the country.'

She gave a regal nod.

Ibrahim said: 'I hope you will accept a glass of brandy, with the compliments of the house.'

'Very kind,' said the man.

Ibrahim poured them more brandy and bowed away. That should keep them sitting still for a while longer, he thought. He left by the back door and went to the house of a neighbour who had a telephone.

*

If I had a restaurant, Wolff thought, I would do things like that. The two glasses of brandy cost the proprietor very little, in relation to Wolff's total bill, but the gesture was very effective in making the customer feel wanted. Wolff had often toyed with the idea of opening a restaurant, but it was a pipedream: he knew there was too much hard work involved.

Sonja also enjoyed the special attention. She was positively glowing under the combined influences of flattery and liquor. Tonight in bed she would snore like a pig.

The proprietor had ~~stare~~ disappeared for a few minutes then returned. Out of ~~the~~ corner of his eye, Wolff saw the man whispering to a waiter. He guessed they were talking about Sonja. Wolff felt a pang of jealousy. There were places in Cairo where, because of his good custom and lavish tips, he was known by name and welcomed like royalty; but he had thought it wise not to go to places where he would be recognised, not while the British were hunting him. Now he wondered whether he could afford to relax his vigilance a

little more.

Sonja yawned. It was time to put her to bed. Wolff waved to a waiter and said: 'Please ~~find~~ fetch Madame's wrap.' The man went off, paused to mutter something to the proprietor, then continued on toward the cloakroom.

An alarm bell sounded, faint and sitant, somewhere in the back of Wolff's mind.

He toyed with a spoon as he waited for Sonja's wrap. Sonja ate another petit four. The proprietor walked the length of the restaurant, went out of the front door, and came back in again. He appraoched their table and said: 'May I get you a taxi?'

Wolff looked at Sonja. She said: 'I don't mind.'

Wolff said: 'I'd like a break~~hh~~ of air. Let's walk a little way, then hail one.'

'Okay.'

Wolff looked at the proprietor. 'No taxi.'

'Very good, sir.'

The waiter brought Sonja's wrap. The proprietor kept looking at the door. Wolff heard another alarm bell, this one louder. He said to the proprietor: 'Is something the matter?'

The man looked very worried. 'I must mention an extremely delicate problem, sir.'

Wolff began to get irritated. 'Well, what is it, man? We want to go home.'

There was the sound of a vehicle noisily drawing up outside the restaurant.

Wolff took hold of the proprietor's lapels. 'What is going on here?'

'The money with which you paid your bill, sir, is not good.'

'You don't accept sterling? They why didn't - '

'It's not that, sir. The money is counterfeit.'

The restaurant door burst open and three military policemen marched in.

Wolff stared at them open-mouthed. It was all happening so quickly, he couldn't catch his breath Military police. Counterfeit money. He was suddenly afraid. He might go to jail. Those imbeciles in Berlin had given him forged notes, it was so stupid, he wanted to take Canaris by the throat and squeeze -

He shook his head. There was no time to be angry now. He had to keep calm and try to slide out of this mess -

The MPs marched up to the table. Two were British and the third was Australian. They wore heavy boots and steel helmets, and each of them had a small gun in a belt holster. One of the British said: 'Is this the man?'

'Just a moment,' Wolff said, and was astonished at how cool and suave his voice sounded. 'The proprietor has, this very minute, told me that my money is no good. I don't believe this, but I'm prepared to humour him, and I'm sure we can make some arrangement which will satisfy him,' He gave the proprietor a reproachful look. 'It really wasn't necessary to call the police.'

The senior MP said: 'It's an offence to pass forged money.'

'Knowingly,' Wolff said. 'It is an offence knowingly to pass forged money.' As he listened to his own voice, quiet and persuasive, his confidence grew. 'Now, then, what I propose is this. I have here my cheque book and some Egyptian money. I will write a cheque to cover my bill, and use the Egyptian money for the tip. Tomorrow I will take the allegedly counterfeit notes to the British Paymaster-General for examination, and if they really are forgeries I will surrender them.' He smiled at the group surrounding him. 'I imagine that should satisfy everyone.'

The proprietor said: 'I would prefer if you could pay entirely in cash, sir.'

Wolff wanted to hit him in the face.

Sonja said: 'I may have enough Egyptian money.'

Wolff thought: Thank God.

Sonja opened her bag.

The senior MP said: 'All the same, sir, I'm going to ask you to come with me.'

Wolff's heart sank again. 'Why?'

'We'll need to ask you some questions.'

'Fine. Why don't you call on me tomorrow morning. I live - '

'You'll have to come with me. Those are my orders.'

'From whom?'

'The Assistant Provost Marshal.'

'Very well, then,' said Wolff. He stood up. He could feel the fear pumping desperate strength into his arms. 'But either you, or the Provost, will be in very deep trouble in the morning.' Then he picked up the table and threw it at the MP.

He had planned and calculated the move in a couple of seconds. It was a small circular table of solid wood. Its edge struck the MP on the bridge of the nose, and as he fell back the table landed on top of him.

Table and MP were on Wolff's left. On his right was the proprietor. Sonja was opposite him, still sitting, and the other two MPs were either side of her and slightly behind her.

Wolff grabbed the proprietor and pushed him at one of the MPs. Then he jumped at the other MP, the Australian, and punched his face. He hoped to get past the two of them and run away. It did not work. The MPs were chosen for their size, belligerence and brutality, and they were used to dealing with soldiers desert-hardened and fighting

drunk. The Australian took the punch and staggered back a pace, but he did not fall over. Wolff kicked him in the knee and punched his face again; then the other MP, the second Englishman, pushed the proprietor out of the way and kicked Wolff's feet from under him.

Wolff landed heavily. His chest and his cheek hit the tiled floor. His face stung, he was momentarily winded, and he saw stars. He was kicked again, in the side; the pain made him jerk convulsively and roll away from the blow. The MP jumped on him, beating him about the head. He struggled to push the man off. Someone else sat on Wolff's feet. Then Wolff saw, above him and behind the English MP on his chest, Sonja's face, twisted with rage. The thought flashed through his mind that she was remembering another beating that had been administered by British soldiers. Then he saw that she was raising high in the air the chair she had been sitting on. The MP on Wolff's chest glimpsed her, turned around, looked up, and raised his arms to ward off the blow. She brought the heavy chair down with all her might. A corner of the seat struck the MP's mouth, and he gave a shout of pain and anger as blood spurted from his lips.

The Australian got off Wolff's feet and grabbed Sonja from behind, pinning her arms. Wolff flexed his body and threw off the wounded Englishman, then scrambled to his feet.

He reached inside his shirt and whipped out his knife.

The Australian threw Sonja aside, took a pace forward, saw the knife and stopped. He and Wolff stared into each other's eyes for an instant. Wolff saw the other man's eyes flicker to one side then the other, seeing his two partners lying on the floor. The Australian's hand went to his holster.

~~Wolff turned and ran for the door. He reached it and flung~~

Wolff turned and dashed for the door. One of his eyes was closing: he could not see well. The door was closed. He grabbed for the handle and missed. He felt like screaming. He found the handle and flung the door open wide. It hid the wall with a crash. A shot rang out.

*

Vandam drove the motorcycle through the streets at a dangerous speed. He had ripped the blackout mask off the headlight - nobody in Cairo took the blackout seriously anyway - and he drove with his thumb on the horn. The streets were still busy, with taxis, gharries, army trucks, donkeys and camels. The pavements were crowded and the shops with bright with electric lights, oil lamps and candles. Vandam weaved recklessly through the traffic, ignoring the outraged hooting of the cars, the raised fists of the gharri drivers, and the blown whistle of an Egyptian policeman.

The Assitant Provost Marshal had called him at home. 'Ah, Vandam, wann't it you who sent up the balloon about this funny money? Becamme we've just had a call from a restaurant where a European is trying to pass - '

'Where?'

The APM gave him the address, and Vandam ran out of the house.

He skidded around a corner, dragging a heel in the dusty road for traction. It had occurred to him that, with so much counterfeit money in circulation, some of it must have got into the hands of other Europeans, and the man in the restaurant might well be an innocent victim. He hoped not. He wanted desperately to get his hands on Alex Wolff. Wolff had outwitted and humiliated him and now, with his access to secrets and his direct line to Rommel, he threatened to bring about the fall of Egypt; but it was not just that. Vandam was consumed with curiosity about Wolff.

He wanted to see the man and touch him, to find out how he would move and speak. Was he clever, or just lucky? Courageous, or foolhardy? Determined, or stubborn? Did he have a handsome face and a warm smile, or beady eyes and an oily grin? Would he fight or come quietly? Vandam wanted to know. And, most of all, Vandam wanted to take him by the throat and drag him off to jail, chain him to the wall and lock the door and throw away the key.

He swerved to avoid a pothole, then opened the throttle and roared down a quiet street. The address was a little out of the city centre, toward the Old Town: Vandam ^{was acquainted with} ~~knew~~ the street but not the restaurant. He turned two more corners, and almost hit an old man riding an ass with his wife walking along behind. He found the street he was looking for.

It was narrow and dark, with high buildings on either side. At ground level there were some shop fronts and some house entrances. Vandam pulled up beside two small boys playing in the gutter and said the name of the restaurant. They pointed vaguely along the street.

Vandam cruised along, pausing to look wherever he noticed a lit window. He was half way down the street when he heard the crack! of a small firearm, slightly muffled, and the sound of glass shattering. His head jerked around toward the source of the noise. Light from a broken window glinted off shards of falling glass, and as he looked a tall man ran out of a door into the street.

It had to be Wolff.

He ran in the opposite direction.

Vandam felt a surge of savagery. He twisted the throttle of the motorcycle and roared after the running man. As he passed the restaurant an MP ran out and fired three shots. The fugitive's pace did not falter.

Vandam caught him in the beam of the headlight. He was running

strongly, steadily, his arms and legs pumping rhythmically. When the light hit him he glanced back over his shoulder without breaking his stride, and Vandam glimpsed a hawk nose and a strong chin, and a moustache above a mouth open and panting.

Vandam could have shot him, but officers at GHQ did not carry guns.

The motorcycle gained fast. When they were almost level Wolff suddenly turned a corner. Vandam braked and went into a back-wheel skid, leaning the bike against the direction of the skid to keep his balance. He came to a stop, jerked upright, and shot forward again.

He saw the back of Wolff disappear into a narrow alleyway. Without slowing down, Vandam turned the corner and drove into the alley. The bike shot out into empty space. Vandam stomach turned over. The white cone of his headlight illuminated nothing. He thought he was falling into a pit. He gave an involuntary shout of fear. The back wheel hit something. The front wheel went down, down, then hit. The headlight showed a flight of steps. The bike bounced, and landed again. Vandam fought desperately to keep the front wheel straight. The bike descended the steps in a series of spine-jarring bumps, and with each bump Vandam was sure he would lose control and crash. He saw Wolff at the bottom of the stairs, still running.

Vandam reached the foot of the staircase and felt incredibly lucky. He saw Wolff turn another corner, and followed. They were in a maze of alleys. Wolff ran up a short flight of steps.

Vandam thought: Jesus, no.

He had no choice. He accelerated and headed squarely for the steps. A moment before hitting the bottom step he jerked the handlebars with all his might. The front wheel lifted. The bike
 hit

hit the steps, bucked like a wild thing and tried to throw him. He hung on grimly. The bike bumped crazily up. Vandam fought it. He reached the top.

He found himself in a long passage with high, blank walls on either side. Wolff was still in front of him, still running. Vandam thought he could catch him before Wolff reached the end of the passage. He shot forward.

Wolff looked back over his shoulder, ran on, and looked again. His pace was flagging, Vandam could see. His stride was no longer steady and rhythmic: his arms flew out to either side and he ran raggedly. Glimpsing Wolff's face, Vandam saw that it was taut with strain.

Wolff put on a burst of speed, but it was not enough. Vandam drew level, eased ahead, then braked sharply and twisted the handlebars. The back wheel skidded and the front wheel hit the wall. Vandam leaped off as the bike fell to the ground. Vandam landed on his feet, facing Wolff. The smashed headlamp threw a shaft of light into the darkness of the passage. There was no point in Wolff's turning and running the other way, for Vandam was fresh and could easily catch him. Without pausing in his stride Wolff jumped over the bike, his body passing through the pillar of light from the headlamp like a knife slicing a flame, and crashed into Vandam. Vandam, still unsteady, stumbled backward and fell. Wolff staggered and took another step forward. Vandam reached out blindly in the dark, found Wolff's ankle, gripped and yanked. Wolff crashed to the ground.

The broken headlamp gave a little light to the rest of the alley. The engine of the bike had cut out, and in the silence Vandam could hear Wolff's breathing, ragged and hoarse. He could smell him, too: a smell of booze and perspiration and fear. But

he could not see his face.

There was a split-second when the two of them lay on the ground, one exhausted and the other momentarily stunned. Then they both scrambled to their feet. Vandam jumped at Wolff, and they grappled.

Wolff was strong. Vandam tried to pin his arms, but he could not hold on to him. Suddenly he let go and threw a punch. It landed somewhere soft, and Wolff said: 'Ooff.' Vandam punched again, this time aiming for the face; but this time Wolff dodged, and the fist hit empty space. Suddenly something in ~~Van~~ Wolff's hand glinted in the dim light.

Vandam thought: A knife!

The blade flashed toward his throat. He jerked back reflexively. There was a searing pain all across his cheek. His hand flew to his face. He felt a gush of hot blood. Suddenly the pain was unbearable. He pressed on the wound and his fingers touched something hard. He realised he was feeling his own teeth, and that the knife had sliced right through the flesh of his cheek; and then he felt himself falling, and he heard Wolff running away, and everything turned black.

- 13 -

Wolff took a handkerchief from his trousers pocket and wiped the blood from the blade of the knife. He examined the blade in the dim light, then wiped it again. He walked along, polishing the thin steel vigorously. He stopped, and thought: What am I doing? It's clean already. He threw away the handkerchief and replaced the knife in the sheath under his arm. He emerged from the alley into a street, got his bearings, and headed for the Old City.

He imagined a prison cell. It was six feet long by four feet wide, and half of it was taken up by a bed. Beneath the bed was a chamber pot. The walls were of smooth grey stone. A small light-bulb hung from the ceiling by a cord. In one end of the cell was a door. In the other end was a small square window, set just above eye level: through it he could see the bright blue sky. He imagined that he woke up in the morning and saw all this, and remembered that he had been here for a year, and he would be here for another nine years. He used the chamber pot, then washed his hands in the tin bowl in the corner. There was no soap. A dish of cold porridge was pushed through the hatch in the door. He picked up the spoon and took a mouthful, but he was unable to swallow, for he was weeping.

He shook his head to clear it of nightmare visions. He thought: I got away, didn't I? I got away. He realised that some of the people on the street were staring at him as they passed. He saw a mirror in a shop window, and examined himself in it. His hair was awry, one side of his face was bruised and swollen, his ~~sleeve~~ sleeve was ripped and there was blood on his collar. He was still panting from the exertion of running and fighting. He thought: I look dangerous. He walked on, and turned at the next corner to take an indirect route which would avoid the main streets.

Those imbeciles in Berlin had given him counterfeit money! No wonder they were so generous with it - they were printing it themselves. It was so foolish that Wolff wondered if it might be more than foolishness. The Abwehr was run by the military, not by the Nazi Party; its chief, Canaris, was not the staunchest of Hitler's supporters.

When I get back to Berlin there will be such a purge ...

How had it caught up with him, here in Cairo? He had been spending money fast. The forgeries had got into circulation. The banks had spotted the dud notes - no, not the banks, the Paymaster-General. Anyway, someone had begun to refuse the money, and word had got around Cairo. The proprietor of the restaurant had noticed that Wolff's money was fake and had called the military. Wolff grinned ruefully to himself when he recalled how flattered he had been by the proprietor's complimentary brandy - it had been no more than a ruse to keep ~~in~~ him there until the MPs arrived.

He thought about the man on the motorcycle. He must be a determined bastard, to ride the bike around those alleys and up and down the steps. He had no gun, Wolff guessed: if he had, he would surely have used it. Nor had he a tin hat, so presumably he was not an MP. Someone from Intelligence, perhaps? Major Vandam, even?

Wolff hoped so.

I cut the man, he thought. Quite badly, probably. I wonder where? The face?

I hope it was Vandam.

He turned his mind to his immediate problem. They had Sonja. She would tell them she hardly knew Wolff - she would make up some story about a quick pick-up in the Cha-Cha Club. They would not be able to hold her for long, because she was famous, a star, a kind of

hero among the Egyptians, and to imprison her would cause a great deal of trouble. So they would let her go quite soon. However she would have to give them her address; which meant that Wolff could not go back to the houseboat, not yet. But he was exhausted, bruised and dishevelled: he had to clean himself up and get a few hours rest, somewhere.

He thought: I've been here before - wandering the city, tired and hunted, with nowhere to go.

This time he would have to fall back on Abdullah.

He had been heading for the Old City, knowing all along, in the back of his mind, that Abdullah was all he had left; and now he found himself a few steps from the old thief's house. He ducked under an arch, went along a short dark passage, and climbed a stone spiral staircase to Abdullah's home.

Abdullah was sitting on the floor with another man. A nargileh stood between them, and the air was full of the herbal smell of hashish. Abdullah looked up at Wolff and gave a slow, sleepy smile. He spoke in Arabic. 'Here is my friend Achmed, also called Alex. Welcome, Achmed-Alex.'

Wolff sat on the floor with them and greeted them in Arabic.

Abdullah said: 'My brother Yasef here would like to ask you a riddle, something that has been puzzling him and me for some hours now, ever since we started the hubble-bubble, speaking of which ... ' He passed the pipe across, and Wolff took a lungful.

Yasef said: 'Achmed-Alex, friend of my brother, welcome. Tell me this: Why do the British call us wogs?'

Yasef and Abdullah collapsed into giggles. Wolff realised they were heavily under the influence of hashish: they must have been smoking all evening. He drew on the pipe again, and pushed it over to Yasef. It was strong stuff. Abdullah always had the best.

Wolff said: 'As it happens, I know the answer. Egyptian men working on the Suez Canal were issued with special shirts, to show that they had the right to be on British property. They were Working On Government Service, so on the backs of their shirts were printed the letters W.O.G.S.'

Yasef and Abdullah giggled all over again. Abdullah said: 'My friend Achmed-Alex is clever. He is as clever as an Arab, almost, because he is almost an Arab. He is the only European who has ever got the better of me, Abdullah.'

'I believe this to be untrue,' Wolff said, slipping into their stoned style of speech. 'I would never try to outwit my friend Abdullah, for who can cheat the devil?'

Yasef smiled and nodded his appreciation of this witticism.

Abdullah said: 'Listen, my brother, and I will tell you.' He frowned, collecting his doped thoughts. 'Achmed-Alex asked me to steal something for him. That way I would take the risk and he would get the reward. Of course, he did not outwit me so simply. I stole the thing - it was a case - and of course my intention was to take its contents for myself, since the thief is entitled to the proceeds of his crime, according to the laws of God. Therefore I should have outwitted him, should I not?'

'Indeed,' said Yasef, 'although I do not recall the passage of Holy Scripture which says that a thief is entitled to the proceeds of his crime. However ... '

'Perhaps not,' said Abdullah. 'Of what was I speaking?'

Wolff, who was still more or less compos mentis, told him: 'You should have outwitted me, because you opened the case yourself.'

'Indeed! But wait. There was nothing of value in the case - so Achmed-Alex had outwitted me. But wait! I made him pay me for rendering this service - therefore I got one hundred pounds and he got nothing.'

Yasef frowned. 'You, then, got the better of him.'

'No.' Abdullah shook his head sadly. 'He payed me in forged banknotes.'

Yasef stared at Abdullah. Abdullah stared back. They both burst out laughing. They slapped each other's shoulders, stamped their feet on the floor, and rolled around on the cushions, laughing until the tears came to their eyes.

Wolff forced a smile. It was just the kind of funny story that appealed to Arab businessmen, with its chain of double-crosses. Abdullah would be telling it for years. But it sent a chill through Wolff. So Abdullah, too, knew about the counterfeit notes. How many others did? Wolff felt as if the hunting-pack had formed a circle around him, so that every way he ran he came up against one of them, and the circle drew tighter every day.

Abdullah seemed to notice Wolff's appearance for the first time. He immediately became very concerned. 'What has happened to you? Have you been robbed?' He picked up a tiny silver bell and rang it. Almost immediately, a sleepy woman came in from the next room. 'Get some hot water,' Abdullah told her. 'Bathe my friend's wounds. Give him my European shirt. Bring a comb. Bring coffee. Quickly!'

In a European house Wolff would have protested at the women being roused, after midnight, to attend to him; but here such a protest would have been very discourteous. The women existed to serve the men, and they would be neither surprised nor annoyed by Abdullah's peremptory demands.

Wolff explained: 'The British tried to arrest me, and I was obliged to fight with them before I could get away. Sadly, I think they may now know where I have been living, and this is a problem.'

'Ah.' Abdullah drew on the nargileh, and passed it around

again. Wolff began to feel the effects of the hashish: he was relaxed, slow-thinking, a little sleepy. Time slowed down. Two of Abdullah's wives fussed over him, bathing his face and combing his hair. He found their ministrations very pleasant indeed.

Abdullah seemed to doze for a while, then he opened his eyes and said: 'You must stay here. My house is yours. I will hide you from the British.'

'You are a true friend,' Wolff said. It was odd, he thought. He had planned to offer Abdullah money to hide him. Then Abdullah had revealed that he knew the money was no good, and Wolff had been wondering what else he could do. Now Abdullah was going to hide him for nothing. A true friend. What was odd was that Abdullah was not a true friend. There were no friends in Abdullah's world: there was the family, for whom he would do anything, and the rest, for whom he would do nothing. How have I earned this special treatment? Wolff thought sleepily.

His alarm bell was sounding again. He forced himself to think: it was not easy after the hashish. Take it one step at a time, he told himself. Abdullah asks me to stay here. Why? Because I am in trouble. Because I am his friend. Because I have outwitted him.

Because I have outwitted him. That story was not finished. Abdullah would want to add another double-cross to the chain. How? By betraying Wolff to the British. That was it. As soon as Wolff fell asleep, Abdullah would send a message to Major Vandam. Wolff would be picked up. The British would pay Abdullah for the information, and the story could be told to Abdullah's credit at last.

Damn.

A wife brought a white European shirt. Wolff stood up and took off his torn and bloody shirt. The wife averted her eyes from

his bare chest.

Abdullah said: 'He doesn't need it yet. Give it to him in the morning.'

Wolff took the shirt from the woman and put it on.

Abdullah said: 'Perhaps it would be undignified for you to sleep in the house of an Arab, my friend Achmed?'

Wolff said: 'The British have a proverb: He who sups with the devil must use a long spoon.'

Abdullah grinned, showing his steel tooth. He knew that Wolff had guessed his plan. 'Almost an Arab,' he said.

'Goodbye, my friends,' said Wolff.

'Until the next time,' Abdullah replied.

Wolff went out into the cold night, wondering where he could go now.

*

In the hospital a nurse froze half of Vandam's face with a local anaesthetic, then Dr Abuthnot stitched up his cheek with her long, sensitive, clinical hands. She put on a protective dressing and secured it by a long strip of bandage tied around his head.

'I must look like a toothache cartoon,' he said.

She looked grave. She did not have a big sense of humour. She said: 'You won't be so chirpy when the anaesthetic wears off. Your face is going to hurt badly. I'm going to give you a pain-killer.'

'No, thanks,' said Vandam.

'Don't be a tough guy, Major,' she said. 'You'll regret it.'

He looked at her, in her white hospital coat and her sensible flat-heeled shoes, and wondered how he had ever found her even faintly desirable. She was pleasant enough, even pretty, but she was also cold, superior, and antiseptic. Not like -