



THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

PHILIP
KERR

— A BERNIE GUNTHER NOVEL —



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—————
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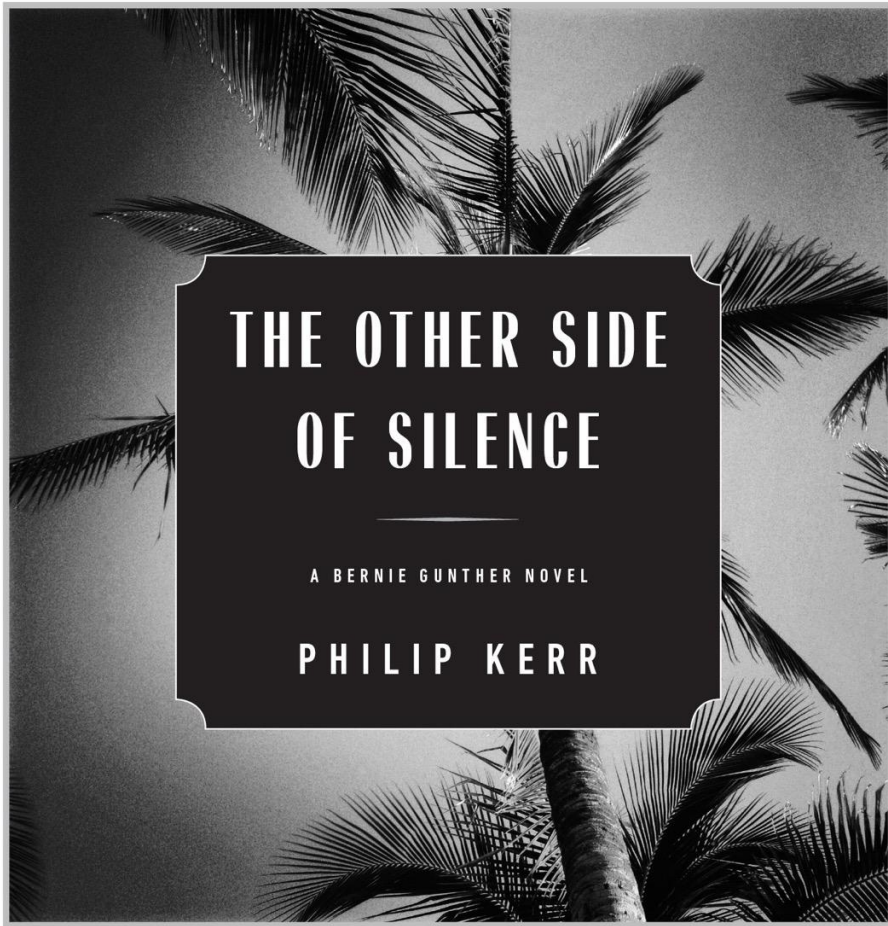
The Day of the Djinn Warriors

The Eye of the Forest

The Five Fakirs of Faizabad

The Grave Robbers of Genghis Khan

One Small Step



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Version_1

To Jane, for all the happy years

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*He ruin'd me, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death: things which are not.*

—JOHN DONNE, "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day"

ONE

FRENCH RIVIERA

1956

Yesterday I tried to kill myself.

It wasn't that I wanted to die as much as the fact that I wanted the pain to stop. Elisabeth, my wife, left me a while ago and I'd been missing her a lot. That was one source of pain, and a pretty major one, I have to admit. Even after a war in which more than four million German soldiers died, German wives are hard to come by. But another serious pain in my life was the war itself, of course, and what happened to me back then, and in the Soviet POW camps afterward. Which perhaps made my decision to commit suicide odd, considering how hard it was not to die in Russia; but staying alive was always more of a habit for me than an active choice. For years under the Nazis I stayed alive out of sheer bloody-mindedness. So I asked myself, early one spring morning, why not kill yourself? To a Goethe-loving Prussian like me, the pure reason of a question like that was almost unassailable. Besides, it wasn't as if life was so great anymore, although in truth I'm not sure it ever was. Tomorrow and the long, long empty years to come after that isn't something of much interest to me, especially down here on the French Riviera. I was on my own, pushing sixty and working in a hotel job that I could do in my sleep, not that I got much of that these days. Most of the time I was miserable. I was living somewhere I didn't belong and it felt like a cold corner in hell, so it wasn't as if I believed anyone who enjoys a sunny day would miss the dark cloud that was my face.

There was all that for choosing to die, plus the arrival of a guest at the hotel. A guest I recognized and wished I hadn't. But I'll come to him in a moment. Before that I have to explain why I'm still here.

I went into the garage underneath my small apartment in Villefranche, closed the door, and waited in the car with the engine turning over. Carbon monoxide poisoning isn't so bad. You just shut your eyes and go to sleep. If the car hadn't stalled or perhaps just run out of gas I wouldn't be here now. I thought I might try it again another time, if things didn't improve and if I bought a more reliable motor car. On the other hand, I could have returned to Berlin, like my poor wife, which might have achieved the same result. Even today it's just as easy to get yourself killed there as it ever was, and if we were to go back to the former German capital, I don't think it would be very long before someone would be kind enough to organize my sudden death. One side or the other has got it in for me, and with good reason. When I was living in Berlin and being a cop or an ex-cop, I managed to offend almost everyone, with the possible exception of the British. Even so, I miss the city a lot. I miss the beer, of course, and the sausage. I miss being a cop when being Berlin police still meant something good. But mostly I miss the people, who were as sour as I am. Even Germans don't like Berliners, and it's a feeling that's usually reciprocated. Berliners don't like anyone very much—especially the women, which, somehow, only makes them more attractive to a dumbhead like me. There's nothing more attractive to a man than a beautiful woman who really doesn't care if he lives or dies. I miss the women most of all. There were so many women. I think about the good women I've known—quite a few of the bad ones, too—whom I'll never see again and sometimes I start crying and from there it's only a short trip to the garage and asphyxiation, especially if I've been drinking. Which, at home, is most of the time.

When I'm not feeling sorry for myself I play bridge, or read books about playing bridge, which might strike a lot of people as a pretty good reason on its own to kill yourself. But it's a game I find stimulating. Bridge helps to keep my mind sharp and occupied with something other than thoughts of home—and all those women, of course. In retrospect it seems that a great many of them must have been blondes, and not just because they were German, or close to being German. Rather too late in life I've learned that there's a type of woman I'm attracted to, which is the wrong type, and it often happens that this includes a certain shade of hair color that just spells trouble for a man like me. Risky mate search and sexual cannibalism are a lot more common than you might think, although more usual among spiders. Apparently the females assess the nutritional value of a male rather than the male's value as a mate. Which more or less sums up the history of my entire personal life. I've been eaten alive so many times I feel like I've got eight legs, although by now it's probably just three or four. It's not much of an insight, I know, and like I say, it hardly matters now, but even if it happens late in life a degree of self-awareness has to be better than none at all. That's what my wife used to tell me, anyway.

Self-awareness certainly worked for her: She woke up one morning and realized just how bored and disappointed she was with me and our new life in France and went back home the very next day. I can't say that I blame her. She never managed to learn French, appreciate the food, or even enjoy the sun very much, and that's the only thing down here of which there's a free and plentiful supply. At least in Berlin you always know why you're miserable. That's what Berlin *luft* is all about: an attempt to try to whistle your way out of the gloom. Here, on the Riviera, you would think there's everything to whistle about and no reason at all to be down in the mouth, but somehow I managed it and she couldn't take that anymore.

I suppose I was miserable largely because I'm bored as hell. I miss my old detective's life. I'd give anything to walk through the doors of the Police Praesidium on Alexanderplatz—by all accounts it has been demolished by the so-called East Germans, which is to say the Communists—and to go upstairs to my desk in the Murder Commission. These days I'm a concierge at the Grand Hôtel du Saint-Jean Cap-Ferrat. That's a little bit like being a policeman if your idea of being a policeman is directing traffic, and I should know. It's exactly thirty-five years since I was first in uniform, on traffic duty at Potsdamer Platz. But I know the hotel business of old; for a while after the Nazis got into power I was the house detective at Berlin's famous Adlon Hotel. Being a concierge is very different from that. Mostly it's about making restaurant reservations, booking taxis and boats, coordinating porter services, shooing away prostitutes—which isn't as easy as it sounds; these days only American women can afford to look like prostitutes—and giving directions to witless tourists who can't read a map and don't speak French. Only very occasionally is there an unruly guest or a theft, and I dream of having to assist the local *Sûreté* to solve a series of daring jewel robberies of the kind I saw in Alfred Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief*. Of course, that's all it is: a dream. I wouldn't ever volunteer to help the local police, not because they're French—although that would be a good reason not to help them—but because I'm living under a false passport, and not just any false passport, but one that was given to me by none other than Erich Mielke, who is currently the deputy head of the Stasi, the East German Security Police. That's the kind of favor that sometimes comes with a high price tag and, one day, I expect him to come calling to get me to pay it. Which will probably be the day when I have to go on my travels again. Compared to me, the *Flying Dutchman* was the Rock of Gibraltar. I suspect my wife knew this, since she also knew Mielke, and better than I did.

Quite where I'd go I have no idea, although I hear North Africa is accommodating where German names on a wanted list are concerned. There's a Fabre Line boat that sails from Marseilles to Morocco every other day. That's just the sort of thing that a concierge is supposed to know, although it's much more likely that there are rather more of the hotel's well-heeled guests who've fled from Algeria than there

are those who want to go there. Since the massacre of *pieds-noirs* civilians at Philippeville last year, the war against the FLN in Algiers isn't going so well for the French, and by all accounts the colony is ruled even more harshly than it ever was when the Nazis left it to the tender mercies of the Vichy government.

I'm not sure if the effortlessly handsome, dark-haired man I saw checking into one of the hotel's best suites the day before I tried to asphyxiate myself was on any kind of wanted list, but he was certainly German and a criminal. Not that he looked like anything less affluent than a banker or a Hollywood film producer, and he spoke such excellent French that it was probably only me who would have known he was German. He was using the name Harold Heinz Hebel and gave an address in Bonn, but his real name was Hennig, Harold Hennig, and during the last few months of the war he'd been a captain in the SD. Now in his early forties, he wore a fine, gray lightweight suit that had been tailored for him and black, handmade shoes that were as shiny as a new centime. You tend to notice things like that when you're working at a place like the Grand Hôtel. These days I can spot a Savile Row suit from the other side of the lobby. His manners were as smooth as the silk Hermès tie around his neck, which suited him better than the noose it richly deserved. He tipped all of the porters handsomely from a wad of new notes that was as thick as a slice of bread, and after that the boys treated him and his Louis Vuitton luggage with more care than a case of Meissen porcelain. Coincidentally, the last time I'd seen him he'd also had some expensive luggage with him, filled with valuables he and his boss, the East Prussian gauleiter Erich Koch, had probably looted from the city. That had been in January 1945, sometime during the terrible Battle of Königsberg. He'd been boarding the German passenger ship *Wilhelm Gustloff*, which was subsequently torpedoed by a Russian submarine with the loss of more than nine thousand civilian lives. He was one of the few rats that managed to escape from that particular sinking ship, which was a great pity since he'd helped to bring about its destruction.

If Harold Hennig recognized me he didn't show it. In our black morning coats, the hotel's desk staff all tend to look the same, of course. There's that and the fact that I'm a little heavier now than I was back then, with less hair probably, not to mention a light tan that my wife used to say suited me. For a man who just tried to kill himself I'm in remarkably good shape, even though I say so myself. Alice, one of the maids I've taken a shine to since Elisabeth left, says I could easily pass for a man ten years younger. Which is just as well, as I have a soul that feels like it's at least five hundred years old. It's looked into the abyss so many times it feels like Dante's walking stick.

Harold Hennig looked straight at me, and although I didn't hold his gaze for more than a second or two, there was no need—being an ex-cop, I never forget a face, especially when it belongs to a man who's a murderer. Nine thousand people—men and women and a great many children—is a lot of reasons to remember a face like Harold Heinz Hennig's.

But I have to admit that seeing him again, looking so prosperous and in such rude health, left me feeling very depressed. It's one thing to know that there are people like Eichmann and Mengele who got away with the most appalling crimes. It's another thing when several of the victims of a crime were your friends. There was a time when I might have tried to exact some kind of rough justice, but those days are long gone. These days, revenge is something of which my partner and I talk lightly at the end or perhaps the beginning of a game of bridge at La Voile d'Or, which is the only other good hotel in Cap Ferrat. I don't even own a gun. If I did I certainly wouldn't be here now. I'm a much better shot than I am a driver.

TWO

Between Nice and Monaco, Cap Ferrat is a pine-planted spur that projects into the sea like the dried up and near useless sexual organs of some old French roué—an entirely appropriate comparison, given the Riviera's reputation as a place where great age and precocious beauty go hand in hand. Usually to the beach, to the shops, to the bank, and then to bed, although not always in such decorous order. The Riviera often reminds me of how Berlin was immediately after the war, except that female companionship will cost you a lot more than a bar of chocolate or a few cigarettes. Down here it's money that talks, even when it has nothing much to say except *voulez vous* or *s'il vous plaît*. Most women would prefer to spend time with Monsieur Gateau to Mister Right, although unsurprisingly these often turn out to be one and the same. Certainly, if I had a bit more cash I, too, might find myself a pretty little companion with whom to make a fool of myself and generally spoil. I'm enough of a feeble-minded idiot now to be quite sure that I don't have what nearly all women on the Côte d'Azur are looking for, unless it's directions to Beaulieu-sur-Mer, or the name of the best restaurant in Cannes (it's Da Bouttau), or perhaps a couple of spare tickets to the Municipal Opera House in Nice. We see a lot of Monsieur Gateau and the firm, greenish apple of his rheumy eye at the Grand Hôtel but he has his *confrères* at the nearby La Voile d'Or, a smaller, elegant hotel situated on a high peninsula overlooking the blue lagoon that is the picturesque fishing port of Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. This three-story French villa—formerly the Park Hotel—was established in 1925 by an English golf champion named Captain Powell, which probably explains the old wooden putters on the walls; either that or they have a very challenging hole in the hotel's very elegant drawing room. That's usual where I sit down and drink gimlets and play bridge with my only three friends, twice a week, without fail.

To be perfectly honest, they're not what most people would call friends. This is France, after all, and real friends are thin on the ground, especially when you're German. Besides, you don't play bridge to make friends or to keep them either, and sometimes it helps if you actively dislike your opponents. My bridge partner, Antimo Spinola, an Italian, is the manager at the municipal casino in Nice. Fortunately he's a much better player than I am, which is unfortunate for him. Our usual opponents are an English married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Rose, who have a small villa in the hills above Èze. I wouldn't say I dislike either of them but they're a typically English husband and wife, I think, in that they never seem to demonstrate much emotion, least of all for each other. I've seen Siamese fighting fish that were more affectionate. Mr. Rose was a top heart specialist in London's Harley Street and made a small fortune treating some Greek millionaire before he retired to the South of France. Spinola says he likes playing with Rose because if he had a heart attack then Jack would know what to do, but I'm not so sure about that. Rose drinks more than I do and I'm not sure he even has a heart, which would seem to be a prerequisite for the job. His wife, Julia, was his nurse-receptionist and is by far the better player, with a real feel for the table and a memory like an elephant, which is the animal she most closely resembles, although not because of her size. She'd be a very good-looking woman if her oversize ears were not stuck on at right angles to her head. Crucially, she never discusses the hands she's just played, as if she's reluctant to give Spinola and me any clues as to how to play against them.

It's a good example to take when it comes to discussing the war, as well. As far as anyone knows, Walter Wolf—that's the name I'm living under in France—was a captain with the Intendant General's

Office in Berlin, with responsibility for army catering. It's what you might expect of someone who worked in good hotels for much of his life. Jack Rose is quite convinced he remembers me from a stay at the Adlon Hotel. I sometimes wonder what they might think if they knew their opponent had once worn an SS uniform and been the near confidant of men like Heydrich and Goebbels.

I don't think Spinola would be very surprised to discover I had a secret past. He speaks Italian as well as I do, and I'm more or less certain he was an officer with the Italian 8th Army in Russia and must have been one of the lucky ones who got out in 1943 following the rout at the Battle of Nikolajewka. He doesn't talk about the war, of course. That's the great thing about bridge. Nobody talks about anything very much. It's the perfect game for people who have something to hide. I tried to teach it to Elisabeth but she didn't have the patience for the drills I wanted to show her that would have made her a better player. Another reason she didn't take to the game was that she doesn't speak English—which is the language we play bridge in because that's the only language the Roses can speak.

A day or two after the arrival of Hennig at the Grand Hôtel I went down to La Voile d'Or to play bridge with Spinola and the Roses. As usual they were late and I found Spinola sitting at the table staring blankly at the wallpaper. He was in a somber mood, chain-smoking Gauloises in his shadowed ebony holder and drinking Americanos. With his dark curly hair, easy smile, and muscular good looks he always reminded me a little of the film actor Cornel Wilde.

"What are you doing?" I asked, speaking Russian to him. Speaking Russian to each other was how we kept in practice, as there were few Russians who ever came to the hotel or to the casino.

"Enjoying the view."

I turned and pointed at the terrace and beyond it, the view of the port.

"The view's that way."

"I've seen it before. Besides, I prefer this one. It doesn't remind me of anything I'd rather not remember."

"That kind of day, huh?"

"They're all that kind of day down here. Don't you find?"

"Sure. Life's shit. But don't tell anyone here in Cap Ferrat. The disappointment would kill them."

He shook his head. "I know all about disappointment, believe me. I've been seeing this woman. And now I'm not. Which is a pity. But I had to end it. She was married and it was getting difficult. Anyway, she took it quite badly. Threatened to shoot herself."

"That's a very French thing to do. Shoot yourself. It's the only kind of French marksmanship you can rely on in a fix."

"You're so very German, Walter."

He bought me a drink and then looked at me squarely.

"Sometimes, I look in your eyes across the bridge table and I see a lot more than a hand of cards."

"You're telling me I'm a bad player."

"I'm telling you that I see a man who was never in army catering."

"I can see you've never tasted my cooking, Antimo."

"Walter, how long have we known each other?"

"I don't know. A couple of years."

"But we're friends, right?"

"I hope so."

"So then. Spinola is not my real name. I had a different name during the war. Frankly, I wouldn't have stayed alive for very long with a name like Spinola. I was never that kind of Italian. It's a Jewish-Italian name."

"It doesn't matter to me what you are, Antimo. I was never that kind of German."

“I like you, Walter. You don’t say more than you have to. And I sense that you can keep confidence.”

“Don’t tell me anything you don’t have to,” I said. “At my time of life I can ill afford to lose a friend.”

“Understood.”

“If it comes to that, I can ill afford to lose people who don’t like me, either. Then I really would be alone.”

On the bar top next to my gimlet was a Partagas cigar box, which Spinola now laid his hand on.

“I need a favor,” he said.

“Name it.”

“There’s something in there I’d like you to look after for me. Just for a while.”

“All right.”

I glanced around for the barman and seeing that he was safely outside on the terrace I lifted the box and peeked inside. But even before I’d flipped the lid open, I knew what was in there. It wasn’t cigars. There’s something about the twenty-three-ounce weight of a Walther police pistol that I would recognize in my sleep. I picked it up. This one was fully loaded and, to my nose at least, it had been recently fired.

“Not that it’s any of my business,” I said, closing the cigar box, “but this one smells like it’s been busy. I’ve shot people myself and that was nobody’s business, either. It’s just something that happens sometimes when guns are involved.”

“It’s her gun,” he explained.

“She must be quite a girl.”

“She is. I took it off her. Just to make sure she didn’t do anything stupid. And I don’t want it around the house in case she comes back. At least until she returns my door key.”

“Sure, I’ll look after it. A good bridge partner is hard to come by. Besides, I’ve missed having a gun about the place. A house feels kind of empty without a firearm in it. I’ll put it in the car, okay?”

“Thanks, Walter.”

I stepped outside, locked the gun in my glove box, and went back into the hotel just as the Rosens drew up in their cream Bentley convertible. I waited a moment, and then instinctively opened the heavy car door for Mrs. Rose to step out. He always drove them to the La Voile d’Or, but she always drove them back, having allowed herself just the two gin and tonics next to his six or seven whiskeys.

“Mrs. Rose,” I said pleasantly, and gallantly picked up the green chiffon scarf she dropped on the ground as she got out of the car. It matched the green dress she was wearing. Green wasn’t her color, but I wasn’t going to let that interfere with my game. “How nice to see you again.”

She answered, smiling, but I was hardly paying much attention to her; my mind was still on Spinola’s girlfriend’s gun while my eyes were now drawn to two men having an argument at the opposite end of the hotel terrace. One of them was a florid-faced Englishman who was often hanging around La Voile d’Or. The other was Harold Hennig. Automatically I opened the front door for Mrs. Rose before allowing myself a second look at Hennig and the Englishman, which revealed it was perhaps, less of an argument and more a case of a smiling Hennig telling the Englishman what to do and the Englishman not liking it very much. He had my sympathy. I never much liked taking orders from Harold Hennig myself. But I put it quickly out of my mind and followed Jack and Julia Rose inside, and for the first time in a while Spinola and I beat them, which trumped everything until I went back to the Grand to cover for our night porter, who’d phoned in sick with a summer cold, whatever that is. I’d had a winter cold in a Soviet POW camp for about two years and that was bad enough. A summer cold sounds just awful.

I don’t mind the late shift. It’s cool and the sound of cicadas is as soothing as the night honeysuckle.

that adorns the walls behind the emaciated statues near the front door. Also, there are fewer guests : evidence with questions and problems to solve and I spent the first hour on duty reading *Nice-Matin* help improve my French. At about one o'clock I had to go and help a very rich American, Mr. Biltmore, up to his fourth-floor suite. He'd been drinking brandy all night and had managed to empty a bottle and the bar with his obnoxious remarks, which were mostly to do with the war and how the French hadn't quite pulled their weight, and that Vichy had been a Nazi government in all but name. I wouldn't have argued with any of that, unless I'd been a Frenchman. As Napoleon might have said but didn't, "French history is the version of past events that French people have decided to agree upon." I found Biltmore slumped in a chair and barely conscious, which is the way I prefer hot drunks, but he started to get a little loud and unruly as I went to rouse him politely. Then he took a swing at me, and then another, so that I was obliged to tap him on the chin with my fist, just enough to daze him and save us both from further injury. That left me with a different problem because he was as big as a sequoia and just as hard to fold across my shoulder, and it took almost all of my strength to get him into the elevator, and then the rest of it to haul him out of the cage and onto his bed. I didn't undress him. As a concierge, the last thing you want is for a drunken American to regard your loss of consciousness when you've got his pants halfway down his legs. Amis don't take kindly to being undressed, especially by another man. In a situation like that it's not just teeth that can be lost but a job as well. On the Riviera, a concierge—even a good one, with all his teeth—can be replaced in a matter of time at all, but no hotel wants to lose a guest like Mr. Biltmore, especially when he's paying more than fifteen hundred francs a night, which is about four hundred dollars, to stay in a suite he's booked for three whole weeks. No one can afford to lose thirty thousand francs plus bar bills and tips.

By the time I went back downstairs I was as warm as a Chinaman's pressing cloth. So I went back into the bar and had the barman make me an ice-cold gimlet with the good stuff—the 57 percent Plymouth Navy Strength gin they give the sailors in nuclear submarines—just to help the four weak ones I'd already drunk at La Voile d'Or to take the strain. I hurried it down with my evening meal, which was a couple of olives and a handful of pretzels.

I'd just finished eating dinner when another guest presented herself at the front desk. And it was quite a present: lightly scented, sober, tightly wrapped in black, which left you a pretty good idea of what was under the paper, and with a nice little diamond bow on the front. I don't know much about fashion but hers was a sort of ballerina bodice-shaped dress, with one shoulder uncovered and, not that I looked at it again, not a bow on the waist at all but a little diamond flower. In her matching black gloves and shoes, she looked every bit as fine as Christian Dior's bank balance. Mrs. French was one of our local regulars, a rich and extremely attractive English lady in her forties whose father was a famous artist who'd once lived and worked on the Riviera. She's a writer by all accounts and rents a local house in Villefranche, but she spends much of her free time at the Grand Hôtel. She swims a lap in our pool, reads a book in the bar, uses the telephone a great deal, and then has a late dinner in the restaurant. Often she's alone, but sometimes she's with friends. A few weeks ago, Mrs. French seemed to be making a play for the French minister of national defense, Monsieur Bourgès-Maunoury, who was staying here, but that came to nothing. It seemed that the minister had other things on his mind—like the Islamic threat posed by the Algerian FLN, not to mention Egypt's cut-price Hitler, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and perhaps the anonymous woman who was in the room next to his. He's not a bad-looking fellow, I suppose; dark-haired, dark-eyed, perhaps a little oily, a bit small, and frankly a couple of leagues below where Mrs. French plays. I thought a nice brunette like her could do better. Then again, Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury is tipped to be the next prime minister of France.

"Good evening, Mrs. French," I said. "I hope you enjoyed your dinner."

"Yes, it wasn't bad."

"That doesn't sound nearly as good as it should be."

She sighed. "It could have been better."

"Was it the food? Or perhaps the service?"

"To be honest, neither one of them was at fault. And yet there was something lacking. With only my book for company, I fear it was nothing that can be easily remedied by anyone here in the Grand Hôtel."

"Then might I ask what it is you're reading, Mrs. French?" My manners have improved a lot since I started working in hotels again. Sometimes I sound almost civil.

She opened her crocodile-leather dispatch bag and showed me her book: *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene. My cop's eyes took quick note of the bottle of Mystikum, a sheaf of French francs, a gold compact, and a little purple screw-top tin that might have contained a powder puff but more probably contained her diaphragm.

"Not one I've read," I said.

"No. But I think you've probably forgotten more about how to render an American acceptably quiet than Graham Greene has ever learned." She smiled. "Poor Mr. Biltmore. Let's hope he puts his son's head down to alcohol tomorrow and not your fist."

"Oh, you saw that. Pity. I had thought the bar was empty."

"I was seated behind a pillar. But you handled it very well. Like an expert. I'd say you've done the kind of thing before. Professionally."

I shrugged. "The hotel business always presents a number of interesting challenges."

"If you say so."

"Perhaps I can recommend something else for you to read," I offered, hurrying to change the subject.

"Why not? You are a concierge, after all. Although in my own experience playing Robert Benchley is perhaps above and beyond the call of your normal duties."

I mentioned a book by Albert Camus that had impressed me.

"No, I don't like him," she said. "He's too French for my tastes. Too political, as well. But now that I think about it, maybe you could recommend a book about bridge. I'd like to learn the game and know you play it often, Mr. Wolf."

"I'd be happy to lend you some of my own books, Mrs. French. Anything by Terence Reese or S. Simon would do, I think."

"Better still, you could teach me the game yourself. I'd be happy to pay you for some private lessons."

"I'm afraid my duties here wouldn't really permit that, Mrs. French. On second thought, I think you're probably best to start with Iain Macleod's *Bridge Is an Easy Game*."

If she was disappointed she didn't show it. "That sounds just right. Will you bring it tomorrow?"

"Of course. I regret I won't be here to give it to you myself, Mrs. French, but I'll certainly leave it with one of my colleagues."

"You're not working tomorrow? Pity. I enjoy our little chats."

I smiled diplomatically and bowed. "Always glad to be of service, Mrs. French."

In bridge that's what we call No Bid.

THREE

Well, this is a pleasant surprise. Fancy meeting you here.”

Just a few kilometers west of Cap Ferrat, Villefranche-sur-Mer is a curious old Riviera town full of tourists enjoying its hidden Escher stairways, high tenements, and dark, winding cobbled streets. It's a little like being in a Gallic version of a Fritz Lang movie, shadowy, secret, and full of awkward, fish-eye angles, perfect for a deracinated wanted man living quietly and under a false name. So it was surprising to bump into Mrs. French outside a bar on—of all places—the Rue Obscure, which is entirely vaulted over, like a crypt, and most reminds me of a part of old Berlin, which is probably why I go there. Alone. The La Darse Bar is a crummy, sepulchral sort of place with sawdust on the floor and sticky wooden tables and looks like it's been in existence since the time of Charles V, but the house rosé they serve in earthenware pitchers is just about drinkable and I'm often to be found there if anyone was ever inclined to look for me. Nobody ever had been inclined to look for me and so I couldn't help but feel that Mrs. French finding me in the Rue Obscure wasn't entirely the happy accident she claimed. She was wearing pink capri pants, a matching head scarf, a loose black sweater, and around her neck was a string of pearls and an even more expensive-looking Leica. Hers was the kind of carefree, casual look that women spend a lot of time in front of the mirror getting just right.

“Do you live around here, Mr. Wolf?” she asked.

“In a manner of speaking. I have a place on Quai de la Corderie. On the seafront.” I wondered what among my colleagues at the GHCF might have told her where I lived and, more to the point, my habits, and quickly arrived at the name of Ueli Leuthard, who was my boss and, I knew, a friend of Mrs. French.

“You realize we're almost neighbors, don't you? My house is on Avenue des Hespérides.”

I smiled. My house resembled the local jail. The houses on Avenue des Hespérides were large, well-appointed villas with several stories, sprawling gardens, and expensively uninterrupted views of the sea. Describing us as neighbors was like comparing a sea urchin with a giant octopus.

“I suppose we are,” I said. “But what brings you along this street, Mrs. French? It's not called obscure for nothing.”

“Taking pictures, like everyone else. When I'm not writing, I take photographs. I've even sold a few. And call me Anne, please. We're not at the Grand Hôtel now.”

“That's for sure. You know, I wouldn't have thought there's enough light for a picture in here.”

“This is the whole point of a good picture. To work with the available light and shade. To find definition and meaning in black and white where none seems obvious. And perhaps to illuminate a mystery.”

She made it sound like being a detective.

“Well, aren't you going to buy me a drink?” she asked.

“In there?”

“Why not?”

“If you'd ever been through the door you'd know the answer to that question. No, let's go somewhere else.” I dipped my head beside her ear for a second and sniffed loudly, for effect. “That's Mystikum, and I'd prefer to enjoy it because you're wearing it, not because it hides the smell of fish.”

“I'm impressed. That you know my perfume.”

“I'm a concierge. It's my job to know these things. Besides, I saw the bottle in your handbag last

night when you showed me your book.”

“You have keen eyes.”

“Not for very much, I’m afraid.”

She nodded. “I won’t argue about going somewhere else. It does smell of fish around here.”

“Good.”

“Where shall we go?”

“This is Villefranche. There are more bars in this town than there are mailboxes. Which probably explains why the post is so slow.”

“I’ve a better idea. Why don’t we go to your house and then you can give me that bridge book?”

“I think I may have misled you, Mrs. French. When I said it was a house what I actually meant was a lobster pot.”

“And you’re the lobster, is that it?”

“Certainly. There’s no room in there for much more than me and a local fisherman’s hand.”

“All right. Why don’t you go home, fetch the book, and then bring it to my house? Avenue de Hespérides, number eight. We can have a drink there if you like. There’s quite a substantial wine cellar I’ve hardly touched since I rented the place.”

“Didn’t the Garden of the Hesperides have some golden apples that were guarded by a never sleeping, hundred-headed dragon named Ladon?”

“We had a guard dog, but he died. I do have a cat. His name is Robbie. I don’t think that you need to worry about him. But if you’d rather not—”

“It’s like this, Mrs. French, so you don’t mistake me. We might easily become friends. But suppose we fell out again afterward? You want me to teach you bridge. There are drills. Homework. Suppose I said you were not a diligent pupil? What then? Suppose I had to get rough with you when you played your hand all wrong? Believe me, it’s been known.” I shrugged. “It’s just that like all lobsters I’m anxious not to get myself into hot water. Staff are discouraged from fraternizing with people who stay at the hotel and I wouldn’t want to lose my job. It’s not a great job but it’s all I have right now. The movie business is a little slow down here since Alfred Hitchcock left town.”

“Well, that’s all right then. I never stay there. I hate staying in hotels. Especially grand hotels. They’re actually very lonely places. All of the rooms have locks on the doors and I always find them rather claustrophobic.”

“You’re very persistent.”

“I certainly wouldn’t want you to feel uncomfortable, Mr. Wolf.”

She winced, and I sensed that it was me who’d made her feel uncomfortable, which made me feel bad. That’s a problem I have sometimes; I never like making people feel bad, especially when they look like Anne French.

“Walter. Please call me Walter. And yes, of course, I’d love to come. Shall we say in half an hour? That will give me time to fetch the book and to change my shirt. For a lobster it’s the most painless way there is to change color.”

“I think pink would suit you,” she said.

“My mother certainly thought so when I was a baby. Right up until the moment she discovered I was a boy.”

“It’s hard to imagine that you had parents.”

“I had two of them as a matter of fact.”

“What I mean is you seem like a very serious man.”

“Don’t let that fool you, Mrs. French. I’m German. And like all Germans I’m easily led astray.”

Back home I did a lot more than change my shirt. I washed, and combed my hair. I even splashed on a little Pino Silvestre that a guest had left behind in his hotel bedroom. I get a lot of my stuff that way

It smells like a mixture of mothballs and a Christmas tree, but it does repel mosquitoes, which are a real problem down here and it's better than my natural body odor, which is always a little sour these days.

Mrs. French's villa occupied a beautiful garden that was a series of lawned terraces that hung on the edge of the rocks above Villefranche and looked as if it had been landscaped by someone from Babylon with a head for heights. The semi-rusticated pink stucco house had a round corner tower and an elegant first-floor terrace with an awning. There was a pool and a clay tennis court and a guest villa and a caretaker's house with an empty dog kennel that was only a little smaller than the place where I lived. I took one look at the basket and the dog bowl and thought about applying for the vacancy. We sat on the terrace that faced the floodlit, aquamarine pool and she handed me a bottle of Tavel that matched the color of the stucco and helped take away the taste of my cologne.

Inside, the place was full of books and art of the kind that takes a lifetime to collect, or paint, depending on whether it's taste or talent you have, and since I have neither, I just stood in front of it all and nodded, dumbly, careful not to admit that I thought it was all a bit like Picasso, and which she might reasonably have taken as a compliment but for the fact that I can't stand Picasso. These days all his faces look as ugly as mine and it seemed unlikely that my face should be of any interest to a woman who was at least ten years younger than I am. I wasn't sure what she was up to; at least not yet. Perhaps she really did want me to teach her bridge, but there are schools for that, and teachers, even on the Riviera. Maybe I'm just being cynical, but she showed no real interest in the book when I gave it to her and it stayed unopened on the table for as long as it took us to finish one bottle and open another.

We talked about nothing in particular, which is a subject on which I am something of an expert. And after a while she went into the kitchen to prepare us some snacks, leaving me alone to smoke and go inside the house to snoop among her books. I brought one back to the terrace and read it for a while. But finally she came out and soon after that, to the point.

"I expect you're wondering why I'm so keen to learn the game of bridge," she said.

"No, not for a minute. These days I try to do as little wondering as possible. The guests tend to prefer it that way."

"I told you I'm a writer."

"Yes, I noticed all the books. They must come in handy when you're thinking of something to write."

"Some of them belonged to my father." She picked the book I'd been reading off the table for a moment and then tossed it back. "Including that one. *Russian Glory*, by Philip Jordan. What's it about?"

"It's a sort of panegyric about Stalin and the Russian people, and the evils of capitalism."

"Why on earth were you reading that?"

"It's like meeting a rather naïve old friend. For a while during the war it was the only book that was available to me."

"That sounds uncomfortable."

"It was. But you were telling me about why you're so keen to learn the game of bridge."

"How much do you know about William Somerset Maugham? The writer?"

"Enough to know that he wouldn't be interested in you, Mrs. French. For one thing you're not young enough. And for another, you're the wrong sex."

"That's true. Which is why I want to learn bridge. I was thinking it might provide me with the means of getting to meet him. From what I've heard, he plays cards almost every night."

"Why do you want to meet him?"

"I'm a big fan of his writing. He's perhaps the greatest novelist alive today. Certainly the mo

popular. Which is why he can afford to live down here in such splendor at the Villa Mauresque.”

“You’re not doing so bad yourself.”

“I’m renting this place. I don’t own it. I wish I did.”

“What’s the real reason you want to meet him?”

“I don’t know what you mean. Maybe you didn’t notice it, but I have an entire collection of his first editions and I would dearly like him to sign them all before—before he dies. He is very old. Which course would make them worth a lot more. I suppose there’s that.”

“We’re getting warmer,” I said. “But I’ll bet that’s still not the real reason. You don’t look like a book dealer. Not in those pants.”

Anne French bridled a little.

“All right then, it’s because I have an offer from an American publisher called Victor Weybright to write his biography,” she said. “Fifty thousand dollars, to be precise.”

“That’s a much better reason. Or to be more accurate, fifty thousand of them.”

“I’d really like to meet him, but as you’ve observed I’m the wrong sex.”

“Why don’t you just write to him and tell him about the book?”

“Because that would get me nowhere. Somerset Maugham is notoriously private. He hates the idea of being written about and, so far, has resisted all biographers. Which is one reason why the money is so good. Nobody has managed to do it. I was thinking that if I learned to play bridge I might inveigle my way into his circle and pick up some conversation and some color. He’d never agree to meet me if he knew I was writing a book about him. No, the only way is to give him a reason to invite me. By all accounts he used to play with Dorothy Parker. And rather more recently with the Queen of Spain and Lady Doverdale.”

“Bridge isn’t the kind of card game you can just pick up and play, Mrs. French. It takes time to become good. From what I hear, Somerset Maugham’s been playing all his life. I’m not sure even I’d be in his league.”

“I’d still like to try. And I’d be willing to pay you to come here and teach me. How does a hundred francs a lesson sound?”

“I’ve got a better idea. What kind of cook are you, Mrs. French?”

“If it’s just me, I tend to go to the hotel. But I can cook. Why?”

“So I’ll make you a deal. My wife left me a while ago. I miss a cooked meal. Make me dinner twice a week and I’ll teach you how to play bridge. How’s that?”

She nodded. “Agreed.”

So that was my deal. And in bridge the dealer is entitled to make the first call.

FOUR

For a couple of weeks my arrangement with Anne French worked well. She was a quick study and took to the game like a new deck and a dealer's shoe. She wasn't a bad cook and I even managed to put on a few extra pounds. Best of all, she made a hell of a gimlet, the kind you can taste and feel for hours afterward. This might even be why, once or twice, I got the idea she wanted me to kiss her, but I managed to resist the temptation, which is unusual for me. Temptation is not something I can easily avoid when it comes wearing Mystikum behind its rose petal ears and you can see its smaller washing still hanging on the line outside the kitchen door. It wasn't that I didn't find her attractive, or that I couldn't have used a little affection—or that I didn't like her underwear—but I've been bitten so many times that I'm as twice shy as the wild pigs that came into the trees at the bottom of her garden after dark and truffled around for something to eat. Shy and apt to think that someone might have a rifle pointed at my ear. Meanwhile, I continued going to La Voile d'Or for my biweekly game and my life continued along the same monotonous path as before. Life can be appreciated best when you have a regular job and a goodish salary and you can avoid thinking about anything more important than what's happening in Egypt. At least, that's what I told myself. But one night Spinola was drunk—to be drunk to play bridge—and I was actually pleased because it gave me an excuse to call Anne to see if she wanted to take the Italian's place at the table. I was disappointed to discover, first that she wasn't at home and second that I was more disappointed than I told myself was appropriate, given everything I'd told myself and her about not getting involved with hotel guests. Meanwhile, the Roses drove Spinola home in their Bentley, which left me alone on the terrace with a last drink and cigarette wondering if I should drive to Anne's house in Villefranche and look for her in case she hadn't heard the telephone or chosen not to answer it. It was the wrong thing to do, of course, and I was just about to do it all the same when an Englishman with a little dog spoke to me.

"I see you here a lot," he said. "Playing bridge, twice a week. I say, aren't you the concierge at the Grand Hôtel?"

"Sometimes," I said. "When I'm not playing bridge."

"It is rather addictive, isn't it?"

He was probably about forty but looked older. Overweight and a little sweaty, he wore a double-breasted linen blazer, a white shirt with overextended double cuffs and gold links that looked like a modest day on the Klondike, gray cavalry twill trousers, a silk tie that was the color of a South American jaguar, and a matching silk handkerchief that was spilling out of his top pocket as if he were about to conjure a bunch of fake flowers, like a cheap magician. He was the same man I'd seen arguing outside the hotel entrance with Harold Hennig.

"Hello, I'm Robin Maugham."

"Walter Wolf."

We shook hands and he waved the waiter toward us. "Buy you a drink?"

"Sure."

We ordered drinks, some water for the dog, lit our cigarettes, took a table on the terrace facing the port, and generally tried to behave normally, or at least as normal as you can when one man is homosexual and knows that the other man is, and the other man is fully aware that the first man understands all that. It was a little awkward, perhaps, but nothing more than that. I used to believe in moral order, but then so did the Nazis, and their idea of moral order included murdering homosexuals.

in concentration camps, which was more than enough for me to change my own opinions. After the orgy of destruction Hitler inflicted upon Germany, it seems pointless to give a damn about what one man does in a bedroom with another.

“You’re German, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s all right. I’m not one of these Englishmen who doesn’t like Germans. I met a lot of your chaps in the war. Solid men, most of them. In forty-two I was in North Africa with the 4th County of London Yeomanry, in tanks. We were up against the DAK—the Deutsches Afrikakorps—which was the 15th Panzer Division in my neck of the woods. Good fighters, what? I’ll say so. I sustained a head injury at the Battle of Knightsbridge, which ended my war. At least that’s what we called it. Strictly speaking, it was the Battle of Gazala but one always thinks of it as the Battle of Knightsbridge.”

“Why?”

“Oh. Well, that was the code name for our defensive position on the Gazala line: Knightsbridge. But to be quite honest there were so many chaps I knew in the 8th Army from Eton and Cambridge and my Inn of Court that it sometimes felt as if one was shopping in Knightsbridge. Not that I was an officer’s mind. I joined up as an ordinary trooper. On account of the fact that I was a bit of a bolshie. And just to pay my own bar bills, so to speak. I never much liked all that damned officer malarkey.”

He made it all sound like a long day in the cricket field.

“What about you, Walter?”

“I was well behind our lines and quite safe in Berlin. A man without honor, I’m afraid. Too old for all that. I was a captain in the Intendant General’s Office. The Catering Corps.”

“Ah. I begin to see a pattern.”

I nodded. “Before the war I worked at the Hotel Adlon.”

“Right. Everyone stays at the Adlon. *Grand Hotel*. The film, I mean. Vicki Baum, wasn’t it? The Austrian writer.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Thought so. I’m a writer myself. Books, plays. Working on a play right now. A comedy that’s based on Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. It’s about a man who has three daughters.”

“There’s a coincidence.”

Maugham laughed. “Quite.”

“I suppose it would be too much of a coincidence if you were not related to the other Maugham who lives around here.”

“He’s my uncle. Matter of fact, he used to know Vicki Baum, when he was living in Berlin before the first war.”

The drinks arrived and Robin Maugham grabbed his glass of white wine off the waiter’s tin tray with the impatience of the true drunk. I should know; my own greenish glass had taken on the aura of the holy grail.

“He likes Germans, too. Willie. That’s what we call the old man. Speaks it fluently. On account of the fact that before med school he spent a year at the University of Heidelberg. Uncle Willie loves Germany. He’s particularly fond of Goethe. Still reads it in German. Which is saying something for an Englishman, I can tell you.”

“Then we have something in common.”

“You too, eh? Jolly good.”

It was easy to see that Robin Maugham was a playwright. He had an easy way of speech about himself—a talky, bantering sort of chat that concealed as much as it revealed, like a character you knew was going to prove much more consequential than he seemed if only by virtue of his prominence on the theater bill.

“You know, what with the bridge and the German, perhaps you’d like to make up a four at the Villa Mauresque one night. The old man is always keen to meet interesting new people. Of course, he’s notoriously private, but I’ll hazard a guess that the concierge at the Grand Hôtel—not to mention someone who worked at the famous Adlon—well, that person must be used to keeping a few confidences, what?”

“I’d be delighted to come,” I said. “And you needn’t worry about my mouth.”

I thought about Anne French and what she might say when I told her I’d been invited up to the Villa Mauresque. It was possible she would perceive my invitation as an affirmation of her own strategy: to learn bridge in order to meet Somerset Maugham. But it seemed equally possible that she would see it as some kind of betrayal. And while for a brief moment I considered simply not telling her in order to spare her feelings, it seemed to me that my being there at all could only help to facilitate her own invitation. Alternatively, I might be her spy and report on how things really were at the Villa Mauresque, providing her with the color she needed for her book.

“But I feel I ought to read one of his novels,” I said. “I’d hate to have to admit that I haven’t read any. Which one would you recommend?”

“A short one. My own favorite is *The Moon and Sixpence*. Which is about the life of Paul Gauguin. I’ll lend you my own copy if you like.”

Robin Maugham looked at his watch. “You know, it occurs to me that we could still make dinner at the villa. That is if you haven’t already dined. Willie keeps a very good table. Annette, our Italian cook, is wonderful. Willie was in a good mood today. Rather absurdly, an invitation to the forthcoming wedding of Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly in Monaco seems to have left him delighted as if he was getting married himself.”

“I got an invitation myself but sadly I shall have to decline. It would mean finding all the decorations and buying a new suit, which I can ill afford.”

Robin smiled uncertainly.

I looked at my own watch.

“But sure. Let’s go. I don’t mind interrupting my alcohol consumption with some food.”

“Good.” Robin drained his wineglass, scooped up the terrier, and pointed toward the end of the terrace. “Shall we?”

I climbed into my car and followed the Englishman’s red Alfa Romeo up the hill and out of the town. It was a lovely warm evening with a light sea breeze and an edge of coral pink in the blue sky as if some nearer Vesuvius were in fiery eruption. Behind us the lightly clad myrmidons of Hermès filled the many waterside restaurants and narrow streets, while the miniature Troy that was the little port of Cap Ferrat bristled with innumerable tall masts and hundreds of invading white boats that jostled for an undulating position on the almost invisible glass water, as if it mattered a damn where anyone was going or anyone came from. It certainly didn’t matter to me.

FIVE

Approached along a narrow, winding road bordered by pine trees, the Villa Mauresque stood on the very summit of the Cap and behind a large wrought-iron gate with white plaster posts on one of which was carved the name of the house and what I took to be a sign against the evil eye, in red. It didn't slow me down and I drove through the gates in Robin Maugham's dust as if I had the nicest baby blue eyes in France. The place couldn't have looked more private if King Leopold II of Belgium had been living there with his pet pygmy and his three mistresses and his private zoo, not to mention the many millions he'd managed to steal from the Congo. By all accounts he had quite a collection of human hands, too, lopped off the arms of natives to encourage the others to go into the jungle and collect rubber, and I think the king could have taught the Nazis a few things about cruelty and running an empire. Unlike Hitler, he'd died in bed at the age of seventy-four. Once, he had owned the whole of Cap Ferrat, and the Villa Mauresque had been built for one of his confidants, a man named Charmeton, whose Algerian background had left him with a taste for Moorish architecture. I knew that because it's the sort of detail a concierge at the Grand Hôtel is supposed to know.

According to Robin Maugham, his uncle had owned the villa for more than thirty years. It was the type of place you could easily imagine a novelist writing about except that no one would have believed it, for the house seemed even more elaborate—inside and out—than I could have expected. Anne French was renting a nice villa. This one was magnificent and underlined Maugham's international fame, his enormous wealth, and his impeccable taste. It was painted white, with green shutters and tall green double doors, horseshoe windows, a Moorish archway entrance, and a large cupola on the roof. There was a tennis court, a huge swimming pool, and a beautiful garden full of hibiscus, bougainvillea, and lemon trees that lent the evening air the sharp citrus scent of a barber shop. Inside were ebony wood floors, high ceilings, heavy Spanish furniture, gilded wood chandeliers, blackamoor figures, Savonnerie carpets, and, among many others, a painting by Gauguin—one of those heavy-limbed, broad-nosed, Tahitian women that looks like she must have gone through rounds with Jersey Joe Walcott. Over the fireplace was a golden eagle with wings outspread, which reminded me of my former employers in Berlin, while all the books on a round Louis XVI table were new and sent from a shop in London called Heywood Hill. The soap I used to wash my hands in the ground-floor lavatory was still in its Floris wrapper, and the towels were as thick as the silk cushions on the Directoire armchairs. The Grand Hôtel felt like a cheaper version of what there was to be enjoyed at the Villa Mauresque. It was the sort of place where time and the outside world were not welcome; the sort of place it was hard to imagine could still exist in a ration-book economy that was recovering from a terrible war; the sort of place that was probably like the mind of the man who owned it, an elderly man in a double-breasted blue blazer that looked as if it had been made by the same London tailor as Robin's, with a face like a Komodo dragon lizard. He stood and came to shake my hand as his nephew made the introduction, and when he licked the lips of his thin, broad, drooping pink mouth, I would not have been surprised to have seen a tongue that was forked.

"Where have you been, Robin? We've delayed dinner for you, and you know I hate that. It's most inconsiderate to Annette."

"I dropped into the Voile for a drink and met a friend of mine. Walter Wolf. He's German and he's a keen bridge player and he was at a loose end so I thought I'd better bring him along."

"Is he indeed? I'm so glad." Maugham placed a monocle in his eye, looked directly at me, and

smiled a rictus smile. “We d-don’t see n-nearly enough G-Germans. It’s a good sign that you’re returning to the Riviera. It augurs well for the future that Germans can afford to come here again.”

“I’m afraid you’ve got me wrong, sir. I’m not here for the season. I work at the Grand Hôtel. I’m the concierge.”

“You’re very welcome all the same. So, you play bridge. The most entertaining game that the art of man has devised, is it not?”

“Yes, sir. I certainly think so.”

“Robin, you’d better tell Annette that we have an extra guest for dinner.”

“There’s always plenty of food, Uncle.”

“That’s not the point.”

“I thought we could make a four with Alan, later.”

“Excellent,” said Maugham.

While Robin went to speak to the cook, Maugham himself took me by the arm and into the dark green Baroque drawing room, where a butler wearing a white linen jacket materialized as if from thin air and proceeded to make me a gimlet to my exact instructions and then a martini for the old man with a dash of absinthe.

“I dislike a man who’s not precise about what he wants to drink,” said Maugham. “You can’t rely on a fellow who’s vague about his favorite tippie. If he’s not precise about something he’s going to drink then it’s clear he’s not going to be precise about anything.”

We sat down and Maugham offered me a cigarette from the box on the table. I shook my head and lit one of my own, which drew yet more of his approval, only now he spoke German—albeit with a slight stammer, the way he spoke English—probably just to show that he could do it, but given it was probably a while since he’d done it, I was still impressed.

“I also like a man who prefers to smoke his own cigarettes rather than mine. Smoking is something you have to take seriously. It’s not a matter for experiment. I myself could no more smoke another brand of cigarette than I could take up marathon running. Tell me, Herr Wolf, do you like being the concierge at the Grand Hôtel?”

“Like?” I grinned. “That’s a luxury I simply can’t afford, Herr Maugham. It’s a job, that’s all. After the war, jobs in Germany weren’t so easy to come by. The hours are regular and the hotel’s a nice place. But the only reason I’m doing it is for the money. The day they stop paying me is the day I check out.”

“I agree. I have no time for a man who says he’s not interested in money. It means he has no self-respect. I myself only write for money these days. Certainly not for the pleasure of it.” A tear appeared in his eye. “No, that went out of it a long time ago. Mostly I write because I’ve always done it. Because I can’t think what the hell else to do. Unfortunately, I have never been able to persuade myself that anything else mattered. I’m eighty-two years old, Herr Wolf. Writing has become a habit, a discipline, and, to some extent, a compulsion, but I certainly wouldn’t give what I write to anyone for free.”

“Are you working on anything at the moment, sir?”

“A book of essays, which is to say, nothing at all of any consequence. Essays are like politicians. They want to change things and I’m not much interested in any change at my age.”

A large and lumpish man with bad psoriasis and wearing a garishly colored shirt appeared and went straight to the drinks tray, where he mixed himself a drink as if too impatient to wait for the butler to fix one for him.

“This is my friend Alan,” said Maugham, reverting to English. “Alan, do come and say hello to my friend of Robin’s. Walter Wolf. He’s German and we’re hoping he’s going to play a couple of rubber with us after dinner.”

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