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The classic tale of suspense set in Provence, where an English tourist investigates a series of mysterious deaths, from the acclaimed master of action and suspense. From all over Europe, even from behind the Iron Curtain, gypsies make an annual pilgrimage to the holy shrine of their patron saint in the Provence region of southern France. But something is different about this year's gathering, with many suspicious deaths. Cecile Dubois and Neil Bowman decide to investigate. Eavesdropping, Bowman discovers that a man named Gaiuse Strome is financing the gypsies, and his suspicions on the real identity of Strome center on a highly wealthy aristocrat, distinguished folklorist and gastronome, Le Grand Duc Charles de Croytor, whose girlfriend Lila Delafont is a friend of Cecile. As they follow the caravan, Bowman and Cecile find that their lives in danger many times in an effort to uncover the secret the gypsies are so determined to hide, and before long are running for their lives.

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CARAVAN TO VACCARÈS
Alistair MacLean



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Copyright

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Dedication

To Jean-André and Emanuela Charial

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PROLOGUE

They had come a long way, those gypsies encamped for their evening meal on the dusty greensward by the winding mountain road in Provence. From Transylvania they had come, from the *pustas* of Hungary, from the High Tatra of Czechoslovakia, from the Iron Gate, even from as far away as the gleaming Rumanian beaches washed by the waters of the Black Sea. A long journey, hot and stifling and endlessly, monotonously repetitive across the already baking plains of Central Europe or slow and difficult and exasperating and occasionally dangerous in the traversing of the great ranges of mountains that had lain in their way. Above all, one would have thought, even for those nomadic travellers *par excellence*, a tiring journey.

No traces of any such tiredness could be seen in the faces of the gypsies, men, women and children all dressed in their traditional finery, who sat or squatted in a rough semi-circle round two glowing coke braziers, listening in quietly absorbed melancholy to the hauntingly soft and nostalgic *tsigane* music of the Hungarian steppes. For this apparent lack of any trace of exhaustion there could have been a number of reasons: as the very large, modern, immaculately finished and luxuriously equipped caravans indicated, the gypsies of today travel in a degree of comfort unknown to their forebears who roamed Europe in the horse-drawn, garishly-painted and fiendishly uncomfortable covered-wagon caravans of yesteryear: they were looking forward that night to the certainty of replenishing coffers sadly depleted by their long haul across Europe – in anticipation of this they had already changed from their customary drab travelling clothes: only three days remained until the end of their pilgrimage, for pilgrimage this was: or perhaps they just had remarkable powers of recuperation. Whatever the reason, their faces reflected no signs of weariness, only gentle pleasure and bitter-sweet memories of faraway homes and days gone by.

But one man there was among them whose expression – or lack of it – would have indicated to even the most obtusely unobservant that, for the moment at least, his lack of musical appreciation was total and his thoughts and intentions strictly confined to the present. His name was Czerda and he was sitting on the top of the steps of his caravan, apart from and behind the others, a half-seen shadow on the edge of darkness. Leader of the gypsies and hailing from some unpronounceable village in the delta of the Danube, Czerda was of middle years, lean, tall and powerfully built, with about him that curiously relaxed but instantly identifiable stillness of one who can immediately transform apparent inertia into explosive action. He was dressed all in black and had black hair, black eyes, black moustache and the face of a hawk. One hand, resting limply on his knee, held a long thin smouldering black cigar, the smoke wisping up into his eyes, but Czerda did not seem to notice or care.

His eyes were never still. Occasionally he glanced at his fellow-gypsies, but only briefly, casually, dismissively. Now and again he looked at the range of the Alpilles, their gaunt forbidding limestone crags sleeping palely in the brilliant moonlight under a star-dusted sky, but for the most part he glanced alternately left and right along the line of parked caravans. Then his eyes stopped roving, although no expression came to replace the habitual stillness of that face. Without haste he rose, descended the steps, ground his cigar into the earth and walked soundlessly to the end of the row of caravans.

The man who stood waiting in the shadows was a youthful, scaled-down replica of Czerda himself. Not quite so broad, not quite so tall, his swarthily aquiline features were cast in a mould so unmistakably similar to that of the older man that it was unthinkable that he could be anything other than his son. Czerda, clearly a man not much given to superfluous motion or speech, raised a questioning eyebrow: his son nodded, led him out on to the dusty roadway, pointed and made a downward slicing, chopping motion with his hand.

From where they stood and less than fifty yards away soared an almost vertical outcrop of white limestone rock, but an outcrop which has no parallel anywhere in the world, for its base was

honeycombed with enormous rectangular entrances, cut by the hand of man – no feat of nature could possibly have reproduced the sharply geometrical linearity of those apertures in the cliff face: one of those entrances was quite huge, being at least forty feet in height and no less in width.

Czerda nodded, just once, turned and looked down the road to his right. A vague shape detached itself from shadow and lifted an arm. Czerda returned the salute and pointed towards the limestone bluff. There was no acknowledgment and clearly none was necessary, for the man at once disappeared, apparently into the rock face. Czerda turned to his left, located yet another man in the shadows, made a similar gesture, accepted a torch handed him by his son and began to walk quickly and quietly towards the giant entrance in the cliff face. As they went, moonlight glinted on the knives both men held in their hands, very slender knives, long-bladed and curved slightly at the ends. As they passed through the entrance of the cave they could still distinctly hear the violinists change both mood and tempo and break into the lilting cadences of a gypsy dance.

Just beyond the entrance the interior widened out and heightened until it was like the inside of a great cathedral or a giant tomb of antiquity. Both Czerda and his son switched on their torches, the powerful beams of which failed to penetrate the farthest reaches of this awesome man-made cave, and man-made it unquestionably was, for clearly visible on the towering side-walls were the thousands of vertical and horizontal scores where long-dead generations of Provençals had sawn away huge blocks of the limestone for building purposes.

The floor of this entrance cavern – for, vast though it was, it was no more than that – was pitted with rectangular holes, some of them large enough to hold a motor car, others wide and deep enough to bury a house. Scattered in a few odd corners were mounds of rounded limestone rock but, for the most part, the floor looked as if it had been swept only that day. To the right and left of the entrance cavern led off two other huge openings, the darkness lying beyond them total, impenetrable. A doom-laden place, implacable in its hostility, foreboding, menacing, redolent of death. But Czerda and his son seemed unaware of any of this, quite unmoved: they turned and walked confidently towards the entrance to the right-hand chamber.

Deep inside the heart of this vast warren, a slight figure, a barely distinguishable blur in the pale wash of moonlight filtering down through a crack in the cavern roof, stood with his back to a limestone wall, fingers splayed and pressed hard against the clammy rock behind him in the classically frozen position of the fugitive at bay. A youth, no more than twenty, he was clad in dark trousers and a white shirt. Around his neck he wore a silver crucifix on a slender silver chain. The crucifix rose and fell, rose and fell with metronomic regularity as the air rasped in and out of his throat and his heaving lungs tried vainly to satisfy the demands of a body that couldn't obtain oxygen quickly enough. White teeth showed in what could have been a smile but was no smile, although frozen lips drawn back in the rictus of terror can look like one. The nostrils were distended, the dark eyes wide and staring, his face as masked in sweat as if it had been smeared with glycerine. It was the face of a boy with two demons riding on his shoulders: almost at the end of his physical resources, the knowledge of the inevitability of death had triggered off the unreasoning and irrecoverable panic that pushes a man over the edge of the abyss into the mindless depths of madness.

Momentarily, the fugitive's breathing stopped entirely as he caught sight of two dancing pools of light on the floor of the cavern. The wavering beams, steadily strengthening, came from the left-hand entrance. For a moment the young gypsy stood as one petrified, but if reason had deserted him the instinct for survival was still operating independently, for with a harsh sobbing sound he pushed himself off the wall and ran towards the right-hand entrance to the cavern, canvas-soled shoes silent on the rocky floor. He rounded the corner, then slowed down suddenly, reached out groping hands in front of him as he waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the deeper darkness, then moved on slowly into the next cavern, his painfully gasping breathing echoing back in eerie whispers from the unseen walls around him.

Czerda and his son, their torch beams, as they advanced, ceaselessly probing through an arc of 180 degrees, strode off confidently through the archway linking the entrance cavern to the one just vacated by the fugitive. At a gesture from Czerda, both men stopped and deliberately searched out the furthestmost recesses of the cavern: it was quite empty. Czerda nodded, almost as if in satisfaction, and gave a peculiar, low-pitched two-tone whistle.

In his hiding-place, which was no hiding-place at all, the gypsy appeared to shrink. His terrified eyes stared in the direction of his imagined source of the whistle. Almost at once, he heard an identical whistle, but one which emanated from another part of this subterranean labyrinth. Automatically, his eyes lined up to search out the source of this fresh menace, then he twisted his head to the right as he heard a third whistle, exactly the same in timbre and volume as the previous two. His staring eyes tried desperately to locate this third danger, but there was nothing to be seen but the all-encompassing darkness and no sound at all to break the brooding silence except the far-off keening of the gypsy violins, a far-off reminder of another safer and saner world that served only to intensify the sinister stillness inside that vaulted place of horror.

For a few moments he stood, fear-crazed now and wholly irresolute, then, within the space of as many seconds, the three double whistles came again, but this time they were all closer, much closer, and when he again saw the faint wash of light emanating from the two torches he had seen earlier, he turned and ran blindly in the only direction which seemed to afford a momentary respite, careless or oblivious of the fact that he might run into a limestone wall at any-moment. Reason should have told him this but he was now bereft of reason: it was but instinct again, the age-old one that told him that a man does not die before he has to.

He had taken no more than half-a-dozen steps when a powerful torch snapped on less than ten yards ahead of him. The fugitive stopped abruptly, staggering but not falling, lowered the forearm that he had flung up in automatic reflex to protect his eyes and stared for the first time, with narrowed eyes, in a barely conscious attempt to identify the extent and immediacy of this fresh danger confronting him, but all his shrinking eyes could make out was the vaguely discernible bulk of the shapeless figure of the man behind the torch. Then slowly, very slowly, the man's other hand came forward until it was brightly lit by the beam of the torch: the hand held an evilly curved knife that glittered brilliantly in the torch-light. Knife and torch began to move slowly forward.

The fugitive whirled around, took two steps, then stopped as abruptly as he had before. Two other torches, knives again showing in their powerful beams, were scarcely further away than the man behind him. What was so terrifying, so nerve-destroying, about the measured advances of all three was the unhurriedly remorseless certainty.

'Come now, Alexandre,' Czerda said pleasantly. 'We're all old friends, aren't we? Don't you want to see us any more?'

Alexandre sobbed and flung himself to his right in the direction where the light from the three torches showed the entrance to yet another cavern. Panting as a deer does just before the hounds drag it down, he half-tumbled, half-ran through the entrance. None of his three pursuers made any attempt to cut him off or run after him: they merely followed, again walking with that same purposeful lack of haste.

Inside this third cavern, Alexandre stopped and looked wildly around. A small cavern this time, small enough to let him see that all the walls here were solid, hostilely and uncompromisingly solid, without as much as the tiniest aperture to offer any hope of furtherflight. The only exit was by the way he had come in and this was the end of the road.

Then the realization gradually penetrated his mind, numbed though it was, that there was something different about this particular cavern. His pursuers with their torches were not yet in sight, so how was it that he could see so well? Not clearly, there wasn't enough light for that, but well enough in contrast with the Stygian darkness of the cavern he had just left behind.

Almost at his feet there lay a huge pile of rock and rubble, clearly the result of some massive fall or cave-in in the past. Instinctively, Alexandre glanced upwards. The rubble, piled at an angle of about forty degrees from the horizontal, didn't seem to have a summit. It just stretched on and on and Alexandre's gradually lifting eyes could see that it stretched upwards for a vertical height of at least sixty feet before it ended. And where it ended it had to end – for there, at the very top, was a circular patch of star-studded sky. That was where the light came from, he dimly realized, from some roof collapse of long ago.

His body was already beyond exhaustion but now some primeval drive had taken over and the body was no longer its own master, in much the same way as his mind had lost control of it. Without a glance to see whether his pursuers were in sight or not, Alexandre flung himself at the great rock pile and began to claw his way upwards.

The rock pile was unstable and dangerous to a degree, a secure footing impossible to obtain, he slid a foot backwards for every eighteen inches of upward progress made, but for all that the momentum induced by his frenzied desperation overcame the laws of gravity and friction co-efficients and he made steady if erratic progress up that impossibly crumbling slope that no man in his normal senses would ever have attempted.

About one third of the way up, conscious of an increase in the amount of illumination beneath him, he paused briefly and looked downwards. There were three men standing at the foot of the rubble now, lit torches still in their hands. They were gazing up towards him but making no attempt to follow. Oddly enough, their torch beams were not pointing up towards him but were directed towards the floor at their feet. Even had his confused mind been able to register this oddity Alexandre had no time to consider it, for he felt his precarious hand- and foot-holds giving way beneath him and started scrabbling his way upwards again.

His knees ached abominably, his shins were flayed, his fingernails broken, the palms of his bleeding hands open almost to the bone. But still Alexandre climbed on.

About two-thirds of the way up he was forced to pause a second time not because he chose to but because, for the moment, his bleeding limbs and spent muscles could take him no farther. He glanced downwards and the three men at the foot of the rockfall were as they had been before, immobile, their torches still pointed at their feet, all three gazing upwards. There was an intensity in their stillness, a curious aura of expectancy. Vaguely, somewhere deep in the befogged recesses of what little was left of his mind, Alexandre wondered why. He turned his head and looked up to the starry sky above and then he understood.

A man, highlit under the bright moon, was seated on the rim of the rockfall. His face was partly in shadow but Alexandre had little difficulty in making out the bushy moustache, the gleam of white teeth. He looked as if he was smiling. Maybe he was smiling. The knife in his left hand was as easily visible as the torch in his right. The man pressed the button of his torch as he came sliding over the rim.

Alexandre's face showed no reaction for he had nothing left to react with. For a few moments he remained immobile as the man with the moustache came sliding down towards him, triggering off a small avalanche of boulders as he came, then tried to fling himself despairingly to one side to avoid the impact and the knife of his pursuer, but because of his frantic haste and the fact that he was now being severely buffeted about the body by the bounding limestone rocks he lost his footing and began to slide helplessly downwards, rolling over and over quite uncontrollably with no hope in the world of stopping himself. So treacherously loose had the surface of the rockfall become that even his pursuer was able to preserve his balance only by taking huge bounding leaps down the rockfall and the volume of the torrent of stones now crashing on to the floor of the cavern was indicated clearly enough by the alacrity with which the three men at the foot of the rockfall moved back at least ten paces. As they did so they were joined by a fourth man who had just come through the cavern

entrance, then immediately afterwards by Alexandre's pursuer, whose great leaping steps had taken him past the still tumbling boy.

Alexandre landed heavily on the floor, arms instinctively clutched over his head to protect it from the cascading stones that continued to strike his body for a period of several seconds until the rain of rocks ceased. For as long again he remained dazed, uncomprehending, then he propped himself to his hands and knees before rising shakily to his feet. He looked at the semi-circle of five men, each with a knife in hand, closing in inexorably on him and now his mind was no longer uncomprehending. But he no longer had the look of a hunted animal, for he had already been through all the terrors of death and he was now beyond that. Now, unafraid, for there was nothing left of which to be afraid, he could look into the face of death. He stood there quietly and waited for it to come to him.

Czerda stooped, laid a final limestone rock on top of the mound that had now grown at the foot of the rockfall, straightened, looked at the handiwork of his men and himself, nodded in apparent satisfaction and gestured towards the others to leave the cavern. They left. Czerda took one last look at the oblong mound of stones, nodded again, and followed.

Once outside the entrance cave and into what now appeared to be the intolerably harsh glare of bright moonlight that bathed the Alpilles, Czerda beckoned to his son who slowed his pace and let the others precede them.

Czerda asked quietly: 'Any more would-be informers amongst us, do you think, Ferenc?'

I don't know.' Ferenc shrugged his doubt. 'Josef and Pauli I do not trust. But who can be sure?'

'But you will watch them, Ferenc, won't you? As you watched poor Alexandre.' Czerda crossed himself. 'God rest his soul.'

'I will watch them, Father.' Ferenc dismissed the answer to the question as being too obvious for further elaboration. 'We'll be at the hotel inside the hour. Do you think we shall make much money tonight?'

'Who cares what pennies the idle and foolish rich throw our way? Our paymaster is not in that damned hotel, but that damned hotel we have visited for a generation and must keep on visiting.' Czerda sighed heavily. 'Appearances are all, Ferenc, my son, appearances are all. That you must never forget.'

'Yes, Father,' Ferenc said dutifully. He hastily stuck his knife out of sight.

Unobtrusively, unseen, the five gypsies made their way back to the encampment and sat down, at a discreet distance from one another, just outside the perimeter of an audience still lost in the sadly-happy rapture of nostalgia as the volume and pace of the violin music mounted to a crescendo. The braziers were burning low now, a faint red glow barely visible in the bright moonlight. Then, abruptly and with a splendid flourish, the music ceased, the violinists bowed low and the audience called out their appreciation and clapped enthusiastically, none more so than Czerda who buffeted his palms together as if he had just heard Heifetz giving of his best in the Carnegie Hall. But even as he clapped, his eyes wandered, away from the violinists, away from the audience and the gypsy camp, until he was gazing again at the honeycombed face of the limestone cliffs where a cave had so lately become a tomb.

CHAPTER 1

‘The cliff battlements of Les Baux, cleft and rent as by a giant axe, and the shattered, gaunt and terrible remnants of the ancient fortress itself are the most awesomely desolate of all ruins in Europe.’ Or so the local guide-book said. It went on: ‘Centuries after its death Les Baux is still an open tomb, a dreadful and dreadfully fitting memorial to a medieval city that lived most violently and perished in agony: to look upon Les Baux is to look upon the face of death imperishably carved in stone.’

Well, it was pitching it a bit high, perhaps, guide-books do tend towards the hyperbolic, but the average uncertified reader of the guide would take the point and turn no somersaults if some wealthy uncle had left him the place in his will. It was indisputably the most inhospitable, barren and altogether uninviting collection of fractured and misshapen masonry in western Europe, a total and awesome destruction that was the work of seventeenth-century demolition squads who had taken a month and heaven alone knew how many tons of gunpowder to reduce Les Baux to its present state of utter devastation: one would have been equally prepared to believe that the same effect had been achieved in a couple of seconds that afternoon with the aid of an atom bomb: the annihilation of the old fortress was as total as that. But people still lived up there, lived and worked and died.

At the foot of the western vertical cliff face of Les Baux lay a very fittingly complementary feature of the landscape which was sombrely and justifiably called the Valley of Hell, partly because the barren desolation of its setting between the battlements of Les Baux to the east and a spur of the Alpilles to the west, partly because in summer time this deeply-sunk gorge, which opened only to the south, could become almost unbearably hot.

But there was one area, right at the northern extremity of this grim cul-de-sac, that was in complete and unbelievably startling contrast to the bleakly forlorn wastes that surrounded it, a green and lovely and luxurious oasis that, in the context, could have been taken straight out of the pages of a fairy-tale book.

It was, in brief, an hotel, an hotel with gratefully tree-lined precincts, exotically designed gardens and a gleamingly blue swimming pool. The gardens lay to the south, the immaculate pool was in the centre, beyond that a large tree-shaded patio and finally the hotel itself with its architectural ancestry apparently stemming from a cross between a Trappist monastery and a Spanish *hacienda*. It was, in point of fact, one of the best and – almost by definition – one of the most exclusive and expensive hotel-restaurants in Southern Europe: The Hotel Baumanière.

To the right of the patio, approached by a flight of steps, was a very large forecourt and leading off from this to the south, through an archway in a magnificently sculptured hedge, was a large and rectangular parking area, all the parking places being more than adequately shaded from the hot summer sun by closely interwoven wicker-work roofing.

The patio was discreetly illuminated by all but invisible lights hung in the two large trees which dominated most of the area, overhanging the fifteen tables scattered in expensively sophisticated separation across the stone flags. Even the tables were something to behold. The cutlery gleamed. The crockery shone. The crystal glittered. And one did not have to be told that the food was superb, that the Châteauneuf had ambrosia whacked to the wide: the absorbed silence that had fallen upon the entranced diners could be matched only by the reverential hush one finds in the great cathedrals of the world. But even in this gastronomical paradise there existed a discordant note.

This discordant note weighed about 220 pounds and he talked all the time, whether his mouth was full or not. Clearly, he was distracting all the other guests, he’d have distracted them even if they had been falling en masse down the north face of the Eiger. To begin with, his voice was uncommonly loud, but not in the artificial fashion of the *nouveau riche* or the more impoverished members of the lesser aristocracy who feel it incumbent upon them to call to the attention of the lesser orders of the existence of another and superior strain of *Homo sapiens*. Here was the genuine article: he didn’t

give a damn whether people heard him or not. He was a big man, tall, broad and heavily built: the buttons anchoring the straining folds of his double-breasted dinner-jacket must have been sewn on with piano wire. He had black hair, a black moustache, a neatly-trimmed goatee beard and a black-beribboned monocle through which he was peering closely at the large menu-card in his hand. His table companion was a girl in her mid-twenties, clad in a blue mini-dress and quite extravagantly beautiful in a rather languorous fashion. At that moment she was gazing in mild astonishment at her bearded escort who was clapping his hands imperiously, an action which resulted in the most instantaneous appearance of a dark-jacketed restaurant manager, a white-tied head waiter and a black-tied assistant waiter.

‘Encore,’ said the man with the beard. In retrospect, his gesture of summoning the waiting staff seemed quite superfluous: they could have heard him in the kitchen without any trouble.

‘Of course.’ The restaurant manager bowed. ‘Another entrecôte for the Duc de Croytor. Immediately.’ The head waiter and his assistant bowed in unison, turned and broke into a discreet trot while still less than twelve feet distant. The blonde girl stared at the Duc de Croytor with a bemused expression on her face.

‘But, Monsieur le Duc –’

‘Charles to you,’ the Duc de Croytor interrupted firmly. ‘Titles do not impress me even although hereabouts I’m referred to as Le Grand Duc, no doubt because of my impressive girth, my impressive appetite and my viceregal manner of dealing with the lower orders. But Charles to you, Lila, my dear.’

The girl, clearly embarrassed, said something in a low voice which apparently her companion couldn’t hear for he lost no time in letting his ducal impatience show through.

‘Speak up, speak up! Bit deaf in this ear, you know.’

She spoke up. ‘I mean – you’ve just *had* an *enormous* entrecôte steak.’

‘One never knows when the years of famine will strike,’ Le Grand Duc said gravely. ‘Think of Egypt. Ah!’

An impressively escorted head waiter placed a huge steak before him with all the ritual solemnity of the presentation of crown jewels except that, quite clearly, both the waiter and Le Grand Duc obviously regarded the entrecôte as having the edge on such empty baubles any time. An assistant waiter set down a large ashet of creamed potatoes and another of vegetables while yet another waiter reverently placed an ice bucket containing two bottles of rosé on a serving table close by.

‘Bread for Monsieur le Duc?’ the restaurant manager enquired.

‘You know very well I’m on a diet.’ He spoke as if he meant it, too, then, clearly as an after-thought, turned to the blonde girl. ‘Perhaps Mademoiselle Delafont –’

‘I couldn’t possibly.’ As the waiters left she gazed in fascination at his plate. ‘In twenty seconds –’

‘They know my little ways,’ Le Grand Duc mumbled. It is difficult to speak clearly when one’s mouth is full of entrecôte steak.

‘And I don’t.’ Lila Delafont looked at him speculatively. I don’t know, for instance, why you should invite me –’

‘Apart from the fact that no one ever denies Le Grand Duc anything, four reasons.’ When you’re a Duke you can interrupt without apology. He drained about half a pint of wine and his enunciation improved noticeably. ‘As I say, one never knows when the years of famine will strike.’ He eyed her appreciatively so that she shouldn’t miss his point. ‘I knew – I know – your father, the Count Delafont well – my credentials are impeccable. You are the most beautiful girl in sight. And you are alone.’

Lila, clearly embarrassed, lowered her voice, but it was no good. By this time the other diners clearly regarded it as *lèse-majesté* to indulge in any conversation themselves while the Duc de Croytor was holding the floor, and the silence was pretty impressive.

‘I’m not alone. Nor the most beautiful girl in sight. Neither.’ She smiled apologetically, as if afraid she had been overheard, and nodded in the direction of a near-by table. ‘Not while my friend Cecile Dubois is here.’

‘The girl you were with earlier this evening?’

‘Yes.’

‘My ancestors and I have always preferred blondes.’ His tone left little room for doubt that brunettes were for the plebs only. Reluctantly, he laid down his knife and fork and peered sideways. ‘Passable, passable, I must say.’ He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper that couldn’t have been heard more than twenty feet away. ‘Your friend, you say. Then who’s that dissipated-looking layabout with her?’

Seated at a table about ten feet away and clearly well within earshot of Le Grand Duc, a man removed his horn-rimmed glasses and folded them with an air of finality: he was conservatively and expensively dressed in grey gaberdine, was tall, broad-shouldered, black-haired and just escaped being handsome because of the slightly battered irregularity of his deeply tanned face. The girl opposite him, tall, dark, smiling and with amusement in her green eyes, put a restraining hand on his wrist.

‘Please, Mr Bowman. It’s not worth it, is it? Really?’

Bowman looked into the smiling face and subsided. ‘I am strongly tempted, Miss Dubois, strongly tempted.’ He reached for his wine but his hand stopped half-way. He heard Lila’s voice, disapproving, defensive.

‘He looks more like a heavy-weight boxer to me.’

Bowman smiled at Cecile Dubois and raised his glass.

‘Indeed.’ Le Grand Duc quaffed another half goblet of rosé. ‘One about twenty years past his prime.’

Wine spilled on the table as Bowman set down his glass with a force that should have shattered the delicate crystal. He rose abruptly to his feet, only to find that Cecile, in addition to all her other obviously fine points, was possessed of a set of excellent reflexes. She was on her feet as quickly as he was, had insinuated herself between Bowman and Le Grand Duc’s table, took his arm and urged him gently but firmly in the direction of the swimming pool: they looked for all the world like a couple who had just finished dinner and decided to go for a stroll for the digestion’s sake. Bowman, though with obvious reluctance, went along with this. He had about him the air of a man for whom the creation of a disturbance with Le Grand Duc would have been a positive pleasure but who drew the line at having street brawls with young ladies.

‘I’m sorry.’ She squeezed his arm. ‘But Lila *is* my friend. I didn’t want her embarrassed.’

‘Ha! You didn’t want *her* embarrassed. Doesn’t matter, I suppose, how embarrassed *I* am?’

‘Oh, come on. Just sticks and stones, you know. You really don’t look the least little bit dissipated to me.’ Bowman stared at her suspiciously, but there was no malicious amusement in her eyes: she was pursing her lips in mock but friendly seriousness. ‘Mind you, I can see that not everyone would like to be called a layabout. By the way, what *do* you do? Just in case I have to defend you to the Dulce – verbally, that is.’

‘Hell with the Duke.’

‘That’s not an answer to my question.’

‘And a very good question it is too.’ Bowman paused reflectively, took off his glasses and polished them. ‘Fact is, I don’t do anything.’

They were now at the farther end of the pool. Cecile took her hand away from his arm and looked at him without any marked enthusiasm.

‘DO you mean to tell me, Mr Bowman –’

‘Call me Neil. All my friends do.’

‘You make friends very easily, don’t you?’ she asked with inconsequential illogic.

‘I’m like that,’ Bowman said simply.

She wasn’t listening or, if she was, she ignored him. ‘Do you mean to tell me you never work? You never do anything!’

‘Never.’

‘You’ve no job?’ You’ve been trained for nothing? You can’t do *anything*?’

‘Why should I spin and toil?’ Bowman said reasonably. ‘My old man’s made millions. Still making them, come to that. Every other generation should take it easy, don’t you think – a sort of recharging of the family batteries. Besides, I don’t *need* a job. Far be it from me,’ he finished piously, ‘to deprive some poor fellow who really needs it.’

‘Of all the specious arguments ... How could I have misjudged a man like that?’

‘People are always misjudging me,’ Bowman said sadly.

‘Not you. The Duke. His perception.’ She shook her head, but in a way that looked curiously more like an exasperated affection than cold condemnation. ‘You really are an idle layabout, Mr Bowman.’

‘Neil.’

‘Oh, you’re incorrigible.’ For the first time, irritation.

‘And envious.’ Bowman took her arm as they approached the patio again and because he wasn’t smiling she made no attempt to remove it. ‘Envious of you. Your spirit, I mean. Your yearlong economy and thrift. For you two English girls to be able to struggle by here at £200 a week each on your typists’ salaries or whatever –’

‘Lila Delafont and I are down here to gather material for a book.’ She tried to be stiff but it didn’t become her.

‘On what?’ Bowman asked politely. ‘Provençal cookery? Publishers don’t pay that kind of speculative advance money. So who picks up the tab? Unesco? The British Council?’ Bowman peered at her closely through his horn-rimmed glasses but clearly she wasn’t the lip-biting kind. ‘Let’s all pay a silent tribute to good old Daddy, shall we? A truce, my dear. This is too good to spoil. Beautiful night, beautiful food, beautiful girl.’ Bowman adjusted his spectacles and surveyed the patio. ‘Your girl-friend’s not bad either. Who’s the slim Jim with her?’

She didn’t answer at once, probably because she was momentarily hypnotized by the spectacle of Le Grand Duc holding an enormous balloon glass of rosé in one hand while with the other he directed the activities of a waiter who appeared to be transferring the contents of the dessert trolley on to the plate before him. Lila Delafont’s mouth had fallen slightly open.

‘I don’t know. He says he’s a friend of her father.’ She looked away with some difficulty, saw and beckoned the passing restaurant manager. ‘Who’s the gentleman with my friend?’

The Duc de Croytor, madam. A very famous winegrower.’

‘A very famous wine-drinker, more like.’ Bowman ignored Cecile’s disapproving look. ‘Does he come here often?’

‘For the past three years at this time.’

‘The food is especially good at this time!’

‘The food, sir, is superb here at any time.’ The Baumaniere’s manager wasn’t amused. ‘Monsieur le Duc comes for the annual gypsy festival at Saintes-Maries.’

Bowman peered at the Duc de Croytor again. He was spooning down his dessert with a relish matched only by his speed of operation.

‘You can see why he has to have an ice-bucket,’ Bowman observed. ‘To cool down his cutlery. Don’t see any signs of gypsy blood there.’

‘Monsieur le Duc is one of the foremost folklorists in Europe,’ the manager said severely, adding with a suave side-swipe: ‘The study of ancient customs, Mr Bowman. For centuries, now, the gypsies have come from all over Europe, at the end of May, to worship and venerate the relics of Sara, their patron saint. Monsieur le Duc is writing a book about it.’

‘This place,’ Bowman said, ‘is hotching with the most unlikely authors you ever saw.’

‘I do not understand, sir.’

I understand all right.' The green eyes, Bowman observed, could also be very cool. 'There's no need – what on earth is that?'

The at first faint then gradually swelling sound of many engines in low gear sounded like a tank regiment on the move. They glanced down towards the forecourt as the first of many gypsy caravans came grinding up the steeply winding slope towards the hotel. Once in the forecourt the leading caravans began arranging themselves in neat rows round the perimeter while others passed through the archway in the hedge towards the parking lot beyond. The racket, and the stench of diesel and petrol fumes, while not exactly indescribable or unsupportable, were in marked contrast to the peaceful luxury of the hotel and disconcerting to a degree, this borne out by the fact that Le Grand Duc had momentarily stopped eating. Bowman looked at the restaurant manager, who was gazing up at the stars and obviously communing with himself.

'Monsieur le Duc's raw material?' Bowman asked.

'Indeed, sir.'

'And now? Entertainment? Gypsy violin music? Street roulette? Shooting galleries? Candy stalls? Palm reading?'

'I'm afraid so, sir.'

'My God!'

Cecile said distinctly: 'Snob!'

'I fear, madam,' the restaurant manager said distantly, 'that my sympathies lie with Mr Bowman. But it is an ancient custom and we have no wish to offend either the gypsies or the local people.' He looked down at the forecourt again and frowned. 'Excuse me, please.'

He hurried down the steps and made his way across the forecourt to where a group of gypsies appeared to be arguing heatedly. The main protagonists appeared to be a powerfully built hawk-faced gypsy in his middle forties and a clearly distraught and very voluble gypsy woman of the same age who seemed to be very close to tears.

'Coming?' Bowman asked Cecile.

'What! Down there?'

'Snob!'

'But you said –'

'Idle layabout I may be but I'm a profound student of human nature.'

'You mean you're nosey?'

'Yes.'

Bowman took her reluctant arm and made to move off, then stepped courteously to one side to permit the passage of a bustling Le Grand Due, if a man of his build could be said to bustle, followed by a plainly reluctant Lila. He carried a notebook and had what looked to be a folklorist's gleam in his eye. But bent though he was on the pursuit of knowledge he hadn't forgotten to fortify himself with a large red apple at which he was munching away steadily. Le Grand Duc looked like the sort of man who would always get his priorities right.

Bowman, a hesitant Cecile beside him, followed rather more leisurely. When they were half way down the steps a jeep was detached from the leading caravan, three men piled aboard and the jeep took off down the hill at speed. As Bowman and the girl approached the knot of people where the gypsy was vainly trying to calm the now sobbing woman, the restaurant manager broke away from them and hurried towards the steps. Bowman barred his way.

'What's up?'

'Woman says her son has disappeared. They've sent a search party back along the road.'

'Oh?' Bowman removed his glasses. 'But people don't disappear just like that.'

'That's what I say. That's why I'm calling the police.'

He hurried on his way. Cecile, who had followed Bowman without any great show of enthusiasm, said: 'What's all the fuss! Why is that woman crying?'

‘Her son’s disappeared.’

‘And?’

‘That’s all.’

‘You mean that nothing’s happened to him?’

‘Not that anyone seems to know.’

‘There could be a dozen reasons. Surely she doesn’t have to carry on like that.’

‘Gypsies,’ Bowman said by way of explanation. ‘Very emotional. Very attached to their offspring. Do you have any children!’

She wasn’t as calmly composed as she looked. Even in the lamplight it wasn’t difficult to see the red touching her cheeks. She said: ‘That wasn’t fair.’

Bowman blinked, looked at her and said: ‘No, it wasn’t. Forgive me. I didn’t mean it that way. If you had kids and one was missing, would you react like that?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I said I was sorry.’

‘I’d be worried, of course.’ She wasn’t a person who could maintain anger or resentment for more than a fleeting moment of time. ‘Maybe I’d be worried stiff. But I wouldn’t be so – so violently grief-stricken, so hysterical, well not unless –’

‘Unless what?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I mean, if I’d reason to believe that – that –’

‘Yes?’

‘You know perfectly well what I mean.’

‘I’ll never know what women mean,’ Bowman said sadly, ‘but this time I can guess.’

They moved on and literally bumped into Le Grand Duc and Lila. The girls spoke and introductions, Bowman saw, were inevitable and in order. Le Grand Duc shook his hand and said, ‘Charmed, charmed,’ but it was plain to see that he wasn’t in the least bit charmed, it was just that the aristocracy knew how to behave. He hadn’t, Bowman noted, the soft flabby hand one might have expected: the hand was hard and the grip that of a strong man carefully not exerting too much pressure.

‘Fascinating,’ he announced. He addressed himself exclusively to the two girls. ‘Do you know that *all* those gypsies have come from the far side of the Iron Curtain? Hungarian or Rumanian, most of them. Their leader, fellow called Czerda – met him last year, that’s him with that woman there – has come all the way from the Black Sea.’

‘But how about frontiers?’ Bowman asked. ‘Especially between East and West.’

‘Eh? What? Ah?’ He finally became aware of Bowman’s presence. ‘They travel without let or hindrance, most of all when people know that they are on their annual pilgrimage. Everyone fears them, thinks that they have the evil eye, that they put spells and curses on those who offend them: the Communists believe it as much as anyone, more, for all I know. Nonsense, of course, sheer balderdash. But it’s what people believe that matters. Come, Lila, come. I have the feeling that they are going to prove in a most co-operative mood tonight.’

They moved off. After a few paces the Duke stopped and glanced round. He looked in their direction for some time, then turned away, shaking his head. ‘A pity,’ he said to Lila in what he probably imagined to be *sotto voce*, ‘about the colour of her hair.’ They moved on.

‘Never mind,’ Bowman said kindly. ‘I like you as you are.’ She compressed her lips, then laughed. Grudges were not for Cecile Dubois.

‘He’s right, you know.’ She took his arm, all was forgiven, and when Bowman was about to point out that the Duke’s convictions about the intrinsic superiority of blonde hair did not carry with it the stamp of divine infallibility, she went on, gesturing around her: ‘It really is quite fascinating.’

‘If you like the atmosphere of circuses and fairgrounds,’ Bowman said fastidiously, ‘both of which I will go a long way to avoid, I suppose it is. But I admire experts.’

And that the gypsies were unquestionably experts at the particular task on hand was undeniable. The speed and coordinated skill with which they assembled their various stalls and other media of entertainment were remarkable. Within minutes and ready for operation they had assembled roulette stands, a shooting gallery, no fewer than four fortune-tellers' booths, a food stall, a candy stall, two clothing stalls selling brilliantly-hued gypsy clothes and, oddly enough, a large cage of mynah birds clearly possessed of that species' usual homicidal outlook on life. A group of four gypsies, perched on the steps of a caravan, began to play soulful mid-European music on their violins. Already the areas of the forecourt and car-park were almost uncomfortably full of scores of people circulating slowly around, guests from the hotel, guests, one supposed, from other hotels, villagers from Les Baux, a good number of gypsies themselves. As variegated a cross-section of humanity as one could hope to find, they shared, for the moment, what appeared to be a marked unanimity of outlook – all, from Le Grand Duc downwards, were clearly enjoying themselves with the notable exception of the restaurant manager who stood on the top of the forecourt steps surveying the scene with the broken-hearted despair and martyred resignation of a Bing watching the Metropolitan being taken over by a hippie festival.

A policeman appeared at the entrance to the forecourt. He was large and red and perspiring freely, and clearly regarded the pushing of ancient bicycles up precipitous roads as a poor way of spending a peacefully warm May evening. He propped his bicycle against a wall just as the sobbing gypsy woman put her hands to her face, turned and ran towards a green-and-white painted caravan.

Bowman nudged Cecile. 'Let's just saunter over there and join them, shall we?'

'I will not. It's rude. Besides, gypsies don't like people who pry.'

'Prying? Since when is concern about a missing man prying? But suit yourself.'

As Bowman moved off the jeep returned, skidding to an unnecessary if highly dramatic stop on the gravel of the court. The young gypsy at the wheel jumped out and ran towards Czerda and the policeman. Bowman wasn't far behind, halting a discreet number of feet away.

'No luck, Ferenc?' Czerda asked.

'No sign anywhere, Father. We searched all the area.'

The policeman had a black notebook out. 'Where was he last seen?'

'Less than a kilometre back, according to his mother,' Czerda said. 'We stopped for our evening meal not far from the caves.'

The policeman asked Ferenc: 'You searched in there?'

Ferenc crossed himself and remained silent. Czerda said: 'That's no question to ask and you know it. No gypsy would ever enter those caves. They have an evil reputation. Alexandre – that's the name of the missing boy – would never have gone there.'

The policeman put his book away. 'I wouldn't go in there myself. Not at this time of night. The local people believe it's cursed and haunted and – well – I was born here. Tomorrow, when it's daylight –'

'He'll have turned up long before them,' Czerda said confidently. 'Just a lot of fuss about nothing.'

'Then that woman who just left – she is his mother –'

'Yes.'

'Then why is she so upset?'

'He's only a boy and you know what mothers are.' Czerda half-shrugged in resignation. 'I suppose I'd better go and tell her.'

He left. So did the policeman. so did Ferenc. Bowman didn't hesitate. He could see where Czerda was going, he could guess where the policeman was heading for – the nearest *estaminet* – so was momentarily interested in the movements of neither. But in Ferenc he was interested, for there was something in the alacrity and purposeful-ness with which he walked quickly through the archway

into the parking lot that bespoke some fixed intent. Bowman followed more leisurely and stopped in the archway.

On the right-hand side of the lot was a row of four fortune-tellers' booths, got up in the usual garishly-coloured canvas. The first in the row was occupied, a notice said, by a certain Madame Marie-Antoinette who offered a money back if not satisfied guarantee. Bowman went inside immediately, not because of any particular predilection for royalty or parsimony or both, but because just as Ferenc was entering the most distant booth he paused and looked round directly at Bowman and Ferenc's face was stamped with the unmistakably unpleasant characteristics of one whose suspicions could be instantly aroused. Bowman passed inside.

Marie-Antoinette was a white-haired old crone with eyes of polished mahogany and a gin-trap for a mouth. She gazed into a cloudy crystal ball that was cloudy principally because it hadn't been cleaned for months, spoke to Bowman encouragingly about the longevity, health, fame and happiness that could not fail to be his, took four francs from him and appeared to go into a coma, a sign Bowman took to indicate that the interview was over. He left. Cecile was standing just outside, swinging her handbag in what could have been regarded as an unnecessarily provocative fashion and looking at him with a degree of speculative amusement perhaps uncalled for in the circumstances.

'Still studying human nature?' she asked sweetly.

'I should never have gone in there.' Bowman took off his glasses and peered myopically around. The character running the shooting gallery across the parking lot, a short thick-set lad with the face of a boxer who had had a highly unspectacular career brought to an abrupt end, was regarding him with a degree of interest that verged on the impolite. Bowman put his spectacles back on and looked at Cecile.

'Your fortune?' she enquired solicitously. 'Bad news?'

'The worst. Marie-Antoinette says I will be married in two months. She must be wrong.'

'And you not the marrying kind,' she said sympathetically. She nodded at the next booth, which bore a legend above the entrance. 'I think you should ask Madame What's-her-name for a second opinion.'

Bowman studied Madame Zetterling's comeon, then looked again across the car-park. The gallery attendant appeared to be finding him as fascinating as ever. Bowman followed Cecile's advice and went inside.

Madame Zetterling looked like Marie-Antoinette's elder sister. Her technique was different inasmuch as the tools of her trade consisted of a pack of very greasy playing cards which she shuffled and dealt with a speed and dexterity that would have had her automatically blackballed in any casino in Europe, but the forecast for his future was exactly the same. So was the price.

Cecile was still waiting outside, still smiling. Ferenc was standing now by the archway in the hedge and had clearly taken over the eye-riveting stint from the shooting-stall attendant. Bowman polished his glasses some more.

'God help us,' Bowman said. 'This is nothing but a matrimonial agency. Extraordinary. Uncanny.' He replaced his glasses. Lot's wife had nothing on Ferenc. 'Quite incredible, in fact.'

'What is?'

'Your resemblance,' Bowman said solemnly, 'to the person I'm supposed to marry.'

'My, my!' She laughed, pleasantly and with genuine amusement. 'You *do* have an original mind, Mr Bowman.'

'Neil,' Bowman said, and without waiting for further advice entered the next booth. In the comparative obscurity of the entrance he looked round in time to see Ferenc shrug his shoulders and move off into the forecourt.

The third fortune-teller made up the cast for the three witches of *Macbeth*. She used tarot cards and ended up by telling Bowman that he would shortly be journeying across the seas where he would

meet and marry a raven-haired beauty and when he said he was getting married to a blonde the following month she just smiled sadly and took his money.

Cecile, who now clearly regarded him as the best source of light entertainment around, had a look of frankly malicious amusement on her face.

‘What shattering revelations this time?’

Bowman took his glasses off again and shook his head in perplexity: as far as he could see he was no longer the object of anyone’s attention. ‘I don’t understand. She said: “Her father was a great seaman, as was his, as was his.” Doesn’t make any kind of sense to me.’

It did to Cecile. She touched a switch somewhere and the smile went out. She stared at Bowman, green eyes full of perplexed uncertainty.

‘My father is an admiral,’ she said slowly. ‘So was my grandfather. And great-grandfather. You – you could have found this out.’

‘Sure, sure. I carry a complete dossier on every girl I’m about to meet for the first time. Come up to my room and I’ll show you my filing cabinets – I carry them about in a pantechicon. And wait, there’s more. I quote again: “She has a rose-shaped strawberry birthmark in a place where it can’t be seen.”’

‘Good God!’

‘I couldn’t have put it better myself. Hang on. There may be worse yet to come.’ Bowman made no excuse and gave no reason for entering the fourth booth, the only one that held any interest for him, nor was it necessary: the girl was so shaken by what she’d just been told that the oddity of Bowman’s behaviour must have suddenly become of very secondary importance.

The booth was very dimly lit, the illumination coming from an Anglepoise lamp with a very low wattage bulb that cast a pool of light on a green baize table and a pair of hands that lay lightly clasped on the table. Little of the person to whom the hands belonged could be seen as she sat in shadow with her head bent but enough to realize that she would never make it as one of the three witches of *Macbeth* or even as Lady Macbeth herself. This one was young, with flowing titian hair reaching below her shoulders and gave the vague impression, although her features were almost indistinguishable, that she must be quite beautiful: her hands certainly were.

Bowman sat on the chair opposite her and looked at the card on the table which bore the legend: ‘Countess Marie le Hobenaut.’

‘You really a countess, ma’am?’ Bowman asked politely.

‘You wish to have your hand read?’ Her voice was low, gentle and soft. No Lady Macbeth: here was Cordelia.

‘Of course.’

She took his hand in both of hers and bent over it, her head so low that the titian hair brushed the table. Bowman kept still – it wasn’t easy but he kept still – as two warm tears fell on his hands. With his left hand he twisted the Anglepoise and she put a forearm up to protect her eyes but not before he had time to see that her face *was* beautiful and that the big brown eyes were sheened with tears.

‘Why is Countess Marie crying?’

‘You have a long lifeline –’

‘Why are you crying?’

‘Please.’

‘All right. Why are you crying, please?’

‘I’m sorry. I – I’m upset.’

‘You mean I’ve only got to walk into a place –’

‘My young brother is missing.’

‘Your brother? I know someone’s missing. Everyone knows. Alexandre. But your brother. They haven’t found him?’

She shook her head, the titian hair brushing across the table.

‘And that’s your mother in the big green-and-white caravan?’

A nod this time. She didn’t look up.

‘But why all the tears? He’s only been missing for a little while. He’ll turn up, you’ll see.’

Again she said nothing. She put her forearms on the table and her head on her forearms and cried silently, her shoulders shaking uncontrollably. Bowman, his face bitter, touched the young gypsy’s shoulder, rose and left the booth. But when he emerged the expression on his face was one of dazed bewilderment. Cecile glanced at him in some trepidation.

‘Four kids,’ Bowman said quietly. He took her unresisting arm and led her through the archway towards the forecourt. Le Grand Duc, the blonde girl still with him, was talking to an impressively scar-faced and heavily built gypsy dressed in dark trousers and frilled off-white shirt. Bowman ignored Cecile’s disapproving frown and halted a few convenient feet away.

‘A thousand thanks, Mr Koscis, a thousand thanks,’ Le Grand Duc was saying in his most gracious lord of the manor voice. ‘Immensely interesting, immensely. Come, Lila, my dear, enough is enough. I think we have earned ourselves a drink and a little bite to eat.’ Bowman watched them make their way towards the steps leading to the patio, then turned and looked consideringly at the green-and-white caravan.

Cecile said: ‘Don’t.’

Bowman looked at her in surprise.

‘And what’s wrong with wanting to help a sorrowing mother? Maybe I can comfort her, help in some way, perhaps even go looking for her missing boy. If more people would be more forthcoming in times of trouble, be more willing to risk a snub –’

‘You really are a fearful hypocrite,’ she said admiringly.

‘Besides, there’s a technique to this sort of thing. If Le Grand Duc can do it, I can. Still your apprehensions.’

Bowman left her there nibbling the tip of a thumb in what did appear to be a very apprehensive manner indeed and mounted the caravan steps.

At first sight the interior appeared to be deserted, then his eyes became accustomed to the gloom and he realized he was standing in an unlighted vestibule leading to the main living quarters beyond, identifiable by a crack of light from an imperfectly constructed doorway and the sound of voices, women’s voices.

Bowman took a step through the outer doorway. A shadow detached itself from a wall, a shadow possessed of the most astonishing powers of acceleration and the most painful solidity. It struck Bowman on the breastbone with the top of a head that had the unforgiving consistency of a cement bollard: Bowman made it all the way to the ground without the benefit of even one of the caravan steps. Out of the corner of an eye he was dimly aware of Cecile stepping hurriedly and advisedly to one side then he landed on his back with a momentarily numbing impact that took care of any little air that bullet-head had left in his lungs in the first place. His glasses went flying off into the middle distance and as he lay there whooping and gasping for the oxygen that wouldn’t come the shadow came marching purposefully down the steps. He was short, thick-set, unfriendly, had a speech to make and was clearly determined on making it. He stooped, grabbed Bowman by the lapels and hauled him to his feet with an ease that boded ill for things to come.

‘You will remember me, my friend.’ His voice had the pleasant timbre of gravel being decanted from a metal hopper. ‘You will remember that Hoval does not like trespassers. You will remember that next time Hoval will not use his fists.’

From this Bowman gathered that on this occasion Hoval did intend to use his fists and he did. Only one, but it was more than enough. Hoval hit him in the same place and, as far as Bowman could judge from the symptoms transmitted by a now nearly paralysed midriff, with approximately the same amount of force. He took half-a-dozen involuntary backward steps and then came heavily to earth again, this time in a seated position with his hands splayed out behind him. Hoval dusted

off his hands in an unpleasant fashion and marched back up into the caravan again. Cecile looked around till she located Bowman's glasses, then came and offered him a helping hand which he wasn't too proud to accept.

'I think Le Grand Duc must use a different technique,' she said gravely.

'There's a lot of ingratitude in this world,' Bowman wheezed.

'Isn't there just? Through with studying human nature for the night?' Bowman nodded, it was easier than speaking. 'Then for goodness' sake let's get out of here. After that, I need a drink.'

'What do you think *I* require?' Bowman croaked.

She looked at him consideringly. 'Frankly, I think a nanny would be in order.' She took his arm and led him up the steps to the patio. Le Grand Duc, with a large bowl of fruit before him and Lila by his side, stopped munching a banana and regarded Bowman with a smile so studiously impersonal as to be positively insulting.

'That was a rousing set-to you had down there,' he observed.

'He hit me when I wasn't looking,' Bowman explained.

'Ah!' Le Grand Duc said non-committally, then added in a penetrating whisper when they'd moved on less than half-a-dozen feet: 'As I said, long past his prime.' Cecile squeezed Bowman's arm warningly but unnecessarily: he gave her the wan smile of one whose cup is overful and led her to the table. A waiter brought drinks.

Bowman fortified himself and said: 'Well, now. Where shall we live? England or France?'

'What?'

'You heard what the fortune-teller said.'

'Oh, my God!'

Bowman lifted his glass. 'To David.'

'David?'

'Our eldest. I've just chosen his name.'

The green eyes regarding Bowman so steadily over the rim of a glass were neither amused nor exasperated, just very thoughtful. Bowman became very thoughtful himself. It could be that Cecile Dubois was, in that well-turned phrase, rather more than just a pretty face.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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