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The Satan Bug

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Содержание

The Satan Bug	6
Copyright	7
Dedication	8
Contents	9
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

ALISTAIR MACLEAN

The Satan Bug



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Dedication

To Bill Campbell

Contents

[Cover](#) [Title Page](#) [Copyright](#) [Dedication](#) [Chapter One](#) [Chapter Two](#) [Chapter Three](#) [Chapter Four](#) [Chapter Five](#) [Chapter Six](#) [Chapter Seven](#) [Chapter Eight](#) [Chapter Nine](#) [Chapter Ten](#) [Chapter Eleven](#) [Chapter Twelve](#) [Chapter Thirteen](#) [Keep Reading](#) [About the Author](#) [By Alistair MacLean](#) [About the Publisher](#)

CHAPTER ONE

There was no mail for me that morning, but that was no surprise. There had been no mail for me in the three weeks I'd been renting that tiny second-floor suite of offices near Oxford Street. I closed the door of the outer eight by ten office, skirted the table and chair that might one day house a receptionist if the time ever came that Cavell Investigations could run to such glamorous extras, and pushed open the door marked "Private."

Behind that door lay the office of the head of Cavell Investigations, Pierre Cavell. Me. And not only the head but the entire staff. It was a bigger room than the reception office, I knew that because I'd measured it, but only a trained surveyor could have told it with the naked eye.

I'm no sybarite, but I had to admit that it was a pretty bleak sort of place. The distempered walls were of that delicate tint of off-grey pastel shading from off-white at floor level to off-black just below the ceiling that only London fog and the neglect of years can achieve. In one wall, overlooking a narrow grimy courtyard, was a tall narrow window, washed on the inside, with a monthly calendar close by. On the linoleum-covered floor a square desk, not new, a swivel chair for me, a padded leather armchair for the client, a strip of threadbare carpet to keep the client's feet from getting cold, a hatrack and a couple of green metal filing cabinets, both empty. Nothing more. There was no room for anything more.

I was just lowering myself into the swivel chair when I heard the deep double chime of the bell in the reception-room and the sound of hinges creaking. "Ring and enter" the legend on the corridor door read and someone was doing just that. Ringing and entering. I opened the top left-hand drawer of my desk, pulled out some papers and envelopes, scattered them before me, pulled a switch by my knee and had just risen to my feet when the knock came at my inner door.

The man who entered was tall, thin and a close student of the *Tailor and Cutter*. A narrow-lapelled coat hung over an immaculately cut charcoal suit in the latest Italian line, and in his suède-gloved left hand he carried his other glove, black bowler, briefcase and, a few inches up his wrist, a tightly-rolled, horn-handled black umbrella. He had a long pale narrow face, thin black hair parted in the middle and brushed almost straight back, rimless glasses, an aquiline nose and on the upper lip a thin black line that, on closer inspection, still looked like a thin black line, miniaturisation of the moustache brought to an almost impossible state of perfection. He must have carried a micrometer about with him. He looked for all the world like a top-flight City accountant: I couldn't see him as anything else.

"Excuse my walking straight in like this." He smiled briefly, three gold caps in the upper teeth, and half-glanced over his shoulder. "But it seems your secretary——"

"That's all right. Please come in." He even talked like an accountant, controlled, positive, slightly over-precise in the articulation. He offered me his hand, and the hand-shake, too, was in character, quick, neat, giving nothing away.

"Martin," he introduced himself. "Henry Martin. Mr. Pierre Cavell?"

"Yes. Won't you sit down, Mr. Martin?"

"Thank you." He sat down gingerly, very straight, feet together, brief-case balanced with scrupulous care across his touching knees and looked around him slowly, missing nothing, a faint smile not showing his teeth. "Business not—ah—so very brisk these days, Mr. Cavell?"

Maybe he wasn't an accountant after all. Accountants, as a rule, are polite, well-mannered and slow to give unnecessary offence. But then maybe he wasn't feeling quite himself. People who came to see private detectives were seldom in a normal frame of mind.

"I keep it this way to fool the Inspector of Taxes," I explained. "How can I help you, Mr. Martin?"

"By giving me some information about yourself." He was no longer smiling and his eyes were no longer wandering.

"About myself?" My voice was sharp, not razor-edged, just the voice of a man who hasn't had a client in all the three weeks he's been in business. "Please come to the point, Mr. Martin. I have things to do." So I had. Lighting my pipe, reading the morning paper, things like that.

"I'm sorry. But about yourself. I have you in mind for a very delicate and difficult mission. I must be sure you are the man I want. That is reasonable, I think?"

"Mission?" I looked speculatively at Henry Martin and thought I could get to disliking him without too much trouble. "I don't carry out missions, Mr. Martin. I carry out investigations."

"Of course. When there are investigations to carry out." The tone was too neutral to take specific offence. "Perhaps I should supply the information. Please bear with my unusual method of approach for a few minutes, Mr. Cavell. I think I can promise that you will not be sorry." He opened his briefcase, brought out a buff folder, abstracted a stiff sheet of paper and began to read, paraphrasing as he went along.

"Pierre Cavell. Born Lisieux, Calvados, of Anglo-French parents. Father civil engineer, John Cavell of Kingsclere, Hampshire, mother Anne-Marie Lechamps of Lisieux. Mother of Franco-Belgian descent. One sister, Liselle. Both parents and sister killed in air attack on Rouen. Escaped fishing-boat Deauville-Newhaven. While still in late teens parachuted six times into Northern France, each time brought back information of great value. Parachuted into Normandy D-Day minus two. At end war recommended for no fewer than six decorations—three British, two French and one Belgian."

Henry Martin looked up and smiled thinly.

"The first discordant note. Decorations refused. Some quotation to the effect that the war had aged you fast and that you were too old to play with toys. Joined regular British Army. Rose to Major in Intelligence Corps, understood to have co-operated closely with M.I.6—counter-espionage, I believe. Then joined police. Why did you leave the Army, Mr. Cavell?"

I'd throw him out later. Right now I was too intrigued. How much more did he know—and how? I said, "Poor prospects."

"You were cashiered." Again the brief smile. "When a junior officer elects to strike a senior officer, policy dictates that he should choose a man below field rank. You had the poor judgment to select a major-general." He glanced at the paper again. "Joined Metropolitan Police. Rapid rise through the ranks—one must admit that you do appear to be rather gifted in your own line—to position of Inspector. In last two years seconded for special duties, nature unspecified. But we can guess. And then you resigned. Correct?"

"Correct."

"On a record card, 'Resigned' looks much better than 'Dismissed.' Which is what you would have been had you remained another twenty-four hours. You do appear to have what amounts to a genius for insubordination. Something to do with an Assistant Commissioner, I understand. But you still had friends, quite powerful friends. Within a week of your resignation you had been appointed as head of security in Mordon."

I stopped what I was doing, which was squaring off the papers on my desk, and said quietly, "Details of my record are readily available, if you know where to look. But you have no right to possess that last item of information." The Mordon Microbiological Research Establishment in Wiltshire had a security rating that would have made access to the Kremlin seem simple.

“I am perfectly aware of that, Mr. Cavell. I possess a great number of items of information that I shouldn’t. Like the additional item that I know that, in keeping with your record, you were also dismissed from this post. Like yet another item—the real reason why I am here today: I know *why* you were dismissed.”

The accuracy of my first deduction in the detecting business, that my client was an accountant, spoke ill for my prospects: Henry Martin wouldn’t have recognised a balance sheet if it had been handed to him on a silver salver. I wondered what his line of business might really be: but I couldn’t even begin to guess.

“You were dismissed from Mordon,” Martin went on precisely, “primarily because you couldn’t keep a still tongue in your head. Oh, nothing to do with security, we know that.” He removed his rimless glasses and polished them thoughtfully. “After fifteen years in your line you probably don’t even tell yourself half of what you know. But you talked to top scientists, directors, in Mordon, and you made no secret of your opinion of the nature of the work in which they were engaged. You are not the first person to comment bitterly on the fact that this establishment, referred to in Parliamentary estimates as the Mordon Health Centre, is controlled exclusively by the War Office. You knew, of course, that Mordon is concerned mainly with the invention and production of microbiological organisms for use in war—but you are one of the few who know just how ghastly and terrifying are the weapons that have been perfected there, that armed with those weapons a few planes could utterly destroy *all* life in *any* country in the space of a few hours. You had very strong opinions about the indiscriminate use of such a weapon against an unsuspecting and innocent civilian population. And you made your opinion known in many places and to many people inside Mordon. Too many places, too many people. So today you are a private detective.”

“Life’s unjust,” I agreed. I rose to my feet, crossed to the door, turned the key in the lock and pocketed it. “You must realise, Mr. Martin, that you have already said too much. The sources of your information about my activities at Mordon. You’re not leaving here till you tell me.”

Martin sighed and replaced his spectacles.

“Melodramatic, understanding but totally unnecessary. Do you take me for a fool, Cavell? Do I *look* a fool? What I told you I had to tell you to gain your co-operation. I will put my cards on the table. Quite literally.” He drew out a wallet, found a rectangle of ivory cardboard and placed it on the table. “Mean anything to you?”

It meant a great deal. Across the middle of the card ran the legend. “Council for World Peace.” At the bottom right-hand corner: “Henry Martin, London Secretary.”

Martin pulled his chair close and leaned forward, his forearms on my desk. His face was intent, serious.

“Of course you know about it, Mr. Cavell. I don’t think I exaggerate when I say that it is by far the greatest force for good in the world today. Our council cuts across race, religion and politics. You will have heard that our Prime Minister and most members of the cabinet belong. I do not wish to comment on that. But I can state that most of the church dignitaries in Britain, whether Protestant, Catholic or Jewish, are members. Our list of titled members reads like Debrett’s, of other distinguished members like *Who’s Who*. The Foreign Office, who *really* know what’s going on and are more afraid than any, are solidly on our side. We have the support of all the best, the wisest, the most far-seeing men in the country today. I have very powerful men behind me, Mr. Cavell. He smiled faintly. “We even have influential members in Mordon.”

All he said I knew to be true—except that bit about Mordon, and maybe that had to be true, to account for his knowledge. I wasn’t a member of the council myself, not being the right type for inclusion either in Debrett’s or *Who’s Who*, but I knew that the Council for World Peace, a society semi-secret in its nature inasmuch as it recognised that diplomatic negotiations were best not conducted through newspaper headlines, was of only the most recent origin but already regarded through the western world as the last best hope for mankind.

Martin took the card from me and slipped it back in his wallet. "All I am trying to say is that I am a respectable man working for a pre-eminently respectable body."

"I believe that," I said.

"Thank you." He dipped into his brief-case again and brought out a steel container about the size and shape of a hip-flask. "There is, Mr. Cavell, a militarist clique in this country of whom we are frankly terrified, who promise to wreck all our dreams and hopes. Madmen, who are talking, every day more loudly, of waging a preventive war against the Soviet Union. Germ warfare. It is highly unlikely that they will win their way. But it is against the most unlikely contingencies that we have to be most warily on our guard." He spoke like a man who had rehearsed his speech a hundred times.

"Against this bacteriological assault there could and would be no defence. A vaccine against this virus *has* been developed, after two years of the most intensive research, but the only supplies in the world are in Mordon." He paused, hesitated, then pushed the flask across the table to me. "A statement that is no longer quite accurate. This flask was removed from Mordon three days ago. The contents can be cultured to produce sufficient vaccine to immunise any nation on earth. We are our brothers' keepers, Mr. Cavell."

I stared at him. I said nothing.

"Please take this at once, to this address in Warsaw." He pushed a slip of paper across the table. "You will be paid a hundred pounds now, all expenses, and a hundred pounds on your return. A delicate mission, I realise, perhaps even a dangerous one, although in your case I should not think so. We have investigated you very carefully, Mr. Cavell. You are reputed to know the byways of Europe as a taxi-driver knows the streets of London: I do not foresee that frontiers will present you with much difficulty."

"And my anti-war sympathies," I murmured.

"Of course, of course." The first trace of impatience. "We had to check most carefully, you realise that. You had the best all-over qualifications. You were the *only* choice."

"Well, now," I murmured. "This is flattering. And interesting."

"I don't know what you mean," he said brusquely. "Will you do it, Mr. Cavell?"

"No."

"No?" His face became very still. "You say 'no'? This, then, is the extent of your precious concern about your fellowmen? All this talk in Mordon——"

"You said yourself that my business wasn't very brisk," I interrupted. "I haven't had a client for three weeks. For all indications to the contrary, I won't have one for three months. And," I added, "you said yourself I was the *only* choice."

The thin mouth twisted in a sneer.

"You don't positively refuse to go, then?"

"I don't positively refuse."

"How much?"

"Two hundred and fifty pounds. Each way."

"Your last word?"

"That's it."

"Mind if I say something, Cavell?" The man was losing his manners.

"Yes, I mind. Keep your speeches and moralities for your council. This is a business deal."

He stared at me for a long moment, eyes hostile behind thick glasses, then reached again into his brief-case and brought out five flat packets of treasury notes, laid them neatly on the table before him and glanced up at me. "Two hundred and fifty pounds. Exactly."

"Maybe the London branch of the council should get itself a new secretary," I suggested. "Was it myself or the council that was to be defrauded of the extra £150?"

"Neither." The tone came with the eyes, glacial both of them. He didn't like me. "We offered a fair price, but in a matter of such importance were prepared to meet extortion. Take your money."

“After you’ve taken off the rubber bands, stacked the notes together and counted them out, fifty fivers, in front of my eyes.”

“My God!” The cool meticulous speech had gone and something almost savage came to take its place. “No wonder you were kicked out of so many jobs.” He ripped off the bands, stacked the notes and counted them off separately. “There you are. Fifty. Satisfied?”

“Satisfied.” I opened my right-hand drawer, picked up the notes, address and flask, dropped them into the drawer and closed it just as Martin was finishing the securing of the straps on his briefcase. Something in the atmosphere, maybe an extra stillness from my side of the table, caused him to look up sharply and then he became as immobile as myself, except for his eyes, which continued to widen until they seemed to take up all space behind the rimless glasses.

“It’s a gun all right,” I assured him. “A Japanese Hanyatti nine-shot automatic, safety-catch off and indicator, I observe, registering full. Don’t worry about the scotch tape over the mouth of the barrel, that’s only to protect a highly delicate mechanism. The bullet behind will go through it, it’ll go through you and if you had a twin brother sitting behind you it would go through him also. Your forearms on the table.”

He put his forearms on the table. He kept pretty still, which is the way people usually do when they’re peering down into the barrel from a distance of three feet, but his eyes had gone back to normal quickly and he didn’t seem all that worried that I could notice. This troubled me, for if any man had the right to be worried it was Henry Martin. Maybe this made Henry Martin a very dangerous man.

“You have an unusual way of conducting business, Cavell.” No shake in the voice, just a dry contempt. “What is this, a hold-up?”

“Don’t be silly—and don’t you wish it were. I already have your money. You asked me earlier if I took you for a fool. The time and circumstances didn’t seem right for an immediate answer, but I can give it to you now. You are a fool. You’re a fool because you forgot that I worked in Mordon. I was security chief there. And the first job of any security chief is to know what goes on in his own bailiwick.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“You will. This vaccine here—it’s designed to give immunity against which particular virus?”

“I’m only an agent for the Council for World Peace.”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that all the vaccines, up till now, have been made and stored exclusively in Horder Hall, Essex. The point is that if that flask came from Mordon it contains no vaccine. It probably contains one or other of the viruses.

“Secondly, I know that it is normally impossible for any man, Council for World Peace sympathiser or not, to take top secret viruses out of Mordon, no matter how clever or surreptitious he is. When the last man has left the laboratories fourteen hour time clocks come into operation and the opening combination over-riding those is known to only two men. If anything has been taken it has been taken by force and violence. That demands an immediate investigation.

“Thirdly, you said the Foreign Office was solidly on your side. If that’s the case, why all this cloak-and-dagger approach to me to smuggle vaccine through? The diplomatic bag to Warsaw is the obvious answer.

“Finally, and your biggest blunder, my friend, you forgot the fact that I have been engaged in one form or other of counter-espionage for quite some time. Every new body or organisation that’s set up in Britain automatically comes under the microscope. As did the Council for World Peace when it set up its headquarters here. I know one of the members, an elderly, stout, bald and short-sighted character who is the complete antithesis to you in every way. His name is Henry Martin and he’s the secretary of the London branch of the council. The real one.”

He looked at me steadily for a few moments, not scared, his forearms still resting on the table, then said quietly, “There doesn’t seem to be much more left to say, does there?”

“Not much.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Turn you over to the Special Branch. With you goes a tape of our conversation. Just as a routine precaution I switched on a recorder before you came into this room. Not evidence, I know, but the address, flask and your thumb-print on fifty fivers will be all the evidence they require.”

“It does look as if I made a mistake about you,” he admitted. “We can do a deal.”

“I can’t be bought. Not, at least, for fifty miserable fivers.”

A pause, then softly, “Five hundred?”

“No.”

“A thousand? A thousand pounds, Cavell, inside the hour.”

“Keep quiet.” I reached over the phone, laid the receiver on the table and began to dial with my left forefinger. I’d reached the third number when a sharp knock came to my office door.

I let the receiver lie and got to my feet, making no noise. The corridor door had been shut when Martin had come into my room. No one could open that corridor door without the bell chiming. I’d heard no chime; there had been no chime. But somebody was in the outer office now, just outside my door.

Martin was smiling. It wasn’t much of a smile, but it was there. I didn’t like it. I moved my gun and said softly, “Face into that corner, Martin, hands clasped behind your neck.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” he said calmly. “That man outside the door is a mutual friend.”

“Do it now,” I said. He did. I crossed to the door, standing well to one side, and called out, “Who’s there?”

“Police, Cavell. Open up, please.”

“Police?” The word carried familiar overtones, but then there were a great number of people around who were able to imitate a great number of voices. I glanced at Martin, but he hadn’t moved. I called out, “Your credentials. Under the door with them.”

There was a movement on the other side of the door, then an oblong cardboard slid into view on the floor. No badge, no credentials, nothing like that, just a calling card bearing the words “D. R. Hardanger” and a Whitehall telephone number. The number of people who knew that this was the only form of identification that Superintendent Hardanger used would be very few. And the card matched the voice. I unlocked and opened the door.

Superintendent Hardanger it was, big, burly, red-faced, with the jowls of a bull-dog, dressed in the same faded grey raglan and black bowler that he’d worn in all the years I’d worked with him. I caught a glimpse of a smaller man behind him, a khaki-clad arm and leg, no more. I’d no time to see more for Hardanger had moved his sixteen stone of solid authority four feet into my office forcing me to take a couple of backward steps.

“All right, Cavell.” A flicker of a smile touched the abnormally light blue eyes. “You can put that gun away. You’re quite safe now. The police are here.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, Hardanger, but I’m no longer working for you. I have a licence for this gun and you’re in my office without permission.” I nodded towards the corner. “Search this character and then I’ll put my gun away. Not till then.”

Henry Martin, hands still behind his neck, turned slowly round. He grinned at Hardanger, who smiled back and said, “Shall I search you, John?”

“Rather not, sir,” Martin said briskly. “You know how ticklish I am.”

I stared at them, from Hardanger to Martin, then back again. I lowered my gun and said wearily, “All right, what gives?”

“I’m genuinely sorry about this, Cavell,” Hardanger said in his rough gravelly voice. “But necessary. How necessary, I’ll explain. This man’s name really is Martin—John Martin. Of the Special Branch. Inspector. Recently returned from Toronto. Want to see his credentials or will my word do?”

I crossed to my desk, put the gun away and brought out the flask, money and slip of paper with the Warsaw address. I could feel the tightness in my face but I kept my voice quiet.

“Take your damned props, Martin, and get out. You, too, Hardanger. I don’t know what this stupid charade, this farrago of rubbish, was for and I’ll be damned if you can make me care. Out! I don’t like smart alecs making a fool of me and I won’t play mouse to any man’s cat, not even the Special Branch’s.”

“Easy up now, Cavell,” Hardanger protested. “I told you it was necessary and——”

“Let me talk to him,” the man in khaki interrupted. He came round Hardanger and I could see him clearly for the first time. Army Officer, and no subaltern either, slight, spare, authoritative, the type I’m allergic to. “My name is Cliveden, Cavell. Major-General Cliveden. I must——”

“I was cashiered from the Army for taking a swing at a major-general,” I interrupted. “Think I’d hesitate to do it again now I’m a civilian? You, too. Out. Now.”

“I told you what he was like,” Hardanger muttered to no one in particular. He shrugged his shoulders heavily, thrust his hand into the pocket of his raglan coat and brought out a wrist-watch. “We’ll go. But first I thought you might like to have this. A keepsake. He had it in London for repair and it was delivered to the General’s office yesterday.”

“What are you talking about?” I said harshly.

“I’m talking about Neil Clandon. Your successor as security chief in Mordon. I believe he was one of your best friends.”

I made no move to take the watch from the outstretched hand.

“‘Was’, you said? Clandon?”

“Clandon. Dead. Murdered, if you like. When someone broke into the central laboratories in Mordon late last night—early this morning.”

I looked at the three of them and then turned away to stare out through the grimy window at the grey fog swirling along Gloucester Place. After a time I said, “You’d better come in.”

Neil Clandon had been found by a patrolling security guard shortly after two o’clock that morning, in the corridor beside the heavy steel door leading to number one lab in “E” block. That he was dead was beyond dispute. What he had died of was not yet known, for in an establishment staffed almost entirely by doctors no one had been allowed to approach the dead man. The strictness of the rule was absolute. When the alarm bells rang it was a job for the Special Branch and the Special Branch alone.

The senior guard had been summoned and had approached within six feet of the body. He had reported that Clandon had been violently ill before dying, and that he had obviously died in convulsions and great agony. The symptoms had all the hallmarks of prussic acid poisoning. Had the guard been able to get the typical bitter almond smell, this, of course, would have put the tentative diagnosis beyond reasonable doubt. But that, of course, had been impossible. All guards on internal patrol had to make their rounds in gas-tight suits with a closed circuit breathing apparatus.

The senior guard had noticed something else. The time clock setting on the steel door had been altered. Normally it was set to run from 6 p.m. till 8 a.m. Now it was set to run from midnight. Which meant that access to number one lab would be impossible before 2 p.m., except to those who knew the combination that overrode the time lock.

It was the soldier, not Hardanger, who supplied this information. I listened to him and said, “Why you? What’s your interest in all this?”

“Major-General Cliveden is the second-in-command of the Royal Army Medical Corps,” Hardanger explained. “Which automatically makes him the director of the Mordon Microbiological Research Establishment.”

“He wasn’t when I was there.”

“My predecessor has retired,” Cliveden said curtly, but the underlying worry was clear to see. “Ill health. First reports naturally came to me. I was in London. I notified the Superintendent immediately. And on my own initiative I ordered an oxy-acetylene team from Aldershot to rush there: they will open the door under Special Branch supervision.”

“An oxy-acetylene team.” I stared at him. “Are you quite mad?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Cancel it, man. Cancel it at once. What in God’s name made you do that? Don’t you know anything about that door? Apart from the fact that no acetylene equipment in existence could get through that special steel of that door inside hours, don’t you know that the door itself is lethal? That it’s filled with a near-lethal gas? That there’s a central insulator mounted plate inside the door that damn’ well *is* lethal—charged with two thousand volts?”

“I didn’t know that, Cavell.” His voice was low. “I’ve only just taken over.”

“And even if they did get inside? Have you thought of what would happen then? You’re scared, aren’t you, Major-General Cliveden, you’re terrified at the thought that someone has already been inside. Maybe that someone was careless. Maybe that someone was very careless, maybe he knocked over a container or cracked a sealed culture tank. A tank or container, for instance, with botulinus toxin—which is one of the viruses both made and stored in number one lab. It takes a minimum of twelve hours exposure to air to oxidise the toxin and render it harmless. If anyone comes into contact with it before oxidation, they’re dead men. Before midday, that is. And Clandon, had you thought of him? How do you know the botulinus didn’t get him? The symptoms are exactly the same as those of prussic acid poisoning. How do you know the two guards weren’t affected? The senior guard who spoke to you—if he had been affected, the botulinus would have got him as soon as he’d taken off his mask to speak to you. He’d have died in agonies a minute later. Have you checked that he’s still alive?”

Cliveden reached for the phone. His hand was shaking. While he was dialling, I said to Hardanger, “Right, Superintendent, the explanation.”

“Martin here?”

I nodded.

“Two good reasons. The first was that you are number one suspect.”

“Say that again.”

“You’d been sacked,” he said bluntly. “Left under a cloud. Your opinion of Mordon’s place in the scheme of things was well known. You have a reputation for taking the law into your own hands.” He smiled without humour. “I’ve had plenty of experience of that from you.”

“You’re loony. Would I murder my best friend?” I said savagely.

“You were the only outsider who knew the whole security set-up in Mordon. The only one, Cavell. If anyone could get into and out of that place it was you.” He paused for a significant moment. “And you are now the only man alive who knows the combinations for the various laboratory doors. The combinations, as you know, can only be altered in the factory where the doors are made. After your departure, the precaution of changing was not thought necessary.”

“Dr. Baxter, the civilian director, knows the combinations.”

“Dr. Baxter is missing. We can’t trace him anywhere. We had to find out fast how the land lay. This was the best way. The only way. Immediately after you left home this morning we checked with your wife. She said——”

“You’ve been round at my house.” I stared at him. “Bothering Mary? Questioning her? I rather think——”

“Don’t trouble,” Hardanger said dryly. “You’d get no satisfaction from breaking in false teeth. I wasn’t there, sent a junior officer. Silly of me, I admit, asking a bride of two months to turn in her husband. Of course she said you hadn’t left the house all night.”

I looked at him without speaking. His eyes were exactly on a level with mine. He said, “Are you wondering whether to haul off at me for even suggesting that Mary may be a liar or why she didn’t phone to tip you off?”

“Both.”

“She’s no liar. You forget how well I know her. And she didn’t tip you off because we disconnected your phone, both home and here. We also bugged this phone before you arrived this

morning—I heard every word you said to Martin on the phone in your outer office.” He smiled. “You had me worried for a few minutes there.”

“How did you get in? I didn’t hear you. The bell didn’t go off.”

“The fuse box is in the outer corridor. All very illegal, I’m afraid.”

I nodded. “I’ll have to change that.”

“So you’re in the clear, Cavell. An Oscar for Inspector Martin, I should say. Twelve minutes flat to find out what we wanted to know. But we *had* to know.”

“Why? Why that way? A few hours leg-work by your men, checking taxis, restaurants, theatres and you’d have known I couldn’t possibly have been in Mordon last night.”

“I couldn’t wait.” He cleared his throat with unnecessary force. “Which brings me to my second reason. If you’re not the killer, then you’re the man I want to find the killer. Now that Clandon is dead, you are the only man who knows the entire security set-up at Mordon. No one else does. Damned awkward, but there it is. If anyone can find anything, you can.”

“Not to mention the fact that I’m the only man who can open that door now that Clandon is dead and Baxter missing.”

“There’s that too,” he admitted.

“There’s that, too,” I mimicked. “That’s all you really want. And when the door is open I can run along and be a good boy.”

“Not unless you want to.”

“You mean that? First Derry, now Clandon. I’d like to do something.”

“I know. I’ll give you a free hand.”

“The General won’t like it.” No one ever called Hardanger’s ultimate superior by his name: very few even knew it.

“I’ve already fixed it with the General. You’re right, he doesn’t like it. I suspect he doesn’t like you.” Hardanger grinned sourly. “Often the way with relatives.”

“You did that in advance? Well, thanks for the compliment.”

“You were the number one suspect. But I never suspected you. All the same, I had to be sure. So many of our best men have gone over the wall in the past few years.”

“When do we leave?” I said. “Now?” Cliveden had just replaced the receiver on its rest. His hand still wasn’t very steady.

“If you’re ready.”

“I will be in a moment.” Hardanger was a past master at keeping his expressions buttoned up, but there was a speculative curiosity in those eyes that he couldn’t hide. The sort of look he’d give a man who’d just put a foot wrong. I said to Cliveden, “The guards at the plant? Any word?”

“They’re all right. So it can’t have been botulinus that got Clandon. The central laboratories are completely sealed up.”

“And Dr. Baxter?”

“Still no signs of him. He——”

“Still no signs? That makes two of them now. Coincidence, General. If that’s the word I want.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said irritably.

“Easton Derry. My predecessor in Mordon. He vanished a couple of months ago—just six days after he was the best man at my wedding and *he* still hasn’t turned up. Surely you knew?”

“How the hell should I?” A very testy little man indeed, I was glad he wasn’t a civilian doctor and myself one of his patients. “I’ve only been able to get down there twice since my appointment ... Anyway, Baxter. He left the laboratories all right, checking out slightly later than usual. He didn’t return. He lives with a widowed sister in a bungalow near Alfringham, five miles away. He didn’t come home at all last night, she says.” He turned to Hardanger. “We must get down there immediately, Superintendent.”

“Right away, sir. Cavell is going to come with us.”

“Glad to hear it.” Cliveden said. He didn’t look it and I couldn’t blame him. You don’t make major-general without developing an army mind in the process and the army mind sees the world as a neat, orderly and regimented place with no place at all in it for private detectives. But he was trying to be courteous and making the best of a bad job for he went on, “We’ll need all the assistance we can get. Shall we go?”

“Just as soon as I’ve phoned my wife to let her know what’s happening—if her phone’s been reconnected.” Hardanger nodded. I reached for the receiver but Cliveden’s hand was on it first, pressing it firmly down on its cradle.

“No phoning, Cavell. Sorry. Must have absolute security on this. It’s imperative that no one—*no one*—knows that anything has happened at Mordon.”

I lifted his wrist, the phone came up in his hand and I took it from him. I said, “Tell him, Superintendent.”

Hardanger looked uncomfortable. As I dialled he said apologetically, “I’m afraid Cavell is no longer in the Army sir. Not under the jurisdiction of the Special Branch. He is—um—allergic to authority.”

“Under the Official Secrets Act we could demand——”

“Sorry, sir.” Hardanger shook his head heavily. “Classified information voluntarily disclosed to a civilian outwith a government department is no longer an official secret. No one made us tell Cavell anything and he never asked us to. He’s under no obligation. And we want his cooperation.”

I made my call, told Mary that no, I wasn’t under arrest, that I was going down to Mordon and would call her later in the day. After I hung up I took off my jacket, strapped on a felt shoulder holster and stuck the Hanyatti into it. It was a big gun, but it was a big jacket with plenty of room in it, unlike Inspector Martin I didn’t go in much for the Italian line. Hardanger watched me expressionlessly, Cliveden disapprovingly: twice he made to say something, twice he thought better of it. It was all very irregular indeed. But so was murder.

CHAPTER TWO

The Army had a helicopter waiting for us, but the fog was too heavy. Instead we went down to Wiltshire in a big Jaguar saloon driven by a plainclothes policeman who took far too much satisfaction in leaning with all his weight on both accelerator and siren button. But the fog lifted as we cleared Middlesex, the roads were fairly clear and we made it intact to Mordon by just after midday.

Mordon is an architectural monstrosity, a guaranteed blot on any landscape. Had the designer—if it had a designer—based it on an early nineteenth-century prison, which it exactly resembles he couldn’t have achieved an uglier or more repulsive structure. But Mordon is only ten years old.

Grim, grey and gaunt under the darkly lowering October skies of that day, Mordon consisted of four parallel rows of squat, flat-topped concrete buildings, three stories high, each row, in its repellent forbidding lifelessness, for all the world like condemned and abandoned Victorian tenements in the worst slums of a great city. But a fitting enough façade for the work that went on behind the walls.

Each row of buildings was about a quarter of a mile in length, with about two hundred yards separating the rows. The space between buildings and boundary fence, five hundred yards at the nearest approach, was completely open, completely clear. No trees, no bushes, no shrubs, not even a clump of flowers. A man can hide behind a bush. He might even be able to hide behind a clump of flowers. But he can’t hide behind a blade of grass two inches high—and nothing higher grew in the bleak desolation of the grounds of Mordon. The term boundary fence—not a wall, people can hide behind walls—was a misnomer. Any World War 2 concentration camp commandant would have sold his soul for Mordon: with fences like those a man could sleep soundly at nights.

The outer barbed-wire fence was fifteen feet high and sloped outwards at so sharp an angle that the top was four feet out of line with the foot. A similar fence, only sloping the other way, paralleled the outer for its entire perimeter at a distance of about twenty feet. The space between those fences was patrolled at night by alsatians and dobermann-pinschers, trained man-hunters—and if need be,

man-killers—answerable only to their own Army handlers. Three feet inside the second fence and actually below its overhang, was a two-strand trip-wire fence, of so fine a metal as to be normally almost invisible—and certainly would be invisible to anyone climbing down at night time from the top of that second fence. And then, another ten feet away, was the last fence, each of its five strands running through insulators mounted on concrete posts. The electric current passing through those wires was supposed to be less than lethal if, that is, you were in good health.

To make sure that everyone got the general idea the Army had put up notice-boards at ten-yard intervals round the entire perimeter of the outer fence. There were five different types of notices. Four of them, black, on white, read, “DANGER KEEP OUT BY ORDER”: “WARNING GUARD DOGS IN USE”: “PROHIBITED PLACE” and “ELECTRIFIED FENCES”: the fifth, a violent red on yellow, said simply: “W. D. PROPERTY: TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT.” Only a madman or complete illiterate would have attempted to break his way into Mordon.

We came on the public ring road that completely surrounded the camp, bore right by the gorse-covered fields and after a quarter of a mile turned into the main entrance. The police driver stopped just short of the lowered boom and wound down his window as a sergeant approached. The sergeant had a machine-pistol slung over his shoulder and it wasn’t pointing at the ground either.

Then he caught sight of Cliveden, lowered his gun, gave a signal to a man we couldn’t see. The boom rose, the car moved on, halted before heavy steel crash-gates. We left the car, passed through a steel side door and made our way into a one-storey block marked “Reception.”

Three men waited for us there. Two I knew—Colonel Weybridge, deputy commandant of Mordon, and Dr. Gregori, Dr. Baxter’s chief assistant in “E” block. Weybridge, though technically under Cliveden’s command, was the real boss of Mordon: a tall, fresh-faced man with black hair and an incongruously iron-grey moustache, he was reputed to be an outstanding doctor. Mordon was his life: he was one of the few with his own living accommodation on the premises and it was said that he never passed outside the gates twice a year. Gregori was a tall, heavy, swarthy, dark-eyed man, an Italian and ex-professor of medicine from Turin, and a brilliant microbiologist greatly respected by his fellow scientists. The third man was a bulky, shapeless character in a bulky shapeless tweed suit who looked so much like a farmer that he had to be what he turned out to be—a policeman in plain clothes. Inspector Wylie, of the Wiltshire Constabulary.

Cliveden and Weybridge made the introductions, then Hardanger took over. Generals and Colonels or not, Army establishment or not, there was no question from the word “go” “as to who was in complete charge. Hardanger made it clear from the start.

He said bluntly, “Inspector Wylie, you shouldn’t be here. No member of any county constabulary has any right to be inside those gates. But I doubt if you knew that and I’m sure you’re not responsible for your presence here. Who is?”

“I am.” Colonel Weybridge’s voice was steady, but he was on the defensive. “The circumstances are unusual, to say the least.”

“Let me tell it,” Inspector Wylie put in. “Our headquarters got a call late last night, about eleven-thirty, from the guardhouse here, saying that one of your car crews—I understand jeeps patrol the ring road all night—had given chase to some unidentified man who seemed to have been molesting or attacking a girl just outside your grounds. A civilian matter, outwith Army jurisdiction, so they called us. The duty sergeant and constable were here by shortly after midnight, but found nothing and no one. I came along this morning and when I saw the fences had been cut—well, I assumed there was some connection between the two things.”

“The fences cut!” I interrupted. “The boundary fences? It’s not possible.”

“I’m afraid it is, Cavell,” Weybridge said gravely.

“The patrol cars,” I protested. “The dogs, the trip wires, the electric fences. How about them?”

"You'll see yourself. The fences are cut, and that's all that's to it." Weybridge wasn't as calm as he seemed on the surface, not by a long way. I would have taken long odds that he and Gregori were badly frightened men.

"Anyway," Inspector Wylie went on calmly, "I made inquiries at the gate. I met Colonel Weybridge there and he asked me to make inquiries—discreet inquiries—to try to trace Dr. Baxter."

"You did that?" Hardanger asked Weybridge. The voice was speculative, the tone neutral. "Don't you know your own standing orders? That all inquiries are to be handled by your own security chief or my office in London?"

"Clandon was dead and——"

"Oh, God!" Hardanger's voice was a lash. "So now Inspector Wylie knows that Clandon is dead. Or did you know before, Inspector?"

"No, sir."

"But you do now. How many other people have you told, Colonel Weybridge?"

"No one else." His voice was stiff, his face pale.

"Thank heaven for that. Don't think I'm carrying security to ridiculous lengths, Colonel, for it doesn't matter what you think or what I think. All that matters is what one or two people in Whitehall think. They give the orders, we carry them out. The instructions for an emergency such as this are quite clear. We take over—completely. You wash your hands of it—completely. I want your co-operation, of course, but it must be cooperation on *my* terms."

"What the superintendent means," Cliveden said testily, "is that amateur detecting is not discouraged, it's forbidden. I suppose that includes me too, Hardanger?"

"Don't make my job more difficult than it is already, sir."

"I won't. But, as Commandant, I must ask for the right to be kept informed of all progress and the right to be present when number one lab in 'E' block is opened up."

"That's fair," Hardanger agreed.

"When?" Cliveden asked. "The lab, I mean."

Hardanger looked at me. "Well? The twelve hours you spoke of are up."

"I'm not sure." I looked at Dr. Gregori. "Has the ventilation system been started up in number one?"

"No. Of course not. Nobody's been near the place. We left everything strictly alone."

"If anything had been, say, knocked over," I went on carefully. "Would oxidation be complete?"

"I doubt it. Air's too static."

I turned to Hardanger. "All those labs are specially ventilated by filtered air later cleaned in a closed circuit special compartment. I would like this switched on. Then maybe in an hour."

Hardanger nodded. Gregori, dark eyes worried behind his thick lenses, phoned instructions then left with Cliveden and Weybridge. Hardanger turned to Inspector Wylie.

"Well, Inspector, it seems you're in possession of information you shouldn't have. No need to issue the usual dreadful warnings to you, I suppose."

"I like my job," Wylie smiled. "Don't be too hard on old Weybridge, sir. Those medical men just aren't security minded. He meant well."

"The paths of the just—that's me—are made thorny and difficult by those who mean well," Hardanger said heavily. "What's this about Baxter?"

"Seems he left here about 6.30 p.m. last night, sir. But later than usual, I gather, so he missed the special bus to Alfringham."

"He checked out, of course?" I asked. Every scientist leaving Mordon had to sign the "Out" register and hand in his security tag.

"No doubt about that. He had to wait for the ordinary service bus that passed the road end at 6.48. Conductor and two passengers confirm that someone answering to our description—no names,

of course—got on at the road end, but the conductor is quite positive that no one of that description got off at Alfringham Farm, where Dr. Baxter lives. He must have gone all the way to Alfringham, or Hardcaster, the terminus.” “He just vanished,” Hardanger nodded. He looked consideringly at the burly quiet-eyed man. “Like to work with us on this, Wylie?”

“It would make a change from checking up on the old foot-and-mouth,” Wylie admitted. “But our super and the Chief Constable might have something to say about that.”

“They could be persuaded, I think. Your office is at Alfringham, isn’t it? I’ll call you there.”

Wylie left. As he passed through the doorway we caught sight of an army lieutenant, hand raised to knock on the door. Hardanger cocked an eye and said, “Come in.”

“Morning, sir. ‘Morning, Mr. Cavell.” The sandy-haired young lieutenant looked tired, but his voice was brisk and alert in spite of that. “Wilkinson, sir. Officer in charge of the guard patrols last night. Colonel said you might want to see me.”

“Considerate of the Colonel. I do. Hardanger, Superintendent Hardanger. Glad to meet you, Wilkinson. You the man who found Clandon last night?”

“Perkins—a corporal of the guard—found him. He called me and I had a look at him. Just a look. Then I sealed ‘E’ block, called the Colonel and he confirmed.”

“Good man,” Hardanger approved. “But we’ll come to that later. You were notified of the wire-cutting, of course?”

“Naturally, sir. With—with Mr. Clandon gone, I was in charge. We couldn’t find him, not anywhere. He must have been dead even then.”

“Quite. You investigated the wire-cutting, of course?”

“No, sir.”

“No? Why not? Your job, surely?”

“No, sir. It’s a job for an expert.” A half-smile touched the pale tired face. “We carry automatic machine-guns, Superintendent, not microscopes. It was pitch black. Besides, by the time a few pairs of regulation army boots had churned the place up there wouldn’t have been much left to investigate. I set a four man guard, sir, each man ten yards from the break, two inside and two out, with orders that no one should be allowed to approach.”

“Never looked to find such intelligence in the Army,” Hardanger said warmly. “That was first class, young man.” A faint touch of colour touched Wilkinson’s pale face as he tried hard not to show his pleasure. “Anything else you did?”

“Nothing that would help you, sir. I sent another jeep—there’s normally three on patrol at a time—round the entire perimeter of the fence to make a spotlight search for another break. But this was the only one. Then I questioned the crew of the jeep who’d made this wild-goose chase after the man who was supposed to have attacked the girl and warned them that the next time their—ah—chivalrous instincts got the better of them they would be sent back to their regiments. They’re not supposed to leave their jeeps, no matter what the provocation.”

“You think this episode of the distressed young lady was just a blind? To let someone nip in smartly and unobserved with a pair of wire-cutters?”

“What else, sir?”

“What else, indeed,” Hardanger sighed. “How many men usually employed in ‘E’ block, Lieutenant?”

“Fifty-five, sixty, sir.”

“Doctors?”

“A mixed bunch. Doctors, micro-biologists, chemists, technicians, Army and civilian. I don’t know too much about them, sir. We’re not encouraged to ask questions.”

“Where are they now? I mean, ‘E’ block is sealed off.”

“In the refectory lounge. Some of them wanted to go home when they found ‘E’ block shut up but the Colonel—Colonel Weybridge—wouldn’t let them.”

“That’s convenient. Lieutenant, I’d be grateful if you’d lay on two orderlies or messengers or whatever. One for me, one for Inspector Martin here. Inspector Martin would like to talk to those ‘E’ block men, individually. Please make arrangements. If there are any difficulties you are free to say that you have the full authority of General Cliveden behind you. But first I’d like you to come along with us and identify us to your guards at this gap in the fence. Then tell all the guards, the men who man the jeeps and the dog-handlers to be at the reception office in twenty minutes. The ones who were on duty before midnight, I mean.”

Five minutes later Hardanger and I were alone at the break in the fences. The guards had withdrawn out of earshot and Wilkinson had left us.

The barbed wire on the outer fence was strung between curving reinforced concrete posts like junior editions of modern city lighting standards. There were about thirty strands on the fence, with roughly six inches between each pair. The fourth and fifth strands from the bottom had been cut then rejoined with heavy grey twine tied round the barbs nearest the cuts. It had taken a pretty sharp pair of eyes to discover the break.

There had been no rain for three days and there was no trace of footmarks. The ground was damp, but that was still from the heavy dew of the previous night. Whoever had cut those wires had left long before the dew had begun to settle.

“Your eyes are younger than mine,” Hardanger said. “Sawn or cut?”

“Snipped. Cutters or pliers. And have a look at the angle of the cut. Slight, but it’s there.”

Hardanger took one end of the wire in his hand and peered at it.

“From left at the front to right at the back,” he murmured. “The way a left-handed man would naturally hold cutters or pliers to obtain maximum leverage.”

“A left-handed man,” I agreed. “Or a right handed man who wanted to confuse us. So a man who’s either left-handed or clever or both.”

Hardanger looked at me in disgust and made his way slowly to the inner fence. No footprints, no marks between the fences. The inner fence had been cut in three places, whoever had wielded those cutters would have felt more secure from observation from the ring road. The point we had yet to establish was why he had felt so secure from the attention of the police dogs patrolling the area between the two fences.

The trip-wires under the overhang of the second fence were intact. Whoever had cut that fence had been lucky indeed in not stumbling over them. Or he’d known their exact location. Our friend with the pliers didn’t strike me as a man who would depend very much on luck.

And the method he’d adopted to get through the electric fence proved it. Unlike most such fences, where only the top wire carried the current all the way, the others being made live by a vertical joining wire cable at each set of insulators, this fence was live in every wire throughout. The alarm bell would be rung by the shorting of any of those wires to earth, as when someone touched them, or by the cutting of any of the wires. This hadn’t fazed our friend with the pliers—insulated pliers, quite obviously. The two strands of TRS cable lying on the ground between two posts showed this clearly enough. He’d bent one end of one strand on to the lowest insulator of one post, trailed it across the ground and done the same with the lowest insulator on the next post, so providing an alternate pathway for the current. He’d done the same with the pair of insulators above these, then simply cut away both lowermost wires and crawled through under the third wire.

“An ingenious beggar,” Hardanger commented. “Almost argues inside information, doesn’t it?”

“Or somebody just outside the outer fence with a powerful telescope or binoculars. The ring road is open to public traffic, remember. Wouldn’t be hard to sit in a car and see what type of electric fence it was: and I dare say if the conditions were right he could have seen the trip-wires on the inner fence glistening in the sun.”

“I dare say,” Hardanger said heavily. “Well, it’s no damn’ good us staying here and staring at this fence. Let’s get back and start asking questions.”

All the men Hardanger had asked to see were assembled in the reception hall. They were sitting on benches around the hall, fidgeting and restless. Some of them looked sleepy, all of them looked scared. I knew it would take Hardanger about half of one second to sum up their mental condition and act accordingly. He did. He took his seat behind a table and looked up under his shaggy brows, the pale blue eyes cold and penetrating and hostile. As an actor, he wasn't all that far behind Inspector Martin.

"All right," he said brusquely. "The jeep crew. The ones who made the wild-geese chase last night. Let's have you."

Three men—a corporal and two privates—rose slowly to their feet. Hardanger gave his attention to the corporal.

"Your name, please?"

"Muirfield, sir."

"You in charge of the crew last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me what happened."

"Yes, sir. We'd completed a circuit of the ring road, stopped to report everything O.K. at the main gate and then left again. It would be about eleven-fifteen, sir, give or take a minute or two. About two hundred and fifty yards past the gates we saw this girl running into the headlights. She looked wild, dishevelled like, her hair all over the place. She was half-screaming, half-crying, a funny noise. I was driving. I stopped the jeep, jumped out, and the others came after me. I should have told them to stay where they——"

"Never mind about what you should have done. The story, man!"

"Well, we came up to her, sir. She'd mud on her face and her coat was torn. I said——"

"Ever seen her before?"

"No, sir."

"Would you recognise her again?"

He hesitated. "I doubt it, sir. Her face was in a fair old mess."

"She spoke to you?"

"Yes, sir. She said——"

"Recognise her voice? Any of you recognise her voice? Can you be quite sure of that?"

Three solemn shakes of their heads. They hadn't recognised her voice.

"All right," Hardanger said wearily. "She pitched the tale of the damsel in distress. At the psychological moment someone conveniently betrayed his presence and started running. You all took off after him. Catch a glimpse of him?"

"A glimpse, only, sir. Just a blur in the darkness. Could have been anyone."

"He took off in a car, I understand. Just another blur, I take it?"

"Yes, sir. Not a car, sir. A closed van type, sir. A Bedford."

"I see." Hardanger stopped and stared at him. "A Bedford! How the devil do you know? It was dark, you said."

"It was a Bedford," Muirfield insisted. "I'd know the engine anywhere. And I'm a garage mechanic in civvy street."

"He's right, Superintendent," I put in. "A Bedford does have a very distinctive engine note."

"I'll be back." Hardanger was on his feet and it didn't need any clairvoyance to see him heading for the nearest telephone. He glanced at me, nodded at the seated soldiers and left.

I said, pleasantly enough, "Who was the dog-handler in number one last night?" The circuit between the two barbed-wire fences were divided into four sections by wooden hurdles: number one was the section in which the break-in occurred. "You, Ferguson?"

A dark stocky private in his middle twenties had risen to his feet. Ferguson was regular Army, a born soldier, tough, aggressive, and not very bright.

“Me,” he said. There was truculence in his voice, not very much, but more waiting there if I wanted it.

“Where were you at eleven fifteen last night?”

“In number one. With Rollo. That’s my alsatian.”

“You saw the incident that Corporal Muirfield here has described?”

“Course I saw it.”

“Lie number one, Ferguson. Lie number two and you’ll be returned to your regiment before the day is out.”

“I’m not lying.” His face was suddenly ugly. “And you can’t talk to me like that, *Mister Cavell*. You can’t threaten *me* any more. Don’t think we don’t all know you were sacked from here!”

I turned to the orderly. “Ask Colonel Weybridge to come here. At once, please.”

The orderly turned to go, but a big sergeant rose to his feet and stopped him.

“It’s not necessary, sir. Ferguson’s a fool. It’s bound to come out. He was at the switchboard having a smoke and a cup of cocoa with the gatehouse communications number. I was in charge. Never saw him there, but I knew about it and didn’t worry about it. Ferguson always left Rollo in number one—and that dog’s a killer, sir. It was safe enough.”

“It wasn’t, but thanks. You’ve been in the habit of doing this for some time, haven’t you, Ferguson?”

“I haven’t.” He was scowling, sullen. “Last night was the first——”

“If there was a rank lower than private,” I interrupted wearily, “you’d stay in it till the end of your days. Use what little sense you have. Do you think whoever arranged this decoy move and was standing by with his pliers ready to break in did it *unless* he knew for certain you wouldn’t be on patrol at that particular time? Probably after Mr. Clandon finished his 11 p.m. rounds visit to the main gate every night you went straight into the gatehouse for your smoke and cocoa. Isn’t that it?”

He stood staring down at the floor in stubborn silence until the sergeant said sharply, “For God’s sake, Fergie, use your loaf. Everybody else here can see it. So can you.”

Again silence, but this time a sullen nod of defeat.

“We’re getting someplace. When you came here you left your dog—Rollo—behind?”

“Yes, sir.” Ferguson’s days of truculent defiance were over.

“What’s he like?”

“He’d tear the throat out of any man alive, from the general downwards,” Ferguson said with satisfaction. “Except me, of course.”

“He didn’t tear out any throats last night,” I pointed out. “I wonder why?”

“He must have been got at,” Ferguson said defensively.

“What do you mean ‘got at’? Did you have a look at him before you turned him into his compound last night?”

“Look at him? ‘Course not. Why should I? When we saw the cut outer fence we thought whoever done it must have caught sight of Rollo and run for his life. That’s what I would have bloody well done. If——”

“Fetch the dog here,” I said. “But for God’s sake muzzle him first.” He left and while he was away Hardanger returned. I told him what I’d learned, and that I’d sent for the dog.

Hardanger asked, “What do you expect to find? Nothing, I think. A chloroform pad or something like that would leave no mark. Same if some sort of dart or sharply tipped weapon with one of those funny poisons had been chucked at him. Just a pinprick, that’s all there would be.”

“From what I hear of our canine pal,” I said, “I wouldn’t try to hold a chloroform pad against his head if you gave me the crown jewels. As for those funny poisons, as you call them, I don’t suppose one person in a hundred thousand could lay hands on one of them or know how to use them even if they did. Besides, throwing or firing any sharp-tipped weapon against a fast-moving, thick-coated

target in the dark would be a very dicey proposition indeed. Our friend of last night doesn't go in for dicey propositions, only for certainties."

Ferguson was back in ten minutes, fighting to restrain a wolf-like animal that lunged out madly at anyone who came near him. Rollo had a muzzle on but even that didn't make me feel too confident. I didn't need any persuasion to accept the sergeant's word that the dog was a killer.

"Does that hound *always* act like this?" I demanded.

"Not usually." Ferguson was puzzled. "In fact, never. Usually perfectly behaved until I let him off the leash—then he'll go for the nearest person no matter who he is. But he even had a go at me this afternoon—half-hearted, like, but nasty."

It didn't take long to discover the source of Rollo's irritation. Rollo was suffering from what must have been a very severe headache indeed. The skin on the forehead, just above eye-level, had a swollen pulpy feeling to it and it took four men all their time to hold the dog down when I touched this area with the tips of my forefingers. We turned him over, and I parted the thick fur on the throat till I found what I was looking for—two triangular jagged tears, deep and very unpleasant looking, about three inches apart.

"You'd better give your pal here a couple of days off," I said to Ferguson, "and some disinfectant for those gashes on his neck. I wish you luck when you're putting it on. You can take him away."

"No chloroform, no fancy poisons," Hardanger admitted when we were alone. "Those gashes—barbed wire, hey?"

"What else? Just the right distance apart. Somebody pads his forearm, sticks it between a couple of strands of barbed wire and Rollo grabs it. He wouldn't bark—those dogs are trained never to bark. As soon as he grabs he's pulled through and down onto the barbed wire and can't pull himself free unless he tears his throat out. And then someone clouts him at his leisure with something heavy and hard. Simple, old-fashioned, direct and very very effective. Whoever the character we're after, he's no fool."

"He's smarter than Rollo, anyway," Hardanger conceded heavily.

CHAPTER THREE

When we went up to "E" block, accompanied by two of Hardanger's assistants newly arrived from London, we found Cliveden, Weybridge, Gregori and Wilkinson waiting for us. Wilkinson produced the key to the heavy wooden door.

"No one been inside since you locked the place after seeing Clandon?" Hardanger asked.

"I can guarantee that, sir. Guards posted all the time."

"But Cavell here asked for the ventilation system to be switched on. How could that be done without someone going inside?"

"Duplicate switches on the roof, sir. All fuse-boxes, junctions and electrical terminals are also housed on the roof. Means that the repair and maintenance electricians don't even have to enter the main building."

"You people don't miss much," Hardanger admitted. "Open up, please."

The door swung back, we all filed through and turned down the long corridor to our left. Number one lab was right at the far end of the corridor, at least two hundred yards away, but that was the way we had to go: there was only the one entrance to the entire block. Security was all. On the way we had to pass through half a dozen doors, some opened by photo-electric cells, others by handles fifteen inches long. Elbow handles. Considering the nature of the burdens that some of the Mordon scientists carried from time to time, it was advisable to have both hands free all the time.

We came to number one lab—and Clandon. Clandon was lying just outside the massive steel door of the laboratory, but he wasn't any more the Neil Clandon I used to know—the big, tough, kindly, humorous Irishman who'd been my friend over too many years. He looked curiously small now, small and huddled and defenceless, another man altogether. Not Neil Clandon any more. Even his face was the face of another man, eyes abnormally wide and starting as one who had passed far

beyond the realms of sanity into a total and terror-induced madness, the lips strained cruelly back over clenched teeth in the appalling rictus of his dying agony. And no man who looked at that face, at the convulsively contorted limbs could doubt that Neil Clandon had died as terribly as man ever could.

They were all watching me, that I was vaguely aware of, but I was pretty good at telling my face what to do. I went forward and stooped low over him, sniffing, and found myself apologising to the dead man for the involuntary wrinkling distaste of nose and mouth. No fault of Neil's. I glanced at Colonel Weybridge and he came forward and bent beside me for a moment before straightening. He looked at Wilkinson and said, "You were right, my boy. Cyanide."

I pulled a pair of cotton gloves from my pocket. One of Hardanger's assistants lifted his flash camera but I pushed his arm down and said, "No pictures. Neil Clandon's not going into anyone's morgue gallery. Too late for pictures anyway. If you feel all that like work why don't you start on that steel door there? Fingerprints. It'll be loaded with them—and not one of them will do you the slightest damn' bit of good."

The two men glanced at Hardanger. He hesitated, shrugged, nodded. I went through Neil Clandon's pockets. There wasn't much that could be of any use to me—wallet, cigarette case, a couple of books of matches and, in the left hand jacket pocket, a handful of transparent papers that had been wrapped round butterscotch sweets.

I said, "This is how he died. The very latest in confectionery—cyanide butterscotch. You can see the sweet he was eating on the floor there, beside his head. Have you such a thing as an analytical chemist on the premises, Colonel?"

"Of course."

"He'll find that sweet and possibly one of those butterscotch papers covered with cyanide. I hope your chemist isn't the type who licks his fingers after touching sticky stuff. Whoever doctored this sweet knew of Clandon's weakness for butterscotch. He also knew Clandon. Put it another way, Clandon knew him. He knew him well. He knew him so well and was so little surprised to find him here that he didn't hesitate to accept a butterscotch from him. Whoever killed Clandon is not only employed in Mordon—he's employed in this particular section of 'E' block. If he weren't, Clandon would have been too damn' busy suspecting him of everything under the sun even to consider accepting anything from him. Narrows the field of inquiry pretty drastically. The killer's first mistake—and a big one."

"Maybe," Hardanger rumbled. "And maybe you're oversimplifying and taking too much for granted. Assumptions. How do you know Clandon was killed here? You've said yourself we're up against a clever man, a man who would be more likely than not to obscure things, to cause confusion, to cast suspicions in the wrong place by killing Clandon elsewhere and then dragging him here. And it's asking too much to believe that he just happened to have a cyanide sweet in his pocket that he just happened to hand to Clandon when Clandon just happened to find him doing what he was doing."

"About the second part I don't know," I said. "I should have thought myself that Clandon would have been highly suspicious of *anyone* he found here late at night, no matter who he was. But Clandon died right here, that's for sure." I looked at Cliveden and Weybridge. "How long for cyanide poisoning to take effect?"

"Practically instantaneous," Cliveden said.

"And he was violently ill here," I said. "So he died here. And look at those two faint scratches on the plaster of the wall. A lab check on his fingernails is almost superfluous; that's where he clawed for support as he fell to the floor. Some 'friend' gave Clandon that sweet, and that's why I'd like the wallet, cigarette case and books of matches printed. There's just a chance in a thousand that the friend may have been offered a cigarette or a match, or that he went through Clandon's wallet after he was dead. But I don't think there's even that chance in a thousand. But I think the prints on that door should be interesting. And informative. I'll take a hundred to one in anything you like that the prints on that door will be exclusively of those entitled to pass through that door. What I really want to find

out is whether there's been any signs of deliberately smearing, as with a handkerchief or gloves, in the vicinity of the combination, time-lock or circular handle."

"There will be," Hardanger nodded. "If your assumption that this is strictly an inside job is correct, there will be. To bring in the possibility of outsiders."

"There's still Clandon," I said.

Hardanger nodded again, turned away to watch his two men working on the door. Just then a soldier came up with a large fibre case and a small covered cage, placed it on the floor, saluted nobody in particular and left. I caught the inquiring lift of Cliveden's eyebrow.

"When I go into the lab," I said, "I go in alone. In that case is a gas-tight suit and closed circuit breathing apparatus. I'll be wearing that. I lock the steel door behind me, open the inner door and take the hamster in this cage in with me. If he's still alive after a few minutes—well, it's clear inside."

"A hamster?" Hardanger turned his attention from the door, moved across to the cage and lifted the cover. "Poor little beggar. Where did you acquire a hamster so conveniently?"

"Mordon is the easiest place in Britain to acquire a hamster conveniently. There must be a couple of hundred of them within a stone's throw from here. Not to mention a few thousand guinea-pigs, rabbits, monkeys, parrots, mice and fowls. They're bred and reared on Alfringham Farm—where Dr. Baxter has his cottage. Poor little beggar, as you say. They've a pretty short life and far from sweet one. The R.S.P.C.A. and the National Anti-Vivisection Society would sell their souls to get in here. The Official Secrets Act sees to it that they don't. Mordon is their waking nightmare and I don't blame them. Do you know that over a hundred thousand animals died inside these walls last year—many of them in agony. They're a sweet bunch in Mordon."

"Everyone is entitled to his opinions," General Cliveden said coldly. "I don't say I entirely disagree with you." He smiled without humour. "The right place for airing such sentiments, Cavell, but the wrong time."

I nodded, acknowledgement or apology, he could take it how he liked, and opened the fibre case. I straightened, gas-suit in hand, and felt my arm gripped. Dr. Gregori. The dark eyes were intense behind the thick glasses, the swarthy face tight with worry.

"Don't go in there, Mr. Cavell." His voice was low, urgent, almost desperate. "I beg of you, don't go in there."

I said nothing, just looked at him. I liked Gregori, as did all his colleagues without exception. But Gregori wasn't in Mordon because he was a likeable man. He was there because he was reputed to be one of the most brilliant micro-biologists in Europe. An Italian professor of medicine, he'd been in Mordon just over eight months. The biggest catch Mordon had ever made, and it had been touch and go at that: it had taken cabinet conferences at the highest levels before the Italian government agreed to release him for an unspecified period. And if a man like Dr. Gregori was worried, maybe it was time that I was getting worried too.

"Why shouldn't he go in there?" Hardanger demanded. "I take it you must have very powerful reasons, Dr. Gregori?"

"He has indeed," Cliveden said. His face was as grave as his voice. "No man knows more about number one lab than Dr. Gregori. We were speaking of this a short time ago. Dr. Gregori admits candidly that he's terrified and I'd be lying if I didn't say that he's got me pretty badly frightened, too. If Dr. Gregori had his way he'd cut through the block on either side of number one lab, built a five foot thick concrete wall and roof round it and seal it off for ever. That's how frightened Dr. Gregori is. At the very least he wants this lab kept closed for a month."

Hardanger gave Cliveden his usual dead-pan look, transferred it to Gregori, then turned to his two assistants. "Down the corridor till you're out of earshot, please. For your own sakes, the less you know of this the better. You, too, Lieutenant. Sorry." He waited until Wilkinson and the two men had gone, looked quizzically at Gregori and said, "So you don't want number one lab opened, Dr. Gregori? Makes you number one on our suspect list, you know."

“Please. I do not feel like smiling. And I do not feel like talking here.” He glanced quickly at Clandon, looked as quickly away. “I’m not a policeman —or a soldier. If you would——”

“Of course.” Hardanger pointed to a door a few yards down the passage. “What’s in there?”

“Just a store-room. I am so sorry to be so squeamish——”

“Come on.” Hardanger led the way and we went inside. Oblivious of the “No smoking” signs, Gregori had lit a cigarette and was smoking it in rapid, nervous puffs.

“I must not waste your time,” he said. “I will be as brief as I can. But I *must* convince you.” He paused, then went on slowly. “This is the nuclear age. This is the age when tens of millions go about their homes and their work in daily fear and dread of the thermo-nuclear holocaust which, they are all sure, may come any day, and must come soon. Millions cannot sleep at night for they dream too much—of our green and lovely world and their children lying dead in it.”

He drew deeply on his cigarette, stubbed it out, at once lit another. He said through the drifting smoke, “I have no such fears of a nuclear Armageddon and I sleep well at nights. Such war will never come. I listen to the Russians rattling their rockets, and I smile. I listen to the Americans rattling theirs, and I smile again. For I know that all the time the two giant powers are shaking their sabres in the scabbards, while they’re threatening each other with so many hundreds of megaton-carrying missiles, they are not really thinking of their missiles at all. They are thinking, gentlemen, of Mordon, for we—the British, I should say—have made it our business to ensure that the great nations understand exactly what is going on behind the fences of Mordon.” He tapped the brickwork beside him. “Behind this very wall here. The ultimate weapon. The world’s one certain guarantee of peace. The term ‘ultimate weapon’ has been used too freely, has come almost to lose its meaning. But the term, in this case, is precise and exact. If by ‘ultimate’ one means total annihilation.”

He smiled, a little self-consciously.

“I’m being melodramatic, a little? Perhaps. My Latin blood shall we say? But listen carefully, gentlemen, and try to understand the full significance of what I’m going to say. Not the General and Colonel, of course, they already know: but you, Superintendent, and you, Mr. Cavell.

“We have developed in Mordon here over forty different types of plague germs. I will confine myself to two. One of them is a derivative of the botulinus toxin—which we had developed in World War II. As a point of interest, a quarter of a million troops in England were inoculated against this toxin just before D-Day and I doubt whether any of them know to this day what they were inoculated against.

“We have refined this toxin into a fantastic and shocking weapon compared to which even the mightiest hydrogen bomb is a child’s toy. Six ounces of this toxin, gentlemen, distributed fairly evenly throughout the world, would destroy every man, woman and child alive on this planet today. No flight of fancy.” His voice was weighted with heavy emphasis, his face still and sombre. “This is simple fact. Give me an airplane and let me fly over London on a windless summer afternoon with no more than a gramme of botulinus toxin to scatter and by evening seven million Londoners would be dead. A thimbleful in its water reservoirs and London would become one vast charnel house. If God does not strike me down for using the term ‘ideal’ in this connection, then this is the ideal form of germ warfare. The botulinus toxin oxidises after twelve hours exposure to the atmosphere and becomes harmless. Twelve hours after country A releases a few grammes of botulinus over country B it can send its soldiers in without any fear of attack by either the toxin or the defending soldiers. For the defending soldiers would be dead. And the civilians, the men, the women, the children. They would all be dead. All dead.”

Gregori fumbled in his pocket for another cigarette. His hands were shaking and he made no attempt to conceal the fact. He was probably unaware of it.

I said, “But you used the term ‘ultimate weapon’, as if we alone possessed it. Surely the Russians and Americans——”

“They have it too. We know where Russia’s laboratories in the Urals are. We know where the Canadians manufacture it—the Canadians were leaders in the field until recently—and it’s no secret that there are four thousand scientists working on a crash programme in Fort Detrick in America to produce even more deadlier poisons, so hurried a crash programme that we know that scientists have died and eight hundred of them fallen ill over the past few years. They have all failed to produce this deadlier poison. Britain has succeeded which is why the eyes of the world are on Mordon.”

“Is it possible?” Hardanger’s tone was dry but his face was set. “A deadlier poison than this damn’ botulinus? Seems kind of superfluous to me.”

“Botulinus has its drawback,” Gregori said quietly. “From a military viewpoint that is. Botulinus you must breathe or swallow to become infected. It is not contagious. Also, we suspect that a few countries *may* have produced a form of vaccine against even the refined type of drug we have developed here. But there is no vaccine on earth to counteract the newest virus we have produced—and it’s as contagious as a bush-fire.

“This other virus is a derivative of the polio virus—infantile paralysis, if you will—but a virus the potency of which has been increased a million times by—well, the methods don’t matter and you wouldn’t understand. What does matter is this: unlike botulinus, this new polio virus is indestructible—extremes of heat and cold, oxidation and poison have no effect upon it and its life span appears to be indefinite, although we believe it impossible—we hope it impossible—that any virus could live for more than a month in an environment completely hostile to growth and development; unlike botulinus it is highly contagious, as well as being fatal if swallowed or breathed; and, most terrible of all, we have been unable to discover a vaccine for it. I myself am convinced that we can never discover a vaccine against it.” He smiled without humour. “To this virus we have given a highly unscientific name, but one that describes it perfectly—the Satan Bug. It is the most terrible and terrifying weapon mankind has ever known or ever will know.”

“No vaccine?” Hardanger said. His tone wasn’t dry this time but his lips were. “No vaccine at all?”

“We have given up hope. Only a few days ago, as you will recall, Colonel Weybridge, Dr. Baxter thought he had found it—but we were completely wrong. There is no hope, none in the world. Now all our efforts are concentrated on evolving an attenuated strain with a limited life-span. In its present form, we obviously cannot use it. But when we do get a form with a limited life-span—and its death *must* be caused by oxidation—then we have the ultimate weapon. When that day comes all the nations of the world may as well destroy their nuclear weapons. From a nuclear attack, no matter how intense, there will always be survivors. The Americans have calculated that even a full-scale Soviet nuclear attack on their country, with *all* the resources at Russia’s disposal, would cause no more than seventy million deaths—no more, I say!—with possibly several million others as a result of radiation. But half the nation would survive, and in a generation or two that nation would rise again. But a nation attacked by the Satan Bug would never rise again: for there would be no survivors.”

I hadn’t been wrong about Hardanger’s lips being dry, he was licking them to make speaking easier. Someone should see this, I thought. Hardanger scared. Hardanger truly and genuinely frightened. The penitentiaries of Britain were full of people who would never have believed it.

“And until then,” Hardanger said quietly. “Until you have evolved this limited life-strain?”

“Until then?” Gregori stared down at the concrete floor. “Until then? Let me put it this way. In its final form the Satan Bug is an extremely refined powder. I take a salt-spoon of this powder, go outside in the grounds of Mordon and turn the salt-spoon upside down. What happens? Every person in Mordon would be dead within an hour, the whole of Wiltshire would be an open tomb by dawn. In a week, ten days, all life would have ceased to exist in Britain. I mean all life. The Plague, the Black Death—was nothing compared with this. Long before the last man died in agony ships or planes or birds or just the waters of the North Sea would have carried the Satan Bug to Europe. We

can conceive of no obstacle that can stop its eventual world-wide spread. Two months I would say, two months at the very most.

“Think of it, Superintendent, think of it. If you can, that is, for it is something really beyond our conception, beyond human imagination. The Lapp trapping in the far north of Sweden. The Chinese peasant tilling his rice-fields in the Yangtse valley. The cattle rancher on his station in the Australian outback, the shopper in Fifth Avenue, the primitive in Tierra del Fuego. Dead. All dead. Because I turned a salt-spoon upside down. Nothing, nothing, *nothing* can stop the Satan Bug. Eventually all forms of life will perish. Who, what will be the last to go? I cannot say. Perhaps the great albatross for ever winging its way round the bottom of the world. Perhaps a handful of Eskimos deep in the Arctic basin. But the seas travel the world over, and so also do the winds: one day, one day soon, they too would die.”

By this time I felt like lighting a cigarette myself and I did. If any enterprising company had got around to running a passenger rocket service to the moon by the time the Satan Bug got loose, they wouldn't have to spend all that much on advertising.

“What I'm afraid of you see,” Gregori went on quietly, “is what we may find behind that door. I have not the mind of a detective, but I can see things when they lie plainly before me. Whoever broke his way into Mordon was a desperate man playing for desperate stakes. The end justified by any means—and the only ends to justify such terrible means would be some of the stocks in the virus cupboard.”

“Cupboard?” Hardanger drew down his bushy brows “Don't you lock those damn' germs away somewhere safe?”

“They are safe,” I said. “The lab walls are of reinforced concrete and panelled with heavy-gauge mild steel. No windows, of course. This door is the only way in. Why shouldn't it be safe in a cupboard?”

“I didn't know.” Hardanger turned back to Gregori. “Please go on.”

“That's all.” Gregori shrugged. “A desperate man. A man in a great hurry. The key to the locker—just wood and glass—I have in my hands here. See? He would have to break in. In his haste and with the use of force who knows what damage he may not have done, what virus containers he might not have knocked over or broken? If one of those had been a Satan Bug container, and there are but three in existence ... Maybe it's only a very remote chance. But I say to you, in all sincerity and earnestness, if there was only one chance in a hundred million of a Satan Bug container having been broken, there is still more than ample justification for never opening that door again. For if one is broken and one cubic centimetre of tainted air escapes—” He broke off and lifted his hands helplessly. “Have we the right to take upon ourselves the responsibility of being the executioners of mankind?”

“General Cliveden?” Hardanger said.

“I'm afraid I agree. Seal it up.”

“Colonel Weybridge?”

“I don't know, I don't know.” Weybridge took off his cap, ran his hand through the short dark hair. “Yes, I do now. Seal the damn' place up.”

“Well. You're the three men who should really know what they are talking about.” Hardanger pursed his lips for a moment, then glanced at me. “In the face of expert unanimity, it should be interesting to hear what Cavell thinks.”

“Cavell thinks they're a pack of old women,” I said. “I think your minds are so gummed up with the idea of the Satan Bug on the loose that you're incapable of thinking at all, far less thinking straight. Let's look at the central fact—central supposition, rather. Dr. Gregori bases all his fears on the assumption that someone has broken in and stolen the viruses. He thinks there's one chance in a thousand that one of the containers may have been broken, so if that door is opened there's one chance in a thousand of menace to mankind. But if he has actually stolen the Satan Bug, then the menace to mankind becomes not one in a thousand—but a thousand to one. For heaven's sake take the blinkers

off for a moment and *try* to see that a man on the loose with the viruses presents an infinitely greater danger than the remote chance of his having broken one inside those doors. Simple logic says that we must guard against the greater danger. So we *must* get inside the room—how else can we begin to get any trace of the thief and killer, to try to guard against the infinitely greater danger? We must, I say.

“Or I must. I’m dressing up and taking that hamster in there. If the hamster survives, good and well. If he doesn’t I don’t come out. Fair enough?”

“Of all the damned arrogance,” Cliveden said coldly. “For a private detective, Cavell, you have an awful lot of gall. You might bear in mind that *I’m* the commandant in Mordon and *I* take all the decisions.”

“You did, General. But not any more. The Special Branch has taken over—completely. You know that.”

Hardanger ignored us both. Grasping at straws, he said to Gregori, “You mentioned that a special air filtration unit was working inside there. Won’t that have cleared the air?”

“With any other virus, yes. Not with the Satan Bug. It’s virtually indestructable, I tell you. And it’s a closed circuit filtration unit. The same air, washed and cleaned, is fed back in again. But you can’t wash away the Satan Bug.”

There was a long pause, then I said to Gregori, “If the Satan Bug or botulinus is loose in this lab, how long would it take to affect the hamster?”

“Fifteen seconds,” he said precisely. “In thirty seconds it will be in convulsions. In a minute, dead. There will be reflex muscle twitchings but it will be dead. That’s for the Satan Bug. For botulinus only slightly longer.”

“Don’t stop me from going in,” I said to Cliveden. “I’ll see what happens to the hamster. If he’s O.K., then I’ll wait another ten minutes. Then I’ll come out.”

“If you come out.” He was weakening. Cliveden was nobody’s fool. He was too clever not to have gone over what I had said and at least some of it must have made sense to him.

“If anything—any virus—has been stolen,” I said, “then whoever stole it is a madman. The Kennet, a tributary of the Thames, passes by only a few miles from here. How do you know that madman isn’t bent over the Kennet this instant, pouring those damned bugs into the water?”

“How do I know you won’t come out if that hamster does die?” Cliveden said desperately. “Good God, Cavell, you’re only human. If that hamster does die, do you expect me to believe that you’re going to remain in there till you die of starvation? Asphyxiation, rather, when the oxygen gives out? Of course you’re going to come out.”

“All right, General, suppose I come out. Would I still be wearing the gas-suit and breathing apparatus?”

“Obviously.” His voice was curt. “If you weren’t and that room was contaminated—well, you couldn’t come out. You’d be dead.”

“All right, again. This way.” I led the way out to the corridor, indicated the last corridor-door we’d passed through. “That door is gas-tight. I know that. So are those outside double windows. You stand at that corridor door—have it open a crack. The door of number one lab opens on it— you’ll see me as soon as I begin to come out. Agreed?”

“What are you talking about?”

“This.” I reached inside my jacket, pulled out the Hanyatti automatic, knocked the safety catch off. “You have this in your hand. If, when the lab door opens, I’m still wearing the suit and breathing apparatus, you can shoot me down. At fifteen feet and with nine shots you can hardly fail to. Then you shut the corridor door. Then the virus is still sealed inside ‘E’ block.”

He took the gun from me, slowly, reluctantly, uncertainly. But there was nothing uncertain about eyes and voice when finally he spoke.

“You know I shall use this, if I have to?”

“Of course I know it.” I smiled. But I didn’t feel much like it. “From what I’ve heard I’d rather die from a bullet than the Satan Bug.”

“I’m sorry I blew my top a minute ago,” he said quietly. “You’re a brave man, Cavell.”

“Don’t fail to mention the fact in my obituary in *The Times*. How about asking your men to finish off printing and photographing that door, Superintendent?”

* * *

Twenty minutes later the men were finished and I was all ready to go. The others looked at me with that peculiar hesitancy and indecision of people who think they should be making farewell speeches but find the appropriate words too hard to come by. A couple of nods, a half wave of a hand, and they’d left me. They all passed down the corridor and through the next door, except General Cliveden, who remained in the open doorway. From some obscure feeling of decency, he held my Hanyatti behind his body where I couldn’t see it.

The gas-suit was tight and constricting, the closed circuit breathing apparatus cut into the back of my neck and the high concentration of oxygen made my mouth dry. Or maybe my mouth was dry anyway. Three cigarettes in the past twenty minutes—a normal day’s quota for me, I preferred to take my slow poisoning in the form of a pipe—wouldn’t have helped any either. I tried to think of one compelling reason why I shouldn’t go through that door, but that didn’t help either, there were so many compelling reasons that I couldn’t pick and choose between them, so I didn’t even bother trying. I made a last careful check of suit, mask and oxygen cylinders, but I was only kidding myself, this was about my fifth last careful check. Besides, they were all watching me. I had my pride. I started spelling out the combination on the heavy steel door.

A fairly complicated and delicate operation at any time, the operation of opening that door was made doubly difficult by reinforced-rubber covered fingers and poor vision afforded by slanted goggles. But exactly a minute after I’d begun I heard the heavy thud as the last spin of the dial energised the powerful electro-magnets that withdrew the heavy central bolt: three complete turns of the big circular handle and the half-ton door eased slowly open under the full weight of my shoulder.

I picked up the hamster’s cage, eased in quickly through the opening door, checked its swing and closed it as swiftly as possible. Three turns of the inner circular handle and the vault door was locked again. The chances were that in so doing I had wiped off a fair number of prints but I wouldn’t have wiped off any prints that mattered.

The rubber-sealed frosted-glass door leading into the laboratory proper was at the other end of the tiny vestibule. Further delay would achieve nothing—nothing apart from prolonging my life, that was. I leaned on the fifteen-inch elbow handle, pressed open the door, passed inside and closed the door behind me.

No need to switch on any lights—the laboratory was already brilliantly illuminated by shadowless neon lighting. Whoever had broken into that lab had either figured that the Government was a big enough firm to stand the waste of electricity or he’d left in such a tearing hurry that he’d had no time to think of lights.

I’d no time to think of lights either. Nor had I the inclination. My sole and over-riding concern was with the immediate welfare of the tiny hamster inside the cage I was carrying.

I placed the cage on the nearest bench, whipped off the cover and stared at the little animal. No bound man seated on a powder keg ever watched the last few minutes of sputtering fuse with half the mesmerised fascination, the totally-exclusive concentration with which I stared at that hamster. The starving cat with up-raised paw by the mousehole, the mongoose waiting for the king-cobra to strike, the ruined gambler watching the last roll of the dice—compared to me, they were asleep on the job. If ever the human eye had the power of transfixion, that hamster should have been skewered alive.

Fifteen seconds, Gregori had said. Fifteen seconds only and if the deadly Satan Bug virus was present in the atmosphere of that lab the hamster would react. I counted off the seconds, each second a bell tolling towards eternity, and at exactly fifteen seconds the hamster twitched violently. Violently,

but nothing compared to the way my heart behaved, a double somersault that seemed to take up all the space inside the chest wall, before settling down to an abnormally slow heavy thudding that seemed to shake my body with its every beat. Inside the rubber gloves the palms of my hands turned wet, ice-cold. My mouth was dry as last year's ashes.

Thirty seconds passed. By this time, if the virus was loose, the hamster should have been in convulsions. But he wasn't, not unless convulsions in a hamster took the form of sitting up on its hind legs and rubbing its nose vigorously with a couple of tiny irritated paws.

Forty-five seconds. A minute. Maybe Dr. Gregori had over-estimated the virulence of the virus. Maybe this was a hamster with an abnormally tough and resistant physique.

But Gregori didn't strike me as the sort of scientist who would make any mistakes and this looked like a pretty puny hamster to me. For the first time since entering the room I started to use the breathing apparatus.

I swung the top of the cage back on its hinges and started to lift out the hamster. He was still in pretty good shape as far as I could tell, for he wriggled from my hand, jumped down on to the rubber-tiled floor and scurried away up a long passage between a table and a wall-bench, stopping at the far end to get on with scratching his nose again. I came to the conclusion that if a hamster could take it I could too: after all, I outweighed him by about five hundred to one. I unbuckled the straps behind my neck and pulled off the closed circuit breathing apparatus. I took a long deep lungful of air.

That was a mistake. I admit you can hardly heave a vast sigh of relief at the prospect of keeping on living yet awhile just by sniffing cautiously at the atmosphere, but that is what I ought to have done. I could understand now why the hamster had spent his time in rubbing his nose with such disgusted intensity. I felt my nostrils try to wrinkle shut in nauseated repugnance as the vile smell hit them. Sulphuretted hydrogen had nothing on it.

Holding my nose I started moving around the benches and tables. Within thirty seconds, in a passage at the top of the laboratory, I found what I was looking for, and what I didn't want to find. The midnight visitor hadn't forgotten to switch out the lights, he'd just left in such a tearing hurry that the thought of light switches would never even have crossed his mind. His one ambition in life would have been to get out of that room and close both doors tightly behind him just as quickly as was humanly possible.

Hardanger could call off his search for Dr. Baxter. Dr. Baxter was here, still clad in his white knee-length overall, lying on the rubber floor. Like Clandon, he'd obviously died in contorted agony. Unlike Clandon, whatever had killed him hadn't been cyanide. I knew of no type of death associated with this strange blueness of the face, with the outpouring of so much fluid from eyes, ears and nose, above all with so dreadful a smell.

Even to look was revolting enough. The idea of making a closer approach was more repugnant still, but I forced myself to do it anyway.

I didn't touch him. I didn't know the cause of death, but I had a pretty fair idea, so I didn't touch him. Instead I stooped low over the dead man and examined him as carefully as was possible in the circumstances. There was a small contused area behind the right ear, with a little blood where the skin had been broken, but no noticeable swelling. Death had supervened before a true bruise had had time to form.

A few feet behind him, lying on the floor at the base of the wall farthest from the door, were fragments of a dark blue curved glass and a red plastic top—the shattered remnants, obviously, of some container or other: there were no signs at all of what the container had once held.

A few feet away in this wall was an inset rubber-sealed glass door: behind this, I knew, lay what the scientists and technicians called the menagerie—one of four in Mordon. I pushed open the door and went inside.

It was a huge windowless room, as large, almost, as the laboratory itself. All the wall spaces and three room-length benches were taken up by literally hundreds of cages of all types—some of a

sealed-glass construction with their own private air-conditioning and filtration units, but most of the standard openmesh type. Hundreds of pairs of eyes, mostly small, red and beady, turned to stare at me as I entered. There must have been between fifteen hundred and two thousand animals in that room altogether—mostly mice, ninety per cent of them mice, I should have guessed, but also about a hundred rabbits and the same of guinea pigs. From what I could see they all seemed in fair enough health: anyway all of them had clearly been affected in no way at all by what had happened next door. I made my way back to the lab, closing the communicating door behind me.

Almost ten minutes I'd been inside now, and nothing had happened to me yet. And the chances were remote that anything would happen now. I cornered the hamster, returned him to his cage, and left the lab to open the heavy steel outer door. Just in time I remembered that General Cliveden would be waiting not far from the door ready to fill me full of holes if I emerged still wearing the gas-suit—Cliveden would be understandably trigger-happy and could easily miss the fact that I'd removed the breathing apparatus. I climbed out of the gas-suit and opened the door.

General Cliveden had the automatic at eye level, at the full stretch of his arm, pointing towards the widening crack of the doorway and myself. I don't say he was happy at the prospect of shooting me but he was ready enough for it all the same. And it was a bit late now to tell him that the Hanyatti had a hair-trigger. I said quickly, "It's all right. The air is clear inside."

He lowered his arm and smiled in relief. Not a very happy smile, but still a smile. Maybe the thought had come to him too late in the day that he himself should have volunteered to go inside instead of me.

"Are you perfectly sure, Cavell?" he asked.

"I'm alive, aren't I?" I said irritably. "You'd better come inside." I went back into the lab and waited for them.

Hardanger was first through the door. His nose wrinkled in involuntary disgust and he said, "What in hell's name is causing that vile smell?"

"Botulinus!" It was Colonel Weybridge who supplied the answer and in the shadowless neon lighting his face seemed suddenly grey. He whispered again: "Botulinus."

"How do you know?" I demanded.

"How do I——" He stared down at the floor and looked up to meet my eyes. "We had an accident a fortnight ago. A technician."

"An accident," I repeated, then nodded. "You would know the smell."

"But what the devil——" Hardanger began.

"A dead man," I explained. "Killed by botulinus. At the top of the room. It's Dr. Baxter."

No one spoke. They looked at me, then at each other, then followed me silently up the lab to where Baxter lay.

Hardanger stared down at the dead man. "So this is Baxter." His voice held no expression at all. "You are quite sure? Remember he checked out of here about half-past six last night."

"Maybe Dr. Baxter owned a pair of wire-cutters," I suggested. "It's Baxter all right. Someone coshed him and stood at the lab door and flung a botulinus container against this wall closing the lab door behind him immediately afterwards."

"The fiend," Cliveden said hoarsely. "The unspeakable fiend."

"Or fiends," I agreed. I moved across to Dr. Gregori who had sat down on a high stool. He had his elbows on a bench his face was sunk in his hands. The straining finger tips made pale splotches against the swarthy cheeks and his hands were shaking. I touched him on the shoulder and said, "I'm sorry, Dr. Gregori. As you said, I know you're neither soldier nor policeman. You shouldn't have to meet with those things. But you must help us."

"Yes of course," he said dully. He looked up at me and the dark eyes were smudged and with tears in them. "He was—he was more than just a colleague. How can I help, Mr. Cavell?"

"The virus cupboard. Check it please."

“Of course, of course. The virus cupboard. What on earth could I have been thinking of?” He stared down at Baxter in fascinated horror and it was quite obvious what he was thinking of. “At once, at once.”

He crossed to a wooden cupboard with a glazed front and tried to open it. A couple of determined tugs and then he shook his head.

“It’s locked. The door’s locked.”

“Well.” I was impatient. “You have the key, haven’t you?”

“The only key. Nobody could have got in without this key. Not without force. It—it hasn’t been touched.”

“Don’t be so damned silly. What do you think Baxter died of—influenza? Open that cupboard.”

He turned the key with unsteady fingers. No one was looking at Baxter now—we’d eyes only for Dr. Gregori. He opened both doors, reached up and brought down a small rectangular box. He opened the lid and stared inside. After a moment his shoulders sagged and he seemed different altogether, curiously deflated, head bowed very low.

“They’re gone,” he whispered. “All of them. All nine of them have been taken. Six of them were botulinus—he must have used one on Baxter!”

“And the others,” I said harshly to the bowed back. “The other three?”

“The Satan Bug,” he said fearfully. “The Satan Bug. It’s gone.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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