

seen any good gold bars lying around anywhere?" There was not much in it, a short account of a "rumour current in well-informed circles in the city's gold-mining districts" and an even shorter account of some of the fun-and-games at the Chamber of Mines pavilion at the show-grounds that morning. I didn't imagine it would actually appear. Mac is a hard man on gossip. He believes fanatically that a newspaper exists to state the facts, only the facts. And in my piece there was scarcely a single fact worthy of the name. Still, I had some fun with it, and told the copy boy to be good and sure that it was placed on Mac's desk.

After that I got down to the routine chores. An hour later the intercom on my desk buzzed, and Mac barked briefly: "In here, Walter Winchell! At the double!"

He was sitting at his desk puffing furiously at his pipe, his face as black as thunder. My piece lay on the desk in front of him. It certainly wasn't giving him any pleasure. He pointed at a chair. I just sat down and waited. I wasn't sure whether he was working up to an explosion, or simmering down from the edge of one. Whichever it was, I was pretty certain I was going to be on the receiving edge of one of the blasts of rip-roaring sarcasm and abuse he habitually let loose when something had upset his liver.

But I was wrong. When he finally spoke, all he said was: "Is your passport up to date?"

I wasn't prepared for that. "I suppose it is" I said. "And my dog licence, third party insurance and membership of the ~~Masons~~ Masons."

"Very funny" he snapped. "Save your patter for the copy boy. He's ~~the~~ the only one around here who will appreciate it. You're off to Bolito, tonight!" He sounded savage.

"Bolito?" There was a note of hysteria in my voice, which I tried to suppress. But it had been too sudden for me to get my feelings battened down tight. "Bolito? For Christs sake, what for?"

If you have ever been in Bolito, you'll appreciate the reason for my panic. I had, years before. Once. And once is enough. For my part, it is one of the smallest, stinkingest villages in a large and stinking Portuguese colony that I have ever had the misfortune to set foot in.

On the occasion I was there, the rain had come down steadily for three days, as though running from an open tap. It was luke warm rain, unrefreshing. The town main street, if you could call it that, ran ankle deep in black mud you could smell from a mile away, and dead rats, bat-sized moths and unmentionable things floated down the gutters, washed from the holes and crevices where they had lain rotting in the dry season. The local citizens claimed the rains do stop eventually. I hadn't stayed long enough to check. But when they did stop, I was told, the mosquitoes came down so thick and ravenous, that you began to pray for rain again. I didn't feel that even a Portuguese deserved the fate of going to Bolito.

"For Christs sake. What for?"

"Youre a reporter, aren't you?" Mac snapped, his eyes not on me but on the paper on his desk. "Well now youv'g got the chance to prove your stuff. Your~~e~~ going to report!"

He must have taken leave of his senses. Nothing happens in Bolito that was worth reporting to anyone a mile outside it. It just dripped, stank, and slowly decayed from sloth and inanition.

"This should be the news story of all time!" he said, before I could think of anything to say. "Portugal's new deal for Angola, and all that crap." He took a long pull at his pipe, and then looking at me at last, he added: "It's going to take you a week. Or maybe more."

If it hadn't been for his tone of voice, I would have been certain it was a leg-pull. He sounded dead serious, but he just couldn't be. In a week I could write up the curriculum vitae and antecedents of every man, woman and child, white black or multi-coloured, in the whole lousy dump. And still have enough time to drink myself into a bout of D.T's, or die of yellow fever. Or both. As for the "New Deal" stuff, Portuguese officialdom had been grinding out press puffs about it for months. I could sit right there in my office and write up all there was to tell in about one hour flat - even with one hand strapped behind my back. I said as much to Mac, violently.

"So what in hell is all this about?" I ended.

He looked at me glumly.

"Orders, fellow. Orders."

"What do you mean 'orders'? Who in hell gives orders around here. Except, you!"

"The boss!" he ~~kkkk~~ barked. "Who else do you think could be so bloody daft!"

The boss is Sir Llewellyn Redvers, Bart., a sixty-year old stuffed shirt, who knows as much about news-gathering as I know about nuclear fission, or perhaps less. But he happens to be Chairman of the Board of Directors. He operates from downtown in the mining district, attending meetings of the many mining corporations of which he was also a director. His entrance into the working newspaper business came regularly once a year, on the day of the printer's annual wetstone. He arrived to hand out gold watches to those employees who had completed twenty years with the company without any detected crimes, and stayed to make a pompous speech about Loyalty, Endeavour and Service to the Nation, which made the sandwiches wilt, and even seemed to raise the temperature of the waiting beer. I was damn sure he didn't know anything about how one sets about getting together a news-story on a thing like this, and even more sure that he didn't even know who I was.

"Well why pick on me?" I asked. I was, after all, 'Senior Reporter.' If it meant anything at all, it ought to mean that someone else should be given the really dirty work around the place.

"Don't ask me" Mac said. "He picked you. I didn't."

"But he doesn't even know me!"

"Maybe he didn't yeasterday. But he does now!" he retorted, picking my piece of copy off his desk and waving it gently to and fro. "And another thing," he added. "This story here." He reached over for his matches, struck one with one hand, and applied the flame to the corner of my story. He watched it flare up, until the heat reached his fingers. Then he dropped the last corner of it into the ashtray.

"That's also orders!!" he said, not sounding very happy. "Close the door."

I did so, thinking that there could only be one explanation

for the whole affair. My story must have shaken Archie Potter more even than I had sensed at the time. He was the only person apart from Mac who had any wind of the fact that I was nosing around the Easter Show and its golden pile. And up there, in the Chamber of Mines HQ he would have easy access to the boss, direct, or thorough one of the Boss' board-room cronies. What I couldn't understand was why it was proving so almighty important to the boss to kill the story.

Mac reached down into the knee-hole cupboard of his old fashioned desk, and brought out a bottle of Scotch and two glasses. I had been there for years, but I had never seen or heard of him taking a drink during working hours. He pushed one of the glasses across to me.

"This is a hell of a thing to celebrate" I complained bitterly. "It seems to me an explanation would be more in order."

He looked at me, raised his glass, and downed the contents in a single swallow. He seemed hurt.

"If you think this is a celebration" he said quietly, "you're wrong. Its a wake." He waited a while. I said nothing.

"Well, it should be clear enough" he said at last. "Your story is out. O-U-T. Dead. Forgotten."

"Not by me it isn't" I told him. "And what about me?"

"You're rusticated!" he said sharply. "Not yet out. But you will be if you don't make tonight's plane. You're rusticated for long enough to see the story stays that way - dead! And to let your ~~the~~ curiosity die a little with it."

"Stop talking riddles." I said. "What precisely is this all about?"

"You tell me" he said.

So I told him all about it, adding in the details that hadn't been in my story, the morning's performance at the Show-grounds, and the subsequent session with Archie Potter. He didn't say anything when I had finished. When I got tired of waiting for some word I said deliberately:

"When I started here, you told me one thing I have never had occasion to doubt before. You said you take the decisions about what goes into the paper and what doesn't. You, and no-one

*side*

else. To use your own phrase - "neither god, owners or advertisers."

He looked old and hurt. There was no point in stopping having once got so far.

"As far as I can recall, you've never yet - at least in my time - killed a story to do anyone a favour, or to influence any friends. If this lousy job has ever been worth sticking to, its because we've always printed the facts as we've got them, straight. What's so different about this?"

The answer took a long time coming. I don't think it was because he didn't have one ready. I have never known him not to have a ready retort. But on this occasion, I think it hurt him to say it. It cost him something of his fierce pride, and his self-respect.

"I still say the same" he said at last. "The very same. If the news is worth publishing, I'll publish and be damned! They can chop me if they want to. But they can't tell me what to say'. But this thing of yours, Chris - let's look at it properly."

He took a long time looking, and at last said heavily:

"The point is that the public is entitled to the news - all the news, not just that part of it that ~~some~~ someone in Corner House thinks they should have. And not just that part of it that doesn't disturb the balance sheets, either. All of it. Every bit that influences how a reader thinks, or acts, or believes. Every bit that will make him a better citizen or father, a wiser bricklayer or a better informed clerk!

"But this piece of yours! How does that meet the test?"

He didn't sound as though he was talking to me any more. It was all to flat, too unimpassioned. He was talking to himself, convincing himself - or trying to.

"Would the world be any different without your peice? Will our readers be any poorer, in soul or in spirit? Would it mean a single damn thing to the life of the country if I printed it or not? Would anyone understand the world better, fit into it better, or even see it differently?"

I supposed not, though I didn't say so.

"It would make some juicy gossip around the golf-clubs maybe; give some people a lot of fun speculating is it true or isn't it. But beyond that -" he spread his hands in a wide gesture, and let them fall heavily to his thighs - "Nothing!.

"And for that nothing, they'll fire you. And me as well."

He looked at me again, seemingly conscious again that I was there.

"Some bloody University M.A. will be put in here " he said, with all the old fierceness coming back, "and he'll turn the paper into another mealy-mouthed rag, titillating the public with sensations hinted at but never revealed, and stuffing his paper with whatever helps to stuff the balance sheet!"

It hadn't been very convincing. If anything, I had found it sad to watch this outburst in self-justification. In truth, as I was aware, the piece I had written wasn't worth either the dire consequences he was predicting, or even the destruction of some of his own manhood which I was witnessing. I didn't even feel very strongly about the story. If it had been crowded out by lack of space I would have been unsurprised, and would probably have forgotten it entirely by morning. I tried to make him feel better.

"When you put it like that" I said, not believing a word of what I was saying. "you're probably right."

"I wish I was as sure of that as you are" he said.

He took both glasses, made as if to wash them in the basin in the corner of his office, then changed his mind and refilled them.

"Let's try and make some sense of the thing" I said. "Why should this story be so damn important to the boss anyway? Which means, I suppose, why so important to the Chamber of Mines? Suppose the rumour's right, and six gold bars were swiped? Why the secrecy? Why the clamp-down? Why not just call the cops, and let the insurance companies grieve over it?"

He considered for a moment and said: "Try the other way. Suppose the six bars weren't lifted. What then?"

It made as little sense that way as the other. If they weren't lifted, whose heart was broken by a rumour that they were? And

then again, if they weren't taken, what had been going on at the show grounds?

"Those are exactly the questions I put to the boss" Mac answered. "And he just told me to let him worry about that. All I had to do was kill the story, and get you off to Bolito." His voice was heavy with resentment.

"There's only one possible explanation" I said. "The boss must have pinched those bars himself!"

He leered at me. "And gave a half share to Archie Potter to keep him quiet." He chuckled, raised his glass to me in a salute, and we emptied our glasses. The wake was over. He was already turning back to some proofs on his desk as I rose to go.

"Is there actually a story out there anyway?" I asked.

"At Bolito?" he said, in disbelief. "Be your age Chris. Was there ever a story at Bolito? And if there was, do you suppose Sir Edwellyn Redvers the second, bart, would know about it. Unless he had read it in the Herald first."

"I could always resign" I said, just to needle him.

"You could" he snapped. "But if you did, I wouldn't accept it till the thirtieth. And then I'd insist on a full month's notice. So get the hell out of here and let me do some work!"

"And see you catch that plane without fail tonight!" he added. "And stay there a week at least, unless recalled!"

"Christ!" I groaned, and not acting either. "Do you know what a week in that dump is like?"

"Well go out and make some news if you can't find any to keep you busy. Shoot ~~Palazza~~ or something."

"I'm more likely to shoot myself."

"If you do, Chris, make bloody sure you cable in a good story about it first. I'll give you a by-line."

That was the end of the interview. I knew he had an obsession about by-lines. They almost never appeared in the Herald. In every other paper in the world, almost, by-lines appeared regularly, as regularly as possible. They believed that "Our Correspondent in Cairo, Peter Dogsboddy" became known; people looked forward to reading his dispatches, and began to buy the paper as much for its correspondents as for its self. Naturally reporters love by-lines. Without them they never emerge from

obscurity of the backrooms; with them, they become celebrities, and people read them and believe them, regardless of whether they know what they are writing about any more or not.

But not Mac. He would have none of it. If any reporter turned in a piece that started: "I stood today on the deck of the sinking coaster, Leadbottom...." he would send it back with rude words blue-pencilled all over, and follow it up with a verbal blast of the "get-youreslf-a-publicity-agent.--Don't-use-me-for one!." variety.

"The public wants the news" he would bark. "Not what you or I or Dogsboddy thinks of the news. Give them views, dammit, not self-dramatisation! When I want to give them views, I'll give them views. And make it bloody plain they are views, and whose views they are. But news is news. Tell it straight! Thats all!"

So by-lines on the Herald were exclusively for views. Or almost exclusively. On occasions, when Mac's temper got the better of him, or when he thought a piece of reporting went too far away from the facts and added some dramatic invention, he would put a by-line on the piece, give it the smallest size headline imaginable, and bury it somewhere on the back pages between the brassiere ads, and the breakfast foods. That undoubtedly is where my gold bar story would have ended up, if the boss hadn't killed it.

And it would have been on my desk, carefully circled in red, for the point to be rubbed home the following day.

So there was no gold bar story, no story in Bolito, and nothing to do but suffer it. We fixed up a few details about expenses, the front office sent my ticket up, and we shook hands. He was feeling almost as bad as I was I suppose. But he wouldn't show it. Not Mac. All he snapped as I made for the door was:

"You miss that bloody plane and I'll feed you through the rotary with my own hands - all four colours!" And as I turned the door handle and walked out:

"Tell Mrs. Steele if there's anything she needs, I'm here."

I nodded and went home to pack and phone Meg.

\* \* \* \*



## CHAPTER 3.

The plane touched down at Bolito at 6a.m. I was the only passenger getting off. The others, wisely, were going on to Brazzaville, Lagos and places north. They seemed to stare at me with pity as I walked down the passageway marked "Immigration" while they made for the transit lounge and bar, while the plane refuelled.

The immigration officer was lean and wicked-visaged, in a bloated fashion like a Hollywood gangster run to seed. He had last polished his uniform buttons when he started service as a young boy. He inspected my passport slowly, page by page, in dead silence, without troubling to straighten up out of ~~his~~<sup>a</sup> slouch ~~behind~~ behind his desk. When he got to the last page, he looked at the cover suspiciously, and transferred his yellow eyes from the book to me, studying me slowly from head to foot, with an expression that said he didn't like what he saw.

When he tired of that, he lifted himself from his chair, and started in on my suitcase, lifting the clothes out piece by piece, studying them as though expecting plans of the H-bomb to drop out of the seams, and then dropping them in an untidy heap on the desk. It seemed I would be there till midday, and my clothes would all look as though they had been slept in. So I interrupted his work to ask about currency regulations. I had remembered, I said, that I still had South African currency on me. I put two pound notes on the desk.

He inspected those too, carefully, as though unsure whether they were counterfeit. Finally satisfied, he closed my case, put a chalk mark on the side of it, and fell back into his chair. For a moment I thought he was going to leave the money where it was. But he must have read the thought, because his hand crept out idly, closed on the notes and tucked them into his breast pocket. I picked up my case and walked out into the sun. At that hour of day it was still just cool enough to be tolerable.

A decrepit taxi took me into town. The road had changed from the stinking black mud of my previous visit to a grey, stone-hard cake, criss-crossed with deep scars and pitted with potholes. The driver seemed to take every chasm and hole as a challenge to be met head on without flinching. The Ford bucketed, creaked and crashed its way through, leaving a cloud of grey dust behind it.

There was only one hotel, the Nacional. The driver made no attempt to help me with my case, and no one came out of the hotel to meet me. I carried my case into the dark lobby, where a few drooping and dust-laden palms stood in barrels between some worn brown imitation leather club-easys. There was no one in sight.

I rang the bell on the reception counter twice. Nothing happened. I tried pounding with my fist on the panelled front. The clamour echoed in the lobby, and something scuttled away underneath the counter. Finally a door pushed open, and the proprietor came out in his pyjamas, a great quaking stomach wobbling ahead of him as he slopped along in slippers. His eyes were still heavy with sleep.

He announced his tariff to the accompaniment of grunts and yawns, collected a week's rent from me in advance, and took a key down from a rack behind the counter. He pointed up the staircase to the first floor, said breakfast would be at eight, and shuffled back through the door which swung to and fro after him, giving a loud clap at each passing.

Cigarette ends, scraps of paper and matches littered the wooden stair. The first floor corridor was a little cleaner, but smelt musty, unaired, and the carpet leaked stringy grey entrails from its worn patches. The room itself was painted a bilious yellow, somewhat faded by the passage of time. There was a brown four-poster bed, with a pink towelling bedspread on which a dark brown stain stood out like a map of Australia; there was a straight, hard-backed chair, and a small wash-cupboard affair with green-glazed tile inserts in the doors, whose inside held a chamber-pot and a colony of cockroaches, and its top an enamelled iron basin patterned with pink roses in a wreath of ivy, in which sat an enamelled iron jug. The water was down to about halfway. A dead fly floated on the surface scum of grey Bolito dust.

It had french doors with rusted fly-screens, which led out on to a minute balcony with wrought-iron curlicues from which the green paint was peeling. The view was of a disorderly straggle of corrugated iron roofs in all stages of repair and disrepair, pitched at idiosyncratic angles, interspersed with grey dust yards, and a few dust-grey streets. The streets

trailed down to a small wharf, a collection of corrugated iron sheds forming the docks, and to the featureless expanse of the blue-grey Atlantic. There wasn't a tree or a blade of grass to be seen except in the far distance, well beyond the town, where corrugated iron roofs gave way to grass thatched huts, ~~xxxx~~ scattered about the plain, ~~and~~ disappearing ultimately near the horizon into a fringe of dark olive bush.

Life was beginning to stir in the town. Wisps of smoke were rising straight in the still air, and the sunlight was becoming harsh and over-bright, throwing black bars of shadow before it.

Down the corridor I found a bathroom. Cockroaches scuttled for cover beneath the bath as I came in. Both taps dripped; both gave off a slow trickle of brownish tepid water. I washed the high-water mark off as best I could, had a tepid bath, washed out and refilled my water jug.

That made me feel slightly better, so I went down to breakfast, eaten alone in a cheerless dining room, and felt a bit worse. The eggs were tough and floated in oil, the toast was pulpy and tasted of coal-soot. Only the coffee was tolerable. I drank it black after one look at the bluish milk which had been boiled and had blobs of yellow skin floating in it.

After breakfast I strolled down to the wharf, wondering whether I shouldn't have plumped for being fed through the rotary press rather than face a week of this. There was a single small coaster lying alongside the wharf. Gangs of African labourers were unloading bags of grain, carrying them on their shoulders into one of the iron huts, sweat pouring down their rippling muscles. They were very black, very voluble, talking continuously as they worked, high-pitched voices carrying easily across the distance between warehouse and ship.

Then the smell began to rise with the heat. It came, so far as I could judge, from a sluggish stream which seemed to be discharging the town's waste muck into the sea nearby, while gulls wheeled and swooped into the sea, apparently feeding on whatever it was that was feeding on the muck.

The walk back to the hotel, all of a hundred yards, had the sweat running in a steady trickle down my back and my legs.

I closed the shutters against the glare, and lay down, thinking confusedly about gold bars and why they should be so important. And about Steele, and Meg. And when I struggled back to consciousness again through a clotted blanket of heat it was late afternoon. The heat was beating through the roof and through the pressed steel ceiling on which iron-hard squares of laurel kept mechanical roses in parade-ground order. There was a wet imprint on the bedspread where my body had been, and my head throbbed. I thought of taking another bath, but someone's laundry lay dankly coiled in the tub, so I dowsed my head, freshened myself slightly from the water in the jug, and went downstairs in search of a drink.

By contrast with the rest of the place, the bar was a cool haven. Judging by the number of people there, this was where the money was made at the Nacional, and this was where some of it at least had been spent. There were french doors on three sides, all shuttered against the glare, but open to let some air circulate. Two buzzing fans hung from the ceiling, keeping the tobacco smoke and a few captive flies moving. The walls were rough textured plaster, applied native style with the hands, and whitewashed, except behind the counter where some local artist had painted a rather crude abstract in bright primary colours. Native grass mats hung from the ceiling to form a low canopy over the counter itself.

It was well populated, but not full. Most of the drinkers were Portuguese, in khaki shirt-sleeves and slacks, but a few ~~axrika~~ Africans sat by themselves at a table. There were no women, and not much noise. I got a long, cold beer, and carried it over to an empty table.

A slightly overweight Portuguese, tall and heavily built, strolled over from the counter in a negligent fashion, carrying a drink. He wore the same khaki shirt and slacks, but with a polished leather Sam-Browne belt, which could have made it a uniform of sorts.

"May I?" he asked, pulling out a chair at my table, and sitting down. I waved a hand in a make-yourself-at-home gesture. After a while he began to talk casually, just passing the time of day, or so it seemed. His conversation covered well-traversed tracks,

-where had I come from? Was I staying long? What was the weather like in Johannesburg when I left, and that sort of thing. By the time we had finished the next round of drinks, which he bought, it occurred to me that he had found out about all there was to know about me, except perhaps how many escudos I had in my pocket book. In exchange all I knew was that he was Captain Tonio Alvedo, of Bolito security police.

He was a very pleasant fellow, with an easy-going, somewhat sleepy manner. I wasn't sure whether his chat with me was by way of business or pleasure, and I didn't much care. He didn't make any of his questioning sound professional, just interested and friendly. And after I had switched to gin and lime and we had reached the fourth round, I stopped wondering which it was. I just let the gin trickle down my throat and relaxed; it didn't seem to have any noticeable effect on me, but just oozed out through the pores as fast as I swallowed it.

Somewhere along the line I got around to Salazar's "New Deal" for the colony. His face was quite expressionless when he said: "I've heard quite a bit about that, if you're interested."

I said I had heard quite a bit myself. But hearing was one thing, and seeing for oneself another. As a professional reporter, what I was after was to see.

"These politicians" he said. "Usually more talk than action, isn't there?"

"I should know" I said. "I spend half my working life listening to their talk, and recording it in case anyone is interested. Talk is cheap. There must be something to see for all this "new deal" talk."

He pondered for a moment.

"There are military installations, of course" he said vaguely. Something gave me the impression that his sleepy eyes were watching to see my reaction. I wasn't interested.

"Nothing new in that" I said. "It just sounds like another dose of the old deal."

"Could be. Could be" he admitted. "And then again there is the fact troops, barracks and military installations means more money spent, more coin circulating. And so more profits for farmers,

more opportunities for industry. And from that maybe new roads, or bridges, even a hospital maybe."

It seemed a pretty cynical view of any new deal. I said as much. If there was any new deal there, I said, it needed more purpose, more drive, more dedication than this. There must somewhere be something deliberate to show, not just these accidental outgrowths, some social works, or social progress. Or even some planning for future development.

He nodded his agreement, not very impressed.

"You could go out and have a look at the irrigation canals" he said. "They've started digging about eighty miles north. Or you could take a walk down to the town office, where they've got the plans for a new wharf and pier for this place.

"But the real stuff" he added, "the big stuff is all military, airports, roads and a lot more."

"Sounds very socially uplifting" I said sourly.

He nodded, seriously. "If I can give you a little advice" he said after waiting to see whether I had any more to add, "Don't try and find out too much about any of that on your own. Because those who do have a funny way of ending up in the place where there just isn't any new deal, real, planned or even spoken of!"

I knew enough of Portuguese colonial jails ~~to~~ need any warning. If it was a direct warning and not a piece of friendly advice for a stranger.

It was getting on for nine o'clock. The hotel's dinner gong had sounded some time before, and the crowd in the bar had thinned out quite a lot. I had missed lunch altogether, and breakfast had been a disaster, so I was feeling somewhat hollow. I asked him if he would care to have supper with me.

"What, here?" he asked, startled. "Hayward, believe me, if you eat here you won't live long enough to see the outside of our town, or the inside of our jails."

With my memories of breakfast, I suspected he could be right.

"What alternatives does Bolito have to offer?"

"Be my guest" he said. "I'll show you."

We went out together into the now dark streets. He took me down a lane where Africans were standing and sitting on the sidewalks, gossiping vivaciously over smoking coal-filled braziers made from

old petrol drums. Near the seafront we came to an unprepossessing shop, its windows frosted over with white paint.

The decor inside was negligible, and the table-cloths not very clean. But the food was quite magnificent - great prawns the size of lobsters, served in hot piri-piri sauce ~~served~~ on mounds of golden rice with herb flavouring. We drank iced Portuguese green wine, smooth as cream, and topped it off with Turkish coffee and tiny glasses of green Chartreuse.

It wasn't exactly la dolce vita, but the next best thing to it in Bolito. A mulatto girl seated on a stool in one corner strummed what sounded like local folk music on a guitar - softly enough not to intrude in the Johannesburg juke-box way, and unprofessionally enough not to demand quiet from the diners. It was a pleasant and peaceful evening, almost enough to make me forget for the moment that I was in exile in Bolito.

Only one ripple disturbed the evening's calm. Just as we finished our coffee, a big, swarthy man with the build of a wrestler manning to paunch came in. He was followed by an equally swarthy youth, but slender, with long black side-burns heavily greased, a Valentino moustache, and a sneer. They both wore tailored, tropical Palm Beach linen suits, which made them very conspicuous in that uniformly khaki-clad assembly. The conversation seemed to die as they walked in. They strode to a reserved table next to the singer, greeting nobody. In the silence heads swivelled round to watch their progress. The spell was broken by the emergence of the Chinese proprietor from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a not-very-clean apron, and greeting the privileged newcomers with a series of oriental bows, and much deferential bowing.

"Who are the celebrities?" I asked Alvaro.

His lip curled. "The fat one is Da Garda" he said. "Felix da Garda. Our Mr. Big!"

I suppose the alcohol was talking more than I. "He may be big" I said. "But he's sitting in a damn small puddle."

He laughed.

"As you say. A bull frog in a small mud pond. But with teeth Hayward. And claws!"

He told me a little that night about Da Garda. Much more!

I learned later, but it all added up to the same thing. Da Garda was Mr. Big. He owned almost everything in Bolito that was worth owning, and quite a lot besides that wasn't. Alvado clearly loathed his guts.

"If you ever get close to him, keep your pockets buttoned" he told me. "He'd stick a knife in your ribs for five escudos, and take the gold from your teeth for another two!"

"What keeps him here, where the pickings seem small?"

He told me something of Da Garda's history. It seemed he had been a small time racketeer in Lisbon, and had done a short stretch in jail for beating up a shop-keeper during a protection racket dispute. After that, Lisbon had shipped him to the colony, to Bolito. The choice was not inappropriate. A more suitable spot for a garbage can I never saw. But Da Garda, though not able to live outside Bolito, had failed to rot as intended. He had in fact flourished, by ways Alvado didn't catalogue too closely, but which seemed, from what he did say, to be a mixture of bribery, strong-arm stuff and cost-plus-ten-percent contracting on government works. He was said to be a millionaire.

I raised my eyebrows at the "government contracting" angle.

"They say" Alvado said softly, not committing himself, "that he owns a couple of Lisbon Councillors, and a share of a governor and a chief of police." He didn't say which governor or which chief of police. It could have been his; which would account for his status in the place.

"Who is the small frog?" I asked, looking at the youth with Da Garda.

"Pete" he said. "A nothing. Body-guard, toady, pimp and hatchet man for the boss. Nothing more."

He told me a few tales, no names, places or dates, about some of the Da Garda-Pete operations. It wasn't a pretty tale; it was mean, brutal and vicious, but not untypical of a lot of goings-on in Portuguese colonies. There were tales of knifings, of gang-beatings and subornation of officials - all told without any detail so that I couldn't have reported any of it even if I had wanted to - and told by Alvado in dead-pan style, as though it was just another facet of Bolito life, like the rains or



the mosquitoes. Regrettable, but ineradicable.

By the time we left the restaurant it was near midnight. Da Garda's Cadillac stood in the road outside, gleaming cream duco and fantastic fish-tail fins trimmed in chrome. It looked as incongruous in the drab waste about it as a neon sign. An African driver, in what could have been uniform, slept with his head on the steering wheel.

At the hotel I suggested Alvado come in for a last drink. He demurred.

"You tourists can booze it up all night, and sleep if off all day" he said. "But I have to present myself, clean and shiny, at eight o'clock sharp."

"Why not make it clean, shiny and slightly oiled?" I asked.

He just grinned.

"In any case" I added, "I'm not a tourist. I'm a hard-working newshound, with my nose to the ground, looking for a world scoop!"

"If I hear of anything that needs a headline I'll get in touch" he said, and went off to bed.

\* \* \* \*

Another day passed. I fossicked about the town in the early morning, and found - as I had expected - nothing to rouse my interest. I watched some boys fishing from the wharf, but they caught nothing at all. I slept again in the heat, woke again in a pool of sweat, and went off alone to the same restaurant for another dose of the same supper.

Da Garda was there again. Pete was with him, and so was a sexy, buxom girl in a skin-tight white dress, cut very low. She looked bored, surly and hard as nails. She was sitting with her back to the rest of the room, and didn't appear to say a word all evening. When they got up to leave, Da Garda gripped her arm like a copper making an arrest, and steered her out. Apart from that, neither he nor Pete made any attempt to talk to her, or even show any recognition that she was present. Alvado didn't appear, so after my meal I walked back to my room.

I wrestled eith another chapter of Dostoevsky. I had decided a long time ago that I couldn't go thorough life without atleast trying to find out what Crime and Punishment was all

about. The spirit was willing, but as always the flesh was weak. In any case, it was too hot with the light on, and large furry moths attracted by it were beating against the fly-screens. Some of them found their way through the holes, flew drunkenly around the light, and then banged into the walls to flop loudly on to the floor, where they continued to lie flapping their wings feebly like expiring birds. I turned the light off and lay there thinking and smoking.

The thinking began with Meg. It always seemed to begin with Meg when I was feeling lonely or low. It seemed to me she must be becoming some sort of a mother figure to me. From that somehow I got on to Steele - where had he been coming from when he died? Did he fall? Or was he pushed?

And then from Steele to police, and from police to crime, and from crime to gold bars again. Steele and gold bars!

Somewhere, in my dim, half sleeping consciousness, I found a thread between Steele and gold bars. It had been - goddammit when was it? Two years before? And then I had it. It was the press preview of the Chamber of Mines new pavilion, two years before, the time they first unveiled the gold pile. There had been perhaps two dozen pressmen, radio commentators and news-reel cameramen, and a score of mining-industry V.I.P's.

The place had still smelt of wet paint, and Archie Potter and his aides had been flapping about like hens, making introductions and passing out drinks, snacks, cigarettes. The President of the Chamber of Mines had made an excruciatingly dull speech about it all, full of cliches about 'the backbone of the nation's wealth', and we had all stood about trying uncomfortably to hold snacks and glass in one hand together with a notebook, while appearing to take notes with the other, No one would have printed such garbage, so the act was strictly for appearances, and by way of payment for the free feed.

The golden pile, I remembered, had stood shrouded in purple, looking like a mourning bier for a dead Caesar. We scarcely looked at it until the President ended his speech with a grand gesture, arm outflung towards the purple pile. Barrymore might have made something of it, but his parched, nasal voice and stiff manner wasn't up to it.

"And now, gentlemen" he whinnied, "I give you the real star of tonight's gathering - one million pounds of the gold of the Rand!" He looked for all the world as ridiculous and wooden as Hitler taking the salute at Berchtesgarden. He held the pose, while everyone waited. Something had gone wrong with the timing, and for about half a minute nothing followed. Then whoever it was must have remembered to pull the cord, and the purple drape fell away to reveal the pile.

Everyone let out their breaths. With relief, not wonder. The pile was the most shattering anti-climax I have ever seen. The pile was nothing, a stack almost ceiling high of dull yellow bricks, carefully arranged with about as much skill as any brick-layer could be expected to have, and as dead as Tutankhamen.

We clapped dutifully, but it sounded hollow. Not even the awesome thought that this heap was a million pounds worth made it worth wasting much energy over.

And then the President had stepped back, outside the ~~ring~~ surrounding rail, and things began to happen. Someone must have pressed a button. With a slight grinding noise, the turntable on which the pile was built began to turn. The lights in the hall went off and a multitude of tiny spot lights came on, twinkling like stars out of the purple ceiling. Instantly the column of gold came alive, the splayed edges of the bricks catching and reflecting the light, throwing it out from hundreds of moving facets, breaking the light into darts of every colour in the spectrum.

There had been a moment of awe-struck silence. And then some real applause began, not the polite stuff of earlier, but a real burst of spontaneous enthusiasm for this fairy-tale display of enchantment.

After that, I rem<sup>em</sup>bered, a troupe of well trained mines executives had given a well-drilled display of their safety gimmicks, with the chief of their electronics division calling the moves like a ballet master. It was electronic gadgetry of high order; they explained some of it, but most of it was over my head, so I had concentrated on the fireworks and missed the technical explanations,

The fireworks had been quite something. To start them off, one of the young executives had leaned over the guard rail as far as he could, stretching out an arm towards the turning pile. Finally, unable to reach by some inches, he ducked under the rail and tried again. As he got within a foot of the target, alarms starting shrilling all over the place, and barred steel grilles slammed down from the ceiling over the doorways. They switched that off, and started again, poking a cane at the pile from outside the rail. As it touched the bars, the whole lot started up again.

After some more of that, they showed us some of how it worked. There were tiny lights set in a ring above the pile, shining straight down on to photo-electric cells set at intervals around the edge of the turntable. Any interruption in the beam, and the circuit was touched off.

"Its a curtain of light" I remembered the ballet master saying, and he flicked a match through the air to prove his point. The alarms and gates came into action again. Then they showed us some of the outer defences, the tremblers that started sirens going if anyone touched the plate-glass window-walls after the night security switch had been set, And so it went, interspersed with talk of vibration detectors and smoke detectors and electronic gobbledygook.

After that, as I remembered it, Carstens put a small troop of uniformed armed guards through a short display of drill, and then we were invited to ask questions.

'What if the power fails?' someone asked.

Archie Potter was doing the answering, very smug. "We've thought of that before you" he said. 'We've an automatic stand-by generator."

"What stops someone putting a spanner into its works?"

"Four feet of concrete vault, underground - and I'm not saying where - ' big toothy grin, "All sealed up for the duration of the show, and with tremblers set to go off if a fly walks on the ceiling."

The questions went on and on.

"How about a quick smash and grab?" someone asked. "Heave a brick through the glass, and then run like hell." There was some laughter. And then Potter said confidently: "Apart from the

chance - or should I say certainty? - that Carstens' boys would put a bullet in your backside as you went, the glass is ~~letter~~-proof - except against a flying saucer or something like that. And bullet proof too!"

"Sherman tank proof?" someone asked.

"We've given the guys at the turnstiles strict instructions that Sherman tanks are not to be allowed in without a ten bob deposit" he answered. "That should take care of that. Any more?"

There wasn't any more, not that I could remember. We had a few more drinks, and I could recall more than one person remarking that a million pounds was a hell of a lot of money; and others stating the obvious - that a hell of a lot of time and thought had been put into keeping it in its rightful owners' hands. It all began to get a bit too falsely convivial, so I had left and gone back to the office to write it up.

Somewhere along the line of that remembering, I had drifted off into a doze. And sometime later I woke again thinking: But Steele? Why Steele? There had been a connection somewhere between Steele and the bars, that was what had started me off on the remembering. And I worried over the connection, alternately waking and worrying, and succumbing to the heat.

Sometime later, it came back to me. I could recall the scene. Steele was there and others, it didn't matter who they were. We were in the pub of the Goldfields Arms, where pressmen used to gather at odd hours to drink, pick each others brains, and try to filch each others exclusive bits of inside information. There was the usual sort of fast and smart patter. Somehow the gold bars had come into it, and the possibilities of their being pinched. There had been a few half-hearted suggestions of how it might be done, each more outrageously impossible than the last, and finally we had been offering prizes - two free drinks I seemed to remember - for the best suggestion. Everyone had tried his hand, Steele included. He was still with the Clarion in those days, but I couldn't recall his idea. Mine, it seemed, had won the pot. ~~£~~

I worried at it for a while, and the idea began to come back to me, the prize-winning idea, so you can guess what the others were like. Mine was something along the lines of a trained python, which would slither along the ceiling, between the little

spotlights, taking care not to break the beams of light, take a gold bar in its teeth, and slither back to his waiting keeper. Two hundred and sixteen times!. At that stage of the party, the little matter of getting the 216 bars out of the building seemed to be passed over unnoticed and unsolved.

Round about this stage of my recollection I slipped into sleep again. And the next thing I knew a python with a gold bar in its teeth was shaking me about, its tail clamped on my arm, and I sat up shouting, in a cold sweat.

It was Alvado. And the morning sun wasn't even up yet.

"What the hell?" was all I managed, when I was halfway conscious.

"On your feet, Signor Pulitzer" he said, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "I've got your world scoop for you."

I staggered up trying to remember what I was doing there, and what he was talking about. Was I being arrested, or was this some weird Portuguese idea of a joke?

"Come on Hemingway" he said as I weaved across to the wash basin and got a handful of water to splash on my face. "No time to waste when duty calls."

"Okay". I said as sanity returned. "I'll come quietly. It's a fair cop, and the plans of Salazar's A-bomb are under my pillow. Now will you please get the hell out of here, you big oaf, and let me sleep."

"Sorry" he said cheerfully, grinning again. "But you newshawks are always drunk and useless when the big story breaks. Lets get going now before it gets too hot."

"Who's going" I snapped crossly. "And what bloody story are you going on about?"

"I've got a body for you sonny" he replied, not at all put out. "A nice white body, very dead but still fresh."

"So what makes this body anything to do with me?"

"Its one of yours" he said. "Or so the message says."

"What do you mean, one of mine?" I asked irritably, dragging on my trousers. "I've tossed all my bodies in the sea with a barrel of concrete around their feet. They never come up."

"Its a South African" he said. "Or so its passport says."

I dragged myself downstairs behind him. He had a field-grey Land Rover outside, and drove it much as he did everything else, casually as though neither fully awake nor caring, but in fact very skilfully, and fast. We took the road south out of the town. It was dusty, but smooth, running parallel to the coast through scraggy bush and sharp tufts of wind-blown grass amongst the dunes. As we drove he told me that the body was at Cap Aquinas; he had received a phone call from the local police, and that was about all he knew.

Five miles out of town we breasted a rise, and on the southern slope lay a well tended estate of banana palms, stretching out almost to the horizon. Just below the crest, well back from the road stood a large sprawling building, white walls and red tiled roof in the Spanish mission manner, and a large enclosed yard between whitewashed brick walls.

"Da Gard's" Alvado said.

It looked cool, prosperous and big enough to be a hotel. The grass around the house swept down across a contoured expanse to a brilliant blue swimming pool, shaped like a deformed kidney; and beyond that again more buildings, stables or barns, all in the same style.

"Quite a dump" I shouted over the noise of the motor. "What does he do? Keep a harem?"

Alvado nodded, his eyes on the road. As we reached the end of the banana plantation, I could see a wide brown strip of levelled land like a roadway, starting nowhere and ending nowhere.

"Landing strip" Alvado yelled. "Just been put down. Hear he's going to get a plane!" That seemed to be a worthwhile idea, because as we passed the boundary fence marking the end of the estate the road deteriorated sharply. We bumped and bucketed wildly over ruts, potholes and loose rocks strewn in the road, I had to cling on for fear of being pitched out on to it. Conversation was impossible over the noise, and we continued in silence all the way to Cap Aquinas. It seemed to me that amongst his other properties Da Gada must have owned quite a slice of the local Roads Department. Beyond his gate, no one cared. The road became a track, little more than the dry bed of a watercourse.

Cap Aquinas was nothing at all, - on the landward side a

huddle of a dozen miserable shacks, covered in banana palm leaves; leaning drunkenly against the prevailing wind; on the seaward side a few wild palms, a stretch of sandy beach and a long spit of flat black rock jutting out into the sea. The surf broke in white foam around its edges.

Not far from the rocks, a circle of tattered black men sat and stood on the sand. Alvado put the truck into four-wheel drive, swung sharply off the track and ploughed his way across the bush verge on to the sand towards them. They were all naked to the waist; and below the waist they wore ragged, patched trousers, torn off or worn off just below the knees, and nothing else.

No one made a move or said anything as we arrived. Alvado got out, and moved across to the circle. I followed. The body lay inside the circle, watched over by an African policeman, who attempted some sort of salute for Alvado which died halfway. He stepped forward and told Alvado that no one had touched anything since he had go there, and handed over some papers. Amongst them was a South African passport, green covered with a gold embossed Springbok device. It didn't look as though it had been in the sea.

Alvado studied it. He didn't have to tell me. I could see. It was Brendan, bashed about and bloodied, but without doubt Brendan. I began to feel the hairs on my scalp rise. The coincidence was too eerie - first Steele, now his boss Brendan. Even in the rising heat I felt a cold shiver; the coincidence was too close to be coincidence.

I forced myself to still the thought, and concentrate on what there was to see. Brendan looked just about as he had when I had seen him last. You didn't have to feel his pulse to know he was dead. His eyes were wide and staring, and large black flies buzzed and settled and buzzed around the blood on his neck. He lay on his back, arms stuck out at impossible angles, legs bent up brokenly. He wore a sports jacket, grey corduroy slacks, and a silk scarf above his shirt, tucked into the V front.

Alvado prodded the body with his toe, and asked a few



questions. One of the oldest men began a long rambling explanation, his eyes never looking up from the sand at his feet. He had come out at low tide, he said, to look for crayfish on the rocks. He had stumbled over the body in the dark, not knowing what it was. Then he had felt it to find out, and when he found out he had run away and told his son. His son had said he should go to the police, and should take something with him so the police could see he was telling the truth. He had gone back, taken the passport from a pocket, and taken it to the police. He had not taken anything else.

Alvado looked sceptical, but made no comment, except to ask the man's name. Then he looked around on the sand for a few moments, asked the policeman what time low tide had been, looked around at the sea and announced he was ready to go. It all seemed pretty casual, though looking back I don't suppose there was much more he could have done. The beach had been fairly well trampled by fishermen in all directions, there were no car tracks visible except our own. So he and the policeman lifted the body and dropped it fairly heavily into the back of the Land Rover, and we were ready to go. He said something in a low voice to the policeman, something I couldn't catch, he waved casually at the men, and drove back across the beach, on to the road and headed for Bolito. No notes, no photographs. Almost, so it seemed, no interest.

He took the road back somewhat slower. Whether it was to concern for Brendan's body, tossing about in the back, or to make conversation easier I did not know. On the way I told him what I knew about Brendan, which wasn't really very much. I knew he was in the insurance business, and before that had been an engineering contractor, and was said to have money. He was one of the social sports - that is to say a patron - or patroniser, not a player. He graced the ringside of the prize fights in evening dress and stiff shirt, and the members stand at the Turf Club race meetings. His name was regularly in the papers, and his picture, usually on the social page where he was described as "an eligible bachelor." His chief occupation seemed to me to have been women, all rather flashy - dancers, mannequins and

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