

actresses, all fairly ephemeral. Even the gossip columns had trouble keeping up to date with them. No doubt I was a bit sour. He wasn't my type, and I wasn't in the mood for philanthropy anyway.

Alvado listened to it all in his sleepy fashion. He scarcely asked any questions, except when my words got lost in the racket. I didn't mention Steele. It didn't seem to me to have any bearing on the matter, and was accordingly none of his business. He dropped me outside my hotel, waved casually and drove off, to the morgue, post-mortem factory or fertiliser plant or whatever it is that they have to deal with things like that in Bolito. Upstairs, I stripped off my shirt, soaked a towel under the cold tap and wrapped it round my neck like a scarf, dragged my typewriter out from under the bed and wrote out a report.

It took longer than it should have. There was lot of xxxing because the machine bobbed about on the bed as I hammered it. I braved the blazing heat of midday to stagger to the post office, where I wanted to send the report off press-collect for payment at the other end. The clerk was surly and unhelpful. We had a slanging match which he must have won, because while my Portuguese is good enough for general conversation it couldn't match his when it came to four-letter words of abuse. The heat must have made me cussed. I knew that a ~~five~~ escudo note across the counter was all he really wanted, but I was damned if I was going to gratify him. I was hungry, unshaven and pig-headed as a mule.

So as I say, he won. I sent it off urgent rate, and paid out almost all the money I had with me. At the end of the report I added : "Send money and presscollect authority or arsenic."

It wasn't much of a story. But Brendan's notoriety in Johannesburg would make it front page news for a day; and if it didn't I had reached the state of fed-up-to-hellness with Bolito and the Herald that I didn't really care.

Back at the hotel I dispossessed the cockroaches from the bath and lay down to a long siesta in tepid water. I lay there thinking that the indurance business seemed to be getting very tough. First Steele, now Brendan. I didn't feel any special

sorrow over either of them. But the problem kept churning around in my mind. Why? Why both of them? What was Brendan doing here? And Steele at Blueridge? How had Brendan died? Or Steele?

When I got tired of chasing the problem around, getting nowhere, I began another round of my epic struggle with Dostoevsky. He won, again. I awoke limp in the late afternoon. The barman gave me directions, and I crawled through the shimmering town to Alvado's office; the sidewalks burning the soles of my feet.

The building was a raw brick box, with a few small windows heavily barred. A soldier complete with automatic rifle leant against the wall next to the entrance. His uniform looked as though he had slept in<sup>it</sup> for a week, and there were black sweat ~~xxx~~ patches under the arms and down his back. He made no move to stop me entering.

Alvado was sitting in a stifling cubby-hole of an office, his feet propped up on a half-opened drawer of the desk. He had his hands locked behind his head, and he was gazing at the wall. He nodded me to a seat.

"That was a nice report you sent off" he said by way of greeting. I hadn't been prepared for that.

"How did you come by it?" I asked.

"Nothing much goes out of this place without my knowing it. And not much comes in either."

"Did you censor it to a skeleton?"

He said I shouldn't worry. It had gone out as written. I asked what his medical people had had to say about Brendan's death. He picked a couple of typewritten sheets out of a drawer and passed them across to me. The contents shook me. Either he had carried a tape-recorder - which I didn't believe for a moment - or he had a memory not much different from one. There wasn't a piece of information I had given him about Brendan that morning which wasn't accurately and tersely recorded. Nor was there anything about what we had seen or heard at Cap Aquinas that hadn't been set out either.

The report said simply: "5.30 a.m. Report received from police post at Cap Aquinas of body on shore. Arrived at scene 6.30a.m. together with C. Hayward, present at my request." There

followed a short biographical description of the life and background of C. Hayward, in which nothing I could remember telling him had been distorted or omitted. It then stated: "Body lay on shore between high and low water marks. High tide was 10p.m. previous evening. Garcia Andra, fisherman, states he crossed beach at approximately 4.a.m. when body was not there. Full moon at this hour. Carlo Canza, fisherman, states he stumbled over body before first light, approximately 5.30a.m. and searched for identification."

There followed an account of the contents of Brendan's pockets, including the passport. There was nothing unexpected - keys, handkerchief, cigarettes, some South African currency.

"Hayward identified body as Brendan, known to him from Johannesburg", followed by the life story of Brendan as told by Hayward,

"No car tracks across beach. Site covered with footprints made by fishermen before my arrival. Body lay fifty yards from road. No indications of how it came there. No signs of immersion in sea on either clothes or contents of pockets.

"Medical examiner states body battered by heavy fall or impact with heavy vehicle, Cause of death: Heart penetrated by end of broken chest-bone. Death instantaneous."

There followed a long catalogue of the injuries as observed by the M.O. The final paragraph read simply: "Passport not stamped for entry into colony. Radio check of all border posts discloses no record of Brendan's entry." It was signed by Alvado with something of a flourish.

I began to feel a new respect for the man. His manner was deceptive. But the report proved he had a remarkable memory, a fast mind for the essentials, and an ability to act at a very non-colonial pace. It was an ~~am~~<sup>impressive</sup> peice of work.

I told him so. He looked vague and disinterested.

"What theories have you got?" I asked.

"Theories?" He sneered. "You can take your pick. A - he died somewhere else and was carried there and dumped. B - he was washed up from the sea after being bludgeoned on a ship out there somewhere. In which case Andra ia a liar or just forgets which way he walked at 4a.m. C - he stumbled down there after ~~being run~~

being run down on the road, and the fall pushed a rib through his heart. ð - the fishermen beat him to death, took whatever money he had that they could use - which wouldn't include South African - and dumped him there."

It was a pretty all-embracing summary, and most of it possible, although the bit about falling off a ship seemed to contradict the document he had prepared. Even in that climate, after hours on the beach, signs of salt-water soaking should have showed up somewhere. Alvado seemed content to let it rest like that - open, unsolved. But I had learnt enough about his deceptive manner not to take that too seriously.

"The problem you don't touch on" I pointed out, "Is: what is Brendan doing here anyway?"

"What indeed?" he replied. He clearly wasn't going to pursue that any further. So I made a few notes for a follow-up report for the Herald, and then we went off together for drinks before supper. We didn't talk about Brendan at all. Most of the time we spent talking about fishing, which seemed to be his main passion. It is only one of my minor ones, but it passed the time, and before we parted for the night he had talked me into another trip to Cap Aquinas the following morning - this time strictly for fishing. He would supply all the gear.

I suspected that, with so much coast around, there must be more than fish in his sights in picking on Cap Aquinas for the expedition. But nothing in his manner gave any hint of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was in my room at first light, full of apologies. A radio message had come. The District Inspector of Police was coming through on a routine inspection, and Alvado could not get away for fishing that morning. I said to forget it, but he insisted that I take the trip anyway; he had his Land Rover at my disposal outside, with an African driver who would double up as guide and ghilly, and bait, tackle and a picnic lunch packed inside. He didn't have to twist my arm. The only alternative for the day was another round of Hayward vs. Dostoevsky.

I have never been mad about fishing on my own. Fishing seems to me strictly an excuse for company. But on the rocks

it was pleasant enough in the early hours while it was still cool. The sea sucked in and out of the rock pools with the sleepy warming sound that makes rock fishing like no other form of relaxation ever discovered. A few fishermen were about, lifting reed crayfish-traps from the pools, and emptying scuttling pink victims into a basket submerged in a pool well above the reach of the tide.

I got a couple of bites, fish of a type unknown to me, all too small to eat and all without fight, as though the warmth had sapped their energy. Two of them my ghilly threw back saying that they weren't for eating. But one round red fish, looking like an overgrown bloater, he opened, cleaned and took away up the rocks to grill for breakfast.

The tide turned, and the surf rose higher and higher above the crayfish pools. The fishermen pulled up their traps, and one by one they drifted silently across to where I was, and took up squatting positions on the rocks behind me. Gradually they began talking amongst themselves, looking sideways away from me, so that I could ignore them or join them just as I chose. They were ragged, illiterate men, in dirty clothes and smelling strongly of fish; but out on the rocks, in the sun, it didn't seem to matter. It was fishing talk, venturing of opinions on the best position for a cast, and the best bait, and occasional reminiscences of great ones landed just at that spot, just with that very technique, long ago.

Once or twice I joined in, asking advice on where to cast. Some of them moved down the rocks closer, still keeping enough of a distance to signify that they were not joining the party, merely overlooking. They showed me the run of an underwater gully, covered in foam, and warned of the dangers of hidden shelves of rock where the big fish basked and fed. With their guidance I cast again, and had two strong bites in quick succession. The first took my hook, sinker and thirty yards of line, but the next came up fighting every inch of the way. Without their aid, nimble feet leaping into the surf at the crucial moment to flip it ashore, I would never have landed it. It looked to me all of fifteen pounds, with wicked teeth.

By that time the ghilly was back with the breakfast. I asked

them to join me, and we sat eating grilled fish hot in our fingers, helped down with sandwiches from Alvado's hamper. There were a few cans of beer, which completed the atmosphere of warm indolence and contentment that comes with rocks and surf and sun. Bolito and its dreariness retreated as though to another planet.

At one stage a swirling cloud of grey dust smoked up along the road. As it drew closer to us, I could make out the shape of Da Garda's cream Cadillac, rocking at speed on the rough path. The car swept up to ~~xxx~~ where the road came nearest to the rocks, and stopped. Da Garda stepped out followed by his man Pete. Around me the conversation died, as the two walked towards us.

Suddenly Da Garda stopped in his tracks. I thought that he had suddenly become aware of my presence there, but perhaps he had other reasons. He said a few words to Pete, too soft to be heard above the seas murmur, and they turned back, got into their car as swiftly as they had got out, swung around and headed back to his mansion - or Bolito. Whatever it was they had come for they had either seen or decided not to see.

One of the fishermen spat carefully, noisily, into the sea. "Assassino" he said, full of hissing venom.

"What do you think that was about?" I asked of no one in particular. No one replied directly. But they talked obliquely, seemingly irrelevantly, very guarded. Whatever it was Da Garda had wanted, they at least implied it couldn't have been anything good.

I prodded them a bit. They talked, always obliquely, never stating their own views or claiming personal knowledge. "It is said that..." they said. "I have heard once..." they said. It was said that men had been beaten up, and shacks burnt in the night. It was said that the quarrel was over protection money unpaid. It was said that even the poorest farmers and shop-keepers had to pay protection. It was said that a poor fisherman, "very poor man, you understand, with five childrens", had been found with a knife in his ribs. It had been heard that he had had a brush with Da Garda. All very vague, no names, dates or places. It could have been normal small-town envy

of the poor for the rich. But whatever it was, it was filled with hatred, and the smell of fear. They hated everything about him, his house, his car, his bodyguard, his swimming pool.

"The sea it seems is not big enough for swimming for such a turd" one of them said contemptuously of his pool.

"Perhaps it would make his trollops smell of fish" another suggested slyly.

And so it went on, airy snatches of hate dropped into the hot air, with long pauses between. Somewhere in the course of it they turned to his airstrip. It was said, they told me, that a plane was coming to land on his farm. They were waiting in eager anticipation of it; they had seen planes pass in the air but never on the ground. For them Bolito was as distant as another continent. A few of them had been there once, most of them never. They wanted to look at a plane on the ground, to see what it really was.

"It is said it should be here soon."

"I have heard that it was to come yesterday."

"Perhaps it came and turned away again." This from the oldest of the group, very old, almost senile. "I heard one in the sky that night." He laughed with a deep scorn. "Perhaps the turd thinks such birds can see in the dark." He rubbed his hands together, full of peasant scorn for the wiseacres of the town.

I thought on that for a while before it seemed to me there might be more to it than mere gossip.

"What night was that?" I asked him at last.

He thought for some time.

"It was the night of the body on the beach."

I could feel a creeping tingle along my spine. But the others scoffed and twitted him. He had been so drunk on the night of the body, they said, that all he could have heard was the buzzing of his own head. Accusation and counter-accusation, getting more and more ribald, further and further from the plane. No one confirmed his tale of a plane. Perhaps it hadn't happened at all.

As the talk drifted on, the tide came up higher and higher. An outside breaker scattered a jet of spray all over us, and we

moved back higher on the rocks. My neck and arms were beginning to burn in the fierce heat, and the rocks higher up were already too hot to sit on.

I packed up, thinking of presenting them with the fish. But it would be no delicacy to them, just some more of their staple food. So instead I gave them the remains of Alvado's beer, said farewell and went back to town.

The fish, wrapped in wet sacking, flopped and bumped around in the back, reminding me vividly of Brendan in the same condition. After that I didn't feel like eating it, and in any case asking the hotel to cook it for me was probably inviting ptomaine poisoning. So I stopped off at Alvado's office to say thanks for the outing, and presented the fish to him. I suppose he had a home somewhere, although he had never mentioned one, or even whether he was married. He was sitting in the same position, feet propped on an open drawer, looking at nothing. The District Inspector hadn't arrived yet. I left him waiting for his arrival, still looking at nothing, feet still on the drawer.

Just before sundown I went down to the Post Office to ask if any mail had come in. Mac's cable was brief and welcome. It said simply: "Story received. If no followup come home. All is forgiven. Ma." There was, naturally, no money.

I got a taxi to take me out to the airport. It was as hot inside the airport building as a boilerhouse. It seemed quite deserted. I went from room to room, opening doors, until finally I found someone asleep in the control tower. I was led there by his snoring, which sounded as though he was at work on the furniture with a rusty saw. He came alive - well anyway half alive - after some vigorous shaking. All I could get out of him was that a plane from the North came through at eleven that night, that the booking office was closed, and that neither I nor any other passenger matter was any of his concern. He didn't know if the ticket off would re-open, and he clearly indicated that he wasn't going to try and find out unless some suitable inducement was placed in his palm. In my financial state, that was not to be contemplated. So I left ticket and booking to



chance, determined to get myself aboard the eleven o'clock plane even if I had to hijack the whole plane to do it.

I was eating alone in the Chinese restaurant when Alvado came in.

"Hear you're leaving tonight" he said by way of greeting.

"Only if your Security Police don't mind" I said as sarcastically as I could manage.

He wasn't the least bit ruffled.

"Not at all" he said. "We're even rather pleased your mother gave you a reprieve before we discovered what you were after here!"

I let it go. By now I suspected that Alvado not only knew who had sent the cable, but also knew my mother's maiden name, the date she had died and probably the inscription on her tombstone as well. I suspected that in some mysterious way he might even have known - or guessed - that I ~~was~~ had been ordered into exile.

We had a good meal, and finally mellow with wine and Chartreuse, he drove me back to my hotel to settle the bill and collect my bags, and drove me out to the airport. We watched the plane taxi in, and waited while a handful of passengers straggled off to the coffee room and lavatories.

"If you happen to pick up anything more about Brendan - anything that might interest me, let me know, huh?" he said.

I said I would, and suggested that he do the same for me, not only about Brendan, but about anything else that might interest a Johannesburg paper.

"With your pull in this town" I said, "you could get the Post Office to send me stuff press-collect."

He said he guessed he could at that, and then added: "How much did the clerk want from you for that privilege?"

I told him that we hadn't actually got down to hard figures; we had just bargained around the general principle of the thing. He seemed vaguely amused.

"Tell me Tony" I said finally. "What in hell keeps a guy of your ability in a hole like this?"

"You don't like our beautiful city?" he asked with exaggerated surprise.

"I find it hard to think of any place on earth I like less.

For me, this is the arse-end of the world. Its a lousy, stinking boneyard, with Da Garda sitting scavenging on the remains like a vulture."

He laughed shortly, not much amusement in it.

"You know" he said slowly. "I once made almost exactly the same analysis as that myself. Only I was talking about Portugal. And the bird was Salazar."

I suppose that answered the question. There wasn't any need to pursue it, even if he had wanted to. We shook hands, I told him to look me up if he ever came to Johannesburg, and I walked out in the dark, across the runway to the plane. He was a damn nice fellow, and it made me sad to think of leaving him there in his exile while I made my escape out of mine.

The plane was almost empty. Johannesburg is not a popular travel destination for travellers from Africa further north these days. I sat in one of the rear seats, looking down as we took off and rose over the land. As the earth dropped away, I could just make out the curve of the coast, gleaming in the moonlight, and the black patch that was Cap Agynas. It came to me then what I had half thought and then buried in my mind earlier in the day. Perhaps Brendan hadn't been slugged and carried to the beach. Perhaps he had been dropped.

I should have told Alvado what the old man had said about the plane in the night. But it had slipped my mind. In any case, Alvado being the kind of man he was, had almost certainly thought of it before me.

#### CHAPTER 4.

The airways bus dropped me off at the Johannesburg terminal. I walked across the bridge to my flat, the morning's traffic din sounding twice as loud after the quiet of Bolito. The flat smelt stale, and unused. I opened up all the windows to the air and noise, and phoned Meg. She sounded rather dreary. I gave her a two-sentence account of Bolito, much as I had given it to Alvado at the airport, and arranged to meet her for lunch.

A bath served to wash ~~the memory~~ <sup>Bolito</sup> out of my skin but not out of my memory. The papers of the past few days lay in a heap

in the entrance hall. I skimmed them rapidly. There wasn't anything more about Steele, but the Clarion had lifted my report on Brendan almost word for word. That wasn't unexpected. We had a gentleman's arrangement between our two papers which didn't really compete, the Herald being a morning edition and the Clarion afternoons. Each of us lifted from the other.

In the Herald, Brendan had made the front page. Alongside my report, which didn't have a by-line, there was a short biographical sketch dug out of the morgue. It didn't tell me anything about <sup>him</sup> that I didn't already know, except that he had no relations in South Africa. Tucked into a small panel at the foot of my report there was a thumb-nail photograph of me, with a small piece about "Chris Hayward, senior reporter of the Herald, who cabled in the first news of the death of W.P. Brendan to ~~reach~~ reach the outside world." There were two lines about my career on the Herald, and then: "Hayward's story has received world-wide coverage. It was sent in ~~in~~ while he was on an on-the-spot reporting mission in a part of the world where no news-agency or daily paper is represented." The headline said: "Herald man scoops the world."

It was a handsome gesture, Mac's apology for having sent me there in the first place, and certainly the only one I would get from the old buzzard. It was a skilful peice of work. It implied, without actually saying so, that Brendan's death had been a mere incident in my important reporting mission, and that the Herald really covered the world with its crew of front-line reporters. It must have been written by Mac's own fine Italian hand.

But after that Brendan proved to be strictly a one-day's wonder. By the next morning it was back on page three, with news about the body being flown back to Johannesburg for burial, and the next day an official statement from the Immigration Department that Brendan had not left South Africa through any of the recognised immigration offices or border control points. There was also a short interview with "the celebrated concert artiste, Miss Glenda Glynn", described as "a close friend of Mr. Brendan's". I could have written the interview without leaving Bolito. It said, in standard jargon, that she had been

"shocked and horrified to hear of this dreadful tragedy. He was always so full of life and confidence that it is difficult to believe it." I thought it would be worthwhile for the paper to keep those lines set up for use every Monday and Friday, they popped up so monotonously often. Miss Glynn apparently had been tearful and stricken when she first learnt the news from a Herald reporter who interviewed her on her return to Johannesburg from a short vacation in the country.

There was nothing more. So I went up to the office and straight into Mac's private smoke-hole.

"Welcome home" he grunted. "I didn't think your shift started till three o'clock."

"It doesn't" I said. "Three - or later. I just dropped in on a small matter of money. You know, cables at urgent rate, entertainment expenses, that sort of thing."

For a moment he looked as though he were going to blow a fuse. He chewed his pipe furiously trying to get himself under control before he snapped: "Expense accounts are settled Fridays. Always have been, and you know it."

"Look Mac" I said. "Exile to the salt mines of Siberia is one thing, but death by slow starvation another. Right now I'm taking a girl to lunch and I haven't got enough for the waiter's tip."

"Well why didn't you say so right out, instead of creeping in here like Oliver Twist?"

I passed my account across the desk. The cable headed the list, but I hadn't seen any reason to leave out Alvado's dinners, or the green wine and Chartreuse, which came under the heading of entertainment allowance.

"What the hell is this?" he barked. "You sting me for the most expensive hotel you can find, and then add on dinners. For two! And booze!"

"The most expensive hotel I could find" I said trying to keep my temper, "had cockroaches in the ~~box~~ bath, rocks in the mattresses, and unmentionable things in the soup. It would have cost you a damn sight more in flowers and funeral expenses if I had eaten in the dump as well."

"You sure have a rough time, don't you? Traipsing around in planes, basking in the sun on beaches, drinking yourself to a stupor and bloating yourself with food. And expensive tarts! Next time there's a holiday jaunt going for anyone, I'll see you stay home, and cover the opening of a dog hospital instead."

He rambled off into a muttered complaint about reporters, miserable money-grubbers, padding their accounts. I had heard it all before. There was only one way to deal with it, and that was to let him run out of froth. Finally he signed the chits anyway, and rang for a messenger to take them down to the office to be cashed.

"Now that your firecrackers are all finished" I said, "What exactly was that crack about expensive tarts?"

"Well dammit" he replied. "Do you think with the price of these dinners for two I should call them cheap tarts?"

So I told him about Alvaro, and how without his aid there wouldn't have been any Brendan story or anything else to show for my trip.

"A good alibi" he said. "You stick to it, especially with Mrs. Steele."

He handed the money over to me.

"I hope you're now cured of those bloody Bolshie ideas of yours!" he said.

"What Bolshie ideas are those?"

"Yours!" he said. "You think that just because a man's a bloody capitalist who spends his days at board meetings and never dirties his hands with a typewriter - you think he doesn't know a news-story from a hole in a balance sheet! Well now you know different. When the boss says: 'Go to Bolito and get the news', you might think he's bloody raving mad. I might think he's raving bloody mad. But now you know better. He knows! He's the boss!" If there isn't a news story in Bolito before he says so, there will damn well be one immediately after. Or the Board will demand an explanation!"

I grinned at him.

"Perhaps he's not clever at all" I suggested, "Just publicity mad. Perhaps he just hates planting his victims' bodies anywhere without an ace reporter on hand to tell the world!"

"By God" he said. "Perhaps you've got it. You'd better do a write-up right away. Just tell the world how he killed him! And why!" His eyes glittered. "I'll give you the biggest by-line in ~~in~~ all the Herald history." He chuckled. "On your way, Sherlock. Mrs. Steele won't wait!"

"In this club, sah, we do not mention ladies names." As I went out of the door, I turned and said: "That was a nice job you did on my Brendan story." It is impossible to say a straight thank you to the old bear. It embarrasses him so much that he would take ~~as~~ it as the signal for a torrent of blush-sparing abuse. He had worn the case-hardened exterior so long that everyone on the staff had learnt to accomodate their manners to it.

"Of course it was a nice job!" he said, characteristically. "What do you expect? I did it myself."

I nodded, and went off to meet Meg.

She was looking wonderful. The colour had returned to her cheeks, and some warmth and life to her manner. She wasn't quite as I remembered her before her marriage, but still better than she had been when I had last seen her. She was wearing olive green which suits her colouring; it wasn't too ~~gay~~ <sup>gay</sup> for a newly-widowed widow, nor too ~~dreary~~ <sup>dreary</sup> either.

"My dear" she said in greeting, "you look as though you've really been burning the candle at both ends."

I put it down to the heat and the cockroaches, topped off by a night flight. Meg isn't much of a drinker, just a social sipper with a rather puritancical view of alcohol, so it seemed wise to leave the Portuguese wine out of the responsibility.

It is impossible to talk in a Johannesburg restaurant at lunch-hour; or at least not in the sort of place I can afford, unless you don't mind everyone round about listening in. The tables are set so close ~~there~~ <sup>there</sup> are always at least sixteen ears to every tete-a-tete. So we kept strictly to the social chatter, fishing, prawns and things like that, while she told me homely things about recovering her living room settee, and a performance of My Fair Lady she had been taken to by Aunt Lil. It wasn't very intimate, but it was warm enough, with something of the old ~~instinctive~~ instinctive understanding of each others' meanings that we used to have in the days before Steele. Neither of us mention-

ed Steele or Brendan, until we were strolling slowly back along the crowded pavements towards the office where she worked. She broke the calm.

"Odd about Brendan, wasn't it. I mean you finding him and everything."

I agreed that it was. Very odd.

"Chris" she said, stopping, and turning towards me, putting a hand on my arm. "Do you think it could be connected in any way. With Rod, I mean, his..." The sentence trailed off.

I said I doubted it. "Just one of those odd coincidences."

She nodded in a doubtful kind of way.

"You read about things happening like that!" she said. Her voice seemed to have gone back into that dreary lifeless tone I remembered from the night Steele died. "But you don't believe them. It never seems possible that it can happen. And then it does. It makes you wonder."

"About what?" I ~~said~~<sup>asked</sup>, not very sympathetic, disliking the turn the conversation was taking.

"About whether you really knew him at all. You know, right underneath. What he was thinking and feeling, right inside him. Even after you've lived together, so close, for so long, you wonder."

I didn't want to get involved in this. It wasn't my business and to tell the truth I felt little sympathy with it. But the silence seemed to call for some remark, so I said tritely: "I don't know that anyone ever really knows another all that well, right down to the core. Not unless they're madly in love."

The words were not very well chosen, but once said they could not be recalled.

"I used to think we were once" she said sadly, "Rod and I. And then as time went on I wasn't sure. Perhaps if I had been sure, I would have known and understood him better."

"Oh Meg! For God's sake!" I said rather angrily.

"The things is, if I had understood him better, perhaps things would have been different, don't you see Chris. Perhaps all this would never have happened. I keep thinking that, and wondering."

"Stop beating yourself!" I said, brutally I suppose. This self-accusing sympathy for a character like Steele who didn't

merit any was making me bitter. "What happened to him happened because he was the kind of man he was. That's all there is to it."

"What kind of man was he?" she asked, not hostile, just sad.

"A taker, Meg. Always a taker, never a giver. He took the best years of your life, and you should know better than me what he gave in return. So stop dramatising it, Meg. One of these days the facts will come out, what he was up to, where he had been. And it won't be in your personality either!"

I must have sounded hurt, because she looked up ~~from~~ at me, patted my arm in that maternal way, and said: "Sorry Chris. Shouldn't cry on your shoulder, should I. Especially after you've bought me a lunch." She tried to smile. It was rather watery.

"You're welcome to my shoulder any time you need it", I said. "You know that."

She nodded, and apologised again. I suggested supper ~~together~~ together, but she cried off, saying something about washing her hair. She thanked me for lunch, said she'd call soon, and went inside to ~~the~~ the office.

I felt depressed and bitter. Once before I had let Meg drift away from me because of Roderick Steele. I seemed to be well on the way to a repeat performance. The first time I knew the cause had been more in me than in her. I have never been much of a fighter, and I had let her go without a battle. It had occurred to me often that perhaps that was what had decided her finally to team up with Steele rather than with me. But this time, I promised myself, I wasn't going to make the same mistake. This time I would fight for her.

As I walked back to my own office, I wondered just how. The only thing I could see was to track the mystery of Steele to its roots. And that meant also tracking the mystery of Brendan - if his death had any connection with Steele. I made myself a solemn vow. On this story I was going to stop toying around, prodding here and there in the hope that something will turn up, which is the way I had always worked as a reporter. This time I was going to crack ~~a~~ <sup>the</sup> story wide open by deliberate effort. I was going to lay the peices, clear and cold, on the table for Meg to see. So



that, once and for <sup>all</sup> I would lay the ghost of Roderick Steele.

As I worked at routine chores through the afternoon, the determination gradually ebbed away in the face of the stark realisation that I didn't know where to start. I had read enough mystery stories to know how ~~xxx~~ their sleuths would have done it. Some would have made elaborate timetables about who moved from here to there, and when; others would have relied on pure reasoning and deduction. And some would have had ~~tip~~-off from the underworld, or a dropped hint from a cop. I had no prospect of advance along any of these lines, and I was feeling pretty low and defeated by the time I went round the corner to a cafe for a lone supper, determined to wrestle with the problem till I solved it.

I had no sooner sat down than a character that I dislike heartily came up and joined me. Bertie Wellish, our drama critic. He didn't ask for an invitation, or a by-your-leave, but just sat down and started talking, in that exaggerated pansy fashion that seems to flourish in the seamier edges of the theater business. It was full of hand-waves, and 'my dear's, and ran on non-stop right through the meal. I tried some deliberate rudeness on him, but I had been doing that for so many years that he had persuaded himself it was my private type of joke, and ignored it. So I heard all about who was sleeping with who in the cast of Oklahoma, and what the stage-manager of My Fair Lady had said to Doolittle when he had demanded that his dust-man's costume be fumigated or dry-cleaned after the hundreth performance. The more I barracked, the more encouraged he seemed to be, as though my opposition was a tribute to his skill as a raconteur. All prospect of planning the hunt for the mystery of Steele vanished before the meal was over, and I could escape back to the office.

I did rewrite stuff, all very tedious and routine, waiting for Meg to ring. But she must have really been giving her hair a full going over, for nothing happened, and I dragged off home at very low ebb. The radio only made me worse. On one programme ~~the~~ Beatles were howling like wombats in pain, and on the other Dr. Kildare was hamming his way through the tear-jerker which had been running in serial form since just before Lindbergh flew

the Atlantic. I finally put myself to bed with Dostoevsky, and slept, for a time, fitfully.

I don't know what time it was when I was being chased by a python, as long as a railway train, with a bar of gold in its mouth. I remember jumping out of a plane to get away, and landing plop on a beach. Only it wasn't me. It was Rod Steele, grinning like a dervish, with sharp fangs hanging out over his lower jaw like Fu Manchu's moustaches. I was watching him; he had blood trickling out of his mouth, and he was pushing me onto a madly spinning turntable with spotlights flashing and bells ringing. My heart was beating like a gong, but he was gaining on me, his hand reaching out to get me. Then his foot crossed the edge of the turntable, and steel bars clanged down around us hemming us both into a cage, searchlights flashed on, blinding my eyes, and sirens began to howl.

I struggle up in a cold sweat. The sun was pouring in through the window, across my pillow. The telephone was ringing. It took me a few moments to discover where I was, and stagger across to the phone.

It was Meg. She started to say something, but I was still too fogged to register.

"Meg, just hold it one minute, will you?" I croaked. After I had doused my head in cold water, I felt more in touch.

"Sorry" I told her. You just saved me from the most ghastly nightmare. I wasn't really conscious before."

"As long as I didn't cause it!" she answered. Chris, I am sorry. I shouldn't have phoned you before lunch. I always forget the awful hours you work."

"Think nothing of it, Meg. You saved me from a fate worse than death."

"Oh, that kind of a dream, was it?" There was a slightly disapproving air in her voice, even though she was trying to play it cool.

"I do believe you're getting yourself a dirty mind!" I told her. "It was actually nothing like what you're thinking at all. I was about to be eaten by a golden python, that's all. At the Rand Easter Show."

"Brrr! Sounds grisly. Especially that bit about the Rand Show. Did he get you?"

"Nothing worth talking of Meg. One leg off at the knee. But what the hell! I'll be able to get about pretty well as soon as the wooden one is delivered. But holding a cigarette in an iron hook may prove a bit tricky."

"Good God!" she said. "You are ghoulish this morning. What are you having for breakfast? Blood?"

"You're getting your characters mixed" I said. "You're on to Dracula and I'm strictly Peter Pan. Or was it Treasure Island?"

"You're not all that clear-headed yourself, it seems. Chris, I really feel bad about yesterday. I don't think I even thanked you for lunch, did I? I just dissolved in self-pity I'm afraid. So sorry."

She sounded sorry. I told her to forget it. It was just one of those days.

"It ~~was~~<sup>wasn't</sup> very fair to you Chris. Am I forgiven?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Meg. When you want to let your hair down or cry on my shoulder, you're always welcome. But really you weren't very fair to yourself."

She said nothing. I don't know whether she was thinking what that meant, or quietly crying.

"I'd like to say sorry myself" I went on at last. "Sorry for being so bloody useless in a crisis. But you know what these Post Office regulations are - no apologies to be made on the telephone without prior consent of the Post-master General. We'll just have to do this person to person."

She still said nothing.

"So how about lunch?"

"That's very handsome of you, my dear. After yesterday" she said.

"But a real lunch, Meg. Not one of those snatch-and-swallow things, at one to two, with everyone's elbow pushing into the soup. Somewhere where we can talk. Can you get away at twelve? ~~What~~ At twelve the crowded one o'clock places would be as empty as they ever get.

"I'd like that" she said. "I'll manage it even if I have to organise a grand-mother's funeral to do it."

In the circumstances that wasn't a very well chosen phrase. I suppose it slipped out because that was the sort of thing she had on her mind. It should have warned me what to expect at lunch. But I didn't comment.

"I'll see you then" I said.

"Look after yourself" she said, and rang off. There it was again. A casual figure of speech? Or an echo of inner fear?

In the bath I pondered again the Steele mystery. It was becoming fairly clear to me that Marlowe's methods of private investigating were more in my line than Poirot's. Marlowe - if I may be permitted to say so with due deference to his success - seemed to me to bumble through, following all threads in all directions, without plans or timetables, until the whole skein suddenly unravelled in his hands in the last chapter, the way ~~of~~ a piece of string in a tangle does when at last you pull the vital **knob**. Anything Marlowe could do in the bumbling about line, Hayward could do. Or so I told myself. Except of course getting slugged with a revolver butt, beaten by a crooked cop, or being doped by a glamorous client outside of working hours. There I would draw the line. The rough stuff seemed to come naturally to Marlowe. But he was six feet tall, strong as a horse and fatally attractive to women. I was five foot nine, and one hundred and sixty.

When finally dressed I started out to bumble off in all directions. I started by calling Tim Nicholls of the Light Plane Club. Over the years I had given him several write-ups for his club's annual rally and parachute jumps, and I felt he owed me something in exchange. When I told him I wanted him to do something for me, he first remarked, casually, that he was pretty busy because the annual rally was only a few weeks off, "...and getting the publicity out is always a hell of a grind." I took the point.

What I wanted to know, I said, was what private owned planes there were around Johannesburg that could make a non-stop flight to Bolito and back. He whistled.

"You aren't half asking for something" he said. "I've got to check the mileage, and then check every plane on the list."

I reminded him that this was the jet age, mach one and

supersonic travel, and all that.

"Okay" he said. "This afternoon. But not before five. And don't forget our rally!"

Marlowe, I felt, twisted arms with more success than I. My next call was to police headquarters, Spike Olivier. I wanted to know whether anything more had turned up on the Steele case, and especially on the matter of his car keys.

He considered that for a moment, and then said by way of answer: "I hear you were on hand when they found Brendan's body. I would like to know a bit about that."

I asked him what made Brendan any of his troubles. "He wasn't found in your territory. Why not let the Portuguese cops grieve over it?"

"Was Steele found in your territory?" he asked. Before I ~~you~~ could think of a reply he added that perhaps I should come down and see him, and we could talk about it, and then rang off. It wasn't an order. But then it wasn't exactly an invitation either. ~~was~~ In any case, I went.

"I see your boxers took the gold medal again" I tried by way of greeting.

He looked pleased.

"The gold and two bronzes" he said. It seemed to give him an excuse for smiling at me. He pushed some papers on his desk into a pile, put a black ledger on them as a paperweight, leant back in his chair and said: "Well. Let's have it."

I told him the Brendan story. I had told it so often by that time that my tongue seemed to run on by itself while my mind roamed away somewhere else. When I came to Alvado's summary of the case he broke in.

"How do you come by that stuff, Hayward? I thought border control was classified information over there."

I told him that it had been given me by Alvado. He knew him slightly he said. They had once co-operated on a diamond smuggling case. "A very good policeman" he opined primly, polishing his glasses.

I agreed. It seemed to be my turn to ask the questions. What had <sup>r</sup>tuned up about Brendan? Any information about how or

why or when he left the country?

"Not a single solitary thing" he answered. "He was last seen by his lady friend on Easter Monday. Then she went off for a rest in the country, and - phttt!" He made a flicking gesture with his fingers. "Vanished. She knows no more. We know no more. No one seems to have seen him again. Except you."

I nodded.

"This girl friend" I asked. "Is that Glenda Glynn?"

He nodded.

"Quite a doll. You should interview her. It's quite an experience."

"This friend business" I asked, determined not to get sidetracked. "Just how friendly a friendship would you say it was?"

"I wouldn't" he snapped, and looked at me severely. "I'm interested in how Brendan died, not in his love life. She's free, white and twenty-one. For all I care she could have been sleeping with him every day and twice on Sundays and it still wouldn't be any of my business."

"Unless she chose to do it in a public place!" I said, getting tired of his starchy rectitude. He wasn't amused. He stood up as though to signal that the interview was at an end. I remained in my chair.

"What about Steele?" I asked. "Any news of his keys?"

"Strictly off the record" he replied, "Captain Claasens has found nothing." It was said in the tone of voice that said that that was exactly what Captain Claasens could be expected to find. He opened the door, waiting for me to go.

"What I like about this place," I said as I got to my feet, "is the square deal one gets here. I came to trade information, mine on Brendan for yours on Steele. And all I get is sweet fanny."

His face got that stony cop look one gets to know so well in my business.

"You got the wrong idea. You came here not to trade but to tell me what you know about a crime. Just to be polite I told you something in exchange. Don't ever think that was a trade. It was just a courtesy to pay for a favour you did me. Don't presume on it too far."

"The very last thing I'd ever do" I said as I went through the door, "is to presume on getting very much of that old world courtesy."

I left him looking wooden and official. He was probably wondering what the hell exactly I had meant by that. I was wondering the same thing myself, but I hadn't been able to think up a better exit line on the spur of the moment. It was time to meet Meg.

We went to a little German restaurant I knew, where the tables are far enough apart for your breathing not to rock your neighbours table. It was almost empty. The atmosphere was very gemütlich, and the fare very German. Just for the hell of it we ordered Königsberger klops, mainly to discover what they were. It was a dreadful mistake. They were even more outlandish than they sound, but all things considered that wasn't the ~~worst~~ mistake of the day.

Meg started off apologising again as soon as the waiter had taken our order. I was determined we weren't going to get off on that tack again, so I just said: "Forget it Meg. Let's just forget yesterday altogether, and start off again as though it never happened."

"I wish it were as easy as that," she said, smiling sadly without looking at me. "Maybe if I could put a thing like that aside, I wouldn't make the same mistakes again, and everything would be different. "

I thought I must have missed a line somewhere.

I said: "I don't think I'm following you too well, Meg."

"Aren't you Chris?" There was a tinge of disbelief in her voice "I mean Rod. Dying so suddenly. And so young. You can't just wipe a thing like that aside, and tell yourself to start again as though it never happened."

"I thought<sup>t</sup> we were talking about the way we parted yesterday!" I said rather sharply.

"Same thing, isn't it Chris?" She sounded rather miserable. I was afraid she was going to dissolve into tears again. But she drew little circles with her fingernail on the table-cloth, ~~studying~~ her eyes glued on them, and said only: "Rod had

a knack of getting between us, you and I, didn't he?"

It was the understatement of the year to my mind.

"He did" I told her. "But he doesn't have to any longer, Meg. Not unless we encourage it."

"You think its so easy to discourage Chris? I've tried. Believe me I've tried. But the more I try, the worse it gets."

I think Olivier must have sapped my patience.

"Ghosts can be laid, Meg" I answered shortly, unsympathetic.

"I wish they could," she replied. "But it seems to me they are like old soldiers. You just have to wait for them to fade away."

"For Gods sake!" I exploded. "You're not being haunted! You're haunting yourself! You said it yourself, Meg - that you and Rod were finished, washed up, strangers! Whatever happened to Rod happened for reasons that had nothing to do with you. So what are you beating yourself for?"

"Oh Chris. I don't know any more. I really don't." She sounded as though her voice was crying in distress. "Don't you see? He might have been driven by me, and the way I treated him. Don't you see that? Or perhaps he was trying in his way to get me back. How can I know Chris? How can I ever know?"

The waiter chose that moment to arrive with the Konigsberger klops. By the time he had put it down, patted everything into place, asked whether we wanted bread, or more wine, the moment had ~~passed~~ passed for reply. I sat there frozen, my hand resting on hers on the table, wondering what to say now.

She gave me no help, just sitting with her eyes averted. I felt like a skater setting out to test doubtful ice, ~~as I started off at last.~~

"Meg" I said, afraid to speak and yet afraid not to. "I suppose I haven't any right to this. Don't answer if you dodn't want to. But that night he died you told me things - that what had been between you once was dead, finished, ashes. That there was no more feeling left at all." She nodded, not looking up. "Was it true, Meg?"

She removed her hand from mine and dropped it in her lap.

"We were still married Chris" she almost whispered.



"Like strangers who had passed in a ship. You said so yourself."

She put her hands back on the table, one hand rubbing the thin gold band she still wore on her left hand.

I put my fingers on it too.

"This isn't anything, Meg. Not anything at all, not once the feeling you had for each other that put it on had died. Nothing. You could throw it in the sea or drop it in the gutter. It wouldn't matter. Once it was a symbol of a tie between you. Never the reality, Meg, only the symbol. And now it's a lump of metal - neither symbol nor reality. The tie ~~xxx~~ disappeared and the symbol with it."

*what* "Oh god Chris! I wish I were clever, wise enough to know what is reality and what a dream."

"You don't have to be wise," I told her. "Just human. You know that the only reality in marriage is the love that holds it together, nothing else. All the rest is symbols, meaningless without the spark."

She nodded dumbly, silent. We sat there, side by side, wrapped in our individual cocoons of misery. I made a desperate effort to ~~fix~~ raise a fork and pick at the gluey grey mess of congealed klops. She followed. Neither of us had the stomach to taste any of it.

"I don't know if I can explain this" she said at last.

"You don't have to Meg. I think I can understand."

"Do you? I wonder if you do. Oh Chris, my dear! I feel so sad for you, so guilty."

There was nothing to say. I waited for her to go on.

"It was true, Chris. It was, the night he died. We were finished, burnt out. If I had never seen him again then, I don't think it would ever have meant anything to me at all. It wasn't women Chris. He ran after women, but I could stand that even if it hurt my pride. I could even stand his selfishness. But what it was Chris was his running, that endless running, climbing, fighting ~~ing~~ to get bigger, higher, more important! ~~xxx~~ Can you understand what that meant, the scheming, smashing others down, climbing on their faces. It was just so - so unfeeling, Chris! So insensitive! So inhuman!

"So that killed it, you see Chris. Every step he ran took us further apart, until we weren't even in speaking distance of each other. Nothing left at all." She paused and thought. "Does that make any sense?"

"Quite a lot" I said. "But why torture yourself with it? It happened. There was nothing you could do about it. It happens to people all the time"

"That's what I thought" she said. "Until he died."

"His death had nothing to do with it, Meg! You know that!" She looked up at me.

"I've been wondering," she said. "Where was he running to, Chris? And why? Why? Why? And the more I ask that, the more it seems to me perhaps I drove him to it. Perhaps he felt us drifting, and that made him run faster and faster, to get somewhere, to be someone. Perhaps he hoped that way he would win me back."

"Forget it Meg. That's nonsense, and you know it."

"Don't you see?" she said, pressing the idea on me. "Don't you understand? For him, whatever it was that was up there - riches, fame, whatever it was - was so wonderful, don't you see he would have thought it would be wonderful for me too? That if he could get it, he would get me back too?"

I shook my head. It was morbid nonsense.

"I keep thinking Chris that perhaps he died trying to do something wonderful for me. Something I never wanted only he couldn't know that."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say something brutal, to tell her that Steele had never lifted a finger to ~~help~~ <sup>do anything for</sup> anyone except Roderick Steele, least of all for her when he was on his way up, leaving her behind. But my courage failed me. I just shook my head again, and said: "It's not true, Meg. And you'll know it's not true when the reasons for his death come out, as sometime they must."

She dabbed at her eyes. We sat in silence as the waiter removed the disastrous remains of our lunch, and brought coffee and doughnuts. We swallowed those in silence, and ~~walked~~ walked back to her office in silence.

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