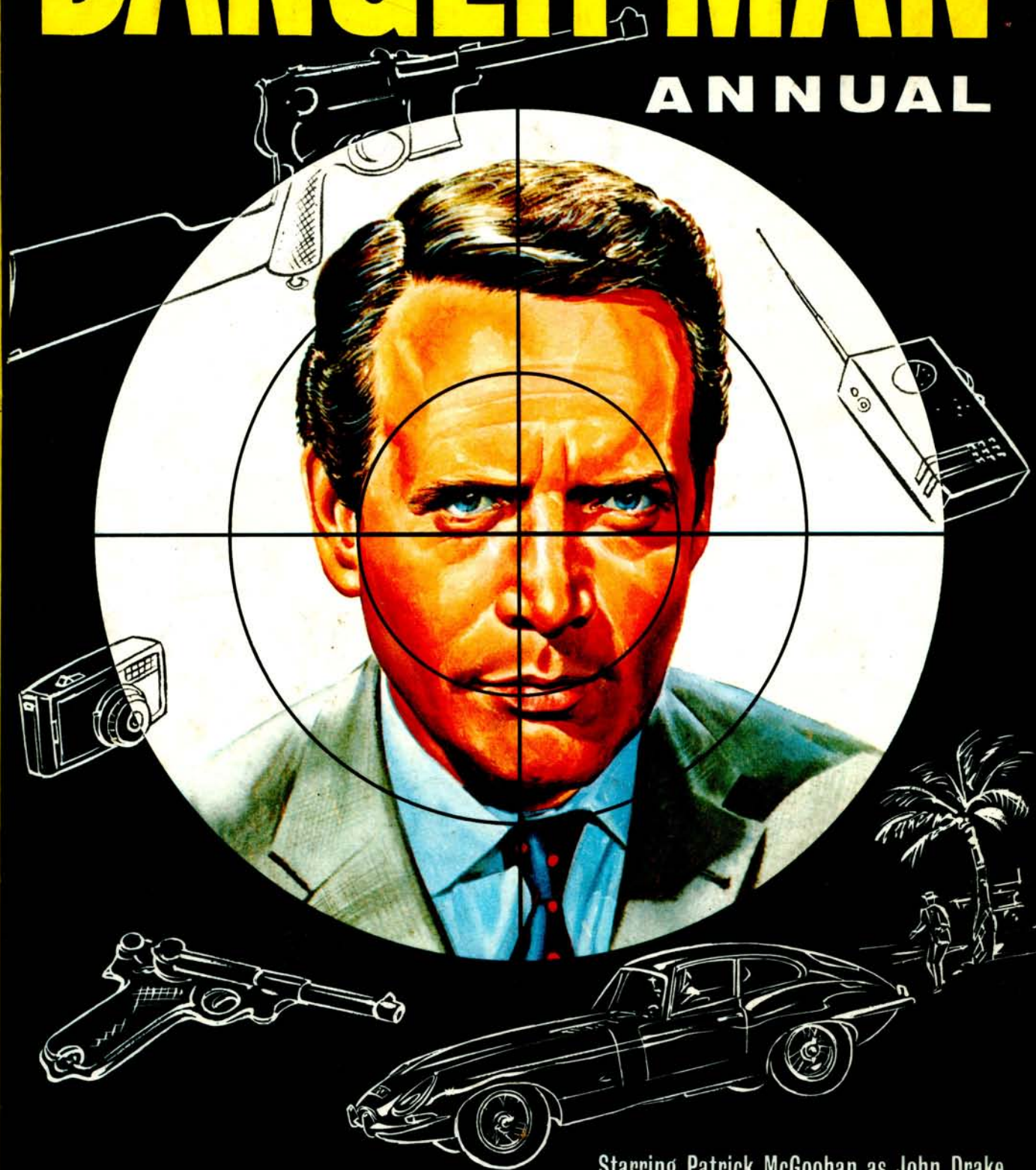


DANGER MAN

ANNUAL



Starring Patrick McGoochan as John Drake
from the famous TELEVISION SERIES





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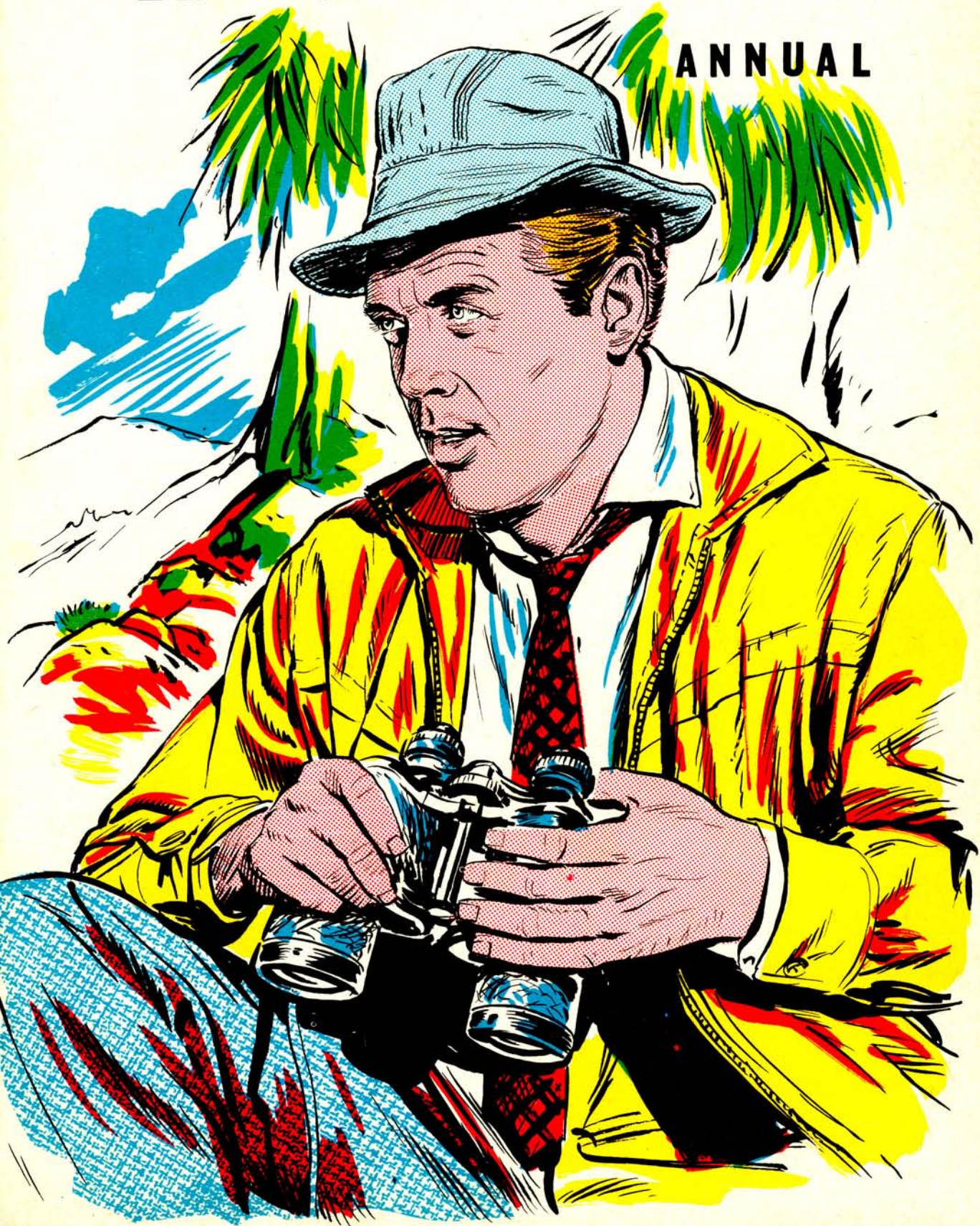
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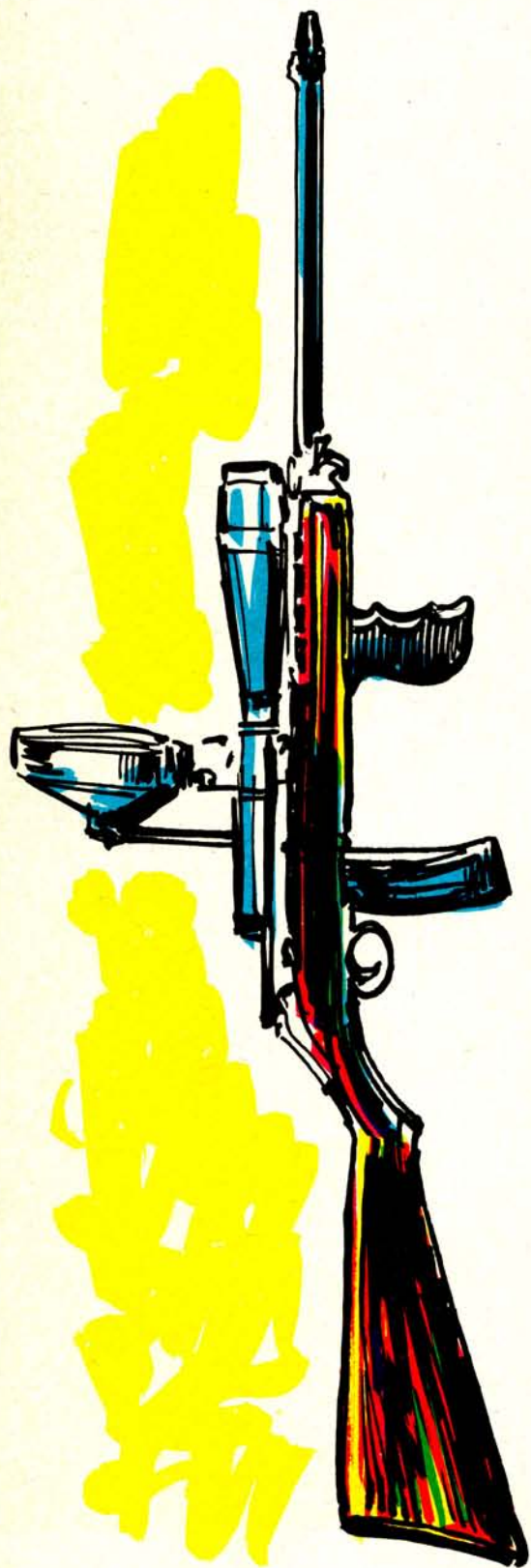
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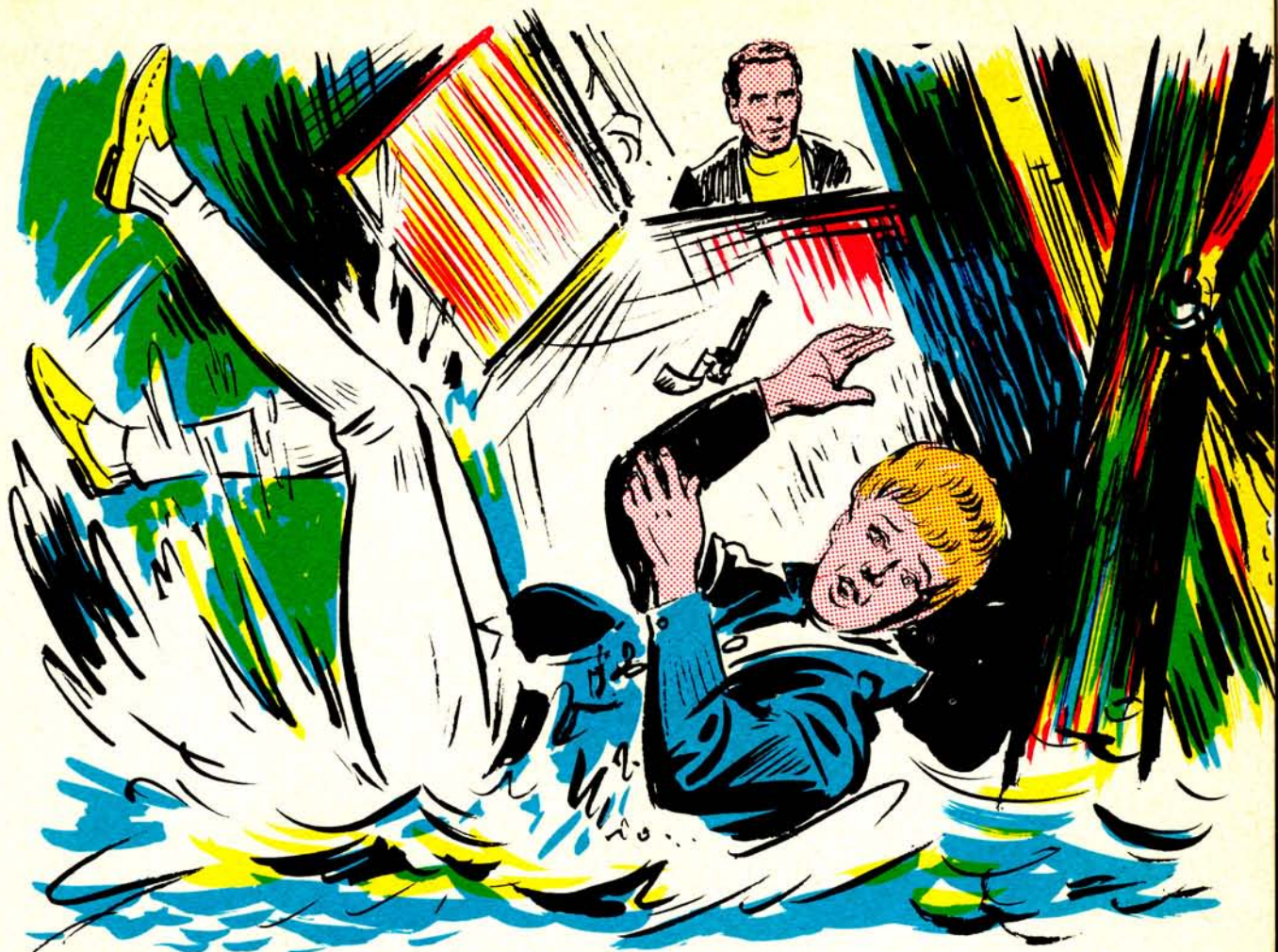
ANNUAL



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THE BIG SPLASH

IT was the hottest night of the summer and Drake was sitting at a sidewalk table on the brilliantly lit Via Veneto in the teeming heart of Rome.

The broad carriageway was agog with every kind of vehicle, from sumptuous Rolls-Bentleys through gleaming Alfa-Romeos and mass-produced Fiats to ancient horse-drawn *carroze*.

The pavements of the famous gilded strip were agog with every kind of character, from

international film stars through millionaire playboys to gaping tourists and shifty-eyed crooks on the make.

But none of these received more than a passing show of interest from the Danger Man as he sat sipping black coffee at a table almost directly outside the entrance to the Café Royal. He was looking for an international spy whose description was unknown and whose only known name was Lamande.

Before he flew out from London Airport that morning, X had told him that Lamande was to meet Albert Gunther, the sinister Chief of Intelligence in the Eastern European State of Volstag, at the exact table where Drake was sitting.

Two days previously Captain Clive Carruthers, a British diplomatic courier, had been ambushed while motoring from Naples to Rome. A fusillade of shots, apparently from a sub-machine gun, had smashed a side window of his car. Carruthers lost control of the car which

crashed into a hedge. He himself was knocked unconscious—and when he came round the diplomatic bag had vanished.

The bag contained complete technical data on a new and revolutionary intercontinental ballistic missile developed in secret at a remote research station sponsored by Allied military chiefs in the steeply wooded country near Positano.

A passing motorist had given Carruthers a lift into Rome, where the courier had instantly established contact with his Embassy chief. Within minutes news of the occurrence had been telephoned to Security HQ in London.

Urgent messages were flashed to British agents in every European capital and many other cities. Carruthers had not seen his attacker and there seemed to be no hint of a clue. Two anxious hours passed—then Agent 909 came through on a priority call from Berlin with the news that Gunther had hurriedly cut short a courtesy visit to the capital.

"Nine-O-Nine reports that Gunther left immediately for Volstag, though he was not due back there for another week," X said. "This morning our man in Volstag filed a coded despatch announcing, very briefly, that Gunther is flying to Rome to meet Lamande at 11 p.m. at a table opposite the Café Royal on the Via Veneto."

"Lamande?" said Drake slowly. "I know the name, it has cropped up on five occasions in the last year—but, so far as my information goes, no one has ever seen him."

"Your information is unfortunately correct," replied X. "All we know is that Lamande is a highly skilled professional thief, specialising in top secret documents which he sells to any Power willing to pay his price."

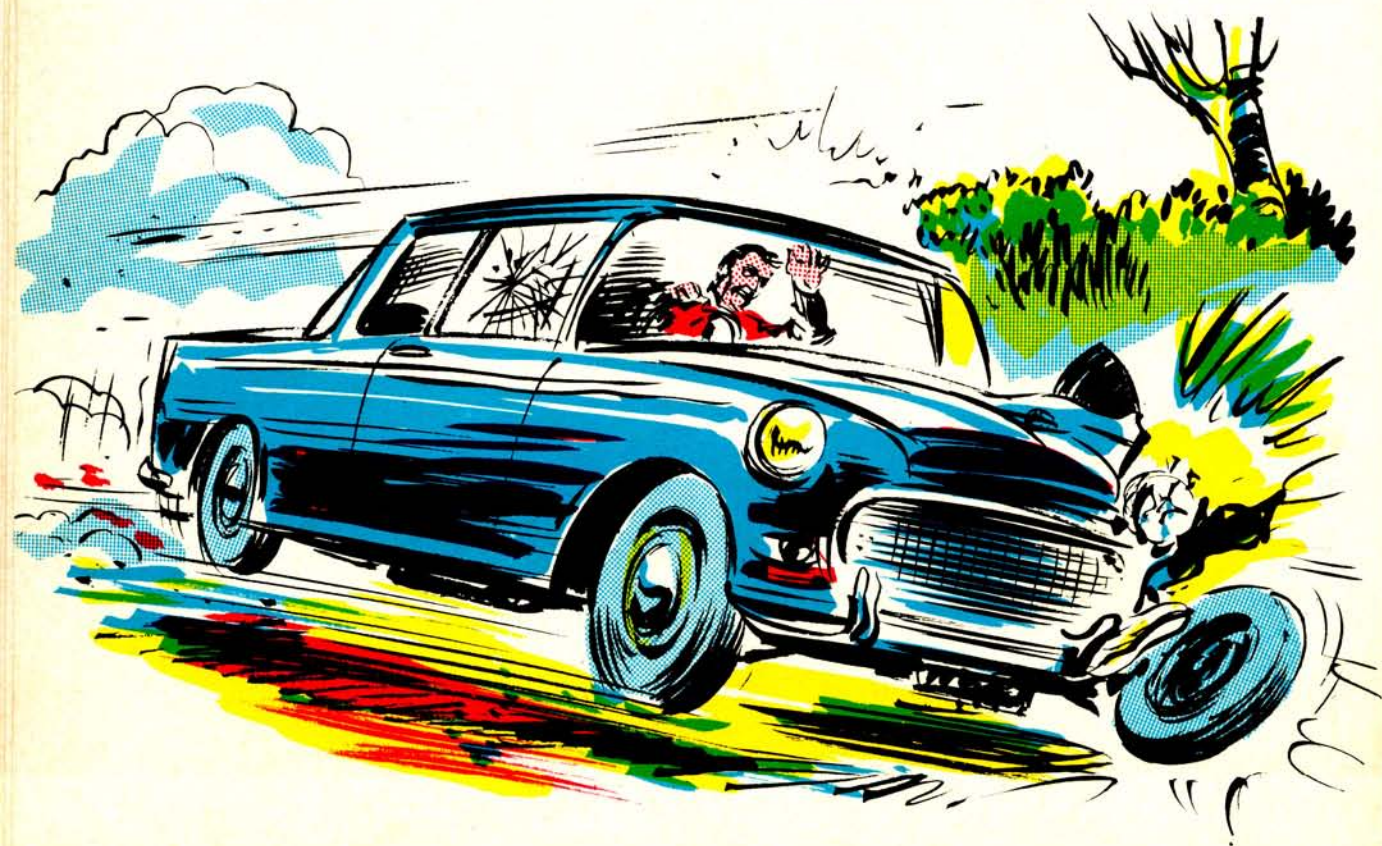
"Nice people," said Drake drily.

X shrugged. "Lamande is without conscience or even the remotest sense of patriotism," he remarked. "He has no sense whatever of loyalty to his native land, which could be France from the name . . . though the very name may well be an assumed one. He has no organisation, preferring to work entirely alone. This, of course, minimises the risks of detection and also ensures that he collars all the loot for himself."

"I'd have supposed he could have got a better price for the missile papers from one of the bigger Powers, sir," Drake ventured.

"On the face of it, yes. But the State of Volstag has ambitions to become a new force in Europe, or their rulers have. It looks as if they've made a very high bid which Lamande has accepted. There can be no other explanation for the meeting in Rome tonight."

Drake smiled. "What time does my flight take off, sir?" he inquired.



"At noon. You'd better be at that table on the Via Veneto a full half hour ahead of schedule and hang on to it. Gunther you have seen. Whoever joins him will be Lamande . . . and you will thus become the first agent to make his acquaintance."

"What exactly am I expected to do?"

"Why, get the documents back, of course," answered X blandly. "How you do it we shall leave entirely up to you—and if you land yourself in a nasty jam we shall disclaim all knowledge of you."

"But of course," assented Drake.

* * *

Following instructions to the split second, Drake seated himself at the sidewalk table precisely at 10.30 that night. There was no one else there, which surprised him because, as far as the eye could see, every other table along the sophisticated boulevard seemed to be occupied.

He soon found out the reason. He had barely taken his seat when a mess-jacketed waiter came quickly across the pavement and said: "Signor . . ."

Drake, who had some knowledge of the Italian language, asked: "*E libera questa tavola?*"

"No," said the waiter sourly.

"Why not?" demanded Drake, lapsing into his native tongue.

"Ah, you are *inglese*," said the waiter. "I should 'ave know from your so-bad *italiano*."

"As bad as your English accent," countered Drake cheerfully.

The waiter's dark eyes flickered. "You ask if the table is free and I tell you no. Is enough. Now you go, eh?"

"It looks free enough for me," answered Drake, crossing one leg over the other.

"The table he is reserved, for two peoples who come shortly . . ."

Drake looked round. "Well, there's room for four, isn't there?"

"The reservation is made on the *telefonico* for two peoples who require all the table, sare," said the waiter obstinately.

Drake took a 1,000 lire note from his wallet and let it flutter down on the waiter's tray.

"Ah!" said the waiter buoyantly, "that make-a the difference, sare."



"I had an idea it might," murmured Drake.

"And if there is any troubles then I 'ave seen you not, *signor*, eh?" The waiter beamed. "But I bring you the whisky, the wine or the coffee, *si?*"

"Coffee," said Drake.

"Okay, I get the waitress to serve you, so I can prove I 'ave seen you not. *Grazie, signor.*"

The coffee arrived and Drake sat toying with it, wondering what would happen when Gunther and Lamande showed up. They could hardly talk business in his presence and would very likely demand his removal. Well, he would deal with the situation as it arose.

It was the longest half hour Drake could recall. At the table just beyond his a party of movie people were engaged in animated conversation and he immediately recognised two of the girls as currently fashionable stars both in America and Italy.

He ordered a second coffee and had almost finished it when a powerfully built man sauntered unhurriedly along the pavement. It was

exactly one second before eleven o'clock. He was wearing a lightweight blue mohair suit and carried his hat. His face was heavy and the coal-black eyes below bushy black brows were both hard and expressionless.

Drake had seen him twice previously—once in the Adlon Hotel in Berlin and once in the terminal building of New York's International Airport. But he had seen him at a distance without the other being aware of the fact and he felt fairly certain that Gunther did not know him.

Then, as the Volstag Intelligence chief neared the table, his eyes narrowed. He seemed to hesitate for a moment before starting to speak in halting Italian.

"I'm English, if that'll help," said Drake.

"English!" Gunther almost spat out the word. Then, with an effort, he got an agreeable look on his florid features and said: "I regret to inform you, sir, but this table has been reserved for myself and a friend."

"Alas," sighed Drake, "but I have also made a reservation for a place here. So I am afraid we shall have to share it."

Gunther glared across the pavement in the direction of the waiter, who was prudently keeping his back turned. For a moment it looked as if the Volstag spy boss was going to make trouble; then he seemed to think better of it and sat down heavily in a vacant chair.

"A pleasant evening, what?" said Drake ingratiatingly.

"Bah . . . is too hot," snapped Gunther.

"It is never too hot to be in Roma," murmured Drake.

Gunther made no reply. Drake sensed that he was becoming irritably impatient. For it was now three minutes after eleven and there was no sign of Lamande.

More time passed. Five minutes . . . eight minutes. Gunther kept looking down at the gold watch on his right wrist, his mouth a long hard line. At the end of a quarter of an hour he rose abruptly and strode off down the sidewalk.

Drake watched his retreating back. There was no point in tailing him. The baffling thing was what had gone wrong—why, in fact, Lamande had failed to keep the appointment. Lamande was the mystery man of international espionage, but he was known to be meticulous in all his dealings.

Perhaps he had received a better offer from another source, perhaps he had been quietly 'liquidated'. Such things were common enough in the world of intrigue and violence in which he moved. But Drake declined to speculate. Theorising without even a semblance of a clue wouldn't get him anywhere. But neither would sitting on at a sidewalk table on the gay Via Veneto.

Gunther, he knew, was staying in an apartment owned by the Volstag Embassy, a sky-priced apartment in one of the new and massive blocks near the Tiber. It was virtually a certainty that Gunther would remain there at least until tomorrow on the chance of Lamande showing up at the flat.

Drake decided to keep watch on the place. It would involve an all-night vigil and could even turn out to be a waste of time, but he knew it was something he must do. Besides, if Lamande had been unexpectedly delayed—something as ordinary as a car breakdown could account for it—he was certain to go to the apartment or at least telephone a new rendezvous. In which case Gunther would be going out again . . . and Drake meant to be not far behind.

With Drake to think was to act. He rose swiftly from his seat, turning as he did so—and bumped into something soft and feminine. In fact, the impact caused the girl to sway almost off balance.

Drake thrust out a steadying arm. "I'm terribly sorry," he exclaimed. "I trust I haven't hurt you . . ."

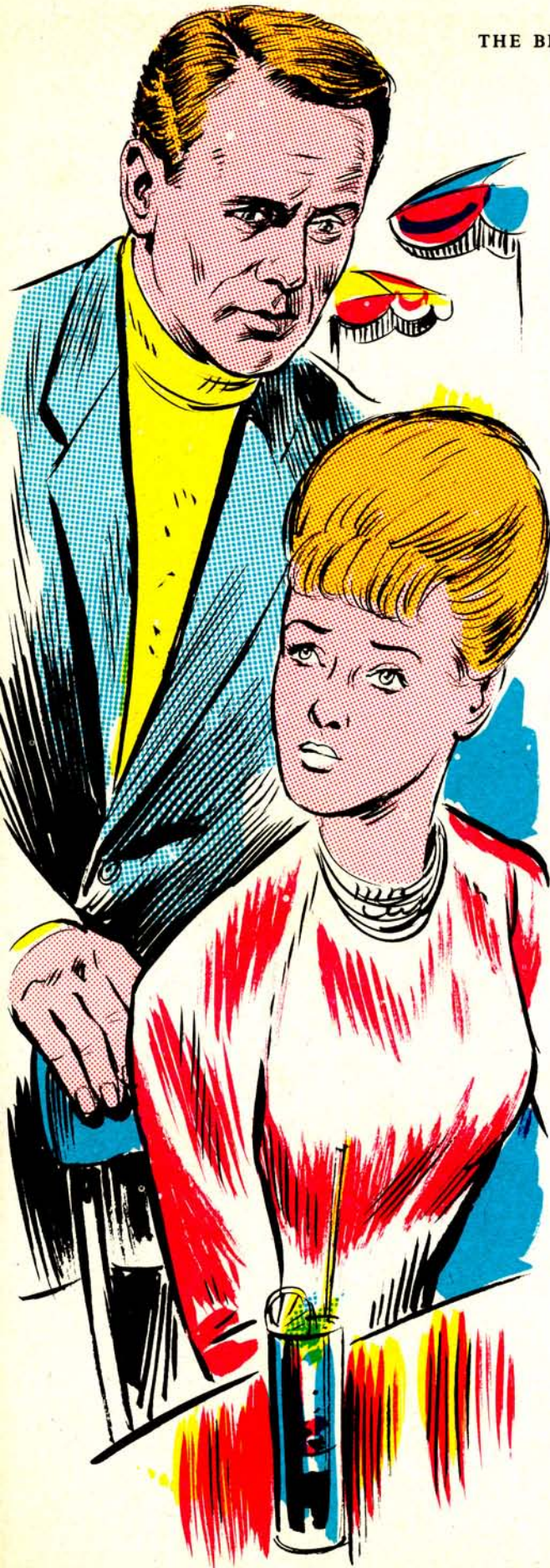
He stopped, realising that the girl was probably Italian.

"It's all right," she said. "My, it's nice to hear English. If I've got to be knocked over by anyone I'd rather he was an Englishman."

Drake smiled. "The tribute is appreciated," he said. His eyes took in the pale oval of her face, the piled coppery hair, her candid gaze, the clothes whose seemingly careless look was of the kind which costs a lot of money.

He was on the point of taking a polite leave when something odd happened to her. The long vivid mouth compressed and her eyes seemed to half close. Something that was almost a shiver took possession of her and she put out a hand to grip the back of a chair.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Drake inquired solicitously.



She pulled herself together. "I'm sorry," she said. "It wasn't anything to do with your bumping into me, it . . . it's . . ."

"Yes?" prompted Drake.

Her shoulders arched in a gesture. "I . . . I hardly know you, but you look a decent man and you're English and . . ." The words trailed away as if she were finding it difficult to continue.

Drake said nothing. For one thing, he was not prepared to invite some tale of woe; he had other and more pressing business on hand. But he could scarcely just stride off.

"Can we sit down?" she asked quietly.

"Well, I *do* want to be somewhere . . ."

"It'll take only a few moments, I'll make it very brief and to the point," she said.

Drake pulled a chair out for her and took another himself. "Just what seems to be the trouble, Miss . . .?"

"Manning—Carole Manning. I'm here on a business trip. I work for a fashion house in London."

"John Drake," said the Danger Man briefly. "I'm also here on business and also from London."

Carole Manning leaned a little across the polished top of the table and said quietly: "I'm frightened, Mr. Drake. Frightened of a man. I somewhat foolishly allowed him to strike up a conversation with me in a *ristorante* earlier in the day . . . since then he has dogged my footsteps. Now he threatens to injure me if I refuse to go out with him . . ."

The story sounded almost commonplace and Drake repressed a yawn. "It'd be just talk, Miss Manning," he said.

She put out a hand to touch his wrist. "No!" she said vehemently. "He meant it, Mr. Drake."

"Well, you seem to have escaped him all right," replied Drake.

"That's just the point—I haven't! He came after me when I started walking up the slope from the Piazza Barberini and I had to run and run to get to the lights and safety of the Via Veneto . . . I was so frantic that I didn't even notice you rising from your seat . . . and . . ."

Drake sent a long look raking down the sidewalk. "There doesn't seem to be anybody hanging around suspiciously," he said brusquely.

"He's waiting for me to go back, I know it, Mr. Drake. And if I go on towards the Villa Borghese Gardens he'll circle round and catch

me there. I . . . I just don't know what to do. But I can't sit here all night . . . please, will you escort me back to my hotel?"

Drake's lips pursed. Then he said quietly: "Look, Miss Manning, I really do have to be somewhere else. But I'll call a taxi and have you driven to your hotel."

"Thank you," she replied simply.

Drake had half turned his head to hail a taxi when he heard her saying: "If you'd seen him you'd know Lamande wasn't making an idle threat and . . ."

"What was that name?" said Drake harshly.

"Lamande . . . he told me his name was Lamande."

Drake stood upright in a single swift movement. He reached down to help her to her feet.

"I'm sure I don't understand . . ." Carole Manning said uncertainly.

"Well, I don't understand it myself, but maybe I soon will," said Drake as he piloted her down the slope.

The brilliant lights of the Via Veneto faded behind them. Now they were going downhill under the shadows of tall trees and the darker pools thrown by the façades of grim old palaces with their vast studded doors. Suddenly the city seemed strangely quiet . . . a giant sprawl of emptied streets, narrow alleys and shuttered wine shops.

A dry, warm wind blew down the slope, lifting torn sections of discarded newspapers. A car looking half a block long went past them with a whisper from twin exhausts. Then there



"And you think he's beyond the lights of the Via Veneto, waiting somewhere in the shadows on the way down to the piazza?"

"He was there when I started running here. I'm sure he is still there. But . . ."

"I'll walk you back to your hotel," said Drake grimly.

"You spoke as if the name meant something to you," Carole Manning said.

"If it's the same Lamande, yes."

"You mean you know him then?"

"I've never met anyone named Lamande in my life," replied Drake. "But the name means something to me all right."

was silence again, the only sound being the tapping of their footsteps.

"The street looks deserted, Miss Manning," said Drake, his eyes probing ahead.

Her hand touched his arm, then gripped it. "Down there . . . under the third tree from us . . . it's *him* . . ."

"We'll walk to it," said Drake composedly. "If he tries anything I'll be ready."

They were almost there when Drake said: "Well, he seems to have vanished . . ."

"Behind the tree trunk . . . look . . ." she cried.

Drake wheeled, but he was too late. Something dull and heavy smacked down hard on the back

of his head. A million lights exploded, eddied and swirled into blackness and nothingness.

* * *

Coming out of it was the worst part. Pain speared his head and his eyes felt hot under lids that seemed weighted down with concrete slabs.

Even the floor on which he was lying appeared to be heaving gently. Somewhere in the near distance he could hear the ceaseless plop-plop of water.

He got his eyes open and instantly closed them again. But after three more attempts he kept them open. He was lying on his back in a boat, a small rowing boat. It was rocking on the gentle swell of the Mediterranean, but it was stationary—which meant that the craft was tied-up to a small pier or jetty. He tried to move his hands, only to find that they were trussed together with hard cords.

When he moved his head the pain was sharp and stabbing. He lay still, the sweat rolling down his forehead and creeping down his back under his shirt. He moved again, and the pain was less searing. Drake judged that the blow he had taken had been enough to put him out, but no more than that.

How long ago, though? It could have been an hour, perhaps less. The nearest sea to Rome was a matter of a dozen miles. A fast car could have whisked him out to the coast in a good deal less than an hour. It didn't matter. All that counted was that he was in a spot and that somehow he had to get out of it.

He made a desperate effort, struggling into a sitting position. Beyond the boat he could see the Mediterranean shining like polished velvet under the half moon riding in a cloud-free sky.

Directly ahead of him was land—and a small floating platform anchored to heavy iron staples. A short distance away on land was a boathouse, and beyond that a villa. The windows were shuttered, but light seeped through tiny slits in the downstairs ones.

Drake stared down at his corded wrists; he knew full well that to struggle against the bonds would merely tighten them. But unless they had taken it from him there would be a sheathed razor blade in the ticket pocket of his jacket.

He managed to insert two fingers in the pocket. The blade was still there. He nursed it out, held

the casing between his teeth and bent low down over his wrists.

Twice the keen blade slipped slightly, cutting him so that a thin trickle of blood oozed on his hands. But he kept on grimly. It took all of five minutes before the last of the cords snapped.

Now he was free. But even as the thought came to him, he lay prone on the floor of the boat again, his hands close together in the position in which they had been trussed . . . for his alert ears had caught the distant throb of a motor. There was a swish of sound, then the motor cut out. Drake raised his head fractionally, enough to take a fast look. It was a big blue and white painted cabin cruiser, flying the French flag.

Someone had nosed the cruiser out of a boathouse round an angle in the shoreline. There was the sound of someone moving, but whoever it was he couldn't be seen because of the screening bulk of the cabin itself.

Drake heard footsteps going towards the villa in the shadow of a line of trees. Then the trees ended and the figure emerged briefly—a slim figure in white slacks, a dark reefer jacket and a yachting cap. Drake saw the figure for no more than a fleeting second, then it was gone—apparently into the villa.

He heaved himself upright again. He touched the back of his head with delicately probing fingers and looked at them. There was no blood, though the back of his skull had a king-size bruise.

But the pain was getting less all the time. He soaked a handkerchief in sea water and bathed the swelling. There was no stinging sensation, so he knew the wound wasn't open.

His jaw set grimly. Drake hauled on the guide rope, bringing the craft tight up to the floating platform. In another moment he was out, bending low and moving soundlessly towards the villa.

Light still glinted from the rear windows facing the sea. Drake edged his way round to the front. A single car stood on the rolled gravel drive—a crimson Mercedes-Benz with a Volstag identification plate and a diplomatic immunity crest.

Drake went up the white stone steps and carefully tried the door. It was closed, but his sensitive fingers told him that the lock wards hadn't been turned. Methodically, he took a



slim section of celluloid from an inner pocket, inserted the celluloid in the keyhole and began a series of small manipulations, using only gentle pressure. There was the smallest click. Drake turned the handle, leaning his shoulder on the panels. The door moved softly inwards.

Now he was in a hall with black-and-white mosaic tiling. An arched Moorish stairway curved upwards from the centre of the hall. Doors led off on either side, but Drake ignored them. The door he wanted faced him, straight ahead beyond the wide foot of the angled stairs.

He went noiselessly across the tiles. The door was nearly shut, but not quite. He poked an index finger at it, felt the door move by the merest fraction . . . but sufficient for him to get a slit view.

Gunther was standing in the middle of the

room, his eyes gloatingly on a British diplomatic bag. A dry chuckle escaped him. "And now to examine the products of two years' intensive research," he breathed. "The vital data which will make my country a force to be reckoned with. Soon the stupid British and Americans will tremble before Volstag!"

Drake realised that Gunther was gloating to himself. He was in the act of slitting open the bag when a thought seemed to strike him and the next moment he put it into words: "A powerful drink, a very powerful drink is in order . . ." he grinned.

He moved across the room, out of vision, and Drake understood that he had gone through to another part of the villa. But the vital diplomatic bag was on the mahogany table.

With a single swift movement Drake was inside the room. He whisked the bag from the table and was back in the hall within seconds.

From where he stood he could see Gunther returning, a tall glass in his hand. The spy chief was actually raising the glass to his mouth when he saw the empty table.

He almost jumped from the carpet, the drink spilling out in a cascade.

"Wh . . . wha . . . what . . . I . . ." Words babbled incoherently from him. Then he hurled the glass from him, his hand streaking inside his jacket. There was a blur of motion as he took from his pocket a wicked-looking nine-shell Luger pistol.

From beyond the door Drake gave a macabre laugh, then pulled the door shut.

A wild yell came from Gunther, heavy footsteps thudded across the room and the door was wrenched inwards.

"I have a gun . . . see, I kill you on sight whoever you are!" Gunther snarled.

Drake said nothing. He was standing flat against the wall to the side of the door—the diplomatic bag wide open in his hands, its contents lying at his feet.

Gunther advanced inch by inch until the long barrel of his gun began to protrude into the hall.

In a voice that only just rose beyond a whisper Drake said: "Don't kill me, please!"

"So you are unarmed, whoever you are," jeered Gunther. "That is good, for now I come out and fill you full of the little holes, eh?"

His powerful frame appeared in the doorway

... but in the same instant Drake brought the open end of the diplomatic bag straight down over Gunther's head.

Gunther uttered a choking bleat, then a yelp as the Danger Man swung him round, planted a knee in the small of his back and sent him reeling out into the hallway.

Blinded by the bag, Gunther staggered this way and that and finally lurched into a potted palm, sitting down on the hard, unsympathetic mosaic with a thud that jarred every bone in his body.

When he got the bag off his head he found himself gazing down the dark muzzle of his own Luger, held in Drake's unerring grasp!

"On your feet, chum," said Drake tersely.

"You . . . you . . ." stuttered Gunther. Then, recovering the power of expression, he uttered a string of strange Volstagian epithets.

"Naughty," murmured Drake reprovingly. He yanked open a closet door with his other hand. "Inside, and make it fast," he ordered.

Naked murder flared in the spy's eyes, but without another word he obeyed. Drake banged the door shut, turned the key in the lock and strolled into the lighted room.

There was a door to his left, leading to a smaller room with french windows overlooking the sea. Miss Carole Manning was lying full-length on a settee. She was securely bound hand and foot and her eyes stared widely from above the gag which hid half of her lovely face.

Drake got the gag off and she croaked: "Thank goodness you've come, Mr. Drake . . . to save me from that dreadful man!"

"When Lamande slugged me what happened to you, Miss Manning?" Drake asked.

"Oh, dear, he hit you with the handle of a gun, then menaced me with the weapon and forced me to help him get you in a car. Then he drove here."

"How the heck did Gunther get here?"

"Lamande telephoned him in Rome and after a while Gunther arrived, that's his car outside. They said you were tied up in a boat and that they planned to . . . to get rid of you before the night was over."

"Jolly decent of them," said Drake heartily. "By the way, where the deuce is he?"

"He . . . he's got a big cabin cruiser, it's anchored outside near where they put you."

Drake grinned. "So it is. As a matter of fact



I saw someone leave it. That would be Lamande, wouldn't it?"

"I . . . I suppose it would be, Mr. Drake. But you haven't untied me," she said winningly.

Drake went on tonelessly: "The figure was wearing a reefer jacket, white slacks and a yachting cap. Exactly what you're wearing now, except the cap—which I can see on the floor."

"I . . . I don't know what you mean . . ."

"I think you do, Miss Manning . . . or should I say Lamande?" purred Drake. "There never was any man hiding behind that tree, was there? You saw me at the table when Gunther arrived and hung back . . . because you must have known who I was. So, when Gunther left, you sold me that cock and bull story. I thought there was something wrong, but I wasn't quite sure, and I made the mistake of allowing myself to be distracted when you shouted that fake warning. Then you slugged me yourself."

Carole Manning, alias Lamande, glared up balefully. Her pale oval face no longer wore a lovely look—now it had the unconcealed ferocity of a jungle cat.

"All right, so I tricked you, Mr. Clever Drake," she sneered. "That'll be something to remember. The great Danger Man outwitted by a girl."

Drake allowed himself a small sigh. "We all make mistakes every now and then, Lamande," he said. "But I think I've rectified it. Our baffled chum Gunther is locked in a closet, I have the diplomatic bag and you're lying trussed-up on a settee."

He laughed harshly. "I suppose Gunther pulled a gun on you and tied you up *after taking back all the lovely loot he paid you to steal the bag?*"

The livid fury in her eyes told him that he had made the right deduction!

With a supreme effort she made her face calm and said pleadingly: "Please release me, Mr. Drake . . . the cords are hurting me."

"All right," answered Drake. He slashed the bonds, stepping back, the Luger hanging down at his side.

Even as he did so, she made a fast movement and switched sideways off the settee—a .22 target pistol in her dainty hand.

"I'll trouble you for that diplomatic bag and the money Gunther filched from me, Drake," Lamande said in a hard, tight voice.

But Drake wasn't even looking at her. His eyes were on the squared-off section of the woodblock floor on which she was standing. Close to his left foot was a small knob-like protuberance.

Drake pressed his foot sharply down on it. Miss Carole Manning, alias Lamande, uttered one wild cry as the trapdoor opened under her. Then she vanished from view and a split second later there was a dull splash.

Drake craned his neck interestedly over the opening. She was swimming in fairly shallow water in the boathouse immediately below the villa.

"I'll be right down and get you out, Miss Lamande," said Drake, for his was ever a kindly nature.

* * *

The French flag fluttered gallantly in the zephyr-like breeze of the deep blue sea as Drake held the cruiser on an even course for Marseilles, where it was his intention to hand Miss Carole Manning Lamande and Mr. Albert Gunther over to waiting officials of International Intelligence.

He regretted that tactical considerations made it inadvisable to have Miss Lamande on deck to share the beauties of the voyage with him, but with both his own hands on the helm it would hardly be prudent to allow so enterprising a girl to roam around at will. In such circumstances she would be only too likely to pick up some heavy object and beat him sharply over the head.

So Drake had thoughtfully locked his prisoners in separate cabins. Gunther had accepted his fate with a kind of surly calm. Miss Lamande, on the other hand, had expressed herself with a breezy freedom hardly becoming in a lady.

The fact that she had been outwitted in her biggest enterprise seemed to press heavily upon her.

"It's not the end of the world," remarked Drake as he escorted her to her cabin, "so cheer up."

"What have I to be cheerful about?" raged Miss Lamande, her green eyes flashing.

"Well, you can console yourself with the reflection that you certainly made a big splash," grinned Drake as he turned the key in the lock.

NO MEDALS FOR THE GENERAL



THE big jet touched down in Rio de Janeiro and the Danger Man stepped out to take another look at the city which he considered one of the most beautiful places on earth.

Nothing would have suited Drake better than to spend a few easy-going weeks strolling along the boulevards and idling on the sun-drenched beaches, but on this occasion he could be there no more than a single night. At nine o'clock on the following morning he was scheduled to catch the flight to Fiesta City, the turbulent capital of the new Caribbean Republic of San Miguel.

The British Security organisation and its American counterpart, the famed CIA, had chosen him as the one man most likely to succeed in the vital task of recovering a joint Anglo-U.S. plan for maintaining order in the troubled naval zone in which San Miguel was a key factor.

The plan, which was contained on a single, closely-typed sheet of foolscap paper, had disappeared from Joint Security Headquarters

—and Harry Polsnak, a trusted confidential clerk, had vanished with it.

After his briefing in London the Danger Man had flown out to Washington for a top conference with Colonel Omar Fullbright, the grizzled war veteran who had risen to the highest rank in American Intelligence.

Colonel Fullbright wasted no time in pleasantries. "It's a situation of the greatest

urgency, Drake," he said. "The new Republic of San Miguel is not exactly friendly either to American or British interests. In fact, the President—General Antonino Ruez—is known to be forming an alliance with the international revolutionary movement whose major aim is to shatter the power of the West."

"You are certain that Polsnak has taken the plan to Ruez, sir?" asked Drake quietly.

Colonel Fullbright nodded. "An unidentified plane touched down on the Eastern seaboard last night and picked up a man answering to his description. Jennings, one of our men in Rio, reports that the same plane came in at a small airstrip thirty miles south of Rio and that the passenger was rushed by car to the city—where he promptly vanished. We believe he was met there by a representative of the Ruez government and will be taken by sea to San Miguel."

"When?"

"They almost certainly intended putting to sea late last night or in the small hours of this morning, but this has been made virtually impossible by a violent storm. The delay gives you a little more time—though, as a matter of fact, we can afford a day or two because the plan is typed in Code Ninety."

"An extremely tough code to break down, I understand, sir," said Drake.

"Yeah, it will take even an expert several days," Colonel Fullbright commented. "Nobody in the Ruez camp could even attempt it—which means that the job will have to be handed to one of the top backroom boys from the international revolutionary movement."

The colonel's face hardened. "It's the international organisation who are our real enemies," he said. "Ruez is nothing but a wine-swilling upstart tyrant—but the Powers behind him are flooding the Republic with the most modern armaments, and knowledge of the Joint Anglo-American plan would make them an even greater threat to world peace. The immediate effect would be to force your Government and mine to completely re-shape naval dispositions throughout the zone—and that isn't a thing we can do either easily or rapidly."

Fullbright leaned forward. "That plan has got to be recovered before it can be decoded, Drake," he said.

"I'll do my best, sir," answered Drake soberly.

For the first time the colonel smiled. "I understand that you invariably achieve the improbable immediately and that the impossible takes you only a little longer," he said.

He stood up, extending a gnarled hand. "We want you to stay overnight in Rio. It is important that you fly from there rather than from the U.S., which could easily arouse suspicions. You will contact Jennings who will provide you with a complete change of identity, a passport and visa—everything you will need. You will become a British tourist named Frank Bull, a Lancashire textile consultant. You will be combining a holiday in San Miguel with well-meaning attempts to sell textile machinery to the Ruez government. Okay?"

"I take it I shall have documents establishing my alleged status as a textile man?"

Colonel Fullbright picked up a briefcase. "It's all in there, even the name of the firm you are supposed to represent. Everything has been laid on. And now—good luck!"

Less than an hour later Drake was winging



his way down to Rio. A red and cream limousine sped him down the *autostrada* to the city centre, where he checked in at the luxurious Hotel Manuel.

He had barely unpacked his overnight things when the telephone rang. It was Jennings.

"I'm in the hotel, in the Opal Bar, perhaps you'll join me right away?" he said.

"In three minutes."

Jennings was standing at the far end of the bar when Drake arrived. The American was about thirty-five, slim and wiry with very fair hair cut short and combed sideways without a parting.

He handed Drake a bulky manila envelope. "Passport, visa, additional trade credentials, the lot," he said briefly.

"You don't waste time or words," smiled Drake appreciatively.

"Thanks," Jennings said. He eyed Drake thoughtfully for a moment, then went on: "There's a sort of keen and resolute look about you, particularly the eyes. I guess a pair of

rimless spectacles might help to hide that. And if you can put on a slightly fussy manner so much the better."

"I suppose you've got the spectacles with you," murmured Drake.

"Sure, I brought a pair just in case." Jennings produced them.

Drake fitted the glasses on his nose, blinked in a self-deprecating manner and said: "Er . . . Senor Ruez . . . I mean Generalissimo Ruez, can I interest your progressive Government in the very latest designs in textile plant?"

Jennings grinned. "You've hit just the right manner," he said.

Drake removed the spectacles and said, in his normal voice: "Do you know if Polsnak has been taken to San Miguel yet?"

The American made a small gesture. "There are a lot of private craft around here, I guess he could be in any one of a dozen or more. Some envoy from Fiesta City met him here, that's for sure—but it's virtually impossible to find out which boat he'll be using. Like I say, it could be . . ."

Jennings broke off, staring hard at Drake. "What's wrong?" he asked in a low voice.

"Don't look round," whispered Drake. "But I think someone is watching us, a fellow in a Panama hat. He's just come into the bar, he's watching us all right." Loudly, he called to the bartender: "Two more of the same, please!"

As he spoke Drake made a seemingly casual half-turn to bring the man into full vision. Jennings, taking the cue, followed suit.

When he resumed his former position the American said levelly: "Now we've got trouble—that's Juan Mizol, of the San Miguel Secret Police."

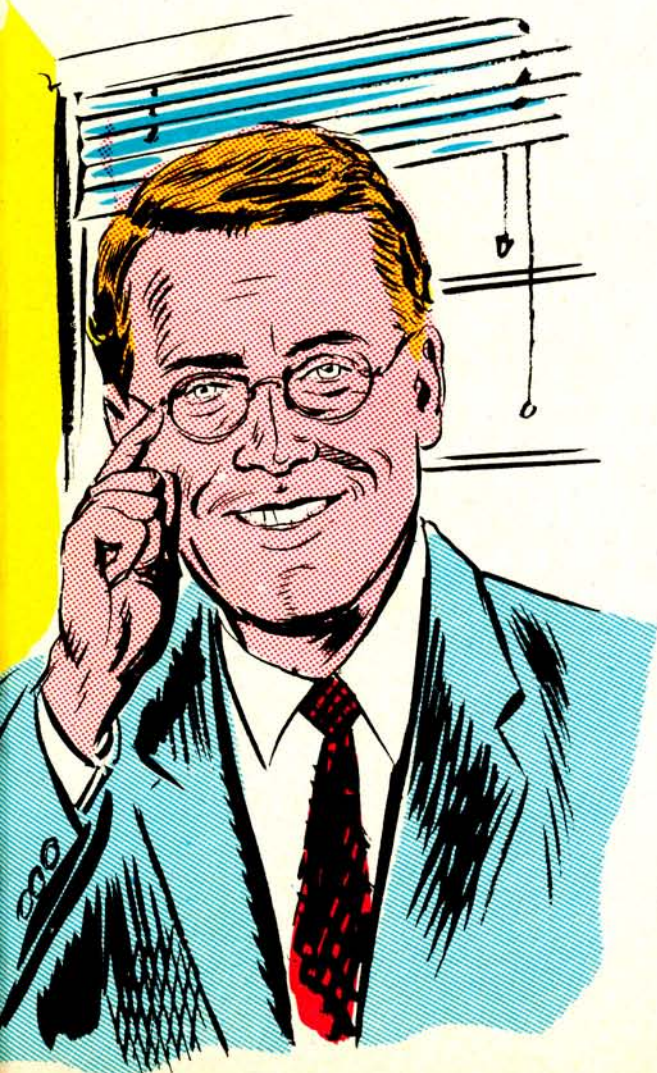
"You mean he knows you, who you are?" Drake queried.

Jennings laughed drily. "We haven't met socially, but he'll know about me all right. That wouldn't matter except that he's seen me talking to you. Now we're in a heck of a spot . . ."

"Have you got a car outside?" asked Drake quickly.

Jennings nodded. "Yeah, a pale blue Cadillac. It's right by the main entrance to the hotel."

"Get in it and I'll follow. Leave one of the car doors open."



Jennings finished the rest of his drink and went from the bar without even looking at Mizol.

Drake allowed another moment to pass, then he strolled casually across the room. When he neared the door he paused and said: "Senor Juan Mizol, surely?"

Mizol's black eyes glittered. "Si, that is my name. And you, *señor*?"

"The name is Drake, John Drake, of British Security Headquarters. Your renown is well known to us, Senor Mizol. I am on my way to visit your country."

"Indeed?" said Mizol smoothly. "For what purpose?"

"I am hoping to have top level talks with the Secret Police of which you are so justly famed a member," replied Drake. "Look, perhaps we can have a preliminary discussion here in Rio?"

Mizol made a false smile against dazzling white teeth. "Perhaps you would care to come to our modest Consulate in Rio, Senor Drake?" he purred.

"Why not?" cried Drake gaily. He cupped a friendly palm round the other's elbow and steered him out through the double swing doors. "Why, there's a taxi waiting," he said jubilantly.

"I have my own car, *señor* . . ." Mizol began. But that was as far as he was able to get—for with a sudden, heavy shove, Drake sent him toppling inside the roomy Cadillac.

In the next second Drake himself was in the car with the door slammed and Jennings was driving fast down the wide tree-fringed boulevard.

Mizol was scrambling up from the floor of the car, his face working convulsively.

"This is the outrage . . ." he expostulated.

"It is indeed," murmured Drake. Swiftly, he jerked the revolver from the shoulder harness below the other's jacket and rammed the muzzle in Mizol's chest.

"I regret extending hospitality at the point of a gun," sighed Drake, "but circumstances appear to render it inevitable."

"Hospitality?" bawled Mizol.

"Assuredly. You will be our honoured guest for the next few days, treated with the utmost respect and housed in conditions of luxury suitable to your eminence. My friend here will be charmed to put you up in his flat for a short while . . ."

"With one hand manacled to a chair," chuckled Jennings.

* * *

Drake caught the morning flight and eighty minutes later the plane was coming in over Fiesta City. From below gleaming white apartment blocks and skyscraper office towers rose in massed array. This was the new sector of the city, built with foreign aid from anti-Western sources. But the rest of the city was still sunk in poverty and squalor, with peasants and workers living in acres of ramshackle wooden huts.

But with the foreign money which had been pouring in since he became the first revolutionary President, the Generalissimo had modernised at least part of the city—especially the part inhabited by Government offices and plushy apartments!

The newest installation of all was the small but elegant airport. There was even a red carpet running from the aeroplane gangway steps into the main buildings. Painted boxes gay with tropical blooms were dotted here and there and soft music came delicately from unseen loudspeakers.

The first hint of the true nature of General Ruez's régime came when Drake entered the Customs block and noted two hard-faced Secret Police officers with hands caressing their gun holsters. They wouldn't need much provocation, if any, to gun some unfortunate down, thought Drake privately.

But so far as he was concerned the formalities were quickly dispensed with. His passport was judged to be in order, together with his papers indicating that he was a British textile consultant combining pleasure with business.

One of the Secret Police handed the file of papers back to Drake with a respectful salute. "I observe, Señor Bull, that you have a letter of introduction to Señor Martinez, the Secretary of Overseas Commerce. You will find him on the first floor of Government House. No doubt he will be pleased to grant you a few moments of his so valuable time."

"I shall be duly honoured," responded Drake.

"Adios, *señor*," said the officer.

A black and yellow taxi took Drake to Government House, a twenty-storey structure set in its own grounds with flowing lawns which

looked as if they had just been barbered and showered.

After getting past a commissionaire wearing what appeared to be the uniform of a Grand Admiral of the Fleet, the Danger Man found himself being interviewed by a girl receptionist with an oval face surmounted by blue-black hair. She took his card and letter of introduction and was back inside three minutes.

"The Secretary will be pleased to receive you in brief audience," she intoned.

Drake went through massive double doors into a magnificently furnished room big enough to house a fleet of buses. A tall man with a nose like an eagle's beak rose from behind an executive desk not quite large enough for a skating rink.

"Welcome to Fiesta City, Señor Bull," he said with a flashing smile. Drake thought there was the slightest emphasis on the way Martinez pronounced the name Bull.

But he said easily: "I am in your country partly on holiday, but it is my hope to combine pleasure with a little business . . ."

"You mean, perhaps, the funny business, eh?" chuckled Martinez jovially. His heavy mouth creased in humour, but there was no humour in his eyes. There was nothing in his eyes.

"I don't quite understand," Drake said.

Martinez slid a drawer open and remarked conversationally: "Then I must endeavour to assist your understanding, *amigo* . . . perhaps these photographs will help?"

He put a batch of pictures on the desk, spreading them out fanwise like a nap hand of cards.

They were photographs of John Drake, special security agent!

Drake bent low down pretending to examine them—at the same time bringing one knee up savagely against the underside of the desk. It was a massive but luckily not over-heavy desk, and the violence of Drake's upward thrust sent it toppling over into Martinez.

The Secretary went down with a judder and before he could get a yell out Drake was sprawled full-length on top of him with both hands round the other's throat.

Naked fear glazed Martinez's eyes, but not even the ghost of a sound escaped him. Then, suddenly releasing his stranglehold, Drake



stood up aiming a small weapon no larger than a .25 calibre automatic.

Martinez struggled to his feet. "You dare not shoot, *señor*," he whispered. "The noise . . ."

"No noise, Martinez," rejoined Drake coolly. "This happens to be a little invention of my own—a gas pistol. A small jet of special gas sufficient to render you unconscious."

"Curse you, Drake," grated Martinez. "For this you will die . . . by inches!"

"On the contrary I shall walk out of here unharmed," said Drake. "If General Ruez knew you had seen through my disguise and failed to arrest me it would be *you* who would die by inches, my friend!"

Martinez swallowed harshly, his whole body trembling.

"I thought that would shake you up a bit," observed Drake. "The only trouble is I shall now have to act very fast. So perhaps you will be so good as to inform me where and when Harry Polsnak is to meet the President?"

Despite his terror, Martinez sneered. "You hardly expect me to tell you *that*," he snapped.

"Unless you wish me to inform Ruez of your incompetence . . . after giving you a swift jet of gas, which in itself would be very hard to explain away . . ."

Martinez shrank back. "No . . . no, please not to tell the *generalissimo* or to fire the pistol . . . please!"

"Start talking, Martinez," said Drake curtly. "You have exactly five seconds."

"Polsnak is due to meet the President in his personal suite at the Fiesta Hotel on San Bernadino Beach in fifteen minutes, *señor*," he croaked.

"Alone?"

"*Si* . . . but you cannot hope to get past the guards."

"You can, though," said Drake cheerfully. "So you will take me there, *pronto* . . . or else!" He put the gas gun in his jacket pocket but kept a hand on it menacingly.

Martinez shivered so violently that Drake almost felt sorry for him—almost!

"For such an act I shall suffer," he moaned.

"You'll suffer if you don't do it," replied Drake grimly. "All right—get going now!"

* * *

They went in a staff car. Martinez drove, his hands shaking on the steering wheel.

Armed sentries with bayonets glinting wickedly on their rifles guarded the entrance to the Presidential suite, but at the sight of Martinez they parted respectfully.

"You see how easy and simple it all is, *amigo*," murmured Drake.

Martinez glared hate, but said nothing as he led the way in. The room seemed enormous. Vivid red carpet spanned the entire floor. There were side tables, television, bookcases, batteries of telephones, a throne-like desk made of solid glass and a vast crescent-shaped bar stacked with gaily labelled bottles.

General Ruez was in the act of pouring himself a tall glass of wine. He was a huge, fat man wearing a military uniform of extravagant design. From a stitched ribbon above his left pocket gold and silver medals gleamed in the light.

His face, complete with three chins, was flabby and sallow and stupid . . . but the black

eyes weren't. They were just about the most evil eyes even the Danger Man could recall having seen.

Sitting in a massive lounging chair was a tough, wiry man in obvious American clothes. Drake realised immediately that he was Harry Polsnak.

The President said something rapidly in his native tongue, asking a question.

In English the Secretary replied: "I have brought you a visitor, general . . . a visitor from London."

The evil eyes turned on Drake.

"So," he said softly. "And who do I have the honour of addressing?"

Drake noted that the craven fear seemed suddenly to have left Martinez and he braced himself for whatever might be coming.

Coolly, Martinez whipped out a revolver and answered: "When I say I have brought you a visitor, my general, I should have said I bring you a prisoner . . . alone and unaided I have captured the notorious John Drake!"

Drake could not repress admiration for the adroit way in which Martinez had saved his face and very likely his life. But even as the thought came to him he dived sideways, simultaneously triggering the gas gun.

A thin amber-coloured stream took Martinez full in the face. He uttered a single gasp, then pitched headlong to the floor and stayed there.

Drake brought the gun round on General Ruez and Harry Polsnak.

"That was a gas pellet, general," he said evenly. "There are five more in the cartridge chamber."

General Ruez was still holding the tall glass of wine, his eyes bulging. Polsnak sat motionless in the chair, like a stone man.

Drake went on in the same even tone: "The plan, Polsnak . . . and be quick about it!"

Polsnak ran a tongue along suddenly dry lips, but his face glared defiance. "Drop dead!" he snarled. "I've just been paid two hundred thousand dollars for that pretty little piece of paper and the general has already put it where not even Mister Smart Aleck Drake will ever find it!"

"Turn out every drawer in the room, open the safe, everything," Drake ordered.

Polsnak laughed jeeringly. "Sure, anything to oblige, pal," he grinned.

Inside five minutes Drake knew the worst . . . there was no sign of the plan anywhere in the room. Yet there hadn't been time to hide it anywhere else. It *had* to be close at hand.

But where? Suddenly, Drake understood that Polsnak's very willingness to ransack the room for him told its own story . . . that Polsnak knew the plan was there, but in the very last place anyone would think to look for it.

General Ruez was greedily gulping wine from the tall glass. The vast libations seemed to restore his aplomb, for now he was joining Polsnak in jeering.

"See, you 'ave come on what you call the fool's errand, *amigo*," he cackled. "Nevair will you find what you seek—ho, ho!"

Drake eyed him for a long moment, taking in the gross features, the vast stomach, the exaggerated uniform, the absurd array of medals. There were no less than ten of them—and Drake was wondering what possible feats of heroism could have earned so many decorations when something struck him.

One of the medals was at least three times the circumference of any of the others, a huge circle of near-gold looking like no medal ever dreamed up by anybody anywhere.

With a lightning flip of the hand, the Danger Man tore it from the ornate ribbon. The sagging on the President's fat face and a croak from Polsnak told him all he needed to know.

"A convenient place in which to hide away a vital plan, general," said Drake urbanely.

General Ruez swayed, then pulled himself together. "So mebbe you 'ave the plan in the medal, *señor* . . . but the second you walk through the door my soldiers will arrest you!"

"Yeah, how do you like that, Fancy Pants?" giped Polsnak.

"I should dislike it intensely," responded Drake. "But you will both be in no condition to warn the sentries or anyone else for some little time."

He nodded at two vast decanters full to the brim with red wine.

"Let us drink a toast—to the downfall of all tyrants," he said. "One decanter apiece, and don't stop drinking until they are both drained to the last drop!"

The President's three chins wobbled agitatedly. "But so enormous an amount of such powerful wine will render us unconscious," he wailed.

"Precisely, general," said Drake. "And while you are having pleasant dreams—nightmares, I hope—I shall calmly walk right out of here with the plan. Now . . . drink up, *amigos*!"



The general, a seasoned wine-bibber, stayed the course better than Harry Polsnak. It was only when he had finished a second vast decanter that he fell completely unconscious on the floor. In another moment he was making a sound not unlike that of a gurgling kettle on the boil.

Harry Polsnak was still on his feet, but only just. He still hadn't quite emptied the first decanter. An idea occurred to Drake's fertile mind, and he took the decanter from the other's shaking hands.

"I think," he said amiably, "I think I will help you through the door—and very shortly into an aeroplane which will take you back to Washington to meet your just deserts!"

Polsnak eyed him owlishly. "Good ol' John Drake," he babbled. "Jolly ol' John Drake. Lesh all have 'nother li'l drink . . ."

* * *

Forty minutes later Drake, Jennings and Polsnak were flying at twenty thousand feet at an air speed of three hundred and fifty miles an hour *en route* for the United States.

Polsnak was fast asleep and neither knew nor cared where he was. The rude awakening was to come—together with the day of reckoning.

"Pity we couldn't have kidnapped Ruez as well," mused Jennings. "Still, I suppose that would have provoked a real international incident. But I hate to think of him getting off scot free—that overstuffed dummy with his ton of medals."

Drake smiled sardonically. "I fancy a more disagreeable fate awaits him," he said.

"Oh, how's that?"

"I mean I wouldn't care to be in his shoes when the foreign revolutionary Powers find that he's failed miserably in his mission and that they've paid out two hundred thousand dollars for precisely nothing. . . ."

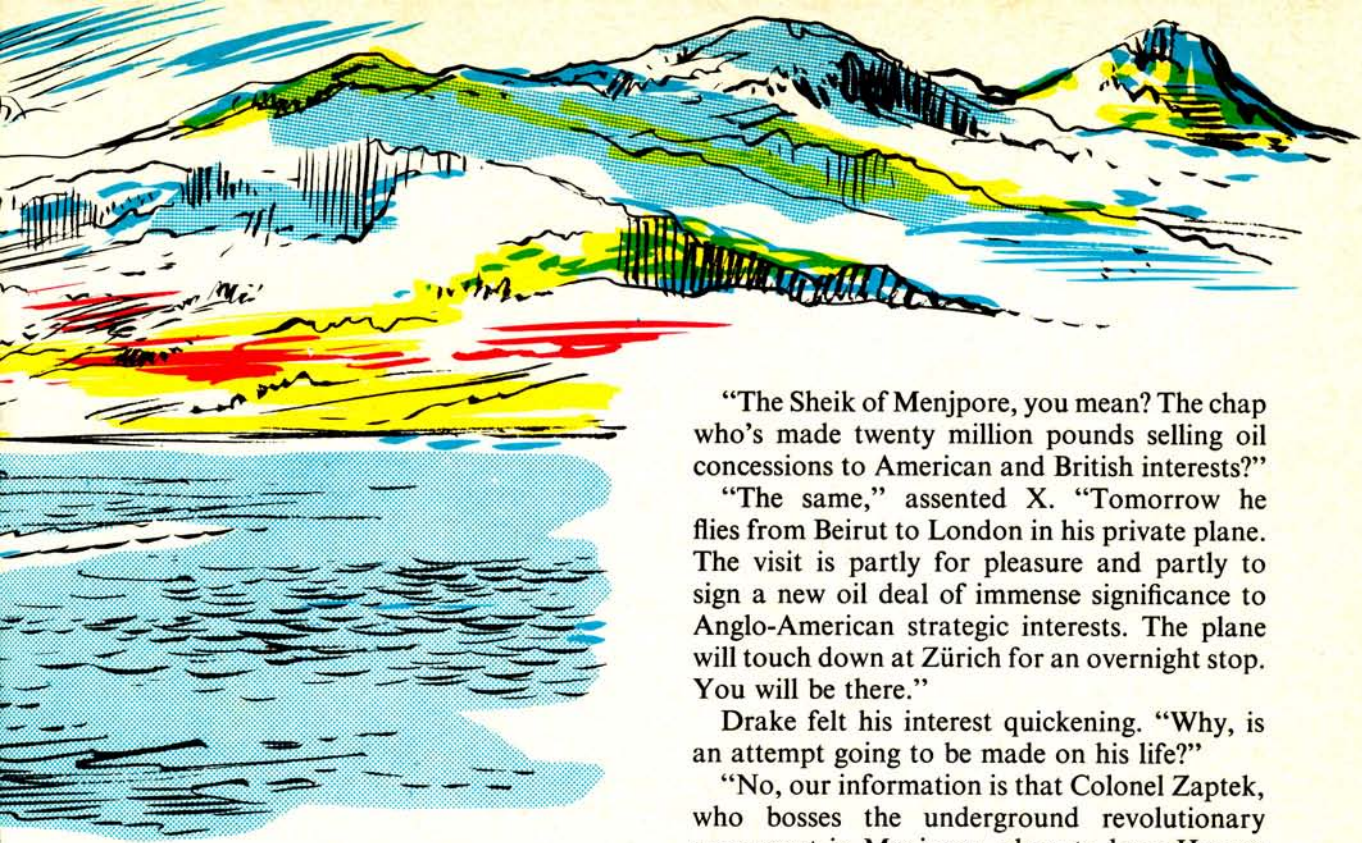
"Gee!" gasped Jennings. "I never thought of *that*. . . ."

The Danger Man held the huge gilded cylinder open on one knee. The top secret Anglo-American plan reposed safely inside it.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, "I think we can take it that now there will be no medals for the general!"



THE SILVER RING



DRAKE was taking a brief holiday in Switzerland when the telephone call came through to his hotel overlooking the sun-dappled sweep of The Paradiso and the brilliant blue of the lake.

He had been in Lugano only five days and wasn't expecting any telephone calls, least of all from London. Wryly, he reflected that this one could have come from only one source.

When he picked up the receiver his worst fears were confirmed.

"I trust you are having a restful and generally agreeable time," said X.

"Until now, sir," answered Drake candidly.

"Yes, I regret to say that I am about to break in on your well-deserved vacation," X went on. "We have a little job for you."

"How big is little?" asked Drake facetiously.

"My dear chap, it will occupy you for no more than a day or two, after which you can resume your interrupted rest."

"H'm, I'll probably need one, sir." Drake thought for a moment and went on: "I suppose it's something over here?"

"Your supposition is correct," said X. "Not, mind you, that we would assign the task to any lesser agent. You have, of course, heard of Abdul Hassan Bey?"

"The Sheik of Menjapore, you mean? The chap who's made twenty million pounds selling oil concessions to American and British interests?"

"The same," assented X. "Tomorrow he flies from Beirut to London in his private plane. The visit is partly for pleasure and partly to sign a new oil deal of immense significance to Anglo-American strategic interests. The plane will touch down at Zürich for an overnight stop. You will be there."

Drake felt his interest quickening. "Why, is an attempt going to be made on his life?"

"No, our information is that Colonel Zaptek, who bosses the underground revolutionary movement in Menjapore, plans to have Hassan Bey abducted and force him to sign a contract with an alliance of Iron Curtain Powers. I need hardly stress that this would inflict a grave blow to Allied interests."

"When, where and how is Zaptek going to pounce?" asked Drake succinctly.

"The time is nineteen hours tomorrow, the place is Zürich, the method . . . unfortunately that is something we do not know. Security guards are being reinforced, but we wish you to be on hand. For one thing, you know Zaptek and the way his brain functions. For another thing, you have something of a flair for handling unusual situations."

"Thanks," said Drake drily. "That'll console me for my broken holiday."

"My dear chap, you'll be back in Lugano basking in the sunshine within twenty-four hours," observed X. "I shouldn't even bother to check out of your hotel."

"You flatter me, sir."

"I never flatter anyone," replied X and hung up.

Well, mused Drake, at least he had the rest of the day to enjoy himself. He could drive to Zurich first thing in the morning, find out the extent of the security arrangements and generally spy out the lie of the land. Meanwhile, he proposed to have a relaxing swim in the lake.

Drake used a powerful crawl which took him well out into deep water. Then, his mind turning over a number of theories, he changed to the breast-stroke. In his preoccupation, he swam much further out into the lake than he had intended—so much so that when he finally turned, the shore was almost out of vision.

It was at this moment that he noticed the rakish cruiser in the distance. The craft was at rest and suddenly Drake realised that someone on board was peering in his direction through a pair of binoculars. Well, there was nothing particularly unusual in that . . .

But even as the thought entered his head, the cruiser's motor surged into a stuttering roar. In the next instant the craft was cutting fast through the deep blue water—heading straight for him.

Drake dived, swerved at an angle and swam under water until his lungs felt like bursting. Now he *had* to surface. His head bobbed up like a popping cork.

The speeding craft had raced beyond the point at which he submerged, but Drake did not doubt that the lookout man was still using his binoculars.

Filling his lungs with a mighty intake of air, the Danger Man dived again, wheeling in another direction. When he was again forced to surface, he noted with satisfaction that the cruiser was now almost a distant speck.

Perhaps he had been mistaken, perhaps the cruiser was simply heading for shore? But why the sudden surge of high speed, why the searching look through powerful glasses? No, Drake's whole training, plus that sixth sense which never failed him in moments of danger, told him that the unknown occupants of the cruiser had identified him . . . and had tried to run him down in the water!

He submerged for the third time. When he finally came back to the surface he almost collided with a canoe being paddled by an athletic young fellow clad solely in swimming briefs.

"Great Scot!" the young man ejaculated. "Where the deuce did *you* spring from?" His tanned face suddenly took on a perplexed expression. "I say, you're probably not English . . ."

Drake, treading water gracefully, grinned. "English as tea and muffins on the vicarage

lawn," he said. "I was swimming under water—if I'd continued another second I'd have bumped my head on your canoe as I came up."

"Jolly lucky for you that you surfaced in the nick of time," the other rejoined. He shaded his eyes, staring over the lake. "I say, that cruiser was tearing up the water, wasn't it?"

"It was indeed," agreed Drake.

"It's only been here a few days, you know. Belongs to a bunch of Arabs or some chaps like that."

Drake felt his jaw harden. "You don't happen to know who they are, I suppose?" he said casually. "I'd like to meet them and perhaps get a chance to look over the boat."

"Really?" The young man wrinkled his nose in distaste. "I didn't much care for the look of them myself—saw them on The Paradiso last night yapping away in some gosh-awful lingo. No, I don't know them—but I heard that the cruiser belongs to some Middle Eastern military johnnie, a Colonel Something-or-Other."

"Colonel Zaptek?" inquired Drake.

"By gad, yes, that's the bloke. Why, do you want to meet him?"

"I rather think so," murmured Drake thoughtfully.

"Well, I can tell you where to find him and his two friends—they've got a sort of chalet up beyond the Villa Castagnola. Sooner you meet them than me, though . . . they look a nasty crew."

"They are," said Drake as he swam for the shore.

* * *

Night had fallen and a legion of coloured lights glittered along the vast crescent of the lakeside. Cars and scooters with girls riding sideways on the pillions hummed down the front and gay crowds were everywhere.

Everywhere, that is, except up beyond the Villa Castagnola where the quiet road wound and dipped between the high greenery of trees and hedges.

Drake drove his Mini with a basic minimum of engine noise and without even sidelights. At the bottom of a short hill he backed on to a small grassy verge—and moved cautiously forward on foot.

The chalet was only just ahead, set on the side of a steep rise sloping up from the narrow road. A sleek Ferrari car stood in front of it on a small concrete square. Nobody was about and no lights showed from the front of the chalet.

Flitting now like a dim shadow in the overhang of the trees which surrounded the place, Drake finally reached a point level with the rear of the structure.

Now he could see lights. They came from what appeared to be a lounge spanning the entire rear of the chalet. The french windows had been closed, but immediately outside them was a paved terrace.

From where he stood it was no more than a dozen yards to the terrace. Crouched low down, he made the trip in two silent leaps.

The movement brought him to the side of the terrace. Flattening himself against the wall, he edged his way forward inch by inch until he was almost level with the french windows.

It was then that he saw the windows were not fully shut. By straining every sense of hearing, he could make out words . . . but few of them conveyed anything to him for the speakers were using the Menjpore language.

Drake risked a fast glimpse into the lounge, his eyes instantly photographing the scene and retaining it like a printed picture.

Colonel Zaptek was standing, an evil-looking man with a hooked nose. Sitting in easy chairs on either side of him were two men Drake had never seen before—one clearly coloured and the other white.

Then Zaptek was speaking again, addressing the swarthy one. "Our friend Schultz does not understand our language," he said. "I think we had better continue this conference in English, since neither of us understands *his* language."

"Dr. Zimmermann will be with us in a few moments, I think," Zaptek went on. "It is necessary that we have our plan in full readiness for the good Doktor, eh?"

"We've already discussed it a dozen times, colonel," Schultz said, speaking English with a thick, slurred accent.

"A final run-through will do no harm, my dear Schultz," snapped Zaptek. "There must be no slip-up in our plan."

"We slipped up on the lake this afternoon," rumbled Schultz. "I still can't figure how Drake eluded us."



"The ingenious Mr. Drake must have spotted you with the binoculars, Schultz," said Zaptek coolly. "You did perhaps make your observations somewhat over-obvious."

"If I hadn't been staring we wouldn't have known he was in Lugano," growled Schultz. "And then he simply vanishes."

"I told you—Drake must have swum a considerable distance under water. Naturally, we could not know which direction he took."

"Do you think he's on to us?"

"With the ingenious Mr. Drake anything is possible. But, even so, I am inclined to think not. No one other than ourselves and Dr. Zimmermann is aware of our plan. . . ." He broke off, turning to Schultz. "Has something just occurred to you, my friend?" he asked suavely.

"It's probably nothing, colonel . . . but some Englishman was asking questions in Menjpore recently, said he was a newspaperman collecting material for some articles and . . ."

Zaptek said tightly: "You did not inform me of this circumstance, Schultz."

"It slipped my memory," replied Schultz uneasily.

"There would seem to be too many slip-ups," said Zaptek. He shrugged. "However, I see nothing to stand in the way of the successful completion of our plan. Dr. Zimmermann will be in charge of the . . . ah, I think I hear his car now!"

Drake had also heard it and wondered whether Zimmermann, whoever he might be, had seen the parked Mini. It would not, of course, mean anything concrete to him—but, just the same, he might speculate as to what it was doing there.

For a moment the Danger Man debated whether to seek cover in the bushes—but he wanted to hear more of the conversation. He was certain that when Zimmermann joined the conference even more interesting revelations would come. There was the almost certain probability that . . .

His thoughts were abruptly interrupted by the smallest sound which came from close at hand, almost directly behind him. Drake wheeled, but before he could complete his turn there was a swish of air and something solid struck his forehead.

In the split second before the impact he saw a gun butt slashing down at him . . . and the quick glint of an ornate silver ring on a strong brown hand.

There was a juddering crash as he hit the open french window and pitched headlong to the floor of the room . . . but Drake didn't hear it.

* * *

He was lying on a bed when he came round. He felt dizzy and vaguely sick and he had the odd sensation that his legs were made of cotton-wool.

No sound came to him and after a moment Drake risked opening one eye a fraction. He was in a small bedroom and the place was empty, so far as he could see in the slanting moonlight from the single window.

He put a hand up gingerly to his forehead. Someone had stuck an adhesive plaster over the cut and the bruised flesh. For several minutes

Drake lay there, completely still, letting strength flow back into him.

Then the door began to open. Immediately, Drake closed both eyes and waited. Somebody was walking without haste across the room towards the bed. A voice said something in a strange foreign tongue, as if the speaker were talking to himself.

The next instant Drake realised that the man was bending over him, no doubt to satisfy himself that he was still unconscious.





Drake had no kind of doubt that the man would be armed, either with a gun or a knife, otherwise he wouldn't have risked bending over him.

Now Drake could feel the other's breath fanning his face. It was the moment to act!

Opening his eyes, he shot his powerful hands upwards, locking them round the man's scrawny throat. A long-bladed knife fell on the bed and before the other could even try to retrieve it Drake had him in a merciless stranglehold which took every ounce of breath and fight from him.

He released the hold and as the other took in great gulps of air, Drake hit him with everything he had on the point of the jaw.

The man flailed backwards from the bed, reeling wildly about the room. Drake, back on his feet now, took him in a spooning ankle Judo throw which slammed him across the room. The man, a dark-skinned Menjporean, hit the wall with a dull thud, slid down to the floor and sat there with both legs outspread and a glazed look in his eyes. Then he put his head between his legs and ceased to take any further interest in the proceedings.

Breathing harshly down his nose, Drake grabbed the long knife from the bed and went softly from the room. Now he was in a corridor with several doors. Lights showed from under one of them, but there was no sound either of voices or movement.

Carefully, Drake eased the door sufficiently open to see in. The room was empty. He went back through the chalet and looked at the front. The Ferrari was no longer there.

Zaptek and his henchmen had already begun the long drive north to Zürich!

Drake went back into the chalet and after some minutes found what he was looking for—a coil of strong cord. He put the scrawny man on the bed and trussed him up. Then, to make doubly sure, he cut the telephone cables.

Fifteen minutes later he was driving back into Lugano, his mind working like a dynamo. It was possible that the wily Zaptek had left for Zürich because of him, but Drake sensed another reason—a change of plan, which could only mean that Sheik Hassan Bey's flight had been brought forward by hours.

The moment he reached his hotel Drake put a call through to X.

The Chief of Security said in surprise: "My dear Drake, I was about to call you. Something important has occurred . . ."

"Hassan Bey has switched his flight departure time, sir," replied Drake.

"Do you know everything in the world?" asked X humorously.

"I could not say, sir."

X made one of his rare chuckles. Then, seriously, he asked: "Just how *did* you know?"

Rapidly, Drake detailed what had happened, adding: "I merely fitted two and two together, sir."

"Well, your simple arithmetic is in good working order. I hope that little car of yours is, too—because you'll have to drive like blazes through the night. Hassan Bey's plane comes in at Zürich Airport at 10 a.m."

"I'll be there, sir," said Drake evenly.

* * *

He drove into the airport with time in hand and went immediately to Security Control.

Captain Welti, a handsome young Swiss officer, greeted him warmly in perfect English. "Nice to have you with us, Herr Drake. But I do not think the Sheik will be flying on to London after all . . ."

"Why not, captain?" asked Drake evenly.

"Operational Control have just received a radio message from the Sheik's small private plane that he has been taken ill. There are only two other men with him—senior Ministers in the Menjapore Cabinet, and they are naturally most anxious. There are also, of course, the Sheik's personal attendants, but I am not counting them."

"Is he seriously ill?"

Welti moved his broad shoulders. "Who can say? But ill enough for one of the Ministers to order another plane to meet the Sheik here. Apparently this was done over the radio some time prior to us being notified . . ."

He stopped as the intercommunications telephone buzzed. Welti took the call and after a moment said: "Everything seems to be in order—the mercy plane has just landed, a few minutes ahead of the Sheik's."

"I see," said Drake. He stared through the wide window for a moment, then turned and

said: "I take it the mercy plane will be flying Hassan Bey straight back to Menjapore?"

"But naturally, Herr Drake. Perhaps we should now stroll out and see that everything goes without a hitch—though I cannot believe that anyone would be so foolish as to make an attempt on the Sheik's life right here at the airport. My dear Herr Drake, the place is swarming with Security police."

"I am certain we shall see no attack, captain," answered Drake gravely.

He accompanied the Swiss from the room and together they walked across the tarmac. The Sheik's small but extravagantly luxurious plane had touched down now and two men armed with a stretcher were already at the head of the gangway steps.

Drake stood with Captain Welti at the bottom. When the stretcher came level with them Drake noted that the Sheik was lying on it quite still and with both eyes closed. His hands were folded over his vivid robes and his breathing was regular, though a little heavy.

The stretcher-bearers moved quietly across to the waiting mercy plane, where a tall man with a jet-black beard waited.

"Carefully, if you please," he said to the stretcher-bearers.

Captain Welti said: "How ill is he, Dr. Klaus?"

"It is difficult to say until I have made a complete diagnosis, but I fancy we shall find that His Excellency is suffering from a recurrence of an old complaint. Air travel is most unwise for him and, as his personal physician, I urged him not to embark on it."

"In such circumstances would he not be better in a Swiss hospital, Herr Doktor?" asked Drake.

"Ordinarily, I would say yes," replied Klaus. "But, weighing *all* the circumstances, as his personal physician I deem it wise to superintend his return to the Palace in Menjapore. I have a responsibility . . ."

"I have one, too, Herr Doktor," said Drake levelly. "I have to be satisfied that the fullest security measures have not only been taken but completed successfully."

Captain Welti looked embarrassed. "My dear Drake, we cannot do more than see that His Excellency is taken safely aboard the plane," he said.

Klaus smiled, a smooth and brilliant smile. "Precisely, Captain." He nodded to the bearers and in another moment the stretcher was inside the plane.

Even without proof, Drake had the surest feeling that something was amiss; every trained instinct insisted that he was right. He fought desperately in his mind to think of a single factor that would enable him to delay the flight . . . but there was none.

Meanwhile, the bearded doctor was speaking, in a voice of oily smoothness which irritated Drake anew.

"Then I bid you adieu, Captain Welty—and my congratulations to the so-conscientious Herr Drake . . ."

As he spoke the doctor raised a hand to touch his splendid black beard. And in the same instant Drake saw it . . . an ornate silver ring glinting on a powerful brown finger!

The hardest of smiles creased the corners of Drake's mouth.

"Your farewell is premature . . . *Dr. Zimmermann!*" he said.

Zimmermann's hand streaked inside his jacket for his gun, but Drake's fist was faster. It delivered a torrid short-arm jab to the doctor's solar plexus.

There was a gurgling gasp as Zimmermann jack-knifed. Two stalwart policemen held him.

Drake spoke swiftly to Captain Welty—who instantly shouted a command. Security guards raced up the steps and burst into the plane.

They were just in time, for now the turbo-prop engines were humming into sudden life.

There was a sharp crack, followed by a yelp . . . then a figure appeared at the head of the steps, clutching a wounded shoulder and flanked by guards. He was Colonel Zaptek.

"He went aboard the plane after it landed—I understood he was an important personality in Menjpire," Captain Welty said.

"He *was*, but not any more," said Drake. "By the way, where are the Cabinet Ministers?"

"In the V.I.P. lounge, drinking wine."

"Well," murmured Drake, "they'd better make the most of it, because they'll soon be in a cell drinking water—for taking a share in Zaptek's little plot!"

After seeing to the transfer of the still sleeping Sheik to hospital, they strolled back to Security Control.

"Perhaps I shall have the pleasure of offering you dinner tonight, my dear Drake," said Captain Welty.

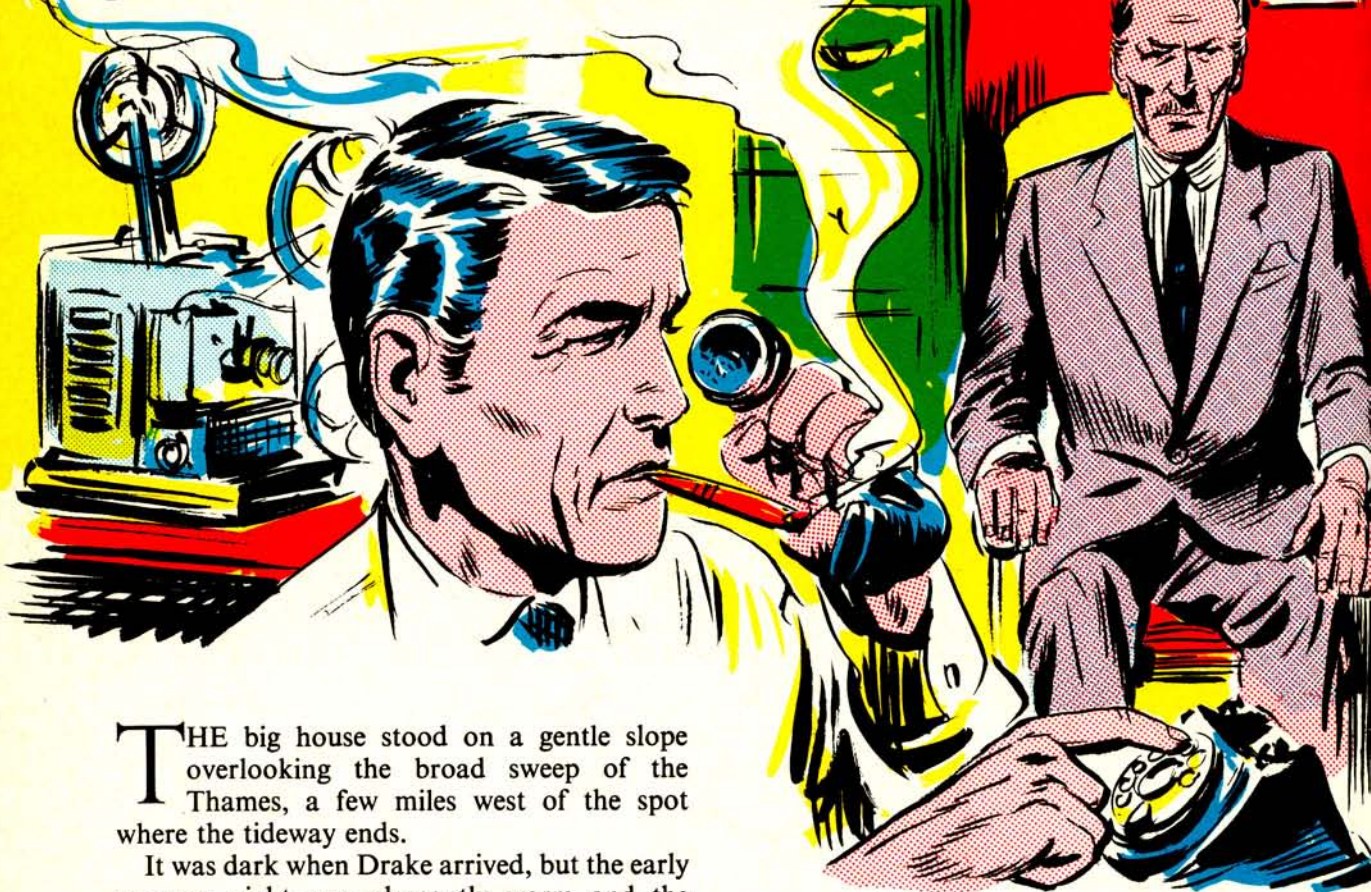
"I am afraid not, captain," answered Drake. "A most urgent matter requires my immediate return to Lugano."

"Indeed? Would it be indelicate of me to inquire as to the nature of this urgency? A special mission, eh?"

"Very special," said the Danger Man with a grin. "My holiday, in fact . . ."



SMOKED OUT!



THE big house stood on a gentle slope overlooking the broad sweep of the Thames, a few miles west of the spot where the tideway ends.

It was dark when Drake arrived, but the early summer night was pleasantly warm and the mingled scents of meadow and river floated agreeably on the calm air.

The Danger Man cruised the Mini expertly round the drive bend, parked and went up the wide stone steps to the imposing main entrance. He thumbed the bell and waited, listening to the measured tread of stately feet as the butler came down the corridor beyond the door.

Then the door opened and he was looking at a portly man whose appearance was so much like that of the faithful old retainer in a period stage play that Drake had some trouble repressing a smile.

"Yes, sir?" The mellow voice which intoned the question exactly matched the majestic appearance.

"I have an appointment with your Prime Minister," Drake answered. "Perhaps. . . ."

He broke off, staring at the odd expression on the other's face.

"If you had an appointment I would know of it, sir," the butler said. "In fact, His Excellency

has no appointment for this particular time."

Drake's eyes flickered. "The appointment was set for eight-fifteen this evening," he said evenly. "My name is John Drake and. . . ."

Again he broke off, for now the look on the other's face was frankly incredulous—and suspicious. At the same instant the butler started to close the door, but Drake forestalled the move with his foot.

"I don't know what is in your mind, my friend," he said, "but if you doubt what I am saying perhaps this will convince you."

He took a long slim envelope from his breast pocket and held it out. The butler blinked uneasily, but he opened the envelope and extracted a single sheet of notepaper embossed with the official designation of the Danger Man's Department.

His face, which had been ruddier than the cherry, suddenly paled.

"I . . . I . . ." he began.



Drake stepped inside the tiled mosaic hallway. "What," he demanded, "is wrong?"

The butler passed an agitated hand across his forehead. "I was under the impression that you called earlier, as arranged, sir. . . ."

"What the devil is that intended to mean?" Drake asked harshly.

With an effort, the butler regained control of himself. "At six o'clock this evening His Excellency was informed by telephone that the appointment had been changed from 8.15 to 7.45 p.m. The call purported to come from your Department, sir, and indicated that you would arrive at the new time. In fact, a gentleman did so arrive, giving the name of John Drake. I naturally admitted him and ushered him into the study. A quarter of an hour later he informed His Excellency that it was necessary for His Excellency to accompany his visitor to London in the latter's car. They departed at precisely three minutes after eight, sir. . . ."

Drake felt his jaw harden. "This man who gave my name . . . what did he look like?" he queried.

"He came in a small car very similar to your own, sir, and was wearing similar clothes. Also,

his physical appearance was broadly similar to yours . . . though not precisely so."

"I'd like to examine the study," said Drake abruptly.

"Certainly, sir."

As he went down the big hallway Drake's mind was alive with conjectures. His appointment with His Excellency Filipe Lesseur, Prime Minister of the newly emergent State of Malicia, was a top security assignment.

The last information X had given Drake before the Danger Man left London was emphatically to the point.

"All our coded information is that counter-revolutionary forces in Malicia plan to abduct Lesseur while he is visiting London and force him to sign a new constitution which would virtually hand over control of Malicia to the rebels," X said in his dispassionate voice.

"Apart from the threat to Lesseur personally, I take it there are other implications, sir?" asked Drake quietly.

X nodded. "Yes, and they are serious ones. Her Majesty's Government has established the most cordial diplomatic and trading relations with the Lesseur régime which has charted vast new petroleum deposits in the country's Central Desert. There is a pact under which we shall be vitally concerned in the development there."

"And if the counter-revolutionary forces grab control, the exploitation of the petroleum deposits will be denied to us and made available to potential enemies?" said Drake.

"Exactly. Our latest intelligence is that agents of the counter-revolutionary junta are already on their way to England. You will go down to Lesseur's riverside house immediately and remain close to him throughout his State visit here." A wintry smile touched the Chief's lean face. "I shall also hope that you will succeed in trapping one or all of these agents," he added.

Well, thought Drake bitterly, the agents had beaten both himself and the Department to it! He realised at once what must have happened . . . the counter-revolutionary junta had deliberately allowed the Department to know that agents were being dispatched to Britain *after* another one or even a group of agents had already been sent.

As the elderly butler held the study door open for him Drake went in, his keen eyes taking in every facet of the comfortable, dignified room.

Nothing seemed to be out of order. A heavy-pile carpet, deep hide leather arm-chairs, a wall-to-wall bookcase, a curved mahogany desk with twin copper-wire trays containing neatly stacked papers, an ivory telephone, a padded swivel chair behind the desk.

Drake went through everything meticulously, but to no avail. Frowning, he took out a cigarette and was almost in the act of lighting it when he sniffed. In the warm air was the faint but characteristic aroma of cigar smoke.

"The Prime Minister doesn't smoke, does he?" Drake asked.

"No, sir. His Excellency is strongly opposed to the use of tobacco in any form."

Drake nodded briefly. "Sure, I read his views in a newspaper article when his visit was first reported." He sniffed again. "That smell . . . it's faint but unusual. A special kind of cigar, I think. One imported specially from Malicia and, so far as I am aware, obtainable at only one shop in the West End of London!"

The Danger Man picked up the telephone and dialled Directory Inquiries. Three minutes later he was through to the private number of Finlay Frobisher, who owned and personally operated the high-class tobacconist shop just off the Haymarket.

It was a long chance, because the Malicia agent who liked the special cigars might well have brought enough supplies with him.

But he hadn't! Drake felt a tremor of excitement as Frobisher said thoughtfully: "Why, yes, as it happens we sold a box of twenty-five Estorite Señors only this morning. To an Englishman, oddly enough."

Well, he would be, thought Drake grimly. Only an Englishman could have deceived Lesseur by doubling as John Drake. . . .

"I suppose it's too much to hope that he gave a name?"

"I'm afraid so, he paid cash. But I can tell you where you might find him. . . ."

"What!" Drake almost jumped.

"Why, yes. You see, I accompanied him to the doorway and heard him tell his taximan to drive to the Lancingham Hotel in Gunther Street. . . ."

"Thanks," said Drake. He put the receiver down and turned to see the anxious butler regarding him with bulging eyes.

"You . . . you have a clue, sir?" he asked.

"I think so, yes."

"Where will you be going, sir?"

"To the place where the Prime Minister may possibly be," answered Drake. "I only hope I'll be in time!"

* * *

Gunther Street was a short and narrow street in the depths of Soho. Drake drove past it,



made a left turn into a cobbled alleyway and parked under a dim lamp.

Then he walked slowly back, moving down Gunther Street at the same unhurried pace—all his senses keyed to acute watchfulness.

A bony-faced man came out of a dingy public house and shambled along the pavement, a dispirited-looking cat darted across the roadway and vanished down some worn stone steps. Otherwise, nothing moved on the dark, ill-lit street.

Then, as he neared the bottom of the street, Drake saw the car. It was standing without lights, a Mini of the same year and same make as his own.

Across the narrow pavement from the Mini a short flight of steps led up to a closed door above which appeared, in flaked lettering, the words *Lancingham Hotel*.

There were windows on either side of the door, but they were broken and partly boarded over.

The door itself was pitted and aching for paint, the brickwork chipped and crumbling—in fact, the whole place wore the desolate look of abandon, as if demolition was due to begin at any moment. Years must have passed since this decrepit hotel had ever opened its doors to paying guests.

Drake gave a small sardonic grin. Perhaps the Lancingham Hotel was receiving unauthorised and strictly non-paying guests?

He drifted on past the front of the deserted hotel, counting the buildings between it and the back entry a little way ahead. Then, without change of stride, he flitted silently down the entry.

It went to the depth of the buildings, merging on an alley which ran parallel with the street. Drake counted his way along it until he knew he was immediately at the rear of the Lancingham.

Let into the crumbling wall was a wooden door sagging on its hinges. Drake put a shoulder against it and used progressively increasing pressure until he felt the door sag further.

In another moment he was inside the paved yard and going softly through the darkness. No lights showed anywhere from the building ahead of him, and Drake stopped, his gaze raking the entire façade, moving steadily from window to window.

They glared glassily back at him . . . except one. This was at first-floor level, and across it on the inside had been drawn a set of black drapes.

The Danger Man took a slim, pistol-like object from his inside pocket, erected the telescopic sights and focused on the slim wood panel running downwards in the middle of the curtained window.

His index finger curled on the delicate trigger, squeezing just once. The gun gave an almost inaudible plop—and no sound at all came from the tiny sensitised metal disc as its suction side adhered firmly to the wood panel.

Swiftly, Drake set up the slim radio mast of a miniature wireless receiver, plugged the microphone into his left ear and waited.

A scraping sound came to him, a sound which could have been made by somebody dragging a chair across an uncarpeted floor. Then a voice.

"You can do what you will, but never shall I sign so infamous a document. . . ." The words were spoken in English, but the inflexions were unmistakably foreign. The voice could only belong to His Excellency Filipe Lesseur.

Then a laugh moved into Drake's ear . . . a curiously gritty laugh at the sound of which every nerve in his being tensed like tautened violin strings. For it was the laugh of a man who, according to the secret files of International Intelligence, was already dead!

Drake had last heard the strange laugh in an eerie hunt through the sewers of Paris—a man-hunt, with Frederick Allen Boyce, renegade Englishman and master spy, as the quarry. Boyce had slipped and fallen into a subterranean torrent which had swept him beyond his pursuer's reach. He had never been seen again, and the security chiefs of a dozen countries had written him off as dead.

But maybe somebody else laughed like Boyce? Drake listened, scarcely breathing.

"Never say never, Excellency," a mocking voice murmured. "And least of all when you are confronted by Agent Nine!"

Drake drew breath in sharply. There was no possibility of mistake now . . . it was beyond all doubt the voice of Frederick Allen Boyce, the infamous Agent Nine who had been given up for lost!

"You I have heard of," Prime Minister Lesseur said icily. "A traitor to your country,

a man whose brains are available to the highest bidder—even those who are the implacable enemies of his own kith and kin."

The gritty laugh sounded again. "Money is all I seek, Mr. Prime Minister, and to get it I have no scruples . . . which includes my methods of, shall we say, artistic persuasion?"

"Whatever you do to me will avail you nothing . . . nothing!"

"My dear Excellency," said Agent Nine silkily, "you surely do not imagine that I am some crude Gestapo-like thug? Without so much as laying a finger on you I shall infallibly induce you to put your illustrious signature to this vital document!"

There was no answer. Then Drake heard the mocking tones resuming.

"What you are about to see, dear Prime Minister, is a private film show. That is the purpose of the screen. The projector, with its own electrical supply, is immediately behind the uncomfortable chair in which you are so securely strapped."

"A film show . . . you must, I fear, be losing your reason . . ." began Lesseur.

"I assure you I was never more sane. The film which you will so soon be observing depicts your young daughter being held prisoner by the counter-revolutionary forces of Malicia. . . ."

A strangled cry welled in Drake's listening ear.

"Ah, that interests you, Mr. Prime Minister," mocked the voice. "It was my own artistic idea—to shoot a film which shows your beloved daughter in the power of your foes. Then, if you still persist in your absurd refusal to sign away your powers, I make the little telephone call to Colonel Zapt in Malicia. . . ."

"Zapt!" gasped Lesseur. "But . . . but he is my trusted friend. . . ."

"You are the big fool, Excellency," sneered Boyce. "Zapt is the secret head of the forces seeking to end your liberal and pro-British régime."

"You said telephone him," muttered Lesseur. "But you have brought me to a deserted building. The phone will not be connected."

Boyce laughed again. "By an oversight it was never cut off, Prime Minister—an oversight which influenced me in bringing you here. There could be no better spot in which to have our little show. Afterwards, should you still prove obstinate, I still make that call to Colonel

Zapt . . . and within minutes of receiving it your daughter will be shot dead!"

"You . . . you . . ." Lesseur struggled for words.

"The film runs just five minutes and also contains a little speech from Zapt to you . . . five minutes in which to save your daughter's life, Prime Minister. And now let us begin, eh?"

Drake snapped off the receiver, a bleak smile on his face. The film and the sound track which went with it would be more than enough cover for him—for he knew that he must act fast.

Jagged bricks lay at the base of the crumbling wall. He wrapped one in his jacket and smashed a ground-floor window-pane. His hand probed for the catch, and in another instant he was in the darkened room.

A pencil-flash speared slim light ahead of him. He went swiftly across the room into a passage and started up the rickety stairway, testing each stair carefully before trusting his weight to it.

He looked at his wrist-watch. Three minutes gone. Well, he still had time. For now he was outside the door to the room in which Lesseur was being held.

From beyond it Drake could hear amplified speech in an alien tongue. The film must have reached the stage at which Colonel Zapt was delivering his ultimatum.

Still Drake hung back. His rapid brain had evolved a plan . . . but one more thing was needed.

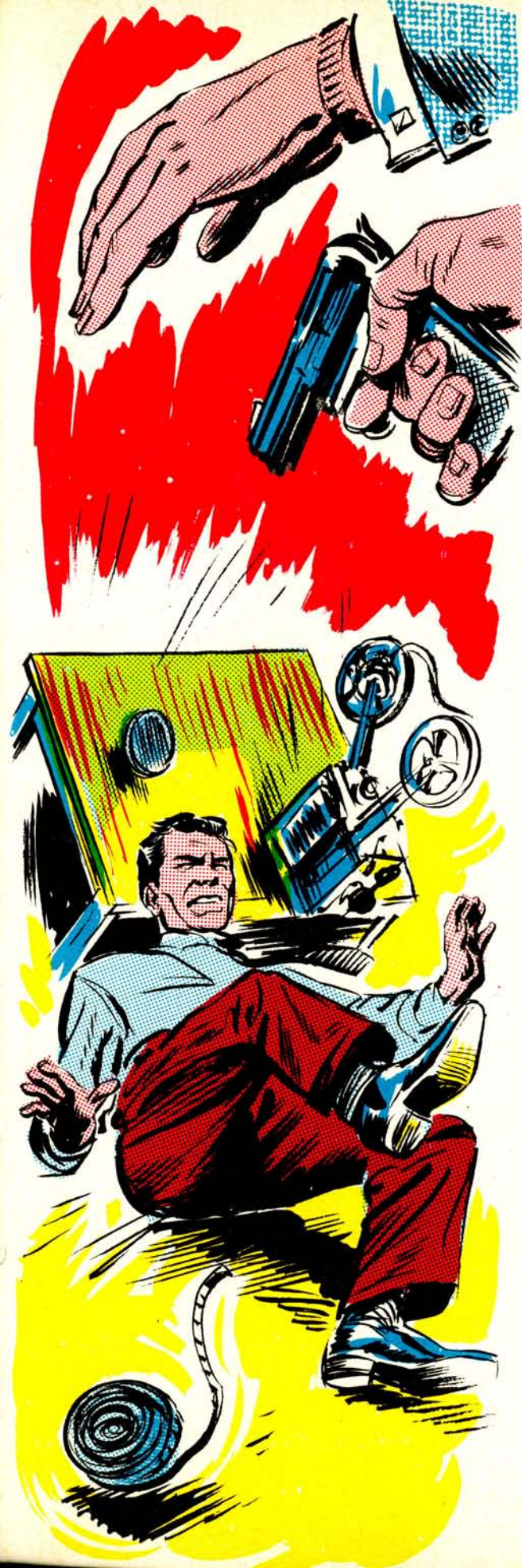
The amplified speech ended, followed by a click as the film finished.

Then came the sound of a telephone being dialled and Boyce's voice giving a Malicia number.

A small silence and Boyce was speaking again. "The operator will call us back in four minutes, Prime Minister . . . then you have the pleasure of communicating your decision to Colonel Zapt! I shall listen with much interest!"

Drake extended the flat of his hand and pushed. The door moved inwards. There was an ejaculation and Boyce stepped into the doorway with a .33 calibre automatic in his hand.

The Danger Man, who had flattened himself against the wall at the side of the door, brought his fist down in a vicious chop on the other's wrist. The gun slammed across the corridor—and simultaneously Drake took the spy in a



judo arm-lock which held him as if in a steel trap!

Then, releasing the hold, he spun Boyce back into the room—to crash into the cinematograph projector. The agent collapsed on the floor among the wreckage . . . and when he started to scramble back on his feet he was looking down the muzzle of his own gun!

"Drake!" he screeched.

"The real one. It was a neat ruse posing as me to disarm the Prime Minister's suspicions. We shall have to find out how you knew I had an appointment with him. . . ."

From the chair Lesseur said huskily: "I myself informed Zapt, in good faith, that you would be coming."

"As simple as that, eh?" sighed Drake. "Unfortunately for Boyce, he couldn't resist smoking a very special kind of cigar in your study. This little luxury—shall we say?—enabled me to smoke him out!"

Boyce glared madly. His mouth worked but no words came.

Drake said pleasantly: "When that call comes through just say who you are and tell Zapt that Lesseur has signed the take-over constitution, Boyce. Don't say anything else . . . if you wish to go on living!"

"I'll kill you for this, Drake!" he whispered.

"Not for some years, I fear," said Drake with a grin. "Ah, here comes the call. Remember . . . this gun is ready to go off."

Boyce took the receiver with a shaking hand. "Everything completed, Colonel," he croaked. "Lesseur has just signed."

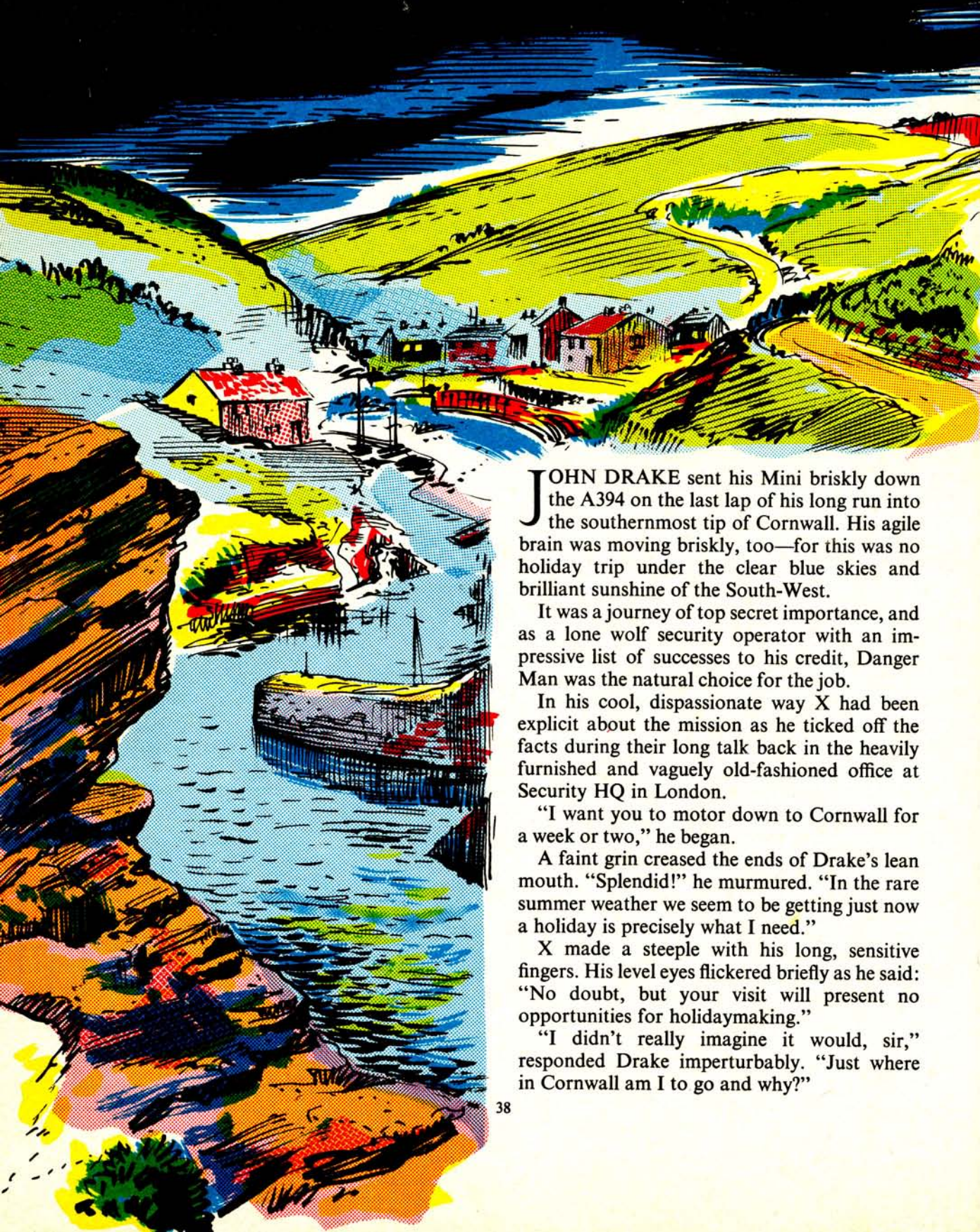
"Admirable . . . bring the signed document back to Malicia immediately." Zapt made an odd gloating sound and Drake took the receiver from the spy's fingers. "You have done even better than you know, Boyce," the colonel said. "Almost immediately after you left Malicia the girl was rescued by the Loyal Guard, so we haven't even got her in our power. . . ."

"And the Prime Minister hasn't even signed the take-over, Colonel," rejoined Drake smoothly. "However, he will almost immediately be signing a warrant for your arrest for high treason!"

"Wh . . . what . . . who is speaking . . . I do not understand . . ." babbled the stricken Zapt.

"Stick around in Malicia for another hour and you will," chuckled Drake.

SMUGGLERS'



JOHN DRAKE sent his Mini briskly down the A394 on the last lap of his long run into the southernmost tip of Cornwall. His agile brain was moving briskly, too—for this was no holiday trip under the clear blue skies and brilliant sunshine of the South-West.

It was a journey of top secret importance, and as a lone wolf security operator with an impressive list of successes to his credit, Danger Man was the natural choice for the job.

In his cool, dispassionate way X had been explicit about the mission as he ticked off the facts during their long talk back in the heavily furnished and vaguely old-fashioned office at Security HQ in London.

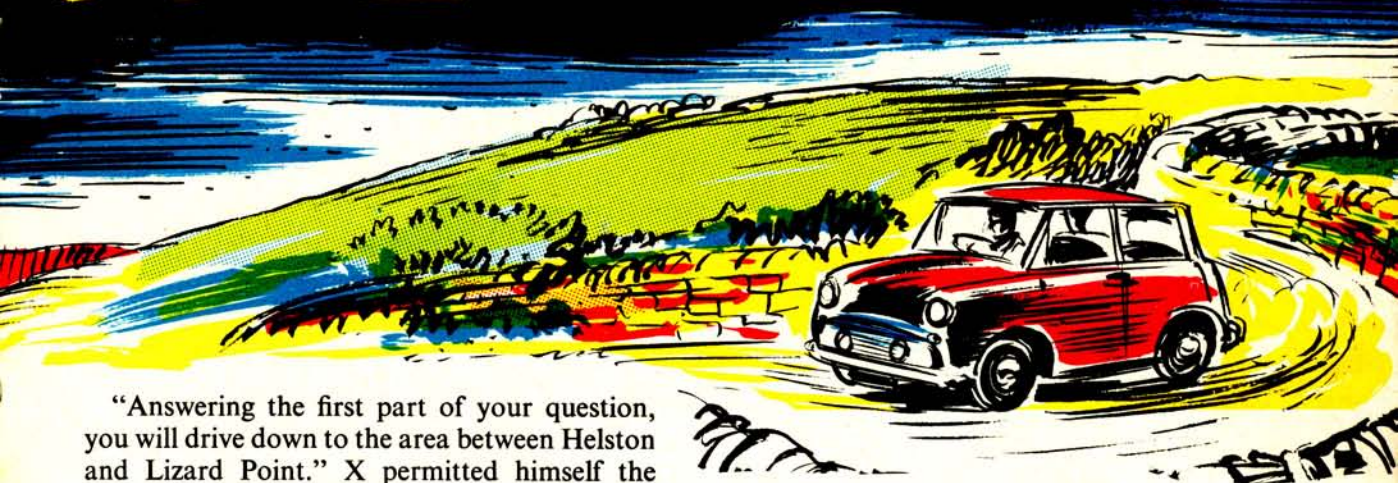
"I want you to motor down to Cornwall for a week or two," he began.

A faint grin creased the ends of Drake's lean mouth. "Splendid!" he murmured. "In the rare summer weather we seem to be getting just now a holiday is precisely what I need."

X made a steeple with his long, sensitive fingers. His level eyes flickered briefly as he said: "No doubt, but your visit will present no opportunities for holidaymaking."

"I didn't really imagine it would, sir," responded Drake imperturbably. "Just where in Cornwall am I to go and why?"

COVE



"Answering the first part of your question, you will drive down to the area between Helston and Lizard Point." X permitted himself the luxury of a thin smile. "The scenery is rugged and picturesque and I know there is some excellent fishing to be had. Not," he added suavely, "that you will take any rods with you, since you will assuredly have no time whatever to use them."

"You'd prefer that I took an automatic pistol, perhaps?"

"It could be necessary," assented the Chief calmly, "though I am aware that you make very sparing use of firearms. As to why you are going down to Cornwall, some rather peculiar security circumstances are causing the Department concern."

Drake nursed a finger along the angle of his determined jaw. "There's the satellite communications place on Goonhilly Downs..." he began.

"No trouble there, Drake," replied X evenly. "What we are interested in has to do with a newer place—you might say it is a security receiving station. It's known to the Department simply as Centre One and is located at an almost inaccessible cove a mile or two south of Black Head near Kennack Sands."

Drake eyed the Chief curiously. "What exactly do they do there?" he asked.

"Basically, it's a small expert staff engaged on receiving and unscrambling coded messages, received on ultra short-wave radio from trusted agents in potential trouble spots in many parts of the world. Centre One comprises a fully equipped radio station, a canteen, recreation venue and living quarters for no more than a dozen men. The place is small—but, believe me, the work is of the greatest significance."

"I see," replied Drake slowly. "Where do I fit in, sir?"

"The three top operators are Lloyd Brandon, Sylvester Balling and James Allcard. They can be counted among the top ten of the world's greatest code breakers. They not only unscramble messages from our own operatives but also break down secret dispatches put out by possible enemy agents. You will see at once the absolute importance of their work?"

Drake nodded briefly.

X unwound his steepled fingers and said succinctly: "Three days ago we sent a man down to Centre One—just a periodical routine visit to see how things were going. He came back with a somewhat odd story..."

Drake said nothing. His lean features were composed but without expression as he waited.

"The day-to-day working of the Centre seemed to be in perfect order and all three men were both informative and co-operative—but, and this is the peculiar thing, our man came back with the impression that in some indefinable way all three were subtly different."

Drake stared. "Different—how?" he asked quietly.

X moved his powerful shoulders in the smallest shrug. "That is exactly what our man—it was Charles Mallory, by the way—found perplexing. On the surface they appeared normal, but all the time he sensed something off-key about them."

Drake said levelly: "Are you saying that Brandon, Balling and Allcard are now regarded as possible security risks, sir?"

"I am not saying anything beyond the fact that Mallory was vaguely disturbed by something in their manner. If it had been just one of them he would have written it off as a single idiosyncrasy, but it was all three."

Drake was silent for a long moment. Then he said thoughtfully: "It could be no more than nervous strain, but. . ."

"But you aren't convinced of that," X finished.

"A change in three key men at a top security centre, even a change so subtle that Mallory couldn't properly define it, needs looking into, I guess."

X stood up. "That, my dear Drake, is why you will motor down to Cornwall—today."

"I keep a bag permanently packed, sir," responded Drake with a smile. "Who am I supposed to be when I get there, by the way?"

"Nobody at Centre One has ever met you, though they've doubtless heard of you. But that doesn't matter. You will use your own name and the ostensible purpose of your visit is merely to learn something about the setup, as a background to your own work. The real purpose is to uncover what, if anything, is wrong down there."

"I'll be on my way within an hour, sir."

"Excellent! I shall expect the fullest report in the shortest time," X said with a bleak smile.

"Naturally," replied the Danger Man amiably.

* * *

Details of the briefing were still milling around in his mind when he turned left at Helston. After only a few miles he swung the little car on to the B road through Goonhilly Downs and on towards the old-world cove at Coverack, turning before he reached it.

From then on it was tricky driving down steeply winding lanes, so narrow that no more than a single car could negotiate them at a time. Tall hedges reared from the sides, and in sections heavily foliated trees met above him like a green roof.

Drake changed down to second gear in order to climb a twisting one-in-five rise which finally brought him clear of the trees and almost on to the promontory of Black Head. In the distance he could see the limitless expanse of the Atlantic, blue and unruffled on a perfect summer's evening.

Gulls wheeled and drifted in the cloudless sky, their hoarse cries the only sound in a remote world he seemed to have entirely to himself.

Then it happened!

The Danger Man had crested the top of the incline and was starting to coast down a long and temporarily straight piece of roadway when, away beyond a high boulder on his left, something glinted briefly in the dazzling sunlight.

A conditioned reflex action born of years of peril caused him to swerve the car in a fast snaking movement.

Simultaneously there came a high *pinging* sound and a puff of pale smoke—and a split second later Drake heard the smash of the bullet into the rear of the Mini.

He slammed his right foot down on the accelerator, sending the car lunging ahead. He was diving headlong down another steep hill when he heard the second shot—but this time the sniper was too late even to hit the back of the car.

But Drake was too busy to congratulate himself on his powers of fast observation. The hill swung acutely left in a wicked hairpin bend, and he had to make massive use both of disc brakes and gearbox in order to take it at a speed which wouldn't overturn him.

Then, in another moment, he was round the bend and bringing the car to a standstill. He leaped straight out and weaved his way on foot through the boulder-strewn undergrowth of the slope flanking the lane.

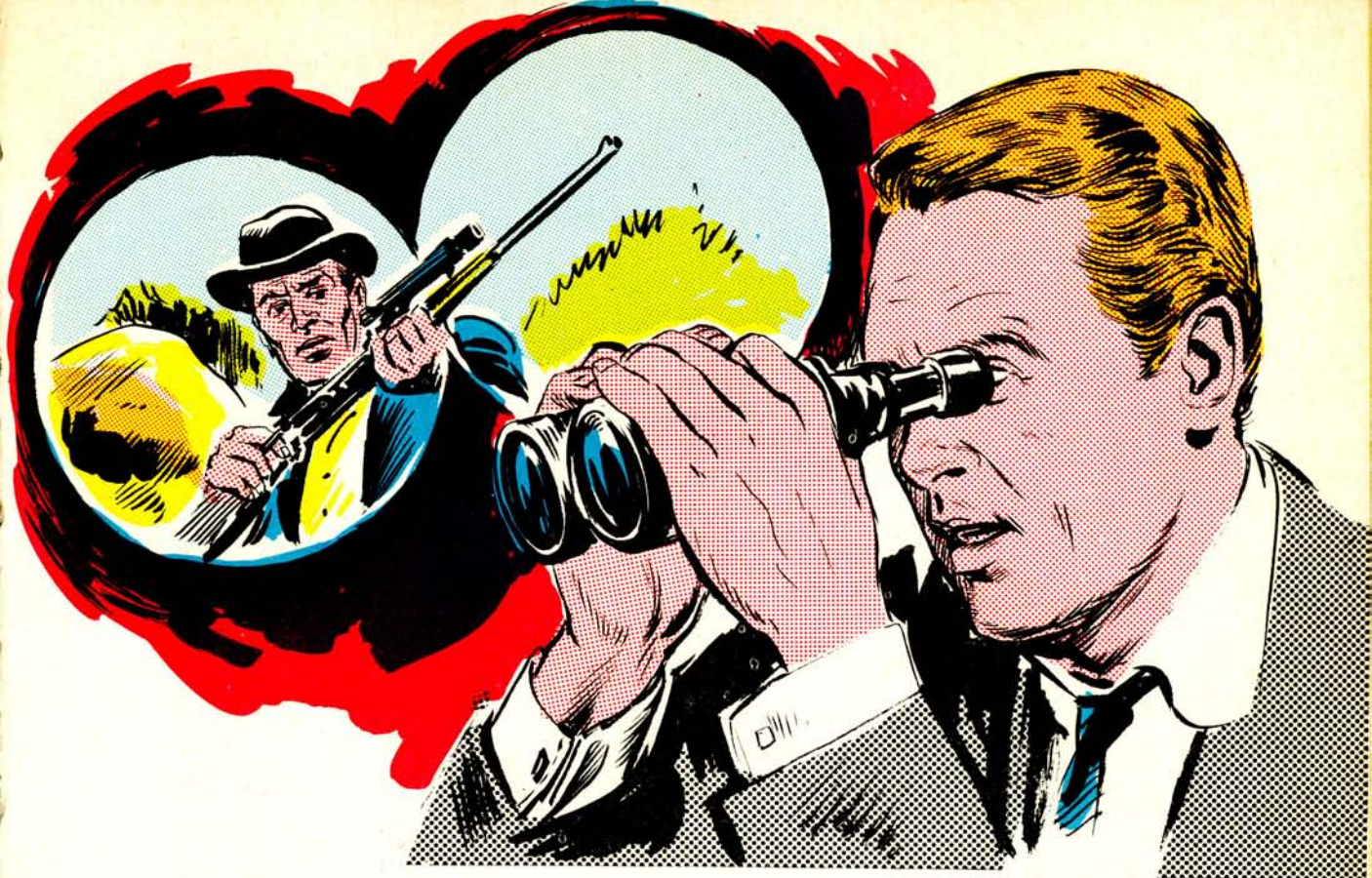
When he clambered on to the summit he sprawled flat on the ground, his gaze raking the distance through powerful binoculars.

Now he had a direct line of vision to the high boulder from which the shots had come. A face came into focus—a white face with deep-set eyes and a mouth like a hard, thin line so that the lips barely showed.

Then, as the gunman moved away, the face vanished . . . but Drake had seen it and knew it!

"Delhardt!" he breathed.

It was in Zürich, seven months before, that Kurt Delhardt had been pointed out to him in a beer cellar. Delhardt was a professional killer, specialising in political assassination. The Intelligence Departments of half the countries in Western Europe had files on him—but never enough evidence to hold him for at least five



murders for which he was believed to be responsible.

Drake knew that Delhardt hired himself out to any undercover or illegal organisation anxious to 'liquidate' troublesome politicians or agents who were getting too close for comfort.

And now the Danger Man himself was on the list!

Drake's jaw set grimly. Somewhere there had been a leak . . . somehow his journey to this remote corner of Cornwall had become known. Yet it was only that very morning that X had briefed him.

The mystery seemed baffling, but Drake knew there must be a solution and that he must find it. Meanwhile, he made his way quickly back to his car and drove steadily on.

One thing was certain—his expedition to Centre One was going to be fraught with interest and even peril. As the thought came to him the Danger Man's eyes shone a little. It was almost as if he were positively relishing the prospect!

* * *

He parked on the crescent-shaped tarmac strip beyond which stood the operational room

of Centre One. To the right were grouped the living and recreational quarters.

An impassive guard had closely examined his credentials at the lodge gate set immediately behind a high steel fence.

"You can drive in now, Mr. Drake," he said laconically. "I believe Mr. Brandon is in the operational section with Mr. Balling and Mr. Allcard. I'll phone through that you're here, sir."

"Why, are they expecting me?" inquired Drake blandly.

"I couldn't say, sir. But they will have to know of your arrival."

Drake nodded. He had got out of the car and was starting to walk towards the main building when a tall, thin man in his middle fifties came out. His face was long and earnest, his suit conservatively grey; in fact, he could have been a banker or stockbroker in the City rather than a trusted Intelligence executive.

"I'm Lloyd Brandon," he said as they shook hands. "We haven't had the pleasure of meeting before. I gather from the guard that you're from HQ."

"Yes, they've sent me down just to get background information on the Centre, they figured

it might be useful in my work," responded Drake. "Didn't X notify you that I was on my way?"

Brandon shook his greying head. "No, but I gather you have a letter of introduction." He smiled. "I'd better see it myself, eh?"

"Of course." Drake handed the document over.

Brandon studied it for a moment, then handed it back. "Everything seems to be in perfect order. And now perhaps you'd care to join us in a friendly drink?"

He led the way into the recreation venue—a large, airy room with smaller rooms adjoining and a curved bar. Balling and Allcard were already there. Both appeared to be in their early forties. Balling was as quietly dressed as the older of the trio, but Allcard was wearing slim slacks, a navy blue woollen shirt and a light-weight car coat.

When Brandon had made the introductions, Allcard said pleasantly: "Well, I hope you'll find the work we do interesting, Drake—though mostly, you know, it can become pretty darned monotonous."

Balling chuckled. "Don't pay too much attention to anything Allcard says about work, Drake," he warned. "Allcard always gives the impression that he's bored to death down here, but he's just as enthusiastic as the rest of us. Mind you, apart from the absorbing nature of the work, it *can* get rather dull in these peaceful parts."

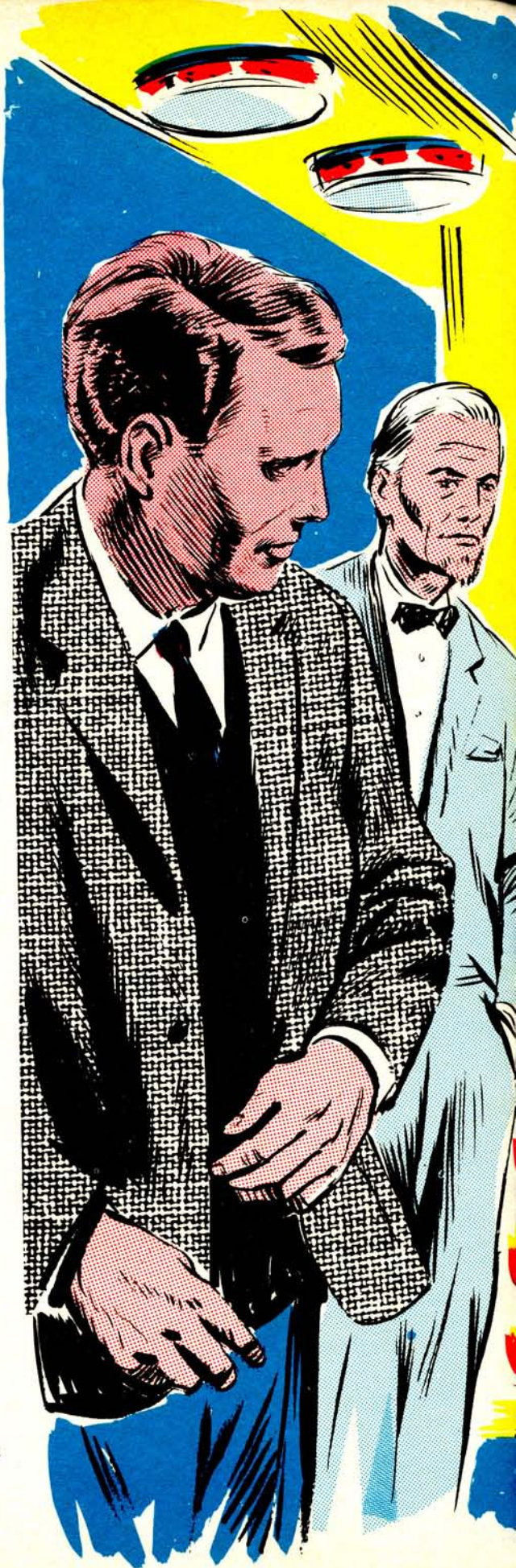
Drake, who had so far not spoken of the incident at Black Head, observed deliberately: "Peaceful is not perhaps the word I would have selected, gentlemen."

Three pairs of eyes stared at him in unison. Then Brandon said: "I don't think any of us quite understands that remark, Drake."

"Then I'll put it another way," the Danger Man answered. "The fact is that the otherwise peaceful nature of my journey here was rather sharply interrupted—shattered might well be the more fitting word—as I came out on a rise near Black Head not more than thirty minutes ago."

"Indeed?" remarked Brandon politely. "A burst tyre, d'you mean?"

Drake smiled grimly. "There was a burst all right, but not from one of the tyres. In fact, it was a burst from a rifle with telescopic sights



some joker had trained on me from a high boulder near the Head."

"What!" Brandon uttered the single word in a startled manner, his expression echoed by that of his companions.

Allcard, who had been in the act of lighting a cigarette, let the flame crawl down the match until it almost touched his fingers. "I say, you can't really be serious," he protested.

"Very serious," Drake said. "In fact, there's a hole in the bodywork of my car to prove it."

"But, great heavens, who on earth would want to fire a rifle at you?" Balling queried.

"A number of characters would be charmed

to undertake the task," Drake answered. "But I hardly expected any of them to show up in this quiet rural area of England."

Brandon, his long face seeming even longer in thought, said: "I'll have to report this to HQ immediately. Incidentally, if the miscreant was using telescopic sights how the dickens did you manage to escape?"

"His sights glinted in the sun and I saw them just in time to swerve the car—luckily for me."

"By gad, yes," cried Allcard. "I say," he went on, "it begins to look as if our activities here are attracting some sinister curiosity."

"I suppose the fellow got away at once?" Balling asked.

"I guess so," Drake replied soberly. "I suppose you gentlemen haven't seen anything else of a suspicious nature since you've all been down here?"

"Not a thing," Brandon replied. "In fact, there hasn't been anything to disturb what you could call the even tenor of our lives here. I must say that this opens up an entirely new field of thought." He pursed his lips and added: "There are, without doubt, several foreign interests who could be curious about Centre One—but, frankly, I can't imagine them engaging the services of a hired assassin. Yet, clearly, that must be the situation."

Allcard blew out a long thin stream of cigarette smoke. "Drake ought to be safe enough inside the Centre," he observed. "Just the same, it might not be a bad idea to put an extra guard on, especially after dark."

"Yes, I'll have it attended to," Brandon said decisively. "And now, I think, we'll all have that drink we really came for."

Twenty minutes later Drake was in the quarters assigned to him—a compact and well-appointed suite which was always kept vacant for official visitors. The place consisted of a handsome lounge, a bedroom, a tiled kitchenette and a bathroom with a shower stall.

The Danger Man stripped, stood gratefully under the cooling shower, shaved for the second time that day and changed his clothes. On the writing desk in the lounge was an ivory telephone. Drake eyed it for a second, then went back into the bedroom and took a black oblong case from his luggage.

He opened the case and drew out a curiously shaped metal object with dual sets of insulated





cables running from it. These he attached to the mouthpiece and receiver of the telephone, plugging one of the other terminals into his left ear.

Then he put a long-distance call through to the unlisted number of X's private residence at Sunbury-on-Thames.

There was a slight interval, then X came on the line.

"Yes?" he said.

"Drake here, sir. Delightful weather—only one small cloud on the jolly old horizon!"

"Splendid," said X testily. "And you rang me up just to tell me that?"

"Naturally, sir. When there is only one small cloud on the azure perfection of the scene I know you will not merely be interested but relieved. . . ." At this point Drake broke off, listening intently.

A slightly muffled and indefinable sound had entered his plugged ear. Then, faintly but nevertheless quite clearly, he heard a voice saying: "I've got him in contact, but he's talking a load of airy-fairy balderdash. I'll keep him in contact, though. . . ."

A wintry smile moved on Drake's mouth. Then he babbled on gaily: "By jove, yes, frightfully good weather. Just the one cloud, nothing more. Oh, I've met Brandon and friends. Splendid fellow. We've had an interesting chat. In fact, I had to tell them about a rather odd thing on the way in here. Some fellow fired a rifle at me from behind a whacking big boulder, but I swerved the car and escaped unhurt."

"You relieve my apprehensions," X murmured. "I should hate to think of you lying shot dead in some lonely spot."

"I'd hate it myself, sir," said Drake amiably. "Brandon wonders if some foreign agency or group may be behind it."

"It's more than possible," assented X. "I told you this mission might be dangerous. You'd better start wearing a gun."

"Oh, I expect I shall manage without firearms, sir," said Drake. "In any case, I hardly expect another attempt—*inside* Centre One. The only thing that really intrigues me is how the chap with the rifle knew I was in the vicinity."

"Cell 069 recently had to switch their activities from Switzerland a couple of jumps ahead of the Swiss Intelligence police. It's possible

they've been having you watched. You could have been followed when you left here."

"I'd have known if a car was behind me all that way."

"The same operative wouldn't follow you all the way. There'd be phone messages to other watchers, who could tail you for some miles and then contact the next man. Sounds a bit complex, but it could be like that, eh?"

"If you think so, sir."

"Well, take care, anyway, and keep in touch," said X genially. "'Bye now.'"

He hung up, but Drake kept the receiver in his hand for a moment more. The voice he had heard before said: "Nothing to worry about there. Drake couldn't have seen Delhardt. Okay. . . ." There was a faint sound, not a click, but the sound of some instrument being removed.

Drake replaced his own receiver, his forehead puckered in thought. The voice he had heard was one he could not even distantly recall. Nor had he any means of knowing how near—or far off—the voice had come from. All he now knew for a certainty was that the line or lines out of Centre One were being ingeniously tapped.

He said nothing to Brandon and the others. So far as he could determine, their attitude towards him had been perfectly ordinary. True, he had no means of comparing their present demeanour with any previous behaviour—but, for the time being at all events, he resolved to say nothing about the tapped phone.

He joined the three in the canteen for dinner, then drifted around the place, his alert eyes taking in everything. Brandon later showed him over the operational room, explaining technical details of its working, to which the Danger Man listened with genuine interest. It was clear to him that Brandon was an expert in his chosen field.

After a while Drake said suddenly: "Have you been able to intercept any particularly vital messages—from alien sources, I mean?"

Brandon nodded. "Why, yes, we have—several, as a matter of fact. Allcard decoded them for us, he's quite a wizard at that sort of thing, despite his rather casual manner, you know."

"Is there any security reason why I shouldn't be told the contents?"

"Surely not, in view of your credentials.



Though, actually, the contents weren't especially significant—just routine stuff. It was the source that interested us. In fact, all three came from a renegade German agent named Weider, Hans Weider. The transmission was intended for reception behind the Iron Curtain and merely detailed his intended movements. It seems that Weider was switching his scene of operations from Berlin to some mountain hideout about thirty miles south of Basle, a place called Lantrau."

"Not to Cornwall, anyway," murmured Drake with a smile.

"No, nothing like that, so Weider can't be implicated in the attempt to pick you off with that telescopic rifle." Brandon glanced at his wristwatch and added: "I've some more work to do. If you fancy a run down to the village there's a rather decent pub there. The Skipper's Cabin it's called. It's bang in the middle of the village, you can't miss it. The beer there is excellent."

"Thanks," said Drake. "I think I'll sample it. See you later, then."

The sun was hovering like a fiery globe over the distant rim of the ocean when he started driving and it would be another half-hour before darkness began to engulf the dreamy countryside. The aromatic scents of summer drifted in agreeably through the open window of the car, and Drake thought that seldom had he encountered a more peaceful setting.

But the events of the very recent past carried a vastly different meaning—and, on top of that, he had a kind of sixth sense that he was almost on the verge of high drama.

A number of cars were already parked on the forecourt and at the side of the Skipper's Cabin, presumably belonging to holiday visitors in the area around Coverack, Mullion and St. Keverne.

The bar was decked out as an exact replica of a skipper's cabin—except that it was several times larger than a ship's cabin was ever likely to be. Brass storm lamps, lit by electricity, had been added; there was a lifebelt, a ship's wheel and various other nautical additions. The bar itself was curved and polished and illuminated by a string of fairy lights.

Blue-jerseyed fishermen with complexions like pickled walnuts mingled with chattering holidaymakers of both sexes. Drake found a place at the bar and tasted the beer—it was fully



up to the standard claimed by Lloyd Brandon.

The landlord, a vast man with merry twinkling eyes, leaned slightly over the dark polished counter and said conversationally: "On holiday, sir?"

"You could say that," replied Drake.

"I first came to these parts on a holiday, me and the wife," the landlord remarked. "Liked it so much we decided to stay. Sold up our home and grocery business in dear old London, took this pub and never been back to The Smoke. Don't want to, either."

"I take it you like the rural life," said Drake, just to make conversation.

"Suits us fine, sir. I suppose you're staying over at Mullion or Coverack?"

"In the vicinity," answered Drake non-committally.

"'Course, the district is quieter in the winter. All sorts come here during the season, and the traffic—whew! Still, there's quiet spots if you look around, smugglers' coves and all that sort of thing."

Drake, who was only half-listening to the flow of chat, suddenly thought of something. "I suppose you get a few foreign visitors?" he asked.

"Some we do, yes," the stout man said. "Not so many this summer, though. Only one round here and I don't rightly know if he's staying in the village or camping. Came in here just the once for a drink. Asked me for *schnapps*, that stuff the Dutch drink." The landlord emitted a fat chuckle. "I don't stock it and he had to make do with Scotch. Morose sort of bloke he was, too."

Drake said quietly: "He wouldn't be a man with a very pale face, deep-set eyes and a thin mouth, by any chance?"

Even before he had finished speaking he knew that it was the same man.

The landlord's eyes widened. "That's him all right, sir. Why, d'you know him?"

Drake shook his head. "No, but I saw a foreign-looking chap early this evening over near Black Head. He seemed to be carrying something, a rifle I think."

The landlord quaffed noisily from a pewter tankard, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said: "I don't know about no rifle, sir, though he *was* carrying a long sort of black case when he come in here. It'd carry one of them rifles you can take apart. Why?"

"Nothing," murmured Drake.

The landlord scratched his thinning hair. "There ain't no shooting goes on around Black Head that I ever heard tell of," he mused. "The only thing I knows of out that way is a cove, about a mile south of the Head. Not many folks go there on account of the lane leading down to it is almost perpendicular and barely wide enough to take a car. Smugglers' Cove it's known as. The smugglers used to run contraband in there in the old days," he added in the manner of one imparting valuable information.

"You mean nobody ever goes there now?" asked Drake.

"Not as I ever heard of. 'Scuse me, sir, there's a customer clamouring for a drink. Mustn't keep a thirsty customer waiting, eh?" And with another plump chuckle, he waddled down the bar.

Drake remained for a few moments in thought. A smugglers' cove too inaccessible for holiday-makers to explore: it could mean nothing at all, or it could mean something. He put his glass down on the bar and as he did so his gaze went to the mirror behind the massed array of bottles.

A slightly built man in dark clothes was sidling out of the inn. His back was turned, but the furtiveness of his departure rivetted Drake's attention. Then, as he swung round, the man had gone.

For an instant the Danger Man was inclined to dismiss the tiny incident as of no importance. But too many odd things seemed to be going on in this remote corner of the South-West. Abruptly, Drake finished his drink and strode purposefully from the inn. His car was parked on the far side of the forecourt in a pool of dark. Nobody seemed to be near it, but Drake moved cautiously through the shadows, keeping to the cover of the stone wall.

In another moment he was by the Mini. There was no one else in sight, no sign of the slight man or anybody else for that matter. Drake shrugged and was about to climb inside when, suddenly, he stiffened. The door on the driving side wasn't fully shut!

Drake's sensitive mouth twisted slightly. He knew well that he had carefully closed and locked the door before entering the inn. For a second he hesitated; then, gingerly, he inserted a key in the door lock, turned it and gently tugged the door towards him.

Nothing happened.

He got into the driving seat and snapped on the roof light. Everything seemed to be in perfect order, nothing disturbed. He had almost decided to switch the engine on when his innate caution restrained him.

Instead, he took a flash-lamp from the glove compartment, turned and sent the white beam probing into the rear.

A thin whistle came from his tight lips. On the rear floor was a small box-like shape heavily muffled in thick black felt.

Drake reached down for it, slid off the felt wrapping and then he heard it . . . a faint but still clear ticking sound. Without a second's hesitation, he virtually leaped from the car. His right arm described a wide swinging arc—and the deadly time bomb spun high into the air to fall sixty feet below into the dark Atlantic.

A minute later Drake was driving hard and fast towards Smugglers' Cove. . . .

* * *

The landlord had been right about the near-impossibility of getting a car down the

steeply-rutted lane leading to the tiny cove. But, under Drake's expert handling, the Mini made it.

He could have negotiated the lane to its bottom, but instead Drake braked to a standstill three-quarters of the way down. He had coasted on a cut-out engine and without even using sidelights. He felt confident that his approach would have gone unnoticed by anyone who might be in the cove.

But now he was walking the rest of the way. And, for once, he had an automatic pistol out, with the safety-catch freed ready for instant use.

The damp night air was still and no sound came to him apart from the ceaseless murmur of the ocean. In another minute he was at the cove, staring at the sandy shore flanked by giant rocks. The moon, sailing free from a bank of cloud, lit up the scene in a pale lunar radiance.

But there was no sign anywhere of human habitation. . . .

Drake flattened his back against the rocky overhang, his keen eyes raking this way and that, seeking the smallest clue. But there was none. In the utter stillness and desolation of the night he might have been the last man in the world.

Yet, instinctively, he sensed that he was close to journey's end. Methodically, he took out a small but powerful pair of night binoculars, training them in a wide sweep along the sandy cove and up the face of the rocky formation.

Unhurriedly he focused on the silent, barely moving water. Still there was nothing. But Drake continued to change his line of vision—he would not be content until he had observed every section of the tiny bay.

Suddenly he knew his persistence had been rewarded. Close inshore, almost out of sight in the dark glowering shadow thrown by the rocks, the water showed a faint disturbance.

Even as he watched the disturbance increased, eddying and swirling. Then something dark and blunt rose from the swirl, moving closer to the shoreline.

It was a submarine!

Drake put the miniature binoculars away and ducked low behind a jutting boulder—waiting.

Nor had he long to wait. The sub came almost close enough inshore to touch ground, and in the next instant the conning tower opened and a swarthy man clambered out.

"Hans Weider!" muttered Drake. "So he didn't go to Lantrau after all!"

With the sub at anchor Weider came ashore. He took a torch from a pocket and snapped the beam on, one-two-three. From somewhere on the slope came an answering three flashes.

"You okay, Delhardt?" Weider called.

"Ja, I am on my way down."

"I'll join you," Weider said. "Perhaps we go to the village inn to make the celebration, yes?"

Without waiting for a reply Weider disappeared up the slope. Drake grinned sardonically. There was nothing for the enemy spy to celebrate—for the Danger Man was still very much alive!

But Weider's departure gave Drake another idea. Even as it came to him he waded straight into the water, and in another moment was on the sub and going slowly and carefully down into its interior, his gun held hard out before him.

But nobody moved.

When he reached the bottom Drake's gaze took in the periscope gear, the navigation apparatus—and, not least, the torpedo machinery. All this he noted in a flash, for there was little time left in which to test the amazing suspicion which had come to him.



There was a steel door to his right. Drake pushed it inwards and stepped adroitly to the side. Nobody came at him with a gun.

Then he was through the aperture . . . and gazing with undisguised interest at the three figures ranged against the wall, three silent men with their wrists and ankles shackled in irons which in turn were stapled to the solid floor.

For a moment the resemblance between them and the three executives at Centre One was so uncanny that Drake could scarcely credit it. But he knew, beyond any shadow of doubt, that the silent men before him were none other than Brandon, Balling and Allcard . . . the real ones!

It was Brandon who spoke first, and again Drake marvelled at the perfection with which the fake Brandon had imitated every subtle inflexion of voice and accent.

"If I could get my hands and feet free I'd make short work of you, my friend," Brandon said.

As he spoke his gaze went to the wall at the side of the door. Drake turned and saw two keys suspended on a coil of thin wire.

He reached the coil down and tossed it to Brandon. "Help yourself," he said with a smile.

Brandon stared almost stupidly at the keys.



"You'd better be quick about it, Brandon," said Drake evenly. "Any minute now we are likely to be entertaining Weider and Delhardt."

Allcard leaned forward, his eyes bulging. "You . . . you're not one of them!"

"I sincerely hope there's not even a passing resemblance," the Danger Man answered. "John Drake, special security agent, very much at your service, gentlemen. Tell me, are there any guns in this tub?"

"In the locker in the main section," said Balling eagerly.

"I'll get them," grinned Drake. "After all, we must be ready to greet our guests!"

Three minutes later they were in readiness. Muffled sounds came from above, then footsteps descending.

Weider was the first down. Over his shoulder he called: "I theenk we should have gone to the pub for the dreenk, ja."

Delhardt appeared, his dead white face a savage mask. "I told you I didn't plug Drake," he snarled. "Is not safe then for me to be seen . . ."

"Least of all by John Drake," said the Danger Man as he stepped forward, his automatic aiming.

For a fraction of a second Delhardt glared wildly. Then his hand made a blur of motion. But it never reached his gun. There was a dull thud as Brandon, emerging from the side of the companionway, brought the butt of a shining blue Navy colt down on the base of his neck. Delhardt pitched forward on his face and lay still. So far as he was concerned the war was over.

Hans Weider stood goggling, his face ashen. "Mein Gott . . . I . . . I . . . wha . . . what . . . how . . . ?" he babbled.

"Ve-ry lucid," chuckled Drake. "But we haven't time to answer your questions, my friend. We have some rather sharp ones to put elsewhere."

With Weider and Delhardt themselves in irons, Brandon said: "How did you know my friends and I were here?"

Drake grinned. "I didn't know you were in a submarine, Brandon. All I deduced was that you were very likely somewhere in the vicinity. I met the men who are impersonating you. Frankly, they might have fooled me but for two factors. Mallory thought there was something

odd about them, that in some strange way they weren't exactly like he remembered you fellows. Secondly, the fake Brandon went out of his way to tell me that Weider was in Switzerland . . . if he'd really intercepted a short-wave message he would know darned well that Weider was here."

He paused and added: "But the biggest blunder of all was to try to kill me . . . that and the certain fact that somebody knew I was coming here. That somebody could only be Brandon. He must have had a telephone message from an agent they had watching my every move, a man who could gain access to HQ. Now tell me what happened to you."

The real Brandon shrugged. "The Central European illegal espionage ring for which Weider works wanted to plant men in Centre One. They handpicked three men who were like us in a general sort of way. Then Alexis Koestling, a plastic surgeon, went to work on their faces. After that we were kidnapped and the three men took our places."

"X will be fascinated when you tell him presently," said Drake.

Balling stared. "Why, is he here, too?"

"Well, I had a very innocent-sounding but insinuating chat with him on the phone earlier this evening," Drake replied. "I stressed that there was one small cloud on the horizon—that always means he can take a hand, if he feels interested enough."

He glanced at his watch. "If we hurry we might even get there at the same time . . ."

* * *

In fact, it was a dead heat.

X's majestic Rolls was on the parking lot when they all arrived in the Mini. Only Drake alighted. He held a brief whispered conversation with his companions, then strolled nonchalantly into the operational room.

"Hello, Drake," said X smoothly. "Everything in order now?"

"Completely, sir."

The fake Brandon smiled. "Excellent," he said. "I trust you had an interesting evening at the village inn. . . ."

"Assuredly. The beer is as good as you claimed when you mentioned the attractions of the place. Unfortunately, you omitted to mention that the additional attractions would include a time bomb."

"You're joking," said Brandon, but now there was another look in his eyes. It was no more than a fleeting look, but it was there . . . and it was an expression of rising fear.

"I also took the opportunity to visit one of the smugglers' coves you didn't mention, old boy," went on Drake suavely.

"Indeed? I hope you found it—ah, interesting."

"Indeed . . . I even found some smugglers. Or, putting it more accurately, three fellows who had been smuggled away, very much against their will!" snapped Drake.

Every vestige of colour sped from the fake Brandon's face. The two other impersonators stood utterly still, their eyes brilliant with hate.

Drake coughed audibly, the door opened and in strode the real Brandon, Balling and Allcard.

"Permit me to introduce . . . the smugglers," said Drake.

A laugh, like no laugh Drake had ever heard, burst from the fake Brandon's lips. At the same instant he dropped a hand over an ebony knob on a recessed control panel.

"I should have killed you myself after Delhardt blundered," he snarled. "But you will not live to question us or to discover how much knowledge we have gained from this Centre. In two more seconds I shall press this control switch . . . and we shall all, the station included, be blasted to eternity."

"Fancy that," murmured Drake. "All of us whirling about in messy fragments!"

"*Mein Gott*, you can laugh," screamed the fake Brandon. "But now you laugh on the other side of the face, *ja* . . ."

He slammed his hand hard down on the ebony control knob.

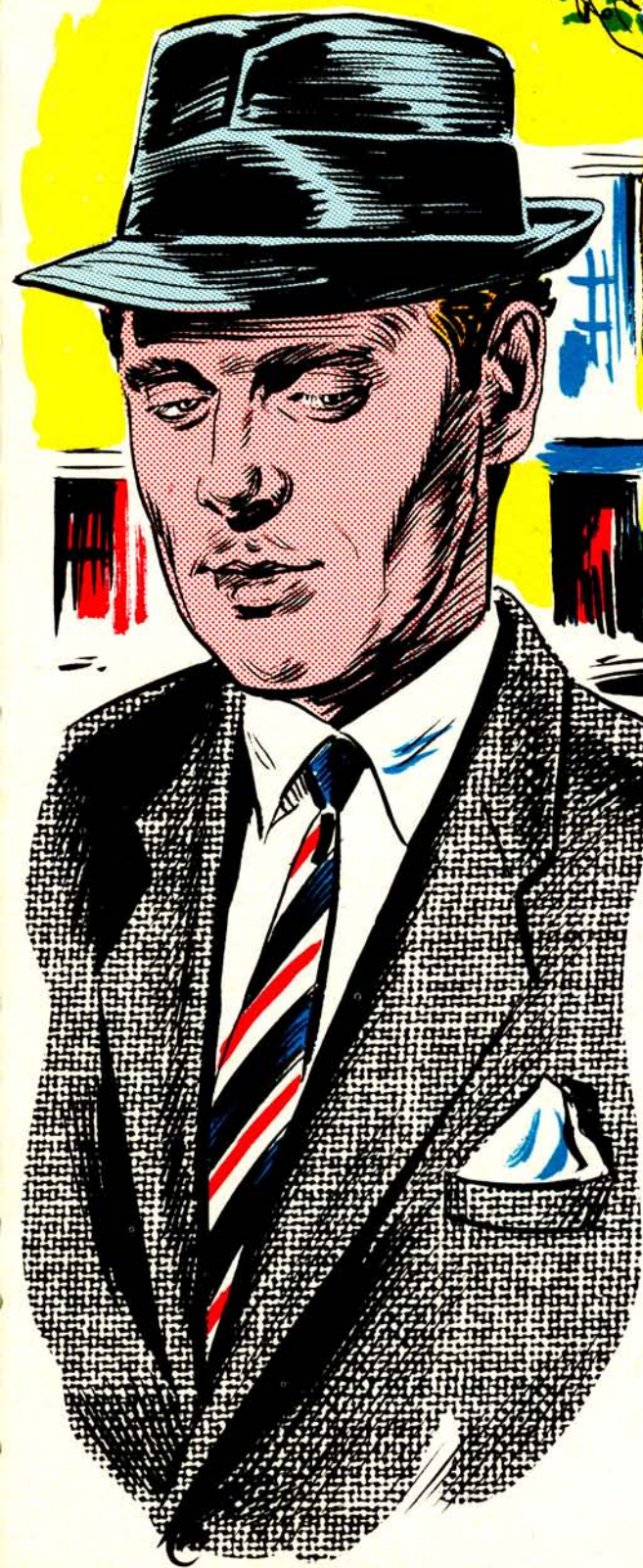
In the stunned silence which followed Drake said coolly: "You're thinking of the wrong face, my friend . . . *it should be yours*."

The fake Brandon and his plotters stared wildly.

"I had all operational controls switched completely off before I came in," chuckled Drake.

X said impassively. "I think I had better buy you a drink, you've rather earned it." Something that was nearly a smile creased his mouth. "A large and powerful brandy, I suggest . . . it was always a popular tipple at Smugglers' Cove!"

COUNTDOWN



IT was seven o'clock in the evening, and because the weather was pleasantly mild Drake was taking a somewhat longer route home. He was a staunch believer in walking as a key to physical fitness.

His stroll had taken him through Carlston Gardens, that elegant London square lined with the fine Georgian houses of the well-to-do. The ceaseless roar of traffic had faded and you could almost imagine that you were strolling in some quiet old country town.

It was at this point in his meditations that the Danger Man experienced the sensation which had served him so well more than once in his adventurous career . . . that unerring sixth sense which told him that he was being secretly watched.

He didn't make the mistake of stopping suddenly and wheeling round. Instead, he continued to stroll on with apparent unconcern for

several more yards; then he paused to light a cigarette, turning slightly as he threw away the still burning match.

Instantly, he knew that his hunch had been right. For just as he casually turned, a man wearing an olive green raincoat and a pulled-down hat slid out of sight behind one of the handsome trees which dotted the square—but not before Drake caught a glimpse of him.

Although his lone wolf work for Security HQ was always done anonymously and as far as possible in secrecy, Drake well knew that there were dangerous men in a dozen or more countries who would be more than willing to kill him. Many times his life had been in danger . . . in London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, New York.

But would-be assassins invariably relied on the surprise attack; it was not their way to tail him through city streets as a sort of preliminary exercise.

Yet there seemed to be no reason why anyone should tail him on this balmy Spring evening; he wasn't engaged on an assignment and was merely taking a roundabout stroll on his way back to his bachelor flat.

He walked on, then removed his hat and dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief. As he did so he held the hat slightly in front of him—for set in the underside of the crown was a small mirror.

By peering sharply at it Drake was able to see that the man in the olive green raincoat had emerged from behind the tree and was on his track once more.

Drake slowed his stride to a saunter and had passed the handsome entrance to Elton House on a corner of the square when not only his intuition but his acutely sensitive hearing told him that Green Coat was no longer following him.

He brought his saunter to a full stop, hesitated deliberately for a moment, then turned and walked back the way he had come—too quickly for the shadower to hide.

"Pardon me," said Drake apologetically, "but I wonder if you could oblige me with the time, I seem to have come out without my watch."

Green Coat tugged the brim of his wide hat further down, as if he did not wish his face to be seen too clearly. He pushed up the sleeve of his jacket and rasped: "Five past seven."

Immediately he turned to go. Drake also turned, at the same instant stumbling into the other. The impact caused Green Coat to sway against the railings of Elton House.



Drake put out a hand to steady him and stumbled again, so that for a moment the two were almost locked together.

"My dear sir, I'm most frightfully sorry," said Drake. "Deuced careless of me, what?"

"Good night!" grated Green Coat—and without another look went fast along the pavement.

Drake watched enigmatically until he had disappeared round the next corner. Then, with a faint and quizzical smile, he strolled on once more.

On arrival at his flat he took a shower, changed his clothes and was trying to make up his mind whether to pass the evening at home or drop in at his club when the phone rang.

"Good evening, Drake," murmured X in his impassive voice. "Tell me—what are your plans for the remainder of the night?"

"I haven't quite decided, sir."

"I'll save you the trouble, then," X said. "Sir Jason Harlee has been kidnapped!"

Drake made a low whistle. Sir Jason Harlee, an Australian knighted in the last Honours List, was the brain behind the development of a new and sensationally powerful rocket shortly due to be demonstrated before a committee of British and American military chiefs.

"I'll drive round to Headquarters immediately, sir," Drake said.

Twelve minutes later he was in the high-ceilinged room with its heavy, overstuffed furniture from which X controlled one of the world's most brilliant Intelligence networks.

"Harlee was to have flown to New York tomorrow," X began. "From there he was to have been flown in a U.S. Army Air Force plane to Cape Ventura. The rocket test is scheduled to take place on April 7, three days from now. The countdown is timed for seventeen hours. Without Harlee the test cannot go on . . . but that's not all."

X picked up a slim file from his desk. "The rocket which Harlee has designed is completely revolutionary in concept and execution. He is the only living man who understands everything about it. When the prototype missile was assembled Harlee, as an additional safeguard, destroyed all his notes."

Drake said evenly: "That means that all know-how about the rocket and its means of production are exclusively locked up in Harlee's brain."

"Exactly. You appreciate the significance?"



"All too clearly, sir. It could mean that Harlee has been kidnapped by some enemy group and that an attempt will be made to force him to reveal his secret knowledge."

X nodded. "Harlee was to have addressed a meeting of the National Scientific Confederation at 7.45 tonight. At 7.15 he left his house to enter his Rolls Royce. The car was driven away. But he did not arrive at the meeting and the Rolls was found abandoned in a Soho side street shortly before eight o'clock. Lady Harlee, who is suffering from a cold, did not accompany her husband. But, from a window, she noted something unusual—the chauffeur, who ordinarily opens the car door for Sir Jason, didn't leave the driving seat."

"You mean he wasn't Harlee's chauffeur, but a plant?"

"Yes. The real chauffeur has since been found unconscious in the garage where the Rolls is kept." X tapped the file he had picked up. "We

have here a detailed though necessarily brief report of the recent arrival in this country of Joachim Borsch . . ."

Drake's eyes flickered. Borsch was the mastermind behind a militant and totally ruthless espionage organisation working for the overthrow of Western democracy in Europe.

"Borsch arrived in England on a forged passport and under the name of Josef Erdlinger, posing as a Swiss businessman. Our man in Zürich gave us the tip-off just too late to intercept Borsch at London Airport. Immediately after arriving, he vanished and hasn't been seen since. But the facts all point to just one thing—that Borsch is behind the kidnapping."

"I see," observed Drake slowly. "But you have no real evidence, sir?" He eyed the Chief keenly for a moment. "Or perhaps you have?"

A corner of X's mouth twitched faintly. "You make a shrewd appraisal of possibilities, my dear Drake. Yes, there is evidence. Fingerprints on the Rolls Royce . . . one of them matches with prints we have of Borsch."

"I didn't know he'd ever been in custody," said Drake.

"He hasn't. Agent 008 in Belgrade got them for us. He was in some night club and walked off with a glass Borsch had been holding—it was as simple as that."

"And now," said Drake cosily, "and now, without so much as a hint as to where our friend Borsch is, you want me to find him?"

"But naturally," X rejoined. "And, of course, very speedily. I regard it as a task well within your known capabilities."

"Thanks," said Drake drily. "Perhaps I should first see Lady Harlee?"

X reached for the telephone. "By all means. I'll call Elton House right away and . . ." He broke off, staring at Drake.

"Elton House!" echoed Drake.

"Why, didn't you know where Harlee lives?"

"No, sir . . . but I passed it this evening, within ten minutes of the kidnapping. A character in a green raincoat was shadowing me. I couldn't think why."

X put the phone down sharply. "He must have been a Borsch man. More than that, he must have recognised you. Your appearance in Carlston Gardens at just that time must have given him some anxious moments. What happened?"

"I went back and asked him the time, sir. I wanted to get a good look at him."

"You'd know him again?"

"More than that, I know where to start looking for him," replied Drake.

"What!"

"I pretended to bump into him and in the slight mix-up which followed I put a hand in his inside breast pocket and relieved him of his wallet," grinned Drake.

He laid the wallet on the desk. "There wasn't a great deal in it—twenty-seven pounds in paper money, a book of stamps, some Swiss money and a membership card for a club in Soho—a place called The Silver Horseshoe."

"I suppose there's a name on the card?"

Drake held it out. "It's made out to a John Smitn," he said. "Well, I'll be off, sir."

"To The Silver Horseshoe Club, I suppose," murmured X. "Well, good luck . . . Mister Smith!"

* * *

The club was midway down Delhay Street, crouched between a seedy photographic studio and an even more seedy snack bar which looked as if food poisoning might well be included on the menu.

There was an illuminated silver horseshoe over the club entrance and the name flashed on and off in red lettering on either side of it. Seven worn stone steps led down to the doorway—and to a hard-faced man with a puckered white scar running down his left cheek.

"Member, sir?" Scarface said in a voice like gravel sifted over rusty wire mesh.

The Danger Man pushed the card under the other's gaze.

"Okay, you're in," Scarface said. His eyes narrowed for an instant. "I don't seem to remember you, sir . . ."

"I've a very undistinguished face," said Drake cheerfully and went on in before the man with the scar had time to take another look.

Dim shaded lights showed him a middle-sized room with a bar, a juke box, half a dozen one-armed bandits and scattered tables. It looked the sort of place where men did quiet drinking and discussed dubious business in furtive undertones.

Several men sat huddled round some of the tables and a few more were helping to prop up the bar counter.



The bartender, a stocky man with thick black hair and wearing a shirt with broad blue stripes, said: "What'll it be, sir?"

"Orange juice," replied Drake.

The stocky man's eyebrows rose a couple of inches in surprise, but he made no comment as he poured the drink. Then he said, conversationally: "New member, aren't you, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Smith introduced me."

"Which one would that be? We got several Mister Smiths on the books."

"John Smith, but you've probably got several with that first name, too."

"Probably."

"I dare say you know my friend, though—he wears an olive green raincoat."

The bartender nodded. "Yeah, know him all right. 'Smatter of fact, he comes in most nights about this time. Stick around and you'll likely see him." The bartender nodded perfunctorily and was about to move off when a thought seemed to strike him and he said: "Your name would be . . . ?"

"Harlee," said Drake in a clear, distinct voice. He had no sooner got the name out than he saw a tall man further down the bar start violently so that his glass jerked in his hand, spilling the amber contents over the counter.

"Unusual sort of name," said the bartender and drifted away.

But Drake wasn't any longer interested in the bartender. He turned slightly, just enough to see the tall man more distinctly. The features were long and lantern-jawed, the eyes brown and smouldering under puffy lids.

The eyes darted in Drake's direction for no more than a moment—then the lantern-jawed man went straight down to the bottom of the room and through a green baize door.

Drake allowed a few seconds to pass, then followed. The door opened on a flight of dank stone steps which curved round to the left. The Danger Man went down them slowly and without sound. When he reached the bend he saw that the steps led to a short passage lit by a single low-wattage and naked electric bulb in the ceiling.

At the far end of the passage, immediately beyond a jutting section of stonework, was a wall telephone, and the lantern-jawed man was speaking into it. Keeping in the shadow, Drake edged his way along until he was fully screened

by the protruding stonework but within earshot.

"I tell you a fella came in the club and said his name was Harlee," the tall man was saying. "I figured I'd better get on the blower to you right away, Mr. Borsch . . ."

Drake's mouth tightened. For a moment there was silence, then the tall man went on: "Maybe it's just coincidence, but No. 2 saw Drake in Carlston Gardens just before we done the snatch, didn't he?"

Another pause, then: "What's this fella look like? I'll describe him for you, boss."

Drake, listening intently, was forced to admit that it was a pretty good description of himself.

It evidently impressed Borsch, for the tall lantern-jawed man said sharply: "So it *is* Drake! He must've given the name Harlee on purpose to see if anybody reacted. Say—he may have seen me hurry off."

Then, in a tone of irritation: "I couldn't help it, boss . . . I figured I had to ring you. Okay, *okay*—I'll leave right away by the back exit. I've got the van, the blue one. It's parked in the alley behind the club. I'm on my way . . ."

He started to replace the receiver, but put it back to his ear. Apparently Borsch was still speaking. It gave Drake the chance he needed. He moved cautiously back to the stone steps, and in another minute was going quickly through the club and up on to the street.

The scarfaced commissioner touched his forehead in expectation of a tip. Drake unhesitatingly palmed him a ten-shilling note and said: "How do I get to the alley at the rear of the club?"

"First turn on your right, then first on your left, sir—and many thanks."

A moment later Drake was there. The van was parked on the cobbles without lights. The front doors were locked but the back one wasn't. Drake got it open, clambered in and crouched low down.

He was only just in time. No more than seconds had passed before the tall man came out of the rear door of the club, got in and backed the van out on to the street.

He turned into the Haymarket, made the one-way detour on to Piccadilly and drove due west. Crouched down on the floor of the van, Drake was unable to see where they were going, but the shrill whine of jets overhead told him they were passing London Airport.



More time passed and still the tall lantern-jawed man drove on. Now they were out in open country. Finally, the van made a series of turns and Drake judged that they were going down narrow roads.

Then, suddenly, they were there—wherever 'there' might be, Drake reflected. The driver had stopped the engine and cut out his lights.

It was the moment for action!

Drake came straight up from the floor of the van, not even trying to be soundless. The lantern-jawed man uttered a startled gasp as he wheeled. It was the last sound he was to make for some little time—for Drake brought his fist down in a single chop which sprawled the other helplessly over the steering-wheel.

In the next instant Drake had climbed over the seat. There was a length of spare cable flex in the dashboard compartment and he used it

to secure the tall man's wrists and ankles. This done, he made an improvised but effective gag—and finally bundled the driver into the rear of the vehicle.

The whole operation had taken only minutes, but it had occupied all Drake's attention. Now he was free to survey the scene. The van had stopped almost at the end of a steep, winding lane flanked by high ragged hedges and tall trees.

Faintly in the near distance the Danger Man could hear the gentle lapping of water which meant that he was close to either a lake or, more probably, the Thames. He moved carefully ahead. Quite suddenly, the hedges ceased and he was looking down a gravelled drive between smooth lawns, a drive which led to a large, white-painted riverside bungalow.

A long, black car stood in the drive, without lights. But there was light in the bungalow. It was coming from behind curtains in a room to the left, a rear room because the front of the bungalow faced the river.

Keeping to the far side of one of the lawns, Drake made his way round until he could see the front entrance. He was unarmed and would need to be especially careful. But no one challenged him when he slid into the porch and tried the door. It was locked, as he had expected—but because the night was warm a side window was slightly open.

Using only modest force, Drake eased the window further open, enough for him to edge his way in.

Now he was inside a square hall. He went across it, still without hurry, until he reached the door to the lighted room. There were several small sounds, then a voice spoke—a heavy, guttural voice.

"... and so, my dear Harlee, you have been brought here as my guest, a very honoured guest!" The speaker gave a fat chuckle.

"I was not aware that you even knew the meaning of the word honour, Borsch," replied Sir Jason Harlee coldly.

"Honour!" Joachim Borsch sneered the word. "That is for fools. But you are still an honoured guest to whom it will be a pleasure to listen... particularly when you disclose the full details of the rocket formula!"

"You must indeed be a fool yourself if you imagine even for a moment that I intend to



discuss *that* with you," said Harlee contemptuously.

Borsch gave another chuckle. "I do not suppose that you have any such intention . . . but nevertheless you will do it. Pen and paper await you."

"You actually think I am going to write the formula down for you?"

"Naturally—and complete with full explanatory notes and methods of usage, my dear Harlee," said Borsch.

"You must be crazy!"

"No, my friend, I am very, very sane. Nor do I merely *think* you will write down the details of your brilliant formula . . . I *know* it!"

There was another sound, then Borsch was speaking again. "See, I press this switch and a panel in the wall slides open to reveal an ingenious arrangement of electrical controls . . ."

Drake leaned a shoulder gently against the door, moving it no more than an inch. Now he was looking directly into the room.

Sir Jason Harlee was sitting in a leather armchair. Joachim Borsch was standing near the side wall, in which was recessed a miniature switchboard of control knobs.

The Danger Man had seen Borsch once, in Vienna—and remembered him as a heavy man with thick features and thinning grey hair. The features were still thick, but now he had a mass of black hair which was low on his forehead and curled inwards at the nape of his neck. The wig, mused Drake, was not only cleverly made, but it dramatically changed the spy's appearance.

But he had no time for further speculation, for suddenly Borsch reached out a hand and touched one of the controls. Simultaneously, two steel arms shot out from the sides of Harlee's big chair, encircling him so that now he was a prisoner in the chair.

"You are ready to talk . . . and to write, eh?" leered Borsch.

The eminent scientist said nothing, but his face had paled slightly.

"So you are still reluctant, my dear Harlee," murmured Borsch. "Soon, my friend, you will be eager to tell me . . . everything. For example, I touch this little button . . . so!"

The scientist's whole body went into a violent, spasmodic jerk as an electric shock surged through him. Sweat pooled in giant blobs on his forehead.

"That is just a preliminary sample, Harlee," snarled Borsch. "There are nine other controls, and each one is operated so the shocks increase." He reached out a hand again, then paused with a grin. "But, first, I use the telephone: it is only in the next room—I shall return in a few moments. And then we begin the treatment in earnest, eh?"

Borsch moved out of vision. Drake heard a door open and swing to. He moved fast into the room, signalling Sir Jason to remain silent.

A touch of the first control and the steel arms which encircled the scientist withdrew. Then Drake aimed an index finger at the door through which he himself had entered. Harlee nodded and they both hurried through it. In the hallway Drake spoke rapidly in the barest whisper.

The next instant Borsch returned from the connecting room.

"And now to drink to the success of . . ." He stopped, the words ending in a gurgling cry as he saw the empty chair. He leaped across the room and stared wildly at the empty chair, his eyes dilating.

At the same instant, Drake coughed. Borsch wheeled, his back to the chair. It was the chance on which Drake had calculated. With a single bound he was in the room, his powerful grip forcing the sinister spy down in the chair. Sir Jason, who had swiftly followed into the room, received a nod from Drake and touched the first of the control switches. In a trice Borsch was a captive in his own ingenious chair!

Hate glared from him . . . hate blended with fear. But, with a superhuman effort, he managed to wipe the look from his face and said: "Mr. John Drake, I presume."

"You mean you know, Borsch?"

The spy nodded his head. "But, of course, your fame is a by-word in every capital in Europe. And now, I suppose, you feel that you have—how do you say it?—turned the tables."

"Where's No. 2, the one who so imaginatively calls himself John Smith?" said Drake.

"Alas, I fear I am wholly unable to gratify your curiosity on that point, my friend . . ." began Borsch.

But Drake cut in sharply: "You're using about ten words where one would do, Borsch. Fighting for time, I think . . . if you can keep us talking long enough help may well arrive."



"I was merely endeavouring to answer your question, my friend," Borsch said.

"I've only one more," rejoined Drake evenly. "It is this—which foreign Power are you working for?"

"In the fashionable crude jargon of your country—drop dead!" Borsch grated.

Drake eyed him for a moment. Then he said: "Many good men have actually died because of your evil activities, Borsch. Now I think it may be your turn . . . I have but to press any half dozen of these switches simultaneously . . ."

Borsch sat frozen in his seat. Drake walked unhurriedly over to the control panel and spread both hands over the massed switches.

"You have precisely ten seconds to start talking, Borsch," he said. "Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . ."

A strangled croak burst from the spy. His heavy face suddenly took on the colour of dirty dishwater. "Pliss . . . I beg you not to . . ."

"Harlee could have begged in vain for mercy, couldn't he?" said Drake coldly. "Six . . . five . . . four . . ."

"Pliss . . . I cannot . . ."

Drake let his spread fingers actually touch the battery of switches. "Three . . . two . . . one . . ."

Naked terror engulfed Borsch. "No . . . I tell you . . . I am engaged by the Revolutionary Commissariat of Lukonia," he babbled.

"And the names of the key men of the Commissariat—the men who have organised the plot?" went on Drake, as his fingers nursed the controls.

Borsch strained wildly against the steel arms which pinioned him. The movement dislodged his black wig which fell sideways down his face, so that both Drake and Harlee were hard put not to burst out laughing.

But Borsch managed to spit out a string of names. Drake carefully noted them on the back of an envelope. He tucked the envelope into his pocket and said with a grin: "You shouldn't judge other men by your own nasty mind."

Borsch said stumbly: "Wh . . . what do you mean?"

"I don't inflict pain on helpless men, much less kill them."

A guttural snarl came from the spy. "You weren't going to press those controls . . . you . . . you fooled me into telling you *everything*!" The last word burst from him almost in a scream.

"That's right," answered Drake cheerfully. "And you fell for the countdown . . ." He broke off, listening. "Ah, that will be Mr. Smith arriving, just too late," he said.

He picked up an ebony ruler from a desk and stood against the side of the door. Borsch opened his mouth to yell a warning, but he was too late.

As Green Coat stepped into the room Drake brought the ruler down with a thoughtful but firm tap on his head.

"You appear to be counting everybody down tonight, my dear Drake," murmured Sir Jason with a smile.

DEAD ON NINE



IT was a perfect summer's evening when Drake drove out of London and, clear of the traffic jams, he settled down behind the wheel to enjoy the run into the agreeable Sussex countryside.

He had ample time, for he was not due at Greystoke Hall until around eight o'clock. There was to be a late buffet supper and, after that, top-level informal talks between the foreign affairs heads of six European nations.

Sir Manfred Greystoke himself would represent Britain and act as host in his own historic mansion—one of the great ancestral English homes built in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Also on hand for discussions of high importance to European peace would be De Massier for France, Mandoli for Italy, Rambert for the Netherlands, Humboldt for Western Germany and Sekert for Belgium.

Drake had been assigned to the conference in the rôle of foreign affairs observer—but his real purpose, as X had emphasised at Security HQ, was to watch for the slightest hint of danger to any of the distinguished visitors. For several months fragments of disturbing information had been coming in from various parts of Europe. Fitted together, they suggested that a new and sinister organisation was in the process of formation—an organisation whose aim was nothing less than political murder.

"It will be known as Homicide International," X had said. "So far, it has not gone into action—but the conference at Greystoke Hall could be the perfect starting point. If anything goes wrong there the repercussions would be immense."

"And the reputation of Homicide International would be made in a single dramatic blow," Drake reflected.

"Exactly. Of course nothing whatever may happen—but we're taking no chances. You travel down to Greystoke this evening."

Drake stood up, his brow thoughtful. "I suppose we have no clue as to the identity of any of the top men behind Homicide International, sir?" he queried.

"It is controlled by a man known simply as The Brain—beyond that we have no information."

"That's a great help, sir," murmured Drake wryly.

"Unfortunately, that's the sum total of our knowledge so far as identification goes. Mind you, it's quite likely that Homicide International aren't yet ready to go into action, but we're taking no chances." A wintry smile flickered momentarily on the Chief's inscrutable face. "There'll be no sleep for you tonight," he said laconically.

Going without sleep was no novelty to the Danger Man, but before setting out he prudently spent the afternoon in bed. Now, rested and alert both in mind and body, he was driving briskly through the lush countryside wondering what, if anything, awaited him at journey's end.

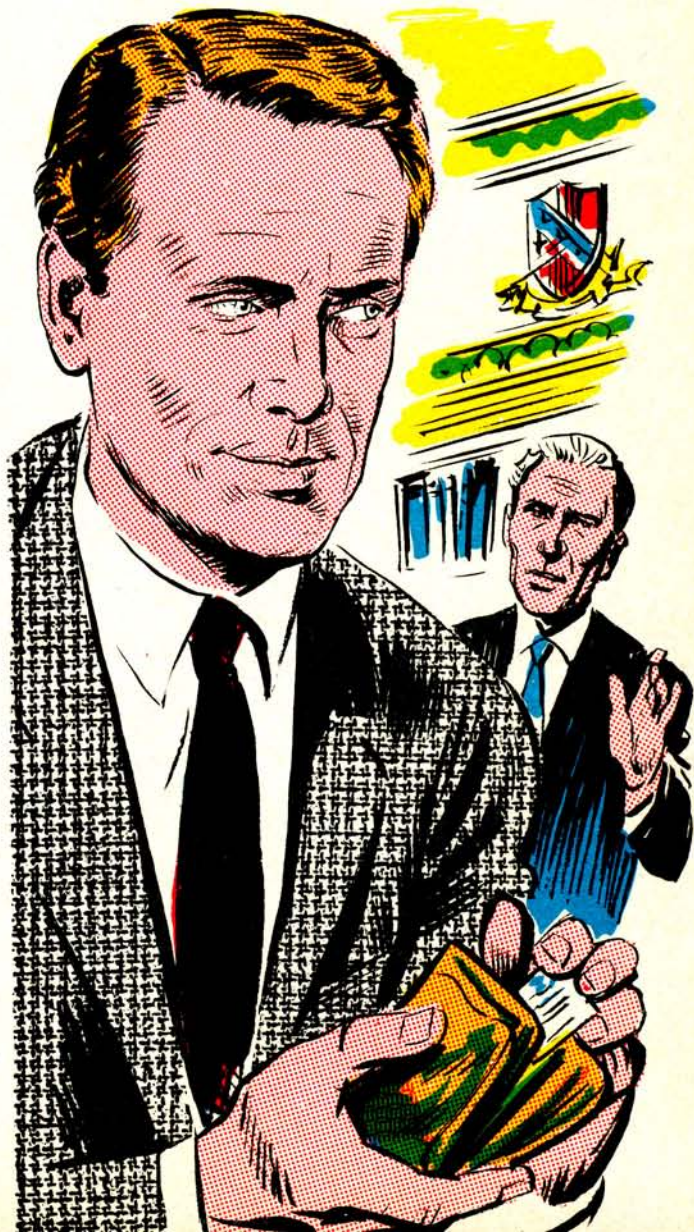
A glance at his watch informed him that he was making excellent time. In a few minutes he would be passing through the picturesque old village of Darleigh, whose half-timbered inn, The Golden Sheaf, occupied a commanding position in the High Street.

Drake decided to stop there for refreshment before completing his drive . . . a tall glass of iced shandy would certainly not come amiss, he considered.

He ran the Mini on to the spacious parking ground at the side of the inn and strolled into the quaint old bar with its walls decorated with sporting prints and the autographed pictures of famous sportsmen of the past fifty years.

There were a number of people already in the bar—local farmers and tradesmen and a fair sprinkling of motorists, for the fame of the old inn was known far and wide. They were all in groups—all except one man who stood alone at the end of the bar.

He was a man of medium height carefully and unobtrusively dressed, and yet in some odd way his quiet blue suit seemed slightly out of



place in that setting. Instantly, Drake knew why—the suit had not been made by any English tailor. The continental styling, though not in any way exaggerated, was apparent to the experienced eye.

Of course it might not mean anything. After all, continental-styled suits were being worn by many young Englishmen . . . but not, perhaps, in quiet old country towns.

Drake grinned faintly to himself. Maybe he was becoming unduly suspicious? Just the same, he decided to ascertain if the wearer of the suit was himself a foreigner.

On the pretext of examining a signed portrait of the late Dr. Grace, that celebrated cricketer of a long-gone epoch, Drake moved close to the man in the blue suit.

After peering earnestly at the picture for a moment, he said jovially: "A jolly good picture of Dr. Grace, what?"

The blue-suited man stared uncomprehendingly. "I—er—beg your pardon, sir," he said.

The words were spoken in flawless English and with no trace of an alien accent, yet in some extraordinary way Drake felt certain that he had heard the voice before.

"Dr. Grace, the famous cricketer, you know," Drake went on.

The man's long and lined face smiled for the first time. "Ah, yes, of course, I was forgetting. But, to tell you the truth, I know little about the game."

Again Drake had the queer sensation that he had heard the voice somewhere. He racked his brain to recall where, but nothing came. Besides, the man's face was totally unfamiliar. Drake was positive he had never seen the man before in his life—but if he had not seen him how on earth could he imagine he knew the voice?

Well, 'knew' was scarcely the right word. He *didn't* know the voice; he merely had this strange feeling of having heard it somewhere. It was a deep voice, almost of bass quality, with a faint sing-song intonation.

But there seemed nothing to be gained by prolonging the conversation—and, with a nod, Drake walked back to his iced shandy.

He was about to pick up the glass when the deep-voiced man came up. "Excuse me, sir," he said politely, "but isn't that Marilyn Manners over there—the film star?"

Drake turned to look. The girl was strikingly beautiful but she wasn't a famous movie actress.

"No, I don't think so," Drake said. "In fact, I'm certain she isn't."

The bass-voiced man smiled apologetically. "Ah, I must have been misled by a passing resemblance, sir. Sorry to have troubled you."

"No trouble," replied Drake.

Abruptly, the other left the inn. For a long moment Drake stared at his glass. Then, slowly, he dipped a finger in the liquid and put the tip of the finger on his tongue. The shandy now had a faintly bitter taste.

The bartender, who had been watching him, said: "Something the matter with your drink, sir?"

"I think I must've dropped cigarette ash in it," Drake replied. "Pour it away and give me another, will you?"

The bartender reached for the glass. "Makes it nasty, ash in your drink, sir," he said affably. "Still, it'd be worse if someone put a knock-out drop in it, eh?"

"Yes," agreed Drake meditatively.

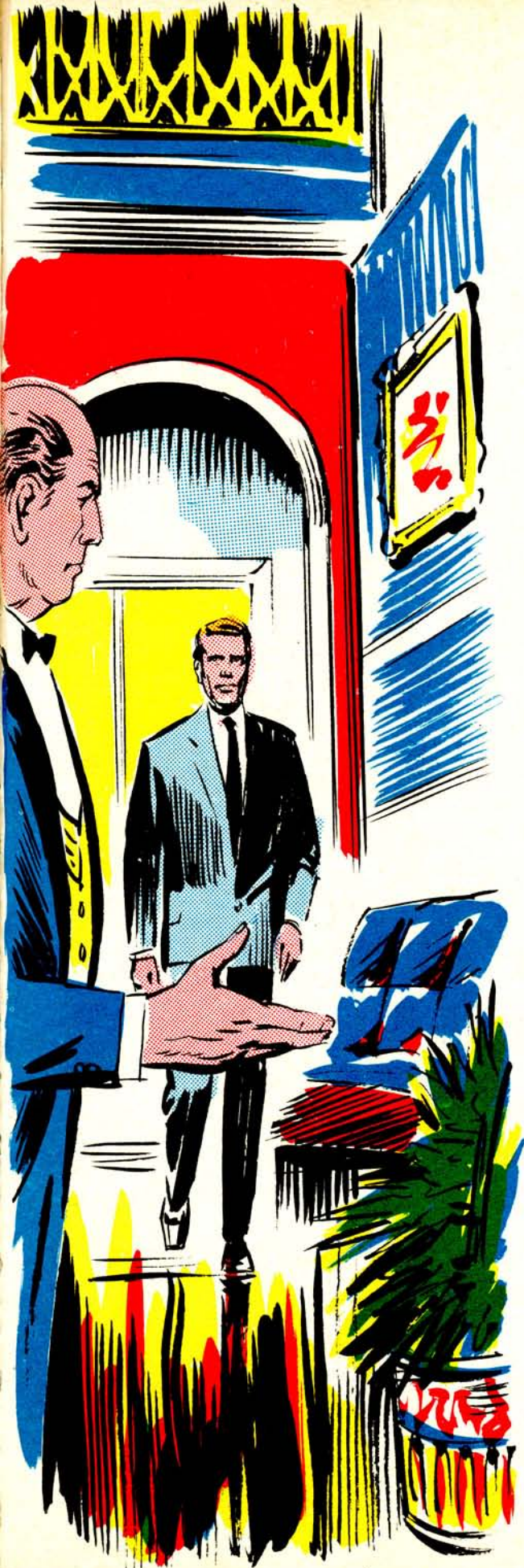
It was a thirty-minute drive from the inn to Greystoke Hall; and Drake spent most of the time trying to make sense of the incident. Even if the man knew he was driving down to Greystoke he simply couldn't have known that Drake would call in at the inn. Therefore, he had merely taken advantage of a chance meeting—for Drake had no kind of doubt that if he had taken that drink he would now be ill, too ill to be on hand for the vital conference!

And there was something else. Though Drake was sure he had never seen the bass-voiced man previously, the latter most certainly knew who he was.

The Danger Man felt that sudden sharpening of the faculties which always came to him when danger seemed imminent. One way or another this visit of his was going to be more than ordinarily interesting!

When he reached Greystoke Hall a number of magnificent cars sporting diplomatic insignia were already parked on the wide cobbled approach to the magnificent house. Drake tucked his Mini unobtrusively alongside an immense Rolls and ascended the wide stone steps to the main entrance.

He rang the bell and listened to the measured tread of butlerian feet approaching from within.



Then the door opened and he found himself gazing at a stout party whose pop eyes surveyed him from a face ruddier than the cherry.

Drake produced the special card with which he had been provided and the butler took it, inclining a grave and silvery head.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Coningsby is expecting you, sir. If you will accompany me to the library . . ." The butler moved off, a dignified procession of one.

The library was to the right of the vast main entrance hall. The butler held the door open and intoned sonorously: "Mr. John Drake, sir . . ."

Drake went through into a comfortable room of mahogany and dark leather and wall-long bookcases. Lester Coningsby was Sir Manfred Greystoke's private secretary, and Drake had been instructed to present his credentials to him first.

The secretary, who had been sitting behind a polished desk, rose and extended a hand.

"I am delighted you were able to come, Mr. Drake," he began courteously. The eyes behind the rimless spectacles flickered briefly. "This is a rather nerve-racking occasion," he observed. "I will readily admit to you that I am feeling somewhat overwrought, Mr. Drake."

"Why, has something untoward occurred already?" asked Drake quietly.

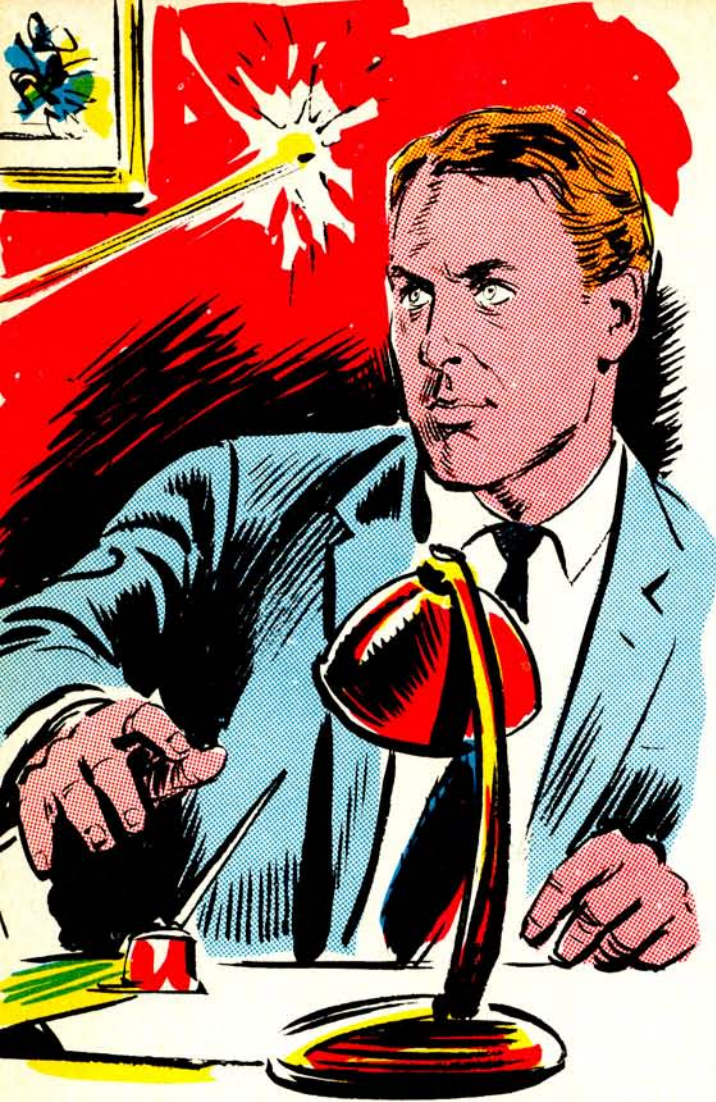
"Oh, no . . . no, by no means," Coningsby exclaimed. He blinked rapidly, and went on: "I mean the nervous strain of the conference and the possibility, even the possibility that some grave event could mar it and . . ." He pulled himself together and added more composedly: "I expect you think I am perhaps unduly apprehensive, eh?"

Drake smiled. "A certain degree of apprehension is not unnatural," he remarked. "Are all the delegates present, by the way?"

The secretary glanced through the windows. "The last one has just arrived, the Belgian envoy," he reported. "I think perhaps we had better join them."

"If you don't mind, I prefer to keep discreetly in the background," Drake answered.

"Ah, yes, of course. You will want to feel free to roam around the Hall," Coningsby reflected. "Just a thought—it might be as well if I knew exactly where you are likely to be, in case it is necessary to contact you."



"I'll be around, never far from the scene of the talks," replied Drake.

"Oh? Well, no doubt that will be all right."

"In any event, I shall be here in the library for the next five minutes," Drake offered. "I'd like to call Security HQ. I take it I can use the phone?"

"But of course. Now . . . if you will excuse me." The secretary nodded and went from the room.

For a few moments Drake remained standing. Then he crossed the room and, keeping to the side of the main window, let his gaze rake the grounds. The visiting cars occupied the immediate foreground. Flanking them were medium-sized hedges and a series of graceful poplars. Drake realised that it would be possible for an intruder to approach quite close to the Hall without running much risk of being spotted—but though he peered intently in every direction

he saw no sign of the bass-voiced man, or indeed anyone else.

Turning back to the room he noted that the table lamp was on. Unhurriedly, Drake sauntered across the room and switched the light off. Then, moving fast, he went back to the window . . . and this time he saw something. It was no more than a fleeting disturbance of one of the hedges. It could have been made by a small animal, like a rabbit—but Drake did not believe this.

He seated himself at the library desk and switched the light on again. At almost precisely the same instant he pushed his chair far back from the desk.

The movement was made only in the nick of time . . . for, even as he moved, he heard a dull plop and then a high keening sound as a bullet cut the air. There was a dull crack as the slug embedded itself in the wall!

Had he remained seated against the desk the bullet would have struck *him*, Drake reflected grimly.

Another searching look from the window revealed no sign of movement anywhere—but by now the unseen assailant would have made his getaway, complete with his silenced rifle.

Drake left the library and strolled, apparently unconcerned, into the big conference room. The delegates were scattered about, chatting in informal groups. Sir Manfred Greystoke, tall and distinguished, detached himself from the West German envoy and came across.

"I certainly hope your presence here is going to be unnecessary," he said with a smile. "I take it nothing suspicious has come to your notice?"

"Well, nobody's been killed yet," responded Drake cheerfully.

Sir Manfred eyed him sharply. "That wasn't what I asked," he said.

"Can I talk with you in private for a moment, sir?" Drake said seriously.

"Yes, of course." Sir Manfred accompanied the Danger Man into the library. "Something suspicious *has* happened, hasn't it?" he inquired.

Rapidly, Drake related the incident at the inn and the attempt to kill him.

"But . . . it seems incredible," Sir Manfred exclaimed.

"The bullet is still in the wall, sir," rejoined Drake soberly. He pointed it out and went on: "An attempt to shoot me while I sat at the desk

can mean only one thing—it was deemed vital to get me out of the way *because time is running very short.*”

Sir Manfred nodded. “You mean that they— whoever they really are—fear that you might uncover a plot due to be put into action almost at once?”

“Exactly.” Drake looked at his watch. “It’s now 8.50 p.m. What time does the conference begin, sir?”

“Promptly at nine . . .”

“And all the delegates will then be assembled together in one place—the room you have assigned as the conference venue?”

“That is the arrangement, yes.”

Drake’s lean mouth tightened. “Then I have precisely ten minutes left in which to block the plan, sir,” he said.



"You mean you actually know what is intended?"

"No, sir. I only know—perhaps feel would be a better word—that whatever is planned is going to take place very shortly. There can be no other explanation of the desperate bid to put me out of action. I believe the chosen moment will be when all the delegates are assembled round the conference table and you yourself have taken the chair."

"But, confound it, Drake, what on earth can be done to us in that setting?"

Drake breathed harshly down his nose. "If I knew that for a certainty I would also know what to do," he said.

"Deadline nine o'clock . . . that now leaves you exactly eight minutes," Sir Manfred commented. "Are you sure you are not letting your imagination run wild just a little?"

"I'm not given to imagining things, sir," answered Drake.

"But, really, it seems incredible that any sinister doom can possibly overtake us as we sit peacefully round a conference table," Sir Manfred objected.

"It seemed incredible that someone would attempt to shoot *me* while I sat peacefully at your library table," observed Drake grimly.

"Well, yes . . . but even so . . ." Sir Manfred shrugged. "Do you want me to call the conference off?"

"If I don't achieve anything in the next five minutes move the meeting to another part of the Hall, sir."

"Very well." Sir Manfred passed a hand agitatedly over his high forehead. "I'll be watching the big clock in the conference room very closely," he said. "It should be in excellent order—it was overhauled only this afternoon."

Drake stared. "Overhauled—why, was there something wrong with it?"

"Coningsby said it had been losing and some workmen came in and spent quite a lot of time on the mechanism while I was out . . ." Sir Manfred broke off, eyeing Drake curiously. "Is something wrong?" he demanded.

Urgently, the Danger Man said: "Will Coningsby be present at the conference?"

"Why, no—he explained that he would be working on some important papers and thus wouldn't be able to attend. It's not necessary for him to be present, is it?"



"I'd like him to be there," said Drake. "In fact . . ."

He stopped as the door opened and Lester Coningsby put his head round it. "I have to drive down to the village, Sir Manfred," he said. "But everything in the conference room is in full order."

"I don't doubt it," said Drake harshly. "Will you wait here just for a moment?"

The secretary looked at him oddly. "For a moment, no more then," he muttered.

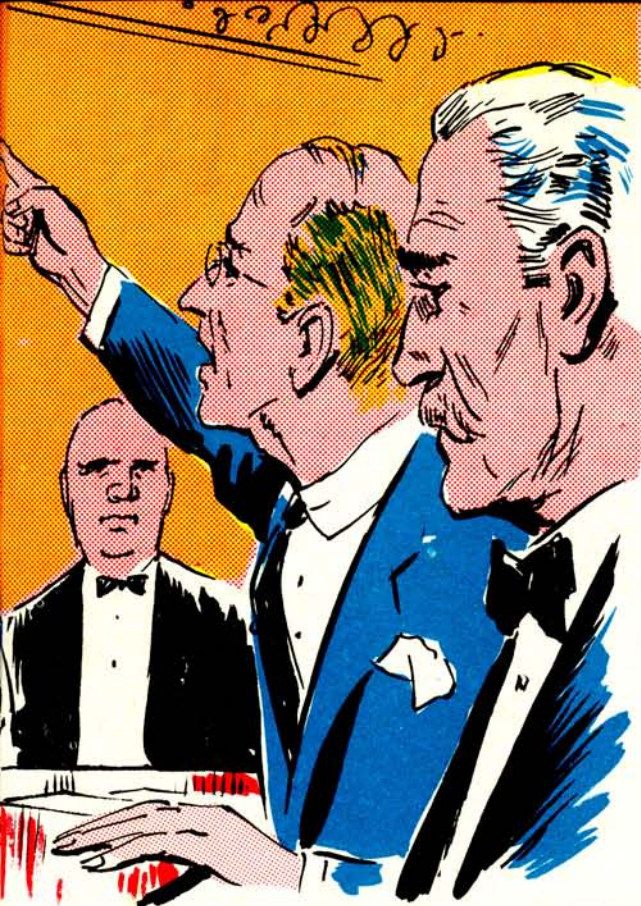
Drake hurried from the room. He was back in less than two minutes. "And now, Mr. Coningsby, I should like you to accompany us to the conference," he said levelly.

"I . . . I . . . look here, I can't possibly . . ." began the secretary. The eyes behind the rimless spectacles were not merely flickering now—they were half-glazed with terror.

Then, with a sudden movement, he leaped back for the open doorway. But Drake moved even faster and in the next instant had the secretary in a police arm-lock.

"Don't try anything, Coningsby," Drake said. "If I have to use any more pressure your arm is likely to require surgery."

With a deft movement he propelled the secretary into the hallway and through the conference room doors. Startled eyes gazed as they entered, but Drake merely sat the secretary at the table while Sir Manfred took his place as chairman.



Above his head on the wall was a handsome clock with a gilded scroll surround. The massive hands pointed to exactly one minute to nine.

Coningsby ran a tongue over parched lips. His eyes were staring at the clock-face, the pupils dilated.

The silence in the big room was almost like something you could feel. Then Coningsby screeched: "Stop the clock . . . for heaven's sake stop it!"

"Now why on earth should we do that?" asked Drake amiably.

Coningsby swung round on him. "Curse you, Drake—curse you. But for you my master plan would have succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. I thought . . ."

"You thought your hired assassin had shot me after you told him I was staying in the library," finished Drake. "I made it clear to you that I was staying in the room in order to see what you would do. Your surprise when I first arrived here was obvious, though you tried to make it appear that you were merely over-anxious about the conference!"

Drake added meditatively: "I assume the gentleman who tried to shoot me is also the one who tried to poison me at the village inn."

"Kurt Sleisger—the incompetent bungler."

"Sleisger? I must have heard his voice somewhere in Europe without actually seeing him," mused Drake.

He gazed unconcernedly at the clock. Lester Coningsby, following his look, shivered.

For the minute hand was jerking into the nine o'clock position.

With a wild scream, Coningsby leaped from his seat. "The bomb . . . the bomb . . . it will kill us all where we sit!" he babbled.

"Fancy that," murmured Drake. "All these important gentlemen lying here dead on nine! And of course myself—and The Brain, alias Lester Coningsby!"

"All right, I *am* the brains behind Homicide International," yelled Coningsby. "My brilliant organisation would have made its first great coup tonight but for you, Drake. Now . . . now we shall all . . ."

He stared stupidly at the clock. The hands were showing one minute past nine.

"Wh . . . what . . . I mean . . ." The Brain croaked.

"You mean we all ought to have been blown to pieces by now," said Drake smoothly. "Too bad the clock is five minutes slow . . ."

Coningsby glared down at his wrist watch. Every known emotion seemed to come and go on his pallid face.

"You've set the hands back!" he whispered.

"A simple but effective ruse, my dear Brain," grinned Drake. "And now, with apologies to Sir Manfred, I had better make sure nothing disagreeable happens at five past nine!"

He stepped swiftly across the room and set the hands back five minutes for the second time that evening.

"If you gentlemen will make quite sure that Mr. Coningsby does not make a hurried exit, I'll trace the detonator mechanism and undertake a little bomb disposal work," he said urbanely.

M. De Massier, the elderly French delegate, said: "But for you, *mon ami*, we should all have been dead on nine!"

Sir Manfred permitted himself a small chuckle.

"In another and altogether more agreeable sense, we can all say that Drake arrived most happily dead on nine," he said.



PAYOFF **ON THE** **FRONTIER**

DRAKE checked in at London Airport, bought a cup of coffee, sipped about half of it and then went into the men's room. The place was temporarily empty—a fact which gave the Danger Man the few moments he needed to make a swift change in his appearance.

Flattening his hat, he rammed it inside his jacket. Then he donned a white raincoat and turned the collar up. He combed his hair the wrong way, adjusted a heavy pair of dark glasses on his nose, stepped back into the corridor and strode off briskly . . . in the opposite direction and heading for the exit.

In a few minutes he was lolling back in a taxi, congratulating himself that he had seen Reiseman in time to take avoiding action.

He paid off the taxi outside Security Headquarters and went straight in to see X.

The Chief eyed him curiously as he entered the comfortable, vaguely old-fashioned room.

"You're supposed to be on the flight to Basle," he said. "What's gone wrong?"

Drake sank into a chair, crossed one leg over the other and said succinctly: "Hans Reiseman was at the airport. I imagine you know what that means, sir."

X fastened a rubber band round a sheaf of official documents and leaned back slightly in his seat. "Yes," he mused. "It means that Reiseman would notify your flight time to Information Anonymous in Basle, thus guaranteeing a somewhat lively reception for you almost immediately after your arrival."

"Precisely," murmured Drake. He smiled thinly. "Right now Reiseman will be wondering where the heck I've got to. . . ."

"How did you manage to get out without his knowing?" asked X.

Drake briefly explained, adding: "He was still sitting in the departure lounge when I came out of the men's room. I don't think he'd know me in the hasty disguise and in the very brief glimpse he got of me as I walked off. Not that it matters—he can't have the remotest idea where I am now."

"Just the same, you have to be in Basle not later than nine o'clock tomorrow morning," replied the Chief.

"I'll take the boat train to Folkestone and use the cross-Channel steamer, then the special tourist train through to Mülhouse and Basle, sir. Second-class, of course, mingling with the holidaymakers to avoid any chance of being spotted again."

"All seats on the special train from Boulogne will almost certainly be booked up already," reflected X. "However, I have no doubt we can pull a few wires in that direction." He picked up a telephone and spoke crisply into it.

When he put the receiver down some minutes later he said: "I've got you a *courette* on the train."

"Thanks."

One of his brief smiles flitted across X's implacable face. "I like the thought of you sharing a compartment with five other sleepers," he chuckled. "I hope they don't all snore!"

Drake made a mock sigh. "A secret agent must be prepared to rough it, if necessary, in the stern cause of duty," he said.

"Well, you've certainly dodged some very rough treatment by fooling Reiseman," the Chief observed. "He'll be quaking in his shoes when he phones his report to Zavig."

The Danger Man nodded. Zavig was the boss of Information Anonymous and one of the three most dangerous spies currently operating in Europe. Nobody knew his first name or even what he looked like. The only known fact was that he had personally set up and was in supreme control of Information Anonymous—a new and extraordinarily efficient organisation specialising in obtaining top secret information and selling it to the Intelligence bureaux of Iron Curtain countries.

Outright theft, blackmail, violent extortion and the ingenious bugging of Security and Consulate offices in half a dozen cities were the group's chosen methods.



In the past few months there had been a series of 'leaks'. Things had reached crisis proportions when a confidential exchange of Anglo-American defence plans had been intercepted at Basle.

Ted Cranford, a British agent working in the Swiss city, had been shot and seriously wounded . . . but, as he lay in hospital, he was able to give the first real clue.

He had been gunned down as he drove his car back to his hotel from a sidewalk café. But just before he left the café table he realised that he was being watched by two men.

"I recognised one of them," Cranford whispered faintly. "It was Fritz Heine. . . . I caught fragments of his conversation . . . he said Zavig was now running I.A. from Basle. . . ."

That was all they got out of Ted Cranford before he lost consciousness again. But it was enough.

Specifically, it was enough for X to assign John Drake to Basle with a single, over-riding instruction—to smash Information Anonymous!

"And that," said X imperturbably, "can be done only by delivering Zavig up to Colonel Secrest at International Intelligence GHQ in Paris."

"On what charge, sir?" queried Drake.

"Secrest will formulate charges which will stand up in court," X rejoined. "You don't have to worry about that aspect of the matter—your job is to get Zavig!"

"H'm," mused Drake. "That could mean I'll have to kidnap him."

X rose. There was no expression on his lean face. "I am not concerned with the methods you may deem it expedient to employ," he said. "In fact, I do not wish to be informed of them, either now or later."

"I thought you wouldn't," grinned Drake.

He returned to his flat and packed a suitcase to replace the one which by now would be en route by air to Switzerland. He had just finished the task when the telephone rang.

Mechanically, he reached out a hand for the receiver.

"Mr. Drake?" The voice was slightly high-pitched with a foreign intonation. It was the voice of Reiseman, the I.A. contact man whom Security HQ had deliberately refrained from arresting in the hope that he might uncon-

sciously lead them closer to the mysterious Zavig.

The instant he heard the voice Drake altered his own.

"The master is away, sir," he said, in a deep and measured tone with Cockney inflexions. "He left for Switzerland by the afternoon flight. If you care to leave a message, sir. . . ."

"He hasn't been back?"

"Been back, sir?" asked Drake in feigned



surprise. "I fear that I do not understand you."

There was no answer, only the metallic click as the receiver was slammed down at the other end.

* * *

The Danger Man held down the bar of his own instrument, then dialled a number. After a brief interval he was in possession of the fact that the caller had been using a public telephone box at Piccadilly Underground Station.

Drake shrugged, locked up his flat and took a taxi to Victoria. The boat train was in and the platform was thronged with luggage-laden

passengers about to set off on Continental holidays.

Scanning every face as he navigated his way along the platform, Drake could see no sign of Reiseman. Finally, he managed to get a seat next to a stout and perspiring man in a tweed hat.

The long train began to glide out of the station and the fat man wheezed conversationally: "Going far, sir?"

"France," answered Drake briefly.

"Your first trip abroad, eh?"

"No."

"Well, it's first time for me, sir. Hope I'm going to like it. It's the foreign food as makes me a bit anxious, like."

Drake was making a non-committal reply when a tall girl with vivid red hair came down the aisle and stumbled against him.

"Oh, dear, I'm terribly sorry," she smiled, "but this train *is* swaying rather, isn't it?"

Drake rose courteously. "Have my seat, miss," he murmured.

"No, really, I can't take advantage of your generosity . . ." the girl began.

"I assure you it's a pleasure," replied Drake gallantly.

For a moment she seemed to hesitate. Then, with another smile, she sank gratefully into the vacant seat. Drake propped his back against the side of the door and lit a cigarette.

The girl was perhaps twenty-five years old and striking-looking. She had brought two suitcases with her and Drake was able to read one of the labels: *Lana Young, London to Basle, Suisse*.

"Have you got enough room, miss?" the fat man asked. "I know I take up a heck of a lot of space."

She smiled. "It's all right, I'm quite comfortable, thanks."

"I'm going through to Northern Italy, to Baveno," the stout one wheezed on. "It'll be my first trip to foreign parts. Where are you making for then?"

"I'm not on holiday," she said. "I'm going to work in Basle as a secretary."

"Basle, eh?" the fat man echoed. "I suppose you speak these here foreign lingo?"

She laughed. "Well, not all of them, just French and German, and not brilliantly, but well enough, I suppose."



"Our friend here," said the fat one, nodding in Drake's direction, "is holidaying in France."

Drake felt oddly irritated. By saying offhand that he was travelling only to France he realised that he had put himself in an awkward spot, for his companions would be bound to see him on the Continental train.

"Actually," he said smoothly, "I misled you—unwittingly, of course. I *am* going to France, but only after a few days in Switzerland."

"Doubling back on your tracks, eh?" said the fat man, beaming.

"I have to make some calls in Basle first," the Danger Man said carelessly.

"Ah, business," murmured the other knowingly. He made it sound humorously sinister.

After that, conversation alternated between idle chatter and the kind of sudden pauses which occur among strangers meeting for the first time.

Then they were at Folkestone, going through Passport Control and on to the cross-Channel steamer. It was a perfect summer's evening. The Channel was as calm as a millpond and only the lightest breeze ruffled across the crowded deck.

Drake found himself separated from his travelling companions. He wandered down into the bar. The fat man was already there, drinking iced lager.

He insisted on buying one for Drake and said: "Glad you came down . . . pity to lose touch after our nice chat on the train, eh?"

"Indeed, yes," murmured Drake politely.

"My name's Armitage, George Armitage," the man in the tweed hat went on. He said it as if he expected Drake to announce his.

"John Franklin," said the Danger Man.

"I'm in the export business, men's suit lengths mainly. And you, sir?"

Drake contrived a smile. "I'm a travel agent, as a matter of fact. I've made this trip to report back on facilities, general conditions, passengers' comfort—all that sort of thing."

"An agent, eh?" Armitage spoke the words slowly. For a fleeting moment Drake fancied there was a slight emphasis in the other's use of the word 'agent'. But the impression was so vague that he dismissed it from his thoughts.

He bought another round of drinks and some time later excused himself and climbed the stairway to the deck. He was leaning over the rail smoking when he sensed that someone had

joined him. Looking round, he saw that it was the redheaded girl.

"Hello, there," said Drake, raising his hat. "I . . ." He broke off, looking hard at her. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"It . . . it's about that fat man, the one in the tweed hat," she said. "Something rather odd. . . ."

Drake felt his senses quicken. But he did not speak.

The girl went on uncertainly: "You remember he said this was his first trip abroad?"

"Yes, he did mention that—why?" asked Drake curiously.

For a moment she seemed to hesitate. Then she went on: "Before I got this job I had to go out to Basle for an interview. Later, I went to a restaurant in the city centre for lunch . . . and I am quite positive that I saw him there!"

Drake rubbed his chin reflectively. "You could be mistaken, Miss Young," he suggested.

"No, I'm utterly certain about it," she replied. "Besides, there's his size."

"Yes." Drake spoke almost as if to himself. There were not many people who would resemble the fat man in bulk and appearance.

"By the way, how do you happen to know my name?" Lana Young asked.

"I read it on your luggage label," said Drake. "Impertinent of me, but I just happened to glance at your case and couldn't really miss it. Incidentally, I'd better tell you mine—John Franklin."

She held out a hand and said: "It's very strange, isn't it, that he should claim so emphatically that he had never been out of England before? Why should anyone do such a thing?"

Drake shrugged. "People do strange things." "Yes, if they have some secret motive. But he's never seen either of us before. . . ."

"Well," replied Drake with a smile, "there's nothing we can do about it, is there?"

"No, I suppose not." She opened her handbag and looked at her reflection in a compact mirror. Suddenly, she stiffened and whispered: "Mr. Franklin—he's some distance away, and he's watching us!"

Drake lit a cigarette, dropped the match overboard and said evenly: "Don't look round. We'll just walk together along the deck."

They strolled round the entire ship, then



went down into the dining-room for a meal. There was no sign of the fat man again. Nor did they see him when they docked at Boulogne—until they passed through Customs, where he was waiting beside his luggage.

"Hello, Mr. Franklin," he wheezed. "I must've missed you on the boat after that little drink we had together."

Drake nodded and was about to pass on when he paused and said amiably: "Well, I guess we shan't be meeting again, unless it's on the train, as you'll be going through to Italy."

"Aye, that's right," Armitage said. "Well, I hope you have a nice time. You, too, miss."

"Sure," murmured Drake. He went up on to the departure platform of Boulogne station. The train was in, but there was still some time left before it was due out. He was strolling on the platform to while away time when he saw Armitage go into a telephone booth.

On an impulse born of infinite experience, Drake drifted close to the booth. The door was slightly ajar and the fat man's back was turned.

He was speaking rapidly and without wheezing.

"Yeah, I tell you it's Drake all right, using the name of Franklin. There's a girl with him. They're supposed to be strangers, but I'm not so sure. Okay, okay . . . I'll see something happens between here and the Swiss frontier."

There was a pause, then: "Yeah, you can tell Zavig everything's going to be all right. I'll see to it personally!"

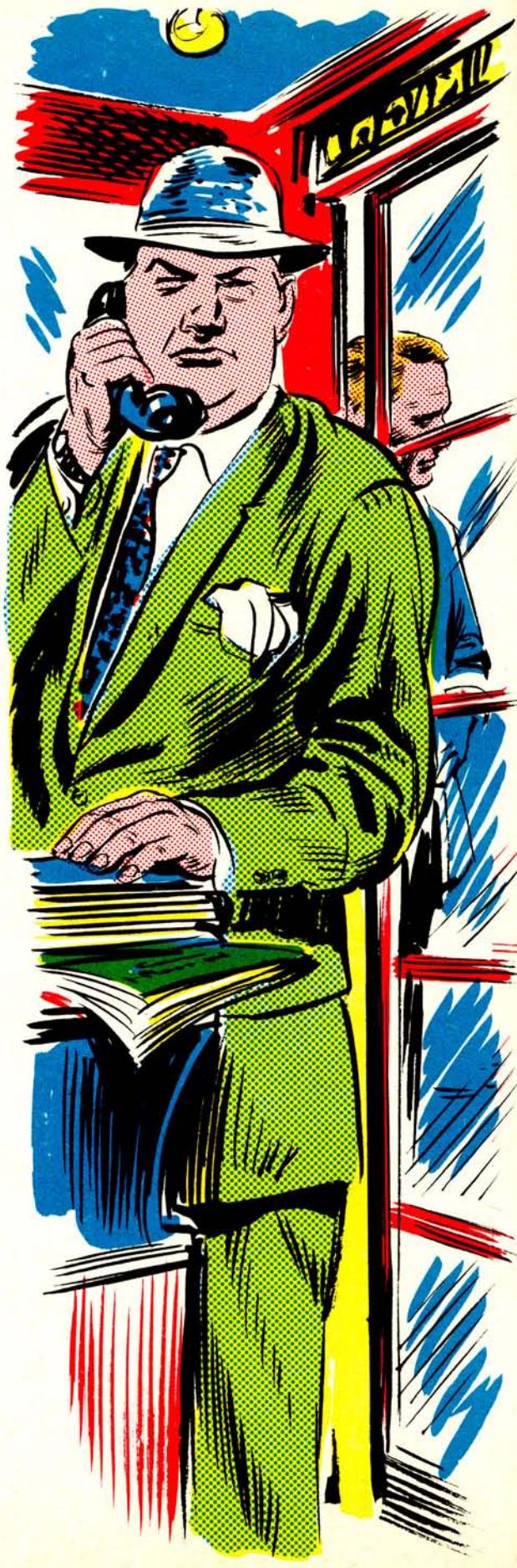
The fat man put the receiver down and Drake edged into the shadows. He watched Armitage waddling along the platform until he came abreast of the restaurant and bar. He seemed to hesitate for a second, then shrugged and went in.

Drake walked quickly back to the waiting train. His luggage was already on board and he could see Lana Young reading a glossy magazine in a compartment.

He climbed the steps on to the train, went along it, put his head round the door and said: "Get your things, Miss Young—we're not going on this train!"

"Why . . . what on earth . . ." she started.

"I haven't time to tell you now," said Drake urgently. "But there's danger here. It concerns our fat friend. Look, will you grab your things and just trust me?"



For a second she looked uncertain. Then, abruptly, she nodded and collected her possessions. Five minutes later Drake was hiring a Renault car. In another fifteen minutes they were driving south-east on the long journey to the Anglo-Swiss border.

The roads were relatively quiet and Drake put his foot down until they were cruising in the high sixties.

Lana Young said simply: "Just what did you mean by danger?"

Drake hesitated, but for no more than a moment. Then, his mind made up, he told her the true nature of his mission—and his real identity.

"Armitage—or whatever his name really is—must have been sent to watch the boat train just in case I used it after dodging Reiseman at the airport," he said. "He thinks you may be in this with me . . . and he was planning to see that we never reached Basle."

"But . . . but how could he do that?"

The Danger Man's lean mouth compressed. "Assassination would make pretty sure, Miss Young," he said evenly.

She shuddered, then fell silent for a moment. She seemed to be thinking or trying to recall something. Finally, she said quickly: "I've just remembered. I saw that man twice in Basle. It was after I had left the restaurant. I saw him going into a building on the Hauptstrasse. . . ."

"Oh, what building?"

"I can't . . . wait a minute, I've got it. An office building . . . there was a sign let into the front, *Schwartz Minerals Incorporated*. But I don't suppose that helps you, does it?"

"We'll find out," answered Drake.

"We?"

"Well, me, then," said Drake with a grin.

"I'd like to be in it with you," she answered.

"It's too dangerous, Lana," the Danger Man said seriously. "For me it's all in the line of duty. For you it's totally unnecessary peril. Where are you staying in Basle?"

She told him the address of an apartment.

"I'll drop you off there," replied Drake. "I'll be at the Hotel Graham."

The hours passed. They crossed the frontier and finally reached Basle. It was broad daylight now and there were already the first signs of activity in a country where work starts early in the day.

Drake dropped Lana Young at her apartment and drove to the hotel. He parked in the wide forecourt, checked in and went straight up to his room.

The porter put his bags down, accepted a tip and started towards the door. As he reached it he suddenly wheeled right round with a long, silenced automatic in his right hand.

"Farewell, Herr Drake!" he grated.

* * *

In the same instant the Danger Man dived full-length in a rugby tackle which brought the porter to the floor with a flat thud.

The gun spun high into the air to crash, with a splintering of glass, in the dressing-table mirror.

But the porter wasn't finished yet. He slid a wicked-looking blade out and stabbed it viciously at Drake.

The Danger Man lunged sideways and almost simultaneously got the other in a deadly Judo hold. Then, with what seemed like the merest pressure, he sent the would-be killer flying across the room.

The man's back hit the wall like a whip-crack. He slid down with both feet splayed out in a V, his eyes glazing. Drake jerked him straight back on his feet, then bent him nearly double and snapped cold steel on his wrists.

Breathing harshly, he flung the man down on the bed and waited for him to come round.

It took only a few seconds. The porter's mouth opened to yell, but Drake picked up the fallen gun and rammed it hard against his ribs.

"One peep out of you, my friend, and it's liable to be your last," he said tightly.

The other's mouth closed suddenly. Only his eyes moved now—blinking rapidly in apprehension.

"Your name, please?" said Drake curtly.

"Humbolt Hoffner . . ."

"Who sent you to kill me, Hoffner?"

"It . . . it was just a job. . . ."

"Don't try to fool around with me, my friend," snapped Drake. "I'm not in the mood. Where's Zavig and what does he look like?"

Now naked terror lived in the other's jumpy eyes. "I . . . I can't tell you, Herr Drake . . . they'd kill me if I" He swallowed convulsively.



"I could make you," said Drake.

Hoffner tongued his dry lips. "Ja, but you would not maltreat a helpless man, Herr Drake . . . that much I know about you," he whispered.

"Which is fortunate for you, my friend," responded Drake. "But suppose you *had* killed me, what were you going to do?"

"Nothing, except to put the room light on and off three times and . . ." Hoffner stopped, his eyes bulging.

Drake grinned. "You didn't mean to tell me even that much, did you?" he said. "And don't try to yell an alarm because you won't be able to!"

He tore a strip off the bed sheet and gagged the shivering Hoffner. Then he switched the room light on, off—three times, at short but distinct intervals.

As he did so the thought came to him that for the signal to be seen the watchers would need to be very close. He bundled the hapless Hoffner into the bath, locked the door and went down to the reception desk.

The clerk nodded in response to his question. "Yes, sir, the Hauptstrasse runs parallel with this street," he said. "From your bedroom window you face the rear of the offices of Schwartz Minerals. Thank you, sir."

Drake went back to his room and took a curious-looking object from his luggage. It resembled a rifle in miniature, but there was no cartridge chamber. Instead Drake loaded a small disc-like projectile into the muzzle. Then, keeping his head out of sight behind the window curtains, he rested the barrel of the weapon on the ledge and squeezed the trigger.

A charge of compressed air erupted with no more than a dull plop . . . and the disc embedded itself in the woodwork of the office window immediately across the street.

Then Drake attached a microscopic radio pick-up to his left ear and listened.

A voice he had never heard before was saying: ". . . so that is the end of the great John Drake. . . . Is good . . . Hoffner has deserved well of us. . . ."

A gloating laugh. Then more words: "But the girl who accompanied him . . . that is something I do not understand . . . except that she must be an agent too."

Another voice cut in: "Drake has always worked alone. Maybe this girl means nothing, Zavig!"

"We do not take chances, Varta. That is not how Information Anonymous has been built up. Yes, I know we have now disposed of the man who was our greatest source of danger . . . but we have to make sure of the girl. When Manfred, using the name of Armitage, found they had left the train in Boulogne he phoned and gave us her name—Lana Young. She probably has an apartment. Very well, we have means of finding out where any new tenants are located. It can be done in minutes on the telephone. Do it now!"

Drake breathed heavily, waiting. Several minutes passed, then he heard Zavig saying: "That is good. Okay—we pay her the visit very soon . . . immediately I have finished my coffee, eh?"

Drake disconnected the pick-up, grabbed the phone and got through to the apartment.

"Get out—and stay out for the next hour!" he ordered.

"But. . ."

"No buts, Lana . . . these guys mean to murder you, don't you understand?"

"But you can't tackle them all alone," she protested.

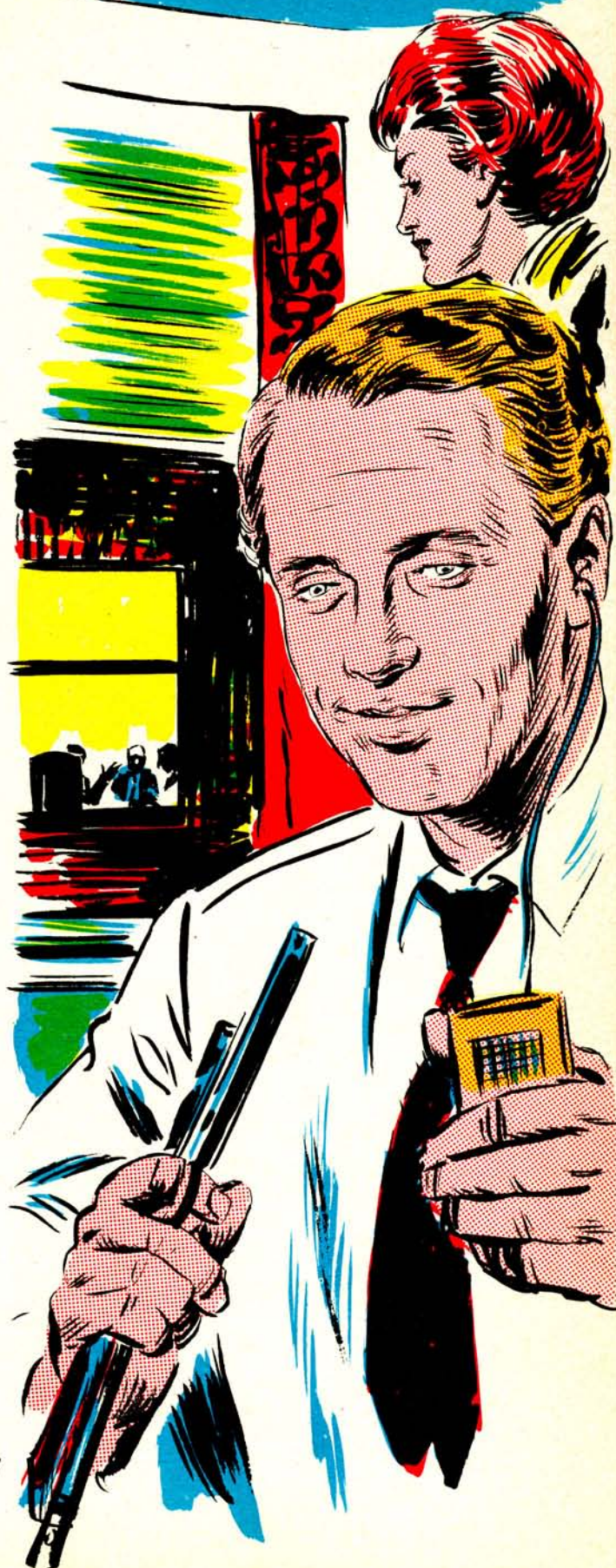
"Do precisely as I say," Drake said in a hard, cold voice. "Leave your flat and telephone Swiss Intelligence, asking for Captain Fritz Malheim—I'll give you the number because you won't find it in the book." He dictated rapidly and hung up.

He went rapidly down the stairs and was crossing the foyer when a thought struck him. He turned, went up to the reception desk, and said: "Who owns Schwartz Minerals, do you happen to know?"

The clerk smiled a superior smile. "You are clearly a stranger here, sir," he remarked. "Herr Gunther Schwartz is the President of the company, a very eminent and respected man of business in Basle, sir."

"What's he like to look at?"

The clerk spread both hands. "Very tall and broad-shouldered, most impressive with his black imperial beard and iron-grey hair. Everyone in Basle knows Herr Schwartz . . . he is the chairman of our Council of International Commerce and is very much loved!"



"I'll bet he is," said Drake. "But not much longer," he added in a low tone.

"I beg your pardon, Herr Franklin," said the clerk.

"It's nothing," murmured the Danger Man.

* * *

He drove fast to the apartment, or just short of it, leaving the Renault on a small side street and walking the rest of the way.

On his instructions Lana Young had left the place unlocked. The Danger Man went straight in. There was a kitchen, a dinette, a spacious lounge, bedroom and bathroom. His keen eyes took everything in at a glance.

Drake took from a pocket a small shining black object the size of a packet of cigarettes. It was an acutely sensitive miniature tape recorder. He fitted it into a flower vase, and replaced the blooms. The tiny mechanism was running, but the blooms rendered it inaudible unless the ear was angled within inches of it.

There was a fitted clothes closet ranged along one of the bedroom walls. Drake slid the doors open and squeezed in among Lana Young's dresses and coats.

Nor was he a moment too soon, for he was scarcely inside when he heard a small sound. He stiffened, waiting—but nothing seemed to happen. Then, after another moment or two, more sounds—and the outer door opened.

"She is not here!" The heavy voice was Zavig's.

The man who had been addressed as Varta said: "Surely she would not have gone out so soon after her arrival?"

Drake could hear them moving around. He rarely used firearms, and even in this perilous venture had not brought one. But he had something no less effective—a long, slim weapon which fired gas shells.

"I do not understand it, Varta," muttered Zavig. "Well, perhaps we wait till Fraulein Young returns, eh?"

"You want me to . . . dispose of her?" Varta said.

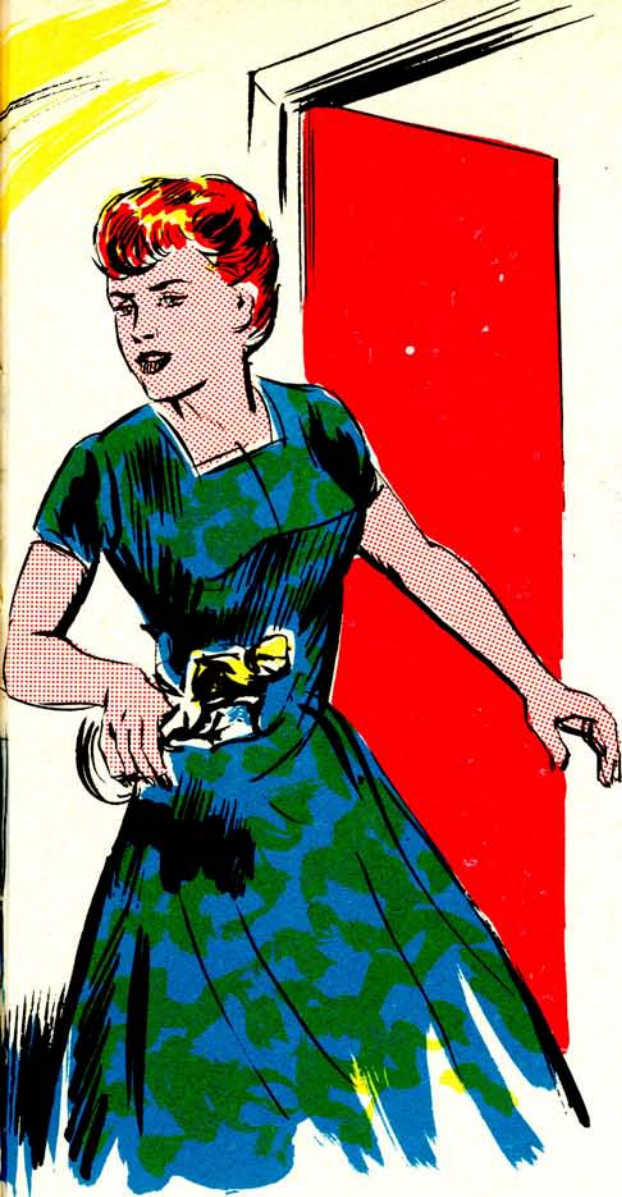
"I think so, I have a personal distaste for crude violence," Zavig said.

"No doubt, though Information Anonymous has not been established without it."



Zavig laughed. "Of that I am aware. But only where it has been necessary. The rest is due to the brains I have brought to bear on its organisation. We have already netted more than three-quarters of a million in sterling by the brilliant removal of vital documents from the stupid British and the no less stupid Americans."

"Sure—and within forty-eight hours we shall launch our greatest coup."



Zavig made another triumphant laugh. "Yes, we invade Washington . . . the Pentagon itself will yield up to us military secrets which will make us rich beyond all imagining. It shall be our greatest and also our final achievement. For after that we vanish . . . and two highly respectable multi-millionaires will be lazing in the South American sun!"

Drake eased the sliding door open the barest fraction. Through it he could see Zavig—a tall, broad-shouldered man with a black imperial beard and iron-grey hair!

Zavig cackled. "And to think none of my so-respectable business associates even dreams that the mighty Zavig is none other than the dull and sober Herr Schwartz! Or that you, Varta, are Herr Mittelhauser, the dull and sober

secretary of our most respectable company. . . ."

From inside the closet Drake uttered a hollow laugh.

The effect was almost staggering. Zavig literally jumped clear of the floor and Varta came forward behind a gun.

Drake slid the door wide open and said: "Nobody suspects . . . but soon all will know, Herr Schwartz, alias Zavig the master spy!"

Zavig reeled back, his face contorted.

Varta aimed his gun—but Drake was still out of vision, and Varta's hand wavered uncertainly.

"In the bedroom, Varta—come and get me," called Drake.

With a muttered oath Varta leaped forward. In the same instant Drake triggered his compressed air pistol. There was a tiny flat blast . . . then Varta flailed back into the lounge, hands groping madly at his eyes.

For a split second Zavig stood there, as if carved out of stone, his face ravaged.

Then all the life seemed to slump from him. Dejectedly, he held out both wrists as if to invite imprisonment. A huge gold ring glinted on the third finger of his left hand.

And something else . . . a needle-sharp barb embedded in the gold. The Danger Man saw it, knew at once that a single stab would kill him almost instantaneously.

But before Drake could act, something hard and heavy gonged down on Zavig's handsome iron-grey head. His knees crumpled under him and he went down in a heap on the carpet and lay very still, if not at peace.

Standing in the doorway was Miss Lana Young. She was holding an elegant statue of the Love God, Eros.

"I came back just before they turned up," she said. "I thought perhaps I might be of some little help."

She looked wonderingly at the statue. "My goodness," she gasped. "I thought it was just a clay figure. It seems to be made of cast-iron. I hope he'll recover all right."

"I think so," said Drake with a grin. "I also think something else."

"Oh, what would that be?" inquired Miss Lana Young.

"I think you'd better chuck that secretary job and become a Secret Agent," chuckled the Danger Man.

MOSES WAS THE 1ST



THIRTY-EIGHT HUNDRED years ago twelve daring men went on a spying mission into the land of Canaan. The espionage "king" who organised the mission was . . . Moses.

If you open your Bible at the Old Testament you can read their report, announcing that they had seen "the land of milk and honey".

But although Moses is the first named spy-master, it is certain that undercover agents were busy at the dawn of history, and very likely before that.

From the days of Moses right up to the present time the work of an agent varies from routine dullness to nerve-shattering excitement. And, win or lose, he is almost invariably an unsung hero.

SPY KING!



When Dwight D. Eisenhower was President of the United States he had occasion to refer to the Central Intelligence Agency, America's great undercover organisation. These are his vivid words:

By its very nature the work of this agency demands of its members the highest order of dedication, ability, trustworthiness and selflessness—to say nothing of the finest type of courage, whenever needed.

Success cannot be advertised; failure cannot be explained. In the work of intelligence, heroes are undecorated and unsung, often even among their own fraternity. Their inspiration is rooted in patriotism—their reward can be little except the conviction that they are performing a unique and indispensable service for their country and the knowledge that America needs and appreciates their efforts.

Which nation has the largest spying organisation in the world? It is the Soviet Union. As recently as four years ago its annual expenditure on espionage was running out at one *billion* pounds. . . .

Not only do Communist agents engage in ordinary spying—if spying ever really *is* ordinary!—they also take part in abduction. So much so that for years Berlin has been the “kidnap capital” of the world.

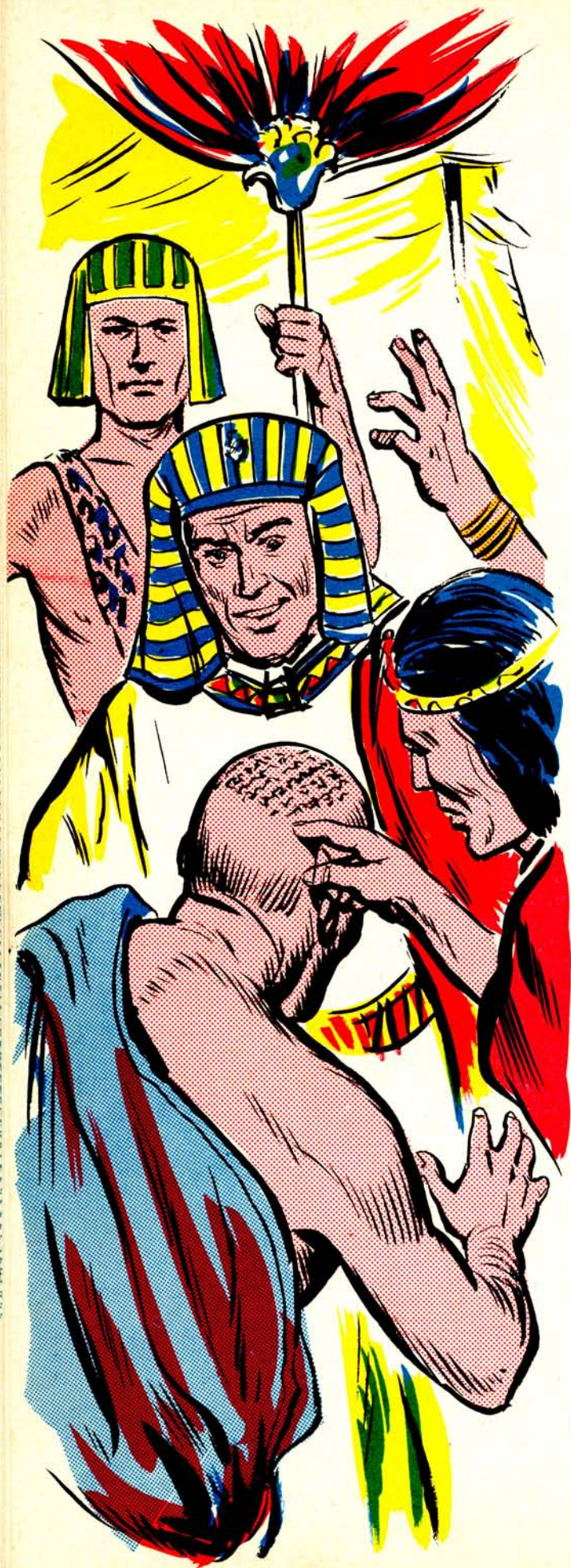
Since the Second World War ended, the Communists are credited with having made over three hundred “snatch” attempts in the city, trying to make off with men—and women—“wanted” behind the Iron Curtain. More than two hundred and fifty attempts were successful.

On top of this, assassination is stated to have been elevated almost to the status of a science!

The methods

Two thousand five hundred years ago, a certain personage in old Persia, craftily planning a revolt against the king, desired to send details of his scheme to his main followers. Unfortunately, they were all located in another part of the country—and royalist soldiers were rigorously searching all travellers for any treasonable possessions.

But the rebel dreamed-up a brilliant idea. He summoned a trusted agent to his tent. Much time passed and still the agent was in the tent.



Finally, he emerged wearing a turban. This was extremely necessary . . . for the agent's head had been shaved as bald as Yul Brynner's!

More time passed, during which the agent's head sprouted a luxuriant growth of thick black hair. The moment was at hand for him to set out on his vital mission half-way across the country.

Along the way the king's troops stopped him and made the most searching of searches. But they found nothing in the slightest degree incriminating.

So they let the agent pass and in due season he reached his master's rebel followers. Bowing low before their appointed spokesman, he said: "Shave off all my hair!"

They did so—and the agent's long sojourn in the rebel chief's tent was instantly explained. *For tattooed on the skin of his bald head were full details of the revolutionary plan!*

Come to think of it, that ruse might well work today. On the other hand, John Drake would seem a trifle odd with a completely shaven head, wouldn't he?

Many are the ruses of the secret agent. Ink which vanishes without trace and is later brought back to legibility; shoes fitted with hollow heels in which top-secret papers are tightly rolled; even hollowed-out teeth.

These, to be sure, are not new tricks—but often old tricks have a way of winning out again and again.

But, in this new epoch of electronics and advanced technological invention, a crop of new devices have come into play.

The ingenious "bugging" of premises so that vital private talks can be heard on a mini-radio a hundred yards away. The use of "back scatter"—a manifestation of electronic reflection—to chart rocket launchings in potentially or actively unfriendly countries. The use from the air of enormously powerful telescopic cameras which can take pictures of Earth-based objects from almost incredible heights.

But despite these essentially mechanical aids, the vast area of undercover work performed by brave men as individuals shows no sign of shrinking.

An agent sent on a perilous mission must have what is known as a "cover". This is neither more nor less than an absolutely foolproof disguise—which often means not only a change of

name but even a change of appearance, so that in dress and manner and attitudes he almost literally becomes another person.

The most microscopic details must be acutely checked, so that in his clothes and possessions there is nothing which will betray the country of his real origin . . . not even a particle of identifiable dust!

Printing presses turn out false identification documents so brilliantly forged that not even an expert can tell the difference.

And here's another thing. If John Drake were going to Rumania in the guise of a Rumanian business man returning home it would not only be vital for him to speak the language with idiomatic subtlety: his suits, shirts, socks, ties, shoes and underwear would have to be made in such a way as to convince any examiner that they were actually made in Rumania instead of fabricated in London.

What else does an agent need? The answer can be given in a single word . . . money.

Very often he will need to carry large amounts of money on his person—sometimes to buy information, sometimes to buy his way in and out of places where information can be acquired.

And sometimes to buy his way out of a dangerous crisis that could well cost him his very life!

Weapons

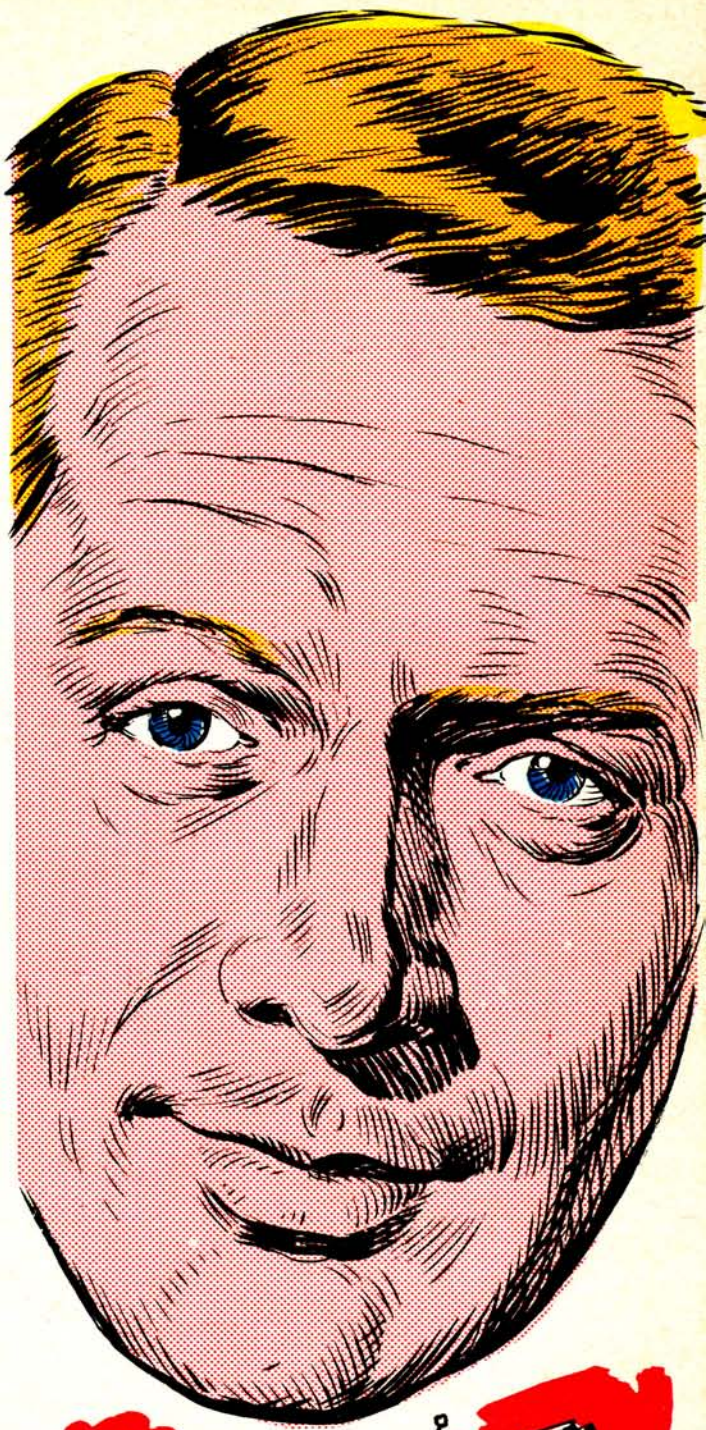
John Drake rarely uses weapons—and when he does they are quite likely to be non-lethal. Such an example occurs in *Playback*, one of the thrilling stories in this book.

Here the Danger Man makes use of what looks like a harmless packet of cigarettes. Thumbing a push-button on the base of the packet, which is already open, he triggers off the firing mechanism and a bullet is ejected through the fake cigarette tips protruding from the open packet.

But, as you would expect, in John Drake's case something rather different comes out!

The Russians are said to have used such a pistol . . . only it was one containing in each bullet enough cyanide to kill a number of men at short range!

In the same story in this annual, reference is made to a silent pistol. These have been invented both by Britain and the Soviet Union. The Russian model, fired by electrical ignition, discharges a cyanide slug which, it is claimed,





can tear right through three-quarters of an inch of wood from a range of twenty-four feet.

These deadly devices have not one, but three barrels, mounted one on top of the other on this .32 calibre weapon.

Arthur Widder, the author of a fascinating American book entitled *Adventures in Black*, reveals that in addition to guns, undercover agents may also use such things as bombs made to resemble chunks of coal; fountain pens which eject tear-gas; railway axle grease which blazes the moment the train begins to roll; even ground glass which, slipped into laundry water when uniforms are being washed, causes soldiers to break out with unexplainable skin irritations.

Sir Robert Baden-Powell recorded information about foreign fortifications by working them into sketch-book drawings of leaves and butterflies. So brilliantly did he do this that he was able to bring detailed military information back to England.

Mr. Widder, after praising this successful ruse, comments: "Today detailed sketches and messages are far more likely to be transmitted by means of the microdot process. In this process a photograph of a full-sized sheet of writing-paper can be reduced to about the size of the period at the end of this sentence. This tiny microdot photograph can then be hidden beneath a false period or elsewhere in an otherwise ordinary letter."

The microdot is later uncovered and photographically enlarged. Vital secret messages have also been hidden in all kinds of other unlikely spots . . . from cuff-links to old bolts, washers and even car batteries!

As to codes—well, they're as old as espionage itself. They were used by the ancient Spartans and by Julius Caesar. Some are simple, some elaborate . . . but no matter how complex, there are usually expert code-breakers who will crack them in the end.

Sometimes, however, the unravelling may take too long. Sometimes, too, the code defies breaking down.

But in 1966, highly developed machines can both cipher and decipher coded messages. Computers come in here as a valuable reinforcement of the code-breaking technique.

But what is the system of coding used by the lone agent who, like our Danger Man, works by himself in ever-present peril to his very existence? The chances are that he simply carries the secret of his own code in his head.

Nowadays, spies are trained intensively at special "schools". Here they learn to read military maps and to interpret every kind of aerial photograph. They also learn how to assemble and operate electronic wire-taps and short-wave radio transmitters for "bugging" and broadcasting on special wavelengths. Then, operating under field conditions, the student spy acquires the strength, toughness and agility to overcome all obstacles he may be called upon to face. As a final touch, he may even be subjected to harsh interrogation to enable him to resist such treatment should he fall into ruthless enemy hands.

In using miniature radio transmitters, agents will usually "beam" information directly on a prearranged time and frequency schedule, often over immense distances.

The tappers

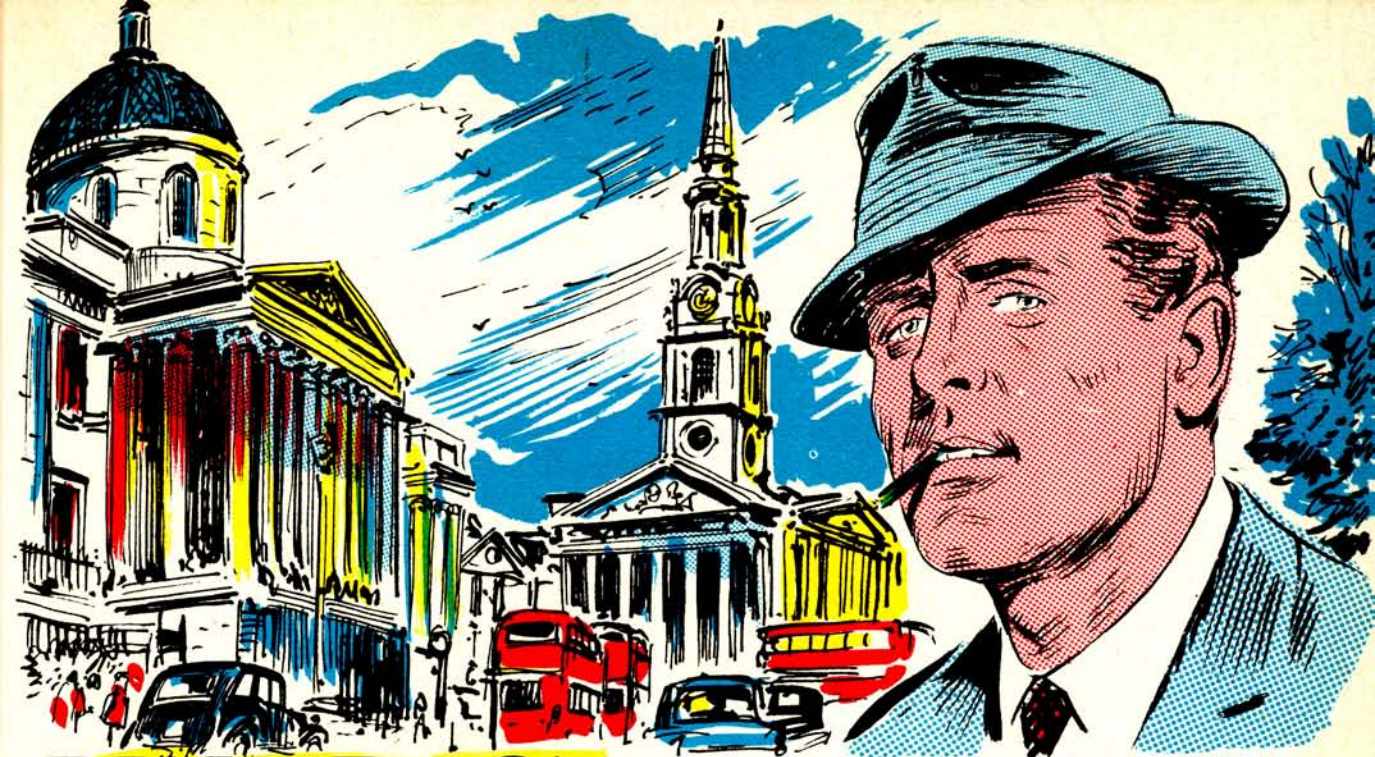
Some agents—Russia's Colonel Abel among them—have utilised the trick of tapping-in on telephone lines to make untraceable phone calls.

Incidentally, the colonel went to America as a master spy, working out of the New York suburb of Brooklyn until his assistant, known only as Vik, went over to the West.

Even Vik knew his boss simply as Mark. But what he did know was Mark's address on Brooklyn's Fulton Street. Finally, Mark—who was none other than Colonel Rudolf Abel—was arrested by America's Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The colonel, described as a gentlemanly spy, is now serving a thirty-year sentence. It is held that it was the breaking-up of his spy ring in the U.S. which led, eight years later in 1961, to the conviction of five people in England for sending naval secrets to the Soviet Union.

Today, as never on such a scale before, the ramifications of espionage are world-wide. . . .



PLAYBACK

WHEN John Drake walked into Security Headquarters on a mild evening in early autumn he sensed at once that something was wrong. Secretaries and clerks were still on duty and looking taut and anxious.

He went through the heavy door into the comfortable room in which he had so often been briefed before one perilous mission after another. Inside, he took a long, hard look at the Chief.

"Take a seat, Drake—have a cigarette, have a drink if you want one." X spoke with a kind of edgy undertone to his normally smooth voice.

"Thank you, sir, but I'd prefer to hear what has happened," replied the Danger Man evenly. "You know then?"

Drake shook his head. "All I know is that you sent for me while I was on leave," he said. "That in itself was suggestive. The atmosphere in this building confirms my impression."

X smiled wanly. "In the usual way I try to remain calm and unaffected, yes . . . but the present circumstances are anything but usual. They concern the counter-intelligence ring operated by Carl van Manshuis and a plot against Colonel Dwight Jannings of the Ameri-

can Army. The van Manshuis ring, as you know, supplies top secret information to potential enemies of the West. . . ."

Drake nodded briefly. "Yes, van Manshuis works out of Amsterdam as well as behind the Curtain. He's been known to turn up in capitals as far apart as Paris, Madrid, Lisbon, Rome, and even New York. But that part isn't either new or alarming, sir."

"No, it isn't . . . but we now have positive information that the van Manshuis gang plan to kidnap Colonel Jannings!"

"Jannings is flying in a U.S. military plane from Berlin to Athens the day after tomorrow," X went on. "The plane will make one landing *en route*, at the airstrip on the small island of Alger in the Adriatic. The information we have is that van Manshuis and his gang will abduct the colonel there."

"But if you know this surely it is a simple matter to alert the U.S. military authorities?"

"We have done," X rejoined. "They think our information is exaggerated—but, even if true, they say they can take care of any situation that blows up."

Drake thought for a moment. Then he said: "Much would seem to depend on the source from where our information came, sir. Who supplied it?"

"Lessing," replied X.

"H'm," said Drake. He remembered that Frank Lessing was smuggled through the Iron

Curtain ten months previously as a 'sleeper'. This was a word used by every undercover organisation to describe agents who hid themselves in a foreign country and did no spying of any kind until, on their secret radio, they got the call to 'wake up' and go into action.

Frank Lessing was the most expert 'sleeper' Security HQ had ever employed. He spoke six languages with idiomatic fluency, and had been hiding out in Amsterdam under the name of Dick Voorhees, a jobbing carpenter. That was ten months ago, and the Dutch city had been chosen because it was believed that Carl van Manshuis was planning to base all his operations there.

"Manshuis set up his organisation in Amsterdam three months ago," X explained. "We instantly sent a radio signal through to Lessing. He went into action right away—and pretty successfully. As a result of information he has given us we have foiled two counter-espionage plots and got our hands on one of the van Manshuis operators in Britain—not a kingpin in the organisation, but a useful capture, and it shows that Lessing is really moving."

"And now he comes through with this information about the coming bid to snatch Jannings when his plane touches down on the island of Alger?"

"Exactly. There cannot be any possible reason to doubt that Lessing has got on the track of something big—but the Americans aren't convinced. In any event, as I said a moment ago, they think they can handle whatever is attempted."

"Has Lessing been in frequent radio contact with us?" queried Drake.

"Oh, pretty often, yes—though he has also kept in touch by letters purporting to be to an elderly relative in Wandsworth. To make this safe we bought an old house in Carfax Street and even planted an elderly member of the staff in it. He gets the mail and brings it to Marston."

Gerald Marston was an expert code-breaker employed by Security—not that any special skill was needed in decoding Lessing's mail, since the formula he was using was, of course, determined beforehand.

"Do you know why the Americans are so confident that the information may be exaggerated?" Drake inquired.

X shrugged slightly. "They say that the

colonel's flight is purely routine and has no connection with security matters. They also claim that if Manshuis was after top secret information he'd be far more likely to kidnap General George Statham."

"Oh, why?"

"Well, on the same day Statham will be driving from Rome to Naples with highly confidential documents which he will hand over to the commander of the U.S. Naval Forces based on Naples. Only three people even know of his pending journey—well, four now that I've told you," added X.

"I see," answered Drake. He looked directly at the Chief. "Where do I fit into all this?" he asked.

"Lessing suggests that we should send the best man we have to the island of Alger a full day in advance of Jannings' arrival there," X answered. "He names you and I have made arrangements for you to be dropped by parachute tonight."

"And then?"

"Three of the van Manshuis organisation are occupying the Villa Messini, which is on a small headland overlooking the airstrip. Your assignment is to round them up, by whatever means you think fit, so that they are incapable of snatching the gallant colonel."

"And the flight time?"

"You report back here at ten p.m. this evening. You take off in a Service plane an hour later."

Drake picked up his hat and went out of the building. Though he had posed no questions, a number were in fact milling around in his mind. He knew, none better, that Frank Lessing was an agent of absolute reliability. He had been tested on a score of hazardous missions—and as a sleeper he was in a class of his own. It followed, therefore, that the utmost confidence could be placed in any information which he dispatched.

Still, Drake was vaguely troubled. If Colonel Jannings was on a purely routine flight what purpose would it serve van Manshuis to abduct him? Above all, why was the sinister organisation not going after General Statham instead?

He was going down the main steps to the street when he saw a tall, slim figure just ahead of him. It was Gerald Marston.

Drake quickened his stride. It occurred to

him that a chat with Marston might be useful and, in any event, would be agreeable. He caught up with him and touched his sleeve.

Marston spun round in an agitated manner. Then he saw Drake and his face cleared.

"Oh, it's you, Drake!" he exclaimed. "For a moment you quite startled me."

Drake smiled. "Sorry about that," he rejoined. "But I thought we might have a friendly chat. It's twelve o'clock. We could have a quiet drink together."

Marston looked uncomfortable. "Oh, I'm afraid I can't manage it this time," he said. "I've got a lunch date. . . ."

Without waiting for a reply he darted across the street, weaving his way in and out of the traffic.

Drake was astonished. Though he and Marston weren't close friends, he knew the other as a man of cool, almost calculating habits. For a moment the Danger Man paused irresolutely. Then, his mind made up, he crossed the busy street himself and walked briskly in the same direction as the code expert.

Marston turned the corner, then hailed a cruising taxi and jumped in. There was another cab following close behind, and Drake unhesitatingly took it.

They almost lost their quarry in Piccadilly Circus and again in Leicester Square. But after that they had no trouble. The leading cab finally came to a halt in a side street off High Holborn.

Drake signalled his driver to stop, handed over a ten-shilling note without waiting for change and went slowly along the pavement, keeping close to the buildings. Not that this caution was needed. Marston never once glanced back in the short time it took him to turn into a narrow, cobbled alleyway.

Half-way down it he disappeared through an open doorway. Drake went straight in after him. The doorway led into a passage with another door at the bottom and a flight of uncarpeted stairs on the right.

Treading carefully on the balls of his feet, the Danger Man went down the corridor to the door. It was ajar. Flattening himself against the wall, he could just see Marston sitting at a desk, watching a telephone.

Then the phone bell rang. Marston took the receiver off its rest and said: "209 speaking as

instructed. . . ." There was a pause, then: "Notify VM, plane leaves England eleven to-night for parachute landing on Alger by J.D."

There was another pause while Marston listened. Finally, he said: "Yes, I'll do that now," and hung up.

He sat for a moment at the desk, then slid open a drawer and took out a hypodermic syringe. He moved across the room, lit a gas jet under a small pan. Then he sterilised the instrument and carefully fitted a small cylindrical object into it.

He came back across the room, sat down at the desk, rolled up one sleeve and injected himself in the forearm.

Drake went down the passage to the alleyway and stood in another doorway. After a few seconds Marston came out and walked quickly down the street.

The hypodermic had been cleansed and repacked, but Drake was not concerned with this. Instead, he got the drawer open and found what he was looking for—a carton containing some of the small cylinders.

Thirty-five minutes later Professor Ralph Seeley, in charge of Security Headquarters' private laboratory, completed his searching tests and said levelly: "In non-medical language, this cylinder contains a derivative of what is known as the truth drug. Injected intravenously its effect is to brainwash the recipient in such a way that his mind responds to and obeys all instructions given to it from a predetermined source."

X breathed harshly down his nose.

"That means only one thing," he said in a low voice. "It means that Marston is—unknown even to himself—a counter-espionage agent working for van Manshuis!"

Drake pinched his lower lip with a thumb and forefinger. "They must have injected him in the first place without his knowledge or consent, sir," he reflected. "After that he would automatically obey instructions to re-inject himself—and to carry out any and every order fed to him in his brainwashed condition."

X nodded. "The first thing we have to do is to see that he gets no more doses. . . ." he began.

"Yes, but could you delay that for a day or two?" asked the Danger Man quietly. "Manshuis may contact him again and if Marston is no longer under the influence of this

drug the organisation will be alarmed. Besides, there's another thing puzzling me . . . before I left that room I called the exchange to check where the incoming call came from. It was a pre-arranged time call—from Rome!"

"What!" X barked out the word.

"There's no doubt about it, sir. It must mean that van Manshuis himself is in Rome . . . and that he is aware of General Statham's coming visit to Naples."

X's face was as hard as granite.

"I'll contact the U.S. authorities immediately," he said.

Drake nodded. "There is still one other baffling factor," he resumed. "I don't understand why Lessing seems to be unaware of the plot. I take it you yourself saw his letter?"

"Actually, no," X rejoined. "Marston has always decoded the letters and presented the results to me—there has never been the slightest reason why this procedure should be altered. Until now!"

"I suppose the original letters are in his office file," asked Drake.

They went down the tiled corridor. As they entered the office Marston wheeled round in his chair.

"I want to see the originals of Lessing's letters, especially the last one received," said X sharply.

For an instant Marston's face looked blank. Then a strange expression moved on it. "My orders are to permit no one to see them," he said in an oddly mechanical voice.

"The orders of VM to 209, I suppose," snapped Drake.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before Marston's right hand streaked inside his jacket—but before he could bring the automatic pistol out Drake had closed in with a fast chopping blow on the other's shoulder.

Marston uttered a short cry and slumped straight down on the floor. Drake took the weapon from him.

In another moment Drake had the file out. Meanwhile X had sent for Fenton, another expert in code-breaking.

Fenton read the letter twice before he looked up and said: "The translation of this is exactly as Marston gave it to you, sir. It states specifically that an attempt will be made to kidnap Colonel Jannings on touch-down at Alger and



suggests that Drake should be dispatched there!"

"There is, however, one strange thing about this letter," Fenton went on. "The original instructions given to Lessing were to misspell the thirteenth word and every subsequent thirteenth word of every letter he posted to us."

X nodded. "Yes, that is his identifying signal."

Fenton said soberly: "There are no misspellings anywhere in this letter, sir!"

There was a heavy silence. Then Drake said slowly: "You know what that means, sir? Lessing is in the hands of the van Manshuis organisation and they have continued to send us letters in his name . . . but they don't know about the misspelling identification signal."

"Exactly, Drake. But that also means the kidnap information is a blind while they concentrate on General Statham."

"Why should they go to all that trouble?" Drake asked quietly. "If we were unaware of a plot against the general why should they decoy me to Alger . . ." He stopped and a wry grin flitted across his lean features. "I think I know the answer to that, sir."

"Yes," responded X. "The Alger plot is not to kidnap Colonel Jannings . . . it's to kidnap you!"

"I think assassinate is likely to be the more appropriate word," murmured Drake. "I'm flattered. . . ."

X permitted himself one of his cool smiles. "Van Manshuis is believed to be responsible for the mysterious disappearances of several Continental agents in recent months," he said. "The organisation must now be turning its attention to British agents—with you as the No. 1 victim."

"Picked killers dispose of me on Alger while the main group snatch the general somewhere between Rome and Naples," mused Drake.

X was about to reply when Marston, who was slumped in a chair, suddenly moaned: "I have to radio a signal that the plane has taken off . . . nothing must prevent this . . . it is an order . . . I must radio the signal at eleven-fifty p.m."

Drake said gently: "It's all right Marston—we all fully understand and you shall make the call. It is an order from VM and must be obeyed without question."

Marston's eyes flickered, then a relaxed expression moved on his face. "Yes, yes," he

replied eagerly. "I am glad that you understand. Then all is well?"

"Certainly," murmured Drake. "You have the transmitter at home and in excellent working order, of course? VM would expect that."

Marston nodded. "VM will radio me first, then I give the signal that the plane has taken off," he said.

Drake dropped a kindly hand on the other's shoulder. "Then it shall be just as VM desires, old friend," he said.

They left a man with Marston and returned to the Chief's room.

"He's still in a brainwashed state," Drake said slowly. "But I don't believe for an instant that I've tricked him into believing we're willing to let him go ahead. The moment he starts transmitting tonight he'll give the alarm!"

"So I imagine, Drake. If we let him broadcast he'll give the game away—but if we stop him the result will be pretty much the same."

Suddenly Drake chuckled.

"I have a friend who makes quite a fat living imitating voices and dialects on television," he said. "What does that suggest, sir?"

"H'm," X rejoined. "Your friend could imitate Marston's voice and put over any false message we want. But it means bringing in an outsider, you know."

"Frankly, I don't see that it matters, sir. In any event, we appear to have no other way out. When van Manshuis comes through let Marston make his identifying call-sign . . . then gag him while my chum reads a prepared message announcing that I am on my way to Alger."

X nodded. "Yes, we'll do that. I take it you also have something else you want me to agree to?"

"Why, yes. I suggest we drop Barling on Alger—and at the same time have a small naval party land there. Between them they should be able to round up the killers at the villa!"

"And just where will you be while all this is going on?"

"In Naples," answered the Danger Man.

* * *

He caught a regular jet flight at six p.m. Two hours and fifty minutes later he was going through passport control at Capodichino Airport.

In another five minutes a taxi was speeding

him down the *autostrada* to the city centre. He checked-in at the Albergo Continentale, went up to his room and took from his baggage a small but powerful combined radio receiver and transmitter operating on ultra-short-wave frequency.

He gave the arranged call-sign: *Daffodil to Red Rose . . . Daffodil to Red Rose . . .*

Then came X's voice: "Gladys leaving home ten o'clock tomorrow morning, can be met any venue *en route* ascertained to be correct. Kindly re-contact twelve midnight. Over and out."

The message, decoded, announced that General Statham would start his car journey at ten a.m. the following day, with the rider that Drake should get into radio contact with Security at midnight to report the ascertained location of the ambush.

That left him two hours. His immediate move was to hire a car—and a fast one. He chose an all-white Alfa-Romeo. Then he called Arnaldo Barretto in Rome. Barretto was an Italian newspaperman specialising in gossip stories about the famous and the infamous who thronged the gay Via Veneto in the heart of Rome.

In a few seconds Barretto's amiable voice came down the wire. "*Buona sera, signor,*" he cried. Then, in flawless English: "Welcome back to Roma, my dear John. Where are you speaking from?"

"Napoli," said the Danger Man.

"Napoli!" answered Barretto with feigned disgust. "It is nothing! Roma is where you should be, my friend, renewing our old acquaintance. I suppose," the Italian added with a chuckle, "it is information you are after, *si?*"

"*Si,*" responded the Danger Man. "You never miss a new face on the Via Veneto. Tell me—do you know a Dutchman named Carl van Manshuis?"

"Alas, no."

"Aged about forty, six feet tall, heavily built, blonde hair going grey at the temples, invariably wears blue suits, has rings on two fingers of the left hand, may be accompanied by two or more other men—one of them small with dark shining hair and a pale sharp face."

Barretto made an exclamation. "I have seen such a big one several times in the company you describe," he said. "In fact, I approached him with the idea of writing a paragraph in my

newspaper column. He is known here as Jan Kooren, a diamond merchant on holiday from Amsterdam. He wasn't much interested in being written-up and refused to be photographed."

"Where he is living in Rome?" asked Drake.

"It is on the Via Dallesandro near the Tiber, Number Thirteen. The so-unlucky number, eh?"

"I hope so," replied Drake grimly.

He hung up, went into the hotel restaurant and ate a late dinner—*pasta asciutta, costoletta di vitello* and *gelato*, with a glass of *vino bianco*. Then a stroll on the waterfront near the Castel Nuova and it was time to re-contact London.

Effectively, what the Chief said was: "The plane took off as arranged. Marston gave his identifying signal. We immediately silenced him and your friend conveyed a fake message that General Statham would begin his drive to Naples at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, instead of ten, which is the real time. He said no more than that, then cut out."

Drake asked succinctly: "What's the wavelength we used for transmitting the message, sir?"

The Chief told him, adding: "They're operating on the same one. Why?"

"It's just an idea I have, sir," answered Drake.

He made sensitive adjustments to the radio and began transmitting, repeating the call-signal that Marston had used. For a few moments nothing happened.

Then, quite distinctly, he heard a voice: "209, is that you . . . come in, 209. . . ."

With a sardonic grin, Drake merely repeated the call-signal—then deliberately faked static interference as he switched over again to receiving.

"209, come in . . . 209, what is wrong . . . what is wrong? Re-call immediately . . ." the voice rasped.

Drake switched off completely, his grin widening. He had no kind of doubt that he had achieved his first objective—to throw van Manshuis and his henchmen into a state of nervous speculation which would keep them up and about half the night, if not all of it.

The time would be more than sufficient for him to drive to Rome. His original intention had been to work northwards from Naples to intercept the kidnap bid somewhere between



the two cities—if van Manshuis had indicated the exact venue when he called Marston. But that had been a long shot. Manshuis hadn't indicated anything. Now it was up to Drake to find out.

He went out of the hotel, got into the Alfa-Romeo and started driving. The magnificent *autostrada* was carrying little traffic at this advanced hour and Drake held the speedometer needle at the equivalent of 93 m.p.h. virtually all the way.

Even so, it was into the small hours when he reached Rome. Now, even the brilliant Via Veneto was deserted like the rest of the great capital—a maze of silent, echoing boulevards and streets, the vast medieval palaces grimly shuttered, a thousand bars and wine shops mute and dark while all Rome slept.

Except, thought Drake, a group of sinister

men in Number Thirteen on the plushy Via Dallesandro.

He drove out, gently now, towards the broad sweep of the Tiber and the soaring grandeur of the Castel San Angelo brooding over the ancient river. Half a dozen blocks south of the Via Dallesandro he cut out the engine and cruised the car into a dim alley with no more sound than the subdued slap of the tyres on the cobbles.

From here on he walked, his eyes alert for the first sign of movement.

Number Thirteen was midway down the Via Dallesandro. Lights showed behind swung curtains. No other lights glittered anywhere on the street. It was a ground floor apartment with a private entrance behind a black wrought-iron gate picked out with gilt.

The Danger Man went past it, down the side of the building. He climbed over a low stone wall, dropping softly on to the smooth turf below. Then he made his way back along the side of the apartment until he reached the first of the lighted windows.

He went down on hands and knees and reaching up one hand, inserted the point of what looked like a fountain-pen in the outer sill of the window. The pen was a 'bugging' device powered by a normal hearing-aid battery and operating on standard FM frequency with a range of one hundred feet.

He took out a radio receiver scarcely larger than a match-box, tuned-in and plugged the microphone into his ear.

The heavy voice of Carl van Manshuis was speaking.

"We haf now tried to re-contact 209 over a period of hours and it is no use. I tell you, Landis, something is wrong!"

Then another voice, which Drake recognised as that of Landis—the shining-haired man Barretto had observed with van Manshuis.

"What can possibly be wrong, Carl? Drake will have been rubbed-out by now and no one knows that we are aware of General Statham's plans. . . ."

"I tell you I do not like it," van Manshuis grated. "I tell you vat I think . . . I think 209 try to contact us again and is caught by the British Security, that is vat I think."

There was a short silence, then van Manshuis went on: "209 supplied us with the information

that General Statham was due to go to Naples with the secret dossier. If the British have trapped him they will notify the Americans and the general's entire plans will be changed."

"That's no more than a deduction . . ."

"So it is the deduction? It is also most likely the right deduction. So I change my plan also . . . we do not wait for the general to start out in the morning . . . we get him now!"

Landis made a low whistling sound. "We'll never get away with it, boss," he whispered.

The Dutchman went on as though the other hadn't even spoken: "At this hour only the night *concierge* will be on duty. Him we deal with so easily . . . the guard we shoot dead!"

"Yeah? The blast will wake up half the darned hotel!"

Van Manshuis laughed harshly. "You think I am the fool?" he sneered. There was a sound like a drawer being opened and he resumed: "You observe this weapon? So, is goot. It is a pistol, but unlike no other pistol you haf ever seen . . . it fires poison bullets and fires them electrically without even a pouff of sound!"

"How many of them have you got?" Landis asked in a low voice.

"Four—enough for all of us. But this will be what you call the two-man job, just myself and you, my friend. We shoot the guard immediately, then enter the suite and kill the two aides. That leaves the general at our disposal—and him we place in the car. Then we inject him, as we did Marston and drive for the Swiss frontier *en route* for our headquarters in Amsterdam. We change the general's clothing, place a false passport in his pocket and so he becomes a companion with whom we are returning from a charming holiday. Once in Amsterdam he will assist us in any little questions we have about his secret papers—or else! How you like that, my friend?"

Landis whistled again. "It's foolproof, even better than our original plan to ambush him between here and Naples."

"No, is not better because now we have to enter a hotel and kill a guard. But it will work, do not doubt that," van Manshuis answered. "There is but one other thing. One matter we have to attend to first—Herr Lessing!"

"We brought him here trussed up in the false base of the car so that we could question him. . . ."

"And he has not answered our questions, not even under pressure," van Manshuis said. ". . . now we do not need him at all!"

Drake felt cold sweat starting to roll down his back. He snapped the tiny radio off and raced across the turf to the back of the apartment. There were two large windows and, between them, a much smaller one.

There was no time left for hesitancy. Drake tore up a loose piece of crazy paving, wrapped his jacket round it and thudded dully against the panes. The splintered glass tinkled, but not loudly—and in another second the Danger Man was inside the room.

A pencil-flashlight showed him the electric light switches. He thumbed one down and saw Lessing struggling on a low divan. His hands were trussed together and one of his feet was roped to a leg of the divan.

He was pale and drawn, unshaven and with dishevelled hair. He opened his mouth, but Drake held up a warning hand.

He slashed the bonds on Lessing's wrists and feet and helped him into a sitting position.

He broke off. They could both hear footsteps approaching beyond the doorway.

Drake flattened himself against the wall as the door swung open. Van Manshuis came through followed by Landis.

"We haf come to . . ." But the big Dutchman



never finished the sentence. It merged in a muttered imprecation.

"He's untied, boss!" shouted Landis. "He's untied himself. . . ."

From behind them Drake said coolly: "What you gentlemen need is a cigarette!"

The spy wheeled, his eyes bulging.

"Drake!" he screeched. "John Drake . . . but . . . but it is not possible. . . ."

The Danger Man grinned, but his gaze never wavered from them for a split second.

"No doubt you will both wish me to explain," he murmured. "But, first, let us light up!"

He held a packet out in his right hand.

Suddenly, Carl van Manshuis laughed.

"So you walk unarmed into my parlour like the fly, eh?" he said. "Or like the stupid fools the English always are. You think to defeat us with the blows from the fists . . . while I haf *this*!"

He brought the silent pistol up, aiming.

"But before I squeeze the little trigger perhaps you tell us how you come to be here, Herr Drake?"

"Of course, why not?" answered Drake calmly. "You have been sending false information, using Lessing's mailing method. It almost succeeded—but not quite. Permit me to enlighten you gentlemen."

Van Manshuis listened without expression.



"Finally," added Drake, "the stupid British Intelligence played you at your own game. A neat playback you might call it, in which the time of the general's departure was falsely altered."

"So?" jeered van Manshuis. "But I haf overcome that."

"Indeed, yes. You were going to take him from his bed in his hotel within the next thirty minutes. . . ."

"What! How you know that?" the Dutchman snarled.

"Another kind of playback," said the Danger Man amiably.

"Kill him!" raged Landis. "The others will be here in an hour. They can throw his body in the Tiber . . . and Lessing's as well!"

Van Manshuis chuckled evilly. "I shall enjoy watching Herr Drake die," he said. "I am only sorry that in the circumstances it must be too quick an exit. So it is farewell, Herr Drake. . . ."

"And you won't even have a final smoke with me?" sighed the Danger Man.

"Kill him, boss!" yelled Landis.

Drake smiled. "I insist that you each have one—or, better still, share one," he said.

As he spoke he thumbed a tiny button at the base of the innocent-looking packet. From the false tip of one of the protruding cigarettes a bluish jet shot out, spreading in a cloud over their faces.

In the same instant van Manshuis and Landis were reeling about the room, their hands groping wildly. Then, uncannily, they began to laugh . . . great rolling waves of absurd laughter.

Drake grabbed the silent pistol, flung the window wide open and stood there with Lessing inhaling the clear air. Van Manshuis and Landis, who had received the full blast of the laughing-gas, were still milling around—but now their absurd laughter was fading.

Lessing eyed them grimly.

"This time they don't have a thing to laugh about," he said. "By the way, what on earth do we do with them?"

"Why," answered Drake, raising his eyebrows, "we take them into the presence of General George Statham, U.S. Military Intelligence, of course."

Lessing seemed puzzled. "Why the 'of course'?" he demanded.

"Well," murmured Drake, "they *wanted* to see him, didn't they?"





