

by the park, the procession had already started it moved like a little dark trickle towards the river. The steel hat on the coffin lay blackened and unreflecting under the winter sun, and the rescue party didn't keep step with the post. It was like a parody of a State funeral—but this *was* a State funeral. The brown leaves from the park were blowing across the road, and the drinkers coming out at closing time from the "Duke of Rockingham" took off their hats. Henry said, "I told her not to do it" and the wind blew the sound of footsteps back to them. It was as if they had surrendered her to the people, to whom she had never belonged before.

Henry said suddenly, "Excuse me, old man," and started after her. He hadn't got his helmet, his hair was beginning to go grey, he broke into a trot, for fear after all of being left behind. He was rejoining his wife and his post. Arthur Rowe was left alone. He turned his money over in his pocket and found there wasn't much of it.

#### CHAPTER SEVEN

### A LOAD OF BOOKS

"Taken as we are by surprise, our resistance will little avail."  
*The Lstlie Duke*

#### I

EVEN if a man has been contemplating the advantages of suicide for two years, he takes time to make his final decision—to move from theory to

practice Rowe couldn't simply go then and there and drop into the river—besides, he would have been pulled out again. And yet watching the procession recede he could see no other solution. He was wanted by the police for murder, and he had thirty-five shillings in his pocket. He couldn't go to the bank and he had no friend but Henry, of course, he could wait till Henry came back, but the cold-blooded egotism of that act repelled him. It would be simpler and less disgusting to die. A brown leaf settled on his coat—that according to the old story meant money, but the old story didn't say how soon.

He walked along the Embankment towards Chelsea Bridge, the tide was low and the sea-gulls walked delicately on the mud. One noticed the absence of perambulators and dogs: the only dog in sight looked stray and uncared for and evasive, a barrage balloon staggered up from behind the park trees: its huge nose bent above the thin winter foliage, and then it turned its dirty old backside and climbed.

It wasn't only that he had no money: he had no longer what he called a home—somewhere to shelter from people who might know him. He missed Mrs Purvis coming in with the tea, he used to count the days by her: punctuated by her knock they would slide smoothly towards the end—annihilation, forgiveness, punishment or peace. He missed *David Copperfield* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, he could no longer direct his sense of pity towards the fictitious sufferings of little Nell—it roamed around and saw too many objects—too many rats that needed to be killed. And he was one of them.

Leaning over the Embankment in the time-honoured attitude of would-be suicides, he began to go into the details. He wanted as far as possible to be unobtrusive, now that his anger had died it seemed to him a pity that he hadn't drunk that cup of tea—he didn't want to shock any innocent person with the sight of an ugly death. And there were very few suicides which were not ugly. Murder was infinitely more graceful because it was the murderer's object not to shock—a murderer went to infinite pains to make death look quiet, peaceful, happy. Everything, he thought, would be so much easier if he had only a little money.

Of course, he could go to the bank and let the police get him. It seemed probable that then he would be hanged. But the idea of hanging for a crime he hadn't committed still had power to anger him. If he killed himself it would be for a crime of which he was guilty. He was haunted by a primitive idea of Justice. He wanted to conform, he had always wanted to conform.

A murderer is regarded by the conventional world as something almost monstrous, but a murderer to himself is only an ordinary man—a man who takes either tea or coffee for breakfast, a man who likes a good book and perhaps reads biography rather than fiction, a man who at a regular hour goes to bed, who tries to develop good physical habits but possibly suffers from constipation, who prefers either dogs or cats and has certain views about politics.

It is only if the murderer is a good man that he can be regarded as monstrous.

Arthur Rowe was monstrous. His early childhood

had been passed before the first world war, and the impressions of childhood are ineffaceable. He was brought up to believe that it was wrong to inflict pain, but he was often ill, his teeth were bad and he suffered agonies from an inefficient dentist he knew as Mr Griggs. He learned before he was seven what pain was like—he wouldn't willingly allow even a rat to suffer it. In childhood we live under the brightness of immortality—heaven is as near and actual as the seaside. Behind the complicated details of the world stand the simplicities. God is good, the grown-up man or woman knows the answer to every question, there is such a thing as truth, and justice is as measured and faultless as a clock. Our heroes are simple: they are brave, they tell the truth, they are good swordsmen and they are never in the long run really defeated. That is why no later books satisfy us like those which were read to us in childhood—for those promised a world of great simplicity of which we knew the rules, but the later books are complicated and contradictory with experience, they are formed out of our own disappointing memories—of the V C in the police-court dock, of the faked income tax return, the sins in corners, and the hollow voice of the man we despise talking to us of courage and purity. The little duke is dead and betrayed and forgotten, we cannot recognise the villain and we suspect the hero and the world is a small cramped place. The two great popular statements of faith are "What a small place the world is" and "I'm a stranger here myself."

But Rowe was a murderer—as other men are poets. The statues still stood. He was prepared to do any-

thing to save the innocent or to punish the guilty. He believed against all the experience of life that somewhere there was justice, and justice condemned him. He analysed his motives minutely and always summed up against himself. He told himself, leaning over the wall, as he had told himself a hundred times, that it was he who had not been able to bear his wife's pain—and not she. Once, it was true, in the early days of the disease, she had broken down, said she wanted to die, not to wait—that was hysteria. Later it was her endurance and her patience which he had found most unbearable. He was trying to escape his own pain, not hers, and at the end she had guessed or half-guessed what it was he was offering her. She was scared and afraid to ask. How could you go on living with a man if you had once asked him whether he had put poison into your evening drink? Far easier when you love him and are tired of pain just to take the hot milk and sleep. But he could never know whether the fear had been worse than the pain, and he could never tell whether she might not have preferred any sort of life to death. He had taken the stick and killed the rat, and saved himself the agony of watching. He had gone over the same questions and the same answers daily, ever since the moment when she took the milk from him and said, "How queer it tastes," and lay back and tried to smile. He would have liked to stay beside her till she slept, but that would have been unusual, and he must avoid anything unusual, so he had to leave her to die alone. And she would have liked to ask him to stay—he was sure of that—but that would have been unusual too.

After all, in an hour he would be coming up to bed  
Convention held them at the moment of death He  
had in mind the police questions, "Why did you  
stay?" and it was quite possible that she too was  
deliberately playing his game against the police  
There were so many things he would never know  
But when the police did ask questions he hadn't the  
heart or the energy to tell them lies Perhaps if he  
had lied to them a little they would have hanged  
him

It was about time now to bring the trial to an  
end

## II

"They can't spoil Whistler's Thames," a voice said  
"I'm sorry," Rowe said, "I didn't catch        "  
"It's safe underground Bomb-proof vaults "

Somewhere, Rowe thought, he had seen that face  
before the thin depressed grey moustache, the  
bulging pockets, out of which the man now took a  
piece of bread and threw it towards the mud, before  
it had reached the river the gulls had risen one  
out-distanced the others, caught it and sailed on,  
down past the stranded barges and the paper mill,  
a white scrap blown towards the blackened chimneys  
of Lots Road . . .

"Come, my pretties," the man said, and his hand  
suddenly became a landing ground for sparrows  
"They know uncle," he said, "they know uncle " He  
put a bit of bread between his lips and they hovered  
round his mouth giving little pecks at it as though  
they were kissing him

"It must be difficult in war-time," Rowe said, "to provide for all your nephews"

"Yes, indeed," the man said—and when he opened his mouth you saw his teeth were in a shocking condition, black stumps like the remains of something destroyed by fire. He sprinkled some crumbs over his old brown hat and a new flock of sparrows landed there. "Strictly illegal," he said, "I dare say. If Lord Woolton knew." He put a foot up on a heavy suitcase, and a sparrow perched on his knee. He was overgrown with birds.

"I've seen you before," Rowe said.

"I dare say."

"Twice to-day now I come to think of it."

"Come, my pretties," the elderly man said.

"In the auction-room in Chancery Lane."

A pair of mild eyes turned on him. "It's a small world."

"Do you buy books?" Rowe asked, thinking of the shabby clothes.

"Buy and sell," the man said. He was acute enough to read Rowe's thoughts. "Working clothes," he said. "Books carry a deal of dust."

"You go in for old books?"

"Landscape gardening's my speciality. Eighteenth century. Fullove, Fulham Road, Battersea."

"Do you find enough customers?"

"There are more than you'd think." He suddenly opened his arms wide and shooed the birds away as though they were children with whom he'd played long enough. "But everything's depressed," he said, "these days. What they want to fight for I don't understand." He touched the suitcase tenderly with

his foot "I've got a load of books here," he said, "I got from a lord's house Salvage The state of some of them would make you weep, but others I don't say it wasn't a good bargain I'd show them you, only I'm afraid of bird-droppings First bargain I've had for months In the old days I'd have treasured them, treasured them Waited till the Americans came in the summer Now I'm glad of any chance of a turnover If I don't deliver these to a customer at Regal Court before five, I lose a sale He wants to take them down to the country before the raid starts I haven't a watch, sir Could you tell me the time?"

"It's only four o'clock "

"I ought to go on," Mr Fullove said "Books are heavy though and I feel just tired out It's been a long day You'll excuse me, sir, if I sit down a moment" He sat himself down on the suitcase and drew out a ragged packet of Tenners "Will you smoke, sir? You look a bit done, if I may say so, yourself "

"Oh, I'm all right" The mild exhausted ageing eyes appealed to him He said, "Why don't you take a taxi?"

"Well, sir, I work on a very narrow margin these days If I take a taxi that's a dollar gone And then when he gets the books to the country, perhaps he won't want one of them "

"They are landscape gardening?"

"That's right It's a lost art, sir There's a lot more to it, you know, than flowers That's what gardening means to-day," he said with contempt, "flowers "

"You don't care for flowers?"

"Oh, flowers," the bookseller said, "are all right. You've got to have flowers."

"I'm afraid," Rowe said, "I don't know much about gardening—except flowers."

"It's the tricks they played." The mild eyes looked up with cunning enthusiasm. "The machinery."

"Machinery?"

"They had statues that spurted water at you when you passed, and the grottoes—the things they thought up for grottoes. Why, in a good garden you weren't safe anywhere."

"I should have thought you were meant to feel safe in a garden."

"They didn't think so, sir," the bookseller said, blowing the stale smell of carious teeth enthusiastically in Rowe's direction. Rowe wished he could get away, but automatically with that wish the sense of pity worked and he stayed.

"And then," the bookseller said, "there were the tombs . . ."

"Did they spurt water too?"

"Oh no. They gave the touch of solemnity, sir, the *memento mori*."

"Black thoughts," Rowe said, "in a black shade?"

"It's how you look at it, isn't it, sir?" But there was no doubt that the bookseller looked at it with a kind of gloating. He brushed a little bird-lime off his jacket and said, "You don't have a taste, sir, for the Sublime—or the Ridiculous?"

"Perhaps," Rowe said, "I prefer human nature plain."

The little man giggled. "I get your meaning, sir. Oh, they had room for human nature, believe me,

in the grottoes Not one without a comfortable couch They never forgot the comfortable couch," and again with sly enthusiasm he blew his carious breath towards his companion

"Don't you think," Rowe said, "you should be getting on? You mustn't let me rob you of a sale," and immediately he reacted from his own harshness seeing only the mild tired eyes, thinking, poor devil, he's had a weary day, each one to his taste after all, he liked me. That was a claim he could never fail to honour because it astonished him

"I suppose I ought, sir" He rose and brushed away some crumbs the birds had left. "I enjoy a good talk," he said "It's not often you can get a good talk these days It's a rush between shelters."

"You sleep in a shelter?"

"To tell you the truth, sir," he said as if he were confessing to an idiosyncrasy, "I can't bear the bombs But you don't sleep as you ought in a shelter" The weight of the suitcase cramped him he looked very old under its weight. "Some people are not considerate. The snores and squabbles . "

"Why did you come into the park? It's not your shortest way?"

"I wanted a rest, sir—and the trees invited, and the birds"

"Here," Rowe said, "you'd better let me take that There's no bus this side of the river "

"Oh, I couldn't bother you, sir I really couldn't." But there was no genuine resistance in him, the suitcase was certainly very heavy folios of landscape gardening weighed a lot. He excused himself,

"There's nothing so heavy as books sir—unless it's bricks "

They came out of the park and Rowe changed the weight from one arm to the other. He said, "You know it's getting late for your appointment."

"It's my tongue that did it," the old bookseller said with distress. "I think—I really think I shall have to risk the fare "

"I think you will "

"If I could give you a lift, sir, it would make it more worth while. Are you going in my direction?"

"Oh, in any," Rowe said.

They got a taxi at the next corner, and the bookseller leant back with an air of bashful relaxation. He said, "If you make up your mind to pay for a thing, enjoy it that's my idea "

But in the taxi with the windows shut it wasn't easy for another to enjoy it, the smell of dental decay was very strong. Rowe talked for fear of showing his distaste. "And have you gone in yourself for landscape gardening?"

"Well, not what you would call the garden part." The man kept peering through the window—it occurred to Rowe that his simple enjoyment rang a little false. He said, "I wonder, sir, if you'd do me one last favour. The stairs at Regal Court—well, they are a caution to a man of my age. And no one offers somebody like me a hand. I deal in books, but to them, sir, I'm just a tradesman. If you wouldn't mind taking up the bag for me. You needn't stay a moment. Just ask for Mr Travers in number six. He's expecting the bag—there's nothing you have to do but leave it with him." He took a quick

sideways look to catch a refusal on the wing "And afterwards, sir, you've been very kind, I'd give you a lift anywhere you wanted to go"

"You don't know where I want to go," Rowe said

"I'll risk that, sir In for a penny, in for a pound"

"I might take you at your word and go a very long way."

"Try me Just try me, sir," the other said with forced glee "I'd sell you a book and make it even." Perhaps it was the man's servility—or it may have been only the man's smell—but Rowe felt unwilling to oblige him "Why not get the commissionaire to take it up for you?" he asked

"I'd never trust him to deliver—straightaway"

"You could see it taken up yourself"

"It's the stars, sir, at the end of a long day" He lay back in his seat and said, "If you must know, sir, I oughtn't to have been carrying it," and he made a movement towards his heart, a gesture for which there was no answer.

Well, Rowe thought, I may as well do one good deed before I go away altogether—but all the same he didn't like it. Certainly the man looked sick and tired enough to excuse any artifice, but he had been too successful Why, Rowe thought, should I be sitting here in a taxi with a stranger promising to drag a case of eighteenth-century folios to the room of another stranger? He felt directed, controlled, moulded, by some agency with a surrealist imagination.

They drew up outside Regal Court—an odd pair, both dusty, both unshaven Rowe had agreed to nothing, but he knew there was no choice; he hadn't

the hard strength of mind to walk away and leave the little man to drag his own burden. He got out under the suspicious eyes of the commissioner and lugged the heavy case after him. "Have you got a room booked," the commissioner asked and added dubiously, "sir?"

"I'm not staying here. I'm leaving this case for Mr. Travers."

"Ask at the desk, please," the commissioner said, and leapt to serve a more savoury carload.

The bookseller had been right, it was a hard pull up the long wide stairs of the hotel. You felt they had been built for women in evening-dress to walk slowly down, the architect had been too romantic. He hadn't seen a man with two days' beard dragging a load of books. Rowe counted fifty steps.

The clerk at the counter eyed him carefully. Before Rowe had time to speak he said, "We are quite full up, I'm afraid."

"I've brought some books for a Mr. Travers in room six."

"Oh yes," the clerk said. "He was expecting you. He's out, but he gave orders"—you could see that he didn't like the orders—"that you were to be allowed in."

"I don't want to wait. I just want to leave the books."

"Mr. Travers gave orders that you were to wait."

"I don't care a damn what orders Mr. Travers gave."

"Page," the clerk called sharply, "show this man to number six. Mr. Travers. Mr. Travers has given orders that he's to be allowed in." He had very few

phrases and never varied them. Rowe wondered on how few he could get through life, marry and have children. He followed at the page's heels down interminable corridors lit by concealed lighting, once a woman in pink mules and a dressing-gown squealed as they went by. It was like the corridor of a monstrous Cunarder—one expected to see stewards and stewardesses, but instead a small stout Jew wearing a bowler hat padded to meet them from what seemed a hundred yards away, then suddenly veered aside into the intricacies of the building. "Do you unreel a thread of cotton?" Rowe asked, swaying under the weight of the case which the page never offered to take, and feeling the strange light-headedness which comes, we are told, to dying men. But the back, the tight little blue trousers and the bum-freezer jacket, just went on ahead. It seemed to Rowe that one could be lost here for a lifetime. Only the clerk at the desk would have a clue to one's whereabouts, and it was doubtful whether he ever penetrated very far in person into the enormous wilderness. Water would come regularly out of taps, and at dusk one could emerge and collect tinned foods. He was touched by a forgotten sense of adventure, watching the numbers go backwards, 49, 48, 47, once they took a short cut which led them through the 60's to emerge suddenly among the 30's.

A door in the passage was ajar and odd sounds came through it as though someone were alternately whistling and sighing, but nothing to the page seemed strange. He just went on. He was a child of this building. People of every kind came in for a night with or without luggage and then went away.

again, a few died here and the bodies were removed unobtrusively by the service lift. Divorce suits bloomed at certain seasons, co-respondents gave tips and detectives out-trumped them with larger tips—because their tips went on the expense account. The page took everything for granted.

Rowe said, "You'll lead me back?" At each corner arrows pointed above the legend AIR RAID SHELTER. Coming on them every few minutes one got the impression that one was walking in circles.

"Mr Travers left orders you was to stay."

"But I don't take orders from Mr Travers," Rowe said.

This was a modern building, the silence was admirable and disquieting. Instead of bells ringing, lights went off and on. One got the impression that all the time people were signalling news of great importance that couldn't wait. This silence—now that they were out of earshot of the whistle and the sigh—was like that of a stranded liner, the engines had stopped, and in the sinister silence you listened for the faint depressing sound of lapping water.

"Here's six," the boy said.

"It must take a long time to get to a hundred."

"Third floor," the boy said, "but Mr Travers gave orders."

"Never mind," Rowe said. "Forget I said it."

Without the chromium number you could hardly have told the difference between the door and the wall, it was as if the inhabitants had been walled up. The page put in a master-key and pushed the wall in. Rowe said, "I'll just put the case down." But th-

door had shut behind him Mr Travers, who seemed to be a much-respected man, had given his orders and if he didn't obey them he would have to find his way back alone There was an exhilaration in the absurd episode, he had made up his mind now about everything—justice as well as the circumstances of the case demanded that he should kill himself (he had only to decide the method), and now he could enjoy the oddness of existence, regret, anger, hatred, too many emotions had obscured for too long the silly shape of life He opened the sitting-room door  
“Well,” he said, “this beats all”

It was Anna Hilfe

He asked, “Have you come to see Mr Travers too? Are you interested in landscape gardening?”

She said, “I came to see you”

It was really his first opportunity to take her in Very small and thin, she looked too young for all the things she must have seen, and now taken out of the office frame she no longer looked efficient—as though efficiency were an imitative game she could only play with adult properties, a desk, a telephone, a black suit Without them she looked just decorative and breakable, but he knew that life hadn't been able to break her All it had done was to put a few wrinkles round eyes as straightforward as a child's

“Do you like the mechanical parts of gardening too?” he asked “Statues that spurt water”

His heart beat at the sight of her, as though he were a young man and this his first assignation outside a cinema, in a Lyons Corner House . or in an inn-yard in a country town where dances were held She was wearing a pair of shabby blue trousers

ready for the night's raid and a wine-coloured jersey  
He thought with melancholy that her thighs were  
the prettiest he had ever seen

"I don't understand," she said

"How did you know I was going to cart a load of  
books here for Mr Travers—whoever Mr Travers  
is? I didn't know myself until ten minutes ago"

"I don't know what excuse they thought up for  
you," she said "Just go Please"

She looked the kind of child you want to torment  
—in a kindly way, in the office she had been ten  
years older He said, "They do people well here,  
don't they You get a whole flat for a night You  
can sit down and read a book and cook a dinner "

A pale brown curtain divided the living-room in  
half, he drew it aside and there was the double bed,  
a telephone on a little table, a bookcase He asked,  
"What's through here?" and opened a door "You  
see," he said, "they throw in a kitchen, stove and all "  
He came back into the sitting-room and said, "One  
could live here and forget it wasn't one's home " He  
no longer felt care-free, it had been a mood which  
had lasted minutes only

She said, "Have you noticed anything?"

"How do you mean?"

"You don't notice much for a journalist "

"You know I was a journalist?"

"My brother checked up on everything "

"On everything?"

"Yes " She said again, "You didn't notice any-  
thing?"

"No "

"Mr Travers doesn't seem to have left behind him

so much as a used piece of soap Look in the bathroom The soap's wrapped up in its paper "

Rowe went to the front door and bolted it He said, "Whoever he is, he can't get in now till we've finished talking Miss Hilfe, will you please tell me slowly—I'm a bit stupid, I think—first how you knew I was here and secondly why you came?"

She said obstinately, "I won't tell you how As to why—I've asked you to go away quickly I was right last time, wasn't I, when I telephoned "

"Yes, you were right But why worry? You said you knew all about me, didn't you?"

"There's no harm in you," she said simply

"Knowing everything," he said, "you wouldn't worry "

"I like justice," she said, as if she were confessing an eccentricity.

"Yes," he said, "it's a good thing if you can get it "

"But They don't "

"Do you mean Mrs Bellairs," he asked, "and Canon Topling ?" It was too complicated he hadn't any fight left He sat down in the arm-chair—they allowed in the ersatz home one arm-chair and a couch

"Canon Topling is quite a good man," she said and suddenly smiled. "It's too silly," she said, "the things we are saying "

"You must tell your brother," Rowe said, "that he's not to bother about me any more I'm giving up Let them murder whom they like—I'm out of it I'm going away."

"Where?"

"It's all right," he said "They'll never find me I

know a place so safe But they won't want to I think all they were really afraid of was that I should find *them* I'll never know now, I suppose, what it was all about The cake and Mrs Bellairs Wonderful Mrs Bellairs "

"They are bad," she said, as if that simple phrase disposed of them altogether "I'm glad you are going away It's not your business " To his amazement she added, "I don't want you to be hurt any more "

"Why," he said, "you know everything about me You've checked up " He used her own childish word "I'm bad too "

"Mr Rowe," she said, "I have seen so many bad people where I come from, and you don't fit you haven't the right marks You worry too much about what's over and done People say English justice is good Well, they didn't hang you It was a mercy killing, that was what the papers called it."

"You're read all the papers?"

"All of them I've even seen the pictures they took You put your newspaper up to hide your face "

He listened to her with dumb astonishment No one had ever talked to him openly about it It was painful, but it was the sort of pain you feel when iodine is splashed on a wound—the sort of pain you can bear She said, "Where I come from I have seen a lot of killings, but they were none of them mercy killings Don't think so much Give yourself a chance "

"I think," he said, "we'd better decide what to do about Mr Travers "

"Just go That's all "

"And what will you do?"

"Go too I don't want any trouble either "

Rowe said, "If they are your enemies, if they've made you suffer, I'll stay and talk to Mr Travers "

"Oh, no," she said "They are not mine This isn't my country "

He said, "Who are they? I'm in a fog Are they your people or my people?"

"They are the same everywhere," she said She put out a hand and touched his arm tentatively—as if she wanted to know what he felt like "You think you are so bad," she said, "but it was only because you couldn't bear the pain But *they* can bear pain—other people's pain—endlessly They are the people who don't care "

He could have gone on listening to her for hours, it seemed a pity that he had to kill himself, but he had no choice in the matter Unless he left it to the hangman He said, "I suppose if I stay till Mr Travers comes, he'll hand me over to the police "

"I don't know what they'll do "

"And that little smooth man with the books was in it too What a lot of them there are "

"An awful lot More every day "

"But why should they think I'd stay—when once I'd left the books?" He took her wrist—a small bony wrist—and said sadly, "You aren't in it too, are you?"

"No," she said, not pulling away from him, just stating a fact. He had the impression that she didn't tell lies She might have a hundred vices, but not the commonest one of all

"I didn't think you were," he said, "but that means—it means they meant us both to be here "

She said, "Oh," as if he'd hit her.

"They knew we'd waste time talking, explaining. They want us both, but the *police* don't want you." He exclaimed, "You're coming away with me now."

"Yes."

"If we ~~are~~ not too late. They seem to time things well." He went into the hall and very carefully and softly slid the bolt, opened the door a crack and then very gently shut it again. He said, "Just now I was thinking how easy it would be to get lost in this hotel, in all these long passages."

"Yes?"

"We shan't get lost. There's someone at the end of the passage waiting for us. His back's turned. I can't see his face."

"They do think of everything," she said.

He found his exhilaration returning. He had thought he was going to die to-day—but he wasn't, he was going to live, because he could be of use to someone again. He no longer felt that he was dragging round a valueless and ageing body. He said, "I don't see how they can starve us out. And they can't get in. Except through the window."

"No," Miss Hilfe said. "I've looked. They can't get in there. There's twelve feet of smooth wall."

"Then all we have to do is sit and wait. We might ring up the restaurant and order dinner. Lots of courses, and a good wine. Travers can pay. We'll begin with a very dry sherry."

"Yes," Miss Hilfe said, "if we were sure the right waiter would bring it."

He smiled. "You think of everything. It's the Continental training. What's your advice?"

"Ring up the clerk—we know him by sight. Make trouble about something. Insist that he must come along, and then we'll walk out with him."

"You're right," he said. "Of course that's the way."

He lifted the curtain and she followed him. "What are you going to say?"

"I don't know. Leave it to the moment. I'll think of something." He took up the receiver and listened and listened. He said, "I think the line's dead." He waited for nearly two minutes, but there was only silence.

"We *are* besieged," she said. "I wonder what they mean to do." They neither of them noticed that they were holding hands. It was as though they had been overtaken by the dark and had to feel their way.

He said, "We haven't got much in the way of weapons. You don't wear hatpins nowadays, and I suppose the police have got the only knife I've ever had." They came back hand in hand into the small living-room. "Let's be warm, any way," he said, "and turn on the fire. It's cold enough for a blizzard, and we've got the wolves outside."

She had let go his hand and was kneeling by the fire. She said, "It doesn't go on."

"You haven't put in the sixpence."

"I've put in a shilling."

It was cold and the room was darkening. The same thought struck both of them. "Try the light," she said, but his hand had already felt the switch. The light didn't go on.

"It's going to be very dark and very cold," he said. "Mr. Travers is not making us comfortable."

"Oh," Miss Hilfe said, putting her hand to her mouth like a child "I'm scared I'm sorry, but I *am* scared I don't like the dark "

"They can't do anything," Rowe said "The door's bolted They can't batter it down, you know This is a civilised hotel "

"Are you sure," Miss Hilfe said, "that there's no connecting door? In the kitchen "

A memory struck him He opened the kitchen door "Yes," he said "You're right again The tradesmen's entrance These are good flats "

"But you can bolt that too Please," Miss Hilfe said

Rowe came back He said gently, "There's only one flaw in this well-furnished flat The kitchen bolt is broken " He took her hand again quickly "Never mind," he said "We're imagining things This isn't Vienna, you know This is London We are in the majority This hotel is full of people—on *our* side " He repeated, "On our side They are all round us We've only to shout." The world was sliding rapidly towards night, like a torpedoed liner heeling too far over, she would soon take her last dive into darkness Already they were talking louder because they couldn't clearly see each other's faces.

"In half an hour," Miss Hilfe said, "the sirens will go And then they'll all go down into the basement, and the only ones left will be us—and them." Her hand felt very cold

"Then that's our chance," he said "When the sirens go, we go too with the crowd "

"We are at the end of the passage Perhaps there won't be a crowd How do you know there is anyone

left in this passage? They've thought of so much Don't you think they'll have thought of that? They've probably booked every room "

"We'll try," he said "If we had any weapon at all—a stick, a stone " He stopped and let her hand go "If those aren't books," he said, "perhaps they are bricks Bricks " He felt one of the catches "It isn't locked," he said "Now we'll see . " But they both looked at the suitcase doubtfully Efficiency is paralysing They had thought of everything, so wouldn't they have thought of this too?"

"I wouldn't touch it," she said

They felt the inertia a bird is supposed to feel before a snake a snake too knows all the answers

"They must make a mistake some time," he said

The dark was dividing them Very far away the guns grumbled

"They'll wait till the sirens," she said, "till everybody's down there, out of hearing "

"What's that?" he said He was getting jumpy himself

"What?"

"I think someone tried the handle "

"How near they are getting," she said

"By God," he said, "we aren't powerless Give me a hand with the couch " They stuck the end of it against the kitchen door They could hardly see a thing now, they were really in the dark "It's lucky," Miss Hilfe said, "that the stove's electric "

"But I don't think it is Why?"

"We've shut them out of here But they can turn on the gas . . ."

He said, "You ought to be in the game yourself.

The things you think of Here Give me a hand again We'll push this couch through into the kitchen " But they stopped almost before they started He said, "It's too late Somebody's in there " The tiniest click of a closing door was all they had heard

"What happens next?" he asked Memories of *The Little Duke* came incongruously back He said, "In the old days they always called on the castle to surrender "

"Don't," she whispered "Please They are listening "

"I'm getting tired of this cat and mouse act," he said "We don't even know he's in there They are frightening us with squeaking doors and the dark " He was moved by a slight hysteria He called out, "Come in, come in Don't bother to knock," but no one replied

He said angrily, "They've chosen the wrong man They think they can get everything by fear But you've checked up on me I'm a murderer, aren't I? You know that I'm not afraid to kill Give me any weapon. Just give me a brick " He looked at the suitcase

Miss Hilfe said, "You're right We've got to do something, even if it's the wrong thing Not just let them do everything Open it "

He gave her hand a quick nervous pressure and released it Then, as the sirens took up their nightly wail, he opened the lid of the suitcase. . . .