AFTER VERLOC

Part I

"How is your bombing case coming along?" asked Dr. Frung, igniting one of his Turkish cigarettes. "You were quite exercised about it a few months ago."

The Assistant Commissioner (Special Crimes) of the Metropolitan Police arched his back against hard wooden slats. His supple, serpentine frame fitted with difficulty into angular English chairs. The great curved mirror over the mantelpiece reflected light from a waterfall of glass above his head, while the sticklike lamp next to him on the card table flickered in an inadequate way, its white shade reddened by fireplace glow. All the other whist players had gone, leaving only Carr and Frung beneath the watchful eyes of smoky portraits on the wall.

When he spoke, it was in a low drawl. Unspoken hyphens seemed to punctuate his words. "*L'affaire* Verloc. I suppose I can tell you we've turned up that Ossipon fellow."

"Aha! The wife's lover?"

"I doubt it. They hadn't time to get that far."

"Yes, yes, I remember. He took her money, left her on the train."

"That's the fellow. He's gone to the dogs, rather quickly it seems. I don't think he's bathed in months." *Where have I been? In the gutter!* Peevish tone of hoarse voice, spluttering through loosened teeth. Great bush of dirty yellow hair, flattened by rain. "Morose young man. But quite intelligent. A medical student at one point."

"So you said."

A firelog snapped, odd and loud among the hushed surroundings. Carr considered his boot, black and solid against the writhing colors of the rug. "As a matter of fact I was with him not more than three hours ago. In a vile place called the Club Silenus."

“Here in London?”

“Not far.”

“And the professor?” Frung asked. As fair as Carr was dark, jaunty in light brown tweeds, the Swiss alienist’s rubicund face suggested an ever-present good mood. With childish curiosity, he asked, “Was he there too?”

“No such luck.”

“So. Unlike your dear friend the Home Secretary, I want to hear all the details. But you must excuse me first. As we grow older, you know — ”

He stood up. Still beaming, but with no small degree of urgency, he walked quickly from the room.

Carr, left alone, rubbed his long fingers against the corners of his heavy-lidded eyes. Leaning his head on the back of his chair, looking up, he saw painted laurel wreaths like bird tracks surrounding his and other chandeliers. At forty-one, he too had crow’s feet, lines distant sun had sketched for him. He was a man of much outdoor experience.

Frung, looking visibly relieved, wriggled back into his seat. “As you know, Commissioner, I am intrigued by the criminal mind.” He tipped his empty brandy glass first to one side, then another. “As personal physician, or one might say as slave, to the women of the Blaukind family, all day I am forced to listen to — in German, we say *Narischkeit*. Nonsense, senseless nonsense. You have no idea what a headache hysterics induce in a man. Your cases take me away from all that.”

“As talking with you does for me, Doctor.”

“Yes. But unlike my good friend Adrian Carr I have no wife at home to soothe my brow.”

Carr sat up straight. Was Frung being sarcastic? The doctor knew many things about Carr's marriage, one of them being that whatever Annie was — and she was many things — she was no brow-soother. The Assistant Commissioner decided not to press the issue. "Very well. The day of the bombing — the evening, actually, when I assumed my modest disguise, as I've told you — Verloc told me everything. The next day, of course, we found his body, and no sign of the wife or the money. Michaelis, Karl Yundt — "

"Pathetic old man."

"Quite so. All of them in the cell told me Ossipon had been quite keen on Mrs. V., and she'd frozen him out as she did everyone. The idea that she had undergone a sudden thaw and run off with the fellow — after stabbing her husband to death — made no sense to me." Grapes in any form made Carr ill. He sipped gin, averting his face to shut out brandy fumes. "I had none of the details, you see. Now I do. Ossipon ran into her, Mrs. Verloc, literally, on the street."

"After the murder?"

"Very shortly after. She was going out — had a valise — but was hastily dressed, with her veil askew."

"Silly affectation. We don't veil our women here."

Carr bit into his slice of lime, unleashing green and pleasant memories. In U— Province native limes and mandarins grew in profusion outside his door. "Out there, I barely noticed the veil. According to Ossipon, she clung to him. He was quite surprised, and not unpleasantly."

"He was the red Lothario, I gather." The doctor lit another cigarette.

"There's one in every cell. Yes, she clung. She clutched, he said. She was terrified, raving about the gallows. Telling Ossipon she had to do it, but of course he had no idea what that *it* was. Until she dragged him back to the house, that is."

“The house that is also the store.”

“32 Brett Street. Where he found the body of the late double agent, as you know from the papers, reclining on his couch. With the knife still protruding, mind you. From his stomach.”

The doctor coughed. Camel markets, rotting figs, dried earth cracking under hot sun: his Anatolian tobacco could empty a room. Carr savored it. “We call that a traumatic shock,” said Frung, and coughed again.

“Yes. He thought Verloc had been killed in the blast. Not Mrs. Verloc’s brother. Shocked or not, Ossipon panicked. Took the money and took to his heels. After promising undying love to the widow, of course.”

“Of course. Then he knew she had killed herself?”

“The wretch carried the tale in his pocket. The newspaper clipping, you know.” There was really no place in the card room for stories like this. For all its plaster graciousness, its oaken coziness, its tinkling flashes of warm light, Carr was sitting ensconced in a world that would have turned Ossipon and his cell and all the Verlocs from its back door. Luckily for him, he knew and was at home in other worlds. “Jumped from the boat in the channel. Wasn’t identified for weeks.”

“*Schrecklich*,” murmured the alienist. “Terrible thing.”

“She blamed Verloc, or so Ossipon said. Too lazy to carry the bomb himself. Had to give it to poor Stevie.”

“Who I am assuming had a mental age of five.”

“Better than that. He could read. But there’s no work for his sort. He was quite dependent on that woman, she watched his every step. I have that from others, not just Ossipon. Far more of a mother than sister.”

“But she had a mother living, did you not say? Who removed herself, by her own choice, to the almshouse?”

“Something like that. She died not long ago. Pneumonia.” Carr removed a cigar from his pocket but did not light it. “I spoke to her, after the fact. In the course of one day she lost both her children, and her son-in-law who was by the way killed by her daughter.” Her swollen legs, like the limbs of a pink elephant. Blubbering, helpless, immobilized in an invalid chair. “Blameless life, and not a very pleasant one at that. Sacrificed like her daughter’s on the altar of poor Stevie.” Saliva formed in Carr’s mouth, and he picked up the cigar. Accepting a light from Frung, he added, “Heat and I went to her funeral. We were the only mourners there.”

“Heat.” The alienist, having replaced his matches in his waistcoat pocket, held up a pink finger. “Such a wonderful name for a Chief Inspector. You have been at times somewhat dissatisfied with him?”

Carr, a languid smoker, leaned his elbow on the table, shading his eyes. “That’s a very fine way of putting it. The Chief Inspector bungled this case at the very beginning.”

“He is ambitious.”

“He is an old department hand. I slipped out from under his methods, you see.” Carr sighed, under the shielding hand. “Policemen need to keep their names out of the papers. Heat will be spoken to. At the right time.” He came up smiling. His smiles were often qualified affairs, mouth settling into the required folds but cavernous eyes unmoved. “Let’s return to Mr. Ossipon. He never spent Winnie Verloc’s funds, you know. He told me he donated them.”

“To the cell?”

“To the Professor. For the manufacture of more bombs.”

“Is the man insane? Surely you told him — ”

“I told him that doing so was a crime, and I had grounds to hold him. In addition to stealing that poor woman’s money, breach of promise, perhaps accessory to murder.” Abandoning his extinguished cigar, Carr gazed into the middle distance. “He was very frightened. He did what so many have done before. You can guess it.”

“Turned on his friends?”

“Oh, I have nothing on them. Only the Professor. The man moved, it seems, after the Greenwich Park affair. No one knew where.”

Behind his horn-rimmed glasses, Frung’s mild blue eyes had an interrogatory air. Carr nodded, confirming what he could not say.

“May I ask you, Commissioner, how do you plan to arrest him? He carries a bomb in his pocket.”

It would be a good way to go down in history. Carr dismissed the memory, his wife’s vapid relation escorting Sir Ethelred back and forth from the houses of Parliament, imagining posthumous glory and fame. “I don’t fancy being blown to bits, you understand. We’ll have to find a way. I’ve an idea or two.” Two clocks chimed, the small plain one on the mantelpiece first, then the tall one, carved in ebony, with marble facings, upright in the corner. “Is it six? Then I must go. Annie is indisposed, which means I’ll be alone at Lady Gwendolyn’s.”

“Wish her my best.”

“I will."

They shook hands, and parted. Frung, small, tweedy, redolent of pasha smoke, walked with the slightest of waddles toward the refreshment room. Carr in what he named to himself his *dank exile* considered the receding back with real affection. His whist had always been a necessary habit, but since the morose editor died on holiday in France and Frung took his place,

there was in addition to the simple pleasure of the game the attraction of real friendship. Cheerful people were his weakness.

PART II

Behind the faded blue silk screen edged with gilt-colored wood, Lady Gwendolyn Lambert reposed on a velvet divan. Open-minded (to a point) and curious, in her eighth decade Lady Gwendolyn in her own words liked “to see what the world was coming to,” and the list of names famous and infamous that had visited this private corner of her drawing room would fill several columns of newsprint. Tonight she was talking with Adrian Carr.

The Assistant Commissioner, having exchanged his dreary work suit for a boiled white shirtfront and evening coat, sipped another, weaker, glass of gin and frowned down at the plate of fruit and cheese before him. He had no appetite, which was not unusual for him. He had gone home just long enough to take a bath and reassure Annie that he would indeed attend Lady Gwendolyn’s soiree, for his wife and the grand patroness of all that really mattered were close intimates despite the wide gap in their ages. He had come here with his hair still damp, eager as a lover, because she was another cheerful person and because she wielded influence that might, still might, help him achieve what he knew was a goal wild and irrational. If social prestige could confer immortality, Lady Gwendolyn would live forever. He hoped she would.

As a champion of the oppressed, Lady Gwendolyn was not completely glad to hear that Ossipon, whom she knew as a friend of her protege Michaelis, had been found and was in a confessional mood.

“Ossipon?” Lady Gwendolyn let the ribbon of her lorgnette drop upon her breast, as with delicate, almost transparent fingers, she picked up a slice of pear and Gorgonzola. “He’s as harmless as a schoolboy. What on earth could he know?”

"Most schoolboys don't spend as much time as he has in the company of a bomb maker."

"Oh dear, that singular little man, the Professor. I haven't met him yet, have you? They say he's a genius."

"I have not. As to his genius, it's of a rather destructive sort."

"But Adrian, you must admire his courage, you must. Would you sacrifice yourself, as he's sworn to do? Blow yourself up? In defense of your principles?"

"Thankfully my principles, as you call them, are less demanding." He watched her sip wine. One of her rings touched the everted rim of her glass, and it gave forth a silvery note. "Let's hope such sacrifice will not be necessary."

"I should hope not!" She replaced the glass on a small inlaid table, one of many thoughtfully placed near every seat. "Poor Annie would collapse like a fallen souffle. Since I explained to her, you recall, about the marital rights of a husband, of which she knew so very little, her devotion to you has if anything increased. Hasn't it?"

Settling back, well distanced, Carr admired her wide gray eyes, her frank expression, her endearing air of complete attention. Life in England — his *dank exile* — became less onerous at Lady Gwendolyn's. "I am very much obliged to you," he said.

"Oh, nonsense. Girls these days need some straight talk. I have buried three husbands, and I know whereof I speak."

The silence that followed was brief, but understandable. The picture of Lady Gwendolyn *en deshabille*, acquiescing to the marital rights of any one of those three men, was not one Adrian Carr wished to retain; not because she was ugly, which she was not, and not because she was old, which she was, but owing to unfeigned respect and affection. He cleared his throat. "Ah, I see Peter Michaelis' book is a success."

“Success? I should hope so. I told everyone I know.” Lady Gwendolyn nodded at the screen at Carr’s back, signifying the greater world. “Did you see how he is lionized? Absolutely deserved. It is a peaceful, gentle soul. Beneficence embodied.”

“Indeed.” Carr restrained himself from commenting on the noted revolutionist’s physical body, which was roughly spherical. “And yet he asserts that private property should be abolished. And by violent means at that.”

The great patroness, of forward-looking art and strident literature along with paroled communards turned author, replaced her lorgnette and folded her hands in her lap. “Rubbish.” Although childless, she spoke in the reverberating tones of a no-nonsense mother. “Turning society on its ear — that’s just a ploy, he told me so and I believe it.” Leaning forward, she added, “And I *said* so. I told *everyone*.”

“I see. Lady Gwendolyn, have you ever thought of what might happen to all this,” he took in with an indicating elbow the silken walls, the yielding carpets, the paintings and the Roman busts on pedestals, the string quartet plying their bows under the six high windows, the tidbits before them and the etched crystal glasses, “if Michaelis and his ilk, whom you support with such commendable enthusiasm — got their way? Everything here would be taken from you.”

Lady Gwendolyn shook an admonishing finger. “You are not addressing criminals right now.”

“No thought was ever farther from my mind.”

“I don’t see what it has to do with me. It’s the parvenus I want to see bankrupted, the beastly manufacturers and elevated tradesmen who require the comeuppance. The Blaukinds and their ilk.” Poised upright on blue silk, lips pursed and eyes narrowed, she might have been rating

recalcitrant servants. “They and their petty bourgeois pretensions. They’re the ones concerned with money, well, it’s all quite new to them. But me!” Her lips parted in mock outrage. “Why would you assume anything in the least, shall we say unpleasant, might happen to me? Those who drive the coming revolution know quite well I am their friend.”

Adrian Carr, sucking lime, drained his glass. He lived a life in which he told himself at least a dozen times a day, you must not fight against your lot. Your lot is fortunate. “I am glad to hear it. There’s something else I’d like to discuss with you, Lady Gwendolyn. Nothing to do with the bomb outrage.”

“Oh, Adrian, not India again.”

Anywhere else in the world he would have stood, he would have paced, he might perhaps have even raised his voice. Here, where such a demonstration was untoward, he made of his rage and distress a small hard ball, and tried swallowing it. Naturally the thing stuck in his throat. “I can’t be happy in — my present post. I must — escape the desk. I want to do real work again, preferably active work, preferably out of doors. I’m chafing from the confinement, and besides, I miss the weather.” Once again, he was saying too much. “The weather is the worst of it,” he added, with less vehemence.

“I see. Have you spoken to Sir Ethelred?”

“I thought I’d better sound you out, before going to him.”

Carr knew his interlocutor. Lady Gwendolyn liked to believe that men of high position, those who, in her words, “had some say in how things are done,” depended on her counsel and approval.

“Very wise of you. The Home Secretary tends toward impatience, doesn’t he. You did best to come here first.”

“I thought so.”

“But it will never happen, Adrian. I am sorry to disappoint you.”

Carr waited.

“I have known Annie Branch all her life, and of course I knew her mother, and her grandmother. You may do many things with Annie — and I know, after speaking to me, you’ve found yourself able to do many more things with her — but no oak was ever rooted deeper in the English soil. Have you ever heard her rhapsodize about cold rain? And blowing leaves, the dead brown ones? She is a, ah, well-proportioned girl and very healthy — ”

“Exactly why I thought from the beginning she should come out with me.”

“But you can’t crack a mold once it’s set. Our Annie was cast in a mold at birth. She believes tropical climates would be fatal to her. You do remember her cousin Charlotte, she died in the cholera plague at Ferozapore.”

“That’s just one person.”

“But it was *someone she knew*. Do you understand how powerful that is? When dreadful things happen to *someone you know?”*

Carr had no response. He knew full well how it felt to be flattened by anecdote.

“You can lead a young filly to the water, but you can’t make her get on the boat. Poor Adrian.” She leaned forward, exuding the fragrance of lilac, and patted his hand. “But you are serving the empire here, are you not? For as long as it lasts, which as you know I believe won’t be long.”

“You anticipate the revolution.”

Lady Gwendolyn, who had in effect brought about Peter Michaelis' parole and had supported him ever since, drew back and favored Carr with a grim smile. "It will be here any minute. Just don't say you weren't warned."

When he set foot on the steamship for his long leave home, Adrian Carr would have laughed at the idea of marrying. Did he need a wife in India? He did not. After his first two green years, he had eschewed the *naukh* girls and established a comfortable liaison with an Anglo-Indian widow with no children and few relatives. He was thus not interfered with, solicited for money or favors, subjected to tearful denunciations, or in short made to undergo anything unpleasant or potentially embarrassing. She (Sita Maclachlan was her name) lived a convenient distance away, just outside his jurisdiction, and she seemed as disinterested in his professional life and inner thoughts as he was in hers (she taught English to small children). If anything, they were too much alike: quiet, quietly observant, fond of whist and tongue-in-cheek humor, unlikely to shriek or bawl or demand. Slim and dark. He said goodbye to her before he left; she shook his hand.

"Will you be here when I come back?" he had asked.

"That depends on who you will be then."

"Why should I be any different?"

She shook back her unpinned hair. "How could you not be?"

Bemused but accepting, Adrian Carr took his leave. On his return to London, he found himself receiving far too many invitations. Some he rejected, some he accepted with reluctance, but he was most loath to attend a garden fete on St. Swithun's Day, given by a dear friend of his late aunt whom he remembered dimly if at all. He went anyway — it was a beautiful day, humid,

hot, and cloudless, just the way he liked it — and there was introduced to a woman of generous proportions, a curly-haired blonde with the merriest of laughs and a disarming effervescence (qualities she shared, as it turned out, with her first cousin Theodore, better known as Toodles, an unpaid private secretary to Sir Ethelred himself).

Annie Branch! Even her name was adorable. Carr acted Othello with her, describing hair-raising adventures and narrow escapes among the Queen's more recalcitrant subjects in the vast plains and eerie forests of U__ Province. "Hundreds of miles," he had declared, after an ill-advised third glass of gin. "Hundreds of miles without a policeman. Until I arrived, and established the department. I had carte blanche, you know. I planned and organized and set in motion a means of enforcing the law as I saw fit."

He did not understand, or rue, those last four words until some time later, after he and Annie married — oddly enough, they shared no small measure of physical lust — and through her extensive connections he took up his present post. In the rat's maze of the London police, Adrian learned to his bitter regret he could do nothing as he saw fit. His position was significant, well-paid, and prestigious. He had no autonomy, no power, and no freedom. From an active, energetic, innovator working mostly *ex officio* among his native constables, he had become a rubber stamp, as desk-bound as his heavy crystal inkwell. Similarly, and with less predictability, Annie's bubbly, friendly disposition degenerated behind closed doors into a welter of grievances, bitternesses, and complaints. She held grudges. Her voice took on unpleasant tones. To Dr. Frung, Carr had confessed he felt like Gulliver, held down and tortured by myriad tiny but painful pinpricks.

"Death by a thousand cuts?" suggested the alienist.

"Not death. Imprisonment, perhaps. Or simply insurmountable annoyance."

Adrian Carr paid the cabman and took the short flight of stairs two at a time. He used his key.

Annie Branch Carr sat at her dressing table, surrounded by oils and emollients, and ran an ivory-handled brush through her thick hair the color of golden syrup. Her open robe showed one rosy breast, and her bare legs were crossed at the knee. “How was Lady Gwendolyn? She hasn’t been to see me in, what, ages. I think she must hate me.”

Adrian looked elsewhere. White walls, white carpet. Black-painted furnishings upholstered in rose-pink. Curving sconces shedding light. He did not wish to be distracted. “She does not. You have no better friend.”

She faced him, brow creased, lips pouting. “Are you then not my friend?”

“My dear, you misconstrue me. Nothing could be further from my mind.”

“Yes.” She turned back, speaking to the mirror before her. “I know anything having to do with me is always furthest from your mind.”

He decided to change course, and approached her from behind, stroking her shoulders. “Annie, you know that isn’t true.”

“Not now, please, I’ve a horrible pain in my side. I should have gone tonight,” she declared, still focused on the mirror. “I know you sat there talking up India to Lady Gwen.”

He forced a laugh. “I don’t believe she’s planning to go east of Suez.”

“Not her. You. You haven’t given up that idea yet, have you? That silly, ridiculous, thoughtless idea of yours about going back there?”

He left her, went to his dressing-stand, found a match, and lit his pipe. Cigars were not permitted in his wife's boudoir. "We really can't discuss, with any rationality at least, what you refuse to see. Or hear about."

"We will not discuss it," she said, with some finality. "You know perfectly well I cannot be in the sunshine, I will get blotched in ten minutes and look quite absurd. As for the temperature, there is really no use for any day warmer than, shall we say, fifty-five degrees."

He stood there, miserable. Summer days in the province of U__ commonly hit one hundred and four, and he thrived. He felt best, slept best, thought most clearly and became more energetic, when other Europeans fled to the hills. "I want to live where I want to live. I want to love my work again."

She turned to him, wincing as she moved her neck as if the motion pained her. "Instead of me?"

"What? Oh, now, Annie — "

She pushed her implements away, stood from her stool, and addressed him across two feet of space. "When I first met you, you told me stories. All about your work."

"Yes, I did. You asked to hear them."

"I asked to hear them, because they made me think you needed to be changed. A man like you should not be shooting guns, chasing horrible people down dirty streets, living in a wretched hut and in fear of your life because some band or another of filthy natives is trying to poison your food. Or behead you in the dark." A sudden flush colored her face. "You, Adrian Carr, are a gentleman. An English gentleman. And when I met you — besides thinking of course that you had the most compelling face I had yet seen on a man, no, I am still speaking, do not, thank you — I thought, it is breaking my heart that this unique and mesmerizing man should live where he

lives, do what he does, deal with whom he must deal with, when he could be here." Her unseeing hand plucked from her vanity a rubber bulb, unattached to a perfume bottle. She squeezed it as if grasping the hand of the city itself, "In London. Living in the world that is important, that is right before us, that we, English gentlemen and ladies, were born to live in. That we should be living in." She threw up her hands, the way she did when Conner was late with the breakfast tray. "And I caused that to happen. I took you unto me and shared it all with you. For nearly three years I have been trying to live, with you, the life of the civilization to which you and I belong." Her face, her voice, her movements, provoked in Carr intense desire. At the same time her words provoked intense desire to leap headlong from the window. "And you want none of it."

He took a puff, his pipe went out, he laid it down. Spontaneous rejoinders would not do; those provoked tears. Energetic affections succeeded at times, but the moment was inauspicious. Silence, withdrawal, pretended oblivion over tomorrow's breakfast: if all else failed, so be it, but he did not enjoy those behaviors, which to himself he called "quashing it." Ingenuous, resourceful, he longed for another approach, and tried one. Raising his head and his eyebrows, he said in a resolute voice, "I have no intention of leaving without you. If you won't come to India, I will stay here. I will. But I won't be happy."

"There!" Ignoring his last sally, which he'd thought would demolish her, she started chattering in her relief. "Because I for one am not about to go dashing off to a place where, as we know, I would be dead within six months. My cousin Charlotte — "

"Come out of that. You haven't been. You just don't know. There's so much there — "

"For you. And what would I do? I don't like dogs. I don't like horses. I'm clumsy at sports, and cards put me to sleep. Not like you and your precious whist. Who will I talk to? The other grass widows at those dreadful clubs? The precious natives, for heaven's sake?"

He tipped the pipe into an ashtray, brass, given to him on a sunny morning in the bazaar by one Krishna Lal Ram, whose renegade nephew Carr had imprisoned for monkeying with Lal Ram's funds and misleading his nubile and brainless stepdaughter. "My friends are precious to me. I have many native friends."

"All of them quite black, I'm sure. And when they do slip their dirks, or whatever they call them, between your shoulder blades — or mine — while we sleep, will they be your friends then?"

There was the pipe, and the pipe-cleaning tool, in his hands. He rammed the prong through the mouthpiece, with force. Quash as he might, persistent truth seeped through like smoke. He was more alone here, in his own house, with his wife, than he had ever been in that blast-furnace of a plain where the air reeked of marigolds and dung fires. "Good night, my dear," he said in a dead tone.

"Good night."

He left her bedroom and entered his own. "I'll be gone early tomorrow," he called. "It's crucial work."

She did not respond, but three hours later they met in his dressing room and the evening ended well.

PART III

The next morning was better, in that it was dry. Fragments of blue peeked through rent-curtain clouds. Carr took them as a promise.

Inspector Heat, under a lamppost, saluted his arriving chief. “Morning, sir.”

“Good morning.”

“Are you really intending to go through with this — this attempt, sir?”

“It won’t be an attempt, Inspector. With any luck it will be an arrest.”

They stood in a deserted street, outside a row of crumbling buildings. Fresh clouds obscured the blue. Torn newspapers flew past them in an unforgiving wind. In U__ Province October was motionless, hazy, and mild.

Heat shifted his weight. The excess flesh that marred his face moved with his feet. “Luck, sir. Funny thing to put your trust in.”

“Yes, well, luck owes me nothing. But I put my trust in you, Heat, when I took up this post. And it turns out I was in error.”

“Sir?” Heat’s jowls could not be still. His round blue eyes, always measured, calculating, and alert for improprieties, stared at Carr in frank bewilderment.

“I’m talking now of the beginning of this case. That fragment of poor Stevie’s coat, which you attempted to hide from me. I said nothing at the time, you will recall. But that doesn’t change the fact. Concealing evidence amounts to insubordination.”

“Sir, I — I surrendered the evidence, sir.”

“Only after I concluded it existed. Trust, Heat. Had I trusted you, Michaelis, an innocent man, would be back behind bars. And we would not know who killed Adolf Verloc. Let alone why.”

Heat’s face, always red, was a furnace. The ends of his corn-colored mustache twitched back and forth on his chin.

“I realize,” said Adrian Carr, warming to his task if not the weather, “my predecessors had you at the end of a long string. Perhaps they couldn’t even see that string, or how far it stretched. I am not them.”

“No, sir.”

“I require crystal clarity.”

“Just so, sir.”

“Your string has been much shortened, Heat.”

“So it appears, sir.”

The man was sweating, in the cold. William Henry Heat, much praised in the popular press, was by all accounts a decent human being, faithful husband, loving father. Carr made haste to dismiss groundless fears. “I have no intention of firing you out. You don’t deserve that. You are an asset to the department.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Simply understand you are not the sole detective here.”

“No, sir.”

“I will run investigations as I see fit. I, Inspector. Not you.”

“No, sir.”

“And I expect cooperation and sincerity. Not trickery, deception, or unwarranted night visits to the homes of suspects. You have an excellent memory, don’t you, Heat?”

“So they say, sir.”

“Remember this, then. I am your superior, and intend to remain so. Ah, Constable Charlie, here you are. All accomplished?”

Scrawny, with predatory eyebrows, a raw-looking street urchin in a uniform too big for him appeared from nowhere, ranging up next to Carr. “All set, guv’nor.”

“You’re sure he’ll wear that coat today?”

“’As to.” Charlie belched. “Don’t ‘ave no other.”

Heat released air from his slackened cheeks. His enunciation, the product of years of hard work, was impeccable. “Constable, don’t you think it’s likely the fellow will check his apparatus first? Before he dresses?”

Runtish Charlie squared off before him, a small and active mouse facing an enormous yellow cat. “‘Aven’t I been watching ‘im for three days? Pats ‘isself down, like. Takes out the pocket bulb. Looks at it, puts it back in ‘is pocket.” He sniggered, showing missing teeth. “Good lookout, that vacant flat across the way. And them binocuwatchucallits ‘elp a lot, thanks for that, guv.”

Heat’s ripe lip curled. “Binoculars. When I was a constable, those were not issued to us.”

“The department wants to give its recruits the latest in technical gear, it’s for everyone’s good, isn’t it.” Carr examined the street, empty except for one horse-drawn cab and a yellow dog urinating on a lamppost. In U__ Province he’d adopted a lookalike dog, a pariah, but found to his regret the beast could not be house-trained. “Of course Charlie uses his natural talent. Quite the second-story man, was our Charlie, Inspector.”

“Ahh.” Charlie, pleased and embarrassed, rubbed his close-cropped black hair. “Aye, I was famous, in a way. In and out, never making a bl, a ruddy sound, sir. Before I joined the force, sir.”

“And hopefully not afterwards.” Carr adjusted his muffler. “Pestilential wind this morning. Our man should be coming out any minute.”

The block of flats was unlovely, a degraded Georgian mansion darkened with grime, chalked with obscenities by local hooligans. The rough east wind pried dust and soot from windowsills, went shrieking through panels of broken glass. The great front door, a relic of grander times, opened in creaking complaint, and a small man emerged, blinking, onto the top step. Chin up, threadbare but confident, the so-called Professor descended the steps.

“Thomas Arbuthnot?”

“Who says so?” The left hand went into the pocket. Carr thought in human incongruity of the perfume bulb in his wife’s hand. Same device, different usage.

“Mr. Arbuthnot, you are under arrest for explosives. Manufacturing and selling. Resulting in deaths, at least three to date. You’d best come quietly.” To Charlie, Carr added, “Make the arrest, Constable.”

“You heard your chief. He gave the order.” Arbuthnot leered at Charlie, who had not yet moved, and stared up at Carr. “If you are his chief, that is. What are you, anyway? Corsican, perhaps? They’ll want to know, for your obituary. Because what I have in my pocket will destroy all of us standing here.”

“Go ahead, Constable.”

There was something in Arbuthnot's face like a decomposition. His chin was unsteady, his shoulders sagged. His meager face suffused with blood. His hand, in his left pocket, made a fist — and made a fist again, and a third time. Nothing happened. The cab horse whinnied.

"Cut yer bleedin' wires for you, 'aven't I?" screeched Charlie, leaping toward the man. "Now what do you say, you murderin' bastard?"

As the Chief Inspector supervised the snapping of the cuffs, Adrian Carr walked backwards to the curb, before turning to cross the street and slip into the cab. "Whitehall," he told the driver.

"Cut his wires?"

"That's correct, Sir Ethelred." Despite several meetings, Carr could not have described the room in which he stood. Plagued by poor eyesight, the Home Secretary kept his lair shadowed and dim. "After observing him for three days, as I've described, my young constable, the erstwhile thief, went catlike into the flat and snipped the connections while Arbuthnot slept. A bit untamed, that Charlie, but he's coming along."

"I should say so." Sir Ethelred, a mountain of a man nearly seven feet tall and a yard wide, made that choked, smothered sound Carr had learned to recognize as laughter. "The lower classes have much talent. We are fools to ignore them."

"Indeed, sir."

"What about Heat? Insubordination can't be tolerated. Defiance all stamped out of him?"

"Oh, Sir Ethelred, I can assure you there was no need to stamp." Before this man, Carr felt like the frailest of reeds. Yet he had walked out of this office triumphant, and hoped to do so

again. “I know his caper. I don’t believe he’ll have much stomach for that sort of thing, next time.”

“Ah yes, next time. You’ve done a commendable job, all around. Would you care to be promoted?”

An ormolu clock, its oval case and Roman numerals all he could make out through the gloom, ticked through a full minute before Carr dared reply. “If — sir — you might see your way clear — to return me to — India — ”

“India? Won’t hear of it. Lady Gwendolyn spoke to me. You can’t do that to poor Annie, you know.”

Carr was at once a broken reed. Had he expected otherwise? Had he been such a fool? His hopes fell to his bootsoles. “Very well, sir.”

“No, we need you here. Do you suppose we are done with bomb outrages? Just because the Embassy sent Mr. Vladimir back to the frozen steppes — or to the firing squad, I shouldn’t wonder — I don’t doubt there will be others.”

“Quite so, sir. We’ve heard reports from Ireland.”

Sir Ethelred expanded, if that were possible. His body seemed to fill the room, his cave of a mouth gaped wide, his voice rang like the bells of St. Paul’s. “Ireland! Rugheaded kerns and gallowglasses! Worse than ten Embassies, if you ask me. Why isn’t Annie pregnant yet?”

“Sir?”