

To
Johnny and Jerry Slattery

PART ONE

The Assassination

I

Somewhere near Venice, Guy began talking with a heavy, elderly man, a refugee from Germany on his way to Trieste. Guy asked questions. The refugee eagerly replied. Neither seemed aware when the train stopped. In the confusion of a newly created war, the train was stopping every twenty minutes or so. Harriet looked out and saw girders, darker than the twilit darkness, holding an upper rail. Between the girders a couple fumbled and struggled, every now and then thrusting a foot or an elbow out into the light that fell from the carriage windows. Beyond the girders water glinted, reflecting the phosphorescent globes lighting the high rail.

When the train was suddenly shunted into the night, leaving behind the lovers and the glinting water, she thought: 'Anything can happen now.'

Guy and the refugee went on talking across the carriage, their eyes fixed upon each other. Guy's sympathy had drawn the German half out of his seat. He held out his hands, cupped, palms up, side by side, occasionally shaking them for emphasis, while Guy gave him an anxious attention that lightened into excitement as he nodded his head, indicating that all he heard was exactly what he had expected to hear.

'What is he saying?' asked Harriet, who did not speak German.

Guy put a hand on hers to keep her quiet.

A current, like affection, seemed to keep Guy's attention directed on the refugee, but the refugee several times stared about him at the other passengers, with an aggressive confidence, as though to say: 'I am talking? Well what about it? I am a free man.'

The train stopped again: a ticket collector came round. The refugee rose and felt in an inner pocket of his greatcoat that hung beside him. His hand lingered, he caught his breath: he withdrew his hand and looked in an outer pocket. This time he withdrew his hand quickly and looked in another pocket, then another and another. He began pulling things out of the pockets of the jacket he was wearing, then out of his trouser pockets. His breath came and went violently. He returned to the greatcoat and began his search all over again.

Guy and Harriet Pringle, watching him, were dismayed. His face had become ashen, his cheeks fallen like the cheeks of a very old man. As he grew hot with the effort of his search, a sticky dampness spread over his skin and his hands shook. When he started again on his jacket, his head was trembling and his eyes darting about.

'What is it?' Guy asked. 'What have you lost?'

'Everything. Everything.'

'Your ticket?'

'Yes,' the man panted between words. 'My pocket-book, my passport, my money, my identity card . . . My visa, my visa!' His voice broke on the last word. He stopped searching and tried to pull himself together. He clenched his hands, then shook one out in disbelief of his loss.

'What about the lining?' said Harriet. 'The things may have fallen through into the lining.'

Guy did his best to translate this.

The man turned on him, almost sobbing as he was beset by this suggestion. He understood at last and started feeling wildly over the coat lining. He found nothing.

The other passengers had been watching him with detached interest while the collector took their tickets. When everyone

else had handed over a ticket, the collector turned to him as though the scene had conveyed nothing at all.

Guy explained to the man that the refugee had lost his ticket. Several other people in the carriage murmured confirmation. The collector looked dumbly back at some officials who stood in the corridor. They took over. One remained at the carriage door while the other went off for reinforcements.

‘He’s penniless, too,’ said Guy to his wife. ‘What can we give him?’

They were on their way to Bucharest. Not being permitted to take money into Rumania, they had very little with them. Harriet brought out a thousand-franc note. Guy had three English pound notes. When offered this money, the refugee could not give it his attention. He was absorbed again in looking through his pockets as though the pocket-book might in the interval have reappeared. He seemed unaware of the group of officials now arrived at the door. When one touched his arm, he turned impatiently. He was required to go with them.

He took down his coat and luggage. His colour was normal now, his face expressionless. When Guy held the money out to him, he accepted it blankly, without a word.

After he had been led away, Guy said: ‘What will become of him?’ He looked worried and helpless, frowning like a good-tempered child whose toy has been stolen out of its hands.

Harriet shook her head. No one could answer him. No one tried.

The day before had been spent on familiar territory, even if the Orient Express had kept to no schedule. Harriet had watched the vineyards pass in the late summer sunlight. Balls of greasy sandwich paper had unscrewed themselves in the heat, empty Vichy bottles rolled about under seats. When the train stopped, there was no sign of a station-master, no porters came to the windows. On the deserted platform, loud-speakers gave out the numbers of reservists being called to their regiments. The monotony of the announcer’s voice

had the quality of silence. It was possible to hear through it the hum of bees, the chirrupings of birds. The little squeak of the guard's trumpet came from a great distance, like a noise from the waking world intruding upon sleep. The train, gathering itself together, moved on for a few more miles and stopped again to the voice of the same announcer giving the numbers without comment.

In France they were among friends. Italy, which they crossed next day, seemed the end of the know world. When they awoke next morning, they were on the Slovenian plain. All day its monotonous cultivation, its fawn-coloured grainland and fields with hay-cocks, passed under a heavy sky. Every half mile or so there was a peasant hut, the size of a tool shed, with a vegetable garden and beds of great, flat-faced sun-flowers. At each station the peasants stood like the blind. Harriet attempted a smile at one of them: there was no response. The lean face remained as before, weathered and withered into a fixed desolation.

Guy, who was doing this journey for the second time, gave his attention to his books. He was too short-sighted to make much of the passing landscape, and he had to prepare his lectures. He was employed in the English Department of the University of Bucharest, where he had already spent a year. He had met and married Harriet during his summer holiday.

With only enough money left to pay for one meal, Harriet had chosen that the meal should be supper. As the day passed without breakfast, luncheon or tea, hunger lay bleakly over the Slovenian plain. Twilight fell, then darkness, then, at last, the waiter came tinkling his little bell again. The Pringles were first in the dining-car. There everything was normal, the food good, but before the meal ended the head waiter began to behave like a man in a panic. Baskets of fruit had been placed on the tables. He brushed them aside to tot up the bills, for which he demanded immediate payment. The charge, which was high, included coffee. When someone demanded coffee, he said 'Later', throwing down change and hurrying on. One diner said he would not pay until coffee was served. The head

waiter replied that no coffee would be served until all had paid. He kept an eye on those who had still to pay as though fearing they might make off before he reached them.

In the end, all paid. The train stopped. It had reached the frontier. Coffee was served, too hot to drink, and at the same time an official appeared and ordered everyone out of the car, which was about to be detached from the train. One man gulped at his coffee, gave a howl and threw down his cup. Several wanted to know why the car was being detached. A waiter explained that the car belonged to the Yugoslav railways and no sane country would permit its rolling-stock to cross a frontier in these hazardous times. The passengers were thrust out, all raging together in half-a-dozen languages, the war forgotten.

The frontier officials made a leisurely trip down the corridor. When that was over, the train stood on the small station, where the air, pouring cold and autumnal through open windows, smelt of straw.

Guy, in their compartment, which had now been arranged as a sleeping compartment, was still writing in his notebook. Harriet, at a corridor window, was trying to see something of the frontier village. She could not even be sure there was a village. The darkness seemed as empty as outer space, yet, blazing like a sun in the midst of it, there was a fair-ground. Not a sound came from it. A wheel moved slowly, bearing up into the sky empty carriages shaped like boats.

Immediately outside the window there was a platform lit by three weak, yellow bulbs strung on a wire. Beneath the furthest of these was a group of people – a tall man, unusually thin, with a long coat trailing from one shoulder as from a door-knob, surrounded by five small men in uniform. They were persuading him along. He seemed, in their midst, bewildered like some long, timid animal harried by terriers. Every few yards he paused to remonstrate with them and they, circling about him and gesticulating, edged him on until he reached the carriage from which Harriet was watching. He was carrying in one hand a crocodile dressing-case, in the

other a British passport. One of the five men was a porter who carried two large suitcases.

'Yakimov,' the tall man kept repeating, 'Prince Yakimov. *Gospodin*,' he suddenly wailed, '*gospodin*.'

At this they gathered round him, reassuring him with '*Da, da*,' and '*Dobo, gospodin*'. His long, odd face was sad and resigned as he let himself be impelled towards the front of the train. There he was urged into a carriage as though at any moment the express would move.

The uniformed men dispersed. The platform emptied. The train remained where it was another half-an-hour, then slowly puffed its way across the frontier.

When the Rumanian officials came on board there was a change of atmosphere in the corridors. The Rumanian passengers were now in the majority. Stout, little Rumanian women, not noticeable before, pushed their way through the *wagon-lit* chattering in French. There was a general air of congratulation that they were safely within their own country. They gave little squeals of excitement as they chatted to the officials and the officials smiled down on them indulgently. When Guy emerged with the passports, one of the women recognised him as the *professor* who taught her son English. He answered her in Rumanian and the women crowded about him admiring his fluency and his pronunciation.

'But you are perfect,' said one woman.

Guy, flushed by the attention he was receiving, made a reply in Rumanian that set them all squealing again.

Harriet, not understanding what he had said, smiled at the fun, pretending to be part of it. She observed how, in his response, Guy looked a little drunk and put out his arms to these unknown women as though he would embrace them all.

The Pringles had been married less than a week. Though she would have claimed to know about him everything there was to be known, she was now beginning to wonder if she really knew anything.

When the train got under way, the women dispersed. Guy returned to his bunk. Harriet remained a while at the window,

watching the mountains rise and grow, ebony against the dim and starless sky. A pine forest came down to the edge of the track: the light from the carriages rippled over the bordering trees. As she gazed out into the dark heart of the forest, she began to see small moving lights. For an instant a grey dog-shape skirted the rail, then returned to darkness. The lights, she realised, were the eyes of beasts. She drew her head in and closed the window.

Guy looked up as she joined him and said: 'What's the matter?' He took her hands, saw they were shrunken with cold and rubbed them between his hands: 'Little monkey's paws,' he said. As his warmth passed into her, she said: 'I love you,' which was something she had not admitted before.

The moment seemed to her one that should expand into rapture, but Guy took it lightly. He said: 'I know,' and, giving her fingers a parting squeeze, he released them and returned his attention to his book.

2

On reaching the main station at Bucharest, Yakimov carried his luggage to the luggage office. He held a suitcase in each hand and his crocodile dressing-case hoisted up under his right elbow. His sable-lined greatcoat hung from his left arm. The porters – there were about a dozen to each passenger – followed him aghast. He might have been mobbed had not his vague, gentle gaze, ranging over their heads from his unusual height, given the impression he was out of reach.

When the dressing-case slipped, one of the porters snatched at it. Yakimov dodged him with a skilled sidestep, then wandered on, his shoulders drooping, his coat sweeping the dirty platform, his check suit and yellow cardigan sagging and fluttering as though carried on a coat-hanger. His shirt, changed on the train, was clean. His other clothes were not. His tie, bought for him years before by Dollie, who had admired its ‘angelic blue’, was now so blotched and be-yellowed by spilt food, it was no colour at all. His head, with its thin, pale hair, its nose that, long and delicate, widened suddenly at the nostrils, its thin clown’s mouth, was remote and mild as the head of a giraffe. On top of it he wore a shabby check cap. His whole sad aspect was made sadder by the fact that he had not eaten for forty-eight hours.

He deposited the two suitcases. The crocodile case, that held, among his unwashed nightwear, a British passport and a receipt for his Hispano-Suiza, he kept with him. When the car had been impounded for debt by the Yugoslav officials at the frontier, he had had on him just enough to buy a third

class ticket to Bucharest. This purchase left him with a few pieces of small change.

He emerged from the station into the confusion of a street market where flares were being lit in the first fall of twilight. He had shaken off the porters. Beggars now crowded about him. Feeling in the air the first freshness of autumn, he decided to wear rather than carry his coat. Holding his case out of reach of the ragged children round his knees, he managed to shuffle first one arm and then the other into the coat.

He looked about him. Hounded (his own word) out of one capital after another, he had now reached the edge of Europe, a region in which he already smelt the Orient. Each time he arrived at a new capital, he made for the British Legation, where he usually found some figure from his past. Here, he had heard, the Cultural Attaché was known to him; was, indeed, indebted, having come to one of those opulent parties Dollie and he had given in the old days. It occurred to him that if he drove to the Legation in a taxi, Dobson might pay for it. But if Dobson had been posted and there was no one willing to pay, he would be at the mercy of the taxi-driver. For the first time in his life he hesitated to take a risk. Standing amid the babble of beggars, his coat hanging like a belltent from the apex of his neck, he sighed to himself and thought: 'Your poor old Yaki's not the boy he was.'

Seeing him there, one driver threw open the door of his cab. Yakimov shook his head. In Italian, a language he had been told was the same as Rumanian, he asked to be directed to the British Legation. The driver waved him to get in. When Yakimov shook his head a second time, the man gave a snarl of disgust and began to pick his teeth.

Yakimov persisted: '*La legazione britannica, per piacere?*'

To get rid of him, the man flicked a hand over his shoulder. '*Grazie tanto*, dear boy.' Gathering his coat about him, Yakimov turned and followed a street that seemed a tunnel into desolation.

The light was failing. He was beginning to doubt his direction when, at a junction of roads, it seemed confirmed by a

statue, in boyar's robes, wearing a turban the size of a pumpkin, that pointed him dramatically to the right.

Here the city had come to life again. The pavements were crowded with small men, all much alike in shabby city clothes, each carrying a brief-case. Yakimov recognised them for what they were; minor government officials and poor clerks, a generation struggling out of the peasantry, at work from eight in the morning until eight at night, now hurrying home to supper. In his hunger, he envied them. A tramway car stopped at the kerb. As the crowd pressed past him, he was buffeted mercilessly from side to side, but maintained his course, his head and shoulders rising above the surge with an appearance of unconcern.

He stopped at a window displaying jars of a jam-like substance that held in suspension transparent peaches and apricots. The light shone through them. This golden, sugared fruit, glowing through the chill blue twilight, brought a tear to his eye. He was pushed on roughly by a woman using a shopping basket as a weapon.

He crossed the road junction. Tramway cars, hung with passengers like swarming bees, clanged and shrilled upon him. He reached the other side. Here as he followed a down-sloping road, the crowd thinned and changed. He passed peasants in their country dress of whitish frieze, thin men, lethargic, down-staring, beneath pointed astrakhan caps, and Orthodox Jews with ringlets hanging on either side of greenish, indoor faces.

A wind, blowing up towards Yakimov, brought a rancid odour that settled in his throat like the first intimations of sea-sickness. He began to feel worried. These small shops did not promise the approach of the British Legation.

The street divided into smaller streets. Keeping to the widest of them, Yakimov saw in every window the minutiae of the tailoring trade – horse-hair, buckram, braid, ready-made pockets, clips, waistcoat buckles, cards of buttons, reels of cotton, rolls of lining. Who on earth wanted all this stuff? In search of even the sight of food, he turned into a passage-way where

the stench of the district was muffled for a space by the odour of steam-heated cloth. Here, in gas-lit rooms no bigger than cupboards, moving behind bleared windows like sea creatures in tanks, coatless men thumped their irons and filled the air with hissing fog. The passage ended in a little box of a square so congested with basket-work that the creepers swathed about the balconies seemed to sprout from the wicker jungle below. A man leaning against the single lamp-post straightened himself, threw away his cigarette and began talking to Yakimov, pointing to bassinets, dress-baskets and bird-cages.

Yakimov enquired for the British Legation. For reply the man hauled out a dozen shopping-baskets tied with string and started to untie them. Yakimov slipped away down another passage that brought him, abruptly, to the quayside of a river. This was more hopeful. A river usually indicated a city's centre, but when he went to the single rusted rail that edged the quay, he looked down on a wretched soapy-coloured stream trickling between steep, raw banks of clay. On either bank stood houses of a dilapidated elegance. Here and there he saw windows masked with the harem grilles of the receded Ottoman Empire. A little paint still clung to the plaster, showing, where touched by the street lights, pallid grey or a red the colour of dried blood.

On Yakimov's side of the river, the ground floors had been converted into shops and cafés. China lettering on windows said 'Restaurantul' and 'Cafea'. At the first doorway, where the bead curtain was looped up to invite entry, he endured the sight of a man sucking-in soup from a bowl – onion soup. Strings of melted cheese hung from the spoon, a pollen of cheese and broken toast lay on the soup's surface.

He moved on. The interiors were full of speckled mirrors, rough chairs, and tables with dirty paper covers. An oily smell of cooking came from them. Again he was conscious that he had changed. In the past, often enough, he had eaten his fill, then somehow explained away his inability to pay. In different parts of the town, he might still attempt it: here he was afraid.

As he sidled from doorway to doorway, there suddenly came to him the rich scent of roasting meat. Saliva sprang into his mouth. He was drawn towards the scent, which came from a brazier where a peasant was cooking small pads of meat. The peasant customers, lit by a single flare, stood at a respectful distance, staring at the meat or occasionally turning to look at each other in a nervous, unsmiling intensity of anticipation. The cook seemed conscious of his superior position. He offered the meat with an air of bestowing it. He whose turn it was glanced about uncertainly before taking it and, when he had paid with a small coin, slipped away to eat in the shadows, alone.

After Yakimov had watched this exchange take place half a dozen times, he took the coins from his pocket and spread them on his palm. They comprised of a few *lire*, *filler* and *para*. The cook, to whom he presented them, examined them closely then picked out the largest of the Hungarian coins. He handed Yakimov a piece of meat. Like the others, Yakimov went aside to eat. The savour unbalanced him. He swallowed too quickly. For an ecstatic moment the meat was there, then it was gone. Nothing remained but a taste lingering about his neglected teeth, so honey-sweet it gave him heart to ask his way again.

He returned to the brazier and spoke to a peasant who looked a little more alert than the others. The man did not answer or meet his eyes but, hanging his head, glanced from side to side as though at a loss to account for the noise he heard. A little dark gypsy of a fellow came bustling up and, pushing the peasant contemptuously aside, asked in English: 'What is it you are wanting?'

'I am looking for the British Legation.'

'Not here. Not anywhere here.'

'But where?'

'A long way. It is necessary to find a conveyance.'

'Tell me the way. I can walk.'

'No, no. Too far. Too difficult.' Dropping Yakimov abruptly, the gypsy went across to the other side of the brazier, where he stood looking resentfully across at him.

Yakimov was growing tired. His coat hung hot and heavy on his shoulders. He wondered if he could find some sort of lodging for the night, making his usual promise to pay next day.

As he went on, the quayside widened into an open cobbled space where a gritty wind sprang up and blew feathers into his face. On the further side, near a main road, stood several crates packed with live fowl. This, he realised, was a chicken market, the source of the pervading stench.

He crossed to the crates and took down one so that the others formed a seat. He sat protected by the crates behind him. The hens, stringy Balkan birds, stirred and cackled a while, then slept again. From somewhere in the market a clock struck nine. He had been wandering about for two hours or more. He sighed. His fragile body had become too heavy to move. Wedging his case out of sight between the crates, he drew up his feet, put down his head and slept.

When awakened by the long scream of a braking car, he murmured: 'Unholy hour, dear boy', and tried to turn round. His knees struck the wire of the coop behind him. The cramp in his limbs forced him to full consciousness. He scrambled up to see what vehicles could be passing, so erratically and in such profusion when it was barely daylight. He saw a procession of mud-caked lorries swerving and swaying on the crown of the road. One lorry dipped towards the kerb, causing him to jump back in alarm. As it straightened and went on, he gazed after it, shocked, the more so because he himself drove with inspired skill.

Behind the lorries came a string of private cars – a seemingly endless string: all the same mud-grey, all oddly swollen in shape, the result, Yakimov realised, of their being padded top and sides with mattresses. The windscreens were cracked. The bonnets and wings were pockmarked. Inside the cars, the passengers – men, women and children – lay about, abandoned in sleep. The drivers nodded over the steering-wheels.

Who could they be? Where had they come from? Aching, famished, racked by the light of this unfamiliar hour, Yakimov

did not try to answer his questions. But the destination of the cars? Looking where they were heading, he saw tall, concrete buildings evolving pearly out of the pinks and blues of dawn. Beacons of civilisation. He followed the road towards them.

After walking a couple of miles, he reached the main square as the sun, rising above the roof-tops, flecked the cobblestones. A statue, heavily planted on a horse too big for it, saluted the long, grey front of what must be the royal palace. At either end of the palace workmen had started screwing pieces of pre-fabricated classical façade on to scaffolding. The rest of the square was, apparently, being demolished. He crossed to the sunlit side where a white, modern building proclaimed itself the Athénée Palace Hotel. Here the leading cars had come to rest. Only a few of the occupants had roused themselves. The rest slept on, their faces ashen and grim. Some of them had roughly bandaged wounds. In one car, Yakimov noticed, the grey upholstery was soaked with blood.

He pushed through the hotel's revolving door into a marble hall lit brilliantly with glass chandeliers. As he entered, his name was called aloud: '*Yakimov!*'

He started back. He had not received this sort of welcome for many a day. He was the more suspicious when he saw it came from a journalist called McCann, who when they met in the bars of Budapest had usually turned his back. McCann was propped up on a long sofa just inside the vestibule, while a man in a black suit was cutting away the blood-soaked shirt-sleeve which stuck to his right arm. Yakimov felt enough concern to approach the sofa and ask: 'What has happened, dear boy? Can I do anything to help?'

'You certainly can. For the last half-hour I've been telling these dumb clucks to find me a bloke who can speak English.'

Yakimov would have been glad to sink down beside McCann, feeling himself as weak as any wounded man, but the other end of the sofa was occupied by a girl, a dark beauty, haggard and very dirty, who sprawled there asleep.

Leaning forward in an attitude of sympathetic enquiry, he hoped McCann would not want much of him.

‘It’s this!’ McCann’s left hand dug clumsily about in the jacket that lay behind him. ‘Here!’ – he produced some sheets torn from a notebook – ‘Get this out for me. It’s the whole story.’

‘Really, dear boy! What story?’

‘Why, the break-up of Poland; surrender of Gdynia; flight of the Government; the German advance on Warsaw; the refugees streaming out, me with them. Cars machine-gunned from the air; men, women and children wounded and killed; the dead buried by the roadside. Magnificent stuff; first hand; must get it out while it’s hot. Here, take it.’

‘But how do I get it out?’ Yakimov was almost put to flight by the prospect of such an arduous employment.

‘Ring our agency in Geneva, dictate it over the line. A child could do it.’

‘Impossible, dear boy. Haven’t a bean.’

‘Reverse the charges.’

‘Oh, they’d never let me’ – Yakimov backed away – ‘I’m not known here. I don’t speak the language. I’m a refugee like yourself.’

‘Where from?’

Before Yakimov had time to answer his question, a man thrust in through the doors, moving all his limbs with the unnatural fervour of exhaustion. He rushed at McCann. ‘Where, please,’ he asked, ‘is the man with red hairs in your car?’

‘Dead,’ said McCann.

‘Where, please, then, is the scarf I lent to him? The big, blue scarf?’

‘God knows. I’d guess it’s underground. We buried him the other side of Lublin, if you want to go back and look.’

‘You buried the scarf? Are you mad that you buried the scarf?’

‘Oh, go away!’ shouted McCann, at which the man ran to the wall opposite and beat on it with his fists.

Taking advantage of this diversion, Yakimov began to move off. McCann seized a fold of his coat and gave a howl of

rage: 'For God's sake! Come back, you bastard. Here I am with this arm gone, a bullet in my ribs, not allowed to move – and here's this story! You've got to send it, d'you hear me? You've got to.'

Yakimov moaned: 'Haven't had a bite for three days. Your poor old Yaki's faint. His feet are killing him.'

'Wait!' Pushing impatiently about in his coat again, McCann brought out his journalist's card. 'Take this. You can eat here. Get yourself a drink. Get yourself a bed. Get what you damned well like – but first, 'phone this stuff through.'

Taking the card and seeing on it the picture of McCann's lined and crumpled face, Yakimov was slowly revived by the possibilities of the situation. 'You mean they'll give me credit?'

'Infinite credit. The paper says. Work for me, you dopey duck, and you can booze and stuff to your heart's content.'

'Dear boy!' breathed Yakimov; he smiled with docile sweetness. 'Explain again, *rather* slowly, just what you want poor Yaki to do.'

3

The Pringles settled into a small hotel in the square, on the side opposite the Athénée Palace. Their window looked out on to ruins. That day, the day after their arrival, they had been awakened at sunrise by the fall of masonry. At evening, as Harriet watched for Guy's return, she saw the figures of workmen, black and imp-small in the dusk, carrying flares about the broken buildings.

These buildings had been almost the last of the Biedermeier prettiness bestowed on Bucharest by Austria. The King, who planned a square where, dared he ever venture out so openly, he might review a regiment, had ordered that the demolitions be completed before winter.

Harriet had spent most of her day watching from the window. Though the university term had not started, Guy had set out that morning to see if there were any students in the common-room. He had promised to take Harriet out after luncheon but had returned late, his face aglow, and said he must eat quickly and hurry back. The students had been crowding in all morning eager for news of their English teachers and the term's work.

'But, darling' – Harriet, still filled with the faith and forbearance of the newly married, spoke only with regret – 'couldn't you wait until Professor Inchcape arrives?'

'One must never discourage students,' said Guy and he hurried off, promising to take her that evening to dine 'up the Chaussée'.

During the afternoon the receptionist rang through three times to say a lady wished to speak to Domnul Pringle. 'The

same lady?’ Harriet asked the third time. Yes, the same lady.

When, at sunset, Guy’s figure appeared in the square, Harriet’s forbearance was not what it had been. She watched him emerge out of a blur of dust – a large, untidy man clutching an armful of books and papers with the awkwardness of a bear. A piece of pediment crashed before him. He paused, blinded; peered about through his glasses and started off in the wrong direction. She felt an appalled compassion for him. Where he had been a moment before, a wall came down. Its fall revealed the interior of a vast white room, fretted with baroque scrolls and set with a mirror that glimmered like a lake. Nearby could be seen the red wallpaper of a café – the famous Café Napoleon that had been the meeting-place of artists, musicians, poets and other natural non-conformists. Guy had said that all this destruction had been planned simply to wipe out this one centre of revolt.

Entering the hotel room, Guy threw down his armful of papers. With a casualness that denoted drama, he announced: ‘The Russians have occupied Vilna.’ He set about changing his shirt.

‘You mean, they’re inside Poland?’ asked Harriet.

‘A good move.’ Her tone had set him on the defensive. ‘A move to protect Poland.’

‘A good excuse, anyway.’

The telephone rang and Guy jumped at it before anything more could be said: ‘Inchcape!’ he called delightedly and without consulting Harriet added: ‘We’re dining up the Chaussée. Pavel’s. Come and join us.’ He put down the receiver and, pulling a shirt over his head without undoing the buttons, he said: ‘You’ll like Inchcape. All you need do with him is encourage him to talk.’

Harriet, who never believed she would like anyone she did not know, said: ‘Someone rang you three times this afternoon. A woman.’

‘Really!’ The information did not disconcert him. He merely said: ‘People here are crazy about the telephone. It hasn’t been installed long. Women with nothing better to do ring up

complete strangers and say: "Allo! Who are you? Let us have a nice little flirt." I'm always getting them.'

'I don't think a stranger would ring three times.'

'Perhaps not. Whoever it was, she'll ring again.'

As they left the room, the telephone did ring again. Guy hurried back to it. Harriet, on the stairs, heard him say: 'Why, Sophie!' and she went down. Turning a corner, she saw the hall below crowded with people. All the hotel guests and servants were gathered there, moving about talking excitedly. Behind the reception desk the wireless, like a mechanical bird, was whirring in the persistent, nerve-racking music of the Rumanian *hora*. Harriet came to a stop, feeling in the air the twang of anxiety. When Guy caught her up, she said: 'I think something has happened.'

Guy went to the manager, who attended him with deference. The English were important in Bucharest. England had guaranteed Rumanian safety. Guy was told that foreign troops were massing on the frontier.

'What part of the frontier?' he asked.

That was not known: nor was it known whether the troops were German or Russian. The King was about to broadcast from his apartments and it was believed that at any moment general mobilisation would be ordered.

Moved by the stress of the occasion, the Pringles waited to hear the King. The mechanical bird stopped. In the abrupt silence, voices that had been bawling to be heard above the din now trickled self-consciously away. The wireless announced that the King would address his subjects in Rumanian.

At that a man in a cape, too stout to turn only his head, turned his whole body and surveyed the gathering with an air of enquiring innocence. '*Sans doute l'émission est en retard parce que sa Majesté s'instruit dans la langue.*'

There was a laugh, but a brief one, an instant extracted from fear, then the faces were taut again. The group waited; a collection of drawn yellow-skinned men and heavily powdered women with dark eyes fixed on the wireless set, from which the King's voice came suddenly out of long silence.

The audience bent expectantly forward, then began shifting and complaining that it could not understand his broken Rumanian. Guy did his best to translate the speech for Harriet:

‘If we are attacked, we will defend our country to the last man. We will defend it to the last foot of soil. We have learned from Poland’s mistakes. Rumania will never suffer defeat. Her strength will be formidable.’

A few people nodded their heads and one repeated: ‘*Formidabil, eh! Formidabil!*’, but several of the others looked furtively about fearing an enemy might mistake these words for provocation. The man in the cape turned again, screwing up his large, flexible, putty-coloured face and spreading his hands as though to say ‘And now you know!’ but the others were not so responsive. This was no time for humour. Giving Guy the smile of a fellow conspirator he strode away and Guy, flushed like a schoolboy, whispered that that had been an actor from the National Theatre.

The Pringles left by a side door that opened on to the Calea Victoriei, the main shopping street, where the blocks of flats rose to such a height they caught the last rose-violet glow of the sun. A glimmer of this, reflected down into the dusty valley of the street, lit with violet-grey the crowds that clotted either pavement.

This was the time of the evening promenade. Guy suggested they should walk a little way; but first, they had to pass through the purgatory of the hotel’s attendant beggars. These were professional beggars, blinded or maimed by beggar parents in infancy. Guy, during his apprentice year, had grown accustomed, if not inured, to the sight of white eyeballs and running sores, to have stumps and withered arms and the breasts of nursing mothers thrust into his face. The Rumanians accepted all this as part of life and donated coins so small that a beggar might spend his day collecting the price of a meal.

However, when Guy tried to do the same thing, a howl went up. Foreigners were not let off so lightly. All the beggars set upon the Pringles together. One hid half a loaf behind his

back to join in the age old cry of: ‘*Mi-e foame, foame, foame.*’ They were hemmed in by a stench of sweat, garlic and putrid wounds. The beggars took what Guy distributed among them, then whined for more. Harriet, looking at a child that trembled violently at her elbow, thought she saw in its face glee at its own persistence. A man on the ground, attempting to bar their way, stretched out a naked leg bone-thin, on which the skin was mottled purple and rosetted with yellow scabs. As she stepped over it, the leg slapped the ground in rage that she should escape it.

‘Do they want to annoy one?’ she asked, and realised there might be revenge for all this abasement in provoking some stranger like herself to the break-down of pure hatred.

At last they were free to join the promenade. The crowd was a sombre crowd, comprising more men than women. Women of the older generation did not walk abroad alone. There were a few groups of girls, their eyes only for each other, seeming unaware of the savage stares of solitary men. Mostly there were couples; tailored, padded, close-buttoned, self-consciously correct: for this, Guy explained, was an hour when only the employing class was free to walk abroad, Harriet might now observe the new bourgeoisie, risen from the peasantry and pretty pleased with itself for having done so.

Because the peasants themselves were given to holiday colours of great brilliance, their male descendants dressed in grey, the women in Parisian black with such pearls, diamonds and silver fox furs as they could afford.

Harriet, meeting glances that became critical, even slightly derisive, of the fact the Pringles were hatless and rather oddly dressed, became censorious herself. ‘They have,’ she said, ‘the uniformity of their insecurity.’

‘They’re not all Rumanians,’ said Guy. ‘There are a great many stateless Jews; and there are, of course, Hungarians, Germans and Slavs. The percentages are . . .’ Guy, his head lifted above the trivialities of conduct, brought out statistics, but Harriet was not listening. She was absorbed in warfare with the crowd.

The promenade was for her a trial of physical strength. Though leisurely, the Rumanians were ruthless in their determination to keep on the pavement. Only peasants or servants could be seen walking in the road. The men might, under pressure, yield an inch or two, but the women were as implacable as steam-rollers. Short and strong, they remained bland-faced while wielding buttocks and breasts as heavy as bladders of lard.

The position most fiercely held was the inner pavement beside the shop windows. Guy, too temperate, and Harriet, too light-boned, for the fray, were easily thrust out to the kerb, where Guy gripped Harriet's elbow to keep her from slipping into the gutter. She broke from him, saying: 'I'll walk in the road. I'm not a Rumanian. I can do what I like.'

Following her, Guy caught her hand and squeezed it, trying to induce in her his own imperturbable good humour. Harriet, looking back at the crowd, more tolerant now she was released from it, realised that behind its apparent complacency there was a nervous air of enquiry, an alert unease. Were someone to shout: 'The invasion has begun,' the whole smug façade would collapse.

This unease unmasked itself at the end of the Calea Victoriei where the road widened in a no-man's-land of public buildings. Here were parked a dozen or so of the Polish refugee cars that were still streaming down from the north. Some of the cars had been abandoned. From the others women and children, left while the men sought shelter, gazed out blankly. The well-dressed Rumanians, out to appreciate and be appreciated, looked affronted by these ruined faces that were too tired to care.

Harriet wondered what would be done with the Poles. Guy said the Rumanians, once stirred, were kindly enough. Some who owned summer villas were offering them to Polish families, but stories were already going round about the refugees; old anti-Polish stories remembered from the last war.

Near the end of the road, near the cross roads where the turbaned boyar, Cantacuzino, pointed the way to the Chicken

Market, a row of open *trāsurās* waited to be hired. Guy suggested they drive up the Chaussée. Harriet peered at the horses, whose true condition was hidden by the failing of the light.

‘They look wretchedly thin,’ she said.

‘They’re very old.’

‘I don’t think we should employ them.’

‘If no one employed them, they would starve to death.’

Choosing the least decrepit of the horses, the Pringles climbed into the carriage, which was about to start when commanded to a halt. A tall, elderly man was holding out his walking-stick with an imperious air.

Guy recognised the man with surprise. ‘It’s Woolley,’ he said. ‘He usually ignores “the culture boys”.’ Then his face lit with pleasure: ‘I expect he wants to meet you.’ Before Woolley could state his business, Guy introduced him to Harriet: ‘The leading English businessman, the chairman of the Golf Club’, enhancing from sheer liberality of spirit such importance as Woolley had; then, turning with tender pride towards Harriet, he said: ‘My wife.’

Woolley’s cold nod indicated that duty not frivolity had caused him to accost them. ‘The order is,’ he announced in a nasal twang, ‘the ladies must return to England.’

‘But,’ said Guy, ‘I called at the Legation this morning. No one said anything about it.’

‘Well, there it is,’ said Woolley in a tone that implied he was not arguing, he was telling them.

Harriet, exasperated by the mildness of Guy’s protest asked: ‘Who has given this order? The Minister?’

Woolley started, surprised, it seemed, not only by the edge on her voice but by the fact she had a voice at all. His head, hairless, with toad-mottled skin, jerked round and hung towards her like a lantern tremulous on a bamboo: ‘No, it’s a general order, like. I’ve sent me lady wife home as an example. That was enough for the other ladies.’

‘Not for me, I’m afraid. I never follow examples.’

Woolley’s throat moved several times before he said: ‘Oh,

don't you? Well, young woman, I can tell you this: if trouble starts here, there'll be a proper schemozzle. The cars and petrol will be requisitioned by the army and the trains'll be packed with troops. I doubt if anyone'll get away, but if you do, you'll go empty-handed, and it won't be no Cook's tour. Don't say I haven't warned you. What I say is, it's the duty of the ladies to go back home and not to be a drag on the gents.'

'You imagine they'll be safer in England? I can only say, you don't know much about modern warfare. I think, Mr Woolley, it would be better if you set an example by not getting into a panic.'

Harriet poked at the coachman and the *trăsură*, seeming about to break fore from aft, heaved itself to a start. As it went, Harriet looked back to give a regal nod and saw that Woolley's face, under a street lamp, had lost what colour it had. He shouted after them, his voice passing out of control: 'You young people these days have no respect for authority. I'd have you know, the Minister described me as the leader of the English colony.'

They were under way. Guy, his brows raised, gazed at Harriet, having seen an extra dimension added to the woman he had achieved. 'I never dreamt you could be so grand,' he said.

Pleased with herself, she said: 'He's an impossible old ass. How could you let him bully you?'

Guy laughed. 'Darling, he's pathetic.'

'Pathetic? With all that self-importance?'

'The self-importance is pathetic. Can't you see?'

For a sudden moment she could see, and her triumph subsided. His hand slipped into hers and she raised to her lips his long, unpractical fingers. 'You're right, of course. Still . . .'

She gave his little finger a bite that made him yelp. 'That,' she said, 'is in case you get too good to be true.'

They had returned down the Calea Victoriei, crossed the square and had reached the broad avenue where the German Embassy stood among the mansions of the very rich. This led to the Chaussée, that stretched, wide and tree-lined, into open

country. The trees, a row on either side of the pavements, were almost bare, what leaves that remained so scorched by the summer's heat that they hung like scraps blown from a bonfire.

It was almost dark. The stars grew brilliant in the sky. The Pringles, sitting hand-in-hand in the old four-wheeler that smelt of horse, were more aware of each other than of anything else. Here they were, a long way from home, alone together in a warring world.

Made a little self-conscious by these thoughts, Guy pointed out an archway at the end of the vista. 'The Arc de Triomphe,' he said.

'The Paris of the East,' Harriet said, somewhat in ridicule, for they had disagreed as to the attractions of Bucharest. Guy, who had spent here his first year of adult freedom, living on the first money earned by his own efforts, saw Bucharest with a pleasure she, a Londoner, rather jealous of his year alone here, was not inclined to share.

'What is it made of, the arch? Marble?' she asked.

'Concrete.' It had been built previously by a fraudulent contractor who had used inferior cement. When it fell down, the contractor was put in prison and the arch re-erected to the glory of Greater Rumania – the Rumania that came into existence in 1919 when the Old Kingdom acquired, as a reward for entering the war on the side of the victors, parts of Russia, Austria and Hungary. 'And so,' said Guy, 'like most people who did well out of the war, she is now a nice comfortable shape.'

While Guy talked, young men howled past the *trăsură* in racing cars, each with a foot on his accelerator, a hand thumping up and down on the hooter. The horse – revealed by the street lights as a phantom horse, a skeleton in a battered hide – was not disturbed. Equally undisturbed was the coachman, a vast cottage loaf in a velvet robe.

Guy whispered: 'A *Skopit*. One of the sights of the city. The *Skopits* belong to a Russian sect. They believe that to find grace we must all be completely flat in front, women as

well as men. So, after they've reproduced themselves, the young people hold tremendous orgies, working themselves into frenzies in which they mutilate themselves.'

'Oh!' said Harriet. She gazed in wonder at the vast velvet backside of the eunuch before her, then she gazed out at the dark reaches of the Muntenia plain, on which the city stood like a bride-cake on a plate. 'A barbarous country,' she said.

They had now passed the last of the houses. On either side of the road, adazzle beneath the dark, star-lighted violet of the sky, were the open areas owned by the restaurants that had no gardens in the town. Each spring, when the weather settled, they shut their winter premises and brought their chairs and tables up the Chaussée. Within these enclosures the limes and chestnuts, hose-drenched each morning, spread a ceiling of leaves.

When the *trăsură* stopped at Pavel's, one of the largest of the open-air restaurants, there could be heard above the traffic the shrill squeak of a gypsy violin. Within the shrub hedge of the garden, all was uproar.

The place was crowded. The silver-gilt glow from the globes set in the trees lit in detail the wrinkled tree-trunks, the pebbled ground, and the blanched faces of the diners that, damp with the excitement of food, gazed about them with deranged looks, demanding to be served. Some rapped with knives on wine-glasses, some clapped their hands, some made kissing noises at the waiters, while others clutched at every passing coat-tail, crying: '*Domnule, domnule!*' for in this country even the meanest was addressed as 'lord'.

The waiters, sweating and disarranged, snapped their civilities and made off before orders were complete. The diners shouted to the empty air, sometimes shaking their fists as they seethed in their seats, talking, gesturing, jerking their heads this way and that. It was an uproar in which there was little laughter.

'They all seem very cross,' said Harriet, who, caught into the atmosphere, began to feel cross herself.

A waiter, flapping at the Pringles like an angry bird, conveyed to them the fact they were blocking the way to the kitchen