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The Light of Day

ERIC AMBLER

THE LIGHT OF DAY

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THE LIGHT OF DAY

Eric Ambler was born in London in 1909. Before turning to writing full-time, he worked at an engineering firm and wrote copy for an advertising agency. His first novel was published in 1936. During the course of his career, Ambler was awarded two Gold Daggers, a Silver Dagger, and a Diamond Dagger from the Crime Writers Association of Great Britain, named a Grand Master by the Mystery Writers Association of America, and made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth. In addition to his novels, Ambler wrote a number of screenplays, including *A Night to Remember* and *The Cruel Sea*, which won him an Oscar nomination. Eric Ambler died in 1998.

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Eric Ambler

THE LIGHT
OF DAY



VINTAGE CRIME/BLACK LIZARD

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Also by Eric Ambler

It came down to this: if I had not been arrested by the Turkish police, I would have been arrested by the Greek police. I had no choice but to do as this man Harper told me. He was entirely responsible for what happened to me.

I thought he was an American. He looked like an American—tall, with the loose, light sun the narrow tie and button-down collar, the smooth, old-young, young-old face and the crew cut. He spoke like an American, too; or at least like a German who has lived in America for a long time. Of course, I now know that he is not an American, but he certainly gave the impression. His luggage, for instance, was definitely American; plastic leather and imitation gold locks. I know American luggage when I see it. I didn't see his passport.

He arrived at the Athens airport on a plane from Vienna. He could have come from New York or London or Frankfurt or Moscow and arrived by that plane—or just from Vienna. It was impossible to tell. There were no hotel labels on the luggage. I just assumed that he came from New York. It was a mistake anyone might have made.

This will not do. I can already hear myself protesting too much, as if I had something to be ashamed of; but I am simply trying to explain what happened, to be completely frank and open.

I really did not suspect that he was not what he seemed. Naturally, I approached him at the airport. The car-hire business is only a temporary sideline with me, of course—I am a journalist by profession—but Nicki had been complaining about needing more new clothes and the rent was due on the flat that week. I needed money, and this man looked as if he had some. Is it a crime to earn money? The way some people go on you would think it was. The law is the law and I am certainly not complaining, but what I can't stand is all the humbug and hypocrisy. If a man goes to the red-light district on his own, nobody says anything. But if he wants to do another chap, a friend or an acquaintance, a good turn by showing him the way to the best house, everyone starts screaming blue murder. I have no patience with it. There is one thing I pride myself on it is my common sense—that and my sense of humor.

My correct name is Arthur Simpson.

No! I said I would be completely frank and open and I am going to be. My correct *full* name is Arthur Abdel Simpson. The Abdel is because my mother was Egyptian. In fact, I was born in Cairo. But my father was a British officer, a regular, and I myself am British to the core. Even my background is typically British.

My father rose from the ranks. He was a Regimental Sergeant Major in the Buffs when he was born; but in 1916 he was commissioned as a Lieutenant Quartermaster in the Army Service Corps. We were living in officers' married quarters in Ismailia when he was killed a year later. I was too young at the time to be told the details. I thought, naturally, that he must have been killed by the Turks; but Mum told me later that he had been run over by an army lorry as he was walking home one night from the officers' mess.

Mum had his pension, of course, but someone told her to write to the Army Benevolent Association for the Sons of Fallen Officers, and they got me into the British school in Cairo. She still kept on writing to them about me, though. When I was nine, they said that if the

were some relative in England I could live with, they would pay for my schooling there. There was a married sister of father's living at Hither Green in South-East London. When the Benevolent Association said that they would pay twelve-and-six a week for my keep, she agreed to have me. This was a great relief to Mum because it meant that she could marry Mr. Hafiz, who had never liked me after the day I caught them in bed together and told the Imam about it. Mr. Hafiz was in the restaurant business and was as fat as a pig. It was disgusting for a man of his age to be in bed with Mum.

I went to England on an army troop ship in care of the sickbay matron. I was glad to go. I have never liked being where I am not wanted. Most of the men in the sick bay were V.I. cases, and I used to listen to them talking. I picked up quite a lot of useful information before the matron, who was (there is no other word) an old bitch, found out about it and handed me over to the P.T. instructor for the rest of the voyage. My aunt in Hither Green was a bitch, too, but I was wanted there all right. She was married to a bookkeeper who spent half his time out of work. My twelve-and-six a week came in very handy. She didn't dare get too bitchy. Every so often, a man from the Benevolent Association would come down to see how I was getting on. If I had told him the tale they would have taken me away. Like most boys of that age, I suppose I was what is known nowadays as "a bit of a handful."

The school was on the Lewisham side of Blackheath and had a big board outside with gold lettering on it:

CORAM'S GRAMMAR SCHOOL

For the Sons of Gentlemen

FOUNDED 1781

On top of the board there was the school coat of arms and motto, *Mens aequa in arduis*. The Latin master said it was from Horace; but the English master liked to translate it in Kipling's words: "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs ... you'll be a Man, my son!"

It was not exactly a public school like Eton or Winchester; there were no boarders, we were all day boys; but it was run on the same lines. Your parents, or (as in my case) your guardian, had to pay to send you there. There were a few scholarship boys from the local council schools—I think we had to have them because of the Board of Education subsidy—but never more than twenty or so in the whole school. In 1920 a new Head was appointed. His name was Brush and we nicknamed him "The Bristle." He'd been a master at a big public school and so he knew how things should be done. He made a lot of changes. After he came we played rugger instead of soccer, sat in forms instead of in classes, and were taught how to speak like gentlemen. One or two of the older masters got the sack, which was a good thing, and The Bristle made all the masters wear their university gowns at prayers in the morning. As he said, Coram's was a school with a good tradition, and although we might not be as old as Eton or Winchester, we were a good deal older than Brighton or Clifton. All the swotting in the world was no good if you didn't have character and tradition. He made us stop reading trash like the *Gem* and *Magnet* and turn to worthwhile books by authors like Stevenson and Talbot Baines Reed.

I was too young when my father was killed to have known him well; but one or two of his pet sayings have always remained in my memory; perhaps because I heard him repeat them so often to Mum or to his army friends. One, I remember, was "Never volunteer for

anything,” and another was “Bullshit baffles brains.”

Hardly the guiding principles of an officer and a gentleman, you say? Well, I am not sure about that; but I won't argue. I can only say that they were the guiding principles of a practical, professional soldier, and that at Coram's they worked. For example, I found out very early on that nothing annoyed the masters more than untidy handwriting. With some of them, in fact, the wrong answer to a question neatly written would get almost as many marks as the right answer badly written or covered with smears and blots. I have always written very neatly. Again, when a master asked something and then said “Hands up who knows” you could always put your hand up even if you did not know, as long as you let the eagerness of the other boys put their hands up first, and as long as you smiled. Smiling—pleasantly, I mean, not grinning or smirking—was very important at all times. The masters did not bother about you so much if you looked as if you had a clear conscience.

I got on fairly well with the other chaps. Because I had been born in Egypt, of course, they called me “Wog,” but, as I was fair-haired like my father, I did not mind that. My voice broke quite early, when I was twelve. After a while, I started going up to Hilly Fields at night with a fifth-former named Jones iv, who was fifteen, and we used to pick up girls—“squares”—“squares pushing,” as they say in the army. I soon found that some of the girls didn't mind a bit if you put your hand up their skirts, and even did a bit more. Sometimes we would stay out late. That meant that I used to have to get up early and do my homework, or make my aunt write an excuse note for me to take to school saying that I had been sent to bed after tea with a feverish headache. If the worst came to the worst, I could always crib from a boy named Reese and do the written work in the lavatory. He had very bad acne and never minded if you cribbed from him; in fact I think he liked it. But you had to be careful. He was one of the bookworms and usually got everything right. If you cribbed from him word for word you risked getting full marks. With me, that would make the master suspicious. I got ten out of ten for a chemistry paper once, and the master caned me for cheating. I had never really liked the man and I got my revenge later by pouring a test tube of sulphuric acid (conc.) over the saddle of his bicycle; but I have always remembered the lesson that incident taught me. Never try to pretend that you're better than you are. I think I can fairly say that I never have.

Of course, an English public-school education is mainly designed to build character, to give a boy a sense of fair play and sound values, teach him to take the rough with the smooth, and make him look and sound like a gentleman.

Coram's at least did those things for me; and, looking back, I suppose that I should be grateful. I can't say that I enjoyed the process though. Fighting, for instance: that was supposed to be very manly, and if you did not enjoy it they called you “cowardy custard.” I don't think it is cowardly not to want someone to hit you with his fist and make your nose bleed. The trouble was that when I used to hit back I always sprained my thumb or grazed my knuckles. In the end, I found the best way to hit back was with a satchel, especially if you had a pen or the sharp edge of a ruler sticking out through the flap; but I have always disliked violence of any kind.

Almost as much as I dislike injustice. My last term at Coram's, which I should have been able to enjoy because it *was* the last, was completely spoiled.

Jones iv was responsible for that. He had left school by then, and was working for his father, who owned a garage, but I still went up to Hilly Fields with him sometimes. Or

evening he showed me a long poem typed out on four foolscap pages. A customer at the garage had given it to him. It was called *The Enchantment* and was supposed to have been written by Lord Byron. It began:

*Upon one dark and sultry day,
As on my garret bed I lay,
My thoughts, for I was dreaming half,
Were broken by a silvery laugh,
Which fell upon my startled ear,
Full loud and clear and very near.*

Well, it turned out that the laugh was coming through a hole in the wall behind his bed, so he looked through the hole.

*A youth and maid were in the room,
And each in youth's most beauteous bloom.*

It then went on to describe what the youth and maid did together for the next half hour—very poetically, of course, but in detail. It was really hot stuff.

I made copies and let some of the chaps at school read it. Then I charged them fourpence a time to be allowed to copy it out for themselves. I was making quite a lot of money, when some fourth-form boy left a copy in the pocket of his cricket blazer and his mother found it. Her husband sent it with a letter of complaint to The Bristle. He began questioning the boys one by one to find out who had started it, and, of course, he eventually got back to me. I said I had been given it by a boy who had left the term before—The Bristle couldn't touch *him*—but I don't think he believed me. He sat tapping his desk with his pencil and saying “filthy smut” over and over again. He looked very red in the face, almost as if he were embarrassed. I remember wondering if he could be a bit “queer.” Finally, he said that as it was my last term he would not expel me, but that I was not to associate with any of the younger boys for the rest of my time there. He did not cane me or write to the Benevolent Association, which was a relief. But it was a bad experience all the same and I was quite upset. In fact, I think that was the reason I failed my matriculation.

At Coram's they made a fetish out of passing your matric. Apparently, you couldn't get a respectable job in a bank or an insurance company without it. I did not want a job in a bank or an insurance company—Mr. Hafiz had died and Mum wanted me to go back and learn the restaurant business—but it was a disappointment all the same. I think that if The Bristle had been more broad-minded and understanding, not made me feel as if I had committed some sort of crime, things would have been different. I was a sensitive boy and I felt that Coram had somehow let me down. That was the reason I never applied to join the Old Coramian Club.

Now, of course, I can look back on the whole thing and smile about it. The point I am making is that persons in authority—headmasters, police officials—can do a great deal of damage simply by failing to understand the other fellow's point of view.

How could I have possibly known what kind of man this Harper was?

As I explained, I had simply driven out to the Athens airport looking for business. I spotted

this man going through customs and saw that he was carrying his ticket in an American Express folder. I gave one of the porters two drachmas to get me the man's name from his customs declaration. Then I had one of the uniformed airline girls give him my card and the message: "Car waiting outside for Mr. Harper."

It is a trick I have used lots of times and it has almost always worked. Not many Americans or British speak demotic Greek; and by the time they have been through the airport customs especially in the hot weather, and been jostled by the porters and elbowed right and left they are only too ready to go with someone who can understand what they're talking about and take care of the tipping. That day it was really very hot and humid.

As he came through the exit from the customs I went up to him.

"This way, Mr. Harper."

He stopped and looked me over. I gave him a helpful smile, which he did not return.

"Wait a minute," he said curtly. "I didn't order any car."

I looked puzzled. "The American Express sent me, sir. They said you wanted an English speaking driver."

He stared at me again, then shrugged. "Well, okay. I'm going to the Hotel Grand Bretagne."

"Certainly, sir. Is this all your luggage?"

Soon after we turned off the coast road by Glyphada he began to ask questions. Was I British? I side-stepped that one as usual. Was the car my own? They always want to know that. It is my own car, as it happens, and I have two speeches about it. The car itself is a 1955 Plymouth. With an American I brag about how many thousands of miles it has done without any trouble. For the Britishers I have a stiff-upper-lip line about part-exchanging it, as soon as I can save enough extra cash, for an Austin Princess, or an old Rolls-Royce, or some other real quality car. Why shouldn't people be told what they want to hear?

This Harper man seemed much like the rest. He listened and grunted occasionally as I told him the tale. When you know that you are beginning to bore them, you usually know that everything is going to be all right. Then, you stop. He did not ask how I happened to live and work in Greece, as they usually do. I thought that would probably come later; that is, if they were going to be a later with him. I had to find out.

"Are you in Athens on business, sir?"

"Could be."

His tone as good as told me to mind my own business, but I pretended not to notice. "I am, sir," I went on, "because if you should need a car and driver while you are here I could arrange to place myself at your disposal."

"Yes?"

It wasn't exactly encouraging, but I told him the daily rate and the various trips we could take if he wanted to do some sight-seeing—Delphi and the rest.

"I'll think about it," he said. "What's your name?"

I handed him one of my cards over my shoulder and watched him in the driving mirror while he read it. Then he slipped it into his pocket.

"Are you married, Arthur?"

The question took me by surprise. They don't usually want to know about your private life. I told him about my first wife and how she had been killed by a bomb in the Suez troubles.

1956. I did not mention Nicki. I don't know why; perhaps because I did not want to think about her just then.

"You did say you were British, didn't you?" he asked.

"My father was British, sir, and I was educated in England." I said it a little distantly. I dislike being cross-examined in that sort of way. But he persisted just the same.

"Well, what nationality *are* you?"

"I have an Egyptian passport." That was perfectly true, although it was none of his business.

"Was your wife Egyptian?"

"No, French."

"Did you have any children?"

"Unfortunately no, sir." I was definitely cold now.

"I see."

He sat back staring out of the window, and I had the feeling that he had suddenly put me out of his mind altogether. I thought about Annette and how used I had become to saying that she had been killed by a bomb. I was almost beginning to believe it myself. As I stopped for the traffic lights in Omonias Square, I wondered what had happened to her, and if the gallant gentlemen she had preferred to me had ever managed to give her the children she had said she wanted. I am not one to bear a grudge, but I could not help hoping that she believed not that the sterility had been hers not mine.

I pulled up at the Grande-Bretagne. While the porters were getting the bags out of the car, Harper turned to me.

"Okay, Arthur, it's a deal. I expect to be here three or four days."

I was surprised and relieved. "Thank you, sir. Would you like to go to Delphi tomorrow? On the weekends it gets very crowded with tourists."

"We'll talk about that later." He stared at me for a moment and smiled slightly. "Tonight I think I feel like going out on the town. You know some good places?"

As he said it there was just the suggestion of a wink. I am sure of that.

I smiled discreetly. "I certainly do, sir."

"I thought you might. Pick me up at nine o'clock. All right?"

"Nine o'clock, sir. I will have the concierge telephone to your room that I am here."

It was four-thirty then. I drove to my flat, parked the car in the courtyard, and went up.

Nicki was out, of course. She usually spent the afternoon with friends—or said she did. I did not know who the friends were and I never asked too many questions. I did not want her to lie to me, and, if she had picked up a lover at the Club, I did not want to know about it. When a middle-aged man marries an attractive girl half his age, he has to accept certain possibilities philosophically. The clothes she had changed out of were lying all over the bed and she had spilled some scent, so that the place smelled more strongly of her than usual.

There was a letter for me from a British travel magazine I had written to. They wanted me to submit samples of my work for their consideration. I tore the letter up. Practically thirty years in the magazine game and they treat you like an amateur! Send samples of your work and the next thing you know is that they've stolen all your ideas without paying you a penny a piece. It has happened to me again and again, and I am not being caught that way any more. If they want me to write for them, let them say so with a firm offer of cash on delivery, plus

expenses in advance.

I made a few telephone calls to make sure that Harper's evening out would go smoothly and then went down to the café for a drink or two. When I got back Nicki was there changing again to go to work at the Club.

It was no wish of mine that she should go on working after our marriage. She chose to do so herself. I suppose some men would be jealous at the idea of their wives belly dancing with practically no clothes on in front of other men; but I am not narrow-minded in that way. If she chooses to earn a little extra pocket money for herself, that is her affair.

While she dressed, I told her about Harper and made a joke about all his questions. She did not smile.

"He does not sound easy, papa," she said. When she calls me "papa" like that it means that she is in a friendly mood with me.

"He has money to spend."

"How do you know?"

"I telephoned the hotel and asked for him in Room 230. The operator corrected me and so I got his real room number. I know it. It is a big air-conditioned suite."

She looked at me with a slight smile and sighed. "You do so much enjoy it, don't you?"

"Enjoy what?"

"Finding out about people."

"That is my newspaper training, *chérie*, my nose for news."

She looked at me doubtfully, and I wished I had given a different answer. It has always been difficult for me to explain to her why certain doors are now closed to me. Reopening old wounds is senseless as well as painful.

She shrugged and went on with her dressing. "Will you bring him to the Club?"

"I think so."

I poured her a glass of wine and one for myself. She drank hers while she finished dressing and then went out. She patted my cheek as she went, but did not kiss me. The "papa" mood was over. "One day," I thought, "she will go out and not come back."

But I am never one to mope. If that happened, I decided, then good riddance to bad rubbish. I poured myself another glass of wine, smoked a cigarette, and worked out a tactful way of finding out what sort of business Harper was in. I think I must have sensed that there was something not quite right about him.

At five to nine I found a parking place on Venizelos Avenue just round the corner from the Grande-Bretagne, and went to let Harper know that I was waiting.

He came down after ten minutes and I took him round the corner to the car. I explained that it was difficult for private cars to park in front of the hotel.

He said, rather disagreeably I thought: "Who cares?"

I wondered if he had been drinking. Quite a lot of tourists who, in their own countries, are used to dining early in the evening, start drinking *ouzo* to pass the time. By ten o'clock, when most Athenians begin to think about dinner, the tourists are sometimes too tight to care what they say or do. Harper, however, was all too sober. I soon found that out.

When we reached the car I opened the rear door for him to get in. Ignoring me, he opened the other door and got into the front passenger seat. Very democratic. Only I happen to prefer my passengers in the back seat where I can keep my eye on them through the mirror.

I went round and got into the driver's seat.

"Well, Arthur," he asked, "where are you taking me?"

"Dinner first, sir?"

"How about some sea food?"

"I'll take you to the best, sir."

I drove him out to the yacht harbor at Tourcolimano. One of the restaurants there gives me a good commission. The waterfront is really very picturesque, and he nodded approvingly as he looked around. Then, I took him into the restaurant and introduced him to the cook. When he had chosen his food and a bottle of dry Patras wine he looked at me.

"You eaten yet, Arthur?"

"Oh, I will have something in the kitchen, sir." That way my dinner would go on his bill without his knowing it, as well as my commission.

"You come and eat with me."

"It is not necessary, sir."

"Who said it was? I asked you to eat with me."

"Thank you, sir. I would like to."

More democracy. We sat at a table on the terrace by the water's edge and he began to ask me about the yachts anchored in the harbor. Which were privately owned, which were for charter? What were charter rates like?

I happened to know about one of the charter yachts, an eighteen-meter ketch with two diesels, and told him the rate-one hundred and forty dollars U.S. per day, including a crew of two, fuel for eight hours' steaming a day, and everything except charterer's and passenger food. The real rate was a hundred and thirty, but I thought that, if by any chance he was serious, I could get the difference as commission from the broker. I also wanted to see how he felt about that kind of money; whether he would laugh as an ordinary salaried man would or begin asking about the number of persons it would sleep. He just nodded, and then asked about fast, sea-going motorboats without crew.

In the light of what happened I think that point is specially significant.

I said that I would find out. He asked me about the yacht brokers. I gave him the name of the one I knew personally, and told him the rest were no good. I also said that I did not think that the owners of the bigger boats liked chartering them without their own crewmen on board. He did not comment on that. Later, he asked me if I knew whether yacht charters sent parties out of Tourcolimano or the Piraeus covered Greek waters only, or whether you could "go foreign," say across the Adriatic to Italy. Significant again. I told him I did not know which was true.

When the bill came, he asked if he could change an American Express traveler's check for fifty dollars. That was more to the point. I told him that he could, and he tore the fifty-dollar check out of a book of ten. It was the best thing I had seen that day.

Just before eleven o'clock we left, and I drove him to the Club.

The Club is practically a copy of the Lido night club in Paris, only smaller. I introduced him to John, who owns the place, and tried to leave him there for a while. He was still absolutely sober, and I thought that if he were by himself he would drink more; but it was no good. I had to go in and sit and drink with him. He was as possessive as a woman. I was puzzled. If I had been a fresh-looking young man instead of, well, frankly, a potbellied journalist, I would

have understood it—not approved, of course, but understood. But he was at least ten or fifteen years younger than me.

They have candles on the tables at the Club and you can see faces. When the floor show came on, I watched him watch it. He looked at the girls, Nicki among them, as if they were flies on the other side of a window. I asked him how he liked the third from the left—that was Nicki.

“Legs too short,” he said. “I like them with longer legs. Is that the one you had in mind?”

“In mind? I don’t understand, sir.” I was beginning to dislike him intensely.

He eyed me. “Shove it,” he said unpleasantly.

We were drinking Greek brandy. He reached for the bottle and poured himself another. I could see the muscles in his jaw twitching as if with anger. Evidently something I had said, or which he thought I had said, had annoyed him. It was on the tip of my tongue to mention that Nicki was my wife, but I didn’t. I remembered, just in time, that I had only told him about Annette, and about her being killed by a bomb.

He drank the brandy down quickly and told me to get the bill.

“You don’t like it here, sir?”

“What more is there to see? Do they start stripping later?”

I smiled. It is the only possible response to that sort of boorishness. In any case, I had no objection to speeding up my program for the evening.

“There is another place,” I said.

“Like this?”

“The entertainment, sir, is a little more individual and private.” I picked the words carefully.

“You mean a cat house?”

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that, sir.”

He smirked. “I’ll bet you wouldn’t. How about ‘*maison de rendezvous*’? Does that cover it?”

“Madame Irma’s is very discreet and everything is in the best of taste, sir.”

He shook with amusement. “Know something, Arthur?” he said. “If you shaved a bit close and had yourself a good haircut, you could hire out as a butler any time.”

From his expression I could not tell whether he was being deliberately insulting or making a clumsy joke. It seemed advisable to assume the latter.

“Is that what Americans call ‘ribbing,’ sir?” I asked politely.

This seemed to amuse him even more. He chuckled fatuously. “Okay, Arthur,” he said at last, “okay. We’ll play it your way. Let’s go to see your Madame Irma.”

I didn’t like the “*your* Madame Irma” way of putting it, but I pretended not to notice.

Irma has a very nice house standing in its own grounds just off the road out to Kephisis. She never has more than six girls at any one time and changes them every few months. Her prices are high, of course, but everything is very well arranged. Clients enter and leave by different doors to avoid embarrassing encounters. The only persons the client sees are Irma herself, Kira, the manageress who takes care of the financial side, and, naturally, the lady of his choice.

Harper seemed to be impressed. I say “seemed” because he was very polite to Irma when I introduced them, and complimented her on the decorations. Irma is not unattractive herself and likes presentable-looking clients. As I had expected, there was no nonsense about m

joining him at *that* table. As soon as Irma offered him a drink, he glanced at me and made a gesture of dismissal.

“See you later,” he said.

I was sure then that everything was all right. I went in to Kira’s room to collect my commission and tell her how much money he had on him. It was after midnight then. I saw that I had had no dinner and would go and get some. She told me that they were not particularly busy that night and that there need be no hurry.

I drove immediately to the Grande-Bretagne, parked the car at the side, walked round the bar, and went in and ordered a drink. If anyone happened to notice me and remember me later, I had a simple explanation for being there.

I finished the drink, gave the waiter a good tip, and walked through across the foyer to the lifts. They are fully automatic; you work them yourself with push buttons. I went up to the third floor.

Harper’s suite was on the inner court, away from the noise of Syntagmaios Square, and the doors to it were out of sight of the landing. The floor servants had gone off duty for the night. It was all quite easy. As usual, I had my pass key hidden inside an old change purse, but, as usual, I did not need it. Quite a number of the sitting-room doors to suites in the older part of the hotel can be opened from outside without a key, unless they have been specially locked, that is; it makes it easier for room-service waiters carrying trays. Often the maid who turns down the beds last thing can’t be bothered to lock up after her. Why should she? The Greeks are a particularly honest people and they trust one another.

His luggage was all in the bedroom. I had already handled it once that day, stowing it in the car at the airport, so I did not have to worry about leaving fingerprints.

I went to his briefcase first. There were a lot of business papers in it—something to do with a Swiss company named Tekelek, who made accounting machines—I did not pay much attention to them. There was also a wallet with money in it—Swiss francs, American dollars and West German marks—together with the yellow number slips of over two thousand dollars’ worth of traveler’s checks. The number slips are for record purposes in case the checks are lost and you want to stop payment on them. I left the money where it was and took the slips. The checks themselves I found in the side pocket of a suitcase. There were thirty-five of them, each for fifty dollars. His first name was Walter, middle initial K.

In my experience, most people are extraordinarily careless about the way they look after their traveler’s checks. Just because their counter-signature is required before a check can be cashed, they assume that only they can negotiate it. Yet anyone with eyes in his head can copy the original signature. No particular skill is required; haste, heat, a different pen, a counter of an awkward height, writing standing up instead of sitting—a dozen things can account for small variations in the second signature. It is not going to be examined by a handwriting expert, not at the time that it is cashed anyway; and usually it is only at bank that the cashier asks to see a passport.

Another thing: if you have ordinary money in your pocket, you usually know, at least approximately, how much you have. Every time you pay for something, you receive a reminder; you can see and feel what you have. Not so with traveler’s checks. What you see, and when you look, is a blue folder with checks inside. How often do you count the checks to make sure that they are all there? Supposing someone were to remove the *bottom* check in

folder. When would you find out that it had gone? A hundred to one it would not be until you had used up all the checks which had been on top of it. Therefore, you would not know exactly *when* it had been taken; and, if you had been doing any traveling, you probably would not even know *where*. If you did not know when or where, how could you possibly guess *who*? In any case you would be too late to stop its being cashed.

People who leave traveler's checks about *deserve* to lose them.

I took just six checks, the bottom ones from the folder. That made three hundred dollars and left him fifteen hundred or so. It is a mistake, I always think, to be greedy; but unfortunately I hesitated. For a moment I wondered if he would miss them all that much sooner if I took two more.

So I was standing there like a fool, with the checks right in my hands, when Harper walked into the room.

I was in the bedroom and he came through from the sitting room. All the same he must have opened the outer door very quietly indeed, or I would certainly have heard the latch. I think he expected to find me there. In that case, the whole thing was just a cunningly planned trap.

I was standing at the foot of one of the beds, so I couldn't move away from him. For a moment he just stood there grinning at me, as if he were enjoying himself.

"Well now, Arthur," he said, "you ought to have waited for me, oughtn't you?"

"I was going back." It was a stupid thing to say, I suppose; but almost anything I had said would have sounded stupid at that point.

And then, suddenly, he hit me across the face with the back of his hand.

It was like being kicked. My glasses fell off and I lurched back against the bed. As I raised my arms to protect myself he hit me again with the other hand. When I started to fall to my knees, he dragged me up and kept on hitting me. He was like a savage.

I fell down again and this time he let me be. My ears were singing, my head felt like it was bursting, and I could not see properly. My nose began to bleed. I got my handkerchief out to stop the blood from getting all over my clothes, and felt about among the checks lying on the carpet for my glasses. I found them eventually. They were bent a bit but not broken. When I put them on, I saw the soles of his shoes about a yard from my face.

He was sitting in the armchair, leaning back, watching me.

"Get up," he said, "and watch that blood. Keep it off the rug."

As I got to my feet, he stood up quickly himself. I thought he was going to start hitting me again. Instead, he caught hold of one lapel of my jacket.

"Do you have a gun?"

I shook my head.

He slapped my pockets, to make sure, I suppose, then shoved me away.

"There are some tissues in the bathroom," he said. "Go clean your face. But leave the door open."

I did as I was told. There was a window in the bathroom; but even if it had been possible to escape that way without breaking my neck, I don't suppose I would have tried it. He would have heard me. Besides, where could I have escaped to? All he would have had to do was call down to the night concierge, and the police would have been there in five minutes. The fact that he had not called down already was at least something. Perhaps, as a foreigner, he did not want to get involved as a witness in a court case. After all, he had not actually lost anything; and if I were to eat enough humble pie, perhaps even cry a bit, he might decide to forget the whole thing; especially after the brutal way in which he had attacked me. That was my reasoning. I should have known better. You cannot expect common decency from a man like Harper.

When I came out of the bathroom, I saw that he had picked up the check folder and was putting it back in the suitcase. The checks I had torn out, however, were lying on the bed. He gathered them up and motioned me towards the sitting room.

"In there."

As I went in, he moved past me to the door and bolted it.

There was a marble-topped commode against the side wall. On the commode was a tray with an ice bucket, a bottle of brandy, and some glasses. He picked up a glass, then looked at me.

“Sit down right there,” he said.

The chair he motioned to was by a writing table under the window. I obeyed orders; there did not seem to be anything else to do. My nose was still bleeding, and I had a headache.

He slopped some brandy into the glass and put it on the table beside me. For a moment or two I felt encouraged. If you are going to have a man arrested you don't sit him down first and give him a drink. Perhaps it was just going to be a man-to-man chat in which I told him my hard-luck story and said how sorry I was, while he got dewy-eyed over his own magnanimity and decided to give me another chance.

That one did not last long.

He poured himself a drink and then glanced across at me as he put ice in the glass.

“First time you've been caught at it, Arthur?”

I blew my nose a little to keep the blood running before I answered. “It's the first time I've ever been tempted, sir. I don't know what came over me. Perhaps it was the brandy I had with you. I'm not really used to it.”

He turned and stared at me. All at once his face was neither old-young nor young-old. It was white and pinched and his mouth worked in an odd way. I have seen faces go like that before and I braced myself. There was a metal lamp on the writing table beside me. I wondered if I could possibly hit him with it before he got to me.

But he did not move. His eyes flickered towards the bedroom and then back to me.

“You'd better get something straight, Arthur,” he said slowly. “That was just a little roughing up you had in there. If I really start giving you a going over, you'll leave here on a stretcher. Nobody's going to mind about that except you. I came back and caught you stealing. You tried to strong-arm your way out of it and I had to defend myself. That's how it'll be. So cut out the bull, and the lies. Right?”

“I'm sorry, sir.”

“Empty your pockets. On this table here.”

I did as I was told.

He looked at everything, my driving license, my *permis de séjour*, and he touched everything. Finally, of course, he found the pass key in the change purse. I had sawn off the shank of it and cut a slot in the end so that I could use a small coin to turn it, but it was still over two inches long, and heavy. The weight gave it away. He looked at it curiously.

“You make this?”

“Not the key part. I just cut it down.” There seemed no point in trying to lie about that.

He nodded. “That's better. Okay, we'll start over. We know you're a two-bit ponce and we know you heist traveler's checks from hotel rooms when you get the chance. Do you write the counter-signature yourself?”

“Yes.”

“So that's forgery. Now, I'm asking again. Have you ever been caught before?”

“No, sir.”

“Sure?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any sort of police record?”

“Here in Athens?”

“We’ll start with Athens.”

I hesitated. “Well, not exactly a police record. Do you mean traffic offenses?”

“You know what I mean. Quit stalling.”

I sneezed, quite unintentionally, and my nose began bleeding again. He sighed impatiently and threw me a bunch of paper napkins from the drink tray.

“I had you pretty well figured out at the airport,” he went on; “but I didn’t think you’d be quite so stupid. Why did you have to tell that Kira dame that you’d had no dinner?”

I shrugged helplessly. “So that I could come here.”

“Why didn’t you tell her you’d gone to gas up the car? I just might have bought that one.”

“It didn’t seem important. Why should you suspect me?”

He laughed. “Oh brother! I know what that car you have sells for here, and I know the gasoline costs sixty cents a gallon. At the rates you charge you couldn’t break even. Okay, you get your payoffs—the restaurant, the clip joint, the cat house—but they can’t amount to much, so there must be something else. Kira doesn’t know what it is, but she knows there’s something because you’ve cashed quite a few traveler’s checks through her.”

“She told you that?” This really upset me; the least one can expect from a brothel keeper is discretion.

“Why shouldn’t she tell me? You didn’t tell her they were stolen, did you?” He drank his brandy down. “I don’t happen to like paying for sex, but I wanted to find out a bit more about you. I did. When they realized that I wasn’t going to leave without paying, they were both real friendly. Called me a cab and everything. Now, supposing *you* start talking.”

I took a sip of brandy. “Very well. I have had three convictions.”

“What for?”

“The charge in each case was representing myself as an official guide. In fact, all I did was to try to save one or two clients from those boring archaeological set speeches. The official guides have to learn them by heart before they can pass the examination. Tourists like to know what they are looking at, but they do not want to be bored.”

“What happened? Did you go to jail?”

“Of course not. I was fined.”

He nodded approvingly. “That was what Irma thought. Now you just keep on playing straight like that and maybe we can keep the police out of this. Have you ever been jailed anywhere, to serve time, I mean?”

“I do not see why I should ...”

“Okay, skip it,” he broke in. “What about Turkey?”

“Turkey? Why do you ask?”

“Have you been there?”

“Yes.”

“Any police record there?”

“I was fined in Istanbul for showing some people round a museum.”

“Which museum?”

“The Topkapi.”

“Were you posing as an official guide that time?”

“Guides must be licensed there. I did not have a license.”

“Have you ever driven from here to Istanbul?”

“Is that a criminal offense?”

“Just answer. Have you?”

“Occasionally. Some tourists like to travel by road. Why?”

He did not answer. Instead, he took an envelope from the writing desk and began scribble something in pencil. I desperately needed a cigarette, but was afraid to light one in case it might look as if I were no longer worried. I was worried, and confused, too; but I wanted to be sure I looked that way. I drank the brandy instead.

He finished his scribbling at last and looked up. “All right, Arthur. There’s a pad of plain paper there and a pen. I’m going to dictate. You start writing. No, don’t give me any arguments. Just do as I tell you.”

I was hopelessly bewildered now. I picked up the pen.

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Head it: *To the Chief of Police, Athens.* Got that? Now go on. *I, Arthur A. Simpson, of—put your address—do hereby confess that on June fifteenth, using an illegal pass key, I entered the suite of Mr. Walter K. Harper in the Hotel Grande-Bretagne and stole American Express travel checks to the value of three hundred dollars. The numbers of the checks were ...*”

As he felt in his pocket for the loose checks, I started to protest.

“Mr. Harper, I can’t possibly write this. It would convict me. I couldn’t defend myself.”

“Would you sooner defend yourself right now? If so, I can call the police, and you can explain about that pass key.” He paused and then went on more patiently. “Look, dad, maybe you and I will be the only ones who will ever read it. Maybe in a week’s time it won’t even exist. I’m just giving you a chance to get off the hook. Why don’t you take it and be thankful?”

“What do I have to do for it?”

“We’ll get to that later. Just you keep writing. *The numbers of the checks were P89.664.577 through P89.664.577, all in fifty-dollar units. I intended to forge Mr. Harper’s signature on them so that I could cash them illegally. I have stolen, forged, and cashed other checks in that way. Shut up and keep writing! But now I find I cannot go through with it. Because of Mr. Harper’s great kindness to me during his visit to Athens, and his Christian charity, I feel that I cannot rob him. I am, therefore, sending the checks I stole from him back with this letter. By taking this decision, I feel that I have come out of the darkness into the light of day. I know now that, as a sinner of the worst type, my only chance is to make restitution, to confess everything, and to pay the penalties the law demands. Only in this way can I hope for salvation in the world to come. Now sign it.*”

I signed it.

“Now date it a week from today. No, better make it the twenty-third.”

I dated it.

“Give it to me.”

I gave it to him and he read it through twice. Then he looked at me and grinned.

“Not talking any more, Arthur?”

“I wrote down what you dictated.”

“Sure. And now you’re trying to figure out what would happen if I sent it to the police.”

I shrugged.

“All right, I’ll tell you what would happen. First they’d think you were a nut. They probably think that I was some kind of a nut, too, but they wouldn’t be interested in me. They wouldn’t be around anyway. On the other hand, they couldn’t ignore the whole thing because of the checks. Three hundred dollars! They’d have to take that seriously. So they start by getting on to the American Express and finding out about all the check forgeries that have been traced back to accounts in Athens banks. Then they’d pull you in and grill you. What would you do, Arthur? Tell them about me and what really happened? You’d be silly to do that, wouldn’t you? They’d throw the book at you. No, you’re too smart for that. You’d go along with the reformation jazz. That way, you’d have a real defense—voluntary confession, restitution, sincere repentance. I’ll bet you’d get away with just a nominal sentence, maybe no more than a year.”

“Thank you.”

He grinned again. “Don’t you worry, Arthur. You’re not going to do any time at all.” He waved the paper I had written and the checks. “This is just a little insurance.” He picked up the brandy bottle and refilled my glass. “You see, a friend of mine is going to trust you with something valuable.”

“What?”

“A car. You’re going to drive it to Istanbul. You’ll be paid a hundred bucks and expenses. That’s all there is to it.”

I managed to smile. “If that’s all there is to it, I don’t see why you have to blackmail me. I would gladly do the job every week for that money.”

He looked pained. “Who said anything about blackmail? I said insurance. This is a seven thousand-dollar Lincoln, Arthur. Do you know what it’s worth now in Turkey?”

“Fourteen thousand.”

“Well then, isn’t it obvious? Supposing you drove it into the first garage you came to and sold it.”

“It wouldn’t be so easy.”

“Arthur, you took a hell of a risk tonight for just three hundred dollars. For fourteen thousand you’d do pretty well anything, now wouldn’t you? Be your age! As it is, I don’t have to worry, and my friend doesn’t have to worry. As soon as I know the car’s delivered, that little confession’ll be torn up and the checks’ll go back in my pocket.”

I was silent. I didn’t believe a word he was saying and he knew it. He didn’t care. He was watching me, enjoying himself. “All right,” I said finally; “but there are just one or two questions I’d like to ask.”

He nodded. “Sure there are. Only that’s the one condition there is on the job, Arthur—no questions.”

I would have been surprised if he said anything else. “Very well. When do I start?”

“Tomorrow. How long does it take to drive to Salonika?”

“About six or seven hours.”

“Let’s see. Tomorrow’s Tuesday. If you start about noon you can spend the night there. Then Wednesday night in Edirne. You should make Istanbul Thursday afternoon. That’ll be okay.” He thought for a moment. “I’ll tell you what you do. In the morning, you pack a

overnight bag and come here by cab or streetcar. Be downstairs at ten.”

“Where do I pick up the car?”

“I’ll show you in the morning.”

“Whatever you say.”

He unbolted the door. “Good deal. Now take your junk and beat it. I have to get some sleep.”

I put my belongings back in my pockets and went to the door.

“Hey!”

As I turned, something hit me in the chest and then fell at my feet.

“You’ve forgotten your pass key,” he said.

I picked it up and left. I didn’t say good night or anything. He didn’t notice. He was finishing his drink.

The worst thing at school was being caned. There was a ritual about it. The master who had lost his temper with you would stop ranting, or, if it was one of the quiet ones, stop clenching his teeth, and say: “Take a note to the Headmaster.” That meant you were for it. The note was always the same, *Request permission to punish*, followed by his initials; but he would always fold it twice before he gave it to you. You were not supposed to read it. I don’t know why; perhaps because they didn’t like having to ask for permission.

Well, then you had to go and find The Bristle. Sometimes, of course, he would be in his study; but more often he would be taking the sixth form in trigonometry or Latin. That meant you had to go in and stand there until he decided to notice you. You would have to wait five or ten minutes sometimes; it depended on the mood he was in. He was a tall, thick man with a lot of black hair on the backs of his hands, and a purple face. He spoke very fast while he was teaching, and after a while little flecks of white stuff would gather at the corners of his mouth. When he was in a good mood, he would break off almost as soon as you came in and start making jokes. “Ah, the good Simpson, or perhaps we should say the insufficiently good Simpson, what can we do for you?” Whatever he said, the sixth form always rocked with laughter, because the more they laughed, the longer he would go on wasting time. “And how have you transgressed, Simpson, how have you transgressed? Please tell us.” You always had to say what you’d done or not done—bad homework, lying, flicking ink pellets—and you had to be truthful, in case he asked the master later. When he had made some more jokes, he initialed the note and you went. Before that *Enchantment* business I think he rather liked me because I pretended not to be able to help laughing at his jokes even though I was going to be caned. When he was in a bad mood he used to call you “sir,” which I always thought a bit stupid. “Well, sir, what is this for? Cribbing under the desk? A pauper spirit, sir, a pauper spirit! Work, for the night cometh! Now get out and stop wasting my time.”

When you returned to the form room you gave the master the initialed note. Then, he took his gown off, so that his arms were free, and got the cane out of his desk. The canes were all the same, about thirty inches long and quite thick. Some masters would take you outside into the coat lobby to do it, but others would do it in front of the form. You had to bend down and touch your toes and then he would hit you as hard as he could, as if he were trying to break the cane. It felt like a hot iron across your backside, and if he happened to hit twice at exactly the same place, like a heavy club with spikes on it. The great thing was not to cry or make a fuss. I remember a boy once who wet himself after it and had to be sent home; and

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