# RECEPTION

The best telegram I ever had said this: CALL ME TOMORROW FOR WONDERFUL NEWS. I had twenty hours to imagine what the news might be. And I delayed for a few hours more. I wanted to prolong the pleasure. I loved the expectation. How often in life do we have the bright certainty that everything is going to be fine?

Traveling alone through Europe, I had just left Germany for Holland, where the telegram awaited me. I liked the Dutch. They were sensible; they had been brave in the war. They still tried to understand the world, and their quaint modernism had made them tolerant. They behaved themselves. It was a church-and-brothel society in which there were neither saints nor sinners, only at worst a few well-meaning hypocrites. Vice without passion, theology without much terror; they were even idealistic in a practical way. They were unprejudiced and open-minded without being naively enthusiastic. They had nice faces. Their pornography was ridiculous, and I think it embarrassed them, but they knew that left to its impotent spectators and drooling voyeurs it was just another sorry prop in sex's sad comedy.

In Amsterdam, where I could have chosen anything, I chose to be idle. I smoked a little hash, talked to Javanese in quacking Bahasa, and was reminded how the 'colonial' and the 'bourgeois' are full of the same worthy illusions, like the solidity and reassurance of plump upholstered armchairs in a warm parlor. I sat and read. I ate Eastern food and slept soundly in a soft Dutch bed. Each night I dreamed without waking – it had never happened in Ayer Hitam, where nights were rackety and hot.

It was winter. The canals froze. Some people skated, as they did in the oldest oil paintings on earth – moving so fast that the swipes of the speed-skaters' blades made a sound like knives being sharpened. Gulls dived between the leaning buildings and gathered on the green ice. The small frosty city smelled of its river and its bakeries, and beer. I went for long ankle-twisting walks down cobblestone streets.

At last, almost sad because it meant the end of a joyous wait, I made my phone call. The telegram had been informal – a friend in the State Department. I had tried to avoid guessing the news: expect nothing and you're never disappointed.

She said, 'You've got London.'

This was London, this reception. A month had passed since the telegram. The party invitations had my name on them ('To Welcome…'). The guests had been carefully selected – it was pleasure for them, a night out. For us, the Embassy staff, it was

overtime. I did not mind. I had wanted London. In London I could meet anyone, do anything, go anywhere. It was the center of the civilized world, the best place in Europe, the last habitable big city. It was the first city Americans thought of traveling to – funny, friendly, and undemanding; it was every English-speaker's spiritual home. I had been intending to come here for as long as I could remember.

And this was also a promotion for me: from FSO-5, my grade as Consul in the Malaysian town of Ayer Hitam, to FSO-4, Political Officer. My designation was POL-1, not to be confused with POL-2, the CIA – 'The boys on the third floor,' as we called them at the London Embassy. I was a spy only in the most general and harmless sense of the word.

It had been a mistake to walk from my hotel to this reception. My hotel was in Chelsea, near the Embankment; the party was at Everett Horton's Briarcliff Lodge, in Kensington. London is not a city. It is more like a country, and living in it is like living in Holland or Belgium. Its completeness makes it deceptive – there are sidewalks from one frontier to the other – and its hugeness makes it possible for everyone to invent his own city. My London is not your London, though everyone's Washington, DC, is pretty much the same. It was three miles from my hotel to Horton's, and this was only a small part of the labyrinth. A two-mile walk through any other city would take you inevitably through a slum. But this was unvarying gentility – wet narrow streets, dark housefronts, block upon block. They spoke of prosperity, but they revealed nothing very definite of their occupants. They were sedate battlements, fortress-walls, with blind windows or drawn curtains. I imagined, behind them, something tumultuous. I had never felt more solitary or anonymous. I was happy. The city had been built to enclose secrets, for the British are like those naked Indians who hide in the Brazilian jungle – not timid, but fanatically private and untrusting. This was a mazy land of privacies – comforting to a secretive person, offering shelter to a fugitive, but posing problems to a diplomat. It was my job to know its secrets, to inform and represent my government, to penetrate the city and make new maps.

That walk through London humbled me. I began to feel less like an adventurer – a grand cartographer – than someone in a smaller role. I played with the idea that we were like gardeners. We were sent to maintain this garden, to keep the grass cut and the weeds down, to dead-head the roses, encourage the frailer blossoms. We could not introduce new plants or alter it. We watched over it, kept it watered; we dealt with enemies and called them pests. But our role was purely custodial. Each of us, in time, would go away. It was the image of a harmless occupation.

But of course in London there was a difference. It was a city without front yards. This was not America, with a low-maintenance lawn around every house. The garden was not a boasting acre here to advertise prosperity to passersby. In London, all gardens were behind the houses. They were hidden. 'Plots' was the word.

Briarcliff Lodge had once belonged to a duke. It rose up from its surrounding hedge, a graceful monument of creamy floodlit walls and tall windows. What an earlier age had managed with stone, we had with light – floodlights, spot-lights, bulbs behind cornices and buried in the ground, wrapped in vines and under water. It was beauty as emphasis, but it also afforded protection. Inside and out, Everett Horton had restored Briarcliff Lodge at Embassy expense. He had hired six waiters tonight, and two front-door functionaries. I handed the first my raincoat – apologizing for its being wet – and gave my name to the second man. But I was not announced. I was early and, after all, I was the guest of honor.

'Mr Horton will be down shortly.'

'Excuse me, where's the –?'

'Just behind you, sir. One flight up.'

In such circumstances the British are telepathic.

Then I heard a child's voice from the upper floor.

'Are the people here yet, Dad?'

'Not yet, but they will be soon. Better make it snappy.' It was Horton's voice. He cleared his throat and said, 'Now, do you want to do a tinkle or a yucky?'

I began to back away.

'Both,' the child said.

'All right,' the diplomat said patiently. 'Take your time.'

All happy families have a private language. The Hortons' was just about as useful and ludicrous-sounding as any other. But if Horton could be that patient with his child, I had little to worry about; and if he was happy, he was more than human.

The rooms in this house were enormous – a gym-size drawing room (perhaps once the ballroom), a library, the dining room to the right, and behind it the morning room and conservatory. A foyer, a cloakroom, a wide staircase. And this was only the ground floor. It was ducal splendor, but Horton was no duke. He lived, I knew, with his wife and child in an apartment on the third floor, at the back of the house. Servants' quarters, really – their little yellow kitchen, microwave oven, dishwasher, toaster, Blooming-dale's furniture, their TV, and five telephones. Horton had not taken possession of the house – he was its custodian. He lived like any janitor, like any gardener. Such is the fate of a career diplomat.

Some minutes later, he came downstairs.

‘We’ve got rather a mixed bag tonight,’ he said. He was formal, a bit stiff-faced. He had a reputation for affecting British slang, and it was hard for me now to think of him as the same man who had just said a tinkle or a yucky.

The front door thumped shut.

‘Mr and Mrs Roger Howlett,’ said the functionary from the hall. There was both dignity and strain in his announcing voice.

‘The publisher,’ I said.

‘Good show,’ Horton said. ‘I’m glad you had a chance to swot up the guest list.’

He was being tactful – I had done little else for the past week. It had been, so far, the whole of my job, that guest list with its fifty names – and more: occupations, ages, addresses, and (if applicable) political leanings. It was a comprehensive list, like ‘Cast of Characters’ at the opening of a Victorian novel. Learning it was like cramming a vocabulary list for a language exam. The only danger at such a reception was in knowing too much – startling the innocent guest by seeming overfamiliar with him.

Until then, my overseas experience had been in Uganda and Malaysia. Prudence, but not much subtlety, had been required of me in those places. Uganda wanted money from us; Malaysia wanted political patronage. Both deviously demanded that we be explicit and suspected us of being spies. Here in London we were regarded as high-living and rather privileged diplomats, a bit spoiled and unserious. But in fact every officer at the London Embassy was in his own way an intelligence gatherer. There were too many secrets here for any of us to be complacent. This garden was not ours, and it contained some strange blooms. And maybe all good gardeners are at heart unsentimental botanists.

Horton’s drawing room was soon filled. I stood at the door to the foyer. In this, the most casual setting imaginable, no one could be blamed for thinking that mine was the easiest job in the world. But every American in that room was hard at work, and only the British people here were enjoying themselves. Once again it struck me how cooperative party guests were – it was perhaps the only reason Embassy receptions were ever given, to enlist the help of unsuspecting people, to find out whether the natives were friendly, to take soundings, to listen for gossip.

I entered the room – penetrated London for the first time – and set to work.

‘Hello. I don’t think we’ve met,’ I said to a young woman.

It was Mrs Sarah Whiting, second wife of Anthony Whiting, managing director of the British subsidiary of an American company that made breakfast cereal. Whiting himself was across the room, talking to Margaret Duboys from our Trade Section. The Whitings had no children of their own, though Mr Whiting had three by a previous marriage to an American woman still resident in Britain and still referred to by Vic Scaduto, our CAO, as 'Auntie Climax.' Sarah Whiting was something of a mystery to the Embassy; she had been married only a year to the managing director. She was still full of the effortful romance of the second marriage – or so it seemed. I got nowhere by inquiring about her husband's business. Second wives are usually spared the details: the husband's affairs were determined by another woman, long ago. Anyway, I knew the answers before I asked the questions.

She said, 'You're an American.'

'How did you guess?'

'You look as if you belong here.'

'Seeing as how I've been here only a week, I'm deeply flattered.'

'Then you must be the guest of honor,' she said. 'Welcome to London.'

We chatted about the weather, the high price of apartments – I told her I was looking for a place – and the décor of this room.

She spoke knowledgeably about interior decoration ('I would have done that fascia in peach'), and when I complimented her, she said that she was interested 'in a small way.' I was soon to find out how small.

'I make furniture,' she said.

'Design it or build it?'

'I do everything.'

I was impressed. I said, 'You upholster it, too?'

'Not much upholstery is necessary,' she said. 'Most of my furniture is for dollhouses.'

I thought I had misheard her.

'You mean' – I measured a few inches with my fingers – 'like this?'

‘It depends on the house. Some are smaller, some bigger. I make cutlery, as well.’

‘For dollhouses?’

‘That’s right,’ she said.

‘Very tiny knives and forks?’

‘And spoons. And tea strainers. Why are you smiling?’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone in your line of work.’

She said, ‘I quite enjoy it.’

‘Your children’ – yes, I knew better, but it was the obvious next remark – ‘your children must be fascinated by it.’

‘It’s not really a child’s thing. Most of the collectors are adults. It’s a very serious business – and very expensive. We export a great deal. In any case, I don’t have any children of my own. Do you have kids?’

‘I’m not married,’ I said.

‘We’ll find you a wife,’ she said.

I hated that – it was the tone of a procuress. I may have showed a flicker of disapproval, because she looked suddenly uneasy. Maybe I was queer! Bachelor means queer!

I said, ‘Please do.’

She turned to the woman next to her and said, ‘Sophie, this is the guest of honor,’ and stepped aside to make room.

‘Sophie Graveney,’ Sarah Whiting said, and introduced us.

Miss Graveney, thirty, was an Honorable, her late father a lord. Her brother had succeeded to the title. We knew little about her, except for the fact that she had spent some time in the States.

I said, ‘We were just talking about dollhouses.’

‘Sarah’s passionate about them.’

‘If things go on like this, I’ll have to get Sarah to rent me one to live in.’

‘You’re looking for a place, are you?’

‘Yes. Just an apartment – a flat.’

‘What location?’

‘I’m near the river at the moment, near Chelsea Embankment. I think I’d like to stay down there.’

‘Chelsea’s very nice. But it’s pricey. You might find something in Battersea. It’s not as fashionable, but it’s just across the bridge – South Chelsea, the snobs call it. There are some beautiful flats on Prince of Wales Drive, overlooking the park.’

‘I’ll consider anything except the sort of place that’s described as “delightfully old-fashioned.” That always means derelict.’

‘Those are lovely,’ she said. ‘Do you jog? Of course you don’t, why should you?’ And she gave me an appraising stare. She had soft curls and wore lip gloss and I could see her body move beneath her loose black dress. She was also very tall and had large feet. Her shoulders were scented with jasmine. ‘I do jog, though. For my figure. Usually around Battersea Park at the crack of dawn.’

Sarah Whiting laughed and said, ‘Tell him your story about that man.’

‘Oh, God,’ Sophie said. ‘That man. Last summer I was out jogging. It was about seven in the morning and I’d done two miles. I was really mucky – pouring with sweat. An old man stepped in front of me and said, “Excuse me, miss, would you care for a drink?” I thought he meant a drink of water. I was out of breath and sort of steaming. I absolutely stank. I could barely answer him. Then he sort of snatched at my hand and said, “I’ve got some whiskey in my car.”’

Her eyes were shining as she spoke.

‘Do you get it? There I am in my running shoes and track suit, drenched with sweat, my hair hanging in rat tails, and this foolish old man is trying to pick me up! At seven o’clock in the morning!’

‘Incredible!’ Sarah said.

‘Then he said, “I want to be your bicycle seat,” and made a hideous face. I jogged away,’ Sophie said innocently. ‘I didn’t fancy him one little bit.’

‘If I get a flat near Battersea Park I can watch you jogging,’ I said.

‘Yes. If you get up early. Isn’t that thrilling?’

A waiter passed by with a tray of drinks. Sophie took another glass of white wine and, seeing that I did not take any, she looked somewhat disapproving.

‘Oh, God, are you one of those people who don’t drink?’

I said, ‘I’m one of those people who’re cutting down.’

‘Oh, God, you don’t smoke either – how boring! I smoke about two packs a day.’

‘Do you?’ I said. ‘Now that’s really interesting.’

‘Is that funny?’ she said, and blinked at me. ‘I never know when people are joking.’

There was a dim suspicion in her voice and a moment of stillness, as if she had just realized that I was a perfect stranger, who might be mocking her. She looked around and smiled in relief.

‘Terry!’ she said, as if calling for help.

She had seen a friend. She introduced him to me as Lord Billows, though he insisted I call him Terry. I recognized him from the guest list – he ran a public relations firm that had a New York office. We talked for the next ten minutes about smoking, its hazards and pleasures: he represented a tobacco company and was very defensive about its sponsorship of mountain-climbing competitions – teams of climbers racing up mountainsides, a sport I had never heard of. To change the subject, I told him I had spent the past two years in Malaysia. He said he knew ‘Eddie Pahang.’ Very chummy: he was referring to the Sultan of Pahang.

Lord Billows said, ‘Your Ambassador in KL gave marvelous parties.’

‘So they said. I seldom got to KL. I was in Ayer Hitam, with the stinking durians and the revolting rubber tappers. You’ve never heard of it. Nobody has. On the good days it was paradise.’

‘Who was your sultan?’

‘Johore.’

‘Buffles – I knew him well. Buffles was a real old trooper. A magnificent polo player in his time, you know. And a greatly misunderstood man.’

‘He used to come to our club once a year,’ I said. ‘One of his mistresses was in the drama society. She was a Footlighter. That’s what they called themselves. They loved being in plays.’

Lord Billows had been grinning impatiently at me through all this. Then he said, ‘I’m going to ask you a very rude question,’ and fixed his face against mine. ‘But you probably won’t consider it rude. You Americans are so straight forward, aren’t you?’

‘That is rather a rude question,’ I said.

Lord Billows said, ‘That’s not the question.’

‘Ask him,’ Sophie said. ‘I’m all ears.’

‘The question is, are you in fact a member of a club in London?’ Lord Billows turned aside to Sophie and said, ‘You see, in the normal way one would never ask an Englishman that.’

I said, ‘I think the Ayer Hitam Club has a reciprocal arrangement with a London club.’

‘I doubt that very much,’ Lord Billows said. ‘I have three clubs. The Savile might suit you – we have some Americans. I’m not as active as I’d like to be, but there it is. I put your chap Scaduto up for the Savile. I could do the same for you. Let me give you lunch there. You could look it over. I think you’d find it convivial.’

‘Is it delightfully old-fashioned?’ Sophie asked.

‘Exactly,’ Lord Billows said.

Sophie said, ‘He’ll detest it.’

‘When applied to houses, delightfully old-fashioned means a drafty ruin. When applied to clubs, it means bad food and no women.’

‘The Savile has quite decent food,’ Lord Billows said. ‘And most of the staff are women.’

‘I was in a club like that once,’ I said.

‘In London?’

‘The States. When I was eleven years old,’ I said. ‘No girls. That was the rule.’

Lord Billows stared at me for several seconds, as if translating what I had said, and then he said coldly, ‘You’ll excuse me?’ He walked away.

‘You shouldn’t have said that to him,’ Sophie said. ‘Why make a fuss about men’s clubs? I don’t object. I hate all this women’s lib stuff, don’t you?’

She had not addressed the question to me, but to Mrs Howlett – Diana – wife of Roger, the publisher, who was standing next to her. The two women began laughing in a conspiratorial way, and Roger Howlett told me several stories about Adlai Stevenson, and I gathered Horton had briefed him about me, because Howlett finished his Stevenson stories by saying, ‘Adlai was enormously good value – single, like yourself.’

‘Meet Walter Van Bellamy,’ Roger Howlett said, and tapped a tall rangy white-haired man on the arm. ‘One of your fellow countrymen.’

Bellamy showed me his famous face and celebrated hair, but his eyes were wild as he said, ‘You and I have an awful lot in common, sir.’ Then he moved away, pushing through the crowd with his arms up, like a sleepwalker.

‘He won all the pots and pans last year,’ Howlett said. ‘And here is one of our other authors.’ He took hold of a large pink man named Yarrow.

‘I’ve written only one book for Roger,’ Yarrow said. ‘It was political. About land reform. I was a Young Communist then. You didn’t blink. That’s funny – Americans usually do when I say that. It was a failure, my literary effort.’

‘I’ve found,’ Howlett said, ‘that some of my authors actually get a thrill when their books fail. I’ve never understood it. Is it the British love of amateurism?’

I knew from the guest list that Yarrow was a Member of Parliament, but to be polite I asked him what his business was.

He hooked his thumb into his waistcoat pocket and sipped his drink and said, ‘I represent a squalid little constituency in the West Midlands.’

The way he said it, with a smirk on his smooth pink face and a glass in his hand and his tie splashed – he had sloshed his drink as he spoke – I found disgusting. If he meant it, it was contemptible; if he had said it for effect, it was obnoxious.

I said, ‘Maybe you’ll be lucky and lose your seat at the next election.’

‘No fear. It’s a safe Tory seat. Labour haven’t got a chance. The working class don’t vote – too lazy.’

‘I want him to do me a book about Westminster,’ Howlett said.

‘Europe – that’s the subject. We’re European,’ Yarrow said. ‘That’s where our future is. In a united Europe.’

‘What actually is a European?’ I asked. ‘I mean, what language does he speak? What flag does he salute? What are his politics?’

‘Don’t ask silly questions,’ Yarrow said. ‘I must go. There’s a vote in the Commons in twenty minutes. Rather an important bill.’

‘Are you for it or against it?’

‘Very much against it!’

‘What is the bill?’

‘Haven’t the faintest,’ Yarrow said. ‘But if I don’t vote, there’ll be hell to pay.’

He left with two other MPs. Howlett went to the buffet table, and I walked around the room. I saw Miss Duboys talking to Lord Billows, and Vic Scaduto to Walter Van Bellamy, the poet. A black American, named Erroll Jeeps, from our Economics Section, looked intense as he stabbed his finger into the transfixed face of a woman. Jeeps saw me passing and said, ‘How are you holding up?’

‘Fine,’ I said.

‘This is our main man,’ Jeeps said, ‘the guest of honor.’

I said, ‘I’d almost forgotten.’

‘It’s a very jolly party,’ the woman said. ‘I’m Grace Yarrow.’

‘I just met your husband.’

‘He’s gone to vote. But he’ll be back,’ she said.

‘The third reading of the finance bill,’ Jeeps said. ‘It’s going to be close.’

‘You Americans are so well informed,’ Mrs Yarrow said.

Horton stepped over and said, ‘I’m going to drag our guest of honor away,’ and introduced me to a Times journalist, an antique dealer named Frampton, and a girl who did hot-air ballooning. The party had grown hectic. I stopped asking for names. I

met the director of a chain of hotels, and then a young man who said, ‘Sophie’s been telling me all about you’ – as if a great deal of time had passed and I had grown in reputation. A party was a way of speeding friendship and telescoping time. It was a sort of hot-house concept of forced growth. We were all friends now.

Someone said, ‘It rains every Thursday in London.’

‘We bought our Welsh dresser from a couple of fags,’ someone else said.

The man named Frampton praised one of Horton’s paintings, saying, ‘It’s tremendous fun.’

At about eleven, the first people left, and by eleven-thirty only half the guests remained. They had gathered in small groups. I met a very thin man who gave his name as Smallwood, and I could hardly match him to the man on the guest list who appeared as Sir Charles Smallwood. And I assumed I had the wrong man, because this fellow had a grizzled, almost destitute look and was wearing an old-fashioned evening suit.

Edward Heaven, a name that appeared nowhere on the guest list, was a tall white-haired man with large furry ears, who vanished from the room as soon as he told me who he was, on the pretext of giving himself an insulin injection in the upstairs toilet. ‘Puts some people off their food, it does,’ he said, but he made for the front door, and the next moment he was hurrying down the street in the drizzle, without a coat.

The party was not quite over, I thought. But it was over. Of the nine people remaining in the room, seven were Embassy people, and when the last guests left – the Times man and the antique dealer – Horton said to us, ‘Now, how about a real drink?’

He then went out of the room and told the hired help they could go home. In his dark suit, and carrying a tray, Horton looked like a waiter. On the tray was a bottle of whiskey and some glasses. He poured himself a drink, urged us to do the same, and said, ‘Please sit down – this won’t take long.’

I assumed this was one for the road. But it occurred to me, sitting among my Embassy colleagues, that I had said very little to them all evening. In a sense, we were meeting for the first time. Their party manner was gone, and although they were tired – it was well past midnight – they seemed intense, all business. This impression was heightened by the fact that Debbie Horton, Everett’s wife, had disappeared upstairs in the last hour of the party. Neither Miss Duboys nor I was married, and none of the others’ wives were present. We had all come to the reception alone.

Horton sat in the center of the circle of chairs, like a football coach after an important

game. Scaduto had told me that he liked to be called ‘coach.’ He looked the part – he was a big fleshy-faced man, who used body English when he spoke.

He said, ‘To tell the truth, I didn’t expect to see Lord Billows here tonight. We were told he was going through a rather messy divorce.’

‘They’ve agreed on a settlement,’ Al Sanger said. Sanger had dark hair and a very white face and a bright, almost luminous, scar on his forehead. He was, like me, a political officer, but concerned with legal matters. ‘His wife gets custody of the children.’

Miss Duboys said, ‘What happens to her title?’

‘She stays Lady Billows,’ Erroll Jeeps said. ‘If she remarries, she loses it.’

‘Find out what she’s styling herself now,’ Horton said to Jeeps. ‘We don’t want to lose touch with her. If we do, there goes one of our most persuasive strings.’ He turned to me and said, ‘I noticed our guest of honor chatting up Lord Billows. Did you make any headway?’

‘He wanted to put me up for a club,’ I said.

‘Jolly good,’ Horton said.

‘I told him I wasn’t interested.’

‘That was pretty stupid,’ Sanger said. ‘He was trying to do you a favor.’

I could tell from Horton’s expression that he was in sympathy with Sanger’s remark.

Sanger still faced me. I said, ‘So you approve of discrimination against people on the grounds of sex?’

‘It’s a London club,’ he said.

‘They don’t allow women to join.’

Sanger said, ‘Are you afraid they’ll turn you down?’

Horton and the others looked shocked, and Margaret Duboys said, ‘I don’t want to get drawn into this discussion.’

I said, ‘Tell me, Sanger, is that remark characteristic of your tact? Because if it is, I’d say your mouth is an even greater liability than your face.’

‘Gentlemen, please,’ Horton said, in his coach’s voice. ‘Before this turns into a slanging match, can we move on to something less controversial? I need something on Mrs Whiting – the second Mrs Whiting. Did anyone have a word with her?’

Scaduto said, ‘I didn’t get anywhere.’

‘She makes furniture,’ I said. ‘Very small furniture. For dollhouses.’

Sanger said, ‘You dig deep.’

‘And cutlery,’ I said. ‘Very tiny forks and knives. If you wanted to stab someone in the back’ – here I looked at Sanger – ‘I don’t think you’d use one of Mrs Whiting’s knives.’

Horton smiled. ‘Debbie wants her on a committee. We had no idea what her interests were. That’s useful. What about our MPs?’

Jeeps said, ‘The finance bill passed with a government majority of sixteen. I’ve just had a phone call. There were eight abstentions.’

‘Good man,’ Horton said. ‘Were any of those abstentions ours?’

‘Six Labour, two Liberal. The Tories were solid.’

Miss Duboys said, ‘Derek Yarrow filled me in on the antinuclear lobby. It seems to be growing.’

Jeeps said, ‘I did a number on Mrs Yarrow.’

‘What did you make of Mr Yarrow?’ Horton asked me, and I realized that in spite of the crowded party my movements had been closely monitored.

‘Blustery,’ I said. There was no agreement. ‘Contemptuous. Probably tricky.’

‘He’s given us a lot of help,’ Sanger said.

‘He seemed rather untrustworthy to me. He described his constituency as “squalid.” I didn’t like that.’

‘That’s a snap judgment.’

‘Precisely what I felt,’ I said, and Sanger scowled at me for deliberately misunderstanding him. ‘He’s a born-again Tory. He lectured me on Europe. You realize of course that he was a Communist.’

‘That’s not news to us,’ Scaduto said.

‘I intend to read his book,’ I said.

Sanger appeared to be speaking for the others when he said, ‘Yarrow doesn’t write books.’

‘He wrote one. It didn’t sell. It was political. Howlett published it.’

‘Yarrow’s a heavy hitter,’ Sanger said.

‘Thank you,’ I said, scribbling. ‘I collect examples of verbal kitsch.’

Horton said, ‘Do me a memo on Yarrow’s book after you’ve read it.’ Then, ‘Was Sophie Graveney alone?’

‘Yes,’ Steve Kneedler said. It was his one offering and it was wrong.

‘No,’ Jeeps said. ‘She left with the BBC guy – the one with the fake American accent. I think she lives with him.’

‘That would be Ramsay,’ Horton said.

‘She doesn’t live with Ramsay,’ I said.

‘How do you know that?’ Jeeps said.

I said, ‘Ramsay’s address is given as Hampstead. Sophie Graveney doesn’t live in Hampstead.’

‘Islington,’ Jeeps said. ‘It’s not far.’

‘Then why is it,’ I said, ‘that she jogs around Battersea Park every morning?’

The others stared at me. Horton said, ‘Maybe you can put us in the picture. If she’s living with someone there, we ought to know about it.’

Scaduto said, ‘Her mother’s Danish.’

‘So was Hamlet’s,’ Sanger said.

‘I’ve just realized what it is that I don’t like about the English aristocracy,’ Scaduto said. ‘They’re not English! They’re Danes, they’re Germans, they’re Greeks, Russians,

Italians. They're even Americans, like Lady Astor and Churchill's mother. They're not English! My charlady is more English than the average duke in his stately home. What a crazy country!'

Margaret Duboys said, 'The Greek royal family is Swedish,' and this seemed to put an end to that subject.

But there was more. The guest list was gone through and each guest discussed so thoroughly that it was as if there had been no party but rather an occasion during which fifty British people had passed in review for us to assess them. Miss Duboys said that she had found out more on the Brownlow merger, and Jeeps said that he had more on his profile about the printing dispute at the Times, and Sanger said, 'If anyone wants my notes on export licensing, I'll make a copy of my update. Tony Whiting gave me a few angles. He's got a cousin in a Hong Kong bank.'

I said, 'No one has mentioned that fidgety white-haired fellow.'

'Howlett,' said Scaduto.

'No. I met Howlett,' I said. 'The one I'm talking about said his name was Edward Heaven. He wasn't on the guest list.'

'Everyone was on the guest list,' Horton said.

'Edward Heaven wasn't,' I said.

No one had any idea who this man was; no one had spoken to him or indeed seen him. But there was no mystery. Before we left Briarcliff Lodge, Horton called the Embassy and got the telex operator, a young fellow named Charlie Hogle. Hogle took the name Edward Heaven and had the duty officer run it through the computer. The reply came quickly. Two years previously, Edward Heaven had been Horton's florist. He was probably still associated with the florist and had found out about the party because of the flowers that had been delivered. Mr Heaven had crashed the party. Horton said that he would now get a new florist and would try to tighten security. You couldn't be too careful, he said. They were kidnaping American diplomats in places like Paris.

'I think we can adjourn,' he said, finally. 'It's been a long day.' At the door, he said, 'You look tired, fella.'

'I'm not used to working overtime,' I said.

'You've been spoiled by the Far East,' he said. 'But you'll learn.' He clapped me on the shoulder. 'I know it's expecting a lot – after all, you're new here. But I like to start as I mean to go on.'