‘There’s another woman to see you,’ my secretary said, giving me an old-fashioned look on ‘another.’

It had been a bad morning – I knew she was thinking about Mr Fleamarsh’s ashes. Mrs Fleamarsh had come in a few days before. Her husband had complained of chest pains on the train to Salisbury, missed the cathedral, collapsed on the bus, and died at Stonehenge. She insisted on having him cremated so that she could carry him in her handbag. Is there a more presumptuous statement than ‘He would have wanted it this way’? Accompanying his coffin back to Baltimore would have meant her missing the tour of the Lake District, and Stratford was tomorrow. Mrs Fleamarsh gave me to understand that a whole unburned adult human corpse was a terribly inconvenient thing. ‘He bowled a lot,’ she said, as if this was all the explanation I needed. And even more obscurely, ‘He always had one of those shiny blue jackets.’

I arranged for the cremation, but as Mrs Fleamarsh was in Stratford, the ashes were delivered to me at the Embassy. The urn, the size and shape of a white crock of Gentleman’s Relish, stood on my desk for most of the afternoon. And it put me in the mood for what happened later that day, though I would willingly have missed it all – Mrs Fleamarsh, the ashes of her husband, and Miss Gowrie and her dark lodger.

Miss Gowrie, the other woman – she had watery eyes and a wind-reddened face – introduced herself as a friend of Sir Charles Smallwood, whom I dimly remembered having met at Horton’s reception. Miss Gowrie, I guessed, was nearing seventy. She sat down and planted both her feet on the carpet to steady herself and she began squashing her handbag in her lap.

She said, ‘I’m afraid I have rather a shocking story to tell you. I mentioned it to Charlie’ – this was the way she referred to Sir Charles Smallwood – ‘and he said I should come straight to you.’

I thought she was a bit drunk or having trouble with her dentures. In fact, she was straining to speak in a dignified way – she was fighting her cockney accent, and losing. She had a voice of astounding monotony.

I said, ‘Go on.’

‘Well’ – wayew – ‘it’s about my lodger then, isn’t it?’

She looked around the office; she peered at the walls; she spoke again. She was one of those people who seem, in the way they whisper and squint, to be addressing eavesdroppers.

‘Mind you, I’m not really a landlady in the normal way. It’s just that I live in Mortlake and the Council put up me rates, didn’t they? Practically doubled them. I had to take in lodgers to pay the additional. That’s Mr Wubb. Colored.’

‘What color, Miss Gowrie?’

‘There’s only one color,’ she said. ‘Black. One of yours.’

I tried to convey, with silence and cold eyes, that I did not like this at all.

‘And that’s why I’m here,’ she said.

‘Because your lodger is black?’

‘Because he’s a thief.’ Feef was what Miss Gowrie said.

‘British?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Before you go any further, I think I should remind you that this is the American Embassy,’ I said. ‘Properly speaking, if you have a problem with your lodger you should go to the police.’

‘He’s one of yours,’ she repeated. ‘American. And he’s driving me mental. It’s not fair!’

‘How do you know he’s a thief?’

‘He keeps the rubbish under his bed, don’t he?’

‘Rubbish?’

‘Rubbish is what he steals – pots and pans and that. He’s driving me mental.’

As she spoke, I resolved to check the man’s citizenship. I didn’t like Miss Gowrie’s manner. She behaved as if she were holding me responsible for this thieving lodger. I hoped I could get rid of her without becoming involved in her problem. I had had enough that day, dealing with the ashes of Herbert Fleamarsh. The worst problems in any office arise at roughly four in the afternoon. It was four-ten, and I wished that I had gone home early.

‘Mr Wubb has no right whatsoever to come here and steal from people. Some college student! I suppose he’s studying how to steal. Why don’t he stay in his own country and steal?’

‘That’s a good question,’ I said, picking up the telephone. ‘Let’s see if the police have an answer to it.’

‘Oh, please, sir!’ she said, and her fear brought forth a terrible tone of respectfulness, almost of groveling. She looked suddenly frightened and small, and I felt genuinely sorry for her. ‘Please don’t tell them. It would be in all the papers. There’d be talk. It would kill me.’

‘That you had a dishonest lodger?’

‘That I had a flaming lodger at all,’ she said. ‘I don’t want the rest of them to know.’

‘The rest?’

‘The street,’ she said. ‘They don’t take lodgers, certainly not black ones. They’re awfully decent.’

She was asking me to agree with her. I said nothing.

‘He’s one of yours,’ she said. ‘You’ll know what to do.’

But he wasn’t, and I didn’t.

It seemed no business of ours, this light-fingered lodger who might or might not have been an American. I checked the files. There was no one named Wubb registered with the Embassy – but not every American registered, and would a thief? Miss Gowrie telephoned me the next afternoon. She was desperate, and I had a free evening: the combination often ends badly. But I liked the idea of going upriver to Mortlake, so I visited her, just to look around, and perhaps to find excuses for my curiosity.

‘He’s rearranged all his furniture, hasn’t he?’ Miss Gowrie said, letting me into the tall gloomy house. It was just off the Mortlake Road, which ran along the river, and the river could be seen – we were mounting the steps to the lodger’s room – from Miss Gowrie’s upper windows. On this wet black afternoon the river’s dampness seemed to penetrate every brick of the house, and the trees dripped gray water from the tips of their bony branches. ‘In his room,’ she said. ‘He’s moved everything, every stick.’

She threw his door open, releasing mingled smells, sweet and sour. Miss Gowrie saw me sniffing.

‘He does all his own cooking,’ she said. ‘That pong is all his. It hums sometimes.’

I looked around the room and then turned to Miss Gowrie and said, ‘Tell me, does your lodger have a small bump or bruise – a little swelling, say – right here on his upper forehead?’

‘Yes – you’ve seen him!’ she cried.

‘Does he often wake you up in the middle of the night, padding around?’

‘All the time! Gives me a fright sometimes. How do you know about his bruise –’

‘And have you noticed that he cooks at night – only at night – not during the day?’

‘Yes!’ she said and clawed her hair straight.

‘Your lodger is a very devout Muslim,’ I said.

‘Musselman?’ she said, saying it like ‘muscle-man,’ and frowning. ‘I don’t know about that. And as for devout –’

‘Oh, yes,’ I said. ‘Muslim certainly, because he rearranged the furniture so that he could face Mecca – over there –’

Miss Gowrie peered in the direction of Mecca and, seeing only Barnes Common, made a face.

‘– and taken down those pictures,’ I said, examining a pair of framed prints stacked to face the wall: two busty ladies in black lace. ‘They hate pictures of human beings.’

‘Spanish,’ Miss Gowrie said. ‘They’re the same as blacks!’

‘Here’s his prayer mat,’ I said. ‘And he must be devout because he has a prayer bump on his forehead. The bruise – you’ve seen it. Also, if he wakes you up at night, he must be saying his prayers five times a day. They bump their heads when they pray.’

‘He might not be praying – he might be cooking.’

‘Of course. Because this is the Muslim period of Ramadhan. It’s like Lent, and it goes on until the end of next month. He can’t eat or drink anything until sundown. That’s why he eats at, ah’ – I had seen a small valise under the bed, and its luggage tag – ‘Abdul Wahab Bin Baz. That explains it.’

Instead of looking relieved, Miss Gowrie had become progressively worried by the information I had given her. And then she said, ‘Ain’t you glad you come over?’

‘Miss Gowrie, he’s not one of ours,’ I said.

‘He’s black,’ she said.

‘Arab.’ The Saudia Airlines luggage tag said everything: he was a Wahabi; he had flown from Mecca to London. A fanatical traveler?

‘Don’t split hairs,’ she said, and flung herself at me. She grasped my arm and exhaled the smell of bread and fish paste.

‘You know these people and their funny ways. You can help me. You’re the only one who can. The police don’t know about prayer bumps and eating after sundown, do they?’

Instead of agreeing, I asked her where her lodger was.

‘College,’ she said. ‘It’s a sort of night school. He goes out about six and comes back at nine. That’s when he starts eating.’

‘And praying, presumably.’

‘I wouldn’t know about that,’ Miss Gowrie said. ‘During the day he just frowsts in here. Studies and that. He’s a great reader. Mad about history. That’s what he told me. That’s all he told me.’

‘How long has he lived with you?’

‘Two weeks. I only discovered he was pinching things two days ago. He must have been at it all last week. I thought, then, out you go! But I reckoned he might be dangerous, him being a thief. That’s why I called Charlie Smallwood, and he give me your name. You’d know what to do – that’s what he told me. Only I wish you’d do it.’

‘Let’s have a look at his loot,’ I said.

Miss Gowrie got slowly to her knees, saying, ‘I used to have a proper charlady – I used to have staff,’ and went on to say that she had discovered her lodger’s thievery while she was cleaning out his room. It was under the bed, in a couple of cardboard boxes. She brought out the boxes, spitting with effort as she did so, and showed me the oddest collection of stolen goods I had ever seen.

There were two brass incense burners, properly called thuribles – they could have

been a hundred years old. There was a brass lamp of Oriental design and a pair of brass candlesticks. There was a metal crucifix and, lastly, a string of about twenty bells – round ones, about the size of golf balls, with a slit in each one. I had never seen any bells like this. Everything was thick with dust and coated with a kind of sour damp rind, as if it had lain on the floor of an underground cave. 'You think it's junk,' Miss Gowrie said, 'then you look closer and you realize it might be valuable. A little Brasso and a dry rag – come up a treat. But if you get very close, it looks like junk again, and that's what it is. So why go to the police? All they're going to do is laugh and say, "Steady on, love." They won't treat it as a serious matter. But they don't have to live here, do they?'

'Maybe it's not serious,' I said.

'You're joking,' she said. 'This is diabolical. You don't get this in shops or houses. This ain't the kind of thing that fell off the back of a lorry. Go on, touch it.'

I took one of the bells and shook it. It had a dull sound and no vibration – about as musical as a pebble hitting a coffin.

'Creepy, isn't it? Like from a church. I tell you, some of this stuff gives me the collywobbles, don't it?'

I knew what she meant. They weren't the sorts of things that anyone would steal, and yet where could you buy them? So they had to be stolen, probably from a church, from a derelict altar – a Muslim fanatic might do that. But what about those little round bells?

It was too late to do anything that day. I left Miss Gowrie with a promise that I would try to get to the bottom of it, and the next morning, with the aid of a good map, made a list of all the churches near her Mortlake house. There were seven. My secretary phoned each one and asked whether anything had been stolen from them. All had been burgled, but not within the previous two weeks. We tried a dozen more nearby churches: no luck.

I was still not satisfied, and so, that same afternoon, I went to the three churches nearest Miss Gowrie's. The Anglican church and Methodist chapel were both securely locked, but the Catholic church was open. I walked through it and into the deep grass of the churchyard.

'Can I help you?' It was a man with a broom, probably the caretaker, but he was suspicious of me and held his broom with the handle forward, like a weapon.

'Hello,' I said brightly, to calm him. 'Are you missing anything from the church – anything stolen? I'm thinking of things like candlesticks or crucifixes.'

‘Not that I know of,’ he said, and yet he had an undecided look. He wanted to say more – he had something on his mind.

I said, ‘You’re very lucky then,’ to give him an opening.

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘We’ve lost most of our outside lights – vandals. They broke every blooming one of them.’

He showed me that all the floodlights in the churchyard had been broken, and as it was also a graveyard, the effect on this gray afternoon was somber, a sort of bleak and muffled violence.

‘I’m amazed they could have broken lights that high,’ I said. The spotlights were attached to the eaves of the church, thirty feet up.

‘They’re savages,’ he said. ‘They use pellets, slingshots, blow-pipes.’

‘Did you see them do it?’

‘No, and I’ll tell you something else,’ he said. ‘I’ve worked here at St Mary Magdalene’s for twenty-two years, and it’s the first time this has happened. The past two weeks have been terrible. Broken glass everywhere. It’s so dark at night!’

‘Two weeks?’ I said, and thought of Mr Wahab.

‘The first week was shocking. But this week hasn’t been so bad. There’s no more lights to break!’ He looked at me in a disgusted way and said, ‘You’re an American, aren’t you?’

I told him I was.

‘You’re used to this sort of thing – vandals, queue-jumpers, lawbreakers. But this isn’t New York or Chicago. This is the quietest part of London. People behave themselves here. At least, they used to.’

We stood in darkness, because of the smashed lights. But this was the early daytime dark of November; it was not yet five o’clock. I decided to stop by the Embassy before I went home.

I was at my desk, wondering whether to call Miss Gowrie to tell her I had found out nothing, when my colleague Vic Scaduto appeared. Seeing me examining one of those strange round bells that the lodger had stolen, Scaduto said, ‘You’ve got the craziest things in your office. Last time I was here there was a funeral urn with a tourist’s

ashes in your pending tray. And now you're playing with a camel bell!'

'How do you know that's a camel bell?'

'Used to see them in India. Place is full of camels. My kids bought bells like that at the bazaar. They're sort of ceremonial – they loop strings of them around a camel's neck.'

I said, 'Can you think of any reason why you might find a camel bell like this in an English church?'

'I love it!' he said, and left my office, snickering.

Just before I went home, the phone rang. It was Miss Gowrie.

'Can you come over straightaway?' she breathed. 'He's just gone out.'

'Is there anything wrong?'

She said, 'There's another parcel, isn't there? He brought it back last night, then, didn't he? The dirty devil!'

'Don't open it. Don't touch it. I'll be right over.'

She was waiting for me by the door, her hands knotted in her apron. She told me to hurry, and started upstairs. Twice she called him a dir'ee devoo – 'And he might be back any minute.'

Mr Wahab's room was the same as before – very neat, the prayer mat facing Barnes Common and Mecca, a slight aroma of stale spice in the air, the pictures turned to the wall. After Miss Gowrie unlocked it, she stepped into the hallway to stand sentry duty while I opened the parcel under the bed. It was a pillowcase, its top twisted and held fast with a length of wire. It gave off the same dusty underground odor as the candlesticks and the crucifix and the camel bells. It seemed to contain sticks of wood and broken pottery wrapped in newspaper. I removed them and saw at once that they were bones – old, yellow, spongy, woody bones – and the cracked bowl of a skull and a jawbone and a number of loose human teeth.

'More of the same,' I said so as not to frighten her. And I wrapped them and returned them to the innocent-looking pillowcase.

'You'll help me, won't you?'

'I'll do my best,' I said.

I was relieved that she had not seen the contents of that new parcel, for I had always considered myself as being fairly unshockable, and yet when I thought of those yellow bones and teeth and incense burners and camel bells under the bed of the Arab in that wet suburb of London, I got the shudders.

It was no longer a trivial, speculative matter about a troublesome lodger. The man from Mecca was, quite simply, a grave robber. Mr Wahab was a ghoul. Why hadn't I thought of it before? Though they looked like ecclesiastical items, they could not have come from a church. But tombs, especially the larger ones, were often a kind of underground chapel, and had an altar furnished with candlesticks, and an incense burner and crucifix.

It was almost certainly a Catholic tomb – the crucifix said that. An old tomb – this stuff had lain undisturbed for a century. A large tomb, big enough to hold an altar, and one that could be entered through a door; if there had been digging, it would have been seen and reported. The tomb was probably above ground. But what sort of a tomb contained camel bells?

This part of London was full of cemeteries – we had cremated Herbert Fleamarsh in nearby Kew. There were five important cemeteries not far from Miss Gowrie's house, and every church had a walled-in graveyard beside it. But only one of those churches interested me: it struck me that a grave robber needed darkness to hide him, and if he did not have it he might break the sort of lights I had seen smashed at St Mary Magdalene's. But no theft had been reported there.

I did not want to see the caretaker again. He would wonder why I was back; he would be suspicious; he would ask awkward questions. I had no answers. So I let a day pass, and then I waited for the five o'clock darkness, and I entered the churchyard of St Mary's wearing a black coat and black gloves and looking left and right. I crept toward the vaults, the flat-topped granite huts with iron doors or sealed with stone blocks. They were unmarked; they were sadly neglected and overgrown with high bushes. Some were hidden in grass; others had almost burst from the ground or been yanked aside by the roots of the trees. I was behind the church and fighting my way through a tangle of bushes when I saw the tent.

It was a sort of Oriental tent, perhaps Arab, with a slanting roof and high steep sides flowing from neatly scalloped eaves. I thought for a moment that I had stumbled upon a group of campers – people often pitched tents by the roadside or in parks (I could see them from the windows of my flat in Battersea) – why not in this graveyard?

But the tent was made of stone. It was white granite or marble, with carved folds, and it bore a tablet with the legend Captain Sir Richard F. Burton. The explorer's tomb was the strangest I had ever seen.

I went close and tried the door. The putty surrounding the door, a marble slab, had been dug away. But a padlock on a rusty hasp remained. I shook the padlock, and it came apart in my hand: it had been sawed through. So he had broken it – I was sure that this was the work of Abdul Wahab Bin Baz. A poem was chiseled into the marble just above the door. I turned my small flashlight on it.

Farewell, dear friend, dead hero, the great life

Is ended, the great perils, the great joys;

And he to whom adventures were as toys,

Who seemed to bear a charm ’gainst spear or knife

Or bullet, now lies silent …

What was that? A sound from the churchyard gate.

Crouching, I ran around to the back of the vault. It was not easy – trees grew close to it, and I scratched my face on a branch as I squeezed through.

At the rear of the tomb, overgrown with bushes and partly hidden by the thickness of black branches, was an iron ladder. It was fixed to the stone; it rose to the top of the tentlike roof. More to hide from the caretaker than to see where the ladder went, I climbed the iron rungs, and when I could not go any farther I looked down in amazement. I was looking straight into the chamber of the tomb.

This tomb, this stone tent, had a window! It was of thick glass and I could see in the narrow beam of my flashlight that it had not been tampered with. But I knew at a glance that the tomb had been plundered. A century of sunlight through this window had faded the stone walls in places and also printed on them the shadows of the objects I had seen in the Arab’s room – the lamps, the crucifix, the string of camel bells. Where a thurible had been plucked from the dust, a disk mark remained, of its oval base. Only these shadows were left of what had once been in the tomb, except for the two coffins. They lay on the floor, at either side of a row of footprints. The larger coffin had been opened. Its lid, a fraction lopsided, had a freshly yanked nail at its end and showed a seam of darkness. But if I had not already seen Burton’s bones, if I had not tried the lock that seemed so secure, I doubt that I would have noticed that the coffin lid was ajar or suspected any tampering. Even under the penetrating light of my pocket flashlight the tomb was very murky, and only serious scrutiny told me that it had been broken into. It was a terrible little coffin room; it was dusty; it was cell-like. It gave me a good idea.

The Arab, Abdul Wahab Bin Baz, had to be stopped. Now I knew how.

It was no more than a short stroll, using the footbridge over the railway tracks, to a row of shops. In one of these, with a sign saying IRONMONGERS, I bought a large, flat padlock. It was very similar to the one the fanatic from Mecca had cut through in order to enter Burton's tomb.

It was now well after six. The church was shut, the gate was locked. I scaled the brick wall of the churchyard and took up my position at the top of the ladder, where I rested against the slanting window of the tomb. I was completely hidden; the graveyard was as dark as the bottom of a deep hole. In a doggedly destructive way, by breaking all the churchyard lights, the Arab had guaranteed that I would not be seen.

I thought: What if he doesn't come back?

And yet, Isabel Burton's coffin had not been disturbed.

Later than I expected, after seven, when my knees were about to give out, I heard the thump of feet in the churchyard – someone had come over the wall. There was a swishing sound, of legs moving in brambles and grass. If it was Abdul, and if he entered the tomb, I would see him through the window. I heard nothing for a while, and then there was a slow millstone sound – the marble door being swung open. When he entered the tomb, I ducked, and I did not move again until, some seconds later, I heard the door being eased shut.

It was not closed entirely. I climbed down the ladder and dashed to the front of the tomb and kicked the door. At that moment there was a cry from the vault, but I was quickly straightening the hasp and clapping the padlock on. There was no sound from inside. The Arab was sealed in. No one would hear him. He had asked for this – and now he was buried alive.

If you knew he was there and you listened carefully you could hear a faint mewing, which was all that was audible of his wild screams through the thick marble walls of the tomb.

'I thought it was him,' Miss Gowrie said, opening the door and with a look of apprehension still on her face. Fright takes a while to fade.

'He won't be back tonight,' I said. 'He may not be back at all.'

'He's out haunting houses, I expect.'

'Not exactly.'

'You come in and have a nice cup of tea,' Miss Gowrie said. 'Put your feet up. Look at

the time! It’s gone eight – you’ve had a long day.’

My day was not over. I told Miss Gowrie I had discovered where Wahab had stolen his brassware. I gathered up the objects and put them into a sack. I would return them to their rightful place, I said.

‘May I sleep in Mr Wubb’s room tonight?’ I said.

‘What if he comes back?’

‘Not a chance,’ I said.

‘You never know with blackies,’ she said.

In his stale bed, in that small room that smelled of carpet dust and prayer sweat, I thought about Abdul Wahab and it occurred to me why he had broken into Burton’s tomb. It was simple revenge. Hadn’t Burton, the unbeliever, trampled all over Islam? In this Muslim’s eyes, hadn’t the English explorer violated the sanctity of his religion by dressing up as an Arab and entering Mecca? Burton was no respecter of taboos or traditions – he had plundered the secrets of Islam in his search for adventure.

This was one Muslim’s reply: the Arab dressed as an English gentleman, prowling undetected in London – as anonymous as Burton had been in holy Mecca. There was a crude justice in what the disguised Arab had done to Burton’s bones in the Mortlake churchyard. This was a civilized country and a different century, but the smell in that bedroom was of dust and bones and the stink of fanatical prayer.

I had set my wrist alarm to wake me before dawn. It was still dark when I crept out of Miss Gowrie’s house. I liked the thrill – carrying the brassware and camel bells and Richard Burton’s bones through the damp chilly streets to the graveyard where the tomb had been opened.

There was no sound at the door of the vault. I went around back and mounted the ladder and shone my flashlight inside.

Wahab lay on the floor, sleeping on his side. He woke when I turned the light on his eyes. This was the first time I had really seen him.

His dark face had a stretched look of panic – the expression certain fish have in fishbowls: trapped and pop-eyed, with fat swollen lips. His eyes were red and puffy, and he was at the last stage of terror. He was limp, making pleading faces at me – or rather at the light – and blinking at the brightness of it. He would have confessed at that moment to being Leon Trotsky.

He clasped his hands and implored me.

I breathed on the window. The vapor condensed, and with my finger I traced a cross in it and shone my flashlight on it. It is the simplest of symbols, but to the man from Mecca it was strange and unwelcome, and I was sure that it made him more fearful than the darkness he had endured in that tomb all night. It was now safe to remove the padlock: I had announced myself as the avenging Christian.

As soon as the hasp was released he pushed the door open and gasped – gave a whinny of fright – and then disappeared at the far end of the churchyard.

It was still dark. I had plenty of time to replace the thuribles, the lamps, the crucifix, and the camel bells, as well as Burton himself in his ornate and rotting coffin. Then I shut the door of the tomb and locked it. I had left everything just where it belonged in the tomb, as anyone could see.